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THE ROLE AND INTERPRETATION OF VISUAL IMAGE IN HISTORICAL STUDIES

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Abstract

This paper explores the role and significance of visual images in the field of history. It examines how visual sources such as photographs, paintings, and other visual media contribute to historical understanding and interpretation. The study delves into the methodologies employed by historians to analyze visual images, discusses the epistemological implications of visual evidence, and considers the challenges and limitations associated with using visual images in historical research. Through a review of literature and case studies, the paper aims to highlight the importance of visual images as both sources and subjects of historical inquiry, with a particular focus on the representation of Korean women.

Keywords Visual image, visual imagery, historical methodology, visual anthropology, visual evidence, visual materials, cameras, photography.

INTRODUCTION

The concepts of “visual image” and “visual imagery” are central to the study of visual anthropology, particularly within the historical context. Visual anthropology itself is a relatively new discipline within the history of Uzbekistan, necessitating extensive research into its subject matter, objects, methodologies, and specific terminologies. A visual image can be defined as material information perceived through the human sense of sight, typically manifested as a two-, three-, or five-dimensional representation of a clearly defined object, person, or event. This image is the focal point of visual materials.

Visual imagery, while more abstract, refers to the general concept formed through the collection and analysis of numerous visual images of a particular type of object, person, or event. Therefore, the visual image represents the material aspect, whereas visual imagery is the conceptual

interpretation derived from it. The formation of both visual images and visual imagery involves various standards, perspectives, and approaches that complement and clarify each other.

In the context of women, visual representations encompass body shapes, clothing styles, facial structures, makeup, manners, rituals, and forms of family hierarchy. These elements vary significantly across different cultures, nationalities, and religions. To understand visual imagery, researchers use visual images as primary sources. Conversely, visual imagery, as part of material culture, arises from ideological and philosophical viewpoints, much like other cultural forms. This duality underscores the importance of both visual images and visual imagery in historical research, particularly in examining the evolving representations of women across different civilizations and epochs.

Theoretical framework. German media theorist Vilém Flusser considered visual materials as integral components of culture and categorized the history of visual images into three main stages: (1) the era of myth and traditional imagery, (2) the period marked by the advent of records, and (3) the age of man-made images. Flusser equated the creation of man-made images to the development of written language. According to him, the distinctive characteristic of man-made images, as opposed to written texts, is their capacity to depict four-dimensional objects, events, or people, captured in a moment of time, in a two-dimensional format. This enables viewers to infer the depicted reality. Although the essence of the image itself is intangible, it becomes perceptible through its visual representation. Like historical realities, visual images can assume various forms, adapting to the demands of their times. Interpreting these images requires a rigorous and objective approach from researchers, who must consider the cultural and historical contexts in which the images were produced and used.

In visual anthropology, the term “visual image” carries two distinct meanings. First, it refers to an imaginary or virtual image that forms in the human mind upon reading a written source or hearing an audio message. In this context, the recipient of the information constructs a mental picture of the object without direct visual exposure. For instance, depictions of individuals from the Middle Ages or earlier, prior to the advent of cameras, are products of such visual imagination. A notable example includes the portraits of Sahibqiran Amir Temur based on descriptions by Sharafuddin Ali Yazdi or Ibn Arabshah. However, using these sources as subjects in visual anthropology remains a contentious issue.

The second meaning pertains to the general concept that forms in the observer’s mind about the depicted object based on a clearly visible

image. This implies that the object presented in a photograph or video is perceived as a representative of similar objects. For example, the portrayal of characters in Korean dramas, which are now integral to the popular K-pop culture, influences our perception of the entire Korean population. These dramas shape our views on their appearance, lifestyle, and socio-economic issues. However, the actual lives of Koreans may differ significantly from these dramatized representations.

The visual image constructed through new media networks is gaining a leading position in modern culture, leading to changes in how visual information is received. The sheer volume of visual materials available for studying the history of everyday life is immense, making it challenging to isolate and examine the visual representations of specific groups within a narrow context. Consequently, it has become a complex task to explain the visual image of a particular group based on the research object’s visual appearance.

In fact, it is impossible to imagine life without visual images: from information dissemination in mass media to the context of entertainment events, and all exchanges related to daily life on social networks, visual images permeate every aspect. Technology, by creating new forms of visual presentation, enables a close study of the unique aspects of everyday life. Whereas early photographs represented only a limited group of people, today, anyone can take and be photographed, irrespective of economic, social, or political background. As a result, the range of visual materials is vast and diverse. Visual materials such as signs, typography, drawings, graphic design, illustrations, industrial design, advertising, animation, and electronic resources serve as means of mutual communication for humanity, conveying information and ideas.

