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Cover calligraphy  Yan Zhenqing 颜真卿, Tang calligrapher and statesman

Cover illustration  Talisman—“Passport for wandering souls on the way to Hades,” from Henri Doré, *Researches into Chinese superstitions* (Shanghai: T’usewei Printing Press, 1914–38)
NIHONBASHI: EDO’S CONTESTED CENTER

Marcia Yonemoto

As the Tokugawa regime consolidated its military and political conquest of Japan around the turn of the seventeenth century, it began the enormous project of remaking Edo as its capital city. In transforming a small fishing village into the headquarters of a new government, the Tokugawa were constructing the nucleus of a new political and geographical order. Building what would become, in one century’s time, one of the world’s largest cities was a significant accomplishment in urban planning and administration on the part of the bakufu, one that scholars have addressed in considerable depth.1 But re-creating Edo also involved re-configuring the cultural landscape of the new capital, and creating for it an identity that was particular to the city. This latter process was guided not only by bakufu officials, but also by writers, artists, intellectuals, and publishers who resided in Edo and who created and circulated new images of life in the “eastern capital” in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.2

The author would like to thank the following people for their comments and advice on earlier drafts of this article: Mary Elizabeth Berry, Bruce Coates, Jay Dautcher, Robert Eskildsen, Matthi Forrer, Thomas Harper, David Pollack, Luke Roberts, Naoki Sakai, Ivo Smits, Stephen Snyder, Rickie Solinger, Watanabe Kenji, Karen Wigen, Samuel Yamashita, the two anonymous readers for East Asian History, and members of the Department of History at the University of Colorado at Boulder, especially Julie Greene, James Jankowski, Edward Ruestow, and Timothy Weston.


2 As Edo developed its own regional and urban identity in the mid-Tokugawa period, various terms roughly translatable as “eastern capital” were devised or adapted by Edo-based writers to distinguish their city from the imperial capital of Kyoto. One of the first such references can be found in the preface of Furai Sanjin’s *Nenashigusa kohen* [Over 300 leaves of poetry], and a number of literary and political contexts were explored in Nishiyama’s book *Edo jidai zuushi* [Pictorial sources from the Edo period] (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1975), vol.4; see also Yonemoto Marcia, *The City of Edo: Edo no kōzō* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997).
times cooperative—between the building of the new capital by the bakufu as a public political space and the cultural construction of the city as a “lived space” by its residents is the subject of this study. 3

The spatial history of Edo can be assessed in microcosm in Nihonbashi 日本橋, the official geographic center of the city. As the point of origin of all Japan’s major roads, Nihonbashi—the “Bridge of Japan”—was the central crossroads not only of Edo, but of the entire country. Originally conceived of as a public space in which the bakufu could display its authority, by the end of the Tokugawa period the inventiveness of Edo-based writers, artists, and publishers had transformed Nihonbashi and the neighborhood immediately surrounding it into a “famous place” (meisbo 名所), whose importance stemmed not from official status, but from the economic and cultural vitality of urban commoner life. The concepts of “space” and “place” are not mutually exclusive, and the transformation of Nihonbashi from a public space defined by the bakufu to a famous place defined by commoners was not a linear shift over time from authority to autonomy, nor a move from “high” to “low” culture. 4 Rather, Nihonbashi reflected the ways in which centrality, within the “integrated yet decentralized state structure” of Tokugawa Japan, was a fundamentally relational spatio-political concept that emerged out of the interactions between central authority and shifting forms of local power. 5

The first part of this study examines the bakufu’s construction of Nihonbashi and its immediate environs as a central space, and the contests over authority that process engendered from within the commoner community. The second part focuses specifically on the role of literature, the arts, and the publishing industry in transforming Nihonbashi into a famous place. In both cases, a plurality of cultural and political forces in Edo combined to determine both the form and function of centrality in Nihonbashi.

**Nihonbashi as Public Space, 1590–1657**

The rebuilding of Edo began in 1590, after Tokugawa Ieyasu 徳川家康 (1542–1616) designated the remote castle town the military headquarters from which he would, at the behest of Toyotomi Hideyoshi 豊臣秀吉 (1536–98), govern the eight Kantō 関東 provinces. The construction process required a massive mobilization of labor, engineering skills, and raw materials, and it wrought vast changes in the physical landscape that are visible to this day. The bakufu requisitioned daimyo labor to widen rivers, clear roads, dredge miles of canals, level an entire mountain to provide landfill for a large section of Edo bay, and construct acres of housing, ranging from opulent daimyo estates to crowded commoner dwellings. 6 And to knit together this “city of water” Naitō Kiyoshige 内藤清成, one of Edo’s first city magistrates (macbi bugyō 町奉行), estimated in 1590 that Edo would require exactly two hundred and seventy-three bridges. 7 Edo’s bridges served as urban
crossroads and as key strategic points over which the bakufu often maintained direct control; by the mid-Tokugawa period bridges also had come to serve as firebreaks, festival sites, and centers of commerce.8

Of all the bridges in Edo, the most symbolically important was Nihonbashi. The bakufu’s designation of Nihonbashi as Edo’s central place drew on the importance of bridges in general; but the choice of Nihonbashi in particular was the result of a larger scheme of urban planning and spatial reordering which the Tokugawa government undertook in the first decades of its rule. In the third month of 1603, shortly after Tokugawa Ieyasu assumed the title of shogun, the bakufu issued a call to all daimyo to aid in the enormous project of leveling Mt. Kanda 神田山 to fill in Hibiya Inlet 日比谷入江.9 At the same time, the bakufu began to implement a plan to build a bridge over what was then known as the Hira River 平川, which ran east from the castle compound toward Edo Bay 江戸湾. Anchored to stone pilings extending from both banks of the Hira River, soon to be renamed Nihonbashi River 日本橋川, the original bridge was built of wood and reportedly measured thirty-seven ken 間 four shaku 尺 five sun 寸 (approximately 226 and a half feet) in length and four ken ten shaku five sun (approximately thirty-four and a half feet) in width.10 It was not the largest or most spectacular of Edo’s bridges, but from the time of the founding of the city the shogunate invested Nihonbashi with a unique significance, declaring it in 1604 the official starting point (ichirizuka 一理塚) for the main roads leading out of the capital to the provinces.11 As the central hub of the road system, all distances to major and minor towns and cities on Japan’s main roads were measured from Nihonbashi, in units of ri 理.12 Establishing the point of origin of the road system in the heart of its own capital city was a means for the new government to secure control, if largely symbolic, over the road system. This was also a way for travelers to mark distances to and from the capital city, and with the considerable growth in physical mobility in the early modern period, Nihonbashi became a major geographical reference point for travelers, pilgrims, migrants, and merchants. The many varieties of printed maps and gazetteers that were published from the late seventeenth century on attest to the geographic systematization of Japan in general and of its roads in particular; they often include detailed legends listing traveling distances from Nihonbashi in Edo to other towns and regions.13

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8 There were two types of bridge in Edo, those built and maintained by the bakufu (gonyū-bashi 御入橋), and those built and maintained by private entities (itemochibashi 一手持ち橋). Whether daimyo estates or merchant communities. See Kokushi Daijiten Henshū linkai, ed., Kokushi daijiten [Comprehensive dictionary of national history, 1st ed., 14 vols (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1979–)]. For a discussion of the evolving functions of Nihonbashi’s southern neighbor Edobashi in the early modern period see James L. McClain, “Edobashi: power, space, and popular culture in Edo,” in McClain et al., eds, Edo and Paris, pp.105–31.


10 These dimensions are from Saitō Gesshin’s 斎藤月岑 compendium of events in Edo from 1590 through 1848, Bukō nenpyō 武江年表, which was first published in 1873. See Kaneko Mitsuharu, ed., Bukō nenpyō (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1968), vol.1, p.11. These are only approximate dimensions for the original bridge, however, since Nihonbashi burned down and was rebuilt ten times during the Tokugawa period.

