

Pierre Joseph Rossier

Pioneer Photographer in East Asia

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As research continues into the life and career of Pierre Rossier it is becoming increasingly apparent that his role in the history of early East-Asian photography was greater than previously expected.

Rossier was almost a complete mystery to photo-historians until just four years ago.¹ This paper aims to provide an update on those initial findings and to reassess his overall contribution to early photography in China, Japan, the Philippines and Thailand.

Pierre Joseph Rossier was born on the 16th July, 1829 in Grandsivaz, a small village in the French-speaking Canton of Freiburg, Switzerland. Rossier was born into a Catholic farming family of modest means, the fourth eldest of ten children. But unlike his brothers and sisters, Pierre was not destined to follow a farming career. He must have shown early intelligence because, at the age of sixteen, he was given a teaching post at a school in the nearby village of Mannens-Grandsivaz.² What he did for the next ten years is unclear, but at the age of twenty-six, on the 19th October, 1855, a passport was issued to him showing his occupation as 'photographer.' The passport was valid for three years and the countries to be visited were France and England; the purpose of travel was to practise his profession as a photographer. The passport gives his height as 5 feet 3 inches (1.6 metres) and indicates that he had brown hair and grey eyes.³

According to the Freiburg town archivist it was most unusual for passports to be requested by Freiburg residents at that time. Rossier was apparently enterprising as well as intelligent. Being a photographer in 1855 was by no means easy. The equipment was expensive to purchase and the process itself was technically difficult and required, at the very least, a basic knowledge of chemistry. Why he decided to go to France, and then England is unknown. But his decision would certainly be life-changing.

We have no idea what he did for the next three years, but in June 1858 the *China Mail* newspaper lists him as a passenger on his way to Hong Kong from Bombay, present-day Mumbai. He arrived on July 7th, 1858 and



Fig. 1 The Crystal Palace, Sydenham, London, ca. 1854.

shortly thereafter we get a partial explanation as to why he had made the trip. The English author and entertainer, Albert Smith, then on a visit to Hong Kong in search of new material, met Rossier on the 25th August 1858 and recorded in his diary: "Paid a visit to Messrs. Negretti and Zambra's photographer, M. Rossier, who lived at the Commercial Hotel, belonging, I believe, to Messrs. Lane and Crawford. He complained much of the effect of the climate on his chemicals."⁴

Negretti and Zambra was a very successful London firm which specialized in the manufacture and sale of photographic and scientific equipment. The firm, which also operated its own photo studios, considerably enhanced its reputation and income when it was appointed as official photographer to the Crystal Palace Company at Sydenham, London which opened in 1854. The Crystal Palace itself was a huge iron and glass structure, originally built to house the 1851 Great Exhibition in London. (*Fig.1*) The palace and grounds were the world's first 'theme park' offering education, entertainment and sports facilities and the site attracted some two million visitors a year. Negretti and Zambra's exclusive appointment helped it to become one of the most successful photographic businesses, if not *the* most successful, in the country. Alongside their manufacturing concerns, Negretti and Zambra was a large retailer of stereoscopic photographs, issuing a significant

number of collections from the early 1850s onwards. Albeit from a position of financial strength, the firm took on the heavy expense, risk, and uncertainty, of sending Rossier to China to photograph the Opium War of 1857-60.

Shortly after arrival Rossier, as we have heard, complained about the impact of the climate on his chemicals. This is interesting since Negretti and Zambra would have supplied their photographer with state-of-the-art equipment and chemicals. From the content of the photographic periodicals of the time, we can see that the firm was at the forefront of photographic know-how and technology. Given the financial risks, we must also assume that the firm had chosen, in Rossier, an experienced and skilful operator. And yet, as we discover later, his early results in East Asia were not entirely satisfactory. For several decades to come the difficulties of using a camera in the Far East would persist and a number of photographers such as Paul Champion and John Thomson would write about the problems they experienced.⁵

In fact, some of the specific problems encountered by Rossier were referred to in passing by Henry Negretti himself in a letter to *The British Journal of Photography* published on May 15th, 1861, (p.192). Negretti was disputing claims made by Mr. Ferrier, a French competitor and wrote: "With reference to [the] statement that M. Ferrier has used his process in hot and cold climates without any inconvenience, has M. Ferrier ever been further than a few hours' journey from any large town or city where he could obtain any chemicals required for the albumen process, or even obtain a fresh stock of prepared plates from home if needs be? His having taken views in Italy or Switzerland is no test that he would not be at times inconvenienced in distant countries, such as China, Japan, or Siam [Thailand], where one of our photographers is at present, and at times where not even a drop of rain water is to be had; where on occasions, through the failure of a steamer, spoiling of chemicals, or some such casualty, the photographer has had to set to work with *only* his camera, lens, and glasses in his possession."

