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Photographing the Ogasawara Islands: thinking

Early Japanese photography – like so many other elements of Japanese modernity – has often been considered a mere by-product of interaction between western technical know-how and traditional Japanese aesthetics. Academic approaches to understanding the photography of Meiji Japan (1868-1912) have likewise been hampered by what could be called an isolated aesthetics, where images are divorced from their social context even as they are mined for ‘evidence’ in what they purportedly tell us about Japanese history or customs.



Fig.1 - Kusakabe Kimbei, 641 Wisteria at Kameido, ca 1860-1900
Hand-tinted Albumin Print, 21.3 x 27cm
Collection of Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution
Views such as this beautifully coloured image of wisteria in bloom over a pond on the grounds of a Tokyo temple, with people standing on a gracefully arching bridge in the background, were mass produced and collected by tourists from all over the western world.

a discrete group in both subject matter and format and are an excellent example of early Japanese use of photography. These images of First Settler subjects in *carte de visite* format (figure 2) are not duplicated in other collections, and no negatives appear to have survived; analysing them first requires an understanding of their photographic genre.

Patented in 1854 by the Parisian photographer André Disdéri, the *carte de visite* gained worldwide popularity in the last half of the 19th century. These ‘calling card’ photographs were albumin prints measuring 6cm x 10cm, pasted on cardboard and sold at inexpensive prices, which made mass production (and big profits) possible. Beginning in the 1860s, particularly in Europe and America, *cartes de visite* became a kind of social currency among members of the bourgeoisie (Poole 1997:109). Exchanged between friends and acquaintances, they were collectible and often arranged and captioned in albums. Images of famous people – royals, actors, politicians, war heroes – sold particularly well.

The subjects of *cartes de visite*, however, were not exclusively the middle and upper classes of Europe and America. Human curiosities became a favourite subject; photographers travelled the colonised world to capture ‘native’ types, and at home sought photographs of urban and working class ‘others’. In contrast to the bourgeois *carte de visite*, in which individuals self-consciously presented themselves to the camera and participated in creating and circulating their photographs, ‘type’ photographs often used models and created an ‘aesthetics of the same’, wherein images of often (but not always) anonymous subjects were arranged in albums under headings such as ‘natives’, ‘peasants’ and other ‘exotics’ (Poole 1997:116,119). ‘Types’ were generally photographed in the controlled conditions of a studio. The bulky *carte de visite* camera, capable of taking multiple exposures on a single negative plate either through a system of multiple lenses that could be used separately or through a mechanism that rotated the plate, made the process efficient and cost-effective.² The photographer usually posed the subject against a plain backdrop in an attempt to neutralise context.

Interpreting historical photographs requires situating them within the specific places they occupy within given genres. Though often difficult (as here), photographs must also be examined within the realm of consumption – where their meaning is created. We can then probe the possible lives of the images, their original contexts and possible meanings.

The names of the subjects are not written on the Ogasawara *cartes* (the captions here are my own). Photographed alone or in groups of couples, children or families (figure 3), subjects are not posed against a neutral backdrop that strips away context, as is commonly seen in both studio and field *carte de visite* photographs of ‘types’. Some subjects are posed in front of a thatched dwelling. Others feature couples photographed in an open space with no readily identifiable cultural markers other than clothing (figure 4). Although they are identified by name in one of the larger photographs held in the national collections, the subjects in the photograph of the Bravo family (figure 5) are as anonymous as in the other *cartes*.

Although these photographs could easily be categorised as ‘repressive’ or ‘colonial’, nothing on the forensic level inherently exoticises or dehumanises their subjects. Without knowing the circumstances of production or the ways in which they were consumed, one might interpret many of these as

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Furthermore, the focus of most research has been on one category of image – commercial tourist photography (figure 1) – thereby ignoring photographs produced for consumption within Japan. Much of this earlier work relentlessly pursued biographies of so-called master photographers, defined as such by the connoisseurship of collectors and dealers and the scholarship of academics and curators. One way to expand the discussion is to focus on images produced by photographers for the domestic (in other words, non-tourist) market, and to start to ‘think with’ these images to explore not only their historical and cultural contexts, but the role of the photographs themselves. Early Japanese photography of the previously uninhabited Ogasawara Islands, some 1,000km south of Tokyo in the Pacific, provides an interesting possibility for such exploration.

