
Dancing butterflies,
water fountains,
and spinning tops:
Magic and acrobatic
tricks in *misemono-e*

“They threw tops into the air, jerked them down, made them travel up inclines, into miniature pagodas, spin around and come out, then spun them on a man’s shoulder and back and arms, threw them twenty feet into the air and caught them on a samurai sword blade where they spun back and forth”.¹

John Fiorillo



1. Yamashatei Utagawa Kunitsuru 山車亭歌川國鶴 'First-class spinning tops' (Ichiryū koma no ōmagari, 一流こまの大曲), 'Ueno in Yamashita, Eastern Capital' (Tōto Ueno o Yamashita 東都上野御山下), Takezawa Tōji 竹澤藤次, Woodblock print, ōban nishiki-e, c. 1843–1845 (Osaka).

Collection of Peter Ujlaki, Ashiya, Japan.

During the Edo period (1615–1868), side-shows and exhibits, *misemono* (見世物), were a familiar sight in the streets of Edo. Entertainers scattered about the city included acrobats, conjurers, jugglers, top-spinners, dancers, chanters, singers, storytellers, puppeteers, amateur actors, mimics, samisen players, flautists, percussionists, quick-draw sword unsheathers, snake-handlers, and circus-style freaks. There were, as well, menageries of exotic animals, life-size doll displays, and optical peep shows.²

The antecedents to *misemono* included early street arts (*daidō-gei* 大道芸) enacted at fixed outdoor locations such as urban crossroads or on the grounds of temples and shrines. A customary venue for later *misemono* was the temple fair (*kaichō* 開帳) where large crowds of pilgrims and tourists viewed sacred objects usually hidden from public view. Once there, visitors were diverted by enterprising showmen. The 'Chronological record of the Edo region' (*Bukō nenpyō* 武江年表), compiled by Saitō Gesshin (齋藤月岑, 1804–1878), a compendium of events around Edo each year between 1590 and 1873, cites 125 *misemono*, with 107 in the nineteenth century, eighty-six of those after 1840.³ These entertainments, typically lasting only a few days or weeks, were presented in small theatres and variety halls (*yose* 寄席) or in temporary enclosures on or near the grounds of shrines and temples.

Generally, *misemono* have not been considered worthy of serious study. They were thought to be "generally crude, frequently vulgar, liberally dosed with commercialism and rapacious hucksterism ... [but they provided] a valuable index to evolving popular taste in any given era".⁴ *Misemono* have been categorised as (1) acrobatic and related theatrical and magic shows; (2) animal acts; and (3) craftwork demonstrations and displays.

This essay focuses on the first type of *misemono* as depicted in ukiyo-e. The

discussion begins with a selective history and subsequently investigates the theme of magic and related entertainments presented in woodcuts of the late-seventeenth through the third quarter of the nineteenth century.⁵

