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Scenes of Childhood:

Exhibiting Childhood as National Imagery

Aurore YAMAGATA-MONTOYA

Abstract

Japan, March 2006. After four months of high attendance, the exhibition Nihon no Kodomo: 60 Nen organized by the Japan Professional Photographers Society ends with a huge success. Just six months later, the exhibition was remodeled by the Japan Foundation for what would be a five-year-long world-touring exhibition, under the new name Scenes of Childhood: Sixty Years of Postwar Japan. The tour started in Jordan and toured 20 countries in North and South America, Africa, Europe, and the Middle East, before closing in Cuba in September 2011. Within its Arts and Cultural Exchanges section, the Japan Foundation has developed a Traveling Exhibitions Program to 'introduce Japanese arts and culture to overseas' (Japan Foundation, 2016, n.p.) that runs about twenty exhibitions every year. Scenes of Childhood has been one of the most largely displayed and successful photographic exhibitions of the Japan Foundation in those last five years, following an interest for childhood and youth. I focus on this specific exhibition to analyse how a cultural institution like the Japan Foundation produces and exports a national self-representation using photographs of children. The photographs are exported not only as cultural objects, but also as testimonies of Japanese history and culture. Looking at them helps us consider what self-image Japan sends to the rest of the world. What does the exhibition say about Japan? What place does childhood occupy in the national imagery? I refer to both Western (Higonnet 1998) and Japanese (Jones 2010) models of childhood to consider how childhood is integrated within the national history and imagery. I focus especially on the assumed "innocence" of children to show how a national imagery is created. I argue that Scenes of Childhood promulgates an image of Japan that is that of a harmless, pacific and victim nation.

Introduction: Exporting Photographs of Children

In March 2006, after four months of high attendance, the exhibition *Nihon no Kodomo: 60 Nen* [*Children of Japan: 60 years*] organized by the Japan Professional Photographers Society in Tokyo closes with success. Just six months later, it was remodeled by the Japan Foundation as a touring exhibition, and renamed *Scenes of Childhood: Sixty Years of Postwar Japan*. The tour started in Jordan and toured 20 countries in

North and South America, Africa, Europe, and the Middle East, before closing in Cuba in September 2011.

It displayed a hundred photographs of Japanese children taken during the second half of the twentieth century. A hundred 'Scenes of Childhood' that put together formed the 'Japanese Child' [*nihon no kodomo*] of the original exhibition. Beyond a general interest for childhood that developed in the nineteenth century (Higonnet 1998), exposing the young bodies in this context raises several questions. Who is this 'Japanese child'? What place does childhood occupy in the national imagery? How are "official" representations of Japan created? Those are the main questions that I attempt to address in this paper. In order to do so, I first identify the historical context of the nineteenth century when the exportation of a nation's image became institutionalised and briefly retrace the development and goals of the Japan Foundation. I then turn my attention to the structure of the exhibition and consider how the original one was adapted. This leads to the third and last point, the choice of self-representation through childhood and its implications.

A Tradition of Displaying the Nation Abroad

The Japan Foundation emerged in 1972 from a century-long tradition of cultural exportation. Showings of Japanese art and artifacts abroad developed during the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1862 the first substantial exhibition about Japan took place. At the World Fair held in London, about six hundred Japanese articles were displayed through the initiative of Sir Rutherford Alcock, British Minister to Japan, who collected the items while he was posted there (Mitsukuni, Iko and Tsune 1984, 86).

