An 1875 article entitled “How to Produce Photographic Portraits Without a Camera” from *Anthony’s Photography Bulletin* describes the visit of the foreign astronomer and photographer M. C. Kardatz to the Chinese city of Zhifu (modern-day Yantai). While in Zhifu to observe and record a transit of the planet Venus, Kardatz also photographed local Chinese officials, much to their astonishment and delight. The anonymous author notes that although Kardatz and his camera attracted great attention, he was “studiously avoided” by the operator of the only photography studio in town. Kardatz later discovered this was because the native photographer had been producing portraits without actually using a camera:

The heathen Chinese has merely acquired a large collection of portrait negatives, and when a customer came, he took his measure mentally, looked through the stock, and chose the picture most like. As all Chinese heads are pretty similar, and their pigtails much about the same length, it was never difficult, apparently, to make a match, for the public were quite content with what they got for their money. The photographer seemed to thrive, for the good people of Tschifu [Zhifu] were never tired of having their portraits taken, and, as everybody was satisfied, there was no reason why matters should be changed.¹

This account, flippant tone and all, fits quite comfortably within nineteenth-century Western commentaries on Chinese photography practices. The racial stereotypes—the deviousness and ignorance of the “heathen Chinese,” that all Chinese look alike—are not new. Just as clichéd but of
particular interest here, however, are the identification of Chinese photographers with portraiture and the implicit but clear line drawn between the impostor Chinese operator, ridiculed for his sham knowledge of a Western technology, and the authentic, foreign photographer who serves the cause of Western science.

Photography was introduced in Hong Kong by European photographers as early as the 1840s. By the 1860s, these same photographers and their successors were in competition with ever-increasing numbers of Chinese photographers in Hong Kong and the larger cities, particularly the treaty ports, of China. Accounts such as the one quoted above often present an essentializing and binary opposition of Western and Chinese. However, it was not merely Chinese involvement in photography that these Western observers found disturbing; rather, they were both unsettled by and contemptuous of how these new practitioners used photography. The works produced by Chinese photographers for a Chinese market and the assertion of Chinese pictorial and social conventions in these photographs, specifically in the area of portraiture, generated disdain and distress among Western observers. Whether described as inept imitator or backward traditionalist, the Chinese photographer’s deployment of photography for his own ends challenged not only Western constructions of the Chinese body but also Western concepts of photography as an objective and scientific technology.

Portraiture clearly dominated Chinese uses of photography; other subjects apparently held little interest for Chinese photographers and their clientele. Although Western commercial photographers active in China executed large numbers of portraits, their customers (probably largely foreign residents and tourists) also provided a market for other subjects, including landscapes, city views, and genre scenes. Moreover, the specificity of the Chinese portrait aesthetic and its distinct divergence from a Euro-American understanding of what constituted a portrait and a photograph puzzled foreign photographers. To better understand how a Western photographer constructed a portrait, it is helpful to look at the work of the American photographer Milton M. Miller (fl. 1850s–1870s). Working in Hong Kong and Canton in the early 1860s, Miller was one of the few American photographers active in China at this time. He produced works in a number of genres, but his surviving photographs indicate that he specialized in portraiture—a specialty that may be explained by his American background and training. His oeuvre is also notable for the large number of Chinese subjects.

*Milton Miller’s “Broker in Hong Kong”*

A portrait is an image whose function is to preserve an individual’s physical likeness, usually without a narrative. Miller’s *Broker in Hong Kong* (a broker being a comprador or Chinese middleman employed by a foreign company), from the early 1860s (see Fig. 9.1), exhibits the clarity and
immediacy characteristic of Miller’s fine portraits. However, the image does more than merely preserve the subject’s physical appearance. For nineteenth-century viewers of this picture, several recognizable ideologies were in play, and these fade in and out of focus as we consider in turn the identities of the photographer, the sitter, and the audience.

The first frame of viewing to consider is visual: Miller as an American photographer trained in Western ways of seeing. Mid-nineteenth-century Western discourses of photography marveled over its objectivity in reproducing the object; in reality, photography emerged directly from and continued a Renaissance model of vision. Following a mimetic code that is fundamentally Western, it is founded on the notion of a logical eye that organizes what it sees in terms of a regularized, perspectival space. This model of seeing is embodied by the camera obscura to which the camera is the mechanized heir.

At first glance, Miller’s image appears wholly candid and uncontrived: a man seated with legs crossed, leaning on a small table, holding a fan and snuff bottle. The lucidity of the image makes it easy to underestimate how precisely and deliberately the sitter has been posed and framed. Renaissance rationality and an American taste for unadorned directness underlie Miller’s careful mapping of the broker’s body as a clear and tangible object in three-dimensional space. The sitter’s placement in the center of the image, his asymmetric pose with one leg projecting forward, the column of the small table, the spacing of the chair legs on the carpet, the line where
floor meets wall: all these features serve to locate the sitter with maximum clarity and legibility within the studio’s rational box of space.

