

How Photography Shaped the Portrayals of Japanese Women in Late 19th- and Early 20th-Century Japan

*Japanese photography, in the new capitalist consumer age of visual media, places women in the role of consumer or site of commodification—objectified as a commodity for monetary gain. While late 19th-century photographs of Japanese women portrayed them mainly in subordinate roles as sites of commodification, it can be argued that photography at the turn of the century introduced women in more dominant roles—as consumers with purchasing power in new forms of visual media, controversial images, and advertisements. This article investigates the history of photography in Japan and its visual representation of women in early media, artistic photography, journalism, and advertisements. By exploring various themes, historical events, and artistic/political movements in late 19th- and early 20th-century Japan, I observe some clear trends and shifts in how women came to be represented, as well as how they chose to represent themselves. Photographs, articles, and a case study of a popular Japanese women’s magazine, *Fujin Gahō*, reveal how Japanese women were at times a symbol of modernity that challenged old ideas, but also served to promote the traditional image and expectations of Japanese women.*

Keywords: Japanese photography, Japanese history, Japanese women, 19th century, 20th century, advertisements, *Fujin Gahō*

INTRODUCTION TO JAPANESE PHOTOGRAPHY

Photography was first invented by William Henry Fox Talbot in 1839 and, by 1848, had made its way to the ports of Nagasaki. During the Tokugawa shogunate, Japan adhered to an isolationist foreign policy known as *sakoku*, a policy it maintained until 1853 (Laver, 2011). Under this policy, which lasted for over two hundred years, foreign visitors were prohibited, Japanese nationals couldn’t leave the country, and ports were closed. After the abolition of *sakoku*, trade with America and Europe



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brought foreign businessmen and tourists to Japan in the late 19th century. With the influx of international visitors, Japanese photography and photographic studios flourished, and tourism played an enormous role in the international circulation and popularization of images of Japan. Some of the most well-known 19th- and 20th-century photographs of Japan were taken by foreigners.

Early Japanese photography focused predominantly on portraiture and landscapes. During the late 19th century, thousands of inaccurate photographs featuring sex workers, tradeswomen, or actors dressed as geisha or samurai made their way to Europe (Tucker, 2003). At the turn of the 20th century, artistic photography became increasingly popular and sparked vigorous debate over the best uses of photography. There were those who “advocated photography’s utilitarian and practical potential,” while others “promoted its aesthetic possibilities” (Ross, 2015, p. 3). It is important to understand that Japanese debates on aesthetics in photography “mirrored Japan’s simultaneous responsiveness and resistance to artistic movements in the West,” which is particularly evident in their depiction of women (Tucker, 2003, p. 43).

Pictorialism, Japan’s first major aesthetic movement in photography, “demonstrated that photography could address the same kind of themes as paintings yet retain an individual expression that reflected the inner dimensions of the artist” (Ross, 2015, p. 3). Artists practiced painting prints by hand to give them colour and heighten their aesthetic appeal. Late 19th-century photographs were mainly produced in studios as souvenirs for tourists or as portraits for wealthy clients. The popular image of the Meiji Empress Haruko, photographed by Uchida Kuichi in 1872, is an example of portraiture for the wealthy (Figure 1).

In later years, “alienation of urban life following the Great Kantō Earth-quake of September 1923 marked the turn towards modernism in art photo-graphy” (Ross, 2015, p. 3). The 1920s and 1930s marked a period of rising consumerism, when photographs became increasingly common in newspapers and advertise-



Figure 1. *The Empress Haruko* [albumen print, 1872]. Photographer: Uchida Kuichi. Public domain.

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ments as forms of visual media. The proliferation of photography for consumer and artistic purposes led to the expansion of photographic themes, perspectives, and portrayals of Japan and its people in the early 20th century. It is imperative to consider political, social, economic, and military aspects of early 20th-century Japan to better contextualize the representation of women and the female image in photography. Furthermore, using photographs for the study of gender in Japanese history is useful to reduce generalizations and Eurocentric perspectives, and to evaluate the causes, nature, and effects of women's depictions in visual media.

