The Transformation of Kabuki Themes: From Tokugawa to Meiji

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Kabuki has been a popular performing art in Japan since its formation in the Tokugawa era. However, the kabuki seen today in modern Japan is not the same as the kabuki seen previously. A major impact on kabuki theatre was the Meiji Restoration of 1868. The paper below will discuss an important aspect in the transformation of kabuki. This transformation was that of the themes of the kabuki plays. The government, seeing many of the traditional Japanese themes as controversial and inappropriate, regulated the kabuki performances in a way that was appealing to the Western, foreign eyes. Because theatre served as an integral part of culture in the West, the Japanese sought to do the same; kabuki was to be made into a far more educational form of entertainment that was ethical and decent. Several well-known kabuki plays, both from the Tokugawa era and the modern era, are discussed in order to understand the importance of these controversial themes.

Beginnings

Kabuki began during the Tokugawa era (1600 – 1867), an era of unification following the Warring States Period. Victorious Tokugawa Ieyasu self-appointed himself as Shogun and chose Edo (Tokyo) as the capital. After Ieyasu’s victory in the Battle of Sekigahara, peace was restored to the country. Once Tokugawa Ieyasu was in control, there was a sense of freedom and opportunity in Edo. This centrally located city would soon be the birthplace of kabuki theatre because of this atmosphere.
Kabuki’s role in society contributed to Japan’s cultural identity. A kabuki-represented identity, such as Japan’s, was considered by the Japanese elite as distasteful for the Western visitors. Inspired by Western traditions of the cultural importance of their theatre and wanting to create a positive image of Japanese culture for the Westerners in newly opened Japan, the government made many changes to kabuki. Specifically, the themes of the kabuki dramas underwent a transformation due to the arrival of the Western foreigners’ influence. This transformation was the product of a popular role of kabuki in Japanese society among the common people combined with a feeling of discontent and desire for change among the Japanese government leaders.

This paper begins with the origins of kabuki and some of its earliest developments during the Genroku era (1688—1703). In order to understand kabuki’s later developments and adaptations, one must first be familiar with its origins and practices. Following the discussion of the various styles of acting and the importance of training, the role of kabuki in society is discussed. This role includes the importance of theatre attendance by the commoners of Japan, kabuki’s patronage, and the bakufu relations with kabuki. Understanding this role leads to further understanding of the importance of the Meiji adaptations for, as we will see, kabuki plays an enormous role in Japanese society.
With the end of the initial history and background information on kabuki, our attention is then turned towards the themes of the plays. This consists of the programmatic “worlds” in which plays were written, eight major scenes of emphasis in kabuki plays, *ninjo-giri* conflicts, and Tokugawa prohibitions of various themes. The Meiji adaptations of kabuki are discussed next. The incoming foreigners created a need for the Meiji government to adapt kabuki because of its large, prominent role in Japanese society. Kabuki became restricted to an even greater extent because of the desires of the Meiji government to appeal to the Westerners. Finally, to reinforce the Meiji attitudes towards some of the plays, three of the most popular plays in the kabuki repertoire are discussed in order to reveal how they have changed since the Meiji Restoration. This analysis concludes this paper and hopefully gives the reader an understanding of Japan’s evolving kabuki theatre.

The origin of kabuki can be credited to a single woman and prostitute from Kyoto and a priestess of the Buddhist Izumo Shrine, Okuni. She performed many Buddhist songs and dances with a small group of actors and actresses in Kyoto. When performing, Okuni dressed in male attire and played the role of a samurai. Her “scandalous modern songs” and “sensuous dance” as a man
became known as kabuki. Following Okuni’s first performance, many other troupes of women formed and performed frequently while practicing prostitution.

Kabuki was deeply tied to both male and female prostitution. Within a few years of Okuni’s performances in Kyoto, there were imitations by troupes of prostitutes. These shows, known as yūjo kabuki (prostitutes’ kabuki), demonstrated many techniques used by prostitutes to approach prospective clients. Additionally, male performers assumed female roles which created a sexual confusion. Hayashi Razan (1583–1657), a contemporary Confucian scholar, expresses this confusion: “The men wear women’s clothing; the women wear men’s clothing . . . They sing base songs and dance vulgar dances; their lewd voices are clamorous, like the buzzing of flies and the crying of cicadas . . . This is the kabuki of today.”

Despite the confusion, people continued to flock to the performances of yūjo kabuki. Because the audience comprised mostly of samurai and other footsoldiers, who attended the theatre for entertainment and acquiring a prostitute, there were sometimes fights sparked by rivalries over the performers. The violence between the patrons due to a conflict over prostitutes

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1 James R. Brandon and Samuel L. Leiter, Masterpieces of Kabuki: Eighteen Plays on Stage (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 1.
The sense of freedom first felt by Okuni diminished when, in 1629, the Tokugawa shogunate banned the women from the stage. After Okuni’s banishment, young boys and men took over the profession which they had began doing in 1612, including both acting and prostitution, although they certainly did not live a life of luxury: “Kabuki actors of the Edo period (1600—1868) were called ‘Kawara beggars’; they lived under poor conditions as pariahs; and they were looked upon by the general population with a combination of fear, awe, and contempt.”3 These living conditions were certainly a result of the early practices of kabuki actresses and young boy actors.

Troupes of young boys began performing wakashu kabuki (youths’ kabuki) about ten years after Okuni first performed her songs and dances. Some of the performances of the young boys were about homosexual love and others about techniques to solicit prostitutes. Homosexual practices became widespread beginning in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries during military campaigns as well as in Buddhist monasteries. Furthermore, in the seventeenth century, some

shogun and feudal lords exerted their preference for charming, elegant youths, which in turn led to commoners practicing homosexuality as well in the footsteps of their leaders. In 1648, homosexual practices were banned in the plays and, because of the government’s lack of success, the Tokugawa government closed the theatres in Edo and other cities four years later in 1652, bringing about the end of *wakashu kabuki*.

