

Fig. 1 (far left): "C9 Fuji from Yoshiwara," photographer unknown, late 19th century, Album 32, Courtesy of Kurokawa collection.

Fig. 2 (left): "Sleeping beauty," Raimund von Stillfried, late 19th century, Furness collection, Courtesy of the Penn Museum.

Exotic and Modern

Representing Meiji Japan in Photography

Naoko Adachi

Japan's first encounter with photography was likely in 1843, when a daguerreotype arrived in Nagasaki from the Netherlands.¹ Subsequently, Japanese scientists studied the technology with the resources from abroad and with local support to master this new form of visual representation. By the 1860s, wet-collodion albumen printing became a popular method for producing photographs in Japan, used for portraits of important people and for commercial purposes. In the mid-19th century, when Japan lifted international trade restrictions, many foreign diplomats, scholars, and merchants came to Japan through select port cities like Yokohama. Photographs were popular souvenirs for these visitors, a way to bring back the views that they encountered while they were in Japan. The prints were hand-colored and then bound into an album with luxurious lacquer covers. The market expanded significantly from around the 1880s until the 1900s. Today, tens (or even hundreds) of thousands of these souvenir photographs exist around the world, suggesting that this was an extremely lucrative market. These images still shape the impressions and stereotypes about Japan around the world today, making them an important subject of study. This article examines these photographs to consider how Japan was represented for foreign audiences during the late 19th century.

Souvenir photographs conveyed a wide variety of messages about Japan in the Meiji period (1868-1912). As commercial products, they reflected what the consumers would have liked to see. Many examples emphasize the famous landmarks of Japan, such as Mount Fuji. Some images highlight the distinctness of Japanese customs, establishing stereotypes of Japan that are still persistent today.² Extensive scholarship on Orientalism has shaped the ways in which we think about representations of "Eastern" images found in the "West." This postcolonial discourse has focused on how Western representations of the East disregard or even disrespect the native cultures in favor of foreigners' imagined fantasies. While the souvenir photographs played a part in exoticizing Japan, they also reveal various aspects of Japan beyond mere imagination.

In addition to the images that highlighted the exotic distinctness of Japan, souvenir photographs also emphasize the industrial progress of the time. Moreover, these photographs connect to visual representations about Japanese culture from an earlier period. Specifically, I look at paintings by a Nagasaki

painter, Kawahara Keiga (1786-1860?), who was commissioned to paint Japanese customs and natural life for a Dutch audience in the early 19th century. The visual similarities between the Japanese souvenir photographs and Keiga's paintings reveal that accuracy to detail was as important as showing exotic views in these photographs. Through this discussion, I argue that Japanese souvenir photographs served a variety of complex purposes, reflecting the intentions of both the Japanese makers and European viewers.

Landscapes and everyday life

The most popular subjects of the souvenir photographs are landscapes and everyday life. Landscape images show famous places and architectures, such as large castles and religious sites. Albums were suitable for collecting a series of famous places around Japan or various images of a certain location from different angles. Landscape images often documented the places that the collector had personally visited, or wanted to visit, following a geographic pattern. Furthermore, as Japan was going through rapid change

during the Meiji period, landscape photographs documented the remnants of the Edo period (1603-1867), working as archival resources of the depicted locations.³

Another significant role of the landscape images was to establish a typical Japanese view. Mount Fuji, for instance, is a common subject in the souvenir photographs [Fig. 1]. Most photography studios owned images of Mount Fuji from various angles, and many extant albums include at least one view of the mountain. While Mount Fuji had been well known prior to the Meiji period, these photographs reinforced the image of Mount Fuji as the symbol of Japan.

