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Form, Iconicity and the Pictographic Heart Sutra

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with introducing iconic pictograph systems that were created by Buddhist priests more than three hundred years ago to help illiterate people recite important Buddhist sutras. These iconic pictograph systems did not imitate Chinese characters or their meanings, nor did they utilize the available *kana* system of phonographs. Instead, pictographs were created that made use of Japanese homophones related to everyday objects, such as household utensils, farming tools and body parts, as well as making use of various metaphors, and even puns, resulting in pictographs that are at once humorous and effective. The present paper will first discuss the importance of form in Japanese culture, introduce the Heart Sutra and the notion of mantra, and then illustrate how the pictographs could induce the desired pronunciation for reciting the Heart Sutra. And finally, there is a brief discussion of how this pictograph-induced recitation of the sutra could be mantra-like in producing a calm meditative state.

Keywords: iconicity, pictograph, mantra, sutra

形，アイコン性と絵心経

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to introduce to English readers the iconic pictographs that were created almost three hundred years ago to help illiterate Japanese people recite an important Buddhist sutra. But before discussing these pictographs, it will be beneficial to first emphasize the importance of form in Japanese society. For those who visit Japan for the first time, Japanese society often appears to be quite formal. Another way to express this sentiment is to say that form appears to be very important in Japanese society. The form of how things are done, how things are said, as well as what is done and said, is important. Learning the formalities of performing properly, learning the formalities of speaking properly, are prerequisites for becoming a functioning adult member of Japanese society.

To give a very simple example, from an early age, Japanese children learn that at meal time they should say *itadakimasu* (a polite verb meaning ‘to receive’) before beginning to eat. Everyone, all over Japan, should begin a meal this way. And when finished, everyone should say *go-chishoo-sama-deshita* (a noun, with attached honorifics and tense marker, meaning ‘a feast’). Even if not everyone thinks the meal was a delicious feast, they should still say that it was. Saying so makes it so, or at least gives the formal impression that it was delicious. And so, in Japanese society, we can say that in many instances performance can make things happen, or at least give the impression that the desired outcome has occurred. The importance of form in Japanese society carries over into all areas of human interaction, including religious activities. Consider Kasahara’s (2001: 47) description of the introduction of Buddhism into Japan some 1,500 years ago.

In the middle of the sixth century, foreign “deities” appeared in Japan, together with a profound, complex philosophical system. When Buddhism entered Japan, its “eighty-four thousand buddhas” were conveyed from the Korean peninsula and the Chinese mainland to the Japanese archipelago. Among the Japanese, it was especially powerful for members of the imperial court who actively encouraged the acceptance and indigenization of Buddhism, bringing the “deities” into the world of the Japanese divinities. It was not that people fully understood the spiritual essence of Buddhism or its elaborate philosophy. Rather, they looked on Buddhism as a facet of continental civilization that had contributed to the cultural advancement of China and Korea and that, moreover, promised direct, practical benefits to its believers and practitioners. Thus Buddhism was first understood more in terms of form than of content.

This, then, is the environment into which Buddhism first blossomed in Japan. At that time, Buddhism was thought to be one of the catalysts for cultural advancement, and “greatly impressed the Japanese with its beautiful rituals, elegantly inscribed sutras, monumental temples and pagodas, and splendid statues” (Kasahara 2001: 47). It is one of these elegant sutras and the Japanese tendency to

be impressed by, and even put emphasis on, form and performance, that is our point of departure for the following discussion of iconicity. Section two will introduce the concept of *mantra*, and an English translation the Heart Sutra. Section three will briefly discuss the sounds of the Japanese language, present the Heart Sutra in *kanji*, and explain some of the iconic pictographs used for inducing the recitation of the sutra. The final section will suggest a possible goal of the pictograph-induced performance of the sutra.

2. Mantras and the Heart Sutra

As stated above, religious societies in Japan, like the rest of Japanese society, considered form to be very important. Of course this is not something limited just to Japanese religions. Religions all over the world consider their formal rituals to be an integral part of their traditions. By extension, although the meaning of a prayer is of course important, in addition, for some prayers, even the sounds of the prayers, especially in the case of mantras, are thought to be essential. Consider, for example, what Joseph Campbell (Campbell and B. Moyers, 1988: 286) has to say about the Hindu/Buddhist mantra-like incantation *aum* (or *om*).

