

# EXHIBITING PHOTOGRAPHY IN PRE-WAR SINGAPORE

The founding of two camera clubs in 1921 created more opportunities to exhibit photographs in Malaya. **Zhuang Wubin** revisits three significant photo exhibitions in pre-war Singapore and examines their implications.



Between the 1920s and the onset of the Japanese Occupation in 1942, there had been various efforts to organise photography exhibitions in Singapore that featured the works of European and Asian photographers. The organisers of each exhibition had their own agendas and reasons for staging the event. Their political affiliations and sources of patronage were also different. By revisiting these initiatives, we can piece together a narrative of pre-World War II Singapore through the conditions that made the staging of these exhibitions necessary and possible.

## Malaya Borneo Exhibition, 1922

On 31 March 1922, the Malaya Borneo Exhibition opened to much fanfare on reclaimed land adjacent to the Telok Ayer basin. Occupying 65 acres (around 263,046 sq m), the colonial spectacle

was put together in less than six months. After several extensions, the fair ended on 17 April.

Governor of the Straits Settlements Laurence Guillemard conceived the idea for the exhibition. As he noted in the souvenir guide, its objective was to “bring together, for the first time in history, representatives of all classes from the two important Malayan countries under British influence”, namely British Malaya and Borneo, so that “by interchange of ideas and discussion of matters of interest to each, considerable mutual benefit might be derived by all, and a revival of local trade possibly stimulated”.<sup>1</sup>

However, in truth, the revival of colonial trade was probably the key reason for organising the exhibition. In Singapore, the post-World War I euphoria quickly gave way to a recession in 1920,

which only started easing in 1922.<sup>2</sup> There was also the minor matter of coinciding with the visit by the Prince of Wales who officiated the opening. The souvenir guide also highlighted that the exhibition would show the prince the “natural resources and possibilities of Malayan countries under British influence, and to illustrate as far as possible some of the characteristic features of these countries and their people”.<sup>3</sup>

To that end, plans were made for members of the Malay, Dyak and Murut communities to create life-size replicas of their traditional houses for display.<sup>4</sup> While 42 Dyaks arrived from Sarawak to build their longhouse, the North Borneo Chartered Company, however, failed to round up enough men to re-create a Murut house.<sup>5</sup> In any case, the Arts and Crafts Section remained one of the most

popular exhibits at the fair, featuring some 20,000 items made by or belonging to the indigenous communities of Malaya and Borneo. Many of these items were also available for sale.<sup>6</sup>

The exhibition included performances to entertain visitors, such as Sulu and Dyak dances, *mak yong* and *menora* dance forms from Kelantan, *boria* theatre from Penang, *mek mulung* theatre and *wayang kulit* shadow play from Kedah, regimental band music and even a Tamil fire dance.<sup>7</sup>

Many major businesses in Singapore, such as Fraser and Neave, Robinson and Co., and Sime Darby and Co., participated in the Commerce Section and bagged medals and diplomas for their best products. This was the key objective for staging the fair in the first place.<sup>8</sup>

Outdoor events included boat races, football matches, “live” Terengganu boat-building demonstrations, a circus, a dog show, a zoo comprising animals from different “collections” and even Manila Carnival entertainment.<sup>9</sup> Into that melee was an exhibit of photographs.

F. de la Mare Norris, government entomologist and assistant to the director of agriculture of the Federated Malay States, was instrumental to this photographic display. Norris had been elected president of the Malayan Camera Club (MCC) when it was established in Kuala

Lumpur in 1921.<sup>10</sup> In the same year, the Singapore Camera Club (SCC) was founded, which catered initially to Japanese amateur photographers in Singapore and Johor (this club is unrelated to the similarly named club formed in 1950 in Singapore).

When plans were drawn up for the Malaya Borneo Exhibition in Singapore, the organisers turned to the MCC for help due to its connection with the colonial milieu, instead of approaching the SCC. Norris was selected to chair the Photography (Amateur) Committee, which comprised non-Asian members, including his wife Muriel. (Norris also served as honorary secretary of the exhibition’s Agricultural Section Committee.)

In January 1922, an open call was held for submissions from “amateur photographers of all races” for the photographic display. At the time, amateur photography connoted an artistic pursuit as opposed to professional photography where practitioners engaged in photography for profit. One of the conditions stipulated was that the photographs had to be taken in either the Malay Peninsula or Borneo.<sup>11</sup>

Exhibitors could submit photographs in any of the seven classes (or categories): (i) pictorial photography; (ii) portrait studies; (iii) outdoor or fancy-dress portraits; (iv) nature studies; (v) native life studies; (vi) places of interest, and (vii) miscellaneous. The first three classes were “intended solely for work of a pictorial and artistic nature”, while “photographs exhibited merely for their interest or technique” should be submitted to the remaining classes.<sup>12</sup> Not surprisingly, the winning submissions were dominated by Japanese practitioners of the SCC and British members of the MCC. Norris and his wife also won multiple awards.<sup>13</sup>

Professional photographers were not left out. A Photography (Professional)

Committee was also set up to organise submissions from professional photographers. In that committee of five, two Asian names stood out: Lee Keng Yan (most likely Lee King Yan; 李鏡仁) and S.K. Yamahata.<sup>14</sup> Their inclusion suggests that by the early 1920s, Japanese and Chinese studio photographers had gained a foothold in Singapore’s photographic trade, and could no longer be sidelined by the colonial government or European studio owners.

