



The Placenta as the Depository of Patriarchal Imagination Reproductive Experiences in Tokugawa Japan

Though largely neglected, the placenta plays a critical role in reproduction, both physiologically and symbolically. Focusing on the Tokugawa period, where narratives on reproduction by male authorities in the fields of medicine, morality, and politics became prominent, this article argues that the placenta functioned as a depository of imagination, based on patriarchal desires, anxieties, and concerns. In childrearing manuals and obstetrical texts, prior to birth the placenta was depicted as what delivered nutrients to the fetus while protecting the fetus from toxins derived from the mother, revealing the ambivalent views on the maternal body. During the postpartum period, the placenta was used to address wishes for the child's career success and his or her obedience to the family patriarch, as well as concerns over female promiscuity. In short, the placenta operated as a discursive apparatus for control of the female body and for the soothing of anxiety surrounding maintenance of the patriarchal order.

Keywords: reproduction—patriarchy—Japan—Tokugawa period—placenta

While often associated with hope and excitement, many experience pregnancy and birth also with a sense of uncertainty, fear, and anxiety. Further, though often associated with femininity, reproduction is also an interest of men, and it invokes various emotional responses in them. Emotions surrounding pregnancy and birth existed in premodern settings, but it is often difficult to access them, as written accounts of such experiences tend to be scarce. This article uses the representations of and rituals on the placenta as the window to examine emotional aspects of people's experiences of reproduction in the Tokugawa period in Japan (1603–1868). I argue that male anxiety, in particular, is evident in how people viewed and handled the placenta.

Today, the placenta is frequently disposed of as medical waste (Birdsong 1998; Baergen, Thaker, and Heller 2013), but it was not treated as such in many cultural and historical contexts. Premodern Japan was no exception. It had been considered as something that belonged to the realm of the sacred from ancient times in the country (Kinoshita 1981; Nakazawa 2003), and it remained so during the Tokugawa period.¹ This study attends to the dynamics during the pregnancy, in addition to postpartum rituals and experiences of people in different strata of society. Following feminist scholarship on reproduction, which offers the possibility of reconceptualizing the body through the prism of the placenta (Maher 2001), I examine people's experiences with pregnancy and birth through this organ.

The Tokugawa period offers an intriguing case, because the understanding of the beginning of life was debated intensely during this era, and the authoritative male narrative of reproduction became prominent. The dynamic behind this included the emergence of obstetrics (Ogata 1919; Shinmura 1996; Sugitatsu 2002), the prohibition of abortion and infanticide (Chiba 1983; Drixler 2013; Ohta 1997, 2006, 2007; Saeki 2017; Sawayama 2005; Takahashi 1981), as well as the popularization of childrearing manuals, which typically explained the processes of fetal development and what constituted proper behavior for pregnant women (Burns 2002; Kajitani 2014; Ohta 2011). The placenta, which was commonly called *ena*, appeared in various historical accounts.

Patriarchy was the central framework in societal and family structure, and because of—rather than despite—this, fathers played a critical role in childrearing. As the household became the basic social and economic unit, the importance of family lineage was emphasized not only for elites but also for ordinary people. The average

household size declined to between four and five by the mid-Tokugawa period, from over seven at the beginning of the era (Hayami 1973, 53–56, 67), further contributing to parents' closer attention to each child. Accordingly, the father, as the head of the household, became responsible for educating and disciplining children, who were expected to bring stability and prosperity to the family (Ohta 2007, 7). Historical documents suggest that fathers of this time indeed spent much time with their children (Ohta 2011).²

For this reason, childrearing manuals were originally written for fathers, but as authors began to emphasize the importance of early education, they promoted the idea that it should start even during pregnancy and shifted their target audience to mothers.³ Childrearing manuals urged pregnant women to control their behaviors and thoughts, and the placenta was used to highlight this. That is, the placenta functioned as the symbolic divider between the mother and the fetus, delineating the contour of the fetus. While the fetus was inside the woman's body, it was imagined as a separate individual deserving proper care and attention. This imagination enabled both the ideas of the mother nurturing the fetus through the placenta, as well as the placenta protecting the fetus from toxins derived from the mother.

By examining the depictions and treatment of the placenta in obstetrical texts, child-rearing manuals, and popular fictional stories, this article demonstrates that the placenta was central in reproductive experiences in Tokugawa Japan and functioned as the depository of (male) emotions surrounding pregnancy and birth. During pregnancy, the representations of the placenta encapsulated the ambivalent male gaze upon the female reproductive body. The placenta was depicted as both the symbol of maternal care and as the shield to protect the fetus from its mother. Treatment of the placenta after delivery highlighted unease surrounding the maintenance of patriarchal order, including not only hopes for the good health and successful career of the child but also concern over the child's biological paternity as well as desire for their obedience to superiors, most importantly to the father.

