

***Shunga* in the Meiji Era: The End of a Tradition?**

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This article examines the final period of *shunga*, customarily defined as erotic imagery produced by the woodblock-printing technique. It takes up artists who continued the earlier traditions of *shunga* (such as Kawanabe Kyōsai and Tsukioka Yoshitoshi) and those who developed new modes (among them, Tomioka Eisen). The new Meiji administration was anxious to suppress material it deemed inappropriate, and new censorship legislation was introduced in 1872. However, the clandestine production and sale of *shunga* continued until the early 1900s. As was always the case, quality varies, but the best Meiji era *shunga* is distinguished by fine draughtsmanship and deluxe printing effects. As part of modernization, women gained new, more visible roles in society and these were quickly taken up as characters in *shunga*. Japan's engagement in hostilities with first China and then Russia provided the impetus for the further production of erotica to supply to troops. Yet, by this point such material was seen as a potential embarrassment to the nation, and its suppression thereafter intensified. At the same time, the shifting role of the naked body within visual culture had a major impact on *shunga*, and rival technologies, such as photography and lithography, were supplanting woodblock-printing. The result was the emergence of a new genre of sex-related imagery, which, when compared with *shunga*, is marked by its directly explicit nature and a lack of humour.

Keywords: *shunga*, erotica, woodblock print, Kawanabe Kyōsai, Tomioka Eisen, Sino-Japanese War, Russo-Japanese War, censorship, the nude

Scholarship in recent years has often drawn attention to the continuities of social and cultural practice from the Tokugawa shogunate to the new administration of the Meiji era. Likewise within visual culture, study of the past few years has revealed a rich world of *shunga* 春画 continuing into the late nineteenth century, and has made clear the large scale of production. The best Meiji *shunga* are characterized by exquisite printing, with deluxe effects such as metallic pigment, burnishing, blind printing and gradated shading. Technically, such works are of no lesser quality than their predecessors and demonstrate there was still a market for luxury erotica. At the same time, one finds a continued pirating of compositions, and reprinting of popular works using different formats and technology. In

terms of subject matter, with the creation of new, more visible roles for women (as students, teachers, secretaries and nurses), these figures entered the fantasy world of erotica as sexual agents. Yet despite the enduring popularity of *shunga*, towards the end of the Meiji era a number of factors would cause a decline in their cultural position and popularity.¹

Traditional *Shunga*

From the dawn of woodblock prints as a popular consumer good in the seventeenth century, *shunga* had been an integral part of ukiyo-e production, and artists had designed erotica as a standard part of their repertoire. Though *shunga* were officially banned, evidence suggests they were tacitly tolerated by the Tokugawa 徳川 regime. The Meiji era, however, saw a major break from earlier practice, wherein nearly all ukiyo-e artists stopped producing erotic printed work. This was due in part to shifts within the sphere of ukiyo-e itself. From 1872 onwards, the government undertook to regulate and control prostitution more strictly, as part of its project to “civilize” Japan in the view of Western nations. Concomitant changes in social mores prompted a move away from the established focus of ukiyo-e on the women of the pleasure quarters, and a concentration instead on more wholesome subjects, such as the modernization of the cityscape, new models of ideal womanhood, or Japanese victories in battle. Kabuki theatre was repurposed with a message of national valor and heroic stories from Japanese history, and therefore continued to be viable subject matter for prints. Thus, among ukiyo-e artists, Toyohara Kunichika 豊原国周 (1835–1900) designed only a few erotic book illustrations, but for an artist such as Kobayashi Kiyochika 小林清親 (1847–1915) this type of work was simply outside his remit. The exception during the first half of the new era was the prodigiously inventive artist, Kawanabe Kyōsai 河鍋暁斎 (1831–1889), who produced numerous erotic prints and paintings. Kyōsai lived for just over twenty years into the Meiji era, and created wonderfully irreverent works poking fun at the novel features of “civilization and enlightenment” (*bunmei kaika* 文明開化), infused with his fertile imagination and comic genius. Yet his art remained grounded in traditional techniques and subject matter, and this may explain the persistence of *shunga* in his oeuvre, images which betray no evidence of modernization. A set of three scrolls exemplifies Kyōsai’s spontaneous painting style, often fuelled by his beloved *sake*, yet imbued with both humor and expressiveness (Figure 1). The scrolls depict three different classes of men: at right, a priest with shaved head is straddled by a young woman; in the centre, a courtier wearing lacquered headgear (*eboshi* 烏帽子) grimaces as he pushes forward; and at left, a samurai with top-knot is seen from behind, being bothered by a fascinated cat! The paintings do not explicitly represent the sexual act, but rather elicit a guffaw, in the true tradition of “pictures to make you laugh” (*warai-e* 笑い絵).

