

Shooting for the stars

A self-taught photographer is enjoying phenomenal success in just five years through his constant quest to improve.

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Photos courtesy of LOUIS PANG

LOUIS Pang was stunned when his image beat 2,000 entries from around the world to win what is regarded as the Oscars of wedding photography.

He was not on a commissioned shoot but was instead on holiday in Hanoi with his wife Jasmine, and to hone his craft, he took the picture of a Vietnamese model he had hired.

Pang, from Sabah, is the first Asian to win the prestigious Grand Award in the Portrait category at the Wedding and Portrait International (WPPI) annual convention in Las Vegas, the United States.

His image, titled *Peace*, captures a girl with her eyes closed and hands clasped in a moment of absolute serenity in Hanoi's Temple of Literature. The muted tones, simple composition and calmness won the jury's heart.

"I need the practice when I am not on wedding shoots," explains Pang, 38.

"It takes years to be a doctor, accountant, architect or an engineer. Why should a professional photographer be any different? We have a lot to learn, too."

The WPPI Grand Award is the eighth international award in Pang's five-year career, but for him, it is simply another on-the-job lesson. "To forge forward, I have to forget my past achievements," Pang says solemnly in an interview in Selangor with Jasmine.

"I need to constantly reinvent myself, learn new techniques, break new ground, and not allow setbacks to stop me. Many people say that practice makes perfect, but it is more effective to learn from the best.

"When I started out, there were many established names in the industry. Today, many of them are hardly spoken of. It's a reminder about what would happen if I stop learning at a time when competition cuts across borders, backgrounds or age. The photography industry is relentlessly fast-paced. We either evolve, or become obsolete."

The wedding photography industry is a thriving business where specialised photographers are being recognised more and more,



Louis Pang's winning shot for the WPPI Grand Award this year is a simple composition of a model in a serene, meditative pose at Hanoi's Temple of Literature.

unlike a decade ago.

"The trend has shifted and people now acknowledge that it takes skill and artistry to shoot a wedding beautifully so that your photos are precious keepsakes," explains Pang.

"Sometimes we have to be present from 5am to midnight for a wedding. I shoot every wedding personally because my clients hired me, not a freelancer with my name."

Pang laughs when I mention veteran photographers who have snubbed competi-



Practice makes perfect: Louis Pang is the first Asian to win the 2010 Grand Award in the Portrait category at the Wedding and Portrait International annual convention in Las Vegas, the United States, beating over 2,000 entries from around the world.

tions, and mockingly asks: "Would Anita Mui join a singing contest?"

"I beg to differ," he says. "It's not easy to enter competitions, you know. I am baring myself for people to critique my work and discuss my flaws. But I just want to see where my work stands internationally instead of living in *syiok sendiri* (self-congratulatory) mode. And I believe in setting benchmarks for my work."

"While it's important for clients to appreciate our work, they are emotionally connected to these images that portray them. It's only through a competition that your work is judged for its quality, artistry, skill and technicality."

It takes commitment to seek out competitions, especially professional ones, as they cost hundreds and thousands of ringgit to submit entries. Pang has entered three consecutive WPPI competitions. He had blogged of his desire to win a Grand Award after entering the first time in 2007.

With 40 weddings a year, many abroad, Pang keeps himself from being jaded by getting involved during shoots.

"I take a genuine interest in the most important day of their lives," he says. "I empathise with them, I care that they are hydrated and happy. When the flowers arrive late, I get just as fidgety. I share the bride's nervousness before she heads for the aisle."

"The wedding photographer shares these moments intimately with the couple throughout the day. When we involve ourselves, it's when we get truly unique, beautiful moments."

Little wonder that Pang usually gets appreciative hugs from couples at the end of the day! And his images do become cherished memories.

Bill Hurter, editor of *Rangefinder* and *AfterCapture* magazines, explains in an e-mail interview: "Louis is unusually adept at capturing the day's emotion, whether it's romance, joy, hilarity, or just plain fun."

"He's an empathetic spirit, who is also capable of producing elevated visual statements to portray his subjects. He adds drama to the images by capitalising on natural elements such as rich skies or dramatic lighting or very low light, like candlelight. His images have the touch of a graphic designer – clean, edgy and graphically pleasing to the eye."