“AUM” is a word that represents to our ears that sound of the energy of the universe of which all things are manifestations. You start in the back of the mouth “ahh”, and then “oo”, you fill the mouth, and “mm” closes the mouth. When you pronounce this properly, all vowel sounds are included in the pronunciation. AUM. Consonants are here regarded simply as interruptions of the essential vowel sound. All words are thus fragments of AUM, just as all images are fragments of the Form of forms. AUM is a symbolic sound that puts you in touch with that resounding being that is the universe.

This is considerable iconic/semantic weight for a single word. It is in this way, however, that the sounds of words can be considered to be essential, and the *act* of reciting/performing a mantra-like prayer or holy verse becomes as important as, or even more important than, *understanding* what is being said. That of course is what mantras are, a series of sounds, that when repeated, are capable of creating some kind of spiritual transformation, or as Conze (1988: 124) claims, they “are incantations which effect wonders when uttered.” In a way, the sutra that is the focus of the present paper, the Heart Sutra, is mantra-like in that its mere recitation/performance is considered to be integral for bringing about a special spiritual state (see the final section of this paper).

Of course, the content of the Heart Sutra is also important. The Heart Sutra was first originally transcribed in Sanskrit (over two thousand years ago, after the Buddha had died), and later translated into Chinese, and eventually into Japanese. It has also been translated into English by many (for

example, Gyatso 2005: 59–61, Yanagizawa 2004: 33–41, Conze 1954: 153), but for the purposes of the present paper I will use my own English translation. Notice that in the English translation below, the mantra toward the end of the sutra, since it is the sounds themselves that are important, is left untranslated (Conze (1954: 153), however, translates the mantra as “Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone altogether beyond, O what an awakening, all hail!”).

The Heart (of Perfect Wisdom that has gone beyond) Sutra

Kanjizai Bosatsu,

Moving freely in the depths of perfect wisdom

That has gone beyond

Shed the light of perfection

On the five elements

And found them to be empty

And thus overcame suffering

And said, Sharishi,

Form is emptiness,

Emptiness is form

Form is none other than emptiness

Emptiness is none other than form

The same is true of feelings, perceptions, impulses, consciousness

Listen, Sharishi,

All these things are emptiness

They are not existing nor non-existing

They are not pure nor impure

They do not increase nor decrease

So in this emptiness

There is no form, no feelings

No perceptions, no impulses, no consciousness

No eyes, no ears, no nose

No tongue, no body, no mind

No form, no sounds, no smells

No tastes, no touch, no thoughts

There is no world, no world of eyes, no world of mind

There is no ignorance nor no non-ignorance

There is no decay nor death

There is no non-decay nor non-death.

There is no suffering, no desire, the origin of suffering

There is no enlightenment
There is no attainment of enlightenment
One seeking enlightenment must depend on Perfect Wisdom
That person's heart is free from obstacles
And being free from obstacles
There is no fear.
Unaffected by illusions and dream-like delusions
Realizing Nirvana
All Buddhas of past, present and future
Depend on Perfect Wisdom
Attaining the correct Universal Wisdom
Realizing the Perfect Wisdom is
The Perfect Mantra, the mantra of Perfect Wisdom
The Perfect Mantra
It can eliminate all suffering
The mantra of Perfect Wisdom is
GYATEI GYATEI HARAGYATEI
HARASOOGYATEI
BOJISOWAKA
The Heart Sutra

.
Commenting on the meaning of the Heart Sutra, Conze (2008: 11) claims that it is “one of the sublimest spiritual documents of mankind” centering on “the dominant idea of emptiness.” A further analysis of the meaning emptiness could lead to a very long discussion (for those interested in thorough analyses, see, for example, Conze 2008, Gyatso 2005, Lopez 1988), so we will now leave the consideration of the meaning of emptiness in the sutra, and in the following section consider its form, that is, the Chinese characters, or *kanji*, that it is written in (for those in China and Japan), the Japanese sounds that are used in reciting it (for those in Japan), and then consider how these sounds can be represented in iconic pictographs intended to induce the recitation/performance of the sutra among illiterate readers.

