Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Studies

Research Article

Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Studies
https://so02.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/hasss
ISSN (Online): 2630-0079

EDO-PERIOD BIOGRAPHIES OF THE BUDDHA AND THEIR ILLUSTRATIONS RECONFIGURE GOTAMĪ (*KYŌDONMI*) FROM DEVOTED SISTER TO JEALOUS ADVERSARY

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Received: *6 December 2025*
Revised: *24 July 2026*
Accepted: *30 July 2026*
Published: *20 October 2026*

Citation:
Tantisuk, N. (2026). Edo-period biographies of the Buddha and their illustrations reconfigure Gotamī (Kyōdonmi) from devoted sister to jealous adversary. Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Studies, 26(3), 721–736. https://doi.org/10.69598/hasss.26.3.282965

ABSTRACT

This study examines Edo-period biographies of the Buddha to analyze Gotamī's (*Kyōdonmi*'s) roles and visual representations, focusing on how they reflect contemporary social contexts. Nine Edo-period biographies of the Buddha were included: (1) *Shaka no honji* (1643); (2) *Shakahassōmonogatari* (1666); (3) *Shakahassōki tsuketari butsumomayafujin* (Kateibunko version, 1669); (4) *Shaka ichidaidenki kusui* (1692); (5) *Shaka goichidaiki eshō* (1797); (6) *Shaka ōkeryaku genge* (1805); (7) *Shaka goichidaiki zue* (1845); (8) *Shaka hassō yamato bunko* (1845–1871); and (9) *Hasshūkigen shakajitsuroku* (1854). Based on analyzing these works, focusing on episodes in which Gotamī harbors malice toward Maya, this study identifies two narrative models: (1) the traditional depiction of Gotamī as the devoted younger sister who cared for Prince Siddhartha and eventually became the first bhikṣuṇī; and (2) the jealous elder sister plotting against her younger, more favored sister Maya, the Buddha's mother, before ultimately repenting. The latter model, which emerged in the mid-17th century and persisted into the 19th, aligns with general Japanese notions of sibling hierarchy (and rivalry), wherein elder daughters traditionally held authority. Some biographies have expressed Gotamī's envy symbolically through the imagery of a serpent, a commonly used motif in Edo society. In time, Gotamī's visual representations have shifted from conventional "Chinese codes" to more realistic portrayals, paralleling the broader transformation of depictions of foreigners in 19th-century Japan, reflecting social change and artists' encounters with foreigners.

Keywords: Gotamī; *Kyōdonmi*; biographies of the Buddha; Edo; Japan; illustrations

1. INTRODUCTION

In Japanese biographies of the Buddha (*Butsuden bungaku*), eight episodes that are collectively termed the *Hassō* are commonly recounted, namely, the Buddha's descent from Tusita heaven, his entry into his mother's womb, his birth, renunciation, the subjugation of demons, enlightenment, preaching of dharma, and entry into nirvana (Komine, 1991). Auerback (2016) highlights five developmental stages in Japanese accounts

across these eight major episodes: (1) the Buddha as preceptor, emphasizing scriptural authority in early to medieval works; (2) the Buddha as local hero, with narratives adapted to resonate with Japanese culture, increasingly evident in the early modern period; (3) the Buddha as exemplar, a model of virtuous practice primarily based on canonical texts; (4) the Buddha as fraud, reflecting modern critical reassessments; and finally (5), the Buddha as character, a contemporary approach presenting the Buddha as a historical and cultural figure rather than a religious icon alone. Overall, Auerback's stages highlight the evolution in Japanese authors' and audiences' interpretations and imaginations of the Buddha over time.

Narratives corresponding to Auerback's categories (2) and (3) are prominent in *Butsuden bungaku* from the late 16th to the 19th century when language and story structures were adapted to the era's tastes, making the accounts more accessible to lay audiences although often diminishing earlier, scripture-based biographies' sacred authority. While the *Hassō* episodes remained central, new characters and scenes absent from canonical sutras were frequently added to dramatize the Buddha's hardships. A striking example is "Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī" (*Kyōdonmi* in Japanese), depicted as harboring malice toward the Buddha's mother Maya, causing turmoil in the royal court, and obstructing the Buddha. Such episodes foreground worldly concerns and dramatic conflict to appeal to early modern Japanese audiences. By the 19th century, however, portrayals shifted discernibly toward the Buddha primarily as exemplar in response to increasingly embellished biographies. Works such as *Miyo no hikari* (1830) selectively incorporated canonical material while removing lay additions to restore scriptural authority.

Sueki (2022) traces the development of the Buddha's biographies from the 19th century to the Meiji period, focusing on *Shaka hassō yamato bunko*.[1] Drawing on Auerback's (2016) framework, Sueki examines how these biographies adapted these narratives to the Japanese cultural context. Based on the popularity of the Buddha's biographies during the Edo period, Sueki (2024) challenges conventional views that Buddhism declined during the late Edo and early Meiji periods. During the Tenpō reforms (1841–1843), erotic content in entertainment media was prohibited. So the way such biographies were widely circulated, often as entertaining literature (*yomihon*) for the general public instead, shows that morally instructive literature—including the Buddha's biographies—gained prominence. These analyses reveal how biographies of the Buddha were domesticated by secular narrative patterns such as the moralistic motif that "good is rewarded and evil punished." Thus, such adaptations simultaneously reflect conceptions of the Buddha's identity and contemporary Japanese cultural contexts.

Given that biographies of the Buddha can reveal how scriptural narratives' sacrality can be displaced over time by broadly accessible, moralized, and worldly storytelling, they should not be regarded simply solely as narratives of Buddhism's founder. For instance, the episode where Gotamī's introduction was hostile toward the Buddha's mother Maya, epitomizes such transformation in these works over time. Notably, this episode is not found in canonical sutras nor in traditional biographies outside of Japan, highlighting the hybridity of Edo-period narratives, where canonical elements coexisted with locally resonant motifs.

In the life of the Buddha narratives, three female characters are especially prominent. The first is Maya, the Buddha's mother, the second is the Buddha's consort Yaśodharā (*Yashudara* in Japanese sources), and the third is Gotamī. The traditional version of the biography relates that the Bodhisattva descended into this world and was born as Prince Siddhartha, son of King Śuddhodana and Maya. When Maya passed away seven days after giving birth, King Śuddhodana entrusted the infant prince's care to Gotamī, Maya's younger sister. Gotamī would later become the first woman ordained as a bhikṣuṇī in the Buddhist tradition. In widely circulated Southeast Asian versions of the Buddha's life, such as the *Pathamasambodhi* and the *Mahāvastu Avadāna*, Gotamī is consistently portrayed as nurturing Siddhartha with maternal affection, as if he were her own child. Japanese scriptural sources that recount the Buddha's life similarly emphasize her role, while also tracing her genealogy to King Suppabuddha (*Zenkaku-ō* or *Zenkaku-daijin* in Japanese), who had eight daughters: Maya the eldest and Gotamī the youngest.[2] In Japanese sources, Gotamī is also referred to by the name *Makahajahadai*, and after her ordination, the name *Daiaidō*, which translates as "Great Love."

