In their recently published collaborative volume, Timothy Brook, Jérôme Bourgon and Gregory Blue begin their study of capital punishment in China with photographs of an execution by dismemberment or lingchi in Beijing in 1904. One of the last of its kind, the event took place at Caishikou, (Vegetable Market Street), the Qing execution ground in the southern part of old Beijing. The photographs in question were not, however, taken by a member of the Qing state, but rather by French soldiers who were probably part of the military contingent at the legation of France. Copies of these and other photographs of lingchi were circulated in France, some coming to rest in private collections, others finding their way into museums, Georges Bataille’s The Tears of Eros. My concern in my talk today is with the production, circulation and use of photographs of executions in and outside of China.

I am in general agreement with Brook, Bourgon and Blue about the meanings ascribed to execution photographs by Europeans. As I argued in English Lessons, such images allowed Europeans to construct China as a barbarous place where punishments existed that had since been transcended by a civilized Europe states. As elements that participated in the constitution of Euroamerican civilization as superior to others, photographs of Chinese executions effectively organized China as a living
ethnological museum, where savagery and indifference to the suffering of others was on display. The consequences of this construct were two-fold. First, it allowed Europeans to justify the treaty port system and extraterritoriality in China and second, it helped to insure the preservation of these photographs as evidence, and perhaps more as well. These were not just any pictures of China, but ones that exposed and documented a real China lying behind a façade of arrogance, superiority and exclusion. Why such ideological work might have been necessary I take up in some detail in *English Lessons*, and I won’t rehash the argument here. Instead, I want to direct attention to what I think is a problem in the Brook et.al. interpretation.

It lies, I think, in their emphasis on the insignificance of *lingchi* photographs for constructing the image of savage or barbaric China.¹ Far more commonly circulated, I believe, were photographs of public beheadings. More importantly, photographs of beheadings actually made it into print – they appeared in the illustrated newspapers of the late nineteenth century, predating the *lingchi* photographs by perhaps a decade and, in at least one case significant case, coming from a site other than Caishikou. We can more easily follow the circulation of beheading images through a variety of publications, including histories of late imperial China published in China as well as in Europe and North America up to the present. In what follows, I

¹There is, I think, a tension in the book between the valorization of the *lingchi* photograph and the history presented of European interest in Chinese punishments. Certainly, dismemberment drew an inordinate amount of attention, but Europeans were also aware of the hierarchy of death sentence punishments meted out by the Qing court. Europeans were also aware that *lingchi* was rare in comparison to beheading.
want to trace some of this history. To do so, I will have to go a bit beyond the workshop's request to focus on one photograph and consider a few more [1]. I will begin by sketching the history of four photographs as I have been able to piece them together and will start with publication in the illustrated press of images of beheading that took place during the Boxer Uprising and the subsequent occupation of Beijing in 1900-1901.

The top two photos [2] appeared in on the cover of Leslie’s Weekly, La vie illustree, a Paris weekly; the top one in Black and White, a London weekly [3]. All were published in mid-July, well before the relief of the legations and, as I argued in English Lessons, seemed to anticipate the punishment awaiting the Boxers. The fact that they appeared at the same time in print in three different cities simultaneously suggests that they were part of a shared photo stock of images on China. After Beijing was occupied, there were many, often novel opportunities to expand that photos stock, including numerous beheadings of purported Boxers, photographs of which inhabit public archives in Europe and North America.

Among the illustrated newspapers I have reviewed, few if any of the beheading photographs made it into print at the time of the occupation of Beijing, however. Instead, more common were black & white drawings or etchings [4] – some possibly taken from poor quality photographs. Yet, as I've indicated, numerous photographs were taken of executions and they began to circulate in other ways.
One way was through something like this Brighton booklet entitled 
*Unique Photographs of Executions of Boxers in China*. I am unaware if, there are other booklets like this, but had an interesting career. An Australian friend in Beijing had bought at a sell off of materials from the Sydney University Library in the late 1980s.

