

# YANGON PHOTO FESTIVAL

Press review 2017 (extracts)

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# L'ŒIL DE LA PHOTOGRAPHIE

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## EVENT

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### The Yangon Photography Festival spreads its wings

APRIL 13, 2017 - BURMA , WRITTEN BY [ALINE DESCHAMPS](#)





Yangon Photo Festival © Aline Deschamps



public while at the same time educating a new generation of Burmese photographers in tuition-free, intensive master classes.

Staging five major photography exhibitions in the heart of the city, in the Maha Bandula Park in front of the City Hall this year, however, was a true feat. In previous years, the festival was confined to the gardens of the Institut Français in Yangon, the only oasis of free speech under the military regime. The audience was similarly composed of the local cultural elites and expats. This year, the YPF spread its wings in the most populated and vibrant place in Yangon (formerly Rangoon). It deployed an ambitious events program among family picnics and happy shouts of children. And, what's even more remarkable, the festival encountered no opposition on the part of the government. The mayor of Yangon, Muang Muang Soe, was even proud to emphasize the fact: "The situation in Yangon has changed. The festival will not be subject to any censorship. I repeat, no censorship!"

And so, the Maha Bandula Park freely welcomed World Press Photo, which brings together the best of international photojournalism. Subjects ranging from the refugee crisis to the civil war and famine were in plain view for the Burmese public, something unimaginable even a few months earlier. This was the first time in its history that World Press Photo held a free exhibition in a downtown park. In terms of photojournalism, the country is most efficiently making up for the lost time.

Among the exhibitions in this edition, the visitors discovered *Burma Frontiers*, a collection of rare, early twentieth-century photos by James Henry Green, a British recruiting officer who took advantage of his missions to make the first portraits of thousands of members of ethnic minorities living in remote areas of Burma: Shan, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Padaung, and others.

Similarly, Günter Pfannmüller and Wilhelm Klein seized the opportunity to be the first occidental journalists authorized to travel across the country in the 1980s and, in a large itinerant studio, photographed the diversity of the different minorities, brought together under a common heading: dignity.

The exhibition *Yangon Fashion 1979* in turn presents black-and-white archival images from Studio Bellay, rediscovered by the curator Lukas Birk. At the time of the dictator Ne Win's Burmese Way to Socialism, the country was closed to the outside world. Photography studios were the only places where women in the state capital could try on Western fashions and brighten up their day thanks to outfits smuggled in by sailors.

Landry Dunan, a French photographer based in Bangkok, had spent the days leading up to the festival photographing downtown Yangon residents with his Afghan box camera. He then displayed his black-and-white photographs in the Maha Bandula Park, while inviting curious visitors to have their portrait taken with his *camera obscura*.

At the Institut Français, the famous Swiss photo reporter Dominic Nahr exhibited his work covering the conflict in South Sudan, as well as taught a master class. "*He's a genius!*," his students would exclaim when describing his photos. Dominic returned the compliment, admitting

that he had not expected such quality work from young Burmese photojournalists who have nothing to envy Western counterparts.

The essence of the YPF undoubtedly boils down to turning photography into a new language that allows the young Burmese generation to express themselves.

In practical terms, this key aspect of the festival was made possible thanks to the master classes offered tuition-free by PhotoDoc, the association behind the Yangon Photo Festival. At a time dominated by digital technologies, when banal photos are flooding social networks and new tools make it possible for just anybody to become a photographer, the training offered by PhotoDoc sidesteps the technical knowhow in order to concentrate on fundamental issues and on acquiring journalistic and visual narration skills. Christophe Loviny thereby answers his own question: “We spend years learning to write, but where are we supposed to learn the language of images which we use all the time on social networks?”

This unprecedented desire to raise a new generation of Burmese photojournalists has already paid off. In nine years, over 650 young people attended the photography workshops, first at the Institut Français, then in the most remote regions of the country.

Over the Christmas and New Year season, PhotoDoc set out for the Kachin region, currently torn by conflict between the Burmese Army and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). Christophe and his Burmese team taught photojournalism to over a dozen young refugees forced to flee the fighting.