Kabuki did not progress rapidly until the Genroku era (1688–1703). During this era, kabuki’s developed forms became the criterion for its future developments. It was during this era that three of the most influential actors rose to fame. The first and perhaps most important was Ichikawa Danjuro I, who created an innovative school of acting. Danjuro devised a style of kabuki acting known as *aragoto*. This style is simple and full of chivalrous and heroic movements which are typically greeted with applause from the audience members. The exaggerated movements, in which Danjuro urged actors to perform like they were five or six year old children, are expressions of strength and morality. The movements of *aragoto* are said to reflect the essence of the Edo townsmen.

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4 Ibid., 201.
7 Ibid., 191.
Another important aspect of Danjuro’s aragoto is the actors’ makeup (kumadori). In a scene from the play Shibaraku, one of the most representative of Danjuro’s acting, an evil minister is about to execute several innocent bystanders as an attempt to overthrow the emperor. The evil minister’s face is painted white and has lines drawn around his eyes and across his cheeks, identifying him as the villain. When a sword is about to be dropped down, a cry of “Wait!” is heard from behind a curtain at the end of the hanamichi, an elevated walkway crossing the audience seating present in kabuki theatres to allow actors to make magnificent entrances. The actor appears on the stage as the hero of the play. His face is also painted white but consists of thick red lines around his eyes and on his cheeks. These lines are theatrical representations of the man’s veins bulging in anger.

Stopping at a point on the hanamichi, the hero introduces himself. This introduction, known as tsurane, entertains the audience as he slowly draws out his words and speaks in a loud, thunderous voice. Following his presentation, he moves to the stage to punish the villain and rescue the captives. While doing this, he displays several poses of heroicism, known as mie. When the actors strike these poses, members of the audience shout encouragements to the actor. The poses often occur at the climax of the scene and bring with them a heightened sense of authority of the hero.
The other two influential actors of the Genroku era were Sakata Tojuro and Yoshizawa Ayame. Tojuro was especially skilled in love scenes. Yoshizawa Ayame was known as the greatest onnagata (male actor acting in a female role) of the time.

Tojuro perfected a different style of kabuki acting known as wagoto. This style is full of soft, gentle actions and delicacy in mood. The character of the acting is very realistic and representative of daily life and norms. Since wagoto plays are depictions of the everyday customs, they often present a man visiting a courtesan in the prostitution quarters. Tojuro urged the actors of wagoto plays to “forget about the lines and get out on the stage” and “forgetful of the audience, act the play as if it is a reality.”\(^8\) Sakata Tojuro held realistic and natural acting to the highest degree which boosted wagoto acting’s popularity among actors and audience members alike.

Because actresses were prohibited from performing on the stage, actors had to take the roles of women. The notions of women’s inferiority and the samurai code even limited what the men acting as women could do. The actors known for their perfection in being a female on stage are known as an onnagata. Being an onnagata required much practice and devotion to the art. It is desirable that the actor who performs as an onnagata should feel like one both on and off of

\(^8\) Inoura, 192.
the stage. On stage, the onnagata must do everything in a reserved manner, never exerting her full energies. There is an imaginary line on the stage which the onnagata must never cross; the line is formed by the area where the curtain is drawn across the stage. They must possess realistic beauty and charm and be willing to cultivate these characteristics in all aspects of their everyday life, something which is taught at the beginning of their training.

The variety of disciplines mastered by these three leading kabuki actors show the importance of family lineages in kabuki. Kabuki acting is a hereditary profession where actors are trained in childhood, beginning by age seven (some can begin even younger). These children grow up in a kabuki atmosphere because their fathers and even grandfathers perform frequently. If an actor does not have any sons, he can adopt a successor from among his pupils.

In an interview with four kabuki actors, Professor Leiter asks about the important elements of their training. Although these actors are from the mid-twentieth century, the elements of the training have hardly changed and therefore, the interviews give an accurate depiction of an actor’s training. Bando Tsurunosuke claims that the most important training process is dance: “the actor

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must learn how to move his body.” Following training in dance comes the vocal training and training in other various acting forms.

In his interview with Leiter, Bando Mitsugoro VIII claims that the most important element of early kabuki training is the practical experience. Onoe Baiko discusses the importance of understanding the psychological aspects of your character. In order to play a role successfully, you must completely enter the role while disregarding everything else. The final actor interviewed by Professor Leiter was famous actor Nakamura Utaemon VI. Utaemon was educated in all aspects of kabuki and specialized as an onnagata. Like Tsurunosuke, Utaemon holds dance technique as the most important aspect of kabuki training.

As the young actor-apprentices learn from their mentors, they begin to associate with them in a natural way. The child’s talent begins to be cultivated under the watchful eye of his kabuki teacher. Additionally, he does not just act for the audience: the child takes part in the entire daily routine of being a kabuki actor. This includes the behind the stage life. He must continually practice acting in kabuki theatre and must learn many stage accomplishments (mie), especially if he is intended to become a specialist in women’s roles (onnagata). The young actor must also be able to act through suggestion without speaking for long

10 Leiter, “Four Interviews,” 393.
periods. Tsurunosuke, one of Leiter’s interviewees, claimed that this pause is the most difficult element of acting. This is a very common characteristic of kabuki performances and one which must be carefully mastered by the actor.

Could this characteristic of kabuki acting have been a reason for misunderstanding by the Westerners? Western cultures have long emphasized verbal expression and clear, open communication of opinions and emotions. There is a negative attitude in the Western tradition towards silence, most notably in social and public relations. However, in Japan, silence is prevalent and not frowned upon in the communication of the Japanese. This silence, known as chinmoku, has roots in Zen Buddhism. Through Zen training, one is taught that truth can exist only in silence. It cannot be described verbally. Constantly practicing meditation, quietude, and emptying one’s mind is the only way an individual can understand the goal of Zen practice. Kabuki theatre uses this silence between lines or for long periods of time in order to express tension, excitement, and the climax. Although this may seem odd to Westerners, it is a practice that has long been perfected and established by the kabuki actors.

