Fantastic Travel as Utopia or Dystopia in Edo Period Illustrated-Fiction

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Being a fan of utopian and dystopian tales both classic and more recent -- More’s *Utopia*, Huxley’s *Brave New World*, the films “Brazil” or “The Truman Show,” and so on -- I am struck by the ubiquity of similar types of idyllic or, alternately, dreadful fantasy worlds in Japanese popular fiction and visual media such as comics (manga) and animated films (anime). Famous Japanese animated film director Miyazaki Hayao, for instance, has throughout his long career, created numerous pastoral paradises as well as, and often in the same film, post-apocalyptic wastelands that can easily be regarded as fully-fledged utopias or dystopias, including “Nausicaä of the Valley of the Winds” (*Kaze no tani no Naushika*, 1984), “Princess Mononoke” (*Mononoke-hime*, 1997), or even the children’s fantasy “My Neighbor Totoro” (*Tonari no Totoro*, 1988).

Japanese audiences since at least the 1950s, in fact, seem to have had a particular fascination with fantastic realms on the darker side of the utopian/dystopian spectrum, a phenomenon Japanese literature and popular culture scholar Susan Napier demonstrates well in her essay “Panic Sites: The Japanese Imagination of Disaster from Godzilla to Akira.” Both of these modes, however, can be found in much earlier Japanese popular entertainment as well.

It is not difficult to demonstrate the influence of classic Western literary utopias upon contemporary Japanese fiction as well as popular entertainment such as manga and anime. To extend the above example, it is telling that Miyazaki’s first job in animated film was as an assistant animator for Tōei Studio’s 1965 production “Gulliver’s Travels Beyond the Moon” (*Garibaa no uchū ryōkō*), a Disney cartoon meets “Dr. Who” adaptation of Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*. In fact, the young Miyazaki first drew the attention of studio executives for his proposed revision of the film’s original conclusion, which he found lacking. Despite the ever increasing complexity of his anime creations, in many of his subsequent films as well, Miyazaki has followed the basic utopian fiction formula of creating “a sketch of a harmonious society, outside the known world but peopled with real and ordinary (albeit much improved) humans, as reported to us by travelers or native informants” (Plath, 1971:xii). The same might be said of many of other fantasy worlds represented in current Japanese popular entertainment.

More difficult to detect or to gauge is the influence of a native Japanese utopian or dystopian tradition. In fact, some scholars have concluded that such a tradition did not exist in Japan prior to the translation and publication
of More’s *Utopia* in the 1880s (Nuita, 1971:32). Although there was in point of fact no exact Japanese equivalent for the terms utopia or dystopia in Edo times, works from this time do exist which similarly describe hypothetical worlds both perfect and grossly imperfect as a way of critiquing actual society.

In this article, I discuss several idyllic and horrific fantastic worlds found in the popular illustrated fiction of the Edo period (1600-1868), focusing specifically on tales of fantastic journeys. My object is to describe the development of such narratives as a form of social and political critique, culminating in the creation of more overtly political utopias and dystopias in the mid Edo-period popular genre of *kibyōshi*. In this context, in the latter half of this paper, I take up *The “Two Paths” Threshing Machine; or Separating the Scholars from the Warriors* (*Bunbu nidō mangoku tōshi*, 1788), an important *kibyōshi* portraying a fantastic journey of sorts which proved scandalously effective in lampooning governmental policy.

Edo-period fantastic travel narratives were predominantly short, often illustrated stories that described journeys by foot, ship, or even on the back of a large bird, to lands mysterious, wondrous, or simply bizarre. In their basic form, these narratives might be simple versions of fairy tales, like the one about Urashima Tarō, a fisherman who rescues a turtle and is rewarded by being taken to the palace of the dragon under the sea. Others were more developed and complex and more directly reflected the author’s deep dissatisfaction with aspects of his own society. The examples I have chosen for this discussion are of the latter type, fantastic travel narratives which come round-trip, as it were, to compare, either implicitly or explicitly through the eyes of the protagonist traveler, circumstances in one or more fantastic lands with those in the author’s own country. Although it is less demonstrably fantastic than its precursors discussed below, *The “Two Paths”* was the zenith in Edo-period works to use the trope of travel to an exotic, out-of-this-world locale as a means of critiquing very real matters and figures in the author’s own world.

Scholars interested in classic Western utopian fiction have attributed the frequent use of fantastic travel narratives in such works to the fact that many appeared at the peak of the age of exploration and expansion. English and European readers during the 17th and 18th centuries, one imagines, certainly were especially fascinated by news of foreign lands and circumstances, an atmosphere which would naturally raise interest in more fantastic travel accounts as well.