The concept of the “visual image” is the result of

perception, memory, and experience of an image or object formed in the observer's brain within the field of "visual studies" of scientific research. The uniqueness of the visual image concept lies in its involvement of a medium that reflects the nature of observation. This concept is inextricably linked with cultural context and conventions, as well as with the reception and interpretation within the cultural sphere. The visual image effectively conveys reality, creates new meanings, and evolves alongside cultural contexts. Therefore, studying the visual image within the framework of visual studies is closely related to the exploration of "cultural vision" and the specific features of its reception methods.

The concept of a visual image can be understood as a fundamental mode of perceiving reality shaped by mass media. It represents one of the earliest forms of cultural expression. Rendering an image visible and observable ensures its accessibility to all viewers, facilitating a shared understanding. Each culture has developed its own visual codes, comprising a repertoire of symbolic images.

East and West exhibit distinct approaches to visualization: the East often emphasizes spiritual awareness through abstract, symbolic, and intricate forms, particularly evident in Islamic traditions, where divine presence is emphasized over tangible objects. In contrast, Western visualization predominantly features tangible objects, where the presence of the object itself defines the value of the image. It is noteworthy that, unlike in the West, the Eastern approach tends to be more vibrant and colorful, influenced by the religious diversity prevalent in Eastern societies, particularly Islamic cultures. However, non-Muslim Asian countries exhibit varied visual cultural forms. In East Asian countries, such as Korea, visual representations have evolved through stages including shamanism, Buddhism, Neo-Confucianism, and the introduction of

Christianity from the 19th century onwards.

The history of visual representation in Korea encompasses diverse forms, from primitive murals and figurines to monumental Buddha statues, traditional miniature paintings, portraits of kings and queens, and sacred icons. Each phase reflects the cultural and religious contexts that have shaped Korean visual culture over time.

Primitive art exemplifies the early human capacity to convey experiences through images. These images represent the initial manifestations of human imagination concerning beauty, harmony, and the order of the world. In primitive cultures, visual representations possessed both practical and divine attributes, with imagery serving as a means to approach deities. However, during this period, the content of visual images was not entirely autonomous but intertwined with sensory experiences of feeling, hearing, smelling, and touching. Pictographic monuments, reflecting the primal community's initial attempts to comprehend the world, also mirror the lifestyles of their creators, highlight the unique social relations of the time, and signify the evolution of religious consciousness.

In ancient cultures, visual elements exhibited a meticulous inclination toward accurately depicting reality down to the minutest details. As previously mentioned, representations of individuals among the Greeks served as archetypal models for visual imagery, whether in the form of photographs or statues. Each copy of these models aimed to serve as a prototype for subsequent copies, thereby imparting a profound and elevated significance to any visual element within ancient culture – a representation that closely mirrored reality. Examining these elements provides insight into the qualities valued by ancient Greeks in individuals, transcending gender distinctions. Moreover, it underscores their inclination to surpass ancient norms of legislation and morality,

appealing to divine ideals while challenging existing societal structures.

During the Middle Ages, the visual image evolved into a composition of symbols and illusions that conveyed core content while eschewing the representation of outer appearance or superficiality. The primary function of such images was to facilitate a sense of divine presence through human senses, emphasizing interpretation rather than mere visual perception. In the Muslim world, significant strides were made in this realm by transforming entire inscriptions into visual images through calligraphy. Conversely, in the Christian world, icons occupied central significance. An icon represented a manifestation of the otherworldly adapted to earthly existence, reflecting the belief in the incarnation of God as a human being (such as Jesus in Christian theology). This concept stemmed from the notion that divine ideas could be embodied and expressed in material form, specifically on paper.

Icons, being products of imagination, were not linked to tangible, existing materiality. They served as potent conduits for spiritual

contemplation and devotion. The proliferation of countless icons throughout the medieval world underscores the profound gap perceived between ordinary people and the divine realm during this era. Icons played a crucial role in bridging this gap, offering a tangible connection to the spiritual and metaphysical dimensions central to medieval Christian and Eastern Christian beliefs.