Images of everyday scenes, meanwhile, depict the lives of Japanese people. The images portray men and women from all ages, including children. They show Japanese people dining, working, performing, and so on. Popular photographs show young women in kimono. One image of sleeping women, titled "Sleeping Beauty" [Fig. 2], shows two young women sleeping in a Japanese household with a small painting screen and a lantern. Carefully composed to show the women's faces next to each

other, the image documents their elaborate hair accessories as well. These images of Japanese women shaped the idea that, as Mio Wakita writes, "beauty of Japan is beauty of Japanese women."⁴ This image follows the common choice of subject in Orientalist images, which often show vulnerable and sexualized women in exotic settings. These photographs provided an artificial peek into the private lives of young women, offering detailed visual descriptions of them and their clothing. These everyday pictures often highlight the costumes or distinct and sensual customs, rooted in the Japanese past, before industrialization and the imperial government.

The carefully planned compositions and hand-coloring of these everyday-scene photographs seem to imply that these photographs are fabricated scenes set up by the photographer. Indeed, the photographs "capitaliz[ed] on the West's romanticized notion of an 'Old Japan.'"⁵ Christine Guth also argues that "the ultimate effect [of these photographs] was to create a fantasy of a simple, primitive Japan that appealed to foreign tastes."⁶ However, I propose that there are more to these photographs than only the fabricated, fake images of exotic Japanese life.

Japan's modernization

Another remarkable role of these export photographs was to display Japanese modernization. Previous studies, which focus on the images that highlighted the exotic culture of Japan, have overlooked a large portion of images that in fact emphasize, instead of hide, Japanese modernity. Many albums, indeed, include images that clearly indicate Japan's latest developments in transportation and engineering. This type of image is not as common as the landscape or everyday scenes, but a significant number of albums contain photographs that show signs of modernity.

A popular topic in this type of photograph is the train station in Yokohama. This is how the foreign travelers who arrived in Yokohama would have traveled to Tokyo, the capital of the new Japanese imperial government and the center of cultural and technological developments at the time. The photographs of the Yokohama station include the view of the bridge leading to the station, contrasting the brick train station and the wooden boats in the canal [Fig. 3]. While the station building itself stands behind the bridge, the title of the image written on the bottom right indicates that the station is the main subject of this image. The image shows people, mostly Japanese people in kimono, on the bridge going to and from the station. With the large mountains in the background, this photograph shows the latest transportation technology changing the landscape of what used to be a small village.

Another example centers the newly built iron bridge while people enjoy a boat ride [Fig. 4].

The title and the prominent placing of the iron bridge explicitly indicate the main subject of the photograph. The contrast with a wooden bridge in the background further highlights the advancement of modern engineering in Japan. The people on the boat seem casual and relaxed, showing two men drinking. This image presents how Japanese daily life embraced modern technology in the late 19th century. Western-style brick buildings or steamships in the bays are also popular photographic subjects that signify European and American presence in Japan. These images highlight that the technological development of Japan was far-reaching in the era.

Looking at a variety of images that appear in Japanese souvenir albums, the photographs clearly show more than just fabricated exotic scenes. Views of Mount Fuji or of beautiful young women were indeed popular subjects that reinforced exotic Japanese images. Some previous studies have suggested that the photographic images were “purposely avoiding the new Western-style buildings, railroads and other technological advancements that indicated the changes taking place in nineteenth century Japan.”⁷ However, as I have clearly shown with multiple examples, the souvenir photographs also revealed the development of Japan as a modern nation. As a travel guide from this period explains, travelers could easily travel on the train by the 1890s.⁸ Such development in transportation technology was in fact the result of foreign advisors, who were scholars, engineers, and politicians who were hired by the Japanese government. They brought to Japan the latest technology from their home countries. These photographs showed how Japanese people embraced the achievements of foreign advisors around this period.

Documenting Japan before photography

Even before photography, current and accurate documentation of foreign countries was an important part of European visual culture. Here, I look at the documentation

of Japanese people for the Dutch audience made in the early 19th century as a prehistory to photographic representations.