In sharp contrast, and in part as protection against Western colonization, the military leaders of Japan imposed a policy of self-enforced national isolation that lasted from the mid-1600s to the mid-1800s. By this policy (known as *sakoku*), virtually no persons were allowed to leave or enter the country. And limited trade was conducted only with the favored nations of China and Holland. These circumstances too, however, may have whetted readers’ interest
in circumstances in both literal foreign countries as well as more exotic, fantastic locales. It is a curious fact that many presumed fantastic travel narratives of this time (such as Gennai’s *Romantic Life of Shidōken*, discussed below) contain descriptions of both known literal countries, such as Holland, India, China, and so on, as well as purely fantastic (to modern readers at least) lands.

As a result of the isolation policy, any direct influence of Western utopian fiction upon Japanese fantastic travel narrative is quite unlikely. How then can one explain the many uncanny similarities between Japanese and Western examples -- lands peopled variously by extremely small people, giants, half-humans-half-horses, and so on? I would suggest that these are the natural product of the ordinary utopian and dystopian method which exaggerates or completely alters features of the actual world as a means to bring readers to a better appreciation of the peculiarities of their own manner of society, government, or everyday manners and customs.

To speak of the ultimate origins of some of these visions, whereas the influence of Western sources on Edo period fantastic travel narratives is negligible, the influence of those Chinese is inestimable. This is not surprising since Japan had, for almost a millennium, considered China to be a prestige culture worthy of close emulation. One finds that many Japanese fantastic travel narratives of this time were in fact based upon much earlier Chinese sources, such as artistic and textual representations of Taoist paradises, Buddhist hells, and other types of religiously-inspired fantastic locales.

Japanese artists, writers, and storytellers soon adapted these Chinese tales for their own purposes, accommodating important aspects of their own history and tradition. Take, for example, the tale *The Warrior’s Island Excursions* (*Onzōshi shimawatari*, mid- to late-1400s), a fanciful version of the usually didactic genre of a journey through the Buddhist hells (*jigoku henreki*). In this account, the intrepid traveler happens also to be a central hero from the popular war epic *The Tale of the Heike* (*Heike monogatari*, 1371), namely, Yoshitsune, the valorous general of the Genji clan forces.

Yoshitsune originally sets sail from Tosa harbor in the southern Japanese island of Shikoku on a quest to acquire a copy of the sacred sutra of the Esoteric Buddhist sect, said to be protected by the deity Taishakuten (Sanskrit: *Sakro devānām Indraḥ*) in his castle on Sumeru Mountain. In this telling, this Buddhist mythical realm is reported to exist among the distant Chishima islands far to the north of Japan (east of current day Hokkaidō). Yoshitsune gets sidetracked en route to this remote location and finds himself instead landing upon a succession of fantastic islands. These include islands of half-human half-cats, long-armed people, and demons, as well as of horse-headed people, the latter curiously evocative of the final chapter of *Gulliver’s Travels* (Fig. 1).

In later stories, some of these ostensibly religious fantastic travel narratives could branch out in even more secular directions. The tale *A Journey With Saikaku Through the Realm of the Dead* (*Saikaku meido monogatari*, 1371)
1697), for instance, despite its espousal of Buddhist doctrine, is ultimately concerned with distinctly worldly issues. Comparable to Virgil in Dante’s Inferno, this story tells of how the poet Genmu is led through the Pure Land Buddhist paradise as well as various Buddhist hells by none other than Ihara Saikaku (1642-1693), the famous popular fiction writer who had died just four years previously. Through the Buddhist concept of karmic retribution, the hells of the story are used to satirize well-known figures and social groups of the time, especially gruesome hells being reserved for poets who slight their mentors, plagiarize, or resort to writing pornography. Although not depicting a utopia in the sense of an ideal state or place, works such as this show the potential of fantastic travel narratives to satirize various aspects of actual society. Their role is to point out, as it were, flaws in the presumed utopia of the current society.

Later Edo period illustrators and authors of popular fiction reworked similar fables and religious locales to exploit matters more of the here-and-now for their merchant and samurai class urban readers. These might include exposés of affairs and manners in Edo’s thriving pleasure quarters as well as satirical responses to unpopular government policies. A less overtly political example of these would be Saikaku’s own well-known conclusion to Life of an Amorous Man (1682), in which the protagonist, a sensual man of the world named Yonosuke, sails away with a group of similarly-inclined shipmates to the fabled “Island of Women,” taking along an extensive assortment of aphrodisiacs, prophylactics, sex toys, and abortion-inducing concoctions to assist them in their amorous pursuits (Fig. 2). Somewhat contradictorily, they...
also bring along a large supply of diapers, for use in the event that they happen to achieve rebirth on the island.

