

## Comment

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### Legacy of the Western Photographic Gaze

- Ruminations on Mr. Sebastian Dobson's Report -

In his report, Mr. Sebastian Dobson discusses Western photographers who visited Japan in the twilight years of the Edo Period (1603-1867) and the early Meiji Period (1868-1912) and who he says looked upon Japan and the Japanese people in diverse ways. He says the same heterogeneity underlined the gaze of Western photographers who photographed the envoys of the shogunate when they visited other countries.

How did Japanese photographers, and indeed the entire Japanese people, transform their view of Japan after absorbing the influence of these encounters?

The Japanese people encountered photography both by photographing and being photographed.

In 1854, the daguerreotypist Eliphalet Brown, Jr., who accompanied Commodore Perry's expedition to Japan, took the first-ever pictures of people living in Japan. The photographs were not only brought back to the United States as a record of the expedition but also were presented to the shogunate officials who were photographed. Although it is not known how these officials and people around them reacted, the images must have astonished them as they no doubt did the Japanese people who were photographed in Europe by Nadar or Jacques-Philippe Potteau.

As Mr. Dobson points out, the photographic gazes of Nadar and Potteau on Japan and its people were not homogenous. Brown's gaze was also different. Then, the question emerges: how did the Japanese people themselves see the photographs taken? The answer to this question will reveal the very nature of photography, which forms a category of nonwritten cultural materials.

The study of photography in Japan began at the end of the Edo Period as part of *Rangaku*, or "Dutch studies," which dealt with Western science. In 1861, Ukai Gyokusen opened a photography studio in Edo, or present-day Tokyo, and in 1862, Shimooka Renjo and Ueno Hikoma set up their studios in Yokohama and Nagasaki, respectively. Photographic technology was not the only thing they learned from Western books and photographs: they must have mastered the artistic aspects of photography, including composition and lighting, by studying photographs taken by Westerners. In other words, they imitated the gaze of Westerners.

Take Ueno Hikoma, for example. His landscape photographs are marked by angles and compositions which remind us of those of Felice Beato, who moved to Japan at the end of the Edo Period, lived in Yokohama, and traveled around Japan to take photographs which encompassed landscapes and genre works. Portraits by Ueno show that he captured people's characters as skillfully as Nadar did. These facts suggest that Japanese photography in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century should be regarded as a mirror which reflects the world's gaze at the time, and the exploration of the Japanese photographic gaze is instrumental in gaining illuminating insights into photography.

The gaze of Western photographers who came to Japan in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century not only embodies the diversity of Westerners' images of Japan. It also helps us understand how the Japanese people came to recognize themselves and their country through their encounter with photography – that is, by photographing and being photographed.