

The Reception of *Shunga* in the Modern Era: From Meiji to the Pre-WWII Years

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Why was it that *shunga* came to be viewed as a taboo subject in modern Japan even though during the Edo period its production was so popular and widespread? In this essay I will explore how this change occurred, primarily by following the trail of newspaper reports on incidents relating to *shunga*.

The Meiji government in an effort to transform Japan from a “premodern” country to a “modern” nation as part of the international community, developed policies to ban various elements of Edo period culture. *Shunga* and erotic literature was one target of this policy. The enforcement of renewed censorship edicts began in the early Meiji period, but it was around the time of the first Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War (c. 1895–1905) that this was done in earnest. From around this time thousands of *shunga* were confiscated and destroyed. In the Edo period, *shunga* were often called “laughing pictures” (*warai-e*), and made for amusing entertainment and pleasure. However, from the modern era it came to be viewed as something “obscene,” “embarrassing” and “forbidden.”

Nevertheless, there continued to be those who treasured this heritage, and erotic photographs and picture postcards began to be produced to fill this vacuum. There were also many who continued to value *shunga* as important art and literature. It is now time for us openly to re-examine and re-evaluate the *shunga* tradition.

Keywords: censorship, publishing regulations, modernization of Japan, pornography, Sino-Japanese War, Russo-Japanese War

Introduction

Already in the early years of the twenty first century, there have been many exhibitions of Japanese *shunga* 春画, although mainly in Europe. For example, two hundred and seventy *shunga* works were displayed in *Forbidden Images: Erotic Art from Japan's Edo Period* (Helsinki, 2002), and we have also had *Shunga: Arte ed Eros nel Giappone del periodo Edo* (Milan, 2009), *Secret Images: Picasso and Japanese Erotic Prints* (Barcelona, 2009), and *Lust* (Seoul, 2010). The next event is the large scale *shunga* exhibition planned for 2013 at the British Museum, London, which will focus on *shunga* as both an art form and a historical docu-

ment. These exhibitions have highlighted not only traditional Japanese representations of sex but also the way *shunga* has been received in the West since the late nineteenth century and its impact on Western artists. *Shunga* has been presented as an integral aspect of Japanese society and culture.

While *shunga* has been studied around the world this way, few exhibitions in Japan have included examples of the genre.¹ Why has an art form produced and consumed in large quantities during the Edo period been forgotten in present day Japan, and come to be regarded as taboo? Various possible explanations include the introduction of Western values during the Meiji era (1868–1912) and the government suppression of traditional mass culture and customs as part of modernization.² In this article, I would like to explore some of the background to this issue as revealed in Japanese newspaper reports published from the Meiji era to the pre-WWII years, in particular articles from the *Yomiuri shinbun* 読売新聞 and *Asahi shinbun* 朝日新聞 newspapers appearing between the 1870s and the 1930s.³ The content of these newspapers is now available through searchable online databases. Although newspaper articles inherently report sensational “news,” and cannot be taken uncritically as fact, they do give us a clear view of the changing perception of, and popular attitudes toward, *shunga*. A further stage for this line of research would be to compare these reports with historical information on social and thought control during this period. Before examining the reports, I would like to define the format of *shunga* and *shunga* books. During the Edo period (1615–1868) from the seventeenth century onwards, the world of publishing greatly expanded with the development of printing technology. Like other mass-produced books and pictures of the time, *shunga* were woodblock-printed and reached a wide range of audiences. Aside from these printed materials, many luxurious paintings were privately commissioned but of course reached only a limited audience. Here I will focus on how this form of traditional *shunga* was received and suppressed in the modern era, with reference also to Meiji erotic photographs and picture postcards.

1. Government Control

The diary of an American merchant who stayed in Japan during the last years of the shogunate gives evidence that people of the Edo period did not see *shunga* as embarrassing.⁴ Following are his reports on visits to two Japanese homes in late November 1859:

I was about to go when the old gentleman reached to the top of a case of drawers and took down ten boxes carefully wrapped up. He undid them and out of each box took three books full of vile pictures [*shunga*] executed in the best style of Japanese art, accompanied with letter press. We were alone in the room, the man, wife and myself. He opened the books at the pictures, and the wife sat down with us and began to “tell me” what beautiful books they were. This was done apparently without a thought of

1 The only exhibition has been *Shunga Books and Prints in Context*, held in 2009 at Art Research Center, Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto. However, some *shunga* were included in exhibitions such as *Human Image* at Kyoto National Museum in 2001.

2 Smith 1996, pp. 32–33, and Gerstle 2012.

3 I would like to thank Amy Newland for introducing me to the *Yomiuri shinbun* database, which includes information on *shunga*-related articles published in the newspaper.

