

PULSE

LIFE&TIMES



Fond glimpses of Malaysia

Unity is prevalent in Kenny Loh's photographs of the people who give colour to our nation, writes **Sulyn Chong**

THE nostalgic and simple charm of the Sultan Ahmad Samad Building provides a clean yet significant backdrop to the bold blue, yellow, red and white hues of the Jalur Gemilang.

Paraded proudly by a troupe of ladies clad in pastel-coloured kebayas, bright smiles on their faces, the photograph is rather poetic.

That's Lyana Khairuddin, one of the founders of this Bring Back the Kebaya movement that I find truly fascinating and uniquely Malaysian," shares Kenny Loh as he points to a lady on the right.

Continuing, he says: "What's more interesting is to find out that each of these ladies are actually high-powered and intelligent individuals. However, their sense of duty to bring to life our traditions of old is what strikes me as gallant yet beautiful."

This is just one of the many stunning photographs hanging in the modern and stylish space at Bangunan KSK along Jalan Yap Ah Shak in the heart of the city. It's the second instalment of the Confluent Exhibition presented in conjunction with National Day and Malaysia Day.

This year's exhibition showcases the works of the award-winning photographer, Loh, famed for his *Born in Malaysia* photobook series, and is co-curated by KSK Land. **TURN TO PAGE 26**

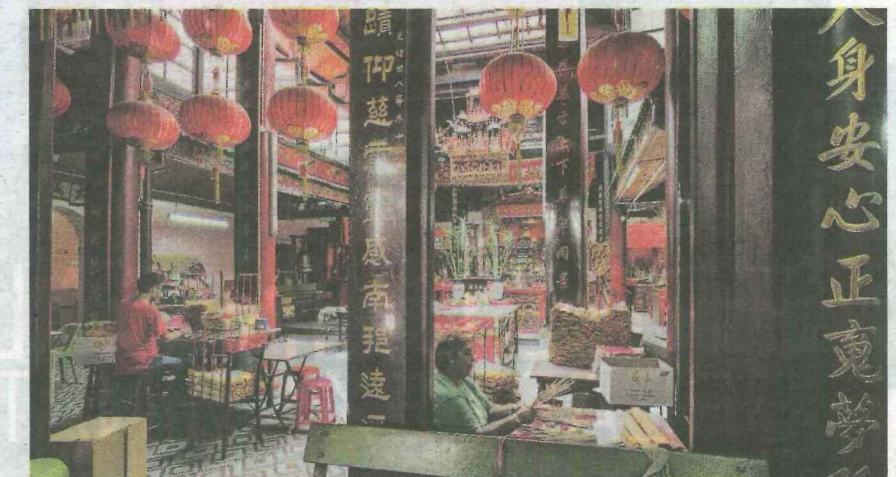
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A mastercraftsman in Penang.



Lim Boi Eng and Munah Abdullah, unlikely friends in the heart of Kuala Lumpur.



A recognisable face in a place that contradicts her race.

Confluent — A Photo Essay of Kuala Lumpur
WHERE Bangunan KSK, 32, Jalan Yap Ah Shak, KL
WHEN Until tomorrow
OPENING HOURS 10am to 5pm (admission is free)
Contact No: 03 2698 0788

Of roots and unity

FROM PAGE 24

Simply titled *A Photo Essay of Kuala Lumpur* by Kenny Loh, the exhibition offers a glimpse of our nation's capital through the lives of the various individuals who helped build it.

Like stills from a movie reel, each photograph hanging in rows of twos show individuals whom we can easily recognise and respect as fellow countrymen.

Although we may know nothing of their stories, the bold quotes that accompany each photo help to offer a poignant insight into their being.

"It's not just the photos that I want people to see. I want people to question it too. So the quotes are perfectly selected to entice inquisitive minds," confides the affable photographer, eyes twinkling.

He goes on to elaborate that the quotes are mere glimpses into who the individuals are.

"A longer version will be available in my book, but they'll be no longer than 300 words. I would rather have the photographs speak for themselves," adds Loh.

Some of the photographs displayed at the exhibition, which ends tomorrow, can be found in his first book, *Born in Malaysia — A Photographer's Journey*

that debuted in 2013. As we take a seat by the window that overlooks the mismatch of high rise and old structures of the city, Loh recalls his initial trepidations when the idea for the project was mooted.

"I never really planned on doing a book on Kuala Lumpur. But when I was approached to do so by a friend, I decided to give it a go even though I wasn't entirely sure what the result would be like," he confides sheepishly.

