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“A Spirit of Cosmopolitanism Happily Prevailing in Art”: The Chinese Camera Club of South Africa and Transnational Networks of Photography. Malcolm Corrigan

Abstract

The Chinese Camera Club of South Africa was formed in 1952 by members of Johannesburg’s small Chinese community who found themselves excluded from local circuits of photography on the grounds of race. The membership of the Chinese Camera Club sought international recognition as well as local visibility by engaging with transnational networks of photography. In so doing, they became agents in the global dissemination of photographic practices and technologies and asserted a cultural cosmopolitanism that subverted the parochialism of apartheid’s racial hierarchy. Alongside their cosmopolitan patterns of association, they also convened and sustained racially exclusive communities of photographic practice. They staged two international photographic salons in Johannesburg in 1956 and 1964 that were open to photographers from across the worldwide Chinese diaspora and thereby helped forge an imagined community of overseas Chinese photographers. In so doing, the Club and its members established a proprietorial connection with so-called “Chinese” approaches to photography and stressed their enduring connection to idealised and ahistorical notions of Chinese culture and civilisation. This paper explores both of these globally articulated identities – the cosmopolitan and the diasporic – as the result of transnational strategies that fostered autonomy and pride in the face of local racial discrimination.

Keywords

Photography; Cosmopolitanism; Transnationalism; Diaspora Studies; Exhibition History; Camera Clubs.

Introduction

The Chinese Camera Club of South Africa (hereafter the Chinese Camera Club) was formed in Johannesburg in 1952 and remained active throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The Club was established by members of Johannesburg's small Chinese community who found themselves excluded from local circuits of photography on the grounds of race. This tenacious group of individuals sought international recognition as well as local visibility by engaging with transnational networks of photography. For example, they exhibited their work at photographic salon exhibitions across the world. They also joined membership organisations such as the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain and, in so doing, became agents in the global dissemination of photographic practices and technologies. By participating in transnational networks of camera club photography, they asserted a cultural cosmopolitanism which subverted the parochialism of apartheid's racial hierarchy. In contrast to their cosmopolitan patterns of association, they also convened racially exclusive communities of photographic practice in order to craft honorific identities based on transnational points of reference. For example, by staging two international photographic salons in Johannesburg in 1956 and 1964 that only exhibited works by individuals who identified as Chinese, they actively convened and sustained an imagined community of overseas Chinese photographers. In so doing, the Club and its members established a proprietorial connection with so-called "Chinese" approaches to photography. By using public platforms to exhibit these photographs, they stressed their enduring connection to idealised and ahistorical notions of Chinese culture and civilisation. These globally articulated identities – the cosmopolitan and the diasporic – served as sources of autonomy and pride in the face of local racial discrimination.

Through their various activities, the Chinese Camera Club and its members became part of international and cosmopolitan networks of photography. To paraphrase Latour, they were embedded within a "skein of networks" which facilitated the dissemination and situated iteration of developments in photographic ideas, technology and practices (Latour 1993:120). This international technological network remained "local at all points," in that it relied on the localised use of photographic technology by historical agents within a specific "territory" or "loop" in the network (Latour 1993, 117–19). By subscribing to "institutional nodes" such as

the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain (RPS), Club members acted as intermediaries in the spread of photographic ideas, technologies and practices (Gore 2015a, 12). Their membership of international photographic bodies legitimised their status as accomplished and skilled photographers (Gore 2015a, 12). Through their elective association with international bodies they also asserted their “cultural cosmopolitanism”, in particular their membership of a global cosmopolitan community of photographers (Hannerz 2005, 204). Contrary to popular misconceptions, cosmopolitanism has never been the sole reserve of internationally-mobile western elites. On the contrary, the attraction of cosmopolitanism has often resulted from unhappiness with one’s position within local hierarchies, and has been used by historical agents to differentiate themselves from parochial and reductive identities (Hannerz 2005, 204). Participating in international networks of photography allowed members of the Chinese Camera Club to assert a sense of cultural cosmopolitanism that transcended their subordinated position in the local racial hierarchy as institutionalised by the Population Registration Act of 1950. This cosmopolitanism was also a means of subverting the fixed and insular ethnic identities imposed upon individuals by state racial classification as it enacted multiple configurations of identity that were based on a variety of international points of reference.

Somewhat paradoxically, the Chinese Camera Club also convened racially exclusive patterns of association within these global circuits of photography. Jürg Schneider’s study of the transnational circulation of photographs by West African practitioners in the nineteenth century is useful for considering the agency and strategies of the Chinese Camera Club in this endeavour. Schneider (2013, 35–38) has coined the term “Atlantic visualscape” to refer to a nineteenth century space – at once material and discursive – within which people, ideas and objects circulated. Within this space photographs acted as material and symbolic objects whose traffic helped disassemble local circuits of interaction and exchange and replace them with networks that embedded the local within the transnational. Schneider traces how early West African photographers were key agents in the (re)production of the Atlantic visualscape and intentionally circulated their images within this zone of exchange. The circulation of their photographs acted to “reterritorialize social networks on local and global levels” and to sustain them across time and space (Schneider 2013, 58). In a similar fashion, the Chinese Camera Club and its members purposefully established relationships and exchanged photographs with practitioners and photographic institutions from across the global Chinese diaspora. They displayed agency in securing prominent local venues for the joint exhibition

of their photographs alongside those of celebrated overseas Chinese photographers. In so doing, they appropriated the format of the international photographic salon – a key institution in cosmopolitan networks of photography – and redeployed it in order to create and sustain an imagined community of overseas Chinese photographers who were united by a shared, so-called Chinese or Eastern approach to photography. In other words, they de-territorialized existing networks of photographic exchange and reassembled social networks across space and time that were based on honorific conceptions of racial difference. In summary, both the cosmopolitan and racially-exclusive practices of the Chinese Camera Club were firmly rooted in the local in that they were shaped by the Chinese South African community's particular experiences of structural discrimination in South Africa.

