Back in Time
Pictures Worth More than 1,000 Words

By Guven Peter Witteveen

These 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).
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

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 stereographs 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.
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?
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.

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.

NOTES

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