

**The Immersive Experience of Teahouse: A Comparative Study from  
Hiroshige I's Ukiyo-e Print *Mount Asama: Teahouse on the Mountain Pass* (1853)  
and Hiroshige II's *Naka-no-chô in the Yoshiwara* (1862)**

Supporting Material for Smart Scholar Program 2020-2021, by An Trinh

In Japanese tradition, *chashitsu* (茶室) is the common name for all architecture structure designed to have a tea ceremony, where no distraction from the outside factors are permitted to disrupt the sacredness of drinking tea itself.<sup>1</sup> However, one of its derivation, *ochaya* (お茶屋), does not only serve tea but also parties and banquets for its customers. Originally opened in the *hanamachi*,<sup>2</sup> rather than a spiritual and religious site, *ochaya* leans towards being a place for entertainment, socialization, and private conversations among people of the same social class.<sup>3</sup> Both types of teahouse have been a regular subject in Japanese arts in general and ukiyo-e prints in particular, and among them, there are two prints that are of interest of this essay. In both *Mount Asama, Teahouse on the Mountain Pass* (1853)<sup>4</sup> (from the series *Famous Places in the Sixty-odd Provinces of Japan*) by Hiroshige I and *Naka-no-chô in the Yoshiwara* (1862)<sup>5</sup> (from the series *Thirty-six Views of the Eastern Capital*) by Hiroshige II, the teahouse serves as the center of human social activities. Here, I would argue that both prints (1) provide a leisure sphere around the teahouse as an escape from reality, and despite being (2) structurally and spatially different, by providing (3) a multi-sensational aesthetic

---

<sup>1</sup> Mach, I., 2012. "Chashitsu - The Japanese Teahouse: An Aesthetic System." In *Folk Architecture – Vernacular Architecture: An International Conference*, Hungary, 2012, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> General name for the district where geisha live and work in Japan.

<sup>3</sup> Nishio, Kumiko. "Career development and business systems in the traditional culture industry training of Geiko/Maiko and the systems of hanamachi in Kyoto." *Il Politico* (2008): 221-234.

<sup>4</sup> Fig. 1, Utagawa Hiroshige, *Ise Province: Mount Asama, Teahouse on the Mountain Pass*, 1853, Smart Museum of Arts, Chicago, <http://smartcollection.uchicago.edu/objects/30500/ise-province-mountain-asama-teahouse-on-the-mountain-pass-is?ctx=655d072f-7f24-453b-96e9-e2e0afd882d3&idx=0>.

<sup>5</sup> Fig. 1, Utagawa Hiroshige II, *Naka-no-chô in the Yoshiwara*, 1862, Smart Museum of Arts, Chicago, <http://smartcollection.uchicago.edu/objects/30565/nakanochô-in-the-yoshiwara-yoshiwara-nakanochô-from-t?ctx=806985be-ad99-4497-9aed-e19dd7691c1a&idx=0>.

system for the audience, these leisure bubbles can trap them in (4) an immersive experience of nature and pleasure.

Putting the two prints in its historical and social context, one can recognize the same motif of escaping from reality in both prints. The two prints were created at roughly the same period, just 9-year apart, in the 1850s and 1860s—the final years of the Edo period in Japan. Particularly, there was foreigners' expedition and warships' intrusion into Japanese water, and the country was pressured to modernize and Westernize. Although this period later is proved to have momentous impact on the development of Japan, at that time, for the commoners, it just meant economic and political turmoil after a very prolonged period of peace, where price was inflated, wars emerged, and many tradition threatened to be lost.<sup>6</sup> Hence, both *Mount Asama* and *Naka-no-chô* portray a humanistic response to escape from this chaos. In *Mount Asama*, by illustrating the classics *chashitsu* near Ise Grand Shrine—one of the holiest, most important, and remotest Shinto shrines even nowadays, Hiroshige I praised the arduous, uncomfortable, and often expensive pilgrimage journey of the commoners to a distant holy place. Being a pilgrim was something luxurious, especially for the farmers as they neglect their worldly duties—i.e. crop production—for several months, but it was a sign of their urge to leave this familiar human world, embark for something new, and live outside of social order.<sup>7</sup> To the governors, the pilgrimage tradition threatened the stable order of human society, thus they limited and even banned the custom: the 7-year moratorium on pilgrimage was announced in 1795 actually lasted almost 25 years instead.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, *Naka-no-chô* depicted a scene of the *ochaya* along the street at the famous red-light Yoshiwara District of Edo. The Western wave of customs also introduced several

---

<sup>6</sup> Constantine N. Vapori, "Caveat Viator. Advice to Travelers in the Edo Period," *Monumenta Nipponica* 44, no. 4 (1989): p. 461, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2384538>.

