

Back in Time

Pictures Worth More than 1,000 Words

By Guven Peter Witteveen

*T*hese photographs of Northeast Asia from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries give people today a window on the economic, environmental, and geopolitical context of the time. This essay introduces some of the early photographs from Japan, Korea, and adjacent lands—scenes that families in the US viewed with the aid of the right-eye, left-eye lenses of the viewstand, or stereograph, so they could enjoy a vivid 3-D experience—to learn about lands that were then unknown to them.

Thanks to the Florence Tan Moeson Fellowship at the Library of Congress Asian Reading Room, I was able to spend a week browsing and copying early photos from Japan, Korea, and Manchuria in the Prints and Photographs room. Much of this is online in various file sizes at loc.gov/pictures, but the majority are not yet digitized. Selected images are reprinted here with permission, but complete photosets may be seen online at <http://old-japanphotos.wikispaces.com> and <http://old-koreaphotos.wikispaces.com>. Most of these images come from the thousands of stereographs in the Prints and Photographs collection.



The William Howard Taft party observing a sumo match in July 1905—four years before Taft was elected president (from the collection of the New York Historical Society).

US, Asia, and the World 1620–1914

The home delivery heyday of stereo photos was 1895 to 1925, when families entertained themselves and guests with the images. This home-delivery business model in America caused a revival in interest in Europe after popularity had peaked around 1880. The *Keystone View Company* (Meadville, PA, 1892 through 1963) rose up among publishers, and by 1921, they had bought up most competitors. In the US and Canada, upstanding young men canvassed door to door, selling the boxed sets of 100 views by theme or by country. While the 3-D technique began in the 1860s, after 1895 the portable stereo camera allowed extensive coverage of world events, including the Spanish-American and Russo-Japanese wars.¹



Ainu family on Hokkaido wearing Japanese textiles with house in background, 1903. (stereograph: Japan)

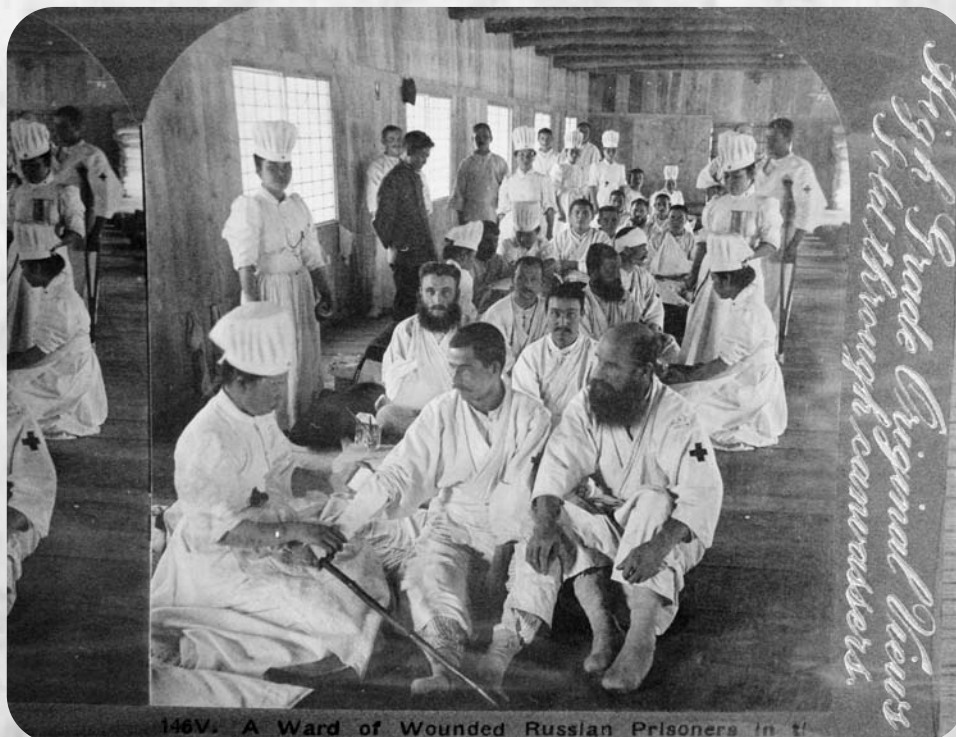
Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Reading Room.

