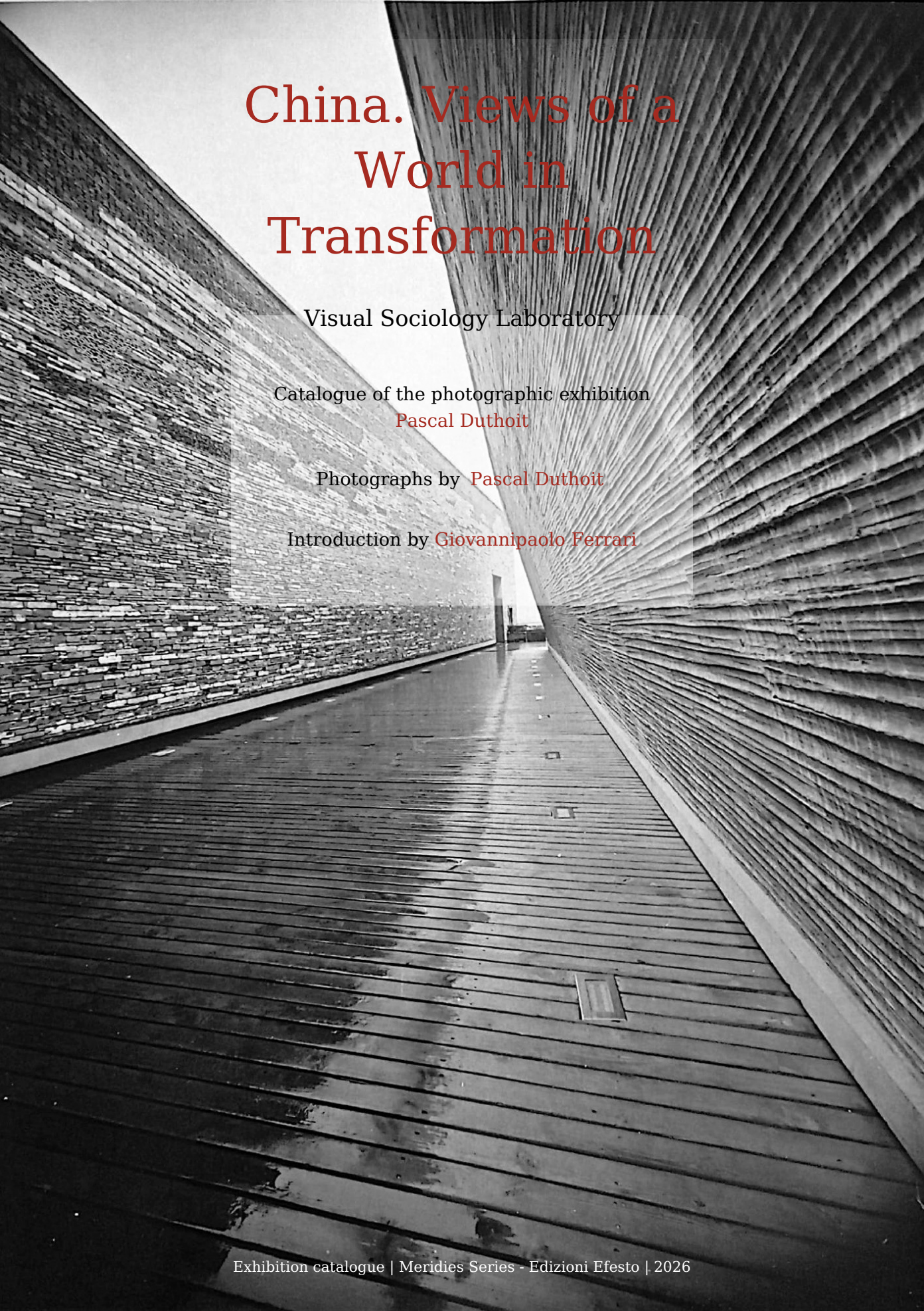


China. Views of a World in Transformation

Visual Sociology Laboratory

Catalogue of the photographic exhibition
Pascal Duthoit

Photographs by Pascal Duthoit

Introduction by Giovannipaolo Ferrari

Exhibition catalogue | Meridies Series - Edizioni Efesto | 2026

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Introduction

Looking at contemporary China means confronting a society in which change seems to have sedimented in space at a speed that is difficult to reduce to a single narrative. The photographs by Pascal Duthoit gathered in this catalogue arise precisely from this tension. They do not claim to explain China, nor to offer a definitive image of it. They do something different and, from a sociological point of view, particularly interesting: they make visible fragments of social relations, ways of inhabiting space, continuities, overlaps, contradictions, and discontinuities.

