In Pursuit of Literacy: Women and Education in Edo, Japan

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Accessibility
In Pursuit of Literacy: Women and Education in Edo, Japan

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Abstract

Floating world images (ukiyo-e) paralleled the challenges women faced in becoming literate. They did so by first forming an ideal of feminine beauty as traditionally cultured women. Images then began to show more modern notions of Edo’s Neo-Confucian manners and how literacy could be an instructional tool to train this type of idealized, moral woman. Schools and homeschooled opportunities opened to support the training of moral and literate females. Around the same time, other images began to appear that warned of women who would forgo household duties to read materials not deemed appropriate for women. Governmental interference in censorship correspond to a time where society was questioning whether women should be allowed access to education. Edo period images offer one window through which we can see both an ideal of feminine beauty as well as challenges to the path of literacy. Ukiyo-e can then teach us about women’s participation in literary education in a way that could not be seen through the historical record alone.
Figure 1. Three Women Enjoying Literary Pursuits (Ayame Tōrō-zu), Katsukawa Shunchō
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Chapter I.

Introduction

On a lazy summer day, three young women leisurely idle in front of a Japanese style garden in Figure 1, Three Women Enjoying Literary Pursuits (Ayame Tōrō-zu) by Katsukawa Shunchō. One woman is hunched over a book, resting her head on her elbows while reading. Her hand is on the page as if she's angling it to see better, or just ready to turn the page. A second woman to the right distractingly looks away while her hand is still poised and ready to begin writing on a pad of paper. The last woman is standing and holds up a book to her chest while leaning her head forward to get a closer look at something far away. Just based on the sheer saturation of reading and writing material in this print, one might think that women during the Edo period (1603-1868) were very capable of reading and writing, and that they leisurely enjoyed doing it as a group activity.

Shunchō was not the only woodblock print artist from the Edo period to draw women reading or writing; there was also Okumura Masanobu, Nishikawa Sukenobu, Suzuki Harunobu, Kitao Shigemasa, Isoda Koryusai, Kubo Shunman, Kitagawa Utamaro, Torii Kiyonaga, Katsushika Hokusai, Utagawa Toyokuni, Utagawa Kuniyoshi, among many more. Recently, researchers have commented on the prevalence of such pictures. In her article on moral guidebooks and educational texts, Martha Tocco mentions that “by the late Tokugawa era, images of women reading and writing were everywhere—in the wood-block prints of famous artists, in the illustrations of popular
novels, and in the pictures accompanying the basic texts written for women.”¹

Meanwhile, in their collection of essays on women’s access to education and literacy, Peter Kornicki, Mara Patessio, and G. G. Rowley question what these types of images could mean, to which Itasaka Noriko answers in her chapter on representations of women readers.² Patricia Fister also noted that many woodblock prints depict courtesans in the act of creating poetry.³

Japan wasn’t alone in over-representing women readers in the visual arts.⁴ But unlike other countries, Japan had a much earlier history of successful women authors. The Heian period of Japanese history (794-1185) is known as the apex of classical Japanese culture and is renowned for producing treasured literary works such as Murasaki Shikibu’s *The Tale of Genji* and Sei Shonagon’s *The Pillow Book*. Many of these works survive today and offer a glimpse into the aristocratic world of court life. The women who wrote them are forever hailed as artistic masters and are frequently featured in stories, plays, and even songs from ancient Japanese history to the modern period. Although educational opportunities were limited to the aristocratic few, women were still acknowledged for their contributions; they were able to make history.

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Shortly after the Heian period, women’s recognitions in literary arts took a noticeable decline that persisted throughout the rest of the premodern period which one author called “the dark ages for women.”\(^5\) It wasn’t until the beginning of the Meiji period (beginning 1868) that Japan instituted formal education for women. By the 1880s, at least one in four students were female and approximately twenty percent of all women were literate.\(^6\) Given that there was no formalized school system for literary education before the introduction of western education models, and coupled with the knowledge that women used to be held in such high regard for creating literary masterpieces but were no longer, it might be convenient to assume that women were no longer reading or writing until the beginning of the Meiji period.\(^7\)

Peter Kornicki has mentioned that women’s writing for the most part stayed in manuscript form which would have given it a limited circulation, something that would have affected the public’s knowledge of such works.\(^8\) Shiba Keiko has been working on collecting such manuscript travel diaries to prove the scope of women who could read and write at the time.

It was predominantly a ‘man’s world’ when it came to the authorship of widely distributed popular literature; writings by women of those times have been largely unknown to the general public of the modern era, and are conspicuously absent from many of the standard texts on Japanese literary history. It was often believed that, in the male-dominated society


\(^7\) William George Aston, *A History of Japanese Literature*. (New York: D. Appleton, 1899), 232. “Women were now rarely heard of in public life, and disappear completely from the world of literature—a significant fact when we remember the feminine masterpieces of the Heian period.”

of the Tokugawa period, women did not enjoy the privilege of engaging in the creation of works of literature.\textsuperscript{9}

While it is not true that women disappeared entirely, the disappearance of their public recognition does beg the question: what really happened to women readers in the period between the Heian and the Meiji? The silence of women’s literary output has been noted quite often as a question without an answer.\textsuperscript{10} But even these gaps in history can be quite important to note. As Bettina Knapp states about women’s role in society, “what is not said in the literary work, therefore, is frequently more significant than what is written. Silences and blank spaces are more telling than verbal prowess.”\textsuperscript{11} Did women really stop reading and writing, or did their participation simply escape the attention of those writing history?

It has proven difficult to ascertain literacy levels for women prior to a formalized school system. Earlier scholars of educational history tend to gloss over the topic of women’s education altogether. Ronald Philip Dore’s book on Tokugawa education for the samurai class has only a short appendix dedicated to women. “It is unfortunate that the education of the female half of the samurai class has to be treated in a short appendix to this chapter, but this at least reflects the small amount of space devoted to the subject in Tokugawa educational writings.”\textsuperscript{12}

Women’s education is further complicated by the ill-defined nature of the word “education.” Without a national school structure or curriculum, there was such high

\textsuperscript{9} Motoko Ezaki, \textit{Literary Creations on the Road}. (Lanham: University Press of America, 2012) v.

\textsuperscript{10} Rowley, \textit{Female as Subject}, 56.


variation in what might be taught to a child for them to be considered educated. Depending on whether someone went to an urban or rural domain school, they might be taught Chinese classics, Japanese poetry, or basic arithmetic. If they were homeschooled, they might have learned only moral instruction and the domestic arts. Literacy was a big part of education, but they did not always necessarily go together. Education could also be passed down through lectures, training, or apprenticeships, so while someone may display knowledge of classical literature, it could be through a parent reading to them, from watching a related kabuki play, or even by overhearing a conversation between poets at a teahouse. The popular culture aspect of classical literature meant that even if someone had basic knowledge of it, it did not mean they knew how to read or write.

What the historical record lacks, the artistic record makes up for in abundance. This thesis seeks to prove that floating world images paralleled the challenges women faced in becoming literate during the Edo period. In other words, these images reflected the public debate that occurred all throughout the Edo period on whether or not girls should be educated. It did so at first by forming an ideal of feminine beauty as a traditionally cultured and literate woman. Images then began to show more modern notions of Edo's Neo-Confucian manners and how literacy could be an instructional tool to train this type of idealized, moral woman. Around the same time, other images began to appear that warned of women who would forgo household duties to read material not deemed appropriate for women such as light fiction. As widely circulated and publicly available matter, floating world images would have the ability to bring this intellectual debate to the common people in terms they might better understand. Edo period images
then can teach us about women’s participation in literary education in a way that could not be seen through the historical record alone.

