



A venerable, but vanishing art.

An elderly Malay man sits behind a small wooden desk: backmarker of three in an outdoor typing pool. He's on autopilot, typing furiously while glancing at the handwritten sheet; when one line is finished, obeying the bell to push the carriage back to start the next. An incongruous scene by the river in Malacca.

I ask if I can take a photograph. He nods approvingly. *"Sure, help yourself."*

On closer inspection I see the man is working on a business letter, so I sit and wait until the task is done. Soon the typewriter bell sounds the final line, and he winds the ratchet to release the page. After a brief scan he places the sheet carefully to his left, adding to a pile already completed, lifting a small glass paperweight and then replacing it, to ensure everything stays in place. He turns to give me his full attention, a man accustomed to order. *"Welcome,"* he says. *"My name is Lawrence."*



I shake his hand and lower myself onto the client's stool, to the right of his desk. Intrigued by the man, I want to know more. *"Hi Lawrence,"* I begin. *"I'm from Australia and very interested in the work you're doing here. Can you tell me about it?"*

"OK, I take a break. My customer usually private citizen," he explains. *"They write about family problem or community issue. I also have business customer."*

"How much to you charge?"

"Oh, one page, (he holds up a sample, smiling) maybe five Ringgit, maybe more. Depend on client."

He's been doing the same job, at this same spot, for forty-five years, which tells me he's in his sixties, possible more; it's often hard to tell with Asians. Nowadays he works two or three hours a day, six days a week. If there's rain, he closes his shop; the municipal government don't allow umbrellas.

He explains that at his age he becomes weary after sitting for hours in the hot sun, then pulls up one sleeve to show his dark tanned, lower arm, contrasting with the upper, as if to say: *"See what 45 years of hard graft in the Malacca sun has done to me."*



I express interest in his portable typewriter. *"Olivetti,"* he says proudly, then adds: *"Made in USA and many years here in Malaysia. Getting old now. I think we finish together."* He nods and smiles at me once more; a deeper, knowing smile.

His compatriots have both turned to watch us. I feel all three must know that the days for their job are numbered. It's likely there'll be no more Lawrences, once he and his *Olivetti* retire.

I line up a photo: Lawrence in the foreground, his fellow workers behind, the river as backdrop. He poses, poised at the keyboard; white open-necked shirt, dark cotton trousers, heavy-rimmed specs and pushed-back thinning hair.

After a short while a new customer appears, introducing himself as John. Lawrence and I look at each other, then laugh, both coupling up *Olivetti* with his large American cowboy hat. John doesn't quite get the joke and takes my seat.

I feel privileged to have met this man, who had given me time and graciously answered my questions, at his workplace in Malacca.

Duncan Gregory

www.whittlingourniche.com