INVENTING A “CHINESE” PORTRAIT STYLE IN EARLY PHOTOGRAPHY
The Case of Milton Miller

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Not much can be said about Milton M. Miller’s professional life. Piecing together scattered records, we know that before starting his brief but productive career in China, he worked from 1856 to 1860 as a cameraman in Robert H. Vance’s San Francisco gallery. In 1859, Vance (1825–76) formed a partnership with Charles Leander Weed (1824–1903), an adventurous photographer and entrepreneur who later opened galleries from Nevada and California to the Far East. When Weed moved to Hong Kong in 1859, Miller followed, serving as the “operating artist” in the newly established Weed and Howard Photographic Gallery in both Hong Kong and Guangzhou. According to an 1860 advertisement, the gallery was equipped with “a large Solar Camera by which Photographic Portraits can be taken Life Size; this is a new invention to which the Advertisers would call especial attention.”

In 1861, Weed left for Shanghai to look for new venues; Miller took over the gallery’s ownership and established the firm of Miller & Co., Photographers. It is unclear how long he maintained the Guangdong operation; in August 1861, Miller announced that the branch would be open for business for only a month. During this period, he also suffered a burglary; the missing properties included “the whole of the articles” in the gallery and a box of negatives. It is likely that Miller operated mainly in Hong Kong, from whence he traveled to Macao, Guangdong, and other locations on commissions. For example, in May 1861 he sailed to Nagasaki, Japan, where he made a series of stereoviews for the American publishers E. & H. T. Anthony. Another commission came from Dr. John Kerr at the Canton Hospital; he invited Miller to photograph a Chinese patient whose “bodies and arms are covered with hundreds of tumors.” This was the first documented use of photography in China for medical research in an institutional context. Miller terminated his Chinese venture in 1863 and returned to his hometown in Vermont, selling his business and negatives in Hong Kong to his former operator S.W. Halsey. It seems that once resettled in America, he reinvented himself as a real estate investor and largely abandoned the career of a photographer; the 1870 U.S. census identifies him as “retired photographer.”

Among the Western photographers working in China from the mid- to late nineteenth century, Miller is best known for his portraits of Chinese officials, businessmen, and women. To many collectors and researchers, these are prized artistic images that not only demonstrate the photographer’s technical sophistication but also reveal the sitters’ inner character—a combination rarely seen in early photography of China. Take his portrait of an old woman, for example (fig. 1). She wears an
elaborately embroidered robe with matching vest and skirt—the ceremonial garb of a Qing official's wife. Though expressionless, her wrinkled face shows signs of a long, unhappy life, delicately contrasting with her ornate crown of jewels and flowers. The image is subtle yet direct. The camera focuses on her face. The directness of the image is also reinforced by light, which comes from above and focuses on the woman's body and face, foregrounding her from the shadowed surroundings. The sense of visual immediacy and the woman's individualized appearance reconfirm the picture's identity as a portrait and explain why this and similar images by Miller have been praised as "the most significant body of nineteenth-century Chinese official portraits."14

But who is this woman? Is she really the wife of a Tartar general, as a version of the picture's English caption says? Who is this Tartar general? Why did the woman appear in Miller's studio to have a formal visage taken? These questions have never been asked because people have willingly trusted the image to be a genuine portrait, mainly based on its heightened naturalistic effect. But during a workshop held at the Getty Research Institute in 2006, this image was scrutinized along with other Miller pictures. Certain peculiar features of these photographs were recognized. One problem concerns the old lady's clothes, which are worn by different women in other Miller pictures, including a young lady whom the caption identifies as the wife of a Cantonese mandarin.

WHO IS THE SITTER?

Taking this initial discovery as a clue, I have tried to trace the links between Miller's Chinese portraits by comparing their subjects, costumes, settings, and props. Many more connections can be established: the young woman is shown both individually and with her husband; the husband is also photographed with his mother and younger brother; the mother, who turns out to be none other than the "1st wife of the Tartar general," appears with other women in yet another picture. This detective work has finally singled out eleven photographs as belonging to a tight, "feature-sharing" cluster: the same people appear and reappear in these pictures in different costumes and changing groups, and the portraits were all shot in the same place and with an identical photographic style. Their iconographical consistency and stylistic coherence suggests a loosely defined "project": it is possible that Miller created these images during his short stay in Guangzhou in 1861. Before contemplating the implications of these findings, however, we need to look more closely at the images.
Milton Miller (American, 1830–99)

Un mandarin con su señora (A mandarin and his wife),
albumen print, 22.8 × 28.3 cm (9 × 11 ¾ in.)

From William Pryor Floyd, “Hong Kong Views,” 1860s

Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute
The most frequently photographed and most photogenic sitter among Miller's subjects is the young man in figures 2 through 5. In figure 2, he wears a winter-style official surcoat (bufu); the bird insignia in the square badge on his chest identifies him as a civil official. During the Qing dynasty, there were nine degrees of civil officials, whose different ranks were indicated by various bird motifs on their badges. In the present case, the bird is probably the silver pheasant (báixian), the symbol of a fifth-degree civil official. The same man appears in figure 3 with his wife. Here he has changed into a summer-style surcoat made of semitranslucent gauze. The bird insignia on the surcoat differs from the first one and indicates a different official rank.\(^{19}\) The same man also appears in two other pictures in casual, domestic clothes. In one picture, he sits with his wife and their four children (fig. 4); in the other, he is with his aged mother, his younger brother, and three children (fig. 5). But it seems that only two children are his: according to traditional customs, the boy sitting next to the younger brother should be the latter's son.