The results of these master classes are most often three- to four-minute stories tackling social, cultural, or environmental issues. The topics chosen by the students may be universal, such as child labor, human trafficking, the LGBT community’s struggle for equality, the experiences of physically or mentally handicapped, etc. However, on occasion, they deal with local situations that have never been covered by foreign journalists, such as jade mining or the plight of the Rohingya people. In Kachin State, young Burmese photographers documented the civil war, the ethnic minorities’ struggle for survival, and the transformation of their hometown into a ghost city, but they also addressed less tragic topics, such as adapting traditional Kachin recipes to the precarious life conditions in refugee camps.

On the occasion of the Yangon Photo Night, March 11, presided over by the godmother of the festival, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the awards went notably to two Kachin photographers. In the emerging photographers category, the first prize was awarded to Seng Mai for his photo essay *The Trap* about women addicts in jade mines, while the first prize in the professional category went to Hkun Lat for his coverage of *The Forgotten War* along Kachin Independence Army front lines. Aung San Suu Kyi handed out the prizes in person, even after having been vehemently criticized in some of the stories. The festival director, remembering the title of the Nobel Peace prize winner’s famous essay collection, *Freedom from Fear*, underscored the symbolic significance of the occasion: “For the first time, the Burmese are no longer afraid to freely express their opinions before their leader.”

These two awards were a great tribute to the investigative work done by Burmese photographers and to the association's master classes, supported by Canon as well as by local groups, such as Myanmar Golden Rock, KBZ, Shwe Taung, and Novotel Max. The photo stories screened at the Maha Bandula Park, created as part of previous years' master classes, were also a huge hit. From the very first seconds of the screening, the festival resounded with shouts translating the astonishment and delight of an instantly gratified public. And as soon as the presentation was over, their eyes still riveted on the giant screen, sometimes with a mobile phone to record everything live, the audience never waited long to show their approval. Even while the featured videos often addressed social plight, they always got a standing ovation.

It would be an understatement to say that the audience, numbering about 6000 every night, was optimistic, curious, and supportive as they listened between screenings to speakers from different organizations discuss such issues as child labor, domestic violence, or prevention of infectious diseases. One of the highlights of the two evenings of screenings was an improvised fundraiser prompted by the heartrending sight of a little girl beggar featured in the story *For Mother*. Hossein Farmani, a gallery owner, philanthropist, and long-time supporter of the YPF, pledged before an engaged public: "I will double the total amount of your donations!" He then added: "Remember the names you see tonight. Remember the photographers. If you run into them, thank them or give them a hug, they are your heroes," he said, having presented a rare selection of Steve McCurry's work, currently on view in an exceptional retrospective at the Lucie Foundation Gallery in Bangkok.

The country has undoubtedly made huge progress since the Saffron Revolution of 2007, when some Burmese, armed only with their cell phones, filmed the repression of protesters, thus becoming the first photojournalists in a country known for the brutality of its leaders. Today, photography has become a lever for positive change in the country.

To borrow the words of the photographer REZA, "while one photograph can't change the world, it can change human beings who can change the world," and the ninth edition of the Yangon Photo Festival is an excellent example.

The second poorest country in Asia after Afghanistan, Burma stripped bare by its own citizens, giving a voice to those who, until recently, were being silenced. The Eye of Photography will revisit some of the noteworthy YPF exhibitions and bring you a selection of the photo essays. You will see them just as if you were seated on the grass at the Maha Bandula Park, intoxicated by children's laughter and moved by discreet tears of emotion welling up in people's eyes.

An invitation to discover the world.

### **Aline Deschamps**

*Aline Deschamps is a journalist, photographer, and a cultural project manager working in Paris and Bangkok.*

## OPINION

## REVIEW &amp; OUTLOOK

## Snap Goes the Market

Snap Inc. made its stock-market debut on Thursday with a valuation of nearly \$24 billion, making it the largest tech IPO on a U.S. exchange since Alibaba in 2014. While Snap's IPO is a good omen for U.S. public markets and innovation—on Wednesday the Dow Jones Industrial Average broke 21000—the parent of the disappearing-message app Snapchat also offers a parable in creative destruction.

