

## Illustrated Buddhist Texts in the Edo Period<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

In the Edo period, in which publishing business was established and the Buddhist sects experienced a revival, new forms of illustrated Buddhist texts were created, while basing themselves on the textual and preaching traditions of the earlier periods. Publication of illustrated Buddhist texts was scarce in the seventeenth century but increases from the eighteenth century onwards, with a significant rise in the latter half of the century. For example, *The Illustrated Essentials of Rebirth in the Pure Land in Kana* was published through the Edo period, and influenced the Japanese views of Hell and Paradise. In the case of books related to Shin Buddhism, illustrated books on Shinran came to be published in the early Edo period. After that, many illustrated texts were published in the later Edo period, such as the illustrated biographies of Shinran, Rennyō and the Seven Patriarchs and *wakun zue* of the Scriptures. Furthermore, many of the contents of illustrated Buddhist texts survived well into the Meiji era.

### 要約

商業出版が成立し仏教教団が復興を遂げた江戸時代において、前代の書物史・教化史に規定されつつも独自の絵入り仏書が生み出された。絵入り仏書の出版は17世紀には僅かであるが、18世紀以降増えてゆく。18世紀後期からは出版が顕著となる。江戸時代を通じて出版された「仮名書き絵入り往生要集」は、日本人の地獄・極楽観に影響を与えることとなった。また、真宗関係の絵入り本に注目すると、江戸時代前期には親鸞に関する絵入り本が出版されるようになり、下って江戸時代後期になると親鸞・蓮如・七高僧らの生涯をまとめた絵入り本や、経典の和訓図会・絵抄などが数多く出版された。絵入り仏書の多くは、明治時代以降も継承されていった。

**Keywords** キーワード

Illustrated Buddhist Texts, Edo Period, *Ojoyoshu*, Shin Buddhism

絵入り仏書、江戸時代、往生要集、新仏教

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine the illustrated Buddhist texts from the Edo period (1603-1868) with considerations to the text culture and the situation of the Buddhist sects of the period. Due to the limitation of the present author's knowledge, examples given in the paper, which are mainly woodblock books, are restricted to specific works as well as works related to specific sects.

### 1. The Text Culture of the Edo Period

Woodblock book printing business is said to have been established around the Kan'ei era (1624-45). Its centre was Kyoto, and the majority of the publication were Buddhist texts (Table). Kyoto was followed by Edo and Osaka, where bookshops were established and developed. Thanks also to the distribution of books, literacy of Japanese people rose towards the latter half of the Edo period, though its rate varied among different classes, regions and genders. ([Konta] [Aoki] et al.)

**Table: Number of publications according to type (from book catalogues)**

	Buddhist texts	Confucian texts	Historical and mythological texts, <i>yusoku</i> **	Literary texts	Dictionaries	Texts on practical studies*	Practical texts*
Kan'ei 10 (1670)	1637	536	79	487	76	433	563
Genroku 5 (1692)	1144	358	56	1078	103	314	345
Kyoho 14 (1729)	1332	404	96	404	58	357	693
Horeki 4 (1754)	434	430	40	692	71	159	847
Meiwa 9 (1772)	452	592	34	539	77	310	842

\* [Hikino] p. 3. "Texts on practical studies" include military treatises and medical and astrological texts. "Practical texts" include textbooks for common people and writing manuals.

\*\* *Yusoku* is a study of traditional codes.

In the field of the History of Early Modern Japan, bibliographical studies have become popular since the 1990s. For example, Yokota Fuyuhiko considered the spread

of written knowledge among and the improvement of arithmetical skills of the educated peasants not as a sign of deconstruction but as a characteristic of the Early Modern ([Yokota 1, 3]). In addition, he argued that *Tsurezuregusa* (*Essays in Idleness*) by Yoshida Kenko (c.1331) should be categorized as Edo literature from the reader's perspective, thus dealing with the issue of readership ([Yokota 2]). Wakao Masaki has been promoting a study of thoughts of Early Modern Japanese on the politics and society of the period through examination of books ([Wakao]). He is involved in the publication of the scholarly journal *Text, Publication and the Change in Society*.

