

A Study on the Perception of Shandong in Modern Western Photography

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Received: 27 February 2026; **Accepted:** 12 April 2026; **Published:** 26 May 2026

Abstract:

From the late 19th century to the first half of the 20th century, Western photographers from various nations entered the Shandong region under multiple identities, documenting a visual spectrum encompassing natural landscapes, cultural landscapes, and historical heritage. These images were not objective, neutral reproductions of reality but rather selective visual constructions shaped by the interplay of Orientalist discourse and cross-cultural cognitive biases. This article examines the photographic practices of modern Western photographers in the Qilu region, drawing on theories of visual construction, spatial politics, and cross-cultural communication. It analyzes the dual cognitive dimensions of Qilu's image through Western photographers' lenses, dissecting the cognitive logic and power relations underlying these images. This research provides historical insights and theoretical support for contemporary Qilu culture and cross-cultural dialogue.

Keywords:

Modern, Western Photography, Image of Qilu, Cross-cultural Cognition

1. Introduction

The birth of photography in 1839 marked humanity's entry into the era of mechanical reproduction, establishing photography as a novel medium for visual production and cross-cultural communication. Around the same time, the Opium War shattered China's centuries-long isolationist policy, allowing Western powers to penetrate various regions of the country. Among these, Shandong, with its unique geographical advantages and cultural significance, inevitably became a focal point of Western scrutiny. As the birthplace of Confucian culture, Shandong embodied Western imaginings of cultural and traditional China. Its diverse geographical spaces and varied natural and human landscapes offered Western photographers vast creative scope. These images formed the primary visual pathways through which the West perceived Qilu, becoming an irreplaceable visual legacy in the history of modern Sino-Western cultural exchange.

2. The Dual Dimensions of Perceiving Qilu in Modern Western Photography

Over a century of observation and photographic practice, Western photographers constructed an image of Qilu rooted in Western value systems through subject selection, content presentation, and symbolic coding. This image simultaneously

reflected the observers' respect and recognition of Qilu culture while being saturated with Orientalist biases and fantasies. Together, these elements formed a comprehensive modern Western cognitive framework of Qilu, serving as a direct visual manifestation of the cultural collision and power dynamics between China and the West during the modern era.

2.1. Symbolic Representation of Confucian Ritual Civilization

As the birthplace of Confucian culture, Qufu became the primary focus of Western photographers. The Temple of Confucius, the Confucian Forest, and the Confucian Mansion—symbolic representations of Confucian ritual civilization—emerged as core carriers of Western perceptions of Qilu. Through Western photographers' lenses, Qilu was first constructed as a “sacred site of Confucianism” bearing profound historical and traditional weight. By deeply associating core symbols of Confucian civilization—such as statues of Confucius, stele inscriptions, Confucian memorial rites, and traditional attire—with the Qilu region, the identity of Qilu as synonymous with Confucianism was reinforced. For instance, German architect Ernst Pfistermann incorporated architecture into the symbolic framework of Confucian culture, focusing on decorative elements like the flying eaves and carvings of the Confucius Temple to explore the ritualistic philosophy embedded within them. French photographer Albert Kahn viewed the Confucius Forest as a symbol of Confucian filial piety and clan order, often centering his lens on tombstones, ancient cypress trees, and ritual scenes. German photographer Heda Morrison documented Confucian rituals and temple ceremonies. These symbolic images constructed Qilu as an eternal Eastern holy city, reinforcing Western stereotypical perceptions of traditional Chinese culture as conservative.

2.2. Specimen-like Documentation of Eastern Rural Society

The Eastern rural society represents the collective perception of Western photographers regarding the folk ecology of Shandong. Through an Orientalist lens of curiosity, they captured the rural life and grassroots populace of Shandong, portraying the region as a quintessential representation of ancient Eastern culture to satisfy Western curiosity about foreign cultures. In their visual representations, Western photographers captured raw details of Shandong's rural society—including old city alleys, village dwellings, market vendors, and scenes of labor. While objectively documenting the fabric of modern rural life in Shandong, these images also served as material for some photographers' exoticist pursuits. For instance, some photographers viewed Shandong's rural society as a “pre-modern” exotic landscape. Their rural imagery either emphasized the primitive and backward production methods of artisans or exaggerated the impoverished lives and outdated customs of the populace. Such images carried a strong Orientalist tendency toward specimenization, deliberately amplifying differences from Western modern society to satisfy Western curiosity about the “ancient East.”

3. Cognitive Logic and Biases in Modern Western Photography's Depiction of Qilu

3.1. Cognitive Logic Under the Overlay of Power

The perception and construction of Shandong's image by Western photographers were not accidental visual choices. They emerged under the triple power overlay of

Orientalist discourse, colonial power, and cultural differences, which collectively shaped the cognitive logic and presentation methods of Western perceptions of Shandong.

