The Joy of Photography

Photography has become a much more familiar art with the spread of digital cameras and cell phones with built-in cameras. An increasing number of people now think of photography as a handy means of expression and a routine part of their daily lives.

The Digitization of Photography

Not so long ago, the standard procedure in photography was to first buy film, take photos, have that film developed at a camera shop or a convenience-store-provided service, and receive the developed photographs along with a set of negatives. Today, it is becoming more common to take photos on a digital camera, save the images on a computer, and print out only the selected shots using a home printer. The camera shops that were once a fixture of every town are starting to disappear, and photographs themselves are seen less as a medium captured on film than as data files to be stored on a computer.

According to the Cabinet Office's Research Regarding the Spread of Leading Durable Consumer Goods (as of end of March 2007), 58.9 percent of Japan's 47.8 million households own a digital camera. Seventy-one percent of households own a computer, which is a necessity when using a digital camera.

Prices for digital cameras in Japan range from 30,000 to 50,000 yen. Considering that it costs about 1,500–2,000 yen to purchase and develop one roll of film, the price of a digital camera is not so expensive. New automatic image stabilization, focus, and face-recognition features make it possible for anyone to take photographs quite skillfully.

Digital cameras have changed the way pictures are taken and ways they are enjoyed thereafter. In the past, one had to purchase film, have it developed without knowing how the photographs would come out, all with great loss of time and money. With a digital camera, the quality of the picture can be checked on the spot and retaken if necessary. Photographs can also be selected for printing, allowing people to take many photographs without spending much time or money. Digital photography also encourages picture-taking not just on special occasions but of anything of interest in daily life, as a method of documenting life almost like a diary.

Photographs taken on digital cameras can be easily processed using a computer, so they can be used to make original postcards or create one-of-a-kind photo albums. Now the average person has control over the entire photography process, including printing. Digital cameras have accomplished something tremendous by allowing people who weren't familiar with photography to really enjoy taking pictures.

Taking Photos by Cell Phone

In Japan, cell phones are used by people of all ages, from children to the elderly. More than 90 percent of high school students have cell phones. Most models these days have a camera feature, making "taking photos" one of the prime uses of cell phones among high school students, along with calling, sending e-mail, checking the time and setting alarms, browsing the web, and listening to music.

Footage of accidents and news events, which would usually have been shot by experts with cameras or video cameras on the scene, are now also taken by ordinary people with cell phones and sometimes shown on news programs. Also, people are beginning to take pictures not just of their vacations and other special occasions, but as a way of saving information they want to make note of, or showing something from their daily lives, such as by posting on a blog.

As more people take pictures on cell phones, photography magazines have begun to publish regular articles on how to take quality pictures with a cell phone, hold contests for photographs taken by cell phone, and publish collections of such photos. Photographs can be sent as an e-mail attachment by cell phone, so sharing photos among friends has become much easier.

People taking photos with cell phone cameras in front of the Kaminarimon ("Thunder Gate") at Sensoji temple in Tokyo

© Hongo Jin

Purikura

Purikura, short for *Purinto kurabu* (Print Club),* is a photo booth where people can take their own photos, and a machine then prints them out in few minutes automatically as stickers at a cost of 300 yen per set. After shooting, users can decorate the frames or draw and write on the frames. This way, users can create imaginative and original stickers they can enjoy in various ways.

Purikura has been popular among junior high school and senior high school girls ever since its 1995 debut in video arcades. Notebooks used to collect *purikura* pictures are called *purikura techo* (*puricho* for short), literally meaning "purikura notebooks," and may have not just *purikura* pictures, but be dressed up with other kinds of stickers, drawings using colored pens or markers, and marginal comments.

The fascination of *purikura* is not just taking pictures with friends and turning them into little artworks. *Purikura* sharing is a means of expressing friendship, and can also be used to record special times and moments. *Purikura* may be another factor that has made photography and album-making much easier and more familiar.