It is from this perspective that China. Views of a World in Transformation can be read as a genuine visual sociology laboratory. Photography does not perform a merely illustrative function here, nor is it an ornament added to a sociological argument constructed elsewhere. It becomes an instrument of knowledge in its own right, because it allows us to pause what we normally pass through without observing, isolating spatial configurations, bodies, infrastructures, objects, and practices and turning them into materials open to social interpretation. Visual sociology, in fact, treats images not only as representations but also as devices through which knowledge of the social world can be produced and organised (Rose, 2016).

Duthoit's photographs possess a particular strength precisely because they avoid an exclusively monumental or spectacular representation of China. They are not concerned only with skyscrapers, the speed of urban growth, large infrastructures, or the most immediately recognisable images of modernisation. Instead, the gaze shifts towards intermediate places: a courtyard, a wall, a walkway, a canal, a commercial interior, a small ritual space, a technical object placed among vegetation. It is often in these interstices that processes of transformation become sociologically legible.

Space, in fact, is not a neutral container in which social relations simply occur. It is itself produced through practices, economic relations, institutions, conflicts, uses, and representations. From Lefebvre's perspective, space is simultaneously produced, practised, and symbolically constructed, and therefore constitutes an essential dimension of the reproduction of society (Lefebvre, 1991). To observe urban space is thus to interrogate the society that produces it. A wall, a pedestrian route, a residential tower, or a place devoted to rituality are not merely physical elements: they contain traces of social relations and of different conceptions of time, memory, and the future.

In the photographs gathered in the catalogue, the Chinese city appears precisely as a stratified reality. Old and new are not arranged in an orderly sequence in which modernity progressively replaces everything that came before it. On the contrary, they coexist, overlap, redefine one another and, at times, enter openly into tension. The old wall remains in front of residential buildings; ritual continues to be practised at the margins of the vertical city; vegetation intertwines with infrastructure and technical devices; the waterscape returns, through reflection, the presence of the towers of new urbanisation.

Studies of Chinese urban transformation have shown how the extraordinarily rapid growth of cities has changed not only their architectural profile but also forms of dwelling, spatial hierarchies, mobility, social relations, and the relationship between local territory and global processes (Campanella, 2008; Logan, 2008). Urban modernisation therefore does not coincide with a simple material replacement of the old by the new. It produces new centres and new peripheries, alters relationships between individuals and territories, and continually redefines the meaning of places.

Introduction

Ningbo and Shanghai, which are among the main contexts traversed by Duthoit's gaze, can be read within this complex geography of transformation. Contemporary large cities are increasingly embedded in supra-local circuits of capital, information, mobility, and infrastructure, and their capacity to concentrate and organise these flows contributes to profound changes in their social and spatial structure (Sassen, 2001). The global dimension, however, does not erase everyday life: large-scale transformations correspond to individual experiences, waiting, ritualities, gestures, routes, and different forms of appropriation of space.

Duthoit therefore photographs not only what changes, but also what remains. And what remains should not be interpreted as a passive survival of the past. Continuity can acquire new meanings precisely in relation to transformation. The images devoted to devotion and rituality show this particularly clearly: practices linked to tradition continue to be carried out in settings shaped by urban growth, infrastructure, and the verticalisation of the city. The past is not simply removed by modernisation; it is repositioned and reinterpreted within the present (Campanella, 2008; Logan, 2008).

The choice of black and white also contributes to the construction of this gaze. By removing the immediate force of colour, the photographs invite attention to forms, materials, lines, relations of scale, solids, and voids. Walls, towers, surfaces, trees, water, and bodies acquire a distinctive formal presence. Black and white also suspends an overly immediate perception of temporality: what belongs to tradition and what belongs to modernity can be observed within the same visual field.

