

Unveiling the Enigma of Sharaku

By Inada Toshiyuki

Some 20 years ago, I published my own thoughts on the ukiyo-e artist, Sharaku, about whom so much research has been done. Assuming that he really did exist, although even that has been questioned, there is actually no real proof that he was a print artist of considerable talent in any of the various theories about this enigmatic figure.

I felt, however, that it might be possible to shed light on the enigma of Sharaku by considering the relationship between Matsudaira Sadanobu—chief official of the Tokugawa shogunate—and Tani Buncho—a talented artist born in 1763. Under Sadanobu's direction, Buncho worked on a compendium of antiquities known as the *shuko jushu*, which was a crystallization of Sadanobu's own interest in history. Sadanobu first became involved in this work as a young man, and it included drawings of the furniture and effects used by feudal lords as well as the fixtures and furniture used at temples and shrines. Later in life when he had resigned his post as a counselor to the Shogun, Sadanobu dispatched the religious scribe and monk, Hakuun and others to various places up and down the country to collect, record, and draw artifacts for the compendium. It also included detailed woodblock prints of many old fine pieces of calligraphy, paintings and other articles faithfully copied by the artist Buncho.

Although the work on the compendium was a major undertaking for Buncho, it is not known exactly when it was published. It does seem, however, that it took three years to print. It is generally thought that it was completed in 1800, although according to Motoyama Gyoshu's *Meijin Kijin*, a kind of historical "Who's Who," the printing took four years and was completed in 1797. Stories handed down to Urata Giichi, the fifth generation of a line of woodblock printers, indicate that the printing took 10 years and many artists were employed in

collecting the material. It also seems that to every artist there were ten assistants who were employed as porters. Urata is also fortunate enough to be in possession of proofs and misprinted pages from *shuko jushu*.

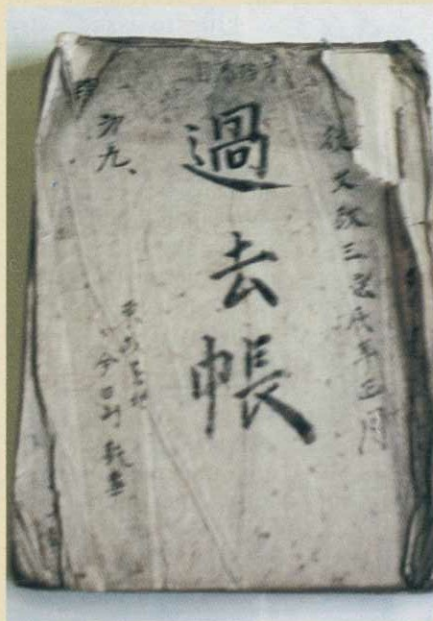
The work involved in producing all the blocks needed to depict the thousands of items that had been collected must certainly have been considerable. Sadanobu

was also a well-read man and had a discerning eye when it came to the arts and must surely have been in contact with a number of artists and men of letters. Sadanobu and Buncho had been friends from an early age, and while Buncho would have played a major role, it can also be assumed that Sharaku and many other artists would have been employed in the work involved in the production of this compendium.

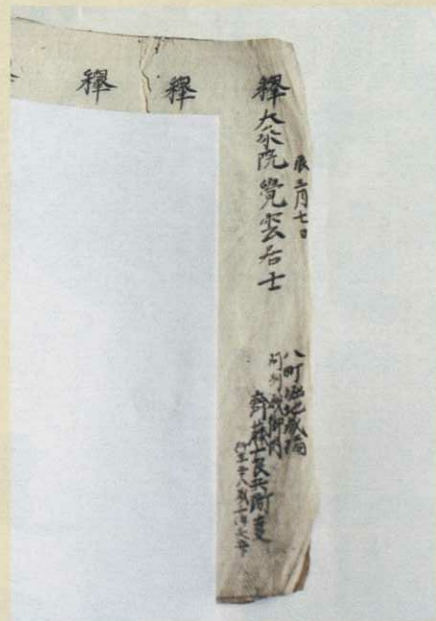
If this was indeed the case, it might explain why Sharaku was only active for a matter of 10 months. It was during this period that he completed his famous actor prints displaying compositional skills and an ability to express the human form in ways far superior to other artists of the era. The sense of movement that he was able to achieve in the face and hands in particular animates these prints, while they are also characterized by the way he caricatured the figures thus emphasizing the faces. His caricatures,



