



Ikumi Kaminishi, *Explaining Pictures: Buddhist Propaganda and Etoki Storytelling in Japan*

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006, x + 284 pp. \$52.00 cloth, ISBN 0-8248-2697-3.

AS THE FIRST English-language book-length study of Japanese Buddhist *etoki* 絵解き “picture explaining,” Ikumi Kaminishi’s *Explaining Pictures* is a welcome addition to the growing corpus of works devoted to the subject of premodern Japanese art and religious culture. *Etoki*, which Kaminishi translates as “pictorial decipherment,” is a seemingly universal didactic performative genre, as Victor Mair demonstrated in his ground-breaking *Painting and Performance: Chinese Picture Recitation and Its Indian Genesis* (University of Hawai'i Press, 1988). In *Explaining Pictures*, Kaminishi employs a global approach to Japanese *etoki* by discussing numerous representative paintings and premodern Buddhist storytelling traditions, including, most prominently, those of Shōtoku Taishi, the *Taima Mandala*, the *Yūzū nenbutsu engi emaki*, the *Kumano kanjin jikkai mandara* (which Kaminishi refers to as the *Kumano*

kanshin jikkai mandara, using the popular [non-Buddhist] reading of *kanjin* 観心 as *kanshin*), and the *Tateyama Mandala*. In addition, Kaminishi's work is fundamentally concerned with the lives and livelihoods of *etoki* preachers themselves—both those who were essentially temple-based, and those who were itinerant—and to this end she discusses representations of *etoki* storytellers in literature and art, including the *Ippen Shōnin eden*, the *Sanjūniban shokunin uta-awase*, selected screen paintings, courtiers' diaries, poetry, and a dramatic work by Chikamatsu Monzaemon.

The historical scope of Kaminishi's work is extraordinary. Although she states on page 14 that the goal of her study is “to decipher how pictorial and performative Buddhist propaganda worked in Japan between the tenth and nineteenth centuries,” she discusses contemporary and near-contemporary *etoki* performances as well, the effect of which is to further enlarge the breadth of her book. Kaminishi repeatedly uses the word “deciphering” in her chapter titles (i.e., “Deciphering the Founder of Japanese Buddhism,” “Deciphering Pure Land Imagery,” “Deciphering the Quasi-Religious *Etoki* Performer,” and “Deciphering Mountain Worship”), suggesting that her intent is to explicate the vast world of Japanese Buddhist *etoki* in the manner of an *etoki* performance itself. As one might therefore expect, her use of diagrams and illustrations is superb. Except for occasional editorial lapses (identical mistakes involving ellipses in two block quotations on pages 26 and 61 that render both passages partly unintelligible; a missing “5” in a list on page 144, etc.), both Kaminishi and the University of Hawai'i Press are to be commended for producing such a handsome book.

Despite its attributes, *Explaining Pictures* has its share of problems, some of which are substantial. Most obvious is the issue of Kaminishi's central thesis, which, according to the blurb on the inner flap of the book's dust jacket, is “the provocative claim that the popularization of Buddhism in the medieval period was a phenomenon of visual culture.” This is indeed a provocative claim, and one that Kaminishi fails to substantiate in any meaningful way. *Etoki* clearly played a vital and hitherto largely unrecognized role in the medieval spread of Pure Land Buddhism—Kaminishi's main concern—but it is too much to contend, as Kaminishi does on page 115, that “in the early medieval period, through *etoki* missionary work, Buddhist teachings... became truly available to nonaristocrats for the first time.” Such an assertion unreasonably discounts the collective importance of the Pure Land proselytizers Kūya, Hōnen, Ippen, and Ryōnin (the founder of the Yūzū Nenbutsu sect), all of whom Kaminishi discusses in the early chapters of her book, and none of whom appear to have employed painted images in their preaching. Moreover, in discussing the twelfth-century Tōdaiji *kanjin* 勧進 (fund-raising) priest Chōgen, Kaminishi undermines her own argument when she writes on the one hand that Chōgen “does not seem to have used the *etoki* method,” and then asserts on the other that “the legwork of Chōgen and others made a significant contribution to spreading the nenbutsu network of the Pure Land faith” (both passages on page 98).

Explaining Pictures suffers from substantial methodological failings as well. While Kaminishi's discussions of art and contemporary theory tend to be good, her

handling of Buddhist and literary textual sources often is not. On page 53, Kaminishi both mistranslates the famous verse-revelation that Shinran is said to have received at the Rokkakudō in 1201, and fails to name the original source of her quoted passage (the thirteenth-century *Shinran muki*). In her footnote, she states that she “consulted Matsumoto Akira’s modern Japanese translation,” but his translation of what, she does not say.¹ On page 61, Kaminishi quotes two passages from the *Kanmuryōju-kyō* sutra, but instead of relying on Hisao INAGAKI’s 1994 translation (or translating the passage herself), she quotes from Takakusu Junjirō’s badly dated translation of 1894.² (She also repeatedly refers to Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 as “Takakusu Junichirō.”) In footnote 20 on page 206, Kaminishi’s use of a less-desirable translation leads her to write that in regard to Amida Buddha’s forty-eight original vows, “the number forty-eight may be a Japanese tradition. *The Larger Sukhāvātīvyūha Sutra* lists only forty-six vows.” Kaminishi refers readers to Max Müller’s translation—also first published in 1894—which indeed contains only forty-six vows. This is because Müller’s translation is based upon a Sanskrit text rather than upon the third- or fifth-century Saṃghavarman Chinese translation (*Bussetsu muryōju-kyō*; T. 12, no. 360), which came to be most widely used by Pure Land devotees in China and Japan, and which does in fact contain forty-eight vows.³

