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Legends of Wise Women and Virtuous Wives: Historical women taken from the collection of Kuniyoshi's Print Series: an Inquisitive Study

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“Legends of Wise Women and Virtuous Wives”
Historical women taken from the collection of Kuniyoshi’s Print Series: an
Inquisitive Study.

MA Thesis

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Figure 1

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Introduction

During the course of my academic journey of Asian art, I have developed a fascination for researching and discussing the portrayal of women within the context of Japanese traditional art. In particular, I was drawn to the more classical narratives and accounts of famous historical women such as Ono no Komachi and Murasaki Shikibu and how they were portrayed in various different contexts and print media over the course of time. I would like to continue with this trend by focusing this MA thesis on highlighting the portrayal of historical women in Edo period art. More specifically, the changing portrayal of women, with an emphasis on the artist Utagawa Kuniyoshi as he seems to have a fascinating way of showing women in his prints. Fascinating in a way, that his portrayal of women differs in many ways from the artists who came before him, such as Kitagawa Utamaro and Suzuki Harunobu. This thesis will go beyond elements of style, such as women in the style of Harunobu or in the style of Utamaro, and go deeper into the spatial elements shown in the prints. Generally speaking, women in prints were depicted as beauties, such as seen in *bijin-ga*, which translates to pictures of beautiful people, and was a popular genre of prints within the floating world prints also known as *ukiyo-e*. The floating world was a space of escapism tied to physical locations such as the pleasure quarters, kabuki theatre and tea houses¹. The pleasure quarters, or the Yoshiwara, especially was a place dedicated to the escape from routine. It represented the ideals of the floating world, and within its boundaries lay a world of freedom and possibilities as Samurai and commoners were able to mingle with one another, transcending the social rules of hierarchy. The *Ukiyo-e* prints are the visual manifestation of the floating world, and were known to portray not only a fantasy, but rather a reflection of the floating world, acting as a mirror². Their popularity was due almost entirely to their accessibility, since they arrived in great numbers and were so widely produced, making them accessible to anyone regardless of their social standing³.

However, women seen in prints were not simply beautiful in the manifestation of their physical features, but rather in the way that they were made beautiful by their surroundings, as they are shown surrounded by decorative and expensive looking objects. The Yoshiwara was well known for its lavish decorating. And because *bijin-ga* often acted as way of advertisement for brothels, this meant that brothel owners commissioned such prints to show just how beautiful and sophisticated their establishment and courtesans are. Besides their surroundings, women in prints were also made beautiful in the way they represented a cultural and refined aesthetic. This was shown by depicting courtesans partaking in activities such as flower arranging or reading, all means by which they could cultivate cultural capital, thus conveying their elegant and sophisticated behaviour to the viewer.

¹ Julie Davis, *Partners in Print: Artistic Collaboration and the Ukiyo-e Market* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014), 3.

² Davis, *Partners in Print*, 78.

³ Davis, *Partners in Print*, 18.

This paper will further discuss the manner in which *yūjo*, or female courtesans, were put on display in a way that was meant to show them as beauties and how this standard or norm for ‘a beautiful woman’ was reflected in popular prints during the Edo period. After establishing what the standard for depicting women was at the time, this paper will proceed to discuss the main character, Utagawa Kuniyoshi, and argue in what ways his depiction of women is vastly different from this portrayal of women.

Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797-1861) is a well-known ukiyo-e artist who lived during the latter part of the Edo period (1603-1868). Kuniyoshi's artistic journey began under the tutelage of the ukiyo-e master Utagawa Toyokuni. Kuniyoshi quickly garnered attention for his distinctive style and skilful execution. One of his more familiar works is the print ‘Princess Takiyasha Summons a Skeleton Specter to Frighten Mitsukuni (ca. 1845–1846)’ in which Princess Takiyasha, a daughter of a Sōma clan warlord, recites a spell to summon a giant skeleton to scare Mitsukuni, the emperor’s official⁴. This print portrays Kuniyoshi’s talent of creating mythical scenes using historical narratives and spiritual or non-human motifs. One might argue it also holds a political narrative highlighting the power struggle between the shogunate and the emperor. Kuniyoshi was widely known for his satire prints which echoed a resentment towards the do-nothing Tokugawa government. This discontent had awakened due to many events plaguing the later part of the Edo period, all such events strengthening the notion that the government could not properly protect or aid the people. This in turn caused satire prints, which critiqued the government in subtle ways, to become popular.

Kuniyoshi’s satirical and ‘tattoo’-like art form of depicting monsters, warriors and legends are few of the many aspects he is renowned for. Furthermore, Kuniyoshi has produced many similar prints depicting both warrior men and women. Among the many prints in his life’s work, a particular example is the print of Tokiwa Gozen from his print collection “Legends of Wise Women and Virtuous Wives” (賢女烈婦傳, Kenjo reppu den). Tokiwa Gozen (1138 – 1180) was a Japanese noblewoman who lived during the late Heian period (794–1185) and is best known as the mother of Minamoto no Yoshitsune, one of Japan's most famous samurai warriors. She is mostly known through Kuniyoshi’s print in which she is seen protecting her sons from the snowstorm (fig 2). It is fascinating to observe how he has portrayed her in such a fierce manner, accurately portraying her characteristic resilience and protectiveness. His print collection ‘Legends of Wise women and Virtuous wives’ includes many such historical women who have been portrayed in a manner which can only be considered ‘unconventional’. By unconventional, one suggests that by using certain motifs,

⁴ “triptych print,” The British Museum, accessed May 2, 2024, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1915-0823-0-915-916

symbolisms and figurative representations in his prints, he portrays historical women in a refreshingly different manner which diverges from the earlier representations of beautiful women seen in prints. As mentioned, Edo prints before Kuniyoshi's time often portrayed women as beauties, who were considered to be in line with the cultural expectations of Edo women, by showing them reading, writing poetry and flower arranging. A woman was made beautiful because of her ability for self-cultivation as well as for the way in which she was arranged in the physical space of the Yoshiwara. Moreover, prints featuring historical women from the Heian period (794-1185) often depicted the women re-fashioned as Yoshiwara courtesans. Nevertheless, the norm for prints portraying women had been to show them depicted indoors, secluded from society, while covered by patterned kimono's and other decorative items. Whereas Kuniyoshi's depiction of historical female figures diverges from this standardized norm, as is seen by his way of depicting women as warriors, not arranged or surrounded by decorative objects. His depiction has piqued my curiosity and spurred my intent to research Kuniyoshi's work more closely with a view to analyse exactly how he changed the norms for portraying women in his prints. He has painted women in a different narrative, far removed from the Confucian ideals and beauty standards society traditionally upheld. He portrayed women as strong, fierce warriors and in doing so he has seemingly created his own narrative of historical women, through his art.

Kuniyoshi's work is well known and much research has already been undertaken into his life and his art. However, I believe this specific angle on the portrayal of women by Kuniyoshi in his prints, and specifically historical female characters, has not yet been sufficiently explored. Therefore, my objective in this thesis is to answer the question: How did Kuniyoshi change the norms for depicting women in his prints?

This research plan aims to first arrive at a basis from what we might consider to be the norm or conventional manner of portraying women in Edo prints, this will be achieved by analysing prints from before Kuniyoshi's time. With a focus on *bijin-ga* and *mitate* art, together with Harunobu and Utamaro who have both been vital in setting the standard of portraying women as beauties in popular prints. Then, we will proceed to compare these prints with Kuniyoshi's prints and attempt to define in which ways the prints of Kuniyoshi deviate from the preceding portrayals of women. Leading to a conclusion of the research question. The expectation is that this research may subsequently induce further analyzation of *ukiyo-e* prints within the academic field which may give rise to more discoveries of other various 'unconventional' ways in which Japanese women may have been portrayed in prints.



Figure 2

Chapter 1: Setting the Norm: Depicting Women as Beauties

This chapter will discuss what was considered to be conventional, and will answer the question: what was the norm for depicting women in floating world prints created during the earlier Edo period? As we dive into bijin prints, we will see recurrent patterns of women depicted as beauties, not only made beautiful in their physical appearance, but with an emphasis on their surroundings which were tactically made equally extravagant to show off the status of the Yoshiwara. Women were depicted as epitome's of beauty because of their clothing, decorative surroundings and by their way of cultivating themselves as they are depicted while writing poetry and arranging flowers. These prints conveyed the social standards set on which aspects made a woman 'beautiful'. Gradually more prints combined the aesthetic with the parody as prints featuring historical women refashioned as Yoshiwara prostitutes came to appear; mitate prints. This chapter will focus on prints from artists Suzuki Harunobu (1724-1770) and Kitagawa Utamaro (1753-1806), who have both been crucial to setting this norm of depicting women within the popular print scene.

