

# The Art of Lai Fong

黎芳

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1 Lai Fong. *Chinese Performers*. 1870s. Albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection

TSINGHUA UNIVERSITY Art Museum in Beijing hosted “Vision and Reflection: Photographs of China in the 19th Century from the Loewentheil Collection”, the museum’s inaugural photography exhibition, in 2018–2019. The exhibition presented masterpieces of early photography of China by twenty-one famous photographers, photographic studios and anonymous artists, among them Lai Fong (Li Fang, aka Lai Afong). The following year, in February 2020, the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University presented “黎芳 Lai Fong (ca. 1839–1890): Photographer of China”, the first museum exhibition of photographs devoted to a single 19th century Chinese photographer. The exhibition included nearly fifty photographs made by Lai Fong in the 1870s and 1880s. Most were selected from the more than 500 photographs attributed to Lai Fong in the Loewentheil Photography of China Collection of more than 20,000 early photographs. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Getty Research Institute and Cornell University Library also loaned photographs to the exhibition. Access to “黎芳 Lai Fong (ca. 1839–1890): Photographer of China” was limited due to the global health crisis. This article presents selected photographs from that exhibition and examines Lai Fong’s place as a leading figure in the history of photography in China.

Lai Fong (circa 1839–1890) holds a distinguished position in the history of 19th century photography for the

exceptional body of work he created in China. He assembled a vast collection of thousands of views<sup>1</sup> recording and preserving the rapidly shifting cultural landscape of the late Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Lai Fong’s photographic achievements form one of the most substantial visual bodies of information of China in the 19th century. The photographer travelled more extensively on photographic expeditions in the 1870s and 1880s than any other Chinese photographer. Expansive in both the range of views and subjects he captured, and sensitive as an artist, Lai Fong created photographs that continue to resonate with viewers today (1, 2). His negatives and prints, distinguished by their aesthetic rigour, were made with painstaking care and superior proficiency in photographic chemistry. Within decades of photography’s invention, Lai Fong mastered the new art form and produced some of the most accomplished early photographs of China ever created.

China’s tradition in optics predates the introduction of photographic technology from the West. It is recorded that over two millennia ago, the Chinese philosopher Mozi and

<sup>1</sup>Terry Bennett compiled an extensive list of known Lai Afong studio photographs arranged by location and the photographer’s numbering system. See Bennett, Terry, *History of the Photography of China: Chinese Photographers 1844–1879*, Quaritch, 2013.



2 Lai Fong. *Dragon Boat Festival*. 1870s.  
Albumen silver print. Loewentheil  
Photography of China Collection



3 Lai Fong. *View of Mountains, Peaks and Hills  
in Hong Kong*. 1870s. Albumen silver print.  
Loewentheil Photography of China Collection

his followers discussed theories of light and optics. Writings in the 11th century by Shen Kuo show that all the principles necessary for the camera obscura, a precursor to the camera, were known in China hundreds of years before the device appeared in the West.<sup>2</sup>

The earliest known report in China of the invention of photography appeared on December 14th, 1839 in the *Canton Press*, an English-language weekly newspaper circulated in southern China. The paper printed an extract from *Athenaeum*, the English journal, titled “Photogenic Drawing”, which gave a detailed account of Henry Fox Talbot’s new process. Soon after, in 1843, Jules Itier (1802–1877), the amateur French daguerreotypist, travelled on a commercial mission to China in which he created the earliest surviving photographs of the country. Itier noted in his journals that Chinese people enthusiastically embraced photography.<sup>3</sup> In the following years, as the daguerreotype gave way to the albumen silver print, many Chinese artists working in Hong Kong studios learned the evolving art of wet plate collodion photography. The most talented, ambitious and productive was Lai Fong (3).<sup>4</sup>

