# The Rise of Japan's Middle Class As Seen Through *Ukiyo-e*

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The first print (Fig. 1) in famous nineteenth century *ukiyo-e* artist Utagawa Hiroshige's series of *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* (*Meisho Edo Hyakkei*) provides an iconic view of Edo. Hiroshige's depiction of the scene, a favorite of ukiyo-e artists, is unique for the insight it provides into class structure in Tokugawa Japan. Beneath the symbolic image of Mt. Fuji appears Edo Castle, representing the ever-present power of the *bakufu* (shogunate). Dominant in the print, though, is the vibrant Nihonbashi district of the *shitamachi*[1], center of the city's chōnin (townspeople)[2] population. The bustling activity of the people seen at the fish market, along the bridge, and on the river in the print's foreground illustrates the increasing power of the city's nascent middle class.

The term *ichioku souchūryū* ("one hundred million, all middle class") is often used to describe post-war Japan's largely egalitarian class structure (Chino 2). Indeed, in 1973, less than thirty years after the close of World War II, government-sponsored surveys indicated that ninety percent of Japanese already considered themselves to be part of the middle class (Duus 300). While it is widely believed that this nearly universal middle class that forms one of the defining characteristics of modern Japan arose as a product of the policies of the post-war era, a close examination of Edo-period culture as seen through ukiyo-e art reveals that the foundation which allowed for the rapid development of a highly equitable class structure in the second half of the twentieth century was in fact created under the Tokugawa shogunate.

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[1] The shitamachi is the "low town," one of Edo's two main geographical divisions. It was inhabited primarily by commoners, as opposed to the aristocratic *yamanote* ("towards the mountains") district.

[2] Literally translated, the chōnin are simply "townspeople." However, the term is generally used to refer to both the merchant and artisan classes living in large cities like Edo.

When Tokugawa Ieyasu and his retainers first arrived in Edo in 1590, the future capital of Japan was little more than a small fishing village, home to an abandoned castle. Ieyasu had been given control of eight provinces in the Kantō region by Toyotomi Hideyoshi in exchange for relinquishing his hereditary land holdings. While theoretically a promotion since the arrangement substantially increased the amount of territory under Ieyasu's control, he was essentially being exiled. Hideyoshi hoped the move to the relatively isolated Kantō region would undermine Ieyasu's ability to threaten his rule of Japan. In fact, the opposite would prove true. Edo provided a blank slate upon which Ieyasu could essentially start from scratch and build a new base of power. He quickly began to craft a powerful military force, cultivating the loyalty of the local samurai. After his victory in 1600 at the Battle of Sekigahara, Ieyasu further consolidated his power by defeating the Toyotomi clan and being officially granted the title of shōgun by the emperor in 1603. In order to ensure that no other daimyō could make a similar ascent, the newly-formed Tokugawa Shogunate instituted several policies aimed at gaining control over its feudal lords that had the unintended consequence of strengthening the chōnin.

One of Ieyasu's first acts as shōgun was to fully align Japan's class structure with Neo-Confucian philosophy. Accordingly, Edo society was stratified into the *shimin* (four divisions of society): *shi* (warriors), *nō* (farmers), *kō* (artisans), and *shō* (merchants), in descending order of importance and power. According to Neo-Confucian thought, the *bushi*, as the wise, ruling class, were at the top of society; next were the farmers, who were highly respected for growing the food essential to all, followed by the artisans, who created goods from the raw materials produced by others. At the bottom lay the merchants, who were held in contempt because they only benefitted from the labor of others, producing no goods of their own. David Howell notes that though the adoption of this Neo-Confucian societal structure was primarily a response to the

shogunate's military need to control its subjects, the philosophy behind it also guaranteed benevolent rule to the lower classes. (21) Samurai were taught that, as protectors of the state, they had the right to tax and expect obedience from those beneath them, but also that they had an obligation to serve the lower classes. (Hall 175) In many cases, this responsibility was met through the undertaking of massive public works projects to build dams, canals, water lines, and public parks for use by the general public. Though labor was generally provided by the lower classes, the daimyō contributed substantial financial resources to the efforts. This burden sharing combined with the universal benefits of the endeavors helped to blur the rigid official class structure. In effect, the Neo-Confucian value system the Tokugawa hoped would maintain a strict social order actually assisted in undermining it by improving the standard of living of the commoners while forcing the ruling class to divert substantial amounts of resources.

