

Photography in Art Promotion: Framing Chinese Architecture as Art in Peking The Beautiful, 1927

Amsterdam Museum Journal

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Discipline

Architectural History

Keywords

Photography / Beijing / Art Promotion / Heritage / Herbert
Clarence White

Doi

doi.org/10.61299/tr896BGt

Issue #3 Winter 2024

Abstract

This essay examines how photography elevated Chinese architecture to the status of art in the early 20th century, focusing on *Peking the Beautiful*, a photography volume published by American photographer Herbert Clarence White in 1927. Despite its academic value, the book has received little scholarly attention. The study explores whether photography can be considered art and its role in shaping its subjects into art. Utilizing Hu Shih's introduction and the book's visual and textual content, the article analyzes *Peking the Beautiful* from the perspectives of institutional recognition, aesthetic experience, semiotics, and ontology. It argues that the book, supported by cultural institutions and the photographer's efforts, reframes Chinese architecture from mere craftsmanship to art, playing a crucial role in the heritagization of Chinese architecture.

Peking, for ages the center of art and culture, the pride of an ancient and glorious civilization, has within its crenelated walls the best that China has ever produced in literature, art, and architecture. To appreciate China, therefore, one must first see Peking.

– *Peking the Beautiful*, Preface

Introduction: Photography in Art Promotion^{1 2 3}

In 1927, the American photographer Herbert Clarence White (1896–1962) published a book entitled *Peking the Beautiful: Comprising Seventy Photographic Studies of the Celebrated Monuments of China's Northern Capital and its Environs Complete with Descriptive and Historical Notes* 燕京胜迹, (41 cm x 33 cm).⁴ This book possesses significant academic value but has not yet received the attention it deserves from researchers. In the introduction, 胡适 (1891–1962) [translation: 'Hu Shi or Hu Shih'], the renowned scholar, philosopher, and leader of China's 新文化运动 [translation: 'New Culture Movement'],⁵ points out that architecture in China has only been considered a form of craftsmanship and has never achieved the artistic status comparable to painting and literature. He highlighted that the aesthetic and cultural values of Chinese architecture have been overlooked due to a longstanding utilitarian perspective. In contrast, Western observers often appreciate Chinese architecture from artistic and cultural viewpoints. Hu called for Chinese people to overcome traditional prejudices and recognize the artistic significance of architecture, viewing it as an integral part of China's cultural heritage (Hu 1927, 7-9). Today, we broadly accept that photography possesses a duality, being both documentary and artistic (Wells 2021, 327-96). Therefore, White's photographs and the architecture they capture seem to be indisputably regarded as art. However, whether photography can be considered an art and its ability to frame the photographed subjects as art is a complex and multi-dimensional issue, this process involves not only a deep aesthetic examination but also concerns semiotics, the ontology of photography, and the intrinsic meaning of the art objects.

This article is grounded in the philosophical framework of 'photography as an art form', exploring how the reproduction and dissemination of photographs in a transcultural context can elevate Chinese architecture from mere craftsmanship to recognized art. The research question is centered on how *Peking the Beautiful* employs institutional endorsement, rich semiotics, and the cultivation of aesthetic experience, along with the photographic ontology of the photographer, to frame Chinese architecture—traditionally conceived as craftsmanship—as art. The article lever-

ages qualitative research methods, informed by literature on photography and artmaking, to critically examine the role of White's *Peking the Beautiful* in this transformation. The methodological approach is tailored to the research objective, emphasizing the book's purpose in promoting Chinese architecture as an art form to a global audience. Data collection primarily involved accessing digital sources, including the Library of Congress' online archives for the digital version of *Peking the Beautiful*, the physical copy of the Cambridge University Library's rare book collection, and the Seventh-day Adventists Encyclopedia for background on White. These choices were made to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the cultural and artistic significance of the work, aligning with the study's broader aim to reassess Chinese architecture through a global, artistic lens.

From an ontological perspective, Susan Sontag, in *On Photography* (1977), argues that photography is not merely a replication of reality but a profound artistic creation that transforms ordinary objects into works of art by transcending their everydayness (Sontag 1977, 3). Roland Barthes, in *Camera Lucida* (1981), introduces the concept of 'punctum', where certain elements in a photograph evoke deep personal emotions, elevating the mundane to the extraordinary (Barthes 1981, 43-46). These transformations reflect the photographer's subjective viewpoint, as post-production modifications (Heidemann 2022, 81) and choices of composition, timing, and lighting imbue photographs with artistic expression (Szarkowski 2024, 1-13), which also challenging the positivist premises of visual knowledge production (Mjaaland 2020, 2), and makes photograph a duality, embodying both realism and constructivism, transcending reality and pointing to inherent possibilities (Ray 2020, 146).

George Dickie's institutional theory of art asserts that the art world's recognition confers the status of art on photographic works, as seen through their display in galleries and museums (Dickie 1974, 35-36). Pedro M. Cabezós-Bernal discusses how international museums use photography to document and disseminate cultural heritage, enhancing public accessibility (Cabezós-Bernal 2021, 156). Contemporary art institutions reconstruct historical narratives, uncover hidden histories, and connect artists with their works through photographic exhibitions, fostering innovative projects and diverse interpretations (Gül Durukan & Tezcan Akmeahmet 2021, 132). Postmodernism blurs the boundaries between reality and representation, allowing photography to create surreal art forms that transcend original contexts (Baudrillard 2016, 126-30). Victor Burgin, Dominique Bauer and Camilla Murgia argue that photography's replicative capabilities elevate the artistic status of its subjects, rendering them transient and

“The documentation of Chinese architecture and environment by Western photographers has provided invaluable visual resources for Chinese architectural history, architectural archaeology, heritage preservation, and even folklore studies.”

illusory entities, stripped of their material qualities and original meanings (Burgin 1982, 1-14; Bauer and Murgia 2021, 7-18).