4 Gerstle 2010, p. 57, quoting Notehelfer 1992, pp. 81–82.

anything low or degrading commensurate with the transaction. I presume I was the only one whose modesty could have been possibly shocked. This is a fair sample of the blunted sense and degraded position of the Japanese as to ordinary decencies of life. These books abound and are shamelessly exhibited. The official that comes into your house will pull perhaps an indecent print from his pocket. I have known this to be done. (26 November 1859)

He then went to a drawer and brought something which he said was very valuable, and suiting the action to the end, placed in my hands three or four very obscene pictures. His wife stood close by and it was apparent from the demeanor of both that there was not a shadow of suspicion in their minds of the immodesty of the act or of the pictures themselves. They had shown them as something really very choice and worth looking at and preserved them with great care. (28 November 1859)

Most surprising for Hall in these encounters was the relaxed nature of women viewing *shunga* with men. Of course, not all Japanese people shared this attitude, but the untroubled way in which a well-to-do woman showed *shunga* to a male guest hints at what may have been a fairly common feeling about *shunga* at the time. It is fascinating that the families were proud of their *shunga*, even though officially the Tokugawa government had banned *shunga* books. The man was a foreigner and the families thought that he would naturally be interested in such things. We can conclude that *shunga* was considered a part of life, and that showing *shunga* as a family treasure to a visitor was not problematic. Professor Hayakawa's article in this special issue further documents the various audiences for *shunga* in the Edo period.

However, the Meiji era saw the beginning of a rejection of Edo period customs and habits, including an appreciation of *shunga*. The Ordinance Relating to Public Morals (*Ishiki kaitō jōrei* 違式註違条例) issued in Tokyo in 1872 banned the sale or purchase of *shunga*, sex toys and *abuna-e* あぶな絵 (risqué pictures), and also targeted established customs such as public nudity, mixed bathing and tattoos. In September 1875, a Publication Ordinance (*Shuppan jōrei* 出版条例) was issued, banning any book with obscene content.⁵

Penal Regulations on Publication

Article 6: Those who author and publish a book with obscenity (anything relating to obscene content, whether in novels, songs or prints) will be imprisoned for a period between thirty days and one year and will be subject to a fine between three yen and one hundred yen.

In addition, the following year the scope of censorship was extended to publications prior to 1875. However, even before the Ordinance there had already been control of *shunga*. A newspaper article of April 1875 reports that a merchant of second-hand goods was arrested for selling *shunga*.⁶ Again, in 1876 we find the following article:⁷

5 *Genron tōsei* 1991, pp. 20–21.

6 *Shinbun Shūsei* 1935, vol. 2, p. 313.

7 *Shinbun Shūsei* 1935, vol. 3, p. 30.

People enter the public bathhouse in the Shiba 芝 area, and after cleaning off the sweat they ascend to the second floor. While they relax and sip cherry tea, a book lender comes along. He gets out various novels and *ninjōbon* 人情本, and openly shows several *shunga* to people without any shame. When I told him that this was banned under the ordinance, he replied by saying, “No, these are very old and I purchased them before the ban on trade.” When I said, “Even if you bought them some time ago, you cannot trade in any items subject to the ban,” he replied, “But I’m not selling them; I’m lending them. All the printing blocks for these books have been planed flat and a book-lender cannot be charged.”

We can see that at this time *shunga* and *shunpon* were still important items for the book-lenders, and they themselves were aware that in the case of lending rather than selling such items, they were not subject to the ban. However, in 1878 the sale of explicit photographs and single-sheet *shunga* was also banned, and newspaper articles from 1879 show that *shunga* in various formats was being censored:

From the day before yesterday the sale is forbidden for being excessively scandalous of a *nishiki-e* 錦絵 entitled *Kana-yomi shinbun*, no. 886 仮名読新聞第八百八十六号 published in the home of Matsumura Jinbei 松村甚兵衛 of Shiba Mishima chō 芝三島町, with text concerning how a certain doctor of Nishi no Kubo Kamiya chō 西の久保神谷町 had forced himself on a female servant.⁸

At a street stall in Ginza yon chōme 銀座四丁目 the evening before last, a policeman noticed that Kawai Kichizō 川井吉蔵, who resided with Iwai Kenkichi 岩井兼吉 of Matsukawa-chō 松川町, was selling “*shunga* photographs” and served him with a fine. Exactly what these were is not easy to determine.⁹

Ono Shinzō 小野新蔵, of the book-lending business Yoshinoya Kichibei 吉野屋吉兵衛 in Kyōbashi Yumi-chō 京橋弓町, went to the house of Nakazato Onobu 中里おのぶ in Yushima Tenjin-chō Itchōme 湯島天神町一丁目 with book stock that included *shunga-bon*. A busybody named Hatsuda Isaburō 初田伊三郎, of a lodging in Asakusayama 浅草山, was in the house at the time and noticed this, so he notified the police, who immediately arrested Shinzō.¹⁰

In this way, book lending, as well as book sales, became subject to control. Influenced by this kind of censorship, from about 1880 *shunga* books were no longer seen in the displays of second-hand bookshops, and people had to go to considerable lengths to obtain them.¹¹ In 1884, a newspaper reported on a court decision regarding the sale of *shunga*, where a bookshop in Kanda Ogawa-chō 神田小川町 had been fined thirty yen and had all its printing blocks confiscated.¹²

8 *Yomiuri shinbun*, 20 March 1879, morning edition.

9 *Yomiuri shinbun*, 9 April 1879, morning edition.

10 *Yomiuri shinbun*, 25 July 1879, morning edition.

11 *Yomiuri shinbun*, 5 May 1880, morning edition.

12 *Yomiuri shinbun*, 22 August 1884, morning edition.

