

The German Envoy's Vision of China Mumm von Schwarzenstein's Photographic Album, 1900–1902

by *Régine Thiriez*

Most books on Imperial China were published during the last period of the empire, and illustrate the final years of the Ch'ing (Qing) dynasty before its fall in 1912.¹ This is logical, as authors in general have always been more concerned with their personal experience. China's somewhat reluctant opening to the Western world started only in the mid-nineteenth century. "Travel and description" literature is quite extensive for the period, as well as "history" and "civilization": a new world was opening and had to be recorded. We know now that this world was also fast disappearing, and this makes the records all the more valuable.

One of these is an oblong volume, bound in leather and cloth in elegant tones of beige and brown, with the single title *Ein Tagebuch in Bildern* in the center. The only touch of color is the bright coat-of-arms on the top left corner. Even closed, this album demands attention.

The title page is also unusual, being a dedication in flowery gothic print: "Meinen Mitarbeitern in Peking zur freundlichen Erinnerung an ihren Chef Alfons von Mumm, kaiserlicher ausserordentlicher Gesandter und bevollmächtigter Minister" (To my collaborators in Beijing (Peking), in friendly recollection from your chief Alfons von Mumm, Imperial Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary). A four-clawed Chinese dragon completes this title page. Then come a list of contents, and a foreword. The last page is a reproduction of the author's China Medal certificate. The book was published in a numbered, limited edition for private distribution.

Alfons von Mumm, or, to give him his whole name and title, Alfons Freiherr Mumm von Schwarzenstein, was German Minister in two major

Far East countries, China (1900–1906) and Japan (1906–1911) (Figure 1). While in office, he saw the end of the Boxer Rebellion, the emergence of Japan as a world power, and its incredible—for Westerners—crushing military victory over Russia. He left the Far East only a few months before the Revolution which was to bring down the last Chinese dynasty (Figure 2).

He was brought to China by the 1900 Boxer Rebellion. After years of increasing demands and extortions of privileges by the Foreign powers, a very strong anti-Foreign and anti-Christian movement had developed in China, often with the open encouragement of the authorities. It culminated in 1900, starting with general unrest in the provinces and rapidly reaching the Beijing area where, after considerable destruction of missionary property, foreigners were bodily attacked. The murder of the German Minister, Baron von Ketteler, on June 20 marked the real start of the “Siege of the Legations”. Foreigners and Chinese converts were besieged in the capital, until they were finally relieved by the arrival of coalition troops on August 14, 1900. This attack on foreign lives and property had an enormous echo around the world, making headlines for weeks, and consequences were very hard for China as the foreign powers sought political and financial retribution. Negotiating those new treaties was hard work for the foreign envoys who had to agree on reparations and impose them on China. Mumm was one of the envoys, as he had been appointed to replace von Ketteler.

He was 41 years old when he arrived from Germany with the reinforcement troops. A career diplomat who had been posted in various Western capitals—he had been a secretary of the Washington Legation between 1888 and 1892, he had for the previous six years been attached to the Oriental Department of the *Auswärtiges Amt*, the German Foreign Office, and had never been to the Far East before. Although younger than most of his colleagues, he was to prove very successful in these complicated times.² In later years he married a Scottish lady, and retired to Italy where he died in 1927.

The major problem facing him in 1900 was to preserve his country's interests while hopefully acquiring new advantages. Germany had sizeable interests in North China, where it had been granted control of Jiaoxian (Kiauchow) in Shandong (Shantung) in 1898, as a compensation for the murder of missionaries. A local German administration and government had been installed, and Germany fully intended to maintain this situation despite the jealousies of other countries. Mumm did a very good job, the intransigence of his position being noted on several occasions, and his



Figure 1. Alfons Freiherr Mumm von Schwarzenstein, photograph, ca. 1900. Archivs der Auswartiges Amt, Bonn. (Courtesy of the Archivs der Auswartiges Amt)

