

— Unearthing the Four-Hundred-Year History of a
Wholesale Fish Market —

The History of Nihonbashi Uogashi

Part 1: The Birth of the Wholesale Fish Market By Issei Tomioka

Japanese cuisine has been attracting worldwide attention in recent years as a healthy, macrobiotic diet. Although Japanese should take pride in this, it is an undeniable fact that modern Japanese people are less sensitive to food. Japanese cuisine is the result of the effort and ingenuity of our ancestors in their pursuit of affluence while taking advantage of the rich blessings nature had to offer. The best example of this is the creativity and practical knowledge employed in the transportation of extremely perishable products from seas and rivers that allowed the Japanese to become a fish-eating culture.

While rice is a major component of the Japanese diet, fish also plays a very important role. Therefore, a look into the history of Nihonbashi Uogashi (wholesale fish market), the forerunner of today's Tsukiji market (officially named the Tokyo Metropolitan Central Wholesale Market), should help us to find the connection between fish and the Japanese people. In this article, we will trace the life of Mori Magoemon, considered the founder of the wholesale fish market, and look at the interesting fate that led to the birth of the wholesale fish market.

The Model Edokko

Uogashi refers to the riverside wholesale fish market located near the Nihonbashi Bridge in the city of Edo (present-day Tokyo). In 1590, thirty-four fishermen led by Mori Magoemon followed Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616), who later became the first shogun of the Edo period (1603–1867), when he entered Edo. Magoemon and his group assumed the responsibility of transporting fish to Edo castle in return for the right to fish the Edo coast. The remainder of their catch was sold in the city, and this is thought to be the beginning of the Uogashi.

Around the year 1700, Edo was the largest city in the world with a population exceeding one million. The Uogashi, located in the central commercial district of Nihonbashi, was one of the three most successful industries in Edo. It was said in those days that three industries collected equal thirds of the city's revenue—the Uogashi, in the morning, theaters in the daytime, and businesses in the Yoshiwara red-light district at night. That the Uogashi collected such a large percentage of the city's revenue dealing in fish, a valuable source of protein for the people of Edo, shows just how prosperous the business was.

Nihonbashi Uogashi was known not only for its lively business, but also for its stringently straightforward practices that were unique in the culture of Edo commoners. A statue com-

memorating the old Uogashi in Nihonbashi is inscribed with the phrase, “the birthplace of the gallant spirit of Edo.” This gallant spirit meant destroying the strong and helping the weak. So important was the fish trade in Edo that it is said even regional lords halted their processions to allow those transporting fish to go ahead of them. Working with fresh fish, which spoils quickly, caused those working at the Uogashi to work and speak as quickly as possible. The common people of Edo considered the dashing young men of the Uogashi, with their straightforward speech and hard-working attitudes, fine examples of Edokko (people born and raised in

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Born in Tokyo in 1962, Mr. Tomioka first worked as an event planner for museums and businesses. He later worked in the office of the Tokyo Metropolitan Central Wholesale Market in Tsukiji where he learned first-hand the culture and traditions of one of Japan's first fish markets, established during the Edo period, which have been preserved to this day. Ten years ago, Mr. Tomioka began recording the stories of Market old timers. With these stories, he began developing the Uogashi-yaro and Tsukiji no Uogashi-yaro web sites. His trilogy, Uogashi Yonhyakunen, Kodan Uogashi Nendaiki, and Saigen Nihonbashi Uogashi Chizu, based on broad investigation of historical evidence and released on the World Wide Web, have been highly acclaimed. Mr. Tomioka has described the vanishing wholesale fish-market culture, including in-depth historical information as well as fantastic stories told by the old timers, from an insider's perspective.

Web sites

Uogashi-yaro <http://www.sakanaya.co.jp>

Tsukiji no Uogashi-yaro <http://www.uogashi.co.jp>



central Edo, to a family with origins in Edo going back a minimum of three generations). Those who worked at the Uogashi also maintained a symbolic importance for the fish-loving people of the largest city in the world.



