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The Morrisons of Peking: Living History

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It is a great honour for me, an historian of modern Chinese art and visual culture who grew up in Melbourne not far from Geelong where George Ernest Morrison was born, to finally see and experience the great library amassed by Morrison in Peking, now preserved in Tokyo.¹ I was a friend of Morrison's middle son, Alastair, who passed away in Canberra in 2009. I got to know Alastair Morrison through his wife the German-born photographer Hedda Hammer Morrison. We met at their home in Canberra in 1989. After Hedda's death in 1991 Alastair generously donated a collection of her photographic prints, personal papers, and objects that they had collected in Asia to the Powerhouse Museum (Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences) in Sydney where I was curator of Asian arts. Having myself travelled to Peking as a young art student in late 1978 and stayed for three years, I was fascinated by the life of Hedda Hammer, a young photographer, who had travelled there in 1933 and stayed for thirteen years.² This essay draws on research conducted on the photographs of Hedda Hammer Morrison over many years in Australia, China and at the Harvard-Yenching Library and reflects on the extended Morrison family who in acknowledgement of their deep connection with China I will refer to as 'The Morrisons of Peking.'³

George Ernest Morrison (1862–1920) is a legendary figure—journalist, traveller, and political adviser to the Chinese government at a time when foreign powers exerted considerable influence in China.⁴ Readers marvelled at his 3,000 mile walk from Shanghai to Yangon undertaken in 1894 and recorded in the book *An Australian in China* (1895), and his informed and incisive reporting for London's *The Times* newspaper, where he was the Peking based correspondent for many years [Morrison G. E. 1895]. Of particular note during his tenure at *The Times* was his coverage of the siege of the foreign legations during the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 and a report that he had perished. A souvenir photograph from the G. E. Morrison collection in the Mitchell Library, Sydney, taken by the S. Yamamoto photographic studio documents the contingent of Japanese military and civilians who defended Chinese Christians barricaded inside Prince Su's Palace, adjacent to the Legation Quarter. **[Image 1]** The photograph, dedicated to 'Dr Morrison,' is signed 'With G. Shiba's compliments. Su-Wang-Fu. Peking, 20 February 1901.' Among the contingent of men posing with rifles, successfully led by Japanese military attaché Shiba Goro, are photographers from the Yamamoto studio.

Yamamoto Sanshichiro (1855–1943) ran a photographic studio in Tokyo in the late 1800s and travelled to China to cover the Boxer Rebellion and the activities of Japanese and other foreign troops. He published a book of photographs titled *Views of the North China Affair 1900* (北清事變寫真帖), with captions in English, Chinese and Japanese, and became one of the most influential photographers in Peking. Perhaps as a result of the dramatic shared experience of the Boxer Rebellion Yamamoto became Morrison's photographer of choice. A photograph taken by the S. Yamamoto studio of Morrison and his head servant Sun Tianlu, who Alastair came to know, was among a small number of precious family photographs preserved by Alastair Morrison. **[Image 2]**

Like his father, Alastair Morrison was a great collector. *Peking* (1909) by Yamamoto formed part of a collection of books on photography and China that Alastair donated to the Powerhouse Museum. It was inspired by a similar publication of three years earlier that can be found in the G. E. Morrison collection at the Toyo Bunko,

suggesting the popularity of such images to the expatriate community. **[Images 3, 4]**

E. Morrison's first house, located in the Legation Quarter, was destroyed during the Boxer Rebellion. In 1902 he moved to the Chinese quarter to a house in Wangfujing Street, part of the grand residence of Prince Pu Lun 貝子溥伦. In order to accommodate his extensive collection of books in Western languages concerning China and East Asia, the southern wing of the residential compound was converted into a library. Owing to Morrison's reputation, Wangfujing Street came to be known among expatriates as 'Morrison Street.' The house was described in an article in the *North China Daily*:

Walk past outside the Legation quarter in Peking, and you come to a typical Chinese house, its outer lodge facing the street, a big courtyard within, a house on one side, a long low building on the other... The long building is his library, containing probably the finest collection of books on the Far East in existence today. It is managed on a plan which reveals the man. Everything is systematised and indexed. The least fact can be ascertained at once. ... Here he works; here he maintains constant correspondence with men of all nationalities throughout the Middle Kingdom. System, accuracy, constant intercourse with all classes, and a tremendous correspondence have been the foundations on which he has built up his knowledge. [Pearl 1967: 209]

