

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

REVIEW ESSAY

Transcultural, Resistant, Everyday: New Photographic Histories of China and Japan

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Luke Gartlan and Roberta Wue, eds. *Portraiture and Early Studio Photography in China and Japan*. New York: Routledge, 2017. 252 pp. \$150 (cloth).

David Odo. *The Journey of “A Good Type”: From Artistry to Ethnography in Early Japanese Studies*. Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum Press, Harvard University, 2015. 144 pp. \$45 (cloth).

Kerry Ross. *Photography for Everyone: The Cultural Lives of Cameras and Consumers in Early Twentieth-Century Japan*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015. 256 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), \$25 (paper/e-book).

Only a few decades ago, the study of East Asian photography was still in its beginning stages. Older survey works tended to foreground the work of European photographers like John Thomson (1837–1921), Felice Beato (1832–1909), and Raimund von Stillfried (1839–1911). This focus was due in part to the understanding that, as Terry Bennett noted in his *History of Photography in China, 1842–1860*, “photographic activity in China before 1861 was conducted almost entirely by foreigners,” and for decades after the introduction of the technology there were only a few locally owned studios in operation (2010, ix). In Japan, there were Japanese-owned photography studios in Yokohama by the 1860s; but even so, as Luke Gartlan notes in the volume he edited with Roberta Wue, *Portraiture and Early Studio Photography in China and Japan* (reviewed later in this essay), foreign photographers remained active (2017, 17).

The presence of foreign-owned photographic studios in Asia does not fully explain the popularity of academic studies of foreign photographers, however; rather, this discursive dominance is at least partly due to the appeal of the romantic narratives that were spun in regard

to early European photographers in East Asia. As noted by Wue and Gartlan (himself the author of a 2015 monograph on Stillfried),

It is not surprising that European and American collections of historical images of Asia often featured the works of Western photographers, thus fostering a vision of Asian photography centered on the intrepid figure of the Western photographer revealing the exotic East to audiences back home. The appeal of these narratives has been nearly irresistible, and the recurrent themes that flavor such accounts, including the ideals of the photographer as auteur and explorer, creator of photographic masterpieces that illuminate foreign lands and peoples, as well as visual record-keeper for traditional cultures and distant nations, have been difficult to shift.” (2)

The approach of recent studies of East Asian photography is quite different, arguably influenced by a new and robust body of literature on the practice of photography in colonial contexts. Critical studies and edited volumes produced by scholars of anthropology, art history, and literature, such as Ali Behdad (2013), Zahid R. Chaudhary (2012), Eleanor Hight and Gary D. Sampson (2002), Nicolas Peterson and Christopher Pinney (2003), and Laikwan Pang (2007) have nudged East Asian photography research away from an understanding of photographs as “distinct artistic expressions of individual photographers,” as Behdad writes, and toward studies of the “network of relations that enable the production of these images in the first place as well as the politico-cultural context that made them so rapaciously consumable as visual and exotic artifacts” (Behdad 2013, 14).

This new focus on the power dimensions that were expressed in the act of taking photographs—their collection and viewing—is well reflected in David Odo’s *The Journey of “A Good Type”: From Artistry to Ethnography in Early Japanese Studies*, which discusses the collection of early Japanese “native type” photographs in the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University. As Odo explains, “Operating on a natural history model, nineteenth-century social scientist constructed the idea of human ‘types’: normalized categories of people based on ostensibly standard physical characteristics, which were in turn associated with certain moral or cultural qualities” (4). The Peabody archive was constructed as an ethnographic databank, recording Japanese physiognomy, culture, and demeanor for scientific study. The pictures were also regarded as “salvage photographs” documenting traditional practices threatened by modernization and Westernization. The collection includes images made

by some of the most famous photographers in Japan, including Beato and Stillfried, featuring popular subjects like scantily clad girls (referred to, not always accurately, as geisha), men dress in samurai armor, craftsmen intent on their tasks, and elaborately tattooed laborers. Although the photographs are meant to represent Japan's distinctive culture, their composition and staging is similar to native-type photographs from Africa and other regions, leading Odo to conclude that the "photographers themselves were also well aware of the anthropological market for their photographs" (105).

