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The Liminality of Early Modern Japanese Roads: Physical and Social Mobility in Utagawa Hiroshige's *Fifty-Three Stations of the Tōkaidō*

Steven Hoekstra

The key to travel is to make the most of its pleasures and to minimize the difficulties you may encounter.

Asai Ryōi 浅井了意, *Tōkaidō Meishoki* 東海道名所記 (1661)

In the middle of a dimly lit thoroughfare, two travelers are being assaulted by the staff of an inn. Tugging and pulling on the travelers' sleeves, the staff try to get them inside. The foremost man is gasping for air as he is being strangled by one of the staff; the other desperately tries to free his arm. On the right, a mean-spirited woman watches the spectacle, while a somber-eyed girl leans out the window of the inn, her head cupped between her hands, gazing downwards. The two women's faces are painted with a thick layer of white dust, as though they are wearing masks. Inside the inn, a man is taking off his worn sandals and preparing to wash his feet after a long day of walking. An elderly lady puts down a wooden tub filled with clean water for the weary traveler.

Utagawa Hiroshige's 歌川広重 (1797-1858) woodblock print depicting Yajirobē and Kitahachi's travel experience from Jippensha Ikku's 十返舎一九 (1765-1831) famous novel *Shank's Mare* (fig. 1), perfectly illustrates how travel, despite its many pleasures, can also be difficult and distressing.[1] The scene portrayed in this print is set in early modern Japan (1603-1868)—also known as the Edo period—in the 35th post town along the Tōkaidō 東海道

[1] Ikku, *Shank's Mare*, 141. The original title in Japanese is *Tōkaidōchū Hizakurige* 東海道中膝栗毛.

Figure 1: Utagawa Hiroshige, *Goyu: Women Stopping Travelers,* 1833-1834. Wereldmuseum Leiden [Coll.nr. RV-1327-12].

(Eastern Sea Route), one of the five national highways in the archipelago. By integrating the travel experience of commoners with the surrounding environment, prints like these exemplify early modern travelscapes, a sub-genre of landscape imagery, to which Hiroshige was arguably the greatest contributor.[2] Unlike the ferocious fervor of warrior prints or the transient tenderness of *bijin-ga* 美人画 (pictures of beauties), landscapes typically evoke a sense of calmness and contemplation. While these landscape prints, of which Hiroshige's Yaji and Kita is a classic example, often depict an immaculate coalescence of visual lyricism, their proximity to reality also offers tantalizing insights into the sociopolitical climate of early modern Japanese travelscapes.

This article argues that the depictions of roadsides in Hiroshige's 19th-century woodblock print series the *Fifty-Three Stations of the Tōkaidō* can be understood as representations of liminal spaces, temporarily challenging the social boundaries of Japan's rigid urban society. By closely reading several prints in both the *Great Tōkaidō* (1831-1834) and *Vertical Tōkaidō* (1855),

[2] Jansen and Poysden, *Hiroshige's Journey*; Forrer, *Hiroshige*; Ōkubo, *Hiroshige*; Uhlenbeck, *Shaping the Image*.

respectively the most well-known and most undervalued of Hiroshige's Tōkaidō series, I demonstrate how Hiroshige's approach to visualizing roadsides reflects the way in which travel in the Edo period was experienced. This experience, by pushing people to engage in activities outside their normal societal role and to share in the hardships of the road, created an ambiguous and fluid space in which the rigid urban rules around class and status could be questioned and explored.

In recent decades, Hiroshige's landscape prints have been widely debated in English and Japanese literature by scholars, including Matthi Forrer (2017), Ōkubo Junichi (2007), Nagata Yujirō (2004).[3] These scholars, however, have primarily examined Hiroshige's Tōkaidō prints in relation to their technical qualities and their literary references, or in historicist terms as visual manifestations of Japan's early modern travel culture. Research on the intertextual references with Ikku's *Shank's Mare*—with which I began this introduction—and the poems of Matsuo Bashō 松尾芭蕉 (1644-1694), for example, has largely been exhausted.[4] Art historians, however, have not yet examined Hiroshige's Tōkaidō prints as visual representations of spaces that question the parameters of physical and social mobility from a sociopolitical and institutional perspective. While the social fluidity of travel spaces–namely, the mingling of classes on the road–is often acknowledged, little attention is given to the laws and norms that underpin these interactions.

