

# JUAN MENCARINI AND AMATEUR PHOTOGRAPHY IN FIN-DE-SIÈCLE CHINA<sup>1</sup>

Xavier Ortells-Nicolau  
Universitat de Barcelona  
xavier.ortells@ub.edu

## Abstract

Juan Mencarini Pierotti (1860 – 1939) was a Spanish employee of the Imperial Maritime Customs Service of China from 1881 to 1912 and later a businessman in the import-export sector with base in Shanghai. Parallel to his professional career, Mencarini pioneered in the history of postage stamps in East Asia, contributed to learned societies with articles and lectures, and was reputed among the foreign community of the treaty ports as an accomplished amateur pictorialist photographer. Based on previously unexamined repositories, contemporary press records, and the cataloguing and analysis of over two hundred photographs, this paper analyzes Mencarini's preserved corpus of photographs as well as his participation in the creation of the first associations of amateur photographers in Shanghai and Fuzhou. Mencarini's photographs captured human types, examples of craftsmanship and agriculture, and architectural landmarks of the area of Fuzhou, and reveal a generic Western imperialist gaze that articulates visual and textual discourses to support knowledge production and commercial opportunities, leaving room for the exploration of the aesthetics of pictorialism.

## Keywords

amateur photography, China's treaty-ports, Customs Service, early photography, Fuzhou, Juan Mencarini

## About the Author

Xavier Ortells-Nicolau is Lecturer in the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures and English Studies at Universitat de Barcelona. He received his MA in Regional Studies-East Asia at Columbia University and his PhD in East Asian Studies at Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. His research has focused on contemporary photography in Mainland China and the historical relationships between Spain and China. His most recent article, "China en el

imaginario visual de la España de principios del siglo XX" (*Hispanic Research Journal*, vol. 18, no. 5, 2017), discusses the presence of the Chinese visual imaginary in fin-de-siècle Spanish culture. As member of the research group ALTER (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya), he collaborates in the digital archive *Archivo China-España* (<http://ace.uoc.edu/>).

## INTRODUCTION

I can assure you, that although it is many years since I dedicated my spare moments to photography, still, I find there is such a fascination when watching the exposed plate being developed, especially if the negative has been correctly exposed, and the development proceeds gradually, and the result is a good, brilliant negative, that I know not how to express the intense satisfaction it produces. (Mencarini, “Making and Finishing Lantern Slides” 37)

On a clear summer morning of 2016, I walked the streets of the French city of Lille towards the Musée d’Histoire Naturelle. I was to meet the one who is responsible of the scientific and technical collections, who was to show me a collection of photographs by a Spanish amateur photographer, Juan Mencarini Pierotti, who lived and worked in China between 1881 and the mid-1920s. As part of my research on early photography in China, I had been tracing Mencarini’s preserved images, albeit with little luck but for the exception of an album of forty prints held at Harvard-Yenching library, and several images scattered in different press articles penned by Mencarini. Upon perusal, historian of photography Régine Thiriez had guided my steps to this cosy museum in Lille, where after passing through displays of stuffed mammals and birds, and hanging skeletons of elephant and whales, I could inspect two large albums, containing over a hundred and twenty prints credited to Juan Mencarini. Commissioned by French chambers of commerce, interested to know about the trade, crafts, crops, and industries of China’s Fuzhou region, and put together by the French consul, the two albums arrived to Lille along three large crates full of objects, which the Musée also guards.

Since my visit to Lille, I have been able to locate more photographs in other albums and publications, and I have gotten access to the collection of family photographs preserved by Mencarini’s granddaughter, Rosario Mencarini Ruiz, whose affability and extraordinary memory has been of great assistance in my research. The resulting corpus, of more than two-hundred photographs, constitute one of the most extensive and varied corpus of early amateur photography from China, with the added value of presenting little problems of date and attribution. Based on the most exhaustive research to date, then, this paper explores the multifaceted figure of Juan Mencarini, takes a detailed look at his role as promoter of amateur photography, and analyzes the visual characteristic of his photographic production.

Spanish historiography has noted Mencarini’s employment in the Customs Service and his contributions to Spanish collections of Asian art (Ginés Blasi; Jardí i Soler; Borao Mateo; Toro Escudero; Brasó Broggi). Mencarini is also widely acknowledged in China as pioneer of philatelic studies in East Asia (Zhang, “Shanghai youpiaohuide faqiren zhiyi”). But his photographic production and his



**Figure 1.** Juan Mencarini and Rosario Blanco in Shanghai in the 1920s.  
Family collection of Rosario Mencarini Ruiz. Reproduced with permission.

participation in the first associations of amateur photographers in China has only been cursorily acknowledged in a few studies of early photography in China. For example, in her monograph on the history of photography in China, Claire Roberts (also guided to Mencarini's photographs, like myself, by Régine Thiriez), succinctly mentions some of the photographs' themes and subjects, and notes that, "[w]ith the subjects cast in passive roles, Mencarini's photographs reflect his personal experience as a foreign observer of China" (45-47). And yet, Mencarini enjoyed an excellent reputation among his Shanghai contemporaries, who acknowledged him as the "local veteran amateur" and "expert pictorial photographer," and pursued his award-winning photos to illustrate reports and albums of mementos. Taking into account his photographic production and his role in the creation and development of association of amateur photographers, this papers argues that Juan Mencarini deserves a significant place in the history of early photography in China, and that his figure offers a valuable case to understand amateur practices in the treaty ports.

Mencarini's corpus of photographs is a clear example of the foreign—colonial, imperialist, but also inquisitive, fascinated—gaze in the convulsive China of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As it is well known, the so-called Opium Wars resulted in a series of treaties that forced the Qing court to allow foreigners to live, trade, and preach in a number of China's coastal cities,<sup>2</sup> a growing presence not devoid of tensions and violence.

Mencarini's photographs offer a first-hand impression of the interests, anxieties, and enjoyments of the foreign communities in these ports, and at the same time are revelatory of the initial steps in the creation of images of China that would circulate globally. In that sense, photographers like Mencarini necessarily assumed the role of facilitator, a position that demanded them to negotiate between reality and expectations, knowledge and fantasy, aesthetics and ethics.

Like the images captured in China by the famed photographer John Thomson (a very probable source of inspiration for Mencarini) between 1868 and 1872, many of Mencarini's photographs betray a pseudo-ethnographic approach in the intention to use images to categorize and explain the peoples and customs of the region of Fuzhou. "The ethnographicness of photography," in Sara Pink's formulation (66-67), is determined by discourse and content; as we will see, Mencarini's photographs often went accompanied by text, captions, and explanations. Frandon's albums divide the images in four sections ("Meubles et habitation," "Ouvriers, marchands, metiers divers," "Types divers," and "Agriculture, paysages, etc.") introduced by brief explanations. Section III, for example, notes that,

In China, more than anywhere else, the classes are distinguished by their costumes. We find, first, nine classes of officials or mandarins, each with two subdivisions; among non-officials, clothes also denote the rank and occupation of the person who wears them. When at home, though, clothes do not indicate social position: people who always dress richly in silk or brocade outdoors, wear light dresses of percale or ramie, simple and often dirty, at home.

Similarly, in his press articles Mencarini used photographs to substantiate comparisons among cultures, for example, that Chinese and Filipino used very similar techniques of carpentry or irrigation (Mencarini, "Chinese in the Philippines") or that "compared with [Christian] altars, rich, elegant, clean and artistic, the majority of Chinese altars are grotesque, miserable and dirty: a heap of ugly statuettes, surrounded by dirty candelabra and old flowers, with filthy and torn hangings" (Mencarini, "El imperio chino (I)"). Next to the discourse of colonial ethnography, the context of production, distribution, and visualization of Mencarini's photographs reveal a network of commercial and diplomatic interests, as well as personal affinities and affects. The result is a combination of the mercantile inventory, the typologies of culture and race, and a proto-touristic catalogue of vistas.

The generic Western gazing subject that underlays in his photographs has the effect, for all its occasional sympathy and curiosity, of objectifying native populations and instrumentalizing cultural difference into an evolutionary



**Figure 2.** Juan Mencarini, “Marchand de gateaux” (Merchant of sweets), albumen silver print, in *Commerce, Industrie, Outils, Ustensiles, Meubles, Vetements, Costumes, Types des Habitants du Fokien*, compiled by Ernest Frandon, 1895. Musée d’Histoire Naturelle, Lille. Reproduced with permission.

discourse that places Caucasians and Western culture over the other cultures and ethnicities. Anthropology (Edwards; Brandes), studies of imperialist visual regimes (Ryan; Jay and Ramaswamy) and of photography in Asia (Morris) have contributed to demystify the alleged objectivity of colonial visual ethnographies, and deconstructed its truth-value as an ideological construct. Some instances of Mencarini’s photographs convey a fascinating visual rendering of such deconstruction. Disavowing the role-play demanded by the photographer, who recreated trade interactions in an ad hoc studio, some subjects gaze back at the camera disoriented, if not fearful. In addition to offer originally unintended portraits of great intensity, these stares become Barthesian punctums that break the imperialist illusion. By waiving their assigned value of the gaze in the colonial acting, local subjects interrogate, up to this day, the viewers of these photographs.

