

Cities and Theaters : Popular Entertainment and the Comparative Study of Civilization

著者(英)	Takeshi Moriya
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Cities and Theaters: Popular Entertainment and the Comparative Study of Civilization

TAKESHI MORIYA

National Museum of Ethnology

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1. EVIDENCE FROM A BROADSHEET

Let me begin with a very specific piece of evidence. It is a printed broadsheet, dated 1825 and titled "A Ranking of Thriving Theaters in the Various Provinces" (*Kuniguni shibai han'ei sumō*; see illustration) [ANZAKO 1968]. At first glance, this print appears to be a ranking chart for Sumo wrestlers, but as the title indicates, it is in fact a listing of 132 different theaters, either by name or location, throughout the entire country ("various provinces"), ranked in order of the degree to which they were then "thriving." It was popular in the late Edo period to use the form of Sumo rankings to make up ranked lists of all kind of things [MORIYA 1978a]. These were called "parody rankings" (*mitate banzuke*), and the theater chart here is a good example of the genre.

The publisher was Honya Yasubei of Osaka, a bookseller with somewhat of a reputation for issuing this kind of *mitate banzuke*. Of course, such a private publisher was interested mainly in providing entertaining reading, which means that one must be cautious in using the ranking of "Thriving Theaters" as historical evidence.¹⁾

Another matter of concern is precisely what sort of establishment was meant by the term "theater" (*shibai*) used in the title. In Japan at the time, there were many different types of theaters, ranging from permanent to semi-permanent to semi-

1) Even if we accept misinformation as common in publications of the time, one particularly striking error in the chart deserves mention: whereas it lists twelve theaters in Osaka, there are only five for Edo. It is unclear whether this imbalance results from lack of information or from an Osaka bias on the part of the publisher. More generally, there is considerable doubt as to the precision of the standards used in such rankings.

If these assumptions are correct, then we can take this chart, despite inaccuracies of detail, as an approximate listing of permanent commercial theaters operating in Japan in the late Edo period. To link it to the topic at hand, it may not be unreasonable to consider it at the same time a listing of “cities with theaters.”

Proceeding on the basis of these assumptions, there are various interesting issues which one can discover in examining this chart, but let me here confine my attention to the matter of the national distribution of the theaters. A complete analysis is beyond my present concerns, so let me simply provide a rough overview of the 132 theaters and their locations.

Consider first the “Three Ranks” (*san'yaku*), the top three positions on both the East and West side, corresponding to the Sumo ranks of *ōzeki*, *sekiwake*, and *komusubi*. It is no surprise that these should correspond to the “Three Great Cities” (Santo) of Kyoto, Osaka, and Edo, but it is interesting that the list includes not only the large established theaters of these cities, but also a variety of small and medium-size theaters, such as “shrine theaters” occupying a permanent space within Shinto shrine precincts. The same is true of other such cities on the list as Nagoya and Sakai. The *mitate banzuke* thus tells us that in the large cities of the time there existed a variety of different kinds of theaters of various sizes.

In terms of the total numbers, however, the three largest cities account for only 26 theaters, less than one-fifth of the total. This means that the remaining four-fifths—106 theaters—were all located in provincial cities. This reveals that the existence of theaters in Japan at the time was not an exclusive monopoly of the large central cities. From this single *mitate banzuke*, we are able to conclude that cities with theatres were distributed widely throughout the country, not only in the large urban centers but in the provinces as well.²⁾

2. A FIRST ATTEMPT AT COMPARISON

This sort of distribution may all seem somewhat self-evident. But is it in fact such a predictable pattern if we compare it with other civilizations in the same era? At least in terms of East Asia, for example, it would appear that the Japanese case was exceptional. In neighboring Korea, permanent commercial theaters were virtually non-existent. In China, the situation was much the same: although the court theaters and theaters attached to religious institutions are well known, “cities with theaters” comparable to those in Japan would have been difficult to find anywhere in China in the same period of history.

