

Pregnancy as Cultural Phenomenon in Early-Modern Japan

Timon Screech

Professor, International Research Center for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken), Kyoto

Pregnancy is a medical fact, but the way in which it is interpreted and understood varies widely across cultures and periods. This talk will begin with Buddhist theories, which sought to explain, and also protect, gestating fetuses. Some of these views were quite ancient, but Japan underwent dramatic social change from about 1600, with the end of its 100-year civil war and the arrival of Western political and scientific thinking. This talk will introduce both strands, but then go on to look at how new ideas of insemination, pregnancy and delivery served as metaphors for the comprehension of other, unrelated matters.

CV

Biography

Timon Screech taught the history of Japanese art at SOAS, University of London, for 30 years, before moving to a chair at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken) in Kyoto, in 2021. He has also been guest professor at numerous institutions in the EU, Japan and USA.

Screech is the author of some dozen books and many articles on the visual culture of the Japan's early-modern Edo period. His PhD, published as *The Lens Within the Heart*, remains in print in a second, paperback edition. Perhaps best-known is his *Sex and the Floating World: Erotic Images in Japan, 1700-1820*, which is also available in Chinese, Japanese and Polish translations. His field-defining study, *Obtaining Images: Art, Production and Display in Edo Japan* was published in 2012.

In 2020 he published two further books, *The Shogun's Silver Telescope: God, Art and Money in the English Quest for Japan* and *Tokyo Before Tokyo: Power and Magic in the Shogun's City of Edo* (also available in Chinese). His major monograph *Shogun Avatar: The Worship of Tokugawa in Early-Modern Japan* will appear in 2026. He is concurrently working on two further books to appear in Japanese, one on early European contacts with the Kingdom of Lūchū (J: Ryūkyū, modern Okinawa), the other on tourist activities by the Dutch East India Company in Japan. His long-term project is a history of the Rokuhara district of Kyoto.

Screech is a Freeman of the City of London, a Fellow of the British Academy, the Academia Europaea, and the Royal Society of Art. In 2022 he was awarded both the Yamagata Bantō Prize, and the Fukuoka Culture Prize, and in 2024 received the Japanese Foreign Minister's Commendation.