

The Empress Dowager and the Camera

Photographing Cixi, 1903-1904

by David Hogge

Photographing
Cixi

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Few photographs remain of the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908), China's notorious head of state during the final decades of the imperial era. Cixi used photographs to model perceptions of her character at the very moment photography was becoming a mass-media vehicle and the Qing dynasty (1644 to 1912) was struggling to survive in a hostile imperialistic world.

Following the virulently anti-foreign Boxer Uprising in 1900, many Chinese as well as foreigners blamed Cixi personally for this disaster. In response, the Qing court initiated measures to reach out to foreign nations through personal diplomacy. Cixi invited members of the foreign legations in Beijing into the palace for luncheons, and appointed a number of Manchus who had been raised overseas to translate and help negotiate the confusing social contacts with Westerners. One of these foreign-raised Manchus was

a young man named Xunling (1880–1943), the son of a former ambassador to Tokyo and Paris. Xunling had picked up a passion for photography while overseas. Upon learning this, Cixi engaged him to take a series of individual portraits and elaborate group tableaux that very much reflected her love of theater, as well as her acute awareness that photography could be exploited to change her public image and simultaneously reaffirm her authority.

This Visualizing Cultures unit is based on 36 of Xunling's glass negatives in the collection of the Smithsonian Institution's Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives. The remainder of Xunling's existing photographs are held by the National Palace Museum in Beijing, or exist only in poor quality commercial reproductions. As such, the Freer set is an important but little known visual record of the advancement of photography as it intruded even into the reclusive inner spaces of the Qing court. There is anecdotal testimony that portraits of Cixi were made by other photographers, but Xunling's series taken in 1903 and 1904 provides the only surviving photographs of the late Qing dynasty's most significant political figure.

Images in this unit, unless otherwise noted, are from the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

PHOTOGRAPHING CIXI

From the 1860s until her death in 1908, the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908) was the dominant political figure in the Qing court. In spite of having begun her career at court as a mid-level concubine, her status as the mother of an emperor, coupled with keen political acumen, ensured her prolonged influence nearly to the end of the Qing dynasty. Cixi's reign was marked by military and economic setbacks, with only sporadic and short-lived attempts at reform and modernization. The Qing court's reputation at that time was mostly one of rigid conservatism, corruption, and incompetence. Yet Cixi herself was also an enthusiastic patron of the arts and of theater, and expanded court decorative arts and opera in bold and innovative ways.

The original intention of the Empress Dowager photographs is difficult to assess. By all accounts, Cixi was fascinated with the photographic process, and took an active role in directing the content and composition of each image. It can certainly be argued that the photographs reflect her personal aesthetic preferences for rich, lushly detailed display. Furthermore, a close analysis of the photographs reveals a wealth of visual and textual markers that denote her religious, political, and theatrical interests. Clearly, these photographs must be approached as visual autobiography.

Yet, the photographs were not only an imperial exercise in creative self-representation, but also were enlisted as part of a strategic response to the Qing court's need to construct a more favorable public identity for its controversial sovereign. Carefully beautified and elaborately painted prints of the photographs were distributed to ministers, governors, and generals, conveying a gracious sovereign with both political legitimacy and benevolent dignity. Likewise, prints presented to President Theodore Roosevelt in 1904 and his daughter Alice in 1905 underscore the complex engagement with foreign powers by the Qing court through the employment of portrait exchange as a means of developing personal support for China's diplomatic objectives.

Finally, the question remains as to whether the photographs were intended as a means of instilling loyalty to the Empress Dowager among her Chinese subjects. Almost immediately following their production, copies of the photographs were being sold on the streets of Chinese cities. Regardless of whether the court actively encouraged their distribution in the manner of other world leaders such as Queen Victoria, or whether they were helpless to prevent them from leaking out, the photographic portraits became a prevalent and enduring symbol of a dying and decadent reign, lending visual form to a dramatic character that would eventually materialize into the “Dragon Lady” in countless Chinese and foreign films of the 20th century.



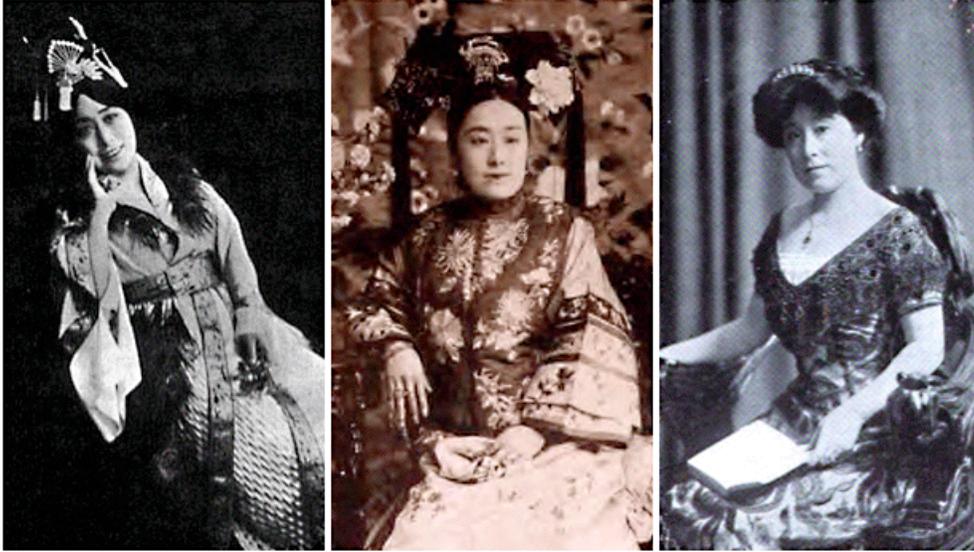
Details from a selection of Xunling’s photographs of the Empress Dowager Cixi—regent of China for 47 years—show the types of poses, dress, and settings she wanted to present as her official image.

The Empress Dowager & her Court Intimates

Imbued with a very feminine love of luxury, addicted to pleasure, and at one period of her life undoubtedly licentious after the manner of her Court’s traditions.... [1]

Tze-hsi [Cixi] cannot therefore be acquitted of a considerable amount of cruelty, of excessive ambition, of proneness to absurd superstition, of extravagance careless of the source whence it satisfied its needs, and of a pliancy of behavior perilously close to insincerity. [2]

In 1964, the Freer Gallery acquired 36 glass negatives from a Los Angeles dealer showing images of the Empress Dowager. No information was provided about their provenance except that they were from the estate of Princess Der Ling (Deling; 1885–1944), a writer who had achieved minor celebrity status in the United States as the author of a series of popular first-person accounts of her two years serving in the Empress Dowager’s court.



Three photographs of Princess Der Ling, ca. 1911–1920

*Der Ling, who was fluent in English, wrote about the Empress Dowager in her 1911 book, *Two Years in the Forbidden City*, featuring photographs of Cixi taken by Der Ling's brother, Xunling.*

Wikimedia [cx413] [cx412] [cx432]

Der Ling's books were strikingly illustrated with the photographs, which she claimed were taken by her brother Xunling (ca. 1880–1943), who had picked up photography as a hobby in Tokyo and then Paris, where their father was the Chinese ambassador.

