Picturing China
1870-1950
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About six months ago I received an email from Jamie Carstairs, a Digitisation Assistant at the University of Bristol. The subject header was ‘Rare historical photos cast light on life in China’. Further enquiry revealed that the images in question are a remarkable collection of photographs of China in the late 19th and early 20th century brought together by researchers from the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Bristol, as part of their ongoing ‘Historical Photographs of China’ project.

The photographs were about to go on display at the Brunei Gallery at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London and I thought they would make an interesting article for IIAS Newsletter. I contacted Jamie and the head of the project Professor Robert Bickers, who reacted with enthusiasm and within no time I received a CD containing all the photos.

I spent a very enjoyable afternoon poring over the simply stunning photographs of life in China before 1950. Photographs in the possession of families or descendants of Chinese and British men and women who lived there. Robert Bickers describes how, “lodged away in attics and cupboards, these images include snapshots of expatriate social life, scenes of everyday Chinese life, and records of momentous historical events”. They form a unique virtual archive for China. I wanted to be able to share a selection of these fascinating photographs with readers, and so the idea of a supplement to the Newsletter was born.

‘Picturing China 1870-1950’ at the Brunei Gallery, 16 October – 15 December 2007 received almost 10,000 visitors and the exhibition has now moved to the Museum of East Asian Art in Bath, UK where it will be until the 13th April. It then moves to the Oriental Museum at Durham University, UK from 24th April to 10th August.

I hope that this supplement, which along with the current edition of IIAS Newsletter will be available at the exhibitions in Bath and Durham, will not only be a useful keepsake for visitors to ‘Picturing China’, but an opportunity for those of you unable to get to the UK this summer to see some of these wonderful photographs too.

The images cover a wide range of topics including everyday life, fashion, industrialisation, crime and punishment, foreigners in China and the Chinese abroad. They provide glimpses of the lost Chinese past and telling evidence of the complex intimacy of British relations with China before 1950. My thanks to Jamie Carstairs for sending me an email one day last summer, to Oliver Moore and Catherine Ladds for their articles and to Robert Bickers for all his efforts and working with me to make this supplement possible.

Anna Yeadell
IIAS Editor

The project team at Bristol University would be interested to hear from owners of similar photographs.

Please email: hums-Chinaphotos@bristol.ac.uk

Acknowledgements

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We are grateful to the following who have given us permission to use photographs in the exhibition: Adam Scott Armstrong, Joan Cottrell, Dr John Cottrell, Hugh Currie, Dr Yee Wah Foo and Johnny Foo, Audrey Gregg, Patricia Hayward, Dr Elizabeth Henzel, Peter Lockhart-Smith, Sheila Metcalf, Colin Palmer, Charlotte Thomas, Dr Mary Tifffen, and Barbara Tilbury.

I would like to also thank in particular Catherine Ladds and Oliver Moore, for their contributions to this IIAS Newsletter supplement, and Jamie Carstairs, who has undertaken all the digitisation for the project and much, much else besides, and to Anna Yeadell for proposing this publication.

Robert Bickers
University of Bristol

The companion volume to the exhibition, Picturing China 1870-1950: Photographs from British Collections (Chinese Maritime Customs Project Occasional Papers No 1, Bristol, 2007, ISSN: 1755-6643), is now available and order forms can be found at: http://www.bristol.ac.uk/history/customs/papers.html, or by contacting the project by email: hums-chinaphotos@bristol.ac.uk
Smiling through the 1920s:
Two private collections of Chinese photographs

Robert Bickers

The written archives available for understanding the worlds of China’s open century between the 1840s and 1949 are vast, and many new materials have recently been made available in Shanghai, for example, at the Shanghai Municipal Archive. But there is also much, in Europe, that we are still finding, and that remains uncovered. A lot of this is in private hands, and much of it is photographic material. By way of an explanation we need to remember just how many Europeans actually visited or spent part of their career in China. It is easy to understate what we might call the turnover of empire and its cognates, such as the Chinese treaty ports. The circulation of professionals, missionaries, seamen, military men and speculative venturers - and even vacationers - across and beyond the European empires generated much greater numbers of transient visitors than we might think. It was estimated in 1921, for example, that the ‘European’ population of Hong Kong was almost entirely refreshed every five years. The British colony was not alone in this, but it is difficult to quantify such movement. We have estimates at census points for the non-Chinese population of Shanghai, but the cumulative totals for those passing through were much greater. Anecdotally, one does not need to look far in one’s immediate circle of friends and acquaintances today to find a China-link. And where there is a link there are usually relics of a China sojourn, photographs among them.

