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Photography's Asian Circuits

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Courtesy Didi Kwantanada and family

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Asia's Colonial Photographies



NEWSLETTER

Photography's Asian Circuits

Accounts of colonial photography in the Dutch East Indies focus on European photographers and exceptional figures like Kassian Cephas, the first (known) native Javanese photographer.¹ Yet photography was not simply a 'European' technology transplanted from the European metropole to the Asian colony. Decentring European photographers from the history of photography in the Indies reveals the more circuitous - and Asian - routes by which photography travelled to and within the archipelago.

Karen Strassler

Chinese studio photographers represent an underappreciated thread of Indonesian photographic history. Europeans owned the earliest and most illustrious studios in the Indies (the first opened in 1857), and there were also large numbers of Japanese photographers in the Indies in the last decades of colonial rule. But by the early 20th century immigrant photographers from

Canton had established a strong presence throughout Java and in other parts of the Dutch colony. These Chinese photographers often settled in smaller provincial towns as well as large cities, and served a less elite clientele than the better-known European studios. My oral history research with contemporary photographers in Java suggests that by the late 1920s, there were more studios under Chinese than European, Japanese, or other ethnic ownership.

In the Indies, portrait studios mirrored social hierarchies, with European-owned studios typically reserved for the highest levels of colonial society. The rest of the population who could afford photographs went to the more modestly appointed and affordable Chinese 'toekang potret'. 'Toekang' means craftsman, signalling that photography was a skilled kind of labour, but labour nonetheless. Indeed, most studio portraitists were recent immigrants of humble origins, a more skilled subset of the massive influx of immigrants from Southern China that occurred in the last decades of the 19th and first decades of the 20th century.² Most photographers emigrated from Canton at a young age, sometimes apprenticing in Singapore before arriving in the Indies. Cantonese immigrants to the Indies were known more generally as craftspeople, recognised especially for their expertise in making furniture. Since it was expensive to buy cameras, Cantonese photographers often deployed these

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woodworking skills to construct their own cameras, using imported German lenses.