## A CAREER IN EAST ASIA

Juan Mencarini Pierotti was born in Alexandria, Egypt, in 15 June 1860. Following the different positions of his father, Albino Mancarini, an Italian-born naturalized Spanish diplomat (1828 – 1886), Juan’s early years and education unfolded in Singapore, Manila, Hong Kong, and Xiamen. After an unsuccessful attempt to

obtain a diplomatic position by a detour in 1880 (Toro Escudero 180), Juan became an employee of the China Imperial Maritime Customs Service in January 1881. In charge of assessing duties on maritime and fluvial trade for the government of China, the Customs Service was staffed by foreigners (particularly Britons) in its directorial positions. Diligently led by Robert Hart for forty years, in time the Customs Service also created a network of lighthouses and beacons, surveys of coasts and harbors, and published reports on trade, weather, navigation, sanitation, and others. Given the close connection of the Customs Service with the Chinese government via the Zongli Yamen, or Foreign Affairs Board, and the advisory role of Hart in all matters concerning the relationships with foreigners, different foreign powers with interests in China tried to secure a proportion of their nationals in the Indoor Staff. Spain's quota was small (peaking in nineteen employees in 1903), and Mencarini was one of the few Spaniards who attained mid-to-high-rank position.<sup>3</sup>

Mencarini was appointed to the Revenue department in Guangzhou with the rank of 4<sup>th</sup> Assistant B, though he spent his first years studying Chinese at the Inspectorate General in Beijing. As was common practice in the Customs Service, Mencarini would change posts several times over the next years, starting in Xiamen (1883) and then being transferred to Tamsui (1884), Zhenjiang (1887), Fuzhou (1889), Xiamen again (1898), Hankou (1900), Shanghai (1904), gradually ascending rank until being appointed acting deputy Commissioner of Xiamen in 1908 in substitution of A.H. Wilzer. All these changes of post involved moving a large family of up to nine children which he had with Rosario Blanco Mendieta, whom he married in 1886 in Manila. References to his service in the Customs Service evince a general respect for Mencarini from diplomats, businessmen, and fellow Customs officials, who highlighted his amiable manners, honesty, and erudition.

In September 1912, after more than thirty years of service, Mencarini voluntarily resigned from the Customs Service, a decision that, although motivated by seeing his prospects of further promotion unfulfilled, accorded with his desire to develop business in the private sector. In the same year he registered the company Mencarini & Co. in Shanghai, which traded in different products, including textiles, car lubricants, walnuts, and umbrellas,<sup>4</sup> and was appointed commercial attaché of the Spanish Consulate in Shanghai, albeit for a short period of four years.<sup>5</sup> After the First World War, which disrupted the trade flow of Shanghai,<sup>6</sup> Mencarini embarked in other business ventures, as owner or partner of companies trading in raw and manufactured cotton, gold bars, real state, and stocks, always with Chinese partners.<sup>7</sup> By 1924, the Mencarinis settled in Manila, where their connections had intensified in the last years with marriages of their offsprings with prominent Manila families.<sup>8</sup> Mencarini worked as teacher of Chinese for the clerks of the Bureau of Internal Revenue and published a Chinese manual (Mencarini, Manual



Figure 3. Advertisement of Veedol lubricants, crediting Mencarini & Co. as “sole agents for Shanghai and Yangtze ports.” *The Oriental Motor*, vol. 1, no. 12, March 1920.

of Chinese Lessons), and continued to have an active cultural life until his death in Manila in 1939.

Parallel to his professional life, Mencarini maintained a large number of cultural and scholarly interests, to which he devoted plenty of time and energies. Taking advantage of different leaves of service to travel, conduct research, and write, he visited the French (Vietnam), British (Singapore), and Dutch (Java) colonies in Southeast Asia in 1896-97 to study their economy and laws so as to advise the Spanish colonial authorities on the potential benefits of encouraging the immigration of Chinese laborers to the Philippines. In 1899, after Spain’s loss of her Pacific colonies and the emerging US domination in the Philippine archipelago, the US consul in Xiamen, A. Burlingame Johnston, requested Mencarini’s research,



which he promptly delivered in the form of the *The Philippine Chinese labor question*, which ran several editions and translations.<sup>9</sup> In his text, Mencarini argued that importing Chinese laborers would boost the economy of the Philippines: “Being docile, amenable to law, industrious, and frugal, [the Chinese laborer] accepts any proffered task which assures him of regular wages, or will till the soil if a market for its products is available” (Mencarini, *The Philippine Chinese Labor Question* 7).

About this period, Mencarini also published his first work of historical philately. A descriptive catalogue of stamps and postcards of the Philippines was to be followed in the next years by catalogues of stamps of Xiamen, Hong Kong, and China, establishing his reputation as pioneer in historical philately in East Asia (Mencarini, *Catálogo Descriptivo; Descriptive Catalogue issued by the Amoy Local Post; Descriptive Catalogue issued by the Hong Kong Post Office; The Postage Stamps of China; Descriptive Catalogue of Chinese Postage Stamps with Appendices*). His interest and familiarity with stamps also made him win a contest for the design of the new stamps of the Fuzhou Post Office in 1895 (“Foochow Post Office”). Incidentally, he might also have been the designer of the stamp-like currency called *Volamon*, an initiative of the Xiamen community of speakers of the invented language Volapük.<sup>10</sup>

Mencarini visited Spain in different occasions, and he never failed to take the opportunity to lobby and lecture about the potential for Spanish companies and traders in Chinese markets. “With a population of 400 million,” emphasized Mencarini, “China is a vast market open to everyone. My golden dream would be to see merely 10 of these millions consume Spanish goods, throwing an annual benefit for our motherland of 5 *pesetas* per consumer” (“Conferencia sobre” 22).<sup>11</sup> One of Mencarini’s main arguments was that Spanish goods were already being imported in China, albeit by foreign firms, such as British traders who commercialized Spanish wines and sherries.<sup>12</sup> His advice and encouragement to Spanish firms was frequently framed as a patriotic enterprise, repeatedly noting that his interest was solely for “the love for country,” and offering as proof that, as an employee of the Customs Service, he was forbidden to enter in trade. One of his articles about Chinese history and culture opens with this passionate and revealing digression:

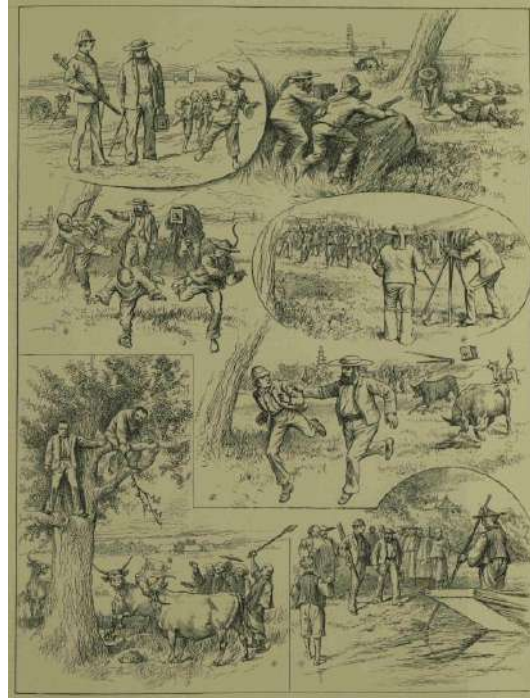
My main objective in approaching the subject is to do something that would serve to exalt our dearest Spain [...] I hope that what I am going to say about China would inspire parents to send their sons to the remote countries of East Asia, so that as Spaniards, along with our beautiful flag, they would bring the product of our soil and of our nascent industries. Let them be known that if in former times we have conquered lands with the sword, we can nowadays fight with other countries by means of trade and national industry. (“El imperio chino (I)”)

The exalted nationalism of Mencarini was not rare. Distance and nostalgia fed warm displays of national sympathy among Spaniards living in East Asia, perhaps symptomatic of the wound opened by the loss of the colonies at a moment when other nations were actively undertaking new processes of imperialist expansion. But his intense relationship with the “motherland” is certainly interesting in somebody of Italian descent, born and educated in different African and Asian cities, and ultimately a cosmopolitan and a polyglot. Indeed, Mencarini’s involvement in the cultural life of the foreign communities of the treaty ports was varied, distinguishing himself, thanks to his multilingual education and wide interests, from the rest of the Spanish community in the treaty ports. His texts in English reveal a modern, educated, and practically-bended businessman and scholar, for whom his nationality became anecdotal vis-à-vis his personal experience in East and South-East Asia.