The wooden blocks from the *shuko jushu*—Treasure House, Chinkokushukoku Shrine, in Kuwana, Mie prefecture



The cover of the *kakochō*, or register of deaths and burials, at Hokoji Temple (left), and Sharaku's real name, Saito Jurobe, as it appears in the register of deaths and burials (right)

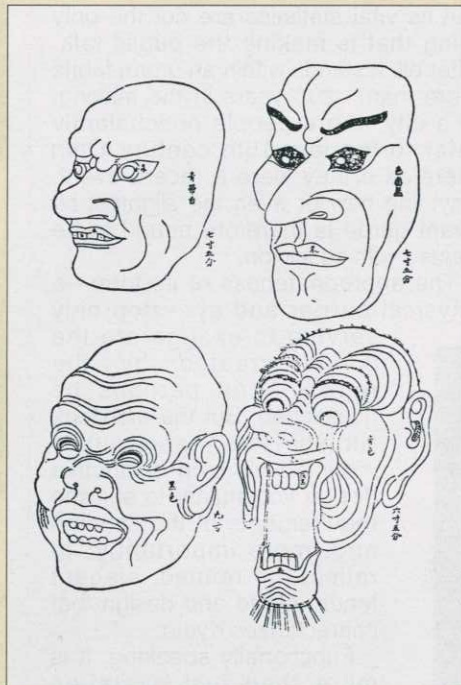


which in no way glamorized his subjects, were closer to a kind of realism and were apparently unpopular with the public. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern much of the kind of deformation employed in antique Japanese masks in his work. Being such an able caricaturist, it is quite possible that Sharaku may even have been employed in copying antique masks. In fact, this particular ability of his, has led me to deduce that he was forced to give up his work on actor prints and drifted into working on the *shuko jushu* compendium under Sadanobu and Buncho, thus perhaps explaining why he apparently disappeared from the ukiyo-e print scene.

Information of some significance regarding Sharaku was presented at a very well attended symposium held in Tokushima in July 1997. The theme of the symposium was "In Search of the Real Sharaku," and much of the fine material presented by the eminent scholars who attended is helpful in gaining a better picture of this artist.

Further very interesting material came to light in an article published in August last year in the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, Japan's widely read financial newspaper. In it, Takeda Hiroshi referred to the *kakocho*, or register of deaths and burials from Hokoji temple that was originally established in Tsukiji, Edo (present-day Tokyo) in 1617.

In order to find out more, I visited the temple in Saitama prefecture on the outskirts of Tokyo. I learned much about



A comparison of ancient masks from the *shuko jushu* (left), and one of Sharaku's actor prints of Ichikawa Ebizo in the role of Takemura Sadanoshin (right)



the historical background of Hokoji and about the records concerning Sharaku as well as about his connections with the feudal lord, Anami, from the exhaustive and conscientious inquiries of the chief priest there, Higuchi Enjun. When the temple was moved from Tsukiji to Saitama prefecture in 1993 after a succession of fires, it seems that Sharaku's remains were buried in a communal grave, which I was also shown.

Sharaku, whose full name was Toshusai Sharaku, was only active for a period of 10 months—from the fifth month of 1794 until either the first or second month of the following year. During this time he published 140 prints, mainly of kabuki actors, and then as far as we know produced no more work. Being such a mysterious figure, it is hardly surprising that so many ideas and theories exist as to exactly who he was.

I compiled a chronological table of dates related to Sharaku's life and work. It

shows us that if he died in 1820 at the age of 58, he was active between the ages of 33 and 34, or between 1794-95. It should perhaps be noted that Sadanobu turned 38 at this particular time and that Buncho turned 33. It is also interesting to note that Sakai Hoitsu became 35 years of age, that other master of ukiyo-e, Kitagawa Utamaro turned 43, and Katsushika Hokusai turned 36. All of these artists therefore passed through a very active period of their careers at this time. Nevertheless, the enigma of Sharaku endures.

I am indebted to Chinkokushukoku Shrine in Kuwana, Tokushima Sharaku Association, and to Hokoji temple for the help I was given in writing this article.

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The tomb in which it is thought that Sharaku's remains were buried with others, when Hokoji Temple was moved from Tsukiji to Saitama prefecture

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