![Fig. 2. Yonosuke shipping off to the Island of Women.](image)

Although not self-evidently political, this episode is nonetheless quite remarkable for the manner in which it mocks both esteemed Buddhist doctrines as well as strict Confucian proprieties. Later, popular writer Hiraga Gennai -- often thought of as the father of the genres of satirical and humorous fiction known later as gesaku -- uses the theme of an island of women to criticize in a more direct and critical way the gender inequalities of Edo society. At the end of his famous work *The Romantic Life of Shidōken* (Fūryū Shidōken den, 1763), he depicts how the eponymous hero and his male crew are shipwrecked upon the mythical Island of Women and forced to serve as prostitutes to the entire population. The grim details of their forced containment in the “pleasure quarters” of the island, how many of them become ill and are hunted down when they try to escape, reveals the truly horrific conditions behind -- to many males of the time -- the presumed “utopia” of the Yoshiwara and other large licensed quarters.

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Combining mainly textual narratives with the occasional illustration, the above types of works are precursors to tales of fantastic lands found in *kibyōshi* and other more predominantly pictorial popular genres. The very malleable medium of the woodblock print -- not unlike today's manga and anime -- was particularly well suited to the representation of such fantastic locales.

Some of these images, as I have mentioned, were in turn based upon much earlier Chinese sources. The following two fantastic travel narratives, for instance, appear to both be based upon the vision of a visit to a land of people with large holes in their chests found in the ancient Chinese encyclopedic work *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (third Century B.C. to second Century A.D.) (Fig. 3). The episodes themselves appear both in Gennai’s famous *The Romantic Life of Shidōken*, mentioned above, and the lesser-known *Strange Tales of Foreign Lands; Or, Hyōei, The Japanese Chuang Tzu* (*Ikoku kidan; Wasōbyōe, 1774*), by an obscure author who went by the pen-name Yūkokushi.
The entry for this country in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (from which the above illustration is taken) relates briefly that “Hole-Chest Country lies to the east of there (San Miao). Its people have a cavity through their chests. It is also said to be situated to the east of Chi Country” (cited in Anne Birrell, 1999:245-246). In contrast to this brief and oddly literal (for modern readers at least) account, Gennai and Yūkokushi each create in their respective versions a full-fledged society, complete with social hierarchies and political institutions.

In Gennai’s version, the protagonist Shidōken -- a former Buddhist acolyte who has been commissioned by a Taoist wizard to seek the true meaning of human compassion by visiting the myriad pleasure quarters of the world -- stumbles upon the Chest-Pierced Country after visiting India, Indonesia, Sumatra, Borneo, Armenia, China, and Holland:

Shidōken flew four or five thousand leagues to yet another vast continent. This was called “the Chest-Pierced Country,” for all the inhabitants, men and women alike, had holes in their chests. When the nobility of this land wanted to go someplace, rather than ride a palanquin they would simply slide a pole through their chests and have themselves hoisted up and carried about. And yet they didn’t feel any pain! At every crossroad, laborers could be found carrying poles: Those catching a ride would call out “Pole man! Pole man!” in the same way that in Japan we yell “Palanquin man! Palanquin man!” Shidōken thought that he’d try getting a lift too, but since he didn’t have a hole in his chest, it was all for naught.

Traveling further into the land, numerous dwellings appeared and the surroundings became livelier. Given that this was after all a barbarous country, the manners of the inhabitants were quite coarse. Seeing Shidōken, all the people, both high and low, men and women, ran and gathered about him, exclaiming, “my, what a stunning figure; who would have thought such a man existed!” People couldn’t get enough of the spectacle and as the day wore on the news spread throughout the country, finally reaching the ears of His Great Holeyness, the king (Gennai, 1961:196-197).

Later, the reader learns that the social status of a citizen of this country is directly proportional to the size of the hole in his or her chest. Hence, the narrator refers to the king as “his most Confucian leader,” a pun on the literal meaning of “great” and “hole” of the characters for Confucius’ name. As in this reference to “His Great Holeyness,” *The Romantic Life of Shidōken* is at times dismissive both of Confucianism and of authority figures. It soon becomes clear that the main satirical object of this episode is the feudal class structure in its entirety:

When an official summoned Shidōken to the court, all the retainers were awe-stricken by his beauty. The king of the country had no sons, but was blessed with a daughter who was sixteen years old at the time. Beholding
Shidōken’s fine visage, the king and princess both promptly decided that he should be her bridegroom. The news that Shidōken would be heir to the throne was announced throughout the land and vassals and retainers were all bidden to gather. People were of mixed opinion, but since it was the great king’s decree, and the princess’s own choice, they could do nothing other than shout “Banzai, may the throne last a thousand years!”

