Photographic Artists: Early Chinese Photography Studios

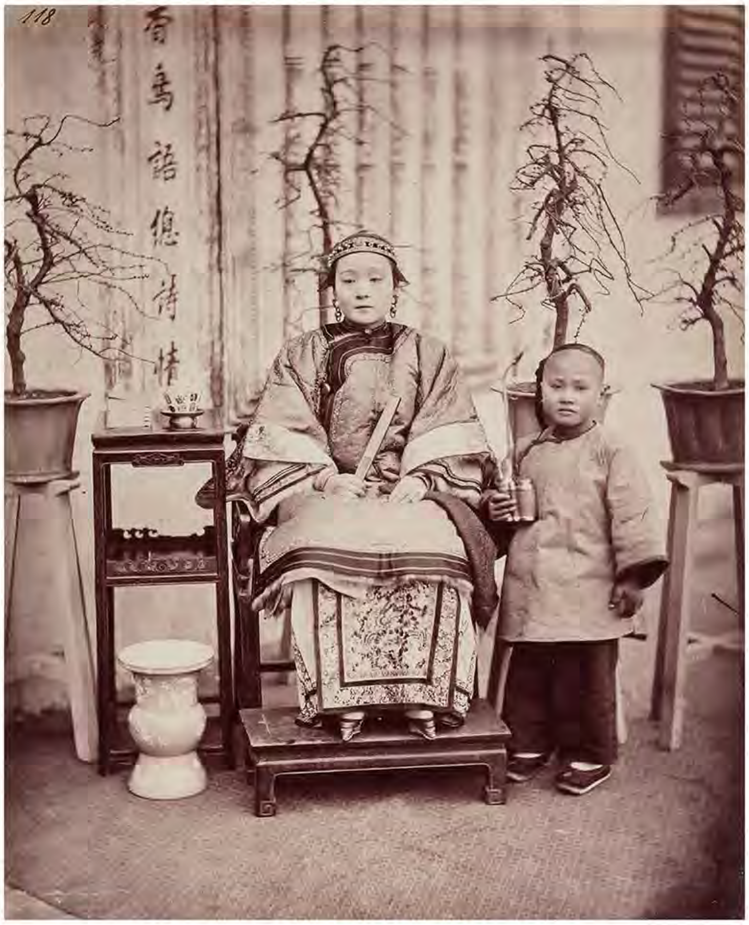
STACEY LAMBROW

PIONEERING Chinese photographers are under-recognised for their contributions to the history of photography. Works by early American and European exponents have been shown in China and appear in exhibitions in the world's most prestigious museums, but their Chinese peers remain largely unknown. This is due in part to the scarcity of fine photographs of China from the period. Appreciation for late Qing dynasty (1644–1911) photographs, as the foundation of art photography in China, requires an understanding of the arduous technical photographic processes required and knowledge of the enduring impact of traditional Chinese visual culture on Chinese photographers.

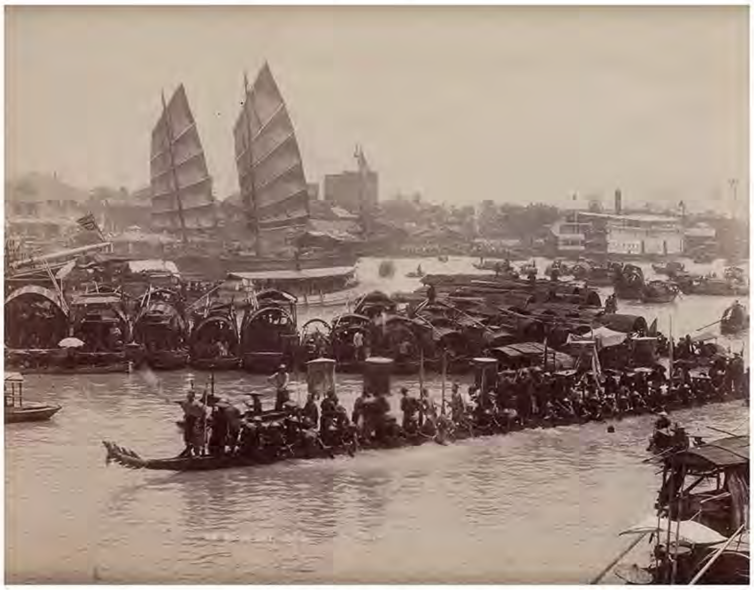
Groundbreaking Chinese artists grasped the potential of the new medium and mastered the art of photography by the 1850s. Their approach to photography was steeped in the traditions, motifs and formal techniques of Chinese art and visual culture (1). These pioneering artists documented and artistically rendered the people and places of China from a Chinese perspective, making them distinct from other photographers in expressing the long artistic legacy and culture of China.

Lang Jingshan, a 20th century photographer, reflecting on art photography in China, declared: "Art can never be detached from this world, much less stand in isolation. It is attached to its time, its society, its nationality."[1] Ranging from portraiture to landscapes and architecture to photojournalism, the works of the pioneers of early photography in China display the influence of traditional Chinese art and visual culture on Chinese identity during the late Qing dynasty.

Early Chinese photographers embraced a wide range of visual references, classical Chinese cultural tropes and formal considerations in their depictions of the shifting social conditions facing China. They captured images of Chinese society on the brink of modernisation (2). They often depicted ancient Chinese traditions, many of which vanished in the mid-20th century. These views were not photographed or understood by foreign photographers. Aware of the cultural and artistic significance of the scenes and events taking place, they captured the images portrayed for centuries in Chinese art. These photographers were artistically free, restricted only by the technical limitations of the chemical photographic process and by commercial concerns. They were not bound to the strict documentary aesthetic or official imagery that later defined most photography in China until the late 20th century.



