

The NEW MAGIC LANTERN JOURNAL

Volume 11, Number 6

Fig. 3. An example of Furo (Japanese wooden magic lantern)³



RECONSIDERATION OF *NISHIKI KAGE-E* (THE JAPANESE MAGIC LANTERN) FROM A PRACTICAL PERSPECTIVE

Mitsue Ikeda

PREFACE¹

THIS PAPER BRIEFLY DISCUSSES *Nishiki Kage-e*'s historical background and reconsiders it from a practical perspective as well as describing its characteristics. For a detailed discussion on previous studies, technical and structural significances, and practical verification experiments, please see my original paper (Ikeda 2012).

1. CHARACTERISTICS

*Nishiki Kage-e*² (the Japanese magic lantern), and a magic lantern performance in the Edo Period (1603–1868), are considered to be the root of Japanese animation. The defining characteristic of this performing art is the close connection between a performer's physical movements and the projected image.

At the end of the eighteenth century, around the Meiwa period (1764–72), a metallic magic lantern from the West was introduced to Japan by the Dutch. Japanese lantern performers at the time replaced the metal of the Dutch magic lanterns with paulownia wood (*Paulownia tomentosa*), which is light and resistant to heat, so that they could easily carry the lantern and move freely to project the images. The Japanese also made many improvements and adjustments to various areas. Those changes included a shutter screen in front of the lens, adjustment of the lens operating system, changes in projection distance, superimposing images by using multiple wooden magic lanterns (hereinafter called *Furo*; Fig. 1), and devising projection methods and hand-operation techniques. With a built-in device in a vitreous *Tane-ita* (lantern slide; Fig. 2), the projected image makes various



Fig. 2. An example of Tane-itas (lantern slides)⁴

movements on the wide screen, which was made of horizontally spliced hand-made Japanese paper.

Like Western phantasmagoria, the Japanese magic lantern projects the image from the back of the screen using multiple projecting devices (*Furos*). However, unlike the Western version, the Japanese magic lantern does not need to use a dolly to move around because of the mobility of the handheld *Furos*. The performers operate *Furos* with musical instruments and narration. The latest dyeing technology available at the time was used to paint the images on the glass-made *Tane-ita*. The images on *Tane-ita* were painted with light transmissive dyes while the rest of the *Tane-ita* was blacked out with *Sumi* (inkstick) so that the coloured image stands out in the dark. This moving projection with vivid colours fascinated people and became a precursor of Japanese motion picture and image culture.

In the West, the invention of perforations and film transport elements enabled Japanese performers to add movement to a still image, and gave birth to the motion picture. About 200 years ago in Japan, the concept of and devices for projecting moving pictures were totally different. The visual experience the Japanese magic lantern offered was different from that offered by Western cinema's visual expression and phantasmagoria. I think that what made the Japanese magic lantern unique was the atmosphere that the lantern performers' *Kehai* (sense of existence) created through their physical expressions. This *Kehai* may have provided new possibilities for artistic and theatrical expressions. Taking into account the traditional techniques, I have created original *Nishiki Kage-e* stories and performed them with my students and volunteers (a performance group Nishiki Kage-e Ikeda-Gumi¹) in order to pursue and consider those possibilities through practice.

2. RECONSIDERATION OF THE HISTORY OF NISHIKI KAGE-E

Japanese magic lantern performances, *Utsushi-e* and *Nishiki Kage-e*, are said to have formed the basis of the unique visual culture of Japan. The origin of the lantern was thought to be a Japanese wooden magic lantern called *Kage-e Megane* (shadow picture glasses), which was an imitation of a magic lantern exported to Japan by early European traders during the *Meivwa* period (1764–72) and used in performances at Nanba-Shinchi, Osaka (Iwamoto 2002, Maeda ed. 1966, Yamamoto 1988). However, the actual performance style of Japanese magic lanterns in Kamigata was thought to have been established in the *Tenpō* period (1830–44), after *Utsushi-e* was developed in Edo and reintroduced in Kamigata (Iwamoto 2002, Kobayashi 1987, Maeda ed. 1966, Yamamoto 1988).

