



# Class and Contradiction: Merchants and Expression of Wealth in the Tokugawa Period

Kate Carey

---

## About the Author

Kate Carey is a senior history major at the University of Washington, planning to graduate in June 2011. Her historical interests span across all time periods and countries, but she most enjoys trying to glean information about past societies from their works of fiction.

---

## Abstract

*Class and Contradiction* explores the society of the merchant class in Tokugawa Period Japan, focusing mainly on the evolution of the merchant class from a lowly social rank, marginalized by the government, to a wealthy, developed group. Despite their wealth, the merchant class was denied power during the Tokugawa Period because of their low status in the social hierarchy. Meanwhile, the samurai, members of the elite warrior class, became increasingly poor and indebted to the merchants in order to keep up with the extravagant lifestyle encouraged by the shogunate. A glaring and unintentional contradiction developed where the samurai had governmental power but little money, and the merchants were wealthy but had no power. In order to cope with the restrictions placed on them, the merchants created their own culture and art form where they could express themselves freely. The paper aims to expose the merchant class' frustration with the Tokugawa system as it was depicted in the art of woodblock printing, otherwise known as ukiyo-e. Why was ukiyo-e so popular? How did the merchants represent themselves and their social situation? How did they portray the samurai? The answers to these questions create an understanding for the mindset of the merchant during this frustrating time in history.



During the Tokugawa Period (1603-1868), Japanese society was full of contradictions. On the one hand, the strict social hierarchy as dictated by Confucian ideology placed the samurai of the warrior class at the top and the unproductive merchants at the bottom. On the other hand, the rapidly accelerating economy, driven by the advances of the Tokugawa Period, fed into the increasing wealth of the lowly merchants. Class tensions rose as the period progressed due to this paradox in the Tokugawa system. Although the merchant class became increasingly wealthy during the Tokugawa Period, they were continuously denied a social status equal to their wealth. Instead, the merchants found freedom in the theater and brothel districts of large cities like Edo, and lived a lavish lifestyle which was reflected in their popular art known as ukiyo-e. This lifestyle made them the targets of resentment from the technically more elite samurai class whose members were losing money to merchants in the fiscally draining Tokugawa government practice of alternate attendance. Through ukiyo-e, the merchant class expressed their social aspirations – despite the limitations of their class – with references to the court culture in which they would never belong. At the same time, the merchants released their frustration while poking fun at their restrictive society by parodying themselves and the samurai elite.

The merchant class was placed at the bottom of Tokugawa society early on in the shogunate's reign. At the beginning of the Tokugawa Period, the shogunate established power by placing several controls over the people, including ideological controls. The

promotion of Confucianism emphasized respect for authority and power in interpersonal relationships.<sup>1</sup> This stabilized Japan's feudalistic society by solidifying a hierarchical social structure. The hierarchy, known as "shinokosho," ranked members of society by usefulness and productivity. "Shi" stood for the highest class, the samurai, who fought loyally for their lord and protected the land, "no" are the farmers who come in second because they produced the food for the country, "ko" stood for the artisans who created everything from artwork to every day tools, and finally the "sho" represented the merchant class who did not create anything and therefore did not earn their status in society.<sup>2</sup> In the Confucian way of thinking, merchants were simply parasites in a society full of productive citizens, and this greatly affected government policy and public opinion with regards to the merchant class.

Discrimination against merchants on the part of the shogunate began early and severely limited the power and influence of the merchants. Even before the official beginning of the Tokugawa Period, Hideyoshi's Sword Hunt of 1588 drew a clear line between the samurai and the lower classes. The Sword Hunt was mandated by Toyotomi Hideyoshi, a warlord who came to power toward the end of the Warring States Period and began the process of unifying Japan. Hideyoshi sought to stabilize Japan,

---

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth B. Pyle, *The Making of Modern Japan*, 2 ed. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1996, 19.

<sup>2</sup> *The Floating World of Ukiyo-E: Shadows, Dreams, and Substance*, Iris Newsom, New York: Henry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001, 28.



much like the later Tokugawa shogunate, by creating a system in which everyone knew their place and purpose. By confiscating all weapons from the non-warrior classes, Hideyoshi created a clear distinction between the samurai and the lower classes.<sup>3</sup> This was the first step in denying merchants power in society, because although the Sword Hunt denied all lower class citizens the ability to fight and the power that comes with owning a weapon, merchants were some of the few people wealthy enough to pose a threat. The shogunate also denied merchants power by effectively ending international trade, which limited their level of influence. At the same time in other parts of the world such as Europe where there were no bans on international trade, merchants became some of the most influential members of society with tremendous wealth which gave them power.<sup>4</sup> In Japan, merchants were restricted to a small sphere of control where their wealth could only grow so much and their power would not be recognized by the government.