Maidservants hurriedly approached Shidōken and told him that he must change into formal court apparel. They gathered about Shidōken and led him to a separate chamber where on a dais lay the many-patterned, gold-buttoned robe of a crown prince. As several maidservants began to undo his sash and change his garments, however, they discovered that he did not have a hole in his chest. At this point, they all flew into a fright and, throwing the robe aside, rushed out of the room. One among them screamed out angrily, “Contrary to being of beautiful appearance, you are nothing more than a freak! Since you don’t even have a hole in your chest, you certainly aren’t fit to be considered leader of the country; the king and princess must both hear of this!” (Gennai, 1961:197-198).

Shidōken falls from grace when it is discovered that he does not have a hole in his chest, which can be read as a parable of the potential arbitrariness of rank and class distinctions which in feudal Japan were determined in large part by pedigree and clan affiliations. The egalitarian implications of the text are clearer still in the episode’s conclusion when Shidōken is expelled from the Chest-Pierced Country. The reason given is that “all wise persons throughout this land have wide holes in their chests, while those with narrow holes are all fools. It is for this reason that those with narrow holes never rise to high positions. It goes without saying that it would be impossible for a person with no hole at all to become crown prince” (Gennai, 1961:198-199). The marriage is promptly canceled and the protagonist is driven from the land at the point of a sharpened bamboo pole. In his version of the original Chinese myth of a land of people with holes in their chest, Gennai is clearly concerned with issues of class divisions and the criteria by which leaders are chosen.

In contrast to the traveling Don Juan figure of Shidōken in Gennai’s version of The Chest-Pierced Country, Hyōei, the hero of Yūkokushi’s version, is a successful Nagasaki merchant who has retired from active life to pursue philosophical study and meditation. In the first episode of the story, after falling asleep while fishing in a boat near his retreat, he is led by Urashima Tarō himself around islands representing various types of Taoist paradises. Beginning with Hyōei’s visit to “the country of antiquarians,” it becomes clear that the narrative is intended as an “anti-utopian” critique of Taoist idylls and their presumed irrelevance to contemporary life in Japan. Hyōei is next led to the country of self-destruction, in which is demonstrated the negative side of utopian thinking in general:
Flying hither and thither for several thousand more leagues, Hyōei alighted
on a large continent. Asking the name of the place, he learned he had
landed in the country of self-destruction. He first took lodgings in Short
Cut Town at the Stumble On Inn, run by a Jack-of-all-trades named
Rihachi. Staying there for a short while, he went sightseeing every day,
observing the customs of the country.

All the people of the land, men and women alike, had a hole in their
chest. Those of higher rank did not use horses or palanquins, but would
simply slide a pole through their chests and be carried about. Bringing
three retainers along on trips and switching them regularly, they could
travel about by pole without exhausting their retinue. Mothers making a
trip with their children to visit the grandparents could fit the oldest to
the youngest, three or even up to five kids on a single pole, and have
them carried about like dried sardines on a skewer. When going to fetch
a doctor, a healthy family member could bring back a surgeon and general
practitioner in the same trip by balancing them on either sides of a pole
carried across his shoulders. It was a very handy form of transport, but it
had its disadvantages as well, not the least of which being that the
cavities in people’s chests were prone to numbers of diseases. Also, when
passing on a mountain path through forests or woods, people would
often get snagged onto a tree branch and become injured (Yūkokushi,

In marked contrast with Gennai’s use of the myth of a land of chest-pierced
people as an allegory of arbitrary class divisions, Yūkokushi’s version focuses
on the many possible uses of this novel mode of transport. The overall aim of
the episode, however, seems to be to demonstrate that newfangled ideas
never turn out in the end to be so truly ideal. Among the myriad rhetorical
purposes to which the vision of a utopia may be used, this story, paradoxically,
creates the fiction of an ideal world as an argument for remaining in the
imperfect present situation.

As I mentioned earlier, Hiraga Gennai is often regarded as a pioneer of
the genres of Edo period popular literature known collectively as gesaku. The
kibyōshi, one of these several genres, emerged a mere 12 years after the
publication of The Romantic Life of Shidōken, and around the same time as
the publication of Strange Tales of Foreign Lands. This new form of illustrated
fiction, in which textual dialogue and narration were combined with -- actually,
literally written upon -- an image, was particularly well suited for the
representation of fantastic travels.

