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Reading by heart: translated Buddhism and the pictorial *Heart Sutras* of Early Modern Japan

Abstract: This article combines contemporary work in social bibliography, translation theory and Buddhist studies to focus on two questions. First, what exactly does the act of “reading” sutras entail? And second, what is the precise relation between material sign and acoustic sound in Buddhist recitation? Answers to these questions are necessarily inextricably bound to local contexts and communities. The so-called ‘pictorial Heart Sutras’ (Jp: *esetsu Shinkyō*) of early modern Japan provide the particular aperture through which I pursue these queries. Following D. F. McKenzie, I understand the pictorial sutras “not simply as verbal constructs but as social products” (1999: 127) which may be examined to reveal patterns of textual engagement, practices of translation and particular techniques for associating the quotidian world of rice paddies and rounded bellies with the abiding realm of religious doctrine. In particular, I argue that the pictorial sutras develop a “visual vernacular” whose lexicon evinces an abiding interest in fecundity and a belief in the apotropaic value of sutra reading.

Keywords: visual vernacular; pictorial sutra; translation; Buddhism; cultures of reading.

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farmers auguring the crops by the horse-shaped patch of snow on the mountain
 a taste of manure to measure how much water to add
 each field seasoned to its own degree
 mountain folk praying to the buddhas and the mountain gods
 divining how rich or meager the harvest
 by the depth of the faint tracks of animals
 or the signs of their scat
 these the plum bob and level of their lives
 and among these tools . . .
 calendars and sutras
 written in pictures¹

¹ This headnote comes from the poem “Nanbu mekuramono” [The blind books of Nanbu] by Katō Fumio and is included in his collection *Nanbu Mekura Koyomi: Shishū* (1987: 22–23). Katō

1 Introduction: translated Buddhism

In the early centuries CE, Central Asian monks rendered the Buddhist scriptures into a host of languages, including Chinese. These monks chose to translate some terms while deciding to transliterate others. For instance, the Sanskrit word *śūnya* ('emptiness' as related to the interdependence of all phenomena) is often translated into the Chinese *ku* ('empty', 'open' or, as a noun, 'sky'), whereas *pāramitā* (the 'perfections' of an enlightened being) generally is transliterated as *boluomiduo* (four symbols whose basic meanings are, respectively, 'wave', 'silk gauze', 'honey' and 'many'), which enters the Sinitic lexicon as a loan word.² It is one of the great curiosities of East Asian Buddhism that, even into the modern era, the sutras thereafter remained, by and large, in the language of Classical Chinese,³ despite an awareness of both the presence of Sanskrit originals and the advantages of translation into local languages like Japanese. This historical peculiarity raises questions about how clerics, and especially lay devotees without specialized linguistic knowledge, conceived of and accessed the scriptures. Indeed, we know that even functionally illiterate Japanese subsistence farmers placed a very high premium on learning to 'read' (Jp: *yomu*, *doku*) the sutras.

This article combines contemporary work in translation theory, Buddhist studies and social bibliography to focus on two questions. First, what exactly does the act of "reading" sutras entail? And second, what is the precise relation between material sign and acoustic sound in East Asian Buddhist recitation? Answers to these questions are necessarily inextricably bound to local contexts and communities, and it is the so-called 'pictorial *Heart Sutras*' (Jp: *esetsu Shinkyō*) of early modern Japan that provide the particular aperture through which I pursue these queries. Following D. F. McKenzie's arguments, expressed most fully in his *Bibliography and the sociology of texts*, I understand these pictorial sutras (essentially, rebuses) "not simply as verbal constructs but as social products" (McKenzie 1999: 127) which may be examined closely to reveal patterns of textual engagement, practices of translation, and particular techniques for associating the quotidian world of rice paddies, winnowing baskets, whetstones, breasts and rounded bellies with the abiding realm of religious doctrine.

hails from Iwate Prefecture, which includes the village of Tayama where the pictorial sutras were created.

² For a useful survey of the many ways in which Chinese deals with translation, transcription and loan words see Chen (1993). Though Chen deals specifically with the contemporary era, many of the techniques were developed in the pre-modern period.

³ More precisely, "Buddhist Hybrid Sinitic". For a description of this specialized liturgical language, and its relation to East Asian vernaculars, see Mair (1994).

After reviewing the history of, and motivations for, sutra reading in Japan, I explore the complex linguistic situation of the eastern provinces. Situated at the far edge of the Japanese cultural sphere, which was itself on the far eastern edge of the Buddhist cultural sphere, the Nanbu region of Japan was the borderland of a borderland and, as such, faced significant challenges to the development of a local Buddhist vernacular. While most scholarship focuses on the practice of sutra transliteration, a privileging of the acoustic register that I call the “mantra-ization” of text, I argue that the pictorial sutras of early modern Japan also cohere on the ocular level, developing a visual lexicon which provides an important window into the reading practices of hypo-literate believers.