3. The sounds of Japanese, *kanji*, and the pictograph Heart Sutra

The Japanese language is phonologically a rather simple language. There are only five vowels, and a little more than twenty consonants. The writing system, however, is something quite different. There are thousands of *kanji*, and two syllabary systems (now consisting of forty-six syllable symbols each);

般若心經
 揭諦揭諦波羅揭諦波羅揭諦波羅揭諦
 一切苦真不虛故說般若波羅蜜多
 提故知般若波羅蜜多是大神呪是大明呪是無上呪是無等等呪能除
 倒夢想究竟涅槃三世諸佛依般若波羅蜜多故得阿耨多羅三藐三菩提
 提薩埵依般若波羅蜜多故心無罣礙無所畏懼遠離一切顛
 明眼耳鼻舌身意無色香味觸法無眼界乃至無意識界無明亦無
 諸法空相不生不滅不垢不淨不增不減是故空中無色無受想行識無
 色不異空空不異色色即是空空即是色受想行識亦復如是舍利子是
 觀自在菩薩行深般若波羅蜜多時照見五蘊皆空度一切苦厄舍利子
 摩訶般若波羅蜜多心經

The Heart Sutra in Chinese Characters

hiragana, a rather flowing script, and *katakana*, a more squared-off script. Above is a rendering of the Heart Sutra in *kanji*, with phonetic prompts in the form of small *hiragana* to the right of the *kanji*.

It should now be quite obvious that for someone who could not read *kanji* or *hiragana*, there is nothing about the written characters of the above sutra that is iconically transparent, and it is also “important to realize that throughout much of the history of Buddhism, few Buddhists could read Buddhist texts” (Lopez 2013: 2). And so, about three hundred ago, in the northeastern part of Japan, some Buddhist priests, trying to devise a method that would enable illiterate Buddhists to learn to recite the Heart Sutra, created a number of iconic pictograph systems. There had already existed some pictographs that were used in calendars and other notices (Watanabe 2012), and the priests were able to build on these pictographs to devise systems for teaching the recitation of the Heart Sutra. First, let us provide the romanization of the pronunciation for the Heart Sutra *kanji* (and *hiragana*) above.

Maka Hannya Haramita Shingyoo

Kan ji zai bo zatsu gyoo jin hannya hara mitta ji shoo ken go on kai kuu do issai kuu yaku sharishi shiki fu i kuu kuu fu i shiki shiki soku ze kuu kuu soku ze shiki ju soo gyoo shiki yaku bu nyo ze

sharishi ze sho hoo kuu soo fu shoo fu metsu fu ku fu joo fu zoo fu gen ze ko kuu chuu mu shiki mu
ju soo gyoo shiki mu gen ni bi zesshin i mu shiki shoo koo mi soku hoo mu gen kai nai shi mu shiki
kai mu mu myoo yaku mu mu myoo jin nai shi mu roo shi yaku mu roo shi jin mu ku shuu metsu
doo mu chi yaku mu toku mu sho toku ku bo dai satta e hannya hara mitta ko shin mu kei ge mu
kei ge ko mu u ku fu on ri issai ten doo mu soo kuu gyoo ne han san ze sho butsu e hannya hara
mitta ko toku a noku ta ra sanmyaku sanbo dai ko chi hannya hara mitta ze dai jin shu ze dai myoo
shu ze mu joo shu ze mu too too shuu noo jo issai ku shin jitsu fu ko ko setsu hannya hara mitta
shu soku setsu shu watsu gyatei gyatei hara gyatei hara soo gyatei bojiso waka hannya shingyoo

The recitation of the sounds represented in the romanization above is the goal of the iconic pictograph prompts developed by the Buddhist priests. Two of the better known pictograph systems for reciting the Heart Sutra are the Morioka version and the Tayama version. A detailed analysis of both pictograph versions of the Heart Sutra would be a book-length project (see Watanabe 2012 (in Japanese) for just such a book-length treatment), and so, due to the space limitations, we will discuss only a few short portions of these two pictograph sutra systems.

