

From Canton to Guangzhou
Photographs by Felice Beato and Xu Peiwu

Gallery 16
Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery
Birmingham, UK
3RD May – 10TH August 2008
The Exhibition

This exhibition presents two series of photographs, taken almost 150 apart of the city of Canton / Guangzhou.

The first body of work is a series of vintage photographs of city of Canton taken by the British photographer Felice Beato in 1860. These are amongst the earliest images taken by a European photographer in China.

These historical photographs are just part of a significant collection of photographs, archives, books and other related material relating to China held in Birmingham Central Library and the City Archives.

The second body of work is a series of images of the modern city of Guangzhou taken by the contemporary Chinese photographer Xu Peiwu: some of these will be taken in direct reference to the buildings and locations represented in Beato's photographs.

The exhibition will explore the different ways in which these two photographers documented buildings, street scenes and people in the city, and in so doing, reveal many of the dynamic changes that have occurred in the more recent process of urbanization.

The exhibition is being jointly curated by Peter James, Head of Photographs, Birmingham Central Library and Dr Jiang Jiehong, Director of the Centre for Chinese Visual Arts at Birmingham City University.

The exhibition will form part of a season of exhibitions staged by Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery which are being presented as part of the CHINA NOW Festival (www.chinanow.org.uk).

The exhibition will be accompanied by a series of lunchtime talks organized in partnership with the Birmingham City University's Centre for Chinese Visual Arts.

The exhibition is just one of many initiatives which seek to foster cultural exchanges between Birmingham and its Sister City of Guangzhou.

The exhibition organizers are seeking to develop opportunities to show the exhibition in a major museum or gallery in Guangzhou.

The Photographers

Felice Beato (born 1833 or 1834, died 1907?) was a [British](#) and [Italian photographer](#). He was one of the first photographers to take pictures in [East Asia](#) and one of the first [war photographers](#). He is also noted for his views and [panoramas](#) of the architecture and landscapes of [Asia](#) and the [Mediterranean](#) region. Beato's travels to many lands gave him the opportunity to create powerful and lasting images of countries, people and events that were unfamiliar and remote to most people in [Europe](#) and [North America](#). His photographs represent the first substantial oeuvre of what came to be called [photojournalism](#). He had a significant impact on other photographers.

Xupeï Wu is a photojournalist based in Shanghai who has spent ten years (1997-2007) focusing on the dynamic change during the urbanization that has taken place in China. Xu Peiwu's exhibition *Pearl River New Town-the Lost Garden of Eden* was shown at the Endless Gallery –Shanghai in 2005. His work has also featured in a number of major exhibitions and galleries in China - including Guangzhou Biennale of Photography, Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangzhou (2005), LIANZHOU INTERNATIONAL PHOTO FESTIVAL, GUANGZHOU (2006) Paris and First-Ever World Photography Biennial, Paris: October 30-November 25, 2007.

Felice Beato

Before the invention of photography in 1839, the popular vision of Imperial China in Europe was primarily formed by two books: the first, published in 1298 detailed the travels of Marco Polo to Cathay; the second, the *Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (1499) was a literary hoax. Nevertheless, both books coloured Europe's impression of China for literally centuries. The vogue of *chinoiserie* in 18th century Europe stimulated the demand for a more truthful view of China. The European vision of China was fed by artists such as George Chinnery who lived and worked in China between 1825 and 1852. Although Chinnery's work changed several misconceptions about China, in his work China was translated into the great picturesque and China was presented as a series of endless rustic scenes. This tradition was subsequently adopted by many of the photographers who subsequently visited the country.

Although present in the country for a relatively short time, Beato created the one of the earliest comprehensive photographic views of China that has survived. Beato came to China as the semi-official photographer of the Anglo-French North China Expeditionary Force. Beato made a trip to Canton where he remained for a few months, and whilst there, created large plate photographic views of the city which, surprisingly, portray a place of diminished scale and rather nondescript character. On a technical level, having overcome the difficulties of obtaining adequate quantities of photographic materials – chemicals, glass plates, were formidable, along with the understandable hostility of the Chinese to members of the expeditionary force. Beato need to transport large quantities of fresh, relatively pure water and the constant worry that his fragile large glass negatives could be smashed in transit. Several factors involved in the taking of Beato's photographs make his work astonishing. First the cameras had to be large in order to contain glass plates of 10 x 12 inches. The weight of the glass plates, which had to be carried in wooden boxes, was a formidable obstacle. In addition to a large tripod, some form of portable darkroom had to be taken along, to include lightproof tent, all the chemicals for coating the plates with collodion emulsion and airtight glass jars for developing and fixing. Beato would have needed a small army of porters or assistants. The photographic emulsion was slow to react to light, and exposures were long, accounting for the blurred movement of people in many of his images. Prints had to be made directly from the resulting negatives.

Beato had returned to England by November 1861, and during that winter he sold four hundred of his photographs of India and China to Henry Herring, a London commercial portrait photographer. Herring had them duplicated and then resold them.

Birmingham Central Library holds a collection 35 Beato's images - mostly views of Canton - alongside a wealth of other photographic material and picture postcards of China in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.