The young wife portrayed in figure 3 also reappears in multiple pictures (figs. 6, 7, and possibly 11). In figures 3 and 6, she wears a full set of the ceremonial attire of an official's principal wife, including an embroidered robe with official insignia and a matching skirt, a jeweled crown, and a long necklace. During the Qing dynasty, a lady put on such a formal costume only on ceremonial occasions. But the woman in figure 6 sits in a languid pose, which seems at odds with her supposed social status and the implied formal occasion. Leaning to one side, she puts an arm on a traditional-style tea table (cháji) while exposing her tiny bound feet.\(^{19}\) Figure 7 presents an even bigger problem: here she is dressed in a Han-style unofficial jacket and skirt, but with a rank badge on the chest. Not only is it highly unusual to combine
No. 603.—The same Mandarin in civilian dress, with his aged mother sitting in the middle, his brother on the right hand, and his children.

Milton Miller (American, 1830–99)
The Same Mandarin in Civilian Dress, with His Aged Mother Sitting in the Middle, His Brother on the Right Hand, and His Children, 1860–63, albumen print, 21 × 29 cm (8 ¼ × 11 3/8 in.) Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute
Fig. 6
Milton Miller (American, 1830–99)
Portrait of a Chinese woman, 1860–63,
albumen print, 23.2 × 18.7 cm (9⅛ × 7¾ in.)
London, Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland

Fig. 7
Milton Miller (American, 1830–99)
Portrait of a Chinese woman, 1860–63,
albumen print, 17.2 × 14.7 cm (6⅝ × 5½ in.)
London, Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland
Fig. 8
Milton Miller (American, 1830–99)
albumeen print, 13.1 x 10.4 cm (5 1/8 x 4 1/8 in.)
London, Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland

Fig. 9
Milton Miller (American, 1830–99)
A Mandarin and His Wife in Full Court Dress, 1860–63.
albumeen print, 14.3 x 19.8 cm (5 3/8 x 7 1/2 in.)
Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute
a rank badge with an informal jacket, but the badge also differs from the one in the previous picture. According to Yuhang Li, who has extensively researched traditional Chinese costumes, the badge seems to have been added arbitrarily onto the jacket, because it covers the embroidered borders running from the neckline to the lower hem.

The young man's clothes—his winter-style surcoat, fur hat, and collar (see fig. 2) as well as his summer-style surcoat with a different rank badge (see fig. 3)—are shared by a middle-aged man in figures 8 and 9, respectively. In the last picture, this older man is accompanied by his wife. Her clothes are identical to those worn by the young woman in figures 3 and 6. Like the younger couple, the middle-aged couple is portrayed with other family members in plain clothes (fig. 10).

Similarly, the young man's aged mother in figure 5 reappears in the picture discussed at the beginning of this paper, in which she has changed her plain robe to ceremonial garb (see fig. 1). Upon close comparison, we find that she and the two women in figures 3, 6, and 9 all wear the same set of clothes and ornaments, including the robe, skirt, vest, crown, and necklace. Moreover, her identity as the "1st wife of the Tartar general" cannot be true because in other pictures she and her children all wear typically Chinese clothes. One of these "Chinese" images is seen in figure 5, discussed earlier. The other photograph is figure 11, in which she appears with other female figures to represent three generations of women in a family.

These eleven pictures were all shot in the same space, as indicated by the identical diamond pattern on the carpet and the same plain backdrop. They also employ identical props, including two side tables—one Chinese style and the
other Western style—a set of covered teacups, and two sets of chairs. In two cases, additional props, such as potted flowers, calligraphy scrolls, and a table screen, are employed to generate a stronger domestic atmosphere (see figs. 3, 4). This space is clearly Miller’s studio in Guangzhou.  

Why should we conduct a close reading that primarily focuses on the sitters’ clothes, ornaments, and rank badges? A careful examination of these details—indicators of the sitters’ (supposed) identity—marks the beginning of a serious inquiry into the nature of these historical photographs. Any historical inquiry requires an evidential base. Due to the paucity of archival evidence in studying early photographic portraits in China, this basis can be established only through a systematical inventory and analysis of the intrinsic properties of actual photographs. Such preliminary examination is both deconstructive and constructive because it simultaneously frees a photograph from unsubstantiated assumptions and reestablishes its status as a historical image and artifact.

In the present case of the eleven Miller portraits, it has become obvious that we can no longer trust the conventional identifications of the sitters. Miller may have provided some of these identifications, such as labels and captions; others were likely added during the course of the images’ circulation and reproduction. These labels, for example, identify the young man in figures 2 through 5 variously as “a Cantonese mandarin,” “a minor official,” and “a Chinese merchant.” The young woman in figures 3, 4, 6, and 7 is said to be the wife of a mandarin or a merchant when she is dressed in
domestic clothes and is labeled as “the number 1 wife of the Canton governor” or the wife of a lower official when she wears the ceremonial costume. As for the old lady in figure 1, we already know that some books introduce her as the wife of the Tartar general in Canton; but she is also identified as “probably the wife of Kwang Tzu-t’ang, governor of Kwang-tung (Guangdong)” in The Face of China; as “the wife of a Cantonese Mandarin” on the cover of Imperial China; and as “Mandarin’s Wife” in Terry Bennett’s newly published History of Photography in China: 1842–1860. None of these claims can be substantiated by textual evidence, but the pictures themselves can easily refute all of them. As mentioned above, no official could have different rank badges on winter and summer surcoats at a given moment; and it is unthinkable that ranking officials and their wives would exchange clothes when they had formal portraits taken in a Westerner’s studio. It is clear that these are all staged “costume portraits” with dubious historical credibility. But the labels and captions provide them with a fictional documentary quality.

