

# Asia's Colonial Photographies

David Odo  
Guest Editor

Almost immediately after the invention of photography in 1839, photographers embarked on expeditions throughout the colonial world. Entrepreneurial photographers rushed to locations along the colonial trail across the Middle East, Africa, the Americas, the Pacific, and Asia, to create images of ancient monuments and 'exotic others'. They created lavish albums of photographs, making available pieces of the periphery for sale in European metropolises. Colonised people and places became the ongoing subjects of the colonial lens.

Early research on this rich body of visual material has generally configured the Euro-American photographer at the centre of a Western technology that was spread across the colonial world. Non-Western cultures were first subjected to the 'colonial gaze', eventually taking control of the camera – and their image – as post-colonial movements took hold. Recent work has challenged this model, creating a larger space for discussion of the local inflections of photography within specific cultural contexts. Indigenous photographic practice has come under increasing study, even as Euro-American photographic practice is being re-examined as new information becomes available and previously neglected areas of photography are seriously researched.

Much work remains to be done, however, particularly concerning colonial Asia. This special issue of the *IIAS Newsletter* is an effort to widen the conversation about colonial photography to include more discussion of Asian material and Asian colonialisms. Although by no means exhaustive, the articles here cover a wide variety of regions, time periods and photographic media. Scholars working in a range of disciplines – anthropology, history and art history – have contributed to Asia's Colonial Photographies. Their work encompasses a variety of approaches to the study of photographs, moving away from Euro-American models of photographic diffusion in some cases, and approaching Euro-American photographers and colonisers from a fresh vantage point in others. This diversity of perspectives enriches our understanding of colonial visuality through studies of local and regional inflections of the global technology of photography.

This special issue begins with our cover story by Karen Strassler that challenges received notions about photography as a 'European' technology in the former Dutch East Indies. Most work thus far has focused almost exclusively on Europe-

an photographers, with a few native exceptions. As Strassler's research demonstrates, however, the history of photography in the Indies has followed a far more circuitous and complex route than has been suggested by European-centred work. As she discusses, ethnic Chinese photographers worked throughout the archipelago, often operating through family and regional ties. This served to expand the availability of the medium to people who resided - geographically, economically and socially - outside the Dutch colonial world, with implications that extend into post-colonial Indonesian society.

Photography in China itself has also been subject to a largely Eurocentric reading of its photographic history. Oliver Moore's article moves beyond previous work, which although illuminating our understanding of how photography served colonial/semi-colonial ambitions of seeing, has not adequately addressed Chinese priorities of content, form and patterns of circulation. Without essentialising its 'Chineseness', Moore asks how Chinese photographers and consumers of photographs added cultural value to visual productions. His article looks specifically at how advertisements for photography studios in Shanghai worked as part of a larger discourse that was the cultural project of photography in late 19th century Shanghai.

Hyung Gu Lynn's essay reminds us of another colonial history in Asia that has too often been neglected in studies of colonial photography. His examination of colonial postcards in Korea does double duty in highlighting the fascinating but rarely-discussed Korean case and simultaneously reminding us of Japan's role as a colonising force in Asia.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, colonialism in Asia was not exclusively a European-Asian problem, and neither was colonial photography. Lynn's work also persuasively demonstrates that postcards can be productively included in discussions of colonial photography in Asia, implicitly arguing for additional work involving this critical form of photographic output.

Janet Hoskins also engages interestingly with postcards, this time in the Vietnamese context. Hoskins brings the focus back to the European coloniser-subject, but with the methodological twist of examining the relationship between postcard image and text. Her analysis shows that although meanings encoded in the postcard's visual image were often supported by captions and written messages, tensions and conflicting ideas sometimes existed between what was pictured and what was written. She uses colonial postcards and the messages they contain to understand the interiority of the sender.

Vietnamese material is also the subject of John Kleinen's article. Kleinen examines a unique collection of glass plate stereo photographs that has recently been discovered. These photographs were created by a Dutch businessman working for a German company in French-colonial Indochina in the 1880s, and are the only amateur material considered in this issue. Unlike the postcards in Hoskins' essay, the glass stereographs do not have written captions or messages. Kleinen considers ways in which to use the images on glass to learn more about the photographer and his life in a colonial setting.

In another article pertaining to the Southeast Asian context, Melissa Banta brings to light very-little known colonial photographs. This archival material, which originated with official US government photographs, has only recently been brought into the larger investigation of colonial photography in Asia. Banta demonstrates the significant potential of these photographs to aid our understanding of some troubling aspects of the Filipino-American relationship during American colonial rule of the Philippines. She also finds possibilities for contemporary re-engagement with the material among contemporary Filipino artists.

Finally, Sophie Gordon provides a historical overview of how colonial photographs of India emerged and developed over time, and how these colonial images have been the subject of Western academic, museum and collector attention. This attention has often focused on material that fits well with pre-existing European categories of aesthetics, excluding indigenous concerns and priorities. There have often been tensions between those who privilege the social meanings and historical context of the photographs and those who emphasise aesthetic qualities. Gordon, however, sees these and other dilemmas that surround photography in India as part of an ongoing debate about the medium that has been continuing since colonial images were first produced. ◀

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<sup>1</sup> See my article on Japanese colonial photography of the Ogasawara Islands for more on this. *IIAS Newsletter* July 2006.

Theme Introduction

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ASiA  
Asian Studies  
in Amsterdam



The Amsterdam School for Social science Research (ASSR) and Asian Studies in Amsterdam (ASiA) are proud to announce the launch of the Wertheim lecture website at <http://www.iias.nl/asia/wertheim/>. All previous Wertheim lectures will be available in pdf format for public reference and class use.

The Wertheim lecture was initiated by the ASSR in 1990 in recognition of W.F. Wertheim's major contributions to the European tradition of historical-sociological research on modern Asia. Starting 2006, the annual Wertheim-lecture is jointly organised by the ASSR and ASiA. The ASSR ([www2.fmg.uva.nl/assr/](http://www2.fmg.uva.nl/assr/)) is a national research school and a research institute of the University of Amsterdam where social scientists cooperate in multi-disciplinary research. ASiA is an initiative of the Board of the University of Amsterdam and the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) in Leiden. ASiA's goal is to stimulate, facilitate and broaden research activities on Asia in Amsterdam, and to make the outcomes and insights of research accessible to a wider audience.