A most interesting rhetorical device used in some of the earliest kibyōshi
to represent such journeys was the so-called “dream pillow” sequence. Similar
to the source material for the fantastic travel narratives discussed previously,
the motif of the “dream pillow” too came originally from China, more precisely,
from the Tang period (618-907) legend of a poor young boy named Lu Sheng
(Japanese: Rosei) who dreams of a future life of riches and splendor as he lay
napping on a magical pillow at an inn in Kantan, China. Later, however, he
awakes to find himself in the same impoverished situation in which he had

In Koikawa Harumachi’s Mr. Glitter ‘n’ Gold’s Dream of Splendor (Kinkin-sensei eiga no yume, 1775), thought to be the first major kibyōshi, this legend is adapted to current Edo circumstances. In this version, the samurai Kinbei falls asleep after having a meal of millet cakes at the Temple of the Buddhist god of fortune Meguro (Fig. 4). As is shown in this scene of the kibyōshi, he is suddenly swept away in an ornate palanquin to the home of a successful saké merchant, Bunzui, who has been searching for years for an heir (Shirane, 2004:676-677).

Fig. 4. Kinbei is greeted by a palanquin in his dreams. From Mr. Glitter ‘n’ Gold’s Dream of Splendor.

Similar to the magic fan used by Shidōken to fly from country to country, the device of the dream pillow works as a form of conveyance to transport the protagonist from his ordinary existence to one more wondrous. Granted, in this instance that journey is not to some distant, fantastic locale, but merely into circumstances to which he, given his low station, would not normally have access. In works such as this, the motifs and devices of older forms of fantastic travel narratives lend themselves to more developed social satire.

Some critics have regarded the kibyōshi as a step backwards from the presumed more literary fiction of Ihara Saikaku and earlier Edo period writers. From another perspective, as a visual form, it allows the reader to imagine he or she is literally stepping inside the fantastic world of the illustration. In this respect, it appears a close antecedent to manga and anime, forms in which the viewer may more easily imagine him/herself as entering into the space of the...
drawing. A fascinating example of innovations in the exploration of space in kibyōshi is found in the subsequent scene of Mr. Glitter ‘n’ Gold’s Dream of Splendor in which Kinbei arrives at the mansion of the sake merchant. Western linear perspective, a novelty in Japan at that time, is used to accentuate the sense of grandeur found in Bunzui’s residence (Fig. 5).

As a form of utopian or dystopian narrative, many kibyōshi were innovative not only in their representation of space, but also in their ability to purposely conflate contemporary and historical time. Inoue Takaaki, a well-known cultural and literary critic in Japan, has commented that such “time-slips,” as he calls them, were an integral element of kibyōshi and served as a way to address political and other themes forbidden to contemporary discourse (Takaaki, 1986:331). Through this device, Edo period creators of potentially offensive material would often transfer events to an earlier time and change the names of characters accordingly (Shively, 1955:159-160).

Such a time-slip is central to the satire of The “Two Paths” Threshing Machine, one of the most controversially political of all kibyōshi. Created by one of the pioneers of the genre, Hōseiō Kisanji (1735-1813), this work criticizes both the government reforms themselves and aspects of the social hierarchy of the time. The piece proved to be extremely popular and went into second and third printings. As a result, however, the author was roundly censured by the shogunate government and forbidden to write any further kibyōshi.

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The “Two Paths” Threshing Machine, in comparison with other fantastic travel narratives considered in this article, is a more narrowly political work. It is strictly concerned with the samurai class and in many sections directs its criticism at a single political figure, Matsudaira Sadanobu (1758-1829), the Senior Councilor (rōjū sūkōten) of the shogunate and author of the Kansei Reforms. Although set ostensibly half a millennium previously, in the early years of the Kamakura period (1185-1333), the story revolves around government policies just recently put into effect to redress what Sadanobu regarded as the too lenient atmosphere of the administration of his predecessor Tanuma Okitsugu. Among various social measures, Sadanobu reinstated the strict censorship laws of previous administrations and initiated the unpopular “Dual Paths of Literary and Military Arts” (bunbu ryōdō) policy, whereby samurai were strongly encouraged to follow scholarly (bun) as well as martial (bu) arts.

In the following episodes from The “Two Paths,” which come from the first of the books’ two fascicles, the author transports the events of Sadanobu’s administration into an earlier era. In this version, Yoritomo, the military leader and victor during the war between the Genji and Heike clans (1180-1185), institutes his own “dual paths” policy. Each scene from my translation is followed by an explication of more obscure details of the written text and the images, along with a discussion of the value of the work as a whole as a utopian travel narrative.

