



Fig. 1. Utagawa Kuniyoshi, *Haru no Kotobuki* (New Year's Congratulations), between 1847 and 1852, woodcut, 36.5 x 25.6 cm (left sheet); 36.5 x 25.4 cm (central sheet 2); 36.6 x 25.5 cm (right sheet), Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Contextualizing *Haru no Kotobuki* by Utagawa Kuniyoshi

Isabelle Nguyen

Translated as “pictures of the floating world,” *ukiyo-e* are large woodblock prints featuring subject matter related to the pastimes of Edo’s (the former name of Tokyo) merchant and artisan castes. The “floating world” refers to Edo’s thriving nightlife in its theatre and pleasure districts.¹ Prints were made by transferring an artist's drawing onto a woodblock, carving out the negative space and then printing it with ink. Each colour in a given image was printed using a different block. In order to execute these prints, publishers would direct a team including a main artist and several other craftsmen.² During the Edo period (1603–1868), the Tokugawa shogunate—the military government—promoted neo-Confucian principles concerned with class and family in order to consolidate power.³ These strict regulations extended towards the arts and resulted in the suppression of entire genres of printmaking.⁴ The aim of this essay is to contextualize *Haru no Kotobuki* (New Year’s Congratulations) (1847–1852) (fig. 1) by Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797–1861) by exploring the extent to which the work reflected or rejected neo-Confucian values related to children and the family. This work depicts a kabuki play—a form of traditional Japanese drama featuring stylized song, mime and dance—during New Year’s season, when actors displayed their New Year’s greetings to the audience.⁵ Kuniyoshi’s print suggests that while kabuki plays adhered to neo-Confucian principles by featuring pious and dignified characters, the irreverent nature of kabuki theatre allowed for freer and more lighthearted representations of adults and children.



Fig. 1. Utagawa Kuniyoshi, *Haru no Kotobuki* (New Year's Congratulations), between 1847 and 1852, woodcut, 36.5 x 25.6 cm (left sheet); 36.5 x 25.4 cm (central sheet 2); 36.6 x 25.5 cm (right sheet), Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Filial piety is a cardinal virtue of Confucianism that restricted how Kuniyoshi depicted children. Confucianism is a moral and religious philosophy derived from Confucius (551–479 BCE), an ancient Chinese philosopher. Japanese scholars travelled to China to study the concept of filial piety as early as the third century. Over time, Japanese scholars added to the literature on this subject in order to adapt the practice of filial piety to the needs of Japanese society and—in the Edo period—of the shogunate. Filial piety constitutes the dual obligations one has in caring for prior and future generations, and although it is centred on the father-son relationship, it also extends to other familial and professional relationships.⁶ Kuniyoshi addresses this practice in *The 24 Paragons of Filial Piety*, a series based on a text of the same title by Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) scholar Guo Jujing (fl. ca. 1295–1321). In a work from this series entitled *Tang Furen* (ca. 1840) (fig. 2), the titular character offers her breast milk to her starving mother-in-law at the expense of her infant son.



Fig. 2. Utagawa Kuniyoshi, *Tang Furen*, from the series “Twenty-Four Paragons of Filial Piety,” ca. 1840, polychrome woodcut print, 22.5 x 35.6 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art. <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/55480>.

Tang Furen embodies filial piety because she prioritizes the well-being of someone who has nurtured her over her own success, which is symbolized by her child. Her story exists as part of a tradition in Chinese and Japanese literature of creating hyperbolic examples of filial piety for common people to emulate.⁷

Kuniyoshi’s *Tang Furen* is similar to *Haru no Kotobuki* in its emphasis on the filial piety of children.⁸ In many versions of the story of Tang Furen, her infant son is described as crying out in protest towards his mother’s actions.⁹ However, in Kuniyoshi’s work, the child’s expression is neutral, and the only sign of gentle protest is his hand reaching out for her right breast. Similarly, while the young girl in the centre of *Haru no Kotobuki* is amused, the fact that she is turned away and hunched over suggests that she is attempting to hide her reaction to the performance. Her reticence differs from the various uninhibited responses of the adults in the audience. These two

children in *Tang Furen* and *Haru no Kotobuki* subdue their childlike impulses as a sign of deference to the adults around them.

