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VISUAL IMAGE DATABASES AND RESEARCH PROJECTS AT NICHIBUNKEN: POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS FOR JAPANESE STUDIES

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Introduction

In this paper, I would like first to discuss the objectives of establishing graphic databases for cultural studies, then introduce some of our graphic databases, and finally explain research projects in our institution. In addition, I will point out difficulties we face in the process of creating databases for visual images.

First, let me briefly introduce our institution. The International Research Center for Japanese Studies, usually referred to as Nichibunken, was established in 1987 as an inter-university institute to promote interdisciplinary approaches in Japanese studies with the collaboration of scholars in Japan and abroad. In order for our center to shed light on various aspects of Japanese culture, we have faculty specializing in the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. In addition to our full time faculty, there are fifteen positions for visiting scholars from abroad to conduct and participate in team research projects, international symposia, seminars, and other events.

An important task of Nichibunken is to support scholars engaged in Japanese studies by providing information. To this end, in April 1999, besides our library and information divisions, we established the Office for Virtual Resources (Bunka Shiryou Kenkyu Kikakushitsu), which is charged with developing an electronic library and digitizing various materials for basic research.

Significance of Visual Images for Cultural Studies

Much of the research conducted at Nichibunken emphasizes visual images for cultural studies. Among our collections are extensive holdings of photographs and art prints, such as emaki, ukiyo-e and old maps. Visual images have been neglected as a source for serious research mainly because of the absence of a theory and methodology for developing a search system. However, if we facilitate communication through visual images, researchers from different disciplines, nationalities, and languages will gain the capability to conduct team and interdisciplinary research. Moreover, graphic materials open up the field for those who are not Japan specialists but wish to do comparative studies. Even people who do not understand Japanese can acquire ideas about Japan by looking at a photograph or an illustration. Sometimes one picture more vividly illustrates a research object than reading several books.

Our institution hopes to create a new research environment for Japanese studies by systematically collecting and organizing graphic materials, which is the purpose for which the Office for Virtual Resources was established.

The Office aims at digitizing various forms of resources, such as classical writings, works of art, photographs, and motion pictures. Preserving fragile materials for the future is one of the objectives of digitization. But the office also aims at establishing user-friendly databases for
research. The architecture of the databases chosen for development will be the responsibility of an Office professor and associate professor. The professor will be a specialist on Japanese studies who will provide a conceptual foundation for a database by thinking broadly about what kind of material should be collected in what way and what kind of research projects are possible using the database. The associate professor will take care of the technical side of establishing the database, mainly focusing on the architecture of databases and how a search system can be created for broader users.

Nichibunkenen is now scanning a huge amount of various materials for future use. Because simply scanning and digitizing materials would create a huge amount of “dead data,” we are working very hard to make sure that the materials scanned and digitized can actually be used by researchers. The Office for Virtual Resources is one of our attempts to achieve this goal by having researchers take the initiative and increase collaboration with specialists, librarians, and system personnel. We believe that the collaboration of these three functionally differentiated divisions is an ideal structure for establishing databases.

**Graphic Databases at Nichibunken**

I now turn to my discussion to explaining our graphic databases. Following is the list of graphic databases open to the public: 1. Database of Foreign Images of Japan (Gaizo Database), 2. Database of Early Photographs (Koshashin Database), and 3. Database of Japanese Art. You can access these databases through our web-site (http://www.nichibun.ac.jp). Currently you must first register and get a password to see these databases. Our web-site provides directions for this.

First, I would like to introduce the “Database of Foreign Images of Japan,” the Gaizo Database. The database consists of Nichibunkennen’s collection of photographs, illustrations, and other visual images of Japan or Japan-related subjects from around the world. Nichibunkennen has an extensive collection of books written in foreign languages about Japan which were printed before the year 1900 that was used as the basis for our Gaizo Database. Why 1900? If we limit the time span for a database, we can have a comprehensive collection; moreover, generally the rights attached to an illustration expire fifty years after an author’s death. The reason why we call this database Gaizo (literally, outside image) is that pictures or illustrations appearing in these books were produced by foreigners, the outsiders.

The characteristic of this database is that it digitizes the name of the books and all the photographs and illustrations which appear in the books. Therefore, we can search not only graphic images but also texts using a single search system. You can search by caption, title, author, or key words. If, for instance, you want to find images related to “Kyoto,” typing “Kyoto” in caption section will yield forty-three items (you can limit maximum hits); twenty items are displayed on one page. Overview of the twenty pictures is quite effective to narrow down your search. If you click your target item, both the picture and the source of the picture appear. The title of the book gives a clue of the purpose for which the photograph was taken. Pictures can be enlarged for detailed viewing when you click on them.

In our collection is a picture of Kiyomizu temple in the nineteenth century that shows a fence that no longer exists surrounding the temple. Professor Yozaburo Shirahata, one of our
faculty who studies the image of Japan with graphic materials, explained the changes in scenery in relation to the old proverb, “you can do anything if you think about jumping from Kiyomizu temple.” (The temple has quite a high platform.) This is just a proverb, but some people took it literally and actually jumped from the Kiyomizu stage. The Meiji government, as part of its efforts to suppress old customs and beliefs, had a fence made to prevent people from jumping and had it patrolled after sunset. Then the number of suicides decreased and the fence was removed. The picture also shows changes in motives for visiting the temple from religious to sightseeing.

