

# Creative Philanthropy

## An Innovative Approach to Literacy





# *About the Founder*

## **Mr. Robert Yet-Sen Chen (1929-2003)**

Mr. Robert Yet-Sen Chen was born at the beginning of China's new Republic, survived the civil wars and the Sino-Japanese War, lived on four continents, and established a thriving international business enterprise. Through it all he never forgot his roots, his boyhood years in rural China. He dedicated significant time, energy and financial contributions in the later part of his life to helping the less fortunate in his home village in Qidong, Jiangsu Province, China.



Mr. Chen was born in 1929. At the age of 14, he left his hometown to study in Shanghai. In 1948, he left China for Hong Kong and eventually went on to attend university in England. In 1957, Mr. Chen returned to work in the family business in Hong Kong. He established the company's presence in West Africa by setting up factories in Nigeria, Ghana and the Ivory Coast. Like many of his generation, Mr. Chen experienced personal loss, war and hunger in his youth which was to prepare him for the rigors and challenges of doing business in uncharted territories. His positive outlook on life and his uncanny ability to see to the core of issues, coupled with his unfailing diligence, contributed to the ultimate success of his personal and professional endeavors. His diligence and sound financial investment strategies paid dividends for the family business.

The elder, Mr. Chen Zao Men, taught his son about the importance of philanthropy – of giving – from an early age. The Chen Zao Men College in Hong Kong was the first charitable project supported by the Chen Family in 1972, and the genesis of a tradition of community service. Mr. Robert Chen built on this legacy of good work by building and supporting six schools, a community hospital, and undertaking much-needed public works in the family's hometown of Qidong. His lifetime of philanthropic work culminated with the creation of the Chen Yet-Sen Family Foundation in October 2003, prior to his unexpected and premature passing on November 29, 2003.

Mr. Robert Chen was a successful businessman, a caring family man, a generous benefactor and a respected citizen. Compassionate and generous, he cared deeply about educating the younger generations, in whom he saw unfulfilled potential to excel. His spirit lives on in the Foundation that bears his name.

# *The Chen Yet-Sen Family Foundation*

## **About Us**

Established in 2003, The Chen Yet-Sen Family Foundation is a hybrid charitable institution with a strategic focus on improving early childhood literacy, through the development of libraries and reading programs. The Foundation also supports experiential out-of-classroom programs which aim to improve personal development of children.

## **Geographical Interest**

The Foundation supports organizations for innovative, cost effective and high impact programs in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Ghana.



## **Mission Statement**

To nurture the potential of the next generation by building, supporting & sustaining innovative approaches that enhance learning & personal development.

This includes:

- Supporting relevant local organizations and people to achieve capacity building
- Introducing best practices or new ideas
- Scaling up successful projects
- Encouraging the dissemination of innovative ideas
- Assisting with people resources in libraries
- Promoting quality literature
- Supporting life skills training

# *Message from the Board*

*We are pleased to present this case study,  
showcasing a selection of  
the Chen Yet-Sen Family Foundation's work  
since we began operations in 2003.*

*For us as a Foundation, these retrospectives are a  
perfect opportunity for us to reflect on the  
work we have done,  
what we have learned, and  
where and how we might improve.*

*It is also our hope that through sharing our  
experiences, we will amplify the lessons learned  
and approaches adopted, supporting others on  
their own philanthropic journey.*

# *Creative Philanthropy*

## **An Innovative Approach to Literacy**

*“It is not because things are difficult that we dare not venture;  
it is because we dare not venture that they are difficult.”* Seneca

### **Introduction**

For over a decade, the Chen Yet-Sen Family Foundation (CYSFF) has supported early childhood literacy programs in various parts of China, Hong Kong and Ghana. CYSFF has established itself as a leader in promoting healthy reading habits in children aged 0-12 – nurturing a love of books, with engaging quality content. Along the way, the Foundation has developed domain expertise in early childhood education, and remains dedicated to fostering a stimulating reading environment that nurtures creativity, confidence, curiosity, compassion and critical thinking.