Photography, however, is never a transparent reproduction of reality. Every image is the result of a point of view, a selection, a distance, and a framing. Visual methodology therefore invites us to question together what an image shows and the conditions through which it is constructed and interpreted (Rose, 2016). To photograph means selecting a portion of the world, temporarily removing it from the continuity of everyday life, and attributing relevance to it.

This is the meaning of the expression visual sociology laboratory chosen as the catalogue's subtitle. The exhibition does not merely seek to present photographs, but to construct a space in which images can generate sociological questions: what kind of society becomes visible through these places? What do apparently secondary infrastructures tell us? What relationship is established between memory and urban transformation? How are the relationships between nature, the built environment, and technology redefined? The twenty photographs thus become fragments of a study of transformation, moving between individual and structure, everyday life and change, continuity and discontinuity.

From this perspective, the reference to the "real China" does not imply a claim to identify a single authentic reality opposed to representations that are necessarily false. Contemporary Chinese society is plural and cannot be reduced to a single image. A sociological reading must avoid both the exoticisation of China and a narrative based exclusively on indicators of development, embracing instead the complexity, plurality, and contradictions of the processes under way (Ferrari, 2025). Duthoit's photographs move precisely in this direction: they invite us to dwell on the detail, the everyday gesture, the wall, waiting, rituality, infrastructure, and the contrast between different urban scales.

This exhibition grows out of that conviction: the transformation of a society can also be read through the traces it deposits in the spaces of everyday life. Looking at Duthoit's images means approaching contemporary China without reducing it to a definitive formula, recognising at once its speed and its resistances, its modernisation and its memories, its global dimension and the concrete reality of the lives inhabiting its territories. It is precisely in this movement between document and interpretation, image and question, observation and theory that photographic work meets sociology.

Giovannipaolo Ferrari
Università degli Studi di Salerno
Artistic Director and Scientific Coordinator of Meridies - Festival delle Culture Meridiane

01. Between Ritual and Representation



CAPTION Two figures in traditional dress occupy the centre of a historic courtyard. The scene brings cultural memory, rituality, and the construction of images in contemporary China into dialogue.

DETAILS Author: Pascal Duthoit | Location: China, Ningbo, Tianyi Pavilion Library | Technique: black-and-white photography | Exhibition format: 24 x 30 cm | Reproduction: from a scan of the original photographic material