1 Liang Shitai. *Portrait of a Woman and Child.* 1870s. Albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection



2 A Chan (Ya Zhen) Studio. *Dragon Boat Race.* 1870s. Albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection

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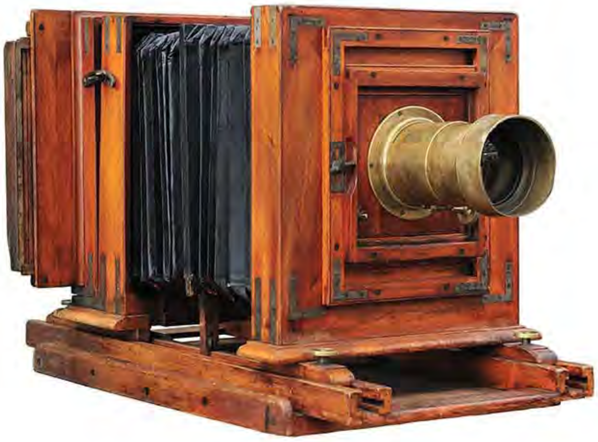
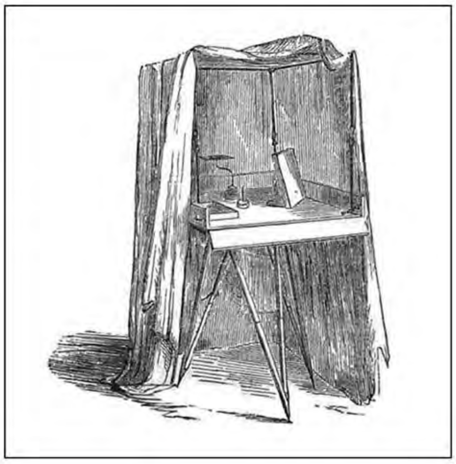
[1] "*Jingshan yulu*" (Quotes of Jingshan), in *Lang Jingshan bailing songshou sheying huiguji* (Retrospective exhibition of Lang Jingshan's photography celebrating his 100th anniversary), Taipei, National History Museum, n.d., p. 17.



3 Meagher Mahogany Wet-plate Tailboard Camera 10 x 10". 1870s. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection



4 Engraving of a 19th century dark room tent used in the field. 1870s

Each photographic print from 19th century China is an unique impression made at a particular time and place. Creating a photograph in the late Qing dynasty required more than artistic vision: it demanded an understanding of chemistry. Early photographers often built or customised their own cameras and formulated photographic chemicals to their own specifications (**3**). The wet plate collodion process was the predominant means of creating photographic negatives in China from the 1850s to the 1880s. The exacting process produced finely detailed images. A mixture of alcohol, sulphuric ether and gun-cotton forms a liquid called plain collodion, rendered suitable for photographic purposes with the addition of an iodide or bromide. The resulting mixture is called iodised or sensitised collodion. An imperfect sensitised collodion could produce a feeble negative, in addition to fogginess, poor contrast, ridges, streaks, stains, undulating lines and an array of other flaws.[2] Perfecting the formula for sensitised collodion was key to creating a successful negative.

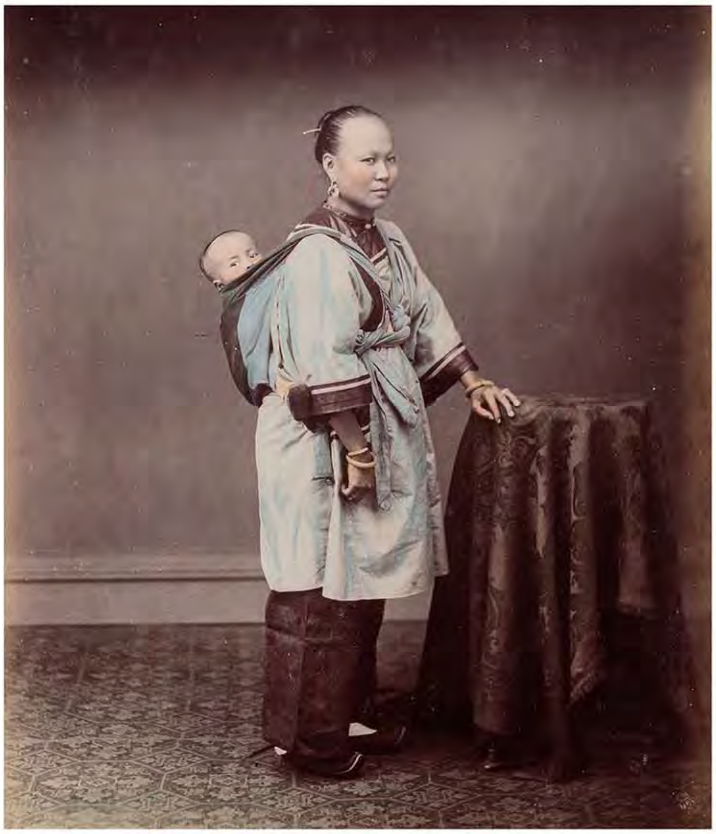
To prepare negatives, the photographer grounded down the rough edges of plate glass with oil of turpentine and a fine file, cleaned and polished the surface of the plates, and placed them in the slots of a grooved plate box. The plates were often used within twelve hours to avoid flaws in the negatives.

The photographer selected a subject and vantage point, positioned the camera, and, if on location, set up a portable darkroom (**4**). The photographer then carefully poured a puddle of sticky collodion onto the glass and evenly coated the plate. Next, in the dark, the photographer sensitised the plate with silver nitrate and placed the wet glass plate in a light-proof plate holder. After inserting the plate holder into the camera, the photographer exposed the glass plate by removing the lens cap, which allowed sunlight to strike the light-sensitive collodion. The plate was left in the apparatus for at least twenty seconds and up to five minutes depending on brightness. The photographer's knowledge of light, temperature and atmospheric conditions in China guided exposure times.

After exposing the negative, the photographer removed the plate from the camera, took it back to the portable darkroom, removed it from the plate holder, and gently poured the developer, a diluted solution of ferrous sulfate (iron), acetic acid and alcohol over the collodion side of the plate. The image then slowly emerged on the plate's surface. At the right moment, the photographer rinsed the plate with clean water to stop the development. The negative, thus fixed, was repeatedly rinsed. The photographer had approximately ten to fifteen minutes, depending on weather conditions, to expose and develop a wet plate collodion negative before the collodion dried and the negative was ruined.

