Fig 1: Advertisement for the Asanuma Company (Tokyo), Shashin shimpo [Photography News], no. 37 (1906)

Fig. 2: "Western People's love of antiquity". Woodblock print after a drawing by Wu Youru (d. 1893), published in 1908

Fig. 3: Portrait of Zou Boqi (1819-1869). Lithograph based on his photographic portrait included in *Qingdai xuezhe xiangzhuan* [Portraits and Biographies of Qing Scholars], part 2, published by Ye Gongzhuo in 1953.

Photography in China: a global medium locally appropriated

When photography is discussed as a colonialist imaging practice, two obvious notions of seeing and being seen come into play. Seeing implies empowerment; being seen does not.

Oliver Moore

In China, one long-standing perception of unequal empowerment was fed by diplomacy. During the hostilities of the second Opium War (1856-1860) the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) government voiced its strong resentment of foreign photographers' engagement on the battlefield. Following the Crimean war, China became the latest theatre for practicing a new Western visual practice of foreign reporting. This was keenly felt in East Asia, and a rapidly industrialising Japan soon made photography an indispensible technique for its imperialist ambitions, envisaging the camera as a kind of dreadnought battleship **(fig. 1)**. The foreign exercise of photography might even usurp what had been taken for granted as an exclusively Chinese privilege to indulge its love of the cultural and material heritage of an ancient civilisation **(fig. 2)**.

But photography has many histories. Photography served colonial ambitions of seeing, but the force of Western colonial adventures should not presuppose that colonised and semi-colonised societies were only seen and saw nothing. Colonising and colonised constructs reveal histories of photography that resisted the technological empowerment of Western vision precisely because native photographers and consumers of the images indigenised photography for local priorities of content, form and patterns of circulation.

Photography in the late Qing was part of a visual economy that has been overlooked in accounts of the West's discovery of China. This article proposes means to explore a Chinese history of photography, and to look more broadly at how the social roles of visual images changed during the transition from tradition to modernity in China. What may be gained is a social history of visual art - within which photography was one medium - that accommodates similarities and differences across diverse cultural settings in late-19th century China. Important too are the documents of the period's rising discourse on photography. Space precludes considering all genres (for example, diaries, poems and technical treatises), but newspaper advertisements profile extremely well the larger discourse to which they belonged. This Chinese discourse may be read not simply as a sign of social change reflected by photographs from China, but as the motivating impulses within the medium itself.

Fig. 4: Photographing and painting portraits. *Tuhua ribao* [Illustrated Daily News], ca. 1910

A Chinese history of photography

Despite the medium's potential for change, the terms in which photography was explained in Chinese documents seem curiously un-modern. This is consonant with the history of many commodities, when the newness of a product is often accompanied by efforts to make it look old and to search for indigenous sources. China's first-known serious enquirer into photography was Zou Boqi (1819-1869) **(fig 3)**, a mathematician from Guangzhou, who determined that the camera worked according to optical principles already recorded in ancient scriptures (dating to 500 BCE!).

Many terms soon co-existed to name photography, including "painting the verifiable image" *(xiezhen)*, which is still current in Japanese *(shashin)*, but obsolete in China. The word has deep roots in Chinese painting theory, and this etymology shows how predominantly the lexicon of painting techniques featured in photography discourse. The new medium of photography was addressed with highly traditional concepts borrowed from the manugraphic (hand-drawn) skills of painting. Indeed, the popularisation of photography was in part due to a highly durable conception that photographers did only what painters had done and continued to do, both naming their art *xiezhen* **(fig. 4)**. Significantly too, material evidence shows that the photographic idiom was borrowed for older visual media, such as painting and woodblock printing. *Figure 3* shows a lithographic portrait of Zou Boqi that merges a photographic image of the sitter's head with a few sketchy brush strokes for his body.

Even the current Chinese term *paizhao* (to photograph) is usually overlooked as yet more evidence of a completely non-Western conception of photographic method. *Pai*, literally "to beat time" is an etymological fossil of the method by which the studio photographer measured exposure time by reciting a set number of words from the *Thousand character essay* (a classical text that school children memorised), and, like a story-teller, accompanied each syllable by beating with a piece of wood. This fascinating lore suggests how the adoption of Western time for telling hours and minutes - so common in many other walks of life - met initial resistance in studio practice. "Beating the time of a picture" shows how a dichotomy of traditional and modern infused a new concept of image-making.

Discourse on photography

Discourse focused primarily on studios. A rare visual document is a photograph of the Lihua Studio on Nanjing East Road, Shanghai, made in about 1890 **(fig. 5)**. This is the smarter kind of establishment to which advertisements and other contemporary documents often refer. Advertisement readers - none of whom had heard of Zou Boqi - were eagerly convinced that photographic practice was Western, and early advertisements strengthened this prejudice:

"Our business's photography was instructed by a Westerner. Our technique is highly skilled. As for using chemicals – when adding gold and silver solutions – we do not stint on production costs. As you will want to keep the image for ever, we add colours that are bright and that will not fade in the future. Our prices are fair. If you are interested, please visit: top of 3rd Street [Hankou Road]. Posted by Su Sanxing."

(Shenbao 1873.1.1)

What is striking in this advertisement is that it assumes a high degree of familiarity with photographic processes. Clearly, readers of the new newspaper already had acquired - or easily could acquire - a sound knowledge of photography's technicalities. The studio's commercial success and aesthetic expertise is authorised by Western instruction, but that authority relies equally on a high degree of technical knowledge on the part of the readers.