2 Sutra recitation in Japanese history

The recitation of sutras has a long history in Japan, well-attested in any number of treatises, most of which were composed by highly educated clerics in close communication with the aristocratic capitals of pre-modern Japan.⁴ Though practices of sutra recitation were largely uncoded in the early centuries of Japanese-Buddhist interaction, clerics and aristocrats associated with the court of Emperor Goshirakawa (1127–1192, r. 1155–1158) began to solidify rules of pronunciation in the late 1100s. His successors Emperors Gotoba (1180–1239, r. 1183–1198) and Gosaga (1220–1227, r. 1242–1246) continued to shape the development of sutra reading aesthetics and to sponsor the training of monks, many of whom were the underemployed and ambitious younger sons of large aristocratic families. By the thirteenth century sutra reading (Jp: *dokyō*) had become a recognized art form (Jp: *michi*), requiring extensive training and affiliation with a lineage of oral tradition.⁵

Each of these lineages championed its own style, with strict regulations concerning the proper rhythm, melody, phrasing, pronunciation (distinguishing, for instance, between voiced and unvoiced consonants) and tone (a feature of Chinese that truly vexed native speakers of Japanese, an atonal language). The stakes of correct pronunciation were quite high. Gaining a reputation as a ‘skilled reader’

⁴ Shiba Kayono (2004) includes typeset versions of many of these treatises in *Dokyōdō no kenkyū*. Her research expands on Shimizu (2001) and it provides a discussion of various lineages of sutra recitation which spun out of the aristocratic capital and the major monastic centers of central Japan.

⁵ The term ‘the path of sutra recitation’ (Jp: *dokyōdō*) was coined in 1284 by the monk Nōyo in his treatise *Dokyō kuden meikyōshū* [Clear mirror of the oral teachings on sutra reading] (see Shiba 2004: 1–11).

(Jp: *nōdoku*) could result in fame and lucrative imperial commissions for performances, while mispronunciations were believed to have dire consequences: one treatise claims that Emperor Goshirakawa actually burned down a portion of the imperial palace when he pronounced a single character of the *Lotus Sutra* incorrectly.⁶

While recent scholarship has therefore uncovered a great deal about how sutra recitation was (at least ideally) accomplished amongst the hyper-literate courtly and priestly cultures, and while we know that people from all walks of life were very interested in reciting sutras for their apotropaic value, we know very little indeed about the mechanics of pre-modern sutra recitation in hypo-literate cultures. One of the most fascinating aspects of the ‘blind sutras’ (Jp: *mōkyō*) or ‘pictorial sutras’ (Jp: *esetsukyō*)⁷ of early modern Japan is that they provide a crucial window into the ways in which one community grappled with the sounds of Buddhism and, indeed, taught themselves to read certain sacred texts.

3 Apotropaic reading

But why read the sutras at all? Why make an effort to memorize, or to learn to decode, long strings of sound whose semantic value was, for most readers, opaque at best? In the wider culture, courtly and clerical concerns with the arca of pitch, syntax and pronunciation were largely moot, the major concern being with the apotropaic functions of sutra reading. One of the major characteristics of Mahāyāna sutras is their propensity to encourage their believers to engage with them on a textual level. Gregory Schopen has gone so far as to call this a “cult of the book” (Schopen 2005: 25) and indeed sutras do seem to call for the worship of their material forms. As the *Lotus Sutra* puts it, “Wherever [this sutra] may be preached, or read, or recited, or written, or whatever place a roll of this scripture may occupy, in all those places one is to erect a stupa of the seven jewels, building it high and wide and with impressive decoration. There is no need even to lodge a *śarīra* [relic] in it. What is the reason? Within it there is already a whole body of the Thus Come One.”⁸

⁶ This story appears in the *Ryaku-tanshō* [Abbreviated notes for singing (the sutras)], recorded in 1367 (see Shiba 2004: 231).

⁷ Traditional names for these texts commonly employ tropes that equate illiteracy to a sort of cultural blindness, as with the terms *mōkyō* ‘blind sutras’, *mekuramono* ‘blind books’, and *muhitsukyō* ‘sutras without writing-brushes’. Modern Japanese scholars, preferring more neutral lingo, have begun to use the term *esetsukyō* ‘sutras relayed through pictures’.

⁸ As translated by Leon Hurvitz (1976: 178. T 9.262.31b26–29). All quotes from sutras reference Takakusu et al. (1924–1934), providing volume number, accession number, page, register and

In other words, Buddhist sutras occupy two ontological registers. In the one, any copy of a sutra text (whether written on paper, memorized or chanted aloud) is a relic in its own right, capable of producing miracles. Amidst sutras such as the *Contemplation Sutra* and the *Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life* promise release from evil karma (T 12.365.345c14) and rebirth in the Pure Land (T 12.360.272c8) where believers can meet the buddha Amida face-to-face and be free of all hunger, illness and pain. The *Nirvana Sutra* promises similar boons including long life (T 12.374.382c25) and even suggests that belief in the sutra can result in increased strength and good looks (399b5–7). Finally, the *Lotus Sutra*, most loquacious in this regard, claims that it shall reward its devotees with breath that never stinks, a mouth and tongue never diseased, teeth ever straight and white, a full and round face, and a perfectly formed male member, among other things (T 9.262.47a8–19).

In the other register, sutras are comprised of words, organized into semantic units, and constitutive of grammatical meaning. This second register often co-exists with the first, so that the same phrases can be read on both semantic and apotropaic levels. For instance, even the briefest of the Mahāyāna sutras, the shorter *Heart Sutra* – which, at just over 260 Chinese characters⁹ (less than a page in English translation) can be chanted in under five minutes – contains apotropaic promises within its semantic frame. The bulk of this miniature sutra consists of a discourse on the Buddhist concept of emptiness, stressing the interdependence of all things and the illusive nature of sensually observable reality. The sutra is comprised of rhetorically dense lines such as: “Form is no different from emptiness, and emptiness no different from form; form is therefore emptiness and emptiness, form. . . . All *dharmas*¹⁰ are empty appearances: not born, not destroyed, neither dirty nor clean, neither increasing nor decreasing” (T.8.251.848c8–9, 10–11). That is to say, though in the course of our daily lives we observe and experience various phenomena, these do not possess permanence. For the sake of convenience, we give them names and think of them as stable objects or beings, but this cognitive convenience is an illusion. Recognizing this

lines. For example, T 9.262.31b26–29 refers to the twenty-sixth through twenty-ninth lines of the second (b) register of page 31 of *Taishō* text number 262 (the *Lotus Sutra*), which can be found in volume 9 of the canon. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

⁹ The sutra was translated into Chinese a number of times, each with a different number of total characters in the range of 260 to 276. The best known and most often chanted version in Japan has 262 characters and is slightly amended (by 2 characters) from the translation by the Chinese monk Xuanzang (Jp: Genjō, 602–664).

