



China: Through the Lens of John Thomson (1868-1872)

Betty Yao

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Born two years before the invention of daguerreotype and the birth of photography, Thomson first traveled to Asia in 1862 where he set up a professional photographic studio. The local culture and the people of Asia fascinated him, and in 1868 he made his second trip, this time settling in Hong Kong. Between 1868 and 1872, Thomson made extensive trips to Guangdong, Fujian, Beijing, China's northeast and down the Yangtse River, covering nearly 5000 miles. This exhibition catalogue is drawn from his time in these regions. These were the early days of photography when negatives were made on glass plates that had to be coated with emulsion before the exposure was made. A huge amount of cumbersome equipment had to be carried from place to place and with perseverance, great energy and stamina, Thomson managed to take a wide variety of images and themes, including landscapes, people, and architecture, domestic and street scenes. As a foreigner, his ability to gain access to photograph women is also remarkable. In China, Thomson excelled as a photographer in quality, depth and breadth, and in artistic sensibility.

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