There were many art forms present in the Edo period, but I will focus solely on ukiyo-e. Literally translating to "floating world pictures," ukiyo-e was a form of popular art including woodblock prints, book illustrations, and paintings that depicted a transitory urban world based on pleasure and merriment. They most notably featured the idealized and delightful lifestyle of Edo pleasure districts including Yoshiwara brothels and Kabuki theaters. The word *ukiyo* has Buddhist origins relating to impermanence and sorrow, but then was adopted to mean an escapist’s world where everything is current, modern, and beautiful. Asai Ryōi’s famous quote from his novel Tales of the Floating World (*Ukiyo monogatari*) explains the sentiment at the time:

> Living only for the moment, turning our full attention to the pleasures of the moon, the snow, the cherry blossoms and the maple leaves; singing songs, drinking wine, diverting ourselves in just floating, floating; caring not a whit for the pauperism staring us in the face, refusing to be disheartened, like a gourd floating along with the river current: this is what we call the *floating world*.

In other words, like a gourd floating down the river, those who participated in the floating world gave no resistance against the fleeting quality of pleasure. While not everyone was able to see a Kabuki play or visit a courtesan in the brothel district, they could live vicariously through the artists with insider knowledge; anyone could buy a peak into this hedonistic lifestyle by simply purchasing a print.

Early ukiyo-e scholars have noted the importance of breaking up these images into smaller phases to capture the changes in public perception, technology

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advancements, artists interests, and current events. William Anderson wrote the first English periodization of Japanese woodblock prints in his catalog for the Burlington Fine Arts Club in 1888. It consisted of six groups that started from ninth century prints. \(^\text{14}\)

Perhaps the most well known periodization comes from Richard Lane. He describes four periods of time: Early Genre Painting and the Rise of Ukiyo-e, The Primitives and the First Century of Ukiyo-e (1660-1765), The Golden Age of the Color Print (1765-1810), and Hokusai, Hiroshige and the Japanese Landscape (1810-1880). Takahashi Seichiro simplified his periodization into three: An Early Period, A Golden Age, and The Closing Years. Itasaka Noriko’s research focused solely on images of women who can read. She based her periodization on trends of what types of women were depicted. Rather than try to explore the entire intervening centuries between the Heian era and the Meiji era, I will instead focus on the last few decades of the eighteenth century and into the turn of the nineteenth century, what Lane and Takahashi might call the Golden Age, and what Itasaka would call the Middle Period. This period fills a gap of women’s educational opportunities that Peter Kornicki’s “Women, Education, and Literacy” chapter does not cover. It also avoids educational changes introduced near the end of the Edo period that occurred due to the adoption of Western education models.

I hope to open a scholarly debate on a topic that has not seen much attention. Adding new findings, I hope my study helps others to see writing during the Edo period as a thriving activity for women. In addition, I hope it helps others to look at nonstandard

\(^{14}\) Allen Hockley wrote a great historiography of Ukiyo-e histories, even if they were focused around the dissemination of Isoda Koryūsai. He expounds on Seidlitz, Anderson, Strange, and Fenollosa. Allen Hockley. *The Prints of Isoda Koryūsai: Floating World Culture and Its Consumers in Eighteenth-century Japan*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003).
sources, such as artwork, in new ways that can open dialogs and fill more gaps that the written historical record can’t readily answer.
Chapter II.

Literacy and the Ideal of Feminine Beauty

Artists began developing ukiyo-e partly in response to a newly developing floating world which allowed consumers to partake of a fantasy life through engaging with art without having to experience it for themselves. At the time, artistic schools and ateliers like the Kano and Tosa schools were the leading providers of fine arts. The Kano school was well established in providing paintings for political leaders since the 1400s while the Tosa school and their Japanese style paintings catered to an imperial and aristocratic patronage. In contrast, ukiyo-e was considered a form of popular art, and therefore needed to demonstrate its legitimacy if it wanted to compete in an already established artistic environment.

Ukiyo-e artists did this in part by establishing a new ideal of feminine beauty but based a lot of their conventions in existing art techniques. This chapter will first examine how these ideals of physical and contextual beauty were created. It will then examine the ways in which these images did not necessarily reflect the lifelike reality of Edo, but rather transformed and masked it. This gives a foundation to approach ukiyo-e in two ways: as products of an artist’s imagination and as the desire of consumers. This relationship between artists and consumers is integral to understanding why each group was invested in having the ideal form of feminine beauty include women who read and write.
Physical Ideal Beauty

Ukiyo-e served as announcements and advertisements of the latest fashions and style of the time. While it's more evident in the kimono patterns and hairstyles of the women, it’s also true of the female shape and size. The earliest ukiyo-e borrowed basic human form and style from traditional secular art, meaning that while landscapes or details of storytelling may have been well defined, human forms were not. By the mid-seventeenth century, female forms, especially of beautiful women, began to popularize. Initially we see corpulent and rounded figures from Hishikawa Moronobu (1618-1694), Torii Kiyonobu (1664-1729), and Torii Kiyomasu (active 1690s-1720s). By the time of Suzuki Harunobu (1725-1770), the idealized form began to appear thinner than the earliest ukiyo-e artists. Though still very much rounded, his females were instead noted for their young and sweet appearances.

It was not until Torii Kiyonaga (1752-1815) and Kitagawa Utamaro (c. 1754-1806) that we begin to see proportions and features more accurately reflect a realistic woman figure. After 1780, Kiyonaga “evolved a type of feminine beauty unsurpassed in the annals of Ukiyo-e — a sweetly expressive face, tall lissome figure, the grace and bearing of a goddess-and with this went a wonderful power of reposeful composition.”15 Many of his drawings did verge on tall and thin, although not as drastic as Chōbunsai Eishi’s (1756-1829) short-lived portrayal of the female form, which could only be described as unnaturally elongated, or what some critics have called “abnormal and decadent.”16

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16 Lane, *Images from the Floating World*, 142.
The Kano school advocated an unchanged artistic style through centuries, but for ukiyo-e, there was no one female style that persisted throughout all the Edo period. Instead, we see each artist develop a stereotypical template for the female figure. The turn towards more realistic proportions came at a time that ukiyo-e began to look critically at human traits, both physically and characteristically.

In the 1791-2, Utamaro designed a series of physiognomies called Ten Physiognomies of Women (Fujin sōgaku juttai) which treated the beautiful women category almost as if the women were natural history specimens. Previously, he had much success with a popular book published in 1788 called Picture Book: Selected Insects (Ehon mushi erami) that also took a similar natural history perspective. With his physiognomies, he was able to extend his skills as an artist and his reputation as an observer of females in a new category of bijinga\(^\text{17}\) that defined and categorized different types of women from a variety of occupations and social ranks.

Figure 2 illustrates one such print from the series. A married woman, indicated by the shaved eyebrows and blackened teeth, holds a letter up close to her face and scrutinizes it. She’s wearing clothing with a basic pattern, and only has a single comb adorn her hairstyle. Her facial expression and the way she is holding the letter close give the impression that the viewer caught her in an intimate moment. While these physiognomies do much to distinguish women, they also still build off stock templates

\(^{17}\) Bijinga can be defined as a category of images and paintings of beautiful women. Although technically, they could include youthful men as well, they most often dealt with only women.
Figure 2. Woman Reading a Letter, Kitagawa Utamaro

*From the series Ten Classes of Women’s Physiognomy (Fujo ninsō jupon), 1792-3.*
for the female form. Davis notes about this series:

None of these figures shows the kinds of distinct differences in eyes, noses, brows, mouths, necks, arms, hands and so on that would be expected if eight women from the city of Edo were brought together. The artist seems to have used a basic template for the female face and figure; their distinctions are dressed upon their frames, expressed by glance and gesture. 18

Though these physiognomies might seem like a push towards creating even more realistic depictions of women, they were still heavily dependent on the stereotypes and templates of feminine beauty. In other prints, Utamaro would not include distinguishing facial traits either. Instead, his identifying features could be found in house emblems or titles that include a woman’s name. Those women who could be identified were mostly performing expected social behavior related to their class and profession, showing that public perspective was also a factor in the direction and success of Utamaro’s work. This could be one of the contributing factors that led Utamaro to draw women according to a preconceived form.