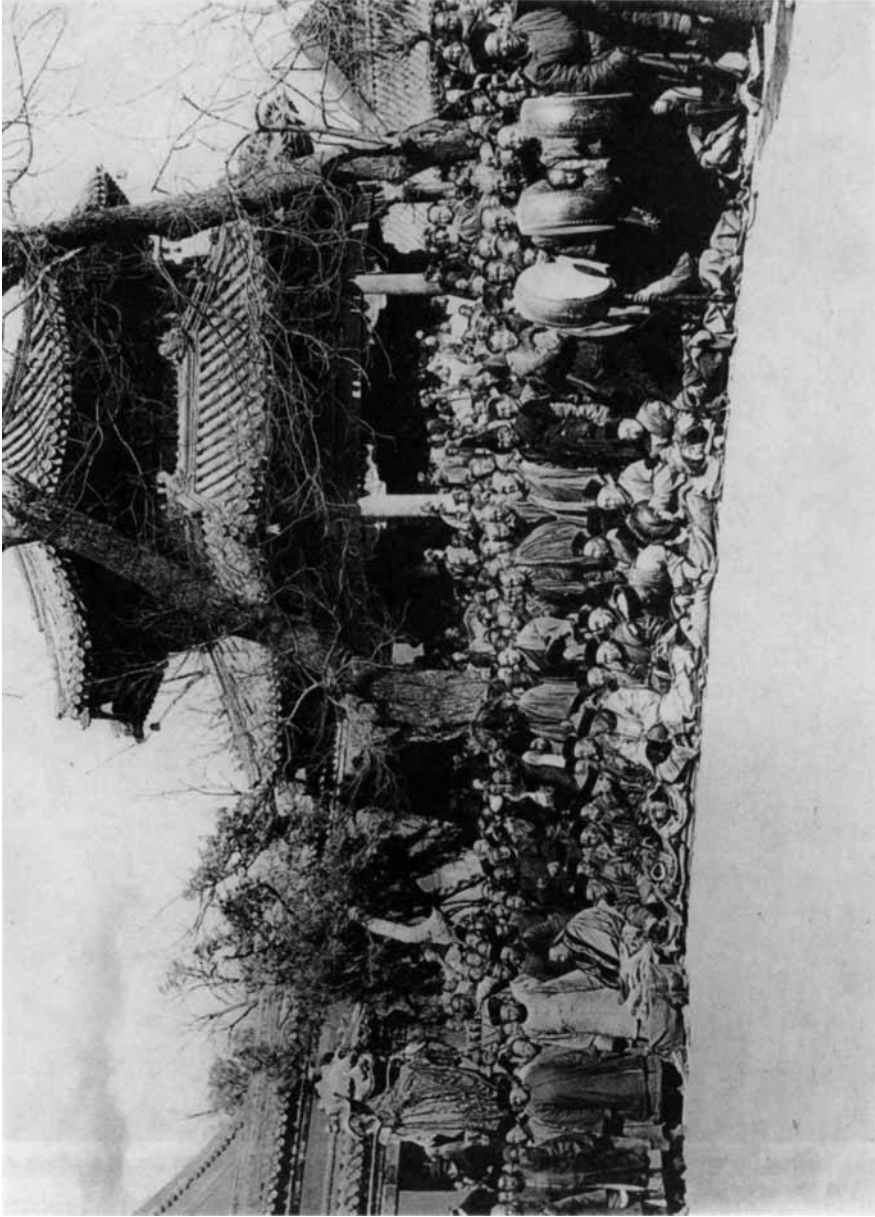


Figure 2. "Audience in the Lama Temple During a Religious Festival," Ein Tagebuch in Bildern, p. 62. (Courtesy of the Harvard College Library)

country's influence in that part of the world was strengthened by the new treaties.

Mumm also produced, in late 1902 or early 1903, a photographic album, *Ein Tagebuch in Bildern*, "A Diary in Pictures".³ It is set up as a real album: photographs are of various sizes, some are straight, some slanted; many are legended but some not, they are arranged by topic. Several views illustrate Mumm's trip from Genoa, but most are of Beijing and North China. A 1901 tour of inspection of the German consulates on the Chinese coast is also documented. There are two hundred and sixty-seven plates, over five hundred pictures.

When did the minister find the time to shoot all these photographs? The diplomatic agenda was rather full in post-Boxer rebellion Peking. Negotiations for new treaties between the foreign Powers and China took a long time, and were further complicated by the voluntary exile of the Imperial Court to Xi'an (Sian) (Figure 3). Could then Mumm have done most of it between the signature of the Treaty on September 7, 1901 and his June 1902 foreword?

The two-page foreword tells us this and more. In a tiny spidery gothic handwriting, Mumm first confirms the dedication. The book was his way of sharing memories with colleagues, friends and associates.⁴ He then goes on to explain that "the greater part [of the photographs] were taken by myself, a smaller number on my orders by my valet Anton Goebel", since he himself had "little leisure" to indulge in his "old hobby of photography". In other words, for each photograph the identity of the eye and hand is an open question.

Another source of confusion is the private character of the publication, as there is no printing date. German bibliography lists it for 1902. This would be late in the year of course, but could be right, as Mumm is not mentioned here under the title of "Freiherr" he was granted on January 7, 1903. Yet even with an early 1903 date, there would have been under fifteen months during which to make the photos and select them; several months were needed for the manuscript to reach Berlin and be printed. So either Goebel was more active a partner than is acknowledged, or His Excellency must have had some leisure despite the demanding diplomatic activity he complains about.

As a matter of fact, there is more to it: some photographs in the book were made long before either man arrived in China (Figure 4). It appears that Mumm resorted to the very common contemporary practice of inserting other photographers' work among his own. In these pre-industrial postcard

