

# *Imaging/Reading Eros*

*Proceedings for the conference,  
Sexuality and Edo Culture, 1750-1850  
Indiana University, Bloomington  
August 17 -20, 1995*

*Sumie Jones, Editor*

*Published by  
The East Asian Studies Center  
Indiana University, Bloomington*

East Asia  
HQ  
18  
.J3  
S48  
1995g

LIMITED PUBLICATION.

Copies are available only from the East Asian Studies Center  
at Indiana University.

Copyright © 1996, by Sumie Jones for Edo Culture Project  
All rights reserved.

No parts of this publication may be reproduced or  
transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic  
or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or  
any information storage and retrieval system, without  
permission in writing from the copyright holder.

East Asian Studies Center  
Memorial Hall W207  
Indiana University  
Bloomington, IN 47405  
e-mail:easc@indiana.edu

ISBN 0-9653281-0-4

## Overcoming the Modern History of Edo “Shunga”

Henry SMITH

As a historian, my point is a predictable one, that Edo shunga have a history—but a history that has been obscured and distorted by the specifically *modern* history of isolation and sentimentalization of shunga that has persisted from Meiji until only recently. As a result of this modern history, we remain tempted when dealing with shunga to be drawn into their forbidden world, to delight in the humor and apparent candor of the images, to engage in fetishistic contemplation of the small and sensuous detail. This cheerful approach presents twin dangers.

First is the danger of thinking that our own late 20th-century experience of shunga is even remotely similar to that of the original owners. Robert Darnton makes a similar point for 18th-century French pornography in a recent review of the publication of many of the classics from the famous “Enfer” section of the Bibliothèque Nationale: noting the prevalence of masturbation in the content of the pornographic literature of the time, and observing that some librarians have found “spermatic traces” on the leaves of 18th-century sex books, he suggests that perhaps the modern researcher should “follow in the steps of those long-forgotten readers, by divesting himself [sic] of enough sophistication, and respond in the same way.”<sup>1</sup> Darnton is at least half serious here, arguing that this would give us direct access to the passions of the past; it would also work to circumvent the intellectual bemusement and pontification of the present. But after divesting ourselves of enough sophistication to imagine Edo ways of viewing shunga, we are still left in need of a new sophistication in grasping how these erotic images did indeed function in the continuing discursive and social re-construction of sexuality in modern Japan.

The second danger is a tendency to essentialize an unchanging “Japanese” quality set apart from an equally monolithic “West,” an issue of interest in many areas today but perhaps especially critical in dealing with sexuality. Particularly since Michel Foucault’s insistence on sexuality as a discursive construction, studies of sexuality have stressed the historicity of such construction, complicating the stereotype of repressive “Victorian” attitudes as representing an essential Western sexuality. Indeed, it has been precisely such notions of Western repression that have structured Japan as an opposing pole in the far East, a land where sexuality is “natural” and liberated. In considering the world of shunga, it is clear that such a simplistic and ahistorical conception must yield to a far more complex sense of a highly contested terrain of sexual discourse and social history of the Edo period. This exploratory essay is a preliminary outline of some of the main themes of the history of shunga within the broader context of changing sexualities in Tokugawa Japan.

## The Problem of Terminology

One first procedure in historicizing shunga might be to conduct a historical rectification of names. Of all the many words used in premodern Japan for the explicit sexual illustrations that we now routinely call “shunga,” shunga was not the most common. In a modern compilation of shunga-related *senryū*, for example, out of over 150 such terms, the relative percentages are as follows: *makura-e*, 46%; *warai-e* or *warai-bon*, 25%; shunga, 15%; *nishikawa-e* (after Nishikawa Sukenobu), 10%; and *hisho*, 4%.<sup>2</sup> In the title of books, the most common term tended to be “*enpon*” (although properly read “ehon,” according to Hayashi Yoshikazu).<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, most of the uses of “shunga” tend to be late, dating from the nineteenth century. On the whole, then, “shunga” is a relatively more modern term, and over the years since Meiji, it has come to be the dominant retrospective word for the Edo phenomenon, particularly in Western usage. In the process, the word has become indelibly linked with the modern Japanese regime of criminalization and genital expunction that has only recently come to an end. (It is revealing that the recent liberalization of the publication of shunga has resulted in the revival of the term “*makura-e*.”)<sup>4</sup> The other side of the coin, of course, is that “shunga” has come to imply an Edo regime of sexuality that was carefree and natural, which was far from the case. To distinguish between Edo attitudes and modern attitudes, I therefore propose to use “*makura-e*” for the former (and for books, “*warai-bon*”), and “shunga” for the latter.

## The Origins of Makura-e and the Matter of Custom

To contextualize the complex art that *makura-e* became within the broader genre of Edo *ukiyo-e*, it is necessary to consider some of the ways in which explicit sexual imagery may have served routine customary functions in premodern Japanese society.

Historically, the first task is to analyze the tradition of painted *makura-e* handscrolls in aristocratic culture. A number of such scrolls survive from the early seventeenth century, and there can be little doubt that as a genre, they flourished from the sixteenth century. They typically show series of couples in aristocratic dress (or rather undress, with such token remainders as *eboshi* caps for men), engaging in a variety of sexual postures. The usual assumption is that these were used either as instruments of seduction, or for the instruction of aristocratic women preparatory to marriage. Neither of these theories, however, are either documented or particularly persuasive: it is equally plausible, in my mind, to imagine male-centered consumption, either in masturbatory solitude or in social gatherings.

