

## Two-dimensional Public Space: The Kabuki Play *Kanadehon Chūshingura* Transposed into 19<sup>th</sup>-century Woodblock Prints

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During the Edo period, Kabuki theatre and woodblock print publishing were closely collaborating parts of the cultural market. Each première was announced by a *tsuji banzuke* print whose function was similar to that of modern-day posters. Immediately after the first day, the audience could buy their favourite actors' portraits and illustrations of the play's highlights. For this collaboration, artists needed to use a special language of symbols to transpose the three-dimensional space of the stage into a two-dimensional sheet of paper.

In my paper I shall discuss several methods of such transposition, using illustrations for the play *Kanadehon Chūshingura* as examples. The widely known story of the revenge of the 47 ronin is an 11-act play (originally written for Bunraku, then adapted for Kabuki), which has been staged in Japanese theatres continuously since 1748. One of the most popular Kabuki plays, it was the subject of almost all kinds of woodblock prints by all major print artists. Because of its immense popularity, *Chūshingura* was always a safe subject to publish, always a sure bestseller, no matter what the style of the prints was. This is why I would like to use *Chūshingura* illustrations as examples.

To start with, let's take a look at the stage production process in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Kabuki.

At first, a prospective spectator would see a handbill posted on a pillar somewhere in the city. It was a *tsuji banzuke*, a theatre programme listing names of chanters and actors. Its essential elements were: the title of the play, the name of the theatre, a list of the actors or cantors, and the date of the première. Almost each of the *banzuke* was illustrated with an image of the most famous scene or scenes of the play.<sup>1</sup> The depicted actors would wear costumes with their family crests. In the case of the *banzuke* from the Krakow collection, which my presentation is based on, the illustrations refer to Acts I, V, VI, VII, and IX. The actors wear costumes with double crests. Each of them has his own family crest as well as the crest of the character played. Honzō in Act IX is a good example because he has on his left sleeve a crest in the shape of the *kanji* 本, the first character required to write his name 本蔵 (Honzō), while we can see the crest of the Ichikawa family, one of the actor clans, on his right arm. The illustrations show the highlights of the play: the introductory scene from Act I, the robbery scene from Act V, the *seppuku* from Act VI, the letter-reading scene from Act VII, and Konami's wedding in Act IX. As in any poster, the informative function was essential for the *banzuke*, and therefore well-known images identified the play at first sight.

Upon seeing such a poster, the prospective spectator would decide whether or not he would like to see the play. Let's assume that he resolved to give it a try. While he was looking through the menu to pick a meal in the theatre, the actors' portraits were still being printed. The moment the actors' names finally became known, the artist, the engraver and the printer worked together on prints which, actually, should have been ready by the day of the première. The characters' figures had been carved in the wood blocks much earlier but the actors' faces were added at the last moment.

An interesting example is the portrait of the actor Nakamura Nakazō I in the role of Sadakurō made by Shunshō (1726–1792/93). Sadakurō was a former samurai of Enya Hangan who, after the death of his master, took to robbery on a mountain road. He appears in Act V, attacks and kills an old man, then dies himself, killed by accident. From the première of *Kanadehon Chūshingura* in 1748 to 1766, actors playing Sadakurō wore a generic robber costume. A turning point came in 1766 when Nakamura Nakazō I was cast in this role. It was intended as punishment for him as a short-tempered actor but he was so brilliant in it that he turned the role into a part of his legend. He wore a tattered black kimono with crests, his hair was tied in a topknot, and he bore two swords as evidence of his samurai status.

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<sup>1</sup> H.D. Smith II, *Chūshingura on Stage and in Print*, Donald Keene Center for Japanese Studies, exhibition catalogue, [http://www.columbia.edu/cu/ealac/dkc/Chushingura\\_part1.html](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/ealac/dkc/Chushingura_part1.html), 2003 (date of access 7.10.2013).

He also painted his face, arms and legs white. Furthermore, to underscore the fact that the action took place during a rainy night, he entered the stage completely wet (after pouring a bucketful of water over himself). [We can see all these elements in the presented image.]



Since that time, actors playing the role of Sadakurō have used this set of costume elements to identify this character.

Another typical actor print is the portrait of Nizaemon Kataoka in the role of Kō no Moronao. He is 'captured' here in a theatrical pose known as *mie*, in which an actor freezes for a few seconds after entering the stage or in the climax of a scene. The *mie* together with the costume (including the makeup) and the crests form a complete set of identification features for a particular character in a play. The actor's own face (highly stylized) is the only element that is his own original feature.