Statue commemorating the old Uogashi in Nihonbashi

Beginning with the Oral Tradition

The Nihonbashi Uoichiba Enkaku Kiyo, an 1889 chronicle, is essential reference for learning about the Uogashi. Written by Kawai Shinnosuke, an employee in the Uogashi office, the chronicle is a compilation of historic records kept by the Uogashi. The following story about Mori Magoemon is contained in a chapter that covers the origins of the wholesale marketers:



The 1889 chronicle, Nihonbashi Uoichiba Enkaku Kiyo (property of Uoichiba Ginrin-kai)

One year, between 1573 and 1592, as Ieyasu was to visit the Sumiyoshi Shrine during a stay in Kyoto, he found himself with no boat to cross a river. Magoemon, who was the leader of Tsukuda village in the northwestern part of modern Osaka prefecture, provided fishing boats to help Ieyasu across the river. The grateful Ieyasu visited Magoemon at home, where he found three pine trees. Seeing the three pine trees, Ieyasu suggested that Magoemon call himself Mori Magoemon (mori means a wood or forest in Japanese, and the Chinese character for the word is a combination of three tree characters).

Stories like this are well known and are common episodes that always include a person saving Ieyasu from imminent danger and receiving special privileges in return. A story regarding

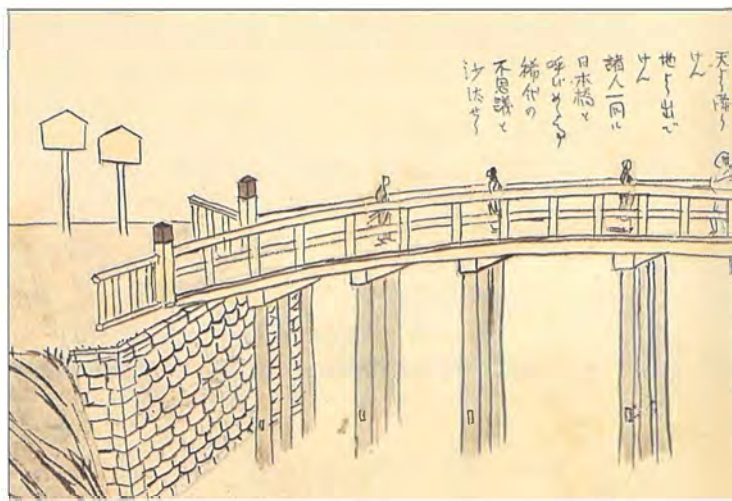
the origin of the Shiba fish market in Edo tells of the founder of that wholesale fish market helping Ieyasu when his boat went aground off Shibaura. Regardless of whether or not Magoemon's story is true, let's see how the lives of Magoemon and his people developed afterwards:

Magoemon supplied Fushimi castle in Kyoto with fish when Ieyasu stayed there in 1599. He also used his fishing boats to help Tokugawa troops pass through the Inland Sea and along the western coast. An especially noteworthy contribution was during two battles the Tokugawa fought in Osaka against the Toyotomi (winter battle in 1614 and summer battle in 1615). Magoemon had his men scout the neighboring sea by disguising war ships as fishing boats and reported to command headquarters daily. Ieyasu rewarded the fishermen of Tsukuda and Owada villages with huge quantities of roasted rice and over 33,060 square meters of land in Osaka. However, as the Osaka land had existing owners, the fishermen said that they could not accept it. Instead, they were allowed to make a request. Their request was to go to Edo and serve Ieyasu.

It seems that in addition to supplying the shogun with fish, Magoemon and his men were also conducting military activities and acting as spies for Ieyasu.

Ieyasu initially entered Edo in 1590 after his troops seized Edo castle. If Magoemon and his group followed Ieyasu into Edo, it is fair to assume that they were a part of the Edo occupation force. It is easy to see how this group of people who served Ieyasu well in war was not merely a group of fisherman, but rather maritime mercenaries with the necessary skills and abilities. As a reward for their services, they were given broad fishing rights over the seas around Edo, and later an area that they named Tsukudajima after their native village. Such rewards surely imply the successful accomplishment of very important missions in which they likely risked their lives.

Ieyasu's visit to Sumiyoshi Shrine, mentioned at the beginning of the story, can be deduced as having occurred in 1582 based on records of Ieyasu's visits to Kyoto between 1573 and 1592. Shortly after his visit to the shrine, Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582), the ruler until his death, died while Ieyasu was staying at Fushimi castle. With Nobunaga's death, Ieyasu needed to return to his own Okazaki castle in Mikawa (present-day eastern Aichi prefecture). However, the journey over the rugged mountains through enemy territory, with only a few attendants, posed the most critical threat to his life up to that point. Legend holds that Magoemon helped Ieyasu reach his home by boat. The covert actions required for such an operation lead some to believe that Magoemon was in fact a ninja. This supposition may not be so far-fetched.