While many scholars and China specialists were skeptical of Deling's sensational accounts of life in Cixi's court, the photographs of her at the side of the Empress Dowager at least corroborated the core of her story.

right: Xunling, ca. 1900

Introduced to photography in Paris, Xunling was the photographer of the photographs of Cixi in this unit.

Wikimedia Commons [cx409]





*Der Ling “assisting Her Imperial Majesty, the Empress Dowager of China, going down Peony Hill toward her Palace”
(caption in Der Ling’s 1911 book).*

[cx115]

Xunling’s portraits have maintained a public presence, mostly as illustrations for newspapers and history books, epitomizing the reclusive luxury of the final years of imperial China—valued as historical artifacts, but with little attention given to their qualities as photographic art. While the bulk of Xunling’s original photographic prints remained in Beijing’s Forbidden City, the Freer negatives are a unique subset showing the raw originals prior to the heavy reworking required to turn them into a finished portrait.



THE EMPRESS DOWAGER OF CHINA.

While Cixi's image abroad was largely that of a tyrannical "dragon lady," this romanticized portrait said to be a depiction of her as a young woman also circulated in publications such as Chinese Characteristics by Arthur Smith (1894, 1st edition).

[cx224]

Born into the family of a mid-level Manchu official in or around 1835, Cixi entered the palace as a mid-level concubine in 1857. Her status rose dramatically in 1856 when she bore the Xianfeng Emperor's only son. After Xianfeng's death in 1861, Cixi became co-regent over her son the Tongzhi Emperor (1856–1875), along with the Empress Ci'an (1837–1881). Although women traditionally held little influence in China's imperial court, the mother of an emperor or widow of a deceased emperor carried considerable authority to sway policy by forming personal alliances with the imperial princes. Cixi proved particularly adept at court politics and developed considerable influence, even after her son took direct authority upon his majority in 1873.

Following the Tongzhi Emperor's premature death in 1876, Cixi amassed even greater power as regent to her three-year-old nephew, enthroned as the Guangxu Emperor (1871–1908). Cixi again stepped down when Guangxu was 17, but the conservative faction's alarm at his modernization reforms of 1898 led to Cixi's reinstatement as regent. Her position in the court remained unassailable until her death in 1908.



*Traditional imperial portraits:
Cixi and the three emperors with
whom she was associated.*

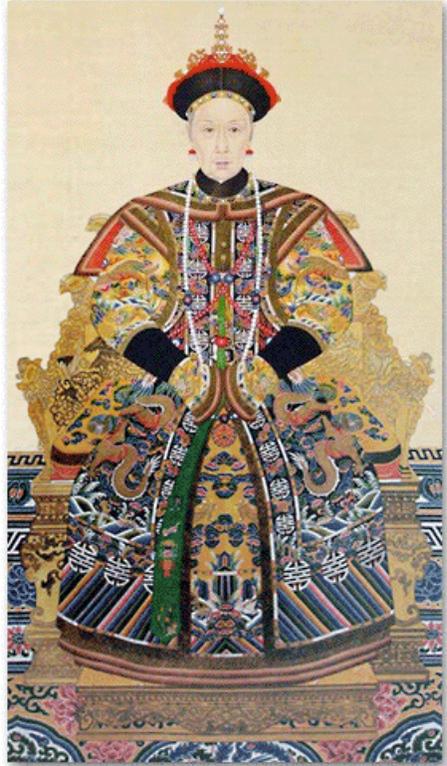
*above, left to right:
Xianfeng Emperor (1831–1861):
Cixi gained power as the mother
of his only heir.
[cx308]*

*Tongzhi Emperor (1856–1875):
Cixi's son with the Xianfeng Emperor
became emperor at age five.
[cx307]*

*Guangxu Emperor (1871–1908):
Cixi's nephew, whom she adopted so
that she could act as regent.
[cx306]*

*right: Imperial portrait of Cixi
[cx309]*

Images: Wikimedia Commons



Outside of the palace, China was suffering near continual disaster and decline, both economically and militarily. Rebellions had revealed the underlying vulnerability of Qing control, and repeated defeats by foreign military powers left the court weakened, saddled with crippling war indemnities, and tolerated by foreign military powers only for the sake of avoiding social breakdown and unrest. Cixi was personally condemned by the West for inciting the Boxers to attack foreign residents and Chinese Christians, and for standing in the way of China's modernization. Restricted contact with foreigners increased the impression that the court was aloof, arrogant, and hostile to foreigners.

Cixi was personally condemned by the West for inciting the Boxers to attack foreign residents and Chinese Christians, and for standing in the way of China's modernization. A grotesque Cixi holding a bloody dagger dominates the cover of the French magazine Le Rire, July 14, 1900. The severed heads and mutilated bodies of Christians appear skewered in the background.

[cx222]



Cixi's Image Problem

China's war with seven Western powers and Japan in the Boxer Uprising of 1900 contributed to severe image problems for the Empress Dowager abroad. In these graphics from France, Germany, Austria, and the United States, Cixi is portrayed as a bloated tyrant, a witch, an "empress" gloating over caged foreigners, and a murderess in a mug shot.



*“Nouveaux Massacres en Chine”
Le Petit Journal, March 6, 1904 (France)
caption “L’Imperatrice douairiere presente a
l’Empereur les tetes des mandarins accuses
d’avoir favorise les interets russes.”
(The Empress Dowager has presented to the
Emperor the heads of mandarins accused of
favoring Russian interests.)*

[cx215]



*“Der Hexenritt in China”
(The Witch’s Ride in China)
Der Floh, 1900 (Germany)*

*caption “It is said in the way of Confucius
about the rule of Tsu-tsie
If over the waters of the Yang-Tse-Kiang
The sun rises from Li-Hung-Chang,
Two dragons will drive you out of the country
well
But a thousand devils come running.”*

(click for the original text)

[cx228]

*“Der Hexenritt in China”
(The Witch’s Ride in China)
Der Floh, 1900 (Germany)*

*caption “Es sprach der Weise Confuci
ueber die Herrschaft der Tsu-Tsie
Wenn ueber die Waesser des Yang-Tse-Kiang
Die Sonne steigt von Li-hung-Tschang,
Dann treibt man Zwei Drachen wohl aus dem
Land, Doch tausende teufel kommen gerannt.”*

(click for an English translation)

[cx228]



Kikeriki, No. 97 June 12, 1900 (Austria)
*caption "Cette bonne impératrice de Chine
 garde soigneusement dans le plus intime de
 son palais, les représentants des puissances.
 Alors! que signifie?"
 (This good empress of China carefully guards
 in the innermost part of the palace the
 representatives of the Powers. So! what does
 that mean?)*

[cx235]

 DOWAGER EMPRESS OF CHINA.
 (Reprinted from The Chicago Herald-Examiner)



 This frowning, begowned old lady is an interesting feature of the "Boxer"
 troubles. She bears a strong resemblance to Mrs. Mack, the New York
 murderess, and if gossip that has floated in from the Orient is
 reliable, she is aiding in wholesale slaughter by secretly encouraging the present uprising
 in China.

