

## Staging Real Sites: Tableau Vivant Photography in Nineteenth-Century China

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### Résumé de l'article

Cet article analyse les premières photographies datées de Nanjing prises par des studios chinois et se penche sur des images mettant en scène des acteurs inconnus dans différents sites historiques à travers la ville. Il soutient que ces photos occupent une place privilégiée dans l'histoire de la photographie, tant en Chine que globalement, étant témoins d'un moment d'expérimentation qui cherchait à reconstituer ou « réaliser » l'identité lyrique de la topographie ancienne d'une ville à travers des performances mises en scène et in situ. Se présentant comme des manifestations non occidentales de photos de tableaux vivants, ces images nous permettent de poser un regard renouvelé sur les façons dont la photographie a représenté la différence et l'identité à travers le monde au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Ainsi, ce corpus nous invite à revisiter les présupposés entourant la facture d'images par le médium photographique, dans des contextes tant locaux que globaux, à repenser les catégories analytiques et descriptives appliquées aux circuits de l'imagination photographique au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, et à réfléchir à son imbrication avec des iconographies préphotographiques de sites.

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In the large albumen print reproduced here, two massive cliffs rise straight out of the photographic frame, dividing the picture plane in two. Beyond and between these rocks, vision is diffused, cast into a blank, misty expanse.<sup>1</sup> | **fig. 1** | Set off in profile against that backdrop, two capped men in jackets and thick robes, trousers and padded shoes, are seated on the ridge of each cliff, facing each other and gesturing demonstratively across the precipice. Looking closer, two more can be discerned on ledges just below, immersed in private thought or quiet contemplation. Leaning further in, the light profiles of a pot, bowl, and kettle appear laid out one by one in front of the men on the left, leading the eye toward the inscription on the facing rock. Carved into the faceted surfaces of the textured cliff, these large characters are set off in white against a mottled, dark ground. Reading top-down “One-Person-Spring” (一人泉, *Yirenquan*), the inscription names a spring that since the Song dynasty (960–1279) has been recorded to flow from the Eastern peak of Mt. Zhong (鍾山, *Zhongshan*), the highest mountain around the city of Nanjing in Southeast China.<sup>2</sup> The effective integration of this inscription into the picture plane is offset by another on the right-hand edge of the facing rock, of which only one character (登, *deng* or “climb”) is discernible. Yet another kind of inscription appears in the lower left corner of the image: small, neat characters read left to right incised in reverse on the negative plate identify the site represented as Purple-Gold Mountain (紫金山, *Zijinshan*), an alternative name for Mt. Zhong. As a whole, this photograph would appear to conjure the presence of an ancient spring, around which aesthetes have gathered to brew tea from its waters and contemplate the distant expanses above and the city at their feet.

Even as we start to piece together how to read this photo, new questions emerge. Who are these people? Are they travellers, and is this a kind of group portrait, or are they actors engaged in some form of on-site performance? Their caps and queues and well-appointed, everyday attire suggest an elite social status and a late nineteenth or early twentieth century date, in holding with the social and historical context for the large, glass-plate negative from which this print was made. The postures and expressive gestures, however, seem staged, as does the prop-like arrangement of tea paraphernalia on the ridge between them. Is this in fact a photograph taken on site, featuring the “real” landscape of Mt. Zhong and its famed One-Person-Spring, or a carefully staged and creatively labelled one? The backdrop being opaque, little visual

Figure 1. Unknown  
photographer, Zijinshan 紫金山  
(Purple-Gold Mountain),  
before 1900. Albumen print,  
approx. 23.5 × 30 cm. Löbbbecke  
Archive, Stadtarchiv Iserlohn.  
Photograph by the author.  
Courtesy of Stadtarchiv Iserlohn.



context is provided for the upward-jutting, strongly faceted rocks, which are typical for but not unique to this mountain in the larger Nanjing region. For all we know, the inscriptions appearing as rock engravings in this photograph could have all been added onto the negative plate after the picture was taken, as is apparently the case with the smaller identifying caption in the lower left, which does not follow the irregular surface of the rock on which it is superimposed. On second thought, little in this printed image seems to ground the scene tangibly into a readily attestable “real space.”

These ambiguities further compound the photo’s uneasy allocation in current understandings of nineteenth-century photography in China. The scale and angle do not allow clear recognition of the sitters, and their demonstrative postures and setting are unusual for portraiture known to date. While the figures in the scene are far more prominent than those featured in so-called landscape photography of the time, their elite identities and activities do not align with the typical subjects that serve to embellish such landscapes. As I will argue below, this image occupies a special place in the history of photography not only in China but across the globe, witnessing a moment of experimentation that sought to enact or “realize” the lyric identity of a city’s celebrated landscape through staged, on-site performances. As such, this image invites us to revisit working assumptions about photographic image-making—in both local and global contexts—and to reassess analytic and descriptive categories applied to nineteenth-century circuits of photographic imagination. What is more, it draws renewed attention to imbrications of the photographic medium with pre-photographic iconographies of place.

As the growing body of writing on photography at the colonial frontier shows, on the irregular terrain of imperialist expansion and modernization, photography offered its surfaces for the projection and refraction of foreign and native desires, outsider and insider vision, and crafted new forms for the articulation of cultural and spatial selves.<sup>3</sup> I situate this essay in conversation with these discussions, and see room for a better understanding of the relations between photographic imagination at the colonial frontier and the imperial metropolis. I will propose that the images analyzed here bring to light non-Western forms of tableau vivant photography, and in so doing call into question lingering distinctions that continue to shape scholarship in the field.

