# Construction of Female Portraits: Gazing into the Interior of Chinese and Japanese Group Photography

Clara Tang

The three objects discussed in this essay are female group photographs, taken in studio settings in China and Japan during the late nineteenth century. While presenting the same theme—female figures, supposedly courtesans or geishas, in secluded spaces—they reveal different framings of 'beauties' through photographic staging and the use of props. The central questions therefore are as follows. How is the viewer's gaze of these women conditioned by the spatial composition and objects in these photographs? What does this visual strategy reveal about the social context of the subjects? And, what are the subjects or topics presented to the viewer? In this study, objects in the Dresden State Art Collections are closely investigated from new insights gained from recent research in the fields of modernity, visual culture and photography in China and Japan.

## Chinese female group photography from the Dresden collection – Between the private and the public

Dated to the late nineteenth century (1870-1900), an early Chinese photograph from the Dresden Collection **(fig. 3.1)** is taken from a series entitled *Travel Photography China*. It depicts four women in a semi-circle, stiffly seated on elevated chairs. They are framed on both sides by high tables on which are placed potted plants, teacups and a tobacco pipe—paraphernalia that once represented higher status. Over time these objects became ubiquitous in photography and signifiers of its mass production.[1] Gazing directly at the camera, the women sit completely still. No skin is shown except for their faces and hands. Their wide dresses conceal the forms of their bodies apart from their long, elegant hands which are neatly placed on their laps—a common feature of early Chinese portrait photography.[2] Their bound feet are visible from under the many layers of garments, a display that Régine Thiriez, a French scholar of early Chinese photography, assumes to be a deliberate part of the female portrait.[3] The painted backdrop shows a door, a window on the left side with a bright curtain, and a screen door or cupboard on

[1] This kind of pipe can be found in various portraits; e.g. in the studio images of photographers Lai Afong or Pun Lun. See Terry Bennett, *History of Photography in China: Chinese Photographers, 1844 – 1879* (London: Quaritch, 2013), 105, fig. 6.47; 153, fig. 9.5.
[2] Régine Thiriez, "Photography and Portraiture in Nineteenth-Century China," *East Asian History* 17/18 (June/December 1999): 94.
[3] Thiriez, "Photography and Portraiture," 93.

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the right. The décor reflects the illusionistic photography settings typical to early Chinese photography in that the 'modern' furniture clearly indicated a constructed, 'foreign' photographic space.

Taken in the same studio session and collected in the same *Travel Photography* series (1870-1900), another early photograph from China, though similar at first glance, depicts different subjects and a more personal and interactive motif **(fig. 3.2)**.[4] The three young women portrayed in the image are seated on the same elevated chairs, which includes a round table with the same props in their midst. Two of them are grouped to the left of the table, dressed in identical dark garments, while the third female figure, seated to the right, is dressed in mostly white garb. They hold objects in their hands: two fans, two handkerchiefs and a book.

It can be assumed that the two photography sessions took place in the same studio with arranged props, as they appear in both images. According to the previous research, the photographer was most likely William Saunders (1832-1892), although many Chinese studios adopted imported designs from foreign photographers or even bought them from disbanding studios.[5] As one of the earliest, most celebrated British photographers in Shanghai from the late 1860s until the late 1880s, Saunders held his photography sessions in the Hongkou district in Shanghai. Due to the large number of his extant photographs, his images are one of the major sources for comparison and identification of early Chinese photography. Thiriez offers additional identification for the Saunders attribution. According to Thiriez, the headbands of pearls, such as the ladies' jewelry in the picture, situate the female subjects in Shanghai, where this sort of headdress was popular among courtesans and other women **(fig. 3.1)**.[6] Thiriez also argues that multiple images have the same floor pattern and table, though without identifying any specific studio.[7] Along with his foreign contemporaries, Saunders is known for photographs capturing "native life in Shanghai," such as those staged portrait photographs described in this paper.[8]

The four women in the first image are clearly depicted as courtesans **(fig. 3.1)**.[9] According to Laikwan Pang, courtesans were one of the major forces embracing new photographic technology and advertising it in China, especially when it was introduced and becoming popular in Chinese cities, especially Shanghai.[10] The necessary tools for the courtesan—her visibility and her beauty—were already known via popular print culture such as periodicals distributed throughout China; e.g. *The Illustrated Lithographer* 點石齋畫報 (*Dianshizhai huabao*). Courtesans went to photo studios to have their picture taken

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[4] The decoration is identical, the room structure is similar with the window or door on the left side of the image and the parts of the wooden wall structure on the right; the floor tiles have the same pattern; the women are also seated on similar, or even the same style chairs.

