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Through Hanjimono (判じ物) to Enlightenment: The Pictural Heart-Sūtra (般若絵心経)

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Abstract

Even considering Japan’s high literacy rates during the early modern period, it is rather unlikely, that the majority of the Japanese population would have been able to read and understand an important Buddhist text like the Heart Sutra, 般若心経. This naturally posed a problem for the monastic schools, who competed with the rather easy to practice Pure Land and Amida schools, and needed to become more accessible to their lay-supporters. An answer to this problem presented itself in the form of Hanjimono (判じ物), rebus-like allusions, using pictures to represent words or parts of words. Usually used for playfull riddles, artists would also use Hanjimono to represent their names and sometimes even short subversive slogans. It were monks from the Tohoku area who adopted Hanjimono to represent the Heart Sutra and thus helped to make it accessible to the illiterate lay people. The considerations behind that practice are topic of this paper.

Keywords: Heart-Sutra, Hanjimono, Edo-period-Buddhism

After centuries of oral transmission, the memorized and chanted accounts of Buddha’s teachings, were finally written down in the Pali tripitaka, thus making up Buddhism’s doctrinal foundation. It contains a huge number of texts, which were later translated from various Indian languages into Chinese and Tibetan. Later also into Japanese, Korean and many other languages. The ‘Sutta tripitaka’ supposedly contains 84000 of Buddha’s sermons and discourses, which are deemed to ‘conform to the truth’ (kaikyō 契経), as "Sūtras are thought to penetrate into the truth and embrace all sentient beings.”

As Japans Buddhism was deeply influenced by the Chinese dharma tradition, I believe, that the observation, that in China “the sutra text performs a double religious function: on the one hand it is thought of as a vehicle which can be used to make a bodhisattva or buddha present; on the other hand, more radically, it stands in the place of, and (functionally speaking) is, a bodhisattva or buddha.” also holds true for Japan.
It was agreed among many Buddhist scholars, that Sūtras, even if not understood, but recited with faith, would eventually lead to enlightenment, since only the language of the Sūtras has the power to cut through illusions and enlighten the faithful.\(^3\) Which means, that Sūtras had to be studied, read, recited, copied and spread as widely as possible.

Although differences in their respective interpretation eventually lead to the formation of separate schools, Sūtras are in principle trans-sectarian, as all schools agree on their truth.

Since Buddhism's transmission to Japan via China and Korea in the 6\(^{th}\) century, Buddhism was closely connected to the ideas of spiritual and physical healing, hence the great number of early Buddhist statuary depicting the Healing Buddha Yakushi Nyorai, who is always depicted with a medicine jar in his left hand. Sūtras were also often inserted into Buddha statues in order to bring them to life. Handling the scriptures was seen as a task of utmost importance within the monasteries. There existed a hierarchy of Sūtra scholars (gosho hōshi 五種法師) starting with Juji (受持), those who accept and keep it, second were Dokyō (諸経) those who read it, then Jukyō (諸経), those who recite it, followed by Sekkyō (諸教), those who explain it and Shakyō (諸経) those who were able to copy Sūtras in writing.

Sūtras, too, were seen as tools for healing and protection. As right speech has great influence on one's karma, reciting and chanting Sūtras was believed to be very beneficial, but since they were written in Chinese, initially that was possible only for the clergy and an elite minority of educated nobles.

"Chanting is central to most Buddhist practices and rituals. In addition to conveying religious sentiments and ideas, Buddhist chants are believed to establish and renew moral discipline, produce enlightenment, ward off obstacles and exorcise demons, bring rain, make deities and bodhisattvas appear and/or transfer merit to other beings."\(^4\)

Many schools eventually developed specific recitation rituals ranging from anju (暗誦), reciting a sutra completely from memory to act-reading (shindoku 身讀), to a combination of reading and reciting from memory (dokuju 語誦), or to choreographed group recitations (tendoku 天讀), in order to underline the importance of those Sūtras, seen as specially effective in guiding their followers to salvation. Public readings were held by the temples during religious events, but also commissioned by paying patrons in order to express gratitude, to make a wish or to assure the safety and health of their realms or their kin. Around the 8\(^{th}\) century Japanese Buddhism started to move beyond the elite and started to permeate all levels of society. An important tool to this end were Setsuwa (説話), narrations with Buddhist related topics, often composed by Buddhist monks. The oldest Setsuwa collection, the Nihon Ryōiki (日本霊異記), compiled by Kyōkai (景威) between 787 and 824, but also the 11\(^{th}\) century Honchōhokkegenki (本朝法華経記) by Chigen or the anonymous late Heian-period Konjakemonogatarishū (今昔物語集), contain a great number of stories mentioning the miraculous power of Sūtras.

