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**MAPPING INTELLIGENCE:
PHOTOGRAPHY AND TOPOGRAPHY IN STRANGMAN'S ALBUMS**

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This article investigates the events that occurred in the surroundings of Tianjin in the period between the Boxer Uprising and the Russo-Japanese War. The discovery of two albums of snapshots and a short accompanying letter by Richard Strangman, a Customs officer, to Sir Robert Hart, the Inspector General of the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs, and Edwin Conger, the American Minister Plenipotentiary to China, offers a chance to reflect on the use of amateur photography as a tool of intelligence and topography in the border region between Zhili and Manchuria in the early years of the twentieth century.

KEYWORDS: amateur photography, topography, intelligence, Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs, Sir Robert Hart, Tianjin, Boxer Uprising, Russo-Japanese War

INTRODUCTION: STRANGMAN'S LETTER TO HART

In November 1903, the Customs official Richard H. Strangman sent two albums of snapshots to Sir Robert Hart, the Inspector General of the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs (CIMC). In his accompanying letter Strangman wrote, 'I am sending a few snapshots I have been taking to His Exc. Minister Conger as he seemed [*sic*] very much interested in them; while doing so may I have the honor to send a few to you herewith which

may be interesting to you.’¹ This letter is the only accompanying document to two albums of snapshots taken at the turn of the twentieth century. The photographs depict Tianjin and the surrounding area after the foreign suppression of the Boxer Uprising in 1900. The photographs focus on the coast around Tanggu and Dagou, and shed light on foreign interests in the region between the Boxer Uprising and the Russo-Japanese War.

The photographs are framed in two albums labelled in the handwriting of Strangman himself. The albums appear to be a collection of mismatched photographs apparently taken by Strangman. Their subject matter ranges from the Hai River at Tianjin in front of the Customs House and godowns to armies, soldiers and gunboats leaving; from some ordinary moments and curiosities to panoramas; from buoys stored for the winter and salt mills to staff, including a dwarf, and some taken at the railway stations. Some of the significance of the albums arises from the fact that they were made by an amateur photographer, probably equipped with a Brownie camera by Kodak, which had democratized the process of photography, rendering it less expensive and more practical.² This camera allowed Strangman to gather intelligence and survey the topography of the Zhili landscape between Tianjin and Shanhaiguan; it became a tool for ‘mapping’ a particular topographical landscape.

The developed films were arranged by Strangman into two albums, and the display and sequences in which the snapshots were laid may be conveying a message. Unlabeled or scarcely annotated photo-albums of early amateur photographers are often overlooked, but can provide new insights into significant historical moments.³ For instance, Strangman’s albums demonstrate the significance of the Zhili province in the aftermath of the Boxer Uprising and show how the uprising had direct effects on normal activities for the CIMC, and

¹ Letter from R. Strangman to Sir Robert Hart, dated 23 November 1903, in Hart Photograph Collection, Sir Robert Hart Collection, MS15/6/11B/001a, Queen’s University Belfast, McClay Library Special Collection.

² For the democratization of the photography and the amateur photography, see R. Jenkins, “Technology and the Market: George Eastman and the Origins of Mass Amateur Photography,” in *Technology and Culture*, 16.1 (1975), 1-19.

³ Famous is the case of Painter and the late nineteenth century Washington snapshots, see M. Ison, ‘Uriah Hunt Painter and the “Marvelous Kodak Camera”’, in *Washington History*, 2.2 (1990/1), 30-47.

the postal service, several years after the event. The albums also reveal the link between the Boxer Uprising and the preambles to the Russo-Japanese War in Manchuria at the border with Zhili province.

The two albums raise a number of suggestive issues: their conspicuous number of amateur snapshots, their apparently inconclusive arrangement, the discrepancy between the notoriety of the recipients and the anonymity of the sender, and the rationale that may have made them an appropriate present for a junior official to give to two such senior figures such as Hart at the CIMC and Conger at the American Legation. This article integrates visual sources alongside textual materials to bring new light to the social and military history of Tianjin and its surroundings under foreign occupation, a history which is often sketchily narrated.⁴

THE STRANGMAN ALBUMS: CONTENT AND CONTEXT

The archives at Queen's University Belfast hold two albums attributed to Strangman, containing 48 and 50 photos each.⁵ The photos are quite small, between 80x55mm and 110x63mm; the size corresponds to the format of photographs taken by a Brownie N.2, produced by Kodak between 1901 and 1935.⁶ Kodak supplies were available at that time in

⁴ Only a few works in Western languages are completely dedicated to the history of modern Tianjin, including: G. Hershatter, *The workers of Tianjin*, (Palo Alto, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1986), 328p. M.B. Kwan, *The salt merchants of Tianjin: state-making and civil society in late imperial China*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001) 239 p.; R. Rogaski, *Hygienic modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) 415 p.; D. Spicq, *L'avènement de l'eau courante à Tianjin*, (Saarbrücken: Éditions Universitaires Européennes, 2012) 274 p. To this we should add some recent articles by V. Shue, "The Quality of Mercy: Confucian Charity and the Mixed Metaphors of Modernity in Tianjin", in *Modern China*, 32.4 (2006), 411-452; A. De Angeli, "Tianjin sales of land by auctions: Italian Colonialism in the early twentieth century China", in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 15.4 (2010), 557-572; M. Marinelli, "Making concessions in Tianjin: heterotopia and Italian colonialism in Mainland China", in *Urban History*, 36.3 (2009), 399-425; M. Marinelli, "The genesis of the Italian concession in Tianjin: a combination of wishful thinking and realpolitik", in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 15.4 (2010), 536-566. A historical landmark remains the work by O. D. Rasmussen, *Tientsin –An Illustrated Outline History*, (Tientsin: The Tientsin Press, 1925) 320 p.

⁵ The album MS15/6/11B is the one accompanied by the letter and has 48 photographs, while the second MS15/6/11E has 50 photos. Since the calligraphy is the same on the accompanying letter signed by Strangman, we may attribute quite certainly also this album to Strangman. Both albums are in Sir Robert Hart Collection, QUBSC.

⁶ For more information on this model, see Kodak No.2 Brownie Camera, *The Brownie Camera Pace* <<http://www.brownie-camera.com/53.shtml>> [accessed 22 June 2018].