Komine (2017) examines female figures' biographical roles in the *Konjaku monogatarishū* (late Heian period), focusing particularly on Maya, Gotamī, and Yaśodharā. Komine observes that the *Konjaku monogatarishū* identifies Gotamī as the first bhikṣuṇī but does not attribute either the role of antagonist or of harboring malice toward Maya; these narrative elements appeared only in later Japanese adaptations, although the date of the first appearance remains unclear. The earliest known version appears in the *Shakahassōmonogatari* (1666).[3] Sueki (2022) identifies this as a distinctive feature of early-modern Japanese biography of the Buddha. Moreover, the

[1] A multi-volume work published serially for nearly three decades and reprinted well into the Meiji and Shōwa periods.

[2] Sources differ on Maya and Gotamī's parentage: some name King Añjana, others King Suppabuddha. The number of siblings is also inconsistent, generally reported as two or seven.

[3] Hereafter referred to as *Hassōmonogatari*.

motif also appears in Chikamatsu Monzaemon's *jōruri* play *Shakanyorai tanjōe*, adapted to resonate with the interests of Edo-period audiences. Among these adaptations is the portrayal of Gotamī's jealousy toward Maya, a theme that reflects familial tensions. As Kaewrithidej (2003) argues, such representations exemplify how the Buddha's Edo biographies embodied a shared cultural context and values negotiated between authors and their audiences.

Although previous studies have examined Japanese biographies of the Buddha, some merely mention Gotamī in passing (Kaewrithidej, 2003), whereas others focus on the biographies' development in medieval Japan or analyze individual texts (Kurobe, 1992; Komine, 2017; Sueki, 2022; Tantisuk, 2023). If the Buddha's biographies, encompassing textual narratives and illustrated depictions, are understood as *texts*, the *codes* and *contexts* of their production and reception essentially enable effective communication between creators and audiences. This study contends that episodes diverging from canonical accounts, such as those of Gotamī's rivalry with Maya, provide fertile ground for examining *codes* and *contexts* that made such transmissions possible.

This literature review also demonstrates that few studies have focused on supplemental episodes, especially where Gotamī harbors malice toward Maya, and their illustrations. To address this limitation, this article analyzes Gotamī's roles and visual representations in Edo-period biographies of the Buddha. It aims to clarify how her portrayals reflect and correspond to the sociocultural context, within which communication via textual and visual codes allowed audiences to interpret and engage meaningfully with the biographies' narratives.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study frames its examination around the figure of Gotamī in Edo-period biographies of the Buddha. Since there are many published versions and publication years for these Japanese biographies, based on lists provided by Komine (2012), Sueki (2022), and Sueki and Maegawa (2024), this study selects only those biographies that explicitly mention Gotamī. Furthermore, even if a given biography was published multiple times, only a single edition was analyzed. Thus, nine Edo-period works were included: (1) *Shaka no honji* (1643); (2) *Hassōmonogatari* (1666); (3) *Shakahassōki tsuketari butsumomayafujin* (Kateibunko version, 1669); (4) *Shaka ichidaidenki kusui* (1692); (5) *Shaka goichidaiki eshō* (1797); (6) *Shaka ōkeryaku genge* (1805); (7) *Shaka goichidaiki zue* (1845); (8) *Shaka hassō yamato bunko* (1845–1871); and (9) *Hasshūkigen shakajitsuroku* (1854).[4]

The study analyzes Gotamī's roles and visual representations, focusing on episodes in which she harbors malice toward Maya. This episode represents a divergence from canonical sutras that shows how Edo-period authors and artists adapted the Buddha's biographies to align with social norms, cultural expectations, and audience interests. Therefore, this study analyzes how depictions of Gotamī reflect these cultural contexts and experiential influences on artists' visual presentations, showing how shared cultural codes facilitated sacred narratives' adaptation and reception in Edo-period society.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The roles of Gotamī in the Edo period: From devoted younger sister to jealous elder sister

The *Konjaku monogatarishū* primarily depicts Gotamī as the first bhikṣuṇī. The story explains how Ānanda (*Anan* in Japanese) petitioned the Buddha on Gotamī's behalf so that she could be ordained as the first female monastic. The text explains her familial relationship to the Buddha only briefly, describing her as the younger sister of the Buddha's mother and thus the Buddha's maternal aunt. Further, it presents the Buddha's reasoning for initially refusing to ordain a female: normally, women give birth to sons who take ordination and ensure the continuity of Buddhist teachings. Allowing women into the monastic order would lead to a decline in the number of male offspring and, consequently, the number of men entering monkhood. Therefore, the account primarily emphasizes the importance of childbirth and lineage, without invoking the notion that women's presence constituted an obstacle to men's pursuit of the Dharma.

In medieval biographies of the Buddha, such as *Honji* and *Hassōki* (versions circulated during the Muromachi period), Gotamī is consistently described as the younger sister of the Buddha's mother, Maya. In the early Edo period, however, from the mid-17th century onward and continuing in biographies from the Meiji period, new versions portraying Gotamī as Maya's elder sister appear, in which she marries King Śuddhodana

[4] Hereafter referred to as *Honji, Hassōmonogatari*, *Hassōki, Kusui, Eshō, Ōkeryaku, Zue, Yamato bunko*, and *Jitsuroku*, respectively.

alongside Maya, becomes jealous of her, and conspires with her attendants to harm Maya. Yet in almost every account, this enmity ends in Gotamī's repentance shortly before Prince Siddhartha's birth, leading to her eventually becoming the first bhikṣuṇī. Therefore, the narrative pattern divides into two types: (1) Gotamī as the younger sister who harbors no jealousy or malice and cares lovingly for the infant prince; and (2) Gotamī as the elder sister who acts from jealousy and malice (see Table 1).