"Setsuwa on the topic of Sūtras reveal that Sūtra reading was (and remains) a visceral process, sensual and fantastic, involving an almost chemical reaction between body and Sūtra text in the course of which both are transformed in specific ways (the Sūtra may come alive, for instance, and the body may fill with light or be cured of illness)."\(^5\)

Although in most cases the Lotus-Sutra is mentioned as the cause of wondrous events, there are also a few
stories relating to the power of the Heart-Sūtra.\(^7\)

The Lotus-Sūtra (妙法蓮華経 Myōhō Renge Kyō), Hokke-kyō or Hoke-kyō (法華経), favoured by the Tendai (天台宗) and Nichiren-related schools, has been popular since Shōtoku taishi’s times (聖徳太子) as it teaches that all people may eventually attain Buddhahood. In the 13th century Nichiren (日蓮) even went so far as to claim, that

"chanting the name of the Lotus Sūtra - Namu Myōhō Renge Kyō - is the only way to practice Buddhism in the degenerate age of mappo."\(^4\)

The Lotus-Sūtra also inspired other monks of Tendai lineage, like Shinran (親鸞) and Hōnen (法然) who eventually developed their respective brands of Pure Land Buddhism, which both focus centrally on faith and the reliance on the mercy of the Amida Buddha (tariki 他力) encouraging their followers to recite the phrase Namu Amida Butsu (I take refuge in Amitābha Buddha).

Other than the 28 chapter long Lotus-Sūtra, which is usually only recited in excerpts, the Heart-Sūtra or 'Essence of Wisdom Sutra' is in it’s Chinese version with about 260 characters short enough to be memorized and recited as a whole. It contains the essence of the about 40 texts within the Great Sutra of the Perfection of Transcendental Wisdom, and reflects on the concept of the fundamental emptiness of all phenomena.

While it is respected and widely used in all Buddhist schools, the Zen branches, who rely on (jiriki, 自力), one’s own strength to reach enlightenment, treasure it most.

Among the seven Chinese translations of the Sanskrit text, the one accredited to Genjō (玄奘, 600’- 664) is commonly used in Japan. Since its import to Japan in the 7th century, each Chinese character of the Sūtra is read in a special form of Japanese pronunciation for Buddhist texts, called goyomi (御読み), without any change to the texts’ Chinese grammar structure. To make things more complicated, the Sūtra ends with the Chinese phonetic transcript of a Sanskrit mantra: 'gate gate pāragate pārasamgate bodhi svāhā', which is basically unintelligible not only to Japanese readers. But specially the esoteric tradition maintains, that just the sound of the Sūtra alone, could eventually lead to enlightenment.\(^7\)

While the long Lotus-Sūtra, was not really meant to be memorized, the brevity of the Heart-Sūtra would enable even lay persons to memorize it, once there was a way to make its text or rather its sound available to the illiterate, who were neither able to read the Chinese characters nor a Japanese transcription in Kana.

Although Japan generally enjoyed a higher literacy rate than Western countries, it has been pointed out\(^6\), that there existed a huge knowledge gap between social and economic strata, genders, as well as urban and rural areas. It has been also pointed out, that 'literacy' is hard to define, when it comes to Japanese, as there are 3 writing systems.

As a consequence, 'literacy', specially in rural areas refers to some basic knowledge of Kana at best, and that would definitely not suffice, when it comes to reading a Kanji only text like the Heart Sūtra.

However, the implementation of the Danka system (檀家制度), which during the Edo period elevated Buddhism to the rank of a state religion, brought the whole population closer to the temples\(^1\) and increased demand for all types of Buddhist literary genres like sermon ballads (Sekkyō 説教), pious Jōruri or other plays, as well as popular fiction like Buddhist tales or ghost stories.\(^1\) While the ta-riki (他力) schools’ teaching was easy enough to follow, even for the layity, the ji-riki (自力) groups, namely the Zen schools had to make
some efforts to reach their believers, if they not, like the Ōbaku school, would want to go so far as to incorporate the 'Nembutsu' into their practice-system.

Another contributing factor to a greater demand on Heart-Sūtra related information was also the gradual development of the so-called 'Funeral Buddhism' sōshiki bukkyō (葬式仏教), which further raised the need to teach the illiterate, as mourners attending services were expected to join the recitation of Sūtras, whenever possible or even chant or copy (suri kuyo 拝経) the Sūtra at home for the benefit of the deceased.

A solution to this dilemma were Hanjimono, which literally means 'something to solve, decipher or guess' and refers to the game-character, that Hanjimono possessed from the beginning. The origin of Hanjimono is not known, but using the peculiarities of the Japanese language for games has been around since the late Heian period. The oldest text containing Hanjimono is the diary of Nakamikado no Nobutane (1442-1525), Nobutanekyōki (宣胤卿記), written in 1481.

Wordgames, puns and puzzles reached the peak of their popularity in urban areas in Kansai and Kantō during the Edo period. Specially popular were Hanjimono among merchants and artisans, who used them as a way to memorize the names of persons or places, or to playfully list up household items or merchandise.

