

Realism and Ethnology in Ueda Shōji's Photography: Another Aspect of *Ueda-chō*

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abstract

The unique and mysterious atmosphere of the works by Japanese art-photographer Ueda Shōji (1913–2000) is internationally known as “*Ueda-chō* (Ueda-tone),” which is distinguished by his surrealistic staged photography (*enshutsu shashin*), with models or objects in a sophisticated composition that uses sand dunes as a backdrop. On the other hand, it is also recognized in his snapshot photography of naive local people. Although *Ueda-chō* seems to be common in the different types of photography that Ueda indulged in and employed, there is a group of works that has been paid little attention. This paper was aimed at examining another aspect of *Ueda-chō* by focusing on a group of his unstaged documentary photographic works, which were produced for the books on scenery, folklore, and myths of his hometown, the San'in region. These photographs, which were published between the 1960s and the 1980s, have been regarded as expressing only his nostalgic affection for his hometown. This paper discusses them as another aspect of *Ueda-chō* in terms of its relationship with photo-realism and ethnographic photography.

Ueda was born in a port town on the Japan Sea coast and spent his whole life there. He started to prove himself as an amateur art-photographer under the influence of European avant-garde photography in the 1930s. However, the wartime repression of avant-garde art activities and then dominant trends toward photo-realism in the post-war decades left him behind. Ueda was rediscovered and achieved international evaluation beginning in the 1970s. It is said that his photography eliminates the obsession of realism and extracted ‘universality’ from the real objects. However, the universality of *Ueda-chō* has room to be examined in the context of his regionality because Ueda stated that the local climate and traditional culture were important subjects for him and that they contributed to photographs for the books on the Izumo area in the San'in region that explain the mythological specificity in detail. The author of these books, a scholar on ancient history Ueda Masa'aki (1927–2016) was a disciple of the ethnologist Orikuchi Shinobu (1887–1953). Referring to Masaaki Ueda and Orikuchi, some places and objects in Ueda's photographs can be given new interpretations. Therefore, the sensibility of mysteriousness in *Ueda-chō* can be reconsidered in relationship with his regionality and the ethnological studies in modern Japan.

Introduction

Ueda Shōji 植田正治(1913–2000) is regarded as one of the foremost Japanese art-photographers. The publishing of his photo books and his photo exhibitions did not stop after his death; his enduring

photographic legacy continues to attract people. His unique and mysterious style, currently world-renowned as “*Ueda-chō* 植田調,” is regarded as a type of surrealistic *enshutsu shashin* 演出写真 (staged photography), with models or objects in a worked-out composition that uses sand dunes as a

backdrop. According to Kaneko Ryūichi, the term first appeared before World War II in a photo review on Ueda in a magazine.¹ Interestingly, *Ueda-chō* is often recognized even in his snapshot photography of local folks as well. Although *Ueda-chō* seems to be common in the different types of photography that Ueda experimented with, there exists a little-known body of work. This paper is aimed at examining another aspect of *Ueda-chō* by focusing on a group of his unstaged documentary photography, which were produced for books on the scenery, folklore, and myths of his hometown, the San'in region. These works, published in the 1960s and the 1970s, have been regarded only as expressing his nostalgic affection for his hometown, and little attention has been given to them. This paper will discuss them in terms of *Ueda-chō* and propose the possibility of a new interpretation in relationship with his regionality and the ethnological studies in modern Japan. Let us start with an overview of Ueda's works to determine the features and position of *Ueda-chō* in the annals of modern photography in Japan.

***Ueda-chō* in the Early Period**

He was born into a prosperous merchant family in a port town, Sakaiminato, in Tottori Prefecture of the San'in region on the western coast of the Sea of Japan and continued photographing landscapes and people there. His interest in art first shone in his early teens. He wanted to be a painter, but his father was opposed to the idea and bought him a camera instead. Soon his photographs began to win prizes of art-photography magazines, and he came to be known as a talented local amateur photographer in the beginning of the 1930s. *Landscape with a Stop* (1931c.) shows his pictorialist approach with darkroom manipulation that produces a fantastical image of a man in a mantle who is waiting for the train in the twilight (fig. 1).



Figure 1. Ueda Shōji, *Landscape with a Stop*, 1931c. (Ueda 2016, p. 1).

After he took a short course in commercial photography techniques at a photographer's school in Tokyo, he came back home and opened his commercial photo studio in 1933. Simultaneously, he joined some local camera circles and moved toward a new style of photography called "*shinko shashin* 新興写真" (New Photography). It was a modern movement under the influence of European avant-garde photography that achieved sharp focus and distinct compositions. His typical manner of staged photography was started with *Four Girls Poses* (1939). The girls, who are arranged as models in a horizontal space between the sky and sands without perspective, seem to be indifferent to each other and awaiting something. And *Old Chatani and His Daughter* (1940) (fig. 2) has an unusual space between the two figures that are arranged at both ends of the image.



Figure 2. Ueda Shōji, *Old Chatani and His Daughter*, 1940 (*Shōwa Shashin Zenshigoto 10*, Ueda Shōji, 1983, p. 27).

One of the features of *Ueda-chō* lies in the

arrangement of figures, but it is rather the space between them that has been distinguished as a Japanese traditional sense of space “MA 間.” Viewers read poesy and aesthetics in Ueda’s own MA.²

Wartime and Post-war Periods

During World War II, free artistic activities were suppressed. The photography magazines joined hands in a merger because of the shortage of materials and were forced to serve the nation as propaganda media. Many talented photographers yielded to the demands. However, Ueda never got involved in news photography or propaganda photography in his whole life. Ueda’s photo studio was being supplied with only a few materials for shooting portraits of soldiers who were going to the front. With the end of the war, Ueda’s photographs seem to overflow with pleasure to be able to make his own photography freely again. At the time, he often made his family members models, e.g., *Papa, Mama and Children* (1949) (fig. 3). While he made them pose, as if they are mere objects, against the sky and sand dunes, these photographs are somehow warm and humorous.



Figure 3. Ueda Shōji, *Papa, Mama and Children*, 1949 (Ueda 2013, p. 98).

Papa, Mama and Children is now highly appreciated as a masterpiece of *Ueda-chō*, yet, it was criticized when it was published in the 1950s. A photo critic

Watanabe Yoshiaki 渡辺好章 wrote that *Papa, Mama and Children* were clipped images of clowns that were scattered with the worst arrangement on white paper without any relation to each other. And he judged the work was thorough in neither reality nor unreality because the figures were too warm as surrealism and too staged as a portrait.³

Such a severe critique of Ueda seems to be caused by the photo-realism movement at the time. Photo-realism that was devoted to sociocultural documentation became the first dominant trend in postwar Japanese photography. One of the leading figures was Domon Ken 土門拳 (1909–1990), whose motto, “the absolutely pure snapshot, absolutely unstaged,” was frequently referred to as emblematic of such realism. Ueda stated later,

My staged photography was interrupted once by the intensification of the war and again by the storm of realism. So, I continued to photograph children in my climate for a while.⁴

Realism in *Warabe Goyomi* and the Photo-Essay Books on the San'in Region

After the 1950s and the 1960s, which were a bitter period for him, he published his first photo book *Warabe Goyomi* 童暦 (Children the Year Around) in 1971. It marks the beginning of the re-evaluation of Ueda. Ever since, the publishing of his photo books has continued, and he was introduced retrospectively at photo exhibitions in Japan and Europe at the end of the 1970s. Kuwabara Kineo 桑原甲子雄, a photographer and photo critic, set forth the rediscovery of Ueda as follows:

as a result of the student movement in the late 1960s, the new value of the photographer as

epitomizing and embodying human subjectivity became to be demanded in photography, which turned people's attention to Ueda.⁵

In the middle of the 1980s, when he was recovering from his wife's death, he committed to provide fashion photography to some established designers, those photographs of which show fashion models arranged in sand dunes. It emphasized an aspect of fashionable fantasy in *Ueda-chō*. A philosopher Washida Kiyokazu 鷲田清一 who devoted many essays to Ueda wrote,

Mr. Ueda's photography is really cool. His manner keeps away the realism, which is actually only an obsession, and gets rid of sticking to something real. It is the pursuit of extracting a true 'universality' that exists in something real.⁶

This remark may seem to suggest that Ueda's photographs, taken in his local region, have universality because of his rejection of realism. It is true in a sense; however, the relationship between *Ueda-chō* and realism should be examined more carefully. There are other points to note.



Figure 4. Ueda Shōji, *Taking Care of Sister*, 1959–70 (Ueda 2016, p. 85).

At first, Ueda created both staged photography and unstaged documentary photography. The best example is *Warabe Goyomi*. It includes no image of sand dunes and consists of snapshots that capture the daily life of local children in the four seasons. Even though it does not describe any social issue as would a work by someone like Domon, Ueda seems to tend toward the new kind of realistic documentary photography. Not only the manner of the snapshot but also some silhouettes of figures and buildings are printed in high contrast of black and white, e.g., *Taking Care of Sister* (1959–70) (fig. 4), although he usually made prints with great care to impart delicate gradation of monochrome to express the feeling of image. His use of the high contrast is suggested to reflect the trend of new provocative photographers at that time, including, among others, Nakahira Takuma 中平卓馬 and Moriyama Daido 森山大道, emerging with a radical photo magazine, called *Provoke*, at the end of the 1960s.⁷ It is supposed that Ueda was actually very conscious regarding the trends of the different photographic movements and he adopted the realistic style in his photography rather than keeping it away.

More noteworthy is the fact that he was eagerly working for these photo essay books on his local region San'in, particularly the Izumo area, alongside producing *Warabe Goyomi*; *San'in no Tabi* 山陰の旅 (San'in Journey) in 1962; *Izumo no Shinwa* 出雲の神話 (Myth of Izumo) in 1965; *Oki* 隠岐 in 1967; *Izumoji Ryojo* 出雲旅情 (Sentiment of Izumo Journey) in 1971; *Izumo* 出雲 in 1974; *Izumo Taisha* 出雲大社 (Izumo Taisha Shrine) in 1974; *Matsue* 松江 in 1978; and *Shin Izumo-Fudoki* 新出雲風土記 (A New Topography of Izumo) in 1980.

In terms of quantity and the time and energy that Ueda spent on them, this body of work on the San'in books must be a part of Ueda. However, they

have been apt to be overlooked because most of them are documentaries of rural scenery and customs, which seem to suppress the artistic expression that is *Ueda-chō*. Although these San'in works were introduced in his retrospective books and exhibitions,⁸ they were only related to Ueda's nostalgic affection for his hometown. While Ueda's statements show that his local climate and culture are very important subjects, the reviews of his regionality from the perspective of *Ueda-chō* were restricted to Tottori Sand Dunes and the gloomy weather in winter. For instance, a photo critic Shigemori Kōan 重森洪庵 noted that Ueda's lyricism grew up in the climate of San'in, which had a gloomy image.⁹ However, if we closely look at his San'in photography, we can notice Ueda's unique approach to the subjects. His photographs of the main building of the Izumo Taisha shrine, for instance, only show parts or a silhouette of the building in backlight despite the fact that the building is a massive structure (fig. 5).



Figure 5. Left: Ueda Shōji, *Izumo Taisha Shrine* (Ueda M. & Ueda S. 1965, pp. 22–23).

In fact, most of the main buildings of the Izumo Taisha shrine are hidden by a wall. In Ueda's way of presenting the hidden areas, his unique MA take place in the sacred invisibility of the shrine.

