JAPAN DIGEST

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An Introduction to Kabuki

January 1998

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Just step inside a kabuki theater and you will hear shouts from the audience. These shouts, called *kakegoe* (ka-ke-go- eh) are actually shouts of encouragement or recognition made by individual audience members calling out the names of the actors or their affiliations. Upon hearing *kakegoe,* most Japanese people immediately think, "Ah, that's kabuki." Looking around, you will also see the audience eating and drinking freely between the scenes or even during the performance. Spectacular and flamboyant, joyful and tearful, kabuki gives the audience the pleasure of a trip to another world.

The word "kabuki" is usually written with three Chinese characters: *ka* (songs), *bu* (dance), and *ki* (skills). But it actually derives from the classical Japanese verb kabuki meaning "to incline." It also carries the meaning of something eccentric or deviating from the norm. The action in kabuki plays commonly revolves around Buddhist notions such as the law of retributive justice and the impermanence of things. Confucian traditions of duty, obligation, and filial piety are also expressed on stage. Historically, kabuki performances have been "off-beat," employing flamboyant costumes, elaborate makeup, and exaggerated body movements to create a sense of the spectacular. This may sound strange to those who imagine that Japanese people highly value harmony and conformity in society. It is ironic that many Japanese people take pride in kabuki as being one of Japan's cultural treasures, but similar eccentric behavior in actual life is highly disapproved of.

The History of Kabuki

According to tradition, kabuki was founded in 1603 by a Shinto priestess named Okuni. Deliberately provocative, she and her troupe of mostly women performed dances and comic sketches on a temporary stage set up in the dry riverbed of the Kamogawa River in Kyoto. Okuni dressed like a man and wore a cross, probably imported from Portugal, around her neck to highlight her eccentricity. Her troupe gained national recognition and their plays evolved into kabuki that would later become one of the three major classical theaters of Japan.

During the Edo period (1603-1868), when kabuki was fully established as a popular theatrical form, distinction between the samurai class and the commoners (peasants, artisans, and merchants) was more rigidly observed than at any other time in the history of Japan. Kabuki actors were social outcasts, lower than merchants, until the Meiji Restoration in 1868. They were often called *kawara kojiki* or "beggars of the riverbed."

The art of kabuki was cultivated mainly by the merchant class, in contrast with Noh theater that was sponsored and refined by the ruling class. Ranked lowest in the social hierarchy, merchants had become increasingly powerful economically, but had to remain socially inferior in accordance with the rigid social hierarchy. Kabuki, as the commoners' chief form of entertainment, was strictly regulated and censored by the Tokugawa shogunate for fear that kabuki should cause social disruption and possible contamination of the ruling class. Therefore, kabuki, like prostitution, was licensed and restricted to segregated areas in big cities, like Edo (Tokyo) and Osaka. Although fiercely suppressed by the shogunate, kabuki was significant to the commoners as the artistic means by which to express their suppressed emotions under such restrictive social conditions.

Kabuki as Subversion

One fundamental theme in kabuki theater is the conflict between humanity and the feudalistic system. Historically, both playwrights and kabuki audiences were intensely interested in current affairs among the samurai classes as well as the scandals of the commoners. To portray these was no easy task, however, because the ruling shogunate strictly banned the depiction of contemporary events on stage, especially those concerning samurai. In order to avoid the censorship, the playwrights simply changed the names of characters and set such events in the remote past, even though the true characters and events were obvious to all. For example, the play *Kanadehon Chushingura* ("The Forty-seven Samurai") was based on the true story of the vendetta carried out by the loyal retainers from Ako in 1703. The actual historical figure Oishi Kuranosuke became Oboshi Yuranosuke on the kabuki stage; his son Chikara became Rikiya in the play. The setting was also changed to Fourteenth-century Kamakura.

This "matching" of present and past events and disguising the names of the characters is called *mitate* (double meaning). *Mitate* was a very popular, transparent device used in kabuki and the earlier Noh theater that greatly influenced kabuki. The audience could easily identify the actual contemporary events from their fictional parallels. But kabuki performances broke no laws. *Mitate* allowed the commoners to criticize the ruling class from within their own social standing.

Yatsushi (dual identity) is the theatrical device where a major figure in the kabuki play appears in disguise at first. Then later, at a crucial moment, he reveals his true identity. For example, a character who looks like a monk might reveal his identity as a notorious thief. Like *mitate*,

yatsushi provided the means for commoners to portray current events on stage without the fear of reprisal.

Kabuki's Influence on Contemporary Drama

Yatsushi is a common device in Japanese samurai dramas and television cartoons today. *Toyama no Kin-san* (Samurai Kin-san), one of the longest-running and most popular historical (samurai) television dramas, is a good contemporary example of *yatsushi*. Kin-san is the alias of Judge Toyama, who disguises himself as a commoner. By involving himself with the disenfranchised and solving their problems, he comes to understand their feelings. This understanding enables him to pursue his police duties more effectively. Most episodes include a scene where Kin-san fights against villains. During the struggle, Kin-san removes his jacket to reveal a tattoo that identifies him. In court, Judge Toyama (Kin-san unveiled) assumes his true identity and makes a final judgement.

The *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* and *Pretty Warrior Sailor Moon,* created in Japan but also aired in the United States, are additional contemporary examples of *yatsushi*. The human manifestations of the Power Rangers are ordinary fun-loving school children. When an episode's antagonist becomes destructive, these school children instantly transform into ninja like super heroes. Distinguishable only by the color of their uniforms, they strike a variety of theatrical stylized poses, called *mie,* highly reminiscent of kabuki acting skills.

The Art of Kabuki

Kabuki is a highly stylized performing art that combines acting, dancing, and music in an extraordinary spectacle of form, color, and sound. *Mie* is one of the most impressive examples of *kata* or stylized forms of acting that are the external representation of a character's feeling. *Mie* is demonstrated in the climatic moments in the course of a performance when the actor strikes an exaggerated, expressive pose, usually timed to the beating of wooden clappers. These poses require a disciplined use of the body to heighten the excitement and to display the skill of the actors.

One might assume that there is no room for creativity once art has been stylized and fixed. However, *kata* is one of the basics that kabuki actors must learn. The energy for creativity comes from the actors' attempts to break through the rigidity of form, *kata*, without destroying its artistic essence. In Japanese society where conformity is highly valued, deviating from the norm requires a tremendous amount of energy. This energy is often the source of creativity.

The Preservation of Kabuki

After World War II, the United States occupying authorities considered kabuki barbaric and dangerous because of its associations with feudal ideas that were contrary to the ideas of Western democracy. However, it was during this period that American scholars identified and appreciated kabuki's cultural significance and made great efforts to preserve it. This recognition contributed to the elevation of kabuki's status.

Although it would appear that kabuki benefitted from its new respectability, some would argue that once it was regarded as a National Treasure, kabuki lost its original identity and dynamic ties to the common people. In the refined theater of contemporary kabuki, the critical subversive spirit that was so central to its origins has been compromised. Still, in recognition of kabuki's beginnings, some kabuki actors, even those ranked as Living National Treasures, still sometimes call themselves "beggars in silk garments."

Selected Kabuki-related web sites

Kabuki for Everyone
http://www.fix.co.jp/kabuki/kabuki.html
Kabuki: Traditional Theatrical Arts
http://asnic.utexas.edu/asnic/countries/japan/kabuki.html

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The National Clearinghouse for U.S.-Japan Studies is made possible through the generous support of the Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership.