

WOMEN PHOTOGRAPHERS IN SINGAPORE AND MALAYA

In the male-dominated world of 1940s and 1950s photography, three women in Singapore and Malaya found different ways to participate in photography as a studio photographer, a photojournalist and a photography enthusiast.

By Zhuang Wubin

“Women don’t know how to take photographs!” a customer once declared at a Singapore photo studio. Wun Chek Hoi, the apprentice at the receiving end, proved him wrong and went on to become an accomplished woman studio photographer – a rare feat in that era of Singapore.¹

Wun, Si Jing and Chew Lan Ying² were three women who picked up the camera during the 1940s and 1950s for different reasons. Through their lens, they captured everything – from intimate moments of courtship to historic peace talks – discovering both pleasures and challenges while pursuing their craft and passion.

Zhuang Wubin is a writer, curator and artist. He has a PhD from the University of Westminster (London) and is a former National Library Digital Fellow (2023). Wubin is interested in photography’s entanglements with modernity, colonialism, nationalism, the Cold War and “Chineseness”.

Wun Chek Hoi of Chew Photo Studio

Born in China in 1919, Wun Chek Hoi was a Cantonese practitioner of studio photography who came to Singapore with her parents when she was three and began her apprenticeship during the Japanese Occupation. Before the war, Wun’s father operated a lodge and knew a few Cantonese friends in studio photography. During the Occupation, they advised him to open a studio and employ his nine children to keep them productively occupied. By having them work in the studio, he also hoped that they would not be asked to work for the Japanese authorities. With the help of his friends, Chew Photo Studio (自然影社) was established on 1 April 1942 with its main branch at 230 South Bridge Road.³

By September 1942, Chew Photo Studio had been appointed by the Malaya Sumatra Romu Kanri Kyokai (Labour Control Office of Malaya and Sumatra) as one of its official photographers, with branches on North Bridge Road, Serangoon Road, Joo Chiat Road and Upper Serangoon Road. There was also a branch called Smile Studio at the New World amusement park.⁴

At the time, Wun was already in her early 20s and of marriageable age. However, she was worried about her mother who had suffered much hardship when she had to look after her many siblings; now, she had to contend with bringing up her own children. Wun felt that getting married and starting her own family would add to her mother’s burdens. As the eldest among nine children, Wun decided not to get married but to work in the family business and help her parents instead.⁵

At first, Chew Photo Studio hired experienced practitioners and photographers while Wun and her siblings served as apprentices. In those days, Chinese-owned photo studios operated on a strict hierarchical system that governed relationships between employees of different seniority and apprentices. Despite being the owner’s children, Wun and her siblings were not given preferential treatment. They were expected to “wash the floor, clean the toilet, do everything, pour tea for the *sifu* [teacher-mentors] to drink, wait on them”.⁶

The experienced employees did not teach Wun and her siblings in a formal fashion. Instead, Wun was told to observe how they worked and pick up the skills by herself. But whenever she stood behind the photographers to see what they were doing, she would be shooed away for blocking the light. Undeterred, Wun offered to move chairs around the studio to steal glimpses of how they operated the camera. Over time, Wun acquired her knowledge of photography through these stolen moments of “tutelage”.⁷

After an extended period, Wun felt reasonably confident that she could take a good photograph. One day, when the senior employees were out for lunch, a customer turned up at the studio. When she stepped forward to help, the customer was sceptical because Wun was female. But Wun assured the customer that if her work was unsatisfactory, he could come back and have the photograph retaken by the photographer of his choice. “At the time, there was no woman who worked as a photographer and, of course, the customers lacked confidence,” Wun explained. Thankfully, the customer was pleased with her shot and that was when Wun realised she had acquired the basics of photography.⁸

(Facing page) This photograph of Si Jing at Peirce Reservoir was taken by her future husband Huang Da Li. Titled “A Photographer in Action”, Huang submitted the image to the Singapore Art Society’s Open Photographic Exhibition in 1952 but it was not selected. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board. Gift of Wu Sijing.

However, there were still many things to learn in studio photography. Wun added that darkroom work, especially developing negatives and printing images, was the hardest to pick up.⁹ Nevertheless, Wun’s diligence and perseverance ensured that she would become well versed in all aspects of studio work.