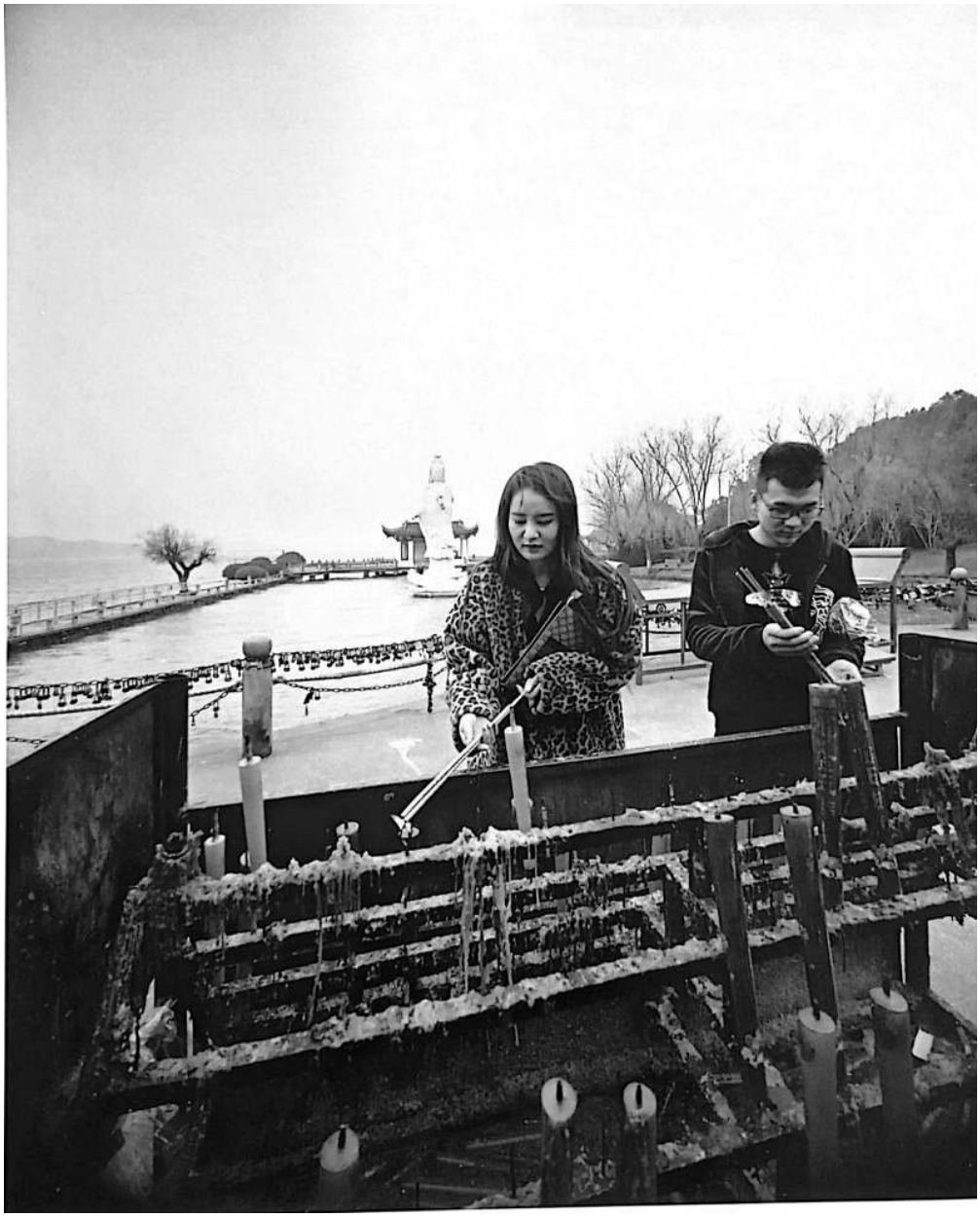
02. Time in the Courtyard



CAPTION Two people in traditional dress move through a space articulated by trees, stone, and architecture. The past continues to live within the gestures and pathways of the present.

DETAILS Author: Pascal Duthoit | Location: China, Ningbo, Tianyi Pavilion Library | Technique: black-and-white photography | Exhibition format: 24 x 30 cm | Reproduction: from a scan of the original photographic material

03. Gestures of Devotion



CAPTION Two young people perform a ritual gesture before an outdoor altar. In the background, water and architecture suggest the coexistence of spirituality, everyday life, and urban transformation.

DETAILS Author: Pascal Duthoit | Location: China, Ningbo, Dongqian Lake, Xiaoputuo Scenic Area | Technique: black-and-white photography | Exhibition format: 24 x 30 cm | Reproduction: from a scan of the original photographic material

04. Geometries of Passage



CAPTION A narrow corridor between two massive walls leads the eye towards a distant opening. Architecture becomes a physical experience of the city: matter, perspective, silence.

DETAILS Author: Pascal Duthoit | Location: China, Ningbo, Yinzhou Museum, Ningbo History Museum | Technique: black-and-white photography | Exhibition format: 24 x 30 cm | Reproduction: from a scan of the original photographic material

05. The City Observes



CAPTION Sculptures, shop windows, cars, and towers coexist along an urban pavement. The contemporary city appears as a layering of images, consumption, and presences.

DETAILS Author: Pascal Duthoit | Location: China, Ningbo, city centre | Technique: black-and-white photography | Exhibition format: 24 x 30 cm | Reproduction: from a scan of the original photographic material

