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The (Mis)Representation of Reality: 'Knowledge' and Image-Making in Glass Lantern Slides of China

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Abstract

The Royal Asiatic Society in London houses a collection of magic lantern slides of China dating from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By investigating a selection of lantern slides, this article explores their epistemological nature and their wider relations to socio-cultural and political systems of power. These lantern slides highlight the complexity of our ways of seeing and representing that are embedded into particular historical and ideological systems in which meaning is both shaped and negotiated. This article argues that images are powerful conduits in disseminating and, if unchallenged, maintaining particular notions and ideas.

Introduction[1]

Deep in the archives at the Royal Asiatic Society (RAS) in London, there is a collection of glass lantern slides of China. The collection consists of two hundred lantern slides which depict a diverse range of topics such as architectural buildings, topographical features, famous historical figures as well as a variety of daily activities. These fascinating objects evoke a time when lantern slides were used as important vehicles in the construction and dissemination of 'knowledge' of far-away and little understood people and places. Lectures generally accompanied a lantern slide show, thereby imposing an instructive nature to these images, and functioned in what Gillian Rose has called a 'double act', which was both fundamental and effective in circulating particular notions and ideas.[2]

A lantern lecture, however, did not accompany the collection at the RAS; nor is there information that could provide insight into the purpose or use of these glass slides by the original owner. What is documented is that the glass slides were donated to the RAS by Mr D. B. Greene in 1982. The collection appears again the following year when Joseph F. Ford gave a lecture at the RAS entitled "China as she was. A collection of photographic

[1]I am grateful to Nancy Charley, archivist at the RAS, who unearthed the donation record and meeting and lecture notes. I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers who provided me with invaluable suggestions on improving this article.

[2]G. Rose, "On the Need to Ask How, Exactly, Is Geography 'Visual'? *Antipode* 35 (2003), p. 218.

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slides taken between 1875 and 1895", with illustrations. Ford had a distinguished career in China beginning in the 1930s and he was well respected in his knowledge of the country and its affairs. He was in the China Consular Service before entering the Diplomatic Service and subsequently served as Director of the Universities Service Centre (Hong Kong), then Director of the Great Britain-China Centre. Ford's interest in China continued right up until his death on 30 April 1993.[3]

The RAS meeting and lecture notes detail how Ford discussed and understood the lantern slides. While he made note of the importance of the collection by remarking on the "wealth of detail to be found in the slides, such as styles of dress and materials used, class differences, diet and variety of human types",[4] he did not question the veracity of the images or explore the ways in which visual (mis)representations had the capacity to embody and maintain information.

The following article seeks to redress this imbalance by exploring the role of lantern slides as a powerful conduit in disseminating and maintaining 'knowledge'. In the first section, the discussion centres around three RAS lantern slides, circa 1865 and 1880, depicting the use of the cangue and an execution scene. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, writers focused attention on 'Chinese cruelty', and with corporal punishment as a central and recurring topic, it is perhaps unsurprising that these sights were photographed and made into lantern slides.

The second section focuses on two lantern slides produced in a Chinese studio in Shanghai operated by Yao Hua (active between circa 1892 and early 1900s). In his lecture, Ford pointed to one slide inscribed 'Sze Yuan Ming & Co., 42 Nanking Rd.' and stated that this "allow[s] one to guess that Chinese photographic studios in Shanghai sold such slides, perhaps for a burgeoning tourist trade".[5] Ford was correct in his estimation that studios owned and operated by Chinese photographers were active in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Ford did not however, elaborate on Chinese studios and thereby omitted compelling insights into the dynamics of power within photographic representations and their cultural, ideological, and aesthetic foundations. Both sections of this article thus examine staged photographs, whether from British or Chinese photographers, to question the veracity of representation and images more broadly. By situating the RAS collection within their historical frameworks, these glass slides reveal wider socio-cultural ideologies and institutional practices. Additionally, this investigation demonstrates how images, if unchallenged, represent powerful vehicles in maintaining particular notions and ideas.

Visual Knowledge: Challenging and Questioning Images

The RAS general meeting minutes begin by detailing the subject of Ford's lecture, and describe the lantern slides as depicting "late-19th century China, showing typical sights of Shanghai, Peking, Soochow, Chinkiang, Ningpo, etc.". The remainder of the notes record

[3]K. Walker, "Obituary: Joseph F. Ford, CMG, OBE" *Asian Affairs*, 25:1 (1994), p. 125.

