

*Photographing Japan in the Japan-Russo War Period:
H. G. Ponting's Expression of Japan*

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Abstract

Herbert George Ponting (1870-1935) was born in Britain and became active as a photographer in Britain and the United States. Not only does he take pictures, he writes illustrated articles to magazines. He is famous for his works taken at the Terra Nova Expedition's Antarctic winter camp in 1911 because of his cinematography and the uniqueness of the place. Before he went to the Antarctic, he had traveled Asia including China, Korea, and Japan between 1901 and 1906 and published two photo albums; *Fuji-San* (1905) and *Japanese Studies* (1906). Four years after he returned to Europe, he combined the two albums and added photographs and produced a travelogue *In Lotus-Land Japan* (1910). It is worthy of note that he recorded his journey in many ways; photo albums, individual photographs, cinemagraphs, and travelogues. Pointing expresses the journey differently. For example, he does not explain what he took except for an introduction in *Fuji-San*, while he described the travel in *In Lotus-Land Japan* which has almost 400 pages. This variation of record indicates there was a demand for information about Japan, and he provided it from various stances. Therefore, comparing these works would illuminate what readers want to see about Japan and how Ponting met their demands. This paper discusses what object Ponting adopted for his works and how they are explained with words to discuss his strategy to create images of the country at the period during Japan-Rosso war.

Keywords: Herbert George Ponting, Rosso-Japan War, Photography

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Introduction

From the end of the 19th century, Japan started to increase its international influence not only with their trading, but also with their arms. The victory of the Chino-Japan War (1894-1895) gathers attention to the trend of the Japan-Russo War (1904-1905).

Herbert George Ponting (1870-1935) was sent to the Far East, including China, Korea, and Japan in 1901 by the publishers of the American magazine *Leslie's Weekly* and the Universal Photo Art Corporation of Philadelphia, publishers of stereo photography (Arnold, 1971, p. 24). He was subsequently commissioned by the American stereograph publisher Underwood & Underwood and the British publishers of *Country Life* magazine to take photographs and conduct interviews, and visited Japan again in 1903. Stereo-photographs he took at this time were in series by Underwood & Underwood as *Japan through the stereoscope* (1904) (Brown, 2005, p. 24). He visited Japan every year until 1906, which is the period when Japan was fighting the Japan-Russo War. During his visit, he published two photo albums of Japan, *Fuji San* (1905) and *Japanese Studies* (1906) mainly from Japan. In 1910, he produced a travelogue *In Lotus-Land Japan* (1910) from British publisher Macmillan and co. He also turned his pictures into a cinematograph and he showed it to the members of Terra Nova Expedition.

His travelogue has second edition that contains Foreword as below;

This book is written by a nomad who has worshipped at the shrine of Nature and Art in many lands; who has spent nearly three happy years in one of the most delightful of holiday lands and who served as a Correspondent with the First Japanese Army during the war with Russia. In it will be found no dissertations on politics economics or social problems; and he who seeks information concerning Japan's vast textile manufactures statistics of her progress or of the rapid growth of her military and naval might will search its pages in vain. (Ponting, *In Lotus-Land Japan*, 1922, p. v)

While he mentions that he "served as a Correspondent with the First Japanese Army during the war with Russia", He declares he would not make comment about politics, social problems, or even modernization in Japan.

However, it is almost impossible not to get any influence of the War. The question is how he manage to express his experience in Japan preventing the War, and how he turns stereographs which companies asked him to take into albums that is his own work. I will discuss this by comparing his works.

1. Japan Through the Stereoscope (1904)

Stereograph is a type of photography that became popular in the 19th century. When a card with two similar images is viewed through lenses, an optical illusion is created that makes them appear to be one three-dimensional image.

Ponting's stereograph series *Japan through the stereoscope* is consists of a hundred photos and, according to Terry Bennett, Ponting shoot more than 90 of them (Bennett, 2006, p. 579). He photographed nature, people, and lifestyle in Japan.

