

# Policy, Family and Audience Experience: A Research on the Root Causes of the Unequal Status of Japanese Female Actors on the Kabuki Stage

Zhuo Cao<sup>1, \*, †</sup>, Xuanlei Du<sup>2, †</sup>, Yicheng Li<sup>3, †</sup>, Zhonglin Zeng<sup>4, †</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Public Administration and Liberal Art, Dalian Maritime University, Dalian, 116026, China

<sup>2</sup> Zhou Enlai School of Government, Nankai University, Tianjin, 300350, China

<sup>3</sup> Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, The University of Sydney, Camperdown, 2006, New South Wales, Australia

<sup>4</sup> Foreign Language and Literature, Shandong University, Jinane, 250061, China

\*Corresponding author. Email: emma1013@dlmu.edu.com

†These authors contributed equally.

## ABSTRACT

Since World War II, with the development of the economy, more and more Japanese women have entered different work fields and played an important role. However, kabuki performance, the earliest form of performance founded by Japanese women, is mainly performed by male actors, and female actors are rarely seen. This paper discusses this phenomenon and takes the influence of public policy, the obstruction of vested interests in the cultural field and audience experience as the main reasons. At present, as more Japanese female actors appear on various performance stages and the aesthetic changes of the audience, female actors may return to the stage of Kabuki performance, although it may take a long time.

**Keywords:** Kabuki performance, female actors, public policy, audience experience

## 1. INTRODUCTION

With the rapid development of modern society and the awakening of women's consciousness, the status of women in Japan is on the rise. Many scholars believe that, as an important factor in Japan's modernization, the status of Japanese women after the war has been improved from different perspectives. Haiyan Fang thinks that with the rapid development of Japan's economy after the war, more and more women in Japan changed from housewives to professional women and gained the independence of the economic [1]. From the perspective of public policy, Zhong Qiu believes that today's economic policy in Japan takes more account of the important role played by women in the economic environment and encourages women to enter the broader job market rather than just engaging in basic service work [2]. Dongdong Zhang believes that equal education is an important symbol of the rise of women's status in Japan after the Second world war. In modern Japan, women have obtained the same right to education as men; modern Japanese women's education shows the characteristics of high enrollment and high degrees [3].

At the social level, since the 1970s, the second wave of the feminist movement has sprung up in Japan, indicating the awakening of Japanese women's consciousness, followed by the rise of the feminist theory represented by the work patriarchy and capitalism written by Yoko One in the field of sociology and the rise of Japanese women's literature with the rebellious spirit [4]. Even though, from the perspectives of employment rate, social capital and popular culture, it could be seen that the status of Japanese women has increased significantly after the war, the reality of gender inequality in Japan still exists in specific workplaces, social networks and cultural activities, which has cast a shadow on Japan's modernization process. Chunhua Yang believes that the current rise in Japanese women's willingness to return to the family is related to the reality of gender inequality faced by Japanese women in the workplace and the current situation of marginalization in the workplace [5]. Kabuki performance is a popular cultural activity in Japan, which was founded by women. However, in the process of development, it is almost difficult to find the figure of female actors in today's Kabuki performance due to the influence of many factors. Therefore, the kabuki stage has become one of the specific working

environments with a serious imbalance of gender ratio in Japan. Based on this, this paper will start from the perspective of gender differences, taking modern Japanese Kabuki performance as the research object, discussing the multiple factors leading to the imbalance of gender ratio in Japanese Kabuki cultural performances to provide theoretical explanation and experience for the phenomenon of gender inequality in a specific field in Modern Japan.

## **2. A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORY OF KABUKI**

Kabuki is a traditional Japanese theatrical performance with a long history that originated in Edo Period. Nowadays, it is known as a performance played by male performers only. However, it is believed that kabuki was initially invented around 1603 by a woman called Izumo no Okuni, a leader of a troupe [6]. The troupe, famous for its name *onna kabuki*, which means women's kabuki, consisted of both female and male members and gave life to the fresh style of performance.

In this troupe headed by Okuni, according to Larson, performers generally switched the genders of their roles on the stage. Female performers got on men's clothes, and the other way, male performers also got on women's clothes.

