

# CONCLUSION

This book has been organized around a series of questions that I was asked by Spanish media, followed by answers, with the intention of outlining the main characteristics of *shunga*. To the Spanish media, with the actual *shunga* works in front of us, I explained about the context of each work and both the Spanish interpreter as well as the film director were fascinated and their positive reactions came as a revelation for them. Such a reaction is likely to be the same for modern Japanese as well. In this final section let us review the main points.

1. When people think of *shunga* the famous ukiyo-e artists Utamaro and Hokusai come to mind, but *shunga* has a long history in Japan, from at least the tenth century. Moreover, it is interesting that even in ancient times the genitals were depicted as exaggerated in size. It is important to note that from the beginning there was a convention not of realism, but rather aiming to depict a kind of imagined psychological reality of sexual experience within the broad range of artistic license.
2. *Shunga* is often termed “secret pictures” (*higa*) or “pictures of secret pleasures” (*higi-ga*), but in the Edo period it was commonly called “pillow pictures” or “laughter pictures,” or “pillow books” or “laughter books.” This element of humor represents the Japanese relaxed attitude toward sex from not only the Edo period, but also from earlier times.
3. It is often said that *shunga* primarily presents prostitutes with their clients in a variety of sexual activities, showing the customs of the pleasure quarters; however, in ukiyo-e *shunga* more than 90 percent of the images depict ordinary folk. We see males and females from children to old folk appear, and usually there is a comic element of foolish absurdity. These foibles are the kinds that we can imagine still happen today.
4. It is not possible most of the time to discover the essence of the image from the picture alone. The texts in the picture, narrative and/or dialogue, are crucial for understanding the context. These reveal the characteristics of the players in the scene and what is going on, and make *shunga* far more satisfying as entertainment. They also reveal much about the attitudes towards sexuality in the Edo period.
5. *Shunga* was commonly called “laughter pictures,” and most images include humor as a key element. Such a term for erotic books and prints suggests that sex and

humor were not only an essential part of *shunga* but also were at the core of the Japanese view of sex in real life from ancient times. In the modern era this relaxed attitude was overwhelmed by Western public morality, leading to a change where sex was associated with the idea of an “original sin” and should be veiled by a taboo, a situation fundamentally different from early times.

6. It has been remarked in Japan and abroad that one major characteristic is the exaggerated size of male genitalia, but if we consider that the images show copulation, it is necessary to depict women in the same exaggerated manner. If we look carefully we see that genitals of both men and women are in proportion to one another, and we also notice that the heads of men and women tend to be about the same size as the genitalia; both heads and genitals are depicted in great detail. Although the proportions are anatomically incorrect, the drawing of heads and genitalia in balance is a key characteristic of *shunga*. This kind of representation suggests deeper insights into the human condition.
7. Many still link this exaggerated representation with modern pornography and consider that *shunga* is primarily for the stimulation of masturbation among young men, but when we examine *shunga* and other sources it is clear that in the Edo period this art form was enjoyed by rich and poor, old and young, men and women. Some will take this to conclude that the Japanese were an incomparably lecherous nation, but that is a shortsighted assumption. Fundamentally the Japanese were not as straitlaced about sex as Westerners, considering it to be a natural part of human life.
8. It is sometimes said that Japan was under a feudalistic regime in the Edo period, and therefore *shunga* served primarily to fulfill the frustrated desires and dreams of men, and that it often shows men using women for sexual pleasure. However, looking at *shunga* up close and in detail, we see that almost always the women are presented as forthright and positive. We can conclude that in *shunga* the ideal of sexual relations was for both parties to reach climax and mutual satisfaction, a kind of male/female harmony or sex utopia.
9. In the contemporary West there is a strong feeling against the inclusion of children in any sort of sexual context, but in *shunga* we see children ranging from nursing infants to adolescents. However, they are never the object of sexual abuse and rather feature as a natural part of family life. This also seems to reflect the fact that religious taboos on sex were not widespread, and therefore it was not necessary to hide sex or keep it secret.

10. Another characteristic technique of *shunga* is its parody of classical Japanese and Chinese literature and poetry. In order to savor the parody it is necessary to know the original literary works, at least in outline. I often am asked did those who enjoyed these erotic parodies have considerable education in the classics? We know that at least from the mid-eighteenth century the spread of *terakoya* schools extended throughout Japan. These schools taught the basics of history and literature, and research shows that literacy was high in Japan in comparison with other countries. Therefore the common people were able easily to decipher the cursive texts and had basic knowledge of the classics so that they could enjoy the parody texts in *shunga*.

The above is an outline of *shunga* and its main characteristics. I do not know how well the Spanish director understood my explanations, but I can only hope that readers of this book will come to have a clearer understanding of *shunga*, a treasure of Japan that has been hidden from the world for many years.