Atlanta Constitution, June, 1900
 (United States)

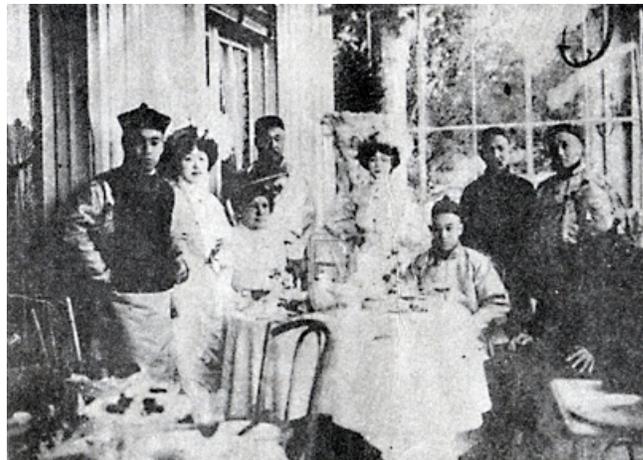
*caption "This frowning, begowned old lady
 is an interesting feature of the 'Boxer'
 troubles. She bears a strong resemblance to
 Mrs. Mack, the New York murderess, and if
 gossip that has floated in from the Orient is
 reliable, she is aiding in wholesale
 slaughter by secretly encouraging the
 present uprising in China."*

[cx252]

Following the occupation of Beijing by the Eight Nation Alliance in 1900, foreign representatives demanded revisions to court protocols to allow unfettered access by diplomatic representatives. Because of the pressing need to accommodate the outside world, the court needed assistants adept at interaction with foreigners. A decision was made to enlist an extraordinary family headed by the diplomat Yugeng (d. 1905), a Manchu bannerman who had served as minister to Tokyo in 1895, and then to Paris in 1899. His wife, Louisa Pearson, was the daughter of a Han Chinese mother and an American businessman, and fluent in English. While overseas, their four children learned multiple languages and Western social graces.

*The Manchu diplomat
 Yugeng (seated at right) and
 family in Paris with the
 visiting Prince Zai Feng
 (seated, center) in 1901*

Wikimedia Commons [cx405]



The daughters Der Ling (Deling) and Rong Ling (Rongling, 1882–1973) in particular were immersed in modern Parisian culture, studying acting under Sarah Bernhardt and dance with Isadora Duncan. Unquestionably, this was a family capable of navigating the social complexities of visits by foreign diplomats and dignitaries. In early 1903, the family was summoned back to Beijing, and Louisa and her two daughters were brought to the New Summer Palace and retained as translators, advisors, and intermediaries.



Cixi accompanied by Der Ling, Rong Ling, and their mother Louisa Pearson in the gardens of the Yiheyuan (New Summer Palace)

detail [cx114]

How Yugeng's photographer son Xunling was introduced into the court is somewhat less clearly documented. Unlike his more-famous sisters, little is known about Xunling, aside from an essay written by Rongling's daughter Lydia Dan when she visited the Freer Gallery in 1982:

Hsün-ling (Xunling) acted as his father's private secretary and took up photography as a hobby while in Japan. He was not an ambitious man; the eldest of two boys and two girls, he was content with whatever fate dealt him, unassuming. The family looked upon him as being stupid. He was married at the age of 15, had a daughter and a son. [4]

By most accounts, the photo sessions were conceived by Cixi, perhaps in response to her awareness of photographic portraits of other imperial figures such as Queen Victoria and the Czar and Czarina of Russia. According to Der Ling, Cixi realized that it would be impossible to bring in a professional photographer:

My mother thereupon explained to Her Majesty that if she desired to have her photograph taken, one of my brothers, who had studied photography for some considerable time, would be able to do all that was necessary. [5]

Xunling was summoned to the New Summer Palace with his cameras and darkroom equipment. A studio was set up in the courtyard of Leshoutang, the main residence hall, and a makeshift throne room assembled. Special permission was required for Xunling to be seated in the Imperial presence in order to see through the lens, and his near-sightedness required permission for him to wear glasses in order to focus. Amusing anecdotes aside, high resolution scans of Xunling's negatives do reveal some limitation in eyesight: focal points are often erratic at best.



An informal portrait in the garden of Yiheyuan

detail [cx116]

Without question, Xunling was an amateur photographer with limited technical skills. Yet in spite of his limitations, the images are compelling. While some commentators call Xunling China's first art photographer, it may be a stretch to ascribe artistry to an amateur photographer with such a limited, anomalous portfolio; yet there is undeniably a majestic quality to many of the photographs that transcends Xunling's abilities, probably due to Cixi's own artistic engagement in the process.

Cixi was fascinated with the technology, and actively dictated the choice and placement of figures, costumes, and props. Cixi's love of bold, sumptuous patterns and her passion for Chinese theater are strongly suggested in the densely crowded compositions of the photographs, filled with riotous patterns of lotuses, brocades, fruit, plants, and decorative screens, in contrast to traditional Chinese studio portraits with their spare use of conventional props.



Traditional Chinese portrait

[cx201]



Cixi's official portrait for diplomatic visitors

[cx202]

Cixi's love of rich decorative elements and theatrical settings are in sharp contrast to traditional Chinese studio photographs (left) with their spare use of props.

In this sense, the creative relationship of Cixi and Xunling is unique in the history of Chinese portrait photography, combining the photographer's technical training with the subject's own emphatic aesthetic vision. Almost immediately following their production, the photographs made their way into public view, reprinted in the press.

It is not clear whether Cixi or her court were complicit in the release of these images. What is clear is that the photographs were used as gifts to officials and as diplomatic exchange. The Qing court recognized that photographic portraiture could be an effective tool to rehabilitate Cixi's damaged image, by conveying specific perceptions of imperial authority, religious piety, and moral refinement. In sum, the photographs hint at complex and multi-layered intentions: as Cixi's personal exercise in creative self-representation, as a strategic response to the Qing court's damaged public reputation, and as part of a program to develop international support through personal diplomacy.

Model Rulers

There is no hard and fast evidence that, in refurbishing her image after the Boxer Uprising, Cixi was directly influenced by photographs of Western royalty. Still, in her famous memoir Two Years in the Forbidden City, Princess Der Ling suggests that the Empress Dowager did indeed model her new self to some degree on Queen Victoria, who died in 1901. It is Victoria who is usually credited with popularizing royal portrait photography and, as the following two images suggest, the similarity between her official portraits and Cixi's (taken in 1903 or 1904) is unmistakable.

Victoria, 16 years older than Cixi, was photographed early and extensively during her 68-year reign, the first known photograph of her being taken in 1844.



*Queen Victoria as photographed for
her Diamond Jubilee, 1897*

[cx315]



Cixi's 1903–04 portrait

[cx110]

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PIETY & POWER

Her Majesty said: "Let us go and have some more pictures taken while the weather is fine." So she walked the courtyard of the Audience Hall, where my brother had a camera ready, and had another photograph taken. She said that she would like to have some taken sitting on her throne, exactly as though she were holding an audience. It took us only a few minutes to have everything prepared in the courtyard. The screen was placed behind the throne, and her footstool was also placed ready for her, and she ordered one of the Court ladies to go and bring several gowns for her to select from. At the same time I went and brought some of her favorite jewelry. She ordered the two gowns which she had worn at the audiences when she received Admiral Evans and Mrs. Evans, to be brought in, and also the same jewels as she had worn on those respective occasions. She had two photographs taken in these costumes, one in each dress. [6]

Ten negatives of the Empress Dowager seated or standing alone before a throne comprise the largest subject group. Cixi presents herself in a variety of costumes, jewelry, and headdresses, but with a nearly uniform setting and furnishings. All were taken in the same makeshift outdoor studio in front of the Leshoutang in the New Summer Palace. At first glance, the portraits appear repetitious, but careful comparison suggests a richer variety of content. Some poses affect a state of regal authority, while others range from a Western-style casual contemplation to a theatricality that is jarringly coquettish.

