

Japanese Illustrated Erotic Books in the Context of Commercial Publishing, 1660–1868

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Edo-period illustrated erotic books (hereafter *shunpon*) were commodities intended for a mass market, the products of an intensely competitive industry. *Shunpon* consistently ranked among the great achievements of commercial book production, eliciting the best from artists, block cutters and printers. In them we regularly encounter high aesthetic standards, fine papers and sophisticated printing techniques, and, eventually, the richest colour palettes and most elaborate covers. Despite being banned in 1722, production resumed by the late 1740s and continued on a significant scale to the end of the period without significant hinderance from the authorities. The bindings and sizes in which *shunpon* were issued had an impact on the disposition of images and texts. Their visual and literary content was often used and reused, both licitly and illicitly. In pursuit of profit, publishers switched, adapted, replaced, pirated, imitated, modified, combined and recombined texts and images. There is no hard evidence relating to the funding of *shunpon*. It appears that some of the most elaborate examples were subsidised by wealthy subscribers. However, the owners of rental libraries carried numbers of them in their stock without untoward consequences; they must also have played an important role in underwriting the production of higher quality material, particularly in the nineteenth century.

Keywords: book bindings, censorship, commercial publishing, deluxe books, erotic books (*shunpon*), pirated editions, printing block reuse, rental libraries (*kashihon'ya*), ukiyo-e school, woodblock printing

Introduction

In this essay I will treat illustrated erotic books (hereafter *shunpon* 春本) as commodities intended for a mass market, and place them in the context of commercial book production. They consistently rank among the great achievements of Edo-period publishing. In them we encounter the highest aesthetic standards, finest papers and most sophisticated printing techniques, and, eventually, the richest color palettes and most elaborate covers. Ukiyo-e artists monopolized the genre and many enhanced their reputations through their *shunpon*. Once color printing had been perfected in the late 1760s, it was immediately applied to the

production of *shunpon*. However, relatively less expensive—but equally accomplished—line-only *shunpon* continued to be published and were issued in greater numbers and larger print runs than their color-printed counterparts. When the production of fine, line-only *shunpon* ceased in the early years of the nineteenth century, those with less disposable income could satisfy their appetite for quality erotica by borrowing color-printed *shunpon* from rental libraries (*kashihon'ya* 貸本屋). There was a lower tier of cheap—often-pirated—material, but thus far it has largely escaped notice. Because it was never highly valued, much less of it survives and what has survived has, for the most part, been ignored by private collectors in Japan and the West, while few institutions have collected this poorly designed and produced material. Nonetheless, an awareness of lesser quality *shunpon* is necessary if we are to gain a rounded picture of the production of printed erotica (Figures 1 and 2). Issues explored in this essay include: censorship and production; formats and the disposition of images and texts; use and reuse of visual and literary contents (both licitly and illicitly); and the relationship of text and images.



Figure 1. *Iro koshō* 色小性. Artist unknown. Eighteenth century, exact date uncertain. 11 × 15.8 cm. Ebi Collection, ARC database, Ritsumeikan University, Ebi0700. The images in this book derive from *shunpon* by Sukenobu but they are poorly drawn and printed.

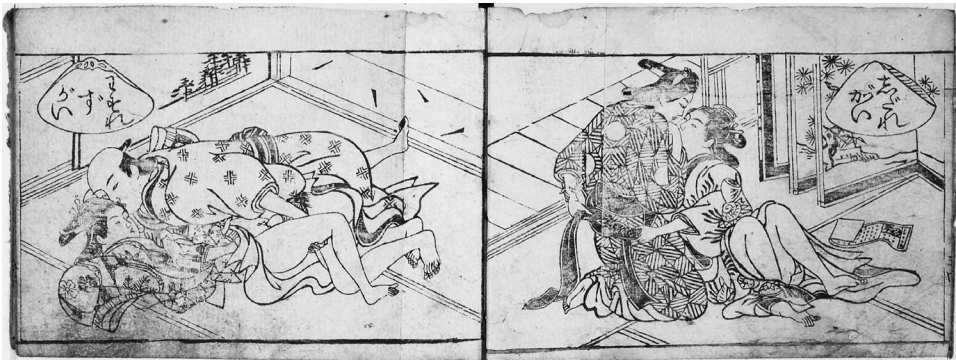


Figure 2. *Koi no nakadachi* 恋の媒. Artist unknown. Eighteenth century, exact date uncertain. 10.5 × 15 cm. Ebi Collection, ARC database, Ritsumeikan University, Ebi0876. The sheets on which this book was printed are composed of pieces of paper pasted together. Note the vertical joints to the left and right of the central “well.”