Photo-realism and Ethnographic Photography in Japan

Another reason for the oversight of Ueda's

San'in works is that they have been produced and received during the boom of photo books for domestic tourism and the folklore interests led by the mass culture in the 1960s to the 1970s. The boom was started earlier by some ethnographic documentary photography, such as Hamaya Hiroshi's *Yukiguni* 雪国 (Snow Land) in 1956; *Ura-Nihon* (Japan's Back Coast) in 1957; and Haga Hideo's *Ta no Kami* 田の神 (God of Rice Field) in 1959, which are full of rituals, timeless farming practices, and rites of daily life in rural Japan. These works of photography highlight a rising interest in Japanese folklore and tradition that came about in reaction to the increasing alienation and displacement that was felt as the population moved into urban centers in the period of high economic growth after the war. However, ethnographic photography had started in the 1930s when the modern ethnological studies in Japan were founded. And even during the war, ethnological surveys were supported by nationalistic policy. According to photo historian Torihara Manabu 鳥原学,

During this period, the only way that a photographer was able to demonstrate, except for national policy propaganda, was through cultural anthropological subjects such as antique art, history, ethnicity, and folklore.¹⁰

Domon, a leading advocate of photo-realism, also energetically photographed old temples and Buddhist statues in the Kansai region for "returning to home in heart"¹¹ at that time. Hamaya Hiroshi (1915–1999), who had been working for news photography, turned toward ethnographic photography at a snowy village in the northern region to avoid committing to the bellicose propaganda. In belief, they turned their back on wartime reality and were searching for the old self of Japan. The photo historian Takeba Joe 竹葉丈

wrote that the photographers had turned to folklore subjects in self-defense against the pressure of the time.¹² It is reasonable to say that these self-defense acts did not get over with the end of the war but rather continued alongside the photo-realism movement.

Ueda's Ethnology and the Izumo Culture

In contrast with the other photographers mentioned above, Ueda was always searching for his own art-photography. The ethnological objects, such as traditional daily tools, customs, and rites, were his motifs in just the same way that foreign goods were. Ueda was known to be fond of novel things and matters, including Western culture. Among his motifs, the most noticeable ethnological object is a mask. Figures wearing a mask often appear in his photographs (fig. 6). The presence of a masked figure gives the impression as though one is from a different world, be it staged photography or not.



Figure 6. Ueda Shōji, *Nogi, Child on the Day of Tondo* (Ueda 1980, p. 48).

The Masked figures are very important subjects for the leading ethnographic photographer Haga Hideo 芳賀日出男 (1921–). He says that the motivation for his photography was started when he got the notion of *marebito* まれびと in the class of Orikuchi Shinobu 折口信夫 (1887–1953), the influential scholar of ethnology, folklore, and classic

literature.¹³ *Marebito* means a rare visiting-god and refers to a supernatural being, who comes from afar bearing gifts of spiritual wisdom, happiness, and arts. People welcome *marebito* with rituals, festivals, and sometimes with their performance as *marebito* by wearing the mask and costume. Orikuchi's following comment deeply inspired Haga to photograph *marebito*: "A person who wears a mask and becomes a god appears at the festival. That was the beginning of Japanese performing arts."¹⁴

Ueda must have been conscious of his contemporary Haga's work and of Orikuchi's *marebito* theory because the ancient historian Ueda Masa'aki 上田正昭, who is the author in Ueda's San'in works on the Izumo area, was also a pupil of Orikuchi and under his strong influence. It is not clear whether Ueda had known the term *marebito* before he began to work with Ueda Masa'aki, however, Ueda had been very familiar with the rituals and festivals that welcome the visiting-god since his childhood, and he contributed the photographs of them with notes in *Izumo no Shinwa* and *Shin Izumo Fudoki*. Ueda's photographs of a masked figure seem to be staged in most cases and do not aim to document folklore in what is disparate with Haga's. Ueda shot a person in an unusual state in everyday life, and so, his photography represents something unrealistic in a realistic manner. This point brings to mind Watanabe Yoshiaki's critique that Ueda's figures are thorough neither in reality nor in unreality. Here we notice that Watanabe was hitting the point that Ueda had marked.

