A Case Study of Tokugawa Japan through Art: Views of a Society in Transformation

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Introduction:

Teachers are encouraged to read “Tokugawa Japan: An Introductory Essay,” by historian Marcia Yonemoto, prior to conducting this lesson. The introductory essay may also be assigned to students with advanced reading abilities (grades 11-12). The essay provides context for this lesson by sketching the outline of Tokugawa history, touching on politics, economics, society, and culture and introducing some historical debates regarding the Tokugawa period. It also gives references for further reading on important topics related to Tokugawa Japan.

During the Great Peace of the Tokugawa era, many economic and societal changes occurred in Japan. While the shogunate sought to maintain political control and its view of an ideal society, a market economy, urbanization, travel, and publishing all played a role in changing society. While merchants were officially among the lower social classes, they were able to wield economic power over the highest social class, the samurai. The government's development and maintenance of roads provided a link between city and countryside, allowing information and ideas to spread and helping to shape a sense of Japan as a unified culture.

As noted in Dr. Yonemoto’s essay, woodblock prints developed as a popular Japanese art form and source of information during the Tokugawa period, both reflecting and shaping the commoner culture that emerged during the era. Thus, they provide a useful case study for examining the changes that occurred in the period. Two series of prints by Ando Hiroshige provide focus for the lesson—The Fifty-Three Stations of the Tōkaidō and One Hundred Famous Views of Edo. Writing of the One Hundred Famous Views of Edo, historian Henry Smith noted, “The cumulative portrait of Edo that Hiroshige paints in the 118 views in this series is rich and diverse, offering not only scenic beauty but countless references to history, custom and legend. It is at the same time, of course, a highly selective portrait, celebrating the beauty of the city, the prosperity of its merchants, the power of its ruler and the pleasures of its people.”

In this lesson, students examine woodblock prints as texts, looking for evidence of economic and societal changes, particularly changes in travel and urban life. Students then work in small groups to read about an aspect of the period and jigsaw with members of other groups to create a larger view of the dynamics of the Tokugawa Period. Finally, students return to the woodblock prints, using them as evidence to illustrate a narrative statement about the period.

Objectives: At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be better able to:
1. Recognize woodblock prints as a reflection of the social and economic changes of the Tokugawa period.
2. Make inferences based on evidence in art.
3. Synthesize information about the Tokugawa period and form conclusions based on reading, discussion, and art analysis.
4. Use art to illustrate key concepts about the Tokugawa period.
5. Explain how Tokugawa policies, the arts, and travel shaped Tokugawa society.

**Vocabulary:**

daimyō: landholding military lords
sankin kōtai: policy whereby the shogunate required daimyō to spend alternate years living in the capital city, Edo
shogun: military rulers of Japan; in the Tokugawa period, this term refers to successive Tokugawa family members who served as hereditary rulers
shogunate: the government of the shogun

**Materials and Advance Preparation:** Download woodblock prints by Ando Hiroshige from two pages of a British website. Use the links in the Tokugawa Japan Online Image List to access the prints. Images 1-5 are from the series The Fifty-Three Stations of the Tokaido (Tokaido Gojusan no Uchi), 1831-1834. Publisher: Takenouchi Magohachie (Hoeido). Format: Oban yokoye. Total 55 Prints. Images 6-9 are from the series One Hundred Views of Edo (Meisho Yedo Hiakkei), 1856-1858. Publisher: Uoya Eikichi. Format Oban tateye. Number of Prints: 120 (inc. Title Page and a replacement print by Hiroshige II). All of these prints are located at http://www.hiroshige.org.uk.

After selecting these nine images, make them available to students in one of the following ways: (1) if using an LCD projector, save the images to your computer and project them for analysis by students; (2) if multiple classroom computers are available, download the images and load them on the classroom computers for student use in pairs or small groups; (3) if classroom computers with Internet access are available, students can go directly to the URLs listed and use the Tokugawa Japan Online Image List to find the images; or (4) print several sets of hard copies of the images.

Have a copy of Nihonbashi from the Tōkaidō Road series displayed in a way that all the students will be able to see it, preferably projected on a screen.

You will also need to make copies of Handouts T1 through T4. You will need a copy of Handout T1 for each student and enough copies of Handouts T2 through T4 for one-third of the class to have each. You will also need to make a transparency from Transparency Master T1. If you are having the students work with the images directly on line, they can use the Online Image List.

**Time Required:** 2-3 class periods
Procedure:

1. Draw students’ attention to the displayed copy of the woodblock print *Nihonbashi*, which literally means “bridge of Japan.” Explain that it is an example of a woodblock print.

Woodblock prints were first used in Japan as early as the eighth century, but they became a highly sophisticated and popular art form during the Tokugawa period (1603-1868). This print, one of a series of travel images from the Tōkaidō Road, was created by the artist Ando Hiroshige. (Note that Japanese names appear with family name first, given name second. Artists were most often known by their given names, so this artist is known as Hiroshige. He was also known as Utagawa Hiroshige, adopting the name Utagawa from the renowned Utagawa studio at which he studied.)

Located in the center of the city of Edo, Nihonbashi was the point from which all distances were measured in Japan. It was also the starting point of the Tōkaidō Road, a main highway linking the Tokugawa capital city Edo with the ancient capital, Kyoto. Along the highway were way-stations, where travelers could rest and buy meals and provisions. Ask students to describe what they see in the picture. (A large group of travelers is coming across the bridge; there are many buildings in the background and on the sides of the print; tall ladders on rooftops could be fire lookouts for the city; inscriptions on the print could include the artist’s name, the title of the print, or other information; in the left foreground is a group of people carrying baskets—probably fish-sellers; there are some animals in the right foreground. A large gate is open in the foreground, inviting the travelers to come through as well as inviting viewers to look within.) Show Quote 1 on Transparency Master T1 and discuss what students can infer about the Tokugawa Period from this quotation. (Travel was common and the government adopted policies not only facilitating travel by the building of roads but mandating it for daimyō; daimyō processions involved large processions of people, but others also traveled during the period; people profited by serving the needs of travelers; different classes and groups of people interacted through travel.) Help students interpret what they observed in light of the quote; that is, what does this woodblock print show about Tokugawa Japan? You may want to do a “think-aloud” demonstrating to students how to bring meaning to their observations:

*The people who are coming over the bridge look like they may be part of a large procession and two of the men are holding up what looks like some kind of a standard, suggesting this may be the procession of someone important. Given what the quote tells us, I would say this is a daimyō procession, traveling between the daimyō’s local domain and Edo as required by the shogunate. The people in the foreground are probably selling goods to travelers. At least one person looks to be selling fish, but they may have other products as well. Thus, the print illustrates travel of the daimyō, and indirectly, the power of the shogun to require such travel; it also shows one way in which people profited from frequent travel in the Tokugawa Period.*

2. Explain that Hiroshige also created a series of prints showing scenes in Edo. This series was called *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* and actually included 118 prints. Show Quote 2 on Transparency Master T1 and conduct a discussion of the points made in the quotation on the transparency. Some questions to guide discussion are provided below:
• According to the quote, who held economic power? (The wealthy townspeople.) Is this similar to or different from what we know about Japan in earlier periods? (Different; in previous eras, merchants and tradesmen were not wealthy nor were they powerful.)
• How was the new urban culture reflected in the activities of the people? (They went to festivals, the theater, and pleasure quarters; they purchased art.)
• Why were woodblock prints so popular? (They were beautiful but also quite inexpensive; they also reflected popular aspects of the lively urban society.)
• Why are the prints of Hiroshige a good source for examining the Tokugawa period? (They document what Edo looked like and what went on there at the end of the period; they also show travel, which was important in the period.)