Silence in Japan has a wide range of meanings, including sympathy, modesty, agreement, patience, embarrassment, resentment, lack of forgiveness,

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and apathy. Although a knowledgeable audience member can interpret the character of the silence, it causes confusion to Westerners who are not used to having silence in their culture. Chinmoku can often be seen as a waste of time in which Japanese could be speaking in order to be more direct in communication. However, silence is used to think about ways to communicate smoothly. Westerners speak quickly and act without thinking whereas Japanese speak slowly and hesitantly in order to process their actions. Japanese society is based on relationships among group members rather than individualism: Japanese stay silent to avoid seeming selfish, being impolite or immature, being rude, and to avoid conflict. These trends are culturally reinforced through the Japanese social relationships with each other and are not inherently obtained from birth. Because of silence’s pervasiveness in Japanese communication, it has no doubt played an important factor in kabuki theatre.

Zoë Kincaid, author of Kabuki: The Popular Stage of Japan, discusses how this element of silence is used. In Mokuami’s play Kochiyama, a long scene of silence occurs as a samurai hides near a road, waiting for a passing palanquin. When the palanquin comes into view, he rushes out bearing his sword, frightening the escorts away. The samurai, expecting to find someone he is after,

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13 Davies, 55.
lifts the curtain and observes that the sleeping passenger is not the man he wants. As he withdraws, the passenger awakens seeing the gleaming sword, saying: “Is that a falling star?” This one line is the only thing spoken in this long scene, illustrating the importance of silence in kabuki performance. The relationship between Japanese culture and kabuki performance complement each other. Kabuki’s elements are representative of the Japan’s culture and society.

**Kabuki and Japanese Society**

In Edo, kabuki was the center of urban culture. Attending the theatre was a very exciting experience, especially for women. Women attending a kabuki performance were able to appear in their best clothes as well as to eat and drink in public. Their favorite actors could see the women in their elegant kimonos. Kabuki performances usually began by 6 a.m., or sunrise, because of their incredible length and the risk of fire if torches were to be used at nightfall. Preparations for their attendance began the day before. These preparations included dressing of the hair and going to the bathhouse; similar preparations were also made by men visiting the pleasure quarters at Yoshiwara.\(^{15}\)

However, kabuki was not patronized by the masses but rather from wealthy commoners, primarily merchants. The prostitution quarters and theatre

\(^{15}\) Shively, “Social Environment,” 212.
quarters were both intended for the entertainment of the commoners and the samurai classes. They were irresistible even to samurai, who attended the theatre with merely a large hat or scarf to slightly conceal themselves, avoiding any confrontations at all cost in order to prevent embarrassment of their class. Although they looked upon the theatre as an evil influence, some high-ranking bakufu officials and powerful daimyo were fascinated by kabuki and were devoted fans. The government restrictions and supervision over kabuki created the need for these upper class supporters to hide their kabuki desires. The pleasure and entertainment districts were the only place where commoners and samurai were on equal footings.\textsuperscript{16} The commoners’ patronage of kabuki can be attributed to the newly found peace in Japan.

When peace was brought about in Japan in the 1600s, the power of the samurai class diminished greatly. Because they found great power in violence, the presence of peace enabled money to become a far superior weapon.\textsuperscript{17} The commoners began to rise because they were wealthier than the powerful samurai. It was this boom in the economy that enabled kabuki to flourish during the Genroku era. Prior to the patronage of kabuki, the two forms of art which were patronized were the Bugaku dances by the Imperial Court and the Noh dramas by the aristocratic samurai. With the inception of kabuki into the

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 55.
theatrical arts world of Japan, the commoners, due to their financial successes, were finally able to sustain their own popular theatre. Four theatres were created in Edo, three in Kyoto, and four in Osaka.\textsuperscript{18} Although these three cities were under Tokugawa control, the cities needed their amusement arenas in order to contain their authoritative positions in population and in commerce.\textsuperscript{19} For these reasons, kabuki prospered in this environment.

Being in the theatre district of the city provided a setting of complete freedom from the strict Confucian society. This attitude was especially prevalent in the merchant class of Edo. The social structure of Edo placed the merchants beneath the samurai class although the merchants were by far superior financially. Because of their wealth, these merchants first bought an expensive courtesan and then spent a large sum of money on a typical day at the theatre.\textsuperscript{20}

In the seventeenth century, kabuki was always under surveillance by the Tokugawa regime, the \textit{bakufu}. Restrictions on the kabuki plays and social environment were present. Considered a disruption to the Confucian structure of relationships, the \textit{bakufu} strove to restrict kabuki’s power. The growing popularity and power of kabuki conflicted with the government’s desires to maintain social classes. Kabuki had much power in its artistic expressions and, as

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 58.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Shively, “Social Environment,” 195—196.
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Bowers claims: “the artistic expression of a people long oppressed by the samurai would by nature be antagonistic to the oppressors and would glorify their own cause.” These artistic qualities excited all levels of society, upsetting the bakufu.

The efforts of the bakufu ended up assisting, rather than preventing, the development of kabuki. Rather than abolishing kabuki completely, their attitude towards it seems to have been that it was a necessary evil, similar to prostitution. A document known as Ieyasu’s legacy gives us insight of this attitude:

Courtans, dancers, catamites, streetwalkers, and the like always come to the cities and prospering places of the country. Although the conduct of many is corrupted by them, if they are rigorously suppressed, serious crimes will occur daily, and there will be punishments for gambling, drunken frenzies, and lasciviousness.

Kabuki performances kept the actors working and the patrons satisfied. Without kabuki, more serious crimes would occur, wreaking havoc throughout the cities.

It is because of this that the government did not abolish kabuki completely.

A pattern recurring throughout the Tokugawa era was the bakufu’s yielding to the persistent pressure of the theatre officials because of the importance of the kabuki theatres in the economy. Because of their leniency, kabuki went through many groundbreaking developments. Theatres and

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21 Bowers, 58.
teahouses were able to be constructed extensively, staging and costumes became more elaborate, and rebellious themes were built into plays.

