

Imagining Singapore: Pictorial photography from the 1950s to 1970s

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Abstract

This thesis explores the development of pictorial photography in Singapore and the different roles it has played in broader Singapore society. After World War II, photography practice in Singapore exploded via the numerous camera clubs and salons. Pictorial photography was the dominant expressive form of photography during this period and was deliberately positioned as art through its circulation in exhibitions and catalogues, similar to the display and distribution of painting and sculpture. The same period saw sweeping changes within Singapore as it fought for and gained independence from British rule, and embarked on a comprehensive industrialisation programme. Pictorial photography in Singapore was shaped by these developments and took on traits unique to its circumstances. I contend that the specificities of the Singapore experience led to a distinct variant of pictorial photography that I term “Singapore Pictorialism”.

Pictorial photography offers a useful platform to examine representation and ideology, especially given photography’s close relationship with realism. Pictorial photography, with its own ideas of reality and aesthetics, provides access to questions of politics and imagination. This study looks at the politics involved in the production and consumption of Singapore Pictorialism, from the ideologies of Singapore’s colonial period to those of the post-colonial shift to independence. It places pictorial photography within this social history to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the visual representation of Singapore. By examining the activities of the photographers and the photography clubs, this thesis uncovers a vibrant photographic scene, which not only had a prominent place in Singapore’s art history, but shaped the way modern Singapore was imagined and represented. Of particular importance to the research are Singapore’s nation-building activities during this period and the role the state played in driving developments within photographic circles, leaving a formidable impact on photographers’ imagination of their country. Photography during this period took on multiple roles, acting as a symbol of democracy and modernity, staging national identity and providing a mechanism for Singaporeans to engage with ideas of the past, present and future.

Declaration

I declare that the research here is my own original work and has not been submitted to any other institution for the award of a degree. All references have been properly cited and the thesis is fewer than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

Signed: _____

Date: 15 June 2020

Preface

This thesis has drawn from primary sources from the National Archives of Singapore, interviews, newspapers, magazines, exhibition catalogues, photographs and secondary sources. My use of these sources has been indicated specifically through footnotes, captions and a bibliography. All other parts of this thesis should be regarded as my original contributions. Small sections of an earlier draft of Chapter Three 'Pictorialism and Modernity' were published in the peer-reviewed journal *Southeast of Now* in 2018. ('Pictorialism and Modernity in Singapore, 1950-60,' *Southeast of Now* 2, no. 2 (2018): 9-31) I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers of that article for their comments, which have been taken into consideration in the presentation of this chapter as it appears in this thesis. Small sections from Chapter Six 'History and Imagination' were also published in *Southeast of Now* in 2019 ("The Photographic Archive as Strategy: Robert Zhao and The Nature Museum," *Southeast of Now* 3, no. 2 (2019): 163–74)

All interviews undertaken for this thesis were conducted under the conditions of ethics approval granted by the University of Melbourne's Human Ethics Advisory Group in 2017. All interview participants signed consent forms agreeing to my use of the information they provided to me in this thesis.

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Abbreviations

FIAP	Fédération Internationale de l' Art Photographique [International Federation of Photographic Art]
MoMA	Museum of Modern Art, New York
MAS	Modern Art Society
PAP	People's Action Party
PSA	Photographic Society of America
PSS	Photographic Society of Singapore
RPS	Royal Photographic Society
SAS	Singapore Art Society

Note on Romanisation and Translation

This thesis includes vocabulary from the Chinese language. For terms in Chinese, I have provided the Chinese characters followed by the romanised *pinyin* in brackets and English translation in parentheses the first time those terms are used. Subsequently, I use only the romanised *pinyin*. The same system is used in the bibliography for book and article titles in Chinese. For Chinese names, I have used the dialect romanisation, rather than the *pinyin* romanisation, thus following the standard in Singapore newspapers, club bulletins and exhibition catalogues. For example, I use Loke Wan Tho rather than Lu Yingtao. I also follow local conventions by putting the last name first for Chinese individuals, and refer to Malay individuals by their first name. Unless noted otherwise, all translations from Chinese are my own.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In 1996, the Singapore Art Museum opened with great fanfare and the mission to “promote awareness and appreciation of 20th century art practices in Singapore and Southeast Asia through exhibitions, publications and public education programmes for local and overseas audiences”.¹ Their inaugural exhibition was *Modernity and Beyond*, a two-part show – the first section was *Themes in Southeast Asian Art* and the second section was *A Century of Art in Singapore*. The latter was described as “a survey of the history of art in Singapore in the 20th century, highlighting major artistic developments and their historical contexts”.² This was the first exhibition to attempt to narrate a comprehensive art history of Singapore, but there was no photography in the show. Instead, the curators presented painting and sculpture “against an eventful socio-historical backdrop spanning British rule to self-government and independence...”.³ The exhibition remains a milestone in Singapore art and an important first step for understanding Singapore’s art history. The exhibition was accompanied by a hefty catalogue written by then museum director Kwok Kian Chow. Titled *Channels & Confluences: A History of Singapore Art*, it has remained a primary text for the study of Singapore’s art history today. Remarkably, there is not a single reference to photographic practice before the 1990s in Kwok’s book.

The absence of photography in Singapore’s art history is puzzling because the 1950s to 1980s saw an incredible explosion of local photographic practice via camera clubs. In 1950, the first Open Photographic Exhibition was held by the Singapore Art Society (SAS) and the Singapore Camera Club was formed in the same year.⁴ Styled after the clubs and salons in London, photographers called their work “pictorial photography”, which later also became colloquially known as “salon photography”. Club after club

¹ *Singapore Art Museum* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 1994), inner cover.

² John Tung, ed., *Singapore Art Museum: An Index of Exhibitions 1994-2018* (Singapore Art Museum, 2018), 21, https://www.singaporeartmuseum.sg/-/media/sam/files/others/w180326_001_324_fa_singles.pdf?la=en.

³ Tung, 21.

⁴ The Open Photography Exhibition was renamed the Singapore International Photography Salon in 1957.

emerged from the 1950s to 1970s, hosting numerous exhibitions, from small member-based shows in clubhouses to international exhibitions at large event halls that showed hundreds of prints. Apart from participating in exhibitions held in Singapore, photographers also regularly sent their prints to international salon exhibitions in London as well as other parts of Europe, America, Australia and Asia, resulting in the international circulation of an immense number of photographs. During this period, local photographers applied for distinctions from the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain (RPS), the Photographic Society of America (PSA) and the Fédération Internationale de l'Art Photographique [International Federation of Photographic Art] (FIAP). There existed a vast international network of clubs and exhibitions, with Singaporean photographers joining overseas clubs, organising portfolio exchanges and even making visits to clubs in other countries. These photographs were made for artistic purposes.

So why was photography missing from the existing narrative? Art historian T.K. Sabapathy, who curated the Southeast Asia portion of *Modernity and Beyond*, has suggested that, in the past, the art historians studying Southeast Asia had not considered photography to fall within the fine arts. Instead, Asian art history was about the “grand traditions”, that is, Hindu and Buddhist art traditions, and photography was simply seen to serve the role of reproductions for study.⁵ Kwok Kian Chow offered a more straightforward explanation – the curators and scholars in Singapore were generally not familiar enough with the medium of photography.⁶ Nevertheless, photography is now widely accepted as part of the fine arts and increasingly seen in museum exhibitions and publications in Singapore. It is thus timely to revisit and investigate modern photographic practice in Singapore.

This is not to say there have not been previous studies of photography in Singapore. However, those have focused solely on 19th and early 20th century photography or on contemporary photography. This thesis therefore responds to a significant gap in research on mid-20th century photography. It seeks to articulate the development of

⁵ T.K. Sabapathy, interview by author, Singapore, 1 August 2018.

⁶ Kwok Kian Chow, interview by author, Singapore, 13 August 2019.

pictorial photography in Singapore and the different roles it played in broader Singapore society. This includes how it intersected with other art forms and the development of modern art. Pictorial photography was the dominant expressive form of photography during the period and was deliberately positioned as art through its circulation in exhibitions and catalogues, similar to the display and distribution of painting and sculpture. While photography was used in other areas such as journalism, fashion, and documentary, the pictorial photographers saw themselves as creators of art. It is this type of photography that this thesis is concerned with.

Pictorial photography also offers a useful platform to examine representation and ideology, especially given photography's close relationship with realism. Pictorial photography, with its own ideas of reality and aesthetics, provides access to questions of politics and imagination. By examining the activities of the photographers and the photography clubs, this thesis uncovers a vibrant photographic scene, which not only had a prominent place in Singapore's art history, but also shaped the way modern Singapore was imagined and represented. Photography during this period took on multiple roles, acting as a symbol of democracy and modernity, staging national identity and providing a mechanism for Singaporeans to engage with ideas of the past, present and future. In this thesis, I contend that the specificities of the Singapore experience led to a distinct variant of pictorial photography. I call this "Singapore Pictorialism", to distinguish it from both the photographic pictorialism that emerged in Europe in the late 19th century and the modernist photography that developed in America in the 1920s. A more detailed discussion of Singapore Pictorialism will follow in Chapter Three.

Conceptual Framework

Representation

In thinking about photography, it is impossible to avoid a discussion on representation, or perhaps more accurately, about the idea of the truth of representation. I take a critical approach to visual representation in order to rethink the images made in

Singapore and how they operate to create meaning. This is particularly important in art photography, which operates as both icon and index. This study will show how Singapore Pictorialism is entangled between these two strands of representation, and may be pulled one way or another to serve various ideologies.

In one of the most poignant books written about photography, *Camera Lucida* (1980), Roland Barthes searches for his dead mother in a photograph of her.⁷ John Tagg has described this search as a “demand for realism”, a demand to know that she was there at that point in time.⁸ Barthes’ treatment of his mother’s photograph relied on the indexical property of photography, its evidential quality which provided a literal trace of reality. Tagg states, “From a phenomenological viewpoint, in the Photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation.”⁹ In other words, the power of photography is deeply tied to a discourse of ‘truth’ and the connection between the subject and its photographic imprint in the form of a perfect, never-seen-before likeness. This assumption of photography’s indexicality underlies many uses of photography, from court evidence and scientific documents to holiday snapshots. Even as there is a recognition of variables such as lighting, framing and scale, it is commonly accepted that the things represented in a photograph were actually there and captured by the photographer at a certain moment in the past.

However, Tagg rejects such an assumption. He argues that a photograph is never a reflection of some pre-existing reality, but in fact, produces a “new and specific reality”. Furthermore, this new reality is always tied to a specific context – it becomes meaningful only through specific transactions.¹⁰ The effect of photography, therefore, is dependent on its own history, one which evolved through the interaction of the medium with the practices and institutions that surrounded it. Barthes’ encounter with his deceased mother through her photograph was not based on some innate property of photography but was a result of a historical process that tied photography to

⁷ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (London: Vintage, 1993).

⁸ John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Basingstoke, England: Macmillan Education, 1988), 1.

⁹ Tagg, 88–89.

¹⁰ Tagg, 3.

evidential functions. In particular, Tagg demonstrates that the techniques of representation used by emerging institutions in the 19th century such as the judicial, health and educational systems were crucial in shaping the way photography was subsequently interpreted.¹¹ Police, asylums and schools all utilized photography for regulatory and disciplinary functions and photography was inevitably implicated into evolving power relations as well as the beginnings of a photographic discourse that positioned it as neutral and given. The ‘truth’ of the photographic image is an assumption that is embedded in the way the medium has been used since its invention, especially by state institutions in the production of knowledge.

This is the case even in art photography, which had very early on already rejected the function of photography as a record of things and emphasized its creative possibilities. Photography is not a unified medium. Any consideration of art photography must acknowledge the way that it has developed in multiple fields, before we can apply more traditional art-historical methods, such as the analysis of style, form and iconography. Photography has been used within multiple institutions, practices, agencies and discourses, and the way photography has operated within one field might not be the same as in another. Photographic meaning often slides between these fields, yet remains preoccupied by Tagg’s “demand for realism”. As Allan Sekula poetically describes, “Photography is haunted by two chattering ghosts: that of bourgeois science and that of bourgeois art. The first goes on about the truth of appearances, about the world reduced to a positive ensemble of facts, to a constellation of knowable and possessable objects. The second spectre offers us a reconstructed subject in the luminous person of the artist.”¹²

The debate surrounding photography’s status as fine art has been ongoing since the mid-19th century.¹³ While it is not the objective of this thesis to defend the status of photography as an art form, it must be noted that pictorial photography first emerged

¹¹ Refer to Chapter 3 in Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*.

¹² Allan Sekula, “The Traffic in Photographs,” *Art Journal* 41, no. 1 (1981): 15.

¹³ Sontag discusses this point at length in the chapter “Photographic Evangelists” in *On Photography*.

as a concerted attempt by photographers to gain legitimacy for photography as art. The beginnings of photographic Pictorialism are often associated with the secession in 1892 of a group of British amateur photographers from the Photographic Society of Great Britain to form the Linked Ring Brotherhood, which promoted the making of expressive photographs. However, even prior to The Linked Ring, photographers like H.P. Robinson were already advocating for photography as a fine art.¹⁴ Similarly, photography's claim to art was also the result of certain historical developments, a reaction to people who saw the mechanised nature of photography as a threat to the "Romantic theory of culture, which sees arts as the elite and manly expression of a given human spirit."¹⁵ The desire to position photography as art led to the formation of Pictorialism's own institutions – the exhibition, the catalogue and the museum – institutions that supported this reading and framing of photography. The value attributed to artistic photography also depended on its mobilisation within these specific institutions. However, most relevant to this thesis is that art photography offers productive material to discuss the potential of photography and to rethink photography's mechanical roots and its ability to make an exact copy of a thing. Art photography, with its focus on aesthetics over evidence, is able to challenge the desire to see "the thing itself".¹⁶

Scholars such as Victor Burgin, Rosalind Krauss and Geoffrey Batchen have all deconstructed the reading of photographs, extending the creation of photographic meaning beyond the visual, to include social practices and the institutional relations of power which make the subject legible.¹⁷ As Jae Emerling has noted, in addressing a photograph, one must always be concerned with "signs *and* objects, events *and*

¹⁴ Margaret F. Harker, *The Linked Ring: The Secession Movement in Photography in Britain, 1892-1910* (London: Heinemann, 1979), 16.

¹⁵ John Tagg, *Grounds of Dispute: Art History, Cultural Politics and the Discursive Field* (University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 125.

¹⁶ "The thing itself" was one of the categories Szarkowski used to define photography. John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2007).

¹⁷ Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997); Rosalind E. Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View," *Art Journal* 42, no. 4 (1982): 311–19; Victor Burgin, "Looking at Photographs," in *Thinking Photography* (London: Palgrave, 1982), 142–153.

narratives, life *and* politics”.¹⁸ While this dissertation will discuss this relationship in more detail later, at this point, I want to emphasise my treatment of the photograph as more than just the image. Meaning is continually negotiated and defined and representation is always political. Photography is not just a reflection of the world, but *shapes* our understanding of the world.

Sontag has suggested that, “Instead of just recording reality, photographs have become the norm for the ways things appear to us, thereby changing the very idea of reality, and of realism” because photography’s realism “creates a confusion about the real.”¹⁹ Sontag further argues that the meaning of the photograph changes, depending on where it is seen and any text accompanying it.²⁰ Even if text is used to explain a photograph, it is commonplace for it to circulate and be re-used and re-seen in a different context. The impact of photography not only depends on the image, but also on the multiple relationships that surround it. In other words, this thesis examines not just what photographs *show*, but what photographs *do*. I seek to demonstrate and analyse the relationships between politics and representation that have contributed to shaping Singapore Pictorialism, and how Singapore Pictorialism has in turn shaped our understanding of Singapore today.

Materiality

Towards this end, this thesis takes the photograph as a material object that exists in time and space, one that interacts with different social contexts that can shift over time. I use a material approach to photography that includes a consideration of the processes of intention, production, distribution, consumption, archiving and re-use, all of which affect the way we understand photographs.²¹ This material approach to photography is not new, as demonstrated by Elizabeth Edwards’ survey of important

¹⁸ Jae Emerling, *Photography: History and Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 17.

¹⁹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 2001), 87, 110.

²⁰ Sontag, 106–7.

²¹ Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, eds., *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images*, Material Cultures (London: Routledge, 2004), 1.

recent anthropological studies in both historical and contemporary photography.²² Similarly, in *The Social Production of Art* (1981), Janet Wolff has provided a comprehensive introduction to the issues surrounding the sociology of art, arguing that art is never divorced from its cultural context.²³ This thesis is part of this shift that places the photograph in a larger network of relationships, highlighting the connections between the social and the material. As an object, the photograph has a social history – it exists beyond its moment of inception; it is made within a certain mode of practice (pictorial, documentary, advertising, etc.), and it can circulate within different platforms (exhibitions, books, postcards). Without disregarding the importance of the study of the image itself, a material approach is able to expand and complicate our understanding of the image content. As Edwards and Hart has argued:

An approach that acknowledges the centrality of materiality allows one to look at and use images as socially salient objects, as active and reciprocal rather than simply implications of authority, control and passive consumption on the one hand, or of aesthetic discourses and the supremacy of individual vision on the other. They may be these things too [...] but they cannot necessarily be reduced to them unproblematically.²⁴

James Hevia has proposed a materialist model of photography, termed the “photography complex”. In his essay on Boxer Era photographs, Hevia proposes a concept of photography as “a network of actants made up of human and nonhuman parts”.²⁵ Within this network, the photograph is not simply a representation of the ‘real’. Instead, it is situated within a complex set of relations that give it meaning, including memory, representational strategies, ideologies and desires, which offer a

²² Elizabeth Edwards, “Objects of Affect: Photography Beyond the Image,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41, no. 1 (October 21, 2012): 221–34.

²³ Janet Wolff, *The Social Production of Art*, 2nd ed. (New York: NYU Press, 1993), <http://nyupress.org/books/9780814792704/>.

²⁴ Edwards and Hart, *Photographs Objects Histories*, 15.

²⁵ James L. Hevia, “The Photography Complex: Exposing Boxer-Era China (1900–1901), Making Civilization,” in *Photographies East: The Camera and Its Histories in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Rosalind C. Morris (Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 2009), 81.

“novel form of agency” in generating new material realities.²⁶ Within the complex, the photograph has a life and it *acts*. Photography plays a role in the creation of knowledge, which is in turn implicated in the dynamics of power relations. The analysis extends to a consideration of the circulation and re-presentation of images, the multiple effects the same photograph might have in different contexts and the implications for meaning. Hevia’s idea of agency seems to rely on re-contextualising images to challenge established readings. However, I want to think about agency in a different manner, looking at how the different actors in Singapore – the pictorial photographers, the general public and the state – engaged with the existing codes of Pictorialism and images of Singapore to further their own agendas.

In this thesis, I take a clear position that photography did not reflect some sort of existing reality, but played a key role in the construction of knowledge of Singapore, one that continues to resonate in the present. Taking a materialist approach as described above, this study recognizes that the photographs did not exist in a vacuum, but were created within a certain context. This context is the Pictorialist movement, which transferred from Great Britain to Singapore in the 20th century. This study takes into account how the medium of photography operated within Singapore society and its circulation overseas, namely through the networks of camera clubs, salons and exhibitions. In Singapore, pictorial photographers typically learnt their skills through workshops and fieldtrips organized by the clubs. They submitted their prints for competitions and salons, both domestic and overseas, through the clubs and they conformed to the club standards for acceptable aesthetics and subject matter. A close analysis of the club and salon system is thus crucial to this research.

Social history

This thesis speaks from the vantage point of the present, in engaging the historical consciousness of Singapore and its complicated relationship with representation. This study acknowledges the politics involved in the production and consumption of the photographs, from the ideologies of Singapore’s colonial period to those of the post-

²⁶ Hevia, 81.

colonial shift to independence. It places pictorial photography within this social history to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the representation of Singapore. Of particular importance to the research is Singapore's nation-building activities during this period and the role the state played in driving certain developments within photographic circles. The Singapore Story – the state-sanctioned narrative of Singapore's shift from a primitive island to a modern British colony to an independent economic powerhouse – had a formidable impact on the photographers' imagination of the country.²⁷ This narrative was largely conveyed through the public speeches of the People's Action Party (PAP), which has continuously been in power since Singapore's first general elections in 1959.²⁸ Chua Beng Huat's analysis of the PAP has revealed the ideological dimensions of their rule, which had been crucial in bringing the population in line for Singapore's development.²⁹ He has identified the ideology of survival through successful capitalist industrial development as the dominant tool to rationalise state policies. Furthermore, this ideology extended to policies beyond the economic – as long as they could be shown to contribute to economic growth, they were considered necessary and "pragmatic".³⁰

The 1950s to 1970s was a period of rapid and significant changes in Singapore. The Japanese occupation had ended in 1945 and there was massive infrastructural damage, unemployment and health issues. The PAP prioritised the livelihoods and material comforts of Singaporeans and saw great success in its developmental strategies. As reflected in the election results, the electorate increasingly accepted the

²⁷ "The Singapore Story" was named as such by then Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong during the launch of a new National Education programme in 1989. Loh Kah Seng, "Within the Singapore Story: The Use and Narrative of History in Singapore," *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 12, no. 2 (1998): 1–21.

²⁸ It should be acknowledged that there were multiple competing narratives and ideologies during the 1950s and 60s, not just The Singapore Story. However, the club photographers discussed in this thesis were most closely associated with the PAP ideology, with Ministers as club members and invited to open the exhibitions. More detail is provided in Chapter Five.

²⁹ Beng-Huat Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*, Politics in Asia Series (Routledge, 1997).

³⁰ Chua, 4.

PAP's concept of economic pragmatism. While this might have subsequently shifted in the 1980s as the circumstances of the nation changed, it is clear that there was a distinct ideological consensus among the population in line with the state in the 1960s and 1970s.³¹ This thesis will demonstrate that there were several elements of the state's narrative that consistently emerged within Singapore Pictorialism – the fight for independence from the British, the importance of modernisation and industrialisation for Singapore's survival and growth, and Singapore's peaceful multi-ethnic community.

As a medium associated with scientific and technological advances, photography was linked to industrial modernity. At the same time, the pictorial photography movement, which had emerged in the late 19th century, emphasized the medium's expressive and aesthetic capabilities. These diverse characteristics of photography allowed it to sit at the intersections of modernity, creativity and individualism, making it very attractive to a Singapore trying to establish herself as a new and modern nation. As shall be further discussed in this thesis, the first exhibition organised by the newly-formed SAS in 1950 was of photography, and not painting. More generally, the belief that photography was a fine art formed a cornerstone of pictorial photography's history alongside the associated discourses of aesthetics and human creativity. As such, any analysis of pictorial work must also take into account notions of style, subject matter and individual expression, as well as the political context discussed earlier.

Methodology

As this thesis is the first to study pictorial photography from Singapore, it has to address very fundamental questions about the history of pictorial photography in Singapore. It seeks to build an accurate picture of the photographers, their activities and their photographs. Due to the paucity of available scholarship, much of the data collection relies on a largely untapped resource of exhibition catalogues and newspaper articles, oral history interviews and close analyses of the photographic images. In tracing the development of Singapore Pictorialism and its significance and

³¹ See Chapter 1 in Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*.

impact, I examine a wide range of issues. Given the broad nature of my research, I have broken down the research areas of this thesis into three sub-categories – the history of pictorial photography, the photographs produced and the social history of Singapore and its connections with photography.

History of pictorial photography

The first category looks at the history of pictorial photography and its specific developments in Singapore. Photographic Pictorialism had emerged in Europe in the late 19th century, but it was not until after World War II that there was an explosion of local amateur practice in Singapore via the camera clubs. Why was this the case? A product of the modern era, photographic technology had appeared in Singapore much earlier with the arrival of Europeans. Subsequently, the growing population, of both residents and tourists, and the burgeoning economy of Singapore provided a thriving clientele for photographic consumption. Swiftly shifting landscapes and a large variety of races also provided a wealth of subject matter. From the mid-19th century to early 20th century, there was a proliferation of European-run studios such as G.R. Lambert & Co. and Sachtler & Co., and subsequently, Chinese-run studios such as Lee Brothers Studio and Empire Studios. I seek to provide a historical understanding of the emergence of pictorial photography and the specificities of its transfer to Singapore. To this end, I not only put together a timeline of photographic practice in Singapore (Appendix A), but investigate the specific roles of the photography clubs and their exhibitions, which in turn reveal the key photographers active in Singapore during the period. I also examine what pictorial photography meant in the Singapore context. What were its aesthetic codes and practices and how did it differ from the Euramerican context?

My study of the photography clubs reveals their central role in directing photographic practice. The clubs not only provided the earliest form of photographic education for most members but also offered a social platform for informal learning from senior members. Clubhouses had darkroom facilities and libraries for members. They organised, and their members judged, the most important photography salons in Singapore, giving them extraordinary power over aesthetic values. An important

element of Singapore Pictorialism was its international links and right from the start, the Singapore clubs were plugged into the international networks of photography societies. More than any other form of art, photography circulated widely through these networks. The clubs actively encouraged members to take part in prestigious international salons, which could heighten the clubs' profile. Furthermore, the Singaporean photographers were aware of their international audience. This thesis explores the links between this internationalism and the actual photographic practice.

Content of the photographs

The second category looks at the content of the photographs. The photographs submitted to salons have been dismissed as repetitive and unoriginal, and the photographers have been accused of copying each other.³² At the same time, the photographers themselves consistently underlined the importance of originality and creativity. To explain this contradiction, my research pays close attention to the process of making and exhibiting the photographs. I trace the kinds of photographs being made in Singapore, by identifying trends in style and subject matter. I also take into account the ways such photographs were received by audiences, not only when they were made, but also by later generations. This part of my research considers the impact of the photographs by taking into account the photography complex. I clarify how the salon system worked to encourage a certain type of content and style, which subsequently laid out the terms of visual recognition for their audiences. I contend that the repetitive themes and images that circulated through the photography clubs and exhibitions actually worked to develop the visual imagination of Singapore. They influenced the way national identity was being negotiated during the period. Ironically, it was the prevalence of copying that amplified the national impact of such photographs.

Historical and social context of Singapore and Singapore Pictorialism

The final category is concerned with the connection between the historical and social context of Singapore and Singapore Pictorialism. While the British had successfully

³² Richard Seah, "Focus Wasn't on Art," *Business Times*, June 14, 1986.

regained Singapore from the Japanese after World War II, they had proven to be fallible. Various parties started challenging their rule, most notably the Malayan Communist Party, which resulted in the Malayan Emergency from 1948 to 1960. Singapore attained self-rule in 1959 and complete independence in 1965. This was accompanied by a widespread and incredibly swift transformation of Singapore in geography, economy and society. These considerable changes occupied the minds and imaginations of Singaporeans, including the photographers. In addition, the largest photography club in Singapore, the Photographic Society of Singapore (PSS) had a close relationship with the government. Members included ministers and government officials who often graced exhibition openings. The club also collaborated with government departments on various photography exhibitions and competitions.

This section places the data from the previous sections into the specific Singapore socio-political context. I examine what was happening in Singapore society during the period of study and how it might have influenced photographic practice. Furthermore, I also investigate the reverse – how photographic practice might have contributed to wider political and social developments in Singapore. To this end, I pay close attention to the position of the Singapore government with respect to photography. I analyse not only the speeches made by ministers and officials, but also the type of photographic activity supported by government departments. Nation-building desires dominated politics during this period. I investigate how this might have extended to the photographers, and framed both the production and reception of images. More generally, I investigate how the aesthetic codes and organisational practices of Pictorialism might have supported specific ideological positions.

Archival and document research

I have undertaken extensive archival research, examining primary sources including speeches, newspaper articles, photography magazines and journals, salon catalogues and camera club magazines. These have been key sources of data regarding photographic activities, trends, and the selection and circulation of photographs for the salon exhibitions. The catalogues of salon exhibitions are particularly important as they contain listings of photographers' names and the titles of their photographs. Most

catalogues from Singapore also include a good selection of image plates, especially of the winning photographs. The catalogues of the Singapore International Salon of Photography and the ASEAN Salon of Photography organised by the PSS have been digitised by National Gallery Singapore's Library and Archive and have been particularly useful. These catalogues have allowed me to see what types of works travelled to Singapore, were considered 'good' examples of pictorial photographs, and might have influenced subsequent photographers.

Another major source of data was the *PSS Monthly Bulletin*, which ran from 1960 till the present. This magazine contains extensive reports of the activities of the club and provides much insight into the central role of the club. It also features the lists of international salons that the Singapore photographers took part in while the editorials reveal topics that occupied the minds of the photographers and their positions on various issues. I accessed these sources at the PSS clubhouse in Singapore. Finally, the daily newspapers have been instrumental in tracing the history of photographic practice in Singapore and have provided an extensive amount of information on specific exhibitions through announcements and reviews. Newspapers circulating in Singapore have all been digitised by the Singapore National Library and are available online, with an excellent search function at *newspapers.sg*. Such historical documents have been crucial in verifying information from the oral interviews.

Oral Histories

This research also engages with oral history. I follow Grele's definition of oral history as the "interviewing of eye-witness participants in the events of the past for the purposes of historical reconstruction".³³ I also follow Paul Thompson, one of oral history's proponents. In *The Voice of the Past*, he rightly explains the importance of oral history in expanding the focus of history, opening up new areas of inquiry and empowering marginal communities. An oral history approach allows for evidence from a new direction, which can be juxtaposed with existing archival documents. This approach, as also applied in this research, allows for a multiplicity of positions, which can lead to a

³³ Ronald J. Grele, "Directions for Oral History in the United States," *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology 2* (1996): 63.

fairer reconstruction of the past and a potential challenge to the established account.³⁴ Thompson also notes that the oral history interview process can allow the historian to discover new written documents and photographs through the interviews with participants themselves.

Some historians have questioned the reliability of memory and the personal biases of the interview process. However, Thompson perceives this subjectivity as something positive. Through oral history, multiple positions and narratives are given legitimacy, which lead to a more complex and inclusive history.³⁵ Alessandro Portelli has also argued that the subjectivity of oral histories is a strength rather than a weakness. According to Portelli, since oral histories are narrative sources, narrativity must be taken into account when we use such sources.³⁶ Beyond considerations of variation in tone, pauses and oscillation, oral histories can also slide between personal 'truth' and the shared 'imagination' of the larger group. This is reflected in the language used by the participant, for example, recurring standard language for broader themes and dialects and anecdotes for personal stories. This was particularly relevant for my interviews with the society members who were invested with larger club objectives and prestige. Furthermore, this subjectivity revealed the desires of the photographers, not only for themselves, but for their respective clubs and their nation. As Portelli states, "Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they think they did."³⁷ My decision to use the term "Singapore Pictorialism" is directly related to the interviews I conducted and the desire to acknowledge the language the participants used.

An important source of data for this study are the oral histories at the National Archives of Singapore. The Oral History Centre at the National Archives has been

³⁴ Paul Thompson, "The Voice of the Past: Oral History," in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, 3rd ed (Abingdon, Oxon: Taylor and Francis, 2015), 37.

³⁵ Thompson, 38–39.

³⁶ Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, 51.

³⁷ Portelli, 52.

conducting oral history interviews since 1979. Among the participants are a number of photographers relevant to this project. The interviews have been digitised and are available as streaming audio files on the National Archives website. To supplement these, I conducted oral history interviews with photographers who worked during the period. These include Tan Lip Seng, who was the first photographer from Singapore to be included in the PSA's list of top ten exhibitors in 1969; Daisy Chee, one of two active female photographers during the time, who also served as secretary of the PSS in the early 1960s; and Ho Koon Sang, a less prominent member of the PSS who achieved an Associateship of the RPS in 1958. I also interviewed art historians and curators, including T.K. Sabapathy, who was also the art critic for *The Straits Times*, and Kwok Kian Chow, the ex-Director of the Singapore Art Museum. The interviews took a semi-structured approach, with a list of questions for the participants, but also with the flexibility to have more wide-ranging discussions. A full list of the interviewees is included in the bibliography.

The interviews with the photographers are important in understanding their personal backgrounds and attitudes toward pictorial photography as well as their process of making and exhibiting prints. More generally, the data from the interviews is juxtaposed against the data from the historical documents to form a more diverse and open picture of the situation in Singapore. Data from photographers who were also jury members gives insight into connoisseurship issues but also expectations across different salons. Finally, the interviews with other art professionals help to situate the photographic activities within the wider Singapore art context.

Photographic prints

As mentioned earlier, this thesis goes beyond the image to look at the photography complex. Nevertheless, the photographs themselves form an important part of this complex. The analysis of the photographs draws from both art-historical methodology and post-colonial theory. Edward Said, in his groundbreaking book *Orientalism* (1978), has demonstrated the way European images of the Middle East reflect certain western

ideologies of difference to support imperial power relations.³⁸ This link between ideology and image has subsequently been developed by numerous post-colonial scholars. In the Asian context, Susie Protschky has done substantial research on the *Mooi Indies* art style in relation to the Dutch colonisation of Java (modern day Indonesia).³⁹ Meanwhile, James Ryan has studied the links between British imperialism and photography in the 19th century.⁴⁰ My readings of the pictorial photographs follow such approaches, in that I acknowledge that representation is never neutral and that photographic representation in particular has an ability to conflate representation and reality.

Where possible, the research has included accessing the actual photographic prints, which are held in both private and public collections. Although images of the photographs were reproduced in salon catalogues, they do not capture the physical qualities of the print itself, which was a crucial element in the judging process. As such, it was important to view as many of the actual prints as possible. A secondary reason for viewing the actual prints lay in their own history – prints submitted to the salon exhibitions typically bore the marks of their maker and the history of its circulation in the form of exhibition stamps. Consider *Spring Time* by Lim Kwong Ling (fig. 1.1), on the back, we can observe Lim’s handwritten title and a stamp of his name. We also see the exhibitions that this particular print travelled to, which included the 9th International Salon in the Republic of China in 1971, the South Shields International Salon of Photography in 1973 and the Central Washington Photography Salon (no date). The information is crucial in mapping out the international circulation of these prints.

The request to see original prints resulted in the discovery of large bodies of photographic work that were never submitted to the salons, which provided an interesting comparison with the salon photographs and led to an investigation

³⁸ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 2003).

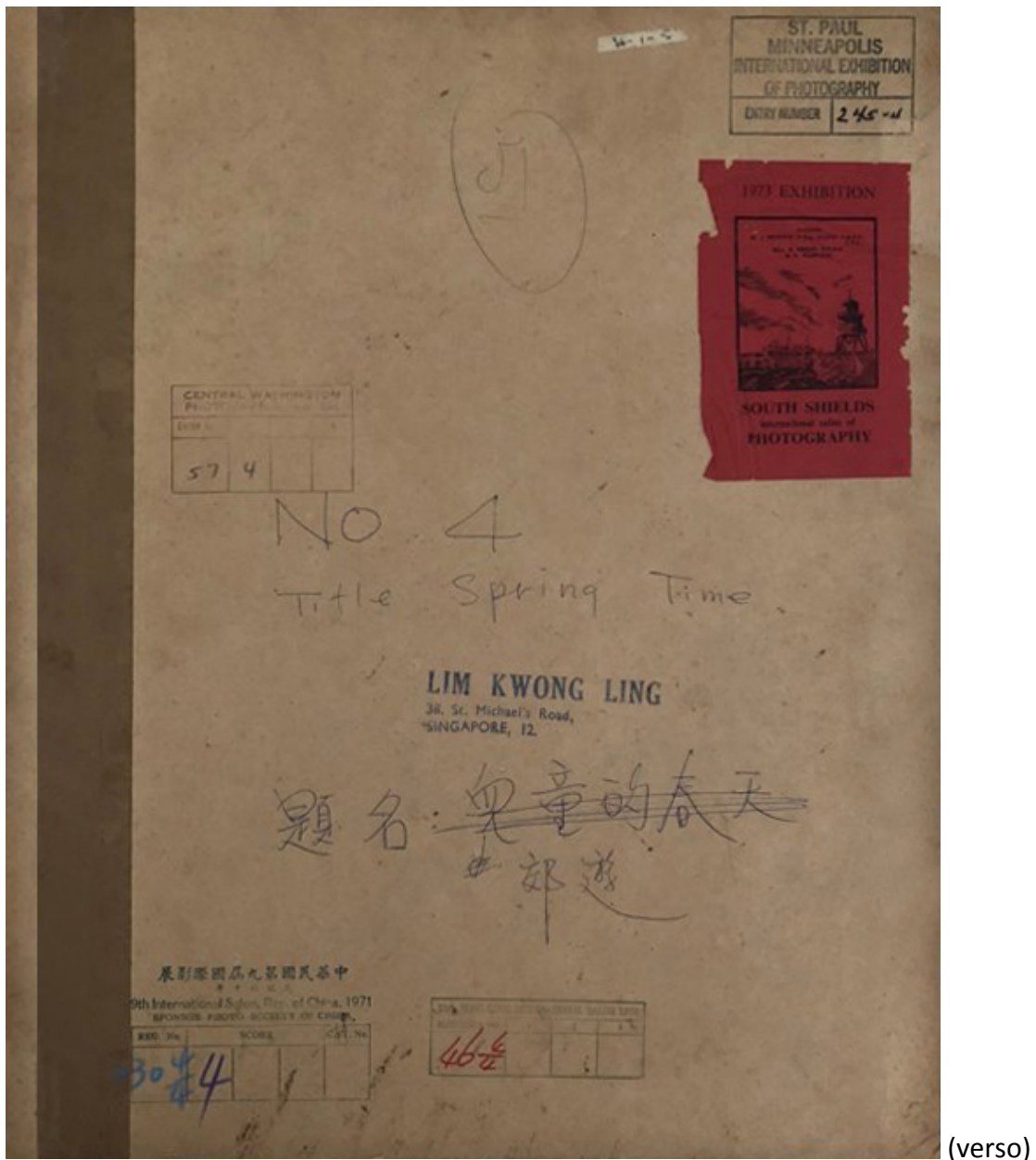
³⁹ Susie Protschky, *Images of the Tropics: Environment and Visual Culture in Colonial Indonesia* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2011).

⁴⁰ James R. Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* (Reaktion Books, 2013).

regarding the photographers' perceptions of the salons. Viewing the physical prints also revealed the existence of multiple variations of the same image, providing insight into the photographers' working process in experimenting with tone, finish and cropping, all of which mattered greatly to them. The quality of the prints showed that some photographers clearly had superior darkroom techniques, given that the majority developed and enlarged the prints themselves rather than sending the film negatives to a photographic lab. Such qualities might differentiate prints of the same subject matter by two different photographers, yet would not be obvious in a reproduction.



(Front)



(verso)

Fig. 1.1. Lim Kwong Ling, *Spring Time*, c. 1970, gelatin silver print, 39 x 48cm. National Gallery Singapore collection.

Relevance and importance of the study

There is a significant gap in existing information and scholarship on modern photography in Singapore (as well as broader Southeast Asia). There is barely any scholarly discussion of photographic practice in the mid-20th century and a lack of understanding of how shifts in photographic activity might have occurred from the 19th century through to the 21st century. In addition, many of the actual photographs have not been collected by public or private institutions. The majority of the photographers

have passed away. Their photographs have already been destroyed, or rest with family members who have not taken good care of the prints. As such, there is very little knowledge of the photographers, the works that were made as well as the impact that photographic practice may have had in the wider field of visual arts. The advanced age of the surviving photographers also means that there is an urgency for primary research in the field.

This thesis does not aim to provide a complete history of photography in Singapore. Nevertheless, as the first comprehensive study of pictorial photography in Singapore, it will fill some of these gaps. It will provide new insight not only into photographic practice itself, but also the role and function of camera clubs and photographic societies, an area that has not yet received much scholarly attention, due to its association with amateurism. It brings photography back into the art history of Singapore and will provide the groundwork for future research in this area, as well as complement research being done in other Southeast Asian countries. It also seeks to generate new knowledge about the role photography has played in visual representation during Singapore's key nation-building decades. While there is much existing literature on Singapore's history, none have made the link to photographic representation beyond using photography to illustrate historical developments. This thesis is the first to consider the impact of photography in framing that history.

I have chosen to situate the study in the period between 1950 and 1980 as these decades saw much activity by the Singaporean pictorial photographers. Prior to the 1940s, photography was dominated by studios, which supplied souvenir prints to both tourists and locals and undertook commissioned portraits. It was only after World War II that we start seeing a significant number of individual local photographers shooting photographs with the goal of self-expression and with the intent to exhibit them. Modern art in Singapore is also typically thought to have emerged from 1945 onwards with the arrival of a group of Chinese artists. They had left mainland China to avoid the Communists, settled in Singapore, and became the teaching staff of Singapore's first

art academy, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts.⁴¹ In the 1980s, there was another sharp shift as artists who were formally trained overseas returned to Singapore. They instigated a turn towards contemporary art in the form of installation and performance, which occasionally made use of photography. By the 1980s, the club and salon scene was declining with a lack of interest from the public. Finally, Chua has noted that there was a break in the PAP's ideological frame at the start of the 1980s, as Singaporeans became less concerned with economic growth and survival.⁴² 1980 thus formed a natural end point for the period under consideration.

Chapter overview

Although studio portraiture, documentary and advertising photography were all present in Singapore during this period, this dissertation limits itself to pictorial photography. This was the dominant style of art photography, which was regularly exhibited and circulated internationally during this period. Considering Pictorialism was the first fine art movement in photography that started in Great Britain in the late 19th century, this research includes the historical and international dimensions of the movement, and builds on John Falconer's previous work on photography in Singapore in the 19th century. The literature review in Chapter Two traces the beginnings of Pictorialism and considers its position within photographic history and its relationship to modernist photography. I argue that the perception of Pictorialism as a specific pre- or non-modern style is much entwined with the agendas of various institutions and personalities, and that Pictorialism followed different paths in different parts of the world.

Each of the remaining chapters of the thesis have been organized around a pair of contradictory terms, an acknowledgement of how these terms were often contested and negotiated by different parties. It is also a nod to the way photographic meaning

⁴¹ Redza Piyadasa, "Modernist and Post-Modernist Developments in Malaysian Art in the Post-Independence Period," in *Modernity in Asian Art*, ed. John Clark (Broadway, NSW: Wild Peony, 1993), 171.

⁴² Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*, 10–11.

shifts in response to changing contexts. Chapter Three – Pictorialism and Modernity – focuses specifically on the development of pictorialism in Singapore and the variant of ‘Singapore Pictorialism’. It positions Singapore Pictorialism as the start of a modernist practice of photography that was predicated on the notion of a fully self-conscious and autonomous art form. The beginnings of this practice occurred against the backdrop of the post-war independence movement, which affected the way Singapore Pictorialism subsequently developed and the qualities it privileged. These qualities included democracy, pluralism and expression. Chapter Four – Originality and Copying – tackles one of the main criticisms of Singapore Pictorialism, its highly repetitive subject matter. To that end, I investigate the role of the camera clubs and photography salons to understand the everyday activities of the photographers. While originality and creativity were privileged, the club and salon system encouraged copying as a way of learning from the ‘masters’ and saw much dialogue and collaboration among peers. This encouraged certain photographers to break away from the salon exhibition and find other ways to innovate and experiment. This chapter deconstructs the categories of ‘origin’ and ‘copy’ to offer an alternative approach to understanding the photographs made.

Chapter Five – Nationalism and Internationalism – studies the international dimension of Singapore Pictorialism, particularly the connection to nationalism. Right from its beginnings, Singapore Pictorialism had a prominent international aspect – there were close ties between the PSS, the RPS in Great Britain, and the PSA in America. The salons in Singapore were styled after the overseas salons. Singaporean photographers were also strongly encouraged to take part in international salons. Winning awards at such salons was seen as bringing not just prestige to the individual photographer but also to the nation. The salons organised in Singapore were seen as symbols of nationhood, and their success as a recognition of Singapore. Taking on the role of cultural cosmopolitans, the Singaporean photographers represented the state and reinforced the country’s new sense of nationhood. The growing awareness of a foreign audience also fed into the government’s desire to represent Singapore appropriately and into the photographers’ aspiration to develop a ‘Singapore School’ of photography.

Chapter Six – History and Imagination – shifts away from the international audience to a local audience. It considers how the reception of these photographs might have changed over time. I take a strong position against the reading of pictorial photographs as historical documents, arguing instead that they demonstrate the way the historical imagination of Singapore was negotiated visually. Singapore Pictorialism offered its practitioners a way to ‘control’ their environment, presenting a kind of visual comfort for its viewers in a Singapore that was experiencing riots, strikes and the Malayan Emergency, which was essentially a guerilla war with the communists. The photographs also allowed the nation to re-imagine a new, modern Singapore during a critical period of change, to reflect on her history, and to navigate Singapore’s past, present and future within the post-war and post-colonial world. The significance of Singapore Pictorialism is not as historical record, but as a platform to examine how this type of collective vision constructed and articulated both history and memory.

Finally, the conclusion in Chapter Seven briefly examines two recent exhibitions that have included pictorial photographs, using them as a springboard to consider the issues that have been discussed in this thesis. I offer some general remarks on this dissertation, its place within current scholarship and directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Photographic Pictorialism

The earliest record of artistic photography in Singapore dates from 1921, with the formation of two clubs – the Singapore Camera Club and the Malayan Camera Club in Kuala Lumpur. Both clubs held exhibitions that featured photographs by both local and overseas photographers, including the Japanese and the British, and awarded prizes for the best work. This seems to also have been the starting point in Singapore for using the term “pictorial photography” to describe artistic photographic art works. The term continued to remain in circulation till the 1980s, and club photographers often self-identified as “pictorialists” or “pictorial photographers” and participated in numerous “pictorial photography” exhibitions. While “salon photography” is also sometimes used to describe such photographs, the term seems to only have emerged in the 1950s as a description of photographs shown in the salon exhibitions.¹ I have chosen to use “pictorial” instead of “salon” photography given its longer history and associations and in keeping with much of the primary sources cited in this thesis.

Strictly speaking, the term “pictorial photography” is an oxymoron. A photograph by its very nature is a visual image – it is *always* pictorial. So what does pictorial photography actually mean? “Pictorialism” and “pictorial photography” were terms that emerged in the 19th century and are often associated with a particular time period within photographic history. Both Beaumont Newhall’s *The History of Photography*, which was first published in 1937 and regularly revised and updated in subsequent editions, and John Szarkowski’s *Photography Until Now*, which was published in 1989 in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name, include sections on Pictorialism, tracing its beginnings in Europe to its transfer to America with Alfred Steiglitz’s Photo-

¹ The earliest use of “salon photography” in Singapore newspapers was in 1956. *Sunday Standard*, November 11, 1956.

Secession group.² These books remain key references for studies of art photography today and the former has been described by Douglas Nickel as the “English-language text that has shaped thinking on the subject more permanently than any other”.³ Despite their titles, both books exclusively feature European and American developments, but nevertheless provide a good summary of Pictorialism’s history and an important backdrop to the subsequent developments of Pictorialism’s transmission to Singapore.

Szarkowski’s history of pictorial photography ends in the 1930s, with an anecdote of Steiglitz having to force the Metropolitan Museum of Art to accept his collection of more than 400 prints. Szarkowski describes the situation prior to the donation:

The pictorial movement [...] had deteriorated into a huge network of local salons, each of which held annual exhibitions of work that continued, decade after decade, to refine the most attenuated ideas of the original pictorialists. The triviality of this work further deflated the reputation of the originals...⁴

Szarkowski concludes that Pictorialism was “an idea did that not quite work”.⁵ In both books, Pictorialism is positioned as the precursor to the subsequent development of modernist photography led largely by the American photographers.⁶

² Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009); John Szarkowski, *Photography Until Now* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1989).

³ Douglas R. Nickel, “History of Photography: The State of Research,” *Art Bulletin* 83, no. 3 (September 2001): 550.

⁴ Szarkowski, *Photography Until Now*, 172.

⁵ Szarkowski, 172.

⁶ The narrative remains an influential one. For example, Canadian curator Ann Thomas writes: “Modernist photography in the United States shared a desire to demonstrate synchronicity with the present by exploring new ideas, subjects and techniques and to define itself against the romantic soft focus of Pictorialism, which by the 1920s had degenerated itself into Mannerism. Sharp, crisp lines would eventually predominate over the aesthetic of soft edges and muted tones.” Ann Thomas, “Between a Hard Edge and a Soft Curve: Modernism in Canadian Photography,” *Journal of Canadian Art History / Annales d’histoire de l’art Canadien* 21, no. 1/2 (2000): 75.

While Newhall and Szarkowski's books aim to cover the broad history of photography, Margaret Harker provides much greater detail regarding Pictorialism in her book on *The Linked Ring*, in the process recognising the heated and abundant debates that occurred among photographers who did not agree with each other on the form artistic photography should take.⁷ Interestingly, she uses the term "Secession Movement" in place of "Pictorialism" and "secessionists" in place of "pictorialists"; she describes the term "pictorial photography" as "confusing and contentious".⁸ Unlike Newhall or Szarkowski, Harker, who was the President of the RPS from 1958 to 1960, and a photographer herself, was intimately involved with Pictorialism past its avant-garde period and had a much closer relationship with her subject. Her historical account is less driven by the need to convey a grand narrative of American photography, thus more open to the contradictions and tensions with Pictorialism.

Harker has observed that the first exhibitions of the Secessionists embraced both the old realistic photography (with its sharply defined images) as well as the new naturalistic and impressionist photography (with its softer focus).

Photographic art at the time was characterised by a wide range and diversity of imagery with the emphasis on individuality. Secessionists held the view that it was the pictorial achievement which mattered rather than the means to that end and called themselves Pictorialists.⁹

Suffice to say, from its very beginnings, Pictorialism was not a stable style. Nevertheless, Harker suggests a few points of common identification – the emphasis on decorative values, the harmony of line and tone to make a unified picture, emphasis on mood, atmosphere or character, individual interpretation rather than factual statement and an avoidance of all things ugly whether they be in the nature of

⁷ Harker, *The Linked Ring*.

⁸ Harker, 27.

⁹ Harker, 68.

the subject or in the taking or making of a photograph, and the importance of appropriate lighting.¹⁰

Like Harker, both John Taylor and Christian Petersen have demonstrated that the history of Pictorialism was somewhat more complicated than Newhall or Szarkowski described. Taylor has pointed out the various schisms that occurred in early Pictorialism and the many arguments held regarding pictorial aesthetics.¹¹ Peterson has looked at pictorial photography in America past its supposed demise in the 1930s, concluding that there was actually a significant overlap between pictorial and modernist photography, and that there were photographers who belonged to both camps.¹²

Despite this evidence, Pictorialism is today often associated with a specific style of photography that features soft edges, low tones and an emphasis on hand-work, and placed in opposition to the sharp edges and crisp lines of modernist photography. Pictorialism's position within this stylistic trajectory is dependent on a modernist art discourse that situates pictorialism in opposition to modern (straight) photography. However, this seems to me to be somewhat inadequate in addressing the realities of the development of pictorial photography. A modernist art discourse is insufficient to explain the emergence of pictorial photography in other parts of the world, including Singapore. It also fails to reconcile the way photography in Singapore often exhibited both modernist characteristics such as clean lines and sharp contrasts, and so-called pictorialist qualities such as an emphasis on the picturesque and the use of allegorical titles.

Recent years have seen more contemporary reviews of the history of photography from scholars like Douglas Nickel, Robin Kelsey and Christopher Phillips, who have all

¹⁰ Harker, 68.

¹¹ John Taylor, ed., *Pictorial Photography in Britain, 1900-1920* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978).

¹² Christian A. Peterson, *After the Photo-Secession: American Pictorial Photography, 1910-1955*, 1st ed (Minneapolis, Minn.: Minneapolis Institute of Arts in association with W.W. Norton, New York, 1997).

provided critiques of Newhall and Szarkowski. Nickel has suggested that Newhall's book was essentially an attempt to draw a history that legitimised the modernist photography that surrounded Newhall when he took up his position at MoMA and curated his 1937 survey of photography.¹³ Nickel describes the modernist aesthetic ideal as "monolithic: sharp focus, a full range of tones, clarity of detail, no darkroom trickery", which aligned with contemporary formalist thought that "each medium had its own unique properties and should be judged according to its fidelity to internally specific criteria". Along these lines, Pictorialism's history was also "distorted to fit the author's scheme", to set the modernists apart from the pictorialists.¹⁴ More generally, Nickel notes the tension between art history and photography history, suggesting that the association of art photography with formalism has limited its potential as an area of research.

Robin Kelsey and Christopher Phillips have also separately discussed the complicated relationship between photography and modernism, by investigating the way MoMA has collected and exhibited photographs, including Newhall's role as curator. Kelsey has suggested that the museum's desire to claim photography as a modernist art led curators and galleries to "ignore or dismiss the circumstances of photographic production, as if photographs could operate aesthetically without regard to their past."¹⁵ This allowed the collection to absorb everything from topographical studies to military surveys. Like Nickel, Kelsey notes that the aesthetic isolation resulted in confusing attempts to define art photography and key personalities such as Newhall, Ansel Adams and Edward Weston associated modernist photography with a rejection of Pictorialism.¹⁶ In a related and earlier essay, Phillips traces the history of MoMA's department of photography through the reign of its three directors, Newhall, Edward Steichen and Jan Sarkowski, effectively demonstrating the way the museum produced a version of photographic history that was "in truth, a flight from history".¹⁷

¹³ Nickel, "History of Photography," 550.

¹⁴ Nickel, 552.

¹⁵ Robin Kelsey, *Photography and the Art of Chance* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015), 249.

¹⁶ Kelsey, 256.

¹⁷ Christopher Phillips, "The Judgment Seat of Photography," *October* 22 (1982): 63.

The perception of Pictorialism as a specific pre-modernist style is thus revealed to be closely entwined with the specific agendas of key personalities and institutions. While it is not my intention to revise American photographic history, the above discussion highlights several important points. The first is that “Pictorialism” is a fluid term, even today, as is its relationship to artistic modernism. The division between pictorial and modernist photography is not as clear-cut as often assumed and the two practices have not always operated in direct opposition to each other. Secondly, a result of this modernist chronology is the subsequent lack of attention paid to pictorial photography after the 1930s, despite clear evidence that pictorial photography continued to be practiced by amateur photographers all over the world, even into the 1970s, assisted by the easy portability of photographic prints and slides and the international distribution of photography magazines. It is only in recent years that these other histories have come to light, revealing a cosmopolitan network of photographers and camera clubs that span decades and countries, in the process also showing how pictorial photography has developed quite differently in different contexts.

Pictorial photography in other parts of the world

Pictorialism spread across countries, accompanied by the formation of an increasing number of camera clubs and annual photographic salons, which were highly influential in promoting the new photography movement and stimulating the production of new work. This was the case in Singapore as well, initially with the two clubs mentioned at the start of the chapter, and after the war, with the formation of another Singapore Camera Club in 1950 that subsequently developed close ties with the RPS and the PSA.

Alison Nordstrom and David Wooters have suggested that European Pictorialism was not the same as North American Pictorialism, and that Australian Pictorialism was originally influenced by the British before developing its own “unique and

characteristic style” that drew from its distinctive antipodean landscape.¹⁸ Richard Kent has observed that artistic photographic practice in China gained momentum in the 1920s, several decades after Pictorialism’s heyday in Europe and America, and was entwined with China’s aspirations towards a Western modernity. Kent further locates the increasing interest in photography in China in line with the May Fourth Movement and asserts a potential nationalist position for Chinese photography. He subsequently identifies two types of Chinese art photography that emerged – “Transplanted International Pictorialism” which mimicked international Pictorialism, and “Chinese-Inflected Pictorialism”, which incorporated subject matter drawn from traditional Chinese ink painting. Kent also notes that the 1930s saw a new kind of photographic modernism in Shanghai that existed alongside Pictorialism, sometimes even within the works of a single photographer.¹⁹

Malcolm Corrigan’s PhD thesis on the Chinese Camera Club of South Africa offers another account of Pictorialism in a different part of the world. Corrigan demonstrates how Pictorialism continued to exert a considerable influence on the South African Chinese photographers well into the 1960s and argues that pictorial photography and camera clubs played a significant role in allowing these photographers to shape their identity during apartheid.²⁰ Paying close attention to the way the photography clubs operated and the international networks that Pictorialism promoted, he shows how the photographers used these platforms to overcome existing racial hierarchies. Corrigan also examines the influence of Chinese landscape painting on pictorial landscapes and contends that the hybrid results allowed them to visualise a sense of belonging to both China and South Africa.

¹⁸ Alison Nordstrom and David Wooters, “Crafting the Art of the Photograph,” in *Truth Beauty: Pictorialism and the Photograph as Art, 1845-1945*, ed. Thomas Padon (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2008), 44.

