CHINESE PHOTOGRAPHY

NOTES TOWARD A CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS
OF A WESTERN MEDIUM

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Photography in China began by imitating Western models. The earliest examiners were British and French explorer-photographers, such as John Thomson and Felix Beato, who concentrated on scenic views and portraits of "native types," in an effort to document a land few Europeans had seen. Before such photographers arrived, European explorers had commissioned local artists to make highly realistic illustrations of native flora, fauna, and customs. (Later, they commissioned painters to make copies of personal photographs, usually either enlarged to oil paintings or reduced to painted ivory miniatures.) These artisans were the ones who then learned the trades of photography. The treaty ports—especially Shanghai, Guangzhou (Canton), and Hong Kong—rapidly filled with photographic studios, the first one we know of opening in Hong Kong in 1865. Most offered both photographic portraits and painted renditions of photographs for sale, and at first catered to British and European seamen and travelers, who generally wanted souvenir portraits or books of views. In addition to serving this Western market, however, photographers and illustrations began making portraits of wealthy Chinese. But in these portraits, they did not adhere to a Western aesthetic.

John Thomson, who wrote a great deal about his experiences in nineteenth-century China in addition to photographing there, did not think much of Chinese portrait work:

...as far as the natives were concerned, the majority wore the Bud- dhist expression of still indifference, and were seated all of the time on a full, with limbs forming a series of equal angles to the right and left. A Chinaman will not suffer himself—if he can avoid it—to be posed so as to produce a profile or three-quarter face. His reason being that the portrait must show him to be possessed of two eyes and two ears, and that his round face is perfect as the full moon, the same careful observance of symmetry is carried out in the entire figure of the face. The face, too, must be as nearly as possible de- vided so that the shadow, or there be any shadow at all, it must be equal on both sides. The only photographer whose work he praised was A. Fong, whose work was beautiful to the Western eye. Judging from his portfolios of photographs, he must be an ardent admirer of the beautiful in nature, for some of his pictures, besides being extremely well executed, are remarkable for their artistic choice of position. In the respect he offers the only exception to all the native photographers I have come across during my travels in China.

In fact, the work that Thomson criticized tapped directly into the Chinese tradition of ancestor and funeral portraiture, but because he lacked a framework in which to understand it, Thomson dismissed it.

The Chinese fine art painting tradition at no time took realism as its goal. In the tradition of ancestor and funeral portraiture, however, distinct from fine art and considered rather as functional art, realism was important. Funeral portraits, carried with the coffin in the funeral procession and later placed in shrines, were supposed to be resting places for the soul of the deceased, and had to be as realistic as possible so as not to let the soul know that it was being de- ceived by an image. The imported technology of photography worked perfectly in this ancient tradition. Ancestor portraits, related to funeral portraits, were elaborate paint- ings, usually of persons of high status, which were kept as relics. Their format was identical to the early photographic portraits made by Chinese photographers—mounts, full- body poses, centered and symmetrical with plenty of visual cues to indicate the status of the sitter. (Cases included ceremo- nial costumes and placement within the photograph; a seated person was more important than a standing person, the person on the left was more important than the person on the right, and the person in the center was most important.)

In Mainland China today, people often request to be photographed fully body, in contrast to being bisected by the camera. In Chinese images, there is a powerful sense of dig-
nified self-presentation: people usually do not smile for the camera, and there are no candid photographs (Suan Sontag's discussion of this is worth reading). In Hong Kong, although full-body portraits are now seldom photographed in traditional style, full-faced portraits of deceased family members are still used in funeral processions and placed in shrines. The widespread custom of inlaying a small ceramic tile portrait of a deceased person into their tombstone is a continuation of the ancestor portrait tradition. Portrait studios do a dual business, producing these tiles for a Chinese clientele as well as Western-style portraits, which have evolved stylistically over the years.

In both China and Europe, then, photography served an interest in the "truthful" representation of reality. In China the place for realistic representations was in the context of rituals and beliefs surrounding death and burial. In the West, such realism was connected both with the aesthetic of single-point perspective and a corresponding desire for "scientif
tional Chinese painting, which he holds as an ideal in his mind as he looks for a corresponding physical reality.9 Mary Hong Kong salon photographers work both in the traditional Chinese style and in a more Western pictorial style, but make a clear distinction between the two kinds of work. The Chinese style photograph received a title and date calligraphed on the surface of the print, and a personal seal stamped onto paper, cut out, and then attached to the image.