### Boundaries of Tableau Photography

What were known as tableaux vivants in nineteenth-century Europe consisted of more than just re-enactments of pre-existing paintings or statues in private salons or on the public stage. These performances took shape around a play on the relation between image and embodiment, invoking still pictures in generative as well as imitative terms, just as they participated in the exploration of new themes and forms of pictorial representation at large.<sup>4</sup> As Martin Meisel has shown, staged tableaux were closely allied with new and broad-ranging interests that linked theatre to painting and literary writing, partaking in a desire to connect picture and narrative as a means of relating the ideal to the real.<sup>5</sup> Technically predisposed to occupy the in-between space of picture and performance, the medium of photography shared, from its inception, a natural affinity with the tableau vivant as representational form. Before and

1. I am grateful for the support of the Denison University Research Foundation for early research and to the Henry Luce Foundation/ACLS Program in China Studies for continued work on this project, and to Mr. Rico Quaschny, head archivist of the Stadtarchiv Iserlohn, for the generous permission to study and reproduce these materials from the Löbbbecke Archive in June 2015.

2. The earliest record appears in Zhou Yinghe (周應合, 1213–1280), *Jingding jiankangzhi* 景定建康志 (1st ed., 1262; *Jiangning: Gu Qingya ju keben*, 1801), juan 19: 25a.

3. See Wu Hung, “Inventing a ‘Chinese’ Portrait Style in Early Photography. The Case of Milton Miller,” in *Brush & Shutter: Early Photography in China*, ed. Jeffrey W. Cody and Frances Terpak (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2011), 69–89; Ali Behdad, *Camera Orientalis. Reflections on Photography of the Middle East* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

4. For historical precedents to nineteenth and early-twentieth-century formations of this performative mode, see Vito Adriaenssens and Steven Jacobs, “The Sculptor’s Dream: Tableaux Vivants and Living Statues in the Films of Méliès and Saturn,” *Early Popular Visual Culture* 13, no. 1 (2015): 41–44.

5. Martin Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983). Though focusing on England, Meisel’s findings have a broader purview.

beyond the medium's use to commemorate or complement tableau performances, photographers pursued the visualization and illustration of a rich array of narrative subject matter on their own terms, through the staging of figures in indoor and outdoor settings, evoking biblical, mythical, legendary, historic, domestic, humble, and, not least of all, exotic and Oriental themes. While nineteenth-century critique of this photographic form as "art" or "genre" was framed in relation to the status and subject-categories of painting, staged photography suggesting narrative content has since been termed tableau (vivant) photography, a designation that can serve to foreground its specific transmedial dimension, while freeing it from the tutelage of painting. The lasting promise this mode seems to hold for the continued manipulation and interrogation of relations between presence and representation, body and code, has garnered renewed attention since the close of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, however, the new terms of distinction sustain puzzling continuities with earlier discursive regimes. Born in the crucible of an industrializing and colonizing world, nineteenth-century photography shows a close imbrication, at once formally, thematically, and historically, between staged productions in the colony and in the metropolis. However, the field of nineteenth-century photography studies appears to have assigned each to distinct spaces of analysis and display. Where tableau is used to denote staged photography at the imperial centre, often connected to debates around its status as "art," staged photos of colonial others are typically considered in relation to ethnographic practice, often in the context of a critique of its claims as "science," and most pertinently, its imbrication with Orientalist discourse.<sup>7</sup> The question this raises for me is straightforward: why this internal segregation of tableau photography as critical category, especially in view of widespread, closely allied practices, not least by globe-trotting photographers, across the nineteenth-century world?

This same conundrum arguably informs Luke Gartlan's critical attention to the terminology of "costume" and the iconography of theatricality in Felice Beato's (1832–1909) work in Japan, against common associations of Beato's photos with the ethnographic discourse of "type."<sup>8</sup> We can otherwise see this division play out in Ali Behdad's simultaneous insistence on a grounding relation between Orientalist photography and ethnographic discourse, and comparison of staged photography in the Middle East with tableau performances in the metropolis, stopping short meanwhile of considering tableau photography as such, and a deeper kinship between productions in the same medium.<sup>9</sup> I take cues from both of these authors' attention to the language and iconographies of photographic staging outside the imperial metropolis, and see the need to question how we use tableau photography as critical category. I propose that we insist on placing imagery of "costume" and "in costume," of high and humble life, side-by-side as interdependent mediations of identity and difference, and explore more inclusively how tableau photography wed fantasy to reality through narrative stagings of self and/or as other. In other words, rather than disclosing tableau-like images in the colony as simply "false" representations clad in a thin veil of so-called photographic objectivity, our task would be to trace the circuits of mediation through which tableau photography shaped an open-eyed dreaming that both enabled and

6. For an early designation as genre photography, see Adolphe Disdéri, *L'Art de la photographie* (Paris: Chez l'Auteur, 1862), 299ff. For new publications see Quentin Bajac, *Tableaux Vivants. Fantaisies photographiques victorienne (1840–1880)* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1999); Lori Pauli, ed., *Acting the Part: Photography as Theatre* (London: Merrell, 2006); Christine Buisine and Arnaud Rykner, eds., *Entre Code et Corps. Tableau Vivant et Photographie Mise en Scène* (Pau: Presses Universitaires de Pau et des Pays de l'Adour, 2012).