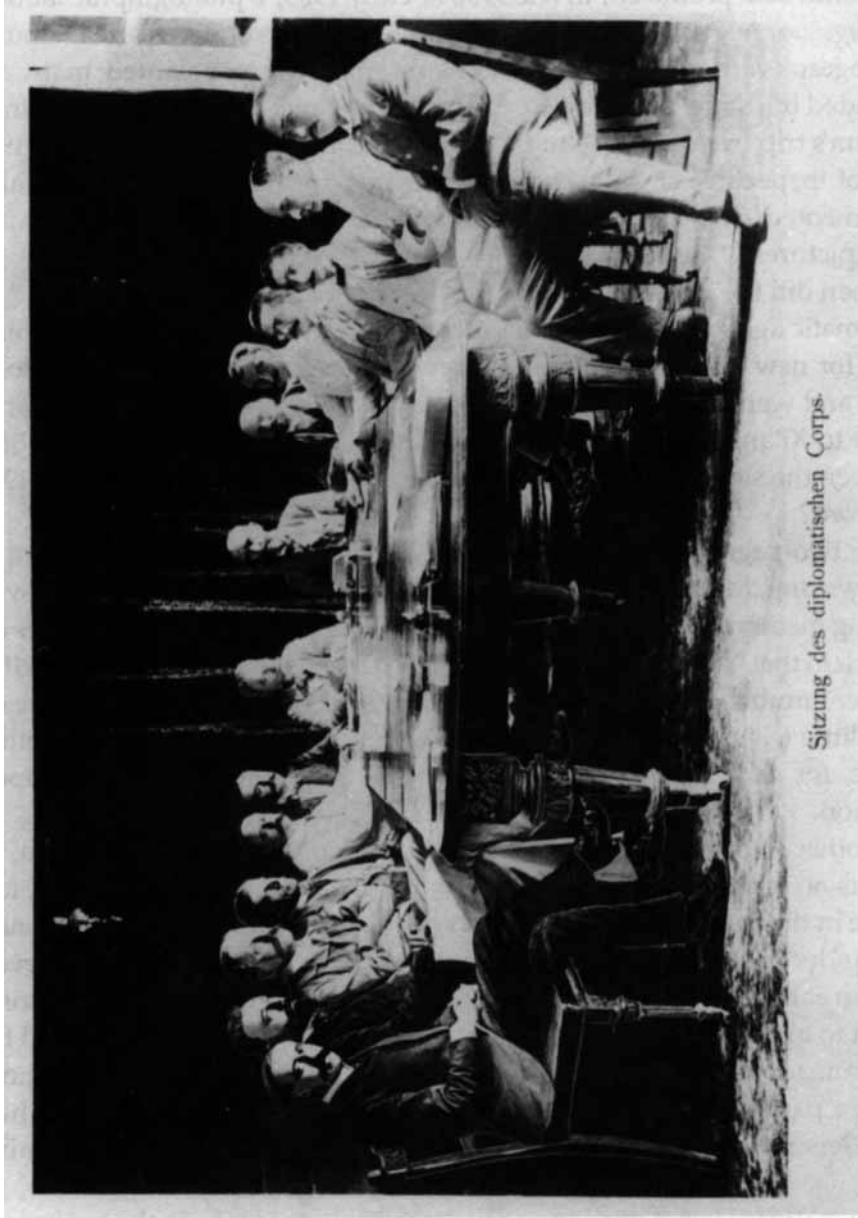


Figure 3. "At Work in Peking:" the Foreign Envoys (Mumm is fifth from the left). Ein Tagebuch in Bildern, p. 265. (Courtesy of the Harvard College Library)

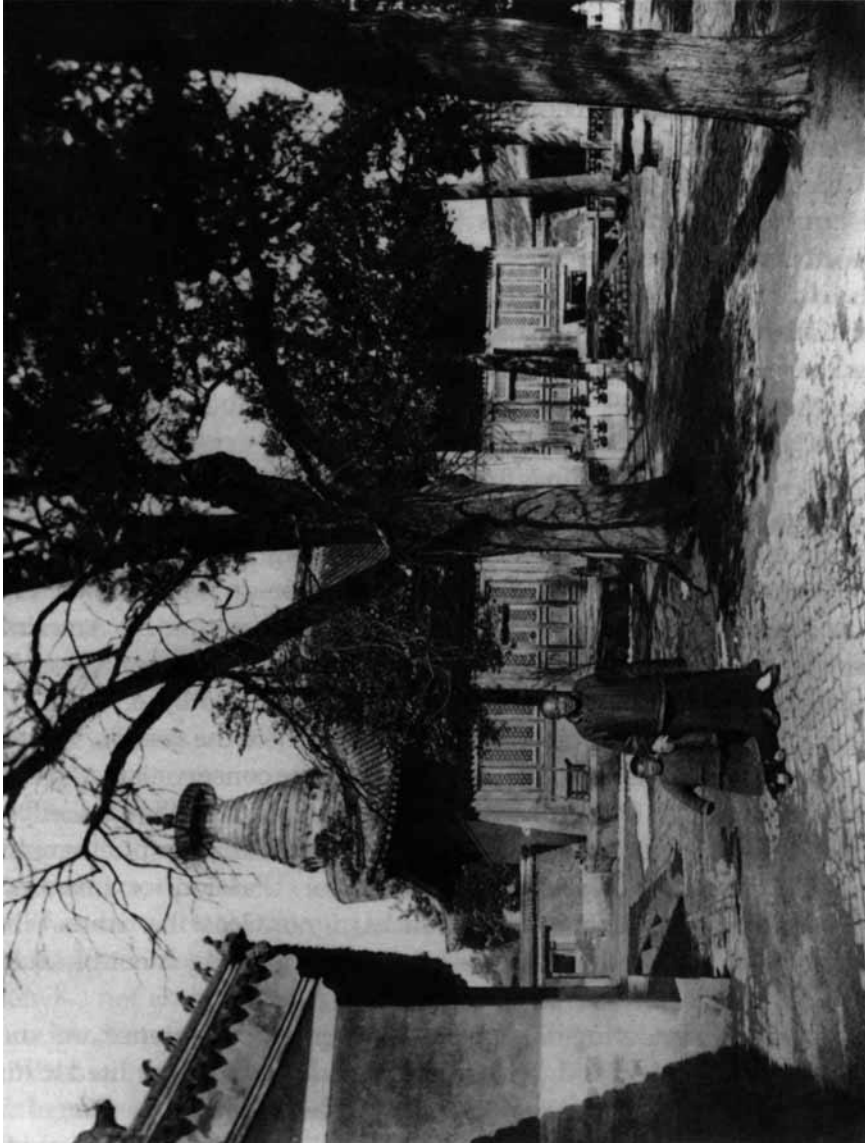


Figure 4. "Courtyard in the Pei-la sze (Baota si), Temple of the White Pagoda in the Western Tartar City," ca. 1875. Ein Tagebuch in Bildern, p. 45. (Courtesy of the Harvard College Library.)

