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PICTURED FICTION:  
*Popular Novels of Nineteenth-Century Japan*  
*in the Starr East Asian Library*

HENRY D. SMITH II

The most striking feature of the thriving world of Japanese popular fiction in the mid-nineteenth century was the dominance of a comic-book type format that wove the written text through and around elaborate visual renditions of the narrated action. The C. V. Starr East Asian Library holds some two dozen examples of this intriguing type of book, representing fourteen different writers and nine artists.<sup>1</sup> While only a scattered selection, it is diverse and interesting enough to provoke a rethinking of what we mean by “literature” in Japan of the transition from Tokugawa to Meiji—and by extension in the astonishing comic-book culture of Japan today.

The story begins in the seventeenth century, in the emergence of a popular market for printed books in Japan to serve the new urban concentrations that appeared in Kyoto, Osaka, and Edo as a result of political reunification under the Tokugawa shoguns after 1600. Commercial printing in Japan began in the imperial capital of Kyoto, stimulated by the seizure of stocks of movable type for Chinese characters from Korea during Hideyoshi’s invasions in the 1590s. Publishers reverted quickly, however, to the wood-block technology that would remain dominant until the 1880s, sustained by an artisanal craft of remarkable sophistication.<sup>2</sup> One critical advantage of wood-block over movable type was the ease of interweaving image and text on the same block in a seamless manner, providing easy opportunity for the comic-book style.

Early printing in Kyoto concentrated on older works of literature, both in Chinese and in classical Japanese, with few illustrations. With the growth of a popular print culture, however, and its spread to neighboring Osaka, the pictorial emphasis became greater, particularly for the emerging townsman literature of the time. Still, as one discovers in the novels of Ihara Saikaku, the illustrations occupied separate pages apart from the text, much in the manner of the traditional scroll painting, in which text and image were regularly alternated.

It was rather in the shogunal capital of Edo (now Tokyo) to the north, where the constraints of tradition were fewer, that the integration of text and image on the same page was systematically developed. The process began with simple books of folk tales and legends aimed at a readership—perhaps more accurately, a viewership—that was not wholly literate, providing only occasional patches of simple narrative text within the pictures. These small pamphlets came to be known as *kusazōshi*, or “grass pamphlets”—perhaps because of the cursive “grass” phonetic script, perhaps because the cheap paper was *kusai* (smelly). They emerged in the late seventeenth century, and flourished in Edo in the middle decades of the eighteenth century, distinguished by the colors of their covers, variously red, blue, or black.

The *kusazōshi* format was turned in a radically new direction in the year 1775, when a



Fig. 1. Cover of first section of *Nuretsubame negawa no karakasa* (Nest-Umbrella for a Drenched Swallow), 1814; design by Utagawa Toyokuni.

samurai writer who called himself Koikawa Harumachi (“Loveriver Springtown”) used it for a parody of an old Chinese story, a witty tale of a country bumpkin who dreamed he had visited the Edo pleasure quarters and become a true rake.<sup>3</sup> This was the first of the *kibyōshi* (yellow covers), which lasted for some two decades as a critical genre in the remarkable parodic culture of Edo that was spearheaded by a creative alliance of urbane samurai and sophisticated townsmen. The *kibyōshi* were illustrated by such leading ukiyo-e artists as Kiyonaga and Utamaro, and achieved a level of wit and sophistication that belied their appearance as chapbooks for the semiliterate. It was the increasingly frequent tone of political satire that finally brought this particular stage of *kusazōshi* to an abrupt end in the shogunal

reforms of the early 1790s, in which some leading kibyōshi writers and their publishers were censored or punished.

