



■ Clockwise from top left: *Star Ferry Smoke* by Lee Fook Chee; *Des Voeux Road Tram*, *Cigarette Seller* and *Sheung Wan Street* by Hedda Morrison; *Tanka Women Getting Water* by Lee Fook Chee; photographers Brian Brake, Lee Fook Chee and Hedda Morrison. COURTESY OF THE ESTATE OF LEE FOOK CHEE AND PRESIDENT AND FELLOWS OF HARVARD COLLEGE

Through the lens of time

Crystal Wu

Celebrating the 25th anniversary of the SAR as well as 10 years of the Asia Society Hong Kong Center at the former Explosives Magazine compound, the center has partnered with The Photographic Heritage Foundation for a nostalgic photo exhibition.

Recovery, Resilience, Resurgence features the works of documentary photographers Hedda Morrison, Lee Fook Chee and Brian Brake from the 1940s to the 1970s.

"We thought that it would be really interesting to have this series of historical periods – Morrison for the '40s, Lee for the '50s and Brake for the '60s and '70s – connect," said Edward Stokes, founder of the Photographic Heritage Foundation and the curator of the exhibition.

This is the foundation's second group exhibition and the first that crosses over multiple time periods.

Its curation goes hand in hand with the Chantal Miller Gallery's historic space, which is located in the oldest building of the compound. Divided into four rooms, visitors are transported through a tunnel of time with each room focusing on a different era of Hong Kong.

The 1940s sees Hong Kong after World War II and the Japanese occupation, and traces of the past can be seen in the photographs next to the opening panel, which are by the German-born Morrison.

Morrison's photograph of the University of Hong Kong depicts its main building without a roof. "Timber was then in extremely short supply for cooking and heating. Many buildings simply had their woodwork taken out entirely and were left as this building was then, semi-derelict," explained Stokes.

Photographs are organized into sets depicting different aspects of Hong Kong. Stokes found Morrison's set of portraits to be among the most important, as they show the lives of everyday Hongkongers.

Two portraits of steely-faced women, in particular, stand out. "What these photographs show, which is a fact of post-war Hong Kong as it recovered, was of people who despite great hardship, had the abiding optimism that was so common in Hong Kong then. It is part of its recovery and it would drive Hong Kong forward into the 1950s."

While all three photographers were not born in Hong Kong, they all stayed in the city for some time – Morrison for six months, Brake for 14 years and Lee for over 60 years.

Stokes noted that the three photographers were still practicing their craft up to their death. "They kept going. They loved photography. They got old but they did not give it up."

He interviewed Lee just before his death in 2012. By then, the Singapore-born lensman was already very sick and in a wheelchair.

"To get the conversation going, I gave him his camera," recalled Stokes. "In an instant, he picked up his camera the way a professional photographer holds his camera. He held it, finger ready to push the shutter release.

"Not only did he pick up the camera, but he also had this wonderful smile, his eyes were sparkling, he was that young man again."

Lee's original Zeiss Ikontas camera is also exhibited in a glass case in the middle of the exhibition space.

Other items that documented his life, such as his ice cream vendor license, are proudly displayed in remembrance of the photographer Lee, whose photos were never published in his lifetime.

The last room shows colored photographs, as by the time New Zealander Brake moved to Hong Kong in 1962, black and whites were losing popularity to colored film.

The internationally-renowned photographer was commissioned to snap Hong Kong for *Life* magazine's *The Great Cities* book series.

Brake's works covered many subjects, from people enjoying a Chinese banquet, children exercising at a rooftop school, to buildings in Central and the scenery of Victoria Harbour.

Detailed descriptions can be found next to each photo, telling the story and speculation behind each image, which stemmed from the photo books that the foundation worked on for Morrison and Lee.

"Photographs are part of the historical records. They show how times were before," Stokes said. "Above all, they tell a story of Hong Kong being a place of great fascination, change and always potential."

Recovery, Resilience, Resurgence is currently closed due to the pandemic, but a virtual tour of the exhibition led by Stokes is available on the Asia Society Hong Kong Center's Youtube page.



■ *Red Banquet* by Brian Brake. COURTESY OF LAU WAI-MAN



■ Exhibition view of *Recovery, Resilience and Resurgence*.