



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 underestimate 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.¹ 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



(fig. 1)



(fig. 2)

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 Shang-

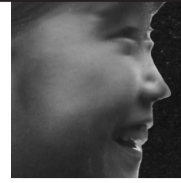
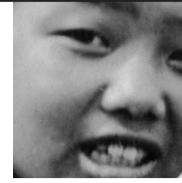
hai around Lake Tai (*Taihu*). Fu, allied to the 'Prince's clique' around Sun Ke, Sun Yat-sen's son, went on to enjoy a respectable political and diplomatic career until 1949, when, after having served as R.O.C. ambassador to the U.S.S.R. (1943-49), he fell out with the leadership and moved to Europe, 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. 5) of 1926-27. But there are also snaps of police emergencies, of a bank robber's tunnel, a note-forgery's printing press, 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

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¹ Sessional papers, 15/1921, Report on the census of the colony for 1921, p. 159.

² From a valedictory article published to mark his departure, in the North China Herald 4 June 1927, p. 421.



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 house-boat holidays that we know he took in the waterways west of Shanghai around Lake Tai.² (figs. 2, 3-4, 6-7) 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 foreigner'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.³ 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 Chiang Kai-shek, 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 sullen committee delegates 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 ambassadorship 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).



(fig. 3-4)



(fig. 5)

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 Lossing Buck 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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² On Fu see Yee Wah Foo, 'A Chinese photographer: Foo Ping-sheung (Fu Bingchang)', in Robert Bickers, Catherine Ladds, Jamie Carstairs and Yee Wah Foo, *Picturing China, 1870-1950: Photographs from British Collections* (Bristol: Chinese Maritime Customs Project Occasional Papers, No.1, 2007), pp. 45-8.

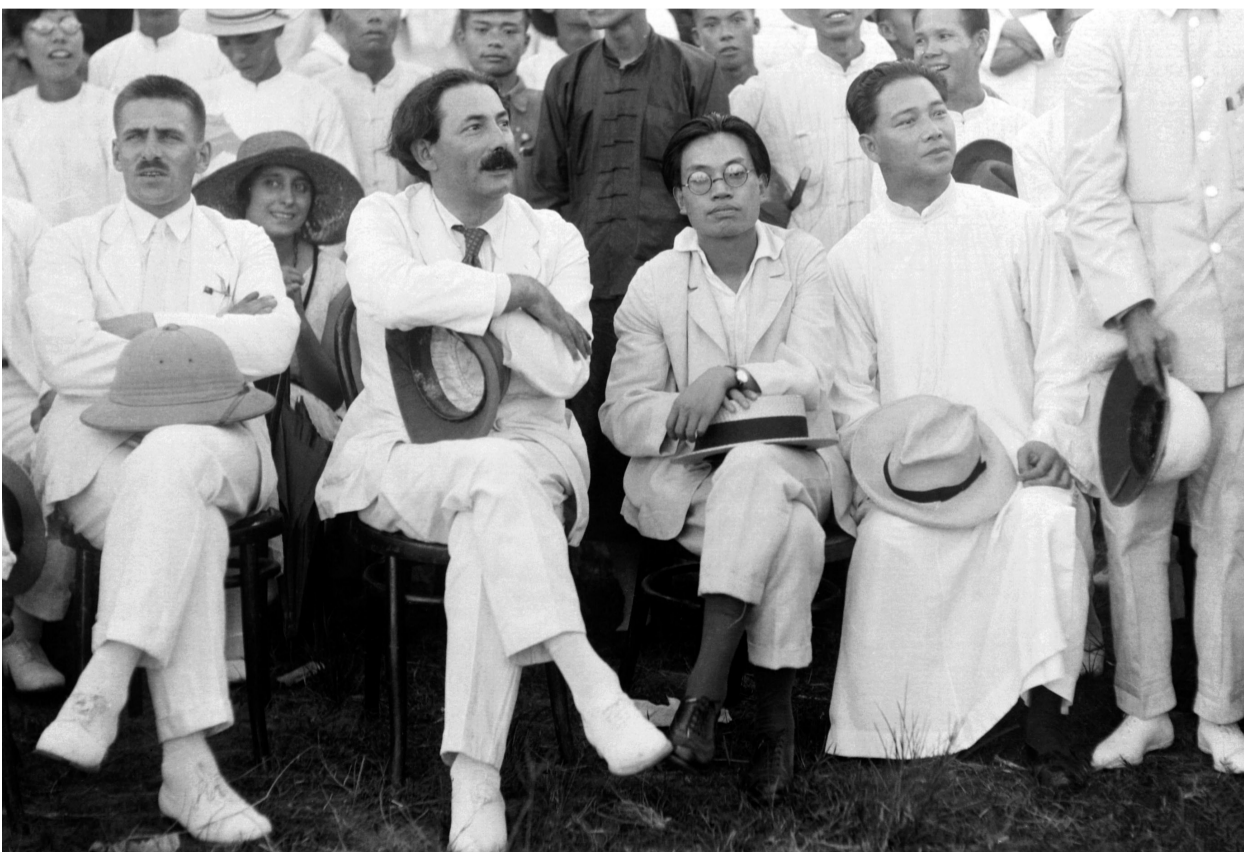
³ R.H. Tawney, *Land and Labour in China* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1932), p. 77.



(fig. 6-7)



(fig. 8)



(fig. 9)

permanently up to the neck in water, so that even a ripple is enough to drown him'.⁴ 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 1965.⁵ 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 ene-

mies, 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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⁵ *Rent Collection Courtyard: A Revolution in Sculpture* (Beijing: Supplement to *China Reconstructs*, 1967). The origin and impact of the sculpture, and latter controversy, are assessed in Kela Shang, "'Rent Collection Courtyard': Fair Use Doctrine Revisited in the Context of Postmodern Visuality", *Perspectives* 7:4 (2006), pp. 223-47.