3. Explain that students will be viewing nine woodblock prints by Ando Hiroshige as visual evidence of the period. Students will be looking at prints from both the Tōkaidō Road (Set A) and Edo (Set B) series to gather information that supports the two quotes from the transparency master. Distribute Handout T1 and instruct students to make notes of what they see in the images as you project them to the class. Be sure students understand that they should fill in only the center column in the chart during the viewing. Using the downloaded images from the sites listed above, show students the nine images. (Suggested answers can be found in the Handout T1 Answer Key.) After students have completed their charts, show each image again, asking students to report what they have documented. You may use the notes in the Teacher Background Information to enhance or clarify students’ observations.

4. Ask students to consider the evidence they have seen in Hiroshige’s prints in light of the two quotes on the transparency master. That is, what did they observe in the prints that provided support for the quotes? How did the prints expand their understanding of the quotes? They should write their interpretation of the evidence from the prints in the righthand column on Handout T1. When students have finished writing, ask a few students to report their interpretations. (Sample answers are provided in the Answer Keys.) As a large group, ask the class if a consensus about the period emerges from their statements.

5. Inform students that they will be working in small groups to learn more about aspects of the Tokugawa period. Divide the class into groups of three. Distribute Handouts T2, T3, and T4 so that one-third of the groups have Handout T2, one-third have Handout T3, and one-third have Handout T4. Direct students to read the handout they have received. When they have finished reading, ask students to discuss the reading in their small group, with attention to the “Questions for Discussion” at the end of each reading. (Suggested answers can be found in the Answer Keys.) What does the reading reveal about one aspect of the Tokugawa period? Ask students to jot down the main ideas from the reading, and be ready to share them with another group of students, all of whom will have read about a different aspect of the period.

6. Jigsaw the class into new groups of three, made up of “experts” about Tokugawa art, travel, and society. Ask students to teach the members of their new group about the reading they have done, allowing time for each student to share their knowledge.
7. After all students have shared, review their earlier observations about the period based on the quotes and prints and ask students to consider how the reading they have done affected their views about the period. Direct each group to work together to create a new two- to three-sentence statement about the Tokugawa period that includes new information from the jigsaw exercise. Ask students to report their new statements. 

(Students may report that during the Great Peace of the Tokugawa era, many economic and societal changes occurred in Japan. While the Tokugawa government sought to enforce laws and regulations to maintain political control and an ideal society, a market economy, urbanization, travel, and publishing all played a role in changing Tokugawa society. While merchants were considered lowly, they ended up wielding economic power over the highest social class, the samurai. The government's development and maintenance of roads provided a link between city and countryside, allowing information and ideas to spread and helping to shape a sense of Japan as a unified culture.)

8. When all groups have completed their new statements about the Tokugawa period, ask students to look again at the prints by Hiroshige they viewed at the beginning of the lesson. To assess student understanding of the lesson content, ask students to work within their groups to illustrate their statements about the period with one or more of the images by Hiroshige, selecting art that supports their viewpoint. Ask students to consider: How does the art help to illustrate key ideas about the period? How does the art reflect a society in transformation? (Students may suggest that the woodblock prints help to visualize the forces of social change during the period. The image of fireworks over Ryōgoku bridge, for example, reveals that some urban dwellers had the money and time to pursue pleasurable activities; the scene at Surugachō and others show evidence of a market economy, and so on.)

Optional Assessment Activity:

To further assess student understanding, ask students to create a classroom art exhibit of the Tokugawa period, assigning groups to select art focusing on one aspect each of societal change during the period. One group may display art reflecting travel, for example; another may choose to display art that focuses on commercial activity during the period, and so on. Students may use images found in this lesson, or choose images by other artists of the period, such as Hokusai. Appropriate art can be found online. Assign each group to write an exhibit catalogue explaining the main social, political, and cultural developments of the period depicted in the art in their display. You may invite visitors from other classrooms to attend an exhibit opening and assign your students to serve as docents, explaining the significance of the art on display and how it reflects societal transformation during the Tokugawa period.

Extension/Enrichment:

To extend the lesson, students may research the main roads and waterways of the Tokugawa period. Maps of the Tōkaidō Road and other main highways can be found online; students may want to compare Tokugawa-period maps with maps of present-day Japan to find similarities and differences between the past and present, and to compare how much Japan was linked by roads then and now.
To learn more about the process of woodblock printing during the period, students may want to explore the excellent Brooklyn Museum website, which includes information about how woodblock print artists, carvers, and printers worked to create the multi-colored print images (www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/online/edo/woodblock/aboutPrinting.php); students may also want to examine the section titled “How to Read a Japanese Woodblock Print,” which offers a guide to the inscriptions, censor seals, and other text found on prints (www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/online/edo/woodblock).

Teacher Background Information on Woodblock Prints by Ando Hiroshige:

Set A: The Fifty-three Stations of the Tōkaidō Road

*Nihonbashi:* Nihonbashi translates as “the bridge of Japan.” Located in the center of Edo, it was the location from which all distances were measured in Japan. It was also the starting point of the Tōkaidō Road, a main highway linking Edo with the ancient capital, Kyoto. In this scene, a *daimyō* procession is coming into view. In the foreground, a group of fish vendors is getting out of the way.

*Shinagawa:* Shinagawa was the first stop outside of Edo on the Tōkaidō Road. The road in this print is lined with teahouses, restaurants, and entertainment quarters. The viewer can see the end of a *daimyō* procession passing through the street.

*Goyu:* This station on the Tōkaidō highway was lined with inns and restaurants. In this scene, serving women from the teahouse at right are attempting to drag travelers inside. The large circle on the wall bears the name of the print series publisher.

*Okazaki:* In this scene, a *daimyō* procession is crossing the bridge over the Yahagi River towards the village and castle on the opposite bank. The founder of the Tokugawa shogunate, Tokugawa Ieyasu, was born in the castle shown in the distance.

*Seki:* This inn along the highway served upper class travelers such as shogunate officials and *daimyō*. A *daimyō*’s attendants can be seen preparing to continue their journey.

Set B: One Hundred Famous Views of Edo

*Clearing Weather after Snow at Nihonbashi:* This Edo view looks down on Nihonbashi, the bridge of Japan, to Edo castle in the upper right and Mt. Fuji on the left. At the bottom right is the Edo fish market; the street is filling with buyers and sellers. Fishing boats in the river are bringing in the day’s catch. The opposite bank of the river is lined with tile-roofed warehouses, which would resist fire in the mostly wood-framed city.

*Surugachō:* This scene depicts shoppers and delivery men in the street outside Edo’s leading dry goods store. In the distance towers Mt. Fuji, heightened by cloud forms often seen in traditional Japanese painting.

*The River Bank by Ryōgoku Bridge:* Hiroshige described this bridge as “the liveliest place” in Edo, with “side-shows, theaters, story-tellers, and summer fireworks; day and night, the amusements never cease.” Cargo and passenger boats can be seen on the Sumida River; tea stalls line the bank.
**Fireworks at Ryōgoku:** Elegant restaurants along the Sumida River sponsored firework displays in the hot summer and fall evenings. Wealthy merchants hired the larger pleasure boats seen in this image for firework-viewing parties on the river. Because of the danger of fire in Edo, fireworks were restricted to the Sumida River.

**Teacher Resources:**


Tokugawa Japan: An Introductory Essay

by Marcia Yonemoto, University of Colorado at Boulder

Sir George Sansom’s history of Japan was first published in 1932 and used in U.S. college classrooms into the 1980s. In it, he described the Tokugawa period (1603-1868) as an era of oppressive “feudal” rule. In this view, hierarchical divisions between samurai, peasant, artisan, and merchant were strictly maintained. Sansom described a system in which swaggering samurai used their swords to cut down commoners. Miserable peasants barely eeked out a living, and urban merchants were scorned as unethical profiteers. According to Sansom, change was loathed. The government kept the rest of the world out, denying “themselves all the gifts which the West then had to offer.” This move, said Sansom, “arrested the cultural development of Japan” (Sansom 1932, 455, 457).