## 2. Buddhist Sects and Publication of Buddhist Texts

The early Edo period saw a revival of Buddhist sects thanks to the granting of fief and promotions of education and Buddhist studies by the Tokugawa Shogunate. Buddhist schools (*danrin*) were established, which prompted publications of Buddhist texts. Buddhism further established its root in the society in a unique manner such as by the *danka* (lay supporter) system, which must have laid the groundwork for the wide reception of Buddhist texts.

As a result, not only the Buddhist Scripture and theological texts but also rather simple popular Buddhist texts were published. In the publishing activities, we observe for example competitions between the books published by temples (*zoban*) and by private bookshops (*bokokubon*), and the formation of bonds between temples and bookshops as exemplified in the establishment of *goyo shorin* (a designated bookshop of a particular temple).

Publication of illustrated Buddhist texts was scarce in the seventeenth century but increases from the eighteenth century onwards, with a significant rise in the latter half of the century. As a general trend of Buddhist publication, we see a decrease in the number of new titles being issued from the eighteenth century onwards, but illustrated texts show an increase, with notable numbers of *wakun zue*<sup>2</sup> and illustrated commentaries in print ([Ushiroshoji] et al.). This trend may be explained by the growth and maturity of readership as well as the publishers' strategies.

The tradition of *etoki* (explanation of pictures) culture from the Middle Ages must have also provided the basis for the publication of illustrated Buddhist texts. Additionally, the rise in the interest in the pilgrimage to temples and shrines in the Edo period and relating publications including topographical books, textbooks for common people, pictures, journals, brief historical records of temples and shrines must have encouraged the publication of illustrated Buddhist texts.

<sup>2</sup> *Wakun zue*: a collection of pictures (*zue*) with texts written in Chinese script accompanied by the Japanese reading of it (*wakun*).

### 3. Ojoyoshu (*The Essentials of Rebirth in the Pure Land*) as Edo literature

This section examines the situation concerning the illustrated Buddhist text, drawing on the study by Nishida Naoki on *The Illustrated Essentials of Rebirth in the Pure Land in Kana*<sup>3</sup> ([Nishida]).

*The Essentials of Rebirth in the Pure Land* (written in Chinese script) by Genshin was written in Kanwa 1 (985) and circulated as manuscripts (written either in Chinese script or *kana*) and printed books (in Chinese script) until the Muromachi period (1336-1573). In the Edo period, mainly by bookshops in Kyoto, editions written in *kana* began to be published, which contained illustration; hence the name *The Illustrated Essentials of Rebirth in the Pure Land in Kana* (nine editions of it are known to have survived).

*The Illustrated Essentials...* is closely related to *The Picture Scroll of the Essentials of Rebirth in the Pure Land* in six volumes (early Edo period, colour on silk). This set of scrolls is in fact a compilation of the chapters on *Onriedo* (leaving a corrupted land) and *Gongujodo* (seeking rebirth in the Pure Land) from *The Essentials of Rebirth in the*



**Fig. 1 – Hell of repeated rebirth for torture**

*The Illustrated Essentials of Rebirth in the Pure Land in Kana*, the edition of 1671  
([Nishida] p.204)

<sup>3</sup> *Kana*: syllabic scripts used in Japan. There are two kinds of *kana*; *hiragana* and *katakana*.

*Pure Land* and is believed to have been used for the *etoki*. The text that accompanies the pictures is written in a mixture of Chinese script and *katakana* and without *yomigana*<sup>4</sup>. It is essentially a simplified Japanese translation of *The Essentials of Rebirth in the Pure Land*.

