

Photographer, Rifka Hayati

Apr 30, 2020 | Yiu Hong Leung

[Yiu Hong Leung]: How did you start to do photography? How was it related to your design background?

[Rifka Hayati]: I started photography back in 2011 when I was in university. I used to be active in school and was always excited about taking photos of my community events, which lead me to the creative world. In 2013, my first job was as a graphic designer for a company who used lots of stock images in their products. Stock with authentic people in it helped me to deliver my campaign tasks and I became fascinated by how images of real people's lives were adapted into the products.

[YL]: What made you decide to start stock photography?

[RH]: Throughout the journey, stock photography featuring local faces became a higher demand at my company. I struggled to find local people across different themes, so that's how I decided to enter the business in 2017.

[YL]: I know you frequently travel between Malaysia and Indonesia for shooting, can you tell us a bit about your background and relationship with these two countries?

[RH]: I was born and raised in a small town in Indonesia called Bangkinang, Riau, but I've been back and forth to Malaysia because we have relatives there. After high school, I decided to apply for a scholarship program in my hometown and finally got it. So I attended the renowned National University of Malaysia and right after my graduation, I received a job offer. I continued to live here and now am married to a Malaysian man.

[YL]: Your consistent focus on featuring modern Muslim communities in the Southeast Asian region, especially contemporary females with hijabs, makes your work stand out. Can you share your vision with us on that? What would you say most inspires you to interpret this differently?

[RH]: The Muslim community is not really featured well in the advertising industry yet. Therefore, I thought I should give it a try to show the world that there are tons of beautiful Muslim people too. Knowing what's trending makes me try harder to create work with the Muslim community. Finding amazing people through social media has made me realize that we have hidden gems in Southeast Asia.

[YL]: How do you define authenticity in visuals?

[RH]: Keeping things real. I always direct my models to be as natural as possible and allow them time to be themselves. When they are into that, I'll play my part in capturing with my eyes. And my best friend is

natural light!

[YL]: Which image would you choose as your favorite photo of yours and why?

[RH]: As I am really into travel and Muslim people here are some favorites.

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[YL]: What are your favorite subjects to shoot? What is your least favorite subject to shoot?

[RH]: People at home are my favorite! I rarely shoot products because it's just complicated in my view. I'd rather go to someone's house to capture them in the moment instead of spending my time with a product in the studio alone (Extrovert talking!)

[YL]: Where do you usually get inspiration from? TV shows, movies, magazines, or other media? How does it influence your work?

[RH]: My Instagram feed, Netflix, and my daily life have become my biggest sources of inspiration. I can scroll on Instagram for hours learning about how people take photos, seeing things from other people's perspectives.

[YL]: What are you watching or reading at the moment?

[RH]: Currently, I am watching Narcos.

[YL]: Do you work alone or collaborate with a team?

[RH]: I work with my husband - Azrul!

[YL]: Tell us more about the work process with your husband Azrul?

[RH]: Since my husband is working full time, I can't really bug him with so much work from my side, we split the workflow - 70% of work is from me and the other 30% is from his side. I will keep an eye on what to shoot and make some plans and photoshoot timelines. I'll contact the talent and arrange for the photoshoot and brief him with the result I want. A little tip for those people who want to work with your partner is to keep communication clear and clarify what you have in mind. When we are on set, we will both shoot from different angles and use different lenses so that we can have more variety to choose from. I always know I can rely on him keeping everything organized. He 's in charge of making sure the files are all transferred to our storage and ready for me to post-process. Once retouching is done, he will do the keywording and I'll do the double-check and we'll submit it.

[YL]: A real team effort! Any shoot disasters or pleasant surprises you have experienced so far?

[RH]: There is one unlucky experience where all my photos taken on our first trip to Bali were lost due to a broken hard drive! After that incident, we are always aware of the importance of backing up files.

The pleasant surprises are that most of the time we get amazing people to work with and we can't thank those people enough who were involved! You rock!

[YL]: What equipment do you shoot with?

[RH]: My guns are Fujifilm XT-3 and Fujifilm XH-1 with prime Fujifilm XF 16mm F1.4 R WR Fujinon, Fujinon XF 35mm F1.4 R, and Fujinon XF 56mm F/1.2 APD.

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[YL]: What is your secret to getting models to be real and relaxed?

[RH]: I always prefer to hire real families or real couples. I get to know them a bit more from their Instagram profile at the casting stage. I talk to them and ask them about their interests and what they normally do in daily life. It's a lot easier for both of us if we avoid creating scenarios that they are not into and that's how we keep them real!

[YL]: I know you are currently developing a side business in wedding photography; can you tell us more about it? How important is social media for you?

[RH]: Never had we thought to be in the wedding photography business, but it happened when one of my colleagues asked me to do a pre-wedding shoot for them. Looking at how happy they were after receiving the photos gave us butterflies. We were excited to see other people respond to our different visual approaches. So that's why we are here now.

Social media is as important as marketing nowadays. It's my main medium to share my shots, to communicate with my customers, to have more connections, to spread my wings and many more possibilities!

[YL]: What are your thoughts on mobile photography – yay or nay?

[RH]: It is, of course, a yay! I can say my phone camera is THE camera that I always carry. If only Apple came out with mirrorless/full-frame functionality, I would be a mobile photographer.