Table 1: Roles of Gotamī in Edo-period biographies of the Buddha

Title	Year	Relationship with Maya	Jealousy and hostility toward Maya	Transformation of jealousy into a serpent	Repentance
Honji	1643	Younger sister	×	-	-
Hassōmonogatari	1666	Elder sister	✓	✓	✓
Hassōki	1669	Elder sister	✓	✓	✓
Kusui	1692	Younger sister	×	-	-
Eshō	1797	Elder sister	✓	✓	✓
Ōkeryaku	1805	Younger sister	×	-	-
Zue	1845	Elder sister	✓	✓ (with illustrations)	✓
Yamato bunko[5]	1845–1871	Elder sister	✓	✓ (with illustrations)	✓
Jitsuroku	1854	Elder sister	✓	✓	✓

To the best of the author's knowledge, the episode in which Gotamī harbors jealousy and conspires against Maya does not appear in canonical scriptures, indicating that her antagonism was a later innovation, reflecting the domestication of narratives in Edo-period biographies. By reframing Gotamī as a jealous elder sister compared with earlier depictions of a nurturing relative, these adaptations localized the biography within familiar patterns of family conflict while enacting a gendered reconfiguration of Buddhist narratives. The following section summarizes this episode and highlights some of Gotamī's assigned characteristics.

Despite King Śuddhodana's marriage to both of Suppabuddha's daughters, the elder Gotamī and the younger Maya, he visits Maya's palace more frequently, fueling Gotamī's resentment and jealousy. When she learns that Maya expects a royal heir, Gotamī fears the consolidation of Maya's power and the loss of her own. Her anger intensifies to the point that she contemplates suicide. However, her attendant Bashōgun intervenes and proposes an alternative that they should harm Maya's pregnancy, such that the king's affection may return to Gotamī. Bashōgun then summons two sorcerers, Gibaku and Mugen, to perform a ritual curse to prevent Maya from giving birth. After the ritual, the sorcerers receive their reward but are swallowed by the earth, a motif that marks their punishment. Further, to induce a miscarriage, in some versions, Gotamī and Bashōgun attempt to substitute Maya's medicine with a potion. Maya suffers for years, unable to deliver the child as a result. Witnessing her sister's prolonged torment, Gotamī eventually recognizes the destructiveness of her envy and repents. Seven days after the prince's birth, Maya passes away, and Gotamī then assumes the role of raising the infant prince. After the Buddha's enlightenment, she is eventually ordained as the first bhikṣuṇī[6].

In comparison, biographies depicting Gotamī as Maya's younger sister contain no episode in which Gotamī harbors malice toward Maya. Instead, she assumes a nurturing role, caring for Prince Siddhartha with great affection. However, in all versions that depict Gotamī plotting against Maya, she is consistently cast as the elder sister. This pattern suggests two significant points about Edo-period biographies: (1) the younger sister is always represented as virtuous; and (2) casting Gotamī as the elder sister transforms her into an antagonist, even though she eventually repents. This duality constitutes a distinctive feature of these biographies. Notably, Gotamī's depiction as the malicious elder sister is absent not only from canonical scriptures but also from pre-Edo biographies. This modification of Gotamī's role emerged prominently in Japanese biographies from the mid-17th century and continued through the 19th century. Although elder/younger sibling status and a malicious disposition are not inherently correlated, Gotamī's consistent depiction as elder-sister/antagonist in these versions suggests a deliberate narrative adjustment. In other words, to align with her role as antagonist, specific factors appear to have necessitated a transformation from younger to elder sister.

[5] The episodes concerning "relationship with Maya," "harboring malice toward Maya," "transformation of jealousy into a serpent," and "repentance" appeared in the volumes published between 1845 and 1846.

[6] However, certain texts, such as the *Hassōmonogatari* and *Zue* identify Yaśodharā, rather than Gotamī, as the first woman to receive full ordination.

In a study of *Zue*, Xiang (2024) suggests that positioning Gotamī as elder sister aligns with contemporary social contexts: portraying an elder sister's anger and resentment when a younger sibling threatens her position as consort may have been drawn from Chinese literary tropes of rivalry among palace consorts. However, the depiction is more likely to have been influenced by Japanese social contexts and the literary tradition in which sibling dynamics frequently served as central narrative conflicts. In biographies portraying Gotamī as antagonist, her elder-sister status is coupled with two motivations for jealousy and resentment: (1) the king lavishes more attention and affection on Maya and (2) Maya becomes pregnant while Gotamī does not. In one biography, Gotamī laments that the child's birth will increase Maya's power and overshadow her own status, thereby obscuring her very identity. When her attendant Bashōgun intervenes to prevent her attempt at suicide, he argues that if Maya gives birth to a daughter, Gotamī's suicide would serve no purpose. This scene reflects a social ideology in which childbearing is of paramount importance. Having children grants status among co-wives and producing sons is especially valued. Despite being the elder sister, Gotamī lacks her husband's affection and his offspring. This anxiety over her social position motivates her envy and malicious scheming.

Japanese concepts of women's familial status during the late medieval and Edo periods are relevant in this context. The Japanese "ie" (家) system of household succession was deeply embedded in Japanese society, encompassing not only the inheritance of the family name but also that of property, business, and ancestral worship. These succession patterns were practiced among elite warrior families with surnames as well as lower-ranking social groups. Such as merchant and artisan families, who passed shop names and businesses to their offspring.

Since the late Heian period, Japanese families tended to designate their firstborn, especially the firstborn son, as their heir, with any remaining property usually divided among other siblings. If the eldest son was incapable of succession, that right passed to the next son. A daughter could only inherit if there were no sons available. In fact, the names of sons and daughters often indicated birth order, a convention that continued into the medieval period. This practice highlights how birth order, regardless of gender, determines one's social status and role, especially concerning family succession. From the late 13th century onward, laws limiting female property-holdings to her lifetime became increasingly common; if a daughter inherited, she could do so only for her lifetime. Upon her death, the rights and property reverted to the family. By the 14th century, a model emerged in which all inheritance was conferred upon a single heir, typically the eldest son, while daughters were generally married into other households. Nevertheless, female inheritance did not disappear entirely, and the practice of first-born daughters succeeding the household, or *Ane-katoku*, is documented even during the Edo period. This form of succession appears to reflect a preference for granting authority to the eldest child, regardless of gender, and is likely a response to multiple factors, including labor needs, considerations of gender equality, and localities' residual matrilineal succession practices. However, despite the first-born daughter "inheriting," her husband typically became the head of household. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the appointment of adopted heirs from relatives or husbands marrying into the family became increasingly common. Frequently, daughters were sent to marry into other households such that their sons-in-law could become heirs, particularly from the 18th century onward. Overall, Edo-period patterns of household succession prioritized male heirs, reflecting entrenched gender hierarchies in familial and social structures (Kanazawa, 2009; Shimazu, 2013).