Lai Fong was internationally acclaimed in his time as the pre-eminent Chinese photographic artist. Though contemporary critics and pioneering European photographers did not recognise or appreciate Lai Fong’s formal or symbolic references to traditional Chinese art, they lauded his photographs of China in the most prestigious photographic journals. John Thomson (1837–1921), the Scottish photographer, dismissive of some Chinese and European photographers, offered high praise of Lai Fong, remarking that the photographer had “exquisite taste”.<sup>5</sup> Thomson conferred on Lai Fong a privileged status among his colleagues and competitors: “Judging from his portfolios of photographs, he must be an ardent admirer of the beautiful in nature; for some of his pictures, besides being extremely well executed, are remarkable for their artistic choice of position.”<sup>6</sup> D.K. Griffith, the British photographer, noted that Lai Fong “had entered the arena of European art, associating his name with photography in its best form”.<sup>7</sup> Lai Fong’s talent as a photographer of exceptional artistic ability and vision was publicly recognised, as was his

expertise as a gifted technician of the new photographic process.

The development of art photography in China derived in part from the work of the earliest Chinese photographers, none better known or more accomplished than Lai Fong and his studio. Despite Lai Fong’s early international reputation as a master photographer, his fame was obscured by a series of conflicts and political events in the 20th century at a time when much of China’s photographic heritage was lost. By the late 1930s, numerous cultural and art establishments in China had been destroyed. The cultural losses included photography studios, art and photography schools, publishing houses specialising in books on photography and illustrated periodicals, and an array of art houses and galleries. Burgeoning cinematographic production centres in China were also lost. Roberto Figliulo, the Chinese art historian, points out that “the few works of art, paintings, movies and photographs that are still preserved, miraculously survived the destruction of war”.<sup>8</sup> The disappearance of much of China’s photographic heritage has concealed Lai Fong’s position as an early master.

Chinese and foreign clients appreciated Lai Fong’s photographs and patronised his studio. He embraced the universality of the medium as both art and documentation, and his albumen silver prints were often affixed to album leaves and presented as custom photographic albums. Photographers in China composed these albums for submission to the imperial court, for purchase, and for their own archives and studio promotion.<sup>9</sup> In addition to individual prints, these albums circulated around China and the world. Lai Fong’s commercial success has overshadowed appreciation of his artistry until recently. Chinese art photography of the Republican era stands on the strong foundation created by Lai Fong and his fellow practitioners.

In the post-1949 period, the trajectory of Chinese art photography, that Lai Fong initiated, was interrupted. Photographers turned away from artful portraits, landscapes, architectural views and cityscapes. Their efforts were directed towards creating official images promoting patriotism and political leaders.<sup>10</sup> This view shaped much of the photography produced in China for decades until



4 Unidentified artist. *Portrait of Lai Fong*. Circa 1869. Albumen silver print. Scottish National Portrait Photography Collection (ref: PGPR 871.1)

the late 1970s.

Qi Xuemin, the art historian, explains that although rare collections of early photographs of China exist, people there know little about them, and systematic research of surviving photographs remains necessary for the development of the history of photography in China by scholars and academics.<sup>11</sup> Richard Kent, the scholar of Chinese painting and photography historian, states that “historians of late 19th and early 20th century Chinese visual culture are only beginning to acquire a clearer sense of how photography came to be viewed as a medium possessing expressive potential that transcends commercial or practical applications”.<sup>12</sup> Numerous Chinese art historians and scholars note that the earliest Chinese photographers drew from traditional Chinese paintings in terms of composition, motifs and tropes as they created portrait and landscape photographs. Kent asserts: “the skilled productions by such professional photographers as Lai Afong in Hong Kong and Liang Shitai in Tianjin arguably laid the foundation for the art photography of the Republican period”.<sup>13</sup>