This sense of clarity is further heightened by the use of controlled studio lighting, lighting that clearly comes from one direction, in this case, from above (commercial photographers often worked in glassed-in studios, which permitted the controlled use of natural light). Physical forms modeled by light and shadow convey a sense of volume and objects seen in the round. Light is also used to reinforce compositional stability by employing the highlights on the man’s gleaming clothes to accentuate the subtle geometries of his pose. The vertical line of the broker’s white jacket closing, for example, flows into the highlighted fold of the robe over his firmly planted left leg, creating the vertical pivot of the composition. This central axis is counterbalanced by two diagonals: one formed by the right arm and leg; the other by the left arm, fan, and white sleeve trim. The composition is further buttressed and stabilized by the sturdy uprights of chair legs and table. Light is also used to enhance a rich play of tones. These tones bring out the fine differences in the textiles—compare the delicate distinctions among the materials of robe, jacket, tablecloth, and carpet—adding an elegant and understated play of patterns and textures to the image.

The image’s composition and framing were relatively easy to control in contrast to other factors in its making. Posing for a photograph in the 1860s, long before the era of point-and-shoot, was not a spontaneous matter; indeed, it required elaborate preparations and could be a physically demanding process. Sittings often took place in the hothouse-like setting of the glass studio; added to this was the nuisance of the metal posing brace often used by photographers. Since exposure times could last up to a minute, the sitter would often be clamped to a brace during sessions to ensure his or her immobility (although no posing brace is visible here, their bases can occasionally be seen in other period photographs, including those by Miller). Maintaining a pleasant expression and relaxed pose while concealing the discomforts of the heat and the strain of neither moving nor blinking was no easy feat.

Numerous articles in contemporary American and European photography journals instructed readers on how to overcome the many obstacles of a posing session in order to attain the best and most natural images. These articles stressed the importance and difficulty of orchestrating pose, expression, gesture, and lighting into an illuminating image of the sitter’s character. Their instructions make it clear that the success of an image depended not only on the photographer’s technical skills but also on his social talents in drawing out and relaxing the sitter. The chemistry between sitter and photographer certainly played a role. The easy yet alert posture and amused expression of the Hong Kong broker testify both to his stamina in posing and to Miller’s ability to put the sitter at ease.
The impression of naturalness, so difficult to achieve, again reflects Miller's background in American portrait photography. American achievements in this area are typified by, among other of Miller's contemporaries, photographers Mathew Brady (1822-96) and Marcus Aurelius Root (1808-88), also portraiture specialists. This American tradition suppressed the artifice of posing in favor of stressing the sitter's individuality through distinctive physical characteristics, not only in appearance but also in pose, gesture, and expression. These attitudes are grounded on two assumptions of nineteenth-century Western portraiture in general and American portraiture in particular: that the individual and his or her inner life could be understood through telling physical idiosyncrasies and that conveying the sitter's individuality was crucial to a successful portrait. In the case of Miller's Hong Kong broker, elements such as the distinctive pose—square-shouldered yet relaxed, the confident crossed legs—together with the amused half-smile, convey a sense of compelling individuality. Furthermore, the sense of naturalness is intensified through the device of the sitter appearing to meet the viewer's eye. Not only is a sense of the sitter's subjectivity achieved, but photography's celebrated ability to preserve a slice of time is also in evidence. By placing the time span of the image within the moment of a smile and look, the photographer replicated the immediacy of a one-on-one encounter.

Miller may well have produced this portrait for a specific patron; the sitter is not recognizable as one of his regular models. However, even if it began as a private commission, Miller subsequently marketed it as a ready-made image, to be sold to foreign tourists and collected in their travel albums (this image is in fact taken from one such album). The photograph has thus lost its standing as a portrait. Although it participates in the conventions of Western portraiture, the omission of the broker's name and its availability to Western consumers indicate that the image has migrated into the generic world of the Chinese type. "Type" is here used to describe a popular genre of nineteenth-century travel photography, the purpose of which was the quasi-scientific illustration of the physical and cultural characteristics of a particular people, usually non-European. Miller's image, like innumerable other photographs of Chinese types, can be interpreted as a toned-down, commercial version of ethnographic documents. One such document by the British ethnologist Jones H. Lamprey (d. 1900), Profile View of a Chinese Male (ca. 1870), demonstrates Lamprey's anthropometric system for measuring and thus categorizing the physical proportions of different races (see Fig. 9.2).

Despite the dramatically different look of these two pictures, many of the same assumptions underpin both images. The type, by definition, reduces its subject to physical manifestations alone, and its function is, in many ways, almost exactly opposite that of a portrait. The specificities and
quirks of appearances no longer reveal the individual but represent a generalized racial truth. Under its new alias, the exquisite clarity and detail of Miller’s print take on additional meaning; the viewer can now visually explore every aspect of the now specimen-like and exotic Chinese broker. His features, clothes, accessories, pose, and expression are used to remap his body in sweeping terms of character, race, occupation, social class, and geographical identity. Miller’s image circumscribes the broker’s body in pseudo-scientific Western mimetic conventions, fixed in time, space, and knowledge by the supposedly objective camera. Paradoxically, the authenticity of such an image was not guaranteed. Bowing to market demand, the same image could variously be labeled as a merchant, an official, or an opium dealer native to Canton or Hong Kong or indeed any place on the tourist’s Chinese itinerary. The fluidity of the sitter’s identity reveals the flimsy cover of such images’ putative educational purposes.