In Europe as well, it is hard to find materials as telling as the *mitate banzuke* list which we have examined. Take first the case of England, which would seem to offer a fairly close parallel to Japan. According to Frances Yates, “Elizabethan and

2) The breakdown of the provincial cities by type is as follows: 51 castle towns (56 theaters), 19 port towns, 7 temple towns, 5 rural towns, and 19 other (miscellaneous or location unclear). Given the nature of the material, these figures should be taken only as indicative of general trends.

Jacobean London was unique in Europe in possessing large numbers of public theaters" [YATES 1969: 92]. England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries would thus seem to have been exceptional within the European context. But thereafter, "For many years there was one theater open in London, the Theater Royal, at Drury Lane, and sometimes one or two more. But there were no fixed theaters in the provinces and the touring companies were few and bad" [TREVELYAN 1942: 260].

As for Germany, Max von Boehn has written that "even in a city like Leipzig, which was richly blessed with culture, it was only in the nineteenth century that permanent theaters came to be established. No matter how great the interest in theatrical performances, it was only in the largest cities that it was possible to maintain permanent theaters" [BOEHN 1922: 409]. As for the case of France, I have not been able to discover any pertinent materials for the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries.

So it would appear that in Europe, apart from the capital cities, the spread of permanent theaters was very limited. This suggests that the situation revealed by "A Ranking of Thriving Theaters in the Various Provinces" cannot be so easily dismissed as self-evident. From the standpoint of the comparative study of civilization, the global distribution of "cities with theaters" seems to be a problem that deserves further attention.

3. THE CONCEPT OF A "THEATRICAL SYSTEM"

In considering popular performance arts (*geinō*) from the standpoint of the comparative study of civilization, it will not suffice simply to analyze such separate themes as form, content, and theory. If we define "civilization" as a system composed of man and of the "tools" or "devices" (*sōchi*) and "institutions" (*seido*) which he creates [UMESAO 1981], then the most direct approach to the problem of popular performance would be to focus on the actual artifacts and institutions of performance, such as the organization of actors, the forms of theatrical presentation, and the physical facilities—in short, the objective aspects of the phenomenon of performance.

In the first Symposium on Civilization Studies, I presented a paper on "The History of Japanese Civilization through Aesthetic Pursuit." In that report, I focused on the facilities known as "Culture Centers" which are enjoying a great boom in contemporary Japan. I indicated various facts about these centers, interpreting them as huge "devices" for fulfilling the compulsion of Japanese to take lessons (*keikogoto*), supported by the "institution" of the *iemoto* system by which the head of a school of instruction has great authority. The *iemoto* system, I noted, began to emerge in the Genroku period of the late seventeenth century as a systematic way of disseminating the various arts among the common people [MORIYA 1984b].

Using this earlier report on the *iemoto* system as a starting point, I wish here to focus on the parallel "institution" of popular entertainment in the Tokugawa period, and on the "device" of the physical theater, as a way of addressing the theme of

“Cities and Urbanization.”

At this point, I must make a confession. The theme of this conference, unlike the previous one, is the *comparative* study of civilization. The assigned task, in other words, is to compare Japan with some other civilization. Unfortunately, my knowledge about any such other civilizations with which Japan might be compared is limited, and there is little available comparative research to which I might turn. All I can hope to do here is to offer an analysis of the Japanese situation, in an effort to tease out a few comparative threads which might serve as the basis for further discussion.

Umesao Tadao has suggested that the terminology of “user” and “maker,” taken from the context of an industrialized society, might be used to analyze the relationship between professional religious practitioners and the common believers [UMESAO *et al.* 1972]. If we use this same argument to analyze the system of popular entertainment, then we should focus on the system of social relations between the performers as “makers” and the spectators as “users.” In this scheme, the theater can then be interpreted as the “device” which mediates between maker and user in the case of any particular performance.

The phrase “theatrical system” (*kōgyō seido*) is not one which has yet gained academic recognition, but I find it a useful concept and would define it as follows: it is a system by which a performing company 1) with no fixed patron 2) performs regularly in a fixed place, 3) with the goal of making a profit, 4) before a large and non-specific audience, which 5) pays a fixed entrance fee, and which 6) views the performance voluntarily [MORIYA 1984a].