11 The five trunk roads were the Tōkaidō 東海道 linking Edo and Kyoto, the Nakasendō 中山道 (or Kiso kaidō 木曽街道), traversing the Japan Alps and central Japan and ending in Kyoto; the Kōshū kaidō 甲州街道 from Edo northwest through Hachioji 八王子, connecting to the Nakasendō; the Nikkō dochū 日光道中, leading northeast to the shrine to Ieyasu in Nikkō 日光; and the Ōshū dochū 奥州道中 leading to the far northeast. The improvement and expansion of this impressive transport system was one of the great achievements of Tokugawa rule; see Kodama Kota, ed., Nihon kinsei kōtsuishi kenkyū [Studies in the history of transportation/communication in early modern Japan] (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1979); Konno Nobuo, Edo no tabi [Travel in the Edo period] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1986); Maruyama Yasunari, ed., Nihon no kōtsu [Japan’s early modern period], vol.6: Jōbō to kōtsu [Information and communication] (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1992); in English, see Toshio G. Tsukahira, Feudal control in Tokugawa Japan: the sankin kōtaï system (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), and Constantine N. Vapori, Breaking barriers: travel and the state in early modern Japan (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

12 Following the precedent of Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the Tokugawa standardized measurements at 1 ri for every 36 chō, or approximately 39 km.

In addition to Nihonbashi’s geographic significance, in the early years of the seventeenth century, the shogunate established several key public institutions of city governance, justice, punishment, and official commerce in the area surrounding the bridge. As will be discussed in detail below, by placing official notice boards (kôsatsu 高札), which conveyed shogunal edicts and prohibitions to the public, and establishing public exhibition grounds for criminals (sarashiba 角場) in the plaza south of the bridge, the shogunate sought to utilize Nihonbashi as a central node of political and social control, and as a symbolic space in which to display its public authority. But before doing so, the space itself had to be created; in terms of infrastructure, this task was accomplished within the first two decades of Tokugawa rule.

When the Tokugawa assumed control of Edo in 1590, the city’s main road axis was not the roughly north–south continuation of the Tôkaidô 東海道, on which Nihonbashi was located. Instead, the main road originated at Edo castle and ran east through the commercial district of Honchô 本町, located
north of the Nihonbashi River (see Map 1). From this neighborhood it took the name of Honchō-dōri 本町道. The road then curved north and east to the villages along the Asakusa River and continued to the post-station (shuku 宿) at Senjū 千住, where it joined the Ōshū kaidō 奥州街道, the main trunk road to the north-eastern provinces. This road axis was the focus of the earliest improvements in the local transportation infrastructure; in 1594 the first bridge built by the Tokugawa crossed the river at Asakusa 浅草, and soon after another bridge was built outside the castle’s eastern gates, which came to be known as Tokiwabashi 常盤橋. Between the poles formed by Tokiwabashi and Asakusabashi 浅草橋, Honchō-dōri bisected the town on a roughly east–west axis, and formed Edo’s first “main street.”

In the years after the Tokugawa consolidation of power in 1603, however, bakufu planners made several key changes in Edo’s spatial configuration. The first was to shift the central road axis from Honchō-dōri to Nihonbashidōri 日本橋道, which connected Nihonbashi and Kyōbashi 京橋 to the Tōkaidō. The Tōkaidō curved along the bay after entering Edo to assume a generally north–south orientation through the city, crossing Nihonbashi via the grand avenues known as Tōri-chō 道町 to the south of the bridge and Muromachi 室町 to the north. The most heavily-traveled and well-maintained road in the country, the Tōkaidō connected Edo to the imperial capital of Kyoto, upon which the shogunate relied for political legitimation, and to the commercial entrepôt of Osaka, upon which it relied for economic sustenance. For the shogunate in the eastern capital, to turn towards the west was to link Edo to the most historically developed, politically important, and cosmopolitan region in all of Japan. At this time, the bakufu also built port facilities at the mouth of the Nihonbashi River, thus placing the bridge at the head of a major water transportation and shipping route. By 1604, when Nihonbashi was designated the center of the road system, it was the core of a significantly rebuilt and spatially-redefined city.

Within the newly designed city, Edo castle took on a different symbolic meaning. The castle was built and rebuilt three times by three successive shoguns in increasingly elaborate forms until it burned down in the devastating Meireki 明历 fire of 1657, which destroyed approximately two-thirds of the city. Until that time, the castle’s towering keep formed the outstanding example of what William Coaldrake calls “architectural authority” in Edo. Judging by plans and paintings of the castle from the early seventeenth century, it seems to have been, as Coaldrake argues, an “elegant, even verbose, architectural proclamation of temporal mastery” by the shogunate over the built environment. The castle also occupies a central political and geographical space in architectural historian Naitō Akira’s suggestive “reading” of Edo’s urban layout. According to Naitō, the castle compound formed the core of a spatialized hierarchy in which status was measured by proximity to the person of the shogun. In this geo-political “spiral,” the highest-ranking collaterals and the fudai daimyo 藩代大名, longtime Tokugawa allies, occupied choice lands to the south and west of...
These estimates are rough at best; neither samurai nor the floating population appear in the urban registries, and commoners were not systematically included in population surveys before the early eighteenth century. The figures quoted here are drawn from Naitō Akira, *Edo no toshi közō*, p.169, and idem, *Edo to Edojō* ([Edo and Edo castle]) (Tokyo: Kashima Kenkyūjo Shuppankai, 1979), pp.141–3, reprinted in James McClain and John M. Merriman, “Edo and Paris: cities and power,” in McClain et al., *Edo and Paris*, p.13; Susan B. Hanley quotes a figure of 570,361 commoners in Edo in 1678, and argues that the commoner population hovered around 600,000 for much of the early modern period, and that the city’s total population probably exceeded one million in 1700; see Hanley, “Urban sanitation in preindustrial Japan,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18.1 (1987): 3–5. For a discussion of the difficulty of ascertaining urban population in the early modern period, see Wakita Osamu, *Nihon kinsei toshi no kenkyū*, pp.246–51; for a more general analysis of population statistics in early modern Japan see Susan B.

Public Space and the Exhibition of Authority, 1657–1725

Like the imposing gates that marked most structures of significance in Tokugawa Japan, Nihonbashi and its surrounding space could be used to control and manage the people who passed through it. But like gates, bridges also allowed for mobility, access, and connection between places; as public monuments of sorts, they also functioned as local landmarks and gathering spots. This informal function made control over public spaces like Nihonbashi extremely challenging for the bakufu, for as Edo grew in size, maintaining authority over the influx of persons and goods to the capital became increasingly challenging. By the mid-seventeenth century Edo’s population was growing exponentially, and with it came important shifts in the city’s political and social dynamics. Estimates of Edo’s total population range widely, especially for the years before the shogunate began systematic population surveys in the early eighteenth century. What seems clear, however, is that the city’s growth over the course of the seventeenth century was staggering: starting from a population of some 5,000–7,000 around 1600, by 1731 Edo had reached its peak size of slightly over one million, of whom fully half were commoners. Moreover, Edo’s population was densely concentrated, particularly in the commoner areas of the city—Naitō Akira has assembled data suggesting that Edo in 1725 had a higher population density
than the twenty-three wards of Tokyo in 1967.22

As previously separate groups mingled, and class and status boundaries blurred in the city, maintaining social order became one of the main concerns of the bakufu and its urban magistrates. Officials responded to the threat of disorder by repeatedly issuing proclamations, directives, and warnings to the urban population. To do this successfully, however, the bakufu required a means to reach the large transient population in Edo; to gain this access, officials turned to the city's central crossroads at Nihonbashi. It was here that the bakufu posted kōsatsu 高札 to announce its regulations and prohibitions. Although it was not the only signboard posting-place (kōsatsuba 高札場) in Edo, Nihonbashi was the most central, and the bakufu consistently posted its most important edicts only at the bridge, where they could be seen by the large numbers of people entering, leaving, or passing through the capital.23