Further, several articles from 1889 report how the sale and distribution of such books and prints was banned. An article of 12 December contains a list of publications banned because they “corrupt public morals.”¹³ Publishers subject to the ban were located in Tokyo, Kyoto, Tokushima and Nagoya. All the listed titles readily suggest erotic content: *Danjo kōgō tokushitsu ron* 男女交合得失論, *E-iri makura no sōshi* 絵入枕草紙, *Zōka myōri danjo kōgō shinron* 造化妙理男女交合新論, and *Jinzō shinpō irogoto shinan* 人造新法色事指南. Of the fifteen books listed, thirteen are *shunpon*.

In this way, when we search through period newspapers we often find articles on the banning of the sale of *shunpon* and the arrest of vendors, but such controls appear not to have been widely implemented. However, from 1905 newspapers frequently carried articles indicating widespread controls and arrests. This was around the end of the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), from which time *shunga* became much more strongly subject to suppression.

An article from May 1905 reported on the burning of numerous *shunga* and harmful picture postcards confiscated up until that time.¹⁴ In June, the following article appeared:¹⁵

It is already an open secret that people are producing and selling *shunga* and other related items that harm society, and at the same time as they are corrupting morals, they are obtaining a great amount of personal profit. The police can no longer ignore this, and a decision has been made that each police station must carry out a full investigation.

From this we learn that the sale of *shunga* had been an open secret, but that officials were now embarking on full-scale suppression.

As a result, the next year saw a considerable number of arrests of those who produced and sold nude photographs or *shunga*. In the first raid more than ten people were arrested, and in the second round thirty-seven people; approximately 8,000 pieces of evidence were found.¹⁶ An article from the month of August reported that a policeman saw a postcard vendor talking clandestinely with a customer in front of a shop, and when he investigated the vendor’s goods found several *shunga*. After investigating further, he confiscated a total of 1,222 obscene postcards of fifty five types, and approximately 10,000 paper items.¹⁷ The arrests did not cease, and ten days later the names of thirteen people were announced and 500 sets of wooden printing blocks were confiscated—a total of 5,000 woodblocks.¹⁸

Sweeping arrests continued until about 1909, with the arrests over three days in August 1908 being especially large in scale. *Shunga* items confiscated on this occasion comprised approximately 7,000 woodblocks, 1,000 types of photographic glass plates, and approximately 10,000 woodblock-printed albums, *yomikiribon* 読切本 books, quarter-size single prints, mechanically produced prints and manuscript works, as well as several tens of thousands of collotype-printed nude postcards and nude photographs, and several hundred obscene implements.¹⁹

13 *Asahi shinbun*, 12 December 1889, morning edition.

14 *Asahi shinbun*, 4 May 1905, morning edition.

15 *Asahi shinbun*, 27 June 1905, morning edition.

16 *Asahi shinbun*, 24 May 1906, morning edition.

17 *Asahi shinbun*, 15 August 1906, morning edition.

18 *Asahi shinbun*, 25 August 1906, morning edition.

19 *Asahi shinbun*, 14 August 1908, morning edition.

Officers from each station adopted disguises and made repeated visits to postcard shops, second-hand bookshops, and other suspicious premises. Saying clever things, like “My employer will be going to Manchuria soon, and normal souvenirs are boring, so please sell me a set of something special,” they traced the supply chain and managed to uncover the whole network.²⁰

A large number of undercover investigations led to multiple arrests of vendors. From these articles we learn the kinds of places that sold *shunga* and nude photographs and the kinds of people who were buying them, and I shall return to this later.

Nevertheless, just as in the Edo period, the production and sale of *shunga* continued despite such controls. In 1909 a large investigation was carried out, because “recently there has been an increase in underground vendors of *shunga*,” and as a result eighteen people were arrested, and three boxes of *shunga* and two cartloads of obscene implements were confiscated.²¹

In 1910 verdicts were delivered on those detained in the wide-scale arrests.²² The sentences handed down were: a twenty yen fine and three months’ imprisonment with hard labor for the postcard vendors, fifty yen and three months for the medicine wholesalers, five months for the stationers, three months for the photographers, one month for the precious metal intermediary, and six months for the footwear wholesalers; they even went so far as a twenty yen fine and six months imprisonment for the models themselves. This article indicates that various merchants—from pharmacists to jewelry and footwear wholesalers—sometimes sold *shunga* as well.

Official suppression continued after the Meiji era, and in 1913 eight people were arrested for clandestine sale, with the confiscation of 22,500 *shunga* and postcards (estimated to be worth around 3,000 yen).²³ Again, in 1926 more than ten people were arrested and approximately 10,000 *shunga* items were confiscated;²⁴ in July of the following year some people attempting to sell *shunga* intended for Manchuria were arrested and 13,000 *shunga* in sets of twelve were confiscated;²⁵ and in September more than twenty people were arrested.²⁶ In 1931 the “boss-man of illicit picture sales,” who sold *shunga* on a large scale using agents mainly in Shinjuku, was arrested.²⁷ Irrespective of the time and scale of incidents, articles on arrests relating to *shunga* continued to appear. However, in the Second World War, the atmosphere became tenser, and the number of articles relating to *shunga* declined. In 1938 we find the following article:²⁸

Jail sentence for selling *shunga*

Aizawa Tsuneo 会澤常雄 (39 years old), detained since December in Kisakata 象潟 police station, Asakusa, for illicitly publishing and selling *shunga*, was sent to the Tokyo

20 *Asahi shinbun*, 14 August 1908, morning edition.

21 *Asahi shinbun*, 10 February 1909, morning edition.

22 *Asahi shinbun*, 8 August 1910, morning edition.