7. Apart from related exhibitions, a concise reflection of the internal organization of the field can be gleaned from the entries "ethnographic photography," "genre photography," and "tableaux" in John Hannavy, ed., *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 499–503, 575–76, 1373–75.

8. See Luke Gartlan, "Types or Costumes? Reframing Early Yokohama Photography," *Visual Resources* 22, no. 3 (Sept. 2006): 239–63.

9. See Behdad, *Camera Orientalis*, esp. 35–37; "Staging." Behdad's a-priori association of Orientalist, staged photography with the discourse of scientific representation deserves scrutiny, as has been done for parallel readings of Orientalist painting by Linda Nochlin in "The Imaginary Orient," *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 33–59.



obstructed social imaginaries, explicitly deploying its performative powers to connect the real to the ideal.<sup>10</sup>

The need to reflect on the terms we use to analyze nineteenth-century staged photography is further underscored by the work of non-Western photographers active at the colonial frontier. That is, the cases discussed below show how Chinese studios working in nineteenth-century Nanjing demonstrated not only expertise in Orientalist iconographies, but an interest in photographic staging that sought to merge the real with the ideal in close parallel with tableau photography across the contemporary world. Their work attests to complex processes of adaptation and transformation of representational modes and underlines the need for an improved understanding of historic networks and configurations of tableau photography as re/presentational practice.

### Uncommon Sites

Though as far as I know unique, the photograph introduced above does not stand alone but comes to us as part of a collection of photos representing sites in and around Nanjing, purchased there in the late 1890s by one of its earliest German residents, Robert Löbbecke (1852–1910).<sup>11</sup> This collection not only provides a terminus ante quem for this undated photograph, it allows us to connect it to what appears to be a range of experiments with staged photography of this city's heritage sites. Currently preserved in the municipal archives of Löbbecke's hometown, Iserlohn in North Rhine-Westphalia, these large photographs on matte paper measure between 8 × 10 and 9 × 12 inches, and are mounted in sets of two each on large cardboard plates. Printed from what seem to be large dry-plate glass negatives of the same size, five of the fifty-two photos in this collection self-consciously stage one or more persons as part of compositions focused on the representation of renowned sites that are identified in Chinese captions inscribed on the negative plate. Of these, three carry a studio mark reading: "POWKEE/PHOTOGRAPHER/NANKING" and are dated between 1888 and 1890. As such, they are part of a rare group of images produced by the Nanjing branch of the Powkee (寶記 *Baoji*) studio, the commercial enterprise of Ouyang Shizhi (歐陽石芝, n.d.), a photographer from Guangdong. Anecdotal evidence and published photographs allow us to reconstruct its early history: Powkee had by 1884 first set up shop in Hankou, branched out or moved to Nanjing around 1888, finally made a name for itself in Shanghai from the early 1890s onward, and from there, may have expanded its business back to Ouyang's hometown in the south.<sup>12</sup> The Löbbecke collection registers an early, to-date largely undocumented moment before the studio's rise to prominence on the Shanghai stage, and deserves attention on that account alone.<sup>13</sup> As such, the dates of this body of work indicate that Powkee's undertaking in Nanjing was short-lived, underlining the speculative nature of Ouyang's move to a city that was not yet officially "open" to foreign trade. Its content, meanwhile, suggests that, above and beyond lucrative perspectives on future growth, the city's unrivalled position in China's cultural imaginary may well have motivated entrepreneurs such as Ouyang to venture into this potentially high-value, yet largely untapped market.

Boasting a storied past as nine-time imperial capital, the landscape of this city was densely inscribed with poetic and cultural memory, gradually

10. I see certain parallels with, and borrow some of the language from, W.J.T. Mitchell's discussion of race as medium in his *Seeing through Race* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2012), 7–40.

11. On the collector, see Götz Bettge and Alfred Bruns, ed., *Ein Westfale in China. Briefe und Fotografien 1895–1900 der Nachlass Robert Löbbecke, Iserlohn* (Münster: Landschaftsverband Westfalen-Lippe, 1982).

12. For discussions of this early history, see Terry Bennett, *History of Photography in China: Chinese Photographers, 1844–1879* (London: Quaritch, 2013), 240–56; Tong Bingxue 全冰雪, *Zhongguo zhaoxianguan shi 中國照相館史* (Beijing: Zhongguo sheying chubanshe, 2015), 287–300.

13. I discuss this collection as a whole, including its relation to its collector and local photographic production, in a separate, as-yet unpublished essay titled "The Camera and the City: Expats, Photographers, and Survivors at China's Colonial Frontier, 1860s–1890s."

accumulated over more than a thousand years. If anything, Nanjing was a city of images: around the time of Powkee's move to Nanjing, new editions of the city's "forty-eight views" and maps detailing its "ancient traces and famous prospects, city neighbourhoods and geography" revived a venerable tradition of painted and woodblock-printed scenic image-sets and trace-maps, reproduced in the new media of lithography and even copperplate engraving.<sup>14</sup> More often than not evoking long-gone structures and animated, lyric landscapes, the iconography of these pictorial images would have been challenging for any photographer to contend with on its own terms. Yet, twenty-four photographs in Löbbecke's collection are identified in their captions as sites associated with this hallowed imaginary and should be understood as its earliest known photographic translation, a connection that, as I will indicate below, remained effectively invisible to their expatriate collector. Not all of these photos carry the Powkee mark, suggesting that more than one studio may have turned its lens toward the city's "famous prospects and ancient traces" (名勝古蹟, *mingsheng guji*). Even so, they share in common an interest in capturing familiar aspects of a scene's prephotographic iconography, and in staging persons to mark the ritual, lyric, and narrative identity of the site represented. In what follows, I will focus on this last group of staged photographs, presenting first a close reading of select images, and then moving on to frame these experiments in the context of photographic practice at the global colonial frontier.