On the mainland, photography took a different turn after 1949. Beginning in the 1920s, there had been a number of very active photography associations, pictorial magazines, and newspapers that carried photographs. With the Revolution, some of these activities were disbanded, as photographs became an integral part of the political restructuring of the country. Picture magazines (hua boa) flourished in the early years of the Revolution. In addition, the practice of sidewalk photographic displays was instituted as a way to present pictorial information to the public. The magazines and displays were used to build support for the programs of the new regime.10

In 1966, the government created a central photographers' organization, which has been through a number of changes—it was closed down during the Cultural Revolution of 1965-1976. It exists now as the Chinese Photographers' Association, and is the central agency serving both to support and direct photography in China. Its offices publish China's three photography magazines—Dangdang Zheying (Popular Photography), Zhong Guo Zheying (Chinese Photog
tography), and Guo Zheying (International Photography)—hold classes in photography, and sponsor exhibitions either from their own membership (usually large group exhibitions representing the major photographers in collaboration with photographers from outside China who pay for their own exhibitions in spaces provided by the Chinese Photog
tography Association). The national exhibitions and magazines are well received by the public; there is a great interest in photography in China.

I recently had the opportunity to travel in China for three months and to research the history of Chinese photography. Since I am partly of Chinese ancestry and speak simple Chinese, I was allowed to travel freely without official gui
dance, however, guides and interpreters were available at my request, and when official meetings were held. I worked with an interpreter for the sake of optimum communication. In addition, I had many informal conversa
tions with people I met—in Chinese, English, or a combinat

Both pictures from a 1930s Shanghai photography magazine.
unofficial perspective. The members and officials of the Chinese Photographers’ Association whom I met in Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou (the three major centers of Chinese photography), and in Chengdu (the major city in the Western part of China) were extremely helpful. I saw exhibitions that they had sponsored and spent several days looking through the central archives in Beijing of photographs from 1910 to the present. In addition, I met with the editors of the three photography magazines and of two of the pictorial magazines published by other government agencies (China Pictorial and Minorities Picture), a magazine devoted to presenting the folk customs and news of China’s many cultural minorities. In each city I visited, I lectured through an interpreter and showed slides of American photography.

The information I was able to gather was limited by many factors, including the length of my stay (too short to get an in-depth sense of the work done in each region of such a large country). One of the facts that I was able to verify is that there was no visit to China, whose customs and socio-political realities require an initial adjustment. However, I thought that what I saw and heard was not information that I would have discovered by leisurely browsing through the libraries of the Chinese. The literacy of the Chinese is very high, as is the literacy rate. The literate Chinese read newspapers, periodicals, and other literate publications. They are well informed about the current events and the political developments in China. They are aware of the accomplishments of the Chinese in various fields, including science and technology. They are also aware of the progress made by the Chinese in the arts, including photography.

The photography I saw was fascinating and impressive. It showed the diversity and richness of Chinese photography, and it was a pleasure to see the work of such a talented and diverse group of photographers. The photography I saw was not limited to the work of Chinese photographers. I also saw photographs taken by foreign photographers, such as the work of the American photographers who photographed the people and places of China. I was impressed with the quality of the work and the creativity of the photographers. The photographs I saw were a testament to the talent and dedication of the Chinese photographer.

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I could hear them gossip about me, and for once I felt like a strange "creature" from outer space bringing them the most outrageous weapon—the camera.4

The documentation of China by Hong Kong photographers falls into two rough groups along generational lines: beautiful color landscapes and portraits by older photographers, and black and white street pictures by younger, Western-influenced photographers. This latter work is part of a third wave of Chinese photography, which, like the early portraits and the pictorial salon work, is based on a Chinese adaptation of Western modes. A number of young photographers work in both a commercial style and the academic/institute arts style that we are familiar with in the West, but bring their own cultural background to it. The street photography done in China bears a close resemblance to Western street photography, but it is less aggressive: though people are photographed without their knowledge, they tend to be shown in a more dignified light. In the last five years a number of young photographers have received training at Western universities and returned to Hong Kong. Their work has a special quality to it, drawing as it does on a dual cultural experience. It blends the non-subject-oriented approach prevalent in contemporary Western art photography (exploration of formal, temporal, or linguistic aspects of the medium) with Asian subject matter, seen in a self-conscious way, with a visual sensibility colored by a Chinese cultural heritage.