A point of departure between the two images is how they treat the relationships between adult women and elderly women. In *Tang Furen*, the titular heroine, despite being an adult, is understood as a pious, self-sacrificing child in relation to her demanding mother-in-law. By contrast, in *Haru no Kotobuki*, the older woman in the upper portion of the central panel casts her glance sideways, allowing the younger women around her to enjoy themselves. The more indulgent demeanour of this elderly woman suggests that kabuki theatre provided a reprieve for women from the rigid social roles they occupied during the Edo period.

The shogunate believed that the ideologies of the previous regime could be eradicated by promoting neo-Confucian values in all spheres of society. However, the *kabuki-mono* were wayward people who defied neo-Confucianism's equalizing principles.¹⁰ Theatres and brothels also clashed with these beliefs, but the shogunate saw them as a necessary evil that kept the larger public entertained. The government sought to regulate these institutions by segregating them in a separate district. Throughout the Edo period, actors and sex workers were excluded from the caste system and were forbidden from having family names or replicating the customs of certain castes.¹¹ Women were banned from performing in 1629, as were children in 1652, as it was believed that their sexually provocative performances and sex work off the stage caused social conflict.¹² Despite how heavily neo-Confucian values were mapped onto the space of the kabuki theatre, many sources describe the theatre—and by extension the playhouse district in general—as a place where women could temporarily abandon their role in society.¹³ In both

Kuniyoshi's *Haru no Kotobuki* and his mentor Utagawa Toyokuni III's (1786–1865) *Odori-keiyō Edo-e no Sakae* (Dance Illustrating the Glamour of Edo) (1858) (fig. 3), the kabuki theatre is represented as a transformative space in which the boundary between performer and audience becomes fluid.



Fig. 3. Utagawa Toyokuni III, *Odori-keiyō Edo-e no Sakae* (Dance Illustrating the Glamour of Edo), 1858, woodblock print on paper.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Odori_Keiy%C5%8D_Edo-e_no_sakae_by_Toyokuni_III.jpg#filehistory.

In *Haru no Kotobuki*, the audience sits in close proximity to the actors. The lack of a stage or any other clear boundary between actor and non-actor has the effect of completely immersing the audience, allowing viewers to transport themselves to the fictive space of the characters and away from their everyday obligations to society. This also explains why the actor is able to get away with his childish display: as an actor, he is able to act more freely than one would in everyday life because he is part of an imaginary world.¹⁴ Toyokuni III's depiction of the July production of *Shibaraku* at the Ichimura-za Theatre in Edo illustrates how walkways were used

by the actors to penetrate the space of the audience. However, since *Shibaraku* was performed in one of the Edo *sanza* (three major) theatres,¹⁵ it would have featured better props and materials to more effectively draw the audience into the narrative. The primarily female audience in *Haru no Kotobuki* reflects the fact that the majority of avid theatregoers were middle- and upper-class women,¹⁶ and further suggests that they experienced kabuki theatre as a form of escape from their social obligations.¹⁷

Much like the kabuki theatres they often depicted, *ukiyo-e* artists were bound by the values of the ruling shogunate. While these military governments varied in their leniency towards the arts, promoting neo-Confucian understandings of class, gender and family was integral to maintaining their power. As an artist working in the late Edo period, Kuniyoshi had to represent these values in his art to a certain extent. In *Haru no Kotobuki*, the Confucian value of filial piety is illustrated by the self-effacing demeanour of the child in the presence of adults. However, because of the understanding of kabuki theatre as a more informal space, Kuniyoshi illustrates the various unrestrained reactions of the young women in the audience. This is not to suggest that the theatre was completely liberating: kabuki actors were marginalized and worked in a highly hierarchical theatre system. For visiting middle- and upper-class women and girls, the theatre district allowed them some degree of relaxation from the strict roles that society imposed on them. *Haru no Kotobuki* offers a glimpse into the complex world of women and girls in the late Edo period as they navigated their roles within a neo-Confucian society.

NOTES

¹ Michael Clarke and Deborah Clarke, "Ukiyo-e," *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art Terms*. *Oxford Art Online*, accessed October 6, 2015, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/>.

² Clarke and Clarke, “Japanese prints,” *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art Terms*. *Oxford Art Online*, accessed October 6, 2015, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/>.

³ Yoko Takakuwa, “Performing Marginality: The Place of the Player and of ‘Woman’ in Early Modern Japanese Culture,” *New Literary History* 27, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 214.