Both these prints were a kind of actor posters in the Edo period. They were sold individually, mostly in connection with a specific stage production.

Finally, if the spectator liked the play, he could buy a set of printed images illustrating the highlights of each act, to remember it better. They were called *monogatari-e* or 'pictures of the story'. I

would like to present four examples of pictures referring to specific *Chūshingura* acts made by various print artists. Each of them includes elements unique for this play, through which these images are easily recognizable as illustrations of the *Chūshingura* play.

**Act I or *Daijō*** introduces the characters of the play and initiates the action, which is why the signs and symbols that identify the characters' names are the crucial elements of the illustrations of this act. This kind of presentation is typical for the Bunraku theatre but it also occurs in the Kabuki version of the *Chūshingura* play. The print designers used these signs and symbols to make sure that it was obvious who was who in the print.

There are crests placed on the curtains as in the Hiroshige print (ca. 1836, publ.

Izumiya Ichibei), but also on the characters' costumes, called *daimon*. The latter were large crests.

They are as follows:

**the Ashikaga family crest** – two horizontal lines in a circle, *maru ni futatsubiki*<sup>2</sup>;

**the Minamoto family crest** – a flower of the Japanese gentian (Lat. *Gentiana scabra*) over bamboo leaves, *sasa-rindō*<sup>3</sup>;

**Kō no Moronao's crest** – a paulownia flower, *go-san-no kiri*<sup>4</sup>, or the kanji *kō* (高), which means 'high'. Moronao is the main villain in the play, arrogant and greedy. He makes advances to Lady Kaoyo, Enya Hangan's wife. When rejected, he offends Hangan, who cannot stand this provocation and attacks

him. In Act XI, Moronao is killed by some of the 47 ronin during their attack on his mansion.

**Enya Hangan Takasada's crest** – two crossed flight feathers, *kokomochi ni chigai-taka-no ha*.<sup>5</sup> Hangan is on duty to receive the emperor's envoys. After his assault on Moronao, he is sentenced to commit *seppuku*. In his last words, Hangan asks his faithful retainer Yuranosuke to avenge him.

**Momonoī Wakasanosuke Yasuchika's crest** – four quadrilaterals composed into another quadrilateral placed in a circle, *maru ni sumitate-yotsumē*<sup>6</sup>. Together with Hangan he receives the emperor's envoys. He evades Moronao's insults thanks to Honzō (his chief retainer) who secretly bribes the villain.

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<sup>2</sup> H.G. Ströhl, *Japońska heraldyka. Ilustrowany przewodnik po herbach samurajskich rodów*, trans. M. Milde, (Bydgoszcz, 2005), p. 195.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 201.

Another symbol is the helmet of Nitta Yoshisada recognized by Lady Kaoyo. It features in prints illustrating the first, ceremonial, part of the *Daijō*. It has been found with forty-seven other helmets and thus it foreshadows the scene in the final act where the forty-seven ronin place Moronao's head in front of Enya Hangan's grave.

**Kabuki and Bunraku costumes** are crucial components of the iconography of *Chūshingura* prints. This theatrical costume was necessary in order to avoid censorship restrictions. Under the rules imposed by the Kyōhō Reforms (1716–1736), the following activities were forbidden in connection with entertainment:

- any mention of high-ranking families from the late sixteen century and members of the Tokugawa family;
- reporting any current events;
- works of art detrimental to public morality;
- publishing unduly luxurious prints; and
- satirical picture books that used false historical settings to mock contemporary government policies.<sup>7</sup>

In the *Daijō*, the costumes worn by the actors are very formal. They resemble the courtly attire of the Edo period.

1. The *Daimon* (*dai* – large, *mon* – crest) is attire worn by the nobility and also the Kabuki costume for the roles of shoguns and *daimyō* in historical plays (*jidaimono*). It consists of a wide-sleeved top garment bearing large crests and a pair of *naga-bakama*, long trailing trousers, hiding the feet.<sup>8</sup> This costume is worn by all the noblemen in the play, especially Tsunayoshi, Moronao, Hangan and Wakasanosuke, who need to be recognizable to the audience. Each of them has an individual costume colour ascribed to him: Moronao's costume is ceremonially black, Wakasanosuke's is blue (*sora-iro*), and Hangan's is soft-canary yellow (*ukon*).<sup>9</sup> According to Ruth M. Shaver, 'yellow fittingly portrays the warm, gentle nature of the quiet Hangan,' while 'the color of clear blue sky express[es] with clarity the virility an impulsiveness of [Wakasanosuke's] youth.'<sup>10</sup> All the print artists follow this theatrical practice because it is the easiest way to present the main characters. Nevertheless, the colours are sometimes exchanged between Wakasanosuke and Hangan. I have noticed this particularly in several Hirohige series from ca. 1836 and 1849–1850. Perhaps this was a way of underlining some other aspects of their temperaments.