Fig 5: Lihua Studio, Shanghai, ca. 1890. After *Lao zhaopian* [Old Photographs], v 32 (2003), p 94

This early studio advertisement also shows one fundamentally modern social activity that had arisen as recently as two decades earlier: the patron visits the 'artist' or photographer at the latter's address. Previous generations had only to snap their fingers to summon a painter into their home. Perhaps this social reversal offered the rationale for building grandiose studio premises - a 'selling point' of some Shanghai advertisements - which more fittingly accommodated patrons whose social station might otherwise preclude their custom. The studio in *figure 5* was certainly well maintained, featured upstairs accommodation and was positioned with eye-catching effect on a street corner. But, visiting studios delivered new problems. Most obviously disadvantaged were women whose casual entry into the morally ambiguous world of female portraiting was not free of anxiety. In 1905, an advertisement on behalf of the founder of Yaohua Studio, reassured readers that his daughter was manager of the premises:

"If you have daughters, they will be photographed by a woman in strict accordance with the etiquette that separates male and female."

(Shibao 1905.3.21)

Several scholars have remarked on the huge enthusiasm that swept Chinese cities and towns for photographic portraits during the late-19th century. Rather less has been said concerning the context and material culture of portraits. A remarkable documentation of supply and demand is the frequent advertising and even illustration of all the essential accoutrements - books, clocks, water pipes, paintings, furniture, official and theatrical costumes - for composing a fashionable portrait. In daily practice, no one had to buy all this stuff, since perusing the advertisements was reliable guidance as to whether a studio provided all the latest items on the market. The assembly in *figure 6* is a good visual corroboration that these artifacts convinced sitters and viewers that a well furnished scene fulfilled the expectations of the new portrait idiom. This image of a planter and his family was taken at their home in southern Russia where poignantly they dressed up in the full theatricals of prevailing - or outdated? - Chinese photographic taste.

Fig. 6: Tea planter and family members., ca. 1900. After *Lao zhaopian*, v 24 (2002), p 102

Within portraits, painted landscape also enthralled as the presence of a senior art tradition within the photographic image. An advertisement of 1889 is a first-class witness to both the cultural and visual importance of landscape within the category of portrait-making. A painter Qian Shouzhi, who hails from Nanjing, 'paints' portraits and 'landscape portraits' *(shanshui xiaozhao)*. The portraits cost one dollar, but a fee for the landscape background is charged separately. Qian also did landscape fans in various dimensions at respectively differing prices. Thus, all production in this studio is priced, except for the large landscape backgrounds which demand the most time and effort. These are clearly available in a range from which the client can choose, provided that he accepts that a scale of prices corresponds with several standards of workmanship.

In its simplest material terms, this is not using a new image technology to entirely supplant an old one. Instead, it exemplifies how one particular operator deployed photography as the means of reproducing manugraphic visual productions in photographic form, at the same time as earning various levels of reproduction fees. The conservative brand of visual nostalgia that Mr Qian presupposes on behalf of his clients may have been a basis for profit only so long as he supplied a crucial cultural justification: his origins in a Nanjing school of image practice. Qian Shouzhi's advertisement is a phenomenon of the highest interest for studying the tensions between modernity and tradition. When modern imaging practices and their increasing industrialisation in Shanghai already threatened the future viability of traditional forms of visuality, a practitioner of those forms adopted the new technology to regain his economic advantage. Moreover he secured the social relevance of this strategy by exploiting the appeal of familiar recent history and regional cultural standards - the location and notion of Nanjing, a byword for elegance and skill in all manner of lyrical and visual creativity. On the one hand, Qian Shouzhi seems to be a classic illustration of Weber's maxim that the market declassifies culture, since through his own self presentation in the field of image production he deliberately mixed genres and made crossing boundaries the commercial attraction of his art. On the other hand, he appears as a subtly attuned market operator who understood which socially valued genres confer prestige upon those who have mastered them, adopting a modern visual technology to reclassify his art in a new prevailing culture.

Studio advertisements reveal how strongly photographic discourse of this period maintained photography and painting as ontologically indistinct. This offered opportunities to prioritise photography with painting aesthetics, more often than not visible in contemporary photographs and in the images with which they might be reconfigured, for example, *figure 3*. One of the commonest Chinese prejudices against photographic portraiture was that excessive contrasts of light and shadow disfigured the sitter. In an advertisement that Yaohua Studio ran twice in 1896 the text defends the studio's work against criticism of photographs that were too dark or too light. The advertiser attempts to clinch the argument that these images are acceptably in tune with Chinese preferences because Yaohua had commissioned a redesign of its studio by a German expert in lighting. What was at stake, then, was not dispelling the cruel deceptions of light and dark - since photography is not an art adapted to that purpose - but the acceptance of a European technology in illumination on behalf of Chinese aesthetics.

Conclusions

Recent work on photography now challenges the primacy of photography's European vision. Its contributors show how to understand the medium of photography as both globally disseminated and locally appropriated. Chinese practitioners and consumers acknowledged that they had borrowed a new technology of vision from the West. However, they added cultural value to visual productions by reference to traditional art forms and by indicating clearly the social conditions by which the maker and receiver of an image entered into contract. Photography was a cultural project that could not function without its proper discourse, of which advertising was simply one of several expressions. Such texts are an essential tool for the historical and critical contextualisation of visual images, especially since they orient the modern reader towards the cultural priorities of Shanghai society in the late nineteenth century. Photography in Shanghai - and in China - was a social production that combined new aesthetic expressions of content and form, and stimulated new social habits. Advertisements were not just tell-tale symptoms of social change that had happened; they were equally reports that set change in motion and visualised it. <

Further reading:

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