



Shomei Tomatsu: The Deep Connection between Life and Creation and the Development of Postwar Japanese Photography and Photographers

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Abstract

This paper mainly discusses the life background, unique creative style and photographic works of Japanese photographer Shomei Tomatsu (1930-2012), and discusses his relationship with the development of postwar Japanese photography, as well as his far-reaching influence on many Japanese photographers. Born during the war, Shomei Tomatsu's passion for photography drove him to stand out during his university years, and after graduation, he became a freelance photographer and reached his creative peak. His works are unique and varied, integrating various elements, with excellent use of light and color. He often explores his own identity through self-portraits. He reflects the social conditions and changes of post-war Japan, focusing on its historical development as the main line, such as the "Chewing Gum and Chocolate" series, expressing his concern about the "Americanization" phenomenon and his insistence on cultural autonomy. His works are not only personal memories, but also a profound witness to the social and cultural life of post-war Japan. They have also had a profound influence on many Japanese photographers, showcasing the complexity and diversity of post-war Japanese society.

Subject Areas

Culture

Keywords

Shomei Tomatsu, Japanese Photography, Postwar Art, Social Documentary, Cultural Influence

1. Introduction

Shomei Tomatsu, a photographer born in Nagoya, Japan, is known as the “giant of postwar photography” for his unique documentary space and deep emotional expression. His photographs are not only a record of Japan’s post-war social reality, but also a profound reflection on personal memory and collective history. His photographic style, which combines elements of realism and modernism, has had a profound influence on the development of Japanese photography [1].

2. Life and Background

Shomei Tomatsu was born in Nagoya, Japan in 1930, he began to get involved in photography at the age of 16, his teenage years during the Second World War, although not directly involved in the war, but the shadow of the war deeply imprinted in his heart, Shomei Tomatsu’s photographic road is not smooth. He initially studied economics at Aichi University, but his passion for photography drove him to experiment and create, and while at university, he joined the photography society and submitted several works for exhibition, gradually making his mark in the photography world. After graduation, he went to work at Iwata Bookstore, and two years later became a freelance photographer and began an independent photography career. In the 1950s and 1960s, Shomei Tomatsu became a key figure in the “mass photography” movement, which led to the peak of his photographic creation (1960s and 1970s), and in 1959, he co-founded the famous photographic collective VIVO, which greatly promoted the development of Japanese photographic art.

Japan suffered a devastating blow due to the Second World War, the social unrest, and the impact of Western culture, has undergone great changes. After the war, the Japanese photography industry experienced a profound change. During this period, the trend of thought and technology of western photography had a significant influence on Japanese photographers. They began to extensively contact and absorb western photographic theories, and developed a strong interest in the concept of modernist photography. With the promotion of Western photography exhibitions and publications in Japan, the Japanese photography community has gained new inspiration and momentum. At the same time, the development of photography in postwar Japan was also deeply influenced by social changes and political environment. A number of innovative photographers have emerged in the Japanese photography world, seeking to break out of traditional photographic expressions and explore new visual languages. Faced with the great transformation and reconstruction needs of post-war society, photographers focused their lenses on social issues and the reality of people’s lives. Their works not only record the changes of The Times, but also reflect profound thoughts on human nature and society. Through these works, the photographers seek to capture and convey the complexity and diversity of postwar Japanese society, as well as the living conditions and emotional experiences of the people during this special historical period. Shomei Tomatsu grew up in such an artistic atmosphere and

gradually formed its own unique photography style.

3. Artistic Style of Photography

After the end of World War II, as a defeated country, many excellent photographers emerged in Japan. However, it is quite rare for a photographer like Shomei Tomatsu to continue to reflect the social conditions and changes of postwar Japan through his photography works, and take the historical development of postwar Japan as the main line of his creation [2].

3.1. Varied Style

Many studies have focused on his ability to grasp the moment. He combines the characteristics of the “decisive moment” and the “non-decisive moment”. On the one hand, like Bresson, he can capture the representative moment movement or expression; On the other hand, like Frank, he would record some seemingly random, ordinary but full of life moments. These studies explore how he found a balance between these two methods of capturing the moment in order to show the complexity of social life in postwar Japan.

3.2. Diversity of Forms

The diversity of the sense of form also makes him stand out. The bold and strange composition of his works breaks through the paradigm of traditional Japanese documentary photography and is refreshing. He records the social scene of Japan in the process of post-war reconstruction with a lens, and also profoundly captures the spirit of The Times and the life state of the people. Some literatures have studied the composition characteristics of Shomei Tomatsu in depth. He often adopts asymmetric and fragmented composition. Some studies have pointed out that this composition breaks the traditional Japanese photography aesthetic concept of pursuing harmony and balance, and is a visual metaphor for the chaotic and broken social reality after the war. For example, in the street scenes he shot, people and objects seem to be scattered haphazardly in the picture, but they convey a strong sense of unease and unrest. Light and shadow are an important element of Shomei Tomatsu works. He is good at using natural light and artificial light to create a sense of hierarchy and drama in the picture effect. In his works, light and shadow is not only a means to shape the shape of the image and the sense of space, but also an important expression of emotion and theme. In terms of color, the early Shomei Tomatsu works mainly emphasize the black and white tone of light and shadow and texture expression. With the continuous development of his creation, he gradually began to try color photography and took color as an important means of expression. He is very delicate in color, good at creating atmosphere and expressing feelings through color contrast and harmony.