Theatre policy required that all of Edo’s main theatres were to be located in a quarter comprised of Sakai-cho and Fukiya-cho, or in Kobiki-cho. 23 Additionally, the prostitution quarters were concentrated to the licensed quarter of Asakusa, which became known as the New Yoshiwara. This segregation was an attempt to separate the entertainment quarters from the center of Edo as well as preventing catastrophic fires which had an enormous impact on the city when they occurred numerous times in the 1650’s. The number of theatres was restricted to four large and eight small venues. The earliest kabuki theatres consisted of a small, uncovered stage with a bamboo paling or bunting enclosing the audience members. Evidence of the first roof covering the stage and audience can be found in a 1639 drawing. 24 The theatre gradually developed in size despite government disapproval and even included boxes, blinds, and screens used to provide privacy from the strict government.

Following the fires of the 1650’s, more elaborate stage sets and costumes were developed to accompany the creation of longer plays. Various types of drawn and drop curtains were used as well as the creation of a runway through the audience (hanamichi). In 1718, wooden shingles were permitted over the stage.

24 Ibid., 347.
and boxes. These were replaced five years later by tile roofs and outer walls of plaster in order to prevent fire hazards. The addition of the roof and walls made it even more difficult for the government to regulate the kabuki performances. The performance became increasingly private and government authorities could not enter observe the performances from the outside. In order to watch a kabuki play, the bakufu had to purchase a seat, allowing the theatre managers to become aware of their presence. Although these adaptations further enabled kabuki theatres to gain privacy from the government, they were granted because of the government’s leniency. Kabuki had a profound effect on the economy: patrons lived in the city in order to be close to the entertainment centers and therefore, patronized the city’s businesses as well. Because theatre owners pleaded that rain was bankrupting them, the bakufu enabled roofs and more solid walls to be created.

Kabuki plays a large, important role in Japanese culture and society. It is within this role that many controversial themes were performed and widely accepted by the various classes of the Japanese audience. However, these themes were ones which the government thought were twisted and distorted: a sore sight to foreign eyes.

**Tokugawa Kabuki Themes**
The vast majority of kabuki plays performed still today have their origins in the Genroku era. The basic kabuki plots consisted of legends, stories, and historical and contemporary events. Plays throughout the Genroku era were scarcely changed; the main changes tended to be small revisions or adaptations of certain selections of the play according to strict Tokugawa regulations. Although there were revisions and alterations present, the majority of the plays were based on the already familiar basic plot. Plays were written around a certain “world” (sekai), or time frame. In a daily kabuki performance, all of the plays performed were related to this “world.” For political reasons, the government was unable to interfere if the so-called “world” was placed in far distant history. Contemporary events were also disguised by being placed in an old “world.”

The major “worlds” were those dealing with the Soga Brothers’ revenge in 1170, the struggles between the Taira and Minamoto Clans around 1300 (the Taiheiki “world”), the heroism of Yoshitsune, and with Toyotomi Hideyoshi or Oda Nobunaga in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (the Taiko “world”). The audience desired acting to lie within the framework of familiarity, convention, and accustomed technique. The “worlds” provided for the

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25 Bowers, 149.
satisfaction of the audience’s desires while still offering room for new surprises and tricks.

Although these “worlds” helped with the programmatic elements of the kabuki theatre, they often forced various unrelated views on current plays, making them seem different than what they actually are about. There were many times when unrelated plays would be forced into a certain “world.” One such example is the famous play written in 1713, *Sukeroku: Flower of Edo.* It was squeezed into the Soga “world,” turning the hero of the play into one of the avenging brothers. This results in a difficult situation for the audience to follow the story logically. Furthermore, being forced into a certain “world” restricts the originality of the plays. The dramatic situations of kabuki plays were quickly formalized and standardized, changing very little since their first performances. Part of this reason is that the audience changed very little as well. The audience was familiar with the plays and was far more interested in seeing what an actor does under certain circumstances. Their familiarity of the play is a prerequisite to their observation of the actor, for they do not have to focus on following an unfolding plot. Unlike Japan, Westerners are far more interested in the plot of the play. They prefer to see a new play for the first time rather than several performances of the same play with few changes.

26 Ibid., 150.
Basic scenes comprised the majority of kabuki plays. These “scenes of emphasis” (shonenba) are similar to Western ideas of the climax.\textsuperscript{27} There are eight major shonenba in kabuki plays and each play may contain more than one shonenba. The first of which are scenes of torture or pressure (semeba). It is in these scenes when a hero is encircled by an enemy and forced to reveal information or reveal his identity. The hero is forced to surrender because of the pressure being put onto him.

The second shonenba is the selling of human life (Mi-uri). Prostitution is an important aspect of this scene but there are also variations. It sometimes deals with a woman who voluntarily sells herself in order to protect her parents or husband. Another variation on Mi-uri is that the sale could be completed without her knowledge. Selling a woman into prostitution is often unthinkable to Westerners, creating feelings of sorrow and despair. However, in the Genroku era where these scenes were first performed, the gay quarters were the most fashionable and extravagant places. The more talented girls were able to choose their own clients. Even those who were not as beautiful or talented still lived a comfortable life in Yoshiwara.

Another shonenba is the substitution of one person for another (Mi-gawari). Substitutions were used for the hero to manipulate the enemy or to save

\textsuperscript{27} Bowers, 151.
someone by sacrificing someone else. Religious substitutions occurred when a statue of Buddha stands as a substitute for a sincere, religious person. Romantic substitutions are used by the heroine who sacrifices herself in order to save her lover. A final form of substitution is ethical, where a servant sacrifices himself for the lord. Substitutions were common throughout Japan. Warriors bought the lives of commoners to use as a double for them in times of emergency.