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<sup>7</sup> J. King and Y. Iwakiri, *Japanese Warrior Prints 1646–1905*, (Leiden–Boston, 2007), p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> R.M. Shaver, *Kabuki Costume*, (Rutland [Vermont]–Tokyo, 1990), p. 120.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

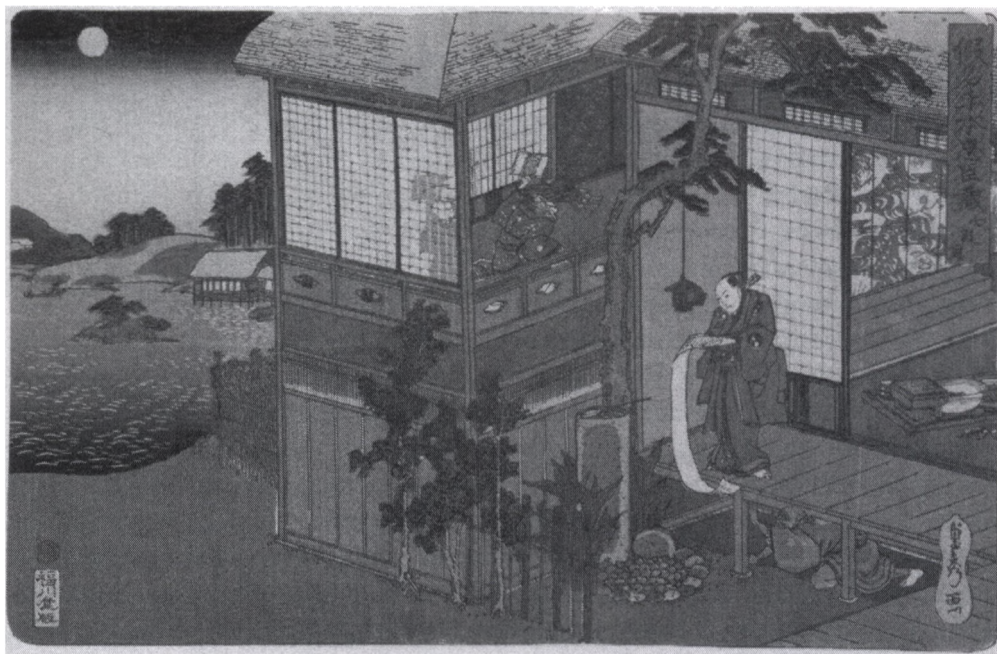


An accessory that goes with the *daimon* costume is the high-crowned hat called *hikitate eboshi*. In *Chūshingura* prints, it was initially worn by Moronao only. Starting in the 1830s, it also appears on Wakasanosuke's and Hangan's heads.

2. The *Kaoyo Gozen* is the Kabuki costume invented specifically for the role of Lady Kaoyo in the *Chūshingura* play. Intended for the wives of *daimyō* or court gentlemen, it consists of a white undergarment (*juban*), a plain-red kimono and an outer garment (*uchikake*) with a purple background and wadded hem, decorated with a circular flower motif. All the garments are floor-sweeping.