Aesthetic experience remains central to photographic art. Monroe Beardsley suggests that art should be defined by the aesthetic experience it provokes, encompassing emotional and cognitive engagement (Beardsley 1982, 77-93). Photographic works evoke such experiences through their composition and settings, integrating subjects into the realm of art. Dominique Bauer states that photography can invoke a sense of pastness (Bauer 2018, 33-44) and the uncanny (Bauer 2016, 126-130). Photography is not merely visual evidence; it involves creative, non-indicative dimensions and critically portrays social phenomena through collaborative, perceptual, and pragmatic practices (Leon-Quijano 2021, 1118). Semiotics further enriches this understanding, as Umberto Eco posits that photographic images, as signs, construct meaning and transform ordinary objects into art (Eco 1986, 15). This intersemiotic connection between photography and other forms, such as poetry, extends beyond original meanings, achieving the 'artification' of photography (Baetens 2022, 423-24; Langmann & Gardner 2020).

Consequently, framing photographic subjects as art involves a complex interaction of ontology, institutional recognition, aesthetic experience, and semiotic indication. The creative input of the photographer, the aesthetic experience of the viewer, and the construction of cultural and contextual meanings collectively facilitate this transformation. Photography not only records reality but also creates art through capturing, interpreting, and reconstructing subjects.

Institutional Endorsement: Photographer and The Community

Peking the Beautiful emerged from an elite cultural circle that laid the foundation for it to become an essential cultural resource and work of art which, therefore, can be considered a 'cultural institution'.⁶ Herbert Clarence White, the photographer and author of the book, and his twin brother James Henry White (1896-1954) were born in New South Wales, Australia, in a well-educated Protestant family with a strong publishing background. Their father, William C. White (1854-1937), was a Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) minister and church leader (Molivarez 2014) and their grandfather, James Springer White (1821-1881), was a co-founder of the SDA Church, one of the founders of *Signs of the Times* magazine,⁷ and the husband of the author Ellen G. White (1827-1915).⁸ At the age of four, he moved back with his family to California. He studied at the SDA Pacific Union College (PUC), where he specialized in theology and obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1921 (Hook, 'Anna Louise' 2022). The *Seventh-day Adventist Year-*

book noted that White was in charge of the Industrial Faculty's Printing department at PUC, specifying that he was well-versed in printing and publishing work during his college years (Rogers 1918, 198–99).

In 1922, White arrived in Shanghai, primarily engaging in missionary work, photography, and publishing. After a one-year stay in Beijing to learn Chinese, he was appointed as the director of Shanghai Signs of the Times Publishing House until 1927 (Hook, 'Anna Louise' 2022). He used his holidays to travel across China, taking about 3,000 photographs, especially in Beijing (Hu 1927, 9), which we have not been able to locate. He also spearheaded the publication of two prominent English periodicals in China, the *Far Eastern Division Outlook* and *China Christian Educator*.⁹ Additionally, the publishing house released two Chinese newspapers, *Shi Djao Yueh Bao* 時兆月報 [translation: 'Signs of the Times']¹⁰ and *Sabbath School Helper*. In 1927, Herbert compiled a representative selection of his extensive photographic work in Beijing into *Peking the Beautiful*, an abundantly illustrated book published by the 上海商务印书馆 [translation: 'Commercial Press in Shanghai'], China's first modern publishing house. This meticulously produced book features photographs of Beijing's architecture, landscapes, and customs (figures 1 and 2). In the publication year of this book, Beijing faced a pivotal moment in history. On April 18, the 国民政府 [translation: 'Nationalist Government'] established its new capital in 南京 [translation: 'Nanjing'], and Beijing was renamed 北平 [translation: 'Beiping'] in 1928, losing its political status but remaining a vital cultural hub. After their return in the United States in 1929, Herbert and James White published another photo album, *Romantic China*, in 1930. James passed away in 1954, Herbert in 1962.

The latter's contributions to Chinese photography history, architectural history, and cultural heritage studies are significant. As indicated on its first page, *Peking the Beautiful* was among the earliest collections in the Chinese architectural community and was later part of the 中国营造学社图籍 [translation: 'Society for the Study of Chinese Architecture's (SSCA) Collection of Books and Drawings']. The SSCA, founded by the architecture expert and politician 朱启钤 (1871–1964) [translation: 'Zhu Qiqian'] in 1930, included among its core members the first generation of Chinese architects and scholars such as 梁思成 (1901–1972) [translation: 'Liang Sicheng'], 林徽因 (1904–1955) [translation: 'Lin Huiyin'] and 刘敦桢 (1897–1968) [translation: 'Liu Dunzhen'], and was the first and the most authoritative architectural research institute at the time (Wang 2023, 128). The dedication in the book explicitly states, "To All Lovers of China's Glorious Artistic Heritage—the Monuments—This Book is Dedicated", predating

Lin Huiyin's endorsement of the artistic value of Chinese architecture by five years: "*The art of Chinese architecture has reached its highest point of maturity. Even when compared with architectural schools around the world, it stands out as a unique and continuous system*" (Lin 1932, 163-165). It also precedes by twenty-seven years Liang Sicheng's assertion, that:

"The individuality of Chinese architecture reflects the character of our nation; it is an integral part of our unique artistic and intellectual heritage, and is not merely a matter of structural materials and methods" (Liang 1998, 13).