* Purinto-kurabu is technically a trademark, but products by other companies with the same feature are also commonly referred to as *purikura*.

purikura techo

Take *purikura* with your friends!

© Hongo Jin

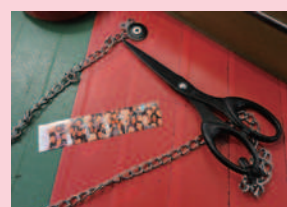
Purikura booths in video arcades.

Touch the screen of the *purikura* and choose the background and frame for your stickers.

Pose in front of the professional lighting set up in front of the screen.

After the photo is taken, you can draw on the image using a special pen connected to the *purikura* by a cord.
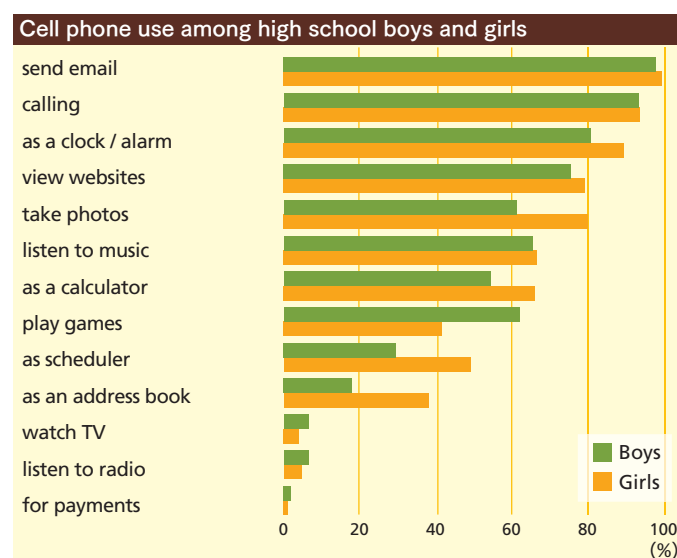
Screen after adding extras to the photo with the special pens: borders, exclamations, dates, messages or comments, about the friends posing together.

The finished stickers come out of a slot in the machine in few minutes.

The booth provides scissors to cut and share the *purikura* stickers with friends.

Done!

Cell phone use among high school boys and girls

- send email
- calling
- as a clock / alarm
- view websites
- take photos
- listen to music
- as a calculator
- play games
- as scheduler
- as an address book
- watch TV
- listen to radio
- for payments

■ Boys ■ Girls

0 20 40 60 80 100 (%)

Source: "Research on Money in Children's Lives" (2005). Central Council for Financial Services Information.

With the proliferation of digital cameras and camera-equipped cell phones, more and more people are quick to take photographs whenever they find something interesting, amusing, or unusual in their daily lives. In Japan, where photography is a daily amusement of so many people, Ume Kayo, a young photographer, is currently gaining much attention.

Ume Kayo, born in 1981, is the kind of photographer who can capture scenes we can all recall seeing (or must have seen) somewhere. Her photographs have a way of making you feel you are there yourself. They can bring forth all sorts of feelings and emotions—amusement, or nostalgia—or awaken precious personal memories. Her photographs radiate an energy and life that cannot be found in photographs taken by clever tricks or elaborate staging.

Her first collection, entitled *Ume-me*, sold 110,000 copies (as of March 2008), a rare achievement for a photography collection, for which she received the 32nd Kimura Ihei Award* in 2007. Her other photo

Unfortunately we are unable to publish Ume's photos on the website because of copyright restriction. But if you are interested, please send an inquiry to takarabako@tjf.or.jp and we will be happy to send you a printed version of *Takarabako* No. 16 which contains her photos.

Ume-me
published by Little More

The World of Ume Kayo

collection, titled *Danshi*, featuring elementary school boys living in her neighborhood, attracted widespread attention, selling 40,000 copies. She has received high praise in newspapers, magazines, on television shows and elsewhere, and her works have been highly rated in showings in Tokyo, Paris, London, and Bangkok.