In letters to the English-speaking press of Shanghai, Mencarini contributed to debates affecting the foreign concessions and local politics. He became a member of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society in 1890, and corresponding member of the Royal Geographical Society of Spain in 1896, learned societies to which he contributed lectures and articles (Mencarini, “Formosa”; “El imperio chino”; “El imperio del Japón”; “Java”). In 1914, he became a member of the International Institute, aimed at spreading the influence of Christianity among Chinese government officials and religious authorities (Bishop). He also founded or joined different associations, being involved in the creation of chess and philatelic societies in Shanghai, and the first associations of amateur photography in Shanghai and Fuzhou. Once settled in Manila, he founded and presided the Philatelic Association of Philippines (1925 – 1926), of which he would later become Life Honorary President and Life Technical Adviser, and founded the first photographic society of the archipelago, the Camera Club of the Philippines (“History”).

## MENCARINI AND AMATEUR PHOTOGRAPHY IN CHINA

In 1891, the *Illustrated London News* published a series of sketches titled “Amateur Photographers in China” (Ross-Lewin). The vignettes show a “Messrs. Tripod and Focus” arriving at a Chinese village by boat with their photographic equipment. They proceed to obtain pictures of a group of Chinese villagers who take a nap under a tree, but are discovered and only by aiming their camera “as a new kind of artillery” can keep the mob at bay. However, the villagers led their water buffaloes towards the foreigners, who have to flee and, bruised and defenseless, find a precarious shelter on top of a tree. After “paying away all their dollars,” the two



**Figure 4.** Rev. R. O' Down Ross-Lewin. "Amateur Photographers in China."  
*The Illustrated London News*, 7 Mar. 1891.

foreign photographers are allowed to leave on their boat, concluding that "China does not yet appreciate every art of civilisation."

Beyond the overt racism of the vignettes, which incorporates topics of colonial hunting to the practice of photograph shooting, this example is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, in framing the practice of foreign photographers in China in terms of violence and even civilizational clash, it reproduces the conditions in which photography was first introduced in China. Indeed, the first shots obtained in China in 1842, within a very short time after the invention of the daguerreotype, took place in the context of the First Opium War and the signature of the Treaty of Nanjing (Bickers), and the scenario of the first studios and practitioners, both professional and amateurs, were the resulting treaty ports. The hostility which foreign photographers had to endure, then, cannot be separated from the tense context resulting from the foreign encroachment and ever expanding presence in China in the face of resistance by Chinese authorities.

Secondly, the vignettes convey the way amateur photography in China was portrayed in end-of-the-century England: as a dangerous and adventurous enterprise akin to hunting wild animals. In China, landscape photography was also considered the task of “the adventurous and enterprising camera man” (“The China Camera Club Exhibition” 773), even when Menzarini and his fellows scarcely ventured inland or, upon the occasion of leisurely excursions, put themselves at risk. This is not to say that photographers working on rural areas in China did not encounter difficulties, even dangers. Scottish professional photographer John Thomson, working in China between 1868 and 1872, related a somewhat similar scene in his *Through China with a Camera* (1899),<sup>13</sup> and special credit should be paid to the amateur photographer Alicia Bewicke Little, who ventured inland to capture photographs “which [even] escaped Mr. Thomson’s omnivorous camera” (“The China Camera Club Exhibition” 774). In general terms, though, amateur photography in the treaty ports seems to have been a much more pleasant and unadventurous activity. The record of the sessions of the camera clubs displays an image of friendly reunions of professionals getting together for entertainment and instruction on the aesthetics of pictorialism and technical aspect of photography.

The foundation of the Camera Club of the Philippines in 1925 was Menzarini’s last participation in a series of associations of amateur photography, which started in 1889, when he joined the recently created China Camera Club (*Yingxiang hui* 影相会) in Shanghai. As Menzarini would later remember, these were years of enthusiasm and large membership. Dry plates had eased the photographic process and diminished exposure times, and Kodaks began to be in anyone’s luggage. As an anonymous writer noted in a Shanghai newspaper in 1890, illustrious amateurs in Europe, like Julia Margaret Cameron, had contributed to revolutionize the value of photography vis-à-vis painting, and Shanghai at the time also hosted ‘photographic artists who are really deserving of the name’, and who were contributing to change photographic tastes and conventions (“Photography Past and Present” 776).

Such new approaches to photography were sensed as particularly acute in relation, or in contrast, to Chinese photography. By the time of the creation of the China Camera Club, different Chinese photographic studios had been operating in different coastal cities. In the 1860s, the studios Afong and Pun Lun specialized in *cartes de visite* in Hong Kong, and as competence grew, other studios opened in Tianjin, Fuzhou or Shanghai. The same anonymous author described “the old stiff photographs of Chinese, to which we are all so long accustomed” as showing “a woman in her smartest clothes, standing, three quarters face, absolute want of expression, small handkerchief delicately held so as to display the whole of it; or a man sitting four-square by a small table, his elbows well turned out, the soles of his boots also carefully displayed” (“Photography Past and Present” 776).<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps for this appreciation, and unlike similar associations in India or Japan, the Camera Club did not include Chinese amateurs—with the exception of a Chan Chin-tung, who took part in the inaugural 1889 exhibition of the China Camera Club. Among the foreigners, the Club was also selective, and its members were diplomats, men of religion, professionals, and a significant number of ladies. In 1891, the moment when Menzarini was appointed Honorary Secretary of the association, the president of the association was Reverent William B. Bonnell, a North-American Episcopalian missionary and professor at the Anglo-Chinese College; the vice-presidency was occupied by Dr. W.J. Miller, a surgeon at the Chinese Hospital Renji Yi Guan, the first Western hospital in Shanghai created in 1844, and businessman W.S. Emens (Frazan & Co.), at the time vice-consul of the United States, acted as Honorary Treasurer.

When Menzarini was appointed to Fuzhou in 1892, he found there a similarly enthusiastic community of amateurs. Professional photographers like Lai Afong and Thomson, and amateurs alike had been attracted to the particularly picturesque landscapes of the countryside around Fuzhou, such as the steep cliff over the Min River, the Buddhist complex of Gushan, the abundant tea fields, and the gorges of Banker's Glen. It was thus probably not too difficult to create the Foochow Camera Club, which held its first meeting on November 13. On the occasion, presiding Georg Siemssen, and after vice-president Mr. F.J. Rentsch<sup>15</sup> took a group photograph of the audience, Menzarini (again, appointed Honorary Secretary) delivered a lecture entitled "A Practical Demonstration on Lantern-Slide Making," in which he emphasized the virtues of lantern-slides for education, explained the process of turning a negative into a slide, and proceeded to make a slide from the photograph Rentsch had shot. In the second meeting in May 18, Rentsch delivered a lecture on "The art of grouping" and to demonstrate his points, Menzarini took two photographs, one with a badly posed group and another according to Rentsch's indications, which he developed instantly for the instruction of the audience.

In June 1893, the Fuzhou Club organized an exhibition of photographs of its members which, a month later, would travel to Tokyo to be exhibited at the Japan Photographic Society along illustrious pictorialists like George Davison (Tucker, Iizawa, and Kinoshita 104-105). Menzarini was the member of the Fuzhou Club who contributed more photographs. It is worth quoting at length a review of the exhibition in Fuzhou, which describes his photographs and serves a testimony of the aesthetic criteria and interests of the period:

Mr. J. Menzarini's seven pictures of 'Portraits and Groups,' Nos. 15 to 21, are all very good, No. 16, 'An Instantaneous Photograph' of the artist's own family, standing out as eminently successful. High praise must be accorded to No. 18, 'Foochow Autumn Races, 1892,' taken at the time of presentation of 'The Ladies' Purse.' Full of figures, each



**Figure 5.** Juan Mencarini, “Elégant aux ongles longs” (Gentleman with long nails), albumen silver print, in *Commerce, Industrie, Outils, Ustensiles, Meubles, Vetements, Costumes, Types des Habitants du Fokien*, compiled by Ernest Frandon, 1895. Musée d’Histoire Naturelle, Lille. Reproduced with permission.

one comes out in the picture with singular clearness, and the faces of each are easily recognizable. Special interest was taken in the groups Nos. 20 and 21, as each contained a portrait of Mr. Lim Chingnan of the Foochow Customs, whose sudden death was announced last week.<sup>16</sup> Passing to Enlargements, we came upon several more pictures of the energetic Honorary Secretary. The pictures of the “Junk Harbor”, Nos. 24, 25 and 27, were exceedingly good; No. 27 especially so. The portrayal of distance in the last mentioned was perfect, the result of the trees on the right being very dark, and Kushan [Gushan] in the center of the picture coming out faintly. We should like to have seen these Junk-Harbor pictures better mounted—in the eyes of casual visitors, the common bordering detracted from their merit. No. 29, “The Five Superiors of the Kushan Monastery”, was good, as far as the figures and portraits were concerned; but it was too faint to class as a very successful photograph. Nos. 31 and 32, “The Ho Shui Yen Shrine” [灵源洞] and the ‘Sacred Fish Pond’ at the Kushan Monastery, were distinctly good; and No. 39, “A Pakling View”, attracted a good deal of attention, which it richly deserved. Nos. 46 and 47, “Varieties of the Night-Blooming Cactus”, were admirable photographs. No. 49. “The Hand of a Foochow Native”, showing an enormous growth of nail, was more curious than agreeable to look at, though at the same time a good photograph. But the gem of the exhibition was No. 54, and we must congratulate the artist, Mr. Mencarini, on this production of a photograph so perfect and pleasing in every way. It is a view taken at Pakling (*Anthony’s Photographic Bulletin*).