WHOSE INDIVIDUALITY?

This renewed understanding challenges the photographs’ status as “the most significant body of nineteenth-century Chinese official portraits.” We should also question a previous conclusion based mainly on this group of images, that as early as 1860 and 1861, many affluent Chinese, including Qing officials and their families, had embraced photography and frequented Western studios to have their pictures taken. One version of this theory appears in Mary Warner Marien’s Photography: A Cultural History.

The standards for middle-class portraiture, developed in the West, were adapted to the tastes of a new, well-to-do Chinese clientele. Lavish furnishing, placed in an enclosure marked off by a cloth backdrop, formed the setting for people who dressed in fine clothing and displayed artistic treasures. Miller’s portraits, mostly of Chinese upper and middle classes, and persons working for foreign trades, usually show the sitters directly facing the camera. A hint of expression is occasionally evidenced on a sitter’s face, but as a rule the camera kept its distance from the sitter.

Figure 3 is the example used to illustrate this statement.

Marien mentions several visual features of Miller’s Chinese portraits, including lavish furnishing, fine clothing, artistic treasures, and the expressions on the faces. Because the sitters’ names are never given even in the make-believe captions, I suspect that the perception of these images as genuine visages of middle- and upper-class individuals is largely based on these features and the photographers’ realistic style, which places a heavy emphasis on a sitter’s physiognomy and character. Indeed, portraits by Miller, whether real or fictional, convey a strong sense of naturalism rarely seen at the time in China, and for this reason he has been compared to Mathew Brady (ca. 1823–96) and Marcus Aurelius Root (1808–88). Like these two representative nineteenth-century portrait photographers, Miller consistently created images that are at once precise and dramatic. He used carefully controlled lighting to delineate figures’ facial features and to mold their clothed bodies. He also took pains to capture hints of facial expression, as we find in several male portraits in this group (see figs. 2–4, 8). Situated in a relatively empty environment, these figures surface from the plain, slightly blurry background, initiating a dialogue with the spectator.

This naturalistic style places Miller among mainstream American portrait photographers of the 1850s and 1860s. As historians of photography have shown, during this period, an ideal photographic portrait was conceptualized in America as a lifelike image emanating from the sitter’s inner character; a representation of this kind must, therefore, treat “the exterior surface of persons as signs or expressions of inner truths, of interior reality.” Serving a well-to-do clientele obsessed with “character,” the task of a portraitist became predominantly “how to achieve it, how to show it and preserve it, and most of all how to recognize it in others.” Furthermore, according to this view, to recognize and represent the sitter’s character not only fulfills the mimetic function of photography but more importantly demonstrates the photographer’s artistic aspiration and talent. In revealing the interiority of the subject, the photographer elevates him or herself from performing a mechanical act to reflecting the sensibility of an artist. Henry James thus stated in 1855 that an artistic photographer “must infuse his personality to elevate the gift he possesses high above that of a mere mechanical power… elevating the cause of genuine art above that mere daguerreotype faculty of ever presenting one exact copy of nature.”

The earliest record of Miller’s professional career shows that in 1856 he was working in Robert H. Vance’s gallery at the corner of Montgomery and Sacramento streets in San Francisco. It is perhaps no coincidence that Vance, “the Pacific coast’s
premier photographic trendsetter and practitioner in the 1850s, opened this gallery the same year with an aggressive advertising campaign. Here is one of his advertisements in the San Francisco Commercial Advertiser, which trumpets the gallery’s unmatched technology, artistic taste, and up-to-date style:

Every plate is carefully prepared with a coating of pure silver, which produces that clear, bold and lasting picture that is so much admired, and which can’t be produced on the common plates, as they are now used by other artists. He [Vance] has of late, after much experimenting, brought his chemical preparations to perfection, using compounds entirely different from anything ever before used in the art, which enables him to produce perfect likenesses, at every sitting, with that clear, soft and beautiful tone, so much admired in all his pictures.

Another advertisement in 1857 emphasized that with the assistance of “another of the best Artists in the state,” “our goal is to perfect ourselves in any new branch of our Art that may be invented, previous to introducing it in our establishment.” Whether or not Vance was referring to Miller here, and other advertisements reflect Miller’s working environment before he went to the Far East. To rise to his employer’s demand in order to survive in the fiercely competitive business of commercial photography, he had to perfect his techniques and skills, embracing while helping to define the prevailing ideal of portrait photography, and proving himself to be a true artist.

Understood in this context, the heighten “individuality” in Miller’s Chinese portraits demonstrated the photographer’s qualification as a creative artist, not necessarily the subjectivity of the sitter, especially when the sitter was a hired model. It is also important to recognize that although he was now working in a British colony away from home, his clients remained Westerners, not the local people. Indeed, even though the figures in his pictures appear to be men and women of distinct physical features and personalities, Miller never noted down their names and merely assigned them some generic identities in English. His shocking insensitivity toward local Chinese laborers during a recorded incident also makes one wonder if he cared at all about his employees’ feelings or thoughts.