<sup>7</sup> Carmen Blacker, "The Religious Traveller in the Edo Period," *Modern Asian Studies* 18, no. 4 (1984): pp. 593-608, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0026749x00016310>, 603.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 604-5.

relatively unfamiliar concepts to Japan, such as *love* or *freedom*. Then, at a time where marriage was still arranged by family relationship and one had little liberty over choosing their own spouse, the individual placed their hope for finding their cherish lover at pleasure quarters like Yoshiwara.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Yoshiwara had different ranks of brothel that not only granted the erotic dreams for the upper-class but also welcomed almost any men. Therefore, while *Mount Asama* served as a religious escape sphere that broke the worldly economic expectations, *Naka-no-chô* portrayed an enchanted escape that crashed the social rules and class order.

Describing such different meaning and context of *teahouse*, both prints also brought a succinct understanding of the two teahouse types' distinct archetype. The *chashitsu* in *Mount Asama* are not the traditional ones which limit outside distraction to its guests by very low ceiling, crawling entrance, and small windows.<sup>10</sup> The section closer to the trail of these *chashitsu* is open without any windows, allowing guests to enter, take a step up the entrance, sit down and drink tea while conversing with fellow travelers, staring at the sea, and enjoying at the surrounding mountains. The other section is mostly covered by wooden walls, upstairs also covered by window to provide more security, maybe for overnight stay. However, the *chashitsu* spirit of being rustic, simple, and minimalized<sup>11</sup> is still strongly reflected in the design and construction of these *teahouses*. The wall, floor, roof, window, and pillars are all single-colored (light brown, yellow, or light green), made from natural materials (such as wood or straw), and mostly undecorated (except some red lanterns hanging outside). The structure is standardized and replicable: the two depicted in *Mount Asama* look quite similar to each other in the parts drawn, except for the axis of the roof and the entrance.

---

<sup>9</sup> 村上 孝之, "Is It True That Love Existed Only in Brothels? On the Edo Tradition of Passion," *比較文学* 32 (1990): pp. 229-242, [https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.20613/hikaku.32.0\\_242](https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.20613/hikaku.32.0_242).

<sup>10</sup> Kenninji Kaisan Eisai, *Tea Curing Record* (originally 『喫茶養生記』) (1211, Kenryaku 1), quoted in [http://wa.ctk23.ne.jp/~take14/History\\_of\\_tea\\_ceremony/rekisi\\_1.html](http://wa.ctk23.ne.jp/~take14/History_of_tea_ceremony/rekisi_1.html), accessed May 18, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

The *ochaya* in *Naka-no-chô* are also similar to each other; in fact, the whole Yoshiwara District was constructed after the Great Fire of Meireki in 1657<sup>12</sup> with sections of analogously-looking teahouses, bordellos, and catering shops.<sup>13</sup> From the print, one can see the seemingly endless row of relatively narrow two-floor houses with *noren* curtain imprinted the logos of each brothel, and the balcony upstairs with outside seat under the lanterns. This repetition in design unifies the *ochaya*, emphasizes a singular identity of Naka-no-chô boulevard. From the audience viewpoint as someone standing right in front of some teahouse and looking to the other side, one can see the geishas turning their back towards them, cherry blossoms planted in the middle, the two lanes on the two sides filled with pedestrians, and from there, a spatial understanding of the street is formed. Although this particular print of Hiroshige II only depicts a small section of Naka-no-chô, its composition still successfully illustrate how the street looks and feels, which agrees with other depictions of this street in various angles, such as ones by Masunobu,<sup>14</sup> Kunimaru,<sup>15</sup> Hiroshige I,<sup>16</sup> Yoshikaru,<sup>17</sup> and Hiroshige III,<sup>18</sup> among others.

