

# When and How the Reclining Figure Appeared in Chinese Visual Culture: A Case Study of a Courtesan Photograph from the Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden

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## Introduction

The photograph in the Ethnographic Museum Dresden photographic collection depicting a reclining Chinese woman features her lounging in a European-style setting (**fig. 5.1**). She reclines on a luxury *méridienne*, which was viewed as an elegant piece of furniture in China during the late nineteenth century. Her left hand supports her face, while the right rests in front of her body. The woman smiles and gazes directly outwards, as if to tease the viewer. The identity of the woman in the photograph is unknown. However, we can still infer her character—in addition to the photo's function and date—from her clothing style, posture, and the interior furnishings.

First, the “reclining” posture was very popular among courtesans in the late nineteenth century. Many photographs of Chinese prostitutes feature this particular pose. Because these women engaged in the sex trade and did not bear the yoke of the Chinese ethics code, they dared to experiment with posing for photos in this sort of “undignified” posture. This woman wears a crescent-shaped hair band which was *au courant* among the courtesan class during the 1880s-1900s.<sup>1</sup> She wears a relatively loose style of clothing. From the 1880s to 1910s, courtesans tended to wear tighter clothes to stress the curves of their bodies.<sup>2</sup> Hence, we can date this photo to approximately the 1880s.

In the background, an European-style clock is arranged at the left upper corner and, as with the *méridienne*—a short sofa of the Second Empire period—it also belonged to luxury furnishings in China. At the time, the high-ranking courtesans (especially Shanghai courtesans) were enamored with the pursuit of Western goods. They preferred to use the European style furniture in the arrangement of their interiors. Thus, Western-style furniture often represented and suggested the identity of Chinese courtesans in the late nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

The size of this photo is the same as that of a visiting card. According to its size, we can deduce that this was a *carte-de-visite* (CDV).<sup>4</sup> Compared to other forms of portraiture, this type of picture was inexpensive and easier to transport. The golden period for the CDV was in the mid-nineteenth century.

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine V. Yeh, *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850-1910* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 57.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>3</sup> Yeh, *Shanghai Love*, 45-51.

<sup>4</sup> It measures 10.5 x 6.35 cm.

Twelve *cartes-de-visite* would usually cost less than one large-format photo.<sup>5</sup> High-ranking prostitutes prepared photos and gave or sold them to brothel visitors.<sup>6</sup> It is safe to assume that these small-size portraits are usually of high-ranking courtesans from the period between the 1880s and 1890s, and that they were used for the purpose of self-promotion. Hereafter, the woman in this *carte-de-visite* from the Dresden photo collection will be referred to as “Dresden Courtesan” in the following sections.

The Dresden Courtesan presents herself in a “reclining” posture. This pose was not a common mode of representation in Chinese visual culture, and it did not exist before the first half of the nineteenth century as it was seen as undignified and unsuitable for the depiction of women.<sup>7</sup> However, later in the nineteenth century, this pose became very common in Europe in the depiction of exotic women in painting, sculpture, and photography, particularly in France. In what follows, we will explore how the Dresden Courtesan photograph emerged from the circulation of motifs from European art and culture to become popular in China’s Treaty Ports.

## Using the “Reclining” posture to reconstruct the new goddess

The reclining female figure is a traditional subject in European Art history which was often used to depict nude goddesses, particularly Venus. In the first century BCE, the reclining Venus on a seashell appeared in Casa di Venus, Pompeii. In the Renaissance, Italian painters began to revive the use of this pose to describe the beautiful goddess. For instance, the *Sleeping Venus* by Giorgione and Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* both represent the goddess as a reclining female figure (figs. 5.2-5.3). Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* especially impacted the later painting of the subject. He posed his Venus gazing at the viewer directly, demonstrating a more seductive expression.<sup>8</sup> As T. J. Clark accurately mentioned, it is about “... the sense of the picture’s sensuality it stemmed from—the unchasteness of its chastity, the openness of its promise of undress and attentiveness ...”.<sup>9</sup>

Several centuries later, Titian’s concept was revived by French painters searching for a proper form to depict their new Parisian “goddesses” of love and sex—the odalisque and the courtesan. One of the earliest and famous odalisques was painted by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Le Grande Odalisque* (fig. 5.4).<sup>10</sup> France began to build colonies in its empire beyond European shores during the beginning of the nineteenth century. Meanwhile, fantastic images of the colonial (or ‘Orientalized’) female figure increased. In the following hundred years, representations of ‘the exotic woman’ grew in popularity. In most cases, these women were depicted as odalisques or slaves, waiting for their masters; an essentialized erotic meaning lies beneath the surface. These depictions demonstrate the sexual fantasies and the desire for conquest of the exotic woman enveloped in a western male gaze. In his painting, Ingres re-contextualizes the meaning of the reclining posture by replacing the Venus with the image of an exotic woman.