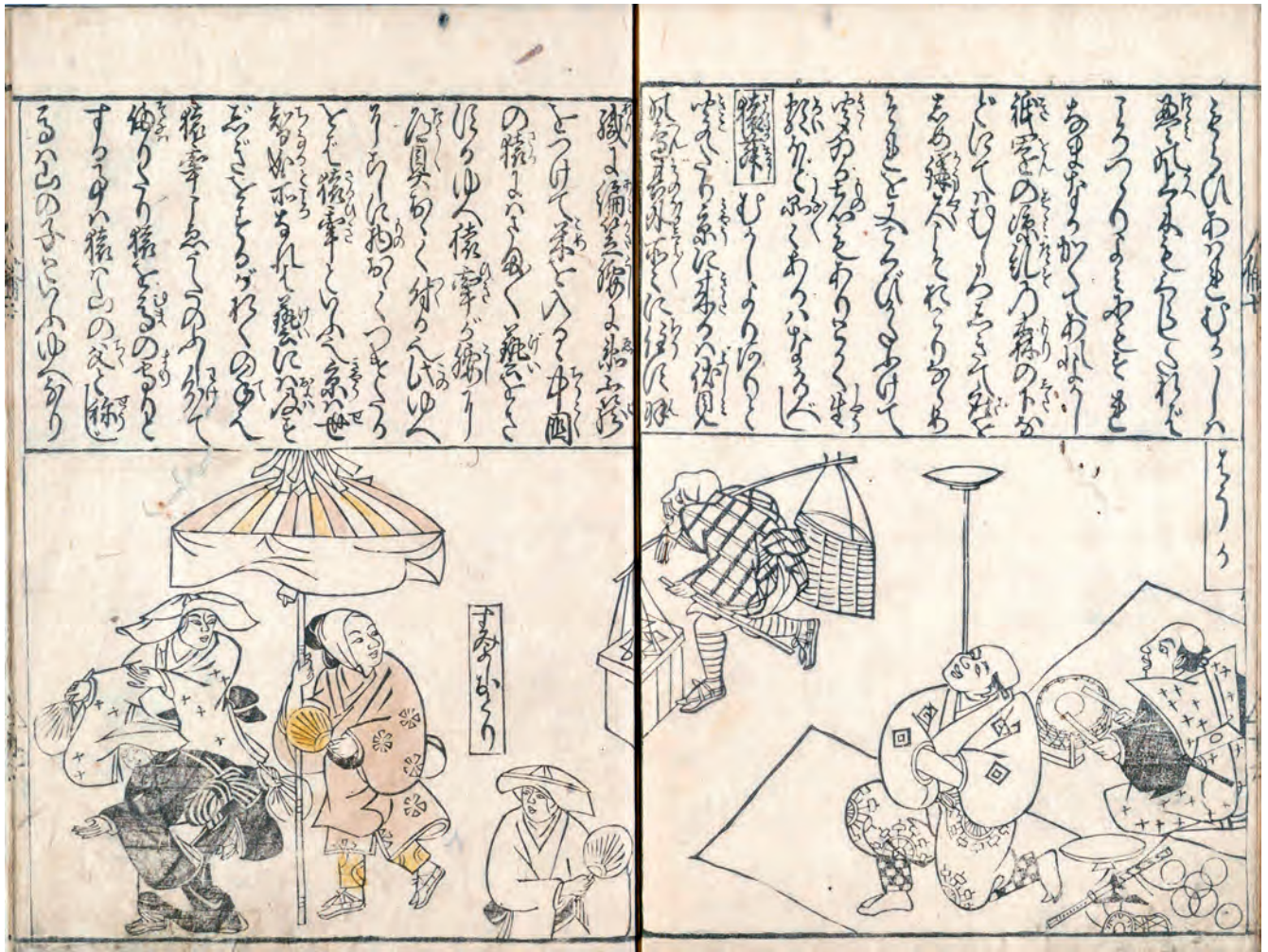
Historical background

Magic or 'hand-lightning' (*tezuma* 手妻) is an Intangible Cultural Property (*mukeyi bunkazai* 無形文化財), so designated in 1997.⁶ Among its earliest forms were tricks and incantations learned together (often secretly) in ancient China, while in Japan it was known at least as far back as the seventh century (Asuka period, 538–710).

Many street performers during the Edo period were self-taught, having learned conjuring, juggling, and acrobatics as a single repertoire. In fig. 2, a two-page spread from the 'Picture compendium of professions and customs' (*Jinrin kinmō zui*) of 1690, passers-by notice a street juggler/illusionist (*tsuji-hōka*) balancing a pole-and-plate on his head. At the lower right there are batons for juggling and metal rings for sleight-of-hand (linked-ring tricks). Here we see the impromptu nature of street entertainment – one could simply lay down a mat and begin entertaining and attracting customers.

As they grew in number, street magicians formed "troupes or guilds dedicated to transmitting carefully honed arts to their progeny".⁷ Thus, aside from autodidactic learning, Edo-period practitioners of magic could acquire their skills as disciples of masters who maintained an apprentice system and passed down craft secrets through the generations.

Around 150 books on magic tricks were published in Japan during the Edo period.⁸ Although textual sources for Chinese magic tricks are fairly scarce, the earliest known printed work entirely on magic in Japan — the two-volume 'Amazing tricks of light-hearted



wizardry' (*Shinsen gejutsu* 神仙戯術) of 1696 — happens to be a translation of a Chinese how-to book from 1510 by the landscape painter, calligrapher, and essayist Chen Jiru 陳繼儒 (1558–1639).⁹ For the 1696 translation, the Japanese editor was Baba Nobutake 馬場信武, a Kyoto physician and scholar who died in 1715.¹⁰

A later but still influential Edo-period work featuring magic and incantations was entitled 'One hundred selected secrets' (*Hiji hyakusen* 秘事百撰), a sparsely illustrated but widely circulated two-volume work from 1827 covering 38 magic tricks. Its author was a Chinese physician working in Osaka called Fukui Chitokusai 福井智徳齋 (real name Funakoshi Keisuke 船越敬祐, dates unknown). There was also a sequel in 1848, 'One hundred selected secrets, second part' (*Hiji hyakusen kohen* 秘事百撰後編), published in Osaka.¹¹

Classic magic tricks

The 'three jewels' of Japanese magic are (1) the 'Fluttering butterfly' (*Ukare no chō* 浮の蝶) or 'Dancing butterfly' (*Chō no mai* 蝶の舞), also called 'Playing with butterflies' (*Chō no tawamure* 蝶の戯れ); (2) the 'Water fountain' (*Funsui* 噴水) or 'water art' (*mizugei* 水藝 or 水芸); and (3) 'Bowls and balls' (*owan to tama* お碗と玉), called *shinadama* 品玉 during the Edo period.