Tianjin,⁷ where Strangman could have bought the camera and rolls of film.⁸ The compact size of the camera, fitting into one's pocket, and being simple enough to be used by a child, started the era of snapshots and allowed amateur photographers to pursue their new passion.⁹

Strangman took the photographs in the two albums between 1903 and 1904. The album with 48 photos was sent to Hart with an accompanying letter, while the album with 50 snapshots must have been sent subsequently, since the photographs in it postdate the letter. The images of the first album did not include any date but were clearly taken before November 1903, while in the second album they dated from December 1903 to Chinese New Year in 1904 (16 February). Since the second album is unconnected to the letter, it is reasonable to presume that only the first was made for Conger and 'copied' to Hart. The second album may have been made specifically for Hart, whose interest in photography is well known. His staff regularly sent him photos and albums depicting personnel, dwellings, and activities performed in the Customs Service.¹⁰

The two albums focused on locations in Zhili Province. Of a total of 98 photos, 46 were taken at Tanggu, and 27 in Dagou. While the former album had just two localities, the

⁷ There was a Kodak stockist in Tianjin at the turn of the 20th century: The Kodak Shop of Messrs. Gartner at 111 Victoria Bund, UK Settlement, which was a wholesale, retail and manufacturing chemist and agents for Eastman Kodak Co. See *China Times guide to Tientsin and neighborhood*, Mrs. Burton St. John, ed., (1908) <https://archive.org/stream/cu31924099092516/cu31924099092516_djvu.txt> [accessed 25 June 2018], and *The North China Desk Hong List, 1919* <https://archive.org/stream/northchinahonglist1919/northchinahonglist1919_djvu.txt> [accessed 25 June 2018]. Although the sources are later than 1900, photographs and postcards with the Kodak Shop stamp dating 1901 prove the existence of the shop at the time Strangman produced the two albums.

⁸ The Eastman Kodak Company of New Jersey started to produce the series of Brownie cameras in 1900. The cheap material and films made photography a hobby to many, since it cost less than a day's wage according to American standards. See J. Richter, *Inventing the Camera* (New York: Crabtree Publishing Company, 2006), p. 17; M. Targ Brill, *Camera: America in the 1900s* (Minneapolis, Twenty-First Century Book, 2010), p. 35.

⁹ C. Harding, Colin, 'Camera Design: 6 Kodak,' in *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography*, ed. by J. Hannavy, (Milton park: Taylor and Francis, 2008), vol.2 p.252. Eastman asked Brownell to design a camera which could be mass produced for a very low cost. The result was the Brownie camera. A box camera fitted with a simple lens and shutter, the Brownie sold for just 5 shillings. Named after the Brownie characters popularized by the Canadian writer, Palmer Cox, the camera was initially aimed at children. Soon, however, it enjoyed much broader appeal as people realized that, although very basic, the Brownie could produce very good results under the right conditions. Within a year, over 100,000 Brownie cameras had been sold. For the next eighty years, the Brownie name was to be synonymous with snapshot photography. B. Batchelor, *The 1900s*, (Westport Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2002), p. 59.

¹⁰ A. De Angeli and E. Reisz, *China's Imperial Eye: Photographs of Qing China and Tibet from the Sir Robert Hart Collection* (Belfast: Queen's University Belfast, 2017), p. 41.

latter also contained views of Qinhuangdao and Shanhaiguan, as well as photographs from a journey by train on the Shanhaiguan railway line. The subjects of the photographs appear, at first, quite random, which makes it difficult to understand what Strangman thought Conger (or Hart) would be particularly interested in. The photos for the first album were either taken from a boat of another boat or from the river embankments, or show the Dagou Bar, or capture activities and buildings erected along the Hai River embankment, such as the Customs House, its godowns and the recreation center for the Customs staff. On closer inspection, the large number of photographs can be mainly divided into: reports about Customs activities from work to recreation; storage of materials in winter; and Customs vessels at anchor. From the first album, I will concentrate particularly on photographs relevant to the withdrawal of foreign troops from Tanggu and Dagou. These locations were respectively the commercial port of Tianjin, and a military fortress complex on the Hai River, where it flows into the Gulf of Zhili. From the second album, I will focus specifically on photographs connected to foreign troops and to Strangman's journey on the Shanhaiguan train line. All these photographs were taken in the period between late 1903 and early 1904.

The first album has eleven photographs of foreign troops, mainly Americans (5), French (2), Russians (2), British (1) and Italians (1), plus one of Conger and Captain Blethen on board the Chinese steamship 'Hsinyu'.¹¹ Of the photographs of foreign troops leaving Tanggu, the American troops were photographed leaving the facilities and embarking in steamships, as well the USS *Monocacy* gunboat at Dagou, while French, British, Russians and Italians were already onboard their national gunboats. The river port of Tanggu (ten miles upstream from Dagou Bar) was where Strangman was tide-surveyor at the time when the photos were taken, and from Tanggu the railway went to Tianjin and Beijing.

To understand the relevance of this photographic record of foreign troops, we should go back to 1900, when the Boxers stormed the province. On 13 June 1900, the Boxers

¹¹ Strangman's photograph album, in SRH Collection, MS15/6/11B/22.

besieged the foreign concessions in Tianjin, and three days later, 16 June, the Chinese forces stationed on Dagou Bar mined the Hai River with torpedoes, to prevent foreign troops sending reinforcements to Tianjin by ship. The Hai River was the only reliable supply line between Tianjin foreign military commands and the foreign fleets anchored at Dagou Bar; as there was no telegraphic line between Tianjin and Dagou either, the Hai River served also as a means of communication between the two localities. The interruption of communications between Tianjin and Dagou and the disruption of supply to Tianjin were intended to make the foreigners in Beijing capitulate, making it of extreme importance for the Chinese to succeed at the Hai. With their position in China at stake, the Allied powers concluded that control of the Dagou Bar was essential to provide supplies and maintain communications with Tianjin; in fact, to lose the area between Tianjin and Dagou Bar meant losing the foothold of the foreign military powers in the whole of Northern China.¹²

In 1900, the foreign fleet's counterattack at Tanggu was led by British, Russian, French, and German vessels, while the USS *Monocacy* withdrew upriver towards Tianjin. The absence of the *Monocacy* from the engagement was particularly glaring, since that ship was under Commander Frederick M. Wise, who was also in overall command of the foreign fleets at Tanggu. The United States did not want to engage in any act that looked like war, or to put the United States in a position of taking part in acts of aggression, since the US government was technically friendly with the Chinese government, due to the 'open door' policy. However, for this very reason the other allied admirals were very critical of the American policy.¹³ The shell damage inflicted by the foreign fleet (minus the Americans) is clearly visible in some of Strangman's photographs, captioned 'Customs Signal Station South Fort. Showing Shell Holes made by fleet. N.E. Side'.