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<sup>5</sup> Wu Hung, *Introduction-Reading Early Photographs of China*, chap. in *Brush and Shutter: Early Photography in China*, ed. Jeffrey W. Cody and Frances Terpak (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2011), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Ge Tao and Shi Dongxu 葛涛和石冬旭, 具象的歷史：照相與清末民初的上海生活 [Pictorial History: Photography and Shanghai Life in late Qing and early Republican China] (Shanghai: Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House, 2011), 54.

<sup>7</sup> Yingjin Zhang discussed the connection between the reclining posture of Chinese prostitutes and European oil painting, such as the *Venus of Urbino* or *Olympia* by Manet with a focus on the sexual implications. Zhang Yingjin, *Prostitution and Urban Imagination: Negotiating the Public and Private in Chinese Film of the 1930s*, chap. in *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai: 1922-1943*, ed. Yingjin Zhang (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 174-5.

<sup>8</sup> Flavio Febraro and Alexandra Wetzel, *How to Read Erotic Art* (New York: Abrams, 2011), 158-159.

<sup>9</sup> T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 93-94.

<sup>10</sup> Febraro and Wetzel, *How to Read Erotic Art*, 254-255.

The reclining female figure loses its divine nature as she becomes an Odalisque in her harem, waiting to be chosen. This exotic "Venus" figure, though removed from the realm of mythology, become the new "goddess" in France.

Along with the odalisque, the courtesan also becomes the new Parisian "goddess." They were the new rising class in Paris during the second half of the nineteenth century. After the *Transformations de Paris sous le Second Empire* by Haussmann, Paris experienced a new threshold in modern life; it can even be said that the city became the center of modernity worldwide.<sup>11</sup> With the development of urbanization, prostitution also gradually transformed. Until the second half of the nineteenth century in Paris, the issue of prostitution was a hotly debated social phenomenon. But even as it became more prevalent in the second half of the century, social commentary on prostitution did not cease. In 1985 T.J. Clark wrote in *The Painting of Modern Life*, "... that women of this kind, formerly confined to the edges of society, had more and more usurped the centre of things and seemed to be making the city over in their image."<sup>12</sup> The highly-developed culture of women in the entertainment industry had a significant impact on art and literature. In the nineteenth century, visual artists and writers were interested in representing prostitutes' appearance and life; hence they became a favorite subject in visual culture.<sup>13</sup> Artists and writers were the consumers and the courtesans were their muses providing creative inspiration. For example, Manet's source for the now infamous painting *Olympia* derived compositionally, in part, from the *Venus of Urbino* (fig. 5.5). However, the main figure was inspired not from the mythical figure, Venus, but a courtesan.<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting, in terms of the larger argument regarding this figural type in China, that Manet painted several courtesans and almost all of them, including *Young Woman Reclining in Spanish Costume*, *Lady with a Fan* (Jeanne Duval, Baudelaire's Mistress), and *The Lady with Fans* (Nina de Callias), were represented in a reclining posture. There is no doubt that Manet was paying homage to Titian with these compositions, but for Manet, these courtesans were also his goddesses on some level. Coincidentally, the prostitutes were partial to using the names of goddesses as their secondary or alternative names.<sup>15</sup>

Not only in painting, but also in photography, which was still developing as a new invention in nineteenth-century visual arts, there are large numbers of representations of courtesans. The photographers' choices often seemed to be similar to those of Manet, as they also depicted female figures in the reclining posture. For instance, a photo dated to the turn of the century, entitled "The Modern Odalisque" is, obviously, an homage to the Ingres's *La Grande Odalisque* (fig. 5.6). In a large number of extant portrait photographs of French prostitutes, the body is positioned in this manner, suggesting approval of the courtesan as the new "Venus."