We don't know Rossier's exact itinerary following his arrival in July 1858, but it is likely that he went straight to Guangzhou [Canton] and put together a portfolio of stereographic views in and around the city and took portraits of the Chinese and also of the occupying British and French forces. He must have started sending the negatives back to London almost immediately, but the first indirect reference to them is not until March 1859 when Albert Smith advertises his lecture on China at the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly, London, illustrated with paintings from Negretti & Zambra photographs.⁶

We also know, following research by China photo-historian Edwin Lai, that Rossier was in Hong Kong in December. An advertisement appeared in the *Hong Kong*

Register on the 28th of that month which makes clear that Rossier had opened a temporary studio:

Photographic Likeness

P. ROSSIER Assistant and Representative of MESSRS. NEGRETTI & ZAMBRA Photographers to the Crystal Palace Company, begs to announce to the Ladies and Gentlemen of Hongkong, that he has taken private apartments at the Commercial Hotel - Hours to be seen from 10 o'clock to 2 o'clock. Hongkong, 21st December, 1858.

It is worth mentioning here that the most successful Chinese photographer, Lai Afong, claimed in his later studio advertisements that his own studio first opened in 1859. Who taught him? In the absence of other candidates, it has to be at least possible that Afong learnt his trade from Rossier. At about this time, traditional Chinese portrait painters began to realize the threat photography posed to their livelihoods. Negretti and Zambra would have equipped their representative and photographer with catalogues and instructions to market their equipment whenever possible. Photography lessons were also a way of funding some of the costs of Rossier's tour of the East. Just how much information, advice and support Rossier gave to Chinese would-be photographers is unclear at this stage. But it would be most surprising if some of them had not taken advantage of his presence in the Colony.

Meanwhile, back in London, and following Albert Smith's March 1859 lecture, Henry Negretti exhibited, for the first time, twenty-five of Rossier's stereoviews of Guangzhou [Canton] and Hong Kong on April 16th at the Blackheath Photographic Society. This was almost certainly the first time that commercial photographs of China and Hong Kong had been shown. *The Photographic Journal* of May 1st reported: "We have to mention a series of twenty-five [stereoviews], recently published by Messrs. Negretti and Zambra, of scenes and individuals of note in China, which are particularly interesting... We believe they are the productions of a photographer sent out specially by the publishers for the purpose of securing them..."

It seems that it was not until September of that year before Negretti and Zambra were sufficiently satisfied with the overall quality of the photographs. They then issued a catalogue containing and promoting the China views which, by now, had grown from twenty-five to thirty-nine. In introducing the photographs the catalogue states: "Messrs. Negretti and Zambra are publishing a series of highly interesting views from India and China. The following subjects have already been issued..." The views were still being adjusted, however, since the catalogue listed forty-two China views but three were yet to be allocated titles.⁷

The official publication date was further delayed



Fig. 2 Back of Negretti & Zambra stereoview.

until 19th November 1859 when a set of fifty views were registered for copyright purposes at Stationers' Hall, London.⁸ As we can see from the back of one of these stereoviews, the set may also have been registered in France. (Fig.2) Note also the complete absence of the photographer's or publisher's name. Because of this, photo-historians have struggled, until recently, to understand the significance of this set of views. The reason for this anonymity was that although Negretti and Zambra were publishers and retailers of stereoviews this was not, by any means, their main line of business. They much preferred to 'wholesale' the views by employing distribution partners in both Europe and America. By not showing the Negretti and Zambra company name on the stereoviews, distributors would be able to add their own. For example, the London Stereoscopic Company was by far the largest distributor of stereoviews in England, and their blind-stamped imprint on Negretti and Zambra's work has caused authorship confusion in the past.

Coinciding with the launch date, the London photo-periodicals and art magazines started to review these China views. Given the difficulties of photographing in the Far East at this time, Rossier had been periodically sending home batches of negatives, not all of which would have reached the high-quality standards for which Negretti and Zambra were famous. It seems clear that the firm was not prepared to market and promote the views until they felt able to offer the public a sufficient number of acceptable images. By November 1859 they were ready.

The *Photographic News* [11th and 18th November] reported that: "The time seems rapidly approaching... [when we will] be able to see the most distant corners of the world in miniature in the stereoscope...and the pictures we have received of Chinese people, costumes, and buildings, will, before long, be followed by others of Japan..." The 10th November *China Express* newspaper provided the best description:

"CHINA IN THE STEREOSCOPE – Messrs. Negretti and Zambra, the well-known photographic artists of Holborn-hill and Hatton-garden, have published a



Fig. 3 A standard Victorian-era stereoscope. Viewing stereoviews through the device creates a surprising illusion of three-dimensionality.

first series of stereoscopic views of China, which will be followed by others representing Views and scenes in that empire and Japan. Canton-that turbulent city, in which the allies at present keep the peace -is the scene of the present Series, and almost every object either of public or private life that meets the eye, from the nine-stories Pagoda, the architectural lion of Canton, and the Tartar-General, to the little pagoda outside the walls which suffered during the recent bombardment, and groups of palanquin bearers, are here to be found faithfully sun-painted for English eyes. The difficulty of taking such a number of views and under such a burning sun is very great; but we are bound to say that almost without exception these views come out extremely well in the stereoscope, and we hope that the energy and enterprise of Messrs. Negretti and Zambra in sending photographic artists to those distant regions of the East will meet with such encouragement from the public as will enable them to continue the Series."

