

A Manga-translation of Visual Commentary on *Tsurezuregusa*

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Abstract

In the Edo time, Kenko (1283-1358)'s *Tsurezuregusa* (Essays in Idleness) became a classical masterpiece. Numerous volumes of commentary were produced and published, and the entire work was thoroughly examined and deeply appreciated. Although received rather less attention, among the commentary there was a significant approach in pictures. Certain commentary books even provided pictures to most all of the sections in the original title. It did not only enrich the long and abundant visual tradition, but also left us a valuable means to read and understand this medieval classic today. Applying manga as a visual language, I have translated such visual commentary for today's readers. This paper gives an overview on the visual commentary and explains the design, the creation and the publication of this project.

Keywords

Tsurezuregusa, *Nagusamigusa*, *Tsurezuregusa Esho*, visual commentary, 4-panel comics, animated GIF file

1. *Tsurezuregusa* and Its Visual Commentary

Kenko (1283-1358)'s *Tsurezuregusa* (Essays in Idleness) is a masterpiece of classical literature from the Kamakura period (1185-1333). It highly represents the achievement of the intellectuals in the medieval time, provides a window for late readers to look back the social value and thoughts of the time past.

In the Edo period (1600-1868), from its early time in the early 17th century, *Tsurezuregusa* became a title of popular reading. Not only the text of the essay, but also numerous volumes of commentary were produced and published, the entire work was thoroughly examined and deeply appreciated. Among them, although received rather less attention, there was a great approach to Kenko's writing in pictures. It formed a rather unique path in the development, namely pictures to carry out the stories, situations and visual settings of each section in *Tsurezuregusa* were first created and published in woodprint books, then in the next stage, many of those compositions were carefully adapted into other visual formats, such as scrolls, paper screens, hanging scrolls and sketch books. This group of works, especially its inner-exchange and literary accomplishment have just started to receive certain academic discussions in recent years. (1)

Under the rapid development of the digital environment, Edo's commentary books are among the group of materials to be digitized and released online for a public use. This provides a huge benefit for researchers who otherwise would face a difficulty to access to it. The following is a short list of 6 representative titles of *Tsurezuregusa*'s commentary with pictures and they are available online.

- a. *Nagusamigusa*, Matsunaga Teitoku, 1652. Waseda University Library (<https://kotenseki.nijl.ac.jp/biblio/100191549/viewer>)
- b. *Tosho Tsurezuregusa Esho*, 1690. National Diet Library (<http://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/2536039>)
- c. *Tsurezuregusa Esho*, Namura Johaku, 1691. National Institute of Japanese Literature (<https://kotenseki.nijl.ac.jp/biblio/200016349/viewer>)
- d. *Tsurezuregusa Weiri*, Umemura Ichirobee, 1717. Waseda University Library (http://www.wul.waseda.ac.jp/kotenseki/html/bunko30/bunko30_e0104/index.html)
- e. *Ehon Tsurezuregusa*, Nishikawa Sukenobu, 1740. National Diet Library (<http://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/2534221>)
- f. *Tsurezuregusa Eiri*, Sanboku Injin, 1812. Waseda University Library (http://www.wul.waseda.ac.jp/kotenseki/html/bunko30/bunko30_e0106/index.html)

Let us take one example to see how the same story was depicted in these titles. In this case, a composition from an early publication was basically inherited, meanwhile it was slowly enriched by adding elements from the story into the scene.

The section in discussion is No. 104. It is an elegant episode of a love story. An anonymous court noble visited a lady in a hidden remote location. Evoked barks of a dog, his visit was met politely by a maid. The servants accompanied the noble and the cart carried the journey were properly arranged, and the couple spend quiet time until the dawn. Figure 1 shows the pictures from each of the six commentary titles. (Fig. 1)