## Reclining women in the Chinese context

The appearance of the reclining posture for women in Chinese photography was closely related to developments in European visual culture; Euromerican photographers introduced their styles to China beginning in mid-nineteenth century. As Craig Clunas discusses in his article, *Photographs of Peking, China*

<sup>11</sup> David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 3.

<sup>12</sup> T. J. Clark, *Painting of Modern Life* (1985), 79.

<sup>13</sup> "Splendour and Misery. Pictures of Prostitution, 1850-1910," Musée d'Orsay, accessed January 13, 2017, [http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/events/exhibitions/in-the-musee-dorsay/exhibitions-in-the-musee-dorsay-more/page/0/article/splendeurs-et-miseres-42671.html?tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=649&cHash=496b4539bf](http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/events/exhibitions/in-the-musee-dorsay/exhibitions-in-the-musee-dorsay-more/page/0/article/splendeurs-et-miseres-42671.html?tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=649&cHash=496b4539bf).

<sup>14</sup> Beatrice Farwell, *Manet and the Nude: A Study in Iconography in the Second Empire* (New York: Garland, 1981), 200.

<sup>15</sup> Clark, *Painting of Modern Life*, 86.

1861-1908, among the many European inventions of the nineteenth century, photography rapidly penetrated the globe, demonstrating visible transcultural connections in a colonial context.<sup>16</sup> After the successful development of the Daguerreotype in 1839, photography was introduced to Shanghai by the French Jesuit missionary, Claude Gotteland.<sup>17</sup>

From the 1840s on, China signed many treaties with Europe and the United States, including the Nanjing Treaty with the United Kingdom, the Wangxia Treaty with the United States, the Whampoa Treaty with France, and many others. After concluding these agreements, the Qing court was forced to open more treaty ports. Hence, European and American diplomats, missionaries, and merchants could legally enter China, specifically five treaty ports: Canton, Fuzhou, Ningbo, Shanghai, and Xiamen. Shanghai in particular became a modern metropolis that integrated Western culture in a number of ways, to the point where it was also known as the “Paris of the East.” Soon after the Second Opium War (1858-1860), foreigners were no longer restricted to the five treaty ports, and moved into other Chinese cities. They deployed their cameras to take photos of people and landscape in China’s inland zones. Their pictures proliferated commercially to other countries.

The first generation of photographers in China were mostly Westerners.<sup>18</sup> John Thomson is one example of an early photographer in China. He traveled throughout the country to document Chinese landscape and culture; upon his return to Europe he published “Illustrations of China and Its People.” Other photographers who settled in China, established studios and also became commercial photographers. William Pryor Floyd is one example; he owned the photographic studio, Shannon & Co. D.K Griffith is another foreign photographer who also operated a photographic shop in Shanghai.<sup>19</sup> Further, William Saunders, who owned studios in Hong Kong and Canton, was famous for his portfolio of “Sketches of Chinese Life and Character.” He hired Chinese models to stage a variety of different roles based, in part, on early eighteenth-century European prints.<sup>20</sup> Early photography often had a very close relationship with painting. The first generation of Chinese photographers—who worked as apprentices under European and American photographers and inherited their visual and cultural practices—were active participants in integrating European visual culture into China’s metropolitan culture. The composition of the reclining courtesans may have been one of the most representative aspects of European, especially Parisian, visual culture making its way into life in China. The first generation of photographers deployed the figure of the reclining female to represent brothel women, such as the photo of a Chinese woman stretched out on a wooden lounge chair by the Shanghai-based American photographer Lorenzo Fisler (fig. 5.7).<sup>21</sup> This image prototype was then later assimilated into the common, broader visual vocabulary

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<sup>16</sup> Craig Clunas, “Commendatory Preface,” in *Photographs of Peking, China 1861-1908: an inventory and description of the Yetts collection at the University of Durham: through Peking with a camera*, ed. Nick Pearce, (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005), iii.

<sup>17</sup> Ge Tao and Shi Dongxu 葛涛和石冬旭, 具象的歷史: 照相與清末民初的上海生活 [Pictorial History: Photography and Shanghai Life in late Qing and early Republican China], 11-13.

