

Nihon-bashi Bridge is now an illustrious Important Cultural Property in Japan, 112 years after its construction. (Nihon-bashi Bridge shown in lower half of photograph)

# Renowned Nihon-bashi Bridge, Traffic Origin on Japan's Major Roadways

Photo: PIXTA

Constructed in 1603, Nihon-bashi Bridge stands in Chuo City, Tokyo and has marked the starting point of Japan's major highways for some 420 years. We spoke with the Nihonbashi Preservation Society about the bridge's long history and the current activities to preserve it.

(Text: Morohashi Kumiko)



Photo: Edo-Tokyo Museum

Tokaido Gojusantsugi Nihonbashi Asa no Kei ("Morning View at Nihon-bashi Bridge" from "Fifty-three Stages of the Tokaido Highway") by Utagawa Hiroshige

Nihon-bashi Bridge is said to have been originally built in 1603, the year the Tokugawa Shogunate was established by Tokugawa Ieyasu. It was initially constructed as a wooden *taiko-bashi*<sup>1</sup> type bridge and designated the following year as the starting point for the five major land routes across Japan: the Tokaido, Nakasendo, Oshukaido, Nikko-kaido, and Koshukaido roads. Fukushima Miyuki of the Nihonbashi Preservation Society describes Nihon-bashi Bridge at the time.

"Nihon-bashi Bridge stood in the center of Edo, an area that bustled with lively fish markets lining the Nihonbashi-gawa River. It flourished as the most prosperous part of Edo thanks to the many wholesal-



Haneda Nihonbashi, a half scale reproduction based on Nihon-bashi Bridge in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, in Tokyo's Haneda Airport Terminal 3



Nihon-bashi Bridge rebuilt in 1911



The *qilin* statue (left) and *karajishi* lion statues (right) installed on the bridge



The Nihon Kokudo Genpyo plaque marking the starting point of Japan's major highways was added in 1972.

ers there. The bridge is depicted in many books and ukiyo-e woodblock prints, including the multi-colored *nishiki-e*<sup>2</sup> prints and *kusazo-shi*<sup>3</sup> woodblock-printed illustrated literature, usually looking so crowded that people could hardly move. In fact, at Haneda Airport Terminal 3 in Tokyo, there is a half-scale replica of the wooden Nihon-bashi Bridge from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, which may give you an image of what the bridge originally looked like when it was made of wood.”

The current bridge, completed over 110 years ago in 1911, is a stone double-arched bridge standing 49 meters long and 28 meters wide. In 1999, it was designated a national important cultural property. It has a statue of the mythical *qilin* beast erected at its center and *karajishi* lion statues at the bridgeheads on each side.

“The *qilin* is a mythical creature from ancient China which, according to legend, can only be seen when a virtuous king or saint appears, and the statue stands at the center of the bridge as a prayer for Tokyo's prosperity. The *Karajishi* lions, the king of all beasts, are thought to have been placed at the bridgeheads to add dignity.”

Bronze for the ornamental elements and illumination, an example of cutting-edge technology at the time, were used to create an exquisite bridge.

Today, the Nihon Kokudo Genpyo plaque is displayed at the midpoint of the bridge as the traffic origin of Japan's major national highways.


“The bridge is also the starting point for the seven major national highways that connect modern Honshu, and many travelers begin their journeys from here. The Nihonbashi Tourist Information Center at the foot of the bridge sells *goshukuba* stamps indicating that the location was once the starting point of the historical major land routes, National Route 1 stickers, and other souvenirs, which many people purchase as mementos of their trip.”

The cityscape around the bridge has been dramati-

cally transformed since Japan's period of rapid economic growth, with the opening of the Metropolitan Expressway built over the bridge in 1963 and other changes. Regretting the changes that have taken place, volunteers came together to form the Nihonbashi Preservation Society. The society continues its work to move underground the overhead expressway passing over the bridge and otherwise restore the landscape around the bridge.

“The preservation society holds an annual ‘bridge washing’ event. Local neighborhood associations, nearby businesses, and others with ties to Nihonbashi gather to clean up the area.”

Fukushima explains why Nihon-bashi Bridge is loved by so many today.

“Nihon-bashi Bridge is not only one of the most famous bridges in Japan. The bridge and its surroundings have also been a center of culture coming out of Tokyo since the early period of modern history. The area leaves a legacy of great historical value that endures today. When you come to Japan, be sure to visit Nihonbashi for feeling some traces of its good old days.” 



“Bridge washing” takes place on the fourth Sunday of July each year.

1. A bridge with a semi-circular curve at the center to form a drum-like shape
2. Multi-colored ukiyo-e woodblock prints that were increasingly popular from late 18th century
3. Popular illustrated reading material written mostly in the phonetic kana alphabets of Japanese. This literature began to be published in the 18-19<sup>th</sup> centuries (mid-Edo period).