

**SNAPPING
AND
WRAPPING**

**PERSONAL PHOTOGRAPHY
IN JAPAN**

by

Richard Chalfen

Temple University

Curating and Interpreting Culture



VERNON PRESS

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Cover photo by Richard Chalfen. A four-foot tall figure of a welcoming cat, maneki-neko, advertising the nearby presence of a camera shop located in the Shibaura region of Tokyo (appears as Figure 5.2).

Cover design by Vernon Press.

To Karen ...

fellow traveler, loving honeymoon companion and superb writer.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The objectives of my studies in Japan are broad-based yet primarily directed toward gaining a better understanding of the use of cameras and personal photographs as part of everyday life in Japan. My goal is to describe and interpret a range of observed practices, sets of interconnected habits focused on the taking, sharing, storing and display of personal pictures within the Japanese context. I will use topic-centric chapters to explore ways that home media can serve as entry points to understanding Japanese society as well as salient features of Japanese visual culture. The ubiquity of home media is briefly summarized as the production and use of personal photographic media especially private family pictures.

The term Japanese photography usually refers to fine art examples, studio photography or even the popularity of camera clubs in early decades of the twentieth century. Books about the history of photography in Japan seldom attend to non-artistic efforts, to picture taking at home (vs. a portrait studio) or to non-business-related socio-cultural matters.¹ In this regard, my goal is to remind general readers and scholars not to ignore the most popular form of photography in Japan, namely casual everyday camera use and habitual uses of personal pictures. Indeed “casual photographers,” ordinary people, most often family members continue to produce the largest and privately held archives across the world and across all genres of photographic expression.

For almost two decades, I have been interested in filling a gap in photography studies with information about ubiquitous collections of snapshots in Japan before digitalization took hold. I am accomplishing this task by citing data gathered in the mid-late 90s about activities in the mid-to-late twentieth century [1940s-70s], at the peak of analog snapshot photography in Japan. As appropriate, I have introduced comparative comments to update findings for contemporary digital times.

The book offers a way to learn about the people and culture of Japan as well as ways to appreciate ubiquitous though less examined photographic practices. How does everyday family photography operate as a mode of visual/pictorial

¹ As a generalization, most histories of photography have been skewed by an art orientation stressing innovation at the expense of non-art and non-professional examples, art media vs. home media, in a sense, privileging ‘the studio over the street.’ An important exception is the collection, *Photography's Other Histories* edited by Pinney and Peterson (2003).

communication? In short, a parallel challenge is presented: what can be learned about both Japan and photography? Said differently, what can be learned about Japan as both an unfamiliar society and culture through studying a model of photographic expression produced by people living that culture? In this context, how is photography attached to issues of culture, specifically Japan and communication, specifically pictorial home media? How does “doing personal photography” provide a window for people generally unfamiliar yet curious about Japanese life? These questions contribute to one of my central interests namely: how Japanese people have organized themselves and their thinking to participate in the broader frameworks of “camera culture” (Beloff 1985) and “the culture of imaging” (Blackman 1986).

Ideally, I would like (a) students of Japan to learn the basics of critical studies of photography and (b) students of photographic media to learn something of Japanese culture and society. In turn, my objective is to explore the uncritical stereotype centered on how “Japanese people just love to take pictures.” I will present examples of how everyday vernacular photography serves more as documents, as cultural statements and less as forms of artistic expression or as an out-of-control “shutterbug” habit. What is someone’s picture collection or photograph album “saying” about the people who made the photographs and organized family albums? What are the advantages and disadvantages of learning about an unfamiliar culture through collections of personal pictures? In turn, I want readers to understand that the following chapters do not serve as a history of photography in Japan nor any kind of definitive ethnography of Japanese society or culture. This book has been written for students (broadly speaking), to encourage reference to and curiosity about their own family pictures, perhaps to encourage them to reach out to parents and relatives for discussion about their own taken-for-granted motivations and practices.

Sources of Data

Data for the following chapters comes from a variety of sources. I lived in Japan spanning three years in the middle ‘90s and early ‘00s while I was teaching courses in Visual Anthropology in Tokyo at Temple University Japan. Much of the impetus for *Snapping and Wrapping* comes from personal fieldwork in the U.S. and Japan that prompted the organization of an undergraduate course entitled: “Pictorial Lives: Toward a Personal Visual Anthropology” as described in following chapters. One of the central texts for this course was my 1987 monograph, *Snapshot Versions of Life*.