Chinese artists in the 20th century, such as the photographer, Lang Jingshan (1892–1995), now revered as “indisputably the most prominent figure in the history of Chinese art photography”<sup>14</sup> and the “Father of Asian Photography”,<sup>15</sup> were aware of their photographic predecessors in China. Lang Jingshan repeatedly stated: “It was my father that started my interest in photography.”<sup>16</sup> Lang Jingshan’s father, Lang Jintang, had an interest in photography in the 19th century, and later when he travelled, he returned with photographs to show his son.<sup>17</sup> It is unlikely that Lang Jing-

shan and his contemporaries had the resources to identify their Chinese predecessors by name, as there was not yet a comprehensive history of Chinese photography. Indeed, it is only recently that guides to 19th century photography have been created through exhibitions and published books. Although, like Lai Fong, Lang Jingshan’s photographs were collected around the world before 1949, his name did not appear in the records of the People’s Republic for decades.<sup>18</sup> The most internationally celebrated Chinese photographers working prior to 1949, from Lai Fong to Lang Jingshan, are only now regaining wide recognition.

Although recent scholarship is making substantial progress, the scarcity of original photographs and the absence of archival records make it difficult to identify Lai Fong’s work. Indeed, the work of early Chinese photographers is

<sup>2</sup>In her article, Jennifer Purtle examines the development of light as a medium in China and explains how the Mohist epistemology of light and its media can be understood in relation to the Euclidean framework of early optics and its developments. See Purtle, Jennifer, “Double Take: Chinese Optics and their Media in Postglobal Perspective”, *Arx Orientalis* 48 (2018), pp. 71–117.

<sup>3</sup>Jules Itier’s Chinese diaries convey that Chinese people were interested in his daguerreotype instrument, and urged him to make portraits of them. See Itier, Jules, *Journal d’un voyage en Chine en 1843, 1844, 1845*, 3 vols, Chez Dauvin et Fontaine, Paris, 1848; also “Yule Aijier Souzhu Riji Zhongguo Zhilu Zhaichao” (于勒·埃及爾所著日記《中國之旅》摘抄), [Extracts from Jules Itier’s Diaries A Trip to China], RC, 1993, pp. 66–68.

<sup>4</sup>See Lee, Anthony, *The Global Flows of Early Scottish Photography: Encounters in Scotland, Canada, and China*, McGill Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 2019, p. 182.

<sup>5</sup>Thomson, John, “Hong-kong Photographers”, *British Journal of Photography*, Vol. 20, no. 656, November 1872, p. 569.

<sup>6</sup>Thomson, John, *The Straits of Malacca, Indo-China and China or Ten Years’ Travels, Adventures and Residence Abroad*, 1875, pp. 188–189.

<sup>7</sup>Griffith, D.K., “Pen-And-Ink Sketch of a London Studio”, *Photographic News*, Vol. 19, no. 899, November 26th, 1875, p. 565.

<sup>8</sup>Figliuolo, Roberto, “Between Public and Private Spaces: Photographic Visions in Contemporary China”, Doctoral thesis, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 2016, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup>See the Introduction by Gu Zheng and Stephanie Tung, in *The Chinese Photobook: From the 1900s to the Present*, Aperture, New York, 2015.

<sup>10</sup>See Mao Zedong’s 1942 “Talks at the Yanan Conference on Literature and Art”, which stipulated that art should be at the service of politics and must serve the broad masses of the people.

<sup>11</sup>Qi Xuemin, “Proving History with Images”, *Visions and Reflections*, Tsinghua University Press, 2018, pp. 36–37.

<sup>12</sup>Kent, Richard K., “Early Twentieth-Century Art Photography in China: Adopting, Domesticating, and Embracing the Foreign”, Vol. 3, no. 2, *Local Culture/Global Photography*, Spring 2013.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>See Lai, Kin-Keung Edwin, *The Life and Art Photography of Lang Jingshan (1892–1995)*, (Thesis), University of Hong Kong, 2000.

<sup>15</sup>Zhang Junmian, “China’s first nude photographer”, China.org.cn, November 29th, 2013.