Another format designed to provoke laughter was the articulated print, which Kyōsai continued into the early 1870s. These were small prints (*koban* 小判, about 9 by 12 cm) sold in sets of twelve in illustrated wrappers. One part, usually a penis, was printed on a moveable insert, which was operated by a tab. In Figure 2, two acrobatic women fight for the

¹ I would like to express my sincere thanks to the private collectors who permitted access to their Meiji *shunga*, and also to the Art Research Center, Ritsumeikan University for allowing me to use their photography. Drs. Laura Moretti, Ishigami Aki and Matsuba Ryōko also have my gratitude for their kind assistance in deciphering the dialogue.



Figure 1. Kawanabe Kyōsai. Erotic scenes. Set of three hanging scrolls; ink and color on paper. Each H. 115.4 × 18.9 cm. Israel Goldman Collection, London.

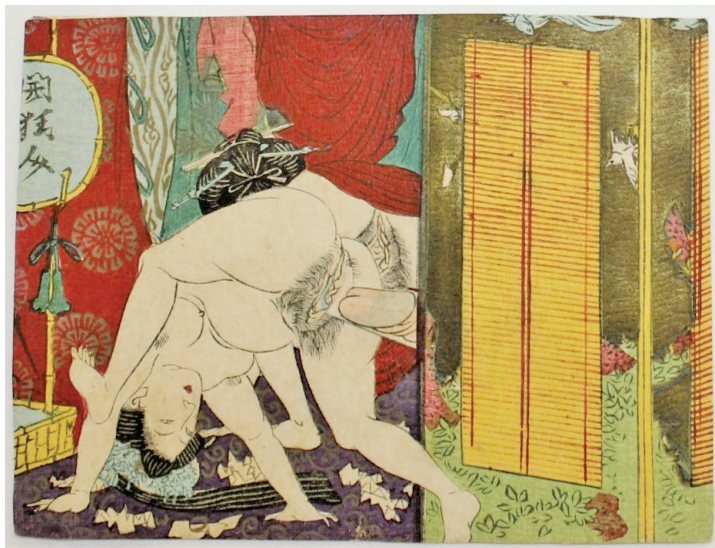


Figure 2. Kawanabe Kyōsai. Articulated erotic print. Color woodblock print. H. 9.3 × 12.5 cm. Israel Goldman Collection, London.

attention of an unseen male behind the folding screen. Kyōsai signed the series using one of his nonsensical erotica pseudonyms, Kaikyōjin Hitsuji 開狂人膝次, or the “Opening Mad Guy, Knee-Goat” (partially trimmed on this print).



Figure 3. Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, *Daikoku Turmoil*. Painting album, ink and color on silk. H. 30.3 × approx. 34.5 cm. Reproduced from Shirakura Yoshihiko et al. *Bessatsu Taiyo: Nikuhitsu shunga* 別冊太陽: 肉筆春画. Heibonsha, 2009, p. 169.

Some Meiji artists may have produced erotic paintings on commission, many of which remain undiscovered as yet. One such example is a painting album of ten pictures, thought to date from the early years of the Meiji era (Figure 3). It is unsigned but bears a seal reading “Tsukioka shi,” and has been attributed to Tsukioka Yoshitoshi 月岡芳年 (1839–1892).² It is unusual in that it presents a continuous narrative, though it contains no text passages. From the construction of the work, it appears it was made originally in the hand scroll format, and there may have been two more pictures, bringing up the total to the customary twelve. The setting is a temple, and the characters are the elderly priest, the Daikoku (meaning a priest’s secret wife), a male temple attendant, and a temple-hand. The story is the well-worn theme of the older man obtaining a woman, who then has it off secretly with a handsome younger man in the same household. Their misfortune, however, is to go at it so enthusiastically that they knock over the folding screen behind which the priest is sleeping, leading to their discovery (illustrated). In the ensuing fight youth beats age and the priest is tied up, but then the temple-hand comes to the priest’s rescue, wielding a heavy wooden club.

² *Nikuhitsu shunga* 2009, pp. 166–69.