A fourth scene of emphasis is that of head-inspection (*Kubi-Jikken*). This was a direct result of the substitutions. An enemy’s head was often brought before an inspecting officer who was required to identify the head. Sometimes parents were called upon to inspect their own child’s head while pretending that it was someone else. These scenes were full of mixed emotions, including many false emotions in order to save themselves. Often, they were very elaborate, requiring a great deal of time for the actor to effectively display his various emotions. Emotions often portrayed include anguish, disbelief, puzzlement, joy, confusion, conflict, and resolution.

The fifth *shonenba* is the slapping with footwear (*Zori-uchi*). Although this may seem puzzling to Westerners, the Japanese are uneasy about the dirt brought in from the street by footwear. Visitors to homes, restaurants, and temples are required to remove their outdoor shoes at the entrance of the
building and place indoor sandals on their feet instead. One of the foulest insults to Japanese is being touched or struck by footwear.

Pulling of the obi (Obi-hiki) is the sixth shonenba. The obi is a long belt worn by both men and women; the unfastening of the obi is closely associated to eroticism. Unrelenting men use the obi to restrain a resisting woman by holding it at one end, creating dramatic poses with the long strip of colorfully embroidered cloth.

The seventh shonenba is seppuku. Seppuku is suicide, an honorable death and considered an act of highest bravery. Seppuku is committed as an apology for sin or error, in compliance with a command by a superior, as entreaty, in error, or in the spirit of boldness. Suicide is committed because of a tragic circumstance where death appears to be a better option than life.

Finally, the eighth and final major scene of emphasis is murder (Hito-Koroshi). Murder is one of the most important themes in kabuki plays. The Tokugawa era was an era of peace following the Warring States Period. Murder was a very stirring subject and constituted an outlet for the Japanese people’s impulses. Similar to seppuku, there are various causes of murder: provoked murder where the hero kills the villain, accidental murder where the victim is mortally wounded during a struggle or the wrong person is killed, and duty murder where a person must sacrifice themselves for a higher cause.
Violence on the kabuki stage is perhaps one of the most characteristic aspects of kabuki. The role violence plays in the plays far surpasses any such violence used in the classic theatre of the West. Although deaths were often performed on stage in the West, massive amounts of bloodshed and violence never occurred. Violence is, in one way, what makes kabuki so distinct from other forms of theatre. Many kabuki deaths happen incredibly slowly; the audience watches the actor die in piercing agony. While dying, the actor is able to show a great deal of pain and suffering, creating an incredibly emotional impact.

The emotional impact is further enhanced by the visual effects of fake blood. Concealed tablets of red liquid are often hidden in an actor’s mouth or robe. The realism of kabuki creates the need for such bloodshed. The red blood creates a dynamic contrast between the white painted bodies and the black kimonos the actors wear, making it a very effective visual device.

The themes of kabuki plays during the Tokugawa era were strictly enforced by the government officials. In addition to the previously discussed prohibitions against women, young men, and the acts of prostitution, several other censors were present. One of the more well-known restrictions was that on the theme of double suicide (shinju). First popularized by Chikamatsu

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Monzaemon (1653—1725), *shinju* is very popular in domestic-type kabuki plays. A common aspect of kabuki plays, regardless of topic, is the intrapersonal conflict between a character’s feelings (*ninjo*) and their duty to society (*giri*). In double suicides, it is this *ninjo-giri* conflict of a young married man and his mistress, often a courtesan, that leads them to believe that a double suicide is the most appealing choice. The performance of the suicide is very beautiful and elegant. The actors must display utmost somberness and hope for a more satisfying future life. Because of the exquisitely poetic treatment and popularity of the *shinju*, in 1723, the government was forced to forbid the suicides and the plays which concerned them. These suicides were a threat to the Tokugawa peace and order that was well-established as a result of the end of the Warring States Period because within them was a portrayal of violence. The violence was an aspect the Tokugawa regime looked forward to removing from its history.

The government’s political interests furthered the Tokugawa restrictions. Plays dealing with political subjects were very controversial during this era. One of the first orders issued to theatre managers, in 1644, stated that: “In plays the names of existing people will not be used.” A stricter law prohibited the

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31 Ibid., 25.
mention of Tokugawa Ieyasu or any of his successors. The government was very sensitive about matters extending back to their rise of power in the late sixteenth century. Playwrights and theatre managers took these laws as challenges when writing and performing kabuki plays. Their plays were camouflaged from the pervasive government by setting the plays in a completely different time period and with characters who, in no obvious way, related to the subject at hand. These playwrights never described events during the Tokugawa era directly in order to avoid troubles with the government.

In addition to the government’s prohibition of the depiction of actual living government leaders, the actor’s depiction was socially frowned upon as well. Because the actors were considered to be a very low social class, almost outcastes, a depiction of themselves as a Tokugawa leader or samurai would be considered intolerable. It is important to note, however, that the government overlooked plays depicting the lives of ordinary commoners. These plays often used real names or obvious substitutes and dealt openly with scandals and shinju. As long as the play was not about a person of high power, the play was not prohibited.

Another portrayal which was prohibited was that of religious leaders such as Shinran, Honen, and Nichiren. Many complaints were submitted by religious leaders in response to the offensive nature and lack of piety of the kabuki
performances. The government action against the plays was political, not a matter of doctrine or belief. They were simply submitting to the grievances of the persuasive religious groups in Japan.

A last prohibition concerned the removal of “unusual events of the present time,” “any matters which are questionable,” and “unfounded rumors which are current in society.”

Besides protecting the names of living political and military leaders, the government did not want current events to be mentioned or gossip and scandals pertinent to these leaders. These rumors would lead to instability in the political power of the Tokugawa.

**Meiji Adaptations**

The effects of the Meiji Restoration of 1868 saw a decline in the artistic developments of kabuki. Kabuki’s recognition by the Meiji government proved to be even more detrimental to its performances than the authoritative Tokugawa repression. The Meiji leaders sought international respect which in turn would give them diplomatic equality. They were very concerned with the Western views of their culture for the West was deeply rooted with the classical theatre such as Shakespeare; kabuki needed to be considered a pleasant sort of

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entertainment in Japanese society rather than a disreputable one. It was constantly being compared to the theatre of the West. Additionally, the government sought to use the stage as an ideal place to instruct the commoners in new behaviors and ethics that were necessary in an advanced nation. In 1872, actors and theatre managers were told: “Now that aristocrats and foreigners will be coming to the theatre, vulgarity and all things inappropriate for family viewing are to be eliminated. Stories must become vehicles of education.” Kabuki was to have a new function in Japanese culture and society.