Historians of early modern Japan, most notably Laura Nenzi (2008) and Constantine N. Vaporis (1994), have provided valuable accounts of early modern travel during this period, which inform this project both in terms of its historical accuracy and in framing roadsides as spaces that question social parameters.[5] In this article, I take the conceptual framework developed by Nenzi and Vaporis and apply it to the 19th-century pictorial traditions of Japan. In so doing, this article fills these significant gaps in both the scholarly

[3] Forrer, *Hiroshige*; Ōkubo, *Hiroshige to ukiyo-e fūkeiga*; Nagata, *Utagawa Hiroshige*.

[4] E.g., Ehmcke, "The Tōkaidō"; Clark, "Utagawa Hiroshige"; Sasaki, "The Realm of Color." Other works include those of Forrer, Ōkubo, Jansen, and Uhlenbeck.

[5] Nenzi, *Excursions*; Vaporis, *Breaking Barriers*.

literature on the work of Hiroshige and in understandings of the relationship between travel and the shifting social order of Japan during the 19th century.

Woodblock Prints and Travel in Early Modern Japan

During Japan's medieval era, physical movement within the country was severely impaired by the dangers of the fragmented provinces waging war over political dominance.[6] When Tokugawa Ieyasu 徳川家康 (1543-1616) unified the country in 1603, however, a period of peace and prosperity commenced. This catalyzed the emergence of a "culture of movement," where people from all social classes took to the road for weeks, and sometimes even months, on end.[7] To maintain this newly acquired peace, the Tokugawa *bakufu* 幕府 (the military dictatorship of the samurai led by the shogun) moved the capital to Edo and forced all its *daimyō* 大名 (feudal lords), including their entire entourage, to reside there for half of the year. This way, disloyal *daimyō* were forced to spend all their money on travelling, instead of levying armed forces against the shogun. The *Gokaidō* 五街道 (the five national highways) were created to facilitate this new mass movement of people, leading to a vast network of supportive infrastructure across Japan. Besides the *daimyō* processions moving to and from the capital, the roads were also filled with merchants, transport workers, nuns, beggars, and pilgrims.[8]

Religious pilgrimage was the earliest form of recreational travel in early modern Japan. Even though the *bakufu* tried to regulate movement as much as possible, for example by constructing *sekisho* 関所 (barrier posts) at provincial borders where travel permits were checked, their efforts were largely in vain.[9] Many people would acquire travel permits under the pretense of pilgrimage, which the *bakufu* more easily granted due to its sacred nature as a religious act, while in reality using these permits for their

[6] Nenzi, *Excursions*, 79.
[7] Vaporis, *Breaking Barriers*, 249.
[8] *Id.*, 13.
[9] *Id.*, 215.

own personal activities.[10] Although there were certainly genuine pilgrims, these "proxy-pilgrims" would indulge in the hedonistic pleasures offered by brothels, inns, and gambling dens found along the road.[11] With the improved socio-economic situation of so-called 'commoners' in the late Edo period, roughly from 1800 to 1868, a "travel boom" occurred.[12]

The rising interest in travel was partially catalyzed by the democratization of knowledge in the second half of the Edo period. Education was no longer restricted to samurai and village leaders but became available for people from all social backgrounds.[13] In *terakoya* 寺子屋 (temple schools) commoners learned how to read and write, which led to a remarkable rise in literacy across Japan. In combination with the rapidly advancing woodblock printing technology, classical stories became widespread knowledge.[14] Many more commoners were now able to read the manifold printed guidebooks, travelogues, and handbooks that appeared on the market. These physical manifestations of Japan's travel culture, not only listed practical information such as distances and prices, but also functioned as a crash course educating the wayfarer on the historical, literary, or religious pedigree of *meisho* 名所 (famous sites) they would find along the way.[15]
Hiroshige's Tōkaidō prints operated in a similar manner—as commercial goods that stimulated travel. They could be bought at publishing houses scattered throughout the city, as well as in remote villages along the road itself. Landscape prints flourished in the late eighteenth and early 19th centuries, as the popularity of travel grew and a sense of urban identity took root in the hearts of the Edoites. Additionally, the prints were a relatively safe investment for publishers; unlike actor prints, landscapes did not age, nor did they draw the attention of censors.[16] Censorship in the Edo period was a

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[10] *Id.*, 4; 202.
[11] Nishiyama, *Edo Culture*, 133.
[12] Vaporis, *Breaking Barriers*, 218.
[13] Nenzi, *Excursions*, 126.
[14] *Ibid.*
[15] *Id.*, 122-13.
[16] Paget, "Hiroshige," 13.

