

Recent Trends in Scholarship on Early Modern Japanese Print Culture

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This article highlights several recent English- and French-language monographs and articles that focus on early modern Japanese print and publishing culture from a variety of perspectives, including (1) as valuable sources of information on Edo period society and ways of thinking; (2) as cultural products involving multiple actors (authors, publishers / booksellers, illustrators, etc.); and (3) as multifaceted phenomena, where text and image are inherently intertwined and cannot be analyzed in isolation.

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The cultural production of early modern Japan has long been a subject of interest to scholars around the world. Special attention has been paid to *ukiyo-e* pictures, paintings, poetry, and fiction, giving rise to extensive research based on the analyses of texts and images. Scholars have long focused on works of well-known authors or genres, trying to reconstruct their artistic, literary, or intellectual trajectories. In recent decades, thanks to the knowledge we have acquired of printed matter, publishers, and booksellers, the focus has shifted to the material conditions of production and the diffusion of cultural artifacts. We thus consider all aspects of cultural creation and reception as well as a range of popular products, without setting discriminatory criteria. The present article discusses some works or articles in English and French that are representative of these new trends.

It is important to begin by mentioning Peter Kornicki's *The Book in Japan*,¹ an extensive study on books, publishing, and reading in premodern Japan now considered a must-read for any cultural historian. On the one hand, Kornicki's work, together with the research of Japanese scholars such as Konta Yōzō, Yokota Fuyuhiko, Wakao Masaki, and Suzuki Toshiyuki—and on the other, the new accessibility of digitized sources and related editorial data—have played a crucial role in the paradigm shift we are discussing here. Kornicki's study appears in the wake of Western research on the history of books and reading, a field of research particularly active during the last few

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1 Peter Kornicki, *The Book in Japan: A Cultural History from the Beginnings to the Nineteenth Century*, Brill 1998; repr., University of Hawai'i Press, 2001.

decades. Though a comparison with the Western publishing tradition is by no means used by Kornicki nor by any of the other researchers mentioned here, Western research has undoubtedly facilitated and accelerated the turning point that we will develop here.

To address this subject, we start with Mary Elizabeth Berry's masterly work, *Japan in Print*.² Berry offers a profound analysis of Edo-period society and culture based on the study of some emblematic categories of nonfictional printed matter such as urban, national, or provincial maps, shogunal personnel rosters of the Tokugawa administration (*bukan* 武鑑 or military mirror), urban surveys such as "Kyoto brocade" (*Kyō habutae* 京羽二重) or "dappled fabric of Edo" (*Edo kanoko* 江戸鹿子), and didactic literature such as "everybody's treasury" (*banmin chōhōki* 万民調宝記).³ She questions the effects that these works, initially produced to fulfill specific functions, had on early modern society, especially on commoners who were not expected to be the primary recipients of this literature. She argues that new identities such as that of "Japanese" freed from status distinctions emerged from the knowledge acquired through reading these books. According to Berry, such phenomena were the result of the free access to knowledge (what she calls "the Library of Public Information"⁴) and the free circulation of cultural products among previously compartmentalized spaces. One can say that Berry's research illustrates the innovative use of printed matter as a means to capture important trends in early modern Japanese society.

The volume *Written Texts-Visual Texts*,⁵ edited by Susanne Formanek and Sepp Linhart, is also noteworthy for the wide range of popular printed matter it explores. On the one hand, it showed Edo-period publishers' talent when responding to unexpected events such as violent deaths, earthquakes, and the arrival of foreign ships; meeting the playful inclinations of consumers (cook-books, travel guides); and enhancing the attractiveness of books by inserting high quality pictures, or developing a wide range of print formats, from bound books to simple printed sheets (*kawaraban* 瓦版). Linhart offers interesting insights into *kawaraban*—a major media of the late Edo period—in his chapter titled "*Kawaraban: Enjoying the News when News was Forbidden*." On the other hand, printed material is also used as a means to observe changes in society. For example, in her chapter "The 'Spectacle' of Womanhood: New Types of Texts and Pictures on Pictorial Sugoroku Games of the Late Edo Period," Formanek uses *sugoroku* games to explore the perspectives of social ascension for women of the time. The volume also draws attention to nonfiction genres that had been little studied until then, such as disaster accounts (see Stephan Köhn's "Between Fiction and Non-Fiction: Documentary Literature in the Late Edo Period") or travelogues (Shirahata Yōzaburō's "The Printing of Illustrated Travelogues in 18th Century Japan"). For the first time, illustrated books that do not have a significant aesthetic or literary quality were considered a basic tool for reflecting on Edo-period culture and society.