23 *Yomiuri shinbun*, 3 May 1913, morning edition.

24 *Asahi shinbun*, 6 August 1926, morning edition.

25 *Yomiuri shinbun*, 11 July 1927, morning edition.

26 *Yomiuri shinbun*, 12 September 1927, morning edition.

27 *Yomiuri shinbun*, 9 March 1931, morning edition.

28 *Yomiuri shinbun*, 13 January 1938, morning edition.

court on the 11th [January], and was formally sentenced on the 12th [January], being given a custodial sentence. Previously this type of crime was subject to just a fine, but a new precedent has emerged, possibly reflecting the current situation.

Sentences at the end of the Meiji era had included imprisonment, but not many such cases appear to have occurred before the end of the century. However, as proposed in this article, in Japan on the eve of the war the official attitude regarding *shunga* led to harsher punishment.

After this, articles on *shunga*-related arrests disappeared from *Asahi shinbun* and *Yomiuri shinbun*. Articles on *shunga* reappeared when Hayashi Yoshikazu's 林美一 study *Ehon kenkyū Kunisada* 艶本研究国貞 was published by Yūkō Shobō in 1971, but I will save discussion of the postwar reception of *shunga* for another occasion.

2. Changes in Attitudes towards *Shunga*

During the Edo period *shunga* was subject to official suppression, but also possessed a celebratory aspect, being used as wedding gifts for brides or as auspicious items at the New Year. In addition, the literati painter Yanagisawa Kien 柳沢淇園 (1706–1758) kept *shunga* and *shunpon* on his bookshelves, and wrote that, “This genre of books is very important for artists and scholars. After reading difficult works and struggling to write, when you are tired, it is a good idea to read *shunga*. It will allow you to relax and make your heart full.”²⁹ This shows that even a serious scholar could consider *shunga* to be relaxing.

Attitudes towards *shunga* in premodern times are also indicated by the various names employed for the genre, for example there was also the term “*warai-e*,” “laughter pictures.”³⁰ “Laughter” was an important aspect of *shunga*, and people who viewed it enjoyed the humor associated with sex. In the Edo period from 1722, *shunga* was many times the focus of regulations that stated the genre was “not good for public customs” (*fūzoku no tame ni mo yoroshikarazu* 風俗の為にも宜しからず). On the one hand, *shunga* was considered illegal, but as seen above it was also generally considered auspicious and humorously entertaining. As Professor Hayakawa’s article in this issue documents, it was certainly not despised by all of society.

However, in the Meiji era this attitude gradually changed. In 1875 the *Yomiuri shinbun* carried the following letter from a reader:³¹

I think that the *ninjōbon* one finds in book lenders are a barrier to the opening up of society, and are terribly harmful, useless things. The reason I say this is because these *ninjōbon* take the indecency of men and women as their premise and in truth cannot be read within the family without shame... They are the same as the *shunga* that have already been banned, and it would be good if they too were stopped.

In 1876 an opinion was published asserting that the “fortune telling” paper slips inside sweets should be banned because they had indecent content. Here we catch a glimpse of

29 Yanagisawa Kien.

30 Nagatomo 1999, pp. 75–76.

31 *Yomiuri shinbun*, 24 September 1875, morning edition.

certain ordinary people's view that not just *shunga* but other items with content relating to love relationships between men and women should also be stamped out.

An article from 1892 is especially interesting as it allows us to appreciate both Japanese and Westerners' evaluations of *shunga*:³²

Westerners' love of this country's antique pictures

... The monstrously ugly (*shūkai* 醜怪) *shunga* that even artists vomit out are a particular favorite of Westerners. Even works by artists unknown at the time are fetching extremely high prices, and so it is incredible that when works by Toyokuni III 三代豊国, Ōkyo 応挙, Hokusai 北斎, Matabei 又兵衛 and others emerge from somewhere, a series with fifty or a hundred prints can sell for five or six hundred yen. Many artists created them—Toyokuni, Ōkyo, Hokusai, Matabei—yet it is very strange how many are emerging recently. It is possible that people are creating forgeries, and artists with a heart grieve deeply for the honor of men of old.

This article states surprise that *shunga* by even unknown artists was selling for high prices to foreigners, and that many *shunga* by Toyokuni, Ōkyo and Hokusai also were appearing and being sold for exorbitant prices. The writer regrets that many of these were surely fake and of low quality and were being sold abroad as works by the great masters. We should note the term “monstrously ugly *shunga*” (*shūkai no shunga*) used in the article. We have no idea if the artists, carvers and printers held such views when creating *shunga*, but the popular media's use of such harsh demeaning terms certainly must have contributed to a change in popular attitudes. Changes can also be seen in the terms used for *shunga* in newspapers. Several articles from this period refer to *shunga* as “monstrous pictures” (*kaiga* 怪画) or “infamous pictures” (*shūga* 醜画). Comparing these expressions with the Edo period term *warai-e*, we can see how far attitudes towards *shunga* had changed.³³

On the other hand, however, we also find that some Edo-period customs surrounding *shunga* continued. Popular Edo period beliefs about placing *shunga* in armor chests and taking *shunga* into battle survived. As Komatsuya Hyakki 小松屋百亀 asserted in 1769 concerning the efficacy of *warai-e*, “Whenever you look at these splendid pictures, you cannot fail to smile. When you are stressed, *shunga* are best.”³⁴

This custom continued until the time of the Russo-Japanese War. According to Yoshida Teruji 吉田暎二 (1901–1972), *shunga* were produced in large quantities to be taken into battle during both the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905). He heard that even in the Second World War there were soldiers who held this belief and placed *shunga* in their packs.³⁵

The following newspaper article concerns an incident confirming that soldiers actually took *shunga* with them in the Russo-Japanese War:³⁶

32 *Yomiuri shinbun*, 10 July 1892, morning edition.

