

PHSNE Starts China Photo Preservation Project with the Chinese Photographers Association in Beijing

by Ruth Thomasian

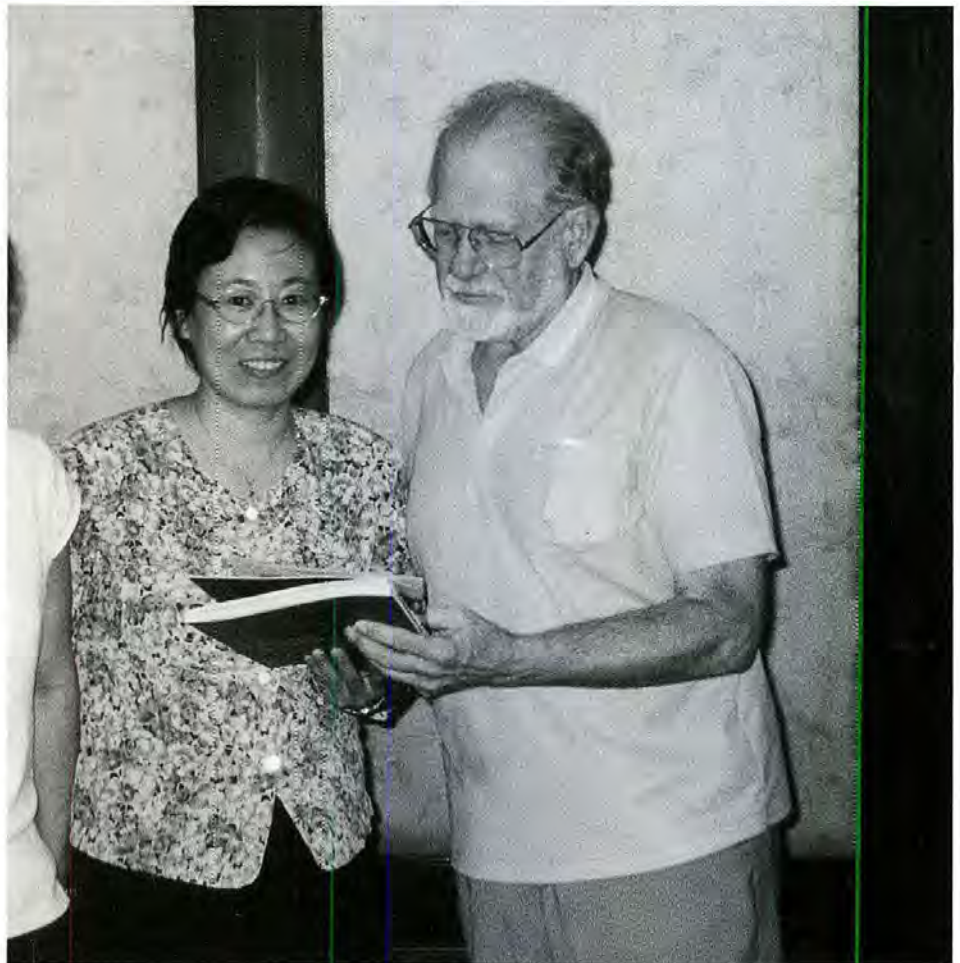
You might ask, "What does travel to China have to do with the mission of the Photographic Historical Society of New England?" We began to discover the answer on our first PHSNE trip to China in June 1999.

At historic sites like the emperor's summer and winter palaces we saw copies of vintage photographs of the emperors and their families. We were curious about who the photographers were, so we asked questions. We wondered if there was an official photographer appointed to be The Emperor's Photographer, similar to the designation used all over Europe and the Middle East.

Interestingly, it turns out that before about 1910 photographers in China were not Chinese but Europeans or Americans. The Chinese had no access to photographic technology. The elite ruling class—most of them located in eastern coastal cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Canton—sought out foreigners to take their photographs. So began our interest in the photo history of China.

By the time we took our second journey to China this past August, Ed Shaw, PHSNE's tour coordinator, had received from stereo master and PHSNE member Paul Wing copy slides of a set of stereo cards depicting life in China, circa 1890 to 1900. As Photographica Show manager, Ed had also made contact with members of the Chinese Photographers Association (CPA) in Beijing and was eager to show them the stereo views.