5 Pun Lun Studio. *Portrait of a Woman.* 1870s. Albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection

The photographer could then make prints from this negative. The albumen silver positive printing process was the prevailing positive photographic process in China from the 1850s until the 1920s. Photographers had highly personalised techniques and procedures for making and printing on albumen paper. They used a variety of paper



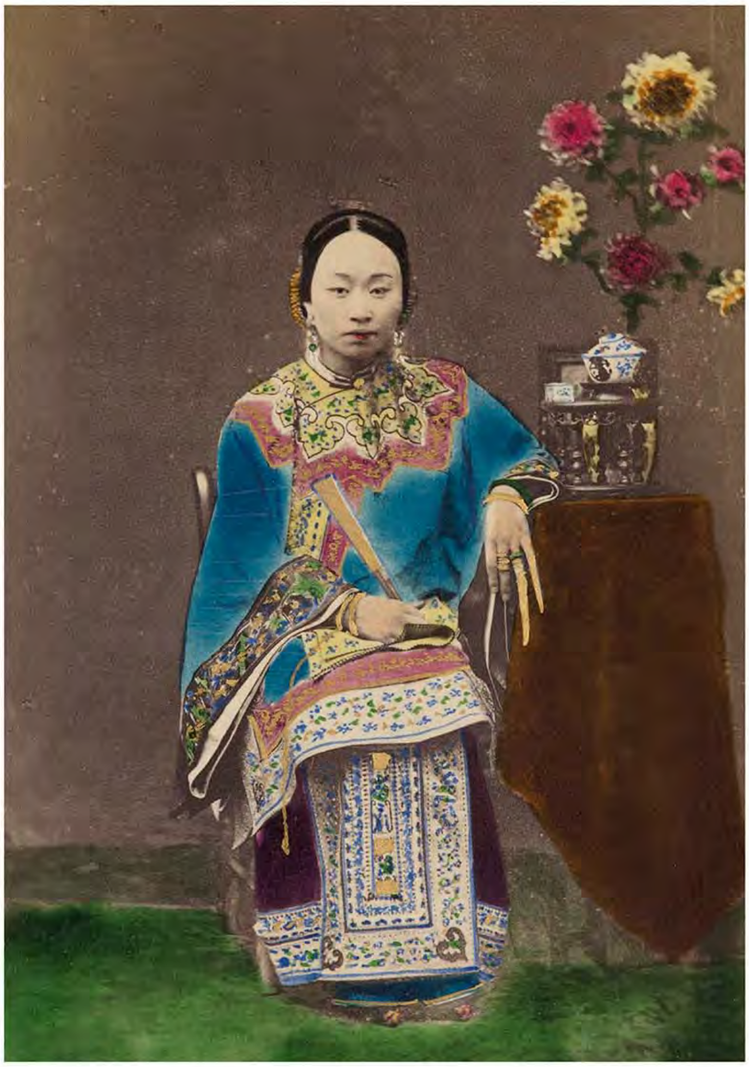
6 Pun Lun Studio. *Portrait of a Woman Carrying a Child*. 1870s. Hand-coloured albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection

substrates, chemical substances and chemical proportions.[3]

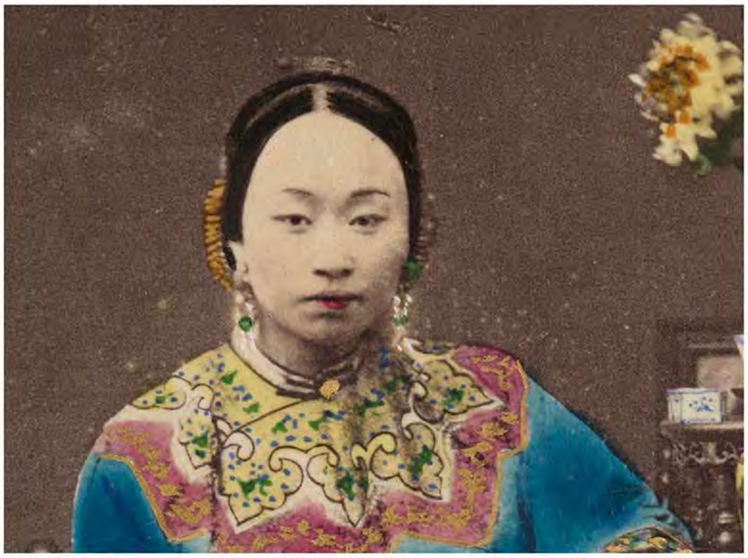
To make an albumen silver print, the photographer, or the photographer's staff, vigorously beat fresh egg whites, added chloride, and floated sheets of a pliable lightweight rag paper in the mixture, one at a time. Once the paper dried, it was sensitised in a silver nitrate solution and hung to dry again. The photographer loaded the print frame, handling the paper only by the edges before exposing the paper through the negative to sunlight, then rinsed the print in water, often toning it with gold chloride, before washing it again. The print was fixed in a bath of sodium thiosulfate and was repeatedly rinsed.

Although the majority of 19th century albumen silver prints were made from chicken egg whites, Chinese photographers also used albumen from duck eggs because these were larger and more readily available and because duck albumen was more light-sensitive than chicken albumen when sensitised in a silver nitrate solution.[4] Prints made with duck albumen were also less prone to cracking and more stable.

The wet plate collodion process was a worldwide phenomenon, but some physical and conceptual aspects of the process were particular to China and the Chinese art traditions on which it drew. Close study of photographs by 19th century Chinese artists reveals aspects of the photograph's making, composition and presentation with roots in traditional Chinese art and painting.



7 Sang Hing Studio. *Portrait of a Seated Woman*. 1870s. Hand-coloured carte de visite photograph. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection



8 Detail of (7), showing intricate hand painting on a small carte de visite photograph. 20 x 15 cm

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[2] Towler, John, *The Silver Sunbeam*, Joseph H. Ladd, New York, 1864. Electronic edition prepared from facsimile edition of Morgan and Morgan, Inc., Hastings-on-Hudson, New York. Second printing, February 1974.