But this sort of publication might have been an exception. More common perhaps was the sale of these executions photographs in China itself. It is clear that soon after 1901, people began to buy them and put them in photo albums of their visits to China and East Asia. I know of at least three such albums. One is in the U.S. Military History Institute in Carlyle, Pa. and is labeled J.D. Givens, “Scenes taken in the Philippines, China, Japan and on the Pacific,” 1912. It includes the two Hong Kong pirate execution photos, but a displacement has occurred [8]. The pirates have been transformed into Boxers. An similar misreading occurred in the second album. This one is the collection of Walter Kurze and is entitled “Memories of My Sea Voyages, 1895-1908.” Again we have the photos printed in the illustrated press. The pages of the album were posted by Kurze’s grandson, who who thinks those executed are Boxers. The third album is that of a French officer from around 1905. Parts of it can be seen in Jerome Bourgon’s, *Supplices Chinois*. a television show produced in France. In the album are two of our photos [10, 11].

From these albums, we have a fairly good idea that the images of execution were readily available for sale in China, that they were probably common enough in treaty ports and in Beijing for soldiers and tourists to acquire them, and that they were of
interest as things to collect on the part of those who visited China from 1905 forward. We also know *Supplices Chinois* who one of the printers of the photographs was. Bourgon reproduces a set of approximately a dozen imags that are labeled “Collection Liou-Seu, Tien-tsin.” [12] Among these is one of our photos, here being used as a postcard [13]. This photo was also produced in a colorized postcard version [14]. It is also interesting for another reason.

I will have more to say shortly about looking, seeing and not seeing what is going on in these pictures. They obviously repel us because of their graphic – one might say pornographic violence – which makes it difficult to see details at times. By pure accident happened to have these two photographs side-by-side as I was preparing this talk. The one on the left is from the Brighton booklet, the one on the right from many sources. What I saw was the fact that they were more than likely taken on the same day, although perhaps with different cameras. How do I know this? The fellow right here is visible in both pictures [15]. More important, if this is the case, it indicates that there was a much larger foreign audience present at these executions than the Brighton booklet indicates.

The images we’ve considered so far seem to circulated from production sites in China into albums and scrap books of foreigners. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the practice of collecting such images continued right up to the beginning of World War Two, with sailors and soldiers, business people, diplomats and consuls, and tourists a ready market for these exotic items. As far as I know, few if any ever appeared in print.
That changed after the war. In 1973, Richard O’Connor published the beach photo of beheaded pirates, which was labeled “Execution of Boxer Chiefs.”² Ten years later, the journalist Harrison Salisbury published a black and white version of the colorized postcard just discussed. Interestingly, he attributed the source to the Military Museum in Beijing.³ In 1988, the French version of Photo published our first image in a photo essay entitled “The history of China in 80 Photos.” [16]

More scholarly works, however, such as Joseph Esherick’s book on the Boxer or Paul Cohen’s History in Three Keys, as well as a number of books published around the one-hundredth anniversary of the Boxer Uprising, have – for whatever reason – not reproduced these images. In China, by contrast, they have appeared in museum displays like that at the Beijing Military Museum, photographic collections published by the Palace museum [17, 18] and in this last case [19], The Forbidden Magazine, where the image of the Japanese soldiers standing over bodies that they have beheaded is part of a series of photographs of the occupation of Beijing. The accompanying text is an exchange of letters between two friends chronicling the depredations of the occupation forces. I will have more to say about the use of these images in contemporary China in a moment, but before I do, it is also worth noting that the photos also circulate today globally on the internet.


The image of Japanese solders executing Boxers can be seen on Flickr and can be purchased from Superstock for publication. In the case of the Flickr site, the text indicates that it was donated by Mrs. P. Hancock. This postcard can be bought on line at Collect.at. And this one, I found on line and purchased from Alan Gottlieb, a memorabilia dealer, while preparing this paper. As unsettling as the continued commodification of these images may be, perhaps even more disturbing is their inclusion on a site called “Beheading Art.” Here over 160 images, most of executions in China, are ranked in rows and columns without comment. The images are easily enlarged and removable for insertion in a presentation like this one.