Censorship

The preface to *Yoshiwara makura-e* 吉原枕絵 (1660, 13.7 × 20.3 cm), the earliest extant dated *shunpon*, expresses an attitude toward sex that would inform nearly all erotica produced in Japan over the following two centuries. The anonymous author reminds us that “[a]ll living beings pursue the way of love,” and that “making love is the prime glory and height of pleasure.” He decries disapproving officials and moralists as “sour lemon-eaters, stinking of Confucius,” who “try to deceive us with talk of conscientious duty.”¹ The latter feared that preoccupation with sex would lead a man to neglect his fundamental responsibilities: filiality toward his parents and loyalty to his ruler. In their view, “lascivious books” (*kōshokubon* 好色本) encouraged such preoccupation. Despite official unease, it was only in 1722—after over sixty years of unhindered production—that *shunpon* were banned as part of the wide-ranging Kyōhō reforms.

Although the Kyōhō ban was never rescinded, in the longer term it did not prove a hindrance to the production of *shunpon*. Production resumed after two decades and continued to the end of the Edo period with only brief interruptions of no more than two or three years occasioned by reforms and/or prosecutions in 1790–91, 1803–1804 and 1842–43. This pattern suggests that officials were not genuinely concerned with the representation of sex in commercial publications. Sex did not carry the burden of shame, guilt and uncleanness with which it was so heavily encumbered in Christian Europe. Their core reservations related to what *was, might be or might appear to be* politically or socially subversive in any commercial print medium. It is likely that the 1722 ban was at least in part a reaction to recently published *shunpon* presenting sexual pairings that transgressed the hierarchic social divisions that formed such an important part of the Tokugawa order.² The diligence of officials—along with sporadic prosecutions—avoided the development of a situation in Japan comparable to that which prevailed in Europe, where, to the end of the 1790s, sexually explicit publications pursued a politically subversive agenda.³

Another measure enacted in 1722 required that all books provide imprint information in a concluding *kanki* 刊記 or colophon. Hitherto imprint information had not been compulsory but was usually present, even in *shunpon*. After 1722, all books were required to name the publisher(s), the date of production (*hannen* 板年), which indicates when the printing blocks were cut, not the year in which a particular copy of the book may have been printed, and the city (or cities) in which the publisher(s) were located.

Once the production of *shunpon* resumed in the 1740s, it is not surprising that they were without colophons. The absence of colophons rendered *shunpon* “invisible”; officials had no evident means of identifying the culprits responsible for their production. From the 1820s the easily deciphered pseudonyms employed exclusively in erotic works by artists and authors were given pride of place in the front matter of *shunpon*, but the authorities still failed to act. For their part, the producers reciprocated by steering clear of overtly subversive themes. As with other aspects of popular culture intended for a mass market—from popular fiction to puppet and kabuki plays to color woodblock prints—most of

1 Trans. Alfred Haft in Izzard 2008, p. 11.

2 Jenny Preston first alerted me to this possibility in a paper delivered in London in September 2010 at a SOAS conference on *shunga*. She continues research on this and related subjects. See Preston and García Rodríguez essays in this volume.

3 See Hunt 1993.

the time producers and officials were able to maintain a *modus vivendi* that mitigated the harsher aspects of the law. Indeed, if officials had genuinely been intent upon suppressing the production of erotica, their efforts must be judged an abject failure.

Lack of concern about the sexual content of erotic books is also suggested by the fact that officials never, so far as we know, took action against rental libraries (until the Meiji period), even though they stocked *shunpon* and it was through them that those books reached their widest audience. Determined prosecution of the rental libraries would have had a serious impact on the production of quality erotica (see below).