Projecting an individualistic air but remaining anonymous, these images represent a curious fusion of the newly emerging artistic genre of portrait photography and the age-old European tradition of depicting “Chinese types and professions.” We can trace this tradition to a set of illustrations that Johannes Nieuhof (1618–72) made after traveling to Beijing in the years 1655 to 1657. But the direct predecessor of nineteenth-century photographic representations of China was William Alexander’s (1767–1816) watercolor pictures and engravings, which he created after journeying with the Macartney embassy to China in 1792. Depicting distant Chinese cities and landscapes, exotic buildings, and figures dressed in special costumes and engaged in different activities, Alexander’s pictures became enormously popular in the early nineteenth century and were reproduced in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the United States. When European and American photographers arrived in China from the 1840s onward to produce their own images of China, they followed the well-traveled routes of Nieuhof and Alexander but updated the depictions of Chinese people and costumes with contemporary visual technology and artistic taste. The puppetlike figures in Alexander’s Costumes of China were turned into real, albeit still nameless, “portraits.” As I will explain in the following section, what this transformation signified, however, was not the self-discovery of an indigenous people but the global reach of Western science and art, which allowed a Western observer to not only record local costumes and customs but also transform the locals into “individuals” in order to demonstrate his own modernity.

REINVENTING A CHINESE PORTRAIT STYLE

When Miller arrived in Hong Kong in 1860, the place was already populated by photo studios operated by Westerners and Chinese alike; the latter’s establishments included the Yichang, founded during the Xianfeng era (1851–61), and the Shengshi (photography society), started by Lai Afong in 1859. John Thomson, a famous British photographer who traveled in China in the late 1860s and early 1870s, noted “a score of Chinese photographers” who had their businesses along the city’s Victoria Road. The emergence and proliferation of commercial studios is a main issue in the history of Chinese photography, as discussed by Jeffrey Cody, Frances Terpak, and Edwin Lai in this catalog. Their discussions show the coexistence of Western and Chinese studios in the major treaty ports and growing competition between them. Cody and Terpak cite the reformer Wang Tao, who felt that the Chinese studios in Shanghai made better prints than their foreign counterparts. Significantly, around this time, the Chinese “peculiarities” in portrait taking also became a recurrent topic
of ridicule in Western accounts: a local sitter always demands a full frontal view with both ears showing, always looks straight into the camera lens in a confrontational manner, always sits squarely next to a side table with artificial flowers on it, always hates shadows on his face, always wears his best clothes and holds a favorite object such as a fan or a snuff-bottle, and always displays his long-nailed fingers distinctly. Thomson reconfirmed most of these oddities in a report titled "T'oung-Kong Photographers." Published in the prestigious British Journal of Photography, this report differs from other accounts in its inclusion of an interview with a fictitious native practitioner named A-hung, thus equating a Chinese photographer's professional standards with a Chinese sitter's uneducated preferences. To drive his point home further, Thomson also illustrated the report with a caricature (fig. 12). In describing this illustration, Roberta Wue writes: "The dead, full-front orientation of the sitters, the painfully unnatural symmetry of his frog-like pose, and the tediously precise positioning of the furniture and props all illustrate and parody the artificial regularity and lack of depth condemned in Thomson's account."

Written in tones ranging from condescending to patronizing, accounts of this kind were nevertheless taken as reality. What makes these reports especially persuasive is the "discursive symmetry" the picture they paint neatly contradicts Western conventions in portrait taking, hence confirming deeply held notions about essential cultural differences between East and West. Developed around the mid-nineteenth century and applied to both operators and sitters, these Western conventions are also concerned with how to arrange the body, where to allow the light to fall, what background and furniture to provide, and what to do with sitter's hands and legs and eyes. One such instruction dictates: "The posture of the person sitting for the portrait should be easy and unconstrained; the feet and hands neither projecting too much, not drawn too far back; the eyes should be directed a little sideways above the camera, and fixed upon some object there, but never upon the apparatus, since this would tend to impart to the face a dolorous, dissatisfied look." It is interesting that while providing a basic perceptual structure for articulating Chinese conventions, these instructions also steadfastly oppose the Chinese way of portraiture. In other words, the Western observers willingly have themselves contradicted on every account by the Chinese conventions, thereby defining the latter as some strange behavior of the other.

As rare textual references to early Chinese photography, Thomson's report and similar "eyewitness" accounts by Western informants have stimulated a scholarly
interest in defining a distinct Chinese portrait style. But as Régine Thiriez summarizes, after having scrutinized hundreds of old portraits from the nineteenth and early twentieth century, generally speaking there are no radical differences between products of Chinese and Western studios. Chinese studios adopted various Western formulas in setting up the backdrop and arranging sitters' poses, whereas many works by Western studios nicely fit the aforementioned Chinese conventions. Her conclusion is supported by Cody, Terpak, and Fraser in their catalog essays and by my own study of photo archives in China and abroad. Rather than confirming the sharp cultural divide repeated in the Western accounts, an empirical study of primary data reveals instead an abrupt split between practice and discourse.