¹⁰ In most cases *dharma* refers specifically to the Buddhist teachings, the ‘law’. In this case, however, the word refers to the larger sense of ‘anything observable by the mind’, that is, reality as we perceive it.

illusion is the beginning of wisdom. This semantic reading, which engages readers in a deeply contemplative logic, may explain why recitation of the *Heart Sutra* is a staple of monastic practice, particularly in the Zen schools.

Lay devotees, however, seem to have been drawn to the sutra for other reasons. It is concise and repetitive, therefore easy to memorize, and it includes two short phrases about the negation of suffering, both of which are spoken by Avalokiteśvara (Jp: Kannon), the popular bodhisattva of compassion. In the opening lines of the sutra, Avalokiteśvara attains deep insight, understanding that all aspects of existence are empty, thereby gaining “release from all suffering and hardship” (T.8.251.848c8). He¹¹ then explains the nature of this insight – “There is no old age and no death, nor is there an end to old age and death. There is no suffering, no cause of suffering, no end of suffering, and no path” (T.8.251.848.c.14) – and he concludes his speech by bestowing upon his listeners a mantra, the repetition of which will “remove all suffering” (T.8.251.848.c.20). Textual promises like these led to the booming genre of ‘explanatory tale’ (Jp: *setsuwa*) literature, which appeared in massive collections between the ninth and fourteenth centuries in Japan and which remained a staple element in Buddhist preaching well into the nineteenth century.¹² Belief in the apotropaic value of Buddhist activities, including sutra devotion, was a major factor in the spread of the religion which came to permeate all strata of Japanese society, penetrating even into the least accessible of mountainous regions, including the notoriously remote and “barbaric” hinterlands of the Nanbu region.

4 Borderland mentalities and Buddhist vernaculars

No doubt it was the promise of suffering relieved that garnered the particular attention of villagers in the Nanbu region of north-eastern Japan.¹³ Considered re-

11 In the Indian context, this bodhisattva is indisputably male. In much of East Asia, however, Avalokiteśvara (Ch: Guanyin, Jp: Kannon) is worshipped in female form.

12 For an extensive study of the *setsuwa* genre in pre-modern Japan, see Eubanks (2011). These tales often stress the miraculous results of sutra devotion, whose practitioners may be rescued from collapsed mine shafts, escape the ravages of fires and earthquakes and the jaws of wild beasts or demons, be cured of disease, or be rewarded with a glimpse of a peaceful reincarnation in the Buddhist Pure Lands.

13 As part of a centralization effort in the late nineteenth century, the Meiji government (1868–1912) reorganized and renamed the geographical areas of Japan, shifting the borders of ‘feudal provinces’ (Jp: *han*) and creating new ‘prefectures’ (Jp: *ken*). Historically, Nanbu has referred

mote and relatively impoverished even today, this district of plunging valleys, steep mountain passes, poor soil, long winters, cold summers, sudden blizzards, and devastating famines has long been regarded as a borderland, situated at the far edge of the Japanese cultural sphere. Prior to the eighth century, in fact, the region was not part of the kingdom of Yamato (progenitor of the Japanese state) but was the province of the Ezo (or Emishi), a culturally distinct tribal group now assimilated into the Japanese population. Tachibana Nankei (1753–1805), a doctor who journeyed through the area in 1786, reflects on this history, writing in his travelogue that,

Even now, the influence of the Emishi remains legible in the many barbaric [Jp: *bango*] place names in the Nanbu and Tsugaru regions . . . and villagers [in these areas] are descended from Ezo seed. . . In the truly remote and mountainous area of Tayama-mura and similar villages . . . people still do not know *kana* writing [the native Japanese syllabary] . . . and they notch wood [instead] as a memory aid. . . Thus, we can see that Japan was opened from the west. (Tachibana 1974: 118)

Speaking as a member of the educated elite, Tachibana sees his own travels as reenacting the civilizing wave of Japanese culture which moved eastward and northward up the archipelago, displacing or assimilating the Ezo/Emishi, bringing knowledge and literacy, and connecting these rugged lands and their peoples to the wider world of East Asia. Notably, the first Buddhist temple in Nanbu was established in 727. It was to remain the sole Buddhist outpost for nearly 750 years, until hermits (generally, monks trained in the Sōtō Zen tradition) began to penetrate the mountainous terrain and establish lasting contacts with villagers. These Zen hermits inaugurated an age of Buddhist cultural engagement in the late medieval and early modern period that resulted in the foundation of several temples (in 1560, 1649, and 1704) and saw the creation of the pictorial sutras in the last decade of the seventeenth century.¹⁴

Returning to the question of language, however, the passage quoted above hinges on the word ‘barbaric’. The term *bango* 蛮語 has a wide semantic range,

loosely to the geographical area around the city of Morioka and covers territory now divided amongst the prefectures of Iwate, Akita and Aomori.