¹² C. M. Biggs, *The United States Marines in North China, 1894-1942*, (Jefferson: McFarland, 2003), pp. 41-45.

¹³ Biggs, p. 51.

Figure 1: Customs Signal Station South Fort Showing Shell Holes made by fleet. N.E. Side. MS15/6.11B.14 upper

Particularly interesting is the annotation Strangman wrote on one of the three snapshots of the South Fort: ‘Customs Flagstaff and Signal Station South Fort. Still held by the French Nov. 1903’.

Figure 2 Customs Flagstaff & Signal Station South Fort. Still held by the French Nov. 1903 MS15.6.11B.6 (left)

This is the first element in the album in which a clear intention can be discerned from the photographs: Strangman was reporting how the allied powers were behaving in the aftermath of the Boxer Uprising and the subsequent Protocol, signed on 7 September 1901, more than two years prior to the photographs being taken. Strangman’s annotation denotes a certain irritability about the fact that, in November 1903, the French national flag was still occupying the South Fort, which belonged instead to the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs, as indicated by the Customs flags on the pole of the signal station. Soon after these photographs were taken, the South Fort was demolished as required by the Protocol.¹⁴

The presence of foreign forces in Tianjin had created problems for the normal activities of the Customs Service. Their arrival was initially as a relief force to suppress the Boxers, but they continued to arrive long after the crisis was past. Their stationing in both Tianjin and Beijing had a logistical consequence: the requisition of Customs premises by those foreign troops, who occupied and confiscated the property of the Customs. At that point, in September 1900, Hart himself complained to foreign diplomats that the main obstacle to the resumption of normal activities in the Customs Service was not the Boxers, but the foreign soldiers.¹⁵ Moreover, Hart referred to the brutality of foreign troops, especially

¹⁴ Strangman labelled photograph MS15.6.11B.23 ‘South Forts. Taku. before demolition’, and ‘After’ the following photograph, MS15.6.11B.24.

¹⁵ R. Horowitz, Richard. S., “The Ambiguities of an Imperial Institution: Crisis and Transition in the Chinese Maritime Customs, 1899-1911”, in *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 36.2 (2008), 279.

of the Russians and the French, though all nationalities were engaged in such despicable behavior.¹⁶ The Customs staff had to get used to this state of affairs in both Tianjin and Beijing. It becomes clear, therefore, that Strangman's photos of the departure of the foreign troops are evidence that the storm was over and that the Customs service could resume business as usual, as it was before the Boxers.¹⁷

Another important aspect of the Boxer Uprising in the area was that the Eight-Nation Alliance fighting against the Boxers was not united. As discussed above, when the hostilities began at Dagou Bar, the naval command was under the United States, but the action was performed by other allies. The British engaged in sea battle, while 2,000 Russian sailors and Japanese Marines went ashore to secure the area. This allowed the allied powers to secure the communication and supply line to Tianjin, and so to hold the key port for all of North China, but it cost the British two ships, with 21 men killed and 62 wounded. The Russians also had 16 killed and 50 wounded.¹⁸ The allied powers actively engaged in the battle of the Dagou Bay were Britain, France, Germany, and Russia, each of which contributed one gunboat to the force apart from Russia, which provided three gunboats, and added a fourth with the arrival of the *Sivouch* the following day on 18 June 1900.¹⁹

All the gunboats involved had low keels to allow access along the shallow Hai River, and the gunboats photographed by Strangman at Dagou three years later had low keels too, for the same reason. The vessels included in Strangman's photographs are the USS *Monocacy*, the French *Morures*, the Russian *Sivouch*, the Italian *Piemonte* and the British *Bramble*. Of these, neither the *Bramble*, the *Morures* nor the *Piemonte* had seen action at the Dagou forts in June, 1900. The French at the time were on the gunboat *Lion*, while the Italian *Piemonte* was

¹⁶ Horowitz, p. 279.

¹⁷ Horowitz, p. 280.

¹⁸ Biggs, p. 50.

¹⁹ Nesoleniy, Sergey Valerevich, Сергей Валерьевич Несолёный, Канонерские лодки первой эскадры флота Тихого океана в русско-японской войне (1904-0905) (The Pacific Ocean First Fleet Gunboats in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), С-Пб.: Издатель Р.Р. Муниров, 2011.

in China only between 1902 and the end of 1903. The only gunboats present for the 1900 battle and still anchored at Dagou Bay in Strangman's photographs were the non-combatant USS *Monocacy* and the late-arriving Russian *Sivouch*.

Among the seven photographs taken by Strangman of the foreign gunboats, all of them show the boats on the Hai River, but only one was taken from onboard a vessel, and that was the *Sivouch*. Other photographs in this album that were taken on a ship's deck, such as the one with the Minister Conger and the Captain Blethem, were taken on board Chinese ships, not foreign ones.

Figure 3 Captain - stooping - and officers of the Russian gunboat "Sivouch"
MS15.6.11B.15 (bottom)

The photograph of the Russian Captain, Anatolii Augustovich Ginter²⁰ (stooping down), and the officers of the *Sivouch* wearing the summer uniform - a set made of a white jacket (called a smock) and dark blue trousers - is informal. The officers must have felt relaxed, and they may have been acquainted with Strangman. There was ample opportunity for such an acquaintanceship to develop, since the Russian gunboat was stationed at the Dagou Bar from 18 June 1900 to late 1903.²¹ Nonetheless, the apparently cordial relationship is conspicuous, given the tensions between the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs and the occupying foreign forces. By contrast, in the second album we find only two photos of foreign troops, and these are of Japanese troops stationing at Tanggu under the command of Lieutenant Nakamura, with one showing the troops lined up for inspection, and another showing a drill.²² The foreign troops which had been stationed in Tanggu were now leaving Dagou Bar.

