Stories That Should Not Be Told: sharebon, kibyoshi and censorship in early modern Japan

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Abstract: This thesis explores the relationship between censorship of the authoritarian government of early modern Japan and the sharebon and kibyoshi sub-genres of gesaku literature, with reference to M.E. Berry’s notion of the private public sphere (1998), and compares the situation of these literary sub-genres with the situation of ukiyo-e prints.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>View</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>View/Open</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Making the term “madcap” connects early modern Japanese genres of humor with North American vaudeville and even Lewis Carroll’s Mad Hatter. Another result of these renderings of generic categories (and the list provided above is by no means exhaustive) is that they highlight how complex and multifaceted the discourse on humor in fact was at this time. In addition to the richly detailed analysis of how kibyōshi actually functioned in the context of early modern Japanese literary culture, Manga from the Floating World systematically explains just how they did not serve as precursors to or direct influences on the modern manga. This argument flies in the face of many statements by Japanese and non-Japanese scholars alike, purporting to make the kibyōshi the manga’s progenitor. The Cambridge History of Japan, Vol. 4: Early Modern Japan, Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991 (hereafter CHJ). 37 Discussions with colleagues in Japan suggest similar issues, although there are certainly more book-length works on the period. The problem seems to lie in where and how to find an overarching theme to the era. This is not to say that the situation is intellectually terminal in some sense: Conrad Totman’s Early Modern Japan (1993), Luke Roberts’s study of Tosa (199839), and Mark Ravina’s examination of three large domains (Yonezawa, Tokushima, and Hiroasaki, 199940) indicate that we have a story of attempts to come to grips with an increasingly tense relationship between natural.