

## Japan in Print: Information and Nation in the Early Modern Period

**Review Number:**

537

**Publish date:**

Saturday, 1 July, 2006

**Author:**

Mary Elizabeth Berry

**ISBN:**

0520237668

**Date of Publication:**

2006

**Price:**

£19.95

**Publisher:**

University of California Press

**Place of Publication:**

Los Angeles

**Reviewer:**

Timon Screech

On a recent holiday to a country that has nothing to do with either Britain or Japan (Iran, as it happens), I took both an English and a Japanese guidebook. I often do this. As expected, the Japanese one was extraordinarily accurate in boat and bus timetables, entry fees and opening hours, all of which were correct. But next to no interpretative assistance was supplied. Mosques with their domes and minarets, buildings and extensions, Shahs and ayatollahs, in short, the culture of the place, were not part of the purview. By contrast, the English guidebook (or I should say the Western one, since I am not arguing for any British exceptionalism) was wrong on most specifics, where it listed them at all, and accepting its own limitation it often told the reader to check at their hotel. But it was expansive on the cultural, or what one might call the contemplative rewards of travel. Here, perhaps, is an atavistic extension of what Berry writes about in her fascinating new book, *Japan in Print*. She calls the archives that were created with astonishing rapidity in the early Edo period (roughly, the seventeenth century) an 'information library'.

Berry is too judicious to make generalisations about the repercussions into the present, much less to proclaim that she has located the origin of what became a trans-historical norm of 'Japanese culture'. But nevertheless, those who know the Japan of today will feel a sense of familiarity with what she writes, as I do with my guidebook. A sense of familiarity, and also, perhaps, of familiar lack. It remains popular in Japan to note how the education system enforces rote learning of masses of data, while, conversely, downplaying analytical or creative skills (which is often expressed in the conundrum of why has Japan has so many scientists but so few Nobel Prize winners). I would maintain that if Berry is correct in seeing the emergence of an obsession with information in the first generations of the Tokugawa shogunate, and of a way of categorising life and of understanding knowledge by the a positioning of oneself against vast quantities of information, this is indeed very much still the dominant mode.

Berry's book is packed with data to substantiate her claims. In a curious way, she recreates the material she

describes. Readers of Michael Ann Holly's *Past Looking* (Cornell University Press, 1996), will find an instance here of Holly's notion of how past works (she is thinking of paintings but it can as well apply to books) prefigure the shape of their subsequent histories. The information library has infested Berry's book and replicated itself, like a cancer, within it. But this is not to criticise. By making her present book one with its subject, Berry creates, for the modern reader, a sense of access to the older works under analysis, and of reading as an Edo reader read. Berry states how an Edo text will be a 'litany of nouns' (p. 18). Hers is too. But this is not to deny she has a theme or agenda, and, as her subtitle denotes, she has a bold one: the creation via this collective oeuvre of the Japanese 'nation' (on which more below).

Japan, in its early modern, or Edo, or Tokugawa period (1603–1868), is thought of as a country at peace. To a large extent it was, at least in the middle portion of that timeframe, barring several peasant insurrections and the very occasional attempted coup. Otherwise expressed, the early Edo period saw a country emerging from a full century of warfare during which there was no central authority at all. This warfare was quite unlike the battles of Europe, which are petty in contrast, because it engaged such vast numbers of people. Regularly tens of thousand were arrayed on either side, and fighting could occur in many parts of the archipelago at once. The wars were immensely destructive, but also organisational feats of a kind never known in Europe. Under such conditions, Berry has it, a community of knowledge, fed by printed media, could not emerge. Skills were built up and handed on, by experience or through oral traditions, but they were not openly available. One of Berry's most interesting and provocative contentions is that it was the cadastral surveys that are known to have been compiled for purposes of taxation as soon as peace was effectively restored (from the close of the sixteenth century), that initiated the new 'style of knowledge' which was one 'sated by categories' (p. 13).

The Japanese islands are extraordinarily diverse. The north is snow-bound while oranges grow in the south. This plethora had to be subjected to some unifying grid if it was to hold together. A similar proposal was made long ago about France, being both Atlantic and Mediterranean. Japan is infinitely more diverse than France. A force equal to bringing its 2,000-plus kilometre string of mountains into one overarching grip had to be very strong indeed. Under the cadastres, the whole sweep of the landscape was measured, which required certain procedures, and the one chosen, intriguingly, was that of rice equivalency. All land was surveyed and, whatever it actually produced, or was thought capable of yielding, it was assigned a rice-yield equivalent. Since warrior stipends were paid in rice, this allowed an immediate transferability from land to earnings. The shogunate enfeoffed its supporters in quantities of land/rice commensurate with their dignity. The lords to whom they gave territories, or whose pre-existing lands they accepted, possessed publicly-known *kokudaka*, or 'bushel levels', and tabulations of lordly landholdings were ipso facto tabulations of lordly income. The entire landscape was construed as mobile units, with the lords moved in or out, their lands added or subtracted, as merit or demerit demanded. These lords were known as *daimyô*, literally 'great landholders'. Indexes of European peerage list by hierarchy of nobility; Japanese ones listed the shogunal court by landholding, which actually meant income. They listed in the same unit, if exponentially more, as that with which a blacksmith or ostler could measure his wealth.

The cadastres are certainly important in Japanese history. But no one has before given them the capacity to construct an entire mental grid, that of 'the knowability through observation of worldly phenomena' (p. 16). And in her conclusion Berry asserts that 'the surveys inducted large numbers of participants – investigators and investigated alike – into an exemplary logic: social phenomena were amenable to inquiry, knowable through observation, and communicable through taxonomic analysis' (p. 210). Many readers may find this persuasive, and think it is, at least, the best available working hypothesis. Unification brought standardisation with the cross-referencing of administrative units. It was via assessment – and *being* assessed – that people learned 'in effect, how to be a public – an object of analysis and collective definition' (p. 42).

This is where Berry's story starts. Some will want to know more about printing in Ming China, which was surely a major influence, but which is barely note here (see p. 147), as an impetus to putting information out into general circulation – not least as the cadastres as such were not printed

The cadastres begin, but maps are also a major part of Berry's book. In some ways they rather unbalance it,

occupying, as they do, so large a chunk in the middle section. Yet indeed, it was by mapping, literally and by metaphorical extension, that the archipelago became known, brought together, and its people could merge. It is notable (and Berry notes it), however, that maps contained absences. The Tokugawa castle in central Edo (modern Tokyo) was never shown. It is a blank on the depicted city space – which led to some wild interpolations when maps were exported and European cartographers sought to plug this gap, adding Versailles-style parterres and orangeries. Maps were also always partial, showing regions or cities, but rarely the entire landmass. Maps also retained ancient and long-defunct political boundaries, and wrote in sites of purely poetic renown. They therefore included the past within the present. The current daimyô, or even the shogun (who directly ruled some third of the land) was inheritor and custodian, but not necessarily permanent possessor of his territory. His political boundaries might not even be demarcated. The Japanese map is a thing of great interest. But again, they were rarely printed, and so are somewhat out of place as the core of Berry's book.

Printed books (not printed pictures) are the real theme, and how they circulated information. Enviably sitting in UC Berkeley's sensational East Asian Library, Berry has been surrounded by printed matter of all kinds. She is overwhelmed by their extensiveness, and who wouldn't be? But it is also the case that many aspects of knowledge were not covered in books, and many things that were covered were not covered in print, only in manuscript. Although cadastres and most maps remained un-printed, Berry has no interest in the manuscript, and this is the one serious limitation of the present study. The shogunate, in fact, did control the presses, and did not permit the circulation of many kinds of information, for all that the quantity of information distributed was big and some unexpected fields (daimyô income, shogunal officeholders) were not policed. Of late, scholarship has tended to focus on censorship and acts of prohibition. Berry's celebration of the range of available printed material is certainly welcome, and perhaps a necessary counter-balance, but she goes close to the other extreme. Looking at non-printed work (beyond cadastres and maps), would have extended her argument, showing how, if manuscripts are taken into account, even more information was available. By addressing manuscripts she would also have shown how emphatic was the division between what could be printed, what could only be published in manuscript, and, indeed, what could not be written in either. Several works now thought key to understanding the Edo period were never published. One example is Hokusai's *bunryaku* ('Tales of a Northern Raft'), one of the first extensive eye-witness surveys of Europe, taken down from the words of a castaway who had spent many years in Russia and met Catherine the Great, compiled in 1793. Matters dealing with the state, its formation and the alterities of differing systems, could not be printed. This book was never published. But we know it was widely read in manuscript. This distinction might seem technical since it does not figure that printed books necessarily circulated in more copies than manuscripts, but it was a matter of law, or of taboo, and crucial for commercial or even actual survival to observe fully. Nor does Berry tell us of Baba Bunkô. His fate is instructive. Bunkô was an early eighteenth-century storyteller, and although the facts are little known, his tales of past and present going on in the shogunal castle were circulated in manuscript. For this he was executed in 1758. There are famous cases of others who fell foul of the law, such as Hôseidô Kisanji (who preferred suicide to interrogation) and Kitagawa Utamaro (who was manacled and, with wrists destroyed, never worked as well again, and died soon). Neither figures in Berry's index. Berry might claim that these occur in the eighteenth century, when times were different, but that century also constitutes a major part of Japan's early modern period, as mentioned in her title. Her claim that 'the state left the past open ... and thus made it accessible to popular writers' (p. 238) is a little optimistic.

Perhaps in the deaths of Bunkô, Kisanji, Utamaro and others, we see the split between the information library and the analytical library. Incessantly printed and repeatedly up-dated compendia of all manner of things (temple treasures, daimyô estates, shogunal officers, theatres) came out, but there was much less data that was not overtly informational. It was even the same in fiction, Berry notes, citing the famous novelist Ihara Saikaku, who made stories with 'gleeful lists interrupting the action as virtual parallel plots' (p. 217). And then, as a shogunal chief minister of the late eighteenth century, Matsudaira Sadanobu (admittedly an extreme case), put it, 'we should not offer new interpretations of classical texts'.

Finally, we must return to the notion of nation. Having referred throughout to 'Japan', from the final chapter

(boldly entitled 'Nation'), Berry begins to refer to Nihon (which, with the romanisation Nippon, is the Japanese term for Japan). She is aware that 'nation' is a tricky concept and apt to slide into that of nation state, which, of course, she realises is anachronistic. But does 'nation' here mean much more than a public? Nation is a loose concept (the Navajo nation and, say, the French nation are quite unlike). A large portion of any educated Japanese person's reading would have been Chinese. How does this impinge? Being part of a group of readers that precisely did not consider itself defined by the identity of its overlords, like an Islamic *ulema* or an early-modern German or Italian cultural cluster, or indeed like being an English-language reader today, suggests absence of nation.

Berry has written a book replete with information and with insight. It introduces so many types of publication that have never been properly discussed before, and treats them in terms of quantity and profusion as well as of specific content, that she has probably changed the way her field will be viewed for a long time to come.

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