

# *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*

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book review of

*Brush & Shutter: Early Photography in China* by Jeffrey W. Cody and Frances Terpak, eds.

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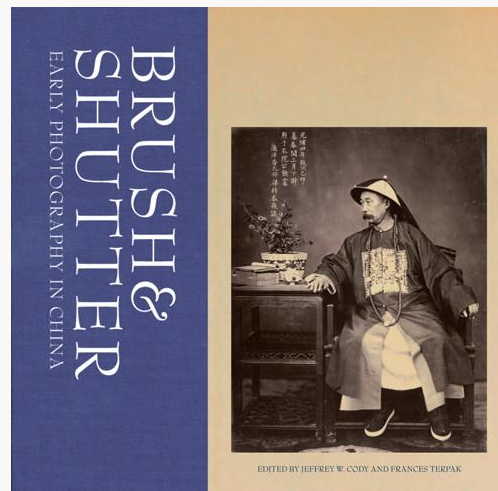
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Jeffrey W. Cody and Frances Terpak, eds., *Brush & Shutter: Early Photography in China*. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2011. 196 pp; 70 b&w and color illustrations. \$40.50 (hardcover) ISBN: 978-1-60606-054-4

*“To fully understand a historic photograph, it is critical to consider the subject matter, genre, technique, format, style, producer, and place and time of production, as well as the possible intentions associated with the images circulation collection and reproduction.”*

Jeffrey W. Cody, a senior project specialist in the Education Department at the Getty Conservation Institute along with Frances Terpak, curator of photographs at the Getty Research Institute gathered a number of early Chinese photography scholars from varying academic backgrounds and professional experiences to examine historic photographs from the Getty collection. The interdisciplinary inquiry served to guide a thorough reading of the historic photographs, gleaning the value of the photograph as a primary document. The result of the collective study characterized the exhibition and scholarly catalogue, of the same name, “Brush and Shutter: Early Photographs in China.”

The catalogue rounds out the selection of material that was originally on view at the J. Paul Getty Museum from February 8 to May 1, 2011, with its six supporting essays and an extended selection of photographs. The history of early photography in China unfolds with images from the Getty collection, supplemental archival documents, pieces from the Kelton Foundation and other notable library and museum collections. The catalog’s six essayists examine the layered history of China’s adoption of the medium at the end of the nineteenth century, from the late Qing period and into the start of the twentieth century, covering specifically the years 1859–1911. The essays, ordered chronologically, explore the western influence and the merging economic, political, and social issues that contributed to the accessibility and dissemination of the photographic process.

Chinese art historian Wu Hung introduces the book with an essay on how to study historical photography and presents a framework from which to read and understand the photographs. The basic framework suggests evaluating format, content, genre, producer, and the surrounding cultural phenomena. Within these categories, Hung outlines sub-categories as a way to establish a more refined study or evaluation. Representation, for example, is subdivided into categories including portrait, place, and architecture.

Renowned researcher in the history of Chinese photography, Edwin Lai, follows Hung with a fast-paced chapter that sets the stage for early photography in China. Lai offers an easy to understand introduction to key historical moments in a chronological and matter-of-fact style, though an accompanying map would be useful. Lai describes the intersections of historical moments in China, noting key historians and their, sometimes, opposing theories of how photography spread throughout the country. Archival illustrations are included, one of which is an 1839 clipping from the English language newspaper, *Canton Press*, published in northern China, that describes M. Daguerre's "solar light" method for capturing an image. Lai describes the economic and political situations that were significant, noting for example that "[i]t was probably not by accident that the newly established British Colony of Hong Kong became the first beachhead for visiting commercial photographers" (22). He explains how the five different treaty ports, before the Second Opium War, would have been the "logical starting points" for traveling photographers, since travel to China was otherwise limited to Hong Kong. Lai connects the moments in China's history that explain ". . . the cultural, technical, and commercial aspects of photography's global reach, as they relate to China, in the second half of the nineteenth century" (29).

