

Just as theatrical show panoramas were making a comeback in late-19th century Europe, photographic panoramas were made of exotic lands thousands of miles away for visual entertainment. The appeal of these wide-angle photographs reveals much about these commercial and amateur photographers who make them and how they frame the foreign surroundings around them.

Photographic panoramas

by German and Chinese photographers in Singapore



Fig. 6: Panorama of church congregation, The Eastern Studio, 1930s, Carbon print

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Singapore, strategically located between the trading routes connecting Europe with East Asia, has been photographed since the early 1840s. Initially, photography trade was dominated by the Europeans, particularly the Germans. After World War One, the Cantonese and subsequently the Hainanese from China took over. Firms such as Sachtler & Company in the 1860s, G.R. Lambert and Company in the 1880s and Lee Brothers Studio in the 1910s left thousands of photographs behind as material proof of their popularity and staying power in this highly mobile trade.

Views of the town of Singapore and its environs were appropriated by the enterprising commercial photographer to cater to visiting tourists and wealthy locals alike during the mid-19th century global market exchange of photographic imagery. Photographic panoramas, given their ability to capture exceptionally wide fields of view, became part of the commercial photographer's repertoire of picturesque landscape views sought after by collectors and travellers, both past and present. This paper presents to the reader several such examples in the collection of the National Museum of Singapore.

Framing an empire

The earliest known photographic panorama made in Singapore was a 10-part image taken from the spire of the St Andrew's Church by the firm Sachtler & Company in 1863, made for presentation to the British Colonial Governor Colonel Orfeur Cavenagh. The firm was one of two listed 'Photographic Artists' (note the early emphasis on their aesthetics qualities rather than technical abilities) in the 1870 *Straits and Singapore Directory*, operating in Singapore up till the early 1870s. In John Falconer's book on early colonial photography in Singapore and Malaya, half of this panorama is illustrated. The museum owns parts of this photographic panorama (figs. 1, 1a). Making a photographic panorama in the 1860s, especially on elevated ground was not an easy task. The 17 October issue of the 1863 *Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce* reported on the challenges one would face mounting the about to be completed spire of St Andrew's Church which was accessible only with scaffolding. The editor, however, acknowledged that "the view [on the top] is magnificent and amply repays the difficulty of ascent."

19th century photographic panoramas were made by overlapping a series of individual views. Each glass plate had to be prepared, exposed and developed individually and even exposures had to be achieved to ensure consistency of tone and definition. Such technical virtuosity would not have been possible without the dry-collodion method available since the mid-1850s as the wet-collodion method necessitated the development of the glass negative on the spot after making the exposure. Alignment of the parts was a tricky business requiring extra-dexterous fingers. Albumen prints, the type of paper available in the 1860s, also necessitated the quick mounting onto a secondary support as the albumen paper curls easily.

Evidence from Fig. 1 indicate that custom-made photographic panoramas could also be broken up for sale as individual pieces as this piece was dated to 1866, three years after the panorama was made.

This raised perspective was not the only privileged point of view employed by these early European commercial photographers. Another example is a five-part photographic panorama taken by the firm G.R. Lambert & Company dated to the 1880s (fig.2). This photograph was likely taken between the time Lambert arrived in Singapore from Dresden in 1875 and before he left Singapore for good in 1885, making this one of Lambert's earliest panoramic works in extant. The distinctive dome of the National Museum of Singapore, to be built on the left side of the cross-gabled building on the left end of this panorama, would only be up by October 1887. The identities of both the Malay and European men are unknown. A successful commercial photographer of the 19th century would have assistants providing help with carrying the heavy equipment and even act as models if needed. The 1881 *Singapore and Straits Directory* listed three native assistants on Lambert's payroll. Could the Malay man be one of his native assistants and the European man his First Assistant, J.F. Charls as listed in the directory? Such questions linger on in early uncaptioned photographs.

Both figures occupy privileged positions in the top right corner overlooking the expanse of the growing colonial city. The appropriation of Fort Canning Hill, the colonial governor's residence between 1820s to 1850s, as a vantage point for painting and photographing the prosperous town under colonial rule has been a well-established pictorial tradition dating back to the 1820s (fig. 3). The viewer, through the photographer's lens, is also placed in a strategic position looking at the two men surveying the progress of Singapore through its physical environment guided by colonial intervention. In the span of half a century, Singapore has morphed from a frontier coolie town into a busy emporium for British and international trading interests. On the right, the tightly packed but ordered Chinese style roof-tops of godowns and shophouses represent the burgeoning ethnic Chinese immigrant working-class population oiling the machinery of trade. This is contrasted sharply with the evenly spaced out bungalows and churches of the European part of town on the left. 20 years later, this image is still ingrained into the collective colonial memory as it appears, in 1903, in the picture postcard format (fig. 4), continuing the tradition of framing the Empire.