While late 19th-century photographs of Japanese women portrayed them mainly in subordinate roles, it can be argued that, at the turn of the century, photography presented women in more dominant roles—as consumers with purchasing power in new forms of visual media, controversial images, and advertisements. This categorization takes into account the motives of those producing and circulating these photographs, as well as the potential consequences arising from the propagation of these images. Through the analysis of photographs from the late 19th and early 20th century, this paper examines how photographs from various decades characterize women as sites of commodification or as consumers or both. More specifically, this paper spans the documented beginnings of photography in Japan (with photographs dating back to the 1870s) to the end of the Taishō period in 1926. During the Shōwa period (1926–1989), Japanese photography saw a dramatic change in themes, ranging from nationalism and patriotism to the photojournalism and photographic realism that documented war atrocities. For this reason, this paper focuses on earlier time periods to emphasize the period of transition that led to the photographic evolution of the Japanese woman.

SALVAGE TOURISM AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF THE FEMALE BODY IN PHOTOGRAPHY

The earliest example of the commodification of the female body through photography in Japan can be seen in late 19th-century touristic photography. Photographers, businessmen, and other foreigners visited Japan and produced images as souvenirs to take home. According to Fraser (2011), “the sense of Japanese identity cultivated by these photographs was of a timeless exotic land; yet paradoxically, Japan was rapidly changing into an industrialized nation, an image directly at odds with the vision conveyed in the photographs” (p. 41). These images, focusing on the traditional and primitive aspects of Japan as seen by European foreigners, “fitted the concept of ‘salvage’ tourism—the idea that it was the obligation of Western colonial powers to document and record traditional cultures before they slipped away” (p. 41–42). The popularity of salvage tourism in the late 1800s and early 1900s propelled the photographic industry in Japan to produce images that would be sought by wealthy foreigners.

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These travellers seemed “to have been driven by what Sigmund Freud called ‘scopophilia’ or an obsession with the pleasure of looking” (Hight, 2011, p. 9). Scopophilic desire also implies that looking is a form of possession, which explains the consumptive nature and popularity of photographs, souvenirs, and collectibles. The proliferation of photographs targeting foreign consumers during this period led representations of Japanese women to “stand precariously between fact and fiction, documentation and art” (p. 3). It also encouraged what Susan Sontag has called “a chronic voyeuristic relation to the world” (p. 3). Photographs of young women, prostitutes, and geishas were very popular in the early 1900s as many foreigners flocked to collect images of exotic, traditional Japan. This ultimately led to sexualized representations of Japanese women, as male foreigners sought to satisfy their scopophilic desires to view the female body.



Figure 2. *Three Women and a Girl* [hand-coloured albumen print, ca. 1877]. Photographer: Felice Beato. Public domain.

The phenomenon of foreign salvage tourism (recording a culture’s dying traditions) and scopophilic desire (possessing through looking) can be seen in many early 19th-century photographs of Japanese women. These photographs were known to have been staged by photographers wishing to depict women in traditional Japanese costumes or as prostitutes in provocative portraits. Many Yokohama photographs were delicately coloured by hand, which heightened their aesthetic appeal (Fraser, 2011). In Figure 2, three women wearing traditional kimonos stand side by side and look directly at the camera. To the right of the women stands a young girl in silhouette, seemingly unaware of the photographer. She may be a servant or she may have wandered into the photograph by chance. Her simple clothes and grooming are notably different from the

elegantly dressed women. This photograph, taken by Italian-British photographer Felice Beato during a visit to Japan, shows the contrast between everyday people and the staged portrayal of wealthy women or actors intended for an audience of consumers. Beato was one of many foreigners who were fascinated by Japanese costumes and customs.