Tracing Magoemon's path inevitably shows us the troubling social conditions around the end of Warring States Japan (1467–1615). However, locating the truth is impossible as all of these stories are based on an oral tradition with no historic evidence to substantiate them. The true roots of the Nihonbashi Uogashi seem to have been buried without record.

Two Magoemons

Mr. Nobuo Okamoto, author of *Nihonbashi Uoichiba no Rekishi* (History of the Nihonbashi Fish Market), Mr. Akeo Miura, author of *Uogashi Hyakumen* (A Hundred Years of Uogashi), and Mr. Sogo Kimura, author of *Tokyo-to Chuo Orosiuri Ichiba-shi Jokan* (History of the Tokyo Metropolitan Central Wholesale Market, Vol. I) were extremely successful in their studies. With gratitude to these forerunners for their hard work and superior effort, I will try to bring the blurred image of the birth of the Uogashi into focus.



Mori Magoemon monument at Tsukiji Hongwanji Temple

The life of Magoemon is full of mystery. Even the years of his birth and death are unclear. A monument to him at Tsukiji Hongwanji Temple notes his death as 1662, at the age of ninety four. Calculating backwards puts his birth in 1569.

This would mean, then, that he was only fourteen years old when he first met Ieyasu. On the other hand, if we assume that he met Ieyasu at an age of about thirty, he would have been 110 in 1662. What's more, it is said that the person who

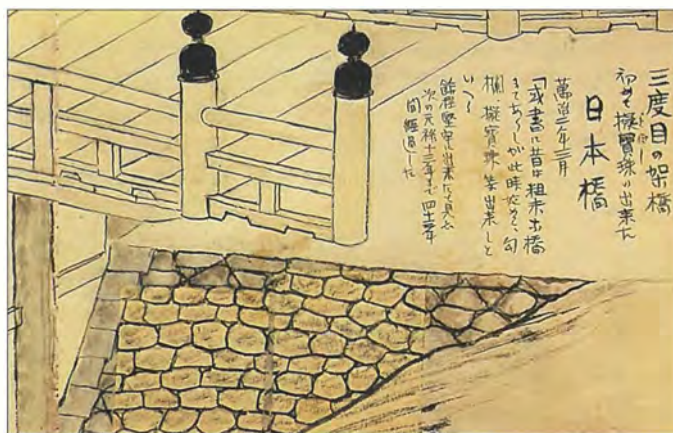
opened the first Magoemon fish shop was a son of Magoemon named Kyuzaemon. However, the names of Magoemon's sons vary depending upon the historical source. So who actually opened the shop?

Mr. Okamoto has inferred that there were actually two Magoemons; the first Magoemon transferred his family's property and title of village leader to his eldest son, who assumed the same name as his father. Therefore, the Magoemon who met Ieyasu has the father, while the Magoemon who died in 1662 has his eldest son. The first fish shop was opened by his second son, Kyuzaemon. This is the only explanation that makes sense to Mr. Okamoto. When Magoemon, the senior, first went to Edo in 1590, his eldest son was twenty-two years

old. If the family property and title were transferred at this time, we can take it as a sign of the first Magoemon's farsighted planning for the future prosperity of his family.

Magoemon's home, Tsukuda village, was located on the northern shore of Osaka bay and was under the control of Osaka castle, home to Ieyasu's primary competitor Toyotomi Hide-yoshi (1537–1598) since 1582. After Hideyoshi brought the entire country under his rule, the city of Osaka would have prospered more and more as the years went by. Even with Ieyasu's favor, it must have been an extremely risky venture for Magoemon to leave home and move his family and followers to Edo. By transferring his family's property and his title to his eldest son, Magoemon hedged his bets in his own daring move to Edo with his second son. Two Magoemons, father and son, one in Edo and one in Osaka, meant a reasonable chance of success regardless of who proved more powerful; the Tokugawa or the Toyotomi.