The first documentary evidence of the existence of kōsatsu at Nihonbashi dates from 1607. Visual representations of the kōsatsuba appear for the first time in the screen paintings of famous places in Edo (Edo meisho zu byōbu 江戸名所図屏風), which depict the city during the Kan'ei 寛永 era (1624–44). But it was not until the Genroku 元禄 period (1688–1704), around the time that Edo's population was swelling to nearly a million, that records of edicts exist in large number. Most notable among the Genroku edicts are two from 1695, posted only at Nihonbashi. Both of them attest to the peculiar character of the reign of Tokugawa Tsunayoshi 徳川綱吉. The edicts cited the recent killing of two dogs in the capital and offered a reward of twenty gold pieces to anyone who came forward with information on the culprits, or who made efforts to prevent further killings of the same sort.24 The eccentric and devoutly Buddhist fifth shogun was deeply concerned with the taking of life, and his “laws of compassion for living things” (shōrui awaremi no rei 正類憐れみの令) dictated severe punishments for anyone found to have harmed a dog.25

During the reign of Tokugawa Ienobu 徳川家宣, Tsunayoshi's successor, the number of edicts posted as kōsatsu increased significantly in scope and seriousness as Ienobu attempted to curb some of his predecessor's excesses. The capital's population was approaching its early-modern peak at this time, and the development of popular entertainment in the form of theaters, music, and pleasure quarters added to the growing vitality of commoner life in Edo. Numerous edicts from the year 1711 survive, and their numbers suggest an upturn in the bakufu's use of this public forum. In the eighteenth century, kōsatsu were used not only to announce changes in law, but to issue cautionary statements and moral exhortations. The Edo magistrate's office posted a series of important edicts at all the kōsatsuba in the fifth month of 1711. They began with a reinforcement of proper Confucian hierarchy: “All familial relations, between parents and children, elder and younger brothers, husbands and wives must be affectionate, and compassion must be extended down to the lowest of inferiors. Those with masters [above them] must perform

22 Naitō gives the figures of 18,590 persons per square km in 1725 as compared to 15,615 persons per square km in 1967 in Edo no toshi kōsō, p.169. Surveys of Edo/Tokyo taken just after the Meiji Restoration in 1868 show that housing for the samurai class occupied roughly 69% of the city's land, commoner housing 16%. In other words, around the turn of the eighteenth century more than half of Edo's total population was housed in about one-sixth of the city's land area. Nihonbashi in particular, with its concentration of wealthy merchant householders, employed large numbers of servants and shop clerks, at first transient and later settled. In central neighborhoods like Nihonbashi, property ownership was limited to the elite of the commoner population, and rents were high in a city where around 70% of the total commoner population rented rather than owned their living quarters; see Takeuchi Makoto, Edo to Osaka [Edo and Osaka], Taikai Nihon rekishi, vol.10 (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 1989), pp.212–16.

23 In addition to Nihonbashi, the other locations were: Asakusabashi, Tokiwabashi, the Shiba intersection at Kuruma-dōri 車道, Sujikaibashi 筋違橋, and Kōjimachi Henzōmon 郷町半歳門.


26 Under Tsunayoshi's rule the bakufu also instituted canine censuses and established dog pounds in Edo, which came to accommodate 48,748 animals by 1698. That the people of Edo were taxed to pay for these endeavors while the shogun lived in luxury surrounded by an inner circle of sycophants did nothing to improve the image of Tsunayoshi as an unbalanced despot. See Donald H. Shively, “Tokugawa Tsunayoshi, the Genroku shogun,” in Personality in Japanese history, ed. Albert M. Craig and Donald H. Shively (Berkeley & Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 1970), pp.95–103.
the shogun’s capital and the people’s city,”

Ibid.

Ako

overarching authority; the Ako incident made


In addition to the physical assembling of
crowds and the striking of alliances,
sensational news and rumors were also
subject to official control; for example, the
celebrated case of the forty-seven ronin of
Akō 赤穂 in 1703 sparked popular interest
in the issue of how virtue, loyalty, and
sacrifice fit into the bakufu scheme of public
order. The well-known incident occasioned
immediate response in the form of a spate
of kabuki and bunraku plays, some appearing
within two weeks of the enforced ritual
suicide of the loyal retainers in the third
month of 1703. Having punished the retain­
ers, in effect, for their loyalty to their lord,
the shogunate may have felt compelled to
enforce the idea that order meant respect to
all authority, but especially to its own,
overarching authority; the Akō incident made
it clear that private vendettas were to be
condemned as conspiratorial associations
that were by their very nature damaging to
the greater good. For a brief discussion of
the Akō incident and its relation to bakufu
law see NB, p.124. See also Eiko Ikegami’s
analysis of this event as an attempt to
impose public order on private forms of
samurai vengeance in The taming of the


Long-term contracts for servitude, the
edict points out, could be secured with the
negotiation between the interested parties.
Ibid.

Ibid, pp.131–2. On firefighting and its
relationship to social order in Edo in the
eighteenth century see William W. Kelly,
“Incendiary actions: fires and firefighting in
the shogun’s capital and the people’s city,”

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The emphasis on behavior appropriate to one’s station in life reiterated
a standard appeal to morality and order, but it took on a new dimension in
the urban context of the early eighteenth century. Beginning with the edicts
of 1711, the bakufu utilized the kōsatsu to inveigh against the assembling of
crowds. In the first instance, edicts posted only at Nihonbashi targeted those
who gathered to witness executions, and later extended prohibitions to cover
the “random assembling of crowds” at the site of a fire, condemning in
particular individuals who “surpass[ed] reason” in pushing their way to the
front of the crowd, and those who looted, stole, or took up arms during a
fire.29 The bakufu exhorted commoners to report arsonists to the authorities
and offered rewards to informants. In spite of its encouragement and enforce­
ment of formal commoner associations for purposes such as self-governance,
policing, and public safety, the bakufu at the same time sought assiduously
to suppress the sort of informal association that might emerge organically in
urban neighborhoods.30

The bakufu also used the kōsatsu to prohibit what it deemed to be
immoral profiteering. A list of edicts posted only at Nihonbashi in 1722 for­
bade the reclamation of land without authorization. These prohibitions
were designed by the bakufu to keep track of new arable land in order to increase
the tax base, but they also warned against the intentional “deception” of
cultivators, and the securing of funds for the purchase of land through “clever
manipulation.”31 Anyone found to have dissimulated in such a manner was
denied the right to apply to reclaim land. In 1726 the bakufu again targeted
profiteering by using the Nihonbashi kōsatsu to warn against the evils of
gambling, this time specifically targeting the practice of betting on the out­
come of poetry competitions.32 Those subject to punishment included not
only the participants, but also the judges of the competition and the owners
of the property on which the competition was held. Offenders were subject
to some combination of arrest, confiscation of real estate and other personal
property, monetary fines, and confinement in handcuffs for a period of up
to one hundred days. The fact that these punishments were levied on people
engaging in literary arts indicates that the level of cultural activity among
commoners, and its potentially “subversive” implications, were duly noted
and addressed by the authorities.

The bakufu used the kōsatsu to articulate its authority and to threaten
punishment if people failed to comply. These tactics—an admixture of
display, exhortation, and intimidation—were also visible in the other major
institutions of public authority in Nihonbashi: that of the sarashibha. The
sarashibha was an area for the public display of convicted criminals at
the bridge’s south end, directly opposite the kōsatsu.33 The sarashibha was not
an execution ground, nor was it a jail per se; those institutions were located
elsewhere in the city. The sarashiba served only to display and publicly humiliate criminals as a means of deterrence. It occupied an area approximately thirteen by twenty-one meters in size, and was cordoned off with ropes. A roofed lean-to covered a straw-matted area, in which criminals were locked in pillories. In front of the pillories stood placards describing the offenses committed by each individual.\textsuperscript{34} The criminals in the sarashiba were meant to form a graphic illustration of what would happen to those who failed to heed the posted edicts; for onlookers, the pairing of sarashiba and kōsatsuba comprised a visual cause-and-effect. And because punishment was public, the sarashiba’s purpose was not only to graphically display the severity of punishment, but to indicate clearly to passersby the shame and social stigma that would accrue to the criminal him or herself.