First, Orientalist discourse served as the core logic underpinning the construction of Qilu's image. The West positioned itself as the civilizational center, viewing the East as the "Other," and established the superiority of its own civilization through the differential construction of the East. As the birthplace of Confucian culture, the Qi-Lu region was naturally incorporated into the traditional Oriental cognitive framework. Western photographers shaped Qi-Lu into an ancient, mysterious Oriental archetype by emphasizing Confucian symbols and exploiting the exoticism of rural landscapes. This satisfied Western imaginings of the East while reinforcing Eurocentric perspectives.

Second, colonial power served as a crucial driving force in shaping Qilu's image. Modern Western colonial expansion into China extended beyond military, economic, and political domains to encompass cultural and visual spheres. The photographic practices of Western photographers were fundamentally extensions of colonial power. Through geographical surveying and visual construction of the Qilu region, they served Western colonial rule and geopolitical interests. Even images captured by humanistic photographers could not entirely escape the influence of colonial power; their perspectives and modes of presentation remained shaped and constrained by the Western colonial context.

Third, cultural differences served as a key pillar in constructing the image of Qilu. Photographers—including sinologists and architects—classified, organized, named, and interpreted Qilu culture according to Western academic frameworks, integrating it into Western knowledge systems. Their images and research provided academic justification for Western perceptions of Qilu, lending scientific legitimacy and rationality to its construction. However, this Western-dominated academic discourse and its paradigms stripped Qilu culture of its indigenous interpretive authority, allowing its cultural essence to be reinterpreted and reconstructed through Western frameworks.

3.2. Cognitive Biases in Power Dynamics

Influenced by Orientalist discourse, colonial power dynamics, and cultural differences, modern Western photography exhibits significant cognitive biases in its portrayal of Qilu. These biases manifest primarily in three dimensions: singularity, superficiality, and stereotyping.

First, simplistic perception. Western photographers viewed Confucian culture as the sole essence of Qilu culture, overlooking its diverse facets such as maritime civilization, revolutionary culture, and folk traditions. This singular perspective led to a one-sided understanding of Qilu's image, obscuring the richness and diversity of its cultural heritage.

Second, superficial understanding. Western photographers tend to freeze Shandong in a static "premodern" landscape, overlooking the profound transformations in its political, economic, cultural, and social spheres during the modern era. Elements of modernity—such as new educational systems, industrial development, and urban growth—are deliberately ignored, failing to fully capture the efforts and progress of Shandong's people amid societal transition.

Third, stereotypical perceptions. Western imagery equates colonial modernity with authentic modernity. By presenting a binary opposition between Western architecture and Chinese neighborhoods, it reinforces colonial hierarchies and distorts the true nature of Qilu's modern transformation. This traps Western perceptions of Qilu's modernity within the fallacy of colonial discourse.

4. Historical Value of Perception and Construction of Qilu's Image in Modern Western Photography

Despite the evident cognitive biases in Western photographic representations of Qilu, these images retain irreplaceable historical value. They constitute precious visual archives documenting the historical, cultural, and social transformations of modern Qilu, as well as irreproducible samples in the history of cross-cultural communication.

First, they preserve numerous vanished historical landscapes and cultural heritage, serving as vital visual materials for regional historical research. Since modern times, the Shandong region has undergone urban renewal, social transformations, and other changes, resulting in the disappearance of many ancient buildings, old streets, and folk customs. These photographs faithfully document their original appearances, providing historical references for studying modern Shandong's urban landscapes and contemporary cultural heritage preservation and transmission.

Second, they vividly depict the transformative journey of modern Shandong society, documenting its transition from a traditional agrarian society to a modern industrial one, and from a closed to an open society. This includes urban development, industrial rise, and transportation reforms, offering visual support for studying the social structure, economic development, and cultural transformation of modern Shandong.

Third, it offers a fresh perspective for understanding modern Sino-Western cultural interactions. The depictions of Shandong in Western photography represent direct visual artifacts of the collision and exchange between modern Chinese and Western cultures. Research on such visual materials can clarify Western perceptions, misinterpretations, and reconstructions of Shandong culture, thereby aiding contemporary regional image construction and cross-cultural communication studies.

5. Conclusions

The depictions of Shandong in Western photography directly visualize the collision of modern Chinese and Western cultures and the power dynamics at play. These images are not singular regional portraits but rather products of interwoven discourses and multiple power struggles. They both solidified Western stereotypical imaginings of traditional Chinese culture and unexpectedly preserved the authentic texture of Qilu society's modern transformation. While bearing cultural misreadings and power biases, they also hold irreplaceable historical value. In-depth research into the image of Qilu in Western photography not only fills gaps in the visual history of the Qilu region but also provides crucial historical insights for the contemporary cross-cultural communication of Qilu culture.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This work was supported by Qilu University of Technology Social Sciences Special Project, grant number 2025XKY15.

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