Scholars today largely dismiss this view. Yet it remains pervasive. Films and manga comics glorify samurai bravado. But they ignore much else about the period. Thus, even the well-informed often are surprised when they read more recent histories of the period. Such newer works describe the political system as a rational “integral bureaucracy.” This system was “not merely a samurai institution.” Rather, it depended on non-elite “commercial agents and activities” (Totman 1981, p. 133). Newer histories call the era “a time of extraordinary social growth and change. In terms of population and production, urbanization and commercialization, and societal sophistication and elaboration, the century was one of unparalleled development.”

What should readers make of these discrepancies? What do teachers and students really need to know about the Tokugawa period? This brief essay addresses these questions by (1) sketching the outline of Tokugawa history, touching on politics, economics, society, and culture; (2) introducing some historical debates regarding the Tokugawa period; and (3) giving references for further reading on important topics.

The Tokugawa Political Settlement

The first Tokugawa shogun was Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542-1616). He came of age in an era of violence and conflict. During the Warring States period (c.1467-1590), centralized political authority—the imperial court and the military government (shogunate, or bakufu)—had lost its effectiveness. Practical political power had passed into the hands of approximately 200 local warlords, or daimyō. The daimyō controlled their own territories. These territories were called domains. By the end of the period, some daimyō had become extremely powerful. Each commanded large swathes of territory and tens of thousands of warriors.

One such leader was Oda Nobunaga (1534-82). Nobunaga was a daimyō from the province of Owari in central Honshu. Using strategic alliances and brutal military tactics, Nobunaga brought about one-third of the country under his control. When he was assassinated in 1582, his most able general, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-98), took his place. Hideyoshi was a brilliant military and political tactician. His talent and ambition had allowed him to rise from a
humble peasant background. Building on Nobunaga’s achievements, Hideyoshi brought all of Japan under his control by about 1590.

Two problems marked Hideyoshi’s later years. One was his growing belief that his power was unlimited. This megalomania was reflected in unsuccessful attempts to invade Korea and China. The second problem was his difficulty in producing an heir. At his death in 1597, he had only one infant son. He entrusted his son’s fate to five trusted allies. Each swore to protect the heir and help ensure the Toyotomi clan’s future. Among these allies was Tokugawa Ieyasu. Ieyasu controlled significant territory in northeastern Honshu. Ieyasu’s castle headquarters was located in the city of Edo (now Tokyo). Hideyoshi had been dead scarcely three years when Ieyasu turned on his former lord. In 1600, his forces defeated the Toyotomi. In 1603, Ieyasu established a new shogunate in his family’s name. He went to war once again in 1615 to completely wipe out the Toyotomi and their allies. From then on, the Tokugawa maintained political authority for 253 years without resorting to military combat.

The primary political goal of Tokugawa Ieyasu and his heirs—his son, Hidetada (1578-1632) and grandson, Iemitsu (1604-1651)—was to cut off the roots of potential dissent and rebellion. In the late 1630s, Tokugawa Iemitsu expelled Portuguese and Spanish Catholic missionaries and traders. This decision was motivated more by the political threat posed by converts, especially daimyō converts, than by dislike of Christian doctrine or the foreign presence in Japan. The early shoguns were wary of other daimyō. Many of these daimyō were recent allies who were not totally committed to Tokugawa rule.

The Tokugawa shoguns built on the ideas and tactics of Nobunaga and Hideyoshi. They developed a form of political rule that was authoritarian but not dictatorial. This can be seen in the way the early shoguns distributed land to their daimyō allies. The Tokugawa kept only about a quarter of the land available for redistribution for themselves. Of the remaining lands, the shogunate allocated about 10 percent to blood relations (known as the collateral, or shinpan daimyō houses). Another 26 percent went to longtime loyal allies, the fudai daimyō. The remaining 38 percent went to the most recent, less stable allies. These allies were the “outside,” or tozama daimyō.

The early Tokugawa shoguns’ use of land distribution to both win the allegiance and encourage the dependence of daimyō illustrates the blend of resourcefulness, pragmatism, and foresight characteristic of Tokugawa political rule. In its policies, the shogunate was careful to balance demands on daimyō with privileges granted to them. For example, the shogunate never directly taxed the daimyō. Instead, it exercised indirect levies such as requiring daimyō to supply labor and raw materials for the construction and maintenance of castles, roads, post stations, and the like. The shogunate also forced all daimyō to commute between their home domains and the shogunal capital of Edo, a time- and resource-consuming practice. The shogunate exercised authority by compelling the wives and children of all daimyō to reside permanently in Edo. There, they were under the shogun’s watchful eye. Daimyō were also required to secure shogunal approval before marrying. At the same time, daimyō were for the most part free to govern their domains as they saw fit. They issued their own law codes and administered justice. Some printed and circulated their own currency. The shogunate intervened only if requested to do so. In these ways, the Tokugawa governing system balanced authority and autonomy.

Economic Growth and Social Change
Studying the Tokugawa era reveals many seeming contradictions. Of these, perhaps none is more striking than the contrast between the Tokugawa rulers’ vision of the ideal economic system and the reality of economic growth and change. With a few notable exceptions, the shogunate and daimyō viewed the economy in simple agronomist terms. In this view, the peasant’s role was to produce basic foodstuffs. Peasants were to give a good portion of their products in tax to support the ruling classes. Artisans used their skills to craft necessary non-food items. Finally, goods that could not be acquired through any other means could be purchased from merchants. Merchants were deemed the necessary evil of the economic system.

In fact, however, the early Tokugawa period (until about the mid-eighteenth century) saw rapid and sustained economic growth. This growth occurred first in the agricultural sector. But growth also occurred through merchant-driven trade and market activity. The concentration of population in cities served as a major impetus for growth and change. Yet many Tokugawa authorities clung to their old notions of a static, agrarian-based economy. The samurai class, who were forbidden from engaging in profitable trade or farming, were disadvantaged by Tokugawa policies and attitudes toward the economy. The ruling class was prevented from taking advantage of economic growth. At the same time, substantial benefits went to merchants and even to market-savvy peasants. Economic growth thus contributed to the inversion of the status hierarchy enshrined in the “four class system.” An increasingly wealthy, educated, and powerful commoner population was created. Meanwhile, samurai, especially those of low rank, steadily became economically weaker.

**Growth in Agricultural Production and Population.** During the Warring States period, agricultural production grew. Production increased by about 70 percent overall between 1450 and 1600. Growth continued into the early Tokugawa period. Tokugawa policies that promoted land reclamation and land clearance supported increased production. In addition, the disarming of peasants and local religious communities that came with the “Tokugawa peace” put more people back on the land. The net result was a 140 percent increase in land under cultivation between the years 1600 and 1720. Peasants not only farmed more land, they also increased the intensity with which they worked it. Through careful monitoring and the spread of information about cropping patterns, fertilizers, and the like, Japanese peasants in the Tokugawa period continued to increase their land’s productivity.