The kusazōshi in the Starr Library collection represent the next stage of development that followed the reining in of the kibyōshi spirit. The genre became tamer politically but more fantastic in content and more popular in audience—not in a reversion to a less literate readership, but rather as a creative response to the rapid growth of literacy among all classes that was conspicuous from the turn of the nineteenth century. Some of the literary genres that thrived in this period consisted primarily of text, notably the *yomihon*—literally, “books for reading,” a term that implicitly suggested the more pictorial alternative of kusazōshi. The new development in picture fictions was simply a further evolution of the kibyōshi, now less parodic in spirit and more sustained in length, consisting of three or more covered pamphlets bound together with silk thread to form what from an early point were termed *gōkan* kusazōshi by the publishers, “bound-together” works of kusazōshi. As in the past, the smallest unit was a set of five folded-over sheets, which as kibyōshi would constitute a single pamphlet, but now the bound-together multiples of five typically reached thirty to forty sheets (sixty to eighty pages) for the single volume (or two-volume pair) that would be put on sale in bookstores.

One distinguishing feature of the new *gōkan* format, which was gradually developed

by Edo publishers in the years 1804–1809, was a new type of cover to replace the older plain kibyōshi “yellow cover” to which a printed title cartouche was pasted. The *gōkan* were now provided with full multicolor covers in the manner of single-sheet ukiyo-e “brocade prints,” a feature that much enhanced the aesthetic appeal of the book itself and provided a special lure when displayed on a bookseller’s shelf. In design, the successive colored covers to the sections of a single volume often constituted one continuous composition—although one could view it as such only by flipping back and forth. Figure 1 shows the first cover of *Nuretsubame negura no karakasa* (Nest-Umbrella for a Drenched Swallow), published in 1814 with text by the renowned kibyōshi writer Santō Kyōden and pictures by the leading ukiyo-e artist of the day, Utagawa Toyokuni. The actor-like appearance of the protagonist shown in the cover is no coincidence, since Toyokuni was known for his actor portraits, and Kyōden’s intricate tale was a skillful weaving of various kabuki plots with folk tales and historical legend. The umbrella pattern on the kimono echoes the title of the work.

Figure 2 reproduces a single two-page spread from *Nest-Umbrella for a Drenched Swallow*—the title of which was taken from a haiku by Kikaku (“Let me lend you my umbrella for a nest, rain-drenched swallow”), in allusion to one event in the convoluted plot. Here we view the penultimate scene of the book: the fateful destruction of Sagami Jirō Toshiyuki



Fig. 2. Scene from *Naratsubame no gura no karakasa* (Nest-Umbrella for a Drenched Swallow), 1814, 33b–34a; text by Santō Ryōden and picture by Utagawa Tovokuni.

(in the center, identified by the encircled Chinese character for “Toshi” on his robe), who is zapped by a mirror ray from the heavenly god to the upper right and turned into a giant rat, shown escaping to the upper left in successive stages. The picture is thus intended to be read as it progresses from right to left, just as in a scroll painting, following the narrative action. The sequence of the six discrete blocks of text, similarly running in a general right to left and top to bottom pattern, is care-

fully indicated by two separate codes, one of matching symbols and the other of Chinese numerals.

The *gōkan* remained the mainstream of fiction production in Japan for over six decades, centered in Edo and distributed nationally. In sheer number of titles, *gōkan* accounted for over two-thirds of all new Edo fiction, and for the decade before the Meiji Restoration of 1868, one compilation lists a total of 371 *gōkan*, 88 percent of the total of

418 volumes of fiction.<sup>4</sup> Virtually none of this literature has been translated into English, or even studied outside of a small circle of specialists in Japan, with the exception of an important book on Ryūtei Tanehiko by the late Andrew Markus.<sup>5</sup> The difficulty lies in the very question of what kind of “translation” is appropriate when the pictures are such an integral part of the work. Although inserting translated text into the picture is one possibility, one is left with the problem of lines that properly read top to bottom and right to left; no adequate solution has yet been found. A related problem is identifying the “author”: the solution adopted for cataloging in CLIO is to list the writer as author and place the artist under the field for “Other authors,” but one might as easily argue for a reversal of this priority.

