

# Troubled Times in Japan, 1830-1868

During the 1830s-60s various parts of the Japanese islands suffered from an unusually high frequency of natural disasters and other problems such as epidemic disease outbreaks, famine, social unrest in the form of riots, peasant uprisings, and mass spontaneous religious pilgrimages, a massive earthquake, and a high rate of inflation. This slide show consists of images from this period.





# The 1830s: Terrible Famine in Many Areas



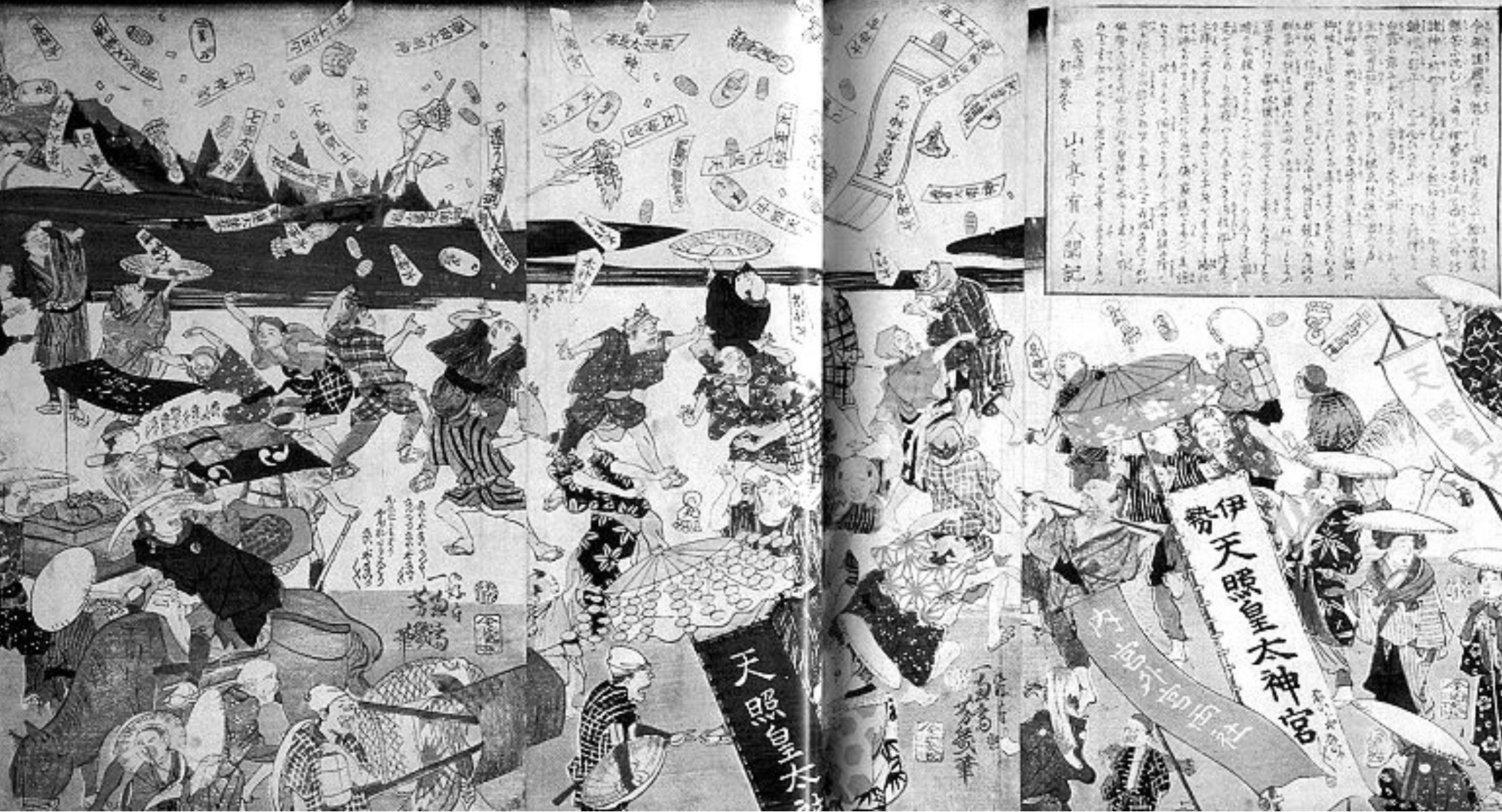
Famine Food (above)

This is a rice cake (*mochi*), but the only problem is that, at best, only about 50% of it consists of rice. The rest is inert material such as clay, chopped grass, chopped tree bark, and so forth.

When farmers had to eat their oxen and other animals (right), famine conditions had become extreme. The 1830s was a particularly bad decade for famine in the Japanese countryside.







Mass religious pilgrimages occurred from time to time (especially one year out of 12 in the calendrical cycle) in medieval and early-modern Japan. They became an especially prominent social phenomenon in the 1830s. Often pilgrimages were sparked by rumors of paper with sacred writing falling from the sky. In this case, the pilgrimage is to the great shrine at Ise, where the imperial ancestors are supposedly enshrined. The banners read "Ise; Great Shrine of Amaterasu." Although not overly political, such mass movements disturbed the ruling authorities and demonstrated the potential power of mobilized popular opinion. They also contributed to the general impression that something was badly wrong and needed to change.





Another mass pilgrimage scene during the so-called “o-kage year” of 1830, a time of particularly frenzied religious activity. Bakufu and local authorities disliked such mass pilgrimages, but there was nothing they could do to prevent or suppress them.



