

Stage and Spectacle in an Age of Maps

Kabuki and the Cartographic Imagination
in Nineteenth-Century Japan

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ONE of the iconic images of the theater in nineteenth-century Japan is a map from Shikitei Sanba's 式亭三馬 1803 *Shibai kinmōzui* 戲場訓蒙図彙, an illustrated encyclopedia of the theater, that depicts the interior of a theater—including not just stage but also dressing and costume rooms, the musicians' room, and various sections of the audience with ticket prices.¹ The map itself is an odd mixture of different kinds of knowledge, both recording in great detail a range of information relating to real spaces and real theaters—pointing out, for instance, differences in positioning between the theaters of the Sakaichō-Fukiyachō 堺町・葺屋町 area and the Kobikichō 木挽町 area—and simultaneously interpolating that information into an abstract cosmography of the theater as a world. This, after all, is the conceit of Sanba's book, one of the most often reprinted and widely circulated works of theater reference in the nineteenth century: it is written entirely as if it were a guidebook to a foreign land, the world of the theater, and contains sections on the climate, geography, customs, and people of this world. In his *kanbun* preface, Sanba notes how “You Xitang 尤西堂 has turned the world into a theater and here Sanba is turning the theater into a world,” literally turning inside out the idea that “heaven and earth are one great stage,” a phrase found throughout Sanba's writings and those of his contemporaries.²

During the course of the nineteenth century, thinking about kabuki became broadly preoccupied with questions of space and place. In many instances this was a matter of the real spaces the theater occupied in cities like Edo, and there are descriptions of the theater districts in works like *Edo meisō zue* 江戸名所図会, maps of the theater district detailing



Fig. 1. The stage as a world. From Shikitei Sanba's *Shibai kinmōzui* 劇場訓蒙図彙 (1803). Collection of the author.

not just the place of the theaters but also the theater teahouses, baths, and pawn shops, even diagrams outlining the structure of stages and dressing rooms. At the same time, a different geography of the stage emerged from contact with writings about theatrical practices beyond Japan. The theater of China—and, to a lesser extent, Europe—became sources of fascination for nineteenth-century connoisseurs, commentators, and historians of kabuki, and the image that emerged of Chinese theater in particular provided a conceptual grid through which—and a vocabulary by means of which—kabuki could be refashioned and reconceptualized: understood no longer as “the source of all dissipation in the world,”³ as one commentator put it in 1830, but as a local iteration of the universal phenomenon of theater. And at the heart of the intersection of geography and theater in this period lay a single metaphor, that “heaven and earth are one great theater,” or, rendered more colloquially, that “all the world’s a stage.”

These different impulses—to map the spaces of the theater, to understand the geography and ethnography of theater in the world, and to comprehend the social world of man as its own form of theatrical spectacle—each, in its own way, drew on and contributed to what Marcia Yonemoto has suggestively called the “vivid geographic imagination” of this period, one aspect of this imagination often overlapping with or commenting on another.⁴ The idiom of geography

became a way of comprehending the theater in the nineteenth century, but turned around, the theater also became a way of mapping social reality—of giving it a form, and thus making it intelligible.

The move toward understanding kabuki's place within a broad history of world theater finds its clearest expression in *Gekijō ikkan mushimegane* 劇場一観顕微鏡 (A Look at the Theater through a Microscope), a work written in 1829 by Kimura Mokurō 木村黙老—essayist, literary historian, and confidant to Kyokutei Bakin 曲亭馬琴. *Mushimegane* was intended, wrote Mokurō, for “theatrical novices” (*shibai kenbutsu no shoshinsha*) to provide an introduction to “viewing the theater” (*shibai kenbutsu no mikata*); the microscope of the title, Mokurō explains, was intended to convey both the introductory nature of the work and the level of detail at which he would present his findings.⁵ But the figure of the microscope is also suggestive of a different aspect of the work: Mokurō's taxonomic impulse, his drive, that is, to understand his subject—kabuki—within a larger classificatory system: the theater.

