Publication of Secret Arts: 
Incantations in Books of Magic Tricks during the Edo Period

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Books that explain magic tricks published in Japan during the Edo period contain not only magic tricks but also information on incantations. These texts do not attract much attention from the perspective of the history of magic. However, they are interesting subjects of study to get an idea of the sense of people at a time when magic tricks and black arts intermingled.

This article gives an overview of books of magic tricks in early modern Japan, starting from the translation of the Chinese “Shinsengejutsu,” and dealing with the incantations described in the same. “Shinsengejutsu” in the early time and the “Sequel to Shinsengejutsu” bring together not only magic tricks but also incantations and tips for living, etc. Originally, magic tricks as entertainment to showcase miraculous phenomena via tricks and gimmicks, and information on incantations, etc. were also mixed in China. The view of magic in Japan, meanwhile, seems to have been influenced by that of magic in China. Because black arts similar to those in China also appear in Japanese magic books, the Chinese incantations might have penetrated into the Japanese everyday life through these books. However, the methods used for incantations differed between Japan and China. When the foreign black arts were imported, they would have been changed to suit the Japanese living environment.

The incantations would have originally been conveyed orally and in secret, but during the Edo period, they were written down in books as practical knowledge and went into circulation. By a curious coincidence, the books that publicized the so-called “secret arts” such as those of incantations, magic tricks, fortune telling, etc. began to be published in the last half of the 17th century, which marked the opening of the period of publication of secret arts in Japan. Some incantations in the books of magic tricks resemble those in the preceding books of black arts. The information on incantations in specialized books would have flowed into the books of magic tricks.

Some incantations described in the books of magic tricks are also accompanied by curse songs and writing actions. In early modern Japan, people’s literacy rate improved from the 17th century, and such social background relates to the existence of the books of magic tricks and incantations in writing. The popularity of the culture of incantations during the Edo period is seen in the potential of various incantations according to the abilities and qualities of those who performed them.

Key words: Magic tricks, Japan, comparative culture, incantations, secret art