Danshi
published by Little More

Ume's photographs might show a mundane moment in everyday life that anyone might think they can photograph, but the secret of her success is that it is a moment no one can capture but her.

* Kimura Ihei Award
A photography award founded in 1975 by the Asahi Shimbun Company named after photographer Kimura Ihei (1901-1974) in honor of his contributions to the Japanese photography. The award is given to upcoming photographers for outstanding achievement in photography and exhibition of their works. Most recipients of this award are still in the business as leading photographers of Japan.

© UME KAYO

High School Photography

While digital cameras have made taking photos easy for everyone, many high school students take photography seriously as part of their school club activities. There are roughly 5,500 high school photography clubs nationwide. Many members of these clubs still prefer traditional methods of photographing with film, which they develop themselves in the darkroom. They show their photographs at school culture festivals, enter works in photography contests held by the photography division of each prefecture's senior high school cultural federation, and/or in monthly contests held by photography magazines.

"The Yomiuri Photo Grand Prix"

http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/photogp/

The Yomiuri Photo Grand Prix is a contest held every year by the Yomiuri Shimbun Company, in which both professional and amateur photographers from all over Japan are eligible. Awards are given in separate divisions for journalism (includes photos of crimes and accidents), special topics, high school, elementary and junior high school, and family.

The high school division is further separated into the "free" and "photo and essay" subsections. For the "free" subsection, the high school students' task is to photograph school events, their school lives, and daily activities. For the "photo and essay" subsection, the photographer focuses on a single student, takes 5 or fewer pictures of him/her, and writes a short essay about the model and the photography process.

TJF's "Lives of Japanese High School Students: Photo and Message Contest," which ended in 2007, is carried on in this "Photo and Essay" subsection, to which TJF gives its full support. Some of the winning photographs will continue to be published for high school students overseas through the TJF website and publications.

Shashin Koshien [Photo Koshien]*

http://town.higashikawa.hokkaido.jp/phototown/koshienofficial.htm

Shashin Koshien, started in 1994, is a national photography contest for high school photography clubs all over Japan held in Higashikawa, a small town in Hokkaido with a population of less than 8,000. Higashikawa is hoping to revitalize the town through photography, not just with the Shashin Koshien but also through its international "Higashikawa Prize" for photography, the International Photography Festival, and its photo collection at the local Culture Gallery.

©Shashin Koshien 2007

What is unique about Shashin Koshien is that contestants enter as teams instead of as individuals, only one work can be sent from one school, the topic and theme is open, and the work must be composed of

©Shashin Koshien 2007

4 to 8 photographs. Over 200 schools throughout Japan submit entries. The primary competition is judged in 8 regional blocks by screening committees composed of photographers, magazine editors and others. Fourteen winners from the 8 blocks then compete at the main contest held in Higashikawa in July, in teams of three contestants and one coach.

For the main contest, each team uses the same kind of camera and photographs in the same area for 4 days. They select a specified number of photos according to their specified theme, and submit them as a collection. The collection is then judged in a public screening session, and the team with the highest score becomes the winner. Since many photographs must be taken in a limited time and organized into a single composition, teamwork is very important. Participants improve their skills as photographers and grow as individuals in the process of overcoming obstacles to achieve their goal.

The main contest is also supported by local high school students, a staff of local citizens, and former contestants from previous contests. The Shashin Koshien offers a great opportunity to interact with and get to know a local community, not just the judges and participants from other schools.

The main contest was once televised, and was also made into a comic. It is inspiring to see these students working with each other and reflecting on themselves via photography, thereby growing as individuals.

* "Koshien"
Koshien is a well-known baseball stadium in Hyogo prefecture. It is the home base of a popular professional baseball team and the site of the national high school tournaments every spring and summer. Virtually synonymous with the high school tournaments, the Koshien Stadium has become a mecca of high school baseball players and a kind of generic term adopted by major national high school tournaments of other kinds (such as Manga Koshien or Dance Koshien).