The curators' essay provides an in-depth look at photography's emergence from the 1860s in Late Qing China. They describe how over a span of a couple of decades, photography ultimately shaped its national image during "several tumultuous political and social battles inside and outside the Qing court . . ." Photography was one of several technologies that "became a significant catalyst for reform . . ." and was ascribed by "officials" interested in modernization and as part of the Self-Strengthening Movement (34). Part of the agenda of that movement insisted on mastering technology, and medicine was one of the first disciplines to use photography as a means of illustration. By 1860, commercial photography studios populated the port cities and within twenty years, the boundaries between traditional and modern ways of seeing blurred as photography became more influential.

Furthering the discussion on modern imagery, art historian, Wu Hung's chapter on portraiture in early Chinese photography, reveals the complexity of representation. Hung exposes the staged portrait photography of Milton Miller, an American who worked in China from the late 1850s–1963. He argues that Miller's portraits align with the naturalistic style of American portrait photographers, where the emphasis is on the sitter's physiognomy and character (78). At the same time, Hung dissects the compositional style to determine whether Miller deliberately intended to imitate ancestor portraits, thereby reinforcing the stereotype of Chinese portraiture.

Chinese historian, Sara Fraser brings the catalog up to the 1900s, and the shift of the photographer's focus from the tradition of individual sitters to groups of laborers or "coolies". A negative representation of China is articulated in these photos, a response to historical

events. Fraser deftly explains how the political issues of the Second Opium War and the Boxer Uprising were evident in the transformed style of photography that emphasized an unfavorable representation of the Chinese. Some preconceived history or contextual knowledge of Chinese history, however, is assumed of the reader. That said, it is clearly discussed what triggered the new “frame” in which photographers chose to represent China by the end of the nineteenth century. At that time, photographers directed the lens on wartime experiences, labor, and unrest guiding the photographic format to that of documentary recordings.

Each essay in the catalog explored to some extent other artistic mediums alongside the evolution of photography in China, thus the title *Brush and Shutter*. By the end of the century, for instance, painting did not serve as well to document the significant cultural events. The documentary style gave way to photography that incorporated urban life as visual culture, which had become increasingly stimulating by the 1920s. Drawings, lithographs and albums of “pictures” were easily available and included in newspapers and journals.

The last chapter by Chinese historian, Wen-hsin Yeh, describes how “The camera made significant gains as an instrument in the everyday industrial production of urban images, especially in comparison with its circumscribed role in the nineteenth century” (114). The political scene in Chongqing or Hong Kong, by the late 1930s, however, steered the use of the camera from visual appeal to an orientation focused on propaganda. Yeh reinforces Hung’s directions for studying the photograph by paying close attention to the framing of the image—the who, what, where, why, and how. Who were the photographers, what was the purpose, what were the relationships? Was the intent to record, commemorate, certify, document, entertain, or advertise? Yeh sums up the questions about how to read historical photographs, suggesting that the photographs are “products of specific historical sites beyond the frame” (118).

The catalog is beautifully designed giving the images prominence in the layout. Images are scattered throughout, except following the sixth essay where approximately 30 pages are exclusively dedicated to large plates, some in color. The greatest flaw of the catalog is the typeface. The font is tiny, light and overly stylized. While it is understandable to want to give the images priority, considering the emphasis of the exhibition is about reading images, the lack of readability of the text does a disservice to the scholarship. (Seriously, even those who are near-sighted may need to put on some magnifying specs.) The combined scholarship makes this catalog especially worthwhile. With the varied discussions on representation, technology and image production, and Eastern-Western influences, the exhibition catalog *Brush & Shutter: Early Photography in China* will support research on the history of photography, art history and visual culture, nineteenth century art, the turn of the century, and Chinese history. It is highly recommended for academic libraries, in particular, those serving the graduate level.

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