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PHOTOGRAPHY AND PORTRAITURE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY CHINA

Régine Thiriez

A major source of frustration for the amateur of early photographs, especially portraits, is anonymity. Their origins are usually shrouded under a series of questions: who made the photographs, who collected them, and how they reached their present location, are often mysteries. Likewise, who the subject was, when and where he or she was photographed, for what occasion, to what end, and who received and kept copies, is a matter usually left to conjecture. To the stranger, any name scribbled on the back will again raise speculations as to who the individual was and what life he or she lived. While most of these questions must remain unanswered, this article tries to suggest some of the ways in which even anonymous portraits may be able to tell a story.¹

One of my present purposes is to define the standards of photographic portraiture in China in the second half of the nineteenth century using as a primary and essential resource photographic prints of the time, and to explore a number of topics that arise from these standards. This work originated in my study of a large number of images found in a number of private and public collections and repositories. Grounded on this material and moving to some of the ideas it suggests, the present paper does not claim to be a specialized study in any particular direction. It is a preliminary work that aims at raising issues rather than resolving them.

Each culture has dealt with portraiture in its own way. The culture considered here is that of China during the second half of the nineteenth century. The limit is 1900, a time when the newly-born portable camera radically transformed photography and its uses. Because of the variety and extent of sources available, I have limited myself here to Western repositories and collections, including my own gathered from various flea markets. The mode of selection is significant when, as discussed below, it affects factors

¹ My thanks go to the many colleagues who have over the years helped me to develop my ideas on photographic portraiture. I would also like to thank the readers of East Asian History for their constructive comments.
such as the ratio of men’s to women’s images, which would presumably be quite different in purely Chinese family sources.

The impetus for this article comes from ten years of frustration in dealing with the anonymity of images of late imperial Chinese. I offer here a few suggestions for dealing with and interpreting the material such as it is. Readers will notice that as a rule I will ignore the portraits found in early or contemporary publications. In my experience, what have been or are being published are usually the images that are the most noticeable, whether for reasons of high photographic quality or because they show well-known people. Since they are not representative of the average production of their time, however, they are not particularly helpful in defining standards for the ordinary photographic portraits which comprise the overwhelming bulk of the production.

**Introduction**

The invention of photography was announced in Europe in 1839, just three years before the first of the “Opium Wars” forced the Imperial government of China to open five ports to trade with the West. The new medium of photography and the Western mercantile and missionary presence along the China coast developed simultaneously. Within a few years, photography would become the standard way of making a portrait in all places reached by foreigners, and soon also inland. This is how it became a crucial social agent.

Photography’s major impact in China was indeed in portraiture. A portrait as discussed here means a person’s likeness, an image intended to show an individual’s outward appearance that includes overt or coded indications of character and social status. As it happens, this genre of personal representation was a tradition both in China and the West. In the context of the mutual exclusion that marked the relationship between the Chinese and Western communities during the nineteenth century, photographic portraiture was also one of those rare areas of interest that people shared. Local photographers served them all by making appropriate cultural adjustments.

During the period considered, photographic portraits were produced in three basic formats: the *carte-de-visite* consisting of a photographic print pasted onto a small (roughly 6.5 x 10 cm) card. It was widely used the world over from the 1850s on. The larger cabinet card (about 11 x 16.5 cm) was most common towards the end of the century. Both types of cards were displayed in frames or kept in specially configured albums. Finally, the full-plate print (some 20 x 25 cm) was produced throughout the period, usually affixed to album leaves. In the later years a new form appeared: the photographically illustrated postcard. Tremendously successful, it borrowed material from existing sources in addition to using new photographs.
ADVERTISEMENTS.

HONGKONG PHOTOGRAPHIC COMPANY.

Corner of Wyndham and Wellington Streets.

(NEARLY OPPOSITE THE GERMAN CLUB)

OPEN DAILY, SATURDAYS EXCEPTED.

REDUCTION OF PRICES.

AFTER this Date and until further notice Prices will be as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cameo Portraits</th>
<th>if in one order for 1 doz.</th>
<th>$4.00</th>
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<td>Do.</td>
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Portrait 8 X 6 plain, .................................. each 6.00
" worked up and mounted ................................ 10.00

Enlargements made from any Photograph (faded or otherwise) colored in oil and framed complete ................................ 25.00

Views from Negatives in Stock ................................ 0.50
Do. Do. per doz .................................. 5.00

Out-door groups at private houses on Saturdays by arrangement.

Views of Private Houses & Grounds to order first copy ........ $10.00
Extra copies .................................. each 0.50
Patrons of the Hongkong Photographic Rooms can get their servants taken at first copy ................................ 0.50
Extra copies .................................. 0.25

N.B.—Suitable Colours for Dress are black, brown and green.

During the cold season the best light for portraiture is from 10 till 1.

Hongkong, December 7, 1874.

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**In a Class By Itself**

Whether photographic or painted, portraiture is a commercial genre *par excellence*. The reputations of many great photographers such as Nadar in Paris or Matthew Brady in New York were built on it. In China, portraiture was important long before the advent of photography. One of its best-known formalistic manifestations were the “ancestor portraits” used in the context of family worship. The need to create images to materialize the family line made portraiture essential to the traditional Chinese social order. Photography merely added a technical dimension to the existing environment of artistic and cultural practice, while also extending its reach to more strata of the society.

The new medium had its limitations, however, and as a consequence of its technical requirements of strong lighting and the immediate proximity of darkroom and chemicals, most of the early portraits were produced by commercial studios, the only places suitably designed and equipped. This put a serious check on creativity and contributed to stereotyping. However, it is through the studios that, ultimately, photographic portraits of Chinese from all classes of society made their way into Western albums and illustrated publications of the time, now to be found in collections the world over.

