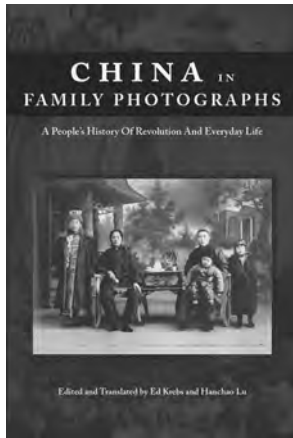


Peeling the Onion Stories



China in Family Photographs

A People's History of Revolution and Everyday Life

BY ED KREBS AND HANCHAO LU

ABINGDON, UK: ROUTLEDGE
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PAPERBACK

Reviewed by Arthur Barbeau

Asked to write a review of *China in Family Photographs*, I quickly got caught up in the task. Using stories from a series begun in 1996, Ed Krebs and Professor Hanchao Lu translate the tales based on the pictures that accompany the text. They also wrote an introduction to each piece, setting it in context. My reaction was positive, even enthusiastic.

I'd call the approach of our two authors "onion stories." They are layered. One way is to take the subject of the story and peel back that person's life for a couple of generations to see from whom and from where he/she came. Another way these accounts are layered is that they are set in an extremely turbulent time in China: the end of the Sino-Japanese War, Civil War, creation of the People's Republic, and shifts in politics and national goals. Among these were the appearance of communes; the Great Leap Forward, where the unintended consequences of government policies caused many millions of peasants to starve; and the horrors of the Cultural Revolution. There were charges, punishments, deaths, and, after the fall of the "Gang of Four," attempts at rectification for at least some of the victims.

The stories that most affected me were those about the rationing of many goods that continued into 1987, when I was at Henan University in Kaifeng. Grains and cooking oils were among those scarce goods. As a "foreign expert," it was possible to get around some of these by paying a bit more. I also needed to negotiate with my work unit (Dan Wei) in order to purchase a bicycle. There were also many "mei you" ("don't have") in menus and stores. Nostalgia gripped me as I remembered. My memories jumped back thirty years as I remembered going to get cooking oil with the necessary coupons, but the shop for oil was sold out. Recalling that, I made another leap backward of forty-plus years to World War II, when there was also rationing in the US. True, tires, gasoline, etc., didn't affect a child, but it was harder to find candy and other desirable things, and I worried how it would affect Christmas. I also remember my female classmates complaining that they could no longer find stockings.

Krebs and Lu set up reasonable categories for grouping their stories into chapters. They fully explain their methodologies. There is a good map of key cities to orient the reader. Their list of additional readings is adequate, though I feel it could be expanded into more recent time periods, but the decent index made searching for topics simpler. I did feel there were a couple of works missing. For example, Cecil Beaton was sent by England on a monthlong tour of China. Beaton was a fashion designer (*Gigi* and *My Fair Lady* were among his masterpieces) and glamor photographer, as well as a historian of fashion (*The Glass of Fashion*, 1954). His book, *China* (1946), which has great photographs, is excellent. Later, I did blow up and mount two of his photos of professors at Fudan University in Shanghai as a personal gift to that school.

For three days, I sat with *China in Family Photographs* on my closed laptop. Old enough to appreciate printed text, I could underline key words and phrases, mark important passages, and write comments in the margins. I'll admit that I was excited and satisfied.

Then, it occurred to me that something was missing. In 1992, stumbling around in Lanzhou (Gansu), I came across a mosque for women. That hooked me, and for the next quarter of a century, I've wandered about China, using whatever time I could steal on twelve trips, searching for them and their history.

Going back to Krebs and Lu's map, there is nothing to the west of Sichuan and Guizhou. However, there is a whole chapter on trying to understand the nuances of separating and understanding the stories as the People's Republic was developing its official system of how many ethnic groups there were and, in some cases, how to separate one from

another. My first women's mosque was in that blank space on the book's map; there is no mention of the Hui comprising half the Muslim population of China, whose presence dates back to the seventh century. Considering the years I spent in Ningxia (Hui Autonomous Region) and Gansu, or even in Henan with China's third-largest Muslim population and where women's mosques began, I was quite disappointed in this particular omission.

Who else had been left out of *China in Family Photographs*? Apparently, it is all the peoples on the fringes of China, such as the Tibetans and the mixed groups of Qinghai in the mountains of south China. There is no mention of the ethnic groups of the Uyghur Autonomous Region for either the Uyghurs or Uzbeks of the cities; the Kazakhs and others who herd on the steppes are missing. Further to the northeast, the Nei Meng herders are not mentioned. Where are all the ethnic groups of Yunnan in the south? The book needs at least some coverage of major religious groups like "my" Muslims, as well as Buddhists, Daoists, and Christians.

There is nothing on the railways, which helped guarantee that China remained a single country, or of the cement superhighways of the present age. Miners of coal, iron ore, and rare heavy metals, and producers of oil or gas, seem not to exist. On the trains, engineers, conductors, the car girls, and the railroad police deserve some mention, as do those manning freight trains. Fishermen off the coast, on the rivers, and in lakes such as Tai Hu don't have a place. Boats that ply the rivers as a source of transportation are ignored. Where are the long-distance truck drivers, the long-distance buses, rural buses with their elliptical wheels and lack of springs, and even the existence of strings of pack mules and camels that can still be found in a few remote areas? And where are those with the pedicabs and taxis that have replaced the sedan chairs and rickshaws of earlier ages?

Minor groups of workers who did and still do make life more livable need to be remembered. From little old ladies with their pans of tea eggs to other purveyors, *you tiao* (fried oil sticks), *shao bing* (pocket bread), skewers of mutton bites, and *congee* (porridge soup) help keep Chinese alive with tasty street foods. Roadside cobblers, shoe repair persons, and their like are still needed. These are people, too, and they are Chinese. They have lives and they all have stories. While they may have fewer personal or family photographs, there are abundant pictures of these in other existing collections.

So please, Mr. Krebs and Professor Lu, your work isn't done yet, so don't think of retiring. Over the next few years, you need two more volumes to complete your studies. One is of the major linkage groups that keep China a single nation and well-supplied, despite distance, ethnicity, and different spoken dialects, even as we can appreciate the unifying nature of China's traditional written language. Compare modern China with the breakup of the old Soviet Union, and consider the redrawing of borders in central and southeastern Europe. Personally, I really miss those wonderful people on the margins of society that bring smiles to Chinese faces and joy to their stomachs. Bring your map up to date; the western half of the country should not be completely blank. Your reading list and index can be modernized. I'll stick around to read both those needed new volumes with enjoyment. Now, please get back to work! ■

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