As evidence of the newly established role of kabuki in Meiji society, two developments occurred within the first few years of the Restoration. Firstly, in September 1868, the sanza’s banishment to Saruwaka-machi was repealed. The sanza were Edo’s three remaining authorized kabuki theatres towards the end of the Tokugawa era. In 1841, these sanza were relocated to Saruwaka-machi in Edo’s northern outskirts in order to impose more restrictions on the theatres, a prevalent theme throughout the Tokugawa era. The 1868 overturning of the banishment was a sign of the government’s new ideas about the theatres. The theatres were now in a place where all of the public were exposed to them.

The second development occurred in 1871. Kabuki actors prior to the Meiji Restoration were members of a social class so low “that they were not permitted

34 Bach, “New Directions,” 79.
surnames, so they had no access to worlds inhabited by the lofty personages portrayed on their stages." In 1871, kabuki actors were finally given full social status as new commoners. This full social status was a necessity if the Meiji government wanted to disconnect kabuki from its links to prostitution and the pleasure quarters, thus creating a more positive image of its culture.

As can be expected, the audience of kabuki was changing as well. The repeal of the Tokugawa social class restrictions enabled kabuki to be enjoyed by all levels, not just the merchant classes. Although the authorities were still not fully supportive of the theatre, they acknowledged its contributions to society and focused rather on limiting the damage that its increased public exposure could cause to society. Many educated elites attended kabuki performances and often were accompanied by Western guests. With the influx of Western observers came demands for the accommodation of these audience members. Western chairs were added to the theatre seating and, with the introduction of electricity, new lighting and special effects were produced. With the growing popularity of kabuki amongst the Westerners, the Meiji government had to make rapid changes to the rules of kabuki performances, affecting many of the plays being performed. These changes were first implemented in a series of edicts in 1872.

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36 Bach, "New Directions," 81.
The first edict and an accompanying editorial explain the government’s reason for removing inappropriate materials from kabuki performances:

Because members of good society and foreigners were now attending plays, theatres were forbidden to show anything inciting lewdness which parents and children could not watch together, but they should rather show wholesome plays which could be considered educational.\textsuperscript{37}

The editorial extends this idea further:

Generally speaking, it is through the eyes that the heart is touched. All feelings, be they pleasure, anger, compassion or joy, arise from what we see. The theatre is a means of delighting the eyes and gladdening the heart, but its main aim must be to educate. Light amusement is acceptable in moderation; however, there are many licentious things that must not appear on stage, things that, if we watched with our families, would make us hide our faces in our sleeves. If foreigners saw such shows, they would surely think that these are part of our national customs and that we indulge in them ourselves. Naturally they would come to despise us because of it.\textsuperscript{38}

This edict and editorial was the first one issued to theatre managers in regards to the topics of their kabuki performances. It was very important for the “licentious” topics to be removed from the performance in order to prevent Western views and opinions of kabuki which differed from those desired by the Meiji government.

\textsuperscript{37} Payne, 322—323.
\textsuperscript{38} Payne, 323.
In one way, the first edict was a repeat of the Tokugawa restrictions against kabuki. In both eras, the restrictions placed on kabuki called upon the avoidance of politically rebellious or insulting references to the Emperor or Shogun. However, the first edict represented the Meiji government’s desire to prevent the Westerners from being stunned by the insults against the Emperor as well as to contain political criticism of the regime.

A second edict encouraged playwrights to no longer use false names to disguise historical figures in their plays. By encouraging the use of real names, kabuki would become more educational, an aspect which was desired by the Meiji government. One such example is the name Hashiba Hideyoshi, whose “kabuki stage” name was Mashiba Hisayoshi. Paving the way for an educational stance, Hideyoshi’s name was preferred because the false name had the potential to confuse the young and therefore teach them false information. The accompanying editorial to this second edict states that an actor is an instructor and that the theatres are a sort of school. Additionally, the setting of the play and its characters should complement each other: “regarding play content, one should not be setting them in the Kamakura era and changing character names to people of the Ashikaga line.”

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39 Payne, 323—324.
Later that year, in August, kabuki theatres were required to present play scripts to the Kyobusho (Department of Religious Affairs) for censoring as well as registering the dates of their theatrical performances with the Kyobusho. Unlike the previous two edicts, the censorship by the Kyobusho of the kabuki theatres was required; failure would result in a suspended license for a period of time. The aspects of the play scripts being censored were disrespectful references to the Emperor and mischief harmful to public morals. Actors must also act in a way appropriate to their newly achieved social status. In September, kabuki theatres were required to apply for a performance license as well as pay taxes on their earnings. This taxation meant that kabuki was being accepted and incorporated into mainstream society; previously, because kabuki was considered outside of society, the theatres had been exempt from taxation.

Although there were many efforts to censor kabuki for the Westerners, harsh feelings were still expressed by the foreigners in response to the kabuki performances. One of the earliest descriptions of kabuki was by Swedish botanist Karl Peter Thunberg (1743—1828). His description represents one that the Meiji government attempted to avoid nearly a century later, setting the stage for the Meiji edicts of 1872:

The actors have a costume so unusual and so strange that one is led to believe that they intend to startle the spectators and not to amuse them. Their gestures are not less ridiculous than their clothes. They
make grisly contortions which demand much exercise. The theatres are not comparable to those of Europe so far as decorations, the size of the hall, and all the accessories are concerned. . . Their pieces are very gay, but of an oddness that borders on the ridiculous.\textsuperscript{40}

Thunberg assumes that even the Japanese audience members would be startled by the performances. Because their costumes and movements were considered to be abnormal and their themes to be treasonous, this had a tendency, according to Thunberg, to startle the entire audience.