But do these handscrolls in fact represent a much older tradition, going back as far as the Heian period, as is generally argued by those favoring a notion of an unbroken Japanese “shunga” tradition? Yasumura Toshinobu, for example, has argued that Japan is distinctive in the lack of any inter-

nalized taboos against the open display of the genitals, and finds a particularly important indication of this attitude to be gross exaggeration in graphic depictions of the [inevitably male] genitalia, citing various Nara-period graffiti from Hōryūji and Tōshōdaiji as early evidence.<sup>5</sup>

As a customary tradition within the aristocracy, however, in the absence of any surviving makura-e handscrolls from before the sixteenth century, much hinges on textual appearances of the term *o[n]sokuzu-no-e*, which etymologically seems to indicate "reclining pictures" and which in the Edo period—as in *Kiyū shōran* of 1830<sup>6</sup>—was accepted as the ancient Japanese word for "warai-e." The term appears as early as the legal commentary *Ryō no gige* of 834 (where it is implied that such depictions were *not* openly condoned), but the most revealing and often cited (as in *Kiyū shōran*, for example) reference is a story from the *Kokon chomonjū* of 1234. In a conversation with the legendary monk-painter Toba Sōjō over the notion of "*esoragoto*," or artistic license, a samurai-priest observes that past painters of *osokuzu-no-e* showed the "dimensions of the thing itself" (*sono mono no sunpō*) as much larger than in reality, as a way of sustaining

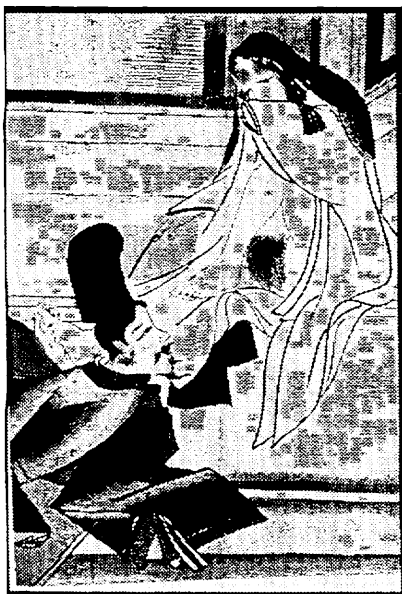


Fig. 1. Detail of Edo-period copy of *Koshibagaki zōshi e-kotoba*, a handscroll of the Kamakura period. From Fukuda Kazuhiko, *Ukiyoe no miwaku* (Kawade shobō shinsha, 1986), p. 12.

visual interest (*midokoro*). This would seem to confirm both a tradition of such images, and of genital exaggeration within that tradition. If any of the surviving (and much later) copies of the famous *Koshibagaki zōshi ekotoba* scroll accurately replicate the presumed original of the late 13th century (cf. Fig. 1), we can be sure that such a tradition of depiction existed, at least in narrative painting.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, we have little evidence for directly linking any such tradition with the surviving makura-e handscrolls of the 16th-17th centuries, except perhaps in the preference for exaggerated genitalia. It seems possible that "*ososokuzu-no-e*" were not systematically reproduced within

the Heian or medieval court itself, but rather re-created on a new scale under the cultural conditions of the period of reunification in the later sixteenth century. One major factor in this process may well have been the inauguration of large-scale quarters of licensed prostitution, beginning with the



Fig. 2. Sexual exploits of Prince Genji, from *Yoshida Hanbei, Genji o-iro asobi* (1681). From Fukuda Kazuhiko, *Ehon ukiyoe sen* (Kawade shobō shinsha, 1990), p. 17.

Shinchi area of Osaka in 1585. In other words, we may be dealing not with the survival of an older customary practice, but of its imaginative re-creation under totally new historical conditions. Since one key feature of the new licensed quarters was the adoption of a systematic fantasy about the world of Genji, it is no surprise that early printed makura-e would feature depictions from the *Genji* itself (see Fig. 2).

We cannot so quickly dismiss, however, the frequent allegation of an elite tradition of the use of makura-e for the customary instruction of brides. One particularly persuasive account of the survival of such a practice from Tokugawa on into the Meiji period is to be found in the recollections of Hachisuka Toshiko, a granddaughter of Tokugawa Keiki and daughter of the daimyo family of Tokushima, who married into the Matsudaira family of Tsuyama in the late Meiji period, and whose upbringing seems to represent the survival of aristocratic samurai custom.<sup>8</sup> She describes being shown a painted makura-e handscroll, at about age 14, by a senior lady-in-waiting (*rōjo*), who explained that it was necessary for her to study closely so that she would not disappoint her husband-to-be. Despite problems with the veracity of this account, it does tend to confirm a late Tokugawa custom of distributing such images among women as a part of bridal instruction. It remains entirely possible, however, that any such customs were not the legacy of an ancient Heian court tradition, but rather may have been constructed over time in response to the widespread circulation of makura-e, both painted and printed, throughout the Edo period itself.



Fig. 3. Examples of multiple sexual positions, "Grasping from Behind" and "Through the Shōji," from Hishikawa Moronobu, *Koi no mutsugoto shijū hatte* (1679). From Fukuda Kazuhiko, *Ehon ukiyoe sen* (Kawade shobō shinsha, 1990), p. 58.