[5] Viewers are inclined to presume a Western photographer classified groups due to their professions or gender. However, Wu Hung points out that there was no clear line between a specifically 'Western' or 'Chinese' portrait style, since Chinese adopted the ways of newly introduced styles and made them their own. See Wu Hung, Inventing a 'Chinese' Portrait Style in Early Photography, chap. in Jeffrey Cody and Frances Terpak, eds., *Brush & Shutter, Early Photography in China* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2011), 85. Evidence that William Saunders was the photographer of these particular images was suggested by the Dresden curatorial staff during a Heidelberg IKO research trip, July 2016.

[6] Thiriez, "Photography and Portraiture in Nineteenth-Century China," 94.

[7] Ibid., 96; 98.

[8] Régine Thiriez, "William Saunders, Photographer of Shanghai Customs," *Visual Resources* 26: 3 (September 2010): 307. For a comprehensive biography on Saunders, see Terry Bennett, *History of Photography in China: Western Photographers, 1861 – 1879* (London: Quaritch, 2010), 83-106.

[9] While courtesans were fashion idols of women generally, the fluctuating fashion styles rule out a single identification of anonymous subjects, exposing the photographs to more than one reading. See similar garb and photographic subjects in two 1870s works, "Wealthy Manchu Man with Wives and Servant" and "Wealthy Lady and Servant," in Regine Thiriez, "Photography and Portraiture in Nineteenth-Century China," *East Asian History* 17/18 June/December (1999): 85, fig.7; 88, fig.13.

[10] Laikwan Pang, *The Distorting Mirror: Visual Modernity in China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 71-79.

as an advertising tool to increase visibility, and as documentation of their beauty or as a memento for patrons. The stereotyped view of generic 'beauties' (or the 'courtesan' type) is epitomized in this photograph. Features such as stiff postures of the four women and their uncomfortable, almost identical poses on modern chairs, framed by decoration and the strictly frontal view—all emphasize their two-dimensionality as objects to be viewed and studied in a purposefully constructed photographic space. Their unoccupied, immobile hands with long fingernails reveal their status as women mainly concerned with their own beauty, while their bound feet indicate eroticism and lower status; both conceal any indication of individual personality traits.

Although bearing close similarities in terms of props and theme, the second photograph, however, differs immensely in regards to clothing, posture and quality of communication **(fig. 3.2)**. All of the three female figures seem to be engaged in a conversation or lesson, and the photographer captures this moment. The woman coded as 'older' on the right, dressed in standard courtesan garb similar to the clothing in the other image, is holding a book in her hands, indicating "desirable literacy" of women. Alternatively, this may also indicate an instructive reading session with her two students on the left.[11] There seems to be no control over the sitters' hand positions as in the aforementioned, 'formulaic' image **(fig. 3.1)**. Their cornered seating arrangement as well as the 'informal' attire of the two novices and the missing fashionable pearls indicate an implied closeness to one another and a more intimate space, revealed through the camera in a voyeuristic manner. The format of the photograph could possibly reflect the photographer's interest to create a boundary between the 'inside' of a private room and an outer public sphere; the verticality creates a more defined space with the (painted) window.

The different visual angles that create distinct styles of female portraits in both photographs calls to mind a print *I see and pity* 我見猶憐, from the *Pictorial of the Flying Shadow Chamber* 飛影閣畫冊 (*Feiyingge huace*), one of the popular magazines in the late nineteenth century **(fig. 3.3)**. The ways in which photographs were staged is clear in how it becomes a subject in print making; the photographer constructs the scene and positions the elements within the frame according to conventions.[12] The prints also contain various generic props similar to those placed in photographic settings, for example the fan and the handkerchief in the seated woman's lap, or the plant on the small table. In addition to portraits in Chinese print culture, courtesans were also targets of the voyeurism in the public eye, as depicted in another image from the contemporary pictorial magazine, *The Illustrated Lithographer* **(fig. 3.4)**. Courtesans were carried through the city in palanquins, transforming these entertainers into representatives of popular culture in metropolitan urban space. We might consider how Saunders' cultural background as a European photographer and his practice of using the studio to stage photos conditioned his gaze of his female subjects (as distinct from the perspective of courtesans in contemporary Chinese popular media).