\textbf{A Look Into Specific Kabuki Plays}

What follows are summaries and analyses of some of the major kabuki masterpieces. These examples are enlightening to the sort of topics the government was adamant at prohibiting and will pave the path for understanding the reasons behind the transformation of kabuki following the Meiji Restoration of 1868.

One of the most well known kabuki plays is \textit{Sukeroku: Flower of Edo}. Written for Ichikawa Danjuro II, who acted as Sukeroku, the play is based on the love between a courtesan, Agemaki, and her lover, Sukeroku. It is said that both

\textsuperscript{40} Ury Eppstein, “The Stage Observed: Western Attitudes Toward Japanese Theatre,” Monumenta Nipponica 48, no. 2 (Summer, 1993): 151.
Agemaki and Sukeroku killed themselves in Osaka in either 1673 or 1709.\textsuperscript{41}

Several other plays were written and performed in 1675 and the years to follow. The production of \textit{Sukeroku: Flower of Edo} abandons the theme of their double suicide. Instead, the play tells how Sukeroku and his brother Shinbei kill Ikyu, a rival samurai and patron of Agemaki. Tsuuchi Jihei II, son of Danjuro I’s favorite playwright, rewrote the play within the “world” of the Soga brothers three years after its first performance in 1713.

With the desire of the government to adapt plays for a more educational setting, one of the first things done was shortening the lengths of the plays. The longest versions of \textit{Sukeroku: Flower of Edo} were three hours long. With the introduction of the play to foreigners, it was commonly reduced to two hours by omitting a few scenes. These omissions additionally allowed the government to prevent certain unattractive scenes. The first scene often omitted is the introduction of Manko, Sukeroku’s mother. She arrives in Yoshiwara searching for Agemaki in order to dissuade her from becoming involved with Sukeroku. Because Sukeroku is supposed to be avenging his father’s murder, his constant visits to see Agemaki and brawling with others in Yoshiwara have become a distraction. Impressed with her devotion, Manko grants Agemaki permission to marry Sukeroku and begs of her to deter her son from his continuous brawling.

With Ikyu on his way to visit Agemaki, Manko departs and thinks about the sad fate of her son and his courtesan. Manko gives Agemaki a letter and departs. After reading the first few lines, Agemaki responds, “Because of Sukeroku, a quarreling son, a mother’s life is black.” Further realization leads Agemaki to believe that “because of Sukeroku, my quarreling lover, my life, too, is black. How pitiful a woman’s fate.”

The reason this scene is often cut is because it provides a correlation between the prostitution quarters of Yoshiwara and constant brawling by samurai and other patrons in the quarters. The resulting violence is one in which the Meiji government did not want to advertise to the foreign visitors; Japan has been known as a violent country since the 16th century.

Another scene often omitted is the giving of a jacket by Manko to Sukeroku following their encounter in the street of Yoshiwara. Due to Sukeroku’s quest for his stolen sword, Tomokirimaru, his brawls with the samurai were a way for him to find his sword. Agemaki, who is still suspicious of Sukeroku’s brawling after talking with his mother, has Manko pass by Sukeroku disguised as a samurai. When he picks a fight with her, he is shocked to see his mother as the disguised samurai. After explaining his reason for picking fights (out of filial piety in his quest to find the stolen sword), Manko

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42 Brandon, Kabuki: Five Classic Plays, 58.
gives him a charmed jacket which will protect him in his fights. However, the jacket will split if his brawl is not inspired by filial piety and so too will his mother’s heart split.

Prior to the final omitted section, which is shockingly the conclusion, Ikyu and Sukeroku encounter each other and, in an attempt to rid himself of his enemy, Ikyu tries to make Sukeroku make a treasonous statement against the government. Using a nearby three-legged incense burner, Ikyu makes an analogy that together, they can attack the Shogun. He takes out his sword and slices the burner in two, suggesting that if they work separately and choose not to join each other, they will not be able to accomplish such a feat. Sukeroku observes that the sword of Ikyu is actually his “Tomokirimaru.” He whispers to Agemaki that he will wait for Ikyu tonight and she goes back into the house. Sukeroku departs down the hanamichi.

This final omitted section consists of the murder of Ikyu and Sukeroku’s flee from the scene. When Ikyu leaves the house that night, Sukeroku is waiting for him and kills him. As he examines his “Tomokirimaru,” a crowd arrives to pursue the murderer. Sukeroku hides in a huge barrel of real water until the pursuers were led to believe that the murderer has fled by Agemaki. Sukeroku then climbs out of the barrel of water and ascends to the roof to make his escape. The provoked murder of Ikyu was one in which the government felt strongly
against. Because Sukeroku: Flower of Edo was one of the most popular plays of the time, having the climactic murder at the end would suggest the importance of this scene in relation to Japanese culture and life.

The Subscription List (Kanjincho) went through a major adaptation for the Westerners. Initially adapted from a Noh drama, Ataka, in 1841, Kanjincho dramatizes an incident in the life of a historical figure from the twelfth century, Minamoto Yoshitsune. Unlike Sukeroku, this play added in new aspects and edited already existing ones rather than removing them altogether. The cause of these additions is the fact that Westerners are unaware of the story of the general and one of the main characters, Yoshitsune. Yoshitsune is a skilled warrior and it was through him that his brother Yoritomo secured the position of Shogun. Yoshitsune’s popularity boomed and out of fear, Yoritomo ordered him to be captured. Yoshitsune’s party, led by the priest Benkei, flees to the Ataka barrier station. The Ataka barrier guard, Togashi Zaemon, is determined to find Yoshitsune and capture him; it is said that Yoshitsune was disguised as a Buddhist priest. Although he recognizes Yoshitsune, he allows them to pass because of Benkei’s resourcefulness. The giri-ninjo conflict of Benkei arises because the only way he can save Yoshitsune would be by slapping as if he were just a mere porter. However, slapping him would be an inhuman act. Benkei suppresses his human emotions and carries out his duty to save Yoshitsune by
slapping him in front of Togashi. It is this slap that saves Yoshitsune from being captured by Togashi.