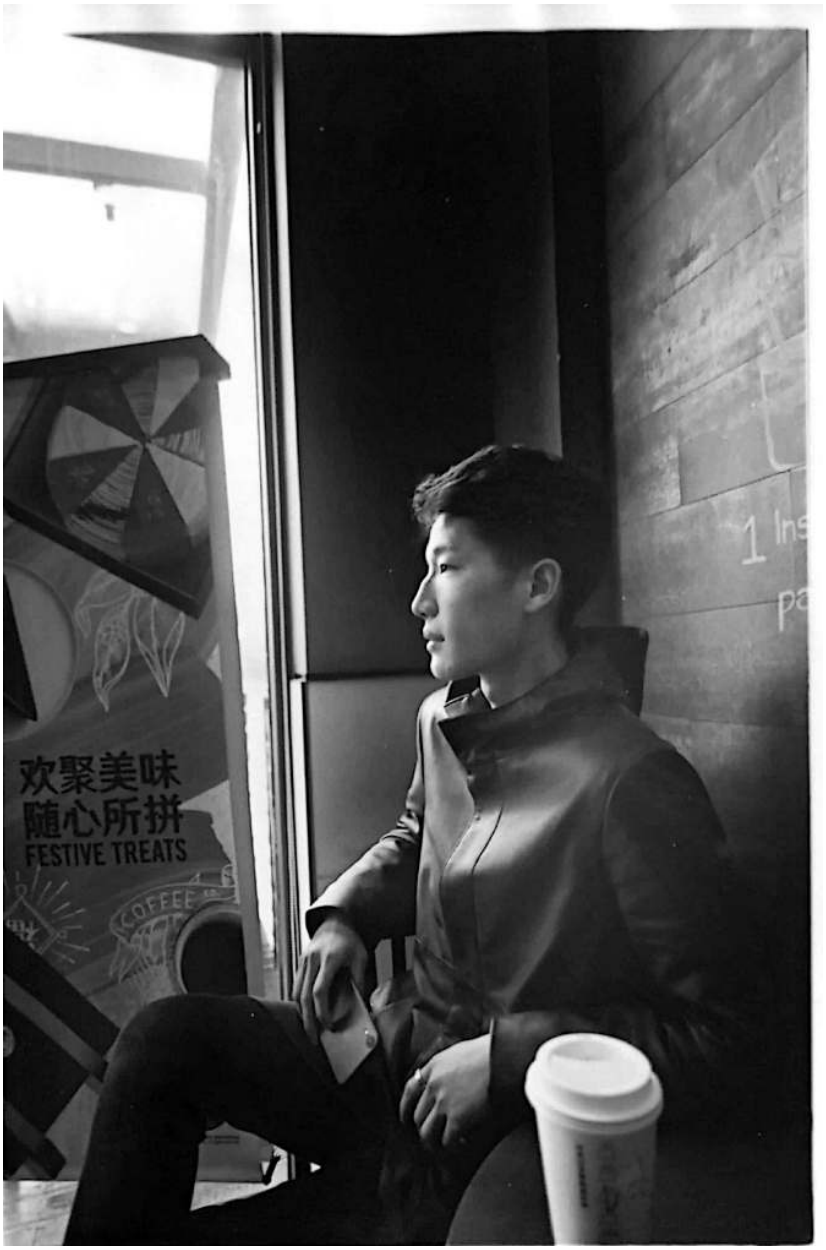
06. Urban Verticality



CAPTION In the large interior space of an urban centre, people in motion occupy floors, stairways, and balconies. Architecture organises and multiplies the flows of city life.

DETAILS Author: Pascal Duthoit | Location: China, Shanghai, Shanghai Museum, People’s Square, Huangpu District | Technique: black-and-white photography | Exhibition format: 24 x 30 cm | Reproduction: from a scan of the original photographic material

07. Metropolitan Waiting



CAPTION A young man sits beside a window, suspended in a moment of waiting. The portrait restores an intimate dimension of urban life, between consumption, mobility, and solitude.

DETAILS Author: Pascal Duthoit | Location: China, Ningbo, University of Nottingham campus | Technique: black-and-white photography | Exhibition format: 24 x 30 cm | Reproduction: from a scan of the original photographic material

08. Dreaming by the River



CAPTION A young woman in theatrical dress holds balloons by the river as the skyline emerges in the background. Imagination, representation, and metropolis meet in public space.

DETAILS Author: Pascal Duthoit | Location: China, Ningbo | Technique: black-and-white photography | Exhibition format: 24 x 30 cm | Reproduction: from a scan of the original photographic material

09. At the Margins of the New



CAPTION An area devoted to an ancient religious ritual lies at the foot of the vertical city. Here urban transformation reveals its unresolved and material dimension.