#### Beyond Staffage: Scene-Marking Figures

A photo by the Hankou branch of the Powkee studio before its move into the Nanjing market fits squarely in colonial photographic practices and may serve as a foil to think about what is different in Nanjing.<sup>15</sup> Likely taken in the mid-1880s, this photograph offers a view of the Yangzi river, with a fleet of foreign ships defining the horizon on the river above. Profiled just off-centre above the strongly textured earthen bank filling the foreground, the small, but clear-cut figure of a man is seen squatting on the riverbank, the long black queue on his back set off in sharp contrast against a simple, white robe. While adding human interest to an otherwise lifeless scene, this figure anchors its landscape in a racially identifiable space. Referred to as "staffage," this device hailed from European pictorial vocabularies and was prevalent in colonial photography, readily mastered by photographers operating in South China's treaty ports, including Powkee.<sup>16</sup> Though aesthetically consistent with Powkee's earlier productions, the images crafted in Nanjing not only focus on sites unfamiliar to their expatriate audience, but profile human figures that interact with each site in a way that cannot be reduced to the role of mere staffage. Among these, prints with a Powkee signature and Chinese title focus on single figures seen from the back or in profile, while those with a Chinese title but no studio mark feature groups of four men arranged in various poses. Even if both sets of images may thus reflect distinct production choices and possibly studio styles, they similarly use staged performance to connect prephotographic imaginaries with Nanjing's contemporary landscape. As the scenes selected for analysis here show, the range of enactments attest to a moment of experimentation, a search for a new language for the photographic realization of this city's hallowed identity.

14. See the advertisements in *Shenbao* 申報 of February 3, 1888: 4, and February 4, 1892: 6. These ads echo with extant lithographic and copperplate prints datable to the late nineteenth century.

15. For a reproduction of this undated photograph, signed in the negative "POW KEE/PHOTOGRAPHER/HANKOW," see: Terry Bennet, *Chinese Photographers*, 244, fig. 11.4.

16. On colonial uses of picturesque landscape, see James R. Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 70–72.

A Powkee photo generically titled “Outside the South Gate” (南門外, *Nanmen wai*) shows a lone figure carrying an umbrella standing in front of a commemorative stele that rises from the foreground to tower over a low horizon of undulating hills. | **fig. 2** | Beyond a few low houses barely discernible in the darkly toned middle ground and the walled fortress on Raining-Flower Terrace (雨花台, *Yuhuatai*) merging into the distant horizon, this spacious, open image is free to focus all attention on the stele featured in three-quarter profile at its centre and the figure standing to its left in the same visual plane. Hinging on the implied immersion of this figure in the text inscribed on the stele’s surface, this staged scene transforms what is in fact one of a pair of stelae flanking the tomb of the early Ming general Song Cheng 宋晟 (?–1407), located just outside the city’s South Gate, into a site-specific prop for the enactment of a generic pictorial theme.<sup>17</sup> | **fig. 3** | That is, this stele on its tortoise base plays here the role of the prototypical ancient stele encountered by a wandering scholar familiar from images generically titled “images of reading (or visiting) memorial stelae” (讀碑, *Dubei*; 訪碑, *Fangbei*; or 觀碑圖, *Guanbeitu*). While, as Clarissa von Spee shows, painted representations of this theme have been interpreted to illustrate different legendary encounters with commemorative stelae, the pictorial iconography evoked in this photo serves a culturally resonant but generic reading of an encounter with a famous, commemorative inscription in a masterful hand, or in other words, the archetypal form of an ancient trace (古蹟, *guji*).<sup>18</sup> As such, this photo enacts a form of generic narrative topos preeminently associated with Nanjing’s identity as a paradigmatic site of ancient traces. Association of this generic theme with the city’s symbolic landscape was not unprecedented in pictorial representation, as witnessed by the loyalist subtext intimated in a fan painting on the same theme by the famous Nanjing painter and survivor of the end of the Ming dynasty, Zhang Feng 張風 (?–1662).<sup>19</sup> | **fig. 4** | However, even if the umbrella marks the trope of the wanderer in contemporary terms, the short working-man’s trousers, seemingly bare legs, and simple footwear of the figure fit awkwardly with its typical elite male subject and render this performance, no matter how skillfully composed and situationally evocative, oddly contrived.

In contrast with this carefully orchestrated performance by what seems to be a labourer doubling as an actor, the photographs carrying titles in Chinese but no studio mark stage groups of self-possessed, well-dressed gentlemen in various poses of relaxation at famous sites to the north and northeast of the city. Mimicking a rock inscription in the lower-left foreground, the title of a photographed scene identifies it as the “Twelve Caves of Swallow Mountain” (燕山十二洞, *Yanshan shi’erdong*).<sup>20</sup> | **fig. 5** | Between this inscription and the four men seated on the rocky outcrop across it in the front right, the image opens up to the space in the middle ground that holds a building with a plaque reading “Three-Terrace Cave” (三台洞, *Santaidong*), and leads to a pavilion perched on the mountain flank above. The careful staging of these men at different points of elevation and in varying postures directs the viewer’s gaze to the space around them, a visual interest that is sustained by the presence of a monk standing in the doorframe of the cave entrance to their left, and of travellers, highlighted for clarity, taking in the view from the pavilion on top. Rather than showing the “country house of a wealthy Chinese,” as

17. The inscription was noted in the 1930s to have been heavily worn and nearly illegible, suggesting the identity of the tomb occupant may have been lost to most passers-by. See Zhu Xie 朱悛, *Jinling guji mingsheng yingji 金陵古蹟名勝影集* (A Photographic Album of Jinling’s Ancient Traces and Famous Prospects) (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1936), fig. 97–98.