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Elements of photographic voyeurism are evident in Figure 3, which depicts a prostitute partially covering her chest and looking into the distance. Her body language and gentle demeanour, with hands placed modestly over her chest, suggest submissiveness. Lack of eye contact with the photographer or the camera was a common element, a voyeuristic device that gave the viewer the impression of watching the model without being seen. Many foreign photographers took an interest in seeing women do everyday tasks such as washing hair, cleaning, or painting, as if to salvage or document the lives of exotic and supposedly primitive people, compared to Europeans.

The propagation of these images abroad led Japanese women to be viewed as exotic and sexualized, when seen through the voyeuristic gaze of foreigners. The image of Japanese feminine docility contrasted with foreign masculine imperialism—the latter consisting of visual imperialism, commodification of the female body, and power through consumerism and the possession of souvenir images. In fact, this was a misrepresentation of the time, as Japan was undergoing a period of rapid industrialization and few women dressed in the traditional costumes portrayed in studio images. As a result of the photographic export of these staged images, many Western museums continue to misrepresent late 19th- and early 20th-century Japanese woman, even today.

THE COMMODIFICATION OF THE FEMALE BODY IN JAPANESE ARTISTIC PHOTOGRAPHY

The commodification of the female body through photography was also evident in images produced by Japanese photographers in the early 20th century. While some claim that photographer Nojima Yasuzō's "Taishō and early Shōwa era nudes of earthy, robust young women are classics of Japanese photography" (Charrier, 2006, p. 48), they can also be a clear example of scopic desire of the female body through the capture and possession of nude images. Charrier (2006) observes that, although



Figure 3. *Untitled [Prostitute]* [hand-coloured albumen print, ca. 1880s]. Photographers: Raimund von Stillfried & Hermann Andersen. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. Public domain.

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the majority of these photographs were not exhibited during Nojima's lifetime because of their erotic subject matter, they remain widely celebrated in Japan and internationally. Contemporary critics set these images apart from pornography and interpret Nojima as a "serious, thoughtful artist who developed an appreciation of the feminine that transcends the superficial and the shallowly erotic" (p. 48). Nojima's work also displays aspects similar to foreign salvage tourism by emphasizing voyeuristic elements such as depicting women in submissive positions looking away from the camera.

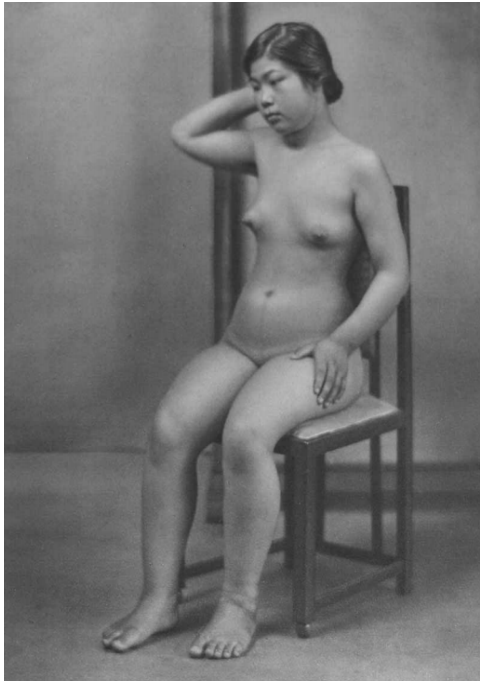


Figure 4. *Untitled* [gum bichromate print, 1921]. Photographer: Nojima Yasuzō. The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, Japan. Public domain.

