

Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures  
East Asian Humanities Lecture Series



## Fashioned Exposure: Empress Dowager Cixi's (1835-1908) Photographic Portraits

This talk analyzes how Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908) utilized photography to produce images for different purposes. While Cixi created a formal image for the foreign public, she also projected a provocative personal celebration of female agency in the photographs intended for informal purposes. Regardless of photography's novel properties, both types of images linger between tradition and innovation. On the one hand, Cixi's formal photo portraits rigorously adopt the visual language of traditional imperial portraiture to ensure the sitter's transformation from a single individual to the embodiment of an empire. On the other hand, Cixi appropriated negatively perceived poses in beauty painting, such as looking into a mirror and crossing her legs, to emphasize the power generated from feminine beauty and fecundity. Her appropriation was not to extend the painting's original meaning but to facilitate a purposeful subversion.

Dr. Ying-Chen Peng  
Assistant Professor, Department of Art  
American University

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1:00-2:30 pm

Linder Commons, Suite 602

The Elliott School of International Affairs

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