Regal Fashion

Cixi changed gowns and accessories frequently in this photo series posed with a throne in Xunling's outdoor studio. Each costume is described in photographic inventories, such as "Imperial Portraits in Dragon Robe and with Crown." Cixi's attention to appearance, ingrained from her days as a young imperial concubine and heightened by her great love of theater, offers a contrast to the thoroughly predictable paintings of Qing court luminaries. This personal sense of fashion went hand in hand with her new appreciation of the power of photography in presenting a positive regal image to the outside world.



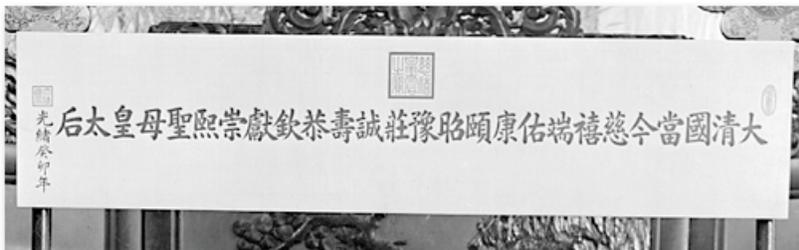
[cx104] [cx105] [cx102]
[cx109] [cx107] [cx108]

In a book on the Palace Museum's collection of Empress Dowager photographs, Lin Jing writes that Cixi had the photographs she liked enlarged, mounted in elaborate frames, and hung in her bedroom. "At that time, most of these photographs were hung in bedchamber on round-headed silver hooks shaped like flying dragons. Besides, a pair of hooks was used to support the bottom of the heavy frame."



Cixi rests her hand with its prominent, ornamented fingernails on a Victorian-style pedestal.

[cx103]



The banner in the background of Cixi's portraits generally include her honorary title as Grand Empress Dowager of the Qing Empire and, as typical of Qing imperial rulers, included her lengthy accumulated titles describing her virtues.

detail [cx103]



“4-inch-long gold covers protect the third and little fingernails of her right hand and jade covers with the same length protect the third and little fingernails of her left hand.”

Lin Jing, The Photographs of Cixi in the Collection of the Palace Museum, page 30.

detail [cx103]

The seemingly coquettish poses Cixi sometimes assumed have long puzzled scholars, since they seem so out of character for a head of state—especially where she gazes into a hand mirror as she places a flower in her hair, rather in the manner of a young concubine. (See the opening photo in this unit.) The pose may have held particular meaning for her, since she repeats it several times.

It is possible that she is drawing from a scene in *The Orchid Pavilion*, one of her favorite popular operatic dramas—a theatrical reference that members of her court would immediately recognize. Regardless of origins, the striking individualism implicit in the pose reveals a willfulness exceptional for a woman so bound by convention and propriety.



A close-up detail in a formal outdoor group portrait of Cixi and her attendants unexpectedly reveals her using a small mirror to adjust her hair ornaments.

[cx124] full and detail



Venerable Old Buddha

Whenever I have been angry, or worried over anything, by dressing up as the Goddess of Mercy it helps me to calm myself, and so play the part I represent. I can assure you that it does help me a great deal, as it makes me remember that I am looked upon as being all-merciful. By having a photograph taken of myself dressed in this costume, I shall be able to see myself as I ought to be at all times. [7]

At the farther end of the performative nature of the photographs, Xunling shot two sets of religious tableaux in his studio in the New Summer Palace in which Cixi appears as Avalokitesvara, the androgynous bodhisattva (enlightened-being) who most deeply exemplified the Buddhist virtue of compassion. Predictably, these tableaux have provoked a range of critical responses.



Cixi posing as the compassionate bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, with the high-ranking eunuchs Li Lien Ying and Tsue Yu Gay.

[cx128]

There were, in fact, many Qing imperial precedents for portraits identifying with a divinity, such as a well-known 18th-century painting of the Qianlong Emperor (1711–99) as Manjusri, a bodhisattva associated with transcendent wisdom. Rather than personal aggrandizement, the intent was to display imperial piety and spiritual aspiration. Cixi's role-playing as Avalokitesvara conveys a similar aspiration to integrate temporal and spiritual authority—a challenge all the more compelling given her status as a female head of state.

This painting of the Qianlong Emperor as the bodhisattva Manjusri illustrates Qing imperial precedents of identifying with Buddhist deities.

[cx213]



At the same time, it is difficult to discount an element of whimsy in Cixi's religious tableaux. More than traditional Buddhism, the theatrical staging and props seem to reflect the strong influence of the Beijing Opera—an effect heightened by posing the court's leading eunuch officials as Cixi's divine attendants and costuming them in the familiar headdress of opera warriors.

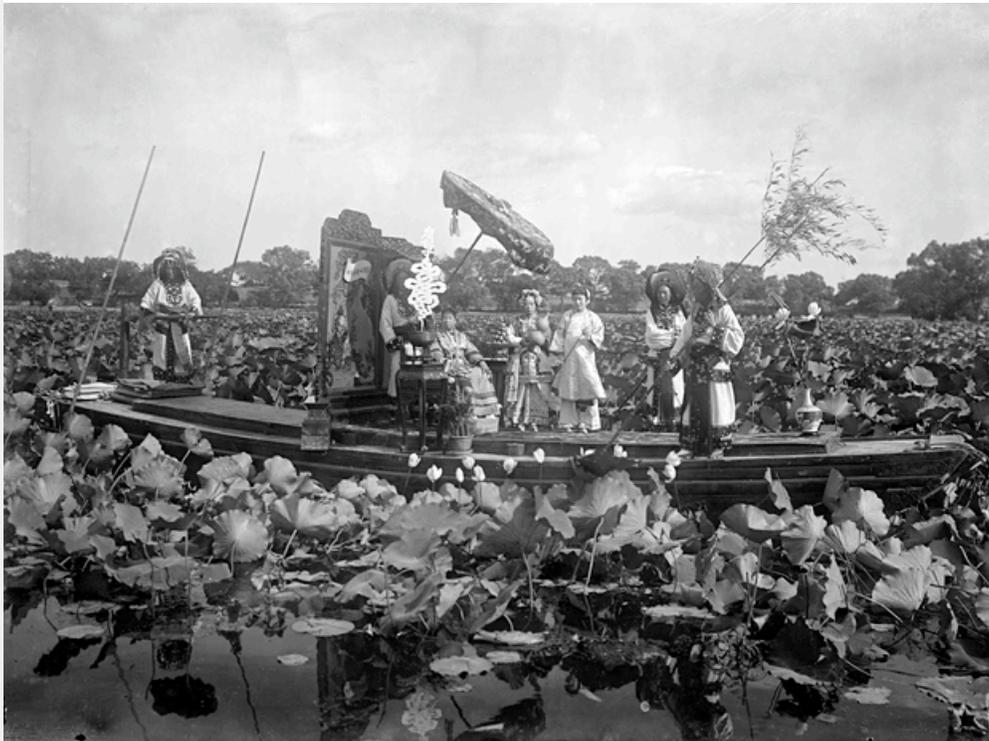




These two details show changes in personnel and costume in this devotional construct.

details, top to bottom: [cx128] [cx129]

A similar jumble of religious and secular theatricality characterizes Xunling's religious boating scenes as well. Here, in four of the photographer's most complex and panoramic compositions, Cixi is seated among her theatrically attired attendants on a flat boat, poled through an expanse of blooming lotuses outside the Forbidden City. The lotus is a central symbol in Buddhism, and close scrutiny again reveals these scenes to be larded with Buddhist allusions.