It can be seen that through the effort of the leader Okuni and her group, women have made the largest contribution to the establishment of this new style of art. In fact, women were actively involved in the performance of kabuki from 1603 to 1629. However, on the other hand, the position of women in kabuki performance was gradually being cracked down during this time, which seemed inevitable in the previous society where women were of a quite low social status. After the emperor took strict actions against the court women who performed kabuki and punished the relevant parties, the reputation of kabuki and female performers was struck, although this event should have little connection with the professional kabuki artists. Moreover, in 1628, after a fight happened during the performance of a female kabuki dancer called Azuma, the government severely punished her and, in the next year, banned all the female artists from the stage of kabuki. In consequence, from 1629, women were unallowed to perform kabuki officially.

It is true that sometime after the law was proclaimed that female performers were legally banned from kabuki, women were still involved in this art in various ways. For example, some of them hid their true gender and pretended to be a man in order to perform on the stage, and some turned to inconspicuous places such as small theaters where the regulations were not strictly put into practice. There are also records where women actually performed on the stage of kabuki in 1643. However,

despite the fact that women still sometimes performed kabuki under the official ban, their involvement in kabuki was illegal and could not be put on the table.

## **3. THE CURRENT DEVELOPMENT OF KABUKI**

Kabuki, a traditional classical art, once faced with great embarrassment under the onslaught of the fast-food culture, was eventually able to re-enter the national scene and has received a great deal of appreciation and recognition internationally, which has made an outstanding contribution to cultural diplomacy. For example, in the last century, it was performed as part of a visit to the Soviet Union in June 1928, as well as performance in China in 1955, which paid great importance after the Second World War, and also became a crucial part of the centenary of the Japan-US friendship in 1960 [7].

Such a revival would not have been possible without the existence of the National Public Cultural Organization, a voluntary organization established in 1961 (its membership peaked in 2001 when there were 1,405 organizations nationwide), and the Matsuzake Corporation, the largest operator of kabuki, shows founded in 1895 [8]. Besides, the National Theatre Act, published in June 1966, and the establishment of the National Theatre in the same year also played a role. The interaction of these initiatives enabled kabuki to increase its efficiency while maintaining the quality of its performances, allowing it to start performing regularly and, while widening access and making it possible for people to see the performances without leaving their homes, effectively reducing costs by organizing joint projects and making it "affordable".

In addition, in 1968, the Japanese government established the Department of Cultural Property Preservation within the Agency for Cultural Affairs and a variety of cultural popularization courses, which have led to a more significant effect on the preservation and revitalization of classical opera. In addition to cultural promotion, in 1990, the Japanese government established the Japan Foundation (renamed the Japan Society for the Promotion of Arts and Culture in 2003) [9], composed of specialists nominated by various departments, to provide strong financial support for kabuki and enhance its organizational capacity.

All these efforts have enabled kabuki to revive itself after many crises. According to data provided by Shinji Takeuchi relating to the fiscal year reports from 1999 to 2008, the average ratio of income to expenditure for each theatre changed from 88.7% to 95.5%, and the average deficit dropped from 1.11 million yen to 440,000 yen, essentially balancing the budget.

From the demonstration above, it can be concluded that the monopolization of men in kabuki culture has held

a long history. It might be initially due to historical reasons, including the humble position of women in the time of feudal rule, the strict control of the government on folk art and the rooted conventional thoughts. However, since that, it has been hundreds of years, and nowadays, the social status of Japanese women has been obviously increasing in all classes. On the contrary, traditional Japanese theatrical performances have still been dominated by men on the stage, with women mostly "physically absent" [10]. Among them, kabuki is currently still performed by men only, which seems to be disjointing the innovative and developing Japanese society.

#### **4. DISCUSSION ON THE REASON FOR MALE DOMINATION IN KABUKI CULTURE**

##### ***4.1. The influence of historical policy and path dependence***

After World War II, Japan quickly started the process of modernization, which is reflected in many aspects, such as economic marketization, political democratization and a more complex social structure. However, the trend of gender equality as an essential element of modernity did not flood the stage of kabuki performance. This has to do with the refinement and institutionalization of regulations on the exclusion of women from the Kabuki stage since 1629.

Path dependence is an important concept in the theory of historical institutionalism, which thinks that the policy arrangement will be affected by the institutional arrangement in the historical stage. Once the system is formed, the reward for maintaining the original system will be greater than the cost of changing the system. Therefore, unless there are historical key points, the formed system will not change in the long term, and the system changed due to historical key points will also be affected by the traditional system [11]. From the perspective of historical institutionalism, the form of Japanese Kabuki performance was established and gradually institutionalized after a key historical node in 1629. Although the government restricted the new form, it has never reached the strength of the historical point like 1629. Therefore, under the effect of path dependence, the system of male occupation of the Kabuki performance stage has been preserved for a long time. Until today, it has not changed significantly.

