Japanese Woodblock Prints as a Lens and a Mirror for Modernity

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Like many people, I was drawn to Japanese woodblock prints, or *ukiyo-e*, by their great detail, vibrant colors, and depiction of life in the pre-modern era of Japan. I bought them as souvenirs during my first trip to Japan in 1996 and chose them for their affordability, ease of portability, and their Japaneseess. In the classroom, I used these unique items as illustrations of a bygone era of Japan. Throughout the years, students have responded positively to Japanese woodblock prints. They are very student-friendly in that they are visual and appeal to people of many ages; are not abstract and can be appreciated on many levels; and are abundantly accessible in books and on the Internet. Students also respond positively to *ukiyo-e* due to their great variety: samurai, geisha, actors, and landscapes. Young people can easily pick up the themes of bravery, humor, satire, and beauty. *Ukiyo-e* have been used for decades to vividly illustrate books and other literature on pre-modern Japan.

Visual representation has long been used successfully in the classroom. While pleasing to the eye, art can also quickly present concepts that might require pages of text to adequately convey. For
example, Renaissance paintings have been used for centuries to teach about the ideas of humanism. The use of Michelangelo’s *David* can show the *rebirth* of Greco-Roman values of beauty, youth, heroism, and the importance of the individual. However, a knowledgeable teacher is still needed to point out the advancements from the pre-Renaissance period and its legacy in Western civilization. As demonstrated in Sally Stanhope’s article on *Casta* paintings, images help visualize difficult concepts, such as the role that race plays in Latin American socio-economic realities.\(^1\) Similarly, *ukiyo-e* can be used to teach concepts about early modern Japan, such as urbanization, economic development, and modernization.

Slides were the main form of visual presentation in the classroom years ago, but now teachers are much more likely to use PowerPoint or Prezi presentations with images garnered from the Internet. The Internet has greatly increased the availability of the Japanese woodblock prints and their variety. There is also the simple fact that students prefer when lectures are delivered with images. Being raised as visual learners from a young age, they respond better to information if it is presented via maps, charts, or art. While there is the danger of dumbing down a topic with stock images, the benefits outweigh the disadvantages.\(^2\)

*Ukiyo-e* are important in classrooms since they move the narrative away from outdated viewpoints to a broader understanding of pre-modern Japan. The oversubscription of Japanese samurai in Western conceptions stems from the decades-old fascination with warriors who had European knight-like weapons and a code of ethics. This can be seen as an example of orientalism, just as pervasive in views of East Asia as in South West Asia.\(^3\) While samurai have the cool factor, the overemphasis on them by academics as well as modern media has given us a distorted view of Tokugawa society. Merchants, craftsmen, and townspeople constituted a growing and vibrant sector of Japanese society. A focus on this part of Japanese society also forms a strong continuity with modern Japan. It brings an economic viewpoint into the discussion of Tokugawa Japan rather than just political and social viewpoints. *Ukiyo-e* can highlight for students topics such as urbanization and the merchant class, and move away from the stereotypes of dashing samurai and passive merchants and peasants, bringing out a more healthy and nuanced view of traditional Japanese society.
Background

What makes a nation modern? A standard explanation might include a capitalist economy with specialized labor, a developed infrastructure, and educational institutions serving a large urban middle class. By this definition, Japan was a modernizing nation before the arrival of the Americans in 1853. By 1800, Japan could be seen clearly to have developed a market economy. The Tokugawa guided the economy with limited involvement and a pro-business mindset. A complex transportation and communication system had been established while educational institutions were still in their infancy. Large urban centers and a thriving middle class had already developed.

Historians argue that modernization in Japan did not emerge suddenly after the Meiji Restoration in 1868. It had strong precursors during the Tokugawa era. The popular art of woodblock prints (*ukiyo-e*) are one lens through which to see these modernizing forces at work. Long the domain of art historians, this commercial product has been largely ignored by economic historians, except as an illustration of the pre-industrial era. Yet, antecedents of modernization can be seen in the late Tokugawa era in a micro-history study that examines the production and consumption of prints and the development of a national culture.