CYSFF has always believed in going deep rather than broad. Depth is the only path to expertise, which allows the Foundation to comprehend the challenges faced by the sector, and so recognize new opportunities. Through extensive research, and with the conviction that healthy reading habits are a gateway to lifelong learning, CYSFF is in a position to identify the unmet needs of children, parents and educators.

In 2004, CYSFF identified a gap in family literacy in Hong Kong, with no solution in sight. As a family foundation, CYSFF was in a position to assume the risk and took bold steps to create two independent organizations: Bring Me A Book Hong Kong (BMABHK) in 2006 and the Feng Zikai Chinese Children’s Picture Book Award (FZK Award) in 2008. BMABHK has begun to transform attitudes and habits in families with young children, while FZK Award has galvanized the Chinese children’s literature publishing industry to market high quality original work. With these initiatives, CYSFF has sown the seeds from which social change will sprout.

*“We recognize that this is a big and risky step for any Foundation to take, especially for a relatively young and inexperienced organization such as ours. We may in the future find that it was a mistake to overreach our capabilities, but as we encourage our partner organizations to try bold, imaginative and risk-taking programs, we should also foster a similar internal culture.”*

*(James Chen, Chairman’s Report, CYSFF 2004-2005 Annual Report)*

## Bring Me a Book Hong Kong – A New Model for Promoting Family Literacy

The Foundation's approach is supported by evidence linking early domestic literacy activities (reading aloud, singing nursery rhymes) to a lifelong love of reading and learning, as well as academic success. In 2002, American academics published a report called 'A decade of family literacy: Programs, outcomes, and future prospects'. One of the study's key findings was that the best indicator of a child's future academic success is being read to at a young age.

Around this time, CYSFF came across the 2001 results from PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study). Hong Kong ranked last of the 32 countries surveyed that year, with only 16% of young children (aged 0 to pre-school) experiencing high levels of literacy activities at home (e.g. reading, singing, storytelling). The same survey showed that only 21% of parents in Hong Kong read often to their pre-primary age children, compared to the international average of 51%.



In 2001, territory-wide education reforms were implemented in Hong Kong to improve reading habits among the young. Additionally, the government had formed the 'Standing Committee on Language Education and Research' to enhance English proficiency, as well as implementing 'reading to learn' programs (promoting learning to read as the foundation of reading to learn). However, English proficiency remained low among Hong Kong's youth, according to a 2003 study published by Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups.

In 2004, James Chen, Co-Chair of CYSFF, wrote an op-ed for the *South China Morning Post*, urging parents in Hong Kong to focus on early childhood literacy: "Children will be better off if parents went back to the basics, rather than spending money to enroll their children in all sorts of enrichment programs, and spend more time reading at home". CYSFF felt a sense of urgency, and was excited to discover Bring Me A Book Foundation (BMABF). The big question was how CYSFF could bring this model to Hong Kong. One option was to sponsor BMABF to conduct a pilot program in the territory. Another possibility was to find a local organization already working with children in Hong Kong to team up with BMABF. What about an entirely new organization? After much consideration and consultation with board members, CYSFF decided to incubate a new, independent organization to bring BMABF's programs to Hong Kong in 2006.

## ***Why?***

Our research showed that very few organizations took a reforming approach to early childhood literacy, seeking to alter attitudes and habits. Those that did lacked the professional capacity and/or domain expertise, while other organizations focused more on the hardware (e.g. book donations). CYSFF found that BMABF's innovative model and progressive approach fitted with the Foundation's core values. In particular, BMABF's First Teachers Training program, and its complimentary Book Bag and Book Case libraries, encouraged greater parental participation (connecting their work and home via workplace libraries), and placed an emphasis on cultivating the habit of reading together. CYSFF believes that to nurture healthy reading habits requires significant amount of resources, both hardware (libraries and quality content) and software (training and programs for children and adults). Additionally, as with any behavioral change, impact can only be assessed over a long period. There is risk, but BMABF's model aligns well with CYSFF's core beliefs, so the risks make sense.

## ***How?***

Conscious of the difference between strategic and operational risk, CYSFF didn't want to take on the operational control of BMABF's program in Hong Kong. Although incubating a new organization has its own risks, CYSFF decided to secure a technology transfer from BMABF and establish an independent non-profit organization: Bring Me A Book Hong Kong (BMABHK). BMABHK would be an affiliate of BMABF and adhere to BMABF's key values and program guidelines. However, with permission from BMABF, BMABHK would operate independently and have the flexibility to adapt the model to the local context.

