

Japanese Literature and Art: Building the Digital Archive of Woodblock *Kuchi-e* Prints and its Impacts

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abstract

Many books from the mid-to-late the Meiji era, mainly literary works, had woodblock-printed frontispieces (*kuchi-e* prints). These *kuchi-e* prints are valuable resources for understanding the culture of the era, yet they have been avoided in all research fields, including literature and the fine arts, because they are difficult to handle due to their format. In this paper, I will explain about the infrastructure development of a digital research environment for *kuchi-e* prints, which is what I am currently working on.

Introduction

The connection between painting and literature is very deep. The paintings used as illustrations in novels are a familiar example of this connection. As shown in the illustration below (Figure 1), early modern picture books



Figure 1. Ryukatei Tanekazu. (1849). *Shiranui monogatari*, 1(1).
Art Research Center, Ritsumeikan University, accession no.:
hayBK03-0636-01

had a mixture of illustrations and text, and you can imagine that readers were constantly aware of the illustrations while reading these works.

On the other hand, if you look at modern literature books, in contrast to its earlier modern counterparts, illustrations have been eliminated, and only the printed text is left alone. As a result of the significant changes in the way novels are made and the printing technology of modern times, illustrations and other visual elements intended to aid in reading have faded from the modern novels.

However, not all visuals were eliminated from modern novels. Illustrations could still be found; they remained popular in novels serialized in newspapers and magazines. In addition, during the Meiji era (1868-1912), many books were published with strikingly beautiful bindings. Although there had been a

decrease in the visuals intended to directly aid in reading, many visuals remained to prompt readers to acquire written works. In other words, remaining visuals were meant to inspire a desire to read or purchase. These included “modern woodblock-printed frontispieces” (hereinafter, this is called “*kuchi-e* prints”. This means to distinguish them from the Edo period frontispieces) during the Meiji 20s (1887-96). In this paper, I will take up *kuchi-e* prints and introduce the digital archive construction project and explain the effects it brings.

1. The Research Method

1.1. Books in the Edo Period and the Meiji Era

First of all, let me check what *kuchi-e* prints are, as they did not just suddenly appear in modern times. They actually were around during the preceding Edo period. However, early modern and modern frontispieces differ in appearance and character. In terms of appearance, early modern frontispieces used mainly half-page printed spread configurations (Figure 2), while modern frontispieces are mainly printed on separate sheets of medium-sized print (Figure 3). Modern frontispieces have several insertion methods available.

As for how these were drawn, early modern frontispieces mainly featured full-length images and names of characters, normally emphasizing their introduction but not showing actual scenes. Despite the publishing rules that placed restrictions on coloration in the Edo period, impressive images were rendered employing various ink colors and printing techniques. On the other hand, in

modern times, techniques have been adopted for composing images to depict different times and places in the same picture. Sometimes, characters who do not actually appear in works are depicted. However, in the late Meiji era, modern frontispieces included magazine frontispieces featuring beautiful women who were unrelated to the beginning of the novels.



Figure 2. Ryukatei Tanekazu. (1855). *Shiranui monogatari*, 21(1). Frontispiece
Art Research Center, Ritsumeikan University, accession no.: hayBK03-0636-01



Figure 3. Kuroiwa Ruiko. (1896). *Ayashi no mono. Kuchi-e* prints
Art Research Center, Ritsumeikan University, accession no.: 54100230-01 (Collection of Tomoo Asahi)

The modern woodblock-printed frontispiece was born against the backdrop of publishing companies aiming to ensure employment for woodblock craftsmen and revive woodblock printing.¹⁾ However, I will skip over explaining

the specific ups and downs of the industry. Furthermore, the “*kuchi-e* prints” I just mentioned in this paper were not the early modern ones, but rather those made today in modern Japan using multicolored woodblock printing.

1.2. The Purpose and Significance of My Research

It is difficult to address *kuchi-e* prints physically, as they are inserted into books. Furthermore, despite their close connection to novels and their many artistic elements, they are usually left out of discussions of art and literature. Under such circumstances, the history of *kuchi-e* print research is presently quite sketchy. The first studies were done in the U.S. in the 1990s, as a branch of research into *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints. Very little subsequent development has been seen, just the creation of compendiums and similar works. However, recently, exhibitions including modern woodblock-printed frontispieces have been held at art museums and libraries both in Japan and abroad.²⁾ There appears to be a rise in popular interest, and a need for further research.

Therefore, we have embarked on the development of an infrastructure for a digital *kuchi-e* print research environment. Presently, we are constructing a database, while simultaneously attempting to study *kuchi-e* prints using the materials thus obtained.

2. The Database's Concept and its Impacts

We are currently in the process of developing metadata for the database, and here we describe the concept and structure of the database we are

currently building.

In my archive construction, I have utilized the know-how, ideas and system of the Art Research Center, Ritsumeikan University (hereinafter, this is called “ARC”). Database construction does not mean the building of a single database. Through connection to other databases within the Art Research Center, I hope to make it possible to see *kuchi-e* prints in three dimensions. However, since the book archive has so little collected, I do not plan to limiting ourselves to the Center, and to establish links with the archives of other organizations for greater accessibility. Doing so will aid in discussing the relationship between bindings, *kuchi-e* prints, and text (Figure 4).