The library comprised some 24,000 volumes in Western languages about China and her neighbours, including books maps, engravings, photographs, pamphlets and periodicals that Morrison had collected in the course of his working life. When Morrison decided to sell his massive library, Yamamoto was commissioned to record the building and its contents. The series of documentary photographs make clear the extent of the library and the care with which it was managed. **[Image 5]** An inscribed photograph of George E. Morrison flanked by Odagiri Masunosuke (seated left) and Ishida Mikinosuke (seated right) commemorates the sale of the collection in 1917 to Iwasaki Hisaya. **[Image 6]**

At the time of the sale of his collection to what would become the Toyo Bunko, Morrison did not know that he only had three years to live. Five years earlier he had married Jennie Wark Robin, his young New Zealand-born secretary. A photograph taken by the S. Yamamoto studio records a proud father with his three sons who were all born in Peking: Ian in 1913, Alastair in 1915 and Colin two years later. **[Image 7]** The boys were extremely young when their father died. Alastair, the middle child, was only five years old. Tragically, their mother died three years later, in 1923. The boys were brought up by their nanny and an elderly maiden aunt and educated in England. Each of them would grow up to become remarkable travellers whose lives, like their father's, were entwined with the fate of China and her neighbours.

Ian, the eldest child, started his career in East Asia and taught English at Hokkaido University from 1935–1937 [Morrison I. 1938]. Later, he followed in the footsteps of his father and became a committed and fearless journalist, and war correspondent for *The Times*. He travelled extensively in the course of his work and became proficient in Chinese and Japanese. After serving in Malaya, Java, New Guinea and the Pacific, he was tragically killed during the Korean War. In an obituary, written by Colin MacDonald, a friend and former *Times* correspondent in China, Ian Morrison is described as '[g]ifted with a sensitive mind, restless energy and an almost prolific pen' [McDonald 1950].

Ian and Morrison's youngest son Colin married sisters, Maria and Steffi Neubauer, daughters of a 'Shanghai industrialist from Vienna.' For a time Colin Morrison worked for the Hong Kong government.

Morrison's middle son Alastair was also a great traveller and like his father acquired lifelong habits of keeping a diary, collecting and walking long distances. From an early age Alastair developed a keen interest in ornithology. His first collections were of moths and butterflies. After graduating from university, Alastair travelled to Peru and Chile to collect bird specimens, many of which he sold to British zoos and museums.⁵ In 1940 he visited his brother Ian, who was then working in Shanghai, and accompanied him on a trip to Peking. Alastair had been ill and decided to recuperate there. It was in Peking that he met Hedda Hammer.⁶ **[Image 8]**

Hedda Hammer had trained as a photographer in Munich at the Bavarian State Institute for Photography. After working in commercial studios in Germany for a number of years she applied for the job of manager of a photographic studio in Peking. Hartung's Photo Shop had placed an advertisement in the German magazine *Der Photograph* in May 1933. On 10 August, having been offered the job, Hedda Hammer was China bound [Roberts 2012a: 50–51]. By 1933 Hitler was in power and many artists and intellectuals had left or were seeking ways to leave Germany. The 25-year old Hammer was part of that exodus. **[Image 9]**

The German-run photographic studio located in Legation Street was established in 1912 by the Messrs Hartung. It was where expatriates had their photographs taken and films developed and where souvenir views of the city and environs could be purchased. It also functioned as an agency for imported photographic equipment and supplies. By 1933 it was an established studio with a German proprietor and 17 Chinese photographers, making of the job of manager quite demanding.

In her spare time Hedda Hammer rode her bicycle around the city of Peking exploring its streets, temples and parks. The built environment and people's way of life provided rich subject matter for her photographs. **[Image 10, 11]** She liked to take photographs from high vantage points, which gave her the freedom to work uninterrupted and create carefully composed modernist images. In her now famous photographs of rickshaw pullers the shadows are as important as the working men who stand alert waiting for their next fare. **[Image 12]**

After her contract at Hartung's expired in 1938 she remained in the Japanese-occupied city of Beiping as a freelance photographer. She undertook commissions and produced albums of local scenes as souvenirs for visitors and departing residents. As a German citizen she occupied a privileged position, at least until World War II spread to the Pacific late in 1941. She supplemented her income looking after expatriate property, assisting her employer with some craft related business, and after the end of the war worked for the American Red Cross.