In 1867, France invited Japan to participate in its World Fair. The *Bakufu* government accepted and delegated a mission to Paris, led by Tokugawa Akitate. But conflicts between government and individual enterprises arose with the submission of items by the Saga and Satsuma domains (Mitsukuni, Iko and Tsune 1984, 87), who had a long tradition of opposition to the central government, as exemplified in the Satsuma Rebellion (1877). It was in 1873, at the Vienna World Fair that Japan was first represented as a unified nation. The Japanese exhibits were coordinated from then on under the sole control of the Meiji government (Conant 2006, 258). It gave Japan an opportunity to present the country to the rest of the world and define itself as a modern, industrial and “civilized” nation at a time when the Meiji government struggled to position itself among the Western nations and renegotiate the Unequal Treaties of 1858. As Ellen Conant said:

‘during the latter half of the nineteenth century, international expositions became a virtually mandatory form of public relations for the major powers, notwithstanding their enormous cost. In those days, world’s fairs were natural expressions of national pride, evidence that a country had crossed the divide between the developed and the non-developed, primarily through the excellence of its arts and manufactures’ (2006, 255-6).

The World Fairs, in all of which Japan participated from 1878, offered a perfect opportunity for self-representation. Its official participation gave the government control over Japan’s international image.

In the twentieth century, following a wider trend relating to war propaganda (Nye 2004, 100), this cultural exportation was institutionalized and was increasingly initiated by the Japanese government itself. In 1934, the *Kokusai Bunka Shinkōkai* (International Cultural Relations Society) aimed to promote Japanese culture in the areas it occupied (Vyas 2008, n.p.). In 1972, the Japan Foundation replaced the *Kokusai Bunka Shinkōkai* with an increased emphasis on the notion of ‘promoting international understanding through cultural exchange’ (Japan Foundation, 2016, n.p.), to erase the imperialistic connotations of its predecessor. Its emergence coincides with a period of growth in the national confidence of the country (Goodman 2001, 181). The 1970s were also a period in which the oil shock and the United States pressures pushed Japan into diversifying its diplomatic and economic contacts, especially through the ‘Official Development Assistance’ consisting of concessional loans and technical assistance that Japan had already instituted in Asia to facilitate trade and investments (Mochizuki 2007, 3). This expansion has also opened up the possibility of new cultural exchanges. The geographical travel of *Scenes of Childhood* can be interpreted meaningfully in the light of this broadening of Japan’s ‘geographic horizons’ (Mochizuki 2007, 3). We have to be conscious that practical details such as costs, dates and interest in the theme proposed, as well as the Japan Foundation public relations, play a role in the construction of the itinerary. Nonetheless, it seems meaningful that it toured mainly countries with recent (post-war) relationships. The traditional political, economic and cultural relationships with other countries of Asia and, increasingly since the nineteenth century, of Europe and America (to be understood as North

America) seem to have turned towards the building of a new cultural network, including the Middle East, Africa and South America.

The Japan Foundation focuses on three main goals divided into three sections within the institution: the artistic and cultural exchange, the promotion of Japanese language, and the encouragement of collaborative research in the field of Japanese Studies. *Scenes of Childhood* belongs to the 'Arts and Cultural Exchanges' section, within which a 'Traveling Exhibitions Program' has been developed. It aims to 'introduce Japanese arts and culture to overseas', running about twenty projects every year. Their field of interests ranges from traditional arts and crafts to more contemporary practices in art, photography, architecture or designs. Whilst the exhibitions are conceived by the Japan Foundation, their organizational aspect is shared between this organization and diplomatic missions abroad. The host institutions have varied from museums to cultural centres, from universities to embassies or city halls. This list includes both sites of knowledge and sites of political power. Although they lack the sacralised aspect of the museum, the spaces confer to the exhibit an aura of authority and institutional recognition.

First supervised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a 'special agency' (*tokushuhōjin*), since 2003 the Japan Foundation is an independent administrative corporation (*dokuritsu gyōsei hōjin*). However, despite this administrative change, it strictly follows the government policies and remains in Vyas's terms 'a state-level government agency' (2008,

n.p.). As such, it presents a specific vision of Japanese society and history, as I develop below.

Documenting childhood

To understand how the image of Japan is constructed through *Scenes of Childhood*, we need to look at the format and structure of the project itself. *Scenes of Childhood* is not as much a creation as a re-creation. It is an adaption for a foreign audience of an original Japanese exhibition, which offered a framework from which to compose the new project. The theme and timeframe of 60 years were kept. The exhibit needed, for practical reasons, to have fewer items, so a selection was made, reducing the number of photographs, hence facilitating the transport and installation.