The Chinese South African community and the formation of the Chinese Camera Club

The vast majority of the Chinese Camera Club's members lived in the former Transvaal, where, by the 1950s, the Chinese South African population numbered around three thousand nine hundred people (Yap and Man 1996, 330). The community originated from free immigrants who arrived in South Africa from Southern China from the 1870s onwards (Harris 1995, 159; Park 2008, 14–17). They eked out a living as traders and merchants despite statutory restrictions that were introduced from the beginning of the mineral revolution onwards.¹ Such measures – the result of organised white opposition to unwelcome economic competition – restricted their ability to live and trade outside of stipulated areas (Harris 1995, 159–68). Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Chinese South African population grew steadily through processes of chain migration, and movement back and forth between China and South Africa continued during this period (Park 2008, 17–18).

Following the Population Registration Act of 1950, a foundational cornerstone of apartheid policy, individuals from the Chinese community were classified as 'Coloured' and faced discrimination on the basis of this designation. This residual, imprecise and contested category comprised of all those who were considered to be neither 'White' nor 'Native' (Goldin 1987, 168). In 1951 a proclamation created a 'Chinese' subdivision within the 'Coloured' classification (Harris 1999, 187). The introduction of a range of legislation during

the first decade of apartheid further restricted the Chinese community's access to housing, property ownership, education, healthcare and public facilities. The Group Areas Act of 1950 caused particular hardship for Chinese South Africans. Although the community successfully resisted the implementation of Chinese group area in Johannesburg, not having a group area created its own problems, and between 1955 and 1975 those classified as Chinese lived an insecure existence as 'disqualified persons' who relied on permits to reside and trade in group areas set aside for other racial groups (Harris 1999, 190–6). Furthermore, the election of the National Party in South Africa in 1948 and the declaration of the People's Republic of China in 1949 effectively cut Chinese South Africans off from mainland China (Yap and Man 1996, 276; Park 2008, 54–55). Although Chinese South Africans were later singled out for concessions via the permit system, they suffered from structural racism and discrimination throughout apartheid.

The majority of the Chinese Camera Club's membership were shopkeepers. Some, like Cecil King, ran photographic studios in Johannesburg's Chinatown (Lorna Sing, e-mail message to author, February 3, 2015). Others branched out into other business ventures - Jack Ho ran a litho-printing business in Fordsburg whilst Lai Wing became a successful wholesaler (Ho interviews 2014) (Wing 2014). Although their access to photographic equipment suggests a level of economic freedom, in reality the financial position of most members was highly precarious. Due to restrictions on owning property, many would have relied on finding nominees who were willing and eligible to purchase business premises on their behalf. One would approach a nominee of the appropriate racial classification for purchasing a property in a particular group area – for example, a white nominee for a white group area. This was risky position as if an unscrupulous nominee decided to claim ownership of the property and the business there was legal recourse for Chinese South Africans to prevent this (Yap and Man 1996: 348) (Ho interviews 2014). Furthermore, members of the Chinese Camera Club were neither passive nor fantastically wealthy consumers of photographic technology but savvy purchasers who used a range of tactics – including their access to overseas markets – to keep the costs of photography low (Corrigall 2016, 148–83). For example, some Club members obtained their equipment when visiting Hong Kong, where they retained family ties (Ho and Lai interviews 2014). At that time, Hong Kong had no import tariffs and, consequently, the latest cameras were available at very cheap prices and were all the more inexpensive due to competition between the multitudes of photographic shops (Chan 1964, 19) (Olson 1966, 20). Some members of the Chinese

Camera Club would ask relatives or fellow Club members who travelled to Hong Kong to purchase the latest cameras and equipment for them at prices that were dramatically lower than on the South African market (Ho and Lai interviews 2014) (May interview 2013).

The formation of the Chinese Camera Club in 1952 was part of a widespread trend in the Chinese South African community. From the early twentieth century onwards a number of Chinese-only political, sporting and cultural organisations were established. The proliferation of such organisations amongst a Chinese community distinguished by racial classification, language and shared adversity helped inculcate a sense of shared identity and solidarity (Yap and Man 1996, 207–45). During the 1950s in particular there was a renewed growth in the number of sporting and cultural organisations set up by the Chinese South African community. According to Yap and Man, these racially exclusive organisations were a symptom of racial segregation (which was consolidated by legislation introduced by the recently elected National Party government) as well as a means by which the “generally reticent” Chinese community could avoid the humiliation of being turned away by white-dominated clubs and organisations (Yap and Man 1996, 391). Like these organisations, The Chinese Camera Club was only open to individuals who were considered Chinese (“Why is Chinese Photography Different?” 1964).

In interviews, former members offered a number of complementary explanations for the Club’s racial exclusivity. In Club member Thomas Lai’s view, it was because of the legal context of racial segregation (Lai interviews 2014). Another reason offered by Jack Ho was that the Club’s meetings were held in Chinese, owing to the fact that some members were not fluent in English (Star August 17, 1964; Ho interviews 2014). But Ho also explained that the Club was established to provide photographic education to his community, who, because of their racial classification, were unable to access such education elsewhere. This was something Ho was freshly aware of: in the early 1950s, around the time the Club was formed, Ho had applied to study photography at the Witwatersrand Technical College in Johannesburg but his application was rejected on the grounds of race (Ho interviews 2014)

There were also an international context that led to the formation of the Chinese Camera Club. According to Club member O. Y. Shue, Jack Ho was inspired to set up the Chinese Camera Club after his exposure to the activities of camera clubs in Hong Kong (Shue interview 2013). Around 1948, Jack Ho’s father sent him to Hong Kong for two years of schooling (Ho interviews 2014). During this time there was a renaissance in camera club

activity associated with prominent photographers such as Francis Wu and institutions such as the Photographic Society of Hong Kong (Lai 1996, 237–8). Jack Ho regularly attended the exhibitions and meetings of the Photographic Society of Hong Kong and, on his return to Johannesburg around 1950, went about establishing a camera club (Ho interviews 2014). The formation of the Chinese Camera Club as a racially exclusive organisation was therefore the result of a variety of imperatives. In summary, it was established to provide photographic education to photographers in the Chinese community who would have been excluded from white-dominated camera clubs and educational institutions where the language of instruction was English or Afrikaans, as well as to link the Chinese community to wider cultural trends in the Chinese diaspora.