[4]The Royal Asiatic Society, "General Meeting, 10th February, 1983, President in the chair" *Meetings and Lectures at the Society*, p. 368.

[5]RAS, *Meetings and Lectures at the Society,* p. 368.

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Ford's talk, which highlighted the variety of streets signs, portraits and architectural sights represented in the collection. Ford paid close attention to dates, noting that the earliest photograph in the collection may have been taken about 1873 and the latest in 1907. He also attempted to identify the photographers, noting that the work was "probably done by a few foreigners such as Saunders, John Thomson and others".[6]

Ford's cursory mention of photographers and their work is understandable. Researchers on early photographs of China are continually plagued by identification challenges due not only to the anonymity of both photographers and subjects, but also to the standard practice of freely copying prints from one studio to the next.[7] But despite his attention to detail, Ford did not question the images; indeed, the main title of his talk, "China as she was" underscores the general tendency to view photographs as visual documentary evidence that is representative of a larger whole.

Raphael Samuel has commented on this phenomenon of allowing photographs to speak for themselves, completely unchallenged:

> It is a curious fact that historians, who are normally so pernickety about the evidential status of their documents, are content to take photographs on trust and to treat them as transparent reflections of fact. …we do not feel obliged to question, or for that matter to corroborate, the picture's authenticity, to inquire into its provenance, or to speculate on why some figures are there and others, who might have been expected to be present, are not.[8]

Samuel argues for the need to apply the same analytical tools to images as scholars use to scrutinise text. He explains that in order to "construct new narratives or pursue different problematics",[9] images need a critical investigative process, the same as any source material.

James Ryan considers Samuel's argument in *Picturing Empire*, here he explores the place of photography in the imaginative and ideological environment from the beginning of Queen Victoria's reign in 1837 to the eve of the First World War. Ryan demonstrates the need to contextualise photographic and aesthetics practices within their historical frameworks in order to grasp their meaning and importance. The significance of photographs, he argues, lies in understanding who is using this visual medium and for what purpose. By approaching photographs with the same cautionary investigative enquiry given to textual documents, Ryan also notes that in the post-colonial context, historical photographs represent "a form of collective colonial memory" and that these visual archives reveal constructions and longevity far more complex and significant than previously understood.[10] A similar recognition of the long-lasting effects images have on the imagination has been reiterated by scholars engaged with any variety of visual genre.

Samuel moreover reminds his readers how in the ancient world pictorial art was of primary importance in learning and memory retention. He argues persuasively that "[s]omething is not secure enough by hearing, but it is made firm by seeing".[11] Edward Said,

[6]RAS, *Meetings and Lectures at the Society,* p. 368.

[7]R. Thiriez, 'William Saunders', p. 311.

[8]R. Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London; New York: Verso, 2012), p. 329.

[9]*Ibid*, p.329.

[10]J. R. Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* (London, 1997), p. 12.

[11]R. Samuel, *Theatres of Memory,* p.xxi.

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reflecting on the lack of popular visual culture in his seminal work, *Orientalism*, likewise remarked on the "powerful, simplifying and reductive effect" of images:

> I mean, when you see an American-Indian with feathers and paint across his face he looks terrifying and it doesn't matter whether you've read about him in Fenimore Cooper or not… it fixes the image in your mind forever. It also, if you receive these as I did growing up – medieval films about the Crusades, *Arabian Nights* films, Imperial films, films with exotic Chinese – all of them are very difficult to remove from your head when later on you grow up and you *read the books*.[12]

Much like Ryan, Said underscores the lingering effect images have on the imagination, stressing how the act of seeing "fixes [an] image in your mind forever". He also made note of the power that arises when images and text work together to homogenise a discourse. By coinciding popular images, such as in films or photography, with a single, repetitive narrative found in books or lectures, such representations are given added authenticity and veracity. This is especially the case when information is disseminated by respected and learned individuals and societies.

Lectures and lecture notes accompanying lantern slide sets were especially persuasive in their instructions because, unlike other genres of spectacle and performance, there was an element of seriousness to the experience precisely because respected scientific societies used lantern slides to disseminate knowledge. The Royal Geographical Society (RGS) was an avid user of this visual technology when promoting geographical education alongside exploration. Hence, it became common practice for experts and specialists to integrate the use of lantern slides in its lectures as an effective means in disseminating 'facts' about distant peoples and cultures.

