Japanese Cultural Treasures at the Library of Congress: Digitization of the Rare Books Collection

Elizabeth Oyler
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Elizabeth Oyler
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

The Library of Congress holds one of the most comprehensive collections of Japanese written materials outside Japan, including a number of unusual or unique rare books. As part of a larger endeavor undertaken by the Library to make its holdings available online, the Asian Division began digitizing its Japanese rare books collection in 2004; this work is one of several collaborative projects the Library is undertaking with Japanese institutions to digitize and promote the Japanese collections. On March 27, 2007, the Asian Division held a symposium entitled “Japanese Cultural Treasures at the Library of Congress” as one of the inaugural events of that venture. The goals of the symposium were to highlight recent digitization efforts of the Japanese holdings and discuss the consequences of the project within academic contexts. My role was to address the issue of digitization from the perspective of scholars with interests in pre-modern topics working primarily from institutions distant from the Library. What does digitization of rare materials mean for the scholarly community, and what role do digital images play in the larger scheme of research projects in our field?

Like many scholars of Japanese literature and culture who reside outside Japan, I spend the majority of my professional time at my home institution, relying heavily for my research on our library’s holdings and materials I can obtain through interlibrary loan. Our university library’s collection includes the most prominent annotated print editions of canonical primary texts, as well as a large collection of critical works and journals; many other similar sources are available through interlibrary loan. These works are crucial research tools, but like most university collections, ours cannot easily provide direct access to the original texts, or even reproductions, of the works my colleagues and I study. We often rely heavily on modern print versions, and can examine originals only on research trips to archives. Many of these collections are in Japan, but a number are abroad, and that held by the Library of Congress is among the most significant. Unfortunately, the Library of Congress’ collection is generally underutilized by scholars of Japanese subjects—my own introduction to the Library of Congress collection came only while I was working in residence at the Library’s John W. Kluge Center during 2002-2003. Access to the rare books in the Japanese collection helped shape the project I was working on at that time, and it also has helped fuel a second project. One aim of digitization efforts is to increase awareness and usage of rare books by academic professionals.

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Collaborations highlighted at the symposium include a joint digitization effort between the Library and the International Research Center for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken) and the Japanese Geographical Survey Institute. The rare books that have been digitized to date (Summer, 2007) as part of the collaboration between the Library and Nichibunken include four _Nara-ehon_ 奈良絵本: 静Shizuka. 2 v. : col. ill. ; 34 cm. (Japanese Rare Book Collection, Sakanishi Collection; PL 790.S54 1500 Japan Cage); しくれShigure. [16-?] 3 v. : col. ill. ; 24 cm. (Japanese Rare Book Collection, Sakanishi Collection; PL790 .S45 1600 Japan Cage); ほうみやう童子Homyo Doji. [17-?] 3 v. : col. ill. ; 30 cm. (Japanese Rare Book Collection, Asakawa Collection; PL793 .H58 1700 Japan Cage); 曽我物語Soga monogatari. [16-?] 25 v. : col. ill. ; 16 x 24 cm. (Japanese Rare Book Collection; PL790.4 S63 S64 1600 Japan Cage); and _Genji monogatari_ (1654). A catalog of the Japanese rare books, entitled 東京国立国会図書館日本古典籍目録 (Beikoku Gikai Toshokan zō Nihon kotenseki mokuroku) _Catalog of Japanese Rare Books in the Library of Congress_ was published in February 2003. A full discussion of the Asian Division’s Chinese and Japanese digitization projects can be found in Mi Chu Wiens, “World Digital Library and E-resources in the Asian Division, Library of Congress,” _Journal of East Asian Libraries_ No. 138 (February, 2006): 1-4.
The Japanese rare books collection got its start with a generous donation in 1905 by Crosby Stuart Noyes, editor and publisher of the Washington Evening Star. Given his professional interests, it is perhaps not surprising that many works he donated were prints and drawings, but they also included a number of illustrated books from the Edo period (1603-1868) that remain in the Noyes collection in the Asian Division.