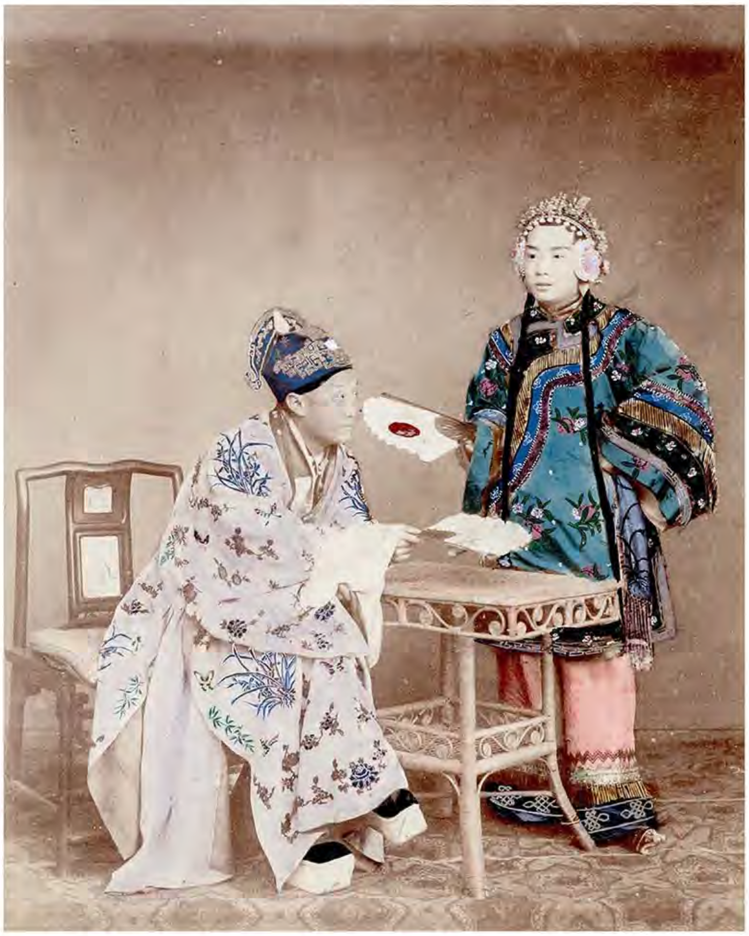
[3] Stulik, Dusan C. and Art Kaplan, *The Atlas of Analytical Signatures of Photographic Processes*, Los Angeles, The Getty Conservation Institute, 2013, p. 7.

[4] Hunt, Robert, *Photography: A Treatise on the Chemical Changes Produced by Solar Radiation, and the Production of Pictures from Nature, by the Daguerreotype, Calotype, and Other Photographic Processes*, London, J.J. Griffin, 1851, p. 98.

Yi Gu, the art historian, observed that all twelve Chinese words for photography, in the first decades after its invention, were pre-existing terms for portrait painting.[5] The first photographers and photography studios in China created landscape and architectural views, but it was the physical likeness presented by portrait photographs that captivated their imagination. Photography studios also occupied the spaces of traditional artists and portrait painters. In many galleries, grand reception halls exhibited the new photographs alongside traditional oil paintings, portrait paintings and paintings on ivory.

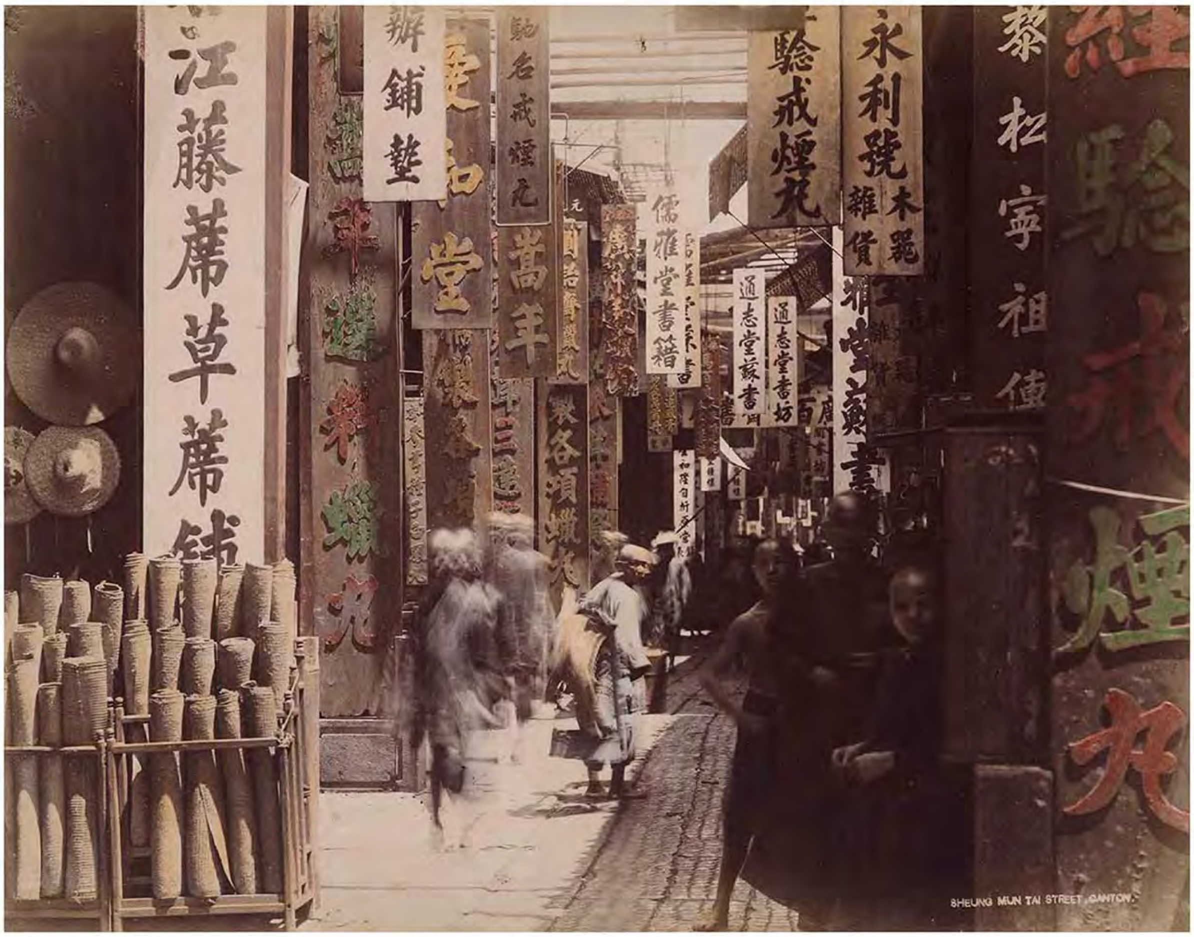
Pun Lun Studio, a gallery in Canton (Guangzhou) and Hong Kong, sold painted portraits on silk and canvas, as well as paintings of traditional subjects such as scenes from Ming dynasty (1368–1644) poems and books, and fine decorative arts. Wen Dinan, the son of the studio's owner, learned the art of photography in the early 1860s. He proved adept at attracting the firm's clientele to the newly fashionable modern art form of photography.[6] Pun Lun Studio soon became a successful pioneering photography studio, establishing branches in Hong Kong, Foochow (Fuzhou), Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) and Singapore (**5**).