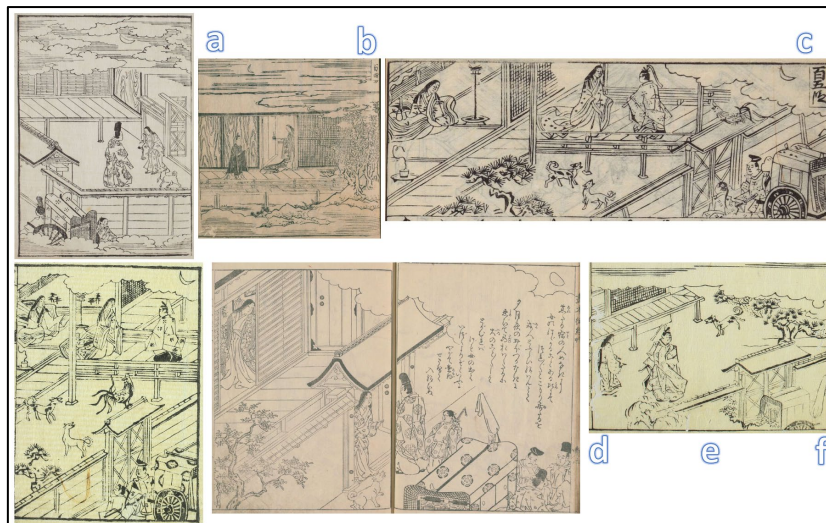


Fig. 1 Pictures on the section No. 104 (a. *Nagusamigusa*, v.4, p.7a, b. *Tosho Tsurezuregusa Esho*, v.3, p.14a, c. *Tsurezuregusa Esho*, v.1, p.48b, d. *Tsurezuregusa Weiri*, p.62a, e. *Ehon Tsurezuregusa*, v.2, p.8b, f. *Tsurezuregusa Eiri*, v.3, p.4a)

The core elements of the composition are the visiting noble and the maid to respond. These two figures are found in all six pictures. In *Nagusamegusa*, the earliest version of the commentary, there are a dog in the yard and two servants beside a cart out the door. In *Tsurezuregusa Esho*, the lady appeared at the far end of the house, even more, a rooster which never appeared at the writing was added to the top of the door, indicating the arrival of the dawn. This formed the largest version of this composition. However, this development included a different time -- the evening when the noble arrived, and the morning when he left. This fact made a small picture became complicated. In later time, the rooster disappeared in *Ehon Tsurezuregusa* and *Tsurezuregusa Eiri*.

Tsurezuregusa is formed by a total of 244 sections, some are as short as a few words, and some are extremely long. To this, the Edo commentary provided pictures to about 90% of the sections. In particular, *Nagusamigusa* had pictures to 157 sections, (2) and *Tsurezuregusa Esho* had pictures to 213

sections. These two titles well represent the achievement of visual commentary, and my work of reading and interpreting of this group of materials set a focus thoroughly on them, *Nagusamigusa* and *Tsurezuregusa Esho*.

2. A Story of a Priest at the Ninnaji

Section No. 53 in *Tsurezuregusa* became an enlightening example on the way of visual commentary to the original writing. First, let us read the entire story. It is comparatively long, but highly enjoyable.

This story too is about a priest at the Ninnaji. A farewell party was being offered for an acolyte about to become a priest, and the guests were all making merry when one of the priests, drunk and carried away by high spirits, picked up a three-legged cauldron nearby, and clamped it over his head. It caught on his nose, but he flattened it down, pulled the pot over his face, and danced out among the others, to the great amusement of everyone.

After the priest had been dancing for a while he tried to pull the pot off, but it refused to be budged. A pall fell over the gathering, and people wondered blankly what to do. They tried one thing and another, only succeeding in bruising the skin around his neck. The blood streamed down, and the priest's neck became so swollen that he had trouble breathing. The others tried to split the pot, but it was not easily broken and the reverberations inside were unbearable. Finally, when all else had failed, they threw a thin garment over the legs of the pot, which stuck up like horns, and, giving the priest a stick to lean on, led him off by the hand to a doctor in Kyoto. People they met on the way stared at this apparition with unconstrained astonishment.

The priest presented a most extraordinary sight as he sat inside the doctor's office facing him. Whatever he said came out as an unintelligible, muffled roar. "I can't find any similar case in my medical books," said the doctor, "and there aren't any oral traditions either." The priest had no choice but to return to the Ninnaji, where his close friends and his aged mother gathered at his bedside, weeping with grief, though the priest himself probably could not hear them.

At this point somebody suggested, "Wouldn't it be better at least to save his life, even if he loses his nose and ears? Let's try pulling the pot off with all our strength." They stuffed straw around the priest's neck to protect it from the metal, then pulled hard enough to tear off his head. Only holes were left to show where his ears and nose had been, but the pot was removed. They barely managed to save the priest's life, and for a long time afterwards he was gravely ill.

Essays in Idleness, P.46-47 (3)



Fig. 2 Picture on section No. 53 (*Tsurezuregusa Esho*, v.1, p.26a, 26b)

This story is formed with four stages. First, the poor priest, in order to cheer up the party, put a three-legged cauldron into his head, but only soon found out that it was impossible to remove it. Then, with help by his colleagues, they visited a doctor in the capital, but had no luck. Now, even his mother appeared, but their voices had difficulty to reach the priest. Finally, someone decided that the life should matter the most, so they pull out the cauldron in force, to the extreme that “only holes were left to show where his ears and nose had been”. Nonetheless the priest survived.