The ‘Historical Photographs of China’ team at Bristol University, working with colleagues at the University of Lincoln, and the Institut d’Asie Orientale, Lyon, has been hunting for such photographs, digitising those it finds, and disseminating these images through an open-access website, http://chp.ish-lyon.cnrs.fr/. There are many familiar scenes and scenarios in the collections unearthed, but even the most routine expatriate picnic snapshots have something to offer the scholar interested in exploring the cultures and visual cultures of the foreign China life. They can also go well beyond that. Many collections provide surprising new visions of China – of place, people, predicaments - that raise new questions or open new angles for thinking about the recent Chinese past. In this article I want to introduce and discuss two collections, and two photographers, and explore what one in particular might suggest about the accidental virtues of the private archive.

The politician and the policeman

The photographers were enemies. This was not personal, but if Guomindang activist and politician Fu Bingchang (Foo Ping-sheung, 1895-1965) had fallen into the hands of the detective branch of the Shanghai Municipal Police, which was led until May 1927 by William Armstrong (1867-1931), then we would not have his photographs. The Shanghai International Settlement’s hostility towards the Guomindang before March 1927 meant that a man like Fu might have been handed over by the force to face certain death at the hands of local militarist forces holding the city. The changing political atmosphere in fact probably contributed to Armstrong’s decision to retire early after the success of the Guomindang’s National Revolution, and return to a newly-purchased manse in Scotland with his China souvenirs. These included albums of photographs, many of them taken by him on houseboat holidays in the countryside west of Shanghai around Lake Tai (Ta-hai). Fu, allied to the ‘Prince’s clique’ around Sun Ke, Sun Yat-sen’s son, went on to enjoy a respectable political and diplomatic career until 1949, when, after having served as R.O.C. ambassador to the U.S.S.R. (1943-49), he fell out with the leadership and moved to Europe, taking with him his diaries and the output of a prodigious career as an amateur photographer. William Armstrong’s albums included shots he had either bought or acquired through work. Some are familiar – we find them in contemporary newspapers or reportage for example - and show at street-level the chaotic events of the 1925 May Thirtieth incident and movement, or the nationalist revolution (fig. 3) of 1926-27. But there are also snaps of police emergencies, of a bank robber’s tunnel, a note-forging print shop, and of Armstrong’s collection of (perhaps confiscated) knives and swords. These might be the expected visual souvenirs of a policeman. After all, it is easy to assume a policeman has a rougher character and interests than, say, a banker. Family evidence suggests...
in fact that one album, which included many photographs of executions, was later destroyed by Armstrong’s descendants as being too gruesome.

Many other police families kept theirs, however. But there are also dozens of portraits of rural folk, young and old, male and female, taken on the houseboat holidays that we know he took in the waterways west of Shanghai around Lake Tai (figs. 3-4). An educated guess – there are no captions and no other documentation – places these photographs in the early to mid-1920s, shortly before he left China. Armstrong and a fellow police veteran show up in some of the shots, horsing around with their shotguns on the canal sides, but they are mostly absent, and the images which predominate and which linger in the viewer’s mind are the portraits, the men, women and children looking into the photographer’s camera. These shots were clearly taken by Armstrong, but I can think of no unambiguous reason why this foreign Shanghai urbanite took and kept this record of these unnamed Chinese rural folk.

Fu Bingchang has left a collection that makes for easier readings. His photographic life was a public one – and he was heavily involved in the jingshe, a noted photographic club in Canton in the 1920s. The club members aimed to specialise in landscape portraits, but Fu recorded people as much as he recorded place. The young revolutionary took numerous fine shots of the political events in which he was involved. There are many familiar faces in his records of political meetings in the Guomindang’s political base in Canton before the Northern Expedition of 1926-27. Here is Wang Jingwei, here a youthful Chuang Kai-shhek, there Liao Zhongkai, Hu Hanmin, Fu’s patron Sun Ke; here are notable meetings of the Guomindang’s ruling councils, here is a smiling Borodin. Some of the shots were shared by Fu with museums in Taiwan after he returned to the fold in 1956, but the negatives and prints have stayed in Europe.

These well-composed images of Canton politics on the cusp of becoming national (and international) politics tell an orthodox story, but retell it crisply, and with a layer of affable humanity absent from the more familiar group photographs of suits and committee delegations that we know all too well. Borodin in fact smiles easily, and exudes a charm that we might pause and note. We forget the place of charm in history (fig. 9), but a photograph reminds us of it. Fu’s images also catch the sheer excitement of events, of confidence in strength, and the anticipation of action - the action whose consequences on Shanghai streets some of Armstrong’s images record. Fu’s collection has two further main themes: Portraits of women and men in his circle, mainly women, and shots taken during his ambassadorial mission in Moscow, or in a shattered Europe, which he visited when attending the early conferences of the United Nations after 1945. The portraits, of friends and lovers, members of the elite circles of the ruling party, urban and urbane, can provide some perhaps too easy contrasts with the unnamed women and men in Armstrong’s rural portraits. We know who most of Fu’s sitters were, and have dates and places in many cases. We can look at their fashion choices, and reflect on the way they portray themselves or are portrayed by Fu. Here is the private world of Guomindang China (figs. 1-8).