One new feature of *gōkan* in the 1840s was the inauguration of long-running serialized works, appearing at the rate of two to three volumes a year (each volume, or *hen*, typically consisting of two twenty-sheet fascicles, or forty double-page spreads). The Starr Library collection has scattered volumes of such major titles as *Jiraiya gōketsu monogatari* (Heroic Tales of Jiraiya, 11 vols., 1839–1868), *Shaka hassō Yamato bunko* (A Japanese Library of the Life of Siddhartha, 58 vols., 1845–1871), and *Inu no sōshi* (The Book of Dogs, 56 vols., 1848–1881). The greatest of all, however, was *Shiranuhi monogatari* (The Tale of Shiranuhi), which from its beginning in 1849

was to reach a total of ninety volumes a half-century later.<sup>6</sup> Begun by the artist Utagawa Kunisada and the writer Ryūcatei Tanekazu (a disciple of Ryūtei Tanehiko, the real consolidator of the *gōkan* genre), this epic saga of Shiranuhi, a cross-dressing female warrior from Kyushu who wielded the magic power of a spider, was continued by an additional writer and five more artists before concluding in the Meiji period.

The scene in figure 3 shows the character Ayahata crouching on the floor with a dagger in her hand. A young woman of noble birth, Ayahata has been sold into prostitution under the control of the evil O-Ushi, who is seen lurking behind a stone lantern outside beneath the moon. O-Ushi appears to be peeping in on the scene from the next page to the left; this was one of many clever pictorial devices used by *gōkan* artists to heighten suspense. Ayahata is secretly in love with the hero(ine) Shiranuhi, not realizing that he is really Princess Wakana in her male persona, and has learned that a man whom she despises wishes to buy her freedom from the brothel. Despairing, Ayahata prepares to take her own life when suddenly a tiny spider drops from the ceiling and wraps a powerful thread around her wrist to stay the dagger, then descends to the board floor to spell out in silk the advice *Ayamachi su na* (Do not make this mistake!). Readers of the time would have known instantly that this was yet another case of the famous spider sorcery of