Figure 2: Utagawa Hiroshige, *Nissaka: The Sayo Mountain Pass*, 1831-1834. Wereldmuseum Leiden [Coll.nr. RV-1353-25-26].

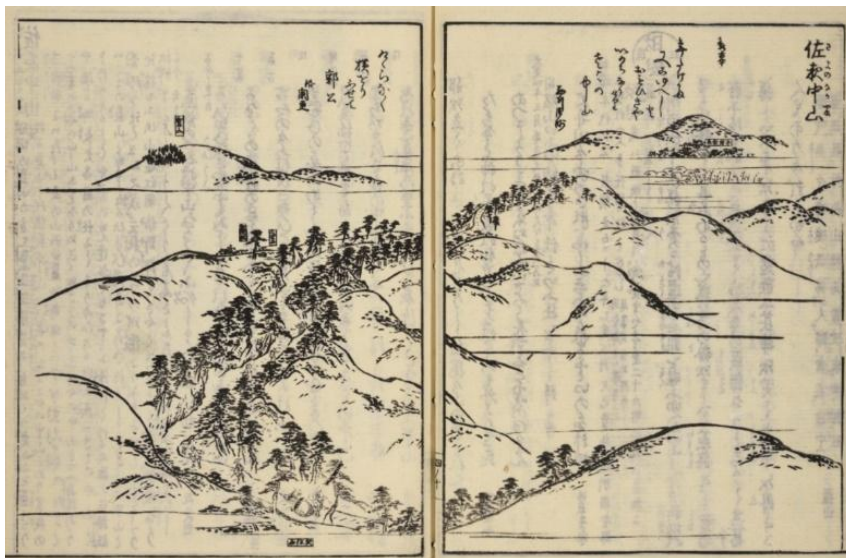

Figure 3: Akisato Ritō, *Tōkaidō Meisho Zue*, 1797. Wereldmuseum Leiden [Coll.nr. RV-17-1b].

difficult obstacle that artists and publishers constantly had to navigate—sometimes even leading to incarceration.[17] As products of mass production and consumption, woodblock prints were naturally used to circulate current events or critique the authorities. While the government tried to regulate prints as strictly as possible, what was prohibited one day would often reappear the next in a new guise. Hiroshige's travel prints largely evaded censorship, as they were more concerned with storytelling than with political commentary.

In *Nissaka: Sayo Mountain Pass* (fig. 2) from the *Great Tōkaidō* series, Hiroshige's rendition alludes to the illustrated guidebook Tōkaidō *meisho zue* 東海道名所図会 (*Illustrated Collection of Famous Places on the Tōkaidō*) by Akisato Ritō 秋里離島 in 1797, which describes the legend of the conspicuous "rock that wails by night" (*yonaka no ishi* 夜那賀石) in the middle of the road (fig. 3).[18] Venturing further into Ritō's guidebook, readers would learn that Prince Munetaka 宗孝親王 (1242-74), the sixth shogun of Japan, travelled along the same road as they were walking.[19] Such stories and history lessons did not only stimulate the recreationalist to head out, they also helped the "armchair traveler" to enjoy imagined travel from the comfort of their home.[20] With more money in their possession, printed guidebooks to lead the way, and relaxed regulations, travel became accessible for a large number of people in early modern Japan.[21]

The Road as a Social Mirror: Interpreting Class and Identity

Society in the Edo period was organized according to neo-Confucian orthodoxy into four estates, known as the *shi-nō-kō-shō* 士農工商 (samurai, peasant, artisan, merchant) system. This class system was based on a person's contribution to society, rather than their

[17] Davis, "The Trouble with Hideyoshi," 281.
[18] Ehmcke, "The Tōkaidō," 114.
[19] Ritō, *Tōkaidō meisho zue*, 29.
[20] Vaporis, "Caveat Viator," 464.
[21] *Id.*, 463.