The main text of *The Illustrated Essentials...* is nearly identical to the text of *The Picture Scroll of the Essentials...* (although the former is written in a mixture of Chinese script and *hiragana* and is accompanied by *yomigana*), and furthermore its illustrations follow the picture scroll up until the edition of Kansei 2 (1790). One may thus call *The Illustrated Essentials...* as a printed version of *The Picture Scroll of the Essentials...*, in which the text and pictures of the scroll were used as the main text and illustrations of the printed version. The book circulated widely, whose readership was not limited to monks. It was also used as a material for *etoki*. As such, it influenced the Japanese views of Hell and Paradise. (Picture 1, 2)



**Fig. 2 - The descent of saint with Amida Buddha**

*The Illustrated Essentials of Rebirth in the Pure Land in Kana*, the edition of 1671  
 ([Nishida] p.241)

<sup>4</sup> *Yomigana*: transliteration of Chinese script into *kana*

#### 4. Illustrated Books of Shin Buddhism (True Pure Land Buddhism)

In this section, illustrated books that are related to Shin Buddhism are examined.

Publication of books related to Shin Buddhism continued to increase in and beyond the eighteenth century, and moreover it showed a different pattern from those of other sects ([Kanmuri] [Hikino]). Publication of illustrated books also increased.

Monks of Shin Buddhism preached the followers using Rennyō's *Epistles* (a collection of letters written by Rennyō). In general, they did not use Scriptures such as the Three Pure Land Sutras (*Sutra of Immeasurable Life*, *the Meditation Sutra*, and *the Amida Sutra*) or Shinran's *Kyogyoshinsho* (A collection of passages expounding the true teaching, living, faith, and realizing of the Pure Land). Nonetheless, the monks' teaching was based on the knowledge acquired from various texts which included Scriptures. They taught, at times using *etoki*, about the life of Shinran, the founder of the sect, as well as the history of the sect.

How illustrated books on Shinran came to be published can be summarized as follows. First, in Einin 3 (1295), Kakunyo's *Honganji Shonin Shinran Den'e* (the illustrated narrative scroll on the life of Shinran) was established. The main text, in verse, of this scroll was made into *Godensho*, while its illustrations were compiled into *Goeden*; the latter was a hanging scroll and used for *etoki*. Illustrated books were published based on these two



Fig. 3 - A scene that a mountain priest saw Shinran and believed devoutly in Buddhism

*Biography of Shinran*, imprint date unknown ([Kusaka] p.70-71)



Fig. 4 - A scene of the separation of Honen and Shinran  
*Story of Shinran*, the edition of 1663 ([Hiramatsu] p.81)

types of compilations. For example, *Shinran Shonin Godenki* (Biography of Shinran) was published in Kanbun 12 (1672) and reprinted (Picture 3). The *joruri*<sup>5</sup> text *Shinran Ki* (Story of Shinran), which may be considered an illustrated Buddhist text in a wide sense, was performed as a puppet show in Osaka, but its performance was banned in response to the complaint made by Higashi Honganji Temple; its publication was also banned (Picture 4) ([Ogawa] [Kusaka] [Sakato]).

In the later Edo period, many illustrated texts important for Shin Buddhism were published, such as the illustrated biographies of Shinran, Rennyo and the Seven Patriarchs (Ryuju, Tenjin, Donran, Doshaku, Zendo, Genshin, Honen) and *wakun zue* of the Scriptures. The latter was not merely texts of Scriptures written in Japanese reading but in fact commentaries with illustrations and parables, thanks to which the believers could easily access and familiarize themselves with the content of the Scriptures. Writers of *yomihon*,<sup>6</sup> who took part in writing some of these illustrated books, were also instrumental in creating this trend. Furthermore, many of the illustrated books were still reprinted in the Meiji era and beyond.

5 *Joruri*: a type of performance with either puppets or humans typified by musical accompaniment of storytelling on *shamisen*, a Japanese string instrument.

6 *Yomihon*: a literary genre of fantastic tale which was popular in the late Edo period.

## Conclusion

Through this study one may reasonably conclude that in the Edo period, in which publishing business was established and the Buddhist sects experienced a revival, new forms of illustrated Buddhist texts were created and developed, while basing themselves on the textual and preaching traditions of the earlier periods. Furthermore, the contents of such texts survived well into the Meiji era.

Illustrated Buddhist texts have been little studied in the History of Early Modern Japan. It is thus necessary to learn from the achievements produced in Japanese Literature, History of Buddhism and Art History and combine knowledge from different fields in order to promote the study of them.

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