Odo's richly illustrated study makes several key contributions. He identifies features that attracted Westerners and uncovers their staged elements, including the costumes in which models were dressed (or undressed). In some instances, photographers significantly altered photographs, as in the case of a portrait of a laborer that the colorist transformed in such a way as to effectively redraw the man's tattoos (41).

Even more concerning than their staginess is the degree to which the Peabody photographs reinforced prevailing ethnic stereotypes and were selected or interpreted in ways that buttressed racist ethnography. Photographs of the Ainu, the Japanese ethnic minority, were intended to "prove the group's status as 'inferior' [to the Japanese] by marking them as primitive and different based on clothing, body modification and adornment, dental features, eye shape, and amount of body hair, among other attributes" (75). Odo also contextualizes the Japan archive with other ethnographic collections created by Harvard faculty, including the photographs of enslaved African Americans, Brazilians, South Pacific Islanders and others, commissioned by the anti-Darwinist and unrepentant racist Louis Agassiz (1807–1873). The Agassiz commissions include a wrenching image in a daguerreotype of an African American woman named Delia, who is depicted stripped to the waist. As Molly Rogers argues in a study of the Agassiz commissions, as best we can tell, Delia's eyes are brimming with tears (Rogers and Blight 2010).

Like the Agassiz photographs, the Peabody Japan collection was intended to support the "abstract concept of a 'racial type'" that would, in turn, help define "race as a fixed, natural category"—that is, one in which racism was alleged to be justified by science (Odo 51). Some of the most highly regarded Western scholars of the time took it as their life's work to try to prove, using photographic and other forms of documentation, that white people were biologically superior. This view remains deeply shameful, as indeed it was at the time. The Peabody Japan collection includes a Stillfried photograph of a young woman shown, similar to Delia, in a state

of undress with one breast partially exposed (46). One wonders how many women of color were compelled, by either force or financial need, to pose nude for the white “ethnographic” photographer’s lens. And what is the responsibility of the historian of photography today to foreground in our critical scholarship the evidence of exploitation in these images? Odo’s study makes this issue plain and is an important step toward fully addressing the issue.

If images of Asians taken by Westerners are often fictitious, stereotyped, and complicit in racist projects, this observation throws into greater relief the freshness of images taken by Asian people themselves in their own photographic studios. *Portraiture and Early Studio Photography in China and Japan*, the volume of essays edited by Gartlan and Wue, shows how much we have to learn from “the diverse roles of the subject invoked in photographic sittings, the medium’s association with and incorporation into ‘traditional’ visual practices and cultural systems, and photography’s part in devising modern, gendered, and public identities for its subjects” (1). Local photography studios also produced courtesan portraits, and staging was still common. Chinese and Japanese sitters of all classes donned whimsical costumes and enacted quirky visions of “modern” and “traditional” practices. Nonetheless, it is important to note that a robust domestic photographic industry paid clients the ultimate flattery of catering to *their* tastes, thus revealing their agency and values.

In the first essay of the collection, “Shimizu Tōkoku and the Japanese Carte-de-visite,” Luke Gartlan takes up the “subject’s self-conscious collaboration in the photographic process” (7). Tōkoku (1841–1907), a gifted botanical illustrator trained in photography by an emigrant German naturalist, opened a photographic studio in Yokohama in 1868. His images of candy and flower sellers, and young girls carrying loads of water and firewood, arguably formed a costume series that catered to tourist tastes, but in their specific details they seem intentionally to transgress the visual codes of typical Yokohama souvenir photographs. Female subjects eschew a demure gaze and are depicted in frank, frontal view, showing an unusual degree of deliberate engagement with the process of portrait photography. These details suggest to Gartlan that even the souvenir portrait could challenge Western tastes, and provides a “transcultural site of resistant, everyday counterimagery” (32).