Generally there is no perceptible connection between model and photographer, thus reducing any relationship to the strict level of customer and supplier. However, whether the photograph was selected and preserved because the model was appealing, or because he/she was known to the collector, often remains an open question. The reasons why old photographs are still in circulation are as irrational as they are mysterious. No direct connections link the two people involved, years and oceans apart: the sitter looks at the camera, anticipating the image that he/she is helping create, and the collector looks at those eyes. West gazes at East, with no reciprocity.

Depending on the sitter and no matter who the photographer was, two general kinds of photographic portrait were made in nineteenth-century China. The first one, of Chinese men and women, presents specific and interesting characteristics which are the subject of this article. In contrast, Westerners in China were represented in exactly the same way as they were elsewhere in the world at the same time. As any European or American family album will testify, the image in Figure 2 follows the standard representation of a man of his time in the West (note the posture and the vignette format including only the head and shoulders.) There is nothing to suggest that the photograph was taken in China.
In fact, the only clue to either the location or the identity of the photographer of the portrait in Figure 2 is an inscription on the reverse side stating that it was produced by one “Ying Cheong” from Shanghai (Figure 3). Considering the huge cultural gap between China and the West, it is odd to see a Chinese portraitist working in a manner which is so specifically Western. Nevertheless, this portrait and many others indicate that this type of work was actually the norm. Of course this is difficult to prove conclusively as many portraits are not signed. In addition, copying was a common practice at the time, so the original print could easily have been made by someone from a different cultural group. Valid arguments like these tend to make research in the field extremely difficult, yet very consistent evidence leads to the conclusion that Chinese studios produced Western-type portraits for their Western customers.

There is no doubt that both Chinese and Western photographers were active in the Treaty Ports. In the 1840s, the first photographers were foreigners who came with their equipment. However, with technical progress allowing more efficient and cheaper images to be made, especially, from the early 1850s on, through the use of negatives that enabled duplication, Chinese artisans soon became familiar with the process and entered the field, first as assistants and then as studio owners and/or photographers. These new photographers achieved dominance in the photographic industry in China over at most twenty years. An 1875 advertisement from the China Directory, for example, indicates that competition, presumably between local and Western photographers, was forcing prices down (Figure 1). A few Western, and later Japanese, studios nevertheless remained active in the Treaty Ports well beyond the turn of the century. This is probably because the foreign studios covered the whole range of commercial photography—portrait, topography; and types and customs—while the Chinese tended to specialize in portraiture only. Nevertheless, I would argue that an overwhelming majority of the portraits made in China during the period under review were created by Chinese photographers.

4 In 1866, a visiting Frenchman and amateur photographer commented: “The Chinese are beginning to deal with photography, and a few of them already obtain satisfying results, using equipment purchased from Europeans.” (Paul Champion, “Sur les difficultés que présente l’exercice de la photographie dans les contrées telles que la Chine et le Japon.” La Lumière, 15 Feb. 1867, p.3.)

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Figure 3
Reverse side of carte-de-visite in Figure 2.

From the mid-1860s to the mid-1880s, the Chronicle and Directory for China, Japan, etc. and its offshoot the China Directory listed Chinese firms dealing with foreigners in Hong Kong (“Chinese Hongs”). Photographers were included from the start, and the lists show their progression over a crucial period of twenty years. The 1869 issue (using 1868 figures) listed four Chinese and two Western firms in the British colony, while the issue dated 1886 (using 1885 figures) included ten Chinese photographers as opposed to a single foreigner. It should be noted that while most Western studios appear to be included, on the Chinese side only those photographers actively seeking foreign custom were listed, which leads one to assume that the actual number of Chinese photographers operating in Hong Kong was much higher.

5 See the editorial in The Far East, March 1877, p.68.
With rare exceptions, portraits generally followed the same format: there was a particular style, or codified formula, for how a portrait was executed in Treaty Port China. In fact, the Western portrait in Figure 2 suggests that the distinction between Western and Chinese should be sought not at photographer’s level but at the customer’s. There is no doubt that both communities had quite different perceptions of what a portrait should be, and that photographers readily obliged. It might have been expected that Chinese and Western photographers would use different props, techniques or styles. But if one has to look at the back of a card to know who made it, the evidence is against this cultural distinction. In fact, the best clue to the cultural background is not to be found in the style but in the date the work was produced, because of the growing Sinicization of the studios. In general, nineteenth-century photographers considered themselves to be artisans and only rarely artists: now a universal notion, “style” in photography is really a twentieth-century concept. All sources agree that even in famous studios like Nadar’s or Brady’s, standard portraiture was more a factory-line operation than an artistic one. At that time, and apart from well-known exceptions such as Nadar’s celebrity portraits (which by no means constitute the full output of his studio), a photographic portrait was a “likeness” reproducing the physical and social character of the sitter. While its quality depended on the photographer’s talent, the portrait was not dependent on his personal aspirations.

The reality of nineteenth-century attitudes to photographic production naturally goes against our current perception of the photographer-artist as someone in complete control of “his” image, even able to dictate it. It is, however, relatively easy to establish that in general it was the customer’s expectation that determined the resulting image. Among many examples very similar to Figure 2 are a card in the author’s collection made by “Howell” of Hong Kong and dated 1871, and a set of three portraits of Western men by the Uyeno studio in Yokohama. Such posture and presentation were quite common in the West. Likewise, Figures 5, 11, 12, 13, 22 and 24 display standard postures for Chinese women from various parts of the country, while Figures 4, 6 and 25 reflect the usual ones for men. Figures 7 and 23 are adaptations of the representation of the married couple, and Figure 21 shows the usual pattern adopted for the representation of families. That a Chinese (Ying Cheong in Figure 2) would produce a fully Western portrait while an American (Dinmore in Figure 4) created a very frontal, Chinese-looking group portrait, confirms that
indeed the customer was the determining party in the production of the image. It may certainly be assumed that Ying Cheong had another style for his Chinese customers, while Dinmore did indeed create Parisian-looking portraits of Western men and women.