Looking more closely at these women, as well as to others drawn by Utamaro, it may be argued more substantially that he established specific conventions, as though employing a template, for showing ideal beauty rather than relying upon observation. Rather, in order to make distinctions between individuals, Utamaro seems to have relied upon differences of costume, hairstyle, and gesture; these are socially coded markers, indicative of status, class and stereotype. No renowned Edo beauties are shown with features unique to them; none has a distinctive mole, nose, mouth or other feature.19

Utamaro took on a persona of an insider that was sharing this little-known world of women. And it was this type of perspective that helped build his Utamaro brand. Julie


19 Davis, Utamaro and the Spectacle of Beauty, 106-7.
Nelson Davis believes that Utamaro’s prints were not the creation of one sole artist, but rather, that Utamaro was more of a brand name of floating world creations that had the voice of a man knowledgeable about the ways, customs, and habits of the Yoshiwara.\textsuperscript{20} This gave his prints an air of authenticity concerning beautiful women; Utamaro was so intimately knowledgeable about woman that he not only could identify a courtesan on the street, but he could also classify and distinguish one courtesan from all others. This was not something that all consumers had firsthand experience with, and so they instead had to live vicariously through floating world images. Utamaro’s representations then shared this intimate world.

Other Japanese artists during Utamaro’s time did not draw their images as imitations of real life. For example, prints of well-known courtesans did not necessarily represent what the woman’s true physical features were. If anything, the depictions that were the most real were the fashion of the women, because woodblock prints were often used to show off the latest styles and fashions for women. In Figure 3, courtesans identified by name and their \textit{kamuro}\textsuperscript{21} parade in their finest and most extravagant kimonos that have such visually appealing patterns they could essentially be works of art in their own right. The series title’s emphasis on pattern books indicates garment makers were possibly a part of the production process in some way.\textsuperscript{22} Courtesans themselves were often viewed as commodities, and so this series serves a dual purpose of

\textsuperscript{20} Davis, \textit{Utamaro and the Spectacle of Beauty}, 106-7.

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Kamuro} can be defined as a young attendant to a courtesan.

Figure 3. The Courtesan Karauta of the Ōgiya Brothel, Isoda Koryūsai

*From the series A Pattern Book of the Year’s First Designs, Fresh as Spring Herbs (Hinagata wakana no hatsu moyō).*
advertising both the fashions as well as the women themselves. Because the artist included the names of the courtesans, they could be cross-referenced with a Yoshiwara Saiken, a guidebook that listed courtesans from all brothels in the pleasure quarters and gave basic details about them such as their ranking and price. These guide books were published by Tsutaya Juzaburo, one of the two publishers of the Hinagata series.

Beyond kimono patterns, Figure 3 also was used to inform an Edo audience of the latest trends in hairstyle. The tate-hyōgo style used in the Hinagata prints became popularized in 1775. A bizashi, or armature of bone, wood, or metal secured the lantern was used to secure the hair so that it could flare out like a lantern over the ears in the temple area. The one hundred and forty prints of the Hinagata series all sported this new hairstyle, although some did include variations that differ slightly from this main hairstyle. The differences in variations as well as the use of accessories were constantly changing to keep up with the latest trends, and ukiyo-e were one way in which people could be updated with the trends.

The physical features listed so far such as body form, fashion, and hairstyle were such a strong indication of what it meant to be feminine in the Edo period, that onnagata characters, male Kabuki actors who took on female roles, could be given female identities in images through these means. Onnagata were often drawn as if they were really females; masculine qualities such as realistic nose size were often not included in prints so that onnagata did not give off the impression of a man dressing up like a female. The Kabuki theater had removed females from the stage since 1629, and so such realistic portrayals had the potential to cause some of the same disturbances. To differentiate them from actual images of women, some artists began to represent onnagata by giving them
accessories of masculinity such as the *murasaki boshi*, or purple cap. Such coverings were originally used when actors were ordered to shave the tops of their heads in order to not appear too attractive. The covering then became a symbol for the *onnagata*. Ukiyo-e then could use a feminine stock characterization, which was the common symbol of beauty, while the cap would simply be a visual cue of the actor’s true gender. Had these drawings instead tried to imitate reality and show the actor with both masculine qualities held in a feminine grace, it would not have had the same message of beauty communicated to the consumers. *Onnagata* images then cemented the idealized feminine image.

While it may look like the artists are defining the terms of the ideal of feminine beauty, its developed through a cooperative and collaborative relationship between multiple constituencies. Davis describes multiple relationships between artists, publishers, writers, carvers, printers, imitators, patrons, and buyers that all had a stake in a final product, and all had their individual contributions to the final result.23 One takeaway is that consumers of ukiyo-e were both partaking of and contributing to images of the ideal woman. Both artists and consumers were a part of the merchant and artisan classes, and thus these classes were the ones constructing representations of the female ideal. The creation of a femininity in popular culture was a male construction of which women were denied participation.24

Still, if women’s physical traits weren’t portrayed accurately from the real world, then how do we decipher whether their actions were? In other words, if prints were not

23 Davis, *Partners in Print*.

mirrors into Edo life, then how do we make sense of whether a print of a woman reading actually meant that women of the time could read?

Depicted is perhaps an equivocal word to use as it begs one of the questions that confronts us in any consideration of Utamaro art, as to how far he recorded the Edo of his time and how far he pictured something based on Edo and its inhabitants, but really a dream world of his own imagination. We can hardly think of an ukiyo-e artist as we might of a European genre painter of the same period, as the camera-eye whereby we are able to view a world otherwise lost to us. Utamaro’s art is the very antithesis to the literal photograph: it is an art that wills rather than accepts, that selects, composes, and translates.25

This is important to keep in mind as we analyze these images. By looking at them as accurate historical pictures, we will certainly be disappointed in their accuracy. However, by looking at them in terms of a consumer product, both what representations were consumed by a paying audience and what messages the author wanted to communicate, we may be able to see learn about public and artistic perceptions, which could be very telling about the social climate at the time.

Contextual Beauty

Many ukiyo-e showed women reading or writing well known classical literature, such as The Tale of Genji, Ise Monogatari, or Hyakunin isshu. Ukiyo-e represented the ideal of feminine beauty as an educated woman knowledgeable in traditional literary arts such as Japanese classics and poetry. Before the Edo period, only aristocratic women had access to educational opportunities that allowed them to learn such topics, and so these allusions to the past connected the woman to the reputation of reading women from the Heian era. The previous section outlined some of the physical features of women, from

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25 Hillier, Utamaro Colour Prints and Paintings, 22.
their body shapes and facial features to the look of their clothing—essentially everything that framed their bodies. Beyond just physical idealization, throughout the Edo period, we begin to see contextual idealized beauty through other elements such as actions and behaviors. These elements began to solidify as representations of an educated and traditionally cultured women. We see this in ukiyo-e through the prevalence of historical paragons of beautiful women such as Murasaki Shikibu and Ono no Komachi, two women who were known for their traditional skills and education. High-ranking courtesans, women who were required to emulate the ideal woman in order to be successful in their profession, were also turning towards education and training in traditional arts such as calligraphy and poetry. From this, we can begin to see a link developing between images of literate women and the ideal of feminine beauty.

A large theme found in ukiyo-e is depicting historical figures. Women poetesses often found in ukiyo-e include the following: Ono no Komachi (825-900), Murasaki Shikibu (978-1014 or 1025), Koshikibu no Naishi (999-1025), Saigū no Nyōgo (929-985), Kodai no Kimi (late 10th-early 11th century), Lady Ise (875-938), and Nakatsukasa (912-991). Many prints of these women are simply portraits, although because they do follow the basic definitions of beauty described in the previous section, we cannot be sure whether these portrait images include any features that look like the actual women.

These women were well known for their literary skills in poetry during the Heian period. The fact that they’re still being represented centuries later speaks to their celebrity status. Including them as a genre of woodblock prints immortalizes and glorifies these women for their literary accomplishments. They achieved some level of fame during their lifetimes that carried forward centuries later, and people are still passing on the story of
their achievements in a positive light. This gives credence to women and their ability to achieve notoriety through their writing. In a sense, these images carry the weight of role models.