Offenders who merited exhibition at Nihonbashi formed a veritable catalog of sins against the Tokugawa social order. Their ranks included the murderers of superiors, survivors of attempts at double suicide, unchaste priests, counterfeits of coinage or of medicines, swindlers, forgers, unlicensed prostitutes, and recidivist thieves.\textsuperscript{35} The criminals were held in the main Edo jail at Kodenmachō, from which they were transported to the exhibition site at daybreak, and forced to remain there until the late evening. This was repeated for a prescribed period of time, usually between one and three days, after which the offenders, depending on the severity of their crimes, were released, banished, or taken back to Kodenmachō to be executed. A text from the 1750s recounts the case of a Kanda merchant and his Yoshiwara mistress who failed in their attempt at love suicide, resulting in their exhibition for three days in the sarashiba at Nihonbashi and subsequent banishment as hinin (“non-persons”). In 1721 a Nichiren priest from Mito was locked in the pillory at Nihonbashi for three days after his plans to commit love suicide with an Edo prostitute were discovered.\textsuperscript{36}

While most criminals sat confined in a pillory for public viewing at the sarashiba for a given stretch of time, perpetrators of particularly egregious crimes faced the additional punishment of nokogiribiki, or “saw pulling.” This consisted of slashing the prisoner’s shoulders with a blade, then locking him in a pillory with wooden saws placed on either side of his neck, which bystanders were invited to insert into the wound and pull back and forth.\textsuperscript{37} In medieval Japan, passersby actually participated in this form of public torture, but in the Edo period, they rarely performed the saw-pulling in practice. Instead, by laying the saws next to the criminal, nokogiribiki became a symbol of the severity of the crime committed, and the responsibility of the community to enforce justice on its own members. On one occasion, this punishment was meted out to a servant in an Ōmi incense shop who was convicted in 1721 of murder. He was first led around the city for public exposure and then confined in the Nihonbashi sarashiba in the “saw pulling” pillory for two days, followed immediately by execution.\textsuperscript{38}

More common, however, were lesser crimes, which tended to be more
ambiguously and difficult, if not impossible, to control. One example was the breaking of vows of celibacy by Buddhist priests. Contemporary observers recorded that in the eighth month of 1825, during a three-day period between the twenty-first day and the twenty-third day no less than sixty-nine priests ranging in age from seventeen to sixty years old were confined in the sarashiba at Nihonbashi to do public penance.39 Judging from evidence such as this, it seems that by the early nineteenth century, the bakufu’s exhibition of crime and punishment, while dramatic and didactic, perhaps was not having the desired effect.40

The sarashiba, in concert with its companion institutions of the kōsatsu and the petition box, allows us to assess the nature of Tokugawa justice in the urban context. By placing the edict-bearing signboards and the criminal exhibition ground at the center of the capital, the shogunate attempted to proclaim its ideals of social behavior, and to vividly display the consequences of defying them. But while the institutions of the kōsatsu and the sarashiba gave off an aura of omnipotent authority and omnipresent state surveillance, their power was limited in practice, circumscribed like the cordoned-off spaces they occupied in Nihonbashi. In actuality the bakufu administered justice sporadically and strategically, and depended heavily on the network of commoner self-governance to enforce order on a day-to-day basis; public authority was consistently dependent on “private” implementation by individuals or groups within or associated with the commoner community.41

Moreover, displays of authority were occasionally undercut by expressions of discontent, often articulated by literate members of the community, such as low-ranking samurai or educated merchants. Graffiti and other miscellaneous writings (rakusho 落書) as well as rumors, tall tales, and jokes proliferated in times of crisis, and eighteenth-century diarists recorded the best of the lot. Anonymous writers produced tongue-in-cheek senryū 川柳 describing the “terrifying (kōsatsu) tablets at Nihonbashi” (Otsukamarashii satsu no aru Nihonbashi おつかなるしい札のある日本橋) where the literate “looked with their eyes” and the illiterate “looked with their ears” (Kōsatsu wa me de mirusoba de mimi de miru 齢札は目で見るそばで耳で見る).42 According to one scholar, commoners even parodied the kōsatsu by putting up imitation placards in Nihonbashi and pasting petitions onto the bridge’s railings in direct defiance of bakufu orders.43 This evidence suggests that the “public,” in its variegated form, was highly attuned to the inconsistencies in official policies, and just as the bakufu made Nihonbashi the specific locus of its political pronouncements, commoners made it the specific target of their sarcastic criticism.

Nihonbashi thus functioned as a locus of authority, but also as a locus of interchange between the bakufu and its subjects. Increasingly, it became a space where the bakufu confronted dissent as much as it exercised top-down control. The form of dramatic but ultimately ineffectual authority realized in the confined spaces of the kōsatsu and the sarashiba illustrate what James W. White has recently argued are characteristics of the inconsistently repres-
sive Tokugawa state, which “especially in the realm of social order, continued to grow in ‘estateness’ throughout its life, while its capabilities glacially declined.” Authority and dissent thus stood in a dialectical relationship, and mutually produced each other in the political space of Nihonbashi.

Nibonbashi as Famous Place in the Early Tokugawa Period

The making and remaking of public political space in Nihonbashi worked in concert with its construction as a “famous place” in narrative and visual depictions of the bridge by contemporary observers of the building of Edo. In addition to bridges, Edo’s many famous places included temples, shrines, markets, inns, and scenes or “views” of the natural landscape. Whether described in text, arranged in a series of perspective prints, framed as single scenes, or narrated in the order in which a traveler might encounter them, these sites not only represented but shaped a fluid and changing sense of place and space in the eastern capital. Miura Jōshin, a rōnin from the Odawara Hojo 小田原北条 who came to Edo soon after the establishment of rule by the Tokugawa, was an early contributor to the making of Nihonbashi as a famous place. In his rambling account of “things seen and heard” in Edo during the Keichō 慶長 era (1596–1615), Jōshin attests to the success of the bakufu in creating a city that reflected its newfound power, referring repeatedly and respectfully to the shogunate’s achievement of a peaceful settlement. He describes Nihonbashi as “a bridge built by Japan’s people (Nihonkoku no hito 日本国の 人), gathered together.” In the tradition of establishing peace and prosperity begun under Japan’s early imperial rulers, he writes, the Tokugawa assumed control of the road system by building the bridge at Nihonbashi: “The name of this bridge was not bestowed by humans. Perhaps it fell from the heavens, perhaps it rose up from the earth. That all people came at once to call it the bridge of Japan is a strange thing.” Jōshin saw the construction of the bridge itself as part of the architecture of shogunal power. His emphasis on the glory of the capital makes a clear connection between the material splendor of Edo and the success of its founders in bringing peace to the realm.

By the late seventeenth century, however, the characterization of Nihonbashi began to shift as population growth made the urban crowd a fixture in Edo, one that contemporary writers depicted repeatedly as the defining feature of the city’s center at Nihonbashi. Asai Ryōi 浅井了意 (d. 1691), a writer of popular didactic literature (Kanazōshi 仮名草子) like Miura Jōshin, wrote the following description of Nihonbashi in his 1662 guidebook, Edo meishoki 江戸名所記 (Record of Famous Places in Edo):

【On the bridge are those noble and humble, high and low; people coming up and people going down [to western Japan], people leaving and people returning, horses, conveyances, people scurrying like ants on a pilgrimage to Kumano Shrine. From morning until evening, both sides of the

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48 Although conventional interpretations posit a steady decline in Edo’s population in the late eighteenth century due to the prevalence of short-term labor and the shift of economic growth to rural and semi-rural market towns, Takeuchi Makoto speculates that this may have been instead a population shift within the sprawling and diffuse bounds of Edo proper. Takeuchi argues that showing aggregate population decline do not take into account the possibility of population shifts from the area of the city under the control of the city magistrates (the *gofunai* 御府内) to the immediate outskirts of Edo, which was under the control of the rural magistrates. See Takeuchi, *Edo to Osaka*, pp. 200–10. As for trade, until the latter part of the eighteenth century Edo remained heavily reliant on imports of basic foodstuffs from western Japan. It was also dependent on the surrounding hinterlands for labor, necessitating a constant influx and outflow of goods and persons. With the increased commodification of labor and the shift away from long-term servitude to short-term wage work, the rate of in-migration to Edo grew over the course of the eighteenth century, as workers came to settle in the city for short periods of time. See Gary Leupp, *Servants, shophands, and laborers in the cities of Tokugawa Japan* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), and Robert J. Smith, “Town and city in pre-modern Japan: small families, small households, and residential instability,” in *Urban anthropology: cross-cultural studies of urbanization*, ed. A. Southall (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 163–210.

