
Jet Li's world of One



By [Kevin Tan](#)

It reads like a script of a traditional Chinese movie: the dutiful son promises his mother at her deathbed to spend his life in the service of the less fortunate. But that was indeed the promise international film star Jet Li made to his dying mother who only managed to utter a sigh when he asked about her final wishes.

So it was that this promise and the near-drowning experience of Li and his daughters in the Maldives during the 2004 Asian tsunami deepened his interest in philanthropy and his subsequent founding of the One Foundation, a philanthropic organisation, in April 2007.



Speaking to INSEAD Knowledge at the [Global Social Innovators Forum](#) held recently in Singapore, Li, the recipient of the inaugural Social Innovation Park Distinguished Fellow Award, said: “Because I’ve learnt that life and death are naturally unavoidable, I’ve learnt to live happily and to the fullest every day. Because I’m happy and have no pressure on myself, I can choose to produce or not to produce movies, and I can choose to do or not to do charity work. But I choose to share my happiness with others.”

Li’s desire to do good for mankind also has its genesis from over a decade ago when the former national wushu champion of China had begun seriously pondering about life.

“In 1997 I started thinking about the meaning of life. Why do we live? What do people hope to gain from living?”

“Regardless of whether you’re Chinese, European or Asian ... I think every living thing desires happiness. People feel anxious and insecure because they lack happiness.”

“In the past seven years, my understanding of life – of which the tsunami was one of the driving forces – was that one shouldn’t wait for retirement before helping others.”

Having made up his mind, Li took a sabbatical from his film career in 2007 to found the One Foundation and become a full-time philanthropic activist. The aptly-named foundation, which partners the Red Cross in China, reflects Li's idea of individual monthly donations of one renminbi (about US 15 cents) from every able person in China. A colossal fund could then be built up to aid non-governmental organisations working for various deserving causes.

Indeed, people in China can donate to the foundation by patronising many businesses that have signed up with the foundation, as one renminbi would be donated to the foundation from their bill. Other donation channels include post offices, mobile text messaging and online payment solution PayPal.

“We position the One Foundation as an engine to drive charitable activities in the 21st century. If we can accumulate one-dollar donations, we would be able to effectively address the natural disasters in the world,” says Li.



Besides his mission to help the less fortunate, Li says he is concerned about the immense pressures of urban life, exacerbated by technological tools which worsen – instead of improve – people’s work-life balance. That’s also

why he founded the foundation “to address issues pertaining to material wealth, life, attitudes, as well as to share my opinions with everyone”.

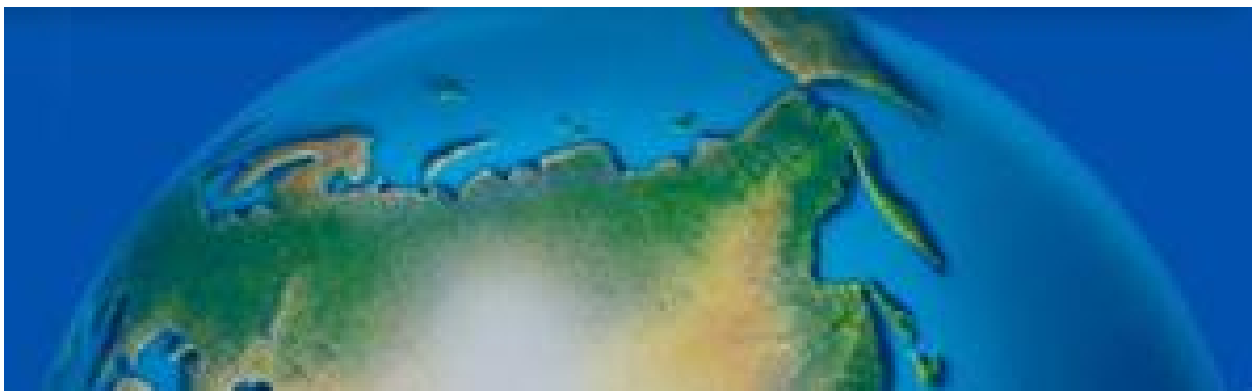
At the heart of Li’s philanthropic advocacy is his belief in the moral obligation of individuals as members of the human race.

“The One Foundation does not seek to raise awareness of social responsibility or corporate responsibility towards helping others, but rather we seek to raise awareness about our individual moral obligations as citizens of the world in helping others.”

Li explains that as people need to be cared for when they are children and when they are old, they are therefore obliged to contribute to society when they are in their prime or in the ‘middle’ stages of their lives.

Even beyond contributions in terms of dollars and renminbi, Li, who jokes that he hopes to become the world’s “biggest beggar”, is really mining for compassion.

“Actually what I’m really asking for is not money. Rather it’s the heart. What’s in your heart, your love, your kindness and your goodness. Everyone has it, but most of the time we just put that into our families, but I’m asking people to spread their kindness to others,”



“Governments around the world are trying to resolve poverty but none of them can successfully achieve it. We don’t expect NGOs (non-governmental organisations) to achieve such a goal. Rather we’re building a platform to get people to express what’s in their hearts. In this way, I’m a beggar to beg people to do a little bit more.”

Certainly the One Foundation, which has offices in the US and Hong Kong and is in the process of setting up shop in Singapore, is thriving, as many Fortune 500 companies have become members. For instance, the

foundation's management partners are Boston Consulting Group and McKinsey, while its auditor is Deloitte.

In addition, some corporate members, such as advertising agency BBDO, provide pro-bono work to the foundation, seconding teams of their professionals for months at a stretch to work on projects that would otherwise have cost the foundation millions of dollars in fees.

In terms of monetary donations, the foundation received monthly donations of 10 million renminbi in 2007 and it hopes to achieve monthly donations of 100 million renminbi in 2008. And stressing the foundation's focus on "transparency" and "professionalism", Li says he wants to build the foundation in ways that are similar to how major listed companies expand and replicate their businesses around the world.

Ultimately, though, Li wants the One Foundation to transcend its founder.

"I took a break from making movies because I hope in five years, 10 years, 20 years' time to build the spirit of the One Foundation. So regardless of whoever heads the One Foundation in the future, the importance is that people identify with the spirit and ideals of the foundation. That's the ownership for everyone not just Jet Li."

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