It was not until the beginning of the Edo period that bijin-ga, prints featuring elegant individual women, often yūjo or courtesans, became widespread⁵. Before the Edo period women were not often shown in prints, at least not in the way bijin-ga displayed them. These "pictures of beautiful women" were a sub-genre of ukiyo-e. Many have argued the purpose of bijin-ga to be commercial; to present beautifully dressed women as commodities of desire. Their objective, one assumes, was to inevitably lure customers into the pleasure quarters by depicting women as beautiful 'objects'⁶. These prints meant business and often did serve as advertisements for the floating world, in particular the pleasure quarters. Brothel owners commissioned publishers and artists to publish lavish prints that showed just how sophisticated and cultured the brothel and her yūjo were⁷. Therefore, women in prints were shown as arranged and on display as high quality 'objects', seamlessly matching the quality of the items surrounding them⁸. They were arranged in such a way that was meant to be assessed by the viewer. It was not just the beauty of the women themselves, but everything about bijin-ga was meant to be unpacked and assessed. This suggests that the social norm for prints depicting women during this time, are prints in which women were not only made beautiful in their personal features, but their beauty was mirrored and amplified by their surroundings. The concept of beauty thus became commodified and culturally constructed by aspects such as clothing, but also because of the sophisticated aesthetic they represented⁹. They radiated a cultured, elegant and domesticated lifestyle, because they were adorned with fine quality clothes and decorations, all while keeping an elegant

⁵ Ann Wehmeyer, "Rethinking 'Beauties': Women and Humor in the Late Edo Tōkaidō gojūsan tsui," *Literature & Aesthetics* Vol. 22, no. 2 (December 2012): 201.

⁶ Timothy Clark, *Kuniyoshi: From the Arthur R. Miller Collection* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2009), 125.

⁷ Davis, *Partners in Print*, 91.

⁸ Davis, *Partners in Print*, 94.

⁹ Julie Davis, *Picturing the floating world: Ukiyo-e in context* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2021), 30.

posture as they posed for the viewer. The viewer being not only men, but women as well. While these prints were mostly intended for the male gaze, they also acted as ‘trendsetters’ benchmarking the standards for beauty and fashion for other women as well¹⁰. Reflecting the epitome of a contemporary beautiful woman, and thus setting the social norm.

The decorations and interiors depicted alongside the beauties in these prints were therefore considered important markers for rank and standing. Which meant it was crucial for brothel owners and their businesses to show off their status through such prints¹¹. They would also often spare no expense to commission grand artworks to decorate the walls of their brothels. This manner of ‘kazari’, or lavish decorating had become a flagship of the Yoshiwara. The spaces of the brothels made beautiful and extravagant to enhance the beauty of its inhabitants¹². One reoccurring theme was the use of flower symbolism and the use of flower decorations. The yūjo were often likened to blossoming flowers: “The Yoshiwara is decorated with flowers for sale, the beauties who sit on display.”¹³ Thus, the beauties in prints were always portrayed with extravagant clothing or accessories, usually adorned with flowers. Each yūjo had her own distinctive flower, which meant that in personal portraits her clothes and accessories such as a parasol or a lantern box would be decorated with her own flower pattern¹⁴. Renowned artist Kitagawa Utamaro was famous for his bijin-ga. The print below (fig. 3) is made in his signature okubi-e style, portraits from the waist up¹⁵. This print features the courtesan Okita of the Naniwa teahouse from his print series *Kōmei Bijin Rokkasen* or “Renowned Beauties from the Six Best Houses”.

¹⁰ Wehmeyer, “Rethinking ‘Beauties’,” 203.

¹¹ Davis, *Partners in Print*, 97.

¹² Timothy Clark, “Flowers of Yoshiwara,” in *Kazari: Decoration and Display in Japan, 15th-19th Centuries*, ed. Nicole Coolidge (New York: N.Y. Japan Society, 2002), 64.

¹³ Clark, “Flowers,” 73.

¹⁴ Clark, “Flowers,” 66.

¹⁵ Gerald Groemer and Kazuo Nishiyama, *Edo Culture: Daily Life and Diversions in Urban Japan, 1600-1868* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 73.



Figure 3

Although her name is missing from the print, due to censorship rules during the Kansei reforms (1787-1793) which forbade the inscription of names of sex workers and tea houses, a point to be further expanded in the next chapter. There is still enough evidence shown in the print to point towards her identity. The devil is in the details, and in order to circumvent these restrictions Utamaro often used a smaller hanji-e, or pictorial puzzle in his prints. The exact origin of hanji-e is difficult to pinpoint, but the application of such pictorial puzzles became more widespread around the 18th century most likely due to these censorship rules. Okita's name is hidden, but by using pictorial symbols shown below, he spelled out her name. He used the pictorials 菜二把 (na ni-wa) in which wa is a Japanese counter word for bundles, therefore he depicted two (ni) bundles (wa) of vegetables (na). Followed by an arrow (屋, ya), the open sea 沖 (oki), and a rice paddy field (田 ta). Eventually spelling out: Naniwa ya Okita, or Okita of the Naniwaya teahouse.



figure 3, in detail

Utamaro also applies the previous mentioned flower symbolism as she is shown wearing an ornate hairpin with a paulownia blossom on it, and her clothing is patterned with stylized ivy, both flowers generally associated with Okita. Even though this personal portrait focuses less on showing a decorated background and more on her individuality, there is more to it than meets the eye.

Her being depicted alone, gives the viewers a more private view. Which is another component to the cultural norm this author wishes to unpack, as women were often depicted secluded and indoors. This was due to the following two reasons. Firstly, a woman's beauty was ultimately defined by a notion of controlled visibility¹⁶. Meaning a woman was considered ideally beautiful when she was shown secluded, and remaining mostly hidden from the gaze of men. A woman with access to a private, secluded space was deemed powerful as this showed she had the time and space available to cultivate herself¹⁷. The Yoshiwara maintained a hierarchal system when it came to ranking their courtesans. A courtesan's rank was ultimately determined by a combination of her beauty, talent, training, experience, popularity, and the overall financial and social investment made to her career¹⁸. If she could invest her time in reading, writing poetry and flower arranging, she was considered a higher ranked courtesan than others. Such activities were seen as 'classical arts' and surmised the cultural behavioural standard of Edo society at the time¹⁹. Those who were fluent in cultivating themselves, were considered especially civilized. As they adhered to the aesthetic ideals which had become the standard of society²⁰. Therefore, women who were shown honing their skills, were conveying the importance of investing in one's cultural capital and were deemed beautiful because of this. Most of

¹⁶ Rebekah Hunter, "Aesthetics of Womanhood in Heian Japan" (PhD diss., University of Oregon, 2014), 5.

¹⁷ Hunter, "Aesthetics," 64.

¹⁸ Davis, *Partners in Print*, 80.

¹⁹ Eiko Ikegami, *Bonds of civility: aesthetic networks and political origins of Japanese culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 324.

²⁰ Ikegami, *Bonds of civility*, 325.

these activities were performed indoors, which is reflected in Edo prints as women were often portrayed in indoor spaces. The background therefore plays a crucial part in such prints. Some prints show the women surrounded by decorations in order to enhance the beauty of the courtesans. While other backgrounds as seen in this particular print are more simple, focusing mostly on her individuality. Nevertheless her identity is tied to the space and confines of the Yoshiwara. One could imagine that it would be strange to see a print depicting a yūjo in a grassy farmland for example. In a way, they do exist within the Yoshiwara and are shown as such.

