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聖保羅男女中學
St. Paul's Co-educational College

「Flashback- An Investigation of the Changes of
Photo-taking studios in Hong Kong
in the second half of the 20th century」

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The 8th Inter-School Competition of Project Learning on Hong Kong's History and Culture

Changes in Hong Kong Industries and People's Livelihood

St Paul's Co-educational College

Category A: Written Report (Senior category) (HC_18_SA_013)

***Research Question: Flashback - An Investigation of the Changes of
Photo-taking studios in Hong Kong in the second half of the 20th
century***

Group Leader

- Chan Long To

Group Members

- Chan Carine
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- Mak Ho Yee
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Abstract

An industry rises and falls as a result of economic transformation or changes in cultural trends in relation to the socio-economic developments of a community. Consequently, a lot can be observed from changes in a specific traditional industry, and documenting its advancement over the years can often carry deeper implications.

Throughout the 20th century, photo-taking, especially family portraits, in traditional studios had become more popular in both Western and Chinese societies, especially among the local in Hong Kong since family life played a prominent role in their traditional values. Close-knit families in Hong Kong would travel together to photo-taking studios to record the moment of union and deep-rooted familial bonds. In fact, back to the late 19th century, these studios had not been as paramount in importance, as salons only served the British colonial rulers and Chinese leaders and social elites exclusively. Yet starting from the mid-20th century, photo-taking studios skyrocketed in popularity, and reached its golden era from the 1960s to 1980s, with its gradual decline in the 1990s. While a full family photo was still considered a luxury, it was treated as a staple of people's lives, with people lining up outside to take a photo before the Chinese New Year holidays.

This research aims to look into the rise and fall of photo-taking industry in Hong Kong in the second half of the 20th century and to critically analyse the reasons behind the transformation, demonstrating the changes in Hong Kong's people's livelihood. Thus, this

investigation will cover two main focuses: the ups and downs of the industry and the people's lifestyle as reflected.

Our research has been outlined into three major parts: The first part, the 50s-60s, would illustrate the take-off stage of the photo-taking industry due to the need for practical uses and analyse its importance to the traditional Chinese society in Hong Kong; The second part, the 70s-80s, would illustrate a continuation in the rise of photo-taking industries, and the signs of decline of the industry in the late 80s. Historical factors would be taken into account to demonstrate the changes to the industry. The last section, the 90s, illustrates the significant decline in traditional studios as Hong Kong transformed into a more diverse economy with the socio-economic changes as well as technological advancement. Different related historical events over the decades would be used to explain the changes of the industry, illustrated by different types of photos taken at that time, for instance, family photos, student photos and wedding photos, etc.

In terms of methodology, we will mostly rely on primary sources. We conducted interviews with the owners of 美姿華攝影室, a renowned photo-taking studio established in 1964 in Aberdeen as well as 銀の照相院, which is located in Kwun Tong. Having been in operation for over half a century, these studios provide us with valuable insights into the peaks and valleys of photo-taking industry from an insider's perspective. Furthermore, another major source we will use is *the Hong Kong Memory*, in which interviews with Ng Kong, a photographer who set up his own photo-taking studio in Hong Kong after the WWII, are available in its oral history archives. Last but not least, some other secondary sources from the library and internet will be utilized to further substantiate and illustrate our findings.

In short, the traditional photo-taking industry holds a unique place in Hong Kong, as it literally documented the lives of Hong Kong people throughout the 20th century. The types and contents of photos indicated the rise and fall of the industry, clearly reflecting the shift in cultural context coupled with the economic transformation of the city. From the traditional conservative Chinese belief of an industrial city to liberal Western values in an advanced service-based economy, the essence of Hong Kong history and the life of Hong Kong people could be observed through the lens of film cameras.

As only a few traditional photo-taking studios remain in present time, chances for first-hand interviews are limited, thus there may not be a full representation of the industry as a whole. The social-economic implications behind features of the photo-taking industry were mainly based on interviews, articles, reference books and logical deductions with regards to the situation of Hong Kong at the time. Thus, they may be influenced by subjective opinions.

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I. Introduction

An industry rises and falls as a result of economic transformation or changes in cultural trends in relation to the socio-economic developments of a community. Consequently, a lot can be observed from changes in a specific traditional industry, and documenting its advancement over the years can often carry deeper implications.

Throughout the 20th century, photo-taking, especially family portraits, in traditional studios had become more popular in both Western and Chinese societies, especially among the locals in Hong Kong since family life played a prominent role in their traditional values. Close-knit families in Hong Kong would travel together to photo-taking studios to record the moment of union and deep-rooted familial bonds. In fact, back to the late 19th century, these studios had not been as paramount in importance, as salons only served the British colonial rulers and Chinese leaders and social elites exclusively. Yet starting from the mid-20th century, photo-taking studios skyrocketed in popularity, and reached its golden era from the 1960s to 1980s, with its gradual decline in the 1990s. While a full family photo was still considered a luxury, it was treated as a staple of people's lives, with people lining up outside to take a photo before the Chinese New Year holidays.

This research aims to look into the rise and fall of photo-taking industry in Hong Kong in the second half of the 20th century and to critically analyse the reasons behind the transformation, demonstrating the changes in Hong Kong's people's livelihood. Thus, this investigation will cover two main focuses: the ups and downs of the industry and the people's lifestyle as reflected.

