



PICTURE perfect

Capturing a moment and creating a lifetime memory is Kid Chan's forte

In the planning of a wedding, photography always seems to come in last when it comes to budget consideration. Whatever's leftover will be left for the professional to step in and capture your big day in pictures. Frankly, Kid Chan is a little disappointed with this way of thinking. "I went to a wedding at Shangri-La Hotel sometime ago. Just by the venue you know that it was a grand affair. The deco was elaborate, food and wine were fine and of course expensive. But you know what? There was no photographer," he says, with an incredulous expression on his face.

Chan then puts forth this question (to no one in particular): "Why pay so much for something that goes into the waste overnight, and skimp on something that could preserve that big day for a lifetime?"

Chan, if you haven't guessed already, is a wedding photographer. He's made quite a name for himself since he took over P One Photographers through a management buyout in 2000. He is the executive director of PortraitOne.com/P One Photographers, and is the first Malaysian to be accepted as a member of the American-based Wedding Photojournalist Association (WPJA). And just recently, Chan was named as one of the 100 People You Must Know in Asia, in the *Malaysian Tatler*.

The business runs from two offices: a studio in an office lot in Bangsar, on Jalan Maarof, and the other at the Sheraton Imperial Hotel, and a website: www.portraitone.com. For this interview, I meet him in his office in Bangsar which sits on the top floor of a six-storey building. In the corridor leading to his office are pictures lined up on the wall of Chan with celebrities and local prominent figures he's had the opportunity to meet or work with. This hallway of fame can make a bit of an impression on a customer. Well at least I was quite impressed, especially when I walked by a photo of him with Paula Abdul.

The reception is set up like a living room, warm and cosy with pictures of marital bliss coveting much of the wall space. On the coffee table is a laptop connected to a flat-screen monitor featuring a slideshow of some of PortraitOne's best works, probably for my benefit. Chan, 28, is dressed in a suit and tie, and is padding around in his socks (no shoes allowed) getting two cups of green tea organised for us. Despite the fact that he has had quite a bit of coverage from the press about him and his work, he still seems a bit excited for another interview.

He starts by telling me that the wedding photography actually came about by accident.

As a graduate in commerce, he had thought he was destined for all things corporate but after two years in the field as an executive assistant he was a little burnt out. He acquired an apprenticeship at a photo studio his sister was running and began to pick up photography.

Eventually, he procured the business the old-fashioned way — he bought out the business, which was previously fashion-based. He decided to change the company's direction and get into corporate work, taking pictures for corporate communications, events, chairman's portraits and so on. His clientele comprised multinational corporations and government organisations. They did not, repeat, did not do weddings.

"If you saw the order of hierarchy for photographers, wedding photographers were considered the pariahs. Events photographers were better treated, and above them specialists or commercial photographers... this is measured in terms of fees. So we weren't interested in it; we didn't want to touch it. They pay you a certain amount of money, and they refer to you as 'Boy, come here...'. They work you to death and don't respect you as a professional. I wasn't prepared for that kind of ego-beating job."



Chan: Hiring a wedding photographer is more than just paying for his time

So, isn't it funny how the business he was so adamant about steering clear of became the very foundation of his success? It happened when one of his clients, a rather prominent figure, asked if he could do his daughter's wedding.

"How could I say, no to this Datuk?" Chan says of the incident.

Apparently, Chan's style of storytelling was seen through the collection of the photographs.

"When it came to Malay weddings especially, the photographs were always just the couple sitting there, and then the rest was about who and who came. There was nothing about the ceremony, and no real moments captured. Our style caught on with the first job we did — people liked it. Soon, we found ourselves taking photos of the weddings of their extended family."

PortraitOne's big break came with the wedding of Paula Malai Ali and Tengku Kudin. They were the only photographers commissioned to document the couple's auspicious day, and later on, when publications requested for pictures, Paula made sure that Chan and PortraitOne were credited for them. The buzz began. Here, finally was a group of photographers who understood the culture, the ceremony and were able to produce beautiful modern-

day pictures that perfectly captured the day.

Soon, Chan was supplying wedding photographs to the heavily circulated *Pesona Pengantin*, in which he even had his own column. PortraitOne is considered the pioneer of Malay wedding photography.

"It's like a boy-meets-girl kind of situation. It wasn't love at first sight. I found that I actually enjoyed [photographing weddings]. I learn more about culture, the colours... it's just amazing."

Business is definitely thriving for Chan. Advanced bookings have been made as far as December this year. He admits that today is a far cry from those days when he looked at weddings as a downgrade of his services. Today, weddings are a cash cow for the company.

"There are a lot of new, young wedding photographers cropping up, and sometimes they approach me for advice. I usually tell them that it doesn't bring in a lot of money. It took a while for our company to be established, and now, yes, we do charge premium yet affordable prices. But when you're just starting off, it's more about friendships. That's what we treasure most."

His friendships have turned into quite the viral marketing phenomenon — most of the jobs PortraitOne acquires are through word of mouth, and Chan says they spend next to nothing on advertising.

"Hiring a wedding photographer is more than just paying for his time. It's also for his whole body of knowledge, his experience. The kinds of clients who come looking for me are those who think I know what has to be done, and not the ones who come and tell me everything they want me to do."

At the end of the day, Chan's path to success has been a series of unexpected turns. I say to him, if anyone had told you that you were going to be a wedding photographer when you were growing up...

Chan flashes a huge grin, "I probably would have been very upset."

Well, like they say, you never really know until you get there.



Telling a story with his wedding photos