
Visualizing Cultures: A New Approach to “Seeing” History and Culture

John W. DOWER and Shigeru MIYAGAWA

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

1. Introduction

Modern history has been told primarily through the written text. This is natural and richly rewarding. At the same time, however, such fixation on language cuts us off from an enormous body of historically fascinating material embedded in the visual world—the photographs, prints, paintings, popular graphics, and material objects that saturate everyday life and decisively influence how we see ourselves and others. *Visualizing Cultures* is an innovative website that opens windows on modern history by integrating graphic images, expert commentary, elegant design, and substantial databases in ways that have only recently become technologically possible. It can be accessed at <http://visualizingcultures.mit.edu>. Launched at MIT in 2002, the site has focused topically to date on Japan and Asia in the modern world. The principal investigators are the co-authors of this article.

Our case-study focus so far has been Asia in the modern world, with particular (and now changing) focus on Japan. Thirteen elaborate units are now online—and in the process of developing these we have developed considerable knowledge in all aspects of this sort of digital humanities, including technology, legal issues (notably, intellectual property), education-oriented design and editing, the presentation of potentially controversial images, etc. We have also sharpened our understanding of how the Web can be used to advance image-driven scholarship of a sort more expansive than is possible in e-journals—including inclusion of large and (where appropriate) bilingual databases. We also have developed institutional partnerships with museums and other repositories of graphic images that can become a model for others exploring these same frontiers.

Critical start-up funding for the project was internal, with three years of support from MIT’s d’Arbelloff Fund for Innovation in Undergraduate Education. Additional funding has been received from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Japan Foundation’s Council for Global Partnership, and MIT’s Microsoft-funded iCampus project. Over the past two years, *Visualizing Cultures* has been sustained by an Andrew W. Mellon Distinguished Achievement Award granted to John Dower in 2005. We recently received word of funding from the Getty Foundation and the Luce Foundation to do work on new China and Japan units.

2. Goals

Our goals over the next three years are:

- (1) Significantly enhance understanding and teaching of China, Japan, the Philippines, and World War Two in Asia (Korea as well as Southeast Asia will be developed later) through image-driven scholarship;
- (2) Provide a sophisticated online model for the use of images by scholars and educators in other topical and disciplinary areas;
- (3) Develop new levels of collaboration with museums, libraries, rare archives, and the like that will make valuable visual materials widely accessible in a structured manner—and simultaneously will encourage others to establish comparable collaborative projects.

2.1 The Visualizing Cultures “Vision”

Visualizing Cultures holds promise of new ways to understand and teach about Asia:

Unparalleled use of visuals

We offer on our own platform a broad and deep topical coverage of Asia in the modern world that makes unprecedented use of the visual record ranging from popular and commercial images to the fine arts. Other scholars in the Asia field are of course already also mounting visual sites. Our scale and model is more elaborate, but the overall goal in any case is to push the envelope and inspire other scholars to pursue comparable approaches.

Visuals as “texts”

We regard *Visualizing Cultures* as a conceptual model for incorporating visual materials as “texts” integral and essential to understanding in the humanities and social sciences in general. This builds on our increasing fascination with the dynamics of society and culture at popular or grass-roots levels; with constructions of “self” and “others”; with the multiple manifestations of “modernity,” particularly as seen comparatively across time and place; and so on. *Visualizing Cultures* is not art history, and the visuals we draw on run the gamut: lithographs, engravings, woodblock prints, paintings and drawings, photographs, posters, advertisements, cartoons, and fine art as well. These are integrated with original scholarly commentaries, as well as written texts from the time.

As the specific “*Visualizing Cultures: Japan*” units have evolved, we also have attempted to graphically invigorate the notion of “cultures” in our modern world. That is, the project is not simply concerned with “capital-C” cultures in the more traditional geographic or “civilizational” sense (like Japan, China, “East,” “West,” etc.). Rather, it addresses a range of broader, non-parochial “small-c” cultures and issues that transcend geographic, national, racial, ethnic, religious, ideological, political, and other conventional boundaries. In one way or another, most units draw attention to such issues as the impact of differing modes or mediums of representation; “cultures” of power, war, nationalism, imperialism, colonialism, racism, commerce and consumerism, technological change, and the like; multi-directional “boundary crossings” in all their complexity; and “modernity” as seen from a truly global perspective.

3. *Visualizing Cultures* Platform

Visualizing Cultures (VC) is built on the OpenCourseWare (OCW) platform, an MIT project initiated in 2001 with the goal of making materials from virtually all MIT courses available freely on the Web. Over 1,800 courses are already up, ranging from simple to elaborate presentations, and around 1.5 million users worldwide access OCW each month. All materials on OCW come with copyright permission, so that users can make free use of the material for non-commercial purposes. (The materials can be translated or integrated into an existing project, and visual images can be downloaded for non-remunerative educational purposes.) OCW has been widely recognized as one of the major online educational innovations of recent years.