E-mailing back and forth to the CPA, Ed made arrangements with the Deputy Director of the International Liaison Department, Madame Sun Yancong to meet with our trip members during our stay in Beijing. The Taiwan Hotel where we stayed was kind enough to provide us a function room where 17 of our travel group gathered for an informal meeting reminiscent of our monthly PHSNE meeting with show and tell and speakers.



Madame Sun Yancong of the Chinese Photographers Association welcomes PHSNE member and China Trip Coordinator Ed Shaw to Beijing with a gift of her organization's publications, August 2000. Photo by Jim McKeown

Our speakers were Madame Sun, who is also a photographer, and her colleague photojournalist Wang Baoguo Robert. Our national tour guide Li Wenlian Helen acted as interpreter for Madame Sun who described her organization, founded in 1956, as having 4,000 members and a staff of 120 headquartered in Beijing. Members contribute funds, but the organization does receive some government funding.

The CPA has two departments devoted to exhibitions: one for domestic exhibits and another for international. CPA publishes photograph books and magazines. Its Department of the History of Photography has published four

books. It also sponsors a photo-art festival and a forum for sharing photo techniques. Madame Sun expressed how pleased she was with PHSNE's interest in helping preserve Chinese photo history. She said much had been lost during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and they looked forward to our collaborative efforts.

Mr. Wang, or Mr. Robert—as he called himself—is a journalist with China Photo Press of Beijing. Speaking in English, he said Chinese photographers have learned many things from American photographers, especially from photo publications like *National Geographic* and *Life* magazines. He said



Ed Shaw (standing right) and Ruth Thomasian (seated at left) conduct meeting at the Taiwan Hotel in Beijing with members of Chinese Photographers Association and PHSNE. Photo by Jim McKeown

he would like to get information on the history of American photography.

Ed then shared with our speakers and audience the stereo slides of old China by passing around a stereo viewer and pages of slides for freeviewing. Madame Sun and Mr. Robert were fascinated with the stereo shots, never having seen either stereo or such views of China at the turn of the 20th century. Ed said he is working on arrangements with stereo master and PHSNE member Ron Labbe to reproduce the stereo views in CD format for the CPA. Thus began PHSNE's China Photo History Preservation Project.

Trip members who attended this first meeting (there will be more!) included Steve Baker, John and Johnson Chan, Bev Conway, Bill Costa, Adrian Levesque, Eaton Lothrop, Jim McKeown, Carl Peterson, Holly Raymond, Norb Regelhaupt, Sandra and Steve Samojeden, Ed Shaw, Ruth Thomasian, Sam Trotz, and Bob Wiener.

Enthusiasm for this project spread quickly around the room. Eaton Lothrop said he had two Chinese cabinet prints to share; Adrian Levesque volunteered to scan photographs, Jim McKeown took photos of the meeting; Bill Costa said he had stereo software to help make stereo views browser-compatible on the Internet; Bev Conway of-

fered to design a web site; John and Johnson Chan are eager to help with translations, and Ruth Thomasian signed on to do PR.

Our meeting, at the end of a long day of travel in search of Chinese culture, concluded with a great beginning of another kind of travel—back in time to help preserve and protect the photographic history of the most populous

country in the world with the world's oldest surviving civilization dating back more than 4,000 years. PHSNE members and friends are invited to participate by sharing photographs, expertise, and knowledge. Please contact Ed Shaw, 617-965-0807 or ebshaw@bu.edu. And in June 2001 join PHSNE on its journey to China and Tibet. ❖



A vendor of music, assumed to be the man in the center, sells time on his Sears and Roebuck cylinder phonograph through a multiple listening device, probably in Shanghai, c. 1895-1900; one half of a stereo pair from the collection of Harry Newman; photographer unknown. Documentation by Paul Wing.

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Full itinerary in the next Journal.

Please call Ed Shaw at

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Mother and Child. Lhasa, Tibet 1984. Jack Naylor photo

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