Between 1592 and 1596, seven fishermen, including Magoemon's second son Kyuzaemon, made several trips to Edo. Although some believe the trips were for intelligence gathering, the primary purpose was most likely fishing. We can assume that they were taking stock of the seas in preparation for their move to Edo. Their main catch was icefish, caught with seine nets manipulated by six men in two boats, with an



An illustration of the third Nihonbashi bridge, completed in 1659 (property of Wholesales Co-operative of Tokyo Fish Market)

additional man held in reserve. Presumably, they sailed to Edo during the icefish season, from November to March.

Ando Shigenobu (1549–1621) helped Magoemon and his men make inroads into Edo. Shigenobu was from Mikawa, the same town as Ieyasu, and served the Tokugawa his entire life. He assumed the position of senior councilor in 1613. With such a strong retainer of the Tokugawa behind them, the Magoemon group was able to establish and then solidify their footing in Edo.

Hideyoshi died at Fushimi castle in Kyoto in 1598. Two years later, a decisive battle was fought at Sekigahara (present-day southwestern Gifu prefecture). It is said that Magoemon and his group took part in the battle. The Tokugawa won the battle and gained the ruling power. Though this information would have been known in Osaka as well, Magoemon remained cautious and sent only seven of his fishermen to live in Edo.

The aforementioned Nihonbashi Uoichiba Enkaku Kiyo states that Magoemon's seven fishermen supplied fish for the seventh-day celebration of the birth of Ieyasu's grandson, Iemitsu (1504–1651), in 1604. This indicates that the men had moved to Edo within two or three years of the battle at Sekigahara,



An illustration of the first Nihonbashi bridge, completed in 1603 (property of Wholesales Co-operative of Tokyo Fish Market)

The Nihonbashi Uogashi Established in 1606 or 1607

It is known that a fair was held every four days in the area popularly known as Yokkaichi near the estuary of the old Hirakawa river. Yokkaichi had a fish market that primarily sold salted dried fish with fresh fish sometimes available as well. As this preferable location seems to have not been available to Kyuzaemon, he established his shop on the bank of Dosanbori, reasonably near Yokkaichi.

[illegible]

1607, we can determine that the Nihonbashi Uogashi was also established in 1606 or 1607.

Mori Kyuzaemon (Tsukuda Kyuzaemon)
Mori Yoichiemon (Tsukuda Kurobe)
Mori Sajibe (Tsukuda Sakube)
Inoue Yoichibe (Owada Yoichibe)
Inoue Sakube (Fushimiya Sahe)

Historical records from Tsukudajima, quoted in a book by Mr. Fusagoro Kawasaki, tell us that a wave of fishermen headed for Edo in July 1612—five years after the Nihonbashi Uogashi was established. This seems to be a little late. Or, does this mean that small numbers of fishermen had been moving to Edo during that time? It is said that a total of thirty-four peo-



The fish market described by de Viviero could not have been the Nihonbashi Uogashi, as there is no way it could have developed to such a level by 1609 or 1610. A document on the local history of the Shiba district in Tokyo claims that the description is for the market established in the area by Edo's

native fishermen before the Edo period. However, Mr. Okamoto believes that de Vivero was describing the Yokkaichi market after its relocation to Nihonbashi. Whichever the case may be, we should not assume that the description is of the Nihonbashi Uogashi, though it does show us how successful other markets in the area were.

Within thirty years of de Vivero's experiences in Japan, however, the Uogashi had expanded significantly and the number of wholesalers had increased rapidly. Why?

Kansai Fishermen Move to Kanto

Since ancient times, coastal fishing villages from Osaka bay to the Kii channel had been active suppliers of fish to Nara, Kyoto, and Osaka in the Kansai region. A large number of fishermen and highly advanced techniques had nearly depleted local fishing grounds by the beginning of the Edo period.



These fishermen began looking for ways to fish new grounds in other regions. They were encouraged by the move of Magoemon's group to Edo and their establishment of the Uogashi. Huge numbers of fishermen and others in the fishing industry from the Kansai region made their way to Edo and other parts of the Kanto region. At that time, fishing in the Kanto region was quite primitive and could not compare with the advanced techniques used by Kansai fishermen. In a work published in 1614, Miura Joshin expressed concerns that marine resources would be exhausted due to over-fishing by the highly skilled Kansai fishermen. His somewhat exaggerated examples of this over-fishing clearly convey the surprise at the drastic changes in fishing experienced by the locals.