The 'acknowledgments' in the book directly reveal its origins within an eminent network, underpinning its significance. In addition to the assistance of his twin brother James during photographic expeditions,¹¹ the book benefited from the support of many dignitaries, scholars, and publishing figures of the time. White noted that his interest in Beijing's historical architecture was primarily inspired by the works of the writer and sinologist Juliet Bredon (1881-1937), especially the 1922 *Peking: A Historical and Intimate Description of its Chief Places of Interest* (Bredon, 1922). Born into a

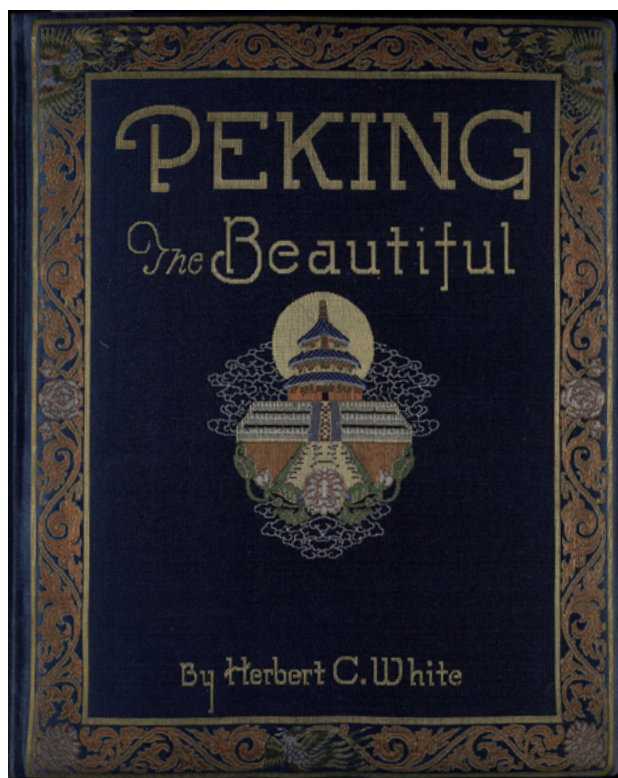


Figure 1. Silk-covered book cover: Shanghai, 1927. Photograph by: H. C. White (White 1927, cover).

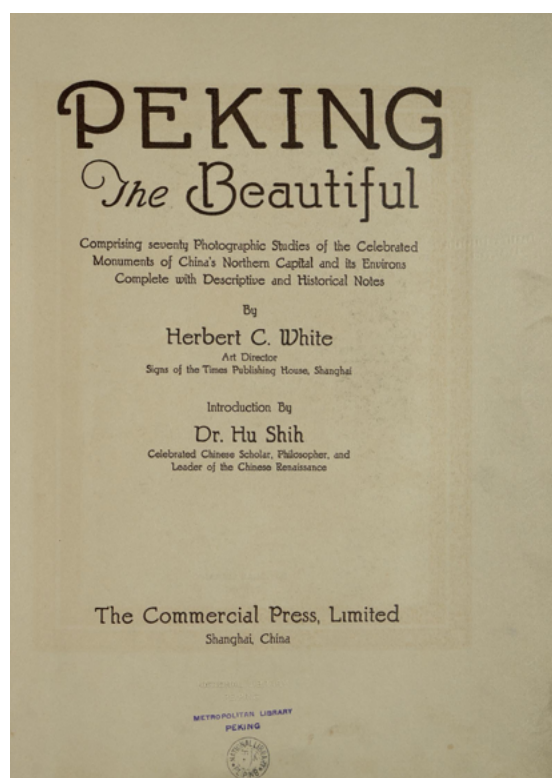


Figure 2. Title page of *Peking the Beautiful*: Shanghai, 1927. Photograph by: H. C. White (White 1927, 3).

prominent family and raised in China, Bredon was well-versed in Chinese culture. She was the daughter of Sir Robert Edward Bredon (1846–1918), Deputy Inspector General of Chinese Customs (Translation Department of the Institute of Modern History 1981, 55), and the niece of Sir Robert Hart (1835–1911), Inspector-General of China's Imperial Maritime Custom Service (IMCS). White mentioned that Bredon provided sympathy and advice in the conception and planning of the book. The author also drew knowledge from the works of sinologists such as the American missionary William Alexander Parsons Martin (1827–1916), who had been appointed by the 光绪帝 (reign 1875–1908) [translation: '*Guangxu Emperor*'] as the inaugural president of the Imperial University of Peking, the precursor of Peking University (Covell 1978, 1). He was also the first foreigner to travel from Peking to Shanghai by land (The First 200). Furthermore, the book received support from the Qing Princess 裕德龄 (1881–1944) [translation: '*Der Ling*'], who played a significant role in "*the preparation and the revision of the captions*" (White 1927, 1). As one of 慈禧, 西太后 (1835–1908) [translation: '*Empress Dowager Cixi*']'s most trusted individuals, Der Ling possessed a profound understanding of Beijing, which was inaccessible to outsiders at the time. White regarded her "*suggestions and criticism of untold value*" (White 1927, 1). The album's publication also enjoyed the backing of several key figures in the publishing industry. Dr. 郎富灼 (1869–1931) [translation: '*Fong Foo Sec*'], Director of the English Department at Commercial Press, encouraged White's conceptualization of the book and named it. Additionally, the artist Mr. A.C. Liang colorized twelve selected photographs, enhancing their aesthetic appeal. In summary, the importance of *Peking the Beautiful* lies not only in its content but also in the collective efforts of several influential individuals. These contributions formed a 'cultural institution' that validated and endowed the album with its artistic status.

White's contribution should be situated within the broader Western fascination with and documentation of Chinese art during the early twentieth century. Figures like White played a crucial role in the reproduction and dissemination of Chinese architecture through prints—both images and texts—effectively making this architecture movable and accessible to a global audience in various scales. This process of reproduction makes Chinese architecture movable, aligning with Mari Hvattum and Ann Hultzsich's assertion that prints bring silent architecture to life (Hvattum and Hultzsich 2018, 20). As Tim Anstey argues, architecture should not be seen merely as static entities but as 'things that move' (Anstey 2024, 1). Through the representation and reproduction of architectural photography

“The individuality of Chinese architecture reflects the character of our nation; it is an integral part of our unique artistic and intellectual heritage, and is not merely a matter of structural materials and methods” (Liang 1998, 13).

by Western photographers, Chinese architecture gained new perceptions and meanings as it circulated globally.

