

Impressions of a lost world

Photography in China 1860-1950



Ferry M. Bertholet

MERCATORFONDS

Acknowledgements

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Ha-ta-men Street, 'Evening in the Streets of Peking', 1910-1920.
 Donald Mennie (1875/76-1941). Photogravure (detail), 18.6 x 26.7 cm.
 On the background are two pailou, memorial arches or honorary portals.

Preface

*On a wide and earthen (dusty?) street
 sounds slowly fade away.
 The heat of the day has softened.
 Scents and odours linger in the air.
 Rickshaw-runners pace their stride
 between people walking home.
 Rays of golden light
 cast shadows on the sand.*

Old photographs can be enchanted, they bring a vanished world to life. The spectator is swallowed: for a moment he may be present in a long bygone time.

Around 1840 photography was introduced in China. In this period the Celestial Empire was ravaged by wars and bloody revolts. The first photographers were European visitors, settlers, missionaries and scientists. Their photos were intended solely for the Western market. The knowledge of other parts of the world was quite limited. Photos brought the mysteries of the other side of the world a bit closer. They fuelled the interest in faraway, exotic countries.

The circumstances in which the first photographers worked were not easy. On their tours they trawled around with a large, difficult to handle camera, a hefty, wooden tripod construction, heavy glass plates and the necessary chemicals. (fig. xx) The technical process required that the plates were prepared shortly before, and developed shortly after the exposure. If one waited too long, the sensitivity of the emulsion would deteriorate.

The working on the glass plates took place in a tent that was brought along specifically for this purpose and drawn up in the vicinity. The position of the camera was accurately determined. Because of the long shutter-time, movements of both the camera and the topic had to be avoided as far as possible. It was too cumbersome and too precious to let photos fail. In several cases however, we notice that during taking the picture, bystanders have walked through the image, with the result that vague shadows were recorded on the plate. (fig. xx)

Itinerant photographers had to deal with heavy ordeals such as primitive transportation, poor accommodation and firm travel restrictions, which were imposed by the authorities. They frequently were facing a superstitious, fearful and sometimes even hostile population who never had seen a foreigner. On one of his trips the famous photographer John Thomson narrowly escaped death when enraged bystanders pelted with stones by raging bystanders during his work. He had to defend himself with his tripod.

In addition to topics like Palace architecture, pagodas, temples, artfully landscaped gardens, harbor views, street scenes, studio portraits, etc., western photographers also gave a picture of the in their eyes bad habits of China, such as the binding of women feet, smoking of opium, gambling and the implementation of cruel punishments and executions. From the side of the Chinese there was generally an attitude of indifference. One could muster no appreciation for the mechanical view of reality. Besides, the images of their everyday environment added nothing that could be of any importance for them.

'Impressions of a lost world' shows a personal choice from a collection of rare photographic images from China at that time. These photos are often fascinating and poignant, not only because of the aesthetic beauty but also by the atmosphere and the emotional charge that they depict. This book is basically about human beings with an emphasis on urban life. Thus we see probing street scenes, life on the waterways, group portraits, brothels, executions and performances of street theatre.

I used material of famous and of totally unknown photographers, from early albumen prints, magic lantern photo slides, stereo photographs and silver print postcards to 'snapshots' that by none other than the maker and its immediate surroundings are seen. Without these photographic images our impression of earlier times would completely be blurred.

In some cases I have decided to crop a photo. Faded and damaged photos are reproduced in their original glory using digital techniques.