In many ways, Mokurō's book is typical of a genre that began to proliferate in the late eighteenth century and aimed to record, explain, and define various theatrical “practices” (*kojitsu kisoku* 故實規則); indeed, *Mushimegane* includes a bibliography listing twenty-two of the most well known titles, beginning with Sanba's *Shibai kinmōzui*, and the body of *Mushimegane* is in many ways a systematization of earlier work on kabuki. But in his preface, Mokurō frames his study in a very different way than Sanba, not as an imaginary geography of the theater but as a quite literal emplotting of kabuki against a grid made up of both temporal and spatial axes. “The theater (*shibai* 劇場) originated in the distant past,” writes Mokurō, “with the ancient customs of *kagura* 神樂 turning in the Heian period into *shirabyōshi* 白拍子 and then *sarugaku* 申樂. It was later called *dengaku* 田樂, and has recently transformed into *kabuki*.”⁶ Nowhere in *Mushimegane* does Mokurō present the *terminus a quo* of most previous histories of kabuki, the quasi-mythical figure of Okuni who even now too often appears as an originary figure in theater histories. And in Okuni's place, we have not another figure, a different figure, but rather a genealogy: a slow transformation of theatrical practice over a millennium.

Even as he establishes a genealogy of theatrical practice within Japan, however, Mokurō also frames the history of Japanese theater as belonging to yet a more general phenomenon of theater, of which the Japanese

case is but a particular example. “Nowhere is theater not performed,” continues Mokuurō, “whether in distant foreign countries—as recorded in *Tales of the Seven Indias* (*Shichi Tenjiku-banashi* 七天竺話)—in the various lands of China—as recorded in *News from the Northern Sea* (*Hokkai ibun* 北海遺聞)—or, more close by, in the various provinces and islands of Japan.”⁷ Here, in addition to an historical genealogy, Mokuurō offers a spatial framework, and in each instance the impulse is the same: to move both diachronically and synchronically to create a frame of reference within which he can de-particularize the theatrical practices of nineteenth-century Japan, seeing the history of kabuki not as the history of a discrete phenomenon, but as an instance of a broader set within which it is encompassed. What emerges in Okuni’s place—what emerges in place of the particular history of kabuki—is something rather profound: an abstract concept of the theater (*shibai* 芝居·劇場·雜劇); a concept able to articulate the connections between and among theatrical practices across time and space; a concept that sees kabuki as a particular instance of a general category.

Already over a century earlier, Arai Hakuseki 新井白石—the scholar, shogunal advisor, and economist—had sketched, in his “Notes on Actors” (“Haiyūkō” 俳優考), a framework for a comparative history of the theater, noting at the opening of the essay that “the origins of acting in the different courts is a matter that is not yet known,” and proceeding with a detailed philology of particular instances of acting in classical texts; but even Hakuseki’s essay, which circulated in manuscript until the early twentieth century, lacks a unified concept of theater that encompasses and expresses the variety of practices he details.⁸ It is the concept of actor rather than of theater that provides the essay its framework and unity; it is what allows Hakuseki to consider the histories of *zaju* 雜劇 and *sarugaku* together, and to translate the one into the other. What he is missing is a kind of hypothetical equivalence, those “tropes of equivalence” that Lydia Liu has suggested occupy “the middle zone in translation.”⁹ And it is precisely this middle zone that we find in Mokuurō’s essay: the idea of *shibai* 芝居—a concept rendered alternately with the characters we now read as *gekijō* 劇場 and *zatsugeki* 雜劇, the Japanese equivalent of *zaju*—very much the sort of “makeshift invention” that Liu suggests is the hallmark of this sort of translanguaging practice.¹⁰ Here *shibai* refers not to kabuki in its particularity, as it often does in the nineteenth century, but to a range of theatrical traditions

abstracted from particular practices and locations, very much in the way that the term is now used.

In the century between Hakuseki's death in 1725 and the publication of Mokurō's *Mushimegane* in 1829, a great deal had changed and an abstract idea of the theater that was able to function in a translingual environment was both more thinkable and in many ways more urgent. Hakuseki's work is based entirely on a philological approach to texts like the *Mencius* 孟子, the *Shiji* 史記, and the *Guoyu* 國語—or in the Japanese case the *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 and *Genji monogatari* 源氏物語—but over the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries there is an enormous growth in exposure to—and knowledge of—foreign theatrical practices in Japan. The most immediate site of this exposure was Nagasaki, and the dictionaries compiled by the Nagasaki interpreters are filled with references to theatrical terms and role types, some even devoted entirely to theatrical subjects. At the same time, references to foreign theater—some quite brief, others more extended—appear in a remarkable range of eighteenth and nineteenth century sources that report—with varying degrees of authority—on foreign customs.

