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Headline: **Best shots at a fresh start**

Byline: Vietnamese photography students have snapped their way to favour, as an exhibition shows, writes [Joyce Hor-Chung Lau](#)

One of the tough parts of being an editor is saying no to charities looking for publicity. For an arts editor, this may mean rejecting amateur artworks, even if they were created with the best of intentions. Curators working for professional art spaces can become similarly jaded.

This was the challenge the Saigon Children's Charity (SCC) faced when they asked the Foreign Correspondents' Club (FCC) to display photos by the 14- to 18-year-olds enrolled in their vocational training school. The SCC teaches poor Vietnamese youth practical, marketable skills such as sewing and hairdressing. Their photography students are being trained so they can later get jobs taking pictures for weddings, ID cards or become photography assistants. It's not exactly a high-brow art school.

On the other hand, the venerable journalists' club displays some of the highlights of Asian photojournalism, including covers from Time and the Economist, and Vietnam war shots by legends such as Robert Capa, Larry Burroughs and Hugh Van Es, who still sits on the committee to decide which photos should be allowed to grace the FCC's walls.

"When we were first contacted by this charity, we debated whether or not to give a bit of space for a worthy cause. But when we heard how young the photographers were, we really didn't know what to expect," says FCC wall committee chairwoman Ilaria Maria Sala. "Then we actually saw the photos. We were really surprised by the quality. Even more startling was that the subject matters were actually interesting. That's why we've allowed this exhibition to go on for so long, a full month."

The reaction at the South China Morning Post was the same. "Send samples over first, and we'll see about coverage," I said, expecting the worse. What I got were vividly coloured landscape and portraits shot with thought and insight. From a technical point of view, it was obvious these young photographers had good eyes for colour, contrast, texture and composition. More importantly, the images carried emotional weight. They were by turns jubilant, pensive, humorous and melancholic, and perhaps an indication that children who grow up in tough circumstances can be mature beyond their years.

The photos are doing well in Hong Kong. Eighty-six original, unlimited edition prints were sold at the exhibition's opening night on March 2. "Professional photographers said some should be entered into competition," says SCC founder Paul Cleves. The 44 photos, which had never been exhibited outside Vietnam until now, will continue their tour to London later in the spring.

Cleves, who once taught at the exclusive Eton College in England and ran the school's Photography Society, founded the SCC in 1992. "Of course, the kids here are very different from the boys at Eton, but they have the same motives and motivations. By running this photography programme, we're giving them their first chance to be creative, and to potentially make a living from that creativity," he says.

The SCC photography programme has about 40 students. The best works become calendars, greeting cards and prints, which are then sold. "Some of the money goes to the students, to reinforce the idea they can make money doing this. A few have made enough to buy their own cameras. The goal is to make them self-sufficient."

Cleves says the students also learn to do the developing and printing themselves. Students go out on photo shoots about once a week, often to parts of Vietnam they would never have the chance to see, considering the relatively high cost of travel. "The kids manage to take a lot of photos that neither I, nor any other western adult could ever take."

Saigon Children's Charity Photographic Exhibition

FCC main bar

2 Lower Albert Rd, Central

Tel: 2521 1511.

Ends Mar 28

Original unlimited prints cost \$400 (framed), \$200 (unframed), with all proceeds going to charity <http://www.saigonchildren.com>