Conclusion

Tracking these photographs, writing as it were, their biographies of circulation and reproduction, requires the interrogation of more than books, more than a “publishing” history. They arrive before us today in pages of works like English Lessons and Death by a Thousand Cuts, but also, as I've indicated, on internet sites. Moreover, our internet search engine not only finds these photographs, but juxtaposes them to other sites that do not contain them, but something else.


5 Website accessed February 21, 2009 http://www.flickr.com/photos/11437040@N05/1689991784/


Google “executions – China – Boxers – beheadings” and one is presented with a series of links that not only reproduce the photos considered here, but provide links to organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, organizations that express their outrage at public executions in sports stadiums in contemporary China. The simultaneous occurrence of pasts and present – as if Google itself were conspiring in the generation of Benjuminian montages – repeats Chinese barbarism and maintains the distance between the civilized, the modern and the persistence of archaic remnants in China in yesterday and today. Here then is one of the powers of the photograph, for as it figures the continuities of China, it also totalizes either side of the equation, constituting and maintaining totalizing essences of China and the West.

But, if such an exercise reminds us that even the dead are not safe, the plethora of links Google conjures is a reminder of the sheer density of the photographed past. In that density, the images I've presented gesture towards at least three histories. The first of these would be one of capital punishment in Europe and the processes through which public execution was removed from the streets of the city and confined inside the prison. There executions were transformed from the spectacle of the state displaying its power and awing its populace, to various forms of legal-rational processing, including the constitution of authoritative witnesses who confirmed the state’s efficiency in transforming the life of the criminal into death. Might it not have been possible, therefore, that part of the European
fascination with public executions in China was the opportunity to see what
no longer could be seen, but was still happening behind the forbidding walls
of the prison.

A second historical trajectory that these photographs participate in is
one that would understand photography as a tool of empire. They may be
understood as part of those ethnographic projects, discussed by James
Ryan, that documented the races of empire.\textsuperscript{8} In the case of the execution
photographs, there is a second order documentation involving a graphic
record of punishments meted out to those who had dared to attack and kill
Europeans. In that form, they may also operate as trophies as well as
participants in the act of punishment.\textsuperscript{9}

The third historical trajectory has to do with the arrival of tourism in
China. I have spoken a bit about the development of the tourist industry
after the Boxer uprising. There is no question, if we are to believe the tourist
brochures, that many came to China to see living ethnographic exhibits and
in some cases to participate in the forbidden – sex, drugs, and apparently,
photographs like the ones we've seen today. The commoditization of the
execution photo in the form of the postcard points toward a burgeoning

\textsuperscript{8} James R. Ryan, \textit{Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the

\textsuperscript{9} For further discussion see James L. Hevia, “The Photography Complex:
Exposing Boxer China (1900-1901), Making Civilization,” 79-120, in Rosalind
and its Histories in East and Southeast Asia} (Durham: Duke University Press,
2009), 16.
market in colonial exotica and to the perceptions tourists brought to China with them. The presence of Europeans posing in some execution photos as if they were in front of a famous landmark reinforces this impression [24]. Such poses also direct our attention to something else. Europeans were not only drawn to executions to see archaic forms enacted; they also seemed to have been fascinated by what they understood to be spectacle.

The news reports of the execution events in 1900-1901 suggest as much. A reporter for the *Sydney Morning Herald* described the scene of executions as “Bland Holt” affairs, referring to the spectacular stage productions of an Australian entrepreneur. As for the size of the crowds, Sydney Adamson, *Leslie’s* special correspondent in Beijing, noted that large turnouts of soldiers, missionaries, reporters and photographers had become “hideously commonplace.”

