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Photographs of Tz'u-hsi in the Freer Gallery Archives

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Archival materials in library collections, sometimes called "ephemera" or "memorabilia", have increasingly become vital primary research sources for scholars. They are important not only for studying the past but also for understanding the relationship between the past and the present. Along with picture files of engravings, lithographs, and clippings from journals and newspapers, a number of libraries, especially art libraries, have been collecting photographs, which provide visual evidence for researchers in social sciences and the humanities. In fact, archives are an integral part of the library collections, widening avenues of research methodological approaches.

The Archives of the Library of the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery own more than seventy collections, diverse in subject and wide-ranging in time, dating from the 1860s to the present. After the library moved in 1987 to its new facilities at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery which is adjacent to the Freer Gallery of Art and shares with the Freer Gallery the same administration and staff, all the archival materials previously scattered in various gallery departments were assembled, consolidated, and placed under the administration of the library.

Among the more than 100,000 photographic images in the Archives are forty-four silver gelatin dry plate photonegatives (some copy) and silver gelatin photonegatives (copy) depicting Tz‘u-hsi 西后 (1835-1908), the Empress Dowager of the Ch‘ing dynasty.

Photography was first brought into China from the west in the mid-nineteenth century. From the 1860s on, foreign photographers were already found at work in Canton, Shanghai, and later in Peking and other cities. Photographic portraiture slowly gained popularity. The desire for photographic portraiture had dissipated the earlier belief that photography was some trick of witchcraft and that, for the imperial family, it would be undignified to be subjected to the lens of a camera. As it was costly at the beginning to have photographs taken and photoprints produced, photography was popular mostly among diplomatic circles, high officials, and princes such as I-hsin and I-huan, sons of Emperor Tao-kuang. We know that Tz‘u-hsi left behind numerous photographs, as did Pu-i, the last Ch‘ing emperor.

Early photographic portraits, called "hua hsiao chao" 故小照, reflected the subject’s demand for personal likeness in the style of the traditional portraiture painting. Similarly, the composition and the conventions of poses, facial expressions, costumes, and trappings are often highly formal. Photographs were taken not only for amusement, but also for serving various social and ritual functions. They were used to make an impressive display in palatial halls, to demonstrate status, authority, and wealth, as well as to be presented as gifts to officials and diplomats. In 1844 an English diplomat presented his family photo to the first Chinese diplomat, Ch’i-ying, who reciprocated the friendly gesture with his own
photographic portrait. Tz'u-hsi had her photographic portraits enlarged, duplicated, and displayed and distributed among the officials. In 1904 she presented one of her photographs to the Queen of Germany through the German crown prince during his visit to China.

The popularity of photography made it possible for a number of early western photographers to gain entry into circles which would have remained closed otherwise. One quarter, however, remained inaccessible to them, the Palace. The photographs of Tz'u-hsi, including those in the Archives of the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, are known as works of Hsün-ling (1874-1943), the only court photographer. A younger son of Yü-keng, a Manchu diplomat who was envoy to Japan in 1895-98 and to France in 1899-1902, Hsün-ling studied land transportation, but his hobby was photography. When he returned to China with his family in 1903, he took home an entire set of camera equipment. Shortly afterwards, through his mother and two sisters, Te-ling and Jung-ling (also known as Princess Der Ling and Princess Roon Ling), who served the Empress Dowager after their return in early 1903, Hsün-ling was summoned to the palace, became Tz'u-hsi's photographer, and stayed there until 1905. He was given special permission to wear his glasses, which otherwise would not have been allowed, and stand — instead of kneel — in front of the Empress Dowager during the photo sessions. His name has sometimes been identified as Yü in some western-language publications, probably taking the first part of his father's name, Yü-keng, as a surname. Yamamoto Sanshichiro, a Japanese photographer who had a photo studio in Peking, was said to have also taken a photograph of Tz'u-hsi in the Summer Palace and been paid a huge sum of gold.¹ Some of Hsün-ling's negatives were said to have been sold to Yamamoto.

¹Chung-kuo she ying shih (T'ai-pei shih: She ying chia ch'u pan she, 1990), 83.

