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“A Huge Blunder from Beginning to End”: Colonial Archives and the Hong Kong Commission of Baron Raimund von Stillfried

Luke Gartlan, University of St. Andrews

This paper examines an album of photographs of the visit of the Royal Princes Albert Victor and George of Wales to the British colony of Hong Kong in 1881-1882. As an official commission of the Governor-General Sir John Pope-Hennessy, the Austrian photographer, Baron Raimund von Stillfried, endeavoured to satisfy his patron’s demand for a deluxe souvenir of the royal visit.

This case study emphasizes the potential of official commissions to embarrass their colonial masters and render the mechanisms of colonial bureaucracy open to public scrutiny. As the full financial cost of the commission became known, the subsequent public scandal threatened to compromise the photographs’ intention as testaments of colonial order and authority. The controversial history of this commission effectively ensured the photographic album’s burial in colonial archives as a compromised document of state maladministration. To borrow Christopher Pinney’s recent term, it provides a salient reminder of the potential ‘poison’ of photography for the operations of colonial governance. This paper highlights the hazards of photography for the purposes of colonial officials and the potential of colonial archives to reveal alternative histories of photography’s unruly relations with colonial and institutional power.

Biographical Note

Luke Gartlan is Lecturer in the School of Art History at the University of St Andrews, Scotland, where he teaches courses on the history of photography and cross-cultural visual culture. He has been a visiting fellow at the University of Vienna, Nihon University in Tokyo, and the Australian National University, and has contributed to exhibition catalogues for the National Gallery of Victoria and the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography. Luke has published articles in numerous journals, including *Visual Resources*, *Early Popular Visual Culture*, and *The La Trobe Journal*, and was guest editor of a special issue on photography in nineteenth-century Japan for *History of Photography* (May 2009). With Gael Newton, he convened an international two-day conference *Facing Asia: histories of legacies of Asian studio photography*, held at the Australian National University in August 2010.