Through a hundred pictures, the exhibition documents not only childhood, but Japanese culture and society in general. The exhibition *Scenes of childhood* points at a historical perspective that highlights the social changes in Japan since the post-war period, as not only its title says, but also the inclusion of the socio-historical aspect in the catalogue and flyers I could access. From the perspective of the Japan Foundation, photographs act more as a historical document than a piece of art, as evidenced by the 2005 Annual Report: 'The Arts and Culture Group of the Japan Foundation is committed to furthering mutual understanding by introducing the country's fine arts, architecture, music, theater, dance, cinema, TV programs, literature, and sports, as well as by shedding light on the historical and social background that gave birth to them—a perspective that is often overlooked when cultural products

are transmitted commercially' (2005, n.p.). The Japan Foundation bases its cultural politics on a belief of shared existential values that overcome frontiers: 'arts and culture has (sic) the power to break through barriers of language or cultural difference and speak to our common humanity' (Japan Foundation 2009, 6).

The importance of the photographs as historical documents has also been expressed in the specific context of *Scenes of Childhood*. The Japan Foundation website affirms: 'The 100 works in this exhibition act as a document of the children themselves and simultaneously depict them in specific times and spaces throughout Japan, from the past to the present' (Japan Foundation 2016, n.p.). In another promotional page of the website we can read in a similar wording:

'in addition to serving as a testimony of the photographers' views of children, the works in this exhibition act to document the lives of the children themselves and depict them in specific times and places throughout Japan, from the past through the present. By observing these carefully selected works, we hope that audiences will become more aware of the changes that Japan has undergone over the past 60 years and thus enable to develop a deeper understanding of the country and its people' (Japan Foundation 2016, n.p.).

This idea is reused and developed by the host institutions. The Japan Information and Culture Center, Embassy of Japan in Washington, D.C. (U.S.A) writes in its leaflet: 'From scenes of a country recovering from the ravages of war, to those of a nation catapulted to industrial growth and material abundance, *Scenes of Childhood* is a visual postwar history, not only of Japanese children, but of the times and places in which they

lived. Each image illuminates the immense change Japan had undergone over the past 60 years, instilling a deeper understanding of the country and its people' (Japanese Embassy 2009). In other words, the photographs are not of value for their intrinsic artistic value, but for the documentary aspect.

In the case of this exhibition, childhood is not represented *per se*, but as a vehicle of national memory and identity. Other exhibitions of photographs of children that took place in the years 2000s and 2010s also validate the centrality of images of childhood to the idea of Japanese national identity in the post-war period. Among them, is the exhibition *Kodomotachi* (2012) which was held at the Ken Domon Museum of Photography (Sakata); or *Photographs of children* (2011), a series of three subsequent exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Photography (Tōkyō). Along with the Japan Foundation's exhibition, those two exhibits opened the way for exhibitions of photographs of children based on social consideration of childhood rather than on artistic values, as was the case with the earlier exhibitions on childhood held in Japan. On the website of the exhibition *Go-Betweens: The World Seen Through Children*, it is affirmed that it 'turns its gaze on politics, culture, family and other aspects of the environment surrounding children, and the problems they face' (2014, n.p.).

Toshiharu Nakamura pointed out how worldwide, during the 2000s, several exhibitions about home, the family and children were curated (2014, 1). In Japan three main exhibitions popularized these themes, *Wonder and Joy: Children in Japanese art* at the Tōkyō National Museum