The activities of the Chinese Camera Club must also be understood within broader historical trajectories of camera clubs and pictorialism in South Africa. The first camera clubs in South Africa were formed in urban centres during the 1890s, and from their inception onwards they enthusiastically participated in global networks of photography (Bensusan 1966, 33–37). For example, in 1891 the Cape Town Photographic Club received a photographic album from an overseas club and in 1892 sent a selection of twenty five lantern slides produced by its own members to the Photographic Society of Great Britain for display (Vertue 1960, 359). The history of camera clubs in South Africa had also long been entwined with the history of pictorialism. Pictorialism emerged in the late 1890s and 1900s as a movement that sought to assert photography's status as an independent fine art. Its rapid dissemination was facilitated by a transnational network of camera clubs, periodicals, exhibitions and visiting photographers (Nordström and Wooters 2008, 44). What united pictorialists was not a fixed set of aesthetic practices but a shared emphasis on the individual expression of emotion and beauty and the importance of craftsmanship in photography (Young 2008, 251–3; Baillie 2014, 20–36; Nordström and Wooters 2008, 38–48). The pictorial movement developed differently amongst individual camera clubs in different parts of the world, and the mediation of pictorialist practices by South African camera clubs was shaped by local historical and social contexts, as well as the particular climate and geographical environment of a given locality. By the 1950s, pictorialism remained the dominant influence on photographic practice in South African camera clubs, and many individual members of the Chinese Camera Club self-identified as pictorialist photographers (Corrigall 2015, 48).

Around the middle of the twentieth century camera clubs became embedded in transnational circuits of pictorialism to an even greater extent. Increasing emphasis was placed on gaining accreditation from global photographic institutions and exhibiting in a broad range of international photographic exhibitions (Peterson 1997, 154–6). Within this context, the Chinese Camera Club sustained and consolidated transnational outlooks and orientations that had long been a feature of white-dominated South African camera clubs, although the reasons for their participation (as well as the patterns of their association) were distinctive and related to their particular local experience of racial discrimination.

International recognition, cosmopolitanism, and local visibility

Members of the Chinese Camera Club enthusiastically participated in cosmopolitan and transnational networks of photography. For example, they entered international photographic salon exhibitions staged by camera clubs across the world. The term salon was appropriated from the French and referred to official exhibitions of academic painting and sculpture. During the late 1890s pictorialist photographers in camera clubs across Europe began to appropriate the salon format in order to assert the artistic status of their photographs. Camera clubs would organise international salons that were open to photographers across the world, and were a means by which local practitioners could remain abreast – and shape – transnational trajectories of practice.

Competition was central to camera club life, and by the middle of the twentieth century the amount of photographs one had exhibited in international salons had become an increasingly important marker of accomplishment in photography. This competitive trend was encouraged by rankings of salon acceptance figures that were published in local and international photographic magazines, journals and annuals (Peterson 1997, 154–6). Such rankings provided a highly visible platform upon which members of the Chinese Camera Club could gain international recognition and display their superiority to local white South African photographers. Between 1955 and 1960 the South African photographic journal *Camera News* published details of overseas salon acceptances by South African photographers in every issue. In 1955 and 1956 these listings were largely populated by names of white pictorialists such as Joseph Denfield and Rhodes Tremeer. In January 1957 Tony Yau was the first member of the Chinese Camera Club to have details of his overseas

salon successes published, and between 1958 and 1960 members of the Chinese Camera Club came to dominate these listings (“Overseas Salon Successes” 1957, 336). The amount of salon acceptances accrued by Chinese Camera Club members was quite staggering, and would have required a significant amount of time, dedication and financial investment crafting photographic prints and posting them across the world for consideration. To provide an example, between 1957 and 1960 Ho Koo’s print ‘Farewell’ was exhibited 108 times, and in 1958 alone he had 104 prints exhibited in international salons (Bensusan 1966, 95) (Willey and Goldsmith 1959, 61–2). This international success was even more remarkable given the small size of the Chinese Camera Club relative to other camera clubs in Johannesburg – something that was remarked upon at the time by Johannesburg’s *Star* newspaper (“Why is Chinese Photography different?” 1964).² Such productivity was a means by which the Chinese Camera Club and its members gained international recognition for their achievements, as well as local visibility amongst the readership of *Camera News* (Bensusan 1966, 61–2).

Individual members of the Chinese Camera Club employed particular strategies in order to maximise the number of salon acceptances they achieved. By studying international photographic salon catalogues, W. Shung Lau noticed that Hong Kong photographers had a very high level of salon acceptances. He began to research their participation in exhibitions, and noticed they entered a large number of US salons. Lau calculated that if he continued to only participate in salons outside of America, his salon acceptance rate would remain low. Accordingly, Lau “joined the US circuit” by sending a portfolio of eight monochrome prints (‘Black Handle’, ‘In Step’, ‘Symmetry’, ‘Cold and Grey’, ‘Maiden’, ‘Book-worm’, ‘She’, and ‘Tom Black’) to salons across the USA and as a result of this deliberate plan of action his salon acceptance rate tripled (W. Shung Lau, e-mail message to author, March 27, 2014). Indeed, Lau was one of the Chinese Camera Club’s most prolific exhibitors. As he pointed out in a letter to the Photographic Society of America, between 1964 and 1968 Lau exhibited 66 photographs in 514 photographic salons across the world, peaking with 150 salon acceptances in 1966 (Lau 1970). Such a tactical approach was not unusual, and photographic journals of the period often published articles detailing strategies for increasing one’s salon acceptance rates (See Wah 1966, 30–31).

² In the absence of membership records, it is difficult to ascertain exactly how large the membership of the Chinese Camera Club grew to be. There were 10 founding members at their inaugural meeting in 1952 (Ho interviews 2014). A newspaper report from 1964 stated that there were 40 members, but Thomas Lai, who was a member of the Club by that time, estimated that there were only around 20 members (“Why is Chinese Photography Different?”) (Lai interviews 2014).