Format

Both before and after 1722, *shunpon* were embedded in the world of commercial publishing: they were produced by the same publishers, artists, block cutters and printers who produced non-erotic illustrated books. Explicit erotic content apart, *shunpon* are indistinguishable in size, format, and materials from other commercially produced woodblock-printed illustrated books. They embody the latest fashions in book design and every technical innovation in book production. Each of the major formats in which *shunpon* were produced is discussed here, beginning with the most frequently encountered.

Fukurotoji shunpon

Most *shunpon* are in *fukurotoji* 袋綴 (“bag-bound”) format, which dominated commercial book production in all genres through the whole of the Edo period. In this format, the sheets making up a volume are printed on one side only and folded in half printed side out. The folded sheets are stacked and bound together with two twisted paper cords passed through two pairs of holes punched along their open ends, and tightly tied; the folded ends of the sheets form the fore-edge of the book. Pliable, composite paper covers are then sewn onto the bound sheets using thick silk thread passing through another set of four holes. The illustrations in these books usually run across the double-page opening. The left and right halves of these images are printed from separate blocks; in the bound book there is always a break between them. Care and skill were required to assure that the separately printed halves of the images would match when brought together in the finished book, particularly when the images were color printed.

Links may be discerned between the size and orientation of *fukurotoji shunpon* and the disposition of texts and images in them. Up to the Kyōhō reforms, if an extended erotic text formed part of an *ōhon* 大本 (“large-book”) *shunpon* (26 × 18.5 cm), it usually appeared as a continuous band that ran above the image field. With the exception of prefaces, pages made up entirely of text are unusual in them. Illustrated *ōhon* editions of non-erotic literary works issued in the same period, while similar in external appearance, are not as intensely illustrated. In them the text is only occasionally interrupted by an image.

The image field available in smaller, horizontal format *shunpon* (13.5 × 20 cm) does not provide sufficient space to present both a lengthy text and good-size figures. In these books, text and images occupy separate pages with no more than snatches of dialogue, if that, appearing in the image fields. The illustrations in these books are usually grouped together before the main text. In works published in more than one volume, each volume usually

begins with pages of images followed by pages of text. The separation of texts and images became the norm for *shunpon* from the opening decades of the eighteenth century.

Initially, color was applied by hand to the illustrations. In some instances it was done so expertly that it appears to have been the work of a professional colorist if not the artist himself. However, in many cases, it was the owner of the book or a member of his household who added color. In the decade before the Kyōhō reforms, professional hand coloring of the first illustration was standard practice, at least in finer *shunpon*. When production resumed in the 1740s, the opening illustration was regularly color printed or stenciled. *Shunpon* in which all the illustrations were printed in multiple colors first appeared in the late 1760s. Thereafter line-only and multi-color *shunpon* co-existed until the early years of the nineteenth century, after which multi-color illustrations achieved dominance in the genre (see below).

From the mid-1750s through the 1770s a small group of *shunpon* were produced in Kamigata that are unlike any seen before or after in form or content. These single-volume *ōhon* contain at least seventy-four sheets (148 pages), which makes them three times thicker than the usual *shunpon* volume. Text-rich and profusely illustrated, they offer complex literary and visual parodies of contemporary handbooks for women on deportment, letter writing and good behavior. They replicate the dimensions, covers, page layouts and internal organization of the works they lampoon.⁴

In the 1760s, at the same time that these large books were being produced, *shunpon* by artists of the Kitao 北尾 and Katsukawa 勝川 lineages started appearing more regularly in the smaller *hanshibon* 半紙本 size (“half-sheet book” size, approximately 23 × 16 cm). Vertical *hanshibon* soon became the preferred size and orientation for *shunpon*, particularly in Edo, and remained so to the end of the period. It also became the norm for non-erotic books of illustrations (*ehon* 絵本) and lengthy novels (*yomihon* 読本).

Hanshibon shunpon were usually issued in three volumes. As already noted, the images nearly always appear at the beginning of each volume, followed by the text-only pages. When the illustrations are color-printed, they are sometimes on a heavier grade of paper than the following text sheets, the better to bear repeated printing on multiple color blocks.

Album-format *shunpon*

Fewer album-format (*gajōsō* 画帖装) *shunpon* were produced, and they were issued in smaller print runs than *fukurotoji shunpon*. In these books each sheet of thick, high-quality paper is printed on one side only and folded in half printed side in. Each folded sheet is glued along its right and left edges to the folded sheets that precede and follow it. These glued edges form the fore edge of the finished book. The assembled sheets are pasted within stiff composite paper covers, and the “spine” (formed by the folded ends of the assembled sheets) is enclosed by—but not attached to—a strip of silk fastened to the front and back covers. Only one opening of these books can be viewed at a time. An aesthetic advantage of the format is that the double-page images are not interrupted by the central “well,” as they are in *fukurotoji* books. However, with repeated use, the central fold can weaken and split and the sheets can detach one from the other. There is evidence that for some of these works not

⁴ See Gerstle 2011.

all of the sets of sheets produced were folded and assembled into an album; purchasers were sometimes given the option of buying them as sets of prints. The inherent fragility of the album-format books rendered them unsuited for inclusion in the stock of rental libraries.

The album-format *shunpon* was almost entirely an Edo phenomenon. Initially—as with illustrated woodblock-printed *fukurotoji* books—line-only printing was the rule, sometimes enhanced with expert hand coloring. They were issued as single volume *ōhon* containing twelve double-page images—and perhaps a preface or postscript. The early examples lack extended texts either on the image sheets or on separate text-only sheets.

From the 1770s the twelve images were invariably printed from multiple blocks using the most expensive pigments and lavish special effects. They might also contain erotic texts of varying lengths—sometimes in the image field, sometimes on additional, text-only sheets. Outstanding among these remarkable album-format *shunpon* are Katsukawa Shunshō's 勝川春章 (1726–1793) *Ehon haikai yoburo dori* 会本拝開よぶろどり (1788) and Kitagawa Utamaro's 喜多川歌麿 (c. 1753–1806) *Utamakura* 歌まくら (1788) (both in the British Museum). In the 1780s, the format was also used for expensive, privately commissioned poetry anthologies. The latter displayed the same level of elegance and extravagance encountered in the finest album-format *shunpon*. It is likely that the same Edo publishers produced both and funded them through subscriptions. In the 1790s, production of all categories of album-format books was severely curtailed because of government disapproval of the conspicuous consumption they represented.

The disappearance of album-format *shunpon* in the 1790s coincided with the appearance of increasing numbers of multi-color *fukurotoji shunpon*. Manpower and skills were transferred from production of the one format to the other in response to government intervention. It is at this time that we first encounter *fukurotoji shunpon*—and illustrated books in other genres—issued simultaneously in multi-color and line-only editions. Wealthy consumers of album-format *shunpon* could now opt for multi-color editions of *shunpon*; those who previously purchased the less expensive line-only material still had that that option open to them (Figures 3 and 4).



Figure 3. *Ehon koi no gakuya* 會本戀の樂室. Illustrations by Utagawa Toyokuni I. 1803. Multi-colour edition. 15.5 × 11 cm. Ebi Collection, ARC database, Ritsumeikan University, Ebi1260.



Figure 4. *Ehon koi no gakuya*. Illustrations by Utagawa Toyokuni I. 1803. Line-only edition. 15.5 × 11 cm. Ebi Collection, ARC database, Ritsumeikan University, Ebi1241.

In the 1810s and 1820s a small number of *ōhon* album-format *shunpon* by Katsushika Hokusai 葛飾北斎 (1760–1849), Keisai Eisen 溪齋英泉 (1790–1848), and Yanagawa Shigenobu 柳川重信 (1787–1832) were produced; in the same period those artists also designed color-printed *fukurotoji shunpon*. The format is very rarely encountered in the 1830s. A notable exception is *Kagetsu jō* 花月帖 (1836) (Art Research Center, Ritsumeikan University). Its place was taken at the luxury end of the market by hybrid-format *shunpon* (see below). The album-format was taken up again in the last two decades of the Edo period. The late Edo examples are in various sizes, all smaller than *ōhon*. The full range of techniques available to printers were lavished on them, as they were on a number of outstanding *fukurotoji shunpon* produced in the same years.

Hybrid-format *shunpon*

From the mid-1820s to the early 1840s some high-quality multi-color erotic books were produced in a hybrid format (*konsei toji* 混成綴).⁵ They appear to be *fukurotoji* books. Closer examination reveals that the two halves of each opening are printed on a single sheet of paper from a single set of blocks with a wide central margin between them. These sheets are folded in half *image side in* and the outer edges of are glued to the outer edges of the preceding and following folded sheets exactly as in album-format books. However, once all the sheets are attached one to the other, they were sewn together and provided with covers in the manner of *fukurotoji* books. This format guaranteed that the colors and special printing effects in each half of the double-page images matched perfectly since each image was printed from one set of blocks. (A perfect match was not always achieved in *fukurotoji* books, where each half of a double page image was printed from a separate set of blocks.) Hybrid-format *shunpon* combined the high pictorial quality of album-format image sheets with the sturdiness of *fukurotoji* binding. Rental libraries welcomed high quality books that were robust enough to survive repeated handling. Since they played a significant role in the circulation of *shunpon*, particularly in the nineteenth century, it is likely that the rental libraries provided the impetus for the production of these hybrid books. Examples of *shunpon* in this format include Utagawa Kunisada's 歌川国貞 (1786–1855) *Shiki no nagame* 四季の詠 (1828) (British Museum) and *Konotegashiwa* 古能手佳史話 (1836) illustrated by Eisen (Art Research Center, Ritsumeikan University).

Handscroll-format *shunpon*

The handscroll (*makimono* 巻物) was the favored format for painted erotica; it is the rarest format employed for *shunpon*. To date, five examples have been identified: two from the 1770s; one from the 1780s; and two from the 1860s. The sample is too small to allow any generalizations to be made but it includes one of the greatest printed *shunpon*, Torii Kiyonaga's 鳥居清長 (1752–1815) so-called *Sode no maki* 袖の巻 (c. 1788) (British Museum). Non-erotic printed handscrolls exist but they are even rarer than the erotic ones. In the last six decades of the Edo period, top-end *shunpon* were produced almost exclusively in

⁵ Hayashi 1988, p. 48. Gianni Morra, a dealer in Japanese prints and books, first brought this format to my attention.

three-volume *hanshibon* or *ōhon*-size *fukurotoji*-format books in which multi-color printing was the norm. In fact, the majority of multi-color printed books produced in those years were *shunpon*. Legislation in the aftermath of the *Ehon Taikōki* 絵本太閤記 incident of 1803–1804 curtailed the use of multi-color printing in commercial publications. Because the Kyōhō reforms had removed *shunpon* from official oversight, the new legislation could be and was ignored by producers. The high costs entailed in the production of multi-color printed books had always required special funding, whether from private sponsors, groups of individual subscribers or rental libraries. In the opening decades of the nineteenth century there was a substantial increase in the number of rental libraries. It appears that the latter subsidized the production of high quality *shunpon* and made them available to a much wider audience than could ever afford to buy them. It was in the interest of the rental libraries to support the production of the most appealing books possible. The increasing elaborateness of *shunpon* from the 1820s suggests intense competition among producers and distributors to meet rising expectations. Because they were illicit, publishers could ignore sumptuary legislation and employ every refinement of the printer's art in them. As a result, the most extravagantly produced books of the nineteenth century are nearly all *shunpon*.

Shunpon were published in both Kamigata and Edo into the early years of the nineteenth century but by the 1820s production in Kamigata had declined drastically, overwhelmed by the quality and quantity of material pouring out of Edo.

Repackaging and Reusing the Contents of *Shunpon*

The visual and textual contents of *fukurotoji shunpon* were often copied, adapted and repackaged. A publisher might prolong the working life of a set of blocks by updating the images and/or texts cut into them. That was achieved by means of *umeki* 埋め木: the portion of the text or image to be changed was cut out of the printing block, the gap filled with a wooden plug, the top surface of which was then cut with the replacement text or detail. A set of blocks cut in 1718 to print *Fūryū imosegawa* 風流妹背川 (International Research Center for Japanese Studies, Kyoto) provides an example of the use of *umeki* to update images. The blocks survived the suppression of *shunpon* in 1722, and were still usable forty years later. The publisher who printed from them in the early 1760s disguised the fact that he was using old blocks by replacing the heads by *umeki* so that all the figures sported the latest hairstyles (Figures 5 and 6). He also provided entirely new text sheets.