This split leads us to think about the nature of Western accounts of Chinese portrait photography and the complexity of studio practices. In other words, we no longer frame our inquiry around what separated Chinese and Western studios or whether Chinese sitters and photographers developed distinct standards in taking portraits. Of course indigenous traditions of portraiture existed in premodern China and would influence people's attitude toward the camera. Instead, our questions are refocused on a self-conscious construction of an "authentic" Chinese portrait style in photography, a construction that took place from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century. To my knowledge, during this period, no Chinese writer or photographer wrote about this style and related practices; the so-called Chinese conventions of portrait photography were exclusively reported by Western observers (although sometimes citing local informants), in contrast to the contemporary Euro-American ideal of portrait photography. Nor did Chinese writers and photographers comment on heterogeneous practices of Western portrait photography—an absence of interest that signifies the lack of a comparative approach. In contrast, the Western discourse on the Chinese portrait style was entirely based on a comparative approach, which was internalized by Miller in his studio practice. While following the Western canon in making images for foreign and some Chinese subjects, he also made the earliest set of portraits that began to define a distinct Chinese portrait style.

Here we return to the eleven photographs with a renewed interest. The subject of our examination shifts from the sitters' clothes, ornaments, and insignia to their poses, gestures, props, and grouping. Underlying this shift is a changing focus from the sitters' identity to the modes of representation. Among the eleven images, five portray individual sitters and six are group portraits. My discussion here focuses on the single-sitter pictures.

Four of these five images conform to a standardized composition, with a man or woman placed in the exact center, sitting in a perfect frontal pose, and looking straight into the camera (see figs. 1, 2, 7, 8). Seemingly frozen in silent stillness, these static images betray no bodily movement or any sign of animation, and their rigidity is reinforced by the frontal arrangement of the chair and side table. The notion of space is reduced to a minimum. A picture appears flat, even if the sitter's face and robe are given a sculptural quality. We have no difficulty identifying the origin of this compositional style: if Miller's treatment of the face and body followed a popular Western style, he designed the composition to echo a traditional Chinese ancestor portrait. If we put a contemporary ancestor portrait (fig. 13) next to the four images, we see the same frontal posture, same direct look, same empty background, same spatial reduction and enhanced two-dimensionality, and same feeling of stillness and lack of animation. Several factors further suggest that in making these images, Miller may have intentionally imitated ancestor portraits, a contemporary visual tradition in nineteenth-century China.

First, like ancestor portraits, these images show full-bodied figures dressed in official garb (even the woman in figure 7 wears a rank badge). Second, several details of Miller's portraits, such as a hand lightly holding a long necklace, the symmetrical placement of the two feet, and the use of a broad footstool, are found in ancestor portraits. Third, the two males in figures 2 and 8 almost fill the entire picture frame. This composition is rarely seen in portrait photographs but is a distinct feature of many ancestor portraits. Fourth, around the same time or slightly later, fake ancestor portraits were made for commercial purposes and exported to foreign countries. Fifth, as exemplified by figure 27 in Cody and Terpak, surviving works by earlier Chinese photographers such as Lai Chong (active 1853) closely follow prevailing Western styles and betray no influence of Chinese ancestor portraits. Finally, a comparison of these four images with other portraits by Miller reveals a deliberate effort to create a typical Chinese portrait style.

The sitters in these other portraits include both foreigners and Chinese, whose identities are often definitively recorded in the captions. In figure 14, a certain J.H. Chevechon sits in a relaxed posture with hat in hand. The diagonal balustrade and vertical column define an architectural space for him. In figure 15, General Sir
Fig. 13
Portrait of Zhalafeng'e from a hanging scroll, second half of the 1800s, ink and color on silk, image as shown: 221.5 × 144.9 cm (87 7/8 × 57 1/16 in.)
Washington, D.C., Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Fig. 14
Milton Miller (American, 1830–99)
J.H. Chevechon, Hong Kong, ca. 1860, albumen print, 9.4 × 5.7 cm (3 11/16 × 2 1/4 in.)
London, Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland
John Michel stretches his booted foot in an outlandish manner almost outside the picture frame; his nearly perfect profile image forms an exaggerated contrast to a frontal Chinese ancestor portrait. In figure 16, the Tartar general of Guangzhou appears in casual clothes amid sons and subordinates in his private garden. These examples make it clear that Miller had a wide range of compositional possibilities at his disposal, and in creating portraits for different subjects or purposes he made deliberate choices in the setting, gesture, and spatial arrangement. The fifth single-sitter portrait among the eleven Miller images also reveals similar choices (see fig. 6). Unlike in the photos with the four frontal visages, here the woman leans to one side and looks downward. The photographer has abandoned the frontal mode and has taken the picture from an oblique angle. Together with the attached chair and side table, the woman's body constitutes a three-dimensional mass. We wonder why, in taking this portrait, Miller steered away from the ancestor-portrait model? A possible answer is that the asymmetrical composition reinforces the woman's languid manner and melancholy mood, which is taken as the purpose of this picture. Miller took more than one shot of this scene. Comparing the two existing versions (see figs. 6, 17), we find that they differ slightly in the angle of the body and face. It is as if the photographer tried to find an ideal vantage point from which he could most effectively capture the heightened femininity of a Chinese beauty.