14 Tendaiji, whose chief devotional image is of the bodhisattva Kannon (Sk: Avalokiteśvara), was founded in 727. In 737, it was named by the imperial government as a provincial temple (Jp: *kokubunji*), the sole center of state-sponsored Buddhism for the region. Though there were a number of Buddhist adepts and wanderers in the intervening centuries, some of whom set up hermitages or erected stone statues deep in the mountains, the next building (Fukuzōji) was not erected until 1560. This Sōtō Zen temple was joined by two others of the same school in 1649 (Jizōji) and 1704 (Daishōji), a reflection of the increasing number of Zen monks ministering to local populations. For a history, see Iwate-ken Bukkyōkai (1976: 46–53).

referring to (a) the language of the Ezo or Emishi peoples, (b) the thick (Japanese) dialect of villagers living far from the capital, (c) the rough language of people from the eastern provinces, and (d) the language of foreigners, of people who are not racially Japanese. Even today, residents in the Tayama area of Japan speak in a heavy dialect, sometimes pejoratively called “*zuzu-ben*” for its tendency to neutralize vowel sounds preferentially toward “u”. For example, the Buddhist term *shiki* (‘form’) and the farming term *suki* (‘plow’) are locally homophonous, and *sasa* (‘bamboo leaf’) in local dialect is pronounced *satsu* (homophonous with the latter part of the word *bosatsu*, the Japanese rendering of the Sanskrit term ‘*bodhi-sattva*’). Additionally, the dialect tends toward voiced consonants: “*kya*” (an onomatopoeia for animal cries) becomes “*gya*”. The spoken language of early modern Tayama, then, was “barbaric” in at least two senses. It was definitely rough and eastern provincial in its pronunciation patterns, and it contained a large number of words from Emishi/Ezo, particularly for place names and geographical features.

As the above discussion indicates, the linguistic situation in early modern Japan was complex, especially so in the more remote eastern provinces. Drawing on the work of Frye (1974: 57–69),¹⁵ we can identify multiple linguistic registers. The “written administrative language” of the central government, when not actually Chinese (Jp: *kanbun*), comprised a formal variant of Japanese which was heavily inflected with Sinitic compounds and syntax (Jp: *sōrōbun*). The “spoken administrative language”, while clearly Japanese, was deeply influenced by the dialects of Japanese in use along the eastern coast, particularly around the capital at Edo. Villagers across Japan would have spoken in a variety of local “vernacular languages” and the Tayama dialect, discussed above, would have been almost wholly unintelligible to people from outside the region. Finally, Buddhist scriptures were written in Chinese and recited in a Japan-icized pronunciation, meaning that the “religious language” of early modern Japan was distinct from any Japanese (or Chinese) vernacular, and unintelligible to any but those initiated and trained in its use. To make matters of “religious language” doubly complex, sutras, as encountered in Japan, contained religious language within religious language: some Sanskrit terms, names and phrases, transliterated by means of Chinese characters, remain embedded in the Chinese translation.

In short, the situation was one of total linguistic discontinuity. In seeking to read the scriptures, Tayama farmers faced a considerable linguistic challenge, even if the goal was not to grasp the semantic content of the sutras but rather “simply” to pronounce the sounds of the sutras accurately enough to secure apo-

¹⁵ Discussed in Nattier (1990: 195–219).

tropaic boons. “Reading” the sutras required these people to memorize Tayama dialect-inflected pronunciations of a Japan-icized transliteration of a Chinese translation studded with Sinitic transliterations of Sanskritic loan words: an intensively hybrid and multi-glossic situation which, despite its complexity, has remained highly stable.¹⁶

Tachibana’s description of the Nanbu region as a frontier area located at the far edges of the Japanese cultural sphere is very typical and reminds us that Buddhist practitioners there labored under a heavy yoke of what Jan Nattier has called a “border region mentality”. Studying Buddhist translation practices in Central Asia, Nattier proposes that the cultural “center of gravity of the Buddhist world”, whether India or China, exerted a strong influence on the choice of target languages for translation (Nattier 1990: 212). Japan, and indeed northeast Asia as a whole, remained dominated by Chinese, and translations into the local vernacular were exceedingly rare, doubly so in areas like Nanbu, the borderland of a borderland.

And yet, in many ways, the development of a local Buddhist vernacular is precisely what we see in the pictorial sutras. As I argue below, this vernacular existed not on the semantic or syntactic level, and only incidentally on the acoustic level. Instead, the rebus sutras of early modern Tayama developed what I would call a “visual vernacular”,¹⁷ a collaborative creation of the monk Zenpachi and the villagers of Tayama.

5 Zenpachi and the creation of the pictorial sutras

According to traditional accounts, a monk named Zenpachi created the first of the pictorial sutras in the 1690s. Born as Minamoto Uemon (dates uncertain), Zenpachi began his life as a low-ranking member of the once-prestigious Minamoto clan, a branch of which had helped to establish an outpost of aristocratic culture in the town of Hiraizumi. Located on the southern edge of the Koromo River, the *de facto* border between Japan and the Emishi/Ezo territories to the north, the

¹⁶ Sutras are still pronounced in this fashion today, though lay devotees refer not to rebuses but, most commonly, to sutras written in Chinese characters and glossed in the native Japanese *kana*. Some children and elderly people, particularly women, may read from *kana*-only texts of the sutras, though with the growing impact of public education in post-war Japan, *kana*-only sutras are increasingly rare, mostly to be found on the shelves of antiquarian book stores.