Kaminishi’s romanized representations of Japanese poetry are also highly unorthodox. While it is a current convention in English-language scholarship to romanize the usually thirty-one syllables of a *waka* in five lines of 5/7/5/7/7 syllables (or, in some cases, in two lines of 5/7/5 and 7/7 syllables), Kaminishi’s layout of poems on pages 161, 179, and 180 appears to be partially random. Furthermore, Kaminishi badly mistranscribes the second poem on page 161 (*Fūga wakashū* 2099), for which she also neglects to cite an adequate bibliographic source.⁴ More disturbing still is Kaminishi’s tendency to misrepresent suppositions as facts; in the case of the mistranscribed *Fūga wakashū* poem, she matter-of-factly states on pages 161–62 that the legend of which it is a part “was forged around the fourteenth century to encourage more women to visit Kumano.” While this may be true, without some kind of evidence (of which there is none), this is purely a matter of conjecture. Kaminishi

1. Matsumoto is similarly vague. His book, *Shinran no shōgai* (Tokyo: Daihōrinkaku, 1995), is written for a general audience, and therefore contains no annotations of any kind. Kaminishi’s mistranslation stems from her misapprehension of phrase *dakarete ageyō* in Matsumoto’s modern Japanese translation. The original *kanbun* passage, which Matsumoto cites on pages 80–81, is less ambiguous because of its use of the passive verb *okasaru* 被犯 (MJ: *okasareru*). For a translation and thorough discussion of *Shinran muki* in English, see DOBBINS 1989, 23–24.

2. As was the convention of his time, Takakusu employed pseudo-biblical phrasing, i.e., “Thou shouldst sit down properly, looking in the western direction, and prepare thy thought.”

3. *Bussetsu muryōju-kyō* is one of five extant Chinese translations. It is traditionally attributed to the third-century translator Saṃghavarman, but many scholars believe that it actually dates from 421. See INAGAKI 1994, 56; KAMATA et al, 1998, 99–100. Incidentally, because of her reliance on Müller’s translation, Kaminishi refers to Amida’s vow for women as vow 34 rather than 35.

4. *Fūga wakashū* is available in a modern annotated edition, TSUGITA and IWASA (1974), which Kaminishi apparently did not consult.

footnotes her claim, referring readers to Machida Sōhō's *Erosu no kuni: Kumano* (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1996), page 176. A quick check of that book, however, reveals that Machida makes no such bold assertion: after questioning the historical veracity of the *Fūga wakashū* poem-story, Machida tentatively writes that "it seems to be a stronger possibility" (*de aru kanōsei no hō ga tsuyoi yō da*) that the legend was composed for the purpose that Kaminishi claims.

Unfortunately, *Explaining Pictures* is marred by many such misleading statements. To cite but one further example, in her discussion of painted representations of Nyoirin Kannon's salvation of women from the Blood Pool Hell in *Kumano kanjin jikkai mandara*, Kaminishi writes on page 159 that one of Kannon's six arms "is extended toward a white-robed, kneeling woman. In that hand Nyoirin holds a scroll: a copy of the *Blood Basin Sutra*." Although most scholars would agree that the scroll in Nyoirin's hand is probably the *Blood Basin Sutra*, there is no way to tell for certain. Barbara RUCH, for one, has suggested that "the tiny text depicted [in Nyoirin's hand] could as well be *The Heart Sutra* (*Hannya shingyō*)" (2002, 574). Kaminishi cites Ruch's article in her bibliography, so it is a mystery why she unequivocally states that the scroll is the *Blood Basin Sutra*.

Though *Explaining Pictures* has its problems, it is also a pioneering, illuminating work. Kaminishi's Introduction is intelligent and well-informed. In chapter seven, Kaminishi discusses the likely influence of imported Christian iconography upon the composition of *Kumano kanjin jikkai mandara* in the sixteenth century, and her analysis is both fascinating and persuasive. Her examination of the *Tateyama Mandala* in chapter eight is also good, as are her discussions of the *Hōryūji Shōtoku Taishi eden* in chapter two, the *Ippen Shōnin eden* in chapter five, and the *Sanjūniban shokunin uta-awase* in chapter six. Taken as a whole, *Explaining Pictures* is thus a significant contribution to the field of *etoki* studies, and to premodern Japanese cultural studies at large.

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