**Chinese Photographers and Chinese Sitters**

The Chinese saw photography both as a Western scientific technology and as an exotic novelty. This may explain the scant discussion of photography in aesthetic terms by Chinese observers. After its arrival in Hong Kong in the 1840s, photography was quickly and almost primarily used to make portraits. An 1876 article from the Shanghai newspaper *Shenbao* 申报 entitled “Zhaoxiang fa” 照相法 (How to take a photograph), begins by care-
fully identifying the technology as a Western one: “Photography was invented by Western countries; China did not have it.” The anonymous author then describes in clear and simple terms the process of taking a portrait photograph by the collodion method. In portraits made by this method, “The expression and resemblance are altogether identical—there is not a hair missing. It is truly a marvel!” He adds the caveat that the image is less than lifelike in its lack of color, but its black-and-white state can be remedied by tinting, which will make the image extremely realistic. The article also makes special note of the fact that a hundred identical copies could be made from the same glass negative. Chinese commentators appear to have been particularly taken with the practical possibilities of photography as a marvelous method for making duplicates. Indeed, the other noteworthy function the anonymous author ascribes to photography is as an ideal method for reproducing calligraphy models. He comments on the advantages of having reduced-size yet exact facsimiles of texts and models such as the “Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Gathering,” Stone Drum script, the Huashan stele, and the teachings of the sages, particularly when “eighteen inscriptions can be contained in one inch.”

A similar commentary can be found in one of the numerous guidebooks to Shanghai published in the late nineteenth century, Ge Yuanxu’s 葛元煦 Huyou zuji 湖遊雜記 (Miscellaneous notes on traveling in Shanghai) of 1876. A practical volume, Ge’s guidebook discussed many of Shanghai’s novel features and attractions and was intended as a convenient reference tool for the wide variety of people passing through Shanghai “from the eighteen provinces of China and twenty-four foreign countries.” Ge’s brief entry on photography gives a quick outline of the photographic process, adding that “in recent times, the Chinese have taken up this technique, buying chemicals and photographic apparatus and opening photography studios. They can be found in every province.” Ge also mentions the reproductive potentials of photography, especially for “every kind of calligraphy model.” And photography was indeed used for such mimeographic purposes. A Shenbao article of 1872, for example, describes double-faced folding fans made from photographs of texts in both Chinese and English (“estimated at over four or five thousand words”), which, when opened, were “better than a Chinese-English dictionary.”

Despite such amusing novelties and the hopeful discussions of photography as an ideal technique for making exact copies, such uses do not appear to have become widespread (perhaps because lithography was a much cheaper alternative). Photographic portraiture was a different matter and soon became a familiar part of hybrid treaty-port culture. Ge Yuanxu found photographic portraits, particularly once color had been applied, “superior to portraits,” by which he must have meant painted portraits. And almost all Chinese photographers specialized in portraiture. In com-
parison to the advertisements of Western photographers, which vied to offer the greatest range of photographic products, formats, and services, advertisements for Chinese photography studios tended to be brief, offering only portraiture services. One Shenbao advertisement from 1876 announces the opening of the Qiaoxian 巧現 photography studio on Sima lu 四馬路 (or Fuzhou Road in Shanghai's foreign concession. Like many such advertisements, it assures readers that the studio has learned the secrets of photography from the West, that it uses only high-quality materials, and that its products are both refined and “legible” (the promise in many such ads that the studio’s photos will not fade suggests that this was a common problem). This particular photographer also offered to accommodate patrons unable to visit the studio in person: “We are willing to make house calls to: people of advanced years wishing to have a record of their appearance, the female relations of officials [who seldom ventured out into public], and those who live far away.”

For many Chinese photographers, portraiture and photography were closely linked both in practice and in business. It was not uncommon for photography studios to produce Western-style painted portraits as well. This was because photography, particularly in Hong Kong, occupied the same market niche as Chinese export painting workshops, with the two close enough to draw on and even share the same pool of skilled labor and foreign clientele. Both export painters and photographers employed Western pictorial technologies; interestingly, both also made the most of the duplicative potentials of their media (Chinese export artisans used their craft to provide copies of images and texts as diverse as maps, sheet music, prints, and photographs).

Chinese commentaries repeatedly remark on the exact likenesses the camera was capable of producing. However, that Chinese notions of portraiture and likeness differed significantly from those of the West did not go unnoticed by foreign observers. An 1878 article from the North-China Herald describes the interactions of the English portraitist Walter Goodman (1823–7?) and his subject, the Chinese ambassador to England (the resulting portrait was subsequently exhibited at the Royal Academy in London). With a condescending facetiousness, the article discusses the ambassador’s “strange” ideas on portraiture:

There was still a good deal of coaxing needed to make him sit properly. He was very particular about the details. He had a strong objection to his hands being shown, and was constantly slipping them up his sleeves, from whence the artist had to disinter them. He was just as anxious that his ears should be painted as that his hands should not. He made it an essential condition that both ears should appear, “Otherwise,” he gravely said, “people will think that I have been disgraced and that one has been cut off.” He insisted also that the two buttons which denote his rank should be shown, but as they are fixed to the back of his cap it was not
easy to see how this could be arranged. "Now you can see them," he said, burying his face in his lap. "But then I cannot see your face," said the artist. At last it was arranged that the buttons should be placed upon the ambassador's shoulder. Mr. Goodman wanted to paint him in his full court robes, but he refused, gravely saying, "People would think that Kuo-Ta-jen wished to be worshipped." I believe that he is so well-pleased with his portrait that he means to let Mr. Goodman paint the ambassadress.  

This account is strikingly close to writings by Western photographers of this period on the work of their Chinese colleagues. The tone of such pieces ranges from bemusement to contempt; almost all mark a clear distance between their own work and what they perceived as the substandard production of Chinese photographers. These accounts tend to dwell at length on what they considered to be the peculiar practices of Chinese portraiture. In 1872 the British photographer D. K. Griffith (fl. 1870s–1890s) described the oddities of a Chinese portrait session in Shanghai:

Great are the preparations for the sitting. Their number one (best) clothes are dispatched by a coolie; they are put on in the studio with much care and more talk; the victim seats himself, spreading his robe out to the best advantage; he will have a small snuff-bottle in one hand, and a fan in the other. A direct front face must be taken, so as to show both his ears, and each side of his face of the same proportions; both feet must be so arranged that they are of equal length, perspective being no reasoning power with a China-man. The hands are next arranged so as, if possible, to show each finger distinctly. If they are blessed with a fancy long-nail or two, great is their delight to see them well brought out in the portrait. They will to a certainty have some flowers with them, and a small vase to be placed on a table, or in some cases a French clock is the pride of their hearts, and is to be placed close beside them.

The works of Scottish photographer John Thomson (1837–1921) betray his ethnographic interests, as does his 1872 account of a visit to a Hong Kong studio, in which he describes in careful detail the practices and behavior of a fictive Chinese photographer named A-hung. Again, Thomson's attention is drawn to portraiture. Although patronizing in tone, Thomson's account offers more insight than Griffith's into Chinese pictorial practices. Thomson at least allows A-hung to speak:

"You foreigners...always wish to be taken off the straight or perpendicular. It is not so with our men of taste; they must look straight at the camera so as to show their friends at a distance that they have two eyes and two ears. They won't have shadows about their faces, because, you see, shadows form no part of the face. It isn't one's nose, or any other feature; therefore it should not be there. The camera, you see, is defective. It won't work up to that point; it won't recognise our laws of art." But, then, I say to A-hung,—"If you had no shadow the face would be a blank." "Oh no, our artists know better, for they give you the features complete, without the shadows."

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Thomson goes on to look at samples of A-hung’s photographs “representing natives of both sex in holiday dress.” He describes them thus:

They were all taken in the same pose seated at a very square table, or rather a table that looks like a number of carefully-constructed skeletons of cubes placed one above the other, like part of the apparatus of a lecture room designed to illustrate the principles of geometry. On the table there is a vase containing artificial flowers—gaudy caricatures of nature. The background of plain cloth is adorned with two curtains, arranged so as to form part of an isosceles triangle above the sitter, who is posed as if his figure were intended to demonstrate a proposition in Euclid.24

Thomson emphasized his point with a caricature of a Chinese portrait, showing the awkwardly splayed-out sitter steamrolled flat on the paper (see Fig. 9.3). The dead, full-front orientation of the sitter, the painfully unnatural symmetry of his frog-like pose, and the tediously precise positioning of the furniture and props all illustrate and parody the artificial regularity and lack of depth condemned in Thomson’s account.

*Lai Afong’s “Native of Hong Kong—Woman”*

There are no comparable commentaries by Chinese photographers on their foreign colleagues. They are at a further disadvantage in that few identifiable works by Chinese photographers survive. Photographers like Milton Miller and John Thomson are unusual in several regards, not least of which is the relatively large number of their surviving photographs. After all, the entire oeuvres of many photographers, Western and Chinese, have vanished without a trace. This is especially true for Chinese photographers, the majority of whom are now known by name only. One exception is the long-lived Hong Kong photographer Lai Afong 賴阿芳/黎阿芳
(fl. 1859–1900), often simply called Afong. Lai Afong appears to have taken up photography by the late 1850s, eventually establishing a well-known studio in Hong Kong. A late 1897 advertisement issued by his studio promises “a more complete collection of Photo Views than any other establishment in the Far East.” John Thomson described him as: “a plump and good-natured son of Han, a man of civilised taste, and imbued with a wonderful appreciation of art... Judging from his portfolio of photographs he must be an ardent admirer of nature; for some of his pictures, besides being extremely well-executed, are remarkable for their artistic choice of position.”

Despite Afong’s prominence, relatively few works can be securely identified as being from his hand. One work attributed to Afong is a 1870s image of a Chinese type, *Hong Kong Native—Woman* (see Fig. 9.4), a work that probably originated as a portrait. As is true of many such portraits, the conventions and practices underlying this work are familiar from vernacular Chinese painted portraiture, best known in the form of the ancestor portrait, portraits created for rituals of ancestor veneration. These portraits follow rigid pictorial codes. John Thomson’s catalogue of the peculiarities of the Chinese photographed portrait apply equally well to such painted portraits.