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II. The Blossoming of the photo-taking industry in the 50s & 60s

The 50s and 60s featured the rise of the photo-taking industry due to the need for practical uses. These studios were solely for photo-taking and used basic equipment like film cameras, light bulbs for indoor lighting and simple backgrounds for photos. Often located in the upper floors of traditional tenement buildings, studios were especially concentrated in industrial areas like Ngau Tau Kok, Aberdeen, etc.¹ After the Second World War, there was a post-war baby boom, where children aged 0-4 accounted for 40.5% of the population in 1961.² Hence, there was a rising demand for baby photos, and subsequently identification document photos as well. At the same time, the rapidly growing population also fueled the need to take photos in studios for government demographic and hospital recording purposes. As photos in the 50s and 60s were practical in nature, they featured minimal accessories, with customers usually just wearing their daily simplistic clothing and standing in front of a plain background. This is a stark contrast from the stringent aesthetic demands of customers later in the century.

The most prominent types of photos taken in studios include baby photos, ID card photos, family photos, wedding photos and business photos. Each of these is underpinned by the socio-economic traditions of Hong Kongers in that period, and can tell us a lot about both their belief and perceptions.

Common characteristics in photos³

A distinct feature that could be found in photos during this period was that people tended to have a straight face. This was mainly due to the limitations of the photographic films. According to our interview with Mr Joel Chung of 銀の照相院, in the early days, the exposure time for these films would take up to 15 minutes; since it would be impossible for customers to keep their smile for such a long time, photographers would usually ask customers to be expressionless. On the other hand, developing films required much effort, cost and time⁴ while only limited editing could be done on the photos;⁵ hence, photographers must ensure everything should be in their positions to avoid waste of films. When these photographic films would easily become blurry once a single movement was captured on camera, photographers would choose to fix everyone's postures and

¹ 梁佩芬. "舊時話：影樓舊話." *蘋果日報-副刊-果籽*. 19 November. 2009

<https://hk.lifestyle.appledaily.com/lifestyle/culture/daily/article/20091119/13434275>. Accessed 25 March 2019

² Developments in demographic trends of Hong Kong and their implications for public policies, Prof Frederick W Ho, 28 April 2017.

https://www.censtatd.gov.hk/FileManager/50th_seminar/Prof%20Frederick%20HO%20Wing%20Huen.pdf Accessed 15 May 2019.

³ 鐘燕齊. *物語：相片考-影樓篇 (一)*. 三聯書店(香港)有限公司, 2015. p.86

⁴ 馬珮嵐. "藍曬達人重現舊曬相工藝." *東方日報*, 24 October 2018,

https://orientaldaily.on.cc/cnt/lifestyle/20181024/mobile/odn-20181024-1024_00298_001.html. Accessed 20 April 2019

⁵ Louis. "舊式影樓菲林情." *Kidults*, <http://kidults.com.hk/culture/152-4-2/>. Accessed 20 April 2019.

tell customers not to move and only stare straight. This demonstrates how the technology of photography was yet to be developed and that much adaptation must be made to fit the limited techniques.

As stated by Mr Chung, another reason why people did not smile in photos was due to their poor oral hygiene, in which people often had yellowed and missing teeth. This showed how the majority of locals failed to afford quality dental care during the 50s-60s, and led relatively frugal lives.

Western influence also played an important role. In the 17th century, there was belief in Europe that only lower class people would smile or laugh. Hence, those who could afford to take portraits, such as the rich or the royals, would only put on a serious face when doing so. As Hong Kong was governed by the British since the early 19th century, the culture of having a deadpan expression when taking photos was also brought to Hong Kong.

Baby Photos

In those days, once a male was born in the family, the first thing a lot of families did was to bring them to a traditional studio for their first baby photo.⁶ The motive behind this was to document this moment of pride and honour - to the traditional Chinese, a male infant brought prosperity, and was a feat worth showing off to neighbours. Even if the household did not have favourable financial conditions, a photo for the baby boy was still considered an indispensable part of their tradition. Families even went out of their way to highlight the gender of the baby in photos - the baby boy was stripped naked, and placed on a "tai hong" chair (a product of space race in the 50-60s) so as to make their male genitals more apparent in the photo.

Sadly, the same could not be said for female newborns, who were not even given the opportunity to take a baby photo in a studio. This highlights the traditional Chinese patriarchal society in Hong Kong which adheres to beliefs of gender inequality.⁷ This widely proliferated view is well-justified by the economic conditions in Hong Kong by the 60s. The city was in the phase of rapid industrialization with emphasis on light industry like the plastic industry. As males made up a larger part of the labour force at that time, male newborns were considered a status of power and prosperity. This could be proved as in 1966, a total of 975360 male were economically active,

⁶ "【母親節好去處】舊式菲林照相館 一張全家福留下三代人的動人時光." *Sunday Kiss*, 9 May 2018, <https://www.sundaykiss.com/298517/uncategorized/%E6%AF%8D%E8%A6%AA%E7%AF%80-%E7%85%A7%E7%9B%B8%E9%A4%A8-%E5%85%A8%E5%AE%B6%E7%A6%8F/6/>

⁷ 陳盈瀛, 黃正軒 and 王嘉政. "【全家福看舊時】社會變遷的「旁觀者」 隱藏在老照片的倫理觀念." *香港01- 藝文*, 23 February 2017, <https://www.hk01.com/%E8%97%9D%E6%96%87/34566/%E5%85%A8%E5%AE%B6%E7%A6%8F%E7%9C%8B%E8%88%8A%E6%99%82-%E7%A4%BE%E6%9C%83%E8%AE%8A%E9%81%B7%E7%9A%84-%E6%97%81%E8%A7%80%E8%80%85-%E9%9A%B1%E8%97%8F%E5%9C%A8%E8%80%81%E7%85%A7%E7%89%87%E7%9A%84%E5%80%AB%E7%90%86%E8%A7%80%E5%BF%B5>.