The second reason why an emphasis was often put on women being shown alone or in secluded, often indoor spaces, was in order to display her ability to attract attention to the otherwise unseen aspects. Meaning, what was being conveyed in the subtle, less visible aspects of the prints. The ability to evoke a sense of desire by the subtle exposure of her neck, the bare skin of her wrists, or layers of decorated silken robes waiting to be untied²¹. Seemingly inviting the viewer to come out and ‘play’. This notion of allure is found in the concept of *iki* conveyed in *bijin-ga*. *Iki* seems to be a difficult concept to explain, however, it encompasses the aesthetic consciousness of courtesans. It is the sexual tension, and the refined culture of sensation and allure of what they may awaken²². One’s understanding is that it entails the push and pull of the sexual dynamic between men and women. The woman, pulling the pleasure seeker in with her cultivated grace and charms, and the viewer, understanding the allure and reciprocating the pull. Like yin and yang, with *iki* comes the accompanying concept of *tsū*. *Tsū* which was a virtue found mostly in men, and encompasses the act of being culturally sophisticated. It required men to be extremely sophisticated and able to master the rules of civility which was expected of visitors of the pleasure quarters²³. In order to accomplish this, they too were expected to possess cultural capital. In this dynamic, there can be no full achievement of *iki*, without *tsū*, therefore both men and women were expected to adhere to societal norms of being culturally sophisticated, and thus invest time and energy into culturally cultivating themselves. Opposingly, Groemer and Nishiyama (1997) explain that a woman with child, or married, no matter how beautiful, lacks the sexual allure that is otherwise found in the presence of Yoshiwara women²⁴. The yūjo was expected to be the subject of desire and embodied this aspect of *iki*. Yet pregnant or married women no longer had a place in the pleasure seeking space, which explains why in most *bijin* prints the women are not depicted in a married or motherly role.

In another *bijin-ga* example, Utamaro depicts the courtesan Hanaōgi of the Ōgiya while she composes a letter. Hanaōgi's name is deciphered from the hanji-e as follows: from top to bottom, a hand fan (扇

²¹ Davis, *Partners in Print*, 96.

²² Groemer and Nishiyama, *Edo Culture*, 54.

²³ Davis, *Partners in Print*, 64.

²⁴ Groemer and Nishiyama, *Edo Culture*, 55.

ōgi), an arrow (屋, ya), flowers (花 hana), and, another hand fan (扇 ōgi). Hanaōgi was also known by the name ‘flower fan’ of the Ogiya, with her personal crest being two cherry blossoms. Again playing into the flower symbolism, Utamaro adorned the last fan with pink flowers and, the flowers depicted next to the fan are cherry blossoms. Her patterned kimono is also decorated with cherry blossoms. Therefore, even though her actual name is missing from the print, enough evidence points us to her identity. Here too, she is shown in a private manner as she conveys a sense of cultural elegance while she writes her letter, while simultaneously drawing attention to her exposed neck and rolled up sleeves.



Figure 4

Utamaro’s individual beauties echoed the idealized women that had been the norm at the time. Portraying a sense of beauty not only in their physical features, but also in the elegant clothing and their sophisticated past-times, the whole package making them appear the epitome of female beauty. In depicting women as beauties in this way, Utamaro became vital to contributing to the societal expectations of women. His influence in the ukiyo-e scene was substantial, as not many artists were able to achieve fame in their lifetime, let alone produce as many prints as he had, but aside from Utamaro, one cannot discuss bijin-ga without mentioning Suzuki Harunobu.

Harunobu’s influence in the bijin-ga scene was also significant, so much so that Clark (1997) laments his reign as the Harunobu period (1725-1770)²⁵. Suzuki Harunobu was born before Utamaro and was considered an innovator. He was one of the first to produce full multi-coloured prints called nishiki-e

²⁵ Timothy Clark, “Mitate-e: Some Thoughts, and a Summary of Recent Writings,” *Impressions*, no. 19 (New York: 1997): 8.

in 1765, causing prints to move beyond the former two- and three-colour prints²⁶. Harunobu often toyed with special techniques, and dabbled in a wide variety of subjects, from classical poetry to contemporary beauties. By the 1760's he had become one of the primary producers of bijin-ga. His style of portraying women was slightly different from Utamaro, as Harunobu's beauties were less 'robust' and fashioned as more slender figures with elongated faces. Nevertheless, he too was vital to the aesthetic standards of depicting women as beauties in prints. Though his style may be different, he depicted women as elegant beauties by similarly showing them in decorated clothing and surroundings. Where Utamaro's individual beauties may have lacked the decorated backgrounds and focused more on their individuality, Harunobu emphasizes the decorated background much more in his prints. One of his books on bijin's is called 'The Courtesans of the Great houses'. This book was published in 1770, before the censorship rules had been implemented. Still, the book features various prints in which the women are seen partaking in all types of cultured activities such as reading and writing. Portraying them as refined young women, and solidifying the standards for what constitutes as 'a beautiful woman'. As shown in the print below from the book, two courtesans are seen reading and writing poetry. This book was meant to offer a private glimpse into the life of a courtesan and how she spent her time when not entertaining visitors²⁷. Conveying the notion that they deemed cultivating themselves in their private time very important, which complimented their beauty immensely in such prints.



Figure 5

The print below also shows two courtesans, likely positioned in a private room within the brothel. Both are wearing fashionable decorated clothing. The room is decorated with patterned wallpaper, a screen with an impressive art piece and an expensive looking mirror. Here, the decorations are deemed equally, or perhaps even more important than the subjects themselves. And are thus put on

²⁶ Groemer and Nishiyama, *Edo Culture*, 70.

²⁷ Davis, *Partners in Print*, 93.

display to show the wealth or status of the brothel as they could afford to invest in such decorations. More importantly, the objects' purpose was to enhance the beauty of the women and to show them as refined, sophisticated courtesans. Seemingly like dolls, they are put on display, and all aspects of the print were meant to be assessed by the viewer.



Figure 6

One could say Harunobu was known not only for his bijjin-ga art work, but perhaps even more for his mitate-e. Mitate prints are another genre within the ukiyo-e field and are mostly known as parody prints, but as Timothy Clark (1997) argues, to call such works 'mere parody pictures' misrepresents their vast complexity and intentions²⁸. Mitate prints are a wide range of transformational pictures, and it is difficult to label all such prints under the title of 'parody pictures', however it proves even more difficult to translate or encapsulate exactly what is a mitate print in one single English word. Mitate-e seemingly entail the recognition of hidden references to historical events or even to other famous prints²⁹. They were filled with layered nuances and similarities between aspects which in fact do not seem to be apparent or similar at all³⁰. Mitate prints were allegories featuring brain-teasing collisions of indirect comparisons covered by multi-layered hints. One's understanding is that to make a genuine mitate-e is to have access to a mind palace full of vast historical knowledge and prints. It means being able to make subtle references to earlier works, while keeping a playful, but, ironic connection that

²⁸ Clark, "Mitate-e", 21.

²⁹ Clark, "Mitate-e", 9.

³⁰ Clark, "Mitate-e", 8.

links the contemporary with the historical. Mitate-e is fitting in the floating world theme, as it seemingly transcends space and time by alluding to historical characters and occurrences, while combining all this with the contemporary.

Mitate-e, were not often titled as mitate, but rather displayed with the title *fūryū* or *fūzoku* at the time³¹. Such as Utamaro's *Fūryū Rokkasen* (風流六哥撰, ca. 1796) print. Both Utamaro and Harunobu were again significant names in the mitate scene. One noticeable common aspect was the fact that both Harunobu and Utamaro re-fashioned historical figures, such as characters from the Tale of Genji or Heian period legends such as Ono no Komachi, as Yoshiwara courtesans in their mitate prints. Utamaro in particular enjoyed playing with linking *yūjo* featured in his prints to the poet Ono no Komachi. The previously shown print featuring Okita of the Naniwaya has a *fūryū* where he links Okita with the male waka poet Ariwara no Narihara (825-880). Ariwara is pictured in the hanji-e in the top left corner. In doing so, one believes Utamaro's intentions may have been to draw to a similarity between Okita and Ono no Komachi as Ono no Komachi was rumoured to have had a love affair with Ariwara. Thus, he re-fashions Okita as Ono no Komachi by associating her with Ariwara.



