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Proposed Abstract

Title: Decentering Medical Orthodoxy: Visualizing Female Agency and Epistemic Subversion in Edo Print Culture

Abstract: Historical narratives of medical modernization frequently frame the adoption of Western clinical objectivity as an inevitable progression, a process that simultaneously centralized formal, male-dominated medical authority. This paper decenters that teleological narrative by examining how commercial print culture in Edo-period Japan (1603–1868) provided a tactical space to subvert patriarchal medical and moral orthodoxies from below. Before the boundaries of modern science hardened, artists and commercial publishers actively negotiated who could claim authority over female bodies, sexuality, and health.

Through a comparative visual analysis of two distinct interventions, this paper demonstrates how popular visual culture generated alternative, embodied epistemologies. First, Tsukioka Settei's parodic conduct book, *Onna dairaku takara-beki* (*Great Pleasures for Women and Their Treasure Boxes*, 1770), weaponized the rigid visual layout of traditional women's moral manuals. By embedding graphic depictions of female sexual agency within this recognizable format, Settei exposed the gap between patriarchal prescriptions and lived female experience, using visual evidence to invalidate abstract Confucian ideals. Second, Katsushika Ōi's *Onna chōhōki* (*Illustrated Handbook on Daily Life for Women*, 1847) extended this subversion into reproductive health. By illustrating fetal development and childbirth through the practical, relational lens of midwifery—rather than the abstract, externalized anatomical diagrams of male physicians—Ōi asserted the superior epistemic authority of women's experiential knowledge.

Ultimately, this paper argues that the modernization of Japanese medicine during the Meiji era was not a linear emancipation, but a process of epistemic enclosure. The formalization of Western medical models and the suppression of commercial erotic print actively foreclosed the spaces where alternative, female-centric authorities had previously circulated. By recovering these visual histories, this research challenges the assumed neutrality of medical modernization, revealing it as a highly gendered consolidation of power.

Extended Abstract (2-4 pages)

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Introduction

Historical narratives of scientific visualization often presume an evolutionary progression toward Western medical objectivity, viewing non-Western visualizations as “pre-scientific” and destined to be superseded. This teleological narrative typically centralizes formal, male-

dominated medical authority as an inevitable, progressive march toward modernization. However, this paper decenters that framework by examining how commercial print culture in Edo-period Japan (1603–1868) produced a distinct epistemological mode: integrative visual knowledge. Before the boundaries of modern science hardened, artists and commercial publishers actively negotiated who could claim authority over female bodies, sexuality, and health.

Rather than framing Edo-period visual culture as simple opposition to patriarchal medicine, this paper analyzes how these works functioned as strategic reconfigurations within available commercial and artistic structures. Through a comparative visual analysis of two distinct interventions—Tsukioka Settei’s parodic moral manuals and Katsushika Ōi’s midwifery illustrations—this research demonstrates how popular visual culture weaponized commercial formats to generate alternative, embodied epistemologies and subvert patriarchal orthodoxies from below.

Parodic Knowledge Production and Structural Camouflage

The first major intervention traces how male-dominated commercial print networks were utilized to subvert orthodox moral pedagogies. Tsukioka Settei, an Osaka-based artist specializing in *bijin-ga* (beautiful women), published *Onna dairaku takara-beki* (Great Pleasures for Women and Their Treasure Boxes) in 1770. The work’s title and physical format immediately signal its parodic intent, directly targeting *Onna daigaku* (Greater Learning for Women). Attributed to Kaibara Ekiken, *Onna daigaku* was the most influential women’s conduct manual in Edo Japan, prescribing feminine virtues such as obedience, domestic skill, and chastity through rigid moralistic instruction. Settei appropriated this recognized title structure, substituting “pleasure” (*raku*) for “learning” (*gaku*) and adding “treasure boxes,” a recognized euphemism for female genitalia.

Crucially, this work is a sophisticated visual critique operating through formal mimicry. Settei maintained the conduct book’s standard visual conventions, layout, and didactic framing, but systematically inverted the content to urge women to seek sexual pleasure, depicting couples in intimate positions. By visualizing these denied erotic realities within the recognizable camouflage of a conduct book format, Settei exposed the vast gap between patriarchal prescriptions and lived female experience. The implicit argument of the imagery is that women’s actual lives involve sexual pleasure and erotic agency, effectively using visual proof to invalidate abstract Confucian prescriptions. While constrained by the patriarchal realities of male commercial publishing, this parody created critical distance, allowing viewers to recognize the disparities between patriarchal ideals and lived realities.

Visualizing Women's Medical Authority

The second intervention extends this visual subversion directly into the medical sphere, moving from moral parody to claims of epistemic authority over reproduction. Katsushika Ōi’s *Onna chōhōki* (*Illustrated Handbook on Daily Life for Women*, 1847) emphasizes women’s practical and embodied knowledge grounded in real-life experience. In stark contrast to male physicians’ obstetrical texts—such as Kagawa Genteki’s *Sanron yoku* (Book of Obstetrics, Gynecology & Childbirth, 1775)—which presented childbirth through theoretical anatomical

knowledge, Ōi devoted Part 3 of her book entirely to pregnancy, presenting a remarkable series of illustrations depicting fetal development in utero.

Ōi provided a powerful counter-visibility to the abstract, externalized anatomical diagrams found in male-authored texts. Her work strategically grounds reproductive anatomy in the social and practical realm of female labor and birth care. For example, while the supine birth position historically allowed male physicians to exert maximum visual access and procedural control, Ōi's illustrations depict a woman immediately after giving birth in a supine position, attended exclusively by a midwife and female attendants within a birth chamber. By visualizing a midwife assisting in the delivery alongside neutral, descriptive text, Ōi validates the legitimacy of midwives' experiential knowledge and women's bodily autonomy against male-dominated medical orthodoxy. The visual form itself makes an epistemological argument: women's embodied experiences constitute legitimate knowledge equivalent to, or surpassing, the textual expertise of male physicians.

Conclusion: The Epistemic Enclosure of Modernity

The commercial success of both Settei's and Ōi's works—circulating openly through established print networks—demonstrates that these were not isolated oppositional voices, but indicators of broader audience demand for visual knowledge about female bodies that acknowledged women's perspectives. By working tactically within available commercial genres and artistic conventions, these artists created spaces that made women's embodied knowledge visible, legitimate, and commercially valuable.

However, the modernization of Japanese medicine was not a linear emancipation. The Meiji government's suppression of Japanese erotic art *shunga* in the 1870s and the formalization of obstetrics under Western medical models ultimately eradicated the spaces these hybrid works created. Male medical authority became more, not less, totalized. The genre distinctions inherited by modern scholars—rigidly separating erotica from medical illustration, and art from science—are products of this historical rupture, not natural categories. By recovering the epistemic work these images performed, this paper challenges assumptions about the necessary relationships between scientific knowledge and visual objectification. Ultimately, Edo print culture's integrative visual knowledge offers a productive provocation for decentering modernity: it asks us to recognize what is lost when modern paradigms systematically separate knowing from feeling, anatomy from pleasure, and observation from embeddedness.