In mid-19th century China, many artists left traditional painting in favour of fine art photography. Some bridged the gap by applying paint to photographs. Pun Lun Studio had a group of talented artists to create and apply paint to photographs (**6**). The hand-colouring process, used by these studios, incorporated elements of traditional Chinese art. Chinese pigments, made from plants and minerals, came in the form of chips, cakes or powders.[7] The pigments contain higher glue content than Western gouache, allowing



9 Pun Lun Studio attributed. *Portrait of Opera Performers.* 1870s. Hand-coloured albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection

10 Lai Fong. *Garden in Guangzhou.* 1870s. Hand-coloured albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection



11 A Chan (Ya Zhen Studio). *Sheung Mun Tai Street in Canton (Guangzhou).* 1870s. Hand-coloured albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection

them to bind better to papers and silks. These pigments, which could withstand the wet-mounting process of Chinese scrolls, were well suited for application on albumen photographs.[8]

After albumen prints were washed and prepared to receive colour, colourists worked on them at wooden tables equipped with porcelain bowls, brushes and cakes or powdered pigment. Colouring a photograph was a tedious and time-consuming process. Master colourists produced fewer than three finished prints a day. Applying pigment to photographs in China was common enough that a guide to

12 Liang Shitai. *Portrait of Prince Ch'un.* 1870s. Albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection

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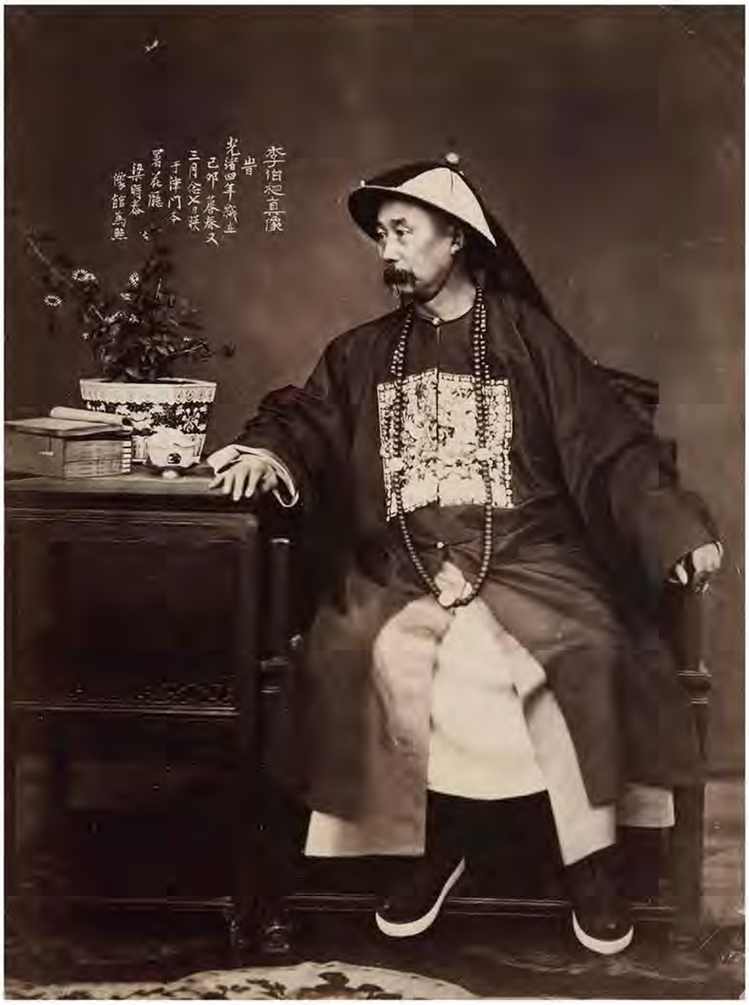
[5] Gu, Yi, "What's in a Name? Photography and the Reinvention of Visual Truth in China, 1840–1911", *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 95, no. 1 (Taylor & Francis, Ltd, CAA), 2013, p. 120.

[6] Bennett, Terry, *History of Photography in China: Chinese Photographers 1844–1879*, London, Quaritch, 2013, p. 98.

[7] Ayres, George B., *How to Paint Photographs in Water Colors: A Practical Handbook Designed Especially for the Use of Students and Photographers, Containing Directions for Brush-work in All Descriptions of Photo-portraiture*, Philadelphia, Benerman & Wilson, 1869.

[8] Gardner, Franklin B., *The Painters' Encyclopaedia: Containing Definitions of All Important Words in the Art of Plain and Artistic Painting*, New York, M.T. Richardson, 1887, p. 87.