I offered this course in a visual anthropology curriculum at two campuses of Temple University, namely in Philadelphia and Tokyo. Enrolled students were required to undertake a series of out-of-classroom projects grounded in personal observation and fieldwork. The qualitative methods and strategies of

fieldwork for assigned projects will be described in several of the following chapters as well as in Appendix 1. I have discussed the advantages and disadvantages of students using their own families in projects in conjunction with ethical dimensions of fieldwork in general and working with their family pictures in particular. I emphasized the importance of examining photographs in conjunction with their custodians, people responsible for their existence, organization and storage. I am pleased to add that the common reaction to my course has been: "I never thought there was so much to it and how much could be learned from a bunch of snapshots!"

During this time, I also used several university research grants to undertake projects involving Japanese home media (see Chapters 3-6). In the mid-to-late-90s, these funds allowed me to compensate several Japanese research assistants to help with my own fieldwork, to do translations, to tutor me in the proper social conventions regarding introductions and acceptable protocols.² These occasions represented a special context in which several of my students personally contacted and introduced me to Japanese families living in Tokyo. I was able to obtain invitations from family members to undertake a series of in-home personal interviews focused on their own photograph albums. All families knew I was a professor, teaching and doing research at an American University in Tokyo. It was made clear my work was university-sanctioned research; personal permissions were obtained to see and discuss family photographs and write about them at a later time. Notably, doing such research, writing about findings and publishing family photographic materials made by members of societies and cultures different from your own can raise questions. While such materials may be easily found, borrowed or purchased for study, serious restrictions may apply regarding writing about, reproducing and publishing information about such materials. This problematic topic will be discussed in greater detail in Appendix 2. I was pleased to learn that "Japan is an excellent place to do research, for people tend to respect academic inquiry and, respond with good will to all kinds of requests" (Hendry xiii 1999).

Other sources of data come from previous fieldwork I conducted while serving as a research consultant for the Polaroid Corporation, Eastman Kodak Company and several startup businesses in the Boston, Massachusetts area. Much of this work centered on problematic practices and conventions that required personal examinations of family photograph collections, especially the viewing of albums in conjunction with in-person interviews. In short, I will

² My newly acquired Japanese language skills were too fundamental to conduct interviews and undertake other research tasks. I remain greatly indebted to the help of these assistants.

photography,” the significance of materialist and practice-based approaches to photographic representation, and the importance of including “uses and viewings” of photographs as part of a visual communication paradigm.

I emphasize the centrality of “wrapping culture” as fundamental to conceptualizing the methods, results, findings and significance of my studies. I will introduce notions of sharing personal pictures, kinds of informational control, snapshot communication, models of human-photograph interaction as well as pragmatic rationales, attitudes and memory needs. In addition, I will frequently mention the relevance of losing and trying to recover personal pictures after a disaster, specifically the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami (“3.11”) in northeast Japan. I ask what can be learned from intense efforts to recover lost people and their photographic representations in the context of Japanese culture.

In the second chapter, I offer a cursory overview of some research on analog family photograph albums made by a sample of Japanese family members. Albums represent a significant opportunity for ordinary people to organize and represent their lives in a pictorial, symbolic version of themselves and their family life. Here we ask how culturally laden values and habits are invoked to construct “photo-albumized” versions of life. In order to better understand current interests in the enthusiastic endorsement of digital photography, we need some comparison to the use of analog cameras and pictures made roughly between 1930 and 1980. For instance, how are prominent themes, settings, topics of these photographs related to pictures being retrieved and returned after the 2011 tsunami? In turn, I will speculate on how such themes might be changing in digital times.

The third and fourth chapters stress how additional clarity is gained through using a visual communication perspective specifically for purposes of making cross-cultural comparisons. For instance, what can be learned about prescriptions and proscriptions of photo habits when the same home media projects are assigned to college students living in the U.S. and Japan. Does the use of similar cameras produce the same results, or do we discover another area of human behavior when cultural differences become visible in both literal and figurative ways? How, for instance, do members of both cultures feel about displaying family personal pictures inside and outside the home, perhaps displaying them at the workplace, carrying personal pictures in wallets, taking photographs while the travelling and even while using cameras to take pictures surrounding times of death?

The fifth chapter is the first of two dedicated to problematic relationships of photography and death, again, particularly relevant to results of the 3.11 aftermath. First, I examine one use of snapshots outside the home, namely the appearance of personal photographs in Japanese pet cemeteries. Here we gain some appreciation for one way to honor non-human family members after

death, and for the need to display a representation of important non-humans in a private home-like space. What kinds of similarities and differences are found with humans and their pet companions? How might these findings and activities be connected to the intense need to find and treasure family pictures after natural disasters? How does this phenomenon help us understand better the comments Japanese people have made after recovering their lost family pictures?