These photographs, incidentally, can only be fully appreciated by viewing them through custom-made stereo-viewers. (Fig.3) It is easy to forget that the stereo-photographer, when using his camera, is invariably seeking views, or angles which enhance the three-dimensional experience when the final photograph is studied through such a viewer. This applies equally to group portraits where the compositional skills of the stereo-photographer can only be appreciated when viewed in the same way. Stereo-photography was, and is, difficult. It requires an extra sensitivity and artistic awareness which most otherwise expert photographers found hard to replicate. (Figs.4-5)



Fig. 4 Pierre Rossier: ‘Canton. The Landing Place, Taken from the House of the Commissariat.’ No.6, 1858, albumen-print stereoview, 83 x 174mm [‘NZ’ scratched into negative]



Fig. 5 Pierre Rossier: ‘Canton. Group of Coolies, or Street Porters.’ No.54, ca.1858-60, albumen-print stereoview, 83 x 174mm

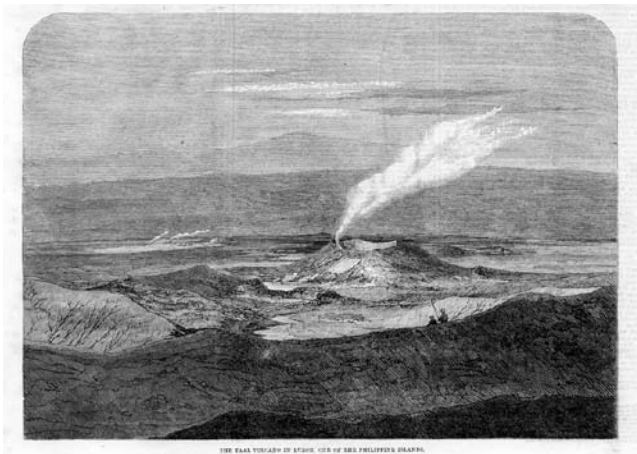


Fig. 6 Illustrated London News, 4th February 1860, (p.109). Woodcut engraving after Pierre Rossier stereoview of the Taal Volcano, the Philippines, 1859.

Back in China, Rossier would have been aware that Japan’s 250 years of isolation from the outside world was scheduled to end on the 1st July, 1859 with the opening of the ports of Kanagawa [changed to Yokohama], Nagasaki and Hakodate. This was obviously a major event and Rossier did well to obtain permission to travel to Japan on the British warship HMS *Sampson*, the same ship that

would be transporting the British Minister, Rutherford Alcock, to his official residence in Edo – present day Tokyo.

But that was several weeks in the future and the hard-working Rossier did not want to waste time. His employers had previously instructed him to visit the Philippines, if it were possible to fit it into his schedule. They wanted him to photograph the Taal Volcano and carry out some minor scientific experiments. The *Illustrated London News* carried a report about Rossier’s visit and gave an illustration of the volcano. (Fig.6)⁹ *The Photographic Journal*, however, carried a more detailed account of the trip:

“PHOTOGRAPHIC CONTRIBUTIONS TO SCIENCE. ...Messrs. Negretti and Zambra, the official photographers to the Crystal Palace Company, have some time since had a gentleman in their service, who has been devoting his energies to the delineation of subjects of considerable interest in China, some of which we noticed casually in our report of a *soirée*, given by the Lord Mayor at the early part of the present year... To this volcano [Taal, Luzon, the Philippines] the enterprising photographer wended his way, according to instructions received from Messrs. Negretti and Zambra, incited thereto by some zealous geologists who were anxious to pay a visit to the spot in such a convenient manner by deputy; and, having been there, he brought away with him that for which he went – an exact transcript of the crater. We cannot forbear laying before our readers the following extract, so full of interest, from a letter received by Messrs. Negretti and Zambra from their representative: - *According to your instructions I started from Canton and proceeded to the Philippines. Arrived at Manilla, I went on to the village of Taal, from thence on to the crater. I left the village at midnight and got to the spot at eight in the morning, travelling by canoe. Arrived at the edge of the crater, I pitched my tent; but such was the heat of the place, and so dense the steam that arose from the fissures, that I was glad to move further off to avoid being suffocated. Having found a more convenient spot I tried my first plate; nothing! Second, ditto; third, fourth – all black, all overdone: suffice it to say, that though I had been giving from thirty to forty seconds, with the same light and chemicals, the day before, I obtained the negatives I send you with four seconds’ exposure – a curious circumstance deserving investigation. I was surrounded by sulphurous vapour, more especially when the wind (which was continually shifting) was blowing towards me: such was the density of vapour; that on one occasion indeed my two guides bundled into my tent, to the great danger of my bath and chemicals. I send you the three negatives I was enabled to take, and would have gladly sent you duplicates, but after about a couple of hours’ work my bath got covered with a black pellicle which adhered to the collodian, causing the plates to stain all over, so that I was obliged to give up. On the north-east of the small crater you will see a small lake: its waters are*

