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Zhou, Luo

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# CROSS-CURRENTS



## EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

### **Chinese Leisure Scenes through Sidney Gamble's Camera**

Luo Zhou, Duke University Libraries

#### **Abstract**

Sidney D. Gamble was a trained sociologist and an amateur photographer. He took nearly five thousand photographs during four trips to China between 1908 and 1932, covering a wide range of elements of Chinese society and providing a visual archive for an important period in Chinese history. Among Gamble's many interesting images documenting events and moments during those turbulent years, the photographs that capture leisure scenes are uniquely charming, giving us a peek into the daily lives of Chinese people a century ago. This article accompanies the September 2013 *Cross-Currents* photo essay, which features images selected by curator Luo Zhou from the Sidney D. Gamble Photographs collection (<http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/gamble/>).

#### **Introduction to the Digital Collection of Gamble Photographs**

In 1908, eighteen-year-old Sidney Gamble arrived in China for the first time, with his parents. The family visited Hangzhou, and the trip impressed Gamble so much that he came back to China three more times between 1917 and 1932, traveling throughout the country to collect data for socioeconomic surveys and to photograph urban and rural life, public events, architecture, religious statuary, and the countryside. As a sociologist and renowned China scholar, as well as an avid amateur photographer, Gamble used some of the pictures to illustrate his monographs, but most of his photographs were never published and therefore remain largely unknown.

About fifteen years after Sidney Gamble's death in 1968, his daughter, Catherine Curran, found a trove of nitrate negatives in a closet in the family's home in New York. Stored in beautiful rosewood boxes, the negatives were sheathed housed in individual paper sleeves and annotated with typed and handwritten captions (figure 1). In order to properly preserve the negatives, Ms. Curran hired an archivist, who transferred them into archival sleeves and transcribed the captions onto typed labels. In 1986, Catherine Curran established the Sidney D.

Gamble Foundation for China Studies to preserve the photographs and provide access to them. Duke University Libraries invited Ms. Curran to place her father's photographs in its Archive of Documentary Arts, and an agreement to bring the Gamble collection to Duke was signed in March 2006.



Figure 1. Gamble's nitrate negatives, with handwritten captions. *Source:* Duke University Libraries.

In October of that year, Duke University Libraries contracted with Chicago Albumen Works in Massachusetts to digitize the highly flammable nitrate negatives, a process that continued through the spring of 2007. The vendor also digitized the typed image labels to transform them into raw text, which became the foundation for the image captions and geographic headings in the Sidney D. Gamble Photographs digital collection. In early 2008, digital collections staff updated the geographic names in the labels to Library of Congress subject headings formats, added province names to the metadata, and standardized the descriptions to support searching and browsing. The complete collection was published in fall 2008 and is accessible online at <http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/gamble/documentary>. The collection marks the first comprehensive public presentation of this large body of work and includes photographs of China, Korea, Japan, Hawaii, San Francisco, and Russia.

### **Sidney Gamble's Four Trips to China**

When Gamble visited Hangzhou in 1908, the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) was rapidly collapsing, and both the Empress dowager and the Guangxu Emperor died that winter. The final Qing emperor, Xuantong, was forced to abdicate in 1912, leaving China in the hands of

inexperienced revolutionists headed by Sun Yat-sen. The young Republic of China witnessed Yuan Shikai's failed attempt to revive the monarchy and in 1916 entered the warlord era. Sidney Gamble arrived in China for the second time in May 1917, accompanied by Robert Fitch (who would become president of Hangchow Christian College in 1922) and Presbyterian missionary J. H. Arthur (Gamble 2004). The three men traveled up the Yangtze River from Zhejiang Province deep into Sichuan Province. It was quite an adventure navigating the river's rapids in Sichuan, and Gamble took many photographs of his experiences. Figure 2, which shows him perched in a wheelbarrow wearing a pith helmet and holding his camera, is a fine representation of a Western scholar doing fieldwork in Asia in the early twentieth century.



Figure 2. Sidney Gamble in a wheelbarrow traveling from Xindu to Chengdu, 1917.<sup>1</sup>

In the spring of 1918, Gamble visited relief camps in Tianjin, where a great flood had left millions of Chinese homeless the year before (figure 3). He joined the international staff of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in Beijing and became a member of the Princeton University Center in China in 1917. He visited Hebei and began to conduct fieldwork for a social survey of Beijing with American missionary John Stewart Burgess, while teaching elementary economics and the principles of philanthropic and institutional work at Yenching University (Gamble 2004).



