



## “In-Conversation”

November 2007

*Featuring*

**Mr Lim Seng Tiong**

Veteran Photographer

*Interview conducted by*

Steven Yee Pui Chung

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### WORKING EXPERIENCES

- Involved in commercial projects for company annual reports, magazines and many other commercial publications
- Photography consultant for wedding & travel, wedding Dressing (published by Fullhouse Communications PL)
- A regular contributors to the following publications:
  - Arts Magazine published by Singapore Arts Centre
  - Changi International published by SPH
  - Silver Kris SIA in flight Magazine
  - LianHe Zao Bao Singapore Press Holdings
  - Singapore Magazine By SIF
  - Yuan Magazine by Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations
  - NTUC Life Magazines
  - Photographer for IMF
  - Photographer for Singapore Air Show
  - Photographer for National Library
  - Photographer for National Heritage Board

Dec 1999 to Mar 2001: Chief photographer

- StarEastNet.com, an entertainment internet portal
- Specialized in photography, videography and video editing

1980 to 1997: Executive Photographer (managerial)

- The Straits Times, Singapore Press Holdings
- Head of the photographic unit of Straits Times
- Covered CHOGAM 1988
- Straight times photographer for overseas visit by the former and current Prime ministers and cabinet ministers
- Sports photographer for SEA games
- Arts and cultural photographer for major regional Arts Festivals

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### TEACHING EXPERIENCES

- Have more than 25 years of teaching experiences in various schools, corporate organizations, community centres, clubs and societies:
- Give talk in overseas: China, Malaysia

Photography Instructor of:-

- Various community centres (1980-2001)
- Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts
- Sub-Station (17 years)
- Singapore Institute of practice performing arts
- Photographic clubs & Societies of universities and schools

Photography teacher of

- National junior college
- Anglo Chinese School
- Siglap Secondary school
- Hwa Chong Junior College
- MGS Toa Payoh secondary

Photography advisor of

- Photographic clubs & societies in community clubs
- National Archives Of Singapore

## **PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS**

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*Former Elected Council member of*

The Photography Society of Singapore

*Associate of*

The Photographic Society of New York

*Member of*

The society of worldwide ethnic Chinese Photography

*Member of resource panel of*

“Young Artists Award, Singapore Cultural Medallion” for Photographic Arts under Singapore National Arts Council

*Honorable member of*

Photographic Society of South East Asia

*Member of academy of counsel of*

PAJ Academy of Photography, Johore, Malaysia

## **AWARDS & ACHIEVEMENTS**

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- Received numerous awards
- 1995: National Arts Council 1995 Young Artist Award
- 1991: National Youth Service Award 1991
- 1989: Asean Outstanding Art photography award, organized by CAJ (Confederation of Aean Journalists)
- 1986: Nikon Photo Contest International “Honourable mention”
- 1987: Canon Photo Contest Asia “Honourable mention”
- Held a number of solo exhibitions
  - 1994: Solo Photography exhibition in Malaysia
  - 1994: Second solo exhibition on “Theatre Performance” at the Sub-Station, Art Gallery
  - 1992-1993: Exhibitions in Community Clubs “Photographic Club”
  - 1991: Solo Exhibitions at Central Library, NUS
  - 1990: First Solo Exhibition on “Theatre Performance” at The Sub Station, Art Gallery

## Questions:

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

My father remain a big inspiration to me, in fact, my path in photography is greatly influenced by him and is like a heritage. During my childhood day in Primary 3, my father gave me a camera to take pictures of a school excursion. I was assigned as the official photographer. In those days, there were no formal photography courses. Built-in exposure meter or auto-focus. Most of us learn through trial and error.

When I entered Balestiar Hill Secondary school, I joined the school's photography club which has no photography instructor. This is probably the reason why I volunteer my services to teach in some of the schools' photography clubs today. My stint in my school's photography club provide me with the environment to take pictures of the school's events, get the chance to process and print the pictures for the school's magazines. I began to take part in local and international photography competition and won awards in Pan Malaysian, RI National Students' Photography Competition as well as Nantah International Photographic Competition.