covered in a white vapour like steam; its borders strewn with a greenish white sulphurous substance, caked like ice on the edge of a pond. The effect all along the edge of the lake is very curious. I attempted to descend from the great crater to the inner one, in order to follow your instructions as to the temperature and density of the water; but I felt so weak from excessive perspiration that I was obliged to desist: it has to be done by a rope. I however sent down one of my guides who brought up a gourd full of water, the temperature of which, was, when I received it, 110 degrees Fahrenheit. I will send it to you if I have no accident, as it might be interesting to some of your scientific friends. I left the crater about twelve o'clock, and returned to Taal by half-past five, having wind and current in my favour. I have already told you of the many difficulties I had, especially in Canton; but this volcano photographing beats all. I sincerely hope your friends will not suggest any more such interesting objects for your photographer to take. As to Japan, I have no doubt I shall get on very well but if I hear that a volcano exists there I shall be tempted to turn back, as I think one volcano in my life will be sufficient. Three admirably-printed glass transparent stereographs, from the negatives mentioned in the above extract, are before us, and anything of the kind more interesting it is not easy to conceive of... We sincerely trust that Messrs. Negretti and Zambra will meet with the encouragement they so richly merit, by an extensive demand for these highly instructive and interesting subjects, and thereby be induced to renew their efforts for placing before the public specimens so well calculated to elevate the taste and inform the mind."¹⁰

We have no photographic portrait of Rossier and no letters or journals have been found. This letter is the closest we can get to understanding something of his personality. He gives the impression of being very confident in his own professional ability and also in his relationship with his employers.

Time was running short, but Rossier may well have taken other photographs whilst in the Philippines although, if so, none has surfaced. A photograph of the Taal Volcano is listed and offered for sale [oddly amongst a list of Japanese views] in an 1863 Negretti and Zambra catalogue, but again no examples have yet been found.¹¹

Rossier would now have been in a hurry to rendezvous with HMS *Sampson* at Nagasaki in order to take up the offer of passage to Edo. Here the contemporary passenger lists in the newspapers throw up an anomaly. According to the *Overland China Mail*, Rossier arrived in Hong Kong from Manila on the 18th June, 1859. However, HMS *Sampson*, which had been in Nagasaki harbour for some days, left Nagasaki, with Rossier on board, on the 20th June. In 1859 it would have been impossible for Rossier to make the crossing over to Nagasaki in just two days, and he must have changed his schedule and caught an earlier ship. This is just one of the mysteries which are waiting to

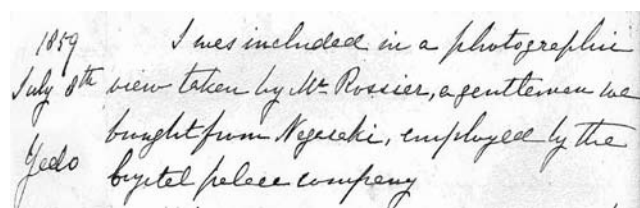


Fig. 7 Detail from a ship's journal, written by one of the officers of HMS *Sampson*, Henry Purcell Ward, between 1st January 1858 and 31st October 1860. This particular entry was made on July 8th 1859 at Edo.

be cleared up.

Incidentally, we only know that Rossier was on the *Sampson* because of a ship's journal kept by one of the officers. Details of this were given in the 2004 *PhotoHistorian* article referred to in the notes and references below. (Fig.7) When he arrived in Japan Rossier took many historical and important photographs, including the first commercial ones of Tokyo, Yokohama, Kanagawa and Nagasaki. (Figs.8-11) It is possible that he spent the winter in Japan because we next hear from him leaving Kanagawa for Shanghai on February 27, 1860.¹²

A key reference appeared in London, a month earlier, when the *London & China Telegraph* reported:

Among the cargo brought by the *Delta* steamer, which arrived from Alexandria, was a large package containing photographic negatives, taken in Japan by an artist dispatched specially for the purpose by Messrs. Negretti and Zambra, of London.
January 13th, 1860

These are probably the first of Rossier's negatives of Japan to arrive in London. Three days later *The Photographic Journal*¹³ made mention that Murray & Heath's new 'Smartt's Photographic Tent' was used by Rossier:

Messrs. Negretti and Zambra some months ago sent out, with their photographer, one of these tents to China and Japan; and only last night (this gentleman desiring to extend his operations) they sent off a second one.