Formerly known as the Bonin Islands, the Ogasawara Islands are home to the descendants of a 19th century settlement of Americans, Europeans, Polynesians and Japanese. The original settlement party, organised under the auspices of the British consul in Hawaii, set sail from Honolulu in 1830 and formed the first permanent colony. It remained more or less independent until Japan’s colonial expedition to Ogasawara in 1875. After having satisfied several western governments that the rights of their citizens would be protected under its rule, Japan sent representatives of four ministries along with 13 settlers to Ogasawara aboard the warship *Meiji Maru*. By 1882 all non-Japanese Islanders were naturalized as Japanese citizens.

The islands’ photographic representation was integral to the expedition and exemplifies Japan’s use of photography as a bureaucratic and political tool in colonial expansion.¹ Early government projects, such as photo-documenting the colonisation of Hokkaido in 1871 and conducting a photographic survey of ancient religious sites and cultural treasures in west-

ern Japan in 1872, were intended to record and preserve, but what most influenced such projects was the growing belief that photography could record reality in unmediated terms. The government further understood that the unlimited reproducibility of photographs made it possible to disseminate them as never before, providing an unprecedented opportunity to influence public knowledge.

Matsuzaki Shinji (1850-?), a commercially successful Tokyo photographer, was retained for the Ogasawara Expedition, the first time the government paid a photographer to work in such a capacity. He had served the previous year as the self-appointed, unpaid photographer of Japan’s failed 1874 attempt to take over Taiwan (then Formosa). Matsuzaki was contracted to produce 1,000 photographs and received permission to sell an unlimited number to the general public. Relatively few of his Ogasawara images survive: the Tokyo National Museum, the National Archives, a private collection, and the Ogasawara Village Department of Education hold a total of 67 photographs.

Based on subject matter, Matsuzaki’s Ogasawara photographs can be divided into three categories: ‘landscape’, ‘Japanese’ and ‘First Settler’. Landscapes show only the ‘natural’ environment of the islands and attempt to exclude all evidence of human presence; Japanese photographs feature members of the Japanese expedition party or Japanese material culture; First Settler photographs capture the non-Japanese people who first settled the islands, their descendants or their material culture. These categories are not perfect – many images might fall somewhere in between – but they are a useful starting point in analysing the photographs as they provide a basis for understanding what the producers of the images deemed worth photographing.

Calling cards

I am going to limit my discussion here to the 11 images held by the Ogasawara Village Department of Education; they form