Closely related to the previous chapter, the sixth paper takes readers one step further into relationships of death, beliefs in afterlife and vernacular photography. Emphasis here is placed on “seeing” deceased relatives and close friends as they make unanticipated appearances in everyday snapshot photographs. Ghosts play important roles in Japanese folklore, fine art and popular culture—and usually not in good or beneficial ways. How can ghost beliefs also penetrate personal photography and, as such, possibly disrupt the preferred harmony of interpersonal interaction as part of everyday life? Are there any reports of ghost appearances in pictures now being taken of tsunami-destroyed locations?

My seventh and final chapter offers an overview and summary of my previous findings. After stressing the importance of sharing pictures as a unifying theme and reviewing “Print Club” practices as an additional example, I suggest a pattern of logic for thinking about connections between people and their photographic representations. I emphasize an understanding of how visualizations contribute to producing comfortable lives and, in turn, considerable discomfort as revealed in the loss of such personal pictures within the Japanese context.

One last word at this point. Studying and reporting on Japanese snapshots faces potential criticism of uncritically exploiting and extending a cultural stereotype, even potentially bordering on Orientalism.⁴ Contrary to initial expectations, I have not addressed the possibility that Japanese people have taken and possess more photographs in their lifetimes than most others in the world—this has not been my objective. Contrary to being interested in exoticized Japanalia, I have examined the usefulness of applying anthropologist Joy Hendry’s wrapping metaphors to everyday life in Japan, namely to that sector of life that deals with personal photography. My hope is that I have been able to take a critical perspective on an internationally recognized stereotype by creating a critical appreciation. Admittedly, I have

⁴ This stereotype is easily understood as a piece of ‘Japanism’, a way of thinking about, constructing and even judging Japanese people, society and culture, also verging on a part of Orientalism, connoting ways to feel superior and a sense of domination, all of which have no place in my home media studies.

been accused more than once of over-thinking something as “trivial” as a collection of snapshots. But I have worked to demonstrate the short-sighted superficiality of this judgment to conclude that, indeed, there is a lot to think about and perhaps more than initially expected.

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Connecting Photography to “Everyone”

The following chapters contain information about two quite large and potentially unwieldy topics, namely Japan and photography. Narrowing my primary interests to “personal photography in Japan” still requires considerable contextual clarification due to ambiguity about three elements of this phrase. For instance, the term “photography” has come to mean a range of activities and practices as well as contents and stylistics of pictorial forms, all of which go considerably beyond acts of looking at pictures. I have been including what is done with both cameras *and* photographs as part of what ordinary people do in everyday life. I’ve tried to learn who “takes” pictures, who appears “in” photographs, as well as who gets to see these pictures in both the short and long term. What happens to their meanings, memories and general significance along the way? Art historian Deepali Dewan reminds readers that “Some family photographs move several times, from private to public archives, from one continent to another, from treasures to orphan images and back again, depending on their flow as generations pass away, homes are cleaned out, or circumstances that force abandonment or loss reconfigure them and their meanings” (2018). Currently, occasional transformations from analog to digital and back again must be added. This approach differs from one that limits “photography” to concentration on semiotic or iconic features of photographic content, one that focuses on studies of specific images as text.

At the center of this inquiry is the intimate relationship of everyday life, visual culture and, in turn, personal photography. Media theorist, Nicholas Mirzoeff, maintains that everyday life is visual culture, favoring the culture of the majority in comparison to the elite practices of professionals; he directs “attention away from structured formal viewing settings like the cinema and art gallery to the centrality of visual experience in everyday life...” (1998: 7). Said slightly differently, visual culture has more to do with “the street” and less to do with “the studio.” The scene is set for studies of the vernacular in relation to home media vs. art media.

Of parallel importance is the treatment of photography as a communication process, one that examines both the creation and interpretation of information and messages while taking a broad view of the ways, means and general circumstances of making, using, showing, viewing and storing pictures for one

particular model or genre of photography. I have favored a ground-up approach to learning about practices and conventions of photographic communication, looking for patterns of habitual camera use, picture content and third, what subsequently happens to the pictures that are produced. This orientation attempts to balance previous preferences for studies of the discursive, semiotic, and material character of photographs (Hand 2012) with more of a source-and-destinations approach as part of a “social life” of personal photography perspective.

