

Jason McDonald, "Japanese Teeth and Skulls in American Newspapers, 1884-2012"

In a study of 350 American newspapers, I traced the use of the terms "Japanese teeth" and "Japanese skulls" from 1884 to 2012 using ProQuest Historical Newspapers and Newspapers.com. From the nineteenth century to just before the war, "Japanese teeth" and "Japanese skulls" are most often abstract concepts that refer to the appetites of the Japanese government, or to traditional blackened feminine Japanese teeth. During World War II, the press moves from abstract concepts ("kick in the Jap's teeth") to reporting on souvenir collection by American soldiers. In combat, Americans find large numbers of corpses, skulls and teeth on the battlefield. Believing they were emulating native headhunters, Americans removed the skulls of Japanese soldiers. Newspapers at first endorsed the practice and reported on skulls and teeth shipped home and exhibited. In 1944, *LIFE* published a photo of a woman with a Japanese skull, and President Franklin Roosevelt received a letter opener made from a Japanese bone. Newspapers reversed their position and condemned the practice. Worried about Japanese complaints to the international press, the government ordered the armed forces to suspend the practice. After the war, Americans begin to question the practice. In the 1950s veterans begin to seek to bury or return their artifacts. By the 1960s, Japanese Buddhists ask Martin Luther King and Paul Tillich to facilitate skull return. In the 1980s police asked veterans to dispose of skulls properly so investigations are not compromised. Today the Japanese consulate has procedures for American veterans to return artifacts to Japan.