



**The noble art of giving**  
**Robert Ho is carrying on his famous family's proud tradition of philanthropy**

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CITY

CELEBRATING  
**HONG KONG**



# GIVE, and you shall RECEIVE

**Philanthropist**  
**Robert Ho** is proud to have carried on the family philosophy engendered by his grandfather

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Robert Ho Hung-ngai may have been born to one of Hong Kong's pre-eminent "first-generation" merchant families but he's always taken to heart the mantra of giving before receiving.

For more than 150 years, the Ho family has been serving the community, playing an instrumental role in Hong Kong's transformation from colonial entropic to thriving metropolis.

"It's our family motto," says the former White House reporter turned philanthropist, in the boardroom of his charitable organisation, the Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation.

Ho, now 80, inherited his philanthropic streak from the generations of his family who were engaged in charitable endeavours.

Years as a journalist in the United States and Hong Kong also seem to have given him a passion for seeing and fostering societal change.

Looking over the boardroom as Ho speaks is a imposing oil portrait of the man who started it all – his grandfather, the late Sir Robert Ho Tung Bosman – patriarch of one of the most influential clans of the colonial era.

Born in Hong Kong to a Dutch father with Jewish ancestry and a Chinese mother, the twice-knighted Ho Tung was most recognised for his work helping to boost Sino-British ties during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He was also renowned for having bankrolled Sun Yat-sen's overthrow of the Manchus during China's 1911 Revolution.

"My grandfather was a com-prador, which in those days essentially meant mediator and communicator between British and Chinese," Ho says.

"He even tried to mediate conflicts between the feuding warlords during the [Warlord Era of 1916 to 1928] to get them to come to terms."

Ho Tung's work in public service was followed by a successful career in business – he rose to be-



Robert Ho is inspired by a portrait of his grandfather, Sir Robert Ho Tung Bosman. Photo: K.Y. Cheng

come one of Hong Kong's richest people.

The massive wealth and influence he accumulated in investments and real estate quickly made him the first Chinese person to obtain "legal permission" to live on Victoria Peak, an almost unthinkable feat at the time.

Ho Tung's sons followed in

his footsteps and also established themselves as prominent society figures. Eldest son Edward founded the Chinese Gold and Silver Exchange Society in 1910, while third son George Ho Ho-chi went on to found Commercial Radio Hong Kong in 1959.

The family's influence extended north into the mainland. Ho Tung's second son, Robert Ho Shai-lai – Ho's father – served as a decorated general in the Chinese republican army under Marshal Zhang Xueliang and fought the Japanese in Manchuria in 1931.

Ho describes his father as a patriotic military man who relinquished his British nationality to become full Chinese.

"This was earth-shattering news in those days," says Ho.

"Both regimes [the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China] treated him as a patriotic Chinese who was Chinese till the day he died."

But despite the family's proactive role in local and national political spheres, Ho says his family has never wielded political power. "We don't play politics and we don't go out and try to influence people," he says. "We have always been apolitical because my father was a soldier and both regimes respected that."

Unlike many of Hong Kong's more gregarious wealthy families, the Ho's have managed to stay clear of the "tycoon" label. Partly due to their expansive and extended family tree – Ho says there are members of the family he has never met – the family has become more of an institution than a family-run enterprise.

The family name blends inconspicuously into the community, not as the owners of blue-chip stocks or branded franchises but as supporters of libraries, school buildings and grants.

Both the University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University, for instance, have student halls named Lady Ho Tung Hall, after Ho Tung's eldest daughter, Victoria. The Hotung Secondary School in Causeway Bay (formerly the Hotung Secondary School for Girls) was named after Ho Tung himself in 1953, just three years before his death.

The year he died, Ho Tung found what would be come one of the city's largest and foremost community trusts, the Sir Robert Ho Tung Charitable Fund. To this day the fund, now managed by HSBC Trustee, continues to donate tens of millions of dollars a year in areas ranging from poverty alleviation and health care to elderly care and education.

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In recent years, the amount available for donation has grown to about HK\$10 million a year. Last year, the fund allocated HK\$8.2 million to 170 projects, including major grants to the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals, the Salvation Army, Po Leung Kuk and St John Ambulance. In 2011, it doled out HK\$14.7 million to 229 organisations.

"I think it's a wonderful thing what the family is doing in philanthropic work," says Ho, who eventually started his own charitable foundation in 2005, focusing on promotion of Chinese cultural heritage, the arts and Buddhist philosophy.

"It is important that we make the world understand the philosophy of Buddhism, not just the religion."

The foundation has offered various grant programmes in partnership with the American Council of Learned Societies with the aim of "expanding the understanding, interpretation and application of Buddhist philosophy in contemporary scholarship and society". Grant categories range from PhD dissertation fellowships to collaborative research grants.

"As far as Chinese arts and

**\$10m**

Amount, in HK dollars, the Sir Robert Ho Tung Charitable Fund has to give away each year

culture are concerned, we don't think it has been exposed and understood enough in the world other than in museums," Ho says.

In Hong Kong, the foundation aims to promote awareness and preservation of local heritage. It also supports the city's youth and artistic community to ensure a vibrant creative future.

Endeavours in the arts include a grant to the Guggenheim Museum in New York this year. As part of the initiative, the museum will now commission major works from at least three artists from the mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong or Macau, that will enter the Guggenheim's permanent collection and become part of The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Collection.

His philanthropic efforts have been recognised on both sides of the Pacific and for all sorts of reasons. Since retiring from journalism, Ho has divided his time between Hong Kong and Vancouver, Canada.

He recently donated an undisclosed amount to the University of British Columbia to help establish North America's first contemporary Buddhist studies programme.

This week, he was awarded the Order of British Columbia (OBC) for helping advance scientific knowledge and medical expertise and raising public awareness about mental health.

"Our family, like many others, likes to call ourselves a first-generation Hong Kong family," Ho says. "When Hong Kong was ceded to the British there was a group of local Chinese people who were rooted here and took the opportunity to invest in Hong Kong and succeeded."

"But as my grandfather once said, for all we have taken from society, we must also give back."



Robert Ho opens a urological unit at Tung Wah Hospital in 1986 (left); with politician Rita Fan Hsu Lai-tai receiving an honorary degree at HKU in 2009 (above). Photos: SCMP Pictures