Pioneers in the production of Chinese photography at the close of the nineteenth century, such as Thomas Child (1841–1898), Charles Frederick Moore (1837–1916), John Thomson (1837–1921) from Britain, and Ernst Ohlmer (1847–1927) from Germany, played a crucial role in documenting and shaping visual representations of China. The early twentieth century witnessed an intensified Western interest in the photographic portrayal of China, prompting a number of foreign photographers to travel to Beijing, where they sought to capture the transforming landscape of this historically significant imperial city. Around 1900, Japanese photographers Ogawa Kazumasa (1860–1929) and Yamamoto Zanshiro (1855–1943) documented Beijing’s architecture, highlighting the complex interplay between cultural exchange, political upheaval, and the impact of Westernization on traditional Chinese architectural research during a pivotal period in Sino-Japanese relations. In 1907, the French sinologist Edouard Chavannes (1865–1918) (Cordier 1918) conducted extensive surveys across 陕西 [translation: ‘Shaanxi’], 山西 [translation: ‘Shanxi’], 河北 [translation: ‘Hebei’], and North-east China, capturing numerous photographs of the Great Wall, which were later published in the 1915 Paris edition of *Mission archéologique en Chine septentrionale* (Chavannes 1909). Albert Kahn (1860–1940) was a French banker and philanthropist known for his ambitious project, ‘The Archives of the Planet’, which aimed to document the world through color photography from 1909 to 1931. His initiative was particularly notable for its use of the autochrome process, the first practical medium of color photography, which allowed for vibrant and detailed images. Kahn commissioned a team of photographers to travel to over fifty countries, including China, where they captured its people’s daily lives, landscapes, and cultural practices, resulting in the first sets of colored photos of China in 1912 (De Luca 2022, 259–298). American sociologist Sidney Gamble (1890–1968) (Notehelfer and Jervis 2006) first visited China in 1908 and returned several times between 1917 and 1932. During these visits, he engaged in Christian social work and conducted extensive socio-economic surveys. He documented daily life, public activities, architecture, and religious culture in Beijing and rural northern China through thousands of photographs. Jonathan Spence described Gamble’s Chinese photos as vigorous, ebullient, unsentimental, and starkly illustrative, yet never cruel (Spence 1992, 51–67). Ernst Boerschmann (1873–1949) (Kögel 2015), conducted an exhaustive survey from 1906 to 1909 across fourteen provinces in China, covering tens of thousands of miles and documenting imperial architecture, temples, ances-

tral halls, and residences. His work culminated in publications such as *Die Baukunst und religiöse Kultur der Chinesen* (1911, 1914, 1931); *Chinesische Architektur* (1925); *Baukunst und Landschaft in China: Eine Reise durch zwölf Provinzen* (1926); and *Chinesische Baukeramik* (1927) (Wang 2010, 42). Osvald Sirén (1879–1966) (Törmä 2013) visited China between 1918 and 1935, conducting extensive research on ancient architecture, gardens, and sculptures, resulting in a substantial collection of photographs and written materials. His publication *The Walls and Gates of Peking* (1924) offers a detailed analysis of Beijing’s ancient fortifications, and his seminal work, *Gardens of China* (1949).

The documentation of Chinese architecture and environment by Western photographers has provided invaluable visual resources for Chinese architectural history, architectural archaeology, heritage preservation, and even folklore studies. Moreover, these images have reproduced Western aesthetic sensibilities and architectural heritage mindset. This is obvious in White’s work, where the modern framework of heritage values—encompassing aesthetic, historical, scientific, social, and spiritual dimensions that contribute to the significance of a place or object (Lennon 2006, 52)—is already clearly articulated, with the artistic aspect particularly explicit in *Peking the Beautiful*.

Semiotics and Aesthetic Experience: Album’s Contents

The quality of the book is commendable, rich with Chinese symbolism both in textual descriptions and photographic works, unveiling the mysteries of early 20th-century Beijing. The album includes seventy-one photographs meticulously captured by White, well-crafted essays and delicate vignettes, presented on double page spreads with the photo on the right and the text on the left. Among these, architectural photography dominates with sixty-eight images, while the remaining three are one portrait and two camel caravans. The majority of the sixty eight architectural photographs feature seventeen from the 颐和园 [translation: ‘*Summer Palace*’], ten from the 紫禁城 [translation: ‘*Forbidden City*’], seven from the 天坛 [translation: ‘*Temple of Heaven*’], four from 雍和宫 [translation: ‘*Yonghe Temple*’] and from 香山公园 [translation: ‘*Fragrant Hills Park*’], and two from the 长城 [translation: ‘*Great Wall*’], the 国家古观象台 [translation: ‘*Chinese National Observatory*’], and the 国子监 [translation: ‘*Imperial College*’]. From his arrival in China, White was immediately captivated by Beijing’s picturesque landscapes and profound civilization. Hu Shi’s earlier mentioned introduction lauds the photographic collection as a precious record of Beijing’s many important landmarks and historical sites. White’s photographs show-

case Beijing's iconic city gates and walls, the solemn Temple of Heaven, the majestic Forbidden City, the monumental Great Wall, and numerous temples and monasteries, presenting an authentic glimpse of early Republican-era Beijing (Hu 1927, 8) (figures 3-6). Unlike the usual old photos of Beijing, which show large numbers of people on the streets, White's photos are empty of people, or include a few individuals posing elegantly. From its cover, protected by a specially designed box, *Peking the Beautiful* features exquisite hardcover binding adorned with embroidered silk material, which underscores the bibliophilic value of the book itself, making it a reference for scholars studying early 20th-century Chinese art, architecture, and cultural heritage.