"Yet, he is a wonderful 'fly on the wall', capable of capturing these emotion-filled moments unseen and unnoticed by participants, which makes a great wedding photog-



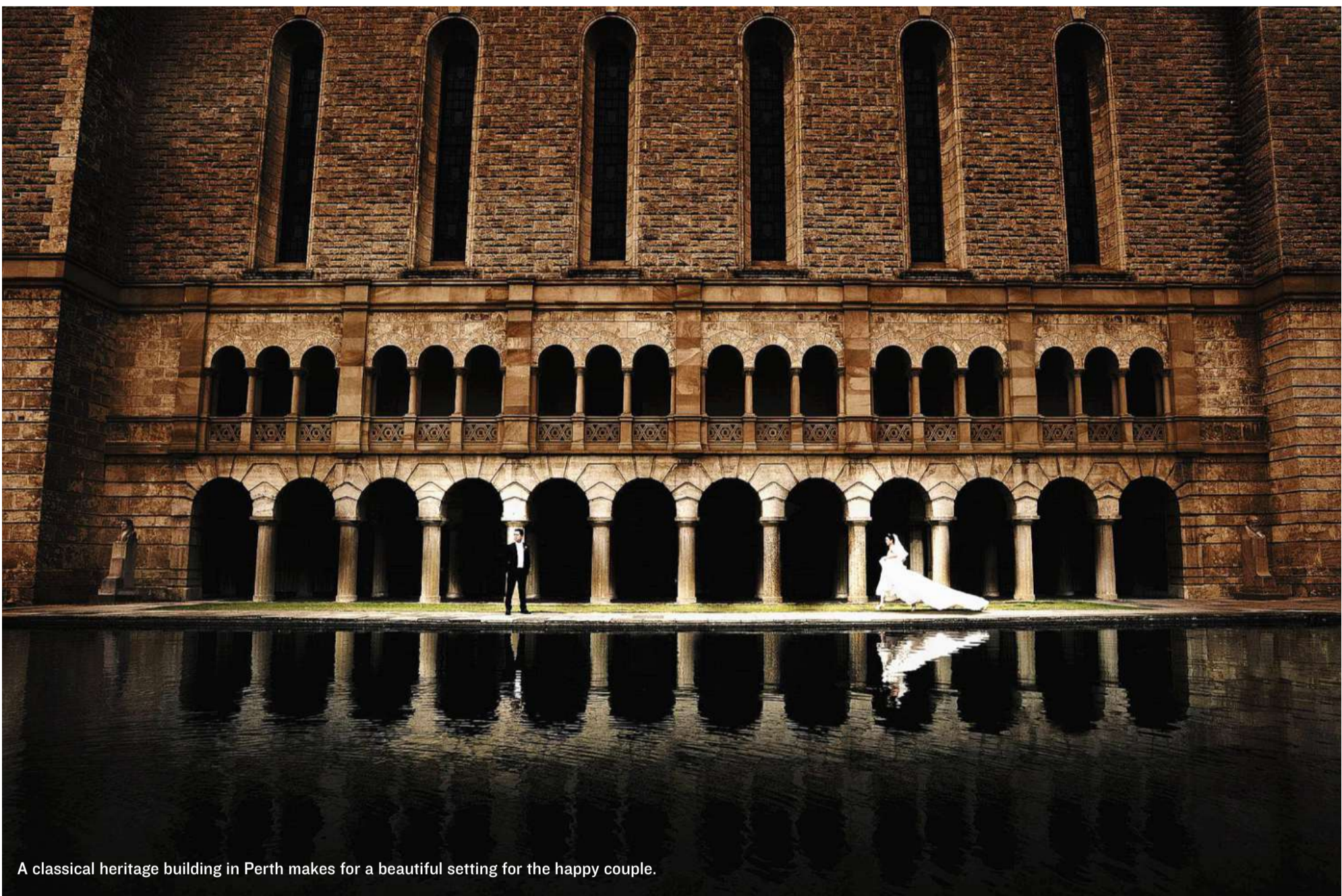
Jenny and Kevin's pre-wedding in Bali at the famed wedding chapel.



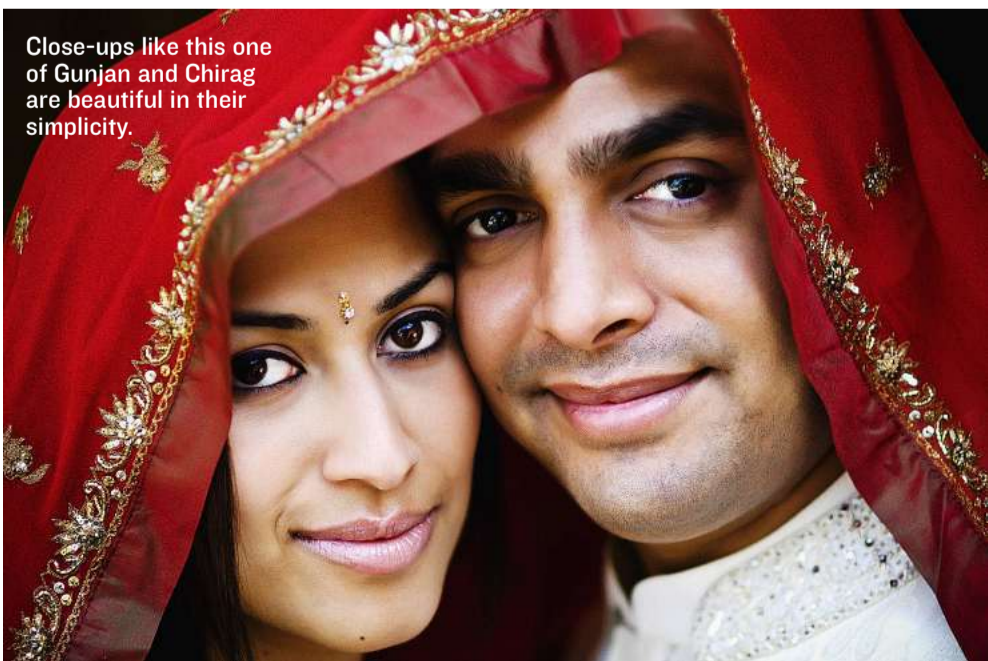
Vintage spells class in Vivian and Michael's pre-wedding shoot in Cuba.



A bridge of brides and maids ... Martina and Gabriel's wedding in Cebu, the Philippines.



A classical heritage building in Perth makes for a beautiful setting for the happy couple.



Close-ups like this one of Gunjan and Chirag are beautiful in their simplicity.



The moment everyone's been waiting for captured from a different angle!



A wedding shot in Sabah highlighting the bride's pretty, hand-embroidered veil.

(Far left) The photograph of Irene and Dylan's beachside wedding in Kota Kinabalu captures its breezy, carefree spirit.

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Portrait of love

rapher. Joe Buissink has this gift as does Marcus Bell, two of the finest wedding photographers I know. Louis has it, too."

Pang has come a long way from his hometown of Tawau. After returning with a History and Writing degree from the University of Toronto, Canada, in 1997, he joined the *Borneo Post* as a reporter. He was required to shoot his own photos so he bought a Nikon FM2 manual camera, still regarded today as a trusty workhorse.

"Being a press photographer taught me to relate to people from all backgrounds," Pang recalls. "In a single day I could be in the Prime Minister's company; the next hour, with squatters. How do I pose people comfortably yet with purpose? How do I communicate with them?"

But over time, Pang's enthusiasm faded. "I became dissatisfied with my work. I had big ideas and ambitions, and I felt I couldn't achieve them if I stayed on in a company. I wanted to take my chances on my own."

So Pang drew his last RM2,500 pay cheque and started his own business from his mother's house. He learned the hard way that skills and eagerness fail to put food on the table.

"Six months went by without a single engagement. I panicked," recalls Pang quietly.



Emily and Wilson's pre-wedding shoot has her looking more like a professional model than blushing bride!

"A local businessman mentored me. He helped me understand that a whole new set of skills apply when we are running a business."

Pang signed up for management and basic accountancy courses at the Malaysian Institute of Management in Kuala Lumpur.

He also capitalised on technology where the Internet became a medium for him to share his values and ideas through his website and blog to broadcast his work. Jobs came slowly. He was hired for his first wedding for RM800.

Today, Pang shoots weddings from Cameron Highlands to Cuba, and was among the first to introduce imported, glossy wedding books instead of typical albums.

Pang also busies himself with teaching workshops and speaking engagements. He operates a website www.wedshooter.tv where he shares tips for budding photographers, and has just opened a second studio in Sri Hartamas, Kuala Lumpur.