Figure 4. Poetess Murasaki Shikibu at Ishiyama Temple in Otsu (shore of Lake Biwa), Suzuki Harunobu
Images of Lady Murasaki are imbued with strong iconography relating to a tale that while she sat at her desk on the veranda of the Ishiyama Temple, she stared at the moon and became inspired to write her famous novel. Whether this tale is true or not has not been discovered; however, numerous ukiyo-e as well as Edo period paintings that present Lady Murasaki almost always contain elements of this tale. In Figure 4, Murasaki is leaning onto a table filled with writing instruments, pen in hand, while she looks at the moon over lake Biwa in the background. She is wearing a large flowing robe that hides her figure underneath. Her long black hair is let down and is flowing over her shoulders and past her right knee.

Ono no Komachi is another poetess who also makes many appearances in ukiyo-e woodblock prints and paintings, both as a famous poetess and a woman known for her incredible beauty. Very little biographical data is known about this woman; however, it is possible to get a sense of her deep passion through the love poems included in the first imperial anthology of Japanese poetry titled *Kokin Wakashu*. Chōbunsai Eishi includes one such poem in his 1801 series *The Thirty-six Immortal Women Poets*, shown in Figure 5.

\[
\begin{align*}
Omoitsutsu & \quad \text{Did he come to me} \\
Nureba ya hito no & \quad \text{Because I fell asleep} \\
Mietsuramu & \quad \text{Longing for him?} \\
Yume to shiriseba & \quad \text{If I had known it was a dream,} \\
Samezaramashi o & \quad \text{I would never have awakened!}^{26}
\end{align*}
\]

Eishi’s series includes images of thirty-six women poets from history alongside poems

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written by them. In Komachi’s image, she is peeking out from a pile of billowing robes. Her long black hair follows the wave patterns that they create. She is wearing white makeup typical of Heian aristocratic portraits, and her eyebrows have been shaved off and redrawn higher on her head. Although the poem’s content does not deal with anything shown in the picture itself, this was typical of portraits form this period.
Eishi’s series is quite remarkable in that the poems for each immortal poet had been copied in the hand of a young female calligraphy student between the ages of six and fifteen. These were students of the Hanagata shodō calligraphy school, run by Hanagata Yoshiakira. The calligraphy style is consistent throughout the book, almost as if only one person wrote each poem. This is not something typical, especially of girls so young, and so the woodblock carver may have had a hand in unifying the handwriting of each young girl. By doing so, he also makes the calligraphy school look more like they have a unifying style. The teacher is mentioned by name in the preface, and so this type of book would have served as an advertisement for his calligraphy school as well to show off the accomplishments of his aspiring young students.

In order to demonstrate that the training of these young girls went beyond simple skill in drawing kana (the elements of Japanese syllabic script), they were called on to transcribe the poems within an unusually broad range of formats—from regular even lines to complex scatterings of syllables that almost require a map in order to be read. By embracing this variety, the sponsors could imply that the children not only are learning to write with surprising facility, but also are learning the aesthetics of calligraphy and the fundamental principles of poetry.²⁷

Even if the Heian language differed enough from the Edo period to render it indiscernible to these young girls, they were learning the aesthetics of calligraphy as well as about traditional poetry styles such as the waka. In doing so, each of these girls worked with the poems of a historical female figure who gained recognition through her literary skills and essentially served as role models to these calligraphy students.

The Edo period was a time of relative peace as compared to the Warring States period previously. This allowed both men and women to indulge in leisure activities to a degree not seen in decades. Ukiyo-e began to represent some of the idealized activities

²⁷ Pekarik, *The Thirty-six Immortal Women Poets*. 

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that women could take up in their leisure time, which was often modeled on leisure time activities well known in the Heian period, much like the calligraphy displayed in Eishi’s series. The Four Accomplishments are such pastimes that highlight calligraphy as an art alongside painting, performing music, and playing the Chinese board game go.

Calligraphy is a gestural art form, and in Japan writing is a performance. Apart from the inherent meaning of the words, readers who write calligraphy themselves treat the text almost as a theater libretto that they instinctively re-perform in their imagination, tracing the writer’s gestures as they read it. In fact, it is often necessary to retrace the writer’s hand in this way just to decipher the script. Drawing naturally provokes a similar response in readers who have cultivated this reading habit.28

Knowledge of these activities were expected of the upper class for centuries, including the Edo period.

Courtesans in the Yoshiwara district were famed for their cultural education in these pursuits. Kitagawa Utamaro drew a brothel full of courtesans engaging in these high-culture activities. In Figure 6, the foreground of the first two sheets show women painting. The background of the first sheet shows two people in a back room engaged in a game of go. On the front of the third sheet, a woman reads a sheet of paper which represents calligraphy. And the background of the third sheet shows a woman sitting at an instrument.

The Four Accomplishments was a very well-known set of cultural knowledge at the time, and a well-recognized ukiyo-e iconography. Many ukiyo-e artists, such as Kikugawa Eizan, Yashima Gakutei, Shiba Kokan, Isoda Koryusai, Kitao Shigemasa, Utagawa Toyoharu, Utagawa Kunimaru, and Ishikawa Toyonobu drew their own

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versions. Often series with numbered themes were part of a larger category of floating world images called *mitate-e*, translated as “parody pictures.” These types of pictures made viewers look at the photo in two different ways. Many would have a juxtaposition of past and present. Others would present both Chinese and Japanese themes. In depictions of the Four Accomplishments, we see Chinese pastime activities conducted by modern women.

Many books aimed to inform brothel managers of the importance of training courtesans in reading, writing, and traditional arts. For example, the Sparrow of the Yoshiwara (*Yoshiwara Suzume*), written in 1667 appealed to managers to teach writing early in the apprentice stage of a courtesan’s career, and that they should be knowledgeable in poetry writing and traditional Japanese literature. Other books such as *Hidensho* and Sample Letters for Use in the Yoshiwara (*Yoshiwara-yō bunshō*)
emphasized the letter writing aspect of a courtesan’s profession by providing sample love letters.  

Courtesans aimed to emulate upper class women in behavior and education to make themselves more desirable to upper class, wealthy, and “less boorish” clients. This is not to say that courtesans lived the luxurious lifestyles as portrayed in the woodblock prints—actually far from it. It’s probably worth examining how there was a lot of idealization and fantasy going on in ukiyo-e to the point that a lot of the murky reality was purposefully removed. What we are seeing is not the same thing as what was the reality for these courtesans. For one, many of them were not allowed to leave the gates of the Yoshiwara and were essentially indentured slaves. Many were sold into their positions of servitude by their parents for money. Mortality rates were also horrendously high. Potentially courtesans could serve less time if a wealthy patron was to buy out the rest of their contract, but it was certainly not something they could depend on.

Davis takes a realistic approach to describing the Yoshiwara. There is a spectrum of discourse that pins the beautiful, happy, wonderful Yoshiwara at one end, and the slavish, miserable, dirty Yoshiwara at the other end. Understandably, artists tended to portray the optimistic escapist version; however, elements likely existed from both ends. This topic itself could take many books to cover, so I won’t be broaching it in detail here except to say that artistic representations were indeed far from reality.

Ukiyo-e represented the ideal of feminine beauty as an educated woman knowledgeable in traditional literary arts such as Japanese classics and poetry. Beauty

29 Kornicki, *The Female as Subject*, 13.

30 Quote from Fujimoto Kizan (1624-1704) in Shikidō ōkagami (Great Mirror of the Way of Love) translated in Kornicki, *The Female as Subject*, 13.
wasn’t simply having an aesthetically pleasing face. In the Edo period, it was a stereotype of characteristics which included physical appearance as well as behavior and knowledge. These characteristics can be found in the immortalized women writers from centuries prior who were glorified as examples of the ideal woman that every young girl should strive for. They can be found in the characteristics in which courtesans tried to emulate. This idealized beauty set the context for how we can look at pictures of women reading.

