

JOHN THOMSON'S HONG KONG

湯姆森鏡頭下的香港



PAST & PRESENT

今昔 交遞



Hong Kong almost 150 years apart – profoundly changed yet still recognizable

1868, and Hong Kong, then a British Crown Colony, is one of the fastest growing, albeit small, cities in Asia: the pre-eminent free port on the China Coast. A generation before it had been no more than a rugged island with some isolated fishing villages. By the late 1860s Hong Kong's population was approaching 150,000, including Western merchants, adventurers and officials; and an infinitely larger number of Chinese, some of them educated, the vast majority not. Kowloon had been added to the Colony by an imposed treaty with China in 1860.

By the late 1860s some 5,000 ships berthed in Hong Kong annually, all moored beneath the towering summit of Victoria Peak. Below its sheer slopes were gullies surrounded by bamboos, where streams plunged towards the harbour. Along the foreshore, and by 1868 reaching into the hills, Victorian buildings had sprung up. The praya, or foreshore road, was lined with classical facades: a grand City Hall, naval and military facilities, and trading firms. Higher up, in the 'mid-levels', stood government offices, churches and mansions. 'Central District' had tree-lined boulevards. Further to the east and west were the largely Chinese districts. Densely crowded, their shop-houses lined the foreshore and climbed the granite step-ways.

It was into this melting pot and port city, a world apart from his native Edinburgh, that John Thomson arrived in 1868. Later to be the most renowned Western photographer to capture Southeast Asia, China and Hong Kong in the mid to later nineteenth century, Thomson photographed Hong Kong's landscapes, buildings, harbour and people.

Born in Edinburgh in June 1837, after his schooling Thomson worked for an optical and scientific instrument maker. In 1858, he completed his apprenticeship, having mastered the principles of photography. Ambitious and enterprising, in April 1862, two months short of his twenty-fifth birthday, John Thomson sailed for Singapore.

The following decade saw Thomson crossing Southeast Asia and China, mainly along the coasts but also into the lesser-known interiors. Singapore, Malaya, Sumatra, Penang, Siam, Cambodia and Vietnam: all were given a visual identity through his images. After a year's sojourn in England from 1866 to 1867, when he sought to forge a reputation and courted his wife-to-be, the indefatigable photographer returned to Asia. In Hong Kong from 1868 to 1870, and later in China between 1870 and 1872, Thomson created a body of work unparalleled in the nineteenth century images of Asia.

Following his return to England in 1872, books of his Asia, especially his China, photos appeared over the subsequent decades. Each was a visual and publishing masterpiece. People, landscapes, buildings, artifacts and cultures were his forte.

The Wellcome Library, London, is today the repository of Thomson's work. Its archive holds his irreplaceable glass negatives, each of them taken under the laborious conditions of the photographic methods of the times. The Wellcome Library, collaborating with the curator Betty Yao, has shown Thomson's images internationally in recent years, including at a major exhibition at the Hong Kong Maritime Museum, and in a later show at the Foreign Correspondents Club. The book *China Through the Lens of John Thomson, 1868 – 1872*, by Betty Yao, presents Thomson's China and Hong Kong images.

Looking at John Thomson's superb, content-rich images at the Maritime Museum, and later at the FCC, brought to mind his laborious work – with his 'wooden box' camera, a shoulder-wearying tripod, and fragile glass negatives. How different to the ease of digital photography today! Yet nonetheless there were continuities. Images, after all, depend on the photographer's 'thinking eye' not on cameras: whether cumbersome or light, however rudimentary or high-tech. Moreover, despite Hong Kong's development, many of today's roads remain aligned with those of 1868. Might there be comparisons to record? And the territory's resplendent, always visible peaks meant locating many of Thomson's photo sites, employing back bearings, was possible. Surely an enticing photographic challenge! The images seen in this exhibition are the result.

Inevitably, however, Hong Kong's development since 1868, especially in recent decades, means that some Thomson vantage points can only be estimated, not precisely replicated – or approached, not completely reached. In some cases, walls of buildings obscure his vistas. In these cases the 2015 images reflect the original photo sites as closely as possible. Or, if the same panorama cannot be accurately shown, the 2015 images indicate a 'sense' of the area's continuities and contrasts. Maps and charts of the 1860s to 1880s helped in detailing each pair of images' relationships, which are broadly described in the captions. (The social content evident in the photos is mostly apparent. It is only noted occasionally, in passing, in the captions.)

The photographer who documented the 2015 photographs is most sincerely thanked for his persistence in seeking vantage points closest to John Thomson's; and for persevering to create such memorable images, despite very real difficulties with weather and light.

The Photographic Heritage Foundation, Asia Financial Holdings and Bernard Charnwut Chan hope that this exhibition will bring interest and pleasure.

