

The Art of Ukiyo-e from the Perspective of Hierarchical Concepts

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Abstract. The aims of this study are to analyze ukiyo-e art from the perspective of hierarchical concept, and to expound the influence of hierarchical concept on the development of ukiyo-e art from three aspects: production process, style characteristics and commercial cooperation. Ukiyo-e art can be called the representative of Japanese art, and its emergence and development are caused by multiple reasons. In the process of its growth and development, there are many factors affecting and restricting it. It is suitable for qualitative research because of its flexibility in looking at ukiyo-e art from a hierarchical perspective. Overall, this study will provide an invaluable source of information about ukiyo-e art. It will benefit artists, researchers, art students, and scholars interested in studying this theme and field.

Keywords: Ukiyo-e; Hierarchical Concepts; woodcut

1 Introduction

Japanese people exhibit a complex blend of characteristics, encompassing both a combative and benevolent nature, a simultaneous appreciation for martial prowess and aesthetics, a balance between assertiveness and politeness, adaptability coupled with stubbornness, docility and irritation in the face of manipulation, loyalty and betrayal, courage and timidity, conservatism and openness to novelty [1], [2]. Throughout Japan's seven centuries of feudal history, hierarchical thinking has become deeply ingrained in the psyche of every Japanese individual. Strict class distinctions based on factors such as occupation, gender, and age determine one's societal position [3].

The social hierarchy is traditionally categorized into distinct roles: samurai, peasants, merchants, and artisans, with samurai enjoying the highest social status. Merchants and artisans are commonly referred to as 'townspeople' or 'chonin.' In feudal Japan, only the upper echelons of society, specifically aristocrats and samurai families, were allowed to maintain genealogical records [4]. This privilege extended to the use of surnames, a practice permitted until the mid-nineteenth century. This historical context underscores the exceptional status of samurai in the society of that era [1], [5].

In ancient China, the concept of 'Three Bonds and Five Constants' emphasized hierarchical relationships in feudal society, establishing a model of moral principles. In Japan, etiquette serves as a significant manifestation and practical expression of hierarchical values. Mothers start teaching their infants etiquette while still carried on their backs. Bowing is a common form of respect and a clear expression of hierarchy. Girls bow to boys, younger siblings bow to older

siblings, children bow to fathers, and wives bow to husbands. Bowing not only shows respect for the recipient but also reinforces the hierarchical structure.

Japan's moral framework prohibits actions that challenge hierarchical norms. Strict obedience is expected towards seniors who have retired, and individuals must adhere to the authority of their elders [3], [4]. For example, even if adult children are present, they must wait for the father, the head of the household, to finish eating before they can start their meal. The deference to elders, on one hand, reflects a culture of respect for the elderly, and on the other, underscores how hierarchical thinking is deeply embedded in the Japanese mindset, permeating various aspects of daily life.

2 Methodology

This study will use qualitative research, and the research design is case study. The main aim is to understand ukiyo-e art from a hierarchical perspective and to explain specific aspects of its influence. Data collection in this study will adopt the document method and the observation method.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 The Art of Ukiyo-e

The Origin and Characteristics of Ukiyo-e Art in the Edo Period" Ukiyo-e art originated during the 17th century Edo period, a time when Japan was under the rule of the Tokugawa shogunate. Historically parallel to China's Qing dynasty, this era witnessed a significant influx of Chinese woodblock prints into Japan [5]. Ukiyo-e art is typically divided into two forms: hand-painted and woodblock prints, with our discussion primarily focusing on the latter.

The literal translation of Ukiyo-e is "pictures of the floating world," a term derived from Buddhist terminology originally referring to the ephemeral nature of human life, encompassing birth, aging, illness, death, and the transient nature of the worldly existence. As Buddhism gradually assimilated into Japanese culture, the concept of "ukiyo" evolved to signify the pursuit of immediate pleasures, occasionally tinged with a hint of eroticism.

The creative themes in Ukiyo-e art are diverse, including *bijin-ga* (portraits of beautiful women, sometimes incorporating explicit depictions of love and sexuality), *yakusha-e* (actor prints), and *fūkeiga* (landscapes). The *bijin-ga* often portrays courtesans, geisha, and beautiful women, employing delicate techniques to convey the beauty and sensuality of women in real-life situations. Representative artists in this genre include Hishikawa Moronobu and Suzuki Harunobu.

Yakusha-e focuses on depicting kabuki actors, serving not only artistic purposes but also functioning as promotional materials. Notable artists in this category include Torii Kiyonobu and Tōshūsai Sharaku. *Fūkeiga*, portraying Japanese landscapes and natural scenery, experienced a resurgence in popularity when interest waned in *bijin-ga* and *yakusha-e*. Prominent artists in this category include Katsushika Hokusai and Utagawa Hiroshige.