Why the placenta matters

The placenta is an understudied body part. "Despite its crucial role in the health of both the fetus and the pregnant woman, the placenta is the least understood human organ" (Guttmacher, Maddox, and Spong 2014, 303). The reproductive body was historically overlooked in the modern notion of the body (Grosz 1994), and the placenta has also largely been neglected in the social sciences and humanities for a long period (Colls and Fannin 2013), with the exception of anthropological scholarship on postpartum rituals using the organ. Early twenty-first-century feminist studies have, however, demonstrated that the placenta is a critical aspect of reproduction that provides keys to understanding the boundedness of the body, care, and subjectivity, as well as fetal-maternal relations (Colls and Fannin 2013; DiCaglio 2018; Hird 2007; Maher 2001, 2002; Simms 2009; Yoshizawa 2016).

The placenta provides us with a particular vantage point to elucidate how people experienced pregnancy and birth. The anxiety over the placenta was a serious matter, as placental complications could mean dire consequences to the reproductive

outcome as well as women's lives. In addition to medical concerns, there was an element of symbolic fear, associated with the ambiguous nature of the placenta. The placenta exists in a liminal space and time. That is, it is situated in between maternal and fetal bodies, along with the umbilical cord, and it exists only during pregnancy. The placenta is formed by the embryo but functions relatively autonomously, and it belongs to neither the maternal nor the fetal body. As the biologist H el ene Rouch explained, "On the one hand, [the placenta] is the mediating space between mother and fetus, which means there is never a fusion of maternal and embryonic tissues. On the other hand, it constitutes a system regulating exchanges between the two organisms" (Irigaray 1993, 39). Pointing out that "The porous nature of the placental division between maternal and foetal matter is part of its ambiguous and challenging nature" (2002, 105), JaneMaree Maher argues that the placenta can even be seen as a synecdoche of pregnancy.

Ambiguity allows a wide range of interpretations, but it also generates anxiety. "Things become meaningful only when placed in some category" (Zerubavel 1991, 5), and the uncategorizables possess power and invoke fear (Douglas 2002, 118). The act of categorization brings a sense of control over the uncontrollable and thus helps to ease feelings of apprehension. Performing of rituals was one way in which assigning and confirming the meaning of the placenta took place. Historically, anthropologists studied the ritual treatment of the placenta in various cultural settings (De Witt 1959; Frazer 2009; Jones and Kay 2003; Long 1963; Meyer 2005, 82) and argued that such rituals functioned as the mechanism to relieve anxiety (Jones and Kay 2003, 103). This study investigates the specificity of the angst expressed through the discussions and treatment of the placenta in the Tokugawa period, clarifying the source of anxiety.

Nursing in the womb: Placenta as the nurturing maternal body

Authors in the Tokugawa period generally depicted the pregnant body as the nurturer of the fetus and thought that the placenta played a significant role in taking care of it. By the early nineteenth century, obstetricians began writing their explanations of fetal development, and many emphasized the critical role of the placenta. For example,  maki Sh usei wrote in his *Sanka Shinan* (Lessons on Obstetrics, 1826; see the Appendix for details of primary sources used in this article) that the fetus was located in the uterus and received nutrients through the umbilical cord. According to him, the placenta first received the maternal blood, which went through the umbilical cord and arrived at the fetal liver, from which it traveled to the heart and then reached every part of the body.  maki continued that once moving through the entire fetal body, the blood returned to the maternal body through the placenta, which was then mixed with that of the mother. He described that it was like a circle (Kure and Fujikawa 1895, 883).

Other obstetricians had similar ideas. For example, Kagawa Ransai's disciples recorded that he said, "The placenta is what filters the blood and delivers it throughout [the body of] the child" (*Sanka Kibun* [Records of Obstetrics], around 1810). Okuzawa Kench u, who studied both Chinese and European medicine, also noted in his *Sanka Hatsume*i (Inventions in Obstetrics, 1833) that "while the fetus

is in the uterus, it receives the mother's blood in the placenta and has it reach the whole body to nurture different parts [of the body]. There are numerous thin blood vessels in the placenta, and they become one and connect to the umbilical cord, and reach the child's navel" (Nakamura 1999, 74). All these doctors paid close attention to the blood and viewed the placenta as the critical point of passage that delivered the maternal blood to the fetal body.

Authors of Confucian childrearing manuals also considered the maternal body as the nurturer, with the placenta playing a crucial role in fetal development. While obstetricians maintained that the blood nourished the fetus, authors of childrearing manuals presented the idea that the fetus was fed breast milk even while in the womb. Milk represented what allowed the fetus and infant to survive, as there was no reliable substitute unless another lactating woman offered hers (Sawayama 2011, 2016). Namura Jōhaku⁴ wrote in his *Onna Chōhōki* (Records of Weighty Treasure for Women, 1692) that after the fetus gained the shape of a person in the seventh month, it would be equipped with various senses, including that of taste through which the fetus learned the sweetness of the milk. He elaborated that the fetus would start drinking over two liters of milk during the night in the ninth month (Yamazumi and Nakae 1976, 250). The notion of the fetus consuming breast milk in the uterus was widespread. In his book on folk remedies for women *Fujin Ryōchi Tebako no Soko* (Cures for Women Hidden on the Bottom of a Small Box, 1704), Hata Genshun called the umbilical cord the rope of the milk (*chizuna*). The philosopher and doctor Andō Shōeki referred to it as the feeding rope (*kainawa*) in his book *Tōdō Shinden* (Tale of the Truth, around 1752).