VC is one of very few “courses” explicitly designed to take optimal advantage of the OCW platform. In 2004, MIT awarded the Visualizing Cultures project the “Class of 1960 Innovation in Education Award.” In 2005, the National Endowment for the Humanities selected VC for inclusion on “EDSITEment” as an excellent online resource for education in the humanities.

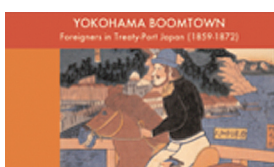
It is important to emphasize that the visual materials on *Visualizing Cultures* have heretofore been largely inaccessible to scholars and the public at large. Not only do we make them freely and openly available, but they are offered within a cohesive design and a technically advanced platform.

4. Present Units on *Visualizing Cultures*

To date, units have focused on Japan’s emergence as a modern state and society. The objective has been not merely to enhance understanding of Japan in the modern world, but also to use this as a case study for demonstrating the complexities that can be revealed by sophisticated use of the visual record. Multiple perspectives on events and developments are always kept in mind and often highlighted. Many of the visuals introduced are non-Japanese, and virtually all have been impossible to access easily until now. The first unit we completed, on Commodore Perry’s arrival in Japan in 1853–54, draws from a wide range of collections in the U.S. and Japan. Beginning with the second unit, we adopted the strategy of approaching institutions that have pertinent collections that are particularly suited to opening new intellectual vistas. The following ten units are online as of early 2007 [at <http://visualizingcultures.mit.edu>]:



1. ***Black Ships & Samurai: Commodore Perry & the Opening of Japan (1853–54)***. This pioneer unit juxtaposes hundreds of American and Japanese images of the historic mission that “opened” Japan to the modern world. Visuals come from some 50 or so sources, including rare books as well as museum collections.



2. ***Yokohama Boomtown: Foreigners in Treaty-Port Japan (1859–72)***. Based on a collection of “Yokohama prints” at the Smithsonian Institution’s Arthur Sackler Gallery, this is a vivid and early sample of the popular representation of “Westerners” in newly-opened Japan.



3. ***Felice Beato’s Japan: Places (ca. 1869)***. This unit reproduces in its entirety a classic photo album by the pioneer Western commercial photographer in Japan; from the Hood Museum at Dartmouth.



4. *Felice Beato's Japan: People (ca. 1869)*. This companion Beato album, from the Smith College Museum of Art, established a model for “Japanese types” followed by later photographers. The two Beato units stimulated our development of innovative treatment of “revealing details” when working with photographs in particular.



5–7. *“Throwing Off Asia”: Woodblock Prints of Japan’s “Westernization” (1868–1905)*. Based on the excellent Sharf Collection at the Boston MFA, this breaks down into three presentations: “Westernization”; “The Sino-Japanese War (1894–95)”; and “The Russo-Japanese War (1904–5).” These exceptionally elaborate units involved on-site survey of the entire Sharf Collection and the MFA’s subsequent digitization of an additional 150 prints never before made accessible.



8. *Asia Rising: Japanese Postcards of the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5)*. This taps the Leonard Lauder Collection of postcards donated to the MFA in 2002, which totals over 20,000 images. The entire Lauder database for just Russo-Japanese War postcards numbers over 1,800—and this unit together with the one that follows are simultaneously a remarkable study of “self” and “others” in a new age of imperialistic warfare and an eye-opening introduction to new genres of popular “modern” visual representation at the turn of the century.



9. *Yellow Promise / Yellow Peril: Foreign Postcards of the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5)*. Companion to site #8, this views the war from multiple non-Japanese perspectives (notably French, Russian, English, German, and Italian). The complexities of race and power at the turn of the century in Asia emerge with stunning vividness here.



10. *Ground Zero 1945: Pictures by Atomic-Bomb Survivors*. Put online in 2005, the 60th anniversary of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, this unit derives from a database of over 2,000 visuals at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. The Core Exhibit “reads” some 35 of these images, and the unit presents a bilingual Database of over 400 paintings and drawings done by survivors in the early 1970s.

Developing these units led us to various modes or models of analysis and presentation. These include “Core Exhibits” where the scholarly analysis is presented most thoroughly; “Visual Narratives” that isolate specific themes (and can be models for student projects); increasing use of video and film (the “VCTV” component); interactive components that can engage users more actively; keyword-oriented databases that *eventually* will facilitate searches across collections; and refinement of effective presentations involving juxtaposition of images, isolation of details, captioning or highlighting for those who eschew the more densely written portions of the site, handling of harsh or potentially controversial images, etc.

Given its topical focus on Asia in the modern world, VC has the potential to broaden our understanding of “world history.” Beyond this, however, our ultimate goal always has been to concretely offer an intellectual and technological model that can help deepen our “visualization” of the human experience itself.

5. Future Units

Over the next three to four years, we plan to develop units in the following three topical areas: China in the Modern World, “Modernism” In Early 20th-Century Japan, and The Asia-Pacific War: Graphic Images and Contemporary Memories. As before, all content will be placed on MIT’s OpenCourseWare, assuring open access to all.