Although I share this conventional notion of the Japanese lantern's origin, the actual production and practice of modern-day *Nishiki Kage-e* leads me to be sceptical of previous views on the establishment of Japanese magic lanterns in Kamigata. For example, in order for the *Kage-e Megane* show to be a big hit in Osaka in 1790, it would have been necessary to make many improvements. To perform the *Kabuki* story '*Musume Dōjō-ji*' (Girl Dōjō temple) with a Japanese magic lantern in 1796, several magic lanterns as well as advanced operating techniques must have been required. For the producer and performers, it seems natural that in order to keep the audience

in a show tent for a certain amount of time and keep them satisfied, certain improvements needed to be made. For example, at least the magic lantern should have been moved around, effective built-in gizmos and picture-switching techniques should have been developed and practised, and some music played.

Japanese magic lanterns were the latest visual media at the time. If the best scenes from *Zyōruri* and *Kabuki* were arranged for the magic lantern and performed for the audience, those shows would have had a good chance of commercial success at the box office. Because the people of Osaka at the time had a tendency to respond quickly to new things, as soon as the Western magic lantern was introduced to Japan they made a Japanese version of it in wood and put it on the market. Therefore, the previous view that it took more than 40 years for the Japanese magic lantern performance to be recognised among people in Osaka seems to be unreasonable and inappropriate.

The clue to solving this problem was found through Matsumoto's (2011) discussion, as well as an experiment on the light source (Ikeda and Nakagawa 2011). The former made a comparison of public performance styles – Ogaki-Matsue's *Furo*, owned by the Tsuchishima family in Shikoku Island, with the household magic lantern and a set of Kamigata style *Tane-ita* obtained by Matsumoto in 2010 (Matsumoto 2011). Matsumoto concluded that although Ogaki-Matsue's *Furo* was used for public performance with six wicks for the light source (Yamamoto 1975:7), its manufacture was like that of the household magic lantern and was designed to use only one or two wicks. The latter, a practical verification experiment, proved that the popular light source at the time, which was an earthen oil lamp filled with rapeseed oil with one wick, could provide enough brightness for the magic lantern performance (Ikeda and Nakagawa 2011: 130–2).

Also, I examined contents of Matsumoto's vertically pulling *Naga-ita* slides. That stories were adopted from *Zyōruri* and *Kabuki* suggests not only that *Nishiki Kage-e* tuned into popular entertainment scenes at the time but also that in order to perform them, high-level operating techniques and multiple projectors were required. If such a performance was possible, the establishment of Japanese magic lantern shows in Kamigata was much earlier than previously thought. Therefore, during the 1790s, when Etienne Robertson was performing his elaborate mechanical magic lantern show 'Phantasmagoria' in Europe, a totally unique magic lantern culture relying on the expressive ability of the lantern performer was being established in Kamigata at the same time.

3. NARRATIVE SPACE OF NISHIKI KAGE-E

One of the most popular themes for the household magic lantern was *Kaidan-mono* (ghost stories; Fig. 3). The main performance style consisted of a small touring company of three to ten people performing at a local tavern or a village headman's garden or house. The show was usually held at night when it started to get dark. In those days, there was very little background light and darkness was more intense. For people at that time, the darkness shrouded everything. It is the place where *Yōkai* (supernatural creatures), *Bake-mono* (monsters)

NOTES

1. I would like to express my respect for the earlier researchers of the Japanese magic lantern. The current Nishiki Kage-e Ikeda-Gumi would not exist without their work, which created the foundation for this performance group. I also would like to express my sincere gratitude for the following people: successive members of Nishiki Kage-e Ikeda-Gumi who have performed the shows with the author; Nobuaki Nakagawa, Tadao Iwakura, and K kichi Fujimoto, who contributed to the improving operations of *Furo* and the experiments on the light sources; Fumio Yamagata and Y ko Tanaka of *Minwa-za*, who have given me generous advice since I began engaging in the reconstruction and improvement of *Furo*; Natsuki Matsumoto for research on the household magic lantern which served as a trigger to write this paper. Special thanks go to Natsuki Matsumoto and his

advice and extensive knowledge in various fields. I also would like to thank Mr George Auckland and The Magic Lantern Society for giving me an opportunity to publish my paper. To this end, I thank my daughter, Yuki Tanaka, for translating this paper into English.

2. The name *Nishiki Kage-e* was used in Western Japan. In Edo (former Tokyo), it was called *Utsushi-e*.
3. This particular model was made by Mitsue Ikeda on July 2011, and called *Nishiki Kage-e Ikeda-Gumi Furo*.
4. These slides were used for one of *Nishiki Kage-e Ikeda-Gumi's* original plays, '*Sakura Shiranami Hyoi To Bukuro*' (Cherry blossoms, Foaming waves, Flicking bag).
5. Please visit the group's website (<http://nishiki-kagee.com/>) for more information.