To return to the two communities, when ordering a portrait, would a Chinese patron necessarily go to a Chinese studio, and a Westerner visit a Western shop? To do so would certainly guarantee that their expectations would be fully met. There were, however, other significant considerations. The Chinese might go to the Western establishment for the added prestige and cultural cachet of the foreign name, while the Westerner would generally have found a better bargain in the local shops. In fact, Chinese studios soon outnumbered Western ones to such an extent that this issue became immaterial, and notwithstanding a number of exceptions such as William Saunders’ successful Shanghai studio (1862–87), in China, photographers were in the main Chinese.

There is no doubt that photography reached China already laden with conventions and ideas about what constituted a photographic image. As a result, while painted Chinese and Western portraits had previously been quite different both in spirit and result, the contrast faded in photography. Not only was the purpose the same in both cultures (to show the sitter to the best advantage), but for the first time the technique and technology employed to produce the images were the same. Everyone used the same cameras and chemicals. For a long time, the considerations for the creation of images were primarily technical imperatives—related to light, exposure time, setting, the rendition of colour value and printing. Whether in Europe or in China, there were, quite simply, not that many ways of producing a good photographic portrait.

This does not, however, explain how, during the early decades of photography in China, portraitists used similar studio paraphernalia everywhere along the China coast. I would suggest that the paraphernalia were adopted by the first (commercial?) photographers in Hong Kong or Shanghai in response to customers’ demands. The material environment consisted of a limited and repetitive array of objects. A table displayed, in various combinations, a water-pipe, a teacup and/or a vase of flowers or a plant. A wide-mouthed vase often stood by the sitter’s feet (Figure 5). Several modern authors have identified this ubiquitous porcelain vase as a spittoon. However, it is not the traditional kind (which is also seen, albeit rarely), and is found in purely decorative situations. Neither was it a traditional accessory of painted portraits. I believe it to be a basic photographic studio prop merely used to fill the space. As remarked to me by Bill Sargent of the Peabody Essex Museum, the painter Howqua used one such vessel in a similar way in one of his portraits of a Chinese Canton merchant.

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8 The wet collodion emulsion (used between 1855 and the early 1880s) was blue-sensitive and did not reproduce exactly the scale of colour tones as seen by the eye: blues, no matter how dark, would always appear light on the print, while even pale yellows and pinks were dark. This is why photographers would advise sitters as to what colours to wear (see Figure 1).

9 Common in Shanghai portraiture, round tables were often hidden under a cloth of Indian pattern (see Figure 4), a style also used in the West (see the portrait by Louis Pierson of Napoleon III’s mistress Countess Castiglione, used as the cover image by Frizot for his New history of photography).

10 Several modern authors have identified this ubiquitous porcelain vase as a spittoon. However, it is not the traditional kind (which is also seen, albeit rarely), and is found in purely decorative situations. Neither was it a traditional accessory of painted portraits.
The model was not rigid in the early years. See variants in the work of Miller (Hong Kong and Canton, c.1860-64), Floyd (Hong Kong, c.1870), or Woodbury and Page in their 1860s Java portraits of Chinese. Nevertheless, Dinmore (Shanghai, c.1865-68) and the early Tonkin photographers generally adhered to it, and so did most professionals and many amateurs from then on. Examples include the “Chinese standard” portrait of a Chinese man by the black photographer James P. Ball in Helena, Montana, about 1890 (reproduced in George Sullivan, *Black artists in photography*, 1840–1940 [New York: Cobblehill Books, 1996], p.50.)

Figure 6

*Man in own garden, Shanghai.* Note the combination of personal antiques and standard studio objects on and by the table (courtesy Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Mass.)

already found in traditional Chinese and Western painted portraits, became so desirable that studios would use them even for outside exposures, as well as for all kinds of unlikely contrived “outdoor” scenes. Painted backdrops then made their appearance in studios to enhance the setting; at first Western in style, they soon turned into a fantasy China reminiscent of Chinoiserie landscape or architecture, and the photographs became an interesting example of mass-produced auto-orientalism. Curtains, meant to filter daylight, would also act as backdrops. The occasional clock completed the setting, as an ornament at once exotic and modern.

This group of objects can be usefully compared with the status symbols seen in earlier painted portraits. Found in most cultures under diverse guises, they are universal in meaning, if not in form. In China, the social ideal was the official/scholar, and the iconic representation of the literatus invariably included antique objects such as bronzes, precious porcelain or paintings, with flowers or miniature trees to evoke the scholar’s assumed affinity with nature. (Whether the scholarly status was real or imaginary was usually beside the point.) Such élite Chinese symbolism was quite alien and “unreadable” to early Western photographers in China; in addition, there was no fixed Western tradition with which to compare it, as the objects appearing in Western photographic portraits are extremely diverse. To satisfy their local clients, the first photographers in China selected from their stock of props a few random items of everyday life and systematically displayed them next to their sitters, in what would become “the” acceptable setting for photographic portraits. No cultural tradition of any kind was invoked at that stage, but from then on the genre of Chinese portrait photography found itself defined along these particular lines for everyone along the coast, whether customers or photographers. In a matter of a few years, this standard setting would be found in Chinese immigrant portraits as far away as San Francisco or South America. Traditional antiques and plants were left for portraits made in the home, where they were often combined with the new objects (Figure 6).

Of course, there were variations on the main theme. Sometimes the sitters’ occupation was clearly suggested, as in a c.1865 group portrait of three Shanghai merchants which features an abacus (Figure 4). Likewise, portraits of courtesans...
would often include cut flowers, a symbol of their condition, as well as books intended to show their desirable literacy. Officials would display their insignia of rank. As may be seen in an elegant family group with bejewelled women (Figure 7), men's hats could be set on stands for better effect, or because circumstances did not warrant their wearing them (Figure 8). Manchu men would be careful to display on their thumb the archer's ring symbolic of their assumed martial prowess (Figure 9), and everyone's desirable long finger nails would be presented to best advantage (Figure 10).

