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**R**obert Ho Hung-ngai doesn't believe artworks should be in exclusively private possession. "I am an art lover, but I am not a collector," the philanthropist says. "Why should I have art just for my own appreciation? It belongs in a museum for the public to enjoy."

As chairman of the Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation, which he set up in 2005, the 76-year-old has been putting his money where his mouth is: he supports high-profile Chinese art exhibitions and performances around the world.

The latest project is *Power and Glory: Court Arts of China's Ming Dynasty*, which opened on Wednesday and runs until September 21 at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. Showing the collection from Beijing's Palace Museum, the Nanjing Municipal Museum and Shanghai Museum, this is the Californian institution's first collaboration with mainland counterparts.

The foundation mainly promotes Chinese arts and culture, says Ho, who made a stopover in his native Hong Kong recently on a business trip to Taiwan from Vancouver, where he has been living since 1989. "We also want to encourage cross-cultural understanding. So, why don't we let the people around the world see and enjoy that?"

It matters little whether the art form supported is traditional or contemporary, visual or performing. Ho's foundation was, for instance, responsible for the 2007 exhibition *Britain Meets the World: 1714-1830 at the Forbidden City* jointly curated by the British Museum and The Palace Museum, while earlier this year it sponsored Cai Guoqiang's exhibition *I Want To Believe*. It was the first solo show of a Chinese-born artist at the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

Last year, the foundation supported the overseas tour of Taipei-based Cloud Gate Dance Theatre's *Wild Carcass* performance in North America and Britain.

But of all his philanthropic efforts, it is the promotion of Buddhist art that is dearest to Ho's heart. His foundation will be financing the establishment of a new Buddhist art gallery at Victoria & Albert Museum in London, the world's largest museum of art and design. Due to open in April next year, the gallery will show Buddhist sculptures, paintings and other works from Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, the Himalayas and East Asia since the early period.

"It is the only gallery focusing on Buddhist art in the UK, and it has already generated lots of interest," says the patriarch, himself a practising Buddhist.

"In fact, other museums have offered to lend their artefacts [to the new gallery] because there is no central place to exhibit them." Grandson of Sir Robert Ho Tung - the head compradore of Jardine Matheson in the 1880s who became the richest man in the city during Hong Kong's pioneering years - his first introduction to the ancient religion and philosophy was through his grandmother Lady Clara.

According to Ho, she was a devoted Buddhist who set up a temple and charity, called Tung Lin Kok Yuen, in Happy Valley in 1931. Though Buddhism today forms an essential part of his life, it has not always been that way. "As a child, I had to accompany [Lady Clara] to a lot of these [Buddhist] rituals," he says. "There was a lot of chanting,



Photo: Jonathan Wong

Buddhist philosophy drives his foundation, philanthropist Robert Ho tells **Yenni Kwok**

# Wheel of life

and while sitting and waiting, I would always ask myself when I could get out of here again. I was forced to go to these things, and as a result I hated it. I stayed away from Buddhism after that."

The change came in the 1970s, when his father, Robert Ho Shai-lai, a former Kuomintang general and Chiang Kai-shek's former ambassador to the US, was about to retire from Tung Lin Kok Yuen and no other family member was sitting on the board. "He said: I am getting old. Whether



Robert Ho (top) chairs a foundation that presented artefacts (left) at Britain Meets the World in Beijing and Cai Guoqiang's work (above) in New York. Photos courtesy of the Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation

you like it or not, you have to sit on the board," Ho recalls. "I told him: 'I try to avoid those temples like a plague, and now you want me to sit on the board?' But, what can you do if your old man has a gun pointing at you?"

Through Tung Lin Kok Yuen, Ho got to know a board member, a Taiwanese monk, who opened his eyes to Buddhist philosophy.

"He taught Buddhism as a philosophy of life, showing how our outlook should be, how you can understand yourself and other people," says Ho, now chairman of the foundation which is based in Hong Kong and Vancouver.

"Although I grew up in a Buddhist family, I had a period when I really tried to avoid it. But, from the 1970s on, it changed. I am now really into it. I am happy and at peace with myself. I look at the world, and I understand the world."

The family foundation now funds exhibitions of Buddhist arts, from French monk Matthieu Ricard's photography to a travelling exhibition of The Dragon Gift, which shows rare and sacred Buddhist arts from Bhutan. First shown at the Honolulu Academy of Arts this year and scheduled to reach New York in autumn and San

Francisco next spring, this is the first comprehensive exhibition of Bhutanese art in the US.

It also sponsors public lectures by prominent Buddhist teachers, such as Ricard and American scholar Robert Thurman. "My vision is to spread Buddhism," Ho says. "Not the religion, though, not the rituals, but Buddhist philosophy. Now, how do you do that? You can

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Robert Ho (above)

shout in the street or buy airtime or you turn to people who are curious already. So we decided to focus on institutions of higher learning."

In September, the Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation will give an undisclosed amount of money to Stanford University's Centre of Buddhist Studies to expand its programmes. It follows the footsteps of the sister foundation, Tung Lin

Kok Yuen, which has financed the establishment of the Centre for Buddhist Studies at the University of Hong Kong, and similar centres in Thailand, Vancouver and Toronto.

"Our next target is a university in the east Coast [of America]," Ho says. "Then England, and our next stop is Australia. We don't try to influence people to become Buddhists. But if you are interested to learn, go ahead."

Just like his ake on arts, Ho believes academia should be as widely accessible as possible. The knowledge of Buddhism should be available not only to university students, but also to the general public. "They must have public lectures, by people who are qualified, like Matthieu Ricard, Robert Thurman," he says.

"Our target is to create a global network and to link the different centres. So if students in England are interested in a course in Hong Kong, they can take the course via the internet and get credits for it. Similarly, professors can visit colleges; that's my vision."

Universities can be jealous of each other's programmes "but we're trying to convince them that at least the religious departments should not be small-minded", Ho says.