



# Historical views and histories of viewing

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Created by Chinese and British photographers, many photographs that the Historical Photographs of China project safeguards exemplify an extraordinarily confident handling of the camera as an implement of historical record. Both professional and amateur images, usually motivated to some extent by the ideological concerns of institutions that employed the individuals who made them, these photographs include views of commercial endeavour, industrial progress, philanthropic enterprise, political ceremonies, diplomatic junctures, tourist views, street assemblies and battles, not to mention some symbolic bonfires (of opium; of Japanese goods). Most images date to the period between 1900 and 1940.

## A drawing room and an empress-dowager.

Even the more personal mementoes of living quarters, church attendance, childhood (Chinese and British) can be highly revealing. One of my favourites among a domestic category of souvenirs is a view of the drawing room in the Senior Customs Assistant's resi-

dence at Macao, ca. 1906 (fig. 17), for it captures what pictures the incumbent of his office hung on the walls. Most remarkable is the presence of the empress-dowager Cixi in three or perhaps five of the famous photographs dating to the period 1903-05, when the Qing ruler commissioned numerous portraits of herself (fig. 18). In 1904, no doubt aware of the role of the photograph in international dealings, Cixi had sent one of her portraits for presentation to the German empress Augusta Viktoria. Even more remarkably that year, the palace tacitly approved when the Japanese publishing entrepreneur Takano Bunjiro in Shanghai prepared a number of the dowager portraits for commercial distribution. The publisher's recommendation to potential buyers of these images encouraged them "to gaze on the venerable face, in the same way as westerners who hang an image of their ruler in their homes".

This is a small discovery, but it is a fascinating visual rejoinder to the story of the empress-dowager's earliest attempts to put her image into public circulation. Hanging in this particular drawing room, the presence of the



(fig. 16)



(fig. 17)

empress also highlights the unique political relations between the British Customs service and the de facto ruler of the Qing empire. Regardless of how the Macao Assistant, Reginald Hedge-land, acquired these portraits, his ownership is proof that Cixi's efforts to have herself photographed in a number of costumes and surrounded by a changing repertoire of elegant objects was not impelled by palace boredom and vanity. Instead, it was consonant with a Qing government strategy that subjected the photographic image to its full potential in hitherto untested functions of foreign and internal diplomacy.

## Histories of different practices of photography

The Project's photographs also document the history of a visual medium that underwent repeated changes over the centuries following the first formal announcement of a photographic process in Paris in 1839. No less significantly, the photographic work of a British customs commissioner, for instance, juxtaposed with that of a Chinese politician in the Republican era raises interesting questions of how photographic vision was variously determined by native and foreign practices.

What kind of photography does a collection of photographs spanning several decades represent? One answer to the question is defined by the year 1888. From then onwards, following the Eastman Company's production of the Kodak camera, people's experience of photography in many parts of the world was increasingly limited to - and liberated by - nothing more than aiming the lens. "You press the button - we do the rest" was the unforgettable sales pitch. In 1900, Kodak began production of the long-running 'Brownie', aiming its simplicity and cheapness partly towards children. (fig. 16) The snapped photograph, which engendered the new Chinese verb *快照*, now came into its own. One of the critical developments was the dramatic shortening of exposure times, which allowed the photographer to 'freeze' and capture objects in movement. Felice Beato's frequently reproduced photograph of a north corner of the Peking city walls (1860), for instance, is an eerily unpopulated architectural view, since, during its long exposure time, the passers-by slid away from any permanent optical grasp. Such an image belongs to the history of quite another kind of photography.



(fig. 18)

### Striving for the snapshot

Not all photography became suddenly as easy as the marketing of the snapshot would suggest, but a new partnership between the individual and the photographic industry reformulated ideas about how and when to do photography. One of the effects of this revolution was that it created new expectations of how photographed human bodies might look less formally posed. Portable and speedily operated apparatus freed millions from the establishment, conventions and opening hours of the photographic studio. Studies of photography in China have tended to stress exclusively the studio portrait as if it were a supreme artistic genre or else the only possible photographic transaction in the visual economy of late Qing and Republican China. Of course, studio portraits deserve attention, but some of their shifts in content and form merit analysis in context with photographic pursuits that happened outside the norms and practices of studio business. Indeed, from the 1890s onwards, the notion of photographic truth increasingly stressed informality as one of the most important qualities of amateur and professional photographs. Even photographers using sophisticated equipment - as well as some working for studios - strived for a 'snapshot' look. This does not mean, however, that the old style of rigorously posed portraits and groups disappeared, for millions of consumers clung tenaciously to social and political ideals visualised by horizontal evenness, vertical symmetry, and hierarchical order. Instead,



(fig. 19)

with the advent of the 20th century, two quite diverse practices of photography absorbed the attention of varied and sometimes inter-related priorities.