Once they had been made, two essential steps allowed portraits to survive and eventually reach us: they were acquired, sometimes by people unconnected with the sitters, and they were preserved. For each photograph, several people were involved in a process covering at least a century. There were those individuals who commissioned them as likenesses, those who received them as presents or a legacy or who purchased them as curios or mementos, and those who kept them. For any photograph to reach us now, it must have been commissioned and taken, then kept, then passed on. Of course, many if not the majority of images did not survive the passage of time, and it should be kept in mind that what we see now is only a small fraction of what was originally produced. Each stage in the transmission of the pictures involved what could be called a miniature “Board of Censorship,” that was invested with the authority to fully decide what images would be passed on. The process of selection, salvation and reproduction continues to this day—including through the limited selection illustrating these pages.

Unfortunately, the means of distinguishing portraits-to-keep, that is, those commissioned for private use, from portraits-to-sell, or those made especially
for the market, have been blurred. The passage of time, the original production process, commercial practices, or the use of images in publications, have all contributed to the confusion. Among the prints made from original plates and those copied from other prints, there is no doubt that a number of the images which made their way into foreign photographic albums are really private portraits sold without the consent or even the knowledge of the sitters. This is probably the case with the dignified old lady in Figure 11, shown apparently sitting in her own courtyard. While the studies of Chinese photographic history have not yet dealt with this aspect of portraiture, it is clear that portraits were offered for sale because a Western market for “exotic” or “Chinese” types developed both in China and overseas. Such misappropriation is less likely to have occurred with the beauties of both sexes or actors found in the same albums (see Figures 16 and 18). Like elsewhere in the East, the Chinese eagerly collected this type of portrait, which appears to have been legitimately offered for sale to both Western and Chinese amateurs.12

There is no doubt that photography gained much of its social éclat from the impetus towards “modernity” which was taking shape, especially in Shanghai. Having photographic portraits made was a way for the individual to participate in a noticeable way in this trend. Interest in photographic

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**Figure 11**

Old lady (detail). The books are meant to show that she is literate. The image was taken outdoors with minimal furniture and a plain backdrop, in an itinerant photographer’s practice used also by studio photographers for people unable or unwilling to visit the studio premises. A man’s portrait, probably her son’s, was done the same day with the same setup (courtesy Dennis G. Crow, Los Angeles)
portraiture went beyond likeness *per se*, and included a growing fascination with collecting and displaying photographs as objects.

If Westerners were keen on images of Chinese, photographs of Westerners were similarly local curios. It was reported that small photographs of Westerners were put in trick bags in fairs near Shanghai. Itinerant peepshows also presented all kinds of images, including those of monuments (and also pornography) from the West. Whether the Chinese elected to adopt such Western amenities as gas lighting and horse carriages or not, there was widespread curiosity about the strange visitors and their generally astonishing behaviour. Strolls in Western areas were a great source of entertainment for both local inhabitants and visitors in the Treaty Ports. So were any kind of sporting events, whether boat-race or paper-hunt, when, for lack of any suitable quarry, horsemen actually chased pieces of paper all over the countryside. Horse races never failed to attract large crowds who came as much to view the Westerners as for the betting. Photography likewise was entertainment, and it thrived especially in Shanghai.

The penetration of photography inland far from the foreign presence and Western culture was slow. The main reason for this was the potentially violent antagonism against this alien, dangerous-looking and seemingly magical technology. Nevertheless, wherever possible, itinerant photographers carried their temporary shops with them, moving from temple fair to local market fair to private house. For all the people's reservations about the photographic apparatus, its product, the picture, was a beguiling creation

*Portrait and Image*

One of the essential characteristics of portraits is that they are commissioned and paid for by the sitter. Nevertheless, the fact that numbers of the copies now available were originally acquired by people unrelated to the sitters (as is evident in many albums) indicates that studios also used their stock of privately commissioned works to produce material for the general public. Likewise, photographs were copied from one studio to the next. A print bearing the stamp of a Hong Kong shop could very well have been created in Shanghai, Xiamen (Amoy) or Tianjin—if not Japan, or even Europe. Clear examples of inter-studio pilfering are Figures 7, 11, 21 and 23 in this article, which show well-to-do families and a wealthy matriarch, respectively. It can be assumed that these highly respectable people did not relish the indignity of being made into objects of curiosity, their images becoming mere commodities for sale on the open market. And, while courtesans used their photographs as advertising tools or even sold them to customers (a common practice in Shanghai, for example), this did not prevent photographic shops from directly offering them to the public without permission, a practice feared by the women as it damaged their professional standing by making their image too readily available to anyone.


14 On the subject of images of Shanghai courtesans, the author has profited from long and fruitful discussions with Catherine Vance Yeh.
None of this has any bearing on the pictures themselves. The significant distinction in portraiture is between paid models required to follow the operator's instructions, and paying customers who were commissioning a portrait made to their taste. The first category, in which the photographer determined the image, was meant to illustrate “types and customs,” and was an extension of the contemporary Western curiosity about foreign people, as well as of the reliance and growing dependence on photography as a source of information. It was also perceived as being absolutely “true.” Starting with the first Opium War and continuing well into the nineteenth century, China was seen as one of the “new” countries, the reason why its photographic images were eagerly collected and published. Their use for information led to attempts to show everything: the hairdo might be photographed from behind, or the ragged clothing displayed. This was commercial work in which effect overrode study. Nevertheless, 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.