Even when considering well-known Western photographers, the contributors to this volume stress the interconnectedness of the photographer and the local environment. In the second essay, on the case of Milton M. Miller (1830–1899), Roberta Wue stresses that “Miller’s

encounters with these sitters of other cultures and races seem to have sparked his curiosity” and his images “show an openness to other pictorial preferences and cultural ways,” as in his commissioned portraits of Chinese bank staff in Hong Kong (47). Wue argues that “Miller’s own investment in the photograph can perhaps be measured by the technical daring demonstrated in the image: the fearless inclusion of an unpredictable dog in a shot that required a lengthy exposure, his usual confidence in arranging a small crowd of sitters, and finally, his ability to balance the extreme tones of the picture” (48). The technical mastery demonstrated by Miller shows respect for his sitters and softens any negative associations for a photographer whose other portrait work in China has been criticized—for example, by Wu Hung (2016)—for deliberate misrepresentations.

What is certainly true is that portrait sitters in China and Japan were eager consumers of photographs. When hired by Western photographers, the staginess can be exploitative. But when clients commission portraits from Chinese studios like Powkee, the subject of Yi Gu’s essay “Powkee and the Era of Large Studios,” dressing up in front of painted backdrops suggests self-expression. Established in 1889 in Shanghai by a colorful onetime political reformer and devout Buddhist, Powkee gave clients the option of dressing as monks and opera stars, Chinese literati and Westerners, men and women. The creativity offered to and enjoyed by Powkee’s clients shows that the urban photography studio was a “space of glamor, entertainment, fantasy, and social mingling” (65).

Of course, photographic studios were not free-for-alls, at least not if the client abided by the rules of “Matsuzaki Shinji’s *Dos and Don’ts for the Photographic Customer*,” an 1886 pamphlet discussed in Sebastian Dobson’s essay. According to Matsuzaki (1850–?), clients should “wear good clothes which have been tailored to fit your body” (84), specifically in the case of Western attire, and “ladies were advised to wear make-up sparingly” (85). And, he advised, all customers should avoid “a slovenly appearance, a pose that is indecent or anything of that support, or a posture that is ill-mannered” (87). Matsuzaki noted that many clients had unrealistic expectations of their portraits, in part because they were seeking to emulate ukiyo-e (woodblock-print portraits of famous actors and geisha). Other “conventions of the print tradition,” particularly the use of cartouches, also remained popular among photographic clients. These traces of print culture conventions suggest that “more traditional visual media were still being consumed alongside photography” (90).

The overlap between traditional and modern portrait styles is also considered in Claire Roberts's essay, "Chinese Ideas of Likeness," which considers how "the introduction of photography to China in the 1840s was less a watershed event that signaled a new way of seeing than a purposeful adoption of a contemporary medium, and an enfolding of it into an existing language of image making" (97). Local traditions of commemorative portraiture continued to influence photographic composition, while, at the same time, photorealistic elements were incorporated in portrait painting.

Similar to how Japanese customers continued to request cartouches and other traditional textual elements in their photographic portraits, Chinese clients enjoyed inscribing poems and other texts onto the backs and borders of photographs. These often quite lengthy inscriptions are the subject of Richard Kent's essay, "Inscribed Photographic Portraits," and, as Kent argues, they suggest how commissioned portraits could be further personalized and made into unique and heartfelt objects. "The act of inscribing a photographic portrait represented a tactic that might rescue the studio portrait, with its limited, rather homogenous conventions—however wondrous in terms of its verisimilitude—from the realm of sheer commodity" (127).

Another example of the application of a unique Chinese visual tradition to photographs is the popular *erwo tu* (doubled photograph), discussed in Tiffany Lee's essay, "One, and the Same: The Photographic Double in Republican China." These portraits were also popular in Europe, but the Chinese variety evokes famous double portraits like the Qianlong emperor's (r. 1736–1795) famous *One or Two?* They employ the technique of printing adjacent negatives of the same person in different poses or costumes, creating a double self-portrait that "brings to life a plural existence of the same person" (147). Even as commissioned photographs represent the desire to literally see oneself, the double portrait reflects a desire to see multiple selves, or even to see oneself interact with its twin, as in the case of double portraits that show one figure kneeling before, beseeching, or even serving its fictitious twin.