49 For a recent discussion of *meisbo* in the classical poetic tradition, see Edward Kamens, *Utamakura, allusion, and intertextuality in traditional Japanese poetry* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997).


bridge are packed solid with [people] shoving, eyeballing, and jostling; one can’t pause to rest one’s legs, for those who stop are repeatedly trod upon or have their sashes cut and lose their swords, or even have their purses taken, or have things snatched from their hands … . All the way from the far west to the far east, the high and low of all the country’s provinces who come and go at Nihonbashi must truly defend themselves … . Below the bridge the voices of the market; on top of the bridge the sound of people … .

Ryôi’s description of Nihonbashi captures the chaotic metropolis that Edo had become. It emphasizes mobility in all its dimensions—physical, social, and economic. The crowds at Nihonbashi encompass those of “high and low” status, those from the “far west to the far east,” who flocked to the capital in the seventeenth century to engage in trade, whether in commodities or in labor.

Accounts like Ryôi’s began the process of situating Nihonbashi within the popular panoply of Japan’s “famous places,” which were coming to be known and celebrated by the common people as well as by the literati elite. Although famous places typically had been defined by references to them in the classical poetic canon, by the early modern period they had come to include contemporary sightseeing venues, and other places of note for the traveler or sightseer. Nihonbashi was a new *meisbo* 名所, one created by the energy of the new capital and by the efforts of popular writers like Ryôi and even Ihara Saikaku 井原西鶴 (1642–93), who contributed to the conventionalized image of Nihonbashi as the gathering place for all Japan’s people in his *Nipponeitaigura* 日本永代倉 (Eternal Storehouse of Japan). In that work, he equated the grandiosity of governance in the city with the broad sweep of the main avenue through Nihonbashi, its population on any given day, according to Saikaku, equal to that of the crowds gathered for the Gion 祇園 Festival in Kyoto.

**Famous Places, Private Profit: the Insider’s View of Nihonbashi in the Late Tokugawa Period**

Early commentators on Nihonbashi such as Asai Ryôi and Ihara Saikaku no doubt captured the chaotic essence of Nihonbashi life in the late seventeenth century. However, like almost all Edo residents in these years, they were essentially outsiders: Saikaku was, of course, an Osaka townsman, and Ryôi, like so many others, was a relative newcomer to the city from the neighboring provinces. Their focus on the mobility of the urban crowd in and around Nihonbashi remained a fixture of depictions of the bridge through the late Edo period. But increasingly, as native-born “sons of Edo” began to assert their influence over representations of the city in literature and the arts, the defining qualities of Nihonbashi began to shift subtly. It was not only the movement of people, but also the movement of goods and commodities that
came to characterize Nihonbashi in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Economic activity formed an integral part of Nihonbashi life, whether it took place in the neighborhood’s bustling markets, rice warehouses, elite merchant houses, or in the small shops that lined its broad avenues. As merchants gained economic power, they also began to accrue cultural capital, becoming patrons of the arts and conspicuous consumers of clothing, food, and entertainment, such that by the end of the eighteenth century, the merchant culture which had its origins in Nihonbashi had become a defining feature of Edo life. The *Edokko*, the archetypal native son of Edo, was described by the writer Santō Kyōden 山東京伝 (1761–1816) in 1787 as deriving the essence of his being from his upbringing “in the very center of Nihonbashi,” where, bathed as a newborn in canal water within sight of Edo castle, eating the whitefish caught in the Sumida River, and wandering about the merchant mansions of Honchō, he reflected not only the culture of his immediate local environment, but that of prosperous merchant life as a whole. As merchant wealth transformed Nihonbashi economically and socially, it wrought changes in the cultural identity of this most emblematic of commoner neighborhoods. Nihonbashi became, in the hands of its own resident writers, artists, and publishers, an expansive network of famous places oriented towards the experiences and tastes of the commoner consumer.

Merchant activity in Nihonbashi was not new, for merchants had settled near the bridge from the time of Edo’s founding. From the early seventeenth century, the bakufu purposely located its designated purveyors, known as *goyōasshi* 御用達, or *goyō shōnin* 御用商人, in the neighborhood just north of the Nihonbashi River. On either bank of the river near the bridge were vast markets for fish and vegetables which, by the eighteenth century, circulated their produce not only in the eastern region but throughout the entire country. The district surrounding the bridge, roughly encompassing the area from Kyōbashi in the south to Kanda Sujikaibashi in the north, and from Edo castle to the west and Edobashi to the east, came to house some of the city’s largest merchant organizations and a plethora of smaller ones. A survey taken in 1877 revealed that within the Meiji government’s newly-designated district of Nihonbashi, there were 1,533 merchant houses specializing in one hundred and eight different types of products.

In the context of the rise of merchants’ economic and cultural power, it is not surprising that commerce, exchange, and the flow of persons and goods became the main themes of visual and textual representations of the area from the mid-eighteenth century on, as famous-place status transformed these key characteristics of local culture into elements of a visual iconography. Woodblock prints depicting famous places from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries focused on locales renowned for commerce and entertainment. Their emphasis on mobility and vitality emphasized a new and dynamic perspective, one which visually transformed the static, hierarchical spiral of the “shogun’s city” into a series of snapshot-like “views” of commoner life.
What the viewer does not see here is the conflict that underlay the composed surface of such prints, for throughout the eighteenth century Nihonbashi's fish merchants, many of whom possessed the status of official purveyor (goyotasshi) repeatedly contested bakufu attempts to regulate the amount of fish that could be sold on the increasingly lucrative consumer market. The bakufu, for its part, wanted to insure its access to the choicest selections from their designated merchants' catches, and levied on the fish merchants what amounted to a tax in kind. In response to this measure, the fish merchants appealed to convert the tax in kind.

A print by Kitao Masayoshi 北尾茂美 (also known as Kuwagata Keisai 鰺形惠斎) dating from the Tenmei 天明 period (1781–89) is one such example (Figure 1). It shows the bridge arching over the river, with Mt Fuji looming in the background. But occupying the foreground is the central focus of the print, the vast fish market (uogashi 魚河岸) at Nihonbashi. The crowds remarked upon by all commentators on Nihonbashi are everywhere in evidence here; they crowd the stalls of the marketplace, and they pack the bridge from one side to the other. The mixing of “high and low” on Nihonbashi is rendered graphically here, as one can see on the bridge the tall, tufted spear indicating a daimyo procession, followed close behind by a merchant’s wagon heaped with cotton bales headed for the market. The two faces of Nihonbashi, that of official power and that of the urban crowd, are juxtaposed in the visual composition of the print.53

In the early nineteenth century, ukiyo-e 浮世絵 artists began to experiment with vanishing-point perspective in their prints and, not surprisingly, this new perspective found its way into depictions of Nihonbashi. The later work of Andō Hiroshige 北斎 and especially of Katsushika Hokusai 葛飾北斎, employ a “commoner’s-eye” perspective in a dramatic fashion. Hiroshige’s well-known print from the series “Fifty-three stations along the