Advancements in technology and materials encouraged the spread of *ukiyo-e*. Bright colors for clothing were prohibited by law and custom, but were lavishly used in the prints as if to compensate for the restriction. Recycling of cherry woodblocks and improved paper-making techniques promoted the efficient use of materials (Figure 1). Multiple colors for each print required a division of labor process that led to mass production (Figure 2). Initially commissioned by publishers or wholesale dealers, *ukiyo-e* were the products of a collective effort of artists, engravers, and printers, linked to publishers who provided the capital. According to Seiichiro Takahashi, publishers took on the role of bankers in the commodification of capital. These publishers or wholesalers were organized into trade guilds that issued joint-stock shares.

Printing was cheaper in Japan than in the West, where machinery and various font types were needed. *Ukiyo-e* workers were paid by the piece, as wage labor had become the norm for urban workers by
the end of the eighteenth century. These craftsmen usually served a ten-year apprenticeship and were stratified in varying levels of skilled labor. Often, family members would work as a team with more expert members doing the engraving and the less-skilled members working with paper. This breakdown of labor was not unlike the so-called “domestic system” that developed in Europe in the 1700s. Using this division of labor, the mass production of the popular woodblock prints reached new heights (Figures 3 and 4). A visualization of the popular story of the 47 Ronin went through more than 400,000 prints.10

The local distribution and affordable pricing of woodblock prints brought these consumer items within reach of many townspeople. Distribution of ukiyo-e was done by shops called ezoshiya (picture-book stores), which also sold other forms of printed media. Prints
could be sold as single broadsheets or in the popular comic book style of fiction. *Ukiyo-e* could also be rented for a small fee from itinerant peddlers, of which there were estimated to be 656 by the year 1800 in Edo alone.\(^{11}\) The price of a single broadsheet was twenty *mon*, slightly more than the cost of a bowl of soba noodles and well within the reach of wage-earning urbanites, or *chonin*.

The consumption of *ukiyo-e* also showed signs of modernization during the Tokugawa era. The commodification of *ukiyo-e* has long been ignored by scholars interested in the content of the print rather than the print itself. In fact, the “product-ness” of *ukiyo-e* could coexist with and yet be separate from the images they conveyed.\(^{12}\) While we know much about the images consumed, we know less about the consumers. Some prints depict consumers, but they are rare. One Katsushika Hokusai woodblock print, titled *Ezoshiten* (Picture Print Shop) and available online at the Tokyo Metropolitan Library, shows a browser with two swords, indicating his samurai status. The shopper in the foreground is carrying a load, indicating commoner status. The authorities tried, to little avail, to dissuade samurai from consuming such common culture, but in the crowded cities, the line between samurai and commoners was increasingly blurred. A *daimyo* record from the Tosa domain noted that one samurai retainer bought seventy *ukiyo-e* prints in Edo as gifts for

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people back home. Woodblock prints needed no scroll or alcove and were simply pasted or tacked on the wall of a house. Teahouses put images on walls for the entertainment of their customers. Peasants may not have seen the point of spending their hard-earned cash on such frivolous items, but we cannot rule them out either. A comic novel called *Ukiyo-buro* (*Floating World Bathhouse*) hinted at the identity of some *ukiyo-e* consumers in a scene of young boys praising the *ukiyo-e* artist Toyokuni. They declare that his prints are “powerful” and are always taken as presents to the Kansai region.

It is clear that prints were mass-market in a sophisticated manner. Publishers of *ukiyo-e* experimented with different styles, shapes, colors, and limited editions to appeal to the widest audience possible. Some *ukiyo-e* had trademarks or seals, such as a three-tiered Mt. Fuji or a flower shape (Figure 5). This type of branding suggests that for many contemporaries, *ukiyo-e* were commodities created by well-known and trusted businesses.

Publishers were extremely attuned to the fast-changing tastes of *ukiyo-e* consumers. For example, they colluded with *kabuki* troupes to get advanced notice on the latest costumes of famous actors. Indeed, one of Isoda Koryūsai’s well-received prints was reworked seven years later to incorporate a newer, more-fashionable hairstyle. When an earthquake hit the city of Edo in 1855, *Namazu-e* (prints depicting a catfish shaking the earth) were released within two days (Figure 6). Buyers of *ukiyo-e* were not simply passive consumers. A print showing actors’ faces imprinted on the shells of turtles did not sell well for one vendor, whereas one showing a shogun hunting at the base of Mt. Fuji proved a bigger success. *Ukiyo-e* were appreciated by consumers as much for their trendiness as for their mastery of visual form. This level of sophistication by a cultivated consumer base foreshadowed modern habits of consumption.

