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Promotion of Hong Kong Photographic Culture

Did you know Hong Kong was once hailed as a 'Photographic Kingdom'?

The history of Hong Kong photography goes way back. In 1839, the French government first announced the birth of practical photography. A few years later in 1845, Hong Kong had its first portrait studio. Early photographers in Hong Kong were mainly foreigners but by 1860, we see traces of Chinese photographers.

Hong Kong's history of photography is inseparable from its colonial past. The day the British occupied Hong Kong was also the beginning of Hong Kong's photographic history. With the colonial government came an influx of British and American nationals who brought with them advanced photographic technology from the west. The high concentration of foreigners attracted many commercial portrait photographers to solicit business here and the first photo studio was established on Peel Street.

The most famous was the Afong Studio opened by Lai Afong in which his landscape and portrait photographs were well known locally and abroad. By the end of the 20s till the early 30s, advanced technology from the West was introduced to Hong Kong and art photography became popular. Photographic associations were set up and photo competitions were held annually. By the 50s, an increasing number of Hong Kong photographers were winning awards overseas turning this tiny island into a 'Photographic Kingdom'.

Since then, this small fishing village located on the southeastern coast of China came into contact with Western photography as well as the cutting-edge of imaging technology at the time. In the early days, foreign photographers dominated the photography community in Hong Kong. But by 1937, the Photographic Society of Hong Kong was founded. It provided a platform for middle-class photography lovers to showcase their works. This upper class hobby became more accessible and soon spread to the masses. The 50s and 60s saw the emergence of early masters such as Fan Ho and Leo K.K. Wong, documentary photographer Yau Leung and news photographer Chan Kiu who recorded all walks of local life during the 60s. In 1989, Vincent Yu of the Associated Press portrayed images of ethnic minorities and the lower working class behind prosperous Hong Kong. The iconic City Magazine depicted fashionable covers that leave a lasting impression on readers. Generation after generation of photographers captured images of our ever-evolving city, freezing each moment in history.

Like graphic design, photography depicts daily life. Young photographer Francis So used this medium to showcase Hong Kong's lesser known tranquil side. Alan Chan commented, "It is admirable that Francis took great lengths climbing up and down many mountains to capture such beautiful natural scenes of Hong Kong."

In the 70s and 80s, Hong Kong's economy took off and commercial photography flourished. 'Made in Hong Kong' products were promoted to overseas markets. This led to an increase in professional photography, entertainment business, advertising and publishing, nurturing many talented and creative photographers. The economy was booming. Advertising, art and photography are correlated and helped build a solid foundation for local creative industries. Meanwhile, the photographic industry organised many activities and events to promote itself and its photographers. In the 80s, Yau Leung launched The Art of Photography magazine. In the 90s, Lee Ka-sing published Dislocation. Most recently, Asia One Books continued to publish monographs of Hong Kong photographers. These are examples of local people striving to preserve part of our local culture.

In the 90s, record albums and advertising paved the way for a new form of aesthetics. The cinematographic aesthetics collaboratively created by Wong Kar-wai, William Chang Suk-ping, Christopher Doyle and Wing Shya were simply mesmerising. Photo studios became a juncture for photography and society while witnessing public's changing concepts of photography. In the 300 Families exhibition organised by the Hong Kong International Photo Festival, Bobby Sham and Blues Wong have moved on from viewing from a photographer's perspective to a curatorial angle, to convey the complexity of human relationships among Hong Kong families. Young photographer Francis So reflected a mystical side of Hong Kong in time-lapse while German photographer Michael Wolf captured the uniqueness of Hong Kong high-density buildings. Each photographer portrayed a different perspective of our city's skyline.

In today's 'me' generation, technology has enabled everyone to easily capture, press the shutter and digitally amend images. Ever wondered what you are shooting or recording? The photographic works selected in 'VERY HONG KONG VERY HONG KONG' aims to leave footprints in our lives. Whether in black and white or colour, the captured moment is an image. Creativity enables us to jump out of the box and is worth thinking and focusing in today's virtual world.