Figure 1

Kitao Masayoshi, “Fish Market at Nihonbashi Odawara-chō” (c. 1781–89) (from Henry Smith, Ukiyo-e ni miru Edo meisho [The famous places in Edo as seen in ukiyo-e] [Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1993], p. 21)
Tōkaidō (Tōkaidō gojūsan tsugi 東海道五十三次, 1833–34), for example, shows the plaza at the south side of the bridge from a vantage point within the merchant quarters; the print focuses attention on a group of merchants as they pass the edict-bearing signboards posted by the bakufu at Nihonbashi, while a daimyo procession makes its way over the bridge and into view in the background (Figure 2). At the same time that it maintains a focus on the mixing of class and status in Nihonbashi, the printmaker chooses a perspective from the street level south of the bridge, placing the viewer within the merchant quarter and foregrounding the figures of the fish peddlers who lived and worked in the area. In Hiroshige’s later series, “One Hundred Famous-Place Views of Edo” (Meisho Edo hyakkei 名所江戸百景, c.1856–58), this merchant’s-eye view is rendered even more subjectively, as the viewer of the print regards Edobashi, which traversed the Nihonbashi River east of Nihonbashi, from atop Nihonbashi itself (Figure 3). The artist assumes the perspective of someone crossing the bridge moving north to south, for the view stretching out to the east is of the storehouses of Moto Yokkaichō 本四日市町 on the south bank of the river. The scene is viewed from eye level, through Nihonbashi’s arched railings, with the pillar of the bridge and the bucket dangling from the shoulder of the fish-peddler not more than a few paces ahead in the immediate foreground. The tightly-framed view gives a sense of the masses jostling together elbow-to-elbow while traversing the

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Figure 2
*Utagawa Hiroshige, “Fifty-three Stations along the Tōkaidō: Nihonbashi, morning view” (c.1833–34) (from Smith, Ukiyo-e ni miru Edo meisho, p.20)*
bridge. It abandons the distanced perspective of observer while adopting the viewpoint of participant, absorbed into the crowd atop the bridge itself.

Perhaps no other Edo-period artist, however, was more intimately familiar with Edo commoner life than Hiroshige's contemporary, Katsushika Hokusai. Born in Fukagawa, the most recently settled part of the city, Hokusai turned a keen eye to the commercial and cultural activities of his immediate environs. In one of his first landscape series, entitled Azuma asobi 東遊, or later, Ehon tōto asobi 絵本東遊 (Picture book of amusements in the eastern capital), published first in 1799 and reprinted in 1800 and 1802 by the renowned Nihonbashi publisher Tsutaya Jūsaburō, Hokusai guides the viewer to some of the notable sites in the capital, many of them in the vicinity of Nihonbashi. Like Hiroshige and others, he depicts both the bridge itself and the fish market below “forever crowded with people,” as Edouard Goncourt commented in his 1896 study of Hokusai. But Hokusai also shows less familiar sights, ones that an Edo resident highly attuned to the variety of commercial activities in the center of the city might choose: the doll shops of Jikkendō 十軒店, busy supplying a huge crowd of customers just before the Girls' Day holiday, the large drygoods stores at Suruga-cho 劍河町, a dyer and his fabrics, a shop specializing in seasoned seaweed (nori 海苔), a tile maker, and a teahouse. Capping this inventory of “amusements” are two sites unique to the Nihonbashi area: onlookers gawking at Dutch visitors at the Nagasakiya 長崎屋, the foreigners' inn located in Hongoku-cho 本石町, and the storefront of Tsutaya Jūsaburō's shop itself, with piles of prints stacked up for customers' viewing, flyers announcing coming publications, and the publisher's familiar ivy-leaf crest on the large and conspicuously-placed sign out front.

Hokusai later went on to produce some of the most recognizable landscape prints of famous places in Edo and elsewhere. Chief among these familiar images are his series of views of Mt. Fuji, “One hundred Views of Mt. Hokusai.
Fuji” (Fugaku byakkei 富岳百景, c. 1834) and “Thirty-six views of Mt. Fuji” (Fugaku sanjurokkei 富岳三十六景, c. 1831). In the latter series, Hokusai includes several views of Fuji from Edo. He uses the focal point of the sacred mountain to expand the commoner visual perspective in a highly dramatic fashion; the print of Nihonbashi is a good example of this (Figure 4). In it, Hokusai, like Hiroshige, puts the viewer on the bridge itself, but this time slightly above the fray, skimming the heads of the anonymous crowd of merchants. From the top of the bridge, the viewer takes in simultaneously several symbols of Edo and of Japan: the rice warehouses, market, and bridge at Nihonbashi, Edo castle, and Mt. Fuji.

These images of Edo and Nihonbashi presented new perspectives on Nihonbashi and on the “low city” inhabited by Edo commoners. Looking at the city from ground level afforded quite a different view of Nihonbashi than the one the bakufu imagined. Ukiyo-e prints disaggregated the coherence required of Nihonbashi as a political space, and narrowed the visual focus to specific and ever more localized places, things, and practices. As Edo commoner culture reached the height of its dynamism in the early nineteenth century, it was not enough simply to be acquainted with the familiar sites and activities in the city; one had to possess complete and minutely detailed knowledge of the ever-changing styles, fads, and other cultural phenomena of the capital if one desired to be known as a tsuijin 通人—a connoisseur. The increasing specificity with which Edoites thought about and viewed place was due in part to this attention to the fine weave of culture in the capital city.

To cater to those aspiring to connoisseurship and others simply desirous of attaining familiarity with the city’s cultural geography, writers and artists produced vast quantities of information: guidebooks to the pleasure quarters, encyclopedic illustrated compendia of famous places, detailed city maps, woodblock prints, and, in a genre that drew from all of the above, highly self-referential popular literary representations of Edo life in the form of satirical comic fiction (gesaku 創作). Publishers and booksellers provisioned the cultural appetites of literate Edo residents, and many of these publishers were located in the environs of Nihonbashi. Prior to the early modern period, the publishing industry was centered in western Japan, in the cities of Kyoto and Osaka; large publishing houses based in those cities typically established and maintained smaller branch operations in Edo. But as Edo’s population and economy grew, by the mid- to late-eighteenth century it emerged as the publishing capital of the country.

Within Edo, many of the largest and most influential publishing concerns located themselves in Nihonbashi, which became the urban hub of literary and artistic production. Several branches of the publishing house Suharaya 須原屋 were dispersed through the area—the largest and most prolific, Suharaya Mōhee 須原屋茂兵衛, was just south of the bridge in Nihonbashi-minami 1-chôme. Suharaya Shinbee 須原屋新兵衛, publisher of the works of Ogyū Sorai 萩生徂徠 and many of his disciples, was located nearby in /1672, the bakufu handed down an edict regulating the types of fish that could be sold on the open market at any given time of the year; the new law dictated the earliest time at which sale of each type of fish could begin, as follows: trout (masu 鮭), from the first month; bonito (katsuo 鰤), from the fourth month; salmon (sake 魚), from the end of the eighth month; cod (nama tara 生鰤), from the eleventh month; razor clams (mategai 馬賀貝) from the eleventh month; sweetfish (ayu 白魚), from the twelfth month; see NB, pp. 238–40, 250.

55 Hokusai’s panoramic map of the Tōkaidō, published in 1818, also places Nihonbashi in the foreground (the bridge arches up into the print at lower right) and Fuji in the background (at upper left), with the entirety of east-central Honshu stretching between them; the destination of Kyoto hovers off to the upper right. The artist’s name and seal, and the brief explanatory overlay part of the depiction of Nihonbashi, and the marker for “Edo” hovers above it. For a reproduction see Forrer, ibid., p.225.
56 Henry D. Smith II places the rise of Edo publishing in the 1790s, based on estimates of numbers of titles published in each of the three major cities. See Smith, “The history of the book in Edo and Paris,” in McClain et al., Edo and Paris, pp.334–5, for a more complete discussion.
Nihonbashi-minami 2-chôme. Suharaya Ichibee 須原屋市兵衛, the publisher of Sugita Genpaku 杉田玄白 (1733–1817), Hiraga Gennai (1729–89), Katsurakawa Hoshū 桂川甫周 (1751–1809), and many prominent figures in the Western sciences and practical learning, was located on the north side, in Muromachi 3-chôme. The aforementioned Tsutaya Jūsaburō, perhaps the best-known publisher of the early modern period, whose clients included Santō Kyōden and many of the most popular late eighteenth-century writers and ukiyo-e printmakers, was located in Tōri Abura-chō 道油町. Also in the immediate vicinity was the early publisher of picture books (ebon 絵本), Tsuruya Kiemon 鶴屋喜衛門, and the Edo branch of the Nagoya publisher Eirakuya Tōshirō 永楽屋東四郎, who published many of Hokusai’s major works. The presence of so many prominent publishers in the Nihonbashi area made the neighborhood the center of the publishing industry.