I wanted to join the courses in an established local photographic society but was rejected because I was deemed to have won so many awards and "over qualified" to be in the courses. Thus I have to continue to learn on my own.

I was enrolled the Associate of The New York Photographic Society in Secondary 4. It was during this time when I met one of the local pioneers in photography, Mr Tan Lip Seng. I had the chance to learn under him in a course supported by Canon. Lip Seng is respectable. Initially, I thought I was good enough but during the photo clinic, Lip Seng threw my works into the dustbin. He said that my works should be better, not good enough. This changed me completely. Thus I spend more time taking and developing pictures. After 3 months, my works get better. His harsh words woke me up and changed me for the better. Lip Seng is a perfectionist.

When I entered Pre-University, I have developed an approach to teach photography and began teaching photography in the Balestiar Hill Secondary School.

I do not have the luxury in my early years which many photographers have today. Nowadays, there are so many places where one can learn photography and hone their skills, especially with the introduction of so many high technology camera systems. But this self learning approach enables me to learn photography the hard but fruitful way.

### 2. What made you choose photography as a career? Why Photojournalism?

After Pre-University, I entered national service and served in a particular department of the Police Force which enabled me to take certain kinds of pictures for certain training materials. I was given the chance to shoot in difficult situation using a manual camera. What thrilled me was using infra-red film for some of the work.

After I have finished my national service, I had a few choices. I could have studied photography in US, or accept a post in the government service or join the Straits Times as they need photographers but the pay is lower. The type of pictures demanded in the Straits Times is different compared to what many club photographers are shooting. Salon photographs are not allowed. In those days, Salon photography is one of the main streams in the photography circle besides commercial and studio photography.

Over 100 candidates applied for the Straits Times photographer post. I was short-listed to go for the second round test. I was given 2 rolls of film and tasked to within a day shoot things that I find have news value as well as pictures of a certain kind of sports. After a day of shoot, got back to the photo unit, process the films and made contact prints 8R size to choose 6 pictures to be printed in B/W. My portfolio was chosen and I officially joined the Straits Times as a photographer in **1980**.

I met up with the personnel manager. The comment was past track record of awards only meant one is good technically but it does not mean that one can shoot like a professional. I was offered a salary of S\$200 per month (while the government post which I turned down was S\$800 per month). I took up the challenge as photography is

still my passion, and I told myself that I shall excel in the field of photography in 10 years. For the first half of the month, I slept in the office due to the heavy work schedule and I wanted to learn as much as I can.

My first assignment was to cover a day in the life in “Gang Kar” fishing port in Singapore within 24 hours. It was a good challenge and it built up more interest in my work. My experiences in the national service helped. I will not hesitate to use high ISO, something which photographers at that time will hardly imagine using.

I was given many opportunities to shoot a wide genre of subjects and topics with the camera (without exposure meter) and three lenses provided by the company. My training and skill acquired in my days of Salon pictorial photography helped me greatly, especially the art of composition, techniques etc.

Why Photojournalism? It simply brought me closer to the people and the environment.

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

I feel I need to breakthrough in photography. I picked up theatre performance. There are many interesting characters and the stage simulates daily life of the people. I started with Wayang performances. I explored the backstage and front stage. I like to experiment with different methods with fast and slow shutter speed, and my works were recognised and won prizes in several photography competitions. People began to see my style in my photography works. I got more involved in performing arts especially theatre and eventually I became good friend with the late Kuo Pao Kun.