We see that they are not exactly photographs of the Edo world, but they hold a lot of symbols for what is going on during the period. We see the excessive leisure of these women, and while that may not be how much the average woman had, we can gain a sense of how it was acceptable for upper class women (and high-ranking courtesans emulating upper class women) to use this leisure time, of which reading was just one activity.
Neo-Confucian values became the cornerstone of relationship management in the Edo period. It addressed familial relationships; like that of filial piety, where first a woman is dependent on a father, then when she gets married she is dependent on her husband, and then later in life she is dependent on the care of her son. More specifically though, Neo-Confucianism addressed social relationships which built the foundation of the class system under shogun rule. Most people fell into one of the following four fixed social ranks (in order of social prestige): samurai, farmers, artists, and merchants. Samurai, as the ruling elite were placed at the top. Farmers were acknowledged for growing life-sustaining food while artists only created objects. Merchants were seen at the bottom of this list, because they did not create something new for society, but merely redistributed the contributions of others. These categories dictated specific duties and limitations for the people.

Despite these social ranks indicating farmers were held in higher esteem than merchants and artists, they not experience a higher status of living. During the relative peacetime of the Edo period, merchants were able to grow in economic power to the point where class lines between the merchants and samurai classes began to blur in some regards, and swap in others, at least in terms of quality of life. Samurai were given a stipend based on their rank and domain. Many samurai used these stipends to purchase floating world activities, some squandering all their money on it. There was even a category of courtesan nicknamed “castle-toppers” due to the fact that courtesans could essentially bankrupt a samurai if he wasn’t fiscally responsible.
The government was able to use these Neo-Confucian relationships to monitor and control society into socially accepted roles based on their hereditary rank, but that did not stop many from trying to live outside their means or adopt social behaviors of the upper-class. Marriages were one such vehicle to increasing one’s social status. Ōgimachi Machiko (1679-1724) was a middle-class aristocrat who grew up in Kyoto and was educated in court customs. Her family earned three hundred koku through an annual stipend. She was then offered the opportunity to become the concubine for the shogun’s adjutant, Yanagisawa Yoshiyasu (1658-1714), who was earning an annual stipend of over seventy thousand koku.

Machiko may have been originally seen as a conduit through which Yoshiyasu could obtain political power in the court, but Machiko’s education was certainly another factor in the arrangement. “She provided him with access to the learning and immense cultural prestige of the court, and she was by anyone’s standards a deeply learned woman herself.” Her skills in writing were used to document Yoshiyasu’s house history for his descendants. Machiko’s knowledge of Japanese and Chinese classics bolstered it by including many literary references. Creating such connections and allusions to classics, Machiko then would have elevated the status of Yoshiyasu’s house, and thus her literary skills would have been highly beneficial to the arranged relationship.

Social mobility did not only work in one direction, and so sometimes citizens were forced to experience a decrease in social prestige. Ōhashi is one such woman. Her father’s transition from samurai to ronin meant he was no longer entitled to his annual stipend.  

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31 Koku is considered to be how much rice it would take to feed one person for one year. This measurement was used as a stipend currency.  

32 Rowley, The Female as Subject, 52.
stipend of one thousand *koku*. Being poor, he then sold Ōhashi to a brothel in Shimabara. As a courtesan with the training of a daughter of a samurai, she became a very popular commodity. Her poetry and skill in painting were often requested by clients. “Poems by courtesans have long been admired and enthusiastically collected in Japan, partly for their inherent beauty, but perhaps more because of the ‘star’ status of the artists themselves.”33 Ōhashi then may have felt the disgrace of her family’s fall in rank, but at least her skills in literacy were able to set her apart in her new role as a courtesan.

Machiko and Ōhashi’s stories emphasize the societal value placed on literary knowledge. Yoshiyasu sought out such qualities in his concubine much like clients likely sought out Ōhashi’s poetry skills—skills men idealized and went out of their way to obtain.

Ukiyo-e hold an important part in visualizing these characteristics of the ideal woman, but they also play a part in the training. They corroborate details of what scant evidence exists on how women learned. More importantly, they were used to show examples of women performing acceptable social behavior in line with governmental Neo-Confucian ideology. Women were the target audience of some ukiyo-e, such as those images included in moral conduct books, where woodblock prints accompanied the text to visually complement and show examples for women to better understand their role in society. Even more than that, the men of the target audience held these expectations of the women in their lives, whether they are seeking a wife, selecting a courtesan, or learning how to raise his daughter properly. But how did women become this vision of ideal? How were they trained to meet these social expectations? This chapter will look at

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33 Fister, *Japanese Women Artists 1600-1900*, 70-1.
the landscape of learning—where and how women learned to read and write. This will help us to better understand how, who, and even which women could gain the skills needed to be the ideal female as depicted in ukiyo-e prints.

Homeschooling

Before the Meiji period, there was no formalized education available for women. The nun Kakuzan (1252–1305) wrote of as much in a letter to a family member of her belated husband: “Being women, we have no intellectual education by which we may benefit society. We only practice the doctrine of the three obediences and marry a husband.”

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In the Heian era, a time when women were renowned for their literary accomplishments, the only education outside of temples was the official State Academy. This school could accommodate upwards of 400 students; however, the Taihō Code indicated it was designed for the sons of nobility. By 728 A.D., it was not able to incentivize enough students, and so it widened the doors to the sons of all officials regardless of rank. The Academy even attempted to make its learning compulsory to combat the low attendance rates. Yet one thing it did not try was reduce the restrictions on enrollment to allow women to attend.35 Aristocratic women simply depended on private tutoring.


Homeschooling carried on as the most widespread form of education into the Edo period. Although schools were beginning to allow women, the government had not interfered with or proscribed education for women. If a young girl was to learn, it was propelled by a family member, often mothers and grandmothers, but possibly a father or brother instead. These family members would take on the role of teacher, although it was not uncommon to hire a tutor for the purposes of homeschooling.36 In rare cases, husbands would also teach their wives. Enomoto Yazaemon (1625-1686) gifted his fourteen-year-old daughter a trove of books such as The Imagawa Letter (Imagawa-jō), conduct books including the Twenty-four Examples of Filial Piety (Nijū shikō), and the Millionaire’s Bible (Chōjakyō) that he expected her husband to help her read.37

Being educated at home was considered a much more appropriate way for women to learn, because it did not take them away from the house for long, so that they could still complete their household duties. Their training could also be personalized to a family’s profession or rank. Parents were able to directly tutor their children in the knowledge that would help them for their hereditary ranks, whether that be how to balance accounts, buy supplies at the store, or learn moral education to make young girls more marriageable. Daughters of samurai might have more extensive training in Neo-Confucian ethics and virtues, while a commoner might be trained instead in skills necessary to serve and maintain a merchant’s house. Time would not be wasted on training some of the extra skills that were taught in domain schools or private academies, such as Kanji or arithmetic.


37 Kornicki, The Female as Subject, 12.
In the cities, schools were clustered closer together, so it was more likely that a student wouldn’t have to travel very far in order to attend. In the countryside, schools were more geographically spread, so students would have to travel much farther. Some villages did not have schools, so in order to learn, a student would have to travel to another village or city, often for extended periods of time. Time at school or even traveling to school is time away from manual labor, so those in the countryside did not generally have the luxury to dedicate a certain amount of time for schooling each week. The time cut down by homeschooling instead gave some country students the opportunity to learn, where they might not otherwise have had.