Despite the two prints' different subjects and structure, they both appeal to the commoners' longing to escape through a multisensory beauty. *Mount Asama* brings a sense of both natural beauty and the contemplative purity as one gets closer to the destination of their pilgrimage. Travelers would often walk overnight, arrive at these *chashitsu* for short tea break right at dawn, and within those swift moments of resting, they could see the sun rises and the

---

<sup>12</sup> It was previously located near Nihonbashi, closer to the city center.

<sup>13</sup> Seigle, Cecilia Segawa, *Yoshiwara: The glittering world of the Japanese courtesan*, University of Hawaii Press, 1993, pp.23-26.

<sup>14</sup> Fig. 1, Tanaka Masunobu, *Naka-no-chô in the Yoshiwara*, Woodblock Print, 1740, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, <https://ukiyo-e.org/image/mfa/sc201003>.

<sup>15</sup> Fig. 1, Utagawa Kunimaru, *View of Naka-no-chô in the New Yoshiwara in Edo*, 1811, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, <https://ukiyo-e.org/image/mfa/sc138510>.

<sup>16</sup> Fig. 1, Utagawa Hiroshige, *Cherry Blossoms at Night on Naka-no-chô in the Yoshiwara*, Woodblock Print, c. 1832-1838, Minneapolis Institute of Art, <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/63177/cherry-blossoms-at-night-on-naka-no-cho-in-the-yoshiwara-utagawa-hiroshige>.

Fig. 1, Utagawa Hiroshige, *Holiday of Cherry Blossoms at Naka-no-chô in the Yoshiwara*, 1840-58, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, <https://ukiyo-e.org/image/mfa/sc138473>.

<sup>17</sup> Fig. 1, Utagawa Yoshikazu, *Holiday of Cherry Blossoms at Naka-no-chô in the New Yoshiwara*, 1859, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, <https://ukiyo-e.org/image/mfa/sc167615>.

<sup>18</sup> Fig. 1, Utagawa Hiroshige III, *Cherry Blossoms at Naka-no-chô in the New Yoshiwara*, 1870, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, <https://ukiyo-e.org/image/mfa/sc232556>.

surrounding serene mountains before setting again for the rest of the trip to Ise Grand Shrine. This tranquil beauty is translated into colors by Hiroshige I: multiple shades of blue and green were used to portray the ocean, mountain, rocks, and trees,<sup>19</sup> as well as some yellow and brown for the teahouses and the light pink at the horizon implying the emergence of the sun. The overall tone is cool and earthy, without any particular moments of high contrast nor vibrancy, and one can feel both their eyes and their soul purified to witness this secular beauty.

On the other hand, *Naka-no-chô* represents the beauty accompanied with bustling energy and festivity. Beauty is perceived audibly through the chatter and maybe music from the kabuki theaters staged along the street,<sup>20</sup> visually through the color, and sensually through the fleeing sexual desire in the air. Comparing to *Mount Asama*, this print is much denser and more crowded, we can seem to hear the *geishas'* talking to each other and feel the busy life of urban nightlife. Additionally, the color here is also much warmer and more vibrant, mainly concentrate at the depiction of the three *geishas* on the foreground: the similar purple-with-leaf-pattern costume of the two talking *geishas* and the fancy-purple-and-black-dragon kimono of the *obasan* behind them. All three are wearing green-and-yellow<sup>21</sup> *obi* around their waist, very dedicated and showy *kandashi* for their hair, and *geta* shoes. All these details demonstrate that these women are well-prepared to welcome guests at the busiest time of the day—as evening comes<sup>22</sup>—and ready to lure them into a journey of sensual and voluptuous activities. Then, they would submerge in this multisensory pleasure and momentarily forget about their unhappy lives.

---

<sup>19</sup> The colors of the print at the Smart Museum is a little more blue than the one at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Since the color of trees are often green, I will analyze the color by the MOFA print instead. (Fig. 1, Utagawa Hiroshige, *Ise Province: Mount Asama, Teahouse on the Mountain Pass*, 1853, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, <https://ukiyo-e.org/image/mfa/sc230737>.)

<sup>20</sup> Seigle, Cecilia Segawa, *Yoshiwara: The glittering world of the Japanese courtesan*, University of Hawaii Press, 1993, pp.27.