Deluxe Achievements

Somewhat further into the Meiji era, the highest quality *shunga* begin to demonstrate changes in aesthetic approach. Most notably, compared with designs at the end of the Tokugawa period the compositions become less crowded, and the figures are placed against a blank field rather than in fully described settings. A range of sophisticated printing techniques was employed to create high-quality products for the luxury market. The illustrated erotic book containing a continuous narrative seems to disappear, and sets and albums usually continue the convention of twelve images, often structured using seasonal indicators.

Probably the best known erotic work of the Meiji era, and perhaps the last great *shunga* print album, is *Yakumo no chigiri* 八雲の契り, a title taken from the preface (Ebi1118). The album preserves the typical format of twelve pictures and the settings, props and characters are essentially unchanged from *shunga* of the Tokugawa period. Figure 4 depicts a couple under a mosquito net, a well-established *shunga* setting. The album was apparently distributed by Wada Tokutarō 和田篤太郎, proprietor of the publishing house Shun'yōdō 春陽堂, as a gift at New Year 1896 to authors and others involved with the journal *Shin-shōsetsu* 新小説.³



Figure 4. Design from *Yakumo no chigiri*. Color woodblock print. H. 25.0 × 17.0 cm (covers). Ebi Collection. ARC Database, Ritsumeikan University. Ebi1118.

The album was apparently very successful and was reprinted. The printing blocks were then sold to Matsumura of Kanda, and other images were inserted, leading to several different versions.⁴ Although the order of the images varies from copy to copy, the album always opens with a scene of a woman masturbating after reading an erotic text. In terms of

³ Higashiōji 1977, p. 13. *Shin-shōsetsu* had appeared only from January 1889 to June 1890, but would recommence publication in July 1896. The precise date of the album is still a matter of debate.

⁴ Other impressions are held by Nichibunken (see website <http://db.nichibun.ac.jp/en/category/enbon.html>) and Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. Variations can be seen in the *mikaeshi* pattern, the end-papers, and the presence or absence of a title-slip (*daisen* 題簽).

style, however, the artist drew on Western techniques of realism, particularly in the shading. In its atmosphere, the album conveys little of its era, but rather appears more a revival of Tokugawa period craft, tinged with nostalgia. In Figure 5 a man and woman are reclining together and he reaches a hand around her hips. The composition is classic *shunga*: both figures are fully clothed and the genitals are placed as visual focus at the very center, both revealed and framed by the textiles.



Figure 5. Design from *Yakumo no chigiri*. Color woodblock print. H. 25.0 × 17.0 cm (covers). Ebi Collection. ARC Database, Ritsumeikan University. Ebi1118.

Yakumo no chigiri is attributed to Tomioka Eisen 富岡永洗 (1864–1905), best known for his frontispiece illustrations (*kuchi-e* 口絵) for magazines and novels. Born the eldest son of a retainer of the Matsushiro domain in Nagano, also a painter, Eisen studied painting at home before moving to Tokyo in 1878, aged only fourteen, where he subsequently gained employment in the Draftsmanship Division of the Army Head Office. He also studied ukiyo-e techniques with the Kanō-school painter Kobayashi Eitaku 小林永濯 (1843–1890). However, when Eitaku passed away in 1890, Eisen resigned his position and devoted himself to producing illustrations for newspapers, magazines and school textbooks. The album contains a preface, with a style reminiscent of Tokugawa period *gesaku* 戯作 fiction, invoking suitably grandiloquent motifs from nature and mythology, given the inclusion of “Yakumo” (and, through it, Izumo and Susanoo no Mikoto) in the work’s title. Consensus has it that the author was Yamada Bimyō 山田美妙 (1868–1910), though this type of text was a new departure for him.⁵

Apparently in response to the success of *Yakumo no chigiri*, Ōhashi Otowa 大橋乙羽 (1869–1901), the head of the rival publishing house Hakubunkan 博文館, commissioned

⁵ A transliteration and modern Japanese translation of the preface is given in Ujiie 1976, p. 71. Ujiie debates at length on the likelihood of Bimyō as author, suggesting that Ozaki Kōyō 尾崎紅葉 (1868–1903) is a more plausible candidate, but ultimately ruling him out because of the difference in style and his association with the rival Hakubunkan 博文館 publishing house; Ujiie 1976, p. 72.

their chief artist, Takeuchi Keishū 武内桂舟 (1861–1942), to produce an album of equal quality. Known as *Yozakura* 夜桜 (Ebi1119), it was issued soon afterwards, probably in 1897.⁶ In Figure 6 a young woman coyly bends over the exaggerated member of a young man. In format and design it is very similar to *Yakumo no chigiri*, and possibly was put together by the same workshop. The printing effects are of the highest quality: delicate *bokashi* ぼかし on the woman's sleeve, highlighted with silver, burnishing on the black of both figures' hair to give a sheen, blind printing on the collars and sash, and shell-white (*gofun* 胡粉) to indicate the fluid dripping from the woman's vagina. In Figure 7, a young man energetically enters a young woman behind, tipping her over with the force of his advance. The pale flesh and genitalia are set against the intense red of the woman's underskirt, creating a vivid contrast.