18. See Clarissa von Spee, “Visiting Stelae. Variations of a Painting Theme,” in Shane McCausland and Yin Hwang, ed., *On Telling Images of China. Essays in Narrative Painting and Visual Culture* (Hong Kong: The Hong Kong University Press, 2014), 213–38. While von Spee expands the discussion to include the representation of stelae alone as a motif, I regard the stele-reading figure instead as a distinct theme, evoked in this photograph.

19. This fan, titled “Reading the Stelae” (*Dubeitu*), painted in ink and light colour on paper, measures 16.6 cm by 50.1 cm, and is now held in the Suzhou Museum. For a reading of Zhang Feng’s fan in relation to the Manchu takeover, see Wu Hung, *A Story of Ruins: Presence and Absence in Chinese Art and Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 82.

20. The correct name for this site should be the nearly homophonous Twelve Caves of Rock Mountain (岩山十二洞, *Yanshan shi’erdong*). The misspelling here is puzzling and potentially follows an association with the famed site of Swallow Rock (燕子磯, *Yanziji*) in its vicinity.



Figure 2. Powkee Nanjing, *Nanmenwai* 南門外 (Outside the South Gate), 1890. Albumen print, approx. 23.5 x 30 cm. Löbbecke Archive, Stadtarchiv Iserlohn. Photograph by the author. Courtesy of Stadtarchiv Iserlohn.



Figure 3 (right). Wilhelm Metzener (n.d.), "Sung Cheng's Tomb," ca. 1935, in: Zhu Xie 朱偁, *Jinling guji mingsheng yingji* 金陵古蹟名勝影集 (A Photographic Album of Jinling's Ancient Traces and Famous Prospects) (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1936), fig. 97.

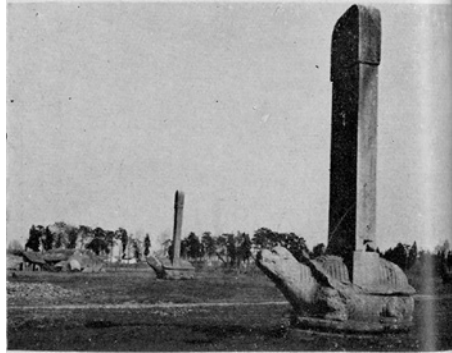


Figure 4 (below). Zhang Feng 張風 (?–1662), *Dubeitu* 讀碑圖 (Reading the Stelae), ink and light colour on paper, 16.6 x 50.1 cm. Photograph courtesy of the Suzhou Museum.





**Figure 5. Unknown photographer, *Yanshan shi'erdong* 燕山十二洞 (Twelve Caves of Swallow Mountain), before 1900. Albumen print, approx. 23.5 × 30 cm. Löbbbecke Archive, Stadtarchiv Iserlohn. Photograph by the author. Courtesy of Stadtarchiv Iserlohn.**



**Figure 6. Unknown photographer, *Yanshan shi'erdong* 燕山十二洞 (Twelve Caves of Swallow Mountain), detail, before 1900. Albumen print, approx. 23.5 × 30 cm. Löbbbecke Archive, Stadtarchiv Iserlohn. Photograph by the author. Courtesy of Stadtarchiv Iserlohn.**

stated in the collector's caption, the place registered here is a famous site by the Yangzi river named for its series of staggered caves, featuring a number of pavilions built into the mountain around them, including the so-called River-Viewing Pavilion profiled in this photograph. Löbbecke's assumption that this is a group portrait of wealthy proprietors of the buildings in the background is telling, as it signals, in contrast with the opacity of the image's stated subject, the social intelligibility of its sitters to this expatriate resident. It is fair to assume that Löbbecke was responding to not only the quality of their attire but also the sophistication of their coded postures. | **fig. 6** |

Formally speaking, however, the image fits uneasily with contemporary portrait photography, and is, as such, unlikely to be a repurposed group portrait.<sup>21</sup> Compositional features such as the relative scale of the figures and their off-centre staging in an outdoor setting, looking away from each other and outward in four directions, are inconsistent with prevailing practices in group portraiture across the globe, where the sitters dominate the image and their poses are configured to suggest reciprocal relations as much as individualized visual interest.<sup>22</sup> No matter their programmatic arrangement in frontal, three-quarter, and profile view, stage-directed to orient the viewer's gaze outward to the surrounding landscape, the *Twelve Caves* group does not fit the mould of typical genre tableaux in the colony either, a major photographic currency at the colonial frontier.<sup>23</sup> The leisurely privilege and relaxed self-possession of this group differ in identity and affect with those sitters arranged in "natural" configurations to illustrate the "costume" and "custom" of occupational, social, racial, and gendered identities.<sup>24</sup> Rather, their body language suggests an iconographic vocabulary derived from the playbook of portrait photography, albeit to stage a subject of a rather different kind. By enacting the cultivated enjoyment of this celebrated destination outside the city walls, these figures serve a representational program that takes the scenic and lyric identity of a local site as its subject.