**Even an IPO valuation of nearly \$24 billion is no guarantee of success.**

Intel's former CEO Andy Grove liked to say that only the paranoid survive, and that's truer today than ever. Over the past decade the social-media business has undergone several transformations as new entrants have spurred competition and innovation. Snap may be the latest craze but won't be the last.

Recall that MySpace, founded in 2003, was all the rage until it was eclipsed by Facebook. CEO Mark Zuckerberg famously launched Facebook in 2004 as a social-networking platform for Harvard undergrads. After expanding to other colleges and high schools, Facebook opened up to adults in 2006. The social network was able to monetize its user base by selling targeted ads—pizza ads for college students or sports promotions for athletes.

In 2012 Facebook bought the photo-sharing startup Instagram for \$1 billion, which may have been the best deal since the Dutch bought Manhattan for beads. Two years later Facebook acquired the messaging service WhatsApp for \$19 billion. Both apps have developed features that compete with Snap's disappearing stories.

The two acquisitions have also facilitated Facebook's mobile transformation. Since 2012 the company's monthly active users have doubled to 1.9 billion while profits have increased more than 300-fold. About 85% of its ad revenues come from mobile. Perpetual innovation has driven Facebook's growth, and now it is bidding to become a news publisher without paying for the content it offers. Facebook deplores fake news but doesn't want its users to pay for the real thing.

By contrast, Twitter's user and revenue growth have slowed markedly since its public offering in 2013. A major reason is the company was late to develop new features and revenue streams. CEO Jack Dorsey recently had to lay off hundreds of employees, which shows that even Silicon Valley dynamos aren't immune—and

may even be more vulnerable—to market forces unleashed by fast-changing technology.

Snap has built on its predecessors' ideas. Evan Spiegel and Bobby Murphy launched the disappearing photo-sharing app while students at Stanford in 2011 to help kids keep their Saturday night exploits discreet. Like other social-media companies, the app has morphed into a content creator and aggregator.

Media companies including the Journal create Stories for Snap that disappear within 24 hours. Curators weave user snaps into videos that are spliced with short ads, which must be entertaining since users are allowed to skip them. Geo-filters and lenses allow users to personalize selfies with doodles, graphics or even commercial promotions.

Snap's competitors include other social-media platforms as well as YouTube, production studios and set-top-box apps. Its development has intensified competition across the media and tech spectrums as industry barriers have crumbled. Social-media entrepreneurs have benefited from little government regulation or interference, which has allowed them to adapt quickly to competition.

Snap boasts about 160 million daily active users and reported \$405 million in revenues last year with a goal of \$1 billion in 2017. One challenge will be expanding its audience beyond young adults, who may outgrow the app or ditch it for the latest thing. R.I.P. MySpace. Going public will also test the founders' commitment to protecting privacy while raising revenue and capital.

\* \* \*

Investors are cheering Snap's IPO of 200 million shares on the New York Stock Exchange in hopes that a success could encourage more venture-backed startups. Last year there were only 105 IPOs on U.S. exchanges, the fewest since 2009. One reason is that the regulatory costs of going public—mainly imposed by Sarbanes-Oxley, but also Dodd Frank—can outweigh the benefits. Amazon went public in 1997, three years after launching. Snap waited six.

To avoid becoming another MySpace, Snap will have to continue innovating and growing, and the good news for the American economy is that investors are willing to bet that it can.

## My Big Fatca IRS

Almost since the Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act (Fatca) became law in 2010 to go after fat cats stashing money abroad, these pages have reported that it has led the IRS to treat law-abiding Americans as criminals. Turns out we have allies—at the IRS.

Buried within the most recent report the IRS taxpayer advocate submitted to Congress in January is a section taking issue with Fatca. "The IRS," says the report, "has adopted an enforcement-oriented regime with respect to international taxpayers. Its operative assumption appears to be that all such taxpayers should be suspected of fraudulent activity, unless proven otherwise."