On the other hand, there is a stereograph of the War were published in the same year from the same publisher. It was taken in battlefield in China and the series continued to 1905.

Actually, it was difficult to take pictures of the War. According to Arnold, the work of Western battlefield reporters and photographers was not particularly productive, as the Japanese severely restricted the actions of their correspondents, kept their plans top secret. Photographs of the front line from the Russian side were available, but those from the Japanese side were rare (Arnold, 1971, p. 31). There is a series of albums of the war, but pictures were taken by Japanese army. It is therefore highly likely that these photographs were strictly censored and controlled by the Japanese military.

As he was a Correspondent with the First Japanese Army, he did take pictures for magazines, but he did not turn them in pictures in other works, while he turned many pictures in *Japan through the Stereograph* into his photo albums or travelogues. Therefore, were taken by Ponting, it is *Japan through the Stereograph*, not the photographs of the war, that can be called his work, over which he had authority and over which he photographed at will.

2. Fuji San (1905)

Fuji San is a photo book published in 1905, which, as the name suggests, contains 25 photographs of Mt Fuji. The book is in Japanese binding and was published by K. Ogawa (小川一真出版部). It is a publisher owned by Kazumasa Ogawa (小川一真, 1860-1929), a Japanese photographer who plated many works by foreign photographers in Japan such as *Great Earthquake of Japan* (1891) by John Milne (1850-1913) or *Supplement to Landscape Gardening in Japan* (1893) by Josiah Conder (1852-1920).

This album was dedicated to Basil Hall Chamberlain (1850-1935) and W.B. Mason (1853-1923) and describes them as ‘Authors of *Murray’s Hand-book to Japan* (Ponting, *Fuji San*, 1905, p. i)’. ‘*Murray’s Hand-book to Japan*’ is officially known as *A Handbook for Travellers in Japan* which was kind of standard guidebook on Japan at the time. Here Ponting alludes to the association with the famous guidebook, indicating that it was aimed at travellers who would pick up *Murray’s* guidebook maybe as a souvenir.

Ponting also refers to the authors of the handbook as ‘my friends’ in *In Lotus-Land Japan*, and states that they gave him advice (Ponting, *In Lotus-Land Japan*, 1910, p. vi). In the same preface, he describes the impetus for writing the travelogue as “these notes became so voluminous that the suggestion of friends, resident in Japan, that I should embody my experiences in a book, written round some of my photographs (Ponting, *In Lotus-Land Japan*, 1910, p. v).” There is a possibility that these two people, helped to realise this suggestion, because Ogawa, who collotyped and published Ponting’s two albums had also, once helped produce the fourth edition of *Murray’s Handbook to Japan* as the publisher responsible for sales. In other words, Ponting’s works on Japan were born out of his detailed documentation of his travels and the connection he made during his travels, rather than from the requests of Western companies that asked him to go to Japan.

The idea of publishing a book of photographs of Mount Fuji itself was not new: *The Volcanoes of Japan Part 1, Fuji San* was published by Kelly & Walsh in 1892. Like Ponting’s work, this is a collection of photographs of Mt Fuji taken from various angles by William Burton. The Plate is preceded by a commentary by John Milne (1850 -1913), professor of mining and geology at the Imperial College of Engineering, on the site and the decline in the area where the photographs were taken. Ponting’s *Fuji San*, on the other hand, contains almost no written information other than the title of each photograph, with the exception of the Introduction. *The Volcanoes of Japan* is superior in terms of the amount of knowledgeable information.

How then did Ponting respond to travellers' receptivity? Masumi Yajima cites similarities between the photographs of Hokusai and Ponting in terms of differences in form, use of the foreground and the fact that the climber represents the steepness of the mountain (矢島, 2013, pp. 119-124). It indicates that the photographer was highly conscious of the artistic quality of his work.