The winners of the professional section were dominated by Japanese photographers who blended Japanese tradition with Western techniques, although the Chinese-owned Empire Studio (established by Low Kway Song in 1920) and Eastern Studio (founded by Lee King Yan in 1922; he had previously set up Lee Brothers Studio on Hill Street) also won awards.<sup>15</sup>

Selected photographs submitted to the two committees were displayed in one of the railway godowns on the exhibition grounds. One of the first portraits a visitor would have seen in the professional section was that of Lady Guillemard, wife of Laurence Guillemard, placed near a portrait of the Sultan of Johor. The power structure of the colonial society was made clear in a visual and spatial sense. On a superficial level, the close proximity of the two photos indicated an equal relationship between the British and Malay elites. The implication, however, is that it was the “protection” and tutelage of British colonialism that ensured the continuity of Malay power.

More crucially, the public display of photographs in the exhibition marked a significant attempt to utilise the amateur and professional pursuits of photography to advance the agenda of the colonial state. Photography was included in the array of displays and performances in the fair, which

**(Facing page)** A souvenir guide produced for the Malaya Borneo Exhibition held in Singapore from 31 March to 17 April 1922. Image reproduced from *Guide to the Malaya Borneo Exhibition 1922 and Souvenir of Malaya (Singapore: Malaya Borneo Exhibition, 1922)*. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RRARE 607.34595 MAL; accession no. B02935804).

**(This page)** The carnival at the Malaya Borneo Exhibition held in Singapore from 31 March to 17 April 1922. Arshak C Galstaun Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

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advertised and showcased the products and “development” of Malaya and Borneo, giving the impression that these were the result of “benign” British rule. In effect, photography was used by the British to visualise and shield the specific effects of colonialism. In the process of decolonisation and nation-building, the national elites retained a similar faith in photography, mobilising it for a variety of cultural, socio-political and diplomatic projects.<sup>16</sup>

**Overseas Chinese Photographic Exhibition, 1935**

On 24 March 1935, the Chinese Consul-General to Singapore, Philip K.C. Tyau, presided over the opening of the Overseas Chinese Photographic Exhibition. Newspaper reports hailed the exhibition as the “very first of its kind in Singapore” and the “first one promoted by the Chinese in Malaya”, presumably because it showcased the works of Chinese photographers residing in Malaya

even though entries by photographers from Hong Kong were also included.<sup>17</sup>

By this time, the SCC and MCC had become inactive. And unlike the public display of photographs at the Malaya Borneo Exhibition in the previous decade, where works by the Japanese were featured, it had become less acceptable during the 1930s for Chinese photographers – who considered themselves cultural elites – to be seen on the same public platform as their Japanese counterparts. This was because Japan’s blatant aggression in China from the late 1920s had given rise to anti-Japanese sentiments among the Chinese communities in Singapore and a surge in nationalist feelings for the Chinese motherland.<sup>18</sup>

The exhibition was held at the premises of the Nanyang Chinese Students Society on Prince Edward Road. Founded in Singapore in 1919, the society was a self-help organisation targeted at overseas Chinese youths, with the aim of helping

them eradicate bad habits, strengthen their physiques and propagate the national language.<sup>19</sup> The exhibition organisers also invited Tyau to serve as its patron. These initiatives revealed the unmistakable imprint of Chinese nationalism on cultural and artistic matters in Singapore.

The idea of staging the exhibition was first mooted by a small group of photo enthusiasts at a New Year’s Eve dinner in 1933.<sup>20</sup> Application details were disseminated throughout February 1935 via the network of Chinese photo studios in Singapore, and also through Keng U photo studio in Kuala Lumpur and Kong Hing Cheong in Penang.<sup>21</sup>

Kwa Soon Hock, an employee of the Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation (OCBC), was responsible for receiving the submissions.<sup>22</sup> Despite the hefty entry fee of \$1, the organisers received 352 prints from 38 entrants in Sitiawan, Seremban, Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Perak, Penang, Terengganu, Singapore and Hong Kong. After two rounds of selection, 83 prints were shortlisted.<sup>23</sup>