In addition, the development of urbanization, travel, and a national culture can be seen in a micro-history of *ukiyo-e*. While woodblock printing had first flowered in Kyoto and later Osaka with religious and actors’ prints, respectively, it was in mid-eighteenth-century Edo that it reached its greatest heights, with prints (*Edo-e*) highlighting fashionable spots in the city. The new capital produced a “common culture” formed largely by townspeople, with lower ranking samurai contributing a “passive consumerism.” Utagawa Hiroshige, also known as Andō Hiroshige, had previously portrayed women and
actors, but took a dramatic turn for landscapes with his *Edo-e, Famous Views of the Eastern Capital*.

The woodblock prints also show a new culture of travel that was developing at this time. While trade and religious pilgrimages had always existed at some level, the alternative attendance, or *sankin-kotai* system during the Tokugawa era marked a large increase in travel. This system required feudal lords to reside in Edo, strengthening Tokugawa central control. However, the lords had to return to their home provinces every other year to maintain local control. This required travel changed the face of Japan: roads and post-stations had to be constructed to help facilitate the process. This culture of travel can be seen in many prints, particularly in Hiroshige’s *Fifty Three Stations of the Tōkaidō*\(^\text{20}\) (Figure 7).

Landscape artists, like Hiroshige and Hokusai, helped create a national culture just as much as kabuki and haiku poetry (Figures 8 and 9).\(^\text{21}\) As Henry Smith wrote, “The latent nationalism of Mt. Fuji became increasingly explicit in the course of the Tokugawa period,
through a nationalist revival known as national learning.”22 This new national culture was transported from the center to the periphery by people visiting Edo and buying souvenirs to take home or send back to the provinces. Through Japan’s national infrastructure of roads, this diffusion was being carried out during the two centuries before the Meiji Restoration. These prints were popular because they could be enjoyed by people who were unable to undertake such journeys themselves. This new sense of a physical Japan created a common feeling of nationalism that developed further in the Meiji period.

*Ukiyo-e* further contributed to national culture by defining Japanese-ness through depicting images of foreigners. Chinese, Koreans, Dutch, and later Americans, British, Russians, French, Ainu, and Africans were shown in a reverse form of orientalism.23 This genre reached its peak in the famous Yokohama prints of the very late 1850s and early 1860s. The Yokohama prints were very popular in their day and speak to the Japanese desire for information about the outside world (*Figures 10 and 11*). The Yokohama artists

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focused on the unfamiliar and unusual, and the prints were novel enough to be bought by Westerners. Yet their popularity was short-lived and after 1862, few images of non-Japanese were produced, possibly due to anti-foreign sentiment.24

The point of micro-history is to “[ask] large questions in small places.”25 *Ukiyo-e* as consumer items have been neglected by historians but can illuminate the early modern period in Japan, beyond describing the Tokugawa era in such seemingly negative terms as “feudal” and “isolated.” *Ukiyo-e* show how in production, consumption, and the development of national culture, Japan was already well into the transitional stages of modernization. I have said that the prints are a lens to see this development, but as *ukiyo-e* changed first in the Yokohama and later in the Meiji prints (Figure 12), a lens turns into a mirror, in which Japan could marvel at itself as it became fully modern.

Notes


6. Totman, 339.


11. Akai, 189.


15. Totman, 340.

16. Akai, 182.


18. Akai, 179.

19. Smith, 32.


21. Totman, 344.


Appendix A

Lesson Plan

Learning Objectives
Students will be able to build an argument and understand that the precursors of modernization in Japan existed during the Tokugawa era. This can be seen in the production, distribution, and consumption of Japanese woodblock prints. Also, the development of a national culture can also be seen in Japanese woodblock prints by the nineteenth century.

Key Questions
1. How do the production, distribution, and consumption of Japanese woodblock prints show the antecedents of modernization?
2. How do Japanese woodblock prints also show the development of a national culture during the Tokugawa era?
3. How does this challenge Western definitions of modernity?
4. How does this challenge the typical narrative of modernization being brought to Asia by Westerners in the nineteenth century?
5. How much of an economic miracle was the industrialization during the Meiji era if it already acquired the antecedents of modernization before the arrival of Westerners?

Placement
This lesson could be done at end of Tokugawa era or when you discuss Meiji era where it could act as a good review of the early modern period of Japan.

