

## The Image of Japan under the Western Photographic Gaze

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The subject of this paper is a broad one – how Japan was regarded under the gaze of Western photographers – and in the short time available I would like to focus upon the first two decades that photography was practiced in Japan, namely from 1853 to the middle of the 1870s.

Firstly, however, it is important to point out that the idea of a single, homogenous Western photographic gaze on Japan is misleading, since different Western photographers approached Japanese subjects in different ways even at the same time. Indeed, one could argue that there are as many photographic gazes as there are photographers. Even when categorized into convenient groups, such as commercial photographers, scientific photographers and amateur photographers (or perhaps ‘non-commercial photographers’ would be more accurate in this last instance), early Western photographers of Japan appear to be motivated in different ways during the period under discussion. Since this paper seeks to focus on the link between the creators of a Western photographic gaze and their consumers, I will concentrate on the work of commercial photographers who were resident in Japan.

In the 1860s, Western commercial photographers in Japan, most prominently Felice Beato, served a local foreign clientele which was familiar with Japan. Consisting for the most part of resident merchants, missionaries and members of the naval and military forces of the major powers, and in particular Britain and France, who were stationed in Yokohama, this clientele generally had long-term experience of Japan and was aware of the changes going on around them in Japanese society. Change and modernization were accepted facts of life in Japan both before and after the Meiji Restoration, and both found a place in the work of resident photographers. Two good examples of this informed gaze are provided by Felice Beato in his studio portraits featuring members of the Satsuma clan. The Satsuma clan was an object of particular fascination with the foreign community in Japan: older established residents would recall the role of its retainers in the murder of the British merchant Charles Richardson during the so-called Namamugi Incident of September 1862, as well as the punitive naval expedition which Britain had dispatched to the capital of the Satsuma domain, Kagoshima, in August of the following year. Beato had been quick to exploit this interest in the Satsuma clan following his arrival in Yokohama in July 1863; while attached to the Swiss diplomatic mission to Edo, he employed subterfuge in order to take a photograph which was quickly marketed back in Yokohama as a view of the Satsuma clan yashiki. Sadly, recent scholarship has established that this view shows not the Satsuma residence in Mita, but instead that of the Shimabara clan in the neighbouring Tsunazaka district. Nevertheless, the view was accepted as such at the time, and the mood of menace it evoked, especially in its skillful use of figures in the middle distance, as well as its appearance shortly before the so-called Anglo-Satsuma War, guaranteed its popularity. The figures in this scene are almost certainly not samurai of the Satsuma clan, and

are either unwitting retainers of the Shimabara clan or, more likely, yakunin from the escort provided by the Shogunal authorities for the protection of Beato and his Swiss hosts during their visit to Edo (Photo1). Beato received an opportunity to photograph actual members of the Satsuma clan a few months later when a group of samurai from Kagoshima came to Yokohama in December 1863. This group headed by Iwashita Saejimon was assigned to negotiate an indemnity with the British Legation for the murder of Charles Richardson, as well as normalize relations between their clan and Britain, with which they were still nominally at war.

This striking portrait of Iwashita and his fellow envoys reveals an informed gaze on its subject matter. The sitters seem to appear on their own terms. A mood of defiance is evident: two of the envoys stare directly at the camera, and one of them stands with his hands thrust deep into his pockets. The oldest samurai, probably Iwashita himself, holds a book in a Western-style binding – unfortunately, the text on the front cover is indecipherable, and we can only speculate as to whether the volume is a dictionary or scientific manual, but its prominent position does seem to offer mute testimony to the Satsuma clan's familiarity with Western learning. For a contemporary Western audience in Japan, such a detail would not appear incongruous but would instead hint at the ambiguous attitude of the clan as both consumers of Western knowledge and perceived opponents of the opening-up of Japan to the outside world.

Beato photographed members of the Satsuma clan again over three years later while reconstructing the extensive portfolio of negatives which he lost during the great Yokohama fire of November 1866. This larger group portrait, probably taken in 1867, dispenses with the stark background Beato used previously and is more staged than its predecessor but still has as much impact. This time, only the central figure in this group appears to be aware of the camera; the other samurai seem intent on studying the map spread out in front of them, and the viewer is made to feel as if he or she has intruded into a private space (Photo2). The gaze of the central seated figure meets that of the viewer with cool defiance, evoking the attitude of the Satsuma envoys of 1863. Modernisation is also apparent: at least members of the group are dressed in Western-style uniforms, while even those in more traditional Japanese costume wear Western shirts underneath, and the central figure – presumably the commander of this group – appears to sport a gold watch chain. This mixture of styles was typical of samurai dress in the lead-up to the Boshin Civil War of 1867-68 which initiated the Meiji Restoration, and would have been a familiar sight even to residents of the relatively enclosed Yokohama foreign community. In addition to Beato's later Satsuma group portrait, the portfolio of other costume studies which he produced around the same time included at least one other example of members of the samurai class combining Western and Japanese elements in their dress.