©Shashin Koshien 2007

My Three Years Face-to-Face with Photography

Midoring
First-year university student, 18, Osaka
* Third-year high school student at time of interview

Discovery of the Shashin Koshien*1

The same year I joined the photography club in high school, "Yossan," the leader of the club, and other third-year students were competing in the Shashin Koshien. I'll never forget the excitement in their faces when they talked about their experience. They were skillful in working with their models, and their photographs were really great.

I asked Hanabata-sensei, our club advisor, about them, "What is their secret? How can I get like that?" and he answered, "Participating in the Shashin Koshien makes all the difference. They have much more depth and breadth than first-year students." The average high school student is concerned only with his or her own little world, but upperclass members like Yossan

Yossan (right)   ©Midoring

go out and take pictures for the contest every day, and through photography they are in touch with the world and people outside school. That gives them more maturity and an awareness of the wider world.

So I decided I really wanted to join in our club's participation in the next Shashin Koshien. At the end of my first year, when the club began to prepare for the next year's competition, I signed up without a moment's hesitation.

How and What to Photograph

I went out with my camera every day. But when I would show my pictures to Hanabata-sensei and the upperclass members of the club, they would say, "you won't get to Shashin Koshien with those photos. What you've got is too simple and direct. It's a good start, but you need to include more background, and have photos shot with different framing and from different angles. You have to improve your skill." I knew there was something wrong with my photos, but it was tough because I didn't know what or how to photograph. But I kept on going out to photograph, and gradually I did develop better skills, including those for photographing people. It takes courage to ask a stranger if you can photograph him or her. Before that, I had not taken that many photos of people because I was too shy to speak to anyone, but before I knew it I was photographing people by myself, even when my friends were not around. Still, our club did not make it to the Shashin Koshien finals that year.

Some time after the Shashin Koshien in my second year was over, people began to tell me that my photography skills were getting better. But I didn't want my photos to be just "good." I wanted others to say that they were interesting and fun. I began to photograph less. Even when I tried, I would imagine how it would appear as a photo, and think "Nah, it's not interesting enough. Never mind." Then I participated in the school's study trip to Italy in December of second year. Hanabata-sensei told me that this was practice for the Shashin Koshien. If I could not take good photographs during this trip, I would not make it to the finals. I took dozens of rolls of black and white film with me. During our seven-day stay, I photographed people, scenery, and all sorts of things. Until then, I hadn't really known what I should photograph, but in Italy I found myself once again wanting to photograph anything and everything. When people began to compliment me on my photographs, I gained confidence. I began to think to myself, "If I like it, I'll photograph it."

Photo taken during the school study trip to Italy in December of my second year.

Photographs That Speak for Me

We began preparing our final submissions for the Shashin Koshien in January. Before, the upperclass members had been the leaders of the team, and we had just followed their lead. Now we had to prove we could do it on our own. I was all psyched up, ready to have all eight photos in our submission be my photos, and lead the team to victory. We all decided on *takoyaki*,*2 for our topic. It would really illustrate the Osaka spirit, and it would show the relationship people have with *takoyaki*.

Takoyaki

At first we took staged photographs in Dotonbori,*3 acting out a scene of "having a great time eating *takoyaki*," cueing each other to pose with *takoyaki* poised before open mouth, to look at the camera, and so on. Then, one day, I was photographing the man who works a *takoyaki* shop in our old-town Osaka neighborhood, and just naturally I started talking to

him. We got a little acquainted and he began to tell me a little about his life. I found out he had been making *takoyaki* there for decades, and I realized, "Wow, this *takoyaki* shop has been here all these years! This man has been living here all this time!" The photograph I took gets across the admiration and amazement I felt. That is the kind of photograph I want to take.

You Gotta Shape Up!