If taken literally, this would mean that Rossier returned to England a few months' earlier. On the other hand the allusion could simply refer to Rossier's initial departure from England, probably around April 1858. When and why Rossier sought permission to lengthen his stay in the East is not clear. Perhaps Rossier's employers had asked him to obtain further views of China and Japan and to try to obtain permission to cover the escalating conflict with China.

In Paris, meanwhile, the influential French photo-periodical, *La Lumiere* carried, in March 1860, a review



Fig. 8 Pierre Rossier: 'Jeda. [Tokyo] Group of Japanese, and general construction of a Japanese Dwelling.' No.61, 1859, albumen-print stereoview, 83 x 174mm



Fig. 9 Pierre Rossier: 'Yakuama. [Yokohama] General view of Yakuama.' No.72, 1859, albumen-print stereoview, 83 x 174mm. This series contained three Yokohama photographs – the earliest known.



Fig. 10 Pierre Rossier: 'Kanagawa. General View of Kanagawa.' No.69, 1859, albumen-print stereoview, 83 x 174mm. This series contained four Kanagawa photographs – the earliest known.



Fig. 11 Pierre Rossier: 'Panorama of Nagasaki.' No.1-5, 1860, albumen-print stereoview, 83 x 174mm. This second series contained a five-part panorama of Nagasaki of which this view is one part. Whereas the Rossier first series was concentrated around Tokyo and Yokohama, the second series centred on Nagasaki.

of Rossier's China views and also a competing set of stereoviews from Shanghai. Neither photographer's name is mentioned, but it is clear from the text that Rossier's photographs in Canton were being considered, and that they pre-dated those from Shanghai which we now know were taken by the Frenchman, Louis Legrand. It is apparent from reading the article that even as late as March 1860, photographs of China were seen as something of a novelty – at least in France.¹⁴

Rossier left Shanghai in late-March 1860 and arrived in Hong Kong on March 27th before moving immediately on to Guangzhou. It is at this city that we can assign an exact time and date to one of Rossier's photographs. (Fig.12) In the Royal Marines Museum in Portsmouth, England there is the journal of Lieutenant Charles William Carrington who was the Quartermaster General of the Royal Marine Special Service Brigade. His entry for the 5th April, 1860 reads: "Overcast and cold, but fine. At 11 o'clock, the Major General [This would be General Sir Charles Straubenzie] accompanied by his staff and Major Pownall 3rd Buffs [3rd East Kent Regiment of Foot], appointed Commissioner in place of Major Fisher, Royal Engineers, and attended by a guard and the band of the Buffs, proceeded to pay a farewell visit to the Tartar General. After exchanging the usual amount of courteous speeches, and partaking of tea and ... [illegible], a photograph of the party was taken by a photographer, at present staying in Canton, and who attended for the purpose. The Major General then called upon Laoh the Governor General, more civil speeches and expressions of respect, and another photograph was taken, Laoh having proffered much anxiety to see the process used to have a likeness of himself."¹⁵

On May 23rd, 1860 (p.5) *The Times* newspaper in London issued the following advertisement:

JAPANESE LADIES IN FULL DRESS – A STEREOGRAPH of the above interesting subject, taken by Messrs. NEGRETTI AND ZAMBRA'S artist, now in Japan, forwarded on receipt of 24 stamps -1, Hatton Garden, and 59, Cornhill [London]

The photograph in question (Fig.13) is significant in that it was the first commercially published photograph of Japan and the earliest photograph we have which depicts Japanese females. In addition, the same advertisement was issued a few days later on the 28th May (p.3) including the words 'full coloured.' This would also make it the earliest-known coloured photograph of Japan to be offered for sale.

We left the restless Rossier in Guangzhou in April, 1860 and we now pick up his trail again in Shanghai in late June staying, according to the *North China Herald*, at the Astor House Hotel.¹⁶ He may have gone to Shanghai to replenish his photographic chemicals. It is far more



Fig. 12 Pierre Rossier: 'Canton. Farewell Visit of Gen. Sir Charles Straubenzie to the Chinese General-in-Chief.' No.47, 1860, albumen-print stereoview, 83 x 174mm [Blind-stamp: 'The London Stereoscopic Company' appears on the mount]



Fig. 13 Pierre Rossier: 'Japanese Ladies in full dress winter Costume.' No.79, 1859, albumen-print stereoview, 83 x 174mm. This was the first commercial photograph of Japan to be published, and the first to show Japanese females.

likely, however, that he was there to seek permission of the British and/or French military authorities to allow him to accompany them to the scene of the imminent conflict in North China. If so, it seems he was not successful. The British already had Felix Beato and Lieutenant John Papillon, and the French had Du Pin, Fauchery and Louis Legrand. Rossier would have been devastated. His employers, Negretti and Zambra, would have expected an explanation from the thirty-year-old. After all, that would have been one of the key reasons for extending his stay in East Asia.