DETAILS Author: Pascal Duthoit | Location: China, Ningbo | Technique: black-and-white photography | Exhibition format: 24 x 30 cm | Reproduction: from a scan of the original photographic material

10. Rituality within Transformation



CAPTION A monk burns religious effigies in a marginal space dominated in the background by vertical towers and new construction. Ritualisation becomes a concrete measure of the city’s transformation.

DETAILS Author: Pascal Duthoit | Location: China, Ningbo | Technique: black-and-white photography | Exhibition format: 24 x 30 cm | Reproduction: from a scan of the original photographic material

11. Invisible Spirituality



CAPTION A monk completes the ritual burning of a religious effigy. Behind the growth of the metropolis emerge gestures, efforts, and forms of work that often remain outside the official image of modernisation.

DETAILS Author: Pascal Duthoit | Location: China, Ningbo | Technique: black-and-white photography | Exhibition format: 24 x 30 cm | Reproduction: from a scan of the original photographic material

12. Disciplined Natures



CAPTION Trees and vegetation form a small urban green space; the whitewashed trunks reveal practices of care and landscape regulation. Nature enters the city as a designed and governed environment.

DETAILS Author: Pascal Duthoit | Location: China, Ningbo | Technique: black-and-white photography | Exhibition format: 24 x 30 cm | Reproduction: from a scan of the original photographic material

13. Tradition on Pause



CAPTION An elaborate traditional headdress rests on a counter beside objects of everyday use. Tradition, temporarily set aside, enters the ordinary space of contemporary life.

DETAILS Author: Pascal Duthoit | Location: China, Yinzhou Museum, Ningbo History Museum | Technique: black-and-white photography | Exhibition format: 24 x 30 cm | Reproduction: from a scan of the original photographic material

14. Infrastructures of Everyday Life



CAPTION Large pipes cross a canal between residential buildings and urban structures. The city reveals itself through its infrastructure: what sustains collective life while remaining almost unseen.

DETAILS Author: Pascal Duthoit | Location: China, Shanghai | Technique: black-and-white photography | Exhibition format: 24 x 30 cm | Reproduction: from a scan of the original photographic material

15. Layers of the City



CAPTION An old brick wall covered in vegetation separates the foreground from residential towers. The contemporary city grows through superimposition, allowing different materials, times, and scales to coexist.

DETAILS Author: Pascal Duthoit | Location: China, Ningbo, city centre | Technique: black-and-white photography | Exhibition format: 24 x 30 cm | Reproduction: from a scan of the original photographic material

16. The Wall and the Towers



CAPTION The dark material of an old wall fills the foreground while tall buildings rise beyond the boundary. Old and new do not replace one another: they remain simultaneously visible.

DETAILS Author: Pascal Duthoit | Location: China, Ningbo, city centre | Technique: black-and-white photography | Exhibition format: 24 x 30 cm | Reproduction: from a scan of the original photographic material

17. Technology in the Landscape



CAPTION A metal utility cabinet appears among vegetation and rocks. Infrastructure enters the natural landscape and silently alters the way it is experienced.

DETAILS Author: Pascal Duthoit | Location: China, Ningbo | Technique: black-and-white photography | Exhibition format: 24 x 30 cm | Reproduction: from a scan of the original photographic material

18. Reflections of the New China



CAPTION Residential towers are reflected in the water of a canal. The verticality of the new city finds a second presence in the reflection, suspended between urban development and landscape.

DETAILS Author: Pascal Duthoit | Location: China, Ningbo | Technique: black-and-white photography | Exhibition format: 24 x 30 cm | Reproduction: from a scan of the original photographic material

19. Passages between Two Cities



CAPTION A walkway and low infrastructures guide the eye towards a front of residential towers. The route connects the small-scale city at ground level with the vertical city of contemporary development.