Simulating ancestor portraits, the four frontal images have a different objective in forging an essential, timeless Chinese portrait style. Again, it should be emphasized that the presumed clients of these works were Westerners in China or back home, whose interest in purchasing a Chinese image lay fundamentally in its exotic otherness, as a visual testimony of a foreign culture and mentality. By employing hired models, Miller could construct such images with ease; he could order them to put on different costumes and ornaments, to move this or that way, and to form different groups. For the same Western clientele, however, he also hoped to demonstrate his artistic sensibility by representing the sitters' characters, a sensibility that would separate him from an old-fashioned illustrator of oriental people and costumes. The combined outcome of these desires conforms to neither Chinese nor Western aesthetics in their own terms but mingles local visual norms, Western expectations, and the photographer's personal ambitions in a hybrid form. As we will see, this form would be further articulated and abstracted into a stereotype. But even in 1861, the two most dominant features of the four Miller portraits—Chinese
The Tartar General, his attendants and servants, group made in front of his palace.

Fig. 16

Milton Miller (American, 1830–99)
The Tartar General, His Attendants and Servants,
Group Made in Front of His Palace, 1860–63,
albumen print, 22.2 × 29.2 cm (8 3/4 × 11 1/2 in.)
Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute
sitters represented in the manner of an ancestor portrait—clearly separated them from other types of portraiture, advertising them as authentic Chinese images in both subject matter and style.

THE CHINESE PORTRAIT STYLE AS A STEREOTYPE

Miller did not invent this style of portraiture; rather, he reinvented a local visual tradition to create quintessential Chinese images for a global audience. Like many other Western photographers working in China at the time, he viewed his Chinese subjects with both cultural superiority and fascination. His artistic/commercial endeavor in Hong Kong was embedded in a diverse array of colonial administrative practices and financial enterprises. That he worked within a colonial structure made his images readily accessible to the imaginative conceits of a broad range of Western viewers and also guaranteed the legitimacy of his Chinese style in a colonized territory, making it a model for local studios to follow.

But what is a “local studio” in a place like Hong Kong? It should be recognized that an uncritical use of the term already internalizes the colonizer’s approach and terminology. In actuality, commercial photo studios of foreign and Chinese ownership operated side by side in the center of the city; there was no clear line demarcating their spaces and practices. In his catalog essay, Edwin Lai states that many early Chinese photographers had been trade painters producing Western-style pictures for foreign travelers and residents alike. Almost exclusively located in major treaty ports in the second half of the nineteenth century, their practices were heavily influenced and even controlled by the same array of colonial administrative practices, commercial enterprises, and visual culture. Most of these studios learned their trade from their Western associates, and their advertisements explicitly emphasized such connections to propagate the authenticity of their products. In this political and economic environment, it is only natural that these Chinese studios would participate in the colonial construction of a typical Chinese portrait style and even claim this style as their own. Moreover, because this style actually derived its source materials from local culture, its reverse transformation into local culture was smooth and invisible. Further adjustments were made during this process of reclamation: new props were added, changing styles of clothes indicated shifting fashion, and heavy-handed foreign references were sometimes neutralized. These adjustments, or re-appropriations of an already appropriated indigenous visual tradition, concealed the colonial intent.
Fig. 18
Lai Afong (Chinese, 1839–90)
Western man in Chinese costume photographed in Hong Kong,
ca. 1885, albumen print, 14.6 × 9.5 cm (5⅜ × 3⅛ in.)
Canberra, National Gallery of Australia
in the initial construction of the style, translating a Western fetish into Chinese self-imaginary.

By 1872, when Thomson wrote his report in the *British Journal of Photography*, the process of this transformation or reclamation had been largely completed. The fictive Hong Kong photographer A-hung could now give him a whole lecture on the Chinese portrait style, and another British photographer, D. K. Griffith, could also thoroughly attribute this style to Chinese sitters’ choices.\(^53\) These accounts, which had become unequivocal and self-evident in the 1870s, signaled a further transformation of the Chinese portrait style into a stereotype not only in visual representation but also in verbal discourse. Three operations made this second transformation possible, including a complete “fixity” (or fixed perception) of a typical Chinese portrait;\(^64\) a deepening concealment of the Western participation in the style’s construction;\(^58\) and a forced divorce between this style and the concept of art. A single paragraph from Thomson’s report and the accompanying diagram (see fig. 12) sufficiently demonstrate these operations. The paragraph reads:

They [Chinese portraits] were all taken in the same pose seated at a very square table, or rather a table that looks like a number of carefully-constructed skeletons of cubes placed one above the other, like part of the apparatus of a lecture room designed to illustrate the principles of geometry. On the table there is a vase containing artificial flowers—gaudy caricatures of nature. The background of plain cloth is adorned with two curtains, arranged so as to form part of an isosceles triangle above the sitter, who is posed as if his figure were intended to demonstrate a proposition in Euclid.\(^56\)

In this characterization, the Chinese portrait style connotes rigidity and an unchanging order reinforced by countless repetitions.\(^57\) Works of this kind deny gentle contours, spontaneous movements, or a romantic atmosphere and exhibit only unfeeling, geometric shapes arranged in a cold symmetry. Envisioned as a natural outcome of the local mentality, this style is now defined as purely Chinese, freed from any of the cultural ambiguity or stylistic hybridity that once characterized Miller’s Chinese portraits. Significantly, Miller’s, or any Western photographer’s, role in the construction of this style is deliberately erased. Thomson specifies the strange, “very square table” next to a Chinese sitter as a principal feature of a typical Chinese portrait; but we have seen that this table is in fact a permanent fixture of Miller’s studio and appears in seven of the eleven pictures studied in this paper (see figs. 1, 2, 6–9, 11). Finally, in Thomson’s aesthetic judgment, such unchanging, formulaic images cannot be qualified as art; this explains why he represents them with a drawing, highlighting the “gaudy” artificial flowers erected on the side table. Homi Bhabha describes stereotyping as “a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place,’ already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated.”\(^58\) By abstracting the Chinese portrait style into a crude caricature, Thomson dismisses the materiality of this style as well as its historical temporality, but his drawing also reveals an anxiety about facing real photographs, including those made by Miller.