It appears that Rossier's next move was to base himself in Japan, especially Nagasaki where he added to his portfolio of Japanese views and portraits. These were then dispatched to London and *The Times* carried the following advertisement dated October 3rd, 1860 (p.11):

Photographs From Japan – A case of rare and curious photographs of the scenery of this interesting country, and illustrative of the manners and customs of the Japanese tribes, which have been executed by a special artist sent out for the purpose by the enterprising firm of Negretti and Zambra of London, are expected by the Peninsular and Oriental Company's steamship *Ceylon*, which will probably arrive at Southampton on Wednesday.

This appears to be Rossier's second shipment of Japanese negatives back to London.

In October 1860, following the Chinese military defeat at the hands of the allies, the combined British and French forces were destroying much of the Emperor's Summer Palace in Beijing. Meanwhile Rossier, unable to get to the conflict was in Nagasaki awaiting instructions from London. Whilst there he was commissioned by the British consul George Morrison to take photographic panoramas of the Harbour and the proposed site of the foreign settlement. Rossier's Nagasaki photographs show he was not just a stereo-photographer but also more than capable of delivering fine work in the technically demanding field of panoramic photography. These photographs, a three-plate and an eight-plate panorama, are held by the National Archives in London together with a letter from consul Morrison addressed to his Minister in Edo, Rutherford Alcock. Morrison states that he has: "...taken advantage of the presence of a professional photographer ...here for the moment, Mr. Rossier, an employé of the firm of Negretti & Zambra of London...the cost ... seventy Dollars...but considering that M. Rossier's time is specifically devoted to other purposes, and that he was occupied with them for several days...as he is not a tradesman here for the sale of photographs, [I] was not in a position to bargain...and I have seen very fair photographs taken, unassisted, by a pupil of M. Rossier..."¹⁷

It is important to note that Rossier was instructing Japanese in photography at this time. At the Dutch medical school in Nagasaki, a group of Japanese was struggling to master the theory and practise of photography. When the seasoned professional Rossier arrived, the students were able to overcome any remaining obstacles and made very rapid progress. Amongst those students who benefitted were Ueno Hikoma, who later became a famous Japanese photographer, Horie Kuwajiro and Maeda Genzo.

On 26th November, 1860 a selection of the latest views sent from Japan by Rossier are combined with some China views and advertised in the *London and China Express* by what appears to be a Negretti and Zambra distributor:

CHINA AND JAPAN.-A New Series of very beautiful Stereoscopic Pictures, Groups, Views, Street Scenes &c. –To be had of all Dealers. Wholesale only, of G.R. and Co., 24, Lawrence Lane, Cheapside. [London]

And on February 18th, 1861, Henry Negretti displays at the Blackheath Photographic Society meeting in London "...a large number of transparent stereoscopic views [glass stereos] in Java, Japan and many other places..."¹⁸ At the same meeting Negretti also reported a curious fact. He had sent to Rossier in Japan some stereoscopes as presents for the European military officers, and the Japanese had immediately copied them and decorated them with lacquer. Examples were produced within one week and Rossier



Fig. 14 Pierre Rossier: 'Siamese Prince. Luhang Wongsā.' No.3, 1861, glass stereoview, 83 x 174mm. Part of a Negretti and Zambra series of thirty views and portraits taken in Thailand.

ordered 200 and sent them to London for sale.¹⁹

We are not sure what instructions were received by Rossier, but sometime early in 1861 he was in Bangkok, Thailand adding a series of some thirty views and portraits to the burgeoning Negretti and Zambra East-Asian stereoview portfolio. Whilst in Bangkok Rossier met the French zoologist, Firmin Bocourt who had arrived on 10th December on a scientific expedition. Bocourt commissioned Rossier to complete a portfolio of 'Siamese Types' and a number of striking portraits were the result. (Fig.14)²⁰

The British Journal Of Photography, October 1st, 1861, (p.350) also reported that: "His Royal Highness the King of Siam is about to become a practical photographer, and is impatiently awaiting the arrival of a complete set of apparatus manufactured for him by Messrs. Negretti and Zambra, and has, beside, engaged the services of a gentleman to initiate him in the principles and practice of photography." It is likely that Rossier arranged the transaction and he was probably the King's photography instructor.

Rossier temporarily broke his sojourn in Thailand and left in September 1861 for Hong Kong and was in Shanghai the following month. In England, several travel books were published using Rossier's Japan views. For example, George Smith published *Ten Weeks in Japan* in April and Henry Tilley published *Japan, the Amoor, and the Pacific* in July. In November *The Art Journal* reviewed a collection of some 108 Negretti and Zambra stereoviews of China and Japan.