Looking at the ways in which members of the Chinese Camera Club archived and displayed items of ephemera from photographic salons gives a sense of how much value their competitive achievements and their international recognition held for them. When a photographer had a print accepted for exhibition in an international salon of photography they were customarily sent both a salon acceptance sticker and a catalogue of the exhibition (which would on occasion feature a reproduction of their photograph). Sometimes the salon acceptance stickers, which are fascinating examples of period design, were affixed to the back of the successful print, “providing concise exhibition histories of individual pieces” (Peterson 1997, 140). However, just as often salon stickers were kept loose from prints and were treasured within personal collections. W. Shung Lau, Jack Ho and Tony Yau, for example, all kept collections of their salon acceptance stickers which they valued greatly (Fig. 1) (W. Shung Lau, e-mail message to author, February 26, 2014; Ho interviews 2014; Yau interview 2013). Bo Lon Lau kept an extensive collection of exhibition catalogues from the many salons he participated in, as did Jack Ho (Ming interview 2014; Ho interviews 2014). Others such as Lai Wing and Gandy Chang arranged their salon acceptance stickers next to newspaper cuttings in photographic albums and scrapbooks, creating personal archives of their success and cultural cosmopolitanism (Teddy and Linda Lai interview 2014; Chang interview 2014)



Fig. 1: A selection of Tony Yau's salon acceptance stickers (1958–1963). Digital Scans.
(Courtesy of Tony Yau).

Participation in photographic salons across the world, and the international recognition it conferred, was also a means of joining a community of photographers, at home and abroad, that transcended the racial segregation and discrimination of South Africa. The international network of salon exhibitions had long been seen across the world as a cosmopolitan fraternity in which the only distinction which mattered was one's skill and artistry in photography, such that Chin-San Long, the Shanghai based pictorialist, had observed in 1939 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 and limitation as to

race, creed or standing – a spirit of cosmopolitanism happily prevailing in art [sic]” (Long 1939, 2). Such a cosmopolitanism – underpinned as it was by notions of humanism and egalitarianism – would have been attractive to members of the Chinese Camera Club, for the very reason that it stood in contrast to the balkanising racial engineering of apartheid South Africa.

Members of the Chinese Camera Club also aligned themselves with international photographic membership organisations. This cosmopolitan strategy enabled Club members to become links in a field of relations that united photographers from across the world by virtue of their common institutional memberships (Latour 1993, 120). For example, a large number of Chinese Camera Club members joined the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain (RPS). Jack Ho was the first Club member to join in 1955 and he remained a member until the end of 1968 (Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain, 1955–1979). A number of Club members also joined the Photographic Society of America (PSA), which, like the RPS, boasted a large international membership. In fact, the Club itself affiliated with the PSA in July 1956 as an organisational member, and between 1954 and 1968 at least fifteen individual members of the Chinese Camera Club joined the PSA (“Directory of Membership” 1960) (“Membership Directory” 1964) (“New Members” 1965a) (“New Members” 1965b) (“New Members” 1965c) (“New Members” 1969). Membership of such bodies enabled Club members to explore new ideas and master the latest technologies and practices in photography. For example, many joined the RPS’s range of special interest groups, and their subscription patterns reveal that a range of overlapping photographic interests existed within the Club. By far the most popular subscription was to the pictorialist group, but Club members also subscribed to other special interest groups—such as the photojournalist, colour and motion picture groups (Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain, 1955–1979).

Membership of such “institutional nodes” allowed Club members to play an active role in the global dissemination of rapidly changing photographic practices, technologies and techniques (Gore 2015a, 12). Of course, Club members also displayed a remarkable degree of experimentation and resourcefulness in their interpretation of these trends. One example of this can be discerned in W. Shung Lau’s monochrome print, *She*, which he produced in 1966 (Fig. 2) (Lau 1970). W. Shung Lau stated that he was influenced in the conception and production of this photograph by Op-Art – which was popular at the time – being particularly

drawn to its “abstract images” (W. Shung Lau, e-mail message to author, February 23, 2014). At this time the influence of Op-Art on photographic practice was increasingly apparent, notably in the work appearing in international photographic journals and salons. For example, in 1966 the *PSA Journal* (which, as a member of the Photographic Society of America, Lau would have received) published an instructional article on Op-Art photography, detailing how photographers could achieve Op-Art effects in their photographic prints (Burlingham 1966).

