

**The Other ‘Morrison of Peking’:
Hedda Morrison and her Photographs of China**

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Synopsis:

Hedda Morrison, nee Hammer, was a German photographer who managed Hartung's Photography shop in Peking from 1933 to 1938. After her contract ended, she remained in China, working as a freelance photographer until 1946. She assembled several thousand of her photographs into thematic albums and sold individual prints or whole albums to patrons. Her photographs also illustrated several books by others on topics as diverse as handicrafts, classical furniture, monasteries, and funerals. During her residence in China she captured on film handicrafts, lifestyles, buildings, religious practices, and streetscapes that have all but vanished. Although she purposely did not record the seamier side of life in the city, her photographs constitute an important part of the historical record of 20th century China. The Harvard-Yenching Library at Harvard University has embarked on a two-year project to catalog and digitize the photographs in the collection, with a view to making them available over the Internet. After leaving China, the Morrises moved on to Hong Kong, where Hedda continued making photographs. Her photos of Hong Kong in 1946 are a unique record of that post-war year in the colony, and will be the focus of a book to be published jointly by Harvard University and the Hong Kong Photographic Conservation Society. Mrs. Morrison's photographs of Sarawak, where the Morrises relocated after leaving Hong Kong, were bequeathed to Cornell University.

In 1946, her final year in Peking, Hedda Hammer married Alastair Morrison, an officer in the British Colonial service and a son of Dr. G. E. Morrison. Dr. Morrison was famous long before he obtained the medical degree that he never used, and long before he wound up in Peking. As a teenager, he made the news for walking alone across the whole of his native Australia, and back. Perhaps the press that his feat garnered led later to his turning to the press as a career. He had a varied career as an advisor to China's president, Yuan Shikai, and as the Peking correspondent for the *Times* of London. His first-hand reporting of the siege of the foreign legations by the anti-foreign Boxers in 1900 riveted the world for weeks on end. Messages were smuggled from the captives to Morrison, who turned them into telegrams to the *Times*. Some of the notes and telegrams are in the

collections of the Harvard libraries. G. E. Morrison also was a noted bibliophile. His immense collection of Western-language books on China formed the nucleus of what is now the Toyo Bunko (Oriental Library) in Tokyo. His vast collection of papers and photographs is in the Mitchell Library in Sydney, Australia.

Dr. Morrison has been the subject of books and symposia. Hedda Morrison is less well known.

Hedda Hammer Morrison (1908-1991) was born in Stuttgart, Germany, and received a diploma in photography from the Bayerische Staatslehranstalt für Lichtbildwesen (National Institute for Photography) in Munich in 1931. The two-year course covered not only photographic techniques but also professional law, business management, drawing, and photo optics. Upon obtaining her diploma, Hedda responded to an advertisement for a photographic assistant to manage Hartung's Photography Shop in faraway Peking, encouraged to leave Germany by her antipathy to the rise of the Nazis. While still in Germany, Hedda was influenced by the "new realist" approach to photography, an approach that looked at ordinary subjects in extraordinary ways. That influence can be seen in the unusual angles and shadows that are so predominant in her China photos.

Hartung's was a well-known studio and shop that operated in Peking at the time. Its customers included publishers of travel guides and diplomats and tourists wanting mementos of their stay in the city. The shop had a German proprietor and seventeen Chinese employees. Upon the expiration of her contract, she became a freelance photographer with a wide range of friends and patrons, a working knowledge of Chinese, a Rolleiflex camera, and a bicycle. She was contracted to provide the photographs for George Kates's book on Chinese household furniture, for Wolfram Eberhard's book on Huashan (which was not published until 1973 and which features a photograph of Hedda with a monk from White Cloud Temple), for Alfred Hoffman's book on Nanking, and for Caroline Beiber, the collector and seller of Chinese art and handicrafts.

Hedda Morrison's training and experience, coupled with her energy and her artistic eye, enabled her to capture on film nearly ten thousand images of a rapidly-changing city that existed in a narrow lane between the past and the future. She recorded places, buildings, crafts, clothing, and lifestyles that have all but disappeared. Someone has written that her photos recorded "thin slices of space and time." Although she might not have realized that her photos would come to have historical value, she did know her audience: she purposely did not record the seamier side of life in Peking. Perhaps that was

because she wanted to show her beloved city only in a good light, but also because she knew what would sell.

The twenty-eight albums of her prints that she bequeathed to the Harvard-Yenching Library at Harvard University, along with some 10,000 negatives, contain breathtakingly beautiful images that she herself printed and cropped, thereby enhancing her artistic presentation of the images. She was able to show the albums to potential customers, who could select individual images or have her assemble thematic albums for them.

The digitization project at Harvard is based on the nearly 6000 prints in the collection rather than the nearly 10,000 negatives because the prints represent the images as Hedda wanted them seen, China in her own view. (Hedda journeyed again to China and Hong Kong in the 1980s, taking along her camera. The photographs that she took at that time also were given to the Harvard-Yenching Library but are not included in the digitization project.) Prints that were lacking in the albums have been reprinted from the original negatives, but each will bear a note stating that the print was not made by Hedda Morrison. Access to the images will be through Harvard's online catalog of visual images. Master files will be stored in a digital repository and will be used to make publication-quality prints on demand and for a fee.

The world of Asian scholarship has only recently begun to demonstrate great interest in photographs as historical records. It is anticipated that the success of the Hedda Morrison Project, one of several projects at Harvard that focus on East Asia, will lead directly to the cataloging and digitization of the remaining 50,000 photographs of East Asia in the collections of the Harvard-Yenching Library.

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