Indeed, the RGS once contained as many as 40,000 lantern slides, predominantly of maps, diagrams, figurative and landscape photographs.[13] Lantern slides allowed for far-away places and peoples to be systematically accumulated in one location and visually presented to an audience.[14] These photographic images were a powerful accompaniment in adding to the verisimilitude of the lectures. John Tagg asserts that the status of photographs "as a technology varies with the power relations which invest it" and that its "nature as a practice depends on the institutions and agents which define it and set it to work".[15]

As a respected and learned society, the RGS occupied a central position between the British scientific community and the imperial government and played a key role in constructing and collecting a particular vision of the world.[16] The significance and meaning of photographs is thereby constructed through specific systems of power and ideological apparatuses and lantern slides proved to be a most effective tool in promoting the imperial project during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[17] All genres of topics and themes were converted into lantern slides and China became just one of a multitude of 'views' into far-away places and people.

[12]C. Frayling, *The Yellow Peril: Dr. Fu Manchu & The Rise of Chinaphobia* (London, 2014), p. 9. His emphasis.
[13]E. Hayes 'Geographical Projections' on *The Royal Geographical Society*, online: www.rgs.org/about/our-collections/collaborative-research-on-the-collections/geographical-projections. Accessed 13 August 2019.
[14]E. Hayes 'Geographical Projections' accessed online 13 August 2019.
[15]J. Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays of Photographies and Histories* (Basingstoke, 1988), p. 63.
[16]J. R. Ryan, *Picturing Empire,* pp. 22–23.
[17]J. R. Ryan, *Picturing Empire,* p. 27.

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Visualising China: China in the British Imagination

Within the broader visualisation of China in Britain during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, 'knowledge' about China and the Chinese were transmitted through a variety of visuals, such as the illustrated press as well as popular public displays. As material culture, the consumption of tea and blue and white willow pattern china wares were understood as a complex paradox being simultaneously Chinese and quintessentially British. Forms of entertainment, such as the *Aladdin* pantomimes, Albert Smith's *Mont Blanc to China*, and Astley's Royal Amphitheatre *The Bombardment and Capture of Canton* entertained audiences while constructing a particular view of China.[18]

There were further visual instructions to be found in exhibitions such as Nathan Dunn's Chinese Exhibition at Hyde Park and the Chinese collection that was on display at the Great Exhibition of 1851. For the amusement of children, China was represented in numerous books, game boards such as *The Siege of China by the Englishmen* and *The Taking of Canton*, and toys like the one created by the German toy manufacturer Lehmann that produced several tin toys with Chinese figures, including two Chinese coolies carrying a tea chest and a set of four Allied figures ready to "toss the Chinese Boxer" from a canvas canopy.[19]

Within this myriad of visual entertainment, photography played a significant role in visualising China and its people and Western photographers were eager to capture China for a curious audience at home. The French caricaturist Cham (Amédée de Noé) depicted this zeal in October 1858 in a satirical cartoon illustrating five hooded cameramen pointing their lenses at the emperor of China as he leaves the palace (Fig. 1). However, photographers, whether professional or amateur, inevitably entered China with fixed ideas of what was worth documenting. The images were taken to "accompany the *already* written accounts"[20] and the resulting series of repetitive tropes found in the photographic images of China point to what people were interested in seeing as well as what they expected to see.

[18]On tea, see E. Rappaport, *A Thirst for Empire: How Tea Shaped the Modern World* (Princeton, 2017). On material culture, see E. H. Chang, *Britain's Chinese Eye: Literature, Empire, and Aesthetics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford, 2010); S. Cheang, "Selling China: Class, Gender and Orientalism at the Department Store" *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 20, No.1 (Spring 2007), pp.1–16; C. Pagani, "Objects and the Press: Images of China in Nineteenth-Century Britain." Imperial Co-Histories (ed) J. F. Codell (Madison, N.J and London, 2003) pp. 147–166. On *Aladdin*, see A.V. Witchard, *Thomas Burke's Dark 'Chinoiserie': Limehouse Nights and the Queer Spell of Chinatown* (Farnham, U.K., 2009). On Albert Smith, see J. M. Thorington, *Mont Blanc Sideshow: the Life and Times of Albert Smith* (Philadelphia, 1934). Astley's Amphitheatre mentioned in R. Bickers, *The Scramble for China: Foreign Devils in the Qing Empire, 1832–1914* (London, 2011).