Furthermore, in reality, the Neo-Confucian class structure did not weigh as heavily on commoners as it may appear. Legally, the famers, artisans, and merchants were, for most purposes, treated as one group. (Howell 24) Indeed, Howell claims, "Insofar as each status group performed a distinct function, all were equally important to the maintenance of social order. Status relations were thus guided as much by horizontal differences in social function as vertical distinctions in rank." (31)

Neo-Confucian-based educational policy was also a factor in the rise of the chōnin. Initially, Confucian schools, such as the Yushima Seidō, depicted in print forty-seven of Hiroshige's *Meisho Edo Hyakkei* (Fig. 2), were set up in Edo to educate the sons of the ruling class. As a result, the Buddhist clergy, who had traditionally been responsible for teaching the elite, shifted their attention to instructing both the male and female children of commoners in *terakoya* (temple schools). The chōnin population soon attained a degree of numeracy and

literacy rivaling that of the samurai. By the mid-nineteenth century, school attendance in the city of Edo had reached between seventy and eighty percent. (Kato 3) The development of a widely educated commoner population assisted not only in the running of the lower classes' various commercial enterprises and in the development of a rich chōnin culture, but also in increasing their overall prominence and clout in a Confucian-based society that placed a high value on the concept of merit.

The shogunate's implementation of the *sankin kōutai* (alternate attendance) system also played an important role in helping to strengthen the chōnin. This doctrine mandated that all daimyō spend only one half their time in their own domains. The remaining portion was to be spent in Edo, where their families were forced to live full-time as hostages. The bakufu mandated that they build elaborate residences as part of a careful city planning effort aimed at eliminating the possibility of a successful revolt. The city was arranged in a spiral, with the mansions of the most loyal and important daimyō located closest to the castle and the least loyal a safe distance away. Print fifty-four of the *Meisho Edo Hyakkei* shows the estate, located along the inner moat of Edo Castle, of Ii Naosuke, one of the shogun's most trusted daimyō advisors. (Fig. 3) Daimyō considered especially likely to rebel were surrounded by those who were viewed as being more dependable. Seventy percent of the city's land was allocated to the bushi, forming the *yamanote*, or "towards the mountains" district; the remaining thirty percent became the shitamachi, home to the chōnin (Smith 9).

The policy of sankin kōtai had a significant impact on class structure. It brought about a sharp increase in demand for the services provided by the chōnin. As the daimyō and their samurai retainers moved to Edo en masse, the bakufu-mandated construction of their elaborate mansions required enormous amounts of raw materials and skilled labor, and their high-class

tastes created a booming market for the trade of expensive imported goods facilitated by the commercial sector. In essence, the shogunate's policies had reduced the samurai to little more than a class of consumers.

By the nineteenth century, the samurai were in dire financial straits. After over a century of being forced to maintain two main residences and regularly organize massive processions between Edo and their distant land holdings, the sankin kōtai policy had effectively plunged the daimyō and their retainers into poverty. The meager stipends of rice they received had been fixed centuries earlier and were nearly worthless as a result of inflation and Edo's transition to a largely cash-based economy. Feudal lords found themselves forced to take high-interest loans from the increasingly wealthy merchants in order to pay for their expenses. Lower level retainers routinely took up additional employment, producing various handicrafts in their free time or occasionally working under a merchant or artisan.

