

Michael Rogge

The amateur photographer and filmmaker tells **Nadine Bateman** about Hong Kong of yesteryear and why he has no desire to return.



PHOTOGRAPHIC MEMORY I grew up in Amsterdam, the son of an explorer who mined for oil, gold and diamonds in Indonesia. My father loved taking photographs of his exploits. One of my first memories is of him turning the crank of a home movie projector. I inherited his enthusiasm – and the projector – when I was 10. But the second world war and my parents' moderate means [my father had lost all his money in the Wall Street crash of 1929] prevented me from acquiring a movie camera. Then, in 1942, I was given a Kodak box camera and in 1947, a Kine Exakta camera. From my pocket money, I bought a second-hand 9.5mm movie camera in the same year.

IN THE MONEY I had wanted to join a film company or continue studying after leaving school but I needed to earn money to support my family. So I went to work for an overseas Dutch bank and I was extremely lucky to be sent to Hong Kong. I shared an apartment with two colleagues at 62 Macdonnell Road, Central, which we called 'the mess'. The bank had an office in a Victorian building on the corner of Des Voeux Road and Ice House

Street. It has since been torn down. In 1950, we moved to Marina House, Queen's Road Central, also since demolished. I arrived as the youngest of the Dutch staff – 20 years old – and left as head of a department in 1955. One of my films [which you can see on YouTube] shows me strolling from the flat to the office.

INTREPID EXPLORER I had little free time: I worked six days a week and every two years I got a fortnight's holiday. But in my spare time I liked to explore the city; filming it and taking pictures. I would also go to the cinema, listen to music and write letters to the *South China Morning Post*.

It was in 1949 that I read a letter to the editor in the *SCMP* from John Blofeld, an authority on Chinese Buddhism, calling for the formation of a study group. I was the only person in the colony who answered and I visited him in Sha Tin. He in turn introduced me to Mr Woo of a law firm in Ice House Street. With Mr Woo, I visited the Pure Land and Esoteric Buddhist groups, which I believe were in Happy Valley. That's how I was able to film Buddhist ceremonies. I was able to visit Hong Kong film sets as acting president of the Sino-British Film Group.

Once, when filming the sunrise, to have a good view from a hill top I trespassed unknowingly into military territory and I was picked up by a jeep but was released soon after they had made inquiries about me. That film won an award.

FILM FANATIC I stayed in Hong Kong from 1949 until 1955 and returned in 1961 for a month. I revisited in 1989 for one week. During those times I took hundreds of photos and hours of film.

In 1952 I was present at the formation of the Hong Kong Amateur Cine Club and I later became president. I was asked to start a film unit as there was nobody filming professionally outside of the studios. I considered it seriously but in the end I opted for the safe life in the bank, where I had already forged a successful career.

For six years [after 1955] I was stationed in Japan, where I also took many films and photos. Recently, a joint exhibition of my work and [that of] a former colleague, Hans Brinckmann, was held in Tokyo and attracted 49,000 people. The documentary films were shown in the early 60s on Dutch television in

two 25-minute programmes that were titled *Three Million Souls of Hong Kong* and *People of Japan*.

PARADISE FOUND I thought Hong Kong was Shangri-La. To me it was a dreamy place. I enjoyed its international atmosphere and I was particularly fond of visiting Kowloon. The Radio People was the name of a well-known hi-fi shop on Nathan Road where the owner was an enthusiastic hi-fi fan. He introduced me to LP records and predicted (to my utter disbelief) that all 78rpm records would disappear. [On his recommendation] I traded in my gramophone for a record player that played LPs. It was liberating not to have to turn the record over every five minutes.

Then there was Harris Book Shop, just around the corner [from the office] in Ice House Street. The owner was a rotund book-worm, always struggling with the heat [and] surrounded by an odd mixture of books. [The store was] full of surprising finds. It was the sort of shop that was pushed out of business in the course of economic expansion.

Then there were the beaches, of course, the trips into the countryside and the many nice people I met.

Never having left my home country before, it was all a great adventure. Also, coming from an occupied country and having suffered the 'hunger winter' of 1944-45 – when I left Holland some goods were still rationed – it seemed in Hong Kong I could buy anything with the good salary I was earning.

... AND LOST When I returned to Hong Kong in 1989, on a trip with my adopted son, I did not recognise anything. I cannot recall any site being the same: possibly Cat Street, Ladder Street and the Tiger Balm Garden. But Kowloon, Yau Ma Tei typhoon shelter, Aberdeen, Lantau Island: its monastery, the waterfronts ... all had changed. I also went to Macau, which had not changed that much at the time but I hear it is almost like Las Vegas now.

I have no desire to return; 1989 was enough. Without wishing to be unkind, the image of the Hong Kong of my memories was shattered. I realised it had all gone.

To view Michael Rogge's many films and photographs of yesteryear Hong Kong, and elsewhere, go to <http://hk.youtube.com/user/MichaelRogge>.