The government also ignored the merchant class with regards to protecting their livelihood, and instead focused on the needs of the productive classes, mainly the samurai and farmers. Japan's economy was based solidly in agriculture at the beginning of the Tokugawa Period, so the shogunate saw no reason to protect the business of

merchants.<sup>5</sup> As one Japanese scholar, Ogyu Sorai, wrote in the 1720s, samurai and farmers are productive and important members of society and should be protected by the government, while "merchants, on the other hand, carry on an insignificant occupation...it should be of no concern of government if they ruin themselves."<sup>6</sup> By the time this was written, Japanese merchants had increased their wealth and power despite – and possibly because of – the neglect of the shogunate. While the government spent its time protecting the samurai and the farmers, merchant industry went unchecked, which allowed them to come up with new ways to consolidate their wealth and attract the business of others.

A great deal of the wealth of the merchant class can be attributed to the rapid urbanization of Japan following the Warring States Period. Daimyo lords began moving the warriors out of the countryside and into consolidated settlements known as castle towns in the 1580s in an effort to control their samurai.<sup>7</sup> These castle towns created new demands such as the demand for workers to build their houses and markets from which to buy their goods, and this attracted people from the countryside to move into castle towns and fulfill these needs. Some castle towns, like the center of the Tokugawa shogunate in Edo, quickly grew into cities teeming with activity. Many merchants saw an opportunity in these

---

<sup>3</sup> Pyle, *The Making of Modern Japan*, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Charles D. Sheldon, "Merchants and Society in Tokugawa Japan," *Modern Asian Studies*, v. 3, no. 17 (1983), 479.

---

<sup>5</sup> Sheldon, "Merchants and Society," 478.

<sup>6</sup> Ogyu Sorai, *Seidan*, III, Tokyo, Japan: Nihon Keizan Shosha, 1914-17, 427.

<sup>7</sup> Pyle, *The Making of Modern Japan*, 3.



rapidly growing castle towns and established lucrative businesses, feeding off of samurai spending promoted by the castle town system, characterized by the Tokugawa shogun's requirement of alternate attendance.

Alternate attendance was a method used by the Tokugawa shogunate to monitor the daimyo and maintain their loyalty, but it also worked to contain daimyo wealth through the promotion of heavy spending which benefitted the merchants. In the system of alternate attendance, daimyo would live half the time in their domain and the other half in Edo. The families of daimyo lived in Edo and large numbers of people were required to take up residence there as servants. Artisans and merchants flocked to Edo to provide the goods and services needed by the daimyo, samurai, and their families. The merchants took advantage of this opportunity of high demand, "making their services indispensable...organizing complex distribution and financial systems which proved to be largely beyond the understanding of the samurai."<sup>8</sup> Merchants filled an important niche in Tokugawa society which the government unknowingly made indispensable with the alternate attendance system.

Rising merchant wealth and the lavish spending of the daimyo can be attributed to the general economic growth of the early Tokugawa Period. An increase in agricultural productivity began toward the end of the Warring States Period, perhaps stimulated by the effect of more widespread peace, but also due to better farming techniques discovered

---

<sup>8</sup> Sheldon, "Merchants and Society," 479.

and shared among Japanese farmers. According to the Cambridge History of Japan, between 1550 and 1650 agricultural productivity doubled.<sup>9</sup> Naturally, an increase in food production led to population growth, creating more people to produce goods and spend money.

With a strengthened agricultural force and a growing population, Japanese society became more reliant on trade and the services of merchants. As agricultural techniques were perfected, different regions began to specialize in certain areas, creating a need for trade in order to redistribute goods.<sup>10</sup> This made the job of the merchant necessary to survival and, in general, commerce increased over this period. Trade soon became a necessity in Japanese life and daimyo invested in infrastructure like roads, better ports, and new channels to ease travel and trade between areas in their domain.<sup>11</sup> The road between Kyoto and Edo became especially important to the alternate attendance system as daimyo and their samurai traveled back and forth.<sup>12</sup> The specialization of production in different domains created a dependence on trade that benefitted the merchants, and the alternate attendance system established the necessary

---

<sup>9</sup> Donald H. Shively, *The Cambridge History of Japan*, 4, *Early Modern Japan*, Cambridge University Press, 1991, <[http://histories.cambridge.org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/uid=2312/book?id=cho19780521223553](http://histories.cambridge.org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/uid=2312/book?id=cho19780521223553_CHOL9780521223553)>, 543.