times, photographic studios the world over had a stock of negative plates of various dates and origins, from which they made prints on customer's request. Many professional photographers had been at work in China starting before 1860, together with amateurs who also left a production of very high quality. Only a small number of these photographs was signed on the negative, but in general, authorship seems to have been considered irrelevant by contemporaries. As a consequence, even if Mumm had wanted to go against the accepted practice of his time and credit the older prints he used, attribution would have been extremely difficult decades later. China's foreign population was notoriously transient.⁵

The important point, actually, is that these much older views are not misplaced amongst the later work. Old China was still everywhere in 1901, side to side with the ruins left by the Beijing or Tianjin (Tientsin) sieges, or in the Forbidden City even while it was used for review of foreign troops. In fact, whoever made the photographs becomes somewhat unimportant: Mumm chose to publish them with his own—or Goebel's—work, and made the book a whole.

To go back to Goebel, Mumm's foreword tells us that he was also in charge of developing and printing. The view of another photographer shows us the small portable camera used at the time—a long shot from the time-consuming technique used by earlier photographers in Beijing, like Felice Beato or Thomas Child whose works are well represented in American collections.⁶ Although light negative glass plates were now bought ready to use, laboratory work still required an expert hand—and time.

This bizarre creative association, between a turn-of-the-century servant and a German aristocrat belonging to a corps whose conservatism and class consciousness are still bywords, reminds of the French millionaire Albert Kahn. In 1908 Kahn sent his chauffeur on a crash course in photography before taking him on a trip round the world . . . Passion for a common subject has always been able to erase some barriers, at least in private. What is more noteworthy here is really the printed acknowledgement of such a relationship. Was it necessary?⁷

One can't help wondering if Goebel's activities were so intense and such common knowledge that the "greater part" would have been credited to him anyway—and Mumm discredited. But then, the same would be true of the general attribution to "myself of my valet . . ." of even the older photographs. The China residents who were the prime recipients of the book were likely to be familiar with older photographic albums where these prints could be found. Yet the latter are ignored here. In consequence, this author-

ship maze leads us to a basic interpretation of Mumm's acknowledgement, that of the honest recognition of a fruitful cooperation. Goebel had a share in the shooting, and was thanked for it. In the end, the ultimate choice of the prints to be published had to be Mumm's own, and that makes it his book.

The result is a very interesting document on a world and a man both long gone. The world is for everyone to see, in the palaces and street scenes, the military parades and the landscapes; here is eternal China apparently inured to the passing of time in its streets and courtyards, wounded China of 1901 subjected to Foreign will . . . (Figure 5). The man is more discreet. An educated German, he is sensitive to the poetry of old stones and buildings, and also appreciative—with "suitable" condescension—of the exoticism of the Chinese way of life. He is a nationalist, quite superior, and certainly interested in symbols (so many occasions for parades in the Forbidden City, the ultimate humiliation . . .). We find a man very much of his time, in fact.

Mumm is on every page. He travels towards a country in turmoil where he would have huge responsibilities, still recording his trip as any worry-free traveller would have done. He settles into everyday life as he selects his subjects in the streets and courtyards. For all his Western prejudices against China—and these were particularly strong in the world at large in the aftermath of the Boxer rebellion, Mumm does not try to show the Chinese at a disadvantage. A singularity of the book is the absence of any stereotype. The three "necessary" topics found in most Western photographic collections or albums of the time—opium smoking, execution or torture, and bound feet—are conspicuously absent here. He does not try to make a point but describes what he likes. As a consequence, most of the official character of his mission comes out indirectly, in the military parades, princely portraits, and rare points of view to which he had privileged access. In the same manner, he will not often make military affairs a central topic, but rather passing scenes he happens to witness; the devastation caused by war is likewise not granted more than anecdotal interest—and will be seen only through destroyed buildings, not the appalling misery surrounding them.⁸

What led the diplomat to travel away from Beijing? There were the usual outings North towards and beyond the Great Wall, a vacation. As for South China, he went there on an official tour, as he says in his foreword. In late 1901 he was inspecting German consulates along the coast. This was both a state and an unpretentious affair: travelling on a German warship with Admiral Bendemann, yet being entertained by amateur theatricals . . .