Figure 3. Flooded area being pumped by hand, Tianjin, 1918.



Figure 4 (left). Hall of Supreme Harmony, Thanksgiving Day review with men and soldiers, Beijing, November 28, 1918.



Figure 5 (right). Peking University students speaking and interacting with police in front of the YMCA, Beijing, June 3, 1919.

In 1917, China entered World War I on the side of the Allies. Although China did not see any military action, it provided laborers who worked in Allied mines and factories. Gamble witnessed Republican China's celebration of the victory in the Forbidden City in 1918. Figure 4 documents an impressive review in front of the Hall of Supreme Harmony, the ceremonial center of imperial China. However, the Treaty of Versailles ignored China's plea to end concessions and foreign control of China, and on May 4, 1919, students began to demonstrate against it. The May Fourth Movement, as it was called, quickly became a broader cultural movement focused

on revitalizing and unifying China so that it could combat warlordism, exploitation, and foreign imperialism. With his camera, Gamble captured students from Peking University giving public speeches in front of the YMCA building (figure 5).

In the winter of 1919, Sidney Gamble returned to California with negatives of some 2,500 photographs taken during his second sojourn in China. In 1921, he published his first book, *Peking: A Social Survey*. In March 1924, he arrived back in Beijing to resume his post as secretary of the International Committee of the YMCA. From 1924 to 1927, he made several trips to Miaofeng Shan in the suburbs of Beijing, taking photographs and filming pilgrims visiting the mountain's famous goddess temple (footage available at <http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/gamble/documentary/>). He attended the funeral of Dr. Sun Yat-sen in 1925 and began to conduct research on prices, wages, and the standard of living in Beijing. He returned home in 1927.

In the summer of 1931, Gamble returned to China for the last time. That fall, he served as research secretary of the National Association for the Mass Education Movement (MEM) and carried out surveys of village life in northern China. The MEM set up an experiment in Ding Xian, a county some two hundred miles south of Beijing that aimed to create a new countryside through innovations ranging from planting better crops to staging village dramas and providing village health workers. Figure 6 depicts a farmer from Ding Xian with two big, beautiful pumpkins on a table. Gamble departed China for good in February 1932. Back in the United States, he published *How Chinese Families Live in Peiping* in 1933, followed by *Ting Hsien: A North China Rural Community* in 1954.

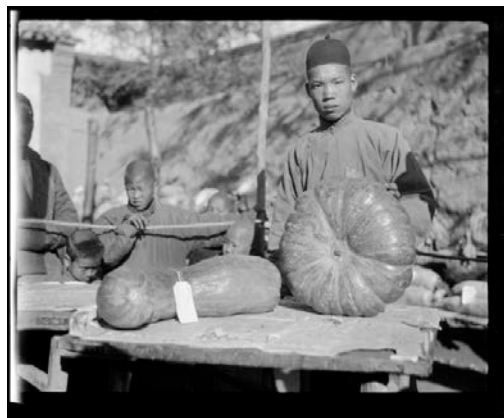


Figure 6. Model squash, Ding Xian, 1931.

## Leisure Activities of the Chinese

Despite all of the upheavals in early twentieth-century Chinese society, Chinese people continued to pursue their leisure-time activities in both traditional and new ways and places, as seen in Gamble's photographs. Ordinary men raised birds and indulged in horseback riding, tobacco and opium smoking, and opera singing. Women were also seen smoking, but they seldom pursued other hobbies because of housework and seclusion. Men and women both attended traditional temple fairs and church events, joined pilgrimages, and participated in holiday celebrations, but their goals and pleasures in these pursuits may have been different. People visited temples on the birthdays of gods and goddesses and on important holidays, such as New Year's Day, to pray for good fortune for themselves and their families. But whereas women might beg for a son or grandson and enjoy the time to socialize with other women and men in public, men would often ask the gods to bless their work and careers.

