



From Chaplin to Kabuki

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Introduction

It is not generally known that in August, 1931, just six months after its world premiere (and three years before it opened in Japan), *City Lights* was adapted in Japan as a Kabuki theatre piece entitled *Komori no Yasusan* ('Bat Man Yasu'). This lecture will offer evidence of Chaplin's influence on traditional Japanese culture by comparing *City Lights* and *Komori no Yasusan*.

Chaplin was known as "Professor Alcohol" in Japan during the silent era, as a result of the extraordinary popularity of his "inebriate" character. When the talkies arrived, Chaplin's popularity only intensified. Many Japanese critics nostalgically regarded silent films as more artistic than talkies, and considered Chaplin a true artist – or even a philosopher – who elevated film to an art form. Simultaneous to this critical elevation, Chaplin maintained his extraordinary popularity among regular filmgoers in Japan.

It was against this backdrop of both critical and popular acclaim that Chaplin's *City Lights* was adapted for Kabuki in Japan. Kabuki still maintained its position as a popular entertainment during this era. But how did Kabuki approach Chaplin's two-tiered popularity with the Japanese intelligentsia and the common filmgoer?

1. From *City Lights* to *Komori no Yasusan*

Usually a Kabuki show runs 25 days, after which an entirely new performance is staged. Because many of the top actors take holidays in the summer, experimental or comic performances take place in August. Kimura Kinka¹, one of the most popular playwrights of the day, wrote the *Yaji-Kita* series, based on popular comic story by Juppensha Ikku², for the August Kabuki performances between 1928 and 1930.

When Otani, president of the Shochiku company which runs the Kabuki performances, commissioned Kimura to write a light comedy for the August production in 1931, the playwright decided he needed to try something different. Kabuki could avail itself to other forms of expression, such as the Bunraku puppet show, so its productions had the flexibility to be influenced by foreign films. Kimura enjoyed Chaplin and had already borrowed the tightrope sequence from *The Circus* for his *Kisokaido-Hizakurige*, which ran in August of 1929. In the September 1931 issue of the theatre magazine *Engei Gaho*, Kimura stated, 'I had been writing *Yaji-Kita* for three years and ran out of material. I was beginning to realise that I must come up with something new when someone told me about *City Lights*. But I had only a sketch of the plot from a cinema magazine.'

According to our research, the earliest detailed description of *City Lights* to have appeared in the Japanese press is "A Cinema Diary in America 6", written by film critic Tamura Yukihiro in the 21 March, 1931 issue of *Kinema Jumbo*. Kimura probably wrote the scenario of *Komori no Yasusan* based on this magazine article, and then supplemented it with details provided by his friends the legendary actors Ichimura Uzaemon the 15th and Ichikawa Ennosuke the 2nd, who had just seen the film in the United States.

We can get some idea of the nature of the story of *Komori no Yasusan* by examining the transcript of the script held at Shochiku Otani Toshokan, the serialised novel that appeared in the newspaper *Yomiuri Shimbun* (22 July – 19 August 1931), a copy of the souvenir brochure at the National Theatre in Japan, and 'A Review of *Komori no Yasusan*' by Chiba Ichiro in the September 1931 issue of *Engei Gaho*. From this material we can infer that Kimura followed the story of *City Lights* almost exactly in *Komori no Yasusan*. Morita Kan'ya the 13th played the part of 'Komori no Yasusan', the lead character based on The Little Tramp. Ichikawa Shocho the 2nd, who was famous for his beauty as an Onnagata³, portrayed 'Ohana' (which means 'Flower' in Japanese), the character based on the blind-flower girl, while Ichikawa Sumizo the 6th played 'Kazusaya Shimbei', a variation on the millionaire.

Kimura moved the setting of the story to Ryogoku (now a part of Tokyo) during the Edo period (1603-1867). The opening scene from *City Lights* was changed to the unveiling of a statue of Buddha. The cabaret scene in the original film was now a Geisha play, and the famous boxing scene became a female sumo wrestling match. In the sumo scene, Komori no Yasusan tries to run away from a big female wrestler and play for time by doing many

“mattas”⁴. All of this suggests that Kimura allowed himself great latitude in developing his plot, while remaining true to the basic story from *City Lights*.