The overall growth in agricultural productivity caused a rise in the general well-being of the people. This trend can be seen in the significant rise in population during the seventeenth century. Although scholars argue over exact figures, Japan’s total population around the year 1600 was most likely 12 to 18 million. The population at the time of the first reliable national census taken by the shogunate in 1720 was around 31 million. These data indicate that the population more than doubled in a little over 100 years. For a number of reasons, including family planning and voluntary limitation of family size among the peasantry, population growth leveled off in the eighteenth century. Japan’s population grew at a negligible rate between the early eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries. The economy, however, continued to grow, leading to an economic surplus. That surplus was a key factor in Japan’s rapid industrialization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

**Growth in Markets and Trade.** Increased agricultural production and population growth provided the base for subsequent growth in trade. Increases in trade were also enabled by
such developments as the creation of reliable and effective transportation networks. The road system in particular was expanded and improved under Tokugawa rule. Shipping networks on sea routes were also expanded, especially those linking the major commercial centers in western and eastern Japan. Along with growth in trade came growth in the use of money. Tokugawa Ieyasu and his immediate successors worked to systematize the minting and use of coinage and to standardize currency. In turn, this greatly facilitated domestic trade. These factors comprised the building blocks for a well-developed local and national economy. Regional and domainal capitals were linked by good roads. Smaller market towns and settlements grew along these roads. Local areas developed specialty goods and products. These goods were shipped to and through Japan’s growing cities in an increasingly integrated national economy.

**Growth of Cities.** During the Warring States period, local lords began to gather their warriors around them in headquarters centered on fortified castles. This tendency was formalized by Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu, who demanded that their retainers live in the capital cities rather than in their domains. As a result, so-called castle towns (jōkamachi) sprung up in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Some 90 new towns appeared between 1572 and 1590 alone. The number continued to grow in subsequent decades. The emergence of castle towns and later of cities had a significant economic impact. Building cities required assembling, equipping, feeding, housing, and supervising huge numbers of laborers and technical specialists. It also required importing vast amounts of resources: soil, stone, lumber, thatch, kilns for baking roof tiles, charcoal, and the like. From the late sixteenth century on, these labor forces came to number in the tens of thousands. As a result, as castle towns grew, laborers and service personnel settled in and around towns. Samurai settled near the castles of their lords. The commoners who served the samurai moved into adjacent areas. Over time castle towns evolved into urban areas.

Development of the city of Edo is a prime example of the urbanization process. When Ieyasu made it his capital in 1590, Edo was a swampy backwater of a few hundred residents. Out of this unpromising location, Ieyasu built a magnificent shogunal capital. Laborers cut down forests, leveled hills to fill in wetlands, rerouted rivers, and dredged creeks and canals. They built bridges and walls, erected shrines and temples, and constructed buildings. Among the buildings erected were opulent daimyō mansions and the magnificent castle of the shogun. Warehouses, storefronts, and common dwellings were also built. By 1600, Edo was a town of some 5000 dwellings. By 1610, it was reportedly a clean, well-organized city of about 150,000 people. As samurai retainers of the shogun and of daimyō flooded into the city in the early seventeenth century, the population zoomed upward. By 1657, Edo had about 500,000 residents. By 1720, it was the world’s largest city outside of China, with a population of about 1.4 million. Half a million of these residents were samurai.

Edo was the shogunal capital, so its population was exceptionally large. But smaller, regional castle towns also grew significantly. Kanazawa, headquarters of an extensive domain on the Japan Sea coast, was a town of 5,000 in 1580. It grew to 120,000 in 1710. Nagoya, a small town in the early seventeenth century, had become a regional center of 64,000 residents by 1692. Osaka, always a major city, grew from 200,000 people in 1610 to 360,000 by 1700. It hit a peak of half a million by the late eighteenth century.

Growth was good for the economy in general. It affected different classes differently, however. In particular, merchants benefited from the increase in trade, markets, and urbanization. Samurai suffered from those same phenomena. Why did the samurai lose out?
First, samurai were paid in fixed stipends, disbursed in rice. These stipends were based on an individual’s rank and office and did not increase at a pace equal to the rise in prices. Second, with the growth of the market and monetization of the economy, samurai had to trade their rice stipends for cash. This process was controlled by merchants in Edo and Osaka. It put samurai at the mercy of both the unstable market price for rice and the greed of merchant moneychangers. Finally, samurai were forbidden by law from engaging in farming or commerce, which might have afforded them some economic relief. All of these factors made it almost impossible for samurai to benefit from the growth occurring in the economy. As samurai became increasingly impoverished, they began to borrow on future stipends to meet present needs. Thus they put themselves in debt to merchant lenders. Having samurai at their mercy not only earned the merchants a measure of profit, it also gave them significant symbolic leverage over their samurai superiors. For the samurai, being indebted to lowly merchants was extremely galling. Many low-ranking samurai whose stipends gave them barely enough to get by felt they had to scrimp and save while merchants prospered. Matters were made worse by the fact that samurai had to keep up appearances. Protocol deemed that they dress properly, live in good style, and engage in the social activities (which involved expensive gift-giving) that were required of them, but were increasingly beyond their economic means.

Tokugawa authorities were aware of the problems facing samurai. They repeatedly tried to shore up the political and moral order by elaborating on the unique role of samurai as moral exemplars and scholar/administrators. By definition, commoners could not fulfill those roles. Through the Kyōhō Reforms of the early eighteenth century and the Kansei Reforms at the turn of the nineteenth century, the shogunate enacted measures aimed at stabilizing and strengthening the economic and political status of the samurai. But the authorities’ reassertion of proper political order could not change reality. Neither shogun nor daimyō could offer much practical help to financially strapped samurai. More broad-minded thinkers such as the philosopher Ogyū Sorai (1666-1728) proposed radical reforms. One such reform was returning the samurai to the land so they could farm. Another was overhauling the office and rank system so that lower-ranking “men of talent” could rise to positions of power. These men often languished in idleness while less deserving sons of high-ranking families inherited their fathers’ positions. In the end, economic growth in the Tokugawa period favored commoners over the elite.

The Emergence of Commoner Culture

While they were not shy about commenting wryly on the state of society, urban commoners were not political activists. Peasant protests did break out in the eighteenth century, largely due to authorities’ failure to provide relief during times of crop failure and food shortage. But the new urban bourgeoisie did not attempt to overthrow the warrior government. Rather, urban commoners tended to turn away from the troublesome world of politics. They used their newfound wealth to fashion a new style of life and art. While the new style borrowed aspects of elite “high” culture, it was in many ways utterly new to the early modern urban scene. By the Genroku period (1688-1703), one could see in Edo and other cities a flourishing merchant class that was developing a cultural style all its own. Merchants flaunted their wealth, building enormous houses and dressing in finery that exceeded that of samurai. The shogunate was not at all happy about this. It repeatedly issued laws forbidding merchants to wear fine silk clothes and restricting the construction of large and showy homes in merchant quarters.
However, such laws were difficult to enforce. Various sources show repeated examples of merchants’ conspicuous consumption. By the mid-eighteenth century, popular representations abounded of the poor samurai pawning the clothes and swords off his back for a little extra cash. Then a merchant redeemed them and paraded around the city in the purchased finery. Such sights enraged samurai. Yet they had to suppress their anger and keep up the façade of reserve and prosperity appropriate to their status. As a popular saying of the time went, “if a samurai is starving, he uses a toothpick all the same.”

Despite their economic plight (or perhaps to gain relief from the misery of it), samurai frequented the entertainment areas originally created by and for merchants. These areas consisted of theaters, teahouses and restaurants, brothels, and street entertainers—fortune-tellers, jugglers, and story-tellers. Brothels were a new feature in the cultural life of cities. Prostitution had a long history in Japan. Not until the Tokugawa period did the government seek to control it through licensing and surveillance. Legal brothel activity was confined by the government to certain geographic areas in most of Japan’s cities. These areas were referred to as the licensed quarters. Of course, there was also much illegal prostitution in cities. The shogunate could scarcely control it, much less eradicate it.