According to Nomura (2008)'s survey of historical materials from the Kamakura period (*Kamakura Ibun*) from the late 13th and 14th centuries, the practice of naming girls to indicate birth order had declined, indicating the diminishing significance of female birth order along with daughters' succession. Nevertheless, names with elements such as "Otsu/Oto (乙)"—which implies "younger" or "junior"—as in Otohime, Otome, Otomae, and Otomatsu remained in use. Although it is impossible to verify the actual birth order of these women, the sustained use of names denoting "younger sister" compared with those denoting "elder sister" suggests a cultural emphasis on youthfulness and innocence among women. Furthermore, Nomura surveys the heroine's naming in the *Urashimatarō* legend, which spans the Nara, Muromachi, and modern periods. The finding shows a shift in the character's naming. In the Nara period, the heroine was named "Kamehime." However, the use of the name "Nyōbō" or "Otohime" increased during the Muromachi period. Eventually in the modern period, the name "Otohime" predominates. These changes reflect an emphasis on the heroine's image as the "younger sister" or as youthful and innocent. Nomura also notes that since daughter-based succession had begun declining during the Muromachi period, daughters had fewer binding responsibilities to their natal families. Consequently, they could more freely accompany and support the hero. The role of Otohime aligns with marrying daughters into other families, as she ultimately becomes the hero's companion. Incidentally, the hero's name, Urashima*tarō*, incorporates an element that indicates the "firstborn son".

In sum, although female birth order no longer conferred significant inheritance rights since the late Medieval period, the symbolic status of the "younger" daughter persisted in personal names. This usage conveyed values associated with youth, innocence, and endearment. This trend continued into the 19th century, the same period covering the biographies analyzed in this study. As previously discussed, none of the biographies that portray Gotamī as the younger sister cast her as a villain. However, in versions that include Gotamī's plotting against Maya, she is consistently portrayed as the elder sister. Furthermore, her dialogues emphasize concern about power as a queen consort, asserting that the birth of Maya's son would secure her authority and status, rather than Gotamī's, in the palace.

This transformation indicates how narratives were adapted to align with the Edo period's social context and the expectations of contemporaneous audiences. In the Japanese cultural context, elder sisters traditionally held greater responsibilities or greater household authority than younger sisters. By assigning Gotamī the elder sister status, the narrative rationalizes her envy and antagonism toward Maya. The lack of affection and offspring from her husband, contrasted with Maya's growing influence through childbirth, amplifies tension and reinforces moral and social lessons. Moreover, persistent depictions of "adorable younger sisters" from the medieval period onward suggest that retaining Gotamī's original role as the younger sister would have conflicted with the period's codes of representation. This gendered reconfiguration of the Buddha's biography highlights how Edo-period authors manipulated familial roles and birth orders. They effectively domesticated canonical Buddhist texts into culturally resonant, morally instructive, and popular narratives for the Japanese readership.

3.2 Visual representations of Gotamī in the Edo period

3.2.1 Depictions of jealous women and serpents

This study also finds that Gotamī's jealousy and resentment are consistently described as being inherent to women. Her envy and anger cause immense suffering that this jealousy transforms into a green serpent, a gigantic snake spreading across the sky, summoning all manner of evil spirits. The narrative explains Maya's suffering by referencing a karmic enmity spanning 700 lifetimes. The story reveals that Gotamī and Maya have been adversaries throughout countless past existences. In a previous life, King Hōsha of Tōjō-koku had a consort named Ikuda. Due to her karma from that life, Ikuda was reborn as Gotamī, who receives less of King Śuddhodana's affection than Maya. The Bodhisattva explains that once Gotamī enacts her revenge in this lifetime, she will finally abandon her jealousy and anger. He also instructs Maya to remain composed and understanding.

This episode emphasizes the relationship between women, jealousy and resentment. Even the Buddha's mother critiques herself when he enters her womb. She acknowledges to him that as a woman, her body is considered impure and unfit for the Bodhisattva. Yet due to her meritorious actions in previous lives, he assures her that she is suitable to bear him. The narrative continues to foreground Gotamī's anger and envy toward Maya; even when she is ordained as the first bhikṣuṇī, they reiterate that despite her jealousy and misdeeds, she is capable of realizing her sins and attaining monastic life.

Initially, biographical illustrations rarely depicted Gotamī. According to this study's survey, scenes of her malice became visually explicit only after *Hassōki* (1669). However, these illustrations offered limited detail because Gotamī's physical appearance and attire were barely distinguishable from Maya's. In *Hassōmonogatari* and *Hassōki*, she wears an elite Chinese woman's attire, holds a gourd-shaped fan, and sits on a tiger skin. Although the text describes her jealousy as transforming into a giant serpent, this imagery is not illustrated. Not until 19th-century works such as *Zue* and *Yamato bunko* did the illustrations depict Gotamī's plotting more frequently. This shift suggests that the narrative had gained sufficient significance for artists to represent it visually. Across these works, Gotamī is consistently depicted as a high-ranking woman with authority above all other female figures (except for Maya). Moreover, the texts establish a link between female jealousy and serpents. The visual association between Gotamī and serpents or dragons emerges more prominently in 19th-century illustrations, particularly those in *Zue* and *Yamato bunko*.

The renowned *ukiyo-e* woodblock print artist Katsushika Hokusai illustrated *Zue*. On the character introduction page, Gotamī is depicted from behind, observing a portrait of Maya while holding a short, unsheathed sword in her right hand (Figure 1 left), symbolically conveying Gotamī's malice. Representing a character's inner thoughts through visual cues is a common technique in *ukiyo-e* prints. For example, in *Umegae of Chitose* from Utagawa Hiroshige's series *Mirror of a Courtesan's Fidelity* (circa 1818–19), a woman gazes into a mirror; the reflection shows not her face but that of the man she is thinking about. In Gotamī's case, the hanging portrait replaces this reflective medium.

After Maya becomes pregnant, Gotamī's jealousy and rage intensify. Hokusai depicts this through contrasting illustrations (Figure 1 right).[7] On the right-hand page, Maya is presented as serene and dreamlike, whereas on the left, Gotamī's envy transforms into a giant serpent. The bright colors on the right-hand page and dark tones on the left highlight the contrast between the scenes. The left page does not show Gotamī's face; instead, the serpent's winding tail extends into the bedchamber, symbolically indicating the creature's origin in the room, which resembles a grand Chinese-style building. Twisting through the darkness, the serpent directly faces Maya, symbolizing Gotamī's malicious intent toward the figure on the right-hand page. Based on this study's review, no earlier illustrated biographies depict Gotamī's jealousy toward Maya as clearly as *Zue*, including through a short sword or a huge serpent. Thus, although textual references to Gotamī's jealousy and its transformation into a serpent have appeared since *Hassōmonogatari*, *Zue* is the first to enhance these depictions through illustrations, making the narrative content more vivid.