Mencarini's involvement in amateur camera clubs in China continued upon his return to Shanghai in the late 1904, when he became member of the Shanghai Amateur Photographic Society, which had succeeded the China Camera Club. Lectures, on occasions of a rather technical tone, as the one on the "Chemistry of photography",<sup>17</sup> or about the photographic work of some of its members, continued to be a frequent feature of the Society. We have notice of one such talk by Mencarini in April 6, 1905, which dealt with the region of Fuzhou and which he illustrated with his photographs, for which at the time he was becoming well-known. The report of his lecture exemplifies Mencarini's approach to photography, which he understood both as an aesthetic practice and a pedagogical instrument.

Mr. Mencarini has done a great deal of camera work in this beautiful country and it will be remembered that he won the gold medal at the recent exhibition with a picture taken a few miles from Foochow. He was able to illustrate his remarks last night with some excellent views of scenery which he did not hesitate to compare with that of Switzerland and the Riviera. Mr. Mencarini supplemented his purely descriptive passages with a sketch of the history of the port, from the time of the first Portuguese traders in the 16<sup>th</sup> century through the period of its 19<sup>th</sup> century prosperity, till the present time, when 'through the unparadonable neglect of the natives,' the tea trade has departed to India. (*The North China Herald and Consular Gazette*, 7 Apr. 1905)

In 1907, with an official membership of over a hundred and thirty, Mencarini became president of the Society, and delivered talks about isochromatic photography and the focusing glass (February 5 and March 14, respectively). Mencarini's active involvement in the activities of the Society motivated the local press to note, when he abandoned Shanghai to occupy a new post in Xiamen, that his "interest in photography while he was stationed in Shanghai will long be remembered" (*The North China Herald and Consular Gazette*, 30 Jan. 1909).

After Mencarini's departure, the Shanghai Photographic Amateur Society experienced ups and downs, until 1917, when in the context of the World War and its financial constraints it discontinued its activities. It was necessary to wait until 1923 for a new phase to begin, and such revival was prompted by an open letter penned by Mencarini and published in the local press on March 23. Shortly after, on April 10, a general meeting witnessed the reconstitution of the Society, electing "the local veteran amateur" Mencarini as Chair ("Shanghai amateur photographers"). On May 2, the Society held the first meeting of its new era, in which a Monsieur Chattel lectured on "Natural Color Photography." Mencarini's involvement in this new phase of the Society, however, was brief, as he soon abandoned China for good and settled in Manila.

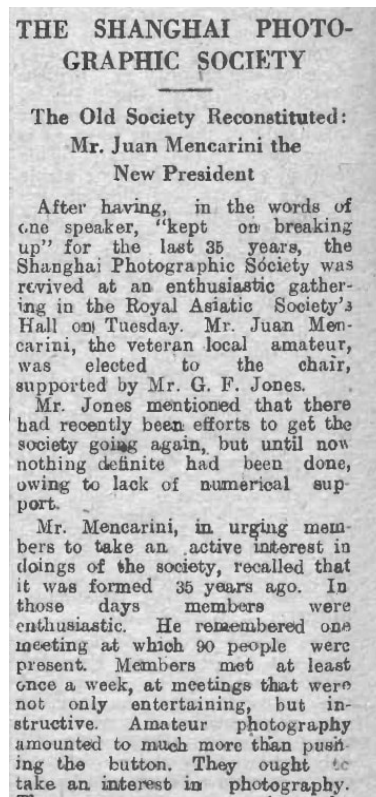


Figure 6. "The Shanghai Photographic Society." *North China Herald*, 14 Apr. 1923.

## JUAN MENCARINI'S PHOTOGRAPHS

We finally turn to Juan Mencarini's body of photographic works, which, as we have seen, was quite appreciated by his contemporaries in China's treaty ports. The total number of photographs which I had been able to locate and catalogue to date moves around two-hundred images, constituting one of the largest, more diverse, and well-dated and attributed bodies of early amateur photography from China.

Over the last years, the interest on early photography from China has increased significantly, with important research on professional photographers, both Chinese and foreigners, like Felice Beato, Milton Miller, John Thomson, and Lai Afong, as well as commercial studios. The complex attribution of photographs obtained by non-professionals (which often ended up in the albums of souvenirs of the expat community, in contrast with the detailed lists of images for sale by professional photographers and studios), has made difficult to acknowledge the activities and



production of amateurs. Moreover, the explosion of interest in “old China” and old photographs, part of a growing commodification of nostalgia in contemporary China in the 1980s and 1990s (Wu; Hillenbrand), has often favored impression over historical accuracy and detail, thus not always contributing—actually, on occasions confusing even more—knowledge about the amateurs’ practice. The situation has started to change over the last years with the research undergone by scholars like Terry Bennett and Régine Thiriez, in addition to a number of international projects of research, cataloguing, and interpretation of early photographs, which provide valuable materials on a large number of practitioners, publishing houses, and associations related to professional and amateur photography in pre-Revolutionary China.<sup>18</sup> In this context, the corpus of Juan Mencarini’s photographic production becomes an important contribution to our knowledge about amateur photography in China, and, with it, a vindication of amateurs active in China at the time, such as Isabela Bird, Ernest Henry Wilson, Donald Mennie, Baroness Grenier-Caetani, and C.A. Killie, to name only a few.

Research on early photography, and even more amateur photography, inevitably faces the challenge to accurately attribute and date the images. The corpus of Mencarini’s photographs contradicts this rule, as a large number of his photographs are directly attributed to him, either in the cover of the albums or in the captions of the images. In other cases, the wide diffusion of his photographs allows to attribute them by comparison among different sources. As for the dates of the photographs, the identification of Fuzhou as location of much of his production, the detailed records of Mencarini as employee of the Customs Service (including posts and time served), and the dates of different publications and exhibitions, delimit a period that spans from late 1891, when we have notice of Mencarini’s family moving to Fuzhou (*The North China Herald and Consular Gazette*, 13 Nov. 1891), and 1894.<sup>19</sup>

The largest number of original prints are found in a series of albums. The Musée d’Histoire Naturelle in Lille, and the library of the Musée Guimet in Paris hold two copies, with only slight differences, of two large accordion-fold view-books, of 43x32 cm, including around 120 albumen prints, of which the albums state that “nearly all” the photographs were obtained by Mencarini.<sup>20</sup> The albums were a commission of the Chambers of Commerce of Lille and Bordeaux, interested in Chinese markets and goods, to the French honorary consul in Fuzhou, Ernest Frandon.<sup>21</sup> In addition, two smaller albums, a “Foochow album” currently held at the Harvard-Yenching library, and an album titled “Foochow,” with the inscription “Photographs by J. Mencarini” on the cover, held at the Bibliothèque National de France, constitute examples of the diffusion of Mencarini’s photographs among colleagues and friends, who used them to compose albums of mementos. The Harvard album, which contains forty silver prints in large format (13x19 cm, album 21x28 cm), probably belonged to S.L. Gracey (1835 – 1911), Methodist minister and



**Figure 7.** Juan Mencarini, “Lotus pond in South China.” In Mrs. Archibald Little (née Bewicke), *The Land of the Blue Gown*. T. F. Unwin, 1902.

US consul in Fuzhou in two periods (1890 – 1893 and 1897 – 1907), who appears in some of the photographs.<sup>22</sup> For its part, the album held at the Bibliothèque National, with twelve 13x19 cm prints, belonged to Customs Service employee Auguste Mouillesaux de Bernières, who acquired it in 1893, and was donated to the Société de Géographie by Mrs. Bernières-Henraux in 1930.

Besides these purpose-made albums, an important source of Juan Mencarini’s photographs is the book *The Land of the Blue Gown* (London: T. F. Unwin, 1902) by the aforementioned Alicia Little, née Bewicke (1845 – 1926). The book, in which Little tried “to picture in outline the condition of things before the uprising of 1900, that Annus Funestus, and that especially in relation to us foreigners in China,” includes over one hundred photographs by different photographers, including twenty-five images attributed to “Mr. Mencarini.” Mencarini also included a significant number of photographs in newspaper articles he penned and published in Spain, China, and the Philippines. These images are often related to the topics discussed in the text, and are intended to illustrate his points on issues as varied as the differences between Chinese and Filipino agricultural and craft techniques, Chinese flower culture, fighting techniques, or archaeological sites (Mencarini, “El imperio chino (I)”); “The Chinese in Philippines”; Arnáiz and Van Berchem). Finally, Mencarini’s granddaughter, Rosario Mencarini Ruiz, preserves an important collection of family photographs, although their attribution must probably be shared between Juan Mencarini and his son Joaquín.