Today, several Dutch museums own significant collections of Japanese images that were made for export.⁹ Philipp F. von Siebold is particularly known for amassing a large collection of Japanese objects, which makes up the Siebold collection as well as the foundational collection at the Museum Volkenkunde, both in Leiden. Siebold was a German physician and botanist, who traveled to Japan from Holland in 1823 and lived in Nagasaki as a teacher and a researcher. He hired the professional painter Kawahara Keiga, to make detailed depictions of Japanese people, customs, architecture, and natural life. Keiga was a prolific painter who likely had a large workshop to cater to the Dutch commissioners. Keiga's paintings traveled to Europe after they passed the strict censors of the Japanese government.¹⁰ His paintings of Japanese people and their occupations are particularly interesting as a comparative example with the souvenir photography.

Keiga produced multiple series of portraits that feature various occupations in Japan. These are descriptive illustrations that focus on one person or a group of people, highlighting their clothing and belongings with little details of their surroundings. For instance, an image of a blind masseur is from a series of ink paintings from the 1820s that show individuals in their respective occupations at the Museum Volkenkunde [Fig. 5].

The choice of subject and the simple composition of this illustration resemble photographs made after the 1870s. Felice Beato and other photographers produced many images similar to this type of occupations images, though it is unlikely that photographers in Japan would have had access to Keiga's illustrations. Figure 6 is a photograph of a blind masseur. The illustration and the photograph both show the bald men with their eyes shut. Their closed eyes and the canes signal the blindness. The postures of the models and the things they are holding correspond to each other. Rather than creating an imaginary scene with specific



Fig. 5 (above): “Blind musicians and a blind masseur” (RV-1-4483-15), Kawahara Keiga, 1823-1829, Courtesy of Museum Volkenkunde.

Fig. 6 (right): Untitled (Blind Masseur), photographer unknown, late 19th century, Furness collection, Courtesy of the Penn Museum.



settings, this pair focuses on the costumes and bodily characteristics. Though space is limited to discuss other examples, there are other pairs that show similarities between Keiga's illustrations and souvenir photographs.

These comparisons suggest that the producers of these images likely understood that their clients liked simple and legible illustrations. In these depictions, exoticization, or the exaggeration of how distinct Japanese culture is from the Dutch, is a part of the visual rhetoric but not the central purpose of the image.¹¹ Rather, the images provide information about how various individuals are dressed for respective occasions in clear ways.

These examples show that the Dutch observed Japan decades before photographs documented Japanese lives. Through this comparison, I do not intend to suggest that Keiga's paintings had direct influence on the souvenir photographs. Rather, I suggest that the similarities of the visual elements in both contexts suggest that they likely had similar roles. These images demonstrated not just the exotic fantasy about Japan but also the simple and clear documentation of the current industrial and cultural developments in Japan. In addition to fulfilling Western curiosities about Japanese culture as exotic subjects, these images that traveled abroad also helped frame Japan's current status for the Dutch audiences.

Conclusion

Japanese souvenir photographs have often been described as fake, artificial images of Japan. While this is true for some of the photographs, this is not the only type of images that these early Japanese photographers produced. The photographs show the latest industrial and cultural developments of Japan as well, highlighting the engineering and transportation technologies in Japan. These photographs were an arena for a wide variety of images, and they had various purposes according to the desires of both the makers and the buyers. The motive to present the candid state of other nations was common even before photography, as Keiga's paintings have shown. Close examination of the Japanese photographs unfolds nuanced ways of looking at images for foreign viewership.

The complex meanings of the souvenir photographs are important to grasp a holistic understanding of the relationship between Japan and the Euro-American visitors during

the Meiji period. In addition to imposing buyers' imaginary views on Japan, the photographs showed Japan as a competitive industrial nation quickly learning European science from European visitors themselves. As Japan adapted European science, fashion, and politics, Japan was also becoming a military empire as well. As representations of the tumultuous transformation that was the Meiji period, the souvenir photographs deserve multifaceted perspectives for analysis.