Accordingly, fetal deaths were understood to be the result of the fetus discontinuing to drink milk in the womb (Sawayama 1998, 55, 226). The aforementioned Hata Genshun wrote that when the calmness of the belly was disrupted with the mother falling or lifting something heavy, the fetus would let go of the milk rope, resulting in a miscarriage (Shimano 2007, 33). Sasai Moan's *Ubuya Yashinaigusa* (Family Manual for Raising Infants, 1774) also suggested that this type of understanding was common. He criticized those who falsely believed that lactation during pregnancy indicated miscarriage, which resulted from the fetus letting go of the nipple in the womb (Shimano 2007, 33). Similar explanations frequently appeared in the *Shitai Hirōsho* (Reports of Fetal Deaths), an official local document in Ichinoseki (in present-day Iwate prefecture in northern Japan) compiled for the surveillance of reproduction in the nineteenth century (Sawayama 2009). Fetal death reports from other areas also showed such explanations for the cause of miscarriage.⁵ In short, whether it was envisioned as blood or milk, what was seen as central in fetal development was the continuous feeding by the mother via the placenta, placing an increased sense of responsibility on the woman.

Placental protection: Placenta as the mechanism against maternal toxins

While authors of child-rearing manuals described the pregnant body as nurturing, they, as well as local government officials, did not necessarily celebrate it as positive. Rulers wished to have control over reproduction, as population numbers directly

affected the subsidy provided by the central government, and they were uneasy that they only had limited influence on the actual pregnancy and birth. One way in which they exerted control over reproduction was the use of the concept of pollution (*kegare*) and its associated notion that women's inappropriate behaviors, especially in the areas of eating and drinking, would contribute to the child's poor health. In this framework, the placenta was imagined as a protective mechanism for the fetal body against maternal toxins.

The notion of pollution was used to explain the mechanism of how ill fortune occurred (Namihira 2009, 18), and it was central in the belief system as well as in the maintenance of social order in premodern Japan. The most potent pollution was considered to have come from deaths, and those who were associated with them (e.g., dead people and their families, gravediggers) were thought of as polluted. Because the polluted were also believed to have polluting power, there were myriad taboos observed to avoid the spread of the pollution (Namihira 2009, 18; Narikiyo 2003).

The female body, especially as it related to reproduction, was viewed as a source of danger associated with blood and pollution.⁶ Whereas the emphasis on taboos pertaining to pollution surrounding death declined in the Tokugawa era, the danger of pollution pertinent to birth was further stressed with the development and consolidation of the patriarchal system during this period (Narikiyo 2003, 202). When women were considered polluted during menstruation and around the time of delivery, they were not allowed to engage in certain activities, including entering shrines. Because fire was believed to spread pollution, food for those women was prepared separately from the rest of their families. Such notions of pollution were reinforced by prominent intellectuals of the time as well. For example, in his *Yōjōkun* (Lessons for Health Cultivation), health expert Kaibara Ekiken (1961 [1712]) stated that when taking medication, a person should not look at anything polluted, such as the dead or a pregnant woman, as that would cause the spirit to sink and cancel out the effectiveness of medication.

As the female body came to be seen as the embodiment of risk and pollution, what followed then was the notion that the fetus and the infant must be protected not only from external danger but also from the "poison" of its mother. The placenta was often depicted as an umbrella hat in the shape of a lotus leaf, situated at the top of the fetus.⁷ Head coverings symbolized protection for liminal beings in precarious contexts,⁸ and this image of the placenta exemplifies such symbolism.

For the fetus, its immediate environment was the maternal body, and pregnant women were advised to be mindful of their actions and thoughts. In particular, proper diet was considered essential, because problematic food and drink consumption were seen as threats to the survival of the fetus. The idea that pregnant women's wrongful eating and drinking would cause smallpox for the child was introduced from China during the Kamakura period (1185–1333) (Shimano 2011, 23), and it gradually took root in Japan. For instance, a text for practitioners of the syncretic *shugendō* religion called *Shugendō Shūyō Hiketsu* (Essentials for the Training of Shugendō, written around 1520) stated that the placenta covered the head of the fetus and prevented the fetal body from being destroyed by the poisons caused by what the mother consumed (Nakamura 1999, 72).