in 2001; *Milkmaid by Vermeer and Dutch Genre Painting- Masterworks from the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam*, at the National Art Centre in Tōkyō in 2007; and *L'enfant dans les collections du musée du Louvre* organized by the National Art Centre, one year later (Nakamura 2014, 2). Whereas the latter two exhibits displayed foreign art, the former one focused on Japanese art exclusively. Nakamura argued that it was curated to celebrate the pregnancy of the Imperial princess and critics highlighted the lack of questioning about the symbolism of childhood (Nakamura 2014, 4). What happened in those early exhibitions, or other international exhibitions, such as *When They Were Young: A Photographic Retrospective of Childhood* at the Library of Congress (United States of America), is an acknowledgement of images of childhood already present in the collections of the museums. Those images acquired a new visibility in the light of the social environment. Social concerns surrounding the child gave him/her a newfound acknowledgement. It is interesting to note that childhood entered museums through images valued for their artistic aspect, the visual pleasure, rather than the social awareness of the latter exhibitions of photographs. With the first exhibitions, childhood was affirmed as a legitimate field of museum display. Together, they show that childhood was present in different times and places. Individually, each showed the sensibilities of representing childhood, through images focusing on ideals of beauty and love.

Images of childhood

How has childhood become part of the national imagery? The Japanese child is visible in the cultural exports of Japan. Just to name a

few: the figure of the schoolgirl (Ashcraft and Ueda 2010), the many children of Miyazaki's films, anime characters like Shin-chan or Son Goku junior. There are a multitude of Japanese children in European minds, a multitude of perceptions of Japanese culture from different epochs, more or less realistic and all attractive to an international audience (Pellitteri 2012). The Japan Foundation exhibition brings a different perspective in medium and breadth. Together it offers an image of childhood, one that is widely present in Japan through the works of famous and less known photographers. The bookshops' shelves are full of photo-books filled with images of children and families. From Ken Domon's post-war children to the sales success *Mirai-Chan* by Kotori Kawashima (2011), photographs of children document the everyday life of Japanese people. The hundred photographs selected by the Japan Foundation shifts the representation of childhood from the commercial to the historical field, and from fiction to the reality of documentary photography, following a tradition established by Ken Domon with series such as *Hiroshima* (1958), *Chikuhō no kodomotachi [Children of Chikuhō]* (1960) or *Rumie-chan wa Otoosan ga Shinda. Zoku Chikuhō no Kodomotachi [Rumie's Father is Dead. The Children of Chikuhō Continues]* (1960).

Childhood is an easy window into another culture. It is a universal experience with certain immovable aspects over time and place, as Peter Stearns has pointed out (2005 and 2011). Biologically, children are submitted to physical growth and intellectual maturation. Culturally, play is a consistent element, visually identifiable for members of another culture. Those universal aspects allow the audience to cling on to a

known meaning or sentiment. They understand that the child is playing even though they might not know the game; they acknowledge his/her cries as pain or sadness even though they might not know what or who caused it. By putting forward the cuteness and games, the exhibition follows the Western ideal of the innocent or romantic child (Higonnet 1998). Not only does it facilitate the understanding and identification of the audience with the scenes represented, but as Joseph Nye pointed out '[w]hen a country's culture includes universal values and its policies promotes values and interests that others share, it increases the probability of obtaining its desired outcomes because of the relationships of attraction and duty that it creates' (Nye 2004, 11). Japan inscribes itself within the (dominant) Western set of values while at the same time it erases its own specific "scenes of childhood" that could bring a disapproval gaze.

In the exhibition, I identified the lack of such a view of childhood. The model of the 'little citizen' (*Shōkokumin*) of the early twentieth century was developed by Mark Jones (2010). However, the pre-war image of childhood is today still relevant. It is debatable whether they remain as dominant or residual cultural models (Williams 1977). Nonetheless, its importance in our understanding of past and contemporary childhood is essential.

