

# The Publishing Culture of the Edo Period

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## Origin of the publishing industry

It was during the Edo period (beginning of the 17th century through the middle of the 19th century) that publications in the form of printed materials came to be distributed widely and in large numbers.

Prior to that time, publication by printing methods was almost exclusively carried out by Buddhist temples. It was virtually only these Buddhist establishments that possessed the facilities for storing the printing blocks and the manpower and financial means necessary for carving the blocks and printing from them. Printing was carried out by carving writing and images in reverse on wooden blocks, inking the blocks, and pressing paper on the blocks. Naturally, the majority were Buddhist texts including sutras, and the creation of printed materials was a variety of religious activity. This printing of sutras was not primarily intended for a broad readership, but was rather a substitute for the practice of copying scriptures (known as *shakyo*) that was considered an act of devotion to the Buddha. The scriptures created in this fashion were offered to the temples and that was the conclusion of their role. It is difficult to call this "publication" in the strict sense of the word as it was not intended for wide distribution and was not provided for the enjoyment of an unspecified broad readership.

Copper type brought back from the Korean Peninsula at the end of the 16th century by Toyotomi Hideyoshi's military expedition led to the popularity of publishing materials in type print. Publishing that employed wooden type created in imitation of metal type was carried out by statesmen, temples and benefactors among the citizenry. (A recent convincing theory holds that type printing technology introduced by Christian missionaries was used.) This method of printing which was immensely

more convenient than the existing woodcut block printing method, which required enormous expense and labor, had the added attraction of being a novelty, and when the disturbances of war subsided somewhat, it was quickly received by Japanese society whose cultural demands were growing. The numbers that were published and the varieties may have been limited, but there is no small historical significance in the fact that publications other than Buddhist materials began to be created and circulated with ease. Such small-scale publishing primed the pump for an expanded readership and brought on a demand for published materials.

From the 1630s wooden-type publishing declined, and woodblock printing became once again the most common method. It is safe to see this as the point at which the demand for publications surpassed the efficacy of type-printing which was so efficient. Printing with wooden blocks did require major expense and considerable labor, but reprinting was simple. If there was such demand that reprinting became necessary, this method was much more convenient and efficient than having to reset the type from scratch each time.

In other words, we can say that the demand for published works increased so much at this time that it could not be met by small-scale type-printing publication. We can assume that works published by wooden-type printing had become to some extent a saleable commodity, and we can verify that there type-print works were published by bookstores. However, because it was during the 1630s that blocks became the main form of printing, we can say that it was during this period that publishing became established as a single industry. Once it was possible to anticipate that the major initial investment needed for creating the woodblocks and storing them could later be recovered, the



Musume Teikin Kogane no Niwatori Vol. 2; published in 1857, story by Santo Kyozan, illustrations by Utagawa Kunisada. One of the representative work of *soshi* or *kusazoshi*.

printing method of using blocks came into use. The possession of the woodblocks meant the right to guarantee the publication of the relevant published work (corresponding to the role of the *shikei* [paper matrix] in current-day movable-type printing.) That in itself became an asset that a publisher could buy and sell. These early publishing houses sprang forth among the public benefactors who energetically involved themselves in publishing printed works and the technicians who were trained by the temples which had a long tradition of printing. It was they who were to support the spectacular publishing culture that was to unfold in the years to come.

## The Edo Period

Japan had an ancient tradition involving written works. It was a culture inclusive of Japanese handmade paper and the written word. There still exist today beautiful works from ten centuries ago written with elegant brushwork. As was writing itself, this culture was one of a certain segment of the intellectual elite composed of the imperial court and nobility and the Buddhist priesthood. A great transition in this culture of published works was to occur in the Edo period.

At the beginning of the 17th century

the powerful government of the Tokugawa Bakufu was established. A long, continuous period of peace and stability had arrived. In response to this new age which no one had ever experienced, aspiration toward scholarship appeared, as did a movement to attain some sort of purpose through written works. And the peace that was brought to society permitted the publication of written works for the reading pleasure of broad segments of the social structure.

