

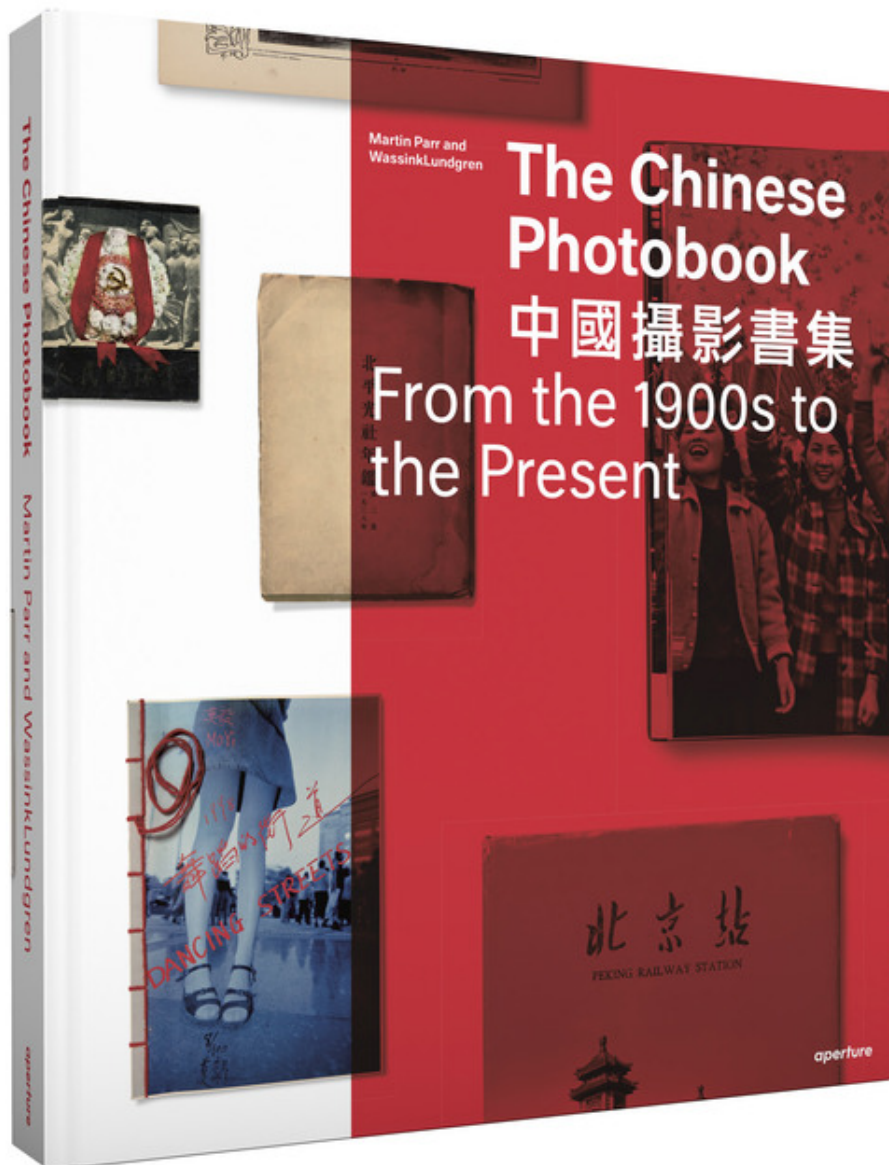
*The Chinese Photobook: From the 1900s to the Present*, compiled by Martin Parr and WassinkLundgren; texts by Gu Zheng, Raymond Lum, Ruben Lundgren, Stephanie H. Tung, and Gerry Badger. New York: Aperture, 2015.

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*The Chinese Photobook* is an eye-opening archive, an invaluable resource for the emerging field of studies of photography in China. In its presentation of samples of photobooks produced by Chinese and non-Chinese photographers from the beginning of the twentieth century to today, this massive publication intersects with similarly formatted histories one of its editors, the British Magnum photographer Martin Parr, has coedited for Phaidon, and the growing series of histories organized by nation or by continent (such as photobooks of Japan or of Latin America) produced by Aperture. It is enriched by a series of brief but illuminating texts by, among others, the late Raymond Lum, of the *TAP Review*, and the most distinguished scholar, historian, and curator of contemporary photography in China, Gu Zheng.

In his introduction, Gu Zheng (with contributions by Stephanie H. Tung) makes the notion of a Chinese photobook itself a problem: he situates the concept within an account of the semantics of various terms in Chinese for books with images or with texts and images, and then defines the Chinese photobook as either a book by a Chinese photographer on any subject or a book by a foreign photographer about China.

Noting the coincidence of the year 1839 regarding the first announcement, in France, of the invention of photography, by Daguerre, and the start of the first Opium War, pitting Britain against China, Gu Zheng steers clear of a simple reflectionist model of the relationship between photography and historical context. He argues instead that Chinese photobooks both represent the country's transformations that began in the mid-nineteenth century and are themselves the products of specific and changing technological, political, economic, and cultural conditions. He observes that the photobook has been a vehicle for the dissemination of information or a medium of artistic expression or, often, both.

Indeed, Gu Zheng has some illuminating things to say in his other contributions to the volume, as he connects the ideological purposes of certain photobooks to the aesthetic choices governing the composition of their images and the layout of their pages.

The book is organized into seven sections: photobooks from the late Qing empire through the founding of the People's Republic of China, in 1949; photobooks produced in the Japanese puppet-state of Manchukuo (Manchuria) and during the Sino-Japanese War, 1931–45; photobooks from the years following the founding of the People's Republic through the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, in 1966; state-produced publications from the Cultural Revolution to the present; independent and increasingly experimental art and documentary photobooks from after the Cultural Revolution, 1979 to the present; collections from Hong Kong and Taiwan; and publications by non-Chinese photographers from 1949 to the present. Within each section, every photobook enjoys one (more, in some cases) two-page layout that features the cover and some of the pages from a particular book, as well as information on the physical qualities of each book—that is, dimensions, paper and binding, printing techniques—and often a brief but sometimes enlightening discussion of its aesthetic qualities.

