

DEVELOPMENT OF INTERPRETATION OF THE WORD
UKIYO IN RELATION WITH STRUCTURAL CHANGES
IN JAPANESE SOCIETY

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General literature about Japan, as well as specialized works on visual art history, catalogues of Japanese woodcuts exhibitions, references thereof in the press, and literature in Japanese studies often show uncertainty about the translation and interpretation of the designation “ukiyo-e” – overseas the perhaps best-known phenomenon of Japanese visual arts. The question of interpretation of the word ukiyo has not been satisfactorily solved in the circles of Japanese experts, either. That is why the author tries to give an account of the content of this word and causes of the regular change of its content in relation to Japanese society development, based upon the results of the research done on it up to now.

The usual translations “pictures of the changeable world”, “pictures of the transitory life” etc. do express the notion. What causes problems, however, is explanation of the term itself. The meaning of the Japanese word ukiyo obviously changes in the course of time and in the Edo period (also Tokugawa, 1603–1867), in the times of flourishing of “ukiyo”-style visual arts and literature, it denotes a worldview and philosophy, in a certain sense contradictory to its original Buddhist content of the Heian period (794–1192).

One of the most important representatives of the linguistic and ideological kokugaku school, Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801), whose extensive work belongs to the peak of Japanese traditional philology, refers in his essay collection Bamboo basket (1795–1799) to the origin of the notion of ukiyo and criticizes its “wrong” understanding and use in literature, visual arts and everyday life: “As ukiyo (“uki” written by the character that means distress – auth.) means the world of suffering, this notion can be used to denote a situation characterized by gloom. One can see it when reading classical poetry. But under the influence of the word *fusei* (two characters, meaning “floating, light, cheerful” and “world”), found in Chinese texts of the Tang dynasty (618–907 – auth.) and by its copying (the Chinese character *fu* can also be read uki in Japanese – transl.) the word ukiyo (uki written by the *fu* character, meaning “floating, ...”) is used to denote

the world in general, which is, however, wrong. While reading classical poetry, attention should be paid to the fact that this one is written by the “sad” uki.”¹

Let me now make clear and compare here those readings and meanings of the two above-mentioned characters to which I am going to refer later on:

1. the “sad” uki character:

憂

Sino-Japanese *yuu*

ureeru, uryouru – to worry, grieve, lament, be anxious

urei, uree, usa – worry, distress, sorrow, grief, anxiety, trouble

uki – sad, unhappy, gloomy

ushi – suffering, gloom

2. the “happy” uki character:

浮

Sino-Japanese *fu*

uku – float, rise to the surface, be cheered up

uita – happy, cheerful, frivolous

ukareru – enjoy oneself, be happy, be in high spirits

ukiukito – happily, cheerfully, buoyantly

ukiukisuru – be in high spirits, be pleasantly excited, be in a cheerful mood

As we can see, the meanings of the two characters are contradictory to each other. The fact that the strongly symptomatic word ukiyo has been written in various periods by these two contradictory characters, cannot be considered purely accidental. The content of the word has apparently gone through a complex development connected not only with ideologies, religions of the respective periods of time, changing worldviews and value systems, but also with changes in the power ratio of the respective social classes in those periods.

The Big Japanese Dictionary² states in the entry of ukiyo the chronological order of the word’s spelling, viz. the “sad” uki + yo, followed by the “happy” uki + yo (both without the hiragana “ki” in between), and it strictly distinguishes its uses according to the spelling:

In the first case – the “sad” uki + yo – it is life full of suffering, the Buddhist concept of “dukkham” – suffering, “anityatā” – impermanent, transitory character, and “impurity” of this world, spreading from the second half of the Heian period to the beginning of the Edo period and its typical sign was pessimism. The use of ukiyo in this sense is documented in the dictionary by sources from the classical literature and divided into four categories:

a) the world, the life full of suffering and pain: ukiyo no umi (life as a sea of suffering).

b) sufferings caused to one by “man–woman relationships” – love.