<sup>16</sup>Lai, Kin-Keung Edwin, *The Life and Art Photography of Lang Jingshan (1892–1995)*, University of Hong Kong, 2000.

<sup>17</sup>Lang Jingshan, *Photographic Works of Chin-san Long*, The Photographic Society of China, Taipei, 1972, unpaginated.

<sup>18</sup>Mia Yinxing Liu, “The ‘Emulative’ Portraits: Lang Jingshan’s Photography of Zhang Daqian”, Vol. 6, no. 1, *Composite Realities: The Art of Photographic Manipulation in Asia*, guest edited by Claire Roberts and Yi Gu, Autumn 2015.

challenging to identify and requires meticulous study and comparison of firmly attributed photographs. Most 19th century photographs of China do not bear studio imprints, and early photographers rarely signed or marked their glass plate negatives. Photographs by Lai Fong, or Afong studio, are most often identified by their inclusion in albums displaying the Afong studio label on the inside cover, by printed labels with captions that accompanied some Afong studio photographs, and by reoccurring studio props, such as carpets and tables. A few rare examples exist with the “Afong” signature appearing in the print, after the artist inscribed his name on the glass plate negative.

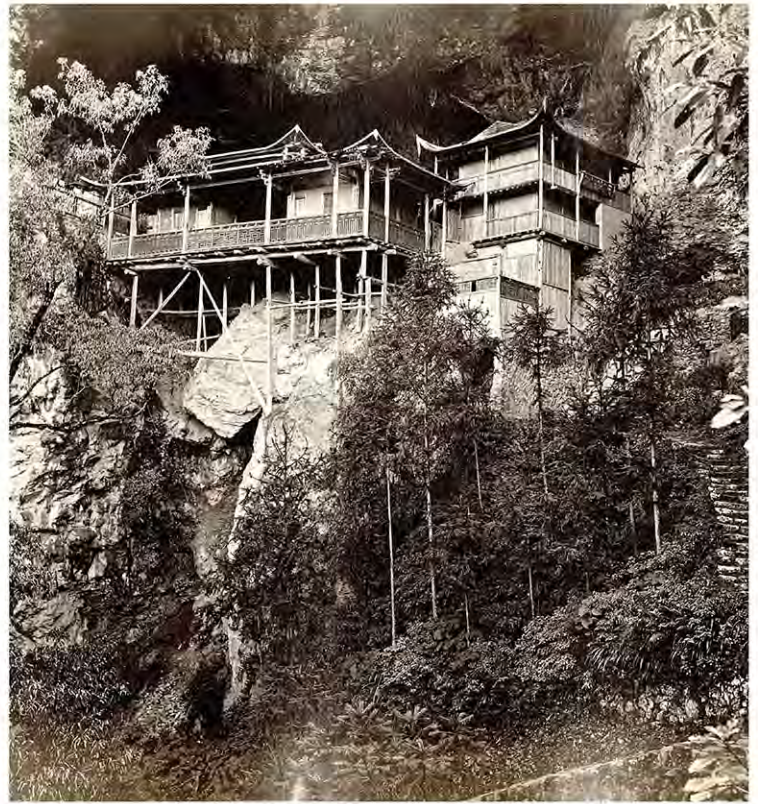
Photographs printed from Lai Fong’s own negatives dominated his studio’s production, but Afong studio also printed works by other notable foreign photographers, who sold their negatives to Lai Fong before they left China. This practice allowed Lai Fong to offer clients a larger and more diverse selection of images of China and its people. Albums composed of photographs printed by Afong studio may also include images taken by identified photographers, such as John Thomson, Dutton & Michaels, and Milton Miller (1830–1899). Rather than removing or covering the other photographer’s credit, which was the most common practice, Lai Fong usually chose to retain the studio markings of other photographers. Once he travelled to, and made his own views of important sites, he discontinued his use of these other negatives.