The prohibition order issued by the Tokugawa shogunate in 1629 is the historical key point of the turning point in the development of Japanese Kabuki performance. From the early Arab kabuki to the female kabuki under the Tokugawa shogunate, the performance became an erotic performance and spread to public places all over Japan, which was inconsistent with the

mainstream Confucianism of Japanese society at that time. Therefore, the Japanese government introduced a law in 1629 prohibiting women from performing kabuki. Since then, it has become a practice that female actors do not appear on the Kabuki stage. In addition, there were no obvious historical key points to change this phenomenon. Corresponding to the phenomenon that female actors are excluded from the Kabuki performance stage is the rise of male actors in the Kabuki performance stage. *Wakashu kabuki* is the main form of Japanese Kabuki performance after female kabuki. *Wakashu*, for underage men, is a form of Kabuki performance performed by beautiful underage teenagers [12]. The appearance of *Wakashu kabuki*, on the one hand, indicated that male actors had achieved a dominant position on the Kabuki performance stage; on the other hand, because of the combination with the art form of wild talk, kabuki performance had more complex plots.

Although male actors replaced female actors on the kabuki stage after 1629, kabuki performance still did not get rid of the basic orientation of erotic performance, and male erotic performance prevailed in the warrior class at that time. However, different from the female kabuki performance, the male kabuki performance was gradually institutionalized after 1629, and there was no historical key point to change this phenomenon. In 1652, the Tokugawa Shogunate issued a ban on *Wakashu Kabuki*. Although the ban issued by the Japanese shogunate in 1652 could be seen as a huge change for Japanese Kabuki performance since 1629, which largely eliminated the form of Kabuki performance with erotic performance as the core, the continuity of the system, which could be called the path dependence played an important role. The form of male Kabuki performance continued.

Today, the early Kabuki performance with erotic performance as the core has been replaced by modern Kabuki performance with more artistic forms and rich plots, but what has remained unchanged is the dominant position of male actors on the Kabuki stage since 1629. From the perspective of historical institutionalism, the historical key point for the Japanese Kabuki performance appeared in 1629. Since then, the gender structure on the stage of Japanese Kabuki performance has undergone fundamental changes. Although Japanese Kabuki performance has experienced many changes after 1629, and there have been great changes in performance content and performance form, the phenomenon of male Kabuki performance has gradually institutionalized affected the later institutional changes. At present, Japanese society has generally accepted the form of the male Kabuki performance, and the cost of institutional change will be higher than the benefit of maintaining the system of Kabuki performance by male actors. Therefore, under the effect of path dependence, the male-dominated Kabuki performance will continue for a long time.

#### ***4.2. Obstacles of vested interests: Famous family in Kabuki Culture***

Most of the kabuki performers come from kabuki families, and they are usually male descendants or adopted sons of the families that have been performing kabuki for generations. These families, who have already had vested interest, are continuing to develop kabuki in modern times and maintain their own benefits. Therefore, not everyone is free to enter this profession and perform on stage.

There are dozens of registered kabuki families in Japan, and there are a few of the most famous ones among them (Narita-ya, Onyu-ya, Koryu-ya, Nakamura-ya, Narikoma-ya). Usually, the kabuki families are called xx ya to divide their genre and use their own flags as symbols. Each kabuki family has its own flag as a symbol and has its own style.

Basically, all-male offspring are raised with a good foundation in singing and dancing and will be led on stage from childhood by their fathers or grandfathers. After they make progress, a ceremony called Shumei will be held, which means inheriting the stage name of their predecessors. It is a recognition of them and a legacy of family glory. For example, the name Kansaburo Nakamura of Nakamura-ya has been passed down for eighteen generations, and Nakamura-ya is also a long-established Kabuki family.

It is the rule of the Kabuki family that passes on to men, not to women. And if the male descendants of a family are unable to perform their duties, they can choose talented adopted sons from disciples or common people to carry on the business.

The famous Japanese actress Matsu Takako was born in Koryo-ya. And her father, her brother, and nephew are all current kabuki performers. Although she grew up learning traditional Japanese dance, she eventually became an actress rather than a kabuki performer.

Also, from the documentary and interviews, it is acknowledged that the wife of a kabuki performer in the kabuki family has to take care of the whole family on her own without any help. Hiring a maid is not allowed in the kabuki family for prudential reasons. With busy daily affairs, the wife sleeps less than four hours a day.

With such a family tradition of not valuing women, Kabuki performers are definitely men, women isolated from inheriting.