¹⁷ I am expanding on the sense of an “architectural vernacular” here: that is, a visual “language” whose foundational structures and decorative elements are domestic and functional, rather than public and monumental.

town had flourished in the eleventh and twelfth centuries before succumbing, like most of eastern Japan, to a long period of civil war which did not end until approximately 1600. Zenspachi was born one century into this renewed peace and, as a young adult, he found a position as a petty bureaucrat in charge of overseeing books, almanacs and calendars produced by and for temples in Hiraizumi (Sakaguchi 1982: 169). In the early 1690s, Zenspachi's immediate supervisor was implicated in the disappearance of some high-priced goods from the Chūsonji temple. Perhaps fleeing suspicion himself, Zenspachi headed deep into the nearby mountains, eventually taking refuge with the village chief of Tayama where he remained for several years. By all accounts, his relations with the villagers were warm and he even seems to have been adopted into a local family. Moved by the illiterate villagers' desires to memorize and recite apotropaic sutra passages, Zenspachi worked with them to create the first pictorial sutras, essentially rebuses which transliterate the Classical Chinese sounds of the sacred texts into a series of simple line drawings.

How, then, do the Tayama pictorial sutras work? Let us consider the linguistic permutations of the most well-known example, the Tayama-style *Heart Sutra* (Jp: *Tayama-kei Shinkyō*),¹⁸ the most complete Sanskrit title for which is *Mahā prajñā pāramitā hṛdaya sūtra*. The Chinese title translates some elements from the Sanskrit – *hṛdaya* ('heart') becomes *xin* ('heart', 'mind', 'essence') and *sūtra* ('essential teaching') becomes *jīng* (a 'classic' of the Chinese cultural canon) – forging links to pre-existing Chinese terms. Other concepts translated less readily and are accommodated by assigning certain Chinese symbols primarily for their phonetic value: in this instance, the Sanskrit *mahā* ('great') is approximated with the Chinese characters for 'rub/polish' (*mo*) and 'scold' (*he*), *prajñā* ('wisdom') is rendered with the characters for 'pivot' (*ban*) and 'if' (*ruo*), while *pāramitā* is indicated with the characters for 'wave', 'silk gauze', 'honey' and 'many' (*boluomiduo*). Japanese speakers, reading this Chinese title aloud, accommodate the Sinitic sounds to their own vernacular, essentially transliterating while dropping tonal inflections and adjusting for local conventions of pronunciation. To read the

18 Though it had been in use in the Tayama region since the 1690s, the pictorial *Heart Sutra* first garnered more widespread public attention when a copy was printed in the 1797 appendix to Tachibana Nankei's very popular *Tōyūki* ("A record of travels in the East"). In addition to the *Heart Sutra*, there are extant pictorial versions of a handful of other popular Buddhist texts for recitation including parts of the Lotus Sutra (Jp: *Hokkekyō*) and the Sutra of Great Compassion (Jp: *Daihikyō*), several hymns (Jp: *wasan*) to salvific figures like the compassionate bodhisattvas Kannon (Sk: Avalokiteśvara) and Jizō (Sk: Ksitagarbha), and a number of *darani* (Sk: *dhāraṇī*): incantations, transliterated via Chinese from the Sanskrit, whose sound is said to contain the power to ward off evil and bring fortune. For a poetic account of the history of these texts and their importance in local culture, see Katō (1987: 18–21).

Heart Sutra aloud in this specialized Sinitic “church language” requires extensive exposure to Chinese orthography in order to simply produce the appropriate sounds.

What the Tayama sutra does is to reduce this orthographic barrier by substituting pictures of quotidian objects – farm implements, body parts, animals – in the place of the more acoustically opaque Chinese characters. In the Tayama rebus text, then, the sutra title is rendered with drawings for ‘target’ (*ma*), ‘side’ (*ka*), ‘demon mask’ (*hannya*), ‘pregnant belly’ (*harami*), ‘rice paddy’ (*ta*), ‘heartwood’ (*shin*) and ‘temple hall’ (*gyō*). Villagers, decoding these pictures and pronouncing them aloud in their local dialect, would thus produce sounds similar to those pronounced by educated clerics.¹⁹

Example (1) clarifies this complex situation, which shuttles between translation and transliteration, sense and sound. Moving one step at a time (from Sanskrit to Chinese, Chinese to Japanese, and Japanese to the Tayama rebus), I have bolded translated terms and underscored transliterated ones.

(1) Sanskrit:

Mahā prajñā pāramitā hrdaya sūtra

Chinese:

摩訶般若波羅蜜多心經

Mohe banruo boluomiduo **xin jing**

Japanese:

摩訶般若波羅蜜多心經

Maka hannya haramita shingyō

Tayama Rebus:

Target/side/demon mask/pregnant belly/rice paddy/heartwood/shrine

Maka hannya haramita shingyō

19 Jiménez and Smith (2008) note an uncannily similar development in post-Conquest Mexico:

Shortly after the conquest, a friar named Gerónimo de Mendieta described how the Cholultecans employed the rebus principle to record information in Latin. Mendieta was intrigued by the Indians’ use of drawings based on the sounds of whole words in Nahuatl rather than individual letters in Latin. He gave a detailed description of how Cholultecans learned to recite the *Pater Noster* (Lord’s Prayer) by drawing a picture of a *pantli* (flag or banner) to represent *pater*, followed by a picture of the fruit of a prickly pear, *nochtli*, for *noster*. Although Mendieta viewed this strategy as a temporary one to be abandoned once the Cholultecans memorized such prayers, it can also be regarded as an example of one of the strengths of pictographic literacies in the multilingual setting of postconquest Cholula. (Jiménez and Smith 2008: 35)

What becomes immediately obvious is that, as the sutra moves from Chinese to Japanese, it becomes a fully transliterated text whose sound value overpowers and thwarts any gesture toward semantic transparency. In short, the entire sutra is treated as a special category of language; it is a potent verbal formula (Sk: *dhāranī*, *mantra*) which condenses large amounts of scripture into relatively short, easily memorized phrases whose numinous strength (to reduce suffering, for example) is not semantic or orthographic, but fundamentally acoustic, in origin.²⁰ On the surface, the Tayama pictorial sutras simply reprise this already established trend. Crucially, however, there is a less obvious way of understanding the particular cultural work that the Tayama pictorial *Heart Sutra* accomplishes.

