Transfigured Image-unveiling Rituals at Edo in the Late 18 Century

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Image-unveiling is defined as a display over a certain period of time for hopeful visitors of some Buddhist or Shintoist image that is usually enshrined and securely hidden from public view in a temple or shrine. Viewers hoped to have some magical power imparted to them from the unveiled image that, they believed, embodied the power. The worshipers who believed that they had had their wishes fulfilled by their prayers to the unveiled image made a donation to the image itself or to the temple or shrine where it was enshrined. Unveiling of the image in its original term, therefore, was a purely religious phenomenon.

The early practices of image unveiling could be traced as far back as to the thirteenth century. Substantial acceptance of Buddhism by a wide range of public could be observed through the period from the end of th sixteenth century over the seventeenth century. The latter half of the seventeenth century saw the climax of public awareness in Buddhism. The donations made by the pious public during this period amounted to enormous sum, although each donation by an individual might by a petty one, having enabled many new temples to be built and old ones to be repaired.

Toward the end of the seventeenth century, the bakufu, or shogunate, and most of th fiefs all over Japan began to experience financial decline, which forced them to give up some of their governmental financing for the public sectors to take over. Their new financial situation also affected the procurement of temple facilities repairing resources, which were now mainly to be secured by the public with their donations to reduce the lords commitment to raise the necessary fund by themselves. The bakufu in the beginning of eighteenth century decided on the policy of making the religious ritual of image unveiling an official event which required a government approval for public performance. As a consequence, collecting donations for the image-unveiling at temples was incorporated into one of the government undertakings for financial aid to temple facilities repairs. By this the bakufu was able to reduce their own financial or material expenditures incurred by such repairs. Temples, on the other hand, were forced to work harder on collecting donations for repairing
their own facilities.

At about the middle of the eighteenth century, the public faith in Buddhism began to show some dwindling tendency, and accordingly the overall income of the temples from donations were reduced. Financial dependence by many temples on donations including ones for the image-unveiling, for the purpose of repairs, by this time, however, was so big that the temples had to device various plans of attracting people to the image-unveiling events. One of the successful plans designed by them was to reshape the image-unveiling event into an entertaining event. The transition from a religious event to an entertaining event of the image-unveiling thus became particularly noticeable in the 1770's and, after then, any temple premises where the image-unveiling was to be held was turned into an entertaining spot crowded with street performers and show tents or stalls for the visitors to the image-unveiling event.