Fig. 3. Example of Yōkai (supernatural creatures) depicted on Tane-ita
(from Sakura Shiranami Hyoi To Bukuro (Cherry blossoms, Foaming waves, Flicking bag))

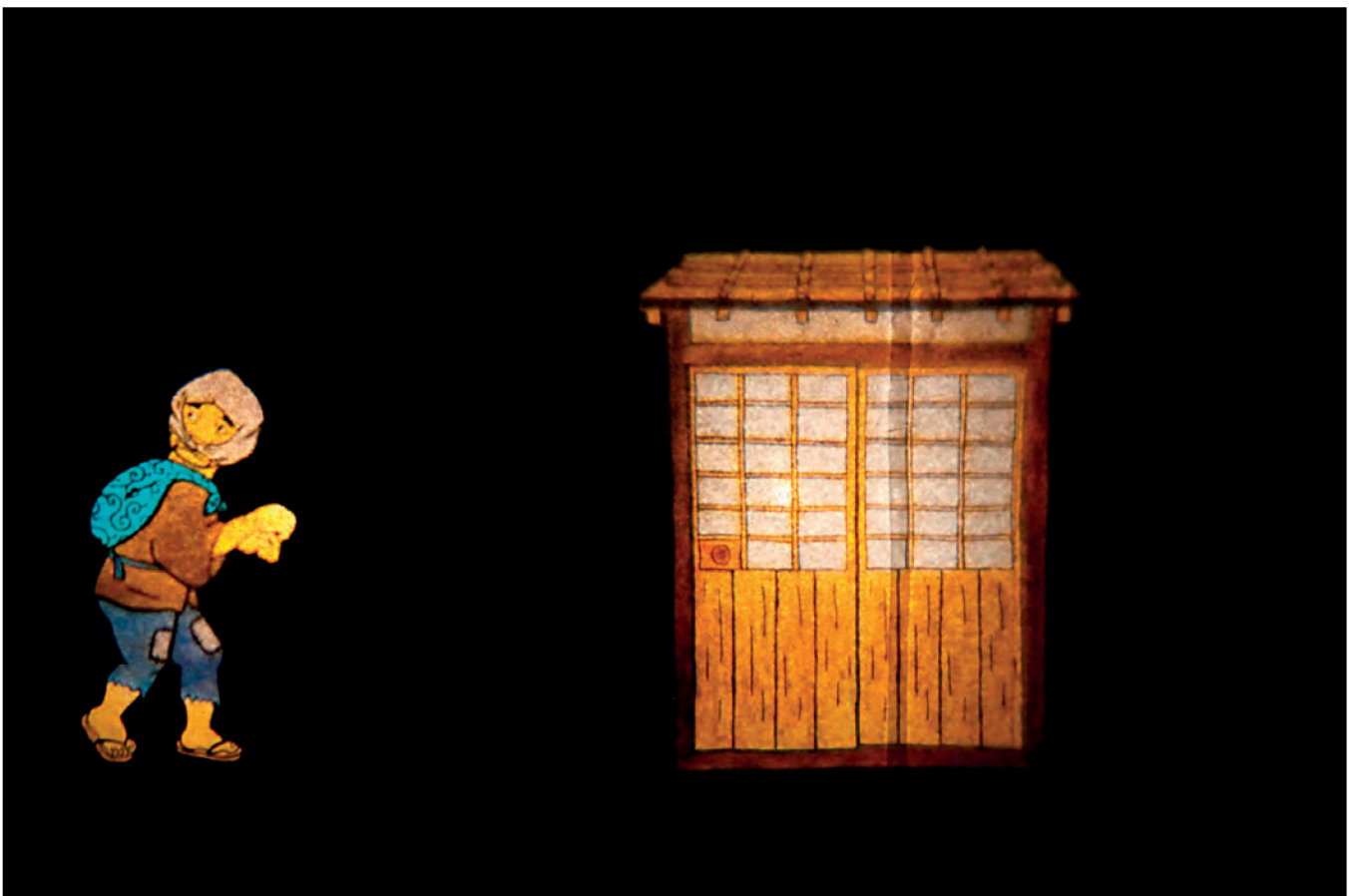


Fig. 4 Man approaching the door, from Sakura
Shiranami Hyoi To Bukuro (Cherry blossoms, Foaming waves, Flicking bag)