Figure 4: Utagawa Hiroshige, *Okitsu: The Okitsu River*, 1831-1834. Wereldmuseum Leiden [Coll.nr. RV-1353-25-18].

economic situation.[22] This meant that poor peasants, who provided the nation's food supply, were technically of a higher status than rich merchants, who profited from others. The samurai justified their position through the productivity of their land, which compensated for their personal lack of contribution.[23] However, this social structure is much more ambiguous than it initially appears.[24] In reality, a person's position in society was mostly based on their financial situation, irrespective of their formal status. While it is true that the samurai class was generally more affluent, well-to-do merchants, village leaders, or artisans could live similarly comfortable lives with servants, schooling and luxury. In addition, samurai from low-ranking families could sometimes live in conditions comparable to those of the average commoner.[25]

The inconsistencies between wealth and status are often evident in Hiroshige's Tōkaidō. In *Okitsu: The Okitsu River* (fig. 4) from the *Great Tōkaidō,* a group of people has just come around a

[22] Totman, *A History of Japan*, 228.
[23] Neary, "Class and Social Stratification," 390.
[24] *Id.*, 391.
[25] Totman, *A History of Japan*, 228.

bend, following the curvature of the river. In the background we see a misty landscape that seamlessly blends with the water of Sagami Bay. White rectangles in the distant indicate ships departing, presumably to Edo. A heavy looking man in a *kago* 駕籠 (open palanquin) is being carried by four toiling carriers.[26] Behind them, a horse led by a post boy carries a second traveler, his belly also exposed to the humid air. These men, although travelling luxuriously, are no samurai. They each wear a single *wakizashi* 脇差 (short sword) on their waist sash, an indication that they are commoners, who were only allowed to carry a single sword during the Edo period.[27] Samurai, on the other hand, wore *daishō* 大小, a pair consisting of a long and a short sword.

Despite the lower status of these two men, they were still able to travel in a fashion similar to their social betters. On the highway, a person's mode of transportation was determined by their purchasing power rather than their social status.[28] In this instance, roads functioned as a space outside the lawful norm, since commoners were legally prohibited from riding horses during the Edo period.[29] Therefore, once a commoner drew near enough to Edo—and re-entered the realm dictated by these norms—they would again be subject to the strict regulation of urban society, and not be allowed inside the city on horseback.[30] Why exactly commoners were allowed to ride horses on the road but not in the city is difficult to determine.[31] One possible explanation is that the rider was not actually controlling the horse; rather, they merely sat on horseback while it was being led by a footman.[32]

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[26] A *kago* was a triangular shaped, open box swinging from a horizontal pole. During his travels in Japan, Major Henry Knollys (1886) states that they were "the most clumsy, heavy, and uncomfortable means of transport which could be devised," quoted in Vaporis, *Breaking Barriers*, 221.

[27] Fujiki, *Katanagari*, 142-3.

[28] Vaporis, *Breaking Barriers*, 10.

[29] *Ibid.*

[30] *Id.*, 221.

[31] Vaporis only briefly mentions this law in *Breaking Barriers*, 221, but does not go in much further detail. His reference, the *Kinsei kōtsū shiryō shū* 近世交通史料集 vol. 9, no 896, 388, likely sheds more light on this issue.

[32] Vaporis, *Breaking Barriers*, 221.

Figure 5: Utagawa Hiroshige, *Narumi: The Famous Local Shibori Cloth*, 1833-1834. Wereldmuseum Leiden [Coll.nr. RV-1353-25-41].

Another example of nonconformist transport can be seen in *Narami: The Famous Local Shibori Cloth* (fig. 5). Two groups of travelers are walking down the sloped thoroughfare of Narami. The foremost group consists of three women, two walking and one being carried in a small *kago*. Unlike the previous print, this time only two carriers are needed. It is clear these women are travelers, as walking canes, straw hats and sandals are all iconographic indicators. Behind them, a hunched over woman sits on the back of a horse, led by a post boy. Travelling alone, she has hired a porter to carry her luggage. Inside the small shop on the left we see two men chatting over a cup of tea. On display for sale are the famous Arimatsu *shibori* 絞り (knotted and then dyed textiles). Every post town was known for their famous local product, *meibutsu* 名物. In the Late Edo period, *meibutsu* became extremely popular, with travelers buying these items while passing through towns as tangible memories of their journey.[33] These items included products such as

[33] Nenzi, "Cultured Travelers," 301.

comestibles from locally harvested produce, woodblock prints, fans, or other random paraphernalia that served as a viable souvenir.[34]