The fishing privileges that Magoemon's group received may have been a reward for services rendered during the war that resulted in Ieyasu becoming shogun. However, the Tokugawa shogunate strongly encouraged the skilled fishermen from the Kansai region to come to Edo so that the castle's demand for fish could be met. Another group generally believed to be from the present-day Osaka area moved to Edo and formed a fishermen's district known today as Fukagawa. Though unrelated to Magoemon and his group, this additional group had also been in Edo since Ieyasu's arrival and also enjoyed fishing rights. While many of those who moved from the Kansai region continued fishing, a large number also started fish

wholesale businesses with capital they brought with them. The participation of these wholesalers helped to promote the rapid increase in the scale of the Uogashi.

The demands of Edo castle were not the only reason for Kansai fishermen to move to Edo. During the period between 1596 and 1615, cotton farming expanded throughout Kyoto, Osaka, and Nara. The primary fertilizer used at that time was dried sardines. To supply the sardines, Kansai fishermen were forced to expand their range as far north as Hokkaido, the northern-most island of Japan. Sardine fishing requires large nets and a number of boats, necessities that triggered an increase in the scale of fishing operations. It also allowed owners of the boats and nets to build up capital and expand their fleets, separating them by an ever increasing margin from the men who actually caught the fish.

The invasion of Kansai fishermen into the Kanto region effectively restructured local fishing in a very short period of time. At the center of this restructuring was the Uogashi. The prices of fish varied significantly depending upon the distance between where the fish was caught and the Uogashi. Techniques for keeping the fish fresh and transportation improved significantly. There were eight main grounds where fish was caught for the shogunate: Honshiba, Kanasugi, Shinagawa, Oiohayashi, Haneda, Namamugi, Shinshuku, and Kanagawa, with most of the fish delivered to the Uogashi before delivery to the shogunate. Fishing villages too far away from the Uogashi to supply fresh fish dried, salted, or smoked their fish for shipment and sold at lower prices.

The Emergence of a Competitor

Fishermen and capital from the Kansai region spurred rapid growth of the Uogashi, as evidenced by the fact that many of the Uogashi's wholesalers were from the Kansai region. When the Nihonbashi Uogashi was originally established, only those associated with Magoemon could be wholesalers there. Further, to prevent too much competition, the number of wholesalers would also have been restricted. Unfortunately for Magoemon, however, things began to change.

In 1616, Yamatoya Sukegoro, a supplier of live sea bream from present-day Sakurai city in Nara prefecture, undermined the monopoly held by Magoemon's group. With a large amount of capital behind him and an innovative way of thinking, Sukegoro established a completely new system for distributing live fish. Sukegoro's system consisted of the use of tanks that allowed his sea bream to be transported alive over long distances. Using his tanks, Sukegoro achieved his own monopoly in the supply of sea bream caught primarily off the coast of present-day Shizuoka prefecture. Modern methods for transporting live fish are based on Sukegoro's innovation. In addition, Sukegoro made a large payment to each fishing village that he dealt with to cover wages and all costs, including equipment. This system proved to be more efficient than that used by others, including Magoemon's group, up to that point. Magoemon's group and others collected their fish through brokers in the various fishing villages. With Sukegoro's success however, other wholesalers also began to use his system to control the fishing villages directly.

With the emergence of this powerful competitor, Magoemon's group would have done all in their power to maintain their hold over Edo fisheries. Later, they organized a cooperative

and established rules for operations. One of their goals was to show their solidarity against new competitors. A century later, a dispute over domination of the Uogashi broke out between the decedents of Magoemon and Sukegoro.

The infusion of new blood to the Uogashi was inevitable. Many new players were necessary for the Uogashi to develop in both scale and function. The dynamic nature of the growing demands of one of the largest cities in the world exceeded the expectations of the wholesalers in every aspect of the industry, including the catch, sale, and transport of fish. Even Magoemon's group, the first in the fish market business, could not escape the tidal wave of change, despite the exceptional privileges afforded them.

Uogashi—Four Hundred Years of Solitude

In 1630 Magoemon's group was given 33,000 square meters of Teppozu tideland. They spent fifteen years reclaiming the land and completed development of Tsukudajima, named after their home, in 1644. Magoemon's two dreams, establishing his group in Edo fisheries and the development of the Uogashi, were completed by Magoemon and his son with Tsukudajima. His is a story of achievement that should be passed down to all generations.