One hugely arresting photograph that is a self-reflexive address to these issues is the portrait of Min Chin (fig. 19) by Fu Bingchang (Foo Pingsheung). Fu was a Republican politician and diplomat, as well as a seriously engaged amateur photographer who practiced all the necessary skills to develop and print his photographs. Min crouches slightly as she manipulates the controls and the shutter release of a Voigtlander 'Superb' camera. No 'Brownie' this, but arguably the best camera on the market (after 1933) for professional and amateur work. Fu's image is a portrait of Min and a leading product of the precision optics industry. It looks snapped, but, of course, it is carefully arranged (and photographed with Fu's second camera). It is also a photograph of taking a certain kind of photograph. The woman smiles and aims the camera downwards. Is this to suggest photographing a child? Leaving aside what anyone's fantasies might have been at that moment, forget not that the marketing of the snapshot had targeted children for several decades by now. Hundreds of pages of Kodak literature, for example, published in Chinese and distributed from Shanghai throughout the 1930s give ample space to children and how to photograph them.

### Differing photographic visions

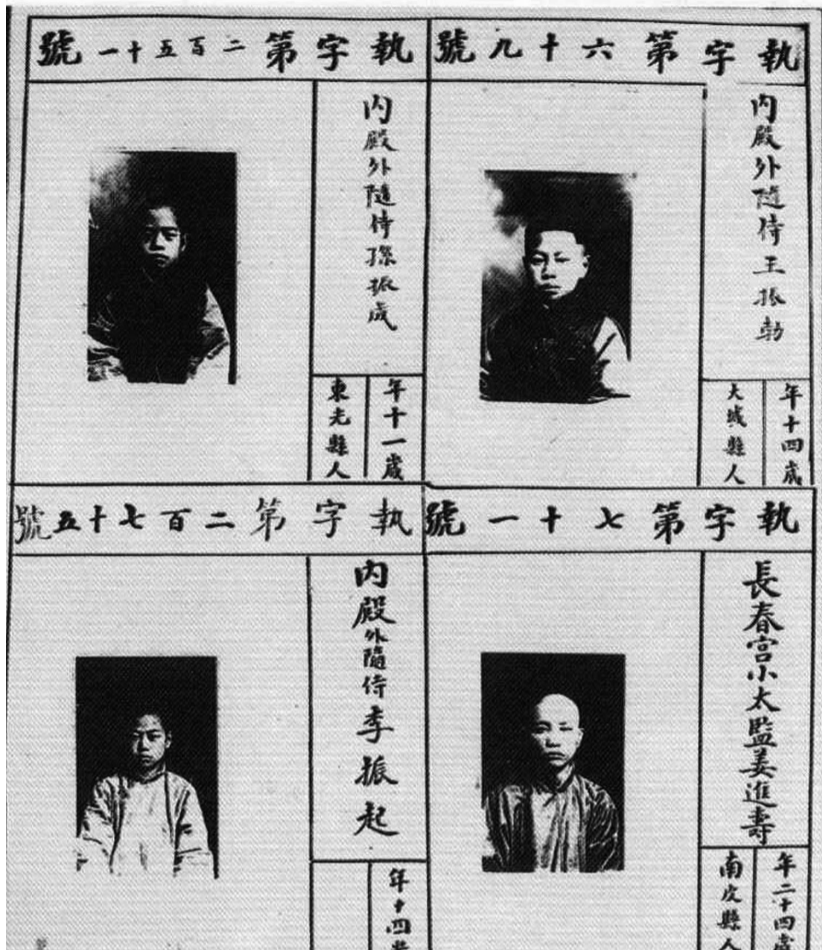
Chinese bodies appear in photographs of quite a different order made by the Shanghai Municipal Police officer William Armstrong, who worked in the

city and made periodic forays into the surrounding region. He departed from China in 1927. Why Armstrong should have been motivated to photograph local country people is unknown, since it seems not to have been any part of his work. Striking, however, is the fact that he systematised these images in a way that is exactly analogous with the visual archives of social control used in China before and during Armstrong's service in Shanghai (fig. 20). As if to make the correspondence even closer, he even cut away the backgrounds of some of his figures in order to paste the remaining cut-outs against a blank surface.