accumulating almost 70% of the total employed population.⁸ They were most engaged in the rapidly rising electronics industry, plastic industry, textile industry and clothing industry.⁹

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ID Photos

Due to the Chinese Civil War (1946-49), there was an influx of immigrants from China to Hong Kong as they sought for peace and stability, causing a huge population surge. Hong Kong's population had seen a 5-fold increase during the post-war period, from 600,000 in 1945 to 3,720,000 in 1967. This was enabled by the lack of border control in Hong Kong until June 1951, hence prompting the need for immigrants to obtain photos for ID card application. As photo-taking studios were the only place for citizens to take pictures,¹⁰ ID card photos took up a large part of their business.

The photos featured a plain background with an often expressionless subject, reflecting how the emphasis of photos were on practicality, but not on its style. As mentioned by Mr Chung, immigrants were desperate to get their photos taken so they could obtain an ID card as soon as possible, showing their bid to establish their sense of identity as Hong Kong people and to assimilate into local society. Having endured and overcome a gruelling journey to Hong Kong, immigrants were proud of obtaining their Hong Kong ID card. As the population of Hong Kong continued to increase exponentially in the 60s, with almost half of the population comprising immigrants,¹¹ the demand for ID card photos remained high and was still one of the main sources of profits for photo-taking studios.

⁸ "Hong Kong Statistics (1947-1967)." *Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong*, 1969, https://www.statistics.gov.hk/pub/hist/1961_1970/B10100031967AN67E0100.pdf. Accessed 28 April 2019

⁹ "Industrialization in Post War Hong Kong", *Hong Kong Memory* https://www.hkmemory.hk/collections/postwar_industries/industrialization_in_postwar_hong_kong/index.html#&panel1-8

¹⁰ Liang, Binghua. *Legends of the Central & Western District Hong Kong (Revised Edition)*. Hong Kong (China): Central & Western District Council, 2005. p.93

¹¹ *Hong Kong Statistics (1947-1967)*. Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong, 1969, https://www.statistics.gov.hk/pub/hist/1961_1970/B10100031967AN67E0100.pdf. Accessed 28 April 2019

Family Photos

In the 50s and 60s, one of the most important traditions for Hong Kong families was taking family photos in photo-taking studios. Given that most border-crossing attempts from Shenzhen to Hong Kong were thwarted by Mainland police, immigrant families would take photos to send back to the Mainland as a reassurance of peace. As reasoned by Mr Chung in the interview, since many of their families were torn apart by the Chinese Civil War and the ensuing social and political instability, family reunions were few and far between, so any time a family got together was an occasion for family photos, which acted not only as a physical documentation, but also as a mental reassurance that the family was united.

For local families, most family photos were taken annually during Chinese New Year, the peak season for photo-taking studios. During Chinese New Year, hordes of families would line up for their annual family photos, with the queue often ending up on the streets.¹² There was a saying that “photo-taking studios are more profitable than banks”,¹³ since the queues were even longer than that of banks and the constant exchange of cash in studios made its business extremely prosperous.

There were several features of family photos that reflected the traditional beliefs and lifestyle of Hong Kong people. Families were arranged in the photos according to their status, typically with

the seniors sitting in the front and the centre, while younger members would be standing behind them and children would be sitting on the floor. Since most families only had photos taken once a year, it was considered an extremely important and solemn affair, so people tended to look serious and expressionless. This demonstrates the spirit of family and the respect of seniority, both of which are the traditional Chinese values.

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The photo on the left is typical family photo taken during Chinese New Year in 1956,¹⁴ in which the whole family was gathered and dressed up for the solemn and

important occasion. This shows the importance of annual family photos in Chinese culture as they recorded the moment of union and deep-rooted familial bonds.

Moreover, the 50s represented the start of the first generation of public housings. The escalating number of immigrants crossing the Hong Kong border marked the emergence of illegal squatter

¹² 香港文匯報專題組. “影樓「活化石」 靚相靠通氣.” *文匯報*, 10 Dec. 2018.

<http://paper.wenweipo.com/2018/10/12/HK1810120040.htm>. Accessed 23 April 2019

¹³ 莫家文. “【港故事】收藏家拯救回憶 六十年代影樓重生.” *蘋果日報*, 21 Sept 2018

<https://hk.news.appledaily.com/breaking/realtime/article/20180921/58710185>. Accessed 23 April 2019

¹⁴ “原來全家福還可以這樣拍？過年一定要試試” *每日頭條*, Jan 2017. <https://kknews.cc/zh-hk/news/y8qlk6g.html> Accessed 15 May 2019.

areas.¹⁵ And after the Shek Kip Mei squatter fire in 1953 that destroyed the homes of 53000 people, the government found the urgent need to build a huge number of low-cost resettlement buildings to accommodate the large population.¹⁶ Some examples were the North Point Estate (1957) that housed around 6250 people,¹⁷ and the Choi Hung Estate (1964) which had 7455 flats, becoming the largest estate at that time.¹⁸ By the 60s, these buildings already accommodated one-third of Hong Kong's population.¹⁹ According to the interview with Uncle Chan from 美姿華攝影室, the rise of resettlement estates fueled the demand for family photos as they were required by the authority when moving in for head-counting purposes. Therefore it became an extremely common scenario to see extended families lining up outside the photo-taking studios, waiting for their family photos to be taken before they could earn themselves a space in the multi-storey residential buildings.

