The Reading Cultures and Ethical Codes of Germany and Japan in the Eighteenth Century

Jeonghoon Yoo & Yong Hyun Kim

Abstract: Texts whose themes are contrary to the social norms and ethical codes of their era, or which disseminate what are seen as unwholesome ideas, have been in many societies prohibited from being published or sold, or even from being read. This paper will examine such cases in Germany and Japan in the 18th century. These texts challenged the ethical norms of their societies, which were based on the authority of the Enlightenment and Christianity and of the Shogunate, respectively. In particular, Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and Chikamatsu Monzaemon's *Sonezaki Shinju*, iconic works of the two countries in the 18th century, led to an increase in cases of the social phenomenon of suicide. Criticism of the role these texts played in inspiring these acts and of what was viewed as their unethical contents helped rather than hindered their success, and this demonstrates that the officially-sanctioned ethics of the day and the desire of ordinary readers were in a relationship of mutual tension, and that the differentiation of the two countries' reading cultures from ethical codes was progressing. The study of the widespread social phenomena related to reading books which were seen as illegitimate in Germany and Japan is an important basis for research into the relationship between the reading culture of the 18th century and the ethical codes of the day, specifically as this evolution relates to social modernization.

Key words: Reading culture; Ethics; Goethe; Chikamatsu Monzaemon; Forbidden books; Suicide

Authors: Jeonghoon Yoo (lead author) is Research Professor at the Global Institute for Japanese Studies of Korea University. He specializes in the study of Japanese literature in the Edo & Meiji period (Email: cuttiecysai@gmail.com). **Yong Hyun Kim** (corresponding author) is Associate Professor at the Department of German Language & Literature of Korea University. His research interests include literary theory and reading culture (Email: entmythos@korea.ac.kr).

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内容摘要： 书被禁止出版或贩卖有多种原因。这些原因包括违反社会制度与伦理观，传播危险思想等。在 18 世纪的德国与日本，挑战于建立在基督教与

幕府的权威之上的社会规范与秩序的书被列为禁书。当时两国具有代表性的畅销书——歌德的《少年维特的烦恼》以及近松门左卫门的《曾根崎心中》——引起了自杀的社会现象，被批评违反了当时的伦理观。然而对模仿自杀与反伦理性内容的批评反而帮助作品成为畅销书，这恰恰说明伦理观与大众需求相互间存在张力，以及读书文化开始分化这一现象。通过考察德国与日本同时出现的"禁书"这一社会现象，论文证明 18 世纪读书文化与当代伦理观的关系应该成为近代化研究的分析对象。

关键词：读书文化；伦理观；歌德；近松门左卫门；禁书；自杀

作者简介：柳政勋 (第一作者)，韩国高丽大学 Global 日本研究院研究教授，主要研究方向是江户明治时代的日本文学；金容铉 (通信作者)，韩国高丽大学德文系教授，主要研究方向是文学理论与读书文化。

Reading is a cultural modality that has undergone rapid development throughout the history of humankind, in which capacity it has played a critical role in the sharing and transmission of human culture. Despite its significance, however, reading has begun to fade from our culture, because of the extreme velocity of the technological advance of electronic media and the sharp increase in the number of electronic media consumers, as well as the fact that reading books is a skill that requires a longer period of time to master than the use of other media do. In light of this waning of the book as a cultural force, this study explores the era in which the book came to the fore, specifically in terms of developments in eighteenth century Germany and Japan, where reading books began to take root as a new form of cultural participation. Comparing social phenomena that revolved around reading in the two countries will be helpful in grasping the degree of influence of reading on the era's social and cultural environments, which were undergoing major transformations, and in shedding new light on the roles of reading and literature in today's competitive media landscape.

Let's take a brief look at the situation of Germany and Japan in the eighteenth century. Germany was seeing the development of the Enlightenment and civil society. In tandem with this, the country was going through a revolution in text-based cultural production, in the form of advances in printing and paper technologies, the diversification of texts (books, newspapers, magazines, and so on), the increase in the variety of books, and their mass publication and popularization (Faulstich 15-16). In this period, printed texts played an increasingly important role as a means for education and information transmission due to the development of the bourgeoisie. Meanwhile, as the reading population grew and the book market expanded, the literary community went through structural

changes: each stakeholder in the literary community was required to recognize their new roles and responsibilities in a novel cultural environment and act accordingly, with authors seeing themselves as producers, publishers as mediators, readers as recipients, and critics/translators as professional readers. These changes suggest that literature began to distinguish itself from other cultural fields and to gradually develop its own social system (Schmidt 280-285). During this time, novels emerged as a literary genre in the book market and gained attention from the public, giving rise to debates surrounding their ethical functions in civil society, the relationship between fiction and reality, and the boundary between "high-brow" and "low-brow" literature. In light of these issues, in eighteenth century Germany there was a pressing intellectual inquiry into the entire context surrounding the act of reading, or in other words, who read what, where, how, and why.