An affectionate collection
But Armstrong’s photos provide more than material for a rural/urban, elite/ non-elite contrast with Fu’s elite sitters, valuable and interesting as that is. His men and women in fact suggest to some viewers a revisionist slice of rural life. An audience at Peking University was much taken with these portraits, but had some questions which puzzled me. ‘Are there any shots of thin people?’ asked one academic. The answer was, well one or two, but in the main these are portraits of confident, self-assured rural people, often smiling for the camera. They are not, then, explained my questioner, the cowed, starving peasantry of standard representations of the Chinese peasantry. And, he continued, Armstrong clearly had no axe to grind. His was not a propaganda project, and neither was it a social survey. It was not a deliberate, pointed, record of the rural world he passed through on his house-boat; the Shanghai policeman had nothing to try to prove (not outside the streets of Shanghai at any rate). If anything these were nostalgic shots of a people and area much visited by Armstrong, sometimes in the company also of a Chinese girlfriend. There are affectionate shots of her, and perhaps affectionate is the term which best suits the collection overall. These photographs offer a glimpse of a different view of China and its peoples than might usually be ascribed to a successful anti-nationalist and anti-communist British policeman. But they also offered for this Peking audience a vision of a different rural China than that which lies at the heart of many academic and political interpretations of the Chinese countryside and revolution.

These people certainly lived in one of China’s most prosperous agricultural regions, although it was also here that scholars like John Lassing Bock and his students conducted the ground-breaking fieldwork that fed into our received notions of rural immiseration, and into R.H. Tawney’s classic image of the position of the peasant as akin to ‘standing

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permanently up to the neck in water, so that even a ripple is enough to drown him. More recent foreign scholarship has questioned such a picture, but Chinese communist historiography is unlikely to revise its assessment of the pre-1949 rural situation, which is also deeply embedded in post-1949 culture. Armstrong’s portraits contrast sharply, for example, with the iconic plastic representation of rural misery delivered in the famous ‘Rent Collection Courtyard’ tableau (Shouzu yuan) created by folk artists and Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts sculptors in 1965. For my audience photographs provided a potentially fresh way to think about the modern rural experience. This might be too heavy a burden for a few dozen portraits to bear, but the photographs certainly offer one alternative to the existing represented past, and one which struck a Chinese audience in particular as worth pursuing. So thinking about William Armstrong’s photographs alone suggests the ways in which these relics of the treaty port world, and of its enemies, which are now lodged in the care of descendants in Britain, can prompt new ways of thinking about modern China’s history, and its peoples.

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The Chinese Maritime Customs Service was a foreign-run and internationally-staffed institution, whose responsibilities grew far beyond its initial purpose of administering the duties on foreign trade, to encompass lighting the China coast, harbour maintenance, publishing reports on countless China-related topics, and even representing China at international exhibitions. Written records about the work and workforce of the Customs between 1854 and 1949 are plentiful. Over 52,000 such files are housed in the Second Historical Archive of China, Nanjing, alone. The reports and correspondence lodged in the archive tell us a great deal about the Service’s guiding principles and ideologies, its everyday business, and the Customs’ contribution to the development of China’s foreign relations. Yet photographs, in particular the photographic collection of a British Customs man, R.F.C. Hedgeland, offer us an alternative view, and sometimes a clearer picture, of the Customs world of work and the Sino-foreign environment it operated in.

Reginald Follett Codrington Hedgeland was born in Exeter, Devon on 18 December 1874. After being educated at St Paul’s School, London, and Pembroke College, Oxford, he joined the Indoor Staff, the prestigious administrative branch of the Customs in 1897. China and the Customs was a somewhat unorthodox choice; one might have expected Hedgeland to join one of the more established imperial administrative services, such as the Indian Civil Service. But China held many attractions for a young Englishman in the late 19th century. In the popular British imagination, China spoke of adventure and the exotic yet also, increasingly, of professional opportunities. Over the century of its existence, almost 11,000 European and American staff from over 22 countries travelled to China to join the Customs, or else were recruited in China itself. They worked alongside over 11,000 Chinese employees. Hedgeland’s Customs career was longer and more successful than those of most of his colleagues – he stayed for 32 years, retiring in 1930, having attained the senior rank of Commissioner – yet it was undistinguished by any spectacular achievements. What is unusual about Hedgeland is that from the moment he set foot on Chinese soil in 1898 until his retirement 32 years later, he documented his entire career with photographs.

