

'INTACT' SOURCES: PHOTOGRAPHY IN HONG KONG

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Photography and Hong Kong were both 'discovered' ca. 1840 and 'grew up' together in the same century. [1] The earliest known photographs made in Hong Kong were produced by photographers like John Thomson and Felice Beato, two Europeans who came to the colony in the years just after the medium's invention. Hong Kong also had a number of ethnic Chinese working in the medium, with photographers like Kai Sack, the first Chinese practitioner known to have worked professionally in the colony, and Lai Afong, who was arguably the most famous of the 19th century Hong Kong-based photographers. [2] At this time, Hong Kong was an emerging centre of trade and a prime staging ground for travel into other parts of Asia especially into China. Practitioners like Lai, and Thomson and Beato who even set up studios in the colony for a time, played an influential role in the education of local photographers, turning these early photography studios into a training centre for photographers practicing not only in the colony but also in other parts of China. [3]

Photography moved throughout the Asia-Pacific region in tandem with European colonial expansion and supported their ability to control, understand, exploit, and reveal. The process of colonial expansion and the part played by photography in creating images of these colonized places, combined to 'internalize' colonial representations of Hong Kong into the culture. Photography provided the 'proof back home' in England that the process of colonization was working and was necessary in order to justify an overall practice of 'civilizing' 'savage, exotic' lands. [4]

According to photo-historian and critic Abigail Solomon-Godeau, photography produced by colonial rulers involves a "double act of subjugation: first in the social world that has produced its victims; and second, in the regime of the image produced within and for the same system that engenders the conditions it then represents."⁵ If this suggestion holds in the case of photography in Hong Kong, then what can we make of the images produced by the "subjugated" themselves? If we follow this argument, self-representation by the colonized appears an impossibility and additionally sets up an oppositional 'colonizer/photographer vs. colonized/photographed' framework. As such, I suggest here a different basis for the understanding of photography in Hong Kong, a basis that depends on neither the victimization of the colonized nor on the means of representation as lying solely in the hands of the colonizer.

From the turn of the century to the 1970s, Hong Kong's photography conflated a broad acceptance of 'Western' pictorial sensibilities with a distanciation from/resistance to Chinese pictorial conventions found in the art of that period. Much of the photography from this time tended to rely on a general use of stereotypes: junks in the harbour, markets, temples, colonial style harbour-front buildings, and so on. What we find in much of this work can be characterized as a double act. It is a paradoxical process but one that is not based on the subjugation suggested by Solomon-Godeau. Instead we find images produced in a 'pictorial' or documentary style that engage with 'imported', but by this time ingrained, conventions which tend to disavow a certain level of Chinese visual aesthetics although, admittedly, that

aesthetic is difficult to define. This interplay suggests a double “double-consciousness” that structures the layers of Hong Kong’s photography. This doubling is exemplified by stereotypical images of the colony produced by a diverse range of photographers from permanent residents and expatriate colonials to locally born and recently transplanted Chinese. The practice of this diverse group of photographers producing similar images for different audiences and purposes is, I am suggesting, the basis for photography in the colony until the 1970s and has had a lasting influence.

This approach may help viewers/readers of photography to understand the kinds of images produced in the colony from around the beginning of the century to the mid-1970s. The photographer Yau Leung, who worked from the 1950s to the 1990s, produced images which exemplify the work of this period. [6] His photographs and those of his contemporaries, though clearly informed by documentary and street styles from North America and Europe – for example Henri Cartier-Bresson and W. Eugene Smith– emulate neither the clever compositional games of Cartier-Bresson nor the overt social reformism of Smith. Leung’s *Rickshaw* (1965) is an example of this ambivalent, doubled approach as he photographs a rickshaw driver at Hong Kong’s Star Ferry, there primarily for tourists’ photographs. Significantly this particular figure, loaded as it is with stereotypical colonial connotations and the subject of countless touristic imagery, is presented as utterly banal. The driver, shown in between customers, appears inanimate, as if he only comes to life once he’s paid to. In the choice to photograph him not with a customer joyfully riding but as a subject waiting to provide a service, there emerges the chance to critically read the photograph as partially undermining the colonial structures that foster the production of tourist photographs themselves.

Documentary and street photography, along with the various ‘camera-club’ styles (ruins, pretty girls in fields of flowers, sunsets, silhouettes, and the like), dominated the medium throughout this period. [7] From the early 1970s to the mid-1980s several factors shifted this focus: local and overseas photographic exhibitions, the founding of a university-level photography program at the Hong Kong Polytechnic, the development of digital imaging, and the beginning of the handover transition period. [8]

The earliest exhibition to promote an alternative to the photography discussed above was *Seven Photographers* (1973) organized and curated by Ng Hong-lam, a photographer, technician and teacher who studied photo-printmaking processes in the UK. Though details of this show are scant – there are no extant documents from the exhibition – many photographers have subsequently provided first-person accounts of the show. [9] The exhibition, which included the work of Mok Kwok-shuen and Cheng Kai, presented highly manipulated and alternative photographs, many using non-silver techniques that had been rarely if ever seen in Hong Kong. The move from work based on photography as a documentary medium to photography focused more on process or conceptually-oriented concerns signalled an important shift in emphasis.