While most publishers saw their main jobs as marketing books and prints, larger publishing houses also functioned as “salons,” cultivating a roster of authors brought together by common interests as well as by market opportunities. Suharaya Ichibee was one notable example of this tendency; by all accounts his Muromachi 3-chôme business and residence was a gathering spot for intellectuals and authors interested in the practical applications of empirical learning. Suharaya Ichibee himself was said to have played a major role in
guiding the direction of his publishing house, known as the Shinshōdō
申椒堂. In addition to the aforementioned Hiraga Gennai, Sugita Genpaku,
and Katsurakawa Hoshū, the painter and writer Shiba Kōkan 司馬江漢 (1758–
1818), the mapmaker Nagakubo Sekisu 長久保赤水 (1717–1801), the essay-
ist and bakufu official Ōta Nanpō 大田南斎 (1749–1823), and others constituted
a client list of considerable notoriety and many crosscutting personal
ties. Ichibee could also draw on connections from the Nihonbashi neighborhood
itself, for many scholars and writers who published at Nihonbashi-based
houses lived in the area. These included not only commoners, but also rōnin
such as Hiraga Gennai, who maintained a residence in Kanda’s Shirakabe-chō
白壁町. Gennai’s home was well known as a gathering place for intellectuals
and literary figures until it burned down in 1772. Ogyū Sorai located his
academy in Nihonbashi’s Kayabachō 茅場町. The pioneer printmaker Suzuki
Harunobu 鈴木春信 (1725–70), whose salon included such figures as Shiba
Kōkan (in his guise as a painter and printmaker) and Morishima Chūrō
森島中良 (also known by his literary sobriquet Shinra Banshō 森羅万象
[1754–1808]), and the scholar of botany Tamura Ransui 田村藍水 (1718–76),
also lived in Shirakabe-chō. The painter Sō Shiseki 宋紫石 (1715–86) illustrator
of Gennai’s botanical treatise Butsurui hinshitsu 物類品質 [1763], resided in
Nihonbashi-dōri-chō 4-chōme, very near where Sugita Genpaku performed
Japan’s first autopsy. Genpaku was also a friend, colleague, and frequent guest
of Gennai. The illustrator of Genpaku’s treatise on anatomy, Kaitai shinsho
解体新書 [1774], was Odano Naotake 小田野直武 (1749–80), an official of
Akita 秋田 domain who learned Western-style painting from Gennai and was
also a frequent visitor to both their residences. Another Dutch studies scholar,
Ōtsuki Gentaku 大槻玄涯 (1757–1827), located his private academy a bit
further south in Mizutani-chō 水谷町 near Kyōbashi, where he later held the
famed “Dutch New Year” (Oranda shōgatsu オランダ正月) Western-style
gatherings which attracted a good number of the Western studies and artistic
community, including many of those noted above. Finally, the Nagasaki-ya, the
residence depicted by Hokusai that served as home to the Dutch traders in Edo,
was located in Hongoku-chō 3-chōme, equidistant from Nihonbashi and
Kanda.58

The concentration of intellectual and creative energy in Nihonbashi
combined with the area’s economic vitality to create a highly localized
“cultural economy.” Commoner publishers and writers, rōnin intellectuals
and scholars alike resided in Nihonbashi; moreover, they themselves, via the
medium of print and the publishing market, contributed to its reinvention as
a famous place. Verbal and pictorial depictions of Nihonbashi from the mid-
to late-eighteenth century capture the mobility of a central place that was con-
tantly forced to incorporate and accommodate its peripheries. If the bakufu
sought to create in the center of Edo a circumscribed space in which to
fashion its own political identity, by the late seventeenth century writers,
artists, and publishers of the sort described above began to reconstruct the
notion of centrality by crafting tightly-focused portraits of the multiple sites
of fame and importance in urban commoner culture.

57 For a general discussion of the Shinshōdō, see Takeuchi Makoto, Edo to Osaka, pp.271–
2; on Ichibee and the publication of Sugita Genpaku’s Kaitai shinsho 解体親書 see
Konta Yōzō, “Kaitai shinsho no hanmoto: Ichibee no koto” [Regarding Ichibee: the
hanmoto of Kaitai shinsho], Rekishi chiri kyōiku 247 (Feb. 1976): 46–51. For complete
lists of the publications of Suharaya Ichibee and other early modern publishers, see
Sakamoto Yōko, ed., (Kyoho iko) Hanmoto besei shoseki mokuroku [Index of printed
materials from the Kyōhō period and after, banmoto (listed) separately] (Osaka: Seibun-
dō Shuppan, 1982).

58 Information pertaining to literati residences in Edo can be found in the following
sources: Nishiyama Matsunosuke, Edo no seikatsu bunka, pp.224–33; Tanaka Yūko,
“Toposu tōshite no Edo kiiwaado” [Edo keywords as topos], Kokubungaku: kaishaku
to kyozai 35.9 (990): 102–9; Haga Toru, Hiraga Gennai (Tokyo: Asahi Shinbunsha,
59 Aoki Michio takes issue with the tendency among historians of Edo (chief among them Nishiyama Matsunosuke and Takeuchi Makoto) to exaggerate the continuity in late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Edo. Aoki sees a clear distinction in the cultures of the Tanuma 田沼 and Bunka–Bunsei 文化文政 years; he sees the Tanuma era as one of significant socio-economic division within the urban commoner class and protests that the conflict of these years is too often submerged in a rosy view of Edo’s “golden age” of commoner dominance in the early nineteenth century. See Aoki Michio, “Edo no bunka wo dō toraeru ka” [How should we understand Edo culture?] Rekishi hyoron 536 (Dec. 1994): 2–13. In English, see Henry D. Smith II’s analysis of “Edo nativism” in “The floating world in its Edo locale, 1750–1850,” in The floating world revisited, ed. Donald Jenkins (Portland, Oreg. & Honolulu: Portland Art Museum and University of Hawaii Press, 1993), pp.25–61.


61 Edo meishou zue has recently been reissued in a six-volume paperback pocket edition, see Ichiko Natsuo and Suzuki Kenichi, eds, Edo meishou zue [Famous places of Edo, illustrated], 6 vols (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1996–97). For a detailed numerical analysis of the types of sites depicted (religious, social, natural, historical) and the visual characteristics of each depiction, see Kaneko Teruyuki, “Kinsei köki ni okeru Edo gyōrakuchi no chiikiteki tokushoku” [The distinctive local characteristics of Edo amusement districts in the later early modern period], Rekishi chiri 176 (Feb. 1995): 20–43.

But as Nihonbashi’s cultural economy gradually transformed anonymous urban space into a multiplicity of familiar places via the creation and publication of famous-place images, Nihonbashi became just one of many famous sites in the capital. Its central status was displaced in the early nineteenth century when the established merchant élites of Nihonbashi faded into the background while the brasher and more self-consciously plebeian residents of the Fukagawa and Honjo 本所 neighborhoods across the Sumida River emerged as the new commoner cultural archetype. One historian has phrased this geographical shift in cultural terms, as a transition from the “refinement” prized by Nihonbashi merchant establishments to the “boorishness” of the Fukagawa nouveaux riches. Pejoratives aside, this spatial shift clearly constituted a redefinition of Edo culture itself. In Fukagawa, the base industries were not in supplying the warrior class with finished goods, but in transshipping the raw materials, especially lumber, for the further growth of “Great Edo” (Ō-Edo 大江戸), as contemporary commentators dubbed the city. Unlike Nihonbashi’s designated purveyors, who were compelled by their status to strike compromises with the authorities, the Fukagawa merchants disdained orthodoxy and official ties, and sought to live life fully and flamboyantly in the present moment.