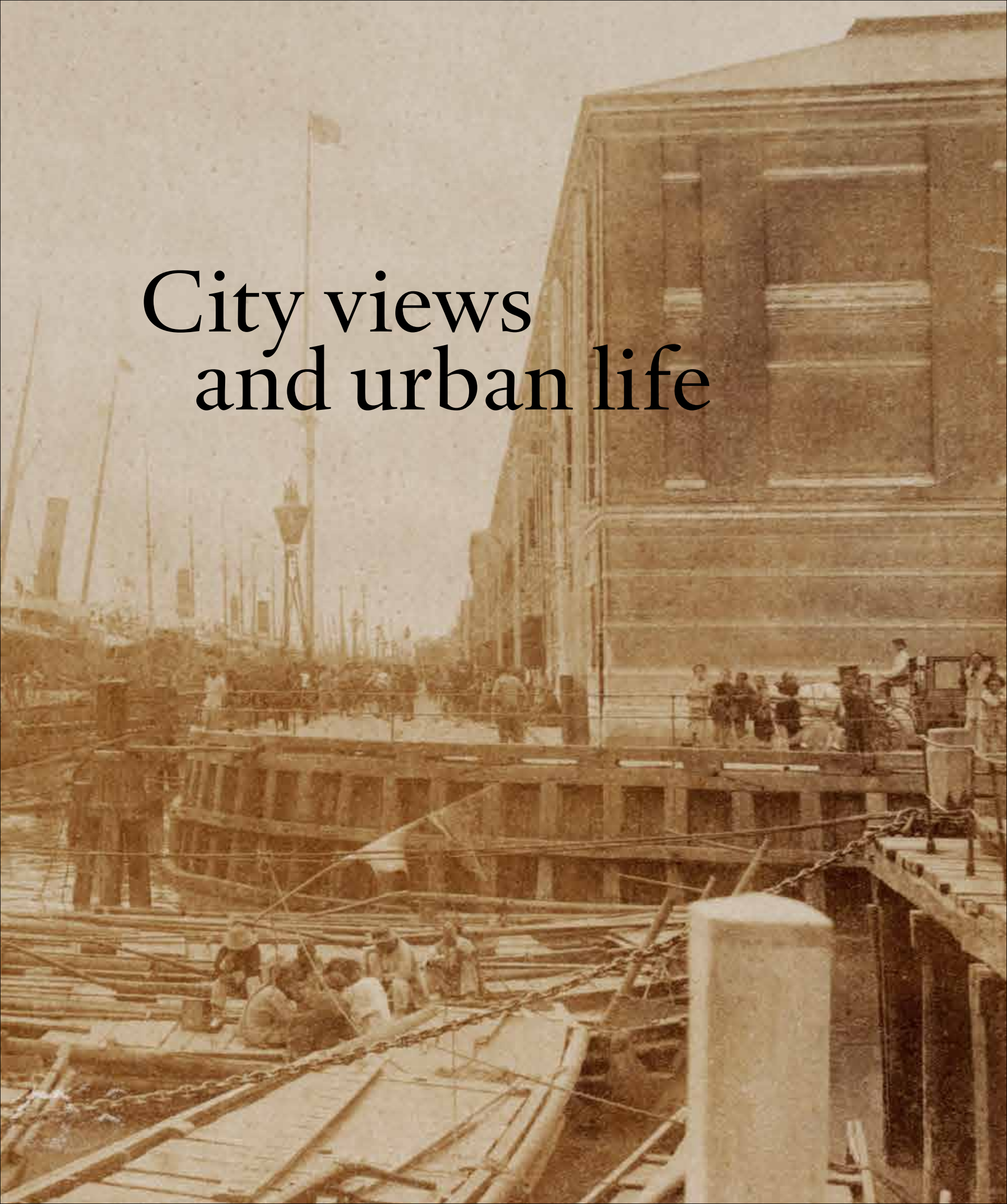
The approach to the subject is unconventional and thus differs significantly from previous – mostly academic – publications in this field. The issue here is not so much the scientific and technical backgrounds; my goal is to create a certain surprise by offering an impressive visual spectacle out of ancient imagery. The lyrics are reduced to a minimum so that the viewer can see and make his or her own discoveries. It's our imagination that matters.

F.M. Bertholet

History of photography in China



A photo shop at the corner of Nanking and Lloyd Road, 1890-1900. Albumen print, 21 x 26.5 cm. This shop is closely situated to the Bund. Its clientele exists mainly out of westerners. Nearly all bystanders are aware of the fact that a photo is being taken and they stare into the lens full of attention and cheerful curiosity.



City views
and urban life



Outside the walls around the old Chinese city of Shanghai, c. 1870.
William Saunders (1832-1892). Albumen print, 20.1 x 25.1 cm. Torn down in 1912,
the wall was erected in 1554 as a protection against pirates in the area.