Cixi surrounded by eunuchs and courts ladies in a variety of Buddhist and theatrical costumes.

[cx131]

According to the archives of the Imperial Household Department, in 1903 the Empress Dowager issued the following directive to the Imperial Household Department for the photo shoot:

For the 16th day of the 7th month photo shoot on the Central Sea, prepare a boat that has no sail or roofing. Fourth daughter of Yikuang shall dress up as Sudhana (Child of Wealth) in a Lotus costume and a Wu- Beng. Li Lianying shall dress up as Skanda (Wei Tuo), perhaps with Skanda's Helmet and related paraphernalia. Deling (San Gu Niang) and Rongling (Wu Gu Niang) shall play Punt Fairies. They shall have the fisherman's bonnets and wear the costume dresses of Bai Suzhen, who is a white snake that has taken on human form. Perhaps they should also have some paraphernalia—either red or green would work. Have the Garden Department prepare two paddles for the junk, and have San Shun who works at the Imperial Household Department prepare several bamboo rods with leaves. All items must be ready for my inspection on the 8th day of the 7th month. [8]



This detail from the above photograph shows Der Ling and Rong Ling costumed as "Punt Fairies" just as Cixi had instructed.

detail [cx131]

In the existing negatives, various groupings and costume arrangements are tried, but Cixi is always the same, seated in front of the screen beneath the title "Putuoshan Guanyin," a manifestation of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. Putuoshan, an island off the coast of Zhejiang province, was considered one of the four sacred sites of Chinese Buddhism. Cixi was particularly devoted to this manifestation of the bodhisattva and had a priest from Putuoshan in court as spiritual advisor.

The sign on the screen identifies Cixi as a manifestation of the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Analysis of the high-resolution scans reveals additional textual markers. In addition to the requisite pyramid of fruit, a three-legged archaic bronze vessel is placed before the Empress Dowager, upon which is attached what appears to be a slip of paper with "Ningshougong" (Palace of Tranquil Longevity) written possibly in her own brush. Ningshougong was a complex built within the Forbidden City for the retirement of the Qianlong Emperor. Cixi particularly admired and emulated Qianlong, and his palace was given over for her use. An identical sign is attached to an enameled porcelain vase at the far end of the boat.



Texts displayed in the boat scene include a three-legged bronze vessel with a slip of paper with “Ningshougong” (Palace of Tranquil Longevity) written on it and an identical sign attached to a porcelain vase. The sign on the screen identifies Cixi as a manifestation of the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

Details from above image of Cixi on a boat [cx131]
[cx244] [cx245] [cx246]

Rising out of the bronze vessel is a striking object in the shape of the character for longevity stylized into a wisp of smoke. It is unclear what this object is constructed from, but textiles and other decorative arts in Cixi’s court were notable for boldly displayed longevity symbols. In the high-resolution scans one can make out three previously unreadable characters on the top of the longevity character. The characters read *Guangrenzi*, or “Broad Benevolence,” which was Cixi’s Daoist title, conferred by the abbot of Baiyunguan, a major Daoist temple in Beijing and a political base for the court’s conservative faction.

Thus decorative elements take on considerable significance and, in combination with the Putuoshan Guanyin screen and the reference to Qianlong’s palace, indicate that the boating scene is more than a picnic with eunuchs and attendants in opera costumes. On the contrary, Cixi was employing photography to create a calculated assemblage of intersecting references to religious and political alliances, associations, and hierarchies, as she sought to maintain her own political legitimacy within the factional environment of the final years of Qing dynastic decline.

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DIPLOMACY

"Do you think the Empress is sincere in her profession of friendship?" I asked.

"If you could meet her and she should take your hand and look in your eye and speak to you as she has to me, you would think her sincere," was the answer.

"A man's first impression of a woman as deep as the Empress is not worth much," I said.

"I would rather trust a woman's intuition of the woman."

"What does that tell you?"

"I cannot think otherwise than that she is sincere."

—A conversation with Sarah Pike Conger
from *Friendly China* (1949) by Bailey Willis [9]

The first years of the 20th century following the Boxer Uprising of 1900 saw an unprecedented level of diplomatic engagement by the Qing Court, as the necessity to cast off traditions of imperial seclusion became apparent. Moreover, there was an apparent realization that establishing personal ties between the Empress Dowager and the Beijing diplomatic community was necessary for constructive international relationships. In a bold step, Cixi hosted a series of gatherings at the palace for the ladies of the legations, assuming that the women would be more amenable to appeals of friendship.



A party of Westerners invited to the palace after the Boxer Uprising. Cixi took particular interest in hosting visits by ladies from the foreign legations.

detail [cx236]

Cixi's graciousness at these functions was duly reported to the press, making a generally positive impact on her international reputation. Cixi developed a particularly strong friendship with Sarah Pike Conger, the wife of the American envoy to Beijing. Conger wrote movingly of Cixi's many virtues in newspaper articles and books. The image of Cixi holding the hand of Conger, tightly surrounded by other ladies of the American legation, reveals the lengths to which Cixi was willing to go to forge personal bonds.



Cixi holds the hand of Sarah Pike Conger, the wife of the American minister to Beijing. Three other ladies of the American legation make up the group, along with the young daughter of the photographer Xunling.

[cx113] full and detail



Photos for the White House

Research of diplomatic documents surrounding the photographs has turned up a 1904 memo from Sarah Conger's husband, Minister to Peking Edwin Conger, to Secretary of State John Hay, describing a large photographic portrait of the Empress Dowager and requesting that it be presented to President Theodore Roosevelt:

The portrait was received at the Legation in a black wood box, lined with yellow silk, with a yellow silk curtain hanging over the front of the picture inside the box. The box was encased in a well-fitted, yellow quilted silk case; and over all was spread an exquisitely embroidered cloth of imperial yellow. [10]

After an exhaustive search by the Freer Gallery, the photograph was discovered in the attic of Blair House, the State Department's official guest residence for visiting heads of state. The portrait is currently in a State Department frame, the original box and brocades unfortunately lost. In spite of age darkening, the surface is lavishly tinted, with dense, minute details picked out in brilliant gold paint. The effect is one of regal authority, while the scale of the figure and her direct gaze lend a sense of personal affinity—perhaps just the combination Cixi believed would be most effective in communicating with a fellow head of state.



The Empress Dowager sent this large and lavishly tinted photographic portrait to President Theodore Roosevelt in 1904. It was only recently rediscovered.