A separate but central issue in the history of explicit genital depiction in Japan is the tradition of Chinese sexology, which had long been known. Indeed, it is the Japanese medical text *Ishinpō* of the late tenth century that preserves parts of the ancient classics of Chinese sexual yoga that had been lost in their homeland.<sup>9</sup> The impact of this elaborate tradition are also apparent in many aspects of Edo-period makura-e, notably in the frequent depiction of set numbers of multiple postures (as in Fig. 3). Much less obvious, however, is any direct linkage between specific Chinese traditions of genital depiction and those that we find in 17th-century Japan. Surviving Chinese examples suggest wholly different genres, not only in the much more exaggerated and insistently detailed genital emphases of Japanese makura-e, but also in the wholly contrasting cultural settings. Many Chinese erotic works are set in the scholar's studio, featuring all the accoutrements of the literati life and an idyllic garden environment; little of this seems relevant to Japanese makura-e.

The complex matter of customary uses of makura-e in the Edo period appears in a very different guise in the common allegation that they served as amulets for victory by samurai, typically by keeping them in chests of armor, but also by bearing them directly into battle hidden in helmets; these came to be known as *kachi-e*, "victory pictures." A classic Edo-period reference appears in Act 10 of *Kanadehon Chūshingura*, when the merchant Amakawayā Gihei refuses to open the chest containing arms for the 47 rōnin on the grounds that it contains *warai-bon* and *warai-dōgu*.<sup>10</sup> (It is revealing that the objection is not to revealing the books themselves, but rather the name of the famous lord whose name appears on the order for such items.)

We also discover a considerable sub-genre of *senryū* on precisely this theme of makura-e hidden in armor chests (*gusoku-bitsu*).<sup>11</sup> But did such a custom ever in fact exist, and when did it begin? Hanasaki and Aoki provide a revealing citation from a work of 1717, *Buke zokusetsu ben* (A

Clarification of Popular Beliefs about Samurai), which argues reasonably that no true samurai of the past would ever have steeled his nerves for battle by gazing at an erotic image as alleged: on the contrary, this would have done nothing but dissipate his resolve. But, the same account claims, contemporary samurai families now do indeed keep such images in their armor chests. The author also suggests that this misinformed custom has already been around for some time (as of the early eighteenth century).

We seem to have here a revealing case of the *construction* of urban folk practices surrounding makura-e, one that may well derive from long-standing rural practices of the display and worship of both male and female genitals, practices intimately connected with prayers for both agricultural and human fertility.<sup>12</sup> In the urban setting, however, the magical powers of the genitalia tended to shift from procreative powers to other and more general forms of protection. Note that the *warai-bon* in armor chests, for example, are often alleged to protect specifically against fire, a particular hazard of the urban samurai residence. And more broadly, one finds frequent reports that makura-e were commonly placed in storehouses in Japan as protection against fire, or to have been carried on the person to ward off calamity or insure good fortune. Women of the pleasure quarters until recent times are said to have carried makura-e in their purses or tissue-holders to assure that they would never be without money.<sup>13</sup> The distribution of these practices by region, class, and historical period remains unclear, but I suspect that they came to be most widely diffused precisely in the course of the nineteenth century, largely in the cities.

It thus seems likely that the reported "everyday life" uses for makura-e in Edo culture<sup>14</sup> were the *result* of the popularity of makura-e, and not its cause. Virtually all the evidence for such customary usage dates from the eighteenth century and later, whereas the commercial market for printed makura-e began in the third quarter of the seventeenth century in both Kamigata and Edo. It is also clear that these

earliest works were a direct outgrowth of the new and flourishing institution of the Yoshiwara licensed quarters in Edo, since they take the form of guides (*hyōbanki*) to the brothel. The earliest dated work of this sort is *Yoshiwara makura* (Yoshiwara Pillow) of 1660, which depicts men making love to courtesans, each of whom is represented by the crest for specific house of prostitution. Various pictorial conventions certainly were derived from earlier painted scrolls of aristocratic lineage, but now the context was wholly different, with a commercial market catering to large-scale and systematic licensed prostitution.

This is not to say, however, that such images over time could not have come to serve the kind of customary amuletic functions mentioned above, with no necessary connection to the Yoshiwara and other forms of prostitution. Particularly by the end of the Edo period, cheaply printed erotic images may have come to be used in amuletic ways by the lesser urban classes, and perhaps even by the rural elite. Yet the fact remains that the specific origins of Edo makura-e lie squarely within the world of the brothel.

### The Ideological Context of Edo Makurae

In conjunction with the first great wave of printed Edo and Kamigata makura-e in the 1670s and 1680s, there emerged an ideological complex that sought to justify the pursuit of sexual pleasures as a "way" (*dō*, or *michi*), as classically formulated in Fujimoto Kizan's *Shikidō Ō-kagami* (The Greater Mirror of the Way of Sexual Passion) of 1678.<sup>15</sup> The elaborate rules for progression along a journey of increasing sophistication from *yabo* (boorish and unenlightened) to *sui* (stylish and enlightened) may be seen as characteristic of the process by which taste emerged as the key arbiter in an increasingly commercialized market for goods and services—in this case, sexual services. As Craig Clunas argues for the world of "superfluous things" in late Ming China, taste and discrimination evolved in the urban culture of Genroku Japan as a crucial form of brake on exclusively wealth-determined consumption.<sup>16</sup>

The Tokugawa bakufu did not of course approve of this culture, particularly the involvement of the samurai class. But this attitude did not stem from any judgment on the morality of sexual pleasure per se; after all, it was the samurai establishment that had itself promoted licensed pleasure quarters as a way of managing sexual desire in barrack cities. Bakufu disapproval was rather on the grounds that it encouraged laxness, excess, and indecorous behavior. It is difficult to isolate any particularly "Confucian" element here, and at any rate there is little evidence of Confucianism as having much to say about eroticism per se, except to the degree that if unchecked, it could threaten family harmony and even survival.