Since industrialization was in full swing by the 1960s, the workers who worked hard in light industries often saved up their money for buying new clothes and accessories and used family photos as an opportunity to show off their new accessories as a sign of wealth. This reflected the hardworking nature of locals, and their materialistic way of spending. As for the poorer families that sometimes could not even afford proper, decent clothing, and even showed up to studios barefoot, they had to rely on studios for costumes. The fact that they were willing to spend a significant amount on renting costumes for a family photo once again reinforces the importance of the family photo in among the local Chinese.

Business Photos

One of the less practical purposes of studios was to take business photos for wealthy merchants at that time. When studios first rose in popularity, many taipans (i.e. western expatriates) visited them to take formal portraits. The portraits would later be hung on the walls of their offices, and therefore held great importance as a symbol of status. Due to the formal nature of such portraits, the businessmen would wear full tuxedo attire, and refrain from smiling so as to show professionalism.

¹⁵ 周子峰. 圖解香港史 (一九四九年至二零一二年). 中華書局 (香港) 有限公司, 2012. p. 16

¹⁶ Memories of Home- 50 Years of Public Housing in Hong Kong Exhibition. *Hong Kong Housing Authority*, <https://www.housingauthority.gov.hk/en/aboutus/events/50yrsexhibition/highlights.html>. Accessed 1 May 2019

¹⁷ LegCo Panel on Housing Meeting on 3 April 2000- Redevelopment of North Point Estate. Housing Authority, 2000. <https://www.legco.gov.hk/yr99-00/english/panels/hg/papers/a1263e07.pdf>. Accessed 29 April 2019.

¹⁸ 建設及建築物 - 屋宇建設委員會屋村. 香港地方. <http://www.hk-place.com/view.php?id=202>. Accessed 11 May 2019

¹⁹ Wordie, Jason. "Boundary Street - Tai Hang Tung Recreation Ground" in *Streets: Exploring Kowloon*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007 p.131 *Google Books*, https://books.google.com.hk/books?id=AyfPeYnp3oC&pg=PA131&lpg=PA131&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false

The founder of 銀の照相院, Mr. Joel Chung, suggested that rich men's practices might be a reason why families in typical family photos usually did not have a smile on their faces. Seeing the expressionless portraits of tycoons, they too followed suit. This shows the commoners' instincts in imitating foreigners with high social status, their admiration of the West, as well as the Western-dominated atmosphere in society at that time.

At the initial set-up of photo-taking industries, portraits were primarily exclusive to taipans, which showed the power-relations in Hong Kong of the 50s and 60s, and the discrepancy in both status and wealth between the Westerners and local Chinese. However, moving on to the late 60s, photo-taking in studios became more accessible to the general public, mostly due to the economic take-off as well as the rising consumption capacity and living standards of the people. Due to the surge in manufacturing capabilities aided by the Chinese immigrants,²⁰ Hong Kong's GDP had reached 1.321 billion USD.²¹ This marked the integration of photo-taking studios into the customs of commoners.

Wedding Photos

During this period of time, love was viewed as serious and rigid by the society. This may be largely due to the fact that arranged marriages was the main approach to romance in those days, and love was based on a mutual need for starting a family for proliferation of offspring. As a result, couples were more conservative when taking couple photos. The holding of hands was viewed as the most amount of affection couples could show. Furthermore, the male must stand at the left of the photo while the female at the right, which demonstrates the strict adherence to traditional Chinese beliefs.

Conclusion

The 50s and 60s signified the the blossom of traditional photo-taking studios mainly due to the post-war baby boom, influx of immigrants from China and the establishment of public housing.

III. Taking-off of the photo-taking industry in the 70s & 80s

The 70s to 80s featured a continuation in the rise of photo-taking industries, up till the late 80s when signs of decline for the industry started to emerge. During this time, Hong Kong's light industries were at its peak, in which industries, such as toys, plastics, watches and clothing, prospered. As a result, general living standard and quality of life of locals increased, which allowed them to increase their spending of materialistic items e.g photos in photo-taking studios.

²⁰ Dragages Hong Kong http://www.dragageshk.com/pdf/dragages_history_1960s.pdf

²¹ The World Bank <https://data.worldbank.org/country/hong-kong-sar-china?view=chart>

ID Photos

Due to the Touch Base Policy implemented in 1974, there was an increasing need for the government to carry out identity verification. The government allowed illegal immigrants from the mainland to stay in Hong Kong as long as they reached urban areas and met their local relatives, while those at the border would be repatriated back to the mainland immediately.²² However, the policy failed to halt the influx of immigrants but encouraged the reunion of many cross-border families, so the demand for ID card photos remained high, contributing to the stable source of income for many photo-taking studios.

Family Photos

Due to such policy, many families were able to be reunited. A reunion after being physically separated for months and even years always encouraged these families to take family photos in photo-taking studios formally.

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For example, this photo which belongs to one of our group members' family was taken in the 70s in a photo-taking studio for public housing application. The photo was then hung in the living room of the flat to prove that the number of family members were the same with the one stated in the application form.

Moreover, by the mid-1970s, the government was able to provide homes for 234059 households and over one million people.²³ With the Ten-Year Housing Programme proposed by the Governor Murray MacLehose in 1973, the official public housing was established.²⁴ The grassroots competed to apply for the limited housing available in order to improve their living condition. Since a family photo must be submitted along with the public housing application as the government would only recognize the faces present in the photo. This incentivised people to head to studios to obtain their family photo as soon as possible.²⁵

²² Kammerer, Peter. "Understanding of history must teach Hongkongers – and mainlanders – the need for tolerance." *South China Morning Post- Opinion*, 23 November 2015.