Shashin Koshien is really demanding. You go out to photograph every day, but the photos still don't come out the way you want. Hanabata-sensei and older students give thumbs down over and over. Every time, it really gets you down, but you can't afford to feel sorry for yourself; you have to keep on taking photos.

Riding around on my bicycle looking for *takoyaki* stands and shops to photograph, I started to feel so angry with myself I thought I would cry. Slapping my thighs, I tried to pull myself together. "You gotta shape up!" I told myself. I didn't want to be second to anyone when it came to effort; I just couldn't imagine any of my club mates being more determined than me to do my best. Yossan sent me a great letter of encouragement: "If you think you get good just by going on shoots after school every day and developing your film, over and over until May—if you think you can get eight good enough photos out of that, you're dead wrong. When I was taking my photos under the tracks for the Koshien, every day I thought to myself what that place meant to me, and what I wanted to express by photographing it. You need to make clear to yourself why you want to photograph *takoyaki*. You can do it!" I felt that Yossan really understood me, and shared the feelings I was struggling with.

Discovery from Struggle

I had been thinking all the time about what *takoyaki* meant to us. As I took more photographs at stalls and shops around the old-town Osaka neighborhood, I began to see that *takoyaki* were not just a *meibutsu* or "famous product" of Osaka. They're eaten by people of all ages, from little kids to old folks, and everyone clearly loves them. One day, I photographed a girl at a *takoyaki* shop, hanging on its *noren* curtain while her mother worked inside. The girl looked a bit lonely, and the old-fashioned,

well-worn façade of the shop testified to its long history. This is probably one of my best shots; a photo that awakens many thoughts and images in the mind of the viewer.

In the end, none of my own photographs were included in the set submitted to the Shashin Koshien primary screening. Photos that show the life at an old-town neighborhood taken with time and patience—the kind of photos I like—aren't often chosen for such contests. After much discussion among us, we agreed that in order to beat the competition, we should use photos with more impact. We all thought that they were good photos, including myself, but still we did not make it to the finals.

The six months of photographing in preparation for the Shashin Koshien primary were difficult and exhausting. But I wouldn't be where I am today if I had not taken up that challenge. Hanabata-sensei's words still echo in my mind: "When you're having a hard time, struggling to take that perfect photo, it's like when you're going up a steep stairway. It's only when you make it to the next floor that you look back and realize how far you have come."

Photographs That Feed the Imagination

It may sound boastful, but I think those photos I took in my old-town neighborhood were really good. They may not have what you call impact, but those photos show *takoyaki* subtly blending into the surrounding atmosphere. Looking at them, you start thinking of all kinds of things—the lives of the people shown, the flow of time in the scene, and so on. I decided to major in photography in university. My teachers recommended that I continue art major in college, but I think I want to devote my life to photography. Photography is a way to cut out and record brief moments in time. For example, no matter how skillfully you might draw the houses from the post-World War II era, people may not think much of them, but a photograph will attract more attention, because it delivers more reality. I want to preserve this era I live in through photographs. I want to take the kind of photographs that feed the imagination of those who see them. And, this is the first time I'm saying this, but I want to become a professional photographer and publish a collection of my own photographs someday.

Shot not long after I started taking photographs. I just aimed my camera straight at my subject. Hanabata-sensei said that style vividly displayed my personality.

One of the photos I took for our last submission to the Shashin Koshien.

Notes

*1 Shashin Koshien: See "Japanese Culture Now-4." National photo competition for high school students. Only teams that won the primary competition in each region can enter the finals held in July in Hokkaido. The photography club in Midoring's high school organizes a team of volunteers each year, begins discussing a theme around January, and composes its entry of eight photographs by the deadline for the first screening.

*2 *Takoyaki* are made of wheat flour batter flavored with seasonings and a small chunk of octopus meat and grilled in a ball shape.

*3 Dotonbori: Main shopping district in the southern part of Osaka, with many good restaurants.