From Porcelain to Photography: The Transformation of Femininity in the Representation of Chinese Women

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Since the eighteenth century, the representation of Chinese woman in porcelain and export paintings, together with images of pagodas, musicians, and Mandarins have developed into stereotypes of China for foreign consumption. This fantasy world was not disrupted until the invention of photography in 1839, which launched a new period of representing the Chinese woman. This essay explores shifts in the portrayal of Chinese femininity by analyzing cross-media motifs and imagery from porcelain to photography.

An export porcelain plate collected in the Porzellansammlung (Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden) exhibits a classic pictorial configuration of representing the eighteenth-century Chinese woman **(fig. 12.1)**. This octagonal plate depicts a scene of a “mother teaching children (教子图),” in which an elegant woman sits on a stool teaching two young boys. This motif highlights the virtues and domestic responsibilities that represents the core concepts of contemporary Confucian femininity. The theme of “mothering” in porcelain was immensely popular in the domestic and export market. A large number of vessels with this theme circulated in Europe in the eighteenth century, but the original meaning, which referred to feminine virtues stressed by Confucianism, had been forgotten and reframed in a new context.

Meanings of pictorial narratives in Chinese export porcelain was modified mainly to satisfy the commercial demands of the European market. Although the décor on Chinese export porcelain undoubtedly quoted illustrations from drama, prints, and a variety of text and visual resources circulating in China and Europe, the original meanings of the texts and imagery adapted for porcelain were produced to appeal to European taste(s).[1] There were many variations in the representation of Chinese women on porcelain in eighteenth-century Europe. In 1734, Adam Friedrich von Löwenfinck, an artisan in the Meissen porcelain factory, had access to a large number of Chinese and Japanese export porcelain collected by August the Strong.[2] Inspired by the decoration on Chinese export porcelain in the royal collection, this influential porcelain artist modified motifs and created new imagery of Chinese women. A specific example is a porcelain plate produced in Bayreuth—Löwenfinck’s other atelier—which depicts a mother teaching children; it is similar to those on Chinese export porcelain **(fig. 12.2)**. However, he pointedly adds a bound foot to the woman in his plate. It is unclear what level of knowledge Ger-

[1] As Dawn Odell has argued, the meaning(s) of Chinese porcelain, with some motifs reflecting literati taste, was ultimately highly adaptable when modified in the process of producing export ware (and their imitators) for consumption in Europe. See Dawn Odell, Porcelain, Print Culture and Mercantile Aesthetics, chap. in *The Cultural Aesthetics of Eighteenth-Century Porcelain*, eds. Alden Cavanaugh and Michael E. Yonan (London: Routledge, 2010), 156.

[2] Ulrich Peitsch, Der Lebensweg Adam Friedrich von Löwenfincks, chap. in *Phantastische Welten: Malerei auf Meissener Porzellan und deutschen Fayencen von Adam Friedrich von Löwenfinck (1714-1754)*, eds. Ulrich Peitsch and Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen Dresden (Stuttgart: ARNOLSCHE, 2014), 11.

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mans had in the eighteenth century of foot binding custom.[3] This author assumes that his modification of a woman's body was a pictorial strategy to satisfy European customers' voyeuristic curiosity about this practice. Body in this context becomes a field upon which cultural difference inspires imagination, and the body of the Chinese woman is the object which is viewed and manipulated.

The eroticization of objects was the primary fixation of commodity culture. European artisans reshaped the image of femininity to meet customers' desires and gradually developed a "commodity of aesthetics."[4] In the middle of the eighteenth century, many Chinese paintings and porcelain objects with erotic scenes reached Europe. The mobility of export porcelain enabled European clients to imagine and reshape the body of Chinese women. This shift can be recognized in a porcelain plate depicting a reclining nude and a harlequin, decorated in Canton on special order **(fig. 12.3)**. The reclining nude is a repetitive subject in European painting which would have reminded viewers of Venus. The Chinese female nude in this work suggests the infusion of European pictorial traditions and erotica into the Chinese market. The presence of a peeping harlequin—representing a foreigner—indicates the ubiquitous voyeuristic gaze of the European, symbolizing power and surveillance with the increasing desire to conquer and colonize.