## Chinese images in comparison to staged Japanese female photography from Dresden

The second Chinese image **(fig. 3.2)** also illustrates similarities in composition and theme to a third work from the Dresden collection **(fig. 3.5)**. In this Japanese photograph dated to roughly the same period (1870-1910), a group of three young women dressed in traditional garb—the younger girls, ap-

[11] Pang, *The Distorting Mirror*, 85.

[12] This print has also been stated as being from the 1884 Dianshizhai huabao issue, and translated as "Having a different view." See Miao Yu, "Space, vision and identity: imagining and inventing Shanghai in the courtesan illustrations of Dianshizhai Pictorial (1884-1898)" (Master's Thesis, McGill University, 2006), 79, fig.18.

prentices called maiko, in colorful kimonos, and the older geisha in monochrome layers—are sitting on the floor. The girl on the right is tying pieces of cloth around a branch, or 'wish tree' for the *tanabata* (七夕) festival.[13] This festival is held on 7th of the 7th month.[14] Instead of looking at the camera, all three seem preoccupied with the task. The space is defined by the folding screen on the left, a popular prop and signifier of intimacy that was used to seclude the room and generally served as a structural divider of space in various, innovative forms in Japanese photography **(fig. 3.6)**.[15] The three sitters are similarly positioned inside the constructed photographic space as in the second Chinese photograph and their clothes represent the same divide as in the other image **(fig. 3.2)**. This photograph might also represent a teacher-pupil relationship, as the woman on the right seems to be the older geisha, and the girls her young maiko.

In early Japanese photography, group images frequently appeared in the portfolio of many souvenir photography studios and explicitly staged for foreign customers. Geishas were especially popular subjects due to the iconic status within the late nineteenth-century western discourse on Japan and Japanese women. As seen in this hand-colored album photo, a common denominator in female group images in the late nineteenth century was the overt mise-en-scène with a focus on what were perceived by foreign customers as 'Japanese.' Souvenir photography in Japan especially accommodating a gaze from the outside looking in was perhaps most famously achieved in Kusakabe Kimbei's photography in Yokohama. The medium of photography perpetuated and legitimized the voyeuristic gaze.[16]

In comparison to the Japanese photograph, the staging of courtesans in the Chinese images under consideration reveal subtle compositions and a diversifying modern context in women's lifestyles. The differentiation from one another and the narrated, comfortable poses in a modern environment can also be considered in terms of the development of prominent courtesan figures. In Shanghai especially, courtesans became symbols of new fashion and were attributed legendary reputations with the introduction of famous courtesan biographical novels of the late nineteenth century. Catherine Yeh explains how the Shanghai courtesan novels used the image of group portraits to portray different personalities and social situations, creating a set of personal histories and in-depth characters—superficially innocent, but cunning in reality.[17] These notorious media personalities, such as Hu Baoyu—who is credited with introducing Cantonese style to Shanghai including the pearl headband–were essential elements of Shanghai modern visual culture.

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[13] The festival celebrates a famous folk story (transferred from China) of the lovers Orihime and Hikoboshi who were only allowed by Orihime's father to meet once a year, on the 7th day of the 7th month. See: Katherine Rupp, *Gift-Giving in Japan: Cash, Connections, Cosmologies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 139-141.

[14] Mio Wakita explains the obscurity around the female models for souvenir photography around that time which included family members (in the early stages), courtesans, geishas and rashamen. See Mio Wakita, *Staging Desires: Japanese Femininity in Kusakabe Kimbei's Nineteenth-Century Souvenir Photography* (Berlin: Reimer, 2013), 81-82. Further elaboration on the role of a maiko and a geisha can be found in: Liza Crisfield Dalby, *Geisha* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 165-176; 218-227.