In 1975, the first full-time degree-granting program in photography in Hong Kong was established at the former Hong Kong Polytechnic’s Swire School of Design (now simply the School of Design), marking a shift in attitudes towards the medium in the

region. Focusing primarily on design education and technical concerns, the school has at one time or another educated or employed many of Hong Kong's most prominent photographic artists including So Hing-keung, Joseph Fung, Kith Tsang Tak-ping and Warren Leung Chi-wo, as well as many of the younger practitioners working today. The closing of the photography section of the design school in 2000 might be seen as part of a more general, global move in arts and design education to interdisciplinary approaches as opposed to the focus on medium specific pedagogy in the past. As part of this interdisciplinary movement, based primarily on technological changes in the ways the medium is practiced, photography is now becoming more closely aligned with broader digital imaging techniques as it is in university-level programs around the world.

In the early 1980s, Michael Chen curated an exhibition of American photo-based artists at the Hong Kong Arts Centre. The exhibition was aptly titled: *Photographic Alternatives: Contemporary American Photography* (1982) and it featured the work of William Larson, Joyce Neimanas, Robert Heineken, Ken Josephson and Catherine Jensen. [10] It emphasized a more conceptual, fabricated approach, which in some ways reflects Ng Hon-lam's efforts exhibited a decade earlier. This highly successful exhibition was the first ever show of late-20th-century photography produced outside Hong Kong. Larson, Heineken and Neimanas all came to Hong Kong and presented influential workshops at the Fringe Club (a mixed entertainment and art space and a big supporter of local photography exhibitions) and at Joseph Fung's Photo Centre (an alternative training and exhibition space for photography operating from approximately 1982 to 1989).

The practice of documentary photography in Hong Kong remained strong throughout this diversification, exemplified by two important projects undertaken in the 1990s. The first, initiated by Wong Wo-bik (with assistance from Sinsee Ho, Joseph Fung and Wong Miao) was titled *Three Photographic Perspectives: Hong Kong, Mainland China, Taiwan*. It included a series of exhibitions, seminars, and an influential text by the same name. The project was the first to involve contemporary photography from all three regions. [11] It brought into focus the lack of connections between art workers in the '3 Chinas' and helped foster relationships in an otherwise politically-charged context.

The second documentary photography project, titled: *The Metropolis: Visual Research into Hong Kong, 1990-1996*, was organized by Wong Wo-bik and Sylvia Ng and included exhibitions in 1991 and 1992 at the Hong Kong Art Centre, a research project and subsequent publication by the same title in 1996. It involved many of the most active photographers in Hong Kong. The text, published bilingually and representing one of the few efforts to critically engage with photography practices in Hong Kong, included a series of important historical and critical essays by Wong Wo-bik, Yvonne Lo, S.Y. Lee, Leung Ping Kwan and Desmond Hui. These two projects could be seen as among the most important photographic efforts in the 1990s because they not only presented high-quality exhibitions but they also engaged in and promoted a critical discourse. Efforts to develop a critical dialogues of this sort, especially in regard to photography, were and continue to be rare in Hong Kong, a fact that further underscores the importance of these two early projects.

As photography moved into the eighties and nineties and more exhibition and publication opportunities developed, photography as both a vernacular medium and as an art form grew in popularity and in the number of practitioners. Venues such as the Fringe Club, the Hong Kong Art Centre, the now defunct OP Fotogallery (operating from 1996 to 2000), Para/Site Art Space, 1aspace, Artists' Commune, and others, exhibited (and continue to exhibit) photography and/or photo-based work by local and overseas artists, on a regular basis.

During the years of OP Fotogallery's operation, the owners Lee Ka-sing and Holly Lee led a committee focused on publishing emerging and established photo-based artists to produce two influential publications of this period. *Dislocation (NuNaHeDuo)* – a monthly supplement to *Photo-Pictorial* magazine, consisting of images and critical texts, and *OP Editions*, an intermittent, quarterly publication representing an unusual publishing venture designed to encourage the collection of photographs by inviting, for each issue, ten photographers to donate prints and offer them for sale. Though Holly Lee and Lee Ka-sing left Hong Kong for Toronto in 1999 they have continued their efforts to promote photography from Asia. Shortly after their arrival in Canada, they opened the Lee Gallery focusing primarily on Asian photography, created a series of websites featuring many of the same photographers shown in their previous publications and others from around the world, and are now bringing *OP Editions* back in a substantially revised format.

These influential periodicals gave many emerging artists their first chance at publication and offered much needed moral support. Now, with photography moving away from its position as a medium taught and practiced in seclusion from other media, the pros and cons of publications, educational programs or venues dedicated solely to photography must be re-examined.

