Madame Hanako (1868-1945):
The geisha who became an actress on the early 20th century European stage

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Despite winning huge popularity in the West in the early 20th century, the actress and ex-geisha Hanako and her company have never been well known in Japan. The fact that Hanako was able to captivate a substantial European audience performing Japanese drama over a period of nearly twenty years (1902-21) makes her an important figure in the introduction of Japanese theatre to the West. She also influenced famous Western and Russian artists. In his book *Nihon no sakka* (Japanese novelists) Donald Keene expressed his surprise about Japanese drama scholars' ignorance of Madame Hanako's achievements.
Hanako. Therefore in this paper, I am going to clarify her achievements.

1. Hanako’s background

According to the book Rodin to Hanako, written by Sawada Suketarō, Hanako, whose real name was Ohta Hisa, was born in Aichi prefecture in Japan on the 15th of April 1868. Her personal history is quite complicated. Although her parents were still living and well-off, they gave Hanako away for adoption. Unfortunately, her foster father then ran away because of debts, and she had to work as a child actor in several touring companies of female kabuki actors.

Eventually Hanako left the touring companies and, at the age of sixteen, became a geisha when her foster mother sold her. The experience of being a geisha is important, as it means that Hanako must have learnt several Japanese musical instruments such as the shamisen, in addition to traditional Japanese dance and gidayū chanting. These skills are the same as the fundamental training for professional kabuki actors and were what helped Hanako to perform abroad.

Several years later Hanako was released from her contract as a geisha by her marriage to a building contractor. However, she still felt unfulfilled and described her married life as follows:

‘My life will carry on like this, won’t it? I will spend my whole life with a husband who is twenty years older than I without any love, won’t I? This man has redeemed my body but he cannot redeem my soul. I am unsatisfied. I miss something.’ This kind of thought arose in my mind day and night.3

Hanako’s life experiences were not unusual for the time, and many women who were living similar lives to Hanako might have nurtured the same thoughts. However, what was unusual was that Hanako did not suffer for long. She fell in love with the son of a pawnbroker and divorced the building contractor to marry him. This kind of affair, in which a married woman left her husband for a new man, was rare in this period.

However, Hanako was then deserted by the pawnbroker’s son and had to seek a means of supporting herself. If she had been a typical Japanese woman of those days, she would have simply become a geisha again.

However, she chose something different and joined a group which was going to take part in a cultural exhibition in Copenhagen. In her autobiographical essay ‘Geisha de yōkō shi joyō de kaeru made no nijū nen’ (The twenty years when I left Japan as a geisha and returned as an actress) Hanako relates:

If I had not met the pawnbroker’s son at that time, I would never have known Europe nor how large the world was. I may have ended my life as a shamisen player in the countryside with a dark, lonely and warped mind, without realizing the fact that one can start an enterprise admirably just through one’s own effort and can also obtain wealth and honour.4

Thus Hanako, at least in retrospect, always tried to live positively despite suffering all sorts of misfortunes. This vitality may have lain at the heart of her attractiveness and performance skills.

2. The blossoming of Hanako’s acting career

Hanako’s performing career started, in effect, in 1902, when she went to Copenhagen to participate in a cultural exhibition with some other Japanese entertainers. At first, Hanako performed mainly Japanese dances alongside two other geishas.

Afterwards, she was asked to join another company of Japanese performers by a German producer and made her debut as an actress in Dusseldorf. The company went on to perform all over Germany. When their contract expired in 1904, the members of the company went to Britain and Loie Fuller (1862-1928), a famous producer, offered them a contract.

Fuller had earlier introduced Kawakami Otojirō and Sadayakko’s company to the entertainment world in Europe. If Hanako had not met Fuller, her success might not have been possible. What is noteworthy is that Fuller promoted Hanako to a central position. Why did Fuller decide to make Hanako the star?

Firstly, she must have remembered the great popularity of Sadayakko only a few years earlier, and felt that the key to success was to have another star actress like her. Secondly, Fuller might have observed Hanako’s talent. Thirdly, she must have had a sense that the trend was moving towards actresses gaining more attention.

In his article entitled ‘Hanako’ in New Japan, Vol. 14, Donald Keene surmises the reason why Hanako was able to win popularity in foreign countries in the following quotation:

Hanako’s extraordinary success on the European
stage was a curious by-product of the rage for
great actresses that swept Europe and America
during the early years of the century. Bernhardt,
Duse, Réjane and others drew impassioned
audiences not only at home but in countries where
their languages were not readily understood.5

Therefore, it might be said that the timing was
right for a foreign actress to rise to the top of the
theatrical world in Europe. Westerners' interest in
Japanese theatre was also continuing to grow.
Hanako fitted in with the demands of the times
perfectly. After signing a contract with Fuller, the
company became Hanako's in reality as well as in
name, and performed all over Europe, Russia and
the USA.