<sup>18</sup> Edwin K. Lai, *The History of the Camera Obscura and Early Photography in China*, chap. in *Brush and Shutter: Early Photography in China*, ed. Jeffrey Cody and Frances Terpak, 24.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>20</sup> Sarah E. Fraser, *Chinese as Subject, Photographic Genres in the Nineteenth Century*, chap. in *Brush and Shutter*, ed. Cody and Terpak, 91.

<sup>21</sup> Although the identity of the female sitter of figure 7 is unclear, several indicators support her identity as a courtesan. In addition to her very seductive body language, a demure woman living within the family structure was not expected to pose alone suggestively in public photographs. Further, a sash hangs beneath her, below the frame of the chair, indicating that this photo should be taken between the mid-1860s and the late 1880s. That is, the position of the sash is indicative of the décor’s date; see Yeh, *Shanghai Love*, 36. During this time, women in China eschewed posing before the camera due to the ethics of the feudal family code, while courtesans utilized photography for commercial purposes; they became some of the main customers of the photographic atelier. See Ge Tao and Dongxu Shi, *Pictorial History: Photography and Shanghai Life in the late Qing and early Republican China*, 38.

of photographic representations of sex workers, as observed in several examples from a courtesan catalog published in 1911 (figs. 5.8-5.9).

One reason for this, was that the identity of these Chinese women belonged to the category of the exotic female; they represented a male sexual fantasy of the colonialized woman. Similar to the odalisque, these Chinese prostitutes—especially those active in the treaty ports—were waiting to be chosen and consumed by a clientele. Distinct from courtesans, however, the odalisque did not actually exist. She was a cipher for male sexual fantasies. But, from the end of the nineteenth century onward, in depicting the Chinese prostitute, European and American photographers followed the pictorial paradigm established by Ingres's *Odalisque*.

Shanghai's urban culture, envisioned as the “Paris of the East” among treaty ports, had many features similar to Paris. The social position and life of the Shanghai prostitute was comparable to those in the Second French Empire; in both locales during this period, prostitutes were ranked.<sup>22</sup> In Shanghai, upper-class prostitutes carried the titles *Changsan* 長三 or *Shuyu* 書寓.<sup>23</sup> They were similar to high-class courtesans in the upper echelons of society in Paris, who enjoyed the spotlight during social occasions. In addition to storytelling halls (書場), theaters, restaurants, and teahouses, high-class brothel houses also became necessary leisure and social spaces of urban elites.<sup>24</sup> In the process, despite the perception that they sold their bodies, which in effect meant abandoning conventional values, in the end this did not mean they were social outcasts. On the contrary, they represented an aspect of Chinese modernity.<sup>25</sup> High-ranking prostitutes in Shanghai especially were not just sex workers, they were stars, among the most stylish and modern groups in society. At that time, the most representative aspect of prostitute culture was the pursuit of Western material culture, and the accompanying lifestyle. Courtesans adopted European habits and bought large quantities of European furniture. Hence, prostitutes' photographic portraits often contain various Western items or props. In the photo from the Dresden collection, the European style clock and a *méridienne* were rare, high-priced fashionable western goods, which high-ranking prostitutes were known to acquire. For these reasons, this female figure is likely a Shanghai courtesan. Given the social and cultural factors that align the Shanghai courtesan with the new Parisian goddess in the nineteenth century, we can assume that the photographers chose this particular posture quite deliberately to display the Chinese courtesan figure.

Due to the lack of background information on the Dresden Courtesan, the image itself can be analyzed to reveal clues about the identity of the woman, date, and the photograph's function. Visual evidence suggests that it was taken approximately in 1880; it was the kind of photograph used for the self-promotion of high-ranked Shanghai courtesans. Moreover, the most noteworthy aspect is the figure's posture—it is indicative of key characteristics of Chinese visual culture at the end of the nineteenth century, which reflects transcultural exchange between China and the Western world. At the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century, China was forced to open its doors in the wake of colonial pressures, resulting in a wave of European and American culture rushing into China. Using the Dresden Courtesan as a case study, it is evident that in the process of introducing photographic technology, European photographers also brought other aspects of Western visual culture to China. A posture used in the European Renaissance to represent Venus was re-purposed by French artists, and then became part of the transcultural exchange of cultural practices in East Asian treaty ports. The courtesan becomes a symbol of modernity and this one photo is an index of its many facets.