Figure 2 indicates how a set of pictures describe the above dramatic development in *Tsurezuregusa Esho*. (Fig. 2)

This set of pictures are structured along the progress of the event, focused on four scenes that took place in the party, the doctor’s office, the bedside and the temple hall. The four scenes are carefully divided by wave lines and inserted text, each formed a clear and telling story moment.

The structure of the pictures, along with its comic touch of the drawing, gave a hint related in contemporary comics, especially “4-panel comics”. Formed with four frames, often with a vertical layout, this comics style is widely and frequently inserted into newspapers and magazines. Pictures from *Tsurezuregusa Esho* have already prepared enough contents, and a simple cut and paste thus easily bring up a fantastic product of a 4-panel comics. The only need is to add a title to this work. The choice here briefly means “A Drunken Priest”. (Fig. 3)

In *Tsurezuregusa Esho*, it is possible to find a few more examples with a similar four-stage composition, such as sections No. 87, No. 115 and No. 162. These three sections all have two small frames and one big frame, but the big one could be read as two parts without a clear dividing line.

The temptation to read a set of pictures along the development of the described event, and to arrange it based on the layout of the modern comics thus provided a significant path to an approach to the reading, interpreting and presenting the Edo visual commentary to contemporary readers.

3. Translation in Manga

Taking 4-panel comics as a template to retell the old pictures opened a new door to the approach of Edo commentary. It soon became obvious that there is no need to limit to those pictures which could be considered as four stages. In fact, there is a great possibility to read one scene from different angles and portions, to divide the reading process into a few steps. Specifically, in order to meet the expectations of a 4-panel comics which is highly familiar to modern readers, it is considerable to break a reading into four stages.

We can take the following section as an example. The section No. 11 states a short experience of a journey of discovering a hidden hut. The carefully arranged writing described a moss-covered path, a



Fig. 3 4-panel comics: “A Drunken Priest”

water pipe, chrysanthemum and red maple leaves on a holy-water shelf, then a tangerine tree and a forbidding fence (Refer to *Essays in Idleness*, p. 11). *Nagusamigusa* provided the following picture for this section. (Fig. 4)

This picture thoroughly depicted all the elements from the original writing. A reader could follow the main character in the middle of the scene to walk through from the corner of top-right, experience a series of discoveries by following the author: crossing the far path, realized a hidden hut, came cross a holy-water shelf as a sign of a residence, and finally realized the fence with a nameless disappointment. This process was visually prepared in the picture, and it could be adapted into four continuing frames. The switch of the focuses in each stage eventually guides the sight for a reader, to interpret the visual information and to provide an assistance to the understanding of the picture and the writing. It eventually better assists the readers in the contemporary time. (Fig. 5)

The above approach could be described as a process of a translation. It is to arrange Edo pictures into a style of modern comics, in this case it is the style of 4-panel comics, and to invite readers to apply their knowledge and experience on that visual media toward pictures from hundreds of years ago. Here, manga plays a role of an expression to link classical materials to the contemporary people. As the concept of translation is to apply one language into another, such as “to translate in English”, “to translate in French”, thus it is only natural to create the concept of “to translate in manga”.

A manga-translation became a way to present the visual commentary of *Tsurezuregusa* to readers today.



Fig. 4 Picture of section No. 11
(*Nagusamigusa*, v.1, p.25a)

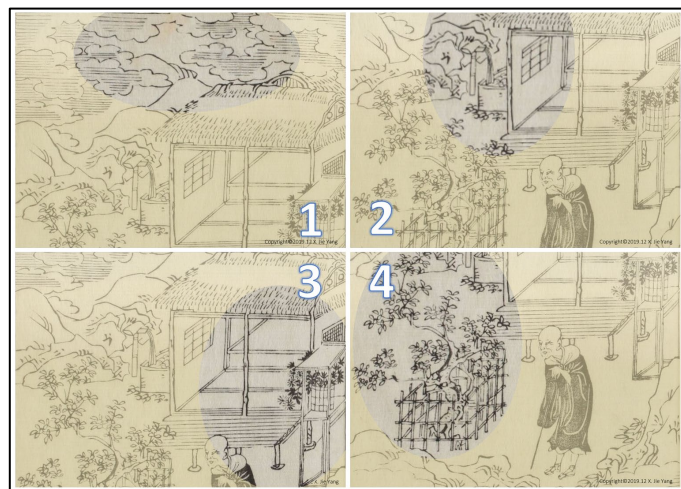


Fig. 5 Picture of section No. 11, arranged into four frames

4. GIF Moving Picture, a Digital Design

While established the approach to the Edo commentary, the next stage becomes to turn it to solid a product, to publish it, and to engage it to real readers. Fortunately, the current digital environment prepared a practical means for the crucial task in this development: the publication.

