

Historical Expressions and Comprehensions in Visual Materials: A Reading of *Pictorial Record of the Mongol Invasion*

X. Jie YANG

University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

1

The picture scroll is a unique genre from medieval Japan. A study shows that more than 600 titles of scrolls were recorded in various historical and literary documents. Today, over 200 titles have survived.¹ A typical picture scroll has multiple sections that combine text and pictures to describe a plot or sequence of events or a collection of situations under a chosen theme. Picture scrolls cover a very wide range of topics. From literary fiction to historical events and religious beliefs, the central feature of these scrolls is located in the spirit of narrative activities. It is safe to say that picture scrolls have played an important role in Japanese tradition. Carefully designed and well-developed styles led to special principles and manners of a rich literary and pictorial expression.

In the contemporary academic field of vision, picture scrolls have been approached from various directions. In the first place, scrolls with pictures became important objects for classical art and art history studies. Literary studies have also had a vested interest in scrolls for their fictional narratives, although such studies traditionally focused only on the text and ignored the pictures. Likewise, scrolls that document historical events have always been of major interest for historians. As a natural extension to such efforts, in the past two decades a new concept of “historical documents in pictures (*kaiga shiryō*)” was introduced. This trend represented a significant shift in focus from text to pictures. Enormous energy and attention was devoted to deciphering these pictures, which naturally constituted the unique aspect of these scrolls.²

In this context, the following two basic yet challenging questions remain. How have historical events been recorded in picture scrolls, especially as artistic portrayals? In what ways were they received and understood by contemporary observers and to what degree were they influenced by—or did they contribute to—traditional common knowledge? A reading of *Pictorial Record of the Mongol Invasion*, with special attention to one specific section, suggests an answer to these fascinating questions.

2

The Mongol invasions in 1274 and 1281 were crucial events in medieval Japanese history. They left irreplaceable influences on all aspects of the time, not only on political, economical, military, and diplomatic affairs, but also on the masses and popular culture. It was literally a turning point for the society as a whole.³ For this reason, the Mongol invasions have been one very important topic for modern historiography. In this regard, *Pictorial Record*

of the Mongol Invasion has always received much attention.⁴

This scroll addresses a sequence of unusual happenings during that time. In fact, the current title is not an original attribute of this work, but was given at a latter time. It is often pointed out that this title misleads readers. The scroll does not intend to describe or to record the event in a thorough and broad perspective, but rather under a highly personalized viewpoint. This particular scroll was created by Takezaki Suenaga in a time shortly after the invasions. It also includes Suenaga's own personal experiences and memories. It recorded the highlights of Suenaga's fights against the Mongol invaders at the risk of his life, as well as his hardships and struggles as a low rank soldier to obtain proper recognition and rewards from the local and the central government. Suenaga's activities therefore were not limited to his home village, nor the battlefield on the land and in the ocean, but expanded as far as the political center of the time, Kamakura up to the North. Largely because of the nature of these events, many details of this scroll, from situations such as Suenaga cutting off heads of Mongol invaders to the difficulties of his journey, can be found only in this scroll. It is no longer possible to confirm these specific events with other historical sources.⁵

In addition to the fact that this record focuses on a low-rank, unique individual, the value of this scroll is enhanced due to its very style, a document formed by written text and the corresponding visual accounts. It is literally one of a kind and few other materials could be compared under this condition. Because of this uniqueness, pictures from this title have often been referred to and relied on heavily. Scenes found from this scroll were always quoted to show the related situations, regarded as a standard visual presentation. As pointed out by Toda, "... these pictures are valuable, aside from their artistic qualities, as historical reference."⁶

In order to better understand the meaning of the scroll as a whole, a further analysis of the pictures becomes essential. Research into a written historical document would begin with a comparison against other written records, thus pictures as classical documents also deserve a careful effort to put it back to the context of the visual tradition. The way of expression through pictures should be the starting point for a reading of the scroll.

3

Pictorial Record of the Mongol Invasion contains eleven sections of text and pictures. Along the development of the historical events, texts and pictures together briefly present three groups of situations. These include: Suenaga's going to the battlefields and fighting against Mongol invaders on the land, visiting Kamakura for a proper judgment and a reward, and meeting with the hero of a battle and fighting on the ocean during the second invasion.⁷ Besides a large number of battle scenes, Suenaga's visit to Kamakura was a highlight of this scroll. This journey eventually determined his fate. It was believed that this journey and the reward gained from the trip were the very reasons for the creation of this scroll. Thus as a way of reading this scroll, a close look at the meaning and the structure of this set of pictures is attempted in the following.