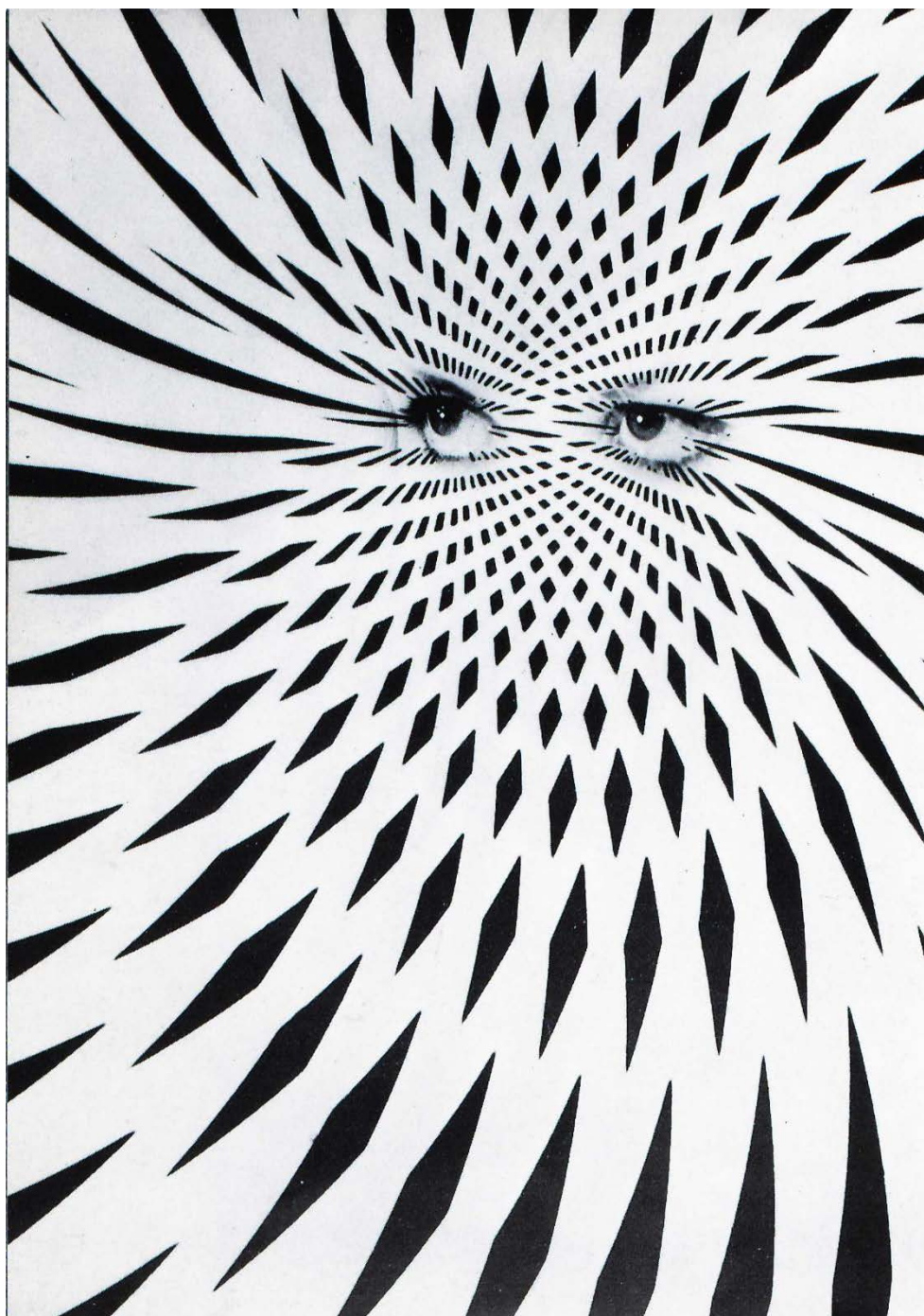


Fig. 2: W. Shung Lau, *She* (1966). Halftone reproduction of a monochrome photographic print. (Reproduced from Johannesburg Photographic Society 1966)

Drawing on this influence W. Shung Lau experimented with different ways of making a salon print “with a bit of OP” (W. Shung Lau, e-mail message to author, February 23, 2014). Firstly, Lau drew diamond shapes onto a mounting board and painted these with solid black paint. Next, he photographed the mounting board using regular film and enlarged this negative onto lithographic, high-contrast film (a type of film used in off-set printing). After development he was left with a negative featuring a high-contrast pattern of solid black diamond shapes on a transparent background. W. Shung Lau made two copies and placed both in the enlarger to create a sandwich print. After a lot of time and effort spent trying out different arrangements of the two negatives, Lau managed to align the diamonds on the two negatives in such a way that they looked like the profile of a person. Lau printed the image on photographic paper, and, after examining the print, was satisfied. It was at this stage that Lau came up with the title of the print, *She*. Lau then took a few days to think about what to do next. He looked through his stock of photos, and came across a portrait photograph from several years beforehand. Lau’s attention was seized by the model’s sharply focussed eyes and he set about combining the model’s eyes with the diamond pattern. In order to do this, Lau started making the photograph afresh, and firstly blocked out the areas on the photographic print where he wanted the eyes to be. To do this he cut circles out of cardboard and attached them to the photographic paper using thin wire. He then exposed the diamond pattern onto the photographic paper, before removing the cardboard circles and exposing the eyes onto the unexposed spots on the print. He then developed the full image and when the print had dried, looked again at the print and decided that it “looked great” and printed ten copies for stock to submit to photographic salons across the world (W. Shung Lau, e-mail message to author, February 23, 2014). What this lengthy process shows is the agency of the photographer in mediating transnational trends; Lau did not passively mimic ‘overseas’ practices but in fact demonstrated a great deal of creativity and thoughtfulness in shaping a personal take on the op-art phenomenon in photography.

Membership of the RPS and PSA also allowed members of the Chinese Camera Club to assert their status as accomplished photographers and to out-compete local photographers from white-dominated camera clubs. One of the most commonly recognised ways of proving

one's competence in camera club networks was to achieve the Associateship of the Royal Photographic Society, a greatly coveted distinction that elevated one above the ordinary RPS membership by virtue of a proficiency in one of eight photographic specialisms. Applicants were required to send a portfolio of twelve photographs (after 1962 this was increased to eighteen photographs) to the RPS, where it was assessed by a panel of experts (Mikellides 2013, 114). Nine members of the Chinese Camera Club were awarded the Associateship between 1960 and 1972, all under the pictorialism specialism (Fig. 3) (Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain, 1955–1979). Of all the camera clubs in South Africa, The Chinese Camera Club had the highest proportion of RPS Associates in relation to their overall membership (Ho and Lai interviews 2014). There was a shared aspiration within the Club that encouraged members to apply for the Associateship in order to raise the profile and standing of the Chinese Camera Club locally and to outcompete white dominated camera clubs. This can be discerned in W. Shung Lau's recollection of how he responded to the news that he had been awarded the Associateship in 1964; according to Lau, "My thought at that very moment – did it – another [A]RPS" (W. Shung Lau, e-mail message to author, February 24, 2014). He then informed senior Club members Yen Lai and Au Chi Bin and they spread the good news to other Club members (W. Shung Lau, e-mail message to author, February 24, 2014). This reflects how obtaining one's Associateship was considered both a personal success but also a success for the Club.

W. Shung Lau attributed his and others' success in obtaining their Associateship awards to the advice and knowledge they were given by senior members of the Club. A pattern developed in which those who had obtained their Associateship provided advice and training to any junior Club members who wanted to apply. Following Ho Koo's successful Associateship application, the Club had a guide, and when subsequent members obtained their Associateship, they in turn passed on their knowledge and experience (W. Shung Lau, e-mail message to author, April 4, 2014.). This is corroborated by Jack Ho, who remembered that:

each one that applied for the ARPS, we go to their house, they present the prints they want to send in, and we sort of try to show them how to improve it, what's wrong, it should be this way, that way, and, so everyone that applies, we go to each one's house and check their prints, and then they start improving it, so [it's] OK [to submit]. (Ho interviews 2014).

The scrutiny that each applicant's portfolio received from their peers further reinforces how important a goal the associateship was within the Chinese Camera Club's culture.

It is clear that individual Club members were extremely proud of their membership of the RPS and the PSA. Tony Yau framed his Associateship certificate from the RPS and he still had the treasured item in his possession when I interviewed him in 2014, over fifty years after it was awarded (Yau interview 2014). Some club members literally wore their memberships as a badge of pride. Edmund Lang recalled how his father, Club member F. M. Lang, had badges from the RPS, PSA and the Chinese Camera Club that he would always proudly wear on his blazer jacket, whether he was photographing or not (Fig. 4) (Lang interview 2013). By wearing all three of these badges together, F. M. Lang asserted the existence of a relationship of equals between the Chinese Camera Club, the RPS and the PSA that spanned national borders.