### *Smoking Tobacco and Opium*

Tobacco and opium are not native Chinese plants. Tobacco originated in the Americas and was brought to Europe in the sixteenth century by Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch sailors (Olivova 2005). Then, probably in the late sixteenth century, tobacco found its way to China: from the Philippines to Fujian, from Nanyang (Southeast Asia) to Guangdong, and from Japan to Korea and North China. Smoking became a national pastime at the end of the Ming dynasty. During the Ming and the Qing dynasties, the emperors sometimes banned tobacco, because smoking it was deemed harmful to people and, more crucially, because its cultivation took too much land from food production. The Chinese population grew rapidly in the Qing dynasty, and feeding people was a challenge. Nevertheless, smoking tobacco became popular among both men and women, and farmers planted tobacco all over China. Figure 7 shows a busy farmer in Guangdong apparently preparing tobacco seeds for planting.

Gamble took many photographs of lower-class men smoking pipes, which was a typical practice before cigarettes became popular. Tobacco leaves were dried and cut into thin strips and packed into a small container, to which a stem was attached. The smoker would light the tobacco threads and inhale through the stem. The longer the stem was, the milder the taste (Olivova 2005). Figure 8 features a pilot on the Yangtze River smoking a very short pipe. The pilot must have needed a strong hit of tobacco to stay energetic for the job. Figure 9 portrays an old man, a

gatekeeper at a temple, smoking a longer pipe—more for entertainment than out of necessity. Gamble also came across women smoking pipes, usually (even among lower-class women) with long, thin stems (figures 10 and 11).



Figure 7 (left). Planting tobacco, Guangdong, 1918.

Figure 8 (center). Pilot smoking, Yangtze River, 1917.

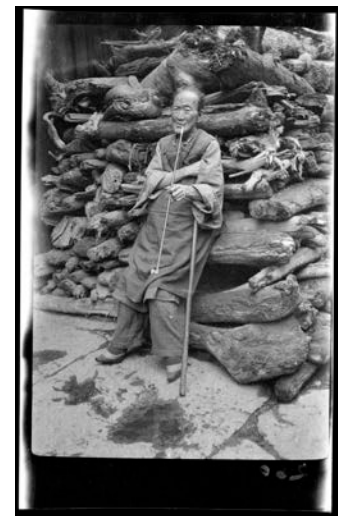


Figure 9 (left). Old gatekeeper, Hangzhou, 1919.

Figure 10 (center). Grandmother and pipe, Tianjin, 1918.

Figure 11 (right). Old woman smoking, Sichuan, 1917.



The pipes in these four photographs were called “dry pipes” (*hanyandai* 旱烟袋 or *hanyandou* 旱烟斗) and were often made from bamboo. Pipes made of brass were also popular, but although they were more durable (Olivova 2005), they were also more expensive and hence less affordable for poor people. Figure 12 depicts a poor patron renting an expensive pipe, which seems to be made of brass and has a complicated shape. Figure 13 portrays a beggar walking on the riverbank smoking a simple long, thin pipe, possibly homemade from a bamboo stem.