The collection made another impressive step forward when the renowned historian Asakawa Kan’ichi of Yale University was commissioned by the Library and Yale to buy books during a stay in Japan in 1906-07. Professor Asakawa added over 9000 volumes to the Library’s holdings; his choices reflected his deep knowledge of the tradition and his engagement with a variety of fields, including history, religion, geography, music, and art. Many of the works of literature he collected are unique: no other known editions exist, even in Japan. And many are of extraordinarily high quality.

The next period of great activity for the rare books collection came under the leadership of Dr. Sakanishi Shiho, the first area specialist on Japan hired by the Library, who served here from 1930 to 1941. Under her direction, the overall collection tripled in size, including a significant augmentation of the rare books holdings. The Library has continued to build on this solid foundation, and now represents one of the most important collections of Japanese books outside of Japan.

Among the works unique to the collection, perhaps the most important is a remarkably well-preserved woodblock print edition of Genji monogatari (源氏物語 The Tale of Genji) from 1654, a fifty-eight chapter work with separate chapters for commentary, a genealogy, a list of poems quoted in the text, and an un-illustrated sequel entitled Yamaji no tsuyu (山路の露 Dew on the Mountain Path). The significance of this text recommended it as an early candidate for digitization, which was completed in March, 2007. Although the fifty-four canonical chapters of the text are for the most part identical to other printed editions from the period, the particular configuration of the text plus addenda represented by the Library’s copy is the only one of its kind in any public collection anywhere. The significance of the Library’s Genji stems from its uniqueness: it is a complete, coherent, and datable text that can be compared with other variants. And because this work is illustrated, we also can use it to consider issues of illustration and figurative representation.

Illustrations from the Library’s Genji demonstrate the dynamic relationships shared among Edo works and also between them and the tradition inherited from earlier periods. Decisions about which scenes merited illustration, and the degree to which such images adhere to the iconographic vocabulary already well developed for Genji representation, are vital issues for describing literature, art, and print culture of the Edo period. A comparison of images from the Library’s Genji with other canonical versions of the same scenes suggests ways the text can contribute to conceptualizing Genji reception during Japan’s early modern age.

Figure One shows an oft-illustrated scene from the “Wakamurasaki” (若紫 Young Murasaki) chapter of the Library’s Genji. It is remarkably similar in composition the same scene from the Burke albums, a Tosa school shikishi 色紙 attributed to Tosa Mitsuoki. The shikishi represents one of the most iconic forms of Genji illustration, and we can see its influence on the print version. In both, Genji faces away from the reader, peering through a brushwood fence at the back of Murasaki, who looks wistfully after her escaped sparrow. Genji is at the bottom of the image and Murasaki at the top. The Library’s version has Genji in the bottom right corner gazing to the top left, while the shikishi places him in the bottom left looking up and to the right. Genji is accompanied by one retainer in both illustrations; Murasaki stands in front of three rather than two other girls or ladies in the Library’s print edition, but that is the only major difference. Figure Two compares the same scene with a contemporary woodblock illustration, to which it is virtually identical, hinting at both the canonization of image patterns and the vitality of what was indeed a thriving print industry.


4 Images and discussion of the Burke albums can be found in Miyeko Murase, Genji monogatari: legends and paintings (New York: G. Braziller, 2001).

Figure Three is the illustration from the Library’s *Genji* of the carriage fight scene from the “Aoi” (葵 Heartvine) chapter. As with Figure One, it is identical to other, contemporary woodblock print versions, but the crowded jostling among the outriders we see here is somewhat more claustrophobic than, for example, what we find in an eighteenth-century *ehon* (絵本 illustrated text) version held by Dartmouth’s Hood Museum. Yet when we compare the same two texts’ illustrations of Genji cutting Murasaki’s hair later in the same chapter (Figure Four), we again find striking similarities: the central figures from the Library’s *Genji* are a near-mirror image of those in the Dartmouth *ehon*, but whereas Genji looms over Murasaki in the *ehon*, in the Library’s *Genji*, the go board Murasaki stands on gives her added stature in the print, and she rather appears to tower above her patron. These differences, sometimes immediately evident and sometimes subtle, describe the parameters of imagistic allusion and provide rich material for the study of art history and image/text relationships so vital a part of early modern literature.