For example, the scene in which the blind girl first mistakes Charlie for a millionaire (as a result of hearing a limousine door slam) was modified to have Komori no Yasusan talking aloud to himself to suggest to the girl that he had just alighted from a kago (a vehicle carried on the shoulders of two people). This sequence was not described in “A Cinema Diary in America 6”, so Kimura probably learned it from Ichimura and Ichikawa.

However, there is a notable difference between the film and the Kabuki play. During the opening scene of *City Lights*, Charlie is found sleeping on a statue being dedicated to the local citizens, and is driven away during the unveiling ceremony. This film was released in 1931, when such a statue would appear frivolous to the ordinary person suffering in the Depression – a situation reflecting Chaplin’s interest in satire and social criticism. Similarly, Komori no Yasusan sleeps on a statue of Buddha, which also excites and alarms those watching this particular unveiling. But at the end of this scene Komori no Yasusan, for some unexplained reason, is given meal money by a Buddhist tutor, which lessens the satirical impact of the original.

In Japan, Chaplin is often described as the filmmaker of love, laughter, and tears. But, in fact, Chaplin’s films are sometimes politically radical and dramatically cruel. But most people in Japan who saw Chaplin’s films did not respond to the parts that were cruel or political. This is important to bear in mind when considering the impression that Chaplin made on the Japanese.

2. Komori-Yasu and Morita Kan’ya the 13th

The title character in *Komori no Yasusan* is based on the well-known figure ‘Komori-Yasu’, who appears in the “Genjidana” scene in the famous Kabuki piece, *Yo wa Nasake Ukina no Yokogushi*. This narrative was written by Segawa Jōko the 3rd, and was first in 1853. Komori-Yasu is a tramp character and teaches Yosaburo, the protagonist, how to extort women. Kimura wrote, ‘Komori-Yasu is an ideal role to adapt to Charlie, because he is a gentle tramp.’⁵ Clearly Kimura tailored Komori-Yasu to be “Chaplinsque”.

The fact that this historical Kabuki tramp was being compared with Chaplin’s screen character

for the production of *Komori no Yasusan* is significant. There is a long history in Japan of adapting foreign plays to fit its culture. For example, *Shirano Benjuro* is an adaptation of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Then there was *Five-storey Tower*, an adaptation of *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. However, the adaptation of *City Lights* was more complex. For example, in *Hamlet Yamato no Nishikie*⁶, a Bunraku puppet show version of *Hamlet*, the author Kanagaki Robun renamed the hero as Hamuramaru. Kimura did not find a similar sounding Japanese name for "Charlie", but instead borrowed one from a well-known Kabuki character. So, from this point of view, this particular adaptation of foreign material also reflects the deep roots of traditional Japanese culture.

The protagonist Komori-Yasu was played by Morita Kan'ya the 13th, who was very popular at the time as a matinee idol. However, he was not an obvious selection. Given its use of narrative, Kabuki is a theatre genre. Because of its emphasis on visuals, it is also related to painting as an art form. Kabuki is full of symbolism: the villain characters have their faces painted red, while the main characters appear with white faces. Kabuki also uses "stop motion" as an artistic convention. For example, when a man and woman fall in love in a Kabuki narrative, they freeze in a pose to show how deeply they have succumbed. If the proper effect has been accomplished the audience will applaud the beauty of their pose. Because Kabuki is so steeped in tradition and symbolism, a good-looking actor should not play a tramp character in these productions. Morita had always played the part of Yosaburo, the handsome protagonist, instead of Komori-Yasu, the tramp character in the "Genjidana" scene. Usually a top Kabuki actor is not selected to play a part, but chooses the role himself. So why did Morita decide to play Komori-Yasu in *Komori no Yasusan*?

Morita probably took on the part of Komori-Yasu in *Komori no Yasusan* because he felt that he could capture the dual nature of "the gentleman tramp" through the seemingly incongruous intertwining of his own persona as a "gentleman", with the Komori-Yasu character of "the tramp".

