

Nihonbashi: Forever the Center of Tokyo

From the days when the best fish and shellfish were sold from boards laid out on the river bank, to today when Japan's leading equities or other trading services are available at the TSE, Nihonbashi has always been the place to go in Tokyo.

Even today “the true Tokyoite” calls himself or herself *edokko*, literally “child of Edo (former name of Tokyo).” This would be someone who was born and raised in the downtown area of Tokyo. True *edokko* have a strong love and respect for the culture, customs, history and traditions of the Edo period (1603-1868). These people have a strong but restrained pride. They don't really care for outsiders but they are never impolite. They care for each other but are never intrusive. This is Edo style.

Explaining Tokyo is not simple

To commemorate the 150th anniversary of the renaming of Edo to Tokyo and the establishment of Tokyo-fu (prefecture), the Tokyo Metropolitan Government is conducting the “Old meets New: Tokyo 150 Years” program. Commemorative events and related PR projects have been held and are planned to assist Tokyo citizens and overseas visitors to rediscover the attractiveness of a Tokyo where tradition and innovation have coexisted from Edo, to modern times, to the present. Tokyo 150 Years will also serve as an opportunity to focus on the Olympic and Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020 and beyond.

Explaining Tokyo is not simple. Visitors to Tokyo often ask, “Where is the city center?” Tokyo is a very complex city; there is very often no simple answer for even the most simple of questions. There are various concentrations of activities in distinct areas all around the city, so there are many different “centers” or main hubs for many various enterprises. But one of the centers for trade and commerce is, and always has been, the area around Nihonbashi Bridge.

In the Edo period one of the great attractions of Nihonbashi Bridge was its view of the thriving fish market and the bustling shops around it. The bridge had long been the center of Edo and



was thick with foot traffic; the neighborhood at its base served the citizens of Edo as a kind of public square. As early as 1606—two years after the bridge was completed—official notice boards appeared on the west side of the south end of the bridge. There, official decrees and instructions to the populace were posted. And from time to time, the reverse occurred, as common people posted satirical verses that sharply criticized the government.

Four impressions of Nihonbashi; (clockwise from top left) Fukutoku Shrine nestled amongst modern buildings; Nihonbashi Bridge in the 1950s; *ukiyo-e* print of Nihonbashi during Edo times; the bridge as it is presently.



“a town where every day a thousand *ryo* is dropped”

Ichi nichi sen ryo ochiru machi was, and is still, often said of Nihonbashi: “a town where every day a thousand *ryo* is dropped” (i.e., changes hands). In the Edo period a *ryo* was the largest denomination of the official central currency. A *ryo*, a large gold ovaloid coin, was a huge amount of money. Simple calculation based on its gold weight at today's rates

makes one worth more than \$600. And that's without factoring in inflation over the intervening two or three hundred years! Of course this is just a popular maxim that was said of the Nihonbashi area but there is no doubt that it was the mercantile center of Edo.

Today still it must be said that Nihonbashi remains the center of Tokyo. “Kilometer zero,” the point from which all distances are measured to the capital, is at the middle of Nihonbashi Bridge. Japan's highway signs indicating the distance to Tokyo actually state the number of kilometers to Nihonbashi. And the area remains one of the centers of Tokyo's financial and business activity. Many corporations, financial institutions, hotels and department stores maintain a major presence in Nihonbashi. The Bank of Japan is there. Nihonbashi's main market is now the Tokyo Stock Exchange (TSE), a world leading stock exchange, and there, still, a lot of money changes hands every day.

It has never been just about the money

Edo-Tokyo has been devastated by disasters and calamities many times in its history. The Great Fire of Meireki in 1657, the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923 and the Second World War are three times Nihonbashi was almost completely destroyed. Nearly nothing remains of old Edo in Nihonbashi today. But there is one thing, the Ikkokubashi Maigoshirase Sekihyo. The “Sign for Lost Children,” a stone pillar signpost at the foot of Ikkoku Bridge, near Nihonbashi Bridge. If you had lost your child in the busy market, you could put a description on one side of the pillar, if you had found a lost child you could put a description on the other side. Hopefully there were many match-ups and many lost children were reunited with their distraught parents. The signpost speaks wonders of the love the people of old Edo had for each other. It has never been just about the money. This spirit of old Edo still lives on in downtown Tokyo today.