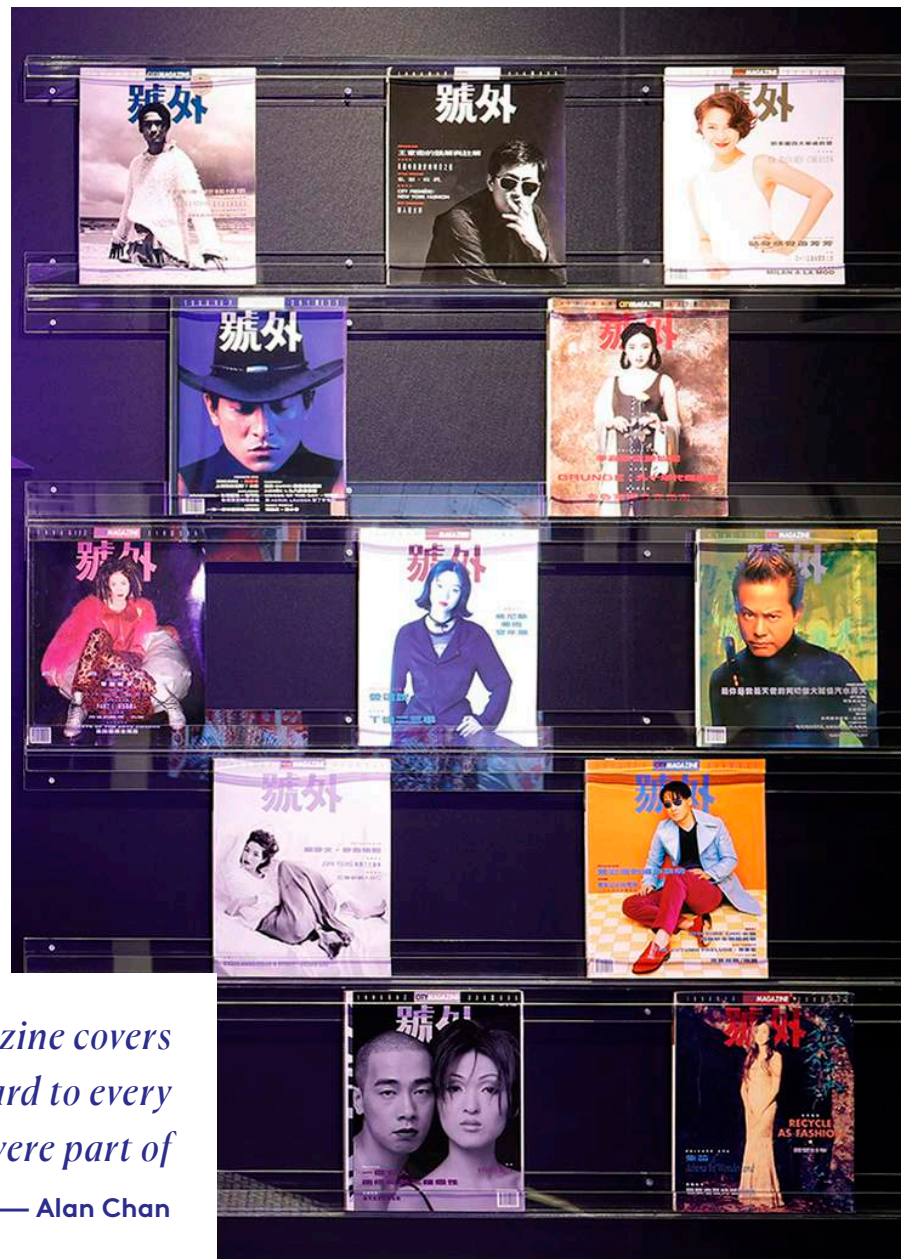
Witness An Ever-Evolving City

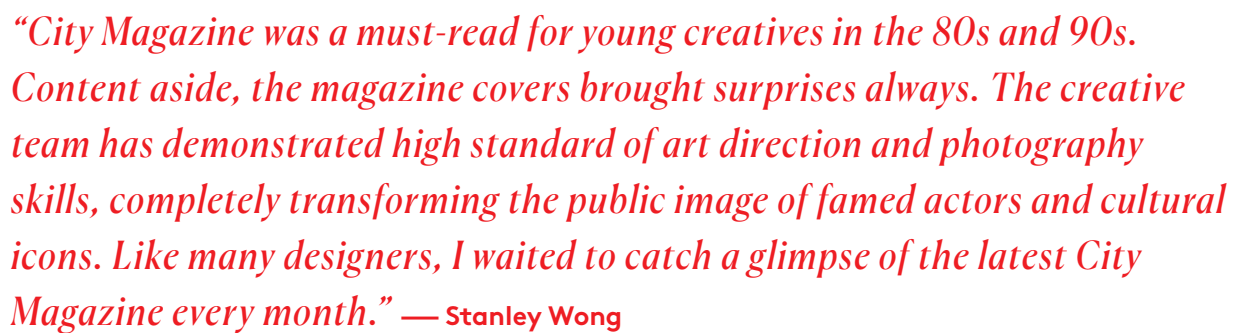
City Magazine

Covers

For almost four decades, City Magazine has been the beacon of middle-class culture. Often cited even today as a symbol of the rising class of the 80s in Hong Kong after the war. Its in-depth interviews and thought-provoking essays on literature and movies have deep-rooted influence on Hong Kong culture, especially in the 80s and 90s. Equally notable are its covers, which are the combined effort of distinguished photographers like Leong Ka-tai, Ringo Tang, stylist Tina Liu and art direction prodigy William Chang Suk-ping. Together the team has produced some of the most memorable magazine covers featuring the biggest stars in Hong Kong. These covers also featured emerging artists and noteworthy alternative creators. Who can forget the covers of Lin Ching-hsia, Leslie Cheung and Rosamund Kwan. Every cover is a fashion statement and became something readers look forward to. These photographs have in fact transcended time and became the emblems of Hong Kong culture at its most glorious.