Tennis matches and tea parties

It is difficult to identify who actually took the photographs in Hedgeland’s collection. Some were undoubtedly taken by Hedgeland himself - he occasionally expressed an interest in photography in his letters - yet he also seems to have collected photographs from other amateur photographers in the Customs staff and occasionally purchased them from professional photographers. After he returned to Britain in 1930, Hedgeland’s collection was compiled into three albums, now housed in the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. There are no images of momentous events in China’s modern history or of turning points in the history of Sino-foreign relations in this collection. As was typical of photographic souvenirs taken home to Britain from China, a couple of gruesome shots of executions are included, but Hedgeland’s taste was on the whole more mundane. He preferred instead to record bunds, offices, colleagues, tennis matches and tea parties. The value of this collection, then, lies in what it can tell us about the different milieus in which the Customs Service operated, and, moreover, what it was like to work for this organisation.

By the time that Hedgeland retired in 1930, there were Customs offices in almost 50 ports, stretching from...
commercial entrepôts of the eastern seaboard to China’s furthest inland reaches. Within his first eight years of employment in the Customs, Hedge-
land had served in sub-tropical Hainan (1898-99) in the south, Nanjing (1899-
1903) on the Yangzi River, and the north-eastern port of Tianjin (1903-06). There then followed a move back to the south, first with a posting in the Portu-
guese colony of Macau (1906-09) and then in British Hong Kong (1909-11), before he embarked on his first home leave (1911-13). The variety of profes-
sional, social, commercial and envi-
ronmental conditions which Customs 
employees were required to acclimatise to during their careers is immediately visible on a browse through Hedge-
land’s albums. The white suits, pith hel-
mets and palm trees, which feature in 
snapshots of jaunts around Hainan and Macao, contrast sharply with his pho-
tographs of the snow-covered streets of Tianjin’s British concession. Whilst the written record offers us a partial view of these diverse environments, Hedge-
land’s albums, which juxtapose shots of the colonial grandeur of buildings on the Peak in Hong Kong with uninspir-
ing snaps of the Nanning bund, more directly convey a sense of just how far the Customs, and the foreign presence more generally, reached into China. On returning from home leave in 1913, Hedge-
lamb spent much of the remain-
der of his career consigned to isolated inland ports, with the exception of year-
long stints in charge of the Shantou (1925-26) and Canton (1926-27) offices. One such port was Nanning, a posting viewed with trepidation in Customs circles. First opened to foreign trade in 1907, attempts to turn Nanning into a trading centre ultimately foundered. Nanning’s many failings as a treaty port, and the failure of the Customs to effectively assert its control over trade in the area, are all too evident in Hedge-
land’s photographs of the crumbling bund, buildings submerged under 30 feet of water during the record floods of 1913, and mountains of confiscated opium. Furthermore, although a couple of prominent foreign firms, the Asiatic Petroleum Corporation and British American Tobacco, set up shop in Nan-
ing, the resident foreign community was tiny. ‘There is practically no soci-
ety at Nanning, and there is no amuse-
ment here that one does not make for 
oneself,’ Hedge-bland lamented in 1917. Ever-resourceful, he gamely attempted to develop the social life of the port, and even harboured dreams of turn-
ing Nanning into a ‘summer resort’ for foreigners in the south. However, his photographs of the makeshift golf

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The gaps in photograph collections, and what the photographer chooses not to record, are also significant. In Hedgeland’s collection the absence of photographs documenting the tumultuous political events of the early decades of 20th century China suggests much about his mentality, and that of his fellow Customs officers. For the most part Hedgeland was stationed in quiet ports, yet he was on the scene during the anti-British strike and boycott of 1925 in Shantou and was Commissioner in Canton (1926-27) during an important phase in the Guomindang’s rise to power. Yet, whereas Hedgeland’s letters to the Inspectorate General diligently reported on political events in the area, his photographs betray a lack of personal curiosity in China’s politics. Although they made much of their position as ‘servants of the dragon throne’, the majority of the foreign staff, with a handful of exceptions, exhibited little more than a cursory interest in China’s development as a nation.1

Routine work and occasional dramas
Hedgeland fastidiously collected photographs of the various offices he worked in and the people he worked with, Chinese and foreign. As such, his albums form a rare visual archive of the routine work and occasional dramas which constituted the working world of the Customs, which does much to enhance our understanding of how the organisation operated at a local level. Moreover, these images also offer a candid glimpse of the social and professional relationships which coloured working for the Customs. Camaraderie is captured in, for example, an informal map of junior Indoor Staff men in Nanjing relaxing after dinner in the Customs mess, yet the clearly demarcated social and professional boundaries which fractured the staff are also palpable. The vast cultural distance between the Chinese and foreign Indoor staffs is conspicuous on comparison of a group portrait of the Chinese clerks at Tianjin in 1905, awkwardly assembled before the camera and clad in changpao robes, (fig. 10) and a portrait of Hedgeland and fellow Customs Assistant P.F. M. Kremers attired in Western tweed suits and wielding walking sticks (fig.12). The divisions which cross-batched the Customs staff (figs. 14, 12), however, were not only based on race. Take, for example, Hedgeland’s formally posed photographs of the Customs staff at the various ports he served in. The besuited European staff themselves appeared conspicuously foreign when placed between foreign and Chinese society, and thereby maintain clear boundaries between foreign and Chinese society, are unambiguous in Hedgeland’s collection. All this is, of course, hinted at or discussed in the written records of semi-colonial China. Yet only photographs can effectively show us these differences, distances and incongruities. Whereas, for example, successive Inspector Generals insisted that the foreign staff should consider themselves ‘the countryside’ of their Chinese colleagues, formally posed staff photographs instead suggest the discomforts of proximity. Letters, diaries and so forth are much more selective about what they choose to reveal, yet in photographs everything deemed too trivial or unsuitable for the written record is often very plainly on view.

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1 CSA, 293(2) 3537, ‘Hanning Semi-Official, 1900-21,’ semi-official no. 75, Hedgeland to I.G. Aglen, 12 January 1914.
2 See Jeffrey Auerbach, ‘Imperial Boredom and the Administration of Empire,’ Common Knowledge, 11:2 (2005), 283-305, for a discussion of the boredom which permeated careers in colonial administration more generally.
3 CSA, 293(2) 3537, ‘Hanning Semi-Official, 1900-21,’ semi-official no. 75, Hedgeland to I.G. Aglen, 13 January 1914.
4 See J. Auerbach, ‘Imperial Boredom and the Administration of Empire,’ Common Knowledge, 11:2 (2005), 283-305, for a discussion of the boredom which permeated careers in colonial administration more generally.
5 Quote taken from the title of Charles Drexel, Servants of the Dragon Throne: Being the Lives of Edward and Cecil Bourn (London, 1906). For exceptions see, for example, China consul, diplomat and short-lived Inspector General of the Customs in 1894, Sir Thomas Francis Wade, produced texts on the Chinese language. H. B. Morse, in the Customs 1874-1909, pursued a post-Customs career as an historian of China’s trade and international relations.
Historical views and histories of viewing

Olive Moore

Created by Chinese and British photographers, many photographs that the Historical Photographs of China project safeguards exemplify an extraordinarily confident handling of the camera as an implement of historical record. Both professional and amateur images, usually motivated to some extent by the ideological concerns of institutions that employed the individuals who made them, these photographs include views of commercial endeavour, industrial progress, philanthropic enterprise, political ceremonies, diplomatic junctures, tourist views, street assemblies and battles, not to mention some symbolic bonfires (of opium; of Frenchman’s bread), and a range of other practices. The categorisation of these images encouraged them to gaze on the venerable face, in the same way as westerners who hang an image of their ruler in their homes.

A drawing room and an empress-dowager.

Even the more personal mementoes among a domestic category of souvenirs is a view of the drawing room in the Senior Customs Assistant’s residence at Macao, ca. 1906 (fig. 17), for it captures what pictures the incumbent of his office hung on the walls. Most remarkable is the presence of the empress-dowager Cixi in three or perhaps five of the famous photographs dating to the period 1903-05, when the Qing ruler commissioned numerous portraits of herself (fig. 18). In 1904, no doubt aware of the role of the photograph in international dealings, Cixi had sent one of her portraits for presentation to the German empress Augusta Viktoria. Even more remarkably that year, the palace tacitly approved when the Japanese publishing entrepreneur Takano Bunjiro in Shanghai prepared a number of the dowager portraits for commercial distribution. The publisher’s recommendation to potential buyers of these images encouraged them “to gaze on the venerable face, in the same way as westerners who hang an image of their ruler in their homes”.

This is a small discovery, but it is a fascinating visual rejoinder to the story of the empress-dowager’s earliest attempts to put her image into public circulation. Hanging in this particular drawing room, the presence of the empress also highlights the unique political relations between the British Customs service and the de facto ruler of the Qing empire. Regardless of how the Macao Assistant, Reginald Hedgecock, acquired these portraits, his ownership is proof that Cixi’s efforts to have herself photographed in a number of costumes and surrounded by a changing repertoire of elegant objects was not impelled by palace boredom and vanity. Instead, it was consonant with a Qing government strategy that subjected the photographic image to its full potential in hitherto untested functions of foreign and internal diplomacy.