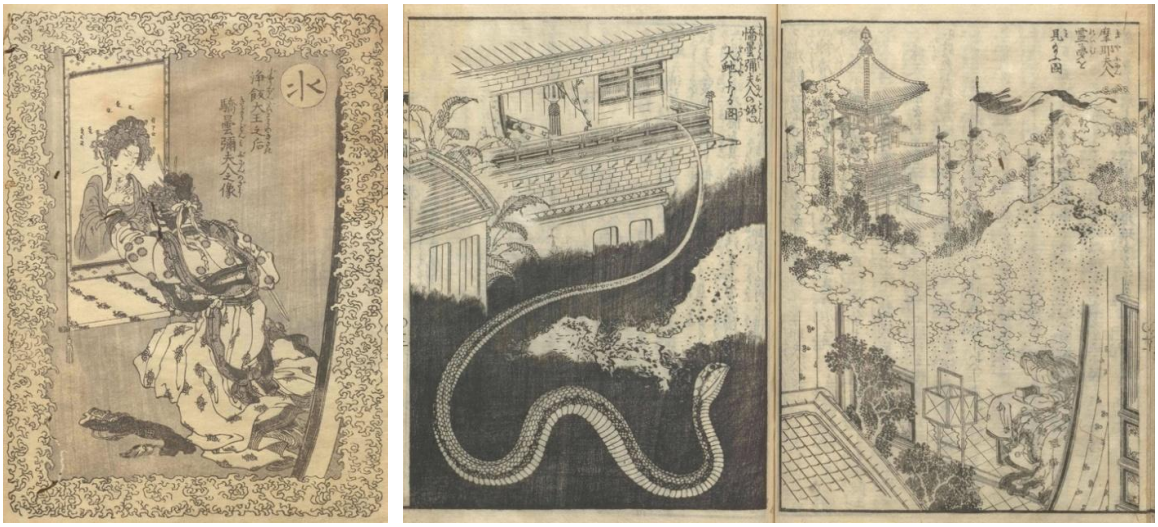


Figure 1: Gotamī on the introductory page (left) and her jealousy transformed into a serpent (right) in *Zue* (Yamada & Katsushika, 1845)

Compared with other biographies, *Yamato bunko* contains a particularly large number of illustrations, attributable to its 58-episode, multi-volume *gōkan* format, published over 27 years. The illustrations were produced by artists of the Utagawa school, including Utagawa Kunisada I, Utagawa Kunisada II, and Kawanabe Kyōsai. In the introductory section presenting the characters, Gotamī is depicted in two distinct styles. In one, she appears as a Japanese figure, dressed in a kimono and adorned with elaborate hairpins characteristic of a courtesan or a female character in *Kabuki* plays. In the other, her portrait is framed above the first and rendered in a foreign guise, indicated by her distinctive attire and headdress. In this image on the left page, Gotamī sits beside King Śuddhodana, who stands, directing his gaze toward Maya on the right-page.

The *Yamato bunko* particularly emphasizes illustrations, with text interspersed across the pages, resulting in a greater number of depictions of Gotamī than in other biographies. The work also introduces several episodes not observed in other versions. In scenes of Gotamī's hostility toward Maya, one page depicts her reclining in a kimono adorned with ornate hairpins, with the upper part of the illustration showing a dragon, symbolizing Gotamī's jealousy and envy, flying through darkness toward a palace. A Female attendant expresses shock while gazing at the dragon (Figure 2).[8] Although Gotamī is surrounded by floral decorations, the cloth trailing behind her bears a pattern resembling serpent scales. Thus, *Yamato bunko* also symbolizes Gotamī's jealousy through serpentine, or draconic, in this case, imagery. Additional illustrations include episodes from Maya and Gotamī's former lives and the latter's consultations with Bashōgun.

[7] On the left page, the illustration depicts a giant serpent, accompanied by the caption, "Gotamī's jealousy transformed into a giant serpent" (translated by the author). This image corresponds to the accompanying narrative: "嫉妬の毒念萌す時は。無明の闇に迷ひ。七百生の其間青躰の蛇身と生" ("When malicious intent rooted in jealousy begins to sprout, one becomes lost in the darkness of ignorance and is reborn as a green serpent for seven hundred lifetimes." [translated by the author]) (Yamada & Katsushika, 1845).

[8] The illustration corresponds to the accompanying narrative: "かこつそのいちねんかりねのゆめにもあをきへびとなりうろこをさかだてゝ青龍城のよるの床へととびゆく" ("During a brief nap, a single thought of profound grief transformed into a green serpent with bristling scales and flew toward the bedchamber of Seiryū Palace." [translated by the author]). (Mantei et al., 1845–1871)



Figure 2: Gotamī's jealous mind transforms into a dragon in *Yamato bunko* (Mantei et al., 1845–1871).

Episode 2's opening page visually summarizes the preceding narrative in a single illustration (Figure 3). Gotamī is enthroned upon a dais, clad in a kimono with ornamental hairpins, while the smoke of incense placed before her metamorphoses into a dragon. A rubric identifies the motif: *"The envy of Gotamī gave rise to a green serpent, intent on enmity against Maya of the Seiryū Palace."* On the opposite side, two sorcerers, along with Bashōgun, gaze at the dragon.

Thereafter, the manuscript offers a sequence of further illustrations, including Gotamī brandishing a dagger while staring at Maya convulsing in anguish on the ground. In the episode in which the earth swallows the sorcerers, Gotamī, Bashōgun, and their attendants are astonished and attempt to flee into the Japanese-style palace. The manuscript also includes illustrations of the banquet for flower-viewing, King Śuddhodana's visit to Gotamī's residence, and the demise of Maya, the Buddha's mother. Moreover, while Maya is consistently rendered in light-colored garments, Gotamī's attire, especially in episodes preceding her repentance, is dominated by dark tones. This visual contrast in using color underscores Gotamī's role as Maya's antithesis.



Figure 3: Opening page of episode 2 in *Yamato bunko* (Mantei et al., 1845–1871)

In the *Jitsuroku,* Hashimoto Gyokuran illustrated Gotamī's malevolent schemes. While depicted as consulting with Bashōgun, the illustration contains no serpent or dragon motif. The depiction of the ritual curse on Maya depicts sorcerers performing the rite amid surging flames; however, Gotamī herself is absent. Her image only reappears when Bashōgun prepares to end his life: as he holds a sword up to sever his head, Gotamī rushes forward, both hands raised to prevent the fatal stroke.

