

Japanese photographic coverage of the Vietnam War

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In a 2001 interview Crown Prince Naruhito listed as his three of his most prominent memories of the twentieth century the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, the 1970 Osaka Expo, and a 1965 photograph of a family fleeing across a river in South Vietnam. The first two are predictable, but why the third? The fact is: histories of postwar Japan usually treat the American War in Vietnam as an event that had little impact on Japanese consciousness. Like many Japanese in the 1960s, however, the Crown Prince was deeply affected by Japanese photojournalistic coverage of the War. Books like photographer Okamura Akihiko's *Minami Betonamu Sensô Jûgun-ki* (*With the Army in South Vietnam*, 1965) were instant bestsellers, while images by Akimoto Keiichi, Ishikawa Bun'yô, and others illustrated popular serialized accounts by famous correspondents such as Kaikô Takeshi and Honda Katsuichi. Other photographers, such Sawada Kyôichi and Toshio Sakae won Pulitzers and other international accolades for their coverage of life in combat zones. The popularity of Vietnam War photographs in Japan gives rise to a number of intriguing questions. For instance, why were Japanese, who were not direct combatant in the war, so interested in a distant war? How did Japanese photographers represent the war, and in what context did their images reach the Japanese public. How did popular and critical discourse on Vietnam impact Japanese understandings of self and nation in the tumultuous sixties and seventies?

In my larger project, I seek to address these questions by examining war narratives fashioned by Japanese photographers active in Indochina from 1963-1975. For this presentation, however, my scope is more limited. I will focus on the work of Okamura Akihiko, Akimoto Kei'ichi, and Ishikawa Bun'yô during the early years of the war. While these photographers' 'photographic reports' (*shashin hôkoku*) were presented as conveying the "reality," or *genjitsu*, of the war, the representations their images created often proved popular because they provided a dramatic and long-term spectacle and, more importantly, because they resonated with complex and unresolved problems afflicting domestic Japan. Some of these issues, such as the presence of the American military in Japan, had direct ties to the fighting in Vietnam. Others, however, such as the reconfiguration of popular Asia-Pacific War memory, the emergence of a postwar Japanese ethnic nationalism, and the debate on realism and humanism among photography theorists, seemingly had little relationship to the events in Southeast Asia until photographers and commentators forged such linkages through wartime coverage. I examine how these linkages were constructed in order to pinpoint the varied, and sometimes contradictory, meanings Vietnam War photography held for individuals in Japan.

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Present Position

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Education

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M.A. **Northwestern University**, History, 2008

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B.A. **Montana State University**, History, minor in Japan Studies 2004

B.A. **Montana State University**, Photography, 2004

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Research Experience

- “The ‘Vietnamization’ of Japan: Japanese Photojournalists and the War in Indochina,” Northwestern University (Ph.D. dissertation) 2010-present
- “*This is War in Vietnam*: The Contested Meaning of Okamura Akihiko’s Photographs in American and Japanese Print Media,” Northwestern University 2009-2010
- “Imaging Ideology in Meiji Japan: the *Graphic* and Photographic Representations of Nation and Empire,” Northwestern University (M.A. thesis) 2007-2008
- “Exhibition and Identity: Creating the ‘nation’ in Meiji Japan,” University of Oregon (M.A. Thesis) 2006-2007
- “Inventing the Exotic: Okakura Kakuzô and the Making of Modern Japan,” University of Oregon 2005-2006

Affiliations/Memberships

- Association for Asian Studies 2005-Present