

The First Exhibition of Works of by the Pioneering Chinese Photographer Lai Fong at the Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University



Two Peking Opera actors dressed in Huaguanli suits posed with ease. Photograph by
Lai Fong

Overseas Network, New York, April 10 (Reporter Li Xiaohong) Most of the known surviving late Qing Dynasty old photographs present China through the eyes of foreign photographers. But at that time, how was China viewed through the lens of Chinese photographers? Since February, the four-month special exhibition "Chinese Photography Giant: Lai Fong (ca. 1839-1890)" has been exhibited at the Johnson Art Museum of Cornell University in the United States, which has attracted the attention of the world. Fifty precious original photographs have passed through years of wind and rain, and truly show the life of Chinese society in the 19th century, telling the story of China in that era.

In the second half of the 19th century recently invented photographic technology entered China through Western diplomats, businessmen, and missionaries, and the camera began to record Chinese history in a completely new way. Soon after the arrival of photography in Hong Kong, Guangdong, and other places

successful local Chinese photographers emerged, the most famous of which is Lai Fong.



Beijing carriage

Born in 1839, Lai Fong was originally from Guangdong. He moved to Hong Kong when he was a boy. When he was 20 years old, he worked in a photography studio run by a foreigner to learn and study photography. He started his own studio, Afong Photo Studio in Hong Kong in 1870. His work has been recognized worldwide, and British photography historian Terry Bennett called him "the best photographer in China in the 19th century". "The achievements are no less than those of their Western counterparts in the same period." His commercial vision achievements resulted in his studio being regarded as "The most successful photography studio in the late Qing Dynasty." His artistic philosophy is rooted in Chinese cultural traditions and has had a profound impact on the cultural psychology and aesthetic orientation of later Chinese photographers.

"Despite Lai Fong's outstanding artistic achievements in the history of photography, he is not yet properly recognized on the international stage. His works are very scarce and therefore have rarely been studied or exhibited." Curator of the Lowentheil Photography of China Collection, a famous American

photography collection, Stacey Lambrow said, "This solo exhibition of Lai Fong's photographs being held at Cornell University is the world's first exhibition of this, or any, early Chinese photographer."



Bride with traditional sedan chair

The earliest known photographers in the history of Chinese photography are mostly foreigners. The number of known local Chinese photographers like Lai Fong are not as large. As one of the world's most important private collections of original historical photographs of China, Loewentheil has collected 21,000 early photographs of China from collectors, art galleries, dealers, auction houses and other channels for more than 30 years. The private collection includes more than 500 works by Lai Fong. Most of the 50 original photographs in this special exhibition were selected from the 500 photographs in the Loewentheil collection, and were created from 1870 to 1890.

Speaking about the curatorial concept, Kate Adlerman Frankel, curator of photography at the Johnson Art Museum of Cornell University, said that the exhibition is based on the themes of business and trade economy, landscape, portraits, city life, and urban architecture. The timeline is expanded near and far, giving the audience a glimpse of the life in modern Chinese society.



Hong Kong Peak Tram

Following the lens of Lai Fang, we see the progress of China's science and technology and the process of modernization at the end of the 19th century. In the trade theme section of the exhibition, the photographic work of Asia's first funicular railway, Hong Kong Peak Tram, attracts attention. In the photograph, the cable car track is surrounded by the two mountains and it resembles a ladder, as the cable car drives towards the peak. When the Hong Kong Peak Tram was put into use in 1888, it replaced the sedan chair and became a new up and down tool for the residents of Taiping Peak. As a result, Taiping Peak has become an excellent viewing point in Hong Kong. More than a century has passed, and this cable car has survived wind and rain to this day. This photograph echoes the continuous history of time and space.



China Waterway Fairway in Late Qing Dynasty

A masterpiece that records changes to modern Chinese society is this photograph "China Waterway in the Late Qing Dynasty." The composition of the photograph is very artistic. The arrangement of the peaks and mountains in the background and the echo of the peaks created by the placement of the six sailboats in the center, with their reflections in the water, is clever. The subject of the photograph offers an interesting narrative. The six Chinese wooden sailboats taken by Lai Fong can be traced back to the Han Dynasty. In the past two thousand years of history, China designed countless exquisite ships. The emergence of Chinese sailboats has made China's navigation technology ahead of other countries for nearly a thousand years. The visual records of China in the late Qing Dynasty left by Lai Fong provided a valuable resource for academic researchers historians.



Portrait of Li Hongzhang

As a disseminator of China's early photographic culture, Lai Fong captured the spiritual style and historical memory of a nation and an era from his perspective. In the portrait area of the exhibition, the portrait of Li Hongzhang, the important minister of the late Qing Dynasty, is a highlight. Li Hongzhang official power is presented through Lai Fang's lens as he sits gazing away from the camera, his eyes squinted and his temperament on display. When photographing high-ranking people, Lai Fong used an angle to visually elevate the relative position of the subject of the photograph and the viewer, reflecting the high status of politicians and capturing their shrewd and reserved side. Lai Fong was not only an excellent photographer, but he was also a talented businessman. He learned Western photography composition techniques and combined

that knowledge with the viewing psychology of Eastern culture, and the resulting photographs he took not only satisfied Chinese people, but also attracted foreigners, winning the favor of Chinese and foreign bureaucrats and wealthy businessmen. The famous British photographer John Thomson commented: "Chinese people's understanding of art is very different from ours, but Lai Fong's work is very different from his Chinese counterparts, it is easy for us to accept." Lai Fong's photography studio was successful. He was prosperous in business, hiring and training some foreign photographers, such as eminent photographers as Emil Rusfeldt, and Griffiths, etc., attracting many Hong Kong residents, foreigners, and foreign tourists to his studio.



Guangdong Longding Waterfall of Dinghu Mountain

In his more than 30 year photography career, Lai Fong ran a busy in Hong Kong photographic studio and traveled to the north and south of the river, taking pictures of natural scenery and people from all walks of life in many diverse places. His aesthetic style is deeply influenced by Chinese landscape painting. In this photo of the Longtan waterfall in Dinghu Mountain, Guangdong, he juxtaposed the white turbulence, the dark stone shadows, and the unshakable pool water, with a strong contrast effect, showing a moment in eternity. The water reflecting the waterfall has a moral meaning in Chinese culture.

"More than 150 years ago, when Lai Fong carried his heavy photographic equipment through China and creating photographs through a complicated process, his work not only preserved a simple record of history, but was also full of exploration and the expression of art" said Frankel. Works of art by the Chinese photographic pioneer Lai Fong provide us with a different perspectives, as records of the natural landscape and observations of human history. They are of great academic value and significance to China' s cultural heritage.

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