The written text recorded in great detail Suenaga's harsh journey to the North, his difficult stay in Kamakura, the long conversation between him and Adachi Yasumori, and finally Suenaga's rewarding moment. Suenaga's journey did not receive any support from

his family. In order to arrange money for the journey, he had to sell his horse. It took him two months and nine days to get to Kamakura, and then another two months were spent in Kamakura as he waited for a chance to appeal to a central officer. The written text recorded all of these details.

Thereupon visited any number of officials and told them my tale but they ignored me because I appeared to be a minor warrior with only one low-ranking follower. Since there were no officials who would see me, I realized that I could only rely upon the support of the gods. So once again I visited Hachiman and prayed with all of my heart. On the third day of the tenth month, I had the opportunity to speak at the office of appeals that was administered at that time by Akita no Jō no suke Adachi Yasumori. (p. 87)⁸

Here comes a very long and detailed conversation for the appeal, describing the situation in the battle, as well as the reason why Suenaga requested a reward.

“Your situation,” Yasumori reflected, “is most difficult indeed. I now must immediately report to the Yamanouchi lord. He will hear of your battle deeds.” (p. 90)

One more month passed, and finally came the rewarding moment.

Responding to his summons, I arose from the chamber and approached Yasukiyo. Bowing deeply I respectfully looked to Yasukiyo and received the document. As I was taking the document, Yasukiyo also said, “Yasumori personally requested that you be directly rewarded. Here.” Again I respectfully received Yasumori’s edict (p. 106). . . .

I was speechless for having been so honored. Respectfully I received a chestnut horse with a saddle decorated with a small, comma-shaped heraldic device. Saeda Gorō, master of the stables, provided the horse’s bridle and other well-made accoutrements. It was the first day of the eleventh month, at the hour of the sheep. (p. 107)

While all of the above dramatic and exciting developments of the appeal of Suenaga were carefully carried out in the text, the picture portion did not, also could not, record the entire sequence of the long and complicated events. Instead, pictures ignored all of the difficulties on the road and during his stay. Rather, they focused on Suenaga’s visit to Adachi’s resident/office, then the rewarding time where Suenaga left the house and was presented with a horse. Traditional reading of these pictures would suggest that these scenes reflect only part of the events similarly recorded within the written text. The choice of these selected situations resulted from the relative importance of events. As pictures should present the truth or the memory of such true events in history, it is up to later readers to trace out limitless information from these virtual records.⁹

However, such a reading might have overlooked certain significant features of pictures. Although describing the same flow of events, texts and pictures were in fact two different media, thus they relied on different means and traditions for their expressions. It is a great

challenge to seek for the pictorial tradition and expression in order to better understand the meaning of the scenes.

4

There are a number of ways to approach the content of a set of pictures. One could deal with the overall theme of the drawing in a large scale, or focus on each and every small item found in a picture in great detail. In the current study, I decided to start with separating this set of pictures into a number of smaller units as indicated in Plate 1. This process partitions the pictures from the original flow of the content. A reader's viewing focus is shifted so one must concentrate on one unit after the other.

It could be considered that this type of approach is supported and enhanced by the practice and appreciation of calligraphic works. Before a reading of a piece of a calligraphic work as a whole, it is common and essential to look into each and every character. It is from the meaning and the style of each individual character that the composite nature of a calligraphic work is formed. In a similar manner, a picture is formed by multi units. Therefore it is both possible and important for a reader to approach it by focusing on each of those units.

This approach suggests that the current set of pictures should be separated into five units. They are: (a) two soldiers handling horses and three men sitting besides the door, (b) a group of soldiers sitting in the waiting room, (c) two soldiers sitting on the ground, one of them dozing; (d) with the presence of three men, the guest meeting the host, and (e) the guest being seen off, presented with a reward of a horse.