²Princess Der Ling, Two years in the Forbidden City (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1924), 214-218.
time recommended her son, Hsün-ling. He was immediately summoned to the Palace to take photographs of Tz'u-hsi the next day. Even though at that time electricity was already in use in the Summer Palace, in order to use natural light to avoid casting shadows on her face (this, it was believed, would bring bad luck), a shed was erected in front of Lo shou t'ang, Tz'u-hsi's residence hall. It was furnished with appropriate trappings, including a carved threefold screen, and decorated with flowers and fruits symmetrically placed on the two sides. The photographs were either enlarged, framed, and hung in the palace halls during the birthday celebrations or were presented to officials as gifts.

The Freer photographs can be grouped into several types. One group of images depicts Tz'u-hsi alone, standing or sitting, in formal poses with a different costume for each pose, but with the same background. Across the top portion of the portrait is a colophon written in Chinese which reads: "The Empress Dowager, the sacred mother of the Great Ch'ing Empire, motherly, auspicious, upright, blessed, healthy, dignified, long-lived, respectful, reverend, and worshipful." It was taken on the occasion of the Empress Dowager's seventieth birthday, with two seals and the date, the year of Kuang-hsü kuei mao (1903), affixed at the end.
Another group of photographs depicts Tz'u-hsi surrounded by her ladies-in-waiting and eunuchs, with one of them depicting her with four wives of foreign diplomats, among them Sarah Conger, wife of the American minister in Peking. Most of the figures depicted in these photographs can be identified, such as Te-ling and Jung-ling, their mother Lady Yü-keng, several princesses, and her favorite eunuch, Li Lien-yíng (1847-1911).

The third group of photographs shows Tz'u-hsi in motion with her entourage, including her favorite dog, taken before or after an audience, in a sedan chair in a procession (see Figure 2) or on a barge on a lotus pond.

![Figure 2. Tz'u-hsi on her way to a morning audience. In the foreground are her two eunuchs, Li Lien-yíng on the right and Ts'ui Yü-kuei on the left. Negative no. SC-GR 275. Courtesy of the Archives of the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery.](image)

There are photographs of two of the Tz'u-hsi portraits painted by Katharine Carl, the first western portrait painter to paint Tz'u-hsi, who spent time in the Summer Palace from August 1903 to May 1904. Before one of the portraits was sent to St. Louis, it was photographed by Hsūn-ling and framed and viewed by the officials at the Foreign Office. The painting later was presented to the United States government. These portraits also resemble the traditional Chinese portraiture painting with no shadow on the face and little perspective. A colophon was later added that presented birthday wishes to Tz'u-hsi.

Two interesting photographs show Tz'u-hsi dressed as Kuan-yin, flanked by a princess on her left side and Li Lien-yíng on her right in one and by a eunuch on each side as her attendants in the other. A colophon over her head reads: P'u-t'o shan Kuan-yin ta shih
（Goddess of Mercy of P'u-t'o Mountain). According to the archives of the Imperial Household Department, Tz'u-hsi chose July 16, 1903 as an auspicious day for the sitting, giving detailed instructions how the arrangements should be made and what clothes and decorations were to be used for the session. Tz'u-hsi's indulgence in luxury and pomp, her amusement in theatricals, and her curiosity about novelties are evident in these photographs.

Photographs of Tz'u-hsi were not kept exclusively in the palace. Many of them were scattered beyond the walls of the palace, some becoming commodity items. In 1904 Takano Bunjiro, a Japanese publisher in Shanghai, reproduced photographs of Tz'u-hsi and of members of the imperial family for sale in his publishing house, Yu cheng shu chu. His action was accepted by the imperial palace. In addition to the hundreds of photographs originally kept in the palace and, since 1925, in the Palace Museum's library, photo archives, and storage vaults, a number of photonegatives and photoprints have found their way into museums and private collections in other parts of the world.

The Freer photographs were purchased by John Alexander Pope, Director of the Freer Gallery of Art from 1962 to 1971, who wanted to preserve them "in a safe place where they can be used by historians of the future." The acquisition took place in June 1964 from Mrs. Ernst von Harringa of California who had previously acquired the material from Thaddeus C. White (1885-1944), who had married Princess Te-ling in 1907. Thanks to Pope's foresight, the Archives of the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery have been able to provide some most interesting photographs for the use of our researchers.

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