²⁰ A.A. Ginter was born in a family of Navy officers in 1857, in Saratov, and was the Commandant of the gunboat *Sivouch* between April 1902 and January 1914 officially docked at Port Arthur, he died after 1917 unknown date, <http://cbsfokino.ru/pluginAppObj_41_01/2012_-----pdf p.4> [accessed 25 June 2018].

²¹ The *Sivouch* then left Dagou for Niuzhuang (currently Yingkou) and anchored in the Liao River until called into service during the Russo-Japanese War, and was sunk on 2 August 1904.

²² See Strangman's photograph albums, in SRH Collection, MS15.6.11E.49 and 50.

STRANGMAN'S JOURNEY BY TRAIN

The second album, like the first, provides information about the activities of the Customs in Tanggu and Dagū. This corresponds to half the snapshots, while the rest of the album is dedicated to a journey by train that Strangman undertook from December 1903 to January 1904. He visited Shanhaiguan and Qinhuangdao, and took photos in Tanghe (now a suburb of Qinhuangdao),²³ of the Lanzhou Bridge, Anshan, and Changli; all these locations were along the Beijing-Mukden (Shenyang) line, built between 1881 and 1907.²⁴ The snapshots were laid out in the album following the above sequence, showing that he started his 'report' from the farthest point from Tanggu. In Shanhaiguan, Strangman took six photos, including the 'first Customs House of China', the city gate, three of the Great Wall and one of the city temple. In Qinhuangdao he took eight photos, mostly of the harbor and its activities, proving that in that locality he was not a tourist, while in Tanghe he took two snapshots of the village temple, as well as one of the grave of a high official.

Figure 4 Near Tanghe Station, Grave of High Official. MS15.6.11E.43

Taken near the grave of a high official in Tanghe village, the photograph does not reveal the identity of the man standing by the grave. The man may be Strangman himself, and he may have thought it superfluous to add his own name. If so, the location for this self-portrait and the caption 'Grave of High Official' may reflect his personal aspirations.

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From Tanghe Station there was a 3-mile spur line to the Harbor Works of the Chinese Engineering and Mining Company Ltd. 'The Company have laid down, at their own cost, a branch line of railway connecting with the main line [Beijing-Niuzhang]... This branch line leads down to the steamers' berths at the breakwater and pier, and connects by a loop line with the Company's own godowns and coal yards. Passengers are thus able to step from the ship into the passenger car.' *The Directory & Chronicle for China, Japan, Corea, Indo-China, Straits Settlements, Malay States, Siam, Netherlands India, Borneo, the Philippines, &c: With which are Incorporated "The China Directory" and "The Hong Kong List for the Far East"*, Hong Kong daily press Office, 1904, p. 160.

²⁴ For further information about the construction of the line, see Huang Chingchi, 黄清琦, and Chen Xibo 陈喜波, *Jing-Fei tielü zhi lishi dili yanjiu 京奉铁路之历史地理研究 (1881-1912 年)* (A historical geography research of Peking-Mukden Railway under the vision of modernization (1881-1912)), in *Dili yanjiu 地理研究 (Geographical Research)*, 33.11 (2014), 2180-2194.

Although Strangman seems to be a tourist in Tanghe, the railway spur line to the harbor was of strategic military importance, and probably motivated his visit to the locality. In 1898, when Qinhuangdao was opened to foreign trade, the Chinese Engineering and Mining Company decided to develop the harbor at Tanghe because the company was searching for an ice-free port, from which to ship coal in the winter months when Tanggu was inaccessible. Though north of Tianjin, Qinhuangdao is much closer to deep water, and its harbor does not freeze over in winter. When the Boxer Uprising broke out the spur line was already completed, allowing the allied forces to use the locality and facilities as a landing place for troops and munitions in the war.²⁵

The sequence continues with a photograph taken from the train on the Shanhaiguan line (part of the Jinghua line connecting Beijing to Mukden), a photograph of the bridge on the Luan River at Luanzhou, followed by a photograph of a fortification on the top of a bare hill, called Anshan, and finally one from the station of Changli, where carts for hire were waiting next to the railway station. The photographs were not laid in the album in the order of the railway stations along the line from Shanhaiguan to Tanggu, in which case they would have been Shanhaiguan, Qinhuangdao, Tanghe, Changli, Anshan, Luanzhou, and Tanggu. Here again, as for the first album, the order is puzzling. If the display is in the order of Strangman's journey, it seems that he travelled from Shanhaiguan to Qinhuangdao, and then went down the railway spur along the Tanghe estuary, which functioned also as a passenger link from the ships to the main rail line between Beijing and Niuzhuang.²⁶ Then Strangman's itinerary seems to lead backwards from Luanzhou to Changli via Anshan.

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P.H. Kent, *Railway Enterprise in China: An Account of Its Origin and Development*, (London: E. Arnold, 1907), pp. 86-87.

²⁶ Built at the company's own costs, "this branch line led to the steamers' berths at the breakwater and pier, and connected by a loop line with the company's own godowns and coal yards." See *The Directory*, 1904, p. 160.

The kinds of photographs taken at Qinhuangdao record Maritime Customs activities there, while in the rest Strangman seems to be indulging himself in being a tourist. Shanhaiguan was at that time, as today, an important tourist attraction because of the Great Wall. But we should not forget that in 1903 the location aroused other interests, which Strangman had the opportunity to investigate.

As mentioned earlier, Strangman took six photographs around Shanhaiguan. The first is emphatically entitled ‘The First Customs House in the (Chinese) World’.

Figure 5 Shan Hai Kwan City East Gate, MS15.6.11E.27

The photograph indicates the attachment Strangman felt to the institution he served throughout his working life. The photograph presents the building, a traditional Chinese dwelling, from the front. This kind of photograph was perhaps a memento for Strangman, though Hart might have appreciated it as part of the history of China’s Customs establishment. Shanhaiguan became a location for collection of Customs revenue in 1848.²⁷ The Shanhaiguan office was located on the border between Zhili and Fengtian (Liaoning) about two miles away from the Beihai Bay, and was thereby in a strategic position to control the sea traffic between China and Manchuria. Originally, Shanhaiguan Customs was a Manchu-monopolized office. When Westerners began to take interest in Manchurian trade, around the mid-nineteenth century, the Shanhaiguan office assumed responsibility for collecting transit dues²⁸

Moving forward, among the other photos taken in Shanhaiguan, three were taken on the Great Wall: one from the Chinese side emphasizing the wall’s slope, another from the

²⁷ ‘Shanhaiguan’, in P. Schelling, and R. Salkin, eds, *International Dictionary of Historic Place: Asia and Oceania*, (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), vol.5, p.742.