[15] A device to divide scenes is also used in another Japanese image from the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden collection, PO5710.

[16] Kusakabe Kimbei is one of the best-known souvenir photographers to respond to the cultural profile of his customer. Wakita argues that the staging of photographs was to meet the evolving expectations of "visual commodity." See Mio, Wakita, "Sites of 'Disconnectedness': The Port City of Yokohama, Souvenir Photography, and Its Audience," *Transcultural Studies* (2) (2013): 101-102.

[17] Catherine Vance Yeh, *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850-1910* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 259-260.

## 'Lives' of the Dresden female photographs

Another aspect of the photographs is the circulation of images and accompanying histories. Since photographs were made for viewers' consumption and commercial Chinese images later resurfaced in souvenir albums, it is impossible to assume the 'private' character of these images. It is also difficult to reconstruct original purposes for these Chinese female group portraits. Nonetheless, once collected in albums, photography often gained a status as a part of ethnographic collections—as demonstrated by the Chinese photographs purchased and collected for a travel album by Dietrich Drost (1928-1974), the deputy director of the Ethnographic Museum in Leipzig.[18] As documents of 'Chineseness,' the images could therefore also have served to export a Chinese 'type,' a racial "standard-bearer," which "exemplif[ies] particular physical traits such as hair texture, height, or skin color, and could be classified further as possessing certain moral or cultural qualities [...]."[19] Although these studio photographs were not comparable to pseudo-scientific images of, for example, a study of a bound foot or of hairstyles, the voyage of the photographs to Europe and their visual consumption by foreigners as possibly 'proto-ethnographic' objects needs to be considered as well.[20]

## Conclusion

The photographs discussed in this essay illustrate the shifts of photographic studies of courtesans as allegedly timeless 'objects,' as well as possible scenarios of their actual daily routines that had already been well established in Chinese print culture. It is crucial to consider the agency—firstly of the sitters themselves, and secondly, of those who arranged the spaces around them that served as representations of modern, public culture and the urban environment—that actively or passively contributed to the photographs. Furthermore, the foreign photographer, and the Chinese souvenirs, or commodified objects, need to be factored into the history of these images; the shaping of female imagery was not a unilateral history. Especially in comparison to the Japanese photograph considered in this essay, where the artificiality of the scene is apparent, the Chinese examples present more diversified representational strategies through props and composition, as well as a wide variety of staging strategies ranging from the formulaic courtesan to individualized women. They indicate a certain consciousness of photography as a "cooperative product," even in the works generated by Western studios such as Saunders'.[21] However, although information on William Saunders' works is widely dispersed, the anonymity of his female sitters calls attention to the dichotomy of foreign representation and individual identity that was central to photography in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in China.

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[18] Drost was Deputy Director of the Ethnographic Museum, Leipzig. See Museum für Völkerkunde, *Jahrbuch*, (Leipzig: Akademie Verlag, 1975), 5-6.
[19] David Odo, *The Journey of "A Good Type": From Artistry to Ethnography in Early Japanese Photographs* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015), 51.
[20] See Jurgita Rainyte, "Dis-continuity of Beauty in Late Nineteenth-Century Chinese Photography," **fig. 3.13**, in this volume.
[21] Yeh, *Shanghai Love*, 86-87.

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**Fig. 3.1** William Thomas Saunders, [A group of four young women, each seated on a chair], 1870-1900, albumen paper print, mounted on cardboard, 19.8 x 27.5 cm, cardboard: 23.5 x 31.8 cm.
Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden, Inv. No. F 1974-1/9.4
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**Fig. 3.2** William Thomas Saunders, [A group of three young women, each seated on a chair], 1862-1892, albumen paper print, mounted on cardboard, 27.7 x 20.2 cm, cardboard: 31 x 23.5 cm.
Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden, Inv. No. F 1974-1/9.3
© Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden.