In January, he is organising Creative Asia, a seminar featuring international photographers.

"It's costly to attend these workshops abroad so I bring the speakers here," he explains.

"I believe the saying, 'A tide raises all ships'. So if our industry becomes more internationally recognised, everyone benefits. I hope more Malaysian photographers will be successful globally as that will raise our profile. We Asians tend to undervalue ourselves against our foreign counterparts. It's time we stopped doing that and have more faith in our ability."

Pang credits the two women in his life for his achievements.

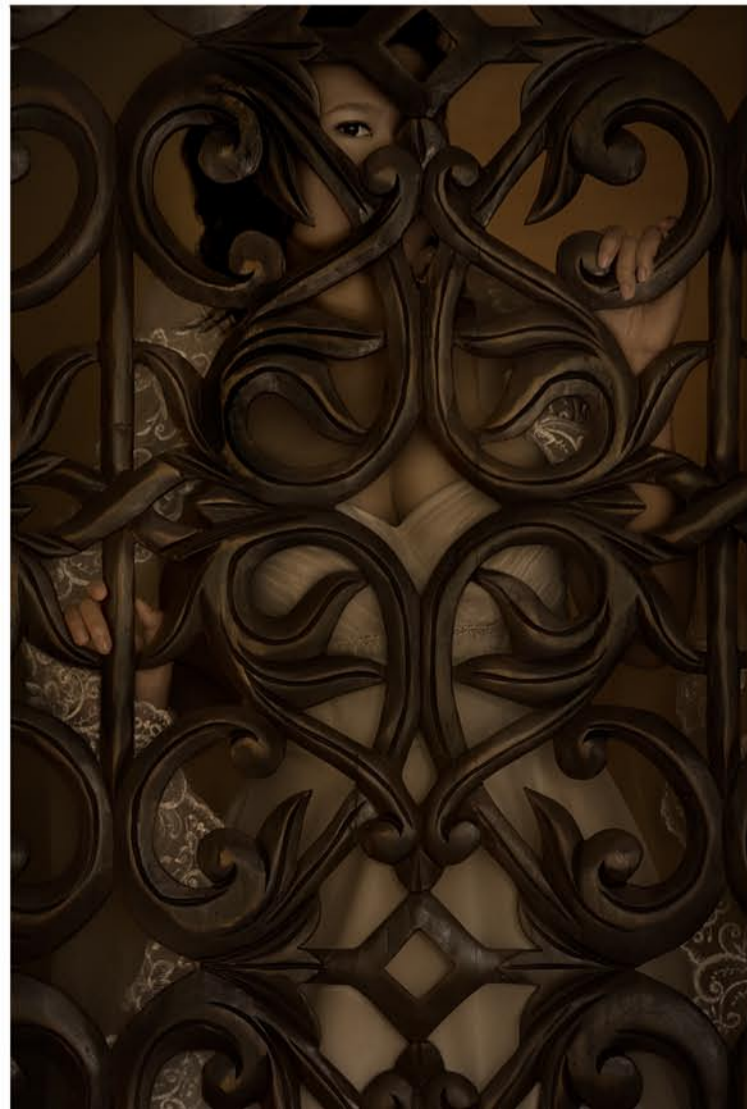
His wife Jasmine has been his biggest supporter and fan, he says, adding that her background as a librarian is invaluable in maintaining accounts and records, image cataloguing, and clients' requirements.

"And my mother single-handedly raised my two elder sisters and I," says Pang.

"She'd always insisted we not follow the majority. Even in school when we'd hum along while reading, she'd scold me when I protested that everyone else was doing it.

"And while relatives thought my mum was crazy to send me overseas to learn reading and writing instead of taking 'respectable' courses like medicine, law or accountancy, she told me to, 'be who you are.'

"Humility keeps me on the right path. Most importantly, I must invest in myself. I allocate two months every year solely for training and to recharge myself. Just as on the first day when I started out, I am still asking people whose work I admire: 'Can you show me how I can be better?'"



A spontaneous, joyous moment captured at Patt and Tze Thean's wedding in Kuala Lumpur.

■ Louis Pang's work can be viewed on louis-pang.com, facebook.com/louis-pang-studio, or wedshooter.tv.