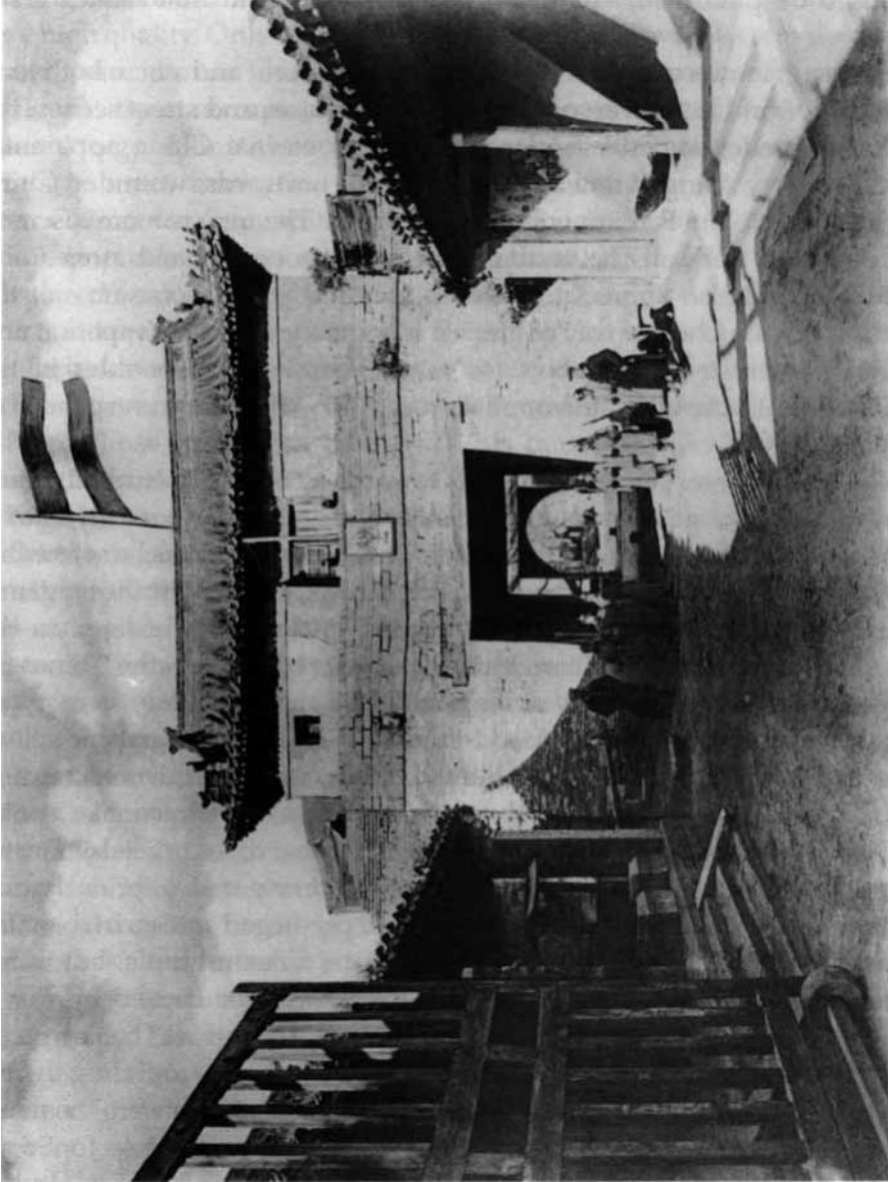


Figure 5. "German Soldiers Guarding a Gate in Peking." Ein Tagebuch in Bildern, p. 45. (Courtesy of the Harvard College Library)

The *North China Herald* relates Mumm's visit to Fuzhou (Foochow) in November, 1901. We also have the program (in German and English) of the entertainment specially put together "in honor of the German Guests" at the Fuzhou theater: "Snow White, Dramatized Fairy Tales with songs & dances, in 3 acts"—actors were the German Consul's family and friends.⁹ (Figure 6).

We have here a picture of foreign life in China, where one had simple amusements like paper-hunts or amateur theatricals and concerts, trying to be entertained while remaining as much as humanly possible within the bounds of Western social rules and manners. There was as little intercourse with the natives as could be achieved—and this was by mutual consent. Things were slowly changing in Mumm's time, however. In June 1901, Mrs. Gracey the Fuzhou US consul's wife, recorded having given the "first ever [reception] given to wives of Chinese officials by a foreign lady. It was as good as a play".¹⁰

Mumm reveals his personality in his fourth chapter, "my travels in the country", where he becomes only an amateur photographer intent in recording both the signs and travel incidents. A sense of humor appears: taking a shot at a photographer who does the same to him, the breakfast table before and after¹¹ . . . (Figure 7). As an ordinary traveller, he has discarded for a while his purpose of "writing" history. Here is the host known for giving pleasant parties and keeping a good table.¹²

Other facets of the man peep here and there. He is a diplomat. In the Forbidden City the British are presented before the Germans. French troops show off the old Cathedral built by their missionaries. True, there are more photographs of Germans than of other nationals, but Field Marshall Count von Waldersee, the Commander-in-Chief of the allied troops, obviously deserves a full page *ex quality* (Figure 8). Mumm is also thorough and systematic (no major spot in or around Beijing is ignored), and sometimes romantic (his German mind appreciates the peculiar atmosphere of the ruined European palaces of the Yuanmingyuan,¹³ ignored by most photographers) (Figure 9). There is a definite sense of majesty in the book's many architectural views, yet the same impressive quality can be found in the few formal portraits.

