

**Military Strike:
Fear and Loathing
In Burma**



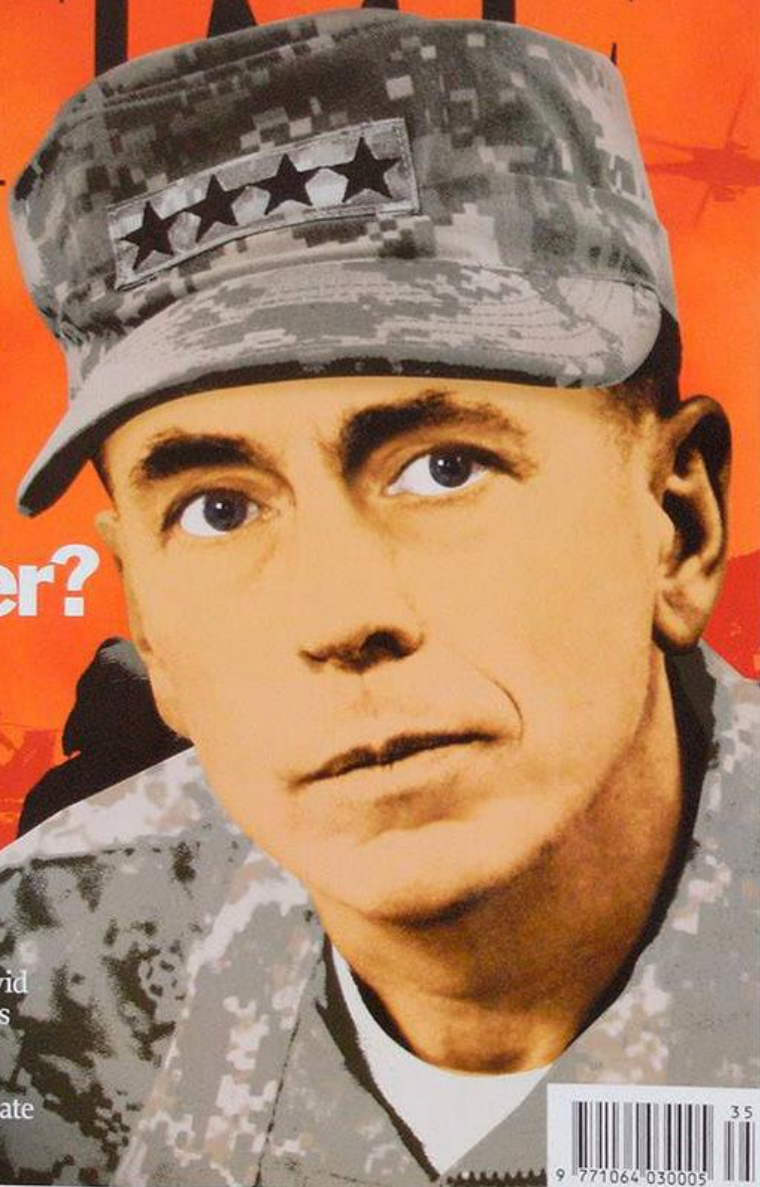
**Boeing's
Bold New
Flight
Plan**

**Shooting Star:
Hong Kong's
Forgotten Master
Of Photography**



TIME

**How
Much
Longer?**



As U.S. General David Petraeus delivers his progress report on Iraq, here's how to understand the debate