33 We can surmise that from the modern era that changes in attitudes was also affected by Western influence and international treaties on trade in pornography, but I do not have space here to explore this, and plan to examine this aspect in another article.

34 Komatsuya Hyakki, vol. 5.

35 Yoshida 1973, pp. 20 and 40–41.

36 *Asabi shinbun*, 3 March 1905, morning edition.

Arrest of an illicit vendor of *shunga*: Taking advantage of the fact that people send postcards of beauties to comfort soldiers going off to war, there has been a dirty trick recently whereby some produce *shunga* in defiance of the law, and they intend to sell these to departing soldiers.... The police were aware that price-lists were being distributed in the Army Hospital and so, the day before yesterday police officer Kawata 川田, adopting the disguise of someone from the countryside, visited [a vendor named] Ōtsuya 大艶 and said, “We have a soldier in the family, and we heard in the hospital that you sell *shunga*, so could you sell me some?” Ōtsuya, unaware that he was being tricked, was pleased to have a customer and going into the back room he showed him various sets of twelve pictures for more than one yen, twenty five *sen*, with titles such as *Enoshima miyage* 江の島土産 and *Azuma miyage* 吾妻土産.



Figure 1. Nurse and soldier. 1893–1912. Ebi Collection 1149.

The items being sold here were *shunga* with themes from the Edo period such as *Enoshima miyage* and *Azuma miyage*, and in the same format of a set of twelve pictures. There is no information on their size, but presumably they were small enough to be portable. *Shunga* of the time showed not just scenes of Japanese nurses and soldiers together (Figure 1) but also a Japanese soldier bugging a Russian soldier. Various *shunga* were produced in accordance with the situation in society at the time, and people of all kinds, including soldiers, consumed the pictures for the sake of “comfort.”

However, as we saw in the previous section, after the Russo-Japanese War ended

and Japan was accepted as an equal of the Western powers, the government's censorship of *shunga* became extremely tight and enforcement more rigorous. C. Andrew Gerstle has written of this trend, "After winning in the Russo-Japanese War, the international consciousness in Japan strengthened and its leaders came to see *shunga* as something embarrassing from an international viewpoint."³⁷ It was from this point that state censorship of *shunga* took a more invasive and comprehensive turn, with confiscations and large scale public displays of burning *shunga*. This crackdown would eventually lead to a common view in the postwar academic and art world of *shunga* as taboo. The beginning of the twentieth century is also when the police began actively to control and suppress any kind of political activity or writing seen as subversive. Of course as we have seen, this had been a development building gradually since the beginning of Meiji, and the controversies over the display of nude paintings in the 1890s³⁸ also signals government and elite sensitivity to international opinion and perceptions of Japan. The difference after the Russo-Japanese war is that *shunga* was no longer seen as a still-prevalent remnant of Edo society; rather it came to be seen as something to eradicate physically and from cultural memory. It is impossible to find any newspaper articles of this period giving positive evaluations of *shunga*. *Shunga* came to be regarded as "shameful," and the only articles are those concerning "arrests" and "suppression" as part of the censorship campaign.

3. The Vicissitudes of *Shunga* and *Shunpon*

What kind of *shunga* and *shunpon* were produced and sold from the Meiji era onwards? Of course, traditional production methods current during the Edo period did not change suddenly when the Meiji era began. There are examples of top-level artists such as Kawanabe Kyōsai 河鍋曉齋 (1831–1889) and Tomioka Eisen 富岡永洗 (1864–1905) producing *shunga*. However, with the spread of new technology such as photography, the situation for artists began to change, and this brought new developments for the form and content of *shunga* and *shunpon*.

Photographic processes were introduced from the West during the last two decades of the shogunate, and became a new medium for representing the human form. From as early as 1862, Ueno Hikoma 上野彦馬 in Nagasaki and Shimooka Renjō 下岡蓮杖 in Yokohama began careers as professional photographers. By around 1877 Tokyo is said to have had more than one-hundred thirty photographers, showing great expansion of the new medium.³⁹ Yokohama had many Western photographers who catered to the foreign market for Japanese souvenir photographs.⁴⁰ The technology could also naturally be used for something like *shunga*. In the erotic book, *Shunsō jōshi* 春窓情史, published in the early Meiji era, a nude woman is depicted covering her eyes with her hand and posing for the camera (Figure 2).

³⁷ See Gerstle 2012.

³⁸ The three famous "nude incidents" were: 1) in 1890 the illustration of a nude female painting by Watanabe Shōtei 渡辺省亭 brought about a controversy termed Hadaka Kochō ronsō 裸胡蝶論争 (Naked Kochō Controversy); 2) the showing of nude paintings and sculptures at the Meiji Bijutsukai 明治美術会 in 1891 and the subsequent media controversy over their suitability for Japan; and 3) the 1895 display of Kuroda Seiki's 黒田清輝 nude painting *Chōshō* 朝妝. These are examined in Kinoshita 1993, pp. 98–99, and Miyashita 2008, pp. 96–98 and 104–109.

