

An Encounter in Hong Kong Streets, 60 Years Apart

S. Louisa Wei (text)
Phil M.F. Shek (images)

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Hong Kong has a history punctuated by waves of immigrants and influxes of expats, especially during years of wars, famine, and drastic social changes. The wide wealth gap among different classes contributes to the diverse cityscapes within walking distance of one another. Street photography in the international and multicultural metropolis has continued to fascinate photographers – some sojourning and others rooting. With two sets of photos – from British traveller Nick Howard and Hong Kong native Phil M.F. Shek – laid side by side, this essay questions the meanings generated through the juxtaposition of these images. Since the photo sets were taken in the 1950s and the 2010s respectively, does the time gap make a statement about Hong Kong today?

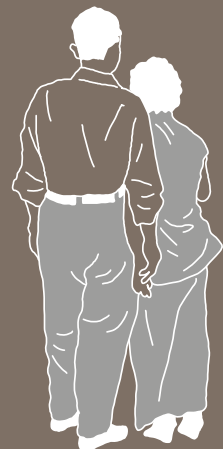
#nick howard

#phil m.f. shek

#hong kong image

#street photography

#documentary photography



This photo essay is inspired by an unlikely encounter of two sets of snapshots in the streets of Hong Kong, taken nearly sixty years apart. The eight monochromic and two-colour photos by Nick Howard captured the city and its people between 1957 and 1958 on 35mm black-and-white and reversal colour film. Howard was a British native who arrived in Hong Kong as a navigator on a Merchant Navy ship¹. He subsequently continued his journey from Southeast Asia to South America before returning to complete his education and becoming a lecturer at Sheffield University. Phil Shek's ten coloured photos were taken between 2014 and 2015 with digital cameras. Born and raised in Hong Kong, Shek grew up in the 1980s and took his first photography lessons in the early 1990s when the Hong Kong economy was soaring. He considers his aesthetics as being rooted in Hong Kong's localism and multiculturalism. All photos in this essay have not been published before, not because they lack artistic qualities, but because, as I hope to prove, their moments are yet to come.

In April 2015, Howard sent me his Hong Kong collection, starting with the image that caught my eye on Facebook. These were the images which, in his words, had some "artistic merits."² The details preserved in all depths of fields stunned me. A curiosity towards and compassion for the subjects shone through these images, reminding me of Hedda Morrison's Hong Kong collection from between 1946 and 1947 (Stokes 2009). The works by both Howard and Morrison fulfil the basic concepts of "documentary photograph" with "people in a public place" (Jardin 3); such visual records of the everyday lives of people in Hong Kong are as valuable as documented moments of catastrophe, even though the former had less circulation in public media before the era of social media. Without Morrison's professional training, Howard's snaps seem more spontaneous. Nevertheless, as Roland Barthes (1980, 4) states in *Camera Lucida*, to pin down the meaning of

photography and to classify it as amateur or professional is challenging (1980, 4).

My communication with Nick Howard started on April 7, 2015, and his last email to me was on August 7, 2016. During the last year of his life, he was fighting cancer. He wrote to me on good days and sent me pictures that he took in Hong Kong, Vietnam, and Cuba.³ When Shek first saw Howard's works, he commented: "It is like *The Double Life of Véronique*."⁴ The 1991 film by Krzysztof Kieslowski features the parallel stories of two identical-looking women living in France and Poland. Looking through one hundred scanned prints by Howard and hundreds of digital images of his own, Shek found a picture to "match" every shot by Howard. As a professional photographer, Shek has exhibited his works in collections according to techniques or themes. However, he had never thought of exhibiting his street snaps as they are his own "visual diaries." He enjoys examining his daily snaps, finding details captured by his camera but omitted by his eyes. He examined Howard's photos in the same way, feeling touched by the signs, buildings, people, their expressions, and motions that happened before his time. "Hidden narratives" began to emerge during this reviewing process, testament to the striking power of the photographic medium to document the past.

Shek observes a mild sort of orientalism in Howard's images, but I believe "snapshots" may be considered to "resist incorporation into colonial narratives" (Widdis 2018, 181). With this difference in interpretation in mind, I turned to Howard's biography. Phil Turner describes Howard as an eyewitness to "revolution around the world in the 1950s," encountering a bloodless coup in Indonesia, the Argentinians' support of Eva Peron, and Bay of Pigs attack in Cuba (Turner 2016). When he arrived in Hong Kong in 1957, the city did not have a political drama for him to capture. In place of an artistic ambition or an ideological

motivation, Howard's endless days "staring at empty horizons" formed his unusual creative urge: "when we reached a harbour, I was enthralled by the people around and carried a camera with me everywhere." His fellow Chinese crewmen pointed out to him "the best places to visit when ashore," so he had "considerable self-confidence" when roaming the streets of Hong Kong.⁵