<https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1881960/understanding-history-must-teach-hongkongers-and-mainlanders>. Accessed 11 May 2019

²³ 周子峰. *圖解香港史 (一九四九年至二零一二年)*. 中華書局 (香港) 有限公司, 2012. p.16

²⁴ "Public Housing Development." *The Hong Kong Housing Authority*, <https://www.housingauthority.gov.hk/en/about-us/public-housing-heritage/public-housing-development/index.html>. Accessed 28 April 2019

²⁵ 梁佩芬. "舊時話：影樓舊話." *蘋果日報-副刊-果籽*. 19 November 2009

<https://hk.lifestyle.appledaily.com/lifestyle/culture/daily/article/20091119/13434275>. Accessed 25 March 2019

Furthermore, starting from the 70s, more students would leave Hong Kong and pursue their studies in foreign countries such as the UK, USA, Canada and Australia.²⁶ As universities in these countries were more internationally-recognised, more households would choose to send their children away to ensure that they can stand out among their peers once they step foot in the society. With Hong Kong experiencing an economic take-off in the 1970s, as the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) reached a record-high year-on-year increase of more than 15%,²⁷ more people could then afford the sum of money needed.

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For example, this family portrait of one of our team members' family was taken during the mid-1970s in a studio in Ngau Tau Kok. The well-dressed family was there to record this precious moment before one of the family members leaving to study overseas and another one getting married. As seen in the photo, the oldest among the family, had earned a seat in the middle, with the eldest two sons standing right behind in the second row. It was also said that the family had prepared new clothes for this occasion.

The Confidence Crisis in the 80s evolved from the 1997 issue further drove the demand higher for family photos. After signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984, it was presented to Hong Kong people that they would soon lose the British citizenship they had treasured for years. They had a pessimistic attitude towards the future of Hong Kong, especially after the June Fourth Incident in 1989, as well as the negative impacts a controlled economy would have on the city's diversified economy. As a result, many people, especially the young talents and professionals,²⁸ left Hong Kong in search of a more stable political and economic environment. In 1980, it was recorded that there were 22,400 people leaving Hong Kong for residence overseas. By 1987, the number of emigrants had experienced a 25% increase to 30,000.²⁹ As people left the city, it was important for them to capture the last moments with their beloved family members since they did not know when they would return. The family photos, subsequently, acted as a tie between the

²⁶ 胡少偉. "香港的跨境教育與學生流動." *香港教師中心學報* 第十四卷, 2015, p.108.

<https://www.edb.org.hk/HKTC/download/journal/j14/B02.pdf>. Accessed 1 May 2019.

²⁷ "Economic Development of Hong Kong over the Past 40 Years." *General Statistics Branch(2) of the Census and Statistics Department*,

https://www.censtatd.gov.hk/FileManager/EN/Content_1064/A2_E.pdf. Accessed 11 May 2019

²⁸ Leung, Rachel and David Vetter. "Hong Kong youth leave the city in search of a better life." *Inkstone: Translation China- Society*, 20 August 2018 <https://www.inkstonenews.com/society/search-better-life-hong-kong-millennials-want-leave-city/article/2160516>

²⁹ Wong, Siu-Lun. "Emigration and Stability in Hong Kong." *Occasional Research Paper 7*, Social Sciences Research Centre, 1992. p.3 <https://hub.hku.hk/bitstream/10722/42565/1/07.pdf?accept=1>

emigrated family members and those staying in Hong Kong so that they could always feel each others' presence even when alone in a foreign country.³⁰

As the studios were still the only places equipped with adequate gear for taking relatively large-scale photos, coupled with rental costumes and proper backgrounds, family photos continued to make up a large part of their profits and remain high demand, according to Mr Chung.

Wedding photos

As people's living standard started to rise in the 70s, more and more locals could afford taking wedding photos with increasing quality and variety. Given that weddings are typically once in a lifetime, people were willing to splurge and spent significant amount of money on getting their wedding photos done, they were the most profitable for photo-taking studios in this phase.

According to Mr. Ho, a seasoned photographer from 長虹攝影, he typically received 80 orders for wedding photos per month in the 70s.³¹ With each photo package ranging from 12 to 36 photos, the final price including photo selection and editing totaled at HK\$1400-2000, or even more. Since the average daily wage of an industrial worker e.g. cotton spinning, plastic flower ranged from HK \$11.88- 19.30,³² their monthly wage would be around HK\$300-480. Hence, it is evident that an average local worker would need to use a few months worth of savings to afford wedding photos, a very high cost to impart. It reflects that these photos were very much a luxury.

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In this stage, Hong Kong people were having increasingly materialistic lifestyles as they could spend more. Large-scale and well-known studios often sent advertising leaflets to housing estates by post to increase clientele, combined with luxurious and refined photo packages offered, showed how the 70s was the peak of wedding photo-taking in studios.