Rossier's time in the East was coming to an end and it is likely that his standing instructions were to dispose of his equipment and chemicals before returning to Europe. The following advertisement, placed in the 1st March, 1862 issue of the *North China Herald*, probably signals Rossier's imminent departure:

FOR SALE A BARGAIN A new and complete set

of photographic apparatus comprising: A Patent Mahogany Folding Camera, with all improvements, first class in every respect. A Ross Portrait Lens, very superior A Ross Landscape Lens, do. All in small portable case. ALSO, A Portable Mahogany Tripod Stand, with Ball and Rocket Joint and Patent Screw Adjustment. ALSO, A Travelling case completely fitted up, containing all the necessary apparatus, together with a large fresh supply of Chemicals just received from London, and two practical works on photography. The whole quite new and in perfect order. The above is to be sold A BARGAIN, in consequence of the owner's leaving Shanghai. For further particulars apply at the "Shanghai Dispensary", Bridge Street. Shanghai, 27th February, 1862.

On the 7th March, 1862 Rossier left Shanghai for Hong Kong and was back in his home town of Freiburg, Switzerland later that year.²¹ As if by way of a final approbation, Rossier's China, Japan and Siam stereoviews were exhibited, as glass stereos, at the International Exhibition in London, in May of that year.²²

Rossier's life back in Europe was, as far as we know, relatively quiet. As mentioned earlier, no letters or articles he might have written have yet been found and it looks as though he drifted into relative obscurity. We know from the public records that in October 1865, in the nearby town of Aarau, Rossier married Catharine Barbe Kaelin (1843 -1867) who came from Einsiedeln. Less than a year later, on the 30th July 1866, Christophe Marie Pierre Joseph was born. Perhaps Catharine failed to recover from the childbirth because, on the 4th April 1867, she died at the tragically young age of 23.

Rossier had opened a studio on his return and a second one in German-speaking Einsiedeln. A reasonable number of his local photographs appear in Swiss private and public collections. (Fig.15) Surprisingly, though, none of his work from East Asia seems to form part of these collections. On the 24th May 1872, in what appears to be his first trip outside of Switzerland since his return, he applied for a one-year passport to travel to France. The reason for the journey is unknown.

The Freiburg trade directories show that Rossier's studio, based at 211 Place du College, was in operation there until at least 1876. Sometime between 1871 and 1884, Rossier married for the second time. His wife, Marie Virginie Overney, was the former domestic to his landlords. On 16 March 1884, Joseph Louis, Rossier's second son, was born in Paris. Joseph would own a café in Vevey, in the Canton de Vaud, Switzerland, and would die there in 1927.²³

There is an 1898 Swiss publication listing Freiburg Canton's famous people. It mentions that Rossier died in Paris, but doesn't give the date, and that he was the first



Fig. 15 Pierre Rossier: A family in Freiburg, Switzerland. Albumen-print stereoview, 83 x 174mm. ca. 1871.

photographer to traverse the Far East taking photographs: “Rossier Pierre, 1er photographe ayant parcouru les Indes. decede à Paris.” This means that Rossier died in Paris sometime between 1883 and 1898.²⁴

Pierre Rossier led a fascinating and colourful life and returning to his quiet home town in Freiburg to settle down at the age of thirty-three must have been hard for him. It is perhaps not surprising that he sought out the vibrancy of cosmopolitan Paris in later life. The details of what he did there remain to be discovered.

As for his legacy, the evidence shows that Rossier was a talented and skilful photographer, overcoming the many impediments faced by photographers in East Asia. His were the first commercial photographic views of China (1858) and Japan (1859), and this may equally apply to Thailand (1861) and the Philippines (1859). As a seasoned professional photographer, armed with the most sophisticated photographic equipment of the time, he contributed greatly to the spread of photographic knowledge across East Asia.

Notes & References

- 1 Bennett, Terry, “The Search for Rossier: Early Photographer of China and Japan,” *The PhotoHistorian*, No. 147, 2004, (pp. 9-13).
- 2 Genealogical information on the Rossier family was obtained from the Freiburg Town Archives. Reference to Rossier’s occupation as a ‘regent’ [teacher] is found under archive reference: AEF.census, No. 8, 1845, reg. VI, (p.427).
- 3 Freiburg Archives: Ref: AEF, DPC II, 13,335
- 4 Smith, Albert, *To China and Back*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press,