The first classic trick, *Ukare no chō*, was (reputedly) performed for centuries at the imperial court.¹² It features paper butterflies, shaped and folded on stage before an audience, which are made to hover and dance (flutter) realistically and gracefully near the edges of a folding fan (*ōgi*). The illusion was included in some of the oldest extant magic

2.
Unknown artist
Street juggler / illusionist
(*tsuji-hōka* 辻放下)
balancing a pole and plate,
'Picture compendium of
professions and customs'
(*Jinrin kinmō zui* 人倫訓蒙
図彙), 1690, vol. 7, part 7,
Woodblock-printed ehon
with hand colouring, 225 x
320 mm (2 pages).

National Diet Library (ndljp/pid:
2592445).



3.
Tagaya Kanchūsen
多賀谷環中仙
‘A continued revelation
from the bag of rare arts’
(*Chinjutsu zoku zange
bukuro* 珍術続さんげ袋),
Woodblock-printed ehon,
1727, Two lines of text at
far right: “Fly the butterfly
made from a single piece of
paper”.

Public domain (location unknown).



4.
Jippōsha Ichimaru
十方舎一丸
Butterfly trick, ‘Passing
on the early magic tricks’
(*Tezuma hayadenju* 手妻
早傳授), Osaka, 1849,
Woodblock-printed ehon
with hand colouring, 170 x
118 mm.

John Fiorillo Collection.

manuals in Japan, among them ‘A continued revelation from the bag of rare arts’ (*Chinjutsu zoku zange bukuro* 珍術続さんげ袋, 1727) by Tagaya Kanchūsen (act. 1727–1734; fig. 3);¹³ ‘Street-performing Collection’ (*Hōkasen* 放下筥, 1764) by the Osaka merchant, publisher, and illustrator Hirase Hose (Sukeyo) 平瀬輔世 (c. 1747–1797; fig. 8);¹⁴ ‘Continuation of the collection of magic’ (*Zoku tawaburegusa* 続たはふれ草, 1795 and later edition 1849) by Kiyū 鬼友, (dates unknown); ‘Passing on the early magic tricks’ (*Tezuma hayadenju* 手妻早傳授, 1849) by Jippōsha Ichimaru 十方舎一丸 (act. 1844–1849; figs 4, 7, 15) and the reuse of Jippōsha’s illustrations in later works.¹⁵

The credit for elevating *Ukare no chō* from a clever trick to an enchanting performance art is usually given to the magician Yanagawa Itchōsai I 柳川一蝶齋 (died 1870) along with Tanigawa Sadakichi 谷川定吉 (dates unknown) when, around 1820, they entertained with flying paper butterflies and conjuring while also performing with ‘ghostly’ puppets.¹⁶ However, the history of the Yanagawa lineage remains uncertain. It may be that the first Itchōsai learned the butterfly trick as early as 1802 with or without the involvement of Tanigawa.¹⁷ Regardless, these two magicians helped to establish *Ukare no chō* as a display of choreographed artistry rather than mere sleight-of-hand.¹⁸

A British naval captain provided a glowing commentary in 1859 that underscored the artistry of *Ukare no chō*: “Gradually [the paper butterfly] seemed to acquire life from the action of his fan—now wheeling and dipping towards it, now tripping along its edge, then hovering over it, as we may see a butterfly do over a flower on a fine summer’s day, then in wantonness wheeling away, and again returning to alight, the wings quivering with nervous restlessness! One could have sworn it was a live creature”.¹⁹ An American newspaper reviewer who in May 1867 witnessed Risley’s ‘Imperial Japanese

Troupe' perform before sold-out audiences at the Academy of Music in New York reported, "A bouquet of flowers held in the hand of one of the performers attracts the butterfly; presently other butterflies appear, and soon a swarm hovers around the nosegay. This trick is simple, but very graceful and beautiful".²⁰

