



Jean Loo's (above) photos, such as the one of Yunnan farmer Zheng Fengxin (right) who had to fetch up to 40kg of water thrice daily until water was piped to her home, bring across the need for safe water. ST PHOTO: TERENCE TAN



PHOTO: JEAN LOO

Photographer Jean Loo worked with non-profit body Lien Aid to capture water issues in Asia. Her photos are featured in a show

# Tapping into the Mekong

corrie tan

**B**efore Zheng Fengxin, 70, got a tap installed in her house, she would haul 40kg of water in buckets on her shoulders from a spring in the mountains. Thrice a day, she made this three-hour trek.

Interviewed in a documentary, the weather-beaten native from Yunnan, China, says in her Hani dialect: "In the past, due to water shortage, I could bathe only once a month. Now, when I come home from work in the fields, I can take a good bath and feel very comfortable."

Zheng's story is part of *The Children Of Mekong*, a multimedia exhibition by freelance photojournalist Jean Loo, on at Objectifs Gallery until Dec 3. Twenty-one photographic prints and six videos capture the need for safe water and sanitation in Asia.

Loo, 26, says: "What is it like day in and day out for someone who is working for a proper toilet? I really wanted to bring that across."

The exhibition was commissioned by

Lien Aid, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that seeks to make clean water and sanitation accessible to poor communities in Asia. Lien Aid covered Loo's travelling costs and paid her a small fee for her time spent on the project, which she has been working on since December last year.

She graduated in 2007 with a degree in journalism and publishing from the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), where Lien Aid has an office that coordinates the NGO's projects in the region.

Interested in its cause, she met its representatives in December last year to talk about potential projects, leading to *The Children Of Mekong*.

The Mekong river flows through China's Yunnan province, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, and is an apt symbol for the project, tying together the geographical regions Lien Aid is active in.

Loo travelled to Phnom Penh in February, to the Mekong Delta in April, and to Yunnan in May. She was accompanied by two journalist friends, Cheow Xin Yi and Yang Huiwen, both 26, who helped with

interviews, sound recording and research on separate trips.

The photojournalist would spend a week in each country and work up to 14 hours each day to document conditions there.

She recalls trekking with all her camera and recording equipment for an hour through the mountains to get to rural villages: "Each trip was really exhausting and intensive, but that made me grow into the project. I enjoyed every single moment of it."

Her prints are for sale at the gallery from \$400. A portion of the proceeds will go to Lien Aid.

She hopes to screen the videos she made in schools, as well as give talks on the project and how photography and social change can go hand in hand.

A worksheet is available on the project's website (<http://childrenofmekong.org>) to encourage teachers and educators to hold discussions with their students after watching the videos, which were made with the help of Little Red Ants Creative Studio.

Loo says: "It's important that kids

here have a look at what's going on beyond our country. We live such a comfortable and well-provided life. Children never have to question where their water comes from or if they have a toilet."

She hopes those with knowledge in water and sanitation technologies will step in to assist Lien Aid after viewing the exhibition.

She says: "There's always a need for affordable toilets. Technology can come from anywhere, and Singapore can be one of the best places to provide that."

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view it

## THE CHILDREN OF MEKONG

**Where:** Objectifs Gallery, 2nd floor, 56A Arab Street

**When:** Till Dec 3, Mondays to Fridays, 11am to 7pm; Saturdays by appointment

**Admission:** Free

**Info:** Call 6293-9782 or go to <http://childrenofmekong.org>

## Varsity course on Lady Gaga

Charleston, South Carolina – Pop provocateur Lady Gaga may be only 24, but she has already won a string of awards and can now add another feather to her many hats: a university course in her name.

Lady Gaga And The Sociology Of Fame is one of the latest courses to be added to the curriculum at the University of South Carolina for the spring 2011 semester. And it already has the campus buzzing.

"The case of the fame of Lady Gaga is sociologically relevant as a study in popular culture and the social conditions of the current culture of fame," said Professor Matthieu Deflem, who will lead the course.

A self-proclaimed fan of the American music diva who has raised eyebrows with her over-the-top costumes and stunning music videos, Deflem, 48, is also a huge follower of pop culture since the 1960s.

"The fame of Lady Gaga is a current occurrence that will also tie in with students' interests," said the professor, who has been teaching courses on international policing and terrorism for the past 15 years.

He has met Gaga five times and seen her perform live 29 times. And he argues that her meteoric rise to stardom is unique to today.

"Her fame has taken place over the past two years in a society which is very different from some decades ago," he said. "Especially the influence of the Internet and technology will be relevant."

Gaga's 2008 debut album *The Fame* has sold more than 15 million copies worldwide, and captured a number of awards, including No. 2 on the Billboard 200 chart and six Grammy Award nominations.

"I think the Lady Gaga course will have a positive impact on the university image because it shows the school is diverse and has courses that aren't necessarily standard," said business major student Kirk Broome.

But other campus instructors question whether such a course really has a place among more serious subjects.

"I'm sure such courses exist all over the world," said associate professor Ernest Wiggins of the journalism school. "The study of fame and celebrity is nothing new."

Agence France-Press