Figure 7 features a print created in 1767 by Suzuki Harunobu titled *Chi*, that shows a scene of homeschooling. A young girl sits at a low table, with a brush in her hand practicing writing from a copy book many times. The letters are written on top of each other until the sheet starts to become a blur. In Edo times, paper was conserved by using each sheet more than once; calligraphy was written on top of previous writings until the paper was black with ink, as can be seen in the image. An older woman stands behind her, holding the young girl’s writing hand to help guide through the correct brush strokes. An even younger girl, possibly too young to learn how to write yet, looks on. She has a kimono with a maple leaf print, signifying that this is an autumn print. A single chrysanthemum in a vase on the floor additionally makes this a seasonal image. The pile of papers on the floor next to the table states the date as “*Meiwa shi, ku gatsu,*” meaning the ninth month of 1767, confirming the time of year.
Figure 7. Wisdom (Chi), Suzuki Harunobu

From the series The Five Virtues (Gojō).
Arthur Baldwin Duel translates the poem on the upper right as, “We are born in a world where there is a right way, and if we learn one thing we can know ten.” This quote then defines wisdom, the title of the print, as not simply knowing things, but knowing the right way of things. In doing things the right way, one can aptly apply the wisdom to similar situations. This is akin to the English proverb first used by Anne Isabella Thackeray Ritchie, “if you give a man a fish he is hungry again in an hour. If you teach him to catch a fish, you do him a good turn.” The proverb in Harunobu’s print then connects the acts of reading and writing to the definition of wisdom.

Schools

The Edo period educational landscape was a decentralized scattering of learning opportunities that depended much on the social rank and gender of the student. By the turn of the Meiji period, over 10,000 commoner schools, 276 domain schools, and 1,500 private academies independently already existed.

Decentralized domain schools (hankō) offered a basic education, but because there was no standardized structure, each differed in terms of curriculum, whether they allowed girls to attend, and what types of records they kept. The gender composition simply wasn’t recorded for many of these earlier schools which makes it harder to identify the educational opportunities that were available to girls. Scholars have been creative when working out the gender of students, such as identifying the difference


between male and female students by their names on attendance records.\textsuperscript{41} Still yet, school records only give a partial picture of what types of women were able to access education.

The 276 independent domain schools were largely in castle town regions. They primarily catered to the sons of samurai families, and only rarely did admit girls. For example, in 1841, the Tsuyama domain in Okayama prefecture provided a single room for instruction of girls by female teachers. These classes used moral primer books such as The Greater Learning for Women (\textit{Onna Daigaku}) and Precepts for Women (\textit{Onna imagawa}) as the primary means of education. This domain school was the exception to the rule though. As Peter Kornicki mentions, “It can be safely asserted, therefore, that the education of commoner women was a subject that for the most part did not concern samurai officialdom in the Edo period.”\textsuperscript{42}

Instead, commoners relied more on independent schools not associated and run by domains. These types of schools were often called temple schools (\textit{terakoya}) and were managed by a range of village roles, such as local priests, doctors, educated farmers, village officials, or even women who previously worked in a samurai household. The skill and expertise of the teacher would often dictate what type of learning went on in the school. Gender demographic information is a bit misleading for these types of schools. Of the 297 temple schools that existed in the city of Edo, all but two allowed females, and one even did not allow males. This 99\% co-ed rate does not mean that women

\textsuperscript{41} Kornicki, \textit{The Female as Subject}.

\textsuperscript{42} Kornicki, \textit{The Female as Subject}, 9.
attended. Nor does this mean that regional schools outside of the city of Edo allowed such a high percentage of women either.

Figure 8. First Calligraphy Class of the New Year at a Fashionable School (Fūryū terako kissho hajime keiko no zu), Utagawa Toyokuni

In the triptych by Utagawa Toyokuni, students from various backgrounds sit at tables with practice paper, a copy book, and writing supplies to write the first calligraphy of the New Year. This *mitate-e*, or parody picture, is unlikely to depict a *terakoya* as it really was; however, by looking closer, we can tease out some elements that were indicative of the Edo period landscape of learning, such as the re-use of paper and the importance of holidays to literary arts. Meanwhile we can also overlook some of the elements that may be exaggerated for aesthetic effect, such as the beauty and high percentage of female teachers.
The spatial details suggest that the room in the image was likely dedicated solely to calligraphy activities. The heavy furniture in the top right corner that held the writing supplies as well as the wooden tables used by the students were unlikely to move. All around are writing supplies such as paper, brushes, scrolls, and books. From the eighth century to the beginning of the Edo period, woodblock print publishing was limited to religious purposes, and so most books were in manuscript format. Writing out each book was costly, especially in labor, and so they were relatively rarer. It was really Tokugawa Ieyasu who pushed for a secularization of woodblock book printing which resulted in lower the costs of books dramatically.\textsuperscript{43} Such a pile then would have been feasible for others beyond the aristocratic class.

The energy and poise of the people in the image show that these were not necessarily elite-class. One woman on the left sheet yawns while holding her brush carelessly in the air. Another girl on the front left sheet rests her chin in her hand while scraping ink as if she’s bored. A few students are looking at a woman in the middle print holding up and reading a folded paper. Her mouth is open as if she’s reading the words aloud to the room. Two women on the right-side print are preparing tea. The artist draws the attention throughout each of these groups’ vignette to tell a variety of stories about what goes on at a such an imaginary school. This is not a class with order and discipline as would be expected of the elite class, but much more relaxed.

The appearance and dress of the people also give a glimpse into their lower-class rank. The kimono of the teachers all have modest patterns, and while their hairstyles are

\textsuperscript{43} Kornicki, \textit{The Book in Japan}, 148-55.
adorned with pins, combs, and other adornments, they have much less than other prints of the time representing geisha, courtesans, or higher-class women.

Class consciousness was important for the Neo-Confucian order but the late 1700s was also a time full of changes. Educating young girls was one strategic way to build up their upper-class appearance in order to better position them for social mobility. Especially by learning moral education, young girls might have better etiquette that would be appealing to high-ranking samurai or rich merchants. Laura Nenzi believes that even this opportunity for social mobility speaks to the changes in cultural education opportunities in Edo. “The enjoyment of arts, music, and other pastimes was no longer the monopoly of the samurai class.”

While a calligraphy school such as this might not have existed, this image likely holds truths about how the students learned. They had pads of paper where they would repeatedly write letters. They would have access to ink scrapers and other necessary tools. They also would have had teachers overseeing their progress and guiding their hand through the letters such as in Toyokuni’s image. A parallel can be seen in Harunobu’s Figure 7 as well.

Another parallel can be drawn to the image of Ono no Komachi by Chōbunsai Eishi (Figure 5), which featured the calligraphy skills of a student in the Hanagata shodō calligraphy school run by Hanagata Yoshiakira. It was likely used as a form of advertisement to solicit new students, and so likewise, mitate-e such as Toyokuni’s First Calligraphy Class of the New Year at a Fashionable School may have been some form of advertisement of services.

Moral Education

The Japan Department of Education wrote a History of Japanese Education for the Japan-British Exhibition in 1910 explains how women received education for the sole purpose of teaching them these Confucian principles. Women were trained in reading and writing Japanese, however the more scholarly language, Chinese, was discouraged. Yet, because many administrative and scholarly works were in Chinese, this limited the sources and scope women could use for learning.

Many surviving tutor books, such as The Greater Learning for Women (Onna Daigaku) written by Kaibara Ekken (1630-1714), show a focus on humility, modesty, and most importantly obedience. This book very shortly became a symbol for the morality of women during the Edo period. Kaibara fused Confucian thought into nineteen articles that range on such topics as divorce, relationships to in-laws, household responsibilities, and behaviors to avoid. In every single one of the articles, the book defines another way to oppress women and remove their agency. Take, for example, the seven reasons for divorce:

(i) A woman shall be divorced for disobedience to her father-in-law or mother-in-law. (ii) A woman shall be divorced if she fail to bear children, the reason for this rule being that women are sought in marriage for the purpose of giving men posterity. A barren woman should, however, be retained if her heart is virtuous and her conduct correct and free from jealousy, in which case a child of the same blood must be adopted; neither is there any just cause for a man to divorce a barren wife, if he have children by a concubine. (iii) Lewdness is a reason for divorce. (iv) Jealousy is a reason for divorce. (v) Leprosy, or any like foul disease, is a reason for

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divorce. (vi) A woman shall be divorced who, by talking overmuch and prattling disrespectfully, disturbs the harmony of kinsmen and brings trouble on her household. (viii) A woman shall be divorced who is addicted to stealing.47

These rules clearly serve to limit women’s rights. They give men the power to end a relationship due to vague reasons such as jealousy or lewdness, but don’t even grant women the power to divorce an abusive husband. These moralistic textbooks then took away power from females instead of using their ability to read and communicate to empower them.