[19]On Nathan Dunn, see N. Dunn and W. B. Langdon *"Ten Thousand Chinese Things": A Descriptive Catalogue of the Chinese* (London, 1843). On The Great Exhibition, see J. A. Auerback, *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display* (New Haven, 1999). On children books, see S-W. Chen, *Representations of China in British Children's Fiction, 1851–1911* (Burlington, 2013). The board games are mentioned in S. E. Fraser, "The Face of China: Photography's Role in Shaping Image, 1860–1920" *Getty Research Journal*, No. 2 (2010), p.47; *Taking of Canton* by Bommier & Jannin (1858) Plate 12, in *Brush and Shutter: Early Photography in China* (eds) J. W. Cody & F. Terpak (Los Angeles, 2011), p. 132. On Lehmann's "Boxer Rebellion" tin toy, see Lehmann toy collection online: https://lehmanntoycollection.com. Accessed 13 August 2019.

[20]J. L. Hevia, 'The Photography Complex: Exposing Boxer-Era China (1900–1901), Making Civilization' in *Photographies East: The Camera and Its Histories in East and Southeast Asia*, (ed.) by R. C. Morris (Durham & London, 2009), p. 84.

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Fig. 1. *Actualités: La Chine étant ouverté attire immédiatement à Pékin tous les photographes, qui se mettent en mesure de saisir sa majesté impériale dès sa sortie du palais* (News event : As soon as China was opened up, photographers descended on Peking to capture an image of the emperor leaving his palace)
From *Le charivari*, 15 October 1858]

What distinguishes this medium from other forms of visual 'knowledge' was that photographs were perceived to be objective. Susan Sontag pointed out the propensity to view photographs as representations of truth, "Photography furnishes evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it".[21] The faith of photographs to depict an unbiased truth of the world is problematic. Photographers are part of their own socio-cultural frameworks and thus their ways of seeing and capturing the world are rooted in cultural codes and aesthetic conventions.

Popular photographs of China were subsequently turned into lantern slides to be used for both educational and entertainment purposes thereby blurring the distinction between fact and fiction by encouraging viewers to approach the world and its diversity of people and places as an exhibition. James L. Hevia explains that this operated as a "potential for an active and interactive experience that offered up the world in a kind of hyperreal mode of presentation"[22] and which effectively removed the boundaries between reality and imagination.

[21]S. Sontag, *On Photography* (New York, 1978), p. 5.
[22]Hevia was referring specifically to stereographic images. J. L. Hevia, 'The Photography Complex', p. 100.

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The popularity of lantern slides in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century coincided with a penchant for combining information with entertainment, or in contemporary parlance, *infotainment*. Alan Rauch points to how "knowledge was being produced and consumed at such an unprecedented rate that few could ignore its growing impact on the culture" during the nineteenth.[23] He highlights the fetishisation of knowledge that was, and continues to be, "something valuable for its own sake".[24]

Information transmitted through visuals was especially powerful because, as Said articulates, images have a way of permanently fixing an idea in the imagination. This article approaches the RAS magic lantern slides with an awareness of the perils of unquestioningly believing what you see. The following sections will challenge the representations of the slides, questioning who has the power and authority to represent who and for what purpose.

Capturing 'Knowledge': Representation vs Reality

One of the more popular stereotypes that made its way into almost every form of narrative about China during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the idea of Chinese cruelty exemplified through China's corporal punishment practices. Nineteenth century writers such as Régis-Évariste Huc (1813–1860) and Samuel Wells Williams (1812–1884) stressed 'Oriental despotism' and the brutality of Chinese punishments as a way of emphasising binary cultural differences between the East and the West.[25] Public executions were a central topic within this narrative (Figure 1) and such sights coincided with the belief that cruelty was a Chinese characteristic trait.