The disquiet apparent in Nojima's female models is an important distinguishing feature of his photographs, and sets them apart from Japanese and Western nudes that focus on the narrowly prescribed ideal female form (Charrier, 2006). This can be seen in his 1921 photograph of an unknown woman, depicted in Figure 4. Her posture looks awkward and uncomfortable, and she avoids eye contact with the viewer. Compared to other studio portraits, this woman seems not to be wearing makeup and her hair is unadorned, suggesting that she is from a lower class. Nojima's photographs "reinforced the notion that the primordial vitality and erotic spirit of the 'common' woman—but also her manifest inferiority—were inscribed in her physique and physiognomy" (Charrier, 2006, p. 50). He explored these themes through what he calls "primitivistic eroticism." For this reason, Fraser (2011) concludes that Nojima's work

"appropriated a Western Oriental fantasy of the submissive, exotic, primitive female 'Other,' but translated it into class, rather than racial, difference" (p. 61). Contrary to Western scenarios, the lower-class Japanese female is the "other" being gazed upon by the upper-class Japanese male artist, thus changing the paradigm to one that is class based (Fraser, 2011). Unlike the images produced by foreign photographers, Nojima does not focus on women's costumes or "backwardness" or make these appealing to the viewer. Instead, it is the models' submissiveness, primitiveness, and docility that is aesthetically appealing to both foreign and Japanese photographers.

THE COMMODIFICATION OF THE FEMALE BODY IN ADVERTISEMENTS

The commodification of the female body can also be seen in advertisements targeting male audiences. Before the 1920s, “beauty posters were known for their illustrative images, but by 1922, designers began to use photography” to appeal to consumers (Thornton, 1989, p. 9). The 1922 Japanese port wine ad in Figure 5 depicts a woman appearing to be nude, holding a glass of wine. Her gaze is directed at the camera as if looking at the viewer and offering a drink. Advertisements such as this one depart from the submissive image of the Japanese woman portrayed in both touristic and artistic photography. However, as the bare-shouldered model is likely not wearing clothing, the woman in the image is still portrayed as vulnerable and subordinate to the (male) viewer.

Art historian Kenneth Clark (1957) has observed that “consciously or unconsciously, photographers have usually recognized that, in a photograph of the nude, their real object is not to reproduce the naked body, but to imitate some artist’s view of what the naked body should be” (Weisstein, 1957, p. 360). For this reason, it is important to understand photographers’ varied perceptions of the female image in order to comprehend how changing interpretations affected the representation of Japanese women both within and outside of images. Whatever the purpose—tourism, advertising, art—all photographs are intended to appeal to the viewer in some way. Depictions of women reveal the desires, imaginings, and expectations of viewers and artists alike, and photography serves as a projection of patriarchal society and of the notion of what a woman is, or should be.

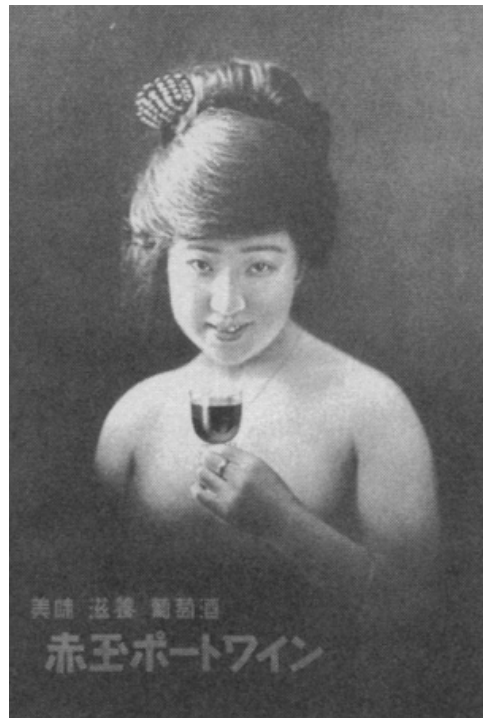


Figure 5. *Port Wine* [gum bichromate print, ca. 1922]. Photographer: Mokuda Inoue. Designer: Toshiro Kataoka. Public domain.