The rare books collection contains many other valuable works as well. Most of the literary pieces are wood-block print editions, but there are also manuscripts and *Nara-ehon* (奈良絵本 illustrated works of the “Nara” style). The majority was produced during the more than two and a half centuries of the Edo period, and they represent the major genres of Japanese writing: poetry, tales, histories, commentaries, dictionaries and short fiction. Many are illustrated, some lavishly, and most are in extremely good condition for works of their vintage. Meticulously catalogued by Shōjō Honda and annotated by Jin’ichi Konishi, the *Pre-Meiji Works in the Library of Congress: Japanese Literature Performing Arts, and Reference Books* (1996) provides a comprehensive overview of the collection. The opportunity to actually work with some of these texts was one of the most exciting aspects of my sojourn at the library. My area of specialization is representations of the Genpei War period (late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries) in literature and the performing arts, and the Library has a remarkable collection of relevant works. Central to my study was the *Heike monogatari* (平家物語 Tales of the Heike), of which the Library holds two printed editions. The first, a text interspersed with *sashie* 揮絵 illustrations, dates from 1677, and the second was printed in 1682. Both are twelve-chapter versions derived from the *kataribonkei* (語本系 recited-text line), the more popular stream of *Heike* variants. The collection also contains a well-preserved illustrated print version of the long variant text of the *Heike* entitled *Genpei jōsuiki* (源平盛衰記 Record of the Rise and Fall of the Genji and Heike Clans) dating from 1655. The illustrations of this work were the most complete set of images from a *Heike monogatari* variant accessible to me, and some proved extremely useful in articulating my thesis, which concerned the importance of the interaction between written and oral modes of interpretation as a theme in *Heike*.7

*Heike monogatari* is Japan’s most important war tale, and from very early on it existed in forms intended for reading as well as those intended for reciting. We are most familiar today with the performed variants of the *kataribonkei*, as they were carried throughout the country by the *biwa hōshi* 琵琶法師 - blind male chanters of the tale who accompanied themselves on the *biwa* lute and performed before all sectors of the population. The art of *Heike* recitation, or *heikyoku* 平曲, was popular throughout the late medieval age and well into the Edo period, when sighted amateurs—mostly members of the samurai class—began to study it. In order to teach sighted amateurs how to perform, a notation system not unlike that for *nō* drama or other sung narrative forms developed, and this was famously codified in the *Heike mabushi* 平家正節. Organized as an educational tool, the *Heike mabushi*’s first chapter contains the *ku* 句, or episodes, that students learn first, and the final book includes the “secret pieces” that are only taught once the rest of the repertoire is mastered. This results in the famous opening chapter of the *Heike monogatari*, “Gion shoja 毘頭精舎” appearing at the end of the *Heike mabushi*. I draw attention to this work because the version circulating in Japan is based on a text dated to 1776 held by the Kyoto University Library. The annotations in the Kyoto University edition are relatively sparse, and are only comprehensible to someone already initiated into the art.

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The Library of Congress holds another copy of the Heike mabushi that includes far more detailed notations than those in the Kyoto University text. The precise date of the text is unknown, but it certainly is from the early nineteenth century, only slightly later than the Kyoto University version. The Library’s text is not widely known in Japan, but it most certainly should be, for a number of reasons. First, it is a vital artifact from the time when heikyoku was an important social phenomenon, both as a performing art and a hobby for wealthy members of society. Second, its fuller annotations represent unique historical documentation for an art that boasts only a handful of masters (and therefore teachers) today. Sustained study of the Library’s Heike mabushi in the future will better situate it within the textual lineages of fuhon 諂本, or annotated texts for Heike recitation, and bring it to the attention of scholars and performers for whom it represents an extremely important historical, musical, and literary source.