Histories of different practices of photography

The Project’s photographs also document the history of a visual medium that underwent repeated changes over the centuries following the first formal announcement of a photographic process in Paris in 1839. No less significant, the photographic work of a British customs commissioner, for instance, juxtaposed with that of a Chinese politician in the Republican era raises interesting questions of how photographic vision was variously determined by native and foreign practices. What kind of photography does a collection of photographs spanning several decades represent? One answer to the question is defined by the year 1888. From then onwards, following the Eastman Company’s production of the Kodak camera, people’s experience of photography in many parts of the world was increasingly limited to - and liberated by - nothing more than aiming the lens. “You press the button - we do the rest” was the unforgettable sales pitch. In 1900, Kodak began production of the long-running ‘Brownie’, aiming its simplicity and cheapness partly towards children. (fig. 16) The snapped photograph, which engendered the new Chinese verb cài, now came into its own. One of the critical developments was the dramatic shortening of exposure times, which allowed the photographer to ‘freeze’ and capture objects in movement. Felice Beatto’s frequently reproduced photograph of a north corner of the Peking city walls (fig. 15), for instance, is an eerily unpopulated architectural view, since, during its long exposure time, the passers-by slid away from any permanent optical grasp. Such an image belongs to the history of quite another kind of photography.
with the advent of the 20th century, two quite diverse practices of photography absorbed the attention of varied and sometimes inter-related priorities.

One hugely arresting photograph that is a self-referential address to these issues is the portrait of Min Chin (fig. 19) by Fu Bingchang (Foo Pingsheung). Fu was a Republican politician and diplomat, as well as a seriously engaged amateur photographer who practiced all the necessary skills to develop and print his photographs. Min crouches slightly as she manipulates the controls and the shutter release of a Voigtländer 'Superb' camera. No 'Brownie' this, but arguably the best camera on the market (after 1933) for professional and amateur work. Fu's image is a portrait of Min and a leading product of the precision optics industry. It looks snapped, but, of course, it is carefully arranged (and photographed with Fu's second camera). It is also a photograph of taking a certain kind of photograph. The woman smiles and aims the camera downwards. Is this to suggest photographing a child? Leaving aside what anyone's fantasies might have been at that moment, forget not that the marketing of the snapshot had targeted children for several decades by now. Hundreds of pages of Kodak literature, for example, published in Chinese and distributed from Shanghai throughout China in 1927. Why Armstrong should have been motivated to photograph local country people is unknown, since it seems not to have been any part of his work. Striking, however, is the fact that he systematised these images in a way that is exactly analogous with the visual archives of social control used in China before and during Armstrong's service in Shanghai (fig. 20). As if to make the correspondence even closer, he even cut away the backgrounds of some of his figures in order to paste the remaining cut-outs against a blank surface.

When Armstrong arrived in Shanghai in 1893, an administrative culture of visual control was a long-established political fact. In 1863 the foreign-controlled Shanghai Municipal Council stipulated that Chinese servants employed in the Shanghai international settlement must be registered and photographed. Many regions of the world confronted similar articulations to enhance urban police work at the end of the 19th century. Chinese circumstances seem to have been particularly receptive to such methods. In Beijing the surviving palace archive of eunuch staff includes photographs of the newest recruits, similarly arranged four to a page (fig. 21). Thus, Armstrong's images, and also recall, match a colonial practice of seeing and archiving, fully consonant with western and Japanese imperialist penetration into the city and made periodic forays into the surrounding region. He departed from China in 1937. Why Armstrong should have been motivated to photograph local country people is unknown, since it seems not to have been any part of his work. Striking, however, is the fact that he systematised these images in a way that is exactly analogous with the visual archives of social control used in China before and during Armstrong's service in Shanghai (fig. 20). As if to make the correspondence even closer, he even cut away the backgrounds of some of his figures in order to paste the remaining cut-outs against a blank surface.