Besides the pictorial representations on export porcelain, export paintings circulating in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries commissioned by Europeans and Americans further extended the voyeuristic gaze upon the foreign female body. Compared to export porcelain, export paintings undoubtedly provided a more detailed view of China and the Chinese for Europeans and Americans. In 1800, George Henry Mason published a book entitled *The Costume of China: Illustrated by sixty engravings: with explanations in English and French.* These were based on original drawings that Mason purchased from the Chinese craftsman, Pu Qua, during his stay in Canton in 1789-1790.[5] The illustrated book reframes the stereotypes of Chinese culture that developed in the eighteenth century into vivid ethnographic representations that depict Chinese people in a variety of costumes and professions. Each plate is accompanied by Mason's comments that not only describe the figures but also reveal his personal interpretations. In the commentary of the plate "Chinese Woman," he writes that the woman's small feet, "compel her to move with such cautious and unsteady steps, such as would cause a painful sensation to a European **(fig. 12.4)**."[6] It is significant that Mason introduced a superior way of viewing bound feet in the representation of Chinese woman from a European perspective. He tried to connect the female body with suffering and pathology, which also indicated the sickness and abnormality of Chinese people at large.

Besides George Mason and several artists such as William Alexander who traveled China with the Macartney Embassy in 1793, most Europeans had never seen a representation of a Chinese woman based on close documentary data (rather than imaginary portrayals).[7] The invention of photography in 1839 not

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[3] An early description of bound feet occurred in the prose of Thomas Hood written in 1826; he called bound feet, "almost invisible feet." See Thomas Hood, *The Works of Thomas Hood* (New York: Derby and Jackson, 1861). Also see Mimi Chan, *Through the Western Eyes: Images of Chinese Women in Anglo-American Literature* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co. Ltd.,1989), 104.

[4] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, The Other Side of Venus: The Visual Economy of Feminine Display, chap. in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, ed. Victoria De Grazia and Ellen Furlough (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 113.

[5] George Henry Mason, *The Costume of China: illustrated by sixty engraving: with explanations in English and French* (London: Printed for W. Miller, 1800), Plate XI; for a detailed description of this book see Ulrike Hillemann, *Asian Empire and British Knowledge: China and the Networks of British Imperial Expansion* (Berlin: Springer, 2009), 28-30.

[6] George H. Mason, *The Costume of China*, Plate XI.

[7] William Alexander traveled as a draftsman on the 1793 Macartney Embassy to China. He produced thousands of sketches during the two-year journey and then translated these into watercolors and engravings of Chinese landscape. These were exhibited at a 1796 Royal Academy exhibit. See Stacey Sloboda, "Picturing China: William Alexander and the Visual Language of Chinoiserie," *The British Art Journal*, v. IX, no. 2 (2008): 28-36.

only satisfied the desire and imperative to see and explore the East Asian world, but enhanced stereotypes of the Chinese woman through the categorization, control and transmission of photography.

Beginning in the 1860s, European travel photographers initiated a new way of displaying Chinese women. Photography was introduced to China through British imperial expansion during the first Opium War.[8] The initially passive, rather than strongly collaborative, reception of photography in colonial contexts should serve as an indication—from the very beginning—that photography cannot be seen simply as technology, but as an extension of the human eye, compounding the construction of power relationships. In other words, photography as a revolutionary medium did not simply lead to accurate investigation and representation of the physical world, but also symbolized a gaze of control, relating to hierarchy and surveillance.[9]

William Saunders (1832–1892), the British photographer, created a photographic album called *Chinese Life and Character Studies, 1863-64*, that was an important reference for both European and American photographers, as well as local cameramen, in terms of categorizing and representing Chinese people and society.[10] The portrait of a married Chinese woman taken by William Saunders features a woman in Han costume seated on a chair; her gaze is averted and a three-quarter profile view of her face is visible to the camera **(fig. 12.5)**. The bonsai plant and table with porcelain around her create a nostalgic environment that reminds the viewers of similar visual representations on porcelain surfaces from the eighteenth century. The sitter's hairstyle and ornaments, bound feet and fan collectively suggest Saunders' attempts to transfer the stereotypical imagery of Chinese women typically found in painting, porcelain surfaces, and other common export items into a new photographic framework.