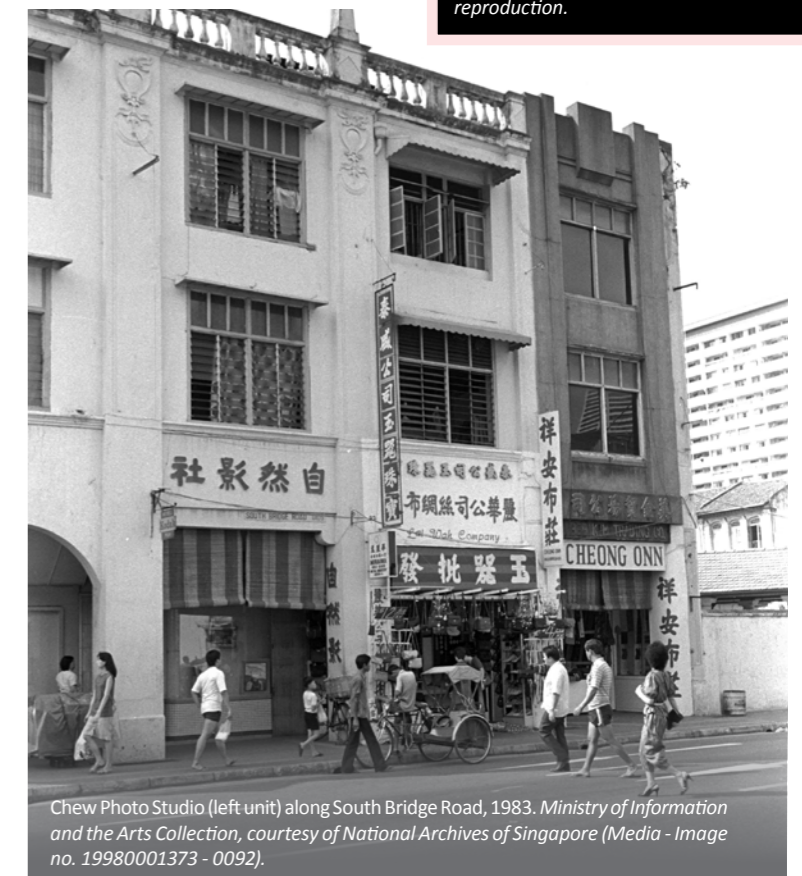
After the Japanese Occupation, the experienced operators left to start their own businesses, leaving Chew Photo Studio to be managed entirely by the Wun family. Over time, the main studio on South Bridge Road became an iconic presence in Chinatown. In the 1960s, the studio expanded into the adjacent unit to cater to increasing customer demands, and air conditioning was also introduced to provide greater comfort to customers.¹⁰

The business peaked between 1963 and 1975. During auspicious days when Chinese couples held their weddings, there would often be a long queue outside Chew Photo Studio. Their record was photographing 42 couples in a day.¹¹

Wun was also very popular among Hindu customers. As the studio was located beside the historic Sri Mariamman Temple, many couples and their families and friends would visit the studio to



Portrait of Wun Chek Hoi published in *Lianhe Zaobao* in 1991. Source: *Lianhe Zaobao*, 30 June 1991 © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.



Chew Photo Studio (left unit) along South Bridge Road, 1983. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image no. 19980001373 - 0092).



A wedding photograph by Chew Photo Studio, undated. Courtesy of Zhuang Wubin.

have their photographs taken after their wedding ceremony at the temple, insisting that Wun helm the camera.¹²

In the business of studio photography, keeping up with the latest technology and changing customer tastes was crucial. As Wun and her siblings aged, it became harder to keep up with the relentless pace of innovation and competition. In late 1994, after more than half a century in business, Chew Photo Studio closed for good.¹³

In a 1991 interview, Wun downplayed her sacrifices for the family and her status as a pioneering studio practitioner. Her satisfaction came simply from seeing her siblings gainfully employed in proper work. “Please don’t say that I am great, this is heaven’s plan [for me],” she said.¹⁴

Si Jing and Popular Photography

In 1990, Ng Soo Lui, who was born in Singapore in 1934, started publishing a series of articles in *Lianhe Zaobao* (联合早报). These writings, under the penname Si Jing, were mainly about her coming-of-age years in Chinatown and various aspects of Cantonese culture and traditions. Her writings also made references to her involvement in popular photography during the 1940s and 1950s, offering insights from a woman’s perspective.

Si Jing was born into a poor family. When she was three, Si Jing was given to Ai, a domestic servant or *majie*,¹⁵ who worked in a leisure house as the maid of courtesans. Years later, Si Jing realised that Ai had used different ways to enslave her so that she would become her money-making tool in the future. Fortunately, as Si Jing grew older, her average looks saved her from a life of prostitution. When Singapore fell to the Japanese in February 1942, Ai sent nine-year-old Si Jing back to her birth family.¹⁶

After the Japanese Occupation, Si Jing’s mother kept her promise to send her to school for at least two years. In 1945, Si Jing, who was already 12, enrolled for primary one at Yeung Ching School.¹⁷

Her mother worked as a seamstress and during the lead-up to the Lunar New Year in 1946, received many orders to tailor new clothes. On the morning of New Year’s Eve, after completing her final order, Si Jing’s mother waited until the reunion dinner for the customer to collect it. With that small payment, she rushed to the fabric stalls on Smith Street to buy several yards of the “cheapest and coarsest white cloth”.