[cx207]

The painted and gilded print sent to President Roosevelt is typical for its time. In the early age of photographic enlargements, technical limitations impaired the quality of rescaled prints, with considerable loss of detail, clarity, and tonal range. Yet while image deterioration was generally unavoidable, in this instance it was used to advantage.

Careful study of the underlying print with the applied colors digitally removed reveals a near complete loss of detail and shading, leaving only a faint outline of facial features. Painted details are strategically applied to redefine key features, including the chin and lower jaw outline, thereby creating a compelling illusion of youthfulness. The Blair House portrait masterfully uses the new technology of photography to convey the presumption of realistic accuracy, yet with the artistic license of painted portraiture.

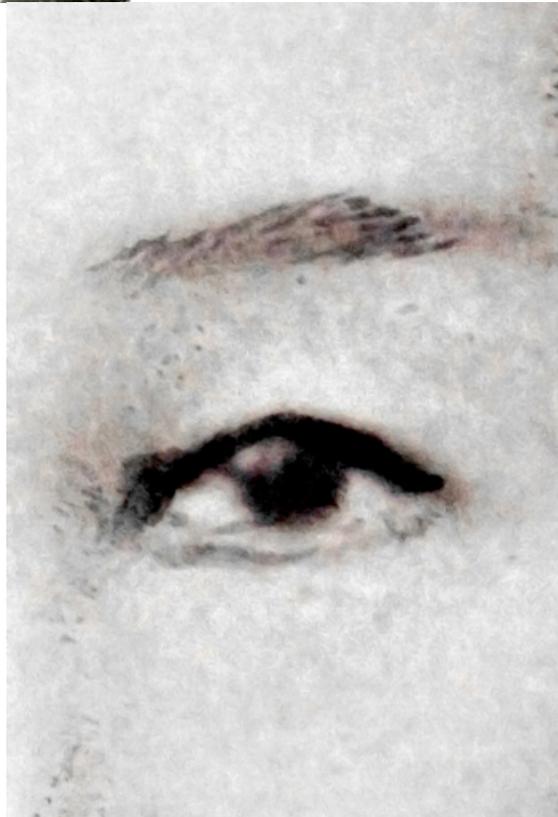


This Xunling photographic print of Cixi in the Palace Museum in Beijing was the source for the colorized version sent to President Roosevelt.

Palace Museum, Beijing [cx243]

Close-up detail of Cixi's left eye in the portrait given to Theodore Roosevelt shows fine details created with the brush.

[cx210]



The manipulated Cixi portrait reveals more than the desire to glamorize a 70-year-old ruler. After 1900, indemnities demanded by the foreign powers for losses incurred in the Boxer Uprising were crippling the Chinese economy and undermining support for the Qing government. Since the Americans were regarded as more disposed to relinquish their portion of the indemnities, it was Roosevelt (and his family) who were the target of gifts personally bestowed by the Empress Dowager. Indeed, an argument can be made that the portraits were part of a strategic calculation to develop interpersonal ties to effect diplomatic objectives.

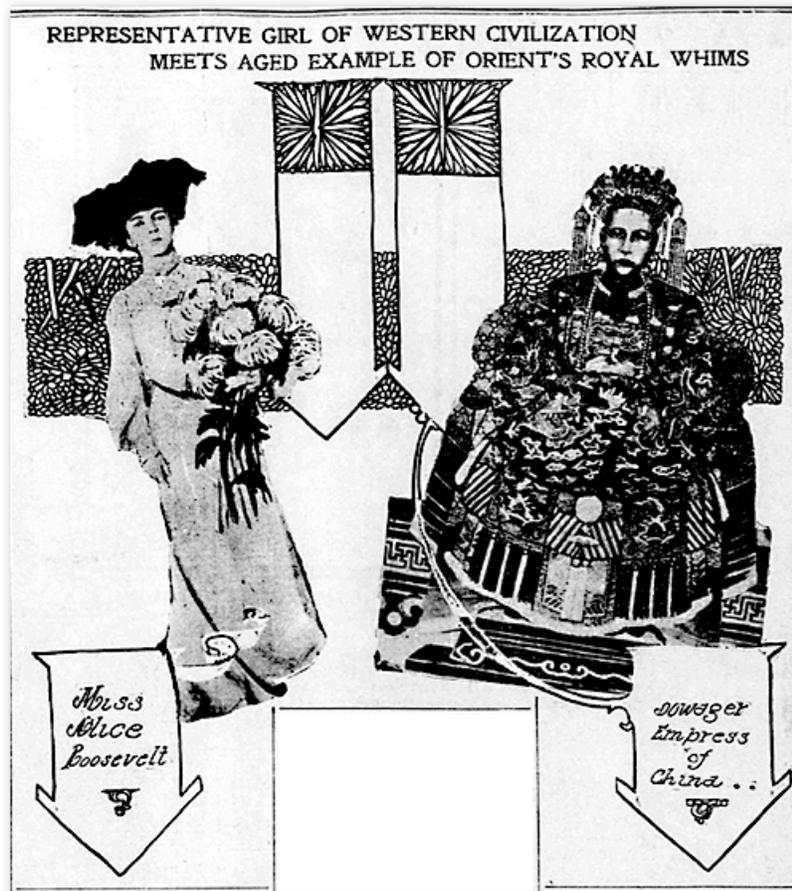
In such ways, the Xunling photographs were part of a larger effort to maintain political legitimacy and relevance by an increasingly enfeebled and desperate Qing court. It is a striking coincidence that indemnity reductions called for by Roosevelt were passed by Congress in 1908, the same year as Cixi's death. Were the photographs, then, the whim of an insular and erratic ruler, or a calculated element in a carefully managed foreign policy initiative?

In addition to the Blair House portrait, Roosevelt's daughter Alice (1884–1980) received a smaller portrait when she visited Beijing in 1905. Alice had achieved a degree of celebrity both for her entertainingly rebellious public behavior and her good looks. Naturally, the newspapers made much of this symbolic clash of civilizations. As *The Washington Times* quipped, "It well may be that the visit of this young American girl will have its effect on the terrible old woman who rules China, and that it will help along the improvement of the great empire." [11]



Alice Roosevelt, daughter of President Theodore Roosevelt, photographed in China in 1905.

detail [cx205]



This graphic juxtaposition of Alice Roosevelt and the Empress Dowager appeared in The Washington Times, September 14, 1905.

[cx204]

The audience of the president's daughter with Cixi took place at the New Summer Palace in mid September. In her autobiography, Alice writes that on the day after the audience:

A troop of cavalry clattered down the street to the Legations, surrounding an imperial yellow chair in which, by itself, was the photograph. It was in an ordinary occidental gilt frame, but the box that held it was lined and wrapped in imperial yellow brocade and the two officials were of much higher rank than those who brought the Pekinese [a dog also received as an imperial gift]. [12]

This vivid description suggests that rather than a mere personal memento, the photograph has become an extension of the imperial presence, due the ceremony and deference given the Empress Dowager herself. Like the portrait sent to her father a year earlier, the photograph Alice received had been carefully reworked to make Cixi appear decades younger.