At a glance, it seems as though the woman inside the *kago* might be of noble status, perhaps a samurai's wife travelling with her two maidservants. In reality, it is more likely that she is the wife of a wealthy merchant or village head. Aristocratic women in the Edo period travelled inside personal *norimono* 乗り物 (enclosed palanquins) carried by several servants.[35] In contrast, *kago* were often rented out at rest stations or post towns. The two women in front also raise questions about their status. Their short-sleeved kimono's (*kosode* 小袖) indicate that they are married.[36] Yet, according to the state's ideology, married women were bound to the household, expected to conform to family obligations and not leave their village.[37] Only after becoming a mother-in-law, and being mostly released from family obligations, did commoner women have the option to leave the house more often and for longer periods of time.[38] Lastly, it was unusual for women to travel alone in the Edo period, making the woman on horseback a rare sight.[39] It is hard to determine exactly what place in society these women occupied, but their participation in travel exemplifies how Hiroshige portrays the ambiguous social nature of travel spaces, allowing women to re-create their identities in this liminal space.

Obstacles on the Road: Nature's Role in Early Modern Travel

As quoted by Asai Ryōi in the beginning of this article, the wayfarer had to "minimize the difficulties" of travel in order to enjoy it. The difficulties a traveler might encounter along the Tōkaidō manifested itself in different forms. Although the roads were maintained very well, they followed the natural contours of the landscape.[40] This

[34] Vaporis, *Breaking Barriers*, 223.
[35] Nenzi, *Excursions*, 80.
[36] Vaporis, *Breaking Barriers*, 156.
[37] Nenzi, *Excursions*, 54.
[38] *Id.*, 85.
[39] Vaporis, *Breaking Barriers*, 155.
[40] *Id.*, 38. Many European visitors commented on the state of the *Gokaidō* roads. During the 19th-century, the Swiss envoy Aimé Humbert wrote, "[the Tōkaidō] is in certain respects, superior [to the great roads of Europe]," quoted on page 40.

Figure 6: Utagawa Hiroshige, *Hakone: View of the Lake*, 1833-1834. Wereldmuseum Leiden [Coll.nr. RV-1353-25-11].

resulted in many steep mountain passes, dangerous cliffsides and wide rivers that needed to be traversed. It is for good reason that Yasumi Roan 八隅芦庵 gave several precautions to travelers when crossing rivers in his handbook *Ryokō Yōjinshū* 旅行用心集 (Precautions for Travelers).[41] The roads became especially dangerous after long spells of rain or when the winter snow began to melt, which resulted in the rivers getting wider, temporary bridges getting washed away and the currents rushing through with unexpected strength.[42]

Hiroshige's Tōkaidō depicts a great number of scenes where travelers are dwarfed by the surrounding landscape. This compositional strategy metaphorically alludes to how people are always at the mercy of nature. Moreover, it emphasizes the solitude of the many undeveloped areas of the road and the incredible length of such journeys. In *Hakone: View of the Lake* (fig. 6) from the *Great Tōkaidō*, the center of the pictorial plane is dominated by a large mountain of various colorful rocks. The fading blue water on

[41] Vaporis, "Caveat Viator," 475-6.
[42] *Ibid.*

the left leads the eye upwards to a vast mountain range, towered by an impressive snow-covered Mount Fuji. Besides the steep cliffside, we catch a glimpse of Hakone, deeply submerged in the forest and the surrounding mountains. On the right, the unusually large quantity of tiny straw hats and hardly noticeable banner poles waving in the air indicate a *daimyō* procession moving down the mountain pass. Engulfed by the dominating landscape, the samurai are barely visible, their significance put into perspective against the enormity of nature. This steep and crumbling mountain passage does not differentiate between samurai and commoner.

The *Vertical Tōkaidō* lends itself especially well to depicting large stretches of overwhelming nature. In *Kanaya: View of the Ōi River* (fig. 7) we see one of the largest rivers of the *Gokaidō*. Hiroshige places the viewer in the middle of the road, at the apex of a steep hill. The viewer's gaze is directed upwards by a bending line of thatched roofs that gradually turns into hints of people who get smaller and smaller, finally marked as mere dots on the horizon. In contrast to these faint traces of human presence, the river dominates the picture plane, consuming the travelers trying to cross. The river