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It is impossible to convey in a short review the extraordinary range within *The Chinese Photobook*, but I hope that from the following examples the reader will get a sense of the collection.

In addition to recontextualizing the works of more familiar photographers, such as Lang Jingshan's composite landscapes and Cartier-Bresson's canonical photographs of the revolutionary years, as well as expected themes, among them the development of the cult of personality, from Chiang Kai-shek to Mao Zedong, *The*

*Chinese Photobook* shows us less-known or virtually unknown works, such as Donald Mennie's richly printed photogravures of Beijing and his hand-colored prints of the Three Gorges; Ellen Thornebecke's early-twentieth-century experiments in combining photographs, drawings, and text; pictorialist photography by Republican-era photography societies; such as the Guangshe; recent documentary and art photography by mainlanders such as Zhang Hai-er, Lu Nan, Liu Zheng, Hou Dengke, Jiang Jian, Chen Lingyang, Rong Rong and Inri, Zhang Xiao, and Zhang Kechun; a gritty photobook on Hong Kong's Walled City by Wong Kan Tai, and a book of bleakly colored photographs in *Themeless Parks*, by Dustin Shum.

Also in the collection are samples of Taiwanese photography on nativist themes, by Wang Hsin, and on the mentally ill by the Magnum photographer Chien-chi Chang; experiments with photography and book format on "nebulous light," by Yao Jui-chung; the images within images, frames within frames in Shen Chao-liang's *Stage*; and the work of Marc Riboud, which has been important to a slightly older generation of mainland documentary photographers, such as Hou Dengke and Zhang Xinmin.

It is especially valuable that *The Chinese Photobook* contains samples of largely inaccessible work, such as Sun Yanchu's self-published book *Obsessed*, which adopts a blurry and grainy aesthetic akin to that of the Provoke photographers of Japan. Other photobook samples have an unexpected theme or show surprising aesthetic choices, such as one illustrating the tales of Mother Goose and another on the struggle, in 1910–11, to eradicate a plague in northeast China; and one commemorating the establishment by Japan of the puppet-state of Manchukuo that adopts an aesthetic derived from Soviet Constructivism and German New Objectivity.

In addition, there are books on urban sites, such as underground shopping centers and overpasses; some devoted to natural phenomena such as "Chinese clouds," water, and birds; and books documenting the emergence of unofficial and often experimental photography in the years just after the Cultural Revolution.

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*The Chinese Photobook* will prove to be an indispensable resource for researchers on the subject of propaganda: there is an array of propaganda photobooks put out by Japan during its occupation of China and Taiwan; propaganda produced in the short-lived state of Manchukuo (including an ornate pro-fascist photobook produced jointly by Manchukuo and Italy); and that from the Nationalist regime as well as Maoist and post-Mao state publications.

This strength, however, is also a shortcoming—if that's the right word for such an extensive publication. There is a certain sameness in the aesthetic and subject matter of a considerable number of propaganda photobooks by the Nationalists, the Communists, and the Japanese in Manchukuo that is very telling but, after a while, a bit monotonous as well. Indeed, the writers of the texts find more to say about the historical background of the numerous commemorative photobooks than they do about the qualities of the photographs they present. Again, although this choice enables a nuanced understanding of the aesthetics of propaganda, it is also one that leaves less room for samples and discussion of experiments in contemporary China. Most important, it gives short shrift to work produced in Taiwan and Hong Kong, though the materials on these places that are included are fascinating, and Stephanie Tung's historical introductions provide helpful ways of contextualizing them.

To be sure, as Gu Zheng tactfully points out, *The Chinese Photobook* draws on Martin Parr's vast personal collection and does not claim to constitute a comprehensive history of the subject. And yet it is striking how much the choices and the organization seem to be dominated by old and often discredited narratives, such as China's supposed isolation from the world and its more recent past as a response to the West (for alternatives, see Oliver Moore's research on nineteenth-century Chinese photography or, a bit farther afield, Maki

Fukuoka's account of the early reception and engagement with photography in Japan).

*The Chinese Photobook* is divided, for the most part, by political regime, unlike the thematic organization of other such histories published by Phaidon and Aperture (among them those coedited by Parr). Not only does this decision make it appear that the subject matter of Chinese photography is largely limited to China itself—which is no more or less true of the photography of, say, Japan or America—but it also makes it appear as though propaganda is the predominant approach to understanding Chinese photography, which is belied by the explorations by contemporary photographers in mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

For all of this volume's inclusiveness, the intellectual coordinates that seem to guide the selection and organization of materials render to the uninitiated reader certain kinds of photobooks to be virtually invisible.

I do not want to overstate this criticism, however: it is more directed toward the dominance of an area-studies approach to China than it is a critique of the collectors, editors, and writers for this volume. The depth and range of the material they display provide a historical context for future studies in contemporary Chinese photography. We are all very much in debt to the generosity and commitment of Martin Parr, WassinkLundgren, and their collaborators. I will draw much from *The Chinese Photobook* in my own courses on photography in East Asia, and I enthusiastically recommend this book to anyone or any library with an interest in the ongoing expansion of the histories of photography.

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*Editor's Note:* An annotated list of recent photobooks by Chinese artists, compiled by independent book collector Jiayi Liu, can be found [here](http://tapreview.org/resources.html#east) [<http://tapreview.org/resources.html#east>].

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