³⁹ Ozawa 1990, p. 294.

⁴⁰ *F. Beato* 1987, p. 5, and Miyashita 2008, p. 101.

Perhaps erotic photographs were not included in the 1872 censorship regulations because the market was not widespread by that point. However, a newspaper article from 1875 reports on a man “detained for selling photographic pictures in a manner like *shunga*.”⁴¹ In 1878 someone possessing this sort of photograph was given a fine. From this we can see that erotic photographs were more widely available by this time, being produced by both Japanese and non-Japanese studios, and that they were included under censorship regulations.⁴²

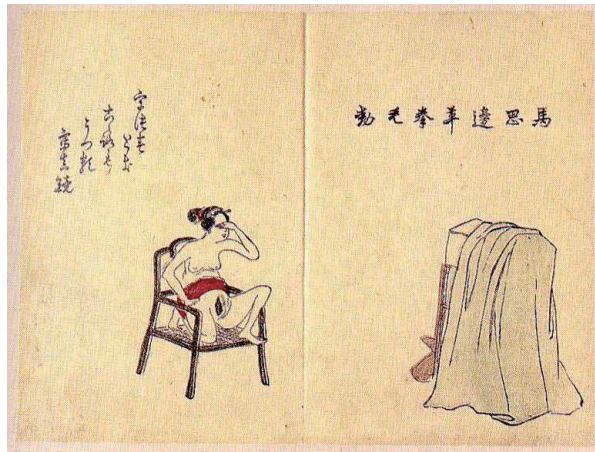


Figure 2. Illustration from *Shunsō jōshi* 春窓情史 (Tale of the Spring Window). 1868–1882. Image reproduced from *Bessatsu Taiyō: Hakkinbon III*.

Along with photography, another new format that appeared for *shunga* in the late Meiji era was the postcard. The use of privately produced postcards was authorized in 1900, and they became widespread thanks to the popularity of commemorative postcards during the Russo-Japanese War. Mention was made earlier of examples of postcards with beautiful women or *shunga* being sent to soldiers heading for the Russo-Japanese War, and large numbers of “obscene postcards” were confiscated in the arrests of 1906. At the same time that postcards were becoming popular, *shunga* postcards were produced and distributed at a tremendous rate. Among them, we find “hidden (see-through) *shunga*” (*sukashi shunga* 透かし春画) designed to escape the strict eye of the censor. A newspaper in 1906 carried the following item:⁴³

Recently, with the growing popularity of postcards various ruses have appeared in their imagery and production. Among them are quite a few that make use of dubious pictures of naked women and “*sukashi shunga*.”

These *sukashi shunga* at first glance appear to be normal postcards with beauties or landscapes, and there is space in the middle and at the corners to write one’s message. However, when held up to the light, an image appears in the blank area and it is revealed as an erotic

41 *Yomiuri shinbun*, 25 October 1875, morning edition.

42 *Yomiuri shinbun*, 21 February 1878, morning edition.

43 *Asahi shinbun*, 19 May 1906, morning edition.

postcard (Figures 3 and 4). Postcards of the time were made by pasting together two or three sheets of thin paper, and the trick was made possible by printing the erotic image on an inner layer.⁴⁴



Figure 3. “Hidden *shunga*,” 1904–1906. Ishiguro Keishō 石黒敬章 Collection. Image reproduced from *Taiyō* 424.



Figure 4. “Hidden *shunga*,” 1904–1906. Ishiguro Keishō Collection. Image reproduced from *Taiyō* 424.

While this new genre of *shunga* was being developed, production continued of *shunga* and *shunpon* with traditional, Edo period contents and format. As mentioned previously, large scale arrests relating to *shunga* were carried out from 1905 to 1909, and the confiscated items included many printing blocks. This shows that, until that time, *shunga* and *shunpon* were being produced by woodblock printing. Incidentally, the *Asabi shinbun* of 1906 carried a detailed list of confiscated evidence:⁴⁵

The confiscated printing blocks from that property numbered more than 500 groups and more than 5,000 items, among which were the following:

⁴⁴ Ishiguro 1996, p. 88.

⁴⁵ *Asabi shinbun*, 25 August 1906, morning edition.

- Seventy seven blocks for *shunga* entitled *Tōkaidō gojūsan tsugi* 東海道五十三次
- Thirty eight of the same entitled *Haikara* ハイカラ
- Sixty three of the same entitled *Shinpan kodakara* 新版子宝
- Seventeen blocks for an unspecified publication
- Two hundred fifty *shunga* entitled *Shinpan kodakara*

We can see that themes from the Edo period, such as *Tōkaidō gojūsan tsugi*, were being used. According to Saitō Shōzō 斎藤昌三, books censored in April 1905 included the following works:⁴⁶

- *Godairiki koi no shigarami* 五大力恋之柵 (2 volumes)
- *Fūzoku suiko den* 風俗遊妓伝 (3 volumes)
- *Shunjō kokoro no taki* 春情心のた気 (3 volumes)
- *Tsūzoku tanso gunka* 通俗堪楚軍歌 (3 volumes)

These are all titles of *shunpon* published in the late Edo period. It is unclear whether they were printed from re-cut blocks or whether they were later printings from the original blocks, but when we consider them alongside the example of the *Tōkaidō gojūsan tsugi*, it is clear that Edo period *shunga* and *shunpon* continued to be popular into the late Meiji era. Articles that mention blocks being confiscated due to censorship can be found until about 1911, and after that it seems that production changed to newer printing technologies.

Shunga paintings were also produced in large numbers as before. In 1899 an operation illicitly trading in *shunga* was investigated, and in addition to books, several tens of scroll paintings on silk and paper were confiscated.⁴⁷ In 1922, searches were carried out in the homes of painters who had formed a group called Aizankai 愛山会 that was trading in *shunga*, leading to the confiscation of three hundred sixty five paintings on silk and paper, handscrolls, and framed works.⁴⁸ Articles of this kind can be found until the early Shōwa era (1926–1989), showing that painters were secretly producing and selling *shunga*, and that this type of *shunga* continued to be in demand.

4. The Circulation of *Shunga* and *Shunpon*

As we saw from the newspaper articles in section 1, the distribution methods for *shunga* in the early Meiji era continued unchanged from the Edo period: book lenders, street stalls, and second-hand bookshops operating at night. *Vita Sexualis* (*Ita sekusuarisu* キタ・セクスアリス) by Mori Ōgai 森鷗外 (1862–1922) (which in fact was banned as well soon after its publication in 1909) includes the following description of a bookshop for illustrated material:

Kuriso 涅麻 paused in front of a shop that sold prints. While I was looking at colored prints of the Satsuma Rebellion, he picked up a book covered with a paper wrapper on display at the front of the shop. “Madam,” Kuriso said to the elderly attendant,

⁴⁶ Saitō 1932.

⁴⁷ *Asahi shinbun*, 25 May 1899, morning edition.

⁴⁸ *Asahi shinbun*, 26 May 1922, morning edition

... “How about selling me the *real* thing?”
 “You’re joking. These days the police are very strict.”

Printed on the cover of this volume wrapped in paper was a woman’s face and above it in large letters were the words *A Funny Book*. In the print shops in those days were many such books that dupe the customer. Inside were short stories or something of the sort, the volume deliberately wrapped in paper to make it appear as if it contained something secret. These books were sold to those eager for erotic pictures.⁴⁹

Because the shop was selling woodblock prints from the Satsuma Rebellion that took place in 1877, we can assume this episode occurred around the same time, and it provides evidence that print shops were selling “erotic pictures.”

Trade was also carried out at street stalls and on festival days at shrines. Many late-Meiji newspaper articles report on people being charged with selling *shunga* at the roadside. Among them was an individual who traded on the street in Ginza:⁵⁰

At a night time stall in Ginza he sells *shunga* which he has carried there in a big bag. When he sees a passerby who might buy something, he calls out, “Good evening,” whips out some *shunga* and skillfully peddles them.

Apart from this, there were many vendors of picture postcards among those arrested in the large scale raids of late Meiji, and they accounted for some of the trading and distribution of *shunga*.

Those purchasing *shunga* were not limited to Japanese. From Meiji onwards *shunga* was exported to the West, Korea, Java, Manchuria and elsewhere. An article from 1880 states:⁵¹

Westerners love the *shunga* that are strictly prohibited in this country and are steadily exporting them, so that painters produce them in quantity. The taste for this kind of thing is just the same in the civilized West.

In 1884, a man was arrested for selling pornographic photographs to a Russian soldier who came into Yokohama on a ship.⁵² Yokohama was an important location for *shunga* vendors aiming at the foreign market. A newspaper article of 1888 warned of operators who exported *shunga* and photographs in large quantities on the foreign ships leaving Yokohama.⁵³

Many sold *shunga* to Westerners resident in Yokohama. In 1901, someone who entered an American’s home in Yokohama in order to sell *shunga* was arrested for stealing in the owner’s absence.⁵⁴ From this we can glimpse something of the character of those dealing in *shunga* at the time.

This period also saw the beginning of newspapers being used to market goods. In 1907 a man was arrested for placing an advertisement in more than forty newspapers

49 Mori 1972, pp. 49–50. The final word, “drawings,” has been changed to the more correct “pictures.”

50 *Asabi shinbun*, 22 April 1908, morning edition.

51 *Asabi shinbun*, 27 August 1880, morning edition.

52 *Yomiuri shinbun*, 18 December 1884, morning edition.

53 *Asabi shinbun*, 23 August 1888, morning edition

54 *Asabi shinbun*, 14 May 1901, morning edition

in and around Tokyo for the “Sale of Pillow Books,” by means of which he illicitly sold *shunga*.⁵⁵ He was distributing *shunga* produced in Tokyo to surrounding areas through the postal system.

Magazines were used in the same way. An article of 1913 reports the arrest of a man who as a cover for the sale of *shunga* had placed an advertisement in an arts magazine headed, “An Interesting Photography Album,” and who had received orders by post.⁵⁶ Daughters of respectable families and merchants and even female high school students were apparently listed among the customers taking advantage of the anonymity of the postal system.