²⁸ Y. Liang, *The Shanghai Taotai: Linkage Man in a Changing Society, 1843-90*, (Singapore: NUS Press, 1990), p. 72.

Manchurian side showing the steepness of the wall, and a third showing the Great Wall extending to the sea.

Figure 6: Shan Hai Kwan. MS15.6.11E.31

The above snapshot was arguably taken from the Chenghai Tower down to the sea, because we can see the Nanhaikou Pass Tower and the Jinglu Beacon Tower and, in the far background, the Entering Sea Stone Wall. Strangman must have stood in an elevated position to take the photograph, since we can see the wall in the lower foreground. The photograph itself gives a panoramic view, though the Shanhaiguan railway station on the Beijing–Mukden line had been put straight through the fortification of the Great Wall, and part of the wall had been demolished in 1894 when the line connecting the Tangshan and Tianjin regions was extended by a spur into Manchuria that ran through the pass at Shanhaiguan.²⁹

The very same year that Strangman visited Shanhaiguan, the trunk connecting Shanhaiguan to Niuzhuang was also opened, to link the region with Manchuria. In Manchuria, railroad and mining development were more military and strategic than commercial.³⁰ In the period 1896 to 1904, Russia expanded its penetration in northeast Asia, and especially after the Boxer Uprising, Russian forces occupied Manchuria and increased their activity in Korea.³¹ The Moscow agreement of 22 May 1896 between Russian ministers and Li Hongzhang, Governor-General of the Zhili Province, had established a strategic partnership between the Qing and Russian empires against a possible Japanese attack, and the Qing cemented this cooperation by granting Manchurian railway concessions to the Russo-Chinese Bank.³² Sure enough, the Japanese considered the railway to be a threat to their interests in Manchuria, and the railway proved to be one of the sparks that set off the Russo-

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰ H. Conroy, 'Lessons from Japanese Imperialism', in *Monumenta Nipponica*, 21.3/4 (1966), 337.

³¹ Conroy, p. 339.

³² V. Zatsepine, *Beyond the Amur: Frontier Encounter between China and Russia, 1850-1930*, (Oakville: UBC Press, 2017), pp. 100-101.

Japanese War in 1904-05. The Boxer Uprising derailed the Sino-Russian relationship, however, when the Boxers attacked the Russian railways,³³ and Russia responded with 100,000 troops and did not withdraw them after the defeat of the Boxers.³⁴ In 1901, Russia's Manchurian railways partially reopened, and in 1903, shortly before Strangman's visit, the lines were again in full service.³⁵

Shanhaiguan presented a location from which to survey Russian policy in the region. Russia signed the Final Protocol, on 7 September 1901, and received the largest indemnity, but while the allied forces withdrew from Beijing, a reduced contingent of Russian troops stayed in Manchuria. They were stationed in the main towns along the Chinese Eastern Railway and continued to suppress bandit attacks on the railway and nearby settlements. Only after the Qing-Russian agreement of 26 March 1902 did Russia start a gradual withdrawal of its troops from Manchuria.³⁶ To complete the troop withdrawal, the Russian administration demanded control of the Niuzhuang-Shanhaiguan section of the Niuzhuang-Tianjin railway, financed by a British loan. However, it encountered Chinese opposition backed by the Powers, which were informed of it by China. In 1903, the Russian Finance Minister Sergei Witte, who was considered by the hardliners to be at fault for the troop withdrawal, was replaced by Admiral Evgenii Ivanovich Alekseev, an advocate of Manchurian annexation.³⁷ By 8 April 1903 Russia was supposed to have left Manchuria definitively, but

³³ J. Reardon-Anderson, *Reluctant Pioneers, Chinas expansion northward, 1644-1937*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 111.

³⁴ Zatspine, pp. 119-120.

³⁵ Von Witte Association, 'The History of building the Trans-Siberian lines', <<http://www.vonwitte.org/index.php/the-witte-system-/the-history-of-building-trans-siberian-railway>> [accessed 25 June 2018].

³⁶ Zatspine, p. 129

³⁷ "Admiral Alekseev was put in charge of both the military forces and the diplomatic relations of a newly created Viceroyalty of the Far East, composed of the Amur region and the Liaodong concession." See B. Elleman, and S. Kotkin, *Manchurian Railways and the Opening of China: An International History*, (New York: Sharpe, 2010), pp. 23-24.

only at the end of September 1903 did the last contingent of Russian troops supposedly leave. In fact, some remained, disguised as railway guards.³⁸

Strangman's journey and visit to Shanhaiguan came at the end of 1903. Just a few months earlier, in June 1903, the Japanese cabinet endorsed a basic policy statement that Japan could not surrender or share interests or influence in Korea with another power (Russia). The Russians refused to acknowledge the so-called *Man-kan kokan* to exchange Manchuria for Korea, arguing that the 39th parallel in Korea should be the line of division of interest.³⁹ The Russo-Japanese War broke out on 8 February 1904 when the Japanese government cancelled earlier bilateral negotiations over spheres of influence in Korea and severed diplomatic ties with Russia. On the night of 8 February, Japan launched a surprise attack on the Russian naval base at Port Arthur.⁴⁰ It is very plausible that the journey Strangman made to Shanhaiguan was to witness the situation in Zhili along the railway line and the coast. He clearly investigated thoroughly and took snapshots of foreign troops leaving Dagū by boat, as well as of the Chinese and foreign ones on train at Tanggu, photographing the hot spots along the railway line. On the other hand, Strangman's visits to tourist sites were equally carefully recorded, making it hard to say whether he might have sometimes been a tourist, or merely disguised himself as one.

³⁸ Zatsepine, p. 129.

³⁹ Conroy, p. 340.

⁴⁰ Zatsepine, pp. 130-131.