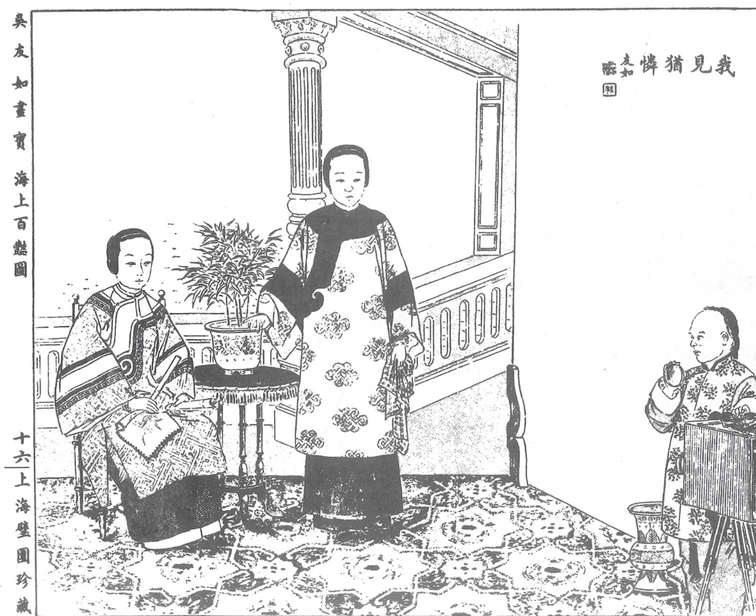


**Fig. 3.3** Wu Youru 吴友如, *I see and pity* (我見猶憐), printed in 飛影閣畫冊 [Pictorial of the Flying Shadow Chamber], 1893, woodblock print. After Laikwan Pang, *The Distorting Mirror: Visual Modernity in China*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007, 73, fig. 2.1.

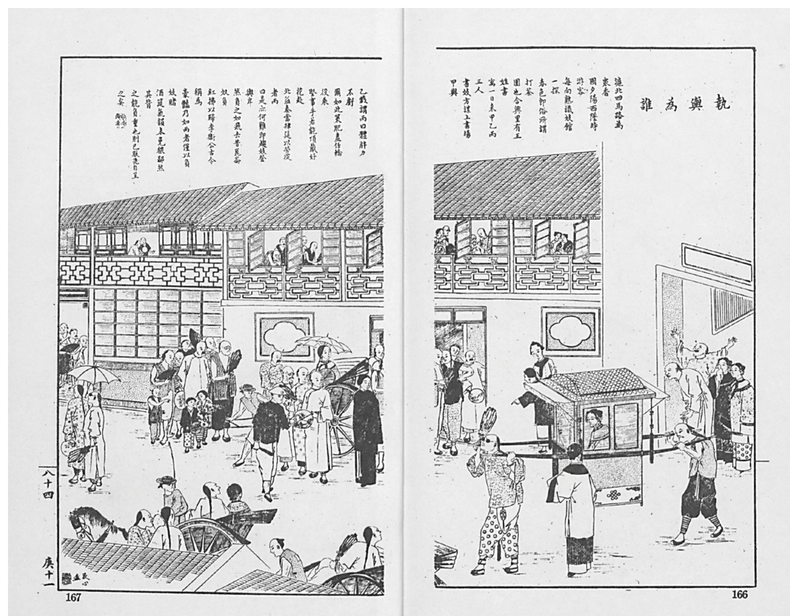

**Fig. 3.4** *Street scene: a courtesan passes by in a palanquin*, printed in 點石齋畫報 [Illustrated Lithographer], vol. 7 (1886), p.166-167. After Christian Henriot, "Chinese Courtesans in Late Qing and Early Republican Shanghai (1849-1925)," *East Asian History* 8, December (1995): 50, fig.13.

**Fig. 3.5** Unknown photographer, [Group of three Japanese women], 1870-1900, from the album "Charles Walter Palmié - Japan II," p. 104, albumen paper print, colored, mounted on cardboard, 20.9 x 26.5 cm, cardboard: 31.2 x 38.7 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden, Inv. No. 51552.71 © Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden.

**Fig. 3.6** Unknown photographer, *Whispering*, 1880-1900, from the album "Japan III," p. 20, albumen paper print, colored, mounted on cardboard, 26.4 x 20.2 cm, cardboard: 54.5 x 38.5 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden, Inv. No. F 2015-1/3.37 © Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden.