Creating a User's Guide on Early Photography in China

Regine Thiriez, Institut d'Asie Orientale, France

Introduction

This paper originates from a book under completion, which goes under the tentative title of: *Early Photography of China: A User's Guide*. In a conference oriented towards sophisticated twenty-first century computer and Internet applications, focusing on nineteenth century photography might seem like a step backwards. It is, and I make no apology for it: without data to be inputed, the Internet would only be a web to nowhere.

The book is the result of personal experience and frustrations, as well as of questions I was asked in a variety of circumstances. It relies on over a decade of research and use of early photographs, as well as on study of what was done. The project's ultimate aim is to open the field to all scholars wishing to use the essential historical source which is early photography of China. It is clear that people know photography: they practice it. What they usually have trouble understanding, is that nineteenth century photography was not done with a zoom lens, a 4000 ISO self-loading film or a disposable camera. Or that the end result was not considered in the same light, either.

I started looking into early photography of China in 1987 for a research project on the European Palaces of the Yuanmingyuan, the Old Summer Palace in Beijing. The palaces were built by Jesuit missionaries for the Qianlong emperor in the 1750s. We had thought that the search would be completed in six weeks. That was twelve years ago, and I am still looking. Most of the reasons for this are not special to Peking or to Qing palaces. They are a normal consequence of the state of the field of early photography of China.

The first brick wall I hit was that nobody knew for sure where there were early photographs. I wrote about 500 letters over the first two years of search, and none of them directly resulted in photographs coming out (if you except the museum kindly answering that they did not have any which ultimately turned out to have the largest series of all.)

This is how I was led to try to understand the situation, and unconsciously look for remedies. The remedies are the objects of my current work. I view this forthcoming book as a toolbox meant to help its users place early photographs in their original cultural and technological context, and therefore find what any of the images they will come across really show. The book has no claim to being a comprehensive encyclopedia about

photographs and repositories. (This is well beyond the reach of a single researcher.) Instead, it proposes to provide means to look at, and for, photographs. Here is the table of contents.

Early Photography in China: A User's Guide

Introduction: Why such a book

I. To search for, and research, photography of China
- Range covered by early photography of China
- How photography developed in China
- What/Where early photographs of China are found
- Reproducing photographs for research
- Indexing photographs

II. Forms under which photographs are found
- Appearance and presentation of early photographs
- Technical data on early photography

III. What is found, and why
- Survey: techniques used, how and how much
- Data on nineteenth century photography
- Specifics of early photography of China

IV. Identification of subject and author
- Information potentially available
- Identifying subject and author
- Dating photographs
- Misleading clues

V. Application: Early Photography in Shanghai
- Chronology of Shanghai Photography
- Export Photography in Shanghai
- The Photographic Portrait
- Typical Scene in Shanghai Photography
- *The Far East* Magazine (1875-1877)
- The Photographically Illustrated Postcard: End and Culmination of an Era

VI. Chinese Studies Issues: How to identify--and is there any point in doing so, the amateur photographer from the professional, or the Chinese photographer from the Western one.

Appendixes

* List of identified photographers (with sources)
* Identified repositories
* Sources potentially useful to document photographs and photographers
* Re-attributing: Bonnetain's *L'Extreme-Orient* (pub. 1887)
* Thomas Child's portfolio (Beijing 1870-1889)

What I would like to discuss in this paper is the introduction, that is, why I considered such a book could contribute to the field of Chinese studies. The paper will discuss the way early photography is used by contemporary scholars and the reasons that led to this situation. Building on this, I will then outline the specifics of early photography in China.

I - EARLY PHOTOGRAPHY IN CHINA IN OUR TIMES

What it is

Photography and its derivatives, cinema, television, and more recently CD-ROM and Internet, have been a constituent of the whole life of each person in this room, and of their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents (at least). Life without photography became unthinkable about a century and a half ago. Yet, in the field of Chinese studies, knowledge, and use, of photographs as essential archival resources is absurdly limited.

