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Michel Frizot and Ying-lung Su, *Henri Cartier-Bresson: China 1948-1949, 1958*. Translated from the French by Lorna Dale, Francisca Garvie, and Jenny Wilson. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2019. 287pp. Maps, figures, plates, timeline, notes, and bibliography. \$75.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-500-54518-8.

Review by Nicole Hudgins, The University of Baltimore.

Is Henri Cartier-Bresson the most famous twentieth-century photographer in the world? If he is, this fame, his legend, may derive from the idea of “the decisive moment” grabbed in an instant, as the thinking goes, by Cartier-Bresson’s 50mm Leica camera.[1] Arguably, though, Cartier-Bresson’s celebrity owes as much to his talent for global networking and a decisive *technological* moment as it does to his photographs. Several talented photographers preceded Cartier-Bresson in China, such as John Thompson (1837-1921), Felice Beato (1832-1909), and Isabella Bird Bishop (1831-1904). But those photographers traveled in the age of the tripod-supported box camera, before film, and before photographically-illustrated news magazines like *Paris Match* (est. 1949), *L’Express* (est. 1953), and especially *Life* magazine (est. 1936).

Aside from taking up photography at the right time, Cartier-Bresson was also a superb networker, making influential friends wherever he traveled. His postwar sojourn in New York netted him a retrospective at MOMA (he was 39), and the contacts he made during the Spanish Civil War and World War II led to his co-founding Magnum Photos, a professional co-op agency that shifted power from publishers to photographers, whose members retained ownership of their work. Later, Cartier-Bresson’s trip to civil-war-torn China in 1948 was made easier by the fact that he had a multi-lingual, Asian wife (Ratna “Eli” Mohini), as well as an American guide fluent in Mandarin (James Burke), and a burly rickshaw driver who helped Cartier-Bresson find, and pay, his subjects in Beijing (called “Peiping” in the *Life* photo essay).[2] Posthumously, Cartier-Bresson’s reputation has been stewarded by a foundation established by his second wife Martine Franck (herself a Magnum member), and nestled near the Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris.[3]

Indeed, the present volume was a project shared by the photo-historian Michel Frizot, the curator Ying-lung Su, and the Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson. But unlike Cartier-Bresson’s own 1954 publication *D’une Chine à l’autre*[4], these authors laid out the photographer’s entire process during his sojourns in China, first during the civil war that ended in Communist victory in 1949, and then when he returned to witness parts of Mao’s Great Leap Forward in 1958.

Aside from substantial biographical and explanatory text and discussion of the most well-known of Cartier-Bresson's Chinese images, the authors show his personal notes, photo proofs *not* selected by Magnum for publication, and the street images accumulated by Cartier-Bresson when he failed to reach the Communist lines in 1949.[5] It was during these periods of downtime, walking the backstreets of Shanghai, that Cartier-Bresson's humanistic style, long cultivated since the 1930s, manifested itself freely. The authors note Cartier-Bresson's shock at the "blatant and tragic social inequality and the chaotic conditions" of the city, quoting the photographer as saying that only "here and in Chicago" had he seen such a close juxtaposition of opulent wealth and grinding poverty (p. 12). Cartier-Bresson himself was a non-affiliated communist.

Historians of photography and print media will see in this volume how magazines of the period used Cartier-Bresson's photographs on their covers and to illustrate photo essays within, both in black and white and in color. In the preserved cables and telexes reproduced here for the first time, the magazine editors' determination to tell particular stories stands out. Indeed, they sometimes told Cartier-Bresson exactly what story they wanted to tell: "[G]o to tea houses get faces of quiet old men whose hands are clasped around covered cups of jasmine tea," *Life's* editor specified in a cable (p. 14). Frizot and Su also lay bare the magazines' bitter resistance to Magnum's terms, fighting with photographers over ownership of the negatives. Furthermore, the stresses and strains that plague today's media content producers were well-known to Cartier-Bresson and his colleagues. "HCB's impressive achievement required him to carry on proving himself straight away," Frizot explained, "in a profession where one was quickly forgotten without constant repetition and renewal" (p. 23).

As will be apparent in this review, *China* does not present Cartier-Bresson as a French photographer—that is, as a photographer in the long French tradition going back to the 1820s. Like all his fellow Magnum photographers, Cartier-Bresson positioned himself as a multi-lingual citizen of the world, armed with camera, at least for the decade or so following the establishment of Magnum. In a sort of postwar Treaty of Tordesillas, the new agency allocated Europe to David Seymour, Africa and the Middle East to Georges Rodger, and Asia to Cartier-Bresson, with Maria Eisner minding the store in Paris, and Rita Vandivert in New York.[6] At the dawn of what historian Ian Kershaw dubbed the Global Age (1950-2017), Henri Cartier-Bresson was comfortable speaking and writing in English, and even wrote his captions in English. Arguably, it was only later, in the 1950s and 60s when he published his French photobooks (and retired from photography in favor of drawing and painting), that Cartier-Bresson became a French artist.

The authors have not attempted to counter received ideas about Cartier-Bresson, but rather emphasize the need to understand the historical and professional context of his oeuvre. The book's two most interesting insights are implicit rather than explicitly asserted. First, if there was a "decisive moment," it wasn't in Cartier-Bresson's shooting but rather the time (postwar 1940s) and the environment (the postwar market for news magazines). Frizot and Su demolish the notion that Cartier-Bresson magically took the perfect photograph with the flick of his camera's shutter. Quite the contrary. Each incident represented in Cartier-Bresson's five thousand negatives from the China period were taken from every possible angle, every point of view—above, behind, easterly, westerly, below, from distances, close to subjects' faces, over a period of different days, using dozens and sometimes hundreds of rolls of film.[7] This laborious, obsessive process is made clear to the reader in the contact strip illustrations showing the same scene shot from multiple perspectives.