The Ambassador's album is not everyone's. Few books actually offer so much diversity. The splendidly framed temples at Chengde (Jehol) delight the eye, while the incongruity of spotting the important Imperial prince, keeper of the Imperial tombs at Xiling (Hsiling), posing arm-in-arm with two Westerners, is fully appreciated¹⁴ (Figure 10). The photographs are meant to speak for themselves, to be striking. They are.

Programme.

Theater in Foochow.	Foochow Theatre.
Zu Ehren der deutschen Gaeste!	In honor of the German Guests.
Donnerstag , 28. Novbr. 1901.	Thursday, Nov. 28th. 1901.
Schneewittchen: Dramatisiertes Maerchen mit Gesang & Tanz in 3 Auf= & neuen kostbaren Anzuegen.	Snow White. Dramatized Fairy Tale with songs & dances in 3 acts.
Personen: Koenig Boese Koenigin Schneewittchen Die 7 Zwerge Prinz Otto Ein Jaeger	Dramatis Personae: King Wicked stepmother Snow White The 7 dwarfs Prince Otto A huntsman
I. Aufzug: Zimmer der Koenigin 2. do : Im Zwergenhaeuschen 3. do : Im Walde	Scene 1. The Queen's room Scene 2. The Dwarf's house Scene 3 . The Forest.
Um recht zahlreiches Erschei= nen wird gebeten.	
Die Direktion.	

Figure 6. Program of the Fuzhou (Foochow) Theater, Gracey Scrapbook, (Album A, 1979. 16. a) Peabody Museum of Salem.

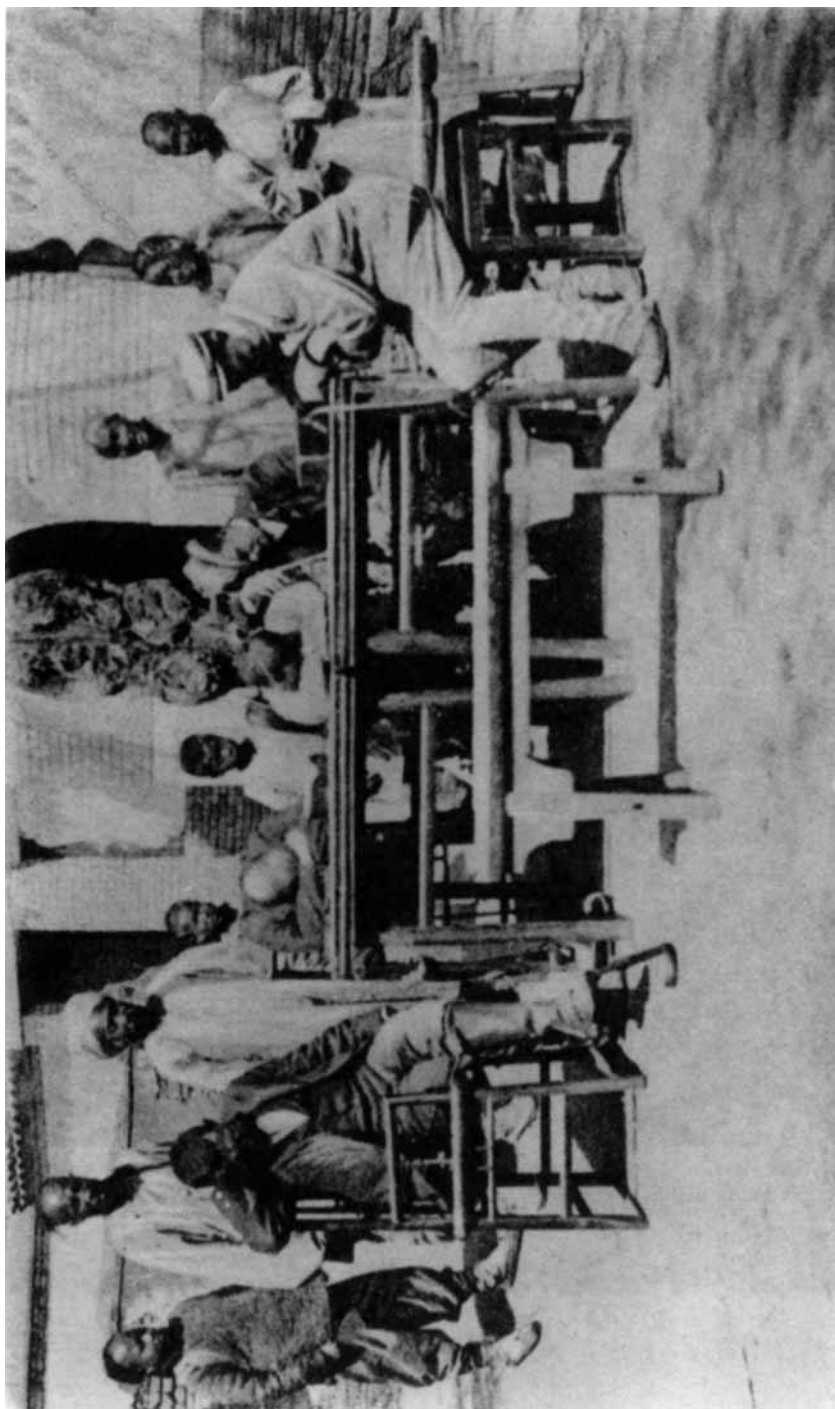


Figure 7. "After Breakfast. . . ." Ein Tagebuch in Bildern, p. 191, lower right. (Courtesy of the Harvard College Library)