THE TRANSITION PERIOD: CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARD CIRCULATING IMAGES

Early attitudes about the circulation of women’s images were negative, and people were reluctant to accept photographs of women as anything other than signs of a lack of modesty and self-respect. While the media wanted to use the female image

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for advertising to increase patriotism and consumerism, rapid technological advancement in visual media left many conservative people opposed to the idea of immodestly circulating images of women.

The ideal example of this phenomenon is the 1908 National Beauty Contest held by the newspaper *Jiji Shinpō*. This newspaper invited the people of Japan to send in photographic portraits to find the most beautiful woman in the country (Fraser, 2011). The newspaper “framed the competition in frankly nationalistic terms, asking



Figure 6. Beauty contest winner Hiroko Suehiro from *Nihon bijinchō* (*Book of Japanese Beauties*, ca. 1908). Photographer (attributed): Kiyoshi Esaki. Public domain.

for contestants willing to engage in a beauty battle that would help cement Japan’s reputation as a player on the world stage” (pp. 52–53). By this time, photographs of beauties (*bijin*) had long been popular in Japan, and images of the most beautiful geisha were purchased *en masse* by both Japanese and foreign consumers (Bardsley, 2012). After many images were submitted, the newspaper selected sixteen-year-old Suehiro Hiroko, shown in figure 6. The daughter of a wealthy and distinguished family, she attended the famous Gakushūin school in Tokyo. Suehiro, who was unaware that her photo had been submitted by her brother-in-law, was immediately expelled from school once the photograph was published (Bardsley, 2012). The principal of the school took such drastic action because “he knew that any hint of improper behaviour on the part of a female student or teacher would only fuel public suspicion that education corrupted girls” (p. 42).

Women who published images of themselves were seen as unchaste and immoral. Even though the image of the sixteen-year-old beauty contest winner does not appear to be inappropriate or sexualized, it still maintains voyeuristic elements—in particular, the lack of eye contact with the camera. The image may have been negatively associated with Western consumer photographs of prostitutes or lower-class actors, taken to appeal to foreigners’ desires. Public opinion about images of Japanese women reveals much about expected roles and attitudes. In the case of the beauty contest, the actions of the principal exemplify the fears and conservative attitudes ordinary Japanese people would have had regarding the female image.

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However, controversies in Japan during the 1910s and 1920s over circulated photographs of women eventually began to change the social norms that expected women to be modest and retiring, and away from the public eye. The rise of consumerism and advertising in magazines, newspapers, and other forms of media ultimately parallels the progression of women from commodification to representation in more varied roles—for example, as consumers themselves. Photography also “functioned to frame the New Woman as a foreign import to Japan” and served to blur the lines “between respectable—and ostensibly private—women” and “women much less respected because of the sexualized and public nature of their work” (Bardsley, 2012, pp. 39–40).

By 1910, photography was a part of people’s daily lives in Japan, and the emergence of the Bluestockings—modern, intellectual women—as the New Woman “put photography at the centre of controversy” (p. 41). Thus, when their photographs appeared in public, they “functioned to obscure the borders of respectability even further” and “topped the risqué attraction of the schoolgirl by offering a new representation of the Japanese woman, an intellectual, adult woman who was also a desiring one and had no qualms about publishing her photo for all to see” (p. 42).

Increasingly, it became more acceptable for magazines, newspapers, and advertisements to portray the female image; however, the early controversies around images of the Bluestockings can be interpreted as a form of activism that demanded that women be noticed on a national level. Photographs of women in advocative or political roles were a symbol of progressiveness and a newfound identity for many Japanese women. Ultimately, for



Figure 7. *The Bluestockings’ Public Lecture* (ca. February 1913). Public domain.

some, photographs of the Japanese woman became a form of activism and a reaction to patriarchal rules and gender expectations. For example, photography made it possible for women to be seen giving political speeches, working non-traditional jobs, and dressing in modern and non-traditional clothing. Figure 7 shows Iwano Kiyoko giving a public lecture in Tokyo in 1913, during a time when political involvement for women was illegal. Controversial images of members of the Bluestockings resulted in some of them losing their jobs and facing social rejection, which eventually led to the disbanding of the group. While photography played a major role in defining the New Woman and presenting her to the world, it also paved a path for use as a medium to challenge the status quo. This exemplifies the transition

