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| Institution: SOAS University of London | | |
| Unit of Assessment: 25 - Area Studies | | |
| Title of case study: Breaking the Shunga Taboo: Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art | | |
| Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2009–2013 | | |
| Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit: | | |
| Name(s): | Role(s) (e.g. job title): | Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: |
| Prof Andrew Gerstle | Professor of Japanese Studies | 1993–2019 |
| Period when the claimed impact occurred: October 2013–31 July 2020 | | |
| Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N | | |
| <p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Research at SOAS led to the taboo over <i>shunga</i> being broken both in the UK and Japan – particularly among museums and their audiences, and in media discourses. This was achieved through rigorous collaborative research and ground-breaking publications that led to successful public exhibitions and catalogues in London, and in Tokyo and Kyoto in Japan where exhibitions of <i>shunga</i> had never been held. Reaching nearly 400,000 visitors, these exhibitions led to positive transformations of curatorial practices and commercial sponsorship of exhibits of sexual material, informed a change in audience attitudes and media discussions of human relationships, and enabled more long-lost <i>shunga</i> to emerge from private collections for public consumption and education in Japan.</p> | | |
| <p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p><i>Shunga</i>, Japanese traditional erotic art and literature, flourished from at least the 15th century, and particularly from the late 16th to the end of the 19th century. The works are in the formats of paintings, illustrated woodblock printed books and single-sheet prints in both monochrome and full colour. From 1722 onwards erotic books (<i>kōshokubon</i>) were proscribed, but this did not stop production for long, and major artists and writers continued to contribute to this genre. It was not until the early 20th century that <i>shunga</i> paintings became the object of censorship and made academic/museum study and exhibitions impossible.</p> <p>The research aim was to investigate the works, their reception and how they were distributed before 1900 and to hold exhibitions in London and Japan in order to break the taboo. Initially Prof Andrew Gerstle (SOAS from 1993) proposed a collaborative research project with Timothy Clark, Head of the Japanese Section at the British Museum, which was funded by the Leverhulme Trust. The three-year grant (2009-2012, GBP214,028) enabled Gerstle and Clark to survey private collections in Japan and Europe to find new material. The project investigated the history of <i>shunga</i> from various perspectives in order to dispel the image of <i>shunga</i> as pornography only of interest to men [3.2]. In particular Gerstle focused on the <i>shunga</i> parodies of women's conduct books to show that <i>shunga</i> was also aimed at women. Conduct books were popular and taught women Confucian values as well as practical aspects for work and family life, and modest female conduct. One finding in examining the <i>shunga</i> parodies of these books was the often explicit message that women too should expect sexual pleasure in a conjugal relationship. The research team's approach was to focus not only on the images but also on the extensive text in <i>shunga</i> books. This led to findings that humour was pervasive, demonstrating the joys and foibles of sexuality both for men and women. Gerstle published one book in Japanese on erotic parodies of women's conduct books [3.3] and three translations and studies of this genre [3.4, 3.5, 3.6]. Another approach was to show how the native religion was seen as open to sexuality as natural, in contrast to Confucianism or Buddhism. <i>Shunga</i> works often set the origins of erotic</p> | | |

representations in the Shinto founding myth of the sexual union of the gods Izanagi and Izanami, as well as other native stories. The parody of conduct books based on Confucian ethics presented a relaxed and more positive view of sexual pleasure for both men and women.

With Timothy Clark and Aikiko Yano, also co-curator at the British Museum following a Leverhulme Fellowship at SOAS (2013–2014), and Aki Ishigami, Postdoctoral Fellow at Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, Gerstle edited the British Museum exhibition catalogue [3.1] counting contributions from 40 academics and scholars in Japan and the West. Members of the research group, including Gerstle, contributed to the Japanese catalogue [3.1a] for the subsequent *shunga* exhibitions at the Eisei Bunko Museum in Tokyo (2015) and Hosomi Museum in Kyoto (2016), the first ever *shunga* exhibitions in Japan. The exhibitions and publications showed *shunga* to be explicit depictions of sex but in the context of humour, affection and mostly mutual pleasure. The team's work was nominated for best research project by the Times Higher Education Awards in 2016.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

3.1 Clark, T., Gerstle, C.A., Ishigami, A. and Yano, A. (2013). *Shunga: Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art*. London: British Museum Press; Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. ISBN: 978-0714124766. Available on request **Peer-reviewed**

3.1.a. Japanese translation (2015). Tokyo: Shogakukan. Available on request

3.2. Gerstle, A. and Clark, T., ed. (2013). 'Shunga: Sex and Humor in Japanese Art and Literature' (special issue). *Japan Review*, 26. <http://doi.org/10.15055/00000159> **Peer-reviewed**.