STRANGMAN, HART AND CONGER: THE PURPOSE OF THE PHOTO-ALBUMS

Strangman was not a regular correspondent with the Inspector General, but we know that Hart was fond of him. This can be seen in the fact that he mentioned Strangman to Campbell, his London resident secretary, in a letter dated 12 March 1905, calling Strangman 'a good man' when referring to the Customs 'outdoor lot'.⁴¹ Yet we know little about the man himself. Richard Hedley Strangman (in Chinese 师安蒙 *Shi Anmeng*) was born in Stoke Newington⁴² around 1857. He was a British national who entered the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs as a watcher in January 1884, and resigned as Chief Tidesurveyor in Swatow (currently Shatou, Guangdong Province) in April 1918. Strangman spent his 32-year career as a member of the outdoor personnel, a less prestigious role than membership of the indoor (administrative) staff.⁴³ At Customs, Strangman served as Assistant Tidesurveyor from July 1899 to December 1900 in Tianjin, when he was promoted to Tidesurveyor, a position he held until April 1905, still in Tianjin. He was then transferred to Hankou as Harbor Master, while all the other functions were executed in Tanggu, Tianjin harbor, where the Hai River enters the Bohai Sea. Regarding his private life, we know that he married Annie Saikao⁴⁴ 35 years his junior⁴⁵ before 1912, when they traveled from Hankou to Shanghai and returned in February that year.⁴⁶ Their daughter, Mary, later married J. Hildebrandt.⁴⁷ After his retirement, the Strangmans lived in Shanghai, where his wife passed away, on 1 July 1941,

⁴¹ Hart to Campbell 12 March 1905, letter 1367 Z/1050/1, in *The I. G. in Peking: Letters of Robert Hart, Chinese Maritime Customs, 1868-1907*, ed. by J. Fairbank, K. Frost Bruner, and E. MacLeod Matheson, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), vol.2.

⁴² Stoke Newington, located in North-East London, is nowadays part of the Borough of Hackney.

⁴³ Strangman climbed the career ladder from watcher in January 1884, to Assistant Tidesurveyor in July 1899, then Chief Tidesurveyor in December 1900 and finally Harbor Master in April 1905, the highest position in Outdoor Personnel. On 5 April 1904, he also received the Civil Rank of the Fifth Class from the Chinese authorities. See *The Service List, China. Imperial Maritime Customs. - Service Series N.1* (Shanghai: Statistical Department of the Inspectorate General of Customs, 1900-1912), 1900 p. 26, 1903 p. 24, 1905 p. 133, 1907 p. 135, 1912 p. 35.

⁴⁴ 'Mrs. Annie Saikao Strangman', in *North-China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette*, 9 July 1941, p. 62.

⁴⁵ Ibid. In the obituary dated 1941, it was stated that Annie Sakao was aged 53, and so born in 1892.

⁴⁶ 'Passengers', *North China Herald*, 17 February 1912, p. 473, 24 February 1912, p. 527.

⁴⁷ 'Mrs. Annie Saikao Strangman', p. 62.

after a short illness.⁴⁸ Strangman had died one year previously on 27 November 1840 at Victoria in British Columbia, Canada, aged 83. His estate included property in Shanghai.⁴⁹

Strangman's name is seldom reported. He was one of the multitude of Maritime Customs staff, and would never have come into the limelight if not for these two albums. The albums, now part of the Hart Collection at Queen's University Belfast, date post-1900, and therefore were not among those of Hart's possessions destroyed in the Boxer Uprising.⁵⁰ As a result, they were included among the personal effects that Hart brought home at the end of his career in China. Hence, although we have only scattered personal information about Strangman, we know that he had a hobby: photography. As an amateur photographer, Strangman was a consumer of Eastman's invention: the Kodak camera. Eastman's roll film system did not initially attract professionals, who continued to use the glass plates, but was instead considered suitable for the amateur. The roll film system was described as a suitable 'system of photography which could place all of the complexities of photography in the hands of the manufacturers and a simple camera in the hands of nearly everyone six years of age or older.'⁵¹

Strangman sent the two albums and the accompanying letter to Sir Robert Hart, the Inspector General of the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs. Born in 1835, in Portadown, Co. Armagh, Hart graduated from Queen's College Belfast and joined the British consular service in China at the age of 19. After five years, in 1859, he left the consular service and was appointed to the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs, where he remained for his entire career, becoming the Inspector General at only 28 years old. He retired in 1908 and died in England in 1911. Hart was erroneously declared dead during the Boxer Uprising by *The*

⁴⁸ 'Deaths', *North China Herald*, 9 July 1941p. 80.

⁴⁹ 'From Daily News Ads.', *North China Herald*, 6 Aug 1941, p. 240.

⁵⁰ On the night of 13 June 1900, during the early stage of the Legation Siege in Beijing Sir Robert Hart lost most of his photographic collection, and so the actual collection is post-1900, while few items survived either because they were within the diaries or stored elsewhere. For more on Sir Robert Hart's photographic collection, see A. De Angeli and E. Reisz, pp. 40-43.

⁵¹ R. Jenkins, pp. 13-14.

Times on 17 July 1900, but if he was not dead physically, certainly many were hoping he was. As Horowitz affirms, ‘That the premature obituary was the beginning of this tradition of writing about the IG [Inspector General] is fitting. For these interpretations largely gloss over the final decade of his career in China.’⁵² After the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) the Customs Service faced many crises due to growing competition between the foreign powers, the Boxer Uprising, and Chinese nationalism. Hart’s management was also provoking growing dislike, so that after 1900 the Customs Service itself ‘came to be seen, not so much a facilitator of reform and modernization, but as an instrument of foreign imperial power and as a debt collector for international bankers.’⁵³

Strangman also sent the photos to Conger, remarking that he noticed Conger's interest. Although Conger expressed his interest in Strangman taking the photographs, it is not known if Strangman sent to Conger an exact copy of one or both albums, or only some snapshots. Nevertheless, Strangman's statement – and the photographs themselves - prove that Strangman met Conger at least once. This was on board the steamer ‘Hsinyu’ of the China Merchants Steam Navigation Company, where Conger, in company of Captain Galen Clapp Blethen,⁵⁴ posed in winter clothes for a photograph on the deck of the steamer docked in the Tanggu Bay, in Tianjin Harbor, presumably in late 1903.

