

Piercing Through a Porous Archive

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The album kept by Taiwanese photographer Peng Ruei-lin (1904–1984), who served as a military interpreter for the Imperial Forces, is annotated in Japanese, and through its absent blank pages, reveals structures of silence and withheld gazes. Alongside a war painting by Fujita Tsuguharu (1886–1968) and Fujii Hikaru's porous archive that recomposes Peng's visual records, they cast new shadows under the searchlight traversing the Pacific Rim—from Taiwan, through Vietnam, to Singapore—and thread lines of shifting allegiances and distrust amid the fractures of the tumultuous era.

Fujita Tsuguharu's *The Bombing of Singapore* (1942, Work 2), painted while he served as a war painter, adopts the vertiginous viewpoint of a fighter aircraft: the post-midnight sky, the flames and black smoke of the bombing are rendered in delicate tones. By excluding the ground's carnage from the frame, the composition restrains visceral violence while imposing an aesthetic distance—a device that orders the visual field. Whether such works of 'war paintings' constitute mere propaganda or cultural artefacts of artistic merit became a question under the Occupation Forces; Fujii Hikaru's *Japanese War Art* (2022, Work 3) reenacts that controversy, exposing the political and ethical contradictions embedded in military-era painting and raising contemporary questions about effaced documentation and the intentional erasure of memory.

Born in Hsinchu Prefecture during Japanese rule, Peng studied at the Konishi Professional School of Photography and won acclaim for his early pictorialist works employing the technically demanding colour-carbon printing process (Work 6), becoming the first Taiwanese to earn a degree in photography. At the Apollo Studio he founded on returning to Taipei, the intersecting gazes—photographer, sitter, and unseen viewer—inscribed intricate strata into the silver-halide emulsion (Work 11). The presence of exiled Nguyễn-dynasty royals and members of the revolutionary Việt Nam Phục Quốc Đồng Minh Hội (note 1) hint at tacit negotiations with the Japanese Imperial Army advancing into French Indochina, amplifying the political reverberations of portrait photography as archive. In Peng Ruei-lin, *Tokyo Shasen Portfolio Composition 4* (2025, Work 11), the movement's key figure Prince Cường Để appears; the pairing of the society's flag with the rising-sun ensign registers the tense formation of political subjecthood amid Indochina's entangled fates (Work 12).

In the exhibition, Peng's original prints (Works 5–7) appear in ornate frames, while pages from his private album—an assemblage of photographs of friends and military figures, sketches, magazine clippings, and postcards—rest inside a plain paulownia box with a matching lid. Reconfigured by Fujii, these materials respond to the performative act of opening and closing the box, summoning a shadow-laden, furtive archive. Each opening unseals time, initiating a dialogue with the silence the images have borne; each closure cuts off the light, returning the photographs to a darkroom that still harbours the power and absence lodged in history's interstices.

In 1945 Office of the Government-General, citing fire-prevention, ordered the demolition of the building housing Apollo Studio. Subsequently, Peng shuttered the studio and withdrew to the suburbs. Had he sensed Japan's defeat that would come scarcely two months later (note 2), he might never have relinquished the space or turned away from photography. Fujita, meanwhile—pilloried for his complicity in the wartime order—departed Japan in 1949 and never returned.

Searchlights raked the night sky, scoring fresh fault lines where the post-war politics redrew the boundaries of ideologies. Their beams probed voids once barred to the gaze, coaxing lost narratives and long-entombed feelings to the surface. The porous archive—stitched from absences—yields new shadows as light threads through its texture, exposing the fractures of history embedded at the threshold of perception and within the medium itself.

Note 1: Việt Nam Phục Quốc Đồng Minh Hội (League for the National Restoration of Vietnam) was a Vietnamese independence organisation founded in Shanghai in 1939. It continued the lineage of Phan Bội Châu and Prince Cường Để's earlier Reformation Society and Việt Nam Quang Phục Hội, which grew out of the Đông Du movement motivated by Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War. Backed by the Japanese military, the league sought to spark popular uprisings in concert with Japan's advance into French Indochina, aiming to oust French influence and secure independence.

—Reference: Keiichi Tachikawa, "Vietnamese Independence Movements and Japan during the Second World War," NIDS Security Studies 3, no. 2 (Nov. 2000) [Japanese].

Note 2: Although the building that housed the Apollo Studio was slated for demolition, the plan was abandoned with Japan's defeat in 1945, and the district still bears the imprint of its wartime façade. Situated in a commercial area along the Tamsui River in Taipei, the site later became one of the locations associated with the February 28 Incident of 1947.