Early photos were made by foreign observers, and the Japanese began to learn the craft, seeing things with a different sense of composition and significance.² The first photographs in Japan go back to 1853–54 as part of Commodore Perry's mission. The most prolific early period begins in the 1870s, but the stereo-photographs came later as cameras became more portable. Tourists could buy memento pictures at famous sites, but they could also visit a studio and select their favorites to comprise a personal scrapbook from the photographer's stock. Photography in Korea coincided with the increasing numbers of Christian missionaries there. The Prints and Photographs collection also have images from journalists, as well as the same stereograph publishers seen for Japan. Scores of images pertain entirely to the Russo-Japanese war, too.



Stereograph viewer with Ainu family photo imposed.

Source: Robert Edward Auctions at <http://tinyurl.com/3nh24v9t>.



146V. A Ward of Wounded Russian Prisoners in the Russo-Japanese War-wounded prisoners at Japan's Tokai military hospital near the coast of Kumamoto prefecture. 1905. (stereograph: Russo-Japanese War, lot 3372f) Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Reading Room.



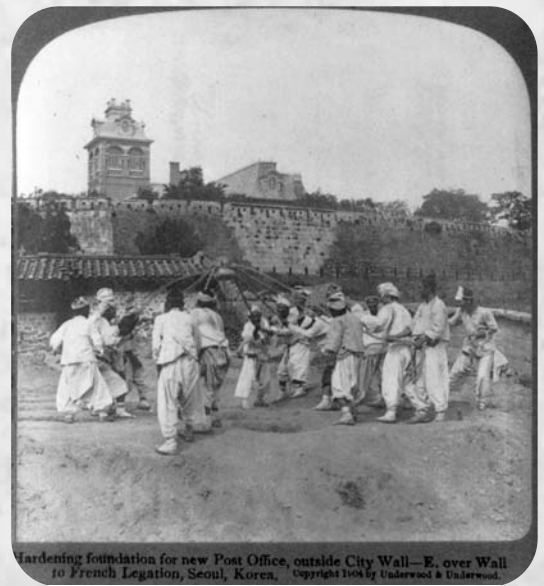
The Ginza commercial district: mixed Japanese and Western clothing styles, straw boater hats, electric streetcars, and clock tower indicate breaks from the past. Tokyo c. 1904. (stereograph: Japan) Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Reading Room.



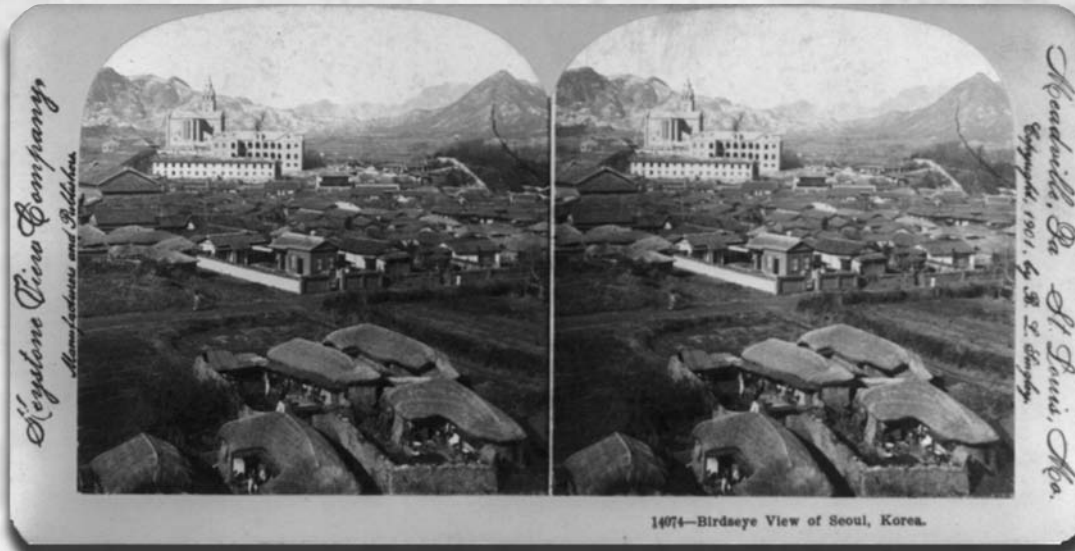
Main street Chemulpo (today's Incheon), Korea, with Catholic church prominent in the background. Horsehair hat indicates scholarly Yangban social status of man in the foreground, c. 1904. (stereograph: Korea) Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Reading Room.