The experimental nature of this production and the intuition that what we are dealing with is not a novel form of travel portraiture but rather a form of tableau that serves the photographic realization of a legendary, lyric site, finds support in the Purple Mountain scene discussed at the outset of this essay. Also featuring a Chinese caption in the lower left, this image stages a similar group of four men seated on top of large rocks, this time engaged in a range of demonstrative gestures and complex poses.<sup>25</sup> | **fig. 1** | Individuated and suggestive of interaction, each gesture seems designed with the viewer in mind. | **figs. 7–8** | The man furthest to the left, holding a teacup in his near hand, faces right and points with his far hand upward in the direction of the opposite ridge. Below him, another man is seated cross-legged, turned slightly toward the right, leaning his cheek in a pensive pose on a hand holding a brush, as if on the cusp of literary creation. On the opposite ridge, another man in a cross-legged pose, resting an umbrella on his lap, gazes leftward as if in quiet contemplation, while above him and on top of the highest ridge, a fourth figure is seated in profile oriented left, his near hand on his outstretched knee and the other raised mid-way in a suspended pose, potentially also holding a brush.<sup>26</sup> Rather than representing, as imaginatively assumed in the collector's heading, "Closely adjacent rocky islands on the Yangzi river," this site is

21. Photographs of visitors to the Ming mausoleum in Löbbecke's collection are by contrast likely candidates for a repurposing of commissioned portraits for commercial distribution. On this practice, see Roberta Wue, "Essentially Chinese. The Chinese Portrait Subject in Nineteenth-Century Photography," in *Body and Face in Chinese Visual Culture*, eds. Wu Hung and Katherine R. Tsang (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 257ff.

22. For a prescriptive text on the grouping of figures around shared action in group portraiture, see Disdéri, *L'art de la photographie*, 278.

23. One of the most prolific of these was the studio of William Saunders (1832–92) operating in Shanghai from the early 1860s to the late 1880s. In China's colonial arena, as elsewhere, commercial production of so-called "low" genre, or staged narrative scenes of everyday, humble, or ritual life, would benefit from consideration in relation to tableau practices of low as well as "high" genre, or scenes of middle-class domestic life, in the imperial metropolis.

24. For contrasting examples of affect and agency in genre photography at the colonial frontier, see Behdad, *Camera Orientalis*, 37. For a very incisive reading of posture and affect in the disclosure of Milton Miller's "Chinese" portraiture as invented, staged images that are operationally consistent with genre representations of "costume" and "custom," see Wu, "Inventing a 'Chinese' Portrait Style."

25. In spite of the large format of these photographs, the lower angle of the shot in the Purple Mountain scene makes it impossible to judge if the individuals featured in both photos are in fact the same.

26. Due to the angle and depth of focus of the lens the nature of this object is impossible to distinguish.



identified in its Chinese inscriptions as the One-Person-Spring on the peak of Mt. Zhong, which, as discussed above, presided as the highest mountain over Nanjing's symbolic landscape. Celebrated since at least the Song dynasty among the splendours of this mountain, and named for the delicate flow of its water, this spring was recorded in the Jiaqing era (1796–1820) as the only ancient water source still to be found there, and in the Xuantong era (1909–1912) as one of the three finest to brew locally grown tea.<sup>27</sup> Due to its location on the highest top of the mountain, lyric evocation of this site conjured the pleasures of pure and remote contemplation, imbued with associations of moral and aesthetic elevation. But while Mt. Zhong as a whole figured centrally in the pictorial iconography of the city, there is no precedent for the focus on this spring as visual synecdoche for the mountain as a whole. The photographer's toolbox clearly allowed the production of a closer match for pre-photographic views of the mountain rising above the surrounding landscape, featuring since at least the late sixteenth century, the imperial tomb at its centre. | **fig. 9** | What, then, was at stake in coining this new image for this major site? The body language of the four sitters offers a point of access into some of the motivations at play here. Though in number, general attire, and scale relative to the landscape, the men are of a kind with those in the *Twelve Caves* scene, their gestural language connects to a different source of imagination. That is, comparison with so-called “scene-marking figures” (點景人物, *dianjing renwu*) from a nineteenth-century re-edition of the seventeenth-century *Mustard Seed Garden Painting Manual* suggests that in this case the photographer may have been looking at Chinese pictorial traditions for inspiration.<sup>28</sup> | **fig. 10** |

The fourth chapter of this painting manual introduces its subject matter in the following terms:

“The various modes (式, *shi*) of scene-marking figures ... should all display a relation of reciprocal regard (有顧盼, *you gupan*) with the mountain- and waterscape (山水, *shan-shui*): the figures should seem to gaze at the mountains, and the mountains, in turn, should seem to look down at the figures; the zither should be listening to the moon, while the moon should appear suspended in silence, listening to the zither ...”<sup>29</sup>

The compound verb typically translated as “gazing around” (顧盼, *gupan*), used here nominally in the first sentence, does not have a direct counterpart in the English language: it articulates a form of anticipative attention, a visual outlook that doubles as significant, embodied attitude toward one's physical or social environment. Depending on context, connotation of this term could range from commanding self-assurance to benevolent regard for one's fellow men. In the context of this seventeenth-century painting manual, this disposition is oriented toward the geophysical environment, marked by serenity, detachment, and complete freedom from worldly affect and material concerns. While successful scene-marking figures are in this preface stated to serve as aspirational stand-ins for the viewer, triggering the viewer's desire to “leap inside and trade places with the figures in the painting,” their operation is at the same time compared to a literary device: like a thematic marker in a literary composition, they bring out the painting's main theme, whence their name.<sup>30</sup> To illustrate the kinds of lyric themes that could be evoked by these figures' expressive poses, this manual selects famous poetic verses to accompany the first few figural modes in this chapter.

