— Unearthing the Four-hundred-year History of a Wholesale Fish Market —

The History of Nihonbashi Uogashi

Part 4: The Vanishing Uogashi

By Issei Tomioka

Illustrations
Kazan Mori
(Property of the Wholesales Co-operative of Tokyo Fish Market)

The Uogashi was epitomized by *Edokko*, or people born and raised in central Edo. Uogashi fish wholesalers were those *Edokko* who had economic power and the distinction of having been designated purveyors of fish for the shogunate. These wholesalers acted as patrons of Edo's popular culture. In contrast, young men working at the Uogashi represented the dashing and swashbuckling *Edokko*. Whether good or bad, the behavior of both types of *Edokko* had an impact on Edo society.

What role did the Uogashi play in the history of Edo's common people? Let's look at the people and a few incidents to get a feel for the atmosphere of the time.

"Sukeroku" and the Uogashi

Ota Shokusanjin (1749–1823), a low-ranking samurai and author of popular stories and *kyoka* (comic thirty-one syllable verse) who depicted the everyday lives and manners of Edo's common people, once wrote, "The people of Odawara-cho are so-called *Edokko*. This is why they praise Edo actors and favor Ichikawa Danjuro (stage name taken by a series of kabuki actors of the Ichikawa family)." Shokusanjin extolled the Uogashi's wholesalers as true *Edokko* for their patronage of Danjuro, and in this case, referred specifically to their support of "Sukeroku," a kabuki play by the Ichikawa family.

"Sukeroku" incorporated a popular revenge story of the Kanto region into a drama originally written for puppet theater. In 1749, "Sukeroku" was adapted into a drama of resistance against power, reflecting the atmosphere of Edo during that time. As a representative of the Edo townspeople, the main character, Sukeroku, defies and verbally abuses the villain in the story. Audiences were enraptured by the rough and dynamic style of the performance. The hero's spectacular actions had a cathartic effect on the people of Edo and the play was performed in Edo's three major theaters during the New Year's holiday for over one hundred years.

A widely accepted reason for the ties between "Sukeroku" and the Uogashi is that Masumi Kato (1684–1725), founder of the Kato-bushi school of narrative chanting accompanied by the *shamisen*, was from the Uogashi. One scene in "Sukeroku" incorporated Kato-bushi chanting and was very popular with audiences. At some point, it became an unwritten rule that prior approval from the Uogashi was required whenever "Sukeroku" was to be performed with Kato-bushi chanting. It

Theatergoers of the Edo period left home before dawn (account by Kazan Mori). Property of the Wholesales Co-operative of Tokyo Fish Market

Issei Tomioka

Director, Uogashiyaro K.K.
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

A large curtain was often used in Kabuki plays. Those actors to whom a curtain with the characters of the Uogashi was dedicated were particularly influential (account by Kazan Mori). Property of the Wholesales Co-operative of Tokyo Fish Market

is said that Danjuro actors personally visited the Uogashi before any performance of "Sukeroku." In return, Uogashi wholesalers made a regular practice of dedicating a large curtain displayed on the stage to their favorite actors, and large groups of Uogashi wholesalers regularly attended "Sukeroku" openings and applauded loudly at key points in the play. These Uogashi leaders generously supported theaters where "Sukeroku" was performed and even helped to finance the rebuilding of theaters destroyed by fire. Theater was the most popular form of entertainment in Edo. The people of the Uogashi, regardless of age and often accompanied by their families, were especially enthusiastic theatergoers.

Two Types of *Edokko*

Edokko are often characterized as being careless in their spending and straightforward in their speech and manner. These characteristics describe the low-class people of Edo who seemed unable to save money or behave sensibly. However, not all *Edokko* were like that. There were many *Edokko* who had significant financial power and led sophisticated, cultured lives.

The local residences of samurai warriors from the various domains throughout the country made up a major part of the metropolitan area. Including these samurai, the majority of Edo's population was not native to Edo. Despite their origins, however, many of these people boldly boasted that they were also *Edokko*. In contrast, true *Edokko* did not boast their origins, but took quiet pride in having been born in Edo and assisted in the growth of the popular culture with a deep knowledge of the history and society and, in some cases, financial support.

Nihonbashi Uogashi fish wholesalers who had operated since the beginning of the Tokugawa shogunate may be regarded as the latter type of *Edokko* exhibiting success and achievement. In addition to favoring Danjuro, their patronage of the Yoshiwara red-light district was comparable only to that of rice brokers and moneylenders. They also enjoyed pleasure jaunts, under the pretence of pilgrimage, to famous shrines and temples. Items donated by the Uogashi can still be found in shrines and temples in many parts of Japan. The Uogashi also produced many distinguished cultural figures whose works remain in posterity. Two of these, Sugiyama Sanpu (1647–1732) and Takarai Kikaku (1661–1707) were prominent students of Matsuo Basho (1644–1694), the famous haiku master particularly known for his travelogue titled *Oku no Hosomichi* (The Narrow Road to the Deep North).

Sanpu and Kikaku

In 1672, prior to taking his formal penname, Basho arrived in Edo and lived near the Nihonbashi Uogashi for a time.

The first bonito of the year
Amazingly fresh
They would have been alive when they left Kamakura

This is a haiku poem in which Basho describes the first bonito catches of the year. Basho lived in the residence of Sugiyama Kensui, a haiku poet known as Ozawa Senpu and a carp wholesaler whose business was named Koiya. Kensui's eldest son, Sanpu, supported Basho and came to be known as one of the master's ten most prominent students.

Sanpu has been considered Basho's greatest benefactor. The wholesale carp business, particularly prosperous at that time, made it possible for him to provide such great support. Koiya maintained a carp farm in Fukagawa. Basho later lived in a remodeled cottage that had previously been the caretaker's lodge at Koiya's carp farm. The cottage was named Basho-an after a basho (banana) tree growing near the cottage, and Basho adopted the same for his penname. It is thought that the following well-known poem was written at the Fukagawa cottage:

An old quiet pond—
A frog jumps into the pond,
Splash! Silence again.

On March 27, 1689, Basho set out for the deep north. He traveled up the Sumida River to Senju, where he took his leave from those who had accompanied him on the first part of his journey. It was then that Basho composed the following poem for Sanpu, who had supported him for so many years.

Passing spring
Birds are crying
And the fish are in tears

It is said that Sanpu tried to prevent Basho from traveling north out of concern for the chill in the early spring air. The cordial relationship between Basho and Sanpu was likely the reason Basho composed this poem. Or, perhaps by mentioning fish, he may have intended to make a clear break from his youth spent at the Uogashi.

Sanpu was the first son of a carp wholesaler and purveyor to the shogunate. Along with Takarai Kikaku (1661–1707) and

Hattori Ransetsu (1654–1707), Sanpu was a leading haiku poet of the Basho school. Among his students, Basho trusted Sanpu most for his coherent and sound style, unaffected by trends, as well as for his personality.

Persistently I stare
At the moon
Still I cannot hear
Two nights before a full moon
Yet, the moon is too beautiful
To get tired of looking at
Unexpected dismay
A tooth came out for the first time
Autumn wind

As the first poem above would indicate, Sanpu suffered severe hearing loss. It is said that Basho was very upset with Kikaku for teasing Sanpu that he would never keep up with the world because of his hearing disability. Sanpu also studied Japanese painting at the Kano school, and his art is characterized by realism. Of the many portraits of Basho, that by Sanpu is believed to be the most faithful portrayal of the haiku master. The farewell note Basho wrote to Sanpu before his death shows the warm personal relationship between the two:

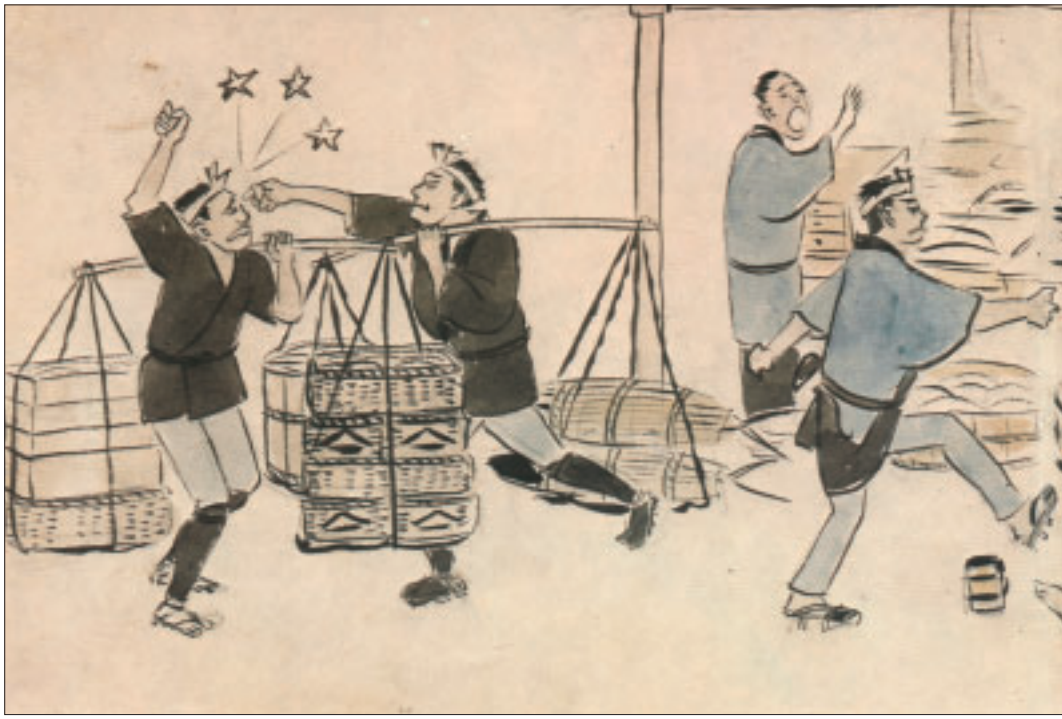
I tell you, Sanpu, that I shall never forget the generous support I have received from you over the years, even after my body no longer exists. It is regrettable for both of us that my life is ending in an unexpected place and therefore I cannot say farewell to you in person. I hope you will keep working on your haiku and that it provides entertainment for you in your old age.

Takarai Kikaku, another prominent student of the Basho school, was originally a physician. He later purchased a wholesaler's license and became a fish wholesaler. Thus, Kikaku may be described as an *Edokko* haiku poet from the Uogashi.

Spring-time in Edo,
Not a day passes without
A temple bell sold
Savoring cool air in the evening
Lucky to be born a man
Sound of silk tearing heard from Echigo-ya
It's time to change to summer clothes

Along with his witty, smart and refined style of haiku poems that reflect the atmosphere of the Edo townspeople's lives, many stories involving Kikaku also remain. One such incident, describing a chance meeting with Otaka Gengo at the foot of Ryogoku Bridge on the night of December 13, 1702, is a particularly well-known story told in the *kodan* style of storytelling. The general theme of the story has even become well known in other countries.

Gengo (penname Shiyo) was a *ronin* (masterless samurai) who studied haiku under Kikaku. One night, Kikaku noticed that a shabby peddler crossing Ryogoku Bridge was Gengo. Kikaku felt sorry for Gengo's presumed financial difficulties. After sharing some small talk, Kikaku improvised an opening stanza for a renga collaborative poem, and in response Gengo promptly added "awaiting a treasure boat that might come tomorrow morning" as the next stanza. At the time, Kikaku did not find any particular meaning in the response. The next day, however, he learned that a group of forty-seven *ronin*, including Gengo, had raided and killed Kira Yoshinaka to avenge their lord's death. Kikaku then realized that Gengo had been dressed in disguise in order to spy on the residence of their target. Kikaku was greatly ashamed by his ignorance.