The problem is not so much that photography is being altogether ignored. Photographic resources are even now being developed for twenty-first century uses: CD-Roms of collections; photographs presented on Internet sites; databases are being planned on China photography, including one in France by the Institute for East Asian Studies in Lyon; research on nationwide photographic resources for China are underway in The Netherlands; missionary archives at large have been the object of inventories in the United States. Albums of old photographs are published with heart-warming regularity. And as any dealer can confirm, photographs of China sell very well, thank you.

Nevertheless, it is patent that photography, and especially early photography, is severely under-used by researchers in general. Chinese studies make use of it almost exclusively for the post-imperial times, and then in narrow ways and in very specific fields. It is not standard practice for our musicologists or textile specialists to rely on old photography as a primary source. It should be. The practice of merely inserting in books -- as a formality -- a few photographs barely relevant to the subject and often selected by some assistant, is not very constructive. Nor is its recent opposite extreme, the photo-album which mixes at random years and places and is fully devoid of references, especially as to the image-documents (and the reason why this is done is that most of the authors use copies which they are themselves not able or willing to study as documents.)

I would note immediately that technology is not the answer: putting photographic images on the Internet will contribute to research only if the material has been correctly identified, indexed and/or interpreted. There is in fact good reason to fear that the increasing ease of reproduction and diffusion of photographic documents will lead to a staggering multiplication of errors, followed by their duplication. China photography is a very uncharted field, where no one knows very much. In real life, errors have the most depressing tendency for passing along the line from author to author.

To illustrate the risks, I would take the single example of a well-known photograph, that of three women caught in a single cangue. The scene was dated 1907 in the 1978 reference book, *Imperial China Photographs*.[1] Since then it was re-published in several significant works, still as 1907.[2] As it happens, the date is wrong, I believe by 30 to 40 years -- a very long time for early photography.[3]

The photograph was not only misdated, it is also often interpreted as real life -- what it probably would have been in 1907. But this is not, and probably never was, daily life in the Shanghai Concessions. It is a studio creation, as is confirmed by the setup in front of a Western window, not in the street; the lack of the pasted slip of paper stating the reason for the punishment (a legal obligation); and the pristine condition of the three women who

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[1] Clarck Worswick and Jonathan Spence, New York: Pennwick Publishing, 1978, p. 61.

[2] See Colin Mackerras, *Western Images of China,* Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1989, etc.

[3] The earliest dated publication I found went back to 1897: John L. Stoddard, *Lectures. Vol. 3, Japan and China,* reed Boston: Balch Brothers 1906, p. 323. There are certainly earlier occurrences, as the image is compelling.

cannot have been standing there more than the few minutes necessary for the exposure. This photograph actually belongs to a series of two, the other one showing two men in the same place and situation.[4]

To go back to the general lack of interest for photographic documents, it is a relatively new phenomenon. When photography was born in 1838, it was hailed as a miracle instrument that would at long last make reality available to all, however distant it was. Everywhere in the West, photographs of faraway countries were the object of rapid and extensive descriptions and comments. Photography was an essential factor in the image revolution, moving along with industrial revolution and general colonial expansion. Merchants and armies reached distant countries, and travellers followed in their wake with notebook and, surprisingly often, camera. People who, from birth or education, were considered the elite, felt duty-bound to inform themselves on all and everything, as well as to educate others. Hence their travels, and the stories and images they published on their return. Prints, as later postcards, were pasted in albums and widely used as sources by illustrated publications. This tradition was lost during the current century, when photography became mere support for news or family entertainment. It was no longer the scientific reference it had been since the very beginning.

However, for a number of years, we have been witnessing a change regarding the use of photography by the scholarly world at large, with a worldwide reversal of trends. Nevertheless, the change of vision from photography as mere illustration to photography as primary archival resource has been much slower and limited for China than for other Western or non-Western areas.

Why is China different?