Figure 5. *Fūryū imosegawa* 風流妹背川. Illustrations by Kawashima Nobukiyo. Printed from the original blocks. 1718. 14.5 × 21.5 cm. Detail. International Research Center for Japanese Studies, NBK129.



Figure 6. Title uncertain. Illustrations by Kawashima Nobukiyo with later modifications. Printed from altered blocks. Early 1760s. 14.5 × 21.5 cm. Detail. Ebi Collection, ARC database, Ritsumeikan University, Ebi1204.

The time that elapsed between the cutting of a set of blocks and their modification could be a matter of a few years rather than decades. There was a brief vogue in the late 1820s for *shunpon* that dealt in explicit detail with sex-scandals involving kabuki actors. One such book was *Ehon koi no gakuya* 艶本戀の樂や, published in 1827 with illustrations by Kunisada (Art Research Center, Ritsumeikan University). It recounts a love triangle involving Bandō Mitsugorō III 坂東三津五郎 (1775–1831) and Onoe Kikugorō III 尾上菊五郎 (1784–1849). In the illustrations, the actors' faces are easily recognized. But interest in the scandal quickly subsided. When that happened, more profit was milked from the blocks by replacing the actors' features with generic male faces, cutting actor-related texts from the image blocks, and changing the accompanying text blocks (Figures 7 and 8).



Figure 7. *Ehon koi no gakuya* 艶本戀の樂や. Illustrations by Utagawa Kunisada. Printed from the original blocks. 1827. 22 × 15.5 cm. The trimmed right half of a double-page opening. Ebi Collection, ARC database, Ritsumeikan University, Ebi0836.



Figure 8. Title uncertain. Illustrations by Utagawa Kunisada with later modifications. Printed from altered blocks. After 1827. 22 × 15.5 cm. The trimmed right half of a double-page opening. Ebi Collection, ARC database, Ritsumeikan University, Ebi0927.

In the two preceding examples, publishers were working with the original blocks. If an unscrupulous publisher wished to cash in on a successful work he had two options for creating a pirated set of printing blocks. He could take apart a copy of the book he wished to copy and use the printed sheets as block-ready drawings to cut a new set of printing blocks. This technique is known as *kabusebori* 被せ彫り. Even the best-printed copies of *kabusebori shunpon* appear smudged because the text and images are always slightly reduced by the

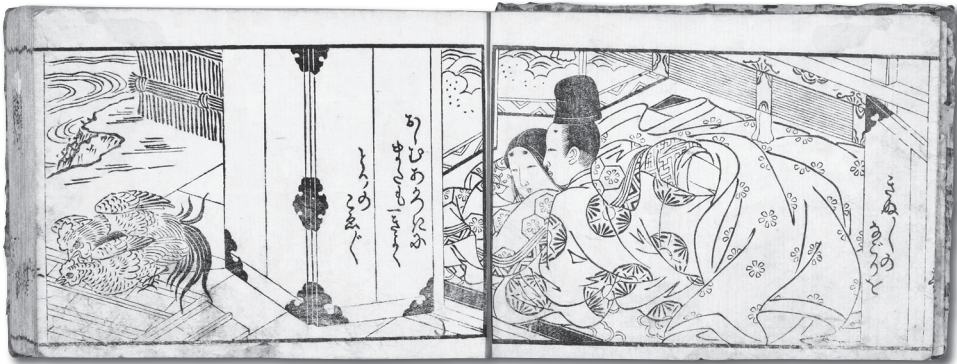


Figure 9. *Ehon minarasu sao* 笑本見馴棹. Illustrations attributed to Terasawa Masatsugu. Printed from the original blocks. 1770. 11 × 16 cm. Ebi Collection, ARC database, Ritsumeikan University, Ebi1147.



Figure 10. *Ehon minarasu sao* 笑本見馴棹. Illustrations attributed to Terasawa Masatsugu. Printed from new blocks created by *kabusebori* 被せ彫り. After 1770. 10.5 × 15 cm. Ebi Collection, ARC database, Ritsumeikan University, Ebi1010.

process (Figures 9 and 10).⁶ In the instance reproduced here, the distance from the top right to the bottom left corner of the image field on the left page has contracted from 16.2 cm to 15.8 cm and on the right page it has contracted from 16.5 to 16 cm. Despite the inferior quality of *kabusebori* editions, there was sufficient demand for them to make it profitable for opportunistic publishers to produce them.