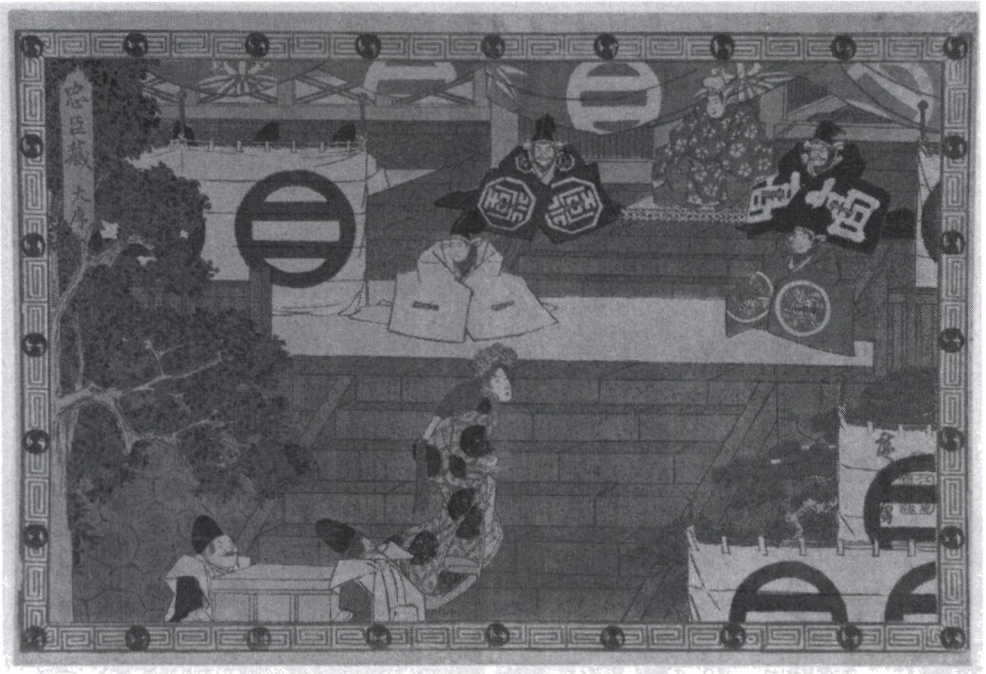
The wig in this costume is of the category in which long hair hangs down the back (*mino-shikoro-no-sagegami*). A purple silk cloth called *bōshi* is placed on the forehead. The most characteristic element is the *hanagushi* – an ornamental hairpin consisting of three rows of silver flowers, placed in back of the *bōshi*.<sup>11</sup>

When these elements meet then there is no manner of doubt that one looks at the opening of the *Kanadehon Chūshingura* play illustration.



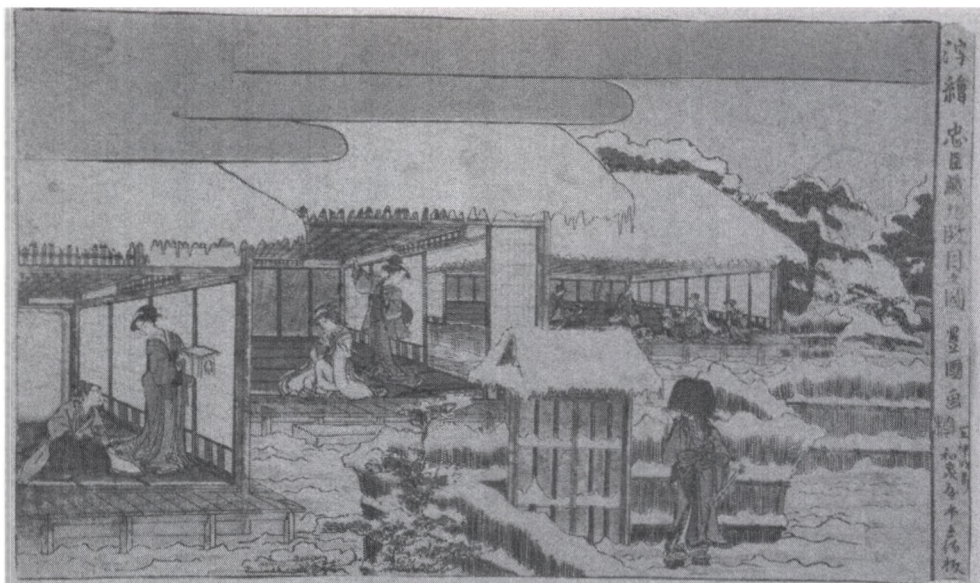
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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 161-162.



Another example is the letter-reading scene from Act VII. In this act, we find the leader of the 47 ronin, Ōboshi Yuranosuke, drinking at a teahouse in the pleasure quarter in Kyoto. He receives a letter from his late master's widow, describing the secret plans of revenge. He goes out onto a veranda to read it. The letter is in the form of long scroll, easily seen by the enemy spy, Ōno Kudayū, who is hiding below the veranda, as well as the courtesan Okaru, who can read it in a mirror, sitting in a room on the first floor. Yuranosuke seems to be unaware of their presence.

