Portraits from China, 1923–1946

Photographs and Their Subjects

Portraits from China, 1923–1946, explores the relationship between photographer and subject. Three pairs of eyes—the professional photographer Hedda Hammer Morrison, the self-made scholar Owen Lattimore, and the naturalist-anthropologist Frederick Wulsin—offer us vivid portraits of China in a turbulent time. Morrison's peddlers in the streets of Beijing, Lattimore's soldiers in the Communist Party bastion of Yan'an, and Wulsin's lamas in the temples of Wangyefu dramatize China's geographic and cultural complexity. These portraits are products of the imagination: the result of collaboration between the sitter and the photographer or of the photographer's control of the captured image.

Photography arrived in China in the early 1840s, only a few years after the invention of the daguerreotype. For more than 150 years—excluding the Maoist period (1949–1976) when few foreigners were allowed to work in China—both Chinese and non-Chinese actively photographed Chinese people, street life, and landscapes. In China, as in many other parts of the world, the photographers' subject matter changed dramatically during the twentieth century, moving from formal to less formal portraits, from studios to city streets, from grand buildings and landscapes to ceremonies and handicrafts.

In China, portraiture became the stock-in-trade of Chinese and European photographers. For Chinese consumers, portrait photography had many appeals, with immortality ranking high among its attractions. Having a realistic rather than an idealized, painted image of a parent or grandparent on the ancestral altar was a strong motivation for commissioning photographic portraits. Photographic portraits also offered vicarious social and economic mobility. Through photography, anyone could pay to be someone important for an hour, and, with the printed photograph in his possession, could be that person for all time. After the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, many Chinese resumed their love affair with the camera as thousands of photographic studios reappeared.

Of the three photographers highlighted in this exhibit, Hedda Morrison is the only professional; Lattimore and Wulsin belong to a different tradition of expedition, journalistic, and scholarly photographers. Less concerned with the aesthetics of the finished print, they saw their photographs as illustrations for their academic and journalistic writings.
Hedda Hammer Morrison (1908-1991) trained at the State Institute for Photography in Munich, Germany, and traveled to Beijing in 1933, where she became the manager of Hartung’s, a German-owned photography studio. She left Hartung’s in 1938 to work as a freelance photographer. She lived in Beijing until 1946 when she moved to Hong Kong. Working with a Rolleiflex camera and a bicycle, Morrison photographed Beijing street life and created hundreds of informal portraits of city residents. There are nearly 30,000 photographs in the Hedda Morrison Collection at Harvard-Yenching Library.

Owen Lattimore (1900-1989) was a self-educated scholar and political advisor to the U.S. Government on Central Asian and Chinese affairs. He used his photographs to complement his many research monographs and articles. Of the 2,545 images that Lattimore deposited at the Peabody Museum (from 1914 and from 1924 to 1937), his photographs of Chinese Communist leaders and supporters, which he took during a four-day visit to Yan’an in June 1937, are perhaps the most famous.

Frederick R. Wulsin (1891-1961), a professional anthropologist, began his career as an explorer and natural history collector in Africa and China. In 1923, Wulsin obtained National Geographic Society funding for an expedition through western Mongolia and northwest China, where he collected specimens, took many photographs, and kept copious notes on his journey. Of the more than 2,000 photographs that Wulsin produced during this expedition, only 36 were published. Wulsin’s favorite camera was a 4 x 5 Graflex, and he and his wife, Janet, did some of their own developing on the journey. Many of his best portraits were made in Wangyefu, the seat of a Mongolian principality, where the Wulsins stayed in May 1923.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology
11 Divinity Avenue
Cambridge MA 02138
617-496-1027
www.peabody.harvard.edu