Alternatively, an unscrupulous publisher might commission a copyist to create a fresh set of block-ready drawings that closely follow the original publication. However, to reduce costs, the copyist might be instructed to simplify elements of the original design to facilitate the cutting of the new blocks. This can be seen in the illustrations of a pirated copy of Nishikawa Sukenobu's 西川祐信 (1671–1750) *Iro hiinagata* 色ひいな形 (Figures 11 and 12).

⁶ All printing in the Edo period was done on moistened paper. Moistening the paper causes it to relax and expand. The paper shrinks back to its original size as it dries. This means that the printed field on a sheet is slightly smaller than the same field on the cut block. Therefore, when a printed sheet is used to cut a new block, the print field on the new block is slightly smaller than the print field on the original block. When a sheet is printed from the newly cut block, the shrinking of the paper again reduces the print field. As a result, the print field of a *kabusebori* book undergoes a double reduction, making it measurably smaller than the print field of the original.

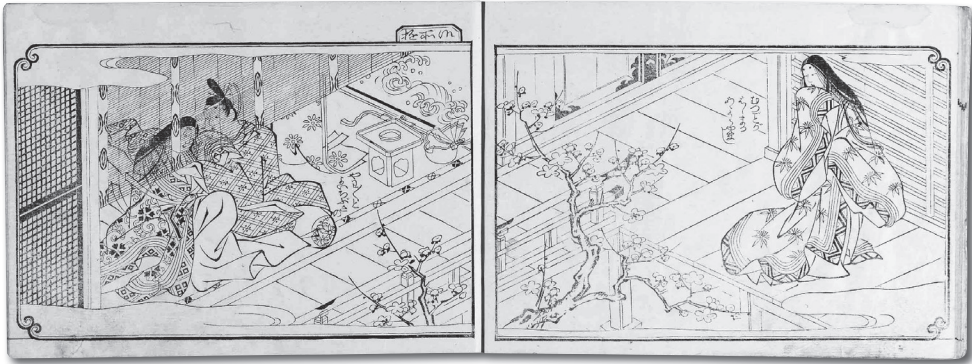


Figure 11. *Iro hiinagata* 色ひいな形. Illustrations by Nishikawa Sukenobu. Published by Hachimonjiya from the original blocks. 1711. 13 × 18.7 cm. Ebi Collection, ARC database, Ritsumeikan University, Ebi1059. This copy was printed on *gampi* paper 雁皮紙; the original purchaser paid a premium for a copy printed on that superior grade of paper.

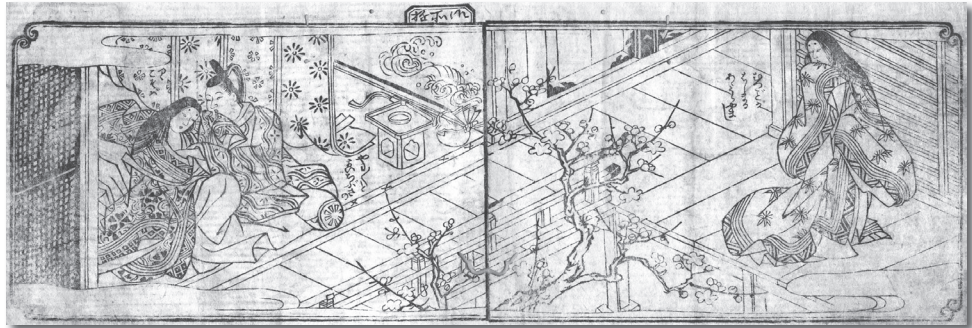


Figure 12. *Iro hiinagata* 色ひいな形. Illustrations after Nishikawa Sukenobu. Published from a pirated set of blocks. Margins here trimmed. After 1711. International Research Center for Japanese Studies, NBK086. Note the absence of the blind cutting across the two figures on the left and the simpler patterns on their robes.

In this instance, the pirate-publisher did not reproduce the original text sheets. By using existing blocks to print alternative text sheets, he further reduced his production costs.