DETAILS Author: Pascal Duthoit | Location: China, Ningbo | Technique: black-and-white photography | Exhibition format: 24 x 30 cm | Reproduction: from a scan of the original photographic material

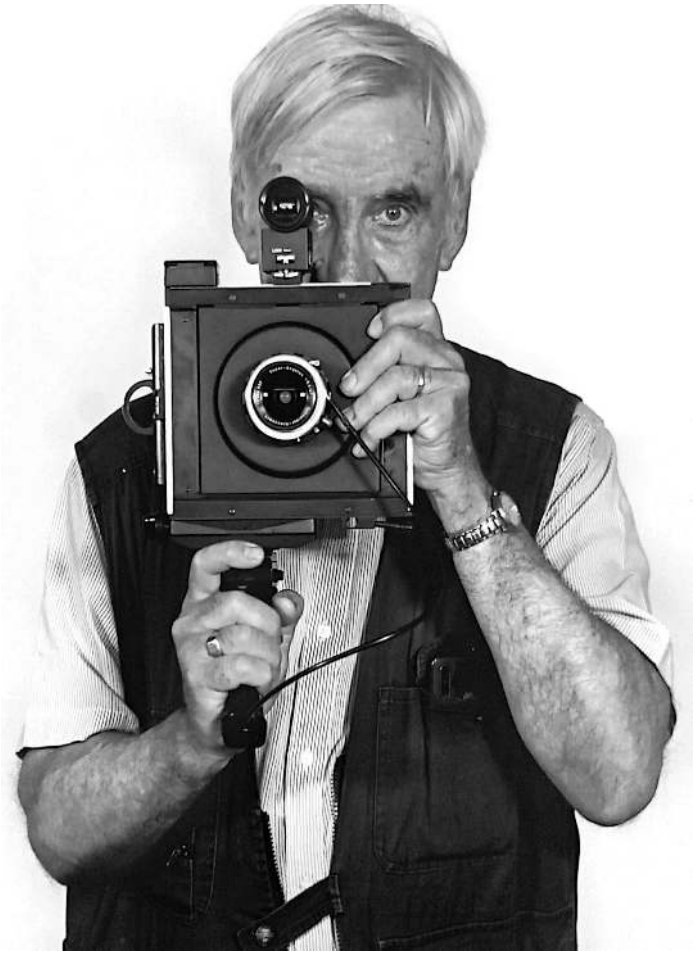
20. The Park and the Metropolis



CAPTION A pedestrian path crosses a green area while the city’s towers emerge in the distance. Designed nature and skyline coexist in the everyday life of the Chinese metropolis.

DETAILS Author: Pascal Duthoit | Location: China, Ningbo | Technique: black-and-white photography | Exhibition format: 24 x 30 cm | Reproduction: from a scan of the original photographic material

The author



Pascal Duthoit

Pascal Duthoit is a photographer and was professor of photography at the Beaux-Arts, École Régionale Supérieure d'Expression Plastique in Tourcoing, France. His photographic work focuses on the observation of spaces, architecture, and forms of everyday life, with particular attention to the relationships between individuals, landscape, and social transformations. In the series China. Views of a World in Transformation, Duthoit moves through different urban contexts of contemporary Chinese society, especially Ningbo and Shanghai. His gaze records the coexistence of tradition and modernisation, rituality and infrastructure, memory and urban development. Black and white accentuates the documentary dimension of the images while also highlighting their formal construction, geometries, and spatial layers. The photographs gathered in the catalogue portray a China far removed from stereotypical representations: a concrete, everyday, and plural reality, observed through places, people, and details in which processes of social change become visible.

Essential bibliography

Campanella, T. J. (2008). The concrete dragon: China’s urban revolution and what it means for the world. Princeton Architectural Press.

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The citations in the introduction refer to an essential selection of studies useful for contextualising processes of urban transformation, the social production of space, and visual methodologies.

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This catalogue accompanies the photographic exhibition China. Views of a World in Transformation and brings together a selection of black-and-white photographs taken by Pascal Duthoit in Ningbo and Shanghai.

The images portray urban contexts of Chinese society: spaces of devotion, architecture, courtyards, infrastructure, margins, and everyday scenes in which tradition and modernisation coexist.

Through a documentary and sensitive gaze, the volume offers a visual journey through contemporary China, away from stereotypes, enriched by an introduction by Giovannipaolo Ferrari, descriptive entries, captions, and a brief biography of the author.

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