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from women's one-dimensional representation as a site of commodification to more diverse portrayals enabled by new forms of visual media. This is not to say that women's bodies were no longer commodified; indeed, they continued to be objectified throughout much of the time period, and still so today. However, this transition acknowledges the appearance of new narratives and characterizations of women that encouraged the exploration of modern ideas in art, as well as the evolution of women's roles.

GENDER ADVERTISING, THE MODERN GIRL, AND WOMEN AS CONSUMERS

While photography helped exhibit the New Woman in the first decade of the 20th century, the Modern Girl (*Modan Gaaru*) became the face of the consumer in the 1920s and 1930s. Photography quickly made its way into new popularized forms of visual media such as magazines that appealed to the Japanese female buyer. According to Miriam Silverberg (2007), the Japanese Modern Girl was a middle-class consumer in late 1920s and 1930s urban Japan—often characterized as apolitical, morally corrupt, sexually promiscuous, and “liberated . . . from age-old traditions and conventions” (p. 52).

Rita Felski (2005) observes that discourses on the topic of consumerism were frequently centred around the female body and typically depicted the woman as a consumer. As Rosalind Williams notes, “to a large extent, the pejorative nature of the concept of consumption itself derives from its association with female submission to organic needs” (1991, p. 208). In the early 20th century, photography was the prime means of depicting the ideal female consumer in advertising.

Historians have pointed out that, in Japan, the “Western fantasy is perhaps the most prominent strategy used by publishers to promote sales” (Hayashi, 1995, p. 190). Increasingly during this time period, magazines taught female readers how to attain a better quality of life by marketing Western independence and individualism, whereas earlier images of women “were crystallized by the term *endure*, i.e., to suppress emotions, deny ambitions, and adapt to any environment” (p. 190). Magazines and visual media schooled readers on practices that caused profound cultural transformations. Women were taught to desire material things and shown images of the ideal female consumer that they ought to emulate (Inoue, 2007). The Modern Girl increasingly became the target of advertisements and companies wishing to promote the lifestyle desired by these women, while, at the same time, encouraging women to see themselves as loyal consumers.

JAPANESE FEMALE CONSUMERS AND THE “WESTERN FANTASY”

The “Western fantasy” was not something new in 20th-century Japan. Technological advancements, urbanization, and the accessibility of photography and visual media to everyday people resulted in its popularity at the turn of the century. Photographs of Japanese women in western-style clothing date back to the beginnings of Japanese

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photography. Early visual consumption of photographs was accessible only to the wealthy. During the late 19th century, wealthy Japanese women indulged in having their portrait taken as a “status-enhancing act” and a marker that they were “participating in the latest fad connected to modernization” (Fraser, 2011, p. 45). In these early portraits, western-style clothing “often indicates social status, particularly for women” (p. 45). Figure 8 shows Kaneko Shibusawa photographed in the late 19th century wearing a western-style dress. She is pictured in what appears to be an intricately staged studio or household setting, indicative of her status and wealth.



Figure 8. Kaneko Shibusawa [albumen print, ca. late 1800s]. Public domain.

In the 20th century, the popularity of western-style dress was due to the accessibility of visual media, newspapers, and magazines to everyday women. For the first time, technological advancements had enabled the distribution of images on a wider scale. The first newspapers produced by “metallic movable type were published in the 1870s” and, within ten years, the technology was widespread and media distribution had expanded “beyond the possibilities of woodblock printing” (Frederick, 2017, p. 12). By the 1890s, it was possible to distribute newspapers and magazines at larger scales due to more efficient postal systems (p. 12).