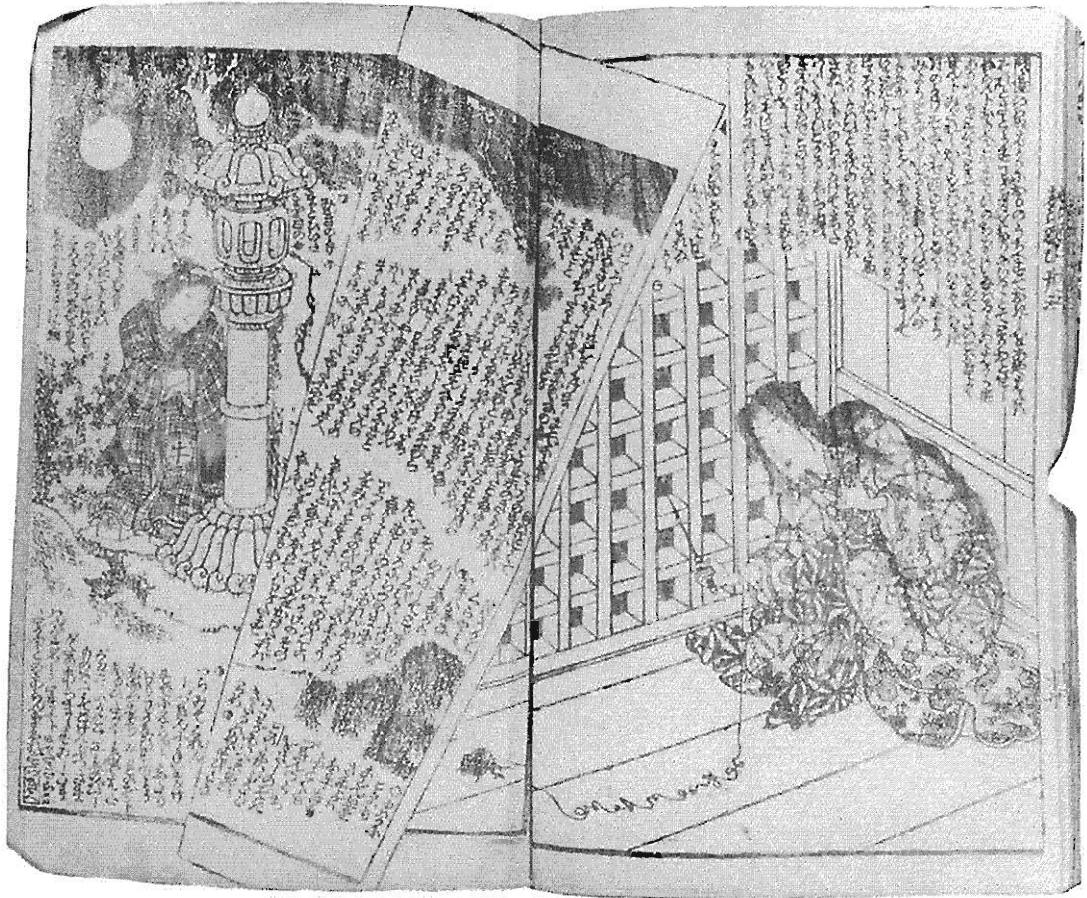


Fig. 3. Scene from *Shiranuhi monogatari* (The Tale of Shiranuhi), vol. 23, 19b–20a. This appears near the conclusion of volume 23, published in 1857, just two years before the opening of Japan to regular trade with the West.

Shiranuhi him/herself, who has intervened to save the life of Ayahata.

Unlike the text-centered works of the *yomihon* (reading book) and *ninjōhon* (sentimental book) genres, which were typically read on a rental basis from book-lending peddlers, the *gōkan* were purchased for household reading following the seasonal spring/autumn schedule by which they were typically published. One writer raised in this era later recalled the

characteristic method of reading a *gōkan*, whereby one first leafed through the pictures in order to get a general idea of the main events and the fates of the central characters, and only then turned to the text to confirm and refine one's pictorial intuitions.<sup>7</sup> One can witness this form of viewing/reading daily among the comic-book consumers on the subways of Tokyo today.



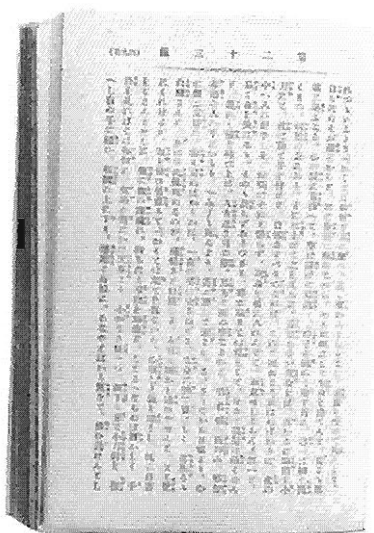


Fig. 4. Meiji period reprint of *Shiranuhi monogatari* (The Tale of Shiranuhi): from *Zoku Teikoku bunko*, vol. 28 (Tokyo: Hakubunkan, 1900). This corresponds to the portion in figure 3 from the 1857 original.

The wood-block *gōkan* format survived into the Meiji period, but it fell victim in the early 1880s to competition from movable type, with which it could not compete in either speed or cost. In the meantime, the emergence of a thriving newspaper readership following the lifting of the old Tokugawa ban on the discussion of current events had created a new readership eager to have news and to have it fast. The Meiji press was quick to take advantage of the speed enabled by movable type, in turn producing readers habituated to the regular and standardized forms of metal type, very different in style from the calligraphic brush forms of Edo wood-block fiction. In these ways, a generation gap quickly developed between older

Edo readers and new Tokyo readers, a gap that grew with each passing year in the 1880s and after. In the process, the pictures that were so basic to *gōkan* were either eliminated or reduced to the occasional picture-only insets characteristic of book illustration in the West, serving as mere appendages to the written text. One American scholar has recently argued that this represented a fundamental shift from older Japanese "pictocentrism" to the text-rooted "logocentrism" of Western literature, and the resulting inability to appreciate the world of *gōkan* fiction.<sup>4</sup>