Under Fatca, Americans must now report overseas holdings of more than \$50,000 even if they owe no taxes, or else face crushing fines. For foreign financial institutions, the penalty for not giving the IRS what it wants to know about their American clients is a 30% withholding penalty on any U.S.-sourced payment to these institutions.

**Why assume that Americans overseas are tax cheats?**

The taxpayer advocate minces no words: "The IRS has taken this approach despite a lack of comprehensive statistical data establishing the existence of widespread noncompliance or fraud" and "despite [Taxpayer Advocate Service] analysis indicating that the vast majority of these taxpayers actually appear to be substantially more compliant than a comparable portion of the overall U.S. taxpayer population."

In sum, the IRS application of Fatca is "un-systematic, unjustified, and unsuccessful."

The taxpayer advocate isn't in the business of calling for laws to be overturned, so it recommends fixes around the edges. By contrast, the new "Campaign to Repeal FATCA" initiative launched last month by Nigel Green of the deVere Group—an international financial consulting firm—argues for nixing the law that turns Americans overseas into financial "pariahs."

With the GOP controlling Congress and White House, the time is ripe for Republicans to make good on their pledge and give Fatca the heave-ho.

## China's North Korea Feint

Is China greeting the Trump era by getting tough on North Korea? That may be the impression Beijing has tried to convey by announcing a suspension of coal imports from the nuclear-armed state. But there is less here than meets the eye.

As is often the case regarding Beijing's ties to Pyongyang, the details of the coal cutoff are murky. In the most generous telling, China has decided to squeeze North Korea's key source of hard currency to punish it for acting in destabilizing ways—testing missiles, assassinating overseas enemies with VX nerve agent and the like. By this logic, Beijing is signalling a desire to work with the new U.S. Administration on the shared goal of denuclearizing the Kim regime. North Korean state media have pushed this line, slamming China for "dancing to the tune of the U.S."

Yet Beijing has said that it had to cut off coal imports to comply with United Nations sanctions passed in November. According to the Foreign Ministry, Chinese imports in 2017 have already approached the U.N.'s annual value limit of \$400 million. Beijing would hardly deserve applause for buying its full quota and then stopping to meet its legal obligations.

A year ago the Chinese also promised to comply with an earlier round of U.N. sanctions on North Korean mineral exports. But Beijing made sure those sanctions included a loophole exempting transactions for undefined "livelihood purposes." It then proceeded to rack up record purchases of North Korean coal.

After November's sanctions moved to nullify the "livelihood" loophole with hard caps, Beijing promised a cutoff—yet still imported more

**Beijing isn't cutting economic support to its nuclear client state.**

North Korean coal in December than in any previous month of the year. Its total coal imports for 2016, a year in which it twice voted for sanctions on such purchases, rose 14.5% from 2015 and totaled more than \$1 billion.

Pyongyang can fund a lot of missile tests with that money. Then there is the unspecified sum China will soon begin paying for 4,000 metric tons of North Korean liquefied petroleum gas, an arrangement quietly announced this month and spotted by Victor Cha of the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Beijing sustains Pyongyang in countless other ways, including access to Chinese oil, banks, trading firms, ports and front companies. Contrast this with China's unofficial economic sanctions on South Korea merely for wishing to defend itself against North Korean nuclear missiles by installing advanced U.S.-made antimissile defenses.

Beijing is clearly exploring its options in the Trump era, which is no doubt why it dispatched foreign-policy chief Yang Jiechi to Washington this week to meet the President and some of his senior aides. The coal gambit may have been a gift of sorts to Mr. Trump after he reaffirmed traditional U.S. policy toward Taiwan.

Whatever Beijing intends, it is clear that Pyongyang's nuclear and missile capabilities pose a direct and increasingly intolerable threat to U.S. security, and that the threat will end only when the Kim dynasty is deposed. If Beijing won't cut its economic lifelines to the North, the Trump Administration should use financial sanctions on Chinese entities to force the issue.

## Democrats Abandon Ship



**WONDER LAND**  
By Daniel Henninger

That scene you saw the moment President Trump ended his speech to a joint session of Congress was the Democrats abandoning the ship of state.