Another aspect of this database is that since graphic images can be keyed in independently, the Gaizo Database frees visual images from the contexts of the books so that these pictures can be considered as an independent resource for research, apart from the perspective of the author. Moreover, because pictures by Japanese were often printed in foreign books, we can see how the same pictures were interpreted differently by foreigners. For instance, Professors Shirahata and Monta Hayakawa found that one illustration taken from Hokusai Manga was introduced as “Japanese siesta” in one book, while another book titled the same picture “how the Japanese sleep.” Self-evident customs for the Japanese were misinterpreted and images of Japan were created through these pictures.

The next database I would like to introduce is the “Database of Early Photographs” (Koshashin Database). This project digitized hand-colored photographs of Japan made as luxurious souvenirs for foreigners dating from the end of the Edo period through the beginning of the Meiji period. The collection is quite extensive, and at present, the number of items collected has already reached 8,000.

You can search these photographs by place or proper noun or the time the photograph was taken or the context. If you type in “Kyoto” and “bridge,” you will find nine items. Using this database, a team research titled “Discovering Japan in the 19th Century: Images of Other Cultures as Formed by Graphic Images” is being conducted at Nichibunken. In Japan the history of opening a country and the history of photography overlap; hence through these visual images we can see how the images of Japan were created and how they have changed.

Finally, I would like to introduce the “Database of Japanese Art.” This database was completed as a part of the “Japanese Art Abroad Research Project.” This project surveyed important Japanese works of art which were exported to or taken abroad from the end of Edo to the beginning of the Meiji period. More than one million Ukiyo-e wood block prints alone were taken abroad in the Meiji period.

In order to determine the extent of Japanese works of art scattered abroad, Professors Kyoko Betchaku and Hayakawa surveyed more than fifty thousand works of art in the Pushkin and Hermitage museums in Russia, Ferenc Hopp Museum in Prague, Hungary, and Naprstek’s Museum in the Czech Republic. Among the works surveyed, 7200 were photographed and processed to slides in the museums, then copied onto photo-CD and finally computerized at Nichibunken. It was found that the Pushkin Museum owns Hokusai’s “Ueno” which had not been known to exist in Japan as well as the rare series by Hokusai called “Genroku Kasen Kaiawase.” These are now included in the Database of Japanese Art. Currently, the rights of digitization of works of art have become a serious issue. At Nichibunken we solve this
problem by putting the name of the museum that owns the artifacts on the digitized picture for this particular database.

Another problem in the establishment of graphic databases is how to create a comprehensive database for basic research. The amount and kind of visual images are enormous, one reason being that visual images include illustrations, pictures, posters, and maps. There is always a tension between a researcher’s specific interest and a comprehensive collection which can be applicable to a variety of research purposes. Prof. Shirahata suggested that we pay attention to the foreigner’s perspective— that is, images of Japan through the eyes of foreigners. Thus, a clear focus on the sort of illustrations or pictures to be collected was established and the number and type of graphic images that would be a part of the database made manageable.

In order to illustrate one of the directions of our future research, I would like to introduce Nichibunken’s project, “The Conversion of Two Dimensional Graphic Materials into the Three Dimensional Model: The Three Dimensional Model of Rakuchu-Rakugai,” directed by Professor Takeru Akazawa. This study is undertaken in collaboration with Toppan Printing Company, which uses special technology to convert a two dimensional painting to a three dimensional environment. The Rakuchu-Rakugai-zu is a pair of six-panel folding screens with a bird’s-eye-view of Kyoto in the early 17th century. The painting depicts Kyoto in detail: not only the architecture and landscape but also as many as 2,728 people are illustrated in the picture, such as monks, merchants, nobles, craftsmen, barbers, and performers. The painting is undoubtedly a first-class work of art, but more importantly, it is a record of the culture, economy, manners and customs of that age.

In order to convert the two dimensional painting to a three dimensional environment, faculty members in architecture, history, art history, anthropology, and computer graphics discussed what kinds of sound were heard, how people walked, and how things for sale in stores were displayed. When the project is completed, we expect that an interactive experience of the old capital of Japan will be possible. The virtual reality Rakuchu-Rakugai should be an excellent resource for research on art and culture and a good reference for a digital archive project.

To conclude, visual images are a useful source for research on Japanese culture. However, we have to deal with a number of problems, such as how to create a comprehensive database for basic research, and how to create a search system that can incorporate broader contexts. Standardization of search systems for graphics is especially challenging. I have explained some of our attempts to solve these problems, while we are still in the midst of the process. We welcome your suggestions and advice.

NOTES

1 The early version of this paper was presented at a seminar on Image/Graphic Databases, CEAL annual meeting, Boston, 1999.

2 Because of the nature of our center, databases we have established are quite diverse. Currently we have 18 databases, which can be classified into 1) databases of books and articles, 2) graphic databases, and 3) databases for qualitative analysis.