Hailing from Ipoh, and having lived overseas for more than 20 years prior to his return in 2010, the easy-going photo-journalist was unsure of what he would unearth or what kind of images he would be able to capture.

There was also that slight fear that his photographs would end up painting a completely different picture of what we know of as the heart of our nation.

"But I love Lat so much and really wanted to follow in his footsteps through the

photos I take. He's my inspiration and that gave me renewed strength," reveals Loh. However, during the course of his travels around the city for his latest publication, Loh gradually began to realise that there was a lot about the capital that he didn't know about.

"This book is different from my previous publication. It's more of a showcase of the faces of the people who helped build the city to what it is today. It also highlights the many facets of the city's underbelly that common people who work the conventional 9-to-5 are not privy to," he shares.

The collection is made up of the many heroes who selflessly extend their help out of a sense of kindness and respect for their fellow Malaysians.

There's also a section dedicated to the migrants who helped build this concrete jungle we live in. Finally, there's a section on *dan lain-lain* where every race, every colour, and everyone we know who makes up this nation is celebrated.

"There's just so much to be photographed and every time I get out there, I'll come back with many more subjects to be added into the book. My designer is not happy!" quips Loh. He goes on to share that during the 12 months or more that it took to compile his

Be proud of our heritage, continue its glory - Bring Back the Kebaya movement.



Kenny Loh believes that getting to know the personality is as important as capturing the right shot.

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Kenny Loh

subjects, he spent more time conversing with the people he met than actually photographing them.

"There are about 170 subjects and that's a lot of yakking going on," he confides with a hearty chuckle.

Continuing, Loh adds: "I was also very sure at that time that this would be my last project. I don't even know how I did it because to compile a book takes patience and stamina. It's a long journey. And sometimes, things just don't go as you want it to and that kills your mood."

A pause, and he continues: "I thought I'd learnt all that in my first book, but I guess not. Because whenever my friends talked me out of 'retiring', I ended up agreeing with them and began plotting my next one right after putting this to bed! But I'm also very sure that it's just one of my excuses to travel."

THE JOURNEY
The intrepid photographer confesses that although he may have spoken to hundreds of people ever since he began this journey of documenting our nation, he's still not very good at starting a conversation.

"I was never good at speaking with people. Even more so with girls," reveals Loh sheepishly, adding: "This was the reason why I gravitated to photography because being behind the lens helped open doors that might not have been possible to open before."

He also jokes that the camera soon became a convenient tool for starting conversations.

"When I started doing work for the school magazine during my high school days, that was when I met a lot of girls!"

With a smile, Loh recollects a time when he was utterly afraid to approach an old uncle in an old-fashioned optical shop in Ipoh.

"I kept walking up and down in front of the shop, deliberating if I should go in. Unknown to me, the old uncle had been watching me. So, when I finally decided to approach him, he looked so afraid that. It seemed like he was ready to take flight!"

CONCRETE REMINDER
Jokes aside, his photographic documentation of old Malaysia is a concrete reminder that times are changing and much of our culture, as well as heritage which we once held very dear, are dying.

"The people and places I photograph are partly reminders of the things I saw as a kid, and the places I've been to with my father," reminisces Loh, before adding softly: "It started off as a project for my own consumption because whatever I took wasn't earth shattering."

But after a while, the photographs started giving him a sense of belonging. Although many of the people he knew were no longer there, and the businesses had been taken over by the younger generation, it suddenly became important to him. It turned into a journey of discovery of the Malaysia he used to know and what it had become. Shares Loh: "Ever since the publication of my book, many started to see similarities between themselves and

their fellow Malaysians. I remember this one Malay gentleman who was flipping through the book exclaiming to me, "This story makes me understand that the *Ah Pek* who lives in town and supplies chicken to me has the same aspiration as me."

Loh is quick to point out that sometimes you don't really need to travel far to find the best stories.

"My father was my personal story teller and it was heart breaking that it took me so long to actually ask my dad what stories he had," reveals Loh softly, adding: "It brought tears to my eyes when I finally asked him and all he said to me was: 'I thought you would never ask.'"

A quick glance at my watch tells me that I should be on my way to my next appointment. Regrettably, I tell Loh that I need to take my leave. He nods before throwing me a loaded question: "We always talk a lot about unity and diversity, but do we truly know what it means?"

Without waiting for my answer, he concludes softly: "I hope that my photographs will do justice in portraying how beautifully unique we are as a nation. And hopefully that will divert our attention away from those social media posts that attempt to break the roots that we have so strongly cultivated through generations. Unity is something we shouldn't fear because it is this that makes us who we are."

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For more information on Kenny Loh's photobook, visit www.born-in-malaysia.com.