27. See Yao Nai (姚鼐, 1732–1815), *Chongkan Jiangning fuzhi* 重刊江寧府志 (1st ed., 1811; Taipei: Chengwen chubanshe, 1974), 220; Chen Zuolin (陳作霖, 1837–1920), *Shangyuan Jiangning xiangtu hezhi* 上元江寧鄉土合志 ([China]: Jiang Chu bianyi shuju, 1910), 6: 5a.

28. The edition reproduced here is Wang Gai (王概, n.d.) et al., eds., *Jieziyuan huazhuan* 芥子園畫傳 (Shanghai: Hongwen shuju, 1887), juan 4. This is one of the two first, expanded re-editions of this manual published in the late 1880s in Shanghai based on a tracing from a rare original by Chao Xun (巢勛, 1852–1917). His re-edition was widely reproduced in various formats and remains the most widely circulating to date. The texts and chapter contents referenced here are identical to those of the original edition, though Chao's images do not capture the vivacity of his model.

29. Wang Gai, *Jieziyuan*, juan 4: 1a. Author's translation.

30. *Ibid.*



Figure 7 (above). Unknown photographer, *Zijinshan* 紫金山 (Purple-Gold Mountain), detail left, before 1900. Albumen print, approx. 23.5 × 30 cm. Löbbecke Archive, Stadtarchiv Iserlohn. Photograph by the author. Courtesy of Stadtarchiv Iserlohn.



Figure 8 (right). Unknown photographer, *Zijinshan* 紫金山 (Purple-Gold Mountain), detail right, before 1900. Albumen print, approx. 23.5 × 30 cm. Löbbecke Archive, Stadtarchiv Iserlohn. Photograph by the author. Courtesy of Stadtarchiv Iserlohn.



Figure 9. After Xu Hu 徐虎, *Zhongfu qingyun* 鍾阜晴雲 (Clearing Clouds over Mount Zhong), in: *Jinling sishibajing* 金陵四十八景 (Forty-Eight Scenes of Jinling) ([China], 1887), scene 2. Copperplate engraving, approx. 20 × 30 cm. Photograph by the author. Courtesy of the Peking University Library.



Figure 10. Wang Gai et al. ed., *Jieziyuan huazhuan* 芥子園畫傳 (Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting) (Shanghai: Hongwen shuju, 1887), juan 4, 2b-3a.



Figure 11. Wang Gai et al. ed., *Jieziyuan huazhuan* 芥子園畫傳 (Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting) (Shanghai: Hongwen shuju, 1887), juan 4, 4b-5a.



In light of the popularity of manuals such as these with the late-nineteenth-century public and the demonstrable pictorial interest of the Pow-kee photos discussed above, the affinity between the manual's prescriptive content and the staged figures in the Purple Mountain photo deserves more attention. On the one hand, the individual poses and group composition of the four persons in the photo closely echo the social identity and disposition of the figural subjects foregrounded in the manual. That is, the sequential hierarchy, typology, and distribution of scene-marking figures in this chapter all show that they are primarily defined as elite men, while young attendants and rustic denizens of the surrounding mountain- and waterscapes, including fishermen, woodcutters, and farmers, perform supporting and secondary roles. | **fig. 11** | Similarly, the disposition of these subjects, catalogued in the chapter's list of contents by variation of bodily pose, such as the mode of strolling, of folding arms behind one's back, of pointing out, watching clouds, of musing while holding a book, and so on, foregrounds gestures of aesthetic or spiritual immersion and contemplation, embodied spaces of interiority oriented toward the outer world. Coded to channel the viewer's communion with the lyric atmosphere of the landscape, the men in these landscapes are solitary but not alone, mindful but not occupied. The imagination at work in the Purple Mountain scene clearly resonates with this iconography of immersion: while each person inhabits a different private space, the upward-pointing gesture and the overall composition of bodies oriented inward with the brewing tea and spring at their centre, frames their presence in a shared space of sociability. And if the rocky outcrops on which they are seated provide a good match for the generic mountain flanks featured in the manual, the characters "One-Person-Spring" inscribed in the rock, eminently visible to the camera lens, graphically anchor this scene *both* in the lyric imaginary associated with this ancient spring *and* in the real space of Mt. Zhong.

In seeking to coin a new image for this mountain and central icon for the city, the choice to stage the trope of the learned gentleman ascending high mountains, enacting the moral and aesthetic associations of its pure spring waters, seems intended to resonate with contemporary sensibilities of its local elite. The technical challenge to produce large format, glass-plate photography at the actual site, reached only after an often steep and long climb up the mountain, would underline the importance for its image-makers of doing so. Indeed, though today partially obstructed by vegetation, this photograph allows clear recognition of the precise rock formation featured in the image, and the position from where it was made.<sup>31</sup> | **fig. 12** | At the same time, tracking down the site of this shot on the East Peak of Mt. Zhong allowed this author to establish that there is indeed a carved inscription reading "One-Person-Spring" on the right-hand rock, be it located on the flank facing the narrow passage that provides access to the spring, inscribed right to left on the mossy surface moistened by its slow-trickling waters. | **fig. 13** | The discovery that this inscription is invisible from where the photograph was taken, and that no other traces of carving appear on the front-facing side of the cliff, reveals that the characters featured in the photograph represent a remarkably skilful creation by the photographer on the negative plate.<sup>32</sup> By inserting the name of this spring into representational space, the