Scene 1

In Scene 1 of The “Two Paths,” Kisanji uses the first Kamakura-era shogun Minamoto Yoritomo and his chief general Hatakegawa Shigetada to refer indirectly to the contemporary shogun Tokugawa Ienari and his chief senior councilor Matsudaira Sadanobu. The topical nature of the plan discussed, to redeem samurai who excel neither in scholarship nor in military arts, was certainly patently obvious to contemporary readers. In this parody of the dual-paths policy, Shigetada (read Sadanobu) proposes that the samurai be divided into groups according to their true natures as warriors, scholars, or those who excel in neither of these all-important pursuits.

Despite its historical setting, the details of this scene all point to contemporary figures and events, down to the very patterns seen on the kimono of the figures. In addition to Yoritomo/Ienari and Shigetada/Sadanobu, minor characters appearing in this piece also share identities with contemporary figures. The three scribes seen in the right of this scene are modeled on contemporary officials assigned to take a census of the preparedness of individual samurai in scholarship and military arts. This association is made more explicit in the final scene of this section in which Yoritomo and Shigetada (that is, Ienari and Sadanobu) discuss the scribes’ respective reports.
Lord Yoritomo, your people are troubled. You’ve settled Japan and pacified all the samurai. But how will your servant Shigetada now keep up the esprit de corps? The world might seem at peace, but one can’t keep order solely through scholarship. Please decide the extent samurai should study either letters or the martial arts.

Who’d want to expose the lords that way? Did I hear someone’s been drinking cheap liquor from fine china?

They say that Shigetada comprehends life in all its four stages. Does he know the temple has sent out four sages?

Maybe they’re talkin’ bout snake-eyes in backgammon.

We’ll declare which samurai will engage in scholarship and which in martial arts. Of course, there are a lot of bums who are useless at both. We’ll soon sift them out!
In an indirect method of political critique, the slapstick asides of the scribes take the air out of catchphrases such as “to combine scholarship and military readiness” (bunbu kenbi), used by Sadanobu to lend authority to the “dual paths” policy. The first scribe misconstrues this as bunpuku kenbishi, a nonsense phrase comprised of bunpuku chagama, or the teapot from a well-known children’s story, and kenbishi, literally “sword and water chestnut,” a popular brand of saké in the Edo period.

Other puns turn upon homonyms of the word shisō. One sense refers to the Buddhist notion of the four phases of human existence (birth, aging, illness, and death), the other to a priest (or priests, which with some license I translate here as “four”) sent from a temple as messenger. Yet another homonym of shisō refers to a combination of “three” and “four” when tossing dice in sugoroku, a game originating in Egypt and India and introduced to Japan from China in the Nara period (710-784). Similar to backgammon, the objective of the game is to move one’s 15 pieces as quickly as possible around the board. This combination, therefore, did not make for a terribly good roll. The overall effect of these nonsensical asides is to suggest the illogicality of the dual paths policy itself, which, being based solely on a noble-sounding catchphrase, lacked any real connection to how most samurai actually lived at this date.

Scene 2

In Scene 2, Shigetada (Sadanobu) leads the samurai toward the “human hole” of “Fools’ Mountain” -- a pun using alternate Chinese characters for Mt. Fuji -- amid great fanfare and confusion. This scene uses the common Edo period artistic technique of visual irony, whereby two apparently different images are juxtaposed in such a way as to reveal hidden similarities. The sight of the noble samurai filing into the distinctly vaginal-shaped “human hole” (hito ana) of “Fools’ Mountain” -- that is Mt. Fuji, a symbol even at this time of national pride -- is indeed shockingly incongruous. The sexual overtones of this scene are reinforced by later references to a “sticky ooze” and to a cure for erectile dysfunction.

One wonders at first why the valiant general Shigetada is drawn in priestly get-up. Similarities between the priest and the politician, however, become more clear as one realizes, through the mark on his kimono and other clues, that this is in fact Sadanobu, the author of the reforms. The image of the priest urging samurai on to their respective fates in the caves of “Fools’ Mountain” is a very apt symbol for the manipulative policy that Kisanji describes as a veritable “threshing machine.”

Because of the notoriety of this kibyōshi, second and third runs were issued. In these, however, the publishers (perhaps through the common practice of the time of self-censorship) effaced a number of details from the printing
Shigetada thus devised a plan in which the various ranks of Kamakura samurai are told of an elixir of life hidden inside Mount Fuji. Ordered to find the potion, they enter Fuji en masse through the crevice known as the "human hole."

In the guise of a Shinto priest, Shigetada himself sat on the stage where the sacred dances are performed, shooing the Lords toward the opening.

Keep in line! Keep in line!

O yet unseen chasm at the base of Fools' Mountain, tell me, when will the samurai tumble into you?