One of the most striking and most widely copied and circulated manuscript sources is the record of a conversation held in 1725—the year of Hakuseki's death—between Ogyū Hokkei 荻生北溪—the jurist and younger brother of Ogyū Sōrai 荻生徂徠—and Zhu Peizhang 朱佩章, a Chinese physician resident in Nagasaki. Hokkei, serving as a liaison for the eighth shogun, Tokugawa Yoshimune 德川吉宗, enquires about a range of topics and issues, including theatrical practices ranging from subject matter and the construction of plots to the composition of signs and advertising and the names of various role types. The record of the exchange between Hokkei and Zhu Peizhang—mediated by the interpreter Fukami Arichika 深見有隣—suggests how intimately the abstraction of particular practices into general categories is tied to the process of translation and the positing of “tropes of equivalence.” Hokkei asks whether there are specific areas designated for the performance of “*shibai* kabuki, *jōruri*, *karakuri* and such,” to which Zhu responds that “*shibai* and *odori kyōgen*”—that is, theater and dance plays—“are known collectively as *ju* 劇, or colloquially as *xi* 戲,” and that there are no fixed theater districts in China.¹¹ It is precisely in these sorts of translingual exchanges that the categories of theater begin to be freed of specific and

local references and able to act as taxonomic categories in a way that—a century later—Mokurō would deploy them.

One of the most suggestive aspects of this exchange is how little of contemporary Chinese theatrical practice seems to have been known in Japan in the early eighteenth century, and how a century later many of Zhu Peizhang's answers had become common knowledge. There was, in particular, a great deal of interest in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in what Chinese theaters looked like. Images of stages appear in a range of works, from an 1810 account of a shipwreck in Taibei that contains an illustration of a street theater and records that “theaters are extremely common, with over 40 of them,” to more widely circulated and comprehensive treatments of the theater like *Shibai gakuya zue* 戲場楽屋図会 from 1800, and *Yakusha kijinden* 俳優畸人伝 from 1833.¹² *Morokoshi kidan* 唐土奇談, a remarkable work from 1790, contains a variety of images, including one of a theatrical sign and another of the novelist and dramatist Li Yu 李漁. And Chinese role types—which Zhu lists in some detail—provide what would become a widespread way of understanding kabuki's own role types with *sheng* 生 translating *tachiyaku* 立役, *jing* 淨 *akunin* 悪人, and *dan* 旦 *onnagata* 女形. In *Mushimegane*, Mokurō uses Chinese role types to gloss explanations of terms like *tachiyaku* and *onnagata*, a practice, he notes, that he has borrowed from *Morokoshi kidan*.

This impulse to translate the particularities of Japanese theater out of Japanese and into a kind of transcendental category of theatrical convention in a work aimed entirely at a Japanese audience suggests the degree to which, by the middle decades of the nineteenth century, something like what Benedict Anderson has called the logic of seriality had become both thinkable and necessary for understanding the worldliness of Japanese culture.¹³ Here, Japanese theatrical practices are comprehended not in terms of their particularities, but as part of a larger series or universal set: theater *tout court*. This would allow, for example, for Japanese theater itself to become transcendent, and to be appreciated by a foreign audience. Thus *Shibai gakuya zue* includes not only an image of a Chinese stage, but also an account of a Dutch theatergoer who had visited Dōtonbori in Osaka and provided a number of gifts to the actors, including a handwritten note in Dutch in which he had he praised the theater of Osaka over that of Edo and Kyoto—not, one imagines, a portrait of Carl Peter Thunberg, who had

visited the Osaka theater district Dōtonbori in 1776 as part of the Dutch legation to Edo, and who recorded in his *Voyages* that the experience was “a bizarreness approaching the ridiculous.”¹⁴

Nor was *Shibai gakuya zue* the only work to deploy the conceit of a Dutch appreciation for the Osaka stage. A decade-and-a-half later, in 1815, *Shikankoku ichiran* 芝翫国一覽—written, illustrated, and printed by members of Nakamura Shikan’s 中村芝翫 (Utaemon III 歌右衛門) fan club—included a framed Western portrait of the great Osaka actor along with what is described in the text as a “Dutch *kyōka*.”¹⁵ At the same time, throughout the text, *Shikankoku ichiran* is shot through with the idiom of the Chinese stage, providing what Anderson calls “an unself-conscious [*sic*] standardization of vocabulary” that “radically overrides any formal division ... between local and foreign,” creating a peculiar structure in which the universality of Japanese theater *as theater* is guaranteed by hypothetical equivalence with the conventions of Chinese theater.¹⁶ What is most striking about *Shikankoku ichiran*, however, is the way in which this text blends together a number of elements from geography, ethnography, and cartography to create a playful portrait of its subject, Nakamura Shikan. Indeed, the entire text is framed by—and its subject comprehended through—the language of geography: *Shikankoku ichiran* is a biography of the actor written as if it were a guidebook to a foreign land, presenting an overview of the “famous places, historical spots, products, and language” of the Land of Shikan complete with a map and entries of ethnographic detail. Thus, in this text, the actor is at once placed within the real world of historical geography and the emergent transcendent category of the theater; simultaneously, the tools of the geographic imagination are redeployed to frame their subject anew, providing a way of understanding biography as if it were synchronic rather than diachronic: the actor’s life and career mapped and comprehended through the metaphors of space and place.

