

Visualizing China: China 1850-1950

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Robert Bickers

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Andrea Janku

It is perhaps less true today than it was a decade ago that ‘an enormous number of early photographs of China lie largely ignored or unknown’, as Regine Thiriez, one of the pioneers of the field who has spent many years collecting and studying scattered and often very small albums, wrote in 1999.⁽¹⁾ During the last two decades the so-called ‘pictorial turn’ in the humanities (a term coined by W. J. T. Mitchell) has increased historians’ awareness of the wealth and value of visual sources, including historical photographs covering a wide range of motives and issues, from the highly public and political to the most intimate and everyday aspects of life. In China in particular the interest in the latter has found expression in the highly successful magazine *Lao zhaopian* (‘Old photographs’) launched in 1996, and also in an anarchically growing supply of historical photographs posted on the internet on all kinds of websites and blogs. This increased interest, together with new technological possibilities, has boosted the search for long-neglected image archives and the development of repositories and databases to make them more widely available, mostly but not exclusively by major national and research libraries, such as the British Library’s [Images Online](#) [2] or Harvard University Library’s [Visual Information Access platform](#) [3], which includes resources such as the [The Hedda Morrison Photographs of China, 1933–1946](#) [4].

At the same time a large number of smaller specialized archives have been made available online. Dr T. Matthew Ciolek has compiled a list of such websites of historical photographs related to Asian and Pacific Studies (now discontinued).⁽²⁾ In the field of East Asian Studies one of the most successful of the projects that hope to present image databases (though not exclusively photographs in this case) in a way to make them fit for educational purposes is MIT’s [Visualizing Cultures](#) [5]. The approach taken here is to present and analyze images in the form of visual narratives.

A thematically more specialized project is Christian Henriot’s comprehensive [Virtual Shanghai: Shanghai Urban Space in Time](#) [6] website produced at the Institut d’Asie Orientale in Lyons. It is broader in the sense that alongside photographs it also comprises maps and texts, in an effort to produce a comprehensive database on the history of Shanghai, and has been incorporated into a new portal called [The Virtual Cities Project](#) [7], which brings it together with similar projects on Beijing, Saigon, Suzhou, Tianjin, Wuhan and Xi’an, some of which are still in the ‘under construction’ phase. In what appears to be an interlocking

network of websites some of these projects are further linked to a new portal called [Visual Cultures in East Asia](#) [8], also under the aegis of the Institut d'Asie Orientale in Lyons. Robert Bicker's (University of Bristol) [Historical Photographs of China](#) [9] website, started in 2006, was produced in collaboration with the Lyons Institute. It has now also become part of the *Visual Cultures in Asia* portal.

[Visualizing China](#) [10] is a spin-off of the *Historical Photographs of China* website, largely building on and further developing the same image database that now comprises more than 8000 photographs taken in China between 1850 and 1950 and digitised at the University of Bristol's Department of Historical Studies under the aegis of Robert Bickers. It brings together scattered materials found in a large number of academic, commercial and private collections (containing photographs from 'foreign businessmen, staff of the administrations in the Chinese treaty ports, missionaries, and officials of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service') as well as many small and forgotten albums found in attics and trunks'.⁽³⁾ However, *Visualizing China* presents these images in a way that is decidedly different from all the resources referred to above. The first feature a visitor of the JISC-funded website is confronted with is a series of photographs accompanied by questions: 'A rural woman with a toddler' – Why should the photographer, the Shanghai detective William Armstrong, have been interested in this kind of motives? 'Who, where, exactly when?' are the questions accompanying the next picture showing Mikhail Borodin together with Chiang Kai-shek and others taken by the diplomat Fu Bingchang. 'Boys in uniform. Why?' – What is the background of a group of four young boys posing in smart uniforms for a studio photograph? Or simply 'Where and when?' – Are you able to provide information about this unidentified photograph of a guarded entrance to what appears to be a British installation in one of China's treaty ports? This is a challenging project. The user is addressed not as a passive consumer, but primarily as an active participator and contributor. Consequently the most prominent functions offered on the entry page include not only a search field, but also a sign-in link leading to an OpenID login page, which gives access to 'My workbench,' and a feedback button. In addition every field in the individual data sets allows for additional comments and suggestions.

The next feature on this page, entitled 'Republican China in transition', gives an example of how one could use this treasure trove. A highly concise introduction to Canton in the 1920s accompanies a selection of nine photographs, which appear to be randomly chosen from among the different representations of life in republican Canton contained in the database. They come from five different sources, to wit the Banister, Swire, Fu, Shakee/Shaji, and Hedgeland collections. A link leads to a somewhat larger collection of 36 photographs showing more images of 'Canton' from the period 1920–30. There is quite a lot to discover on this page, and much of this is not immediately obvious. When, for example, the map link in the right margin says that '343 of all the results have been geo-tagged', then this seems to refer to the overall number of hits produced by a search for 'Canton'. The smaller result that is being shown has been produced through the 'refine by date' function, which in addition to a year scale also shows in a small graph the distribution of the overall results over the period from 1850 to 1950. The large majority are from 1920 to 1930, though there are other spikes in 1911 and in 1907. Only through clicking 'show items without date information' does the overall result of 469 become visible. Another, albeit in my view less convincing, feature is the 'Explore' function, which produces various links to other related materials within the database. This works reasonably well with a limited number of links, but once there are lots of them (which is mostly the case) the graphical representation is not very satisfying. Once an image one would like to use further is identified, there is either the option to download it or to add it to the workbench, from where sets of images can be exported into an html file. As opposed to many other databases which come with detailed explanations and instructions nobody ever reads, this website clearly follows a more intuitive approach, which in my view works well if one is willing to spend some time playing with it.