“Along with many designers, City Magazine covers were at a time the thing to look forward to every month. They were so cool that I wish I were part of their creative team!” — Alan Chan





“City Magazine was a must-read for young creatives in the 80s and 90s. Content aside, the magazine covers brought surprises always. The creative team has demonstrated high standard of art direction and photography skills, completely transforming the public image of famed actors and cultural icons. Like many designers, I waited to catch a glimpse of the latest City Magazine every month.” — Stanley Wong

Fan Ho/ Yau Leung/ Leo K.K. Wong

Early Masters of Hong Kong Photography



Most known for his captivating daily scenes of Hong Kong in the mid 20th century, Ho Fan was a prolific and successful photographer in Asia. Ho immigrated to Hong Kong from Shanghai at the age of 18, and began his career shooting the gamut of life in the bustling streets and quiet alleyways in Hong Kong. Despite the overwhelming chaos in the city, Ho is consistently capable of isolating a decisive moment to create a painterly and poetic composition — a pioneer in pictorial photography of the era. His photography, a product of his keen eye and darkroom technique, won him international recognition in salons, exhibitions and competitions.

*“A crosswalk in Sai Wan bathing in the mellow rays of morning sun...
In Fan Ho’s photos, I found my childhood – the time when my father
and I would go shop for fruits in the markets in Sai Wan.” — Alan Chan*

The late Yau Leung is another legendary photographer documenting Hong Kong in the 1960s. His street photography depicts the daily scenes in the fast-paced city. One of his recurring subjects is the working class, whose hard work brings glory to the developing city. He captured swiftly the crowded street. His pictures are direct, honest and rarely showy, making them an especially endearing and truthful documentation of old Hong Kong. Ho and Yau photographers painted a nostalgic picture of Hong Kong in the old days.

What began as a way to take his mind off work has become a life-pivoting change of the doctor-turn-photographer Leo Wong. Wong was active during the 60s and the 70s, roaming the city with his Rolleiflex. His black and white photos capture the daily lives in public housing estates, around street corners and in rural fields. His masterful pictorial compositions have earned him multiple recognitions in the local and international photography community.