3. The plays performed by Hanako’s company

When Loie Fuller found Hanako, she was
performing the role of the geisha Akoya in a
play about the famous warrior Taira no Kagekiyo
titled 'Hara-Kiri'. Akoya was not the main role.
But after Fuller undertook the promotion of the
company, Hanako began to play the leading parts.
The company performed several plays entitled A
Geisha's Revenge, A Martyr and Hidari Jingorō's
Kyoddoll as well as others. Hanako was expected to
show specialities such as Japanese dance and
musical performances and, more than anything
else, she was expected to 'die' on stage.

However, it was not just tragedies which Hanako's
company performed. A comedy entitled Otake was
an important repertory of the troupe. This is a play
about a maid called Otake who pretends to be her
mistress. The play was written by Loie Fuller.

Hanako's company had another important repertory
entitled K'iMusume (A Japanese Virgin) written
by Ikuta Kizan (1876-1945) who was a disciple of
Iwaya Sazanami (1870-1933). Hanako came to
know Kizan while both were staying in London.

K'iMusume is based on the Japanese legend
Sarayashiki (House of plates) which is about a girl
who is wrongly accused of damaging a precious
plate. Otake and K'iMusume sustained a long run
at the Ambassadors Theatre in London from 1914
to 1916. Thus, Hanako made Japanese theatre
popular in the West and she also influenced famous
Western and Russian artists such as Auguste
Rodin, Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vsevolod
Meyerhold.

4. The reputation of Hanako

Hanako was the only Japanese woman to pose
for Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) and she was
certainly an important model. Rodin first saw
Hanako's performances in Marseille in 1906.
Reminiscing about the encounter with Rodin,
Hanako relates:

After I performed one act and got back to
the dressing room, a manager said, 'Hanako.
Monsieur Rodin says that he would like to meet
you. He has just seen the scene in which you kill
yourself by stabbing your throat and was deeply
impressed. He wants to make a sculpture of you
[...] Here he is now. Greet him.' To my shame, I
must confess that this was the first time I had
ever heard the name of Monsieur Rodin. After a
few moments he appeared with an assistant. He
had a shaggy beard and was filthy-looking. I
greeted him respectfully. He gave me a bouquet.
We parted then on that occasion.6

Rodin subsequently invited Hanako to his studio
and made more than fifty sculptures of her. Even
today, people can see some of them at the Rodin
Museum in Paris or the Niigata City Art Museum
in Japan.

In fact, not only Rodin but also many artists
around the world, and especially Russian directors,
showed strong interest in Hanako and her
performances. Hanako's company toured Russia in
1909, 1910 and from 1912 to 1913. Hanako had an
impact on Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940), who
was trying to find an alternative to the naturalistic
illusionary theatre style.

Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938), who
developed an important acting theory still relevant
today, also took an interest. He invited Hanako to
the Actor's School of the Moscow Art Theatre
and asked her to give a demonstration. In her
reminiscences about the performances in Russia,
titled 'Kizoku to joyū no akushu: Rosia kōgyō
no omoide (An actress shakes hands with a
noblewoman: The reminiscences of performances
in Russia)', Hanako explains:

Firstly, I showed them how I would use a
dagger to take my own life if playing a young
woman in traditional Japanese theatre. [...] Then I demonstrated how I would take my own
life if playing an older lady as well. [...] Secondly,
I showed them the expression of laughter. I
learned how to laugh when I was a child actor
practicing gidayū, and I performed it as I used to.
Finally, I demonstrated the expression of anger
and the expression of grief. [...] When I finished, the whole audience gave me a standing ovation. ‘Bravo’ was shouted again and again. Mrs Chekhov rose from her seat and offered me her hand. What a lucky person I was! It seems that I had passed a test of art which I had had to take in front of the artists of the Moscow Art Theatre. I felt keenly that I owed my success in this task entirely to the art of my Japanese predecessors.7

It is clear that the techniques which Hanako demonstrated to the members of the Moscow Art Theatre were acquired during her experiences as a child actor with female kabuki performers and her training as a geisha. She was well aware that she owed her skills to the kabuki tradition. However, contrary to the Western and Russian artists’ interest in her, the Japanese theatre’s reaction to Hanako was rather cold. The case of the director of ‘new theatre’ (shingeki), Osanai Kaoru (1881-1928), is a good example.