Alastair, who much earlier had volunteered as a cipher officer in the British Embassy in Peking, worked in intelligence in India after the outbreak of the Pacific War, entering the army with the 2nd Gurkhas [Reece 2009]. **[Image 13]** In 1946 he returned to Peking to marry Hedda Hammer. Most foreigners had already left or were planning to leave. The Morrisons spent 6 months in Hong Kong before relocating to Sarawak, British Borneo, where they would live for twenty years. They did not return to China until 1979.

In Sarawak Alastair worked as a District Officer for the British Colonial service in various up-river locations, and later in senior administrative positions in the capital Kuching.⁷ Hedda accompanied her husband on many of his official journeys and made numerous independent photographic tours. She published a number of dedicated books of her photographs, *Sarawak* [Morrison H. 1957], *Life in a Longhouse* [Morrison H. 1962], and later—with Leigh Wright and K. F. Wong—*Vanishing World: The Ibans of Borneo* [Morrison H. with Wright and Wong 1972], and one of her photographs taken in Sarawak was included in *The Family of Man* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York [Steichen 1955: 12]. Between 1960 and 1966 she worked part-time in the Sarawak government's information office, taking photographs, training photographers, and establishing a photographic library. The Sarawak government recognised her services to the country by appointing her an Officer of the Order

of the Star of Sarawak (1965).

After the incorporation of Sarawak into the state of Malaysia in 1963, Alastair was invited to work in the new Federal Department of Information. Prior to his departure from Sarawak the title 'Dato' was conferred upon him in recognition of his service to Malaysia. In 1967 the Morrisons moved to Canberra where Alastair worked as Head of the South-East Asia branch of the Office of Current Intelligence under the Joint Intelligence Organisation until his retirement in 1976 [Reece 2009].

Only a small number of Hedda Hammer Morrison's photographs taken in China and East Asia were published during her lifetime, mostly in journal articles authored by herself, or licensed to others. Plans to publish a book soon after she left China were thwarted by the loss of her manuscript by a publisher. Towards the end of her life two monographs were produced by Oxford University Press: *A Photographer in Old Peking* [Morrison H. 1985] and *Travels of a Photographer in China 1933–1946* [Morrison H. 1987]. These two books quickly became classics. Morrison's photographs have been widely circulated in China, often without acknowledgement. In 2001 *A Photographer in Old Peking* was translated into Chinese and published in China [Morrison H. 2001].

After Hedda Hammer Morrison's death in 1991 her photographic archive was dispersed among institutions in America and Australia. The archive of images created during her years in China, and her travels in East Asia including Japan, was donated to the Harvard-Yenching Library at Harvard University.⁸ The core of that collection is some 10,000 negatives, the majority taken in China during 1933–1946 but also including photographs taken during return trips in 1979 and 1987. It is a rich visual archive of great historical and artistic value. The collection also contains some 28 thematic photographic albums made by Morrison, many of them bound like Chinese books contained in silk covered Chinese boxes. One early album records her trip to Jehol (Rehe, Chengde) in 1934 not long after her arrival in China. Each photograph is pasted onto a card and accompanied by an extended caption written in German. Together the images and text form a diary-like narrative of her trip [Roberts 2001]. Other albums gather together photographs taken over a period of time and are titled, for example, 'Beihai,' 'Forbidden City, temples, walls, Ming,' 'Street life' and 'Handicrafts.'⁹

The Morrisons' Southeast Asian archive comprising Hedda's negatives and photographs and Alastair's notebooks relating to their time in Sarawak were donated to Cornell University Library. In addition to material relating to Sarawak, there are photographs taken during the Morrisons travels throughout South and Southeast Asia and the Pacific up until 1987, including to Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Burma, Indonesia, the Philippines, India, Ceylon, Singapore, Malaysia, Mauritius, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands.¹⁰

It was decided that Alastair and Hedda's collection of books relating to Southeast Asia would augment the collection of George Ernest Morrison in the Toyo Bunko. This is now known as the Morrison II Collection.

