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Author(s): Jacqueline Quint

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A Picture Worth A Thousand Words: Comparing Photographs of Queen Victoria and Dowager Empress Cixi

By: Jacqueline Quint

Abstract: This brief article discusses how Queen Victoria (1819-1901) and Empress Dowager Cixi of China (1835-1908) used photography and photo editing in similar ways, in order to promote a specific image of themselves to both their people and other countries, as both ideal women and ideal rulers. The physical photos themselves served as useful political tools that these women used to their advantage. **Key Words:** *Photography, female rulers, Queen Victoria, Empress Dowager Cixi, Great Britain, China, Victorian period*



Figure 1, left: Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee Portrait, photographed by W&D Downey Figure 2, right: Photo of Cxii, photographed by Xunling, 1903 ¹

The year is 1861. During the latter 6 months, two of the world's most powerful empires, one in the West and one in the East, experience a death in the royal household that not only changes the structure of the royal households, but also their respective countries as a whole. In December, Prince Albert of England dies, sending his wife Queen Victoria into deep mourning for the rest of her life. In August, the death of Chinese Emperor Xianfeng makes his five-year-old son the next emperor, and the boys' mother, a consort named Yi, becomes the Dowager Empress Cixi, and his regent.

Both women arguably began ruling "behind the curtain" at this time: Victoria withdrew from public life but continued to influence Parliament and policy, and Cixi ruled China first as regent, and then through her son when he came of age. Neither woman's rise to power was uncomplicated, and despite all cultural differences, they dealt with similar issues during their reigns.

Both women were considered conservative in their gender expression and political ideals, yet both were willing to modernize their countries a certain degree. They were explicitly outside of a woman's "proper place" within their own society as persons in power, but still fulfilled traditional female roles in such a way that their empowered state was acceptable. Both women appeared to remain so much in the confines of "proper" womanhood, that a number of contemporaries believed that they weren't doing much of the actual ruling. In the case of Cixi, may be an ideal if untrue perception, but in the case of Victoria, it is more debatable on both counts. Victoria's grief and withdrawal from public life made the public question the need for a

monarch, and so she needed to find some way to strengthen her image in the domestic sphere, her expected place as a woman, as well as her image and place as a monarch.

From 1861 until the women's deaths, the empires of Great Britain and China would go through a lot of change, both rising and declining as other powers began to catch up to them in industrial and military strength. Additionally, British influence in China was the source of a lot of conflict within the Chinese empire, and Chinese influence in Britain created an intense desire for their goods. Various conflicts, spurred primarily by British need for tea, caused losses for China in the early 19th century. The unequal treaties that settled these conflicts created a strong trade connection in Britain's favor, which among other more negative outcomes, did allow for technological exchange. One of these technologies, a great 19th-century phenomenon that both women lived through was the advent and popularization of a new method of self-representation: photography.

The differences in these women's reigns can be a useful tool to explore and compare the differences in culture during the same period. Though Chinese women are denied power in principle, women, like Cixi, did take ruling roles. In both England and China, despite the legitimacy of a ruler like Victoria, or lack thereof with a ruler like Cixi, either is considered ideal due to their gender. Victoria had been the only legitimate heir of either her father or his brothers, making her ascent to the throne clear and expected; but she would have been superseded by a younger brother or cousin, as women only ascended the throne if there were no more legitimate men. Still, her authority and ability to rule was questioned.

Additionally, their contemporaries' expectations for these women in power are strangely similar, despite their cultural differences. This is notable, as England and China were nearly strangers for centuries; they could not have influenced each other in this discourse.

Independently, each culture developed the concept that women were expected to be private, quiet and homebound- things that a monarch could never be. And yet, Victoria and Cixi had to embody both identities. One of the many ways they could do this was through control of their images, made all the easier through photography.