Like my fellow scholars of pre-modern literature, I see the process of archival research as among the most exciting parts of my job. The weight of a several hundred year old volume, the smell of old paper and ink, the sound of paper as pages are turned, the knowledge that one is looking at a text read by the audience one is trying to understand, the possibility of discovering something new or surprising: these are among the great rewards of our profession, and only primary texts afford them. Original texts include contemporaneous transcriptions, illustrations, and paratextual material; these are often unrepresented, differently represented, and sometimes misrepresented in modern print editions. We go to the archives to get one step closer to the original, to avoid the levels of mediation inherent in using modern print texts.

This yearning for the elusive original often results in ambivalent feelings about digitization among people in fields like mine. We share a basic suspicion of such technologies stemming from our concern that today’s society sees digitized images as a replacement for, rather than an enhancement of, current preservation efforts. A recent article about digitization projects in the New York Times did little to assuage these fears; general public opinion seems to hold that in the “digital age,” all other formats need to or will be replaced; and that digitization is the only or best way to preserve materials. There also seems to be a presumption that we can somehow save everything if enough energy and money is spent on digitization. And because this “best solution” is costly, the involvement of large corporations in the process often comes to be accepted as a natural and unproblematic step.

I think the current state of affairs merits critical attention. If original texts become completely inaccessible or only accessible at great cost, it will be a great loss to those who work with them and those who benefit from that work. If digitization is seen as the answer to preservation, we will lose vital connections to original forms. If we think we can or should somehow produce a record of everything that can be recorded, we are foolish. And yet, clearly, the digitization of images, and particularly fragile and unique ones, is an enormously democratizing and enabling research and teaching tool. To be sure, it adds a layer of mediation that must be treated as such. But layers of mediation are inherent in our interpretive processes, and it is our work to recognize what we can and cannot learn from our sources as we sift through them.

With these caveats in mind, I would like to turn to two works that the Library has already digitized and which are contributing to my current research. The first is a seventeenth-century text of the Soga monogatari illustrated with saishoku sashie (彩色拝絵 colored illustrations). The second is an early seventeenth-century illustrated yomihon (読本 text version) of Shizuka 静, a narrative which first appeared as a performance libretto from the kōwakamai (幸若舞 ballad-drama) repertoire. Both Soga monogatari and Shizuka embody important characteristics of medieval Japanese literature and drama at a time epitomized by profound changes in the very nature of “literature.” That general rubric
had been restricted to works generated by and for the elite ruling class up through the Heian period (795-1185); works of literature included waka 和歌 poetry, histories, monogatari (物語 tale literature), nikki (日記 memoirs), and zuihitsu (随筆 essays), but there was no medium to transmit these works much beyond the social borders that stretched downward only as far as the zuryō (受領 provincial functionary) class. From sometime in the late Kamakura period (1185-1333) onward, however, social barriers weakened as social and political groups were refigured. People who formerly were unable to participate in high cultural production and consumption rose to artistic prominence as they combined the arts of the provincial areas with those that had long held important places at the center—the famous nō actor and playwright Zeami (1363-1443) is but the most salient example. The rise of the warrior class following the establishment of the Kamakura warrior government at the end of the twelfth century was a primary reason for this shift: provincial men rose to power, bringing with them their own interests and concerns that they sought to articulate in ways that acknowledged both the uniqueness of their new-found position and the grandeur of the traditional mantle they inherited.

A more widely shared culture, expressed in forms that we moderns tend to categorize as literature, emerged within this context. And, as numerous scholars both in Japan and abroad have noted, an important part of this literature was what we might very broadly categorize as historical narrative and drama, and specifically, narrative and drama that commemorated the rise of the warriors during and after the Genpei War. Historical narrative by and about the warrior class became a central and productive genre.