Family Ties

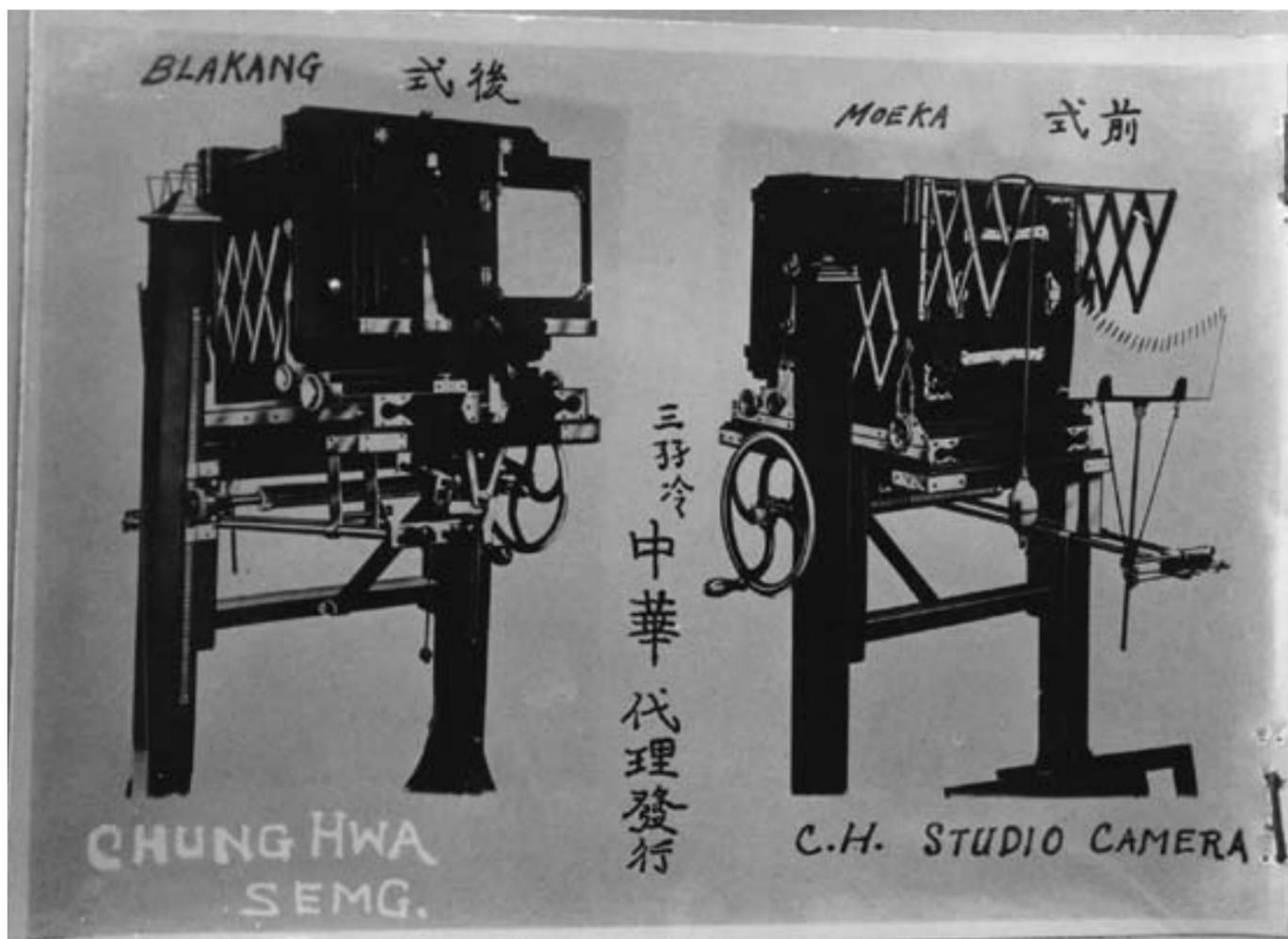
Networks of ethnic Chinese photography studios, linked by familial and regional ties, extended throughout the Indies. Cantonese immigrant photographers typically learned the trade from already established Chinese photographers (usually their own relatives). After a period of apprenticeship, a photographer would open his own studio, often with borrowed money and handed-down equipment. Once a photographer was well established, it was his turn to invite a sibling, a cousin, or someone from the same village in China to join him as an apprentice. This pattern appears to have been a broader Southeast Asia-wide phenomenon. Liu, for example, details the history of the Lee Brothers Studio in Singapore (1910-23), owned by a family that originated in Canton. Members of the Lee family ultimately operated more than a dozen studios in Southeast Asia, including eight in Singapore, one each in Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Ipoh, and three in the Indies, in the cities of Batavia, Magelang, and Bandung (Liu 1995).³ Chinese studios were run as family businesses. Wives, children, and other relatives helped run the shop, and children usually took over the studios of their parents. As one elderly photographer told me, "Photography in those days was still a secret. You didn't tell outsiders how you did it. Now everything's out in the open, but in the past it was kept strictly within the family."

Chung Hwa [China] Studio of Semarang, founded in 1922 by Lie Yie King, exemplifies the general pattern I found in my research in Java.⁴ Lie Yie King (b. 1900) was one of seven children

Page from a Chung Hwa catalogue, late 1930s.

Courtesy Didi

Kwartanada and family.



(five males, two females) born to a poor farmer in Canton province, all of whom, with the exception of the eldest daughter, would eventually come to the Indies. In 1913, Lie Yie King left home for Singapore, where he found work in a studio owned by a Singapore Chinese. In 1920, he set out on his own to Semarang, a bustling commercial port in Central Java, which he believed would offer greater opportunities for himself and his siblings at home. He worked

for a short time in a studio there (possibly owned by a relative who had preceded him) before opening up his own Chung Hwa Studio.