Close-up detail of the portrait Cixi presented to Alice Roosevelt reveals the lengths taken to create an unblemished appearance. Every effort is made to create an agreeable image of China's leader.

detail [cx202]

Western Paintings of the Empress Dowager

I was obliged to follow, in every detail, centuries-old conventions. There could be no shadows and very little perspective, and everything must be painted in such full light as to lose all relief and picturesque effect. When I saw I must represent Her Majesty in such a conventional way as to make her unusually attractive personality banal, I was no longer filled with the ardent enthusiasm for my work with which I had begun it, and I had many a heartache and much inward rebellion before I settled on the inevitable.

—Katharine Carl, *With the Empress Dowager of China (1905)*

In addition to Xunling's suite of photographs, two Western portrait painters made influential contributions to the refurbishing of Cixi's image in the United States. One was the American Katharine Carl, who became an admirer and close acquaintance of the Empress Dowager, and quickly became famous for writing and lecturing about her. The other was the Dutch-American artist Herbert Vos, one of whose portraits eventually came to reside in Harvard University's Fogg Art Museum.



top: two portraits of Cixi by Katharine Carl, 1903–1904

bottom: portraits of Cixi by Hubert Vos, 1905

details

[cx212] [cx302]

[cx303] [cx317]

In 1903 Sarah Conger, the wife of the American envoy to Beijing, approached Cixi regarding the commissioning of a large oil painting, to be displayed at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair "in order that the American people may form some idea of what a beautiful lady the Empress Dowager of China is." The commission was carried out by Katharine Augusta Carl (1865–1938), who took up residence in the New Summer Palace between September 1903 and August 1904.

Katharine Carl in Chinese dress, in an image from her 1905 book With the Empress Dowager of China.

detail [cx310]



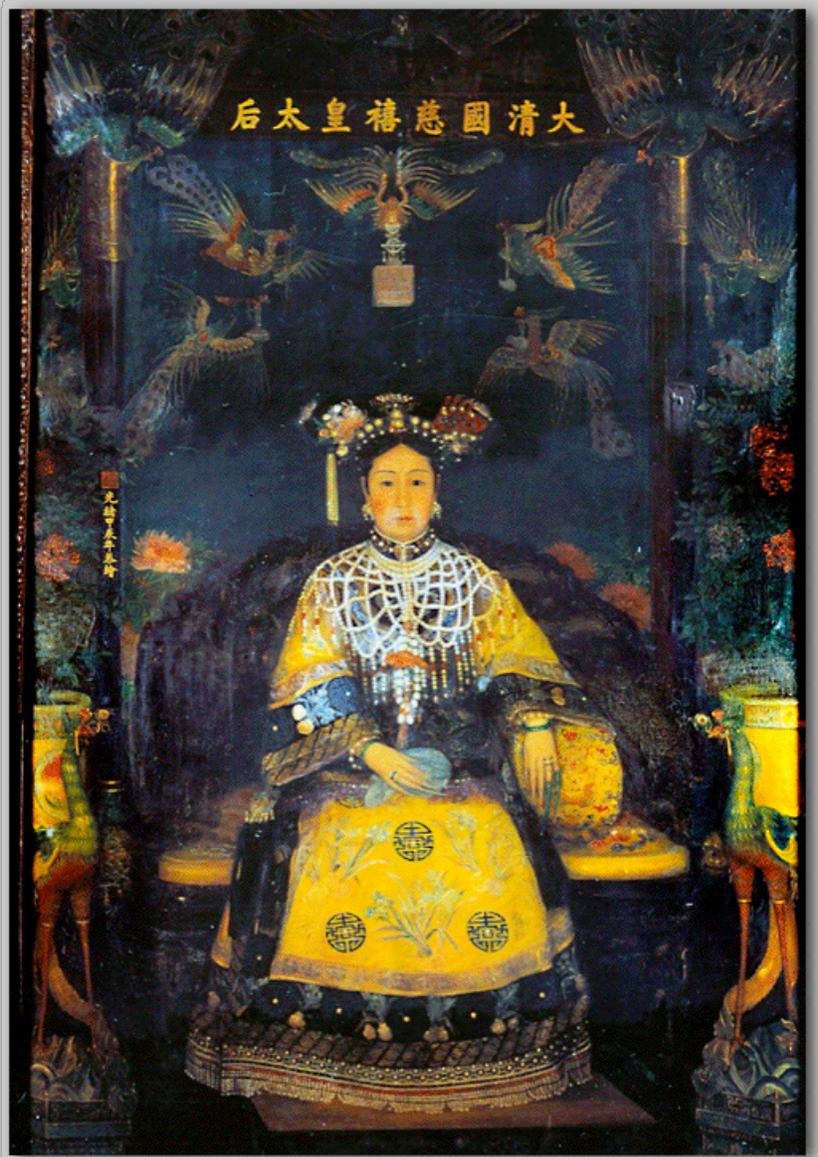
In her memoirs about this rare experience, Carl describes persistent pressure by both court officials and Cixi herself to conform to traditional standards of portraiture:

As the portrait progressed I found myself constantly running up against Chinese conventionalities as to the way it was done. They wished so much detail and no shadow....no fantasy could be indulged in painting the portrait of a Celestial Majesty. It was necessary to conform to rigid conventions. [4]

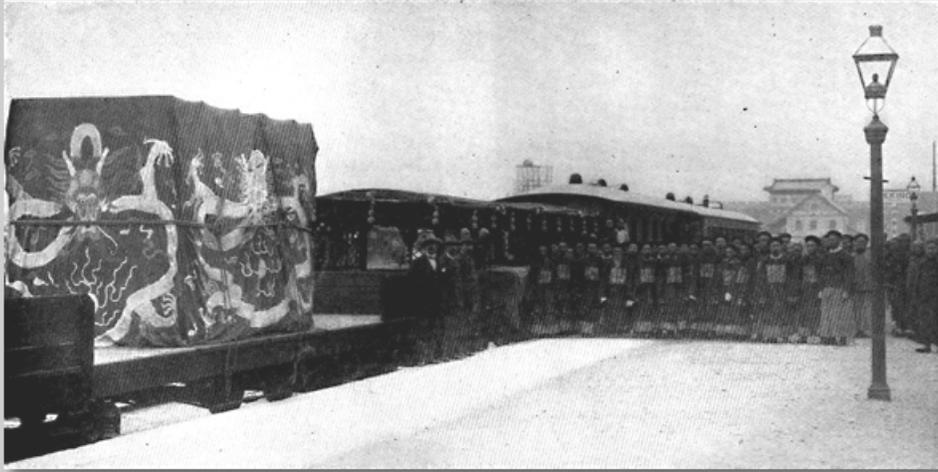
Carl also wrote that on the 19th of April, with the painting near completion, a reception was held for foreign guests and imperial princes. The painting was temporarily placed in its carved wood frame, and:

...a young Manchu, who had been attached to a Legation abroad and had learned photography in an amateur way, had been ordered by Her Majesty to make a photograph of the portrait. This was done while the Princes and nobles were still in the court. When it was photographed, and the Princes had retired, the scaffolding was again put up, the picture was raised out of this carved wood pedestal and was replaced in my studio. All this took the greater part of the day.

Cixi at the Fair



The American artist Katharine Carl, invited to produce a painting of Cixi for the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition, spent many months living in the imperial court precincts in Beijing to carry out this unprecedented commission. The flattering, life-size portrait above (112 x 64 inches [284.5 x 162.6 cm]) produced by Carl was placed in a massive frame said to have been designed by Cixi, shipped to St. Louis accompanied by a large retinue of Manchu officials, and given a prominent place in the exposition's art gallery.



above: Carl's painting being shipped to St. Louis, with Manchu officials lined up on the right.