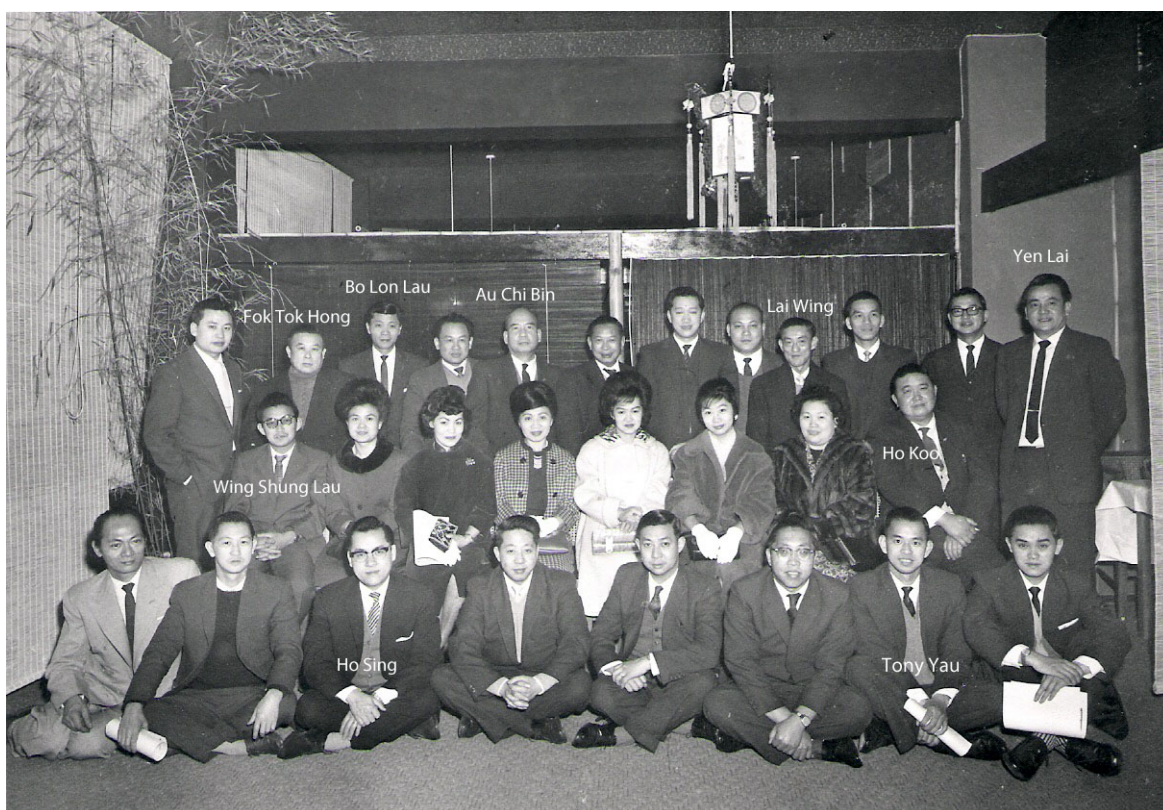


Fig. 3: Photographer unknown. Annotated by author, *Photograph indicating Club members who were awarded the Associateship of the Royal Photographic Society* (date unknown). (Courtesy of Edmund Lang).



Fig. 4: Malcolm Corrigan, *Photographs of F. M. Lang's Badges*. Left to right: *Royal Photographic Society*, *Photographic Society of America*, *Chinese Camera Club* (2013).
(Courtesy of Edmund Lang).

It is apparent that the Chinese Camera Club's international success raised their standing amongst local camera clubs. Having become the highest ranked salon exhibitor in South Africa, W. Shung Lau was invited to give a lecture to the white-dominated Pretoria Photographic Society in 1967. An editorial from the Society's journal ahead of Lau's lecture reflects the esteem in which he was held, and the status he had achieved as an exemplary role model for aspiring salon photographers:

Perhaps one of the most outstanding examples of success in the field of amateur photography is seen in the achievements of Mr. Shung Lau. [...] This year Mr. Lau has achieved 150 monochrome salon acceptances to his credit. We feel extremely fortunate in having enlisted the services of such a successful photographer to address our forthcoming meeting on the subject of his salon pictures. ("From the Editor's Ink Pot" 1967).

The cosmopolitan credentials of Club members also won them wider recognition. Tony Yau received press coverage which broadcast his achievements beyond the photographic community. On September 11, 1959 Johannesburg's *Star* newspaper published a biographical profile of Yau in its pages that was illustrated with a large reproduction of one of Yau's photographs, *Man in the Rectangles*, which had recently been accepted in the Edinburgh International Exhibition of Pictorial Photography ("Grocery Clerk is Genius with a Camera" 1959). On January 6, 1961 the *Star* again featured an article on Tony Yau, reporting that he

had been awarded the Associateship of the RPS, which, in the newspapers words, was “an honour conferred upon photographers of outstanding merit” (“The Work of an Expert” 1961).

What drove members of the Chinese Camera Club to seek international success and recognition? What use did such cosmopolitan credentials serve locally? Arguably, the membership of the Chinese Camera Club were partly motivated by a desire to raise the visibility and profile of the Chinese Community in South Africa, whose position in South African society was so often misunderstood. Looking back, Jack Ho believed that the achievements of the Chinese Camera Club “improved the standing of the Chinese community” in South Africa (Ho interviews 2014). Furthermore, Ho always thought at the back of his mind that it might do so, although this was never a primary or even conscious motivation in establishing and presiding over the Club; such a goal would have seemed too difficult for such an organisation to achieve. Ho believed that the wider Chinese community inadvertently benefited from the Club’s achievements and recognition, and the growing respect they commanded. According to Ho:

I always thought that this [The Chinese Camera Club] would do the Chinese community good. I’ve always had that behind, you know, my mind [...] I suppose its human nature once other people get to know you and see your achievement then they sort of start respecting you and automatically once they respect you and the Club then they sort of take the Chinese population as a whole, [...] when they see a Chinese anywhere it links them up with the achievements of what the Club did. (Ho interviews 2014)

The interrelationship between international recognition and local visibility is again reflected in a quote from Jack Ho evaluating the Club’s achievements:

The success of the Chinese Camera Club was due to our unrelenting efforts to better ourselves with the ultimate goal of achieving international recognition. Above all, during this period of the country’s history, we placed photography above the embarrassment and humiliation felt by ethnic minorities to make our presence visible. (Grundlingh 2001, 35).