This distinction applies universally across all peoples and epochs, yet there exists a common thread that unifies them. The field of history investigates the underlying reasons that give rise to all forms of visual imagery. Disciplines such as cultural studies and art history scrutinize visual images as subjects of inquiry. In historical research, a visual image – broadly defined – emerges as a product of long-term socio-political, economic, and cultural processes spanning centuries. This perspective becomes particularly evident when exploring the history of women, where socio-political and cultural transformations have significantly shaped visual representations over time.



Picture 1. Postcard from the collection of Willard Dickerman Straight and Early US-Korea Diplomatic Relations. Cornell University Library Archives. 1904. Resource: <https://rosalindnoor.medium.com/un-veiling-the-joseon-period>

In contrast to the Middle Ages, the late 19th century witnessed the rising popularity of photographs and cameras, which rapidly permeated all strata of global society and inadvertently became pivotal in documenting everyday history. This era, coinciding with the zenith of colonial policies, exemplifies the visual concept of “image”: “The relationship between East and West strengthened, marking the onset of tradition’s decline in the East. Within a brief period (late 19th century to early 20th century), Eastern women began to depart from classical appearances, adopting images assimilating ultra-modern Western culture,” and so forth. This narrative could span hundreds of pages, yet can be encapsulated by the presentation of two photographs: figures 1 and 2.

The transformation in Korean women’s attire over a span of 46 years is starkly illustrated in two contrasting photographs. Both images depict middle-aged women of the middle class (aged 18-30, according to the author), standing prominently before the camera, highlighting the evolution over time. Picture 1 portrays women with their faces entirely veiled, clad in garments that cover them from head to toe, leaving no part of their faces exposed. In Figure 2, women are seen in a more socialized stance, proficient in posing for photographs, evident in their upright posture. Both visual images vividly capture the distinct images of two groups of women.

However, what grounds do we have to regard these images as representative of Korean society as a whole in 1904 and 1950, or indeed at all?



Picture 2. A group of Korean women participating in a performance in Masan, Gyeongsangnamdo on December 27, 1950, amidst the backdrop of the Korean War.

Resource: <http://archive.history.go.kr/id/AUS022>

In visual anthropology, the study of “image” derives general and common characteristics of a social stratum, group, or class from an analysis of individual and unique traits exhibited by all participants or members involved. Upon examining about 50 photographs of Korean

women from the first half of the 20th century stored in various archives, it became evident that in most instances, middle-class women could only venture outdoors wearing a head covering known as a chanot. This practice was reinforced by laws, moral codes (such as those detailed in Queen

Seohe's 15th-century book "Nehun"), and religious influences under New Confucianism. By 1950, the attire seen in Figure 2 had evolved into a customary everyday fashion. Numerous photographs from 1950, unlike those from 1904, are readily accessible online, offering a more comprehensive visual documentation of this transformation.

The visual representation of Korean women from the late 19th century to the early 20th century was characterized by modesty, passivity, and limited rights influenced primarily by three key factors: religion, politics, and morality. Consequently, their attire and conduct were reflective of these societal norms.

Over the 46-year period leading up to 1950, significant transformations occurred. The introduction of Christianity and the diminishing influence of New Confucianism marked a shift in ideological frameworks. Additionally, the collapse of the Joseon Dynasty, the imposition of Japanese colonial rule followed by its dissolution, the establishment of a republican system, and the subsequent wave of Westernization and liberal ideas in Korean culture all contributed to expanding social opportunities for women. These changes ushered in greater rights and freedoms for women than ever before.

Based on the discussion above, it is appropriate to conclude that an image represents a generalized and abstract portrayal of a specific social group, stratum, or class, shaped by ongoing social, political, cultural, and economic processes within a defined period. Visual materials serve as foundational elements for defining such images. However, for a scientifically substantiated understanding, it is essential to meticulously study the individual political, social, economic, and cultural factors that contributed to their formation. Each of these factors plays a crucial role in shaping and contextualizing the visual representations that

define and characterize a particular societal group or class during a given historical epoch.

Throughout human history, the visual representation of women has varied significantly across different civilizations and time periods. The conceptualization of a woman's visual image is influenced by moral codes, cultural values, religious beliefs, and historically constructed gender roles within society. These transformations are often more vividly captured through visual and pictorial media than through textual sources. The evolution and shifts in these representations, prior to their crystallization into visual imagery, are predominantly driven by ideological, moral, and legal frameworks. Consequently, the initial stages of this research necessitate a thorough examination of textual materials that reflect these foundational factors.

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