According to some accounts, Keishū learned painting with Kanō Eitoku Tatsunobu 狩野永恵 立信 (1814–1891), and later studied with Matsumoto Fūko 松本 楓湖 (1840–1923) and Tsukioka Yoshitoshi. From about 1887 he was providing illustrations for various magazines, newspapers and novels, but in his later years he concentrated on paintings. He passed away at the advanced age of eighty one. Though he was several years older than both Eisen and the other major *kuchi-e* artist, Mizuno Toshikata 水野年方 (1866–1908), he survived them both by many years.⁷

New Roles for Women

In Meiji era *shunga* there is obviously a fascination, and perhaps also an anxiety, about the new roles and opportunities for physical mobility available



Figure 6. Design from *Yozakura*. Color woodblock print album. H. 24.0 × 16.5 cm. Ebi Collection. ARC Database, Ritsumeikan University. Ebi1119.



Figure 7. Design from *Yozakura*. Color woodblock print album. H. 24.0 × 16.5 cm. Ebi Collection. ARC Database, Ritsumeikan University. Ebi1119.

⁶ Ujiie 1976, p. 74.

⁷ A third album is *Hazakura* 葉桜, also attributed to Keishū and containing a preface thought to be by Ōhashi himself. As no copy was available for study, it is omitted from this article. See Ujiie 1976, p. 74, and Higashiōji 1977, pp. 49 ff.

to women. Figure 8 is one of the most charming erotic images of the era for its playfulness and apparent innocence (Ebi1149). It comes from a set with eleven known designs, though there were probably originally twelve. Each is titled with the characters depicted, such as “the young lady,” “the gentleman,” “the widow,” “the playboy and the maid,” suggesting a continued interest in presenting a wide range of social types. The two in this design are a female student and a “high-collar guy,” the Meiji term for a dandified, westernized man. The feather boa marks her as a young woman of fashion and he wears a Western-style cape.⁸ The young couple is depicted on an upholstered seat in a railway carriage passing in front of Mt. Fuji. At first all seems innocuous and the woman looks away demurely, but then we notice the provocative flash of leg and underskirt, where the man’s hand has disappeared. As is typical of such works, the woman voices concern that they may be seen, and the man assures her no one is looking, and she should relax. In the Meiji era women of a certain economic class for the first time possessed the opportunity to pursue advanced education, live away from home and travel unchaperoned, and in the popular imagination the female student could easily become a *femme fatale*.

The young woman in Figure 9 is likewise a female student, as we can deduce from the cartouche, where she is wearing *hakama* 袴, the customary dress for female students, and riding a bicycle (Ebi1234). Her partner is another representative Meiji figure, the schoolboy in military-style uniform. The cartouche was a popular convention in *kuchi-e* of the time, allowing the presentation of a different point in time and the means for reflection on temporal progression.⁹ In the dialogue, the boy praises her skill at riding a bicycle. The wrapper for the set which this design comes from has the title *Takara no irifune* 寶の



Figure 8. Dandy and female student. Color woodblock print. H. 13.5 × 19.0 cm. Ebi Collection. ARC Database, Ritsumeikan University. Ebi1149.



Figure 9. Young couple. Color woodblock print, from set of twelve. H. 17.5 × 25.0 cm. Ebi Collection. ARC Database, Ritsumeikan University. Ebi1234.

8 For a comparable woman, see the *kuchi-e* by Mizuno Toshikata from *Usokae* 鶯替え, reproduced in Merritt 2000, p. 150.

9 For example, the frontispiece by Tomioka Eisen to the novel *Hoken musume* 保険娘, where the woman contemplates her act of arson ahead of time; see Merritt 2000, p. 72.

