SOCIAL HISTORY OF JAPANESE POPULAR CULTURE

THE CULTURE OF EDO

(1600–1868)

(THE PRECURSOR OF EDO: CLASSICAL JAPANESE CULTURE)

- Aristocratic culture of Nara (710–794) and Heian (794–1185)
- Feudal culture of Kamakura (1185–1333) and Muromachi (1333–1573)
- Buddhist culture (sculpture, painting) at its height during Heian and Kamakura
- Poetry, ink painting, tea ceremony, ceramics, gardens
- Chronicles, books, diaries (*Kojiki, Genji Monogatari, Makura no Sōshi*)
- These texts circulated only among the aristocracy (i.e. the were not "popular" yet)
- Contemplative texts based on suggestion, simplicity, perishability, and asymmetry
- New aesthetical concepts are introduced (e.g. *yūgen, aware, sabi*)
- Heian art often reflects the atmosphere of collapse and catastrophe
- The first mentions of *kawaii* (Heian); the first manga (12ct.),"zoomorphism" popular

The first manga (12ct.)

THE CULTURE OF EDO (1600-1868)

GENERAL BACKGROUND

- The **beginning** of this period (1600s) was symbolized by
  - Battle at Sekigahara, which ended the "warring states" mayhem (*sengoku jidai*)
  - Political unification of Japan and military rule the Tokugawa shogunate
  - Brand new forms of popular culture emerged, making Edo/Kyoto the "consumer/producer capital"

- Firmly established commercial culture industry, fully conceptualized notion of "popular culture", and its further massification

- The townsman culture (*chōnin bunka*), peaking during the "golden age" of Edo culture, i.e. the Genroku period (1688-1704)

- Japan's isolationist policy toward the outside world (*sakoku*) created a culturally locked state (cf. the Galapagos syndrome), but Japanese culture did not develop in complete isolation

- The **ending** of this period (1850s to 1860s) was symbolized by:
  - Meiji Restoration of the Emperor's power and rapid modernization of the Empire
  - Commodore Perry's black ships (*kurofune*) arriving at Uraga Channel (Tokyo Bay)
  - The *ē janaika* movement: spontaneous, carnivalesque eruption of the peasants

Period illustration of the *ē janaika movement* (1867–1868)

TOWNS, CITIES, DISTRICTS

- The local lords (*daimyō*) laid the foundations necessary for the development of popular culture by establishing and nurturing "castle towns" (*jōkamachi*) (e.g. Nagoya, Kagoshima)
- Some towns grew into "cities", forming commercial and cultural centres (Kyoto, Osaka, Edo)

- Around 1650 Edo was already a cultural center of Japan, rivalling the old center, Kyoto:
  - Kyoto: production of cultural artefacts and transmission of artistic techniques
  - Edo: the consumer capital and the center of the hegemonic culture of the period
  - Kyoto to Edo: rapid flow of high-quality goods (*kudarimono*) from the Kamigata area

- Large shipments from Kyoto to Edo (rice, oil, sake, soy sauce) improved the transport network
- New quarters located near temples and shrines (*monzenmachi*)
- "flower towns" with noble geishas (*hanamachi*)
- Edo divided into "uptown" (*yamanote*) and "downtown" (*shitamachi*)
- Edo reaches population of one million in 1721

THE POPULATION OF EDO
(picture: color photochrome of Edo in 1865)

WARRIORS

- The warrior population (*bushi*), its manners and culture contributed to the uniqueness of Edo
- Worshipping warrior-style variations of the ancient customs (mostly from the Kamakura period)
- Warriors in the city stimulated emergence of a unique economy, making Edo a consumer capital

TOWNSMEN

- The townsman culture (*chōnin bun*ka) peaking during the golden age of Genroku period (1688-1704)
- This culture became an "antidote" to classical/folk culture
- Obsessed with spectacle and sex; bearing sentiments of anti-establishment and resistance
- *Edokko* as the "prototypical townspeople", and a new social stratum with own style and language
- Edo townspeople forged ties between the artists (i.e. those necessary for cultural production), and the craftsmen (i.e. those who had the skills to realize such production)

