On September 3, 1868, the city called Edo ceased to exist. The word Edo literally meant "estuary," referring to the irregular topography of its location—bayside and riverside lowlands rising slowly to westerly hills, land intersected by rivers, streams, and marshes that led to and formed the northwest liminal of a great salt-water bay.

Edo's new name became Tokyo, the "Eastern Capital." This grand title, a self-nomination for equal status with other great capitals of the world, was one of many aspirational gestures of the Meiji government that replaced the deposed Tokugawa shogunate. Japan's new leaders were intent on achieving parity, or the perception of parity, with the powerful nations of the West.

As the seat of the shogunate and de facto capital of late-feudal Japan, Edo's population is estimated to have reached one million by the early decades of the eighteenth century, making it one of the largest cities in the world. Hundreds of daimyō lords who presided over fiefs or domains throughout the land were required to take up part-time residence in Edo annually. Commerce boomed. Popular culture thrived. Samurai warriors without wars became bureaucrats—often, like Kiyochika's family, relegated to lowly posts and a precarious existence.

When Commodore Perry's gunboat diplomacy in 1853 and 1854 forced the Tokugawa rulers to open the country to foreign trade and relations, the greatest immediate visual impact of this Western intrusion did not take place in Edo. Rather, it was to be seen in nearby Yokohama, at the time a fishing village located south of Edo. Yokohama quickly became the most dynamic and cosmopolitan of several "treaty ports" that were opened to foreign residence and commerce, beginning in 1859. It was this little village transformed into a bustling foreign enclave that inspired the first sustained burst of Japanese artistic representations of Western material culture and sartorial fashions—the colorful (and often highly imaginative) genre of woodblock prints known as "Yokohama pictures" (Yokohama-e).

It was only after Edo became Tokyo that the great boom in "Westernization" prints took place, centering on the renamed capital. This coincided with the new government's ardent campaign to eradicate "evil customs of the past" and seek knowledge "throughout the world." (The words appear in a famous "Oath in Five Articles" promulgated in April 1868.) "Civilization and enlightenment" (bunmei kaika) became a resonant slogan of the times, with both parts of the conjunction understood to refer to culture and progress as manifest in the West. This was the background to the glittery boosterism seen in the flood of Tokyo-centered woodblock prints that became so voguish in the 1870s and 1880s, celebrating not just Westernization of Tokyo's physical features, but of its upper-class inhabitants as well. Thus the generic name "enlightenment pictures" (kaika-e).

Kiyochika's return to Tokyo in 1874, after years of self-imposed exile in support of the deposed Tokugawa regime, thus took place just six years after the capital acquired its new name and embarked on its epic course of transformation along Western lines. Telegraph wires had appeared here and there on the landscape before the fall of the feudal regime, but other aspects of Westernization were just making an entrance. Wheeled vehicles, for example, were prohibited under the Tokugawa shogunate (they were deemed dangerous on the mostly narrow roads), and the rikishaw seems to have made its first Japan appearance in Tokyo in 1869. Horse-drawn carriages were another post-Edo innovation. The first railway line in Japan, from Yokohama to Tokyo, was inaugurated in 1872.

The "brick shopping row" (rengagai) of three-story structures in the Georgian style that became famous as Tokyo's Ginza area only materialized in 1873, following a fire that destroyed the neighborhood the previous year. The first gas-fueled streetlights appeared in the capital in 1874. (Electric power did not become available at large until 1886.) On the other side of the coin, the mansions of the daimyō, whose fiefs were
abolished and replaced by prefectures in 1871, had been vacated and largely left unattended—making absence as conspicuous a presence as new technologies and styles when Kiyochika made his way back to the great metropolis.

It was not until two decades after his return to Tokyo, when nationalism swamped his emotions and he redirected his talent to depicting Japan’s emergence as a powerful practitioner of modern warfare against China and Russia, that Kiyochika became a champion of throwing off “evil customs of the past.” Warships, artillery, soldiers and sailors in Western uniforms, days and nights filled with gunfire and gun smoke became his new passion—in woodblock prints every bit as multicolored and celebratory as the earlier, non-belligerent “enlightenment pictures” of fellow artists, from which he had so noticeably distanced himself. Yet even in these later propaganda prints we see his fascination with night and the play of light.

However we may explain his later escape from melancholy, Kiyochika’s “Famous Views of Tokyo,” now regarded as his finest accomplishment, are the very antithesis of celebration. Gradations of light capture his attention. Darkness beckons. Day or night, singly or in couples or in crowds, the figures on streets, pathways, and public areas of the new capital seem enveloped in silence—disengaged observers of the passing of old ways. There is little hint of what lay ahead for the city, the nation, the artist himself.

See the chapter “Kiyochika’s War” in Throwing Off Asia II by John W. Dower