

TRAVELING THROUGH CHINA'S OLD TREATY PORTS (REIZEN DOOR DE OUDE VERDRAGSHAVENS VAN CHINA)



Custom House, Guangzhou

Nicholas Kitto's fascination with ancient western architecture in China is very personal. His great-grandparents worked for a British company in China in the early 20th century. His grandparents met in China and married in Shanghai in 1921. Kitto's father grew up

in the treaty ports of Tianjin and Hankou. When Nicholas moved to Hong Kong during his career as an accountant, he regularly traveled to mainland China. In 1996, during a business trip to Tianjin, he found the house where his father had lived until he was six.



This successful search sparked Kitto's interest in 19th- and 20th-century Western architecture in China, leading to 51 trips totalling 2,784,010 steps to nearly all of China's former treaty ports. During these trips, Kitto took more than four thousand photos of the buildings he encountered. A selection of these from 41 locations has now been brought together in the beautifully detailed, sturdy photo book *Trading Places*.

Cathedral of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Guangzhou

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Well-known and lesser-known treaty ports

The period of the foreign treaty ports in China runs roughly from 1840 to 1943, and includes a very diverse foreign influence. Through various treaties, countries that at that time had a stronger position in the world than China, could trade in China, open diplomatic posts, send missionaries and engage in military activities. Adventurers from the countries that had treaty ports left their mark on the country, often thinking that their stay in China would be permanent. However, history turned out differently.

In the book, architecture in the four largest treaty ports Shanghai, Hankou (part of Wuhan), Guangzhou and Tianjin is extensively discussed, but Kitto gives relatively more space to lesser-known places. A summer retreat in the cool hills of Lushan (Jiangxi) for foreigners who couldn't bear the sweltering summers in the cities along the Yangtze, a serene French cemetery in Tainan (Taiwan) and the train station in Bisezhai (Yunnan), where the clock on track 1 was imported from Paris; Kitto has been there and photographed it.



Astor Hotel, Tianjin

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Foreign stamp on Chinese cities

This book makes it clear that the presence and influence of Western powers in the 19th and 20th centuries extended throughout China, and much of it is still well preserved. Many of the buildings survived the turbulent second half of the 20th century extremely well and are currently being restored to their original glory. A good example of this is the Astor Hotel in Tianjin.

The book also shows how diverse the foreign visitors to China were during the period shown. If you look at the orthodox Sofia Cathedral in Harbin, you imagine yourself in Russia, but the consulate in Tianjin of what was then called Austria-Hungary could just as well have been in Central Europe.

Kitto has managed to find out as much as possible about the original use of the buildings he photographs. Where possible, photographs from the 19th and 20th centuries have been placed next to Kitto's photographs. This often shows how well renewed interest in this part of Chinese history has led to well-executed restorations, but it also sometimes gives a nice picture of past glory.



Tianjin West Station

A journey through the past

In his foreword, Robert Bickers, the man behind the Historical Photographs of China platform, mentions that the "old China" that Kitto captured in this book has survived after the creation of the "new China" in 1949. Kitto helps readers who want to seek out these traces of the past themselves; on the back cover is a QR code that gives you access to a file with the locations of all buildings.

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Trading Places is a wonderful reference book of China's tangible past. If you leaf through the book and see the many special buildings in places like Tengchong, Sanshui and Yingkou, you can only get the urge to put on the walking shoes and take a trip through China's recent past.



Church Missionary Society, Beihai

Posted by Judith van de Bovenkamp, June 28, 2021, CHINA2025.NL

Trading Places: A photographic journey through China's former treaty ports, Nicholas Kitto, Blacksmith Books March 2020, 30.5 × 24.1cm, 400 pages, approx. 700 images, hardcover €64.33, ISBN 9789887963929.

A link to NK's Royal Asiatic Society presentation follows on the website:

