Chapter 4

Being a Brat: The Ethics of Child Disobedience in the Edo Period

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Flip through print artist Utagawa Kuniyoshi’s (1797–1861) Kyōkun zen’aku kozō zoroe (Moral Guidelines for Good and Naughty Apprentices, 1857) or peruse Andō Hiroshige’s (1797–1858) Shōgei keiko zukai (Pictures of Training in the Various Arts, c. 1830s) and discover a scourge of misbehaving youth. Delve further into mid- and late Edo period print media and find a veritable pan-demic of child disobedience. The breadth and magnitude of actual youth rebellion during this period, David R. Ambaras affirms, was such that “violent, larcenous, or dissolute youths [were] prominent fixtures in the early modern urban landscape.”1 Child mischief is unremarkable in itself, but given the rigid moralism grounding education during this period, the appreciation it garnered within visual culture seems remarkable indeed. Was this permissiveness reflective of actual public attitudes, and if so can it be connected to attitudes about children and childrearing generally? Evidence of a transmitted, learned ethic of child misconduct suggests that it can.

The mere suggestion of rampant child unruliness in the Edo period defies commonly held perceptions of Japanese children. It contradicts the discipline and stringency advocated by parenting manuals, and challenges testimonies by European visitors, all of whom praise the efficacy of Japanese parenting. Invariably, these testimonies note a close, amiable rapport between parents and children. In 1637, the Dutch trader Francis Caron wrote that

when [children] cry [parents] show a wonderful patience in quieting them…This method succeeds so well, that Japanese children ten or twelve years old, behave with all the discretion and propriety of grown people.2

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“The Chastisement of children is very moderate,” Deshima resident Carl Peter Thunberg (1743–1828) affirmed over a century later. “I very seldom heard them rebuked or scolded, and hardly ever flogged or beaten.”3 In early Meiji, Western visitors commented on the angelic temperaments of Japanese children, and the docile, feminine nature of boys in particular. Children were so well behaved, they reported, that childhood mischief was virtually absent from Meiji society.4

This study challenges these perceptions by positing child disobedience as a prevalent social issue during the Edo period. It begins by examining celebratory depictions of childhood misconduct within a diverse corpus of print media. The ubiquity of gleeful, mischievous children in print suggests the prominence of youth deviance as a social reality, and a general understanding of disobedience as normative, even desirable, behavior. We then consider the extent to which the incidence of child mischief depicted in visual culture reflected actual practice. The chapter next draws connections between these phenomena and childrearing, discussing how hands-off approaches to childrearing among commoners afforded children a surprising level of autonomy and behavioral latitude. It concludes by discussing rebellion in terms of ritual: as a set of learned, performed, and socially stabilizing practices. This perspective explains the transmission of a qualified ethic of disobedience from commoner adults to adolescents to children.

**Bad Learners: Naughty Children in Print Media**

Given the diversity of stories, plays, prints, games, and poetry produced in the Edo period we are not surprised to find miscellaneous representations of misbehaving children. Much more noteworthy is the rarity of pictures that condemn or otherwise attempt to deter misbehavior. This corpus of works instead appears to create a cultural space for archetypal modes of disobedience. Isoda Koryūsai’s (1735–1790) print *Inu ni matagaru dōshi* (Child Atop a Dog, c. 1770s) of a toddler pinning a dog and yanking its ears, for example, delivers no ideological injunctions against animal cruelty. Rather, it depicts merely the charm of a naughty child at play.5 The delight derived from inflicting wanton harm, evidently, imbues the child with an attractive innocence. In *Edo meisho*  

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3 *Ibid.* These testimonies evoke Takeo Doi’s influential (and controversial) explication of Japanese childrearing in terms of attachment theory and dependence (*amae*).