Doctors called the toxin a child was believed to have received in the womb “uterine poison” (*taidoku*) and considered it highly dangerous. Childrearing manuals often included lengthy instructions on how to avoid inappropriate behaviors that were believed to risk the health of the child, and such discussions contained extensive recommendations on food. Uterine poison was thought to be the source of smallpox and measles, the leading causes of children’s deaths. Chimura Setsuan wrote in his *Shōni Yōjōroku* (Records for the Health Cultivation of Children, 1688) that this toxin would cause measles later in the child’s life. Namura Jōhaku also wrote in his *Records of Weighty Treasure for Women* (1692) that a child with uterine poison might suffer from smallpox and eczema. By the mid-Tokugawa period, the danger of uterine poison was generalized and came to be seen as the origin of any type of disease for children (Shimano and Shirozu 2007). Examples include Kazuki Gyūzan’s *Shōni Hitsu-yō Sodategusa* (Essential Notes on Raising Children, 1703), which argued that uterine poison was the primary determinant of children’s diseases; and *Shōni Imashimegusa* (Cautionary Notes on Children, 1820) by Oka Ryōin, a prominent pediatrician who served the central government as a doctor, in which the author stated that uterine poison would induce various illnesses for children. Hirano Jūsei’s *Byōka Suchi* (Essential Knowledge on Medicine, 1831) also stated that eight or nine out of ten children’s diseases were derived from poison left by fathers and mothers of the children (Shimano and Shirozu 2007).⁹ The placenta was seen as a barrier that blocked the unwanted toxins from entering the fetal body.

These ideas were disseminated through one of the popular childrearing manuals of the time, *Records of Weighty Treasure for Women* (1692). Its author, Namura Jōhaku,



Figure 1. Depictions of fetal development and a birthing scene. Source: Namura Jōhaku, *Onna Chōhōki* (Records of Weighty Treasure for Women, 1692). National Diet Library, Japan.
<https://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/2533891>



Figure 2. Depiction of aborted fetus. Source: Ihara Saikaku, *Kōshoku Ichidai On'na* (The Life of an Amorous Woman, vol. 6, 1686). National Diet Library, Japan. <https://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/1137498>

wrote that the head of the child was covered with the placenta, which protected the child from poisons potentially present in what the mother ate (Yamazumi and Nakae 1976, 258). The image that accompanied such discussion (figure 1) listed illustrations of the fetus for each month of gestation on the bottom, starting from the right, along with the specific Buddhist deities that protected the fetus on the top. The fetus during the ninth month of pregnancy in this image (on the left page, second row, second from the left) is shown with the placenta hat on its head.

A popular story also used similar imagery. Prominent poet and storywriter Ihara Saikaku wrote in his *Kōshoku Ichidai On'na* (The Life of an Amorous Woman, 1686) that when the protagonist was about to die, she looked outside a window and saw numerous children wearing lotus-leaf-shaped placentas on their heads, their lower bodies soaked in blood (figure 2). They were crying and saying that she was a terrible mother. The character realized that those were children she had aborted in the past.

The same idea was seen in a parody of the explanation of fetal development called *Sakusha Tainai Totsukizu* (Ten Months in the Womb of a Writer), written by woodblock print artist and author Santō Kyōden in 1804. The protagonist was a writer who struggled to write a story by the deadline and desperately asked a god that he would become pregnant with the seed of a plot. Once he swallowed the seed given by the god, the author's ideas were depicted as the fetus inside his belly. In the ninth month, he pondered that he should quit being a writer and live like a masterless samurai, and this thought was shown in his transparent abdomen as a person (the fetus) holding a fan while wearing a woven hat (placenta) (figure 3).

With such images widely available, people likely internalized the notion of the protective placenta hat. The placenta was seen as part of the nurturing mother that



Figure 3. The character's story idea depicted as a fetus. Source: Santō Kyōden, *Sakusha Tainai Totsukizu* (Ten Months in the Womb of a Writer, 1804). National Diet Library, Japan. <https://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/2537598>

delivered nutrients in the form of blood or breast milk to the fetus, while at the same time it was depicted as a shield to protect the fetus from maternal threat. This dual framework allowed male experts to encourage women to foster their identity as mother, and simultaneously extended male experts' control over the female reproductive body.

Patriarchal desires in postpartum placenta rituals

The treatment of the placenta after delivery also allows us to access rich accounts of people's emotions. Instructions for placenta rituals were included in an old medical text as well as books on protocols for elites, whose simplified versions were disseminated to people in the lower strata of society through childrearing manuals. Such instructions often included processes of purification, placing it in container(s), and burial. Though there was disagreement on the details of how the placenta should be handled, it is evident that many practices were motivated by the desire to maintain patriarchal order. The analysis also suggests that people in Tokugawa Japan saw what the anthropologist James G. Frazer (2009) called sympathetic connection between the placenta and the child,¹⁰ within which the placenta is conceived as the child's symbolic sibling or partner (Jones and Kay 2003) or the protective force that shaped the life of the child (Leach 1950).