Figure 7

This author believes the reason why it became more common to reference historical figures in prints might have been due to censorship rules, but as Harunobu lived before this time, it is more likely mitate-e's popularity was owed to the fact that it played directly into the audience's love for subtle humour mixed with a sophisticated artistic style. As mentioned before, the social norm had been for people to be cultured and educated in classical literature, history and art. Therefore, mitate-e prints

³¹ Clark, "Mitate-e", 8.

catered to this sophisticated audience by combining the classics with contemporary wit. Evidently, there was a decline in prints picturing individual beauties and a rise in prints depicting historical female figures from earlier periods because of this³². Which meant that the art scene started featuring less contemporary beauties and more historical figures. Mitate prints seemingly move away from the typical beauties featured in *bijin-ga* in a way in which one believes that the intention of mitate is slightly more ironically intended. Bordering on the verge of satire. Harunobu and Utamaro were leading figures in the *bijin-ga* scene, and for this reason they too played a role in prints moving away from depicting the individual contemporary beauties. Instead, they focused on representations of historical women re-fashioned as Yoshiwara courtesans. As mentioned, Utamaro enjoyed likening courtesans to the poet Ono no Komachi. In doing so, he was required to have had vast knowledge of Heian period narratives and must have possessed some kind of mental archive of past prints or paintings. In turn, the observer of mitate prints was also required to hold such knowledge in order to understand the references he was making and using the power of observation to comprehend the many layered meanings depicted. Mitate prints were thus considered as a refined mode of expression. Not to be understood by the many, but, rather to be enjoyed by the cultivated few.

Harunobu also had an uncanny and skilful ability to poke fun at historical narratives using various hidden nuances in his mitate prints. In one of his prints he referenced an episode from the *Tales of Ise* from the Heian period. In this scene a young woman is abducted by a man who has become quite enamoured of her³³. The *Tales of Ise* is a collection of many different poems, one of which, the main character is believed to be the Ariwara no Narihara, the previously mentioned male poet from the Heian period. In below figure we can see Harunobu's mitate version of this scene. As we can see, the noble characters from the *Tales of Ise* who would normally be depicted wearing courtly clothing. Harunobu's print, however, has given a comedic twist to the scene by refashioning the courtly-like woman as a *yūjo*, and, the man, once of noble descent, now presumed to be a servant of the Yoshiwara, carrying the *yūjo* on his back. He has therefore re-fashioned both characters in the likes of the Yoshiwara.

³² Wehmeyer, "Rethinking 'Beauties'," 204.

³³ "Akuta River," RISD Museum, accessed May 3, 2024, <https://risdmuseum.org/art-design/collection/akuta-river-akutagawa-201065>



Figure 8

Both Utamaro's and Harunobu's artworks have been crucial to setting the standard for depicting women as beauties in prints. Showing that their beauty was comprised by their physical features, but even more so by their decorated clothing, layered and adorned with flower patterns symbolizing both the Yoshiwara and their own identity. Furthermore, the women were pictured in secluded spaces, spending time engrossed in refined activities and cultivating themselves which was deemed an important societal standard for all Edo members of society at the time. The women in their prints also instilled a sense of allure, attracting attention to aspects directly hidden from view. Harunobu and Utamaro produced many bijin-ga and mitate prints that played into this societal norm, thus conveying and lamenting the expectations of an ideal sophisticated woman. Because their portrayals echoed the idealized expectations of a woman, they greatly contributed to setting the beauty standards for women at the time.

Chapter 2: Changing norms: Censorship and Satire in Edo Prints

This chapter continues with a discussion regarding the incidents occurring in the late Edo period. As this period was seemingly plagued by many turbulent events such as nation-wide famines and foreign invasions. The people of Edo grew increasingly more resentful towards the Tokugawa government and its rigorous censorship reforms, which included many policies infracting on their overall moral conduct. All of this led to a gradual shift in the print scene where prints moved away from contemporary subjects such as courtesans and towards a surge in satire prints which echoed the discontent under a guise of hidden references. The norm of depicting women as beauties gradually shifted towards satirical and politically charged narratives.

Interestingly, our trendsetter Utamaro was arrested in 1804 for making illegal prints depicting the 16th-century military ruler Toyotomi Hideyoshi. They were considered illegal due to the underlying political satire he was endeavouring to convey. In this print, called “Hideyoshi and his Five Wives Viewing the Cherry-blossoms at Higashiyama”, Utamaro, seemingly took things a little too far. There are many aspects to unpack here, but, first of all, he conveyed a lack of respect for the important historical warlord, Hideyoshi by portraying him as a customer of the Yoshiwara. But most importantly, it was known that the Shogun of that time, Tokugawa Ienari, had many wives, thus it is was assumed that Utamaro was actually making a reference to the Shogun in this print and using Hideyoshi as a ‘cover’³⁴. When artists and writers published prints or books based on historical plays which referenced any contemporary politics, it attracted unwanted attention and reprisals from the government. And, as one might expect during this time of censorship, Utamaro’s case was considered a great offense. Which inevitably led to his imprisonment and his ultimate demise in 1804.

This leads us to discuss the historical context of this period. As previously mentioned, the Kansei reforms (1787-1793) restricted the naming of Yoshiwara yūjo or teahouses in Edo prints. The Kansei reforms were a series of conservative measures taken during the Kansei era (1789–1801). The reforms were imposed by the Japanese statesman Matsudaira Sadanobu in order to restore the sinking financial and overall weakened condition of the Tokugawa government. Many coinciding events led to the weakening of morale, such as frequent natural disasters, crop failures and inflation. Sadanobu had stated that the precarious economic situation was due to three different factors; the first being the overall shortage of goods and services in Edo. Secondly, due to a decline in the value of materials such as gold, silver and copper³⁵. But, most importantly, he found great fault in the frivolous and excessive consumption of the people. With this he alluded to the frivolous spending on prints or art work. Therefore, besides implementing various economic reforms to help improve inflation and price

³⁴ Doreen Muller, “Political Satire in Edo Prints,” BA2 MACH Seminar (class lecture, Leiden University, Leiden, October 14, 2019).

³⁵ Isao Soranaka, “The Kansei Reforms-Success or Failure?” *Monumenta nipponica* 33, no. 2 (1978): 153.

increases, he also implemented a series of moral reforms to promote a more frugal life style for Edo and its people³⁶. Sadanobu set out to correct the public morals which led to various prints and publications coming under rigorous censorship. Satirical books and prints that mocked historical and present day politics were banned³⁷. Though one might argue that the censorship was never truly actively pursued as so many art works have managed to survive³⁸. Even so, any prints depicting discontent towards the government or any form of political messaging were heavily restricted and were actively punished, more so than any prints promoting sexual activity³⁹. However, Sadanobu may have underestimated the stubbornness of the Edokko⁴⁰. Since they greatly resented any governmental intrusion on their social activities⁴¹. This discontent can be seen conveyed in the way artists found creative ways to circumvent the censorship by hiding names with playful puzzles, among other things. Eventually, these reforms were gradually dismantled after Sadanobu's dismissal.

Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1789-1861) grew up in similar, yet, slightly different turbulent times. Before he was born there was a nationwide famine in the 1780s (Tenmei Era). Then, another nationwide famine ravaged the area in 1832 (Tenpo Era) and spread all over the country, many people became destitute in both the urban and agricultural communities, and many died of hunger. In 1837, Heihachiro Oshio, a former police sergeant from Osaka, became indignant at the shirking Tokugawa government and conducted an armed uprising in Osaka, known as the Oshio Heihachiro Rebellion. Many farmers followed Oshio, and the social uprising spread to other regions, which came as a great shock to the Shogunate government and its domains. After the Shogun Ienari died, senior councillor Tadakuni Mizuno implemented various policies called the Tenpo reforms (1841-1843) in order to cope with the crisis and to reconstruct the financial affairs with the purpose of re-strengthening the power of the government. Inevitably, none of these policies worked well and were regarded as unsuccessful. This was due to the fact that fierce opposition from every social class was thrown back at the government and Tadakuni was eventually overthrown after just three years. Much like Sadanobu, Tadakuni's policies also emphasized frugality in personal affairs, hoping to clamp down on the civilian's moral conduct with the Tenpo reforms. This inevitably meant that many satirical 'lewd' works of art and literature came under relentless censorship. Tadakuni clamped down on popular prints and all unlicensed brothels were closed down⁴². Ukiyo-e artists had to refrain from depicting any courtesans and actors⁴³. Linhart (2004) argues that because of this, the Tenpo reforms caused a surge in satirical prints, causing an impactful shift in the ukiyo-e industry where prints moved away from depicting

³⁶ Soranaka, "The Kansei Reforms," 154.

³⁷ Rebecca Stevens, "The Forbidden Ukiyo-e of Edo Japan," *The Collector*. Last modified June 26, 2023. accessed May 4, 2024. <https://www.thecollector.com/ukiyo-e-censorship/>

³⁸ Davis, *Partners in Print*, 121.

³⁹ Sarah Thompson, *Undercurrents in the Floating World* (New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1991), 21.