An illustration of the origins of the Uogashi—selling excess fish after supplying Edo castle (property of Wholesales Co-operative of Tokyo Fish Market)

The Uogashi reached its pinnacle sometime between 1688 and 1704. However, business at the Uogashi differed greatly from that of other trades and industries. As the Uogashi's commodities came from nature, volume and prices were in constant fluctuation depending upon the catch. In addition, wholesalers competed with each other within the confines of the market. While significant profits were possible, the wholesalers had to be quick and decisive. The floor of the Uogashi was the site of heated competition and disputes and many found this, combined with rapid social changes, too much for them.

This may be the unavoidable nature of the wholesale fish market. In an insulated and closed society, all participants must be open-minded and able to respond to whatever nature or society might throw at them. Conditions in the modern Tsukiji market have changed little since the Edo period. The distress often felt by today's fish wholesalers is likely much the same as that dealt with by Magoemon four hundred years ago.

Timeline

- 1582 The first Magoemon likely meets Ieyasu for the first time when Ieyasu visits Sumiyoshi Shrine. Oda Nobunaga dies.
- 1590 Ieyasu enters Edo. Magoemon and his group accompany Ieyasu. Magoemon's eldest son assumes position as village leader and takes his father's name.
* After this first visit, seven of Magoemon's group, including his second son Kyuzaemon, make frequent visits to Edo.
- 1598 Toyotomi Hideyoshi dies.
- 1599 The first Magoemon employed to supply Ieyasu with fish during his stay at Fushimi castle.
- 1600 The Battle of Sekigahara
- 1601 (?) Kyuzaemon opens the first fish shop at Dosanbori.
- 1603 Ieyasu appointed shogun by the emperor. Construction begins on civil engineering projects, financed by regional lords, throughout Edo. Nihonbashi bridge is constructed.
- 1604 Magoemon's seven fishermen supply fish for the celebration of Iemitsu's birth and receive rewards from Ieyasu.
* By this time, the first of Magoemon's group have completed their move to Edo.
- 1606–1607 Relocation of merchants, including Kyuzaemon, from Dosanbori to Nihonbashi.
- 1610 Spaniard Rodrigo de Vivero, shipwrecked in Japan, visits a fish market.
- 1612 (?) Fishermen from Tsukuda and Owada villages beginning moving to Edo.
- 1613 Fishing permit is granted to the fishermen from Tsukuda and Owada villages. Ando Shigenobu assumes the position of a senior councillor.
- 1614 Magoemon and his group render distinguished military service in the Osaka winter battle.
- 1615 Magoemon and his group rewarded for meritorious service in the Osaka summer and winter battles. They accepted roasted rice, but declined the offer of land.
- 1616 Yamatoya Sukegoro moves into the Uogashi and opens his own wholesale business.
* Sometime between 1615 and 1623, the area of land used by the Uogashi is expanded greatly.
* Around the same time, Uogashi operations are officially authorized by Edo magistrate.
- 1626 The Honshiba and Kanasugi wholesale fish markets are authorized.
- 1628 Yamatoya Sukegoro begins supplying live sea bream in earnest.
- 1630 The Tsukuda fishermen are given the Teppozu tideland.
- 1644 Tsukudajima is completed.
- 1657 Meireki-no-Taika (the great fire of the Meireki era)
- 1662 The second Magoemon dies at the age of ninety four in his hometown, Tsukuda village.

About the illustrator

Kazan Mori was born Shigesaburo Mori in 1881 in Honfuna-cho, Nihonbashi Ward, Tokyo. He was the third son of Genbe Mori, a fish wholesaler at the Nihonbashi Uogashi. While working for Nishinaga, a wholesaler in another part of the Uogashi, Mori taught himself to draw and paint. Later he worked for the Maiyu Shimbun and Jiji Shimbun newspapers, and joined the Tokyo Manga-kai (a group of Japanese cartoonists), established in 1916. Having received his father's tutelage, Mori referred to himself as a Nihonbashi Uogashi research artist and spent many years drawing the people, their lifestyles, and work, from the beginning of the Edo period through the Taisho era (1912–1926), at the Nihonbashi Uogashi. Great numbers of his meticulously accurate and historically valuable drawings have remained to this day. Mori died in October 1944 in Shirogane, Minato Ward, Tokyo.

A book of Kazan Mori's drawings has been published by the Wholesales Co-operative of Tokyo Fish Market, and is titled Nihonbashi Uogashi.

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