いり船, a pun for “having fun in the pleasure quarters,” and there is a design for each month. This is the image for April, the start of the new academic year. There was concern at the time about the new form of relationships between male and female students, and the so-called “modern” love-affairs, which were associated with selfish individualism and socialism, rather than devotion to the one’s family and, through this, to the state.¹⁰

The obvious ability in draftsmanship of the unidentified artists of these works was matched by the skill of the printer, and great care was expended on them. In each print in the set Ebi1149, areas of flesh are given definition by blind printing, and the ground is sprinkled with mica. In the design illustrated, the black area of the man’s sleeve (where his cape is thrown back) is burnished, there is blind printing on the contours of Mt. Fuji, and a delicate blue pigment is applied to create a soft effect on the feather boa. Similarly in Ebi1234, care is taken to achieve fine printing effects, with silver detailing on robes, blind printing to create texture within white areas, and delicate shaded application of pink on the facial features. A seasonally appropriate plant is printed beneath the text in the fan in each design, for example wisteria for April (Figure 9) and maple for November (Figure 13).

The new custom of seaside bathing was another opportunity for women of leisure to socialize with men and show off their figures. In this light-hearted scene of a couple enjoying themselves at the seaside, the image for June, the young man sports a straw boater and the woman wears one of the fashionable new bathing costumes (Figure 10). It is from a set of prints entitled *Izumo no chigiri* 出雲の契. In terms of its themes, characters, dialogue and palette of bright colors, the set is representative of late Meiji era erotica. It contains new scenarios previously unimaginable. The title clearly plays on the popularity of *Yakumo no chigiri*, and has associations of male-female relations. The works here are from a rare printing with only ink contours and gold highlights (Ebi1124). This album of twelve prints continues the convention of dialogue within the picture, providing additional context.



Figure 10. Seaside bathing, from *Izumo no chigiri*. Color woodblock print. H. 18.0 × 24.0 cm. Ebi Collection. ARC Database, Ritsumeikan University. Ebi1124.

10 Mitchell 1983, p. 160.

The woman here says, “Stop! Someone might see. Let’s go home.” The man replies, “I can’t wait till we get home. There’s no one around; it’s fine. But it’s not stable here, so hang onto my neck.” Ofer Shagan attributes the work to Terasaki Kōgyō 寺崎廣業 (1866–1919), but another possible attribution is to Miyagawa Shuntei 宮川春汀 (1873–1914), also an artist who produced *kuchi-e*.¹¹

Censorship in Meiji

Erotic material had been subject to legal restrictions since 1722, when an edict was issued banning “lascivious books.” The nominal ban had been sporadically enforced, but *shunga* were tolerated because they were not regarded as threatening to the political regime. Under the Meiji administration, official attitudes towards erotica became yet more hostile, but for different reasons. The reinforced restrictions on published material specifically formed part of a wider context of reforms of social practices and an attempt to establish a new moral code for the new imperial nation. A central tenet of the new government’s program of “civilization and enlightenment” was to demonstrate that Japan was a modern nation on a par with the Western powers. This necessitated reforms in conformity with Western standards of morality and censorship. Long-established social practices, such as mixed bathing and the exposed bodies of laborers, brought critical comments from resident Westerners, and the government responded by outlawing them.

Control of published material was an important factor in the establishment of the new administration and in obtaining popular support for the project of modernization.¹² One of the earliest imperial edicts of the new era, issued by the Administrative Office (*gyōseikan* 行政官) in 1869, already contained a “morals” clause, prohibiting books that would “promote lewdness and debauchery.”¹³ Reissued by the newly established Ministry of Education in the eleventh month of 1872, it contained fully fifty-four articles relating to public morals. In 1875 jurisdiction for censorship was transferred to the Home Ministry, which issued revised Press Regulations (*Shinbunshi jōrei* 新聞紙条例) and Publications Regulations (*Shuppan jōrei* 出版条例), in June and September of that year respectively. Reiterations of the regulations were issued as a Public Ordinance in 1887, and finally in April 1893 this was revised as the Publishing Law (*Shuppan hō* 出版法).¹⁴ Key provisions of this law remained in place until Japan’s defeat in the Pacific War in 1945, among them article 19: “When published literature and pictures are regarded as disturbing to public peace and order or injurious to morals, the Home Minister has the authority to forbid their sale and distribution and to confiscate the plates and printed matter.”¹⁵

Nevertheless, despite these controls intended to encompass the suppression of inappropriate visual material, *shunga* continued to operate in a grey area. They did not constitute official

11 Shagan 2011, *gekan*, pp. 184 and 186.

12 Mitchell 1983, p. 46.

13 Rubin 1984, p. 20

14 Unlike the situation obtaining during much of the Tokugawa period, when publishers’ guilds were charged with monitoring proposed publications for compliance with the law, publishers were now required to submit copies of a book to the censors after publication. If a book was in fact banned, the publisher incurred a substantial loss as the print-run was already complete. The system of post-publication censorship therefore encouraged publishers to self-regulate to avoid incurring financial losses.