¹ MOTOORI Norinaga: *Tamakatsuma* (Bamboo Basket). Muraoka Tsunetsugu. Kami (Part One). Tokyo, Iwanami shoten 1970, p. 132.

² *Kokugo Daijiten* (Big Japanese Dictionary). Tokyo, Shougakkan 1981, pp. 215–216.

c) this vain, impure world as opposed to the world of purity, the Buddhist heaven.

d) transitory, impermanent, ungraspable, worthless human life as a dream, an illusion, a trick of the inscrutable fate: ukiyo no chiri (life as vain dust).

The second way of spelling – the “happy” uki + yo – is stated by the dictionary as characteristic of its interpretation in the Edo period, where it means, along with the transitory, impermanent world, the inscrutably and abruptly changing one, at the same time also the world of indulgence in sensual pleasures. These values become at this time the sense and fulfilment of man’s existence, which leads, in a way, to negation of the previous ideology, worldview, value system and morals. The use of the word ukiyo in this sense is divided in the dictionary into seven categories:

- a) life is transitory, no point in worrying about anything, one ought to enjoy it in full: ukiyo-gawa (life as a river), ukiyo no nami (waves of life).
- b) indulgence in sexual pleasures: ukiyo-otoko (man of such qualities), ukiyo-onna (woman of such qualities), ukiyo-bikuni (nun of a doubtful reputation), ukiyo-bouzu (monk of doubtful morals), ukiyogi (seductiveness), ukiyogokoro (passion for sensual pleasures), ukiyo-gurui (state of having given in to worldly pleasures), ukiyo-banashi (erotically oriented stories).
- c) amusement quarters, red-light districts: Ukiyo-shouji (local name in Osaka), ukiyo-kouji (brothel-bordered lane), ukiyo-jaya (brothel), ukiyo-dera (Buddhist monastery of doubtful reputation), ukiyo-buro (public bath with prostitution), ukiyo-kago (vehicle transporting clients to the amusement quarters), ukiyo-kinchaku (small bag worn by maids of courtesans).
- d) the real world, man’s everyday life in the society with its rules, morals, duties: ukiyobanare (not leading a normal, settled life), ukiyonomane (a kind of amusement, parody of events, customs, people of the time), ukiyo no narai (rules observed by the world, the practical course of the world).
- e) contemporary, modern (as an adjective to a noun): of pictures – ukiyo-e, of hats – ukiyo-gasa, of dolls – ukiyo-ningyou, of stories – ukiyo-banashi, of dyed fabric patterns – ukiyo-zome, also: ukiyodango (a kind of cake), ukiyomon (a kind of a tiny pattern on fabrics), ukiyomoteyui (hair string), ukiyogi (sense of fashion).
- f) short for ukiyobushi (a kind of songs).
- g) short for ukiyo-bukuro (a silk bag for various purposes).

The examples for the individual categories have been excerpted both from the above-mentioned Kokugo dictionary and from the Big Dictionary of Classical Japanese. Many of them are characteristic for their ambiguity: ukiyobito – a modern / sensually indulgent person, ukiyogi – sense of fashion / seductiveness. The same holds for names of fashionable parts of garment, and, indeed, for literary and visual arts genres. The Kokugo big dictionary, for example, ranks the name of the artistic ukiyo-e style to the 2.e category, viz. “pictures of the mod-

ern times”. Such a simplified explanation has been, however, strongly opposed by many arts experts, historians and philosophers, as will be referred to below.

The Classical Japanese dictionary gives the spelling of the word ukiyo in the frequency order – first the happy uki, than the sad uki, and on the basis of examples from literature, the process of change in its content is followed. Its interpretation is, however, only divided into seven categories, which is an insufficient and rather superficial classification.³ E.g. the 1.d category is missing – impermanent, ungraspable life, world as an illusion, considered by many researchers as a very important one (see below). Exactness of the categorization in the Big Japanese (Kokugo) Dictionary has been testified and proved by my study of the major works of Classical and Edo-period literature.