⁴⁰ A name for the People of Edo.

⁴¹ Soranaka, "The Kansei Reforms," 163.

⁴² Sepp Linhart, "Hell and its Inhabitants in Ukiyoe Caricatures of the Late Tokugawa and the Early Meiji Period," in *Practicing the Afterlife: Perspectives from Japan*, ed. by William R. LaFleur and Susanne Formanek (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences, 2004), 346.

⁴³ Linhart, "Hell and its Inhabitants," 345.

flowers, courtesans and landscapes, and more towards pictorial puzzles and most importantly, satire⁴⁴. This indicates that the previous discussed norm for how women were depicted in popular prints, was changing too.

Utagawa Kuniyoshi was one of the many rebels who created satirical prints. Since he was active at a time during which almost all popular art and culture echoed the notion that Edo society was in its final stages of decay, his influence to the satirical print genre was substantial⁴⁵. Kuniyoshi was thus a leading figure in the movement attempting to undermine the Tokugawa government, as he actively partook in creating many satire works of art⁴⁶. Satirical prints which are known to ridicule a person, society or any contemporary events are also known as giga or fūshiga⁴⁷. These kinds of prints became widespread during the latter part of the Edo period and were known to bridge the relationship between politics and art⁴⁸. As these allegories undoubtedly highlighted the vast political changes happening in Edo, they were crucial in helping to awaken the political awareness of edokko.

Kuniyoshi, as a producer of such powerful instruments of communication, had to navigate around the strict controls on subjects such as courtesans, the Tokugawa family, and any other significant contemporary events⁴⁹. Kuniyoshi's most famous example of his evidently political aversion towards the Tokugawa Shogunate is the print called 'Picture of Minamoto Raikō's camp when fighting against the earth spider ghost' (Minamoto no Raikō-kō yakata tsuchigumo yōkai onasu no zu) which was published in 1843, amidst the Tenpo reforms. This print was the direct cause of the spread of numerous rumours and interpretations. This is an example of a print, much like mitate-e, whose underlying messages had to be deciphered. According to Linhart (2004), the message was clear. Minamoto no Raikō, who in history books is also known as Minamoto no Yorimitsu, a samurai from the powerful Minamoto clan during the Heian period, is depicted sleeping on the right side of the print. He is conspicuously meant to represent the ruling Shogun at the time, Tokugawa Ieyoshi⁵⁰.

⁴⁴ Linhart, "Hell and its Inhabitants," 346.

⁴⁵ Melinda Takeuchi, "Kuniyoshi's 'Minamoto Raikō' and the 'Earth Spider'": Demons and Protest in Late Tokugawa Japan," *Ars Orientalis*, vol. 17 (1987): 6.

⁴⁶ Linhart, "Hell and its Inhabitants," 347.

⁴⁷ Freya Terryn, "Playful pictures as satire: Utagawa Hiroshige III capitalizing on the shift in political power during the Boshin War," in *Voiced and Voiceless in Asia Vol.1*, ed. Martin Lavička and Halina Zawiszová (Palacký University, 2023), 266.

⁴⁸ Terryn, "Playful pictures," 266.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Linhart, "Hell and its Inhabitants," 350.



Figure 9

There is much to be said about this print, namely the fact that the two worlds, the human world and the supernatural world are seen to be colliding. Furthermore, Minamoto, or Ieyoshi, is seen fast asleep, utterly unaware of the ghostly Earth Spider trying to catch him in his web. Minamoto's retainers do not see this 'second world' and remain unaware of the monster trying to capture their commander and continue to play games in their ignorance. Looking carefully, one might observe one of the retainers to be Tadakuni⁵¹, or so it is thought. Implying that he remains oblivious and not-so subtly hinting at his ignorance and the incapability of the 'do-nothing' government. The various demons, waiting to attack are thought to be victims of the Tenpo reforms, waiting for their chance to strike back and claim their just revenge⁵². The reforms had brought hardships to many layers of Edo society, the economy was struggling, places of entertainment were severely restricted, and depictions of actors and prostitutes were strictly forbidden⁵³. Altogether, causing many people to suffer economic hardships and many were forced to return to the countryside. Even if Kuniyoshi had not intended for this print to be so popular for its satirical narrative, many edokko resonated with the dissatisfaction that they were feeling with the current government. The growing discontent lingered, causing satirical prints to flourish even more.

After the 'failure' of the Tenpo reforms, civil unrest continued to sweep the country. In 1855 the Great Ansei earthquake hit Edo and was a destructive, world altering, event. On some accounts the event was referred to as Yonaoshi, which translates as the renewal of the world, the world in this case being Edo. And, though the earthquake brought great destruction, it was also thought to have brought

⁵¹ Takeuchi, "Kuniyoshi's 'Minamoto Raikō'," 14.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Takeuchi, "Kuniyoshi's 'Minamoto Raikō'," 13.

about a wind of change. Wealth was redistributed from the upper-class to lower class merchants, as firemen and builders were needed to rebuild houses. Many saw it as an attempt to restore the economic imbalance present in Edo. Therefore, even though the earthquake was perceived as a threatening event, it also had a dual-meaning of acting as benefactor, and improving the current undesirable economic conditions in Edo⁵⁴. Due to the precarious state of the government and its censorship it was understood that creating prints about such a catastrophic affair was not allowed. Only factual news about the event was accepted, but any satirical or personal interpretations of the event were forbidden. Therefore, during this time Namazu-e or catfish prints became popular, seemingly disguising and using an ‘anthropomorphism’ for the earthquake, as a Catfish. With this hidden satire, they continued to convey a desire for change.

It was also during this time that the kawaraban, the single news sheets, came into existence. One of the main, and less contentious roles of these newssheets was in spreading news and information, particularly after events such as; fires, floods, volcanic eruptions, and earthquakes⁵⁵. The other function of the newssheets, however, was sensationalism. Speed and news-worthiness were essential factors for the kawaraban, and since they were not produced regularly no one knew when the latest issue would be published. Though, one doubts that ‘Lady Whistledown’ from ‘Bridgeton’ took her inspiration from the kawaraban, the idea behind the sensationalism does seem somewhat similar. Though sensational, any political content had to be carefully disguised. However, when Commodore Perry and his black ships arrived in 1853 it was said that more than 40 kawaraban reported this event⁵⁶.

With this foreign arrival, an epidemic of measles and other unfortunate events continued to plague Japanese society. The growing doubts about the shogunate’s ability to govern were especially heightened after the arrival of foreigners. As Smits (2006) argues in his article, the earthquake worked as a catalyst for growing doubt, and the impact of foreign influence inevitably deepened the political awareness and dissatisfaction of the edokko⁵⁷. The Tokugawa family seemed unable to offer protection from foreign invaders and the edokko could no longer tolerate supporting the government and its weakened rule⁵⁸. All these incidents inevitably contributed to the further weakening of the Tokugawa Shogunate and eventually, this led to its end. The edokko were unhappy with their situation and gradually manifested their growing dissatisfaction towards the shogunate. By 1868, the shogunate transitioned into a centralized, bureaucratic nation-state under the Meiji Restoration⁵⁹.

⁵⁴ Takashi Miura, “Chapter 4: Upholding a Catfish as a Yonaoshi God” in *Agents of World Renewal: The Rise of Yonaoshi Gods in Japan* (Honolulu : University of Hawaii Press, 2019), 95.

⁵⁵ Rebecca Salter, *Japanese Popular Prints: From Votive Slips to Playing Cards* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 58.

⁵⁶ Salter, *Japanese Popular Prints*, 59.

⁵⁷ Gregory Smits, “Shaking Up Japan: Edo Society and the 1855 Catfish Picture Prints,” *Journal of social history* 39, no. 4 (2006): 1059.

⁵⁸ William Steele, “Edo in 1868,” in *Alternative Narratives in Modern Japanese History* (Oxford: Routledge, 2003), 61.

⁵⁹ Steele, “Edo in 1868,” 61.

It is therefore conclusive that due to the political turmoil that plagued the late Edo period, popular prints moved away from depicting courtesans and the Yoshiwara, and moved towards satirical prints which echoed the discontent that the people of Edo felt towards their ineffective government. Thus causing a shift in the aforementioned norm of depicting individual beauties and historical women as Yoshiwara courtesans. As the new norm became those of satire prints which gave a voice to the growing discontent people were feeling, cleverly ridiculing the Tokugawa government and any political contemporary events. Prints depicting women thus changed along with the growing political awareness present in later Edo period.