OTHERS

- Masterless samurai (*rōnin*), "street knights" (*kyōkaku*), chivalrous rowdies (*otokodate*), hoodlums (*kabukimono*) and other gangsters roaming the city and looking for fight
- Wandering priests, monks, exorcisers (*sekizoro*)
- Master-courtesans (*tayū*) and female geisha, versus average "red light district" prostitutes

RED LIGHT DISTRICTS

- establishing brothels and red light districts (*yūkaku*)
- Edo's Yoshiwara (1617), Osaka's Shinmachi (1623), Kyoto's Shimabara (1640)
- Artistic geishas move to more sophisticated "flower towns" (*hanamachi*)
- They frequent countless *ochaya* and *ryōriya* (e.g., Kyoto's Gion, or Edo's Shinbashi)
- The oversight of sexual commerce as important governmental function even today

- Yoshiwara became the center of Edo social and cultural life
- At the same time, it reflected lewdness and moral depravity of the townsman culture
- Eventually, townspeople replaced the warriors as the main clients of Yoshiwara
- Pleasure quarters were spaces where the Japanese popular culture was flourishing
- Yoshiwara as a favorite setting of *ukiyoe*:

Hokusai's *ukiyoe* depicting the red light district of Yoshiwara (1811)

Digital reconstruction of Yoshiwara

UKIYOE

- Printing culture became technological basis for the townsman culture (*chōnin bunka*)

- Woodblock prints: illustrated books (*ehon*), colored images (*ninshikie*), and most importantly *ukiyoe:*
    - The term "floating world" (*ukiyo*) was coined by the townsmen for the pleasure districts
    - It is adapted from Buddhism to signify the ephemeral and illusory nature of existence

- Mass production of *ukiyoe* during the Kyōhō period (1716-1736)
- *ukiyoe* (same as the famous Edo craftsmanship) emerged from the *shitamachi* areas around Nihonbashi, where the "cultured men" of the downtown have lived
- Originally cheap products in Japan, *ukiyoe* heavily inspired the West: Japonaiserie (Japanese-themed or influenced arts), the Impressionist movement (Manet, Dega, Van Gogh)

- The main content of *ukiyoe*:
    - interest in nature and female beauty (*bijinga*)
    - Interest in supernatural fantasies and ghosts (*yōkai, bakemono, oni*)
    - Interest in grotesquery, sociopolitical commentary and satire

- *Ukiyoe* as a form of popular culture that made the step from (mass) CULTURE to (high) ART

Kiyonaga (1785), Hokusai (1800)

Hiroshige (1852)
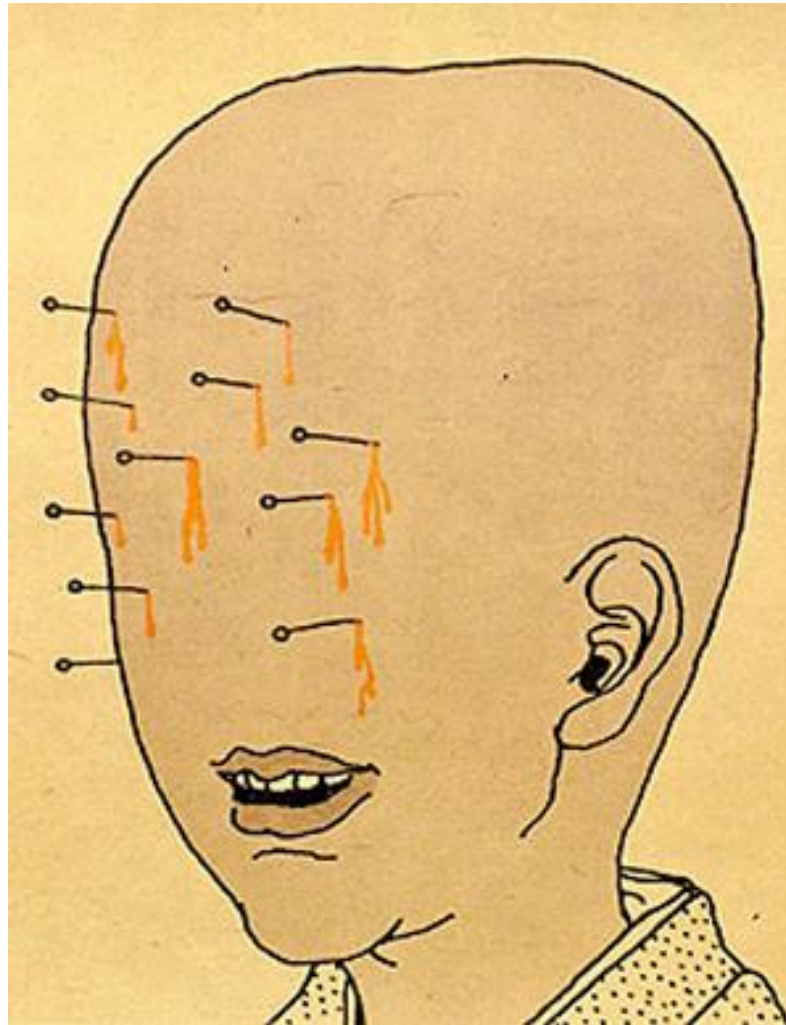
Monsters and shape-shifters (*obakemono*)