Peking the Beautiful is not merely a traditional album of photographs but a combination of photos and texts. Each textual piece plays a crucial role in disseminating knowledge about Chinese architecture, its history, values, and underlying philosophies, thereby offering global audiences a more insightful understanding of Chinese architectural heritage. The textual descriptions reveal many details that photographs alone cannot convey, placing architecture within specific contexts to stimulate readers' aesthetic experiences. For instance, the essay on the Forbidden City



Figure 3. *Walls of Peking (Tung Pien Môn)*: Shanghai, 1927. Photograph by: H. C. White (White 1927, 18).



Figure 4. Temple of Heaven: Shanghai, 1927. Photograph by: H. C. White (White 1927, 110).

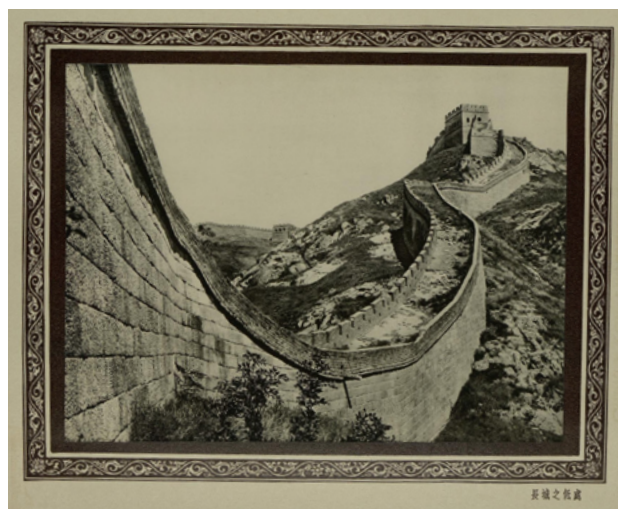


Figure 5. *The Great Wall of China: Shanghai*, 1927. Photograph by: H. C. White (White 1927, 70).



Figure 6. *Mongol Lama Monks Reading Their Sacred 'Ching'*: Shanghai, 1927. Photograph by: H. C. White (White 1927, 74).



Figure 7. *The Forbidden City from the north-west*: Shanghai, 1927. Photograph by: H. C. White (White 1927, 30).

not only features a spectacular cityscape photograph (figure 7), but more importantly, White's description enables the readers to truly comprehend this architectural marvel and acknowledge its value as a human artistic treasure: "*Forbidden City, with its acres of yellow tile gleaming like gold in the sunlight*" (White 1927, 30). This depiction captures the grandeur of the imperial palace. Subsequently, White poetically reveals multiple layers of meaning beyond the physical structure of the Forbidden City:

“What poetic suggestion in the very name of the city, exclaims Miss Bredon, a Forbidden City reserved for the Son of Heaven! The dignity of such a conception compels respect, doubly so when we consider all it represented the profound reverence paid to the Sovereign by the people of a great empire, the immense spiritual power in his hands, the tradition of his divine descent, the immemorial dignity of his office. To have seen this Forbidden City therefore is to have seen something much more wonderful than noble buildings, and to enter it is to feel the pulse of the ancient civilization which throbbed as mightily in the eighteenth century as ever in that dim past whereof these palaces themselves, though already old, are but a modern record” (White 1927, 30).

Firstly, White reveals the unique status and lofty symbolic representation of the Forbidden City as the imperial palace of Ming and Qing dynasties. Bredon’s admiration indicates that the name of Forbidden City carries poetic and grandiose implications—a sanctuary reserved exclusively for the Son of Heaven (White 1927, 30). It not only reflects a realm of supreme spiritual authority but also embodies the sacred inviolability of the emperor. He also emphasizes the social hierarchy represented by the Forbidden City which was much more than the main imperial residence but also a profound tribute of the empire’s people to their monarch, the immense spiritual power of the emperor, the ancient dignity of the sacred blood-line tradition, and the responsibilities it entails. These symbolic meanings transcend the Forbidden City’s architectural structure, becoming a carrier of culture and power, reflecting the reverence of the ancient Chinese for imperial authority and compliance with divine will. On October 10, 1925, the Forbidden City transformed into the Palace Museum, marked the opening of imperial spaces to the public. This shift from royal private domain to public cultural resource symbolized its evolution into a shared heritage, providing a valuable site for studying ancient Chinese court culture and art (Zhou 2020, 12-19). As a witness to history, it bears the continuity and vitality of China’s ancient civilization from the 15th century and even more distant pasts. While the palace complex may be considered ‘modern’ in the flow of time, its recorded civilizational pulse remains deeply rooted in ancient traditions, resilient and vigorous. Therefore, perusing the photo book is an appreciation of architecture and a profound aesthetic experience of the vitality of ancient Chinese civilization. White’s descriptions anchor the Forbidden City at the core of Chinese politics, history, culture, and art.

“White’s contribution should be situated within the broader Western fascination with and documentation of Chinese art during the early twentieth century.”

It serves as a symbol of imperial authority and an essential component of the spiritual and cultural heritage of the Chinese nation, rich in significance and far-reaching influence. Serving as a bridge between past and present, tradition and modernity, the Forbidden City holds profound artistic value.