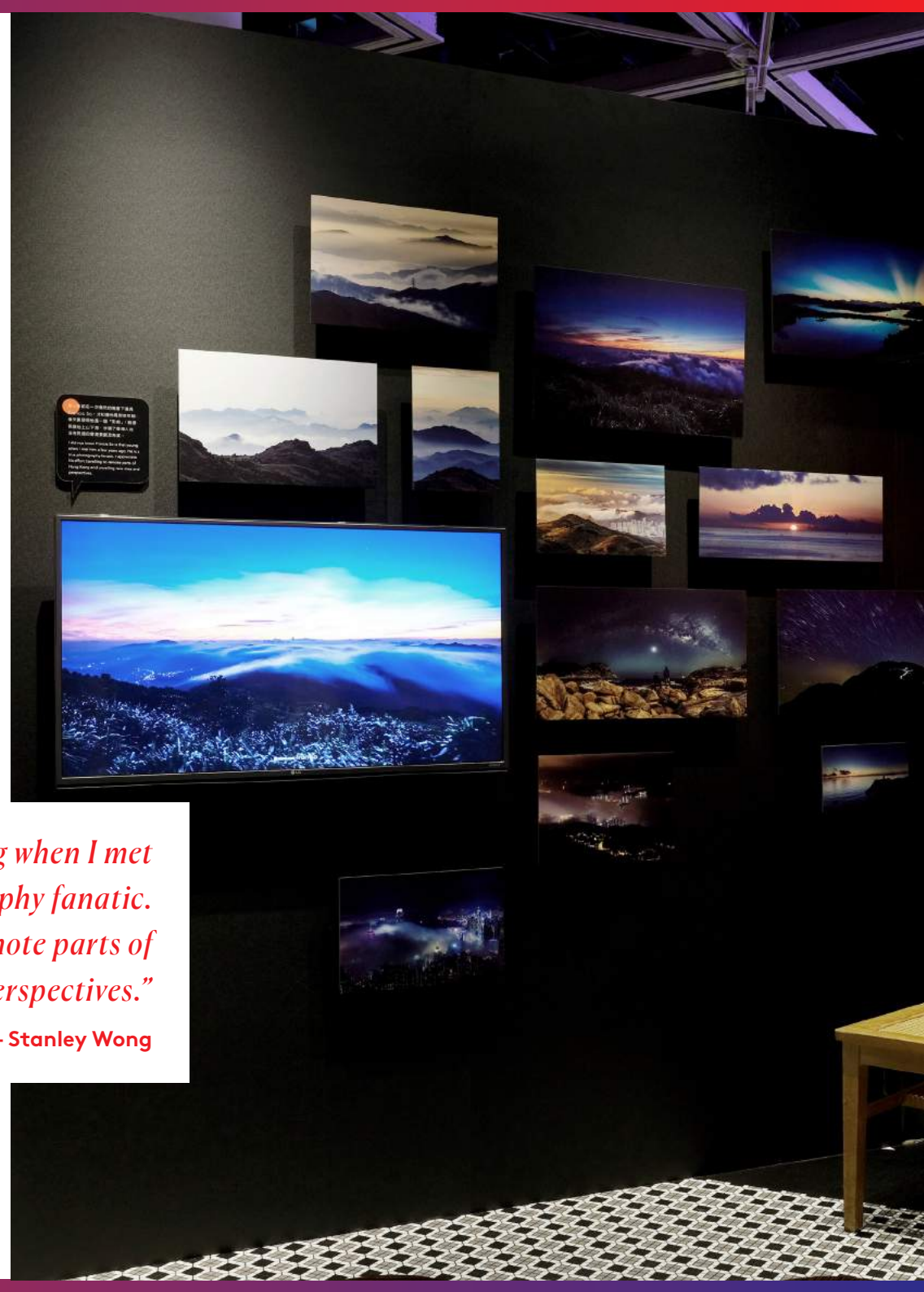
Francis So

Scenery and Landscape Photography

The self-proclaimed “photo tripper” is travelling the world to capture mesmerising landscapes with his camera. Although his still cityscapes and starscapes are equally stunning, it is his eclectic collection of awe-inspiring timelapse that earned him Internet fame. For his debut 4K time-lapse video Seen By My Eyes, So escaped the hustle and bustle of the city and returned to the wild to take thousands of photographs of Hong Kong’s natural scenery. The 5-minute time-lapse movie condenses hours into seconds, revealing the normally imperceptible motion of stars and clouds. As the viewers watch cloud gliding over mountain ridges, stars disappearing, the sun rising over the sea, So shows the tranquil side of Hong Kong that is rarely seen.

“I did not know Francis So is that young when I met him a few years ago. He is a true photography fanatic. I appreciate his effort travelling to remote parts of Hong Kong and unveiling rare sites and perspectives.”

— Stanley Wong



Studio Portrait Photography

“I was never really fond of old studios. I remember vividly the hideous haircut my mum insisted before my student headshot, not to mention the added humiliation when it appeared on my handbook....