# The Ansei Edo Earthquake, 1855

Late in 1855, a powerful earthquake (M 6.9 - 7.2) shook Edo, the bakufu capital. The violent shaking caused buildings to collapse in many areas, which were then swept by fires. By random chance, an area containing the central offices of the Bakufu were especially hard hit because they were on low-lying land that had been part of the bay only a few hundred years earlier. To onlookers, it seemed as if the cosmic forces had targeted the bakufu directly.



The earthquake resulted in a large number of catfish picture prints. Why catfish? Because giant catfish symbolized earthquakes. At right Edo residents harmed by the earthquake attack a giant catfish. In the upper left hand corner, a group of construction workers rush to rescue the catfish from the angry mob. Why? Think of who would benefit economically from a major earthquake.







Yoshitoshi, *The Spirits of Disease*, ca. late 1850s

Disease, death, lurid crimes, and similar topics were common in the visual art in the last decades of the Tokugawa period. There was an uneasy sense that the world was on the verge of major change.





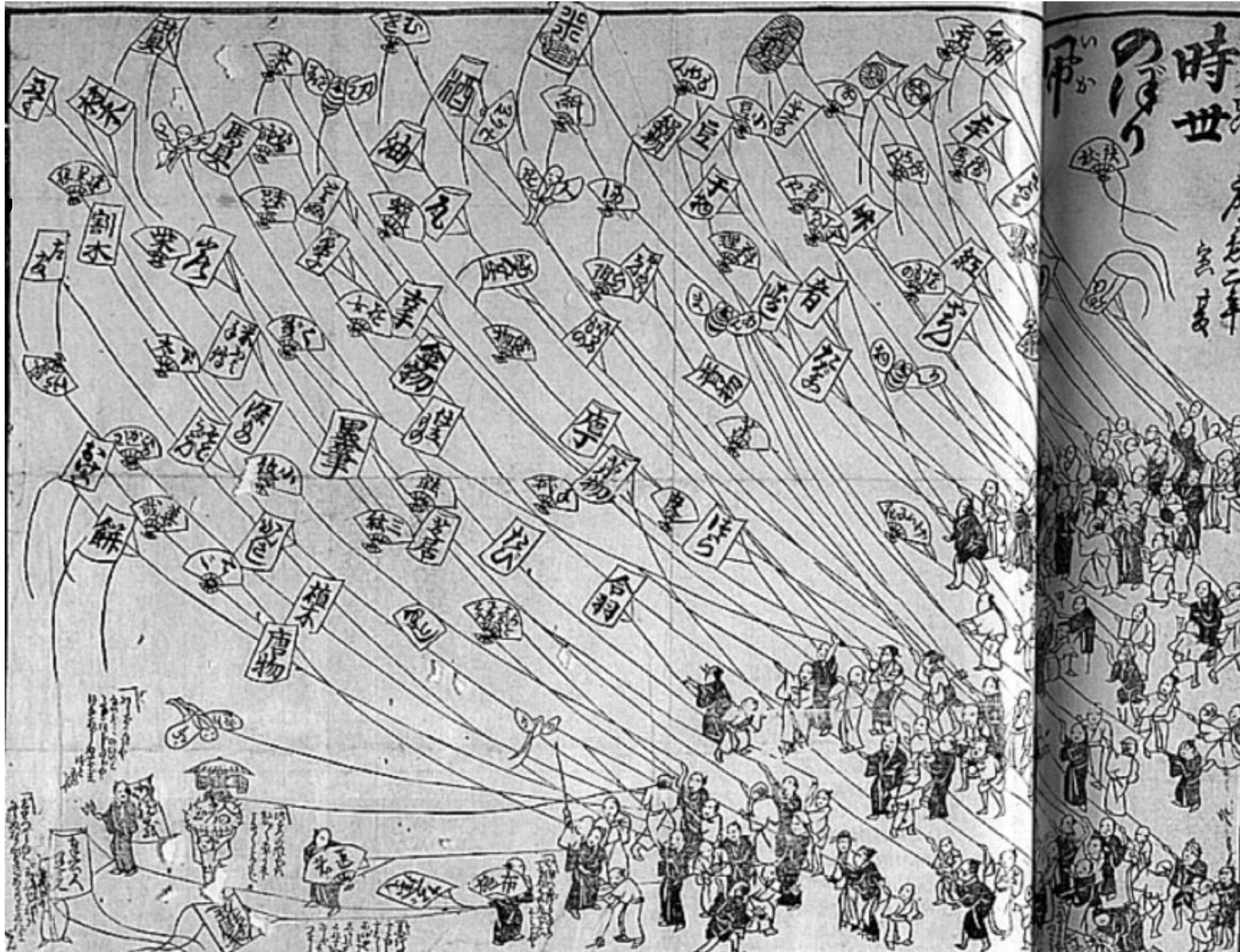
In 1862, a measles epidemic swept through most of Japan, followed in subsequent years by more serious epidemics such as cholera.

Much as the Ansei Earthquake of 1855 gave rise to catfish picture prints, the measles epidemic gave rise to measles prints (*hashika-e*). Both images here the measles demon.





Sky-  
High  
Prices  
ca.  
Early  
1860s



Inflation ravaged the economies of many urban areas in the 1860s, prompting destructive riots (*uchikowashi*) in some cases. Here kites with the names of commodities and services illustrate the problem.