Unpeeling Layers of Visual Meaning

Photographic literacy refers to the ability to distinguish between the sorts of meanings intended by the photographer, those inherent in the scene and those that the viewer imposes. Separating these meanings starts from the most personal (the names and family connections of those pictured) and extends to the most anonymous and abstract (what is symbolized or artfully composed). What is the location, season, hour, and timing of the shutter release (would a shot just before or just after give different results)? On a larger scale, what is the historical moment on a national, regional, and local scale? By juxtaposing the wider events with the personal stories, a vivid mix of meanings emerges. Seen in a less personal way, and disregarding names and individual circumstances, what does the photo generalize? More widely still, does the image symbolize something for the photographer, the viewer, or both? At the most abstract, does the image express artistic composition and elicit emotional response? Finally, from a critical vantage point, what might appear outside the photo borders; what is cropped out? And taken as a single statement, is the subject different than if portrayed in a series of images of several moments and several angles? What visual conventions of the culture are being reproduced or challenged? When accompanied by words, is text primary and image an afterthought, or the reverse?



Construction crew prepares the foundation for the new post office, Seoul c. 1904, showing the French legation building beyond. (stereograph: Korea) Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Reading Room.



Birdseye view of central Seoul c. 1901: Thatch roofing predominates with dirt streets, electric wires, and trolley tracks showing changes underway (Seoul was one of the first cities in Asia that was wired for telephone service). (Stereo-graph: Korea) Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Reading Room.



Ceremonial procession led by three Buddhist priests but followed by brides: either an uncommon Buddhist-officiated rite or a "ghost marriage" to fulfill the spirit of the deceased sons. Western-looking Yokohama shows shop signs in English, c. 1910–1920. (lot 11356-2)

Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Reading Room.



Photographer Frank G. Carpenter in Manchuria at hotel with his driver. He provided much of the visual coverage of Northeast Asia seen by people in the US, 1910–20. (lot 5806) Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Reading Room.

Using Photos in the Classroom

Pictures provide a vivid warm-up exercise in the classroom. They can be food for thought and reflection; illustrate an idea, location, or moment; or be the object of careful and critical deconstruction for the layers of meanings, whether the images come from national archives, a family album, or a person's Facebook wall. When location is specified, the students can practice map skills and locate the image there, as well as visit the present-day scene from satellite pictures online. Students become detectives seeking evidence on foods, footwear, or head covers from a time and place, for example. In a multimedia exercise, a student or teacher can show a set of related images, write a script, and narrate the sequence of images.

Taken together, these early photos from Northeast Asia transport the viewer to the moment the photographer framed and pressed the shutter. They allow us to humanize another time and place caught up in wider currents, in many ways similar to the intersecting global and personal lives we lead today. ■

NOTES

1. See also William C. Durrah, *Stereo Views* (Gettysburg, PA: Times & News, 1964).
2. Clark Worswick, *Japan: Photographs 1854–1905* (Pennwick/A.A. Knopf, 1979), and Hugh Cortazzi, Terry Bennett, Russkoe Geograficheskoe Obshchestvo, *Japan Caught in Time* (New York: Weatherhill Publishing, 1995).



Port of Kobe c. 1900 in the fall as seen from hinterlands; steam and sailing ships at anchor; sedan chair with two porters in foreground. (lot 12548h) Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Reading Room.



Festooned with European flags, the Mitsukoshi department store was Japan's biggest showcase of world goods for the emerging consumers. Looking over the dirt street, this exotic Western-style architecture itself made a powerful statement of foreign things to come, Tokyo c.1910-1920. (lot 11356-2) Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Reading Room.



Remains of army officers killed in action in Manchuria. Tokyo 1904 [stereograph: Russo-Japanese War. (lot 11691) Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Reading Room.

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