



2013 HAWAII UNIVERSITY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES
ARTS, HUMANITIES, & SOCIAL SCIENCES
JANUARY 6TH TO JANUARY 8TH
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HONOLULU, HAWAII

THE SENSUALITY OF BOOKS: TOYING WITH EDO SHAREBON BOOKS

NAHOKO FUKUSHIMA

TOKYO UNIVERSITY OF AGRICULTURE
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR



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Proceeding for
2013 Hawaii University International Conferences,
Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences
January 6,7 & 8

The Sensuality of Books:
Toying with Edo *Sharebon* Books

Nahoko Fukushima
Associate Professor,
Tokyo University of
Agriculture



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This paper discusses unique aspects of the reading experience of *sharebon* works, a genre of Edo “playful literature.” The materiality of the books creates an ironic aesthetic of textuality due to the material layout of the text, for which *Yûshi hôgen* is used as the main example.

While the prevalence of digital books seems to have turned bound books of paper and ink into the objects of nostalgia, recent studies on textuality as well as book design are provoking reflection on the impact of materiality on the reading experience of the books presented in their classical bodies. We have reached a stage that casts questions on our assumption that the sole proper function of these objects we call “books” is to be read, i.e., it conveys information.

Other usages of “books” are brought to light if we think of the early periods of book-making, when books were still scarce and treated as valuables. Some books were just laid out on the shelf as examples of collections of literary works and/or encyclopedias with glittering spines to show of the wealth and learnedness of the master of the house. We can also think of the sacred texts displayed in religious places. Here I would like to present another usage of the “books,” that is, to enjoy the physical book as a toy for a kind of play. This paper investigates another possibility for a deeper appreciation of these books through the examination of *sharebon* books published mostly during the 18th century in Edo Japan.

The way a text with its front and back matter was given a physical form produces a peculiar reading experience, artfully intertwining with the wordplay sprinkled through these texts, another interesting trait of *sharebon*. Actually, according to the definition of Webster Dictionary, “books” are “a collection of folded sheets bearing printing or writing that have been cut, sewn, and usually bound between covers into a volume,” but not the information appearing on a screen. The covers of *sharebon* leads us to the important aesthetic notion of “*mitate*”—“likening”—seen in Edo art.



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A volume, i.e. the book as a physical object, inevitably helps us to give a notion of “wholeness,” since you can physically grasp the entire “text” within your hands at once. In other words, you are to be privileged to obtain the entire cosmos any given book provides, felt viscerally in the hand and contained here in this specific chunk of matter, fully present in this specific mass. One of the intrinsic pleasures of reading *sharebon* texts is the sense of the reception of Chinese culture we find hidden in each text, and the humor and irony of the way the original classical Chinese sources are deliberately distorted in these works. This technique was also a discreet way of enacting what I would like to call "Samurai Dandyism." These intertextual dimensions of *sharebon* already signal a certain distinctive form of conviviality, but to fully appreciate this we cannot ignore what the materiality of the books themselves contributes to their textuality. That is, a reader not only appreciates the joy generated by the text and the materiality of the books as a toy, but also obtains the entire lofty atmosphere of the Chinese classical world all the samurai ruling class were longing for, through the shape of “mimicking” books.

Thus the materiality of *sharebon* adds another dimension of pleasure to the reading experience and a bodily sensuality to its textuality. Hence the reading experience of *sharebon* is not limited to the cognizance of its actual text, but also involves a unique characteristic of the book as a kind of fondled toy. That is, these books enable a kind of play, presenting themselves as things to be toyed with: playthings.

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