#### ***4.3. Audiences welcome male performers dressed as women***

From the audience's point of view, they prefer male performers to female performers.

On the one hand, Kabuki themes fall into two general categories: those depicting the world of aristocrats and warriors and those depicting the lives of ordinary people. Therefore, most early Kabuki plays were written with men as the main characters, and female characters were not important. Also, in traditional Japanese society, it was usually men who went out to socialize and watch the performance. The all-male audience did not need more female characters to please them and was satisfied with the male-dominated story [13].

On the other hand, kabuki performance is very typical of gender performativity. Gender performativity was introduced by the American theorist Judith Butler, who is famous for Queer Theory [14]. It means that the subject constructs oneself as the subject of a certain gender through playing or imitating the gender. According to Butler, in the performative act of forming a gender identity, the production of gender identity is preceded by the act of manipulation. The gender identity of the subject is fluid in gender performativity, which has uncertainty and openness. Kabuki performers show their outstanding performance skills in gender performativity, displaying the unique beauty of the female form.

Around the time of Yarou kabuki in the Edo Period, onnagata's art performance began to appear in kabuki, which means men disguised as women. Although male kabuki performers are not women, they have repeatedly studied their performance techniques. Not only do they change their appearance, but they also try to understand the female demeanor. Some even adopted a feminine dress of code and feminine behaviors off stage in order to fully develop the onnagata's art.

The founder of onnagata's art, Ayame I, was praised for being extremely beautiful and the embodiment of an androgynous one. He speaks in women's way, eats foods that are good for women, and tells everyone around him in every way to treat him like a woman [15]. And Hannsirou VIII wore women's clothes when he went out, and even at home, he wore a girl's kimono, the traditional Japanese clothes. The World-famous Kabuki performer, Tamasaburo V, said it would be better to keep the skills one normally cultivates deep in his heart and perform it as a natural character on stage [16].

The resulting gender ambiguity of these "feminine" performances continued to fuel the public's desire for androgynous beauty. So the tradition of male performers in kabuki has been passed down in this way as a popular art.

### **5. FEMALE ACTORS ON THE STAGE OF MODERN KABUKI PERFORMANCES**

Although the male actors still monopolized Kabuki performance after 1629, noticeable great changes have taken place in Japan's social structure and national culture after World War II. Under the dual influence of cultural

pluralism and the trend of gender equality, Japanese Kabuki performance is likely to face a second historical key point, which makes female actors return to the Kabuki performance stage again after 1629.

As the Japanese society develops, varieties of different cultures and thoughts have flown from other regions like the Western countries, and gender equality and cultural diversity are also improving. As a consequence, the social status of women in numerous classes has risen, including in the artistic and entertainment industry. Basically, there have been much more female figures appearing in the public view, such as music and film performers, the television and the cinema. For example, the Showa era (1926-1989) and also one or two decades after that is famous for the activeness of the number of great female singers like Mariya Takeuchi, Kyoko Koizumi, Seiko Matsuda, Akina Takamori and Izumi Sakai, who might have faded from the public but are still holding reputation in the audience today. Besides, female performers have also been active in the film and drama areas, such as Momoe Yamaguchi, Yuki Uchida and so on. Nowadays, new female actresses and singers are popular among the public and swarmed by the audience, which is in sharp contrast with the traditional Japanese theatrical realms like kabuki.

Mizutani Yaeko, who was awarded the Third Class Order of the Treasure Crown for the New School (the New School is a modern drama based on the "Sousi Sipai" and "Syosei Sipai", and is called the New School in contrast to the "Old School" of Kabuki). In the era when the New School and Kabuki were performed together, female actors, led by Mizutani Yaeko, had many important roles in Kabuki-za. However, Ichikawa Kairozo's daughter Riho made her debut in Kabuki-za as Ichikawa Potann, a dance medalist, broke the so-called "woman's ban" and created a social sensation as a woman.

It is no coincidence that not only are there more and more women on stage but there are also more and more women in the audience off the stage. In modern times, women no longer stay at home as they did in traditional societies in the past. They also have their own entertainment needs. For women, traditional samurai stories do not appeal to them as much as they do to men. The Takarazuka Revue Company, which emerged in the Taisho era, adopted the opposite strategy from kabuki, featuring all actresses and even male roles played by women. This new form of performance has attracted people's attention. Also, the artistry and enjoyment of cross-gender performances have also attracted a large number of female fans. The Takarazuka Revue Company is not only popular in Japan but also has a worldwide reputation.