6 Visual vernacular

As D. F. McKenzie reminds us, texts are not simply “verbal constructs”; they are also “social products” (1999: 127). Thus McKenzie, and others in the field of textual sociology, encourage us to look closely at the material artifacts of written texts not only as an end point but also as a jumping off point for reconstructing or reimagining the social network that produced, and was produced by, that material text.²¹ What sorts of social networks does a given text reveal? What potential relationships between reader, environment and landscape are suggested?

To get at these questions, we must move beyond issues of sound and mantra, and consider the Tayama *Heart Sutra* as an ocular document. See Figures 1 and 2. With the exception of italicized items (which are written in the native *kana* syllabary), all lexical items are pictures.

While I would caution strongly against comparing this and the Japanese situation on the basis of “pictographic literacies” [my emphasis], clearly there is much interesting comparative research to be done on matters of transitional literacies born of interactions between proselytizing religious movements and indigenous language communities.

20 Donald S. Lopez notes that, “Among other purposes of the repetition of mantra, according to a traditional fourfold division, are the pacification of negative circumstances, the multiplication of what is deemed desirable, the acquisition of a particular power, and the wrathful destruction of opponents” (Lopez 1990: 353). For a useful parsing of the term *dhāranī*, its etymology and semantic range, see Copp (2008). On the difficulty of distinguishing between mantra and *dhāranī*, see Sharf (2002: 337, n. 3).

21 McKenzie argues, for instance, that, “each reading [of a text] is peculiar to its occasion, each can be at least partially recovered from the physical forms of the text, and the differences in readings constitute an informative history” (McKenzie 1999: 19). For other articulations of textual sociology, see McGann (1991) and Schillingsburg (1991). For Buddhist-specific readings see Eubanks (2011), Kieschnick (2003) and Rambelli (2007).

Thus, aside from a handful of abstract signs – numbers (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 9, represented by lines) and two *kana* (“n” and “ji”) – all of the drawings are of concrete objects and they fall roughly into six categories. (1) The best represented grouping is of hand tools and work-related objects: rope, winnowing baskets, saws, wells, spokes, whetstones, canes, thresholds, sails, weaving shuttles, cork stoppers, bottles, containers, stackable boxes and casks. (2) Allowing for some overlap, objects related to subsistence activities more generally rank a close second and include hunting-related items (targets), items related to forestry (heartwood, bamboo leaves, saws), rice farming (paddies, sheaves, winnowing baskets), food preparation (toasted wheat cake, wheat gluten, tea leaves and containers of various sorts), and sericulture (mulberries, weaving shuttles). (3) We also see a number of religious pictures: temple halls, buddha and bodhisattva statues, relics, monks, priests, incense, handbells, demon masks, shrines and lottery sticks. (4) Domestic and wild animals local to the area form a somewhat smaller grouping and include horses, chickens, rabbits, rats, monkeys, dogs, and mosquitoes. (5) Body parts (pregnant bellies, rounded stomachs, eyes, breasts, open mouths and hands) are also a core component. (6) Finally, we have a small grouping of what might be called non-local objects, items which attest a connection to the wider world of Japanese commerce (coins), culture (letters, chess pieces), bureaucracy (jails, crimson seals, swords of the type worn by samurai), and knowledge of the Asian continent (the lone elephant).

These images comprise a visual lexicon which is strongly tied to local village life. We see a recurrent interest in fecundity – the rice paddies are lush with growth, women’s bellies are swollen with new life and their breasts with mother’s milk, and there is enough surplus food to store up in containers against less-fortunate times. This, in an area of Japan which is known for its use of wooden dolls (Jp: *kokeshi*) to represent stillbirths and children lost to malnutrition, for use in religious ceremonies and rituals of family mourning.²² This, in a community which would suffer massive food shortages in 1692–1703 and again in 1747–1757; among people whose descendants would flee the area as refugees, dying along the roadside in the thousands during the Great Tenmei Famine of 1783–1786.²³

Read against the backdrop of local history, this visual lexicon clearly evinces a cultural preoccupation with food and nourishment, punctuated by the specter of death (note the coffin) and civil disobedience (the sword, the jail).²⁴ Religious

²² For an introduction, see Brooks (1981).

²³ According to modern climatological studies, the Tōhoku (north-eastern) region of Japan suffers periods of famine roughly every fifty years. See Kondo (1988).

²⁴ For a survey of the work done on peasant civil disobedience, and its consequences, see Totman (1986).

