

THE QUESTIONING GAZE

on Ergy Landau's photos taken in China

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[EN]

Abstract

Today, Ergy Landau (Budapest, 1896 — Paris, 1967), a French-Hungarian photographer is rather known as an excellent portrait photographer whose atelier was also an important meeting point for artists in interwar Paris. In my paper I would like to focus on a less known part of her career, namely on her travel to China in 1954. In the year following their visit, Landau and Goncourt Prize winner Pierre Gascard published two books about China. One of them was published under the title of 'Chine ouverte'. In this booklet the role of the photographs is not significant. However, the second book, 'Aujourd'hui la Chine', prefaced by Claude Roy, is a carefully edited volume in which photos and texts mutually complete each other.

In the 1950s, a growing number of texts by leading French authors documented the socio-political changes of China. The travel of Gascaud and Landau followed the tendency of these travel reports. On the photos by Landau one can see the traces of the cultural transition, the changes of urban landscape, those of the fast industrialization and the mingling of times. The paper raises these questions: what might the Western reader of China actually see in 1954? How can we recognize the photographer's gaze on her photos? What is the connection between the vintage prints and the edited book? Into what kind of society the book provides a glimpse?

Keywords

Ergy Landau, photobook, photohistory, views of China, travel and photography, travelogue, 1950s .

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Resumo

Hoje, Ergy Landau (Budapeste, 1896 — Paris, 1967), fotógrafa franco-húngara, é conhecida como uma excelente fotógrafa de retratos cujo atelier foi também um importante ponto de encontro para artistas numa Paris entreguerras. No meu artigo gostaria de me concentrar numa parte menos conhecida da sua carreira, nomeadamente, a sua viagem à China, em 1954. No ano seguinte à sua visita, Landau e o vencedor do Prémio Goncourt, Pierre Gascar, publicaram dois livros sobre a China. Um deles foi publicado sob o título de “Chine ouverte”. Nesta obra o papel das fotografias não é significativo. No entanto, o segundo livro “Aujourd'hui la Chine”, prefaciado por Claude Roy, é um volume cuidadosamente editado, onde as fotografias e os textos se complementam.

Na década de 1950, um crescente de textos dos principais autores franceses documentaram as mudanças socio-políticas na China. A viagem de Gascar e Landau seguiu a tendência desses diários de viagem. Nas fotografias de Landau pode ver-se os vestígios da transição cultural, as mudanças da paisagem urbana, de uma rápida industrialização e contacto entre diferentes tempos. O artigo levanta as seguintes questões: O que é que um “leitor” ocidental da China vê, na realidade, em 1954? Como podemos reconhecer o olhar da fotógrafa nas suas fotos? Qual é a conexão entre as estampas vintage e o livro editado? Em que tipo de sociedade o livro oferece o livro um vislumbre?

Palavras-chave

Ergy Landau, photobook, história da fotografia, vistas da China, viagem e fotografia, diário de viagem, década de 1950.





«...asking a question means beginning to answer it» — this quotation from László Krasznahorkai entwined a column at the exhibition organized in April 2013 at the Hungarian Institute in Paris, displaying Ergy Landau's photographs taken during her visit to China in 1954. The introduction at the entrance of the exhibition mentioned above was an allusion to an unique, fictive travelogue on China, which permanently and deliberately challenges time and space posing questions on the nature of cognition.

Travelogues always concern various levels of understanding. The perspective of the observer-traveler is constantly changing; and his or her report following the trip is always a construction primarily addressed to the audience.

In my paper, I will talk about a travelogue that is based on the photos taken by Ergy Landau during her visit to China in the fall of 1954, as well as on the impressions of French writer Pierre Gascar. The Hungarian born photographer and the Goncourt prize winner writer had the privilege of being among the 28 members of the French delegation officially invited to China when the Communist country celebrated the fifth anniversary of its new constitution. According to Roger Portal, one of Landau's companions, the group, which consisted of varied people with diverse professional and worldviews, covered approximately 6-7000 kilometers in the course of the 45 days they spent there, exploring East-China from Beijing to Tianjin, then travelling through North-East-China back to Beijing, to Shanghai, Canton, Hanku and back to the capital.

In the year after their visit to China, Ergy Landau and Pierre Gascar cooperated on two books. The role of photographs is not truly significant in the thin

Chine ouverte. There are only four of them accompanying the text, as illustrations of ideas articulated in Gascar's travelogue. However, *Aujourd'hui la Chine* is a carefully edited book in which text and image mutually complete each other.

In my paper, I will first talk about the photo exhibition I curated in 2013 in Paris, with Landau's prints. Secondly, I will present the photobook based on the photos taken by Landau as well as in Gascar's impressions. Finally, I will place it in a context of decolonization in France in the 1950s and today.