The photos and essays are not juxtaposed on the same page but presented independently. The text begins with an illuminated initial, beneath which lies an autonomous vignette with a drawing, which is not a reproduction of the photograph but stands alone. Its role extends beyond decorative purposes, echoing and complementing the respective article through static or narrative images. For instance, in the essay *The Mountain of Ten Thousand Ages*, focusing on Longevity Hill in the Summer Palace, the photograph depicts a picturesque scene where buildings are reflected in the pool, divided by pristine marble railings, while the vignette drawing offers a scene that could occur on the pond, with people leisurely boating on the lake (figure 8). In the corresponding essay, White introduces:

“Few, save the Empress Dowager herself, were ever allowed to partake of the pleasures of this romantic spot. Today, the gates are thrown open: ...the lovely lake. The scene spread out before us is enchanting. All that the lavish hand of nature could bestow, combined with the best that human art and skill could devise, seems here to be brought together to enrich the spot and make it beautiful. Gardens and flowers, hills and groves, mountains and lakes, islands and bridges, temples, and pagodas, in all their natural and artistic splendor, make a rare setting for the elegant ‘verandahed’ pavilions and spacious courtyards which compose the Imperial summer home” (White 1927, 38).

White perceptively reveals how the Summer Palace embodies the perfect harmony between the generosity of nature and human artistic skills. The words “Gardens and flowers, hills and groves, mountains and lakes, islands and bridges, temples and pagodas” not only enumerate the various components of the natural scenery and cultural landscape of the Summer Palace but also emphasize their harmonious unity in natural beauty and artistic splendor. Thus, the mutual complementarity of photography, text, and vignettes creates a perceptual experience for the reader characterized by tranquility, natural and artistic harmony. This approach showcases the grandeur and delicacy of the Summer Palace as a royal garden. Such descriptive techniques possess high academic and artistic qualities, guiding

readers to deeply appreciate the unique charm and profound significance of the Summer Palace.

Photographic Ontology: Peking's Color

In the 'Introduction', Hu Shi pointed out that from the outset, White approached Chinese architecture as an art form in his photography (Hu 1927, 9). White believes that his book will possess artistic and documentation value (White 1927, 11), as he observed many ancient and priceless monuments ruthlessly destroyed at the time. Consequently, this book is envisioned as "*a work of immeasurable value to China and the world, as an authentic record of picturesque Peking*" (White 1927, 11). *Peking the Beautiful* stands as one of the earliest systematic records of Beijing architecture. It marks the first attempt to colorize photography to capture and showcase the vibrant colors of Beijing's palaces and temples. Chinese architecture emphasizes profoundly integrating nature and the environment (Almodóvar-Melendo & Cabeza-Lainez 2018, 2443; Chen and Wu 2009). Hence, the colors of the environment and architecture are crucial elements in perceiving the beauty of Chinese architecture. This significant perception was absent in all previous black-and-white photographs of Chinese architecture:

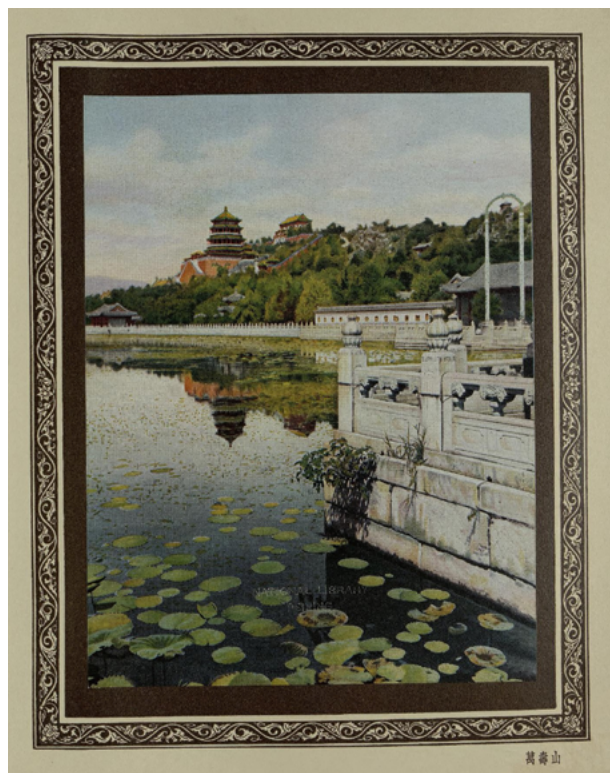
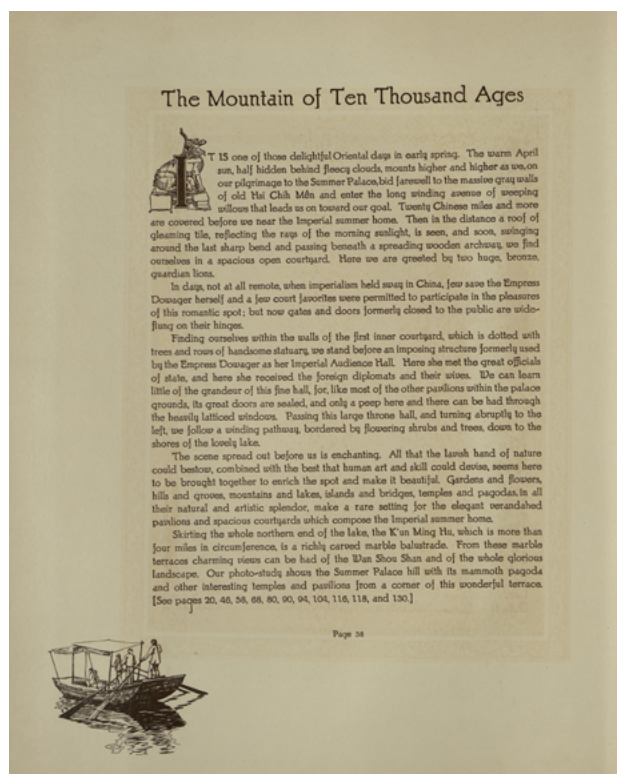


Figure 8. *The Mountain of Ten Thousand Ages*, the text, photo and vignette: Shanghai, 1927. Photograph by: H. C. White (White 1927, 38).

