

A tale of two colonies

The ongoing exhibition 'Photographs from the 1950s: Marjorie Doggett's Singapore, Lee Fook Chee's Hong Kong' explores the parallel narratives of the two islands and their transformation post World War II.

In 1947, a young woman named Marjorie Doggett and her would-be husband exchanged their native Hastings, on the south coast of England, for the far-flung imperial city of Singapore, where that same year, journeyman Lee Fook Chee traded that British island for another when he set off north across the straits to Hong Kong.

The two had nothing in common, had never met, and yet more than 70 years later, it is their parallel accounts of two former island colonies that collide and contrast in historical documentation that feels more like self-reflection.

One trait they did share was photography, and both were self-taught. As the 1950s transformed both cities, financially and therefore architecturally, Doggett found purpose in photographing her pioneering preservation work. On the far side of the South China Sea, Lee made a living selling his photos to tourists.

Camera in hand, Doggett sought to capture Singapore's cityscapes and buildings, with striking images

A young Lee Fook Chee. Picture: The Estate of Lee Fook Chee / Sino Group





Above: a street scene in Hong Kong. In the 1950s, Singapore was home to Southeast Asian-style shophouses with arched “five-foot ways” to protect people from the tropical rain and sun. Kowloon had similar streets that served the purpose, but even back then, Hong Kong shophouses were packed in as densely as possible.

Left: the Star Ferry crossing Victoria Harbour.

Below: children swim off the docks in Hong Kong.

Pictures: The Estate of Lee Fook Chee / Sino Group

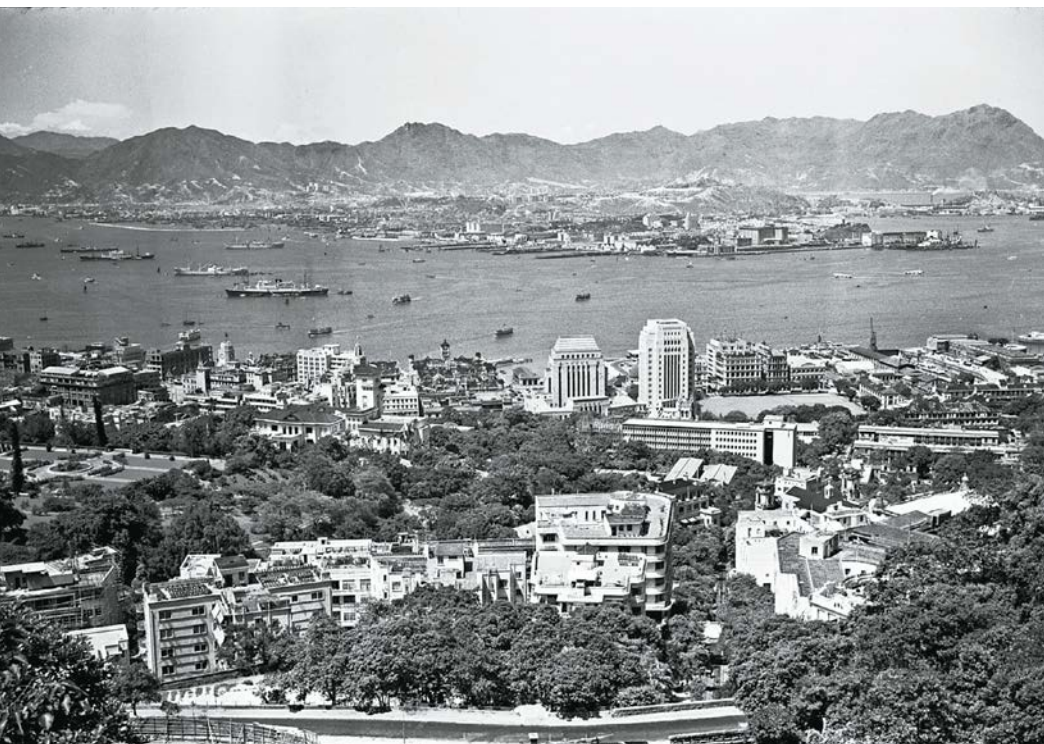


Above: boats in Singapore harbour.