3.3. Gerstle, A. (2011). *Edo onna no shungabon: tsuya to warai no fûfu shinan* (*Shunga* books for Edo-period women; charm and humour for couples). Tokyo: Heibonsha. ISBN: 9784582855753. Available in request (**Respected Japanese publisher. 9000 print run, out of print in 2019. The book was reviewed by a Japanese *shunga* specialist and was an output of the Leverhulme Trust research grant.**)

3.4. Gerstle, A. and Monta, H. (2010). *Bidô nichiya johôki. Nichibunken series, Kinsei enpon shiryô shûsei*, V. Kyoto: International Research Center for Japanese Studies; Nichibunken Japanese Studies Series, 44. ISBN: 9784901558495. Available on request

3.5. Gerstle, A. and Monta, H., eds (2007). *Onna shimegawa oeshi-bumi* (Love Letters and Erect Precepts for Women). *Nichibunken series, Kinsei enpon shiryô shûsei*, IV. Kyoto: International Research Center for Japanese Studies. ISBN: 9784901558341 <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/3894/>

3.6. Gerstle, A. and Monta, H., , trans. and study (2018). *Onna dairaku takara-beki* (Great pleasures for women and their treasure boxes). *Tsukioka Settei 3 'Onna dairaku takara-beki': Kinsei enpon shiryô shûsei, VI; Collected Erotic Texts of the Early Modern Period, VI*. Kyoto: International Research Center for Japanese Studies. ISBN: 9784901558952. Submitted to REF2021.

Outputs 3.4, 3.5, and 3.6 were published after peer review by the International Research Center for Japanese Studies, a Japanese national research institute in Kyoto.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Japanese views of *shunga* have changed so dramatically from before the SOAS-British Museum research project and exhibition that it is now hard to imagine how powerful the taboo was in Japan before Gerstle's research. Newspapers would not print the word '*shunga*,' much less have articles about it – as confirmed during an exhibition viewing by the reporter of Asahi Newspaper [5.4]; museums such as Tokyo National Museum and libraries denied holding *shunga* or refused access; no exhibitions had ever taken place in Japan; almost no art dealers or book sellers worked with *shunga*; and scholars rarely mentioned *shunga* even in discussing sexuality or social history. In the 1990s, the Keio University library refused to receive the donation of the famous Shibui *shunga* collection, according to its then Professor of Art History. This all changed due to Gerstle's project. Working with the British Museum proved a catalyst to opening up the iconic national institution to exhibitions with explicit sexual content, leading to impacts among audiences and on media discourses. The success of the UK exhibition also changed attitudes among museum

management and curators in Japan, leading to the first ever modern day display of *shunga*, and re-examination of its legacy among curators and educators in universities in Japan.

Impact in the UK within the British Museum and among its national audience

The British Museum (Director Neil MacGregor) agreed to host the exhibition (October 2013–January 2014) but the taboo proved powerful: no Japanese companies would sponsor the BM exhibition and the Japanese Ambassador at the time was against the plan. Furthermore, negotiations to host the exhibition with as many as 30 Tokyo venues always failed, usually with the pattern of initial interest shown, followed months later by an embarrassed apology. Clark, project partner and British Museum (BM), curator noted ‘the judgement came back that, in Japan, ‘the social base for appreciating *shunga* has not yet been established’ [5.1 p133]. Finally, the President and Vice-President of the Japanese art dealers association Tokyo Club privately sponsored the BM exhibition and the *shunga* exhibitions – *Shunga: Sex and Pleasure* – in Tokyo (2015) and Kyoto (2016).

