

SHUNGA : Ten Questions and Answers

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II. TERMS TO DESCRIBE *SHUNGA*

Question 2. *Shunga* in the West has been referred to as “pornography,” but what was the original meaning of the word “*shunga*” (literally “spring pictures”)?

A. The word “*shunga*” originates in China from the tradition of *chun’gong mihua* (Jp. *shunkyū higa*), meaning “secret pictures of the spring palace.” “Chun’gong” refers to the Chinese crown prince, and “mihua” means “hidden pictures.” The book on painting *Gasen*, cited earlier, quotes the Latter Han (CE 25–220) text *Du duan* 独断 (Jp. *Dokudan*) by Cai Yong (Jp. Saiyō) to explain why *shunga* handscrolls have twelve scenes: “The Emperor takes twelve women as his consorts; this is because there are twelve months in the year.” From this, we can see that Japanese interpreted that the Chinese emperor who reigned over the earthly realm would have one woman for each month of the year, and that following yin-yang theory, it was essential for him to have intercourse with the women using secret carnal techniques and rituals to maintain his authority. The paintings that explained these secret traditions were known as *chun’gong mihua*. We can surmise that in time the idea of secret traditions became less important and *shunga* came simply to mean pictures of sex.

Further, as time passed *shunga* came to be associated with the vitality of rebirth in springtime and as a representation of the image of spring as a time of budding romance when men and women’s feelings led to love and sex. However, I believe that in Japan in the Edo period, the convention of having twelve scenes in painted handscrolls or series of prints was inspired by the Chinese court tradition of secret paintings. In the Edo period among high-ranking courtiers and samurai, as well as wealthy commoners there was a tradition of including *shunga* paintings in bridal trousseau. This most likely also follows the Chinese tradition of considering *shunga* to be essential spiritual power to balance yin-yang forces and maintain peace in the realm. We can understand that this custom of presenting *shunga* had the aim of creating conjugal harmony and a peaceful and prosperous home.

We have seen that *shunga*’s history goes back to the Heian period, but the terms for explicit erotic art have changed over the ages. We can get a sense of the meaning and significance from the terms themselves.

Osoku-zu 偃息図: This was used from the Heian period. “*Osoku*” means “to rest, lie down.” Therefore *osoku-zu* refers to a picture showing men and women lying down in bed together, relaxing and enjoying themselves.

Kachi-e 勝絵: The origins of this were mentioned above, and as we can see from the meanings of the characters “pictures of victory,” it was common for samurai to use this term for the *shunga* that they kept with their armor, which they believed would bring them victory in battle and keep them safe. In the Edo period, commoner households as well would keep *shunga* in their storehouses in the belief that it warded off fire. These beliefs continued even into the modern era and we know that Japanese soldiers in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) carried *shunga* in their uniforms to protect them from bullets.

These kinds of stories about *shunga* might seem strange and superstitious to us in modern times and some may speculate that these were just made up to allow people to look at erotic pictures, but as we can see from sexual incidents and scandals among those well educated or not that plague our society today, the power of sex is as forceful as ever. The inevitability of sex, its attraction, its power, and spiritual force has been with us since the dawn of the human race, without wavering, and it is therefore not easy to dismiss this belief in the power of carnal pictures to ward off evil and maintain prosperity as simple or foolish superstition.

Makura-e 枕絵 (pillow pictures): In the book on painting techniques *Gasen*, the word with the characters normally read “*shunga*” is glossed with both the readings “*shunga*” and “*makura-e*.” In the Edo period *makura-e* was a common term for *shunga* pictures. The image of pillows suggests of course the bed where men and women make love and therefore “pillow pictures” came to mean images of intercourse. Also, a term for erotic books (*enbon* or *ehon*) was also “*makura zōshi*” meaning “pillow stories.”

Warai-e 笑絵 (laughter pictures): This is thought to be the most common term for *shunga* in the Edo period. In the world of art dealers and antique booksellers, the term “*wajirushi*” (“*wa*” symbol) is used. It was a kind of code name for *warai-e* and *warai-hon* (*shunga* books), its use dating from the Edo period. We can surmise that in the Edo period people viewed sex as being related to laughter and fun. This is an important consideration for us when we today try to understand *shunga*.

Nure-e 濡絵 (wet pictures): This was another term for *shunga* that was more explicit than “pillow pictures.” It probably echoes kabuki where romantic scenes of couples were termed *nureba* (wet scenes), referring to emotion as well as eroticism, and so for Edo folk, the term would not have seemed so direct or explicit.

Higa 秘画 (secret or hidden pictures): This term originally referred to Chinese erotic pictures in the possession of the emperor and used for secret carnal knowledge, but from the Meiji era the term *higi-ga* (secret techniques pictures) was also used to refer to erotic pictures that needed to be kept hidden. It gave a seductively erotic aura to the images.