This stereotyping of the Chinese portrait style, then, provided a new basis for cultural dialogue and self-imaginary. When Afong made a “Chinese” portrait for a foreign man in 1885, he not only dressed him in Chinese costume and equipped him with a water pipe but also asked him to sit frontally, staring into the camera; and he arranged the props—including artificial flowers on a square chaji—strictly according to the standard image caricatured by Thomson in his report (compare figs. 12 and 18). Echoing the first generation of Chinese portraits made by Miller twenty-four years earlier, this costume portrait aimed no longer to construct an authentic indigenous style, but only to consume it.
1. Thanks to Terry Bennett's archival research, we now know that Milton Miller, also known as Marshall M. Miller, was born in Dunmore, Vermont, in 1830. After he died in 1899, an obituary in the *Vermont Phoenix* provided information about his life before and after his commercial adventure in China from 1860 to 1863. See Terry Bennett, *History of Photography in China: 1842–1860* (London: Quaritch, 2009), 169–79.

2. An 1856 San Francisco directory listed Miller as a photographer in the gallery of William Vance at the corner of Montgomery and Sacramento streets. But because this location was actually that of Robert H. Vance, who had a documented association with Miller, Peter E. Palmquist and Thomas R. Kailbourn have argued that the record is likely a mistake and that Miller started to work for Vance from at least 1856. Peter E. Palmquist and Thomas R. Kailbourn, *Pioneer Photographers of the Far West: A Biographical Dictionary, 1840–1865* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2000), 401.


4. Weed arrived in Hong Kong on 19 January 1860. Miller arrived six months later, on 29 July of the same year.


6. The name of Miller's business is mentioned in a notice posted by S. W. Halsey in the *Hong Kong Daily Press* on 5 January 1864, after Halsey acquired the firm and Miller's negatives.


12. For example, Terry Bennett recently stated: "Milton Miller was arguably the best portrait photographer in nineteenth-century China. His subjects are never stilted and he tried to tease out the personality of each sitter—often succeeding with such intense immediacy that for a moment or two the intervening 150 years melt away, leaving us feeling wholly engaged, but slightly unnerved." Bennett, *History of Photography in China*, 169.


16. As stated in the introduction to this catalog, the workshop's chief focus was to examine actual examples of early photographs of China housed in the Getty Research Institute.

17. This group almost certainly includes other pictures. For example, one of a set of stereoviews published by E. & H.T. Anthony in 1862 is titled "Mandarin and Family, Canton, China" (no. 8). It portrays the same group of figures in figure 10 in the present essay but in a different way. For a reproduction of this stereoview, see Bennett, *History of Photography in China*, fig. 163, lower left.

18. Note that the tail of the bird differs from the one in figure 2 and that the two badges also have different patterned borders.

19. This is the opinion of Yuhang Li of the University of Chicago, an expert in traditional Chinese textiles and costumes.

20. This studio was very possibly located at the North Parade Ground in the Old City of Guangzhou. See Palmquist and Kailbourn, *Pioneer Photographers*, 401.

21. For example, Regine Thiriot opens her essay "Photography and Portraits in Nineteenth-Century China" with these sentences: "A major source of frustration for the amateur of early photographs, especially portraits, is anonymity. Their origins are usually shrouded under a series of questions: who made the photographs, who collected them, and how they reached their present location, are often mysteries. Likewise, who the subject was, when and where he or she was photographed, for what occasion, to what end, and who received and kept copies, is a matter usually left to conjecture." *East Asian History* 17/18 (1999): 77.


24. Chinese officials began having their portraits taken soon after photography was introduced to China. But according to available records, the occasions included formal audiences and meetings, the signing of treaties, and other special activities. There is no definitive evidence for their frequent visits to commercial photo studios at this early stage.


33. Evidently Miller considered himself an artist, not a mere technician. When he married in 1866, for example, he identified his occupation as "artist." After he died, his obituary recounted that, accompanied by Ira G. French, Miller went to San Francisco in 1856 and became a professional photographer there; "the art of photography was not far advanced at that time, nevertheless Mr. Miller and Mr. French made some photographs which have not been surpassed in this country." *Vermont Phoenix*, 14 January 1899. The whole obituary is cited in Bennett, *History of Photography in China*, 177–79.

34. The incident is reported in the *Hong Kong Crime Mail*, 5 October 1980. Here is a summary provided by Palmquist and Kailbourn: "In Canton in early October, Miller hired fourteen..."
coolies to move some goods. When the laborers balked at his offer of a dollar for their collective work, he fired a warning shot at them, striking a coolie in the thigh. Miller surrendered himself to the authorities and was released on four-hundred-dollar bond. Fortunately, the coolie’s wound proved to be slight, and Miller’s only penalty was a seventy-five-dollar fine.” Palmquist and Kailbourn, Pioneer Photographers, 401. For more information about this incident, see Bennett, History of Photography in China, caption for fig. 174.

35 Johannes Nieuhof, An Embassy from the East-India Company of the United Provinces, to the Grand Tartar Cham, Emperor of China (London: John Maccow, 1669).

36 William Alexander published a set of his China images with the first systematic account of the embassy by George Stuclton (An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China) in 1797. These illustrations were then partially duplicated with the publication of the book in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the United States within three years. Also in 1797, he began to publish his own pictorial account of the expedition, first in small groups of four images at three-month intervals. These images were finally compiled into a single volume titled The Costume of China in 1805.

37 Because of the lack of surviving photographs by Chinese studios in the early years, it is still difficult to reconstruct their activities and evaluate their achievement. But the existence of such studios in Hong Kong in the late 1850s and early 1860s seems beyond doubt. See Su Zhigang 宿志剛 et al., Zhongguo xijingshi li (A brief history of Chinese photography) 中國攝影史略 (Beijing: Zhongguo Wenxian Chubanshe, 2009), 26–27, 45–47. For introductions to early photography in Hong Kong, see Roberta Wue, ed., Picturing Hong Kong: Photography 1855–1910 (New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1997), 15–57; Bennett, History of Photography in China, 9–28.

38 For the full citation and a discussion, see Jeffrey Cody and Frances Terpak, “Through a Foreign Glass: The Art and Science of Photography in Late Qing China,” this volume, pp. 33–68.

39 Cody and Terpak, “Through a Foreign Glass.” For the Chinese text, see Liu Shangling 劉善齡, Xiyou jingming zai Zhongguo (Western inventions in China) 西洋發明在中國 (Hong Kong: Shunlan Shudian, 2001), 61.


42 Wue, “Essentially Chinese,” 266.

43 Trachtenberg, Reading American Photographs, 26.


45 A good example of this scholarly pursuit is evident in Roberta Wue’s essay; there, she substantiates Thomson’s view with works by Mong, Wue, ”Essentially Chinese,” 266–72.

46 This view is expressed strongly by Régine Thiriez. She writes: “It might have been expected that Chinese and Western photographers would use different props, techniques or styles. But if one has to look at the back of a card to know who made it, the evidence is against this cultural distinction.” Thiriez, Photography and Portraits in Nineteenth-Century China, 82.

47 Focusing on genre scenes of the “native types,” Fraser summarizes her findings in these words: “In general, from the 1860s to 1890s, there are few distinct differences between the panoramas and genre studies shot by many of the Hong Kong and mainland photographers and the works produced by Western cameramen.” See Sarah E. Fraser, “Chinese as Subject: Photographic Genres in the Nineteenth Century,” this volume, pp. 91–109.

48 Although some Qing ancestor portraits include a chair next to the sitter, this furniture usually appears in informal portraits of living people. For an example of the former kind, see Jan Stuart and Evelyn Sakula Rawski, Worshiping the Ancestors: Chinese Commemorative Portraits (Washington, D.C.: Freer Gallery of Art, 2001), 29, fig. 9.


50 Another early example is a portrait of Zou Beqi (1819–69), who produced China’s first homemade opera in 1844. Like the portrait of the Mongol general Senggelgin in Lai Chong, it does not represent the sitter’s entire body and rejects the frontal pose and direct eye contact. For a reproduction of the image, see Bennett, History of Photography in China, fig. 4.


52 For an insightful discussion on this point, see Fraser, “Chinese as Subject.”

53 “Great are the preparations for the sitting. Their number one (best) clothes are dispatched by a coolie; they are put on in the studio with much care and more talk; the victim seats himself, spreading his robe out to the best advantage; he will have a small snuff-bottle in one hand, and a fan in the other. A direct front face must be taken, so as to show both his ears, and each side of his face of the same proportions; both feet must be so arranged that they are of equal length, perspective being no reasoning power with a China-man. The hands are dressed with a fancy long-nail or two, great is their delight to see them well brought out in the portrait. They will to a certainty have some flowers with them, and some small vase to be placed on a table, or in some cases a French clock is the pride of their hearts, and is to be placed close beside them.” D. K. Griffith, “A Celestial Studio,” London Photographic News, 28 May 1875, 260. Cited in Wue, “Essentially Chinese,” 266.

54 For the concept of “fixity” in a colonialist discourse, see Homi K. Bhabha, “The Other Questions: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism,” in Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994), 66.

55 In her discussion of the “super-sign,” Lydia Liu notes that as a “hetero-cultural signifying chain that crisscrosses the semantic fields of two or more languages,” a super-sign also camouflages its foreignness “by adopting the stratching face of an indigenous word.” Lydia H. Liu, The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2004), 13–14. Indeed, there are similar features between the Chinese portrait style discussed in this paper and a super-sign in Liu’s theoretical formulation, but some fundamental differences between linguistic and visual constructs also resist a direct application of her theory to this style.

56 Thomson, “Hong-kong Photographers,” 569.

57 Bhabha, “The Other Questions,” 66.

58 Bhabha, “The Other Questions,” 66.