Chapter 3: Moral Education for Women

This chapter will glance back towards the aesthetic norms of Edo society and what exactly constituted being a ‘beautiful woman’ by discussing the genre of didactic books for women. These books were meant as moral guidelines to teach young women how to achieve ideal womanhood. Due to the censorship rules, many publishers saw potential in producing such books as these were seemingly approved and supported by the government. These moral guides aided the Shogunate as they echoed the importance of aesthetic and hierarchal values also present in contemporary society.

Before diving into Kuniyoshi’s “Legends of Wise Women and Virtuous Wives” it is first important to discuss the role of moral biographies for women, as we will need this background to assess Kuniyoshi’s satirical interpretation on this literature genre for women. During the Edo period, thousands of manuals were printed, the purpose of which, was to teach young women model moral values and ideal female behavior⁶⁰. Moral books for women featured many inspirational tales of historical virtuous and wise women, as well as books focusing on female conduct and etiquette. Early Edo books on moral education for women closely followed the Chinese Confucian teachings. Strongly conveying the belief that an ideal harmonious social structure can only be achieved when both women and men adopt a Confucian code of conduct⁶¹. This entails following the outdated family system and patriarchal ideal of men working to support the family and urging women to take on the role of sole caregivers. Thus strengthening the notion that virtuous wives and mothers should not assume leadership, but rather pursue the passive role of care taking⁶². This subservient position restricting them to the home and discouraging them to seek work outside the house.

These books were mainly used as moral instructions for women, but had also been useful in conveying lessons to men⁶³. Cultivated behaviour had become the norm for all layers of society, and these guidebooks acted as a tool for disseminating that behaviour. As well as disciplining and regulating the moral behaviour of Edo society without actually causing people to feel compelled to follow these social rules⁶⁴. Many publishers were restricted as to what they could produce and print due to the censorship measures, which is why they soon came to realize that the production of moral books for women was a worthwhile investment⁶⁵. Although this genre was not officially disseminated by the Tokugawa government, it was clearly endorsed and encouraged by the government to partake in studying such teachings. Not only because it worked extremely well in disciplining people into

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Lillehoj, “Properly Female: Illustrated Books of Morals for Women in Edo Japan,” in *Women Gender and Art in Asia, c. 1500-1900*, ed. Melia Belli Bose (New York: Routledge, 2016), 232.

⁶¹ Lillehoj, “Properly Female,” 230.

⁶² Sumiko Sekiguchi, “Gender in the Meiji Renovation: Confucian “Lessons for Women” and the Making of Modern Japan,” *Social Science Japan Journal* 11, no. (November 2008): 202.

⁶³ Lillehoj, “Properly Female,” 232.

⁶⁴ Ikegami, *Bonds of civility*, 325.

⁶⁵ Lillehoj, “Properly Female,” 232.

cultivated social behavior, but also, because it upheld them to the hierarchal values of the Tokugawa state⁶⁶. The hierarchical system of the Tokugawa adhered to a social system in which Edo society was divided into various classes. Among which was the daimyo at the top, also known as feudal lords and samurai, followed by middle-class citizens and at the bottom artisans and merchants could be found. This system was influenced by Confucian ideals, which emphasized social order and hierarchy⁶⁷. The moral guidebooks adhered to this system by addressing etiquette rules for how to properly greet someone of higher status and how to bow correctly, among many other social rules. Although these books may not have echoed the notion of frugality urged by the government, as publishers and consumers stubbornly continued to revel in the thriving consumer culture of print buying, still, these books were likely endorsed by the government due to the moral stance they supported.

Coincidentally, these didactic books acted as instruments in conveying Confucian ideals, though it was also believed that these books were distributed as a form of entertainment. More importantly, they acted as a means to help cultivate the emerging nationalist mindset within the people which had been kickstarted by the growing discontent towards the Tokugawa shogunate⁶⁸. As these books helped shape the behavioral patterns of the Edo population, they also contributed to the cultivation of a nationalist mindset by ultimately reinforcing the notion of a Japanese cultural identity. This author believes they did so by moving away from Chinese examples of moral behaviour to featuring more traditional Japanese narratives as examples of proper social behaviour. Early Edo accounts on moral education for women were mostly focused around Chinese teachings. One such account was the manuscript of Liu Xiang which offered many inspirational examples of women featuring fourteen stories of exemplary mothers and women who were wise, chaste, self-sacrificing and eloquent⁶⁹. However, even though many moral books in the early Edo period featured Chinese examples, we observe a general shift of moral books for women moving away from the Chinese influence and more towards classical Japanese narratives. Printed books drew their inspiration more and more from courtly narratives such as the Tale of Genji, as many considered the study of classical Japanese literature to be crucial to the shaping of ideal womanhood for Japanese women⁷⁰. This shift was also apparent in the previously mentioned mitate prints, as they moved towards depicting more historical characters as their subject. This author believes the shift in moral books coincides with the popular prints shifting towards mitate-e where women such as Ono no Komachi were refashioned as Yoshiwara courtesans, because mitate-e was considered to be a refined mode of expression. It required the viewers to be cultivated in the arts and knowing the classics. Therefore, in order to fully be able to enjoy and understand the wit of mitate-e, one had to require knowledge of the past, as well

⁶⁶ Ikegami, *Bonds of civility*, 332.

⁶⁷ Ikegami, *Bonds of civility*, 333.

⁶⁸ Lillehoj, "Properly Female," 230.

⁶⁹ Lillehoj, "Properly Female," 233.

⁷⁰ Lillehoj, "Properly Female," 240.

as being up to date with the contemporary. One concludes moral guidebooks and mitate-e were both important in spreading historical women as examples of ideal femininity. The reason historical women were used as example, one believes, is most likely due to the fact that Japanese classics represented the standard for beautiful women as they emphasized the importance of investing in their own cultural capital. As discussed, many Edo prints showed such examples of women while reading, writing, ikebana (flower arranging) and playing music. These were all considered refined attributes also expected of contemporary women who would make good wives. Since a woman's beauty was wholly found in her cultivated nature, soon thereafter, there was a surge in historical figures used not only in prints but also in moral guidebooks. More historical women were portrayed in order to convey the idealistic role models of womanhood. Thus signifying the important use of historical narratives to shape womanhood even in contemporary Japan. And that the standards for women to achieve ideal womanhood were to be found in studying the classics, just as women in prints were portrayed performing such duties as they spent time to cultivate themselves in order to become virtuous and good wives. Hishikawa Moronobu (1618-1694) an artist considered substantial to the ukiyo-e genre, was one of the early leading figures to provide illustrations of wise Japanese historical women for the moral guides⁷¹. He drew inspiration from the infamous Murasaki Shikibu, who much like Ono no Komachi, was considered an epitome of female elegance and beauty during the Heian period. Thus, as we have observed, even in contemporary Edo influence of the classics remains crucial to the shaping of virtuous women. Which is why one believes, many popular print artists similarly drew inspiration from the past and used such historical women in prints to represent a woman's ideal form of manner and beauty. One believes this shift from Chinese classics to Japanese classics also helped to foster a nationalistic mindset, which is why didactic books became an important tool in disseminating this nationalist sentiment.

In Japanese classical literature, a focus was often put on the importance of a woman's chasteness and elegance. Besides chasteness, another aspect which was conveyed through the form of traditional narratives was the notion of vulnerability. It was considered feminine if women were considered weaker than men. Their freedom of movement was often heavily constricted due to their lifestyle and the restrictive garments that they wore. Namely, they were required to wear layers of very restricting fabric, which severely limited their movements. Women during the Heian period often travelled by ox cart, and were expected to remain out of view at social gatherings⁷². This point was previously mentioned in the similar notion of controlled visibility. In which a woman was made beautiful in her ability to attract attention to the unseen aspects and awaken a notion of allure. Therefore, it goes

⁷¹ Lillehoj, "Properly Female," 238.

⁷² Margaret Childs, "The Value of Vulnerability: Sexual Coercion and the Nature of Love in Japanese Court Literature," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 58, no. 4 (1999): 1063.

without saying that drawing inspiration from historical narratives echoed the ideal picture of womanhood.

Moreover, Heian women were considered significantly weaker physically because of their poorer health due to their excessive time spent indoors while cultivating themselves. Which incidentally made them more vulnerable, yet a vulnerable woman was preferred by men, as they were often discouraged to pursue direct and strong-minded women⁷³. This was something that still held true in contemporary Edo, as images of strong women were not very apparent.