¹⁹ Richard K. Kent, “Early Twentieth-Century Art Photography in China: Adopting, Domesticating, and Embracing the Foreign,” *The Trans-Asia Photography Review* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2013), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7977573.0003.204>.

²⁰ Malcolm David Corrigan, “A History of the Chinese Camera Club of South Africa” (PhD Thesis, SOAS, University of London 2016).

Lee Wing Ki and Edwin Lai have both looked at photography in Hong Kong. Commissioned by the Asian Art Archive (AAA), Lee's research period extends from 1960 to 2012 and notes the enduring popularity of pictorial photography in Hong Kong, describing it as the "Kingdom of Salon Photography".²¹ By analysing one of Hong Kong's most successful photography magazines, *Photo Pictorial*, Lee suggests that pictorial photography was used by China to maintain links with the Chinese diaspora and to extend China's influence.²² Lai studied an earlier period, starting from 1846 when photography was first introduced, to 1941 when the colony fell to the Japanese. He marks the appearance of amateur photography in the 1900s and art photography in the 1920s, also highlighting the influence of developments in Beijing and Shanghai.²³ Lai notes that until the 1970s, photographers in Hong Kong associated art with the representation of beauty, which borrowed from Chinese literati tradition, and that the works prized "simplicity and involved idyllic subject matter".²⁴

These studies have highlighted the importance of locality in considering the different permutations of Pictorialism as it developed in different parts of the world. A key challenge in this thesis is thus pinning down a suitable definition of "Pictorialism" and its related descriptor "pictorial photography". As Nordstrom and Wooters have described, "Photographic Pictorialism was simultaneously a movement, a philosophy, an aesthetic and a style."²⁵ They conclude that "pictorialism was, ultimately, not so much a style or a look as it was a philosophy", one which revolved around the photograph as a work of art and the print as a hand-crafted object that was equal to painting or sculpture.²⁶

²¹ Wing Ki Lee, "Locating Photographic Practice in Hong Kong since the 1960s" (Asia Art Archive), 42, accessed May 24, 2017, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/resources/papers-presentations/locating-photographic-practice-in-hong-kong-since-the-1960s>.

²² Lee, 44–46.

²³ Edwin Lai, "Hong Kong Art Photography: From Its Beginnings to the Japanese Invasion of December 1941" (PhD Thesis, The University of Hong Kong, 1996), 60–61.

²⁴ Lai, 122.

²⁵ Nordstrom and Wooters, "Crafting the Art of the Photograph," 33.

²⁶ Nordstrom and Wooters, 48.

Ulrich Keller also questions the place of style in his critical re-examination of pictorial photography in two separate but related articles. Keller chooses to use the terms “art photography” and “pictorial photography” but not “Pictorialism”, even though his study covers the emergence of The Linked Ring and the Photo-Secession (yet another example of the tenuous nature of the various related terms). He places the emergence of art photography against the backdrop of industrialisation and the accompanying rise of materialistic attitudes. Many amateur photographers were influenced by the larger trend for the educated classes to turn away from vulgarity and materialism towards a kind of refined artistic sensibility. Keller has described the early art photographers as “elitist” - the photographic societies and salons were dominated by the wealthy and educated.²⁷ Given that the existing art institutions did not accept photography as a legitimate art form, the photographers designed their own art world – a system of exhibitions, publications and aesthetic values – and their “ultimate goal was not the production of meaningful pictures, but the display of photographs in ‘real’ art museums.”²⁸ Keller concludes that it is the ideology of art photography as promoted by Steiglitz that is relevant and it did not manifest in style or theory but “in a more cosmetic trend toward social and spiritual exclusiveness.” Pictorial photography emerged from a “desire to stand apart from, rather than to stand for something”.²⁹

Within this framework, Keller shows how elements of style became a way for photographers to judge whether specific standards of art photography had been reached or missed by other photographers. He identified a “doctrinary terminology” that emerged within art photography, where the “safer and simpler the rules, the more authoritative became the author’s tone”, which contributed to his/her artistic legitimacy.³⁰ This often saw a focus on the picturesque, which was often used interchangeable with “pictorial” by the early art photographers. Other aesthetic concepts that were often referred to included tone, breadth, value, composition,

²⁷ Ulrich F. Keller, “The Myth of Art Photography: A Sociological Analysis,” *History of Photography* 8, no. 4 (October 1984): 252–53.

²⁸ Keller, 256.

²⁹ Keller, 260.

³⁰ Keller, 265.

harmony and balance.³¹ Over time, these principles ended up defining pictorial photography, but as Solomon-Godeau puts it, it was on mistaken grounds.³² The foundation of Pictorialism was always the aspiration to position photography as art, in the process prioritising the expressive possibilities of the photograph and the individuality of the photographer. In that respect, the relationship between pictorial and modernist photography was not necessarily an antagonistic one but one with blurred lines and overlapping concerns.

The recognition of this underlying philosophy becomes very important as “pictorial photography” became an increasingly fluid term that started overlapping with other photographic approaches in the middle of the 20th century. This can be most clearly seen in the numerous articles debating the definition of pictorial photography in the RPS Journal and Amateur Photographer. An article in the November 1952 issues of AP asked:

What is pictorialism? What makes a good print? What is that indefinable something that makes a record 'pictorial'? Whilst it is easy to classify subjects under various headings as landscape, architecture, portraiture, documentary and so on, I doubt if photographers will ever agree on what is 'pictorial'!³³

Photographers continued to argue about this for the next two decades, particularly the use of the “pictorial approach” in other types of photography such as documentary and architecture.³⁴

³¹ Ulrich F. Keller, “The Myth of Art Photography: An Iconographic Analysis,” *History of Photography* 9, no. 1 (January 1985): 1–2.

³² Solomon-Godeau has suggested that Pictorialism was “an error of means, not of ends”. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Winning the Game When the Rules Have Been Changed: Art Photography and Postmodernism,” in *The Meaning of Photography*, ed. Robin Kelsey and Blake Stimson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 156.

³³ Raymond P. Smith, “What Is Pictorialism?,” *Amateur Photographer*, November 12, 1952.

³⁴ For example, Margaret Harker discussed how architecture photographers should treat their subject in a “pictorial manner”, “Pictorialism in Architecture Photography”, *RPS Journal*, July 1950. Similarly, Nettie Moon discussed “Pictorial Portraiture” in July 1953.

The concerns of the next generation of pictorial photographers were summed up by then RPS President Margaret Harker in 1958:

Can it be that there is a shift in emphasis these days from the subjects which used to be considered pictorial to those which are found to have pictorial potentialities today? Can it be that photographers have found that industrial subjects have a beauty and interest peculiar to this day and age; that aircraft have lines which appeal to the eye as much, or more, than an old castle in Spain; that life revealed by the modern microscope has the structure, design and texture as wonderful as any form, animate or inanimate; that the revealing expression, the unposed attitude, the fleeting moment captured unawares, are more a part of today than the posed, deliberate studio portrait?³⁵

By 1965, photographers seemed no closer to a definition for pictorial photography. T.I. Williams concluded:

What is the pictorial photography to which we have given our allegiance? [...] "Pictorialism" and "pictorialist" are even vaguer in meaning; like mules, they have no pride of ancestry, and I doubt if you will find them in a dictionary at all. [...] The sorry fact is that there is no definition of pictorial photography, and no synonym or substitute that is any better.³⁶

Harker's observation of "pictorial potentialities" is particularly interesting, essentially reclaiming for Pictorialism modernist subject matter and style. Despite this blurring of the lines, the underlying philosophy remained the same, that is, the privileging of aesthetic qualities over all else, including factual reality. In looking at the development of pictorial photography in Singapore, I therefore propose to move away from the emphasis on style (sharp or soft focus), genre (landscape or architectural), or subject matter (the countryside or the skyscraper), and consider Pictorialism as a philosophy

³⁵ Margaret F. Harker, "Message from the President," *RPS Journal*, 1958.

³⁶ T.I. Williams, "Pictures in the Building," *RPS Journal*, 1965, 62–63.

centered around the photograph as an art object. By repositioning Pictorialism as such, we can account for differing stylistic approaches, while still recognising its original ideology. This more flexible approach allows for a consideration of the different permutations of Pictorialism as it took root in other countries, including Singapore, but also a connection to modernist photography. By side-stepping style, we avoid Szarkowski's accusations of triviality and can extend the story of Pictorialism past the Photo-Secession. A significant part of this thesis will look at how Pictorialism took shape in, and intersected with Singapore society and the specific local characteristics that emerged. Within this framework, I further position pictorial photography in Singapore as the start of a practice of modern photography, one predicated on the notion of a fully self-conscious and autonomous art form, which drew from Pictorialism's fine art roots.

Photography in Singapore

To date, there is very little research on photography in Singapore. Photography has not been included in the narratives of art history in Singapore until its appearance as contemporary art. At the start of this thesis, I have already noted that the first comprehensive history of art in Singapore, *Channels & Confluences: A History of Singapore Art*, did not mention photography. Instead, Kwok traces the development of modern art in Singapore through painting and sculpture. Interestingly, he also chose to include a short section at the end on installation and performance because "the fundamental idiom remains individualistic expression", yet photography is excluded.³⁷ The absence of photography from this written history is puzzling when one notes the intense amount of photographic activity in Singapore since the 19th century. This lack is even more notable when one remembers that the Singapore Art Society, whose members are extensively discussed in *Channels & Confluences*, hosted the First Open Photographic Exhibition in 1950.

³⁷ Kian Chow Kwok, *Channels & Confluences: A History of Singapore Art* (Singapore: National Heritage Board, Singapore Art Museum, 1996), 13.

There is also no comprehensive history of photography, art or otherwise, in Singapore. Interestingly, there have been four books published that touch on different aspects of 19th century photography. The first three – *Singapore: A Pictorial History* by Gretchen Liu, *Singapore: 500 Early Postcards* by Cheah Jin Seng, and *Singapore Through 19th century Photographs* by Jason Toh – all use photographs as ‘evidence’ to present historical narratives.³⁸ The fourth book, *A Vision of the Past: A History of Early Photography in Singapore and Malaya* by John Falconer is the most informative, using primary sources to trace out a history of photography till the early 20th century.³⁹ Falconer’s work pays attention to the international transfers that occur – in technology, skills and prints – and discusses how these images worked for colonial objectives. There is then a startling gap of information until Zhuang Wubin’s recently published *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey*, where there is a chapter on Singapore that briefly touches on a few photographers who the author feels should be recuperated into the canon of modern art.⁴⁰ The majority of the chapter then focuses on contemporary photography from the 1990s onwards.

Falconer’s work is important in providing a historical beginning for photography in Singapore. He identifies the daguerrotypes taken in 1844 by Frenchman Jules Itier, who was travelling to China and the Indies as the head of a commercial mission, as the earliest surviving photographs of Singapore. From this starting point, he traces the different European photographers who visited and worked in Singapore and the fates of the different photographic studios until the closure of the last studio, G.R. Lambert & Co., in 1918. He explains how Singapore’s favourable geographical position as a stop from Europe to Asia meant a steady stream of customers. The studios responded to the desire for photographic souvenirs accordingly.

³⁸ Jin Seng Cheah, *Singapore: 500 Early Postcards* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2006); Gretchen Liu, *Singapore: A Pictorial History, 1819-2000* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2007); Jason Toh, *Singapore through 19th Century Photographs* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2009).

³⁹ John Falconer, *A Vision of the Past: A History of Early Photography in Singapore and Malaya: The Photographs of GR Lambert & Co., 1880-1910* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1987).

⁴⁰ Wubin Zhuang, *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2016).

While Falconer has noted the role of photography in abetting European colonial expansion, offering the possibility of more accurate record-keeping and assisting in the fields of anthropology and ethnology, what is really interesting is that he also understood the power of photography. In fact, he has suggested that it would be difficult to “overestimate the impact of photography’s sheer authority in presenting authentic impressions of places and peoples” to the Europeans who were increasingly curious about Britain’s empire.⁴¹ He acknowledges that the studios were not part of a conscious program of propaganda, but nevertheless notes:

The subject matter of such photographs inevitably therefore reflects a European view of the East. Without devaluing their importance as historical records, the photographs can in certain respects be seen as a form of visual propaganda, disseminating an impression of the steady and harmonious growth of the colonial dependencies while largely playing down or ignoring those aspects of life which did not accord with this outlook.⁴²

What then, was this “steady and harmonious growth”? The majority of images produced during this time fell into two categories – views (landscapes) and types (portraits). Popular views included sweeping panoramas, the elegant Victorian edifices of European towns, the shop houses and temples in Chinatown and the Singapore River. To understand the appeal of such sights to the Europeans of the time, I quote the most famous photographer to visit Singapore, John Thomson:

Not many years ago it was a mere desolate jungle-clad island, like hundreds of others in the Eastern seas... When I first saw it in 1861 I was startled by the appearance of the European town, and since that time it has been yearly

⁴¹ Falconer, *A Vision of the Past*, 6.

⁴² Falconer, 30–31.

registering its substantial progress in steadily increasing rows of splendid docks, in bridges, in warehouses, and in government edifices.⁴³

Along with the changing landscape, Singapore saw a large variety of migrants. In 1897, there were more than 27 nationalities living there; by 1911, there were 48 different ethnicities (counting Chinese and Indian as only one each).⁴⁴ Portraits were thus a very popular representation of Singapore. They were typically taken in the studio and featured an incredibly diverse range of ethnicities, possibly the most diverse in any British colony, in both group and individual poses. Canadian author James Carter, who visited Singapore in 1907, described Singapore as follows:

The crowds in the street contribute a picturesque medley of dresses, the costumes of all nationalities adding to the local charm, which would be hard to match elsewhere even in the East.⁴⁵

Taking on Carter's idea of "a picturesque medley", Jason Toh has suggested that studios like G.R. Lambert & Co. consciously employed aesthetic strategies to appeal to an audience familiar with picturesque conventions.⁴⁶ This seems particularly obvious when we look at images such as *View of the Singapore waterfront from the Esplanade* (fig. 2.1) and *View from Mount Wallich* (fig. 2.2). Furthermore, ideas of the picturesque played an important role in much early pictorial photography and deserve greater consideration. However, unlike Falconer, Toh does not consider the politics of such images or those of the picturesque. In fact, in the conclusion of his essay, he simply wonders if the parts of Singapore that were not photographed were not "photoresque" enough (a term he coins to describe the photographic picturesque).

⁴³ J. Thomson, *The Straits of Malacca, Siam, and Indo-China: Travels and Adventures of a Nineteenth-Century Photographer*, Oxford in Asia Hardback Reprints (Singapore; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 53–54.

⁴⁴ Cheah, *Singapore*, 244.

⁴⁵ Toh, *Singapore through 19th Century Photographs*, 24.

⁴⁶ Toh, 25.



Fig. 2.1. G.R. Lambert & Co., *View of the Singapore waterfront from the Esplanade*, late 1890s, albumen print, 20.9 x 27 cm. National Museum of Singapore collection.



Fig. 2.2. Bourne and Shepherd, *View from Mount Wallich*, c. 1872, albumen print, 26.7 x 47.5 cm. National Museum of Singapore collection.

In addition to these books, there has been one thesis that touches on pictorial photography from Singapore. A student at the Lasalle College of the Arts, Kong Yen Lin, has written a masters thesis titled “Rise of Modernism in Singapore Photography,

1950s to 1980s: Aesthetic Negotiation through an Ethnic and National Identity Prism”. Seeking to trace the development of modern photography in Singapore, her research is limited by her methodology – she focuses on only five photographers. By looking at the life and work of these five Chinese photographers, her thesis concludes that modern photography in Singapore took the form of pictorial photography, which demonstrated a hybridisation of Western pictorial style with Chinese aesthetic values and local subject matter. Kong’s hypothesis was that these photographers consciously evoked traditional Chinese aesthetic values in the form of the Six Principles of Chinese Painting.⁴⁷ In general, the small sample size and the framework of ethnicity in her research precludes a broader discussion of Pictorialism in Singapore. Like Kong, my research also positions pictorial photography within the framework of modern art in Singapore, but will expand the discussion to considerations of circulation and exhibition as well as ideology and a politics of representation.

Daphne Ang completed her PhD dissertation on “The Production and Patronage of Portraiture in Colonial Singapore” in 2015.⁴⁸ Ang looks at portraiture in Singapore, including both painting and photography, from c.1839 to c.1940. Although Ang does not discuss pictorial photography, her thesis offers an understanding of the studio system in place in Singapore prior to WWII and provides an explanation for the transfer of photographic skills in the early 20th century. Separately, there have also been various monographs on individual photographers, including Yip Cheong Fun, Tan Lip Seng and Kouo Shang Wei.⁴⁹ However, these lack detailed historical analysis and fail to position the photographers within the broader photography or art histories in

⁴⁷ Yen Lin Kong, “Rise of Modernism in Singapore Photography, 1950s to 1980s: Aesthetic Negotiation through an Ethnic and National Identity Prism” (Masters thesis, Singapore, Lasalle College of the Arts, 2016), 23–25.

⁴⁸ Daphne Ang, “The Beginnings of an Art Historiography: The Production and Patronage of Portraiture in Colonial Singapore” (PhD thesis, SOAS, University of London, 2015).

⁴⁹ Bridget Tracy Tan, *An Ingenious Reverie: The Photography of Yip Cheong Fun* (Singapore: National Library Board, 1994); Wubin Zhuang, *Shifting Currents: Glimpses of a Changing Nation* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions; National Library Board, 2018); Lip Seng Tan and Han Wue Teo, *Light & shadow: Tan Lip Seng’s 50 years of photography* (Singapore: Art Retreat, 2009).

Singapore. Nevertheless, they contain useful biographical information as well as a significant number of reproductions relevant to this thesis.

There have been some recent studies that provide useful comparative research for this research project and offer insights into how we might understand pictorial images. Clare Veal and Karen Strassler have looked at photography in Thailand and Indonesia, respectively. Veal completed her PhD on the relationship between Thai photography and identity and one chapter of her thesis looks specifically at pictorial photography in Thailand, paying particular attention to the involvement of the monarchy. Strassler published *Refracted Visions: Popular Photography and National Modernity in Java* and one chapter is also devoted to the camera clubs in Indonesia although Strassler chooses to use the vernacular term “salon photography” rather than pictorial photography. As an anthropologist, Strassler focuses on the way such photographs operated within modern Indonesian society and, similar to Corrigan’s study of the South African Chinese photographers, considers the dynamics of race in her analysis. Supplementing this is the catalogue of an exhibition titled *Garden of the East*, which showed at the National Gallery of Australia and includes substantial essays on photography in Indonesia. Both Thailand and Indonesia had active photography clubs and hosted international salon exhibitions in the 20th century. Although the history of photography in these two countries follows fairly different trajectories, there are strong similarities in the aesthetics of the pictorial work in Southeast Asia, including Singapore.

The photography clubs in Singapore also had a close relationship with their counterparts in Hong Kong and photographers consistently exhibited in each other’s country. Hong Kong was seen as Singapore’s biggest competitor in the salon competitions in Asia, so the Singaporean photographers kept close watch over developments there. Edwin Lai’s study on Hong Kong shows a very similar situation to Singapore, where pictorial photography was the dominant type of photography

practiced and activities revolved around photography clubs and competitions.⁵⁰ Given the reciprocal exchanges between the clubs in Singapore and Hong Kong, it is extremely likely that photographers in Singapore were influenced by the Hong Kong photographers and vice versa. Singapore photographs were featured in Hong Kong magazines, many of which were available in Singapore.

A Politics of Representation

This research project positions photography within the larger field of visual culture and post-colonial theory. Post-colonial approaches to 19th century photography outside of Europe and America have received increasing attention in the last couple of decades. Scholars like Anne Maxwell and Susie Protschky have both looked at the way imperialism has played a part in the production and reception of photography.⁵¹ However, this dissertation is most indebted to James Ryan's research on the way photography is able to support a politics of representation. Ryan's work has drawn strongly on the work of post-colonial theorists like John MacKenzie in understanding imperialism as a set of cultural values towards the rest of the world, as well as on Edward Said's discourse of Orientalism. In *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualisation of the British Empire*, Ryan looks at the production and circulation of photography in building a geographic imaginary of the British Empire as part of British imperialism. Taking photography as a culturally constructed way of seeing, Ryan shows how the visual concurs with the ideological. Arguing against a neutral consumption of photographs, he positions photography as something that is situated within cultural codes and conventions, from which it derives its meaning. Throughout his book, Ryan continually demonstrates how the photographs made for British consumption in the

⁵⁰ Lai, "Hong Kong Art Photography: From Its Beginnings to the Japanese Invasion of December 1941," 122.

⁵¹ See Anne Maxwell, *Colonial Photography and Exhibitions: Representations of the "native" and the Making of European Identities* (London; New York: Leicester University Press, 1999) for an in-depth study on the representation of colonised peoples via the framework of the world fairs; See Protschky, *Images of the Tropics* for a study specifically of the Dutch East Indies.

19th century reveal “as much about the imaginative landscape of imperial culture as they do about the physical spaces or people pictured within their frame.”⁵²

Of particular interest is Ryan’s chapter on landscape (Chapter Two: Framing the View), which is presented as a controlled space. He places landscape photography as part of the picturesque tradition of art, but suggests that the 19th century photographers “disguised their dependence on pictorial convention in order to promote photography as an objective record of sight, in the process reinscribing imperial landscape as a natural way of seeing”.⁵³ Using Samuel Bourne’s photographs of India, Ryan further suggests that by imposing the aesthetics of English scenery, that is, the picturesque, on these foreign landscapes, these Victorian photographers were “familiarizing and domesticating a potential hostile landscape.”⁵⁴ In Chapter Five, ‘Photographing the Natives’, Ryan continues the discussion with respect to portrait photography. He places the genre within the discourses of ethnology and anthropology, which were rapidly developing fields of study in the 19th century. Theories of physiognomy were being developed and photography was a key tool of investigation. Recording new races in terms of ‘types’ rather than individuals was thus a natural extension of the colonial project, a way of putting everyone in their proper place. The photographs taken were to be an accurate marker of human difference.

Although Ryan does not deal specifically with Southeast Asia in his examples, instead discussing colonial images of India, Africa and Australia, his ideas are relevant to the aesthetic ideals seen in the photographs of Singapore and Southeast Asia. Within this framework, we can understand the appeal of depicting the Singapore river and the carefully composed elements of nature, architecture and peoples, both as part of a practice drawing upon established conventions of composition and as a way of civilising and thus controlling a space through discovery and conquest. Photography’s indexical nature lent itself perfectly to this endeavour with its association of truth and representing what-was-already there. These scenes were thus naturalized, to the point

⁵² Ryan, *Picturing Empire*, 20.

⁵³ Ryan, 47.

⁵⁴ Ryan, 51.

that the three Singapore scholars I mentioned in the previous section chose not to question the images at all.

Interestingly, Ryan argues against a pure art historical approach to photography which he feels marginalizes photographic practices that do not fall within the framework of art, such as commercial or advertising photography.⁵⁵ He also takes pains to state that the photographer's artistic motivations do not preclude imperial ideology or influence, and that the latter was in fact a source of imaginative power.⁵⁶ Given that this study does limit itself to pictorial photography which is framed as 'art', an art-historical framework is important in understanding the development of pictorialism and its approaches. However, I do agree with Ryan that imperial ideology was a crucial factor in the production of 19th century photographs. Thus, if we accept that the European photographers of the 19th century built a specific vision of what lay beyond Europe, then it seems logical that this vision persisted through, or at least influenced, the international photographic salons in the 20th century. Furthermore, post-war society in Singapore was strongly influenced by nationalist sentiments, which surely also had an impact on the vision of Singapore as put forth by the Singaporean pictorialists.

Ryan is only one of several scholars taking an interest in the way photography operates across cultures. Rosalind Morris has also discussed the circulation of 19th century images in her introduction to *Photographies East: The Camera and its Histories in East and Southeast Asia*. Mainly using the photographs of John Thomson, she discusses the conventions by which Asia was represented and how they were affected by the photographer's own desires. More importantly, she acknowledges Thomson's sociological ambitions and suggests that his photographs were intentionally stereotypical. That is, Thomson wanted his images to be recognisable as representative of a type, the 'Far East'. In addition, Morris offers a possible explanation for the continuation of such visual tropes in 20th century photography, suggesting that

⁵⁵ Ryan, 18.

⁵⁶ Ryan, 55.

the desire for foreignness has led to the fetishisation of the past in photography.⁵⁷ This point is particularly interesting as it has bearing on the camera club activities which often included trips to rural areas to capture life there. A complicating factor is that the desiring subject had also shifted to the local.

Rey Chow's work on cultural identity considers the complexities of representation and provides an explanation for the visual construction of difference and the desire for self-exoticisation within othered communities. In particular, Chow critiques the traditional position of post-colonial studies in establishing the West as the active gaze that presents the non-West as the passive objects. While such studies have revealed the power relations inherent in orientalist discourse, it ignores the fact that the East is as much an agent involved in the politics of spectatorship.⁵⁸ Instead, Chow asks:

What is needed, after the ethical polemic of Said's *Orientalism* is understood, is the much more difficult task of investigating how visibility operates in the postcolonial politics of non-Western cultures besides the subjection to passive spectacle that critics of orientalism argue. How do we deal with the fact that non-Westerners also gaze, are voyeurs and spectators? [...] After demonstrating the bloodiness of Western instruments of vision and visibility, how do we discuss what happens when "the East" uses these instruments to fantasize itself and the world?⁵⁹

Chow was one of the earliest scholars to recognize the agency of "the East" in this politics of vision and the complexities of spectatorship for the non-West in the age of technologised visibility, i.e., film and photography. She notes that it is the act of visual encounter, e.g. in watching a film or looking at a photograph, that leads to the

⁵⁷ Rosalind C. Morris, "Introduction," in *Photographies East : The Camera and Its Histories in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Rosalind C. Morris, *Objects/Histories : Critical Perspectives on Art, Material Culture, and Representation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 17.

⁵⁸ Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visibility, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 12–13.

⁵⁹ Chow, 13.

beginnings of self-consciousness, which is itself intrinsically tied to both *seeing and being seen*.⁶⁰ More specifically, the post-colonial subject is always aware of being-looked-at, and this awareness affects the way she looks at things, and is in fact, a key element in cross-culture representation.⁶¹ Mary Louise Pratt has also identified how colonized subjects represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer and uses the term “autoethnography” to describe such practices.⁶² The understanding that self-representation is autoethnographic is extremely important as I consider the kinds of photographs that were submitted by the Singaporeans to the international salon exhibitions. It offers a framework to consider how the photographers consciously developed an image of ‘Singapore’ within the codes of Pictorialism and the way Singapore had been previously represented.

Chow’s case studies of Zhang Yimou’s early films – which bear similarities to pictorial photography in its depiction of a timeless past – offer an insight into the translation of foreignness between Western and non-Western cultures.⁶³ Chow not only considers the way Zhang’s films are received differently by different audiences, but suggests a connection with the idea of exhibitionism, or the pleasure of being seen. Her argument is not about identifying the *correct* representation, but to understand that this representation emerges as a product of cross-cultural transfers. Furthermore, the Oriental’s orientalism may act as a strategy – by staging orientalism, one is able to achieve attention and status. This certainly seems to be the case with regards to the award and honour system in the salon and societies.

Conclusion

While much of this thesis relies upon primary documents in archives and collected oral histories, the literature discussed in this section informs the theoretical underpinnings

⁶⁰ Chow, 9.

⁶¹ Chow, 180.

⁶² Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd ed (London; New York: Routledge, 2008), 7–9.

⁶³ See Chapter 4 of Chow, *Primitive Passions*.

of the research. Pictorialism was a truly international photographic movement and the various historical studies demonstrate the diversity that actually existed within the movement as well as the way various local variations developed. This thesis will build on such research to trace the development of pictorial photography in Singapore along with its specific characteristics. It also seeks to understand how pictorial photography could be linked to the country's colonial history, particularly given the close ties between the PSS in Singapore and the RPS in Great Britain. A study on pictorial photography in Singapore will enrich and expand our understanding of this photographic movement and offer a wider perspective on photography history. It not only presents links between Singapore and Europe and America, but also the less studied connections between Asian countries.

This thesis also recognises the agency of the Singaporean photographers and their awareness of the international audience. It acknowledges the politics of representation and how the photographs did not just reflect the Singapore environment, but actually contributed to the visual imagination of modern Singapore. In considering the way these photographers shaped the representation of the nation, this thesis extends the existing research on 19th and early 20th century images and prompts a rethinking of how these works have been framed thus far.

Chapter 3: Pictorialism and Modernity¹

A good artistic photograph is not only a record of people, things and experiences, it is also a representation of the modern spirit. [...] It is not only related to artist's technique in operating the machine, it is also related to the atmosphere and content that it is trying to express.²

Marco Hsu, 1970

In Singapore, the term 'pictorial photography' was widely used to describe photographic art works from the 1920s to the 1970s. It was used in newspaper articles, photography club journals and by the photographers themselves. Singaporean photographers often self-identified as 'pictorialists' or 'pictorial photographers' and participated in numerous national and international exhibitions that claimed to show 'pictorial photography'. Nevertheless, it has never been conclusively defined, often simply associated with amateur artistic photography and the camera clubs. The most active period of such photographic practice in Singapore coincided with its key nation-building years, occurring after the Japanese occupation from 1942-45, seeing Singapore gain independence from the British to join Malaysia in 1963, its separation in 1965 to form an independent republic and the associated growing pains. The 1950s in particular saw an increasing sense of Singapore as a nation, culminating in self-governance in 1959. During this time, the idea of the modern was pervasive, crucially implicated into the formation of the new national identity. The photographers were not isolated from these national developments, having lived through the occupation, the subsequent loss of confidence in the British and the first Singapore national elections.

¹ Small sections of an earlier draft of this chapter ('Modern, Modernity and Modernism' and 'Pluralism of styles') have been published in 'Pictorialism and Modernity in Singapore, 1950-60,' *Southeast of Now* 2, no. 2 (2018): 9-31.

² Ge Ma, "山水、人物、生活、與瞭解黃克攝影個展推介 (Landscape, Character, Life and Understanding: A Recommendation of Huang Ke's Solo Exhibition)," *Nanyang Siang Pau*, June 29, 1970.

This chapter investigates the development of 'Singapore Pictorialism', a term I use to describe this particular photography movement in Singapore. While photographic pictorialism is not typically associated with modernity or modern art, the emergence of Singapore Pictorialism was closely entangled with ideas of the modern. This chapter thus starts by examining what modernity meant in the Singapore context. It then goes on to present a brief chronology of art photography in Singapore, to illustrate its early influences and historical milestones and its key players and institutions. Singapore Pictorialism took many of its cues from Pictorialism in Europe but also exhibited key differences, due to the different historical context. This chapter will highlight these differences, which are not only within the photographs themselves, but also in the attitudes of the photographers and the role they played in the formation of a new national identity. In the process, I will clarify the way pictorial photography intersected with modern Singapore society, leading to the emergence of a specific Singapore-inflected Pictorialism.

The premise for this chapter draws upon John Clark's study of the transmission and transformation of stylistic practices from Europe and America to Asia in his book *Modern Asian Art*.³ Instead of portraying these transmissions as examples of stylistic copying, Clark's study suggests that the values associated with Pictorialism were re-coded across cultural boundaries, and more importantly, the very act of transference from one country to another saw the codes themselves change. In the case of Singapore, the explanation for the kinds of transformation that occurred necessitates a close look at the corresponding social and political situation. I trace this transmission of Pictorialism to Singapore and consider the ways in which its associated practices changed (or remained the same) in the new context. It distinguishes pictorial photographic practice in Singapore from that in Europe and North America and sets the context for much of the discussions to follow in later chapters.

³ John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (New South Wales: Craftsman House, 1998).

Modern, Modernity and Modernism

Scholars have pointed out the difficulties involved in the use of the term 'modern' in Asia. Among others, Geeta Kapur has observed the difference between modernisation and modernism – the former being a social and economic process while the latter a cultural term specifically situated at a period of Western history. Kapur suggests that non-Western nations have typically been excluded from modernism, or at least seen as “incidental” to it.⁴ Jim Supangkat has also pointed out that the development of modern art in Asia was not based on (Euroamerican) modernism and instead requires an analysis of the specific historical, social and cultural factors.⁵ On the other hand, Astri Wright has noted the imprecision in the use of a term like 'modern' in non-Western cultures; modern Indonesian art was preoccupied with different concerns, which complicated comparisons with Euroamerican modern artists.⁶

In the literature review, I discussed the development of Pictorialism in Europe in the 19th century and its subsequent position within a modernist art discourse. This resulted in the perception of Pictorialism as a specific style of photography that featured soft edges, low tones and an emphasis on hand-work, situated in opposition to the new modernist photography which featured clean lines, sharp edges and smooth surfaces. As a consequence, Pictorialism was often seen as a pre- or non-modern style. This use of 'modern' is more accurately described as 'modernist', reliant on an art discourse that traces a consecutive series of avant-garde reactions and privileges the notion of truth to medium.⁷ In other words, it was a modernist discourse that was tied to Euroamerican art history and the associated ideas of originality and autonomy.⁸

⁴ Geeta Kapur, “Contemporary Cultural Practice: Some Polemical Categories,” *Social Scientist*, no. 3 (1990): 54.

⁵ Jim Supangkat, “Art and Culture in the Third Space: The Case in Indonesia,” in *International Symposium 2005: Cubism in Asia: Unbounded Dialogues* (Tokyo: The Japan Foundation, 2006), 248–57.

⁶ Astri Wright, “Artist Roles and Meaning in Modern Indonesian Painting,” in *Modernity in Asian Art*, ed. John Clark, 183.

⁷ John Clark, ‘Open and Closed Discourses of Modernity in Asian Art’, in *Modernity in Asian Art*, ed. John Clark, 5–6.

⁸ Christopher Phillips has provided an excellent analysis of the complicated relationship photography has had with modernist ideas via a case study of MOMA's photography

In Singapore, pictorial photography was closely associated with modernity. As art critic Marco Hsu (Ma Ge) aptly described, it was a “representation of the modern spirit.”⁹ Pictorial photography practice developed in the same period as what is now commonly accepted as modern painting and sculpture in Singapore. However, even within the Singapore context, Kwok Kian Chow has noted the shifting meanings of ‘modern art’. He sets out three definitions:

1. Modern as the emergence of art as an independent and individualistic practice, in contrast to its previous religious or public functions.
2. Modern as the high point in the development of artistic practice, that is, art in the 1950s when there was a flourishing of artistic innovation.
3. Modern as used by the Modern Art Society to symbolise a departure from the mainstream Chinese migrant art (Nanyang school), which subsequently came to refer to abstract art in the 1970s.¹⁰

Therefore, in seeking to understand pictorial photography in Singapore, I am proposing to avoid a modernist art discourse and to take an approach that takes into account a broader idea of modernity. John Clark has observed how modern art in Asia developed in response to different historical processes, including the “growth of a society, and within it an art world”, the “institutional introduction and reinforcement of society-wide modernisation processes” and the “transfer to Asian art cultures of a penumbra of styles [...] (which were) assimilated, transformed and developed in relative autonomy to their Euramerican centres of origination...”¹¹ These different processes provide the basis for a more contextual articulation of modern art. Simon Soon has succinctly summarised Asian modernism as “how artists responded to modernity in

department. Phillips, Christopher. ‘The Judgment Seat of Photography’, *October* 22 (1982): 27-63.

⁹ Ma, “山水、人物、生活、與瞭解黃克攝影個展推介 (Landscape, Character, Life and Understanding: A Recommendation of Huang Ke’s Solo Exhibition.”

¹⁰ Kwok, *Channels & Confluences*, 8.

¹¹ John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (New South Wales: Craftsman House, 1998), 14.

Asia”.¹² Along these lines, in discussing pictorial photography in Singapore, the conditions of modernity specific to the developmental history of Singapore must be considered.

Modernity in Singapore is intrinsically linked to the legacy of British colonisation and the subsequent search for national identity. Singapore is not unique in this. In his catalogue essay for the 4th Asian Art Show in Fukuoka, curator Masahiro Ushiroshoji noted that Asian artists have had to learn Western techniques while still establishing a form of self-expression that was not a mere copy. The most common solution was for these artists to depict local subject matter, for example, local landscapes or traditional folk tales, using Western techniques. Furthermore, because these artists were often working during periods of nation-building, they tended to conflate the search for self-expression with a search for national identity.¹³ In other words, their objective became to create a Singaporean art, or an Indonesian art, or a Filipino art, and so on. Often, there was a negotiation between tradition, as a substitute for Asian-ness, and modernity. This negotiation has been well-documented with respect to the Nanyang school of painting, which strove to develop a new aesthetic for art in Malaya.¹⁴

Redza Piyadasa has noted that the idea of the self-expressive creative individual did not exist in Malaya (of which Singapore was a part) prior to British colonisation. The indigenous Malay population created art objects for religious or utilitarian purposes, but did not see art as a separate secular category with its own practitioners.¹⁵ It was only with the arrival of the Nanyang artists that society began to recognize ‘art’ along

¹² Simon Soon, “When Was East and Southeast Asia’s Modernism in Art? Comparisons and Intersections,” in *The Modernist World*, ed. Allana Lindgren and Stephen Ross (New York: Routledge, 2015), 79.

¹³ Masahiro Ushiroshoji, “Realism as Attitude: Asian Art in the Nineties,” in *4th Asian Art Show: Realism as Attitude*, ed. Kiichirō Nakayama, trans. Janet Goff (Fukuoka: Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, 1995), 34.

¹⁴ Kwok, *Channels & Confluences*, 38, 40–61.

¹⁵ Redza Piyadasa, “Early Modern Art Developments in Malaysia and Singapore, 1920–1960,” in *The birth of modern art in Southeast Asia: Artists and movements, 1997*, ed. Masahiro Ushiroshōji and Toshiko Rawanchaikun (Fukuoka; Hiroshima; Shizuoka: Fukuoka-shi Bijutsukan ; Hiroshima Kenritsu Bijutsukan ; Shizuoka Kenritsu Bijutsukan, 1997), 229.

with the associated value systems of connoisseurship, patronage and education. The Nanyang artists have thus often been identified as the harbingers of modern art in Malaya. These Chinese artists travelled to Southeast Asia in the 1920s and 1930s and many settled in Singapore, finding positions as teachers in the various Chinese schools. In 1938, one of these artists, Lim Hak Tai, founded the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, the first fine arts academy in Malaya, which played a very significant role in the development of art practice in Singapore.

Familiar with both Chinese ink techniques and Western oil painting, the Nanyang artists were situated at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, but also that of their old (China) and new (Singapore) homes. Emelia Ong has suggested that through his academy, Lim led these artists to embrace “an avant-garde stance in art, advocating innovation, open-mindedness and diversity.”¹⁶ Therefore, even though there was no one easily identifiable “style”, what the artworks had in common was a very diverse and open approach that saw various combinations of techniques, media, as well as modes of representation from both Chinese and Western painting traditions. Interestingly, this openness was very similar to the attitudes of the pictorial photographers. More generally, modern art brought with it a consciousness of the artist as an expressive individual and the value of creativity.¹⁷ This consciousness extended across to photography.

While the first stirrings of modern art appeared in the 1920s, World War II and the Japanese Occupation proved a stumbling block to its development. In Singapore, the art societies and art school were shut down and leaders interned and even killed. It was only after the Japanese were defeated that the development of modern art took off again. Piyadasa has suggested that the very lateness of this growth led to pluralistic tendencies, which were further supported by the lack of existing cultural ideology. This meant that artists felt free to draw from diverse sources for their inspirations.

¹⁶ Emelia Ong, “The Nanyang Artists: Eclectic Expressions of the South Seas,” in *Imagining Identities*, ed. Nur Hanim Khairuddin and Beverly Yong, Narratives in Malaysian Art: Volume 1 (Kuala Lumpur: RogueArt, 2012), 64.

¹⁷ Kwok, *Channels & Confluences*, 8.

Therefore, artistic developments would not have necessarily followed “deterministic evolutionary patterns” like the story of modern art in America and Europe.¹⁸ Although Piyadasa was addressing the development of painting and sculpture, the war had a similar impact on the development of photography in Singapore.

Photography before the war

Two years after Daguerre revealed the daguerreotype to the French public in 1839, the first photographs were made in Singapore by an American doctor passing through on an American warship in 1841.¹⁹ Another two years later, 1843 saw the first photography studio in Singapore set up by an enterprising Frenchman, Gaston Dutronquoy, in his hotel.²⁰ While Dutronquoy’s business does not appear to have done well and his subsequent fate is unknown, the 1850s saw more success by a number of itinerant European photographers, including the well-documented John Thomson, who typically spent a few months in Singapore providing their services before moving on to other nearby cities.²¹ In 1958, Edward Edgerton opened his studio and introduced to Singapore the wet collodion process, which allowed for multiple prints from one plate. Edgerton was followed by a string of photographers who set up permanent studios in Singapore, including Sachtler & Co. and G.R. Lambert & Co., which became two of the most prominent and prolific studios in Malaya.²² The latter remained in business from 1867 till 1918 and produced the most comprehensive collection of photographs of Singapore. According to Falconer, the studio employed a few native assistants, which would have led to the transfer of some photographic skills.²³

¹⁸ Piyadasa, “Modernist and Post-Modernist Developments in Malaysian Art in the Post-Independence Period,” 170.

¹⁹ Falconer, *A Vision of the Past*, 8; Carl Gibson-Hill, “Singapore’s First Photographers,” *Foto News* 1, no. 5 (January 1955): 16.

²⁰ Gibson-Hill, “Singapore’s First Photographers.”

²¹ Falconer, *A Vision of the Past*, 12.

²² Falconer, 16–18, 21, 27.

²³ Falconer, 33.

By the 1890s, numerous Chinese studios had also begun to emerge in Singapore.²⁴ Chinese photographers came to Southeast Asia in the 19th century, many escaping the Taiping Rebellion in Southeast China in the latter half of the century. Documented cases include Pun Lun, who established his studio in Singapore in the 1880s, Lee Poh Yan and his family, who operated more than a dozen photographic studios, including the famous Lee Brothers studio, in Southeast Asia between 1875 to 1940, Yong Fong Studio and Low Kway Song's Empire Studio in 1920.²⁵ Chinese photographers typically trained as apprentices in European studios or in Jesuit missionary schools in Shanghai.

Daphne Ang has noted that after acquiring such skills, many opened photography studios with other family members and kept the knowledge within closed circles.²⁶ This is supported by K.F. Wong's experience – he was unable to obtain an apprenticeship in Singapore in the 1930s as he did not have the necessary family or village connections to the existing photography studios. As a result, he had to return to China where he got a position in a Xiamen studio.²⁷ Wong finally returned to Sarawak as a trained photographer in 1937 and opened several photography studios in Sarawak and Singapore.²⁸ Wong also noted that most of the Chinese photography studios in Singapore were operated by migrants from Guangdong, who would only take apprentices from their own village or province.

The business of the European studios primarily revolved around the sales of landscapes and portraits of the different races in Singapore, often bought as souvenirs by tourists. While studios like G.R. Lambert & Co. also undertook commissioned

²⁴ For a record of the different photography studios set up in Singapore from the 1840s to 1940s, see Daphne Ang, "Portraiture and Photography in Colonial Singapore," in *Inherited & Salvaged: Family Portraits from the NUS Museum Straits Chinese Collection*, ed. Foo Su Ling (Singapore: NUS Baba House, 2015), 74–100.

²⁵ Ang, 87–88; Daphne Ang, "The Straits Chinese and Civic Portraiture in Singapore 1819-1959," in *Great Peranakans: Fifty Remarkable Lives*, ed. Alan Chong (Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2015), 43.

²⁶ Ang, "Portraiture and Photography in Colonial Singapore," 90.

²⁷ Hanjia Fang and Shaohua Lin, *世界著名摄影家黄杰夫 (Shijie zhuming sheyingjia Huang Jiefu)* (Fuzhou: Haichao Sheying Yishu Chubanshe, 1995), 25–30.

²⁸ Fang and Lin, 31–34.

portraits, such services were increasingly provided instead by Chinese studios, which had a key advantage over the European studios. Many Chinese photographers were also trained as miniature and glass artists, allowing the studios to offer alongside the photo portrait, other services such as tinted photographs and paintings copied from photographs.²⁹ Toward the end of the first World War, the European studios were unable to sustain their trade and started shutting down, which Falconer has attributed to the spread of picture postcards and the rise of amateur photography.³⁰ The Chinese studios, on the other hand, proliferated and by 1932, there were 21 such studios in Singapore, all providing commercial portraiture services, which continued to be in demand by the rich Straits Chinese families.³¹ Therefore, despite the tight control on apprenticeships, these studios would have played a key role in the transfer of photographic skills and knowledge in the first half of the 20th century.

Singapore also had a few Japanese studios.³² However, their importance was not so much in the transfer of skills as it was in bringing to Singapore examples of fine Japanese pictorial work. The Japanese photographers started the Singapore Camera Club in 1921 (not to be confused with the other Singapore Camera Club founded in 1950). While it was formed mainly for the Japanese, it tried to encourage non-Japanese membership in later years.³³ The club organised annual exhibitions opened to the public and a 1922 newspaper article noted that the club had over 120 members in Singapore and Johor.³⁴ Other studies have shown the impact of Pictorialism on Japanese photographic practice and it would be reasonable to assume that the Japanese photographers in Singapore would also have been influenced by Pictorialism.³⁵ Supporting this view is a news article from *The Singapore Free Press and*

²⁹ Ang, "Portraiture and Photography in Colonial Singapore," 91.

³⁰ Falconer, *A Vision of the Past*, 37.

³¹ Ang, "Portraiture and Photography in Colonial Singapore," 90.

³² Ang, "Portraiture and Photography in Colonial Singapore."

³³ "Japanese Photographic Exhibition," *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, August 24, 1922; "Camera Club Show," *The Straits Times*, July 5, 1926.

³⁴ "Japanese Photographic Exhibition."

³⁵ Ryuichi Kaneko, "Pictorial Photography in Japan," in *Truth Beauty: Pictorialism and the Photograph as Art, 1845-1945*, ed. Thomas Padon, trans. Wataru Okada (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2008), 78–84.

Mercantile Advisor, which noted that the Japanese prints were the “best work” at an exhibition in Malaya and “what was really a pleasant feature to the judges was the manner in which the Japanese pictorial ideas were blended with Western ideals, with remarkable good results”. The writer added that the display would “compare favourably with the productions of the leading London salons”.³⁶

In terms of other camera clubs, there are brief records of a Singapore Amateur Photographic Society, which was formed in 1887 and promoted amateur photography in the late 19th century. Accounts show that members largely comprised Europeans and the society did not organise any regular exhibitions.³⁷ As such, it was unlikely that the society had much impact on non-European practitioners. However, 1921, the same year the Singapore Camera Club was formed, saw the formation of another new photography club – the Malayan Camera Club in Kuala Lumpur.³⁸ Most significantly, this is also when the term ‘pictorial photography’ started gaining traction. In January 1922, the Malayan Camera Club had their open call for the Malaya-Borneo Exhibition featured in the *Malaya Tribune*. The article noted that the exhibited photographs would be classified into seven categories, the first of which was “Pictorial Photography”, which comprised “general pictorial subjects, including moonlight and sunset views, still life, etc, etc”.³⁹ The article further noted that the photographs in this category had to exhibit “distinct evidence of personal artistic feeling and execution”. Photographs submitted for “interest or technique” should be entered in a different category.

The Malayan Camera Club was targeted at European amateurs but its annual exhibition was opened to all races. A report on the club’s activities described it as

³⁶ “Western Arts,” *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, April 8, 1922.

³⁷ “Singapore Photographic Society,” *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, February 4, 1896, 3.

³⁸ “Japanese Photographic Exhibition”; “Malayan Camera Club,” *The Straits Times*, August 13, 1921.

³⁹ “Malaya-Borneo Exhibition,” *Malaya Tribune*, January 20, 1922.

engaging in “artistic picture-making with the camera in portraiture, landscape, etc”.⁴⁰ A similar report the following year declared the club’s desire for its exhibition to show “the best pictorial work of Malaya”.⁴¹ Club activities were styled after camera clubs in Europe and members would certainly have been aware of Pictorialism and its practices. The first Chairman of the club was F. de la Mare Norris, who was an agricultural field officer for the Department of Agriculture in Kuala Lumpur. Subsequently, the term ‘pictorial photography’ gained increasing prominence in Singapore in describing a type of artistic photography, despite its lack of clear definition. In one article for example, it was vaguely described as “the making of a picture as distinct from an ordinary photograph”.⁴²

Although there is very little further information about these two clubs and a complete lack of reproductions of any photographs made by their members, their existence and exhibitionary activities show the beginnings of pictorial photographic practice in Singapore, along with its associated structures – the camera club and the photographic salon. The clubs and exhibitions also provide clear evidence of the presence of European-style Pictorialism in Singapore. For example, several of the photographs submitted to the Malaya-Borneo Exhibition had already previously been exhibited in the London Salon.⁴³ K. Sibbald, who was the exhibition secretary of the Malaya Camera Club was also an Associate of the Royal Photographic Society in London.⁴⁴ One must not underestimate the popularity of some of these exhibitions – 40,000 people visited the Malaya-Borneo Exhibition on the first day and newspaper reports note that the photography exhibition was very popular.⁴⁵ While these early exhibitions were dominated by the Europeans and Japanese, by 1925, we finally see a Chinese name in the list of winners of the Malayan Camera Club annual exhibition – Mr Lee Wung

⁴⁰ “Malayan Camera Club - Exhibition of Photographs,” *Malaya Tribune*, February 9, 1922.

⁴¹ “Malayan Camera Club,” *Malaya Tribune*, January 25, 1923.

⁴² “Camera Club Show.”

⁴³ “Malaya-Borneo Exhibition,” *The Straits Times*, February 11, 1922.

⁴⁴ *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, June 22, 1927.

⁴⁵ “M.B. Exhibition,” *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, April 13, 1922.

Tseong, who was awarded a diploma in the Portraits section.⁴⁶ In 1927, another Chinese name is listed – Mr Chia Boon Leong, who won a medal in the General category for his picture *Morning Sunlight*.⁴⁷

By the 1930s, however, there were no further mentions by either club or their exhibitions in the press, and it is likely that they both were discontinued. Despite the lack of club support, there were signs that individual photographers continued to engage in artistic photography. Kodak organised a *Salon of International Photography* in 1931, which was a large, worldwide competition and included participants from Malaya. Held in the ballroom of the Capitol Theatre with free entry for the public, *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advisor* described it as “an interesting event and one of some artistic importance”.⁴⁸ A spokesperson for the judging panel for Malaya and Siam thought that photographers from the region “had not done at all badly” and that in the Still Life category, the Malayan prize winner was the best.⁴⁹ Another article pronounced that the exhibition had succeeded in “making the public aware that since the invention of the photographic lens, a new art has been born”.⁵⁰ More generally, the exhibition brought to Singapore fine examples of photographic work from all over the world, which surely would have inspired local photographers.

In 1935, the Chinese community organised the *Oversea Chinese Photography Exhibition*.⁵¹ Despite the entry fee of \$1, the exhibition, which was opened to all resident Chinese in Malaya, received over 352 entries from 38 photographers from Selangor, Negri Sembilan, Perak, Penang, Trengganu, Hong Kong and Singapore, a clear sign that artistic photography had had a significant regional impact by then.⁵² Based on

⁴⁶ “Malayan Camera Club,” *The Straits Times*, July 30, 1925.

⁴⁷ “Malayan Camera Club,” *The Straits Times*, April 1, 1927.

⁴⁸ “Photographic Exhibition,” *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, December 30, 1931.

⁴⁹ “An Art That All Can Practise,” *The Straits Times*, December 31, 1931.

⁵⁰ “Photographic Exhibition,” December 30, 1931.

⁵¹ All records of the exhibition and subsequent society use the word “Oversea” and not “Overseas”.

⁵² “Chinese Photographs,” *Sunday Tribune*, March 24, 1935; “Photographic Exhibition,” *Malaya Tribune*, February 7, 1935.

the description of the catalogue, it seems the project was a significant endeavour. It not only included the list of works and some reproductions, but essays on photography such as “Pictures versus Records” by Dr Chia Boon Leong and “Night Photography Notes” by Mr Liew Choe Hoon.⁵³ The presence of the former is particularly interesting as it is evidence that the photographers were aware of the debates in Europe regarding Pictorialism and photography as an art form. Chia had taken part in the exhibitions organised by the Malayan Camera Club and won two medals in 1927.⁵⁴

The Oversea Chinese Photography Exhibition is also significant for being the only exhibition from this period with reproductions featured in the local press, which reveal works that displayed a good grasp of the trends in European Pictorialism. (fig. 3.1) Comprising portraits, landscapes and still life, the reproductions show a marked consideration for aesthetics, each image demonstrating a careful use of composition alongside technical competence. *The Mask* by Sie-to Kuan To is a particularly fine example of dramatic lighting and composition to create a very striking still life.⁵⁵ A review in *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* described the works as “balanced and harmonious”.⁵⁶

⁵³ I was unable to find any copies of the catalogue. “Photographic Exhibition,” *The Straits Times*, February 27, 1935.

⁵⁴ “Malayan Camera Club,” April 1, 1927; “Malayan Camera Club - Results of Storch Medal Competition,” *The Straits Times*, November 23, 1927.

⁵⁵ *The Straits Times*, March 28, 1935.

⁵⁶ “Photo Exhibition - Artistic Work by Overseas Chinese,” *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, March 25, 1935.

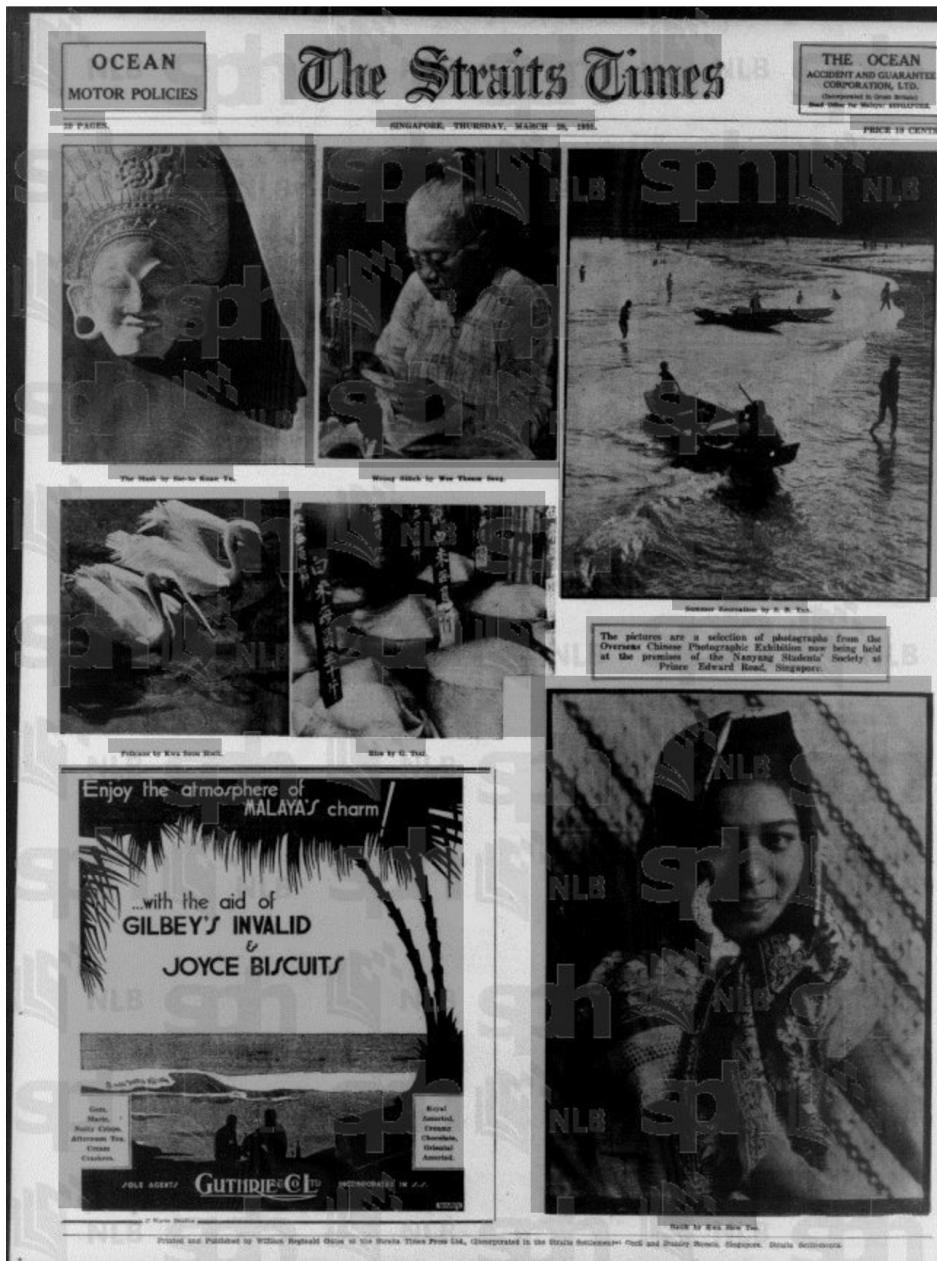


Fig. 3.1. Photographs from the *Oversea Chinese Photography Exhibition*, published in *The Straits Times*, March 28, 1935, p.20.

