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Gambling on a dream

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WHEN Genting Group founder and chairman Tan Sri Lim Goh Tong was reportedly gravely ill last year, shares of the group promptly dived. The rumours surrounding Lim's frail health affected the company's share price for days. Such is the hold the 84 year-old tycoon has on Genting's fortunes. Lim eventually regained his health and so did the price of the group's shares.

This year alone, Lim has made a few public appearances and is in somewhat better health. Lim was there to greet Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for the official launch of the First World Plaza, Asia's largest hotel, at Genting Highlands and he also took time to play host at the gathering of the Lim clan.

A close family friend, Albert Cheok Saychuan, chairman of Bangkok Bank (M) Bhd concurs, 'You have to admit that at 84, he has the greatest stamina for a person his age.'

Yet, there is more to Lim than meets the eye. Besides his highland resort and casino, Lim takes a strong passion in the welfare of the Chinese community. As the honorary president of the Federation of Hokkien Associations of Malaysia, his Genting Group has been a regular donor to many of the community's charities.

Lim's success story is an intriguing one. In 1937, then a young teenager from the Fujian Province of southern China, he landed in British Malaya with a few dollars in his pocket. Fired by nothing more than youthful vigour and dreams, he wanted a better life than he could ever possibly hope for in then Kuomintang China.

Today, more than six decades later, Lim ranks as the second richest man in Malaysia (as reported in Malaysian Business' Feb 16, 2002 issue) and one of the richest in Asia. He controls three listed companies in Malaysia, namely, Genting Bhd, Resorts World Bhd and Asiatic Development Bhd.

Indeed, his rags-to-riches story has been told many times and it has today become a Malaysian dream. Without doubt, 'Uncle Lim,' as he is famously known, has some of the most interesting achievements in his dossier.

For starters, this tycoon successfully transformed the jungle terrain of Gunung Ulu Kali to become Malaysia's most popular tourist destination - Genting Highlands. Last year, the highland resort, with 14,000 staff under its payroll, attracted more than 14 million tourists. Besides having Malaysia's only licensed casino, Lim's city of entertainment has Southeast Asia's longest cable car ride.

His acts of charity are in no way limited to the Chinese community. For an octogenarian with little education and who speaks only Hokkien and a smattering of bazaar Bahasa Malaysia, Lim is said to have a strong passion for academic pursuit. His children have degrees from all around the world. But, that is not all. Lim has the distinction of having a library name after him, the Tan Sri Lim Goh Tong Virtual Library located at the Hospital Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's (HUKM) Cheras medical campus.

Says Datuk Dr Khalid Abdul Kadir, professor of medicine and consultant endocrinologist at HUKM as well as a close family friend of the Lims, 'Tan Sri (Lim) had expressed his wish to donate back to society.' For Khalid, Lim's donation came at an appropriate time for the training of doctors and specialists in the country.

Khalid says, 'I was impressed with Lim's passion for knowledge and wanting to know more about everything. We were a new teaching hospital in 1997 and needed to look for funds to develop the hospital and the faculty from sources outside the Government Treasury.'

As Lim has sponsored a few of HUKM's consultants to visit the renowned Mayo Clinic in the United States, Khalid felt it was an honour for HUKM to have a library dedicated to Lim. In line with Lim's visionary outlook, Khalid notes, 'We felt that our library should be not the usual type of library with hard copies of books or journals. Rather, we needed to be forward looking and have an online virtual library.'

Some of his critics might say, what is a few million ringgit for a rich tycoon like Lim? But Lim donates with immense ease. 'We actually had no problem in getting the donation and it was actually twice what we asked for,' asserts Khalid on his donation request to the tycoon.

Yet, for all his wealth and fortune, Lim may be one of the most down-to-earth and simple of persons. 'He has the ability to go down to your level,' says Cheok. He recalls an occasion with Lim. 'When having lunch with Lim at Awana, he ordered all sorts of exotic dishes such as shark's fin soup and bird nest's soup for us.' But the tycoon, adds Cheok, did not partake in any of the food but instead had a bowl of keau tiau ting (flat noodle soup).

The tycoon is said to have his breakfast regularly at coffee shops in Petaling Jaya and also never fails to partake in his simple bah kut teh - a soup concoction favoured by construction workers for its energy-boosting qualities.

His simplicity in culinary matters is quite unlike his legendary presence at all Genting Highlands' construction projects. Even in the blazing sun, Lim cuts a familiar figure with his broad rimmed hat and cane in hand. He goes to the ground to ensure all work gets done to specification. Lim was once quoted as saying, 'Kalau tidak tengok dia orang kerja, budak-budak ini main.' (If I do not supervise, the workers will play the fool.)