In the eighteenth century, Japan was in a similar situation to Germany. For a long period of time, reading had been regarded there as a luxury enjoyed only by the ruling class, including the nobility. Things began to change after the Japanese invasion of Korea (then Joseon) in 1592, as Joseon's printing technology was introduced to Japan and Japanese society slowly began to change as a result. The country abruptly entered a period of stability when the Tokugawa Shogunate was founded and order was restored. And in the Genroku Era (元 禄 , 1688~1704), one that is generally considered to be the Golden Age of pre-modern Japanese culture, books began to be read by ordinary people for leisure purposes. Picture books (草 双 紙), specifically books with large illustrations and accompanying text, were published by the thousand and book rental stores (貸 本 屋), where people could borrow picture books, began to sprout up. Books like *The Life of an Amorous Man* (好色一代男) and *Five Women Who Loved Love* (好色五人女) explicitly depicted sexual acts between men and women; *Nansō Satomi Hakkenden* (南総里見八犬伝), a full-length novel that does not suffer by comparison with today's fantasy novels, was published; and *Tōkaidōchū Hizakurige* (東海道中膝栗毛), a fiction about two men's fantastic travels, gained popularity with readers. *Nisemurasaki Inakagenji* (偽 紫 田 舎 源 氏), an accessibly written version of *The Tale of Genji* (源 氏 物 語), which was already considered a classic, and *A Hundred Horror Stories* (百 物 語), a collection of stories that had been passed on orally, were also published. As the number of people who read for pleasure increased, book-related businesses, such as the above-mentioned book rental stores, publishing houses, and literary agencies, thrived. As the quantity of books sold increased, book genres diversified as well. Newly-emerged genres included fictions that cast aspersions on the Shogunate and the samurai class with a hint of satire and

humor, and they were soon banned.

In order to delve into developments related to reading in eighteenth century Germany and Japan, we will examine texts that created sensations, and the social and ethical issues that revolved around them. More specifically, we will look into *The Sorrows of Young Werther* by Goethe and *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki* (曽根崎心中) by Chikamatsu Monzaemon (近松門左衛門), who was referred to as the Shakespeare of Japan. The focus will be on the reactions in the two countries when they were published and the influence they had on their respective societies, particularly, the tension between the theme of suicide and prevailing ethical norms.

On the Border between Good Books and Forbidden Books

Literary scholars and critics are asked to recommend worthy books, but when they ask themselves what the appropriate process and criteria are for selecting such books and for determining which are unacceptable, they often find themselves at a loss. For instance, it is unproblematic to discuss Hermann Hesse's *Beneath the Wheel*, a story about the emotional pain of adolescence, or Dazai Osamu's *No Longer Human* (人間失格) in class as a teacher, but one may hesitate to personally recommend them to teenagers. And when one does so, one may feel the need to explain the background of the novels before they read them, because these stories end very tragically, and they may have a negative influence on young readers. However, such concerns go beyond personal matters and are related to social concerns, and thus deserve further discussion.

In the eighteenth century, reading began to extricate itself from the influence of monarchs and patrons, in other words from royal families and elites. The cultural economy diversified so that authors became directly connected to readers in myriad ways, and a division of labor occurred as the book market expanded. Fields such as publishing, which mediates between authors and readers, and criticism, which helps readers choose books worth reading, emerged. These changes suggested that authors and publishers, who used to be sponsored by patrons, needed to compete fiercely to survive in the literary marketplace and to find ways to satisfy the needs of a wide spectrum of readers with diverse tastes. As the number of books available to readers increased, some began to be attracted to banned or disregarded books, rather than to those which were approved of. In other words, the gap between the desires of ordinary readers and the proclivities of professional readers grew wider, and ordinary readers began to form a reading culture of their own. However, this issue can be better understood only by considering both the logic of the book market and the social norms and ethical codes of the eighteenth century.

Sometimes, books that are beloved and praised by readers are banned from being published, sold, or read on the grounds that they run counter to the norms of the social system and its ethical codes, or that they spread unwholesome ideas. This is how censored books, which propagate ideas which are contrary to so-called "traditional customs and moral norms," gain notoriety. Such texts in Germany and Japan in the eighteenth century were those that challenged the social order, which was based on the authority of Christianity and that of the Shogunate, respectively. The process of determining which books are forbidden emerges through critics' harsh denunciations, publishers' self-censorship, and the censorship and prohibition of sales ordered by a responsible authority. Interestingly, the fate of books takes an unexpected turn, which we can see from the examples of Germany and Japan.