There is an important issue that grows out of seeing photography in a cultural context rather than as purely the product of individual minds: the issue of power relationships and the camera. Photography was brought into China by Westerners, following the Western subjugation of parts of China. The camera came on the heels of the utilitarian as the symbolic method of alter-the-fate appropriation. Western photographers first made photographs of the Chinese; when the Chinese learned photography they did not reverse the process. It is almost as if the camera, a Western instrument, points in one direction only—from mainstream Western culture outwards. In essence, a power relationship is expressed through the use of the camera; the person behind it tends to be socially dominant over the person in front. Westerners entered China forcibly and photographed it. Hong Kong Chinese, who are relatively Westernized and economically powerful, also enter China and photograph. Hong Kong photographers tend not to photograph Westerners; they concentrate on photographing Chinese people and customs. On the rare occasions that they do photograph a Western subject, they choose a seductive woman. Even young Hong Kong photographers who have studied in the West choose to photograph in the Chinese minority community wherever they are studying, or else not to photograph people at all. Mainland Chinese photographers tend not to photograph either Westerners or Hong Kong Chinese, but each other and their ethnic minorities. And while in mainland China there is a conspicuous absence of photographs exploring or depicting people from other cultures, this is in striking contrast to the Western obsession with photographing anyone from a less powerful culture.

Within their own societies, photographers in Hong Kong, China, and the West tend to point their cameras at socially vulnerable points of entry. For example, Western photographers, who have traditionally been from the middle class, often use their medium to record life on the fringes of their own culture, in addition to exploring other parts of the world. John Thomson is an excellent example: he first photographed in Asia, then returned to England to document the lives of the urban indigent in London. In the U.S., countless photographers, photographing for middle-class viewers, make a point of using non-middle-class people as their subjects. In both the U.S. and Hong Kong, and sometimes focus on women, children, and older people—the vulnerable or second-class members of society. I have already mentioned the preponderance in Mainland Chinese photography of images of pretty women and minority people, but it seemed to me that the majority of the portraits I saw were of minority subjects, who are colorful and exotic to the Han Chinese. The exception to this tendency in each culture is photography the famous, but in a sense, public figures or celebrities are also socially vulnerable and cannot enforce their privacy.

In each of these cultures, the camera points from the person with the power to enter someone else’s space to the person less able to defend his or her space. It is interesting that apart from the tradition of family portraits or snapshots, which seems to be universal wherever there are cameras, most art photographers in China, Hong Kong, and the U.S. have tended to photograph anything but their own ordinary daily life. (This has recently changed in the U.S., for several reasons.)

With this analysis, I am trying to suggest a model for how photography in each of these cultures reflects the power structure and the desire to mediate within the culture. In overview, Hong Kong photographers are trying to connect a Chinese heritage with Western influence in a way that is authentic for them. Correspondingly, in China, photographers are trying to create a positive national image which can inpire individuals with collective goals, and at the same time open them to controlled outside influences. In the West we could be said to photograph those who are different from ourselves, perhaps out of a desire to consume and appropriate the “other” on our terms and thereby be at the center of the universe. In the sense that they are deep cultural indicators, used without consciousness of their full meanings but because of those meanings, photographs seem to be art in the broadest and richest sense of the word.

NOTES
1. Taiwan also represents a point of comparison with Mainland Chinese culture. I chose Hong Kong because of the continuing frequent communication between Hong Kong and the Mainland and because Hong Kong is a center of photography.
4. Ibid., p. 186.
6. This interview was provided by Robert Lam, assistant curator of the Hong Kong Museum of History.
8. In the U.S., as in many parts of the world, there are similar avant-garde organizations which espouse a similar aesthetic of photography, i.e., the beautiful photographic presentation of accepted subject matter. These societies all participate in international competitions, and when they do, Hong Kong photographers almost always dominate. Any list of international salon awards will show a substantial number of Hong Kong photographers among the top 10 prize winners.
9. All quotes are from Sontag.
10. Conversation with Pan Xue Nan, who has done extensive research on China-in-exile, sidewalk, photographic displays.