The 500-page BM exhibition catalogue initially sold 8000 copies and was in its third printing by 2020. The exhibition attracted approximately 90,000 visitors [5.1a p128]. Gerstle and the other 3 curators gave more than 40 interviews before and during the show to media from all around the world. Media coverage in the UK was extensive, with all the major newspapers reviewing the event positively, some more than once [5.1a p129], and totalling about 70 pieces of coverage in advance of and during the opening (from September 2013 onwards) [5.2a]. The Daily Telegraph’s Joan Bakewell considered that ‘the exhibition will change any preconceptions on the Japanese culture of sex and pleasure’ [5.2b], while in The Guardian Jonathan Jones wrote: ‘A world away from pornography, explicit Japanese *shunga* prints celebrate sex as a sensual act, and everyone has a good time’ [5.2c p1]. Women made up the majority of visitors, comprising 55% of the total audience, 6% up from the BM average of 49% [5.1a p128]. Feedback suggested a shift in attitudes to sex and sexuality, including among women visitors who found that ‘Lots of people are in the exhibition and nobody is uncomfortable, there is a good atmosphere’. One also commented that ‘everyone seems a lot more interested and relaxed than I thought they would be’, with ‘lots of quiet conversations’, while another described ‘the sheer gorgeousness of the drawings, the vibrancy, the detail, the tenderness’ as ‘the most exciting thing really’ [5.1c p42].

Impact on curatorial practices, corporate sponsorship, media discourses and university education in Japan

Media coverage of the exhibition in Japan was even more extensive, generating 1,284 online and print news reports [5.3a] and included special issues of magazines, the most substantial being *Geijutsu Shinchō* [5.3b], a popular monthly art magazine. Their team of 3 people spent a week in London preparing a 68-page spread that covered the whole exhibition. More than 200 media reports and blogs covered the exhibition, virtually all of them positively, stating that though the depiction of sex was explicit, it was almost always showing mutual pleasure and often with a humorous angle. A female reporter saw the BM *shunga* show and wrote in *Mainichi* Newspaper that its success ‘enabled Japan to break the taboo and host a *shunga* exhibition’ [5.3c]. The question that all Japanese media asked was, ‘Why can we not have an exhibition of *shunga*, our own culture, in Japan?’ This was the first time that newspapers had included comment on *shunga*, including tastefully cropped colour photos. In the opinion of the Deputy-Director of Culture Division at the *Asahi* Newspaper, there hadn’t been ‘such a big article [about *shunga*] in a newspaper before. It was a report on the exhibition at the BM, but this marked the beginning, — as you can see, the article is in colour.. it was rather novel at the time, and...was quite a breakthrough’ [5.4 p1].

The BM exhibition impacted on the attitude and perspective of the Director of the Toyo Bunko Museum in Tokyo – a well-known museum and library first created by the Mitsubishi Corporation founders (Iwasaki). After visiting the BM *shunga* exhibition (with a tour led by Gerstle and other curators) in 2013, the Director immediately opened up their extensive – but hidden under lock and key – collection of *shunga* for researchers and exhibited it for the first time. In August 2016 he stated, ‘It was with the British Museum’s influence that they managed to ‘open the door’ and made it possible to show *shunga* in Japan’ [5.5]. The Senior Curator also noted that ‘[t]he visitors to the

BM exhibition could see the solid academic foundation which the exhibition was built upon. The exhibition provided the audience with a well-established guideline for them to navigate through the exhibition: it would show them meanings as well as histories behind the works, give them certain perspectives to enjoy the works and an understanding of their values' [5.5].

Significantly, a *shunga* exhibition was held at the private museum Eisei Bunko in Tokyo between September and December 2015. The Director of the Museum, explained, 'The BM exhibition received big responses [from public and from media]; however, in Japan, there was a complete lack, and this made me concerned. My staff were against the *shunga* exhibition. The Tokyo Police called my staff to the Police Station to explain the exhibition in front of Tokyo senior police officers' [5.6]. Reactions in the media were large-scale and, according to the Vice-President of the Tokyo Club, 'overwhelmingly positive', with 'as many as 1,300 [media reports], the most ever for a public exhibition' [5.3a, 5.10]. The Tokyo Club, the Japanese art dealers association who had also privately sponsored the Eisei Bunko exhibition, managed to recoup their expenses for the BM show and more. The Vice-President confirmed that the 2013 BM exhibition 'had a tremendous impact in Japan, in the media and in enabling the first *shunga* exhibition in Japan' [5.10].

Hosokawa, a former prime minister and head of the samurai Hosokawa family of Kumamoto castle, also agreed to display a painted hand scroll and illustrated printed book in the Eisei Bunko show. The Tokugawa Museum of Mito (one of the 3 branches of the Tokugawa Shogun family) also lent a painted hand scroll to the exhibition – only one year earlier, they had denied the existence of any *shunga* in their collection when the BM was researching for the 2013 exhibition. [5.8].