“Of all the art books thus far produced in China, no attempt has been made to show the beauty and charm of the wonderful coloring of palaces and shrines. In the present volume, the difficult and expensive task of presenting Peking in all the glory of its marvelous coloring has been accomplished, for twelve of the photographic studies have been reproduced in full and natural colors — a triumph which makes this work distinctive” (White 1927, 12).

Due to the high cost of producing color photographs at the time, only twelve photos in the album are in color, which still stands out remarkably today (table 1). What criteria did White use in selecting these twelve photos? Firstly, White recognized that these buildings contain rich color information, which is integral to accurately documenting them (figures 9 and 10). Furthermore, White keenly perceived the heritage value of these buildings, now among Beijing’s most important landmarks, anticipating their heritagization in the 1920s.¹² In 1909, the 清政府民政部 [translation: ‘Qing Ministry of Civil Affairs’] issued China’s first law on cultural heritage protection, the 保存古迹推广办法 [translation: ‘Methods for the Preservation and Promotion of Ancient Monuments’]. However, its effectiveness was limited due to the weakening of the Qing rule and sparse coverage and reporting of survey data by provinces. In 1930, the 南京国民政府 [translation: ‘Nanjing Nationalist Government’] enacted China’s first law on cultural relics protection, the 古物保存法 [translation: ‘Antiquities Conservation Act’], marking a significant milestone for architectural scholarship in China, coinciding with the inaugural issue of the 中国营造学社汇刊 [translation: ‘Journal of SSCA’]. 第一次全国文物普查 [translation: ‘The First National Cultural Relics Census’] within the People’s Republic of China began in 1956, organized on a nationwide scale to inventory immovable cultural relics (Wang and Zhao 2019). Returning to the 1920s when the book was created, China’s heritage conservation concept was still developing. Today, the buildings on the twelve colorized photos chosen by White are listed in China’s highest-level heritage category, MCHSNP, with over half designated as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Among these, White seemed particularly fond of the Summer Palace, which occupies one-third of the color plates. This admiration stems not only from its astonishing history and opulence, symbolized by “something for which the wicked Empress Dowager once squandered the twenty-four million taels originally appropriated for the construction of the new navy” (Hu 1927, 8), but also because White believed the Summer Palace encapsulates greatness, vastness, and glory, capturing the imagination

and humility in the face of these ancient and magnificent symbols (White 1927, 11). Through substantial financial investment and contemplation, the photographer dedicated an ontological effort to elevating Chinese architecture into an art form.

Page Number	Photo caption	Article title	MCHSNP, major cultural heritage sites under national-level protection 全国重点文物保护单位	UNESCO World Heritage
16	万里长城	Morning Sunlight on the Great Wall	MCHSNP	1987
26	玉泉山瓷塔	The Porcelain Pagoda	MCHSNP	1998 (part of Summer Palace, an Imperial Garden in Beijing 颐和园)
38	万寿山	The Mountain of Ten Thousand Ages	MCHSNP	1998 (part of Summer Palace)
46	颐和园长廊	A Thousand-Colonnade Walk	MCHSNP	1998 (part of Summer Palace)
54	西山御苑宝塔	The Hunting Park Pagoda	MCHSNP	/
62	北海之九龙壁	At the North Sea Gardens	MCHSNP	/
78	天坛之围墙	The Altar of Heaven	MCHSNP	1998
94	颐和园玉带桥	The Camel-back Bridge	MCHSNP	1998 (part of Summer Palace)
102	太和殿	The Throne Hall of Supreme Harmony	MCHSNP	1987
124	孔子纪念坊 (“圆桥教泽”坊)	The Confucian Pailou	MCHSNP	/
144	祈年殿	The Annual Service at Heaven's Altar	MCHSNP	1998
154	喇嘛教之住持	The Prayer Hour at the Lama Temple	MCHSNP	/

Table 1. *Twelve colored Photograph from the album, pages, captions and heritage categories.*

Conclusion: Framing Architecture as Art

Peking the Beautiful holds significant academic, artistic, and high bibliophilic value. Its photographers, Herbert and James White were distinguished representatives among early 20th-century photographers in China—such as Edouard Chavannes, Ernst Boerschmann, Osvald Sirén, Sidney Gamble, renowned for their profound humanistic cultivation and artistic sensibility. Their collections of Chinese photographs, if conserved, warrant further systematic exploration, constituting crucial academic resources in photographic history, architectural history, and cultural heritage. This study examines the pivotal role of photographic images in the process of art promotion, using the book as a case study. It demonstrates how, through institutional endorsement, semiotic expression techniques, and the creation of aesthetic experiences, photographers' proactive artistic endeavors have reframed Chinese architecture from a discourse of craftsmanship to an art form, subtly engaging in the heritagization process.

Firstly, *Peking the Beautiful* emerged from a highly esteemed milieu, with its author hailing from a wealthy and well-educated background. The book is further distinguished by the endorsement of Hu Shi, and its production and dissemination were significantly bolstered by White's prestigious network of influential figures, including Juliet Bredon, William Alexander Parsons Martin, and Princess Der Ling, among others. This high level of quality has established the book as a valuable reference for the later SSCA. Consequently, the photos within the volume are imbued with considerable artistic and scholarly significance. Secondly, it features seventy-one of White's photographs, focusing on key sites like the Summer Palace and the Forbidden City. Hu Shi praises it as a valuable record of Beijing's landmarks. White's images and texts reveal the artistic and cultural significance of these structures, offering readers a deep understanding of Chinese architectural heritage and a cohesive artistic experience. Thirdly, one of the most notable methodologies employed by White is the use of colorized (painted) photography to elevate Chinese architecture to an art form. By introducing vibrant hues that were missing from earlier black-and-white photos, twelve color photographs vividly showcase the architectural grandeur of Beijing. This innovative approach seamlessly integrates artistic expression with documentary accuracy, positioning Chinese architecture as both a significant historical record and a remarkable aesthetic achievement. In a transcultural context, this work has made significant contributions to the Chinese architectural historiography and the conservation of cultural heritage, and indeed made Peking very beautiful.