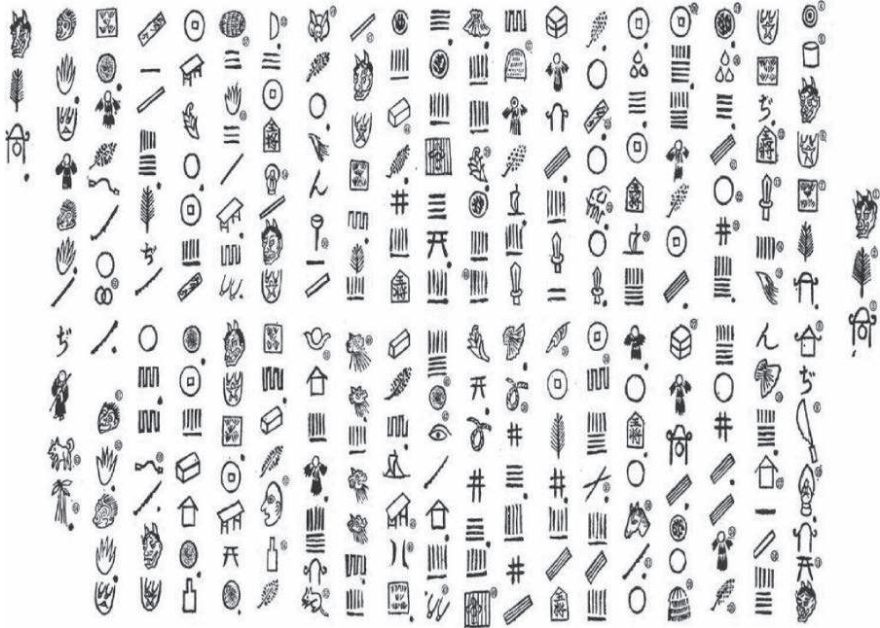


Fig. 1: One example of a pictorial *Heart Sutra* from the Tayama region. There is some variation between extant versions of the pictorial sutra. Some versions, for example, have *suki* ‘plow’ for *shiki* ‘form’. On the whole, though, the lexicon of images used is relatively stable across the examples the author has been able to examine.

activities, including the chanting of sutras such as this one, would have provided one of the few potential strategies for overcoming these very real anxieties. As I have discussed above, reading the sutra aloud has apotropaic force in the acoustic realm. Equally important, however, reading the sutra with one’s eyes – gazing at the visual landscape imagined in and by the text – reinforces hope in the power of magical language, allowing villagers to envision a world of plenty. This is, of course, the very world that the sutra promises when it mentions “release from all suffering and hardship” (T.8.251.848c8) in a place where there is “no old age and no death. . . . No suffering, and no cause of suffering” (T.8.251.843.c.14). The Tayama sutra renders that promised world in a local, visual vernacular, a world in which people engage in wet rice agriculture and eat wheat gluten, a world in which they make rope of rice stalks and cut firewood with a very particularly shaped saw, a world in which silkworms are fed mulberry leaves, in which

demon mask/ heartwood/ temple hall
 target/ side of container/ demon mask/ pregnant belly/ rice paddy/ heartwood/
 temple hall/ coffin/ ji/lumber saw/ bodhisattva statue/ temple hall/ shrine/ demon
 mask/ pregnant belly/ rice paddy/ ji/ chess piece/ sword/ five/ tail/ n/ shell/ nine/
 temple/ one/ threshold/ nine/ toasted wheat cake/ relic/ four/ threshold/ wheat
 gluten/ well/ nine/ nine/ wheat gluten/ well/ threshold/ threshold/ monk/ mulberry/
 coin/ nine/ nine/ monk/ mulberry/ coin/ threshold/ stacked box/ monk/ temple
 hall/ threshold/ toasted wheat cake/ wheat gluten/ sheaf of straw/ coin/ relic/ four/
 coin/ chess piece/ sail/ nine/ monk/ wheat gluten/ chess piece/ wheat gluten/
 horse/ cane/ wheat gluten/ mulberry/ wheat gluten/ letter/ wheat gluten/ elephant/
 wheat gluten/ sword/ coin/ incense/ nine/ lottery stick/ six/ threshold/ six/ stacked
 box/ monk/ temple hall/ threshold/ six/ sword/ two/ loom shuttle/ coin/ heartwood/
 well/ six/ threshold/ chess piece/ incense/ winnowing basket/ monk/ mulberry/
 sail/ six/ sword/ shell/ rope/ well/ four/ six/ well/ threshold/ shell/ six/ six/ tea leaf/
 toasted wheat cake/ six/ six/ tea leaf/ shrine/ rope/ well/ four/ six/ jail/ four/ toasted
 wheat cake/ six/ jail/ four/ shrine/ six/ nine/ crimson seal/ eye/ cane/ temple/ six/
 breasts/ toasted wheat cake/ six/ whetstone/ mulberry/ well/ six/ chess piece/
 whetstone/ mulberry/ incense/ sail/ work table/ bamboo leaf/ rice paddy/ spoke/
 demon mask/ pregnant belly/ rice paddy/ incense/ heartwood/ six/ chicken/
 chicken/ six/ chicken/ chicken/ incense/ six/ rabbit/ mulberry/ wheat gluten/ tail/
 n/ handbell/ one/ threshold/ sunny sky/ temple/ six/ monk/ nine/ temple hall/ rat/
 half coin/ three/ coin/ chess piece/ buddha statue/ threshold/ demon mask/
 pregnant belly/ rice paddy/ incense/ whetstone/ mulberry/ open mouth “ah”/ bottle/
 mulberry/ cask/ three/ pulse/ three/ cane/ work table/ incense/ breasts/ demon
 mask/ pregnant belly/ rice paddy/ coin/ work table/ shrine/ toasted wheat cake/
 coin/ work table/ tea leaf/ wheat gluten/ coin/ six/ letter/ toasted wheat cake/ coin/
 six/ whetstone/ temple hall/ toasted wheat cake/ bottle/ letter/ one/ threshold/
 nine/ heartwood/ ji/ cane/ wheat gluten/ incense/ incense/ cork stopper/ cane/
 demon mask/ pregnant belly/ rice paddy/ toasted wheat cake/ monk/ mulberry/ cork
 stopper/ cane/ wheat gluten/ circle/ cane/ monkey scream/ hand/ monkey scream/
 hand/ belly/ monkey scream/ hand/ belly/ monk/ monkey scream/ hand/ cane/ ji/
 priest/ dog bark/ mosquito/ demon mask/ heartwood/ temple