Occasionally block-ready drawings commissioned for a new edition of a book were redrawn by a second artist in his own style. The two editions of *Konrei hiji bukuro* 婚礼秘事袋 present just such a case. The first was published in Osaka around 1770 with illustrations by Tsukioka Settei 月岡雪鼎 (1726–1786); the second was published in Edo around 1795 with illustrations by Gessai Gabimaru 月齋峨眉丸 (active 1789–1818) (Figures 13 and 14). This was not an instance of piracy but the creation of a new edition of a work.

The above examples underline the danger inherent in making a definitive statement about any Edo period woodblock printed book if you can only access one copy of it.

Text and Images

The fluid makeup of *shunpon*—with texts and images switched, adapted, replaced, combined and recombined—presents substantial challenges to bibliographers and anyone else working with them. Laura Moretti has demonstrated that, “when popular prose entered the commercial dimension of print, texts did not need to be fixed entities; they were, rather,



Figure 13. *Konrei hiji bukuro* 婚礼秘事袋. Illustrations by Tsukioka Settei. About 1770. 15 × 21 cm. International Research Center for Japanese Studies, NBK 297.



Figure 14. *Konrei hiji bukuro* 婚礼秘事袋. Illustrations by Gessai Gabimaru. About 1795. 12.8 × 18.8 cm. Ebi Collection, ARC database, Ritsumeikan University, Ebi0659.

protean constructs that could mutate in accordance with the perceived needs of the public and/or marketing decisions taken by the publisher.”⁷ Her observation is also relevant to our understanding of *shunpon*.

The relationship of the visual and literary contents of *fukurotoji shunpon* varies. In some, text and images are inextricably linked. In most, particularly when text and images are segregated, there is usually only the loosest connection between them, if any. In some cases a text printed from the same blocks will be found bound with quite different sets of images. Kamigata publishers were particularly ready to uncouple and recombine image and text sheets but the practice is also encountered among their Edo counterparts.

In surviving *shunpon* the image pages are invariably more heavily thumbed and much more frequently stained than the text pages. This evidence of use demonstrates that for many consumers, the chief attraction was the illustrations. The near universal grouping of the sheets carrying illustrations together, even when there was no technical requirement for them to be separated from the text sheets, facilitated such selective use. In *yomihon*, a genre in which the text has clear primacy, sheets bearing images are interspersed among the text

⁷ Moretti 2010, p. 340.

sheets, to be encountered as the story is read. Anyone who has sought images within lengthy *yomihon* texts will know how difficult it can be to find them. In *shunpon*, on the other hand, the images are almost always “up-front,” easily accessible, and capable of being appreciated on their own, without the user having to negotiate the text pages. Assembling *shunpon* in this way reflects publishers’ awareness of consumer behavior.

Conclusion

In order fully to understand *shunpon* they must be seen in the context of commercial book production. Despite their status as banned books after 1722, publishers, artists, authors, block cutters, and printers persisted in producing printed erotica. The profits to be made outweighed the (mostly) slight risk of prosecution. Competition among producers for a share of this bouyant market kept the overall quality high: *shunpon* rank among the very finest books produced in just about every decade between 1660 and 1868. The owners of rental libraries carried numbers of them in their stock without untoward consequences. We do not possess hard evidence of the funding models employed. It is likely that some of the best were subsidized by wealthy subscribers; rental libraries must also have played an important role in underwriting the production of higher quality material, particularly in the nineteenth century.

As we continue to explore Edo-period *shunpon* from the perspective of our individual disciplines, we must never lose sight of the fact that these books were, first and foremost, products of an intensely competitive industry. We must seek to understand how the practicalities of production and the imperatives of the market shaped them.

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On-line Resources

All of the *shunpon* mentioned in the running text and image captions (with the exception of *Yoshiwara makura-e*) may be viewed in their entirety through one of the following image databases:

Ritsumeikan University ARC “Special Books” Database (ARC)

立命館ARC所蔵特別図書データベース

<http://www.arc.ritsumei.ac.jp/dbroot/privilege/enter.htm>

International Research Center for Japanese Studies: Erotic Books Database (NBK)

国際日本文化研究センター・艶本資料データベース

<http://db.nichibun.ac.jp/en/category/enbon.html>

(Registration and a password required to gain access to this database.)

The British Museum: Collection Database Search (BM)

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database.aspx