The shift away from Nihonbashi towards Fukagawa was not a simple re-centering of Edo along economic lines. It is perhaps more accurate to characterize the shift as part of a process of geographically, politically, and economically de-centering Edo as a whole. As Andrew Markus points out, the Edo of the Bunka–Bunsei years (c.1804–30) “is not the administrative center of the nation … nor is it a cluster of religious or cultural monuments. Rather, the city exists as a network of sakariba, or bustling places, a collection of vital nodes at which the electricity, eclecticism, and pleasure-seeking imperative of city-dwellers converge.” Urban crowds flocked to popular entertainments like carnivalesque sideshows (misemono 見世物) and temple fairs (kaichō 開帳), and patronized Edo’s many shopping districts, pleasure quarters, festivals, and seasonal gatherings. As they did so, printmakers, writers of guidebooks, yearly schedules of events (nenjū gyōji 年中行事) and other graphic and literary genres created and marketed these texts for sightseers. As the number of famous places grew, the number of site-specific events in Edo correspondingly proliferated; the Edo meishō zue 江戸名所図会, a vast compendium of notable places and events in the capital compiled by three generations of the Saitō 斎藤 family, who hereditarily held the position of neighborhood chief (machi nanushi 町名主) in Kanda, depicts 656 famous places or notable events in Edo and its environs. Published in two phases in 1834, it fills twenty volumes. This dispersion of money and persons throughout the city only exacerbated the fragmentation of political authority in the first half of the nineteenth century, as the city was plagued with popular disturbances of various sorts, from the “breaking and smashing” (uchikowashi 打ちこわし) of retaliatory crowd violence to the millenarian “world renewal” (yonaosbi 世直し) movements spread from the countryside.
After the Meiji Restoration, Nihonbashi’s centrality was further disaggregated by the widespread reorganization of Japan’s political and symbolic geography under the Meiji state. The familiar arch of the wooden bridge was replaced by a stone structure in 1878 whose wrought-iron lamp posts and gargoyles were the first such Western-style ornamental public sculptures built in Japan, and a grand public spectacle was staged for Nihonbashi’s re-dedication.62 But while the official presence of the bakufu in Nihonbashi was replaced by monumental new edifices housing the centerpieces of the Meiji state’s finance and communication systems, such as the Bank of Japan and the Central Post Office, Nihonbashi was only one of many central places in new Tokyo. In Meiji woodblock prints, the familiar sights of daimyo processions and merchant pushcarts on Nihonbashi were replaced by scenes of Kyobashi, located closer to the newly-built brick façades of Ginza, the symbol of the modern-as-Western city.63 The merchant presence in Nihonbashi remained strong, but the favored suppliers to the shogun were forced to transform themselves or fade away.64 The rapid move towards modern cosmopolitanism made Nihonbashi’s links to the old regime seem antique at best; like the rest of Shitamachi, Edo’s old “downtown,” it receded into the background in the Meiji and Taishō eras, evocative of an ever more distant past.

The Boundaries of Authority and Autonomy in Nihonbashi

The multiplication of Edo’s political and cultural centers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries cannot simply be attributed to an historical shift from a status-based order to a class-based one; neither can it be attributed to a move from “high” to “popular” culture. Rather, the foregoing account of various attempts to redefine authority and autonomy in Nihonbashi exemplifies the tension between centralization and decentralization that was built into the early modern system itself. For if we look at the early modern political settlement as a whole, we can see that the vertical hierarchies of governing principle also took on a horizontal spatial dimension, as the bakufu was compelled to establish interlocking alliances with daimyo scattered throughout the country. The result was a polity whose spatio-political center was inherently dependent on the support of those supposedly in its periphery. Tokugawa rule embodied this tension between centralization and decentralization in that it emphasized relations with daimyo in which relative practical autonomy was granted in exchange for bakufu control over domain produce and receipt of certain forms of real and symbolic tribute. This effective trade-off of different types of power was embodied in many Tokugawa political institutions, including the alternate attendance system (sankin kōtai), the tax and juridical systems, government surveying, census-taking, and mapmaking. In both the process of their implementation and in their ultimate goals, these administrative practices sought to strike a balance between local or regional autonomy and central control. A diversified educational network of schools and academies also contributed to the tension...
65 Mary Elizabeth Berry argues that “integration in a society of difference could not occur primarily through the erosion or transcendence of boundaries. Rather, integration required workable principles of relationship between disparate social units.” See Berry, “Was early modern Japan culturally integrated?,” Modern Asian Studies 31:3 (1997): 571.


67 In English, see Wigen, Japanese periphery; David L. Howell, Capitalism from within: economy, society and the state in a Japanese fishery (Berkeley & Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 1995), Philip C. Brown, Central authority and local autonomy in the formation of early modern Japan: the case of Kaga domain (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993), Luke S. Roberts. Mercantilism in a Japanese domain: the merchant origins of economic nationalism in eighteenth-century Japan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). In Japanese the literature on regional history is too extensive to list here. Recent work has focused more explicitly on the problems of regionalism (as opposed to national level analyses) and regional identity; see in particular the work of Tsukamoto Manabu, especially his Kinsei sakki: chibō no shiten kara [Rethinking the early modern period: From the regional perspective] (Tokyo: Nihon Editasukiru Shuppanbu, 1986); Sasaki Junnosuke, Chiiki sho wo manabu to iu koto between integration and dispersion, for they shaped a culture in which common knowledge was widely disseminated, yet locally inflected and status-specific. 65

There are many labels for the multi-centered geo-political structure of early modern Japan. Historians have long struggled to find a vocabulary adequate to describe a polity in which power was dispersed geographically and minutely differentiated at all levels within a vast administrative hierarchy. From “centralized feudalism” to “parcellized sovereignty,” “integral bureaucracy,” and, more recently, “the compound state,” various conceptual terms have been applied to capture this balance between centrality and locality, in its political and geographical meanings. The case of Nihonbashi, together with recent studies focusing on regional and local history confirms that early modern Japan defied simple analytical dichotomies of center versus periphery, and of bakufu authority versus domain autonomy. 67 By beginning with a focussed study of Nihonbashi, this article attempts to build on a small but growing body of scholarship that directly addresses the spatial dimension of culture in the early modern period. 68 In spite of the fact that—and perhaps precisely because—Nihonbashi was Edo’s official center, authorities were forced to contend over and compromise with commoner interests at practically every turn in order publicly to articulate, if not to enforce, official norms of order and behavior. Commoner interests in turn were expressed not by attempts to overthrow the system but by incremental acts aimed at re-ordering it, spatially and culturally, from within. We can use the example of Nihonbashi to begin to rethink the language of contradiction and opposition in studies of central-local relations, and to move towards a vocabulary that phrases the problem as a dialectical one, across space as well as time. Centralization paradoxically enabled decentralization in the early modern period; this process, so visible in the shogunal capital itself, undergirded the flexible rigidity of the Tokugawa polity, a characteristic that contributed to its long survival as well as to its ultimate demise.


68 Despite the geographic concerns inherent in terms like “centralized feudalism” and its various successors, the spatial analysis of the early modern system is just beginning to be addressed by historians writing in English. In a review essay published in 1992, Karen Wigen noted that “For most of the twentieth century, geography has been pushed so far into the background in the English-language corpus on early modern Japan as to be rendered virtually invisible.” Wigen, “The geographic imagination in early modern Japanese history: retrospect and prospect,” Journal of Asian Studies 51:1 (February 1992): 3–29. Many of the recent works on Edo history and culture cited in the text and notes of this article address this gap in the literature.

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