⁴ Tun-Jen Chiang and Richard A. Posner, “Censorship versus Freedom of Expression in the Arts,” in *Handbook of the Economics of Art and Culture*, vol. 1, ed. Victor A. Ginsburgh and David Throsby (Amsterdam; Boston: Elsevier North-Holland, 2006), 317.

⁵ James R. Brandon and Samuel L. Leiter, *Kabuki Plays on Stage: Brilliance and Bravado* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 27.

⁶ Francis L.K. Hsu, “Filial Piety in Japan and China: Borrowing, Variations and Significance,” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1971): 67–68.

⁷ Katherine Carlitz, “Desire, Danger and the Body: Stories of Women’s Virtue in Late Ming China,” in *Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State*, ed. Christina K. Gilmartin et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 112.

⁸ Kuniyoshi’s work may depict a scene from a Soga play, which focuses on the filial piety of two Soga brothers—two historical figures—who set out to avenge their father. As a play that was intended to usher in the New Year, the story also involves the older generation’s duties insofar as they must pass in order for the new generation to flourish. See Brandon and Leiter, 26–29.

⁹ Carlitz, 112.

¹⁰ Takakuwa, 215.

¹¹ As an aside, the first recorded kabuki actor was a woman named Okuni. She performed in the early seventeenth century as a stylish and eccentric male character named Kabuki-Mono, which means “eccentric person.” She inspired many imitators, most of whom were sex workers who performed as men to entertain brothel patrons. See Takakuwa, 215–16, 219.

¹² The reason that women and child actors who engaged in sex work endangered the social order was because men would start conflicts over them. See Earl Jackson, Jr., “Kabuki Narratives of Male Homoerotic Desire in Saihaku and Mishima,” *Theatre Journal* 41, no. 4 (December 1989): 461.

¹³ Takakuwa, 217–18.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹⁵ Faith Bach, “Breaking the Kabuki Actors’ Barriers: 1868-1900,” *Asian Theater Journal* 12, no. 2 (Autumn 1995): 267.

¹⁶ Hilliard T. Goldfarb, “Kabuki Scene with Drummer Sticking out His Tongue at Beauties,” unpublished notes, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Archives, Montreal, September 1, 2005.

¹⁷ I was not able to find anything about humour and sexuality in kabuki as entertainment for women specifically. However, Hayakawa Monta explores how women in the Edo period consumed sexually explicit prints (*shunga*). These prints were seen as humorous as well as titillating; this could be a reflection of how sexual imagery was seen in Edo Japan in general. While women were known to purchase and consume these products, it was considered embarrassing and potentially scandalous if others knew. See Hayakawa Monta, “Who Were the Audiences for *Shunga*?” *Japan Review* 26 (2013): 20–27.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bach, Faith. "Breaking the Kabuki Actors' Barriers: 1868-1900." *Asian Theater Journal* 12, no. 2 (Autumn 1995): 264–79.

Brandon, James R., and Samuel L. Leiter. *Kabuki Plays on Stage: Brilliance and Bravado*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002.

Carlitz, Katherine. "Desire, Danger and the Body: Stories of Women's Virtue in Late Ming China." In *Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State*, edited by Christina K. Gilmartin, Gail Hershatter, Lisa Rofel, and Tyrene White, 101–24. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994.

Chiang, Tun-Jen, and Richard A. Posner. "Censorship versus Freedom of Expression in the Arts." In *Handbook of the Economics of Art and Culture*, vol. 1, edited by Victor A. Ginsburgh and David Throsby, 309–35. Amsterdam; Boston: Elsevier North-Holland, 2006.

Goldfarb, Hilliard T. "Kabuki Scene with Drummer Sticking out His Tongue at Beauties." Unpublished notes, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Archives, Montreal, September 1, 2005.

Hsu, Francis L.K. "Filial Piety in Japan and China: Borrowing, Variation and Significance." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1971): 67–74.

Jackson, Earl, Jr. "Kabuki Narratives of Male Homoerotic Desire in Saihaku and Mishima." *Theatre Journal* 41, no. 4 (December 1989): 459–77.

Monta, Hayakawa. "Who Were the Audiences for *Shunga*?" *Japan Review* 26 (2013): 17–36.

Takakuwa, Yoko. "Performing Marginality: The Place of the Player and of 'Woman' in Early Modern Japanese Culture." *New Literary History* 27, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 213–25.