The little citizen of the pre-war period, led to the excesses of the child-soldier's imagery in the 1930s-40s. Not only has this period been mainly excluded from the timeframe, but the photographs are constructed in opposition (Montoya 2013). The standing military-style posture is

replaced by children running and crouching. The visual power of the organized group leave space for the individual freedom within the crowd, and (boys) uniforms are replaced by Western-style civilian clothes. The militarism disappears and is replaced by the image of the innocent child playing freely. *Scenes of Childhood*, like other photography exhibitions of the Japan Foundation, *Gazing at the Contemporary World- Japanese Photography from the 1970s to the Present* (2007-2011) or *The Metamorphosis of Japan After the War* (2012) have excluded the pre and wartime periods. Those three projects show the reconstruction of the country under different lights. This can be explained by the Japan Foundation's role to spread the image of the nation; thus, the touring exhibitions should avoid possible diplomatic tensions. (Re) presenting the militaristic time will not only bring back a past identity that Japan fought against but might revive the "historical problem", based on different perceptions of the past (Berger 2007, 181). The militaristic and ultra-nationalistic years are thus kept away from the viewers' eyes.

After the Second World War, Japan had to rebuild the country not only materially, but had to reconstruct an image that could legitimize it in worldwide power relations. Politically, Japan rebuilt the country on a new constitution based on Western models (Sirota Gordon 1997) that forbade it to have an army, and hence renounce any belligerent actions and the pre-war expansionist politics. However, the building of the image of a pacifist nation has to be accompanied by cultural exchanges that will create a new popular image of Japan in the mind of foreigners.

The Japan Foundation fills this role and promotes the image of an artistically productive and innovative nation.

Moreover, Japan has rebuilt its image as a pacifist nation, building up its post-war identity as a victim. *Scenes of Childhood* carried on the idea of victimhood that developed in the nation's collective memory (Berger 2007, 186) and in literature and film: 'children play an indispensable role (...) as the archetype of pure victimhood' (Orr 2001, 110). Chronologically, the first pictures shown are of the survivors of the atomic bombs. This curatorial choice calls for the empathy of the audience. Moreover, the popular assumption of childhood's innocence increases the child's status as victim.

Though adults occasionally appear in Domon's photographs, children remain the main subject. When present, adults are defined in relation to their relationship with the children: as parents or carers, as amusers, as teachers or salespersons. The adult remains a background presence in the lives of those children. Is it not exactly the absence that Domon documented in his series *Rumie-chan*? He documents the capacity of those children to face life on their own, orphans and abandoned children. Symbolically the damaged child of Domon's photographs can represent post-war Japan, surviving surrounded by death. Patricia Holland defines this absence of adults as characteristic of the images of victimized children in undeveloped countries (2004, 148). They are abandoned or orphaned children, left without protectors. This imagery allows the viewer to make abstractions of past militaristic events and see the "new Japan" as a pacific and harmless nation.

Conclusion: Childhood as national imagery

Each photograph is a “scene of (Japanese) childhood”. Each one of them tells what it means to be a Japanese child after the war, growing up during the reconstruction of the country, living through the Japanese economic miracle or through the crisis years. Each one of those images is essentially Japanese. Each one is the reflection of an epoch. I believe that the plural of ‘scenes’ in the title is less important than the singular of ‘childhood’. The different ‘scenes’ construct a vision of life in Japan, and depicts the (stereo-) typical child of each successive period since the mid-1940s. The social changes linked to a period matter less than the continuity of a post-war national identity. The differences in photographic techniques are also part of the historical changes. Industrial progress and aesthetic evolutions are not so much the choices of individual photographers as the norm of the time. The official descriptions of the exhibition highlight the importance of children, not only as social actors, but as representatives of the whole Japan: ‘*Scenes of Childhood* is a visual postwar history, not only of Japanese children, but of the times and places in which they lived’ (Japanese Embassy 2009). The narration uses it as a synecdoche in which the part represents the totality, childhood stands for the whole of society. The description provided by the Japan Foundation makes clear the curatorial process. The main characteristic of the children photographed, above their differences, is their Japanese nationality.

The analysis of the Japan Foundation’s exhibition is just one example of how childhood is used and integrated within the national imagery.

The “naturalness” of childhood, the “unquestionable” innocence allows to present this exhibition as truthful. At the same time, it (re)created an image of a pacific and harmless nation. It also puts Japanese children on the same level as children “world-wide”, in order to forget the opposition during the war and the militarisation of the younger generation as is visible in the (hidden) photographs of the time.

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