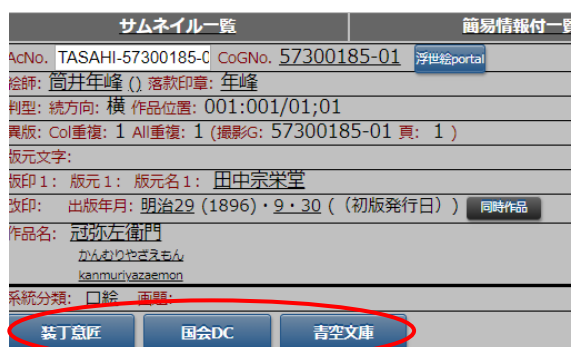


Figure 4. Database metadata
The "URL Links" can include links to internal and external ARC databases.

Presently, the image data on *kuchi-e* prints are being put into the Ukiyo-e Portal Database,³⁾ and it is in temporary residence.

Kuchi-e prints, cut off from the book,⁴⁾ resemble *ukiyo-e* prints, as they are in the form of one-page multicolored woodblock prints. ARC has accumulated a wealth of know-how, including the ability to use lighting techniques to identify the printing techniques from different images, and the ability to identify detailed metadata. As described above, since the basic concept is based on the Ukiyo-e Portal Database, there is no inconvenience in the design of the database.

However, the information contained in *kuchi-*

e prints has many aspects that are different from *ukiyo-e* prints. Metadata items must be examined in close detail. Sometimes, the titles of the books or magazines to which a *kuchi-e* print has been attached are different in subject matter from the *kuchi-e* prints themselves. Naturally, metadata needs to be entered, including volume numbers and editions, publishing company names, and the authors of the novels in which the *kuchi-e* prints were originally found. Unlike *ukiyo-e* prints, information about the publication is rarely written on the screen of *kuchi-e* prints. Therefore, we need to input metadata referring to the back of books with *kuchi-e* prints. Thus, as mentioned earlier, it is good to secure links to the book databases.⁵⁾ Presently, the image data on *kuchi-e* prints are being put into the Ukiyo-e Portal Database, and not appropriate to showing name of data item, the system must be changed so that metadata item names are displayed in a way suitable for *kuchi-e* prints.

In the past, we have used these methods to build archives of collections owned by research institutions and individuals. Content is being accumulated and used for research.⁶⁾

Conclusion

Finally, let me look at the positioning of *kuchi-e* prints based on our archival experience.

My long-term research objective is to put *kuchi-e* prints at the forefront of humanities studies. When we think about *kuchi-e* prints, different opinions may arise regarding what they are, depending on the field of the humanities. I believe *kuchi-e* prints deserve a place in the history of publishing. The study of publishing culture refers to studying two things. One is the study of various methods and techniques for printing text and images intrinsic to publishing, as well as methods and means of selling and distribution. The other is the study of

various cultural-historical influences of published books on society, in other words, various issues that arise in publishing in relation to the outside world.⁷⁾

Based on this, it is natural that *kuchi-e* prints are currently considered a “bonus material” that came with books. The primary reason for this is that there are only traces that suggest that *kuchi-e* prints were enjoyed separately. Many Meiji era novels have *kuchi-e* prints removed. It can also be confirmed that a collection of *kuchi-e* prints was published in the same period.⁸⁾ *Kuchi-e* prints are one-page pieces independent in form, which gradually became independent from the content of the novels. Therefore, they became even more like bonus material.

However, they were not simply bonus material. They provided opportunities for the craftsmen in the colored printing techniques that came to fruition in the Edo Period, as well as their disciples, and are a resource for imagining what sort of techniques were used in bonus material for books compared to the colored prints of the previous or same era. Furthermore, they may be considered a valuable resource for imagining the Meiji era publishing culture, including what sort of people were involved in preparing bonus material, and what costs were involved for bonus materials.

As stated before, *kuchi-e* prints may have been bonus material for books. However, if that is the case, I think they are a necessary resource for thinking about the Meiji era publishing culture. Thus, when researching *kuchi-e* prints, a digital humanities approach may be considered a very effective research technique.

Notes

- 1) Iwakiri Shinichiro. (2003). *Kindai kuchi-e-ron: Meiji-ki mokuhan kuchi-e no seiritsu*. *Publications of Tokyo Bunka Junior College*, 20, 13-23.
- 2) For more information, see the following paper. Tsuneki Kana. (2019). *Kuchi-e Prints' Production and*

System: On Digitalization of the Asahi Collection. *Art Research*, 19, 3-14.

- 3) Art Research Center, Ritsumeikan University. The Ukiyo-e Portal Database, https://www.dh-jac.net/db/nishikie/search_portal.php [10-15-2019]
- 4) The *kuchi-e* prints in the market today are often in the condition of a single piece separated from a book.
- 5) National Diet Library, Japan. National Diet Library Digital Collection, <http://dl.ndl.go.jp/> [10-15-2019]
- 6) Tsuneki Kana, *supra* note 2.
- 7) The Kyoto Branch of the Japan Book Publishers Association (Eds.). (1996). *The Cultural History of Books & Publishing in Japan*. Tokyo: The Japan Book Publishers Association.
- 8) Wada Shizuko (Eds.). (1911). *Edo nishiki*. Tokyo: Shunyodo.