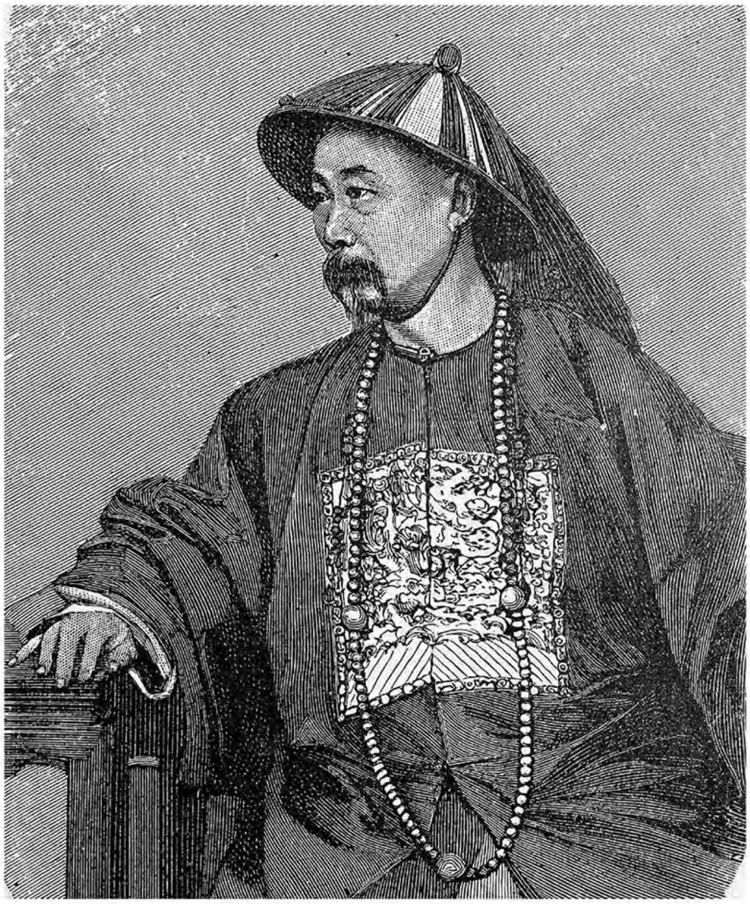


13 Liang Shitai. *Portrait of Li Hongzhang*. 1879. Albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection

photography, published in the *Shanghai Daily* in 1876, includes colouring as a standard step in the photographic process.[9]

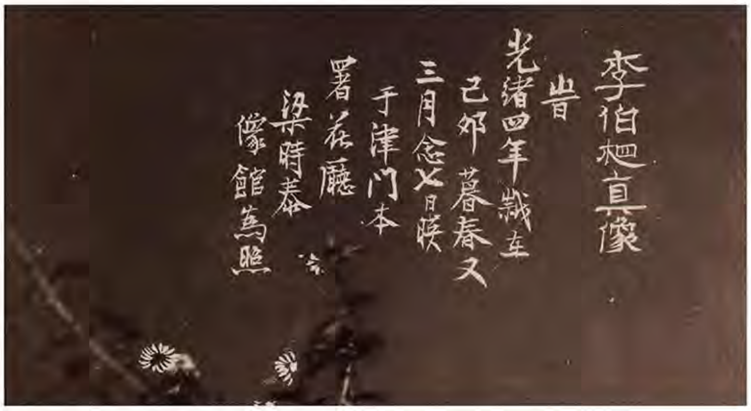
Chinese photography studios, such as Ye Chung and Kung Tai in Shanghai, A Chan (Ya Zhen) in Canton and Pun Lun Studio in Hong Kong, offered superb hand-coloured albumen silver prints, most commonly in the carte de visite format (**7**–**11**). Larger format prints required more time to colour and consequently were more expensive and less frequently purchased.

Advertisements and directories referred to these photographers as "photographic artists", "painters", "portrait painters" and "photographers". For example, Liang Shitai's (active 1870s–1880s) earliest known advertisement in the Hong Kong *Daily Advertiser*, dated October 2nd, 1871, identified the artist as "See-Tay Photographer and Painter", and this phrase appears in future advertisements. Liang Shitai was exacting in every aspect of photography. He sought authentic poses and captured them using precise lighting and advanced chemical techniques and processes. His reputation as China's foremost portrait photographer resulted from his ability to achieve a flattering physical likeness while reflecting the sitter's inner character or "transmitting the spirit" of the sitter, the ultimate goal of