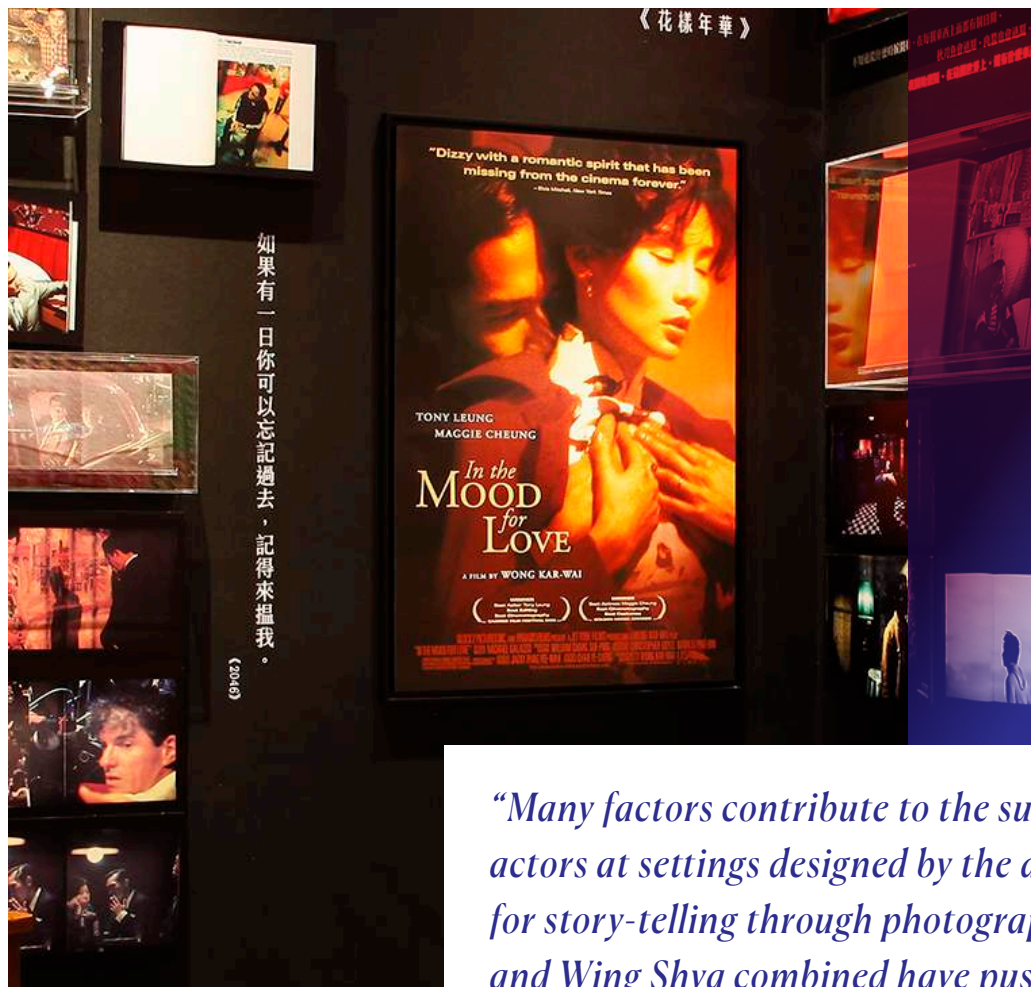


However, I do love the hot stamp embossed gold edges of studio portraits, which reminds me of British royal letters.” — Alan Chan

At a time when camera was a luxury, getting a picture taken could be a ceremonious event in and of itself, sometimes taking hours or even a whole day. Many families turned to professional photo studios such as Helen Studio and Sammy Studio for family portraits every year. For parents who wanted to preserve their children's fleeting innocence, the time-freezing magic of photography was invaluable. Not only did the physical photographic prints become a family memento, for some, the experience of having a picture taken in a professional studio gave them fond memories. However, as cameras become portable and more affordable, the photo studio industry has dwindled since the turn of the 21st century, followed by the rise of professional wedding photography. Studios like GP Wedding and Modern Classic have indoor studios with various themes, which match the unique and imaginary styles of the clients. With the introduction of natural makeup and shooting style, professional wedding studios have completely changed the business of studio photography. Standing on the frontline, the photo studio industry witnessed the massive change in visual culture of Hong Kong.

The Team of Wong Kar-wai/ William Chang Suk-ping/ Christopher Doyle/ Wing Shya

Cinematographic Aesthetics



Wong Kar-wai, William Chang Suk-ping, Christopher Doyle and Wing Shya, each member of this all-star team are top-notch talents in their own field. Together, they have produced several world-renowned movies. Film maestro Wong's distinctive narrative style undeniably put Hong Kong cinema onto the world stage. Chang is an art direction and costume design guru whose work have been the highlights of countless films and concerts. Doyle's camera work is critically acclaimed among his peers and the international film stage, and Wing Shya has shot for i-D and Vogue Italia since the 90s. Their collaboration, with Wong as the director, Chang on art direction and costume design, Doyle on cinematography and Shya on set photography, has created cinematic masterpieces namely Happy Together, In The Mood for Love and 2046. The team cooked up some of the most iconic scenes in film history. The exchange of gazes between Tony Leung's and Maggie Cheung's characters in In The Mood for Love has etched into the public consciousness.

“Many factors contribute to the success of Wong Kar-wai’s movies. The director who oversees actors at settings designed by the art director, basking in the ambience under lighting dedicated for story-telling through photography. Wong Kar-wai, William Chang Suk-ping, Christopher Doyle and Wing Shya combined have pushed movie into new realms.” — Alan Chan

News Documentary Photography

Veteran Associated Press (AP) photojournalist Vincent Yu has covered many historic news events across the Asia Pacific region in his thirty-year career. Joining AP in 1989, the Hong Kong photojournalist produced countless photo stories, introducing the human conditions of Hong Kong to a wider international audience. Stories such as Hong Kong McRefugees and subdivided home residents expose the communities living on the fringes of the wealthy Asian society, taking an in-depth look into the inequality and injustice beneath the glamour. Vincent Yu also spent six years capturing the greatly increasing pace of reclamation in Hong Kong of recent years. Witness the daily changes in our coastal area in his documentary photography series "The Vanishing Coastline".