According to *In Lotus-Land Japan*, he repeatedly read Patrick Lafcadio Hearn's (1850 -1904) *Kwaidan*, a collection of mysterious Japanese tales, during his climb up Mt Fuji, and at the summit of the mountain he describes "It was a wondrous, almost preternatural spectacle, like a vision of Dante's dream. I was Dante, and the gaping crater before me was the steaming mouth of the bottomless pit of hell (Ponting, *In lotus-land Japan* 203)". He felt as if he was in the world of *Divine Comedy*. In this way, he emphasizes the exotic mystique of sacred mountain Mt. Fuji and he expressed it not in words but in photographs.

There are more photographs in *Fuji San* than in *Volcanoes of Japan* in which people influence the composition of the images. In fact, Ponting does not include all of his photographs of Mount Fuji in *Fuji san*. His stereograph 'Pilgrims at the End of their Ascent, on Fujiyama' (1904) includes a group climbing Mt Fuji, but it does not appear in his photo book. The fact that the subject's face is facing front may have been a factor in their exclusion from the album. For, all the other people in the photo either have their backs to us or their faces are obscured by shadows. By not showing their faces, it is not possible to identify who is in the photo and their expressions are in the imagination of each viewer. This is one of the ways he keeps the mystic of the spiritual mountain that partly distract attention from the War.

The person becomes part of the landscape along with nature and never looks at audience. Therefore, viewer can concentrate on seeing the mysterious sacred mountain. Alternatively, the fact that the characters have their backs to the readers means that they are looking at sceneries, and the readers see the same thing as the characters, so the photographs in which people appear have the effect of giving a stereograph-like sense of realism. Readers who might have traveled Japan would recall their experience of mysterious land vividly, or readers who have not been there would be travellers in the future.

3. Japanese Studies (1906)

Ponting calls himself 'a nomad who has worshipped at the shrine of Nature and Art in many lands (Ponting, *In lotus-land Japan* v)', and *Japanese Studies* which was published in 1906 is a good example. This work also includes nature outside of Mt Fuji, such as Kegon Falls. It also features traditional Japanese architecture that is popular with travellers, such as Kinkakuji Temple, which were not included in the previous work. Also, while the previous work featured only boatmen and his climbing companions, this work features a wider range of characters of different genders, professions and ages.

The album contains many photographs that artisans making Japanese art. They are working on ivory, painting vases or doing embroidery. Japanese arts or crafts were actively exported to the West in the 19th century. These pictures show process of making objects that was already familiar to Westerners. In the previous album, the people were hide their faces mysteriously, but this time the faces are shown, which has the effect of making the viewer realise that the objects they may have in the West are actually made by human being in Japan.

As they are human, they have their daily life such as reading, cleaning, or greeting. Thus, this collection of photographs focuses more on people living in Japan than its predecessor.

Many of these photographs show women, wearing beautiful kimonos and holding Japanese umbrellas, admiring flowers or animals in their natural surroundings. Many artworks by artist who had influenced by Japanese art have those ladies or items in their works. Therefore, those women could be a symbol to express Japanese beauties.

Shooting Japanese women has another meaning. Although there is no mention of politics in his travelogues, stories of Russian prisoners of war and tragic episodes in Mukden are recounted. The most frequent mention of the war is in Chapter 12, “Concerned Japanese Women”. In this chapter he talks about how devoted Japanese women were to supporting Japanese soldiers and how Japanese men respected women. He describes Japanese women during the war as follows.

The self-control of the Japanese women, when troops were leaving for the Front, was misunderstood by many foreigners. They were called cold, and lacking in sympathy, and indifferent; but this was far, far from the truth, for they are full of such feminine instincts as sympathy and fellow-feeling. On such occasions as a husband going to the war it is a point of almost honour to control oneself, but I have often seen an act of kindness bring tears to Japanese eyes, and I have seen a whole theatre-full of people — women, and children, and men too—sniffing and sobbing audibly as a touching tragedy was being acted with masterly skill. No! the Japanese woman's heart is not hard and cold; it is full of sympathy, and tenderness, and pity. The Japanese smile, too, which is so often belied by the heart, takes long to understand, but when one knows what it often means, the very soul is sometimes wrung to see it. it. (Ponting, In *Lotus-Land Japan*, 1910, pp. 242-243)