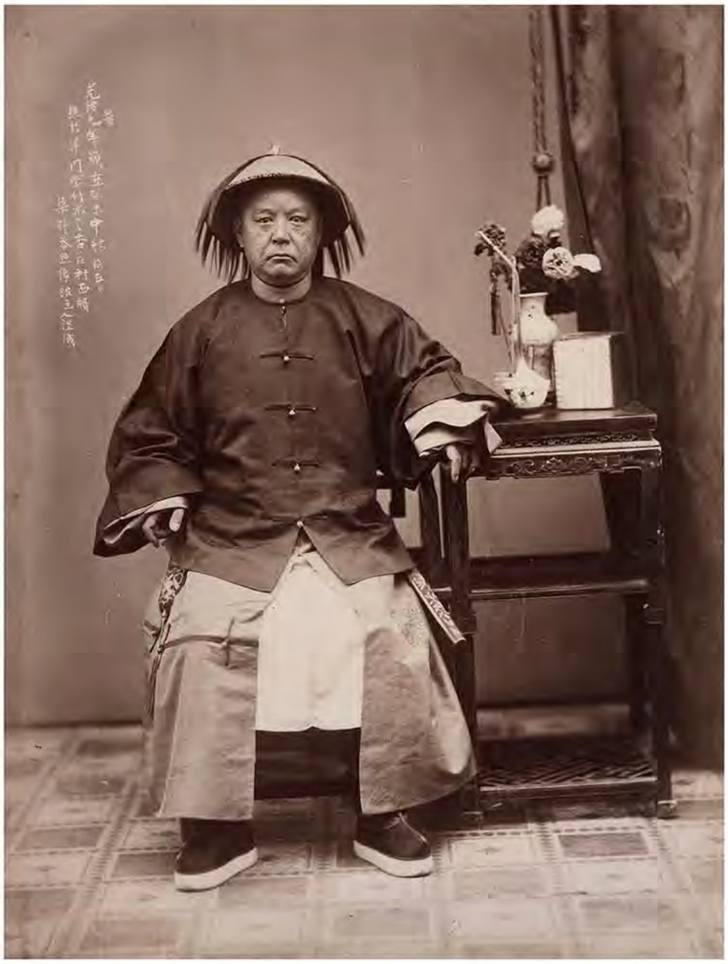


14 Engraving after Liang Shitai's *Portrait of Li Hongzhang*. Circa 1879

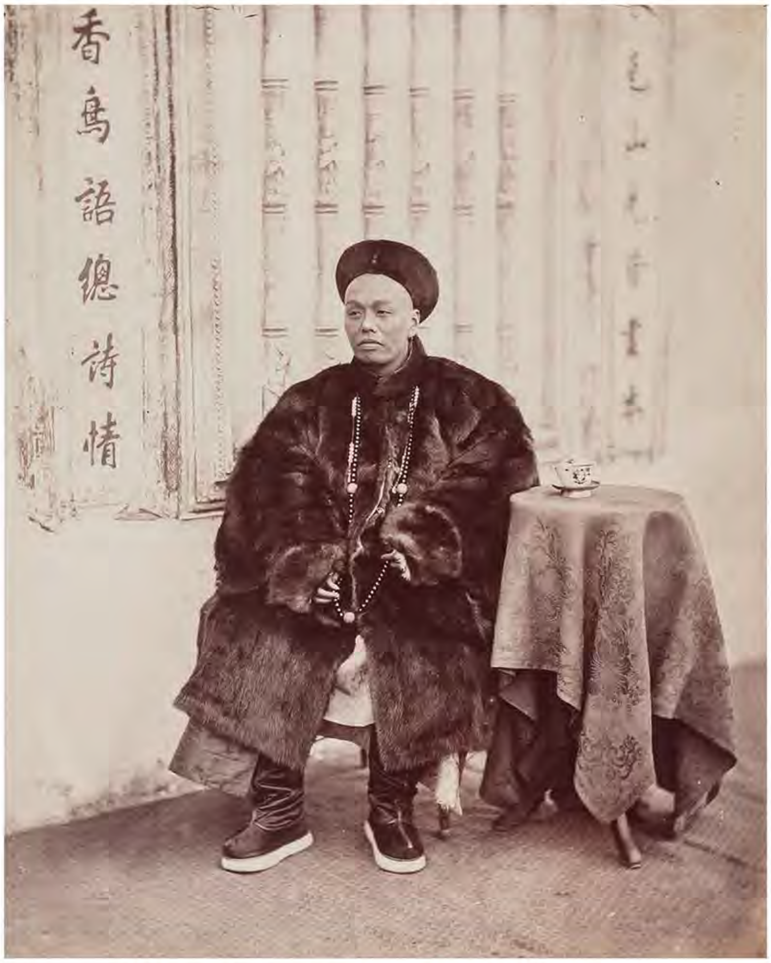
15 Detail of (**13**), showing the cropping of the official summer hat of the Marquis



16 Detail of (**13**), showing calligraphy integrated into the final print



17 Liang Shitai. *Portrait of an Official.* 1879. Albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection



18 Liang Shitai. *Portrait of a Seated Man.* 1879. Albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection

Chinese portraiture. The country's most influential men and women sat before Liang Shitai's camera, including imperial court officials (**12**).

Li Hongzhang (1823–1901) was one of the officials famously photographed by Liang Shitai (**13**). Li Hongzhang valued technological innovation and was impressed by the talent of artists such as Liang Shitai and his contemporary, Lai Fong (Li Fang, aka Lai Afong, circa 1839–1890). Recognising the power of the photographic image, the statesman presented his photographic portraits as gifts to diplomats. His image was further circulated domestically and globally in international newspapers, magazines, and other publications. The *Illustrated London News* and numerous other international publications published an engraving after Liang Shitai's photograph of Li Hongzhang (**14**). As a result, Li Hongzhang was the first Chinese dignitary whose face was recognised worldwide. Roberta Wue, the art historian, points out that Li Hongzhang "actively cultivated his public image both in China and abroad—and photography played an important role in this publicity campaign".[10] The statesman became an international celebrity.

In a poem, Li Hongzhang compared photography to master paintings by Mi Fu (1051–1107) and his son, Mi Youren (1074–1153):

Returning home, I touch the mirror-painting,
such a tiny space contains a magic land.
The painting from the Mi family may not
have both qualities of exact likeness and ingenuity like this.
Li Hongzhang, 1886.

咫尺罗瀛壶
未必米家桢
有此肖妙俱
李鸿章作于1886年

Li Hongzhang's poem suggests that the likeness captured by photography is enchanting and superior to Chinese painting.

Liang Shitai followed established traditions of Chinese art in his photographs. In an advertisement in *Shen Bao*, the Chinese newspaper, in 1876, he described photography as a "shortcut to capturing the essence of painting".[11] He used tools, brushes and ink to embellish his glass plate negatives. In his portrait of Li Hongzhang, Liang Shitai heavily painted and etched the glass, adding flower petals to the potted plant. He used stippling to smooth out imperfections in the dignitary's face and beard and etched the negative to crop his *guanmoa*, or official's summer hat. Even the dent on the fine taste, technical proficiency and discernment of a skilled artist (**15**).

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[9] Gu, Yi, "What's in a Name? Photography and the Reinvention of Visual Truth in China, 1840–1911", *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 95, no. 1 (Taylor & Francis, Ltd, CAA), 2013, p. 123.

[10] Wue, Roberta, "The Mandarin at Home and Abroad: Picturing Li Hongzhang", *Ars Orientalis*, Vol. 43 (Regents of the University of Michigan, The Smithsonian Institution), 2013, pp. 140–156.

[11] *Shen Bao*, "Advertisement of See Tay (Liang Shitai)", Shanghai, May 29th, 1876.

Liang Shitai most notably integrated the tradition of calligraphy into his photographic process (**16**). Although calligraphy, in the form of poems or inscriptions, was a standard element of Chinese painting, it seldom appears in early photography. Calligraphy, literally "beautiful writing", has long been appreciated in China as a supreme art form, more valued than painting and sculpture and ranked alongside poetry. All educated men and women were expected to be proficient in the art, an expectation that has endured until modern times. Liang Shitai's portrait of Li Hongzhang is rare, but the artist's calligraphic inscriptions on the two copies of the print in the Loewentheil Collection and the print held by the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles all differ in composition, format and wording. Each of the three prints is unique. The innovative photographer worked with composite negatives to achieve this. As Wue notes: "Liang Shitai made choices that enhanced the photograph's identity as a Chinese image of a Chinese subject".[12] Calligraphic elements often appear in Liang Shitai's photographs (**17**). Even in portraits without the photographer's inscriptions, backgrounds often display couplets (**18**). In this way, Liang Shitai demonstrated his knowledge and appreciation for ancient Chinese art forms and allied himself with the literati.