Fighting was a part of life at the Uogashi, with five or six fights occurring daily. The *Edokko* spirit, characterized by straightforwardness and a sense of by Kazan Mori). Property of the Wholesales Co-operative of Tokyo Fish Market

Altercations at the Uogashi

While the fish wholesalers at the Uogashi were true *Edokko*, the young men working in their shops were typically self-proclaimed *Edokko* braggarts. Yet these dashing youths became the iconic figures of *Edokko*. Conducting business only in the morning, it is said that almost a third of the money changing hands daily in Edo was spent at the Uogashi. As speed was of the essence in dealing with fresh fish, the speech of those at the Uogashi was abbreviated and rough. Negotiations between sellers and buyers at the Uogashi sounded like angry disputes, though this was simply the way the two groups spoke to one another. In truth, however, disputes and altercations were simply a way of life for the vigorous people of the Uogashi.

Throughout its history, spanning the more than three centuries of the Edo period (1603–1868), Meiji era (1868–1912) and Taisho era (1912–1926), the Uogashi had all types of altercations ranging from minor squabbles to historical battles.

Small fights were part of the daily routine. Gambling and fighting, and especially fighting, were the two favorite pastimes of the young men at the Uogashi. Groups of ten or twenty would get together and go looking for fights. According to Tatsuzo Taguchi's autobiography of his life as a prominent figure at the Tsukiji Fish Market, a sash called an Uogashi sash was sold at a Nihonbashi department store. Targeting those who enjoyed fighting, the sash was designed

fair play, was gradually lost as open competitions, individualism and egotism grew rampant during the transition from the Edo period to the Meiji era (account

to tie at the front so that those wearing it could quickly untie the sash and run away if their opponent should catch them by the robe from behind. In larger fights, an entire neighborhood would join in. The reasons for such fights were not important. These large fights were exciting for the participants and their families, and provided great entertainment for the large crowds they attracted. Food stalls were sometimes set up so onlookers could purchase snacks to enjoy as they watched the fights. According to records, one such fight was about to break out between two fish markets, but the fight was settled through mediation between leaders of the two markets. These fights were considered a type of entertainment in Edo as city officials turned a blind eye to them.

Despite all of the fighting, the Nihonbashi Uogashi was still responsible for providing fish to the shogunate at rates significantly lower than they could achieve with sale to Edo's restaurants and townspeople. However, the burden became so great that fish wholesalers gradually began to supply lower quality fish. In response, the frustrated shogunate established a food supply office in 1792 to forcibly collect the best fish from the Uogashi. This led to the largest conflict since the birth of the Uogashi.

The food supply office was so relentless in its collection of fish that the wholesalers, brokers and retailers all suffered greatly. The office hired those knowledgeable about the fish market as their collectors. Carrying a hook, they seized any good fish they found from stores, vendors' tubs, and even from catches just unloaded at the market. To protect their businesses, fish merchants went to great extents to hide fish from these heartless fish snatchers, even hiding them in chests of drawers in their living quarters rather than storing them in their commercial spaces.

Dealing with the collectors exhausted the Uogashi's merchants. After appealing to authorities for help, a liaison office was established to serve as a cushion between the food supply office and the Uogashi merchants. With establishment of the liaison office, one percent of the gross fish purchase price paid by wholesalers to fishing villages was contributed and saved in the liaison office as a reserve fund. When payment received from the food supply office was less than the value of the fish collected, the merchant was compensated from this fund. This system seemed to work for a while. However, the new peace did not last long as those managing the liaison office gradually became more arrogant and bureaucratic. They acted in favor of the food supply office and grew reluctant to compensate merchants from the reserve fund, preferring to use the money to feather their own nests. As the situation became worse than it had ever been, Uogashi merchants worried about the future of the Uogashi itself.

Those at the Uogashi finally reached their breaking point. Feeling they had no alternative, Nishinomiya Rihachi, Iseya Shichibe, Kamisakiya Jujiro, Tsukudaya Hikobe and Iseya Kametaro set out to raid the liaison office at daybreak, brandishing large knives. On their way to the liaison office, the five were joined by other men carrying hooks, knives or anything else that could be used as a weapon. Before long, the liaison office was surrounded by a large mob. While the original five men had intended only to intimidate the officials, their actions led to the injury of some officials. Concerned that the incident would be treated as a criminal act and in fear of repercussions, some wholesalers and co-op leaders rushed to the scene to intervene and help settle the matter. However, the

Merchants hid fish in unlikely places. When a collector from the food supply office was around, merchants chatted to customers on subjects not related to business. Once the collector left, they invited customers into their kitchens to sell fish. Property of the Wholesales Co-operative of Tokyo Fish Market

original five stood their ground. At knifepoint, the liaison officials signed a pledge to close the liaison office with the entire mob witnessing the event.