Another photographic panorama from the 1880s attributed to Lambert shows the vast expanse of the Padang (fig. 5), the social hub for the ruling elites of the day. Again, conventional rules of photographic aesthetics were employed as part of the colonialist vocabulary for consumption by a predominantly western audience. Here, the native people are placed as picturesque figures (most likely as indicators of scale) against the backdrop of civic institutions like the Cricket Club, the Hotel de l'Europe and the St Andrew's Cathedral (elevated status since 1869), symbols of western civilisation. These photographic panoramas show the technical expertise of Lambert with their sharpness, an important criteria for good saleable 19th

Fig. 2: Panorama taken from Fort Canning Hill, G.R. Lambert & Company, Mid-1880s, Albumen print



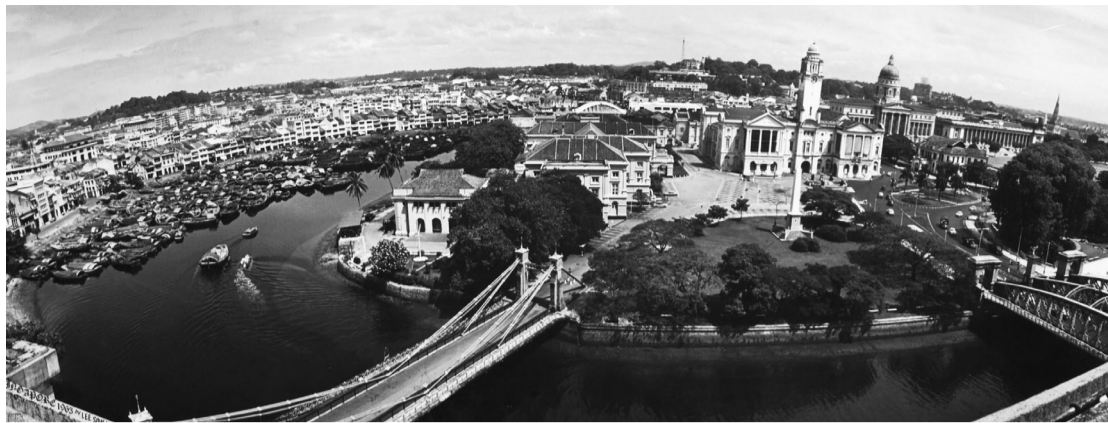


Fig. 7: Panorama taken from Fullerton Building, Lee Sow Lim, 1963, Gelatin-silver print

Fig. 1: Left part of panorama taken from St Andrew's Cathedral, Sachtler & Company, 1863, Albumen print



Fig. 3: View from Government Hill of the Plain, Singapore River and Chinatown, Robert Elliot, 1822-1824, Uncoloured aquatint

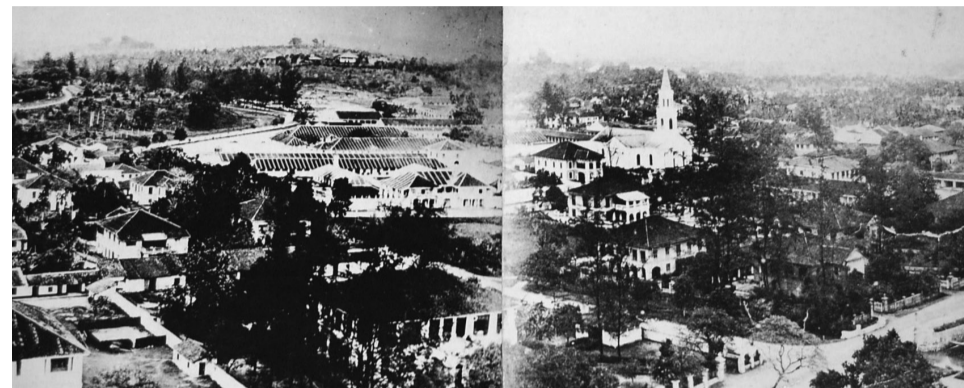


Fig. 1a: Middle part of panorama taken from St Andrew's Cathedral, Sachtler & Company, 1863, Modern silver gelatin print

century photographs. With the rise of global capitalism driven by an expansionist colonial policy, these exotic foreign photographs appealed to the 19th century Western middle class trying to articulate its own consumerist identity.