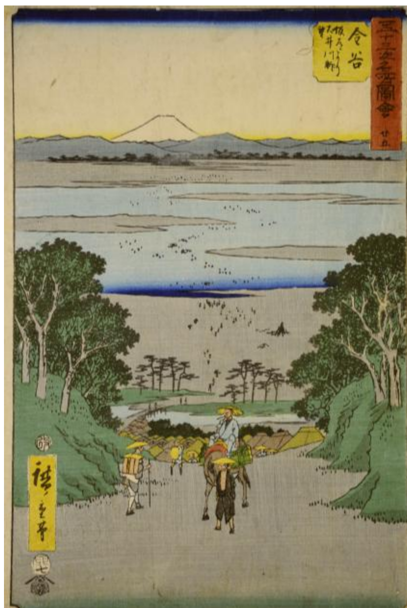

Figure 7: Utagawa Hiroshige, *Kanaya: View of the Ōi River*, 1855. Wereldmuseum Leiden [Coll.nr. RV-2525-221].

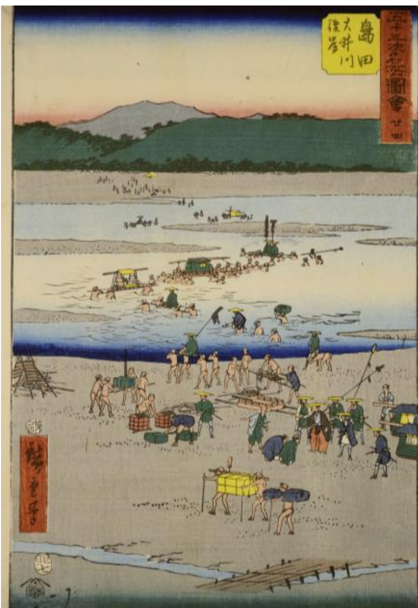

Figure 8: Utagawa Hiroshige, *Shimada: The Suruga Side of the Ōi River*, 1855. Wereldmuseum Leiden [Coll.nr. RV-2525-222].

was too wide and voracious for bridges or ferryboats. Instead, travelers had to rely on locals to transport them across or risk their lives by wading through the heavy currents themselves.[43]

In *Shimada: The Suruga Side of the Ōi River* (fig. 8) the previous scene is shown from the other side. Porters are slowly transporting a *daimyō* procession across the river. The wealthiest samurai are carried in enclosed palanquins, while the less wealthy ride piggyback, elevating them to the same level as commoners who would cross in a similar manner. The fact that rivers caused difficulties is not only noted in Yasumi's previously mentioned handbook, but also by several Westerners who traveled through Japan during the Edo period. On his way to an audience with the shogun, the German scientist Engelbert Kaempfer (1651-1716) wrote about the Ōi river, noting that:

> In the bottom of the river are large, moving rocks. Its waters gush with the speed and power of an arrow, and it cannot be crossed on horseback without knowledgeable, specially appointed guides (of which five have to guide one horse when the water is low, that is, knee-deep). If they lose their passenger, they lose their lives.[44]

By depicting the Ōi river in all its overwhelming vastness, Hiroshige emphasizes what little control people had over nature. The vanishing viewpoint further exemplifies how long this uncomfortable crossing must have been. As seen in the aforementioned example of *Okitsu* (fig. 4), people of low status could still travel relatively luxuriously, which made the river crossing less troublesome. While samurai were generally more affluent and could afford the luxury of an enclosed palanquin (*norimono*), crossing by ladder, platform, or *kago* was available to anyone with the means to pay, whether samurai or peasant.

Other difficulties travelers might encounter during their journey were unexpected weather patterns such as harsh winds, heavy downpours, extreme heat and thick layers of snow. Kaempfer

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[43] Kaempfer and Bodart-Bailey, *Kaempfer's Japan*, 56.
[44] *Ibid.*

Figure 9: Utagawa Hiroshige, *Shōno: Sudden Rain*, 1831-1834. Wereldmuseum Leiden [Coll.nr. RV-1353-25-46].

noted that "[t]he wind, however, is very strong and always cold and carries a lot of snow in winter, but in the dog days it is unbearably hot. Throughout the year the heavens are generous in their supply of water . . ."[45] In *Shōno: Sudden Rain* (fig. 9) of the *Great Tōkaidō*, two groups of travelers are surprised by a sudden shower. Two people are running downhill against the mighty wind, hoping to find cover in the village below. The other group, making its way up the steep mountain, is led by a man clad in a raincoat made of straw, followed closely by two barely dressed porters carrying a *kago* covered with oiled paper to keep out the rain. The trees in the background bend so low, as if about to snap. Rain cascades from the sky in tightly drawn lines, evoking an unpleasant experience. After rain, however, comes sunshine, and in the next print of the series a beautiful, tranquil winter scene is shown in *Kameyama: Clear Weather after Snowfall* (fig. 10). Much like the scene from Hakone, here too we barely see the hats of a passing procession, engulfed by the surrounding icy winter landscape. The rooftops in the background are indicated by a singular line, with no further detail

[45] *Id.*, 55.