The Library’s Soga monogatari and Shizuka are part of this tradition. The narrative of the Soga monogatari—the elaborate revenge story of Soga Jūrō and Gorō against their father’s killer, a kinsman named Suketsune—celebrates warrior values and the warrior world created with the establishment of the first shōgunal office by Minamoto Yoritomo in 1192. Like much good literature, it concomitantly calls the authority of the new government into question: the brothers’ revenge is part of a larger cycle that starts with and draws attention to Yoritomo’s grudge against the boys’ grandfather, Sukechika, who had ordered the drowning of Yoritomo’s infant son, who would have been Sukechika’s grandson. The work Shizuka recounts the famous shirabyōshi 白拍子 performer’s similar loss of a newborn at the hands of Yoritomo, who would have been the boy’s uncle; the webs of intrigue involving Yoritomo and his anxieties about lineage and control loom large in both these works and narrative about this period more generally. Like Heike monogatari, both Soga monogatari and Shizuka embellish a historical story, and also like the Heike, they have strong ties to recitational traditions: all three works, or at least parts of them, were carried around the country and chanted before audiences, doing for the Genpei War something similar to what Ken Burns’ television documentary films have done for the Civil War and other culturally foundational moments in the history of the United States. The analogy can perhaps be pushed further as well: in both cases, storytellers take on the enormous project of turning complex events into comprehensible narrative, which they accomplish through thematization of what audiences see as their fundamental cultural values, and they do so by illustrating, either verbally or pictorially or both, these values in context.

Soga monogatari and Shizuka are particularly useful in demonstrating the process of the concretization of cultural values. The protagonists of both works appear in numerous texts and performing arts during the Edo period, including short fiction, Kabuki, and the Bunraku puppet theater—visual and aural as well as written arts. They remain beloved cultural heroes even today. Their popularity stems in part from their iconic status: the brothers are exemplary samurai men, and Shizuka, the beautiful and defiant lover of doomed hero Minamoto Yoshitsune, is a corresponding model of femininity. As such, they illustrate ways ideas about the masculine and feminine are made normative in works that depict the foundational moment of warrior rule.

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10 These were lower-ranking aristocrats whose status did not allow them to secure permanent positions in the central government. Many of the finest writers of the time, most notably Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shonagon, were daughters of provincial functionaries.

The Library’s *Soga monogatari* and *Shizuka* represent snapshots of how the tales were told at a specific moment within their longer legendary histories. Both texts date from the seventeenth century. The storylines of each were solidified during the Muromachi period, and they recount events describing the establishment of the Kamakura warrior government at the end of the twelfth century. Each work involves layers of narrative and history, the excavation of which provides a unique opportunity and set of challenges for scholars of literature, culture, and history.

Illustrated works inherently further invite inquiry into the cooperative telling of a story by text and image. We generally expect that illustrations appear at the dramatic highpoints in narratives to show the heroes at their most heroic, and the Library’s *Soga monogatari* meets expectations: images encapsulate the most emotionally-charged and spectacular moments in the brothers’ lives. Illustrations of painful leave-takings (Figure Five), the enactment of their vendetta (Figure Six), their engagement of the enemy (Figure Seven) and their tragic ends (Figure Eight) guide the reader visually through their story, highlighting what is most important about the brothers: their unity, their patience, their devotion, their nobility, and their tragedy.

The story of heroic men depicted in both narrative and illustrations is the story of their vitality, their honor, their strength, and their loyalty to each other: they are impoverished yet noble, doomed yet stoic and brave.

With this in mind, when we look to *Shizuka*, we expect that the most dramatic moment in her story—her defiant dance before Yoritomo as he tries to force her to reveal the whereabouts of his younger brother and rival, Yoshitsune—will be illustrated; the love between Yoshitsune and Shizuka is after all the source of her stature as a tragic heroic beauty. Although the narrative itself devotes significant attention to this event, the text contains no illustrations of it. The story told through images rather emphasizes the most pathetic aspect of Shizuka’s character, which is indeed also the point of this story: her taking of provisional vows (Figure Nine), her betrayal by her maid (Figure Ten), and the murder of her infant son (Figure Eleven), a tragedy which leads Shizuka to take religious orders and pray for the repose of Yoshitsune’s soul after he has been tracked down by Yoritomo. Although the *kōwakamai* libretto emphasizes her heroic defiance (dance is an important element of this celebratory performing art), the Edo period illustrations of the narrative stress instead what was increasingly becoming the story of women associated with famous warriors: Shizuka is fated to take the tonsure and pray for her male dead, thereby remembering the past as embodied by a military man.