Figure 7 “On Board C.M.S.N. Co's S/S Hsinyu. US Minister Conger & Captain Blethen.” MS15.6.11.B.12

⁵² R. Horowitz, ‘The Ambiguities of an Imperial Institution: Crisis and Transition in the Chinese Maritime Customs, 1899-1911’, in *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 36.2 (2008), 276.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Captain Galen Clapp Blethen was born in Phippsburg, Maine on 2 May 1847 and died in 1924 aged 78 in Tianjin, China. He worked on the China coast for nearly half a century, mostly on the Tianjin run with Russel and Co., and then the China Merchants Steam Navigation Company. He retired in 1913. See ‘Old China Coast Skipper’, *South China Morning Post*, 17 Aug 1923, p. 12; and ‘Obituary: Capt. G.C. Blethen’, *South China Morning Post*, 30 May 1924, p. 14.

Edwin Hurd Conger⁵⁵ served as US Minister Plenipotentiary to China (similar to an ambassador) from 8 July 1898 to 4 April 1905, a tumultuous period in which to be stationed at Beijing. Like Hart, Conger and his family were declared dead during the Boxer Uprising in an article published on 17 July 1900, in *The San Francisco Call*, entitled ‘Interesting Life History of Minister Conger’. Just like Hart, Conger too was alive and well. He survived the Legation Quarter siege, which ended in mid-August 1900 when it was relieved by the Eight-Nation Alliance. The Congers were well known for their social life, and Hart himself was acquainted with them. In a letter to Campbell, his London-based secretary, after dining at the Congers’ on 29 October 1904, Hart wrote that ‘The Congers have a wide Chinese acquaintance, male and female: no other Legation comes near them in this respect.’⁵⁶ Conger’s wife, Sarah, is well-known as a personal acquaintance of the Empress Dowager Cixi, and the story of their friendship is narrated in *Letters from China: with particular reference to the Empress Dowager and the Women of China*,⁵⁷ published in 1909. Conger and Hart shared some views on the role of Britain and the United States in China. However, their economic policies differed, with one promoting the ‘open door policy’, the other having spent a life ‘collecting the customs revenues’ and managing the Service for the Chinese empire.

The accompanying correspondence to the two albums Strangman sent to Hart is an important factor of analysis. Strangman represented the sender, while Hart and Conger were the receivers of the message constituted by the letter and the two photo-albums. We do not know what (if any) replies the recipients sent to Strangman, so only partial elements of the interaction are available for the analysis. However, from the tenor of Hart’s comment

⁵⁵ E. H Conger was born on 7 March 1843 in Knox County, Illinois. He participated in the American Civil War and was elected as a Republican to Congress, serving two terms. He married Sarah Pike in 1867 and in died in 1907. During his diplomatic career, he was twice in Brazil (1890-1893 and 1897-1898), China (1898-1905) and Mexico (1905-1907). For more details on this aspect see ‘Conger, Edwin Hurd (1843-1907)’, in *Office of the Historian*, USA Department of State, <<https://history.state.gov/departments/history/people/conger-edwin-hurd>> [accessed 22 June 2018].

⁵⁶ Hart to Campbell 30 Oct 1904, Letter 1349 Z/1032, *The I.G. of Peking*, vol.2.

⁵⁷ Published by A.C. McClurgher in 1909.

regarding Strangman as ‘a good man’ in his correspondence to Campbell,⁵⁸ we may deduce that Hart considered Strangman’s message credible on the basis of his ethos (or ethical appeal).⁵⁹ At the same time the photograph of Conger and Captain Blethen on the deck of the ‘Hsinyu’ steamship taken by Strangman shows the pathos (or emotional appeal) conveyed between sender and receiver. Moreover, Strangman’s linguistic choice to refer to the level of interest by Conger (i.e. ‘very much interested’) and Hart (i.e. ‘may be interesting’) coincided with an emotional expression for Conger and an ethical one for Hart, based on his scruple to keep his superior informed. Therefore, the ethos and pathos between Strangman and the receivers of his message strengthened the logos (logical appeal) of the two albums message: the snapshots were at the same time a contingent proof and a rational argument of the situation in Tanggu and Dagou Bar, as well as the developments at the border between Zhili province and Manchuria between late 1903 and early 1904.

Finally, let us consider why those photos were so interesting for Conger and Hart. The answer revolves around two main aspects: the military or strategic material, and the logistics related to the railway. Russia used the construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway as Witte conceived it to promote peaceful economic penetration in Manchuria accompanied by negotiated expansion in China, but finally it became a potential catalyst for military expansion. The Western powers, however, and even more so Japan, regarded Russian plans with suspicion. Hart also worried about the situation in Manchuria; in his personal diary he wrote on 16 March 1903 that he was aware of the Russian intention by Witte, and so he was taking the matter for discussion to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs looking for insight on the

⁵⁸ Hart to Campbell 12 March 1905, letter 1367 Z/1050/1, in *The I. G. in Peking*.

⁵⁹ According to Aristotle, the rules of communication are based on three modes of persuasion: ethos, logos and pathos. Ethos is based on the speaker’s personal character and so the intent of the message should be credible thanks to speaker’s competence, good intention and empathy; the pathos is the emotional influence of the speaker on the audience and is based on the speaker’s ability to persuade the audience; while the logos is the appeal toward logical reason, thus the speaker wants to present an argument that appears to be sound to the audience. See *European Rhetoric: Ethos, Pathos & Logos – Modes of Persuasion (Aristotle)* <<http://www.european-rhetoric.com/ethos-pathos-logos-modes-persuasion-aristotle/>> [accessed 24 August 2018].