Ritualistic treatment of the placenta started among elites. Specificities of burial preparation indicated that the careful handling of the placenta was one way in which people tried to achieve their child's good health and successful career. Furthermore, the level of elaboration with co-buried objects as well as the decorations on and layers

of containers displayed the family's status and power. One of the earliest accounts on the placenta in Japan appears in the oldest medical text known in the country, *Ishinpō* (Prescriptions from the Heart of Medicine, 984), which cited a Chinese classic, *Sankei* (The Sutra of Birth), stating that:

The placenta should be washed first with pure water then with sacred *sake* (rice wine). It should be wrapped in silk and placed in a jar. One should put five coins and place the placenta on top. If parents wished the child to have literary talent, they should place a writing brush as well. Place the lid tightly so that it would not be damaged by insects or eaten by farm animals or birds or wild animals. The lucky direction should be determined based on the birth month. One needs to have someone dig a hole that is three *shaku* and two *sun* (97 centimeters) deep and bury it there. If damaged by animals or insects, the child might become ugly or die with disease. (Maki 1995, 154–55)

The imperial family and other elites between eleventh and sixteenth centuries practiced the treatment of the placenta similar to the description that appeared in *Ishinpō* (Doi 2004; Nakamura 1999). With the formalization of these rituals during the Muromachi period (1336–1573) when the powerful Ise and Ogasawara families detailed various protocols for warrior families, including handling of the placenta (Nakamura 1999; Tanigawa 2001, 92), such practices continued into the Tokugawa period (Nagashima and Ohta 1968; Tanigawa 2001, 90–91).

The families wished for the child's good health and successful career, as they were closely linked to the prosperity of the patrilineal family. One way in which they showed this desire was through the choice of co-buried objects, which became more elaborate in later years. In *Ishinpō*, hopes for the child's future career were shown in the placement of a writing brush. But a document from the sixteenth century, *Kainin Chakutai no Koto* (On the Donning of a Belt for Pregnancy),¹¹ included a discussion of placing a bow made of mulberry and an arrow made of lotus, as well as kelp (*kombu*), chestnut (*kachiguri*), and *noshi* (ceremonial decoration on a gift to wish good luck), suggesting the parents' hope for the child to become a successful warrior. Records indicate that others buried the placenta with money or an abacus for boys, and threads and needles as well as cosmetic items for girls (Yamazato 1997).

Another characteristic of elite placenta preparation was the multiple layers of containers and elaborate decorations, for the purpose of pristine preservation and as a status display. The damage of the placenta by creatures was believed to result in the child's disease, indicating the belief in sympathetic connection. The aforementioned Ogasawara document mentioned that if eaten by wild animals, the child would suffer from mental illness, and if eaten by insects, the child would experience a malignant tumor (Nakamura 1999, 39–40). Based on the same notion, *Sanjo Hōshiki* (The Manners in the Birthing Place, 1756) by Ise Sadatake urged family to:

Place the white silk cloth on the bottom of the placenta bucket made of pine, and wrap the placenta with it, then position coins wrapped in a paper as a weight. Pack cotton between the placenta and the bucket so that the placenta would not move. Place a lid on the bucket and close it with nails. Place it in an outer bucket, close

with a lid, wrap it in white and red silk, and finally encase it in a pot with a lid made of pine. (Nakamura 1999, 51–53)

Their desire for proper preservation is also seen in the location of the burial. Elites typically buried the placenta in a hill or a shrine, together with a clear marker (Fukunishi 2010; Kinoshita 1981).

A family's wish for the child's health was evident also in the instructions of decorating the placenta bucket with paintings of a pine tree, bamboo, a crane, and a turtle, all of which are symbols of good luck and longevity.¹² A placenta from the late seventeenth century that belonged to the Date family was placed in a cedar bucket with such paintings, which was then wrapped in silk with the same symbols and placed in a copper container with a lid at Zuishōji Temple in central Edo (Tanigawa 2001, 90–91).

With the popularization of Confucian childrearing manuals from the seventeenth century (Yamazumi and Nakae 1976), the elite practices of placenta burial came to be known to people of different social status. Archeological findings indicate that by the early to mid-eighteenth century, people in the mid to lower strata of society were practicing simplified versions of the elite placenta burial rituals (Tanigawa 2001, 95). Obstetrical texts from the early and mid-nineteenth century also contained discussions of such practices.

Though rituals were introduced and there was increasing interest in the handling of the placenta, this did not mean that there were agreed upon protocols among non-elites. Authors of Confucian childrearing manuals indeed complained about how ordinary people treated the placenta. For example, Records of the Health Cultivation of Children stated that people in the lower strata of society threw the placenta away as a filthy object, even to the point of discarding it on the street. The author of Records of Weighty Treasure for Women (1692) wrote that it was regrettable that ordinary people would simply leave it on a street or the gate of a shrine. Doctors agreed. Kojima Isai, a disciple of Gotō Konzan, the authoritative figure in the *Koihō* tradition of medicine, criticized in his *Hosan Michishirube* (Paths for Safe Delivery, 1782) that people buried it in places such as near the doorsill on the side of the premises or under the floor (Nakamura 1999, 76). The obstetrician Mizuhara Sansetsu also wrote in 1850 that the placenta should be buried in a dry and elevated location on the premises, warning that it should not be disposed of with other polluted or polluting matters (Nakamura 1999, 79).