Sanba had used a similar conceit in *Shibai kinmōzui*, the third volume of which consists largely of what Sanba called “a likening of actors to the various countries of the world.” Here, of course, these individual countries are themselves inserted into a broader geography of the “theater as world,” and it is this framing device on which *Shikankoku ichiran* too no doubt draws. For much of the nineteenth century, Sanba’s text would provide a cognitive metaphor for the theater: the

theater envisioned as a world, and through this, the world understood once more as a single great theater—a metaphor that promised to comprehend social reality as a play, and mankind as actors. In the decades that followed the original publication of *Shibai kinmōzui*, this metaphor would be picked up and elaborated in a number of forms and broadly refashioned according to an emergent cartographic imagination that sought not only to comprehend the stage as a world, but also the stage *in* the world, a process that would only pick up steam in the first decades of the Meiji period (1868-1912).

But rather than a fulfillment of the promise put forward in Mokurō's *Mushimegane* of a universal taxonomy of the theater through which kabuki could be understood as part of the universal set of theater, by the second decade of the twentieth century a different pull had emerged—a pull toward comprehending the particularity of the Japanese theatrical tradition not as a local example of a universal phenomenon, but as a non-generalizeable particularity.

In 1920, nearly a century after Kimura Mokurō's telescopic view of the theater, Tsubouchi Shōyō 坪内逍遙 published a translation of *As You Like It*, volume 16 of his edition of Shakespeare's complete works. Although Shōyō had begun translating Shakespeare as early as 1909, it was not until 1920 that he was first faced with rendering into Japanese Jaques' line from Act 2, Scene 7, "All the world's a stage,/ and all the men and women merely players." In 1920, Shōyō was completely immersed in the world of nineteenth century kabuki, deeply involved in cataloguing the material that would become the basis for the Tsubouchi Memorial Theater Museum at Waseda, and writing his book on Toyokuni and theater prints.¹⁷ But rather than drawing on the framing device that writers like Sanba had deployed so deftly to draw out the staged nature of the world and the worldliness of the stage, Shōyō invented an entirely new idiom: "all the human world is a stage, and all its men and women actors" (*ningen sekai wa kotogotoku butai desu, sōshite subete no danjo ga haiyū desu*).¹⁸ For a writer so erudite in Japanese theatrical tradition, so deeply immersed in the kabuki culture of the Bunka and Bunsei eras (1804-1830), and so attuned to phrasing and language, the dry formality of Shōyō's rendering seems oddly out of pitch, and certainly flattens out one of Shakespeare's greatest lines. How could he not hear the echo of that governing image of the early nineteenth century stage in Shakespeare's language? How could he

have so completely cut off his translation from any reference to, or acknowledgement of, this uncanny resonance?

It is almost as if—consciously or unconsciously—Shōyō had drawn an unbreachable barrier between the two theatrical traditions that he most admired, as if he could not see them together as belonging to the same set, as if he could not imagine that in Sanba he could find an idiom suitable for translating Shakespeare. And so the moment passes and in the place of uncanny convergence we have only a kind of dissonance, a dissonance that largely misses the point of Shakespeare’s line by narrowly construing “stage” as *butai* 舞台, rather than as *shibai* 芝居 or *gekijō* 劇場.