The second interesting insight in the book (again hinted at but not dwelled upon) was the role of Cartier-Bresson's first wife, Carolina Jeanne de Souza-Ijke, a.k.a. Ratna Mohini, a.k.a. Eli. This Javanese dancer, poet, and linguist "was responsible for the thorough research" that went into the selection of locations in China and into Cartier-Bresson's notes (p. 214). There is (un)surprisingly little scholarly or biographical information available on Eli, Cartier-Bresson's partner for the thirty-year period between 1937 and 1967, when they divorced.[8] Striking in this volume was Eli's apparent influence on Cartier-Bresson's physical practice. He seemed to be "propelled by a real Leica dance, 'dancing along the pavement like an agitated dragonfly,'" as Truman Capote put it (p. 28). The authors pointed out that a dance-like movement "was nothing out of the ordinary for the husband of the Javanese dancer Ratna, who had had affiliations with the dance world since 1937" (p. 28). Cartier-Bresson himself admitted, "My friends tell me it is really strange watching me work. I jump, I go on tiptoe, I creep up on people or I step back," searching for the ideal vantage point (p. 28). Seeing as Eli resided in Paris for her entire adult life, the possibility of a proper biographical project awaits the intrepid world historian who can pick up the trail of her interesting life.

One of the great strengths of this book is its last third, "Return to the Revolution," which contextualizes the photographer's 1958 project amid Mao Zedong's second Five-Year Plan in the new People's Republic. Here Cartier-Bresson's communist sympathies run up against the totalitarian nature of Mao's methods: "China is sacrificing the present to the future," the photographer wrote, "which is most unpleasant to those who have to live with it." He continued: "And there is all the time propaganda. The people have not a moment's peace. It is a regimented world, and it can be very tedious. But I believe we mustn't look at it emotionally. That does not help us to understand. For China is a country which the Western world cannot ignore" (p. 231). That passage accompanied photographs showing, for example, Beijing university students constructing a campus swimming pool using no machines or vehicles, just their hands and loads holstered on to their backs. Another series depicts the People's Militia of female and male soldiers drilling in Tiananmen Square. Cartier-Bresson made a point of showing the regime assigning labor and military tasks to men and women equally, and its resolve to provide girls and women with education equal to that of their brothers. Like his existentialist friend Jean-Paul Sartre, Cartier-Bresson was troubled by the way the regime saturated the people's airwaves, cinemas, lines of sight, and bodies with propaganda messages. He managed his misgivings by concentrating on his signature "anthropological" approach: capturing the faces, trades, and curiosities of the people as members of the "Family of Man." [9]

Weighing in at nearly four and a half pounds, *China* may not be appropriate for an undergraduate course. Its dimensions liken it more to a coffee table book than a college text. Nevertheless, both undergraduate and graduate students would benefit from seeing how the authors carefully dissected the photographer's process. Rather than selecting a few iconic images, the authors took nothing for granted; they reveal how assignments and print layouts were negotiated between the photographer, magazine editors, and Magnum staff. Frizot and Su did not brush over Cartier-Bresson's artistic, financial, or professional failures, but instead took pains to show how he made the most of these situations—a good lesson for anyone. For all universities that contain a journalism school, history of photography program, or studio photography program, this book would be an excellent addition to their libraries. *China* may be appreciated either for its expert scholarship or as a volume to curl up with and leaf through the large image reproductions.

NOTES

[1] Frizot and Su trace the origin of this concept to the epigram in Cartier-Bresson's 1952 book, *Images à la Sauvette*, quoting a political saying of the seventeenth-century Cardinal de Retz: "There's nothing in this world that does not have a decisive moment and it is the height of good practice to recognize and seize that moment...." (p.9).

[2] The rickshaw driver appears in a Cartier-Bresson photograph on p. 63 of the book. It is never explained why *Life* magazine called Beijing "Peiping" rather than the more common Anglicized name during the era, Peking.

[3] <https://www.henricartierbresson.org/en/>

[4] Henri Cartier-Bresson, *D'une Chine à l'autre*, introduction by Jean-Paul Sartre (Paris: R. Delpire, 1954).

[5] He was detained by the People's Army for a month, then returned to Shanghai. Cartier-Bresson's detention, although free of violence, was a painful reminder of his German imprisonment in 1940, from which, after two failed attempts, he escaped and made it back to France in 1943.

[6] The group's leader, Robert Capa, was permitted to take jobs in any region. On the history of Magnum, see Nadya Bair, *The Decisive Network: Magnum Photos and the Postwar Image Market* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020).

[7] The need to survey the periphery, to get close, and then distant, was nicely laid out in the book's section on Cartier-Bresson's famous "Gold Rush" photograph of the Shanghai bank run of 1948, during the fall of Kuomintang (pp. 166-167).

[8] The only original research that I located on Mohini was in Kunang Helmi, "Ratna Cartier-Bresson: A Fragmented Portrait," *Archipel*, année 54 (1997): 253-268. Her book of posthumous poems is entitled *Nos Ombres en fête* (Losne: B. Thierry Bouchard, 1990).

[9] "The Family of Man" was a blockbuster traveling photography exhibition organized by the New York Museum of Modern Art photography curator, Edward Steichen, in 1955. The exhibition included eleven Cartier-Bresson photographs, including one from the first China series.

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