Each of these conditions implies a converse which indicates the form of performance prior to the establishment of a “theatrical system.” Such a “pre-theatrical” system thus involves 1) a performance troupe protected by a fixed patron, 2) at a place decided by the patron, on an irregular basis, 3) in return for protection, 4) before a small and specified audience, which 5) pays no admission fees, and which 6) does not necessarily come of its own free will. Of course, this is purely a theoretical model, and one can posit various forms of performance which fall somewhere in between these two ideal-type extremes.

Note that the first three conditions in both cases deal with the performers or “makers” of theater, and the last three with the audience or “users.” From this we can see that the evolution of a theatrical system involves a process of mutual response and development between the “makers” and “users” of performance. Using this model, let me now turn to an analysis of the actual emergence of a full-fledged “theatrical system” in Japan.

Let me start with the assertion that in Japan, the kind of “theatrical system” described above had already begun to take shape in the late medieval period (14th to 16th centuries) in the form of the type of performance known as *kanjin kōgyō* or “fund-raising performances” [MORIYA 1970]. Such performances involved the sponsorship of entertainment by Shinto shrines or Buddhist temples as a way of raising money for the construction or repair of buildings. The viability of such fund-raising

efforts depended on how many spectators could be drawn, and this depended in turn on the skill and popularity of the performers. The situation was thus as if the performers were “makers” selling their product to “users” who voluntarily paid money in order to enjoy a performance, whatever the religious ends to which the profits were turned.

Such performances did not, however, satisfy the further conditions of a fixed place or a regular schedule of performance. Nor were the performers—in this case, Nō actors—necessarily free from the protection of patrons, who often restricted the actors’ participation in performances. It was not until the Edo period, from the seventeenth century, that one finds in Japan the emergence of a full-fledged “theatrical system” in the sense that I have defined it.

Changes in the nature of the performers involved a variety of conditions, including 1) the appearance of performers or troupes permanently residing in cities; 2) the establishment of permanent theaters performing on regular schedules; and 3) the provision of commercial capital for entertainment. As a result, by the end of the seventeenth century, there had emerged in the “Three Great Cities” of Kyoto, Osaka, and Edo an entertainment establishment consisting of three basic elements: licenses issued by the bakufu, theatrical troupes (*za*) organized on an annual basis, and the physical theaters (*shibai*) themselves.³⁾

4. A SECOND ATTEMPT AT COMPARISON

How did the relationship between “maker” and “user” in the entertainment system of early modern Japan compare with that in other civilizations? Let me begin by considering the revealingly different situation in England in the age of Shakespeare (late sixteenth to early seventeenth centuries).

Particularly surprising from a Japanese viewpoint is the fact that many of the major theatrical troupes in England in this era were under the protection of specific patrons. The very names of the groups enabled one to distinguish their patrons, and in 1572, a law was passed which limited patronage of theatrical troupes to nobles of the rank of baron and above, thereby adding to the prestige of actors. For example, the actor James Burbage, who built England’s first permanent playhouse (known simply as “The Theater”), was a member of a company known as “Lord Leicester’s Men” (or “Servants”) [MANTZIUS 1937, III: 21]. After Leicester’s death, this troupe moved from one patron to another, each time changing its name: “Lord Strange’s Men” to “The Earl of Derby’s Men” to “The Lord Chamberlain’s Servants” and

3) It is particularly important to note the impact of bakufu policy on the emergence of a system of entertainment in the Edo period, as revealed clearly in the issuance of special entertainment licenses by the shogunal authorities [MORIYA 1978b]. It is no coincidence that the three cities—Kyoto, Osaka, and Edo—in which a theatrical system was first organized were all cities under the direct control of the bakufu. The concern here, however, is less with the details of bakufu policy itself than with what made such a policy feasible.

finally to "The King's Players" in 1603 [MANTZIUS 1937, III: 21]. There seem to have been special patrons for the theaters as well. For example, in 1603 the above-mentioned "King's Players" performed exclusively in the Globe Theater, which was recognized and patronized by the monarch.

The situation seems to have been much the same in France. The famous playwright Molière (1622–73), for example, was first a member of the private company of Philippe d'Orléans, the brother of King Louis XIV, and later of the private company of the king himself. After Molière's death, Louis XIV established the Théâtre Royal (later the Comédie Française) as a way of unifying all French theaters.