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Notes

- 1 Nihon Shashinshi Gaisetsu (Tōkyō: Iwanami Shoten, 1999), 6.
- 2 David Odo, *The Journey of a Good Type* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Peabody Museum Press, Harvard University, 2015).
- 3 Morihiro Satō, *Topogurafi No Nihon Kindai* (Tokyo: Seikyūsha, 2011).
- 4 Mio Wakita, *Staging Desires* (Berlin: Reimer, 2013) 82.
- 5 Anne Nishimura Morse, “Souvenirs of ‘Old Japan’” in Sebastian Dobson et al. *Art & Artifice* (Boston, MA: MFA Publications, 2004) 41. David Odo described these photographs as “imagined Japan, ... material manifestations of foreign attitudes about Japan during the period” Odo, *The Journey of “a Good Type,”* 4, 27.
- 6 Christine Guth, *Longfellow's Tattoos* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004) 41, 51.
- 7 Karen Fraser, *Photography and Japan* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011) 40.
- 8 John Murray, Basil Hall Chamberlain, and W. B. Mason *A Handbook for Travellers in Japan* (London: J. Murray) 1891.
- 9 Though the Netherlands was the only European nation to participate in trade with Japan, Japanese objects traveled all across Europe after arriving in the Netherlands. The export objects thus targeted European people beyond the Dutch.
- 10 Ken Vos, Matthi Forrer, *Kawahara Keiga: Photographer without a Camera* (Leiden: Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, 1987).
- 11 Kobayashi Jun'ichi, *Siboruto to Kawahara Keiga - “Edo jinbutsu gajo” wo megutte* (Asahi shinbun shuppan, 2016).



Fig. 3 (above): “18 Railway station, Yokohama,” photographer unknown, late 19th century, Album 63, Courtesy of Kurokawa collection.

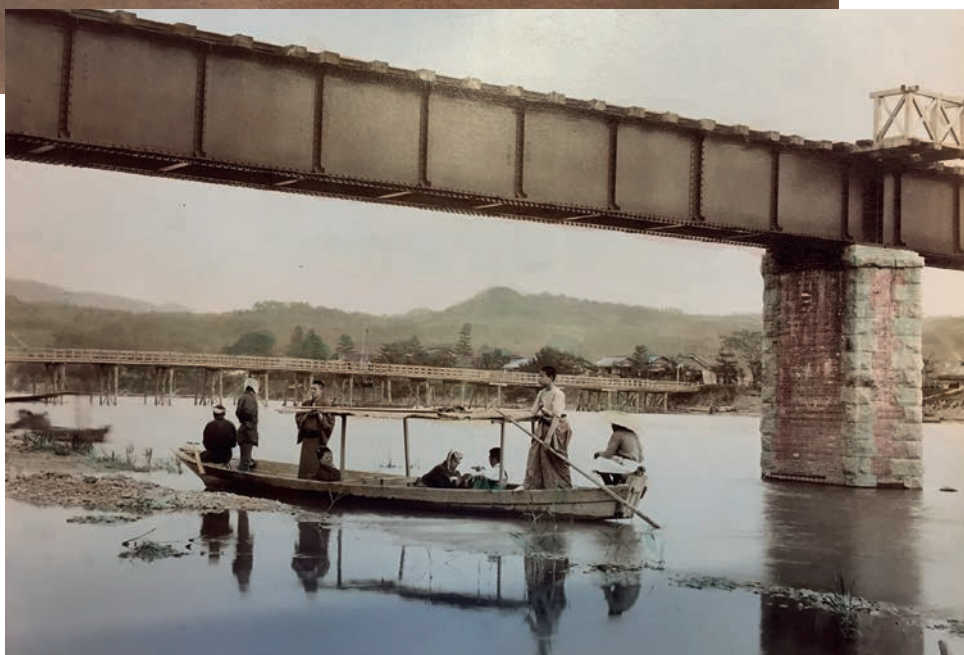


Fig. 4 (below): “702 To look over iron bridge from Uji river” from *Photograph album of a trip to Japan* (Ms. Coll. 833), photographer unknown, late 19th century, Courtesy of the Kislak Center for Special Collections, University of Pennsylvania Libraries.