

Chapter IV: Ukiyo-e Prints

Column 4: The Beginnings of Ukiyo-e Prints, Ukiyo-e, and Two Major Places of Debauchery

Today, the word “*ukiyo*” is written as 浮世 (meaning “fleeting life”) in Chinese characters, but until the Middle Ages, people used the term 憂世, which conveyed the idea that life is difficult and nothing is permanent in this world. However, during the Edo period, people began to part from these pessimistic feelings and adopted a more optimistic view of the world. They believed that life was fleeting, so they tried to enjoy it as much as possible, rejoicing in the world of taste and hedonism. These feelings were reflected in ukiyo-e.

Red-light districts and theater towns were places of amusement where people in the Edo period could escape from their everyday lives and enjoy fictional worlds. Therefore, these places were referred to as sites of debauchery. The beginnings of Ukiyo-e prints were to depict the mores of the common people in these two major sites, -the brothel and the theater town.