“Vincent Yu is among all documentary photographers who shows persistent passion and devotion for photography, ranging from photojournalistic work for news agency to his self-initiated creative projects.” — Stanley Wong



300 Families

Photography Exhibition

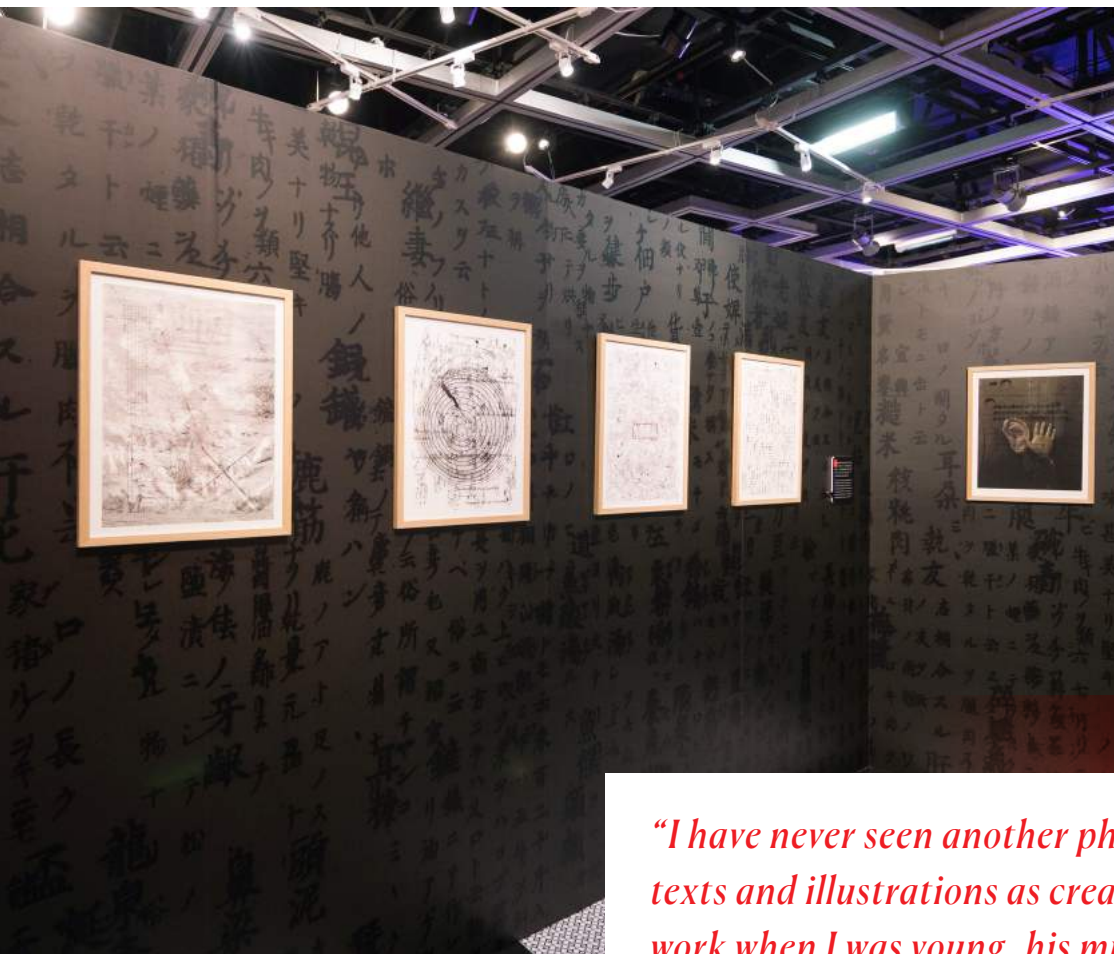


In 300 Families, curators Bobby Sham and Blues Wong took on the quest to define “families” in Hong Kong. The flagship programme orchestrated by the Hong Kong International Photo Festival in 2013 explored the incredible complexity of modern families through the lens of 12 groups of contemporary photographers and emerging artists. They went out to photograph 300 families, each is asked to take on the subject with their own interpretation. The project challenges the conventional notion of “family”, tackling topics such as step-parenthood, same-sex marriage, interracial families, homeless people, master and protégé in martial arts studios, foster families and elderly people living alone. The exhibition painted a holistic picture of the nuances and varieties of familial bonds in Hong Kong through different ages.

Participating photographers include Amber Au & Bobby Sham, Chan Hau Chun, Roy Lee, Leong Ka Tai, Thomas Lin, Rambo & Lorraine, Vincent Mak Siu Fung, Wei Leng Tay, Ducky Tse, Tse Ming Chong, another mountainman and Vincent Yu.