Striving for the snapshot

Not all photography became suddenly as easy as the marketing of the snapshot would suggest, but a new partnership between the individual and the photographic industry reformulated ideas about how and when to do photography. One of the effects of this revolution was that it created new expectations of how photographed human bodies might look less formally posed. Portable and speedily operated apparatus freed millions from the establishment, conventions and opening hours of the photographic studio. Studies of photography in China have tended to stress exclusively the studio portrait as if it were a supreme artistic genre or else the only possible photographic transaction in the visual economy of late Qing and Republican China. Of course, studio portraits deserve attention, but some of their shifts in content and form merit analysis in context with photographic pursuits that happened outside the norms and practices of studio business. Indeed, from the 1890s onwards, the notion of photographic truth increasingly stressed informality as one of the most important qualities of amateur and professional photographs. Even photographers using sophisticated equipment - as well as some working for studios - strived for a 'snapshot' look. This does not mean, however, that the old style of rigorously posed portraits and groups disappeared, for millions of consumers clung tenaciously to social and political ideals visualised by horizontal evenness, vertical symmetry, and hierarchical order. Instead,
many parts of the world in the 1890s, a control strategy developed much earlier with the cooperation of native administrators.

Clearly, different kinds of photographic visions were at work in the creation of these various archives. Fu Bingchang is a fascinating individual and probably the best photographer in the present group, even though it remains difficult to relate his work with that of others, since he operated amid such rare social and political privileges. His motive to take photographs was inevitably different from most foreign residents. Fu might have least expected it, but he would never live in mainland China again after 1949. His British contemporaries, on the other hand, counted on retiring from their posts and returning to the other side of the world. Even while their imminent departure was still distant, they shot photographs to enable consumption at a distance, that is, to show absent contemporaries and future generations what China looks like.

Capturing the historical moment

Detectably at variance too is how some subjects of photographs and their makers cooperated in their conscious efforts to make the historical moment visible. The photograph of Hedgeland and his staff before the Nanning Customs House (Guangxi province) is probably not quite the formal image that every one expected, since Hedgeland was distracted by his dog during the exposure. Never mind, for the assembly of official garb, maritime uniforms, doorway calligraphy and a hierarchical arrangement of bodies impart much of the practical and symbolic realities of this remote station within its larger fiscal and political universe (fig. 22). To create the human face of this institution, the photographer and his clients followed conventions that differ not so much in form from photographs of exclusively western institutional groups. That said, the image also shows an arguably Chinese preference for the familiar studio props of pot plants as well as for sufficient depth to include the name of the building centrally and prominently.

Consider by contrast, then, another photograph, not in the Project’s collection, which shows a view of an entirely Chinese group dating only a few years later and located in the commercially vibrant uplands of southern Shanxi (fig. 23). In this view of daily work for the Qixian (Qi county) Tobacco Agency, men of various occupations are posed around the machines, tools and packaging equipment of a processing plant. Except for five figures in various positions of authority (occupying positions along the image’s central vertical axis) everyone acts out his appointed function in a number of action poses. A strong notion of theatricality attends not quite the formal image that every one expected, since Hedgeland was distracted by his dog during the exposure. Nevertheless, for the assembly of formal pose, maritime uniforms, doorway calligraphy and a hierarchical arrangement of bodies impart much of the practical and symbolic realities of this remote station within its larger fiscal and political universe (fig. 22). To create the human face of this institution, the photographer and his clients followed conventions that differ not so much in form from photographs of exclusively western institutional groups. That said, the image also shows an arguably Chinese preference for the familiar studio props of pot plants as well as for sufficient depth to include the name of the building centrally and prominently.

The cultural determination of different visual priorities makes photography the absorbing subject that it is. That is to say, it is possible to comment on earlier visions of China during a period that intensified Chinese-foreign exchanges. Historically, research of this nature demands working across cultural, economic and institutional contexts and, even at risk of making the categories ‘Chinese’ and ‘foreign’ too absolute, it requires that historical exploration of what is now established as a British archive be conducted as far as possible within each constituent image’s original fields of space and time in China.
The current programme of work grew out of a Chung-Chiau Foundation and Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project on the ‘History of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service’. A large number of descendants or relatives of former members of the Service contacted the research team via its website, and they often had photographs and documents which they were willing to share with the project team. Moreover, as the Customs project researchers explored collections relating to the Service archived in Britain it was also realised that some of these included photographs that were not easily accessible to scholars. A similar pattern had accompanied earlier research on the Shanghai Municipal Police, and it became apparent that large numbers of potential highly interesting historical photographs, relating to many different facets of the foreign experience in China, were in private hands in the United Kingdom. The ‘Historical Photographs of China’ project aims to locate, digitise and disseminate this virtual resource to the scholarly community, and to the wider public. Starting with photographs relating to the Maritime Customs, and related subjects, the team began processing material in early 2008. The photographs in the ‘Historical Photographs of China’ collection mostly come from the sources outlined below. Currently 3,500 images are publicly available on the project website (http://shanghaidiap.cn/), with others coming on stream in 2008-09. Those photographs relating to Shanghai are also accessible via the Virtual Shanghai project pages at http://virtualshanghai.lsb-l.ncl.ac.uk/, as the project is working together with the team at 1Yon led by Christian Henriot.