Tung Hing Studio photographs of the Wuyi Mountains, in the remote north-east corner of Fuijan province, also signify a reverence for traditional art. Scholars regard these works as the pinnacle of late Qing dynasty landscape photography. The studio created artistic views of the monumental rock formations, venerated for generations by pre-eminent poets and philosophers (**19**). Jeffrey W. Cody and Frances Terpak, renowned photography curators, state that the Tung Hing Studio photographs of the Wuyi Mountains "triggered references to Taoist settings in traditional ink paintings and a long-standing historic tradition related to the adulation of stones…"[13] The series of photographs expresses a traditional literati aesthetic long associated with the grand Chinese landscape they portray. These photographs are unmatched in their sensitivity, reflecting traditional Chinese landscape painting, *shanshui hua*.

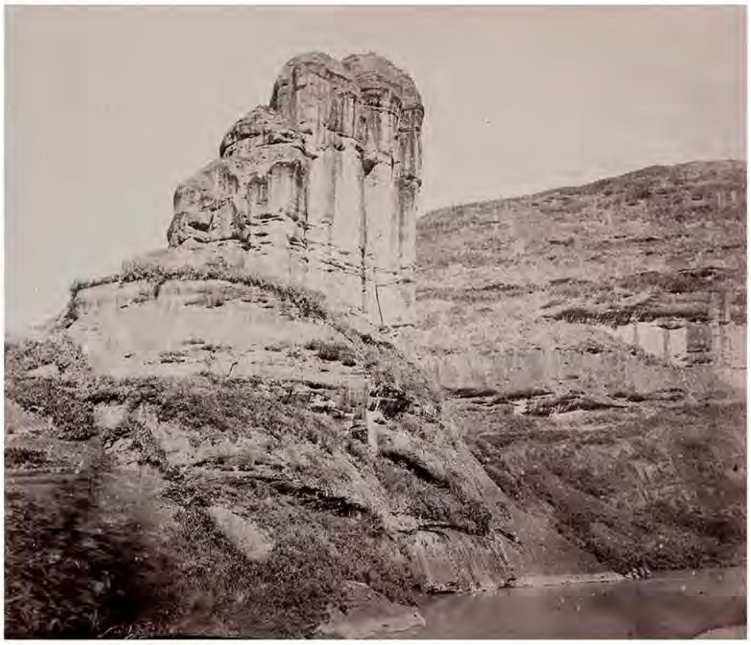
The Wuyi Mountains are considered the most beautiful mountain range in south-east China. Like the artists who preceded them, the earliest photographers of China were drawn to its scenic wonders. Lai Fong created the first known photographs of the region in 1869. Photographers travelled with their fragile photographic equipment on small boats and bamboo rafts along the Nine-Bend River to capture the earliest images of the stunning geological spectacles. Tung Hing Studio's view of the famous Jade Maiden Peak is part of the artist's series of photographs of the Wuyi Mountain range (**20**). To make these photographic prints, the studio used glass plate negatives meticulously coated and developed on site. The artist required precise lighting and weather conditions to capture the exquisite view.

Jade Maiden Peak stands at the confluence of Nine-Bend River and Two-Bend Stream. It faces Great King Peak across a stream with Iron Slab in the middle. The striking geological formation, with its smooth rock cliffs and regal form, is said to resemble a slender woman. Clusters of wildflowers bloom on the top of the peak and appear like a decorative garland in the maiden's hair.

An ancient Chinese legend connected with Jade Maiden Peak, well known by Chinese photography sudios and their clientele, reveals that the immortal Jade Maiden in Heaven admired the beauty of Earth and fell in love with Da Wang, the Great King. She decided to live with him on Wuyi Mountain. The Iron Slab Demon informed the Jade Emperor, who became furious and used his powers to separate the lovers. He turned the Jade Maiden and the Great King to stone, with Iron Slab forever standing between them. This legend, long referenced in poetry and traditional painting, is the subject matter presented by Tung Hing Studio as part of the series of almost ethereal photographs (**21**). Approximately 150 years after their creation, the photographs remain objects of contemplation and pleasure.

Shengqing Wu, the art historian, states: "… photographs possess certain affective qualities and an immediacy that

19 Tung Hing Studio. *View in the Wuyi Mountains.* 1870s. Albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection



20 Tung Hing Studio. *Jade Maiden Peak.* 1870s. Albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection

21 Tung Hing Studio. *Great King Peak*. 1870s. Albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection

22 Pow Kee Photographer's Studio. *View in Nanking*. 1888. Albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection

23 A Chan (Ya Zhen) Studio. *Portrait of a Female Guiqin Player*. 1870s. Albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection

directly communicates emotional information and engage the viewer's feelings".[14] Photographs by Chinese artists invite contemplation and ignite the viewer's imagination despite the time and distance that separates the viewer from the artists, places and moments when the photographs were made (**22**, **23**). Representing both personal and collective memory, the earliest images of China are charged with artistic and historical intensity. Early Chinese photographers mirrored and evoked the motifs, themes and styles of Chinese painting, transforming the new photographic medium into an art form.

The Loewentheil Collection is launching its first virtual exhibition, "Seizing Shadows: Rare Photographs by Late Qing Dynasty Chinese Masters". The virtual exhibition showcases a selection of rare 19th century photographs of China by pioneering Chinese photographers. The photographs, many never before digitised or published, are by major early photographers and studios including Lai Fong, Liang Shitai, Pun Lun Studio, Tung Hing Studio, A Chan (Ya Zhen) Studio, Pow Kee Studio, and others.

Stacey Lambrow, of the 19th Century Rare Book & Photograph Shop, specialises in historical photography of China. She is the curator of the Loewentheil Photography of China Collection and has curated international exhibitions on the early photography of China.

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[12] Wue, Roberta, "The Mandarin at Home and Abroad: Picturing Li Hongzhang", *Ars Orientalis*, Vol. 43 (Regents of the University of Michigan, The Smithsonian Institution), 2013, p. 146.

[13] Terpak, Frances and Jeffrey W. Cody, "Through a Foreign Glass", *Brush and Shutter: Early Photography in China*, edited by Jeffrey W. Cody and Frances Terpak, Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press in association with The Getty Research Institute, 2011, p. 56.

[14] Wu, Shengqing, *Photo Poetics: Chinese Lyricism and Modern Media Culture*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2020.