Major donor avoids the limelight

ASK any Singaporean to name a local philanthropic organisation and the Lee Foundation is likely to pop up.

But the man at the heart of the respected foundation remains something of a mystery.

Chairman Lee Seng Gee, 86, is not one to make an issue of his generosity. The father of four is happy to give – but he does it quietly.

The foundation, which was set up in 1952 by Dr Lee’s late father, Dr Lee Kong Chian, has donated well over $400 million in areas such as education, health and the arts, mainly in Singapore and Malaysia. Its contributions include a $60 million gift to the National Library Board and a $50 million purse to the Singapore Management University.

Dr Lee’s philanthropic efforts earned him the Public Service Star in 1992 and an honorary Doctor of Letters from National University of Singapore (NUS) in 2002.

But those brief forays into the public domain were exceptions to his rule of avoiding the limelight. Even when he was given the National Day Distinguished Service Order award today, the Lee Foundation declined to issue a statement.

In a rare interview in 2003, Dr Lee told NUS’ Alumnus magazine about his family’s long-held tradition of “sharing what you have with those who have not”, which influenced his own philosophy of giving.

“My grandfather was involved in community work. When his business became successful, he built schools here and in China,” he said. “From the time I was young, I understood the meaning of a strong sense of duty and obligation.”

Dr Lee was chairman of the Lee Rubber group, which owns rubber, oil palm and pineapple plantations in Malaysia, and also has other interests such as rubber refining.