By the time a new clientele arrived in Japan in the early 1870s in the form of the globetrotter, the few remaining elements of samurai dandyism evident here – the chonmage or top-knot, and the two swords in particular – were fast disappearing as the new Meiji government was effectively legislating the samurai class out of existence. For the short-term visitor, who quickly displaced the long-term foreign resident as the main consumer of photographic imagery of Japan, such manifestations of modernization were far less appealing than the idea of a timeless, pre-modern idyll of which the inhabitants included a traditional warrior class. As Luke Gartlan has shown, this demand on the part of a new clientele prompted Beato's effective

successor, Baron von Stillfried, to shift his work away from outdoor photography 'where the impact of modern technology was increasingly present' to the more controlled space of the studio. Thus, just as Japan was beginning to modernize and the samurai was fast disappearing, the Western photographic gaze was firmly directed backwards towards an age free of such disturbing elements. In his Yokohama studio, Stillfried not only recreated imagined scenes of samurai life, but also on a few occasions parodied the 1870s vogue for Western costume, a development which he had been happy to see represented in his topographical portfolio at the very start of the decade (Photo3). When Stillfried later purchased Beato's studio and stock in 1877, he appears to have reissued only those negatives of samurai subjects which unequivocally showed them in a state of pre-modern innocence, and for the remainder of the century, other practitioners of the 'Yokohama shashin' genre continued this policy, dressing up models as samurai - with varying degrees of accuracy - and producing staged scenes in their studios.

The European – or Western – photographic gaze on Japan should not be thought of as homogenous. I have concentrated on European photographers who were resident in Japan because their case best illustrates the way in which their gaze responded to a major shift in their client base in the early 1870s. Different photographic gazes upon Japan and particularly its samurai inhabitants could be found elsewhere. After all, the first recorded instance of a Westerner (in this case an American) photographing Japanese subjects occurred not in Japan, but during 1852-53 in San Francisco, where a group of Japanese castaways was being accommodated before joining Perry's expedition to China and Japan. Japanese samurai, members of the first shogunal mission abroad since the opening of Japan, were photographed in the United States in 1860; members of a similar mission to Europe in 1862 had their portraits taken in locations as varied as London, Lisbon, St. Petersburg and Berlin, and during their stay in Paris in April 1862 encountered two very different aspects of the European photographic gaze. Their best-known encounter was with the famous photographer Nadar, who had two sittings with members of Takenouchi's mission, the first at the hotel where they were staying and the second at his well-appointed studio in Rue des Capucines. The result, a sequence of large format portraits and more affordable carte-de-visite portraits showed the samurai in their traditional dress, though often rather incongruously posed in a European interior. Contemporary newspaper reports of the sittings suggest a relaxed atmosphere, with the Japanese – among them, Matsuki Koan, a member of the Satsuma clan who had already studied photography – showing great interest in the process of fixing their likenesses and bombarding their host with questions, while Nadar traded caricatures with one of the more artistically accomplished members of the mission and even posed his six-year old son Paul in a group portrait with the senior envoys. Underlying the warmth of the occasion, however, were other considerations. Acute financial pressures obliged Nadar to operate his studio as more of an industrial undertaking, and the widespread curiosity in Paris surrounding the Japanese visitors presumably offered him the chance to explore a profitable side-line to his regular portfolio of portraits of contemporary notables.

Less well recorded, but strikingly different in comparison, was the sequence of sittings which took place during the same visit with Jacques-Philippe. Potteau, a naturalist attached to the Museum of Natural

History, was not even a professional photographer, but he had somehow received training in the medium and persuaded the museum to let him construct a studio in the Jardin des Plantes, the main botanical gardens in Paris, where he embarked upon creating a 'Collection anthropologique' to record various racial types. Potteau employed a consistent format for most of the 500 negatives he took, with the upper half of subject's body photographed twice against a monochromatic background, once from the front and once from the side, and the photographs, accompanied by his observations, were put on sale to members of the public in the Museum. It is unclear how Potteau recruited his Japanese sitters in April 1862: only a handful of the mission members (including Fukuzawa Yukichi) appear to have been photographed, and, to judge from the lack of written record, they visited Potteau's studio without the knowledge of the senior members of Takenouchi's mission. Unlike Nadar, Potteau's gaze was uncompromisingly scientific and was concerned more with providing a record for anthropological study than making a profit. Nevertheless, his work also succeeded in capturing the personalities of his sitters and stands comparison with that of Nadar.

The difference between resident and non-resident photographers of Japanese subjects is only one difficulty one encounters when attempting to explore the Western photographic gaze on Japan. Indeed, the task is so complex that one should beware of talking about one homogenous gaze, and accept instead that the early photographic record of Japan is comprised of several overlapping gazes.