While newspapers, photographs, and magazines became easier and cheaper to produce, how did they revolutionize the depiction of Japanese women as

Modern Girls and consumers? Urbanization and the increasing number of working women meant that salaries gave everyday women independent purchasing power for the first time. From the turn of the century, “women comprised about 80 percent of the workers in textile factories” and around “20–40 percent of [female] factory workers” read magazines that were often shared in dormitories or factory lounges (Frederick, 2017, p. 16). Moreover, while many of the contracts sent wages back to the workers’ families, “separation from parental supervision allowed greater freedom in how they spent what money they had” (p. 16). Thus, businesses flocked to advertise fashion, cosmetics, habits, and the “Western fantasy,” no longer only to wealthy housewives, but also to young working-class women. Ultimately, this led to the diversification of women’s representation as more independent consumers.

A CASE STUDY OF A JAPANESE WOMAN'S MAGAZINE: *FUJIN GAHŌ*

Japanese women's magazines reflected women's desires to change their traditional roles. This is particularly evident in early magazines with nationalist overtones such as *Fujin Gahō*. First published in 1905, it targeted primarily housewives and unmarried women, using images, ads for commodities, and self-help literature. Effective advertisements promoting cosmetics presented an image of the ideal woman (Inoue, 2007). A photograph, with its "illusion of capturing the whole person," enhanced dreams and possibilities, making them seem "tangible to countless viewers" (Bardsley, 2012, p. 53). Ultimately, magazines that offered self-help "advice on how to cook, how to raise children, how to manage a household budget, and how to engage in sexual activities" attracted women through the promise of change and modernization but, at the same time, created their own "brand of stereotyped images of women steeped in commercialism not tradition" (Hayashi, 1995, p. 189). Hayashi observes that "the core of these magazines' power is the gender asymmetry they create" between contradictory social demands of traditional values and independence (p. 189).

This concept is exemplified in issues of *Fujin Gahō* in the early 20th century. The February 1906 issue of *Fujin Gahō* in Figure 9 shows a Japanese woman wearing an extravagant western-style dress paired with a hat and numerous accessories. The woman's posture and expression are serious, and are reminiscent of earlier forms of portrait photography, as opposed to the more artistic styles of photography of later years. Pictures such as this one would have been relatively uncommon in 1906, as many models wearing western clothing were Westerners, Chinese, or royals. The aspirations of everyday women to wear western-style clothing grew with each passing year, but, in reality, most still wore kimonos. The "Western fantasy" was still unrealizable for most Japanese women; however, photographs illustrated these fantasies and made them more widespread.



Figure 9. Atsuko Otahara. (ca. February 1906). From *Fujin Gahō*. Public domain.

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Figure 10. Photograph of a geisha (ca. 1906). From *Fujin Gahō* supplement. Public domain.

argues that it is important to consider the implications of gender in advertising because the systematic arrangement of male-female differences allows us to “think profitably about the way in which self-definition is guided and externally determined” (p. 25). Thus, more life-like attributes in photographs of women allow them to be seen from perspectives that characterize them differently. The portrayal of women in active rather than passive roles in photographs affects how they are characterized, how their role in society is perceived, and how gender expectations change. For instance, in the 1920s, women are seen in more candid photographs that have movement and life compared to studio-staged photographs. This 1925 issue of *Fujin Gahō*, shown in Figure 11, depicts

The style of photographing women developed rapidly from formal portrait photography to more artistic interpretations of geishas and other beauties. The *Aesthetic Picture Report*, published as a supplement to *Fujin Gahō* in 1906, depicts artistic images of Japanese women. Figure 10 shows a popular geisha wearing what appears to be a western-style dress with short sleeves, delicately holding flowers while gazing away from the camera. The setting, feel, and expression in this photograph contrast markedly with the image in Figure 9: even though both photographs were published in the same magazine in the same year, the model in modern dress displays more movement and life.

