

# The Empress Dowager and the Camera

## Photographing Cixi, 1903-1904

by David Hogge

Photographing  
Cixi

Piety & Power

Diplomacy

Cixi's Afterlife

Sources  
& Credits

### CIXI'S AFTERLIFE

Xunling's photographs are often cited to illustrate the permeation of photography throughout Chinese society at the turn of the century, penetrating even the inner recesses of the imperial court, with its wary conservatism and archaic traditions. As the preceding analysis suggests, however, court officials at the highest level were by no means passive photographic subjects. On the contrary, the court took an active role in the production of a public identity, with China's supreme political figure engaging with the camera, exploring its technical capabilities and uses, and finally employing it in the creation of a new, hybrid expression. In that sense, the photographs represent a sincere but belated attempt by the court to engage visually with the modern. They reflect a desperate attempt to remain relevant by conforming to emerging mandates to personally engage with political allies, subjects, and the international community through portraiture.

The ambiguity of many of these photographs may not be a result of our own failure to understand their context so much as a failure of the court to effectively grasp the potential of this new technology. If anything, the photographs convey disorientation—the shock of naive technological initiation that may be excitingly novel, but whose actual usefulness is not clearly described or discerned. Nevertheless, there is undeniably a richness to many of the the photographs that largely reflects Cixi's unique and innovative artistic sensibilities, with their rich floral profusion and dense decorative assemblies.

Regardless of the original intention of the photographs, their impact on the enduring popular image of the Empress Dowager is convoluted. Did casting off court traditions of concealment and inaccessibility have the intended effect of establishing a more sympathetic public image of Cixi? Her domestic reputation certainly did not improve over the remainder of her reign. Overseas Chinese reformers such as Kang Youwei continued to target Cixi as the primary culprit responsible for China's failures. Through the Republican period (1912 to 1949) and subsequently the People's Republic, little positive could be seen in the historical depictions of her reign. Outside of China, the photographs also had little positive impact on popular attitudes toward China's rulers. Like the ethnographic lens employed by Western explorer-photographers of the 19th century, Xunling's images were a supreme trophy, providing glimpses of the fading, insular court of an oriental woman-despot to an eager Western audience hungry for a steady stream of visual exotica.

While the photographs may have somewhat mitigated the demoniacal images of Chinese and other Asians that appeared so frequently in the turn-of-the-century foreign media, Cixi's overall arch-evil persona remained largely intact. The few highly complementary books by those who knew her personally, such as Sarah Pike Conger, Katharine Carl, and Princess Der Ling, were more than offset by subsequent historical surveys. The general trend was to follow the model established by the 1910 tome *China Under the Empress Dowager* by Sir Edmund Backhouse and J.O.P. Bland. Long considered the authoritative reference on Cixi, this book—which used two of Xunling's photographs as illustration—claimed to present a neutral view of Cixi, yet consolidated many of the popular rumors:

*Despite her swiftly changing and uncontrolled moods, her childish lack of moral sense, her unscrupulous love of power, her fierce passions and revenges, Tzu Hsi [Cixi] was no more the savage monster described by "Wen Ching," than she was the benevolent, fashion-plate Lady Bountiful of the American magazines.*

Flattering descriptions by the likes of Conger were dismissed as the product of simple-minded women, easily swayed by honeyed words. Ironically, many of the more sordid tales conveyed by Backhouse and Bland were derived from documents subsequently discovered to be forgeries. Predictably, Cixi's self-portraits as the compassionate bodhisattva Avalokitesvara were frequently cited as evidence of a ruler out of touch with reality, immersed in her own self-aggrandizement.

In cinema, the dominant image-creating medium of the mid-20th century, visual traces of Xunling's camera work remain. The ubiquitous flanking pyramids of fruit, for example, strongly suggest that set designers frequently consulted the photographs for inspiration.



*The Empress Dowager is portrayed in a film still from "The Last Tempest," 1976*

Wikipedia [cx247]

More interesting, however, are the frequent references to the camera itself. From the unrestrained villainy of the Cixi character in "Sorrows of the Forbidden City" (1948) through the more nuanced and even sympathetic figure of more recent treatments such as in "Li Lianying, the Imperial Eunuch" (1991), allusions to Xunling's photography project recur.



*Cixi confronts the camera in the 1948 film "Sorrows of the Forbidden City."*

Wikimedia Commons  
[cx256]

Perhaps this signifies unbridled consumption of Western technology for the sake of personal vanity, the subtext being that, like Cixi's infamous marble boat pavilion paid for with Chinese navy funds, photography was an extravagant and self-centered amusement even as the country at large suffered and declined in technological stagnation. In the 1976 Hong Kong film "The Last Tempest," a depraved and thoroughly Westernized Der Ling herself operates the camera as Cixi plots and schemes to maintain power and obstruct reform.

Against this flood of sensational imagery, Xunling's photographs were only grist for the inevitable mill of cultural stereotyping.



*In the 1976 Hong Kong film "The Last Tempest," Der Ling—the sister of the man who photographed Cixi—herself operates the camera as Cixi schemes to maintain power.*

Wikipedia [cx232]

### *Cixi in the Movies*

*Film posters such as these suggest the enduring fascination with Cixi and the decadent court life she epitomized. The movie at bottom right was a Sino-Japanese production released in 2010 and starred a Japanese actress as the Empress Dowager.*



*"The Empress Dowager" movie poster, China, 1975*

Wikimedia Commons  
[cx216]



*"The Last Tempest" movie poster China, 1976*

Wikimedia Commons  
[cx225]





*"Der Ling and Cixi," a Hong Kong Repertory Theater production, 2006*

Wikimedia Commons  
[cx237]




*"The Pleiades," a Sino-Japanese series starring Yūko Tanaka as Cixi, 2010*

Wikimedia Commons  
[cx255]

*On viewing images of a potentially disturbing nature: click here.*

Massachusetts Institute of Technology © 2011 Visualizing Cultures

Creative Commons License 

MIT VISUALIZING CULTURES