Figure 1—Éva Fisli. *The entrance of the exhibition in Paris, 2013*

The China of Yesterday: pictures of an exhibition

The exhibition *La Chine d'hier par Ergy Landau*, displaying Landau's photos taken in China, was divided into three sections. The first room offered a selection of those photographs which represented the landscape, the Great Wall, the buildings and ornaments of the imperial palace and opera scenes; everything that was considered exotic and belonged to the image of China as usually known in the West. The central room of the exhibition focused on the views of China in France in the 1950s, in a decade with more and more travelogues published about the enormous country in radical change. In this unit, next to the (cautious) "Chinese world" entry in the 1955 edition of the *Larousse Encyclopaedia*, there was the copy of *Aujourd'hui la Chine*, book of Ergy Landau and Pierre Gasca, published in 1955. The 50 prints displayed in the show were presumably also used during the editing process of this volume.

The versos of the contemporaneous blow-ups owned by Christine Dufour-Beöthy and displayed in the glass cases let the visitors take a glance into the photographer's (and the editor's) workshop. One of the achievements of the positives displayed here was the tracing of succeeding work phases, as the photo is transformed while editing the book. Some of the pictures are cropped; sometimes contrasts become much sharper; other times the image is coloured for the publishing. The comments on the versos were made presumably by Landau; the edited pictures in album usually bear simpler titles.

The third room of the exhibition showed street views and portraits, many of them were *not* included in the book. In this selection the people from *China Today* emerge gradually from the crowd of unknown faces. In the photo series by Landau, the average Chinese couple is represented by Mr. and Mrs. Tchou living in a "hutong" in Beijing; the owner of the capital's oldest pharmacy and his elegant wife also appear; and Li Chan Yuan from the village of Tai Ping embodies "the" Chinese peasant. Visitors could also find photos about the barber at work in the street, students gathering in parks in order to relax, to discuss things or to do some exercises, people waiting for the train at the main railway station or entering their home in the evening, mothers with their children, workers in search of books published for them and young couples dancing in front of a Maoist scenery.

A Chinese Photobook

Ergy Landau, who was born in Budapest, Hungary in 1896⁶, arrived in China in 1954 already as an experienced photographer. She was a member of the French delegation, one of the people who could “make a picture” of the huge civil-war-ridden country that was going through important industrial and social changes in the 1950s. She participated in an organized trip, which meant that she did not travel alone following only her own wishes.

However, Roger Portal, one of her travelling companions, recalls that they had some opportunity for individual walks as well, specially in the cities where they stayed longer (for instance, they spent altogether two weeks in the capital and 3-5 days in Shangai and Canton).⁷

The photographer was also free in the sense of choosing the scope of her camera. She had the freedom of selecting from her pictures after the trip too, notwithstanding the fact that she was looking through the glasses of her own culture,



Figure 3—Eva Landau. *China*, 1954. Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of Christine Dufour-Beöthy



Figure 4—Eva Landau. *China*, 1954. Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of Christine Dufour-Beöthy



Figures 5 and 6—Eva Landau. *China*, 1954. Gelatin silver print.
Courtesy of Christine Dufour-Beöthy

age and dreams.⁸ This is demonstrated by the photos exhibited in Paris, some of which represented what was exotic, ancient and different in China, what might have seemed both familiar and unknown to Western eyes.

Among the photographs there are several shots of children. It is worth mentioning here Landau's travelling companion Roger Portal, once again, who did not neglect to mention that his first impression in China was dominated by the great number of children in the cities, who would bustle around strangers as soon as they stopped for a moment. According to him, urbanization and the spectacular growth in the number of births were the most striking phenomena in the new China. Certainly, both Landau — great at photographing children anyway — and Gascar observed these features. Yet different versions of time met in their Chinese photobook. Still and timeless landscapes appear in the photos as well as visible traces of human presence: stone ornaments of old buildings or current construction sites. Thus the next in *China Today* is full of references to time.

The book is essentially based on contrasts. The constant confrontation of the new and the old world is visible not exclusively in the text, but also in the typography and in the juxtaposition of some pictures. Sometimes the reader can see a coloured (!) portrait of a young person next to a grey old face, and on the pages of the volume, one can find the carefully dosed contrast of drawings of ancient Chinese figures and motifs and modern photographs.⁹

According to the prints, Ergy Landau was just as impressed by stone ornaments on buildings as by street views or an interesting face, or at least she pursued to record many of them with her camera. Thus, the dragons, guardian lion statues and twines in her photos reappear in the pages of the book published in 1955 as if they were graphic quotations.