Ghosts (*yūrei*)

Folk/mythical creatures

"Eye Monsters"

Ukiyoe as reflection of the West

Ukiyoe as satire (the dog shogun Tsunayoshi)

Tsunayoshi in Japan pop today:

KABUKI

- The "mother" of *kabuki*: Izumo no Okuni (1574-1640)
  - Originally a shrine maiden (*miko*), a prostitute, and the first Japanese "celebrity-entertainer"
  - Okuni modified folk/sacred dances and added sex-appeal (cf. today's *aidoru*)
  - While being cross-dressed, she "behaved oddly" (*kabuku*)

- Okuni performs at the imperial palace (1612), but invites contempt and regulations:
  - only males allowed to perform
  - separation of *kabuki* from prostitution
  - theatres must follow the principle of *kanzen chōaku* (reward virtue, punish vice)

- In the past, *kabuki* was often portrayed as pointless and low-brow form of theater
- Travelling theater troupes performed *kabuki* for small rural towns and villages
- *Kabuki* and the "cult of celebrity" reigns supreme from mid-18th ct
- Yotsuya Kaidan one of the most popular kabuki plays since 1825 (a tale of revenge and haunting)
- The new rulers of Meiji since 1868 saw *kabuki* as a pedagogical tool
- *Kabuki* was proudly presented to the West in 1879

- Same as *ukiyoe*: transformation of *kabuki* from (urban) CULTURE to (global) ART

Kabuki

(C) Association for Traditional Performing Arts of Japan

The transformations of Okuni

The "legacy" of Okuni

OTHER POPULAR PERFORMING ARTS

- Reflected by the townspeople's passion for theatrical arts and music
- The golden age of popular performing arts: the Kaisei period (1804-1830)
- Theater as escape from life (*genjitsu tōhi*) and possibility to break with reality

- Chikamatsu Monzaemon:
    - love suicide plays (*shinjūmono*), based on the conflict of *giri-ninjō*
    - puppet theater (*jōruri, bunraku*) with its impeccable movement of the puppets
    - contemporary stories (*sewamono*) versus historical stories (*jidaimono*)
    - *gidayū* narrators and *shamisen* musicians

- The *Nō* theatre
    - origins in medieval "monkey music" (*sarugaku*) in 11ct; founders: Kan'ami/Zeami Motokio (14-15ct)
    - Wealthy peasants and merchants as the most conspicuous consumers of *Nō*
    - Popularization of the *Nō*-theatre during the Edo period