<sup>10</sup> Shively, 544.

<sup>11</sup> Shively, 544.

<sup>12</sup> Shively, 544.



infrastructure for widespread trade throughout Japan.

While the alternate attendance system benefitted the merchant class and filled their pockets, the daimyo and samurai were losing money to the now wealthy merchants, which created class tension. Within the alternate attendance system it was a matter of pride for the daimyo to display their wealth in the extravagant procession to and from Edo, in their living quarters in Edo, and in their lifestyle. The high demand for products of status in Edo, Sorai argued, allowed merchants to raise prices however high they pleased.<sup>13</sup> Sorai especially criticized merchants for robbing honest samurai of their stipends, writing that the majority of their pay “granted them by their lords in return for their loyal and devoted service” fell to the merchants of Edo.<sup>14</sup> The sense of injustice felt by the samurai elite due to the contradictions of the system created tension between the samurai and merchant classes. The alternate attendance system at once drained the daimyo of their money, leading to lower samurai stipends, and filled the pockets of the merchants. The same society that placed merchants at the bottom of the social hierarchy promoted their success by encouraging high spending rates.

Merchants enjoyed their newfound wealth, but because no authority came with it they created their own way of life, known as ukiyo, filled with the pleasure of the brothel and theater districts in Edo where they could exhibit their power. Ukiyo can be translated

in many different ways; before the 1680s, when this lifestyle emerged in a time known as the Genroku Period, “ukiyo” was a Japanese word meaning “the here and now,” but was later attached to the society of the merchants of Edo who recognized that the here and now was constantly changing.<sup>15</sup> The ukiyo lifestyle is associated with the merchant class and completely separate from the society of the upper classes. This is where the merchants could reign free of the Tokugawa society’s restrictive hierarchy, spend lavishly, and live in the moment.<sup>16</sup> Ukiyo has been described as a floating world, perhaps because it was a place where merchants could live outside Tokugawa society, floating between the world they lived in and a fantastical world they created. It is within this culture that Japanese woodblock prints, also known as ukiyo-e, were originally conceived.

Ukiyo-e was art made for the masses which depicted the lifestyle of the Genroku Period. The prints often illustrated scenes in brothels or the famous actors of kabuki theater which were both heavily patronized by the merchant class. Woodblock prints by nature can be mass produced as opposed to a single artist working for a small group of clients to create individual pieces.<sup>17</sup> Merchants who aspired to a higher social rank enjoyed the privilege of having their own art form, especially when it so closely resembled and may have been based on yamato-e, the popular art of the 17<sup>th</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Sorai, *Seidan*, 37-8.

<sup>14</sup> Sorai, *Seidan*, 51.

---

<sup>15</sup> Newsom, 50-1.

<sup>16</sup> Pyle, *The Making of Modern Japan*, 38.

<sup>17</sup> Newsom, 29.



century Japanese court.<sup>18</sup> Ukiyo-e differed from yamato-e in the fact that yamato-e were one-of-a-kind painted works of art, while ukiyo-e was mass-produced with woodblocks. Nevertheless, ukiyo-e closely resembles the style of yamato-e. This might explain why famous printers of the Genroku Period signed their work with the title “painter of Japan;” even though their work was not painted, the title gave them a sense of importance and infused the prints with credibility and worth.<sup>19</sup> This attracted merchants who were frustrated with their inability to raise their social status and searching for a way to experience court culture while they were unable to obtain it.

As an art form of the merchant class, ukiyo-e reflects more than their desire to live the courtly life, but also reveals their attitude toward their social situation. Throughout depictions of themselves and of samurai, the merchant class released their frustration with Tokugawa society by parodying it. At the beginning of the Tokugawa Period, when they were solidly placed with the lower classes, merchants attempted to see humor in their situation and used self-deprecating humor to make light of their low social standing and lack of power.<sup>20</sup> Later on, once the merchant class rose in wealth but not traditional status, they poked fun at their ability to use their money to buy respect. In the print, “Proverbs: The Navel’s Change of Address,” a merchant pushes his way through a busy crowd while the text above him reads

that instead of following the righteous path this man can “throw his weight around by keeping money to bribe others in his sleeves.”<sup>21</sup>



The man did not follow the honorable path, or perhaps was not allowed to, like the merchants of the Tokugawa Period, so he used his riches to achieve his goals. While the affluence of the merchant class may have increased, their social standing did not change and this frustrated these men who pushed up against the glass ceiling created by the Tokugawa shogunate for people like them.

