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Breaking the Disciplinary Boundaries: Collaborative Research in Early Modern Japanese Arts and Literature

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Dr. Jones' paper was presented at a meeting of the Early Modern Japan Network in Washington, D.C., April 1992

Having agreed to speak on the state of my field, I find it difficult to describe in a nutshell what my field is. Let me call it *gesaku* 戯作 studies, taking the Japanese term in the widest sense possible. In the traditional Japanese definition, *gesaku* refers to specific types of popular literature of the later Edo period. I propose to use the term to include all "playful" types of arts, whether literary, pictorial, or theatrical, but I will limit my discussion to the study of playful arts based in the city of Edo during the later Edo period since this is where *gesaku*-esque features are most conspicuous. The systematic overview by Professor Totman of the state of the study of Edo period history was in keeping with the rhetoric of his discipline. I ask you not to expect anything so dignified for the next 15 minutes: there won't be any clear categories or balanced evaluations. If his presentation was of *kangaku* 漢学 style, mine will be a sort of *gesaku* --fragmentary, self-referential, and biased. Such an approach may not be unsuitable for describing the development of *gesaku* studies in Japan and in the U.S., which can be characterized by fragmentariness and self-doubt, rather reflecting the nature of *gesaku* itself.



I began as a comparatist specializing in Edo *gesaku* and its counterparts in English and French literatures. My realization that literature of the 18th and early 19th centuries both in Japan and in the West could not be studied in isolation from the other arts (particularly painting, theatre, music, and architecture) led

me into the even more suspicious waters of comparative arts. To mix and confuse categories is universal to bourgeois cultures: like their Western counterparts, Edoite artists bent traditions to invent their own genres and conventions. Edo *gesaku*, however, is an extreme case. We cannot even talk about "literature" knowing that books were intermingled constructs of pictures and texts; "author" does not seem to be an adequate term for one who not only wrote stories but drew illustrations (or at least drafted pictures for the artists to complete) and designed the entire production of the book; nor does the term "texts" in the traditional sense do justice to a large body of Edo creations that were not in a written form or to *kabuki* 歌舞伎 scripts, for example, which were subject to instant changes according to the gossip in town or to the inclination of the star actor. In addition, the production and the reception of Edo culture cannot be separated since the response of the reader/viewer/audience was inherently anticipated in the creation of texts, written or unwritten, because of the topical nature of products and of the closeness of communication between artists and their audience in the forms of friendly circles, correspondence, and reviews, as well as of publishers' sensitivity to the changing tides of the market and censorship. Hence, Edo culture must be discussed in terms of "performance" (not merely on stage), "production" (including book-making, for instance), "story telling" (even in songs and advertisements), and "reception" (readership, audience, and patronage) quite beyond the traditional generic distinctions according to which Japanese culture was described for a long time. The pressure is on all of us to step into fields of study for which we are not adequately trained, but the good news is that Edo culture, seen in broad context, is an inexhaustible treasure house of materials, methodologies, and arguments, yet to

be discovered or explored: none of us will be out of our jobs for a few centuries to come.

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1992 EMJ NETWORK MEETING

About two dozen participants in the Early Modern Japan Network gathered in Washington at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies in early April. Philip Brown announced that the Northeast Asia Council (NEAC) of the Association for Asian Studies had voted to recommend that the Network be accorded committee status under NEAC. This provides the Network with tax-exempt legal status and the use of AAS banking facilities. Brown noted that much of the credit for nursing the motion through NEAC belonged to Anne Walthall and expressed his appreciation on behalf of the Network. Ronald Toby proposed a motion of thanks for Professor Brown's efforts to organize the network and gain official status for it. The motion was approved by acclamation.

EMJ NETWORK'S NEW STATUS

The Northeast Asia Council's approval of committee status for the Network has several significant implications for network activities.

- 1) We now have banking facilities through the Association for Asian Studies. We can receive and disburse funds and can begin to carry our own financial weight.
- 2) We can proceed with plans to develop programs to support enhancement of our research skills such as the training project in handwritten manuscripts discussed at our first meeting. Planning for this particular project is now under way.
- 3) According to AAS guidelines, committees can involve people who are not AAS members, but those formally listed as members

of the committee MUST be AAS members. Non-AAS specialists still may participate in the services provided by the Early Modern Japan Network (e.g., subscriptions to *Oboegaki*, the electronic mail list).

4) Committee status requires us to re-evaluate the formal organization of the network. It requires more formal structure than we have had heretofore. The usual pattern is for a committee to have six to nine members with staggered three-year terms. We need not stay with that model. For example, all early modern Japan specialists who are members of the AAS might form the committee, but elect a set of officers at annual meetings. Some might be semi-permanent officers (e.g., executive director) or all of the officers might rotate. *Bylaws* need to be considered and adopted. Both of these matters must be discussed at the next business meeting of the network at the AAS meeting in Los Angeles. Please give careful thought to them.

5) Subscriptions for *Oboegaki* must now be collected to pay for publication and related activities. Since we pay nothing for our electronic mail list, all interested parties may participate without charge.

SUBSCRIPTIONS TO OBOEGAKI

To this point, *Oboegaki* has been sent to interested parties without charge. Generous donation of duplication facilities and underwriting of mail charges from Ohio State University and Emory University have made this possible. Now that we have the ability, through the Association for Asian Studies, to collect and disburse funds, the Network must pay its own way.

At our first meeting in New Orleans, those assembled determined that a \$15 charge for regular subscriptions and a \$5 fee for student subscriptions should cover the costs of a semi-annual newsletter and distribution of a directory of Early Modern Japan specialists. In accord with this decision, all future issues will be sent only to paid subscribers. During this, our start-up year, however, regular subscriptions will be \$10 and student subscriptions \$5.

Checks, money order, etc. (regretfully, in U.S. dollars only) should be made payable to the *Association for Asian Studies*. Student subscriptions should be accompanied by a photocopy of a valid student I.D. Please use the subscription form on the last page. All subscriptions should be mailed to:

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