Figure 9. *A Thousand-Colonnade Walk*: Shanghai, 1927. Photograph by: H. C. White (White 1927, 46).

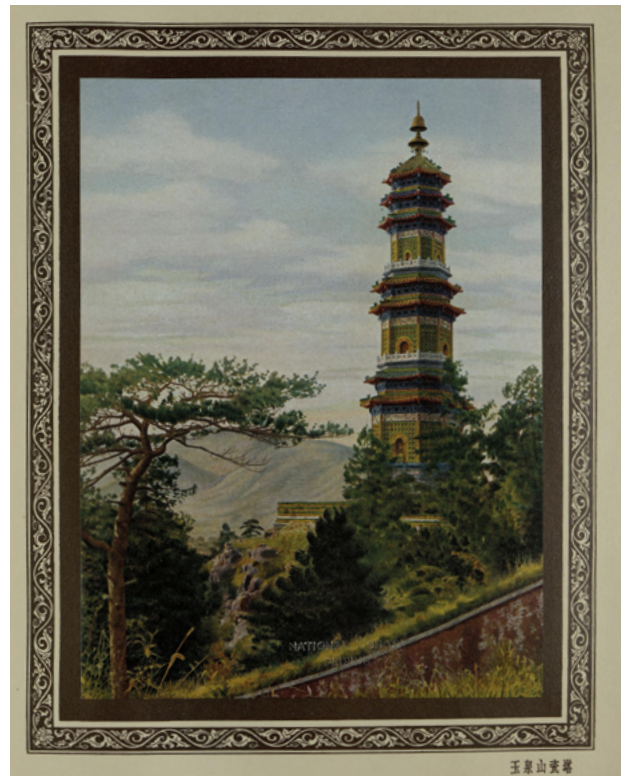


Figure 10. *The Porcelain Pagoda*: Shanghai, 1927. Photograph by: H. C. White (White 1927, 26).

“Figures like White played a crucial role in the reproduction and dissemination of Chinese architecture through prints—both images and texts—effectively making this architecture movable and accessible to a global audience in various scales.”

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Endnotes

- 1 The authors are grateful to Prof. Dominique Bauer (KU Leuven) and Dr. Cui Jinze (KU Leuven) for their thorough help.
- 2 The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.
- 3 This research is supported by the China Scholarship Council (CSC) [grant number 202106260024].
- 4 There are actually seventy-one photos and texts in the book. See digital version online: www.loc.gov/item/2021667036/. 79 by Herbert and one (124) by Henry.
- 5 The New Culture Movement, which began in 1915, was a cultural campaign aimed at promoting Western ideals of democracy and science while opposing Chinese feudalism and traditional culture. It sought to foster intellectual enlightenment and individual liberation within society. By advocating for the use of vernacular language and introducing Western thought, the movement profoundly influenced China's cultural development and social transformation, laying the groundwork for the subsequent May Fourth Movement. See: Chen (2017).
- 6 Cultural institutions are pivotal organizations dedicated to creating, preserving, and disseminating cultural products and services, acting as bridges between cultural heritage and contemporary culture. These institutions, including museums, theaters, libraries, and cultural centers, serve as repositories of artifacts and knowledge and as active participants in community cultural and economic life. Comprising formal and informal organizations, cultural institutions define societal roles by upholding and promoting cultural values and setting expectations and standards for social interaction. Their presence and activities enrich cultural diversity and provide spiritual support and intellectual resources crucial for sustainable societal development. See Currie (2021).
- 7 *Signs of the Times* was first published on June 4, 1874, in Oakland, California, by James Springer White, one of the co-founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. *Signs of the Times* aimed to be “*not only an expositor of prophecy, and a reporter of the signs of the times, but also a family paper for religious and general news*”. See “More than a Century of SIGNS”.
- 8 *Smithsonian Magazine* ranks Ellen G. White as “one of the 100 Most Significant Americans of All Time”; see Frail (2014).
- 9 Originally: *Asiatic Division Mission Outlook* (June 1917–) and *Asiatic Division Mission News* from 1912 to April 1917. See Rogers (1918).
- 10 The Signs of the Times Press was an imprint established by the SDA in Shanghai, serving as the focal point for their Chinese-language evangelism efforts. Zhou Zhenwei's article outlines the press's journey from its challenging beginnings through its development in Shanghai, its continued publication during the resistance against Japanese aggression, and its transformation and contributions to establishing the Shanghai Printing School after the victory of the resistance. The Signs of the Times Press witnessed the SDA Church's missionary activities in China and saw its publication, Signs of the Times, become one of the best-selling periodicals in the rear areas during the war of resistance. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Signs of the Times Press underwent government administration. They transformed into the Shanghai Printing School, playing a crucial role in cultivating professionals for the printing industry. See Zhou (2017).
- 11 James Henry White, as a missionary of the SDA Church, arrived in China with his wife Margaret in 1921, serving in the Northern China Union Mission (Shanxi, Hebei, and Shandong provinces). He held positions as secretary-treasurer of the Jilin Mission 吉林传道会 and the Zhili Mission 直隶传道会, overseeing educational and youth ministry, until 1927 when he shifted to evangelistic work in Shandong. During this period, they raised three children in China before returning to the United States in 1929. See Hook, ‘Margaret Polly’ (2022).
- 12 Heritagization refers to the process of officially recognizing cultural practices, places, or objects as heritage. It involves designating certain elements within a culture as worthy of preservation, promotion, and transmission to future generations. See: De Cesari & Dimova (2018); and Hafstein (2018).