Through focusing on each of these units of the whole picture, we are soon able to find that most of them present structures and themes that were common to medieval picture scrolls. A quick search yields the list below:

(a) Men beside the door, with horse(s)

- *Ishiyamadera engi* (The Legends of The Ishiyama Temple), vol. 5, no. 1 (Plate 2), vol. 6, no. 4
- *Kasuga Gongen genki e* (The Miracles of the Kasuga Deity), vol. 5, no. 1, vol. 6, no. 2, vol. 13, no. 5
- *Boki ekotoba* (Biography of the Priest Kakunyo), vol. 1, no. 3 (Plate 3)
- *Ippen hijiri e* (Pictorial Biography of the Monk Ippen), vol. 4, no. 1
- *Saigyō monogatari emaki* (The Tale of Saigyō Tokugawa Museum), no. 3
- *Nayotake monogatari emaki* (Tale of Young Bamboo), no. 4
- *Haseo soshi* (The Tale of Haseo), no. 1

(c) Men sitting on the ground, dozing

- *Eshi no soshi* (Story of a Painter), no. 3
- *Kasuga Gongen genki e* (The Miracles of the Kasuga Deity), vol. 15, no. 6 (Plate 4)
- *Ishiyamadera engi* (The Legends of The Ishiyama Temple), vol. 2, no. 3 (Plate 5)

(d) The host meets a guest

- *Haseo soshi* (The Tale of Haseo), no. 3 (Plate 6)
- *Nayotake monogatari emaki* (Tale of Young Bamboo), no. 4 (Plate 7)

(e) Guests are being seen off

- *Eshi no soshi* (Story of a Painter), no. 3
- *Kasuga Gongen genki e* (The Miracles of the Kasuga Deity), vol. 3, no. 5 (Plate 8)
- *Hikohohodemi no mikoto emaki* (The Tale of the Deity Hikohohodemi), no. 5
- *Ippen hijiri e* (Pictorial Biography of the Monk Ippen), vol. 1, no. 1 (Plate 9)
- *Saigyō monogatari emaki* (The Tale of Saigyō Banno Museum), vol. 2

This list is limited to only nine popular titles that were created during the same period of time. If we expand this search to a larger number of titles, it should not be a difficult task to create a much longer list of this type. Nonetheless, this list already provides us with a rather unexpected angle to the pictures. It is clear that each of the above four units presents a common scene. A further search for the meaning of each unit, as well as the meaning of an entire picture with similar combinations, becomes the next question.

5

From analyzing the units forming these sets of pictures, we found that although each example contains variations in persons, situational settings, place and time, nevertheless they convey a rather common theme or share a similar message. Examining each of the units, related meanings or messages would be suggested as the following: (a) horses and servants in the front of the door indicate the status of the host family, (b) dozing on the ground means the passing of time, (c) sitting face to face being the structure of a meeting, the guest on the right and the host on the left, and (d) standing on the left of the building indicates seeing off a visitor. Here once again, we may apply a basic principle of calligraphy to explain the fact of the rich variations of the drawings in each unit. The same character might be written in very different shapes and styles, yet a reader would have no difficulty to read and identify the writing. Similarly, although a figure may wear different clothes or face a different direction, his identity remains uncontested. By the same token, sitting down beside a door or dozing on the ground formed the central message of a unit.

Therefore, viewing each unit in this way raises doubt in the traditional reading of the pictures. It now becomes obvious that each of the units was a result of popular pattern. Naturally, it was not purely a creative drawing by the painter either, which would depict something even further from the truth of a historical moment. In fact, we are able to find a number of conflicts within this set of scenes in regard to the visual presentations. For one, why are there horses in front of the house? It is certainly not the case that Yasumori was ready to go out while he met with Suenaga. Also, those horses were unlikely to belong to Suenaga since he had sold his horse(s) to prepare for his trip to Kamakura. The story also recounts that he did not receive a horse until the end as a final reward for completing his goal. Suenaga's visit was not among a large group of people, therefore a setting of many visitors gathering in Yasumori's house was not expected either. This situation is actually a good example to demonstrate that for medieval audiences, a visual record was not expected to depict a real life situation in precise detail. At the moment that a reader wants to seek true visual images from the pictures, the intended expression of the pictures within the particular context and the style have already been overlooked. Thus a scroll might start to fall into parts.

It should be much more important to seek answers about how those patterns and themes were created, how they were followed and received, and to what degree they were shared between the painter(s) and the readers. These themes could be considered as codes or icons for the expression of picture scrolls, which were understood by the readers in a time when scrolls were produced and highly appreciated. They were generated and kept within the development of this particular genre, deeply rooted in the tradition of the scrolls and enriching its power with the growing variations and changes. This is a place to rebuild the principle of the expression in pictures and to trace the gaze of the readers at that time. Thus without the knowledge of the meaning of each unit, it would be nearly impossible to understand the content of the pictures.