Typography and photography can be read in several ways in the book. Sometimes, the drawing motif repeats a motion captures in the photograph, thus linking the old and the new world; sometimes it grabs a single detail, or multiplies a motif. For instance, the unknown typographer makes new birds fly onto the picture of an ancient Chinese symbol, the crane. The book is a spectacular result of the cross-collaboration between writer, photographer and typographer.

China's Readers

«First I started to read about China, its yesterday and its today, and then I went there to see it», wrote the poet and essayist Claude Roy, author of the preface in the book of Landau and Gascar (Roy, 1955: 6). Knowledge constructed by books and pictures is constantly overwritten by current interests. Question remains, however, the focus of the changing public attention is, what is regarded with interest by the current readers.

It may be useful to mention here Henri Cartier-Bresson's photobook published in 1954.¹⁰ The volume *D'une Chine à l'autre* presented photos from 1948-1949 in its lean way. The photoreport is prefaced by Jean-Paul Sartre. The pictures taken before and just following the communist take-over give a strong imprint of China and are sometimes filled with tension, poignancy to European eyes.¹¹

Compared to this book, *China today* does not offer any dramatic tension. According to Landau's pictures taken in 1954, China is first if all cheerful: many of the photos selected and published in the book show hilarious faces and the text also greets the general happiness...

While Cartier-Bresson's *documentarist*¹² photobook offers a detailed historical overview and a map of China, and its author highlights the context of every image in pretty long captions, the book by Landau and Gascar does not aim at this kind of submergence. The list of pictures at the end of their book contains only short lines, with the names of places or some general remarks such as *Chinese Streets, In the Forbidden City, Student, etc.*

According to Sartre, in his preface of Cartier-Bresson's book, the photojournalist tears quite spectacularly with the former visual ethnic stereotypes of Western eyes about Chinese people¹³, in the introduction of the *China today*, so Claude Roy reflects on the outsider position of the author-travellers:

«I do not claim that this is the first time in centuries when we can take a look at China without interest, for that would be false. Quite the contrary, we are passionately interested in the country. However, this is the first time when we can take a look at it with a genuine interest (...)» (Roy, 1955: 23).

What Sartre sees as the virtue of the photos by Cartier-Bresson, showing the human beings behind the stereotypes, that is the comprehension of the so called *homme profond* for Roy. Both Sartre and Roy emphasized the humanist features of photography in the context of decolonization.¹⁴

As for Gascar, who wrote the textual part of Landau's book, he sees China in the 1950s as a relatively sunlit, picturesque landscape, which looks hopeful and fresh in comparison with the alienated and dull Eastern Europe. Landau's renowned French co-author thought in the mid-fifties that «in 10 or 15 years (...) China will be a great industrial power. This perspective opens every way to the future for the Chinese worker» (Gascar, 1955: 58-59).

The large country “with bright future” was alluring to Gascar. The crowd that can be seen on the photos many times is not depressing to him at all, and does not tend towards alienation. Gascar rather saw the possible realisation of individual and collective liberty in it. He saw and wanted to make the readers see the happiness of the people after the years of chaos and suffering, rather than the starving millions, he saw the general hunger for culture. The writer emphasized zealously the way the country was oscillating between the past and the future.

Gascar's texts fit to the wave of (not only) French political travelogues of the 1950s.¹⁵ He also belonged to the generation of left-winged intellectuals, many of whom visited China on an official invitation from the distant country in the fifties and who usually recorded their experiences with great success.¹⁶ The Chinese travelogues were published in several magazines or by Gallimard Publishing House, and, in 1956, *Les Temps modernes* edited a special issue called *China today and yesterday*. I would place the Chinese photobook of Ergy Landau on a virtual bookshelf in the neighbourhood of these texts.

60 years on, Gascar's text has inevitably lost its enthusiastic character. However, the photographs have been enriched by time. In the photographs one can

see today the former cities that were rebuilt ever since, the *hutongs* that disappeared during the past decades as well as the small shops that were closed, the transformed landscape and society. Briefly, one can recognize today the pictures of China in transition.

Equally, today we can turn with curiosity towards the photos that were not included into the book, even if the photographer took them when she visited China. These photographs are already numerous in the Dufour-Beöthy collection, presumably there may be even more on the still unknown negative.¹⁷

Conclusion

The photographs taken by Ergy Landau were the pictures of China's transition indeed. While organizing the photo exhibition opened in the Spring of 2013, in Paris, I was interested in what the country had been like, according to the insight afforded by the photos and the contemporaneous texts published along each other, and how we can place the trip and the book in their former geopolitical context. However, one should have no illusions: although the selection did bring several longforgotten positives by Landau into the limelight, it could but touch the surface. A more comprehensive perspective of the photographer's trip and work in 1954 and of her book's significance in her career could yet be achieved by researching the still available negatives and the comparison on further, primarily French (and Chinese) sources. Nevertheless, I still think it is important, even from a distance of three years, that even if only for a short time I managed to reveal that Landau's *oeuvre* up to 1967 was richer than previously acknowledged.¹⁸ Of course, I have no ultimate answers regarding its amplitude but I hope I have succeeded in asking the question correctly.

