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VISUALISING CHINA

Photographs shine the spotlight on old Shanghai

An archive of 8,000 images is now online, writes **Josephine McDermott**

The history of many British families is bound up in the country's past as an imperial power, with ancestors who lived in far-flung former colonies.

But all too often the photographs recording the lives of expats in the late 19th and early 20th centuries are stored away in dusty attics and storerooms and then eventually thrown away, when they could be very useful sources for historians and genealogists.

"When people get to their mid- to late-seventies they start binning stuff and often their children have no interest in it because they've lived with it and it's family junk to them. Grandchildren are different but they often don't get there quick enough," says Robert Bickers, Professor of History at Bristol University.

But thanks to the launch of the Visualising China website last month, an impressive digital archive of 8,000 photographs taken in China between 1870 and 1950 has been made more widely accessible.

The collection began when Prof Bickers started researching his book, *Empire*

Made Me: An Englishman Adrift in Shanghai, published in 2004. The book passes from expat to expat in Shanghai as required reading on the city in the 1920s and 1930s. It tells the story of Maurice Tinkler who left Britain to be a constable with the Shanghai Municipal Police at a time when the British exerted heavy control over the running of the city.

"I was after information – letters and diaries – when I started researching Tinkler and decided to put him in the context of the men and women in Shanghai with him. Lots of the families of policemen got in touch with me and people would often say, 'I've got pictures.'"

The pictures have since trickled in from all over the UK, China and Hong Kong and have all been scanned and indexed with the help of Jamie Carstairs, the digitisation officer on the project. They are curious snapshots of lives since forgotten. Some of the pictures are mundane, some extraordinary. Among Prof Bickers' favourites are colour slides of Shanghai taken in November in 1945. "They are



Clockwise from top left: Harold Peck carries his two children, Stanley and Barry, Chinese-style; a crowd listening to a gramophone; John Sullivan (sitting on the mast) and colleagues during the houseboat excursion; and Shanghai's Bubbling Well police station

the earliest colour slides I have ever seen," he says. He is particularly interested in how people used photographs to capture their social rise. He recalls one gentleman, previously a Yorkshire miner, seen in a photo wearing a white linen suit and a panama, sitting in a rickshaw in Japan, and concedes: "That's a long way to go."

Some are intriguing. One policeman took lots of pictures of countrywomen. "There doesn't seem to be anything sexual about it. They are quite charming. There are at least 150, taken on houseboat holidays. He left Shanghai in 1927. They were

in the hands of his nephew in Scotland."

Some photos have not made it online, such as those of executions. It appears it was a macabre habit to photograph these death scenes, to the point where now when one is unearthing, it elicits the cry: "Oh no, not another slow strangulation."

But in most cases, the motto is: "Just get them out there." "People write and say things like 'I grew up in Wuhan and I've never seen pictures like this of my city,'" says Prof Bickers. He sees putting the catalogue on the web, as a way of bringing the material back to China. Many pictures

were lost in the Japanese invasion and civil war. The Cultural Revolution (1966-76) also wiped out a lot of material. "People destroyed lots of family photographs of bourgeois behaviour from the 1930s in case it was discovered and used as evidence."

A recent thrill came when Jamie Carstairs realised that he was looking at two sets of photos taken by different people on the same trip. Two personal collections of Shanghai Municipal policemen, Harold Peck and John Sullivan, had been handed to the archive two years apart. It then became

apparent that the two men had been on the same houseboat excursion or duck-hunting trip, possibly in the waterways or lakes west of Shanghai. It serves as an indication of the exhaustive work and dedication put into cataloguing this era of Chinese history.

*If you would like to contribute photographs, email jamie.carstairs@bristol.ac.uk. A book of pictures from the collection is also available, *Picturing China 1870-1950*.*

Follow Josephine McDermott's blog at telegraph.co.uk/chelseagirlinchina

The builders who brought more than the sound of silence to Shangri-La

It's the sort of thing that could drive even the most sanguine of sorts, let alone a burnt-out, frazzled English teacher, slowly but surely round the bend.

Looking back on it now from the almost surreal calm of my Parisian apartment, I wonder what on earth possessed me to believe that a Spanish mountain village would be a haven of peace. Perhaps the gentle tinkling of the sheep bells at night and the bleating of their owners, the eerie "poop-pooing" of the Scops owl, whose cry is so reminiscent of a bleeping oven timer that it dragged me out of bed several times before I realised the kitchen was not about to explode.

Was it the heady scent of jasmine and orange blossom, or the radiant smiles of the locals that lulled me into a false sense of security? What

could possibly shatter the blissful, magical silence that bewitched every visitor?

I threw caution to the wind, sold up in England and, as in so many other stories, bought a wreck of a house and gradually did it up. Major work on the house lasted a mere six months. So, I moved in and finished off the painting and decorating. I lived very frugally for a while, but gradually found work, built up a business and began to believe that I'd finally cracked the Meaning of Life.

For two glorious years there was pure, unadulterated peace and quiet. The odd malevolent mosquito would occasionally hum loudly enough to wake me from my slumber, a lonely, lovelorn Eeyore might bray dolefully in the distance, or a stray dog yap. Small children might

Celia Nicholas found there's a different attitude to noise – and time – in Spain

even let off miniature firecrackers at fiesta time, the odd tourist lumber up the stone steps in the wee small hours, half-singing half-mumbling in a happy, sangria-sodden stupor, but all were more endearing than exasperating. I boasted to friends that I had found Shangri-La. But nothing had prepared me for The Builders.

I feel sorry for them, I really do. At least some of them, some of the time. They get an awfully bad press. But why, oh why, did they have to do major work on all three sides of my dear little house all at the same time? And for three whole years?

They would arrive at 7.45 in the morning in the heat of

summer and the chill of winter, resolutely cheerful. The hammering and angle-grinding would begin almost immediately, with my torturers pausing only briefly for a mid-morning snack. After that, there would be more thumping noises, squealing of drills and the sharp tap of hammer against metal, then silence as they skedaddled off for lunch at 2.30 in the afternoon before the boss arrived. To this day, my brain throbs at the mere thought of hearing mallet against chisel against stone.

The dear chaps were happy, smiling, friendly and even apologetic, though they were baffled at my reaction to being woken by angle

grinders at eight o'clock on a Saturday morning. Noise, they said, was inevitable and part of life. But it would all be over soon: such an interesting choice of word.

Contrary to popular belief, time does wait for some. It waits for the Spanish, who steadfastly and laudably refuse to let it rule their lives. The foolish, naive foreigner learns that *mañana* means "tomorrow" and that *mañana por la mañana* means "tomorrow morning". Disappointment will be lurking in the wings and poke its nose into every appointment made. *Mañana* can be anything between a day and three months.

So the estimated three to six months crept on to nine, then 12, carried on through Sacrosanct August, when no self-respecting builder would be seen dead with a cement

mixer, a spade or even a trowel and into September. I gently inquired about progress. "Soon," they said. And so it continued. I pleaded with them to hurry along, but as they were paid by the day, they understandably felt no pressure.

So when a friend asked if I might like to come back to Paris, what could I say? Upping sticks yet again, job-hunting as an old goat, flat-hunting and all that ensues, is not for wimps. Neither is leaving a truly beautiful place. But leave I did.

Will I return? Maybe one day. The building work is finished. I miss the tinkling of the sheep bells and the sighs of Eeyore. Peace and quiet have been restored. But then Paris has so many other charms, I may have to stay just that little bit longer ...