"In-Conversation"

June 2013

Featuring

David TAY Poey Cher, JP

Publishing Consultant and
Award winning photographer

Cultural Medallion 1982
Fenton Medal from The Royal Photographic Society,
MFIAP, FRPS, Hon.EFIAP, Hon.FPSS, Hon.FPSM

Interview conducted by

PhotoVivo.com

ABOUT DAVID TAY POEY CHER

David TAY Poey Cher, JP, FRPS is a name that strikes a familiar chord among the publishing and photography circles in Singapore. He was CEO of Singapore's leading magazine publisher (with more than 70 titles) until his retirement in June 2006.

As a photographer, he is versatile both as a practitioner and a promoter. In 1982, he was the first photographer to be awarded the Cultural Medallion, Singapore's apex arts award, in recognition of his artistic excellence and distinguished track record in promoting the art of photography.

He was admitted as an Honorary Life Member of The Royal Photographic Society (England) in 2000 and, in August 2008, he became the first Asian ever to be elected as a board member of the International Federation of Photographic Art.

In promoting the practice and appreciation of photography, he has organised many international photographic events which included the World Photo Congress (1980), World Camera Show (1994), Photo & Imaging Asia (2001 & 2003), ClickArt: World Meet of Photojournalists 2003, FIAP Congress (2012) etc.

David has also used photography to help raise funds for the Dover Park Hospice, the Breast Cancer Foundation and a number of other Singapore charities. In 2007, he initiated the *Harmony of Minds* project to promote inter-religious harmony and raised about $140,000 for the President's Challenge. He helped raise another $150,000 for the needy elderly in 2010 through the *Birds in the Garden City* project, which was aimed at promoting a greener living environment.

Apart from photography, David has also distinguished himself in community service. He was appointed Justice of the Peace by Singapore's President in 1998, and was awarded the Public Service Star in 2006 in recognition of his contributions to the well-being of Singapore and for helping the less fortunate in our society.

Find out more about him at www.davidtaypc.sg

Questions:

How did you get started in photography?

I took up photography somewhat by chance when my father bought me a Rolleiflex 2.8F twin-lens reflex camera and a Leica M3 instead of a scooter which I aspire to own. Making the best of my father's gifts, I joined a local photography club in 1960 where I enrolled for a basic course in pictorial. The instructor then was Wang Su Fah, FRPS. I was fortunate to have award-winning pioneer photographers like Lim Ming Loon, ARPS, Lee Lim, FRPS and Peng-Seng Wu, FRPS to mentor me as well.

As a young photography student, I was very encouraged when one of my first exhibition prints won me the 1st prize in the photography club's Quarterly Competition. The picture was taken on my first Sunday outing at Mata Ikan where cockle shells were being burnt to a powder for use as whitewash paint. The win had kick started my decades-long passion in photography.

In your opinion, how has the photography culture evolve over the past 5 decades?

Since 1960, the landscape of photography has changed drastically. I started with black-and-white (BW) films. Colour films were in their early stages. The film speeds then ranged from the low of 25ASA to a high of 400ASA. Higher film speeds from 800 to 1600 ASA came into the scene at a much later stage.

Post production services for BW, from developing films to making prints, could be done by the photo studios. However, many serious amateur photographers enjoyed working in the darkroom themselves. I liked to make enlargements of 16in x 20in BW prints in the darkroom. For colour prints and slides, we normally got them processed by the main commercial labs of Kodak, Agfa, Fujifilm, etc.

Digital photography with acceptable quality came to the fore in the 90s. Digital technology has since changed the ways that images are made, as well as the ways that they are applied. Today, digital cameras of good quality have become very affordable, and are very easy to use. Moreover, most mobile phones are equipped with cameras of acceptable resolution, with 8 to 13 mega pixels becoming the norm. Many people are using smartphone cameras to take and post images on Facebook, websites or blogs. In fact, there are more people taking photos nowadays than ever before.