But there is something else at work in Shōyō’s awkward rendering of Jaques’ monologue: in his writings on the theater from the -teens onward, Shōyō becomes increasingly insistent on the particularity of Japanese theater—and especially kabuki—emphasizing both its distance from, rather than proximity to, the theatrical traditions of the West, and the inability of Western scholars properly to understand its distinctive nature. It is a particularity to which Shōyō returns again and again in his Taishō essays on kabuki, **and yet it is a particularity the precarious fragility of which becomes exposed through the uncanny echo produced between Shakespeare and Sanba, so that Shōyō is either deaf to or unwilling to recognize this trope of kabuki on the Elizabethan stage.**

And so, a century after Mokurō’s *Mushimegane* had broadly situated the Japanese stage within a universal set of the theater, we have not the fulfillment of that promise but its opposite: a withdrawal into particularity and difference that would characterize so much of interwar thinking about Japanese culture, a move that would serve as a critique of often Eurocentric universalizing schemas, but that would in the process sever thinking about Japanese culture from a broadly comparative context—a context in the first instance neither occasioned by nor restricted to a vague if normative image of the West and that would remain a hallmark of Japan’s engagement with the world across the long nineteenth century.

NOTES

1. Shikitei Sanba, *Shibai kimmōzui: Kyōwa 3-nen shōhanbon*, ed. Kokuritsu Gekijō Geinō Chōsashitsu, *Kabuki no bunken 3* (Tokyo: Nihon Geijutsu Bunka Shinkōkai, 2001).

2. *Ibid.*, p. 13. In Japanese, the phrase is 「天地一大劇場」. You Xitang 尤西堂 is the literary name of You Tong 尤侗.

3. Buyō Inshi, *Seji kenmonroku* (Tokyo: Seiabō, 2001), p. 256. 「これ世に放蕩を引き起す基なり。」

4. Marcia Yonemoto, *Mapping Early Modern Japan: Space, Place, and Culture in the Tokugawa Period, 1603-1868* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 4.

5. Kimura Mokurō, “Gekijō ikkan mushimegane” in *Engeki bunko*, vol. 3, ed. Engei Chinsho Kankōkai (Tokyo: Gannandō Shoten, 1973), p. 2. 「芝居見物初心の人、劇場看官の観法。」

6. *Ibid.*, p. 1. 「夫劇場は元是上古の神楽の餘風にして中古白拍子といふ者に變じてその後申樂と成りて田樂と稱へ近世歌舞伎と變ずる。」

7. *Ibid.* 「遠くは外国(外国に芝居のある事七天竺話に見えたり)震且諸邦(諸国に芝居ある事北海遺聞にみえたり)の類ひ近くは日域の諸州諸島總て雜劇の行はれざる所なし。」

8. Arai Hakuseki, “Haiyūkō,” in *Arai Hakuseki zenshū*, vol. 6, ed. Kokusho Kankōkai (Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai, 1907).

9. Lydia Liu, *The Clash of Empires: the Invention of China in Modern World Making* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 110.

10. Liu, *The Clash of Empires*, p. 110.

11. “Kyōhō nenjū Fukami shirabegaki,” in Tessō Dojin, “Kaihyō ibun” (no date), in the Dōshisha University Library, Komuro-Sawabe Bunko, C081.K5 vol. 38. 「芝居歌舞伎浄瑠璃カラクリ等定まりたる所有りて...芝居踊り狂言總名ヲ劇ト云俗ニハ戯ト云。」

12. “Hyōryū kibun” (1810), in the Tosa Yamauchi Treasury and Archives, ㊦380-14. 「劇場殊の他多く四十余。」

13. Benedict Anderson, *Spectre of Comparisons* (London: Verso, 1998).

14. Carl Peter Thunberg, L. Langlées, and Jean Baptiste Pierre Antoine de Monet de Lamarck, *Voyages de C.P. Thunberg, au Japon, par le cap de Bonne-Esperance, les îles de la Sonde, &c. : traduits, raédigés et augmentés de notes considérables sur la religion, le gouvernement, le commerce, l'industrie et les langues de ces différentes contrées, particulièrement sur le Javan et le Malai*, 4 vols. (Paris: Chez Benoît Dandrée [et al.], 1796), vol. 4, p. 25.

15. Dōrosai Hyakki, *Shikankoku ichiran* (Osaka: Morimoto Tasuke, 1815). The poem listed in the table of contents as a “Dutch kyōka” (*Ransho kyōka*) is printed on 9 recto.

16. Anderson, *Spectre of Comparisons*, p. 33.

17. The book was *Shibai-e to Toyokuni oyobi sono monka*, published by Shunyōdō in 1920.

18. *Okinimesumama*, trans. Tsubouchi Shōyō (Tokyo: Waseda Daigaku Shuppanbu, 1920), p. 87. 「人間世界は悉く舞臺です、さうしてすべての男女が俳優です。」