The sad ukiyo is frequently found mainly in some works of the second half of the Heian period. Heian was a flourishing time for the Japanese nation, characterized by its rich cultural activities and prolific production in the field of arts. It is also the time of the spreading of the Buddhist worldview among representatives of the ruling class, hand-in-hand with the ukiyo concept specified above.

The word ukiyo is found in the book *Ise Tales* (*Ise monogatari*), a collection of very short, poem-pointed stories, mostly about unfulfilled love.⁴ It was compiled between the beginning of the tenth and the half of the eleventh century, the author remaining unknown. In the tale 82 it reads:

“Tireba koso
itodo sakura wa
medetakere.
Ukiyo ni nani ka
fisashikarubeki?”

“’Tis because they fall
that the cherry-blossoms are
the more precious to us.
For what in this gloomy world
should stay for eternity?”

The ukiyo here translates into modern Japanese as “*nayami-ooi kono yo*”⁵ – this world full of sufferings, and is ranked in both of the mentioned dictionaries into the 1.a category – the sad world. I would, however, prefer the 1.d category, since this is rather the case of impermanence of this world, of the human life, beauty etc.

³ NAKADA N., WADA T., KITAHARA J.: *Kogo Daijiten* (Big Dictionary of Classical Japanese). Tokyo, Shougakkan 1983, pp. 185–186.

⁴ *Ise Monogatari* (Ise Tales). KATAGIRI J., FUKUI T., MATSUMURA S.: *Kanjaku*. Nihon no koten daizukan 10. Taketori monogatari. Ise monogatari. Tosa nikki. Tokyo, Shougakkan 1983, p. 171.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

In the Collection of Later Selected Waka-songs (*Gosen-waka-shuu*), compiled in 951 by Minamoto no Shitagou, in the part *Zatsu* (Songs of miscellaneous topics), Section 2, the song 1189 reads:

“Oshikarade
kanashiki mono wa
minarikeri,
ukiyo somukamu
kata wo shiraneba.”⁶

“Grief should I not feel
for any of the sad things
that I have been through,
how to give up this vain world
I, however, do not know.”

Ukiyo in this sense represents the 1.c definition.

The character for the sad uki is very frequent, both in expressions like *kokoro-ushi*, *urewashigeni*, *kokoro-uku*, *uki*, *kokoro-ukeredo*, and the word *ukiyo* itself, in the work *Waking Up in the Middle of the Night* (*Yowa no Nesame*), dating from about 1060 and ascribed to authoress Sugawara no Takasue no musume.⁷ This is a love story about the suffering accompanying a profound passion between a man and a woman, and it is in this sense (1.b) that we meet here with the word *ukiyo*. In Chapter Four, e.g., the heroine *Nesame no Ue* (a pun – her name homophonous with “waking up”):

“E zo shiranu
ukiyo shirasheshi
kimi narade
mata wa kokoro no
kayowuramu juwe...”⁸

“Oh and if it were
not to thee, who made me know
unknown pains of love,
why should, then, my affection
turn to anyone at all?”

⁶ *Gosenwakashuu* (A Collection of Later Selected Waka Songs). KATAGIRI Youichi: Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten, Shin Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei 6, 1990, p. 357.

⁷ This authoress’s name has only been preserved in form “daughter of an aristocrat named Sugawara no Takasue”, as is often the case with female authors.

⁸ *Yoru no Nesame* (Waking Up in the Middle of the Night). SUZUKI K.: Tokyo, Shougakkan, Nihon Koten Bungaku Zenshuu 19, 1974, pp. 358–359. Transl. into modern Japanese, p. 392.

The male protagonist of the relation uses, in the same chapter, the word *ukiyo* in the same sense: “*Ukiyo wo shirifajimekereba, kagirinaki kotodomo to iwedo...*”⁹ “As you have come to know the suffering of love, its infinite forms...”

Another way of conceiving of *ukiyo* can be found in a work of the *kanazoushi* (kana-syllabary written books of tales) genre, viz. Shimizu Kanja of the late Kamakura (1192 – 1333) and early Muromachi (1336 – 1573) period. It is a tragic story of Shimizu Kanja and his wife Oohime from the times of the fights for power between the Taira and the Minamoto clans. “*Ukiyo ni majirawan yori wa... yama no naka ni iwori wo musubi...*”¹⁰ “(A judicious man) does not care for the world... building up a hut in the mountains”. Here, *ukiyo* is already used in the sense of the everyday, civil life, 2.d, and this meaning is met with more and more frequently from this period onward. Like in the Edo period the *ukiyo-zoushi* (books of tales of “our days” / of “amusement quarters”) genre novel *The Greatest Pleasure-Goer Man* (*Koushoku Ichidai Otoko*)¹¹ dating from 1682, written by the most important prose author of the times, Ihara Saikaku. It is a story of a man called Yonosuke who spends his all life having love affairs. “*Tajima no kuni, kane horu sato no hotori ni, ukiyo no koto wo soto ni nashite...*”, “In the Tajima country, by a mine town, (there lived a man who) completely abandoned his daily duties (and indulged all days in an unheard-of pleasure hunt...)”¹²

Ukiyo in the sense “contemporary”, “modern” – 2.e, can be found very often in the Edo period. For instance in Chapter One of another of Saikaku’s works *The Greatest Pleasure-Goer Woman* from 1692 it reads “*ukiymotoyui*” (see above), *ukiyo no sharemono*¹³ (the modern woman of beauty) and others. It is a book of even a somewhat socially critical effect, with an immense documentary value, recording an old woman talking about her life path through all the “ranks” of the prostitution system of the times. In these cases, however, beside the 2.e meaning, another undertone can be felt from the context, something like “characteristic of a woman of the amusement quarters” in the 2.b and 2.c senses. In the same way one finds the above-mentioned expression “*ukiymoyo*” in

⁹ Ibid., p. 358. Compounds with the “sad”-uki character can be found almost in every page, vide e.g. 361, 365, 366, 369, 371, 372, 377, 378, 381 etc. P. 382 gives an explanation to the notion of *ukiyo*: *tsurai danjo no naka* (sufferings of love).

¹⁰ *Shimizu Monogatari* (Shimizu Kanja). WATANABE Morikuni, WATANABE Kenji: *Kanazoushishuu*. Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten, Shin Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei 74, 1991, p. 183.

¹¹ *Ichidai* in the book’s title, found also in some other Saikaku’s works, means both “the biggest”, as is usually translated into foreign languages (e.g. by M. Novák into Czech), and “one generation”, “a person thereof”, as is given in the 2. dictionary, p. 146.

¹² IHARA Saikaku: *Koushoku Ichidai Otoko* (The Greatest Pleasure-Goer Man). Zenchuu-yaku. Joukan. MAEDA Kingorou. Tokyo, Kadokawa Shoten, Nihon Koten Sousho 1980, pp. 14–15.

¹³ IHARA Saikaku: *Koushoku Ichidai Onna* (The Greatest Pleasure-Goer Woman). TERUOKA Yasutaka, HIGASHI Akimasa: *Ihara Saikaku Shuu 1*. Tokyo, Shougakkan, Nihon Koten Bungaku Zenshuu 38, 1971–1973, p. 433, 428.

Saikaku's "To Everyone Their Own Judgement"¹⁴ in the very beginning of the first story. The work is a collection of tragicomically-tuned stories of the last day of the year, the lunar New Year's Eve, which is, until this day in the Japanese tradition, the time of repayment and claiming back debts. It is an excellent probe into the urban society of the time and the heroes of the respective stories each represent their own stratum of the city's inhabitants.

In "Records of Remarkable Towns on the Toukaidou Road", a documentary fiction of a monk, written around 1661 by Asai Ryōi, the notion *ukiyo* is found in the sense 2a: "Issun saki wa yami. Ashita wo mo shiranu ukiyo naru ni"¹⁵ "A step forward – darkness. This inscrutable world in which no-one knows what tomorrow shall bring to us..."

From the beginning of the 17th century the notion *ukiyo* is used more and more in the senses 2b, 2c, containing stronger and stronger erotic charge, and is often found also in the gradually more and more vulgarizing texts of pornography-based literary production. In this sense it is found as early as in "Urami no suke" (the protagonist's name) by an unknown author. It is an account of a scandalous relation between a "debauched" samurai and one of the Emperor's concubines, due to which the man was in 1606 degraded from his hatamoto rank and excluded from the samurai estate. The time of the book's birth is probably very close to this event. "Kokoro no nagusami wa ukiyo bakari"¹⁶ "The only comfort for our hearts is plays of love". The same sense of *ukiyo* is also seen in Saikaku's "Twenty Japanese Ungratefals" (1686), a parody on old Chinese Confucian didactical stories about children's respect to their parents. It is a collection of often brutal stories about ungratitude and crimes committed, usually because of property, on parents, brothers or sisters. In the first story we read about the hero's situation: "Inkyou no takuwae aru ni kiwamarishi, bungen naredomo mamarazu, nihaka ni ukiyo mo yamegataku"¹⁷ "Knowing that his parents keep some savings for the time when they are old, he would have liked to get it out of them, but they did not yield. Not being able, however, to give up revelling so abruptly..."

The development and content changes of the notion *ukiyo* are analysed in detail by Taizou Ehara in his "Reflections on the Notion of Ukiyo".¹⁸ He writes

¹⁴ IHARA Saikaku: *Seken Muna Zan'yō* (To Everyone Their Own Judgement) – (a different way of reading the characters). MAEDA Kingorou. Tokyo, Kadokawa Nihon Koten Bunko 1991, p. 17.

¹⁵ *Toukaidou Meishoki* (Records of Remarkable Towns on the Toukaidou Road). ASAKURA Haruhiko. Tokyo, Heibonsha, Touyou Bunko 346, 1979, p. 31, 37.

¹⁶ *Urami no Suke, jou. Kanazoushishuu*. MAEDA Kingorou, MORITA Takeshi. Tokyo, Iwanami shoten, Nihon Koten Bungaku taikai 90, 1965, p. 51.

¹⁷ *Honchou Nijuu Fukou* (Twenty Japanese Ungratefals), Ihara Saikaku Shuu. MUNEMASA Isao, MATSUDA Osamu, TERUOKA Yasutaka. Tokyo, Shougakkan, Nihon Koten Bungaku Zenshuu 39, 1973, p. 191.

¹⁸ EHARA Taizou: "*Ukiyo*" *Meigikou* (Reflections on the Notion of Ukiyo). Ehara Taizou Chosaku Shuu. Dai 17 Maki. Tokyo, Chuouokuronsha 1980, 178–195.

that the original meaning of ukiyo – the “comfortless”, “vain”, “distressful” world, started to be used, as early as the Heian period, in the Buddhist spirit as an equivalent of “this” world, earthly life. The idea of vanity of being is preserved also in the gradual confusion of this meaning with the content of the “happy”-uki character: to flow, to float, found sporadically in the given phrase as early as the Kamakura period. In the Muromachi period literature, the prevailing use of ukiyo in the sense “illusory”, vague world is apparently vanishing. In the times between the Muromachi and Edo periods “as a result of conceiving of ukiyo as the world of illusions and delusions”, there appears more and more strongly the tendency to let life flow in accordance with the voice of the heart and animal instincts¹⁹ of man. In the Edo period, instead of “escapes into the past and the faith in a brighter future one endeavours to relish the present reality”. In the sphere of city inhabitants’ lifestyle, this finds its expression in the extreme escalation of sense of reality and the notion ukiyo acquires new meanings like “this”, “real” world, “present times” etc.²⁰

From the twenty’s of the seventieth century the notion ukiyo is eventually understood exclusively as the world of plays, sensual amusements, love adventures and pleasures, to which Ehata refers as follows: “Notions like ukiyoe or ukiyozoushi did not mean simply pictures, or stories, respectively, of “our times”, but these words contained a really strong erotic message and unambiguously implied associations with the world of courtesans, prostitutes and underworld men”.²¹ The same opinion is held by the prominent contemporary sociologist and historian Kin’ya Abe in his work “On Meanings of the Notion *Seiken*”: “Ukiyo meant, in the times of the greatest flourishing of cities and townsfolk culture, above all the world of the amusement quarters, the voluptuous, epicurean life philosophy and lifestyle of inhabitants of cities, the world of money and sex, pragmatic morals and shamelessly realistic and materialistic conception of human existence.”²²

In the study of theoretical works of Japanese provenance about the meaning and use of the notion ukiyo I have been interested above all in the reasons of the several centuries prolonged transformation of the original contents of this word into, in a way, its opposite. Why, this is one of the key concepts of the worldview of the times, in the case of which this kind of interpretation is rather difficult to explain. I have not, however, found any satisfactory answer to this question in the materials studied. They all speak about the process, but not the reasons, for this phenomenon. Only in the Big Japanese Dictionary a note can be found that the new meaning of ukiyo in the Edo period is a reaction to the nihilist, pessimist, self-denying and ascetic approach to life in the previous period.

¹⁹ ABE Kin’ya: “*Seiken*” to *ha nani ka*. Tokyo, Koudansha Gendai Shinsho 1995, p. 148.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ EHARA Taizou: op. cit., p. 184.

²² ABE Kin’ya: op. cit., p. 148.

In order to understand the reason of this surprising shift in the content of the notion *ukiyo* from its original Heian period meaning, classifying negatively the real world, toward the optimistic, life-affirmative interpretation in the Edo period, it is necessary to analyse the historical and social preconditions of this interesting phenomenon.

In the period of the Tokugawa shogunate, Japan formed into a central state with conspicuously absolutist features. The basic pillars of the state ideology of the times were both Confucianism with its rigid norms of inferiority within the society and the samurai codex, completed in this period, which were complemented in the worldview sphere by the state-controlled Buddhism. The society was divided into four classes, viz. samurais, farmers, artisans and merchants. The farmers were subordinate to samurai princes, to whom they paid taxes in rice and other products. The samurais, a stratum of princes' mercenary troops, materially dependent on their lords, were paid from them in kind again, especially in rice.

The remarkable labour progress, brought about also thanks to the short period of contacts with oversea countries, with Europe at the end of the 16th and beginning of the 17th century, resulted at this time in an irrepressible increase in importance of cities. In them very rapidly developed the strata of artisans and merchants, satisfying the ruling class' increasing life demands and providing goods distribution, respectively. These were, however, regarded as non-productive, or, in the case of merchants, indeed parasitic, from the point of view of the state ideology which considered growing rice the main economic activity.

The central military government put the local military aristocracy under a strong control aimed at enforcing its own policy. The princes had to establish and maintain in the shogun's capital Edo (present-day Tokyo) dignified residences and make immensely expensive journeys to it, accompanied by long service sojourns, which naturally caused their gradual economic weakening. This, as well as the long-lasting peace, were the reasons why the princes were compelled to reduce their troops, which resulted in high unemployment among the samurais – appearance of the *rounin* social stratum. These samurais without their lords were compelled to look for new ways of subsistence and often found them in cities. Many representatives of this relatively educated class became there an important potential of the further economic and cultural development. The material and cultural riches of the society were gradually overdrawn from military aristocracy's granaries into the dynamically developing towns.

The inferior position of artisans and merchants contrasted sharply with their steeply growing economic power and the importance they actually played in the society. The military government injured them by overbearing economic measures, confiscations, forced finances lending, annulment of samurais' debts etc. The shogunate tried to control strictly, by means of numerous edicts, and limit the way of their social and private life, strongly forbidding them any luxury in the sphere of living (size and arrangement of their dwellings), dress (kinds of fabrics, patterns and colours of cloths), eating, entertainment and culture.

The position of rich city inhabitants was marked on the one hand by growing economic power, on the other, however, by a great social and existential insecurity. “As a means of escape from the system of regulations and limitations, and as an opportunity to develop their own way of social life, making use of their accumulated riches, there grew large in cities amusement quarters of theatres, attractions and brothels, which were also a profitable form of enterprise.”²³

In the amusement quarters – the “places of evil”, *akusho*, the richer city inhabitants found inspiration for forming their new life style that often denied the shogunate-dictated value system and revolted against it. An apparent manifestation of this revolutionary element in the social thinking was also the “teaching” of the newly understood *ukiyo*. From an analysis of the social situation in the late feudal period²⁴ one can deduce the fact that the new interpretation of the notion *ukiyo* was a conscious expression of the city inhabitants’ protest against the military regime’s oppression and the existing social situation. It can be testified also by study of the cities’ cultural production of the times, and by the *ukiyoe* style.

The arising city culture had a popular and mass character, which was a natural reaction to the ossified, manneristic aristocratic culture, not comprehensible without the classical education, a typical expression of which was e.g. the *Noh* drama. It developed in a close connection with amusement centres of inhabitants of big cities like Edo, Osaka, Kyoto, Kobe etc, with amusement quarters of brothels, theatres and other attractions that became an ample source of subjects for literary, dramatic and visual arts production. Their unifying element was the new worldview, expressed by the revolutionarily interpreted notion *ukiyo*, and therefore this word is used in literature e.g. in referring to the popular stories *ukiyo-zoushi*, and in visual arts for denoting the genre of painting, later woodcut, production – *ukiyoe*. The most prolific period of city culture was Genroku era (1688–1703) which saw the culmination of the production of the three great masters of word: Ihara Saikaku in prose, Chikamatsu Monzaemon in drama, and Matsuo Bashou in poetry. Along with the vast production of novels, new theatre forms – *Kabuki* and *Joururi*, and the impressionist poetic condensation – *haiku*, developed the visual art of *ukiyoe*, inseverably connected with them.

Townspiece literature starts with the prose form *ukiyo-zoushi*, produced from 1682 until the end of the 18th century. They consist of novels produced by townspeople about themselves and for themselves, written in a distinctive style. The word itself appears from the end of the 17th century, but in this period mainly in the sense of erotic-toned to pornographic literature (see above) and comes into use in literary science as late as beginning of the Meiji period (1868–1912). The best-known author of this genre is the already several times quoted Ihara Saikaku (1642–1693). In his works, *ukiyo* is found in nearly all the phrases mentioned here, and in others as well, really often and in the most various meanings (see given examples).

²³ NOVÁK, Miroslav: *Japonská literatura I (do roku 1868)*. Praha 1977, p. 93.

²⁴ VASILJEVOVÁ, Zdeňka: *Dějiny Japonska*. Praha, Svoboda 1986, pp. 243–312.

In Saikaku's production the element of protest against the military regime's oppression is apparent. His works depict, often with a great forbearance, sympathy and understanding, heroes according to the contemporary value system utterly negative. Their morals usually openly contradict the established state-prescribed norms and denies them. He likes depicting historically true stories of extramarital love between women and men who set themselves against what is generally considered the basic virtue – preferring obligation (*giri*) to feelings (*nin-jou*), follow the voice of their hearts until fulfilling their love and accept the fixed punishment – death. His works also include stories about sedulous men of commonfolk who, often by very “ungentle” means or ways, strictly forbidden and punished by the regime, reach material riches and personal happiness, success and acknowledgement. In his work “To everyone their own judgement” (see above) he introduces to the reader witty inventive debtors who try to avoid payment of their debts, achieve understanding and human compassion of the lender. Another of his favourite topics, the most problematic and provocative from the point of view of the established legal and moral norms, is homosexual love. With understanding and in a most humane eye he renders the often tragic stories of love between men that in his rendition does not differ in any way from “normal” heterosexual love. Saikaku's works, depicting phenomena mostly inadmissible and culpable according to the norms of the day, usually do not have a moralistic or didactic effect, just the opposite – a very humanist one. That is why I guess, especially in the case of this author, in whose works the word *ukiyo* is extraordinarily frequent, that he worked with it quite intentionally, misinterpreted it programmatically, thus rebelling, hiddenly but perseverantly, against the spirit of the tying-down censorship, squeezing oppression and license of the regime.

The new worldview became manifest in the sphere of visual arts in the *ukiyo* genre, characteristic with its captivating dynamics and buoyant vitality. There is an end to everything, nothing lasts for ever. The life is short, leaks away like water, it is necessary, therefore, even if at the cost of one's self-destruction, to enjoy the beauty of each moment and everything it offers to one. This transient beauty is captured by *ukiyo* masters in their colour-ablaze and charming shots. That is why they are frequent targets of attacks and rights of recovery from the shogunate that reacts to the provocative joy of the “immoral” life denying the lined-up norms, by ever harsher obstructions like limitation of the licensed range of topics, prescription of the number and palette of allowed colours within one picture etc.

The notion *ukiyo*²⁵ itself came to general use in Tenna era (1681–1684) when *ukiyo* was taken both as the present times, and as the world of sensual passions, mundane vice, love. The production of this kind served first as illustration to pieces of literature, but soon found its place in poster production and leaflets about attractions in amusement quarters, about beautiful courtesans, theatre per-

²⁵ This notion was apparently used for the first time ever by Ihara Saikaku in his *Kou-shoku Ichidai Otoko* (1682) (acc. to: Ehara T., quoted work, p. 190)

performances, actors, sumo wrestlers etc. This production formed into a genre at the end of the 17th century, on a larger time scale it is, however, limited to the Edo period. Locally, it is connected to Edo (hence also “Edo-e”, Edo pictures), even though works of a similar character were created in other big cities as well. The insatiable market of Edo period townsfolk culture gave rise to whole schools of eminent ukiyoe artists and artisans, out of which world-wide fame was gained most of all perhaps by Katsushika Hokusai and Andou Hiroshige.²⁶ The richness of the extant jewels of this style today testifies to a failure of the government’s endeavour to limit the ukiyoe production and to artists’ and consumers’ ignoring of shogunal edicts.

The Edo period, characterized by its strong centralism, absolutism and sway of the shogunate, is on the one hand a period of the greatest flourishing of the culture of the increasing city inhabitants’ class, and, on the other, one of the cultural impotence of the declining military aristocracy’s estate. The artistic production of this period is one of the vital items of Japanese cultural heritage, and also maybe one of the most prominent phenomena whose potential was able to inspire and influence strongly even later artistic production, especially visual arts in Europe. What is extraordinarily important is also its documentary value, as it describes faithfully the lifestyle, worldview, morals and life philosophy of inhabitants of cities in the time of late feudalism in Japan. At the time of its appearance it represents a way of enjoying life through experience of art and amusement by the consumers of the time. Beside this, however, and which is what I have intended to point out by my paper, it also has ambitions and a mission of a different kind, which is not taken into account distinctly enough in study of Japanese culture of this period. It is, as is very well known from artistic production practice in other absolute regimes, the art – state relation, a protest, opposition, refusal of the state’s norms limiting the individual, resistance against bondage and lack of freedom. Therefore the “misinterpretation” of the original notion of ukiyo in this period can be considered as designed, purposeful and intentional.

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²⁶ In spite of the fact that some contemporary scholars like Ehara Taizou consider assigning these artists to the “ukiyo” category as absolutely wrong: “Ato no Hiroshige no fuukeiga nado ga, keshite ukiyoe no hanchuu ni zokushinai koto ha akiraka de aru (Later Hiroshige’s landscapes and others apparently do not belong to the “ukiyo” category), op. cit., p. 191.