New technologies have broached additional questions as to the authenticity of the photograph as a document which have long been major concerns for the medium. Moving alongside this is the concurrent interest in the handover/post-handover phenomenon which has provided an impetus for the closer examination of Hong Kong as a site of cultural production. This is most apparent when encountering images that simultaneously address the handover and play with the relationships between media as a part their overall materiality and content. These issues are brought into particular focus, for example, in Holly Lee's *Bauhinia in Front of Hong Kong Harbour, ca. 1997* (1997), part of a series of digitally manipulated photographs created to superficially resemble paintings. The photograph, depicting a large Bauhinia (Hong Kong's hybrid flower emblem) looming in front of the Hong Kong Island skyline, presents a temporally ambivalent dilemma. It can be seen as suggestive of three different reference points for the then impending handover of the colony to China.

First, the image refers to the handover as an event that had, for all intents and purposes, already happened. [12] With all the decisions having been made, nothing remained but a series of ceremonial performances. Here the photograph, in its conventional form as a documentary medium, suggests the past invading the present.

Second, the image in its reference to the handover shows not the event itself but a symbol of the 'new' Hong Kong as if there was nothing to see in the process of the handover itself. This was to some degree the case as, paradoxically in one of the most visually stimulating and photographed cities in the world, there was little for the international media to show other than repeated shots of the skyline. The journalists eventually resorted to simply interviewing each other, following a kind of media pecking order, in an incestuous sort of imagistic cannibalism.

Third, if we see the image as a faux-history-painting, it sets itself up to be its own emblem, a future-perfect historical memento of the handover, designed to be viewed in a time yet to come – the present projected into the future. The three 'times' of the photograph overlap and diffuse specific readings. Acting as a destabilizing support of this is its all too obvious 'hybrid' technique (it is printed on a glossy paper so its appearance as a painting fails upon a cursory examination) which tends to shift its existence as a document or memory aid into a biting critique of reading Hong Kong simply as a botanical or cultural hybrid. (For a more detailed critique of reading Hong Kong as a hybrid entity, see Joan Kee's *Questioning "Hybridity" in the Art of Hong Kong Now* in this issue.)

Today photography has developed into a practice that continues at once to participate in the dissemination of stereotypical images of the HKSAR (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region) as a "World City", a site where East-meets-West, or a business-focused metropolis, while also creating pictures that attempt to undo these very notions. Photography is now so much a part of the everyday culture that it has become a generic mode of image production, rarely questioned and always relied upon for the quickly-needed image. Yet this may just also be seen as an advantage if, as Holly Lee or Yau Leung suggest through their images, photography, understood as part of the greater field of lens-based media, is seen in its ability to play multiple roles in representations of Hong Kong. This may require not only a revamping of photographic education and exhibition practice, and a much more vibrant critical discourse, but also a thorough reconsideration of the part photography plays in Hong Kong's visual culture.

Notes:

1. Photography was invented and began its dissemination in 1839 in France and England, significantly the two most influential colonial powers of the time. Hong Kong, though having a long history of settlements prior to the arrival of the British, was founded as a colony in 1842.
2. For detailed discussions of the early days of photography in the colony, see Edwin Lai Kin-keung, "The Beginnings of Hong Kong Photography," *Picturing Hong Kong: Photography 1855 - 1910* (New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1997) 49-57; and "Hong Kong Art Photography From Its Beginnings to the Japanese Invasion of 1941" (Master's thesis, University of Hong Kong, 1996).
3. Lai, "The Beginnings of Hong Kong Photography," 55. See also Chen Sen et al., *History of Photography in China 1840 - 1937* (Taipei: Photographer Publications, 1990).
4. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Who Is Speaking Thus?" *Photography at the Dock: Essays in Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) 169-183.

5. Ibid., 176.
6. For examples, see Yau Leung, ed., *Photo Hong Kong 1950's - 1970's* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 1996). This text also includes other important photographers' work of this generation including Ngan Chum-tung and Chung Man-lok.
7. Up until the 1970s, in Hong Kong as well as in the United States and Europe, camera-clubs and related photo organizations were highly influential training grounds for many professional and amateur photographers. They had strict definitions as to what a 'good' photograph could be, enforced through frequent and rigorous competitions. Regarding documentary photography in Hong Kong, see Yvonne Lo, "The Development of Documentary Photography in Hong Kong Since 1950," *The Metropolis: Visual Research into Contemporary Hong Kong, 1990 - 1996*, ed. Sylvia Ng (Hong Kong: Photo Pictorial Publishers and Hong Kong Arts Centre, 1996) 21-23.
8. The Hong Kong Polytechnic was a tertiary-level college until it was granted full university status in 1995.
9. Much of the following is based on a series of interviews I conducted between 1997 and 2000 with photographers in Hong Kong, including Ng and many others.
10. This exhibition came about in part because Wong Wo-bik, an important figure in the development of photography as an artistic form of expression in Hong Kong, studied with William Larson in the US and, having met several of the other artists during her time there, made these contacts available to Chen.
11. Wong, Wo-bik and Sinsee Ho, eds., *Three Photographic Perspectives: Hong Kong, Mainland China, Taiwan* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Arts Centre, 1994). This text includes papers presented at a symposium by the same name held at the Hong Kong Arts Centre from 25 to 27 February 1994 along with some written especially for the publication.
12. I have borrowed the idea of the handover as having already occurred prior to the official ceremonies of June/July 1997 from Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997).

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