A first reasons for this situation is that nobody knows *where to find* what was produced in China by nineteenth century photographers, and even less *what it is*. I would estimate that studies in China photography are now at the same level as Mid-Eastern studies over twenty-five years ago. In other words, they have not really started yet. But is this a cause or a consequence?

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[4] Early prints of the two are found in the photographic collections of the Far Eastern dept., Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. The dated photographs in the lot are between 1875 and 1880. I believe the negatives for the two cangue scenes could be earlier than 1875.

There appears in fact to be very little demand for reference works such as those available on Japan or Middle East photography. As I see it, an enormous number of early photographs of China lie largely ignored and unknown, mostly -- although not exclusively -- because too few people value them. In particular, the social sciences, which are primary users of photographic documents, developed later for China than for other areas.

However, it seems to me that an essential and deep-rooted reason for the current lack of interest is specific to our field. It is cultural. The preoccupation with the written word, preeminent in traditional Chinese scholarship and culture, has led scholars to consider that texts do not need to be supplemented by other resources. This is true for Chinese and Western researchers alike. (I would be tempted to liken this to studying Buddhist traditions without the support of iconography. You will be able to produce something, but it will most certainly be lacking.)

So we are facing a double-edged problem: we don't use photographs because we believe we don't need them, and we believe we don't need them because we don't know what they are. In other words, scholars in the many disciplines involved with this region who might benefit from the exploitation of the resource, are either unaware of its existence, or have no idea of where to look for material relevant to their research. All the monographs in the world -- and there are not many on early photographers of China -- will not plug this gap.

Actually, studies of Chinese photography took a start in due time in the 1970s. The years 1977-78 saw the publication in the United States and France of several general works on early China photography. Unfortunately, nothing followed this early effort. There is no denying this is a very difficult field, but the result is that even monographs are extremely difficult to do, because there is not enough general knowledge about early photography in China.

This is not stimulating when you are merely trying to find material related to your own study, whether about harness in north China or the apparition of the heart as a decorative item in Shanghai dress (n.b.: about 1864). There are some splendid books about John Thomson (active in China 1868-1873), one will come out shortly on Felice Beato's work during the 1860 China campaign (but Beato did nothing else in China). In the current state of affairs, what gets identified is only the material that stands out. Being exceptional, that material is unfortunately not representative of the general production of the times and it does not constitute a reliable sample of what can still be found.

It would be unreasonable to expect all researchers to attempt to find their way across the collections, large and small, that hold early photographs of China. For one thing, many collections are very small, sometimes a mere dozen photographs. Repositories are scattered everywhere and are of all kinds, from the national archives to the family attic. Many of these places do not really know what they have, or even that they have anything at all. Photographs do not rate high on librarians' priorities. (I speak here from personal experiences in major institutions.) Visiting scholars are informed that there is nothing because there is not enough staff to show rare and fragile material. Or the collections are in such disarray that although librarians assume they have photographs, they cannot say for sure.

Even in the best case of well equipped repositories, images are not indexed. It is simply impossible for a non-specialist to do it. The standard photograph is anonymous, and therefore has no place in directory of photographers. It is not identified, because it never came with any caption. It is also undated.

Such is the situation currently faced by the rare specialists of history of China photography. They have to consider going through inventory and indexing, of tens of thousands of prints and glass negatives kept all over the world in thousands of known and unknown repositories. (Only then will we really know what is available for research.) It will certainly be an impressive mass. But the task is daunting, to say the least.

However, this does not say that there are no alternative ways of dealing with the situation such as it is and start using photographic archive documents as a matter of routine. Whether these ways are alternative or necessary, is even an interesting question. It is wise to understand what kind of material one is dealing with. Was photography even able to produce the type of document wanted? Were such a geographical area, such a social group, accessible to cameras at such a given time? Did the reproduction processes allow the resulting images to be published, and how? What are the usual patterns of conservation for "old" photographs?