The flatness that Thomson found so objectionable in A-hung’s portraits was founded on visual sensibilities and aesthetic preferences very different...
from those found in the West. Spatially, these images are not organized in accordance with one-point perspective; instead, space is ordered by a series of overlapping planes, an arrangement that results in a subtle denial of depth. In Afong's portrait, this minimization of space and volume is achieved in several ways, most conspicuously through the manipulation of light in a manner a contemporary Western photographer would have found most odd. Light, seen by Western photographers as the sine qua non of photography, is not used to model, sculpt, or highlight form. Neither emphasized nor maximized, light evenly blankets the sitter and objects in the image. As a result, shadows are minimized and volumes suppressed. This serves to highlight the silhouettes of objects such as the vase, teacup, and spittoon, which are not presented in the round but as flat, cut-out shapes. This is particularly true of the flowers, which rise weightlessly from the vase like a series of bubbles. The impression of flatness is further stressed by the emphasis on the graphic play of line and pattern in the sinuous trim of the robe, heavy lines of the dark furniture, bold carpet pattern, and the smaller designs of skirt and kerchief. The strong horizontal of the baseboard and the massless curve of the curtain further telescope the image's space and volumes.

Thomson and others were frequently struck by what could be termed the "anti-naturalism" of the Chinese portrait. Formally, this meant the use of a pictorial language more conceptual than mimetic and that thus stressed image surface. Consequently, the Chinese portrait is perhaps best understood as a sequence of signs; signs that relied heavily on culturally specific codes for constructing likeness. It is therefore not surprising that both Chinese painted portraits and photographed portraits followed many of the same conventions for establishing likeness and resemblance. Social identity, another core feature of portraiture, was also symbolically conveyed in a preoccupation with comportment and pose and the use of suitable dress, props, and attributes.

"Likeness," in particular, was a narrowly defined concept. It centered specifically on the face and had little to do with the remainder of the body. This is generally reflected in the majority of Chinese painted portraits by the marked disjunction between face and body. This was so commonly accepted that it was standard practice for a face specialist to paint the face alone and for the rest of the painting, including the body and background, to be painted by another artist. And not just any view of the face would serve; a view that was as absolutely correct and abstractly ideal as possible was sought. In ancestor portraits, the face is nearly reduced to its constituent components, with every feature emphatically and clearly represented, including both ears, and with profile and partial views of the face avoided. Something of this approach to likeness carried over into photography. In fact, photographers even powdered the sitter’s face or later retouched the
face in the photograph in order to eliminate unwanted shadows or marks. Baron Raimund Stillfried von Ratheinitz (1839–1911), an Austrian photographer known for his photographs of China and Japan, observed:

In a portrait the face must be as white as possible; indeed, it is usual to place the sitter in direct sunshine. All shading in the face must be removed by retouching, white lead being used for painting on the positive pictures; so that the eyes, mouth, and nose are merely black dots or strokes. It is scarcely necessary to say that all resemblance to the original is lost. 28

John Thomson’s account of A-hung’s Hong Kong studio includes a similar description:

The faces of A-hung’s choice samples are generally very white, and look flat and round, with the features well marked on the blank surface, like the mountains on a chart of the moon. We remark to A-hung—"The faces are as white as if your sitters’ heads had been dipped in whitewash before being operated on." A-hung’s face beams with satisfaction as, in reply, he says—"Yes, I thought you would like them. They are very fine, and I obtain the pure white by applying powder to the face of the sitter. The glass house is hot, you know, and he perspires at once when he sits down, so that the powder sticks admirably." 29

Such strict notions of verismilitude did not permit much variation in the sitter’s expression. Already made difficult by the long exposure time required by cameras of the period, facial expressions would doubtless have been considered too fleeting or frivolous to be included in a formal likeness. In addition, one foreign observer, A. G. Jones, noted of the Chinese: “In formal saluting it is considered presumptuous to look a person straight in the face or smile much.” 30 Such unspoken rules of public decorum offer another explanation why Chinese sitters gazed at the camera so remotely and impassively. (Incidentally, these same unwritten rules also explain why spectacles are so seldom seen in photographs: wearing glasses in public was considered a breach of etiquette.)

In contrast, physical likeness in portraiture had little to do with the body. If likeness was borne by the face, it was the body that conveyed the sitter’s social status. Accordingly, acceptable options in pose and gesture were quite limited and tended toward the standardized over the individualized. This was especially true of ancestor portraits, which nearly without exception showed sitters in a static, “rigidly frontal and symmetrical pose seated in a chair . . . never [performing] a gesture more active than fingering a costume accessory.” 31 Photographic portraits were not as severe in practice, but related conventions are recognizable. Sitters like Afong’s Hong Kong native are typical in the depiction of the entire body, presented frontally, limbs restrained in a limited range of gestures, body contained within a closed silhouette. The use of formal, even ritualized, frontal poses, with tightly contained gestures, dovetails neatly with descriptions of polite Chinese behavior found in etiquette manuals written for Western

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expatriates. Formal public occasions called for participants to conduct themselves with dignity and gravitas, expressed through proper bearing and posture. W. Gilbert Walshe had the following advice for foreigners visiting China at the end of the Qing:

In sitting and standing one should be circumspect; in these matters the Chinese are very particular. Leaning the elbow on the table, lounging or spreading the feet widely apart, or crossing the legs, should be avoided. The feet should be planted firmly on the ground, whether sitting or standing; in the former position men keep their knees apart, women close together. When standing, the correct attitude is that of “attention!” the arms hanging straight at the sides; the legs should be kept more or less rigid, and no limpness or invertebrateness be exhibited.³²

Added to this is the fact that sitters for both painted and photographed portraits are almost always seated. In a distant echo of traditional images of emperors and deities, a seated pose had connotations of dignity, authority, and formal self-presentation.³³ As an illustration from a 1906 book on Chinese etiquette shows, to be seated was the correct and appropriate way for social superiors and figures of authority to receive subordinates and inferiors (see Fig 9.5).³⁴ In photographs, the repeated appearance of this seated pose with relatively little variation reflects a conception of the body not as unique and individualized but as harmonized with standardized ideals of propriety and social decorum.³⁵
It would have been inconceivable for a Chinese sitter to be photographed in the same fashion as General Sir John Michel in Milton Miller’s roughly contemporary Hong Kong portrait (see Fig. 9.6). Here, a quite different conception of the body, particularly in its relationship to space, is realized. Michel is immediately recognizable as a military man—this is conveyed in his panoply of uniform, sash, medals, sword, boots, spurs and kepi. It is also communicated in a composition no less rigorously geometric than Afong’s. Lucidly organized into vertical thirds, the empty right-hand third is balanced by Michel’s out-thrust leg. The composition can also be read as being organized in four quadrants, centering on Michel’s crossed hands and sword hilt. From this double foci, the general’s limbs, body, and sword pinwheel out with the crisp organization of the composition preventing any sense of disorder or loss of decorum. The slashing dynamism of Michel’s pose, centered metaphorically and compositionally on the upright sword, contributes vivid and original visual drama to his identity as a military man.

A Chinese sitter would have shied away from such a likeness precisely because of its individualizing and distinctive kineticism, the exact opposite of the preferred static and controlled display of the body. Indeed, the contrasting poses not only reflect different concepts of appropriate self-presentation but also imply a very different relationship of the body with space—centripetal rather than centrifugal. By extending his body outward,
Michel claims ownership of the space around him; in comparison, the Chinese body is the weighted center of a neutral space.

Cropping of the body is usually minimized in Chinese portraits. Views of the entire body were favored, with half-length or bust-length views generally avoided. This obviously relates to Chinese ideals of a physically "complete" likeness; in addition, the holding of the viewer at arm's length confers an aura of dignity on the sitter. In another portrait by Milton Miller of a Chinese merchant and his young son (Fig 9.7), Miller tightly frames his sitters, bringing the viewer in close and drawing them into a private circle. The level gazes of father and son and their physical proximity create the vivid effect of a tête-à-tête encounter with the viewer. Because of the lens' short focal length, the background blurs out of view, reproducing the effect of the eye focusing on a close object. The effect is one of striking intimacy and intensity, characteristics that would have made the image inappropriate for a formal portrait. Miller’s replication of a physical encounter necessarily incorporates an element of time; indeed, much of this image’s intensity is due to the sensation of the moment preserved. In contrast, the deliberate distance of the Chinese portrait eliminates the vagaries of time as measured by a fleeting glance or look; instead, the formality of these images erases time and replaces it with a seeming timelessness.
The Living Sitter

Through a series of set conventions, the Chinese body was emblematized, posed, ordered, and brought in line with ideal templates of likeness and social identity. Much as with an ancestor portrait, the individual and the specific are subsumed by a correct rhetoric of formal presentation. Ancestor and photographic portraits differ sharply in one important feature, however—those who sat for a photograph were alive. Ancestor portraits were by definition posthumous. Ancestor portraits also had a clear function as objects of veneration to be used in a ritual setting (it was only later in the twentieth century that photographs of the deceased began to supplant the painted ancestor portrait). Photographed portraits appear to have no such comparable gravity of purpose; they seem to have been regarded much more casually by the nineteenth-century Chinese consumer, perhaps as no more than a novelty. In fact, the potential of small-sized portrait images that could be endlessly reproduced did not escape the savvy Chinese entrepreneur. Shanghai courtesans, for example, were among the first to exploit photography for purposes of self-promotion by giving away portraits to admirers and clients.57

And despite A-hung’s two-ear rule, a quick glance at period photographs make it clear that Chinese photographers may have referenced but seldom adhered to the ancestor portrait’s hieratic frontality and severe symmetry. It is rare to see sitters locked in the classic iconic pose of the ancestor portrait, and this may be due to the simple fact that these were portraits of living individuals. For example, in Afong’s photograph, the view of the sitter’s face is not a true full-frontal. Slightly off the perpendicular, her face is shown in a seven-eighth’s view, and her casually crossed feet suggest a nonchalance unimaginable in an ancestor portrait (such a pose is closer to those found in informal literati portraiture, where the crossing of the legs indicates a sitter at ease or at leisure). Although photography pursued a comparatively static and formal presentation of the body, there are small signs of animation and a greater gamut of gestures, particularly in the positioning of the hands. Men and women share similar poses and gestures, although a woman would not be seen in the less demure poses assumed by some men, for example, with hands planted on spread knees or legs crossed at the knee. Afong’s sitter carefully rests one hand on the table; the other lies in her lap, loosely holding a semi-folded fan; both gestures are standard in photographed portraits. The relatively relaxed display of her hands is in contrast to the formal modesty of ancestor portraiture, in which the feet and hands of female sitters are usually concealed within voluminous folds of clothing and almost never seen.