Sino-Russian agreement. In March 1903, Hart's concerns centered on the Customs in Manchuria, and in particular Port Arthur, which the Russians had developed to the detriment of Niuzhuang, the main port of Manchuria, on which the trade of three countries in the region was dependent: Great Britain, USA, and Japan. Hart also wrote that Russia had been forced to stop its plan, referring to Admiral Alekseev's policy of annexing Manchuria.⁶⁰

One month later, on 22 April 1903, Hart complained that the Chinese government should have followed Li Hongzhang's warning about Russia,⁶¹ which 'undoubtedly foresaw that Russia's "temporary measures of military occupation" in Manchuria and on the Korean border must inevitably precipitate war between her [Russia] and Japan.'⁶² In the same day's diary entry, Hart wondered if he should join in Conger's quest⁶³ to avoid political policy and pressure, and instead establish a presence through business, and by opening investment. As John Hay, the Secretary of State, wrote to President Roosevelt, the United States had no 'attitude of hostility toward Russia in Manchuria. On the contrary, we [USA] recognize her exceptional position in northern Manchuria.' This statement openly contradicted the American open door policy because it recognized the sphere of influence principle, proving Hay's pragmatic approach. According to Moore, Hay 'might have come to believe that, despite the efforts of the other powers, Russia would attain complete control of Manchuria', and so, 'Hay understood perfectly well that the Russians knew the United States would not fight over Manchuria and he may have been making the best of a bad situation.'⁶⁴

Meanwhile, the situation in Manchuria was deteriorating and, on 13 May 1903, Hart recorded that *The Times* correspondent George Ernest Morrison had called in that day and

⁶⁰B. Elleman and S. Koktin, *Manchurian Railways and the Opening of China: An International History* (Armonk, N.Y.: Sharpe, 2010), p. 23.

⁶¹Sir Robert Hart's diary 22 April 1903, vol.64, Sir Robert Hart Collection, QUBSC, MS15/1/64.

⁶²For the agreement, see J. Bland, *Li Hung-chang*, (London: Constable & Company Ltd., 1917) pp. 199-201.

⁶³Hart's diary 22 April 1903, vol.64, QUBSC, MS15/1/64.

confirmed to him the risks of war between Russia and Japan.⁶⁵ These concerns were reiterated on 2 June, when Hart wrote 'War is decided on,' and wondered if this would mean the disintegration of China, with Hart referring to the 'idi sinici.'⁶⁶ Between June 1903 and February 1904, Hart did not write about war again, which was essentially the period when Strangman took the photographs. Finally, Hart laconically registered in his diary entry, dated 5 February 1904, just three days before the hostilities started, the statement: 'War!'⁶⁷. On the very same day the Russo-Japanese War took off, 8 February 1904, he annotated 'war is war' and also 'omni sini off,' as China must not take part.⁶⁸

In this scenario, we should remember that our protagonists, Conger, Hart and Strangman, were, respectively, the US representative in China, a British servant of the Chinese Maritime Imperial Customs, and Hart's right hand in that situation. Furthermore, Hart's comments proved how he and Conger shared similar attitudes towards the conflict: China and the USA should not take part in the war, neither openly, nor offering support as allies to the parties in conflict. They aimed to preserve China's territorial integrity to foster trade, Conger as representative of the country promoting the open door policy, and Hart as the Chief Inspector of the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs and tax collector for the Chinese government.

CONCLUSION

Strangman's photographs, despite their confusing ordering within the albums, can be seen on close examination to reflect an underlying logic. In most cases they depict military staff, the Dagu forts, and the foreign gunboats leaving the Tanggu Bay. Above all, they bring to notice the doubts and questions of the protagonists of this story: Strangman, Conger and Hart.

⁶⁵ Hart's diary 13 May 1903, *ibid*.

⁶⁶ Hart made a classical reference comparing the "idi sinici" to the fate of the Roman Emperor Caesar, who was assassinated at the Ides of March in 44BCE. Hart's diary 2 June 1903, *ibid*.

⁶⁷ Hart's diary 5 February 1904, MS15/1/64.

⁶⁸ Hart using the Latin expression "omni sini" refers to all Chinese, and indicating that they should be off, he meant they should not take part in the conflict but remain neutral. Hart's diary, 8 February 1904, *ibid*.

Strangman's photos revealed the relief of seeing foreign troops leaving the Tanggu station crossing the Dagū Bar, which meant the resumption of normal activities for the Customs Service. Conversely, photos taken during his journey to the border of Manchuria, where the Russian presence was very strong, sent Strangman's eyes toward logistics and infrastructure, such as the Shanhaiguan railway line and its stations, the Luanzhou bridge and fortifications at Shanhaiguan and on Anshan, all of strategic importance.

These photographs were taken by Strangman both as personal mementos and to report intelligence, and they were considered an appropriate present for such important figures as Conger and Hart. There is no evidence that Hart requested the albums, but the fact that he preserved them means two things. First, Hart wanted to know more or to continue to monitor the situation; and second, that Hart considered Strangman to be a reliable informer whom Hart could trust and who had an understanding of the situation. And, Strangman did not incite too much suspicion taking those photos. Above all, in late 1903 and January 1904, the questions were: was Russia really retreating? And was Japan ready to attack Russia?

Finally, a few words on the use of photography. Although the article examined only a limited number of the 98 photographs in the two albums, it demonstrated that often the historical narrative and its logos are based on the consequentiality of events. However, what we consider, through the lens of the past, as certainties, were for contemporaries mere possibilities that happened to be. Using amateur snapshots can prove useful in rebalancing methods for writing history, reminding historians to be curious about minor events and, in this case, to see the impending major events through the eyes of contemporaries. The choice to scrutinize the photographs of the Tanggu and Dagū forts could have led this research to focus on those places, but instead it was a very short accompanying letter that prompted me to examine a limited number of photos that tell another side of the story. It led to an unexpectedly major event of the time with all the unresolved questions and problems faced

by the three protagonists in this story. Therefore, as Siegfried Kracauer conceptualizes, photography and history have inner connections, because images are a ‘historical reflection whose meanings we may be able to grasp only through interpretation,’ where the historian is called to explore the ‘tension between facts and meanings, between visual details in themselves and the significance discovered through them.’⁶⁹

Strangman's albums and accompanying letter were the ‘ignition’ for telling the story of three men, who, on the eve of the Russo-Japanese War, were looking anxiously at events, troops movements, military drills, and trade patterns. Trust and discretion tightened them together across social boundaries, while their ‘interest’ was an expression of doubts, fears, and hopes about an incoming event, of which they did not know the outcomes, though they surely expected important and irreversible consequences for the geopolitics of Manchuria and China.

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⁶⁹ L. Gomez-Popescu, ‘Towards a History through Photography: An Introduction’, in *E.I.A.L.*, 26.2 (2015), 9.

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