Fig. 2: A picture-by-picture reading of the pictorial sutra shown in Figure 1

monkeys are common, and in which wandering monks dress in black robes. A place that, famine and blizzard aside, looks very much like Tayama.²⁵

In short, the pictorial *Heart Sutra* interweaves sacred word with quotidian landscape to create a document that must be read synaesthetically. Through fusing local dialect (sound) and quotidian farming objects (sight) with the specialized language of Sinitic Buddhism, the Tayama sutras create a visual and acoustic “alternative space” (Donadey 2000) in which the wonder-working powers of sacred sound translate themselves to the lived reality of subsistence agriculture, a localization of the words of the Buddha and indeed a radical act of “translation”, in the religious sense of the transport, transfer or conveyance of relics and sacred remains.

7 Conclusions

The pictorial sutras of early modern Japan thus suggest a great deal about the relation of acoustic sound to material sign in East Asian Buddhism. As I have argued above, we should read the Tayama *Heart Sutra* simultaneously on two registers. First, diachronically and acoustically (the “mantra” reading), the magical and mantic sound of the sutras is decoded and voiced by readers who move through the text linearly, from first to last phoneme. In this sense, the Tayama sutras function as a transliteration and repeat a trend common in Japanese Buddhism: namely, the treatment of Buddhist texts as acoustic formulae. Second, when read synchronically and visually, the legible lexicon of the sutra is absorbed in one encompassing gaze by readers who recognize a tapestry woven mostly out of the materials of quotidian village life – rice paddies and sheaves of straw, bared breasts and monkeys, chickens and mulberries – but a quotidian life that is (or at least promises to be) free of suffering. The “grammar” (in the anthropological sense) of this latter text is not one of subject, object and verb, but is, rather, one of juxtaposition and simultaneity, not a narrative but a set of elements from which narrative can be constructed. In this sense what we see is not simply a transliteration, but is also a radical translation of the sutra’s sounds into an extremely local context. Acts of spatial translation, such as this, are not unknown in clerical

²⁵ By comparison, the hyper-literate visual vernaculars of the capital relied upon an intimate knowledge of Edo dialect, customs, landmarks, artists, fashions and turns of phrase. See Iwasaki (1999) and Ono (1999).

or hyper-literate cultures of Japanese Buddhism,²⁶ but the Tayama pictorial sutras, as material traces of early modern hypo-literate strategies of textual accommodation, are rare testaments indeed.

Rendering sutras into pictures is, after all, an interpretive act reflecting a certain shared understanding of what sutras are, how they can and should be encountered, and the conceptual network into which they fit. The pictorial sutras speak to the suitability of a locally situated lexicon to accommodate Buddhist text as a miracle-producing substance which, though not perhaps syntactically parseable in a grammatical sense, is nevertheless intensively meaningful. The pictures reflect and construct a familiar world of work and food, sex and religion, animals and fields. The sounds of these pictures echo local patterns of pronunciation while the syntactical referent remains an intensively non-native Buddhist Hybrid Sinitic. Unlike the Chinese translations used by most literates (monks and educated lay believers), however, the pictorial sutras alter the affective distance, in that their orthography is one of intimately familiar objects rather than a thick tangle of foreign script. In short, the pictorial sutras attest the presence of a vibrant “textual community”.²⁷

Finally, the Tayama pictorial sutras can also be read as highly innovative in the broader context of the Japanese acculturation of Buddhist materials, with primary relevance to the history of Japanese translations of Buddhist texts. Traditional scholarly accounts maintain that Buddhist language reform movements did not begin until the Meiji period (1868–1912), when temples created sectarian universities for training clergy and the state established a system of public universities, many with departments of Buddhism. According to the standard discourse, scholars in these academic departments spearheaded efforts to create, for the first time, Japanese language translations of the complete Buddhist canon, the first volumes of which did not reach print until 1917.²⁸ The idea of a “visual

26 Among the educated elite in Japan, there was a long tradition of restating passages and capturing images from Sinitic Buddhist texts in native Japanese poetry (Jp: *waka*). See Kamens (1991). In addition, clerical culture occasionally produced thinkers who attempted to envision Japanese landscapes as quintessentially Buddhist terrain. See Grapard (1989) and Dōgen (online text).

27 Brian Stock defines “textual communities” as “microsocieties organized around the common understanding of a text” and he argues that “individuals (who) belong to such communities . . . existed in a sort of halfway house between literacy and nonliteracy” (Stock 1986: 12).

28 The first volume of the *Kokuyaku daizōkyō*, translated into Japanese from the Chinese by the Kokumin Bunko Kankōkai editorial team (1917–1932), was published beginning in this year, with later volumes appearing through the 1920s and 1930s. An array of other collections (translated from Pāli or Tibetan, for instance) appeared steadily through the 1930s and 1940s. See Hirakawa and Caedel (1955: 226–227), for a chronological bibliography.

vernacular”, however, challenges this received knowledge and I would suggest that the ‘illiterate sutras’ (Jp: *mōkyō*) of north-eastern Japan comprise an early foray into the radical translation of Buddhist scripture into a Japanese vernacular. In closing, the pictorial sutras not only anticipate the efforts of scholars and clerics working primarily in academic, urban contexts by two centuries; they also provide a rare, and therefore crucial, glimpse into the hopes and visions of a hypo-literate textual community.

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