Interestingly, as moral literature moved away from Chinese exemplary women to classical Japanese narratives, so did it too move away from demure, virtuous models to stories featuring strong women. Around the 17th century, more accounts of heroic women from earlier centuries began to appear in Japanese conduct books for women⁷⁴. Conveying not only virtuous values but with an emphasis on courage as well. The *Honcho Jōkan*, one such account of moral guidebook, similarly featured examples of good mothers and wise women, but also a notable shift towards portraying ‘warrior’ women. Although representations of strong women became more wide-spread during the late Tokugawa period, only stories of strong women that did not diminish the ‘status quo’ were allowed⁷⁵. Meaning stories of strong women that did not go against the social norm of contemporary society or went against the Confucian and hierarchical ideals endorsed by government. In other words, virtuous strong women were allowed if they represented the ideal expectations of women in terms of social behaviour and their roles as mothers and wives. One example was the popular account of Empress Jingu, who was famous for her leading role in the battle with the Korean peninsula. She was the consort of Emperor Chūai, but after his death she assumed leadership and led the military campaign⁷⁶. She played an important role in moral books, because she embodied many valued characteristics such as courage, filial piety, her unwavering loyalty to her husband and her devotion to her country. Empress Jingū’s narrative was therefore used to teach women about resilience, the importance of supporting their husbands, and maintaining the family honour. Her story provided a tangible example of how women could contribute to the stability and prosperity of their families and society.

Another account is one on Tomoe Gozen, a skilled archer and swords-woman who lived during the Heian period. She was one of the many famous heroic female warriors of Japan, originally featured in the classical *Heike monogatari* which narrates the events of the Genpei war⁷⁷. She was said to have had an enchanting appearance and to have been a powerful warrior. She too, embodied qualities such

⁷³ Childs, “Value of Vulnerability,” 1064.

⁷⁴ Lillehoj, “Properly Female,” 23.

⁷⁵ Sekiguchi, “Gender in Meiji,” 212.

⁷⁶ Chieko Mulhern, *Heroic with grace: legendary women of Japan* (M.E. Sharpe, 1991), 30.

⁷⁷ Ryan Sassano-Higgins, “*Fighting from the Shadows: Women Warriors of Premodern Japan*” (PhD diss., ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, 2016), 64.

as bravery, loyalty, and dedication to fight for her people. Her willingness to fight and sacrifice for a greater cause exemplified the Confucian virtues expected of both men and women. While Tomoe Gozen was celebrated for her martial skills, she was also depicted as beautiful and graceful. This duality reinforced the idea that women could be strong and capable while still embodying traditional feminine qualities, making her a relatable and aspirational figure for women. Thus, representations of warrior women in moral books were not rare, but they remained only in demand if they could fit into the conformed social norms. In other words, as long as such accounts were in line with Confucian codes and did not harm society's standardized norms of ethical behavior, then stories or prints featuring strong women were praised⁷⁸. Besides that, any literature or art depicting warrior women which could inspire converse ideals for women, such as motivating women to seek independence or work outside the home, were not easily tolerated by the government.

Aside from an increase in narratives on strong women, there was also an increase in stories featuring strong courtesans. By including courtesans, moral books stayed in tune with popular cultural trends as many contemporary art was adamant in portraying the pleasure quarters and the floating world. One such example which appeared in moral guidebooks was the tale of Kaneko, a fierce courtesan who was able to stop a frightened horse. This tale signified her capability of skilfully clamping down on the wild behaviour of both men and animals⁷⁹. Accounts of prostitutes or courtesans as a moral teaching subject was not entirely uncommon in Chinese moral books, but not in the manner in which Japanese moral books embraced them. This was most likely due to the influence of the Yoshiwara that such accounts made their way into the teachings for young women. *Onna Daigaku* (greater learning for women), which was a prominent example of guidelines for women on subjects such as clothing and home care, and even later became the subject of an erotic parody entitled *Onna Dairaku* (great pleasures of women)⁸⁰. Which clearly showed the powerful influence the floating world had on popular contemporary art.

Edo moral books for women were effective in disseminating proper behaviour and moral standards for women and were seen as an educative tool. Moral books with illustrations became increasingly varied and slowly diverged from the original Chinese teachings. While still highly praising Confucian rules, moral books started including more accounts on native Japanese sources as teachings. This shift amplified that the ideal standard of beauty expected in a Japanese woman was to be found in the classical narratives. Conveying the notion that a woman who is loyal, virtuous and possesses great cultural capital, was an epitome of social elegance. Classical Japanese narratives thus become more apparent and emphasized the traditional womanhood embodying a strong devotion to their country.

⁷⁸ Sekiguchi, "Gender in Meiji," 214.

⁷⁹ Lillehoj, "Properly Female," 254.

⁸⁰ Lillehoj, "Properly Female," 255.

Similarly, more accounts of strong warrior women appeared. However, such accounts were only tolerated if they served the greater good, and could uphold the purpose of promoting the standardized social behaviour found in Confucian teachings and was in line with the hierarchical system of the government.

Chapter 4: Kuniyoshi's Legends of Wise Women and Virtuous Wives: A Satire on Moral Education for Women

This chapter will concentrate on Kuniyoshi's print series 'The Legends of Wise Women and Virtuous Wives', which was intended as a satirical mockery towards the moral books for women. We will discuss how he changed the norm of depicting women as classical beauties, towards his portrayal of women as warriors. Seemingly changing the pictorial narrative of Edo prints featuring women.

The print series 'The Legends of Wise Women and Virtuous Wives' (Kenjo reppuden, 賢女烈婦傳) was created ca. 1841-1842, consisting of approximately thirty one different prints depicting important historical female figures⁸¹. This print series was intended as a mockery, or satire on Edo didactic books which included many accounts and biographies on wise and virtuous women. As discussed in the previous chapters, Kuniyoshi was the so-called crowned prince of satirical prints. Being active during a time in which the growing discontent towards the government was so apparent, meant that Kuniyoshi himself contributed many such satire prints echoing the resentful sentiment his fellow edokko felt as well. Besides his satire prints, he was most famous for his print portraits of warriors (musha-e), so much so, he was given the nickname 'Musha-e Kuniyoshi'⁸². Being the rebel that he was, he was always trying to find a way around the censorship rules and to bend the rules however he pleased. In doing so, he challenged the previously discussed standards for depicting women.

One of the ways in which he did this was by portraying women and showing them in seemingly different surroundings. In the print below (fig. 10), Hangaku Gozen is depicted. She lived during the Heian period and was a daughter of the Jo family, a branch of the Taira clan. She was another famous warrior women of Japanese history. In 1201, Hangaku fought in the war against Sukemoto's attempt to overthrow the Kamakura Shogunate. A text from the Azuma Kagami, a source from the Heian period on the events of the battle, describes the combat skills of Hangaku as being superior to men. And although she has the beauty and grace of a woman, she has the heart of a warrior⁸³. She was seen to be as fearless as a man, and as beautiful as a flower. Kuniyoshi too, portrays her here as a fierce woman. And although she is beautiful in her elegant physical features, one immediately notices the stark difference in her less decorative environment. The space she is depicted in is noticeably spartan in comparison to the lavishly decorated pleasure quarters seen in bijin-ga and mitate prints. This gives the impression that the space shown is outside of the floating world sphere. Kuniyoshi has actively

⁸¹ "Stories of Wise Women and Faithful Wives," Kuniyoshi Project, accessed May 3, 2024, <http://www.kuniyoshiproject.com/Stories%20of%20Wise%20Women%20I.htm>

⁸² Takeuchi, "Kuniyoshi's 'Minamoto Raikō'," 7.

⁸³ Sassano-Higgins, "Fighting from the Shadows," 34.

arranged her in a space away from the floating world by leaving out an emphasis on lavish and decorated objects surrounding her, leaving the focus on Hangaku Gozen, and on her alone. Besides the aspects of decoration, Hangaku demonstrates a stern posture, her sword a prominent presence in the print. Her warrior bearing leaving her no room for allure. The apparent lack of sexual pull making the entire atmosphere a contrast when compared to the other beauty prints discussed previously. Furthermore, her warrior clothing, albeit decorated in a feminine way, is vastly different from the flower patterned kimono's present in bijin-ga.



