



Donor's stories

CHEN YET-SAN FAMILY FOUNDATION

The Chen Yet-Sen Family Foundation was established in 2003 to continue the philanthropic work of Robert Yet-Sen Chen. Find out about the Foundation from James Chen, Robert's son and Co-Chair of the Foundation.



"It is the cultural norm to give back in China. My father started his philanthropic work after he retired. For him, it was not just about giving money, which he did generously, but he also gave up a lot of time. As a child, he was desperately poor and personally experienced famine, so his focus was to give back to his own home town.

Towards the end of his life, my father wanted to wind down his philanthropy. However, we realised as a family that having made such a great start it would be a shame to stop. I decided to take a more westernised approach and, with the help of a consultant, we went through a process to start a formal foundation.

I was shocked when we tried to decide on our mission statement as we spent hours arguing over our ideas and could not agree. We decided to undertake a process of elimination, and thought about what we did not want to support. Over the years, we refined our mission and today we are clearer that empowerment through education is the critical issue we want to address.

The approach we take to addressing education is slightly left-field. We felt that to a lot of Chinese parents, education revolves around test-taking success. As a result, students can become one dimensional and lack the skills needed in the world today. Children should be encouraged to learn for themselves and be given the tools to learn. Our mission is to challenge conventional thinking about what good education means and have three main recipients of our philanthropy.

Stone Soup Alliance is a major initiative in China to encourage primary schools to develop and maintain a vibrant school library and reading culture amongst the student population. We believe a good library resource is the key to self-learning and the development of imagination in children.

Another was the 'Bring me a Book Hong Kong' charity that we founded and is now the leading advocate of early childhood and family literacy in Hong Kong. Every year, we reduced our funding by 20% which makes the charity operate more sustainably. It has to make the case for support with the local community, and not just rely on our foundation for funding and running the risk of a culture of dependency.



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The Feng Zikai Chinese Children's Picture Book Award came out of 'Bring me a Book'. As we raised our children, my wife and I were shocked at the lack of original Chinese language children's books. We thought hard about how to address this issue – if we should get into the publishing business, for example. Instead we decided to establish the prize, thinking that this way we can raise standards and increase the visibility of this issue. My mother provided the initial support for the award and we expect to continue to support the award development until the prize matures, probably for 10 years in total.



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Traditional philanthropic practice is like an asset-management approach to philanthropy. You make grants to different NGOs in order to diversify your portfolio. What we have evolved into is a focused foundation with key areas of expertise based on the venture capital model. We believe we are much more effective in our giving because we have domain expertise in the areas of school libraries and early childhood and family literacy.

A separate personal focus of my philanthropy is a UK registered charity called Vision for a Nation. A number of years ago, I came across the idea of adjustable eye-glasses, and invested in the product as a for-profit company, Adlens. What appealed to me was not just the possibility of doing well on the business side, but to make an impact on the social side. I thought this was a good way to do both.

In the beginning, we were active in a number of African and Asian countries, but soon realised we were not being effective. We stepped back and decided to focus on Rwanda. Our goal is to ultimately correct the vision of the entire population of Rwanda. It's a huge ambition, but Rwanda is a fantastic country, and the government is working closely with us.

This last project was a nice way to accomplish both business and social goals. From a financial investment point of view only, I would not have taken the risk. But because it had such a huge potential to benefit society, I continued funding. One thing I have

learned is that there are blended values in investing, so we try to consider both social and financial return. Being in a privileged position, we can take more risks if the potential social payoff is worthwhile.

The people you work with on your philanthropy are important. If you are making a major gift to impact certain things, you will only achieve that impact if you have the right people. It is important to have a highly qualified executive director. And also an experienced board, with a real interest in how the organisation is being run, that can challenge when necessary.

Too often, people join boards because it is socially prestigious, but they have no idea what is going on within the organisation. In Hong Kong, the management of some organisations has no accountability to the board. That is where you start to have problems and become ineffective. For me, it is about getting to know the board members and whether they will hold management to account.

The biggest challenge to philanthropy in Hong Kong is that people are generous, but it is an emotional cheque book. Donors just give money, and do not feel they can also take the time to get involved. However, if they don't spend time with a charity, they won't get good results. The more engaged you are in your giving, the greater chance you will have of being successful in your efforts.

That is why we are sharing how we go about our philanthropy with other families. We currently have a Chinese family that shadows us. They've sat in on our board meetings and are able to see what we do on a day-to-day basis. If they happen to like a project we discuss, they may donate some money, but we are really trying to educate so they know how to 'do' philanthropy within their own family.

Philanthropic work is good for the soul in both tangible and intangible ways. What we are doing in Hong Kong is exciting, and it is also nice to have founded Vision for a Nation and be able to impact people around the world.”



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