From the start, the Foundation had a clear five-year exit strategy to push BMABHK towards self-sufficiency – financially and operationally. In 2006, CYSFF funded 100% of BMABHK and devoted time and manpower to set up the board of directors and the organization. Thereafter, CYSFF reduced its funding support by 20% each year. CYSFF's motivation for reducing funding in subsequent years was to allow BMABHK a chance to become independent and work with other partners to develop itself as a separate entity. 2011 was the last year CYSFF provided financial support to BMABHK.

BMABHK focuses on family literacy programs specific for children aged 0-12. The organization took the model from BMABF, launched in California, and adapted it to the local context:

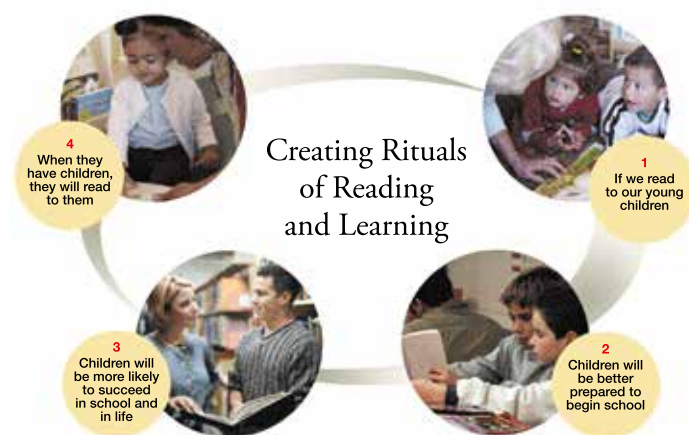
- Promoting and nurturing reading and writing in both English and Chinese to meet the needs of the bilingual environment in which the children live.
- Encouraging parents to bond with their children through reading aloud activities together.



- Helping communities create a reading culture and providing training for parents.
- Planting the seeds that will change social behavior, impacting generations to come.

BMABHK offers the following programs to pre-schools, kindergartens, community centers, medical facilities and workplaces to promote family literacy:

- a) Bookcase Library – includes 45 titles of English and Chinese children’s books recommended by early childhood literacy experts. The library contains a variety of books suitable for different ages.
- b) Book Bag Library – Book bags can be borrowed (rented) and include high-quality hardcover books and CDs to help children develop language skills. The library offers approximately 220 titles suitable for children aged 0-11.
- c) First Teacher Training – Parents are their child’s first and most important teachers, so BMAB provides them with guidance about reading aloud at home. This scheme also supports early childcare providers, such as kindergarten teachers, with additional training.



### ***Risks and Mitigation***

There were lower risk options available to CYSFF, such as running an initial pilot or finding a partner organization for BMABHK. However, the Foundation evaluated the size of the risk against the potential for impact. Although a partner organization would lower the financial risk, it may result in only incremental change, as CYSFF would not be able to guarantee quality. Operating BMABF’s model within CYSFF did not make sense, as it would distract the Foundation from its core operations. The decision to incubate a separate organization was not made lightly, and CYSFF understood the great risk it was taking. How would the organization be set up and staffed? How to bring in the right talents to execute and run the organization? Is five years sufficient for the entity to become self-sustaining financially? There were other risks as well: could BMABF’s American model work in Hong Kong? Would parents be open to a workplace library that allowed them to borrow books to read at home with their children? How would BMABHK convince parents of the positive impacts of this approach on academic success, which is what most parents care about? How does CYSFF go about introducing BMABHK, knowing that it goes against the grain?

