Kuala Lumpur in Postcards 1900-1930

From the collections of Major David Ng (Rtd) and Steven Tan

Text by Muzaffar D.J. Tate
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The Growth of Kuala Lumpur

Between the 1890s when these picture postcards begin up till the 1930s where they end, Kuala Lumpur grew considerably, stimulated in the first place by its selection as capital of the newly-formed Federated Malay States (1896) and yet more so by the sudden rise of rubber planting in the first decade of the new century. Within a generation it was transformed from a small mining town into a compact, well-ordered administrative centre and focus of commerce and trade. The Chinese nucleus of small two-storey shophouses remained, their monotony broken by taller blocks with elegant neo-classical or neo-baroque facades. Substantial government buildings, designed in a distinctive Moorish style, now graced the heart of the city. Banks, the buildings of large commercial houses, hospitals, schools, department stores, hotels, a central market and the most imaginative railway station in all South-East Asia gave Kuala Lumpur an identity of its own. The Malay kampung that had sat on the edge of the Chinese kernel had disappeared before the advancing lines of brick and plaster shophouses with their roofs of tile, but a new Malay settlement had also sprung up in Kampung Bahru. The Indian presence had increased, promoted by the spread of rubber plantations around the city, the coming of the railway and the proliferation of the administration, with Brickfields, Bangsar and Sentul their centres of settlement. The European community created a garden city of their own, fashioned amongst the hills of Damansara on the west bank of the Klang River which separated them from the ' Asiatic' quarters.
Two views of Kuala Lumpur, the first (1) taken around 1897 from the footbridge across the railway line to Rawang which used to run at the base of the hill on which the present police headquarters (Bukit Aman) stands. The new Government Offices (the Sultan Abdul Samad Building) can be seen under construction on the far side of the Parade Ground (Padang). The corner lot of the shophouses to the left of the Government Offices was occupied by the department store established by Loke Chow Kit in 1892. These shophouses were later pulled down to make way for the new General Post Office. In view (2) is presented a panoramic view of the Padang and the Government Offices facing it which once completed (1898) became Kuala Lumpur’s principal landmark. This picture was taken in the early 1900s. In the left foreground can be seen the original Selangor Club (founded 1884): to the right the oblong shape of the railway halt constructed for the convenience of the British Resident whose offices were on the hill from which this picture was taken. To the right of the halt is the Selangor Recreation Club, established in 1896 ‘for the poorer members of the English-speaking community’, while the five-arched building visible on the right-hand side of the Padang is the original Chartered Bank Building (built in 1891).
Any book about Kuala Lumpur should start, of course, with the river which, until the coming of the railway, was the main means of communication with the outside world. The view in (3) shows the muddy confluence of the Gombak and the Klang rivers which probably gave the town its name. The line of these two rivers separated the main part of the town, with its Asian inhabitants – seen on the right-hand side in (3) – from the official and European section on the opposite bank. The Jame' Mosque (at the confluence) was not yet built. The picture was taken from the old Market Street Bridge and probably dates to the early 1900s. The views shown in (4) and (5) belong to the same period and were taken in the other direction, i.e., downstream from above the confluence on the Gombak River near where the old Supreme Court Building now stands. These views have hardly changed at all as far
as the right-hand bank in the pictures are concerned. The scenes of the river shown in (6) and (7) looking upstream from just below the Market Street Bridge belong to a later date, i.e. (6) to the 1920s and (7) to the early 1930s. In both pictures the high facade of Chow Kit's store on Holland Road (Jalan Belanda) can be clearly seen on the left-hand side, with John Little's to its left in (6) and with the clock tower of the Government Secretariat peering above. In (6) the Jame Mosque is visible in the right-hand background, while in (7) can be seen the Supreme Court Building in the background.
The first permanent bridge to be built across the river was the Market Street Bridge, constructed in 1883 to take the place of the felled tree trunk which had served the purpose to that date. This timber structure was replaced in 1890 by the 30 m lattice girder bridge seen in (8) and (9). These two pictures were taken in the 1900s when two-storey Chinese shop-houses still held sway in Market Street (Leboh Pasar Besar) itself. The next two bridges to be built were the Java Street (Jalan Tun Perak) Bridge over the Klang River and the Gombak Bridge over the Gombak River in 1884, whose timber structures were likewise replaced by iron in 1890. The view of the Gombak Bridge shown here (10) was taken soon after the