The Tokugawa government sought to stabilize society by the regulation and enforcement of law and the dissemination of morality. Laws were proclaimed via the written word and moral precepts were transmitted through published works. The government poured effort into thoroughgoing literacy education by such means as publishing and distributing widely texts for education. Learning from the thirst for learning of the Tokugawa who led the shogunate, the various feudal domains enthusiastically promoted educational activities within their own territories. With the encouragement of the shogunate, institutions such as the "temple schools" (*terakoya*) for the education of the common people were established throughout the land. Further, the attainment of literacy became indispensable for economic activities and for local self-government. The will of the statesmen and the advantage to the ruled coincided in the creation of a nation with a rarely seen high literacy level. The culture of the written word permeated broadly across social strata and each level of society and each level of education began to enjoy its own amusement through the agency of writing. With the arrival of the 19th century, the number of the "temple schools" and the number of the enrollees increased rapidly, markedly raising literacy levels. The publishing industry produced more works for the enjoyment of this newly rising literate segment of society, creating one new work after another to further stimulate the demand.



Ongyoku Tamazoro; published at the end of the Edo period (mid-19th century)  
A book of popular songs called *Gidayu Joruri*. Jackets of miscellaneous books are shown on the jacket of this song book.

The Russian missionary Nikolai visited Japan as a priest attached to the Russian consulate at Hakodate in June 1861. Based on his observations at that time, he wrote a report called "Japan as seen from the perspective of the Christian missionary organization" (published in the *Russkiiia Vedomosti* [the Russia Herald] in September 1869). There is an extremely interesting passage\*<sup>1</sup> in this report. "Two girls are standing along the street, looking at the pictures in a book. One of the girls has just bought the book and is showing it off to her good friend. The book is a certain historical novel. It can reasonably enough be said that it is not necessary to buy books in this country. There are a truly large number of shops that loan books, so one can borrow a book to read for an unbelievably low charge. Not only that, but it is not even necessary to go to the booklenders. The reason is that, books are delivered every day, to every narrow alleyway, no matter far at the end of the lane! You should visit one of these booklenders for the experience. What you will find is almost exclusively historical war narratives. (This is because of the public's taste which was cultivated during the long period of civil war and confused fighting.) Moreover, you will not find a volume that is not badly thumbed. Not only that but the pages are so smudged and worn from handling that one can hardly read what is written on the page. This is clear evidence of just how much the populace of Japan reads."

He follows the above with the additional comment, "In terms of the numbers of people who are literate and who read books, Japan is in no way behind the nations of Western Europe. (Not to mention Russia!)" The degree to which Japanese read at the time seems to have been entirely unexpected.

The first cause of his astonishment is that the girls (a twofold surprise because they are women and because they are young in years) are accustomed to reading, and moreover, what they are reading is a historical novel. This is not merely a special instance, but rather such a common event that the two girls share in discussing the subject. The second reason why he is surprised concerns distribution, concretely the rational system of the booklenders. For a person who has come from a society in which it is natural for writing and the custom of reading to remain the prerogative of a segment of a privileged class, it was quite amazing that such a book distribution mechanism was in operation. The fact that Japanese at the end of Tokugawa shogunate (in the middle of the 19th century) had achieved the habit of reading on a constant, daily basis gives evidence to the maintenance of a distribution structure. It indicates that books were in no way uncommon and that they were an everyday item in society.

Another Russian named Mechnikov who arrived in Japan in 1874 (during the Meiji period) reports that during breaks between jobs, the laborers who carry freight pull novels from their loincloths and fall totally absorbed in reading. (*Russkiiia Vedomosti* serialization between September 10, 1883, and December 30, 1884, titled "Memories of a two-year assignment in Japan.")\*<sup>2</sup> This results not from a thoroughness in education for a new age brought about in the newly arrived Meiji period, but it is a cultural phenomenon carried over from the Edo period.

The establishment and the flourishing of the publishing industry, and the flood of books and other printed materials,

were brought forth by the conditions of the period.

**Books (shomotsu) and storybooks (soshi)**

In the Edo period, "publications" were divided into two major categories. One was *shomotsu* (books), which included publications traditionally related to such fields as religion, thought, scholarship and classic literature and intended to be instructive. The other was *soshi* (storybooks), a category which included amusing pamphlets for immediate enjoyment, collections of letters, and books on fortunetelling, in other words, practical books for gaining everyday knowledge. Although they were not bound publications, the *ukiyo-e* (woodblock prints of the "floating world") and printed *kawaraban* (tile block print) pages describing news events are also considered part of this second category.