The history of makura-e, we are often told, is punctuated by periodic episodes of bakufu repression, specifically in Edo city regulations (*machibure*) of 1722, 1790, and 1842. In every case, however, the crackdown was only one part of

a larger program of the suppression of political dissent, and no specific mention is made of erotic images (as opposed to erotic books, *kōshokubon*, the target in 1722) until 1842.<sup>17</sup> At any rate, there is almost no evidence whatsoever for the direct suppression of makura-e as such on grounds of "obscenity": it was rather the potential threat to the social order that unchecked licentious behavior might pose. The depiction of the sexual act itself was of no evident concern.

And yet the history of the publication of printed makura-e and warai-bon does in fact reveal a certain correlation with periods of political repression.<sup>18</sup> The first wave of makura-e described above, led by Moronobu and Jihei in Edo, and Yoshida Hanbei in Kamigata, tapered off in the late 1680s, but a new wave of creativity at the hands of the Kyoto artist Nishikawa Sukenobu appeared in the years 1711-22, and may well have been brought to an end by the first general prohibition of "*kōshokubon*" in 1722. (The importance of Sukenobu's legacy is reflected, as mentioned above, by "*nishikawa-e*" as a generic term for makura-e.) Publication of makura-e almost completely ceased for over a decade thereafter, resumed only with a handful of works by Okumura Masanobu in Edo in the 1740s—most of which are undated, suggesting efforts to thwart the authorities.<sup>19</sup> Even in the 1750s and 60s, only a handful of new works were produced.

Everything changed after 1765 and the emergence of Harunobu as the creator of the new multicolor *nishiki-e* ("brocade prints"). This ushered in a sustained period of remarkable creativity in makura-e production, with a total of 122 titles from 1766 until 1790. The Kansei Reforms of 1787-93 clearly took a toll, however, as evidenced in a marked drop in makura-e production after 1790, although there was a brief revival in the work of Utamaro in the period 1798-1903. After this, however, ensued a long period of drastically reduced erotic publication, with only a handful of works in the 1810s. But from about 1820, in the early Bunsei period, a third and final great boom in makura-e publication began, lasting on until the suppression under the Tenpō Reforms in 1841. Here as under the Kansei Reforms, bakufu suppression had a clear and direct impact on makura-e publication.

It would be wrong to conclude, however, that the history of makura-e publication must therefore be written along the axis of bakufu repression. While such repression clearly helps explain the abrupt drop of publications after 1790 and 1840, it does nothing to elucidate the much more important issue of how the three great waves beginning in the 1670s, 1760s, and 1820s were launched and sustained. I would suggest that any interpretation of Edo shunga that focuses purely on bakufu regulation may be missing the target. There is no evidence, for example, that makura-e were ever produced with any overt intentions to attack the dominant political authorities. This is in striking contrast to Western Europe where, Lynn Hunt has argued, pornography was always closely linked with politics. In France, in particular, much pornographic writing in the 18th century was a direct attack on the royal family and its profligate ways.<sup>20</sup> This kind of writing is difficult to imagine under the rule of the Tokugawa bakufu, where any form of explicit political satire was effectively

suppressed. The politics of sexuality must therefore be sought not in overt contestations of power between politicians and intellectuals, but in the more complex and subtle negotiations of gender discourse between the Tokugawa state and the publishing arm of popular culture. The overtly political pornography that was dominant in early modern Europe was effectively sublimated in Japn, giving a more latent—although no less powerful—political character to Edo makura-e.

I would argue that the cultural politics of Edo shunga are probably to be found in a very different realm, in the changing discourses on sexuality itself that were conducted apart from official bakufu authority. The transition between the first two waves, for example, may reflect not so much the official bakufu crackdown on *kōshokubon* in 1722, for example, as a basic long-term shift in the discourse on sexuality. One prototypical work here may have been Kaibara Ekiken's *Yōjōkun* of 1713, which included a critique of sexual passion as a dangerous threat that would sap energy and shorten life. Ekiken (himself already in his eighties at this point and probably not so threatened) laid corresponding stress on “the way of the marital couple” (*fūfu no michi*) in what was clearly a radical alternative to the “way of sexual passion” of the *shikidō-ron* that paralleled earlier makura-e.<sup>21</sup> Although Ekiken's arguments may have had little direct influence on potential publishers or consumers of makura-e, it does seem emblematic of a tension between two opposed views of sexuality, one preoccupied with family reproduction, and the other dedicated to contests of social status in the anti-reproductive world of prostitution in the pleasure quarters. One example of a tentative interaction between the two views may be seen in the new wave of makura-e production in the era of An'ei-Tenmei, which despite its roots in the culture of the licensed pleasure quarters was also broadened to include the depiction of “normal” and even positively familial varieties of sexual activity.

It remains, however, the third and final boom in makura-e in the Bunsei and Tenpō periods that must provoke the greatest interest in any effort to conceive of a “modern history” that will connect Edo shunga with their Meiji survival and re-interpretation. This last phase of Edo makura-e occurred in the period that modern cultural historians have come to characterize as “decadent” (*taihai*). Whatever we chose to call it, such a tendency certainly began earlier (most obviously with Utamaro), but took clearest shape from the 1810s, with various of Hokusai's books, and particularly after Toyokuni's *Oo-yogari no koe* of 1822, which triggered the new boom and was followed by a wide variety of works by Kunisada and Eisen in the years that followed. As with nishiki-e prints in general from the Bunka-Bunsei era, one finds a tendency to increasing violence and sadism in erotic publications, as well as a fetishistic emphasis on luxurious printing, in rich colors and tactile gouffrage (*karazuri*), packed in paulownia boxes.