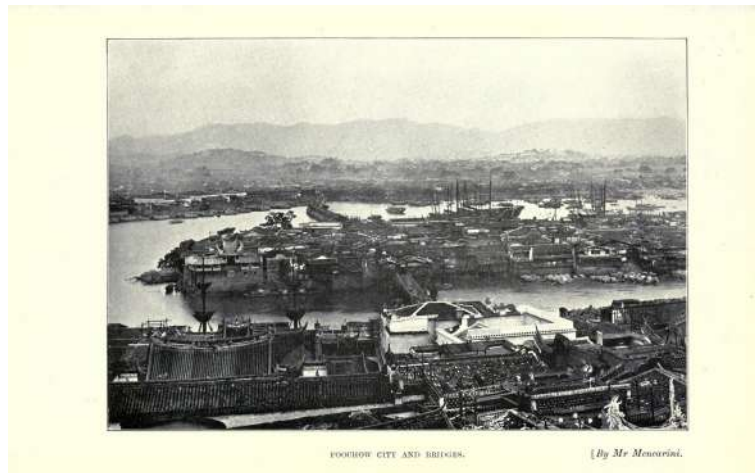
**Figure 8.** Juan Mencarini, “Tissage du coton” (Weaving cotton), albumen silver print, in *Commerce, Industrie, Outils, Ustensiles, Meubles, Vetements, Costumes, Types des Habitants du Fokien*, compiled by Ernest Frandon, 1895. Musée d’Histoire Naturelle, Lille. Reproduced with permission

The largest and most comprehensive collection of Mencarini’s photographs is undoubtedly the one in the two albums composed by the French consul Ernest Frandon at the behest of French chambers of commerce. The Musée d’Histoire Naturelle in Lille preserves, along with the two albums, the three large crates also sent by Frandon, containing fabrics, jewelry, pipes, brushes, tools, kitchen utensils, tea sets, hats, opium pipes, toys, a collection of nails, etc., many of which are also featured in the photographs. As “samples of crafts, furniture and other objects of considerable size would result in a too heavy freight,”<sup>23</sup> Frandon commissioned Mencarini to obtain, as the album makes explicit, “nearly all” the images (“*presque tous les clichés reproduits dans le présent album*”), for which he did not receive economic compensation. Dated in 15 April 1895, the two albums are divided in four sections (“Meubles et habitation,” “Ouvriers, marchands, metiers divers,” “Types divers,” and “Agriculture, paysages, etc.”), each opened with introductory remarks on the topic. The photographs, 129 in total, and presenting in most occasions succinct captions in French, are displayed in groups of four or three along the pages. Of a total of 129 albumen silver prints, the majority does not offer problems of attribution to Mencarini, as they appear in other sources of Mencarini’s images, display the signature “J.M.” on the print, or reveal the same background (to be discussed later) or the same subjects as other photographs. Frandon’s albums also include a series of photographs obtained, as the caption indicates, “after the combat,” that is, the naval battle between French and Chinese fleets in the river Min, which took place on 23 August 1884. Given the *fresh* state of the visible ruins

of forts and sunken ships, and the fact that Mencarini's arrival in Fuzhou occurred around 1891, it is doubtful that these photographs were obtained by Mencarini.

By the beginning of the 1890s, Fuzhou (transliterated in contemporary English sources as Foochow, and Fout-chéou in French ones), the seat of the viceroy of Fujian and Zhejiang, had a population of over six hundred thousand inhabitants. One of the first five ports (along with Shanghai, Ningpo, Xiamen, and Guangzhou) open to foreign trade in the aftermath of the First Opium War (1839 – 1842), Fuzhou was strategically located, guarding the mouth of the Min River, to become one of the largest centers of the trade of tea of the types *pekoe* 白毫, *oolong* 乌龙 and *congou* 工夫, which grew in the neighboring Wuyi Mountains 武夷山. Tea trade in Fuzhou had a long tradition: 240 crates of Fuzhou tea were thrown to the water in Boston in 1773, giving rise to the clashes between the North-American colonies and the United Kingdom in the celebrated Boston Tea Party. But it was not until the Taiping rebellion in the 1850s, which put land transportation to Guangzhou under straits, when Fuzhou rose as a major center of the international tea trade. In its peak in 1871, thirty-three clippers and seventeen steamers loaded with tea sailed from Fuzhou to Europe and the United States. Annual clipper races from Fuzhou to London achieved global fame. By the end of the century, though, when Mencarini arrived to Fuzhou, tea trade was in decline, with India having supplanted China as the major exporter of tea, and new products, mostly textiles and paper, were being essayed to replace it. Well-established French interests in the area had asserted its strength in the Sino-French War of 1884, which involved a naval battle in the river Min resulting in the destruction of the Fujian fleet and the Chinese arsenal. Frandon's commission to explore local crops, trades, and industries responded to the need to diversify exports, as well as to locate market niches for potential French imported goods.

By the last decade of the nineteenth century, the stock of photographic views of the area around Fuzhou had been established by earlier generations of practitioners. The Min river and its subsidiary the Yongfu, upon which rise steep cliffs, the Buddhist compound of Gushan, six-hundred meters uphill on the north of the city, the Yuan Fu temple, the gorges at Banker's Glen, and others, had already attracted both professional and amateur photographers. John Thomson captured the region and its people in the 1870-71. *Illustrations of China and Its People*, the second volume of which documents Fuzhou, was widely diffused, whereas the forty-six copies published by subscription of *Foochow and the River Min* (1873), containing eighty photographs of the area, were mostly owned by the local foreign community in Fuzhou. For its part, the Chinese studio Tung Hing 同兴, established in Fuzhou in the 1860s, commercialized the album *Bohea or Wu-e Photographic Views*, which targeted foreigners as main clients. Family collections by Edward Bangs Drew (like Mencarini, a Customs Service employee) and tea trader John Charles Oswald<sup>24</sup>



**Figure 9.** Juan Mencarini, “Foochow city and bridges.” In Alicia Archibald Little (née Bewicke), *The Land of the Blue Gown*. T. F. Unwin 1902.

testify of the interest of amateurs for the picturesqueness of the region. The topics of Mencarini’s photographs often overlap with the subjects of these collections, as well as with contemporary textual descriptions of foreigners arriving to the city by sea, such as the one by Reverend Justus Doolittle, who in *Social Life of the Chinese* (1866) offered an exhaustive account of the city: the Sharp Peak, the Chinese forts on the Min river, Pagoda Anchorage, the bridges joining the Chinese city and the foreign settlement in Nantai; once in town, its architectural landmarks and street peddlers, and further upstream, the tea and rice fields and the ascension to the picturesque Yuan Fu temple, hanging on the rocks.

Mencarini’s images suffer in comparison with the expertise and aesthetic sensitivity of professional photographers, as for example in his photograph of the Temple on the Golden Island, which displays a subject made famous by a wonderful photograph by Thomson. Once we remember that he was an amateur, though, his photographs stand out for the seriousness and purpose with which he approached the practice. Carefully attending to composition and lighting, with a preference for the insertion of human figures to establish the scale, Mencarini’s photographs stand out among other amateur collections for the systematic character with which he approached his subjects. No candid shots sneaked among his preserved albums. Most evident in his press articles, and in his use of magic lantern projections in his lectures, he intended photographs to show and reveal, to accompany, as visual aids and documents, his arguments about different subjects.



**Figure 10.** Juan Mencarini, “Pagode de la Montagne d’Or sur la rivière Ming” (Pagoda on the Golden Mountain by the Min river), albumen silver print, in *Commerce, Industrie, Outils, Ustensiles, Meubles, Vetements, Costumes, Types des Habitants du Fokien*, compiled by Ernest Frandon, 1895. Musée d’Histoire Naturelle, Lille. Reproduced with permission.

Always methodical and neat, repeatedly trusted with the task of secretary of the associations in which he took part, and a lover of statistics and data, the compilation of which was his main task during his long service at the Customs Service, Mencarini’s personality resonated with the discipline and art of photography. At the time taking its first steps towards its consideration as an art form, the actual practice of photography demanded a basic technical and scientific knowledge, and a careful handling of plates, chemicals, and lighting conditions. In addition, images had, for Mencarini, a particularly powerful pedagogical effect, which he did exploit himself in his public presentations. Discussing lantern shows (a precursor of modern day PowerPoint presentations), Mencarini emphasized that “[w]hat would require a long explanation, and then would not convey to the mind a perfect idea of the subject, with the aid of a magic lantern and a photographic lantern slide, can be shown to a large audience one hundred times larger than nature and with all its details.”<sup>25</sup>

For somebody as circumspect and fact-bended as Mencarini, then, photography might have offered a way to tackle with aesthetics and to develop an artistic sensibility which could feed on his personality and interests. We can perhaps distinguish these two attitudes in the two most preeminent types of photographs in which we can divide his production. On the one hand, we can detect the intent to establish typologies among the diversity of local people, transportation systems, and traditional crafts and industries, for which he favored frontal, intelligible, and repeated compositions. Among this group, we find portraits of mandarins and



**Figure 11.** Juan Mencarini, “Femmes du peuple” (Rustic women), albumen silver print, in *Commerce, Industrie, Outils, Ustensiles, Meubles, Vetements, Costumes, Types des Habitants du Fokien*, compiled by Ernest Frandon, 1895. Musée d’Histoire Naturelle, Lille. Reproduced with permission.

officials, servants, peasants, and bourgeois family groups. On occasions, the same subject is portrayed in frontal and rear views, to show female coiffure and garments, or the costume of students and mandarins. Inevitably, Mencarini also documented the practice of bounded feet, which so attracted foreigners at the time, with three takes of the same subject’s feet, respectively wearing one and two shoes, and a final close up of her two undressed, deformed feet. Significantly, seven images illustrate different kinds of palanquins, with details about their intended use or occupants in the captions (for a wedding, for a foreign lady, for a mandarin of the first or second class, for peasants, simple city folk, or bourgeois).