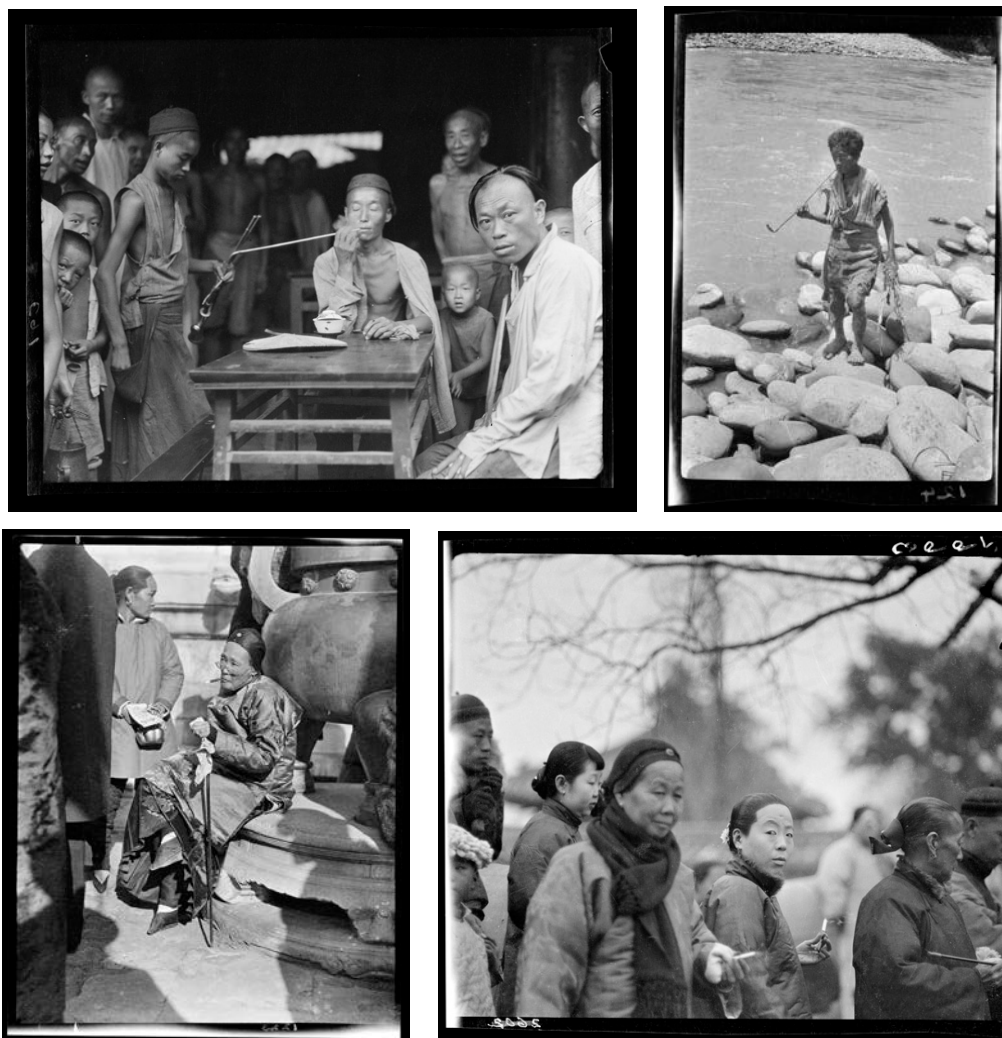


Figure 12 (upper left). Renting smoke , Sichuan, 1917.

Figure 13 (upper right). Beggar smoking, Sichuan, 1917.

Figure 14 (lower left). Old lady sitting on burner, Thanksgiving Day review, Forbidden City, 1918.

Figure 15 (lower right). Women and cigarettes, Beijing, 1925–1926.

Cigarettes began to be imported into China in the late nineteenth century by foreign companies, a development that changed the traditional culture of tobacco consumption by the Chinese. Cigarettes (*yanyan* 洋烟) were more convenient, milder, and more suitable for smoking in public places; as a result, by the early twentieth century they had become quite popular in cities. Figure 14 shows a wealthy-looking old woman resting on a copper incense burner and smoking a cigarette using a cigarette holder while attending the presidential review with her maid. Figure 15 captures three women smoking in public: two are smoking cigarettes using cigarette holders, and the third is smoking a traditional pipe.

Opium smoking in China tells a different story. Opium was used in China as a medical drug as early as the Tang dynasty (618–907) (“Opium” 2009). Smoking opium began to spread in the Qing dynasty and became a common form of sociability, especially for men. Towards the late Qing, the dangers of excessive use of opium were widely publicized, and the court tried to control its trade and launched campaigns to suppress its usage. The young Republican government continued to fight against opium smoking and opium trade.

Gamble didn’t take any pictures of people smoking opium, but he did document a public burning of opium in Beijing on his second trip. Figure 16 presents a table laden with packages of opium and pipes waiting to be destroyed. Despite the many efforts in Republican China to ban opium, especially in the early years, opium remained popular throughout China. During the warlord era (1916–1928), controlling the opium trade became a major and easy source of revenue for the local governments. In Figure 17, workers are busy cutting opium. The man on the right appears to be wearing a uniform, suggesting that the opium trade may have been protected by the local authorities.



Figure 16 (left). Opium burning and pipes, Beijing, 1918–1919.

Figure 17 (right). Cutting opium, Beijing, 1924–1927.