Like the progressive street demonstrations endured by the country the past four weeks, we may assume Congress's Democratic delegation organized their postspeech bolt to the exits via the famous social-media hashtag #TheResistance.

During the speech's most extraordinary moment, the tribute to Carryn Owens, wife of slain SEAL Ryan Owens, one notable Democrat who refused to stand was Rep. Keith Ellison, who just lost a close race for Democratic National Committee chairman to Obama Labor Secretary Thomas Perez, also a man of the left.

You'd have thought that at the two-thirds point, when Mr. Trump hadn't self-destructed as expected, when instead he was looking less like Alec Baldwin and more like President Trump, that Chuck Schumer might have pulled out his smartphone to tweet the troops, "Walk-out maybe not a good idea." Not this crew. En masse, they went over the side, just as they've refused to attend hearings for cabinet nominees and voted as a bloc against virtually all of them.

Donald Trump extended an olive branch on key legislative issues, and the Democrats gave him the you-know-what. In fact, the party might consider making the you-know-what its new logo because Mr. Trump has stolen their mascot, the Democratic donkey.

The donkey was the creation of Democrat Andrew Jackson, whose portrait hangs now in Republican Donald Trump's Oval Office. Jackson's opponents called him a jackass, which he transformed into a badge of honor by putting the jackass on his campaign posters.

Jackson served two terms. Eight years is going to be a long slog for Democrats if indeed they plan to conduct the nation's business with the Trump White House from various street corners.

There is one other relevant image from the moments after the speech ended: Democratic West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin standing—alone—to shake Mr. Trump's hand.

Last week, progressive activists petitioned Minority Leader Schumer to expel Sen. Manchin from the leadership team as retribution for his vote in favor of Scott Pruitt's nomination to run the Environmental Protection Agency.

Sen. Manchin should admit reality and move across the aisle to join the Republicans. What do the middle-finger Democrats have in common anymore with West Virginia, which Mr. Trump carried by 42 points?

We keep reading that the Democrats' newest coalition of the ascendant—from left to far left—sees the tea party as a model. Presumably that includes the politics of mutually assured destruction.

Imperiled Democratic Sen. Claire McCaskill of Missouri, which Mr. Trump carried by 18.5 points and 523,000 votes, expects a primary challenge from the left in 2018. Democratic Senators Jon Tester of Montana, Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota, Bill Nelson of Florida and Joe Donnelly of Indiana, all facing tough re-elections in 2018, must feel like they've been pulled into an alternative universe. And they have. It's called the alt-left.

With Breitbart's Steve Bannon in the White House, we've read umpteen journalistic histories of the alt-right, a phrase some reporters seem to have programmed into a user key.

Well, with established Democratic members of Congress now adopting "resistance" as their basic political model, aren't we due for a similar media dive into the origins of the alt-left?

**The party has two options: #TheResistance, or get in the game Trump is offering.**

Keywords would include: the 1930s, the 1960s, Vietnam, Ramparts magazine, the Weather Underground. Which is to say, if the alt-right flirts with white nationalism, the alt-left always conducts politics at the edge of violence, such as the trashing last month of UC Berkeley. One sign: "Become Ungovernable."

Become ungovernable sounds pretty close to the party's modus operandi for Donald Trump—before he gave that speech.

Congressional Democrats have two options now. Option one is to stay the course of mass resistance. This option assumes that Tuesday evening's President Trump will revert soon to Mr. T, the combative street-fighter.

Maybe, but Hillary Clinton thought Americans would abandon Mr. T, and that failed because too many voters were looking past the personality to get the Trump policies on economic revival. It looks now as if that's exactly what he is going to give them.

If Mr. Trump succeeds, even with only Republican votes, Democrats alienated from the progressive capture of the party could drift further away. The Trump coalition, which is arguably a political bubble, instead could last a generation.

Option two is get out of the streets and get in the game Mr. Trump offered them in his speech.