The production process of Ukiyo-e involves three main steps: first, the artist creates the original design; second, the carver carves the woodblocks based on the design; and finally,

the printer produces the prints. The collaborative efforts of these three stages significantly influence the final presentation and quality of the artwork.

3.2 The Relationship Between Hierarchical Concepts and the Development of Ukiyo-e Art

When Edo Flourished: The Rise of Chōnin Culture and its Impact on Ukiyo-e Art" During the development of the Edo region, it emerged as one of the largest cities globally, boasting a population exceeding one million during that era. Among this vast population, the predominant class was the chōnin, encompassing both merchants and artisans. The substantial population base, coupled with their significant contributions to economic development, enabled the chōnin class to amass enormous wealth, surpassing and even overshadowing the samurai class economically. However, despite their economic achievements, the chōnin class remained at the bottom rung of the social hierarchy, enduring oppression and exploitation from the upper echelons without any alleviation.

The stark dissatisfaction arising from this stark disparity led the chōnin class to gradually grow disillusioned with their unequal status. Consequently, they turned to spiritual resistance, seeking mental freedom and liberation. Ultimately, this rebellion against hierarchical oppression indirectly gave rise to what is known as "chōnin culture." Chōnin culture epitomizes an attitude of pursuing immediate pleasures and stands as a powerful challenge to the traditional ideals of the samurai class.

The yearning for culture and the pursuit of spiritual freedom by the chōnin class indirectly propelled the development of Ukiyo-e art, providing a tangible foundation for its growth. In essence, Ukiyo-e art became a potent weapon for the chōnin class in their spiritual resistance against the upper echelons.

As Ukiyo-e art gained widespread popularity, especially through promotional materials portraying courtesans as "oiran" (high-ranking courtesans), it reflected the curiosity, admiration, and longing of the lower-class populace towards the world of the upper class. In the "pleasure quarters" of that time, there were no class distinctions or restrictions based on wealth; everyone was simply a "guest." Here, guests not only found mental relaxation but also experienced the pleasure of challenging the upper class. This sentiment transformed the lower-class populace into avid fans of Ukiyo-e art, contributing to the art form's development.

In essence, the intertwined narratives of chōnin culture and Ukiyo-e art depict a complex interplay between societal classes, economic disparities, and spiritual resistance during the vibrant Edo period.

3.3 The Impact of Hierarchical Concepts on the Development of Ukiyo-e Art

The emergence of Ukiyo-e art resulted from a confluence of multiple factors. Throughout its growth and development, numerous influences and constraints shaped its trajectory. The hierarchical concept, as a tangible reality, played a significant and undeniable role in the evolution of Ukiyo-e art. This study will specifically elucidate the impact of hierarchical concepts on the development of Ukiyo-e art through the following three aspects.

3.3.1 Production technology

In traditional Japanese painting before the advent of Ukiyo-e art, the medium employed was expensive silk or silk fabric, and the technique involved traditional hand-painting. The high cost and intensive labor associated with these methods dictated that such artworks primarily

served the aristocracy. The common people living at the lower strata of the class-based society essentially had no access to admire these expensive works of art, let alone afford to purchase and personally appreciate them at home. In comparison to the traditional Japanese paintings of the past, Ukiyo-e art, as it transitioned to the woodblock print stage, presented lower production costs, more affordable sales prices, and increased output.

Artistic creations ceased to be exclusive possessions of the imperial and noble classes. Instead, the most significant consumer base in the market became the grassroots populace residing at the lower echelons of society. During this period, they emerged as fervent enthusiasts of Ukiyo-e art, indirectly propelling its development through their passionate patronage. It is likely that those who initially pioneered improvements in the production process could not have anticipated that these changes in craftsmanship would result in the widespread popularity of Ukiyo-e prints.

3.3.2 Style characteristics

3.3.2.1 Theme

Early Ukiyo-e art, known as 'commoner art,' earned its moniker due to its predominantly vulgar and erotic subject matter. However, precisely because its themes resonated with the daily lives of the common people, it garnered widespread popularity. Similar to the introduction of the Chinese Qing Dynasty's 'Spring Palace' paintings to Japan, their exorbitant prices did not deter the upper class; instead, they became highly sought after, failing to gain popularity among the common folks. Consequently, a localized version, known as 'shunga', emerged. Artists crafted pieces filled with sensual elements, both shocking and satisfying the desires of the common class. This rapid acceptance contributed to the widespread acclaim and popularity of Ukiyo-e art during this period.

A plethora of works catering to the interests of the 'chōnin' class was created, such as 'After the Low Song' (Image 1), 'Evening Shower' (Image 2), 'Three Beauties in the Rain' (Image 3), among others. These pieces found immense favor among the 'chōnin' class, further propelling the development of Ukiyo-e art during this era.