I've got my own pile right here, thank you.

Scene 2
block, no doubt due to their charged political implications. Most tellingly, the plum-blossom crest, Sadanobu's family pattern, displayed on the priest's robes in this and other scenes, disappears altogether. This fact demonstrates both the potential effectiveness of kibyōshi as political satire as well as the pressures the government placed on individual authors through censorship, imprisonment, and other measures.

In the punch line, so to speak, of this scene, Shigetada shouts out to a man collecting tribute, "I've got my own pile of rice right here, thank you!" referring to the seat he is sitting on which is presumably stuffed with rice. This is a thinly veiled reference to several political debacles involving rice. In the year The "Two Paths" was published, scores of peasant protests (117 by one count) had arisen due to famine conditions, aggravated by a land tax through which the government extracted 40 to 50 percent of the harvest. This line might also refer to the fact that, to solve the increasing financial insolvency of many samurai, the Sadanobu regime ordered the cancellation of all samurai debts. This, in turn, put rice brokers and moneylenders in great distress.

In short, this scene suggests the acquisitiveness of a samurai government that would hoard rice for their own use even in a time of famine and cancel the large debts that many members of their class owed for this food staple. In such a climate, the very mention of government officials in connection with rice constituted the sort of "sensitive topic" discouraged through censorship of the time, and thus the piece is ostensibly set in the early Kamakura era.

Scene 3

Scene 3 presents three caves, representing the path of scholarship, the path of military arts, and the path of those with no interest or aptitude in either of these officially recognized endeavors. The sign over the cave opening at far right -- "Cavern of Letters and Refinement" -- is written in literary Chinese, using highly stylized seal-script characters, as befits its subject matter. This is obviously the path any samurai who considered himself a true scholar would follow. An accompanying sign reads, by fuller translation, "Warning: Persons lacking a passion for letters and refinement will please refrain from entering." This warning is ironic since, written as it is in archaic language, no unlettered person could possibly understand it. To reinforce this warning, a samurai in the crowd shouts out "No bumpkins allowed!"

At the top center of the illustration, the sign above a second, somewhat more inviting-looking entrance reads "The passageway to eternal life and perpetual youth." The suggestion in this case is that no person trained in the stoical way of the warrior would desire such utopian bliss. This is reinforced by the equivocal response of one samurai, "seems like a nice enough place..." Those who enter this cave, as the story unfolds, are deemed to be the most
"Seems like a nice enough place..."

"Don't mind that... Go in! Go in!"

"No bumpkins allowed!"

Inside the Caverns of Mount Fuji

Cavern of Letters and Refinement

Scene 3
feckless and dissolute of the samurai and are sent to a rigorous samurai training seminar -- not unlike similar seminars today for business managers gone soft -- held at the Hakone hot-springs.

The sign above the third opening, “hobgoblins’ Grotto,” apparently makes this cave an irresistible Venus’ flytrap for any stalwart samurai anxious to demonstrate his mettle. This challenge is underscored in the secondary sign posted outside that reads “Weaklings may not trespass!” A long line of fearless samurai choose to ignore this warning. It is these individuals who are most highly praised by the shogun and his general in the final scene of this fascicle.

Scene 4

The caves depicted in Scene 4 serve as a dystopian representation of the arbitrariness of the dual paths of scholarship and military arts policy that attempted to classify individuals according to stereotyped models of samurai behavior. Contemporary readers would have been reminded of the surveys of military and scholarly preparedness that the shogunate was circulating at the time in order to establish the qualifications of individual samurai in terms both of Confucian scholarship and martial know-how.

Having been sorted out through the figurative threshing-machine of the fabulous caves of Fools’ Mountain, the samurai are thrown back into the contemporary world of Edo, their characters and fates determined by the paths each has chosen. This chaotic scene suggests the general disarray of the samurai class whose function in society as warriors, and corresponding social and economic standing, had gradually eroded throughout the long “Great Peace” of the Edo period. Himself a member of that class, one can imagine the author Kisanji’s close identification with the pathetic figures in the drawing who have truly hit rock bottom. Kisanji adds insult to injury in this scene’s liberal admixture of sexual innuendo and scatological humor.

Scene 5

In Scene 5, which concludes the first half of this kibyōshi, Shigetada and Yoritomo are shown reading the reports of the three scribes. In literal translation, these are titled A Record of Chivalrous Samurai, Exemplars of Scholarly Samurai, and Memorandum: Samurai Backsliders. The last, ominously-titled report refers to those, within the fantastic context of this piece, who have chosen the easy path of eternal life and perpetual youth. In actual Edo society, their counterparts, one presumes, would be those of the samurai class who had become enamored of the ephemeral arts and delights of urban life and who -- much like the free-wheeling artist himself -- had immersed themselves in merchant class culture. It was specifically such social
The worthless samurai who followed neither the path of letters nor of military arts truly knew no shame; But through Shigetada's plan their faults were soon brought into full light.