At the same time we see an acceleration of the revealing process by which the genitalia take on a virtual life of their own, a process that began with the first “big-cunt pictures” (*ō-tsubi-e*) in Shunshō's still schematic and humorous renderings in *Ukiyo no itoguchi* of 1780 (see Fig. 4). The *ō-tsubi-e* was perfected in Utamaro's stunning images in *Warai jōgo* of ca. 1802 (Fig. 5), and in the new style of enpon of the 1720s and 30s, it became customary to conclude each of the standard three volumes with such an image. In the same period, the genitals were often dismembered from the body and personified as beings in their own right, as in Toyokuni's astonishing depiction of a horde of flying female genitalia ravaging a hapless man in “The Cunt Hell of Great Searing Heat” (*Dai jōnetsu bobo jigoku*) from *Mitsugumi sakazuki* of 1825 (Fig. 6).

It is clear that we are now in a wholly different world

### The “Decadent” Phase of Edo Makura-e



Fig. 4. The forerunner of “big-cunt pictures” (*ōtsubi-e*): Shunshō's depiction of male thunder and female lightning in *Ukiyo no itoguchi* (1780), vol. 1. From Hayashi Yoshikazu, *Katsukawa Shunshō* (Kawade shobō shinsha, 1991), p. 158.

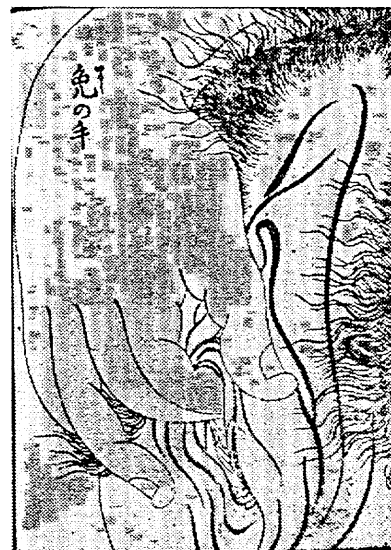


Fig. 5. “*Yurushi no te*” (The hand of permission), from Utamaro, *Warai jōgo* (ca. 1802). From *The Merry Drinkers* (Seisei Doh U.S.A., 1980), g. 27.

from the ethos of either the Yoshiwara or the familial tendencies that appeared in An'ei-Tenmei makura-e. Explicit genital images have been cut loose from such traditional moorings, and partake rather of the general ethos of popular fiction and prints at the time, in which violence, fantasy, and transformation were dominant themes. It is tempting to see this as a reflection of the many social tensions of the time. And indeed, a certain yearning for escapist fantasy in troubled times may partly account for this "decadent" phase; yet the fact remains that such truly fantastic makura-e began in the relatively peaceful and prosperous 1820s, and did not survive into the far more troubled years of the Bakumatsu era.

The drive of makura-e into worlds of transformational fantasy in the 1820s and 30s, and its dissolution in the years following, may be explained by parallel changes in both the discourse on sexuality and in the social history in 19th-century Japan. At the discursive level, perhaps the most revealing changes are to be found in Kokugaku writings of the sort detailed by William Lafleur in his book on abortion and Buddhism in Japan. In tracts dating respectively from 1831, 1834, and 1841, Lafleur detects a growing neo-Shinto emphasis on the primary importance of procreation in sexual activity.<sup>22</sup> He uses these for evidence of opposition to abortion and infanticide, but the same logic also argues against purely pleasurable uses of sex, a logic that would later fit naturally into the ideology of the Meiji state and its preoccupation with production and reproduction.

At the level of the social structure of sex in Edo as well, these are years of importance, reflected particularly in the precipitous decline of the licensed quarters in the later Tokugawa period, and in the corresponding rise of the unlicensed quarters, both in Edo and in smaller cities and towns throughout the country. In effect, prostitution was no longer an elite fantasy that cost fortunes and demanded concomi-

tant demands in sophistication and taste, but rather had become a more routine commodity, cheaply priced and far more widely consumed.

Similar changes hold for rural Japan as well, where according to Kurachi Katsunao, changes in village social structure worked to encourage a basic shift of emphasis in popular attitudes from the "harmony of the sexes" (*danjo wagō*) to the sort of household harmony (*kanai wagō*) foreshadowed by Kaibara Ekiken's stress on "the way of the marital couple." Kurachi sees this as the result of social class divisions in the late Tokugawa village, leading to a heightened concern among the land owning elite for family survival and thus encouraging a primary stress on the household. From the eighteenth into the nineteenth century, Kurachi notes, unmarried daughters tended increasingly to be sequestered and married off earlier in order to assure household fortunes. At the same time, commercial development in the countryside encouraged the growth of local brothels, so that young men from village Japan increasingly sought sexual initiation and experience from prostitutes, thus threatening traditional rural practices of pre-marital sexual experimentation.<sup>23</sup>

In short, we may now see the final "decadent" burst of Edo makura-e as a conjunction of the last remnants of the culture of the classic Yoshiwara that had sustained the earlier two waves, and a popular taste for escapist fantasy and other-worldly transformation. But far more important were parallel attitudes at the time that signalled a new regime of popular sexuality, one in which the household loomed as the primary determinant of sexual values, and not the pleasure of the individual man and woman (although the popularity of rural prostitution in late Tokugawa suggests a real disjunction between discourse and practice). The Meiji state was in a prime position to capitalize on this change.