6

The current reading of pictures further allows us a useful distance to reexamine the historical value of a scroll, with special attention paid to the character and nature of pictures.

This approach leads to a broader issue of receptions of classical pictures. It is the trend of academic efforts to introduce pictorial documents into the traditional history and historiography discipline. It should be pointed out that *Pictorial Record of the Mongol Invasion* has been among those very few that were considered as primary true records for historical events. In the 1980's, contemporary historiography started to seek for a possible expansion to the traditional academic approaches. In this regard, visual documents, especially picture scrolls as a genre, received major emphasis. Many scenes from scrolls were directly linked with written documents and recognized as true records, but given very little disciplinary consideration. This particular title played a fundamental role for such a development.

With regard to this approach, a clear example may be found in a recent publication by Thaomas D. Conlan, the first thorough English translation of *Pictorial Record of the Mongol Invasion*. This book includes a translation of some sixty-five historical documents addressing the invasions and related events as well as a lengthy introduction and a thorough discussion. Its publication presents a strong and serious academic intension and responsibility.¹⁰ In order to mimic the reading order of a scroll, this English book was even specially bound in a way so as to open from the right to the left. However, in spite of all these efforts, a careful commentary was given only to the translation of the text from the scroll. Not a single comment was provided about the pictures. The interpretation and the understanding of pictures were left totally to the readers.

The different approaches seen in this translation for dealing with writing and visual materials indicate a vague yet deeply rooted prejudice toward pictures. It suggests that ancient pictures must depict real-life situations and therefore must always be true and could never lie. In comparison with the written text, which required a translation and explanations, pictures remained as an object of natural understanding. This assumption certainly should be examined and challenged.

The current reading of *Pictorial Record of the Mongol Invasion* eventually proposes an interdisciplinary approach to pictures in a classical work. The virtual tradition and the pictorial expression should both be taken into serious consideration. The content of a picture

needs to be discovered through efforts to seek the intention of the expressions by retracing the gazes of the medieval readers who first looked upon this work.

7

The reading of *Pictorial Record of the Mongol Invasion* presented here however is limited to a very small portion of the pictures. The majority of the drawings, particularly those dealing with the battle situations, could not be addressed. Although fighting against Mongol invaders in classical visual materials does not have many other examples, fighting and battle scenes belong to a rich pictorial tradition. It should be an attractive and challenging topic for future studies.

The study of history and the scope of historiography are growing and expanding their sights and views. It becomes now more and more crucial for interdisciplinary approaches for understanding the traditions and the way of expressions in order to grasp the content and meaning. Within this context, *Pictorial Record of the Mongol Invasion* and its wonderful pictures present with us a good example in this regard. Meanwhile, there are still numerous challenges awaiting us within this title.

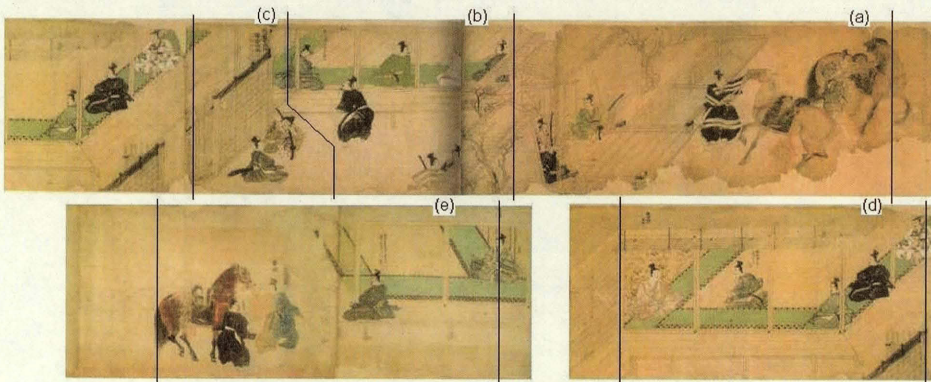


Plate 1. *Pictorial Record of the Mongol Invasion*, vol. 1, nos. 7, 8.



Plate 2. Details from *Ishiyamadera engi*, vol. 5, no. 1.



Plate 3. Details from *Boki ekotoba*, vol. 1, no. 3.



Plate 4. Details from *Kasuga Gongen genki e*, vol. 15, no. 6.