## 6. CONCLUSION

By researching the development history of the Japanese Kabuki performance, this paper discusses the phenomenon that male actors dominate the Japanese Kabuki performance stage and draws the following conclusions.

Firstly, under the joint action of multiple factors, the gender ratio of male and female actors on the stage of the Japanese Kabuki performance is unbalanced. As a form of artistic performance, kabuki performance is influenced by the government's public policy, vested interests in the cultural field and audience experience.

Secondly, 1629 is the key point in the history of Japanese Kabuki performance. The ban of Tokugawa Shogunate led to the gradual disappearance of Japanese female actors on the Kabuki performance stage and made the form of male actors performing kabuki gradually institutionalized and continued. Since then, there has been no appearance with the second historical key point of Japanese Kabuki performance.

Thirdly, since World War II, with the modernization of the Japanese economy, the entry of western culture and the awakening of Japanese female consciousness, more and more women have entered different industries and played an important role. Although male actors still dominate the stage of Kabuki performance, as more female actors appear on other stages and the audience's aesthetic changes, the development of Kabuki performance may face a second historical key point, and it will promote the return of female actors, although this change may take a long time.

## REFERENCES

- [1] H. Fang. A study on the changes of women's social status in the period of rapid economic growth in Japan from the perspective of catchwords, *Journal of Hainan University (Humanities and social science)*, 2016, pp.124-129. DOI:10.15886/j.cnki.hnus.2016.04.019.
- [2] Q.Zhong. Women's culture and Japanese economy: an analysis of women's policy in Japan's new growth strategy, *Modern Japanese economy*, pp.20-28. DOI:10.16123/j.cnki.issn.1000-355x.2015.02.003.
- [3] D.Zhang. On the development of women's educational rights and interests in Modern Japan, *Journal of Henan Normal University (Philosophy and social sciences)*, pp. 126-130. DOI:10.16366/j.cnki.1000-2359.2016.02.025
- [4] P.Zhou. The development of Japanese female literature: from sadness, resistance to rebellion, *Foreign Literature*, pp. 31-37. DOI:10.16345/j.cnki.cn11-1562/i.2014.02.005.

- [5] C. Yang. Sociological Analysis of the rising willingness of Japanese women to return to family - from the perspective of gender differences *Nankai Journal (Philosophy and social sciences)*, 2015, pp149-158.
- [6] T. Larson, *Kabuki as a Women's Performing Art*, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. DOI:10.15886/j.cnki.hnus. 2021.04.004.
- [7] B. Zhang. Interpreting the historical and cultural factors of the hereditary system in the contemporary Japanese Kabuki world, *Beijing Foreign Studies University Research Centre for Japanese Studies, J. North China Univ. Of Tech*, 2021, pp.1.
- [8] X. Lu, *An Introduction to the Development of Beijing Opera and Kabuki*, *Zhengzhou Tourism Vocational, College Art Forum*, 2022, pp.109.
- [9] Fukazawa Masao, *Kumonkyo Kabuki: A Report from Sendai*, *Japanese Literature Notes*, 2011, pp. 36-40. DOI:<https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1001-5477.2021.02.010>.
- [10] Z. Shengnan & C. Shixiang. An analysis of the dynamic mechanism of the institutional change of Chinese art performance groups -- from the perspective of historical institutionalism, *Journal of Hainan University (Humanities and social sciences)*, 2021, pp127-136.
- [11] Q. Zhu. The policy intervention of Tokugawa Shogunate and the establishment of Kabuki, art form *Art hundred*, 2016, pp232-234. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5998/jces.2005.52>.
- [12] G.T. Gabrovska, *Onna Mono: The "female presence" on the stage of the all-male traditional Japanese theatre*, in: *Asian Theatre Journal*, vol. 32, 2015, pp. 387-415.
- [13] S. Birk, *Sex, androgyny, prostitution and the development of onnagata roles in Kabuki theatre*, 2006, pp.1-48.
- [14] Z. Yan, *Judith-Butler: desire, body, gender performativity*, 2004, pp.38-44.
- [15] Y. Fukuoka. *The Words of Ayame, Ed. and Iran. Charles J Dunn and Bunzo Torigoe, The Actors ' Analects, Studies in Oriental Culture 3* New York: Columbia University Press, 1969, pp.49-66.
- [16] L. Jin, *Gender Performativity in Japanese Traditional Theater—the example of Kabuki female form* (A Hundred Schools of Prose, 2020, pp.188-189.