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<sup>22</sup> Yeh, *Shanghai Love*, 31.

<sup>23</sup> Christian Henriot, *Prostitution and Sexuality in Shanghai: A Social History 1849-1949* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 22-25.

<sup>24</sup> Henriot, *Prostitution and Sexuality in Shanghai*, 38-40.

<sup>25</sup> Yeh, *Shanghai Love*, 68-70.

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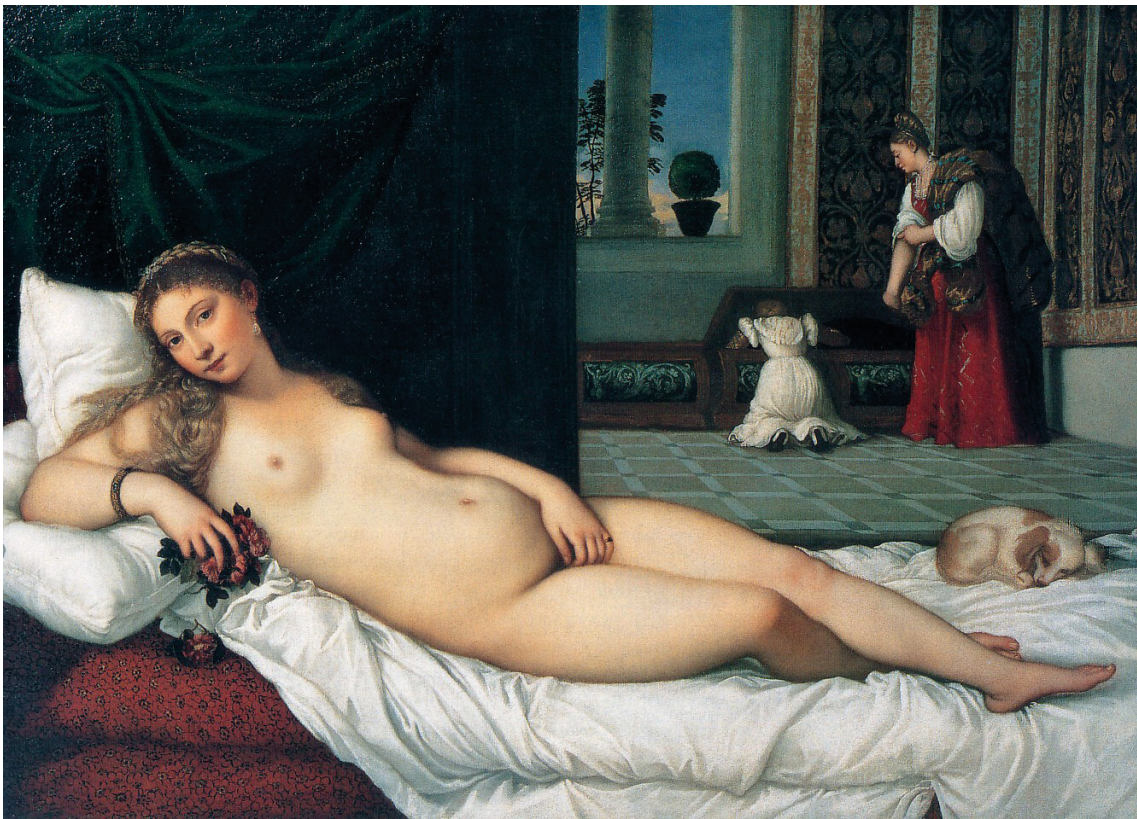


**Fig. 5.1** Unknown Photographer, [Chin. Mädchen.], 1870-1900, albumen paper print, mounted on cardboard, 6.2 x 9.5 cm, cardboard: 6.4 x 10.4 cm, carte-de-visite. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden, Inv. No. F 1981-1/27.93 © Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden.