The above describes the beginnings of art photography in Singapore and the momentum would have likely continued if not for World War II. For example, there were plans for what the press described as “the most ambitious photographic exhibition held in Singapore” in August 1940.⁵⁷ Organised by the Council of the Friends of Singapore, the exhibition was subsequently cancelled as “the public would be

⁵⁷ “Exhibition of Singapore Photographs Planned,” *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, May 31, 1940.

unlikely, in present conditions, to be interested in the exhibition".⁵⁸ The conditions referred to could only have been the war. The Japanese took control of Singapore in February 1942 and remained in power until August 1945. During this time, Singapore suffered severe hardship; not only was there overcrowding and food shortages, the Japanese began a purge of the Chinese community. Official records estimated 6,000 executions; unofficial figures ranged from 25,000 to 50,000.⁵⁹

The Singapore Art Society exhibitions

The war caused a break in the development of art and photography, and it was not until 1949, with the establishment of the Singapore Art Society (SAS) that we see an interest in photography again. One cannot overestimate the significance of the annual exhibitions of photographs organised by the SAS from 1950, which set the scene for how art photography in Singapore was to subsequently develop. The first exhibition, simply titled First Open Photographic Exhibition, was presented at the British Council Hall from 29 January to 5 February 1950, and featured 223 prints; 200 from photographers in Malaya and 23 non-competition prints from the Hon. Malcolm Macdonald, Mr Loke Wan Tho and Dr Carl Alexander Gibson-Hill. The exhibition committee comprised Gibson-Hill, Loke and Tok Khoon Seng, the Secretary of School Art Exhibitions. The judges were Gibson-Hill, Loke and Richard Walker, the Art Superintendent of the Singapore Schools.

At the time, Gibson-Hill was the Curator of Zoology at the Raffles Museum and the Chairman of the SAS. He was a medical doctor, a naturalist and an ornithologist. He had great interest in the natural and cultural history of Malaya as well as in photography. He joined the Royal Photographic Society (RPS) in 1948 and became an Associate of the society in 1949. His photographs of Malaya were published in a book

⁵⁸ "Photographic Exhibition May Be Cancelled," *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, July 13, 1940.

⁵⁹ Dalit Singh and V.T. Arasu, eds., *Singapore, an Illustrated History, 1941-1984* (Singapore : Information Division, Ministry of Culture, 1984., 1984), 52; M. C. Ricklefs, ed., *A New History of Southeast Asia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 308.

The Malayan Landscape: 70 Camera Studies (1949) and he was well-regarded as both a researcher and a photographer. His friend Loke was the owner of the Cathay film studios and chain of cinemas and a well-known art patron who went on to build a significant art collection. Loke had a great interest in photography and natural history and engaged in ornithology as a hobby. He joined the RPS in 1937 and became an Associate in 1955. His images of birds were published in scholarly journals and he exhibited in several international photography salons in the 1950s. Finally, Richard Walker was a trained artist who studied at the Royal College of Art and taught art classes at Raffles Institution for both art teachers and students. As a painter, he would have brought to the table, whether consciously or not, aesthetic criteria from painting.

There are several important implications one can draw from this information. Firstly, that the First Open Photographic Exhibition was influenced by the organisation of the photographic salons in London. As members of the RPS, both Gibson-Hill and Loke would have regularly received the *RPS Journal* and kept updated with developments there. Loke also spent time in London where he studied at King's College, Cambridge. Both would have been familiar with the way photography salons were organised overseas. The open call and jury process of the Singapore exhibition was similar to the annual photographic salons held in London and elsewhere, even with the categories of Portrait, Landscape and Pictorial. Of course, Portrait and Landscape were established themes drawn from art, which brings me to my second point, that photography in Singapore, in its 1950 reset, had a distinct relationship with art, and more specifically, painting, right from the start. The first photography exhibition was held under the auspices of the Singapore Art Society. Even after the SAS handed over organising duties of the exhibition to the PSS, they still retained a 'Photographic Group', which exhibited works and submitted prints to various salons. In other words, members of the SAS included photographers. And as early as 1951, photography was being exhibited alongside paintings in shows and this continued regularly.⁶⁰ The First Open Photographic Exhibition was literally the first exhibition ever organised by the SAS – and it was not of painting, but of photography.

⁶⁰ "Chinese Art Exhibition," *The Singapore Free Press*, March 8, 1951; "Photo, Art Show at Polytechnic," *The Singapore Free Press*, December 4, 1959.

Both Gibson-Hill and Loke went on to play integral roles in the Singapore Camera Club. Gibson-Hill was Vice-President and then President of the Club until his death in 1963. Loke was Vice-President from 1955 until his own sudden death in 1964. Loke in particular was very keen for Singaporean photographers to match the standards of their international counterparts and sought to encourage this in various ways, inviting foreign photographers to visit and exhibit in Singapore and vice versa, as well as by buying and displaying international work in the Cathay building to inspire local photographers. He regularly corresponded with photographers internationally, keeping Singapore on the map of the camera club and salon circuit. As a result, pictorial photography in Singapore had a prominent international dimension very early on. More about this is discussed in Chapter Five.

The First Open Photographic Exhibition marked the start of a renewed and sustained pictorial photography practice and a period of intense production and circulation of works. Over 6000 people attended the week-long exhibition, which clearly stimulated an interest in photography. Entries almost doubled in the second year, from 275 to 451, and again in the third year, to 769 submissions.⁶¹ Renamed the Singapore International Salon in 1957 (the 8th year), the annual exhibition continued to grow in size and reputation. At its peak in 1968, it received 4590 entries from 43 countries, and showed 735 works.⁶² Interestingly the Landscape category of the first edition of the exhibition was dropped in 1952, and landscape images were subsumed into the Pictorial category. A Nature category was introduced in 1953, then removed in 1962. By 1963, the exhibition announced that it was dedicated to being at “the forefront of contemporary pictorial photography”.⁶³ The Singapore International Salon, as by then it was known, had become a purely *pictorial* exhibition.

⁶¹ “275 Entries In Photo Exhibition,” *The Straits Times*, January 1, 1950; “Singapore Art Show Is a Must,” *The Straits Times*, January 11, 1951; “3,000 See Photo Display,” *The Straits Times*, January 30, 1952.

⁶² *19th Singapore International Salon of Photography* (Singapore: Photographic Society of Singapore, 1968).

⁶³ *14th Singapore International Salon of Photography* (Singapore: Photographic Society of Singapore, 1963).

The development of photographic practice can also be seen through the reproductions in the catalogue. In the first year, the works were very simple and unremarkable – typical studio portraits and still-life of flowers. The most interesting photographs were Loh Beng's *At the Sauce Factory*, a posed scene of a worker in a sauce factory that made use of lines and patterns, and K.F. Wong's *A Symbol of Peace*, which was a picturesque landscape with a farmer at work (fig. 6.2). The quality of works dramatically improved in the second year, with a much wider variety of subject matter, particularly in outdoor scenes. By the third exhibition, the committee noted that, "it is, in fact, doubtful if more than a third of the 200 prints shown in the Society's first exhibition would have found a place in the present one."⁶⁴

In the same year as the first annual exhibition, the Singapore Camera Club was formed by a small group of amateurs, possibly due to the interest generated by the exhibition. (This new club had no relation to the previous Singapore Camera Club formed in 1921 by the Japanese photographers.) In its first year, the club had 30 members. By the third year, 1952, it had about 250 members and a clubhouse with its own darkroom and library.⁶⁵ It also started its own annual exhibition, the Pan-Malayan Photographic Exhibition and published its own journal *Foto News* in 1953. In 1955, the first interest group within the club was formed – the Pictorial Group, which remained the most popular and active section of the Club through the decades, even as other groups such as the Colour Group and Cine Group were formed. The Club formed the nucleus of photographic activity in Singapore, acting as school, gallery, lab and social centre. As interest in photography grew, more clubs were set up. The South-East Asia Photographic Society was formed in 1958 and started the biannual International Pictorial Photography Exhibition in 1960; the Singapore Colour Photographic Society was formed in 1967 and started organizing the International Salon of Colour Photography in 1976. The clubs and salons were all set up along the same lines, with volunteer committee members and juries.

⁶⁴ *Third Open Photographic Exhibition* (Singapore: Singapore Art Society, 1952).

⁶⁵ Harry Miller, "Official Opening of Our Clubhouse," *Foto News*, 1953, 9–10, 15.

An Open Attitude

The resumption of cultural activities in 1950 did not automatically mean that photographers could simply pick up where they had left off. Instead, it was a *tabula rasa*, which proved fertile ground for the development of Singapore Pictorialism, which drew from Euroamerican Pictorialism but took on different characteristics.⁶⁶ While there were a handful of photographers, such as K.F. Wong, Yip Cheong Fun and Wu Peng Seng, who had been making photographs before the war, as well as the previously mentioned Lim Thian Poh and Kwa Siew Tee, the majority of photographers who became active in the 1950s and 60s only started learning photography after the war.⁶⁷ These included prominent photographers such as Lee Sow Lim, Lee Lim and Tan Lip Seng. This further supports Piyadasa's theory that the break and lateness of the development of modern art in Malaya led to pluralistic tendencies. These were even more prominent in photography (compared to painting) due to several factors.

The first was that the Singaporean photographers did not feel the pressing need to legitimise photography as art, unlike the early pictorial photographers in Europe and America, where the search for recognition was a key driving force in the start of the movement. In 1937, well-known painter Liu Kang wrote a review of the *Photographic Exhibition of Artefacts and Landscapes from the Motherland*, organised by the *Nanyang Siang Pau*, where he asked the readers to "appreciate the works as [...] pieces of art". Liu went on to state:

It is essential to notice the beautiful composition, appropriate camera angles, adequate lighting, and the poetic and artistic effect that results. The photography

⁶⁶ In an interview with Sunny Giam, the Sultan of Trengganu recalled that thousands of Malaysians were forced to give up their cameras to the Japanese soldiers. Sunny Giam, "The Story of a Royal Photographer," *The Singapore Free Press*, February 21, 1958.

⁶⁷ Wu Peng Seng only arrived in Singapore in the early 1950s. During the war, he was in Shanghai where he was enrolled in Guang Hua University.

http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2014-01-16_160401.html.

Accessed 12 Feb 2018.

must captivate and excite viewers, and produce a deep and beautiful happiness. This is why photography has come to be recognised as an art form.⁶⁸

As mentioned, the *First Open Photographic Exhibition* in 1950 was organised by the SAS so was already presented within the context of 'art'. There were also numerous overlaps in personalities. Ho Kok Hoe, who was the President of the Singapore Art Society, was a member and an Associate of the Royal Photographic Society in London. The 9th *Singapore International Salon* had painter Cheong Soo Pieng on its jury and the 5th *Pan-Malayan Photographic Exhibition* had painter Chen Chong Swee on its jury.⁶⁹ Liu Kang also gave a talk on composition for photographers at the British Council Hall in 1956.⁷⁰ Cheong, Chen and Liu were all considered part of the first generation of artists in Singapore and prominent members of the Nanyang school. The stylistic developments in Europe and America had primarily been driven by photographers seeking to position photography as a legitimate art form, hence the focus on hand-work and manipulation.⁷¹ However, the different relationship photography had with painting in Singapore meant that photographers did not need to position photography with respect to painting. This is not to say they were not influenced by painting; there were clearly similarities in the subject matter and composition, particularly with Chinese ink painting. However, this lack of antagonism resulted in a much more open attitude towards photographic styles, which became a key characteristic of Singapore Pictorialism.

This first issue of *Foto News* in 1953 is very interesting in the variety of photographs reproduced. Of particular note is *The Cup Team* by Lim Thian Poh (fig. 3.2). An image of six badminton shuttlecocks laid on the ground and dramatically spot-lit from the side, the photograph is a study of lines and shapes. Clearly influenced by modernist

⁶⁸ Kang Liu, *Liu Kang: Essays on Art & Culture* (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2011), 23.

⁶⁹ Sunny Giam, "Singapore's Champion Cameramen," *The Singapore Free Press*, July 23, 1957.

⁷⁰ Sunny Giam, "Standard Is High but There's Room for Improvement," *The Singapore Free Press*, February 14, 1956.

⁷¹ Peter C. Bunnell, "Pictorial Photography," *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University* 51, no. 2 (1992): 11–12.

photography, Lim has shot the photo from the top to create an almost abstract still-life with high contrast and clean lines. The same issue features three photographs by Kouo Shang-Wei (Kwok Shangwei) – *Tropical Serenade* (fig. 3.3) is a romantic sunset scene with the silhouette of a couple standing under a palm tree, while *Basking Time* shows a group of cows resting under a tree; both feature diffused lighting and a soft focus. However, *Plantain* is a high contrast study of a big bunch of bananas hanging from the tree. (fig. 3.4) Even the title is factual – the plantain is a specific kind of banana – as opposed to the more allegorical titles given to the more sentimental images. The photograph could be used as a scientific study or a record of the tree. Over the decades, Kouo continued to make a wide variety of images and finally had a career as an architectural photographer.



Left: Fig. 3.2. Lim Thian Poh, *The Cup Team* in *Foto News*, 1953, p.12.



Right: Fig. 3.3. Kouo Shang Wei, *Tropical Serenade* in *Foto News*, 1953, p. 24.



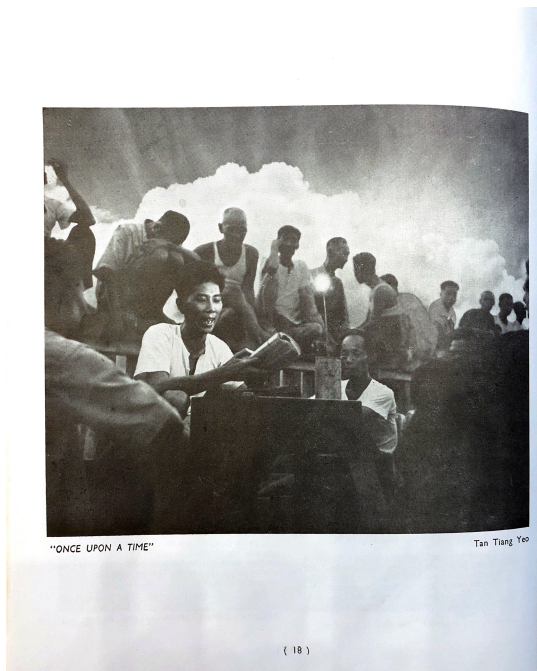
Left: Fig. 3.4. Kouo Shang Wei, *Plantain* in *Foto News*, 1953, p. 26.

Right: Fig. 3.5. Tham Yew Fun, *Returning from the Mist* in *Foto News* 1, no. 5 (Jan 1955), p. 25.

In the second issue of *Foto News* in 1955 (no issue was published in 1954), we continue to see this diversity. The journal includes a reproduction of *Returning from the Mist* by Tham Yew Fun (fig. 3.5), a manipulated print clearly inspired by Chinese ink painting in its depiction of small rowboat filled with people set against a misty background and the branches of a tree occupying the upper right foreground with great picturesque effect. The photograph is a montage, the branches combined with the boat and background in the darkroom. The same issue contains *Sunbeams in the Market* by Tan Tiang Yeo (fig. 4.1), a busy market scene given dramatic lighting from the top left. *Sunbeams* won the Gold Medal at the 3rd *Pan-Malayan Photographic Exhibition* and was exhibited at the 5th *Open Photographic Exhibition*. Although there is very little information about Tan and very few works survived or were reproduced, his photographs show a fascinating attention to local context that few other photographers had at the time. At the same time, he was obviously influenced by the type of misty scenes often seen in European salons. Based on the accompanying

article, Tan spent over three months waiting for a misty morning to get the shot he wanted.⁷²

The 1956 issue of *Foto News* features another work by Tan – *Once Upon a Time* (fig. 3.6) shows a street storyteller surrounded by a group of men at dusk. Beautifully composed and lit, the image is a poignant vision of life in Singapore then, with the men gathering after the workday for their only entertainment – a tale delivered by a storyteller. Tan uses differential focusing – the storyteller is sharp and clear while his crowd is soft and blurry, leading the viewer’s eye into the picture frame and adding to the depth of the photograph. Tan’s preference for a natural, un-posed photograph is made clear. In the same issue is *A Man and his Monk* (fig. 3.7) by Sunny Giam, a rather bizarre composition of a Malay fisherman, a monkey and a palm tree that stands in great contrast to Tan’s piece. The image is a composite photograph where Giam has simply positioned the different elements to create a comical image.



Left: Fig. 3.6. Tan Tiang Yeo, *Once Upon a Time* in *Foto News* 1, no. 6 (Jan 1956), p. 18.

Right: Fig. 3.7. Sunny Giam, *A Man and his Monk* in *Foto News* 1, no. 6 (Jan 1956), p. 37.

⁷² Tan Tiang Yeo, “Sunbeams in the Market”, *Foto News* (Singapore: Singapore Camera Club, 1955), 20.

The absence of formal photographic training would have encouraged this openness to different styles and techniques. The painters in Singapore had been trained in either China or Paris and constantly grappled with both Western and Chinese art traditions. On the other hand, the amateur photographers in the 1950s were mainly self-taught and picked up their skills through books and informal conversations with peers. Younger amateur photographers then learnt from their seniors in the clubs. The exceptions were studio photographers like K.F. Wong who learnt as an apprentice. However, Lee Sow Lim has spoken at length about the difficulty of learning darkroom processing techniques in the 1940s and 50s, even for commercial studio photographers. Most of the technical manuals and books were in English, which many photographers could not read easily. Furthermore, local photographers did not have proper measuring tools for the darkroom chemicals and used ladles, tea-spoons and table-spoons instead. Therefore, much trial and error was involved in getting the process right.⁷³ As a result, photographers learnt through observation, mentorship and experimentation, often gathering informally to exchange ideas and suggestions at the commercial studios or at the photography clubs.

A large part of the learning process took place during the weekly outings organised by the clubs. During these excursions, members would meet at coffeeshops and go off to shoot together. Recalling his first excursion with the PSS, David Tay, who had turned up not knowing anyone, said that Wu Peng Seng approached him and gave him some tips on using his camera and guided him on his shots. Tay, who subsequently joined the society and became its President, added that during these outings, these senior members would help the newer members, explaining how to compose pictures and “how to see things”.⁷⁴ This camaraderie and sense of respect for the senior members cannot be over-emphasized. Many of the photographers have repeatedly talked about the opportunities they had to meet like-minded practitioners through the societies. As an example, Foo described meeting Yip Cheong Fun and subsequently his regular visits

⁷³ Lee Sow Lim, interview by Teo Kian Giap, April 27, 2010, accession number 001818, audio recording, National Archives of Singapore, reel 1.

⁷⁴ David Poey Cher Tay, interview by Claire Yeo, November 19, 2007, accession number 003197, audio recording, National Archives of Singapore, reel 10.

to Yip's provision shop in Chinatown. Yip would show Foo his prints to advise on different lighting techniques. In describing the senior photographers, Foo made no judgment of hierarchy regarding the different styles they had – he simply described them all positively, whether it was the manipulated photo montages of Lee Lim and Tang Yao Xun or the 'straight' photographs of Wu Peng Seng or Yip Cheong Fun.⁷⁵

In addition, art photography in Singapore had a much closer relationship to commercial and studio photography, which would have called for different techniques. Many of the salon photographers practiced some other form of photography: Lee Lim owned a photography studio in Tiong Bahru, Tan Lip Seng worked as a medical photographer at the National University of Singapore Hospital and Foo Tee Jun photographed singers at Life Records before becoming a photographer for the Ministry of Environment.⁷⁶ Chua Soo Bin and Mun Chor Koon shot for advertising campaigns and Tan Siong Teng was a photographer for the *Nanyang Siang Pau*, a Chinese newspaper. Lee Sow Lim has estimated that, in the early 1950s, 90% of the photographers who participated in salon exhibitions worked at photography studios because exhibitors would have needed access to a photographic enlarger to make their prints.⁷⁷ This meant that there was much less class distinction compared to the situation in Europe where the photographers were at pains to distinguish themselves as artists, as opposed to artisans, but also that the photographers themselves were used to working in different styles of photography simultaneously.⁷⁸ This also lent credence to the idea of photography as 'democratic'.

⁷⁵ Foo Tee Jun, interview by Teo Kian Giap, April 12, 2010, accession number 001508, audio recording, National Archives of Singapore, reel 4.

⁷⁶ Foo Tee Jun, interview by Teo Kian Giap, April 12, 2010, reel 1 and 4; Tan Lip Seng, interview by Teo Kian Giap, February 11, 2010, accession number 003478, audio recording, National Archives of Singapore, reel 1.

⁷⁷ Lee Sow Lim, interview by Teo Kian Giap, April 27, 2010, reel 6.

⁷⁸ Keller, "The Myth of Art Photography," October 1984, 249–50.

Photography and Democracy

The openness to styles extended to an openness to race and class, at least officially. In fact, photography was often linked to democracy in Singapore, based on its accessibility to the masses and association with amateur practitioners. While some might argue that the cost of cameras was prohibitive for the lower classes, the fact remains that photography was repeatedly held up as an art for the 'people'.⁷⁹ In fact, a news article in 1957 carried the headline, "A Hobby to Suit All Pockets" and took pains to emphasise that the majority of photographers were not wealthy and included among their numbers "fitters, hawkers, counter salesmen, coffee-shop assistants, barbers and clerks".⁸⁰ In his opening speech for the 9th *Singapore International Salon* in 1958, Loke Wan Tho stated that, "Photography is a great leveller. It recognises no barriers of colour, creed country, or class. [...] Certainly, we photographers belong to the most democratic club in the world."⁸¹ While it was true that the amateur photographers included many middle-class workers, the most successful exhibitors were exclusively Chinese. Tellingly, there was a Malay photographic exhibition held in 1961, but all the judges were Chinese members of the PSS.⁸² There also existed a Malay Photographic Society, but Malay names did not appear in the list of winners at the annual salons. Nevertheless, the idea of democracy was attractive, particularly in the initial years of independence.

Then Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam expressed such sentiments at the Opening of the 3rd *International Pictorial Exhibition* in 1964. Comparing photography to painting, drawing and sculpture, he said:

⁷⁹ It is interesting to note that despite the relatively high cost of owning a camera (about a month's average wage), a significant number of photographers were from the lower to middle classes. Interviews indicate they either saved up to buy it or someone bought it for them.

⁸⁰ Sunny Giam, "A Hobby to Suit All Pockets," *The Singapore Free Press*, May 28, 1957.

⁸¹ Wan Tho Loke, February 21, 1958, MS 6057, Loke Wan Tho Papers, National Library of Australia.

⁸² "All-Malay Photo Exhibition," *The Singapore Free Press*, May 8, 1961.

Photography, on the other hand, is not so restrictive in this respect. To this extent it is more democratic in that entry into this particular form of art is less exclusive. Because of this, photography is nearer the ideal of a folk art — an art with greater mass appeal. The very nature of the medium prevents it from indulging in the abstractions and distortions of reality which make modern painting and even sculpture sometimes incomprehensible to the modern man.

[...]

Like reading and writing, photography should be considered as a readily available medium for ordinary people to develop their innate artistic talents.⁸³

On a different occasion in the same year, Rajaratnam further explicated:

Photography is an art, which, in many respects, reflects the characteristics of 20th century society. First of all, it is in every sense of the word a mass art medium. The ordinary man though deprived of the talent of being able to draw and paint can nevertheless express himself artistically through photography. [...] Photography, therefore, offers every one of us avenues for finding such artistic expression as we are capable of.⁸⁴

Photography as a democratic art form was repeated numerous times at exhibition openings. At the opening of the 15th *Singapore International Salon* in 1964, Yang di-Pertuan Negara Yusof Ishak spoke of photography as “a popular art which affords the ordinary man a means of attempting artistic expression.”⁸⁵ He reiterated this at the 3rd

⁸³ Ministry of Culture, *Speech by the Minister of Culture at the Opening of the 3rd International Pictorial Photography Exhibition of Singapore at National Library on 20.6.64 at 5.00pm*, Singapore: National Archives of Singapore.

<https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/78adee86-115d-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad>

⁸⁴ Ministry of Culture, *Speech by the Minister of Culture, Mr S. Rajaratnam, at the Opening of Photograph Week organised by the Singapore Polytechnic Photographic Society from 17th to 23rd January, 1964*, Singapore: National Archives of Singapore. <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/78eb4e50-115d-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad>.

⁸⁵ Ministry of Culture, *Speech by His Excellency The Yang di-Pertuan at the Opening of the 15th Singapore International Salon of Photography and Foto Fair on May 9, 1964*, at

Malaysia Student Exhibition in 1965: "...photography commands a wide appeal as it is a medium within the reach of the ordinary man."⁸⁶

The highlighting of the democracy of photography was unsurprising given the historical context. Democracy was a fundamental ideal of Singapore's new independent identity, enshrined in both her flag and pledge, which were introduced in 1959 and 1966 respectively. It was a crucial element of her post-colonial narrative of modernity. In fact, according to the 1959 edition of the *State of Singapore Annual Report*, the Ministry of Culture's stated objectives for local arts and culture included: "The propagation of democratic values, conducive to the ultimate creation of a just society."⁸⁷ Photography's democratic characteristics were framed in terms of its accessibility to the "ordinary man". This accessibility depended on photography's easily understood naturalism, situated in opposition to abstraction, as well as on giving that "ordinary man" a means of artistic expression through the simplicity of operating the camera. Underlying this notion, however, was the assumption that artistic expression was an important part of modern life and thus that photography should be "readily available" and "provide the stimulus for exploring and scrutinising the world..."⁸⁸

Parallel to these developments was the founding of the Modern Art Society (MAS) in 1964, the same year Rajaratnam made the above speeches. The MAS championed abstraction, which grew to dominate painting and sculpture in the 1960s and 1970s. Its

2.30pm at the Victoria Memorial Hall, Singapore: National Archives of Singapore. <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/78285a00-115d-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad>.

⁸⁶ Ministry of Culture, *Speech by His Excellency The Yang di-Pertuan Negara at the Third Malaysia Student Photographic Exhibition at Prince Edward Road on Tuesday, 5 January 1965 at 5.00pm*, Singapore: National Archives of Singapore.

<https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/78c7d83d-115d-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad>.

⁸⁷ Quoted in Terence Chong, "From Global to Local: Singapore's Cultural Policy and Its Consequences," *Critical Asian Studies* 37, no. 4 (2005): 555.

⁸⁸ *Speech by the Minister of Culture at the Opening of the 3rd International Pictorial Photography Exhibition of Singapore at National Library on 20.6.64 at 5.00pm*, Singapore: National Archives of Singapore.

aims were clearly stated in the 1963 catalogue: “Realism has passed its golden age; Impressionism has done its duty; Fauvism and Cubism are declining. Something new must turn up to succeed the unfinished task left by our predecessors.” The 1969 catalogue elaborated further: “Modern art is mainly expression by form. Ideas are only of subsidiary importance. [...] Everything follows the rhythm of nature. The composition of colours, the weaving of lines, the creation of form, the spirit of strokes and the force of the knife, all are direct outcome of introspective experience and the release of impromptu emotions.”

Here we can clearly see the competing definitions of modern art as described by Kwok.⁸⁹ On the one hand, it pointed towards an avant-garde practice, as used by the MAS, and on the other hand, it was simply about art as an individual form of expressive creativity, which Pictorialism emphasised. These were not mutually exclusive categories. The abstraction promoted by the MAS was obviously seen as an expression of the artist’s creativity and some of the photographers produced works very much concerned with form and line. However, photography on the whole was seen to be much more connected to naturalism and thus more easily understood. Pictorial photography’s connection to both technology and art provided a different link between modernity and culture. Singapore Pictorialism was thus an alternative modern art form, one open to the masses, unlike the MAS members who were trained in art schools. In that sense, it was more suited to the demands of the new Singapore government.

By the 1960s, Singapore Pictorialism dominated photographic practice in Singapore and the annual salons were the primary arena to view, exhibit and compare works. The diversity in approaches continued to be observed, not only in the works being made by Singaporean photographers, but even within the international entries. Consider, for example, the 11th *Singapore International Salon* in 1960, which received 2009 prints from 43 countries and exhibited 368 prints. Looking at the catalogue reproductions of the exhibited prints, the Singapore jury seemed open to all types of images. This

⁸⁹ Kwok, *Channels & Confluences*, 8.

ranged from the kinds of portraits and landscapes that would not have been out of place in the London Salons in 1900 to an experimental graphic collage print from Austria. Subject matter, too, ran the gamut from sentimental snow-covered countrysides and romantic seascapes to scenes of construction and factory interiors. Both manipulated and straight prints were well represented, as was the full range of focus from soft, blurry edges to sharp clear lines.

Aside from the general selection of prints for exhibition, there were three medals and ten commendations awarded. The winner of the bronze medal was Frank B. Neubert from England for *Jester* (fig. 3.8), which was a portrait of an old man with only his facial features in focus; the remaining details significantly softened by manipulating the print. Another winning print was *Beauty is Vanity* (fig. 3.9) by Tchan Fou-li from Hong Kong. It was a double exposure of the silhouette of a naked female torso juxtaposed with the patterns of a leaf. Semi-abstract in nature, the image shows a play of shapes and lines and could not be more different from the gold medal winner – *The Days of Innocence* (fig. 3.10) by one of Singapore’s most well-known photographers, Yip Cheong Fun.⁹⁰ Depicting a crowded outdoor scene with two mothers and their babies, the lines are clear and sharp and it is evenly lit. There is a strong sense of immediacy and documentary – we can easily imagine the photograph illustrating a newspaper article.

⁹⁰ There is a mistake in the title of the photograph in the catalogue, which lists the work as “The Day of Innocence”.

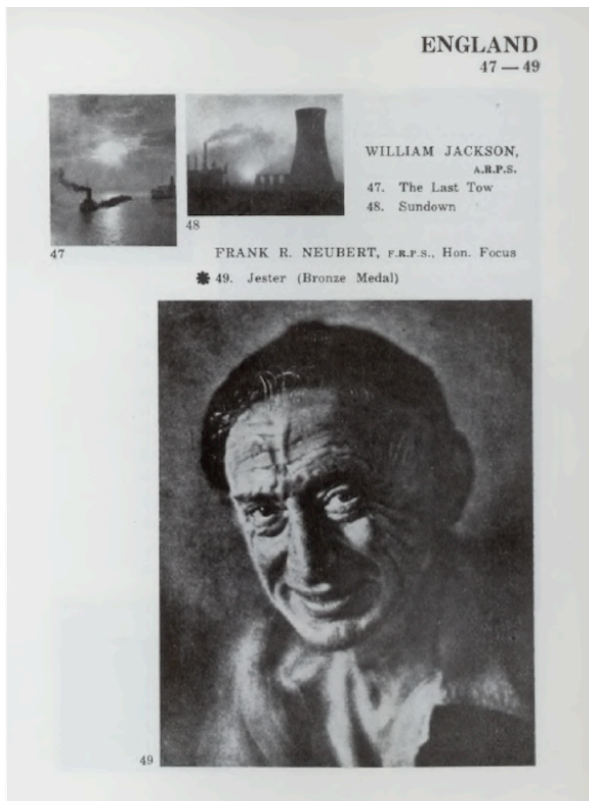


Fig. 3.8. Frank B Neubert, *Jester* in the catalogue of the 11th *Singapore International Salon* (Singapore: Photographic Society of Singapore, 1960), n.p.

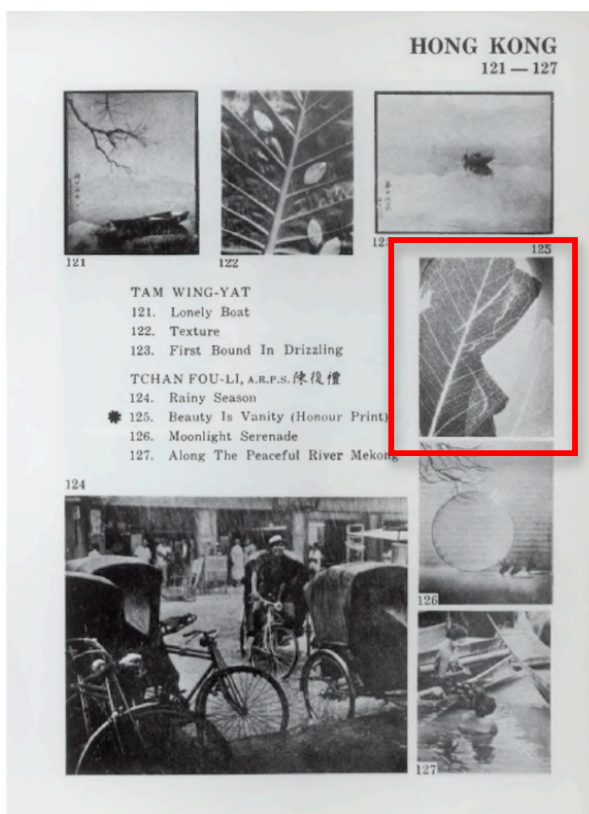


Fig. 3.9. Tchan Fou-Li, *Beauty is Vanity* in the catalogue of the 11th *Singapore International Salon* (Singapore: Photographic Society of Singapore, 1960), n.p.

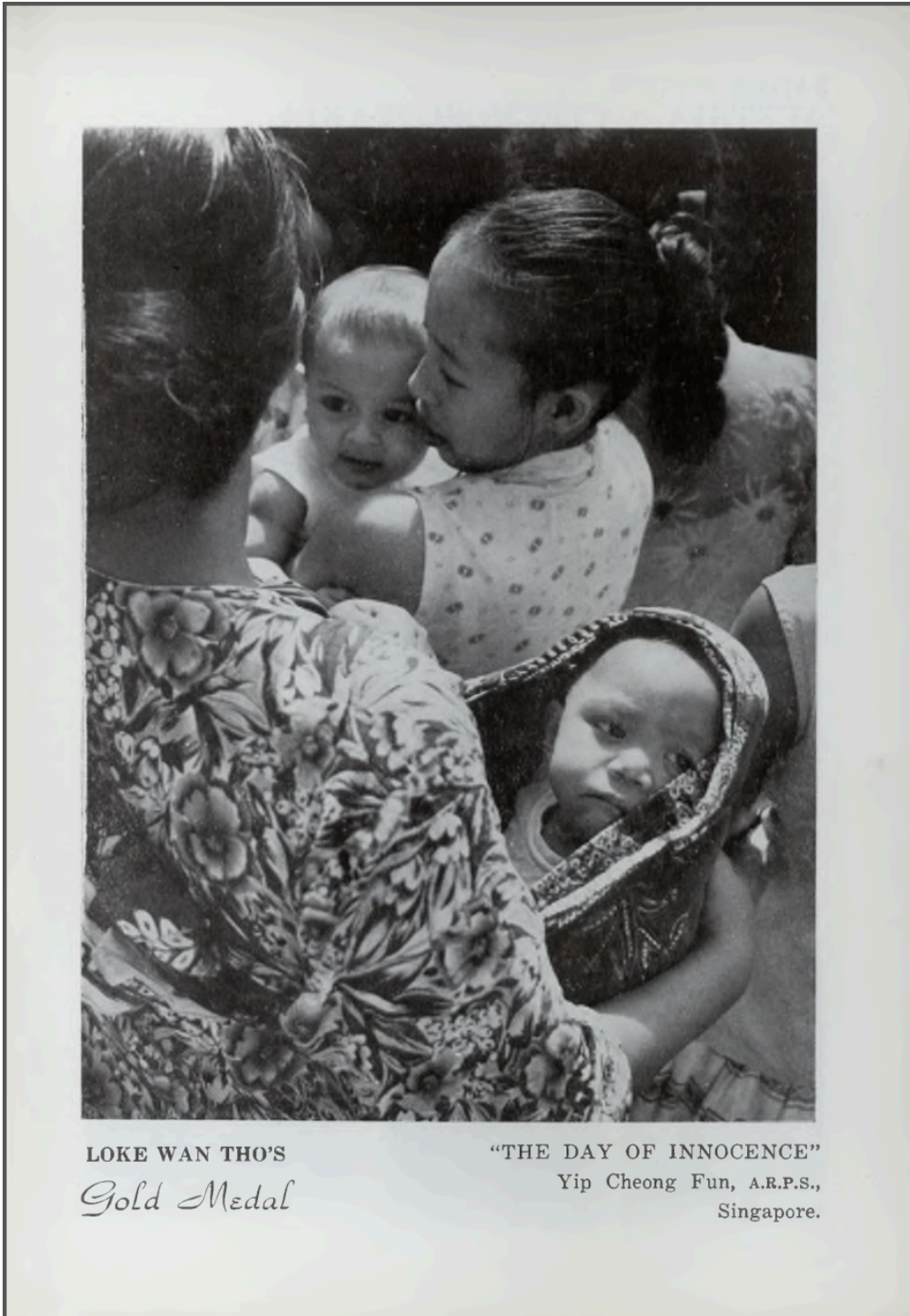


Fig. 3.10. Yip Cheong Fun, *The Days of Innocence* in the catalogue of the 11th Singapore International Salon (Singapore: Photographic Society of Singapore, 1960), n.p.

This pluralism of styles and subject matter was a distinct characteristic of Singapore Pictorialism and a direct result of the way the photographic movement developed. It is also reminiscent of the open-mindedness and diversity that Emelia Ong associates with

the Nanyang artists.⁹¹ Like in painting, stylistic approaches could and did overlap and a neat and linear chronological progression of stylistic evolutions is simply inadequate to address the developments in Singapore. In his evaluation of Nanyang art, art historian T.K. Sabapathy had noted that by drawing from the diverse styles and techniques of the School of Paris, the Nanyang artists manifested “the new – modern – status of the artist, and a fresh approach towards art activity”. He further noted that the artists “were free to select from the available schemas, features which were suitable to their own aspirations, without having to adopt any supporting ideology. The selection was governed primarily by formal (stylistic) requirements.”⁹²

Sabapathy’s observations on Nanyang art show startling parallels to the situation seen in Singapore Pictorialism. If style was not a determining factor in Singapore Pictorialism, what was? The answer is actually consistent with the origins of Pictorialism, that is, the emphasis on expression and beauty.⁹³ In one of the earliest essays on Pictorialism back in 1886, P.H. Emerson had definitively stated, “Pictorial art is man’s expression by means of pictures of that which he considers beautiful in nature.”⁹⁴ The term the Chinese photographers repeatedly use is 美感 (meigan), which literally means a feeling of beauty.⁹⁵ In Singapore, discussions of expression and beauty were closely related and revolved around ideas of composition, proper lighting and technical expertise, including the perfect darkroom print.⁹⁶ These values were upheld through the clubs and salons and grounded the pluralism in style and subject matter.

⁹¹ Ong, “The Nanyang Artists: Eclectic Expressions of the South Seas.”

⁹² T.K. Sabapathy, *Writing the Modern: Selected Texts on Art & Art History in Singapore, Malaysia & Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2018), 342.

⁹³ Peterson, *After the Photo-Secession*, 18–19.

⁹⁴ P.H. Emerson quoted in Peter C. Bunnell, ed., *A Photographic Vision: Pictorial Photography, 1889-1923* (Santa Barbara: P. Smith, 1980), 2.

⁹⁵ Lee Sow Lim, interview by Teo Kian Giap, April 27, 2010, reel 5.

⁹⁶ In the oral interviews referenced in this essay, the photographers frequently speak about composition – simple but with impact; lighting – how it creates interest; and darkroom technique – making a print with good tonal range and control. For a more public discussion, see Check Leng Low, “Beginner of the Month,” *The Singapore Free Press*, October 6, 1960.

A pursuit of beauty

In his introductory remarks in the 1952 edition of *Photograms of the Year*, R.H. Mason asserted:

When a subject is beautiful in itself, any photograph of it which is reasonably good in technique is bound to be attractive, but the pictorial photographer is not content to *take* beautiful pictures; he wants to *make* them. He may give himself a good start by choosing an intrinsically attractive subject, but he goes further and presents it as he, personally, sees it. If he is successful his picture will arouse emotions in the viewer similar to those which he experienced himself. [...] (It must have certain requisites such as line, form and tone composition (sic), and, above all, it must be the expression of the author's idea, or, in other words, have atmosphere. [...])

True aesthetic pleasure comes from the presentation of the sense of fact rather than the actual fact. It is not so much the copying of nature that gives artistic satisfaction as the intellectual pleasure which derives from making the most of any selected material, or adding *beauty* to it.⁹⁷ (my italics)

Photograms circulated internationally and reproduced several works from Singapore over the years. Mason highlights several aspects of pictorial photography that are relevant to our discussion and which were often repeated by the Singapore photographers. Firstly that pictorial photography is beautiful, which comes from a good display of line, form, tone and composition, and secondly, that pictorial photography must be expressive, communicating the photographer's own vision and ideas. In other words, a good pictorial photograph went beyond subject matter to express the maker's creativity, which was also intrinsically tied up with a pursuit of beauty. Each photographer strove to ultimately produce a print that showed, as articulated in the aim of the London Salon of Photography, "distinct evidence of

⁹⁷ R.H. Mason, "Pictorial Photography: An Appreciation of the Pictures Reproduced in This Volume," *Photograms of the Year*, 1952, 12–13.

personal artistic feeling and execution”.⁹⁸ Beauty, expression and individuality were continually stressed.

These ideals are clearly reflected in Yip’s *The Days of Innocence*. It is certainly a very carefully composed image, with the heads of the subjects forming a strong diagonal across the picture frame, drawing the viewer’s eye towards the two children despite the many elements in the picture. Given that it was shot outdoors, the lighting is masterful, again emphasising the focal points of the children’s faces while showing a wide tonal range. The photo is remarkable for its precision in clarity, composition, lighting and tone. Yip had actually taken the photo serendipitously, catching the shot as he walked past a Malay wedding in a kampong off Tanjong Katong Road.⁹⁹ The title offers a hint regarding the photographer’s intention—the work seeks to express the innocence of children, rather than merely to record the wedding, hence the focus on the children’s faces rather than the wedding bustle. To this end, Yip combined technique and his particular vision to create an arresting picture. As a result, the photograph received the highest number of points awarded by the jury of the salon, out of 2009 entries.

Yip is an excellent example of a local photographer who took his cues from European Pictorialism but adapted it to a local context. The allegorical title is very much a trait of Pictorialism, which often used it as a strategy to elevate the photograph into ‘art’. Yip took part in numerous overseas salons and would have been familiar with this practice. The careful observance of technique and composition met the aesthetic criteria of the salon judges, again something Yip would be conscious of. However, the subject matter is characteristic of Yip’s larger oeuvre. While he did make photographs of typical seascapes and portraits, he also frequently photographed modern life in Singapore, ranging from the street scenes of Chinatown, where he lived, to the different religious festivals and activities around the island. He seldom indulged in abstract or ‘pattern’ images, preferring to show a slice of life in Singapore, albeit one

⁹⁸ Mason, 13.

⁹⁹ Sunny Giam, “Spur of Moment Shot Wins Two Gold Medals,” *The Singapore Free Press*, January 19, 1960.

that was carefully framed. Yip was a pictorial photographer *par excellence* and we are fortunate that many of his works remain. As such, he is one of the few photographers from the period whose works are relatively well-documented and this thesis will continue to discuss several of his photographs.

The emphasis on beauty and expression also occurred in painting in Singapore. Another Nanyang artist, Chen Wen Hsi, has described his approach to aesthetics as: “not just physical likeness of shape and form, but the composite image and spirit, the overall beauty and cohesion of the painting. [...] he may construct his lines in different ways, whether straight or slanting, continuous or broken, central, symmetrical or oddly located, whether simple lines or forms or geometric design—they all lend together to produce a symphonic effect of the beauty and message intended by the artist.”¹⁰⁰ Chen could well have been discussing the pluralism in photography and its grounding in beauty.

Ho Kok Hoe was the President of the Singapore Art Society and would have been very familiar with Chen and his works. Ho, who was an architect, painter and photographer, and also a regular salon judge, explained in an article:

In the selection of prints, perfection of developing technique is of paramount importance. A poor print is an automatic reject and special attention is paid to the tonal qualities of the product. [...] After this comes the projection of the photographer’s personality or, if I should say so, his spirit, into the print. In this, one seeks to discover the message the photographer tries to convey in his print. [...] But the judges are looking for something more than a commercial print. Besides technical perfection, they seek the aesthetic sublimation of the photographer’s personality projected in the print.¹⁰¹

Ho points out the importance of the print itself in the photographer’s assessment of

¹⁰⁰ Wen Hsi Chen, *Chen Wen Hsi Retrospective 1982* (Singapore: National Museum, 1982).

¹⁰¹ Kok Hoe Ho, “What a Judge Looks For,” *The Singapore Free Press*, April 14, 1959.

beauty. Many photographers took pride in the fact that they developed their own negatives. Lee Sow Lim, for example, felt very strongly against sending out his negatives to a commercial developing lab as photography was an art and photographers should complete the whole photographic process themselves.¹⁰² While technical perfection in the print and ideals of composition were somewhat easier to assess, expression was rather more difficult to interpret. What was Ho's "sublimation of the photographer's personality" and Chen's "symphonic effect"?

Harry Tan suggests that, "If a photographer has imagination, he puts something of himself in the picture. The result looks alive and takes on some sparkle and interest."¹⁰³ P.L. Chan, on the other hand, tells photographers to use the "seeing eye for pictures that really count" so as to catch the "expressive moment".¹⁰⁴ In practice, the most common way the Singapore pictorialists tried to display 'expression' was through the existing habit of using allegorical titles such as Old Age, Happiness, A Mother's Love, etc., in an attempt to give meaning to an everyday scene. Some photographers also interpreted expression as the expression on a subject's face, particularly in studio portraits.¹⁰⁵ Such images were never about the individual sitter, but about what they represented, and photographers were particularly enamored with wrinkles, which demonstrated 'character'. Expression was sometimes also translated as unusual angles or employing unusual darkroom techniques.

In all these cases, the emphasis was clearly on the individuality and creativity of the photographer, which set their works apart from regular snapshots. Interestingly, this did not contradict the perceived democracy of photography as writers often took pains to encourage beginners by telling them that anyone could achieve these standards with practice and by following some simple rules. Even expression was a technique

¹⁰² Lee Sow Lim, interview by Teo Kian Giap, April 27, 2010, reel 4.

¹⁰³ Harry K.H. Tan, "Always Use Your Imagination..." *The Singapore Free Press*, August 12, 1958.

¹⁰⁴ P.L. Chan, "The 'seeing Eye' for Pictures That Really Count.," *The Singapore Free Press*, February 21, 1958.

¹⁰⁵ Foo Tee Jun was one such photographer. Foo Tee Jun, interview by Teo Kian Giap, April 12, 2010, reel 3.

that could be learnt, hence the advice to practice the ‘seeing eye’ for taking more interesting photographs. This was simply a matter of learning different angles or different ways to frame the subject.¹⁰⁶ Photographers never spoke of genius; instead they stressed regular practice and hard work. They were also generally happy to share their tips and tricks with each other, unlike the early photography studios who took pains to keep their techniques secret. PSS member Tan Boon Yean noted that “a beginner will find that there is never a more anxious crowd of people to help you”.¹⁰⁷

This attitude translated to a very practical and technical approach to pictorial photography couched in expressive terms. Advice columns abounded in both the English and Chinese press. Chun Ni succinctly described photography (he uses the term 沙龍 (shalong) or salon photography which specifically applied to photographs for the salon exhibitions) as an expression of the photographer’s ideas and understanding through scientific tools and chemical materials, which was simply a use of skilful technique and appropriate methods. First the photographer had to select beautiful subject matter, then compose the picture to emphasise the pre-determined theme and atmosphere. Finally, appropriate developing process and paper should be used that matched the theme of the photograph.¹⁰⁸ Another Chinese writer, Chang Feng, also makes a direct link between technique and expression – he tells readers that the arrangement of elements in the photo and the black and white contrast should be used to bring out the ideas that the photographer wishes to express.¹⁰⁹

In a regular advice column for photographers in *The Singapore Free Press*, Sunny Giam defined composition as “the arrangement of details in relation to the main subject of a picture...to obtain pleasing and artistic results in a photograph that has both sense and unity.” Giam advised beginners to use the rule of thirds, simplify their backgrounds and

¹⁰⁶ Tan, “Always Use Your Imagination...”

¹⁰⁷ Boon Yean Tan, “How to Succeed,” *The Singapore Free Press*, September 16, 1958.

¹⁰⁸ Ni Chun, “漫談沙龍藝術攝影 (Discussion about Salon Art Photography),” *Nanyang Siang Pau*, April 22, 1969.

¹⁰⁹ Feng Chang, “攝影應具有目的 (The Purpose Photography Should Have),” *Nanyang Siang Pau*, July 9, 1964.

to make “meaning”.¹¹⁰ On the flip side, “poor print quality”, “bad arrangement and composition” and “subject matter without any theme” were used to describe a bad photograph.¹¹¹ In another article, a critic gave a damning review of the 7th *Open Photographic Exhibition*, writing at length about the poor composition of some of the photographs and expressing his desire to see at future exhibitions “beautiful composition, good texture and more meaningful and lively artistic photos.”¹¹² In their search for the perfect picture, it was completely acceptable to pose their subjects, eliminate parts of the image that the photographer found unnecessary to the final picture, or add in some picturesque elements. Along these lines, composite photography was very popular in Singapore, allowing the photographers to literally piece together a photograph in the darkroom.

Elaborating more on how the photographers in Singapore approached beauty, David Tay has explained his thought process on taking portraits: “Each face actually has his or her own beauty. As a photographer, how do we take the best out from that character? How do you want to feature the person? [...] The use of appropriate lighting will help to accentuate your subject to project that kind of character you want to feature.”¹¹³ Similarly, Foo Tee Jun recalled how he made even an old man dragging a rubbish cart look beautiful with the right composition and lighting in one of his works from the 1960s. Conversely, he was not interested in showing sad or distressing subjects.¹¹⁴ It is clear that the photographers saw a strong link between technique and beauty, particularly through good composition, lighting and tone. This was not unique to Singapore – based on the articles in *Photo Pictorial*, the Hong Kong photographers had very similar ideas about aesthetics. Looking through the catalogues of the Singapore

¹¹⁰ Sunny Giam, “Concentrate on Composition,” *The Singapore Free Press*, July 9, 1957.

¹¹¹ Sunny Giam, “Get out and Get Better Results,” *The Singapore Free Press*, May 29, 1956.

¹¹² Hu Fa Chen, “美術照片的構圖評第七屆公開影展 (Composition of Artistic Photos - A Review of the 7th Open Photographic Exhibition),” *Nanyang Siang Pau*, February 17, 1956.

¹¹³ David Poey Cher Tay, interview by Claire Yeo, November 19, 2007, reel 10.

¹¹⁴ Foo Tee Jun, interview by Teo Kian Giap, April 12, 2010, reel 3.

International Salon, it seems the photographers in Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam also made works that prioritised such elements.

Interestingly, beauty was also assigned a moral value in Singapore. Ye Ni, a critic in the Chinese press, wrote that photographs that featured subject matter such as “bony smokers with pale faces and yellow teeth, women with bound feet riding a bicycle, blind and lonely homeless men” were “unhealthy” artworks, which should not be shown in the salons. Instead, he called for salon judges to select photographs that showed “a beautiful life”, which would have a more “healthy” influence on people and thus improve the photography community.¹¹⁵ A spokesperson for SEAPS also said that the society wanted to help the government “stamp out yellow culture through the introduction of more constructive arts.”¹¹⁶ (Yellow culture, which was a direct translation of the Chinese phrase, was the term used to describe various vices such as gambling, pornography and prostitution.) The Singapore government had launched an anti-yellow culture campaign in 1959, which included a ban on pornography and long hair on men.¹¹⁷

Terence Chong has noted that the Singapore government saw the arts and culture as a way to create a “civilised society”, in order to combat stereotypical images of Singaporeans who pursued capitalism and industry at the expense of refinement.¹¹⁸ What Chong called the “civilising properties” of art was extolled in government rhetoric through the 1960s and 70s. Among others, Minister Rajaratnam observed that, “Music, painting, drama, literature and *a concern for beauty* [my italics] generally are what transforms a prosperous society into a civilised society. Without these Singapore remains not more than a prosperous and efficiently run pasar malam [night

¹¹⁵ Ni Ye, “欣賞與評選 (Appreciation and Selection),” *Nanyang Siang Pau*, January 28, 1965.

¹¹⁶ “A Photo Society’s One Aim,” *The Singapore Free Press*, November 24, 1960.

¹¹⁷ “Campaign against Yellow Culture Is Launched - Singapore History,” accessed April 6, 2018, <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/47129576-377a-44fe-a05f-fefddf0cb765>.

¹¹⁸ Terence Chong, “The State and the New Society: The Role of the Arts in Singapore Nation-Building,” *Asian Studies Review* 34, no. 2 (June 2010): 133.

market].”¹¹⁹ Similarly, then Acting Minister for Culture, Wee Toon Boon proclaimed in 1969 that “Life without art reduces human beings to a level that is hardly distinguishable from the very lowest forms of life. Art expresses the very highest ideals and thoughts which only human beings are capable of. It satisfies their longing for beauty and expression of their innermosts [sic] thoughts and feelings.”¹²⁰ Pictorialism’s aesthetics thus also met a national objective.

Looking at the salon catalogues, it is very clear that this attitude towards beauty was very consistent among the photographers, no matter the subject matter or approach. Technique was paramount, more so than originality or subject matter. It is also equally true that the salons did not feature any upsetting images—there are no hints of the hard lives of the labourers and construction workers often featured as photographic subjects nor of any of the turbulent strikes and riots Singapore experienced in the 1950s and 60s. In other words, the pluralism discussed earlier was limited by the conventions of Pictorialism in its emphasis on beauty. Therefore, the naturalism that marked photography’s accessibility was actually a kind of aesthetic realism that avoided the problems of poverty, war or sickness, all of which had affected Singapore during the time.

Conclusion

Singapore Pictorialism marked the start of a modern photographic practice that prioritised the expressive possibilities of the photograph and the individuality of the photographer. Photography had arrived in Singapore in the mid-19th century and numerous photography studios were set up by first the Europeans, then the Chinese

¹¹⁹ Quoted in Chong, 134.

¹²⁰ Ministry of Culture, *Speech by Mr Wee Toon Boon, Acting Minister for Culture, at the Opening of the Art & Crafts Exhibition held in conjunction with the Singapore Youth Festival on Wednesday, 9 July, 1969 at 5.30pm at Victoria Memorial Hall, Singapore*: National Archives of Singapore.

<https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/79ea00df-115d-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad>

and the Japanese. During this period, photography was largely seen to fulfil a functional role, particularly through the commissioning of portraits by the rich Straits Chinese families. However, it was in the 1920s that pictorial photography became known through the exhibitions organised by the photography clubs formed by the Europeans and Japanese respectively. This stimulated a growing interest in artistic photography among the local Chinese population, which was subsequently interrupted by the war. Photographic activity only picked up again in 1950, with the first Open Photographic Exhibition.

Rather than placing Singapore Pictorialism within a modernist discourse linked to formalism, I have proposed that its development must be seen against the backdrop of the post-war independence movement and Singapore's efforts to be recognised as a modern society. This will become increasingly clear throughout this thesis. Singapore Pictorialism's beginnings were closely associated with the SAS. Its connection to both art and technology made it an exemplary modern art form, and it was perceived as such by the photographers and the government. With the end of the Japanese occupation and the move to self-governance, Singapore Pictorialism was assigned a democratic quality and exhibited a distinctly open attitude that accepted multiple photographic styles and subject matter. At the same time, modernism had introduced a greater consciousness of the figure of the artist, leading the pictorial photographers to prioritise the expressive possibilities of the photograph and the individual creativity of the photographer. Within the Singapore context, a pictorial photograph emerged as one that concerned itself with aesthetics over fact, regardless of stylistic or technical differences. The emphasis on aesthetics manifested itself through a desire for beauty, which was closely linked to technical perfection. This was marked by the valorisation of balanced and harmonious composition as well as precise exposure and tones in the physical print. These ideals were maintained through the photography clubs and annual salons, which tempered the impulse towards pluralism. The resulting brand of photography thus exhibited a type of aesthetic realism that prized technical skills for conveying a sense of beauty.