Hedda Hammer Morrison's archive of negatives and photographs taken Australia was donated to the National Library of Australia, Canberra. That collection comprises more than 46,000 photographs and 32,000 negatives: views of Canberra and the ACT, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia spanning the period 1961–1988.¹¹

A large collection of photographic prints made for exhibition and relating to all phases of her photographic life was gifted to Powerhouse Museum, with later gifts of personal papers; collections of Chinese paper-cuts and belt toggles; Japanese *netsuke*; Indian, Nepali and Tibetan bronzes; ceramics from North and Southeast Asia; and books reflecting the couple's wide-ranging interests.¹² A smaller collection of Morrison's photographic prints was donated to the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.¹³

It was Australia's good fortune that Hedda Hammer met and married Alastair Morrison and as a consequence spent the last decades of her life in Australia. But as historians and curators, how do we understand the oeuvre of

a figure like Hedda Hammer Morrison, who trained as a photographer in Germany, lived and worked for extended periods in China and Sarawak and travelled widely throughout the Asia-Pacific region before settling in Australia? It does not seem right to think about her oeuvre in terms of categories such as 'German,' 'Australian,' or even photography relating to 'Germany,' 'China,' or 'Sarawak'. Such labels are inadequate. And what are we made of Morrison's decision to gift the majority of her work to institutions in America, rather than Australia: her China and Northeast Asian albums and negatives to the Harvard-Yenching Library and her Southeast Asian negatives to Cornell University? Might the archive have remained in Australia if in the 1970s and 1980s there had been a more informed appreciation of her work?¹⁴ Morrison's work was not overtly 'Australian' it fell between the curatorial and collecting boundaries of cultural institutions: museums that generally focused on the ethnographic and anthropological and art galleries that presented photographs as art. Morrison's practice was either too artistic or not artistic enough.

Morrison's decision to donate her archives of Northeast Asian and Southeast Asian photographs to the Harvard-Yenching Library and Cornell University Library respectively, and the Australian images to the National Library of Australia, perhaps reflects the fact that not only was she seeking the best long term repository for her photographs, but also that she regarded herself as an international figure. She recognised that she had worked during a complex period of world history and that she and her work could not be neatly categorised. The library rather than the museum or art gallery would be chosen as the most appropriate home, a sympathetic site for long-term scholarly research where geographic or genre related boundaries were irrelevant.

Hedda Hammer Morrison's photographs were taken with the eye of an informed artist. They record, in beautifully composed images, people and places, customs and ways of life, that are crucial to our understanding of twentieth century history and society—in Asia. Many of the buildings, historic sites and landscapes that she photographed have changed. Some have been developed or are inaccessible. Others have been destroyed. Many customs, trades and crafts that she documented are no longer practiced in the same way.

Among Hedda Hammer Morrison's photographs is a series relating to the farming and production of Peking Duck, including the roasting of ducks at Quanjude, one of Peking's most famous restaurants. Quanjude was established in 1864 and if George Ernest Morrison had an appetite anything like his son Alastair, he would certainly have dined there. Today, Quanjude has franchises all over China, and even one in Melbourne. In 2006 while dining at a Quanjude Restaurant in Peking we were presented with a souvenir card stating how many ducks had been consumed since 1864 and assigning our duck a unique number. The front of the card featured a photograph of the Great Wall and a famous line from Mao Zedong's 1935 Long March poem: 'You're not a real hero if you don't make it to the Great Wall,' to which the restaurant had added 'and you'll be sorely disappointed if you don't eat Quanjude Roast Duck.' The card reproduced Morrison's photograph of a cook at Quanjude roasting a duck on a pole in a brick oven. It is a fine example of the way historical photographs are used to promote business and tourism, collapsing historical time into an eternal present. **[Image 14]** The following year while dining at a Quanjude Restaurant in the west of Peking I noticed Hedda Hammer Morrison's photograph in a display about the history of Quanjude. The manager proudly stated that the photograph was taken by 'Helen Morrison,' and that the man photographed was Zhang Wencao, a third generation disciple of Quanjude's founder, Yang Jinren. A sculpture based on Hedda Morrison's photograph of Zhang Wencao roasting a duck stood proudly at the entrance of their large establishment. **[Image 15]** Like everyone else, we took a photograph as a memento of our gathering. Hedda Hammer Morrison would be amused to know that one of her photographs had been translated back into three dimensions and immortalized in 'bronze,' to create an object that is itself the subject of memorializing through

photography. George Ernest Morrison, himself a photographer of some distinction, would also have appreciated the gesture.¹⁵ The sculpture is a playful acknowledgment of the ongoing resonance of Hedda Hammer Morrison's images—living history—and a fitting tribute to the legacy of Quanjude's founder Yang Jinren and the Morrises of Peking.