Western photographers in China viewed their surroundings with preconceptions shaped by their cultural understanding. As commercial photographers, they needed to coincide their images with the dominant ideology in order to secure sales. Figures 2, 3, and 4 are attributed to the British photographer William Saunders, who was active in Shanghai between 1862 and 1887. His staged scenes of Chinese daily life and activities were extremely popular among Western audiences and these three images were no exception.

Photographs depicting corporal punishment visually translated the written accounts and articulated this Western fascination with Chinese punishments. Figure 4 is one of Saunders most famous re-creations and while undoubtedly staged for the camera, the image was copied around the world in postcards, books, and illustrated journals well into the twentieth century.[26] It was re-captioned to coincide with current events, being used to illustrate the beheading of pirates in Hong Kong as well as capital punishment of Boxers in 1900 before newspapers used the image as a scene of execution in Republican China, despite the obvious Imperial-era dress and queue.[27]

The reproduction of these images in various media formats were a significant vehicle in the process of dissemination and perpetuation of stereotyped views of China. The fact

[23] A. Rauch, *Useful Knowledge: The Victorians, Morality, and the March of Intellect* (Durham & London, 2001), p. 21.

[24] Rauch, *Useful Knowledge,* p. 3.

[25] T. Brook, G. Blue, J. Bourgon, *Death by a Thousand Cuts* (Cambridge, MA, 2008), pp. 166–189.

[26] R. Thiriez, 'William Saunders, Photographer of Shanghai Customs' in *Visual Resources* 26:3 (2010),' pp. 305–308.

[27] R. Thiriez, 'William Saunders', pp. 308–309.

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Fig. 2. 'Execution' Royal Asiatic Society Glass Slide.01/(173)]

Fig. 3. 'Cangue' Royal Asiatic Society Glass Slide.01/(174)]

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Fig. 4. 'Cangue' Royal Asiatic Society Glass Slide.01/(175)]

that Saunders's photographs were deemed important enough to be turned into lantern slides points to the central ideas during this time period. In a lantern lecture reading that came with a boxed set of glass slides entitled "China and the Chinese", the bastinado is featured as a discussion point. Unfortunately, the slides that would have accompanied the reading are missing. The lecture notes, estimated to have been published between 1876 and 1893, offer a glimpse not only on how China was understood and narrated, but also the sights that would have been interesting enough to be transformed from photographs into lantern slides.[28]

The lecture discusses the bastinado as "the punishment most frequently inflicted in every part of China, and for almost every species of offence". The reading details how the punishment is administered ("by slaves kept for the purpose") and where it takes place ("some public place outside the city wall".) The lantern lecture also adds a commentary on how the Chinese react on receiving this form of corporal punishment:

> Upon the termination of this degrading ceremony, the offender, impressed with the feeling that he has been flogged like a schoolboy for his future benefit, falls prostrate before the mandarin, and returns thanks for his parental anxiety and vigilance.[29]

[28]I am grateful to Dr Richard Crangle for all the information he patiently supplied on lantern lecture notes, in particular the ones found on the Magic Lantern Society of the United Kingdom. Online: http://www.magiclantern.org.uk

[29]*China and the Chinese* (London, England: York & Son, estimated dates 1876–1893), Library Item Number 90733, Magic Lantern Society of the United Kingdom. Online: http://www.magiclantern.org.uk

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In likening the offender to a 'schoolboy' grateful for his punishment, the narration promotes the idea that native people only understand the use of force and thus violence was justified in order to control the colonised population.

What is not represented, visually on the lantern slide or in the lectures, is a narrative of violent colonial disciplinary methods. European violence and torture against colonised populations were used up until decolonisation. In China, Euro-americans not only administered punitive actions, they also sanctioned 'Chinese' forms of execution thereby "decod[ing] an indigenous form of punishment and turn[ing] it back against the natives".[30] After the Boxers Uprising, beheadings of mandarins and suspected Boxers by their own compatriots were mediated by allied forces and organised as a public spectacle. This form of punishment was believed to be both significant and appropriate to the Chinese mentality.[31]

Within this colonial framework, the lantern slides provide supposed proof of this apparent 'Chinese mentality' to a British audience at home and present a view that China is a land where unspeakable acts occur. In this way, penal practices served as justification for British colonial rule.[32] In Figure 5, a Western man stands at the front right hand corner of the slide. He is dressed in a 'typical explorer's suit' of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which denotes the idea of a British colonial adventurer.[33] He stands erect and gazes directly at the camera while the bustle of every day life in China surrounds him. The caption simply reads "Honan Road" but his figure within the photograph is a powerful visual reminder of Western presence in Chinese spaces, access that was gained and granted through violent means.