Chung Hwa's rapid success prompted Lie Yie King to invite other siblings to the Indies as well. Eventually, there would be at least eleven studios directly connected through family ties to Chung Hwa (five in Semarang and the rest in other parts of Java).⁵ For one of Lie Yie

King's siblings, though, arrival in the Indies proved a rude awakening. Lie Yap King, Lie Yie King's older brother, had left Canton for Singapore in 1910, at the age of 14. In 1928, he heeded his brother's call to come to the Indies and left behind his comfortable job at a large Chinese-owned studio in Singapore. His son recalled, "My father was deeply disappointed when he came to Indonesia. He didn't know it was so far behind Singapore. In Singapore everything was

more advanced...all of father's dreams were lost when he came to Indonesia." Nevertheless, Lie Yap King's Djawa Studio, which catered to a cross-section of the colonial elite - Dutch, Eurasians, Javanese, and Chinese - would also prove highly successful. Elegant portraits of Chinese opera stars and wealthy Singaporeans hung on the walls of his studio as testaments to his skill and cosmopolitanism.

By the late twenties, Chung Hwa had expanded into the business of distributing and importing photographic equipment and supplies; it would become one of the major purveyors of photographic equipment in Java in the late colonial and early postcolonial period. Lie Yie King's knowledge of English (learned in Singapore) gained him access to British and American publications and allowed him to make direct contact with foreign companies. This enabled him to compete with the five Dutch importers of photographic goods that were based in Semarang at that time. But Lie Yie King also maintained business ties to the Chinese mainland, importing backdrops from Shanghai as well. While the majority of backdrops of the late colonial period placed people in vaguely 'European' scenes, some of these Chinese backdrops instead visualised 'Chinese' locations. One, painted in the 1930s and still hanging in Chung Hwa's former studio, shows a large pavilion with carved pillars looking out onto another Chinese-style pagoda. Another from the same era at Djawa Studio shows a garden and a lake with distinctive rock formations, referencing classical Chinese painting motifs. Such backdrops were probably popular among the large ethnic Chinese populations of the Indies, many of whom were experiencing a renewed sense of their ties to the mainland in response to the rise of Chinese nationalism.



Ethnic Chinese family portrait, late 1930s, Che Lan Studio, Yogyakarta.

Courtesy Didi Kwartanada and family.



Postcolonial backdrop (detail), late 1950s, from City Photo, Yogyakarta. Photograph by Karen Strassler.

Notes:

- 1 On Colonial photography in the Indies, see Groeneveld, Anneke et al., eds. 1989. *Toekang Potret: 100 Years of Photography in the Dutch Indies 1839-1939*. Amsterdam and Rotterdam: Fragment Uitgeverij and Museum voor Volkenkunde; Reed, Jane Levy, ed. 1991. *Toward Independence: A Century of Indonesia Photographed*. San Francisco: The Friends of Photography. On the British studio of Woodbury and Page, see Wachlin, Steven, Marianne Fluitsma, G.J. Knaap. 1994. *Woodbury and Page: Photographers Java*. Leiden: KITLV Press. On Cephas, see Knaap, Gerrit. 1999. *Kasian Cephas: Photography in the Service of the Sultan*. Leiden: KITLV Press.
- 2 See Anthony Reid, "Entrepreneurial Minorities, Nationalism, and the State" in Chirot, Daniel and Anthony Reid, *Essential Outsiders: Chinese and Jews in the Modern Transformation of Southeast Asia and Central Europe*. Seattle UW press 1997: 53.
- 3 The Malaysia branch also operated a photography supplies store called Lee and Sons. Another part of the family enterprise was Wah Heng & Co. in Singapore, which in the 1920s was an important supplier of photography equipment throughout Singapore, Malaysia and the Indies. Liu, Gretchen. 1995. *From the Family Album: Portraits from the Lee Brothers Studio, Singapore 1910-1925*. Singapore: Landmark Books. Berticevich also notes that "many of the photographers of the Southeast Asia region were ethnic Chinese" and many purchased their backdrops from Hong Kong (in particular from the Leung Studio) in the 1950s and 60s. Berticevich, George C. 1998. *Photo Backdrops: The George C. Berticevich Collection*. (Exhibition Catalogue), San Francisco: Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, p. 17.
- 4 The following account is based on interviews with Lie Yie King's son Lukito Darsono (who ran Chung Hwa after his father's death in 1967), Sept 1 and 2 1999, Semarang, and Lie Tiong Dang, current owner of Java Studio (formerly Djawa Studio) and son of Lie Yap King, Sept. 2 1999.
- 5 Other studios opened by relatives of Lie Yie King were, in Semarang, Oy Lan, King Son (now a department store), King (now an electric goods store), Mi Fong (now a travel agency) and Foto Varia. In Purwokerto: Foto Pemuda. In Temanggung: Foto Tjie Sing. In Bandung: Foto Sinar (now closed). In Surabaya: Foto Varia, and Foto Tek Sin (closed). Apparently there was also another studio in Cirebon, but the name has since been forgotten.