As scholars continue to progress in identifying rare photographs by Lai Fong in international collections, the photographer is reclaiming his elevated status in the history of Chinese and international art photography. At present, there is no great institutional collection of Lai Fong’s work in China, which is why exhibitions are of such academic value.

Little is known about Lai Fong’s life. His family was from Gaoming, west of Foshan in Guangdong province (4). Like many others, Lai Fong arrived in Hong Kong as a refugee from Guangdong after escaping the Taiping Rebellion. The artist worked for José Joaquim Alves de Silveira, the Portuguese photographer, early in his career. He learned the art and soon became one of the first Chinese photographers to set up an independent studio, Afong studio, in Hong Kong, that quickly became the most respected Chinese photography studio. The Afong studio offered an unparalleled selection of photographs, including superb views of Beijing, Shanghai, Fuzhou, Guangzhou, Yantai, Shantou, Xiamen and Hong Kong, as well as a diverse range of portraits.

The Afong studio survived its founder’s death in 1890 and continued to flourish, selling prints from negatives made by Lai Fong decades earlier. Lai Fong’s son, Lai Yuet-chen, and his daughter-in-law, Cheung Yuen Ming, ran the Hong Kong studio until sometime in the 1940s. Thus, the studio that Lai Fong established became one of the most prosperous and longest-standing photography studios in China, in operation for about eighty years.<sup>19</sup>

The history of the Chinese enterprise that Lai Fong founded began when the photographer created his first photographs, as early as 1859, at about age twenty. He formally established the Afong studio before 1870, and the earliest known public notice of Afong studio is an advertisement dated April 9th, 1870, published in the *Hong Kong Daily Press* on April 11th, 1870. Surviving albums in collec-



5 Lai Fong. *Façade of Fangguangyan Monastery, Fuzhou*. 1870s. Albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection

tions in Hong Kong, Europe and America, dated 1869, contain printed yellow studio labels pasted inside the front covers, “From Afong, Photographer, No. 54 Queen’s Road, Hongkong”, confirming that Lai Fong was independently active prior to his 1870 advertisement.

The Afong studio albums of photographs in and around the treaty port of Fuzhou in Fujian province include stunning views of the mountains and valleys of Wuyishan. The images evoke the scenery in ink paintings, as the photographs capture the region’s enormous rock formations, crooked crags, cliff faces and natural stone ledges that fascinated literati for centuries. John Thomson followed in Lai Fong’s footsteps, travelling to Fuzhou to create his magnum opus, *Foochow and the River Min*, after Lai Fong made the first known photographic expedition there (5). It is evident from surviving albums in collections in Europe and America that foreigners collected and embraced Lai Fong’s photographs. One of Lai Fong’s Fuzhou albums, dated 1869, held by the National Galleries of Scotland, contains a cabinet-sized portrait of the artist, one of only two known likenesses of the photographer.<sup>20</sup>

Afong studio catered to both Chinese and foreign clientele. In his essay, “Hong-kong Photographers”, published in 1872 in two issues of the *British Journal of Photography*, Thomson wrote: “It may not be generally known that the Chinese in Hong Kong and other parts of China have ‘taken kindly’ to photography” and that “a score of Chinese photographers ... do better work than is produced by the herd of obscure dabblers who cast discredit on the art in this country.”<sup>21</sup> Thomson explained that photography studios, operated by Chinese photographers in Hong Kong, sold works to an enthusiastic Chinese and foreign clientele. It is clear from surviving albums in Europe and America that Lai Fong’s photographs were appreciated by foreigners,



6 Lai Fong. *Portrait of Li Hongzhang*. 1870s.  
Albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography  
of China Collection



7 Lai Fong. *Great Tower Gate, Beijing*. 1870s.  
Albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography  
of China Collection

but they were also valued by local aficionados. Yi Gu, the scholar of Chinese art and photography, stated that in the 19th century, “Chinese consumers tended to favor native photographers over their Western rivals, because Chinese photographers better understood their preferences and were consequently more capable of tailoring photographic images to their tastes.”<sup>22</sup>

Lai Fong’s exceptional reputation, firmly established by 1869, permitted him to photograph China’s most significant people and events. He took photographs of China’s most influential residents and visitors, including intimate portraits of Chinese dignitaries, such as Li Hongzhang (1823–1901) (6). Lai Fong conveyed Li Hongzhang’s high status by taking the photograph from an angle that elevated the statesman, capturing his powerful and dynamic character. Li was one of the first Chinese officials to recognise the political and diplomatic power of the photographic image, and inscribed in his own calligraphy the mounts of his portraits, which he presented to foreign diplomats to project his power and circulate his image around the world. Yi Gu noted: “Chinese scholars and their clients freely adapted visual conventions from painting. Photographic prints were often inscribed with calligraphy and occasionally even mounted on silk.”<sup>23</sup> Lai Fong’s local clients thus approached his photographs with the same familiarity with which they would approach traditional Chinese art.

Afong studio advertisements proudly announced that Lai Fong was a photographer by appointment to H.E. Sir Arthur Kennedy (1809–1883), Governor of Hong Kong, and H.I.H. the Grand Duke Alexis of Russia (1850–1908). In 1879, he photographed Chinese officials and important foreign ministers at a diplomatic conference in Beijing, demonstrating his skill in commemorating significant events of this kind. Afong studio advertisements also boasted of its

“larger, choicer, and more complete collection of views, than any other in the Empire”<sup>24</sup> and declared that the collection is steadily expanding. In Beijing, for example, Lai Fong created the earliest known surviving photographs of the ancient capital made by a Chinese photographer (7).<sup>25</sup> His comprehensive, and indexed, catalogue of photographs is a visual compendium of life in the late Qing dynasty, which stands among the most important bodies of work in the history of the photography of China.

In addition to landscapes, cityscapes, architectural views and portraits, Afong studio also sold a series of character or genre studies (8, 9). The studio organised its collection by location and subject matter, providing printed captions in Chinese and English to describe the images to its cosmopolitan clientele. Lai Fong’s decades of work resulted in a grand, sweeping view of China in the 19th century. The studio advertisements also mention the studio’s numerous artistic services and the photographer’s use of the latest photographic equipment. The artist knew that, although it was his mind and eyes that created a work of art, a fine lens and camera were essential to the creation of a commanding print. The manufacturer of Lai Fong’s cameras and lenses remain unknown, but the quality of his photographs makes it evident that he operated the most

<sup>19</sup>See Bennett, Terry, *History of Photography in China: Chinese Photographers 1844–1879*, p. 98.

<sup>20</sup>Bennett, Terry, *History of Photography in China: Chinese Photographers 1844–1879*, p. 69.

<sup>21</sup>Thomson, John, “Hong-kong Photographers”, *British Journal of Photography*, Vol. 20, no. 656, November 1872, p. 569; and no. 658, December 1872, p. 591.

<sup>22</sup>Yi Gu, “What’s in a Name? Photography and the Reinvention of Visual Truth in China, 1840–1911”, *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 95, no. 1 (March 2013), p. 121.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>See Kelly & Walsh’s *Handbook to Hongkong*, published in 1893.

<sup>25</sup>Both the Loewentheil Collection and the Rare and Manuscript Collection of Cornell University Library hold collections of the earliest photographs of Beijing by Lai Fong.



8 Lai Fong. *Portrait of a Caregiver and a Child*. 1870s. Albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection



9 Lai Fong. *Barber*. 1870s. Albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection

technically sophisticated models available. He managed to achieve remarkable results, producing his negatives despite the arduous circumstances of working with photographic chemistry in challenging and diverse climates.