It would be difficult to assign specific rhetorical meanings to these gestures; their purpose may have been merely to display some small accou-
relement. These small objects are ubiquitous in photographs, whether held in the hand, placed on the small table adjacent to sitters, or both. These items can be categorized as ornamental and decorative, objects associated with the body and personal use. Books and fans appear especially frequently in the hands of sitters—Miller’s broker, for example, holds both a fan and a snuff bottle. Certain items are gender-specific; for instance, snuff bottles are almost always held by men, and handkerchiefs by women. The woman in Afong’s photograph displays not only her patterned kerchief and fan but also bracelets and rings on both hands. The vase, water pipe, teacup, and stack of books on the table next to her are also objects familiar from the usual repertoire. Although some of these items may have been studio props, others were doubtless personal objects holding sentimental value. D. K. Griffith observed that Chinese sitters brought personal belongings to sessions, not only their best clothes but also fans, snuff bottles, vases of flowers, and even prized French clocks. The quotidian nature of these knickknacks meant that they were rarely to be found in formal ancestor portraits; it also indicates that the selection of objects was one way in which a sitter actively contributed to the construction of his or her image and enriched its personal significance.

Even objects that were presumably props are very different from the standard studio props preferred by foreign sitters. As with European and American photography studios, studios in Hong Kong and China were often equipped with prefabricated architectural fragments specifically manufactured for the commercial photographer. In a manner no less artificial than in Chinese portraiture, a clearly fictive environment was created around the sitter, albeit by somewhat different means. In Miller’s Hong Kong portrait of J. H. Chevechon (Fig. 9.8), the generic balustrade and column serve a double purpose. As ideal and abstract volumes, they underpin the photograph’s ordered space. They also make shorthand reference to the Western tradition of formal painted portraiture, locating the sitter in an abbreviated version of a grand architectural setting. Such elements are seldom found in photographs of Chinese sitters. One exception is an 1870s portrait of a Chinese woman by the Hong Kong photographer John Hingqua (fl. 1860s–1870s) (Fig. 9.9). But whereas the angled column and balustrade in Miller’s photograph extend Chevechon’s physical sphere of influence into surrounding space, Hingqua’s balustrade does neither for the Chinese subject. Instead, by photographing his balustrade frontally and placing it exactly halfway up the picture, Hingqua negates the volumes of the prop, safely relegating it to a decorative backdrop. Unlike Chevechon, Hingqua’s woman neither perches on nor leans against the parapet; she makes no physical contact with it at all. The photographer prefers to foreground the customary small objects including water pipe, vase of flowers, fan, and kerchief, as well as the necessary table and chair.
Table and chair were almost always to be found in the Chinese portrait. Together with the small objects that accompany each sitter, they also suggest and signal a setting and environment. However, in contrast to the grand architectural setting of the Western portrait, which, in effect, places the sitter on a pedestal, the situation in the Chinese photograph can be understood as an idealized social encounter with the viewer. Not only is the sitter wearing his or her sartorial best, but token reference is made to the furniture and furnishings of the Chinese reception hall or its equivalent (note the similarity of the objects in Afong’s photograph to the ones in Fig. 9.11). Even in photographs clearly taken outdoors, it remained necessary to include these shorthand allusions to an indoor social setting (a table, carpet, spittoon, bric-a-brac) and thus reinforce the public and formal nature of the sitter’s self-presentation.

Finally, as much as the photographer may have posed and directed each photograph, each client inevitably brought his or her own preferences and expectations to the making of the portrait. It is revealing to compare Afong’s work with that of the Cantonese photographer Liang Shitai 梁時泰, also known as See-Tay (fl. 1870s–1880s). Although much Chinese
portrait photography adopted the conventions of Chinese vernacular portraiture, Liang’s work took a different path by using different visual referents. Liang Shitai pursued his career as a commercial photographer first in Hong Kong and then in Shanghai, before moving further north to Tianjin, where his patrons included members of the imperial court. His later works thus reflect the tastes of his upper-class clientele in their references to elite portrait and painting practices. For example, Liang’s portrait of Yi Huan 夷環 (1841–91; also known as Prince Chun 醇親王, he was the father of the Guangxu 光緒 emperor Zai Tian 賜天, r. 1871–1908), uses the elements of elite literati portraiture to cast the sitter in the familiar role of scholar at leisure (signified by his scholar’s robe and by the casual standing pose). The image is augmented with auspicious symbols of longevity in the form of the deer and the pine branch wielded by Prince Chun, items functioning more as emblems or attributes than as personal possessions. This image also mimics painting in its prominent display of imperial seals (see Fig. 9.10). In
other of Liang’s portraits, he added calligraphed inscriptions giving the sit-
ter’s name, date and place of execution, and his own signature, again following conventions from painting.