Chinese-style backdrop at Chung Hwa Studio, late 1930s, Semarang. Photograph by Agus Leonardus.

From Colony to Nation

When the Japanese Occupation (1942-5) and the war of Independence (1945-9) forced an exodus of Japanese and European studio photographers from the Indies, it was left to ethnic Chinese photographers to bring studio photography into the Indonesian era. In the 1950s and 1960s, the numbers of Chinese-Indonesian owned studios, most tied by direct descent or apprenticeship to those that had operated before Independence, increased dramatically. Translating colonial era conventions into new national idioms, ethnic Chinese photographers worked with Javanese painters to develop a distinctively Indonesian style of portrait backdrop. These backdrops featured such iconic tropical images as volcanoes, beaches, rice fields and palm trees, often conjoined with modern architecture. Others evoked a more fantastical modernity realised in material signs like cars and houses equipped with radios, staircases and electric lights. Unlike the more subtle, blurred style of European backdrops, these post-colonial backdrops, featuring scenes painted in exuberant detail and vivid colour, more closely approximated the style of contemporary Chinese backdrops.

The fates of Chung Hwa Studio and Djawa Studio in the transition to Independence and the post-colonial period are again exemplary of larger historical patterns. In 1942, the Japanese shut down Chung Hwa and confiscated all of the business's cameras, equipment, and supplies, along with two cars, without compensation. While the Japanese shut most studios down across Java, they did allow some to continue operating in order to provide photographic services for the army and the occupation administration. Djawa Studio, often under extremely difficult and abusive conditions, was allowed to contin-

ue functioning in this capacity. Lie Yie King, meanwhile, survived the Japanese Occupation by opening a grocery store, and started Chung Hwa again "from nothing" in 1946. By the mid-1950s, Chung Hwa had regained its former stature and once again supplied studios throughout Java and in Sumatra, Lombok, Makassar, and East Kalimantan.

In the late 1970s, the era of the *toekang potret* - photography as a craft - gave way to that of *cuci cetak* ("wash and print"). Cheap snapshot cameras and automatic developing and printing of colour film rendered many of the specific skills passed down through generations of ethnic Chinese photographers obsolete. Foreign companies began aggressively pursuing the Indonesian market by establishing their own exclusive Indonesian partners (Fuji's Indonesian partner PT Modern Photo was founded in 1972), bypassing earlier networks for distribution of supplies and equipment. Today Chung Hwa has all but shut down, and Djawa Studio (now called Java Studio) faces increasing competition from cheaper, faster, and more "modern" studios. Yet many owners of Indonesia's modern studios are the children and grandchildren, nephews and cousins, of colonial-era *toekang potret*. To this day, studio photography in Indonesia has an ethnic Chinese face. ◀

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Postcolonial Studio Portrait, 1955. Photographer unknown. Courtesy Ibu Soekilah.