Creating a photograph in the late 19th century was technically difficult. Although a crude machine captured the moment, Lai Fong orchestrated each aspect of the photograph's artistic and technical production, resulting in the original photograph being the artist's personal creation. He experimented with lenses, cameras, light conditions and exposure times, while formulating photographic chemicals to his own precise specifications.

The wet plate collodion process was the prevailing means of creating photographic negatives from the 1850s to the 1880s. The process produced sharply detailed images. A glass plate negative was evenly coated with sticky collodion on site, at the location the photograph was made; it was then sensitised with silver nitrate in the dark just minutes before it was placed wet in the camera and then exposed and processed. The process required clean water and a nearby, or portable, dark room, which sometimes appears in Lai Fong's photographs. Depending on weather conditions, the photographer had approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete the process.

Lai Fong then made albumen silver prints from his glass plate negatives by floating a pliable lightweight rag paper in a bath of chloride and freshly beaten egg whites (albumen). Once the paper dried, it was sensitised in silver nitrate and dried again, before it was loaded into a printing frame and exposed through the negative to bright sunlight. Then, the

paper was rinsed, fixed in a bath of sodium thiosulfate and rinsed again. Each photographic print is a distinct impression, its history beginning and reflecting a specific time and place in China. Lai Fong overcame challenging obstacles to convey the character of a particular time and place, or to reveal the psychological state of the people appearing in his portraits. He created works of art that transcend time.

The artist's direct involvement in the creation of his photographs allows for the transmission of atmosphere and feeling that is passed through the photographer, the camera and the chemicals, and onto a thin sheet of an otherwise inconsequential piece of paper. Lai Fong's photographs are more than just accurate historical records—they impart to distant viewers across the ages an experience of the moment he captured. Surviving photographs by Lai Fong passed before the eyes, and through the hands, of an early photographic master.

Liu Bannong's *Bannong tanying* (1927) is the earliest book on Chinese photography as fine art. Liu argued that Chinese photographers should convey their artistic ideas through their particular interpretations of the subjects they photograph,<sup>26</sup> stating:

We must not forget that we are Chinese. We must use the camera to express fully our own characteristics, distinct sentiments, and the literary flavors of the Chinese people. This will distinguish our works from the works of photographers from other countries and enables our works to establish their own kind of character.<sup>27</sup>



10 Lai Fong. *Dinghu Waterfall at Dinghushan*. 1870s. Albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection



11 Lai Fong. *A Mandarin's Wife*. 1870s. Albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection

Liu's theories suggest that Chinese photographers borrow artistic concepts from traditional Chinese art, not just in subject matter, but formally. Lai Fong, as well as a number of other Chinese photographers in the 19th century, reflected traditional Chinese art in their work decades prior to Liu's influential treatise on Chinese art photography.

Immersed in the artistic traditions of China, Lai Fong's work reveals the influence of Chinese literati painting and traditional Chinese art, which heightened his appeal to his domestic clientele. His photographs of natural landscapes, reflecting his appreciation for *shan shui* paintings, show that his work was inspired by a traditional style of Chinese art. His photograph of the Dinghu Waterfall at Dinghushan is reminiscent of a Chinese art tradition (10). This arresting image, like the stunning views of the rock formations of Wuyishan taken in 1869, invites the viewer to contemplate humankind's place in the natural landscape. The achievements of Afong studio are the foundation upon which the art of Chinese landscape photography was built.

Lai Fong's landscapes are masterpieces of early photographic art, distinct from, but equal to, the works of famous European and American photographers, such as Gustave Le Gray (1820–1884) in France and Carleton Watkins (1829–1916) in America. In the manner of Le Gray, Lai Fong at times used his negative as a starting point for his own artistic intervention through retouching. Like Watkins, the pioneering photographer of the American West, Lai Fong captured the majesty and power of his nation's natural landscape. Lai Fong and Watkins made arduous journeys to photograph places of great beauty, and the locations

they photographed remain preserved and protected today by the governments of their respective countries. Leading museums throughout the world collect and exhibit works by Le Gray and Watkins. Lai Fong's photographs merit the same honour.