Figure 1. Hishikawa Moronobu,
After the Low Song



Figure 2. Suzuki Harunobu,
Evening Shower



Figure 3. Torii Kiyonaga,
Three Beauties in the Rain

3.3.2.2 School of art

The flourishing market gave rise to a plethora of diverse artistic styles, as artists, in order to cater to the tastes of their clientele, continuously honed their skills, seeking innovation and staying abreast of contemporary trends. This period witnessed a kaleidoscope of Ukiyo-e art schools, each thriving and contributing to the vibrant artistic landscape. Representative examples include the 'Hishikawa School,' led by Hishikawa Moronobu; the 'Harunobu Style,' epitomized by Suzuki Harunobu; and the 'Ōban-e' style, with Kitagawa Utamaro as a prominent figure[5].

Various schools attracted their own followers, and alongside historically documented artists, there existed numerous talented 'anonymous' artists. Some were apprentices, while others pursued Ukiyo-e art for livelihood, contributing significantly to the advancement of Ukiyo-e art during this period.

3.3.2.3 Composition of a picture

The various Ukiyo-e art schools each possessed their distinctive expertise, employing differing composition styles. Taking Kitagawa Utamaro's 'Selected Love Poems - Musing on Love' (Image 4) as an example, within the format of 'Ōban-e,' approximately eighty percent of the composition is dedicated to portraying the characters. Utamaro emphasizes detailed depictions of facial features and hair, leaving a blank space on the image to inscribe the title of the work and the artist's name. This composition directs the viewer's focus firmly onto the intricately rendered facial features of the characters, allowing the artist to showcase exceptional skill in vividly capturing the characters' emotions through expressions.

In contrast, using Torii Kiyonaga's 'Three Beauties in the Rain' (Image 3) as another example, the 'juvenile proportions' were a characteristic figure proportion frequently employed by Kiyonaga. The elongated, slender figures in this composition create a vertically elongated posture, adding an element of interest compared to other composition styles. The pronounced contrast in proportions successfully captured the interest and favor of the common people.



Figure 4. Taking Kitagawa Utamaro,
Selected Love Poems - Musing on Love

3.3.3 Business cooperation

In the early 17th century under the rule of the Tokugawa shogunate, daimyos and samurais from various regions were summoned to participate in the construction and development of the burgeoning Edo area. Simultaneously, this attracted a significant influx of merchants, craftsmen, and laborers from diverse backgrounds. This demographic shift led to a severe imbalance in the male-to-female ratio, prompting the rapid growth of the entertainment industry. According to records, at its peak, thousands of practitioners were concentrated in the entertainment district of Yoshiwara. To facilitate management, authorities established the 'yūkaku' (pleasure quarters), which included the courtesans' establishments.

The courtesans in the 'yūkaku' were categorized into three-six-nine ranks, with the highest tier known as 'oiran.' Oiran were accomplished in various arts, including music, chess, dance, and were well-read in literature. They were not only exceptionally beautiful but also possessed exceptional grace. However, not everyone had the fortune to encounter an 'oiran,' making them the subjects of artists' creations. To ensure authenticity, artworks were often named after the courtesans, serving as promotional posters and postcards for the courtesans themselves. The courtesans increased their visibility through Ukiyo-e art, attracting more patrons, while artists profited from the sales of popular pieces. Simultaneously, the common

people in the lower strata found satisfaction in the artworks, fulfilling their curiosity about the unknown world and spiritual yearnings [1].

During this period, Ukiyo-e art catered to the aesthetic tastes of the common people, satisfying their spiritual needs. While lacking depth in content and appearing somewhat vulgar, it authentically reflected the real-life of the Japanese populace during that era. The common people's thirst for the unknown, yearning for a better life, and pursuit of joy through art were encapsulated in Ukiyo-e art. Compared to traditional paintings and other art forms of the time, Ukiyo-e art undoubtedly stood out as the most effective medium for dissemination during the Edo period, being both accessible and versatile.

4 Conclusion

Through the study of the relationship between the hierarchical structure in Japan and the development of Ukiyo-e art, it has been observed that the hierarchical concepts did indeed exert a certain influence on the evolution of Ukiyo-e art, from its inception to the rapid development stage. As the saying goes, where there is oppression, there is resistance. The top-down hierarchical relationships can stifle the lower levels, hindering the pursuit of artistic interests. Throughout the entire Edo period, various stages of development in Ukiyo-e art sought a form of freedom, a carefree and spontaneous expression. The 'revolution' under hierarchical oppression became the driving force propelling Ukiyo-e art forward.

Over the centuries, Ukiyo-e art has maintained its vitality because it has served the largest segment of the common populace, staying close to daily life and being grounded in reality. This offers us a vivid lesson for future artistic themes: art originates from life and yet transcends it. Only art forms and languages that people enjoy and find relatable to their lives can endure the test of time.

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