Between these two, there was a disparity that was greater than that between our current-day academic books and regular magazines. Books (*shomotsu*) were 'sacred' and when reading a book one was required to sit properly, open the book on a reading easel or a desk and carefully turn one page at a time. One was not to place a book directly on the floor and one was certainly not to step across it. A *soshi*, however, was a kind of booklet that one could read sprawled out on the floor, read carelessly while drinking saké and dispose of when finished. The production and distribution structure of these differed.

*Shomotsu* were produced by publishing bookstores called *shomotsu tonya*. To the extent that the purchasers of this type of book were limited to the intellectual class, it was rare for such a volume to produce an instant profit. Customarily, it would require repeated printings over a long period of time to retrieve the major initial investment. Other than the bookstores, it might be the temples, private academies or scholars who would finance the publication and become the owner of the blocks, and the bookstores would in their stead help with the printing and binding and take over the

selling of the product. A lot of books were printed in this way. Accordingly, the appearance of pirated versions could be a fatal blow. The *shomotsu tonya* organized themselves and mutually monitored whether there were illegal publications by those outside their organization, hence protecting the rights of their members. Groups formed in the three metropolises of Kyoto, Edo (Tokyo) and Osaka (and a group was later recognized in Nagoya), and not only did they participate in book trade between the three cities, but they controlled the distribution of books to other areas. Establishing cooperation with retailers in the major provincial cities, they would sell books wholesale to the retailers, who would then relay the books on to even smaller booksellers in the local area, many of whom would sell books as well as other items. In this way, by the 18th century a book distribution network was already established on a national scale.

On the other hand, the *soshi* business was one in which there was a quick turn around. It required several types of craftsmen working in league — stencilers who made a clean copy of the manuscript and copied it onto the blocks, engravers to carry out the carving of the blocks, printers to rub prints from the blocks, and binders to put the pages together in book form. There was also extremely close cooperation between these craftsmen and the distribution structure. They were always prepared so that if some topic appeared that would have timely appeal, they could immediately run off a pamphlet of a print and it would be promptly distributed. They spared no effort in constantly attempting to put out novel products in advance of their competitors.

The leading product of the *soshi* enterprises and the publication that supported the industry as a whole was the *ukiyo-e* woodblock print. Proof of this lies in the fact that from the latter half of the 18th century when multicolor printing by the method known as *nishiki-e* (brocade pictures) was discovered and *ukiyo-e*, often called "pictures of the floating world," began to rapidly increase in value as a product, the

industry developed remarkably. Even those *ukiyo-e* which today sell for astounding sums were at that time retailing for twenty-four to 36 *mon*, or at most 48 *mon*. A *mon* at that time was worth perhaps ¥20 today, so even the most expensive at that time could have been bought with the equivalent of ¥1,000 today. However inexpensive labor was at that time, the fact that these prints required multiple color pressings and were printed on high-quality paper and still sold for such low prices shows that it was assumed that they would be purchased in large quantities. (It is said that they would break even if they sold four hundred copies.) These prints were produced in large quantities for enjoyment as a semi-expendable item.

Even wholesome *kusazoshi* (picture books) created for children (reading books based on pictures, similar to present-day comics and close to the chapbooks of the United Kingdom) were available for five *mon* in the mid-18th century and eight *mon* or a set of three for 24 *mon* at the end of the 18th century. They were the equivalent of the weekly comic magazine today. One can see how they could be published in such large quantities on the premise that they were an expendable amusement.

At locations where people gathered in profusion, such as Asakusa, Ryogoku and Shiba Shinmei-mae, were rows of numerous shops called *esoshi-ya* which sold various kinds of *soshi*. The same was true in sections where theaters stood. Besides these locations, there were *esoshi-ya* throughout the city of Edo, and *ukiyo-e* and *kusazoshi* were displayed alongside toys made of paper for children. In the Kyoto-Osaka region there were large numbers of shops called *hanko-ya* similar to the *esoshi-ya* shops of Edo.