Over 1,000 moral conduct books existed in the Edo period, like Onna Daigaku were originally created for women of the samurai class, but towards the mid-eighteenth century, their reach spread to merchant and artisan classes in the city.48 They espoused women's role in society and in the house as subservient to men due in part to a woman's inherent nature including "dull-wittedness, laziness, lasciviousness, hot temper and the tremendous capacity to bear grudges."49 Many have taken this as evidence that women had few rights during the Edo period.

It may seem harsh to read at first but it’s unclear that these books were taken at face value. Most were made by men, whereas in China they were written by women. In Japan, men were more trained in Chinese language, and so it makes sense they would be the ones to translate foreign books for a local audience. The earliest moral reader translated was the Lieh-nuchan (Retsujo den), or “Series of Biographies of Women.”


They were often used as copybooks to teach women how to read and write but may not have been followed strictly in practice for their content.

It’s hard to say that the literacy rate grew without concrete data. Especially with figures suggesting twenty percent of women were literate by the early 1800s\(^5^0\) and ten percent by 1868,\(^5^1\) yet by 1884, the town of Kagoshima only had a literacy rate of four percent.\(^5^2\) What is clear is that literacy was dependent on the time, place, and social status of a girl. Regardless of whether literacy increased, it spread geographically and by social status. This landscape of learning highlights the ways in which women gained the skills to read and write. Though not quite a mirror into the Edo period, ukiyo-e gave visual information to support these details. Ukiyo-e corroborate details of scant evidence of women’s learning. They were also used as images to show women examples of acceptable social behavior.


\(^5^2\) Kornicki, *The Female as Subject*, 17.
Chapter IV.

Shifts in the Ideal Woman

It is well and good to say that the ideal woman was a highly-refined, cultured, and educated woman, and therefore society should train all women to fit this ideal image, but the reality is that there were many other factors that complicated this picture. Perhaps if women could remain as docile, mannered, and idyllic as the literate women of ukiyo-e, there would be no issues with educating the masses. However, this simply was not the case. By gaining literacy, women would gain the ability to read anything and everything, not only those materials sanctioned by the government. Even the possibility of such a case required the government to lose some of their control in how women were trained.

Also, due to sociocultural changes, the literary landscape began to shift. There was an ever-increasing reach to lower classes on the part of the publishing industry, and we see classical literature put aside to make way for popular culture. This type of literature came along with lower class associations, and was considered dangerous, licentious, and counter-productive to a Neo-Confucian society. What began to develop then were instances of literacy that weren’t associated with the educated and well-behaved ideal as before, but instead, with an uncultured and uncouth citizenry. These complications began to seep into ukiyo-e starting in the late 1700s to early 1800s, which only served to further complicate women’s landscape of learning.

Governmental Control

During the relative peace of the Edo period, urbanization increased, roadways began connecting the city to the countryside, advances in print technology allowed book
prices to drop, and merchants began to rise in importance. This convalescence of events shifted the nature of literature. Books could be printed more quickly, at lower costs, and able to spread farther. What more, literary culture was no longer available to the aristocratic; soon lower-class citizens would have access to books and the means to read them. This was scary to the shogunate, who has already displayed their desire to control the citizenry through implementing a strict Neo-Confucian class structure.

There was a real potential for literacy to lead to disorder especially if others could read what and when they wanted. Censorship edicts were enacted multiple times throughout the Edo period to curb these concerns, with the most important being the Kyōhō reforms of 1722 and the Kansei reforms of 1790. These intended to reinforce social order and public morality through banning such material as erotica, the mention of modern events, examples of overly sumptuous lifestyles, or any type of political subversion in both textual publications as well as ukiyo-e. In part, these were to keep Neo-Confucian social classes in check.

Sumptuary laws were launched in hopes of keeping people within their social status as well as to curb excessive spending or lavish lifestyles. Limiting extravagant purchases not only would help samurai stay out of debt, it would help keep merchants in check who spent more than what their social standing should be making. But more importantly, the government wanted to be able to prevent any criticisms of their rulers or anything that could cause a public disturbance, such as libelous proclamations.

It was the duty of people inside the publishing industry to self-police censorship laws in the mid-nineteenth century. They had to weigh the risk of breaking the law with the potential for financial gain. Artists were required to give attribution, signing their
names to their works. This created a public accountability for their works. Censorship approval was also marked through censor seals stamped directly onto works. These censor seals were first implemented during the Kansei reforms of 1790, and so they also are a good indicator of dating works made during this time. Naming who was responsible for the image as well as for its approval gave accountability, and more potential to be caught for infractions.

Censorship edicts had been issued to control what types of information was published, but authors and artists countered with a movement towards what Vishakha Desai calls “veiled dissent”.\(^5^3\) They employed various ways to follow the edicts in word but not in spirit. For example, commentary on a current event could be reworked to seem as if it occurred centuries earlier. Changing details such as the year might be enough to get by publication censors, even if the public would have understood the true meaning of the story. Another way around publication censors was to avoid them altogether by producing works in manuscript form.

What particularly distinguishes the manuscript culture of the Tokugawa period from that of previous centuries is the development of genres of writing that could not be published in printed form on account of the censorship edicts but that were increasingly published, that is, made publicly available, in the form of manuscripts. The origins of this practice are obscure, but the extent it had reached by 1771 can be ascertained from a list of forbidden books published by the Kyoto booksellers’ guild in that year. The largest section consists of a list of 122 illicit manuscripts.\(^5^4\)

The constant reissuing of censorship laws indicate that it was not strongly enforced. Yet although the government may have been lax with their application of

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\(^{5^4}\) Kornicki, *The Book in Japan*, 104-5.
censorship edicts, they were willing to heavily punish certain individuals and make an example out of them as a type of scare tactic from others willing to risk breaking the edicts. The sumptuary laws hit ukiyo-e, discouraging the use of expensive materials and forbidding the depictions of extravagant lifestyles. Santo Kyoden and Tsutaya Juzaburo experienced the punishment for circumventing the sumptuary edicts when Tsutaya was fined half of his worth and Kyoden was placed in manacles for 50 days. Those publishers who approved such a work were punished the hardest and forced into banishment from Edo.55

Many societal voices of the time favored the notion of denying women access to education. Matsudaira Sadanobu (1759-1829), the shogunal chancellor responsible for the Kansei Reform, believed that education in the hands of women was a dangerous thing: “It is well that women should be unlettered. To cultivate women’s skills would be harmful. They have no need of learning.”56 Education could equip women with the skills to question their role in society. They could learn to share their dissent or stir up rebellions, much like the agricultural rebellions that spread after farmers began learning to read and write. Farmers wrote calls to action that spread far and wide dealing with their dissatisfaction of rising taxes in the Edo period. Ōshio Heihachirō’s letter titled A Call to Arms is one such example of how a farmer used the power of writing to call upon the forces of others across Japan who were suffering from over-taxation. He demanded


other farmers to join up in his quest, burn down the buildings of tax collectors, and seize the stored riches in order to redistribute them to the poor.\textsuperscript{57} Allowing women access to educational opportunities could breed this same type of rebellion. Instead of handing them the ability to communicate and plot ways to overthrow the ranking system, Sadanobu believed it was easier and safer to deny women opportunities to learn.

Not all who believed women should not be educated believed it was dangerous. Many just saw education as a waste of resources and failed to see how society as a whole would benefit. Women’s station in life was dictated by Confucian principles of filial piety, or the three obediences: to honor one’s father, one’s husband, and one’s sons. Her place was then at home caring for the men in her life. Chieko Ariga argues that for these reasons, women were too busy acting as caretakers to learn how to read and write.\textsuperscript{58}

Uncultured Women Readers

As a young girl, Hara Saihin was exposed to a world of education not often accessible to girls of the Edo period, thanks to the training of her father, the Confucian scholar Hara Kosho. Kosho also had two sons, though it was Saihin who showed the mental aptitude in classical Chinese poetry. This led him to bring her along on the many trips he took to visit other Confucian scholars, a world that shaped Saihin’s love for scholarship and travel.