Perhaps that is how passionate he is for his projects perched on the mountain top. 'I have been pleasantly surprised by his big dreams and big plans for Genting Highlands,' says Cheok. Even during the financial crisis of 1997 and 1998, Cheok says, 'Lim still saw a bright future for Genting.'

Lim and Cheok's grandfather-in-law, Chin Sophonpanich, Bangkok Bank Co Ltd's late founder, share a similar rags-to-riches story. Both tycoons are reputedly closely associated in many deals. In fact, Bangkok Bank was one of the early financiers of Genting Highlands and its numerous projects. Today, both families are closely linked and occasionally meet up for small talk and dinners.

Khalid remembers Lim for his simplicity and dedication to his friends. 'I met Lim many times as a young man with my father when he was developing Genting and Awana.' Khalid says, 'I am impressed with his simplicity and his willingness to get on the ground and work with the workers.' But, what struck the doctor most was Lim's valued friendship towards his father. 'Lim tried his best to help my father during his terminal illness.' Khalid's father, Tan Sri Abdul Kadir Yusof, was one of Genting's pioneer directors.

While Lim's stature among Chinese entrepreneurs and tycoon-wannabes is often spoken of as that of a smart but shrewd businessman, friends describe him differently. 'A gentle person, soft spoken and simple,' describes Cheok.

How did this tycoon make his wealth? The tycoon, says in his personal recollections, My Dream, 'It all began in 1964, when I was a sub-contractor for the Cameron Highlands hydroelectric dam projects.' Then, on

an evening stroll in the highlands, as the view and sudden gust of cool air refreshed the sub-contractor, he thought of an idea of developing a retirement retreat nearer to Kuala Lumpur. Cameron Highlands was then a four to five-hour drive from Kuala Lumpur.

He wasted no time in translating the idea into action. Perusing map after map, he found a spot not far from Genting Sempah on the top of Gunung Ulu Kali, a place he found most suitable. With his assistants, he criss-crossed the mountains' thick forest, waded through streams and rivers to reach the mountain-top. But, upon reaching the peak, and with a liquor bottle in hand, Lim's idea of a retirement home had expanded into a hill resort.

Again, wasting no time, he approached the state governments of Pahang and Selangor for a piece of mountainous land. It was no easy task as, in the early stages, the Selangor State Government, then headed by Menteri Besar Datuk Harun Idris, was only prepared to give Lim a 99-year lease. But Lim persevered and after numerous meetings with the Menteri Besar, the Selangor State Government finally granted freehold status for Lim's land.

Lim started construction work on Aug 18, 1965, two days after his application was approved by the State Government. The 20km road to the hill top was built with little government help, except for a subsidy of RM900,000. Then, Lim was pouring in money into a project that saw no returns. He had little choice but to sell his 810 hectares of rubber estate in Segamat, Johor to raise RM2.5 million as capital.

Four years later on March 31, 1969, then prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman was invited to lay the foundation stone for the construction of Highlands Hotel (now Theme Park hotel). In a surprising gesture, the Bapa Malaysia announced that the Federal Government would favourably consider allowing Genting Highlands to operate a casino. Lim applied and was granted the licence on April 28, 1969. The rest, as they say, is history.

Today, says Cheok, 'When people look at Genting Highlands, they see a huge monument.' But the Bangkok Bank chairman says, 'This huge monument would not have been possible if Lim had not seen the potential in the area.' Indeed, he may be right as the tycoon is reportedly still a dreamer and a visionary when it comes to his highlands resort. 'It never fails to amaze me that each time we meet, he will have lots of new ideas for his resort,' states Cheok.

Even Lim's son, Datuk Lim Chee Wah, group chief executive officer of Dataprep Holdings Bhd, tells Malaysian Business, 'My father is my business idol. My father epitomises the exemplary businessman with the strongest discipline, integrity, sincerity, care, hard work and simplicity, especially in these trying times of a great loss in confidence in management integrity and performance from the investing public.'

Malaysian Business' request for an interview with Lim was politely turned down by his office. His other children, Tan Sri Lim Kok Thay, Lim Siew Kim and son-in-law Datuk Tan Teong Hean, also declined to be interviewed for this article.

Much has been said and written about this grand doyen. Lim's business acumen is fast acquiring legendary status in corporate Malaysia and is joining the ranks of other legends such as Tan Kah Kee, Loke Yew or Chua Cheng Bok.

Lim's sojourn from the Fujian province of China to then Malaya has paid off in a way the young immigrant could never have dreamed of. Never could the young man with just a few dollars in his pocket have imagined that one day he would build his own city, Yun Ding (Genting in Mandarin) - a city perched on high cliffs bordered by the mountain and clouds.