This situation is comparable to Japan only in the ancient or medieval period. To be sure, one may perhaps find a comparable phenomenon in the patronage of Nō actors by the Tokugawa bakufu or by the various daimyo of the Edo period, but such performers did not appear before the public except on very special occasions, and they were totally distinct from the performers of the kabuki and puppet theaters that were the mainstays of the "theatrical system" at the time. Nor were such protected actors any longer a source of creativity and innovation in the theater, and even though the bakufu and domains did build Nō stages within their private residences, it would have been unthinkable for them to have established Nō theaters open to the general public.

In Europe, by contrast, the royalty and nobility did indeed sponsor popular acting companies and even built theaters for their own favored actors. From the actors' point of view, being so "favored" did not necessarily mean performing exclusively for the sake of the patron, since they also engaged in popular performances for the masses, using the name of their "patron" for mere convenience.

How did Europe compare with Japan in terms of the permanent settlement of actors in cities? Here we find that actors of all ranks seem to have traveled about much more frequently in Europe than in Japan. In eighteenth-century Germany, for example, "the development of the theatrical arts was in the hands of itinerant troupes of actors who traveled about here and there in carts, struggling to make a living in the midst of deprivation and poverty" [BOEHN 1922: 384]. So also the influence of Italy on the theater in France and Spain was made possible by Italian actors who traveled across national borders.

It is true that Japan also had a large number of itinerant performers, but the very existence of the term "*tabi-yakusha*" (travel-actor) presumes a conscious distinction between them and those actors who were permanently settled in the cities. The higher an actor in rank and prestige, the more likely he would be to settle in one city, or at least to limit his movement to the major theaters in the three cities of Kyoto, Osaka, and Edo. A provincial tour by a famous actor was unusual enough at the time to merit special comment.

5. THEATER STRUCTURES AND THE THEATRICAL "MARKET"

We have already seen that a theater may be considered a physical "device" which

serves to mediate between the “makers” and “users” of performance. With the establishment of a theatrical system, the theater comes to serve, from the point of view of the actor/maker, as a place for “performing for profit on a regular basis at a fixed place,” and from the point of view of the spectator/user as a place for “viewing a performance voluntarily for a set fee.” In order to satisfy these conditions of fixed place, regular schedule, and voluntary attendance, a theater must be a permanent facility. The establishment of a system of entertainment thus necessarily results in the construction of permanent theaters and, by extension, of whole theater districts in which a number of theaters stand side by side.

In Japan, such permanent theaters appeared in the late seventeenth century, which by no coincidence was precisely the era in which the theatrical system was becoming established. To use the analogy of commercial activity again, the appearance of permanent theaters is much like the transition from itinerant peddlers to permanent shops, and the construction of theater districts compares with the building of shopping districts. Permanent theaters are the visible indication of the creation of a theatrical system, the concrete “devices” which make it possible.

In the case of Japan in the Edo period, permanent theaters were built specifically for the kabuki and puppet drama. The prototypes of these theaters, however, were the stages of the fund-raising Nō performances of the Muromachi period. Although these fund-raising performances were occasional and the sites temporary, they nevertheless boasted three separate physical elements: 1) a stage with a roof; 2) an open-air area for ordinary spectators on three sides (the so-called *doma*, or “earthen floor”); and 3) a covered gallery (*sajiki*) of higher-priced boxes. The term “*shibai*”, which in the Tokugawa period came to refer to the theatre as a whole, was originally the term for the popular seats in the *doma* of the fund-raising Nō performances.

The kabuki and puppet theaters of the Tokugawa period were also made up of the same three basic elements of stage, pit, and gallery. At first, these were temporary, but in time all were made permanent structures. The final phase resulted in the consolidation of all three under a single roof, thus creating Japan’s first permanent theaters. Even today, Japanese theaters in the traditional style still have a roof shape above the stage, and roof-like eaves above the second-story gallery seats. These are a vestige of the days when the stage and the gallery in kabuki theaters were two separate buildings.