In Germany: The Sorrows of Young Werther by Goethe

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is one of the most celebrated German writers in the history of modern literature. Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, an epistolary novel, first appeared anonymously at the Leipzig book fair in September 1774, and became the first bestseller in Germany. Upon publication, the novel was instantly welcomed by readers, and literary criticism of it attracted even more public attention. It is the story of a man named Werther, who falls in love with a beautiful young girl, Lotte, despite knowing beforehand that she is engaged to another man. Werther suffers from unrequited love and sees no other choice but to take his own life. In the eighteenth century, when the philosophy of the Enlightenment took hold, however, suicide was regarded as an irrational act, while Church authorities for their part saw it as an offense against Christian values. Therefore, it is no surprise that this novel also faced harsh criticism.

It was extolled by the younger generation, but it was criticized by Enlightenment thinkers and those in authority in the Church (Flaschka 253). Those who praised the work thought that Goethe was a genius who followed the dictates of his own inspiration and imagination rather than confining himself to strict literary and ethical rules based on rigid rationalism. Meanwhile, Enlightenment thinkers believed that individualistic thinking and the option of suicide threatened the norms of civil society and the values of the bourgeoisie (Flaschka 263-265). In addition, the leaders of the Christian Church strongly criticized the suicide of Werther, arguing it was "an insult to life, the noblest gift ever bestowed by God." (Flaschka 276). But these denunciations were self-defeating, as surprisingly, what made this novel so popular was precisely this harsh criticism, not favorable reviews.

A book review carried by a local newspaper in Altona argued that *The Sorrow*

of Young Werther should not be further published in order to protect the wholesome values of citizens from corruption. However, just as love becomes even more intense when it is forbidden, this article kindled young readers' interest in the young man's passionate and tragic love story, and many illegal copies of the novel were published and sold (Fuld 149). In addition, Johann Melchior Goeze, a pastor in Hamburg, severely criticized the novel as a disgrace and insult to Christianity and as validating temptations that led pious citizens to sin, rebutted favorable reviews of the book, and even demanded administrative measures to ban it (Flaschka 278-279). Considering that the book inspired some to commit suicide, Goeze's position is understandable. However, his full-throated criticism of it caused unexpected results, drawing the public to it and fueling its publication and sales (Fuld 149). In this way, ultimately the conflict between *The Sorrow of Young Werther* and the religious ethics and social norms of the time made the book a bestseller. In this light, we can begin to discern what the relationship was between reading culture in the eighteenth century and this novel, a banned book and an iconic text.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, pietism led to the internalization within individuals and the autonomization of religion in Germany. This was a Christian movement that reflected the diminished influence of religion in society after the Thirty Years' War, and which stressed personal religious introspection rather than the role of the church or the community (Schmidt 85-86). This tendency, together with the emergence of the bourgeoisie and the increase in individualism, brought about a new way of interacting with religious books, by reading and interpreting them alone. Changes in the cultural environment, namely the growth of printed texts, the spread of novels, and the increase in silent reading, brought about quantitative and qualitative changes in peoples' attitudes toward reading (Schön 28-32). To put it another way, the shift in Germany's social structure and cultural environment in the course of the eighteenth century made it possible for novels that challenged religious ethics and social norms to be published, sold, and embraced by ordinary readers. As discussed above, reading a novel is a personal act, but other acts carried out in relation to a written text are social matters that are intertwined with the interests of various social classes. *The Sorrow of Young Werther* is a good example, as the explicit, thoroughgoing critique of this novel made it an effectively illegitimate book, and the fact that it was forbidden made it popular.

In Japan: The Love Suicides at Sonezaki by Chikamatsu

The Love Suicides at Sonezaki (曽根崎心中), a play written by Chikamatsu Monzaemon (近松門左衛門) which premiered in 1703, caused a Shinju sensation in

Japan. "Shinju (心 中)" is a Japanese term for a romantic double suicide. At the time, it was a common belief among Japanese people that lovers who were not allowed to marry one another in this life could wed in the afterlife if they committed suicide together. Inspired by the real suicides of a soy shop clerk named Tokubei (徳兵衛) and Ohatsu (お初), the courtesan with whom he was in love, Chikamatsu lyrically depicted their deaths in the context of the social conflicts in which they were immersed. Some of those who watched the play perceived their double suicide as a romantic act, and Chikamatsu became known in Japan as a playwright who described the aesthetic dimension of death beautifully.

