

Hotei Blog - Spring 2009

By: Joshua Mostow, *University of British Columbia*



The Lens of Kabuki

Brill has re-launched its Brill Japanese Studies Library (BJSJL), and I have agreed to act as Editor-in-Chief of the series, working with Chris Goto-Jones, *University of Leiden*, Caroline Rose, *University of Leeds* and Kate Wildman Nakai, *Sophia University, Tokyo*. John Carpenter, *SOAS*, will be heading up a new series on Japanese Visual Culture. Hotei has recently published John's catalogue of the impressive Lusy collection of surimono (*Reading Surimono: The Interplay of Text and Image in Japanese Prints*, 2008).

Another title in Hotei's flourishing list is *The Hundred Poets Compared: A Print Series* by Kuniyoshi, Hiroshige and Kunisada (2007), which I co-authored with Henk Herwig. Henk and his wife Arendie, who have become experts in Tenpô era actor-prints, were introduced to me by Hotei founder Chris Uhlenbeck. Given my earlier research on *The One Hundred Poets (Hyakunin Isshu)* poetry collection, we formed a natural team to try to decipher the elaborate associations made between classical poetry and kabuki in the series *Ogura nazorae Hyakunin Isshu*. Working on the series, I experienced a sharp learning curve about all matters connected to kabuki.

With this experience under my belt, I decided to teach a new course on kabuki at the University of British Columbia, in Vancouver this Spring. Many of the plays that appear in our book have been translated into English; there is a series of DVDs now out from NHK of performances from the Kabukiza; and there are a number of wonderful websites of actor-prints, as well as such books as Henk and Arendie's *Heroes of the Kabuki Stage* (Hotei, 2004).

Reading the plays again—and perhaps a little more carefully since I was now lecturing on them!—I discovered many things I wish I could have included in *The Hundred Poets Compared*. For example, I think I may have found what could have been the inspiration for at least the part of the series that is related to kabuki. In Act VIII of *Chûshingura* (The Treasury of Loyal Retainers), the narrator/chanter quotes Yoshitsune's poem from the *Hyakunin Isshu*. Certainly it would have been easy to make a print showing Tonase and Konami in the scene, with Yoshitsune's poem above, but that might have been too simple. More intriguingly, Yoshitsune's poem (number 91), in *The One Hundred Poets Compared*, connects to a scene from the play *Onna Seigen* (figure A). However, both the preceding and subsequent poems—numbers 90 and 92—are compared to scenes from *Chûshingura*: print 90 (figure B) shows Moronao attempting to seduce Hangan's wife, Kaoya, while print 92 shows a scene from a variant *Chûshingura*, *Taiheiki chûshin kôshaku*, though the scene is very similar to the meeting between O-Karu and her brother Heiemon in the original. In other words, it is as if the producers of the series have put brackets around one of their original sources of inspiration.

The One Hundred Poets Compared series was started in response to the Tenpô Reforms, instituted in 1842. Woodblock prints of famous actors were banned, and publishers and artists had to find other topics. Kuniyoshi, Hiroshige, and the writer Tanekazu commenced the series in 1844, depicting scenes from famous plays, using

images of generic figures only to circumvent censorship. Hence, print 7 shows Nagoya Sanzaburô in the kabuki play *Ukiyozuka hiyoku no inazuma* of 1823. One of the things I have realized through teaching kabuki is that even when the figure appears unrelated to the kabuki stage, there may still be a connection. Print 21 (figure C), for example, shows Umewakamaru, whose tragic story derives from the medieval noh play *Sumida-gawa*. He is shown with the slave-trader Shinobu Sôta (not named in the noh play). The Sôta character was very active in kabuki and appears in many plays associated with the “Sumida River World” (*Sumida-gawa mono*), most famously in combination with *Seigen Sakura-hime mono* such as *The Scarlet Princess of Edo* (*Sakura-hime Azuma bunshô*). Despite it not being related immediately to a kabuki play, contemporaneous viewers no doubt made the connection with *The Scarlet Princess* when they saw this print.

A similar link is present in print 20 of the Chinese paragon Yü Jang (figure D). In *Chûshingura*, the Heiemon tells how he dressed as a beggar for three months, looking for an opportunity to avenge his master’s enemy—a strategy that would remind readers of Yü Jang disguising himself as a beggar and waiting under a bridge to kill his lord’s foe. Indeed, in Act IX the hero of the play, Ôboshi Yuranosuke, is specifically compared to Yü Jang. Thus prints which at first glance seem unrelated to the stage, actually have deep connections to it in the popular imagination. The more I study this subject, the more I realize how the lens of kabuki transformed history as seen by the Japanese of the Edo period.



About the Author

Joshua S. Mostow, Professor in the Department of Asian Studies at the University of British Columbia, received his Ph.D. from the Comparative Literature and Literary Theory Program of the University of Pennsylvania. He has published extensively on the relationship of Japanese literature and the visual arts, and recently served as Adjunct Professor in the School of Women’s Studies, Josai International University.