INTRODUCTION
Reading Early Photographs of China

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Intense, prolonged reading—an examination process akin to visual probing or mining—is especially vital to studying early photographs of China, above all because of the paucity of contextual information. For years scholars have worked diligently to discover contemporary references to early photographic practices in China; the finding of any record about commercial studios or individual photographers has generated considerable excitement. Important breakthroughs have been made, and now we know much more about the state of early photography in China than we did thirty years ago. A comparison between the current catalog and either The Face of China as Seen by Photographers & Travelers, 1860–1912 or Imperial China: Photographs 1850–1912—two influential volumes published in 1978—demonstrates undeniable progress in this field, as do the density of references provided in the extensive online bibliography that accompanies this exhibition. But generally speaking, as Edwin Lai explains in his essay, archival information on Chinese photographers in particular is still highly insufficient to support detailed contextual studies. In many cases, a photograph is all we have. Even though we can sometimes identify the photographer or the studio responsible for an image from a signature or trademark, the specific circumstances of the photo’s commission and production is often beyond our knowledge. This situation applies to most examples in this exhibition, which means that to determine the historical status of most nineteenth-century photographs of China, we must first rely on internal evidence. The historical significance of these photographs is defined primarily by their dual existence as images and objects. Herein lies an important contribution of this exhibition and publication project: the Getty team, led by Jeffrey Cody and Frances Terpak, has systematically collected and analyzed primary data regarding early photographs of China and has encouraged colleagues from different disciplines to join this process.

That encouragement, in the context of interdisciplinary inquiry, was evident in a workshop held at the Getty Research Institute as part of this exhibition’s preparation. It was unlike any other workshop or conference I have ever attended; it was also one of the most rewarding discussions I have ever participated in. No prepared papers or speeches were required from the guests, and there was no preconceived thematic program. The invitees came from divergent fields: history, cultural studies, Sino-American relations, urban studies, literature, art history, and the history of photography. What brought them to the Getty was their shared interest in early photography in China, as they had demonstrated in previous writings, albeit from varying perspectives.

Our attention was guided to some thirty to forty historic photographs spread on a large table, around which we stood. These images were a small portion of a photo collection documenting China that the Getty Research Institute had been assembling since 2003, and they had been selected for us to comment on. The assumption was that because all the participants had studied early photography in China in one way or another, we would be able to see different things in these images based on our diverse areas of academic expertise, professional sensibilities, and previous research; our spontaneous comments would lead to conversation, discussion, and future study.

The plan worked out nicely. After some intense viewing, we took turns reporting our observations about each photograph. The initial, often fragmentary and tentative comments soon began to cohere; we started to see a nineteenth-century photograph as not only an image of historical figures or buildings but also a visual construct made at a specific moment by an individual photographer or a commercial studio for particular purposes. Moreover, these photographs were sometimes annotated with titles and descriptive texts, were often compiled into volumes and albums, and were collected by travelers and diplomats. A single image was thus brought into different pictorial or semiotic contexts. The workshop’s methodology made evident that to fully understand a historic photograph, it is critical to consider its subject matter, genre, technique, format, style, producer, and place and time of production, as well as the possible intentions associated with the image’s circulation, collection, and reproduction. Whereas a research project initiated by an individual scholar tends to prioritize one or two aspects, a collective scrutiny like this naturally balances various interests.

A discussion always started and ended with looking at a photograph (or album). For me, this experience gave a new meaning to the “reading” of historic photographs. Although I had previously examined such visual materials, the kind of reading practiced in this workshop was a contested, multidisciplinary, and open-ended process, allowing us to explore as much as possible a photograph’s research value as a primary document. Such collective scrutiny does not necessarily lead to consensus and conclusions; rather, one observation simultaneously inspires, complements, and challenges other views.

This interdisciplinary method of closely reading original visual materials characterizes this exhibition and publication project. The images selected for the exhibition defy narrow definitions as works of art or remnants of popular culture.
(taken mainly in October 1860) represents Beijing under occupation. Juxtaposed with the Hong Kong panoramas, images in these two groups represent China's defeat: the empty fort displays abandoned cannons and corpses of Chinese soldiers (fig. 8); Beijing is devoid of human traces, deceptively making the magnificent cityscape appear like a ghost town frozen in silent stillness.

In contrast, some panorama photographs in this exhibition suggest a deeper interest in representing a Chinese city as a living environment. One such example is a six-part panorama of Fuzhou by the local Tung Hing studio (pl. 50). Lacking a dominant architectural focus, the photograph pictures a section of the Min River, a major source of livelihood for local people. The river not only occupies the entire midground but also connects landmasses, buildings, and boats into an organic whole. A bridge stretches across the river to the right; traditional wooden boats are moored here and there in the water; and on the opposite shore stands a half-finished building, perhaps a temporary theater constructed for a local festival. There is nothing dramatic or spectacular about this picture; rather, it conveys a feeling of day-to-day life familiar to the photographer. Cody and Terpak also find the influence of traditional Chinese geomancy (feng shui) in the photograph's emphasis on water.

Differing from panoramas, with their immense scale, landscape photographs typically focus on specific scenes. There is a marked difference between Chinese and foreign approaches toward a composed scene, however. As exemplified by John Thomson's photographs taken in a Taiwan forest, in the middle of the Snowy Valley in Fujian, or along the Yangtze River in Sichuan, Western representations of Chinese landscapes often convey a heightened sense of naturalness (fig. 9). These scenes, which are generally devoid of architecture, often reflect the photographer's personal responses to natural beauty, whether it is bamboo branches in mist, a waterfall cascading down a tall cliff, or magnificent river gorges in the setting sun. Chinese studios explored a market for landscape images somewhat later, but once Chinese photographers started to make such images, they developed a strategy based on two
traditional concepts: ruhua and jing. Ruhua, or "picturelike," is clearly demonstrated by an album created by the same Tung Hing studio in Fuzhou, whose sixty-three leaves illustrate the scenery of Fujian province (pl. 47). As Cody and Terpak explain in their essay, these pictures are imbued with a distinct literati taste. In fact, many are composed like traditional landscape paintings, with mountains and rivers (shanshui) as the two principal visual elements. The balanced composition, subtle tonal variation, and inclusion of images such as a tiny boat or a hut, all contribute to the photographs' lyricism and tranquility. The second concept, jing, means "iconic view." As constructed scenes with established iconography, jing are crucial to photographs of a Chinese garden or a famous mountain and often consist of both natural landscape and man-made structures. When photo albums were created to represent such gardens and mountains, their individual leaves often corresponded to established jing, constructing visual journeys to these places.

"Building" is the third major subcategory of photo representations of place.13
The assumed viewer of this type of image was again a Westerner, whose fascination with “exotic oriental” architecture had inspired many illustrations and imitations in Europe since the eighteenth century. This is also why, as scholars have noticed, the ancient monuments of nineteenth-century Beijing generated much more interest among foreign photographers (contrary to contemporary photographic practice in Shanghai and Hong Kong, which mainly focused on scenes of daily life). For example, while serving in the Maritime Customs in Beijing during the 1870s, Thomas Child made a large number of architectural photographs in and around this ancient city. Child sold his prints through Far East magazine, published in Shanghai. An advertisement he placed in the July 1877 issue of that journal lists 192 pictures, including major palatial buildings, a dozen pagodas, and views of imperial tombs and cemeteries (pl. 4).

Several photographs in Child’s set represent “remains of ancient Yan walls” and “bridge and ruins.” With such subjects, Child’s photographs exemplify a subcategory of architectural photography favored by many Western photographers. Unlike in traditional China, where ruins were considered inauspicious and rarely appeared in painting, there was a long tradition of depicting ruins in European art, starting from the Middle Ages, if not earlier. Sentiment toward ruins triumphed in the eighteenth century and penetrated every cultural realm: “They were sung by Gray, described by Gibbon, painted by Wilson, Lambert, Turner, Girtin and scores of others; they adorned the sweeps and the concave slopes of gardens designed by Kent and Brown; they inspired hermits; they fired the zeal of antiquarians; they graced the pages of hundreds of sketchbooks and provided a suitable background to the portraits of many virtuosi.”

After the invention of photography, this new visual technology was immediately employed to document ruined monuments around the world, including those in China. It is thus not surprising to find these kinds of images by photographers such as Beato, Child, Thomson, and others (fig. 10). These works mix Western sentiment for decayed buildings and orientalist fascination with “old China.” Thomson’s photograph of a temple in Beijing’s Summer Palace (Yihe yuan), for example, captures the image of a building made of bronze and marble (fig. 11). Instead of emphasizing the pavilion’s durability, however, he contrasts its precise contour with the wild brambles and climbers that have half buried it. Similarly, in the Getty Research Institute collection, an image by an anonymous photographer represents
Fig. 10

Thomas Child (British, 1841–98)

Principal Palace, South Side of Yuen Ming Yuan, 1870–79,
albumen print, 21.3 × 24.1 cm (8 3/8 × 9 1/2 in.)

Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute
Fig. 11
John Thomson (Scottish, 1837–1921)

Bronze Temple, Wan-shou-shan.
collotype, 27.8 × 24.3 cm (10⅞ × 9⅛ in.)
From John Thomson, Illustrations of China and Its People: A Series of Photographs with Letterpress Description of the Places and People Represented (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Low, & Searle, 1873–74), vol. 4, pl. 19
Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum

Fig. 12
Ruins of an Ancient Temple, ca. 1865,
albumen print, 5.9 × 9.4 cm (2⅜ × 3⅜ in.)
Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute
a group of half-destroyed traditional buildings with some local scholars staged amid them, intensifying a sense of the “other” while heightening the ruin’s ancient roots (fig. 12). Historically speaking, these photographs of Chinese ruins initially fulfilled a Western fascination with the picturesque that was alien to premodern Chinese visual culture. But once this type of image was introduced into China, picturesque ruins soon became stock images in tourist photographs produced not only by European photographers but also by local studios. The result was the emergence of a transnational visual culture of ruins in China.

**REPRESENTING EVENTS**

As soon as photography was invented, it was put to use to record important social, political, and natural events. Wars, disasters, riots, grand pageants, volcanoes, fire, the construction of great monuments—sensational happenings that captured public attention—became hot subjects to record with the camera. At the beginning, however, photojournalism still faced many technical challenges. Low plate sensitivity prevented the capturing of moving targets. Clumsy equipment slowed down the mobility of the photographer, who was also hampered by the need for an immediately accessible darkroom and faced constant storage problems, shortages of materials, and hazards of transportation. But even in these difficult conditions, some adventurous photographers still made extraordinary efforts to record current events. Beato’s photographs can again be used to demonstrate this. Although his photographs do not show actual battles and human activities for technical and logistical reasons, Beato constructed a visual narrative that mirrors the unfolding of the Second Opium War.

As David Harris has noted, the popularity of Beato’s war images is indicated by their inclusion in all of Beato’s surviving China albums and by enthusiastic contemporary references and reproductions. It is therefore not surprising that when the Eight-Power Alliance reoccupied Beijing in 1900 and burned down the Summer Palace for a second time, more war photographs were made, creating a sensation around the world. A particularly chilling photograph captures the moment when the Allied Forces occupied Beijing (see fig. 2). The vast field of ruins that the horsemen were entering lay in the center of the Chinese capital, where we see the imperial palaces of the Forbidden City. To better understand these images we may compare them with the picturesque ruins also made by Western photographers (see fig. 10): these two types of photograph differ not only in subject but also in representation. On the one hand, photographs of poetic, picturesque ruins are deliberately tranquil, mysterious, and iconic; the centrality of a decayed oriental structure implies a contemplating Western gaze. On the other hand, the war images register absence. Whether a field of destroyed houses or an empty room carpeted with human remains, these scenes either erase the visual focus or imply a missing one.

These examples make it clear that the introduction of photojournalism to China was generally associated with the expansion of Western power. The war pictures taken by European photographers such as Beato are essentially colonialist because they reflect the mentality of a victorious conqueror behind the camera. A few decades later, however, the European dominance in war photography was challenged by a broad nationalistic campaign, the central goal of which was to transform China into a modern nation-state, defined by Prasenjit Duara as “a collective historical subject poised to realize its destiny in a modern future.” And yet, this emerging nation-state, though overtly anti-West, constructed its history and ideology based on the Western Enlightenment model. Significantly, photojournalism in general, and war images especially, facilitated a nationalist campaign.

This change in the function of photojournalism is easy to understand: once reframed into a nationalist discourse to embody a nationalist gaze, photojournalism provided the most concrete and direct proof of foreign invasion and most effectively accelerated nationalist sentiment. Because of its inherent, empirical “truth value,” the photograph could play this role much better than a traditional art form such as painting or sculpture, especially when news photos became a regular feature of mass media, which (as Wen-hsin Yeh explains in her essay) had an enormous impact on the shaping of a nationalist ideology as well as a modern visual culture. From its beginning, nationalist photojournalism placed a strong emphasis on war images. The Russo-Japanese War in 1904 was the first political event thoroughly covered by an illustrated Shanghai biweekly. After 1909, major Chinese newspapers generally featured news photos, delivering tangible and often disturbing images of wars, massacres, assassinations, and other kinds of violence to an anxious audience. The demand for such images sharply increased around major political events, among which were the Republican Revolution in 1911, the First World War from 1914 to 1919, and the Japanese invasion in the 1930s. Perceived as reality itself, such images constructed an observed world in print, posing the question of national survival to the Chinese and inspiring them to save their country and culture.
CODA: PRACTICE

An examination of a photograph’s format, inscription, content, and representation prepares a foundation for further investigations into its practice. Here the concept of “practice” concerns at least three basic domains: the technical and social aspects of a photograph’s production, and the postproduction phases, which include marketing, use, reception, reproduction, and circulation. These are broad, complex issues, but we can understand them more clearly if we ask some basic questions.

For example, in investigating the technical aspect of a photograph, what type of photography was used to produce the image and under what conditions was it made? Did the photographer employ the copperplate of a daguerreotype, the paper negative of a calotype, a glass plate coated with albumen, or a rolled-up celluloid film? How much did the camera weigh and what darkroom equipment was used? How fast was the lens and how long was the exposure? What does it mean if a studio portrait looks spontaneous but the sitter was actually tied to a metal posing brace? Although these questions might sound technical, the answers to them clarify a photograph’s inherent ability (or inability) to represent reality, as well as its productive process, social function, and reproducibility.

Considering a photograph’s production as a social interaction, we should first find out who actually took part in it. Was the photographer a free agent acting independently or part of a research project, commercial enterprise, or colonial army? How can we define the relationship between the photographer and the sitter? Was the sitter a paying customer or a hired model? Who made the decisions in arranging the sitter’s pose, expression, and props? What was a photograph’s purpose, if the sitter was a high official or a royal prince, as in the cases of See Tay’s portraits of Li Hongzhang and Prince Chun Xian?

We should also be cognizant of the nature and roles of a studio as both a commercial institution and an interactive social space. Considering photo studios first appeared in Paris in the 1850s and combined “a stroll along the boulevard with a visit to the theater,”22 how did a photo studio in Hong Kong or Shanghai in the 1860s and 1870s help construct the self-image of an urban resident? And how did it produce photographs other than portraits for a large, diverse market? Moreover, as Wen-hsin Yeh contends in her essay, photographic production is subject to the general cultural and material conditions of a given place. Using Republican Shanghai and wartime Chongqing as two examples, she demonstrates that each place had its own visual projects and capacities and therefore produced different images.

Once a photograph was made, its story did not stop there. The negative could be reused to produce anonymous “role and costume” images for commercial purposes. The print could be reproduced in different forms to illustrate a postcard or to make a collage with other photographs (pl. 59). The prints could be bought by different people for different purposes. They could be purchased as cheap souvenirs, used by a traveler to compile a personal account of China, or collected by enthusiasts of “old photos” for aesthetic or sentimental reasons. In studying these situations, we should take them as individual historical cases, exploring their different contexts and divergent uses. Though these cases may be disjunctive in time and place, all of them are linked by a single image.

It is impossible to develop a full discussion of these issues in this brief introduction. However, readers may be better prepared to appreciate the probing essays in this catalog and viewers of the exhibition may be better served in examining the works on display. The study of historic photographs of China still has a long way to go. In presenting a group of neglected examples to the public and in stimulating interest in this material, this exhibition and catalog are making an important contribution to this growing field.
NOTES

1 Terry Bennett recently lists some particular difficulties in this field. One of them is the limited written sources:
   Genealogical research into Chinese photographers is an enviable task, because family records are practically non-existent, whereas researchers into nineteenth-century Western photographers have the luxury of being able to call upon a seemingly infinite array of resources such as census returns, birth/marriage/death certification, trade and street directories, and old regional and national newspapers.


3 Held on 11 and 12 December 2006, the workshop (titled ‘Photography of China: Ti and Yang: Essence and Innovation’) was organized principally by Frances Terpak and Jeffrey Cody. In addition to a number of curators and researchers from the Getty Research Institute and the J. Paul Getty Museum, the participants included Shana Brown from the University of Hawaii, Manoa; John Haddad from the Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg; Christian Henriet from the Université Lumière Lyon 2; Oliver Moore from the Universität Leiden; Wen-hsien Yeh and William Schaefer from the University of California, Berkeley; the independent scholar Régine Thiriez and Wu Hung from the University of Chicago.


6 In 1859, doctor and writer Oliver Wendell Holmes helped transform stereographs into an entertainment industry with the development of the compact view and the creation of stereograph libraries. Frances Terpak, "Stereo," in Barbara Maria Stafford and Frances Terpak, *Devices of Wonder: From the World in a Box to Images on a Screen*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2001), 357–62.


8 For example, before the American photographer Charles L. Weed terminated the Shanghai branch of the Weed and Howard Photographic Gallery in 1861, he sold his negatives to a dispensary owner by a certain Mr. Llewellyn, who then announced the purchase in an advertisement: "Mr. Llewellyn, having purchased the negatives of those persons whose portraits were taken by Messrs. Weed & Howard during their stay in Shanghai, begs to inform the Community that he can supply any number of PRINTS from the same at a very moderate charge. Application to be made at the 'Shanghai Medical Hall, Park Lane, Shanghai, December 12th, 1860.' *North China Herald*, 14 December 1861.

9 For a full discussion of the development of this style, see Wu Hung, "Inventing a ‘Chinese’ Portrait Style in Early Photography: The Case of Milton Miller," this volume, pp. 64–89.


12 William Alexander traveled to China with the Macartney embassy in 1792 and produced illustrations for the book after returning to London.

13 Most examples of this type focus on the interior of a building, but there are also photographs that represent the interior of special buildings or street scenes.

14 See, for example, Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach's *Entwurf einer historischen Architektur* (1721; translated into English in 1730), which was the first comparative history of architecture on an international scale. Other architects, such as Sir William Chambers, with his *Designs for Chinese Buildings* (1757), helped fuel a passion for chinoiserie. See Bernd H. Dam and Andrew Zago, *Chinoiserie* (New York: Rizzoli, 2008).


17 David Harris, *Of Battle and Beauty: Felice Beato's Photographs of China* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1999), 29.


19 See the discussion of this in Dua, *Rescuing History from the Nation*.


The essays included in the catalog differ in focus but also converge around similar issues, including the emergence of commercial photography, the use of the camera lens in the construction of “China” for a global audience, the question of subjectivity in photographic representation, the interaction between the foreign gaze and the native subject, and the role of photography in introducing a modern Chinese “pictorial era.” Whereas these essays go further in interpreting images than did the freewheeling discussions in the workshop, their primary significance is to guide us to probe the original images closely. These essays thus lead us to the exhibition itself, where the original images, as they were in the Getty workshop, silently await further interpretations and prompt new discoveries.

The exhibition and accompanying catalog eschew a quick generalization of these visual materials based on popular theoretical models but instead explore their rich potential as historical records. In fact, due to the dearth of primary sources concerning the early development of photography in China, differences in opinion are unavoidable. For example, Cody and Terpak consider photography a Western technology, but Lai suggests an independent origin for photography in China. Such divergence indicates areas for further research and leads readers to consider various possibilities in interpretation. Instead of rehearsing the many discoveries made in the catalog essays, this introduction proposes some basic ways to read a historic photograph, thereby preparing readers to engage with the exhibition and digest the more detailed discussions in this catalog.

**PHYSICAL FORM**

Though a photograph is often conceived as an elusive image, it is also an object with distinct materiality. This is especially true for historical photographs, whose formats and physical condition often disclose their dates, purposes, techniques, and later transformations. Several particular formats are closely tied to popular appreciation of photography. *Cartes-de-visite,* or “photographic calling cards,” are small prints pasted onto approximately 10.5 × 6.35 cm cards. These prints enjoyed wide popularity from the mid-nineteenth century onward, mainly due to their portability and low price. For less than it cost to have a large-format print, a dozen cartes-de-visite of various images could be purchased, making photo collecting an alluring pastime for people of even moderate means.

Another popular format is the stereoscopic card, which juxtaposes two slightly different views of the same subject left and right (see Fraser, fig. 11). When viewed with a stereoscope, the two views merge to become a single, three-dimensional image that engenders discussion and facilitates entrainment, as suggested by the image of women using the device (fig. 1). With the invention of a cheaper and lighter stereoscope viewer, this type of photography was favored by travelers and exploited by commercial publishers and entertainment businesses alike.

A third popular format of photography—a mass medium for photographic reproduction and representation—is the photographic postcard, which became
widely available around the world in the early twentieth century. Three factors contributed to this phenomenon: the public obsession with foreign wars, the growing tourist industry, and the invention of the point-and-shoot camera, which encouraged the development of photojournalism. In China, the creation of the Eight-Nation Alliance in 1900 to suppress the Boxer Uprising exposed the country's interior to intensified surveillance from the foreign camera. Western companies produced a large number of postcards. Often colonial or imperialist in attitude, these tiny prints of destroyed churches and temples, the punishment of the Boxers, and the foreign intrusion into the Forbidden City (fig. 2) were disseminated to an eager international audience.

Catering to popular interests, these three formats responded to new technology and shifting tastes faster than larger, more expensive professional photographs. Due to their limited size and low image quality, however, these formats could never replace full-plate photographs mounted on cabinet cards, which often came in two sizes, 25 × 20 cm and 16.5 × 10.8 cm, and were kept in specially configured albums or displayed in frames. Customers could either purchase unmounded albumen prints or order sets of specially selected prints in albums, complete with labels and captions. Another type of large-format photograph is the panorama, achieved by piecing together two or more prints to form an extended horizontal composition. Several panoramas in this exhibition provide vast overviews of cities and landscapes; their extra-wide format implies a shifting gaze and a visual journey (see pls. 48–52). Following the invention of flexible film in 1888, new types of rotating cameras revolutionized panoramic photography.7

Compared with carte-de-visite prints and postcards, large-format photographs represent subjects in much greater detail and subtlety. They also suffer most from being reproduced in books and catalogs in reduced size. What is lost in such reproductions is an image's narrative or pictorial context, because an original album was often configured around a central topic—either a historical event, a scenic spot, a captivating journey, or a particular type of image. For example, an album made by Felice Beato (1820–1907) in 1860 during the Second Opium War chronologically follows the advance of the foreign invasion, visually capturing monuments (pl. 10) and scenes (pl. 13) never before recorded for a Western audience. John Thomson's Illustrations of China and Its People (1873–74), which he published in four volumes, is a monumental work of ethnographical investigation. Among local productions, a twenty-six-leaf album created by Beijing's Ruixia studio in 1908 records the grand funerary procession of the empress dowager Cixi. An album created between 1910 and 1915 by the Yueh Chi studio in Hangzhou features forty-eight views of West Lake (Xi Hu), each of which is accompanied by a verse of poetry in Chinese and English (fig. 3). To understand the purpose and visual effect of a photograph that is part of a series, a researcher needs to consider the overall production, seriality, and narrative intent, not just one or two isolated "representative" images.

Another type of album was assembled not by a photographer or publisher but instead by a viewer or collector. Such personal compilations were facilitated by the mass-produced prints and unmounded photographs readily available on the market. A good example of this kind of historical material is a two-volume album (pls. 22, 23) compiled by Herbert Francis Brady, who spent thirty years in China and finally rose to the rank of British consul general. As Cody and Terpak point out in their essay, some pictures in the set reflect Brady's interest in historical monuments and
record his professional activities, whereas others document the lifestyles of Western communities in various Chinese cities. Often juxtaposed in an idiosyncratic manner, images in the set do not have a single theme or authorship but provide a rare view of a Western diplomat's engagement with China over a prolonged period. Many such personal albums include the compiler's commentaries, which interact with the images to form a personal account about local customs, architecture, and cultural products (pl. 30). Such verbal components lead us to the second aspect of historical photographs—the various "textual frames" constructed for images.

**INSCRIPTIONS**

An *inscription* is any verbal sign on a photograph, including the single initial of the photographer, the name and address of the studio on the verso of a carte-de-visite, the title or caption under a full-plate print, the narrative description accompanying a stereoscopic presentation or the publisher's trademark, and the personal message on a postcard, as well as the more detailed accounts in a personal album. As this list indicates, such textual components contribute to our knowledge about historical photographs in different ways. Whereas a title can be no more than a few words and simply identifies the subject matter of an image, texts in a traveler's album are often long and complex, consisting of notes, diary entries, and newspaper clippings.

Although photographers' signatures were uncommon during this period, some exceptions exist, especially on photographs produced for noncommercial purposes. One such example in the Getty Research Institute collection is an excellent portrait of Li Hongzhang (1823–1901), arguably the most powerful Chinese politician in the second half of the nineteenth century (pl. 6). Taken in 1878 by the well-known Chinese photographer Liang Shitai (commonly known as See Tay, active...
1870s–80s), it bears an inscription written directly on the print in handsome calligraphy. In addition to identifying the time and place the picture was taken and the photographer who “respectfully” provided this information, the inscription’s literary style and ink-and-brush (suibs) manner disclose the impact of traditional paintings, for which inscriptions often identify the work as a gift and include a dedication to the recipient.

Inscriptions in the form of seal imprints appear in another See Tay portrait (see Cody and Terpak, fig. 3). The subject in this case is Chun Xian (1840–91), the Seventh Prince of the Qing imperial house and the father of the Guangxu emperor (reigned 1875–1908). One large square imprint next to the prince’s visage was made by his official seal; the rectangular imprint reproduces a talisman presented to the prince by the emperor. Unlike the dedicatory writing on the previous portrait, these seals belonged to the prince and represent his authentication of the image. Flanking the figure and confronting the viewer, these bold imprints are integrated into the composition and should be recognized as the prince’s self-presentation.

Many photographs in the Getty Research Institute collection bear printed or stamped inscriptions on the reverse side advertising the names of the photo studios as well as their addresses (see Cody and Terpak, figs. 5–15). Most of these studios were located in treaty ports, and the bilingual format of the inscriptions implies that their customers were both local and foreign. On the one hand, these inscriptions are important because they both reveal the existence of these local studios and connect them to specific images. On the other hand, it would be erroneous to assume they are unequivocal evidence of the original makers of the photographs, because negatives of studio photos could change hands and be used by new owners to produce commercial prints (exactly as traditional woodblocks were often transmitted from one printing house to another). Similarly, we should not blindly trust the label or caption of a photographic print, especially when it appears as a general description lacking historical specificity. This applies to several portraits by Milton Miller (1830–99). As I point out in my essay, Miller very likely hired models to stage costume portraits of Qing officials and their family members (pl. 42). A single person changes identity in different photos, while some titles are either inconsistent or mistaken.

As discursive devices, labels, captions, and longer descriptions constitute external frames for photographic images to control the viewer’s perception. One extreme example of this is a stereograph that Sarah Fraser discusses insightfully in this catalog (see Fraser, fig. 11). Taken in 1900 by American photographer James Ricalton (1844–1929), it bears texts on both sides. A caption near the bottom identifies the content of the photograph: “Some of China’s troublemakers—‘Boxer’ Prisoners captured and brought in by 6th U.S. Cavalry—Tientsin, China.” Inscriptions near the left and right edges specify the publisher of the stereoscope as “Underwood Underwood” in “New York, London, Toronto-Canada, Ottawa-Kansas.” The photographer also provided a long text printed on the verso of the card:

This is in the European quarter of the city, just west of the Pei-Ho river. You see something that was a common sight here in Tientsin during the last weeks of the Boxer War.

It was learned that a large force of Boxers was advancing and had reached a place only ten miles away. Some apprehension was felt about a concerted attempt to recapture the Native City and attack the settlement. The guns were mounted, breastworks were thrown up, and an expedition was made in the direction of the rumored advance. The force sent out included the 6th U. S. Cavalry and a company of Indian Lancers. They met a considerable number of the enemy, returning with about fifty prisoners.

These are the prisoners; we see some of the boys of the 6th Cavalry beyond them. Boxers often doff their distinctive uniform for the ordinary coolie’s garb when about to be captured, but the boys said they knew one was a genuine Boxer because he carried a weapon. One of the cavalrymen grabbed the “real thing” by the pigtails, tugged him into the foreground and placed him near the camera as you see, saying, “You can tell by his bloomin’ squint that he’s a bloody warrior!”

By far the larger half of the population of the empire is of this low, poor, coolie class. How dark-skinned, ill-clad, how dull, morose and vicious they appear! This is a very hot day under a torrid sun, but still they sit here, their heads shaved and uncovered, without a sign of discomfort. They do not yet know their fate. To-morrow they may be shot—but, whether it is bambooing, shooting or beheading, one fellow decided he will have a smoke.
Copied here in its entirety, this caption redefines the image as the visual aid of storytelling. The photographer/narrator, seemingly part of the invading force, specifies the context and content of the photo while making flagrant racial remarks about the subjects. These were the kinds of illustrated narratives that were presented to Western viewers around the world; below the caption, the title of the photograph is written in six languages (English, French, German, Spanish, Dutch, and Russian).

**IMAGE**

*Image*—in its meaning as a visual representation of an object, a scene, or human subject(s)—is the most important property of a photograph and is often equated with a photograph itself. A study of a historic photo as an image necessarily starts with identifying its subject matter and analyzing how it is represented. Although these two types of examination focus on different aspects of a photograph and vary in method, they are inseparable. Together they lead a researcher to explore a photograph's representational mode and period style, the photographer's intention and visual strategy, and the complex relationships between the photographer and the subject and between the subject and the viewer.

**REPRESENTING PEOPLE**

Starting from the subject matter, early photographs often belong to clearly demarcated genres with distinct visual conventions. These genres generally fall into three large categories: people, places, and events. Within the first category, human images and activities constitute two subcategories. A major genre of human images is portraiture. Photographed mostly in a studio, a portrait aims to register the sitter's individual appearance, while the goal of more artistic portraits is to also capture the sitter's character and expression. Beware, however, that the line between a real portrait and a staged costume portrait in early photography is often blurry. Moreover, because studios conventionally kept the negatives, a real portrait could be turned into a "type" image, such as when its negative was used to produce a commercial illustration of an anonymous Qing official, a merchant, or a "Chinese beauty." A pivotal event in the development of portraiture in China was the initial construction by Western photographers of a typical Chinese portrait style. Characterized by a rigid frontal view and level gaze, images of this style sharply contrast with the contemporary Western ideal of artistic portraiture. Deriving pictorial formulas from the indigenous tradition of ancestor portraiture, this style initially reflected a colonial intent to cast the local as an unchanging stereotype, but its construction was also facilitated by Chinese studios in major treaty ports. Eventually the style was "reclaimed" by local culture as its own, and it later became a basis for developing new styles to reflect changing fashion and taste.