One of the most crucial additions to the play for the foreigners was the addition of many chorus lines, describing the history and conflict between Yoshitsune and his brother Yoritomo. Accompanied by flute, drum, and plucked samisen, the chorus tells of Yoshitsune’s past:

Yoshitsune, Yoshitsune! / Defeated armies, / For his brother’s rule. / But family ties are never proof to jealousy. / Soon it was known, / ‘Yoritomo turns his face / From the one / Whom all have learned to love.’ / Forced to flee / Silently, / Yoshitsune and his band of five / For three long years have fled / Through distant places / And seasons / By furtive ship, / Through distant paths of waves, / Arriving, now at last, / At Kaizu Bay.43

These chorus lines poetically tell of the story of the two brothers and their arising conflict. The Japanese audience is aware of this story but with this added information, the foreign audience also understands why Togashi is attempting to capture Yoshitsune.

Because the play is centered around the conversation between the priest Benkei and the guard Togashi, Yoshitsune’s importance is forgotten by the foreign audience. It is because of Yoshitsune’s desire to flee without being captured that prompts Benkei to defend him against Togashi from the outset. In the adaptation of *Kanjincho*, Yoshitsune is given a great deal more movement

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throughout the play whereas in Japan, he would be motionless for a large majority. This movement suggests to the audience his importance.

A final adaptation came in a revision of the order between the danced confrontation of Togashi and Benkei and the slapping of Yoshitsune by Benkei. In the original version of Kanjincho, Yoshitsune is struck before Benkei and Togashi danced. However, this striking is considered the climax of the plot. If the disguised person truly was Yoshitsune, then Benkei would not have struck him. It was Benkei’s cleverness that saved Yoshitsune by the slap. Therefore, the danced confrontation between Togashi and Benkei culminated in the slapping of Yoshitsune, establishing the slapping as the emphasis of the scene. This change enabled the foreign audience to understand the importance of the slap.

These changes enabled the performance of Kanjincho to become more educational to the Western audience, as desired by the Meiji government. Because of its roots in Noh drama, an art form of the nobility, it has become a classic throughout Japan and therefore was performed frequently for foreign visitors as guests of the Meiji leaders. The role of the play in Japan’s culture and society created the need for its adaptations for the Westerners.

The final play to be discussed is Kanadehon Chushingura (The Treasury of Loyal Retainers). Commonly known as Chushingura, the play is the most famous kabuki play in existence. First performed in 1748, it is based upon an incident
which occurred from 1701 – 1703. Asano Naganori, lord of the provincial fief of Ako, was in charge of a large reception at the Shogun’s castle in Edo. Asano requested instruction from Kira Kozukenosuke, master of court ceremonial, because he was unfamiliar with the protocol for the ceremony. However, Asano failed to provide the expected bribe to Kira and was insulted and degraded by the offended Kira. In response to the insults, Asano drew his sword and wounded Kira slightly, an inappropriate act. Asano was ordered to commit seppuku the same day and his lands and property were confiscated. A group of Ason’s retainers vowed to take revenge and they killed Kira in his mansion eighteen months later.

Less than two weeks after the incident, references began to be made about it in a kabuki play about the Soga brothers. The Tokugawa government quickly banned the play after its first performance in Edo. Other smaller plays were written about the incident while being adapted to hide their true meaning. It was not until nearly fifty years after the incident that Chushingura was performed, depicting the Ako incident. This depiction however was disguised because of the censorship on the theatre by the government.

Written at a time of strict restrictions by the Tokugawa government, the play was adapted to disguise its true meaning. One of the adaptations the play first went through when it was written was the changing of names. During the
Tokugawa era, it was illegal to use the names of living people in the kabuki plays. Some of the lesser known characters went through simple edits in their name: Oboshi Yuranosuke became Oishi Kuranosuke, Hayano Kampei became Kayano Sampei, and Amakawaya Gihei became Amanoya Rihei. The main characters of the play had to be changed to an even greater extent: Asano Takumi-no-kami Naganori became Enya Hangan Takasada and Kira Kozukenosuke Yoshitaka became Kono Musashi-no-Kami Moronao.\textsuperscript{44} These sort of name changes were common in kabuki plays from the Tokugawa era because of their restrictions. The kabuki theatre could be a source of uprising by the commoners if the real names of government leaders were used and portrayed negatively. As discussed previously, following the Meiji era, the 1872 kabuki edicts placed an emphasis on making kabuki more educational. Names were therefore changed back to their original names. This impacted \textit{Chushingura} greatly because of its popularity and its topic dealing with a scandalous act in the early sixteenth century. Audiences now became educated through kabuki about the events from 1701—1703.

The second adaptation was similar to the first one in that the play was set in the Ashikaga period (1336—1573) and its locations from Edo to Kamakura.

\textsuperscript{44} Aubrey S. Halford and Giovanna M. Halford, \textit{The Kabuki Handbook: A Guide to Understanding and Appreciation, with Summaries of Favourite Plays, Explanatory Notes, and Illustrations} (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1956), 139.
With the end of the Tokugawa restrictions and the beginning of the Meiji era, the play revealed its true meaning even though it could have previously been assumed if one was familiar with both the actual events and the plot of *Chushingura*.

Due to the Meiji edicts, historical kabuki plays being performed throughout Japan were adapted to educate both the Japanese and foreign audience members about Japan’s true history. It is through these adaptations that the Westerners were able to create a vivid image of Japan’s history. All in all, these changes discussed previously enable the Westerners to understand kabuki to a greater extent. This was the goal of the Meiji government in order to create a stronger relationship and line of communication between Japan and the West. Because of kabuki’s role in society, the government made these changes in order to create a positive image of Japan, an image they hoped would be portrayed to the foreign audience of the kabuki theatre.
Bibliography