### *Temples and Churches*

Temple fairs, which originated out of celebrations of gods' birthdays, were one of the most popular public events in the Qing dynasty and the Republic of China. Men, women, and children all enjoyed attending these events, finding them both entertaining and comforting (Cheng 2007). Figure 18 captures a city god temple procession in a small town in Sichuan. The male attendant in the middle of the crowd of boys, whose face is partly painted in a light color, is likely portraying Bai Wuchang (白无常), called Wuerye (吴二爷) in Sichuan. Bai Wuchang often appears with Hei Wuchang (黑无常); together, they are the so-called "Black and White Impermanence" in charge of bringing the souls of the dead to Chinese hell (Diyu 地狱). The Black and the White are in charge of evil and good spirits, respectively. The characters written on Bai Wuchang's tall hat read, "Waiting for you," which we can understand as "Waiting for your soul."



Figure 18. City god, man attendant, and boys, Sichuan, 1917.

In Beijing, the annual "devil dance" at the Lama Temple is part of an eight-day ceremony every spring during which monks pray for peace and prosperity in the coming year. The ritual dance performed by masked Tibetan lamas is believed to ward off disasters and ghosts. Figures 19 and 20 capture the drama of the performance and its popularity with families over a century ago. In figure 19, we see policemen standing in a line in front of the attendees to maintain order.

This event also offered an opportunity for women to leave the house and mingle with men, as seen in figure 20. Markets were often an important part of these temple fairs, with people enjoying shopping and socializing with friends and relatives.



Figure 19 (left). Big head dancers performing a devil dance at the Lama Temple, Beijing, 1919.  
Figure 20 (right). Lama dignitary and audience, Beijing, 1925–1927.

Pilgrimages to sacred mountain temples were also popular events. Mount Tai (泰山) in Shandong and Mount Miaofeng (妙峰山) in the suburbs of Beijing were both famous destinations where pilgrims could express their faithfulness and seek protection and guidance from Dongyue (东岳大帝) of Mount Tai and Bixia Yuanjun (碧霞元君) of Mount Miaofeng (figure 21). Men and women often organized incense groups (*xianghui* 香会), or flower societies (*huahui* 花会), to help fulfill their pilgrimage. There were two kinds of incense groups: *wenhui* (文会) and *wuhui* (武会). A *wenhui* would organize preparations for pilgrimages such as cleaning up temples, checking and repairing mountain roads, and setting up tea stops (*chapeng* 茶棚) that offered free tea, food, and even lodging along the road. A *wuhui* usually offered free martial art or dance performances, such as the lion dance shown in figure 22, to entertain the travelers.



Figure 21 (left). Tai Miao pilgrims, Shandong, 1919.



Figure 22 (right). Lion Society, Miaofeng Shan, 1924–1927.

Churches and missionary schools provided new places for men, women, and children to meet socially, seek spiritual guidance in Christianity, and engage in different kinds of fun. Figure 23 is an image of a Christmas party at an American boarding school. Dressed in rags, these boys must have come from very poor families or been orphans. At this party they enjoyed food, warmth, kindness, and perhaps a few Christmas songs. Figure 24 depicts another missionary school, judging by the teacher standing by the seesaw. It is likely recess time, with young boys enjoy the seesaw and another two trying to climb poles.



Figure 23 (left). Children at American Board Kindergarten, with Christmas tree, Beijing, 1918.

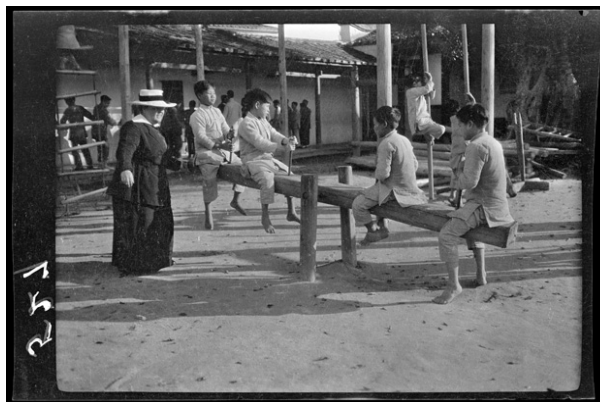


Figure 24 (right). Playing on teeter-totter (seesaw), with Mrs. Wilkinson, Guangdong, 1918.