This chapter has provided a broad look at the way pictorial photography emerged in Singapore and the way it subsequently established itself as the dominant form of photography practised in Singapore, forming a starting point for understanding the particularities of photography in Singapore. The following chapters will consider the way these photographers engaged with ideas of nation, identity and history.

Chapter 4: Originality and Copying

Among prints submitted to the Pan Malayan this year, there was no entirely new subject. I should say, most of the entries were "copies" of pictures previously exhibited. There were far too many pictures of boats, and fishermen, and a few good portraits. For photography to advance in Singapore, and Malaya, and to meet the challenge from Hong Kong and Japan, photographers should express their own ideas, seek new angles, and experiment.¹

P.L. Chan, judge at the 6th Pan-Malayan Photographic Exhibition, 1958

But let us *not* imitate nor copy their photographs, using the exact subject, exact pose or even the exact lighting; let us be photographers, not copyist [sic] working in the printer's shop. Let us have originality of idea and thought, and let us have the courage and conviction to improve.²

Dr Lim Boon Tong, Honorary Salon Secretary,
13th Singapore Salon of Photography, 1963

A key criticism of Singapore Pictorialism was that it was repetitive and full of rampant copies of previous photographs. Conversely, the ideal of originality was consistently extolled as the ultimate goal of a successful and accomplished photographer. This dichotomy between the desire for originality and the prevalence of copying was pronounced in Singapore Pictorialism. This is clearly illustrated in three photographs – Tan Tiang Yeo's *Sunbeams in the Market* (fig. 4.1), which won a gold medal at the 3rd Pan-Malayan Photographic Exhibition³ and was also selected for display at the 5th Open Photography Exhibition⁴; Lui Hock Seng's *The Persian*

¹ P.L. Chan, "Holding Back Best Prints," *The Singapore Free Press*, September 9, 1958.

² *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 3, no. 5 (May 1962).

³ Thiang Yeo Tan, "Sunbeams in the Market," *Foto News* 1, no. 5 (January 1955): 20–21.

⁴ 5th *Open Photography Exhibition* (Singapore: Singapore Art Society, 1954).

Market (fig. 4.2), selected for the 14th Singapore International Salon in 1964⁵; and Foo Tee Jun's 早市 (Morning) (fig. 4.3), selected for the 28th Singapore International Salon in 1977.⁶

Here we see three photographs exhibited more than a decade after the other, yet all three depict startlingly similar subject matters and approaches – a market scene from a high vantage point and dramatic rays of light cutting across the tableaux. This is despite featuring different markets – Tan's photo shows the Ellenborough market by the Singapore River near present day Clark Quay, while Lui and Foo depict *Lau Pa Sat* at Shenton Way. Although copying was denounced, all three prints were accepted for the very same Singapore International Salon of Photography (the Open Photography Exhibition was renamed the Singapore International Salon in 1957). This could not have been because the selection panel was unaware of the earlier prints. Two of the selectors in the 14th Salon were Chua Soo Bin and Wu Peng Seng, who had both participated in the 5th Open Exhibition and would most certainly have seen Tan's work. Even if they had somehow missed it, Tan actually wrote an entire article about making the photo in the 1955 issue of *Foto News*, the annual publication of the Singapore Camera Club, which also included a full-page reproduction of the work.⁷ In addition, Yip Cheong Fun was a monochrome print selector for both the 14th and 28th Salons and would have assessed both Lui and Foo's works. Of course, the prints were not identical – there were slight differences in composition and Tan's print had softer lines and a grainier finish, but I imagine that they would have been considered "copies" by P.L. Chan and Lim Boon Tiong, who are quoted at the start of the chapter.

⁵ 14th *Singapore International Salon* (Singapore: Photographic Society of Singapore, 1964). The work is titled *The Persian Market* in the catalogue. In his interview with Kiang-Koh Kai Lin at National Archives Singapore, Lui calls it *The Teochew Market*. I have followed the title in the salon catalogue.

⁶ 28th *Singapore International Salon* (Singapore: Photographic Society of Singapore, 1977).

⁷ Tan, "Sunbeams in the Market."



Fig. 4.1. Tan Tiang Yeo's *Sunbeams in the Market*, c. 1954, gelatin silver print, 29.7 x 36.3cm. National Museum of Singapore collection.



Fig. 4.2. Lui Hock Seng, *The Persian Market*, c.1964, in *Passing Time: A Photography Book*, (Singapore, Objectifs Centre Ltd, 2018), p. 78-79.



Fig. 4.3. Foo Tee Jun, *早市* (Morning) in the catalogue of the 28th *Singapore International Salon* (Singapore: Photographic Society of Singapore, 1977), n.p.

Why was this similarity in photographs not an issue for a selection panel that ostensibly endorsed originality? Indeed, originality was an actual category in the judging criteria – the Singapore International Salon awarded ten points each for Composition, Originality and Technique.⁸ More broadly, why was originality such an important ideal for photographers? And despite this, why did photographers continue to make such similar work? Furthermore, how do we reconcile the emphasis on individual expression and creation discussed in the previous chapter with these developments? This chapter will address these questions. In the process, I will clarify the development of the photographer’s skills and aesthetic ideals under the guidance of salons and clubs and explore the larger issues relating to the discourses of art and photography.

⁸ *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 2, no. 5 (May 1961).

Originality and Authorship

In 1968, the *PSS Monthly Bulletin* reproduced an article from the *Christian Science Monitor*, which declared that “photographers with an instinct for originality can transform routine, documentary situations into forceful, creative and imaginative photographs that can be labelled ‘original’ and not a ‘copy’”.⁹ A few years later, an article by Lim Boon Tiong on fellow PSS member Tan Lip Seng commented that “Lip-Seng, like all good artists, seeks originality in his pictures. He has little respect for imitators and imitations”.¹⁰ Indeed, while many of the pictorial photographers copied works that they had previously seen, and perhaps all the more *because* of it, they also continued to extol the ideals of originality and individuality.

This tension between originality and repetition was not a new one and closely linked to photography’s historical development as a technological medium that allowed cheap and rapid reproduction. The camera’s ability to make multiple indexical reproductions had always been a characteristic that had to be addressed in legitimising photography as art. Some early pictorialists had tried to tackle this issue by incorporating various techniques that had to be completed by hand in the darkroom, for example, creating a painterly finish in the gum bichromate process. Anne Marsh has suggested that pictorialism “stressed the artificial, the illusionary, the theatrical”, which was a direct result of prioritising the expressive qualities of the photographer and the photograph.¹¹ However, the true aim was really to introduce the idea of authorship and subjectivity into a mechanical process. This was crucial in the assessment of photography as art, allowing photographers to gain aesthetic validation because of the way originality had been privileged as a key criterion in judging fine art.

The idea of a superior ‘original’ versus an inferior ‘copy’ is a relatively recent one and has plagued artforms beyond photography. Elaine Gazda has discussed it in relation

⁹ *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 9, no. 7 (July 1968).

¹⁰ Boon Tiong Lim, “Camera Art of Tan Lip Seng,” *The Straits Times Annual*, 1972, 96.

¹¹ Anne Marsh, *The Darkroom: Photography and the Theatre of Desire* (Melbourne: Macmillan Art Publishers, 2003), 142.

to early Roman and Greek sculptures and Pat Gilmour in relation to printmaking.¹² Both have suggested that originality was a construct of the modernist value system. Originality, along with its associated ideals of individuality and creativity, were all values that could be said to lie at the heart of the modernist project. The original was the source; the authentic work of art. Conversely, copying was evaluated negatively, its only use to point to the original in question. In her critique of such a framework, Gazda has suggested that once the label of 'copy' is given, there was a tendency for scholars to remove the work from serious consideration, preventing a proper study of the so-called copy as a product of its time and place.¹³ Gilmour, on the other hand, has questioned the usefulness of the idea of an 'original' in printmaking and the existence of the original print.

Most pertinent to my investigation, however, have been the writings of Abigail Solomon-Godeau, which have dealt specifically with photography. In her analysis of the canonisation of photographer Eugene Atget, Solomon-Godeau has revealed the way various modernist ideologies were called upon to formulate a framework on which to build a photographic canon.¹⁴ More than Gazda or Gilmour, Solomon-Godeau explains the way art institutions and markets have played such key roles in cultural production and the construction of accompanying discourses to anchor their positions and functions. Scholars, curators and collectors are all part of this system, inserting aesthetic judgements into authoritative hierarchies of value. Photography, as it entered both the museum and market, needed to also fit into the existing modernist art discourses, which demanded a canon, an art-photography history. This required *names* and clear aesthetic criteria. In the case of photography, the latter was principally derived from Clement Greenberg's model of modernist painting and sculpture, and subsequently upheld by MOMA's Photography Department. However,

¹² Elaine K. Gazda, "Introduction: Beyond Copying: Artistic Originality and Tradition," *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome. Supplementary Volumes* 1 (2002): 1–24; Pat Gilmour, "On Originality," *Print Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (2008): 36–50.

¹³ Gazda, "Introduction," 3.

¹⁴ See Chapter 2 "Canon Fodder: Authoring Eugene Atget" in Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 28–51.

unlike in actual painting and sculpture, this development obscured much of photography's history and functions.

“Discourse defines its own object;” in tracing how Atget became such a key figure in photography history, Solomon-Godeau highlights the way his mythology of creative authorship is constructed at the intersection of multiple desires – Walter Benjamin’s emancipatory ideals, Berenice Abbott’s advocacy for documentary and John Szarkowski’s curatorial agenda.¹⁵ The demand for authorship in photography was particularly crucial, as a medium whose output was largely *non-artistic*.¹⁶ In transforming a technique of multiples into art, photography had to fit into a modernist discourse that insisted on the subjectivity of the photograph and the authority of the photographer. Originality was one of the means to do so. It was the system that *produced* authors and what was subsequently taken for originality, rather than one that discovered existing artistic geniuses of inspired originality.

While Singapore Pictorialism did not follow the stylistic affectations of MOMA’s version of formalist photographic modernism, the Singaporean photographers did adhere to a similar privileging of authorship and creativity. This followed from Singapore Pictorialism’s core ideology of photography as an expressive artform that had to be differentiated from its functional uses. Such photography thus continued to be assessed in terms of originality, self-expression and subjectivity. The ‘art’ in art photography was derived from the sensibility of the photographers themselves. As mentioned in Chapter Three, in Singapore, photography was closely associated with modernity. In the same period that Singapore Pictorialism emerged, modern painting and sculpture was perceived as an individualistic and expressive practice in contrast to older forms of art, which might have had religious or public functions. In their bid to anchor photography as a legitimate modern artform, it was only natural for the photographers to deploy themselves as expressive individuals. Just as

¹⁵ Benjamin, alas, turned out the loser in this morass of competing desires. Solomon-Godeau, 29-31.

¹⁶ Commenting on MOMA’s valorisation of Atget, she states: “Atget’s singularity, originality, and – most crucially of all – personal vision and expression must be assiduously promoted.” Solomon-Godeau, 44.

painting had Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Chong Swee and Liu Kang, so too did photography need its Yip Cheong Fun and Wu Peng Seng. Recall also, that the first photography salon in 1950 was hosted by the Singapore Art Society. Along these lines, originality became an important attribute used to distinguish one photographer from another, and to distinguish art photography from other forms of photography.

An article in the *Nanyang Siang Pau* illustrated the way photographers conflated expressionism, originality and authorship:

Nothing is new in this world. Everything would have been taken by someone before. But the question is how you can use new ways to deal with old subjects, in order to create a new and lively artwork. In order to achieve this, you need to be more sensitive towards the surrounding idea. You need to be ready to describe not only what you can see, but also what you can feel. You need to be able to see the potential hidden in a regular subject, for example, a gate and a lamp post after the snow can mean something more – the arrival of winter.¹⁷

In his photography column for *The Straits Times*, Raymond Thomas also discussed what made a good pictorial photograph:

... the emphasis is on rhythm, imagination, individuality, even impressionism—at its best on the spirit rather than the substance. [...] They are supremely interested in the wonder and beauty of light; they try to convey ideas and stimulate feeling. [...] It is an individual Interpretation. [...] Pictorialism depends very largely upon selection and emphasis. Emphasis is designed to strengthen feeling.¹⁸

¹⁷ Chang, “攝影應具有目的 (The Purpose Photography Should Have).”

¹⁸ Raymond Thomas, “Photographic Digest,” *The Straits Times*, October 18, 1959.

In other words, a good pictorial photograph went beyond subject matter to express the maker's ideas, which were also intrinsically tied up with a pursuit of beauty. Originality was manifested through the individual interpretation. It did not matter if there were 20 photographs of fishermen. Each photographer strove to ultimately produce a print that showed, as articulated in the aim of the London Salon of Photography, "distinct evidence of personal artistic feeling and execution".¹⁹ Originality was important mainly for demonstrating authorship and cementing photography's place in the fine arts. Certainly, this seemed to be the reason for such a category in the salon judging criteria, given the many examples of repetitious works that were selected, not least the three photographs I discuss at the beginning of this chapter.

This idea of an individual interpretation and expression of beauty offered a way for photographers to distinguish themselves even when the subject matter was identical. Expressive gestures became a means through which to reconcile the existence of copying, at least in theory. It was easy enough for judges to fall back on some sort of ineffable quality to be found in the work – Thomas' "spirit". The photographers made similar pronouncements. David Tay elaborated on the necessity of conveying to the viewer his own experience of any scene, which he used to distinguish between making a picture and making a record. Like Thomas, Tay stressed the pictorial photographer's spirit: "If your mind is not at peace with itself, it is difficult to produce a piece of work that you can claim to be artistic. [...] how are you able to project (what you want) into your picture and share your experiences with those people looking at your work and evoke their response?"²⁰ Daisy Chee similarly described her "artistic eye", which allowed her to create photographs that would be different from other photographers', therefore it did not matter if the same subject was featured. Recounting a visit to an amusement park with the PSS, she said that she had captured a picture of the ferris wheel at dusk that no one else

¹⁹ Mason, "Pictorial Photography: An Appreciation of the Pictures Reproduced in This Volume," 13.

²⁰ David Poey Cher Tay, interview by Claire Yeo, 12 November 2007, reel 10.

“saw”.²¹ In their interviews, all the photographers repeatedly emphasised the importance of expressing the photographer’s individual viewpoint, both through their “eye” as well as by using the tools of composition, lighting, tone and angle to create the final print.

Postmodernism has shown us that the author-effect is sufficiently powerful a value to even overcome the existence of copying. As Rosalind Krauss has noted, “under the pressures of a modernist definition of art as an act of originality, even copying the work of another is seen as the origination of something new”.²² Seriality, repetition and appropriation were all employed by artists such as Sherry Levine and Richard Prince to critique modernist aesthetics yet all such work was ultimately absorbed by the art system. Singapore Pictorialism did not articulate such critiques of course, but I highlight this to demonstrate how authorship persisted in art photography. It was the photographer who guaranteed the originality and the value of the photograph, through his own self, and this was repeated *ad nauseam* by the Singaporean photographers.

Copying and Competition in the Salons

The focus on both originality *and* the practice of copying was very much led by the salon exhibitions and photography clubs. Beaumont Newhall called the photography salons “tastemakers”, but he was only partially right.²³ The organisers of the salons were the photography clubs, who were not only the true drivers of the developments in pictorial photography, but also set the aesthetic standards to which photographers aspired. Pictorialism was often associated with amateur photographers, but this did not mean they did not have their own institutions and structures. In fact, the photography club occupied the key position in the photography scene in Singapore for decades. The club acted simultaneously as the

²¹ Daisy Chee, interview by author, Singapore, 8 August 2018.

²² Rosalind E. Krauss, “Retaining the Original? The State of the Question,” *Studies in the History of Art* 20 (1989): 7.

²³ Newhall, *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present*, 147.

academy, the museum and the critic, while also providing a social setting for its members. The absence of the commercial gallery and art school meant that the clubs in Singapore were the primary platform for exhibiting work. In time, they even took over what was typically the government-organised 'national' exhibition for photography.²⁴

"Salons Inspire Many to Improve Standard" was the headline of an article in *The Straits Times* on 5 May 1968.²⁵ Salon exhibitions were the most high-profile part of club activities and played a very significant role in driving photographic practice, so much that the term 'salon photography' was increasingly employed in vernacular usage in Singapore. Exhibiting and competing formed the core of club life. Pictorial photography practice thus revolved around the acceptances, awards and rejections from the salons, which were reinforced by the camera clubs whose activities focused on gaining success at the salons. The clubs and the salons worked hand-in-hand to set directions in photographic practice; the more prestigious the salon and the more successful the club, the more influence it had.

All the photography clubs in Singapore organised several kinds of exhibition-competitions. There were the annual salons, which were juried exhibitions that were opened to the general public, club competitions that were only opened to their own members, and finally, regular non-competitive exhibitions that displayed high quality work from both members and international photographers. Important photographers like Yip Cheong Fun and Tan Lip Seng have said that attending the salons inspired their photographic practice. Yip added that he had never heard of pictorial photography until he attended the first Open Photography Exhibition in Singapore, even though he had been taking photographs since 1936. He called himself "merely a snap-shooter" during that early phase of his photographic

²⁴ It is interesting to note that the Director of the Raffles Museum, Dr C.A. Gibson-Hill, was also the President of the PSS from 1953 to 1963, so the club did have an unofficial link to a state institution. A more detailed discussion of the relationship between the club and the nation is provided in Chapters 5 and 6.

²⁵ Tiang Keng Soh, "Salons Inspire Many to Improve Standard," *The Straits Times*, May 5, 1968.

practice.²⁶ Tan similarly recalled that the salons motivated him to take up photography seriously when he saw the “world-class prints” exhibited.²⁷ Tan ended up taking part in hundreds of salons every year, and became the first in Asia to receive the PSA’s Diamond Galaxy rating for colour slides.²⁸

The largest and most important photography salon in Singapore was the Singapore International Salon organised by the PSS. It started in 1950 as the Open Photographic Exhibition organised by the SAS. The significance of this salon has already been established in Chapter Three. The exhibition remained the centre of the Singapore photography scene for the next three decades. Its stature grew rapidly, so that by the late 1950s, it was regularly receiving over 2000 entries each year. When colour slides were included in the 12th salon in 1961, entries surged again to almost 4000. The salon also very quickly gained international recognition – by its third year, it was receiving 300 entries from overseas, almost half of total entries.²⁹ Calls for entries were announced in the *RPS Journal*, which was distributed to members all around the world. The Singapore International Salon took on so much prominence locally that by 1958, a judge of another salon wondered if Singaporean photographers were reserving their best prints for it to the detriment of other salons in Singapore.³⁰

Before taking over the International Salon, the PSS had already cut its teeth on the annual Pan-Malayan Photographic Exhibition, which it had started organising in 1953. This was the biggest event on their calendar until they took over the Singapore International Salon in 1957. Despite its name, the Pan-Malayan was not restricted to residents of Malaya, instead, the first edition was open to Malaya, Sarawak, Brunei

²⁶ *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 2, no. 10 (October 1961).

²⁷ Tan Lip Seng, interview by Teo Kian Giap, 11 Feb 2010, reel 1.

²⁸ The PSA grants photographers various star ratings based on their acceptances at PSA-recognised exhibitions. For example, to receive a Diamond 1 rating, a photographer has to have 1713 cumulative acceptances. For more information, see <https://psa-photo.org/index.php?star-galaxy-diamond-acceptance-requirements>.

²⁹ *The Straits Times*, January 26, 1952.

³⁰ Chan, “Holding Back Best Prints.”

and North Borneo.³¹ By the third edition, it was also open to residents of Indonesia. Responding to political changes in Singapore, the Pan-Malayan became the Singapore National Photographic Exhibition in 1965, when Singapore became an independent nation. In 1978, it changed into the ASEAN Salon of Photography to recognise the entries from the other four ASEAN countries.

The Southeast Asia Photography Society (SEAPS), formed in 1958, also ran its own biannual show called the International Pictorial Exhibition of Singapore, which started in 1960. Like the Singapore International Salon, it used an open call-award system. It was the second largest international exhibition in Singapore. By comparison, in 1966, the Singapore International Salon received 4168 entries, of which 753 prints and slides were shown; the International Pictorial Exhibition received 2127 entries, of which 413 were shown. The Pan-Malayan Photographic Exhibition, on the other hand, was much smaller in scale. In 1967, it received 748 prints and showed 307. There were also many smaller salons in Singapore, which accompanied the formation of new camera clubs. The Singapore Colour Photographic Society was formed in 1967 and started organizing the International Salon of Colour Photography in 1976, while the Photo-Art Association was formed in 1965 and organized the Photo-Art Exhibition in 1969. There were also several salons organised by schools – Nanyang University set up a Photographic Society in 1958 and organised the first annual South East Asian Student Exhibition of Photography in 1960 and the first International Student Salon of Photography in 1962³²; Singapore Polytechnic formed its Photographic Society in 1962 and organised a Southeast Asia Student Photographic Competition in the same year.³³

The Singapore International Salon, the Pan-Malayan Exhibition and the International Pictorial Exhibition were the three most high-profile shows featuring pictorial photography in Singapore. Calls for entries were announced in the daily newspapers,

³¹ "First Pan-Malayan Photo Exhibition Opens June 26," *The Straits Times*, March 18, 1953.

³² Letter from Ang Seo Lim to Loke Wan Tho, 1 June 1961, MS 6057, Loke Wan Tho Papers, National Library of Australia

³³ "Students' Camera Contest," *The Straits Times*, September 22, 1962.

which also prominently covered the subsequent exhibition and winners, together with reproductions of the winning prints. The exhibitions were held at important arts venues ranging from the British Council gallery in the early years to the Victoria Memorial Hall and the National Library in the 1960s. Just as significantly, the format of the exhibition-competition reinforced a sense of contest among the photographers in Singapore and within the clubs. Winning photographers and prints were highly lauded in the press and in the club bulletins, and there was a marked prestige in winning, despite the lack of monetary reward. In fact, the status of pictorial photography as an amateur hobby might have contributed to this sense of rivalry – without the market or the museum, the salon became the only platform on which to assess oneself and one's peers.

Of course, not every photographer could get accepted into these prominent salons and exhibitions. As a result, the photography clubs all organised smaller competitions as well. Different from the salons, which were opened to the general public, these competitions were for club members only, meant to encourage members to improve their photography and provide a platform for them to show their work. Towards this end, there was no entry fee, unlike the international salons. Dr Lim Tian Poh attempted to convince potential members of the PSS in 1956:

The club arranges for monthly, quarterly and yearly competitions. You cannot find better training ground than these for your improvement. You can see how your own work stands along-side those of other members. When you have gained enough experience you are ready to take part in salons and exhibitions in other parts of the world.³⁴

Both the PSS and SEAPS organised quarterly photographic competitions for its members as part of its core activities.³⁵ By 1965, the PSS even had separate

³⁴ Tian Poh Lim, "Why I Should Join a Camera Club," *Foto News* 1, no. 6 (January 1956): 17–21.

³⁵ Despite being called a quarterly competition, *Foto News* 1955 indicated only two quarterly competitions were held by the PSS in 1953 and three in 1954. Given that

categories for monochrome and colour, with a Junior Section (for beginners) and an Open Section for each category.³⁶ Winners were announced in the *PSS Monthly Bulletin* and winning prints were exhibited in the clubhouse.

Other than the exhibitions in Singapore, exhibitions outside of Singapore also played a notable role in the life of a club photographer. A quick look at the *PSS Monthly Bulletin* provides a snapshot of how many overseas salons its members took part in. A feature on “Salon Results” in the November 1961 issue noted that works by PSS members had been accepted to: 14th Illinois International Exhibition, U.S.A.; 1st Tarrasa International Salon, Spain; 6th Eastern Cape International Salon, South Africa; 1st Evora International Exhibition, Portugal; 25th South African Salon, South Africa; 4th Sydney International Exhibition, Australia; 12th New Zealand International Salon, New Zealand; 5th Wisconsin International Salon, U.S.A.; 14th Witwatersrand International Salon, South Africa; 21st North American International Exhibition, U.S.A.; and 2nd C.P.A. International Salon, Hong Kong. Another feature in the October 1965 issue listed acceptances and awards at: Bristol Salon, U.K.; Photoeurop 65; 8th Sydney International Exhibition, Australia; 1965 Seattle International, U.S.A.; 4th Centenario Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; 8th Wichita International; 18th Camberley International Salon, U.K.; 33rd Boston Salon of Photography, U.S.A.; 1965 London Salon, U.K.; 3rd Republic of China International; and 29th Rochester International Salon of Photography, New York, U.S.A., among others. The January 1969 bulletin reported that the Pictorial Group had submitted 1593 prints to 75 exhibitions in 1968, getting 158 acceptances, including one Gold Leaf Award, one Silver Medal, three Bronzes and six Honorable Mentions. The same year, the Colour Group had 314 acceptances from 86 overseas salons, winning one pewter tray, one P.S.A. gold medal (for best slide of the salon), one gold trophy, two plaques, two gold medals, six silver medals and 13 Honorable Mentions.

the competitions were managed by members who had full-time jobs, it is likely that certain editions were skipped if members were too busy.

³⁶ *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 8, no. 10 (October 1967).

It would not be an exaggeration to describe this cycle of competitions as relentless. All year round, photographers were making and submitting works for various salons and exhibitions, whether the big, annual ones in Singapore, the numerous ones overseas or just the regular club competitions. The sheer variety of salons meant that photographers could send similar works to separate salons without getting penalised by the judges. It is also not surprising that pictorial photography became somewhat of a competitive sport where winning took on a disproportionate importance, that is, photographers were making work to win awards rather than to reach new artistic standards. As a first step, a photographer wanted to get his/her work accepted into a good salon. This was not as easy as it sounded. In 1960, the Pan-Malayan Exhibition received 548 entries, from which 171 were exhibited; that was about a 30% chance of getting accepted. In the same year, the Singapore International Salon received 2001 entries, of which 311 were accepted; which was a 15% chance of getting accepted, half that of the Pan-Malayan. It was even more difficult to get into a high-profile overseas salon. The London Salon of Photography received over 4000 entries, and showed only about 10% of the prints submitted.³⁷

In order to improve their chances of acceptance, it would make sense for photographers to closely study the winning prints in salons. A PSS official was reported in *The Straits Times* describing salon competitions as “catalysts to progress and an improved standard of photography”. He was further quoted as stating:

Winning a prize at the salon is immaterial. If a competitor does not win an award, he gets the satisfaction of having his entries placed side by side with the world’s best. It will enable him to study and understand why his entries are rejected. This will act as a powerful spur for him to study and improve himself.³⁸

Photographers could study the physical works at the local salons. For overseas salons, they could look at the reproductions in the catalogues – the PSS had a library

³⁷ Sunny Giam, “He Took THAT Famous Picture,” *The Singapore Free Press*, September 27, 1955.

³⁸ Soh, “Salons Inspire Many to Improve Standard.”

which received many international catalogues. The clubs also organised print clinics to study winning prints. For example, two senior photographers conducted "An appreciation of Selected Prints from the 11th Singapore International" for PSS members in March 1960.³⁹ Another way keen salon participants could learn was by attending judging sessions that were open to the public.⁴⁰ During a salon judging process, the panel of judges would look at every single print or slide submitted, one after another, individually assigning each work a score. After scoring every print, the judges then decided the cut-off score for photographs accepted into the salon. The winners were selected from the highest scored entries.⁴¹ The public sessions meant that attendees could see both rejected and accepted prints. They could also not only identify the handful of prize-winners, but could note which prints scored higher and which prints lower and gain an insight into the selection procedures.

The rampant practice of copying among the photographers in the salons was noted. As early as 1956, a review of the 7th *Open Exhibition* already complained about the inclusion of copied artworks and hoped to see new subject matter in the following year's exhibition.⁴² In an article about photography salons, Lee Sow Lim described them as a competition for fame and social status. Driven by such desires, Lee noted that some photographers went to all measures to win, even copying other photographers, resulting in exhibitions full of similar work.⁴³ Seeing the winning prints lauded would have reinforced specific subject matter and approaches, such as high-key prints or particular compositions. Photographers who wanted to get accepted at certain salons would take note of the successes at that salon and copy elements with the hope of gaining the judges' favour. Another writer, Ye Ni, observed the same phenomenon, adding that these photographers simply looked

³⁹ *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 1, no. 2 (February 1960).

⁴⁰ Ho, "What a Judge Looks For."

⁴¹ Tan Lip Seng, interview by author, Singapore, June 22, 2018.

⁴² Chen, "美術照片的構圖評第七屆公開影展 (Composition of Artistic Photos - A Review of the 7th Open Photographic Exhibition)."

⁴³ Sow Lim Lee, "为沙龙摄影说几句话 (A Few Words on Behalf of the Salon)," *Lianhe Zaobao*, August 28, 1996.

through past catalogues of a particular salon and copied the works that had previously won.⁴⁴

This practice was not limited to just within Singapore. It was, in fact, pronounced enough to warrant criticism by Margaret Harker, President of the RPS, in the 1956 issue of *Photograms of the Year*. Commenting on the 1955 London Salon, she noted that, “The Easterners score by their excellent print quality and text-book composition, but too frequently the work is repetitious of previous Salon and Royal successes.”⁴⁵ To my mind, this is not surprising given the high regard the London Salon was held in Asia. Acceptance into that salon was regarded the pinnacle of amateur pictorial achievement and photographers would have wanted to position themselves as advantageously as possible. Photographers even ‘copied’ themselves – after Yan Fook Leun’s *Southern Spring* (fig. 4.4) was accepted in 1955, he submitted a very similar work, *Dawn of Spring* (fig. 4.5), the following year.⁴⁶ Surprisingly, both were accepted for exhibition, and also selected for inclusion in the annual *Photograms of the Year* publication, which could only have further encouraged such practices.

⁴⁴ Ni Ye, “參加國際沙龍的態度 (The Attitude of Participating in International Salons),” *Nanyang Siang Pau*, February 18, 1965.

⁴⁵ *Photograms of the Year*, 1956, 8.

⁴⁶ *Photograms of the Year*, 1955; *Photograms of the Year*, 1956.



Fig. 4.5. Yan Fook Luen, *Dawn of Spring* in *Photograms of the Year*, 1956, plate 82.



Fig. 4.4. Yan Fook Luen, *Southern Spring* in *Photograms of the Year*, 1955, plate 83.

In his research on the Photo-Secession and amateur photography, Ulrich Keller has pointed out how the amateur status of the photographers drove much of the developments in Pictorialism.⁴⁷ The numerous salon exhibitions allowed pictorial photographers to feel like they were serious photographers rather than just hobbyists. To this, I would add the appropriation of ‘fine art’ values such as authorship and originality were essential to developing that status, to differentiate themselves from mere craftsmen. For example, Singaporean pictorial photographers who were also professional photographers took great care to distinguish their salon

⁴⁷ Keller, “The Myth of Art Photography,” October 1984.

photographs from their regular commercial work. As a subjective ideal called upon in service of the photographers' desire to be part of a growing international elite community of art photographers, originality gave its possessor a special prestige, a different sort of refined sensibility, an artistic eye. Keller described it as "romantically-exaggerated ideas of artistic genius".⁴⁸

Keller also noted that photo criticism developed a normative rather than interpretative character because their largely amateur readership needed aesthetic guidance. In other words, writers ended up addressing the photographers themselves and not the wider general public (as was the case in traditional art criticism). Their proclamations were never about interpreting ideas and expression but were comments on whether existing standards had been met, in terms of composition, tone and breadth. Keller further notes that the "safer and simpler the rules, the more authoritative became the author's tone", which also served to enhance the author's prestige.⁴⁹ While Keller was solely referring to photography writers and critics, the same phenomenon can be observed in the photography salons where the judges took the place of art critics. By focusing on clear and simple standards, the salons could maintain their position of authority. This contributed to a conservative approach that encouraged a study of the rules yet also emphasised authorship and originality.

Salon jury members in Singapore developed a significant amount of influence over photographic practice. Senior photographers were often invited to act as jury members for salons in Singapore and the internal club competitions. However, because of its prominence in the region, the PSS was also invited to send photographers to judge other clubs' competitions, both in Singapore and overseas. For example, in 1961, PSS members judged prints at The Photographic Society of Sandakan, the Malay Photographic Society, the Trengganu Camera Club, the Pulau Bukom Camera Club and the Nanyang University Photographic Society.⁵⁰ The 1965

⁴⁸ Keller, 252.

⁴⁹ Keller, 265.

⁵⁰ *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 2, no. 11 (November 1961).

PSS Monthly Bulletin notes that the PSS had been invited to judge the Sabah Photographic Society's Salon for several years – Au Thian Chor, Lee Lim and Tan Lip Seng judged the 1965 salon while Lee Lim, Wu Peng Seng and Yam Pak Nin judged the 1968 Salon.⁵¹ Given that they were photographers, this practice essentially allowed them to judge themselves (and their friends) and set the standards for photographic practice. For example, a juror who made a lot of high-key prints might select other high-key works for a particular exhibition. This was even acknowledged by the photographers who knew how subjective the preferences of the jurors could be. As Sunny Giam advised, as long as the print quality was good, even if rejected in one salon, the photographer could always send it to another as acceptance “depends greatly on taste of the salon committees.”⁵² Daisy Chee and Foo Tee Jun have both also noted the bias in the personal tastes of the jurors.⁵³

The accumulation of power within the hands of a small group of ‘master’ photographers had several implications. For one, it encouraged further copying of these senior photographers who were likely to be judging future salons, in a bid to appeal to their tastes. But secondly, it caused a few of Singapore's own secessions. The first example was the successful bid by the PSS to wrest the Singapore International Salon away from the SAS in 1956.⁵⁴ Following that, the photographers remaining in the SAS decided to form their own club, the Southeast Asia Photographic Society, in 1958. There are varying opinions on this move – Ho Koon Sang and Lim Kwong Ling have said that it was due to the language issue. The PSS had largely English speakers while the newly formed SEAPS were Cantonese speakers. However, Tan Lip Seng has suggested that the SEAPS members were unhappy about not getting seats on the club council. Suffice to say that there were the usual politics that occurred when large groups of people attempted to organise

⁵¹ *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 6, no. 10 (October 1965); *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 10, no. 1 (January 1969).

⁵² Giam, “Get out and Get Better Results.”

⁵³ Daisy Chee, interview by author, Singapore, August 8, 2018; Foo Tee Jun, interview by author, Singapore, August 10, 2018.

⁵⁴ Ho Kok Hoe, interview by Ken Cheong, Dec 22, 2007, CD-Rom, Ho Kok Hoe archives, National Gallery Singapore Library & Archive.

themselves and these social interactions also had an impact on the way certain photographers and their works gained more prominence over others.

Distinctions and Awards

In addition to salons, photographers also competed for international recognition via certification offered by the RPS, the PSA and the FIAP. In Singapore, the RPS was seen as the most important body recognising pictorial standards, and photographers applied for both the Associateship and Fellowship awards – the ARPS and FRPS respectively. To achieve these distinctions, photographers, who had to first become members of the RPS, had to submit a portfolio of 12 prints that were assessed by a panel. To achieve the ARPS, the works had to demonstrate that the photographer was “thoroughly competent” and “well above average in their photography”; to achieve FRPS, “exceptional work was expected as well as evidence of sound judgement in self-appraisal”.⁵⁵ Once awarded, the photographer could include the terms ARPS or FRPS after his name, as commonly seen in salon catalogues. The PSA had a similar process, while one had to be nominated for the distinctions by the FIAP.

While there was no monetary reward, these awards and distinctions acted as a form of informal advertising for the photographers. There were large numbers of pictorial photographers who also owned or worked in prominent commercial photography studios. This included K.F. Wong, P.S. Teo, Lee Lim, Lim Ming Loon and Yan Fook Leun. P.S. Teo’s brother, Teo Yeow Seng, recalled that he had encouraged his brother to publicise his salon wins and distinctions at his studio.⁵⁶ Lee Sow Lim has also stated that the RPS distinctions were recognised by employers such as the newspapers and could be used to apply for photography-related jobs. It acted as a type of qualification to show that the applicant had a certain level of photographic

⁵⁵ Roger Reynolds, ed., *Portfolio Three. The Royal Photographic Society* (Bath, United Kingdom: The Royal Photographic Society, 2013), 114.

⁵⁶ Teo Yeow Seng, interview by Claire Yeo, June 8, 2007, accession number 003165, audio recording, National Archives of Singapore, Reel 4.

skill. He recalled many who used their RPS certificates to apply for jobs.⁵⁷ There was thus a clear incentive for photographers to apply for such photographic distinctions, which also contributed to the competitive environment.

Photographers not only studied winning prints of salons, they also carefully studied and copied the prints which were part of a successful ARPS or FRPS application. Before making his own application for ARPS, David Tay recalled scrutinising the successful prints that were previously submitted to the RPS. Upon their return to Singapore, these prints had been hung at the PSS for photographers to study. The notion of studying was reinforced by articles in the various club and photo magazines. For example, the *RPS Journal* and the *PSS Monthly Bulletin* both reproduced the portfolios of successful ARPS and FRPS distinctions. The Singapore Art Society also held a special exhibition in 1957 of the prints accepted by the RPS from four of their members' successful ARPS applications. The works of Ho Kok Hoe, Yan Fook Leun, Tong Koon Hung and Kwan Sam-Hoi were exhibited at the British Council to "give the enthusiast encouragement and thus spur them on to attain the coveted honour of being an ARPS".⁵⁸

In his study of the Indian and Japanese painting salons, John Clark has noted that:

Salon artists are not mere conservatives who carry with them an in-built propensity to narrow their technical, stylistic and subject range. They have to be quite innovative even inside narrow salon definitions in order to establish and maintain their own status.⁵⁹

I argue that this was exactly the situation in Singapore. The salon was the main platform for exhibiting their work and photographers had to operate within its confines if they wanted their work to be seen. This was also the case for the

⁵⁷ Lee Sow Lim, interview by Teo Kian Giap, April 28, 2010, reel 4.

⁵⁸ Singapore Art Society, "An Exhibition of Pictorial Photography," Press Release, undated, Ho Kok Hoe archives, National Gallery Singapore Library & Archive.

⁵⁹ Clark, *Modern Asian Art*, 184.

application of photography distinctions. In the midst of this cycle of repetitive subject matter and culture of copying, the successful photographers understood perfectly well what type of work was expected and how to distinguish themselves as the preeminent practitioners. This is made particularly clear when we consider photographs that were *not* submitted to salons or to apply for distinctions.

Beyond the salon

An article in the *Nanyang Siang Pau* explicitly distinguished photographs made for the salons from photographs made for the general public; the former were photographs made for other photographers only.⁶⁰ I contend that the vast majority of photographers recognised the very specific requirements and subjective tastes of the salons and several chose to work outside its confines. Photographers such as K.F. Wong, Kouo Shang Wei and Lim Kwong Ling all made large bodies of work that were never entered into competition. These works often featured new subject matter and a greater documentary focus. For example, the photographers avoided posed subjects and often articulated a desire to produce historical records for future generations. Other than his commercial studio work, Wong made numerous documentary-style photo essays including those of Kuala Lumpur, Bali, Kathmandu and Kashmir. *Photo Pictorial* reproduced many of these works and also carried a prominent feature in the June 1961 issue that remarked that Wong's earlier photographs had been restrained by the salons, with the implication that these later works were distinct from, and better than, the salon works. While the writer does not specify exactly what made a work more or less "salon", he praises Wong's "courage in leaving behind the aesthetics of the salon".⁶¹

Looking at the reproductions in the article, however, it is hard to see a clear divide between Wong's earlier and later works. Despite this, the writer stresses the difference – he notes that 夜之街景 [*The Street at Night*] is not "scenery" but

⁶⁰ Chang, "攝影應具有目的 (The Purpose Photography Should Have)."

⁶¹ "Latest works of Mr K.F. Wong," 攝影畫報 (*Photo pictorial*), June 1970, 18.

“nightlife”. The assumption is “scenery” is just a pretty depiction of a landscape, while “nightlife” is a comment on the lives of the subjects. Similarly, *路上* [*On the Way*] (fig. 4.6) is about the relationship between man and nature rather than just another landscape. In both cases, he notes that Wong’s new works show a deeper understanding of daily life and is better able to convey the local context.⁶² While it is undeniable that Wong depicted a much greater variety of subject matter in the 1960s along with a gradual shift in style and approach, his pictorial roots are equally apparent to me. *路上* [*On the Way*] would be at home in any salon and bears strong similarities to his early sentimental landscapes such as *A Symbol of Peace*, which won an award at the First Open Photographic Salon in Singapore. I highlight this as it is important not to overstate the so-called constraints of the salon, and to show that work made for and outside the salons were not so drastically different. Nevertheless, Wong is a clear example of a pictorial photographer whose work developed beyond the salon circuit.



Fig. 4.6. Kouo Shang Wei, *路上* [*On the Way*] in *Photo Pictorial*, June 1970, 18.

Kouo, on the other hand, commenced an active architectural photography career in 1969, and by the 1980s, had become rather critical of the photographic salons,

⁶² English translations of artwork titles were provided in the article. “Latest works of Mr K.F. Wong.”

despite being actively involved with them, including acting as a jury member even into the 1980s.⁶³ He was still also taking part in competitions – there is a report on his work in the 1985 National Day Exhibition.⁶⁴ Kouo’s tense relationship with the salons highlights some of the fractures that had developed within photographic practice in Singapore by the 1980s. In an interview, Kouo explains that he had to operate within the conventions of the salon before he could break free from them.⁶⁵ In his study of Kouo, Zhuang Wubin has noted that Kouo distinguished his salon photographs from his “art”, although it is unclear what, if any, the difference was, other than the “art” did not show in the salons.⁶⁶ Throughout his life, his work exhibited clear pictorial influences. Certainly, he continued to pursue “truth, virtue and beauty” even in his pictures of daily life, avoiding scenes of poverty and disease.⁶⁷ He also emphasized his desire to express ideas rather than facts, which as I have established in Chapter Three, was a key characteristic of Pictorialism.⁶⁸

In 1978, Kouo won second prize in the Singapore Tourism Board’s photo competition for a work depicting the Singapore city skyline from the Singapore River.⁶⁹ (fig. 4.7) According to an interview in *The Straits Times*, Kouo took eight weeks to make the photo: “I had to wait for the pigeons to fly in a poetic pattern over the lighters. [...] And I also had to include the buildings on the banks. Because of the angle of the picture, I could only take in the buildings at low tide.”⁷⁰ Similarly, Kouo took another two months to make an aerial view of Singapore’s skyline, which won another photo

⁶³ Zhuang, *Shifting Currents*, 16.

⁶⁴ David Tay, “Still in the Darkroom about Trends,” *The Straits Times*, August 25, 1985.

⁶⁵ Xibang Zeng, “摄影工作者郭尚慰的另一面 (Another Side to Photographer Kouo Shang Wei),” *Lianhe Zaobao*, March 28, 1985.

⁶⁶ Zhuang, *Shifting Currents*, 16.

⁶⁷ Shang Wei Kouo, “由星洲影藝說到第五屆泛馬影展 (From the Photographic Art of Singapore to a Discussion on the 5th Pan-Malayan Photographic Exhibition),” *Nanyang Siang Pau*, July 24, 1957; Zhuang, *Shifting Currents*, 20–21.

⁶⁸ There were many contradictions in Kouo’s statements, possibly due to his desire to distance himself from the salons, as well as a rather loose definition of documentary.

⁶⁹ Zhuang, *Shifting Currents*, 54.

⁷⁰ Zi Kwan, “When the Truth Clicks,” *The Straits Times*, October 14, 1982.

competition in 1984, but took pains to state that he “never thought about the competition because then I only wanted to record the progress of Singapore. I knew the lighters would be moving out soon so I quickly took the photographs.”⁷¹ The discrepancy between the lengthy periods he spent to capture his shots and his desire to “quickly” document Singapore is another interesting contradiction. Kouo seems to have been engaged in a kind of pictorial documentary, one that only depicted Singapore in her best light. After all, he criticised the pictures taken by foreigners who would capture “exotic places like Chinatown, highlighting its dirtiness and backwardness”.⁷²



Fig. 4.7. Kouo Shang Wei, *Pigeons flying over the Singapore river*, c. 1970s. Kouo Shang-Wei Collection, National Library Board Singapore.

<https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/pictures/Details/ad66c13f-9dd2-4b9e-837e-71dba605edde>

Lim Kwong Ling was a member of the Photo-Art Association, who helped fellow members choose their photographs for the salons to avoid accidentally submitting

⁷¹ Grace Chng, “‘Cityscape’ Is Tops,” *The Straits Times*, March 8, 1984.

⁷² Kwan, “When the Truth Clicks.”

similar work. After about a decade of photographic practice, he consciously decided to stop participating in the salons in the 1970s due to the repetitive subject matter he had observed.⁷³ He felt that the pure aestheticism pursued in the salons was shallow and meaningless, and one needed to deeply examine daily life in order to produce works that were rich in meaning.⁷⁴ While he continued to be very active in the club, serving on the committee and playing an active role in organising club exhibitions, his personal work turned towards street photography where he avoided any posed or set-up scenes whose artifice he disliked. Lim does not deny his pictorial roots and considers them an important foundation for his subsequent photographic practice.⁷⁵ Learning photography through the clubs and participating in the salons allowed him to pick up not only technical skills but to construct a visually appealing photograph. While Lim stresses his desire to create historical documents that would be valuable for future generations, he also notes that the photo must touch people's emotions, echoing pictorial photographers such as David Tay and Tan Lip Seng.

Lim is the only photographer interviewed for this thesis who explicitly articulated his position that the content of a photo is more important than conveying beauty. (Wong and Kouo have both passed away, thus were not interviewed.) However, his own works retain a pronounced sense of aesthetics with carefully managed composition. He also expressed pride in the quality of his black-and-white prints, which he emphasised were developed and enlarged by himself in his darkroom. Pictorialism's influence was not so easily thrown off. Lim's work thus offers a very interesting case study of a pictorial photographer who consciously tried to go beyond the constraints of the salon yet still worked within the club system. *Hawkers* (fig. 4.8), for example, shows two Malay boys walking down a dirt path with Singapore's distinctive public housing flats in the background. At first glance, other than a shift in location, it is not so different from the kinds of photographs the

⁷³ Lim Kwong Ling, interview by author, Singapore, June 28, 2018.

⁷⁴ Fang Xuehui, "亚洲影艺活动的出色组织者---方学辉 (Asia's Outstanding Photography Promoter), People's Photography News, Sep 26, 1990, reproduced in <http://kwonglinglim.blogspot.com/2008/12/my-photographic-works-year-of.html>. Accessed 3 December 2018.

⁷⁵ Lim Kwong Ling, interview by author, Singapore, June 28, 2018.

pictorial photographers so enjoyed taking of the children running around villages. Yet it *is* different. The shift in landscape from the village to the housing blocks was a significant step in Lim's aspiration to document "reality", but driven by his desire to avoid the repetition he saw in the salons. *Where is my Home?* (fig. 4.9) is an even more unusual subject, depicting two boys in the ruins of their home.



Fig. 4.8. Lim Kwong Ling, *Hawkers*, c. 1970s, gelatin silver print, 40 x 50.5cm. National Gallery Singapore Collection.



Fig. 4.9. Lim Kwong Ling, *Where is my home?*, c. 1970s, 50.8 x 40.4cm, gelatin silver print. National Gallery Singapore Collection.

In fact, looking back at the history of pictorial photography in Singapore, one can argue that the copying seen at the salons also provided an important impetus for the development of photography, by inspiring certain photographers to innovate. An article in 1956 had warned photographers to stop imitating others if they did not want to lose their creative value. The author, Chen Hufa, himself a photographer and member of the SEAPS, had suggested a turn towards depicting more “reality” and “daily life”, which was more meaningful and relevant to Singapore.⁷⁶ Chen felt that Singaporean photographers’ very success at international salons should give them the confidence to explore such new subjects. Indeed, this shift can actually be seen in the late 1950s as photographers started making more work that depicted

⁷⁶ Hu Fa Chen, “漫談藝術攝影 (Discussing Art Photography),” *Nanyang Siang Pau*, February 2, 1956.

distinctly local subject matter - the markets, the laborers at work and local festivals and events – that echoed Chen’s call for representing daily life. Before, the majority of works had comprised still life, portraits and sentimental landscapes. Of course, even as these new themes entered the salons, other photographers promptly began to copy them. Furthermore, the older subject matter or approaches did not disappear, instead, photographers simply added the new subject matter to their existing palette of ideas and moved among them continuously. This cycle of innovation and copying marked Singapore Pictorialism for decades, only to be broken when photographers left the salons.

Pedagogy and Discipline

In the previous chapter, I had mentioned that many of the early photographers in Singapore were self-taught, learning through books, magazines and simple experimentation. There was simply no other option. This had a tremendous impact on the photographs made. There was one art school, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, set up in 1938, but they did not offer photography instruction. However, this changed with the start of beginners’ photography classes offered by the PSS in 1957. This was the earliest formal photography training offered in Singapore.⁷⁷ According to a 1959 article, the annual beginner’s photography course was run at the PSS clubhouse, opened to both members and non-members and offered free of charge as part of the club’s mandate to promote photography in Singapore.⁷⁸ (Although by 1961, it seems these courses were restricted to members only.⁷⁹)

The course was taught by senior members of the club who volunteered their time. This included Wang Su Fah, Tham Yew Fun and Au Thian Chor. Despite the lack of

⁷⁷ There were also some early photography societies in schools, for example, the Raffles Institution Photography Club was founded in 1956 and the Photographic Society of Nanyang University in 1958. However, this chapter focuses on the photography societies not affiliated with schools, which attracted many more members and organised larger scale exhibitions.

⁷⁸ Raymond Thomas, “Photographic Digest”, *The Straits Times*, April 26, 1959.

⁷⁹ *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 2, no. 1 (January 1961).

fees, the course was a very serious one. A description of the course in 1961 tells us that it consisted of 12 lessons plus 15 print clinics and 30 Sunday outdoor practice sessions.⁸⁰ The participants had to take a written exam at the end of the course and submit a portfolio of prints to be assessed by a panel of examiners. Testifying to the commitment needed, although 115 members enrolled, only 48 participants completed the course. Furthermore, not everyone who completed the course would pass the final exams.⁸¹ The Adult Education Board also had a beginners' photography course taught by Wang Su Fah and Lee Sow Lim from 1961, but it was much shorter. Based on a newspaper report, the 8-week course had 60 participants.⁸² Foo Tee Jun, who attended the Adult Education Board course taught by Lee, ended by continuing his studies with the PSS the following year in 1963, as the first course was not thorough enough for his liking.⁸³

David Tay, who attended the PSS course in 1959, has described the 12-week curriculum – participants were taught how to process film, how to use the enlargers and filters, skills in composition and how to make an exhibition print.⁸⁴ Foo Tee Jun elaborated on the emphasis on seeing through the entire process of making the print. He recalled that his instructor, Tham Yew Fun, had insisted that everyone learn to develop their own film negatives and enlarge their own prints. The reason being a photographic lab would develop a whole roll of film at any one time, whereas they could adjust the developing process for each individual image and get better results. Accounts from multiple photographers reveal a dogmatic approach to photography technique that often contradicted the desire for originality and their grand artistic ambitions. As students, the photographers were given not only the traditional rules of composition and balance – the rule of thirds, leading lines and patterns – but also specific instructions like always including “human interest” in the form of a human

⁸⁰ *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 2, no. 11 (November 1961).

⁸¹ The 1969 *PSS Monthly Bulletin* notes that although 23 members completed the course, only 21 passed the exams. *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 10, no. 1 (January 1969).

⁸² “Deputy Speaker Attends First Lesson in Photography,” *The Singapore Free Press*, October 26, 1961.

⁸³ Foo Tee Jun, interview with author, Aug 10, 2018.

⁸⁴ David Poey Cher Tay, interview by Claire Yeo, November 12, 2007, reel 10.

figure in the image.⁸⁵ Interestingly, in looking back at his beginner days, Foo thinks that he was “洗脑 [brainwashed]” by his instructor into following all these rules and pointers for a good photograph. He feels that he might have made better and more interesting photographs if he did not follow his teacher’s advice so closely.⁸⁶

The beginners’ class included studio photography shoots, where the instructor would arrange for a model and guide participants accordingly, as well as 30 outdoor practice sessions which took place during the regular Sunday outings organized by the club.⁸⁷ These weekly Sunday outings were a very prominent part of PSS life and constituted a major part of photography learning outside the classroom. They happened without fail every Sunday morning and anyone could come along and meet the senior photographers of the club, not just students in the beginners’ class. Ho Koon Sang and Mun Chor Koon who joined the PSS before classes were offered, learnt purely through the Sunday outings, which were the key avenue of their photography learning. These “safaris”, as they were called, were even advertised in the newspapers to attract new members. Participants would meet at a coffeeshop (Ye Lan Ting) near the clubhouse before heading off together for the shoots.

During these Sunday safaris, new photographers learnt by copying more experienced photographers, who were also happy to give them very specific instructions. Yip Cheong Fun’s son recalled how photographers would follow his father around during these shoots to learn from him. Yip would point out a particular scene and people would then literally line up to capture that shot.⁸⁸ A newspaper article by Sunny Giam further describes this type of instruction during a PSS safari:

⁸⁵ It is unclear when this particular rule emerged, but it also explains why the majority of pictorial photographs in Singapore include a human figure, particularly after the mid-1950s. Daisy Chee’s account adds that her instructor also told her that the human figure should walk into the frame of the photo and never towards the viewer.

⁸⁶ Foo Tee Jun, interview by author, Singapore, Aug 10, 2018.

⁸⁷ Foo Tee Jun, interview by Teo Kian Giap, April 12, 2010, reel 2.

⁸⁸ Tan, *An Ingenious Reverie*, 16.

Mentor Au Thian Chor called a halt to his horde of followers when the party reached MacRitchie Reservoir. His authoritative finger pointed towards the sky and in a tone of teacher he said: Here is a lovely branch. Take the picture from here...⁸⁹

An article in the *PSS Monthly Bulletin* in May 1960 describes a similar situation at another popular destination, Merdeka Bridge. The unnamed author stated:

Soon I noticed others stooping and at times placing their cameras right on the ground taking pictures of pedestrians or cyclists passing along the bridge. Another thing that struck me was that they were taking pictures right against the sun, a principle which was wrong and strange to me at that time. However being curious I followed suit and took some pictures in the same direction hoping to study them and discover their secrets at my leisure hours.

Later in the same article, the author continued:

One member showed me the reflections of the swaying coconut trees in the water and I began to admire the phantasy of a tropical scene as seen on the rippling waters. It was all so new and refreshing and I have often wondered why I had not noticed it all before I took to photography.⁹⁰

The photographers often talked about “learning to see”, which seemed to entail the ability to identify what would make a good photo from their surrounds and the cultivation of an individual aesthetic sensibility. Ironically, the instructors also attempted to teach this to their class in a rather pedantic fashion. Foo has described the outings to Mata Ikan, which was the area where white wash was produced. The process entailed the burning of shells, causing a lot of smoke that the photographers found very atmospheric. According to Foo, there was a specific vantage point at Mata Ikan that members would be brought to at a specific time on these outings, so

⁸⁹ Sunny Giam, “On Safari,” *The Singapore Free Press*, April 14, 1960.

⁹⁰ *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 1, no. 5 (May 1960).

as to get the best possible photograph that captured the rays of light coming through the smoke.⁹¹ He also recalled the photography instructor advising them to ask the Chinese boys who lived in the kampongs at Mata Ikan to take their shirts off for the photograph, presumably to make for a more 'rural' photograph.

It seems clear that copying and following strict and detailed instructions were part of the learning process for beginners at the club. It was a way to gain technique in shooting a scene as well as in developing a print. During the field trips, the older photographers encouraged it, and the beginner photographers engaged in it. However, this impetus to repeat given formulas did not merely come from the classes and outings. It was also a result of the way photography techniques were conveyed through the magazines and newspapers. In the article that Tan Tiang Yeo wrote about *Sunbeams in the Market* (the work cited at the start of this chapter), he gave very detailed instructions on how he made the photo:

Loading my Rolleiflex with Plus X, [...] I set up the tripod and camera and slipped on the lens hood. A filter was not used. Focussing at fifteen feet, I set the aperture at f5.6 to get the desired depth of field and speed at 1/50 of a second to take care of the movements. [...] The film was processed in Promicrol for half an hour at 68°F. The resulting density and contrast was just right and expected.