While complaints by elites may give the impression that ordinary people did not care about the placenta, a careful examination of historical materials suggests otherwise. Both elites and non-elites did believe in sympathetic connection and worried about the maintenance of patriarchal order, but the details differed. Indeed, what elites thought of as disrespectful might not have been considered as such by ordinary people. In fact, ordinary people did see symbolic significance in the placenta, and their concerns can be elucidated through how they treated the organ.

For example, even just within the process of washing the placenta, various types of anxiety can be observed. To be sure, the washing and purification of the placenta was based on the belief in sympathetic connection between the child and the placenta. The placenta was, at least sometimes, washed with the infant while it was

still attached via the umbilical cord (Yasui 2006). In such cases, people might have considered the practice as bathing the placenta as a symbolic sibling or a protector, rather than washing.

Sympathetic connection was not the only idea behind the practice of washing. That is, it was also based on the fear of divine punishment. While the placenta played the role of protector during pregnancy, it was exposed to maternal blood, rendering it both polluted and polluting. Thus, a careful washing was considered essential. Several texts, including *Records of the Health Cultivation of Children* (1692) and *Onna Geibun Sansaizue* (Illustrated Encyclopedia of Art and Literature for Women, 1771), stated that one should sprinkle salt water before burial as a way of paying respect to *jigami*, a god associated with the placenta and believed to have protected the local area, especially concerning farming. Such treatment had the dual meanings of preventing the gods from getting upset with the pollution and having the placenta under the protection of the gods (Nakamura 1999, 42).

Furthermore, the washed placenta allowed the family to examine it closely. Female promiscuity was seen as threat to the patriarchal order, and dispute over biological paternity was not uncommon (Sawayama 2020). Fear of female sexuality manifested itself as the belief that the family emblem (*mon*) would appear in the placenta, enabling people to determine the biological father (Yamazato 1997). Poetry became popular among ordinary people during the Tokugawa period, and the compilation of poems by ordinary people included ones that mentioned the placenta, such as “Wearing glasses, I look closely at the placenta” (Ozawa 1996). Such practices indicate that female sexuality was indeed a concern both at the personal and societal level, and the placenta was used as a tool to send a message to women.

The commoners’ choice of containers and their burial locations also differed from elites. While elites’ practices suggested that their ultimate goal was the preservation of the placenta, ordinary people wanted the placenta to eventually return to the soil, seeing it as the source of reproductive energy. Andō Shōeki’s descriptions encapsulate such ideas. He noted in his *Tōdō Shinden* (Tale of the Truth, around 1752) that “People buried the placenta in the dirt after the child was born with its completed body. The placenta is the husk of the human. The placenta rots in the dirt completely. After returning it to the dirt in two months, one might get pregnant” (Yamazumi and Nakae 1976). Andō held the notion that humans resembled grains and viewed the placenta within that framework.

While childrearing manuals stated that the placenta bucket was the outermost container used, existing archeological evidence does not match such instructions. Most of the excavated containers from Edo and its surrounding sites consisted of two pieces of pottery bowls put together called *kawarake* (Tanigawa 2001, 88), and in western parts of the country, people typically placed the placenta in pots that were originally used to hold water for extinguishing fires (Doi 2004, 164). In his *Sanka Kibun* (Records of Obstetrics, around 1810), Kagawa Ransai wrote that ordinary people used plain terracotta pots, as opposed to a pot with the painting of sparrows or turtles used by elites (Nakamura 1999, 82). In *Sanka Hiyō* (Secret Essentials in Obstetrics, mid-nineteenth century), Kagawa wrote that the placenta should be placed in a small charcoal extinguishing pot with three small dried anchovies as well as a sea

cucumber, as the sign of celebration (Kure and Fujikawa 1895). The choice of the container was based on people's understanding of the placenta, rather than mere lack of access to the materials. Layers of containers make it harder for the placenta to decompose. Ordinary people, especially farmers, might have had an understanding similar to what Andō described, rather than what elite writers depicted in their childrearing manuals.

Placenta burial locations also reflected a family's desires. Authors of Confucian texts wrote that the placenta should be buried in the location of a good omen, but often there were no specific instructions on how to determine such a location (Yasui 2006). Common places chosen for the burial included where the child was born, under the floorboards, near doorsills or outhouses, earthen floors typically used in a kitchen, and gardens.¹³ They were all boundary areas within the family property that were associated with liminality and reproduction. By returning the placenta to the realm it had come from, people wished for the birth of another child in the future (Iijima 1987, 1989).

Further, choosing locations with heavy traffic was believed to have contributed to establishing desirable relationships between the parent and the child, which in this historical context meant one with a clear sense of hierarchy. In his *Sanka Hiyō* (Secret Essentials in Obstetrics), Kagawa Ransai wrote that one should bury the placenta under the doorsill of the house entrance and explained that it was considered fortunate to be buried where people walked by, as being stepped on meant receiving love. There was the belief that the child would be afraid of the first people or animals who walked on their placenta burial (Ohfuji 1968)¹⁴; parents stepping on the placenta burial had to do with their desire to have a child who would be obedient to the superiors in the family. By burying the placenta in a location with high traffic, people tried to achieve the consolidation of a stable hierarchy within the family, with the father as its head.

Conclusion

An analysis of the representations of and practices surrounding the placenta offers a compelling framework to consider pregnancy and birth, allowing us to access not only what people did but also how they experienced these transformative events. This article argued that the placenta functioned as the depository of patriarchal imagination surrounding reproduction during the Tokugawa period. The placenta embodied the ambiguity surrounding reproduction, and people expressed their anxieties and desires through the organ.

The symbolic significance of the placenta became prominent in the Tokugawa period, where people began to consider proper childrearing as essential for the survival and prosperity of the patriarchal family. It was also the period when male authoritative figures in various fields, including obstetrics, law, and morality, began producing knowledge and narratives surrounding pregnancy, birth, and childrearing. In particular, authors of childrearing manuals promoted education from an early age, claiming that it should start as early as pregnancy. Lowering of the target age of children's education meant an increased level of responsibility for women, which

entailed the expectation of bodily control. Within this framework, the placenta was imagined as a critical juncture between the woman and her fetus that simultaneously divided and connected them. Knowledge about fetal development produced in the burgeoning field of obstetrics reinforced this notion.

Further, male anxiety over the unruly female reproductive body contributed to the use of the concept of pollution, providing the basis for the notion of the placenta in the shape of a lotus leaf umbrella hat protecting the fetus from being destroyed by its mother. Thus, the woman was viewed as both the nurturer and the threat, and the fetus was considered both the protectee and the potential victim of its own mother, presenting incongruous yet not necessarily contradicting notions.

This article also presented the centrality of the patriarchal family as a social institution beyond any divergence based on social class. Tokugawa Japan was a highly hierarchical society, and experiences including pregnancy and birth differed significantly based upon one's social position. Yet, centering our gaze on differences obscures our understanding of a more pervasive ideology at work. That is, while details of the practices differed, careful handling of the placenta was based upon people's belief in a sympathetic connection between the child and the placenta. More importantly, anxiety expressed vis à vis the placenta had to do with the maintenance of patriarchal order, be it the child's health and successful career for elites or the child's obedience and women's chastity for ordinary people.

Though ephemeral, the placenta was a powerful organ. In the patriarchal society where individual survival and success was defined by family stability and prosperity, reproduction was far more than the birth of a child. Indeed, a large part of the anxiety surrounding reproduction had to do with the uncertainty of the future of the family. With its liminal and ambiguous nature, the placenta epitomized the unruly nature of reproduction, functioning as the depository of patriarchal imagination derived from such anxiety.

NOTES

1. Incineration of the placenta began at the beginning of the Meiji era as one of the attempts to modernize medical and reproductive practices.
2. The British physician and diplomat Rutherford Alcock (1863) as well as the American zoologist Edward S. Morse (1917) wrote that fathers were spending much time with and taking care of their children. Because women's income-earning activities were crucial for the survival of many farming families (Walthall 1991), mothers were not seen as solely responsible for taking care of their children. Mashita (1990) also points out that the father performed significant amounts of childcare and daily chores around the house during the immediate postpartum period, especially within small households.
3. While childrearing manuals in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries stated that children's education should start from three years old, by the seventeenth to eighteenth century, authors argued that even infants should be given proper education. By the nineteenth century, authors were emphasizing the importance of *taikyō*, or "fetal education" during pregnancy.

4. He wrote this piece under the name of Kusada Sunbokushi.
5. In 1848 in Sendai domain, for example, the husband of a woman who had miscarried after nine months of pregnancy explained that “the baby in the womb let go of the milk” when his wife fell after stumbling on a stone at a riverbed while washing rice (Kikuchi 1997, 199–200).
6. There are several theories on how reproduction in general and birth in particular came to be included in the realm of the polluted. The anthropologist Namihira Emiko (1976) argued that pregnancy and birth came to be associated with the notion of pollution as they were seen as the opposite of death. That is, death was the transition from a person to a nonperson (e.g., the dead, spirit, Buddha, a god), and birth was transformation in the opposite direction. Drawing upon the work of Mary Douglas and Edmund Leach, Namihira argued that such a liminal state was seen as unstable and dangerous as well as polluted. While Namihira emphasized the precarious nature of birth at the individual level, the religious scholar Okada Shigekiyo (1982, 317–28) stressed the social anxiety associated with birth. He maintained that births and deaths were transformations that disrupted interpersonal relations and social order, presenting the risk of danger to the community and society.
7. People believed that the fetal head stayed on the upper side of the uterus, and the placenta was imagined to have been located above its head. The obstetrician Kagawa Gen’etsu discovered the correct fetal position (i.e., having the head on the bottom), but even after this discovery, the circulation of this knowledge was limited to medical communities (Sugitatsu 2002).
8. There is a clear parallel between birth and death rituals in Japan; while the fetus was imagined to have donned the placenta hat, the dead wore the burial clothes called *kyōkatabira* (Iijima 1994, 52). Other types of liminal beings also wore head coverings, including a bride in the wedding ritual (Furukawa 2009), warriors in combat (Shimano 2011, 93–94), as well as travelers (Komatsu 1995).
9. Hirano did not discuss how the father could leave poison for the fetus.
10. Frazer wrote in *The Golden Bough*:

Thus in many parts of the world the navel-string, or more commonly the afterbirth, is regarded as a living being, the brother or sister of the infant, or as the material object in which the guardian spirit of the child or part of its soul resides. Further, the sympathetic connexion supposed to exist between a person and his afterbirth or navel-string comes out very clearly in the widespread custom of treating the afterbirth or navel-string in ways which are supposed to influence for life the character and career of the person. (2009, 41)
11. A dictation of Ogasawara Nagatoki, recorded by Iwamura Ikyu Shigehisa.
12. For example, see the Ise document of *Sanjo no Ki* (The Record from a Birthing Place) from the seventeenth century. Confucian childrearing manuals, such as Records of Weighty Treasure for Women (1692), *Onna Geibun Sansaizue* (Illustrated Encyclopedia of Art and Literature for Women, 1771), and *Shōni Hitsuyō Yashinaigusa* (Essential Notes on Raising Children, 1703), also instructed that lucky symbols like the crane, turtle, pine, and bamboo should be painted on the bucket.
13. The author of Guidebook of Childrearing for Women, Baiu Sanjin, wrote that people in urban areas buried it under the doorsill, and those who lived in rural areas buried it under the floor of the birthing space (Nakamura 1999, 64). Other childrearing manuals that promoted such burial locations included: *Onna Kagami Hidensho* (Secret Book of Paragon for Women, 1652);

Fujin Yashinaigusa (Guidebook of Childrearing for Women, 1689); Records of Weighty Treasure for Women (1692); and *Onna Geibun Sansaizue* (Illustrated Encyclopedia of Art and Literature for Women, 1771).

14. A poem described that a chief retainer was the first person to step on the placenta burial of the young prince, and the author of another poem self-deprecatingly wrote, “Probably a rich person was the first person who stepped on my placenta burial,” complaining that it contributed to the writer being poor (Ozawa 1996, 69–82).

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APPENDIX

Original Title	English Title	Year	Author
<i>Ishinpō</i>	Prescriptions from the Heart of Medicine	984	Tanba no Yasunori
<i>Onna Kagami Hidensho</i>	Secret Book of Paragon for Women	1652	Unknown
<i>Shōni Yōjōroku</i>	Records for the Health Cultivation of Children	1688	Chimura Setsuan
<i>Fujin Yashinaigusa</i>	Guidebook of Childrearing for Women	1689	Baiu Sanjin
<i>Onna Chōhōki</i>	Records of Weighty Treasure for Women	1692	Namura Jouhaku
<i>Shōni Hitsuyō Sodategusa</i>	Essential Notes on Raising Children	1703	Kazuki Gyūzan
<i>Fujin Ryōchi Tebako no Soko</i>	Cures for Women Hidden on the Bottom of a Small Box	1704	Hata Genshun
<i>Yōjōkun</i>	Lessons for Health Cultivation	1712	Kaibara Ekiken
<i>Shōni Hitsuyō Sodategusa</i>	Essential Notes on Raising Children	1714	Kazuki Gyūzan
<i>Tōdō Shinden</i>	Tale of the Truth	c. 1752	Andō Shōeki
<i>Onna Geibun Sansaizue</i>	Illustrated Encyclopedia of Art and Literature for Women	1771	Torigai Suiga
<i>Ubuya Yashinaigusa</i>	Family Manual for Raising Infants	1774	Sasai Sen’an
<i>Hosan Michishirube</i>	Paths for Safe Delivery	1782	Kojima Isai
<i>Sanka Kibun</i>	Records of Obstetrics	c. 1810	Kagawa Ransai
<i>Sanka Shinan</i>	Lessons on Obstetrics	1826	Omaki Shūsei
<i>Byōka Suchi</i>	Essential Knowledge on Medicine	1831–32	Hirano Jūsei
<i>Sanka Hatsumei</i>	Inventions in Obstetrics	1833	Okuzawa Kenchū
<i>Sanka Hiyō</i>	Secret Essentials in Obstetrics	mid-19th century	Kagawa Ransai