



# A place in time

Behind every book is a story of how it came about — and sometimes, that story is a remarkable one. **by Elaine Lau**

The story behind *Portraits of Penang: Little India*, which features photography by Dr Ooi Cheng Ghee and writings by Gareth Richards and Himanshu Bhatt, is indeed remarkable. The photo-essay casts a poignant anthropological light on the people and the nooks and crannies of George Town's Little India in 1979, when the photographs were taken. They are a startling reminder of a forgotten time and way of life, for with the onset of modernity and industrialisation, the shophouses in Little India out of which traditional trades used to operate and where people used to live have given way to bustling emporiums, restaurants, fashion stores and entertainment outlets.

Ooi, a medical doctor in Penang who is still practising, had taken up photography after the events of the fateful day of May 13, 1969. With the imposition of a curfew and activity watched closely by the authorities, there was not much a young man of 25 could do. Ooi picked up photography to kill time and it quickly became a hobby.

In 1978, Ooi submitted a seminal portfolio of 12 black-and-white portraits to the Royal Photographic Society in London and was elected an associate, an honour bestowed on photographers of a certain calibre. Encouraged by this, Ooi set out the following year to walk the streets of Penang to document the comings and goings of the people or, as he tells it, to do a series.

"I thought I had reached a level of competence to do a series," he says. "Also, I wanted to walk the streets of Penang and have a look at all the things because that was a turning point in Penang. Industrialisation was coming and the factories... The scenario was changing and the population was moving towards the suburbs — the city was slowly depleting of its population. There was also talk of urban renewal. Now [having been in] Singapore — I studied there — I knew what was urban renewal: It means you knock everything down. So I thought I'd take some pictures and tell my children what Penang was like. I was so scared that it would disappear."

Ooi, who was heavily influenced by great social documentary photographers such as Paul Strand, Henri Cartier-Bresson and W Eugene Smith, took to the streets with his trusty Leica M42 and spent the whole of 1979 documenting the happenings at Little India.

He recalls, "I walked into Little India and thought, 'My God, is this another country?' Everything was different from any other place in Penang. Life was taking place on the whole street. It was like life in a theatre; you see before you the drama of living. It was phenomenal. It was not only the structures, but also the traditions, trades, costumes, customs, religion, all brought from India. It was unbelievable that I had this at my doorstep and yet it was so alien [to me]. So I went to take a few pictures, but

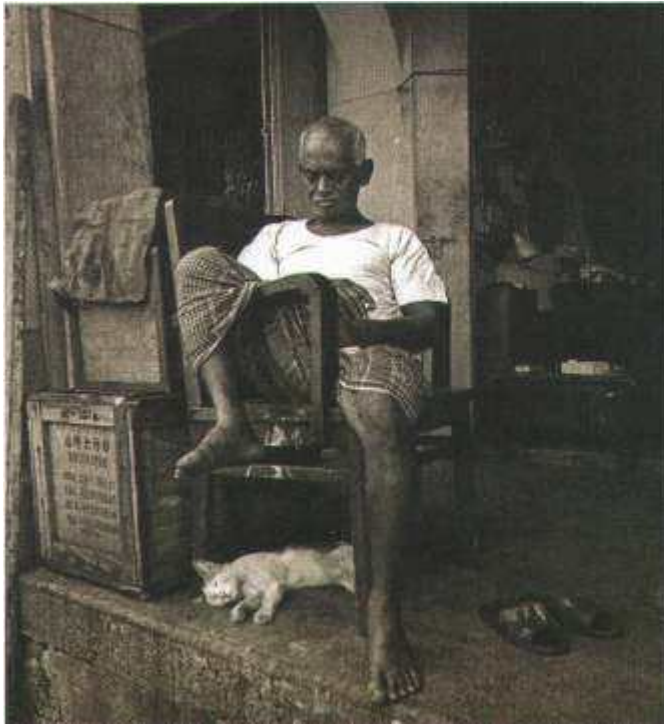
a few pictures led to another few pictures and before long, I was committed to it and it took on a life of its own."

Ooi snapped a staggering 4,000 photographs and he developed the rolls of film himself and did contact prints. He managed to not only document the people in this unique enclave and their way of life, but, as the book beautifully reveals, he also succeeded in capturing the spirit of the place.