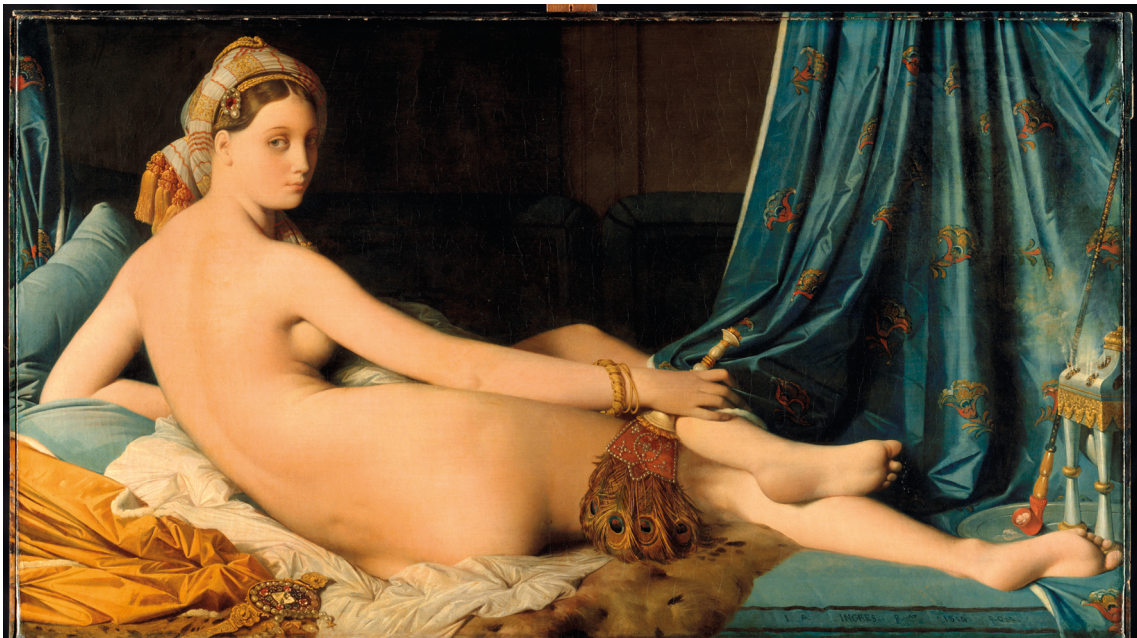


**Fig. 5.2** Giorgione (Giorgio da Castelfranco) and Titian (Tiziano Vecellio), *Sleeping Venus*, 1508/10, oil on canvas, 108.5 x 175 cm. Gal.-Nr. 185. © Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden. Foto: Estel/Klut.





**Fig. 5.3** Titian (Tiziano Vecellio), *Venus of Urbino*, 1538, oil on canvas, 120 x 165 cm. Uffizi Gallery, Florence. © Uffizi Gallery.



**Fig. 5.4** Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *La Grande Odalisque*, 1814, oil on canvas, 91 x 162 cm. Louvre Museum, Paris. © bpk | RMN - Grand Palais | Thierry Le Mage.



**Fig. 5.5** Édouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863, oil on canvas, 130.5 x 190 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.  
© bpk | RMN - Grand Palais | Hervé Lewandowski.



**Fig. 5.6** *A Modern Odalisque*, Photo copyrighted by E. Donald Roberts, Jr., ca. 1894. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C, 2005693275. Courtesy Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.



**Fig. 5.7 a-b** L. F. Fislser & Co, [Portrait of reclining Chinese Lady], ca. 1870, hand-colored albumen paper print, carte-de-visite, mounted on a cardboard, card size 63 x 103mm, studio name and location printed on verso, "From The Photographic Studio of L.F. Fislser & Co. Shanghai." Terry Bennett Collection. Photograph courtesy of Terry Bennett.



**Fig. 5.8 a** Unknown photographer, *A Famous Suzhou Courtesan*, ca. 1911.  
After 艳窈花影—全国各埠名妓小影 [Beautiful Dressing Case and Flower Shadow—Photos of Famous Courtesans from Various Provinces] (Shanghai: Youzheng Press, 1911), 84.



**Fig. 5.8 b** Unknown photographer, *A Famous Courtesan Yue Xian from Fujian*, ca. 1911.  
After 艳窈花影—全国各埠名妓小影 [Beautiful Dressing Case and Flower Shadow—Photos of Famous Courtesans from Various Provinces] (Shanghai: Youzheng Press, 1911), 119.