Interestingly, Shizuka appears throughout the piece as a well-dressed woman of some means: her clothing, apartments, and the people around her all suggest the kind of sheltered existence we might expect of a Heian lady or her cultural descendents, wives and daughters of high-placed warrior households (Figure Twelve). The text identifies her as a *shirabyōshi*, a potentially transgressive category of female who enjoys mobility and other freedoms wives and mothers generally did not. In other words, her emblematic defiance and freedom are essentially overwritten by illustrations that depict her rather as a well-placed mother in anguish over the murder of her child.

Throughout the medieval and early modern period, stories of great popularity like Shizuka’s underwent changes that tended to simplify individual characters, themes, and plots. As a derivative of the *kōwakamai* repertoire, this work emerged in a milieu of strong upper-class warrior patronage. What might that tell us about why and how this quintessential, highly romanticized and eroticized female is articulated by performers and audiences in this context of power and privilege? My working theory is that females, and particularly ones whose mobility, attractiveness, or other powers marked them as potentially threatening to the social order, tended to be portrayed more strongly in their non-threatening roles as mother and, later, as nuns. One question that therefore remains for me with this text is: why is Shizuka’s final tonsure also not the subject of illustration?

None of these are questions I could ask by simply looking at modern, printed editions of the text. The availability of works like *Shizuka* through the Library’s digitization project gives me and other scholars the data to ask more and better questions early in our research, which in turn allows us to be directed by materials as we work with interpretive methodologies to address them more fully. The digitized image is
not a replacement for the actual work—among other things, the Library’s images include reproductions of each page within the book, not its packaging, which is an important indication of its meaning as material culture—but images do allow scholars to accomplish vital first steps that enable better work when we subsequently visit an archive.

The on-line availability of the Library of Congress’s collection is an important step toward integrating a large and rich body of works into the public corpus of research materials for scholars around the world. The quality of the materials available in Library’s collection will provide the basis for better-grounded research projects in the field; the thoughtful use of their digitized collection will ensure the early and easy awareness of and accessibility to these works for a broader and more diverse group of researchers. But it is ultimately the Library itself—the public institution staffed by dedicated professionals eager to see the collections used—that makes digitization meaningful. Digitization moves the Library’s doors from Independence Avenue onto the web, where they can be opened by interested researchers from any location worldwide. Once those doors have been opened, however, it is the physical materials and their stewards that make good research possible; digitized images help raise questions, but it is only conversations with the materials and with the people who know them best that can begin to provide answers.
Figure Two: from “Wakamurasaki,” *Eiri Genji monogatari* (1650)
Kadokawa bunko *Zenyaku Genji monogatari*

Figure Three: from “Aoi” (Book 9)
Left: LOC *Genji monogatari*, Book 9
Right: Dartmouth *Genji monogatari*, Book 9
Figure Four: from “Aoi” (Book 9)
Left: LOC Genji monogatari, Book 9
Right: Dartmouth Genji monogatari, Book 9

Figure Five: Soga Brothers Part from the Hakone Shrine Intendant
LOC Soga monogatari, Book 19
Figure Six: Soga Brothers Enact Their Vendetta
LOC *Soga monogatari*, Book 21

Figure Seven: Soga Brothers Engage the Enemy
LOC *Soga monogatari*, Book 22

Figure Eight: Gorō is Executed
LOC *Soga monogatari*, Book 23
Figure Nine: Shizuka Takes Preliminary Vows
LOC Shizuka, Book 1

Figure Ten: Maid Betrays Shizuka
LOC Shizuka, Book 1
Figure Eleven: Shizuka’s Son Taken From Her LOC Shizuka, Book 2

Figure Twelve: Shizuka LOC Shizuka, Book 1