3.3. Selfie Technique

Shomei Tomatsu often uses selfie lenses in his photography works, which is not

only a way of self-expression, but also an exploration of self-identity. For example, “in Firebird of Japan”, his self-portraits reflect the identity confusion of postwar Japan and the tension between the individual and society.

3.4. Sense of Realm

The photographic works of Shomei Tomatsu, whether shooting people or objects, can deeply dig the inner meaning of the subject and reveal the traces of history, thus showing a deep meaning beyond the surface phenomenon, which is the remarkable characteristic of Shomei Tomatsu as a photographer, and also the unique sense of realm shown in his works. Shomei Tomatsu’s works often show a profound understanding of the subject, but also the exploration and expression of photography art itself, this sense of realm in the works is usually expressed as a unique artistic realm.

4. Chronicler of the Postwar Era

4.1. “Skin of the Nation”

The composition of “Skin of the Nation”, one of Shomei Tomatsu’s representative works, is simple and full of tension. The exquisite use of light and shadow gives the picture a strong expressive force and emotional atmosphere. He captures all kinds of scenes of postwar Japanese society with a keen perspective, showing the “skin” of the nation through black and white images, that is, the surface and deep texture of society. The characters in the works are rich and diverse, including confused youth and tired workers, reflecting the anxiety and struggle of The Times. This collection of works is not only a true record of Japanese society at that time, but also triggers people’s profound reflection on history, culture and humanity, which has high artistic value and historical significance.

4.2. “11: 02 Nagasaki”

A watch that stops forever at 11:02 AM is Shomei Tomatsu portfolio “11: 02 Nagasaki” (see **Figure 1**), the most representative picture, he uses a realistic technique, which makes the work have a strong visual impact and profound historical significance (this expression technique runs through his work “The Man Who Hung the Advertisement, Tokyo”). Meanwhile, the series explores the cruelty of war and the importance of peace through the lens, allowing people to face the historical trauma. This makes it a classic work of postwar Japanese photography, and also reflects Shomei Tomatsu’s high sense of social responsibility.

4.3. “Chewing Gum and Chocolate”

Shomei Tomatsu recalled: “My memory of Japan is the ruins after the defeat, the scene of occupation by the US army. The Americans brought chewing gum and chocolate. It was my first encounter with American culture. They were so real to me in the form of an occupying force that I had to look at it.” [3] “Chewing Gum and Chocolate” is his profound reflection and critique of the influence of

American culture on Japanese society. The series' name symbolizes the sweets given to Japanese children by American soldiers during the occupation of Japan, and these sweet but nutrient-free foods symbolize the superficial appeal and potential hollow-ness of American culture. In the "Chewing Gum and Chocolate" series (see **Figure 2**), Shomei Tomatsu captures daily life and cultural landscapes through his lens, which are the cities occupied by the US military in Japan. The collection shows how American culture permeated Japanese society, from military bases to military bases, and influenced Japanese lifestyles and values, and how Japan fought against the impact of traditional culture and Western culture in pursuit of modernization. There are Americans taking pictures from the ground, American cars with huge tail-wings, Japanese women with Western-style haircuts, and BarBillboard, which draws American beauties under the influence of American culture. Shomei Tomatsu's works not only record American culture, but also express the cultural shock and identity crisis faced by postwar Japanese society. Through these photographs, Shomei Tomatsu his insistence on Japanese cultural autonomy and his concern about the trend toward Americanization.

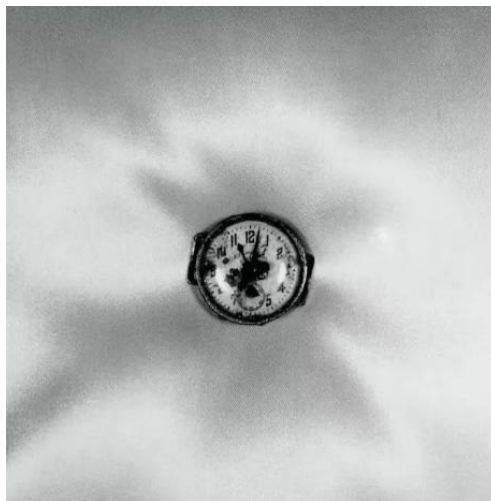


Figure 1. "11: 02 Nagasaki", 1945 year. Shomei Tomatsu.



Figure 2. From "Chewing Gum and Chocolate", 1974 year. Shomei Tomatsu.

He continued to travel to Okinawa to photograph, excavating those strong spiritual areas that were not occupied and continued to resist the influence of Americanization, which also quickly shifted his focus from the material culture represented by the United States to the spiritual culture of Okinawa, and the rich culture and resilient spirit of Okinawa became the subject of his lifelong photography. His work has thus become a celebration of Japanese cultural autonomy and indigenous spirit [4].

Shomei Tomatsu's photography is not only a preservation of personal memories, but also a profound testimony to postwar Japanese society and culture. His work has had a profound influence on many Japanese photographers, such as Moriyama Daiichi, Narahara Kazaka, and Nakaïpei Takuma. Through his lens, we can feel the complexity and diversity of postwar Japanese society. This is something other Japanese photographers do not have, and it is also an important reason why his work can have a profound impact.

5. Summary

Shomei Tomatsu's personal experience has a great influence on his photographic creation. His photography is not only a preservation of personal memories, but also a profound testimony to postwar Japanese society and culture. His work has had a profound influence on many Japanese photographers, such as Moriyama Daiichi, Narahara Kazaka, and Nakaïpei Takuma. Through his lens, we can feel the complexity and diversity of postwar Japanese society. This is something other Japanese photographers do not have, and it is also an important reason why his work can have a profound impact.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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