The samurai emerge from the caves.

Yam broth has been poured around the mouth of the exit and they all slip and fall. This all done by way of a hint to those backsliding samurai.

Scene 4

They thought goblins would scare us?! Not one even showed up!!

Some challenge, huh?!

We've sure hit bottom now!

It's open! It's open! Get me the hell out of here!

These dedicated to books and learning soon began to pour out of this oranny.

This ooze ain't no elixir for everlasting life... It's more like that potion for an everlasting hard on.

My body's all slippery... I can't get a foothold... Hey, thanks buddy!
developments, which had arisen in the laissez-faire atmosphere of the previous administration, that the dual paths policy and other Kansei-period reforms were intended to address. In its derisive satire, then, this piece suggests that, in light of these changes, it is unreasonable to expect samurai to return to the by-then long outdated dual models of the enlightened classical scholar and fierce warrior.

The scholars are more useless even than the martially-minded types. But there are also a lot of backsliders. That lot's no better than the chaff off of grain after it's gone through the thresher.

At least we can be glad the stalwarts still outnumber the scholars. If the world remains at peace, I'm afraid the literati will eventually outstrip the military men.
A similar rejection of such stereotyped models for samurai pursuits and behavior is found in other political *kibyōshi* as well that appeared in reaction to the Kansei reforms and the dual paths policy. One, *The Twin Paths of Letters and Arms, Parroted* (Ōmugaeshi bunbu no futamichi, 1789), was written by Kisanji’s close associate and fellow *kibyōshi* master Koikawa Harumachi (1744-89), credited with having invented the *kibyōshi* genre itself. In this later, more overtly political piece, Koikawa employs a similar “time slip” technique to reveal the city of Edo transformed overnight by naive townspeople who believe that the dual-paths of scholarship and military arts policy applies to such everyday aspects of life even as dress and sports. In this representation of the otherwise urbane lifestyle of late Edo times turned upside-down, courtesans discover a passion for horsemanship, while samurai, absurdly anachronistic to the time, are shown wearing armor and practicing such traditional pursuits as archery in the center of a bustling market place.

Such satirical *kibyōshi* created in reaction to the Kansei Reforms, to which should be added Santo Kyōden’s *A Tour of the “Human Hole” at Fuji* (Fuji no hitoana kenbutsu, 1788), demonstrate that the supposedly frivolous humor of *kibyōshi* could be damaging when directed at political figures and policies. It is clear that the Sadanobu administration viewed these works as subversive in intent, for they subsequently forbade Kisanji to write any more *kibyōshi*. Despite such attempts to quell criticism, the Sadanobu administration became increasingly unpopular. In 1793, bowing to public pressure, Sadanobu was forced to relinquish his duties as Senior Councilor to the shogunate. Considering the strict censorship of these times, such irreverent depiction of contemporary political figures and policies was perhaps only possible through the sorts of chronological and spatial displacement typical of utopian and dystopian fiction. The rhetorical approach and pointed political criticism of *The “Two Paths” Threshing Machine* can be seen as the culmination of a long history in Japanese art and popular literature of addressing topical concerns through the depiction of some more distant, hypothetical realm.

The antecedents to these highly effective works -- for the beleaguered politicos and artists alike even *dangerously* effective works -- can be found in satirical fantastic travel narratives going back to medieval times and based originally on religious or other mythical locales. Like a more extended version of the modern political cartoon, the *kibyōshi* was able to exploit popular knowledge and appreciation of these locales to more subversive ends. Regrettably, this particular form of sociopolitical critique was short-lived, at least in the striking visual format of such types of comicbooks. Victims of their own success, Kisanji, Kyōden, Koikawa, and several others were ultimately forced to give up creating political *kibyōshi* completely. The utopian and dystopian inclinations of these works, however, somehow survived, reappearing in later Japanese works of popular fiction and entertainment with
a vengeance.

References


William Burton has been a fan of Japanese comics for several decades. Decidedly old school, Burton is particularly interested in 1960s and 1970s era avant-garde manga by artists such as Tezuka Osamu, Shirato Sanpei, Mizuki Shigeru, and Tsuge Yoshiharu. A visiting professor of Japanese Literature at Boston University, much of his research and teaching involve topics related to Japanese utopian and dystopian fiction and thought from the Edo period to the present.

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