Working through the night, she sewed new clothes for her two daughters. When Si Jing wore her new *samfoo* (or *samfu*; a traditional two-piece outfit comprising a top and trousers) the next morning instead of the usual hand-me-downs, her mother’s face lit up with a rare smile. To commemorate the special occasion, Si Jing and her siblings visited a photo studio to have their photograph taken – a common Lunar New Year tradition among families.¹⁸

By the second half of 1947, Si Jing’s family finances had become so dire that her mother asked her to stop schooling. Tragedy struck later that year when her mother died in her sleep. Nonetheless, Si Jing’s father allowed her to remain in school until the end of 1948.¹⁹

Si Jing got to know her future husband, Huang Da Li, because their fathers were old friends. By the late 1940s, Si Jing and Huang had developed feelings for each other and like many young people in Singapore and Malaya at the time, they went on outings to the countryside.

Taken at a studio during the lunar new year in 1946, the photograph shows Si Jing (right) and her brother and sister. It was the first time that Si Jing’s mother had enough money to tailor clothes for her daughters and the occasion was commemorated with a studio portrait. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board. Gift of Wu Sijing.



Si Jing and Huang Da Li got married on 8 July 1952. Their wedding photographs were likely taken on the same day at Natural Photographic Store on North Bridge Road. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board. Gift of Wu Sijing.



Si Jing’s photograph of Clifford Pier, titled “Morning”, was exhibited at the Singapore Art Society’s Open Photographic Exhibition in 1952. Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board. Gift of Wu Sijing.

These excursions were especially popular among Chinese-educated students who often took photographs to commemorate their trips.²⁰

Huang and his younger brother earned a decent income by offering photography services at these outings. Later, when Huang gave Si Jing a camera, photography became another reason for their Sunday dates. They walked “along the entire West Coast and took pictures of mangrove swamps, prawn ponds, the jetty in the evening sun, fishing boats at dusk, and huts on stilts among tall coconut trees”. On Si Jing’s 18th birthday, the couple visited Peirce Reservoir.²¹

Huang and Si Jing tried their hand at salon photography. With its focus on technical excellence and aesthetic beauty, salon photography (or pictorialism) was the dominant framework of art photography in Singapore and Southeast Asia in the 20th century. Huang’s images were exhibited at the Singapore Art Society’s Open Photographic Exhibition in 1951, 1952 and 1953, while Si Jing’s submission, a photograph of Clifford Pier titled “Morning”, was exhibited in 1952.²² This exhibition marked both the highlight and her brief foray into the male-dominated world of salon photography before family responsibilities took precedence.

The people and scenery Si Jing and Huang encountered during their dates became subjects in their pursuit of salon photography. They also modelled for each other’s portraits. Huang actually submitted a photograph he had taken of Si Jing at Peirce Reservoir perched on a railing snapping a picture to the Open Photographic Exhibition in 1952, but it was not selected.²³

For Si Jing and Huang, photography served as a leisure activity, a tool of courtship, a means of

income and a way to indulge in the aesthetic pleasure of salon photography. On their engagement day in either late 1951 or early 1952, they used a self-timer to take their engagement photograph at the Botanic Gardens. It shows Huang holding Si Jing’s shoulders from behind, with her head tilted back in a loving gaze at her fiancé. They did not show the image to anyone at the time as the pose was considered too intimate in the 1950s.²⁴

Huang and Si Jing were married on 8 July 1952 and held their wedding dinner at the Great Southern Hotel. Following the trend for Chinese weddings at the time, they likely had their wedding photograph taken at a photo studio that same day. In 1953, Si Jing and her family moved into a new Singapore Improvement Trust flat in Tiong Bahru.

In 2002, Si Jing donated her personal collection of photographs to the National Museum of Singapore. Among these are a few showing the interior of her Tiong Bahru flat. One shows the dining table with a cabinet beside it and above the cabinet on the wall is the framed photograph of Clifford Pier exhibited at the 1952 Open Photographic Exhibition.

Chew Lan Ying, the Pioneering Photojournalist

At the end of 1955, the sleepy town of Baling in Kedah was thrust into the spotlight when Tunku Abdul Rahman, first chief minister of Malaya, and Chin Peng, secretary general of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), met for peace talks there. In the lead-up to the meeting, MCP’s deputy head of propaganda, Chen Tien, and courier guide, Lee Chin Hee, turned up at