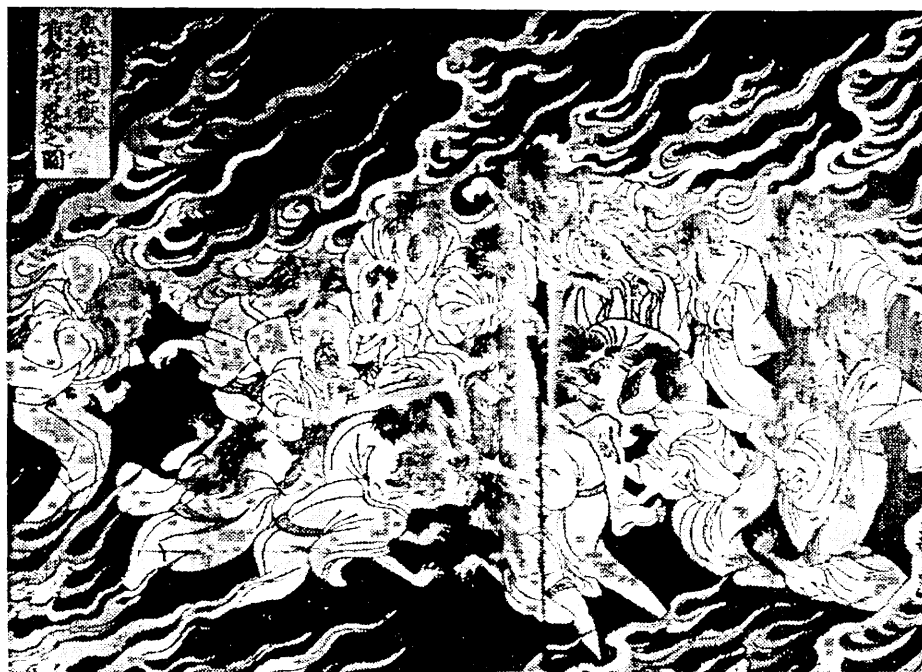


Fig. 6. Utagawa Toyokuni, "Cunt Hell of Great Searing Heat" (*Dai jōnetsu bobo jigoku*), from *Mitsugumi sakazuki* (1825). From Fukuda Kazuhiko, *Ukiyoe no miwaku* (Kawade shōbō shinsha, 1986), pp. 158-9.



## Meiji and the Invention of Obscenity

Some of the earliest actions of new Meiji government dealt with what can now properly be described with the English word "obscurity," since the actions were taken precisely with a view to the disapproving gaze of Western observers. One of the earliest prohibitions, for example, was of street urination (*tachi-shōben*) in Yokohama in late 1868, followed by Tokyo Prefecture in early 1869 with an explicit ban on "shunga [*sic*] and obscene [*midarigamashiki*] nishikie." In the same list, "shunga" were followed by "unsightly" [*migurushiki*] posters for sideshows, and children's toys in the shape of genitalia.<sup>24</sup> The prohibitions were justified as protecting the dignity of the new imperial capital, but the highly visual and sexual nature of all the prohibited items makes it clear that it was above all a matter of *appearances*.

The very notion of "obscurity" (in Japanese, "*waisetsu*") involves a counterpart concept of what would today be called "community standards." No such standards were in fact possible under the peculiar system of rule by the Tokugawa bakufu, by which each low-level group, whether social or territorial, was deemed a semi-autonomous unit functioning on principles of mutual responsibility. What we see in the emerging concept of obscenity in Meiji Japan is precisely the articulation of a national "community" of a sort that did not previously exist, now justified in the name of the emperor. In effect, we are observing the novel conception of a "public" in Japan, a notion that grew out of the bourgeois civil society of the West in distinction to what was even more important, the "privacy" of the middle class family.

The ensuing Meiji period was characterized by a wide diversity of new procedures for remaking Japanese bodies. Much of this came from utterly alien customs, such as sitting in chairs and wearing Western-style uniforms. None of the bodies that habitually appeared in makura-e made any sense under the new regime, except perhaps in the surviving customs of the brothel. At the same time, new forms of sexual behavior were introduced in the fad for translations of Western manuals on the anatomy of reproduction ("*zōkaki-ron*") that began in the mid-1870s and continued to the end of the century.<sup>25</sup> In a sense, these manuals replaced makura-e with an utterly different regime of sexuality, devoted to the control of excessive sexual behavior and in particular to the dangers of masturbation (one of the mainstays of "normal" behavior in Edo makura-e).

In the face of all this, what is the evidence for the survival of Edo-style makura-e in the Meiji period? Anecdotal evidence suggests that it did indeed survive, and even gave rise to a new "civilization and enlightenment" (*bunmei-kaika*) style of shunga in which the lovers are in Western dress and settings. From the limited evidence I have seen, I would judge that the style and aesthetic remained largely that of Edo, with the updating of social types, such as the inclusion of nurses and women students among the sexual partners of men who are often bearded and uniformed. At the same time, Yoshida Teruji claims that cheap shunga prints in Meiji were increasingly produced for customary uses as amulets and charms, particularly among geisha.<sup>26</sup>

Surely the most striking example of the survival as well as the transformation of such customary uses of Edo makura-e, however, was the allegedly widespread printing of shunga albums during the Sino-Japanese War of 1904-05, for inclusion as "*kachi-e*" amulets in the comfort packages (*ianbukuro*) that were sent to soldiers on the front (see Fig. 7). Drawing on what we have seen to be the apocryphal Edo legend that medieval warriors carried shunga into battle, this practice is said to have been carried out in both the wars with China and Russia, and indeed to have survived even in the Pacific War (although often in the form of nude photos.)<sup>27</sup> The allegation that the Meiji state even allocated funds for the production of such battlefield shunga remains undocumented, but it is clear that the government did nothing to restrain a wartime boom in shunga production, both in 1894-95 and again in 1904-05.<sup>28</sup>