But first, an illustration the method used will be useful. Consider the following string of images: a clock with the *hour* hand circling the clock one time; a picture of a scene in which there is one location noted that is far away, and the another one that is *farther* away; and owl with a cartoon-like speech bubble coming out of its mouth, representing its *hoo* cry; an imitation of a work of *art*; a drawing of a container with an arrow pointing *in* it; a drawing of a stack of *hay*; and finally a representation of a automobile *van*. If we put these prompts together, we have:

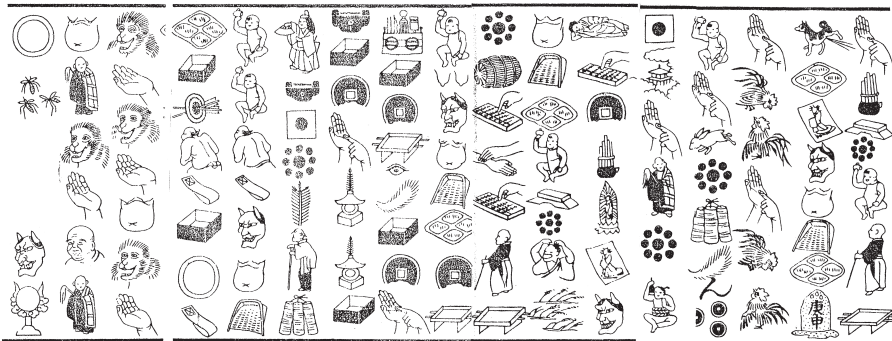
hour + farther + hoo + art + in + hay + van

As should be quite obvious, what we have now is a somewhat imperfect representation of the beginning of the Lord's Prayer:

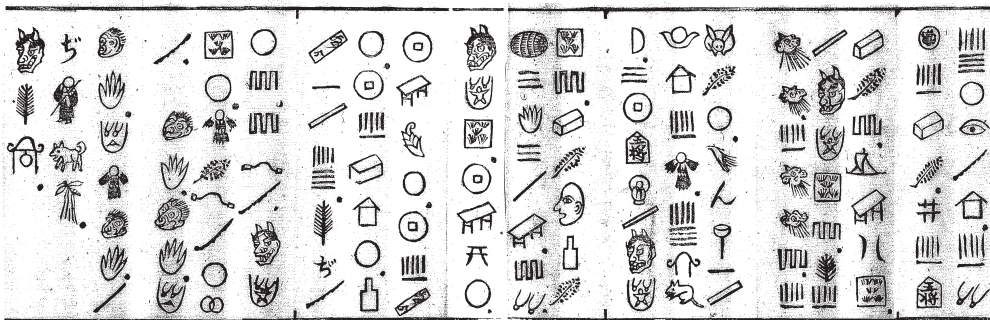
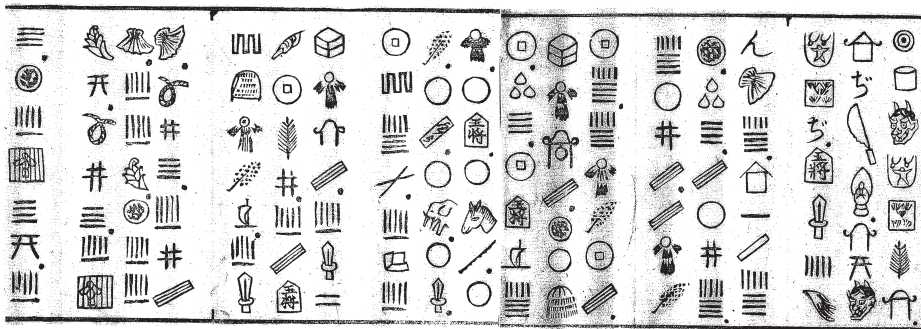
Our father who art in heaven

This, then, is the rebus-like method used to induce the performance of the Heart Sutra. The somewhat simpler sound system of the Japanese language makes for much more accurate representations of the desired sounds. Now let us consider the Morioka and Tayama versions of the pictograph Heart Sutra.

The pictograph sutras are read from top to bottom, and right to left. Therefore the Morioka version has a pot-like pictograph for its first symbol in the upper right-hand corner of the page, and the Tayama version has a target-like pictograph in its upper right-hand corner. In the following discussion, we will consider only the top-right-most vertical line of each of the sutras. Although this is a very small



The Morioka Version of the Pictograph Heart Sutra



The Tayama Version of the Pictograph Heart Sutra

proportion of the pictographs that appear in the sutras, these few pictographs should be sufficient for illustrating the method used. In the Morioka version, there are six pictographs in the top-right-most line, and in the Tayama version there are seven pictographs (Both appearing horizontally below, and for ease of illustration, are read from left to right.). The pronunciation for both of these lines is “*maka hannya hara mi ta shingyoo*”. We will consider the Morioka version first.