The original five instigators of this event became the talk of the town and were considered fearless men with a spirit strong enough to confront even public officials. Thus, the liaison office system, which only harmed the Uogashi, was eliminated and peace was restored. For their role in the incident, however, the five instigators were immediately jailed and, unfortunately, died before their case was resolved. The people of the Uogashi built a five-story pagoda in their memory at Ekoin Temple.

Flames from fires caused by the Great Kanto Earthquake of September 1, 1923 engulfed the Uogashi before midnight on the same day. Property of the

The Edo Defense Corps

While the Edo townspeople found the behavior of the young men at the Uogashi to be quite gallant, the ruling class found it completely absurd. In his book titled *Edokko*, Matsunosuke Nishiyama stated that the ruling class looked down on the common townspeople of Edo. As an example, he cited the following from the memoirs of a high-ranking retainer of the shogun. "Those who call themselves *Edokko*, including people working at the Uogashi and steeplejacks, are extremely dangerous folks because they put up a brave front and are easily provoked." The implied meaning was that a mob mentality could easily be incited in these people.

In 1868, forces of the Tokugawa shogunate numbering 15,000 men were defeated by imperial forces in the Battle of Toba-Fushimi. Encouraged by the victory, the imperial forces began advancing toward Edo. In Edo, the shogunate maintained 80,000 men from leading vassals that could be mobilized to fight and defend Edo. However, after nearly 300 years of peace, these samurai warriors had neither sufficient will to fight, nor the bond of solidarity necessary to win a battle. Some even ran from Edo before facing the enemy. In desperation, the shogunate ordered the creation of a militia of men from the Uogashi and steeplejacks to defend Edo. Uogashi wholesalers, brokers and other workers gathered to discuss the issue, but were completely dumbfounded and speechless at the order they felt to be far beyond their abilities, despite their boldness and love for a good fight. At the meeting, Sagamiya Takebe broke the silence.

> *We have been the designated purveyors of fish to the shogun since the early days of the Tokugawa shogunate. Despite the bumps and detours we've encountered, we continue in this business after all these years. For this, we owe the shogun and his administration. Now the shogun has asked for our help. This is a good chance to repay the shogunate, as well as to show the true spirit of the Edo shogunate's fish merchants. To allow the imperial forces from Satsuma and Choshu to cross this Nihonbashi Bridge and enter Edo will be a huge disgrace to all Edokko.*

Inspired by Takebe's impassioned speech, all of those in attendance suddenly rose to their feet. Driven by the reckless ethos of the Uogashi, which did not allow for turning back, they decided to lead the Uogashi straight into the maelstrom of the time. For common townspeople to fight against the imperial forces that had defeated more than 10,000 shogunate soldiers was suicide. However, no one could stop the men of the

Tempo Reforms Ease Regulation and Uogashi Monopolies—Edo People Loved Fish

"Uogashi" is the term used to refer to the riverside wholesale fish markets once located near the Nihonbashi Bridge in the city of Edo (present-day Tokyo). 400 years ago, roughly thirty fishermen from a village on the northern shore of Osaka bay, led by Mori Magoemon, followed Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616) when he entered Edo. Magoemon and his group assumed the responsibility of supplying 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 considered the origin of the Uogashi.

As the city of Edo developed, the Nihonbashi district grew to be a major commercial center. Even in such a commercial center, the Uogashi was particularly successful. It was said that three industries collected equal thirds of all money spent in Edo;the Uogashi in the morning, theaters in the daytime, and businesses in the Yoshiwara red-light district at night. The seafood business was so successful because the people of Edo loved fish, which was a valuable source of protein at the time.