Figure 6 provides another example of the colonial encounter. In the photograph, both Chinese and Western men are represented as authority figures and appear to be passing judgement on three seated Chinese men. The caption is brief due to space constraints. Nevertheless, the simple title of "Mixed Court" places the image within a history of colonial encounters between China and Euro-American nation-states.[34] The presence of Western men in positions of power visually reiterates the idea of the 'right' to rule in China, with no reciprocity.

The idea of 'barbaric' corporal punishment as a defining Chinese feature lingered well into the twentieth century. Ford's lecture did not attempt to classify an inherent 'Chinese characteristic trait' as the lecture notes on the bastinado did a century before. His description of the execution slide was simple, "the darker, sometimes, terrible side of life".[35] Despite the lack of embellishment, Ford presented the slide as visual evidence with no mention of the scene being staged to cater to Western aesthetic tastes and expectations.

The images of corporal punishments administered in China became part of a "permanent and 'public' visual memory"[36] that worked alongside text to maintain an already established

[30] J. L. Hevia, *English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century China* (Durham, 2003), p. 227.
[31] *Ibid*, pp. 226–229.
[32] T. Brook, G. Blue, J. Bourgon, *Death by a Thousand Cuts,* pp. 27–28.
[33] R. Johnson, "European Cloth and 'Tropical' Skin: Clothing Material and British Ideas of Health and Hygiene in Tropical Climates," in *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, Fall (2009), pp. 556–557.
[34] J. L. Hevia, 'The Photography Complex,' p. 94.
[35] RAS, *Meetings and Lectures at the Society,* pp. 368–369.
[36] Harris was talking specifically about Beato's photographs of the Second Opium War. D. Harris, *Of Battle and Beauty: Felice Beato's Photographs of China* (California, 1999), p. 36.

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Fig. 5. 'Honan Road' Royal Asiatic Society Glass Slide.01/(026)]

Fig. 6. 'Mixed Court' Royal Asiatic Society Glass Slide.01/(186)]

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vision of the country and its people. Hevia argues that "the British assault on China in the nineteenth century was a repetition of a prior discursive violence; China was destroyed in writing well before a single British gun was levelled at a Chinese person".[37] With the inclusion of photographs to corroborate already held beliefs, these images were powerful in reinforcing and maintaining these notions.

Yao Hua's Photographic Studio: Representing China for Western Consumption

The very act of making someone or something visible signifies a means of gaining power and control, however illusory, over the subject. Sontag describes what she perceives as the violence of photography in the act as well as the language that surrounds this visual medium. In being able to 'load,' 'aim,' and 'shoot,' the camera takes on the characteristics of a gun. For Sontag, photography is an aggressive act. She argues that "to photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed".[38] How do these frameworks of understanding further complicate or change when Chinese subjects are visually represented by Chinese photographers?

Some of the staged images of Chinese stereotypes created in Chinese studios were successful and sold well, which is substantiated by the fact that they were turned into lantern slides. From a commercial perspective, these re-creations demonstrated shrewd business acumen in offering Western consumers scenes they would be willing to purchase.[39] Régine Thiriez's research into a photograph of ancestor worship (Figure 7) reveals that the image's almost flippant regard for this important Chinese ritual was staged and photographed by a Chinese studio in Shanghai operated by Yao Hua (active between circa 1892 and early 1900s).

These images incorporate familiar notions of exoticism that appealed to Western consumers. It would be inaccurate however, to describe Chinese photographic practices as simply an imitation of Western visual aesthetic conventions. Yao Hua refashioned his scenes to suit his own artistic tastes and created playful yet subversive photographs. While, for example, Saunders used Chinese furniture in his scenes, Yao Hua preferred Western furniture. This not only symbolised modernity but also visually articulated the transcultural and adaptive nature of these studios to current conditions in contemporary Shanghai.