Lai Fong's portraits are among the most important of the late Qing dynasty. After 150 years, viewers continue to sense the sitter's inner thoughts, feelings, personality and even their response to being photographed. Some of his portraits, such as *A Mandarin's Wife*, were created in a distinctly Chinese style, resembling imperial and ancestral or commemorative portraits (11). Posing for the camera was a formal event for most people in the 19th century. Lai Fong was able to collaborate with his clients to create portraits that at times presented an idealised self. Through the position and gaze of his sitters, their clothing and the use of symbolic props, these portraits convey the dignity and character of their subjects (12, 13, 14).

The photographic format most connected with Lai Fong's distinct artistic lineage is the panorama, which he favoured more than any other photographer working in China in the 19th century (15). The photographic panorama, comprising several individual prints fastened together, resembles a Chi-

<sup>26</sup> Lai, Kin-Keung Edwin, *The Life and Art Photography of Lang Jingshan (1892–1995)*, University of Hong Kong, 2000, p. 104.

<sup>27</sup> Liu Bannong: "Preface" (序), *Beiping Guangshe Nianjian* (北平光社年鑑) [Annual of Guangshe, Beiping], Vol. 2, 1928, reprinted in Long Xizu (ed.): *Zhongguo Jindai Sheying Yishu Meixue Wenxuan*, pp. 208–209.



12 Lai Fong. *Portrait of Women from Xiamen*. 1870s. Albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection



13 Lai Fong. *Portrait of an Official*. 1870s. Albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection



14 Lai Fong. *Portrait of Merchant*. 1870s. Albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection





15 Lai Fong. *Hong Kong Panorama*. 1870s. Three albumen silver print panorama. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection

nese hand scroll. These grand works of art were an artistic and technical challenge to create. Achieving a successful photographic panorama using the wet plate collodion process required making a sequence of exposures pivoting the camera from a fixed point. Lai Fong meticulously plotted out each camera position accurately to be sure the scale remained consistent, compensating for uneven ground. He had to secure a unified set of negatives by maintaining consistent exposure, contrasts and chemistry to preserve the effect of a harmonious view. He devoted countless hours practising and perfecting his technique and experimenting with trail prints to master the skills necessary to accomplish his artistic vision. His panoramic views of majestic landscapes and the bustling cities of China are artistic and technical triumphs.

Lai Fong appreciated technical innovation in art making. He painstakingly retouched glass plate negatives with an ink brush and made his own primitive attempts at combining negatives to achieve atmosphere and mood (16). Decades before Lang Jingshan created the composite photographs for which he is famous, Lai Fong achieved something similar. However, they shared more than technical and artistic similarities: a philosophical view of photography. Lang Jingshan asserted that photography was an “international language”, writing in 1978:

Photography is a kind of international language. It can break down the barriers imposed by space and time, and communicate despite the differences in written or spoken languages. It is the best method to enhance mutual understanding, friendship, world peace and international communion.

The Afong studio photographs from the 19th century provide an opportunity to see China and its people through the lens of a talented and ambitious Chinese master before the epochal transformations of the 20th century. Each of his original photographs embodies both artistic achievement and deep historical significance (17). The exhibition, “黎芳 Lai Fong (ca. 1839–1890): Photographer of China”, at the Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, was received with international acclaim. Bringing together important and rare works by Lai Fong from the Loewentheil Photography of China Collection, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Getty Research Institute, and Cornell Library’s Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, it provided a substantial body of rare original works for students and scholars of art history and visual culture to study to further cultural understanding.



16 Lai Fong. *Pazhou Pagoda*. 1870s. Albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection



17 Lai Fong. *Chinese Junks*. 1870s. Albumen silver print. Loewentheil Photography of China Collection

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