“Personal” is best understood by what it is not, namely the impersonal nature of photography found in everyday examples of mass media. For example, viewers are not expected to know personally (vs. “know of”) who took or appears in photographic advertisements, photojournalism or a range of illustrations found in textbooks, on posters or billboards and the like.⁵ By the term “personal photography” I am generally referring to leisure time activities variously classified as amateur photography, snapshot photography, vernacular photography, non-professional photography, recreational photography, family photography among others, all of which I have elsewhere called the “home mode of visual communication” (Chalfen 1987) or more recently, “home media.”⁶ Personal photographs have almost always been made for private consumption, including various models of production and personal display, especially with analog technology. Most frequent reference is to family members making pictures *for* close relatives or close friends of the family, usually focused on children’s activities, celebratory and leisure activities around the home but also while traveling or undertaking some form of tourist activity (Chalfen 1987).⁷ In these terms, the notion of “home media” makes the most sense.

⁵ Readers will notice that still photography is the primary reference point here. However, motion pictures are also included e.g. home movies or family films, videotapes and now, “cellphlms” (cellphone videos).

⁶ The general question that needs to be asked here: What counts as “photography”, and does everyone agree on the answer? Some authoritative histories of photography do not even include mention of non-professional imagery. More recently, some do not want to include pictures made with camera-phones as “photographs” (Zhang 2018).

⁷ We do not need to be as inclusive as Ross (2015) who suggests the process starts much earlier than pressing a camera’s trigger. He adds such variables/activities as “studying” camera availability, knowing camera types and models, reading articles and camera reviews in photography magazines as well as setting up a darkroom, learning developing and negative use (chemicals), printing (knowing about papers) including cropping and enlarging techniques, followed by learning how to pose subjects, work with models, compose a scene, etc. as he noticed for middle class “dedicated amateurs” and photo “hobbyists” in early 20th century Japan.

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GLOSSARY

— A Wordlist of Relevant Japanese Terms

3.11 (March 3, 2011 — Great East Japan earthquake and tsunami)

Aibo (robotic dog designed by Sony, 1999)

butsudan (in-house shrine / alter found in Japanese Buddhist cultures)

doubutsu no haka no shashin (snapshots placed into pet graves)

e-maki (Japanese illustrated text or narrative picture on hand scroll)

furusato (location of natal or ancestral hometown)

gaijin (non-Japanese person)

Hachiko (name of remarkably loyal dog, d. 1935 Tokyo)

Hanami (cherry blossom viewing and festival)

ihai (memorial tablet)

Jindaiji (Buddhist temple in Tokyo with pet cemetery)

Junnishi-Kwannon (Goddess of Mercy for animals/pets)

kaisha (company)

kamera bāchan (camera grandma/granny)

Katsura Rikyoo (Imperial Villa in Kyoto)

keitai (portable cell phone, short for *keitai denwa*)

kinen (souvenir; keepsake)

kinen shashin (snapshot or commemorative photograph)

kissaten (coffee house)

kombini (from convenience store)

maneki-neko (“the welcoming cat” for good luck)

manga (comic book or graphic novel)

Meiji (modern period of Japanese history, 1868-1912)

meishi (business card)

miyage shashin (souvenir photographs from trip, special occasion)

neko (cat)

Obake (category of ghost)

Obon (mid-July festival of grave visits and cleaning for soul returns)

Ohigan (Buddhist tradition in Japan of visiting graves at equinox)

omiyage (souvenir gift for friends, co-workers, family after a trip away)

- onnanoko shashin* ('girl photography')
- O-Torii* (Grand Gate for a Shinto shrine)
- PostPet* (virtual pet software)
- puricura* ("Print Club" photobooth photo-stickers)
- reikon* (equivalent to the soul or human spirit in western culture)
- sarariiman* (white-collar businessman, from Salary Man)
- Sha-Mail* (photo-mail sent via cell phone)
- shamisen* (3-stringed musical instrument)
- shinrei shashin* (ghost appearance in snapshots)
- Showa* (period of Japanese history, 1926-89)
- Shubun no hi* (Autumnal equinox day after national holiday of respect for aged)
- sumi-e* (ink brush painting)
- Tamagotchi* (a pocket-sized interactive egg-shaped virtual pet)
- Tokugawa* (Edo period of Japanese history, 1603-1867)
- Tooma* (wooden death commemorative grave markers)
- tonkatsu* (breaded pork cutlets)
- TUJ (Temple University Japan)
- uchi-no-ko* (our child or household pet)
- uchi-soto* (core Japanese principle to distinguish inside/outside)
- ukiyo-e* (woodblock prints)
- undōkai* ("Sports Days" or school's sports festival)
- yochien* (Japanese kindergarten)
- Yōkai* (category of supernatural ghost spirit in Japanese folklore)
- Yūrei* (unhappy ghost spirit of the dead in Japanese folklore)

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