15 Mitchell 1983, p. 120

publications in the same way as books, and were therefore not a direct target of regulation in the same way. When their private consumption did become a problem, the issue was usually dealt with by the local police. Ishigami Aki's article in this special issue gives more detail on the changing reception of *shunga* in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Shunga and War

At the same time as the government was cracking down on immoral publications, during the Sino-Japanese War of 1894 to 1895 it was unofficial government policy to supply erotic material to soldiers going to the front. These prints continued the traditional apotropaic function of *kachi-e* 勝ち絵 and provided stimulating images for sexual relief. A medical surgeon during the Russo-Japanese War stated that, "Seeing that at first postcards of beauties became all the rage, and in seeing the lustful bodies it was possible to satisfy some desire,

this method was simply not enough, and in the end, there was a boom of *shunga* as well as naked photographs of beauties. People competed to obtain these...calling them 'bullet-proof' (*dangan yoke* 弾丸除け)."¹⁶ According to Yoshida Eiji, this belief in the protective function of *shunga* persisted as late as the Pacific War.¹⁷

The Sino-Japanese war also produced a new female figure of fascination, the nurse. The nurse was a professional woman whose job it was to touch men, sometimes intimately, and who had access to, and sometimes control over, the male body. Nurses featured in *kuchi-e* during the two major wars of the late Meiji era, and were also a popular theme for photographic postcards during the 1890s.¹⁸ The subjects were often members of the Ladies Volunteer Nursing Association, which was largely staffed by aristocratic women. The empress had visited hospitals and participated in rolling bandages, as had wives of Western diplomats in Tokyo. Prints of the benevolent Japanese nurses tending Russian prisoners-of-war were widely circulated, some even issued by the Japan Red Cross itself.¹⁹

The image for March from *Izumo no chigiri* depicts a soldier and a nurse *in flagrante* on the carpet of a Western interior, suggesting a training facility in Tokyo rather than a wartime scene at the front (Figure 11). The woman wears a Western-style uniform,



Figure 11. Nurse and soldier, from *Izumo no chigiri*. Color woodblock print. H. 18.0 × 24.0 cm. Ebi Collection. ARC Database, Ritsumeikan University. Ebi1124.

16 Quote translated from Shimokawa Kōshi, *Nihon ero shashinshi* (Seikyūsha, 1997), pp. 96–97, quoted in Shimazu 2009, p. 90 (some punctuation amended).

17 Yoshida 1964, p. 20. My thanks go to Professor Hayakawa for providing this source.

18 For an example, see Merritt 2000, p. 170.

19 Shimazu 2009, p. 172.

demonstrating her identity as a professional operating outside the home. The soldier says he was “inflamed at the sight of you from afar, but since there were eyes around us I couldn’t do anything. Today they have all gone for a walk, and so we have a good chance.” The situation—illicit encounters, waiting for an opportunity when other people are out—and the dialogue could both have been lifted straight from a *shunga* of a century earlier; but the physical setting and characters are very much up-to-date.

The hospital scenario portrays the male patient in a weakened state, and the female nurse can easily be portrayed as the dominant partner. In Figure 12 she straddles the soldier on a hospital bed, in a Western-style building with curtains at the window. In the cartouche he comments that today’s battle went extremely well, but that he’s happy to surrender now.²⁰ Noticeably, in designs depicting women in Western uniform, the women wear only a scarlet underskirt underneath. Although a decree was issued in 1882 in the name of the empress urging women to wear bloomers, the practice did not become common until well into the 1920s.²¹

In the design for October from *Takara no irifune*, the cartouche shows the nurse and soldier stealing a glance at one another, and then in the main scene we have the consummation of their attraction (Figure 13). Their dialogue is contained in the fan-shaped cartouches, and it adds an interesting rhetoric of sacrifice and patriotism to this apparently light-hearted erotic scene. The woman declares that the best service she can give the nation is to give birth to baby boys who will become soldiers. The soldier responds by saying that he “doesn’t like this sort of thing,” but given he is seeing the number of his comrades decline through death in battle, it would be a disservice to the nation to “waste his weapon.” By dint of the dialogue, the message of the image shifts from personal



Figure 12. Nurse and soldier. Color woodblock print. H. 13.5 × 19.0 cm. Ebi Collection. ARC Database, Ritsumeikan University. Ebi1149.