CYSFF also considered taking BMABF's model to the Chinese mainland. However, after extensive research, it was determined that China was not yet ready, whereas Hong Kong was ripe for such a radical program. The city was very developed but didn't have many outlets for quality children's books. CYSFF then faced challenges in framing BMAB to Hong Kong's context:

- First, the books recommended by BMABF were English titles. The families in Hong Kong live in a bilingual environment. For the program to be palatable to parents and educators, BMABHK had to curate, with helps of experts, a list of high quality and age-appropriate children's books in Chinese as well as English.
- Second, BMABHK translated the training material to Chinese and conducted sessions in both Chinese and English in order to make the content accessible to parents with low English proficiency.
- Third, the philosophy behind the program challenges traditional Chinese ideas of a 'good education'. Therefore, training for parents and educators had to start with convincing the audience of the evidence linking family literacy to future academic success – providing the 'why', before delving into the 'what' and 'how'.

## The Future of Bring Me a Book

BMABHK is fast establishing itself as the leading advocate of family literacy in Hong Kong. Today, there are over 350 BMABHK Book Case libraries, and more than 21,000 people have participated in First Teachers Training. Many parents credit the training with bringing them closer to their children, as together they discuss stories and go on trips to the library.



In 2013, BMABHK, together with CYSFF, launched the Love to Learn campaign. Through a series of seminars and workshops, the campaign aims to encourage children to think critically and creatively, while reducing anxiety and the stress associated with traditional lessons. CYSFF firmly believes that providing stimulating learning resources to young children at the earliest opportunity is of utmost importance to their future development.

Parents who have participated in these initiatives speak positively about their experiences. One parent cited *"the biggest gain: I now understand the purpose of storytelling with my children and have had a chance to reflect on my more restrictive thinking in the past"*. More importantly, parents are starting to place a high level of importance on family bonding through quality time spent reading together. *"I understand that reading with my child is not just to help them develop vocabulary and language skills, but more importantly, we are bonding during that time and as a result our family is more cohesive. Therefore, it is important to read with our children, and that should not be done by someone else."*

As parents and children change their attitude about reading, naturally they start to focus on the quality of the content. This led CYSFF to take on another high-risk initiative, outside its comfort zone – one that has the potential to catalyze an entire industry.

## **Feng Zikai Chinese Children’s Picture Book Award**

CYSFF quickly gleaned the need for high quality original work for children in Chinese. The Foundation surveyed the marketplace and found a gap: most of the engaging Chinese children’s picture books were translated from English. Why was that?

To answer this question, CYSFF hired a PR firm to conduct in-depth market research into the Chinese publishing industry. It was noted that Chinese literature has not traditionally focused on children as an audience. Chinese literature for children fell into three categories: simplified stories of classics; moral education; and commercial pop culture (from the West). This prompted CYSFF to ask: how can we encourage talented Chinese writers and illustrators to create engaging picture books for children? And how do we help promote and elevate the profile of those already doing great work?

### ***Why an Award?***

The Need was clear, but the solution was not. Should CYSFF create a new publishing company? That would have been very risky, as the Foundation did not possess publishing expertise in a challenging marketplace. Besides, CYSFF felt that the



real gap was in talent, and the nurturing of that talent. Other possibilities included the creation of a program at a university. However, the reach could be limited. The same PR firm also conducted a feasibility study into setting up a book award similar to the Newbery and Caldecott Medals, the two most prestigious awards for children’s literature in the United States. Ultimately, this approach took CYSFF down the path of creating an award to galvanize the entire ecosystem of publishers, authors, illustrators and artists to improve the quality of content for Chinese children’s picture books.

Ms. Daisy Chen, CYSFF board member and wife of the late Mr Robert Chen Yet-Sen, decided to sponsor the inaugural award out of love for her children. *“I often see my grandchildren fully immersed in children’s picture books. I was always curious about what attracted and held their attention so much. After volunteering in a few programs with BMABHK, I realized that children never get tired of the same story when the original work is of high quality and engaging. With creative illustrations, children can have a different experience each time they interact with the same book.”*

Creating an independent organization to launch and operate the award was a new and untested approach, and one that hasn’t been attempted in the Chinese children’s publishing industry. However, this investment had a long-term aim: to build a prestigious brand for the FZK Award, such that years from now it will carry the same clout as the Newbery and Caldecott Medals.