Howard had wanted to give his Hong Kong images back to the Hong Kong people before his passing. When we juxtapose his and Shek's images of people in Hong Kong streets sixty years apart, the city's drastic changes are apparent. Howard photographed the people in Hong Kong a decade after World War II, an innocent age when life was still hard for most people. By contrast, Shek, in his recent photos evokes a pervasive fin-de-siècle atmosphere. Each set of images has its complexity and ambiguity, but they exhibit a striking similarity when compared to one another. Professional and amateur photographers in Hong Kong used to pursue artistic expression as the highest ideal. Today, however, we value documentary photographs as an equally significant heritage. The miraculous encounter of Howard and Shek is a reminder that yesterday will wait for us somewhere tomorrow.

Acknowledgements

In memory of Nick Howard (1933–2016).

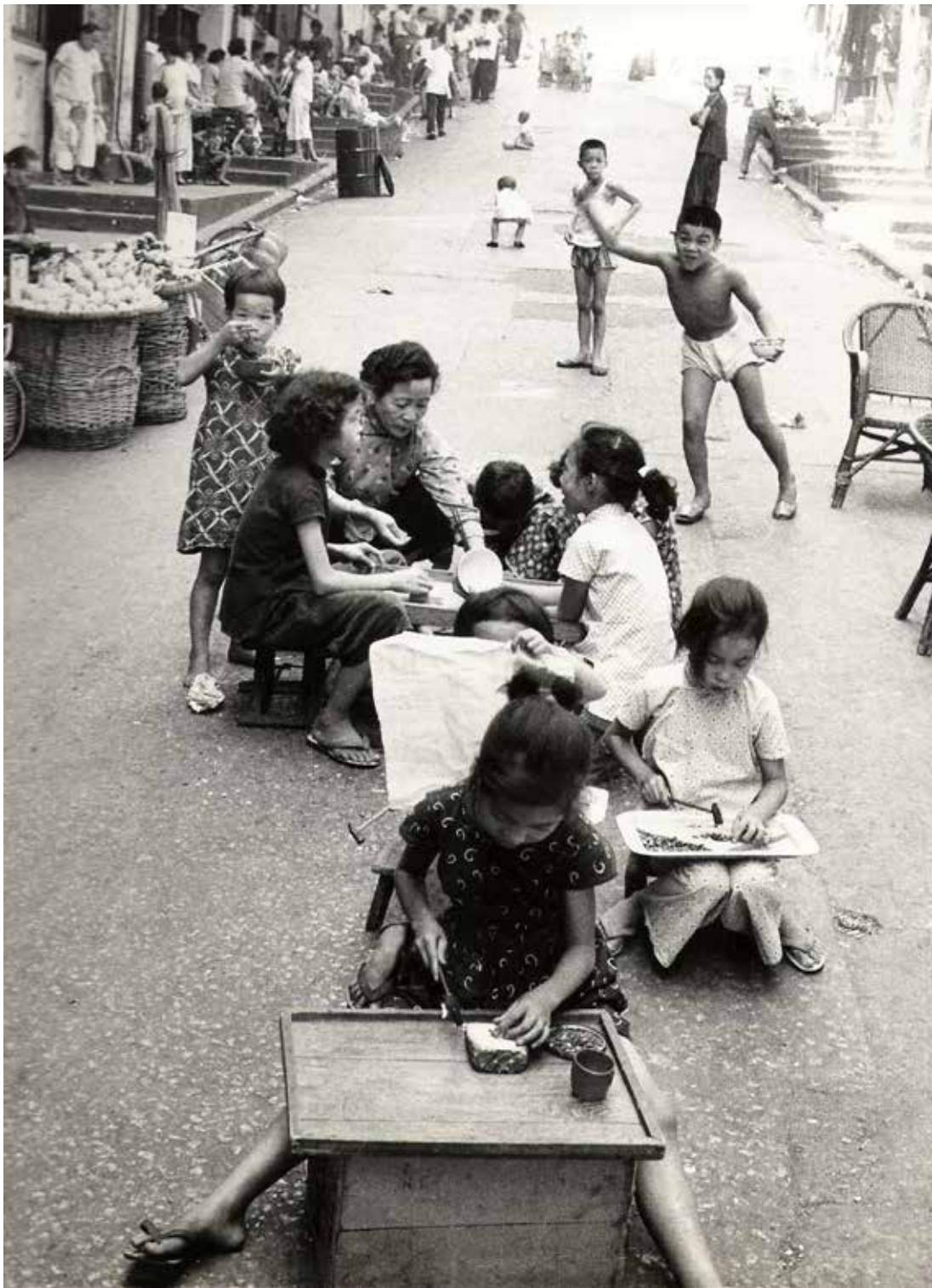


Figure 1: Nick Howard, *Little Helpers*, 1957/58.