The print, a 12" x 15", was made on Gevaluxe. [...] The special characteristics of this paper which give very rich, deep, carbon black, enhanced the quality of the picture to a very great extent and at the same time, it covered up the slight graininess due to the prolonged development.⁹²

Together with the illustration, the article made it as easy as possible for readers to go out and reproduce the work themselves.

⁹¹ Foo Tee Jun, interview by Teo Kian Giap, April 12, 2010, reel 2.

⁹² Tan, "Sunbeams in the Market," 20.

This type of article was present in every issue of *Photo Pictorial* (摄影画报), a photo magazine from Hong Kong that was popular in Singapore. It was also available in the PSS library. Beyond explaining shooting exposure and aperture, the articles also covered the rules of composition and darkroom technique in detail, including masking and making composite photographs. Similarly, in the *PSS Monthly Bulletin* in 1961, there was an article advising members how to shoot the Indian festival of Thaipusam. In addition to the type of film used, the exposure time and the aperture size, the writer also advises readers on specific subject matter to shoot. For example, to “take plenty of close-ups of the faces of devotees as they receive the spikes into their skins” and “candid shots of the faces of the spectators as they witness the anguish and torture of the devotees”.⁹³ The large number of beginners interested in photography and its technical requirements necessitated such instructions. Photographic practice during the time required substantial technical knowledge in focus and exposure. Darkroom processes especially required strict adherence to the chemical formulas and developing times and a disciplined approach to photography pedagogy. Veering away from the instructions would have simply resulted in wasted film, paper and chemicals.

The daily newspapers also ran such photography advice articles. Raymond Thomas wrote a weekly photographic column “The Photographic Digest” for *The Straits Times*, which ran from 1959 to 1960. The majority of Thomas’ articles focused on the ‘how-to’ of photography, that is, giving readers detailed practical instructions on how to achieve specific results. Similarly, the Chinese newspapers often ran photography articles that focused on the ‘how-to’. In 1967, the *Nanyang Siang Pau* had an entire series instructing readers on shooting specific topics, such as ‘Drying Fish’, ‘Spring’, ‘Rain’ and ‘Bamboo Baskets’. Such articles would have not only encouraged the notion of copying as a way to learn photography, but also promoted specific subject matter in line with the articles.

⁹³ *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 2, no. 1 (January 1961).

While the science of photography lent itself to very specific instructional methods, there was another factor that could have encouraged the notion of copying as part of the learning process. The senior photographers were all ethnic Chinese and several studied in Chinese schools where Chinese ink painting and calligraphy was taught. For example, Chua Soo Bin studied at Zhong Zhen Primary and later attended night art classes taught by artist Cheong Soo Pieng, who was trained in both ink and oil techniques. He was also friends with another ink master, Chen Wen Hsi. Both Foo Tee Jun and Tan Lip Seng studied calligraphy in primary school; Foo recalls that his teacher encouraged him to study Chinese painting for its aesthetic qualities.⁹⁴ Similarly, both Yip Cheong Fun and Lee Lim were Chinese educated and both actually continued practicing calligraphy into adulthood, with Lee even incorporating it into some of his photos.

Chinese painting and calligraphy has a long tradition of copying as pedagogy. Artists learnt by imitating the masters and the learning process included direct tracing over existing work.⁹⁵ Calligraphy copybooks and painting manuals highlight the way copying was an integral part of the learning process. The goal was not to make replicas; through this process, the student was expected to gain mastery so that they could progress towards their own personal style. As Wen describes, “as the repeated enactments of familiar movements brings him closer and closer to total mastery of the form, he expresses himself through it.”⁹⁶ The photographers who learnt or practiced calligraphy would have been familiar with such traditions. So while they might not have consciously set out to teach photography in the same way, it seems very likely that they would have had a much more open approach to how copying could play a part in the learning process. A recent philosophical discussion by Han Byung-Chul on copying in Chinese culture has linked it to Taoist thought, suggesting that there was no equivalent of the “original” as understood in English. Original is

⁹⁴ Kong, “Rise of Modernism in Singapore Photography, 1950s to 1980s: Aesthetic Negotiation through an Ethnic and National Identity Prism,” 181.

⁹⁵ For a detailed discussion, see Wen C. Fong, “How to Understand Chinese Painting,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 115, no. 4 (1971): 282–92.

⁹⁶ Fong, 287.

zhenji (真跡), which literally translates to authentic trace.⁹⁷ This would have been further reinforced by the Confucian notion of respect for elders – copying a senior photographer was a way of appreciating his work.

Pedagogy aside, articles continued to admonish photographers *not* to copy. In 1958, Harry Tan ended a column giving the following photography advice:

But a warning, please, if you want to remain a popular chap, don't be a copy cat. Study others' pictures for the purpose of learning how the photographer achieved the effect he did. Then use that "know how" on your own subject. Don't shoot a facsimile print.⁹⁸

So on the one hand, the photographers were teaching photography using methods that encouraged copying. On the other hand, they were told to be original and creative in their output.

Collaboration and Dialogue

The repetition of subject matter was largely a function of the way the clubs operated, namely, through their group shooting excursions. Ho Koon Sang recalled that in the earlier years the outings were very social and informal, with all the members of the club gathering on Sunday mornings before going out together. Everyone would have breakfast together at the coffee shop, while senior members discussed where to go for the day. Members with cars would simply give rides to the others.⁹⁹ Over time, the outings became more organized, with separate outings for members of the Pictorial Group and the Colour Group. As Chairperson of the Colour Group, Daisy Chee said that she had to plan the shooting destinations, which

⁹⁷ Byung-Chul Han, *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese*, trans. Philippa Hurd, Bilingual edition (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 14.

⁹⁸ Tan, "Always Use Your Imagination..."

⁹⁹ Ho Koon Sang, interview by author, Singapore, 25 June 2018.

involved driving around Singapore to scout for suitable sites.¹⁰⁰ These shooting schedules were then publicised in the *Monthly Bulletin* for members' information. (fig. 4.10)



Fig. 4.10. Pictorial Group report in the *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 7, no. 5 (May 1966)

Because the majority of members tended to only shoot with the club, the shooting locations often determined the work made by club members. Subject matter and places repeated themselves through the weekly outings, as photographers continued to practice their skills. For example, the club arranged visits to saw mills in June and September 1966, which would have resulted in numerous images of saw mills that year.¹⁰¹ Other popular and repeated destinations were the granite quarries, Changi beach, Mata Ikan and Chinatown. The club also arranged photography sessions with models, ensuring dozens of portraits of a single subject. With 60 to 80 members on average for every PSS club outing in the early 1960s, it is no wonder that many of the photographs were similar.¹⁰² The other clubs also conducted their own Sunday outings, which meant other large groups of photographers shooting together every week. It was thus very common to come across multiple photographs by different photographers with the same subject.

¹⁰⁰ Daisy Chee, interview by author, Singapore, 8 August 2018.

¹⁰¹ *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 7, no. 5 (May 1966); *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 7, no. 8 (August 1966).

¹⁰² *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 2, no. 11 (November 1961).

It must be noted that the pictorial photographers were very aware that their works could be similar to others and sought to differentiate themselves accordingly. Foo Tee Jun has commented that if many photographers submitted very similar works to a competition or salon, then the judges would just select the best one. He has described how his pictures needed to stand out *precisely* because he went out to shoot with a big group of his fellow club members. He knew that their photographs would look alike, so he took pains to distinguish his own prints. For example, by using darkroom techniques to manipulate his images.¹⁰³ In another anecdote, Foo recalled a group studio shoot of an old Indian man. Unlike the others, he decided to do an extreme close-up of the model, exaggerating his beard and the wrinkles on his face to produce a compelling portrait. The photograph became his first prize-winning print.¹⁰⁴

Consider *Cleaner* by Ho Koon Sang (fig. 4.11) and *Final Touch* by Chow Seng On (fig. 4.12). They were clearly made during the same shooting excursion, depicting the same subject perched on a scaffold with his body extended to clean the façade of a building. Chow's photo has been shot straight on, so the perspective is flattened, highlighting the patterns made by the façade and the scaffold. The photograph won "Picture of the Month" in the *PSS Monthly Bulletin*, where the caption commented that "this is a picture of pattern but with the introduction of human interest into the picture [...] the subject matter is well-placed and the action is good."¹⁰⁵ Ho Koon Sang's version has the entire image reversed (he cannot recall which was the original orientation) and shot from the side at an angle. While the pattern of the scaffold creates interest, the human figure in Ho's photograph takes on a greater prominence.

¹⁰³ Foo Tee Jun, interview by Teo Kian Giap, 1 June 2010, reel 5.

¹⁰⁴ Foo Tee Jun, interview by Teo Kian Giap, 12 April 2010, reel 3.

¹⁰⁵ *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 2, no. 4 (April 1961).



Fig. 4.11. Ho Koon Sang, *Cleaner*, c. 1958, gelatin silver print, 50.9 x 41.4cm. National Gallery Singapore collection.

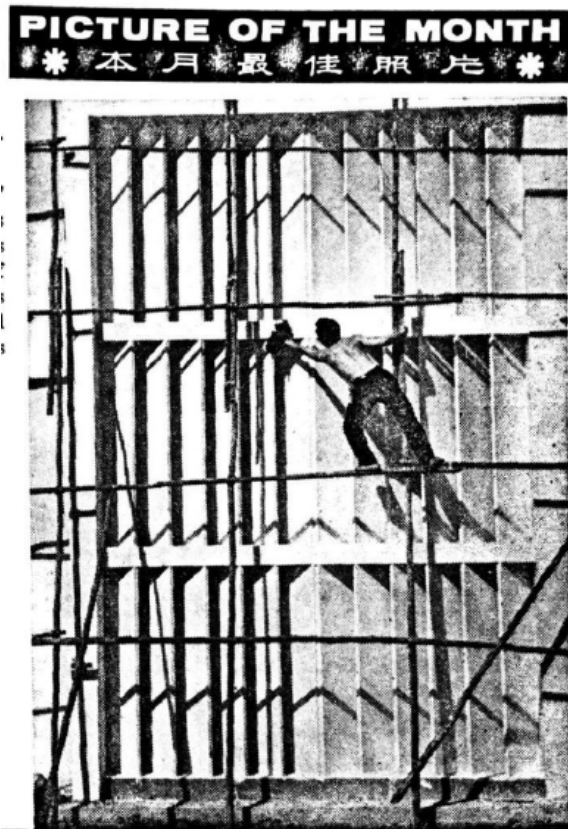


Fig. 4.12. Chow Seng On, *Final Touch*, c. 1958 in *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 2, no. 4 (April 1961).

What is particularly interesting about this image is the human figure in the photograph is Ho himself, who posed for the photo. When asked about the 'copy', Ho emphasised that the two photographs were different. He noted that there were always many fellow photographers around who would shoot the same scene, particularly if there was a posed model. He did not seem to mind the fact that although he had set up the shot, other photographers who were present were also able to take advantage of it. These collaborative shoots were very common – several of the photographers interviewed had anecdotes of such situations. When there were such similar photographs, Ho colloquially stated that “谁出先, 就是谁拿 [whoever shows the photo first, gets it]”. Elaborating further, he said that he had many similar photographs with Yip Cheong Fun, but if Yip showed them first, Ho would not submit his own for any salons. If two photographers did submit similar photographs, then it was likely they did not know each other very well, implying that there was a sort of honour system in place between friends.¹⁰⁶ Lee Sow Lim has admitted that he did not like to have the same themes and subject matter as other photographers. Just like Ho, he stressed the importance of being the first to show the photograph to the public if the work did indeed resemble someone else's.¹⁰⁷

Some of the photographers sought to remedy this sort of repeated subject matter through their own informal methods. Ang Kok Sai has explained some of the compromises the photographers came up with. Describing the process of shooting the same model with three other photographers, he said that each of them were allocated 15 minutes to photograph the subject, including posing and setting up the shoot. During his 15 minutes, the other photographers were allowed to shoot his set-up if they wished, but they were not allowed to submit those photographs for any competitions, that is, he had priority over his particular pose and set-up and vice versa.¹⁰⁸ Also, both the Southeast Asia Photography Society and the Photo-Art

¹⁰⁶ Ho Koon Sang, interview by author, Singapore, June 25, 2018.

¹⁰⁷ Lee Sow Lim, interview by Teo Kian Giap, April 27, 2010, reel 2.

¹⁰⁸ Ang Kok Sai, interview by Lye Soon Choon, June 21, 2004, accession number 002850, audio recording, National Archives of Singapore, reel 11.

Society had a coordinator who would help members select works to submit to salons, in the process also making sure that similar works were not selected for the same salon.¹⁰⁹ Despite these efforts, it is clear that the Singaporean pictorial photographers frequently made works of the same subject matter over decades of salon exhibitions.

The PSS also organized overseas shooting trips. The most frequent destination was the east coast of Malaysia. These excursions were made annually from 1964 and received much publicity within the club, including through special exhibitions of photographs taken during the trip. Photographers often described the east coast as a “paradise for photographers”. Members like Yip Cheong Fun and Kouo Shang Wei made repeated visits.¹¹⁰ These trips were responsible for a huge amount of similar subject matter, particularly of the fishing villages – the fishermen, the gigantic nets and the beaches. Chua Soo Bin often recounts the similarity of one of his photographs with Yip Cheong Fun’s *Rowing at Dawn*, “We were on the same boat. We had almost the same shot; mine was shot just a few seconds later, but his is more famous.”¹¹¹

As one of Singapore’s most prolific and successful photographers, and one who consistently took part in PSS’s shooting excursions, Yip Cheong Fun made numerous works whose subject matter was very similar to other photographers. For example, his photograph, *The Fisherman’s Daughter* (fig. 4.13), and Lai Teck Leong’s *The Last and The Least* (fig. 4.14), feature the same young Malay girl posing with a row of drying fish by the seaside. As with Chua, it is obvious that the two photographers were together on the same shooting excursion to the Malaysian east coast. Yip and Lai chose two different approaches to the same subject matter and Yip arguably produced the better work. Unlike Yip, there is very little information about Lai and *The Last and the Least* is the only print of his accepted for the Singapore International Salon. It is possible that Yip, as a much more senior photographer,

¹⁰⁹ Lim Kwong Ling, interview by author, Singapore, July 19, 2018.

¹¹⁰ *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 5, no. 5 (May 1964).

¹¹¹ Chua Soo Bin, interview by author, Singapore, July 3, 2018.

guided Lai on this particular shoot, as was his habit, and allowed him to shoot scenes which he had set up.



Fig. 4.13. Yip Cheong Fun, *The Fishermen's Daughter*, c. 1957, gelatin silver print, 42.5 x 35.3cm. National Gallery Singapore collection.



Fig. 4.14. Lai Teck Leong, *The Last and the Least* in the catalogue of the 8th *Singapore International Salon* (Singapore: Photographic Society of Singapore, 1957), p. 96.

Photographs made during these shooting excursions, both local and overseas, were often also developed, printed and circulated within the group for discussion. These critique sessions provided a platform for the photographers to share pointers, learn from each other and improve. This dialogue was an important part of club life and would also have had an impact on the work produced. Despite the various calls for individuality, these photographs actually emerged from a very collaborative space, both during the actual shoot and in the discussions that followed. Lui Hock Seng, for example, has said he learnt mainly from these critique sessions at the SEAPS as he did not have any money to attend classes.¹¹² Tan Lip Seng has also highlighted the collegial atmosphere of these shooting and sharing sessions.¹¹³

¹¹² Lui Hock Seng, interview by Kiang-Kah Kai Lin, Oct 4, 2016, accession number 004087, audio recording, National Archives of Singapore, reel 1.

¹¹³ Tan Lip Seng, interview by Teo Kian Giap, February 11, 2010, reel 4.

In thinking about the existence of these sorts of repeated subject matter, I wish to draw upon Rosalind Krauss' discussion of the fiction of originals and copies. Krauss uses several historical examples, including Raphael's many repeated renditions of the same painting and the posthumous casts of Rodin's sculptures, to examine the links between originality and repetition.¹¹⁴ Like Solomon-Godeau, she argues that originality is a myth and the flip side of the copy; one cannot exist without the other. The repression of the copy is necessary for the original to operate as a marker of authorship.¹¹⁵ In a later essay, Krauss suggests that the original might actually be unnecessary – the copies form a series in themselves that might produce their own meaning. Using the example of Roman sculptures, Krauss demonstrates how, rather than copies pointing towards, or venerating, the original, the copy could be valued for its recognisability of subject matter, becoming well-known "types" where authorship then actually took a backseat.¹¹⁶

Within Singapore Pictorialism, we see clearly this co-existence of originality and repetition, but how might we step away from this binary? I want to discuss two photographs by two well-known pictorial photographers. The first work is *Homeward Bound*, c.1957 by Au Thian Chor (fig. 4.15). The print shows a human figure in the middle of the frame, walking along a winding path lined with palm trees. It is a simple scene; there is a sense of tranquillity due to the pared down composition and large amount of sky. The second work bears the exact same title, *Homeward Bound*, c.1960, and is by Yip Cheong Fun (fig. 4.16). Yip's work shows the same subject matter and composition. It is framed slightly tighter, so that the human subject appears larger and the composition is simplified even further, with only a few palm trees and a more dramatic cloudy sky. Given that both works are dated roughly around the same period, it is hard to ascertain which was made first. To

¹¹⁴ Krauss, "Retaining the Original?"; Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1986).

¹¹⁵ Krauss states, "These two terms seem bound together in a kind of aesthetic economy, interdependent and self-sustaining, although the one – originality – is the valorized term and the other – repetition or copy or duplication – is discredited." Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 9.

¹¹⁶ Krauss, "Retaining the Original?," 10.

complicate matters even further, Yip had another work *Morning Round*, dated 1949, which also had the same subject matter and composition. (fig. 4.17) Au and Yip were both senior members of the PSS who were made Associates of the RPS in 1957. They were peers and part of the PSS committee from the late 1950s to the 1970s, so would have known each other well. Au was a camera salesman by trade, while Yip ran his own business. Both were very successful pictorial photographers by all counts – Au had his prints exhibited at The London Salon for three consecutive years, while Yip attained his FRPS in 1961. Both took part in the weekly photography safaris and were often called upon to judge various salons and photography competitions.

Both Yip and Au were considered to be at the top of their group of art photographers, presumably ticking the box for originality, yet they produced two *Homeward Bounds*. It is unlikely that they would have felt the need to copy for gaining acceptance into any particular salon. It is equally unlikely that they did not know about each other's *Homeward Bound*. Given the exact same title and composition of the two photographs and their personal connections, I propose that Au and Yip were in conversation with each other and these works emerged from that dialogue. The resulting photographs illustrate the photographers working together through certain popular themes and subject matter, in this case, the tranquil seaside scene. The original is irrelevant here – the works show how photographers refined their practice by revisiting subjects, often together with others, which the club environment supported. In the case of the two iterations of *Homeward Bound*, Au's version has focused more on the landscape – its expansiveness and beauty – while Yip's version brings more attention to the human figure and the corresponding feelings of going home.

Following Krauss' argument, perhaps these works, these 'copies', hold meaning in their very repetition. One could even consider photography itself as a medium of replication, where everything is a copy. If one avoids the original-copy hierarchy, it is possible to consider the significance of these copies without originals. In fact, the sustained popularity of certain subject matter – the rural kampongs, the construction sites, the cultural festivals – is one of the most interesting

developments in Singapore Pictorialism. The repetition of these subjects takes on a significance in itself and creates patterns of recognition and memory. I examine this phenomenon and its implications in the next two chapters.

Conclusion

At the start of the chapter, I described three photographs of market scenes that bore a strong resemblance to each other - *Sunbeams at the Market* by Tan Tiang Yeo, *The Persian Market* by Lui Hock Seng and *Morning Market* by Foo Tee Jun. When asked about the last, Foo admitted that actually yet another photographer, Loke Loh Hong, first made a similar photograph that he had copied. Lee Sow Lim had shown Loke's photo to the class that Foo was attending at the Adult Education Board. In fact, it was Loke who had brought Foo to the same market (*Lau Pa Sat*) so that he could recreate the photo. Foo further recalled that Lui who was in the SEAPS with Loke, had also copied Loke's photograph.¹¹⁷ As a beginner, Foo felt that it was only natural to study other people's photographs, but when you were not a beginner anymore, you needed to go out and find your own subject matter. While I have been unable to find Loke's photograph and do not know if Loke had been inspired by Tan's *Sunbeams at the Market*, this anecdote reveals the close connections between different photographers and the way these connections, conversations and collaborations subsequently affected the production of these similar photographs.

This chapter has investigated the role of the photography clubs and the structures of the photographic salons in establishing the particularities of Singapore Pictorialism. Despite the professed emphasis on the values of originality and authorship, the club and salon system encouraged a certain type of copying of subject matter, whether it be through the way photography was taught, the way club activities were organised or the competitive nature of the salons. This tension between originality and repetition was one that persisted through the decades of this study, and in fact, it could be argued that the practice of copying ultimately drove Singapore Pictorialism

¹¹⁷ Foo Tee Jun, interview by author, Singapore, August 10, 2018.

to its demise by the late 1970s. By this time, one was to hardly find any progress in practice, but simply more and more of the same few subjects, reworked in the same style by numerous photographers, albeit technically proficient ones. By 1986, a scathing review of a photographic exhibition at the Singapore Festival of Arts highlighted the problem of the “salon style” which “displayed lots of boringly clichéd pictures – hillside scenery with two human figures in a corner, craftsman at work, silhouetted figures against dawn or sunset, pretty face against blurred background, not-so-cute children”.¹¹⁸

The strict confines of the salon and pictorialism’s emphasis on beauty meant that photographers had to be innovative in distinguishing their work, which they did by highlighting individual expression and their ‘artistic eye’, in keeping with modernism’s demand for authorship. This had varying levels of success. Some photographers chose to move away from exhibiting at the salons, making works that circulated through different channels such as magazines as well as specific group and solo exhibitions. I have discussed three of them – Wong, Kouo and Lim, but there were also others who continued to experiment and push their own practice. Nevertheless, the salons remained the most prominent display of pictorial photography in Singapore and continued to dominate the general public’s attention. The vast majority of club members were happy to continue repeating their existing work for the sole purpose of winning awards and acceptances. This had a significant detrimental impact on the kinds of images created and ultimately led to the emergence of ‘salon photography’ as a disparaging term.

Drawing from post-structuralist theories, this chapter has also questioned the categories of ‘original’ and ‘copy’ and elaborated on the way they are both bound to the discourses of modern art. The privileging of one and the criticism of the other was simply part of the process of legitimising photography as a fine art, in keeping with Singapore Pictorialism’s ideology as an expressive modern artform. With this understanding, I have sought to move away from this binary and to introduce the

¹¹⁸ Seah, “Focus Wasn’t on Art.”

possibility of collaboration and dialogue within photographic practice. In other words, could the repetitive nature of the work be due to the photographers working together to develop key themes relevant to the Singapore situation? The interviews with photographers all point towards a very convivial shooting atmosphere – there were no accusations among them about specific instances of copying, despite the overall admonition to be original and not a ‘copycat’. In removing originality from the equation, one obtains a fresh perspective on the developments in Singapore Pictorialism and their significance.

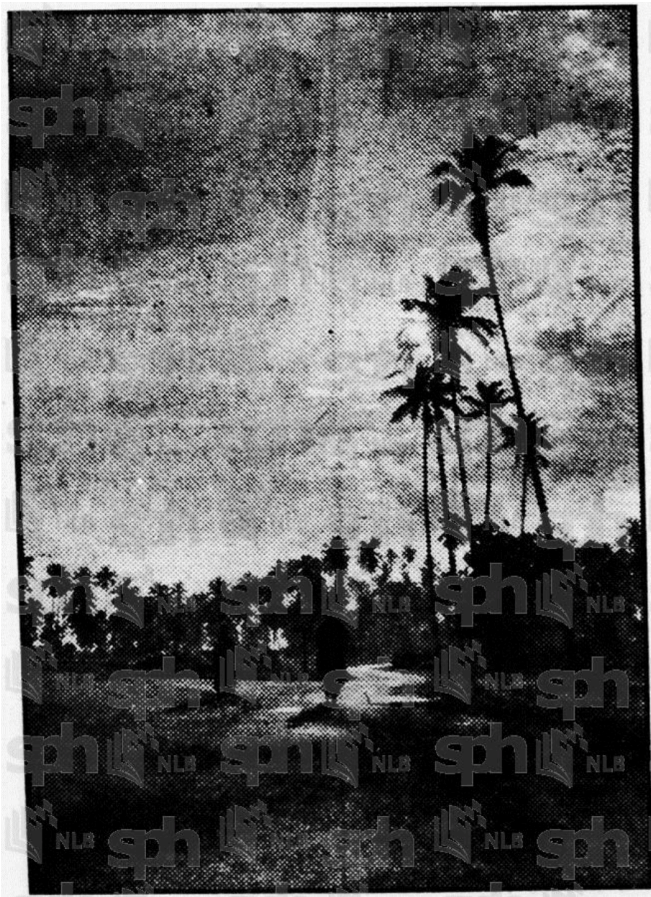


Fig. 4.15. Au Tian Chor, *Homeward Bound*, c. 1957 in *The Singapore Free Press*, August 27, 1957, p. 12.



Fig. 4.16. Yip Cheong Fun, *Homeward Bound*, c. 1960, gelatin silver print, 42.7 x 35.2cm. National Gallery Singapore collection.



Fig. 4.17. Yip Cheong Fun, *Morning Round*, 1949, gelatin silver print, 37.4 x 27cm. National Gallery Singapore collection.

Chapter 5: Nationalism and Internationalism

In 1960, the Southeast Asia Photographic Society (SEAPS) organised the first International Pictorial Photography Exhibition of Singapore. For this inaugural edition, the Chinese title of the salon was 自治邦國藝術攝影展覽 (Zizhi bangguo yishu sheying zhanlan), literally translated to ‘Self-Governed State Art Photography Exhibition’. The salon’s title itself was a declaration of Singapore new status – Singapore had achieved self-governance from the British in 1959. In its second edition in 1962, the Chinese title had changed from 自治邦國 (Zizhi bangguo) [self-governed] to 國際 (guoji) [international], matching the English name of the salon. This shift from ‘self-governed’ to ‘international’ in the title of a pictorial photography exhibition reveals Singapore Pictorialism’s interesting position between the seemingly opposing pressures of nationalism and internationalism. Taken at face value, to have achieved independence was also to be international. In fact, Singapore Pictorialism had both national and international impulses, which not only had an impact on the development of photography in Singapore, but in turn drove a certain visual imaginary of Singapore that persisted even past the demise of pictorial photographic practice.

Pictorialism was an established international photography movement, which Singapore ‘joined’ in 1950 with the start of its own annual salon and the formation of the Photographic Society of Singapore (PSS). While that first exhibition only featured works from Singapore and Malaya, by its second edition the following year, the Open Photographic Exhibition had gone international, showing works from America, Hong Kong, India, Canada and France.¹ In 1953, a short announcement of six photographers whose works were selected for the 57th annual exhibition of the Birmingham Photographic Society was published in *The Singapore Free Press*, with the headline “Malaya is There”.² Malaya had indeed arrived in the world of pictorial photography. The name of the Open Photographic Exhibition was even subsequently

¹ “Singapore Art Show Is a Must.”

² “Malaya Is There,” *The Singapore Free Press*, March 2, 1953.

changed to the Singapore International Salon in 1957 to reflect its prominence and the cosmopolitan nature that was to increasingly define Singapore Pictorialism.

Compared to painting and sculpture, photographs from Singapore circulated much more widely and regularly through the international networks of photographic clubs and salon exhibitions. The photography clubs often built relationships with each other, not only through the distinctions awarded by the big societies like the Royal Photographic Society (RPS) in London, but also through portfolio exchanges. There were also large societies like the RPS and Photographic Society of America (PSA) that many smaller clubs, including the ones in Singapore, were affiliated with. There were high-profile outgoing and incoming international visits, often announced formally in the club bulletins and accompanied by banquets and gifts.³ In a way, this positioned the photographers at the intersection between Singapore and the rest of the world. They were implicated in the visual production of 'Singapore' as a subject for international audiences and the growing nationalism that accompanied the fight for independence. The photographers' access to a global community of fellow amateur photographers and societies played a significant part in how pictorial practice in Singapore developed and how it took on nationalist goals.

This chapter looks at the international dimension of salon photography in Singapore and its relationship with nationalism by investigating the ways in which the photographers engaged with the rest of the world, including through local salons held in Singapore and Singaporean presence in overseas salons. I argue that Pictorialism's international networks were a key factor in its popularity among photographers in Singapore, allowing the salon photographers to take on the role of cultural cosmopolitans, while Singapore simultaneously took its place on the world stage as an independent nation. As the photographers actively sought recognition for Singapore as a modern new nation, they also engaged in a kind of auto-ethnography, a direct result of their newfound awareness of a foreign gaze. The

³ For example, the Vice-President of the PSS, P.L. Chan made a visit to the clubs in Hong Kong and Thailand in 1960. A detailed account of the trip is found in the *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 1, no. 8 (August 1960).

repetition of subject matter encouraged by the salons discussed in the previous chapter further provided a consistent pattern of images that assisted in the development of the emerging national identity.

Construction of nation and identity

Benedict Anderson has argued that the nation is a social construct, an “imagined community”.⁴ Anderson points out that members of even the smallest nation will never meet most of their fellow members, and the idea of the “nation” is constructed by the people who perceive themselves as part of a specific group. Furthermore, despite any actual inequalities or differences among them, the nation is seen to be a “deep, horizontal comradeship”, often driven by political ideologies.⁵ Anderson’s “imagined community” is premised on the development of print capitalism – exposed to newspapers and novels, people start being able to imagine themselves as part of a specific nation. Along these lines, this thesis takes national identity and its characteristics as socially constituted rather than some sort of predetermined essence. It follows then that national identity is negotiated over time and might shift in response to different circumstances, including independence and globalisation. It can also be contested and reconstructed by different groups of people, including the state as well as individual actors. Furthermore, the status of the nation as imagined makes it no less powerful an ideal. There are also parallels between Anderson’s print circulation and photography that will become apparent in this chapter.

Singapore is a particularly interesting case in considering the construction of nation. Colonised by the British in 1819, the island was part of the Straits Settlements until 1963, and briefly occupied by the Japanese in the period from 1942 to 1945. Following Japanese rule, there was a concerted push for independence, and Singapore was granted internal self-governance in 1959, with the British retaining

⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2016).

⁵ Anderson, 16.

control over internal security, foreign affairs and trade. Between 1963 and 1965, Singapore engaged in a brief but tumultuous merger with Malaysia before finally emerging as a republic in 1965. This was accompanied by the associated growing pains of social, economic and political challenges. Despite these difficulties, Singapore industrialised itself in a very short period of time, seeing rapid GDP growth and significant changes in economy, population and the physical landscape. Nation-building thus occurred in a rapidly shifting context within a relatively short timeframe. Under such conditions, national identity is a fragile yet crucial element in the construction of the modern nation-state.

Singapore's national identity is complicated by its history as a land of migrants. After the establishment of the East India Company station in Singapore in 1819, the British successfully encouraged migrants from other parts of Asia to settle in Singapore, attracting people from China, India and other neighbouring lands. An account from George Windsor Earl, assistant to the Resident Councillor of Singapore in 1837 states:

Singapore contains an epitome of the population of the whole Archipelago, and indeed of continental India also. Chinese, Malays, Bugis, Javanese, Balinese, natives of Bengal and Madras, Parsees, Arab and Caffrees, are to be found within the circuit of a few miles, each people forming a separate community, and retaining its customs as completely as if it had never been transplanted.⁶

Chiew has pointed out that Singapore's early settler population was culturally and politically an extension of Britain, Indonesia, China and India. These disparate groups of people did not integrate with one another and did not see the need for nation-building.⁷ Willmott has also observed that these early migrants identified largely

⁶ Cited in Selvaraj Velayutham, *Responding to Globalization: Nation, Culture, and Identity in Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), 22.

⁷ Seen Kong Chiew, "Nation-Building in Singapore: An Historical Perspective," in *In Search of Singapore's National Values*, ed. Jon S. T. Quah (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies, 1990), 7.

with their respective cultures and homelands – China, India, the larger Malay Peninsula – and no Singaporean identity emerged prior to the Japanese occupation.⁸

The lack of a common race and history meant a struggle to define national identity. On 1 July 1961, two years after the attainment of self-governance, Singapore's first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew acknowledged that "independence has preceded the creation of the attributes required to nationhood".⁹ As a result, Lee and the PAP government turned to industrial modernity as the "metanarrative" that would form the bedrock of Singapore's national identity.¹⁰ To this end, the government used Singapore's imperial legacy to enable this narrative – Singapore's 'founding' as a free trade port by the British and her subsequent development as the entrepôt centre of the region, leading finally to her present day status as an industrialised and globally-connected economic powerhouse. The narrative of industrial modernity transcended racial categories – progress was to be the driving force of the new nation, and it would be one that recognized "a genuine era of world politics and world economics which constituted the iron framework within which our national affairs must be conducted".¹¹ A modern Singapore was also a connected Singapore.

Singapore's colonial and settler history meant that its status as a sovereign state had to be re-imagined as specifically tied and distinct to the boundaries of its territory. Created through the process of decolonisation, the "state preceded the development of nationalism rather than emerging as its political consequence and

⁸ W.E. Willmott, "The Emergence of Nationalism," in *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*, ed. Kernial Singh Sandhu and Paul Wheatley (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990), 582–83.

⁹ Ministry of Culture, *Text of a Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, at the University Socialist Club on Friday, July 1, 1960*, Singapore: National Archives of Singapore. <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/7405c563-115d-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad>.

¹⁰ C. J. W.-L. Wee, "Contending with Primordialism: The 'Modern' Construction of Postcolonial Singapore," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 1, no. 3 (1993): 715–44.

¹¹ Heng Chee Chan and Obaid ul Haq, eds., *The Prophetic and the Political: Selected Speeches and Writings of S. Rajaratnam* (Singapore: Graham Brash, 1987), 251.

the state itself became the first major symbol of national identity.”¹² The symbol of the nation-state has become a pervasive and compelling modern global phenomenon, not simply for political elites but as part of the worldwide acceptance of the system of nation-states.¹³ Velayutham has described it as an “inescapable reality predetermining the existence of the modern state in the contemporary world”.¹⁴ He further argues that for the Singapore nation-state to be recognised as part of this world system, it needed to generate a system of national identification, including with other nation-states. He gives the example of Singapore joining the United Nations immediately after independence as well as the formation of ASEAN with Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand in 1967.¹⁵ As we shall see, this was equally true in the cultural arena.

Pictorial Photography, Cosmopolitanism and Contemporaneity¹⁶

In the foreword of the 1959 South-East Asia Salon of Photography organised by the Singapore Art Society (SAS), the society’s President Ho Kok Hoe stated:

Photography, like any other form of art, is an expression of the life and time of a people and in this Salon we see the best aspirations and hopes of the many peoples who call South-East Asia their home.

In South-East Asia, we see a resurgence of nationalism. One nation after another is throwing off the yoke of Colonialism. We in Singapore are on the eve of attaining self-government and we in the Singapore Art Society are especially happy that this Salon should be held at this most opportune juncture. Through art, the people of a country records the moods of history,

¹² Willmott, “The Emergence of Nationalism,” 581.

¹³ Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991), 143–44.

¹⁴ Velayutham, *Responding to Globalization*, 45.

¹⁵ Velayutham, 45.

¹⁶ Small parts of an earlier draft of this section has been published in Charmaine Toh, “Pictorialism and Modernity in Singapore, 1950–60,” *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia 2*, no. 2 (2018): 9–31.

and what is more befitting than that we should, at this crucial moment in the history of our country, hold a salon.¹⁷

Ho seems to have been implying that the very act of organising an international exhibition like the South-East Asia Salon of Photography was a nationalist act. Certainly, the nationalist sentiments did not overtly manifest in the actual photographs in the exhibition. The Gold Medal was awarded to a portrait of a woman by S. Mukherjee from India, while one Silver Medal was given to Singapore photographer Loke Loh-Hong's *Artist*, which depicted a man painting a portrait. Other than the second Silver Medal winner – *War or Peace* by Lan Ke Tung from Indonesia – the rest of the exhibited prints ran the usual gamut of portraits, still-life and genre scenes, with no particular political overtones. Instead, it was the salon that acted as a symbol of the nation within the international network of photography clubs and salons, as Singapore fought to gain recognition of itself as an independent state.

The following year, 1960, saw the 11th Singapore International Salon held at the Victoria Memorial Hall. The guest-of-honour was the Yang di Pertuan Negara, Yusof bin Ishak, who had replaced the British Governor of Singapore.¹⁸ A close examination of the salon catalogue reveals some significant details.¹⁹ Yusof was the first guest-of-honour to also be invited to write a message for the catalogue, and his congratulatory message was translated into Malay and Chinese languages. The entire letter, together with the letterhead that featured the newly designed Singapore crest, was reproduced in the catalogue. The foreword and

¹⁷ *1st South-East Asia Salon of Photography* (Singapore: Singapore Art Society, 1959), 7.

¹⁸ The title literally means Head of State and was changed in President in 1965, when Singapore left Malaysia as an independent state.

¹⁹ *11th Singapore International Salon of Photography* (Singapore: Photographic Society of Singapore, 1960) The catalogue is the only surviving record of the exhibition along with some newspaper articles. I was unable to uncover any photographs of the exhibition, nor the exhibition prints themselves.

acknowledgments were translated into Malay, Chinese and Tamil.²⁰ In addition, the Malay text was positioned first, followed by Chinese, English and Tamil texts. Catalogues from previous years had only included messages from the Club President and only provided Chinese translations that were placed after the English texts. With self-governance, Malay had been deemed Singapore's national language, with English, Mandarin and Tamil as the other official languages. In another first, photographs were organised by country instead of by subject matter. The country name was prominently displayed at the top right hand corner of every page, instead of in brackets after the photographer's name as in previous years (fig. 3.8 and fig. 3.9).

In both these examples as well as the International Pictorial Photography Exhibition of Singapore mentioned at the start of the chapter, the salon *itself* became an assertion of a new nation-state. The three salons were all organised by different clubs, so it is clear that this was not specific to just one group of photographers. So why was it that the salon could stand in for the nation? Or more specifically, why did the photographers use the salon in such a way? Malcolm Corrigan has suggested that the salons were a "cosmopolitan fraternity" where only skill and artistry mattered, rather than race or nationality.²¹ As early as 1939, Chinese photographer Long Chin-san had noted that "in recent years many international photographic exhibitions have been held in various cities of the world, with thousands of entrants whose work lie side by side without any limitation as to race, creed or standing—a spirit of cosmopolitanism happily prevailing in art."²²

²⁰ Looking at the catalogue layout, I propose that the only reason Yusof bin Ishak's text was not translated into Tamil was a lack of space. The designer wanted to show the full letterhead of the type-written message, which had the Singapore state crest on top. The crest was unveiled during the installation of Yusof bin Ishak as Yang di-Pertuan Negara in 1959.

²¹ Malcolm Corrigan, "A Spirit of Cosmopolitanism Happily Prevailing in Art: The Chinese Camera Club of South Africa and Transnational Networks of Photography," *De Arte* 53, no. 1 (January 2, 2018): 11.

²² Long Chin-San, quoted in Corrigan, 11–12.

The classical definition of cosmopolitanism is a Kantian one, referring to a “universal humanism that transcends regional particularism”.²³ In general, it is often used to describe an elevated way of being in the world, detached from the usual constraints of being an ordinary nation-bound citizen.²⁴ However, I would like to refer to Hannerz’s study on cultural cosmopolitanism, which he distinguished from political cosmopolitanism. He identifies cosmopolitans as not only participating in other cultures, but exhibiting “a sense of mastery [...] with a streak of narcissism”.²⁵ More specifically, he notes that it is possible to engage in cultural cosmopolitanism without that sense of humanitarian responsibility towards the world.²⁶ Instead, this cosmopolitanism can feed back into other forms of identification and political action. This seems to be the kind of cosmopolitanism identified by Corrigan in the South African photographers, and I suggest it is also the case for the Singaporean photographers.

There are several implications to Long’s idea of pictorial photography as a cosmopolitan practice. Firstly, Singapore could bypass its yet-to-be-independent nation status, which was the situation in 1960, and circulate within an international network of clubs as a singular, coherent and legitimate state. Secondly, the salon was perceived as a platform where a photographer from Singapore could compete on a level playing field with a photographer from London or New York, and perhaps even get the better of them. This very much suited the objectives of the Singaporean photographers and explains how cosmopolitanism could feed into ideas of nationalism. Finally, often associated with the elite, cosmopolitan tastes and

²³ Pheng Cheah, “Introduction Part II: The Cosmopolitical—Today,” in *Cosmopolitics : Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*, ed. Bruce Robbins and Pheng Cheah (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 22.

²⁴ Bruce Robbins, “Introduction Part I: Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism,” in *Cosmopolitics : Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*, ed. Bruce Robbins and Pheng Cheah, 1.

²⁵ Ulf Hannerz, “Two Faces of Cosmopolitanism: Culture and Politics,” *Statsvetenskaplig Tidskrift* 107, no. 3 (2005): 200.

²⁶ Hannerz, 204–5.

experiences could also serve as “symbolic capital in elite competitive games of distinction”.²⁷

Both Corrigan and Karen Strassler have discussed the assertion of cosmopolitanism by Chinese photographers in South Africa and Indonesia, respectively. Using the Chinese Camera Club of South Africa as his case study, Corrigan successfully demonstrates how these photographers used the transnational networks of photography to transcend the racial hierarchy of apartheid in South Africa in the 1950s and 60s.²⁸ By exhibiting internationally and gaining membership in international photographic bodies, these photographers not only legitimised their own skills in photography, but also asserted a sense of cultural cosmopolitanism that subverted the ethnic identities imposed on them by the state. At the same time, the club also engaged in racial politics by allowing only ethnic Chinese membership and organising racially exclusive exhibitions that promoted links with the Chinese diaspora. The Chinese community was disinclined to identify with South Africa given the apartheid conditions and Chinese culture offered an alternative identity. This dual identity – on the one hand, cosmopolitan photographers who transcended racial categories and on the other, Chinese photographers who could relate to an established and pedigreed culture – allowed them to resist notions of white supremacy. More generally, the success of the photographers raised the profile of the Chinese community in South Africa and gained them greater respect.

The Chinese Camera Club in South Africa was formed in 1952, only two years after the Singapore Camera Club, and both offered its members photography education and a platform to exhibit. Like in Singapore, club members practiced pictorial photography and sought affirmation through the accreditation offered by the RPS and PSA. South African Chinese photographers took part in the salons in Singapore and vice versa. However, a key difference lies in the way the South African photographers emphasised their Chinese-ness, referring to “Chinese photography”, “Chinese camera art” and “Chinese print”, whereas the Singaporeans looked toward

²⁷ Hannerz, 206.

²⁸ Corrigan, “A Spirit of Cosmopolitanism Happily Prevailing in Art.”

the nation-state rather than their ethnicity.²⁹ As demonstrated in Chapter Three, the Singapore clubs took pains to highlight their racial neutrality and democratic nature instead. The nation-state offered the most accessible common ground for a country of migrants and furthermore would have been a prominent idea highlighted in the 1950s during the fight for independence.

The experiences of the Indonesian-Chinese photographers seem to bear close similarities to the South Africans. By looking at the wider networks in which the Indonesian photographers were implicated, Karen Strassler has also described the Chinese photographers in Indonesia as cosmopolitans.³⁰ Like the South Africans, these amateur photographers belonged to camera clubs and took part in many international photographic salons. Mainly ethnic Chinese who had historically been excluded and even threatened on the basis of their race, these photographers looked to pictorialism's international networks to transcend their tenuous position within the nation. Strassler suggests that their engagement with these international networks allowed these photographers to imagine that they were "launching Indonesia towards modernity while promoting their nation as an equal among peers".³¹

Like the Indonesian and South African Chinese photographers, Singaporean photographers were also plugged into the international network of clubs and salons and took on the role of cultural cosmopolitans. However, while the photographers in Singapore largely comprised ethnic Chinese, they were the majority race and did not face similar racial persecution, other than during the Japanese occupation.³² Prominent members of the PSS included both Chinese and English-educated

²⁹ Corrigan, 18.

³⁰ Karen Strassler, "Cosmopolitan Visions: Ethnic Chinese and the Photographic Imagining of Indonesia in the Late Colonial and Early Postcolonial Periods," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 67, no. 2 (2008): 395–432.

³¹ Strassler, 406.

³² There is evidence of Malay, Indian and Eurasian members of the photographic societies and even the existence of a Malay Photographic Society. However, other than newspaper reports, I have not been able to find much information about these photographers.

photographers. For example, the 1964/65 President was Ang Chwee Chai who studied at Jinan University in China, while the Vice-President Loke Wan Tho was born in Malaya and educated in England. Furthermore, despite the Chinese majority, members of all races were welcomed and one of the founding members of the PSS was a Malay photographer. Ang even served two terms as the honorary President of the Malay Photographic Society. The society saw itself as a democratic and inclusive organisation – the photography classes were conducted in both English and Mandarin and the *PSS Monthly Bulletins* were also bilingual. As such, the turn towards the international was not a strategy to bypass national discrimination. Instead, these international networks provided a platform for Singaporean photographers to assert a kind of cosmopolitanism that dovetailed with a burgeoning sense of nationhood. Cosmopolitanism became a strategy to distinguish old colonial Singapore from new, modern and independent Singapore.³³

The cosmopolitanism that appealed so much to the Singaporean photographers was closely connected to the idea of contemporaneity. Reiko Tomii has distinguished “contemporaneity” as a geohistorical concept, as opposed to “contemporary” which points to the present, or in more recent times, indicates a certain type of art. More than just synchronicity, contemporaneity was about lived experiences, foregrounding the agency of those who lived through the period, and thus taking into account both “facts” and “perceptions”. More generally, “contemporaneity can be defined as a given locale’s perception regarding itself and the outside world, one empirically shaped by its interface with another locale and/or the outside world.”³⁴ Tomii’s concept of contemporaneity provides a useful explanation for why cosmopolitanism was so attractive to Singapore. More specifically, I see the various international salons held in Singapore as a tangible and significant display of international contemporaneity for Singapore audiences. They continued to play a symbolic role of Singapore’s presence in an international arena for three decades.

³³ Singapore and Indonesia were not unique with regards to the popularity of pictorial photography. Similar activity has been observed in Thailand, Malaysia and Hong Kong.

³⁴ Reiko Tomii, *Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and 1960s Art in Japan* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2016), 14–15.

The possibility of contemporaneity formed a large part of the desire to be part of pictorialism's international cosmopolitan networks.

Tomii notes that Japan's sense of contemporaneity was tinged with urgency due to the measuring of their progress against Western counterparts – Japan wanted to catch up to the West. While she refers specifically to art practice, this sense of urgency was also present in Singapore, but on a much wider societal level due to the push for independence. International contemporaneity was seen as a mark of modernity, but also independence, and the pursuit of it characterised much of Singapore Pictorialism. International participation in the salons in Singapore was *always* highlighted in the salon catalogues as a mark of that salon's success. A typical description in a catalogue foreword follows: "In all, 1,756 prints were received representing the work of 475 photographers and coming from forty one different countries."³⁵ International entries were even worth news headlines: "20 Countries Enter Photo Show" described the 6th Open Photographic Exhibition in *The Straits Times*.³⁶ The article was published even before the judging and the exhibition, and simply conveyed the statistics and list of countries as well as the judges' names and prizes.

It was clear that like the rest of Singapore, the photographers were very conscious of the changing status of the nation, along with a growing sense of national identity beyond that of a British colony. Recognition of the state played a huge role in the way salons were presented. Furthermore, I contend that it was the international aspect of pictorial photography – its networks – that allowed the salon itself to represent the state and to feed into Singapore's burgeoning sense of nation. These networks allowed for a different relationship to be imagined between Singapore and the rest of the world, one that was contemporaneous and interdependent, rather than subordinate. It should be further noted that these salons were organised by the photographic societies themselves, not the state, and funded by contributions and

³⁵ C.A. Gibson Hill, "Foreword", *8th Singapore International Salon* (Singapore: Photographic Society of Singapore, 1957), 24.

³⁶ "20 Countries Enter Photo Show," *The Straits Times*, January 15, 1955.

donations from members, and managed by volunteers. They thus reflected a grassroots nationalism, although this did not prevent the government from later co-opting the achievements of the photographers for nation-building purposes. It is also noteworthy that the photographers in Singapore were not unique in the way they used the salon to symbolise a new national identity. In 1957, the Penang Pictorialists also chose to celebrate the Malayan Federation's independence by organising the Second Penang International Exhibition of Photography as part of the Merdeka Year celebrations in September.³⁷

Loke Wan Tho and Singapore Pictorialism's International Connections

In Chapter Three, I had introduced Loke Wan Tho's central role in the organisation of the first Singapore International Salon (then called the Open Photographic Exhibition) and how he influenced the development of Singapore Pictorialism. Loke also played a key role in establishing the cosmopolitan identity of Singaporean photographers. A movie magnate, he was the owner of Cathay Film studios in Singapore and was often seen socialising with film stars, politicians and business tycoons. Well-spoken and well-travelled, he was the perfect role model for the modern Singaporean photographer. A keen amateur ornithologist and photographer, Loke's photographs of birds were reproduced in several scholarly books and journals and accepted into photographic salons around the world. His personal archives show frequent correspondence with photographers from all over the world and demonstrate his ceaseless attempts to promote photography in Singapore despite his busy business schedule. In addition to managing the film studio, he was also chairman of Malayan Airways and had numerous other business interests.³⁸ To this end, he even started a personal collection of local and international photographs, which he displayed in the public lobby of his Cathay

³⁷ Sunny Giam, "Lensmen Celebrate Merdeka," *The Singapore Free Press*, March 12, 1957.

³⁸ Loke Wan Tho's personal archives are deposited at the National Library of Australia. MS 6057, Loke Wan Tho Papers, National Library of Australia.

cinema building to inspire local photographers.³⁹ Loke was the Vice-President of the PSS from 1954 until his death in 1964, Vice-President of the Photographic Society Federation of Malaya, and patron of both the Nanyang Photographic Society and the Singapore Polytechnic Photographic Society.

In a letter dated 29 April 1952 addressed to C.A. Yarrington, Director of the “Who’s Who” listing of the PSA, Loke explicitly stressed his desire for international contemporaneity through the Singapore International Salon:

As a member of the P.S.A., I have for some time been anxious to bring our exhibition in line with P.S.A. requirements [...] I think that the showing of foreign works has been particularly useful to our local photographers. A sight of the kind of quality which is required for international exhibitions has opened the eyes of many of us in Malaya and the standard of work must improve in consequence.⁴⁰

Upon Yarrington’s suggestion, Loke, who was a committee member and judge of the salon, revised the terms of the salon to meet the requirements of the PSA and attract more international entries. This was subsequently advertised in the salon entry forms from 1953 as a marker of quality—“judging is in accordance with P.S.A. rules”.⁴¹ This also meant that the Singapore exhibition was recognised by the PSA and acceptances would count towards the international “Who’s Who” ranking managed by the PSA, an important consideration for many international photographers vying for that recognition.⁴²

The PSA recognition allowed the Singapore salon to join an existing international

³⁹ His photography collection is in the National Visual Arts Gallery in Kuala Lumpur.

⁴⁰ Letter from Loke Wan Tho to C.A. Yarrington, 29 April 1952. MS 6057, Loke Wan Tho Papers, National Library of Australia.

⁴¹ See letters from C.A. Yarrington to Loke Wan Tho, 9 April 1952 and Loke’s replies, and 8 May, 1952, and the entry form for the 4th Open Photographic Exhibition. MS 6057, Loke Wan Tho Papers, National Library of Australia.

⁴² The “Who’s Who” ranking was the most high profile individual photographer ranking in the world. It was calculated annually based on the number of salon acceptances a photographer had.

circle of salons and for the Singaporeans to see themselves as peers of the American photographers. However, the connections did not end there. Loke was appointed the Singapore representative for the PSA in 1954 and for the RPS in 1957. His duties were to advance the interests of those societies in Singapore, by assisting with membership enquiries, but also to keep the two societies informed of activities in Singapore. This meant that the *RPS Journal* and *PSA Journal*, which circulated to members all around the world, both regularly published the calls for entries for the Singapore salons. As part of his RPS appointment, Loke even wrote an article about the photography scene in Singapore for the *RPS Journal*.⁴³ By 1960, the PSS was an affiliated club of the Photographic Alliance of Great Britain, the PSA and the Fédération Internationale de L'Art Photographique (FIAP), the three biggest photography associations in the world.⁴⁴ When asked about the benefits of these affiliations, Tan Lip Seng has said that they provided international recognition for the PSS, and were a way for the club to be more involved internationally.⁴⁵

The links between the PSS, RPS, PSA and FIAP meant that many Singaporean photographers also joined those overseas photography societies. These large international bodies that had members from all around the world reinforced the cosmopolitan identity of the photographers. Receiving the *RPS Journal* and the *PSA Journal* also allowed them to keep abreast of the latest developments and trends in photography as well as the upcoming or new salons. It is interesting to note that the PSS also had a number of international members. The membership list published in the July 1963 *PSS Monthly Bulletin* included a significant number of members from Malaysia, as well as members from England, Australia, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Japan, and even from Norway. Tan Lip Seng has suggested that these overseas members joined the PSS, so they could take part in the quarterly members' competitions. With the PSS being the largest photography society in Southeast Asia and the organiser of one of the biggest international salons, member

⁴³ Loke Wan Tho, "Photography in Singapore", *The RPS Journal* 97 (1957): 75.

⁴⁴ Siew Poh Lim, "Meeting in Coffee Shop Led to World Recognition," *The Singapore Free Press*, November 24, 1960.

⁴⁵ Tan Lip Seng, interview with author, Singapore, 22 June 2018.

competitions were “good ground” for keen competitors to check their standards. It was also free to enter, while the salons often charged an entry fee.⁴⁶

Membership in the RPS and PSA allowed the photographers to apply for the certification offered by these two societies – the Associateship and Fellowship. These distinctions were additional proof to Singaporean photographers that they were on par with the rest of the world and received significant attention from both the press and the photographers. For example, when Lee Lim gained his FRPS in 1959, the first in Singapore, *The Singapore Free Press* announced it in an article titled “A Singapore Expert Shakes the Photo World”. The overblown headline highlights the importance the photographic community attached to these distinctions; the writer, Sunny Giam, was himself an amateur photographer and member of the PSS.⁴⁷ Similarly, the *PSS Monthly Bulletin* regularly featured short profiles of members who had gained ARPS and FRPS, often with a two-page spread of their photographs. Loke himself attributed much importance to these distinctions. He personally nominated two photographers – Wu Peng Seng and Lim Boon Tiong – for the FPSA, expressing his concern that “no recommendations from (Singapore) had been submitted to the Council of the PSA for consideration” and “from the technical point of view and from the contributions made towards photography generally, there are several photographers who are deserving of Honours”.⁴⁸ Loke was disappointed when his own application for FRPS was rejected; he only had an FPSA and an ARPS.⁴⁹

From his letters, Loke seemed to have been inordinately aware of the global community of photographers outside Singapore, which was unsurprising given his business and personal connections. While he could not devote much time to photography and took part in the nature sections rather than pictorial sections of

⁴⁶ Tan Lip Seng, interview with the author, 22 June 2018.

⁴⁷ Sunny Giam, “A Singapore Expert Shakes the Photo World,” *The Singapore Free Press*, June 23, 1959.

⁴⁸ Letter from Loke Wan Tho to Randolph Wright Jr., 11 March 1964. MS 6057, Loke Wan Tho Papers, National Library of Australia.

⁴⁹ See letters between Loke Wan Tho and Barbara Green, 6 Sep 1954 and 13 November 1954. MS 6057, Loke Wan Tho Papers, National Library of Australia.

salons, he regularly judged the Singapore International Salon and was very influential in his role of Vice-President and patron. Loke's letter to Yarrington noted that having an international salon in Singapore had "encouraged local workers to exhibit their works abroad". He added that "it has been most pleasant to see the names of Malayan photographers beginning to feature in the catalogues of overseas exhibitions" compared to the period immediately after the war, where "no names from this country appeared".⁵⁰ Loke encouraged a growing awareness of the international pictorial movement through the display of foreign photographs in salons in Singapore as well as in his personal photography collection, creating a desire within Singaporean photographers to be seen in turn by those foreign photographers. For many, the pleasure of seeing Malayan names in overseas catalogues was also the pleasure of acknowledgment as a fellow nation within this international photographic community; of belonging to this community.