The high-ranking courtesans (yūjo) of the Yoshiwara were not common prostitutes. Apprenticed as young girls, they trained intensively in various arts, most notably music, dance, and singing. They were ranked according to their level of training and experience, much like the geisha that still exist today. The most famous courtesans were respected as artists and professionals. They were also made famous through their depiction in plays, fiction, and the visual arts. Indeed, many became movie-star-like trendsetters. Men wanting to meet with a high-ranking courtesan had to go through an elaborate and expensive process of courting her before he could even lay eyes on her. Technically, the pleasure quarters were enclaves for commoners. Samurai were banned on the grounds that they were supposed to be upright, moral, and frugal characters with no time for crass indulgences. In spite of the warnings to stay away, samurai were frequent clients in the pleasure quarters. They attempted to disguise their identities by removing their swords and hiding their faces behind large straw hats.

The pleasure quarters could be extremely costly. Contemporary sources are filled with tales of wealthy merchants and samurai who drove themselves to financial ruin after falling in love with a courtesan. Indeed, the dilemmas of love and money were the fodder for many writers and artists of the Genroku period and later. This period saw the development not only of woodblock prints, or ukiyo-e, but also the emergence of the first great popular writers and dramatists. Two examples are Ihara Saikaku (1642-93) in prose fiction and Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725) in drama. Saikaku was an Osaka merchant and amateur poet who late in life turned to writing fiction. Most of his stories are based on the lives of Osaka commoners. Saikaku’s stories cover two general topics: love and money. They often have a light-handed, somewhat parodic moral message to them. The first of his works of prose fiction, Life of a Sensuous Man (Kōshoku ichidai otoko, 1682), is written in 54 chapters. (That this was a parody of the structure of Murasaki Shikibu’s eleventh-century classic The Tale of Genji would have been obvious to his audience.) The book was a commercial success, thus inspiring the rest of Saikaku’s early stories on similar themes from the perspectives of both men and women. Saikaku’s stories dramatized the lives of common city people, their obsession with making and spending money, and their free spirited nature, which led them into various sorts of romantic and
financial binds. Saikaku almost single-handedly raised merchant life, previously seen as tedious and mundane, to the level of art.

Chikamatsu Monzaemon wrote mainly for the theater, both kabuki and *bunraku* (puppet theater). Chikamatsu’s texts were written to be narrated or sung with musical accompaniment. They featured high drama, with twists and turns of plot. Early in his career, Chikamatsu wrote about contemporary events like the “great political disturbances” (*oie sōdō*) in military households. These works chronicled conflicts between rightful rulers and unlawful usurpers. Later on, Chikamatsu turned to more commoner-centered dramas. These focused on emotional conflicts, often conflicts between social duty or obligation (*giri*) and human feeling (*ninjō*). He is most famous for his plays dealing with “love suicides” (*shinjū*). Love suicides were a real-life phenomenon in which two lovers, committed to other people or occupations (the woman was often a courtesan, the man often a married merchant), resolve to die together rather than live apart. Plays based on this theme, such as Chikamatsu’s classic *Love Suicides at Amijima* (*Shinjū ten no Amijima*, 1721), were extremely popular. The essential conflict represented in *shinjū* tales, a conflict that pulls an individual in two irreconcilable directions, was at the core of most Tokugawa drama. Often, the only solution was death. Love suicide was seen to be the ultimate demonstration of love and devotion. It provided a kind of commoner’s version of the samurai’s *seppuku*, or suicide for honor.

The themes of honor and sacrifice inherent in such highly dramatic stories made commoners feel their culture had something in common with that of the elites. Yet there is a distinct commoner twist to these ideas. This twist both honors and degrades the great samurai tradition of self-sacrifice. Actual incidents of love suicide seem to have proliferated in the late 1600s, perhaps becoming even more common in the 1700s. They became a cultural fad encouraged by the romanticization of the act on stage. In 1722, the shogunate forbade the treatment of *shinjū* on stage, seeing it as an offense against proper family order. The phenomenon of love suicide—both actual and staged—brings to the fore the issue of cultural fads and their spread: How, exactly, did ideas circulate?

**Literacy, Education, and the “Library of Public Information”**

Assessing popular literacy before the advent of modern universal education is difficult. Historians use many techniques to estimate the nature and level of literacy in pre- and early-modern societies. Still, their findings are often tentative. Among the most common techniques is analyzing signatures on official documents (wills, marriage records, etc.) as a measure of people’s ability to write. Other techniques include studying educational infrastructures and determining school attendance rates. Historians also look at data on cultural phenomena such as publishing and circulation of books and other printed matter.

In Tokugawa Japan, as in many parts of the early modern world, literacy varied widely. Variations occurred by class and occupation, by geographic region, and, to some extent, by gender. The ruling elites, Buddhist and Shinto clergy, and commoner intellectuals on the fringes of the elite (Confucian scholars, doctors, and minor officials) tended to be quite learned. They possessed considerable knowledge of Japanese and Sino-Japanese (or *kanbun*, the style of writing derived from classical Chinese, which was used in formal discourse). They also knew the classical works of both the Japanese and Chinese literary and philosophical traditions. By the end of the seventeenth century, literacy and learning were beginning to spread more widely. Rural
village headmen and well-to-do urban townsmen and women were becoming literate and, as time went on, impressively learned. These people became the primary consumers of popular literature and of the arts.

The infrastructure for popular education developed considerably in the Tokugawa period. Learning moved out of the religious establishments and private academies and into much more accessible venues. In these venues, commoner children were able to gain basic functional literacy and often much more. The demand for books was thus extremely high. Publishers in the major cities churned out texts of all sorts. While Buddhist and Confucian texts remained the mainstays of highbrow publishing, many more publishers produced for the general reading audience. Illustrated fiction and poetry were popular. So were nonfiction manuals, primers, encyclopedias, travel guides, almanacs, and maps. As printed materials circulated among ever-greater numbers of readers, they conditioned in people certain patterns of thought and ultimately of behavior. As one scholar has put it, there emerged in Tokugawa Japan a broad-based and widely read “library of public information,” which produced commonly held forms of social knowledge (Berry 2006, 13, 17).

When faced with the question of precisely what percentages of what sorts of people were literate, historians do not give a precise answer. The data simply is not conclusive. The best we can do is point to figures that may serve as broad indicators of the dimensions of literacy. Among samurai, who made up 6 to 7 percent of the population, literacy was almost universal and generally of a very high level. The degree of learning varied, however, according to rank, office, and wealth. There are accounts of illiterate samurai, especially later in the Tokugawa period. These cases occurred among the lowest, most impoverished ranks. Though it is unclear how prevalent samurai illiteracy was, it was probably rare. It was certainly the source of great shame for the unlettered individual and his family.

High literacy is common in an elite ruling class. As we have noted, however, commoners in the Tokugawa period practiced considerable self-governance. The Tokugawa state was very bureaucratic. Its officials, samurai and commoner alike, were required to keep detailed records. They also had to write a great deal of correspondence. Official duties thus demanded high levels of literacy not only among samurai, but also among the upper strata of urban and rural commoner populations who held such responsible positions as city ward official or village headman. Recent research indicates that, by the end of the seventeenth century, the rural elite—numbering some 200–300,000 out of a total population of around 30 million, or less than 0.1 percent of the population—possessed “extraordinarily high literacy and numeracy” in order to fulfill their many administrative duties (Rubinger 2007, 30).