- Outside Performers
    - During festivals and fairs in popular quarters (Asakusa, Ueno, Ryōgoku)
    - Performances were the soul of middle and lower classes
    - 19th century: rise of "variety halls" (*yose*) in Edo (Kanda, Nihonbashi, Azabu, Akasaka, Yotsuya)
    - Variety halls include performance of comic monologues (*rakugo*), music with narration, magic shows

OTHER POP-CULTURAL GENRES

- Popular literature
  - Fiction published by Tsutaya and Tsuruya sold like hotcakes
  - Martial arts literature (e.g. Miyamoto Musashi's "Book of five rings")
  - Writers and humourists (e.g. Jippensha Ikku, Hiraga Gennai)
  - "yellow-covered books" (*kibyōshi*) as illustrated satirical fiction
  - "vernacular stories" (*kanazōshi*) – classical poetry, fiction, diaries for the masses
  - "Tales of Cooking" (Ryōri Monogatari, 164) as the first published Japanese cookbook

- Erotic works
  - "floating world books" (*ukiyozōshi*) and Ihara Saikaku
  - "smart books" (*sharebon*) about the licensed quarters
  - "the joys of boys" and homo-eroticism among elite ranks (e.g. Chigo Monogatari)
  - "spring pictures" (*shunga*) and popular erotic prints in Japan (e.g. Hishikawa Moronobu)
  - "pillow books" (*makura ehon*) as love manuals (e.g. Katsukawa Shunchō)

Shunga by Hishikawa Moronobu (1618–1694)

Makura ehon by Katsukawa Shunchō (1785)

HIGH ARTS VERSUS LEISURE ACTIVITIES

- **Shrines**: Tokugawa Ieyasu's shrine and mausoleum in Nikkō
- **Gardens**: built in opulent imperial manner (*shinden-zukuri*)
- **Court ceremonies** (*gagaku/bugaku*) played at Shinto rites
- **Art schools**: reading, calligraphy, painting, ikebana
- **Handicraft**: craftsman culture (around Nihonbashi area)
- **Martial arts** (*bugei*): swordsmanship now as martial art

- **Leisure pursuits** (*yūgei*)
  - Popularization of high art (*ikebana*, *chadō*, poetry writing)
  - Pilgrimages (to Mt. Kumano or the Ise shrine) – at times transgressive
  - Culinary tea rooms, *shitamachi* pubs (Yaozen), sushi becomes popular
  - Travelling boom and travelogues
  - Fireworks (*hanabi*)

HANABI

- Fireworks as "peaceful application of military means" (i.e. gunpowder)
- Spherical chrysanthemum shells as the representative fireworks of Japan

HANABI: social background

- Decreased need for gunpowder
- Decline of samurai class
- Increased demand for entertainment
- Rise of townsmen culture
- 1733: first public display at River Sumida in Ryōgoku
- further commodification of fireworks (object of *ukiyoe*)

HANABI

Symbolism

- Associated with transience of life, nostalgia for lost times, peak of one's vitality
- Symbolic flower connotations (influenced by the classical art of the Heian period)
- Fireworks as seasonal rites of passage (*hanami – hanabi – momijigari – yukimi*)
- *Hanabi* popularized and incorporated into various festivals (*matsuri*)

- *Hanabi* remains an indispensable ritual of summer in contemporary Japan

- The Edo culture still significantly influences Japanese daily life and popular culture

FOREIGN INFLUENCES

- Despite the *sakoku* policy, Japanese popular culture did not develop in complete isolation

  - The impact of Korean embassies on Japanese visual performance culture (c.f., today's Korean Wave in Japan (*hallyu*), or the success of K-pop (PSY)
  - Chinese culture was highly venerated; the "Selected Tang-Dynasty Poetry" (Tōshisen, 1724) was the number one bestseller of the entire Edo period
  - Dutch learning (*rangaku*) highly important during Edo, same as the Portuguese, Spanish, and English via their technological, medical and gastronomical knowledge

  - Simultaneously, the West was fascinated and affected by many things Japanese
  - Japanese performers go on a first international tour in the West (1866)
  - Introducing foreign capital modified the development of traditional arts

- The issue of cultural origins undermines the nature of a "genuine" popular culture