Lee Ka-sing

Picture-haiku Series



Besides founding independent photography magazine Dislocation, visual media creator Lee Ka-sing is also a prolific commercial and fine art photographer. A poet himself, Lee's photography is very much informed by his experience in literature. His photography tends to present itself as a visual riddle encoded with a hidden message rather than mere pictorial representation. Just as charismatic is his mixed media work, which cleverly merges text, illustrations and photography. Juxtaposing images and toying with multiple perspectives, Lee explores the intriguing synergy between the inherent ambiguity of imagery and the explicitness of text. He is an exemplar of early conceptual photography in Hong Kong. In 1989, he was awarded "Artist of the Year" by Hong Kong Artists' Guild. In 1999, he received Fellowship for Artistic Development by Hong Kong Arts Development Council.

"I have never seen another photographer who interweaves images, texts and illustrations as creatively as Lee Ka-sing. I got to know his work when I was young, his multi-dimensional work is intriguing. To me, it is a crossover of everyday life, art and history — a truly unique and groundbreaking creation for visual art." — Stanley Wong

Michael Wolf

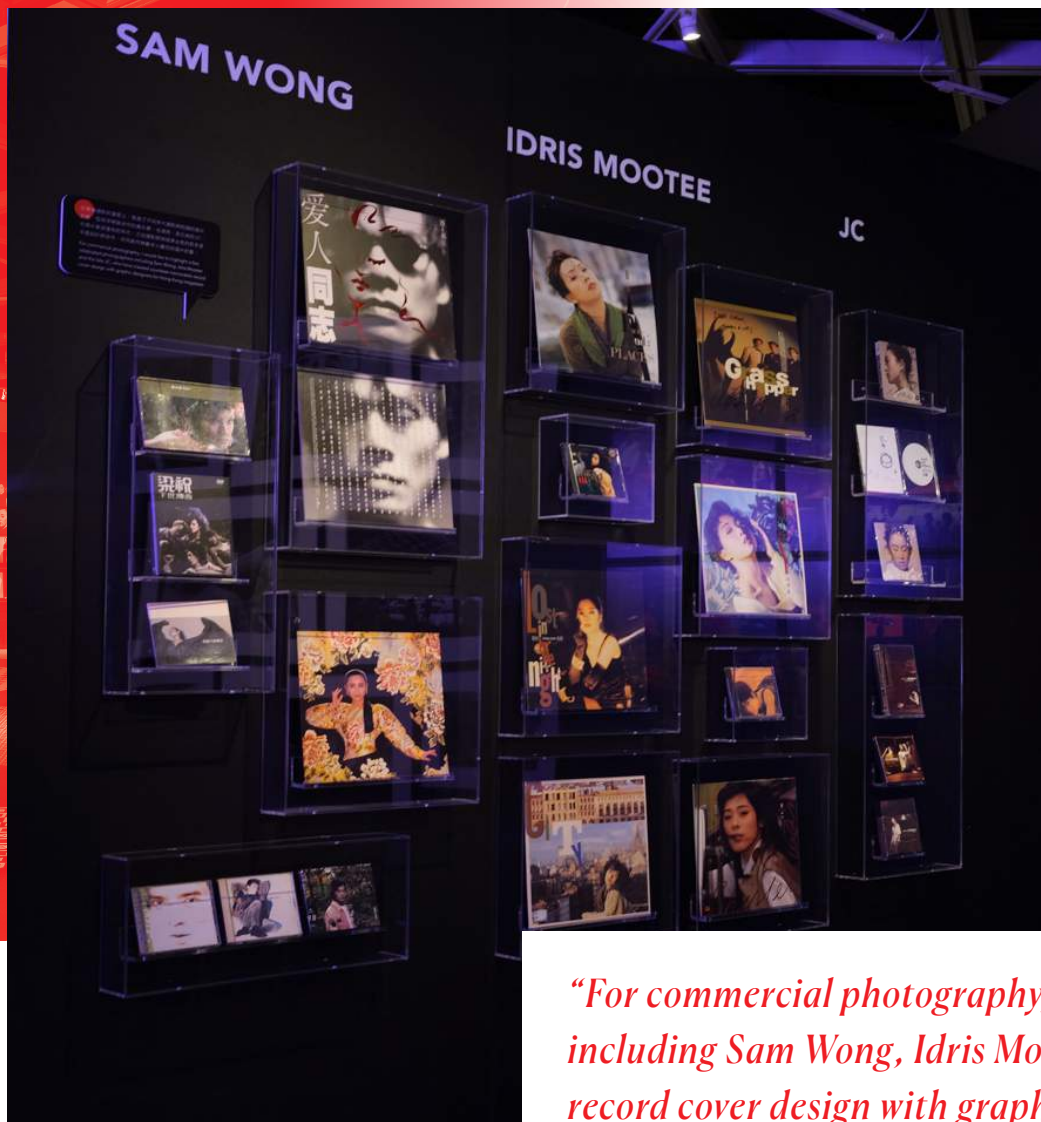
Urban Landscape Photography

Michael Wolf has the talent of distilling the essence of Hong Kong through inconspicuous subject matter. In his series Hong Kong Corner Houses, the Hong Kong-based German photographer catalogues the city's unique residential-commercial buildings with a Bechers-esque rigour. Meticulously shot, the result is a photo series that doubles as a comprehensive urban survey of these vintage architectures of the 1950s and 1960s. In Architecture of Density, the renowned photographer further demonstrates his keen eye for the vernacular, transforming facades of Hong Kong high-rises into visual art that is almost abstract as a result. One gets a glimpse of the multi-layer civic dwellings, streets and lanes (including a series of ancestral tablets). These familiar pictures of Hong Kong in surrealistic style portrayed a suffocating sense of oppression and aroused a lot of attention. The series has since exhibited internationally, putting the tremendous density of the city's architecture on the global radar once again.



Sam Wong/ Idris Mootee/ JC

Record Covers Photography



Sam Wong is a noteworthy photographer responsible for many eye-catching album covers in the 90s. His camera brought out the true temperament of Deanie Ip, George Lam in the 80s and Anthony Wong in the 90s. Proficient in dramatic and powerful lighting, he has produced eye-catching film posters and CD covers for Miriam Yeung, Eason Chan and the likes. He is particularly excelled at capturing the essence of his subject, bringing out the true personalities of celebrities through his lens.

Idris Mootee was another renowned fashion and advertising photographer, famous for his work for Anita Mui, Sandy Lam and Shirley Kwan. He is specifically recognised for his work with Clarence Hui for Sandy Lam, having created many of the record covers throughout her early career. He involved not only in cover shooting but also creative concept as a whole. For “Fuir La Cite”, Mootee put together