The Chinese Salons of Photography and imagined communities of overseas Chinese photographers

The Chinese Camera Club also actively engaged with and sustained transnational photographic communities that were racially exclusive. Such patterns of association existed alongside – but also in contrast to – the notions of universalism, cosmopolitanism and

humanism that underpinned their pursuit of international recognition. Indeed, the Chinese Camera Club and its individual members were key agents in the construction of an imagined community of overseas Chinese photographers. Most notably, they staged two international photographic salons at Johannesburg City Hall that only exhibited the work of individuals who identified as Chinese, regardless of where in the world they resided. Somewhat remarkably in the context of apartheid South Africa, these exhibitions were open to mixed audiences and formed part of the official programming of the Johannesburg Festivals of 1956 and 1964. To give an example of their global reach, the 114 exhibitors at the 1964 exhibition in Johannesburg hailed from ten different countries: Hong Kong, Macau, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, the USA, Vietnam, Sarawak, and South Africa (Chinese Camera Club of South Africa 1964). For the 1956 salon, the Chinese Secretary of the Chinese Camera Club, Au Chi Bin, who could read and write in Chinese, was entrusted with contacting overseas photographers and sent letters directly to the major photographers and camera clubs of the Chinese diaspora, inviting them to submit prints (Ho interviews 2014). He was assisted by the prominent Hong Kong photographer, Yet Pore Pun, who helped collect prints from his photographic colleagues in Hong Kong (Ho 1956). There is evidence – beyond the high level of participation – that photographers across the Chinese diaspora responded with enthusiasm to the invitation. Wellington Lee, the successful Chinese American pictorialist based in New York, described the exhibition as unique and suggested that the Chinese Camera Club hold the salon on an annual basis (“Chinese Make History with Rand Display” 1956).

By participating in Johannesburg’s celebrations of civic pride, the Chinese Camera Club celebrated and made visible their contribution to Johannesburg, whilst also stressing their proprietorial connection to so-called Chinese approaches to photography practiced across the diaspora. If one looks at statements in the press made by Club officials, one can discern a clear strategy which sought to assert their innate connection to these transnational trajectories of practice. On August 17, 1964 an article about the Chinese Camera Club appeared in Johannesburg’s *Star* newspaper. The profile described the achievements of the Club and provided advance notification of the forthcoming all-Chinese Salon of Photography. Entitled “Why is Chinese Photography Different?” the article provided a platform for the Chinese Camera Club to stress their innate link to approaches shared by Chinese photographers across the world. Explaining why the Chinese Camera Club were more successful than other camera clubs in Johannesburg, the article quoted Jack Ho as stating that

“All photographers have basically the same equipment. But the Eastern approach to a subject is quite different – it’s all in the mind” (“Why is Chinese Photography Different?” 1964). Furthermore, an article written by Jack Ho and published in the South African photographic journal, *Amateur Photography*, in 1963, also stressed this sense of honorific difference (Ho 1963). Throughout the article, Ho (1963) used the generic term “Chinese Photography” to describe the work of the Chinese Camera Club, as well as the terms “Chinese Camera Art” and “Chinese print”. In so doing, Ho situated the ideas and practices of Club members within an international network of so-called “Chinese” photographic practice.

Of course, such claims were substantiated by photographs produced by Club members, and the 1956 and 1964 salons allowed them to appropriate and mediate longstanding trajectories of photographic practice that dated back to early twentieth century China and which had subsequently spread across camera clubs in East Asia. This is evident when one traces the participation of the celebrated Chinese photographer Chin-San Long (1892–1995) in the Chinese Camera Club’s Second all-Chinese International Salon of Photography in Johannesburg in 1964. Edwin Kin-Keung Lai (2000) has argued that Chin-San Long (also known as Lang Jinshang) was the pre-eminent Chinese art photographer of the twentieth century. Born in mainland China in 1892, his involvement in photographic exhibitions and societies dated back to the late 1910s and he was one of the founding members of the Shanghai Photographic Society in 1934 (Lai 2000, 97–110). He became famous for pioneering an approach called “composite photography” in which two or more negatives were combined in order to print photographs that resembled classical Chinese painting, in particular the monumental style of landscape painting associated with the Northern Song Dynasty (Liu 2015). This technique developed and transformed earlier photographic methods for emulating historical landscape painting (what Richard Kent (2013) has called “Chinese-inflected Pictorialism”) that were popularised by Beijing camera clubs during the 1920s. Chin-San Long left China in 1949 and arrived in Taiwan in 1950. When settled in Taiwan he led the re-establishment of the Photographic Society of China in 1953, which he presided over until his death in 1995 (Lai 2000, 121–5).

Chin-San Long exhibited four monochrome prints at the Chinese Camera Club’s all-Chinese International Salon of Photography in Johannesburg in 1964. Included amongst these was Long’s widely exhibited print, *Majestic Solitude*, which was originally produced in the 1930s (Fig. 5) (Lai 2000, 208). The photograph was taken from the top of Shih Sin Peak in the Huangshan mountain range in Eastern China (Long 1939, 17). It was his first successful

attempt at creating a composite photograph (Lai 2000, 208). Chin-San Long himself made explicit the link between his composite photographs and Chinese painting, in an exposition which can be applied to *Majestic Solitude*:

All the composite pictures I have made so far are landscapes—landscapes after the style of the traditional Chinese artists. That is to say they are mostly views which might have been seen from some higher plane [...]. By putting different views together I have arranged to have *chien ching* (foreground), *chung ching* (middle distance) and *yuan ching* (the distance) like what Chinese artists do when they paint a piece of landscape. (Long 1941).

Monica Butler (2012, 31) has argued that with *Majestic Solitude*, Chin-San Long referenced multiple historical schools of Chinese painting. The particular mountain depicted, for instance, was frequently portrayed by Ming literati painters (Butler 2012, 31). The composition of the photograph is also indebted to the approach of Song Dynasty painter Ma Yuan, who was practicing in the late twelfth century (Butler 2012, 32). Specifically, the composition is characteristic of Ma Yuan's style, in that "a strong anchoring feature in the foreground is placed against the silhouette of a pale mountain landscape in the deep distance" (Butler 2012, 32).