The publisher (*hanmoto*), craftsmen and the *esoshi-ya* shops were dependent on one another. For the publisher who had to maintain a position where he could wholesale items to the *esoshi-ya* and itinerant traders so that they could get the jump on others and try to sell out certain publications before the government had time to take measures to suppress their sales, it was essential to

keep the production and distribution mechanism constantly active. They were solely dependent on rapid production and rapid sales, so if they could not earn a living, the publishing business would come to a dead end. They had to continue to provide the craftsmen with work and at the same time they had to constantly provide new products to the *esoshi-ya* that would attract the attention of customers. If there was no news that could be sold, they could not refrain from making up news and producing the brochures and prints that would appeal to people's interest.

The *ukiyo-e* was one kind of publication that demanded the very newest. In the *esoshi-ya* were hung pictures based on plays that were currently being performed in the theaters and portraits of the most currently popular actors, courtesans, and sumo wrestlers. And if an item was mistimed and urban dwellers would not so much as give it a second look, the only thing to do was to drastically reduce the price and hope that a traveler would buy it as a souvenir to take back to the countryside. Accordingly, the *esoshi-ya* itself was a media that reflected "the present." If you stood in the store, you would know what was happening in the world and what was currently in fashion. There was good reason why the *esoshi-ya* along with the itinerant peddlars were important focal points of the distribution of informational brochures and prints.

An age in which various kinds of information in large quantities went back and forth and people made decisions about action based on that information accompanied the development of the publishing industry which transmitted innumerable pieces of information to an indeterminate number of people.

### Booklenders

Small retail shops like the *esoshi-ya* could be found not only in the cities but even in remote villages. Unlike in the cities, there was no specialization in the countryside, so almost all of the shops handled both *shomotsu* and *soshi*. Even in places where there were no merchants specializing in the selling of books, such places as sundry shops and pharmacies

played a role in the distribution of publications. Further, there was almost no place that itinerant merchants did not visit. Wholesalers who supplied products to these merchants who functioned as the end of the distribution lines, as we have seen before, extended their networks on a national scale.

This was not all there was to the Edo period distribution of published materials. The booklending business formed an important sector of the publications distribution structure. This business appears to have developed at the beginning of the publishing industry when bookshops upon request loaned their products to readers for a charge. This is thought to have developed into an independent enterprise and created its own mechanisms at the end of the 17th century around the time of the Genroku period when Ihara Saikaku and his followers began to produce popular novels of the *ukiyo-soshi*, a genre appropriate for the Edo period. The appearance of these popular novels the majority of which, although they were for amusement, were not inexpensive gave birth to this business, and this cultivated the readership of novels. It was also because of the existence of this system that publications providing entertainment were published continuously. They stimulated the publishers to develop products that were appropriate for distribution as books for loan, and they even published such materials themselves. With this kind of production and distribution system as a generator, numerous excellent novels for adults and romantic novels for women came into being.

Only rarely did a booklender actually have a shop. Most who were involved in the enterprise made the rounds of their regular customers. Just as in the quoted passage from Nikolai, they would regularly go around to visit their patrons, collecting the books that they had left the last time and leaving new



Front covers of first and second part of *Oshiegusa Nyobo* Katagi Vol. 11; published in 1851, story by Santo Kyoizan, illustrations by Utagawa Toyokuni. Young women judging *ukiyo-e* and *kusazoshi*. The two front covers form a single picture.

books. At a third of the cost of the book itself, the charge for borrowing a book was not inexpensive, but the service became absolutely essential for reading among the people. In the cities, every neighborhood had a booklender. At the beginning of the 17th century, in Edo alone there were somewhere between 600 and 700 such lenders scattered around the city. Even in the provinces, a town or village of any size had a booklender. In places where there was no booklender, there were merchants who regularly made the rounds and this reading culture and the enjoyment of reading reached even the most remote village.

### Note:

\*<sup>1</sup> This passage from *Russkiiia Vedomosti* is taken from *Nikorai no mita Bakumatsu Nippon* (Nikolai's view of Japan during the Bakumatsu period), translated from Russian to Japanese by Nakamura Kenosuke, published in the series *Kodansha Gakujutsu Bunko*, and retranslated into English for *JJTI*.

\*<sup>2</sup> This record is included in *Kaiso no Meiji ishin* (Reflecting on the Meiji Restoration) published by Iwanami Bunko. JJTI

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