

Terry Bennett, *History of Photography in China, 1842-1860*, London, Bernard Quaritch Ltd, 2009, pp. 242, 150 plus illustrations.

### **Valery Garrett**

Much has been written on Western and Chinese painters in China in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. But with the exception of Felix Beato and John Thomson, subjects of recent exhibitions, very little is said about photographers producing images of that exotic country visited by few. Now Terry Bennett, an international authority on historical photographs and author of books on photography in Japan and Korea, has put together an impressive volume on photography in China, 1842-1860.

This first comprehensive history of the earliest years of photography, from the end of the first Opium War to the end of the Second China War, combines previously unpublished research with over 150 photographs, many of which are attributed and published here for the first time. The author sheds new light on the unique value of these photographs and the book reads smoothly and well.

Previous books of photographs in China have concentrated on the subject matter. Here Bennett focuses on the photographers and says, "...some nineteenth-century photographs are truly artistic. In those cases, should we not want to know the name of the artist – and something of his life and history? One of the aims of this book has, therefore, been to try wherever possible to identify the photographer. Beyond that I have also tried to discover something about the lives and personalities of the photographers."

To achieve this, the topics for each of the chapters are organised into lists of photographers with biographical details both brief and extensive when required. The history and development of photography in China is thus shown through the lives of the photographers working at that time. Photographic terms are placed at the end of the book to benefit readers like myself who need a gentle reminder.

Most photographs in China before 1861 were taken by foreigners – soldiers, missionaries, diplomats, traders and commercial photographers. Bennett tells us the earliest recorded use of a camera was in July 1842 by Dr Richard Woosnam and Major General Malcolm who took daguerreotypes probably at Jiaoshan (Zhenjiang) along the Yangtze River at the end of the First Opium War.

No other record has survived of this experiment, unlike those taken by Jules Itier in 1844, whose more than forty daguerreotype photographs of Macau and Canton (Guangzhou) are the earliest known surviving photographs of China so far discovered. Itier describes spending a day with a Chinese official, photographing him and his family, during which a party of “five high officials of Canton.....[came] to see the marvellous invention which the whole town was talking about... Everyone was delighted with his own photograph...”

The first Chinese photographer was Zou Boqi from Nanhai near Canton. He was a scientist, cartographer and mathematician who developed his own photographic equipment and in 1844 produced China’s first home-made camera. However, though he must have known of Itier and others in Canton in the 1840s, he appears to have worked independently of them.

The first commercial studio in China was set up in Hong Kong in 1844 by American artist and professional photographer, George West. No known photographs survive but a number of his paintings remain of his years in China. Others attempted to open studios in Shanghai in the late 1850s, but soon closed. It was clearly difficult to maintain a commercially viable studio in China where there were too few resident foreigners. In Canton in particular, Chinese painters like Tinqu and Youqua had studios turning out folios of paintings of scenery, flora and scenes of daily life which had long been popular souvenirs to carry home. Chinese artists produced paintings on glass and oils of traders and ships’ captains, while George Chinnery, based in Macau, had regular commissions to be fulfilled in oils. This habit of having a painting made to order must have taken time to break.

Pierre Rossier was the first professional photographer to make a tour of China – and Japan – to bring back commercial views to Europe. He arrived in Hong Kong in 1858 and worked for Negretti & Zambra, a major retailer of stereoscopic photographs. He also opened a temporary studio in Hong Kong. The following year Negretti exhibited for the first time twenty-five of Rossier’s stereoviews of Canton and Hong Kong, the earliest occasion that commercial photographs of China and Hong Kong were on display. Several of these are illustrated in Bennett’s book along with numerous rare and little known photographs, most of them in the author’s collection.

There grew to be dozens of amateur photographers among the ranks of diplomats, missionaries and traders, too many to account for, so Bennett profiles the

most significant, both Chinese and Western. The chapters on the Second China War or Second Opium War as Bennett refers to it, focuses on the French and British photographers with particular reference to amateur turned professional photographer, Charles Parker of the Royal Engineers.

The chapter on diplomats in China is equally informative, dealing as it does with two of the attaches to Lord Elgin's embassy to China in 1857-9 who were charged with the responsibility of recording the main events on camera. One of them was the second, and lesser known son, of Dr Robert Morrison, the Protestant missionary who arrived in Canton in 1807. Robert Morrison was appointed to the Diplomatic Service between 1857-58 and several of his photographs are illustrated.

Images of the Second China War deals with well known photographer, Felix Beato and his remarkable photos of the northern forts and the area in and around Beijing. The last chapter is on studio activity in Hong Kong and includes many familiar photos of the colony and people of those early days, especially from Milton Miller's studio, probably the best known photographer of the time.

A Chronology of Chinese Photography up to 1860 and a list of Regional Photography in China from 1842 to 1860 closes the book. It is a marvellous resource for anyone interested in the photographers, sights and people from those early days of Hong Kong and China. My only quibble is that an Index would have been most useful and it is to be hoped this can be included in the follow up volume on photographs from 1860 due in 2011.

**Valery Garrett's** interest in traditional clothing worn in Hong Kong began in the 1970s, and she has become a respected authority on Chinese dress, serving as consultant for museums and collections around the world. She is the author of eleven books, including "*Chinese Dress from the Qing Dynasty to the Present*" published by Tuttle with over 500 illustrations. Her history of Guangzhou, first published by Oxford University Press, has recently been reissued in paperback by Marshall Cavendish International with the revised title "*Heaven is High, the Emperor Far Away: Old Guangzhou and China Trade*". She is an Honorary Research Fellow at the Centre of Asian Studies, Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Hong Kong.