Below the rural elite were the landowning farmers. Their numbers varied over time and by region. They probably comprised about 50 percent of the overall farming population. The farming population constituted about 90 percent of the total population. Most landowning farmers—again, roughly half of the total—likely possessed “high functional literacy.” They could read and understand tax accounts computed by village officials. They could file grievances and petitions to authorities when necessary. Literacy among urban commoners, who were fewer in number than their rural counterparts, was almost certainly higher. Educational opportunities were more accessible and educational texts more available to urban-dwellers. Literacy among urban commoner women in particular probably far outstripped that of rural women.
Literacy and education were by no means monopolized by the elite in Tokugawa Japan. Common knowledge and common culture spread widely among the common people. This widening of the knowledge base greatly facilitated the subsequent development of the modern industrial nation-state.

**The Discontented and the End of an Era**

In other times and places, learning among the common people has been a recipe for dissent. Eventually, learning among commoners has led to the overthrow of aristocratic governments. This was not true in Tokugawa Japan. Unrest did occur. Peasant protest in particular was widespread and sometimes intense in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Ultimately, however, those responsible for overthrow of the Tokugawa regime were members of the ruling class itself: the samurai. This kind of “aristocratic revolution” is unusual in world history.

Why and how did samurai overthrow a government that was ostensibly created in their own interest? To answer this question, one must first look at which samurai became involved in the movement to overthrow the shogunate and “restore” the emperor. The major actors were low-ranking samurai from the tozama domains. Particularly involved were the powerful and autonomous domains of Satsuma in southernmost Kyushu, Chōshū in far western Honshu, and Tosa on Shikoku. Low-ranking samurai had long observed that the system of rank and office under the Tokugawa had become entirely hereditary. They believed it did not sufficiently take merit into account. One born into a family of low rank could never expect to obtain an official appointment or rise to a position of any power or wealth. Moreover, many low-ranking samurai felt themselves to be able than those of higher birth. Those of higher birth glided into office by virtue of blood right. Many of the low-ranking samurai were not afraid to speak their minds. In the later Tokugawa period, the phrase daimyō gei, or “a daimyō’s skill,” came to indicate someone or something entirely lacking in talent or quality.

Samurai grievances were compounded by the events of the early decades of the nineteenth century. Bad crop harvests in the 1830s resulted in widespread famine, disease, and death. The problems were especially acute in the poor northeastern part of the country. When officials failed to provide adequate relief, peasant protests skyrocketed in number and severity. At the same time, Japanese leaders watched nervously as the great Qing empire in China was decimated by the British in the first Opium Wars of 1839-1842. China was thereafter “carved up like a melon” by the other Western powers. The Japanese had already fended off advances by the Russians in the 1790s and early 1800s and by the British in the 1820s. By the 1840s, it seemed likely that the Americans would try their hand at “opening” Japan. In 1853, a U.S. naval delegation led by Commodore Matthew C. Perry arrived with demands from U.S. President Millard Fillmore. Fillmore demanded that Japan agree to trade and diplomatic relations with the United States. The shogun was given a half-year to consider Perry’s request. Observers, especially powerful daimyō, saw that the shogunate had no new ideas about how to handle the foreign threat, much less the domestic problems wracking the country. In the end, shogunal officials agreed, in spite of the emperor’s disapproval, to sign trade and diplomatic treaties with the United States. As in China, the terms gave great advantages to the Western powers. Japan was relegated to semi-colonial status.
For pro-imperial, anti-shogunal forces, the foreign crises, in particular the signing of the treaty with the United States, were the last straw. Plans to overthrow the Tokugawa regime began in earnest in the 1860s. Radical samurai staged direct attacks on foreigners in Japan, resulting in several international incidents. The most serious of these incidents sparked the bombardment of domains in Satsuma and Chōshū by Western naval forces. Finally, in January 1868, combined military forces of the domains of Satsuma and Chōshū marched into Kyoto, took control of the imperial palace, and proclaimed the restoration of the emperor and the abolition of the Tokugawa shogunate. Court nobles and daimyō would form a new government in place of the old. Although its exact structure was unclear in early 1868, the restoration was a clear denunciation of Tokugawa rule. The last shogun, Tokugawa Yoshinobu (or Keiki), retreated to Edo. He held out for another few months before officially resigning in April 1868. Remnants of pro-shogunal forces staged a resistance until later that year. They were ultimately defeated.

Although the Tokugawa regime ended in 1868, it bequeathed a deep and rich political, economic, and cultural legacy to modern Japan. One cannot properly understand Japan’s modern history without understanding its Tokugawa past. Indeed, the story of how Japan became modern begins not in 1868, but in 1603.

**Sources Cited**

Notes

The Tokugawa Political Settlement


For a biography of Hideyoshi, see Mary Elizabeth Berry, *Hideyoshi* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

For a useful and visually rich (hundreds of illustrations, graphs and maps) survey of the founding and development of the city of Edo, see Akira Naito, *Edo, the City That Became Tokyo: An Illustrated History* (New York: Kodansha International, 2003).


Economic Growth and Social Change

When speaking in aggregate demographic or economic terms, it is important to note that growth and decline, whether in terms of population or economy, varied considerably in terms of geographic region. In general, the most economically advanced and prosperous areas of the country were the Kinai Plain, the area of central-western Honshu surrounding the cities of Kyoto and Osaka; northern Kyushu; and, by the mid-Tokugawa period, the Kantō Plain area around the city of Edo. By contrast, the most economically backward and poor areas of Japan tended to be found in the northeast, in what is today called the Tōhoku region and in the Tokugawa period was comprised of the large province of Dewa and Mutsu.

The Emergence of Commoner Culture


A full translation of Chikamatsu’s *Love Suicides at Amijima* can be found in Donald Keene, *Four Major Plays of Chikamatsu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

Literacy, Education, and the Library of Public Information

In his recent study of popular literacy in early modern Japan, Richard Rubinger argues that “…the Japanese data demonstrate that in certain circumstances geography may be a more influential variable with respect to literacy attainment than gender.” See Richard Rubinger, *Popular Literacy in Early Modern Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007), p. 7.
For an absorbing account of a ne’er-do-well samurai in the early 19th century who claimed to have overcome illiteracy in order to write his autobiography of sorts, see Katsu Kōkichi, Musui’s Story: The Autobiography of a Tokugawa Samurai, translated by Teruko Craig (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988).

The definition of 90 percent of Japan’s population as farmers is based on the estimate that by 1700, roughly 10 percent of Japan’s population lived in cities with populations over 10,000; half of that 10 percent lived in cities with populations over 100,000. By comparison, only 2 percent of Europeans lived in cities of over 100,000. This made Tokugawa Japan one of the most urban countries in the world at the time. Figures on urbanization are from Andrew Gordon, A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 23.

The Discontented and the End of an Era


For more on the debate on merit, see Thomas C. Smith, “‘Merit’ as Ideology in the Tokugawa Period,” in Native Sources of Japanese Industrialization, op. cit., p. 169.
### Handout T1: Answer Key

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image Title</th>
<th>What Do I Observe in This Image?</th>
<th>How Do These Observations Help Me Understand the Tokugawa Period?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nihonbashi</td>
<td>rooftops, bridge, various carrying baskets, procession moving over bridge; fish vendors walking in foreground</td>
<td>Students may report that Hiroshige’s prints reveal a period during which travel—by boat and foot—was happening with regularity; the prints reveal city dwellers engaged in peaceful and pleasurable pursuits: watching fireworks, shopping, having conversation in wide boulevards; commercial activity (buying and selling of goods) seems to be widespread in city and country. Students may report that the Tokugawa period revealed in these prints was a peaceful and prosperous time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shinagawa</td>
<td>ships in bay; buildings; boxes strapped to backs of people; procession walking through village; women in tea stalls watching procession</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goyu</td>
<td>inns; restaurants; comic scene: women struggling to pull customer into teahouse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Okazaki</td>
<td>wooden bridge spanning river; castle in distance; baskets and bundles for carrying items; walking in formation across bridge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seki</td>
<td>low building with fabric covering; poles; lanterns; saw horses; saying goodbye; preparing for the journey ahead</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearing Weather after Snow at Nihon Bridge</td>
<td>bridges, warehouses, castle, fish market buildings, boats; fishing; rowing boats; crossing bridge; carrying items to market</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surugachō</td>
<td>large structures: department store buildings; wide street; walking in street; shopping; carrying goods</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The River Bank by Ryōgoku Bridge</td>
<td>bridge; market stalls; sail boats; fishing boats; crossing bridge; rowing boats; shopping in market stalls</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fireworks at Ryōgoku</td>
<td>row boats and pleasure boats; bridge; fireworks; watching fireworks from boats and bridge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Handouts T2 through T4: Answer Key to Questions for Discussion

Handout T2:

1. How did the demands of travel impoverish the daimyō?
The Tokugawa government required that daimyō travel to and from Edo every other year to pay tribute to the shogun. Daimyō traveled with large groups of attendants, staying in inns along the way. This lavish travel was expensive. In addition, daimyō maintained homes in the capital and in their domains.