香港近150年景物對比 — 城市面貌幾番新，昔日印象此中尋

1868年，英國殖民時期的香港，區區蕞爾之地卻是地位超然的中國沿岸自由港，發展步伐領先許多亞洲城市。短短數十年前，香港只是個崎嶇小島，漁村零星分佈。到了1860年代，香港人口已接近150,000，以此為家的包括西方商人、探險家和外國官員，當然還有不斷擴大的華人社群。其時香港華人只有少數受過教育，大多數也目不識丁。1860年，清廷被迫簽訂加條約割讓九龍半島，納為殖民地一部份。

1860年代後期，每年約有5,000艘船訪港，全部停泊在巍峨山頂下的海港。太平山的陡坡翠竹叢生，山溪穿插其間，從高處蜿蜒流進海港。1868年，維港前灘已建有不少維多利亞風格的大樓，市區一直伸展到山腳。又稱前濱馬路的中環海傍沿岸建有一排古典風格建築物，包括外型宏偉的大會堂、海軍及軍事設施和洋行。後方山坡上的「半山區」是政府辦事處、教堂和豪華大宅所在地，「中環」有多條林蔭大道，東西兩端則多為華人社區，這些地區人口稠密，前濱唐樓林立，行人上落落花崗岩石階。

1868年，在愛丁堡土生土長的湯姆森來到這個華洋雜處的港口城市，其後憑著一系列東南亞、中國和香港風景作品成為十九世紀中至後期最著名的西方攝影師。湯姆森用鏡頭記錄香港的風貌，包括自然風景、建築物、海港及人物。

湯姆森於1837年6月在愛丁堡出生，畢業後於一間光學及科學儀器廠任職，1858年完成學徒訓練，掌握了基本的攝影技巧。他雄心勃勃，也極富開拓精神。1862年4月，就在他二十五歲生日前兩個月，湯姆森遠渡重洋到了新加坡。

其後十年，他周遊東南亞及中國各地，除了遊歷沿海地區，偶爾也深入較少外國人踏足的內陸腹地。他的作品為新加坡、馬來亞、蘇門答臘、檳城、暹羅、柬埔寨和越南確立了視覺形象。1866至1867年，湯姆森在英國短居了一年，這位孜孜不倦的攝影師邂逅了未來太太，一心要闖出名堂，於是決定返回亞洲。他在1868至1870年旅居香港，其後於1870至1872年轉到中國內地，多年來拍攝了大量作品。湯姆森亞洲影集之豐富多采，十九世紀其他攝影師的作品實難以企及。

1872年他回到英國，其後數十年有多本以亞洲相片作主題的影集面世，其中中國相片最為人所熟悉。湯姆森每本影集都是出類拔萃的攝影專集及刊物，這位攝影師最擅長寫照人物、風景、建築物、文物和文化特色。

湯姆森的攝影作品現為倫敦維康圖書館(Wellcome Library)的珍貴館藏，該館並收藏他的玻璃底片。那年代的攝影過程艱辛費時，湯姆森每張作品都是無可替代的傾力之作。維康圖書館近年與策展人姚詠蓓合作策辦多次湯姆森攝影展，當中包括在香港海事博物館舉行大型展覽，以及其後在外國記者會展出他的作品。姚詠蓓的著作《晚清碎影：湯姆森眼中的香港與華南(1868-1872)》，收錄了湯姆森的中國和香港作品。

參觀過海事博物館的湯姆森攝影展和其後於外國記者會舉行的展覽後，深深感受到拍攝過程的考驗與辛勞：木盒式相機、重得令肩膀酸痛之三腳架，還有易碎的玻璃底片。相比之下，今天的數碼攝影技術真的簡便無比。然而，有些事情卻始終如一。說到底，一幅影像孰好孰壞，關鍵不在於相機，而是別具心思的「攝影師之眼」。不管攝影器材笨重或輕巧，功能簡單或高科技，這些都是次要。再者，香港這些年來雖然不斷發展，但大部份道路仍保持1868年的走線，所以不少地方可作記錄和對比。香港擁許多秀麗峻峰，這些天然景致可作為反向方位，讓我們確定湯姆森多張作品的地點，享受克服這項攝影挑戰的樂趣！是次展出的作品就是美滿成果。

1868畢竟是個久遠年代，香港經歷了逾世紀的變化，近數十年發展更是一日千里。由於湯姆森當時身處的瞭望點只能推算，拍攝現今對比相片時可能難以找到準確位置，有時亦會因為前路受阻而無法到達。2015年拍攝某些相片時，湯姆森相片中的景觀已被建築物的牆壁遮擋，在此情況下，攝影師只可盡量在最接近原拍攝位置的地方取景，又或如不能準確顯示同一全景，則會以「感覺」表述這些地方的常態與變化。1860年代至1880年代的地圖是好幫手，有助我們深入剖析兩張對比相片的關係，在相片說明中概述。(大部份相片的社會背景都很明確，相片說明只是偶爾順帶一提。)

謹在此向2015年相片的攝影師致以至誠謝意。他縝而不捨地尋覓最接近湯姆森原作的拍攝據點，風裡來雨裡去，跟時間與光線競賽，以最大的毅力創造這輯令人難忘的攝影作品。

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