Figure 2a (previous page, top) Nick Howard, *Mother and Daughter*, 1957/58.

Figure 4a (top): Nick Howard, *Men at Kowloon Dock*, 1957/58.

Figure 2b (previous page, bottom): Phil Shek, *Mother and Daughter, Lai Chi Kwok Road, Kowloon*, 2015.

Figure 4b (bottom): Phil Shek, *Women at Star Ferry Pier, Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon*, 2013.

Figure 3a (previous page, middle left): Nick Howard, *Party in the Yard*, 1957/58.

Figure 3b (previous page, middle right): Phil Shek, *Party at My Garden, Kowloon Tong*, 2014.



Figure 5a (top): Nick Howard, *A Couple at the Mid-level, Hong Kong Island*, 1957/58.

Figure 5b (bottom): Phil Shek, *A Couple at the Peak, Hong Kong Island*, 2013.







Figure 6a (page 117, top): Nick Howard, *Looking at the Ship*, 1957/58.

Figure 6b (page 117, middle left): Phil Shek, *Man Looking Away*, Kwun Tong, Kowloon, 2015.

Figure 7a (page 117, middle right): Nick Howard, *Boys after School*, 1957/58.

Figure 7b (page 117, bottom): Phil Shek, *Boys at Sheung Shui Station*, Kowloon, 2013.

Figure 8a (opposite, top): Nick Howard, *Game after School*, 1957/58.

Figure 8b (opposite, middle left): Phil Shek, *Hanging out after School*, Lai Chi Kok Station, Kowloon, 2014.

Figure 9a (opposite, middle right): Nick Howard, *Rickshaw Man*, Tsim Sha Tsui Bus Station, Kowloon, 1957/58.

Figure 9b (opposite, bottom): Phil Shek, *Recycle Woman*, Wan Chai, Hong Kong Island, 2013.

Figure 10a: Nick Howard, *Fashionable Ladies*, 1957/58.

Figure 10b: Phil Shek, *Shopping Ladies*, Shun Shui Po, Kowloon, 2015.



Figure 11a: Nick Howard, *A Flipped Umbrella, Kai Tak Airport, Kowloon, 1957/58*



Figure 11b: Phil Shek, *A Flipped Umbrella, Mong Kok, Kowloon, 2014*

Notes

- 1 According to Phil Turner, the British Merchant Navy was non-military and crewed by a few British officers and Chinese men doing all the work.
- 2 Howard used these words to describe the photo he sent to me on 12 April 2015, in an attachment titled "Notes to Louisa".
- 3 In bad days, he was in and out of the hospital, Phil Shek and I bought air tickets to see him in November 2016, but he passed away in September. We still travelled to Sheffield. We met his wife Jenny, listened to his interview with BBC, and went through his papers held at Sheffield University Library. This essay is in memory of the sixth year of his passing.
- 4 These words and later quotes from Phil Shek are from exchanges we had over email and messages.
- 5 See note 2.

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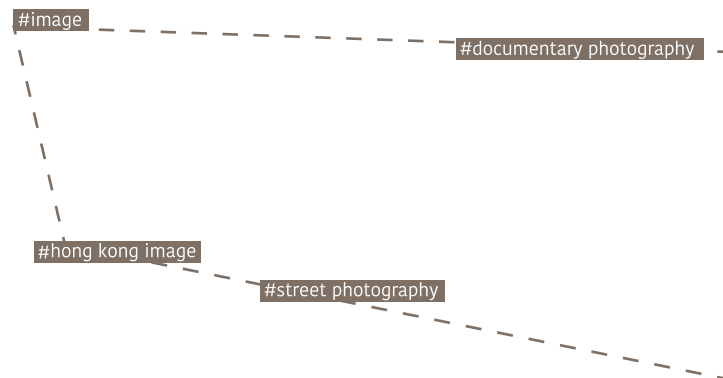
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Bio

Dr. S. Louisa Wei is an associate professor at the City University of Hong Kong and a documentary film director. She writes extensively on women's cinema and Chinese-language documentaries as an academic and critic. Her documentary films have received positive reviews and reportage from major media like *The Hollywood Reporter* and BBC.

Phil M.F. Shek is a photographic artist who focuses on the documentary attribute of the photographic medium. In his work, he explores the photo medium's potentials from traditional aesthetics to immersive digital technology. He is now an instructor of photography and visual communication in the School of Creative Media at the City University of Hong Kong.

#people

#nick howard

#phil m.f. shek



DOI: 10.31182/cubic.2022.5.54

CUBIC JOURNAL 2022