QING DYNASTY PEKING
Thomas Child's Photographs

Selections from the Stephan Loewentheil Historical Photography of China Collection
QING DYNASTY PEKING

Thomas Child’s Photographs

Selections from the Stephan Loewentheil
Historical Photography of China Collection

Exhibited at the
Sidney Mishkin Gallery, Baruch College
September 22nd - October 25th 2016

19th Century Rare Book & Photograph Shop
Important Photographs, Books, & Manuscripts
440 Kent Avenue PHA, Brooklyn, NY 11249 USA
347-329-4534 | 4101602.3407
china@19dshop.com | www.19dshop.com

This exhibition presents selections from Thomas Child’s photographs of Qing dynasty Beijing, better known as Peking in its time. Child’s photographs present the earliest comprehensive photographic survey of Beijing and its surroundings.

Thomas Child was born in Cuddesdon in Oxfordshire in 1841. In 1870, at the age of twenty-nine, Child left England for China to seek his fortune as a gas engineer for the Imperial Maritime Customs Service. While living in Beijing, Child immersed himself in the life of the local people and in the culture of the city. There he practiced photography both as an amateur, photographing the people and places that surrounded him, and as a professional, producing and selling portraits and keepsake albums to augment his engineering income.

One of the first photographers in Peking, Child mastered the wet plate collodion process used to produce the albumen silver prints seen in this exhibition. Paper photography arrived in China in the 1860s. The first photographers in China concentrated mainly on port cities easily accessible to Westerners. After the second Opium War, Western photographers began to have access to the interior of China, and Child established what would be the first and only photography studio business in nineteenth-century Beijing.
Thomas Child. No. 181, Bridal Chair.
1870s. Albumen silver print.

In this photograph Child documents the ancient Chinese custom of the bridal sedan chair. The bridal chair Child photographed is extravagantly decorated. Bridal chairs were used to carry the bride for a wedding. The bride would sit inside of the chair on her journey to meet the man she was to marry. The chair was carried by male porters, and on arrival the bride was helped down by a woman who had been busy in marriage. Traditional Chinese weddings still retain this tradition. The passage in the chair represents the bride’s transition from childhood to adulthood and from one family to another. Child writes, ‘In this kind of Sedan chair borne by eight men, the bride is conveyed closely shut up, from her parents’ house to the bridegroom’s, accompanied by music and a large procession, according to their means’.
Child took a series of three photographs relating to late Qing dynasty marriage customs. This one depicts the daughter of the Marquis Zeng Goutian, a high-ranking Han Chinese official, seated next to her groom. Child comments on the photographs: 

"Weddings are one of the stock ceremonies of the world, and every country has its own customs. In China the bridal colour is scarlet... This bride wore a scarlet satin coat embroidered with gold thread, with a skirt to match, her head dress was a mass of scarlet, gold and pearls... The color red continues to play a vital role in Chinese wedding ceremonies today."
長城


1870s. Albumen silver print.

This superb photograph shows the section of the Great Wall that includes the Nan-K'ou pass leading to Mongolia. The photograph provides evidence of the removal of forest for building materials and security. The Chinese government has reversed that policy, and this portion of the wall is now surrounded by trees on both sides.
Thomas Child.

No. 58. Last Lock of the Grand Canal.

1870s. Albumen silver print.

This is a rare view of the most important canal in Peking. The ancient sections of the Grand Canal date back to the 5th century BC, but the canal took its current form during the Sui dynasty (581-618 AD). Throughout the Qing dynasty, the Grand Canal, an important route between northern and southern China, was crucial for the transport of grain and other commodities to Peking. Child explains that 'between 7 & 8 thousand tons [of grain] arrive every year'. Child was the only 19th-century photographer to photograph the last lock of the Grand Canal.
Thomas Child. No. 72. Moat, Imperial City.

1870s. Albumen silver print.

This is an important early view providing a glimpse of the Forbidden City from across an imperial moat. Child's photograph shows 15th and 16th-century Chinese fortification systems. Most of the walls and canals were dismantled and filled in after the fall of the Qing dynasty; the few that remained were destroyed in the mid-twentieth century. Child's views of Peking's canals and city walls are rare and important historical records - the city's grand fortification systems were infrequently photographed by other early photographers.
Thomas Child.
*No. 1. Front View of Wan Shou Shan.*

1870s. Albumen silver print.

Child took a number of photographs within the grounds of the Summer Palace. This is one of his views of Longevity Hill, which like some other areas within the Summer Palace, showed the effects of war. Child notes that though the buildings are 'mostly in ruins, they look very pretty with the woodland growing over the walls...'. This photograph was taken before Empress Dowager Cixi commissioned the reconstruction of the Summer Palace's gardens, pavilions and halls.
Thomas Child.

1870s. Albumen silver print.

This magnificent memorial arch at the entrance to the Ming Tombs outside of Pe-king is the largest and most famous archway in the capital and one of the greatest in China. Child lavishes the edifice with praise: "this P'ailou is said to be the finest in China... it is made entirely of white marbles, beautifully ornamented with sculptured work..."
Thomas Child.

No. 154. Ming Tombs Avenue of Stone Figures.

1870s. Albumen silver print.

This is a view of Spirit Way at the Imperial Tombs outside Peking. The avenue, lined with solid stone sculptures, symbolizes the road leading to heaven. It is lined with twenty-four animal figures: twelve standing and twelve reclining. Each is carved from a block of marble. In addition, there are 12 sculptures of human figures along the road. The camel and elephant sculptures represent the vast territory controlled by the court. As Child notes, the placing of the heavy solid stone sculptures required 'no small engineering skill.'
Thomas Child.
1870s. Albumen silver print.

This important image by Child is the only known photograph of the grounds of Azure Cloud Temple. It is an important survival as it preserves the original context of the marble diamond throne pagoda. Although they survived the Second Opium War, the beautiful wooden buildings surrounding the diamond throne pagoda were destroyed during the Boxer War. Child comments that priests ‘built these temples in some of the loveliest spots to be found’.
Thomas Child. No. 192 Mongolian Lama.

1870s. Albumen silver print.

This is one of the earliest photographic portraits of a religious figure in Peking. In the 19th century, the term 'lama' referred to any Tibetan Buddhist monk or teacher. The lama and his pupil both hold prayer beads and bundles of sutras in their laps. Displayed neatly on the table are bronze sculptures and sacred Tibetan ritual objects including a skull cup with a bronze Buddha and a statue Kali, the goddess of Time, Power, and Destruction. This image is among the earliest photographic depictions of such sacred objects, and provides a valuable record of religious practice in the period.
QING DYNASTY
PEKING
Thomas Child's Photographs
Curated by Stacey Lambrow

Sidney Mishkin Gallery
Baruch College
135 East 22nd Street
New York City

Opening Reception:
September 22nd 2016
6 pm - 8 pm

Open to the Public:
September 23rd – October 25th 2016

Exhibition Hours:
Monday-Friday, 12 noon to 5 pm
Thursday, 12 noon to 7 pm
Saturday, 12 noon to 6 pm