1974. This reference and Rossier’s connection with Negretti and Zambra, was first mentioned in Worswick, Clark, *Imperial China: Photographs 1850-1912*, New York: Penwick Publishing, 1978.
- 5 For other references to the difficulties faced by early photographers in China and Japan, see the writer’s *Old Japanese Photographs Collectors’ Data Guide*, London: Quaritch, 2006.
- 6 *The China Express*, March 26th, 1859.
- 7 Undated Negretti and Zambra stock catalogue with a British Library accession stamp of September 1859.
- 8 Entered in the Stationers’ Hall Copyright Register as: “Stereoscopic Views in China Nos. 1-50, published by Henry Negretti & Joseph Warren Zambra, No. 1 Hatton Garden, publication 19th November 1859.” The National Archives hold this under reference: COPY 3/10 (p.126)
- 9 *Illustrated London News*, 4th February 1860, (p.109).
- 10 *The Photographic Journal* November 15th, 1859 (pp.280-1)
- 11 November 1863 Negretti and Zambra catalogue entitled *Catalogue of all the Stereoscopic Views on Glass, Published up to the Present Time, with a List of the Various Stereoscopes Manufactured by Negretti and Zambra*. The catalogue was advertised in the November 21st, 1863 issue of *The Times*.
- 12 Rossier departs Kanagawa for Shanghai February 27th, 1860 on board the *Azof: North China Herald*, 10th or 15th March, 1860. [The writer has mislaid the exact date]
- 13 *The Photographic Journal*, January 16th, 1860 (pp. 116-117)
- 14 *La Lumiere* March 17th and 24th, 1860.
- 15 *Journal Quartermaster General of the Royal Marine Special Service Brigade in China 1859-1860* (Royal Marines Museum, ref: ARCH 11/67/3). Although Carrington’s name is not shown, RM records confirm he was Quartermaster at this time.)
- 16 *North China Herald*, July 14th, 1860, (p.110).
- 17 National Archives, Reference: F.O. 46.8 contains the correspondence referred to and also Rossier’s 3-plate and 8-plate panoramas of Nagasaki.
- 18 *The Photographic Journal*, March 15th, 1861, (p.144).
- 19 *The British Journal of Photography* March 1st, 1861 (p.92).
- 20 I am grateful to both Claude Estebe and Gerard Levy for pointing out that Rossier made photographs in Siam for Firmin Bocourt, a French zoologist, who carried out a scientific expedition in Siam in 1861/1862. This was reported in a lecture given by Milnes Edwards, at the French *Académie des sciences* who stated: “... [M. Bocourt] profita de la présence à Bangkok d’un artiste habile (M.Rossier) pour obtenir une nombreuse série de photographies.” [Mr. Bocourt took advantage of the fact that a good artist (M. Rossier) was staying in Bangkok and asked him to make numerous photographs.] *Académie des sciences*, Seance du 10 août 1863, cote Y 324, p. 2.
- 21 Claude Estebe also kindly provided the following background to the mission: “In 1861 the kings of Siam made a promise to M. de Montigny, French Consul-General in China, to give numerous live animals to the French Museum d’histoire Naturelle. A mission, under the supervision of Firmin Bocourt, a zoologist and draughtsman at the Museum, was sent to Siam to receive the animals. The mission left Paris on the 5th September, 1861 with the Siamese Embassy which was returning home. They reached Bangkok on the 10th December. They were greeted by the two kings of Siam and their ministers, and were helped by M. d’Istria, the French temporary Consul in Bangkok and the abbot, M. Larnaudie. They left on the 30th July, 1862 with all the animals presented by the kings, and they reached Paris on the 15th November.” Although Rossier appears to have been in Bangkok for most of 1861, he left on September 22nd for Hong Kong [*Overseas China Mail* October 15th, 1861] and then moved on to Shanghai arriving on October 20th [*North China Herald* October 26th, 1861]. It is not yet clear how and when Rossier met Bocourt, nor when Rossier returned to Bangkok to carry out his commission.
- 22 *North China Herald* March 8th & 15th, 1862. The evidence that Rossier was back in Freiburg in 1862 is provided by Swiss collector and Rossier enthusiast, Gérard Bourgarel who has, in his collection, a portrait taken by Rossier, of a local Freiburg girl, who died in 1862.
- 23 *The Photographic News*, July 25th, 1862, (p.355).
- 24 The fullest account of Rossier’s life before and after his time in East Asia is provided in the publication: Terry Bennett, Gérard Bourgarel & David Collin, *Pierre Joseph Rossier, Photographe Une Mémoire Retrouvée*, Fribourg, Switzerland: Pro Fribourg, 2006 [In French]. Rossier’s time in Japan is covered in the writer’s *Photography In Japan 1853-1912*, Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 2006. A detailed chronology and listing of Rossier’s stereoviews is given in the writer’s *Old Japanese Photographs: Collectors’ Data Guide*, London: Quaritch, 2006.
- 24 Raemy, Alfred, *Livre D’or du Canton de Freiburg. Nomenclature des Bourgeois de la Ville de Freiburg des Anciennes Familles Patriciennes et des Notabilités et Celebrities du Canton*, Freiburg : Bonny, 1898 (p.49).