Plate 5. Details from *Ishiyamadera engi*, vol. 2, no. 3.



Plate 6. Details from *Haseo soshi*, no. 3.

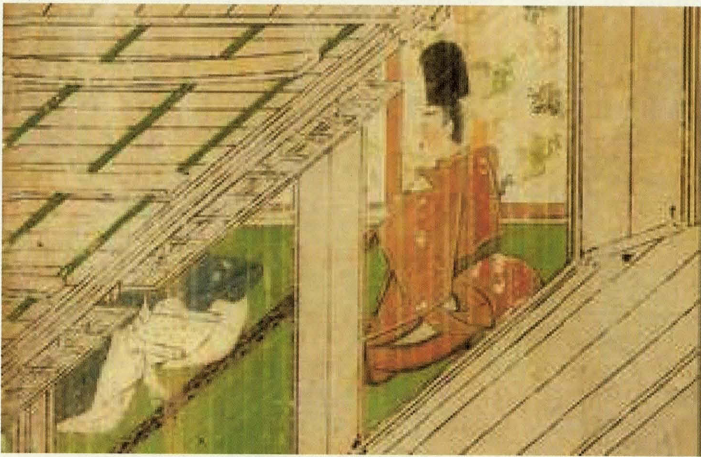


Plate 7. Details from *Nayotaki monogatari emaki*, vol. 4.



Plate 8. Details from *Kasuga Gongen genki e*, vol. 3, no. 5.

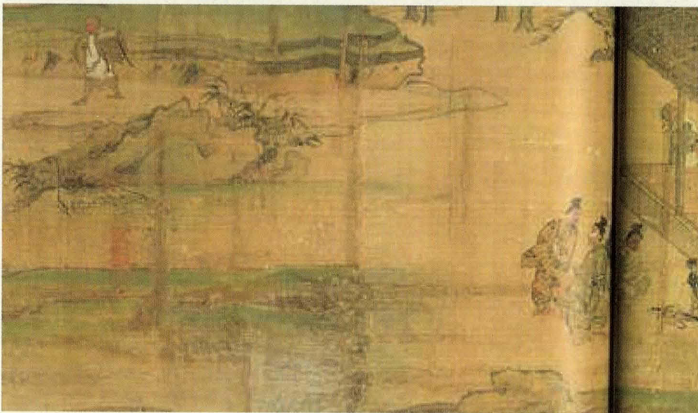


Plate 9. Details from *Ippen hijiri e*, vol. 1, no. 1.

NOTES

- ¹ 奥平英雄：『絵巻物再見』、角川書店、1987年。
- ² 保立道久：『中世の愛と従属』、平凡社、1986年。今谷明：『京都・一五四七年』、平凡社、1988年。五味文彦：『中世のことばと絵』、中央公論社、1990年、『絵巻で読む中世』、筑摩書房、1994年、『「春日験記絵」と中世』、淡交社、1998年。
- ³ 相田二郎：『蒙古襲来の研究』、吉川弘文館、1958年。網野善彦：日本の歴史10『蒙古襲来』、小学館、1974年。
- ⁴ 宮次男：「蒙古襲来絵詞について」、『日本絵巻物全集』9、角川書店、昭和39年12月。村田正治：「『蒙古襲来絵詞』の再検討」、『日本史籍論集』下、吉川弘文館、1969年。川添昭二：『蒙古襲来研究史論』、雄山閣、1977年。Elise Grilli, *Japanese Picture Scrolls* (London: Elek Books, 1958). Okudaira Hideo, *Narrative Picture Scrolls* (New York: Weatherhill/Shibundo, 1973).
- ⁵ 阿部征寛：『蒙古襲来』、教育社歴史新書、1980年。
- ⁶ Toda Kenji, *Japanese Scroll Painting* (University of Chicago Press, 1935), p.103.
- ⁷ 小松茂美：日本絵巻大成14『蒙古襲来絵詞』、中央公論社、1978年。
- ⁸ 佐藤和彦・錦昭江：『図説北条時宗の時代』、河出書房新社、2000年。
- ⁹ Thomas D. Conlan, *In Little Need of Divine Intervention: Takezaki Suenaga's Scrolls of the Mongol Invasions of Japan, Translation with Interpretive Essay* (Cornell University East Asian Program, 2001).
- ¹⁰ X. Jie Yang. Book review. *Journal of the Association of Teachers of Japanese* (forthcoming).