**Conclusion**

Western observers often derided the Chinese photographed portrait for its wooden and formulaic appearance as well as the odd premises of portrai-
ture on which it was based. It must have been additionally disturbing to these observers to see the scientific wonder of photography subjected to the alien and seemingly perverse conventions of Chinese portraiture—Chinese resistance to photography as a Western mimetic process doubtless appeared to be a willful denial of photography’s very *raison d’être*. The resulting segregation of the commercial photography business between Chi-
inese and foreign practitioners, particularly in colonial and semi-colonial cit-
ties such as Hong Kong and Shanghai, is consequently of no surprise. A glance at advertisements for photography studios in the Chinese and Western press shows little overlap, suggesting that most studios served one set of customers to the exclusion of the other. As for the occasional photography studio catering to both Chinese and Westerners, an 1890 account of the opening of the Chinese-owned Shanghai Photographic Enlarging Company in the *Shanghai Mercury* matter-of-factly mentions that the palatial studio offered separate waiting rooms for foreign and Chinese patrons.  

Yet it would be wrong to see the photography market in solely black-
and-white terms. For example, D. K. Griffith disapprovingly observed of Chinese photographers in Shanghai that they predominantly served sailors from foreign ships and that “their studios are little encouraged by foreign residents” (this also seems to have been true of Chinese photographers in Hong Kong). Griffith also adds of these photographers: “Many of them do a very good business . . . imitating their more able and better-supplied for-

It is evident that Chinese photographers did not serve only a Chinese clientele (like its close predecessor, Chinese export painting, photography was dependent on tourist patronage), although it does seem that foreign photographers served primarily their compatriots. The hierarchy of the market was more elabo-
rate than that. After all, the segregation of the market did not mean it was an unsophisticated one.

Photography in China may well have failed to transcend essentializing binaries, seemingly by choice. This failure is intriguing for its hybrid complexity, and Lai Afong is a fine example of this. Afong’s awareness of differing Western and Chinese cultural and visual practices can easily be de-
tected in his photographs. Thomson and Griffith both attest that Afong was more than capable of producing photographs on Western terms—and
Fig. 9.11 Lai Afong, two carte-de-visite portraits, 1870s–1880s (Tsim Bok-kow).

an early album of Fuzhou views bears this out, as does Afong’s later appointment as official photographer to the governor of Hong Kong, Sir Arthur Kennedy. In two carte-de-visite portraits, his understanding of divergent pictorial practices is revealed in the decision to vary formats according to the origins of the sitter. The vignette bust-length image of the foreign sitter gazing off to one side is quite different from the crisp full-length image of a young Chinese man (Fig. 9.11). Afong’s grasp of other cultural practices was also evident in a pragmatic sense, for example, in his hiring of foreign assistants to facilitate business with foreign clients (including—somewhat surprisingly, considering his dim view of Chinese photographers—D. K. Griffith). Afong’s accommodation of different aesthetic and business practices reflect a calm understanding of his customers and their needs. And Afong was not alone in this level-headed acceptance of market conditions.

Interestingly, although Lai Afong and other Chinese photographers may have been able to accept and accommodate cultural differences, it was the rare Western photographer who returned the favor (doubtless because they did not need to). An almost unique example of this is Milton Miller’s Minor Official, Canton (Fig. 9.12). Miller is notable for his large number of
Chinese subjects, and it seems only appropriate that he would be the Western photographer to experiment, however awkwardly, with a Chinese aesthetic. Ironically, this is one of the few photographs of a Chinese subject that at all resembles John Thomson’s crude parody of a Chinese photographed portrait. Miller’s official faces forward in a completely frontal view, feet squarely planted on a plinth, arms locked in place. The Western origins of the image is readily discernible in its formal structure, namely the boxes and geometric volumes that compose the subject, from the low footstool, the cube of lap and legs, the square rank badge and the triangle of the upper body, to the sitter's egg-shaped head and inverted truncated cone of a hat. These shapes are echoed in the plain structures of chair and table, and the small teacup that humorously echoes the shapes of the sitter’s head and hat. The stress on stacked volumes contributes to the lumpish and inert appearance of the image. Combined with an exacting symmetry and frozen pose, these factors together conspire to eradicate any signs of life in the sitter.

The image is not a success. Its austere composition and leaden quality set it apart from the Chinese portrait photographs discussed above. It also is probably not a portrait. The sitter was most likely a paid model as he
appears in Miller’s photographs in a variety of costumes and roles. In addition, another photograph by Miller has a different sitter, in the same pose, wearing identical clothes, and with the same footstool, table, and teacup. This image is almost as lifeless as the first; however, this sitter, a “Chinese Minister,” wears an amused grin that undercuts the supposed subject and highlights the image’s artificiality. Was this a deliberate mimicking of a Chinese subject and a Chinese aesthetic? Did Miller intend this image as a form of chinoiserie targeted at the tourist trade? If so, this image, like so many other photographs of the Chinese subject, underlines the inability of photography in China in the late nineteenth century to transcend its clientele.