

Traditional Woodblock versus Foreign Movable Type Print: The Politics of Printing Options in Early Modern Japan

At the beginning of the 17th century, two printing options existed in Japan. One was the traditional woodblock method, passed down through the centuries, the other was the movable type method, introduced to Japan by means of two separate confrontations with foreign countries during the second half of the 16th century. Both the shipwreck of Portuguese Jesuit missionaries in 1542/43 and Toyotomi Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea in 1592 mark two independent beginnings of the use of the movable type printing press in different regions of Japan. Yet after its heyday, when it had been applied in all major cities from 1600 to 1640, movable type print was almost completely replaced again by traditional woodblock print.

While it is often argued that the changing conditions of consumption and economic culture were the cause of this return to tradition, it should also be considered that this technological 'step backwards' fit well into the Edo-period discourse on a distinct Japanese nationality or national identity. This can be observed on the level of the townsmen who over time evolved into a literate and fervent culture-producing social class. They were inclined to use woodblock print while at the same time emphasizing, in their writings, the characteristic features of Japanese language and scripture (*hiragana* and its calligraphic forms). Thus, the choice between woodblock print and movable type print might be seen not only as being between different technologies, but also between different politics of social and national awareness.