Figure 8. Field Marshall Count Waldersee, Allied commander-in-Chief in 1900, in a Chinese Courtyard, *Ein Tagebuch in Bildern*, p. 191, lower right. (Courtesy of the Harvard College Library)

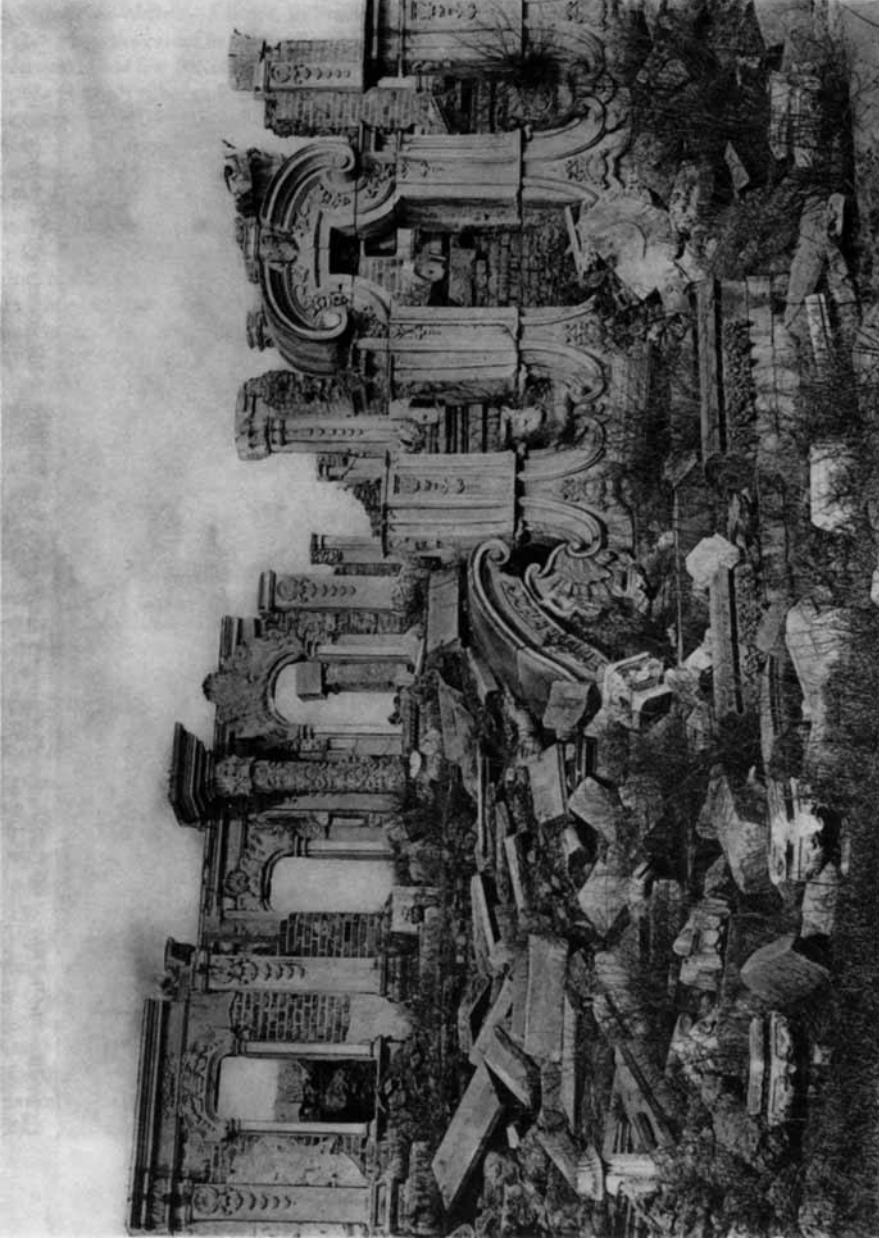


Figure 9. Yuanmingyuan near Peking, Great Fountain and Observatory of the Distant Horizons. Ein Tagebuch in Bildern, p. 191, lower right. (Courtesy of the Harvard College Library)