Gamble documented a YMCA picnic in figure 25. Interestingly, the site of the picnic, according to Gamble, was the Yellow Temple (Huangsi 黄寺), also a “lama” temple. The Yellow Temple was actually two temples—the West Yellow Temple and the East Yellow Temple—and the West Yellow Temple (also called the Dalai Lama Temple) in particular was an important temple for Tibetan Buddhism during the Qing dynasty. In the Republican period, because of a lack of funding from the government, the temple gradually lost its glory. Gamble’s photograph captures the beginning of the YMCA picnic, with the men and boys just arriving and food still in baskets or piled neatly on the table.



Figure 25. YMCA picnic at the Yellow Temple, Beijing, 1918–1919.



Figure 26 (left). Women outside church, Beijing, 1918–1919.



Figure 27 (right). Outside church, Beijing, 1918–1919.

The two women outside the church in figure 26 and the woman on the steps in figure 27 are all smiling. These two photographs were probably taken right after Sunday services as people walked out of the church, satisfied and socializing happily. The Chinese men, women, and children, as well as the Westerners, in these images all look relaxed and content.

### *Other Leisure Activities*

Raising pet birds—birds with colorful feathers, birds with beautiful voices, and smart birds that could perform tricks after proper training—was a popular pastime among Chinese men. The man in figure 28 is proudly exhibiting his two birdcages; of course, it is impossible to tell whether these are singing birds or colorful birds from this black-and-white photograph. Figure 29 features cages on a brick wall and men walking around admiring one another's pet birds. It is easy to imagine that at least some of these birds are showing off their voices in front of the other birds, while their masters exchange experiences and enjoy the singing. The man in figure 30 is holding a stand with a bird perched on it, perhaps a bird that can perform tricks and help its master earn money.

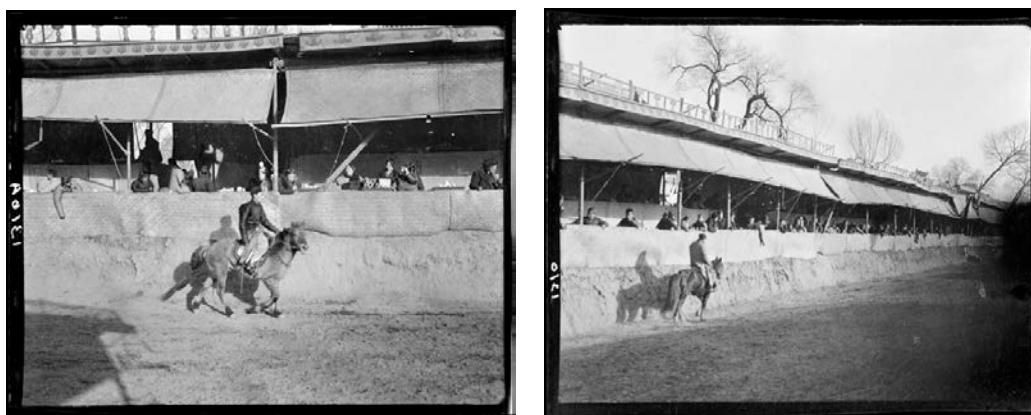


Figure 28 (left). Birdcage man, Beijing, 1924–1927.

Figure 29 (center). Showing off birds, Beijing, 1918–1919.

Figure 30 (right). Man and bird, Beijing, 1918–1919.

Historians have documented horse racing in China from the Han dynasty two thousand years ago to the Qing dynasty of the last century. The Manchu people were especially fond of this sport, and races were regularly held in Beijing from the Qing period through the early years of the Republic. The sport was first developed as a commercial spectacle by foreigners in Shanghai during the late nineteenth century. Foreign diplomats brought racing to Beijing and Tianjin, where races attracted huge crowds of local gamblers. Gamble's photographs of horse racing were taken on his second trip to China. One can't tell from the images exactly how the racing was done, but they reveal a full audience at the event, including rich men and women (figures 31 and 32). Betting might have been part of the fun, and the markets surrounding the racecourse must have offered many opportunities for participants to shop and socialize.



Figures 31 and 32. Horse racing, Beijing, 1918–1919.

Watching street performers at temple fairs and horse racing events was a popular form of entertainment for lower-class people. These performers sometimes worked individually and other times in small groups, collecting money from their audiences in the middle or at the end of the show. Gamble's notes indicate that the two women and small boy in figure 33 are watching a "circus," likely referring to the kind of street performance popular at the time.