No doubt, it will take a while for radical approach to be accepted by the public. When I first experimented using slow shutter speed to blur the moving actions of the dancers, many people criticised my approach. Many preferred sharp crisp images of dancing bodies in mid air. My first exhibition in the early 90s was a struggle. I was glad that Mr Chua Soo Bin, Mr Tan Lip Seng, Mr Tan Teng Chao and Mr Lee Lim gave me lots of encouragement. It took a while for my radical approach to be accepted, notably among the youngsters. I am happy a new generation of young photographers appreciate my approach. The works were commented by a judge in the Fellowship panel of The Royal Photographic Society UK. She commented that hardly anyone took dance pictures my way and even hinted that I should try for the Fellowship. This approach was also a breakthrough.

Besides theatre photography, I also like to take pictures of people. I like to spend sufficient time with the people, understand them well until they trust me enough for me to take pictures of their daily activities as if I am part of them. This allows me to capture their characters. People in everyday life are also like a theatre. Nowadays, I only shoot for certain choreographers and artists like Lim Huai Min, Tan Swee Hian etc.

Landscape is another topic I like to explore, not the usual Jiu Zhai Gou sceneries. I like to explore the rural landscape in rural Singapore and Malaysia.

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

Every place captures my heart as they have different culture, character and feeling. Every place is fantastic, wonderful and interesting, even in Singapore. It is important how you see and find your subject matter, looking at things from different perspectives.

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

Thoughts. I hope people can see my thoughts. I like to shoot pictures in series, a series of pictures that can relate a message and evoke certain feeling. People see what I see. I want people to remember certain things.

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

There are many interesting experiences. There was once I covered a story on the Samsui women in Chinatown and they spit on me. Fortunately I managed to dodge in time. Exciting events include covering stories such as Jiang Zemin in Renmin Great Hall in China, the Royal wedding in a palace in Indonesia. Jostling for space among the many photographers and pushing around. This is part and parcel of the life of a Photojournalist.

It is interesting to observe people and see their way of life. One of my more interesting assignments is to photograph Mr Lee Kuan Yew. He is a very nice person and he shares a lot. He made me feel easy when I take pictures of him exercising. There are occasions when he has to tend to something and he would tell me not to worry and he would come back to me for the photo shoot.

## **7. How do you get your inspiration?**

I got my inspirations through daily observations, look at things and feel it. Everyone can be beautiful in my pictures, all a matter of how much you understand and know them. Observe, understand, go in depth. "Go nearer before you go further". I do not like to use long telephoto lenses and shoot portraits from afar if I have the choice.

## **8. Which photographer inspired you most? What did you learn from him?**

Mr Tan Lip Seng and the late Mr Lee Lim inspired me most. "Change" is what I learnt from them. Lip Seng went beyond his famed Diazo technique and Lee Lim went beyond his studio. What I learnt from them is "style is not what you say your works to be, but style is what people tells you about your works".

## **9. How does photography enrich your life?**

Photography is part of me, day in and day out. It made me look at things in different perspectives and not jump into conclusions. Things can evolve into different perspectives, and eras come with changes. Let your life flow, observe and be patient.

## **10. What would you say is the new challenge for photography as a whole?**

The new challenge is not on digital issues. Digital is nothing new, as it was used in space ships decades ago. Photography is not purely playing with new technology and takes snap shots, notably photojournalism which is in no way snap shot photography. It is important to develop proper thought and systems/series/sequence.

Learn to shoot in series eventually. People tend to talk a lot, put these talk and thought into pictures.

## **11. As an advice to beginners, how can they improve in their path in photography?**

Don't be afraid to accept criticism. Even up till today, Lip Seng still share with me his thoughts and he is never hesitant to criticise me in front of people, and this kept me changing. Be ready to "CHANGE". See things from different perspective. In my opinion, there is no such thing as having one's fixed style. Everyday, everyone is on the move and one should continue to change and not get stagnant. It is essential to see different things and explore new frontiers.

One can also adopt old technique and use new technology to work on them. Observe the past and see what inspiration you can get from there.

I also notice that many youngsters are good technically but they do not put much effort in the content and thoughts. Be experimental.

Also, don't be obsessed with latest technology or brand. The equipment is just a tool.

## Works



