European landscapes with Sandy’s portrait taken in Manila, to create a metrosexual modern femme image for the singer. These photos have added depths and charisma to her musical style and public persona.

The late fashion photographer JC is a force to be reckoned within the entertainment photography. In 2003, JC set up his own studio, photographing stills including record labels for a number of celebrities including Zhou Xun, Eason Chan, Edison Chan, Shu Qi, Zhang Zhi-yi and the likes. His photographic works can be seen in many local and overseas fashion magazines. Through his signature close-up portraits of celebrities, one can see his daring stylistic choices and boundless passion for photography. He never failed to deliver any project, whether it be a record cover or commercial project, with panache.

“For commercial photography, I would like to highlight a few celebrated photographers including Sam Wong, Idris Mootee and the late JC, who have created countless memorable record cover design with graphic designers for Hong Kong megastars.” — Stanley Wong

Yau Leung/ Lee Ka-sing/ Peter Lau

Promotion of Hong Kong Photographic Culture

When photography first arrived in Hong Kong, it was very much a hobby among the colonial elite. The appetite for photography among the public was almost non-existent, let alone any cultured commentaries on the art itself. Yau Leung and Lee Ka-sing are few of the early photo aficionados whose passion does not limit only to practising photography, but pushing the work of fellow Hong Kong photographers to a wider audience. Yau was the chief editor of The Art of Photography magazine (later renamed Photo Pictorial) in the 80s.

The magazine delivered in-depth analysis and interviews of the latest photographic work, chronicling the evolution of Chinese and Hong Kong photography in its forty years of history. Lee Ka-sing started writing monthly columns on Yau Leung's magazine since 1985. Lee's essays were published in the form of a supplement to the magazine. Lee Ka-sing, co-founder of Hong Kong Institute of Professional Photography, founded Dislocation magazine in the 90s and focused on contemporary photography. The magazine also accepted and published submissions from emerging photographers. Besides founding Hong Kong's first and only photo gallery OP Gallery at that time, Lee has introduced photo-collection and academic knowledge in Hong Kong through his personal project such as OP Print Program from 1994-99 and its subsidiary OP Editions, a quarterly curatorial programme with photographs made and signed by the artists. All photographs are in the unique size of 8x10 inch, with a limited run of 20 each.

In the 2000s, Peter Lau, founder of the Asia One Books is another ardent advocate of photography. The company is one of the most prolific art book publishers, helping many Hong Kong photographers publish their very own photo book. In 2009, AO:The Photo Book Centre was launched. Its art space AO Vertical established in 2012 brings the works of the world's greatest photographers to Hong Kong.