Such representations confirm that the narratives explicitly trace her hostility to karmic grudges accumulated across multiple past lives, metaphorically identifying her jealousy with the image of a giant green serpent. In the illustrations, *Zue* and *Yamato bunko* render this jealousy as a serpent or dragon, reinforcing the textual association. Thus, early 19th-century biographies of the Buddha present the symbolic nexus of "woman–envy/resentment–serpent" textually as well as visually, embedding this imagery in the narrative and in pictorial tradition.

The Japanese have regarded snakes as deities of water, mountains, and thunder since ancient times, even while their dangerous, venomous nature rendered them as objects of fear and awe. Medieval literature, for example, *Hosshinshū*, *Kojidan*, and *Shasekishū* primarily represent them as destructive creatures that inflict harm and death on humans. Stories involving serpents serve as moral examples, illustrating Buddhist principles of karmic retribution and the cycle of transmigration. In these accounts, causes of rebirth or bodily transformation as a serpent are typically linked to human attachments, jealousy, and lust and are frequently associated with the sins of women (Wang, 2011).

In the Edo-period conception of serpents, as in research by the *Kinsei shōdōbungei kenkyūkai* (2023) on *Ruizōshū* (Taisho University Library edition, mid-17th century), the serpent motif symbolized one of three unwholesome roots, specifically anger (*dosa*). The serpent also functioned as a metaphor for resentment and peril, denoting danger that ought not be approached. Those who harbored deep-seated hatred were said to be reborn as serpents. In terms of lexical frequency, "serpent" most appeared with terms such as「毒」(poison),「瞋恚」(anger),「龍」(dragon),「蛇身」(body of a snake),「火（炎」(fire/flame),「三熱」(the three torments of serpents and dragons[9]), and「怨」(resentment). This semantic network suggests that Edo-period Buddhist narratives consistently linked serpents with anger, dragon imagery, and suffering. Such conceptual associations also surface in Edo-period biographies of the Buddha in their depictions of Gotamī. Moreover, beyond the *Ruizōshū*, Japanese cultural media encoded the serpent to signify women, jealousy, and wrath, a symbolic complex established long prior to its appearance in Edo Buddhist storytelling.

Between the medieval and early modern periods, Japan witnessed a transformation in Buddhist preaching into didactic narratives that common people could comprehend. In teachings concerning women, a foundational point was the account of the dragon king's daughter (often rendered as the *naga princess*) attaining enlightenment in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra*, which became the basis for subsequent narrative elaborations. Variations of this motif often appeared in temple-origin legends and later developed into pictorial representations. A well-known example is the legend of the *Dōjōji* temple. The legend tells the story of a woman who metamorphoses into a serpent or dragon in pursuit of the priest for whom she longs. Terming such female-serpent figures *nyonin jatai* (女人蛇体), Tsutsumi (2006) notes that by the early modern period, they were frequently associated with wives of landed proprietors who were believed to carry a heavy karmic debt. Typically, such figures were married women, including primary wives or concubines, whose transformation into serpents was attributed to overwhelming resentment. Gotamī presents a parallel in this respect. As the consort of King Śuddhodana—a sovereign over a vast domain—she is driven by profound anger and jealousy. In this case, Śuddhodana himself does not bear grievous karma; however, Gotamī embodies the narrative pattern in which women of high social standing are cast as serpents due to their resentment.

In the visual and literary culture of the Edo period, beyond symbolizing general anger and resentment, the serpent motif functioned specifically to represent female jealousy. *Kabuki* plays, novels, and *ukiyo-e* prints frequently conveyed this association, for example, in *Itozakurahonchōbunsui* (1810) and the hell scene "*Futamegurui*" in the *Kumano Kanshin Jikkai Mandala*. Edo-period women's manuals, such as *Fujin yashinai gusa* (1689; Figure 4 left) and *Nyonin aishū kaiiroku* (1740), also warned against jealousy. The illustrations in those manuals reinforce the link between female resentment and the serpentine motif by depicting women's hair transforming into serpents. Tsutsumi (2006) points out that Buddhist conceptualizations that linked women and serpents became increasingly explicit during the Edo period and broadly permeated social consciousness. In other words, the sutras and Buddhist teachings and legends were transformed into everyday narratives. This motif extended into domestic visual culture. For example, in Toriyama Sekien's *Konjaku hyakkishūi* (1781), the *yōkai Jatai* is depicted as an *obi,* coiling like a serpent across a folding screen (*byōbu*), symbolizing a woman consumed by jealousy. This association persisted into the 19th century, exemplified by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi's *Shinkeisanjūrokkaisen* (1892; Figure 4 right), in which a serpent-like *obi* hangs over a woman nursing her child. These examples reveal that the symbolic connection among women, jealousy, and serpents was deeply embedded in Edo-era Japan's literary and visual media, forming a cultural context for the depictions of Gotamī in biographies of the Buddha.

[9] The sufferings of serpents and *nāgas* are described in three ways: (1) their skin and bones are scorched by hot winds and burning sand, (2) their dwellings and garments are destroyed by violent gales, and (3) their offspring are devoured by Garuḍas.



Figure 4: *Fujin yashinai gusa* (left) (Baiu, 1689) and *Shinkeisanjūrokkaisen* (right) (Tsukioka, 1892)

Portrayals of Gotamī as a malicious elder sister who harbors jealousy and resentment toward the Buddha's mother consistently employ the serpent motif and have a long history of circulation in Japanese society. Particularly between the 17th and 19th centuries, serpents symbolized female jealousy, attachment, and wrath, appearing widely across literary and visual media. Using culturally recognized codes, such as serpent imagery, resonates with Auerback's (2016) argument that these codes function to present the Buddha as a local hero while engaging the audience with familiar symbolic language. Moreover, the story continuously emphasizes Gotamī's envy and anger before her moral awakening, even in episodes depicting her ordination. Although she once harbored unwholesome thoughts, she eventually returns to the path of virtue. Ultimately, she becomes a devoted disciple. This narrative illustrates the Buddha's power that even a woman with deep karmic defilements can recognize her past wrongs, relinquish her resentment, and purify her mind to perceive the path of Dharma. Gotamī, thus, functions in Edo-period biographies as a didactic exemplar, highlighting the Buddha's capacity to rectify individual minds and guide them toward a moral awakening. Gotamī's presentation operates as a mechanism to exalt the Buddha's supreme virtue and greatness while allowing Edo-period audiences, who shared an understanding of the narrative's embedded symbolic codes, to "read" and "comprehend" the texts' meaning through these images.