31. The obstructing tree growing in the foreground prevented reproduction of the exact same angle.

32. This author's close scrutiny of the front-facing cliff on May 14, 2018 did not reveal any traces of earlier carvings, and the carved inscription on the inner flank of the cliff, in the narrow passage whence the spring flows, did not appear to be a recent addition. The fact that "One-Person-Spring" is not currently marked, invisible to the passersby, and no longer featured in the mountain's famous topography would lend support to this assumption. Locating this site was the happy outcome of a semi-directed search informed by reference points collated from historical records, the rock formation in this photograph, and brief notes and photographs posted online in March 2014 by a Chinese visitor searching for this ancient site, last accessed on February 24, 2019 at: <http://www.xici.net/dz00910606.htm>. Photographs posted by this visitor indicate that management of the Sun Yatsen Mausoleum park, of which this site is now part, erected a stone slab to commemorate the spring in August 1995. This slab is no longer present.



**Figure 12.** Site of One-Person-Spring on the Eastern Peak of Mt. Zhong: rock formation in Figure 1. Photograph by the author, May 14, 2018.



**Figure 13.** Site of One-Person-Spring on the Eastern Peak of Mt. Zhong, close-up of rock inscription on the side of the cliff to the right flanking the passage in-between both cliffs, reading “Yirenquan”. Photograph by the author, May 14, 2018.



photographer was able to invoke the evidentiary authority of the situated inscription and in this case, its cultural status as archetypal trace. In so doing, his image encapsulates two intersecting tactics: it renders lyric fantasy tangible through situated embodiment, and lays claim to reality through graphic simulation, doubly underscoring its power to stage the ideal as the real.

### Staging Real Sites

Located in Nanjing's old city centre close to the old Confucian temple, the county school, and the examination compound, Powkee established itself in what would remain, for a while, Nanjing's hotspot for the photography business.<sup>33</sup> Clearly seeking to capitalize on the steady stream of students and candidates, twenty thousand at a time assured to pass by its shopfront during the examination season, its advertisements of the period promote not only unique offerings in portraiture "fast as lightning," but also "photographs of mountain- and water-scape (paintings) by famous artists" (名人山水相片, *mingren shanshui xiangpian*).<sup>34</sup> Though, in absence of extant examples, it is impossible to know whether these last were in fact photographic reproductions of material paintings, or photographs that creatively evoked the work of famous artists, this peculiar offering points to an interest in associating with the fine arts and with an elite, native public. Such associations, and the way in which Powkee and their peer studios in Nanjing sought to realize the cultural identity of Nanjing's trace-landscape may be compared to how, at the same time in North China, another translocal photographer from Guangdong was adopting the iconography of informal portraiture in Chinese painting (行樂圖, *xingletu*) for the photographic staging of his elite subjects.<sup>35</sup> Though in light of these productions, the parallel career trajectories of Ouyang Shizhi and Liang Shitai (梁時泰, n.d.) deserve more consideration, the images discussed here suggest that their interventions were not entirely of a kind.<sup>36</sup> In seeking to create a photographic form of "famous prospects and ancient traces" imagery, the photos collected by Löbbecke defy identification with a single iconographic model, and integrate instead recognizable forms of gesture and motif from photographic conventions of picturesque staffage, staged portraiture, and prephotographic iconographies of scene-marking figures. In so doing, the range of staged performances in these images direct attention to an experimental moment in the articulation of a local subject and its place in global circulations of tableau vivant photographic mediation. That is, these photographs invite us to rethink historical and cultural modalities of spatial representation that remain too often interpreted through the exogenous lens of so-called landscape photography.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, their various enactments of generic, narrative, and lyric themes allow tracing networks of tableau photography outside the colonial metropolis, in this case serving contemporary audiences a new means to realize place-bound identity in "traditional" terms. ¶

33. For Powkee's address in Nanjing, see the advertisement first published in *Shenbao* 申報 of June 27, 1886: 5, and repeated for twenty-four consecutive days. Contemporary and turn-of-the-century records of studios active in Nanjing indicate that this area remained central to the trade.

34. *Ibid.*

35. As exemplified by Liang Shitai's (known to non-Chinese as See Tay) well-known photograph of Prince Chun, Yihuan, (1840–91) feeding deer taken around 1887. The association of this photo with the *xingletu* (illustrations of life at leisure) genre is also made in Chen Shen 陳申, Xu Xijing 徐希景, *Zhongguo sheying yishushi* 中國攝影藝術史 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2011), 88. For a discussion of *xingletu* iconographies in the context of Chinese portraiture practices, see Catherine Stuer, "Affective Landscapes: Vision and Narrative in Nineteenth-Century Picture-Texts," *Ars Orientalis* 48 (2018): 120–22.

36. Though one slightly earlier than the other, both moved from the early colonial frontier in the South northward to new centres and emerging markets, pitching their business strategically to native publics and sensibilities. The complex positionality of (trans-)local photographers working at the colonial frontier invites cross-regional comparison. See the related discussions in Wu, "Inventing a 'Chinese' Portrait Style," 85; Behdad, *Camera Orientalis*, *passim*.

37. For an initial exploration of local modalities of place-photography, see Wu Hung, "Introduction: Reading Early Photography of China," in: *Brush & Shutter*, 10–11.