This is the gap the projected book proposes to attack. This is History of Photography. The next stage will rely on the researcher's most important asset: a persevering and critical mind.

II - EARLY PHOTOGRAPHY IN CHINA

Understanding the field means getting back into the period and the way photography was practiced and collected. Here are a few essential points.

A warning:

Until the end of the nineteenth century, photography was first and foremost viewed as a recording instrument. As seen by the public, its essential quality was it being true. It could not lie. But for all its supposed objectivity, the image recorded not only what the photographer witnessed, or what he chose to represent, but also how he saw it. The development of photography in China belongs to the much broader context of a worldwide evolution of techniques and ideas from which it cannot be separated.

In addition, for photographs to reach us now, they must not only have been taken, but also have been collected. Individual censorship thus had two opportunities of sorting the images, which is continued to this day by publication. The photographs found in the West were those collected by Westerners, and Chinese albums are bound to be very different. In general nineteenth century photographs followed the sole requirements of the Western market. It was a non-Chinese mode of expression. Misunderstanding must be expected: the image of two cranes in a garden will appear to Chinese scholars to be the embodiment of China's spirit, while to the contemporary Westerners they were just a pair of nice birds kept in the British Consulate's garden in Shanghai.

It does not hurt to build a capacity for appreciating what is being shown. Just as we would not think of using texts without a critical mind (one hopes), there is absolutely no reason to take any photograph and the comments that go with it as an unfailing whole. It would actually be rather dangerous.

Development of photography in China

Photography was born in 1838, four years before the opening of the first treaty ports to international trade in 1842. Early recording of scenes, places, events and portrait was extensive. Professional studios followed the first amateurs and started doing business for foreigners and Chinese alike.

Between the early 1840s and 1900, photography evolved from a single-copy metal plate exposed for several minutes in bright daylight, to photography of moving objects, and to the portable camera that could be carried everywhere.

China photographs came in all kinds of sizes, from small index card to full page. Nineteenth century photographs are now found in albums or isolated prints, but also in illustrated journals or books, or on the early postcards. They were reproduced as

photographic prints, or as woodblock or metal engravings. By the early 1890s already, the press was printing photographs as they really appear.

In China, photography developed apace with Western presence. Until the end of the century, it was practiced mostly in the treaty ports, expanding as they did. There was then little difference in style between amateur or professionals, or between Western of Chinese photographers, unless they followed diverging interests. For the professional photographers, customers' demand was what set the trend, while the amateur was more likely to follow his own taste (and I mean "his", a reflection of the Western population in China at that time.) Nevertheless, the same subjects were treated the same way by all parties: amateur photographers and studio customers were the same type of people.

Early photographic production in China

Nineteenth century photography at large covers three essential areas, portrait, topography (architecture and landscape), and typical scenes. Portrait was a universal craze, which perfectly suited Chinese culture. It most certainly comes first for sheer quantity in the total output. Well until the end of the century, it followed rather specific rules of composition which do not all belong to Chinese or Western traditions. Some were created specifically by and for portrait photography in China, a hybrid of sorts.

On the other hand, topography was essential in presenting the ports and their evolution. It did not routinely go inland until much later.

The third area, the typical scene, described the mode of life of the "native" population. The photographs are often well done and very informative. They are descriptive photography and also a universal genre.

The best scenes were done in Shanghai, while Beijing was represented almost exclusively though its monuments. In Shanghai, the Bund was the ultimate representation of Western presence and economic power, while the streets in the concessions showcases of a successful Westernization of the local populations. During the same period, Taiwan was seen as aborigine country. Hong Kong had it all, studio scenes and streets, Western banks and botanical garden, Peak and a scenic race course.

Conclusion

Quantities of photographs were produced in China from the 1840s on, but few are ever used

for research. This will change, hopefully, when the many potential users realize how much early material is available, and how essential this source is. Photography has much to offer to those who care to look for it. It is a first-class archive in its own right, and must be recognized as such in all its uniqueness.