Figure 13. Nurse and soldier. Color woodblock print, from set of twelve. H. 17.5 × 25.0 cm. Ebi Collection. ARC Database, Ritsumeikan University. Ebi1234.

20 「今日の進撃は非常に好都合でした…追撃されては僕も降参します」

21 Stevens 2001, p. 45. This is a hybrid work in technical terms. The purple of the nurse’s uniform was printed in woodblock, with use of *bokashi*, but the red on the blanket was stencil-printed.

pleasure to service to the nation, and the woman's is characterized not by her physical attractiveness (to which little allusion is made), but rather by her usefulness as a bearer of children to be future soldiers. Yet, *shunga* had long been the vehicle for satire, and this dialogue, tongue firmly in cheek, is more likely a subtle jab at the governmental rhetoric regarding the war effort.

Pirating and Recycling

Designers of *shunga* had always drawn on earlier works for themes and compositions, and this is another feature of continuity in the Meiji era. It was more economical to appropriate existing designs than to start from scratch, and many prints update elements and provide new accoutrements. The high-quality print albums were often plundered for compositions then re-used in other print sets. Five designs from *Yozakura* can be identified as the basis for prints in other sets. Figure 9 clearly follows the image illustrated from *Yozakura*, updating the characters and providing a salacious juxtaposition by means of the cartouche, with girl riding a bicycle and boy mounting the girl (Figure 7).²²

There exists a later, inferior impression of *Takara no irifune*, indicating that the success of this item led the publisher to reissue it. Smaller in size, it employs a folding-album format, and it is somewhat cheekily titled, *Kaiga shoseikun* 絵画処世訓 (Painting Maxims; Ebi1148). This later version has none of the fine printing techniques seen in the original version and is much inferior in quality: the lines are rough, the colors are garish, and carelessly copied motifs lose their visual meaning.

Artists sometimes met demand for unique painted works by copying print compositions. Figure 14 comes from a painted album where five of the designs overlap with *Yakumo no chigiri*; this design copies Figure 5. This particular album suggests an interest in various



Figure 14. Painting album. Ink and color on paper. H. 24.0 × 16.5 cm (covers). Ebi Collection. ARC Database, Ritsumeikan University. Ebi0970.

²² See also the final three designs in Ebi1032 and the design for July in Ebi1234.

aspects of modern life, such as men's Western haircuts and uniforms, which are absent in the printed version. Other images are apparently based on contemporary prints, for example yet another iteration of the popular nurse and patient theme, this time with the patient seducing the nurse (Figure 15). The dialogue present in the original print design, which again had the woman speaking of giving herself "for the sake of the country," has been discarded.²³ Tomioka Eisen, presumed artist of the print album, died of tuberculosis at the relatively young age of forty one. We can assume that the demand remained high for the type of work he had been producing, and some of it may have been met by his pupil, Hamada Josen 浜田如洗 (dates unknown).



Figure 15. Painting album. Ink and color on paper. H. 24.0 × 16.5 cm (covers). Ebi Collection. ARC Database, Ritsumeikan University. Ebi0970.

Contributory Factors in the Decline of *Shunga*

The shifting role of the naked body within visual culture had a major impact on *shunga*. "Fine art" was established in the official art world during the 1870s and 1880s, and oil painters were aware that the nude held a high position within the European hierarchy.²⁴ Yet officials were uneasy about the propriety of nudity as a legitimate art form. The debate began in 1889 with an illustration by Watanabe Shōtei 渡辺省亭 (1851–1918) to the story *Kochō* 胡蝶 by Yamada Bimyō, in the January issue of the magazine *Kokumin no tomo* 国民之友. The simple line drawing depicted a naked woman with a robe draped around her, and was closely related to a painting by Shōtei, *Enya Takasada no tsuma shutsuyoku no zu* 塩冶高貞妻出浴之図.²⁵ Although in itself neither new nor particularly provocative, a slew of similar images during the same year led to a ban by the Home Ministry with Notification no. 39

²³ The print is reproduced in Shagan 2011, *gekan*, p. 187.

²⁴ For a thorough study of this process, see Satō 2011, pp. 264–67.