The Morioka Version



Maka

As should be somewhat apparent (for those who know what Japanese pots look like), the first pictograph is an upside-down cooking pot, intended to induce the pronunciation ‘maka’. The word for this kind of pot in Japanese, however, is *kama*, and in order to induce the pronunciation ‘maka’, the pot is thus depicted upside-down. The pictograph sutra therefore starts with a bit of humor.

Hannya

This pictograph represents a mask that is often called a *hannya* mask, apparently because of the craftsman famous for making these kinds of masks was named Hannya.

Hara

This pictograph is again a bit humorous in that it depicts a fat stomach. A stomach in Japanese is a *hara*, and so this pictograph should induce the pronunciation ‘hara’.

Mi

This is a pictograph of a woven scoop-like instrument used on farms for containing or shifting rice and other grains, and is called a *mi*.

Ta

This pictograph depicts a rice field, which can be pronounced *ta* in Japanese.

Shingyoo

This pictograph depicts a holy mirror, and *shin* is one pronunciation for ‘god’ or ‘holy’ in Japanese, and ‘mirror’ can be pronounced *gyoo*.

Now let us consider the Tayama version, which has a somewhat different way of representing the sounds.

The Tayama Version



Ma

This pictograph represents a target, which is pronounced *mato* in Japanese, and it is only the first syllable, ‘ma’ that is considered to be relevant here (since ancient times, pronouncing only the first syllable of a written symbol was also a convention when using *kanji* to write Japanese words).

Ka

This pictograph represents a spool-like instrument for thread that was made of animal hide, which is pronounced *kawa* in Japanese, and it is the first syllable ‘ka’ that is the relevant prompt here.

Hannya

This is again a representation of a mask.

Hara-mi

This pictograph is interesting because it is not only a representation of a ‘stomach’, but a ‘pregnant stomach’, that is it is a *hara* with a body (‘*mi*’) in it, and so *hara-mi*.

Ta

This is again a representation of a rice field.

Shin

This is a pictograph of a tree branch, which can be called a *shin*.

Gyoo

This is a pictograph of a building that can be referred to as a *gyoo*.

Like the rebus-like prompts for the *Our Father* prayer that were discussed above, we have something like the following prompts to induce the correct pronunciation of the first line of the sutra:

Morioka version

upside-down-pot + mask + stomach + scoop + rice-field + holy-mirror

maka hannya hara mi ta shin-gyoo

Tayama version

target + spool + mask + stomach-body + rice-field + branch + building

ma ka hannya hara-mi ta shin gyoo

It should be clear from what appears above that the different pictograph versions of the sutra use somewhat different prompts to induce the desired pronunciations, reinforcing the notion that the actual meaning of what these iconic pictographs themselves depict is unimportant.

4. Concluding Remarks

This paper began with a brief discussion of the importance of form in Japanese culture, and we saw that this notion could apparently carry over to religious activities as well, since the recitation of the Heart Sutra, with little or no reference to meaning, was possible with the iconic pictographs. In the previous section we saw that these pictographs were clearly iconic in that they resembled the real-world objects that they were intended to represent, and that by pronouncing the words for the objects that these pictographs represent, a string of sounds resembling the sounds produced when reciting the Heart Sutra could be produced.

But what could be the purpose of reciting the sutra without an understanding of the meaning? As suggested above, if the sutra has a mantra-like function, then perhaps its recitation alone could possibly, as Keenan and Keenan (2011: 51) state, “lead the practitioner into quiet meditation and deep concentration”. But what could this quiet meditative state be like? And should we even attempt to describe this state, given that in one sense, it is considered to be beyond verbal expression or intellectual understanding? Perhaps Collins (2013: 5), and his description of how some of the effects of reading poetry are beyond mere intellectual understanding may help us.

[O]ne can be overwhelmed by experiences that defy rational explanation. Consider Emily Dickinson’s poetic touchstone: “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. There is no other way.” For Ezra Pound the test was whether or not a set of words created in the reader what he called an “Image,” a verbal pattern capable of presenting “an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.” Such a pattern, he continues, “is the presentation of such a ‘complex’ instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art.”

What we could say about the Heart Sutra, then, is that it is a sound-complex, the performance of which can create/induce a special spiritual state in which there is a sense of liberation from time and space limits, and an image of oneness with the universe. Perhaps this is the goal of the recitation of the Heart Sutra, and perhaps this is what the iconic pictographs are in fact capable of inducing.

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