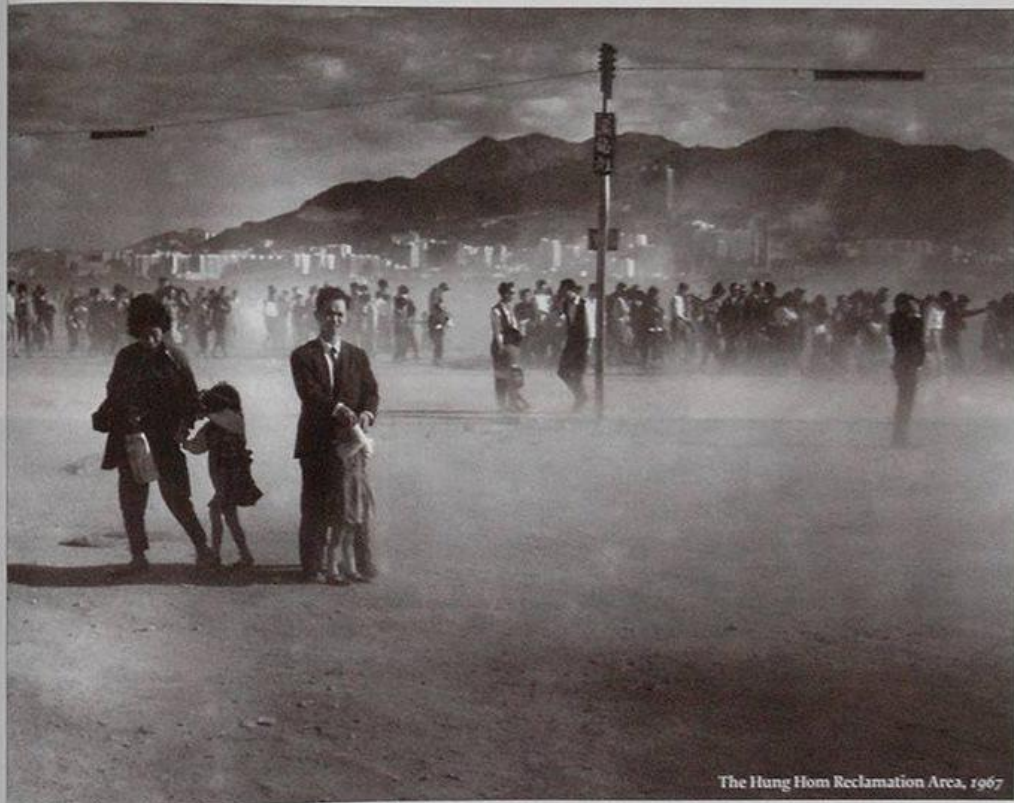


Arts

MOVIES MUSIC BOOKS EXHIBITIONS FASHION ARCHITECTURE

INSIDE
The poet of marriage may very well have understood what his wife endured, and her devotion to him

WILLIAM LEE ADAMS, ON SHAKESPEARE'S WIFE



The Hung Hom Reclamation Area, 1967

PHOTOGRAPHY

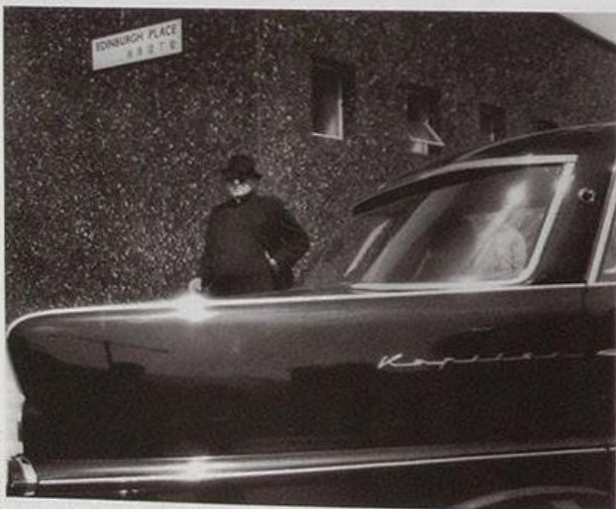
Camera Obscura. A decade after his demise, the legacy of a great photographer goes barely noticed in the city of his birth

BY LIAM FITZPATRICK

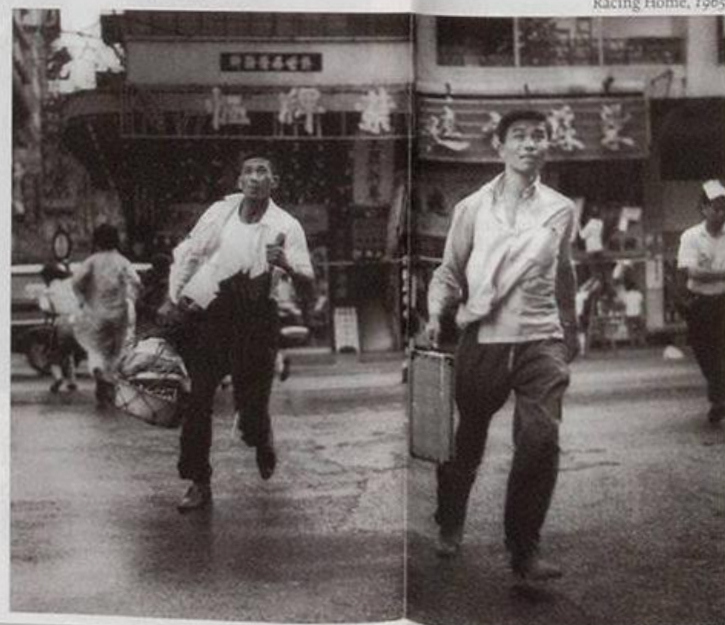
IN THE AUTUMN OF 1997, YAU LEUNG WAS just starting to earn a minor artistic reputation when he slipped off a ladder in his studio, hit his head, and died. That the light should have left the eyes of Hong Kong's greatest photographer in so banal a manner makes contemplation of his passing especially difficult. If photographers are