[cx240]



left: The portrait in its wooden frame.

[cx239]

below: The portrait on display at the exposition.

[cx241]



*After the exposition closed, the portrait of Cixi was presented to President Theodore Roosevelt by the Chinese ambassador in a ceremony at the White House, and subsequently transferred to the Smithsonian Institution. Katharine Carl, for her part, coupled publication of her 1906 book *With the Empress Dowager of China* with an extensive book tour. All of these choreographed activities were designed to establish Carl's flattering portrait as the public face of imperial China's "great lady" in the United States.*

This feature article in the September 24, 1905 issue of The New York Herald coupled Carl's imposing portrait with the visit to China of President Roosevelt's daughter Alice.

[cx214]



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The Empress Dowager and the Camera

Photographing Cixi, 1903-1904

by David Hogge

Photographing
Cixi

Piety & Power

Diplomacy

Cixi's Afterlife

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CIXI'S AFTERLIFE

Xunling's photographs are often cited to illustrate the permeation of photography throughout Chinese society at the turn of the century, penetrating even the inner recesses of the imperial court, with its wary conservatism and archaic traditions. As the preceding analysis suggests, however, court officials at the highest level were by no means passive photographic subjects. On the contrary, the court took an active role in the production of a public identity, with China's supreme political figure engaging with the camera, exploring its technical capabilities and uses, and finally employing it in the creation of a new, hybrid expression. In that sense, the photographs represent a sincere but belated attempt by the court to engage visually with the modern. They reflect a desperate attempt to remain relevant by conforming to emerging mandates to personally engage with political allies, subjects, and the international community through portraiture.

The ambiguity of many of these photographs may not be a result of our own failure to understand their context so much as a failure of the court to effectively grasp the potential of this new technology. If anything, the photographs convey disorientation—the shock of naive technological initiation that may be excitingly novel, but whose actual usefulness is not clearly described or discerned. Nevertheless, there is undeniably a richness to many of the the photographs that largely reflects Cixi's unique and innovative artistic sensibilities, with their rich floral profusion and dense decorative assemblies.

Regardless of the original intention of the photographs, their impact on the enduring popular image of the Empress Dowager is convoluted. Did casting off court traditions of concealment and inaccessibility have the intended effect of establishing a more sympathetic public image of Cixi? Her domestic reputation certainly did not improve over the remainder of her reign. Overseas Chinese reformers such as Kang Youwei continued to target Cixi as the primary culprit responsible for China's failures. Through the Republican period (1912 to 1949) and subsequently the People's Republic, little positive could be seen in the historical depictions of her reign. Outside of China, the photographs also had little positive impact on popular attitudes toward China's rulers. Like the ethnographic lens employed by Western explorer-photographers of the 19th century, Xunling's images were a supreme trophy, providing glimpses of the fading, insular court of an oriental woman-despot to an eager Western audience hungry for a steady stream of visual exotica.

While the photographs may have somewhat mitigated the demoniacal images of Chinese and other Asians that appeared so frequently in the turn-of-the-century foreign media, Cixi's overall arch-evil persona remained largely intact. The few highly complementary books by those who knew her personally, such as Sarah Pike Conger, Katharine Carl, and Princess Der Ling, were more than offset by subsequent historical surveys. The general trend was to follow the model established by the 1910 tome *China Under the Empress Dowager* by Sir Edmund Backhouse and J.O.P. Bland. Long considered the authoritative reference on Cixi, this book—which used two of Xunling's photographs as illustration—claimed to present a neutral view of Cixi, yet consolidated many of the popular rumors:

Despite her swiftly changing and uncontrolled moods, her childish lack of moral sense, her unscrupulous love of power, her fierce passions and revenges, Tzu Hsi [Cixi] was no more the savage monster described by "Wen Ching," than she was the benevolent, fashion-plate Lady Bountiful of the American magazines.

Flattering descriptions by the likes of Conger were dismissed as the product of simple-minded women, easily swayed by honeyed words. Ironically, many of the more sordid tales conveyed by Backhouse and Bland were derived from documents subsequently discovered to be forgeries. Predictably, Cixi's self-portraits as the compassionate bodhisattva Avalokitesvara were frequently cited as evidence of a ruler out of touch with reality, immersed in her own self-aggrandizement.

In cinema, the dominant image-creating medium of the mid-20th century, visual traces of Xunling's camera work remain. The ubiquitous flanking pyramids of fruit, for example, strongly suggest that set designers frequently consulted the photographs for inspiration.



The Empress Dowager is portrayed in a film still from "The Last Tempest," 1976

Wikipedia [cx247]

More interesting, however, are the frequent references to the camera itself. From the unrestrained villainy of the Cixi character in "Sorrows of the Forbidden City" (1948) through the more nuanced and even sympathetic figure of more recent treatments such as in "Li Lianying, the Imperial Eunuch" (1991), allusions to Xunling's photography project recur.

Cixi confronts the camera in the 1948 film "Sorrows of the Forbidden City."

Wikimedia Commons
[cx256]



Perhaps this signifies unbridled consumption of Western technology for the sake of personal vanity, the subtext being that, like Cixi's infamous marble boat pavilion paid for with Chinese navy funds, photography was an extravagant and self-centered amusement even as the country at large suffered and declined in technological stagnation. In the 1976 Hong Kong film "The Last Tempest," a depraved and thoroughly Westernized Der Ling herself operates the camera as Cixi plots and schemes to maintain power and obstruct reform.

Against this flood of sensational imagery, Xunling's photographs were only grist for the inevitable mill of cultural stereotyping.



In the 1976 Hong Kong film "The Last Tempest," Der Ling—the sister of the man who photographed Cixi—herself operates the camera as Cixi schemes to maintain power.

Wikipedia [cx232]

Cixi in the Movies

Film posters such as these suggest the enduring fascination with Cixi and the decadent court life she epitomized. The movie at bottom right was a Sino-Japanese production released in 2010 and starred a Japanese actress as the Empress Dowager.



"The Empress Dowager" movie poster, China, 1975

Wikimedia Commons [cx216]



"The Last Tempest" movie poster China, 1976

Wikimedia Commons [cx225]



"Der Ling and Cixi," a Hong Kong Repertory Theater production, 2006

Wikimedia Commons
[cx237]



"The Pleiades," a Sino-Japanese series starring Yūko Tanaka as Cixi, 2010

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The Empress Dowager and the Camera

Photographing Cixi, 1903-1904

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[Imperial Masquerade: the Legend of Princess Der Ling](#)

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(complete view)

Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Links

[Freer and Sackler Archives home page](#)

[Cixi, Empress Dowager of China Images in the Freer and Sackler Archives](#)

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2. Philip Walsingham Sergeant, *The Great Empress Dowager of China* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1910).

3. In 2010, I oversaw the re-scanning of the plates at extreme high resolution, which allowed thorough analysis of content and condition. The images and discussion presented here are largely a product of that project. As my research advanced, I also uncovered two original prints here in Washington DC that persuasively illustrate the role of the photographs in the broader sphere of international diplomacy.

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