When Osanai visited Russia to study drama in 1913, he was invited by Stanislavsky to a New Year party. However, when [Elena Pavlovna] Muratova, a veteran actress of the Moscow Art Theatre, talked to him about Sadayakko, Osanai could not understand ‘why such a splendid actress was impressed by the likes of a Japanese actress’8. Stanislavsky was listening to their conversation and then asked Osanai his opinion about both Sadayakko and Hanako. Osanai describes the situation as follows:

[Stanislavsky] said ‘I have not seen Sadayakko’s performance yet. How is it?’ I replied ‘She is not an artist!’ in a fierce tone of voice as Mrs Muratowa happened to be absent at that moment. However I did not have the courage to say any more when Mr Stanislavsky then asked ‘Why?’ Concerning this subject, there is no ‘Why’ for us. [...] Moreover, he next questioned me about Hanako. I felt exasperated. I felt that I had to bear all the shame of Japan on my shoulders alone. I blushed. I just said, ‘I have never heard such a name in Japan.’ while breaking into a cold sweat. However, Mr Stanislavsky looked as if he could not believe me. I have no idea what I should have done.9

Perhaps, the reason why Osanai could not talk about Sadayakko and Hanako was due to an inferiority complex, but he should at least have asked Stanislavsky the reasons why he paid attention to Hanako. If Osanai had analyzed the Russian director’s interest in Japanese theatre, he would have been able to grasp the trends of Western and Russian theatre at that time.

That is to say, it was a moment when there was a shift away from Naturalism to Symbolism and Expressionism. Russian directors were seeking new methods of expression. During this process, Hanako’s performances certainly gave some ideas to them. However, Osanai could not accept the fact that a geisha was important.

5. Hanako’s achievements

Despite the lack of acknowledgement of her achievements by the Japanese theatre world, Hanako went on to perform with great Western actresses on even terms.

During the First World War, many actors and actresses from countries allied to Britain took refuge in London, and audiences were able to see performances with a markedly international character. The revue Odds and Ends at the Ambassadors Theatre was one such performance. According to The play pictorial Vol. xxvii, No. 165, Hanako appeared in the revue Odds and Ends playing the role of a British sailor ‘Jack’, who rescues a Japanese girl from villains.

It seems that she proved herself a good match for international actors and actresses and was loved not only by the producer of the Ambassadors Theatre Charles Cochran but also by British audiences. Cochran paid her the same as the leading actress and also worked as her agent.

Hanako recounted how she also joined charity performances in aid of injured soldiers.10 According to the programme of one such performance, Hanako played the role of ‘Japan’ in The Masque of War and Peace at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane in 1915, appearing on stage together with the first-class actresses of those days, such as Lady Tree [Helen Maud Holt]11 (1863-1937) and Madame [Gabrielle-Charlotte Réju] Réjane12 (1857-1920). It seems that she performed an important role by literally representing Japan. In her autobiographical essay, Hanako relates:

Thanks to the prestige of Japan, we enjoy the favour of British audiences. As soon as I arrived back in Tokyo, I went to the Imperial Palace and bowed my head. I could not repress my tears. No one, except a person who wanders from place to place in foreign countries like me, would be able to understand my feelings. Whenever I
perform for foreign audiences, I strongly feel my roots. The magnificent Imperial Palace and the Rising-Sun flag are in my mind and cheer me up.\textsuperscript{13}

As a Japanese actress performing in foreign countries, Hanako therefore not only made Japanese theatre popular but also fulfilled the role of private diplomat. She understood her position and realised she owed her success to her experiences as a geisha and as a child actor. It was her trust in her art and her pride as a Japanese actress which enabled Hanako to perform for nearly twenty years in the West.

Donald Keene concluded his essay ‘Hanako’ by saying ‘Hanako must have been a great woman’ and I think I can finish my paper by saying ‘she was a great woman’. Hanako was a great woman and a great actress.

Notes
3.  Hanako 1917a, p. 90.
4.  Hanako 1917a, p. 91.
7.  Hanako 1917b, p. 28.
11.  The wife of the British actor-manager Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree (1853-1917).
12.  One of the most popular French actresses of comedy in Paris during the 1890s and 1900s.
13.  Hanako 1917a, p. 103.

Bibliography