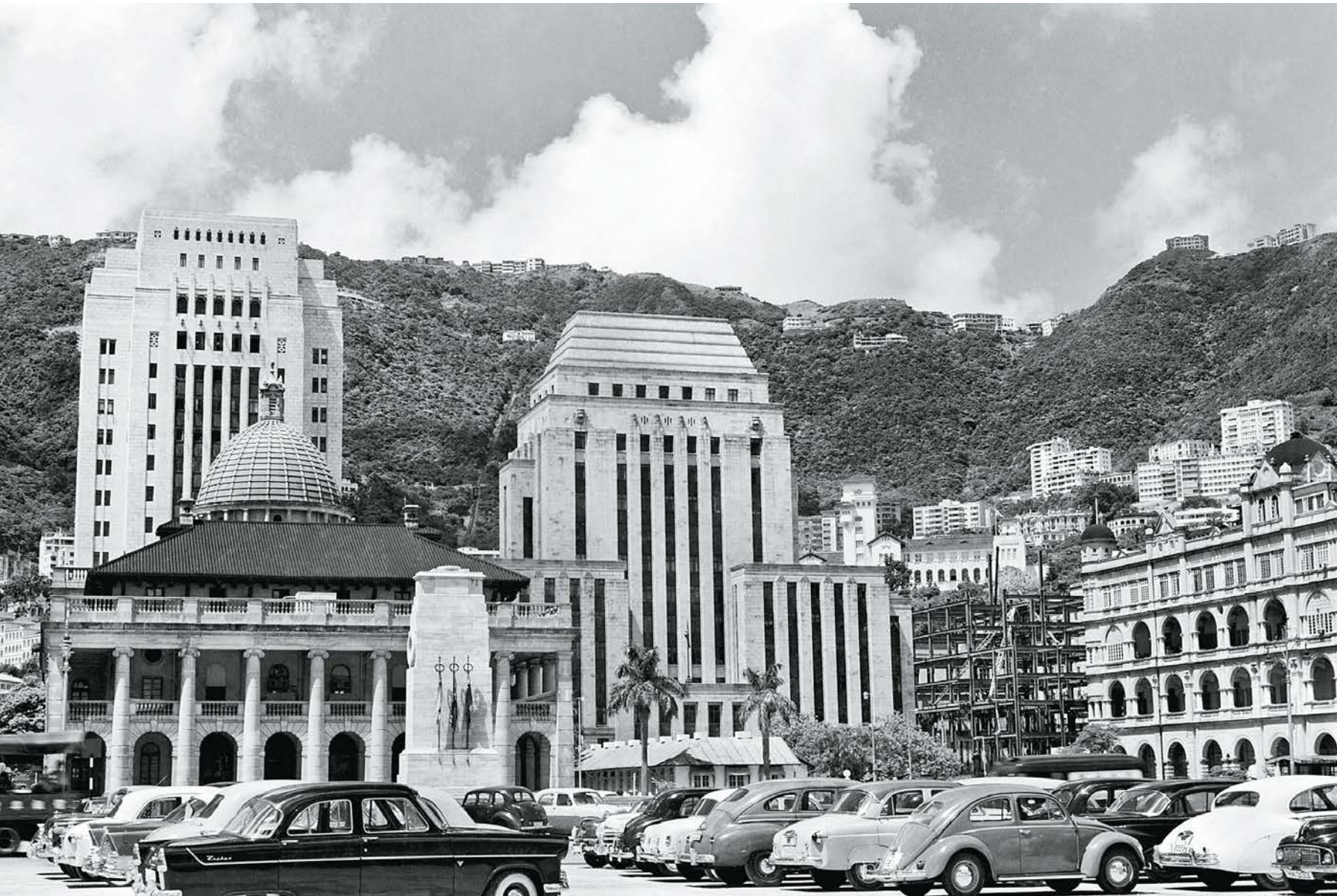
Right: the Fullerton Building seen from Clifford Pier’s archways. **Below:** a Singapore street scene. Bicycles were once a common sight in both Singapore and Hong Kong.

Pictures: Marjorie Doggett / NAS / Sino Group





Left: Hong Kong in the 1950s. **Above:** wheeled conveyances remained common in both cities into about the early 60s. Rattan or wicker containers were common ways to transport goods in Hong Kong until the 50s, but were never used in Singapore. **Below:** cars parked by The Cenotaph in Hong Kong. Pictures: The Estate of Lee Fook Chee / Sino Group





Marjorie Doggett.

resulting in her book, *Characters of Light*, which prompted many others to pursue heritage conservation in the colony. Published in 1957, it was the first photographic work on Singapore's urban landscape, and the first local photography book by a woman.

In both port cities during this period, tourism became increasingly common, and in Hong Kong, The Peak was where Lee made his living. Initially he took portraits, and later he sold his images of local Hong Kong scenes. The work was demanding and unreliable but Lee was streetwise and determined. Despite living in a hillside squatter home, Lee heeded his father's advice to always dress immaculately.

In 1956, Doggett and her husband joined the new wave of Hong Kong tourists. The Peak being then, as it is now, one of the top stops on any itinerary, one wonders whether the British couple from Singapore may have come across Lee plying his trade.

Looking down across Victoria Harbour, the Doggetts would have instinctively compared the Hong Kong skyline with that of Singapore, both cities by then having recovered from World War II's Japanese occupations. Most of Hong Kong's colonial buildings would soon become lost in the reeds of glass and steel that would come to define the modern city in the lead up to its change of hands, in 1997, from one major power to another.

Singapore has become equally unrecognisable, with its magnitude of architectural novelty, and since claiming its independence from Britain decades before Hong Kong, has had a unique post-colonial journey.

In having Doggett and Lee's photographic observations merge and overlap so many decades later, we can see the essential complementarity of the two regional powerhouses.

The unspoken hope, perhaps, stems from what these cities once shared, what they have lost or gained on their parallel trajectories, and however they may absorb or be swayed by external forces, they will remain their own islands, both geographically and culturally, whichever winds may blow through their respective harbours. ■

"Photographs from the 1950s: Marjorie Doggett's Singapore, Lee Fook Chee's Hong Kong" is jointly presented by Sino Group and the Ng Teng Fong Charitable Foundation, supported by the Consulate-General of the Republic of Singapore in Hong Kong, and curated by the Photographic Heritage Foundation and its founder director, Edward Stokes. It is showing at Sino Plaza, 3/F, 255 Gloucester Road, Causeway Bay, until May 30.



Above: Singapore in the 50s. **Left:** the Dalhousie Obelisk in downtown Singapore. In both Singapore and Hong Kong, city centres focused on business and government buildings. **Below:** the intersection of Amoy and Cross streets in Singapore. Pictures: Marjorie Doggett / NAS / Sino Group