Saihin wasn’t raised in the typical way becoming of a young lady. After meeting her, Hirose Tansō commented, “The young woman has been reading since childhood, has familiarized herself with works of literature, and is gifted in composing poems. Her manners are frank and unaffected. She is not bothered by minute details nor particularly compelled to appear feminine. She enjoys drinking.”\textsuperscript{59} Perhaps the comment from Tansō was more directed at Saihin’s manners. She wore men’s clothing and drank alongside them at poetry gatherings. Still yet, it goes shows that education and manners to not necessarily go hand in hand.

While visiting another friend on her journey to Edo to study, she was told that “a woman’s place was in the home.”\textsuperscript{60} Her carefree nature of learning may not have been restricted by her father, but it was subject to the judgement of others. These comments reveal the reality of women and education in Edo—it wasn’t socially acceptable for a woman to be so learned and independent. Education could also get in the way of a woman’s expected societal role, and therefore complicated the discussion of whether or not a woman should be trained towards educated and literate ideal.

Kitagawa Utamaro showed the issues with women learning how to read concisely with his image found in Figure 9. Ukiyo-e prints of women generally feature beautiful and alluring women, but each image in this series depicts an immoral activity or undesirable characteristic, as seen from a parent’s viewpoint. Commentary above each image links which characteristic the image represents and encourages viewers to think about how their actions are perceived in public. Even seemingly innocent actions like

\textsuperscript{59} Keiko, \textit{Literary Creations on the Road}, 10.

\textsuperscript{60} Keiko, \textit{Literary Creations on the Road}, 10.
Figure 9. The Know-It-All (Rikomonono), Kitagawa Utamaro

From the series, A Parent’s Moralizing Spectacles (Kyokun oya no megane).
reading a book could be interpreted as immoral in certain circumstances. The spectacles then have a double meaning (much like how in English spectacle can mean both a public display and a pair of glasses); they represent both how people are seen, and how they can see.

The Know-It-All (Rikomono) print shows the upper profile of a woman lying down and reading a book. Her neck rests against a pillow while her head appears to float just above it, allowing her to skillfully maintain her tōrōbin hairstyle. Utamaro had illustrated the book Poem of the Pillow (Utamakura) fourteen years earlier, which contained many shunga images. Pillows, an object most usually found in a bedroom, often held sexual connotations. Although not as explicit as Utamaro's Utamakura, its use in Rikomono hints that the immoral act this woman is engaging in is being done in the bedroom. This is a mild way to eroticize the image.

The woman in the image wears a simple checked pattern kosode, or robe, that does not drape loosely, exposing her body like many other eroticized bijinga prints of the Edo period. Her mouth is partly open exposing her blackened teeth. Blackened teeth (ohaguro) was considered a stylish cosmetic trend since the Heian period, and not considered bad hygiene. As such, she shows no signs of bad hygiene or poor appearance such as in other prints from the Parent's Moralizing Spectacles series. It then suggests that her undesirable behavior is something more hidden than her personal hygiene.

While it may seem innocent enough, her relaxed posture and the category of book she is reading hint that she is shirking responsibilities to enjoy light entertainment during a time when the government wanted to curb luxuries and excess. Because she is fully

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61 Shunga is the term used to define a category of erotic images during the Edo period.
immersed in reading a book, she is not able to complete household duties or attend to her husband. The text at the top of the image reads:

“Tomoe's courage is not that of a woman. When Ki no Aritsune's daughter married the Middle Captain, she was not jealous of her husband's visits to Kawachi but recited a poem: "as the wind blows, the white waves rise as high as Mt. Tatsuta and there in the middle of the night will go my lord alone". This turned her husband's heart and he ceased thinking about going to Kawachi. Women's sincerity is always [the equivalent of] men's courage. It may seem clever to resort to useless passions or write unconvincing letters, or to neglect one's needlework or to be skilled in music, but these all go too far.”

As Peter Kornicki notes, "The text criticizes the ‘clever’ young woman shown reading and suggests that needlework and housekeeping are more important."62

The book she holds in her hand is titled The Illustrated Chronicles of the Regent (Ehon Taikōki). The story focused on the life and history of the shogun Toyotomi Hideyoshi. It was printed in installments starting from 1797, and became so popular, it was adapted to other popular media such as kabuki and jōruri plays as well as illustrated books. Two years after the Know-It All print was created, Utamaro illustrated scenes from the Ehon Taikōki as single and many-sheet images in the style of ukiyo-e.

This image may at first appear to be only a message to young women teaching them the proper behavior acceptable of young ladies, but Utamaro instead subtly praised and even eroticized these bad behaviors. He was known to skirt around censorship laws by including secret double-meanings in many of his other ukiyo-e prints, which ultimately led to his arrest and censure of some of his version of The Illustrated Chronicles of the Regent.

62 Noriko, The Female as Subject, 105.
With the changes and flourishing of the print industry, censorship laws had to be enacted to protect the government’s control over public information. This was also an attempt to keep citizens acting within social ranks dictated by Neo-Confucian principles. More women were learning how to read and write, due to homeschooling and school opportunities, but they were finding they did not quite meet the image of the ideal female that was formed by ukiyo-e and discussed in the first chapter. Other circumstances began to surface mudding the image of women readers. For example, women reading light fiction, or known to dress and drink like a man, may have been literate, but they were far from the cultured ideal. This caused others to challenge women’s access to the landscape of learning, calling into question the purpose of educating them in the first place. This shift in the ideal of feminine beauty, as well as calls to prevent the education of women, it is perhaps easy to see how women of the Edo period found it challenging to be acknowledged for their literary merits.
Revisiting Figure 1 by Katsukawa Shunchō, we see a peaceful scene of three women leisurely sitting around reading and writing. They are not wearing the flamboyantly decorated kimonos and elaborate makeup of courtesans parading through the Yoshiwara; instead, they are spending their time in front of a garden. The iris in the hanging box to the top right is a symbol of spring and strongly associated with May 5th Boys’ Day. As such, this is a seasonal picture. Due to the peaceful demeanors of the women, we may think this print is related to the relaxation that The Know-It-All is experiencing in Kitagawa Utamaro’s Figure 9. What is it that makes these two prints so different?

Shunchō’s image highlights the physical and contextual elements of the ideal woman. They have a stereotypical body form found in many other images by Shunchō. The facial features of these women are almost identical, making it hard to distinguish them as individuals. Most importantly, their contextual beauty is shown through their leisure activity of reading and writing, an activity that many Heian women enjoyed in their free time as well. The expressionless faces do not hint towards any foul or uncivilized actions or motivations by these women.

Utamaro’s image on the other hand has mild erotic associations due to the location of the picture and even the position of her hands. Even though the woman is the ideal of beauty according to Utamaro’s standard templates, the contextual evidence suggests that she is not as cultured as the women in Shunchō’s print. In fact, the Know-It-All is a form of “veiled dissent” that, while suggesting women shouldn’t squander their
valuable time reading light fiction, makes light of government censors by still showing a picture of a woman squandering her valuable time by reading light fiction.

The difference between these two photos is very telling of the shift of the landscape of learning for women throughout the Edo period. Initially, images of beautiful women set the standard for feminine beauty that even onnagata wanted to imitate. The abundance of images of women reading harkened back to the Heian era, and ideals of cultured and highly-refined aristocratic women. This soon became the goal for men, hoping their wives, concubines, courtesans, and daughters could achieve. Though sometime in the Edo period, this ideal shifted.

Perhaps it was in part due to the spread of literacy to the countryside and to lower-classes. As it spread, literacy began to change to suit new audiences, even including female audiences. While classical literature such as *The Tale of Genji* was still being published along with moral conduct books, more and more popular culture found its way into Japan. Regardless of why it happened, educational histories have omitted women’s educational opportunities from historical records. Ukiyo-e can fill these gaps and give visual representation to the discourse of women’s education during the Edo period.
References