Technology has also enabled many photographers the ease of having their own websites to showcase their works to a wider audience across borders. Also, many websites, like PhotoVivo, keep photographers updated on the happenings and events in photography. They also have forums for other photographers to post their views and opinions. Hence, the new generation photographers' reliance on the photographic societies (which require them to pay subscriptions) would be reduced over time. No longer do they need the photographic societies to provide them the wall space to showcase their works, or facilities like the conventional darkroom.

It is not uncommon nowadays to find groups whose members got together via social media. They share the images that they have taken, exchange information, and organise local and overseas photography trips online. The number of online photographic competitions has also outstripped those competitions asking for printed works.

How has photography affected your life?

Photography is in my blood because it is my mainstream hobby, if not my sole hobby, for more than 50 years. I am grateful to the many people I have met in photography who have inspired me or guided me. I owe it to them for much of what I am now. Through photography, I also had the opportunity to photograph those who lacked material aspect, or were disabled. They gave me a glimpse into the indomitable human spirit, and taught me to be contented and become more compassionate.

What do you think makes a good photograph?

In my view, a technically good photograph does not necessarily contain a good picture.   A good picture is one that is able to share with the viewers something about the spirit of the subject, or his feeling of a place, with a simple and universal message. The image must also have the potential to invite the viewers to open their minds to the truths and fantasies of photographic art. Most people appreciate pretty images, but they are move by emotional ones. I derive more satisfaction when my pictures are able to evoke the viewers' emotions.

As a publishing consultant, how you differentiate a good and mediocre photography book?

First of all, there ought to be a clear objective upon which the book is published. Whether it is to showcase one's favourite works, or to feature a selected theme, the size, design and quality are important.

To begin with, the cover, which is the gateway into the book, should be pleasing and inviting. It has to be user-friendly, not too big or too heavy to hold, yet not too small that it will do injustice to the images. The selected font types and sizes must be easy to read, too

In terms of design, many authors prefer square format which offers more design options and facilitates layout of images of landscape or portrait format. Moreover, the book has to be paced to achieve its objective with a right mix of image sizes and text, complemented with good mix of colours. Quality of paper that offers a good touch and feel are preferred over those that could sometimes cut the fingers. Matt paper is considered for a subdued feel, while glossy paper is preferred to give the images vibrancy. A

printing company with up-to-date technology and services can help a lot in delivering a quality end product.

For anyone who wishes to publish a photo book, I would advise him/her to consider these factors and seek the professional help of an art director and a copy editor.

How would you describe your style of photography?

Straight-forward. Without props and digital manipulation. Each picture to come with a simple statement or message, that transcends language barriers, of how I feel about the subjects or the scenes.

Any advice for new photographers who are keen to take up photography as a freelancer or professional?

For newbies who want to earn from photography, either as freelancers or self-employed professionals, they have to first consider whether or not they have the aptitude and competence to provide photography services of their chosen fields, e.g. wedding, events, fashion, portraiture, product, architectural, sports, etc. They must recognise that doing professional work is different from doing photography as a hobby. They can choose what they want to shoot as a hobby. But as a pro, they have a "contract" with the paymaster to deliver what he wants them to shoot, even under trying conditions.

Furthermore, without special skills or USP (unique selling point), it will be challenging for newbies to compete in a fragmented market where "cut-throat" competition is common. Good networking does help, but they have to deliver on promise to gain the confidence of those who gave them a chance.

Post-shooting digital work, such as retouching and enhancements has become a norm nowadays. Hence, it is important for the newbies to be trained in these areas. Otherwise, it will raise their cost to outsource the back-end services, and they could even compromise confidentiality in certain cases.

A good website presenting the newbie's portfolios will help to increase awareness of the services he or she is providing, as well as add credentials to the photographer's capabilities. Taking up memberships with professional bodies, such as the Professional Photographers of America and the British Institute of Professional Photographers, will help to lend credibility and keep abreast the professional requirements.

What photographs do magazines look for? How do photographers get started to have their photographs featured in magazines?

Different lifestyle magazines may require different photography services; from interior décor to fashion, from product to portraits, etc. The positioning of a title can also affect the requirements.