and *Yūrei* (ghosts) hide, and they could come out from anywhere. The thread lines and crinkles of the Japanese paper used for the screen would add a rough texture to the images floating in the dark and increase the depth of the picture, and the *Bake-mono* and *Yōkai* would float gently in the air. Thus these pictorial monsters effectively became dynamic existences and a ghostly and mysterious world would emerge on the screen. Behind the popularity of *Kaidan-mono* (ghost stories), a world came into existence through the fusion of the space consciousness about darkness among people at the time and the darkness on the screen and within the theatrical space.

In addition to the unique visual cues of the Japanese magic lantern performance, its utilisation of space and spatial representation are also important elements. The shadows of Japanese magic lantern pictures float in the dark. Pitch-black darkness around the pictures is not empty space but *Ba* (field, scene) in a story. It could be a building, a room, a garden, woods, a forest, a river or a pond. It might represent an era itself. Even distinctively different spaces, such as the afterworld and this world, could exist together in this darkness filled with *Kehai* (a sign of presence). Such a spatial consciousness, peculiar to the Japanese at that time, would have influenced the Japanese magic lantern's spatial representation. Therefore, explanatory images were cut off to the utmost extent so that the screen would not brim over with images, and fewer *Furo* were needed to describe a story. This minimalism could help people to get involved in the world of the story.

One of Nishiki Kage-e Ikeda-Gumi's original plays, '*Sakura Shiranami Hyoui To Bukuro*' (Cherry blossoms, Foaming waves, Flicking bag), provides a good example for the characteristics of the Japanese magic lantern's spatial representation described above. On one *Tane-ita* slide, a man and a door are shown and the rest of slide is in complete darkness (Fig. 4). The man's movement and his dialogue tell audiences that there is a house behind the door. The trick attached to this *Tane-ita* is that the man opens the door and disappears into the house. These movements show that the next scene takes place inside the house. Each scene consists of nothing but main pictures and no detail is shown. Certainly, the darkness on the screen is a symbolic space. The performers of *Utsushi-e* and *Nishiki Kage-e* need to be aware of this symbolic nature of the screen space. Utilising every possibility of its extent is a key to portraying the world of the Japanese magic lantern.

The Japanese magic lantern expresses movement through the trick *Tane-ita* and the operation of *Furo* handheld by *Gen-tō Shi* (the magic lantern performer). The pictures on the slide are so limited that it is hard to express emotions through a storyline. Carefully operating the *Furo* to accompany a character's emotion, the lantern performer makes a slight movement of the picture in accordance with the narration. Many emotions – such as surprise, fear, delight, anger, sorrow and pleasure, as well as the weight of an item the character carries – are expressed through the slightest movement, which was and still is dependent on the skill of the performer. *Ikeda-Gumi Furo* has improved operability. Being able to move freely, the performers can pay more careful attention to delicate movements and expression and can create the movements of *Furo* to seem as if part of the performer's body.

4. CONCLUSION

Traditional Japanese techniques of woodcraft, papermaking and dyeing have generated the fascination of Japanese magic lantern performance. Japanese magic lantern's screen space represents darkness not as *Mu* (nothing) but as a symbolic space filled with *Kehai* (a sign of presence). A unique Japanese space consciousness sees this subtle sign of presence as *U* (status of being) and enables a multi-layered narrative space to be constructed on the screen. In addition to the *Kehai* expressed by the darkness of the screen, *Kehai* can also be represented by lantern performers whose *Kehai* (sense of existence) is created through their physical expressions. Seeking new possibilities for artistic and theatrical expressions, the traditional techniques should be taken into account while the possibilities of lantern performers' physical expressions are pursued through practice – in the performances of Nishiki Kage-e Ikeda-Gumi.

Mitsue IKEDA is a professor in the Department of Art Planning, Osaka University of Arts. She has been a member of the Japan Society of Image Arts and Sciences (JASIAS). She is particularly interested in the relationship between physical movements and the visual arts in the performing space. She is currently working on the reconstruction and performance of Nishiki Kage-e, exploring its potential expressiveness and promoting it to the general public through performances and workshops.
mitsue@osaka-geidai.ac.jp

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