Since the 1670's printed Hanjimono circulated in the Kansai area. During the Bakumatsu period, some Hanjimono even appeared in school books as a way to help children memorize things like geographical names. The Hanjimono/Kissō-pattern (吉祥文様) かまわぬ - 'Who cares?', represented by a sickle (kama), a circle (wa) and the Hiragana character 'nu', appeared as early as 1624. It became a fashion item in the late Edo period (and a way to express opposition to the Bakufu), when Kabuki actor Ichikawa Danjūrō VII. (七代目市川団十郎 1791-1859) used it to subversely protest the punishment he'd received for flaunting the shōgunsates frugality laws. 13

While in the game context, Hanjimono were often used to conceal contents, the opposite is true, when applied for the depiction of Sūtras.

From the early 18th century Hanjimono were used to express Buddhist contents in the Tōhoku region, analogous to calendars, charts and other important information, that had been made public as Mekurareki (めくら暦), or "Yearbooks for the blind", meaning here the illiterate.

These yearbooks would use simple stickcharts to represent the names of the zodiacal months or years, they would have little illustrations hinting at Buddhist and other holidays, or would depict agricultural tools or household tools, in order to indicate certain seasonal expressions.

Since 1712 Mekurakyo or Nanbu ekyō and other Buddhist texts appeared.

The Tendai-monk Zenpachi (善八) from Chūsonji in Hiraizumi is credited with the first picturized version of the Heart-Sūtra. This so called Tayama-version circulated around Hachimantai-Tayama in todays Iwate prefecture and dates back to 1783.

Rangakusha Tachibana Nankei's (橘南齋, 1753-1805) travel report from 1797, Tōyuki (東遊記) introduced it to a wider public.

As the picturial Heart-Sūtra was a commercial success for the printing houses, many reprints appeared on the market. Inspired by the lasting demand, a new version, the anonymous, more playful Morioka Version, which was first published by Maidaya (舞田屋) started to be circulated in 1863.
Both, the Tayama and the Morioka versions, also reflect some dialectal peculiarities in their respective pronunciation, hinting at the places where they circulated. To indicate the right pronunciation of the Sūtra commonly known objects were used. For example, the title, Maka hannya hara mi ta shingyō, is represented by an inverted rice pot, usually pronounced 'kama', but inverted the reading would be 'maka'. The well-known Nōh-mask named 'Hannya' was used to represent the sound of the second word. A big belly, 'hara' comes next, followed by an agricultural tool, a kind of gathering basket, pronounced 'mi' and then the picture of a paddy-field, pronounced 'ta'.
A mirror like those, displayed in Shintō-Shrines indicates the reading ‘shingyō’. In this way the whole Sūtra is picturized. To clarify the principle: if you were to write a Christian prayer in Hanjimono, you might get something like...

...to represent the first line of the ‘Hail, Mary’.

Hanjimono are strictly chosen, to represent the sound of the Sūtra, they are in no way making fun or trying to explain or illustrate the Sūtra’s contents.

Both versions of the pictural Heart-Sūtra enjoyed and still enjoy great commercial success and were printed also outside the Tōhoku region.

As many folk religious customs indicate, Sūtras were believed to possess protective or healing properties, just owning a copy was supposed to be beneficial, which explains the high demand for cheap printed versions.

Carrying the Sūtra as amulett on the body or even better, writing the Sūtra directly on the body was supposed to protect or even heal the believer.

An example for this is the 1782 story “Biwa no hikyoku yūrei wo nakashimu” (琵琶秘曲泣幽霊) by Isseki Sanjin (一夕散人), published in the series Gayū kidan (遊遊奇談). It served eventually as model for Lafcadio Hearn’s story “Hōichi the Earless” in his 1904 Kwaidan collection and tells the story of a blind Biwa player who is saved from ghosts because his body was covered with the text of the Heart-Sūtra. Unfortunately for poor Hōichi, his ears were forgotten in the writing process, and so he looses them to an angry ghost.

Keeping a holy scripture as a form of apotropaic magic close to one’s body, or even incorporating it through eating or drinking, was and sometimes is still is practiced also in Western culture. The readily available Japanese 'Hannya Shingyō Men', noodles with the printed Sūtra on them or German Schlußbildchen, cookies or edible papers with little pictures of Saints on them and sold at South-German pilgrimmage sites show,” that the idea is still around even in the 21st century.

These folk religious believes in combination with the (mostly) esoteric teaching about the beneficial effects of a Sūtras sound, help also explain the ongoing demand for Sūtra-related scriptures, all types of charms, merchandise and decorations.

**Conclusion**

The custom to make pictural Sūtras, mainly the Heart-Sūtra available to illiterate Buddhist believers, reflects a strong belief in the power of the Sūtras’ sound. Rather than trying to explain the contents of the written text, it was seen as a viable first step towards enlightenment to be able to just pronounce the wording of the
Sūtra. In this respect the custom of Ekyō shows a strong relation to the esoteric tradition within the Tendai school, although Zen schools also used it in order to be more accessible to their followers.

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