3.2.2 Indian figures in illustrations of the Buddha's biographies

Although the biographies treated here were written and adapted with localized elements, they clearly situate their scenes in India, rather than Japan. References to India, the city of Kapilavastu, and other historically grounded locations appear consistently, following the original sources. However, Gotamī's depictions exhibit changes in physical features and attire that encode certain visual cues signifying a foreign identity (in this case, Indian) according to visual conventions and semiotic codes that would be understood by contemporary Japanese audiences.

These works consistently depict Gotamī as a high-ranking woman, superior to all other female characters except for Maya. As mentioned previously, *Hassōmonogatari* and *Hassōki* portray her as wearing attire characteristic of high-status Chinese women, holding a gourd-shaped fan, and seated on a tiger skin in a Chinese-style building with tiled floors. This portrayal persists even in *Zue*. However, *Yamato bunko* depicts her in Japanese-style clothing, which is likely influenced by *kabuki* and *jōruri* performances and by 19th-century *ukiyo-e* prints. This depiction diverges further in *Jitsuroku* (Figure 5): Gotamī wears a body wrap and a head covering, holds a large fan in her right hand, and gazes at Bashōgun, who is seated below her. Her hair, as well as Bashōgun's, is illustrated with curling lines, and their garments are rendered in flowing, detailed curves. Notably, the architecture, clothing, and vegetation are stylized such that they appear neither Chinese nor Japanese, suggesting an attempt to represent a foreign (presumably Indian) setting.



Figure 5: Gotamī in *Jitsuroku* (Reitei & Hashimoto, 1854)

In ancient Japanese art, a common visual code for representing foreigners or non-Japanese settings was the use of Chinese-style dress and landscapes, particularly Chinese-style architecture with tiled roofs, tiled floors, decorative vases, and ceramic ware. For example, in *Genjōsanzō-e* (14th century), which illustrates the biography of Xuánzàng, the artist depicts Xuánzàng in the Buddhist monastery at Nalanda, India (Figure 6). However, the buildings are rendered in a Chinese architectural style, with green tiled roofs and floors of white and yellow tiles; even the rocks deviate from those seen in typical Japanese gardens. The attendant is styled and dressed in a Chinese manner. Without prior knowledge of the narrative, viewers may easily assume that the setting is China rather than India. The use of "Chineseness" as a visual code to signify foreignness or an overseas setting persisted into the Edo period. Even early 19th-century works such as *Zue* continued to follow this convention.



Figure 6: "Chineseness" as a visual code in *Genjōsanzō-e* (Fujita Museum, n.d.)

From the mid-19th century onward, a shift occurred in characters' visual representation. In *Yamato bunko*, neither the settings nor the costumes were depicted in a Chinese style. Instead, both were represented as distinctly Japanese. The characters' attire resembles that of *kabuki* theatre and *ukiyo-e* prints, a popular entertainment medium of the period. For instance, Gotamī is drawn with Japanese facial features: eyes, nose, lips. Her gestures in adjusting her kimono recall stylistic patterns of *Bijin-ga* and *Kabuki-e*. She wears a multi-layered kimono, and her hair is arranged in a high bun adorned with several hairpins. Thus, her image is reminiscent of Japanese courtesans. Furthermore, architectural elements such as *tatami* flooring, *shoin*-style rooms, and *tokonoma* alcoves set the narrative in a familiar Japanese environment. The only exception is the character introduction page. On that page, as noted previously, Gotamī is represented in a different style. Moreover, motifs and compositions derived from *ukiyo-e* are recurring elements in *Yamato bunko*. For example, when Gotamī and Maya are preparing to travel to Kapilavastu, the illustration depicts a woman checking her appearance in a mirror, echoing a common *Bijin-ga* motif. The image of a nude woman bathing replicates compositional elements from Utagawa Toyokuni I's *Eri-arai* (1812) and the *Bijin-ga* compilation *Edo Meisho*

Hyakunin Bijo (1858) by Utagawa Kunisada I. In the latter work, a similarly posed bathing woman appears under the title *Gotenyama*. Kunisada clearly also carried these compositional devices into *Yamato bunko*[10] (Figure 7).

These examples demonstrate that artists drew upon their experience with *ukiyo-e*, particularly secular depictions of women, to construct illustrations for Buddhist biographies, which were not originally intended as entertainment or secular art. Moreover, the illustrators of *Yamato bunko*, including Kunisada I, were all established *ukiyo-e* artists working in genres such as *Bijin-ga*, *Yakusha-e*, and *Kabuki-e*. This cross-pollination of stylistic conventions and compositional elements from secular visual culture into illustrations of Buddhist narratives indicates that beyond adapting religious content, Edo-period Buddhist illustrations integrated secular, entertainment-oriented visual codes. These images exemplify a hybrid form in which secular and religious visual media merged to produce a distinct form of popular entertainment, rather than a synthesis occurring solely at the level of narrative content.



Figure 7: A nude woman bathing in *Edo Meisho Hyakunin Bijo* (left) (Toyokuni III & Kunihisa, 1858) and *Yamato bunko* (right) (Mantei et al., 1845–1871)

The integration of artists' prior experience into illustrative work can also be observed in the *Jitsuroku*. As noted previously, the illustrations for *Jitsuroku* were created by Hashimoto Gyokuran, who, according to the Kotenseki Sogo Database of Waseda University, was also known as Hashimoto Sadahide (1807–?). Sadahide trained in Utagawa Kunisada I's studio and used several names, including Gyokuransai, Gyokuran, Gountei, and Gyokuō. He produced illustrations for *yomihon* and *gōkan* but is best known for his *Yokohama-e* prints, which were *ukiyo-e* images depicting the bustling port city of Yokohama during the late Edo to Meiji periods. These works, portraying foreign residents and port trade activity, were highly popular and widely produced, particularly after Japan opened to foreign trade in 1853, as increasing numbers of foreigners traveled to and conducted commerce in Japanese port cities, with Yokohama serving as a key hub. Reportedly, Sadahide himself resided in Yokohama for a period, further informing his depictions of the city.