The nature of photography allowed images to be reproduced rapidly and to circulate globally; the medium also provided possibilities for Europeans and Americans to view more accurate representations of East Asian women, while simultaneously reinforcing stereotypical representations and desires. *Cartes-de-visite* (CDV) became highly popular quickly after the French photographer Andre Adolphe Disderi (1819-1889) invented the format in the 1850s. Compared to earlier, larger-format photographic portraits, CDV were inexpensive and easy to transport and exchange. The c*artes-de-visite* are often annotated with messages on the front or back, and the photographic studio's name is printed on the reverse.[11] The group of *cartes-de-visite* in Staatlichen Ethnographischen Sammlungen (SES), Museum für Völkerkunde, Dresden, were circulated in the 1870s-1900s and collected by H. Morgenstern.[12] The photographs are labeled *Chinesische Mädchen* (Chinese Girls) and *Chinesische Frau* (Chinese Woman), indicating their use as souvenir photography; the name and address of the photographic studios are printed on the back of the photos as a marketing strategy **(figs. 12.6-12.7)**.

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[8] The first surviving photograph produced in China is a portrait of the Qing official, Qiying; it was taken by the French amateur scientist, Jules Itier, in 1844, commemorating the triumph of British military in the First Opium War. The Qing official's dull and unpleasant facial expression in the portrait marks an embarrassing beginning of the reception and dissemination of photography in China. See Clare Roberts, *Photography and China* (London: Reaktion Books; Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 11.

[9] Michel Foucault used the "panopticon" proposed by Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century to explain the modern social system as "an indefinitely generalizable mechanism of 'panopticism.' "Photography as the revolutionary modern medium promotes the establishment of a hierarchical system and provides a new means of surveillance." Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, tr. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 7.

[10] William Saunders, who opened Shanghai's first commercial photography studio in January 1862, took a great number of photographs which captured the types and costumes of Chinese in the late nineteenth century; see *Chinese Life and Character Studies, 1863-64*, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2003.R.22, Box 8).

[11] Roberts, *Photography and China* (2013), 27.

[12] H. Morgenstern was an engineer working on a German imperial navy sounding vessel (The SMS Möwe) on a tour to a German colony in the South Pacific between 1895 and 1905; he probably collected these photos during his extended voyage. Information provided by Dr. Agnes Matthias, Curator, Staatlichen Ethnographischen Sammlungen, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden.

Photography can be understood as a "collective assemblage" involving photographer, viewer and photographed subject.[13] This suggests that photography has the potential to arouse the subjectivity of sitters, to some degree, and encourage them to participate in the construction of images. Courtesans' portraits are key for understanding the transformation of Chinese femininity's portrayal in photography. *Cartes-de-visite* were very popular among courtesans because of the possibility for use in self-advertisement.[14] Among the group of Dresden CDV, a portrait of a courtesan in the late nineteenth century shows the representation of a woman reclining on the sofa **(fig. 12.8)**. This woman, wearing a half-moon hairband, is outstretched on the sofa and directs a seductive expression at the viewer; the clock behind her and the western style couch together create an allegorical reference to modernity. This portrait is a hybrid of visual elements—the hairstyle, costume, and bound feet are local—and modern visual elements, such as the clock and couch reference imported material culture. Even the model's seductive pose and expression maybe regarded as imported, as they were absent in earlier local visual representations.