The project was accorded Academy Research Project status by the British Academy in 2007. The team hopes to secure additional funding, and welcomes additional suggestions of material, or interest in collaboration. There is clearly more out there that we are already aware of than we can work on. The website will continue to grow, and a travelling exhibition is showing at The Museum of East Asian Art, Bath, from 3 January-3 April 2008, and at Durham University’s Oriental Museum from 24 April to 30 August 2008. An introduction to the project and its collections has also been published, with reproductions of 12 images across the wide range of collections now digitised, including William Armstrong’s smiling ‘peasants’ and his Shanghai street-scenes, as well as Fu Bingchang’s smart young women and his007 disgustedly lighthearted Guangzhou revolutionaries.

William Armstrong collection: c.500 photographs taken between 1917 and 1927, in four albums, belonging to William Armstrong, a Scottish member of the Shanghai International Settlement’s Municipal Police force. Many appear to have been taken by him, but some were probably purchased or otherwise acquired through work channels. Owned privately.

Banister family collection: c.900 photographs, 1890s to early 1920s, by various photographers. The Reverend William Banister (1851-1928) served with the Church Missionary Society in Fujian province and Hong Kong, and was created first (Anglican) Bishop of Kwangsi and Hunan in 1909. His son, T. Roger Banister, served in the Chinese Maritime Customs Service (1913-44). Owned privately.

Carrall family collection: c.500 photographs in two albums, put together by the daughters of James Wilcockes Carrall (Imperial Maritime Customs Service, served 1888-1902). The pictures date from approximately 1896 to 1925, when the Carralls lived in Chefoo, many were apparently taken by Muriel Fawcett Carrall. Now transferred to Queen’s University Belfast Library. Special Collections.

Cottrell collection: 150 photographs, 1931-51, belonging to a family of Methodist missionaries working in Yunnan province. Many were taken by Fred or Marjorie Cottrell. Owned privately.


Fu Bingchang collection: c.2,500 photographs (loose and in albums) and negatives, many taken by Fu Bingchang, 1920s to 1930s. A graduate of Hong Kong University, Fu was subsequently involved in revolutionary politics in Canton, serving, in amongst other posts, as Superintendent of Customs and Commissioner for Foreign Affairs at Canton 1922-6, as Ambassador to the U.S.S.R. (1949-53), and as Vice President of the Judicial Yuan in Taiwan 1955-56. Owned privately.

Hedgeland collection: c.600 photographs, 1898 to 1937, in three albums, documenting the career of R. F. C. Hedgeland (Chinese Maritime Customs, served 1898-1937). Many of the photos were taken by Hedgeland and others assembled by him. SOAS Library, Archives, PP MS52.

Oswald collection: five albums and some loose prints of this tea-trading Foochow family’s photograph album, 1880s to 1950s. These include early ‘instantaneous’ snapshot photograph, as well as some fine professionally produced photos. The photographs are part of a wider collection of papers relating to the family and their business which is awaiting cataloguing at SOAS Archives.

Palmer collection: 150 photos from China in two albums. William A. Palmer served in the Shanghai Municipal Police (1913-26), and subsequently worked for the Asiatic Petroleum Company in China. The photographs date from the 1920s. Owned privately.

Phipps collection: 137 mostly early 20th century photos, taken or acquired by Harold Evans Phipps, Shanghai Municipal Police (1928-56) and collected in one album. Family portraits, work-related photographs, executions, and images of political and military events are juxtaposed in this striking collection. Owned privately.

Wilkinson collection: an album of family snaps from the 1930s and two albums of scenic photographs, probably purchased by Edward Edwin Wilkinson, who was for the Asiatic Petroleum Company. Owned privately.

Photograph details

Fig. 1, An unknown woman, c.1932, Fu Bingchang: Fu Bingchang collection (fu-s03).

Fig. 2, A small girl, Taikin, region west of Shanghai, c.1932-34, W. Armstrong: Armstrong collection (1932-34).

Fig. 3, A page from one of William Armstrong’s albums, women and girls, Taikin region west of Shanghai, c.1932-34, W. Armstrong: Armstrong collection (1932-34).

Fig. 4, Portrait of an unknown woman, c.1932, Fu Pingchang: Fu Bingchang collection (1932).

Fig. 5, A page from one of William Armstrong’s albums, women and girls, Taikin region west of Shanghai, c.1932-34, W. Armstrong: Armstrong collection (1932-34).

Fig. 6, A page from one of William Armstrong’s albums, women and girls, Taikin region west of Shanghai, c.1932-34, W. Armstrong: Armstrong collection (1932-34).