The second category, on the contrary, was a standard commercial exchange in which the individual would use money buying his or her likeness—that is, prefigured and displayed status. Distinguishing between these two from the image alone is, however, not easy. Given the almost total lack of documentation, only extreme examples of either category can be identified with some degree of certainty. People (often women) shown in outrageous or undignified postures, or poorly dressed, would belong to the first group, while families with children or groups of wealthy matrons were quite certainly from the second. The vast bulk of individual or group portraits lies somewhere in the middle. For example, the many extant portraits of officials belong in this grey area (see Figure 6). Did the sitters pay to have their picture taken and were thus the owners of their image, or were they offered the service in exchange for allowing the shop to use the final product (Figure 12)? Were they, as in the West, quite happy to see their likeness sought after, such an act of public circulation confirming their social position as “celebrities?”

Portraits show any number of combinations of people. The lone sitter is the most common, but we also commonly find groups of men or women; mother and (usually female) child; father and son; master and servant (Figure 13), etc. Real family groups are more rarely seen, whether because they were not usual in the Chinese context of the time,
or because, for some reason, such images did not reach the market. Pictures featuring children without their parents only came later (Figure 14). Group portraiture is the only area in which some level of intercourse between the Chinese and Western communities can be seen. In the Chinese Treaty Ports, there was in actual fact relatively little real contact between the two, and the evidence provided by photography tends to highlight this gulf. Views of Shanghai singled out the Bund as the centre of modern Western or colonial activity and enterprise in contrast to the Chinese streets in the Concessions, and even more so the old walled city. And if both Chinese and Western customers might patronize the same photographic studios to have their portraits taken, the studios that could afford separate waiting rooms for the two groups of clients were prompt to advertise this fact as an asset, in Chinese as well as in foreign newspapers.

Nevertheless, images do show Chinese official(s) sitting with Westerners in the course of their duties. In addition, some groups clearly demonstrate the hierarchy of workers from the various local communities. In Figure 15, which records the visit of a local Chinese official, possibly to the offices of the Messageries Maritimes in Shanghai, examples of both are combined. The scene is casually organized. As usual, the official and his retinue form one group, while the (French?) managers, Indian mid-managers and Chinese workers are arranged according to their internal hierarchical order. In the case of women, meanwhile, and with the exception of some missionary photographs, mixed groups would be seen only after 1900, when the Manchu Empress Dowager Cixi initiated in Beijing the fashion of giving cross-cultural parties.

Many more portraits of women than men are found in Western albums. Does this reflect something about portraiture production in China, or only the collectors’ inclinations? The phenomenon is actually commonly found in collections of “exotic” commercial photography—where, incidentally, “exotic,” or different, would equally apply to Brittany or Wales. Although in China famous people were predominantly male, women were preferred by Westerners as collectible images. To put things in perspective, however, I would note that this was also the time when the world celebrated with great enthusiasm “les petites femmes de Paris,” creating another stereotype still alive in some parts of the globe, that of the loose Frenchwoman.

If only “desirable” specimens were copied, what survives can hardly be considered representative of photographic portraiture in China in general. In particular, the proportion of men who had their portrait taken is bound to be much greater than either collections or publications would indicate. An interesting source on this is The Far East, an early East Asian periodical illustrated with photographic prints directly pasted onto its pages. During the period when it was published in Shanghai (over twenty-nine months from
Visiting official, probably at the offices of the Messageries Maritimes in Shanghai in the 1880s. Note the gas light hanging from the ceiling, as well as Western, Indian and Chinese staff (author’s collection).

Figure 15

July 1876 to January 1879), the journal contained six prints per issue. Fifteen individual portraits of Western people were among these, of whom only one is a woman. During the same period, there were also fifteen individual portraits of Chinese; however, the ratio was eight men to seven women. In addition, and as was the case with Westerners at large, the men were identified by name, or at least by function. Chinese women, on the other hand, except for one family group where social position served as identity, were merely labelled as social or local types: thus they became a generic

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15 Miss Lydia Mary Fay (a local missionary of long standing), December 1876 issue. Before Shanghai (1876-79), The Far East had been published in Yokohama from its creation in 1870 until 1875. The owner/editor was the Australian John Reddie Black. As a journal illustrated with photographs, The Far East had been preceded on the China coast by The China Magazine (Hong Kong 1868-69), which however never used any portraits. (On both journals see Régine Thiriez, Barbar-}

/ian lens: Western photographers of the Qianlong emperor's European palaces (New York: Gordon & Breach, 1998), pp.31-3.)

16 One of them was “the first Chinese gentleman admitted to the English Bar,” Wu Tingfang 吳庭芳, later a prominent diplomat and Foreign Minister under both the Qing and the Republic. The caption identified him under his Cantonese name of Ng Choy, and he was portrayed wearing the British barrister’s characteristic gown and wig.

17 “The Taotai of Anching and his family” (The Far East, Sept. 1878). The text makes it clear that the photograph, by the Shanghai photographer “Kung Tai” (Gong Tai 公泰, in Honan Road), was a commission. Including, as it did, the Taotai’s womenfolk, it probably should not have been offered to the public.
“Pekingese Lady” (Figure 16), a “Young Chinese Lady, Soochow Style,” a “Ningpo Woman” with a spectacular hairdo, and so on. The journal was published in China, and its editor showed more interest in Chinese life than most of his colleagues. Yet, the selection of photographs both disproportionately represented women in the light of their influence in society at the time, and made them into stereotypes. The same is true of most Chinese portraits, male and female, that can be found gathered in albums, and later printed on postcards. In the end, for the average Victorian photograph collectors or any of their contemporaries, all but the most important Chinese in the empire would ultimately be reduced to “types.”

