

'Even the skin of one's face seems to be glowing.
It's a picture that will last through the decades'

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Metro

Zooming in the old fashion way

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Photos by LEW YONG KAN

SNAPPING a photograph now may be as easy as pressing a button. But retired photographer Lam Choon remembers the days when it was like creating a piece of artwork.

Like any masterpiece, creating that perfect photograph could be just as painstaking, said the 77-year-old former royal and state photographer.

"In the 1950s and 1960s, photography took a lot of skill, time and patience. It's not like how it is today with digital cameras and computers," said Lam who has 48 years of experience in the business.

Even before developing a portrait, a lot of time was spent to just 'retouch' the negative - millimetre by millimetre, with brushes, black watercolour and a soft 2B pencil.

The result is a photograph that "captures" the inner beauty of the subject. Character and personality are supposed to shine through.

"Even the skin of one's face seems to be glowing. It's a picture that will last through the decades," said Lam at his Taman Grand Silibin home in Ipoh.

A familiar face at numerous state official functions in Perak, Lam has taken pictures of Sultans, dignitaries, ambassadors and once of Queen Elizabeth II with Sultan of Perak Sultan Azlan Shah during her visit to the state in the 1980s.

Gone may be the days when Lam, who was Perak Photographic Society president, used to tote around several cameras to cover every situation, but he still keeps several of his "old favourites" carefully locked up at home.

Among his treasured possessions are his Linhof Technika 70, once known as the King of Cameras, a Linhof Technika 5 x 7, a Leica M3 2 and a Rolleiflex 2.8.

These cameras, which were in the market in the 1960s, were hailed as the best in the world, he said.

"Every once in a while, I'll take them out, put in a roll of film and take pictures with them.

"The cameras can still be used to take good photographs after all this time," said Lam.

When out on his photography stints, he was usually assisted by his sons Koon Sang, now 51, and Pun Ying, 50, who later worked as an RTM cameraman in 1970.

Another son Koon Yeu, 44, also works as a cameraman for TV3.

Pun Ying, who has also been Perak Press Club president for the last 10 years, recalls that his father became a photographer for the royalty by chance.

"He was taking photographs at a state function in the late 1960s when he was asked to cover the opening of the state mosque in Ipoh. However, another photographer was mistakenly hired for the event," said Pun Ying.

"He did not make a fuss and allowed the other photographer to take over the assignment.

Since he was such a "gentleman", the state took him on to cover all state functions.

"Eventually, he was invited to cover royal functions as well," he added.

Nowadays, Lam keeps himself busy with *tai chi* to stay fit and alert.

Despite his age, Lam believes that one has to keep up with the latest trends and be willing to learn the newest techniques to upgrade one's skills.

"A good photographer has to be prepared for everything. Don't get caught without the right equipment," he said.



Lam showing Pun Ying the correct way of handling his trusty camera.



A picture taken by Lam during the big floods in Kuala Kangsar in the 1970s.



A picture taken by Lam when Queen Elizabeth II called on Sultan Azlan Shah, Tuanku Permaisuri Bainun and Raja Nazrin Shah in Perak in the 1980s.

Familiar face in Perak palace

FORMER royal photographer Lam Choon has covered grand occasions such as the coronation of Sultan of Perak Sultan Azlan Shah and the weddings of the late Sultan Idris Shah's daughters.

Although many may think his job was glamorous, Lam remains modest about his stint.

"It's just my job," said the father of six and the grandfather of seven.

Lam was 18 years old when he decided to take up the trade after having settled in Kampar, Perak.

He came from China with his parents who worked as tin miners in the then Malaya.

In 1946, he was accepted as an apprentice at the Thean Yin Photo Studio in Batu Gajah. The studio was then very well known for its quality of work.

"In those days, if you wanted to learn a certain trade, you had to seek out the best - those who were considered the *sifu* or masters in the business," he said.

After a year, Lam opened his own store - Salon Photo Studio - in the same town, before starting another outlet in Menglembu, about 8km from Ipoh, in 1948.

Lam, who is now chairman of Perak Phun Yue Association, also

opened a photo studio in Sitiawan, Perak, in 1961 and another in Ipoh with two partners a year later.

In the course of his career, he covered the functions of four Perak Mentris Besar, from the late Datuk Seri Ahmad Said to Tan Sri Ramli Ngah Talib who is now Dewan Rakyat Speaker.

When Lam finally retired in 1995, Ramli threw a farewell dinner for him at his residence.

For someone who has spent a lifetime capturing moments of other people's lives, Lam is no stranger to the occasional celebrity or official dropping by to have their pictures taken.

He recalled one occasion when the mother of actress Datuk Michelle Yeoh brought her daughter to his studio when the former Bond girl was a young girl.

"Her mother Datin Janet Yeoh is a family friend and she wanted me to take pictures of her daughter to be sent to some people in England. I remember Michelle was wearing this ballerina outfit and I had her trying out different poses," he added.

Although the studios have since closed following Lam's retirement, his art pieces serve as a lasting memory for many.