Overseas Success

The intersection of the national and international within Singapore Pictorialism played a significant role in its development. The clubs measured their success by their international profiles, including awards won overseas and the prominence of the salons they organised. This means that the photography clubs actively cultivated international connections, strongly encouraged members to take part in international salons, and pursued greater numbers of international entries for the local salons. On an individual level, Singaporean photographers enthusiastically sought and obtained validation through overseas success. As Singapore's first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew observed in the catalogue of the 1963 Singapore International Salon: "The Society, through its regular activities for members and sponsorship of local and international photographic competitions in Singapore and participation in photographic events overseas, has helped to raise the standard and

⁵⁰ Letter from Loke Wan Tho to C.A. Yarrington, 29 April 1952. MS 6057, Loke Wan Tho Papers, National Library of Australia.

prestige of Singapore photographers.”⁵¹

The *Singapore Free Press's* report on the 11th Singapore International Salon opened with a quote from Yusof: “The people of Singapore have established for themselves a reputation in many fields of human endeavour, of which pictorial photography is one which has reached very high standards.” It went on to highlight that PSS members at the time included three Fellows and 43 Associates of the RPS and the PSA had ranked two PSS members as the first and second in Malaya on their annual “Who’s Who” list of pictorial photographers.⁵² This was not unusual; the Singapore dailies frequently gave high profile coverage to the achievements of the pictorial photographers in the 1950s and 1960s, with particular attention paid to awards and achievements overseas. Headlines included “Singapore’s Overseas Successes” (1957) which reported on photographers getting accepted for the Salon Internationale Fotografia in Spain and the Second Cine Club Bella in Italy⁵³, “Top Honours for Colony Photographers” (1957) which reported on PSS members getting recognition at the International Federation of Photographic Art⁵⁴, and “Leading Spore Photographers are today well on top of the Asian Camera World” (1960), which gave a substantial historical account of the achievements of Singaporean photographers, including how they “swept the board in photographic exhibitions local and overseas, leaving the Penang photographers behind”.⁵⁵

In August 1965 *PSS Monthly Bulletin*, the PSS also announced it had won the Gold Medal in the 11th DENAIN International Exhibition for the best overall selection of prints from its members. In other words, it was not just individual photographers winning, but the clubs could also win for best showing. For example, the Society as a whole won the Lucia d’Oro at the Cine-Photographic Como International Salons for

⁵¹ *14th Singapore International Salon of Photography* (Singapore: Photographic Society of Singapore, 1963).

⁵² Harry Chia, “Praise for Singapore Photograph from Yang Di-Pertuan Negara,” *The Singapore Free Press*, September 1, 1960.

⁵³ “Singapore’s Overseas Successes,” *The Singapore Free Press*, April 9, 1957.

⁵⁴ “Top Honours for Colony Photographers,” *The Singapore Free Press*, July 7, 1958.

⁵⁵ “Leading Spore Photographers Are Today Well on Top of the Asian Camera World,” *The Singapore Free Press*, September 1, 1960.

four consecutive years. The award was for getting the most number of colour slides from a single club accepted. Tan Lip Seng, who was the colour slide convenor for PSS at the time, has shared that he specifically chose to prioritise those salons that offered club awards in addition to individual awards, such as the Cine-Photographic Como. This strategy allowed the PSS to win the *Lucia d'Oro*, which came with a gold trophy that was proudly displayed in the clubhouse.⁵⁶ The photographers took much pride in their international salon successes and rankings were a frequent topic of discussion.

As seen from the examples, the individual success of the photographer translated to success for the club and the nation. It demonstrated the superiority of Singapore over larger, richer countries. The attention paid to these events by the press and the kinds of headlines written are particularly interesting as it shows an appreciation of these achievements beyond the photographic community. As a *Straits Times* report on the PSS winning an award from the PSA described, it was a “Photographic award for Singapore”, not just for the club or the photographers.⁵⁷ The Singapore press consistently linked the clubs and photographers with the nation. In another example, the headline of an article on four Singaporean photographers making it into the PSA list of the top 100 photographers read: “For long a challenge – now at last Singapore makes the grade”.⁵⁸ Anderson has of course noted the importance of print capitalism in the origins of national consciousness. Connected through print media and a common language, fellow-readers were the start of a nationally imagined community.⁵⁹ In Singapore, these headlines and articles were featured in both the English and Chinese language newspapers and allowed for a simultaneity of communication of the success of these Singaporean photographers to the wider public. The wider visibility of their international success encouraged the public to identify with the new nation-state, as Singapore raced ahead of Penang, Asia and the

⁵⁶ Tan Lip Seng, interview with the author, 22 June 2018.

⁵⁷ “Photographic Award for Singapore,” *The Straits Times*, September 19, 1966.

⁵⁸ “For Long a Challenge—Now at Last Singapore Makes the Grade,” *The Straits Times*, May 7, 1967.

eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19670507-1.2.53.

⁵⁹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

rest of the world, at least in photography.

Wee has noted that to Singapore's first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, modernity included the capacity to measure up to or exceed the white man, to be a serious player in the politico-economic game.⁶⁰ As an apparatus of (Western) technological progress, photography was uniquely placed to carry Singapore's aspirations to modernity and to position herself alongside other modern societies in Europe and America. In a very straightforward way, the salons allowed photographers to imagine themselves as a nation, and pictorial photography became a way for Singapore to demonstrate her 'modern' status to the world, not just in subject matter, which will be discussed in the next section, but as a peer in this photographic fraternity. This was an important step in the trajectory to independence for a nation that needed to assert a contemporaneous modernity. The salons were a platform where the photographers could position themselves internationally, yet still identify as Singaporean.⁶¹ The fact that Singaporean photographers actually won a fair number of accolades simply added to the appeal of this 'global' nationalism. The awards allowed the photographers to claim a certain prestige for themselves, but also for the nation. Any and all awards were reported promptly in the press, often accompanied by large images.⁶²

Photography and Nation-building

The success of the Singaporean photographers overseas led to two overlapping developments in the visual imagining of the nation. The first was the Singapore government increasingly co-opting pictorial photography for nation-building purposes. The second was the photographers themselves increasingly felt the need to respond to an international audience in depicting Singapore. Yusof Ishak observed

⁶⁰ Wee, "Contending with Primordialism," 722.

⁶¹ Strassler has noted the same phenomenon with the Indonesian Chinese photographers. Strassler, "Cosmopolitan Visions."

⁶² As an example, see "Associate of the Royal Photographic Society," *The Straits Times*, July 3, 1963.

in his opening speech at the 18th Singapore International Salon in 1967:

The word “international” is the key to the understanding and appreciation of our society, our achievements, our aspirations and our relationship with other countries. I am glad to note that for almost two decades now the Photographic Society of Singapore has been winning friends for Singapore through this annual international photographic event. It is my hope that this event will continue to be one of the many symbols that other countries associate with the name “Singapore”.⁶³

The Singapore government clearly saw the potential of photography as a tool of nation-building and responded accordingly. The international successes and cosmopolitanism of the photographers played a distinct role in the government’s perception of photography. Although there was no state funding, photography events drew a significant amount of support from the government in the form of guests-of-honour and patronage. These included the Yang di-Pertuan Negara and subsequent President of Singapore Yusof Ishak, President Benjamin Sheares, Minister for Culture, and later for Foreign Affairs, S. Rajaratman, Minister for Social Affairs Othman Wok, and Parliamentary Secretary for Culture Ow Chin Hock. Articulating the government’s positive view of photography salons, Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock stated at the 9th Singapore International Salon in 1958:

This Salon is not only a day in our Singapore cultural calendar but a day in the international calendar of practitioners of the photographer's art. In this you have played your part in building up a more balanced picture of us overseas. [...] The more that groups such as yours build up the goodwill of associations and

⁶³ Ministry of Culture, *Speech by the President of the Republic of Singapore at the Official Opening of the Photographic Society of Singapore 18th Singapore International Salon of Photography on Saturday, 6th May 1967 at 4.00pm at the National Library Auditorium*, Singapore: National Archives of Singapore. <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/7a2db90e-115d-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad>.

friendships overseas for Singapore, you are, while following your art and your inclination, playing your part too in the new life of our community.

You have your cameras and you can write stories of ourselves and our life written in light – in the light of the perceptive artist in you and in the deepening glow of the new light of citizenship with its growing strength and stature among us.⁶⁴

Lim's declaration was in keeping with the role the new government saw for arts and culture. A few years earlier, in 1955, the Singapore Arts Council had stated that one of its three aims was to "lay the foundations for making Singapore an international cultural centre for Southeast Asia".⁶⁵ Later, the 1959 edition of the *State of Singapore Annual Report* listed the objectives of the newly-created Ministry of Culture, which included "the creation of a sense of national identity."⁶⁶ Photography, then, was seen as a potential tool for nation-building fairly early on and various government departments frequently approached the photography societies to organise national exhibitions and events. Lim's speech was also the first public statement that acknowledged not just the salon as a symbol of cosmopolitanism, but the possibility of the photograph as a site to manage Singapore's image – to build a "balanced picture" and to tell the stories of a new nation. By 1964, photographers were being asked to project the "Malaysian personality through this profound art of photography".⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Department of Information Services, *Speech by the Chief Minister, Dr Lim Yew Hock, at the Opening of the Ninth Singapore International Salon of Photography at the Victoria Memorial Hall on Friday, 21st February, 1958 at 5.30pm*, Singapore: National Archives of Singapore.

<https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/c6416a3d-bcf1-11e6-b045-0050568939ad>

⁶⁵ Tai Ann Koh, "The Singapore Experience: Cultural Development in the Global Village," *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 1980, 307.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Chong, "From Global to Local," 555.

⁶⁷ Singapore was still a part of Malaysia in 1964. "Foreword by Tong Ching Hsien," *12th Malaysian Photographic Exhibition*, Singapore: Photographic Society of Singapore, 1964. Ministry of Culture, *Speech by Mr Jek Yeun Thong, Minister for Culture, at the Opening Ceremony of the Art Exhibition of the Singapore Art Society at the Victoria Memorial Hall on 28 Jun 74 at 5.30pm*, Singapore: National Archives

Interestingly, some scholars have noted that the 1960s and 1970s were characterised by a type of cultural protectionism that emerged as a defence against “decadent Western culture” that was seemingly at odds with the ideals of cosmopolitanism.⁶⁸ For example, hippie culture was seen as a bad influence on the Confucian values of Singapore and its threat led to Singapore’s infamous ban on long hair on men in the 1960s. As Minister for Culture Jek Yeun Thong explained in 1974: “Faced with threats from the aggressive culture of the West, our own arts must reflect countervailing values that will be helpful to Singapore.”⁶⁹ In the same year, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Culture, Sha’ari Tadin, asserted that “the arts can play a vital role in nation-building through the inculcation of correct values”, especially since Singapore was “faced with the threats from the aggressive culture of the West”.⁷⁰

As a result, the arts were essentially assigned the responsibility of shoring up Singapore’s national and cultural identity. This included acting as a wholesome alternative to “unhealthy” Western culture. Both Terence Chong and Lily Kong have noted that there was a belief in the moral value of art, which would “redeem us

of Singapore. <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/7cb2bf9e-115d-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad>.

⁶⁷ Ministry of Culture, *Speech by Haji Sha’ari Tadin, Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Culture on the occasion of the 12th anniversary of the Angkatan Pelukis Aneka Daya at the Chinese Chamber of Commerce on 30 Nov 74 at 3.30pm*, Singapore: National Archives of Singapore.

<https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/7cc973b3-115d-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad>.

⁶⁸ Koh, “The Singapore Experience: Cultural Development in the Global Village”; Lily Kong, “Cultural Policy in Singapore: Negotiating Economic and Socio-Cultural Agendas,” *Geoforum* 31, no. 4 (November 1, 2000): 409–24; Chong, “The State and the New Society”; Terence Lee, “Creative Shifts and Directions: Cultural Policy in Singapore,” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 10, no. 3 (November 2004): 281–99.

⁶⁹ Ministry of Culture, *Speech by Mr Jek Yeun Thong, Minister for Culture, at the Opening Ceremony of the Art Exhibition of the Singapore Art Society at the Victoria Memorial Hall on 28 Jun 74 at 5.30pm*.

⁷⁰ Ministry of Culture, *Speech by Haji Sha’ari Tadin, Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Culture on the occasion of the 12th anniversary of the Angkatan Pelukis Aneka Daya at the Chinese Chamber of Commerce on 30 Nov 74 at 3.30pm*.

from the ill-effects of a materialistic, money-oriented existence”.⁷¹ Photography was seen as one such wholesome activity. At the opening of the 1979 Singapore International Salon, Rajaratnam observed that “leisure without something to occupy you can be pretty boring and therefore dangerous” because young people “get over their boredom by turning to drugs or [...] crime”. Therefore, he encouraged everyone to have a hobby, and was pleased to see that photography was getting increasingly popular.⁷²

Despite being an imported Western technology, photography occupied a special position because of its perceived neutrality, which allowed it to be appropriated for nation-building purposes. The idea that photography was a common language that all could speak was integral to the way it was perceived. It was particularly attractive to a Singapore which was grappling with long-standing racial tensions, not only internally, but also externally with Malaysia and Indonesia. In 1964, the tensions between the Malays and the Chinese had resulted in a riot that led to a week-long curfew; during this period, 23 were killed and 454 injured.⁷³ The ongoing racial tension finally led to Singapore being asked to leave the Federation of Malaysia in 1965. The idea of photography as a common language resonated with a government desperate to achieve some sort of stability internally and diplomatic relationships externally.

Photography’s task was made very clear by Parliamentary Secretary for Culture, Fong Sip Chee, at the opening of the 1968 Singapore and Pan-Malaysia Photographic Exhibition:

In a region where many cultures and races coexist, misunderstanding is a

⁷¹ Kong, “Cultural Policy in Singapore,” 412; Chong, “The State and the New Society,” 135–36.

⁷² Ministry of Culture, Speech by Mr S. Rajaratnam, Minister for Foreign Affairs, at the opening of the 30th Singapore International Salon of Photography at the National Museum Art Gallery on Wednesday, 9 May 1979, Singapore: National Archives of Singapore. <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/71b7a0b2-115d-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad>

⁷³ Singh and Arasu, *Singapore, an Illustrated History, 1941-1984*, 269.

constant source of friction. Photography can be a powerful tool for the promotion of better understanding and assuagement of tension. There is nothing more potent in promoting closer contact and friendly competitive spirit than photographic competitions, which unlike other forms of competition have no political undertones.⁷⁴

Photography was appropriated into the state's narrative of multiculturalism and also seen as a tool of soft diplomacy. In 1964, President Yusof Ishak stated that "art is international" and "through the medium of photography we are able to promote international friendship".⁷⁵ This message remained consistent across the decades. In 1978, at the first ASEAN Salon of Photography, Acting Minister for Culture Ong Teng Cheong said at the opening ceremony: "Photography transcends all national boundaries and all barriers of race, language, religion and culture. It is therefore an excellent medium for communication. [...] I am confident that the exhibition will help to promote better understanding among the peoples of ASEAN countries."⁷⁶

The Singapore government was not alone in this view of photography as a vehicle of universal humanism. The most well-known photography exhibition that exemplified this position was the *Family of Man*, curated by Edward Steichen at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Numerous scholars have criticised the way *Family of Man* hid behind this humanist ideology to further American liberal capitalist objectives in response to the Cold War.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, it was a momentous event, not least because it travelled to numerous countries and was seen by over nine million people

⁷⁴ Ministry of Culture, *Speech by Mr Fong Sip Chee, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Culture, at the Opening of the 16th Singapore & Pan Malaysia Photographic Exhibition organised by the Photographic Society of Singapore at the National Library Auditorium on Wednesday, 23rd October, 1968 at 5.30pm*, Singapore: National Archives of Singapore.

<https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/798340a7-115d-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad>

⁷⁵ Yusof Ishak, "Foreword", 15th International Salon of Photography (Singapore: Photographic Society of Singapore), 1964.

⁷⁶ Ong Teng Cheong, "Message", ASEAN Salon of Photography (Singapore: Photographic Society of Singapore), 1978.

⁷⁷ Sekula, "The Traffic in Photographs."

from 1955 to 1962.⁷⁸ The exhibition also travelled to Singapore, albeit as a film rather than a physical exhibition, and was presented by the PSS, facilitated by the United States Information Service, in August 1957 at the British Council Hall. Admission was free to the public.⁷⁹

The increasing government rhetoric about photography trickled down to the photographers. In 1965, an article commemorating the 15th anniversary of the PSS noted that “the Society has helped to promote a better understanding among the peoples of the world through photography”.⁸⁰ PSS President Dr Lim Boon Tiong’s message in the 1969 Singapore International Salon catalogue also declared:

Singapore’s Foreign Minister, Mr. S. Rajaratnam said at recent [sic] international gathering in Bangkok that the new nationalism must fit itself for a world in which countries must become increasingly interdependent and co-operate within a multiplying system of international organisations.

The Photographic Society of Singapore, since its inception, has been practicing this brand of nationalism-or should we say, internationalism. [...]

This year’s Exhibition, the twentieth in the series, has attracted entries from more than forty countries and bespeaks the truth that art knows no barrier—the common language of the photograph is known, understood and appreciated by all. [...]

Our standard in both fields of monochrome and colour is happily rising. Our workers have already achieved parity with the world's best, as attested in the many international exhibitions including this present one.

Lim’s message reveals the way the photographers interpreted state perspectives in their club practice. Just as the government incorporated photography into nation-building narratives, so too did the photographers draw from state rhetoric to align

⁷⁸ Emerling, *Photography*, 126.

⁷⁹ “International Show on the ‘Family of Man’ for S’pore...,” *The Singapore Free Press*, August 27, 1957.

⁸⁰ *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 6, no. 5 (May 1965).

themselves. The PSS was particularly close to the state. In 1964, the society's President, Ang Chwee Chai, was awarded the Public Service Star, the highest honour given to a civilian. Furthermore, every single photographer who was awarded the Cultural Medallion (the highest award given by the state to arts practitioners) was from the PSS. The PSS frequently partnered state organisations on various photographic events, and by all accounts was very proud of being approached by the government for these exhibitions, as it was proof that the PSS was the biggest and best club in Singapore.

Thematic exhibitions

A look at the kinds of exhibitions co-organised by the PSS and the Singapore government reveal how the government sought to manage the visualisation of Singapore through photography and how it tied in with their broader nation-building narratives. In July 1965, the Housing and Development Board (HDB) and the PSS co-presented a photography and poster exhibition at the Victoria Memorial Hall.⁸¹ During the opening speech, Minister for Social Affairs Othman Wok stated:

The Exhibition depicts not only the achievements of the Board during the period of its existence from February 1960, but goes further to portray and encourage health and security measures, civic consciousness and good neighbourliness. The vision with which the Board has planned its activities and the dynamism with which it has executed its plans are an eye-opener to all, particularly to this part of the world where the teeming millions not only experience the tortuous pangs of hunger but also undergo the painful lack of adequate privacy.

The HDB was set up as one of the first major initiatives of the PAP government upon attaining self-governance. In the first five years, more than 50,000 homes were built and it was regularly held up as a success story of the new government. The efforts of

⁸¹ "Housing Display at the Vic," *The Straits Times*, July 7, 1965; "National Day Photo Show," *The Straits Times*, August 11, 1981.

the HDB also supported the metanarrative of industrial modernisation and progress that I discussed at the start of the chapter.

The second HDB Photo Competition was held in 1966, with a generous cash prize of \$1250 for each of the three categories – monochrome prints, colour prints and colour transparencies. The call for submissions in the *PSS Monthly Bulletin* specified that the photographs should “illustrate the design and the structure of the Housing & Development Board properties”.⁸² To assist members to prepare for the competition, the PSS arranged two consecutive weekend excursions for members to shoot Housing Board estates, presumably so that they could repeat the success of the first year where its members had walked away with 75% of the prizes.⁸³ The selected images from the second competition were even exhibited in 1967 as part of the Afro-Asian Housing Conference at the Singapore Conference Hall to “demonstrate the verve and vitality of a young nation making maximum use of its limited resources to provide adequate and better accommodation for its people”.⁸⁴

By organising thematic competitions and enlisting the aid of the PSS, the government was essentially influencing the choice of subject matter in the photographers’ images. The competitions resulted in the creation of a huge number of photographs of the various public housing estates in Singapore. The involvement of the PSS meant that many of the images were of a high technical quality and had an aesthetic sensibility. Furthermore, I contend that these exhibitions brought the image of the housing estates to public consciousness and visually created a new and identifiably Singapore landscape. Photographers such as Lui Hock Seng and Lim Kwong Ling continued to make many significant photographs featuring these flats.

The image of the HDB flat has developed a particular prominence in representations of Singapore even till the present, although its use as a signifier has shifted and even

⁸² *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 7, no. 8 (Aug 1966).

⁸³ *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 7, no. 8 (Aug 1966); *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 6, no. 11 (Nov 1965).

⁸⁴ *2nd Housing & Development Board Photographic Competition*. Singapore: Housing and Development Board, 1967.

been contested. Rather than progress, it has now become a symbol of the everyday life of the average Singaporean, given that over 85% of the population live in such flats. Various scholars have also noted the trope of the HDB flats as a marker of the 'local' in images of Singapore, particularly in film studies.⁸⁵ It has also been appropriated as a landscape that points to the authoritarian rule of the People's Action Party. As Chua Beng Huat and Yeo Wei Wei put it: "Public housing is the literally concrete reminder of the pervasive presence of the government".⁸⁶ Nevertheless, during the 1960s, it was the photographers who first started exploring and depicting this particular icon.

The strategy by the HDB to use thematic photography competitions to influence the production of images was picked up by other government agencies. In 1975, the Ministry of Culture organised the "Our Beautiful Singapore" Photographic Competition, which was followed by an exhibition at the Victoria Memorial Hall in 1976. The exhibition was dominated by images of the Singapore city skyline and the then newly built Chinese gardens, with a clear emphasis on progress in the guise of new construction. In 1977, the Ministry of Culture organised another photography competition, this time with the theme "Singapore: The Old and the New". This was again followed by an exhibition in 1978 at the Victoria Memorial Hall. The exhibition catalogue stated that the exhibition aimed to "depict the advancement and development of Singapore in the past two decades and secondly, to encourage our photographers to capture scenes that are fast disappearing due to extensive urban redevelopment programmes".⁸⁷ Revealing more about the Ministry's goals, Parliamentary Secretary for Culture Ow Chin Hock's opening speech stated that: "The exhibition we have here does not show just the old and the new Singapore. It incorporates an important message, namely that such accomplishments are possible

⁸⁵ As an example, see Olivia Khoo, "Slang Images: On the 'Foreignness' of Contemporary Singaporean Films," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7, no. 1 (March 1, 2006): 81–98.

⁸⁶ Beng Huat Chua and Wei-Wei Yeo, "Singapore Cinema: Eric Khoo and Jack Neo – Critique from the Margins and the Mainstream," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 4, no. 1 (January 1, 2003): 118.

⁸⁷ "Singapore: The Old and the New" Photographic Exhibition. Singapore: Ministry of Culture, 1978.

only through determination and hard work. Otherwise we stagnate, and there is no new Singapore to contrast with the old”.⁸⁸

By then, the pictorial photographers in Singapore had already made a significant number of photographs of the so-called ‘old’ Singapore. Many photographers had been shooting since the 1950s and would have accumulated numerous photographs of old buildings that no longer existed, the kampongs, the street vendors and so on. But what was significant about the 1978 exhibition was the government’s strategy to place such photographs alongside images of industrialised Singapore, particularly the new housing estates and the skyscrapers, to highlight the narrative of progress. In other words, the exhibition conveyed that the loss of some parts of Singapore’s heritage was simply the cost of progress, and the benefits of the ‘new’ offset the loss of the ‘old’. The exhibition *managed* viewers’ responses to the images of old Singapore, emphasising a shared history, a key element of building national identity, as well as a shared future. Several photographers submitted multiple prints as single entries. For example, winner Kouo Shang-Wei’s work consisted of two panoramas of the Singapore skyline, one shot in 1961 and the other in 1977, succinctly conveying Singapore’s successful modernisation. (Fig. 5.1)

The Ministry of Culture also initiated the annual National Day Photography competition and exhibition in 1973. This was co-organised with the various photographic societies in Singapore. Although the first few editions did not have any theme, the 1979 exhibition introduced two new elements – a photo-essay section and a thematic section on children. The following year, the organisers repeated the thematic format, selecting the topic of “Multi-cultural Singapore”. In his foreword, David Tay, who was chairman of the working committee and then Vice-President of the PSS, explained that photographs had the “potential of shaping public and even

⁸⁸ Ministry of Culture, *Speech by Dr Ow Chin Hock, Parliamentary Secretary (Culture) on the Occasion of the Official Opening of the “Singapore: The Old and the New” Photographic Exhibition on Wednesday, 19 April 1978 at the Victoria Memorial Hall at 5.30pm*, Singapore: National Archives of Singapore.
<https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/729fef97-115d-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad>

world opinion towards the things they portrayed”. The aim of the exhibition was to “build the spirit of common purpose and identity within our multi-racial society”. He further noted that despite the fewer entries received for thematic exhibitions as compared to general exhibitions, such exhibitions were important for “projecting a correct image of Singapore”.⁸⁹

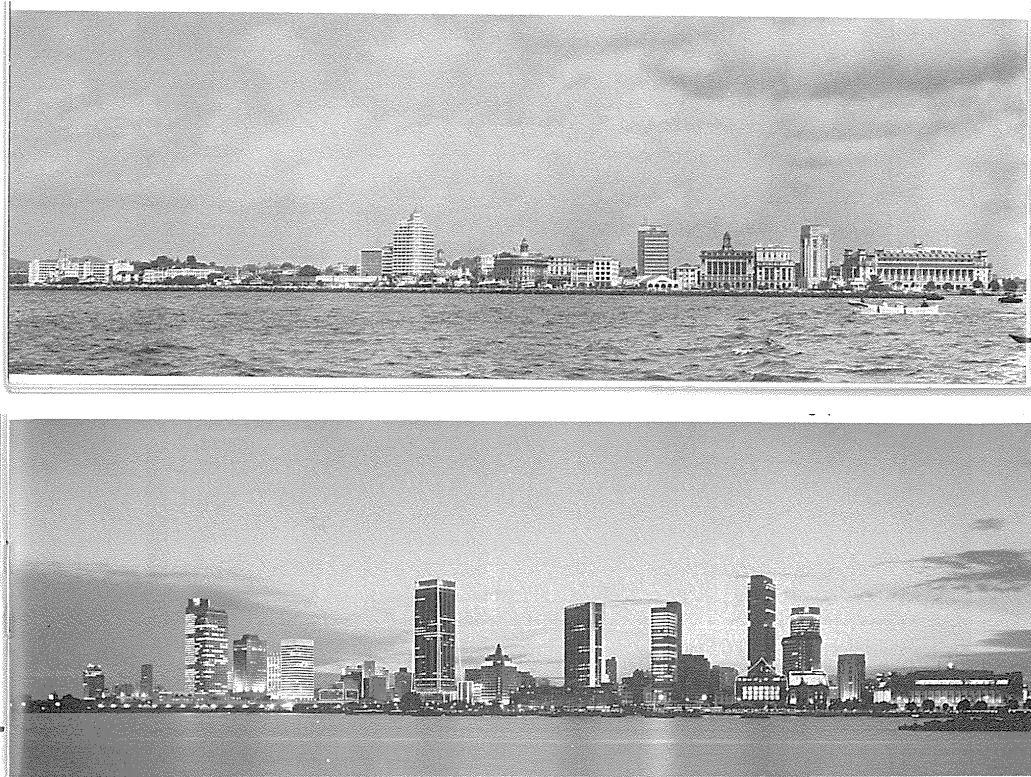


Fig. 5.1. Kouo Shang-Wei, *Singapore Waterfront*, in *Singapore: The Old and The New Photographic Exhibition* (Singapore: Ministry of Culture, 1978).

Although several scholars have studied the way the arts in Singapore has often been used as a staging ground for national identity, none have included a discussion on photography despite its popular appeal.⁹⁰ Chong, for example, has noted that the government mobilised arts and culture to display a Singapore brand of multiculturalism, or what he terms “multicultural fantasies”, both as a way to

⁸⁹ David Tay, Foreword, *1981 National Day Photo Exhibition*, Singapore: Ministry of Culture, 1981.

⁹⁰ Koh, “The Singapore Experience: Cultural Development in the Global Village”; Chong, “The State and the New Society”; Kong, “Cultural Policy in Singapore.”

prevent ethnic conflict and to present a unified national culture.⁹¹ These fantasies were played out in schools, community centres and the annual National Day Parades and typically comprised representations of the traditions of the three main ethnic groups – Chinese, Malay, India. The multi-cultural setting was also used to market Singapore as a tourist destination. A look at the thematic photography exhibitions reveal a similar strategy by the government with respect to photography, extending beyond promoting the ideology of multiculturalism to include ideals of progress and industrialisation. They illustrate how the Singapore government's management of national identity extended to photographic visuality and that they strategically engaged the photographers and clubs for a state-led nationalism.

A Singapore School

The state was not the sole driver of the national imaginary. The photographers were equally anxious to create an identifiably Singaporean photography. A series of letters exchanged between Loke Wan Tho and Major Raymond Thomas in 1954 had already brought up the idea of a "Singapore School" of photography. Thomas was a British Air Force officer who was based in Malaya in the early 1950s. He was a member of the Royal Photographic Society and had presented a series of talks on photography known as 'Photography Club' for the Forces Broadcasting Service. In the 1950s, the programme aired over all Blue Networks of Radio Malaya.⁹² He was also invited to pen a regular photographic advice column 'Photographic Digest' for *The Straits Times* from 1959-60 and acted as a selector for the 3rd and 4th Open Photographic Exhibition in Singapore in 1952 and 1953. As a member of the International Committee of the RPS, Thomas had an interest in the photographic developments in Singapore. His letter was the earliest to propose a kind of national identity for photography from Singapore. Essentially, Thomas wanted to see something *different* from the Singaporean photographers, one that had a "National Characteristic" and

⁹¹ Chong, "The State and the New Society," 137–38.

⁹² 'The Man Behind the Camera', *RPS Journal* 96 (June 1956): 118-9.
<https://www.rps.org/journal-archive>.

was not “an elaborate copy of, shall we say, Western interpretation”.⁹³ The idea of a national school was repeated by Ong Seng Chew in the May 1965 edition of the *PSS Monthly Bulletin*, who noted that “members of the Society have constantly participated in overseas exhibitions for the past eleven years during which time these photographers have evolved a style in their work which is known as the ‘Malaysian School’”.⁹⁴ Unfortunately, neither Thomas nor Ong could describe what this locally inflected photography was.

In the 1953 issue of *Photograms*, Hong Kong photographer Francis Wu made a similar appeal for following “the traditional Chinese Fashion in dealing with pictorials or portraits, and suggests that the Chinese can meet with more success by expressing their own distinctive and oriental characteristics than by imitating Western Art”.⁹⁵ Wu expressed the same view at a lecture he gave in Singapore titled “The Chinese view on photography”. The *Nanyang Siang Pau* reported that Wu urged photographers to make work according to the local lifestyle, custom, culture and tradition, expressing its unique characteristics, rather than copying other photographers’ method and style. He also noted that the Chinese expression of beauty lay in depicting softness, serenity and simplicity.⁹⁶ Wu was regarded highly in Singapore, having been invited to give a solo exhibition as well as act as a judge in the 5th Singapore international Salon, and his words would have been taken very seriously by local photographers.

The clearest advice in achieving a “Singapore School” lay in an article in the *Nanyang Siang Pau* in 1956, which called for art photography in Singapore to focus more on local subject matter and everyday life. The author, Chen Hufa, was the Vice-President of the SEAPS and a very successful salon photographer. He specifically marked the context of Singapore’s changing national status and linked it to new

⁹³ Letter from Raymond Thomas to Loke Wan Tho, 7 Dec 1954. MS 6057, Loke Wan Tho Papers, National Library of Australia.

⁹⁴ *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 6, no. 5 (May 1965).

⁹⁵ *Photograms of the Year*, 1953, 6.

⁹⁶ '吳章建第二次演講中國人對攝影之觀念 (Francis Wu’s Second Lecture on the Chinese View on Photography)', *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 9 January 1954.

subject matter. He suggested documenting the fight for independence and photographing farmers, labourers, students and the changing environment. He further suggested that the increasing success of local photographs in international salons demonstrated that overseas audiences were appreciative and interested in Singapore.⁹⁷ A few years later, well-known Singaporean author Han Suyin made a similar call at the opening of the 1961 Pan-Malayan Photography Exhibition – to show the world more photographs that showcased daily life in Singapore.⁹⁸

While I am hesitant to overstate the importance of Hoo and Han’s influence, there was certainly a clear shift in subject matter by the late 1950s towards depicting the daily activities of Singaporeans as well as local customs and traditions. If there was such a thing as a “Singapore School”, it was not one that had a stylistic coherence, but was rather one that had a heightened sense of place. This manifested visually through the photographs, drawing upon the histories and identities embedded within the migrant communities of Singapore as well as the changing topography. These developments were part of the process of decolonisation, that is, a new identification with the land these migrants had settled in, as well as the nature of the international salons. The rest of this chapter will consider the way Singaporean photographers attempt to communicate with their international audiences, while the next chapter will discuss other aspects of this turn towards local subject matter.

Singaporean photographers were increasingly aware of being seen by the rest of the world, a result of their success in overseas salons combined with Singapore’s status as an emerging independent nation. Along these lines, the *PSS Monthly Bulletin* announced in 1964: “Our Society is well respected at home and abroad; the quality of our photographers have gained a good repute, and those of the present are continually adding to our prestige. Our photographs are our ambassadors to ‘sell’

⁹⁷ Hoo Watt Tan, “漫談藝術攝影 (Discussion on Art Photography),” *Nanyang Siang Pau*, February 2, 1956.

⁹⁸ “泛馬影展開幕 (Opening Ceremony of the Pan-Malayan Photography Exhibition),” *Nanyang Siang Pau*, October 22, 1961.

Malaysia; *the world knows these prints and slides, and so knows us.*"⁹⁹ (My italics) As Loke stated, there was a pleasure in being seen, but this was accompanied by a national self-consciousness.¹⁰⁰ There was a corresponding desire to distinguish photography from Singapore and make it representative of the nation. The salons were not the only platform at which the photographers showed work. The club network meant that Singaporean photographers were regularly invited to participate in other international exhibitions. In 1965, the PSS was invited to participate in a portfolio exchange with the Greater Lynn Camera Club and members were asked to submit work that showed "any subject showing the scenes, the people, the culture, the life of Malaysia".¹⁰¹ In 1968, the PSS invited members to submit works for the annual "Around-the-World with PSA" slide show in Oklahoma and members were informed that "subject-matter is open, but representative slides of Singapore-Malaysian life recommended".¹⁰²

The photographers were not alone in this desire to differentiate the work emerging from Singapore by focusing on local elements. Kwok Kian Chow has recounted a similar preoccupation in the painters.¹⁰³ In the 1940s, the Nanyang painters sought a Malayan visual expression by depicting local subject matter using both traditional Chinese ink techniques as well as School of Paris approaches – this included landscapes, still-lives (often using local fruit) and genre scenes. In the 1960s, the watercolourists were accused of kitsch because of their repeated depictions of the Singapore River, a topic that was also very popular with the photographers. Defenders of the subject matter included Gog Sing Hooi, co-founder of the Singapore Watercolour Society in 1969, who claimed: "The Singapore River once played an important role during the days of entrepot trade. Not only has it economic value, it is also an excellent subject for the artists' drawing board. The busy tongkang traffic, the old terrace houses lining its shores, combined with the characteristic bridges

⁹⁹ *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 5, no. 6 (June 1964).

¹⁰⁰ Letter from Loke Wan Tho to C.A. Yarrington, 29 April 1952. MS 6057, Loke Wan Tho Papers, National Library of Australia.

¹⁰¹ *PSS Monthly Bulletin*, 6(6): 1965.

¹⁰² *PSS Monthly Bulletin*, 9(5): 1968.

¹⁰³ Kwok, *Channels & Confluences*.

spanning the river, all culminate in a picturesque Singapore landscape. This scene is a source of inspiration to many an artist.”¹⁰⁴ Another watercolourist, Ong Kim Seng added: “Many artists [...] have painted the river, depicting it in a style that is distinctly Singaporean... Riverside houses, the bridges that span the river, and the tongkang [...] form scenes that amount to emblems of our country – they have appeared in our postcards, tourist posters and even our currency notes...”¹⁰⁵

The term ‘Nanyang’ was actually first used by Chinese writers to call for a new kind of literature with its own identity and colour (the Chinese term used is 色彩 (secai)). This was a literature that was to be distinguished from mainland Chinese literature. Even more so than the painters, the Malayan Chinese writers strongly believed in developing a national identity for their work alongside a desire for political independence.¹⁰⁶ This desire intensified after WWII. With the majority of writers born or growing up in Singapore, their works not only dealt with local themes and customs but they wrote from the perspective of a Singaporean. Wong Yoon Wah distinguishes the writing from this period as one which did not just use local colour for “decorative purposes” but “manifested” the writer’s experience of Singapore.¹⁰⁷ The term 新华文学 (xin hua wenxue) [Singapore Chinese literature] emerged after 1965. Between 1965 and 1977, 227 Chinese literary works were published in Singapore.¹⁰⁸

Given that the majority of the photographers were ethnic Chinese, they would have been very aware of these developments, although, interestingly, they never used the term ‘Nanyang’ with respect to their own works or approaches. Nevertheless, they were located within this environment with its rising sense of the local vis-à-vis the international. Their works were hung alongside those from other countries in salons

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Kwok, 92.

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Kwok, 94.

¹⁰⁶ Yoon-wah Wong, *Post-Colonial Chinese Literatures in Singapore and Malaysia* (Singapore; River Edge, NJ: Department of Chinese Studies, National University of Singapore; Global Publishing, 2002), 11–15.

¹⁰⁷ Wong, 17.

¹⁰⁸ In contrast, there were 45 English, 32 Malay and 15 Tamil literary books published in the same period. Wong, 19.

and seen next to them in catalogues. The desire for a distinct national identity was conflated with the desire to be successful in the salons. Oftentimes, their photographs were made specifically for foreign audiences, or at least for foreign jurors.

Regular salon exhibitor Foo Tee Jun has said that he tried to portray “something that is exotic and unusual in the eye of a foreigner”, which included pictures of cultural festivals like Thaipusam, celebrated by the Tamil community in Singapore.¹⁰⁹ In a *Singapore Free Press* column which offered comments on photographs submitted by readers, the writer wrote regarding a picture of a row of junk boats at the harbour: “Although you will find it tough to get (the photo) into a home salon, there is a good chance of this being accepted overseas”.¹¹⁰ The advice given suggests that the photographers submitted prints to salons strategically. Perhaps the photo of the junks was too common for the tastes of salon judges in Singapore, but might appeal to a foreign salon? Regardless of whether this was true, there is a clear acknowledgement of the foreign gaze.

Tan Lip Seng, who was a regular salon judge, has also noted that the cultural festivals in Singapore were interesting subject matter for international salons because “western countries do not celebrate these (festivals) such as the Hari Raya Puasa, Deepavali and Thaipusam”. Tan observed that “to score wins at photo salons, your subject matter has to be rare” and “the multicultural and multiethnic identity of Singapore is our unique strength in capturing subject matters different from other foreign photographers”.¹¹¹

The Singaporean photographers were not mistaken in thinking that certain subject matter appealed more to the foreign judges. In 1951, the introduction to

¹⁰⁹ Kong, “Rise of Modernism in Singapore Photography, 1950s to 1980s: Aesthetic Negotiation through an Ethnic and National Identity Prism,” 185.

¹¹⁰ “Camera Coach Comments on Your Pictures,” *The Singapore Free Press*, June 30, 1960.

¹¹¹ Kong, “Rise of Modernism in Singapore Photography, 1950s to 1980s: Aesthetic Negotiation through an Ethnic and National Identity Prism,” 192.

Photograms of the Year by R.H. Mason included the following quote about two photographs from Hong Kong: “The atmosphere of the Orient is well in evidence in ‘The first beam’ by Ma Wing Hung and ‘Fisherman’ by Chun Sam Tsoi but the photographic treatment is more Occidental.”¹¹² In 1956, the caption for Au Tian Chor’s *Optimist*, a close-up portrait of an old Chinese man started with, “To western eyes this portrait has considerable subject interest.”¹¹³ In 1959, Au had another photo selected for *Photograms, Before Bath*, which showed a half-portrait of a nude Malay woman carrying a jar. (Fig. 5.2) This time, the caption noted: “Although obviously posed, this picture is sincere in its portrayal of feminine beauty and it has something of the mysticism and serenity of the Orient in the expression and the graceful pose.”¹¹⁴ In the same issue, the description of Ho Tat Seng’s *Morning Rhapsody* read, “To the occidental this picture has enormous subject interest, but apart from that it has plenty of pictorial merit”.¹¹⁵ The photo showed a Chinese junk sailing on a calm sea.

The display of exotic subject matter is often associated with Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism, a framework explaining how Europe has approached the Orient, specifically, by projecting certain characteristics as signs of difference in order to justify European colonialism.¹¹⁶ A result of imperial legacy, Orientalism marked a form of power and control by the West over Asia, Africa and the Middle East, imagining its peoples as essentially primitive and in need of enlightenment by the West. The representation of Singapore as a uniquely multi-racial, multi-ethnic country was not new. The 19th and early 20th century photographs of Singapore often included an incredibly diverse number of portraits of the many nationalities and ethnicities living in Singapore during the time, and were a popular way to represent Singapore. Portraits of ethnic types were a key part of the colonial encounter, acting not only as tools of ethnology and anthropology but also to satisfy

¹¹² *Photograms of the Year*, 1951, 17.

¹¹³ *Photograms of the Year*, 1956, 19.

¹¹⁴ *Photograms of the Year*, 1959, 17.

¹¹⁵ *Photograms of the Year*, 20.

¹¹⁶ Said, *Orientalism*.

the desire of the European public to see exotic and unknown races.¹¹⁷ Photo studios in Southeast Asia, including Singapore, would hold archives of such racial types for sale to tourists as souvenirs of their trips. The people were often depicted as observed objects and labelled using their race – none had individual descriptions such as names or ages.¹¹⁸ Landscapes, or ‘views’ were also very popular, often depicting sweeping panoramas, elegant Victorian buildings and the bustling harbour. Such photographs operated as imaginings of the “imperial landscape”, offering European viewers domesticated lands from the colonial expansion that simultaneously presented the civilizing benefits that the British brought with them.¹¹⁹

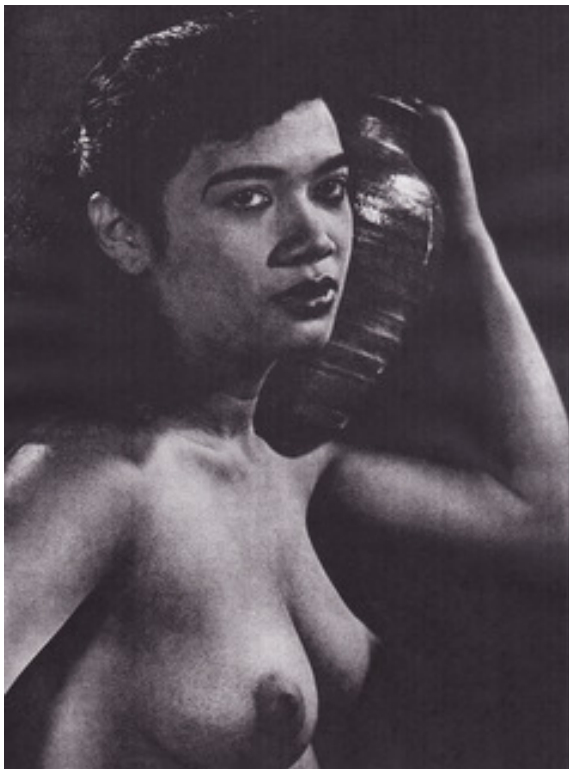


Fig. 5.2. Au Thian Chor, *Before Bath* in *Photograms of the Year*, (London: Iliffe & Sons, 1959), plate 25.

¹¹⁷ For a detailed discussion of such portraits, see Chapter 5 “Photographing the Natives” in Ryan, *Picturing Empire*.

¹¹⁸ For a discussion of the relationship between photography and ethnography, see Elizabeth Edwards, “Photographic ‘Types’: The Pursuit of Method,” *Visual Anthropology* 3, no. 2–3 (January 1, 1990): 235–58.

¹¹⁹ Ryan, *Picturing Empire*; Protschky, *Images of the Tropics*.

If photography was called on to depict the new, modern Singapore along with a unified national identity, why continue to show images that might point towards Singapore's colonial history or those that played to oriental fantasies like *Before Bath*? Indonesia critic Yudhi Soerjoatmodjo has observed a similar resonance between the visual language of colonial photography and the pictorial photographs of Indonesia in the 1950s and 60s. He has criticised the practice of a "pictorialism catering to tourists' fantasies that are not all that far from the imagery offered by the *tukang potret* in Jakarta's old Senen Triangle". According to Yudhi, pictorialism, which focused on "exotic images of exotic people and landscapes", was an extension of colonial photography and was thus not relevant to Indonesia's present. Pictorialism played on nostalgia and sought commercial success. On the contrary, Indonesia needed to liberate itself from "colonialism's projected image" and discover its "true nature".¹²⁰ Yudhi's analysis and conclusion rests purely on the images that were produced. However, Karen Strassler, who also investigates Indonesian photography, has extended her analysis to the networks and contexts within which these photographers were working and comes to a different conclusion – that the Indonesian photographers, both "salonists" and studio photographers, were part of a wave of modernity, notably through their cosmopolitan practices.

Strassler's analysis further notes that the aesthetic constraints of the salon and club system contributed to the production of an *asli* (authentic or indigenous) Indonesia – photographs of beautiful rural landscapes and people, which included images of "young children taking shelter from the rain under massive banana leaves and farmers guiding their water buffalo on a dusty path, of women drawing intricate designs in wax on batik cloth and bustling 'traditional' markets, or dancers in elaborate costumes and volcanoes towering over vivid green rice fields".¹²¹ Rather than simply an extension of colonial vision though, these images were made as a

¹²⁰ Yudhi Soerjoatmodjo, "Beyond Pictorialism: Photography in Modern Indonesia," in *Towards Independence: A Century of Indonesia Photographed*, ed. Jane Levy Read (San Francisco: Friends of Photography, 1991), 117–19, <http://www.asia-pacific-photography.com/towardindependence/pictorialism/index.htm>.

¹²¹ Karen Strassler, *Refracted Visions: Popular Photography and National Modernity in Java* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 37.

response to the racial tensions the photographers faced in their everyday lives in Indonesia, and from a desire for a “romanticised and depoliticised encounter” with the indigenous population.¹²² As a result, the Chinese photographers served as “cultural brokers” for the nation and ironically, contributed to a national “native” vision of Indonesia that continued to exclude them.

Like Strassler, I argue that these new pictorial photographs did not constitute a colonial vision but signified a new agency in self-representation on the part of the photographer. The Singaporean photographers played an important role in the renegotiation of the old colonial vision vis-à-vis the new modern nation within an international network of contacts. They felt a responsibility as visual mediators and thus sought to present positive images of the nation. The editorial message in the May 1965 issue of the *PSS Monthly Bulletin* announced, “Our photographers and photos have advertised this country.” These photographs were not only to represent Singapore, they were also to ‘sell’ the country, in other words, they should present a positive, attractive image of Singapore. This was reinforced by the salon competition system, which led some of the photographers to seek exotic subject matter that would appeal to foreign judges. However, unlike the Indonesian pictorialists, who featured overwhelmingly indigenous subjects, the Singaporean photographers explored a much wider range of subject matter. For example, portraits of all races were frequently made and the various cultural festivals – Chinese, Indian, Malay – photographed, which matched state ideology. It also included a significant body of pictorial work that depicted urban life and the construction of new Singapore landscapes. These depictions of Singapore used the established codes of pictorialism to enter into dialogue with its former colonial masters, and as I have already established, they even took advantage of the international networks of clubs and salons to assert a new independent national identity.

Mary-Louise Pratt’s concept of “auto-ethnography” allows us to move away from Yudhi’s accusations of colonial exoticism. In her study of travel writing, Pratt has

¹²² Strassler, 37.

identified how colonised subjects construct representations of themselves in response to the way they have been represented before.¹²³ Auto-ethnographic representations are not independent, as they draw from existing discourses. Their reception is also uncertain. However, the importance of Pratt's framework lies in its return of agency back to colonised cultures, allowing these subjects to reflexively engage with imagining and visualising themselves even while using the codes of the coloniser. In a later article, Pratt elaborated on her concept, suggesting that auto-ethnographic texts were "merged or infiltrated to varying degrees with indigenous idioms to create self-representations intended to intervene in metropolitan modes of understanding" and "often constitute a marginalised group's point of entry into the dominant circuits of print culture".¹²⁴ A significant number of photographs made in Singapore for the salons and other overseas exhibitions were auto-ethnographic. Photographers were very conscious of the foreign judges in the salon and sought to appeal to their tastes in order to gain acceptances and awards.

A clear example of an auto-ethnographic approach to photography may be found in the "Touristic Singapore" exhibition, which was organised by the PSS in 1968 in conjunction with the 19th Singapore International Salon and Foto Fair, and sponsored by the Singapore Tourism Board. The call for entries asked members to make pictures that would "fascinate potential visitors to Singapore and, therefore, should have exotic appeal, atmosphere and human interest".¹²⁵ The winning photo was *Pious* (fig. 5.3) by Yip Cheong Fun, which showed the interior of the Thian Hock Keng Temple at Telok Ayer Street in Chinatown in Singapore. Framed by the temple pillars, a man is reaching up to place a joss stick on a suspended holder hung above a crowded altar. There is a quiet intimacy to the image. Yip combined the aesthetic qualities of pictorialism – the balanced composition, dramatic lighting and wide tonal range – with local subject matter to present a certain appealing and unthreatening exoticism. Interestingly, Yip had made a very similar image of a Hindu temple around the same period. Titled *Hindu Bell* (fig. 5.4), Yip depicted a priest reaching up to ring

¹²³ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 7–9.

¹²⁴ Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession*, 1991, 35.

¹²⁵ *PSS Monthly Bulletin*, 8(11): 1967.

a bell inside the temple, framed by the curved arches of the doorway. The camera is placed in an identical manner to *Pious. Hindu Bell* won the Third Prize at the Religious Arts Festival in Rochester in 1963 and a Gold Medal in Frieding, Germany in 1970.¹²⁶ Seen together, there is a startling similarity in the two photographs. Despite Yip's own Chinese ethnicity, he treats the Hindu and Buddhist ceremonies in the same manner – it is the aesthetic elements that dominate, not the individual qualities of the respective religions. A photo made for a foreign jury was treated in the same manner as one made for a tourism competition - both were to market Singapore's exotic appeal.



Fig. 5.3. Yip Cheong Fun, *Pious*, 1966, in Bridget Tracy Tan, *An Ingenious Reverie: The Photography of Yip Cheong Fun* (Singapore: National Library Board, 1994), p. 33.

¹²⁶ Tan, *An Ingenious Reverie*, 23.



Fig. 5.4. Yip Cheong Fun, *Hindu Bell*, c.1950s in Bridget Tracy Tan, *An Ingenious Reverie: The Photography of Yip Cheong Fun* (Singapore: National Library Board, 1994), p. 23.

Conclusion

Previous studies of cosmopolitanism and the arts in Singapore have considered only events after 1990, usually focusing on the period after the Singapore government released its 1992 *Global City for the Arts* report, which aimed to make Singapore a new cultural hub so as to attract to Singapore arts-related businesses, tourists, foreign investors and professionals, and to nurture creativity that would benefit the production of other products.¹²⁷ Terence Chong has noted that the ‘Global City for the Arts’ project shifted “a previously insular and resolutely local national cultural policy into one that is global in orientation.” This was followed by the *Renaissance City Report* in 2000, which Chong has described as seeking to “create a cosmopolitan Singapore”. Another study by Chang Pi-Chun also focuses on the ‘Global City for the Arts’ project to discuss the cosmopolitan aspects of Singapore’s nation-building

¹²⁷ Chong, “The State and the New Society,” 142.

objectives.¹²⁸ Chang asserts that Singapore's version of cosmopolitanism was embedded in its national identity as a 'Global City'; furthermore, it was an economic cosmopolitanism, not political, and endorsed by the state. As George Yeo declared, "If the arts in Singapore are only by Singaporeans for Singaporeans, we will get nowhere for we are too small. [...] Singapore is Singapore only because our national spirit is a cosmopolitan one".¹²⁹ However, because the arts had been so closely managed by the state, Chang notes that "many experiences and articulations from below have been excluded from collective imagery".¹³⁰

This chapter then, brings back into focus the experiences "from below", and furthermore, reveals that the cosmopolitan aspects of the arts in Singapore emerged much earlier than these studies suggest. The earlier studies have all focused on a top-down, state driven environment and been more concerned with assessing the state's approach to culture and nation-building. Within these parameters, the engagement with the global was highly managed by the state, and cultural exports were expected to reflect an established national narrative. Photography, on the other hand, was an accessible, open practice, involving large groups of both amateurs and professionals. Pictorial photographers engaged with the international community and exhibited distinct signs of a cosmopolitan spirit from the 1950s, without state intervention, and were not driven by economic considerations. In fact, it was only after pictorial photography from Singapore had been successfully exhibited overseas that we see increasing state rhetoric regarding Singapore Pictorialism and its role in nation-building. Pictorial photography thus offers a different entry point to considerations of locality and nationalism. Rather than positioning photography as an interpretation of a homogenised national identity,

¹²⁸ Pi-Chun Chang, "Going Global and Staying Local: Nation-Building Discourses in Singapore's Cultural Policies," *Identities* 19, no. 6 (November 2012): 701.

¹²⁹ Ministry of Information and the Arts, *Speech by BG (NS) George Yeo, Minister for Information and the Arts and Minister for Health, at the Opening of the Arts Centre Design Exhibition at the Ministry of National Development Exhibition Hall, Annex A, MND Complex, Maxwell Road, Singapore*: National Archives of Singapore. <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/71f11875-115d-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad>

¹³⁰ Chang, "Going Global and Staying Local," 703.

state driven or otherwise, this chapter has illustrated how the photographers and the photographic societies engaged with the nation through the photography complex – the photographic image as well as its channels of production, distribution and consumption – which became a site to imagine and envision national identity.

The cosmopolitan character of the international networks of camera clubs and photography salons was very appealing to a young nation seeking acknowledgement and legitimacy from the international community. The international salon became a platform that allowed Singapore to identify itself as a nation and a symbol of cosmopolitanism and contemporaneity, where the works of Singaporean photographers were exhibited alongside their peers, even their previous colonisers. Their early and consistent international success made photography particularly attractive as a demonstration of nationalism, and the Singapore government increasingly positioned photography as a tool of nation-building. Photography became linked to larger nationalist concerns, and the one has to be understood in the context of the other. To this end, photography's perceived neutrality as a universal language was a crucial element underpinning its function, even overcoming the period's cultural protectionism. The government tried to appropriate photography into narratives of national identity and multiculturalism with varying levels of success, and often approached the photography clubs to assist with these endeavours, especially the PSS. The photographers themselves aligned their activities with state aims and Singapore Pictorialism became a vehicle for expressing a new modern national identity.

This chapter has shown the complex relationship between government, individual and club desires. The practice of photography was not solely driven by government policies, nor by club objectives or individual competitiveness, but was the result of the interplay between these different agents. The consciousness of the foreign gaze in the form of the foreign juries in competitions further complicated this relationship and it is clear that photographers considered the potential appeal of their subject matter for the various foreign salons. Encouraged to present a Singaporean identity through their work, photographers often depicted, but were not limited to, the

different races in Singapore and their associated religious and ethnic practices such as festivals. The national imaginary is thus subject to multiple forces and responds to state, collective and individual desires and practices. The next chapter will continue the discussion on how the pictorial photographers conveyed their experience of locality, both lived and imagined, and their role in contributing to the visual imagination of Singapore, both at their times and in our present.

Chapter 6: History and Imagination

In 2006, the Singapore Heritage Society and the National Library Board co-presented a solo exhibition of photographer Yip Cheong Fun, titled *An Ingenious Reverie*. Yip had passed away in 1989 and this was a rare post-humous exhibition of the work of a pioneer pictorial photographer who had been closely associated with the PSS since the early 1950s. Some of Yip's work has been discussed in earlier chapters. He was a very respected photographer among his peers and won numerous salon awards internationally. He took on several roles within the PSS and often acted as a juror for the salon competitions. *An Ingenious Reverie* featured over 130 photographs and was accompanied by a significant catalogue that included detailed biographical information and an essay by curator Bridget Tracy Tan. It was, and still remains, the most significant exhibition of Singapore Pictorialism, based on scale and quality of works, as well as support by two significant state institutions. Yip had won the Cultural Medallion in 1984, Singapore's highest honour for an arts practitioner.

The involvement of the Singapore Heritage Society is significant, pointing towards the status of Yip's photographs as part of Singapore's heritage. In the preface of *Ingenious Reverie*, the President of the society, Dr Kevin Tan, states that Yip "started out as a documentary photographer, capturing the many changes Singapore was undergoing".¹ In the same year as the exhibition, an article in *The Straits Times* by Ken Kwek also portrayed Yip as a practicing documentary photographer, who spent his life "capturing a cultural landscape that would be rapidly effaced in the name of economic progress".² In a review of the exhibition, journalist Corrie Tan declared that Yip's photographs "serve as a detailed visual history of Singapore", and quoted Dr Tan who described the photographs as "a powerful reminder of a way of life that

¹ Tan, *An Ingenious Reverie*, 9.

² Ken Kwek, "Revive Waning Art Form of Documentary Photography," *Straits Times*, December 22, 2006, sec. Review - Insight, <http://global.factiva.com/redir/default.aspx?P=sa&an=STIMES0020061221e2cm0002a&cat=a&ep=ASE>.

is probably gone forever”.³ These descriptions, which were all made after his death, become particularly interesting in view of the descriptions of pictorial photography practice provided in the earlier chapters of this thesis, which was hardly concerned with documentary objectives. Together, they reveal the way the reception of Singapore Pictorialism shifted away from purely aesthetic considerations to an increasingly functional one that drew upon photography’s authority as historical evidence.

There is no record that Yip saw himself as a documentary photographer and this shift in contemporary understanding of his photographic practice provides interesting insights into Singapore Pictorialism’s complicated relationship with history and imagination.⁴ This chapter takes as its starting point the contradiction between the roots of pictorialism as an imaginative artistic practice and the subsequent appropriation of such photographs into historical narratives and as a stand-in for memory. It investigates how Singaporean photographers evolved their imagery in response to social changes and the important role of imagination in their practice. In the process, it exposes the way photographic meaning is always embedded into larger systems of knowledge and ideology. Photographs never merely reveal some sort of existing reality; they are always implicated in the construction of that knowledge, including that of “history”.

Imagining History

In Chapter Five, I had discussed the way photography was implicated in nation-building ideologies in Singapore. This chapter continues that discussion through the lens of history and imagination. I want to start with three different quotes on the role that photography might play in Singapore. In 1965, a newspaper headline highlighted President Yusof Ishak calling photographs a “mirror of progress” at the

³ Corrie Tan, “Remembering Yip Cheong Fun,” *The Straits Times*, April 1, 2006.

⁴ There is no surviving record of any interview with Yip, only conversations with his children and peers.

opening of the Third Malaysia Student Photographic Exhibition organised by the Singapore Polytechnic Photographic Society.⁵ His actual speech noted that:

(Photography) can serve (to) reflect the course of our national history. [...] And the great virtue of photography as a medium of art lies in the fact that it is rooted to reality which the photographer can interpret and thereby present fine shades of meaning.⁶

Yusof's speech reveals the strange responsibility that pictorial photography was given in Singapore – both as a mirror of reality and an interpretation of it. How could photographs simultaneously reflect history and be an interpretation? History itself must then be accepted as an interpretation, one made possible through the discourse of Art.

A few months later in the same year, the editorial introduction of the *PSS Monthly Bulletin* stated:

But then, when [sic] documentation pictorially accomplished could be very pleasing. This could make the type of photographs stand out from the ordinary postcard views one find [sic] at Change Alley! Pictorial documentation of our country is an important objective.

Singapore and Malaysia especially in postwar years have undergone great changes. Familiar landmarks have rapidly disappeared. Swamps have given way to multi-storied monstrosities of steel and concrete; hills levelled, old buildings rubbed, to be replaced by an [sic] uniform pattern of higher and still higher skyscrapers.

We certainly applaud the mighty progress of the country. Progress is good. Progress is essential. It reflects the virility and strength of the postwar

⁵ "Photos—Mirror of Progress, Says Tun Yusof," *The Straits Times*, January 6, 1965.

⁶ Ministry of Culture, *Speech by His Excellency The Yang di-Pertuan Negara at the Third Malaysia Student Photographic Exhibition at Prince Edward Road on Tuesday, 5 January 1965 at 5.00pm*, Singapore: National Archives of Singapore.

independent vibrant community. But we certainly would like also to see, recorded for posterity, and for help to our Museum of History, our background, our history and our heritage.

Perhaps some of our members would like to devote some time to "record" the progress of the country. Such historical pictures could be great evidences of our march to modernity, bringing back perhaps nothing but nostalgic memories of a dear land, reviewed with pride and fondness.⁷

I have quoted the above at length because it marks an important shift in the attitudes of the photographers and highlights many important concepts relevant to this discussion. The inverted commas around the word "record" is particularly interesting, as it reveals the peculiar position of what the editor described as "pictorial documentation". The inverted commas point to the photographers' understanding of their own work – they knew that they were not making documentary photographs, but were asserting that pictorial photographs could also be valid "records" and even "evidence". This is despite the fact that such photographs often entailed the use of models and significant darkroom manipulation, whereas records within the scientific tradition prioritised accuracy and neutrality. The editorial also highlighted the urgency of these "records" due to the industrial development of Singapore and the rapidly changing landscape, which would ultimately serve as the nation's historical memory.⁸

There had been earlier calls for club photographers to spend more time documenting the city and its buildings in the 1950s. The Vice-President of the PSS, Carl Gibson-Hill made an appeal to members of the PSS to devote more of their time to "pictorial record work" to "produce a full, well-rounded portrait of the city today" in the 1956 issue of *Foto News*.⁹ Gibson-Hill had bemoaned the lack of photographic documentation of Malaya and noted that his own photographs were "factual rather

⁷ *PSS Monthly Bulletin* 6, no. 9 (Sep 1965).

⁸ It is also possible that this increasing interest to document was partly due to the search for a "Singapore School" as discussed in the previous chapter.

⁹ Carl Gibson-Hill, "Recording Singapore," *Foto News* 1, no. 6 (January 1956): 34.

than photographic”.¹⁰ This is a very interesting turn of phrase that, like “pictorial documentation”, recognised that the so-called records need not be factual. Instead, he desired to see record photographs with “high aesthetic content” that would make the work more memorable for future generations and felt that the club’s pictorialists were best placed to accomplish this.¹¹ Gibson-Hill concludes his article by asking the club to form a committee to identify the kinds of local subject matter that should be documented and then to persuade some of its members to go out and fill those gaps. While it is unclear if the club subsequently took on this task, it is significant that right from the early days of the PSS and through the words of its Vice-President, who was also the curator and later Director of the Raffles Museum in Singapore, record photography was not necessarily seen to be separate from pictorialism.

The first quote was from a politician, the second from a photographer, but the third is from a politician who was also an amateur photographer. Singapore Minister for Foreign Affairs S. Rajaratnam made the following speech at the opening of the 15th Singapore International Student Salon in 1977:

In my view picture-making is a way of assuring oneself that one is not dominated by the external world. The external world is disorderly, confusing and seemingly beyond one’s control. The picture maker isolates, selects, arranges and even rearranges the confusion around him not only to give order and meaning to what he sees but even to reshape the world as he thinks it should be. [...] So photography has miraculously restored to us the lost faculty of picture making. But if we are to get the fullest satisfaction from photography, we must see it as a means, through pictures, of telling something about ourselves, our view of the world or what there is in the world outside that is worth seeing.¹²

¹⁰ Gibson-Hill, 31.

¹¹ Gibson-Hill, 35.

¹² Ministry of Culture, *Speech by Mr. S. Rajaratnam, Minister for Foreign Affairs, at the Opening of the 15th Singapore International Salon of Photography 1977 organised by the Photographic Society of Nanyang University at the Sin Chew Jit Poh Promotion Centre*, Singapore: National Archives of Singapore,

Here is a politician's insight into the complex relationship between photography and representation that the photographers in the clubs never fully articulated. Instead of trusting in the "truth" of the photograph, Rajaratnam not only acknowledged the constructed nature of the image but gave the photographer an agency in making that image. Rajaratnam's idea of control in response to the disorderly "external world" is a particularly interesting one and echoes Singapore Pictorialism's focus on careful composition, harmonious balance and aesthetic beauty. Pictorialism was a photographic practice that emphasised control over subject, space and frame. Beyond the shooting of the image, the aspect of control continued well into the darkroom, where the photographers made adjustments in the developing process and manipulated their negatives to achieve their desired outcomes. In addition to control, Rajaratnam also recognised photography's ability to imagine the world. This view was necessarily a subjective one, a "reshaped" world, in Rajaratnam's terms.

Taken together, these three quotes clearly show the very interesting position that Singapore Pictorialism occupied. There is a sense that photography was a space to negotiate vision, imagination and representation. Ideas of truth and reality were not based on a pre-existing set of circumstances, whether a portrait, landscape or scene, captured accurately in visual form. Yet, such photographs were still seen as an appropriate source of historical records and even a substitute for memory. In other words, some of the pictorial photographers and politicians seemed to have had a rather sophisticated understanding of how such photography could take part in shaping history and memory. Elizabeth Edwards has described photography as "the performance of visual imaginings of local and national identities in constituting a field of historical consciousness within those relations".¹³ While she was specifically referring to the survey photographs of Great Britain in the late 19th and early 20th

<https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/713350a9-115d-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad>

¹³ Elizabeth Edwards, *The Camera as Historian: Amateur Photographers and Historical Imagination, 1885-1918*, *Objects/Histories: Critical Perspectives on Art, Material Culture, and Representation* (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2012), 11.

century, the approach is equally valid and perhaps even more apparent in pictorial photographs of Singapore. By highlighting and making visible particular subject matter – the kampong, the fisherman, the labourer – the photographers brought those images to public consciousness and assigned to them a historical value that deepened over time through the repeated reworking of the same subject matter. In Edwards' terms, the photographs show historical imagination being negotiated at the level of the image.

The latter half of this chapter will discuss specific photographs to illustrate this negotiation. However, I first want to briefly explain how pictorial photography could play such a significant role in imagining history. For this, I turn towards the framework of photographic archive, which brings multiple photographs together and allows for re-use and re-contextualisation. Here, the archive is not just a simple repository of things, but a system from which knowledge and history is created.¹⁴ Photographs can be brought together or split apart, they can enter and exit the archive, which imposes a kind of equivalence on its contents – for example, 'History of Singapore' – and obscures the social or economic linkages behind them. A photograph of a street scene can be placed next to a landscape of a tin plantation or a family portrait, all offering knowledge of Singapore's history. Yet the street scene might have been set up for a salon submission, the tin plantation photograph commissioned for potential investors and the family portrait a sentimental keepsake. The archive provides an illusory neutrality that simultaneously promotes an empiricist model of truth. As Sekula has noted, "The central artefact of this system is not the camera, but the filing cabinet."¹⁵

Yip Cheong Fun's exhibition, or more specifically, its catalogue, was simply a continuation of how the photographic archive operates to illustrate Singapore's history, regardless of the original conditions of production. Prior to his exhibition, three pictorial histories of Singapore had been published. The first was Getchen Liu's

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Routledge Classics (London; New York: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁵ Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (1986): 16.

Singapore: A Pictorial History, which presented 1,200 images, including photographs, sketches and paintings, arranged chronologically.¹⁶ The second was *Singapore: 500 Early Postcards* by Cheah Jin Seng, which grouped the images thematically, for example as 'Multiracial Singapore' and 'Royal Event and Exhibitions'.¹⁷ The final one was *Singapore Through 19th century Photographs* by Jason Toh, also the only book featuring solely photographs, which were ordered by geographical areas such as 'Chinatown' and 'West, North and East Singapore'.¹⁸ All three aimed to add to historical knowledge. The foreword in *Singapore Through 19th century Photographs* by then Chairman of the Singapore National Heritage Board Tommy Koh could really be applied to all three books:

There is a Chinese saying that a picture is worth a thousand words, and this volume proves the point. Filled with beautiful and finely wrought images, it also provides the kind of fascinating detail which reminds us that a city is visualized and shaped by human vision, creativity and skill. [...] And I am gratified that with this volume, so many of Singapore's earliest monuments are seen as they were when they first marked the city's skyline more than a century ago.¹⁹

Here, we see three excellent examples of the workings of the photographic archive. Images are lifted and re-ordered in different taxonomies, paired with new text to present historical narratives. The photographs are there to provide empirical proof of the text, but at the same time, to convey an aestheticised history of Singapore. Consider a photograph of H.N. Ridley, the first director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens. Circulated as a postcard by G.R. Lambert and Co., the caption on the front states "Extension of original grafting on an old para rubber". (fig. 6.1) The image shows a European man in a suit standing next to a large rubber tree being tapped for sap. On the other side of the tree is a dark skinned Malay man. This photo is included

¹⁶ Liu, *Singapore*.

¹⁷ Cheah, *Singapore*.

¹⁸ Toh, *Singapore through 19th Century Photographs*.

¹⁹ Toh, 5.

in the section on 'Multiracial Singapore' in *500 Early Postcards*. Ridley's entire career and role in literally shaping the landscape of Singapore is erased in favour of a representation of a European man standing next to a 'native'. Irony aside, I highlight this example to how the archive might be drawn upon in support of ideology even today. As David Company has noted, "It is not that a photograph naturally says a thousand words, rather that a thousand words can be said about it."²⁰



Fig. 6.1. G.R. Lambert & Co., *Untitled (H.N Ridley in the Botanic Gardens)*, c. 1905, in Cheah, *500 Early Postcards*, Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2006), p. 259.

The photographic archive is able to assimilate all kinds of photography, whether art, documentary, survey and so on, but that assimilation comes with a loss of context.

²⁰ David Company, "Safety in Numbness: Some Remarks on Problems of 'Late Photography,'" in *The Cinematic*, ed. David Company, Documents of Contemporary Art (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2007), 187.

The archive allows art museums to present photographs such as Eadweard Muybridge's geographic survey documents and Dorothea Lange's portraits commissioned by the Farm Security Administration within the discourse of High Art. Sekula has described this "new art history of photography" as one which "rummages through archives of every sort in search of masterpieces to celebrate and sell".²¹ The implication of such a use of the archive is the occlusion of historical specificities but also the operations of power and the systems of knowledge that make these photographs legible within the new context, for example, the museum. While Sekula is largely concerned with the appropriation of photographs as artworks and the aestheticisation that dominates the reading of the work, this thesis has observed the reverse, that is, the attempt to appropriate art photography as historical records. Rather than aestheticisation, it appears that it is the 'real' that dominates the reception of pictorial photography through the archive. However, in both cases, the conditions of production remain concealed, which is necessary for the archive to operate successfully.

I want to make clear that this is not an argument against the appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of photography, nor one against the possibility of treating art photography as a kind of historical record. What I want to highlight is the way such photographs can slide between these diverse functions and that the terms of their legibility are inextricably bound up in the workings of the various institutions, or more specifically in the systems of knowledge that enable us to make sense of these photographs. As Herschberger has argued, the spaces of art and science are never completely separate.²² Drawing upon Foucault, Herschberger contends that the archive is never complete, never distinct. As such, it is the very incoherence and discontinuities of the archive that provide the opportunity to study the production of place, identity and history, and how photography can perform multiple functions simultaneously.

²¹ Allan Sekula, "Reading an Archive: Photography between Labour and Capital," in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (London: Routledge, 2003), 445.

²² Andrew E. Herschberger, "Krauss's Foucault and the Foundations of Postmodern History of Photography," *History of Photography* 30, no. 1 (March 1, 2006): 55–67.

The authority provided by the photographic archive to offer historical narratives is bolstered by photography's indexical capability. The desire to see 'the thing itself' in its photographic image dominated photographic discourse in the initial decades after its invention and continues to persist today. The first photography book was William Henry Fox Talbot's *The Pencil of Nature*, which emphasised the camera's ability to trace Nature.²³ Since then, photography has often been defined by its ability to produce a mimetic representation through the neutral hand of the camera, presenting the photograph as a reflection rather than a translation. This is clearly seen in the Singapore case of presenting Yip as a documentary photographer. However, just as the archive is never neutral, being subject to the act of collecting, cataloguing and display, neither is the space within the photograph, even within documentary practice. Over the years, numerous scholars have taken photography's supposed truth to task.²⁴ The indexicality of the photography is not transparent.

The ability to consistently attribute the qualities of universality and truth to photography is a result of its early history.²⁵ Photographs have been used as court evidence and identification, in surveillance and journalism and of course, as historical records. However, John Tagg has convincingly argued that the truth and knowledge they claim to hold is inseparable from the power and control held by the institutions that use photographs.²⁶ In essence, no matter how realistic, the space of the photograph is a regulated space, a controlled space that is always political and always complicit in the exercise of power. In his analysis of American New Deal documentary, Tagg has further suggested that realism is "defined at the level of signification, as the outcome of an elaborate constitutive process."²⁷ In other words, the photographic realism of representation is not necessarily based on a reality that

²³ William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1969).

²⁴ For example, see Martha Rosler, "In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)," in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (London: Routledge, 2003), 261–74.

²⁵ Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*.

²⁶ See Chapter 3 in Tagg.

²⁷ Tagg, 154.

existed to be captured. Instead, it is a complex process of constructing that reality. As I shall demonstrate, this idea of control and construction was highly valued in pictorial photography, which engaged with its own ideas of reality and representation, that allowed for the creativity of authorship (through personal expression and interpretation) yet took reference from real world situations.

A control of vision

Having established a framework for understanding the reception and re-use of Singapore Pictorialism, I now want to turn to the conditions of its production. The defeat of the British in Singapore in 1942 was a milestone in Singapore history. Although they retook Singapore from the Japanese in 1944, the fragility of British rule had been exposed and noted; crime was rampant and unemployment, sickness and malnutrition continued to plague the nation. Singapore also experienced the Maria Hertogh riots in 1950, the National Service Riots of 1954, and the Hock Lee bus strikes and student protests in 1955. It was a tumultuous time for a Singapore recovering from a difficult Japanese occupation and struggling through a push for independence entangled with the Chinese communists. The period between 1948 and 1960 saw the Malayan Emergency, a term the British Government used to describe the war with the Malayan Communist Party. During this period, more than 6000 Malayan People's Anti-British Army guerrillas, 2000 security forces and 2000 civilians were either killed or missing. However, absolutely none of this was reflected in the pictorial photographs of the 1950s and 60s. In fact, anyone visiting the photography salons would be hard-pressed to imagine the riots and disorder afflicting Singapore.

In his research on painting of the period, Seng Yu Jin has suggested that images reflecting the harsher aspects of life in Singapore were marginalised by the Singapore Art Society (SAS), which acted in concert with the British administration to demonstrate their competence in maintaining order and stability in Singapore.

Picturesque paintings of tranquil landscapes and the peoples of Malaya engaging in their daily activities such as pounding rice seemingly oblivious to the climate of violence during the Emergency served to ease minds. [...] Romanticised pictures of serene street scenes and kampong villages were familiar subject matters painted that conveyed a sense of peacefulness to viewers, an outlet of calm for all the bloodshed happening around them in the early 1950s. Such pictorial schémas of restful images were commonly shown at the SAS Annual exhibitions.²⁸

Following this logic, the depiction of the riots, or poverty and hardship in general, were perceived as potentially subversive because they challenged the British government's ability to provide economic security for its people. Additionally, local representatives of government understood that they had to demonstrate their ability to control the unstable situation in Singapore if they hoped to negotiate with the British for self-governance. Showing images of social unrest would not have contributed to their aims.

The SAS was a national-level art organisation in Singapore that included under its umbrella the British Council, Society of Chinese Artists, Persekutuan Pelukis Melayu, Malaya, Indian Fine Arts Society, Y.M.C.A. Art Club, Singapore Camera Club, Singapore Institute of Architects, Singapore University, Teacher's Training College, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, China Society, and the Friends of Singapore. Established in 1949, its objective was to “encourage the practice and appreciation of the arts in the Colony”.²⁹ It was very active and organised the most high-profile exhibitions of the time, including the annual painting and photography exhibitions. As such, it would have been extremely influential in directing the development of art in Singapore, particularly in its selection and curation of works for these big annual exhibitions. Seng convincingly argues that the SAS supported the British impetus to develop a specific Malayan cultural identity through their exhibitions and

²⁸ Yu Jin Seng, *From Words to Pictures: Art during the Emergency* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2007), 10–12.

²⁹ “Art Society Exhibitions For S’pore,” *The Straits Times*, November 22, 1949.

publications. The idea of a Malayan bloc was part of Britain's long-term decolonisation strategy for the region, to maintain a strong presence capable of withstanding the communist threat while retaining goodwill towards the British. A new Malayan identity, which extended to the arts and culture, was seen as a way to shift the loyalties of the Chinese and Indian immigrants towards their new adopted homeland. This was quite clearly manifested in the development of the Nanyang school of painting.³⁰

Singapore Pictorialism was also closely associated with the SAS, given their organisation of the first seven editions of the annual Open Photographic Exhibition from 1950 to 1956. But beyond that, Pictorialism's existing tenets dovetailed perfectly with the SAS's objectives to assist in the maintenance of social order. In the 1956 issue of *Foto News*, published by the Singapore Camera Club, Raymond Thomas urged photographers in Singapore to:

Leave the horrors of the blind beggar and the starving child to the press photographer to whom they rightfully belong and exercise your talent on the beauty of Nature, human, animal, vegetable or mineral and the elements in all their moods.³¹

This attitude is echoed by the photographers interviewed for this thesis, who generally sought to make beautiful pictures. Pictorialism's emphasis on beauty seemed to predispose its makers towards certain kinds of subject matter that avoided the harsher aspects of life at the time.

This was quite distinct from the developments elsewhere. In 1956, a group of artists formed the Equator Art Society in 1956 and sought to use art to pursue social justice. Members produced realist works with social themes and working class subjects to highlight social inequality and elicit social change. President of the society, Lim Yew

³⁰ Seng, *From Words to Pictures: Art during the Emergency*, 13.

³¹ Raymond Thomas, "Thoughts on Photography," *Foto News* 1, no. 6 (January 1956): 12.

Kwan said, “Art does not allow us to produce ‘beautiful things’. It educates us to think independently... Art will reveal what is truth...”³² Another member of the society, Koeh Sia Yong commented, “Some artists may like to portray ‘nice looking pictures’, well that is their prerogative... but many people are suffering and poor; as artists we have the power to awaken society to their needs.”³³ The priorities of the photographers were clearly different from these artists. However, this did not mean that the photographs produced in Singapore were apolitical documents that did not reflect the realities of life during the period. Rather, the emphasis on beauty allowed for a distinct vision of Singapore to emerge in response to their circumstances.

The silver medal winner for the Landscape category at the first Open Photographic Exhibition in 1950 was K.F. Wong’s *A Symbol of Peace* (fig. 6.2).³⁴ The photograph showed a farmer tilling the field against a backdrop of misty mountains. This was a typical picturesque scene combining the beauty of nature with a human element, visually very similar to the kind of *Mooi Indie* landscapes (literally the Beautiful Indies) identified by scholars such as Susie Protschky. Protschky has asserted the importance of such landscapes as an essential element constituting, as opposed to reflecting, Dutch imperialism in the Indies: “Palm trees, volcanic mountain ranges, verdant valleys and shimmering rice fields gave texture and colour to Dutch imaginings of a distant colonial possession.”³⁵ She suggests that the *Mooi Indie* images of rural landscapes supported a narrative of non-intervention, that is, that the Dutch did not encounter any resistance to their rule, which also did not interfere

³² Ong, “The Nanyang Artists: Eclectic Expressions of the South Seas,” 67.

³³ Ong, 67.

³⁴ There is a discrepancy in the catalogues of the 1st and 2nd Open Photographic Exhibitions. An image of *A Symbol of Peace* is reproduced in the 1st Open Photographic Exhibition catalogue with a caption that it won the Silver Medal for Landscapes. However, it is missing from the list of prize-winners. Instead, the list indicates that Wong won for two other photographs – *Beauty’s Secret* and *Morning Prayer*. *A Symbol of Peace* reappears in the artwork list of the 2nd Open Photographic Exhibition, and K.F. Wong’s name appears as the Silver Medal winner for landscapes. It is unclear what happened, although Wong could have changed his mind about submitting a *Symbol of Peace* in 1950, choosing to submit it for the 1951 exhibition instead.

³⁵ Protschky, *Images of the Tropics*, 9.

with the pastoral panoramas found in the pictures.³⁶ The beauty of the landscape naturalized Dutch control over it.



Fig. 6.2. K.F. Wong, *Symbol of Peace*, c 1950 in the catalogue of the 1st *Open Photographic Exhibition* (Singapore: Singapore Art Society, 1950), n.p.

However, Wong's title offers a hint on how this photograph was meant to operate in the post-war period. The quiet scene was not a naturalisation of imperial vision, but a rejection of the horrors of the Japanese occupation. Given Wong's close ties with the Europeans, I would not interpret the image as an anti-colonial one, but as one that gave viewers a sense of comfort by using familiar aesthetic codes.³⁷ In other words, the beauty of the scene offered a kind of visual pleasure that derived from imagining a better reality. Pictorial photography allowed photographers a space to imagine this alternative reality, to exert some control over the environment in the face of the Malayan Emergency that was occurring at the very time. As Rajaratnam

³⁶ Protschky, 82–83.

³⁷ K.F. Wong did several government commissions and was also friends with Malcolm MacDonald, the British Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia. Fang and Lin, *世界著名摄影家黄杰夫 (Shijie zhuming sheyingjia Huang Jiefu)*.

stated in the earlier quote, photography was “a way of assuring oneself that one is not dominated by the external world”.

The guerrilla campaigns led by the Malayan Communist Party had targeted the rural areas of Malaya, particularly the tin mines and rubber plantations that were the main resources of interest to the British. Wong himself would have been particularly aware of the Emergency as he had taken on a commission in 1949 to photograph the Prince of Denmark during his visit to the various Dutch-owned industries in Malaya, which included the plantations. His biography has described how the party was surrounded by armed guards at all times and how much danger they were in.³⁸ It is thus noteworthy that Wong chose to set his photograph in the countryside rather than the city. *A Symbol of Peace* was a fantasy, not a statement of fact. The work becomes even more poignant with the addition of a later fact – one of Wong’s good friends was shot while travelling in the Penang countryside in 1952.

The idea of such a photographic control of vision is not new, although it has often been associated with imperialism. James Ryan has written extensively about the way the picturesque tradition operated within landscape, not only to frame the way places were seen and understood, but to support the acts of empire. He has discussed at length how European photographers working in the colonies in the 19th century used picturesque techniques to make foreign lands more palatable for audiences back home and to domesticise the colonized landscape within an imperial framework. He asserts that:

...the very idea of Empire depended in part on an idea of landscape, as both controlled space and the means of representing such control, on a global scale. For landscape was not something already ‘out there’ waiting to be recorded on glass plates or sketchpads. Rather, it amounted to a particular way of picturing and imaginatively appropriating space by a detached, individual spectator.³⁹

³⁸ See Chapter 21 in Wong’s biography. Fang and Lin.

³⁹ Ryan, *Picturing Empire*, 46.

In particular, Ryan suggests that such photographs played on the tradition of the picturesque to obscure its ideological function. Like Protschky, he contends that these aestheticised landscapes naturalized imperial vision. In other words, the control that the British had over its colonies was reflected in the picturesque landscapes made and circulated during the time.

Although Ian McLean has studied the paintings of the Australian landscape rather than photography, he has also discussed the way the picturesque is used to illustrate the civilising benefits of colonialism. McLean sees the picturesque landscape as a hybrid space, which showed both nature and culture simultaneously and allowed for the colonisers to engage in visions of redemptive possibilities:

The picturesque confirms the mission of Western empire. The favourite picturesque subjects were the frontiers of civilization where history was in the making; not the clean lines of the city, a post-historical space where history had long reigned, or the wilderness where history is not yet. The picturesque artists preferred a landscape in which the ordered farms and estates bordered wilderness, a synthetic space where nature and culture were always in dialogue...⁴⁰

Like Protschky, McLean suggests that these “redemptive” scenes were a way to legitimise colonisation.

As a British colony, representation of 19th century Singapore followed similar narratives. The picturesque landscape was to be found on the banks of the Singapore River and in the growing city. Using McLean’s terms, culture was seen in the Victorian edifices, the wide boulevards and the orderly plantations, while nature lurked in the tropical forests just outside the city and the sea that surrounded the island, but also in the figure of the native, often found in traditional dress. Photographs celebrated the civilising and modernising processes introduced by the

⁴⁰ Ian McLean, *White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 35–36.

British. An albumen print by G.R. Lambert & Co from the early 1900s shows the busy Commercial Square from the water – the foreground presents numerous boatmen on their sampans industriously going about their business while the background is anchored by large and imposing Victorian buildings.⁴¹ The contrast between the elegant Hong Kong and Shanghai bank on the left, the Exchange Building on the right and the rustic transportation in front precisely highlights McLean’s hybrid picturesque space where the mission of Western empire is legitimised. The order of colonisation is manifested in the harmonious balance of nature and culture, old and new.

Other popular images of Singapore included sweeping panoramas of the waterfront. Another albumen print by G.R. Lambert & Co dated c.1887 shows the sea bordering a gleaming new pavement, with beautiful buildings dotting the landscape, including the dramatic steeple of St Andrew’s Cathedral in the far right.⁴² The landscape also included horse-drawn carriages making their way down the waterfront as well as “exotic” natives walking by whilst bearing heavy loads over their shoulders. The order of colonial rule is particularly apparent in this controlled landscape. The lawns are perfectly manicured and the trees are evenly spaced out, each fenced in by its own metal grille. Keeping in mind that such photographs were made primarily for a European audience, these landscapes were a specific vision of Singapore that used elements of the picturesque to present a naturalised view of British Singapore.

In a book on prints and drawings of Singapore from the 19th century, curator Wong Hong Suen has similarly observed the dominance of the picturesque tradition in landscapes.⁴³ She further notes that:

The predominance of certain depictions reflects how Europeans made sense of the Singapore landscape from a position of power. Views of the bustling harbour

⁴¹ Toh, *Singapore through 19th Century Photographs*, 33.

⁴² Reproduced in Toh, 24–25.

⁴³ Hong Suen Wong, *Singapore Through 19th Century Prints & Paintings* (National Museum of Singapore, 2010), 32.

[...] reflect how the *raison d'être* for the establishment and development as a British settlement was founded upon trade and commerce [...] Views of the town rendered from high vantage points presented a panoramic view of the topography but, more importantly, convinced stakeholders that Singapore was a profitable colony...⁴⁴

However, in a curious twist, she also comments that:

Offering personality and opinions just below the surface, prints and paintings embody the beliefs of their makers and their viewers. They present a rare record of the hand of the artist and, as such, reveal an inherent partiality in a far more self-conscious and powerful manner than photography...⁴⁵

Even though Wong acknowledges that photography was “as much a tool of imperial power” as painting, she does not elaborate on photography’s specific role in this politics of representation. What is this “inherent partiality” of painting? If, in fact, it was an imperial vision, then photography’s feigned neutrality would have *added* to its authority in framing the Singapore landscape, particularly as photography of the time made a very similar use of picturesque principles and showed similar subject matter.

Kwa Chong Guan has asked if in “appropriating [19th century photographs], have we not adopted and unconsciously internalised the tourist gaze embedded in these 19th century photographs? It raises perplexing issues of what then is real and authentic in these photographs.”⁴⁶ Kwa concludes that such images have shaped our social memories of these imagined spaces and contributed to a nostalgia for a bygone world.⁴⁷ If we accept such picturesque aesthetics in 19th century photographs as

⁴⁴ Wong, 50.

⁴⁵ Wong, 51.

⁴⁶ Chong Guan Kwa, “The 19th-Century ‘Origins’ of Singapore Art,” in *Charting Thoughts: Essays on Art in Southeast Asia*, ed. Sze Wee Low and Patrick D. Flores (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2017), 41.

⁴⁷ Kwa, 43.

political, then how do we approach the pictorial photographs of the mid-20th century, which clearly retained elements of the picturesque in its emphasis on beauty? It seems rather contradictory to turn around and say that pictorial photographs provided a neutral and objective record of history. It is similarly naïve to treat such works as a simple expression of beauty, thus reducing them to either formal studies or expressive gestures that “estrangle the real world by aestheticizing it”.⁴⁸ By this, I am referring to the anti-aesthetic position on photography espoused by critics such as Rosalind Krauss. Finally, such images surely operated differently from the 19th century photographs, having been made by the ‘natives’, so to speak, and circulating in a completely different context. As such, they cannot be seen as an extension of imperial vision either, as asserted by Yudhi Soerjoatmodjo.⁴⁹

Constructing landscapes

To understand the thinking of the pictorial photographers, I wish to examine a particular subset of pictorial photography – composite photographs. Composite photography or photo montage involved the use of multiple film negatives, sometimes two, but occasionally up to four or five, to create a single image, or repeating or reversing a single negative within a print to different effects. There were several different types of composite photographs commonly made in Singapore. Examples include a simple overlap of two negatives such as *My Expectation* by Wang Su Fah which depicts a fisherman casting his net against a background filled with fish; the use of graphic elements such as *Dance While the Sun is Bright* by Yip Cheong Fun, which has a complex pattern of lines overlaid on a picture of a ballerina; and complex compositions like Lee Lim’s *Morning on the River Bank*, which carefully combines elements from up to four negatives to form a delicate scroll format landscape in the style of a Chinese ink painting. (fig. 6.3)

⁴⁸ Emerling, *Photography*, 31.

⁴⁹ Soerjoatmodjo, “Beyond Pictorialism: Photography in Modern Indonesia.”



Fig. 6.3. Lee Lim, *Morning on the Riverbank*, c. 1965, gelatin silver print, 36 x 29cm. National Gallery Singapore collection

Composite photographs could be found in practically every salon held in Singapore from the 1950s to the 1970s. In his study of Indian studio photographs which used similar montage techniques, Christopher Pinney has suggested that in the Indian context, photography “is not lexically or semiotically marked in local discourse as indexical, and in most cases is not differentiated from other techniques of iconic representation”.⁵⁰ I argue that this was similar in Singapore during this period. The existence and popularity of composite photographs offers clear evidence that the pictorial photographers felt at ease constructing different orders of reality. This also explains the way pictorial photographs were accepted as “documents” as described in the earlier section – photographs were understood to be a representation, not a reflection. This did not mean that they were not interested in “truth”, but that the truth was not necessarily to be found in an indexical representation. Pictorialism’s tendency to use symbolic rather than descriptive titles further supports such a

⁵⁰ Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (University of Chicago Press, 1997), 131.

reading, as did its practice, which allowed all sorts of darkroom and print manipulation. As David Tay succinctly described, “You can report facts, but you can also write a fiction”.⁵¹

While some composite photographs are very clearly stitched together, others are much more subtle. Consider two photographs by Yip Cheong Fun, whose exhibition I discuss at the start of this chapter. The first is *Morning Round*, 1949 (fig. 4.15), which I also discuss in Chapter Four. It shows the back of a man carrying a large object on his head, walking away from the viewer and into the frame of the image. The setting appears to be coastal – there are three tall coconut trees swaying in the sea breeze, sand on the ground and smaller shrubs lining the sides of the path. There is a hint of rolling hills in the far distance and wispy, low lying clouds. Parts of the photo show the use of infrared film - there is a very bright glow around the tops of the coconut trees and the sky is dark, creating a strange sense of twilight in the scene. The second image is *Homeward Bound*, c1960. (fig 4.16) Similar in composition, this photograph shows a woman in place of the man. She is placed in the exact same area of the frame, also walking away from the viewer and into the image. However, on closer inspection we realize that the photograph is not just similar; certain elements are identical. The three coconut trees, the pathway, the shrubs and some of the clouds are exactly the same as the image from 1949. Yip has simply changed the human figure, added in some fluffy white clouds and enlarged the frame slightly.

Numerous examples of composite photographs can be found in catalogues and newspapers. However, I choose to discuss these two images by Yip for several reasons. Firstly, the works stand out for their technical excellence. By that I mean that one cannot tell that they were made using multiple negatives—the different elements are perfectly stitched together in an extremely realistic composition. In fact, the later work can be identified as a composite photo only because of the existence of the earlier print and the possibility to compare them. With this information, it is likely that *Morning Round* itself was also a composite, with the sky

⁵¹ David Poey Cher Tay, Interview by Claire Yeo, 12 November 2007. Accession number 003197, audio recording, National Archives of Singapore, Reel 10.

and trees shot on infra-red film and the rest of the picture done on regular negative film. Using this method of comparison, I have found another example of Yip's use of this technique in *Samsui Women - A Heritage of Endeavour*, undated and *Samsui Women at Work*, c. 1950s; both feature an identical Samsui woman on the left.⁵² These photographs give us an insight into a pictorial photographer's approach to image-making, namely, that Yip literally pieced together a landscape to suit his needs. This seems at odds with the way his work is later positioned as documentary.

While Yip certainly took "straight" photographs that did not entail manipulation (I have discussed *The Days of Innocence* (fig. 3.10) in an earlier chapter), I am reluctant to describe his work as documentary as the recording of fact was clearly not his priority. Yip was closely involved with the camera clubs and made his work for the salons, whose criteria were purely aesthetic rather than social. In particular, the existence of his composite photographs highlight that aspect of pictorial practice that prioritised form over fact and lends credence to my argument that pictorial photography offered its practitioners a way to order the world. Photography involved a distinct act of control over the environment. Furthermore, this went beyond using composite techniques and included the way photographers asked their subjects to pose, cropped away distracting or extraneous objects or used different shooting angles to highlight different components of the image. This is not to say that Yip's work, or pictorial photographs in general, cannot act as documentary records, but it is important to recognise that the pictorial photographers were very comfortable manipulating a print to create their final image.

Yip's two photographs are also interesting for their time frame and repetition. Made in 1949, just after the declaration of the Malayan Emergency, I propose that *Morning Round* operated similarly to K.F. Wong's *A Symbol of Peace*. It was an idealised vision of calm and tranquillity, constructed as a bastion of order in a chaotic situation. The figure of the man walking away might even be said to represent Yip's rejection of the reality of society's disorder for the pictorial harmony to be found within the frame of

⁵² Reproduced in Tan, *An Ingenious Reverie*, 70.

the photograph. Pictorialism's aesthetics offered photographers both an escape as well as a way to control the visibility of their circumstances. In Rajaratnam's words, it was an assurance that "one is not dominated by the external world". Note that despite the constructed nature of the image, Yip did not set up a completely foreign landscape – the use of the palm trees and the human subjects, particularly their dress, situate the photographs in Malaya. So while pictorial photography did not demand a factual recording of the land, Yip retained a sense of place that marked the majority of his photographs. It is important to understand that Yip was re-imagining his own land, not some unknown country; it was not a purely aesthetic exercise. These geographical markers naturalised the images and are probably also why his works could subsequently take on the status of documentary.

Homeward Bound was made more than a decade later in the 1960s. By then, the Malayan Emergency was over and the government had cracked down on the communists, but Singapore was still experiencing unrest, particularly in the form of racial tensions. In the intervening decade, Yip had continued to work very prolifically and achieved international success. In 1955, he made *Rowing at Dawn*, which won a string of salon awards for the next decade, including in Malaysia, Indonesia, Berlin, Washington and France.⁵³ In 1957, he was made Associate of the Royal Photographic Society and his work *Reflection* was reproduced in *Photograms of the Year*, a publication that only selected the best pictorial work internationally. In 1961, he became a Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society. During this period, Yip photographed a huge variety of subjects, ranging from kampong scenes to construction sites, as well as his neighbourhood of Chinatown. While he revisited multiple subjects often, he never made as similar a print as *Homeward Bound* was to *Morning Round*. So why did Yip feel the need to make *Homeward Bound* more than ten years after *Morning Round*? I propose that Yip's reworking of an almost identical photograph was part of a larger turn to nostalgia by the pictorial photographers, which offered another way for the photographers to make sense of their world.

⁵³ Tan, 29.

Reclaiming the Past

The rapid changes in Singapore after World War II meant that there was a much greater sense of the past existing with the present. This dislocation combined with the pluralism in pictorialism described in Chapter Three allowed for an interesting expression of modernity in the form of a kind of nostalgia. By this I do not mean that the photographers were rejecting modernity and change for some sort of idealised past, but that these images of the “past” were themselves a crucial part of Singapore’s developing modernity. These “primitive passions”, to use Rey Chow’s term, were in fact, a condition of modernity. Chow has asserted that China’s modernity arrived with a question – How to deal with the people? – which led Chinese intellectuals to look at China as though it were “a foreign culture filled with unfamiliar others”.⁵⁴ So just as the Western modernism worked by primitivising others (as in the cases of Picasso, Gauguin, Modigliani, but also in the case of modernist American photography), so too did Chinese modernity depend on this relationship. Chow suggests that Chinese art forms *turned* modern precisely the same way, by drawing upon the primitive.⁵⁵ But instead of exoticising others, they exoticised themselves.

Although Chow’s examples of the primitive centre on the figure of the woman, I suggest that in Singapore, it revolved around visions of the rural as a sign of the past. The silence of the photograph as a still image and its ability to circulate through time allowed a space to negotiate origins, history and change. More generally, the nature of photography allows a kind of temporal slippage – whatever is photographed immediately becomes past, even when taken in the present. Photography’s reproducibility and its continual circulation through the salon exhibitions as well as their respective catalogues reinforced this sense of the past. In other words, they repeatedly performed the past. In fact, *Homeward Bound* highlights this exact function — a variation remade a decade after the original. Yip was known to use allegorical titles, and *Homeward Bound* might have signalled his longing for the

⁵⁴ Chow, *Primitive Passions*, 19.

⁵⁵ Chow, 21.

peacefulness of the rural past even as the past acted as the foundation for the modern present. In other words, despite ostensibly depicting the past, these images were always about the present, and formed a crucial part of the new modernity. Photographs of the rural thus operated to simultaneously show both the past *and* the present. This dichotomy was part of the process of re-imagining Singapore during this critical period of change.

According to Barthes, loss, disappearance and death were always embodied in a photograph.⁵⁶ As such, photography was uniquely placed to tackle the anxieties arising from the rapid changes that accompanied modernity. However, the desire to capture the past was not a desire to simply isolate and consume a piece of history, but to create “an affective and sensory relation of past material to the present”.⁵⁷ The past was activated to serve the present. Edwards has suggested that a dynamic relationship exists between past and present, generated by a culture in the process of re-defining itself. The sense of actual loss was offset by the ability of the photograph to preserve a part of that loss. Photographs create chronotopic landscapes, sites that comprised layers of time and space, brought together to form an imagined whole. Within such visual spaces, time is not linear but layered, shaping new narratives that can bring together different temporal points but also dispersing others, contributing to a new “historical topography”, one that relies heavily on imagination.⁵⁸

The question of origins is a particularly fraught one for Singapore, with its population of multi-ethnic migrants. C.J. W-L Wee has noted that Singapore did not have a state-sanctioned history stretching back to some primordial beginning. Any impulse towards ethnic origin needed to be checked to avoid societal unrest. As mentioned, Singapore had suffered from simmering racial tensions since the 1950s, which finally culminated in the expulsion from Malaysia in 1965. Race was consistently at the forefront of politics at the time. To tackle this problem, Singapore’s government

⁵⁶ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*.

⁵⁷ Edwards, *The Camera as Historian*, 165.

⁵⁸ Edwards, 165–66.

used the neutral narrative of progress in the form of industrial and capitalist modernity itself to homogenize the racial and cultural differences within Singapore's population.⁵⁹ I contend that this loss of origin combined with the anxieties of modern life led photographers to turn to images of the rural to play out their fantasies of origin, that is, signs of origin were displaced onto the rural as the universal reference.

Photographers frequently went out to capture the rural areas of Singapore and sometimes Malaysia, particularly the kampungs (the Malay term for village), as well as the newly constructed buildings, bridges and roads, and often on the same day.⁶⁰ These photography excursions were called "safaris" and a description that appeared in *The Singapore Free Press* by PSS member Sunny Giam is very telling. In narrating the trip to "a quiet kampong deep off Kim Chuan Road", Giam used phrases like "the hunt", "armed with \$30,000 worth of equipment", and described the clicks of the shutters as a "twenty-one gun salute".⁶¹ The literal hunting down of these kampungs and fishing villages was a regular occurrence and the photographs that resulted from it formed a significant part of pictorial work. The militant language is significant, supporting the idea of the pictorial photographers treating photography as a form of control over the environment.

An excellent example of the kind of picturesque kampung scene prized by the pictorial photographers is *Her Daily Work* (fig. 6.4), which was most likely made in the 1950s. It looks to have been shot at Mata Ikan – the mist is actually the smoke from the burning of crushed cockle shells, which was used to make whitewash paint. The picturesque effect of the light coming through the smoke made Mata Ikan a favourite with the photographers and a frequent destination of the Sunday outings. The photographer, Wu Peng Seng, was a contemporary of Yip Cheong Fun and a very active member of the PSS, regularly joining the Sunday safaris. Wu consciously

⁵⁹ C. J. W.-L. Wee, *The Asian Modern: Culture, Capitalist Development, Singapore* (Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 34.

⁶⁰ Tan Lip Seng has described in detail the Sunday outings by the Photographic Society of Singapore. Interview by Teo Kian Giap, 11 February 2010, reel 5.

⁶¹ Giam, "On Safari."

created a photograph of “old” Singapore – there is no sign of the bustling industry of Singapore in this photograph, only a quiet village with a woman carrying water from the well. The mistiness of the scene adds to the feeling that this is a Singapore of the past. While Wu also made composite works, they were much more obvious and did not present a seamless landscape like Yip’s. For example, *Spring Tide* is a semi-abstract composite image of three negatives – the nude torso of a woman, an anchor on the beach and the ripples of the sea.⁶² Instead, Wu’s control over vision manifested in his meticulous compositions and choice of subject matter. He was a master at crafting an affective image and understood the way detail and aesthetics could install a sense of time and place.



Fig. 6.4. Wu Peng Seng, *Her Daily Work*, c. 1950s, gelatin silver print, 36.5 x 44cm. National Gallery Singapore collection.

⁶² Wu Peng Peng, *Spring Tide*, undated, gelatin silver print, collection of National Gallery Singapore, 2007-01102. See <https://roots.sg/Roots/learn/collections/listing/1064230>



Fig. 6.5. Wu Peng Seng, *At Rest*, 1964, gelatin silver print, 48.5 x 39cm. National Gallery Singapore collection.

Similar to Yip, contemporary interpretation of Wu's work has emphasised the historical value of the images. A newspaper article described Wu's photographs as showing "the idyllic country life of bygone days, featuring scenes such as geese swimming leisurely in a pond, coconut trees swaying in the breeze, fishermen casting their nets in the hope of a good catch, or a kampong maiden going about her daily chores".⁶³ The constructed nature of Wu's photographs is completely overlooked for its supposed representation of what another article describes as "everyday life from the 1940s and 1950s".⁶⁴ Consider a work like *At Rest*, 1964 (fig. 6.5), which depicts a fishing boat parked under a cluster of palm trees. Emptied of any human subject, the strong sunlight coming in from the left casts everything in shadow, highlighting the

⁶³ "美的旅程 [Mei de Lu Cheng]," *联合早报 [Lianhe Zaobao]*, October 19, 1996 English translation of description taken from http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2014-01-16_160401.html, accessed 6 October 2017.

⁶⁴ "Seeing Beauty in Everyday Life," *The Straits Times*, April 17, 2008.

shapes and creating a dramatic silhouette. The photograph is theatrical—it is *performing* the idea of the fishing village.

These examples of Wu's work are not unique. In general, his prints exhibit a very strong sense of design and pattern, with great sensitivity to lines and shapes. Looking at them, it is hard to reconcile such images with a representation of daily life. Instead, they are stylized photographs, which reveal a pronounced ability to edit on Wu's part and a keen understanding of iconography. Through strict composition and framing, Wu consistently made works that tread the line between decorative and illustrative, which was perfectly in keeping with Singapore Pictorialism's commitment to beauty. From his work, we can see that the attitudes the pictorial photographers had to composite photographs extended to non-composite photographs as well — the photographers continued to construct the land, albeit not as literally. Like Yip, Wu was a very successful salon exhibitor – he was made a Fellow of the Royal Photography Society in 1960 and won the Ang Chwee Chai Challenge Cup in 1962 for the most number of photographs accepted by foreign salons that year. His works reflected the salon standards of the time.

Pictorialism's focus on beauty meant that such rural images were always idealized. Illness, hunger and lack of shelter were never present in these visual imaginations of the past. Instead, fishermen were seen mending their nets or going out to sea, pretty maidens wandered around the kampungs, scenic palm trees lined the seaside and bare-bodied children happily ran around playing. The consistency of these tropes of rural life and the way the photographs repeatedly circulated around the exhibitions established a distinct vision of the past. The desire to depict rural landscapes was so entrenched and consistent that in 1961, Sunny Giam complained about the sheer number of photographs of "misty coconut palms" being submitted to the 9th Pan-

Malayan Photographic Exhibition.⁶⁵ Despite such criticism, as late as 1979, Singaporean photographers were still making and showing such nostalgic pictures.⁶⁶

These landscapes took on an iconic status in collective imagination; practically every single photographer made such images and every single salon exhibition would feature at least a few. They were so popular that when Singapore gradually lost its kampungs to urban redevelopment, the photographers simply went overseas to find similar subject matter. For example, the PSS frequently organised excursions to the East Coast of Malaya. After the first trip in 1955, an article for the club magazine enthusiastically described the “paradise for camera-bugs” seeking kampungs with its “picturesque inhabitants” and “nature at its glory”.⁶⁷ The East Coast proved to be such an attraction for photographers that the club organised another larger excursion in 1956, which was followed by an exhibition at the British Council Gallery.⁶⁸ Ten years later, the *PSS Monthly Bulletin* was still promoting the destination:

There are small villages along the East Coast from Kuantan where you can stop to take pictures before reaching Kuala Trengganu. These good hunting grounds are Kuala Kemaman, Kijal, Kemasik, Paka, and Marang. It is interesting to study the quiet and simple life of the people. Everything goes so slowly. A great contrast compared to the city life of Singapore.⁶⁹

PSS members were even advised that a trip to the East Coast was de rigueur to win international salon awards.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Sunny Giam, “Judges Give ‘duck’s Egg’ for Pictures of Skimming Ducks,” *The Singapore Free Press*, September 14, 1961.

⁶⁶ The 30th Singapore International Salon in 1979 included a work by Chong Soon Yee that showed a bullock cart being driven across a deserted path lined with palm trees.

⁶⁷ Sunny Giam, “East Coast Trip,” *Foto News 1*, no. 6 (January 1956): 36–37.

⁶⁸ Wan Tho Loke, Speech at Opening of East Coast Photographic Exhibition, 17 Nov 1956, MS 6057, Loke Wan Tho Papers, National Library of Australia.

⁶⁹ *PSS Monthly Bulletin 5*, no. 5 (May 1964).

⁷⁰ Siew Poh Lim, “The East Coast of Malaya,” *Foto News 1*, no. 7 (December 1959): 25.

Helen Ennis has described landscape images as the mythologising of land, reflecting a people's possession and attachment to it.⁷¹ I believe that this was one of the functions these rural images performed. In the light of the fight for independence, these images stood for a land that had not yet been colonised. One could even argue that these photographic landscapes worked to reclaim both history and the land for the new nation of Singapore. The nostalgic images provided a sense of continuity and connection with the past, but they also worked as a contrast to modern Singapore; they formed a complex temporal response to the anxieties of modernity. The images were not simply about recuperating a lost history, although that was a part of it, but also about finding a space for Singapore in the post-war and post-colonial world. The search for a distinct temporal order and narrative was also very much a part of the modern condition. Photography thus offered a way to deal with history through visibility and imagination, while simultaneously bringing Singapore into a self-conscious modernity by distancing the primitive in the form of the rural.

More recently, sociologist Chua Beng Huat has noted the emergence in the 1990s of a different kind of nostalgia for the kampung.⁷² Chua asserts that the kampung became a symbol for a more relaxed way of life, juxtaposed against the rat race of the present. This new longing for the kampung emerged as a distinct critique of present everyday life. The spirit of the kampung was invoked in response to the stress and anxieties of industrial modernity.⁷³ More specifically, Chua observes that this nostalgia was "an attempt to control one's life rather than have it controlled by the logic of capital".⁷⁴ This was a shift in the symbolism and function of the kampung that first emerged in the 1950s with pictorial photography. In addition, I believe that the use of the kampung as a "stylised form" of the past was a result of the way that it was previously reworked as an image by the photographers and subsequently

⁷¹ Helen Ennis, *Photography and Australia, Exposures* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), 8.

⁷² See Chapter 8 in Beng Huat Chua, *Political Legitimacy and Housing : Stakeholding in Singapore* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁷³ Chua, 164.

⁷⁴ Chua, 165.

transferred to younger generations who never experienced living in one.⁷⁵ The kampung, abstracted and formalised by the codes of pictorialism, left out the unsanitary living conditions, the shortage of space and widespread social problems such as gambling. As such, such images assisted the purposes of nostalgia in transforming lived experience into fond recollections. Furthermore, this vision was naturalized to the extent that contemporary opinion associated them with documentary, providing them with scientific authority and becoming a formative strand of historical imagination.

Building the Future

Even as they imagined the past, photographers were simultaneously imagining the future. While images of 'past' Singapore showed the rural, images of modern Singapore focused on scenes of building and construction. One of Wu's most accomplished works was *Construction*, 1958 (fig. 6.6). Here was a completely different scene – a labourer is literally in the process of creating the new Singapore. The hard edges and high tonal contrast point toward a modern metropolis totally at odds with *At Rest*, which ironically, was actually made six years after *Construction*. The composition, with multiple strong diagonal lines cutting across the frame, is a distinct shift from the more classical arrangement of subjects in *Her Daily Work* and adds to the graphic quality of the work. Wu also used a composite technique to add a second image of the same scene in the background.

⁷⁵ Chua, 156.



Fig. 6.6. Wu Peng Seng, *Construction*, 1958, gelatin silver print, 49 x 40cm. National Gallery Singapore collection.



Fig. 6.7. Tham Yew Fun, *Division of Labour*, c. 1956 in *Photograms of the Year* (London: Iliffe, 1957), plate 70.

Images of labourers were very popular and depicted in all sorts of industries. If the rural images were about the land, then the construction images were about the

people, particularly the figure of the heroic worker. One of the most interesting examples of such kinds of photographs is *Division of Labour* (fig. 6.7) by Tham Yew Fun, which won the Silver Medal at the 4th Pan-Malayan Photographic Exhibition in 1956. The photograph was also selected for inclusion in *Photograms of the Year* in 1957. In an article announcing the win in *The Singapore Free Press*, Sunny Giam describes *Division of Labour* as possessing “a line of mystery and imagination, exquisitely presented. In *Photograms*, the caption is slightly more detailed:

A very interesting form of “frieze” photograph. The outline of the figures silhouetted against the sky is one which is exciting to follow and they are therefore unified in the mind although separated in fact. The unusual sky makes a dramatic and appropriate background for the great activity of the workers and the diagonal directions of the clouds give a strong impression of movement. The low viewpoint was necessary to obtain the sky background but it also adds drama to the atmosphere.⁷⁶

The two preceding descriptions were not unusual for the time. Written by pictorial photographers, it was typical for them to focus on the formal elements of the photograph, which were often also the reason for the photograph’s success in the respective salons. However, I want to consider how the image might also operate in the context of Singapore’s modernity.