In turning to Europe in the same period, we find a remarkably similar structure in the theaters of Shakespearean England, which included a stage (“platform”) visible from three sides, a level earthen area, and a three-story “gallery.” Whatever the similarities of physical structure, however, it must be emphasized that permanent theaters in Japan were built entirely by anonymous private entrepreneurs for commercial profit, with no involvement or encouragement by rulers, nobles, or philanthropists.

By contrast, in Europe of the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, corresponding to the Edo period in Japan, royal theaters were being established one after another, beginning with the above-mentioned Théâtre Royal in France. In

terms of the comparative history of theaters, the interesting problem is why certain kinds of theaters appeared in one place but not in another. The absence of any state theater in Japan was considered a major drawback by those active in the theater after the Meiji Restoration of 1868. The upshot was the creation of an "Imperial Theater" which was in fact under private management.

In order to sustain a permanent theater offering regular performances, it is necessary to establish a stable "market." Here again let me simply suggest the conclusion without going into the details. In Japan, one finds the beginnings of audiences which are "non-specific and of indefinite size" in the fund-raising Nō performances centered in Kyoto in the late medieval period [MORIYA 1970]. The spacious spectator areas which one finds around the stages of such performances suggest that they were filled by customers who purchased individual tickets to enter.

To be sure, there was still an insufficient "market" to sustain performances on a regularly scheduled basis. The fund-raising performances were by their very nature irregular and occasional events. What finally made possible the creation of a stable "market" for entertainment was the emergence of a large commoner population in the cities of the late seventeenth century. It was the chonin populations of Kyoto (400,000), Osaka (300,000), and Edo (500,000) which enabled theaters catering to a "non-specific audience of indefinite size."

It is misleading, however, to stress the quantitative aspects alone. Equally important was the fact that sizable portion of the chonin population had acquired the economic resources and cultural ambitions that allowed them to engage in the amateur pursuit of entertainment skills, to frequent the pleasure quarters, and to attend the theater. The creation of a full-fledged system of entertainment in the second half of the seventeenth century was closely related to these trends in the qualitative development of the chonin population.

Leaving the details for another occasion, I would like to propose that it was in the Genroku period that one finds the formation of a mass urban society in Japanese cities. In all East Asia at the time, Japan seems to have been the only place with such a mass urban society. The sparse distribution of cities with permanent theaters in other parts of East Asia is certainly related to the level of development of such a mass society. If this is the case, then I might restate the proposition as follows: the theatrical system in Japan was one which was able to mobilize "large numbers of non-specific spectators" because of the formation of an urban mass society in the nation's central cities in the seventeenth century. Or in still different terms, it might be possible to say that certain performers, faced with the need to reorganize their way of operation in response to the appearance of an urban mass, responded by creating a "theatrical system." Or alternatively, perhaps certain performers devised the "system of performance" as a way of escaping from the bondage of specified patrons by appearing directly before the urban masses.

Whatever the dynamics of the process, it is clear that the building of permanent theaters as a physical expression of a "theatrical system" was closely predicated on the existence of cities to supply the density and permanence necessary to attract

a large and non-specific mass audience.

The importance of the formation of cities can also be seen in the three phenomena mentioned above as characteristic of the establishment of a system of entertainment in Japan: 1) the appearance of performers or troupes permanently residing in cities; 2) the establishment of permanent theaters performing on regular schedules; and 3) the start of the provision of commercial capital for entertainment. In other words, the changes in the symbiotic relationship between the “makers” and “users” of the theater was paralleled by a symbiotic relationship between theaters and the cities themselves.

In this way, permanent theaters came to appear throughout the country as urbanization itself spread to the provinces. As a result, we find the situation which we have seen in “A Ranking of Thriving Theaters in the Various Provinces,” where in the first half of the nineteenth century, there were theaters in cities all over Japan.⁴⁾ The existence of permanent theaters is not only a benchmark for determining the level of development of the theatrical system, but also serves to indicate the level of provincial urbanization, particularly as a barometer of the maturity of urban mass society.

6. A FINAL ATTEMPT AT COMPARISON

Let us turn again to the comparison with Shakespearean England, this time with reference to the relationship between theaters and the popular market for performances.