This scene is the most representative illustration of Act VII. In the world of Kabuki imagery, there is no other scene resembling this one, and therefore it is the image that defines this act. It is also a powerful carrier of the narrative element of spying, and is actually used in this way for other stories and other characters.



An interesting illustration of the sequence scenes is an image from Act IX by Toyokuni I. This action takes place at Ōboshi's residence in Yamashina on a snowy day, and it's physically divided into three rooms. This division wouldn't be surprising if one couldn't notice that the silhouettes from room one and room two are repeated in the third room. Thus, in the first room on the left, we can see Yuranosuke's wife, Oishi, with a small table, and their son, Rikiya. They are looking into the second room where Rikiya's fiancée, Okaru, is preparing to meet death from her mother's hand. Both women have come to Ōboshi's place to finalize the marriage contract between Okaru and Rikiya. However, Oishi says she won't allow this unless Okaru's father, Honzō gives his own head as a bridal gift. On hearing this, Tonase decides to kill her daughter but finally Honzō appears as a *komusō* monk playing a *shakuhachi* flute. This is one part of the image. The other part is the third room, on the far right, where we can see all the characters from the left section of the picture. In the centre of it, Yuranosuke is shown holding a sword. He is looking at the plan of Moronao's residence, presented by Honzō. Seated behind him are Tonase and Konami, wearing the same costumes as in the second room, while Oishi and Rikiya are also looking at the plan on the left.

In this way, the artist shows a sequence of three scenes in Act IX. First, Oishi reveals her plan concerning Konami, then Tonase and Konami act in response to this news and Honzō appears on stage, while the final scene with all the characters in it is the last link in this chain. Who said that time can't be shown in a print?



While – in the previous image – the stage arrangement was distributed into several separate rooms, in this example the stage has been moved ‘outdoors’. The scene of Moronao’s capture is placed in the backyard of his mansion, between a fence and a charcoal shed. Still, there is no doubt that we are looking at a theatrical illustration because the characters are depicted as actors in the position called *tachimawari*.<sup>12</sup> It is a kind of acrobatic dance which breaks the realistic style of actors’ movements in a play. In general, this term is used for all kinds of fight scenes but here one can see a particular type called *chidori*, which is a kind of one-person fight against a group. In this picture, the main character, Moronao, is standing in the centre of a group of warriors holding him with ropes.

As *monogatari-e* images were quite predictable for specific scenes, artists used this genre to promote their own areas of interests. Looking back at the images we have already seen, we may say that Shun’ei made actor posters for fans while Shunshō compiled actor portraits with stage arrangement. Toyokuni was interested in linear perspective, which is why we could see a print from the series: *Uki-e Kanadehon Chūshingura*. For Hiroshige, *Chūshingura* was a pretext to draw landscapes and create atmosphere (although this is perhaps not so obvious in the examples that I have shown today).

One thing, however, is certain: at the time when they were made, it was obvious that all these pictures were theatre illustrations. They would have never existed without the stage.

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## Illustrations

1. Shunshō, *Nakamura Nakazō I as Sadakurō*, 1766–1790, colour woodblock print, National Museum in Krakow, in the deposit of the Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology, MNK VI-803
2. Shun’ei, *Aktor Nizaemon Kataoka VII as Kō no Moronao*, ca. 1795 (contemporary print), colour woodblock print, National Museum in Krakow, in the deposit of the Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology, MNK VI-4920
3. Hiroshige, *Kanadehon Chūshingura, The Grand Prologue*, ca. 1836, colour woodblock print, National Museum in Krakow, in the deposit of the Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology, MNK VI-1660
4. Sadahide, *Kanadehon Chūshingura, Act Seven*, ca. 1840, colour woodblock print, National Museum in Krakow, in the deposit of the Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology, MNK VI-4058

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<sup>12</sup> E. Żeromska, *Japoński teatr klasyczny. Korzenie i metamorfozy, tom 2, kabuki, bunraku*, (Warsaw: 2010), pp. 165-166.

5. Toyokuni I, *Kanadehon Chūshingura, Act Nine*, 1795, colour woodblock print, National Museum in Krakow, in the deposit of the Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology, MNK VI-4166
6. Hiroshige, *Kanadehon Chūshingura, The Night Attack, Episode Three: Achieving the Goal*, ca. 1836, colour woodblock print, National Museum in Krakow, in the deposit of the Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology, MNK VI-1674

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