The affirmation of double suicide contained in *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki* faced a strong backlash from the intellectual mainstream. *Shinju Okagami* (心中大鑑), a book published one year after the play was first performed, reported thirty-six cases of such suicides in a two-year period. The first line of the book, "Shinju continues day after day", satirizes the phenomenon. (Shirakura 339) Ihara Saikaku (井原西鶴), who is widely known as the writer of *The Life of an Amorous Man* (好色一代男), criticized it more harshly, saying that the increase in cases of double suicide was merely symptomatic of events in the lives of insignificant men and courtesans. He even argued that lovers committed double suicides not because they were passionate about their love, but because they simply wanted to escape from their reality of fallen reputations or poverty. Ihara's opinion runs squarely counter to the viewpoint of Chikamatsu, who sympathized with lovers who felt they had no choice but to take their own lives in order to be together. Ihara's stance is understandable as he came from a family of Samurais. But it is less clear why was so hostile to the phenomenon of double suicide.

As discussed above, Japan's reading culture prospered and the Shogunate began to censor books in the eighteenth century. In 1670, the Tokugawa Shogunate issued a ban on books about sex, or more specifically, "the publication of books that deal with rumors of others" and "the publication of erotic or pornographic books (好色本)." However, Chikamatsu wrote an "erotic" play based on "rumors of others." The idea of double suicide, which originated in Buddhism, ran counter to the Confucian ethics embraced by the Shogunate, so it is no surprise that the authorities were unhappy with the popularity of *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki*. In 1720, they issued a ban on the publication of erotic novels or novels about double suicides. A year later, they issued the same ban in relation to the work of playwrights. In 1722, the Shogunate even promulgated a law that prohibited double suicide, which stipulated that the bodies of couples who committed a double suicide were not permitted burial. In addition, if there was a person who attempted to take part in a double

suicide but failed in the attempt, he or she was convicted of the murder of their partner and were put to death. If both parties survived, they were displayed in the public square for three days and were demoted to the lowest class, and in this way degraded. After the Shogunate's suppression of double suicides and the death of Chikamatsu, novels and plays on the subject slowly ceased to be published or performed. However, the trend of romanticizing double suicide was prevalent throughout Japanese society, and spread to the Samurai community (Suwa 163).

The fact that the Shogunate had banned certain literary works even before *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki* became popular and that the play encouraged a social phenomenon despite tightened regulation suggest that, just as in the case of *The Sorrow of Young Werther*, *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki* became widely popular because its theme was contrary to social norms. Ironically, along with the development of printing technology and publishing industry, the Shogunate's regulation of books and literary culture contributed to the spread of reading culture in eighteenth century Japan. For the ordinary people who read for pleasure, the intellectuals' criticism of novels and dramas they loved and the regulations imposed by the ruling class served as catalysts that stimulated their desire. Ryūtei Tanehiko (柳亭種彦), the author of *Nisemurasaki Inakagenji* (偽紫田舎源氏), published in the mid-nineteenth century, was sentenced to jail for committing an offense against public morals, and his novel went out of print. It is said that he died of shock after this happened. Despite the attempt at controlling its circulation, however, *Nisemurasaki Inakagenji* became the most widely purchased book in the Edo period. (Shoji 81) There was even a selection of Nisemurasaki Inakagenji-themed merchandise produced. This came about because the ethical strictures that the ruling class attempted to foist on society in the eighteenth century triggered a public backlash.

Conclusion

In the eighteenth century, Germany and Japan underwent similar experiences in terms of the expansion of their respective literary markets and the increase in the number of readers caused by the printing revolution. But the two countries' reading environments were different, as the German readership was divided into the two groups of ordinary and professional readers, whereas Japanese readers were generally comprised of members of the merchant class who had given up on their aspiration of ascending in social class, and as a result merely sought pleasure in their reading. As Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and Chikamatsu's *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki* suggest, however, it is not a coincidence that hugely popular texts in the two countries in the eighteenth century caused extraordinary social re-

actions. In this study, we focus on the external factors that determined the reception of the two texts rather than any inherent factors. Both of them ran counter to the ethical values of the times, and there were many who harshly criticized them. But ultimately, the tension between the desire of ordinary readers and the ethical values of the ruling class helped build impetus behind these texts.

Considering the fact that both Germany and Japan successfully achieved modernization and grew into empires which dominated Europe and Asia respectively, and that they had similar reading cultures and experienced comparable social developments in the eighteenth century, it can be assumed that the print revolution and the rise of reading culture was one of the prerequisites of modernization. If the transformation in reading culture in this period was a driving force behind modernization, the ethical beliefs of the ruling class at the time, which played a critical role in the transformation, should be considered significant. This study examines two iconic texts that arose in Germany and Japan in the eighteenth century, and explores whether there were tensions between the modern transformation of reading culture and contemporary ethical beliefs. In order to deepen the discussion of the reading cultures and ethical codes of Germany and Japan in the eighteenth century, it will be necessary to examine a wide variety of texts and identify their similarities, as well as their distinctive qualities.

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