Figure 10

Kuniyoshi has made at least two other prints featuring historical warrior women, the first one being Tomoe Gozen. Tomoe Gozen, as mentioned previously, was a fierce warrior woman. She was also the mistress of a man of the Minamoto clan and she served him as his archer and swordsman. Besides her fighting skills she was remembered for the fact that she was revered for her commemoration of his death. Her act of performing memorial services was actually an important duty for wives and was actively taught in the Confucian codes of conduct. She was therefore, mostly revered for her virtuous behaviour rather than her fighting skills. Making her one such example of an account of a strong woman who was approved of and found to be in line with the status quo. Kuniyoshi however, chooses to emphasize her fighting skills rather than her excellent moral behaviour. As he focuses on depicting her while she teaches her son how to fight (fig. 11).



Figure 11

Not only does he depict her as a warrior, but she is also positioned as if she were the head of the family. In doing so, one believes Kuniyoshi is poking fun at the Confucian ideals expected of a woman, by portraying her as a powerful leading figure of the household, instead of her maintaining a subservient position. He also does not make any references to her memorial services or any other wifely virtuous duties she may have previously been known for. Furthermore, *bijin-ga* often strayed away from prints featuring women in the role of mothers or wives, because this did not fit in with the aesthetic of a courtesan or in the bounds of the pleasure quarters as it seemingly lacked the qualities of *iki* or sexual allure. In doing so, Kuniyoshi has solidified his intent to feature women, not as decorated commodities of pleasure, but rather as exemplifiers of fierce women.

In another example, Kuniyoshi depicts Princess Anju as she is carrying water buckets from the sea. Princess Anju is a figure from Japanese folklore and her story echoes the Confucian values of loyalty and familial duty. Anju and her brother somehow find themselves being sold into slavery and forced to work in abject conditions, but Anju sacrifices herself, creating a diversion in order to help her younger brother escape⁸⁴. In some accounts her sacrifice includes her drowning herself. Interestingly, Kuniyoshi depicts only Anju, her brother is nowhere to be found. She is shown filling buckets of water, her straw skirt typical attire for working women who collected water. Although her conditions could be described as dire, her beauty is evident. The print however, does not focus on her wise and brave act of sacrificing herself. One believes Kuniyoshi may have deliberately left out this part in his defiance of Confucian values. He depicts Anju as a strong woman, with beautiful features, but strong

⁸⁴ "Stories of Wise Women."

because she diligently performs the labour she is forced to do, and not made strong in her way of sacrificing her own life for her family.



Figure 12

In all accounts, Kuniyoshi has featured strong women who embody virtuous qualities also celebrated in didactic books such as loyalty, courage and wisdom. However, where moral books often highlighted women in supportive and subservient roles, Kuniyoshi's prints focus on their strength and agency. He pictures them individually and shows them as powerful figures, thus challenging and undermining the restrictive roles and expectations that women were expected to adhere to in contemporary society.

Kuniyoshi was always on the look-out for ways to circumvent the restrictions enforced on the art scene by the Tokugawa government. Due to the censorship forbidding prints depicting prostitutes, popular art moved away from flower symbolisms and courtesans, towards satire prints⁸⁵. Furthermore, more classical Japanese examples were seen occurring, in order to convey the traditional ideals of womanhood. Which is also likely the reason why Kuniyoshi often used historical women in his prints, rather than focusing on contemporary women.

Kuniyoshi's aversion towards the shogunate meant that he most likely felt drawn to go against the status quo of depicting women as exemplary figures embodying sophisticated cultivated behaviour.

⁸⁵ Linhart, "Hell and its Inhabitants," 345.

Which is why this author believes he chose the didactic books for women to make a satirical observation. He featured women who were still considered strikingly beautiful, but less in the traditional sense of the word. He pictured them coloured in his signature warrior aesthetic, and actively showing them in less decorative surroundings. His prints also lack the sexual tension often found in beauty prints discussed previously, because these women were portrayed in strong, motherly roles. Also, their surroundings were depicted as less private, less extravagantly decorated, and lacking a focus on the importance of culturally sophisticated or refined values. As they were not shown spending time reading, writing poetry or other activities known for gaining cultural capital with. With this, he seemingly mocks the ethical and aesthetical standards of Edo society, in particular the expectations put on women's behaviour. Another way in which he does this, is by promoting an image of women as warriors and portraying them with swords and armour, which was exactly the opposite of the more demure, feminine ideals of women which had previously been the norm. Furthermore, since the moral books were somewhat endorsed by the government as these etiquettes and moral codes shown helped keep the hierarchal values of the government in place. This could most likely be one of the main reasons that Kuniyoshi could not condone these moral standards, his rebellious spirit urging him to go against the moral books and therefore creating a satire with this print series. His satirical approach in depicting women was therefore in some part due to his reinforced sense of resistance towards the shogunate.

The Confucian ideals had become the standardized behaviour of society. Which is why Kuniyoshi made a point of showing stronger women, who were not made strong because they adhered to the Confucian moral code, but rather strong in personal character and stance. He painted women in a more controversial light, and portrayed them in his signature warrior style. Historically they were warriors, but due to moral books they might not have been known for their fighting skills, but rather for the filial duties they had performed. Therefore, Kuniyoshi returned their warrior 'heart' to them by portraying them as such. He also changed the depiction of women because he moved away from the Yoshiwara brothels and showed the women in different backgrounds, lacking an emphasis on decorations and extravagance, but rather an emphasis on individual character. He also did not show them cultivating themselves in activities in order to gain cultural capital. He portrayed women, still as beauties, but not made beautiful in the way popular prints had done. He therefore changed the depiction of women by using his warrior-style and satirical approach which mocked the Confucian ways.

Conclusion

In the beginning of the Edo period, more prints featuring individual portraits of beauty's appeared. These bijin-ga were known to act as advertisements of brothels and the Yoshiwara. Their main aim was to promote the cultural elegance and beauty of their courtesans. This was evident in the way women were made beautiful not only in their physical features, but more importantly because of how they were placed. They were arranged in decorated rooms, surrounded by lavish art and expensive clothing. The Yoshiwara spared no expense in its extravagance of kazari, decorating both the interiors of its brothels as well as its women. Both Utamaro and Harunobu created many prints depicting women as such, contributing to society's norm for what was considered to be a beautiful woman. The women in these prints echoed the cultural and sophisticated expectations of women. These expectations for women were also strongly conveyed in Edo period's conduct books, teaching women the means with which to achieve ideal womanhood. Most conduct books took their inspiration from Confucian teachings and helped to uphold the Tokugawa's hierarchical system. However, later accounts took pride in teaching the Japanese classical narratives and using historical figures such as Ono no Komachi as examples of moral ethical standards and elegant ideals of womanhood. A rise in Japanese classics in turn might have helped in the awakening of a nationalistic mindset among the edokko.

Soon the growing unease towards the shogunate and its political events grew too significant and evidently infiltrated the art scene too. Due to censorship rules which clamped down on popular prints depicting Yoshiwara courtesans, the print scene moved away from depicting courtesans, flowers and landscape, and more towards satire. Kuniyoshi grew up during turbulent times in which the overall public opinion towards the government was changing. His influence in the satire scene was significant as his discontent towards the ineffective government was present in his prints, thus mirroring the frustrated feelings of his fellow edokko. He created much artwork which was layered with satirical intent, yet he managed not to court controversy as he was able to avoid reprisals from the government. Still, he greatly contributed to the awakening of the political arising of the edokko as many political events continued to unfold around them.

In line with his rebellious spirit, Kuniyoshi took upon the challenge of making satirical content of the didactic guidebooks for women. These moral books taught women how to be good, virtuous wives in line with Confucian ethics. Kuniyoshi poked fun at these Confucian ideals by portraying the women in his print series as strong, warrior women. Celebrating them not for their loyal and supportive roles as virtuous wives, but showing them as powerful main characters. Another way in which he changed the portrayal of women in prints, is seen in the way he moved away from decorative backgrounds,

seemingly placing the women in a space removed from the Yoshiwara and the floating world. In doing so, he emphasized a woman's individual beauty. This portrayal was vastly different from the way women in previous popular prints were made beautiful by showing their cultivated behaviour and how they were put on display, matching the high-quality of the objects surrounding them. In these ways, Kuniyoshi has changed the depiction of women, making room for a new print narrative featuring strong, virtuous warrior women.

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Illustrations

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