5.1 China in the Modern World

The long-term goal is to treat China in the same depth already done for (or in the works for) Japan: to cover, that is, the entire period from the 19th century to fairly recent times. The images will be drawn largely from the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM, in Salem, MA) and Hong Kong Museum of Art. Both institutions have given VC permission to use already identified images in their collections on MIT’s OpenCourseWare platform. Other museums with holdings pertinent to the early China trade also will be approached, including several small collections in New England.

5.2 “Modernism” In Early 20th-Century Japan

This general treatment of “modernism” and modernity in early 20th-Century Japan will eventually evolve into multiple units, including industrialization, social and political protest movements, and the like.

Marketing Modern Beauty: The Shiseido Vision in 20th-century Japan

This is a break-through collaboration based on full access to the private archives of the Shiseido cosmetics firm. Beginning around World War One, Shiseido (founded in the 1870s) emerged as a pioneer in promoting a cosmopolitan ideal of female beauty through cutting-edge advertising as well as publication of several innovative and strikingly illustrated periodicals. The company already has digitized over a thousand images at VC’s request, and we are confident that our innovative treatment can become a model for image-driven scholarship—in this case offering insight into, among other things, the tensions in Japanese society during a period usually addressed primarily in terms of rising militarism. Consumerism, the *international* phenomenon of the “modern girl,” 1930’s breakthroughs in technology as well as graphic representation—all emerge vividly in Shiseido’s marketing up to 1940, when the shadows of war finally (and belatedly) become visible. Professor Gennifer Weisenfeld of Duke, a leading Western expert on 20th-century Japanese art and commercial graphics, will author this multi-unit presentation.

Imperial Tokyo: the Modern Prints of Koizumi Kishio

This site will introduce the manner in which so-called traditional themes and mediums—here woodblock renderings of “100 views”—were reconfigured for explicitly “modern” (and often foreign) audiences. Koizumi’s series, done between 1928 and 1940, complements the modernism seen in the Shiseido treatment; like the latter, it also offers a new angle of vision on the rising militarism of the 1930s. The unit will be authored by James Ulak, Deputy Director of the Smithsonian Institution Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, and based on holdings of the Wolfsonian Museum in Miami; after a series of exchanges with the Wolfsonian and Florida International University, VC now has the digitized images in hand.

Leonard Lauder Collection of Japanese Postcards at the Boston MFA

Another major archival source for modernism in early 20th-Century Japan is the Leonard Lauder Collection of Japanese Postcards at the Boston MFA, which numbers over 20,000 graphics from the early years of the 20th-Century into the 1930s. It is not excessive to describe this collection as an untapped goldmine for visualizing popular culture, consumerism, avant-garde art and illustration, and the like in pre-World War Two Japan. VC has already signed an agreement with the Boston MFA to access their extensive collection. The units on Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars already on VC were collaborations with the Boston MFA.

The Asia-Pacific War: Graphic Images and Contemporary Memories

Memories and recreations of the Asia-Pacific War that began with Japan's invasion of China in 1937 and ended after the atomic bombings of Japan in 1945 continue to provoke widespread, emotional responses in Asia as well as the United States and the United Kingdom. Eventually, VC intends to address this in considerable depth (two completed units already address "Ground Zero 1945").

6. Databases

Each analytical treatment in VC contains numerous images selected from larger collections. To maximize the educational as well as scholarly and research impact of the project, we include many of these images in databases easy to navigate with a Web browser. The value of these original databases lies in making hitherto scattered or inaccessible visual resources more widely available. In addition, we will provide crosslinks to other pertinent collections that are already online. Some of the databases (e.g., Shiseido) will be bilingual (English-Japanese), which will afford Japanese language learners a chance to see Japanese in "raw" data form.

7. Curriculum

Most of the VC units contain extensive curriculum support materials that have been developed by professional curriculum developers at Teaching for East Asia at the University of Colorado under contract with VC. Part of this work has been supported by the Center for Global Partnership. These are available for download on the VC website.

8. Public Education

Along with research and teaching in the traditional modes, VC has moved into nontraditional and less formal venues for education—what we call "public education." Our first, pioneer unit ("Black Ships & Samurai") also became a prototype of "reverse engineering," in that we were encouraged to use the site to develop a traveling installation on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the opening of Japan, in 2004. This installation appeared at universities, libraries, trade shows, the National Archives in Washington D.C., and even a bank lobby in the United States, and was duplicated for display in Japan. The same site was also tapped for an off-Broadway lobby presentation in 2005–2006 (of Steven Sondheim's *Pacific Overtures* at Studio 54 directed by Miyamoto Amon). The potential for comparable adaptations exists for the units to be developed under the proposed project.

Mailing Address:

John W. DOWER
77 Massachusetts Avenue
Building E51-287
Cambridge, MA 02139
(617) 253-4445

Shigeru MIYAGAWA
Kochi-Manjiro Professor of Japanese Language and Culture
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Building 32-D886 // 617-253-6346

E-mail:
miyagawa@mit.edu