

Lessons for Women: Woodblock Prints of the Tenpō Reforms Era

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The Tenpō Reforms (1841-1843) had a visible if short-term effect on the aesthetics of Edo-based, color woodblock-print publishing. Using digital archives, this study has focused on a narrow timeframe in woodblock print history in order to ascertain the immediate effects of official censorship on 'bijinga' and 'yakusha-e' publishing.

In 1842, the Tokugawa Bakufu government under the auspices of Senior Councilor Mizuno Tadakuni banned publications of pictures of beauties (bijinga) and pictures of actors (yakusha-e), and dissolved the self-regulating publishers' guilds. Edo's City Magistrate advised publishers and artists to issue designs that promoted loyalty, filial piety and fidelity by teaching women and children. This study explores the connection between government censorship and the emergence of a didactic woodblock print series directed at women, which purported to offer the consumer lessons (kyōkun-e) on being a moral exemplar.

Tenpō Reforms-era Utagawa School kyōkun-e appropriated the language and iconography found in children's textbooks (ōraimono) and prescriptive literature for women (joshi yō ōrai) to create parodies and pastiches of moral lessons. This study explores the 'retsujoden' theme by focusing on text-image compositions issued in relation to Kagamiyama mono before 1842 and the 'historical' prints that followed the ban. When yakusha-e returned in 1846-1847, these too purported to offer Confucian moral lessons to kabuki audiences in order to appease official censors.

In response to official censorship, the Utagawa School bijinga series from the 1840s bore titles linking them to various kinds of advisory books (tashinami-gusa, oshie-gusa, kokoroe-gusa, yashinai-gusa and tatoe-gusa). Although kyōkun-e were conceived as parodies, some of the designs conveyed practical information to the reader and reflected the pragmatic concerns of urban commoner culture. Through an exploration of the connection between censorship and didactic prints, this paper highlights the link between education and social control.

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