The most numerous group of these images is devoted to illustrate local traditional industries, crafts and trades, with a large series of photographs of street sellers, peddlers and menders. Among them, we find fortune-tellers using different techniques (birds, trigrams, cards, sticks), puppet and panorama itinerant shows, dentists, menders of ceramics, glass, and umbrellas, and peddlers selling multifarious wares (kitchen utensils, masks, fish, artificial and natural flowers, dried persimmons, soups, cakes, vegetables). As Christian Henriot has shown, Chinese peddlers constituted a photographic genre in itself among the foreign photographers in China (93-128). Shanghai Amateur Photographic Society member,



**Figure 12.** Juan Mencarini, “Devin avec oiseau et pakoua” (Fortune-teller using birds and trigrams), albumen silver print, in *Commerce, Industrie, Outils, Ustensiles, Meubles, Vetements, Costumes, Types des Habitants du Fokien*, compiled by Ernest Frandon, 1895. Musée d’Histoire Naturelle, Lille. Reproduced with permission.

Rev. Charles Ewart Darwent, left a testimony of the many street peddlers around the French Town Hall in Shanghai, and their attractiveness for the photographer:

fortune tellers may always be seen. They tell fortunes by cards, by birds, and other ingenious methods. The photographer will see pictures of refreshment and crockery stalls, etc.... Crossing the bridge into the Shantung Road, [the photographer] will find an abundance of subjects—barbers at work, hawkers, scroll, inkslab, crockery, food sellers, etc., etc.

Fuzhou had its own share of peddlers. As Frandon noted in the opening of Section II of his albums, “The largest number of these craftsmen have no goods in stores. Once they are made, their apprentices peddle on the streets.” But Mencarini, rather than capturing the subjects in their ordinary, outdoors setting (as Darwent did), chose to bring the subjects, along with their tools and wares, into an improvised studio, and recreated the circumstances of their trade, including the interactions with customers. Rather than a result of limitations in the equipment or in Mencarini’s craftsmanship as photographer, the studio recreations accords with the intention to capture the most accurate and clear visual description of Fuzhou’s peddlers and merchants, taking into account the purpose of the photographs as visual evidences for a business-oriented audience. To this aim, Mencarini established an ad-hoc studio, similar to the contraptions of an itinerant photographer, recognizable in many photographs by a wooden floor, a clear background cloth and a large side window to maximize natural, uniform lighting.<sup>26</sup> The artificial setting of the



photographs focuses the attention of the intended viewers on the subjects, the details of their garments, and the different objects they carry, many of which were included in the crates sent along the albums.

As an overview of early foreign photography from China easily reveals, to recreate “typical” scenes in the setting of the photographic studio was hardly an innovation. As Régine Thiriez has noted, when foreign photographers paid local subjects to appear in front of the lenses to *document* types and costumes, “effect overrode study” and “in a spirit similar to that of real ethnographic photography, the setting was irrelevant and a barefoot urchin or a wheelbarrow coolie might be seen standing on a Western carpet” (Thiriez, “Photography and Portraiture” 88). What is significant in the case of Mencarini is his amateurism, which separates him from the for-profit catalogues of commercial studios. His condition and approach translated into a search for improvised visual solutions that, while inexpensive and simple, could convey the explicitness necessary for the inventory commissioned by Frandon, and the pedagogical effect that Mencarini exploited in photography. To begin with, the poses of the subjects and the compositions of sitters and objects were intended to maximize detail and information. An itinerant stainer, and menders of glass and ceramics, of shoes, of umbrellas, sit between their carefully arranged portable trunks and tools, eyes down on the tasks they reproduce for the camera (the act-playing reaches its maximum expression in the photograph of an itinerant dentist, whose client mimics an extreme pain at having a tooth removed). Those with a larger cargo, like the menders of items of wicker and bamboo stools, are similarly captured yet outdoors. Fortune-tellers and their clients are made to sit in profile to the camera in tight square-box compositions, sacrificing depth for detail (figure 12).

In an interesting choice, street sellers are displayed in a frontal pose, and are made to look directly to the camera, actually turning the viewer into the potential client of the fictitious commercial interaction that the photograph aims to describe. Another interesting compositional choice is the use of Chinese conventions in some portraits of higher classes, such as those of mandarins, students to the provincial examinations, and the old gentleman with long nails. Situated next to a characteristic small round table with books, these characters, like the bourgeois family groups, are shown frontally and in full-length.

Next to this typological approach, a second group of images reveals the pictorialist bend of Mencarini’s photographic practice, which features more prominently in the albums of mementos of colleagues like S.L. Gracey and Auguste Mouillesaux de Bernières, as well as in Alicia Little’s book *The Land of the Blue Gown* (in which the selected photographs do not illustrate the accompanying text). As the local press noted when Mencarini abandoned China and moved to Manila,



**Figure 13.** Juan Mencarini, “Cuisinier ambulant” (Itinerant cook), albumen silver print, in *Commerce, Industrie, Outils, Ustensiles, Meubles, Vetements, Costumes, Types des Habitants du Fokien*, compiled by Ernest Frandon, 1895. Musée d’Histoire Naturelle, Lille. Reproduced with permission.

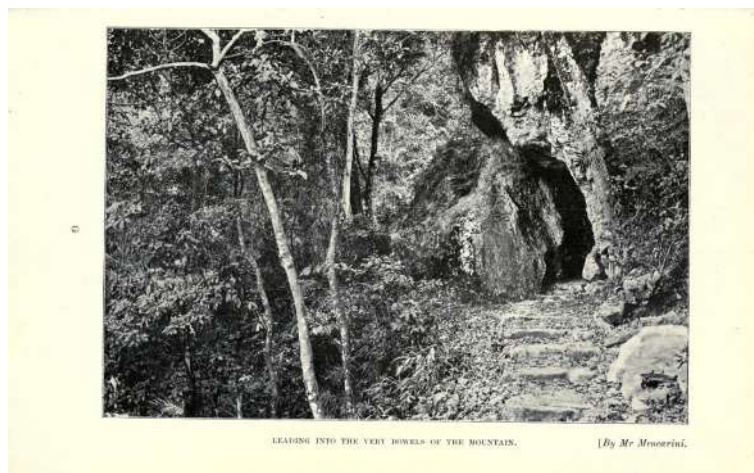
he had “been known for many years as an expert pictorial photographer” (*North China Herald and Consular Gazette*, 24 Mar. 1924), his landscapes and architectural compositions winning awards in local exhibitions, such as the golden medal for best landscape in an exhibition organized by the Shanghai Amateur Photographic Society on February 1905:

The gold medal for the finest picture in the collection has been awarded to Mr. Mencarini for a full-plate landscape—a country scene near Foochow. It is a thickly wooded lane, opening on to a mountain background, with the roofs of a little village just showing between. No one will deny that it is a splendid picture, even if is not considered any better than the same exhibitor’s view of the Sacred Fish Pond at Kushan, which has all the charm of picturesqueness with the added touch of life in a few figures. (*The North China Herald and Consular Gazette*, 24 Feb. 1905)

The only extant copy of the awarded photography opens Mouillesaux de Bernières’s album, but there are several copies of the photograph of the Fish Pond at Gushan (Figure 14). Photographs like these show that a large number of Mencarini’s photographs combined an informative purpose with his enjoyment of the aesthetics of pictorialism. Among these, we find landscapes, views of the city and its architectural landmarks, such as the Black (Wu ta 乌塔) and White (Dingguang ta 定光塔) pagodas, the Pingshan Zhenghai 屏山镇海楼, a guard tower known by the foreigners as Noah’s Ark, and the horse-shoe tomb of Chen Ruolin 陈若霖, a revered local official who was minister in the Department of Punishments



**Figure 14.** Juan Menzarini, “Entrée du temple de Kouchan” (Temple entrance at Gushan), albumen silver print, in *Commerce, Industrie, Outils, Ustensiles, Meubles, Vetements, Costumes, Types des Habitants du Fokien*, compiled by Ernest Frandon, 1895. Musée d’Histoire Naturelle, Lille. Reproduced with permission.