Viewing barbarism and recording spectacle are not the only ways of accounting for the presence of Europeans witnessing and recording executions with their cameras. The history of photography suggests other ways of understanding what is going on in these photos. For example, virtually from its inception, photography was interested in death, and as the technology of the camera improved, capturing the moment of death. Certainly these photos, especially those that deal sequentially with the time before, during and after executions speak to this concern. This interest in

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11 *Leslie’s Weekly*, 18 May 1901: 484.
death cut another way as well. Writers on photograph such as Oliver Wendell Holmes thought of the image as a material preservation that extended life beyond death. These aspects of the photography – to see death and to transcend it – was in part what led Holmes to refer to photography as a “mirror with a memory.” But, as Roz Morris has pointed out, photographs that make death visible have an uncanny effect – they haunt “not only memory of times past but everyday life in thoroughly modern contexts.”

This may be less that case in Europe, partly because these images have not been reproduced with any regularity over time. Still, this may change with easy access to them on the internet. In China, however, matters have been quite different. As I have indicated, the images circulate are circulated in a variety of media, and in so doing, fit themselves into the dominant narrative of modern Chinese history. This is the story of the “Century of Humiliation” that began with the first Opium War in 1839 and ended with the defeat of Japan in 1945, and was only transcended through the Chinese revolution and liberation of the masses.

The images of Chinese executed by foreign soldiers or under the gaze of foreign audiences have become iconic element of this narrative, and few history books or historical museums lack one or another of the images I’ve shown today. The photos may also be seen on a Chinese internet site operated by China.org., where image and text – in English – tell the story of

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“China’s Tragic Years, 1900-1901 – through a Foreign Lense.” Other media also keep the narrative alive. I have written about the “Never Forget National Humiliation” memorial at the ruins of the Yuanming yuan, a memorial that was put up with the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. Around that time, Judith Farquhar and I visited Caishikou a few years ago – it’s a bus stop now on a thoroughly modern intersection – we drew a crowd that told us that this was where foreigners had executed Chinese. We asked how they knew this. Everyone said they had seen it on TV in one of those epics or historical soap operas that keep the “Century of Humiliation” alive and fuel endless discussions of China’s past failures and future prospects.

Let me close with one last thought on these photographs, one that comes from the art historian James Elkins. In his 1996 book *The Object Stares Back*, Elkins explores the problem of seeing, and in so doing takes up a set of photographs of executions in China which include both beheading and lingchi images. He found the photos in what he refers to as a “grisly” collection called *Violence in Our Times*. Acknowledging that these pictures are horrific, disturbing, and painful to look at, Elkins notes that we don’t so much look at them, but look away from their violence. This creates a problem for seeing them. Most pictures, be they paintings or photographs, require, he tells us, a degree of contemplation if we are to have the rich experience we expect from art. If we are drawn to look by a desire to see, a desire that Barthes and others have written on, then the image must not only stimulate

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13 [http://www.china.org.cn/e-8guo/index.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/e-8guo/index.htm)
desire, but in order to be appreciated, must speak in “several registers.” Elkins argues that this is the problem with execution photos like these – they shout all other images down and do so in only one register. “They are harsh and importunate,” he argues, “so that they are not only hard to see; they make everything else hard to see.” And he concludes by suggesting that our reaction to them is like that which police record from witnesses after an act of violence – it is not reason, but shock and confusion that they evoke.

I would suggest that Elkins has put his finger on the challenge that these photographs pose for any historical study. They are, in fact, rich in detail and present to us with a powerful version of events at this particular place and time. But because of their shock effect, they occlude their own details, their own context, and by so doing encourage us to put them aside. I hope that that does not happen. I also hope that I have demonstrated why it is important not to look away. These images were not just any executions, but ones that were demanded by the great powers that occupied Beijing in 1900-1901. The powers demanded that reputed Boxers be executed in this way because they understood it as an especially demeaning way to die for a Chinese person. Such an approach to population management was, of course, not unique to China. Like other colonial contexts, Europeans strove to decode native beliefs in order to use them against the indigenous population. I would argue, therefore, that if these executions of Boxers are shouting at us and shouting down all other images, what I think they are saying is don’t look away – this is what the violence of imperialism looks like.