Other noticeable photographic subjects in the San'in books are some places. The representative location of *Ueda-chō* photography is generally regarded to be the Tottori sand dunes, a well-known landmark of Tottori prefecture. However, in fact, it was after 1950, when Ueda began to take photographs there, because the Tottori sand dunes are far away from Ueda's home in Sakaiminato, it

took more than five hours by train at that time. In addition, Sakaiminato is located at the west end of Tottori Prefecture and belongs to the Izumo area in Shimane Prefecture, which has Izumo Taisha and a castle town Matsue as its major draws.

Today, Shimane, along with Tottori, is the most depopulated prefecture in Japan; however, Izumo is full of special sacred places steeped in ancient history and religion. The oldest records of ancient Japan, *Kojiki*, *Nihonshoki*, and *Izumo-Fudoki*, dating back to the 8th century, convey that an independent nation-state Izumo had been built and governed by the gods, Susano'o, and Ōkuninushi, and was challenged by the Yamato Court in Nara. Throughout the text of *Izumo no Shinwa*, Ueda Masa'aki emphasized the uniqueness of *Izumo-Fudoki*, which was not compiled by Yamato Court, but by local ruling family in Izumo, and the independence of the Izumo myths from Yamato's.¹⁵ To this day, Izumo is full of myths and old shrines that retain a great deal of autonomy in the form of its worship as well as in its architecture and internal organization.



Figure 7. Right: Ueda Shōji, *Yomigahama* (Ueda M. & Ueda S. 1965, pp. 94–95).

As a mythical place, Izumo has the connection and entry spots to the three realms of Heaven, Earth, and the Underworld or the other world, and these realms are mixed together and called *Yomi no kuni* 黄泉の国.¹⁶ Certain places, such as mountains, caves,

and beaches in Izumo were said to lead directly to *Yomi no kuni*, where there is the path of *marebito* as well. In addition, the locations and backdrops of the early *Ueda-chō* works are not the Tottori sand dunes but a beach close to Ueda's house and studio. This beach is now called Yumi-ga-hama 弓ヶ浜, but it was originally called Yomi-ga-hama 夜見ヶ浜. There used to be a path to the *Yomi no kuni*.¹⁷ That is to say, Yomi-ga-hama was a very special place where *marebito* emerged from and went back (fig. 7).

Conclusion

From what has been seen above, the new interpretation can be added to an *Ueda-chō* photograph. *A Little Fox Appearance* (1948) (fig. 8) was photographed at Yomigahama in the twilight.



Figure 8. Ueda Shōji, *A Little Fox Appearance*, 1948 (Ueda Shōji no Tsukurikata, 2013, p. 73).

The image of a jumping masked stranger, who is Ueda's son, actually, now seems to be the long-awaited manifestation of *marebito*. Although Ueda's art-photography and documentary photography for the San'in books are, at first glance, mutually exclusive, they are two aspects of *Ueda-chō* and share the background of inspiration. Therefore, the sensibility of mysteriousness in *Ueda-chō* can be reconsidered in the special regionality of Ueda and the ethnological studies in modern Japan.

Notes

- 1) Kaneko 2013, p. 179.
- 2) See. Iizawa 2016, pp. 249–252.
- 3) *Ueda Shōji no Tsukurikata*, 2013, p.100.
- 4) Ueda S. 1983, p. 157.
- 5) Kuwabara 1980, p. 89.
- 6) Washida 2016, p. 223.
- 7) *Ueda Shōji no Tsukurikata*, 2013, p.32.
- 8) The retrospective exhibition “Seitan 100nen! Ueda Shōji no Tsukurikata,” which celebrated the 100th anniversary of Ueda’s birth and held at Tokyo Station Gallery and Iwate from 2013 to 2014, totally ignores his San’in works.
- 9) Shigemori 1983, pp.57–58.
- 10) Torihara 2013, p. 87.
- 11) *Ibid.*
- 12) Takeba 2003, p. 157.
- 13) Haga 2017, p.232.
- 14) *Ibid.*
- 15) See Ueda M. & Ueda S. 1965.
- 16) *Ibid.*, pp.88–91.
- 17) *Ibid.*, p. 91.

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