CITY VIEWS AND CITY LIFE

Shanghai

*The early morning light breaches the ancient wall,
it's purpose long forgotten.
Smooth as silk, the waters below
await the traffic of a thousand boats.
A new day is born
in the 'City above the Sea'.*

tekst volgt



Inside the old walled city, close to the 'Pleasure Garden', where the courtesans used to stay. After the Taiping revolt (1850-1864) they gradually moved into the foreign concessions, c. 1900. Gelatin silver print, 12 x 16.2 cm.



Street market in the Chinese area of the western concession, c. 1870. William Saunders. Albumen print (detail), 20.9 x 26.8 cm. Much of the selling was done in the open. The citizens bought their vegetables from itinerant hawkers who went from street to street. They attracted costumers by their own special cry or tune.



One of the entrances to the old city near the French concession, c. 1890. Albumen print, 21.3 x 26.9 cm. The supply of fresh water was limited. The majority of the common people used water from nearby wells or water distributed by sellers. Therefore all families needed a big vat to store water. At the right hand side of the bridge one can see a shop with these earthenware vats which were produced in kilns.



Low tide at the Yang-king-pang creek, 1880-1885. Albumen print, 20.4 x 26.6 cm. In the front several large earthenware vats are stored at the muddy bank of the river. On the opposite embankment, several passengers gather together around the displayed goods of street vendors.



Yang-king-pang creek with boats transporting wooden branches and straw, c. 1900. Gelatin silver print, 7.8 x 13 cm.

>> A crowded Chinese street in the International settlement, 1890-1900. Albumen print, 19 x 21.7 cm. This is most probably Nanking Road, a shopping area for wealthy people. On the top right there is a sign for burial material, 'the clothes for the death', straight under it we see the signs of a pawn shop and a hat shop.





Pedestrian and vehicular traffic at the Northern Gate, between the old Chinese city and the French concession. c. 1890. Gelatin silver print, 12.3 x 17.8 cm. At this junction we can see rickshaws, a sedan chair and a group of single-wheeled carts or wheelbarrows, parked at the left hand side of the street.



Concession outside the walled Chinese city, c. 1900. Gelatin silver print, 9.8 x 13.8 cm. Rickshaws and wheelbarrows were not allowed to transport their clients from one concession to another. At the junctions between the concessions the rickshaw men were awaiting the changing travellers.

>> Low tide in a creek outside the old city walls of Shanghai, c. 1910. Gelatin silver print, 9.9 x 14 cm. At the right hand side we see the French concession. Note the sampans laying in the mud between the stone embankments; whole families used to live on these small boats.





The French Bund, 1899-1900. Albumen print (detail), 21,3 x 26,9 cm.
Several large passenger and trade ships have anchored at the quay of the Huangpu river, while rickshaw men are waiting for their costumers.



South market

Hong Kong

*Two men carry a sedan chair
to a client, high above.
Over their heads in silence,
laundry hangs to dry.
A mournful steamer's horn
sounds from the harbour deep.*



Peel Street c. 1910. Gelatin silver print (detail), 9 x 14 cm. The road was built in the 1840's and named after the British prime minister Sir Robert Peel. In this area of Hong Kong Island, the sedan chair was the only mode of transportation, as for the rickshaws, which were introduced in 1870, the steep terrain was not suitable. Courtesy Wayne Chen.

>> Panoramic view of the Praya, 1867-68. William Pryor Floyd (act. 1865-74). Albumen print, 19 x 27 cm. The Praya looking west from the end of Government Pier towards Central and The Peak.





Queen's Road, 1890-1900. Albumen print, 20.5 x 27.4 cm.



Queen's Building and Praya Central, 1880's. Albumen print, 19.7 x 27.8 cm.



Wellington Street looking east, 1875-85. Afong Lai (c. 1859-1940) 21,5 x 27,6 cm.



> Queen's Road crescent, West End, c. 1900. Gelatin silver print (from a stereo card), 8,3 x 7,8 cm.

>> Sampan beached during typhoon season, 1900's. Gelatin silver print detail, 7,7 x 12,3 cm.