The volume *Listen, Copy, Read*⁶ proposes a new way to deal with the history of knowledge by

2 Mary Elizabeth Berry, *Japan in Print: Information and Nation in the Early Modern Period*, University of California Press, 2006.

3 Berry, *Japan in Print*, chaps. 4, 5, and 6.

4 Berry, *Japan in Print*, p. 15.

5 Susanne Formanek and Sepp Linhart, eds., *Written Texts-Visual Texts: Woodblock-printed Media in Early Modern Japan*, Brill, 2005.

6 Matthias Hayek and Annick Horiuchi, eds., *Listen, Copy, Read: Popular Learning in Early Modern Japan*, Brill, 2014.

focusing on the popular practice of learning and didactic books. This printed matter, which covered a large part of Edo-period literature, included primers, guidebooks, handbooks, and dictionaries or encyclopedias, whose authors were not necessarily renowned scholars. Hayek and Horiuchi consider this growing appetite for reading and learning as a distinctive feature of Edo culture. Authors and publishers responded to this request by constantly reissuing these books under new titles, without making major changes to the content. Fields that one might think “specialized” such as painting (C. Marquet), mathematics (A. Horiuchi), medicine (S. Machi), or divination (M. Hayek) came to be widely available to amateurs or beginners and provided the common man with a basic knowledge in the field. Even when the books were intended for specialists, they were adapted to the level of expertise of the reader, which has grown over time. As Hayek and Horiuchi’s volume mainly focuses on particular examples of printed material, it does not provide any insight on the long-term effects of this wide accessibility of technical knowledge on society.

Matthias Hayek’s monograph, *Les Mutations du Yin et du Yang*,⁷ provides some answers to this question by giving a global view on mantic techniques from the origins to the nineteenth century. Hayek’s study of divinatory techniques is based on a careful study of treatises, and it is from the books, as well as their format, writing, and popularity, that he is able to bring out the important changes that occurred in the scholarship and the treatment of the “unknown” in Japan. Though these books were mainly addressing divination specialists, Hayek’s study shows how significant a role printed matter can play when observing and assessing the popular mentality and the approach to the “unknown.”

Among the works of a technical nature examined in Hayek and Horiuchi’s volume some have the expert reader as their target, while others address a wider audience. The *chōhōki* 重宝記 (treasure book), *ōraimono* 往来物 (written materials, such as letters, used from the Heian to Meiji period for teaching children to read and write), or *setsuyōshū* 節用集 (initially a Japanese-language dictionary from the Muromachi period), which offer multiple facets of domestic encyclopedias for everyday use, undoubtedly fall into the latter category. Michael Kinski’s article on *chōhōki* (“Treasure Boxes, Fabrics, and Mirrors: On the Contents and the Classification of Popular Encyclopedias from Early Modern Japan”) as well as Markus Rüttermann’s study of *ōraimono* (“What does ‘Literature of Correspondance’ Mean? An Examination of the Japanese Genre Term *ōraimono* and its History”) show that teaching norms and rules of behavior and communication in society was a salient feature of this publishing genre. Again, the issue of the effects of this normative literature on the readership is not studied here.

The study of these domestic encyclopedias, especially the *setsuyōshū*, continued to fascinate researchers, especially in Germany. The *setsuyōshū* was primarily a dictionary of sinograms that first appeared in the Muromachi 室町 period (1333–1573). It was enriched over the centuries with a wide range of appendices (*furoku* 附録) that gave it the features of an encyclopedia for everyday use. The attempt by Yokoyama Toshio 横山俊夫 (Professor Emeritus of Kyoto University) to determine the most consulted chapters in the dictionary by measuring the dirt on the pages was an interesting endeavor to evaluate its level of use (“The Illustrated Household Encyclopedias that

7 Matthias Hayek, *Les Mutations du Yin et du Yang: Divination, société et représentations au Japon du VIe au XIXe siècle*, Collège de France, 2021.

Once Civilized Japan,” in Formanek and Linhart’s previously mentioned volume), but it did not say how publishers have worked overtime to make the book attractive. Stephan Köhn’s recent presentation, “Mines of Information, Sources of Profit—On the Commercialization of Collections for Timesaving Use (*setsuyōshū*) in Early 18th Century Japan,” in a symposium held in Germany as part of a five-year project,⁸ sheds light on the way Edo-period publishers constantly redesigned the *setsuyōshū* genre of books, altering titles and reorganizing appendices without changing the content of the work in depth.