NOTES

- 1 I take the opportunity to express my thanks to Judit Baranyai and Balázs Ablonczy for having the idea of the Landau exhibition; to József Keresztes-Nagy and Krisztina Vona for having helped me to build up the exhibition *The China of Yesterday through Ergy Landau's Eyes*; to Katalin Szlukovényi for translating my communication held at the conference of the University of Porto in 2015; to Judit Zádor for her help to find Douglas Smith's paper and to Christine Dufour-Beöthy, who gave her consent to publish the photos in her possession.
- 2 Portal, 1954: 227-240
- 3 The book that was published in 1955 in Lausanne, contains 164 pages with black and white and coloured photos. According to its imprint, it was printed in 15.000 numbered copies. Number 372 is in my possession.
- 4 According to Christine Dufour-Beöthy, the photographer gave the prints to her shortly before her death.
- 5 About the Chinese photobooks, see the current project by Martin Parr and Wassink Lundgren.
- 6 «Erzsi Landau was born to a wealthy merchant family. She started studying photography from various tutors, including one of her friends, Olga Máté. She had a studio in the 4th district, at the József Ferenc quay (in Budapest); then she moved abroad, to Paris in the middle of the 1920s. Most of the leading Hungarian intellectuals visited her studio at the 17ème rue Lauriston. She signed her photographs as Ergy Landau (...). On the basis of her portraits (of Iván Múzeum) and her photos (of an unknown man and of French sculptor Antoine Bourdelle) at the Museum of Literature (Petöfi Irodalmi Múzeum) she seems to be a photographer following the tradition of realism, editing excellently, producing photos rich in tone and detail, making good use of the modelling capacity of light and representing intellectually well. Iván Hevesy has called attention to Landau's nude photographs, partial nude compositions, nude groups and her urban and country landscapes. The best of her cityscapes were published in 1954 in the album *La France, le livre ouvert* edited by Pierre Seghers» (E. Csorba, 1997: 50-54).
- 7 See Portal, 1954: 228-229.
- 8 About the cross-collaboration between politically engaged intellectuals and photographers see Montier, J.P. (2010).
- 9 On the back cover there are Chinese symbols written twice, but in different size, meaning "New China"; the expression has been used from the beginning of the 20th century, and after the proclamation of the republic. Later has been used for the Chinese People's Republic. I thank Klára Zombory for deciphering the text.
- 10 See Smith, D., 2009.
- 11 Thus, the shot about the corpse of a newborn baby girl next to a dead cat (32).
- 12 C.f. «The purpose of the book is then, avowedly documentary, an exercise in the communication of visual and textual information about a key point in Chinese history. As such, the book moves away from the conception of the photographic image as an independent self-explanatory artefact towards the construction of a sequence of contextualized images that derive their meaning collectively from an overarching historical narrative» (Smith, 2009: 62).
- 13 Sartre, 1954: 9.
- 14 Douglas Smith confronts the opinion of Sartre (photographs are apt to avoid former ethnic stereotypes), and that of Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag about tautological photos that rather strengthen stereotypes (Smith, 2009: 69-70).
- 15 Cf. Hourmant, F., 2000.
- 16 Cf. the French translation of Jack Belden's book: *La Chine ébranle le monde* (1951), Claude Roy: *Clef pour la Chine* (1953), Paul Ricouer's essay, «Certitudes et incertitudes d'une révolution», published in

January 1956, as a thematic issue of the magazine *Esprit*, called *La Chine, port ouvert*. See also Simone de Beauvoir's *La longue marche: essai sur la Chine* (1957).

- 17 Some of Ergy Landau's photos taken in China (and in Mongolia) are preserved in the National Library of France (Bibliothèque Nationale de France). According to their versos, some of the pictures were exhibited at the French National Salon of Photography (Salon Nationale de la Photographie) in the second half of the 1950s. Our research could be enhanced by researching not only these developed pictures but also those of the archive of the Centre Pompidou as well as that of the Rapho Agency, possibly preserved further relevant material.
- 18 Speaking about the female gaze in the interwar period, Kershaw and Kimyongür mention Landau's work, primarily because of her nude photographs. Cf. «For the first time photographic viewers were faced with the female gaze as it explored the female body and opened up new perspectives. For example, the work of Ergy Landau, who focused almost exclusively on the female nude, broke new ground» (Kershaw, Kimyongür, 2007: 1475, highlighted by the author).

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