The self-stated aim of this project is 'Bringing Chinese history to life ...' – the title of the third main feature of the entry page, which very briefly explains what kinds of materials the database includes and links to more information about the project partners and a project bloc. At this point I would appreciate more information about individual collections referred to in the individual datasets. Who were Banister and Hedgeland? What is the Shekee/Shaji collection? As it stands, further information is only available on the *Historical Photographs of China* website for the more prominent collections, such as those of Fu Bingchang

and G. Warren Swire, or for those from major archives such as the Chinese Maritime Customs or the Shanghai Municipal Police. It is left to the user to find out about the identities of all the other less well-known people who lent their names to the various 'sub-collections'. There may be reasons for this omission, but these are not necessarily obvious. Notwithstanding these shortcomings, if one is prepared to explore different ways to search and browse through the various collections, this resource has much to offer that may indeed bring Chinese history to life. Even though the bulk of the material presents a Western perspective of treaty port China and its environs (the geo-tags attached to a large number of images unsurprisingly show clusters along the east China coast and the Yangzi valley), it is by far not limited to treaty port life. The Western perspective has the advantage to show many aspects of everyday life and rural scenes Chinese photographers may not have been much interested in. This is clearly shown in the contrast between the images from the Fu Bingchang collection (the only one from a Chinese photographer, it seems), which tend to be of famous people (mostly fellow politicians) and the photographer's personal acquaintances (many very interesting portraits), and, for example, the Banister collection, which includes shots of a pedlar in a street, agricultural workers irrigating a rice field, and people busy building the foundations of a house. Searches for terms such as 'women', 'men', and 'children', or 'boats', 'landscapes', and 'irrigation' may all open doors to new fields of enquiry – not to mention the peculiar Western interest in photographs of Chinese women's feet. Particular years or places are other searches well worth exploring. A search for the year 1863 turned out one of the earliest photographs in this database (from the Hughes collection), which shows the Flower Pagoda in Canton. It is indeed interesting to contrast this image with a photo of what appears to be another incarnation of the same pagoda in the [Wikipedia](#) [11] entry on the 'Temple of the six Banyan Trees'. Taken together, these images do indeed give access to life in China in the last two decades of the Qing dynasty and the republican period as we would hardly imagine it based on the majority of the written accounts that tend to focus on the darker sides of history.

But, as indicated above, the project is much more ambitious than that, as it not only provides convenient access to major collections as well as to scattered and hitherto unseen and inaccessible private resources, but more importantly it hopes to do that in a way that utilizes the interactive possibilities of the internet. In the editor's own words, it 'offers cross-searching with related online collections to help avoid time-consuming searches across multiple sites'. Among the most notable examples here would be Bicker's own *Historical Photographs of China*, but also the [Sir Robert Hart Collection](#) [12] at Queen's University in Belfast and [Joseph Needham's Photographs of Wartime China](#) [13] at the Needham Research Institute in Cambridge. Moreover it is hoped that through the 'comment' function further information to, and comments on, the existing records will be added by users, and also that eventually the scope of the database will be expanded significantly by incorporating or linking to other online resources. Future plans, as stated on the website, include the possibility to add or link to 'other relevant resources by incorporating moderated online content which can then be browsed and searched through this single point of access (for example images on Picasa, Flickr, Internet Archive, personal libraries of related Google books, videos from YouTube or online journals)'. Thus *Visualising China* attempts to both use internet technology to link up existing resources and share knowledge in an intelligent way, and, through user logins and private workspaces ('My workbench'), to create individual learning and research environments. Obviously the success of all this will very much depend on how enthusiastically this resource will be embraced by researchers, students and teachers alike. To make this happen may well need a vigorous effort to introduce well-designed units for use in school and university classrooms (perhaps along the lines of the *Visualizing Cultures* project, while maintaining the much more open approach of *Visualising China*). The design seems well conceived, and it is attractive and flexible enough to make this a very promising option for the further development of this website.

Notes

1. Regine Thiriez, 'Creating a user's guide on early photography in China', p. 6 <<http://pnclink.org/annual/annual1999/1999pdf/thiriez.pdf> [14]> [accessed 11 December 2011].[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Asian & Pacific Studies - Historical Photographs*, ed. T. Matthew Ciolek [<http://www.ciolek.com/WWWVLPages/AsiaPages/Asian-Historical-Photographs.html> [15] [accessed

11 December 2011].[Back to \(2\)](#)

3. A selection of these photographs has been exhibited in London, Bath and Durham under the title 'Picturing China 1870–1950: photographs from British collections', and a booklet with the same title edited by Robert Bickers, Catherine Ladds, Jamie Carstairs and Yee Wah Foo was published in the series *Chinese Maritime Customs Occasional Papers* (no.1) in 2007.[Back to \(3\)](#)
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Links

- [1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7841>
- [2] https://imagesonline.bl.uk/?service=page&action=show_home_page&language=en
- [3] http://via.lib.harvard.edu/via/deliver/advancedsearch?_collection=via
- [4] <http://hcl.harvard.edu/libraries/harvard-yenching/collections/morrison/>
- [5] <http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/home/index.html>
- [6] <http://www.virtualshanghai.net/>
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