2. Why were common people also traveling more during this period?
Workers were needed in Edo to provide services to the daimyō and their attendants, so builders, craftspeople, and others traveled to the capital from the countryside to provide labor. Also, the development of a system of roads allowed common people to visit shrines and other religious sites in other parts of Japan.

3. How did travel during the Tokugawa period contribute to economic and social change in Japan? Think about the development of a sense of shared culture as you answer the question.
Travel, by commoners and elites alike, helped link Japan in ways that had not previously existed there. Travelers brought news, art, information, and souvenirs from the capital city to the countryside, spreading a sense of common culture throughout Japan. In addition, travel helped commerce develop in villages along the main highways, linking towns with cities through market activity.

Handout T3:

1. Who might have purchased woodblock prints during this period? For what purpose?
Members of all social classes purchased these inexpensive artworks. Woodblock prints served as advertisements as well as souvenirs of Japanese urban life.

2. How did woodblock prints help link the city and countryside during the Tokugawa period?
Purchased by visitors to Edo and other cities, woodblock prints traveled home with travelers as souvenirs of city life. Woodblock prints conveyed to a rural as well as an urban audience the vibrant social scene of the big cities. In addition, they built markets for goods and services available in the city and vice versa.

Handout T4:

1. How did life change for samurai during the Tokugawa period?
While officially of high status, samurai became increasingly poor during the Tokugawa period. Rather than serving their lords as warriors, samurai shifted to bureaucratic positions in Japan’s urban centers. Because they were paid in fixed amounts of rice, samurai had to exchange their rice for money with the merchant class. They eventually became indebted to the merchants.

2. To which social class in Tokugawa society would you prefer to belong? Why?
Student answers may vary, but many will report preferring to be members of the increasingly powerful and wealthy merchant class, because they seem to be having the most fun during this period, with the most money to enjoy life and the pleasures of urban society.
Quote 1

The flourishing of the Gokaidō [five major highways] was largely supported by the alternate residence system (Sankin kōtaï) whereby feudal lords (daimyō) were compelled to travel annually to Edo, where they kept their families and residences. The formal travelling procedure required many followers and a display of wealth demonstrating their high status. Various categories of inns . . . were built at each station to accommodate the daimyō processions. Many local merchants and carriers were employed to serve them. Consequently, the regions close to the roads benefited economically from the flow of people and trade. The Gokaidō, and especially the Tōkaidō, became sites of social diversity, where people from different classes and regions met.


Quote 2

In this prospering commercial center [Edo], economic power resided with the wealthy townspeople. Artistic patronage and production no longer belonged only to the ruling elite but reflected diverse tastes and values. A new urban culture developed, valuing the cultivation of leisure that was celebrated in annual festivals, famous local sites, the theater, and pleasure quarters. The rich urban experience and the landscape of the time were documented by ukiyo-e, or "pictures of the floating world," including woodblock prints like Hiroshige’s One Hundred Famous Views of Edo. Since they could be purchased inexpensively—one print cost the same as a bowl of noodles—refined images became accessible to a wide audience.

. . . The series, actually comprising 118 prints, remains not only the last great work of Japan’s most celebrated artist of the landscape print but also a precious record of the appearance, and spirit, of Edo at the culmination of more than two centuries of uninterrupted peace and prosperity.

Retrieval Chart: Woodblock Prints by Ando Hiroshige

As your teacher shows each image, record what you observe in the center column of the table below. As you study the images, make notations about structures and technology, human activity, and trade and commerce.

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<tr>
<td>The River Bank by Ryōgoku Bridge</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fireworks at Ryōgoku
After you have studied all nine images, think about how your observations support and extend the ideas about the Tokugawa Period provided in Quotes 1 and 2. Write two or three sentences in the righthand column of the table explaining how evidence from the prints helps you better understand the Tokugawa Period.

**Quote 1**

The flourishing of the Gokaidō [five major highways] was largely supported by the alternate residence system (*Sankin kōtai*) whereby feudal lords (*daimyō*) were compelled to travel annually to Edo, where they kept their families and residences. The formal travelling procedure required many followers and a display of wealth demonstrating their high status. Various categories of inns . . . were built at each station to accommodate the *daimyō* processions. Many local merchants and carriers were employed to serve them. Consequently, the regions close to the roads benefited economically from the flow of people and trade. The Gokaidō, and especially the Tōkaidō, became sites of social diversity, where people from different classes and regions met.


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Tokugawa Period Travel

At the end of a long period of civil war, the Tokugawa clan emerged in 1603 as the preeminent political family in Japan. The Tokugawa ruled Japan from 1603 to 1868, a period known as the Great Peace. The first Tokugawa ruler, or shogun, established a new capital in Edo (today’s Tokyo). Edo was the Tokugawa family’s traditional domain. To centralize power and assert authority over rival regional lords, or daimyō, the Tokugawa shogunate issued and enforced social laws. These laws were based in part on Confucian ideals of the well-ordered society, in part on shrewd political strategy. Some of the laws had unintended consequences.

The Tokugawa government required daimyō to travel from their domains to Edo every other year to pay tribute to the shogun. The daimyō thus lived in their domains one year, and in Edo the next. Their wives and children were required to stay in Edo. This tactic, known as “alternate attendance,” helped keep the peace and control the daimyō’s wealth and power. Because the daimyō never stayed for more than one year in their domains, they were unlikely to unite with neighboring daimyō against the Tokugawa government. The daimyō’s attendants, samurai who traveled with him, were required to leave their families in the domain. The costs of maintaining two elaborate homes, one in the country and the other in Edo, and of traveling back and forth to Edo, with a large retinue of samurai attendants, diminished the daimyō’s wealth.

The continual movement of daimyō and their attendants from the countryside to Edo required a network of highways and waterways linking the main cities of Edo, Kyoto, and Osaka, as well as smaller cities and towns along the way. The Tokugawa government maintained five major highways. The Tōkaidō Road, which linked the ancient capital, Kyoto, with the new capital, Edo, was one such highway. As they traveled the highways, the daimyō processions, often numbering in the hundreds of people, stopped to eat and rest at teahouses, restaurants, and inns that catered to the travelers. Thus, the daimyō processions helped to foster the growth of local markets and regional specialties of food, drinks, arts, and crafts. Travelers from the domains brought information, souvenirs, and regional artwork to Edo. They also spread information, art, and souvenirs of Edo on their return journey to the provinces.

By the middle and late Tokugawa period, common people also traveled the network of roads linking the cities and countryside. Because of the demand for skilled builders, craftspeople, and courtesans to provide services to the daimyō and their attendants in Edo, people moved along the system of roads from the countryside into the capital. Agricultural and other goods produced for sale in the countryside moved along roads and waterways into Edo and other cities. In addition, common people traveled along the major roads to visit shrines and places of religious importance all over Japan.