With respect to permanent theaters, our attention is caught by the opening lines of Karl Mantzius' volume on the Shakespearean theatre: “At the date of Shakespeare's birth (1564) no permanent theater as yet existed in England” [MANTZIUS 1937, III: 1]. The first permanent theater in England appeared in 1576, and from the 1590s one finds what Yates describes as a “sudden efflorescence of new theaters in London” [YATES 1969: 101]. What could have been the social conditions behind this development, and how did it compare with the situation in Japan?⁵⁾

The first major contrast with Japan is the fact that theaters in England developed

- 4) In considering the relationship between cities and theaters in early modern Japan, one must also take into account the existence of the pleasure quarters. This is reflected by the common use of the set expression “theater and pleasure quarters” (*shibai to yūri*) by those who write about the cultural history of Tokugawa Japan. Space does not permit elaboration here, but one may also argue that the establishment of a system of organized prostitution in the pleasure quarters was likewise dependent on the establishment of a mass urban society.
- 5) Yates writes that Shakespeare “wrote for a world in which the new theaters had already arrived when he began, and would continue to develop and flourish exceedingly as his career proceeded” [YATES 1969: 97]. I should also note that Yates' account of the Shakespearean theater differs substantially from the standard account which I present here. Since I am unqualified to judge the validity of Yates' argument, I have relied largely on the traditional version.

from amphitheaters designed for beast-baiting, so that even with the appearance of permanent theaters, both plays and animal sports were performed in a single place. The architecture of the English theater is said to have evolved from the courtyards and balconies of tenements, which appear to have been not only gathering spots for the common people, but also places which nobles and gentlemen frequented at will. The courtyards became a kind of earth-floored pit for the ordinary people, while the surrounding balconies and the windows opening onto the courtyard served as ideal viewing boxes for upper-class spectators. There is much evidence to support this theory that the form of the theater in Shakespearean England evolved from tenement architecture. Although theaters in Japan and England were quite similar in outer appearance, as indicated earlier, they were very different in terms of their origins and evolution.

A second point of contrast is that in England, the appearance of permanent theaters led in time to two different type of theaters, "private" and "public." "Private theaters" referred to small theaters, of which there were five or six in London, which were set up in private residences in the center of town and which catered to an upper-class audience. The "public" theaters were rather for the masses, and were located in the suburban areas south of the Thames and to the north of the City. At the peak of their development, there were more than ten such "public" theaters. These were large in scale, seating by conservative estimate some three hundred spectators. The contrast in clientele between the two types of theaters was most dramatic in the entrance fees, which ranged from sixpence to two and a half shillings for the former, and only from onepence to one shilling for the latter.

Such a range in the quality and price of theaters of course existed in Japan as well. There, however, the larger the scale of the theater, the higher was both the price and the social class of the audience. Nor was there any such conceptual distinction as "public" versus "private" in the Japanese case: one might possibly consider the Nō stages in the daimyo mansions of the Tokugawa period to be "private," but these of course were not theaters for which one paid admission fees. Incidentally, Mantzius suggests that the purpose of the "private" theaters in England was to "collect a small and select aristocratic public. . . and to exclude the tumultuous elements" [MANTZIUS 1937, III: 34]. The use of the term "private" for such play-houses was thus much like the distinction in English pubs between a "private room" for distinguished visitors and a "public room" for the common crowd.

A third point of comparison is that in both Japan and England, the popular theaters were located on the fringes rather than in the center of the city. This was brought about in England by pressure from Puritans and in Japan by official bakufu policy; in both cases the intent was to isolate the permanent theaters which catered to the masses. This isolation is clearly reflected in the location of the "public theaters" of Shakespeare's day, either at Bankside—literally along the side of the river—or beyond the limits of the jurisdiction of the Mayor of London. This is in clear contrast to the "private" play-houses and to the royal theaters of continental Europe. The royal theaters in particular were located in prominent locations on the

most prestigious avenues, becoming monumental focal points in the urban landscape.

In early modern Japan, even though permanent theaters became an indispensable element in any city worthy of the name, they were generally located in entertainment districts on the edges of town. Nor was there anything like a royal theater in Japan, so that theaters never became a “device” which constituted a core urban facility.

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