Japanese women are ‘full of sympathy, and tenderness, and pity’, but they do not show it through self-control. Many foreigners misunderstand this as ‘cold, and lacking in sympathy, and indifferent’. He tries to clear up the misunderstanding by saying ‘No!’ with a strong tone of voice: The Japanese smile also hides its true feelings, stating that ‘the very soul is sometimes wrung to see it’.

This suggests that the female form is not just an expression of beauty, but that there is a soul-crushing emotion behind it: the people in *Japanese Studies* are, unlike the mysterious figures of *Fuji San*, human beings with individual feelings that face the reader. The album could be a study of the hidden heart of the Japanese people.

The work has a mechanism for capturing this emotional mapping. One of the characteristics of this work is that there are poems along with each photograph. For example, on the page of a photograph of a woman ‘Otsunesan’, there is a line ‘modestly half turning as afraid the smile just dimpling on her glowing cheek (Ponting, *Japanese Studies* 11)’. This is a passage from James Beattie's (1735-1803) “Ode To Hope (1831)”. By adding a verse that describes a world protected by the angels that hope brings, the woman's smile is not a cold, affectionate smile, but a benevolent hope. When the emotions triggered by the poem and the emotions triggered by the photograph overlap, all memories can be linked together and a value that transcends time and place can be found at the bottom.

It is also worth noting whose poems are quoted. Ponting quoted words from many poets. Among these, expressions from poet of Romanticism are most frequently used.

According to J.A. Cuddon, one of the characteristics of Romanticism is a “a shift in sensibility and feeling, particularly in relation to the natural order and Nature (Cuddon, 2000)”. The poems and photographs Ponting choose obviously pay attention to nature. His choice of subject that people harmonized with nature fit the philosophy of Romanticism.

To add to the aspects of Romanticism that considering nature, there is another important characteristic which allow Japan to be their motif. Cuddon also points out that Romanticism has an aspect that “an increasing interest in Nature, and in the natural, primitive and uncivilized way of life (Cuddon, 2000)” Ponting shoot only the beauty of nature and traditional way of life in Japan and he carefully avoided the influence of the War. For instance, many pictures of sea or lake contain boat or sampan and equipment people use is only natural materials such as wood or textile. However, if you look closely to the picture “Miyajima”, you can see two iron ships that one of them carrying containers in distance. Even though they look small because of distance and look like silhouettes of boat, they are Western style iron ship, It implies that Ponting intentionally choose the wooden little boats to take his picture.

As the result, Japan in his works doesn't have Western civilization and people lives the same style as they did in hundreds years ago, which is “the natural, primitive and uncivilized way of life”. He does not directly make a case for or against the war, but by introducing Romantic poetry, he indirectly excludes, or denies, a westernising Japan.

Conclusion

Ponting photographed various aspects of Japan in Stereograph and turn them in various way such as photo books and travelogues. The first album, which emerged from his encounters in Japan, presents a mystical representation of the sacred mountain Fuji, while the second book is more intimate to the life and culture of the people, and tries to get to the heart of it by introducing Romanticist poetry. On the other hand, by venerating nature and connecting his work to the world affirmed by Romanticism, he fixes the image of Japan in the Romantic image of uncivilised nature, thus denying modernisation and war.

He describes his days in Japan as ‘happy years in one of the most delightful of holiday lands’, even under the War. When he describes his readership as visitors to Japan, for him Japan is a place to be visited by people and full of beautiful nature and culture, rather than a war-torn country. However, this Japan is a Japan calculatedly created by Ponting to be ‘seen’, as he deifies Japanese nature or touches the heart of the Japanese people, he find his ideal romantic world in Japan and providing his readers with a Japan he a carefully staged.

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