Trespasser, 1976



A Priest Arrives, 1968



Racing Home, 1965



Sleep, 1965

not felled covering disgraceful coups or scrappy jungle wars, posterity likes them to advance to gurgling senility, feted by models, retrospectives and hand-numbered editions. There is no romance in death by lapse of concentration—especially not in a man whose defining artistic characteristic was his undivided presence in, and intense focus on, the moment.

Hardly any of Yau's works are on public display in Hong Kong (although a few pieces were recently hanging in the Heritage Museum as part of a temporary exhibition on the history of cameras). He did not leave a family. His books are out of print or hard to find, and his prints are not available for purchase from any local galleries (however they can be bought from a small one in Toronto, established by the Hong Kong photographer Lee Ka-sing). Outside a tiny circle of dilettantes, nobody knows his name. Thus, 10 years after his death at the age of 56, Yau continues to be as obscure as he was in life. But with the issues of conservation and cultural identity at the forefront of social debate in Hong Kong, his body of work—spanning almost 40 years and recording the city's passage from hard-bitten entrepôt to looming metropolis—cries out for recognition as the extraordinary social and artistic document that it is.

It is unlikely, of course, that Yau would have conceived of his corpus in such solemn terms. Indeed, he once said that his interest in photography stemmed from the prize money that could be won in local competitions. A modest and laconic man, he played merely supporting roles for most of his career. As a stills photographer for movie companies in the 1960s, he was one of thousands of anonymous technicians in the service of a burgeoning entertainment industry. As the publisher and editor of *Photo Tech* magazine in the 1970s, and of *Photo Art* magazine from 1980, his days were spent deciding how best to present the work of other, usually less able, photographers. He didn't seriously think of promoting his own name and work until *Photo Art* ceased publication in the early 1990s, costing Yau his job but giving him the time to go through the thousands of photographs he had taken on journeys to and from work, or in his spare time, since his early 20s.

"We're lucky he was able to keep so many of his pictures," says Ng Siu-ye with a sad smile. A longtime friend and colleague of Yau's, and today the administrator of his copyright, Ng jokes that had Yau been married, "I'm sure his wife would have made him throw most of his photos out. He was a real hoarder, not just of photos but of everything—newspaper clippings,

tram tickets—and you know how small Hong Kong apartments are."

Yau released a small selection of photographs in 1991, in the now unobtainable *Lo Fung Stories* ("Lo Fung" is the archaic literary name for Hong Kong). It was a masterpiece of editing, and a stunning publishing debut: here was a major photographic talent, arriving on the bookshelf or coffee table in a fully formed state and with images that practically hummed with love for the city and its proletariat. "I was born here, I have always lived here and all my work is here," Yau said in the foreword. In his sense of place, he was to Hong Kong what Robert Doisneau was to Paris—a chronicler in black and white of the sooty streets and ordinary people at his city's heart. But in his consummate sensitivity to the decisive moment, Yau was sometimes reminiscent of the great Henri Cartier-Bresson, and, like the French master, carried wherever he went a 35-mm camera—in Yau's case a Voigtländer Prominent—allowing him to move and shoot unobtrusively amid the throng.

Lo Fung Stories was followed by 1994's *Flying Over Childhood*—a childless man's deeply empathetic survey of Hong Kong's young (and with an English title, *Growing Up in Hong Kong*, that doesn't capture the playful poetry of the original). In 1997, he published what was to be his last collection, *A Hundred Changes* (again, poorly

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translated from Chinese as *City Vibrance*). It was a then-and-now volume in which Yau revisited locations he had documented decades earlier in order to record the invariably startling transformations that had taken place in the interim. These books did not sell in large numbers—they simply generated a small flurry of interest in Yau's work that did not, as one would have hoped, grow posthumously. Instead, it merely faded away. As Yau himself wrote, "The things that happen now will be history tomorrow."

Few people in Hong Kong have any idea of the wastage that Yau's death represented. "I never thought that, 10 years later, I would be sitting here talking to someone about Yau Leung," says Ng from behind a box of his unpublished prints. But surely the time has come to ask: Why not? ■

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