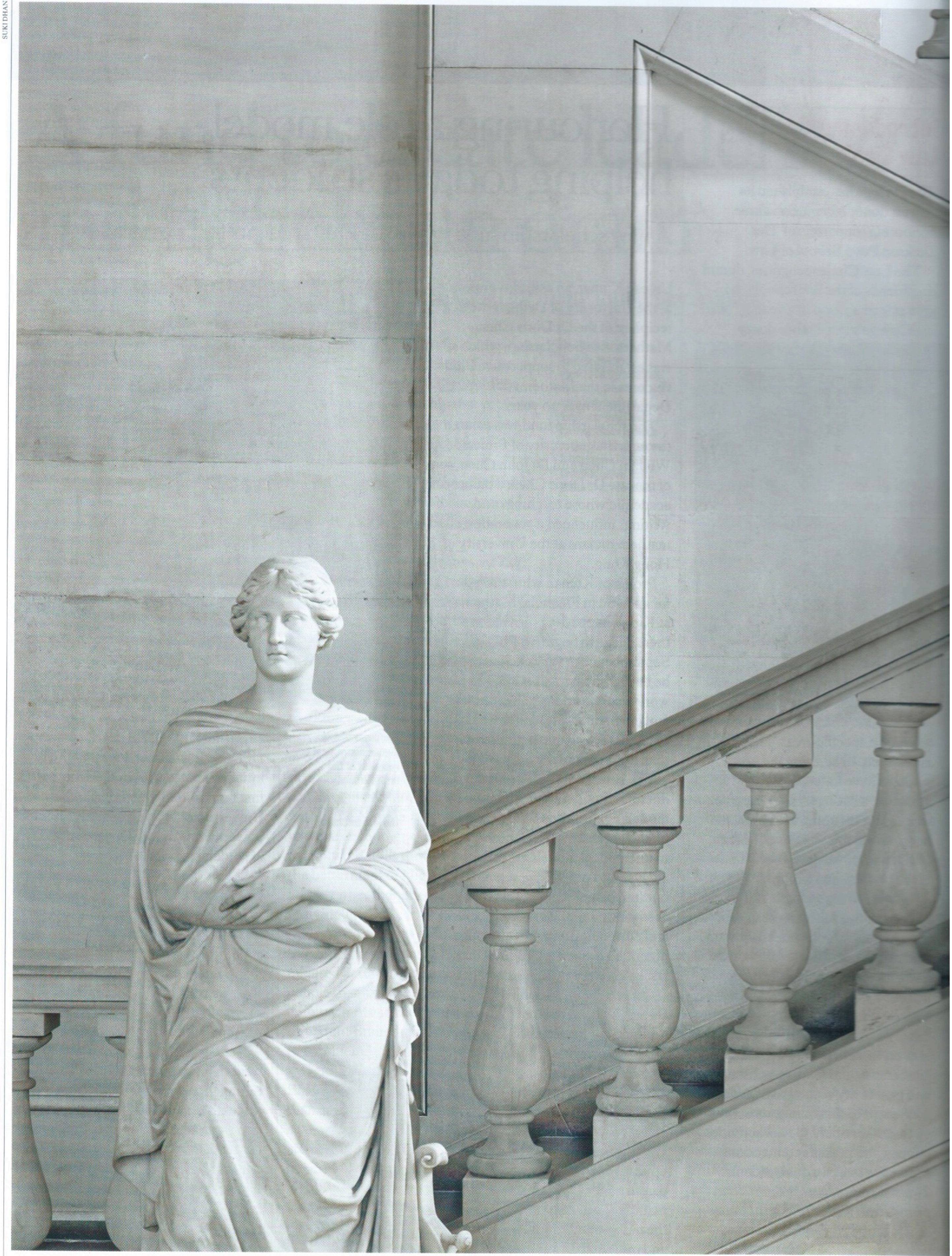
SUKI DHANDA



'HOW DO I KEEP GROWING?'

Since she was a child, Chelsea College alumna Lim Siew-Lian has been defying expectations

BY JAMES BRESSOR

As a polite, unassuming 14-year-old Malaysian girl on an English boarding school hockey pitch, Lim Siew-Lian could have shrunk away when a couple of players from an opposing team started smacking her shins with their sticks.

'These girls started to hit me and one of my teammates who was also from Malaysia,' she recalls. 'My friend and I looked at each other and said, "Should we tell the sportsmaster or should we fight back?"'

Lim pauses and laughs. 'We decided, no, we're not going to tell. We just whacked them back, the same as they did to us. The message was very clear.'

In many ways, that moment summarises the traits that have defined Lim's life: proud, tough and assertive, but always thinking before acting. Those characteristics have served the Chelsea College alumna well. For more than 40 years, she has been central to one of Asia's fastest-growing conglomerates, the Genting Group, which today has more than 100,000 employees across several sectors, including integrated resorts with casinos, cruise ships, oil and gas, factory outlet centres and biotechnology. The group has expanded aggressively across the globe, with nearly 50 casinos in the UK alone.

This business empire has a long history, but it took off when Lim's father obtained a casino license for a hilltop resort more than 40 years ago. Fresh out of Chelsea with her pharmacy degree, Lim oversaw all of the new casino's operations. It was a daunting task for a 21-year-old, but before Chelsea and even before St Francis' College in Letchworth, Lim had been over-achieving.

'I grew up in a time when families still adhered to Confucian values. Loyalty was the first thing that the family expected, above all else,' she says. 'If you were born a girl, you were expected to obey your father. When you married, you were supposed to obey your husband. And when you grew old, you obeyed your son.'