The Tokyo exhibition was a tremendous success, with over 60,000 catalogues sold and over 220,000 visitors to an extremely small museum that had only ever had 20,000 visitors over a 12-month period. Hosokawa stated: 'Learning from studies by many scholars including Prof. Gerstle, and hearing people talk about *shunga*, I came to learn that *shunga* had a great impact on artists such as the Impressionists, and to realise that it was a big problem that such important art was unknown in Japan itself' [5.6]. The exhibition was co-sponsored by the Asahi and Sankei newspapers, two rivals that had never collaborated before – akin to the UK Guardian and Daily Mail collaborating. This positive coverage in newspapers across the political spectrum was fundamental to a shift in societal attitudes. An *Asahi* journalist indicated that the '*Shunga* exhibitions were received positively by young women in Japan' [5.7].

In Spring 2016, the Hosomi Museum in Kyoto hosted the Eisei Bunko exhibition for 2 months, attracting 81,000 visitors. Director Hosomi, who had visited the BM exhibition and considered it crucial to prepare the foreground for the Kyoto show, stated: 'we, most certainly, wouldn't have been able to do it on our own' [5.9]. The Chief Curator confirms that more than in Tokyo, the Kyoto exhibition showed a clear difference between the attendance numbers of female and male audience, with 'many more women than men' [5.9].

A documentary film, '*Shunga* and Nihonjin (the Japanese)' was released in September 2019 [5.11 a and b]. It charts the history behind the Eisei Bunko exhibition, and documents the impact of the BM exhibition on Japan and is now used by Japanese universities as an educational resource to examine *shunga*.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

5.1. Published reflections on impact by the British Museum

a. "Sexhibition": Reflections on *Shunga* in London, Looking Forward to *Shunga* in Tokyo', *Shunga* in Japanese Society, 2015, pp. 127–136.

b. Stuart Frost, 'Evaluation: "*Shunga*" at the British Museum', *Interpretation Journal*, 19(2), Autumn 2014, pp. 15–17.

c. Stuart Frost, 'Collecting and Displaying *Shunga* at the British Museum: Changing Attitudes to Sexually-Explicit Art', *Social History in Museums*, 39, 2015, pp. 36–44.

5.2. Selected UK press coverage

- a. Press reviews summary email from British Museum, 22 Oct 2013
- b. 'What *Shunga* can teach the prudish west about sex' – The Telegraph (13 Sept 2013).
- c. 'Erotic bliss shared by all at *Shunga*' – The Guardian (1 Oct 2013).

5.3. Selected Japanese press coverage

- a. List of Japanese press coverage, Sept-Dec 2015 (Japanese)
- b. *Geijutsu Shinchō*_Dec 2013) (Japanese)
- c. *Mainichi* Newspaper 26 Jan .2016 (Japanese)

5.4. *Asahi* Newspaper Deputy Director Cultural Products Dept - Interview recorded by Gerstle on 24 August 2017. Translated transcription [00.00-01.00 First major article in a Japanese newspaper for BM exhibition; Then 06.38-07.00; 12.00-12.30; 25.30-27.00]

5.5. Director of Toyo Bunko Museum and Curator - Interview recorded by Gerstle on 26 August 2017. Translated transcription [00:00-01:00 and then 02.36-03.58; research as basis: 05.10 – 05.40]

5.6. Morihiro Hosokawa, Director of Eisei Bunko Museum former PM - Interview recorded by Gerstle on 25 August 2017. Translated transcription [01.50 – 02.25 Impact of BM exhibition; 02.50-03.20 Impact of Gerstle and others in promotion of understanding of *shunga*]

5.7. *Asahi* journalist - Interview recorded by Gerstle on 26 August 2017. Translated transcription. [04.20 – 04.60 first time for newspaper; 04.60 -05.40; 07.00 – 07.15; 07.35 – 50; 08.00 –0 8.20 viewing *shunga* as a woman; 11.50 popularity among young women; 12.40 – 13.00 Media Impact in Japan for Eisei Bunko exhibition]

5.8. *Shunga-ten*, Eisei Bunko Exhibition Catalogue, 2015.(Japanese)

5.9. Director and Chief Curator - Interview recorded by Gerstle on 23 August 2017. Translated transcription.

5.10. Email from Vice-President of the Tokyo Club, 22 Aug 2019.

5.11. Impact on film makers and educational materials

- a. Email from Project Assistant Professor, The National Institutes for Humanities, 2 June 2020
- and b. flyer announcing launch of *Shunga* and *Nihonjin* (2019) with English version released in June 2020.