Sadahide's book illustrations encompass a wide range of subjects. Roughly contemporaneous with *Jitsuroku* is *Akōgishiden issekiwa* (1854), which recounts a story of the 47 loyal retainers, set in 18th-century Japan. Sadahide depicted the characters and environments according to Edo-period Japanese aesthetics. However, in *Ezokunkōki* (1854), the work that focuses on the *Ezo* people of northern Japan, Sadahide rendered *Ezo* characters differently from Edo characters, including their clothing, houses, and environmental settings. This difference suggests that, although Sadahide could have employed conventional visual codes for depicting foreigners (such as "Chineseness" or the *Kabuki*-style urban Edo motifs in *Yamato bunko*), he intentionally represented characters and landscapes in different ways. Specifically, in *Jitsuroku*, his illustrations feature characters with wavy curled hair. Their clothing is adorned with wave patterns, and headgear is wrapped in fabric with flowing ends. The buildings are supported by round columns and curved ceilings, with unusually decorated exteriors. Furthermore, the trees resemble palms or banana plants (Figure 8). The use of shading also creates dimensionality, which differs from the classical Japanese painting style. These stylistic choices indicate a deliberate departure from traditional visual codes for foreignness, resulting in a distinct, recognizable aesthetic for the narrative setting and characters.

[10] Although multiple artists were responsible for the illustrations in *Yamato bunko*, this article focuses primarily on the scene depicting Gotamī's malice toward Maya. The volume in which this episode appears attributes the illustration to Ichiyōsai Toyokuni or Utagawa Kunisada I.



Figure 8: Buildings in *Jitsuroku* (Reitei & Hashimoto, 1854)

Despite the unusual visual presentation that differs from immediately recognizable Chinese- or Japanese-style settings, a comparison between Sadahide's other *Yokohama-e* works, such as the illustrations in *Yokohama kaikō kenbun-shi* (1862–1865),[11] and the characters in *Jitsuroku*, such as Gotamī, originally depicted as Indian, reveal only partial correspondence. Thus, *Jitsuroku*'s characters and landscapes emphasize realism and fidelity to the Indian narrative setting compared with other works. Nevertheless, they do not entirely match imagery presented as Indian in Sadahide's *Yokohama-e* (Figure 9). It remains uncertain whether this divergence is due to the work's distinctive genre (a Buddhist theme), which follows a long-established visual and narrative tradition, leaving some residual pictorial codes intact. For instance, the partition beside Gotamī resembles furniture commonly found in Chinese or Japanese paintings. However, *Jitsuroku*'s visual codes depart from traditional depictions of foreigners, while its textual content attempts to provide more accurate information. As noted in the preface, *Jitsuroku* is particularly distinctive in correcting previously erroneous details. Before presenting the main Buddhist narrative, the book includes a schematic of Shakya lineage and enumerates 73 source texts and sutras cited as references.



Figure 9: An Indian woman and an Indian man in *Yokohama kaikō kenbun-shi* (Hashimoto, 1862–1865)

This effort to present the Buddha's biography accurately parallels *Miyo no hikari*, which Auerback (2016) identifies as a development in Japanese biographies that portray the Buddha as an exemplar. This work excised episodes that deviated from the sutras added during Japanization, such as Gotamī's malicious intent

[11] Six illustrated volumes introducing Yokohama include depictions of the townscape and various foreigners, mostly Europeans and Americans, although a few images of Indians are included.

toward Maya. *Jitsuroku* demonstrates a similar effort to correct and faithfully present the narrative: it provides numerous cited sources and includes more realistic illustrations. However, it does not remove supplemental episodes, such as Gotamī's hostile intentions toward Maya. Therefore, *Jitsuroku* is considered a transitional biography, situated between Auerback's categories (2): the Buddha as a local hero and (3): the Buddha as an exemplar. Moreover, it demonstrates the evolution of visual codes for foreigners, moving from conventional Chinese-style depictions of people and landscapes toward an increased focus on realism. This transformation reflects developments in the mid-19th century, when artists had increased exposure to people from diverse foreign nationalities, which in turn influenced their depiction of foreign subjects in Buddhist-themed illustrations.

4. CONCLUSION

In early-modern Japanese biographies of the Buddha, his maternal aunt Gotamī appears in one of two main forms. Traditional accounts portray Gotamī as the younger sister who cares lovingly for Prince Siddhartha after Maya's death, and eventually becomes the first bhikṣuṇī. Yet, another narrative emerged between the mid-17th and 19th centuries, casting her as the jealous elder sister. In the latter pattern, she plots against Maya but ultimately repents and becomes the first bhikṣuṇī. This shift aligns with Japanese familial notions, in which elder sisters held greater authority, thereby making Gotamī's jealousy more plausible. Moreover, the use of serpents to symbolize her envy reflects long-standing Edo-period serpentine codes and motifs that linked women with jealousy and resentment. Further, while foreign figures, including Indians, were initially depicted through only Chinese visual codes, Gotamī's depiction shifted toward greater realism. This change paralleled a broader trend that by the mid-19th century, artists increasingly portrayed foreigners with realism, reflecting Japan's increasingly direct exposure to diverse foreigners. These narratives and visual adaptations also explain Maya's death which was debated at the time whether it was related to Prince Siddhartha's birth. The visual depictions of Gotamī's jealousy and eventual repentance highlight the Buddha's spiritual authority: even women affected by the three unwholesome roots can attain ordination, enlightenment, and rebirth in the pure land.

Whether textual narrative or visual art, presentation of content relies on "codes" that are intelligible to the creator and audience. These codes emerge from, interact with, and respond to contemporary, as well as shared societal ideas and cultural contexts. Without such shared understanding, neither party could fully interpret the embedded content. From this discussion, the study demonstrates that beyond social context, the artist or creator's personal experience plays a key role in constructing these codes. Specifically, codes derived from prior experiences, such as *ukiyo-e* motifs or conventions for depicting foreigners, allowed audiences who were familiar with such codes to recognize and interpret them. Consequently, cultural contexts and artists' experiences produce a communicative code that enables meaning-making, leading to a positive reception from audiences and ensuring that the content is understood and accepted.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author gratefully acknowledges the Center for Japanese Language and Culture, the University of Osaka, for providing the opportunity to access the university's research facilities and its library resources from July 1 to August 2, 2024.

DECLARATION

1. Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

2. Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the author conducted all research activities—including the literature review, conceptualization, data collection, analysis, and preparation of the original manuscript in Thai—without the use of AI. ChatGPT and Gemini were used as consultation tools for translating the manuscript from Thai into English and to perform an initial grammar check. No AI tools were used to generate or modify any images included in this publication. The translated manuscript subsequently underwent professional language editing by Enago. The author then thoroughly reviewed, revised, and verified the accuracy, integrity, and consistency of the English translation with the original Thai manuscript. The author accepts full responsibility for the final content of this publication.

3. Data availability statement
All primary sources and historical materials analyzed in this study are described in the text and listed in the References section.

4. Ethics statement
This study did not involve human participants, human data, or biological samples. All data analyzed were derived from archival research and a review of published literature.

5. Funding
This research received no external funding.

6. Contributor Role Taxonomy (CRediT)
Namsai Tantisuk: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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