Hiroshige exemplifies this phenomenon. Born as a low-level member of the samurai class, he served for some twenty years as head of a brigade of firefighters tasked with protecting Edo Castle and the homes of the ruling elite. Like many of his contemporaries, Hiroshige was forced to find a means to supplement his income. Two years after assuming his hereditary position in the fire brigade, Hiroshige apprenticed himself to ukiyo-e master Utagawa Toyohiro. In essence, he had become by necessity an artisan—a chōnin—despite his aristocratic pedigree. Like many ukiyo-e artists, Hiroshige found himself creating prints that, while undeniably art, essentially served as advertisements for the city's merchants. The Tokyo Museum of Advertising and Marketing cites on its website Hiroshige's print of *Seki-juku* (Fig. 3), one of the post stations portrayed in the *Tokaidō go-jyū-san tsugi*, or *The Fifty-Three Stations of the Tokaidō*, as one example of product placement in his work. (sec. 5) Here, the names of face powders are written

in the place the name of the local daimyō should appear. Later, as Hiroshige's skill improved and his talent became better known, many of his prints, including the *Meisho Edo Hyakkei*, were commissioned by publishers primarily for their artistic appeal. Hiroshige was working for merchants after having been the apprentice of an artisan, both things that would have once been nearly unthinkable for a man coming from a samurai background.

The vast network of roads constructed under the Tokugawa shogunate functioned as a further class leveler. The entire system, known as the Gokaidō, consisted of five major thoroughfares and eight auxiliary roads. (Vaporis 19) The main highways all originated at the Nihonbashi—the bridge at the official center of Japan and the zero distance point according to bakufu decree. Safe, well-maintained, and strictly controlled through a system of checkpoints spaced every four to twelve kilometers apart, the roads provided the bakufu a means to better control movement throughout Japan. The post stations also served as resting and gathering places for travelers. At each, enterprising businessmen set up inns, restaurants, and shops selling *omiyage* (souvenirs). Itinerant entertainers provided amusements. The new road network quickly turned travel into a national obsession in which members of all classes took part. Samurai and commoner alike took to the roads for business and pleasure, and illustrated travel guides and series of travel-themed ukiyo-e prints, such as Hiroshige's *Tokaidō go-jyū-san tsugi*, became frequent bestsellers. Additionally, the post stations functioned as some of the only locations in Tokugawa period Japan where classes could mix freely and with relative equality. In 1854, Fukuzawa Yukichi noted that he shared the roads "with all kinds of travelers—a foolish-looking son of a rich man; a bald-headed grandsire, some geisha, gay and richly dressed, and other women of questionable reputation; farmers; priests; rich and poor." (Vaporis 260) The transit facilitated by the vast network of roads also allowed prominent merchant families from Kyoto,

Osaka, Ise, and other cities to open branch stores in the new capital of Edo, further increasing their affluence and power.

While Nihonbashi was the center of the road network, it was the shogunate's economic policies that provided the most assistance in developing the wealth of the area's residents. Realizing the necessity of the chōnin to his new capital, Ieyasu encouraged their immigration to the city and established Nihonbashi as a center for trade. As an incentive, he accorded them significant special treatment. Merchants and guilds of artisans who agreed to move to Edo were officially licensed, guaranteeing them priority access to lucrative bushi customers. Exceptional treatment was also given with regard to housing; for example, a group of fishermen from the village of Tsukuda were granted permission to construct an artificial island in Edo Bay. (Tomioka 2) Other skilled workers were also granted their own neighborhoods. Such an area assigned to a group of cotton sellers can be seen in the seventh print in Hiroshige's *Meisho Edo Hyakkei* (Fig. 5). Incoming artisans and merchants were also routinely granted tax abatements in a stark contrast with the heavily taxed samurai. Finally, the imported merchants enjoyed a monopoly on trade as it was a profession considered "unworthy" of the higher classes.

The story of Mitsui Takatoshi serves as an excellent example of the success achieved by many merchants arriving in Edo. Mitsui's father, originally a member of the samurai class, sensed the need for merchants after the Battle of Sekigahara, and decided to surrender his position at the top of Edo-period society and open a sake brewery in his native Mie. After his death, Mitsui's mother, Shuho, continued the business, eventually expanding it to sell miso and engage in pawn broking. She sent her eldest son to Edo to open a branch store; Takatoshi was apprenticed under him. Eventually, using his savings from his apprenticeship salary, Takatoshi entered business as a money lender. After amassing enough capital, he opened a dry goods store,

unique in its policy of charging a fixed price for goods, accepting payments only in cash, and selling not only to samurai, but to all levels of Edo society. Soon, he also became licensed to perform money exchanges, opening banks in Edo, Kyoto, and Osaka to enable the transfer of wealth between the silver-based economies in Western Japan and Edo's gold-based market. Reflecting the financial predicament of the samurai, Mitsui warned in his will that his heirs should "never loan money to daimyō because they would be unlikely to return it" (Dersin 111). By Hiroshige's time, Mitsui's business, depicted in the eighth print of the *Meisho Edo Hyakkei* (Fig. 6), had become an institution and remains so even today.