At the same time, the elite samurai class felt left behind by the Tokugawa system because they were no longer more prosperous than many people who supposedly belonged to a lower social rank. It was the samurai belief, as Sorai wrote, that merchants stole the wealth of the samurai class. The merchants felt this animosity, so many ukiyo-e depict samurai defending their social standing. In most cases the wealth of the merchants surpassed that of the socially superior samurai, which put the power in the

<sup>18</sup> Newsom, 39.

<sup>19</sup> Newsom, 40.

<sup>20</sup> Newsom, 72.

<sup>21</sup> Newsom, 92.



hands of the merchants because of their fiscal control of the upper classes due to the constant cycle of money lending and debt.<sup>22</sup>

Samurai had once been the warriors and protectors of their domain, gaining respect

for their loyal service to their daimyo, but as the peace of the Tokugawa Period continued the samurai's warrior status became mostly ceremonial.

By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, samurai wore armor made of lacquered paper that was as symbolic as their social standing during their processions to and from Edo for alternate attendance.<sup>23</sup> A print from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century shows a warrior figure with two swords holding an oversized gun or cannon defensively, as if to keep someone from taking it.<sup>24</sup> Although the samurai role as warriors became obsolete in the Tokugawa Period they attempted to hold on to their important social rank while their wealth slipped away from them. The need for the samurai to keep hold of their status read as

<sup>22</sup> Newsom, 73.

<sup>23</sup> Newsom, 73.

<sup>24</sup> Newsom, 41.

desperation to the merchant class, which they parodied in this print. Another print from the same period shows a ronin, or master-less samurai, being inspected with a magnifying glass by an old peasant man while townsmen leisurely look on in the background.<sup>25</sup> This reflects the merchants' own inspection of the Tokugawa hierarchy, especially the rank of samurai who were fiscally inferior to the lowly merchant class. The merchants' discontent with their social status is suggested in their playful questioning of the samurai rank in ukiyo-e.

Ukiyo-e are a representation of the affluent merchant lifestyle



of the Tokugawa Period. While representing their discontent with the strict social hierarchy, the merchant class pointed out the flaws and contradictions in the system. From the beginning of the Tokugawa Period, merchants were considered the lowest social class because of the Confucian ideals that the Tokugawa shogunate promoted to bring social order to Japan. The shogunate also restricted merchants' potential power by

<sup>25</sup> Newsom, 57.



closing international trade and neglected to protect merchant industries in favor of the more productive samurai and farming classes. The Tokugawa government did the merchants a favor by ignoring them, allowing the merchants to expand their industry without regulation. At the same time, the shogunate implemented the alternate attendance system, which drained the daimyo and samurai of their money for services provided by Japanese merchants. By the decades leading up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the wealth of the upper classes, especially the samurai, transferred to the merchant class, which created a glaring contradiction in the Tokugawa system evident in ukiyo-e. While the samurai were traditionally from a higher social standing, many of them found themselves indebted to the wealthy merchants of Edo, and the merchants, who had become more affluent than many samurai,

enjoyed no higher social ranking. In their discontent, merchants created their own culture known as ukiyo, or the floating world, where they could exhibit their power through lavish spending and express their frustration in their popular art form, ukiyo-e. Ukiyo-e often depicted the merchant lifestyle and their unfortunate social position in a humorous light, and illustrated the shortcomings of the samurai elite by parodying their social paranoia. As the Tokugawa Period came to an end and gave way to the Meiji Period, lower samurai who felt they had been wronged rose to power and the social hierarchy was, once again, turned on its head. The Meiji Restoration marked many changes in Japanese society, including the recognition and respect of the hunger for power like that of the lowly merchant class from the Tokugawa Period.



## Bibliography

Newsom, Iris. *The Floating World of Ukiyo-E: Shadows, Dreams, and Substance*. New York: Henry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001.

Pyle, Kenneth B. *The Making of Modern Japan*. 2 edition. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1996.

Sheldon, Charles D. "Merchants and Society in Tokugawa Japan." *Modern Asian Studies*. v. 3. no. 17. 1983.

Shively, Donald H. *The Cambridge History of Japan*. 4. *Early Modern Japan*. Cambridge University Press. 1991.

<[http://histories.cambridge.org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/uid=2312/book?id=chol9780521223553\\_CHOL9780521223553](http://histories.cambridge.org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/uid=2312/book?id=chol9780521223553_CHOL9780521223553)>.

Sorai, Ogyu. *Seidan*. III. Tokyo, Japan: Nihon Keizan Soshu. 1914-17.