Another difference was in their use of models. Unlike Saunders, Yao Hua used the same models repeatedly in different scenes thereby highlighting the staged nature of the photographs.[40] The images resulted in what Thiriez describes as a move "towards a pantomime" where "photographs were closer to caricature than to objective description".[41] Figure 8 demonstrates the acting of the models; the men look directly at the camera while the moustachioed judge in dark glasses attempts to display firmness and severity in his facial expression. Significantly, the models are bold in their stance; refusing to be passive agents of an active gaze, they confidently look back at the viewer.

[37]J. L. Hevia, *Cherishing Men From Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham and London, 1995), p. 73.
[38]S. Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 14.
[39]R. Thiriez, 'William Saunders,' p. 311.
[40]*Ibid,* p. 312.
[41]*Ibid*, p. 311.

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Fig. 7. 'Ancestral Worship' Royal Asiatic Society Glass Slide.01/(074)]

Fig. 8. 'Chinese Court' Royal Asiatic Society Glass Slide.01/(177)]

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The caption is simple; it reads "Chinese Court." It is written on the wrong side of the lantern slide, as can be seen by the flipped Chinese characters in the background of the photograph. The 'fakeness' of the scene is punctuated by the way the shot was taken. The background structure abruptly ends on the far right of the image, as does the carpet. The caption is significant in the way they work alongside the image to enhance the value of 'truth' in what viewers are seeing. Bruno Latour has described the process of convincing an audience by reducing the possibility for multiple interpretations. He explains,

> One *more* inscription, one more trick to enhance contrast, one simple device to decrease background, one coloring procedure, might be *enough*, all things being equal, *to swing the balance* of power and turn an incredible statement into a credible one which would then be passed along without further modification.[42]

More than a mere indication of place, captions attempt to 'corner' and 'surround' the viewer in dictating the terms of what is being looked at, especially when viewers are asked to believe sights that are incredulous due to their foreignness and unfamiliarity. The undeniably staged scene forces viewers to reconsider the veracity of photographs and the ways in which Yao Hua operated his studio within a socio-cultural and political framework that considered the ways in which his artistic work would be produced and consumed.

During the Victorian era, it was common for Chinese painters in Guangzhou to create scenes according to the desires of their European clients and once in Europe, these images would be re-worked according to familiar aesthetic tastes. Chinese artists quickly learned what China should look like in order to attract Euro-American consumers and happily complied with demand.[43] Yao Hua was therefore working within a well-established Sino-Western artistic profession, albeit with the new visual medium of photography.

Photographs taken by Chinese studios that reinforced clichéd Chinese tropes are fascinating visual commodities that point to tensions between commercial ventures and reformist ambitions at a tumultuous time in China's history. The period in which Yao Hua was an active photographer was one of social unrest as reformers advocated change in order to strengthen China against foreign encroachment. The representations point to the diversity and complexity of visual conventions of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries photographs of China and represent a visual blending between Western and Chinese aesthetic conventions.

Orientalist tropes were indeed used; however, it was the photographic practice of both Western and Chinese photographers susceptible to the demands of paying consumers. The popularity of images that were purchased by Western consumers were based on their ability to confirm and reinforce perceived truths that subscribed to familiar notions of an 'exotic' China in the British imagination.

[42]B. Latour, 'Visualisation and Cognition: Drawing Things Together,' in *Knowledge and Society: Studies in the Sociology of Culture Past and Present* (ed.) H. Kuklick Vol. 6 (1986), p. 17.

[43]T. Brook, G. Blue, J. Bourgon, *Death by a Thousand Cuts*, p. 25.

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Conclusion

While perusing through the collection of slides at the RAS, John Berger's acute perception on ways of seeing springs to mind: "Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights".[44] The selection of images arose from a specific historical context and discursive framework. The choices made to capture or create these particular images are situated within the wider ideological complex in which meaning is both shaped and negotiated.

Lantern slides are especially interesting because unlike other visual genres, these objects were accompanied by lectures to instruct viewers on *how* to look. The staged scenes of corporal punishment or in the photographs created by Yao Hua points to Western audiences tastes and expectations. Significantly, images are highly deceptive and need to be questioned. The photographs are historically constructed and embedded within cultural frameworks and ideological presuppositions that shape our understanding.[45] As lantern slides, they form an intricate part of systems of control and power in which 'imaginative knowledge' are constructed, disseminated, and if unchallenged, maintained.

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[44] J. Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London, 1972), p. 10.
[45] J. L. Hevia, 'The Photography Complex,' p. 80.

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