From the prosperous chōnin, a rich culture blossomed. By the late eighteenth century, the *Edokko*, or "child of Edo," as the residents of the shitamachi came to be called, had developed a unique character and personality. Santō Kyōden describes the Edokko in 1788 as follows:

> He receives his bath in the water of the city's aqueduct; he grows up in sight of the gargoyles on the roof of Edo Castle. He is not attached to money; he is not stingy. His funds do not cover the night's lodging. He is raised in a high-class, protected manner. He is quite unlike either warrior or country bumpkin. He is a man of Nihonbashi to the bone. He has *iki* (refinement) and *hari* (strength of character). (Nishiyama 42)

This segment of the population was generally happy to serve the samurai, knowing both that they wielded much covert power through their control of commerce and that many lower-level bushi envied them and their lifestyle.

Edokko culture was centered on the city's amusement districts, home to—among other diversions— *kabuki* theaters, *bunraku* performances, tea houses, restaurants, sumo stadiums, brothels, and street performers. Hard-working chōnin would spend much of their free time and money in these areas, where they were often joined by the upper class. Though these areas came to be described by the samurai class as *akusho*, or "bad places" (Kobayashi 19), such a branding did little to discourage the ruling elite from patronizing the theoretically off-limits districts.

Afraid of the watchful eyes of bakufu police, they would simply travel to the areas inside palanquins with their faces hidden.

Perhaps the most famous of Edo's amusement districts was the Yoshiwara, the city's officially-licensed prostitution quarter. The top courtesans of the Yoshiwara were accomplished in poetry, writing, calligraphy, and flower arranging as well as sexual acts. (Calza 7) Visiting samurai would leave the two swords branding them as such at the gate to what was effectively a walled community, essentially making them the equal of every other customer. In Yoshiwara, status was determined not by social pedigree but instead by wealth. As a result, anyone with enough cash could participate. A rich chōnin could enjoy a lifestyle within the Yoshiwara that only the elite could live outside of it. Inside, those of all social statuses could enjoy a brief respite from the rigid structure of Tokugawa society so long as they had enough money. Chōnin who could not afford access to the great beauties could live vicariously. Just outside the gate to the district was the shop of Tsutaya Jūzaburō, one of Edo's most influential publishers. He had a monopoly on detailed ukiyo-e guidebooks to the courtesans, their services, and the pleasures which could be purchased inside. (Calza 234)

Like Yoshiwara, the licensed theater districts also helped to blur class distinctions. All classes and both men and women could enjoy kabuki, bunraku, and the various variety shows, such as animal acts and juggling, performed on the streets. Kabuki in particular developed into a major art form, with huge casts of actors, elaborate costumes, sets with trapdoors, and musical accompaniment. Despite being a form of entertainment which had originated among the commoners, members of the samurai class also flocked to the performances. In contrast with the austere, upper class Noh theater, kabuki was extravagant and far more entertaining.

Unlike kabuki, sumo began as an imperial court ritual grounded in Shinto beliefs. However, during the Edo period, it spread to become hugely popular throughout all levels of Japanese society. Similarly to kabuki and prostitution, sumo was officially licensed and regulated by the bakufu and restricted to specific districts. One of the most famous areas for sumo stables in Edo was Ryōgoku, depicted in print five of Hiroshige's *Meisho Edo Hyakkei* (Fig. 7) Although daimyō often provided the salaries of sumo wrestlers, the wrestlers themselves were drawn from all classes. In fact, being chosen as a sumo wrestler provided one of the only chances for a commoner to become a member of the ruling class. The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston notes in their exhibition, *Sumo: Japan's Big Sport*, that the highest-ranked wrestlers were occasionally granted honorary samurai status, including the right to wear two swords. The existence of such an option, as well as the originally aristocratic sport's widespread popularity with all classes, helped to further confuse class structure in Tokugawa Japan.