### ***The Name***

Ms. Daisy Chen agreed to help select an appropriate name for the award, and consulted scholars of Chinese literature. In order for picture books to connect with children, they must see the world from a child’s perspective. Although Feng Zikai never created picture books in the modern form, his works show that he truly understood and respected children. CYSFF obtained consent from Feng Zikai’s family, knowing that his name and work could inspire a new generation of authors and illustrators.

### ***Risk and Mitigation***

There were three major risks that CYSFF had to manage:

- (i) *Operation risk.* Similar to BMABHK, CYSFF made a strategic decision to incubate FZK Award as a separate organization. FZK has its own staff, including a board and executive director, and operates independently.
- (ii) *Reputation risk.* Having been granted the honor of using Feng Zikai’s name, CYSFF needs to ensure the organization operates with utmost integrity. The FZK Award must remain a neutral party without ties to any publisher.
- (iii) *Impact risk.* To galvanize an entire industry, FZK Award needs to establish itself as a neutral industry body leader. The organization must look out for the good of the ecosystem as a whole. Thus, CYSFF looks to other successful award programs after which FZK Award can be modeled, and invites experts from around the world to participate as judges, as a way to build expertise and gain exposure. Ultimately, CYSFF wants authors, illustrators, publishers and consumers to value the FZK brand.

## ***Impact and Looking Forward***

The inaugural Feng Zikai Chinese Children's Picture Book Award was held in 2009, with the aim of encouraging original works specifically for young children. The panel of judges brought together experts from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the United States. 330 books were entered from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. In addition to cash prizes, the organizing committee also purchased 3,000 copies of the prize-winning title, *Reunion*, and donated them to schools and libraries. *Reunion* was the subject of discussion at the second FZK Chinese Picture Book Forum ('Writing with Pictures') in Shanghai in 2010, where it was noticed by keynote speaker Deidre McDermott, senior editor at the British publisher Walker Books. She then negotiated to secure the global rights to translate *Reunion* into English and publish the English version for worldwide distribution in 2011. After its release, *Reunion* in English made the list of *The New York Times*' Best Illustrated Children's Books of 2011.

Since 2009, the FZK Award has been held every two years – the second, third and fourth awards in 2011, 2013, and 2015 respectively. It has reached many involved in children's literature across China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and now Malaysia and Singapore. Continually drawing experts from around the world (including the US and Europe), the FZK Award also aims to bring awareness outside of Asia. While the award has gained some recognition in the industry, there is still a long way to go to establish global name recognition, such that consumers place value the FZK logo.

*"We're starting to see the winning titles evolve from being set in a geographic location to a broader context – moving from local to global. We see the possibility of the award becoming a brand – something desirable globally."* (Annie Ho, Board Member of FZK Award)

## **Summary: An Innovative Approach to Literacy**

*"Take risks: if you win, you will be happy; if you lose, you will be wise."*

*Proverb*

To achieve great impact, one must be willing to take great risks. With both BMABHK and the FZK Award, CYSFF took bold steps into unfamiliar territory to develop and shape the ecosystem of learning. CYSFF has always sought to make decisions by looking at the space holistically, analyzing the challenge deeply, and evaluating a project thoughtfully. Although incubating BMABHK meant taking on new strategic and financial risk, the project has great potential for impact. Similarly, with the FZK Award, CYSFF acknowledged the strategic, financial and reputational risks associated with this initiative but felt this was necessary to elevate the educational attainment of Chinese-speaking children.

Today, BMABHK, FZK Award and CYSFF are essentially sister organizations, respecting each other's area of expertise while open to the potential for collaboration. The executive directors meet on a regular basis to exchange ideas and information. By creating BMABHK and FZK Award as independent organizations, CYSFF took a multi-pronged approach: while BMABHK targets behavioral change, FZK Award targets the creation of quality content.

Family foundations have the ability to assume substantial risk, and to invest with patience and resilience. Leading by example, CYSFF has strived to embody a learning mindset, open to experimentation and committed to evolution. The Foundation's focus on early childhood literacy is part of a broader vision of a 'good education' for Chinese children – not merely the traditional Confucian approach (rote memorization, recitation, imitation), but the cultivation of a critical and creative imagination. With programs that are enjoyable, social and inspirational, it is possible to make education the transformation of a generation.





[www.cysff.org](http://www.cysff.org)