Furthermore, customers started to become more demanding in terms of variety of costumes, props and backgrounds. This can partly be attributed to the increasing influence of western culture

³⁰ 陳盈瀛, 黃正軒 and 王嘉政. “【全家福看舊時】社會變遷的「旁觀者」 隱藏在老照片的倫理觀念.” 香港01- 藝文, 23 February 2017,

<https://www.hk01.com/%E8%97%9D%E6%96%87/34566/%E5%85%A8%E5%AE%B6%E7%A6%8F%E7%9C%8B%E8%88%8A%E6%99%82-%E7%A4%BE%E6%9C%83%E8%AE%8A%E9%81%B7%E7%9A%84-%E6%97%81%E8%A7%80%E8%80%85-%E9%9A%B1%E8%97%8F%E5%9C%A8%E8%80%81%E7%85%A7%E7%89%87%E7%9A%84%E5%80%AB%E7%90%86%E8%A7%80%E5%BF%B5>. Accessed 13 May 2019.

³¹ 婚照留情：歲月無聲 婚照有情 照相館的幸福剪影 蘋果日報, 15 February 2014

<https://hk.lifestyle.appledaily.com/lifestyle/special/daily/article/20140215/18625750>

³² *Wage Statistics March 1974: Employment Statistics Section* Census and Statistics Department Hong Kong. p.19 https://www.statistics.gov.hk/pub/hist/1971_1980/B10500091974HY01E0100.pdf Accessed 14 May 2019.

in Hong Kong, which is often mixed with local Chinese culture when taking photos. It is mainly demonstrated through the outfits of the couples. For instance, the couple in the above photo taken from the Apple Daily are dressed in western outfits, with the bride in a western-style bridal dress, headpiece and veil, while the groom is suited in a tuxedo and bow tie. This reflects the influx of western influence in terms of fashion, showing locals' growing acceptance of foreign cultures.

Each photo-taking session usually lasted for half an hour, with the couple in conservative poses like the groom standing behind a bride on a chair, and holding hands were already considered outlandish, reflecting the conservative nature of society.

Photos for blind dating

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The 70s and 80s saw the rise of the trend of taking photos for blind dating, showing a more autonomous and liberal approach to love. It also reflects the gradual blending of Chinese and Western culture in Hong Kong society.

As opposed to just wearing daily wear to the studios like in the 50s and 60s, customers started to put on more elaborate costumes. Men usually wore khakis, suits or tuxedos as they reflected a high education level and were associated with lucrative jobs in the financial sector. Essentially, westernized attire was a symbol of high income and power. On the other hand, women opted for traditional cheongsam as it was believed to be the most flattering attire for them to show off their beauty and physique.³³ Therefore, Hong Kong in the 70s and 80s was a mixture of a highly Westernized lifestyle and a more traditional Chinese one.

³³ "【母親節好去處】舊式菲林照相館 一張全家福留下三代人的動人時光." *Sunday Kiss*, 9 May 2018
<https://www.sundaykiss.com/298517/uncategorized/%E6%AF%8D%E8%A6%AA%E7%AF%80-%E7%85%A7%E7%9B%B8%E9%A4%A8-%E5%85%A8%E5%AE%B6%E7%A6%8F> Accessed 10 May 2019

Student photos

In the 70s and 80s, student photos became one of the most popular categories in these traditional photo-taking studios. Half a dozen of such photos would cost \$1.2-\$1.5, which was relatively cheap during the days. The low prices of student photos proved that this particular service should be available to students from all backgrounds, even for the grassroots. Studios would still be packed with students, especially during the preschool seasons in August or early September, as these photos were a mandatory part of their school lives.³⁴

Since photos must be submitted along with primary and secondary school application forms to verify the identity of students, the increasing number of students was what pushed up the demand for student photos. This was largely contributed by the provision of free education. The Fisher Report released 1951 suggested the implementation of a 6-year free education system as well as the establishment of public schools;³⁵ but it was not until the 1970s that the above plans were put into action. In 1971, free primary education was available to all students studying in government-subsidised schools; by 1978, students could also enjoy 3 years of free junior secondary school education.³⁶ When knowledge was no longer limited to the rich, parents, even the underprivileged ones, would undoubtedly send their children to schools, hoping that the education received would be able to guarantee their children bright futures ahead.

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As seen in this photo on the left,³⁷ a plain background with simple outfits or uniforms was the main feature of students' portraits, signifying the practicality in these photos.

The 80s also witnessed an improvement in gender equality, judging by the increase in number of female student photos. As aforementioned, baby girls would not have the chance to go to photo studios to take pictures, unlike baby boys. This is because a lot of grass-root families were only willing to pay for the boys' school fees

³⁴ “那動人時光 半世紀影樓留住光影人情。” *香港經濟日報*, 13 November 2015

<https://topick.hket.com/article/962442/%E9%82%A3%E5%8B%95%E4%BA%BA%E6%99%82%E5%85%89%20%20%20%20%E5%8D%8A%E4%B8%96%E7%B4%80%E5%BD%B1%E6%A8%93%E7%95%99%E4%BD%8F%E5%85%89%E5%BD%B1%E4%BA%BA%E6%83%85>. Accessed 2 May 2019.

³⁵ 周子峰. *圖解香港史 (一九四九年至二零一二年)*. 中華書局 (香港) 有限公司, 2012. p.18

³⁶ *The Hong Kong Education System*. Government Secretariat Hong Kong. June 1981. p.15
https://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/en/about-edb/publications-stat/major-reports/edsys_e.pdf. Accessed 3 May 2019

³⁷ 油蔴地文化藝遊 <http://www.huluhk.org/ymt/detail.php?lang=&fd=shop&d=e&i=0> Accessed 10 May 2019.

while girls would have to work in factories starting at a young age.³⁸ However, by the late 1970s, girls could also benefit from the 9-year free education and go to school at their own will. In 1976, 31.6% of women had not received any education; yet by 1986, the number had dropped to less than 20%.³⁹ This was a solid proof that families were willing to put more resources on girls and cultivate their potentials in learning. The status of women in the society was starting to rise. When more girls had an opportunity to go to school, more female students visited the photo-taking studios, further adding to the high demand for student photos.