Much was made also of the postures adopted for sitting in China. A number of contemporary observations state that Chinese sitters demanded to be shown full length and facing the camera—or “whole.” Such an iconographic requirement was certainly true for traditional “formal” portraits which copied their rules of composition from their painted counterparts (see Figure 5). They had the same purpose—of showing status at least as much as representing likeness. Yet a large number of existing images do not meet these criteria, the most common exception showing the face, and possibly the body, positioned at a slight angle, but there are stronger variations from the stated norm: three-quarters, if not full profile, crossed legs, and so on, as in Figure 17. These indicate that the frontal position at least was not imperative. One might object that it could have been difficult for an inexperienced sitter to anticipate the resulting image. However, any photographer forcing portraits on his customers in a form they did not want, especially in China, would soon find himself out of work. The very fact that these images exist means that they were accepted by many sitters as adequate. Some of the sitters may have been paid models who presumably had no say as to how they would be shown, but there are enough photographs of obviously respectable people who could only have been paying customers, to show that some sitters were more open to change than contemporary comments would have us believe. It is relevant here to examine the potential influence of Western sitting habits. Studios would routinely display sample photographs at street level to attract attention. Their windows or glass cases showed Western-type portraits together with Chinese ones for passers-by to inspect. People shot at an angle or from the waist up were thus commonly seen in the public space. The conclusion that this was an accepted, or even, desirable, form of portraiture would have been reached by many Chinese, at least in the Treaty Ports where most of the portraits were created at that time.

**Figure 16**

“Pekingese Lady.” Courtesan in festive attire (including watch pinned on shoulder), credited to an unnamed Chinese photographer. Detail from The Far East, December 1877 (courtesy Bibliothèque asiatique du Collège de France)
Such upper-body portraits were often pasted on cabinet cards, as with Figure 19. Of a size between the carte-de-visite and the full-page print, the cabinet card was an ideal format for portraits, as it was large enough for display while still easy to handle or insert into special albums. Often limited to head and shoulders, it made minimal use of props.

In particular, the full profile of a Mandarin wearing a peacock feather or a lady with an elaborate hairdo were actually showing to advantage assets that painting had always been careful to emphasize, but which a frontal photographic image would have obscured (see, for example, Figure 18). This could be another reason why they were readily accepted. Similarly, it cannot be coincidental that portraits showing only the upper part of the body became common in later years (see Figure 19). Was novelty not, in fact, perceived by sitters as something intrinsic to photographic portraiture, as embodying a desirable “modernity”?

The social environment is an essential issue here, as it might explain some of the most surprising manifestations of photo-
graphic portraiture. Would, for example, compradores (the Western firms' Chinese agents) and officials in the treaty ports have considered that commissioning portraits of their womenfolk was appropriate simply because this was the case in the Western world? Were proper young ladies photographed for match-making purposes? Were informal groups of mother and child, father and child, or whole families together (Figures 20 and 21), done in imitation of foreign practices?

Concerning the images themselves, most portraits show people seated, in some instances with servants standing nearby or in the background (see Figures 7 and 13); however, in a number of cases the subject is standing. Seated men may have their legs crossed (Figure 17) — a very rare but not unseen posture with women. The standing model often rests a hand on the back of a chair or on a table, with fingertips showing beneath the sleeve (Figures 6 and 16). Beyond this, as is very clear during the early decades, portrait photography still followed rules specific to the Chinese cultural environment. This is why at first the hand was shown at least partly covered. (Here it may be noted that one of the first manifestations of changing female fashion was the shortening of sleeves.) The hand could be carefully flattened, only the fingers revealed with their desirable long nails, loosely holding a folded or round fan or handkerchief, or fisted and hidden by the sleeve (Figure 4). The tips of the women's bound feet are visible; it seems that in order to display them, the front of the skirt or trousers was slightly raised. Etiquette was evidently more lax for this important beauty asset than for the wrists,
A peculiar ity of Shanghai portraiture is the high number of ladies featured sitting alone or accompanied by a plainly-dressed servant in the style of an informal portrait (as opposed to the “formal” type). Ladies from the Shanghai area can be identified by their distinctive hairdo, and especially from the headband closely shaping the head, often embroidered with lines of pearls (Figures 7 and 13). Their portraits form a high percentage of those in Western collections, and many such images can be traced to visits to the China ports.
by tourists or other foreigners. Considering the number of courtesans estab­lished in the Concessions and the usual restraint of respectable women, we could speculate that a fair proportion of the ladies belonged to the former class, and therefore should not be taken as being representative of women in general. That they were indeed courtesans is, however, difficult to establish. Nothing in particular distinguishes a virtuous woman from a courtesan in early Chinese photography, unless the latter wants to make a point of being noticed. From the literature on courtesans, it would appear that some features of the iconography, like cut flowers, a provocative man's feather fan (Figure 22) or books, would be an indication of such a status. However, since books were merely symbolic of the sitter's ability to read, they were appropriate for all literate persons (see, for example, the old lady in Figure 11), while cut flower arrangements became such a common prop in both male and female photographic portraiture (see Figure 23) that in the early years of the

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Figure 22
High-ranking courtesan with man's fan in Chinese studio, Shanghai, 1870s–80s (courtesy Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Mass.)

Figure 23
Wealthy Shanghai couple in local Chinese studio, 1870s–80s (courtesy Sylvain Calvier, Paris)

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23 Discussions with C. Yeh. Note that the portraits generally use artificial flowers (confirmed by Thomson, *British Journal of Photography* 20.656 (1872)).
Figure 24

*Album page from the 1870s–80s, added to in c.1906 (courtesy Far Eastern Department, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto)*
PHOTOGRAPHY AND PORTRAITURE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY CHINA

In the twentieth century, it was the action of holding a cut flower that became the clue. Other signs, such as instances in which the model is shown looking straight at the camera, are clearly not significant (the ladies in Figure 10—who happen to be sitting next to their husband—are only one of the many examples). Neither are demureness, downward-cast eyes or modest manners proof of socially-determined virtue. Dress is not an essential criterion either. In contrast to many other cultures, Chinese courtesans' dress did not differ significantly from that of other women. Moreover, in international Shanghai, courtesans directly influenced fashion. Much to the disgust of traditionalists, the daring manners of these high-flyers were avidly copied in respectable households. It is clear, however, that many of the sitters were respectable ladies, if not members of the gentry, and just as clear that a woman depicted with crossed legs or flirting outrageously with the camera was of the courtesan class, or even a common prostitute.