A significant part of these domestic encyclopedias were dedicated to women, and the history of women in the Edo period is a field that has long been considered difficult to address due to a lack of direct evidence. Marcia Yonemoto’s *The Problem of Women in Early Modern Japan*⁹ demonstrates that books for women or pictures representing women printed during the Edo period could be useful sources to reflect upon issues such as filial piety, motherhood, childhood, and marriage as long as one manages to go beyond the conventional or normative features associated with women, and exploits printed matter along with other direct sources such as letters and diaries.

As noted earlier in Formanek and Linhart’s volume, illustrations and pictures held a prominent place among early modern printed material. It was therefore to be expected that attention would focus on their production process. Julie Nelson Davis’s *Partners in Print*¹⁰ is a successful example of this kind of research. Davis sheds light on the context and production process of floating-world prints by subjecting four examples to a close scrutiny. In each example, Davis shows how the different actors (author, illustrator, publisher) involved in the production process worked together. Her study of the *kibyōshi* 黄表紙 (picture book with yellow cover) entitled “Greatest Sales Guaranteed: Quick-Dye Mind Study,” attributed to Santō Kyōden 山東京伝 (1761–1816) and Kitao Masayoshi 北尾政美 (1764–1824), shows the strong intertwining of the text and the image in late eighteenth-century production, as well as the publishers’ efforts to escape the censorship that struck licentious books. Davis’s point is that this book of fiction, that we tend to consider as an author’s book, is the outcome of a collective endeavor. To see it, one just has to navigate through the complex interplay of text and image as Edo-period readers used to do.

Robert Goree’s *Printing Landmarks*¹¹ invites us to a very similar analysis. He inaugurates a very inspiring multidisciplinary approach to the genre of *meisho zue* 名所図会 (illustrated collections of famous places) in which text and plates are considered as closely interwoven objects and the book as the outcome of a collective work.

We cannot close this quick overview without mentioning Laura Moretti’s *Pleasure in Profit*,¹² which is undoubtedly the most representative example of the new wave of studies in cultural history. She begins by departing from the usual view of seventeenth-century printed literature that

8 Conference entitled “The Commercialization of Knowledge in Edo Period Japan: Publishers, Editors, Print Products, and Their Impact on Pre-modern Cultural Life,” University of Cologne, 12th to 14th January 2023.

9 Marcia Yonemoto, *The Problem of Women in Early Modern Japan*, University of California Press, 2016.

10 Julie Nelson Davis, *Partners in Print: Artistic Collaboration and the Ukiyo-e Market*, University of Hawai‘i Press, 2015.

11 Robert Goree, *Printing Landmarks: Popular Geography and “Meisho Zue” in Late Tokugawa Japan*, Harvard University Asia Center, 2020.

12 Laura Moretti, *Pleasure in Profit: Popular Prose in Seventeenth-Century Japan*, Columbia University Press, 2020.

considers that there is nothing worthy of interest before Ihara Saikaku's novels. She focuses her attention on the "forest" of popular and didactic works that have come down to us and inaugurates a cultural history, based on an extensive knowledge of the publishing world as well as on a thorough examination of the books themselves: composition, reading, reception. Moretti departs from Berry's field of investigation by focusing on didactic works, recalling Peter Burke's way of differentiating between information and knowledge: the former would respond to "knowing that" while the latter would respond to "knowing how." According to Moretti, a great number of seventeenth-century popular literature would present the salient feature "to guide the reader in becoming well-rounded human beings" (p. 23). Some of the examples she analyzes in depth are similar to those found in Hayek and Horiuchi's volume, or in Formanek and Linhart's volume, such as manuals of good manners (*shitsukekata-sho* 躰方書), manuals for learning how to write letters, or books for coping with disasters or financial contingencies.

Moretti's book and the multiple initiatives that are flourishing here and there show that historians are faced with vast areas of unexplored Edo-period literature that reveals its secrets when examined through the eyes of the curious early modern reader, but without using modern categorizations or classifications. Although the interest in print culture is equally present in research carried out in Japan, the focus on didactic publications is perhaps a salient feature of research in the West. Didactic works are still so much a part of everyday life in Japan that it is hard to see them as a curiosity. The recognition of illustrations as a central element of this culture is also a distinctive feature of research in the West, where we have become accustomed to observing the drawings, for want of being able to read the texts.

近世日本の出版文化に関する最近の研究動向

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本稿は、近世の印刷・出版文化に関する最近の英語・フランス語での研究成果について紹介するものである。これらの研究では、①出版物はその時代の社会や考え方を反映する貴重な情報源であること、②個々の芸術家による作品としてではなく、複数の関係者（作者、版元、本屋、絵師）との協働によって得られた文化的産物であること、③制作過程においてテキストと画像が不可分に結びついた多面的な現象であること、などが指摘されている。

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