When Armstrong arrived in Shanghai in 1893, an administrative culture of visual control was a long-established political fact. In 1865 the foreign-controlled Shanghai Municipal Council stipulated that Chinese servants employed in the Shanghai international settlement must be registered and photographed. Many regions of the world confronted by western imperialism in the 1860s witnessed the advent of ethnographic visual systematising, which eventually inspired the creation of other archives of control. Nevertheless, the proposal to register lower-class employment in Shanghai was far ahead of similar articulations to enhance urban police work at the end of the 19th century. Chinese circumstances seem to have been particularly receptive to such methods. In Beijing the surviving palace archive of eunuch staff includes photographs of the newest recruits, similarly arranged four to a page (fig. 21). Thus, Armstrong's images, and also recall, match a colonial practice of seeing and archiving, fully consonant with western and Japanese imperialist penetration into



(fig. 20)



(fig. 21)



(fig. 22)



(fig. 23)

many parts of the world in the 1890s, a control strategy developed much earlier with the cooperation of native administrators.

Clearly, different kinds of photographic vision were at work in the creation of these various archives. Fu Bingchang is a fascinating individual and probably the best photographer in the present group, even though it remains difficult to relate his work with that of others, since he operated amid such rare social and political privileges. His motive to

take photographs was inevitably different from most foreign residents. Fu might have least expected it, but he would never live in mainland China again after 1949. His British contemporaries, on the other hand, counted on retiring from their posts and returning to the other side of the world. Even while their imminent departure was still distant, they shot photographs to enable consumption at a distance, that is, to show absent contemporaries and future generations what China looks - looked - like.

### Capturing the historical moment

Detectably at variance too is how some subjects of photographs and their makers cooperated in their conscious efforts to make the historical moment visible. The photograph of Hedgeland and his staff before the Nanning Customs House (Guangxi province) is probably not quite the formal image that everyone expected, since Hedgeland was distracted by his dog during the exposure. Never mind, for the assembly of official garb, maritime uniforms, doorway

calligraphy and a hierarchical arrangements of bodies impart much of the practical and symbolic realities of this remote station within its larger fiscal and political universe (fig. 23). To create the human face of this institution, the photographer and his clients followed conventions that differ not so much in form from photographs of exclusively western institutional groups. That said, the image also shows an arguably Chinese preference for the familiar studio props of pot plants as well as for sufficient depth to include the name of the building centrally and prominently.

Consider by contrast, then, another photograph, not in the Project's collections, which shows a view of an entirely Chinese group dating only a few years later and located in the commercially vibrant uplands of southern Shanxi (fig. 22). In this view of daily work for the Qixian (Qi county) Tobacco Agency, men of various occupations are posed around the machines, tools and packing equipment of a processing plant. Except for five figures in various positions of authority (occupying positions along the image's central vertical axis) everyone acts out his appointed function in a number of action poses. A strong notion of theatricality attends almost any posed photograph, but it is seldom as palpably manipulated as in this view. When Qixian merchants, who were among the most successful capitalists of the early Republican period, sought visual confirmation of their success, they turned not only to the skills of a photographer, but they borrowed spatial conventions and the use of gesture from Chinese opera. The

image is mediated through two visual languages: one dictates the studio pose (the bosses standing usually with hands in sleeves); the other reports a tableau of frozen actions. Not only were photographs of opera extremely popular in these years, but operatic performance was visualised totally congruously within the documentary reality of the photograph. Remarkably enough, even Cixi (fig. 18) had been one of the obliging actors in the development of this aesthetic scheme. Is it imaginable that Hedgeland might have permitted a photograph analogous to what Qixian tobacco merchants authorised? No.

The cultural determination of different visual priorities makes photography the absorbing subject that it is. That it is possible to comment on earlier visions of China during a period that intensified Chinese-foreign exchanges depends a lot on uncovering some of the various impulses that energised picture-making strategies. Historical research of this nature demands working across cultural, economic and institutional contexts and, even at risk of making the categories 'Chinese' and 'foreign' too absolute, it requires that historical exploration of what is now established as a British archive be conducted as far as possible within each constituent image's original fields of space and time in China.

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