Cixi and Victoria, of course, were portrayed in numerous paintings; the two women would continue to be painted even after they began to be heavily photographed. But photography was useful in a different way. Most subjects could not afford a painting, or even a copy of a painting. But photographs were far more affordable, at least in England. In China, the upper class had begun to catch on to the art, and while prints of Cixi's image were being sold primarily Western tourists, they could still be obtained by the Chinese elite. For many, this was the first and only image of their Queen or Empress that they saw, and could own for themselves. Through the circulation of these photographs, Cixi and Victoria could form a certain idea of themselves in the minds of subjects, and also those of foreign visitors, who might pick up the photographs as souvenirs.

Both women enjoyed the art as well. Victoria's collection of photographs, both family photos and ones she collected, numbered over 20,000 at the time of her death in 1901.² It was said that Victoria "could be bought for a photograph", as she loved them so much.³ Cixi's excitement for the art is similarly self-evident, such that she even shadowed her photographer in the dark room.⁴ But beyond that bloom of excitement for the work, they each realized its greater potential. It was a reflection of reality, yet could still be changed and manipulated.

Cixi's first photograph was taken after Victoria was already dead, in approximately 1903. Cixi could not let an "ordinary" professional photographer into the palace as it "would hardly be the thing."⁵ Instead, Cixi's handmaiden and biographer Der Ling's brother Xunling took the

photos. Cixi was fascinated with the process, and her first photo was taken in a procession, though she proclaimed “I am looking too serious. Next time when you are going to take one, let me know so that I may try and look pleasant.”⁶ Cixi appeared to enjoy taking the photographs and find them amusing, such that she rushed through audiences on this first day of photography, so she might get back to taking them.⁷ She soon realized the usefulness of the images, however, beyond their role as amusement.

These photos “reflected [Cixi’s] love of theater, as well as her acute awareness that photography could be exploited to change her public image and simultaneously reaffirm her authority.”⁸ Previous to Cixi’s 1903 excitement, photography of China or Chinese subjects and themes was controlled by widely by the West.⁹ Now, it could be used for her own purposes, to “promote a positive impression of Cixi herself and of the Qing Empire in general to international heads of state and diplomats, in the period after the Boxer Rebellion, a time of ongoing political instability.”¹⁰ As author David Hogge points out in his article, Cixi’s post- Boxer rebellion image, before she began to change it with photographs, was incredibly negative, and often racist. She was most commonly portrayed in cartoons, which depicted her as “a bloated tyrant, a witch, an ‘empress’ gloating over caged foreigners and a murderess in a mug shot.”¹¹ Cixi’s venture into photography appeared to be somewhat successful, as American newspapers that referred to her as a “terrible old woman” in 1905, were instead calling her a “great lady” by the end of that year.¹²

Cixi’s usage of photography expanded beyond curating her public image and proved to have political applications in China’s international relations as well. Photographs with diplomats’ wives allowed them to feel special and included, and they could come away with evidence of the Empress’s kind nature and modern sensibilities. Much like her political friendships with these

women, these photographs of them together served to soften her image in the West. Her affection for these women, according to Der Ling's observations, was grudging at times, but genuine.

In keeping with her theatrical nature, Cixi had a series of highly themed and staged photos taken with herself depicted as Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy in Chinese Buddhism. Western viewers may have seen this as explicit deification of herself, and indeed, these were often "cited as evidence of a ruler out of touch with reality, immersed in her own self-aggrandizement."¹³ However, Cixi and her Chinese subjects would have seen it differently: as piety. Cixi was often cheekily called "the old Buddha", and more formally, would have used the title *lao foye* (老佛爺), a title used by Qing emperors to say they were the reincarnation of Buddhist deities. Cixi choosing to align herself with Guanyin was very much in line with this practice; she merely substituted a female Buddhist deity.¹⁴ It was not an uncommon custom for women to sometimes dress as Guanyin to demonstrate their devotion, this was merely that captured on film in Cixi's case.¹⁵ Cixi herself liked the images, as they reminded her of what she "ought to be at all times."¹⁶

Cixi's imitation of Guanyin's image predates her appearing as the deity in photographs. She was depicted as Guanyin previously in paintings, which was a common practice. Other emperors had associated themselves with particular bodhisattvas in the past, and explicitly tying herself to the Goddess of Mercy reminded her subjects, as well as herself, that she was devoted to the virtue, positive for women. Aligning herself with Guanyin was also necessary to counter Cixi's somewhat harsh image that filtered through both the West and China.