Fig. 5: Chin-San Long, *Majestic Solitude* (ca. 1930s). Monochrome photographic print.
(Royal Photographic Society Collection)

<https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/573434965039762722/>

Had they not already been familiar with Chin-San Long's composite photography technique, Chinese Camera Club members would have encountered an example of it ("Majestic Solitude") at the Second all-Chinese Salon of Photography in Johannesburg in 1964. Club members subsequently employed the composite technique when crafting their own photographs in the darkroom. Former Club member Stanley May recalled that the composite approach, or "sandwich photography" as he called it, was popular within the Club (May interview 2013). Club members exposed different photographic negatives of South African mountain ranges through a projector onto photographic paper in order to print collages whose monumentality approximated the landscapes of classical Chinese painters. Often calligraphy was added and there are surviving examples of such photographs by Gandy

Chang, Bo Lon Lau and Lai Wing (Fig. 6). In producing such photographs, they developed a locally situated art making practice whose referents were both South African and Chinese, and which served to broadcast their familiarity and knowledge of the South African countryside as well as their privileged connection to Chinese visual culture. Furthermore, one can also discern a similarity with local aesthetic practices, especially when one compares the two-dimensionality of Lai Wing's *The Peak* (Fig. 6) with the representations of the South African landscape in works by J. H. Pierneef, in particular his formal arrangement of dramatic geographical features within a flattened image plane. The duality was reflected in a quote from Chinese Camera Club member Stanley May, who also stated that “we would take something that looks Chinese, something that looks South African, and print it together, two negatives, it was appreciated” (May interview 2013).



Fig. 6: Lai Wing, *The Peak* (ca. 1964–68). Monochrome print. (Courtesy of Teddy Lai).

Yoon Jung Park (2008, 70) has argued that, because they were treated as “foreigners and second class citizens” by the apartheid state, individuals from the Chinese community were

disinclined to identify as South African. Simultaneously, Chinese South Africans constructed identities based on idealised notions of a mythical China and Chinese superiority that allowed them to “survive apartheid with their heads held high” (Park 2008, 7). By appropriating and mediating conventions associated with a so called Chinese approach to photography, which itself alluded to classical Chinese landscape painting, individual members of the Chinese Camera Club were “giving visual expression to an identity that allowed them to resist the denigrations of apartheid and secure a sense of belonging in an uncertain and difficult time” (Corrigall 2015, 54). However, as has been argued elsewhere, by referencing specific locales and mountain ranges in South Africa and by referencing the regularity of the Club’s photographic outings to the countryside, during which the negatives making up Lai Wing’s “The Peak” (Fig. 6) would have been taken, individual photographs in fact expressed notions of belonging, and configurations of identity, that were simultaneously local and transnational (Corrigall 2015, 48–57).

Conclusion

Charles Gore (2015b) has highlighted the need to deconstruct the homogenizing categories of ‘African’ photography and the ‘African’ photographer by tracing the multiple positioning(s) of practitioners across networks of photography that were, and remain, simultaneously local, regional and transnational. The Chinese Camera Club presents the perfect case study for this project of deconstruction, in that they were embedded within local social formations and contexts in South Africa and yet also operated within global networks of camera clubs and salon exhibitions. By recognising their participation in extended and interconnected networks of photography, one understands how Club members transcended narrowly local, regional or international discursive framings and assembled multiple configurations of identity by occupying a number of strategic positions in these networks at different times (Gore 2015b, 5).

The activities and photographic output of the Chinese Camera Club and its members were conditioned by their local positioning(s) in relation to the apartheid state. However, they also articulated transnational cultural formations whose meanings were produced by photographers across a chain of locations (Marcus 1995, 96–97). By tracing the worldwide exhibition of individual photographs, by considering Club members’ mediation of

transnational ideas and practices in photography, and by studying their affiliations to international organisations such as the RPS, the “skein of networks” to which these photographers belonged has emerged as an object of study (Latour 1993, 120). Such an understanding collapses binary distinctions between the local, the regional and the global. As Gore (2015b, 1) has argued “photography’s localized spaces of practice and representation are situated within specific social formations composed by the intersection of local elements with the impositions and appropriations of regional and global elements.” In mapping the many outward connections established by the Chinese Camera Club and its members, one also becomes aware of how participation in international cultural formations provided them with alternative spaces, both imaginative and real, for subjective expression, contingent on their multi-sited nature, and reveals ethnographic spaces that might otherwise prove invisible (Marcus 1995, 109–10). As such, my consideration of the international circulation and consumption of camera club photography provides a contrast to more circumscribed accounts of photographic history during apartheid.

Club members who participated within this international web of interrelations practiced agency as intermediaries in the spread of photographic ideas, technologies and practices (Latour 1993, 120; Gore 2015a, 12). They were highly aware of the place they had achieved within multi-sited networks of photography and exploited their coordinates in order to shape and publicise valorising identities. Crucially, there were two main types of transnational identity articulated by the Chinese Camera Club and its members; the cosmopolitan and the diasporic. These interchangeable identities, seemingly paradoxical, were both motivated by local conditions peculiar to South Africa, in that both served to raise the profile and standing of the Chinese Camera Club locally, and allowed them to either transcend or subvert their subordinated position in apartheid racial hierarchy.

Participation in global networks of photography allowed Club members to gain visibility and assert a sense of cultural cosmopolitanism that addressed their dissatisfaction with apartheid’s racial hierarchy (Hannerz 2005, 204). Their recognition within international networks of photography also validated their identities as highly skilled and knowledgeable photographers. This cosmopolitan strategy allowed them to assert configurations of identity based on photographic skill that transcended the reductive and limiting ethnic identities imposed upon them by racial classification. In other words, they were not merely ‘Chinese photographers’, but they were photographers, period, and were recognised as such within meritocratic communities of their peers and equals. On the other hand, the Chinese Camera

Club also staged racially exclusive international photographic salon exhibitions that publically mapped their place within a network of accomplished overseas Chinese photographers. They proudly asserted the existence of a so-called eastern or Chinese approach to photography and presented themselves as innately fluent in this approach. In this endeavour, they asserted a proprietorial and ongoing relationship to mythic ideas of an idealised Chinese civilisation, a diasporic strategy that allowed them to highlight the absurdity of notions of white supremacy.

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