After the victory over Russia, however, a massive crack-

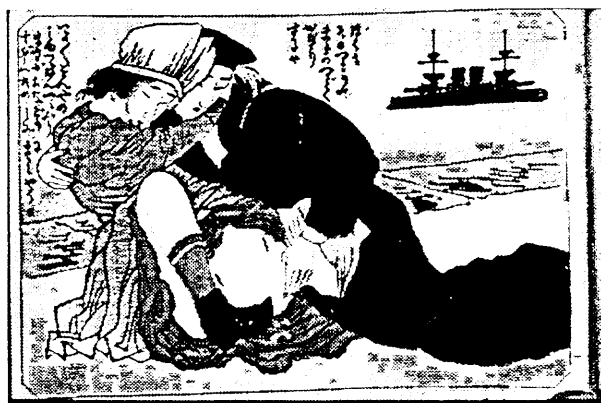


Fig. 7. Probable Meiji *kachi-e* ("victory picture") from the Russo-Japanese War, of sailor and nurse from 11-sheet album "Shin seifuzoku jūkkei." From expurgated reproduction in *Kikan ukiyoe*, bessatsu 1980, p. 131.

down began, and it is reported that three Tokyo police stations in 1907 confiscated a total of 143,000 shunga prints and 5680 blocks.<sup>29</sup> This constitutes a volume of production that may well have outstripped the total production of makura-e in the entire Edo period. The publication of shunga in the old woodblock format seems to have come to an abrupt end, however, with the repression of 1907. Meanwhile, pornography itself had been thoroughly transformed and modernized along Western lines with the advent of photography and, in time, film. The shunga idiom, despite certain advances in its level of realism in the last decades of Edo, could not compete.

In other ways as well, old Edo was rapidly coming to an end as the generations advanced, and from the 1890s, there emerged a thriving school of Edo nostalgists, drawn first of all from the ranks of former bakufu retainers. It was from these circles that the 20th-century custodians of Edo shunga emerged. Some of these were politically motivated, above all the journalist Miyatake Gaikotsu, who was both a great

shunga collector and a ferocious defender of free speech. But for the most part, the habits of these custodians seems to have replicated the habits of Edo: shunga were to be collected and enjoyed with complete discretion, in the company of like-minded connoisseurs. There was a market in Edo shunga, but it was limited to a small and trusted set.

Overall, the modern history of Edo shunga has until very recently evolved under two fundamental conditions that have strongly colored the way in which their Edo history has been understood. The first has been the almost constant threat of criminal prosecution, not only for publishing unexpurgated reproductions of Edo originals but also for dealing and even for mere possession. The severity of control has eased somewhat in the postwar period, but the strict prohibition on the reproduction of genital images has resulted in the total expurgation of the genital essence of shunga in all published books and articles. Shunga have thus come to be function solely as the realm of the private and voyeuristic connoisseur and not as a legitimate theme for historians of Edo culture and art. Just as the pubic hair was been carefully expunged from all public shunga in modern Japan, so shunga themselves have been expunged from Edo cultural history.

The second condition for the modern understanding of Edo shunga has been a persistent nostalgia for the world that produced them, which is idealized as a purer and somehow more tolerant regime in which the "natural" attitudes towards sex of the Japanese people were given free play. The modern custodians of Edo shunga in Japan have been older men absorbed in fetishistic appreciation and in the study of fine details to the detriment of wider context. It is clear of course that in their Edo context, makura-e were not an isolated phenomenon, but changed frequently in responses to larger changes in society and in discourses on sexuality.

But now things have changed dramatically with the apparent lifting of the ban on the reproduction of Edo shunga over the past few years. The story still remains to be told in detail. The battle against obscenity laws in postwar Japan has a long and complex history, but Edo shunga have rarely been the object of much vocal protest, which has been reserved for the work of contemporary writers and artists. Many have commented on the irony of banning the open sale and reproduction of the relatively wholesome makura-e of Edo while permitting the more exploitative and often intensely misogynist pornography that has thrived in recent decades, and it is surely this irony that led police authorities to take a more relaxed attitude.

The emphasis in postwar Japan on pubic hair as the decisive marker of pornography has worked particularly effectively against the unexpurgated reproduction of Edo shunga, in which lavish attention was dedicated precisely to the depiction of hair; indeed the use of pubic hair as the critical marker of obscenity may well be a legacy of Meiji attitudes to the Edo shunga itself. The key person responsible for the gradual dissolution of the pubic hair ban seems to have been Fukuda Kazuhiko, whose photographic reproductions of Edo shunga from Kawade Shobō Shinsha began with the publication of *Ukiyoe no miwaku* (The Lure of Ukiyoe) in Octo-

ber 1986.<sup>30</sup> Fukuda's technique was to insist that he was reproducing art, and to include a majority of non-explicit ukiyoe. With time, however, all barriers have been dropped, and a large number of Edo shunga have now been published in unexpurgated reproduction, some with scholarly apparatus.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, the debate was broadened to contemporary photographic pornography as a result of the celebrated "hair debate" triggered by Shinoyama Kishin's nude photographs, pubic hair and all, of actresses Higuchi Kanoko and Miyazawa Rie in 1991.

