



## ‘In-Conversation’

October 2007

*Featuring*

**Mr Kwek Leng Joo**

A Prominent businessman  
& avid photographer

*Interview conducted by*

Steven Yee Pui Chung

### **Mr Kwek’s list of exhibitions and books published**

- 2001 Guest exhibitor at Photo & Imaging Asia 2001 - *Into the Light* Exhibition
- 2002 “*Timeless Jiangnan*” Photo Exhibition
- 2004 Contributed to “*Lost Horizon*” Exhibition  
Published photo book “*Heart Voyage*”
- 2005 Initiated “*To Singapore with Love*” photo book in celebration of the nation’s 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary & contributed photos to the book
- 2006 Initiated *Singapore Young Photographer Award*  
Guest exhibitor at Photo Imaging Asia 2006  
“*Secret Garden*” Photo Exhibition at Singapore Garden Festival  
Contributed to “*Harmony of Minds*” photo book and exhibition

### **Interview conducted by Steven Yee**

Kwek Leng Joo is a distinguished name many associate with in the business world. Besides being the Managing Director of prominent property developer - City Developments Limited, Mr Kwek also serves the community through various appointments in civic organisations. Our acquaintance was founded on the common interest in photography.

Despite his busy work schedule, Mr Kwek makes the best of every opportunity to pursue his passion in photography. He believes that life is not only about enjoyment or generating wealth. It is easy to get caught up with day-to-day routines and allow important things to take a backseat. This is why Mr Kwek feels that taking time to savour rare experiences is not done enough. Since rekindling his love for photography after a long 16-year hiatus, his voyage has been nothing short of a significant milestone that adds colour and excitement to his life.

Since young, he has always felt an affinity with Nature. Its quiet beauty mesmerises and inspires him more than anything else. In capturing pictures of its diverse family including skies, landscapes, plants, flowers, insects and waters, Mr Kwek often unleashes his imagination and allows himself to slip into the character of his subjects so that he emulates their emotions at that moment. Apart from nature photography, Mr Kwek is also able to establish the same vital connection between his lens and a wide range of subjects such as architecture, people and street scene.

Many may be surprised at the lengths the reserved businessman would go for a good photograph. As witnessed in his works featured in the “Lost Horizon” exhibition in conjunction with the Chinese Cultural Festival in 2004, it surprised me that he had no qualms about scaling mountains, bearing extreme weather conditions and even sustaining injuries. Not an adventure-seeker by nature, Mr Kwek seeks not dangerous encounters but the process of chancing upon interesting subjects and being inspired. To him, the gratification is immeasurable.

Friends and associates of Mr Kwek will know him as a generous supporter of many worthy causes. Apart from outright donations, he has used his photo works to raise funds for the less fortunate and create awareness for environmental sustainability.

In Singapore, photography is not yet a mainstream fine art form and Mr Kwek is committed to elevating the status of photography. Mr Kwek serves as Patron or Advisor to some of the local major photo clubs and he tries to foster a closer network amongst the local photography community through initiating nationwide projects such as Singapore Young Photographer Award and *To Singapore With Love* – a photo tribute in celebration of Singapore’s 40<sup>th</sup> birthday.

The avid photographer has given much to Singapore, be it in business or photography art. I have no doubt more is to come.

## **Questions:**

### **1. How did you get your start in photography?**

Photography has been a hobby since I was a teenager. With some pocket money savings, I bought my first camera – a Chinese-made fully manual Seagull TLR with twin lenses. It was a secret hobby that even my parents were probably not aware of.

### **2. You took a break from photography to divert your focus in your work. What made you return to serious photography again despite your hectic work schedule?**

When I embarked on my career in the early 1980s, photography interest had to take a backseat. It was only later in 1999 that my passion for the art was rekindled by a request to contribute some photographs to a corporate calendar of my company. The theme of Environmental Conservation took me back into the embrace of Nature and almost miraculously, became a significant turning point in my life. It dawned on me that photography could serve as a means to discover and deepen understanding of the truly important things in life.

### **3. What is your favourite topic/specialization in photography?**

My portfolio is quite diverse although the quiet beauty of Nature has inspired and led me to begin with capturing landscape, flowers and insects. I try to uncover the many gems of Nature that are often overshadowed by the hectic city life.

People, places and architecture are also close to my heart, perhaps due to the nature of my work. It is interesting to note how people and their culture influence their lifestyle and create unique cityscape.

### **4. How have you seen your work evolve over the years? How are they affected by your hectic work life?**

As a person matures, his perspective in life evolves. Apart from work, there are also other aspects in life that will affect one’s thinking, interpretation of issues, feeling towards people and the environment. A photographer’s style and presentation of his subjects naturally evolve in tandem with his changing perspectives and sentiments.

Friends and associates have provided constructive feedback that they are seeing more depth and sometimes more complexity in my recent photo works.

**5. What prompted you to publish your book “Heart Voyage”? How did the title come about?**

Since rekindling my passion for photography, it has become more than a pastime to me. I see it as a creative channel to promote meaningful causes that I advocate and more importantly, it enriches my perspective towards life and my surroundings. It teaches me to connect with my subjects and become one with them when I use my camera not as an equipment, but as an extension of my heart. In that sense, photographs hold life’s experiences and represent how the photographer sees life.