According to Erving Goffman (1987), “advertisements overwhelmingly and candidly present make-believe scenes, the subjects or figures depicted being quite different from the professional models who pose the action” (p. 25). He



Figure 11. Women’s Western Costume (ca. 1925). From *Fujin Gahō*. Public domain.

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urban women walking—most dressed in western-style clothing. The illustrations in this issue show the shift from studio photography to candid, outdoor photography, shot in a journalistic manner.

While the increasingly active depictions of women cannot necessarily be said to be more empowering, photographic images intended to appeal to the female consumer begin to show her in ways that she would like to see herself. Many advertisements during this period continued to portray Japanese women's bodies as sites of commodification. However, corporations began to entice women into consumer behaviours through modern and even controversial depictions. Thus, it can be said that photography and other new forms of visual media paired with capitalist consumptive patterns to lead to dramatic changes in how Japanese women were portrayed in the early 20th century.

THE VALUES AND LIMITATIONS OF PHOTOGRAPHS FOR HISTORICAL STUDY

Historians have access to more than 130 years of photographic manipulations, propaganda, and imaginative artistry that have shaped views of Japanese culture. Through photographic portrayals, historians can hypothesize the experiences of Japanese women as well as the roles and expectations placed upon them. According to Hight (2011), “the spread of photography throughout Japan both paralleled and mirrored the rapid westernization of the country, but chronicling this photographic history came much later” (p. 3).

There are many values and limitations to using photographs for historical study. While photographs convey a large amount of visual information, they also leave room for varied interpretation. Photographs allow the viewer to look back in time and are known to effectively set the *zeitgeist* of a period through depictions of fashion, technology, architecture, and more; however, historians must continuously question the intentions of photographers in an effort to interpret history accurately. They may also want to consider how and why these photographs came to be preserved and for what purposes—especially when studying a time period known to have produced many staged images for consumer purposes.

Many museums preserve not only artifacts, but also images as cultural property, art, and photojournalism—all effective sources of primary data for the study of contemporary history. According to Joshua Brown (2007), “photography far surpasses other archival visual media as a pictorial source used by historians, but for the most prosaic of reasons: as uncritically handled illustrations confirming or, more often, merely reiterating the physical appearance of places and persons discussed in the text” (p. 10). This paper analyzes a limited number of photographs from various collections in order to understand the social depictions, roles, and expectations of Japanese women in late 19th- and early 20th-century Japan. All of the photographs were sourced from photographic archives and publications on the topics of Japanese history or photography. Many of these photographs were staged in studios for the

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purpose of tourism, advertising, or pleasure viewing. It must be noted that the agendas and motives of photographers affect their composition and the messages they construct; however, rather than detracting from the usefulness of the image, these messages, when critically analyzed, add value to the photographs. How women are portrayed in a given society reveals a substantial amount of information about their expected roles, conduct, sexuality, and status. Thus, photographs and visual media are indispensable to the study and understanding of gender roles, as well as to social history.

CONCLUSION

The photographic portrayal of Japanese women promoted traditional images, attitudes, and roles but, at times, photographs also served as symbols of modernization that challenged old ideas. In late 19th-century Japan, women were primarily depicted in subordinate roles. Portraying women in traditional feminine roles allowed the female image to become a site of commodification, while salvage tourism exoticized and sexualized Japanese women for foreign touristic consumerism. The rise of consumer-driven scopical desires, enabled through photography in Japan's period of industrialization, was instrumental in determining how Japanese women were perceived. At the turn of the 20th century during Japan's capitalist consumer age, photography presented women in more dominant roles as consumers. Advertisements and products that targeted the female consumer were more likely to depict women wearing modern fashion, and introduced new and more progressive ideas of femininity. Although visual media continues to objectify women even today, the rise of capitalism and the emergence of the urban consumer diversified traditional perspectives and shone a new light on ideas of what it meant to be a woman in 20th-century Japan.

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