The early twentieth century brought street parades, political and cultural movements, and new lifestyles to China. Photographic documentation of these events is important and interesting, as is documentation of the spectators who attended them. The men, women, and children who inhabit Gamble's photographs watch many of the unfolding scenes with amazement. For example, figure 34 captures two well-dressed women watching boy scouts cooking in a field. A



boy dressed in Western clothes is on the left, with lots of men around and a counselor standing on the right. The two boys cooking in the middle may be the sons or brothers of the two women, who look surprised to see the boys learning to cook, perhaps because this was different from what young Chinese gentlemen would traditionally learn to do.



Figure 33 (left). Watching the circus, Beijing, 1918–1919.

Figure 34 (right). Tsinghua scouts with women watching, Beijing, 1918–1919.

Figure 35 documents the procession for Dr. Sun Yat-sen's funeral, and figure 36 shows a parade. In both photographs, men, women, children, and dogs come out of their homes to watch the excitement, looking relaxed and watching with great interest. People stand on rooftops and climb onto trees in order to get a better view.



Figure 35 (left). Sun Yat-sen's funeral, 1925.

Figure 36 (right). Parade route, Beijing, 1925–1927.

Other common leisure activities preserved in Gamble's photographs include men visiting brothels, women and children patronizing street peddlers, and people casually chatting. Figure 37 displays the doorway of a brothel; the names of the prostitutes are inscribed on boards hung on both sides of the entrance and written on paper pasted by the doorway. We can surmise that this is a high-end brothel, because the names of the prostitutes are being used as an advertisement and rickshaw drivers are waiting for their male customers to emerge.

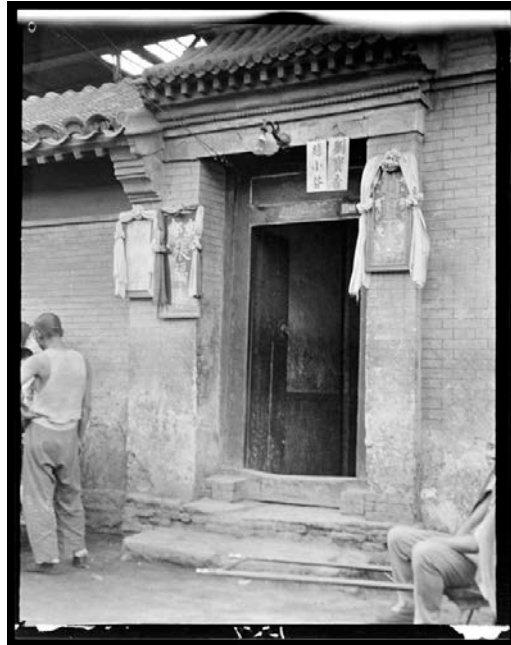


Figure 37. Prostitution sign and doorway, Beijing, 1919.

Figure 38 shows children standing in front of the cart of a street peddler who specializes in toys and perhaps candies that children would beg their parents to buy for them. These street peddlers often sang about what they were selling, and the children in the neighborhood would come out upon hearing these musical announcements. Women also patronized these traveling shops for all sorts of household needs. The baby in figure 39 is holding *tang hulu*, or sugar-coated haws, sweets made from the fruit of the Chinese hawthorn, on a stick, which may have been bought from a street peddler, and two women, either relatives or neighbors, are seen playing with the baby and talking to each other.



Figure 38 (left). Children and traveling shop, Beijing, 1918–1919.

Figure 39 (right). Baby holding *tang hulu*, Beijing, Baoding, 1918–1919.

## Conclusion

Captured over three trips totaling almost nine years, these selected photographs, and many others from the Sidney D. Gamble collection, document Chinese people's leisure activities during the early twentieth century. Despite turbulent political changes, civil wars, and new political and cultural movements, Chinese people continued to enjoy their traditional games, activities, and pastimes, while also finding new ways and places to entertain themselves. People today still enjoy many of these same activities; finding links between these contemporary pastimes and the ways of life in China a century ago further enhances the wealth of information contained in these remarkable images.

*Luo Zhou is the Chinese studies librarian in the International and Area Studies Department of Duke University Libraries.*

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## Notes

- 1 The captions in this essay and in the accompanying online photo essay (<https://cross-currents.berkeley.edu/e-journal/issue-8>) are, for the most part, true to Gamble's handwritten notes, except where information has been edited or added for clarity's sake.

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