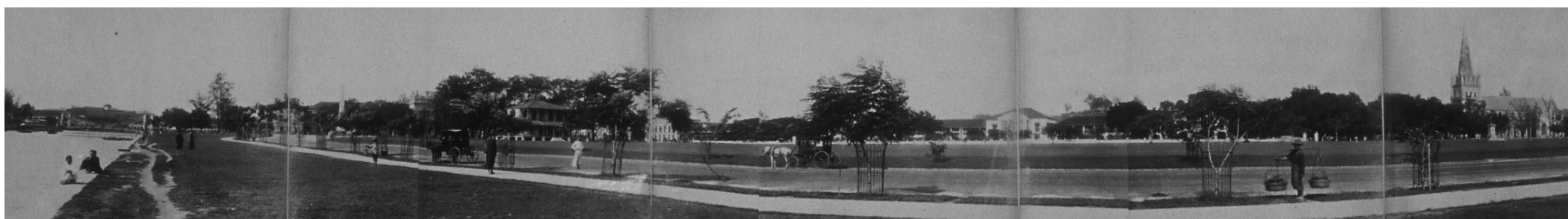
Building an identity

This tradition of making topographical photographs for sale seem to have ceased once the ethnic Chinese photographers took over from the Europeans towards the end of World War One. Ethnic Chinese studios like the Lee Brothers Studio and The Eastern Studio seem to focus their attentions primarily on their studio business catering to family and individual portraits. For one, this attested to the growing numbers of families being formed in Singapore, thus diminishing the need to cater towards tourists' needs. The rise of popular amateur photography since the late 1880s also meant that people who could afford to own their own cameras no longer needed to purchase landscape views from professional photographers as they too, can wield the camera like a paint brush out in the nature.

This shift in subject matter focusing on portraiture is best illustrated by the photographic panorama made by the Eastern Studio (fig. 6) of a church congregation, likely to be the Methodists who established themselves in the Armenian Street area. The Eastern Studio situated on Armenian Street was founded in the early 1920s by Lee King Yan, who had earlier on co-founded the Lee Brothers Studio with his younger brother, Lee Poh Yan. His break-away was typical of family run businesses whose increasing overheads necessitated expansion to survive. Photography was a trade secret exclusive to family members while outsiders were hired to retouch and mount the ready-made photographs. Unlike the Lee Brothers Studio who managed to safeguard thousands of its glass negatives, the Eastern Studio's premises and negative stock were destroyed during a Japanese air raid. Very few of its images survive which makes the existence of this photographic panorama even more exceptional.

What the uncaptioned photograph lacks in empirical information, it makes up for with its choice of pictorial composition. The difficulties experienced in photographing people outdoors in an uncontrollable environment during the late 19th century no longer hampered the 20th century photographer as camera technology improved. The elderly and the privileged are seated in the front row with the children seated before them on the grass. The men follow behind in successive rows forming the central block with the female folk relegated to the two ends. Nature has become the photo studio with the tropical foliage acting as the painted backdrop while the carefully manicured grass mimicked the studio flooring. In a single panoramic shot, Lee has managed to convey a hybrid image combining Asian values with western photographic convention.

Fig. 5: Panorama of the Padang, G.R. Lambert & Company, Mid-1880s, Albumen print



Panoramas continued to be made in 1960s Singapore by a burgeoning class of ethnic Chinese amateur photographers. This group of self-taught amateurs who learnt from British photography manuals and experimented with photography began in earnest in the 1950s. The establishment of the Singapore Camera Club (now the Photographic Society of Singapore) in 1950 and the popularity of national and international salon photography competitions in the 1960s and 1970s gave these amateurs avenues and opportunities to exhibit their works as well as learn about photography development worldwide. Lee Sow Lim was one of them. Lee belonged to the group of local post-World War Two photographers known for his technical proficiency in the darkroom as well as for his early experiments with solarisation and colour-dyeing techniques. Active in the salon competitions between 1955 to 1965, he has participated in over 80 competitions and his works have been exhibited in France, the U.K., Germany, Australia, Cuba and America.

Highly reminiscent of established 19th century colonial views of Singapore seen earlier, Lee incorporates his own cultural identity into his photographic panorama made in 1963 (fig. 7). This view taken from the Fullerton Building (office to the first elected Finance Minister of Singapore in 1959) looks at the oldest part of the city in new light, pondering over its own new identity at the brink of gaining its independence in 1965. Unlike Lee King Yan who signs off with his studio name on the right, Lee Sow Lim purposefully places both caption and his signature red Chinese seal on the left, combining Chinese ink-painting tradition with modern photographic composition. As such, he effectively claims ownership of the work as an ethnic Chinese photographer working in post-colonial Singapore, giving rise to a distinctively personal style.

Trade and business opportunities have brought multitudes of foreign commercial and amateur photographers alike to Singapore's shores, positioning her as a significant node in Asian photography history. These photographic panoramas of Singapore spanning a century form part of photographic history that is still under-explored. Just like these early panoramas, the fragmented histories of Singapore photography are waiting to be pieced together, part by part, before a single coherent wide-angle view can be formed.

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References

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Fig. 4: Panorama taken from Fort Canning Hill, G.R. Lambert & Company, 1903, Postcard