That the confusion between the different types of women was real in Western minds at least is apparent in the way such images were used. A postcard of a young woman carried on a man's back (a typical early mode of transport for a courtesan moving from appointment to appointment in the Shanghai concessions) was published in France by a reputable printer, and a copy was sent to the wife of General Gallieni by a lady friend in 1901. It is extremely unlikely that either of the ladies had any idea of what they were looking at! Another example, in Figure 24, comes from an album apparently compiled with large photographs in the 1870s or early 1880s, and subsequently made into a scrapbook around 1906, when smaller contemporary photographic prints, postcards and newspaper cuttings were pasted around the original images. On the selected page, the early photograph in the centre shows two young ladies sitting for a studio portrait. Quite pleasant to look at, they appear respectable, and may have been. The hair of the figure on the left is coiffed in Shanghai fashion, and the decor belongs to an unidentified Shanghai studio. Around the print were added three smaller photographs: a group of country women from around 1900, two unmistakable “flowers” dressed in c.1905 fashion, and the formal portrait of a well-known courtesan from the south. To this was added the review, cut from a newspaper, of Chinese Ladies at Home, a book by Miss Margaret MacLean which had been published by a Methodist press. As the compiler of the scrapbook, Miss MacLean certainly had no idea of the company she was joining!

To add to the confusion, settings and postures generally became more daring as the century drew to an end and a new one dawned. The demure statues of old were vanishing. Whatever her social rank, a woman might be seen in full profile displaying her hairdo, or with her back reflected in a full-length mirror. Reclining on a sofa was a further development (a posture that was limited, however, to courtesans). Far from being in the tradition of Chinese female representation, this posture had in fact long been a favorite of exotic European portraiture, starting with Orientalist paintings and moving into photography.
As seen above, in the almost constant absence of clues as to the sitters’ identity, the issues of locale, dating and authorship are an important part of a photograph’s history. There are no easy answers to any of these questions. The *cartes-de-visite* and cabinet cards may bear the stamp of the studio which printed them. Not all do, however, and moreover the stamp could be that of a competitor of the original photographer who had merely made copies. In addition, we must confront the corpus of larger sized prints found in travellers’ albums, which are, as a rule, anonymous.

In the absence of direct evidence and relevant clues, the background and furniture in photographs allow a number of prints to be grouped by studio, even if the actual name of the studio still remains unknown. See, for instance, Figures 16, 22 and 23 which share the same painted backdrop although they were found separately. Likewise, a list of studios can be compiled from the various sources available, such as hong lists and other directories, advertisements in Chinese and Western China Coast newspapers, credited photographs and others. However, given the general absence of positive identification or a signature attached to one—or preferably several—images, answers to the question of which photographer took which image remain elusive.

The place where a photograph was made can to some extent be determined through dress or physical characteristics. Women’s hairdos, for example are strongly local, although they vary with the age and marital status of the subject (see Figure 20 showing a Shantou [Swatow] family). Any one clue, however, has to occur a number of times before particular conclusions can be drawn from it. After all, people travelled and it is quite possible that their dress might belong to a geographical area distant from the studio’s. I suggest, for example, that Figure 24 was shot in Shanghai mostly because the same particular carpet and fringed table are found on several images of women wearing Shanghai dress, and that many of the latter, young and pretty, can be assumed to be courtesans. In addition, at the time, only Shanghai and Hong Kong had a developed network of studios and a real photographic industry. Likewise, it is certain that the Beijing lady shown in Figure 16 was not actually photographed in the capital, because the image was both shot in a studio and used in a publication in 1877: records show that the first photographic studio in the capital opened in 1892. In complement to this, I believe its painted backdrop actually to be a Shanghai signature, again because several other beautiful and slightly daring women were photographed in front of it. However, such a string of speculations only yields a
place, not a name. Images also travelled, and there is evidence that the picture of a Shanghai lady could be copied, and purchased, almost anywhere in the world, not to mention China.

**Photographs, Paintings and Postcards**

In the early years in China, as in the West, many businesses advertised their services jointly as photographers and portrait painters—though whether it was the same artist officiating was not specified. Previously with the China trade, foreigners had brought paintings and later daguerreotypes to be copied by local artists. Interaction was frequent and portraits were soon copied from photographic prints as paintings, while purely painted portraiture was integrating photographic paraphernalia. The same props were used for the two processes, and included backdrops such as painted landscapes or curtains (Figure 25).

Not all paintings or engravings were slavish copies, however, and some interesting interchange allowed parts of a painting to be exact copies of a photograph, while the rest was drawn. Following the Chinese tradition of fragmented artistic production, several artists might work in succession on any given painting. When photographs and painting sources were used together with their particular and very distinct modes of representation, the results could be somewhat startling, especially as regards perspective (Figure 26). Alternatively, an engraving might be partly copied from a photographic image, the rest being executed in traditional-type Chinese line drawing. This is how, in Shanghai, the *Shenbao* (Shanghai Times) published woodblock engravings based in part on photographs. Likewise, woodblock prints of Shanghai courtesans used photographic portraits inserted as line drawings in sketches of gardens or interiors. This respected the production-line type of work practised in China, and sketches from photographs were probably included in engravers' sample-books. Similarly, ancestors' portraits might include a body and chair painted in the traditional manner, while the head was copied from a photograph, or, was even cut out of an actual photographic print and affixed to the painted image (Figure 27).

Concurrently, the last years of the nineteenth century saw the advent of the photographically illustrated postcard. At first a photographic print pasted on a card, it soon
became a mass-produced image mechanically printed directly onto the card. Postcards were enormously popular worldwide up to the time of World War I, and although their development really took place in the early twentieth century, they were the culmination of the nineteenth century use of the photographic image as a document. The postcard was a very powerful instrument in transmitting and establishing images of China around the world.