Notes

- 1 This paper has been adapted from a talk delivered on 16 December 2017 at a symposium at the Toyo Bunko to mark the 100th anniversary of the acquisition of the Dr G. E. Morrison collection. I would like to thank the Toyo Bunko for the kind invitation, in particular Shiba Yoshinobu, Executive Librarian, Hamashita Takeshi, Executive Director and Head of the Research Department, Hirano Ken'ichiro, Executive Director and Head of the Museum Department, Harayama Takahiro, Research Fellow, and Ota Keiko, Junior Research Fellow.
- 2 This essay refers to events that took place during the twentieth century, so Peking is used in preference to Beijing or Beijing.
- 3 See [Roberts 1992a; Roberts 1992b: 16; Roberts 1992c: 7; Roberts 2001; Roberts 2002; Roberts 2006; Roberts 2008; Roberts 2009: 25; Roberts 2012a: 50–51; Roberts 2012b; Roberts 2016].
- 4 For an overview of George Ernest Morrison's life, see:
<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/morrison-george-ernest-chinese-7663>
- 5 For details of Alastair Morrison's early life, see [Morrison A. 1993b].
- 6 See [Morrison A. 1993c: 12–13].
- 7 For details of Alastair and Hedda Morrison's life in Sarawak, see [Morrison A. 1993a].
- 8 See 'The Hedda Morrison Photographs of China, 1933–1949,' Harvard-Yenching Library, Harvard College Library
<http://hcl.harvard.edu/libraries/harvard-yenching/collections/morrison/>
- 9 For details of Hedda Hammer Morrison's albums, see:
<http://hcl.harvard.edu/libraries/harvard-yenching/collections/morrison/albums.html>
- 10 See 'Hedda Morrison photographs, (ca. 1950–1985),' Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library:
<http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/EAD/htmldocs/RMM04516.html>
- 11 See 'Hedda Morrison Views of Australia, 1961–1988,' Special Collections, National Library of Australia:
[https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/1585946?lookfor=author:\(Morrison,%20Hedda\)%20%23\[format:Picture\]&offset=7&max=14](https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/1585946?lookfor=author:(Morrison,%20Hedda)%20%23[format:Picture]&offset=7&max=14)
- 12 See Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Hedda Morrison:
https://collection.maas.museum/search?q=hedda%20morrison&has_media=true
- 13 See National Gallery of Australia, Hedda Morrison:
<https://artsearch.nga.gov.au/search.cfm>
- 14 A full-scale retrospective exhibition was not held in a major Australian cultural institution until after her death. The exhibition *In Her View: The Photographs of Hedda Morrison in China and Sarawak, 1933–67*, held at the Powerhouse Museum in 1993 and curated by the author, included sections on Hedda Hammer's training in Germany and early photographic practice, as well as her later years in Australia and work produced at that time.
- 15 For a collection of photographs taken by George Ernest Morrison during his travels in Northwest China in 1910, see [Shen 2008].

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Image 1 S. Yamamoto, Japanese Defenders of the Peking Legations, 1900-1, albumen print on card. Collection: Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney.



Image 2 S. Yamamoto, George Ernest Morrison and Sun Tianlu, c. 1910, gelatin silver print on card. Collection: Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney.



Image 3 S. Yamamoto, *Peking* (北京名勝), 1909. Collection: Research Library, Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney. [cover]



Image 4 S. Yamamoto, *Peking* (北京名勝), 1909. Collection: Research Library, Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney. [example of interior image]



Image 5 S. Yamamoto, View of south side of Morrison Library, Peking, gelatin silver print on card. Collection: Toyo Bunko.



Image 6 S. Yamamoto, George Ernest Morrison with Odagiri Masunosuke (seated left) and Ishida Mikinosuke (seated right), Morrison Library Peking, 1917, gelatin silver print on card. Collection: Toyo Bunko.