with 19th century photographs of Japan



Fig.2 - Matsuzaki Shinji, Portrait of a Family, 1875



Fig.3 - Matsuzaki Shinji, Portrait of Lesart Family, 1875



Fig.5 - Matsuzaki Shinji, Portrait of Bravo Family, 1875

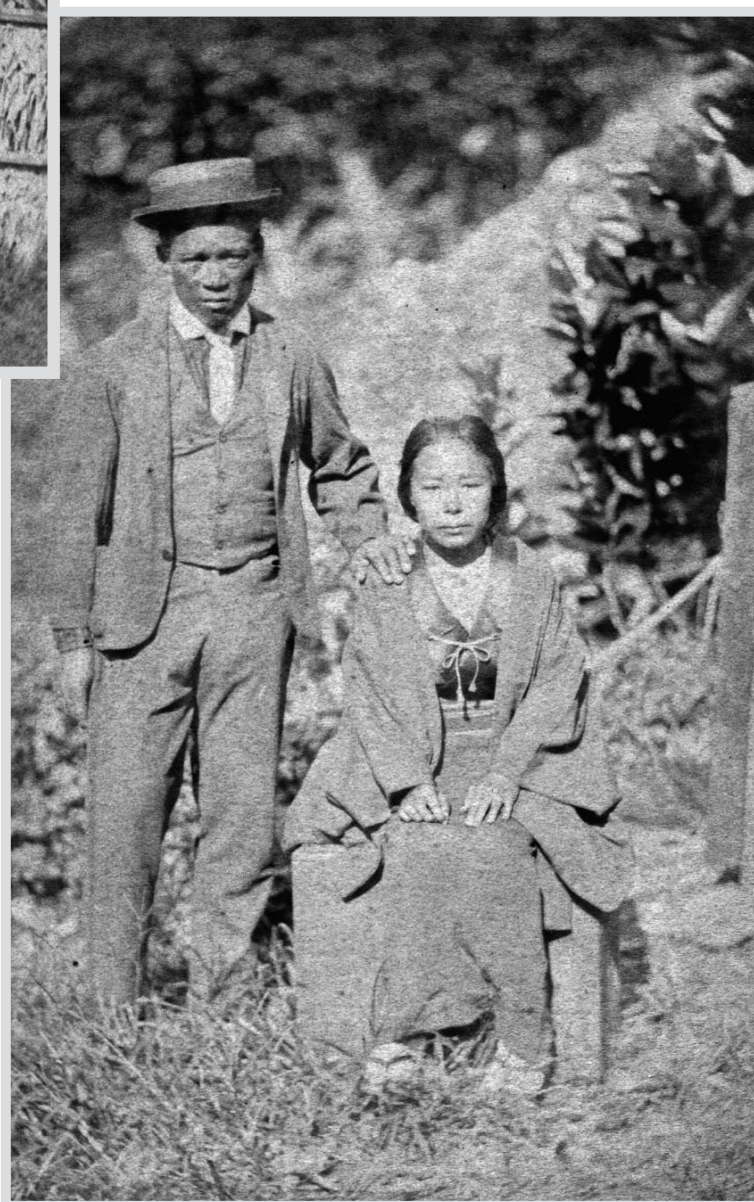


Fig.4 - Matsuzaki Shinji, Portrait of Couple, 1875

equivalent to the bourgeois photographs taken in fashionable studios. Men, and almost all of the women, are dressed in European clothes; except for the rustic outdoor location, one could imagine that these photographs were produced for paying customers rather than a colonial government. However, whether the prints were sold commercially, archived by the government, or both, the subjects were clearly not the paying clients of the government-hired photographer.

Thinking about photographs

What can we say about the consumption of the photographs? Although produced under the same circumstances as the photographs held in the national collections, these *cartes de visite* followed a disappearing trajectory. By this I do not mean the actual 11 *cartes* in the village's collection, for their biographies are relatively well understood. The photographs themselves were in the private collection of Obana Sakusuke, the first colonial governor of Ogasawara and the official responsible for retaining Matsuzaki's services for the expedition. Obana was personally interested in photography and deeply involved in the colonisation of the Ogasawara Islands (Morita 2002). His papers (including photographs) were eventually archived by the Tokyo Metropolitan government, which in turn deposited them with Ogasawara's Department of Education. It is unclear, however, whether additional prints of the *cartes* were originally archived with the other expedition photographs that now form the national collections, or whether they were indeed never included with the other photographs.

Because Matsuzaki's subjects were not bourgeois customers paying for studio portraits, it is tempting to assume that the colonial photographer produced images of an exotic other for government and possibly Japanese public consumption; that individuals could order a set of the photographs and arrange them in their own albums; and that the photographs might have been collected together with others of 'internal exotics', such as Ainu or Okinawans, with collectors adding their own caption to explain the 'Ogasawara type'. But no such album has ever been found, and no concrete evidence exists of commercial consumption of the *cartes de visite*, as opposed to the other photographs, which were advertised for sale at the time of production and subsequently found in a commercially obtained collection.

All this makes one wonder if the government considered the *cartes* unworthy of archiving, perhaps because their smaller image size lacked the clarity of the larger-sized photographs,

rendering them inferior for viewing purposes. This is unlikely, however, since the government commissioned the photographs at great expense and would have expected Matsuzaki to produce a suitable product. Instead, their absence in the national collections might reflect the government's fear that the Japanese claim to the islands could be challenged if the existence of citizens from western nations in Ogasawara became widely known.

I propose rather that the original collector, Obana Sakusuke, used the *cartes* in his management of the colony. Even if the national government did not value them, Obana could have had Matsuzaki produce the *cartes* for use in his capacity as Ogasawara governor, not for any commercial interest but to study the First Settlers. Obana and other colonial bureaucrats might have used them in their detailed written records of each resident, which included names, ages, births, deaths and property. The *cartes de visite* read like a photographic inventory of the islands' inhabitants, with each subject or group of subjects posed stiffly either in front of what is presumably his or her dwelling or in a wild, open space. Although the subjects' names were not recorded on the *cartes* themselves (other photographs included the name of the male household head), in conjunction with written records they would likely have been useful to the colonial administration.

'Thinking with' the photographs in this way – thinking, that is, beyond the content and subject matter of the images in order to consider issues of form and function – expands the discussion about early Japanese photography. It allows one to consider larger social contexts as well as the role of the photographs themselves, and addresses what is often missing from scholarship on early Japanese photography: the agency of Japanese actors and the importance of Japanese institutions in shaping early photographic practice in Japan. ◀

Notes

1. Photography had been part of European colonial projects since almost immediately after its invention in 1839 (Ryan 1997:28). In the United States, the government enlisted photographers to document and justify its westward expansion (Phillips 1996).
2. It is unlikely that Matsuzaki carried the cumbersome *carte de visite* camera in addition to his standard camera in the field. Judging by the images, which show less clarity than the larger albumen prints, he probably exposed the negatives in his standard camera, made standard albumen contact prints and copied these with a *carte de visite* camera when he returned to his studio in Tokyo.

For further reading

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