There is a marked difference between these Guanyin portraits, not originally intended for wide circulation, and the portraits that were: Cixi's face. In official portraits, she has been

retouched significantly, with lines and wrinkles smoothed away. Photography allowed “the presumption of realistic accuracy, yet with the artistic license of painted portraiture.”¹⁷ This was done under Cixi’s instructions.¹⁸ Cixi can have the best of both worlds through this editing: maturity and clear experience, but with the beauty of youth, which often engendered more kind feelings toward a woman who needed to be in a public role, as Cixi was.

Victoria too, tried to reclaim youth with photographs. Though the art of photography started in Victoria’s youth, she aged alongside it. The development of the medium very much parallels Victoria’s reign. The first photographs ever were displayed in London in 1839, the year of Victoria and Albert’s marriage. Like Cixi, she enjoyed watching the process of photography.¹⁹ The first public photographs of the queen were the images she wanted to portray during her married life: a middle-class mother, doting on her children or husband.²⁰ In the 1850’s, these became easily collectible through the small *carte de visite* style, which obscured the minute particulars of the face, including age. They were held up by some as exactly true to life, spreading the image that Victoria desired. A mourning photograph, for instance, had to be real, as Victoria would not have “permitted a photograph for trading purposes thus to invade the privacy of her grief.”²¹

As a widow, her image had to change. The widow’s weeds that were previously discussed impressed on the people her grief and helped raise her above criticism, but they also gave what author Lucy Worsley calls “brand value”; it made images of the Queen instantly recognizable.²² As with Cixi, though, her appearance of age mattered. Victoria gained a lot of weight as she aged, which was apparent on her barely five-foot frame. Photos of her Golden Jubilee were criticized for her appearance being “as if she had ‘oedematous disease’, a condition where the body bloats up with the excess fluid.”²³ For her Diamond Jubilee ten years later, she

made sure no such criticism occurred, smoothing wrinkles off her face and shaving inches off her waist in the edits, as well as removing double chins and making her appear taller.²⁴

Photos gave Victoria and Cixi a direct way to combat negative stigma and place themselves in the minds of their people. Victoria's public appearances were rare, Cixi's nonexistent. Photography served this purpose instead. Indeed, according to the *Photographic News* in 1880, "while Her Majesty continues to lend her countenance to the camera, it does not matter very much whether she appears in public or not. Any loyal subject can gaze upon the ...highest lady in the land for the small sum of one shilling; whereas for [a higher price], on one of the rare occasions on which she assists at public proceedings, he may only be gratified by the sight of her back hair."²⁵ Her Diamond Jubilee portrait was not even registered for copyright, allowing it to be spread even further.²⁶ For China, Cixi's photography served as a way to endear herself and be seen in public, in a way Empresses never were before, and these images.²⁷²⁸

One wonders how much Cixi's self-depiction was influenced by Victoria's. She was known to have an image of Victoria in her quarters, a sight that surprised painter Katherine Carl.²⁹ Smiling was phased out of all but Cixi's earliest photos, depicting herself as serious in all but one photograph, though many visitors commented on her vivacious nature and enjoyment of laughing. Victoria is much the same, publishing only one photo of herself smiling. While smiles were able to be captured within photographs by this point, they did not serve the image that either woman needed to promote. They needed to be larger than life, stoic symbols, whether it be of a kinder, more civilized China, or the steady hand which ruled the empire of Great Britain. Women's emotion got them into trouble, but the woman they each were in these dignified photos was beyond emotion. While this is common enough in representations of both men and women,

elite and common alike, it was especially important for Cixi and Victoria's image to be flawless. They had made themselves into a symbol.

Yet, these smiling photos were published. As one among thousands, it could serve as a helpful hint that they were indeed human, which endeared their subjects to them lest they be seen as too cold, another dangerous extreme for these women in power. That line of "enough, but not too much" is a line that Victoria and Cixi found themselves on often, despite their vastly different cultural contexts, and they used the art of photography as an attempt to bridge their complicated images.

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Endnotes

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