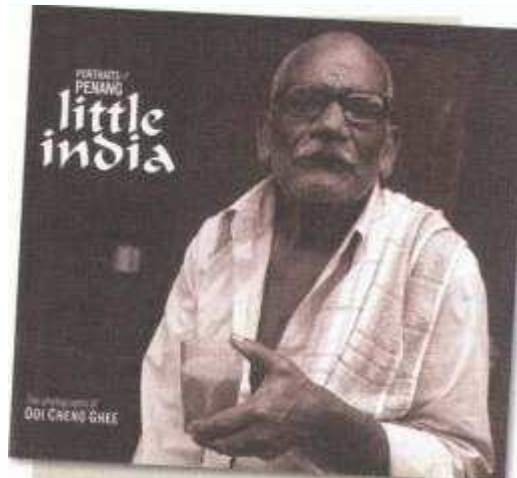
At the time, however, Ooi could not garner any interest in his photos. "No one else, as far as I knew, did this kind of pictures," he says. "You get lonely; there's no feedback. I started to think what's the whole point of it after awhile. There's no place I could exhibit, no one to show to. I didn't know who to contact." And so Ooi put away the photographs and even gave up his hobby, and for the next 20 years the photos remained hidden.

With the arrival of the new millennium, there was growing interest in Penang's heritage among special interest groups and Ooi thought perhaps it was time to revisit his Little Penang negatives and contact prints. With some prodding from his wife Cheong Hor Leng, he showed these to some people. They were astonished at the photographs as they were the only ones available of Little India at that particular time in history.





The photographs, taken in 1979, cast a poignant anthropological light on the people of Little India in George Town



**Portraits of Penang: Little India** can be found in all major bookstores and also at Silverfish Books. It is priced at RM100.



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Fast forward to 2011. The coffee table tome, published by Areca Books and made possible with a grant from Think City Sdn Bhd, Khazanah Nasional Bhd's special projects vehicle, was launched with much fanfare on the streets of Little India itself.

The book opens with a piece by Himanshu on the history and development of Little India and a biographical piece on Ooi by Richards. The black-and-white images that follow — there are 160 in total, all digitally restored by Ooi — are divided thematically into Places, Betel nut workers, Portraits, Collectors and vendors, Trades, Wheels, Tea break, Food, Worship, Where I live, Moments, and Street life, with each chapter introduced with text by Richards.

The photographs are compelling in content and composition, at times lyrical, at others affecting, but all intriguing — they invite you to linger and ponder at what was. Ooi had approached his subject matter with keen sensitivity and wonderful frankness, showing life in Little India and its inhabitants for what it was. The images highlight Ooi's incredible eye and intuition for seeing beyond the mundane. But the way the doctor tells it, he was just shooting whatever caught his eye.

"The good point about the whole thing was I didn't know what I was shooting; it was just a visual exercise," he says. "I took whatever looked good, a bit like a tourist. There was no cause to fight or intention of showing anything. So it ended up that

30 years later, it opens up to so much interpretation by people. But there really is no agenda."

Ooi has a favourite among the lot: the betel nut series, the only surviving photos of a now-extinct industry that gave the island its name. "What I treasure the most is the series on the betel nut industry because it is so rarely recorded in Penang, although Penang is named after the betel nut. It confirms the justification of calling this place Pulau Penang."

What I found interesting was the timelessness of the images. Says Ooi, "That's the whole point to the neutral presentation of the people. They were presented as people not of a special time or circumstances. It's part of being innocent. If you ask me to take similar pictures at present, I wouldn't because I'm so full of prejudice, so full of opinion, so much influenced. At the time, I was looking at things from a very singular point of view. There was no one to tell me that's a good scene or person to take. There was no influence. It was entirely a reactive approach to what I saw ... Looking back, I think these were very innocent pictures. They look very common because they're so real. But if you go to Little India today, you'd find that things are not that real after all because not only the environment is different, you are different."

Towards the back of the book is an index of the photos and a short description of their content. It may not look like much, but Ooi says he spent five years trying to

track down the people in the pictures to get their stories. It was a tedious process, but well worth the effort. "I sat down with some of them for hours and showed them pictures, asking them to tell me about them. I had to go all over Penang to look for them. It took me a long time ... It was hard work ... But I couldn't get them to stop talking. They have so many stories to tell. Every one of them would tell me, 'This is the story I want to tell my children, but they are not interested.' They are so grateful for this book. Hopefully, it will get [their children] interested," says Ooi.

To get people interested in their own history is an aspiration Ooi harbours. The other is that the book would be a "stimulus for future research". He says, "The revival of the area is a good social study, how without interference a community can reinvent itself."

More than anything else, Ooi feels a sense of pride at being able to give back to the Indian community.

"For 30 years, I carried this feeling that although these pictures were mine, they were taken by me, I was more of a custodian. It had to be returned to the people. It was a burden to keep these pictures. After a while you feel a bit responsible; you have this set of pictures that may be relevant and you may not be able to put them to good use for the community or society. When the book came out, I was relieved. I'm no more responsible," he says. **E**