Decline of traditional photo-taking studios

However, the late 80s saw a decrease in competitiveness of the photo-taking studio industry. People started having more access to equipment for photo-taking, including films and portable cameras. Thus, there was no necessity for a photo to be taken at a studio. At the same time, the rise of industries like wedding photo-taking shops undermined the importance of studios. Those specialized shops offered makeup and outfit fitting services in the form of a one-stop shop, which was viewed as more convenient and appealing than regular photo-taking studios by the general public. Hence, while studios still held social significance, the dawn of the 80s foreshadowed the decline of the industry in the 90s.

IV. The Dawn of the photo-taking industry in the 90s

The 90s witnessed a significant decline in traditional studios as Hong Kong transformed into a more diverse economy. The city enjoyed the most economically prosperous era in the 90s, referred to as the days of 'mixing shark fin with rice', which is meant to display the extravagant luxury that many Hong Kong citizens enjoyed during the economic boom. While most of the light industry factories that flourished in the 60 and 70s had moved to the mainland after the Deng Xiaoping's Openness and Reform Policy, Hong Kong developed into a world renowned financial centre, acting as a super-connector between the western world and the mainland. It specialised in the service sector and attracted elites from all over the world. Consumerism was the obvious trend in the wealthy environment of Hong Kong. With the monthly disposable income of Hong Kong people higher than ever, they now consumed more luxury goods to improve their living standard. The increasing contact between Hong Kong and the advanced foreign countries resulted in the trend of digitalization in the late 90s. Different foreign companies invested in Hong Kong, bringing along their advanced technology, as it resulted in the emergence of much more popular high-tech products and services which almost eliminated traditional studios in the market, as illustrated by the following:

1. Competition from modern photo-taking companies

Technological advancement caused the emergence of high-tech photo taking services that was more preferred over traditional studios by the general public in the 90s. Fast-paced lifestyle, due

³⁸ 周子峰. *圖解香港史 (一九四九年至二零一二年)*. 中華書局 (香港) 有限公司, 2012. p.126

³⁹ *A Graphic Guide on Hong Kong's Development (1967-2007)*. Census and Statistics Department HKSAR, 2007. p.70 <https://www.statistics.gov.hk/pub/B1010005012008XXXXB1300.pdf>.

to economic prosperity in the 90s, led Hong Kong people to put more emphasis on convenience and speed when searching for photo-taking services. This directly stimulated the modern photo-taking companies to rise in popularity as they provided faster services with the use of advanced technology. For example, Fotomax, established in Hong Kong in 1982, pioneered the use of Fujifilm Digital Laser Printing technology to provide digital photo output services. Fotomax also provided a full range of Digital Imaging Services, Professional Imaging Services, Document Solution Services as well as the sales of other imaging related products.⁴⁰

Compared to traditional studios, modern studios like Fotomix provided a much wider range of services at a lower cost and fit the requirements and taste of the new generation of customers. As a matter of fact, traditional photo-taking studios were unable to compete with the emerging digital photo-taking chain stores like Fotomax, specifically in sectors like student photos and passport photos. While the demand for such photos was constantly huge, quality was almost a non-factor, as it would just be used for documental use. In addition, there was a limited skill level involved in photo-taking under such standardised and rigid format. This caused customers to shift from using traditional studios to using the services of digital chain photo-taking stores. Photos that used to be the main source of income of traditional studios were then taken by digital photo-taking companies.

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Figure: Modern Fotomax shop in Hong Kong⁴¹

2) Rising popularity and accessibility of portable film and digital cameras

The popularization of user-friendly portal film cameras, or later on, digital cameras, is another factor leading to the downfall of the traditional photo-taking studios in the city in the 90s. In the late 80s and early 90s, companies like Nikon, Sony etc, producers of cameras, established branches in department stores in Hong Kong. According to the Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong people averaged about 28000 Hong Kong Dollars for monthly domestic household

⁴⁰ About Fotomax. Fotomax <https://www.fotomax.com/AboutFotomax?SiteCulture=en-US>
Accessed 6 May 2019

⁴¹ Luk Yeung Galleria- Shopping. <https://www.lukyeunggalleria.com/eng/lyg/shopping/detail?id=142>
Accessed 9 May 2019.

income in the 90s.⁴² Meanwhile, portable cameras at that time only cost about 1000-2000 Hong Kong dollars on average.⁴³ This illustrates that portable cameras were easily affordable by Hong Kong people with their higher nominal income and purchasing power in the 90s. Cameras became consumer goods rather than capital goods, while, back then, they were definitely luxuries with relatively high prices. The fact that so many people got hold of such product demonstrates the high general living standard and accessibility of imported goods in the 90s. This phenomenon directly led to the decline of traditional studios, as their substitutes, portable cameras, became so popular and taking photos was no longer just confined to studios by the professional photographers. Hong Kong young people quickly bought into the idea of using advanced portable film cameras or even digital camera in the late 90s in photo-taking as they embraced the modern trend of digitalization and perceived using high-tech products as a fashionable trend. Digital cameras swept through the market, replacing traditional studios. The demand for services of traditional studios fell drastically which caused a recession in the industry.