With every photo comes a new learning experience – oftentimes, significant lessons that one will remember for life. To me, the end result is never as vital or meaningful as the journey itself. Heart Voyage is not a showcase of technically superior pictures but a means for me to share with my friends a small collection of pictures that marks a milestone in my life. I hope that it has achieved its goal of stirring in the audience the same joy and sentiment I experienced in the process of capturing them.

**6. You have been to many places over the world, especially Asia. Is there any one country or place that has captured your heart?**

Shangri-la, formally known as Deqing, Zhongdian county, Yunnan, is a beautiful paradise I have visited numerous times. Linguistic experts believe that the name is evolved from the Tibetan term “Shambala” and “abode of deities”. Fascinating sceneries of snow-peaked mountains, lakes, borderless grasslands and wildlife are aplenty and they simply take your breath away. The people’s simple lifestyle is accented with colourful culture, festivities and religious practices, music and dance. It is a sanctuary free of worldly desires where I found tranquillity and truly feel without a worry.

**7. What do you want people to see in your photograph?**

While I strive to continuously improve on technical skills and explore different styles, I think at the end of the day, it is more important that a photographer captures what his heart sees and feels. That is the only way to tell the story behind every picture. There is life in every subject and my challenge is to bring that out as accurately as what my eyes see. I would be very heartened if my photos are able to evoke in people the emotions I experienced at the moment the camera clicks.

**8. Do you interact with the people in your photographs?**

I believe in destiny and I appreciate every encounter with people on my photographic journey. Sometimes, observation from a distance offers a clearer interpretation of human dynamics than direct interaction.

In fact, a few of my favourite photos are of people whom I crossed paths with momentarily. Despite language or cultural barriers, the connection we established through the camera lens was magical. Though brief, each encounter has impacted me in different ways and enriched my journey vastly.

**9. What is your most interesting experience during your photo shoot which you would like to share?**

I have always found the process of photography a rewarding experience. Each photo shoot is interesting in its own way as it allows me to discover new subjects, different landscapes and form new friendships.

**10. Which is your favourite photograph?**

[a] Stunning Glory



This moment of the sun breaking out at dawn only lasted for less than a minute. It was taken at a high ground of some 3,500 feet above sea level at Shangri-la, Yunnan about 5 years ago. A group of us woke up before 4 am and took a 2-hour car ride to get there. While waiting, many photographers engaged in chatting or taking a puff. Alas, the moment was gone as quietly as it has crept in. I was fortunate to have stayed focused and captured it. It is one of those magical moments that has etched on my mind till today.

[b] Cutely Charm



Children are not the easiest to photograph but have always been one of my favourite subjects. Somehow, I am able to communicate with them without speaking, but rather, through simple eye contact and body language. The sweet little girl caught my attention with her sparkling eyes. Her innocence is most natural yet it speaks volume to the camera. I am glad that this portrait fetched a tidy sum of \$300,000 in a charity auction in aid of Renci Hospital.

**11. Some say you are your most comfortable and natural self when you are taking pictures. How would you describe this feeling?**

At this present moment, photography is definitely my first love. It is true that I feel most at ease when I am accompanied by my camera. Perhaps it is the freedom when I am not wearing the hat as a businessman or a corporate honcho. During a photo shoot, everyone around me is equal and we communicate as friends do.

**12. You are also very active in the propagation of photography, serving as Honorary Chairman or Patron in various photographic associations. Projects such as “To Singapore with Love” photobook and the “Singapore Young Photographer Award (SYPA)” which are spearheaded by you have much impact on photography in Singapore. Do you foresee the possibility of future projects that preserve the works of pioneer photographers in Singapore?**

It is my hope that the profile of local photography scene be elevated and more young photographers be nurtured and given more opportunities to showcase their artistic talent. For these reasons, the “Singapore Young Photographer Award” is organised biennially for youths between 13 to 25 years old.

Having said that, the inspirational productions of pioneer photographers have merits that deserve to be preserved and honoured. The ability to create excellent pictures even without today’s advanced equipment bears testament to our pioneers’ dedication and endurance to this art form. This also goes to show that the photography in itself is an artistic skill regardless of time.

Young photographers have much to learn from their pioneers. Combined with their creative flair and youthful spirit, I have faith that the local photography community will scale new heights and add much vibrancy to the arts scene as a whole.

**13. What would you say is the future development of photography and your advice to young photographers?**

Some 20 years ago, I would not say photography was an affordable and accessible hobby. With more advanced and user-friendly equipment as well as editing software at relatively inexpensive rate today, photography has become a more popular and attainable hobby. In fact, more can produce photos of decent quality with the help of technology. However, to develop a unique style, character and spirit of your own, it will still require firm commitment and intense practice.

To me, photography has gone beyond a hobby. It opens up a whole new world with no limit to creativity and imagination that not many art forms can offer. It offers one a private sanctuary to freely explore the world, to discover and interpret subjects and express them the way I like. I’m aspiring to another level of photography whereby works are not simply technically superior and appealing to others. I’d advise young photographers not to emulate trends or other photographers’ style. Discover your own strength and interest, capture images freely and do it to please yourself, not others.

## Works