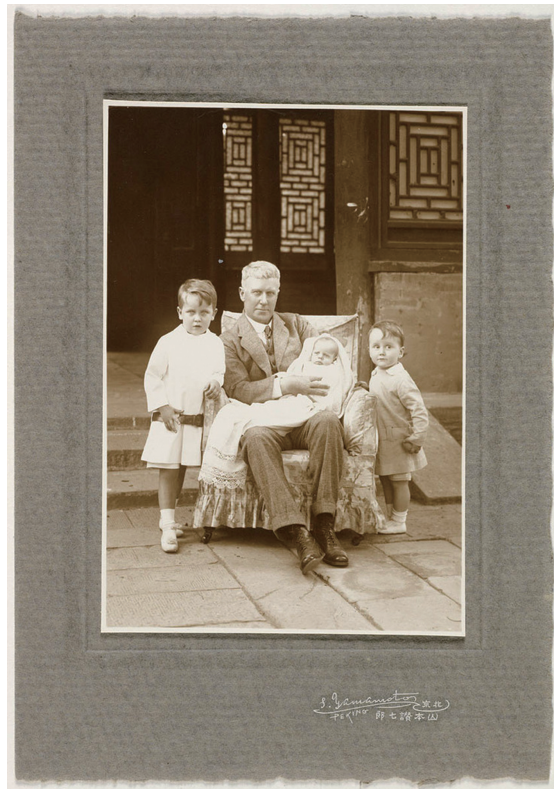


Image 7 S. Yamamoto, G. E. Morrison with his three children, Peking, 1917, gelatin silver print on card. Collection: Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney.

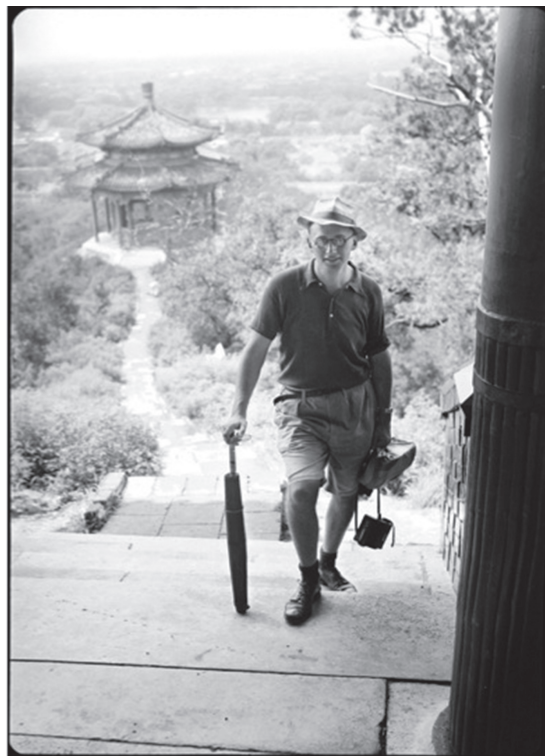


Image 8 Hedda Hammer, Alastair Morrison, Coal Hill, Peking, early 1940s. Private collection. Digital print courtesy Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney.



Image 9 Photographer unknown, Hedda Hammer with tripod, Peking, 1930s. Private collection. Digital print courtesy Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney.



Image 10 Hedda Hamming, Pot market outside the Northeast Gate, Peking, 1933–1946, gelatin silver print on card. Hedda Morrison Collection, Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney.



Image 11 Hedda Hammer, Funeral procession, Zhengyang Gate. Peking, 1933–1946, gelatin silver print on card. Hedda Morrison Collection, Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney.



Image 12 Hedda Hammer, Rickshaws, Peking, 1933–1946, gelatin silver print on card. Hedda Morrison Collection, Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney.



Image 13 Photographer unknown, Hedda Hammer and Alastair Morrison, Peking, 1940s. Private collection. Digital print courtesy Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney.



Image 14 Quanjude Roast Duck Restaurant, Beijing, souvenir card with photograph by Hedda Hammer. Courtesy Claire Roberts.



Image 15 Sculpture based on Hedda Hammer's photograph, Quanjude Roast Duck Restaurant, Beijing. Courtesy Claire Roberts.