In addition to his acting, Morita presided over "Bungeiza" (Literature Theatre), an experimental theatre company that constantly pushed the boundaries of the traditional concepts of theatre. He was considered an intellectual actor. We can now see why only Morita, equally popular among the intelligentsia and general public, could attempt to play a variation of Chaplin's tramp, despite the fact that he was not generally associated with this role as a Kabuki performer.

3. Reviews

The story of *Komori no Yasusan* appeared in serialized form in the paper *Yomiuri Shimbun*, and was performed from August 1st to 25th 1931 in the Kabukiza Theatre. Though Kimura was not satisfied with his work, it became a hit and was made into a film, which was shot in Shimogamo Studio in Kyoto. It was also adapted by Omori Chisetsu for the above mentioned Kabuki play entitled *Aotenjo*, which was performed in the Nakaza Theatre in Osaka the following month.

Judging from the contemporary accounts, both the play and Morita's performance were well received. The sumo scene seems to have been as popular as the boxing match in *City Lights*. In the 13 August 1931 issue of *Yomiuri Shimbun*, one of the readers wrote, 'The female sumo scene is the funniest scene. The contrast between the big Dan'emon (who played the female wrestler) and little Morita is reminiscent of a comic strip.' There is some common ground between this description and Chaplin's films, which always evoked laughter by pitting little Charlie against a large nemesis.

Komori no Yasusan was also popular with the Japanese intellectuals. In a roundtable discussion of *Komori no Yasusan*⁷, Sasaki Kuni said, 'Though many characters from the lower classes appear, the play is still respectable. That is what gives the play its distinction. A comic play tends to be coarse, while *Komori no Yasusan* is not.' The "distinction" that Sasaki noted is also a characteristic of Chaplin's films. The combination of Morita's own persona and body, his dramatic acting skills and a traditional tramp character of Kabuki effectively recreated significant elements of the Chaplin film experience in this very Japanese art form.

Conclusion

When considering *Komori no Yasusan*, the most important point to remember is that it was made just six months after the world premiere of *City Lights*. This serves to illustrate the speed in which information travelled, as well as the international popularity of Chaplin at that time. In addition, Kimura adapted the traditional tramp character, Komori-Yasu, to reflect Charlie, and had Morita, a respected Kabuki performer, play the part. Thus Kabuki, a traditional Japanese theatre genre, seamlessly incorporated the influence of the most popular

comic genius of the newest media in the western world.

Japanese culture has always been successful at incorporating foreign influences. Today, the country is bombarded with information from all over the world. But can we honestly say that we are making the most effective use of it? Perhaps modern Japan can take some guidance from the manner in which Kimura Kinka adapted *City Lights*.

Now we are planning to revive *Komori no Yasusan* today. I have written the new script for the kabuki piece and one of the most popular young kabuki actors is interested in this project. He said he would like to stage the piece in the near future. I think that the fact we young people are going ahead with this project is very significant. I hope it will be successful.

Notes

1. Kimura Kinka (1877-1960) wrote more than sixty plays in his life, such as *Togitatsu no Utare*. It should be noted that in Japan, the family surname precedes that person's "forename".
2. Juppensha Ikku (1765-1839) was a comic playwright who wrote more than 400 stories. *Tokaidochu Hizakurige* and its two main characters "Yaji" and "Kita" are still popular in Japan.
3. Female characters are played by male actors in Kabuki theatre. Actors who play exclusively female roles are called "onnagata".
4. "Matta" means "wait" in English. When a sumo wrestler is not ready for a fighting he says "matta" to another. Usually it is said just once.
5. "As the author of *Komori no Yasusan*" in the September, 1931 issue of *Engei Gaho*.
6. *Hamlet Yamato no Nishikie* was revived by Ichikawa Somegoro the 5th in 1991 for the first time in 105 years and performed also in London.
7. "The Roundtable Discussion of *Komori no Yasusan*" in the August 11, 1931 issue of *Yomiuri Shimbun*.

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