



## “In-Conversation”

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*Featuring*

**Mr Lee Tiah Khee**  
Zaobao Chief Photographer

*Interview conducted by*  
Steven Yee Pui Chung

### ABOUT TIAH KHEE

Tiah Khee is a professional photographer with more than 19 years of experience. He started his photographic career as a news photographer at Singapore Press Holdings in 1987. He worked through the ranks and now heads Lianhe Zaobao's photo desk, the main Chinese daily newspaper in Singapore.

Despite the demands of the newsroom, he always finds time for photography as a hobby. Be it nature, landscape or street photography, he embraces photography with a relentless enthusiasm that speaks of true passion for the craft.

He was so fascinated with birds photography, where he spent most of the time finding birds and photograph them. In wildlife photography, the knowledge of nature, equipments and luck are the key factors to determine the success of the shot.

Why he likes to photograph birds? They are not only most beautiful creatures on the earth, they lead fascinating lives. They feed, drink, swim, dive, perch, fight and fly.

His works have received recognition from both within and outside the photography circle. He was enrolled the Associateship of the Royal Photographic Society in early 1990s. His most recent award is from the 2002 Merlion Park International Photo Competition, in which he faced hundreds of local and international photographers to claim the top prize.

Together with the team of SPH photographers, he visited and captured the historical changes to the various landmarks in Singapore since independence. This project is organized by the statutory board URA. Thereafter an exhibition was held depicting the historical changes.

At the same time, he was involved in a pictorial book project named “To Singapore With Love” – an effort to bring together works of local photographers that is representative of life in Singapore.

His other accomplishment includes: FIAP Silver Medal in 54<sup>th</sup> SIPA 2007 Digital Nature Section, Overall Best Award in the Discovery Singapore and The World Photography Competition (1995), Young Artist Award in Photography (1992) and Best Local Entry Award and Distinguished Photographer Award in the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary National Photo Competition (1990).

He is also a former member of the National Arts Council Resource Panel.

His main wish is to accomplish one goal: publish his own Birds of Singapore pictorial book in the near future.

## Questions:

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

My journey in photography started when I was in Secondary Two. However, in those days, my family could not afford to get me a camera especially after the demise of my father during that time. Through earning some money by taking up some part time work as well as writing articles for the press, I managed to save up some money enough to purchase my first camera to embark on my photography journey. My decision to be a professional photographer is also partly affected by my less fortunate childhood. My passion for photography has been burning since I was young and the only way to have a chance to use proper photographic equipment is to become a professional photojournalist with the press.

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

All the while, I feel that my life will be devoted to my passion which is photography. I chose photojournalism. This branch of photography is one of the more challenging among the other genres of photography. I get to face different challenges everyday in different locations in the different assignments which come with different requirements. It also brought me closer to the daily lives and happenings surrounding us. In my early days in photography, I do not have proper photographic equipment to start off with. I was fortunate to have joined the SPH as a press photographer and get the chance to take pictures with a good set of equipment with different types of lenses.

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

Probably it is due to the environment where I grew up, I like to take pictures of the ordinary people in the neighbourhood. Sometimes when I do assignments which require me to take pictures of the poor people in the neighbourhood, it does affect me and reminds me of the old days. Such subject matter is definitely interesting though.

With my recent acquisition of new lenses, I begin to re-explore one of my favourite topics which is nature photography, notably bird photography.

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

There has been a huge leap in the camera technology advancement. The evolution from B/W film to colour film and to the present day digital had its impact in many photographers' workflow including mine. I have to be mentally prepared to face new technology and make use of it for photography, both for work and for my passion. The convenience of digital is something which I cannot deny and it certainly helped me a lot in my professional work, where I can instantly send images to my office in Singapore from any parts of the world in an instant.

The advance features in the cameras also helped me to push my photography to the next level, especially with the high tech metering system, fast focusing lenses etc. These allow me to capture how I feel and what I see in an instant. The new advance features also allow me to experiment with new ways of taking pictures, especially in bird photography.

I also cannot deny the influence of the digital enhancement software on my works. Now I can easily do enhancement to the photographs of the birds.

My works are not so much affected by my family but rather how my family is affected by my work. Being a press photographer, I am on 24 hour per day standby 7 days a week. There are occasions where I have to go overseas assignment suddenly and I have to postpone several family outings. What pained me is my kids are still young.

### 5. Are there any moments which left you with deep memories?

In the early 90s, I was sent to Jakarta in Indonesia to cover the SouthEast Asia Games. There was a trampedede where soccer fans were rowdy and desperate to snatch free tickets, like some hungry people snatching food. Many ended up fighting. It got so bad and crowded that the military police needed to propel from the helicopter to get into the ticketing booth area to secure the place. Many soccer fans were beaten by the police. The memory of this event is etched deeply in my mind.

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

Regardless if the subject is human, animals, birds or the environment, I wanted to show to the people what I captured at that decisive moment in time. This decisive moment can never be repeated by staging the scene or event finding the same person. I also want to portray the emotion, regardless whether it is a person or an animal. It is not just a photograph.

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

Taking pictures of birds is very challenging. It also brought me much joy and also agony, especially when nature laws set in. There was once I was daily photographing the Olive Winged Bulbul nestlings. The mother bird has been feeding the young for quite a while and the young grew day by day. Then came Mother's day where I took a day's break to celebrate with my mother. The next day, I received a call from my friend that the nestlings came under attack by a group of monkeys and the nest was gone. I would have thought I could complete photographing the entire process of the young birds to the day they could fly. This is the vulnerability of life and made me reflect a lot.

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

I learnt a lot from many world class photographers from all over the world. Their works revealed different perspectives and unlimited creativity. What I learnt from them is ultimately it is not just the photographic equipment that matters most. What is even more important is the need to understand oneself, one's environment and use your heart and soul to capture the moments. Good equipment but without the soul does not make a good picture.

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

Photography to me is like one journey in life. There are moments of ups and downs, moments filled with inspirations and moments lost without motivation. Sometimes we need that "spark" to jumpstart our passion and to breakthrough in our works. It made me realise the laws of nature and the laws of change. I actually took a short break a few years ago from my passion (not work) as I have to juggle my photography career and my new born children. When I rekindled the flame of passion recently, I also realised that my approach and my works seem different from where I last stopped. I tend to look at things from a different perspective after this short break.

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

The photography journey can be a long one. The impact brought in by digital technology made many photographers realise the importance of keeping up to date with the latest in photography technology. Continual learning is a MUST. One cannot stop and live in the old world. This may also lead some photographer to feel stressed, but this is life, which is ever changing. Gone are the days where one can use one's camera and lenses for 20 years which can be later handed down to the next generation.

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

Do not be blinded by a sudden moment of success and be satisfied by one's works at one point in time. It is important to keep learning, keep trying new approaches, experiment, so as to keep pushing oneself to the next level of excellence. I always set myself a daily challenge, which is whether I can produce new works which are better than those taken yesterday.

## Works





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