For those who are keen to provide photography services to the magazines that they are interested in, they should study the published pictures to understand what the editors want. They should then present a

portfolio of their work to interest the editors or their art directors, and leave copies of their work with them for future reference.

Editors and art directors usually prefer to work with photographers who can understand their brief and follow instructions with some flexibility. Magazines have deadlines, and it is important for the photographers to "do it right the first time" as there may be no time for a re-shoot.

Following the success of your recent photography exhibition which is touring the world, what is your next initiative coming up?

My exhibition, *Coming of Age: Forgotten faces of a greying Asia*, launched in Singapore June 2011, is currently touring the different states of Malaysia until October 2013.

Concurrently, 30 prints from the collection will be showcased at The Royal Photographic Society's Fenton House in Bath in July 2013 before going to the International Federation of Photographic Art's Headquarters in Paris.

I would like to wrap up these exhibitions first before working seriously on the next project which is likely to feature another social theme that concerns our society.

Any other advice you would like to share

Practice, and practice, till your mind and your camera can be in harmony.

Don't be afraid to experiment or explore new avenues to develop your own style of photography.
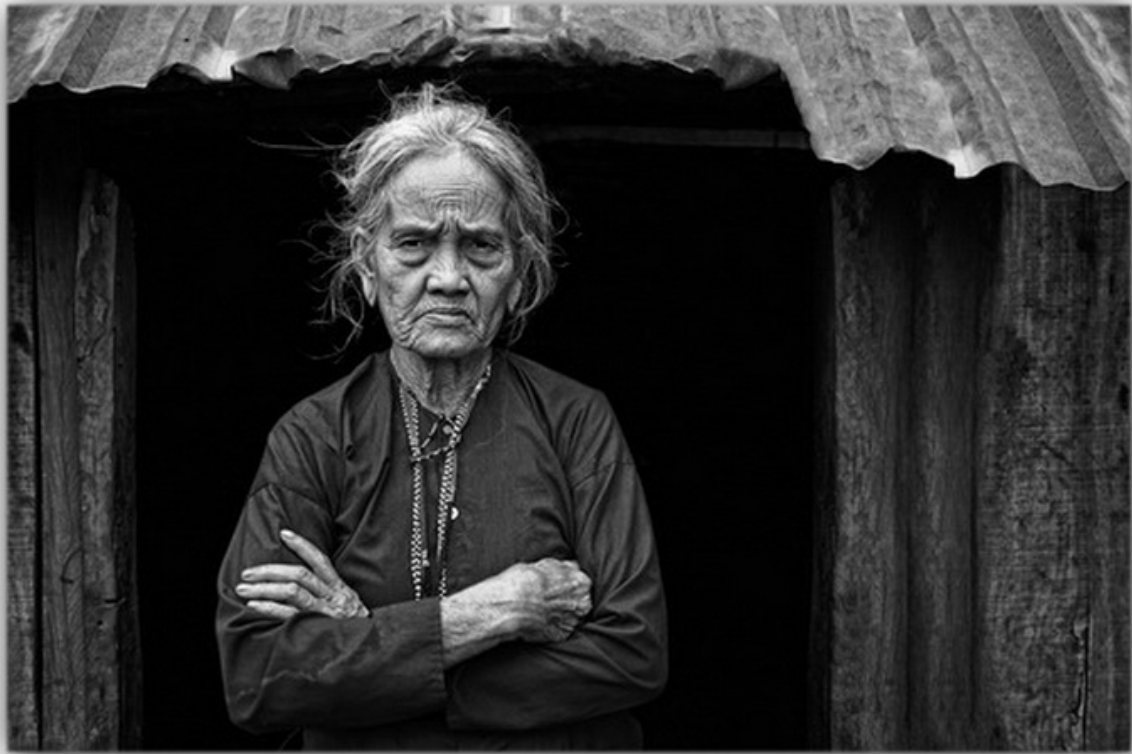
Selected Works

So much has been said and sung of beautiful young girls.Why doesn't somebody wake up to the beauty of old women? Herriet Beecher Stowe (1811 - 1896), American author

More of his works can be viewed from www.davidtaypc.sg