Division of Labour shows a group of men hard at work, possibly clearing the land prior to construction. The silhouette of the men against the sky and the use of a panoramic frame create a dramatic frieze-like effect, both sculptural and monumental in its impact. Here, the focus is not on the individual worker but the combined efforts of the team. The title *Division of Labour* further supports the idea of cooperation – of workers coming together to create something bigger than themselves. If *A Symbol of Peace* rejected the horrors of the war, then *Division of Labour* was hope for the future, one that would be built by people coming together

⁷⁶ *Photograms of the Year*, 1957, 21.

to work towards a larger whole. This was a different vision of the land, shifting from the kampung to the city. The photo was made in 1956, the year Singapore commenced the *merdeka* (freedom in Malay) talks in London to negotiate self-governance. It is also worth noting that 1955 saw some of the worst strikes in Singapore with 946,354 man-days lost.⁷⁷ Industrial labour was constantly on people's minds.

World War II had resulted in massive infrastructural damage in Singapore and the lack of adequate housing was a major problem immediately after the war. A 1947 British Housing Committee report described Singapore as having "one of the world's worst slums". Singapore's fast growing population did not help but the colonial government did not prioritise housing, instead directing resources towards resuming trading activities and establishing the British military complex.⁷⁸ After achieving self-governance in 1959, the Singapore government established the Housing Development Board to urgently address this problem. In the first five years of its operations, the HDB built 54,430 apartment units.⁷⁹ By 1980, it had built over 130,000 units. Other than housing, infrastructure, schools and other amenities were also needed. The Public Works Department was responsible for a wide range of public infrastructure works, including roads and sewage systems and successfully managed the construction of the Paya Lebar Airport (1955), the Merdeka Bridge (1956) and the first multi-story carpark at Market Street (1964).⁸⁰ Education was also a priority for the new government and one school was built per month for eight years from 1959.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Singh and Arasu, *Singapore, an Illustrated History, 1941-1984*, 151.

⁷⁸ Belinda Yuen, "Squatters No More: Singapore Social Housing," *Global Urban Development Magazine* 3, no. 1 (November 2007), <http://www.globalurban.org/GUDMag07Vol3Iss1/Yuen.htm>.

⁷⁹ *Annual report of the Housing and Development Board* (Singapore: HDB, 1965), 10.

⁸⁰ *Built by Singapore: From Slums to a Sustainable Built Environment*, Urban Systems Studies (Singapore: Centre for Liveable Cities, 2015), 9, <https://www.clc.gov.sg/publications/uss2014-built-by-singapore.htm>.

⁸¹ *Built by Singapore: From Slums to a Sustainable Built Environment*, 18–19.

The 1950s and 60s thus saw a literal building of Singapore and it is no surprise that the pictorial photographers grasped the act of building as a definitive one for independent Singapore, marking a new possession of the land. As Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew proudly proclaimed a month after independence: “Over 100 years ago, this country was a mud-flat, a swamp. Today this is a modern city. Ten years from now, this will be a metropolis!”⁸² Photographers would have seen construction sites all around them, making them an easy and accessible subject. However, the photographers also made trips outside the city to shoot related industries such as the iron and steel mill, as well as saw mills. The labourer in a landscape under construction became another chronotope, this time pointing towards the future rather than the past, and contributing to a narrative of progress and development.

Chua Tiag Ming was a younger photographer who made most of his works in the 1960s and 1970s. While also a member of the PSS, he did not have as significant a reputation as Yip and Wu, nor did he exhibit as widely. Nevertheless, he made a series of works that consistently focused on the figure of the labourer. In *Calcining* (fig. 6.8), we see a barefoot man wearing only a pair of shorts carrying shells towards a furnace at a calcification factory. The muscles on the labourer’s bare torso are clearly defined, almost statue-like, bringing our attention to his strength and masculinity. *Untitled (Two Workers)* (fig. 6.9) is one of Chua’s most beautiful photographs. A simple image of two workers at a construction site, it nonetheless conveys drama and gravitas. In *Planks Drying* (fig. 6.10), Chua uses composition and a low angle to create a dramatic image of a worker at the top of a platform arranging wooden planks to dry in the sun. In all three photographs, the focus is on the labourer at work. And unlike his peers, Chua selects simple and descriptive rather than allegorical titles for his works, choosing to highlight their acts of labour. However, all three images are also aestheticised, in the sense that they isolate the human figure and follow quite traditional compositional formats. For example, Chua specifically notes that in *Planks Drying*, he wanted a triangular composition and had used an orange filter to highlight the grain of the wood and the clouds.

⁸² Fook Kwang Han, *Lee Kuan Yew, the Man and His Ideas* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1998), 310–11.



Fig. 6.8. Chua Tiag Ming, *Calcining*, c. 1960s, gelatin silver print, 39.8 x 49.7cm. National Museum of Singapore collection.



Fig. 6.9. Chua Tiag Ming, *Untitled (Two Workers)*, c. 1960s, gelatin silver print, 40.1 x 49.4cm. National Gallery Singapore collection.



Fig. 6.10. Chua Tiag Ming, *Planks Drying*, c. 1960s, gelatin silver print, 49.1 x 39.5cm. National Museum of Singapore collection.

In general, there is quietness to Chua's photographs, completely at odds to a normal construction site. He used pictorial aesthetics to turn our attention from the tough lives of these workers to their heroism in building the nation. In every example, we cannot see the face of the labourer clearly. They are either turned away or cast in shadow. This was quite typical for Singapore Pictorialism, where the focus was seldom on the individuality of the person, but on him/her as a symbol for a larger idea or emotion. In this case, Chua was not interested in the worker himself but in the figure as a representation of the Labourer, a hard and tireless worker doing his part for the nation. The men are always depicted in action. Chua gave his labourers dignity and determination and there is a palpable sense of admiration in these works that is actually quite unusual for pictorial photographs.⁸³

⁸³ It is worth noting that Chua made his fair share of nostalgic kampong photos as well.

The iconic status of the labourer in pictorial photography can be further seen in two of Ho Koon Sang's photographs. In *Labourer*, c.1958 (fig 6.11) and *Cleaner*, c.1960s (fig 4.11), we see the expected image of a man at work. However, both these photographs are posed. In the former, the labourer is in fact fellow photographer Yip Cheong Fun, whose works were discussed earlier. In the latter, it is Ho himself posing as the titular cleaner working on the façade of the National Theatre; he shot the photo using a timer.⁸⁴ These scenes were set up for the camera; the photographs were literally performances of labour. The fact that Ho chose to make these photographs tells us they had become a featured type within pictorial circles. Furthermore, it did not matter if the subjects were real labourers, as long as they were *recognisably* so.



Fig 6.11. Ho Koon Sang, *Labourer*, c.1958, gelatin silver print, 40.1 x 28.3cm. National Gallery Singapore collection.

⁸⁴ Ho Koon Sang, interview by author, Singapore, 25 June 2018.

It is important to remember that these images were all seen either within the context of the exhibitions or the catalogues, never as a single image. In an exhibition, this meant that images of the fisherman mending his net in a kampung would be seen alongside those of labourers at a construction site, sometimes at the same moment and on the same wall. Catalogues allowed this encounter to be repeated multiple times into the future. Annual salons presented a constant variation of the same themes. It is through this circulation, or trafficking as Sekula calls it, that historical imagination starts to take shape. Photography's removal from a temporal fixity – it is always both then and now – allowed the viewer to re-temporalise the moment or even to imagine new temporal sequences. (The composite image itself already contains multiple moments.) In this case, it opened a space for national narratives to be imagined and (re)constructed, to elaborate past, present and future.

Fractured landscapes

The final photographer I want to discuss in this chapter is Tan Lip Seng, who was known for his pioneering work in colour derivation and composite techniques. A medical photographer by profession, he was a very active member of the PSS. Born in 1942, he started practising photography in 1957, while he was only 15. Tan started photographing in black and white but quickly moved to experimenting with colour, which subsequently led him to create some of the most abstracted landscapes produced by pictorial photographers in Singapore. There were others who worked in a similar style, but Tan was the most consistent and prolific. He produced mainly colour slides – these were never developed as prints during the time but circulated as 35mm slides and viewed via projection. Each slide often comprised several layers of film, which were mounted together on a cardboard frame.

In the 1960s, Tan produced numerous photographs featuring workers, including a series on the Samsui women, who were female migrants from China who undertook a lot of hard labour in Malaya, particularly in construction. Easily identified by their

red cloth hats, the women were seen as hard workers who made a large contribution to the development of Singapore. They continued to work at construction sites till the 1980s and have become a cultural icon with tee-shirts and dolls sold as well as a television drama series made about their lives in 1986. They were a fairly popular subject matter for photographers. In *Two Workers*, 1959 and *At Rest*, 1968 (fig. 6.12 and 6.13), we see a pair of Samsui women in a distorted landscape. The lurid pink and blue backgrounds effectively remove the images from reality - Tan used diazochrome film layered with regular Kodak colour transparencies to create the effect. These photographs show a fragmented and abstracted landscape. They have been obviously manipulated by the photographer and edited to remove all unnecessary detail. For example, in *Two Workers*, the pink background effectively eliminates all context leaving the two subjects the focus of attention in a flattened and fractured plane. Different from Yip's work, it is easy to see that these are composite images. The unnatural colours and the hyper-simplified composition make it very clear that the scenes are constructed. At the same time, the inclusion of the Samsui women make it very clear to local viewers that this was taken in Malaya.



Fig. 6.12. Tan Lip Seng, *Two Workers*, 1970, reprinted in 2015, digital print on cotton, 33 x 50.8cm. National Gallery Singapore collection.



Fig. 6.13. Tan Lip Seng, *At Rest*, c.1959, in *Light & Shadow: Tan Lip Seng's 50 years of photography* (Singapore: Art Retreat, 2009), n.p.

While in his work as a medical photographer the objective was to make accurate and detailed records of patients, Tan's artistic work went in the opposite direction. It was never his intention to make historical records of Singapore, but rather to pursue success at the photographic salons, the only place where these photographers could show their work. To that end, he sought to make attractive images that would stand out to salon juries. He did not allow a simple problem like unwilling subjects to stop him. The Samsui women typically did not like being photographed and would even throw stones at the photographers who tried. So Tan simply hired two Samsui women to pose for him and a friend.⁸⁵ He was very successful and went on to win numerous salon awards all over the world. He received his Associateship from the

⁸⁵ Tan Lip Seng, interview with author, Singapore, 22 June 2018.

Royal Photographic Society in 1964 for his monochrome prints, and his Fellowship in 1970 for his colour slides. Both were submitted in the Pictorial Category. In our conversations, Tan clearly defined himself as a “pictorialist” and his work as “pictorial photography”, never “documentary”.

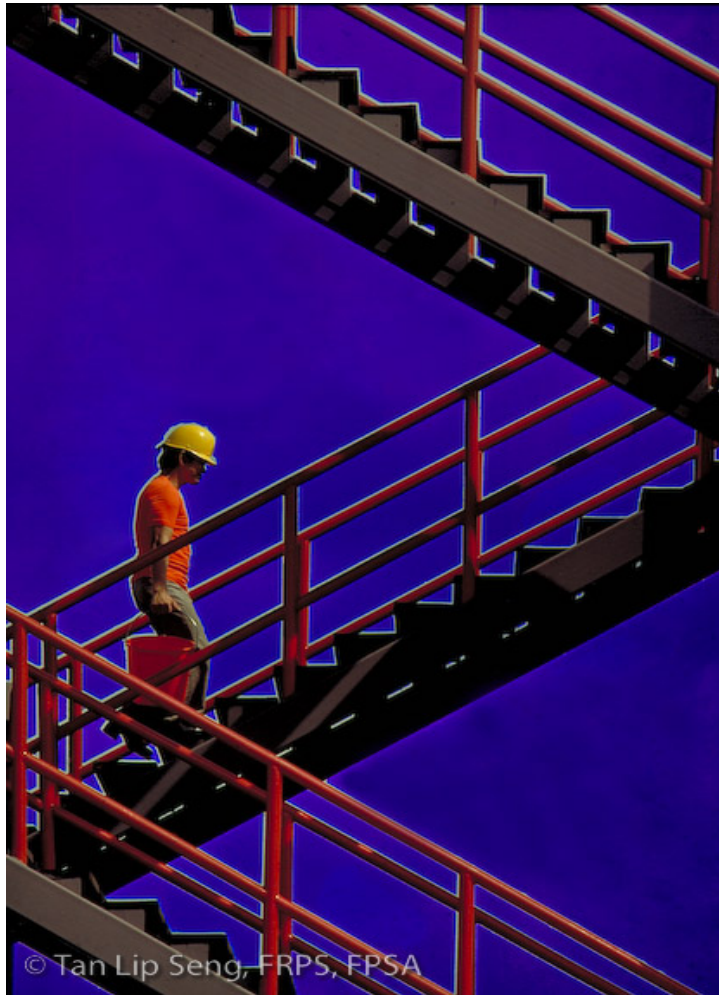


Fig. 6.14. Tan Lip Seng, Z, c.1970, in *Light & Shadow: Tan Lip Seng's 50 years of photography* (Singapore: Art Retreat, 2009), n.p.



Fig. 6.15. Tan Lip Seng, *Under Construction*, 1970, reprinted in 2015, inkjet print on cotton, 33.5 x 52.5cm. National Gallery Singapore collection.

Tan also photographed other kinds of workers, such as in *Z* and *Under Construction* (fig. 6.14 and 6.15). Like the Samsui women, the man depicted in *Z* is dressed and posed to provide what Tan describes as “human interest” within the geometric forms provided by the staircase.⁸⁶ In *Under Construction*, he depicts two workers precariously perched on high scaffolding. In both cases, all background detail is completely erased and replaced with a flat plane in a solid colour, focusing the viewers’ eyes on the strong lines of the composition. Unlike Chua Tiag Ming, Tan was not championing the labourer; they are literally just a part of the composition, albeit an important part that brings the entire picture together. Tan used a similar technique in *Iron and Steel* (fig. 6.16). He again completely eliminated the surroundings and added an eye-catching red to the steel struts to provide a stark contrast against the black background. The worker on the left once again provides “human interest”. In all these examples, Tan completely flattens the picture by removing the background, manipulating it to create a new kind of imaginary landscape.

⁸⁶ Tan states that a good photograph must always have “human interest”. He considers this a rule of his photographic practice.



Fig. 6.16. Tan Lip Seng, *Iron and Steel*, 1970, reprinted in 2015, inkjet print on cotton, 33.5 x 52.5cm. National Gallery Singapore collection.

Despite dealing with much of the same subject matter, and even shooting together frequently with the other photographers, including Yip and Wu, Tan's photographs have never been described as historical records, nor documentary. The bright colours and abstracted forms prevent these photographs from being appropriated as such. The inclusion of Tan's work in this study highlights the role of naturalism in influencing the reception and potential reuse of such photographs. In other words, the naturalism in Yip and Wu's (as well as other photographers') photographic images lent itself to both aesthetic (pictorialist) and evidential (documentary) functions, allowing them to play a formative role in historical imagination. In contrast, Tan's works show the artificiality of that naturalism and emphasise pictorial photography's ability to engage in a performance of place and time.

Drawing from Nelson Goodman's theories, Pinney has suggested that photography is concerned with "the creation of worlds, rather than their duplication".⁸⁷ In looking at photographs, rather than thinking about true or false versions of the world, what mattered was whether the depiction fits a particular frame of reference.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Pinney, *Camera Indica*, 191.

⁸⁸ Pinney, 192.

Knowledge that these photographs were constructed or posed did not negate their 'real-ness', but instead revealed a new subjectivity in the photographers' control over landscape, one that paralleled a newfound search for independence from British rule and the anxieties of modernity. This also marked a distinct shift from the colonial images of the 19th century, which relied on photography's supposed neutrality and 'truthfulness' – they were visual proof of European presence and power. The 'truth' of pictorial photographs, on the other hand, did not rely on photography's evidential qualities, but revolved around patterns of photographic imagination, production and recognition. Over time, these patterns took shape around images of rural landscapes, particularly that of the kampong, and images of construction.

Conclusion

The shift from an aesthetic to an evidential appreciation of pictorial photography in Singapore illustrates photography's complicated relationship with history and memory. I started the chapter with some examples of the way contemporary readings of pictorial photographs position them as documentary illustrations of the past. However, this entanglement of values was already present in 1969. At the opening of the 20th Singapore International Salon in 1969, Acting Minister for Culture Wee Toon Boon declared:

Photography is one of the most effective of modern ways to record current history which can be preserved for posterity. I suggest that in a country like Singapore where vast changes are taking place, pictorial records of these changes should be made more and more so that our history can be read through them. It would be useful therefore if more emphasis is laid by our local photographers to capture the changing moods and aspirations of our people who are endeavouring to build a nation that is strong and viable. Those pictures will reveal to the world not only the colourful design of existence in our multi-

racial Republic but also the course along which history is taking us into the future.⁸⁹

This chapter has investigated the ordered world of pictorial photography and sought to understand its role in the construction of place, identity and history of a nation. That is to say, this is not a search for any intrinsic characteristics of Singapore, but to examine how photography participated in this process of construction and how it might connect back to broader national narratives. The photographs discussed all sit in a space between reality and interpretation, which pictorialism allowed and even encouraged. The photographers mentioned were all members of the PSS and served on various salon and club committees. As such, they would have been very aware of the codes and conventions of pictorial practice. From the examples given, it should also be clear that pictorial photography offered these photographers a space for exploration. There was no need to adhere to any sort of demand for a documentary realism; the photographers were allowed to be imaginative and innovative in their works as long as it fell within the salon codes. While they did not depict “the blind beggar” or “starving child” (in Raymond Thomas’s words), they did respond to their current circumstances, and in the process, mediated a new emerging relationship to the land. Pictorial photographs thus offer the ideal vehicle to examine historical imagination and how such collective vision might shift the patterns of memory.

It is important not to overemphasise the intentions of the photographers. Based on conversations, their priority remained achieving success at the international salons, hence their strict adherence to the conventions of pictorialism. By all accounts, they were perfectly happy working within the rules and regulations of the camera clubs and salons. Certainly, I do not believe that they were all self-consciously working to reflect a new social or political reality through their photographs, although some photographers were more obvious in their intentions than others. However, in going

⁸⁹ Ministry of Culture, *Speech by the Acting Minister for Culture Mr Wee Toon Boon at the Official Opening of the 20th International Salon of Photography on Saturday May 3rd 1969 at 5.00pm at the National Library, Singapore*: National Archives of Singapore, <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/79e9739f-115d-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad>

through the images in the various salon catalogues, it is clear that the majority of pictorial photographers in Singapore made the kinds of images discussed in this chapter. In fact, although I was not able to discuss all their works, every photographer mentioned here made a significant number of both rural and construction images, and these are but a small fraction of what was actually produced and exhibited in Singapore. Looking at the salon catalogues, the repetition of such images becomes very obvious. It is this collective photographic practice rather than any single image that calls attention to the new articulation of historical imagination that emerged during this period. The circulation of these photographs fostered and renewed cultural memory by highlighting a shared past and future.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

In the introduction of this thesis, I began with some remarks on the inaugural exhibition of the new Singapore Art Museum in 1996, noting the lack of photography in that survey of modern art. It thus seems fitting to end with a discussion of two more recent exhibitions that have attempted to address this gap. The first is *A Changed World: Singapore Art*, held at the National Museum of Singapore in 2013, and the second is *Siapa Nama Kamu: Art in Singapore since the 19th century*, the inaugural exhibition of National Gallery Singapore that opened in 2015. Both exhibitions situated photographs alongside paintings and acknowledged that photography had a role to play within the art history of Singapore. *A Changed World* aimed to “chart the art history of Singapore [...] in conjunction with Singapore’s own national history”, while *Siapa Nama Kamu* sought to “explore how we can better understand the story of art itself” and “how the development of art in Singapore relates to the modernisation of Singapore as a society”.¹

These exhibitions were significant in allowing audiences to view photographs and paintings of the immediate post-war period together for the very first time. However, there were clear limitations, the most obvious being the very small number of photographs included in the exhibitions. *A Changed World* showed six photographs by Chua Tiag Ming, Wu Peng Seng and Lee Sow Lim out of a total of 125 artworks; *Siapa Nama Kamu* had a grand total of ten pictorial photographs by Chua, Wu and Yip Cheong Fun in an exhibition of over 300 artworks. (These photographers have all been discussed in this thesis.) The paucity of photography and repetition of photographers was largely due to the fact that the Singapore National Collection did not have a significant number of 20th century photographs, which automatically

¹ Szan Tan and Daniel Tham, eds., *A Changed World: Singapore Art 1950s - 1970s, Dialogues* (Singapore: National Museum of Singapore, 2013), 7; Eugene Tan, “Foreword,” in *Siapa Nama Kamu?*, ed. Low Sze Wee, *Art in Singapore Since the 19th Century* (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2015), 6, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvvc600q.3>.

restricted the number of photographs that could be placed in the exhibitions. Research on pictorial photography was also very limited then, an issue that this thesis has addressed.

A Changed World and Documentary

While *A Changed World's* catalogue did acknowledge that these photographs were not “in a documentary style”, the photographs were nevertheless positioned as “(capturing) the development of our nation beyond the usual portraiture or nature photography”² One of the curators further stated: “In the 1960s, when social and urban change was taking place with the resettling of people from kampongs to HDB housing, the photographers were capturing aspects of that theme in their work.”³ John Tagg’s observation of the “demand for realism” is clearly still present. I have addressed such readings in Chapter 6 of this thesis, arguing for a more complex understanding of such photographs than merely capturing a state of affairs. In fact, the insertion of pictorial photographs into a display of paintings should have encouraged the shift away from a documentary appreciation, given that paintings, unlike photographs were not held to some sort of indexical representation. In comparing Chua’s *Planks Drying* (Fig 6.10) with Lee Boon Wang’s *Shipyards*, the curators do suggest that the photographer made use of symbolism to highlight the contributions of the labourer in the making of Singapore, but stop short of discussing the posed nature of a work like *Planks Drying*. Like them, I have highlighted the imaginative elements of such photographs. However, I have also sought to unravel the contingencies of meaning, which is dependent on the context in which the photo is being read or presented.

Throughout this thesis, I have taken the position that photographs never depict a pre-existing space; instead, photography *shapes* the way we see a space. More specifically, I contend that photographs play an important role in constructing and negotiating historical imagination. Drawing from Foucault’s theory of the archive, I

² Tan and Tham, *A Changed World*, 69, 71.

³ Tan and Tham, 71.

have demonstrated how these photographs, despite originally being made as “art” for the salon exhibitions, gradually became appropriated as historical “documents”. The ability of photography to slide between history and imagination also allowed the photographers to shift between past, present and future – to perform a past, construct a present and imagine a future. This is clearly illustrated in *A Changed World*, an exhibition that looks back on Singapore’s history and contextualises these photographs using an account of the building of Singapore.

I have argued that looking at the Singapore created in pictorial photographs not only reveals a subjectivity and agency on the part of the photographers, but also maps out how patterns of historical imagination emerged during the period. These patterns in turn reveal how photography participated in the construction of national narratives in Singapore, namely, that of a successfully industrialising and independent country, occupied by a peaceful multitude of races. The salons and publications, both locally and internationally, reinforced these narratives and their central place in the nation’s memory. Images of idyllic rural life, hardworking construction workers, newly built public housing, and the celebrations at the various local festivals all operated together to confirm this account of modernity. This archive of images further drew from photography’s authority as evidence. It exerted a significant impact on the collective imagination of Singapore, an effect that continues to make an impression today, or at least in 2013, when *A Changed World* was presented.

Siapa Nama Kamu and the Nanyang

Unlike *A Changed World*, *Siapa Nama Kamu* did not purport to convey the nation’s history; art history was the focus. Interestingly, while pictorial photographs were physically present in the exhibition, the essays in the catalogue made no mention of them at all. In the catalogue’s ‘Introductory Remarks’, Low Sze Wee and Shabbir Hussain Mustafa noted that in curating the section of the exhibition that focused on the Nanyang, “a critical question that we have had to contend with is how its story

should be told alongside parallel artistic developments of other ethnic groups in Singapore.”⁴ Low and Mustafa were acknowledging the Sino-centrism of the existing art historical narrative, yet did not mention anything about the dominance of painting and sculpture. The Nanyang occupies a central position in Singapore’s art history and is often cited as the foundation of modern art. The term was used to describe the work of Chinese migrant artists who produced works that integrated the techniques of the School of Paris with traditional Chinese ink painting in a bid to express their specific locality in Malaya. Chronologically, the period of the Nanyang overlaps with the development of Singapore Pictorialism from the 1950s to the 1960s.

Medium was raised in another essay in the catalogue, ‘Nanyang Reverie’ by Ong Zhen Min. The author stated that writing about the Nanyang had revolved around the confluence of Chinese and Western approaches in painting, but that “this approach becomes highly problematic when other forms such as sculpture, woodcut, batik art and photography are brought into the conversation”. She further suggested that: “These peripheral areas can only be included when the framework for Nanyang art discourse is transferred from stylistic expression to creative motivation as the basis for Nanyang art.”⁵ Nothing further is said about photography’s place or how it might potentially problematise the framework of the Nanyang. Instead, Ong simply proposed that the Nanyang could be thought of as the desire for the local, manifested through subject matter such as coastal scenes and coconut groves, and continued to use examples of paintings to illustrate this argument.⁶ Clearly, the writers in the catalogue felt more comfortable writing about painting and sculpture, even though photographs were inserted into the physical display.⁷ This was likely because they were not familiar enough with the photographs

⁴ Low Sze Wee and Shabbir Hussain Mustafa, “Some Introductory Remarks,” in *Siapa Nama Kamu?*, ed. Low Sze Wee, Art in Singapore Since the 19th Century, 17.

⁵ Zhen Min Ong, “Nanyang Reverie,” in *Siapa Nama Kamu?*, ed. Low Sze Wee, Art in Singapore Since the 19th Century, 45.

⁶ Ong, 46.

⁷ I joined the curatorial team in 2014, more than midway through the planning process of the exhibition. Even though I had helped with the selection of

made in Singapore during the period, an issue that this thesis hopes to have resolved.

Chapter Three of this thesis has briefly discussed the emergence of the Nanyang and the parallels between the pluralism of styles in both Nanyang paintings and Singapore Pictorialism. The latter exhibited a stylistic diversity in practice that the dominant narrative of photographic pictorialism was unable to account for. My literature review in Chapter Two has proposed that this narrative has been driven by a Euramerican modernist art discourse. This discourse associated pictorial photography with painterly qualities, to explain the subsequent development of modernist photography with its sharper and clearer lines. This discourse not only fails to account for the early stylistic diversity in pictorialism, even within Europe itself, but is also inadequate for a discussion of pictorialism in other parts of the world, including Singapore. Studies on pictorialism in China, Hong Kong and South Africa have all highlighted the importance of locality in discussions of how pictorialism might have developed in different parts of the world. This thesis has added to this discussion by presenting the Singapore case. Furthermore, in thinking about Singapore Pictorialism, I have avoided using definitions linked to style. Instead, I have built on the research of Abigail Solomon-Godeau and Ulrich Keller and focused on pictorialism's ideology, which was a desire to position photography as art. This understanding better explains the photographers' emphasis on aesthetic concepts such as tone, composition and balance, as well as on the ability to express certain concepts or ideas. It also explains their drive to exhibit their work, while still allowing for a stylistic diversity in practice.

This definition of Singapore Pictorialism has parallels to Ong's proposal for a shift away from stylistic expression in analysing Nanyang paintings and offers a space for Singapore Pictorialism *within* the Nanyang. In fact, the curation of *Siapa Nama Kamu*, by inserting fairly unknown photographs alongside well-known paintings,

photographs, my written contribution to the catalogue was for the final section of the exhibition - 'Shifting Grounds' - which looked at the shift from the modern to the contemporary.

offered an immense opportunity to begin to reconcile photographic practice with broader art history in Singapore. Seeing these exhibitions certainly played a key role in my conceptualisation of this thesis. This went beyond simply legitimising photography as an art form by presenting its works within an institution or art exhibition, an accusation that Lee Wing Ki has levelled at the Hong Kong Heritage Museum.⁸ Lee argues that nostalgia had played an important part in the recontextualisation of the “uncritical” salon photograph. While it was true that Singapore pictorial photographers, like their Hong Kong counterparts, were occupied with formal considerations such as print quality, composition and tone, this thesis has shown that these photographers were not “uncritical”, but responding to the social conditions of the period. Similarly, nostalgia was not necessarily uncritical, but might be an important facet of reconciling with a nation’s contentious past.

In *Siapa Nama Kamu*, the photographs by Yip Cheong Fun and Wu Peng Seng were placed directly opposite paintings by Chen Wen Hsi, Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Chong Swee, Yong Mun Sen and Lim Cheng Hoe and alongside a woodblock print by See Cheen Tee. These paintings, and one print, illustrated the emergence of the Nanyang School. By inserting the photographs among these Nanyang paintings, the photographers are presented as part of this important art historical moment. Furthermore, a consistent visual iconography appears. This relationship is particularly apparent when we compare Chen Wen Hsi’s *Malayan Scenery* (fig 7.1) with Yip Cheong Fun’s *Amidst the Nets* (fig 7.2) – the two works sit almost directly across from each other in *Siapa Nama Kamu*. Both depict a fishing village in which multiple, large fishing nets are suspended on tall wooden frames to dry in the sun. The composition of both works is similar – the vertical nets contrast dramatically with the boats placed towards the bottom of the image, drawing the eye inwards and downwards. Both also include a human figure in the middle of the lowest part of the artwork, providing scale and a point of focus. Chen’s work is ink and colour on

⁸ In his research report for the Asian Art Archive, Lee criticised two recent photography exhibitions as an institutional attempt to reconstruct a “legacy of salon photography” through the frames of “art” and “master photographer”. Lee, “Locating Photographic Practice in Hong Kong since the 1960s,” 43.

paper and dated c.1950s to 1960s, while Yip's photograph is dated c.1940s. Unfortunately, there is no information about where *Amidst the Nets* was exhibited and it is unknown if Chen ever saw the work. However, they were not the only two artists to depict such a scene. Hanging on the same wall as Chen was Lim Cheng Hoe's *Fishing Village at Kukup*, 1963 (fig 7.3), which also depicts fishing boats and nets, although with a wider, landscape orientation.



Fig. 7.1. Chen Wen Hsi, *Malayan Scenery*, c.1950s-60s, ink and colour on paper, 142 x 93.4cm. National Gallery Singapore collection.



Fig. 7.2. Yip Cheong Fun, *Amidst the Nets*, c.1940s, gelatin silver print, 42.8 x 35.6cm.
National Gallery Singapore collection.



Fig. 7.3. Lim Cheng Hoe, *Fishing Village at Kukup*, 1963, watercolour on paper, 50.8 x 72cm.
National Gallery Singapore collection.

Another pair of similar works are Yong Mun Sen's *Prawn Catcher*, c.1950s, and Wu Peng Seng's *Waiting for the Tide*, 1949. Both show idyllic seascapes with picturesque clouds – the former depicts men standing in the knee-high water using their large nets to catch prawns, while the latter shows two men on a boat going out to fish. *Waiting for the Tide* was included in the 1953 Open Photography Exhibition at the Singapore Art Society and was thus likely to have been seen by the painters of the time. It is not my intention to get into a discussion on authenticity, originality and copying here – such issues have been raised in Chapter 4 – or whether the painting or photograph came first. Rather, the similarity of subject matter raises several interesting points. Firstly, there was clearly a relationship between the painters and photographers. I am of the view that the photographers and painters were aware of each other's works and favoured subject matter circulated through both communities. This becomes especially apparent when the works were physically placed together in exhibitions. Secondly, the presence of the paintings is able to complicate our understanding of the photographs and vice versa.

If, as I have argued in this thesis, Singapore Pictorialism consciously attempted to negotiate with Singapore's past, present and future through symbolic representation of certain icons and landscapes, then the use of a similar canon of images in painting would strengthen this argument. The repetition in painting would have solidified the construction of this particular representation of Singapore. On the other hand, an investigation into examples of different subject matter could also provide alternative information about these politics of representation. In analysing these photographs, I have thoroughly elaborated on the photographers' negotiation of nation and identity. The connections between the Nanyang painters and the photographers is something that deserves further research. I believe that this thesis offers a starting point.

This brief discussion of two recent exhibitions has highlighted some issues surrounding the study of photography in Singapore as well as ways in which this thesis has provided insight into broader topics beyond Singapore Pictorialism. The

next sections offer some general remarks on this study and its place within broader photographic scholarship.

History and significance of Singapore Pictorialism

In my literature review, I had noted the scarcity of writing on photography in Singapore. A key contribution of this thesis has simply been to present a chronology of art photography in Singapore. Drawing from newspaper articles and catalogues, I have revealed a thriving photography community that existed alongside that of painting in 20th century Singapore. From the newspaper articles cited, it is clear that photographs were made for aesthetic reasons and exhibited by local photographers as early as the 1920s. Dozens of photography exhibitions were held every year and thousands of prints were made. Although data collection for this thesis was limited by access to photographers and collections – most significantly, several key photographers had passed away, including Wu Peng Seng, Yip Cheong Fun, Yan Fook Luen and Loke Loh Hong – the salon exhibition catalogues have survived in their entirety and offered comprehensive image references. Wu and Yip's works also remained in public and private collections. However, I was unable to speak to any Malay or Indian photographers despite evidence that they were involved in the societies, and was only able to speak to one female photographer, Daisy Chee. Nevertheless, I was able to interview quite a few living photographers active during the period and built up a broad picture of the photography scene at the time, supplemented by the catalogues and newspapers.

Pictorial photography was the dominant expressive form of photography during this period. Pictorialism transferred to Singapore primarily through British influence, and British clubs and publications exerted significant influence on Singapore, particularly through membership and rankings from the RPS in London. However, while Pictorialism in Singapore was closely linked to European Pictorialism in its focus on aesthetics, particularly in composition, lighting and print quality, I have also identified marked differences. Singaporean photographers were more open to

different sorts of subject matter and styles, and the photographic practice itself became associated with ideas of modernity and democracy in Singapore, and subsequently contributed to a kind of collective memory and nostalgia. I chose to term the movement Singapore Pictorialism, to take into account such local inflections and distinguish it from European Pictorialism.

This account of Singapore Pictorialism has significantly expanded the research on photographic history in Singapore but has also enriched the passage of art history, adding a complexity through the introduction of the photographers, the salons, and the circulation of their photographs. It sits alongside existing chronologies of painting and sculpture such as Kwok Kian Chow's *Channels and Confluences* discussed in the literature review. It remains for these histories to be fully integrated with each other, perhaps through detailed studies of key figures involved in both chronicles, such as art patron and photographer Loke Wan Tho and photographer, painter and President of the Singapore Art Society Ho Kok Hoe. This thesis has also extended the history told by scholars like Jason Toh, Gretchen Liu and John Falconer, whose photographic research have all focused on the 19th century, to present a more complete understanding of photography history in Singapore.

This study on Singapore Pictorialism has added a greater international dimension to the development of art in Singapore, a subject that has not received much attention beyond the arrival of migrant Chinese artists. It offers opportunities for future comparative studies in Southeast Asia, joining other national histories written by Karen Strassler and Clare Veal on Indonesia and Thailand, respectively. There is much potential research to be done in uncovering the links between Singapore, China, Taiwan and Hong Kong; the majority of the photographers were ethnic Chinese, and photographers, artworks and publications circulated extensively in the region. This thesis has briefly touched on some of the connections and exchanges with Hong Kong, but more research is necessary, particularly with regards to Chinese-language sources.

Singapore Pictorialism contributes to a richer understanding of pictorialism's history, particularly outside of Europe and America, as well as of the way the movement impacted photographic practice into the late 20th century. It has complicated the existing framework of modernist photography, which positions Pictorialism as a late 19th century movement. This study also engages with the recent critical re-examination of pictorial photography in general – Princeton University's Department of Art and Archeology and the Art Museum co-organised a symposium 'Rethinking "Pictorialism": American Art and Photography from 1895 to 1925' in 2017, and the University of Melbourne organised a symposium on 'Pictorialism in the Asia Pacific' in 2019. The George Eastman House organised *TruthBeauty* in 2008, an important exhibition that acknowledged the development of pictorialism outside Europe and North America, including in Japan, the Czech Republic and Australia, while the Musée Nicéphore Niépce presented *Visions d'Artistes* in 2018, which sought to present new perspectives on pictorialism in Europe until 1960, much later than the accepted 'end' of pictorialism in the 1930s.

Aesthetics and Politics

Linda Nochlin has suggested that "nothing, perhaps, is harder to write about intelligently than photography."⁹ Her reasoning lay in photography's own history and discourses – as both document and art, index and icon. These opposing discursive fields, as both Allan Sekula and John Tagg have discussed at length, come with their own sets of assumptions and power relations, which are difficult to tease apart and in fact can overlap.¹⁰ However, this is exactly what makes the study of Singapore Pictorialism so productive and enjoyable. As photographs self-consciously produced as works of art, the temptation is to assess Singapore Pictorialism in terms of pure aesthetics and formal criteria. The photograph as art further brings with it a whole set of considerations and institutions – authorship, the academy and the market. Yet photography's unique ability to slide between these fields continually complicates

⁹ Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock*, xiii.

¹⁰ Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*; Sekula, "The Traffic in Photographs."

matters and is able to highlight the often-concealed assumptions that lie behind such representations.

In drawing upon the writings of James Ryan, Douglas Nickel, and Elizabeth Edwards as well as the already-mentioned Solomon-Godeau, Tagg and Sekula, it is clear that this study situates itself within a postmodern camp that rejects the autonomy of art and grapples with the politics of photographic representation. It is at this intersection of aesthetics and politics that the most fruitful discussions on Singapore Pictorialism have taken place. Therefore, in thinking about Singapore Pictorialism, this study has gone beyond a purely art-historical methodology which would have placed the focus on the print and the maker. To paraphrase Solomon-Godeau, the analysis extends past the framing edge of the photograph.¹¹ Instead, I have drawn on James Hevia's framework of the photography complex to include in my analysis the conditions of production, circulation and reception. I have also paid close attention to the historical circumstances of Singapore, which in the period under consideration, saw the fight for independence, the desire for modernity and rapid industrialisation. These factors played a significant role in the way Singapore Pictorialism developed as well as in the way the salons and the photographs were subsequently appropriated for various purposes, including for nation-building. As a result, this thesis has not only taken the first step in filling the gap in existing scholarship on modern photography in Singapore but has generated new knowledge about the way visual representation via photography intersected with historical understanding of this period.

Rather than viewing these photographs as independent objects, I have inserted them back into their original historical contexts, including their beginnings as artwork. I have also considered the way they were presented and received by different audiences, and how this might have changed over time. I allowed the resulting friction to bring up various issues surrounding Singapore Pictorialism – modern or pictorial, original or copy, nationalist or cosmopolitan, history or

¹¹ Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock*, xxii.

imagination – which echoed the inherent tension within photography’s dual nature of document and art. This process highlighted the way photography developed within multiple fields, the complexities of this medium, and the way it has been mobilised, throwing up important questions about the politics of representation along the way. If, as Edwards claims, “history is texted by the pattern of its archiving”, then the photographic archive, as the most visible and widely available source of the ‘past’, must occupy a central role in the creation of that history.¹² The way that archive is created, contextualised and used is thus of great significance to our understanding of how history is conceived.

An argument in this thesis has been that Singapore Pictorialism marked the beginning of modern photography in Singapore. However, this definition of modern photography is manifestly not the version of formalist photographic modernism championed by MOMA and its directors. Indeed, much of Singaporean Pictorialism fails John Szarkowski’s test of “the thing itself”, as the photographs have been staged or manipulated.¹³ Nonetheless, the desire for modernity drove much of the developments in photographic practice in Singapore’s post-war period and became entwined with the ideals of independence and democracy. The international network of clubs and salons was a platform for Singapore to be not only represented as a single and coherent state, but also to demonstrate a modern cosmopolitanism aligned to her new and developing national identity. The international salons, which were a major part of the exhibition infrastructure, became symbols of Singapore’s status as an independent nation, where Singaporeans could meet and interact with other modern nations on an even playing field. Singaporean photographers were encouraged to submit works to salons held overseas. The Singapore clubs also hosted several major annual salons in Singapore, with the Singapore International Salon having the highest profile. The photography clubs were officially opened to all races and classes, and did indeed see a mix of professions - doctors, civil servants and even ministers as well as clerks and salesmen.¹⁴ This “democratic” artform was

¹² Edwards, *The Camera as Historian*, 244.

¹³ Szarkowski, *The Photographer’s Eye*.

¹⁴ Giam, “A Hobby to Suit All Pockets.”

often highlighted by club officials and the government as one that was accessible to “ordinary people” and also one with greater appeal compared to “sometimes incomprehensible” painting and sculpture.¹⁵ In general, photography’s connection to both technology and aesthetics made it a suitable new modern artform that met the demands of the new nation, and it was promoted accordingly.

As a nation in the process of gaining independence, Singapore’s national identity was also in flux and the photographers were a part of this negotiation. My study has revealed that the Singaporean photographers frequently manipulated their print to achieve the desired effect; documentary recording was never a priority. As such, I argue that Singapore Pictorialism’s emphasis on the control of the photographic frame and desire for a kind of aestheticised reality made it particularly attractive as a tool to imagine an ideal Singapore and to navigate a new national identity. Amidst riots and strikes, unemployment and a guerrilla war in the form of the Malayan Emergency, Singapore Pictorialism provided its makers and viewers an alternative landscape, one formed in response to the anxieties of modern life in Singapore. Furthermore, government officials also recognised the constructed nature of the photographic image and the power of representation, subsequently employing photography’s ability to contribute to a stable national identity. These photographs showed a Singapore of peaceful rural kampongs, hardworking laborers and exciting cultural festivals.

This development of Singapore’s new visual identity was backed up by a remarkably consistent archive of images that endlessly circulated through the salons as well as in publications, both locally and internationally. This repetition of images has in fact been a key criticism levelled at pictorial photography even today, and as such, it was especially important to address this in this thesis. After all, photography was a medium that promised mass reproduction, yet because the works were placed within the discourse of ‘art’, photographers were encouraged to be innovative and

¹⁵ Ministry of Culture, *Speech by the Minister of Culture, Mr S. Rajaratnam, at the Opening of Photograph Week organised by the Singapore Polytechnic Photographic Society from 17th to 23rd January, 1964.*

original in their work, to stand out among the thousands of entries in the photography salons. A detailed study of the club and salon system has shown that the prevalence of copying was largely due to the nature of the salons themselves and the way that photographic skills were taught through the clubs. Copying was often encouraged as a way of learning. Photographers also often went shooting as a group, leading to multiple versions of the exact same scene. And finally, the competitive nature of the salon and the prestige of winning drove photographers to replicate award-winning prints.

This tension between the desire for originality and the practice of copying had several implications. Some photographers chose to stop participating in these salons, making work for alternative platforms, such as photography magazines or other types of exhibitions. This study thus made a conscious attempt to include works that circulated *outside* the salon, to provide a more complete picture of Singapore Pictorialism and demonstrating that pictorial photography from Singapore was more varied than initially expected. Other photographers chose to innovate within the confines of the salon, with varying levels of success. While progress was slow, this prompted a gradual turn towards depicting daily life in Singapore. This was driven in part by a desire to distinguish work from Singapore in the international salons, which included photographs from all over the world, but also an emerging recognition of the photograph's status as a historical document and the photographer's social responsibility as a historian. Local contemporary subject matter provided new themes, while simultaneously allowing photographers to express a kind of Singaporean identity in keeping with the developments that were happening in broader Singapore society, namely the quest for independence. Over time, the photographs took on a greater documentary status at odds with their beginnings.

The shift from art to documentary is reversed as these photographs now enter museum collections and are re-ascribed with the value of Art. As a curator in a national gallery, I have always been aware of these shifts, and in presenting these photographs in art exhibitions, I am establishing, or at least encouraging certain hierarchies. Exhibitions subsequently generate their own mythologies and their own

set of imaginaries. The public role of photographs is a complicated one, with a direct impact on the operations of the archive. The thesis, fundamentally, emerged from my personal experiences grappling with the politics of collecting and curating photographs. Studying the genealogy of these photographs was an attempt to unpack and expose their lives, as they were made, exhibited, circulated, published and reproduced in different times and spaces. This study was also prompted by a distrust of the nostalgia that was sweeping across Singapore as it celebrated its 50th anniversary as a nation in 2015.¹⁶ While it is impossible to reshape the institutional practices that continue to direct the consumption of photography by the general public (certainly nothing seems to have shifted since postmodernism problematised the photograph several decades ago), through its comprehensive analysis of Singapore Pictorialism, this thesis hopes to acknowledge these photographic lives and their roles in the production of knowledge.

¹⁶ In particular, the Singapore Memory Project managed by the National Library Board. <https://www.singaporememory.sg/Help-Info>.

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Ho Kok Hoe. Interview by Ken Cheong. 22 Dec 2007. CD-Rom, Ho Kok Hoe archives.
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Appendix A: Timeline

- 1887 The Singapore Amateur Photographic Society invites amateur photographers to attend a meeting to discuss the reconstruction of the Society. The club is renamed the Singapore Photographic Society, conducting regular meetings and talks for its members. The last mention of the Society is in 1897.
- 1921 The Malayan Camera Club is formed in Kuala Lumpur in July. They hold their first annual exhibition in 1922.
- 1921 The Singapore Camera Club is formed in Singapore. Comprising mainly Japanese photographers, it holds its annual member's exhibition at the Japanese Club.
- 1922 The Singapore Camera Club exhibition includes a selection of work from the Malayan Camera Club in KL as well as work from Tokyo.
- 1926 The Singapore Camera Club holds an exhibition of approximately 200 photos at the Victoria Memorial Hall.
- 1931 Photography exhibition / competition held by The New World.
- 1931 *A Salon of International Photography* is held in conjunction with the Kodak International Competition at Raffles Hotel. Prize-winning photos from Malaya are included in the show.
- 1935 To celebrate the Silver Jubilee, an exhibition of paintings, drawings, etching and art photography is held at the Municipal Offices. This exhibition features local artists only.
- 1935 The *Oversea Chinese Photographic Exhibition* opens in Singapore on 24 March at the Nanyang Chinese Students' Society premises, officiated by Chinese Consul-General Dr Philip K. Tyau. Following an open call, over 352 prints by 38 photographers are received from Selangor, Negri Sembilan, Perak, Penang, Trengganu, Hong Kong and Singapore. An estimated 2000 people visit the exhibition.
- 1936 The Oversea Chinese Photographic Society is established after the success of exhibition. However, it closes down the following year due to poor membership
- 1938 A exhibition of photographs and equipment is organised by Leica at the Victoria Memorial Hall.
- 1942 Start of the Japanese occupation.

- 1943 The *Greater East Asia Sphere Goodwill Exhibition* is organised by the Japanese to “extol the fighting power of Nippon”. There is an open call with awards offered.
- 1944 Another Japanese exhibition is held at the Roof Garden of the Nanko (Adelphi) Hotel to celebrate Tencho-setsu.
- 1945 Japanese occupation ends. The British re-take control of Singapore.
- 1947 The British Council is established in Singapore.
- 1949 The Singapore Art Society is established.
- 1950 The *First Open Photographic Exhibition* is held at the British Council from 29 Jan to 5 Feb. The exhibition is organised by the Singapore Art Society and works are selected from an open call to residents of Singapore or the Federation. It is opened by British Commissioner-General Malcolm MacDonald and over 6000 people visited the one-week exhibition.
- 1950 Later in the year, the Singapore Camera Club is formed. (No relation to the Singapore Camera Club formed in 1921.)
- 1951 The Society of Chinese Artists in Singapore organise an open call exhibition of paintings, calligraphy and photos at the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce.
- 1951 The Singapore Art Society organises the *Second Annual Exhibition of Photographs* from 27 Jan to 5 Feb. Held again at the British Council, it is opened by Colonial Secretary W.L Blythe. The exhibition sees 15 entries from outside the Malayan Federation.
- 1952 The *Third Open Photographic Exhibition* is held from 26 Jan to 3 Feb. The exhibition sees 3000 visitors and more than 9000 catalogues are sold. The open call receives 300 entries from overseas. The annual exhibition continues to grow annually, receiving increasing number of entries from overseas photographers.
- 1952 The Singapore Camera Club is affiliated to the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain.
- 1953 The Singapore Camera Club organises the first *Pan-Malayan Photographic Salon* at British Council from 26 June to 5 July. The exhibition is opened to photographers from Malaya, Sarawak, Brunei and North Borneo and continues to be held annually.
- 1953 6 Malayan photographers take part in 57th annual exhibition of the Birmingham Photographic Society.
- 1954 Loke Wan Tho is appointed a representation of the Photographic Society of America.

- 1955 The Pan-Malayan Photographic Exhibition is opened to photographers in Indonesia as well.
- 1956 The Singapore Camera Club changes its name to the Photographic Society of Singapore (PSS) and takes over the organisation of the annual photography exhibition from the Singapore Art Society. They decide to rename the *Open Photographic Exhibition* to the *Singapore International salon of Photography*.
- 1957 The 8th *International salon of Photography* is held at the British Council. This is the first edition of the exhibition organised by the PSS and is opened by the Chief Minister of Singapore Mr Lim Yew Hock.
- 1957 An exhibition of 160 prints by four Hong Kong photographers - Cheung Yu-Chiu, Kan Hing-Fook, Ho Fan, and K.H. Wu – is held in Singapore. PSS also shows 3 films by Sarawak photographer K.F. Wong.
- 1957 6 prints from Singapore are accepted at the RPS annual exhibition, including works by Tan Teng Chao, Wan Yue-Kong, Ang Kong Huat, P.L. Chan.
- 1957 A group exhibition by five PSS members – Chua Soo Bin, Lee Lim, Wu Peng Seng, Ho Tat Seng and P.L. Chan – is held at the Raffles Museum Gallery.
- 1957 The Singapore Art Society (Photography Section) organises an exhibition of pictorial photography at the British Council in May; it is opened by British Director for Information Services, Mr George G Thomson.
- 1957 PSS presents *Family of Man* film at the British Council Hall.
- 1958 Singapore Free Press starts a photography supplement.
- 1958 The South-east Asia Photographic Society is formed.
- 1959 Sponsored by the United States Information Service, photographer Donald Sultner-Welles gave a talk at the Metropole Theatre at Maxwell Road on colour slides in July. His lecture was jointly hosted by Singapore Art Society and the Southeast Asia Photographic Society.
- 1959 PSS organises a photo exhibition in conjunction with Cultural Week.
- 1959 The Raffles Photographic Society holds their annual competition on 2 June and exhibition on 5 June at Raffles Institution Hall.
- 1959 Singapore Polytechnic hosts a joint photography and art exhibition, opened by Goh Keng Swee on 3 Dec. The photos are contributed by the PSS, and the paintings by the Singapore Art Society.
- 1960 The South-east Asian Photographic Society holds a solo exhibition of Hong Kong photographer Eddie Ching, ARPS in March.
- 1960 Nanyang University holds the first Southeast Asian student photographic contest and exhibition in June. The exhibition continues to be held annually.

- 1960 The PSS organises an exhibition of colour photographs of Japan at the Raffles Museum from May to June. The works are by Hong Kong photographers Kan Hing Fook, Lau Wai Kwong and Cheung Yu-Chiu.
- 1960 K.F. Wong has an exhibition at Raffles Museum in July.
- 1960 The South-east Asia Photographic Society organises its first *International Pictorial Photography Exhibition* at Singapore Polytechnic in November. The exhibition is held biannually.
- 1960 Wu Peng Seng and Lee Lim hold a joint exhibition at Raffles Museum in Nov.
- 1961 The *Singapore International Salon of Photography* introduces a colour slide section.
- 1961 The Adult Education Board starts running photography workshops.
- 1961 The PSS organises the *Visit the Orient Year* exhibition at the Chinese Chamber of Commerce from 29 June to 2 July. The show features 20 prints each from the Photographic Society of Japan, the Photographic Club Nghia An (Vietnam), the Taipei Photographic Society, the Hong Kong Miniature Camera Club, the Sarawak Photographic Society, the Photographic Society Macao, the Philippine Chinese Camera Club, the Chinese Photographic Association of Hong Kong and the PSS.
- 1962 The Singapore Polytechnic Photographic Society is formed.
- 1962 The US Information Service and the PSS co-organises an exhibition of of photographs from LIFE magazine at the National Library from 9 to 15 July. 280 prints, both B&W and colour, are shown
- 1962 Singapore Polytechnic Photographic Society organises a photo competition for all students in Southeast Asia. Deputy Prime Minister Toh Chin Chye donates a gold medal.
- 1963 Singapore joins Malaysia
- 1963 Singapore Polytechnic Photographic Society invites Malaysian students to take part in the second Malaysia Student Photographic Competition.
- 1963 The Sultan of Trengganu becomes the patron of Singapore Polytechnic Photographic Society.
- 1963 *PSS Monthly Bulletin* wins Silver Tray award in contest sponsored by PSA. This is the 2nd time it won the award.
- 1964 PSS holds slide show at Hollywood Room at Odeon Theatre on 28 March.
- 1965 Singapore leaves Malaysia to become an independent republic on 9 August.
- 1965 The *7 Men Photography Exhibition* is held at Victoria Memorial Hall from 5-7 March.

- 1965 The Singapore Art Society and PSS organise the Housing Development Board poster and photography exhibition at the Victoria Memorial Hall in July. It is opened by Minister for Social Affairs, Othman Wok.
- 1965 The South-east Asian Photographic Society organises the *Pesta Sukan Photography Exhibition* in conjunction with a sports festival.
- 1965 Eminent Chinese photographer Long Chin San visits Singapore and holds an exhibition at Chinese Chamber of Commerce Exhibition Hall in November. Long stays a fortnight and takes part in the PSS Sunday outings where he meets many local photographers.
- 1965 Well-known American Chinese photographer Wellington Lee sponsors an award for Best Print of the Year for PSS members. Yam Pak Nin wins in the first year.
- 1966 South-east Asia Photographic Society holds 4th International Pictorial Photography Exhibition at National Library hall. This is the last mention of this exhibition in the press.
- 1966 PSS is awarded the PSA colour division gold medal for the color slide show at 17th Singapore Intl Salon. Also won the Silver Tray for the *PSS Monthly Bulletin*, a red ribbon for Excellence in Appearance and a blue ribbon for Excellence in Editorial Content.
- 1967 The PSS presents an exhibition of more than 200 colour slides belonging to the PSA at National Library.
- 1967 The 2nd Housing Development Board photo exhibition is held as part of the Afro-Asian Housing Conference
- 1969 The Pan-Malaysia Photographic Exhibition is renamed the Singapore National Photographic Exhibition.
- 1971 4th South-east Asia Students' Photographic Competition organised by Singapore Polytechnic Photographic Society.
- 1971 PSS presents a screening of 200 colour slides at National Theatre lecture hall from 20-21 Oct.
- 1972 President of the RPS, Mr Peter Wilkinson, visits Singapore from 21-24 May and meets members of the PSS.
- 1972 Ngee Ann Technical College Photographic Society presents the '72 *World Student's Competition* at the National Library Lecture Hall in August; it is opened by Minister of State for Education and principal, Dr Lee Chiaw Meng.
- 1973 The Ministry of Culture together with the various photo societies organises the first *National Day Photo Competition and Exhibition*. It is opened to

Singaporeans and Malaysians. And held at the National Library. (The *National Day Art Exhibition* had started in 1969.)

- 1974 PSS holds an exhibition at the Chinese Chamber of Commerce from 16-18 Nov.
- 1977 The Ministry of Culture organises *Our Beautiful Singapore* photography competition.
- 1978 PSS makes Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam a life member.
- 1978 PSS replaces the *National Photographic Exhibition* with the first *ASEAN Salon of Photography*.
- 1978 The Ministry of Culture organises *Singapore: The Old and the New* photography competition. The winning photographs are exhibited at the National Museum Art Gallery in 1979.
- 1980 National Museum Young People's Gallery presents *Women of Asia* photographic exhibition from 8-18 May.

Appendix B: Interviews

Chee, Daisy	Interviewed in Singapore, 8 August 2018.
Choy, Weng Yang	Interviewed in Singapore, 2 July 2018.
Chua, Soo Bin	Interviewed in Singapore, 3 July 2018.
Foo, Tee Jun	Interviewed in Singapore, 10 August 2018.
Ho, Koon Sang	Interviewed in Singapore, 25 June 2018.
Kwok, Kian Chow	Interviewed in Singapore, 13 August 2019.
Lim, Kwong Ling	Interviewed in Singapore, 28 June 2018.
Mun, Chor Koon	Interviewed in Singapore, 27 July 2018.
Ong, Seng Chew	Interviewed in Singapore, 30 July 2018.
Sabapathy, T.K.	Interviewed in Singapore, 1 August 2018.
Tan, Lip Seng	Interviewed in Singapore, 22 June 2018.
Yap, Chris	Interviewed in Singapore, 29 June 2018