

AT A
GLANCE

SILVER SCREEN

To celebrate the hotel's 85th anniversary, Kadoorie commissioned filmmaker and lifelong friend Elaine Marden to produce the documentary *Tradition Well Served*

GIFT OF GIVING

Philanthropy is central to both the Kadoorie family and The Peninsula; the hotel presented four local charities with cheques of HK\$1 million each as part of its birthday celebrations

ONE VISION

"It's a vision of trying our best to be the best in the city that we're in"

Family Values

AS THE PENINSULA MARKS ITS 85TH ANNIVERSARY, **MICHAEL KADOORIE** TELLS **PAUL KAY** WHY THE PAST AND THE FUTURE DRIVE HIS VISION

THE VIEW FROM MICHAEL Kadoorie's office atop St George's Building in Central is doubtless a spectacular one at any given time, but on this particular morning it is truly awe-inspiring.

It's one of those glorious Hong Kong early winter days when the air is crisp and the sky is a cloudless, perfect blue. Far below, the green of the newly laid grass covering the latest phase of the Central Reclamation contrasts sharply with the charcoal-blue expanse of the adjacent harbour, while across the water the glinting towers of Tsim Sha Tsui vie for attention around the grand old dame that predates them all: The Peninsula.

The jewel in the crown of The Hongkong and Shanghai Hotels group, of which Kadoorie is the chairman, The Peninsula Hong Kong reached the ripe old age of 85 on December 11, an occasion that was marked by a memorable gala celebration at the hotel for 2,000 esteemed guests. More than a hotel, The Peninsula is an institution that has been an integral part of the story of Hong Kong and, for Kadoorie, an endeavour that is inextricably linked to his own family history.

That sense of history is something that is clearly held dear. Back in Kadoorie's office, a sign that reads "Sir Elly Kadoorie and Sons Ltd" greets visitors on arrival, a reminder of the pioneering role his grandfather played in the company, while the offices themselves seem like they've been transported from the *Mad Men* era, with olive-green carpets, dark wood fittings and telephone-intercoms that appear to date from the 1960s.

Kadoorie's personal office, which looks out to Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon Bay and the old Kai Tak airport, is steeped even more deeply in history, with photos of his ancestors and royal certificates presented to his father, Lawrence, proudly displayed. A collection of carved jade fills a cabinet along one wall, while a ceremonial khukuri knife takes pride of place on the desk, a nod – along with the Gurkha security guard in the hall – to the Kadoorie family's long affinity

with the famed Nepalese regiment. An old typewriter by the desk is the closest thing to a computer on show.

It is here, aptly enough, that Kadoorie tells me about his first visit to The Peninsula as a young boy in 1946, having just returned to Hong Kong from Shanghai with his family after the Second World War. "It was a very different Peninsula to the Peninsula you see now," recalls Kadoorie.

At first it may have been the cream cakes in The Lobby that most interested the young Kadoorie, but he eventually took a keener interest in how the hotel operated. Kadoorie recalls accompanying his uncle Horace, who was chairman of the company for more than 35 years, on his regular walks around the property. "I learned a fair amount," says Kadoorie. "I learned from my uncle and [general manager] Leo Gaddi the core requirements of the hotel, the interaction with staff, the complaints and how to treat them, and how to keep the standard of food where they should be."

Suitably schooled, Kadoorie would mature into a young director of The Peninsula, and made his mark by opening the hotel's first discotheque, The Scene. Despite the scorn of one director (who Kadoorie recalls telling him ominously, "You know Michael, every young director's allowed one mistake"), the club was a huge success and soon became the town's most renowned nightspot. So much so, in fact, that even his usually conservative uncle Horace attempted to get into the spirit by having his tailor whip him up a black-and-white checked shirt, much to Kadoorie's amazement.

Since then, Kadoorie has driven The Peninsula forward with a mindset that draws on the traditions of the past but always looks to the future – both in Hong Kong and at the sister hotels around the world, which will soon include the much anticipated The Peninsula Paris.

"We are always trying to raise the bar in terms of values, performance, the expectations of our guests and how we can best meet them," says Kadoorie. "We aim for 180 per cent. If we achieve 75 per cent of that, we are probably doing a little bit better than our competitors."

■ PHOTOGRAPHY EDMON LEONG





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Technology is at the forefront of this push, and The Peninsula Hong Kong recently underwent a HK\$450 million renovation of its rooms and public areas, which added an exclusive state-of-the-art computer system that allows guests to control virtually every aspect of their stay from a discreet tablet. Through technology, points out Kadoorie, the company is also able to keep track of its guests’ preferences and needs instantaneously across its entire global network, ensuring that everything will be as they like it when they arrive.

“The hotel business has changed in a number of ways, following society,” says Kadoorie. “The greatest example of change is speed. The world is a far faster place today. Communication is immediate. Expectations today are far greater than they’ve ever been. And the hotel, as with any other company, has had to be able to cater to that.”

Kadoorie remains proudly hands-on in all aspects of the business. “I test everything,” he says, “and believe you me, nine times out of 10 it doesn’t work for me.” This process of continual refinement of even the tiniest details is what allows the hotel to not only maintain but improve upon its high standards – and it’s a process in which the company’s staff are actively encouraged to participate.

“The climate within the hotel as a family encourages you to put your thoughts forward,

to play a part, no matter what level you are,” says Kadoorie. “Everyone is valued as a contributor. As a result of that I think we’ve been fortunate to keep people far longer. And that of course contributes to the knowledge that staff have of guests.”

Kadoorie is fiercely proud of his staff and the corporate culture that encourages many to stay for decades. It is built, he says, on a platform of mutual respect. “I’m as happy to eat in the staff canteen as I would be anywhere else in the hotel; it’s at a level that I would find very comfortable – and colleagues and staff within the organisation feel the same,” he says. “And if you put that kind of level to everyone, you raise the level, because there isn’t a difference, there isn’t a class distinction.”

On the subject of expansion, Kadoorie says there are generally “a few balls in the air in different places”, although he remains tight-lipped on where those might be. However, he does admit, “India is an area that I think would complete the circle as we have three hotels and a resort in the US; there will be two in Europe. And of course we are well placed in Asia.”

It seems the future for the group is very bright indeed. But for now, it’s the grand old dame of them all, The Peninsula Hong Kong, that is taking centre stage for the culmination of its year-long birthday celebrations.

“I always like a party. It doesn’t matter whether it’s the 75th or the 85th,” says Kadoorie with a laugh. “It’s another milestone. But it is a time to reflect. It is a time to look back over the last 10 years, where have we changed, how have we improved, what is the perception guests have of us today as a group. It’s also of course a great time to celebrate – and The Peninsula knows how to do that pretty well.” ■

ROOM SERVICE

Michael Kadoorie grew up with The Peninsula, which opened in 1928; he has watched the family hotel branch out into a veritable empire that now counts properties across six countries