**Figure 15.** Juan Menzarini, “Leading into the very bowels of the mountain.” In Mrs. Archibald Little (née Bewicke), *The Land of the Blue Gown*. T. F. Unwin 1902.

(Xingbu 刑部) or Ministry of Justice. A large group of photographs documents the Buddhist compound of Gushan. Located six hundred meters uphill to the north of Fuzhou, Gushan was a common destination for leisurely excursions to escape the summer heat. Menzarini captured its different monasteries and altars, and its monks. Venturing outside town, Menzarini also captured tea and rice fields,

and related agricultural techniques (unhusking and threshing of rice, ploughing by calves, and fishing with cormorants), as well as human-powered water wheels. More conspicuously, Mencarini composed a series of images of marked lyricism, such as the photographs of a lotus pond and a group of bourgeois ladies in a private garden, or forced compositions around massive rock formations, vegetation, or the dramatic cliff from which hanged the Yuan Fu monastery.

## CONCLUSION

After introducing his personal itinerary and professional career, this article has emphasized Mencarini's key role in the creation of the first associations of amateur photography in Shanghai and Fuzhou, bringing together foreign professionals, diplomats, Protestant ministers and a considerable number of women for leisurely and instructive reunions and exhibitions. The paper has also essayed an initial examination of the corpus of Juan Mencarini's photographs, which had not been thoroughly examined in previous scholarship on early photography in China. With over two hundred images, supplemented by information that allows to establish attribution and date, Mencarini's photographic production stands out as one of the largest and finest collections of early amateur photography from China.

In 1910, Juan Mencarini participated in the Fifty-fifth Annual Exhibition of the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain, which ran between August 20 and September 16 in the Gallery of the Royal Society of Painters in Water Color, at the Pall Mall. The three photographs sent to London, titled "Itinerant dentist," "God of War Lichee Temple (Foochow) (Interior)" and "Itinerant Glass and China mender," which were induced in Frandon's albums, were exhibited in Section IV of the exhibition, devoted to "Scientific and technical photography and its application to processes of reproduction." In the second floor of the gallery, Mencarini's images thus were exhibited next to radiographs, spectrograms, photomicrographs, and examples of off-set method, which was starting its commercial development at the time. The main rationale for this grouping was the platinotype process which Mencarini had used to develop this negatives. But the fact that his photographs of Chinese people or "idols" were shown next to insects, eye nerves, and X-rayed feet bones echoes the perceived value of photographs obtained in China as documents in the process of knowledge production. Consul Frandon's matter-of-fact descriptions and Mencarini's captions reinforced the illustrative value of these photographs. In the context of the 19<sup>th</sup> century imperialism, to see remote, "exotic" places was part of the process to know and possess these very places.



**Figure 16.** Juan Menzarini, “Collectionneurs de curiosités a Foutchéou” (Collectors of curiosities in Fuzhou), albumen silver print, in *Commerce, Industrie, Outils, Ustensiles, Meubles, Vetements, Costumes, Types des Habitants du Fokien*, compiled by Ernest Frandon, 1895. Musée d’Histoire Naturelle, Lille. Reproduced with permission.

At the same time, the alleged objectivity of images like Menzarini’s coexisted with their great attractiveness (for the photographer and the viewers), which would progressively turn them into commodities. Stereoscopic salon travels, such as James Ricalton’s *China through the Stereoscope*, commercialized by the American firm Underwood & Underwood in 1901, combined education and entertainment with an extraordinary commercial success, as would have the then emerging touristic guides (Cook’s first *Handbook for Tourists to Peking, Tientsin, Shan-Hai-Kwan, Mukden, Dalny, Port Arthur and Seoul* was published in 1909). Menzarini responded to Frandon’s commission with seriousness and an analytical approach, which translated in a series of technical choices, like the creation of typologies by recreating scenes in the homogenizing setting of a studio. But he could not leave out of his photographs a personal fascination for image-making and fin-de-siècle fondness for the pictorial and the picturesque.

To conclude, let us comment on an interesting paradox around the “passive roles” which, as noted at the beginning, Claire Roberts has detected in the subjects of the photographs. In a fascinating game of mirrors, the passivity of the objectified local subjects emerges as a consequence of their *active* involvement and role-playing at the request of the photographer. With the exception of those artisans or menders representing their craft, such acting is based on a particular dynamics of pose and gaze. Local traders, peddlers, servants, and mandarins are shown full-bodied, either seating or standing, and facing the camera, into what constitutes examples of the quintessential, “stiff” Chinese photographic style, decried by the Shanghai



**Figure 17.** Juan Menzarini, “Quincaillier ambulant” (Itinerant ironmonger), albumen silver print, in *Commerce, Industrie, Outils, Ustensiles, Meubles, Vetements, Costumes, Types des Habitants du Fokien*, compiled by Ernest Frandon, 1895. Musée d’Histoire Naturelle, Lille. Reproduced with permission.

amateurs. Actually, the higher the rank, the more comfortable the subjects seem to appear in the photographs, as if mandarins and officials were used to having their portraits taken. In the hands of a foreign photographer, however, such conventions also serve to articulate a series of underlying power relations. This is particularly evident in the few images that show foreigners along with the Chinese. In the middle of a photograph of a group of men identified in the caption as collectors of “curiosities”—the patronizing term for antiquities—the French consul Frandon lays his right arm on the shoulder of the man next to him, in a gesture of familiarity that turns haughty (Figure 16). Moreover, Frandon is the only one who looks away from the camera: Primacy is thus enacted by ignoring the camera. But there are other ways in which the gaze of the subjects subverts the make-believe of the photographs. Some subjects, at loss in a contrived role-playing in a strange scenario, gaze back at the camera yet disoriented, shy or fearful. Theirs is the gaze that breaks the imperialist machine of illusions, and offers a glaring testimony of the kind of alienation experienced by those asked to be actors of their own (self)

representation. In this sense, Menchini's photographs have the added, unintended value of offering portraits of great intensity.

## Notes

1. Research for this paper was part of the project “Interactions between China and Spain in the Contemporary Period, 1898 – 1950,” by the research group Alter (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya), funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (HAR2012-34823, 2013 – 2016) and the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation (“Sino-Spanish Encounters in Taiwanese and European Archives: 1839 – 1939”). Special thanks to Régine Thiriez, Aude Drobrakowski, of the Musée d’Histoire Naturelle in Lille, Rosario Mencarini Ruiz, and the two anonymous reviewers.
2. While Spain did not intervene in the wars, she nonetheless benefited from the treaties, which granted her extraterritoriality rights. The arrival of Minister plenipotentiary Sinibaldo de Mas to China in the 1840s intensified a diplomatic relationship framed by Spain’s colonial possessions in the Pacific (Philippines) and the Caribbean (Cuba), and the coolie trade. After 1898, many of Spain’s already limited trade interests in the area continued to operate via the ports of Xiamen, Hong Kong, and Shanghai, though the total of Spanish trade with China did not go beyond a 0.02% of the total of Chinese trade. Small communities of Spaniards established in Shanghai and Xiamen, mostly composed of Filipinos, missionaries, and a number of individuals connected with Manila families. In sum, the number of Spaniards in China at the turn of the nineteenth century moved around three hundred, peaking up to seven hundred in the mid-1920s (Martínez-Robles and Brassó-Broggi).
3. Others Spaniards who attained mid-rank in the Customs Service were Alfredo Ernesto Blanco (1877 – 1945), an employee from 1897 to 1922; F. de P.M.P. Martí, from 1906 to 1933; and L.F. De Uriarte, who joined the Customs in June 1889.
4. The company is credited in public auctions to provide fabric for the Shanghai Municipal Police (“Tenders for Public Works and Other Requirements.” *The Municipal Gazette*, 9 Apr. 1914 and 13 June 1918). A court case involving the Mencarini & Co. refers shipments of walnuts from Shandong to the US (“A cargo of walnuts. Case in US Court.” *The North China Herald and Consular Gazette*, 5 May 1920). Advertisements in *The Oriental Motor* note Mencarini & Co. as “sole agents for Shanghai and Yangtze Ports” of Veedol oils. According to Rosario Mencarini Ruiz, Mencarini’s granddaughter, the company was also involved in an—unsuccessful—attempt to import umbrellas to China.
5. Mencarini was dismissed in January 1916 after the publication of a letter critical of Yuan Shikai (“Yuan Shih-Kai.” *North-China Daily News*, 31 Dec. 1915). Having previously praised Yuan’s role in the Chinese transition from empire to republic, Mencarini felt disappointed by Yuan’s acceptance of the imperial throne. Carlos de Sostoa, at the time Spanish Consul in Shanghai, argued in letters to the Ministry of State that Mencarini’s opinions were “highly negative to the good relations between the Chinese and Spanish authorities, and must be condemned in the strongest terms.” Building up the case against Mencarini,