Suggested Lesson Plan
Aim: How “Modern” was Tokugawa Japan?
Bell Ringer/Do Now: Students will discuss the quote below and answer the following questions:

*A great peace is at hand. The Shōgun rules firmly and with justice at Edo. No more shall we have to live by the sword. I have seen that great profit can be made honorably. I shall brew sake and soy sauce and we shall prosper.*

— Mitsui Takatoshi (1622-1694), founder of the Mitsui empire

1. What does the writer mean when he says “No more shall we have to live by the sword”?

2. How does the quote indicate changes in Tokugawa society?

3. The Mitsui empire began with food products. What businesses is Mitsui involved in today?

Lesson Development


Discussion of the video of key questions such as “How does this challenge Western definitions of modernity?” and “What makes a nation modern?”

Group-work: Either students could view Japanese woodblock prints in a computer lab or they could view them from a smartboard or projector where a PowerPoint is played continuously on a timed loop.

Students will work together to answer questions about the production, distribution, and consumption of the prints, such as, “How is the production of Japanese woodblock prints similar to the ‘domestic system’ process?” and “Who were the consumers of Japanese woodblock prints?” We will then discuss these issues as a class.

Final Summary: Loop back to have students answer the Aim so the main idea is understood. Then, discuss the lesson as a micro-history where items like Japanese woodblock prints or salt, cotton, etc., can be used to highlight larger issues. Ask students, “How can micro-histories be useful in the study of history?” and “What other items have been used as micro-histories?”
Projects and Extension Activities

1. A comparison of Japanese and Western art in terms of perspective, subject matter, and mass-produced paper prints versus one-of-a-kind canvas paintings.


Appendix B

**Recommended Websites**

- Facts and Details Japan: “Ukiyo-e (Japanese Woodblock Prints)”
  <http://factsanddetails.com/japan/cat20/sub129/item695.html>

- Ukiyo-e.se: “A Guide to the *Ukiyo-e* Sites of the Internet”
  <http://www.ukiyo-e.se/guide.html>

- Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco: “Legion of Honor”

- University of Tsukuba Library: “Educational Colored Woodblock Prints”
  <http://www.tulips.tsukuba.ac.jp/pub/kichosho/kyoiku-nishikie-eng.html>

- Connecticut College: “Asian Art Collections”
  <http://oak.conncoll.edu/visual/asian-art/Caroline%20Black%20Collection%20of%20Japanese%20Woodcuts/index.html>

- Brooklyn Museum: “Hiroshige’s One Hundred Famous Views of Edo”
  <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/features/edo>

- Metropolitan Museum of Art: “Woodblock Prints in the Ukiyo-e Style”
  <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ukiy/hd_ukiy.htm>
<http://www.mfa.org/exhibitions/creative-process-modern-japanese-printmaking>

University of Pittsburgh: “Barry Rosensteel Japanese Print Collection”
<http://images.library.pitt.edu/r/rosensteel/contents.html>

Appendix C

Standards

Common Core Curriculum:

Economics

Exchange and Markets:

D2.Eco.3.9-12. Analyze the ways in which incentives influence what is produced and distributed in a market system.

D2.Eco.4.9-12. Evaluate the extent to which competition among sellers and among buyers exists in specific markets.

D2.Eco.5.9-12. Describe the consequences of competition in specific markets.

The National Economy:

D2.Eco.10.9-12. Use current data to explain the influence of changes in spending, production, and the money supply on various economic conditions.

D2.Eco.13.9-12. Explain why advancements in technology and investments in capital goods and human capital increase economic growth and standards of living.

History

Change, Continuity, and Context:

D2.His.1.9-12. Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.
D2. His.3.9-12. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.

Perspectives:

D2.His.4.9-12. Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.

D2. His.9.9-12. Analyze how current interpretations of the past are limited by the extent to which available historical sources represent perspectives of people.

Historical Sources and Evidence:

D2.His.10.9-12. Detect possible limitations in various kinds of historical evidence and differing secondary interpretations.

D2.His.12.9-12. Use questions generated about multiple historical sources to pursue further inquiry and investigate additional sources.

Causation and Argumentation:

D2.His.15.9-12. Distinguish between long-term causation and triggering events in developing a historical argument.

D2.His.17.9-12. Critique the central arguments in secondary works of history on related topics in multiple media in terms of their historical accuracy.

AP World Curriculum (Specifically how the piece will address the themes):

Theme 1 - Landscapes show human changes in the environment
Theme 2 - Development of a national culture
Theme 4 - Development and intensification of a market economy
Theme 5 - Development of a middle class and urbanization