²⁵ This was a free interpretation of a work by his teacher, Kikuchi Yōsai 菊池容齋 (1781–1878). The paintings are reproduced in Hyōgo Kenritsu Kindai Bijutsukan 1993, pp. 39, 50.

issued on 15 November, but this had very little effect.²⁶ Various attempts at suppression culminated at the exhibition of the Hakubakai oil painters' society in 1901, when police ordered that the lower half of *Ratai: Onna* 裸体: 女 by Kuroda Seiki 黒田清輝 be covered with a cloth, in what came to be known as the "Hip-wrapping Incident" (Koshimaki jiken 腰巻事件).²⁷ At the Hakubakai 白馬会 exhibition in 1903, paintings of full nudes were corralled to a separate "special room" (*tokubetsu shitsu* 特別室), to which only artists and male art students were permitted entry.²⁸

More significantly, competing technologies brought an end to the pre-eminence of woodblock printing and this in turn affected the production of erotica. Woodblock prints retained their popularity during the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895, but by the time of the conflict with Russia in 1904 their informative role was being replaced by photolithographic reproductions in newspapers. By 1910 the established woodblock printing industry had almost disappeared, due to the economic advantages of photolithography and the significant physical and social changes which now made them appear rather old-fashioned.

The camera gradually took over the erotic functions of *shunga*. On one level there were studio photographs of Japanese women, eroticized by the gaze of the male photographer, such as Baron Raimund von Stillfried-Rathenitz (1839–1911) and Felice Beato (1832–1909), and produced primarily for the male tourist trade. These often employed the same settings as ukiyo-e prints, such as women in the bath or at their toilette, and constituted a continuation of established visual tropes.²⁹ On another level there were explicit photographs, greater numbers of which have come to light in recent years.³⁰

With these developments, the representation of the naked body within visual culture bifurcated, and furthermore was restricted to the female. At one end was the painted "nude" (*ratai ga* 裸体画) as an artistic genre, viewable only in controlled, official exhibition spaces; at the other were photographs (whether imported or produced in Japan) of naked female models, obtainable through illicit channels. In this situation there was no longer any place for the *shunga* that had represented both men and women (clothed and unclothed) engaged in intimate acts, and that for more than two centuries had been an accepted and popular feature of print culture.

Conclusion

In many ways Meiji era *shunga* demonstrate continuities with works of the previous decades, despite social and political changes. Many of the compositions, characters, scenarios and dialogue would not be out of place in designs of the early nineteenth century, or even earlier. The level of technical achievement rivals that of earlier works, with deluxe printing effects employed to yield sumptuous results. Nevertheless, *shunga* took their themes from

26 Mitchell 1983, p. 125.

27 Mitchell 1983, p. 44; Satō 1999, p. 242. The censored display was photographed and reproduced in the November 1901 issue of the journal *Myōjō* 明星, together with a critical response. The painting was purchased by Iwasaki Yanosuke 岩崎彌之助 (1851–1908), and was displayed in his Western-style home in Takanawa. It is now in Seikadō Bunko Art Museum 静嘉堂文庫美術館.

28 Volk 2010, p. 60. For further discussion of "the nude" in Japanese art history, see, for example, Teshigawara 1986 and Kitazawa 1994.

29 Miyashita 1992, p. 262.

30 See Ishiguro 1996 and 2002.

everyday life, and the new opportunities for physical and social engagement for women were quickly taken up by artists in order to create entertaining scenarios. As before, these women are not just objects of desire for the male viewers, but remain equal partners in the pleasure of sexual encounters. However, one can perhaps detect a hint of anxiety about the “modern” woman who defied traditional female roles. In the nurse and soldier designs we see an attempt to control the potentially subversive possibilities by having the sexually active woman offer her body explicitly in the service of the nation, just as the male soldier offered his life in battle.

The customary definition of *shunga* as woodblock-printed erotica breaks down during the Meiji era, as other techniques are put into use. Some prints employ a combination of woodblock and stencil printing, and in time the woodblock technology for erotica was completely supplanted by photography and lithography. But with the move away from woodblock printing, *shunga* lost certain characteristics. Photography destroyed the chatty quality of printed *shunga*, and characters lost the ability to speak and cast nuances on the situation. Furthermore, in printed *shunga* the artist depicted imaginary scenarios, using stylized techniques for flesh and fabric, and remaining in total control of physical configuration and mood. Photographs, by contrast, are representations of actual people and are subject to the constraints of anatomy, physical agility and lighting. As John Stevens has stated, “Sex photos tend to create images that are harsh, and more obscene than erotic... As erotic art, *shunga*, ancient and modern, is far superior to dirty pictures shot by a camera.”³¹ As interest in *shunga* increases, it is to be hoped that more works will emerge, deepening our understanding of this hitherto neglected area.

31 Stevens 2001, p. 27.

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