- Spanish ambassador in Beijing Luis Pastor added that Mencarini had provided few, if any, commercial reports to the Consulate during his time as attaché. See Consular correspondence (7 Feb. 1916), Case file 1880 PP 0697, 9438, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid.
6. Barely two months after the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, hostilities arrived to the Pacific, when Japan declared war on Germany and Austria-Hungary and, along with British troops, took the concession of Qingdao from the Germans. In September 1914, Mencarini noted in a letter to the editor of the *North-China Daily News* that “great preoccupation is prevalent at the abnormal condition that this unfortunate war is causing to all classes and nationalities, residing in these Settlements of Shanghai [...] There is no doubt that all necessities of life are scarcer, and if these present conditions continue for any length of time, they reasonably must go on increasing in price for commerce, both import and export” (“Taxation and bad trade,” 9 Sept. 1914).
  7. Spain & China Navigation Co. Ltd., General Merchants and Commission Agents (Hong List, 1922); Technical Supply Co. of China, “Engineering Supplies, Technical Publications” (Hong List, 1928); “Sociedades registradas en el libro llamado de ‘Sociedades,’” File 56/ 16960, Archivo General de la Administración, Alcalá de Henares.
  8. In 1915, Manuel, the eldest, had married Julia de Loyzaga, daughter of the owner of the Mercantile Review and the newspaper *El Comercio*. Joaquín married in 1918 Elvira Summers, daughter of Ricardo Summers y de la Caivada. In 1924, Alfredo married Almudena Ruiz, nephew of Antonio Ramos Espejo, cinema empresario with interests in Shanghai.
  9. In addition to being dispatched to the Department of State (Dispatches from United States Consuls in Amov. 1844-1906, Washington D.C.: National Archives, 1947, Johnson to Secretary of State, 28 Oct. 1899), the text was translated into Spanish, French (*Revue de l’Extreme-Orient*, year 1, no. 1 and nos. 2, 5, and 12, March 1901) and Chinese, in a translation by Mencarini himself that received the endorsement of the *daodai* Zhang Zhidong 张之洞: “This investigation by the foreign author shows that he has inquired with great assiduity into the mode of life existing among Chinese abroad, and the facts regarding their relation to the foreign governments in their adopted country, and the productions of the soil as well the qualities, social tendencies and capabilities of the emigrants themselves [...] The publication of this essay will lead to a wide circulation and the benefit resulting will be very great. I give it unstinted praise” (Prologue to Mencarini, 1899).
  10. Volapük was an invented language created by the German priest Johann Martin Schlayer in 1879. Mencarini probably knew about the language in Xiamen, where Italian Pietro Poletti introduced it to China and where Belgian Jules A. van Aalst, like Mencarini an employee of the Chinese Custom Service, published *The Universal Language or Volapük, Containing the Principles of Grammar and Syntax and a Vocabulary of 3000 Words* in 1888. In Xiamen, a *Volapükaklub* (a society of speakers of Volapük) named *Tongwen hui* 同文會 (“the society for the common tongue”) was established around the tea-shop of China’s first

Volapükist, Yang Yen-Nung. Thanks to Zhang Yutong for his comments on Xiamen's Volapük community.

11. This and the following citations from Spanish articles have been translated by the author.
12. "In the position that I currently occupy in Shanghai, certainly the most important of East Asia, I had been able to ascertain that there are important commercial relationships with our motherland; unfortunately, this trade is, let's say, clandestine, and the resulting operations do not benefit Spanish firms. The origin and finishing of many goods is evidently Spanish, but their trademark is foreign, so that it is foreign traders who obtain profits that should be for the Spanish trade" (Juan Mencarini, "España y China." *España y América*, year IV, no. 17, 1 Sept. 1906, p. 22).
13. Thomson narrates his experience of taking a photograph on the bridge of Chawchow fu (the Guangji Bridge in Chaozhou, Guangdong province): "I had just time to show myself and take a photograph when a howling multitude came rushing down to where I stood near my boat on the shore. Amid a shower of missiles I unscrewed my camera, with the still undeveloped photograph inside, took the apparatus under my arm, and presenting my iron-pointed tripod to the rapidly approaching foe, backed into the river and scrambled on board the boat" (85).
14. Interestingly, John Thomson, in an article published in the *British Journal of Photography* (1872), gives voice to a Chinese photographer from Hong Kong about these differences: "You foreigners,' says A-hung, "always wish to be taken off the straight or perpendicular. It is not so with our men of taste; they must look straight at the camera so as to show their friends at a distance that they have two eyes and two ears. They won't have shadows about their faces, because, you see, shadow forms no part of the face. It isn't one's nose, or any other feature; therefore it should not be there" (cited in Stevenson 143). And yet, many Chinese studios created portraits of Western foreigners indistinguishable from those obtained by foreign photographers (Thiriez, "Photography and Portraiture"), while, as examined by art historian Wu Hung in reference to the photographer Milton Miller, some foreigners would capitalize on the "Chinese style" to cater for a foreign clientele always eager for exotism (Wu).
15. Georg Theodor Siemssen was Consul for Germany and Vice-Consul for Sweden, and founder of Siemssen & Co. (later Siemseen & Krohn). F.J. Rentzsch was superintendent of the Eastern Extension Australasia and China Telegraph Company.
16. Lin Zhenyuan 林振源, a native of Penang and employee of the Customs Service since 1864, was Principal Clerk in Fuzhou at the time of his death in April 1893.
17. The lecture was delivered by Italian engineer Dr. Livio Silva, who directed a mining institute and analytical laboratory in Shanghai. His lecture was reproduced in *The North China Herald and Consular Gazette*, 4 Nov. 1904, pp. 1037–1039.

18. See Bennett et al., *History of Photography in China 1842-1860*, *History of Photography in China: Western Photographers 1861-1879*, *History of Photography in China: Chinese Photographers 1844-1879*; Thiriez, *Barbarian Lens*, "Photography and Portraiture"; Cody and Terpak; Wu. Special mention is deserved by the collaborative projects *Virtual Shanghai* (<http://www.virtualshanghai.net/>), directed by Christian Henriot (Institute d'Asie Orientale, Lyon) and *Historical Photographs of China* (<http://hpc.vcea.net/>), directed by Robert Bickers (University of Bristol), web-based projects that are digitalizing public and private collections of photographs obtained in China.
19. Menzarini took part in the annual exhibition of the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain, which opened between September 24 and November 14, 1894 in London, with three gelatino-chloride prints: "Natives Irrigating Rice Fields," "Kushan Monastery. Altar to the Goddess of Mercy," "Kushan Monastery. Figure representing 'Fo' personating the Past, the first of the Buddhist Trinity."
20. The album at Lille is titled *Commerce, Industrie, Outils, Ustensiles, Meubles, Vetements, Costumes, Types des Habitants du Fokien*. The Musée received them, along with the crates of objects, as part of the collection of the old Musée industriel, commercial, colonial et agricole. For the history of these albums, see Dubois 285. The album at the Musée Guimet is titled *Types, Costumes, Outils, Ustensiles, etc, des Chinois du Sud*.
21. Ernest Louis François Paul Frandon (1842 – 1904) was French consul in Fuzhou from 1883 to 1884, and later in 1886 after a short time as consul in Kobe. Frandon, who had previously worked in Spain for a short time before his posts in Asia, was also acting Spanish consul in Fuzhou at the time. See *The Chronicle and Directory of China, Corea, Japan, the Philippines, Indo-China, Straits Settlements, Siam, Borneo, Malay States, &c.*, pp. 165.
22. The album was found among old books in Brandeis University Library in the late 1970s, when a wall was about to be torn out to expand the size of the science library. The fact that Gracey lived his final years in Newton, Massachusetts, close to Waltham, where Brandeis is located, suggests that the album was a donation of the family of the consul. Thanks to Mrs. Carrie Kent, who found and donated the album to the late Mr. Raymond Lum (librarian at Widener and Yenching Libraries) around 2009, for information about the album.
23. All translations from Frandon's album, by the author.
24. Edwards Bangs Drew Chinese Maritime Customs Service Photographs, Harvard University: [http://hcl.harvard.edu/collections/digital\\_collections/edward\\_bangs\\_drew.cfm](http://hcl.harvard.edu/collections/digital_collections/edward_bangs_drew.cfm). Oswald, Archives & Special Collections, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, reference number: MS 380876: <https://www.hpcbristol.net/collections/oswald-family>. Accessed 27 July 2017.
25. Ibid.
26. In some images, a rockery is discernible beyond the window, which would locate his studio contiguous to a garden or yard. In other photographs of larger subjects, such as a collection of different types of palanquins, and compositions of families and groups of people, white bedsheets or cloth were hanged in the

background. These photographs also seem to have been taken in the same spot, the garden or yard of a gated villa, as it is possible to identify a recurrent series of elements, such as window sills, a rock skirting board, grass, fences, etc. A photograph of the “Deputy Commissioner’s house, Foochow,” included in the collection of Edward Drew Bangs (Harvard-Yenching Library, EBD08.02), who became Customs Commissioner in 1902, shows similar elements, pointing to the fact that the photographs may have been taken in Mencarini’s residence at the time.

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