The use of a digital platform brought in a number of requirements for the design of the outcomes. They particularly include a limit of space within a display screen, a seek for a small size in order to save the resource, and to efficiently apply the feature of a moving display. Based on considerations of all these conditions, the format of an animated GIF picture became the final choice. Instead to line up four frames like a common 4-panel comics, the outcome occupies the space of one frame, and keeps turning and to

replacing one frame by the other, rotates in the right order. At the meantime, to enhance the content of the comics, a highlight was added to each frame. Furthermore, the corresponding text from the original writing and its translation in modern Japanese are given to each frame.

The make of animated GIF files was arranged with a principle of an easy and efficient creation. In particular, the preparation of each frame, from cutting off the right portion, providing a highlight and adding text, was entirely done with PowerPoint. Next, combine such frames into one GIF file with a free software, Giam.

A total of 116 sections from *Tsurezuregusa* were selected and produced into animated GIF comics, used pictures from *Nagusamigusa* and *Tsurezuregusa Esho*. The outcomes were published along they were produced at personal accounts at Facebook and Twitter, briefly released two files a week since Dec. 2019, and completed on Jan. 14, 2021. (4) In addition, for an easy access to the entire body of this work, all GIF files are uploaded into a Facebook webpage, under the title of “Reading *Tsurezuregusa* with Visual Commentary”. (Fig. 6)



Fig. 6 Facebook site: Reading *Tsurezuregusa* with Visual Commentary (<https://www.facebook.com/chushakue/>)

At the current time, this set of GIF files are in Japanese only. However, it could be adapted into other languages. An English version is under a preparation, and the author is looking for possible cooperation from other languages in the future.

5. Classics in the Contemporary Time

The long and rich literary tradition left us abundant treasures, they are inviting for discoveries and appreciations. Among them, visual materials belong to a group under less attention, especially those applied in a process to assist the understanding of old writings, such as visual commentary in this discussion. They tended to be considered as a secondary resource, rarely received academic approach. In most cases, the very existence of this type of materials was frequently overlooked. Obviously, this situation has to be changed.

One early step for such a change is to make these unpopular, yet highly attractive materials accessible for common readers. This requests researchers to jointly contribute their knowledge to translate and to interpret the materials, eventually lead to a wide reading and deep appreciation. The current “manga-translation” is a small temptation toward this goal.

The journey has just started. The value and the attractiveness of classical works are what encourage us for a continuing effort, toward a better understanding of the past.

Notes:

- (1) Shimauchi, Yuko. “The Research of *Tsurezuregusa* drawn for the Picture” (in Japanese). *Journal of the University of the Air* 22 (2005): 132-121. Siode, Kimiko. Shimauchi, Yuko. “The Method of *Tsurezuregusa-escho* as a Commentary” (in Japanese). *Journal of the University of the Air* 33 (2016): 158-145.
- (2) Siode, Kimiko. “On Illustrations of Nagusamigusa: Pictorialization of *Tsurezuregusa*” (in Japanese). *Memoirs of the Nara University* 42 (2014): 264-234.
- (3) Keene, Donald (translation). *Essays in Idleness, The Tsurezuregusa of Kenko*. Columbia University Press, 1998.
- (4) The following blog entries in Japanese described a few related topics to this project. “The origin of 4-panel comics” (<https://note.com/xjieyang/n/n140415115a31>), “4-Panel in GIF” (<http://emaki-japan.blogspot.com/2019/12/gif.html>), “Facebook page” (<http://emaki-japan.blogspot.com/2020/01/fb.html>), “Completed 100” (http://emaki-japan.blogspot.com/2020/11/blog-post_21.html), “Reading *Tsurezuregusa* in pictures” (http://emaki-japan.blogspot.com/2021/01/blog-post_16.html), “A girl in Inaba” (http://emaki-japan.blogspot.com/2020/02/blog-post_22.html), “Demon cat!” (<https://note.com/xjieyang/n/n2a01b4a35133>).