By taking shunga out from under the dark and private recesses to which they were confined by the Meiji state, it is now possible to place them back into their original Edo context, and to begin to understand a complex and conflicted history. The end of this modern history of "shunga" is only the beginning of the writing the history of Edo makura-e.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Robert Darnton, "Sex for Thought," *New York Review of Books*, December 22, 1994, p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> Calculated from Hanasaki Kazuo and Aoki Meirō, *Senryū shungashi* (Taihei shokku, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Hayashi Yoshikazu, *Edo ehon o sagase* (Kawade shobō shinsha, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> For example, [*Ukiyoe soroimono*] *Makura-e* (2 vols., Gakken, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Yasumura Toshinobu, "Shunga no jintai bigaku," *Kikan ukiyoe*, no. 64 (Winter 1976), pp. 70-76.

<sup>6</sup> Kitamura Nobuyoshi, *Kiyū shōran* (Meicho kankōkai, 1979), vol. 1, p. 403.

<sup>7</sup> For a useful brief account of this scroll (as well as other major works in the Japanese tradition of sexology), see Hasegawa Hideki, *Nihon no ensho, chinsho sō-kaisetsu* (Jiyū kokuminsha, 1993), pp. 12-13.

<sup>8</sup> Endō Yūkitaka, [*Kikigaki*] *Tokugawa Yoshinobu zanshō* (Asahi shinbun sha, 1982), pp 176-179. (In the 1985 Asahi Bunko edition, pp. 209-212.)

<sup>9</sup> On this tradition, see R. H. van Gulick, *Sexual Life in Ancient China* (Leiden: Brill, 1961), and Douglas Wile, *Art of the Bedchamber* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> Donald Keene, trans., *Chūshingura* (*The Treasury of Loyal Retainers*) (Columbia University Press, 1971), p. 158.

<sup>11</sup> Hanasaki and Aoki, *Senryū shungashi*, pp. 113-123. Fully 47 such *senryū* are cited, over ten per cent of all *senryū* in this volume.

<sup>12</sup> For a classic study of such practices, see Nishioka Hideo, *Nihon seishin shi* (Takahashi shoten, 1961); the title literally means "A history of sexual deities in Japan," and is translated by the author as "History of Phallicism in Japan." In English, see Michael Czaja, *Gods of Myth and Stone: Phallicism in Japanese Folk Religion* (Weatherhill, 1974).

<sup>13</sup> Yoshida Teruji, "Higa mondō," in *Ukiyoe higa no kenkyū* (Ryokuensha, 1964), pp. 20-21.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> For this and other texts, see *Kinsei shikidō ron*, vol.

60 of *Nihon shisō taikai* (Iwanami shoten, 1976), with commentary by Nakano Mitsutoshi. See also Kurachi Katsunao, "Sei no bunka," in [*Iwanami Kōza*] *Nihon tsūshi 14: Kinsei 4*, vol. 14 [Kinsei 4] (Iwanami shoten, 1995), pp. 357-372.

<sup>16</sup> Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Polity Press, 1991), 147-8, 170-1.

<sup>17</sup> For a summary of such legislation, see Nakano Eizō, [*Edo jidai*] *Kōshoku bungeibon jiten* (Yūzankaku, 1988), pp. 229-34.

<sup>18</sup> The data here is based on Asano Shūgō and Shirakura Yoshihiko, eds., "Shunga shuyō mokuroku," a chronology by artist of printed Edo-period shunga, in [*Ukiyoe soroimono*] *Makura-e*, vol. 2 (Gakken, 1995), pp. 132-142. Although by no means complete, this is the best available list of Edo makura-e.

<sup>19</sup> The Asano-Shirakura chronology lists works for no other artist than Sukenobu and Masanobu within the range of years from Hōei through Kan'en (1704-1751), and none by Sukenobu after 1722.

<sup>20</sup> Lynn Hunt, "Introduction: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800," in Lynn Hunt, ed., *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800* (Zone Books, 1993), pp. 9-44. See also the Darnton review cited above.

<sup>21</sup> Kurachi, "Sei no bunka," p. 366.

<sup>22</sup> William Laflour, *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism*

*in Japan* (Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 108-111. Laflour draws on texts appearing in Haga Noboru and Matsumoto Sannosuke, eds., *Kokugaku undō no shisō*, *Nihon shisō taikai* 51 (Iwanami shoten, 1971).

<sup>23</sup> Kurachi, "Sei no bunka," pp. 370-1.

<sup>24</sup> Naikaku kirokukyoku, ed., *Hōki bunrui taizen*, vol. 55 (1890; reprint edition by Hara shobō, 1980), p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Ueno Chizuko commentary in *Sei, fūzoku*, Iwanami *Nihon kindai shisō taikai* 23 (Iwanami shoten, 1990), pp. 519-26.

<sup>26</sup> Yoshida, "Higa mondō," p. 39-40.

<sup>27</sup> Yoshida, "Higa mondō," p. 20.

<sup>28</sup> Higashiōji Taku, *Meiji no higa* (Gabundō, 1978), pp. 95-97.

<sup>29</sup> Yoshida, "Higa mondō," p. 41.

<sup>30</sup> Successive volumes by Fukuda from the same publisher have included *Ukiyoe Edo no shiki* (1987), *Ehon ukiyoe sen* (1990), and *Fūzoku ehon ukiyoe* (1991).

<sup>31</sup> The most scholarly commentary has been provided in the *kaisetsu* volumes of *Ukiyoe hizō meihinshū* (5 vols., Gakken, 1991-92), which however was prohibitively priced for most libraries and academics. Most of the images have been reissued (with some omissions and some additions) in an affordable version as [*Ukiyoe soroimono*] *Makura-e* (2 vols., Gakken, 1995), but without much of the scholarly apparatus.