The hybrid nature in this courtesan portrait reveals the dilemma of the Chinese woman caught between an emerging subjectivity and the stereotypical representations of an older framework. A composite photo with the diverse representation of Chinese women also reflects an increasing independence and the transformation of the female image **(fig. 12.9)**. William Saunders' "portrait of a married Chinese woman" was cropped and pasted into this composite image **(fig. 12.5)**. Many of the women's hairstyles are arranged conspicuously to symbolize exoticism. It is worth noting that the composite photo also displays some new visual elements. For example, the portrayal of a woman standing in front of the mirror provides a new perspective for representing a woman's body. The woman sees herself, as the viewers see her body through the mirror's reflection. The extension of the visual space indicates the active participation of women in representing the body and self. The mirror in this context is not simply a medium for displaying femininity, but also a medium for self-exploration. The "self" was gradually developing into a more crucial theme in the representation of Chinese women in the early twentieth century. In these photographs they have undergone a transformation, from being objects on view, to subjects possessing their own desires, viewing the self through the world around them.

In summary, beginning in the eighteenth century Chinese export paintings, porcelain and a variety of visual forms collectively contributed to the viewers' imagination regarding Chinese femininity. The original meaning of stories and symbols depicted on pictorial surfaces, however, were often transformed into stereotypical illustrations of gendered exoticism. The dissemination of photography in the nineteenth century further reinforced the colonial gaze. It simultaneously created the potential for some Chinese women to participate in the construction of images, that is, for women to play a more significant role in shaping of their own portrayal. This hybrid photographic milieu marked the beginning of a new era in the visual representation of the Chinese feminine form.

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[13] Karina Eileraas cites the concept "collective assemblages" from Gilles Deleuze to interpret photographic practices as a collective activity by encouraging different subjects to participate. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, tr. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1986), 22, cited in Karina Elierrass, "Reframing the Colonial Gaze: Photography, Ownership, and Feminist Resistance," *French Issue* v. 118, no. 4 (Sept. 2003): 807-840.

[14] Laikwan Pang, Photography, Performance, and the Making of Female Images, chap. in *The Distorting Mirror: Visual Modernity in China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 80.

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Fig. 12.1 Plate, porcelain with overglaze enamels (*famille rose*), Jingdezhen, China, Yongzheng period (1723-1735), Qing dynasty, h. 2.9 cm, d. 21.5 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Porzellansammlung, Inv. No. PO 6164. © Porzellansammlung, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Foto: Adrian Sauer.

Fig. 12.2 Dish, porcelain, Adam Friedrich Löwenfinck, Bayreuth, 1736-1737, Knöller period. H. 3.0 cm, L. 18.6 cm, W. 20.8 cm. Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg, Inv. No. 1942.42. © Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg.

Fig. 12.3 *A reclining nude and Harlequin "Peeping Tom,"* c. 1750, dish, porcelain, Decorated in Canton with overglaze enamel. D. 20 cm. Basil Ionides Bequest. © Victoria & Albert Museum.

Fig. 12.4 Pu-Qua, *Chinese Woman*, 1780-1790, some watermarked 1796 or 1797, hand-colored aquatint plate. Getty Research Institute. After George Henry Mason, *The Costume of China: illustrated by sixty engraving: with explanations in English and French*, London, Printed for W. Miller, 1800, Plate XI, 11.

Fig. 12.5 William Saunders, *Married Woman's Hairstyle*, c. 1870, Terry Bennett Collection.
© Terry Bennett Collection.

Fig. 12.6 Unknown photographer, [Chinese girls], 1870-1900, albumen paper print, mounted on cardboard, carte-de-visite, 9.9 x 6.1 cm, cardboard: 10.5 x 6.5 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden, Morgenstern Collection, Inv. No. F 1981-1/27.109
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Fig. 12.7 Unknown photographer, [Chinese woman], 1870-1900, albumen paper print, mounted on cardboard, carte-de-visite, 9.9 x 6.1 cm, cardboard: 10.4 x 6.4 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden, Morgenstern's Collection, Inv. No. F 1981-1/27.110.
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Fig. 12.8 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. 12.9 Unknown photographer, *Chinese Beauties* (photomontage), 1880-1900, from the album "China III," p. 17, albumen paper print, mounted on a cardboard, 20.9 x 27.1 cm, cardboard: 54 x 37.5 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden, Inv. No. F 2015-1/6.27.
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