The access, in this way, of a much larger public to printed photographs generated a renewed interest in images of beauties or "types and customs." They were, after all, an incarnation of "China." With postcards also, images of women were by far the most common, whether captioned "Manchurian Fashion," "Ragazza del Soochow," or "Chinese Lady with her Clock." This in effect made them into full stereotypes created for public entertainment, blotting out the fact that most of these images had first been commissioned as authentic personal portraits.

In addition, in China at least, the women thus portrayed were almost exclusively prostitutes. This was now the first decade of the twentieth century. Dresses and jackets were getting tighter and shorter; trousers followed suit and were wrapped in garters (Figure 28). Eyes had grown hard and calculating: the gracious courtesans were fast becoming common prostitutes. Through postcards, the new generation of daring and immodest "flowers" was, in the course of a few years, made to embody Chinese womanhood. A woman reclining on a couch next to a stuffed cat, one dainty foot pointed upwards, was thus defined as "Chinese woman at rest" (—a new version of "Cat on the prowl," perhaps).

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30 The first postcards (c. 1869) had one side for the address and one for the message. The address side did not change with the advent of the photographic illustration (c. 1896), and printers used to leave at the edge of the image a blank space large enough for a few words. Starting in 1902, depending on the country, national postal services allowed the back to be separated by a vertical line so as to create space for a longer message. This became the norm within the Universal Postal Union in 1906. Postcards with non-separated backs were used while stock lasted, sometimes with an added line. In any case, a high percentage of early postcards were never mailed and bear no handwritten inscription or postal mark whatsoever.
Such images form a sizeable part of contemporary collections such as that of the French diplomat Collin du Plancy, gathered between 1903 and 1910. All publishers, foreign or Chinese, followed the trend. A number of these cards were published in France by the respectable Messageries Maritimes, a steamer line from which more discretion might have been expected. Unfortunately, there is little indication of how this phenomenon was received by the postcard users, as messages rarely referred to the image. In addition, for a long time no message was allowed on the address side, only a narrow space being left along one margin for a few words.

During its first fifteen years, the photographically illustrated postcard of China covered a surprisingly large range: portraits gathered in an average collection routinely illustrate thirty to fifty years of life in the treaty ports. This was never made clear to their users, as prints and cards were normally left undated by publishers. Lacking evidence to the contrary, the contemporary West could only accept the whole postcard production as representing the current period. However, this was a time of increasingly rapid changes in dress and hair fashion as well as in behaviour, and the scope covered by the cards was very wide. In consequence, the social spectrum was made to appear much broader than it really was at any time. This was not specific to the image of China: by 1900, both expectations of accuracy—which had been quite high in the Western public in the 1860s and later—and the preoccupation of photographers and publishers with delivering it, was waning in favour of sensationalism.

In postcards of women, the quite real modernization under way was visible in places like Shanghai through the increasing number of unbound feet (see Figure 14). Important as it was, and probably because of the “decadent” accompanying dress and setting, it was less effective as a sign of changing times than the short hair and little cap that appeared in male portraits with the advent of the Republic, or the Western-style shoes (right-hand boy in Figure 21) that said that China was, for better or for worse, giving up its old ways and moving into the twentieth century.
Conclusion

While photographic portraiture in China would not have existed in its actual form without the Western presence and actors, nevertheless, from the early years on, it took a form specific to Chinese culture. Quite different from the Sinicized version of the 1920s and 1930s, in the first sixty years portraiture was not able to assimilate the medium and use it as its own. Instead, it had to deal with its intrinsic foreignness. In short, China received photography, not only as a technique—camera and chemicals—but as a cultural practice that included its own “traditions.”

Within a very few years of the introduction of the photographic portrait, an adapted model had begun to take shape. It soon became the accepted standard for portraiture, and even extended to painting. It consisted mostly of a set of special props, from table and carpet to teacup and water pipe. At the same time, the range of postures developed beyond the much-discussed “full frontality, full body” pattern of formal painted portraits. Possibly under the influence of the Western-type portraits displayed by photography shops, Chinese sitters discovered and adopted new angles and positions which showed to better advantage their symbols of rank, wealth or beauty. By the turn of the century, images that showed a person only from the waist up had become a popular format.

The people who sat for portraits were sometimes models paid by the photographer to create standard-type photographs, but most were undoubtedly paying customers who wanted to buy a likeness for their own personal use. That their portraits are now found in Western collections with captions such as “Chinese Lady” or “Shanghai Man” indicates disagreement, as studios sold to strangers privately-commissioned photographs. Models then lost their identity and became “types,” and the photograph was no longer a record but rather an object to be collected. One of the manifestations of this trend is the dominance of women over men in photographic albums kept in the West. Another is the sitter’s usual anonymity that mirrors that of the portraitist, who often remains unidentified and was in any case seen as a mere artisan.

Photography is a Western technique, introduced into China by the West. Widespread in the Treaty Ports, it was used by Chinese and Westerners alike to portray, in specific ways, members of both cultural groups. The difference in result, however, is not between Chinese and Western photographers, but between Chinese and Western sitters, who did not expect the same type of image. As a general rule, portraits testify to the mutual social exclusion of the two communities: they did not mix other than for professional reasons.

Even as it was following a hybrid Sino-Western pattern, photographic portraiture of Chinese answered needs specific to the populations of the treaty ports. In Shanghai in particular, the numerous courtesans used it as a tool of their trade. Portraits are a striking testimony to the changes that were taking place in local society and fashion, as well as a source of misunderstanding when courtesans’ restrained (by Western standards) dress and posture caused them to be identified as respectable ladies by Westerners. This was especially visible in the postcard, which by the early twentieth century could show the depth of the social changes that had occurred during the mere sixty years since the advent of photography on Chinese shores.