The *chanoyu* (tea ceremony), a carefully orchestrated ritual combining the preparation of tea with poetry and art, is another example of an upper class pursuit that spread to the chōnin during the Edo period. In the late sixteenth century, its greatest following was among the aristocracy, samurai, and certain wealthy abbots and merchants who could afford the costly ceramic and lacquer pieces used for preparing and serving the tea. (Dersin 97) By the nineteenth century, however, tea drinking had become widespread in Japan. As the ceramics industry grew and costs fell, commoners of more modest means were able to afford the required tea paraphernalia. As tea houses became popular places of respite along the roads of Edo, the chanoyu became an important opportunity for inter-class interaction. By the early eighteenth century, *sencha* (tea for steeping) began to be prepared widely. Drinking sencha was a less formal occasion, and both chōnin and samurai who met in the cultural clubs and salons of Edo

liked to gather for intellectual discussions at teahouses serving sencha. (Guth 38) Print 117 of the *Meisho Edo Hyakkei*, entitled *Yushima Tenjin sakaue chōbō*, does not show the actual shrine it is named after, but rather focuses on the hilltop view and the two teahouses at the entrance, which had become popular destinations. (Fig. 8)

Ukiyo-e literally translates as "pictures of the floating world" and documents the life of the Edokko. It was a chōnin art form that prospered not by selling to select patrons, but by the mass marketing to all levels of society made possible through the use of woodblock prints. In contrast with prior forms of Japanese art, which were consumed by and glamorized the lives of the aristocracy and imperial court, ukiyo-e drew its subject matter from the actors, courtesans, pilgrimage places, shops, and restaurants that the chōnin themselves made popular. The term *ukiyo*, originally a Buddhist designation for transient beauty, came to refer to the lifestyle devoted to the pursuit of pleasure in the Yoshiwara and other entertainment districts. As a result, ukiyo-e artists depicted the ephemeral experiences of the here and now. (Kita 56) The art was produced in the form of advertisements, calendars, books, souvenirs, and inexpensive wall art aimed at the residents of the shitamachi. But like other aspects of their nascent middle class culture, ukiyo-e transcended its chōnin origins. As it became more popular, many wealthy daimyō commissioned works in the style. Hiroshige himself was hired by the lords of Tendō to produce a silk scroll painting of fishing boats on Tsukudajima with gold embellishments in the ukiyo-e style. Later, finding themselves deeply indebted to wealthy merchants, the Tendō lords endeavored to use the scroll as restitution. (Morse 193) That this was attempted shows how close the tastes and lifestyles of the daimyō and wealthy chōnin had become.

Hiroshige's prints give us a glimpse into what life was like in Edo at the peak of Edokko culture. By the time of his death from cholera in 1858, the shogunate was in decline. The end of

the samurai class and feudal Japan is indirectly recorded in his life and work. *Shitaya Hirokōji*, print thirteen of the *Meisho Edo Hyakkei,* shows an assortment of the pressures mounting against the bakufu. (Fig. 9) Prominent on the right is the Matsuzakaya department store, representing the difficulty posed by increasingly powerful merchants. Along the street, an organized tour group of chōnin women marked by their identical umbrellas indicates the increasing affluence of the commoner population. Finally, in the foreground, a group of samurai wearing western-style pants foreshadows the impending collapse of the Tokugawa regime. The Tokugawa shogunate's policies which so brilliantly kept the peace for more than two hundred and sixty years had the unintended effect of unleashing the repressed power of the chōnin and setting in motion the gradual decline of the samurai. The fact that the vast majority of Japanese today feel that they are part of the middle class can be traced to the rise of the chōnin and associated societal leveling which occurred during the Edo period. With the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the samurai as a class vanished. The skills and services of the chōnin gained even more value in the climate of rapid modernization taking place in Meiji Japan. The increase in the power of Edo's educated and enterprising chōnin population continued through and beyond the Meiji era to provide the backbone necessary for Japan's postwar economic miracle and the development of its ubiquitous middle class.

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