Whereas portraits are sensitive to shifting cultural trends, anthropological records of racial and ethnic types—another major genre of human images in early photography—were made as scientific data to demonstrate human differences. These "type" photos could take many forms, from the carte-de-visite to large-format portraits, but the basic format of profile and frontal views was considered a key to classifying the subject. Represented as such, these images index generality—an entire group of people—rather than portraying individuals. More sophisticated than the typical laboratory studies documenting racial characteristics, the series of photographs representing foreign visitors to Paris taken by Philippe Jacques Potteau, curator at the Musée national d'Histoire naturelle, exhibit a measured elegance. In this exhibition, Potteau's photograph of Kouang Hay, a member of the Chinese delegation to Paris in 1861, describes him as forty-eight years old, born in Hankou, and the "Chinese who brought live fish to the Collège de France" (fig. 4). Although the photograph of Kouang, seated with his long queue falling over his shoulders, resembles a staged portrait, Potteau's label classifies him as an anthropological subject, a specimen who represents a member of the Chinese Empire.

A third genre of human image is medical photography, which (as Cody and Terpak's essay explains) started in China as early as the 1860s. Surprisingly, these disturbing images circulated not only between doctors and medical institutions but also among tourists and the general population as souvenirs and curios. Often taken by portrait photographers on commission, a medical image integrates two disjunctive visual elements—the normal face and grotesque body of a patient—into a single image, thereby fulfilling its assigned function to document individual pathological cases.

Images of human activities differ from portraits due to their emphasis on the professions and behavior of the indigenous population. Instead of portraying an individual face or body, photographs of this kind focus on special tools, costumes, and gestures that document standard social occupations and work. We can trace the origin of this genre to a set of Dutch illustrations produced in the mid-seventeenth
Fig. 4

Phillipe Jacques Potteau (French, 1807–76)

Kouang Hay (48 ans) né à Haukes (Empire Chinois) / Chinois
qui a amené des poissons vivants au Collège de France
(Kouang Hay [48 years old] born at "Haukes" [Chinese Empire] / Chinese who brought live fish to the Collège de France), 1861,
albumen print, 17.6 × 12.4 cm (6⅞ × 4⅞ in.)

Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute
century. But its direct predecessor was the *Costume of China*, a picture book created by the British painter William Alexander in 1805. When Western photographers arrived in China from the 1840s onward to produce their own images of Chinese people, they followed the well-traveled routes of their seventeenth- and eighteenth-century predecessors but updated their images with new visual technology to suit contemporary needs and taste. Their examples were further adopted by local photographers, whose products targeted the same Western market. Several examples in the exhibition belong to this genre and demonstrate this shared market. Among them, William Saunders’s series of Chinese types represents barbers working in an outdoor setting (pl. 40), while other trades were shot inside Saunders’s studio (pls. 38, 39). Staging scenes in an interior was commonly part of the repertoire of photographic studios in China. Some examples include a Chinese man selling pots, by Yueke Lou studio (fig. 5); a water carrier, by Pun Lun (fig. 6); and three coolies carrying heavy loads, by Lai Afong (see Fraser, fig. 4). Although the style and content of these pictures unmistakably signify a Western gaze, the inscriptions on the verso reveal that these were in fact made by Chinese studios in Hong Kong and Shanghai.

**REPRESENTING PLACE**

Advertisements by nineteenth-century studios in China often list three kinds of offerings: images of buildings, landscapes, and panoramas. Indeed, these three types
of photographs all represent places, but with different interests and visual conventions. To create a panorama, the photographer often set up the camera on an elevation, taking an expansive view from a bird’s-eye angle. The foreground, midground, and background are connected seamlessly, stretching from somewhere nearby to the horizon. The photographer favored certain special images: a winding river, a range of rolling hills, a broad bay, or a sea of low-rise buildings in a traditional city. While these images most effectively link separate prints into a coherent composition, they also guide the viewer’s gaze to move along the horizontal dimension, to survey the panoramic view presented before his or her eyes.

Within this general stylistic category, however, different photographers often chose their favorite scenes and developed specific visual strategies. For example, Felice Beato took a large number of panoramas in 1860, from the moment he arrived in Hong Kong to join the British expedition army to the aftermath of the conquest of Beijing. Intimately connected with colonial warfare, these works are not innocent records of specific places; instead, they glorify the point of view of the invading army. While representing places such as Victoria Harbor, Happy Valley, Odin Bay, and Kowloon, the panoramas Beato took in Hong Kong in March 1860 all focus on the immense fleet and campground of the British troops. Framed by land and water, the numerous warships and army tents display the military might of the European powers (fig. 7). The subject of his second group of panoramas (taken in late August 1860) is the conquered Beiting Fort at Dagu, near Tianjin. A third group of images...