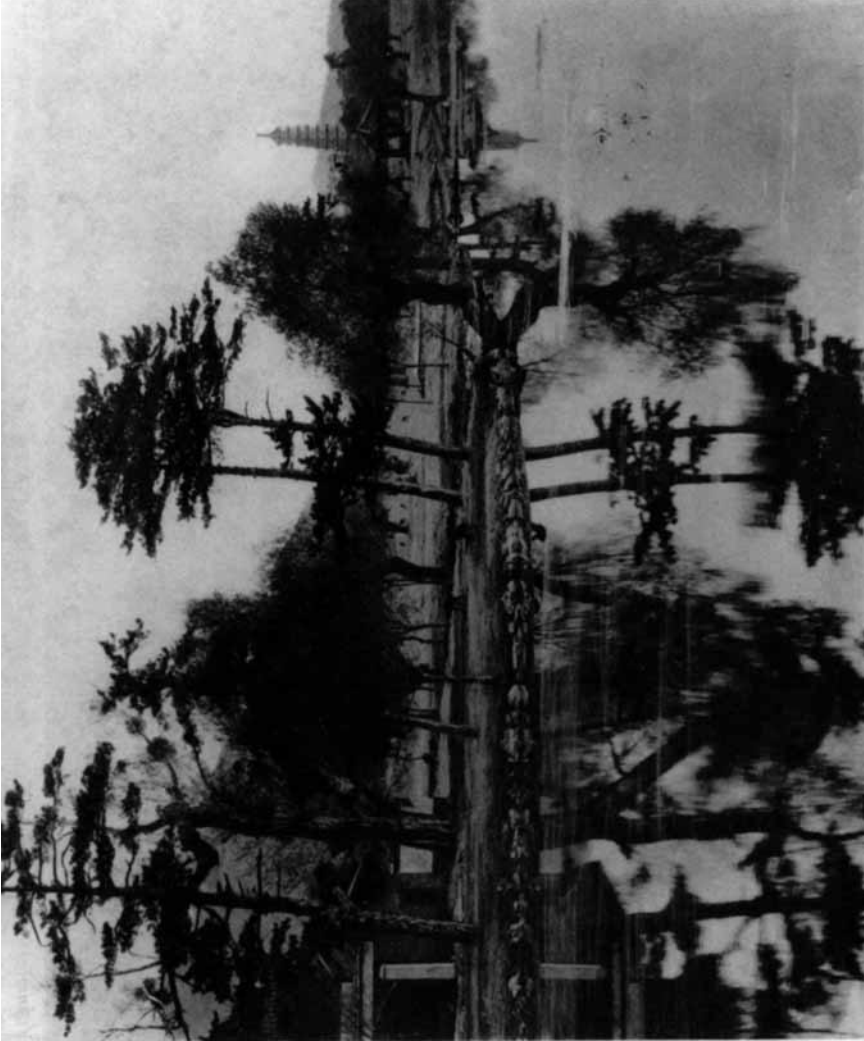


Figure 10. "In the Park of the Castle at Jehol" (Chengde) Ein Tagebuch in Bildern, p. 183, lower right. (Courtesy of the Harvard College Library)

NOTES

1. Until recently, transcription of Chinese words varied according to the Western language used. In this article, to avoid confusion, the system used by Mumm von Schwarzenstein—which is close to the English Giles-Wade's—follows, in brackets, the modern *pinyin* transcription.

2. Mumm's career in the Far East has been studied only in Japan. See Hans Schwalbe and Heinrich Seemann, *Deutsche Botschafter in Japan, 1860–1973*, (Tokyo, 1974), 69–75.

3. His only other published work, *Mein ligurisches Heim* (Berlin: W. Büxenstein, 1915), is an album of photographs of Liguria, Italy.

4. I wish to express my heartfelt thanks to Dr. G. Nöundorf for his kind transcription of the text in standard script, and to Dr. A. Mixius for his complete translation of it. For this article, I am also indebted to Dr. W. G. Wheeler who first brought this rare book to my attention, and to Dr. Breiner who provided the data on Mumm's diplomatic career.

5. Four examples are p. 45, 152 (lower right) and 263 (top and bottom right), for which albumen prints can be found respectively in the Prints and Photographs Department, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York [Album 1991.1073.93], and Far Eastern Department, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto [loose album leaves]. The MMA album is older, comparisons would date it ca. 1870.

6. P. 209, top left. The wet collodion process used in the 1860s to 1880s required the photographer or his assistant to prepare the plate at the last minute by coating it with chemicals mixed on the spot. It had then to be exposed and developed within three minutes. Considering the subject had to remain still during the whole preparation, the high percentage of architectural "still lives" made at that time is easy to explain. "Amateur" photography as we know it was really started by the conjunction of the production of gelatin industrial plates requiring neither preparation or immediate processing, and the availability of the portable camera (in the late 1890s).

7. At this time, crediting photographs in books was still the exception.

8. The brutal vision of China spread at that time by most photographers—see the collection of stereoscopic views of the firm Underwood and Underwood in the United States—is very different. Even less objective than Mumm's, it is the other and more common extreme, where all is blood and destruction.

9. *North China Herald*, 11 December 1901, p. 1123; Mrs. Gracey's scrapbook, Photographic Collections, Peabody Museum, Salem [A1979.16 a.].

10. Gracey; the "first ever" might be open to question, but the comment is certainly a clear illustration of the *de facto* separation between the communities. The Dowager Empress' reception of Legation ladies in February 1902, meant to restore her credit with foreigners, gave a strong impetus to this new form of intercourse.

11. P. 209 and 191, respectively.

12. Lo Hui-min, ed, *The Correspondence of G.E. Morrison, Vol. 1 1895–1912*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976. Morrison to Rockhill, 20 December 1904, p. 280.

13. P. 182–185. Erected by Jesuit artists in the mid-eighteenth century within the walled enclosure of the Old Summer Palace, in a combination of diverse Western and Chinese styles, the European Palaces (Xiyanglou) were put to the torch during the 1860 Franco-British China campaign. Whether because of the odd character of their architecture against the Chinese countryside, or because the burning of the Summer Palace by the British army has always been a very controversial issue, very few photographs of these buildings can be found despite the impressive remains which could be seen well into the 1920s. Regarding the search for photographs of these palaces, see Régine Thiriez, "Old Photography and the Yuanmingyuan", *Visual Resources* VI (1990): 203–218.

14. P. 206, top left.