Figure 10: Utagawa Hiroshige, *Kameyama: Clear Weather after Snowfall*, c. 1831-1834. Wereldmuseum Leiden [Coll.nr. RV-1353-25-47].

needed as they are completely covered by snow. The image has a dramatic downwards flow to it, emphasized by the parallel lines of trees, slopes and rooftops.

As opposed to in western traditions, Japanese texts are read from top to bottom, and right to left. The Japanese eye is thus accustomed to start reading in the top-right corner. This method alters the way one 'reads' an image.[46] In *Kameyama* the trajectory of the eye moving across the image follows a steep downhill motion. Starting at the castle on top of the hill, the viewer's journey down the mountain is less strenuous than that of the procession moving up. For the contemporary viewer, this is not an upward struggle but rather a pleasant descent, contributing to the image's overall tranquil appearance. In contrast, the sense of urgency in the previous image of *Shōno* is heightened by its diagonal movement up and to the left.[47] The steep road leading up the mountain moves away from the

[46] Jullie Nelson Davis explains this concept in more detail in Davis, *Picturing the Floating World*, 5-8. She uses Hokusai's *Great Wave* and *Red Fuji* as examples to illustrate how one's perception of the image completely changes once read from a different direction.

[47] Ōkubo, *Hiroshige*, 224.

sheltered houses in the valley, finally culminating in a merciless onslaught of wind and rain. The composition plays an important role in conveying the tension or calmness of travel and can therefore severely alter the viewer's perception of the image—and in our case, the road.

The Road from Above: A bird's-eye View of the *Tōkaidō*

Another compositional strategy Hiroshige frequently employed was the bird's-eye view, especially in the *Vertical Tōkaidō*. Some critics of Japanese art contend that such an aerial perspective makes the landscape look flat and ordinary, lacking the emotion and dramatic movement seen in the *Great Tōkaidō*.[48] Nagata Yujirō 永田之次郎 (2004) exemplifies this criticism by arguing that the bird's-eye perspective in *Shirasuka: View of Shiomizaka* (fig. 11) makes it unclear what is the focus of the print.[49] I want to suggest, however, that Hiroshige's bird's-eye view is a compositional strategy that accentuates the social impartiality of travel spaces. By observing from above, the viewer sees the road from a broader perspective. Singular details become harder to distinguish, and the travelers look like ants, trudging along the same road in similar conditions. Considering that the *Vertical Tōkaidō* was published at the end of the Edo period, 20 years after the *Great Tōkaidō*, it makes sense that Hiroshige shows the Tōkaidō from a different angle, since that period saw significant political change in Japan.

The bird's-eye view in *Shirasuka* shows the Tōkaidō winding around a steep, grass-covered hill. The background is largely dominated by a vast expanse of light-blue water, occupied by only a few boats. A variety of travelers are walking up and down the road. Easily recognizable are the porters carrying large boxes of goods from one town to the next. Further up the road two samurai can be spotted, barely identifiable by their two swords drawn as mere lines. Approaching them is a person carrying heavy luggage, followed from a distance by someone clad in a straw raincoat. Faces are

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[48] Nagata, "Utagawa Hiroshige," 12.
[49] *Id.*, 11.

Figure 11: Utagawa Hiroshige, *Shirasuka: View of Shiomizaka,* 1855. Wereldmuseum Leiden [Coll.nr. RV-2525-218].

Detail of figure 11

indistinguishable and at a glance these are all 'just' people walking along the road. Especially the two samurai, depicted without porters, fancy transportation, or a large entourage, embody the common traveler, hinting at the politically unstable future that lies ahead.

When Japan was forced to open its borders to foreign trade in 1853, the nation was hit with a period of domestic turmoil.[50] The edifice of the Tokugawa *bakufu* began to crack and people started to criticize the Neo-Confucian political and social frameworks that had structured Japan for the previous two and a half centuries.[51] These events, in combination with several other internal conflicts, caused the military government to collapse several years later in 1868. The *Vertical Tōkaidō* encapsulates these changing times well. For example, this is exemplified by the relative lack of portrayed *daimyō* processions compared to the *Great Tōkaidō*. This was the

[50] Walker, *A Concise History*, 145.
[51] *Id.*, 154.

Detail of figure 12.

Figure 12: Utagawa Hiroshige, *Mitsuke: Ferry on the Tenryū River*, 1855. Wereldmuseum Leiden [Coll.nr. RV-2488-29].

result of eased regulation by the government, allowing the *daimyō* to reside in the capital, causing less movement of large entourages of samurai between the provinces and Edo.[52]

The trend of lone, traveling samurai continues in several other scenes from the *Vertical Tōkaidō*. In *Mitsuke: Ferry on the Tenryū River* (fig. 12) we see groups of people traversing a wide river via long and narrow, pole-pushed boats. Slightly obscured by a few pine trees, a small teahouse is visible in the foreground. A weary traveler sits on a simple bench, about to be served a rejuvenating beverage. A few other travelers occupy the scene. A porter with heavy cargo, a pilgrim with knapsack, and on the left a lone samurai, his swords (*daishō*) protruding from his waist sash. No one seems to notice his presence; he is just one amongst many. Such a site was uncommon a few decades earlier as is apparent when Yaji and Kita tried to cross a river during their shank's mare. Yaji tried to impersonate a samurai to get a discount, but when the ferryman asked: "Is your honour travelling in a *kago* or on horseback? How many pack loads of

[52] *Id.*, 156.

baggage have you? . . . And your attendants?"[53] Yaji stumbled his words and exposed himself. Besides, the ferryman was not going to give them a discount anyway: "We don't make any reduction in our charges."[54]

The many difficulties encountered along a journey often disregard whether a traveler is of high or low status. What is more important is this person's financial situation. For money, not status, buys one temporary relief from aching feet, grants safe passage across rivers, fills bellies, and buys a soft bed at night. Even so, as Yasumi Roan aptly states: "At breakfast and dinner they [those with servants (i.e., the rich)] should put up with what does not appeal to them and eat it . . ." In other words, the wealthy must humble their expectations while traveling. Unlike their comfortable urban homes, where everything is orderly, travel spaces are impartial, and even the wealthy are at the mercy of the road. The bird's-eye view, so often employed by Hiroshige, accentuates the engulfing environment and changing social landscape of the Edo period. Samurai no longer travel in luxury and are simply portrayed as one amongst many. The perception of travelers in the *Vertical Tōkaidō* as a collective of ants on shank's mare accentuates the declining social order of the late Edo period.

Conclusion

This article has explored evidence that Hiroshige's prints of the *Fifty-Three Stations of the Tōkaidō* offer a vivid portrayal of late Edo period travel spaces, revealing how roadsides were consciously perceived—and actively utilized—by travelers as liminal spaces beyond the structured urban environment regulated by the Tokugawa *bakufu*. Through a close reading of several prints from this artist's *Great* and *Vertical Tōkaidō* series, it becomes evident that a traveler's status held little significance on the road; instead, financial means played a more crucial role. The depiction of women and commoners engaging in modes of transportation that were theoretically only available to samurai, illustrate how travel spaces were indifferent to the Neo-Confucian status system. By stepping

[53] Ikku, *Shank's Mare*, 99.
[54] *Id.*, 100.

beyond the normative realm of urban society, travelers were able to reshape their identities and challenge social hierarchies. Furthermore, I propose that Hiroshige underscores the road's impartiality through clever compositional strategies. By depicting travelers immersed in the surrounding landscapes and employing a bird's-eye perspective, he blurs the distinction between samurai and commoner, reducing all to mere travelers—vulnerable to both the perils and occasional pleasures of the journey itself.

Despite its relatively small corpus of prints, this article highlights a previously unexplored area in scholarship on Hiroshige's *Fifty-Three Stations of the Tōkaidō* prints. While previous studies have examined the Tōkaidō series as general visualizations of Japan's early modern travel culture, this article delves deeper by uncovering their institutional and sociopolitical foundations. In doing so, it reinforces the liminal nature of roadsides and their relationship to the fluid social dynamics of early modern Japan. A more extensive analysis of Hiroshige's multiple Tōkaidō series will certainly uncover the many more potentialities still buried within the undulating landscape of his oeuvre.

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