There's no telling what the politically eclectic Mr. Trump might concede the Democrats. He'll insist that his tax bill include Ivanka's child-care proposals. The Tax Foundation estimates they'd cause a revenue loss of \$500 billion. Democrats might ask for a tax to pay for it, like the Obama "Medicare surcharge" on the 1%.

Not to worry. More likely is that the Schumer-Warren Democrats will spend two years listening to the resurrected voice from their past: "Hell no, we won't go." Write [henninger@wsj.com](mailto:henninger@wsj.com).

## Burma's Hopeful Pictures

By Ron Gluckman

Rangoon, Burma

These days, everyone has a camera in their pocket," photographer Christophe Loviny says. "We don't have to focus on the technology, so we can concentrate on the thinking, on storytelling and methods." The longtime Asia photographer does exactly that, spending most of his time training the next generation of local photographers and celebrating their work.

A co-founder of Cambodia's Angkor Photo Festival, Mr. Loviny is involved in photography programs in China, Indonesia and soon the Philippines. But his greatest legacy may be in Burma, a country known until recently for its extreme censorship. For nearly a decade, Mr. Loviny has organized the astounding Yangon Photo Festival. The ninth edition opens Friday, with exhibitions and projections continuing through March 19.

The program is larger and more ambitious than ever before. The centerpiece is a massive exhibit of the best international photojournalism, from the World's Press Photo Awards, to be shown outdoors in a park across from Yangon City Hall. This would have been international news just six years ago, and even today remains an achievement.

The festival features a strong mix of Burmese stories, by locals and the global press, as well as archival treasures. For example, "Yangon Fashion 1979" offers black and white portraits from Bellay Studio, one of the few places locals could dress up. Merchant seamen smuggled in foreign clothing, which the studio secretly kept in its vaults.

The exhibits also include rare photos from the early 1900s by James Harry Green, a British officer who traveled around Burma recruiting soldiers. Mesmerized by Burma's beauty and diversity, he became an accomplished photographer and later an anthropologist. "Burma Frontiers" showcases his fascinating black-and-white portraits for the first time in Burma.

Günter Pfammüller and Wilhelm Klein, among the earliest Western journalists allowed to travel widely in Burma, will attend. In researching the seminal "Insights" guidebook in the 1980s, they created a portable studio, making bewitching medium-format portraits of people from every corner of the country.

Mounting these ever-expanding programs has become a major challenge to Mr. Loviny and a small staff of volunteers working with an annual budget of about \$75,000. Launched in 2008 under the auspices of the Institut Français, the festival is now run by PhotoDoc, a Burmese nonprofit association of documentary photographers.

In the early days, constraints on free speech and the press prompted cat-and-mouse games with the censor. Burma's transition to democracy has brought uneven improvement in press freedom and greater scope to show photojournalism. Aung San Suu Kyi has been a regular participant and patron, while companies such as the bank KBZ and the local office of Canon have been big supporters. Festival topics have included environmental and human-rights issues, including deforestation, drug abuse and human trafficking.

Greater freedom and a growing economy have led to a golden age for the media and photojournalism in Burma. "Over the years, we've trained over 600 people," Mr. Loviny says proudly, noting that many have gone on to successful photography careers.

Minzayar Oo was completing his medical studies before training at one workshop. He has since become a darling of international news organizations and among Asia's most dynamic photographers, mounting powerful exposés of Burma's nefarious jade-mining industry and the brutal ethnic violence against the country's Rohingya Muslims. Mr. Minzayar won the festival's grand prize last year, which included a trip to Amsterdam for the World Press Photo Awards.

Another previous winner, Mayco Nang, studied in France. Now a celebrated commercial photographer with her own studio, she described how dismal prospects were before the festival. Schools were shuttered by the military. Deprived of access to education, she says she worked for nine years in a local studio, saving to buy her first camera.

"When I got it, I was amazed. All of a sudden, I could explore myself." She returns to the Yangon Photo Festival each year to help train other fledgling photographers. "Now, in Burma," she notes with enthusiasm, "there are limitless possibilities."

Mr. Gluckman is a Bangkok-based writer.

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*Rangoon, Burma*  
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