COMING TO THE UK AND RETURNING HOME

While her mother – who had grown up with 21 siblings – could be puritanical, she was liberal about her children's education. She made sure all six of them learned both Mandarin and English. 'My mother said, "One day the world will have to learn Chinese." That was more than 50 years ago, and she was right. It was my mother who persuaded my father to send me to boarding school in England.'

> I wasn't even allowed to play card games growing up

Her father would have an even greater impact on her life. Tan Sri Lim Goh Tong was born in China, grew up poor and immigrated to Malaysia at age 19. By the 1950s, he was a successful entrepreneur involved in construction and mining. The Asian business world at the time was very much a men's club and fathers typically groomed their sons to follow in the family business. Young Siew-Lian, who spoke her mind at the dinner table, impressed her father, and he realised that this daughter could one day help him, beginning with a family trip to Europe when she was 13.

The holiday included visits to British boarding schools – where Lim stashed away application forms – followed by Paris and then on to the marble region near Pisa. Tan Sri Lim had purchased a marble quarry in Malaysia but he didn't know anything about the equipment needed. After a cursory stop at the famous leaning tower, they went to a nearby quarry. While her father met with the quarry's manager, Lim wandered around the grounds, taking down names and information about the various pieces of equipment. On returning home, she presented her father with a neat sheaf of papers containing enough information to order the equipment – and the completed application form to St Francis'.

Chelsea College followed boarding school. Being a student in London during the late 1960s was great fun – 'Who wouldn't enjoy it? You're in Chelsea, right?' – and she met her husband Leong How-Seong, also a pharmacy student from Malaysia. 'We became friends and partners in our practicals,' she says.

Upon graduation, her father surprised her with an unexpected career option. Tan Sri Lim was eight years into the riskiest venture of his life. Convinced that Malaysians would flock to a hilltop resort for cool weather, he was staking his entire fortune on developing thousands of hectares of rainforest now known as Genting Highlands. It was an immense gamble: miles of roads needed to be built, great expanses of raw land had to be cleared and nobody really knew if the resort would prove popular. Well into the project – inspired by a visit to Las Vegas – Tan Sri Lim obtained a license to operate a casino in Genting.

'I didn't know what a casino was,' says Lim. 'I wasn't even allowed to play card games growing up.'

Lim's father asked her to come home and oversee the resort's operations. After much deliberation, she agreed to return to Malaysia. Her father would manage construction of the roads, buildings and other infrastructure, and she would take charge of all administrative and operational matters at the hotel and casino. She soon realised that her Chelsea education had prepared her for Genting: lectures and practicals had provided her with the discipline and investigative skills to analyse challenging situations, develop solutions and methodically execute plans.

'While I was given carte blanche right at the beginning to manage Genting, I also was very fortunate to have my father guiding me, especially in the early years,' she says. 'I learned a lot from him and he relied a lot on me. I just attended to the needs of the business. But we were small, and starting small was an advantage.'

Over the years, Lim and her team of senior managers developed a detailed operations manual and made Genting the first casino in Asia to embrace computer technology. While she could be hard-nosed with staff, she treated employees with respect. She and her team established a share option scheme that rewarded long-serving staff, from busboys to senior managers.

After '18 years in the hills', Lim decided to move on. Genting Highlands had grown from 100 rooms to more than 5,000 rooms and the administrative and operational processes she had developed were firmly in place. She wanted the flexibility to pursue other opportunities and to travel to England, where her three children were attending boarding schools.

She soon entered her next career when the family trust was put in her care. Her analytical skills, judgement and, most importantly, patience – learned at Chelsea and nurtured at the resort – were essential.

'I used the discipline that I had developed at Genting over the years to start this small portfolio, which has grown,' Lim says. 'I now realise there was a marked difference: running Genting was largely influenced by a sense of family duty and cultural expectations, whereas running an investment portfolio offers freedom of choice. And as an investor, my judgement and confidence are critical. Without my university education, I wonder whether I could have made this transition.'

THE BEST YEARS OF HER LIFE

Lim is now looking forward to the future, saying these will be the best years of her life. Her three children are grown and successful. Both of her daughters have degrees from King's: June studied mechanical engineering and has worked at Goldman Sachs, Morgan Stanley and the investment bank China International Capital Corporation; Jacqueline earned her MBBS at King's after completing her MA at Cambridge, and she attained membership to the Royal College of Physicians. Her son Justin, an Oxford graduate, is Genting's Head of Strategic Investments and Corporate Affairs.

Able to look back at her time at Genting with satisfaction, Lim now pursues a variety of interests. She serves on the board of the Cancer Research Initiatives Foundation (CARIF), the only private cancer research facility in Malaysia. Her studies at Chelsea, where she realised that most research involved westerners, made her an advocate for more cancer research with Asian populations.

> “When you fail, it's how you pick yourself up that counts”

Helping women succeed in the business world is another priority. Lim spoke at a Forbes forum for businesswomen in Thailand last year. She advises young professionals to speak up for themselves, not to be afraid of failure – 'When you fail, it's actually how you pick yourself up that counts' – and to ask for help when it's needed. 'Recognise your strengths but, more importantly, recognise your weaknesses,' she says.

At the forum, she emphasised the importance of education, describing it as the most valuable investment in anyone's life. With education comes knowledge and confidence, ultimately leading to independence. Through education, she says, women are empowered to seek their own destiny and achieve equality.

Asked how she measures success, Lim defines it as a lifelong process.

'At any age, we should ask, "How do I keep growing?"' she says. 'When you're in your 20s and have just completed your education, you ask, "Where do I want to go?" In your 40s, when you've had children, you ask, "What can I do now to be successful?" And now in my 60s, I still ask myself, "What next?" I still need to grow.'

Lim Siew-Lian with her parents on her graduation from Chelsea College