On the other hand, there was also production and sale within limited groups of people. These were mainly painting groups that dealt in painted *shunga*. Bringing together members such as the Aizankai mentioned earlier, they traded within their own circle. The following article appeared in 1925:⁵⁷

Prominent Figures Buying Sex Pictures at Ikesu in Shibaura; Illicit Sales Group Arrested ... Called the Shūko 州湖 Painting Group, their first meeting was held at the restaurant Ikesu in Shibaura, Shiba Ward, on 26 June 1923. It was discovered that for a fee of twenty five yen they were distributing twelve sex pictures [painted] on silk and mounted on Mino 美濃 paper. The second meeting was held at the same place on 29 June last year, where seventy two members paid fifty yen and [items] were to be distributed. Among the members were many well-known figures, including city councilors, who were all arrested.

The members of this kind of painting group included many figures with high social positions, such as councilors and university lecturers. The members paid a considerable fee and were then able to purchase *shunga*. This shows that even in the early Shōwa era demand for *shunga* remained high and that market demand was a driving force for publishers of *shunga*.

In 1931 an article appearing in the newspaper on the recruitment of “Members for Sex Literature” reported that an organization under investigation had been charging a joining fee of five yen and a “reading fee” of twenty yen in exchange for a monthly pamphlet in five parts containing an obscene book and obscene pictures.⁵⁸ The membership was not limited to northeastern and western Japan, but extended to Korea and Manchuria, with more than 3,000 individuals registered.

Another aspect to be borne in mind regarding the distribution of *shunga* is the relationship with the entertainment quarters. There was a custom in Kyoto houses of entertainment for geisha to go around selling *shunga* at Setsubun 節分.⁵⁹ We find many articles mentioning the entertainment quarters as the place for trading in *shunga*. A newspaper article of 1928 reported on a man who had aspired to be a painter, but was not selected for the government’s Imperial Exhibition, and so he turned exclusively to producing *shunga*. He practiced his trade in the Kagurazaka 神楽坂 entertainment quarter, and illicitly asked sex workers to sell his work.⁶⁰

55 *Yomiuri shinbun*, 9 May 1907, morning edition.

56 *Yomiuri shinbun*, 3 November 1913, morning edition.

57 *Yomiuri shinbun*, 23 September 1925, morning edition.

58 *Yomiuri shinbun*, 14 June 1931, morning edition.

59 *Yomiuri shinbun*, 8 February 1894, morning edition.

60 *Yomiuri shinbun*, 9 April 1928, morning edition.

In this way, buyers of *shunga* were diverse, ranging from members of the upper classes, to participants in the entertainment quarters, foreigners, soldiers, and female students. The vendors and routes for distribution were similarly varied. A notice in a newspaper of 1898 clearly records this:⁶¹

In this period the illicit sale of *shunga* is extremely common, and the major vendors take their wares to Kobe, Osaka, and Yokohama; the small vendors sell them via office workers and caretakers at government offices, and they make as much as lithographers. These people ought to be dealt with.

Conclusion

As modernization proceeded, *shunga* was disparaged as something “shameful,” and was repeatedly and severely suppressed. The greatest motivation for the suppression of *shunga* was victory in the Russo-Japanese War, and subsequent acknowledgment by the West that Japan was a “civilized” country. The tradition of *shunga* that had continued from the Edo period remained strong even during the changes of the Meiji era, but from around the time of the First World War its presence can no longer be traced in newspaper articles.

On the other hand, in the same period there were some who valued pre-Meiji *shunga* and *shunpon* as art or as family heirlooms:

Price of *shunga*, 1,000 yen

A certain antiques collector who worked in a ministry said he was offered a large quantity of old *shunga* by a former colleague, but he had been asking 1,000 yen for it.⁶²

The article is from 1888, and when we consider that at the time a public official’s starting salary was only fifty yen, we can see just how high the quoted price was.

The scrap-paper trade—Illustrated fiction and *shunga*

“Old families had an incredible amount of antique illustrated books and often I paid the same as for scrap paper... Pillow-books couldn’t be traded openly, but I gather there were some matrons who hid them in piles of ordinary illustrated books. If it was a good book, the price could be stupidly high, and as there were lots of good items in the old feudal mansions, I always had to be on the lookout...” a scrap-paper dealer laughingly said to me. Wasn’t it strange that people were happy to sell off a hundred of their forebears’ old Chinese books, but wouldn’t let go of the pillow books?⁶³

There are many examples of *shunga* surviving as part of the bridal trousseau of a mother or grandmother.⁶⁴ Together with ukiyo-e in general, many *shunga* went to the West as part of the general interest in Japonisme from the late-nineteenth century, and particularly because of their explicit depiction of sex. Many are now preserved in Western museums and private

61 *Asahi shinbun*, 17 September 1898, morning edition

62 *Yomiuri shinbun*, 29 November 1888, morning edition.

63 *Yomiuri shinbun*, 28 September 1907, morning edition

64 Hayakawa 2008, p. 93.

collections. Edmond de Goncourt, early on, was most praising of the artistic level of *shunga*, even comparing Utamaro to Michelangelo.⁶⁵ We also know that the large collection of over one hundred *shunga* paintings in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts amassed by Charles Bigelow was shipped to the US in 1909, after somehow getting high-level approval from both the Japanese and US authorities.⁶⁶

Shunga has undergone strict censorship within modern Japanese society, and during the twentieth century has come to be regarded as taboo and forgotten, but many works have nevertheless managed to survive. It is our task now to restore *shunga* to its proper place in history.

(Translated by Rosina Buckland)

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⁶⁵ Goncourt 2005, pp. 114–15. See also *Secret Images*.

⁶⁶ Morse 2001.

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