<sup>21</sup> Again, the color of the print at the Smart Museum is much more blue than the one at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, including the color of the bushes under the cherry blossoms. Since the color of trees are often green, I will analyze the color by the MOFA print instead. (Fig. 1, Utagawa Hiroshige I, *Naka-no-chô* in the Yoshiwara, 1862, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, <https://ukiyo-e.org/image/mfa/sc135089#&gid=1&pid=1>.)

<sup>22</sup> Noted by a man on the far left of the print lighting a lantern.

This submergence into beauty of the two prints then creates an immersive experience that traps both the characters and the audience into the world inside the prints. The *chashitsu* in *Mount Asama* were looked in between the mountains at the two sides—tracing the edges downhill, one recognize they create an up-side-down rectangle that holds the *chashitsu* at its lowest point, making these teahouses secular and excluded from the outside world. The space is far and wide in all three dimensions: the foreground with some *chashitsu* hidden under the hill, the middle ground with the scattered pilgrims and the two main *chashitsu* sitting at a perpendicular axis to each other, and the background with the ocean behind the rock behind the many layers of mountain. But our point of view is above them all, as if we own everything and can jump directly into this space. Movements are minimal: no waves in the ocean, no wind moving the leaves, and no interactions among the quiet travelers walking with their own umbrella and hiking stick. The peaceful, quiet, and motionless ground of the *chashitsu* and the surrounding mountains make us wonder whether this place is locked in time and both we and the walking travelers below are trapped in this overwhelming scene of nature.

In *Naka-no-chô*, instead of the real nature, a counterfeit one trapped us. The dominant element of this print is the bright pink<sup>23</sup> cherry blossoms row in the middle of the street, which was in fact originally potted cherry plants that were brought in just for the spring festival.<sup>24</sup> Its blossoms, softness, and cloud-like shape in a way directly links the courtesans' beauty and their springtime youth. And similar to these unnatural flowers in Yoshiwara, the love between a *geisha* and her lover was almost always superficial—courtesans often encourage her customer to fall in love but not fall for it herself, they were taught to stimulate passion and obey all orders given, sexual ones included.<sup>25</sup> A famous author wrote: "*This is all a lie, but there is not a man*

---

<sup>23</sup> The print at the Smart Museum is much more muted in color of the cherry blossoms (almost white), so this analysis is also based on the one at MOFA. (Ibid.)

<sup>24</sup> Seigle, Cecilia Segawa, *Yoshiwara: The glittering world of the Japanese courtesan*, University of Hawaii Press, 1993, pp.108-109.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p.156.

who doesn't like it."<sup>26</sup> Not only in prints, but the connection between cherry blossoms, courtesans, and a fictitious world also exists vividly in poetry. A poem by a well-known playwright, Genichiro, is loosely translated as: "*A dream of the Spring-tide* (in a town inhabited by beautiful and voluptuous women to whom their lovers cleave)<sup>27</sup> *as the streets are full of commingling blossoms of the cherries blend together; tidings of the autumn when the streets are lined on either side with lighted lanterns.*"<sup>28</sup> Everything happening seemed to be just a "dream," and the street of Naka-no-chô provided a physical tie: the slopes of the roof and the gaze of the man on the second floor brought the attention downwards to the street, where the cherry blossoms erupted its vivid color and scent that burst outside of the print. Hence, while the composition of *Mount Asama* formed an enclosed space to the *chashitsu* downhill by surrounding mountains, *Naka-no-chô* created a pulling force by the bustling energy of flowers in particular and night-time Yoshiwara in general, both to trap the audiences in a distant place from their present lives.

In conclusion, although the two prints *Mount Asama, Teahouse on the Mountain Pass* and *Naka-no-chô in the Yoshiwara* illustrate very different contexts of the Japanese teahouse, they essentially serve the same purpose. They hope to lure the audience away from their mundane and full-of-worrisome daily lives and to construct alternatives filled with happiness and liberation. Eventually, it all comes down to one of the basic functions of the art—entertainment—and the literal meaning of ukiyo-e—*Pictures of the Floating World*.

---

<sup>26</sup> Quoted Ihara Saikaku, in Seigel, *ibid.*, p.157.

<sup>27</sup> This is implied meaning only.

<sup>28</sup> Originally in Chinese characters, "春夢正濃満街桜雲。秋信先通両行燈影". Mentioned and translated in: De Becker, Joseph Ernest, *Nightless City: Or the History of the Yoshiwara Yukwaku*, Tuttle Publishing, 2012, pp.20-21.