One result of the increasing travel throughout the Edo period was the creation of a more linked and integrated culture and society. People who had formerly been isolated in villages and small towns had chances to travel and to interact with travelers. Changes taking place in cities were transmitted to other areas via travelers. In turn, people across Japan began to feel their association with other Japanese and to recognize commonalities of culture.
Questions for Discussion:

1. How did the demands of travel impoverish the daimyō?
2. Why were common people also traveling more during this period?
3. How did travel during the Tokugawa period contribute to economic and social change in Japan? Think about the development of a sense of shared culture as you answer the question.
Publishing and the Arts in the Tokugawa Period

At the end of a long period of civil war, the Tokugawa clan emerged in 1603 as the pre-eminent political family in Japan. The Tokugawa ruled over Japan from 1603 to 1868, a period known as the Great Peace. The first Tokugawa ruler, or shogun, established a new capital in Edo (today’s Tokyo). Edo was the Tokugawa family’s traditional domain.

As the arts of war gave way to the arts of peace during the Tokugawa period, a publishing industry flourished in Edo and other major cities. In an increasingly urban, literate society, the demand for printed information—novels, poetry, maps, guide books, and woodblock prints—was high. The famous poet Matsuo Bashô published poems and prose about his travels around Japan. Jippensha Ikku’s novel A Shank’s Mare Tour of the Tôkaidô, a comic story about two traveling samurai, was a best-seller in 1802. The popularity of Bashô and Ikku’s works prompted painters and print artists to illustrate the places made famous by their writings. One example is Hiroshige’s print series of the 1830s, The Fifty-three Stations of the Tôkaidô Road. Another celebrated print series of the time, Hokusai’s Thirty-six View of Mt. Fuji, depicted Japan’s revered mountain from many viewpoints and in a variety of weather and light conditions.

Woodblock prints depicting the vibrant urban culture of the period, as well as the landscape of the countryside and the open road, depended on a sophisticated publishing industry for their production and distribution. Woodblock prints were mass produced. Production involved four people: the artist, who drew the design on paper; the carver, who carved the design onto cherry wood blocks, one for each color of ink; the printer, who applied color to each block and transferred the print to paper; and the publisher, who financed the production of the prints and advertised and sold them to the public. Color woodblock printing as developed in this period was a major technological innovation, producing prints that were more advanced than anything available in Europe at the time.

People from all walks of life bought and collected woodblock prints, which were very inexpensive. A woodblock print cost about as much as a bowl of noodles. Travelers to Edo bought prints as souvenirs of the city, returning with them to the countryside and other parts of Japan. These prints helped to advertise what was popular in Edo: famous actors, department stores, women’s makeup, courtesans, restaurants and teahouses, boating and viewing fireworks along Edo’s main waterways, and other aspects of the “floating world,” the shifting urban scene. Woodblock prints depicting this world were known as ukiyo-e, or “art of the floating world.”

Toward the end of the Tokugawa period, large series of prints by Hokusai and Hiroshige of famous places and scenes of Edo, Mt. Fuji, and the Tôkaidô and other roads were hugely popular. Because of their popularity, the publishers of these series produced them in large runs of 500 or 1000 prints per image. Sometimes, second and third editions of these series were printed.

Because woodblock prints were purchased and distributed widely throughout Japan, they served an important and unexpected role in unifying the Japanese people. On one level, woodblock prints spread information about the country of Japan among Japanese people,
wherever they lived. People in small villages could learn about life in the larger cities through the detailed prints. Because prints often included place names, names of publishers and artists, as well as other written tidbits about contemporary life, the increasingly literate commoner population, both urban and rural, could read prints for clues about their changing society. In this way, the prints both shaped and reflected the growth of literacy during the period. On another level, the woodblock prints contributed to the viewers’ knowledge of Japan’s geography. Geographic landmarks—the most obvious being Mt. Fuji—were repeated in woodblock prints so often that they formed a core identification for Japanese people: these images became clearly recognizable symbols of their country. In these ways, woodblock prints contributed to a sense of a shared culture and country called Japan.

**Questions for Discussion:**

1. Who might have purchased woodblock prints during this period? For what purpose?
2. How did woodblock prints help link the city and countryside during the Tokugawa period?
Tokugawa Period Economy and Society

At the end of a long period of civil war, the Tokugawa clan emerged in 1603 as the pre-eminent political family in Japan. The Tokugawa ruled over Japan from 1603 to 1868, a period known as the Great Peace. The first Tokugawa ruler, or shogun, established a new capital in Edo (today’s Tokyo). Edo was the Tokugawa family’s traditional domain. In order to centralize power and assert its authority over any rival regional lords, or daimyō, the Tokugawa shogunate issued and enforced social laws. These laws were based in part on Confucian ideals of the well-ordered society, in part on shrewd political strategy. Some of the Tokugawa government’s rules and regulations regarding the four social classes—the samurai, farmers, artisans, and merchants—had unintended consequences.

The hereditary samurai class was officially the highest social rank in the Tokugawa class system. During the preceding era of civil wars, the samurai had served their regional lords, or daimyō, as warriors. Now in the “Great Peace” of the Tokugawa period, the government required samurai to move off of the land and into castle towns. There, they served their daimyō as bureaucrats and attendants. To show their elite position, the samurai were permitted to carry swords and wear luxurious fabrics, such as silk. By law, however, they could not engage in trade or farming. Thus samurai found it difficult to profit from peacetime pursuits. As a result, many samurai, though high in status, grew poor during the period.

With the movement of daimyō and samurai into regional castle towns, Japan underwent a period of rapid urbanization. Building roads, houses, and government structures required skilled labor; workers required housing, food, and other services. Businesses sprang up to supply the needed materials and goods. Castle towns grew dramatically during the period, as they became regional centers of trade and government administration. To aid economic growth, the Tokugawa government established a monetary system, with standardized coins. This system greatly simplified trade among regions of the country. By 1700, Osaka, a port city and commercial center, had a population of 400,000; by the same year, Edo’s population had grown to 1 million, making it one of the largest cities in the world.

Meanwhile, the three lower classes profited handsomely from a growing population and growing urban centers. Farmers, who made up 90 percent of the population, became increasingly well-off during the period, as more land was made available for agriculture, farming techniques improved, and food production grew. As cities developed and expanded, the urban demand for goods other than food allowed farmers to produce silk and other products in small-scale rural factories. Artisans supplied the skilled labor to build the great castle towns and to maintain and build the roads, bridges, buildings, and infrastructure of an urbanizing society.

The merchant class, officially at the bottom of the Tokugawa social structure, benefited greatly from the period’s economic growth and rapid urbanization, growing prosperous and powerful during the period. The samurai, whose incomes were still paid in fixed amounts of rice, had to trade their rice for cash with the merchants, who controlled this exchange. They became increasingly indebted to merchants, whom they borrowed from to maintain an upper class
lifestyle they could no longer afford. During the Tokugawa period, merchants grew wealthy selling the products and services desired by commoners and samurai alike. The merchant class created a new style of life and art, flaunting their wealth and power, enjoying the theater, hosting boating parties on city waterways, and frequenting restaurants and teahouses. Their lavish lifestyle was celebrated and recorded in woodblock prints of the period.

The Tokugawa shogunate established policies and practices that allowed for a remarkable period of peace and prosperity. Its policies also undermined the power of the samurai class and unintentionally provided an opportunity for the lowly merchant class to emerge as a dominant force in the shaping of Japan's urban culture.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How did life change for samurai during the Tokugawa period?
2. To which social class in Tokugawa society would you prefer to belong? Why?