The prosperity of the Uogashi was supported by Edo's fertile waters and a system of control over fishing villages. Wholesalers at the Nihonbashi Uogashi advanced funds to boat owners in the villages with which they contracted for everything from the purchase and repair of fishing equipment to fishermen's food and wages in exchange for all catches made by the villages. The purchase price of fish was determined by the wholesalers. In this way, the wholesalers exploited the fishing boat owners and acquired fish from them at very low prices. In addition, more efficient collection and transportation methods were promoted through fish brokers who lived in the fishing villages. Should a fishing boat owner wish to free himself from his wholesaler's control by paying back the advanced funds, the arrangement did not allow for lump-sum repayment. Therefore, fishing villages remained subordinate to wholesalers for a very long time.

The Uogashi's control over fishing villages, however, was significantly shaken by the reduction of distribution monopolies initiated by the Tempo Reforms. Shortly thereafter, the shogunate collapsed and the Uogashi lost its powerful backing. The Uogashi was left behind as society became more modern with the introduction of the Meiji era, and it struggled daily with stiff competition.

●See FOOD CULTURE No. 16 for more information.

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Uogashi once they had made up their minds. Under Takebe's leadership, they formed a defense force headquartered at the Uogashi and with the following rules:

- Assembly and dismissal of forces will be upon drum signal; individuals will not act independently.
- Cowards will not be allowed to do business at the market.
- Use of military service as an excuse for failure to supply fish to the shogunate is strictly prohibited.
- "Boat" is the response when challenged with the password "water".

The makeshift defense force met daily to perfect their preparations. Food and *sake* were served at these meetings and as they became inebriated, they were also emboldened. Then, the news arrived that the imperial forces had nearly reached Shinagawa. As the drum sounded, the excited defense force began assembling in the street. Despite their earlier confidence, their clothes were entirely inappropriate for battle. Wearing ordinary work clothes and headbands with "Uogashi" written on them, they brandished knives, hooks, pike poles and other tools of their trade as weapons. There was nothing in their dress, attitude or behavior that suggested a military troop. Yet, several hundred of them gathered at the foot of Nihonbashi Bridge to await the enemy.

Despite their preparations, the battle never occurred. On February 14, 1868, Katsu Kaishu (1823–1899) of the shogunate and Saigo Kichinosuke (1827–1877) of the imperial forces agreed upon the bloodless surrender of Edo Castle after two days of negotiation. This peaceful transfer of power spared the city of Edo from the damage and heartbreak of a bloody battle. The spirit of resolve and loyalty to the shogunate shown by the men of the Uogashi is truly commendable and it is fortunate that no one was hurt.

And Then the Uogashi Vanished

The surrender of Edo led to the collapse of the shogunate and the beginning of the Meiji era (1868–1912), a period referred to as the Meiji Restoration in which the emperor was restored to true power. Having lost its backing, how did the Uogashi fare in this age of "cultural enlightenment"? With the infusion of industrial capital in the fishing industry, the Uogashi lost the control it had long held over fishing villages and was forced to devote itself to the acquisition and sales of fish. In the limited space available within markets, merchants were preoccupied with cutthroat competition. Though the rapid population growth in Edo, renamed Tokyo, increased demand and allowed markets to continue to exist, the Uogashi was left behind in a time of rapid modernization. It became much like an isolated state full of demons and a mere shadow of what it had once been. The Uogashi was ordered to relocate many times. In 1923, the Great Kanto Earthquake, with a magnitude of 8.3 on the Richter scale, struck the Kanto region. Fires, which broke out throughout the city, headed towards the Uogashi. Those with boats tried to escape to Tokyo Bay via the Nihonbashi River, but the fire crossed over the surface of the water, consuming all on the river. Helpless against this inexorable natural force, the Uogashi and its 300-year history was burnt to the ground.

Some vestiges of the Uogashi can still be seen at today's Tsukiji market. However, the cultural spirit of the Uogashi, which was unique to *Edokko*, can no longer be found. More than seventy years have passed since the Tsukiji fish market was built after the Great Kanto Earthquake. Stories from the Tsukiji fish market will have to wait for another opportunity.

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 scrupulous and historically valuable drawings have remained to this day. Mori died in October 1944 in Shirogane, Minato Ward, Tokyo.

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