This sense of photographic clients as literal impresarios of their images is heightened in Maki Fukuoka's essay, "The Fluidity of Representation: Early Photographs, Asakusa, and Kabuki," which discusses how "the intercourse between various pictorial media and the resulting images reveal a continuous—not ruptured—development of the visual arts" (160). Particularly in relation to portraits of famous Kabuki artists, many of these portraits suggest what Fukuoka refers to as "dissonant seeing," or "the exploration of, and fascination with, optical illusions that

play upon a perceived gap—epistemological, ontological, religious, or material, for instance—between the subject in reality and its representation” (162). The double portraits explored by Tiffany Lee might be a good example, in China, of similar dissonant seeing. In the case of Kabuki, even popular scripts of the era show the imprint of photography, as with the 1872 play *A Likeness of Appearances*, in which the heroine Kokin watches her husband walk away with the aid of a small mirror. The actor who played Kokin, Sawamura Tanosuke III (1845–1878), was himself a tragic figure, who lost both his legs to gangrene and continued to act with prosthetic limbs. In photographic portraits of Tanosuke III in character as Kokin, his pose is unusual—sitting facing the camera—as is his enigmatic expression. Dressed up to perform a part whose distinctive scene is concerned with the act of watching, Tanosuke III is performing an act of dissonant seeing: his alert posture calls attention to and returns our gaze.

The last two essays discuss photographic portraits of women in China and Japan. Karen Fraser’s “From Private to Public: Shifting Conceptions of Women’s Portrait Photography in Late Meiji Japan” argues that “for figures such as courtesans and geisha, the circulation and display of images were not a dramatic change from previous practices. The use of photographs represented a continuation of existing woodblock printing traditions with the added enhancement of the use of the latest trend in photography” (175). Although the images themselves were not entirely new, what was different was the increasing willingness of women to have their photographs publicly displayed, breaking taboos that considered it “unacceptable for a woman to expose her likeness to a broad audience” (190).

Similarly, in China, “the unprecedented visibility of respectable women in early twentieth-century China was both reflective and constitutive of the profound shift in gender dynamics in in this period” (193), as Joan Judge notes in the volume’s concluding essay, “The Republican Lady, the Courtesan, and the Photograph.” Women were more visible in many arenas—professionally, in educational contexts, even just strolling city streets. This increased visibility of women’s bodies was paralleled by new options to view them in photographs, and whereas photographs had once been shunned by “respectable” women, increasingly all women saw photographs as a means of self-expression and fixing memory. There were still intriguing differences, however; “courtesan images evoked exotica and fantasy,” using props like bicycles and painted backdrops of Paris, “the portraits of Republican Ladies signaled stolid, cumulative

achievement” (202). And, unlike courtesans, respectable women would be careful to retrieve the negatives from photographic studios, so that they could not be commercially exploited (207).

By the 1920s, another photographic revolution occurred—that of the relatively inexpensive and portable box camera, which quickly became a tool of hobbyists and amateurs. In *Photography for Everyone: The Cultural Lives of Cameras and Consumers in Early Twentieth-Century Japan*, Kerry Ross explores a new global photographic industry, pioneered by George Eastman and other innovators, aimed to place cameras in the hands of as many consumers around the world as they could. The Japanese market expanded quickly. Photography was an activity for children, young women, and devoted aficionados. It was both a family activity and something that young students could enjoy. Half a century earlier, Matsuzaki’s *Dos and Don’ts for the Photographic Customer* had instructed clients in proper behavior in professional photography studios. Hobbyists now trained in darkroom procedures to develop their own negatives, read popular magazines, and joined camera clubs, creating a robust industry. Taking photographs was popular, as was the image of the person who took the photographs—creative, energetic, technologically proficient, social, and with ample disposable income.

These three books shed light on how much there is to celebrate in the trajectory from the Western-dominated photography of the mid-nineteenth century to the much more diffuse, diverse, and democratized photography of the twentieth. Not all photographers, or photographs, are benign. Just because an image is more similar to a selfie than an ethnographic type does not eliminate the potential for abuse. But few technologies have tied the world together so closely in our ability to imagine ourselves in affirming ways, as well as to preserve and complement others. Despite very dark chapters in the technology’s past, sometimes we take pictures because we like what we see.

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