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Digital cameras in the 90s from the brands of Nikon (left) and Sony (right)

3) Changing of socio-economic context

Towards the end of the 20th century, it had become less and less profitable to run traditional photo-taking studios due to a decrease in demand and increase in business costs like rent and wages. The custom and tradition of taking family photos, especially with the whole extended family, had been fading out simultaneously. Consequently, many studios were forced to close down. In the case of Uncle Chan, he had to dismiss his crew of photographers, leaving only himself to run the business. As he owns the flat of the studio, there is no rental cost for his business. Yet, he said that it is in fact more profitable to rent out the flat than for photo-taking businesses.

To the new generation, using film cameras in the setting of the traditional photo-taking studios was considered as a type of craftsmanship as the usage of film cameras requires specific professional skills. However, due to the busy lifestyle of Hong Kong people generated from the booming economy, they had little leisure time to learn how to use film cameras and develop films. This caused a lack of continuity of traditional studios as there are rarely any apprentices hoping to stay in studios to learn about traditional photography. According to Uncle Chan, owner of 美姿

⁴² *A Graphic Guide on Hong Kong's Development (1967-2007)* Chapter 3, Section 3.3 Monthly employment earnings of employed persons 3.4 Monthly domestic household income
<https://www.statistics.gov.hk/pub/B1010005012008XXXXB1300.pdf> Accessed 6 May 2019

⁴³ Expansy Hong Kong - Digital Cameras
<https://www.expansys.com.hk/action/cameras/digital-cameras/> Accessed 6 May 2019

華攝影室, the photo-taking industry had been commonly perceived as a 'sunset industry' in the 90s, pushing youngsters away from entering it. Without new blood, Uncle Chan feared that the precious skills and techniques involved in traditional photo-taking would be lost, and that the rich cultural heritage embedded in this traditional industry would also be gone forever. On the other hand, digital cameras are much easier to use and could be used without training. There are also lots of reference materials and books to let amateur photographers self-learn about photography in taking human portraits. Furthermore printing photos out is also regarded as relatively convenient and cheap compared to developing films. Moreover, quality of photos is very much guaranteed by the high-tech lenses of digital cameras. Therefore, Hong Kong people have regarded digital cameras as more consumer-friendly and preferred to use them instead, contributing to the downfall of the traditional photo-taking studios towards the end of the 20th century.

V. The Future - How could traditional photo-taking studios stay competitive?

In light of the immense competition that has arisen since the 90s, traditional photo-taking studios have to take on a different marketing approach and form of business to maintain relevance in an increasingly competitive market. The rendered traditional photo-taking methods stressing precision and aesthetics have become completely irrelevant due to the change in consumer mindset, explaining why the rougher but significantly more efficient chain photo-taking shops overtook traditional photo-taking studios in this regard.

With such a large part of their business being outcompeted, traditional photo-taking studios have to expand existing markets by renovating its business strategies. Subsequently, the only business left for them are family and wedding photos, which require less immediacy with more stress on quality. This incentivises even the most traditional photo-taking studios to innovate and adopt more advanced technology, and does not limit themselves to the use of film cameras. Arguably, it is the intense competition from the alternative photo-taking formats that drives the entire industry to modernise and improve for the sake of survival.

According to Uncle Chan, the competition sparked a huge change in terms of the selling method adopted by the owners of traditional studios. In the past, they used to take photos on demand, meaning that they would take the number of the set of photos that the clients demanded and were willing to pay for. This limited the business opportunities as transactions were limited to only the predetermined amount. To increase the total revenue of businesses, many studios nowadays start to adopt an approach of taking more sets of photos than the clients ask for. For instance, on top of the 2 sets of 12 photos requested, the photographer would take 6 sets of photos for the customers to choose. While the customers now enjoy the experience of selecting from multiple sets for the ones they find most satisfactory, they also have the additional options to purchase extra sets of photos. This seemingly insignificant change in business approach is what Uncle Chan described as the the best adaptation he has made, and the results are telling as it 'saved his business'.

However, it is also worth noting that since the end of the 90s, traditional photo-taking studios have started to be recognised as part of 'Old Hong Kong' and the collective memory of Hong Kongers. Enthusiasts begin to go to these photo-taking studios for photos, not for practical purposes, but purely out of nostalgia. This documents a rise of Hong Kong localism, in which the identity of Hong Konger is widely celebrated and recognised. The drastically increased attention to traditional photo-taking studios reflects exactly that, as this integral part of Hong Kong livelihood is commemorated, and efforts of preservation have been made.⁴⁴

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VI. Conclusion

The traditional photo-taking industry holds a unique place in Hong Kong, as it literally documented the lives of Hong Kong people throughout the 20th century. The types and contents of photos indicated the rise and fall of the industry, clearly reflecting the shift in cultural context coupled with the economic transformation of the city. From the traditional conservative Chinese belief of an industrial city to liberal Western values in an advanced service-based economy, the essence of Hong Kong history and the life of Hong Kong people could be observed through the lens of film cameras.

As only a few traditional photo-taking studios remain in present time, chances for first-hand interviews are limited, thus there may not be a full representation of the industry as a whole. The social-economic implications behind features of the photo-taking industry were mainly based on interviews, articles, reference books and logical deductions with regards to the situation of Hong Kong at the time. Thus, they may be influenced by subjective opinions.

⁴⁴ 復刻傳統影樓 Metropop 5 June 2018

<https://www.metropop.com.hk/%E5%BE%A9%E5%88%BB%E5%82%B3%E7%B5%B1%E5%BD%B1%E6%A8%93> Accessed 16 April 2019

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