The subordination of pictorial expression did not mean that the written texts of *gōkan* novels were cast aside, but rather that they were recast as "literature," so that late reprints assumed the wholly different format of movable-type text with no pictures. Figure 4 shows an excerpt from the reprint of *The Tale of Shiranuhi*. The tale was reprinted in its entirety in 1900, in two volumes (totalling just under 2,000 pages) of the *Imperial Library*—a massive multivolume republication of many of the works of fiction of the Tokugawa era, in response to what was a growing nostalgia for the ancien régime. The pictorial element was reduced to a handful of frontispiece illustrations of the main characters. The publisher was Hakubunkan, a new breed of publisher that catered to a citizenry that had been trained to read text before pictures.

Yet one only has to observe the Japanese of all generations today, who ride commuter



Fig. 5. Frontispiece illustration from *Shiranuhi monogatari* (The Tale of Shiranuhi), vol. 23. This continuous composition, overprinted in gray and blue on heavy paper, would have been viewed by the reader in three frames from right to left: a single page shows a woman (really a man) holding a magic mirror as weapon; the next two-page

trains absorbed in their comic books, to realize that the deep current of pictured fiction epitomized by nineteenth-century *gōkan* may have survived like a subterranean stream of the popular culture, breaking into the open once again with the revolution in habits of reading and viewing created by television.<sup>9</sup> It may well be up to a generation of scholars reared on television and comics to revive the older tradition of pictured fiction from its long neglect.

1. Starr's wood-block printed books from the Edo and Meiji periods were cataloged under a project, "Extending Access to the C. V. Starr East Asian Library," funded by the U. S. Department of Education under Title II-C grants received during 1991–1993.

2. For the consequences of wood-block technology in Japanese printing, see Henry D. Smith II, "The History of the Book in Edo and Paris," in James McClain, John Merriman, and Ugawa Kaoru, eds., *Edo and Paris: The State, Political Power, and Urban Life in Two Early-Modern Societies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

3. The first *kibyōshi*, *Kinkin-seisei eiga no yume*, has been translated as "Kinkin Seisei's Dream of a Luxurious Life," in Shunkichi Akimoto, *The Twilight of Edo* (Tokyo: Tokyo News Service, 1952), 111–39, including the original picture-text.



spread reveals a great cat monster and a lady in distress; and in the final half-page we see the waiting warrior opponent, all against the minute detail of a distant landscape.

4. Compiled from Asakura Kamezō, [*Shinshū*] *Nihon shōsetsu nenpyō* (Tokyo: Shun'yōdō, 1926). Although incomplete, this chronology of published fiction is a good reflection of dominant trends.

5. Andrew Markus, *The Willow in Autumn: Ryūtei Tanehiko, 1783–1842* (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1992). In Japanese, interesting essays on gōkan as a combinatory art form are to be found in Suzuki Jūzō, *Ehon to ukiyo-e* (Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppansha, 1969), 13–67.

6. The first seventy-one volumes of *The Tale of Shiranushi* were published in the years 1849–1885 in traditional gōkan format, but the final volumes 73–90 (vol. 72 was lost) appeared only in a movable-type edition in *Zoku Teikoku bunko*, vols. 28–29, published by Hakubunkan in 1900 with only a few frontispiece illustrations.

7. Yazaki Sabun, “Kusazōshi to Meiji shoki,” *Waseda bungaku* (October 1927), as quoted in Maeda Ai, “Meiji shoki gesaku shuppan no dōkō—Kinsei shuppan kikō no kaitai,” *Maeda Ai chosakushū 2: Kindai dokusha no seiritsu* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1989), 55. Maeda’s essay, a pioneering study in Meiji publishing history, originally appeared in *Kinsei bungai*, nos. 9 (June 1963) and 10 (February 1964).

8. Charles Inoue, “Pictocentrism,” *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature*, no. 40 (1992): 223–39.

9. For a good survey of Japanese comic-book culture, see Frederick Schodt, *Manga! Manga!: The World of Japanese Comics* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1986).