The participating photographers included well-known amateurs like Chia Boon Leong and OCBC general manager Kwa Siew Tee, who was the father of Kwa Soon Hock. Chia was no stranger to photography exhibitions, as he had earlier received two awards at an exhibition organised by the SCC in 1926.<sup>24</sup> Kwa Siew Tee, on the other hand, was a member of the Royal Photographic Society, having been elected in 1935,<sup>25</sup> and in 1940, he was appointed Justice of the Peace.<sup>26</sup>

The opening was chaired by OCBC manager Chew Hock Leong, who also contributed an essay to the exhibition catalogue.<sup>27</sup> In his address, Chew explained the objectives for organising the exhibition. According to him, the organisers felt that by popularising photography and encouraging “fellow photographic comrades” to focus on the exploration of art, their works would become more artistic and in time measure up against the standard of photographers in advanced nations.<sup>28</sup> There is a strong element of nationhood in Chew’s speech, even though it is not easy to clearly delineate what “nation” meant to the organisers, the participating photographers and the exhibition visitors at the time.

The presence of Tyau and the choice of exhibition venue suggest that the organisers felt a certain affinity with the affairs of China. They identified themselves as *huaqiao* (华侨; overseas Chinese) and named the exhibition accordingly.

(Below) *The Straits Times* featured a selection of photographs from the Overseas Chinese Photographic Exhibition, held at the premises of the Nanyang Chinese Students Society from 24 to 31 March 1935. Image reproduced from *The Straits Times*, 28 March 1935, 20. (From NewspaperSG).



Top left photo: The Chinese Consul-General for Singapore Kwo Ling-pai opening the Yunnan-Burma Highway Photo Exhibition at the premises of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce on 24 November 1939. Top right photo: Lee Kong Chian, president of the exhibition committee. Bottom photo: Visitors at the exhibition. Image reproduced from 南洋商報 [Nanyang Siang Pau], 25 November 1939, 7. (From NewspaperSG).

When describing the exhibits, the English newspapers of the day tended to mention their aesthetics, valorising some of the works as exemplars of pictorial art.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, an article in the Chinese newspaper *Union Times* (总汇新报) on 25 March 1935 singled out a particular photograph by Li Ying (黎英). The writer praised the work for its ability to transport viewers to the actual scene of combat where brave soldiers of the 19th Route Army in the Republic of China fought against the enemy. The photograph had been titled with a Cantonese curse word, most likely to reflect how strongly the photographer felt about the war in China.<sup>30</sup> The 19th Route Army was lauded when it put up fierce resistance against the Japanese troops who attacked Shanghai on 28 January 1932 (known as the January 28 Incident or Shanghai Incident). This event was the precursor to the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45).

The exhibition was hailed as a “thorough success”, with some 2,000 people visiting the show before it ended on 31 March. As a result of the exhibition, the Oversea Chinese Photographic Society was formed in March 1936. It was exempted from registration by the colonial state, suggesting a certain degree of closeness

that some of its members enjoyed with the British authorities. Members included prominent figures associated with Chinese banks in Singapore, such as Chew Hock Leong, Kwa Siew Tee and Teo Teow Peng, who was director of Sze Hai Tong Bank.<sup>31</sup> Police photographer Liew Choe Hoon (or Liew Chor Hoon), an early initiator and participant of the exhibition, also became a member.<sup>32</sup>

**Yunnan-Burma Highway Photo Exhibition, 1939–40**

On 7 July 1937, two years after the Overseas Chinese Photographic Exhibition was held, the Second Sino-Japanese War broke out between China and Japan. As a result, Chinese communities in Southeast Asia became even more connected to the fate of the motherland.

In Singapore, the Singapore China Relief Fund Committee (SCRFC) was set up in August 1937 with prominent businessman and philanthropist Tan Kah Kee as president. A year later, in October, Tan helped to establish the Southseas China Relief Fund Union (SCRFU) and became its chairman. By January 1939, the SCRFC had formed over 20 sub-committees with more than 200 branches across the island, extending its

collection of funds beyond the city centre of Singapore. This caused much concern to the colonial authorities as the SCRFC was increasingly functioning “like a political party machinery” at the grassroots level.<sup>33</sup>

In 1938, Japan gained control of Xiamen and Guangdong, two major hometowns of the overseas Chinese in Nanyang (South-east Asia). By then, China had lost most of its seaboard connections to the outside world. To open up a route so that war supplies could enter China, the 1,154-kilometre-long Yunnan-Burma Highway (also known as the Burma Road), linking Lashio in eastern Burma (Myanmar) with Kunming in China, was rushed through for completion by some 200,000 Burmese and Chinese labourers.

Traversing treacherous terrain, the highway became serviceable for heavy transportation vehicles at the start of 1939. However, China still lacked skilled drivers and mechanics to work along the route. In early 1939, the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party) government of the Republic of China appealed to the SCRFC for help. Around 3,200 people across Nanyang, not all of whom were ethnic Chinese, answered the call. Some gave up well-paying jobs while a few women disguised themselves as men to serve in China’s war relief efforts.<sup>34</sup>