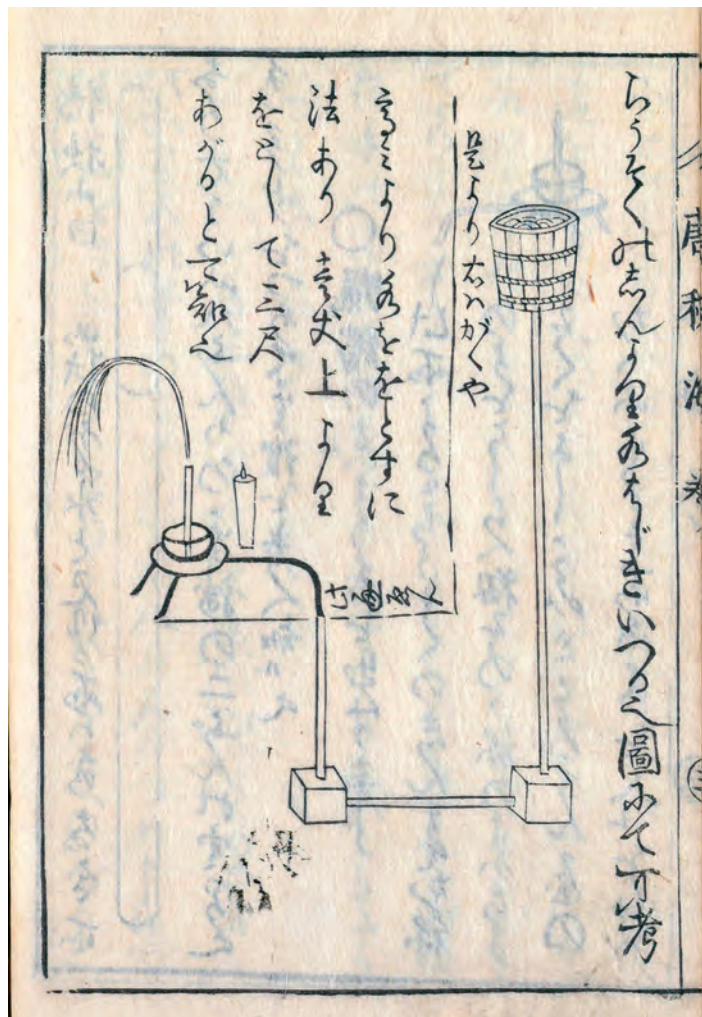
The *Chinjutsu zoku zange bukuro* (fig. 3) revealed that a thread (presumably very fine and invisible to the audience) was attached to the butterfly at one end and, at the other, hidden within the magician's pocket or behind the kimono sash (*obi*).²¹ The *Tezuma hayadenju* (fig. 4) mentions securing a hair on the butterfly while concealing it at the other end between the ribs of the fan.²² Today's magicians use a silk thread or a strand of human hair to manipulate flight.²³

The first-generation Itchōsai took the stage name *Bungo no Daijō* 豊後大掾 in 1847, passing on the Itchōsai (II) name to his adopted son Yanagawa Bunchō 柳川文蝶 (died 1879), who used it until calling himself Yanagawa Bunchōsai 柳川文蝶齋 in 1871. The first Yanagawa remained widely celebrated in Japan, entertaining the shogun, dignitaries, and foreign guests in the 1860s. His version of *Ukare no chō* became the signature act for a magic-tricks dynasty whose lineage adopted a stylised butterfly as a family crest for three generations (involving six different Yanagawa performers) until the death of Itchōsai III in 1909.²⁴



5.
Tagaya Kanchūsen
多賀谷環中仙
'Secret China sea'
(*Morokoshi himegoto umi*
唐土秘事海), 1733, vol. 1,
Mizugei illusion (water
flowing from a candle
flame), Woodblock-printed
ehon, 220 x 150 mm.

National Diet Library (ndljp/pid:
2533787).



6.
Tagaya Kanchūsen
多賀谷環中仙
'Secret China sea'
(*Morokoshi himegoto umi*
唐土秘事海), 1733, vol. 2,
Apparatus for water-flow
illusion from candle flame,
Woodblock-printed ehon,
220 x 150 mm.

National Diet Library (ndljp/pid:
2533787).

Water art (*mizugei*)

The second classic of Japanese magic is the 'Water Fountain' or 'Magic Fountain Trick'. Its antecedents were various mechanical water-delivery systems (*mizu karakuri* 水機関 also 水からくり) that began appearing in numbers around the Kanbun era (1661–1673) in Osaka. These waterworks relied on a basic understanding of 'water science' or hydrology (*mizugaku* 水学).²⁵

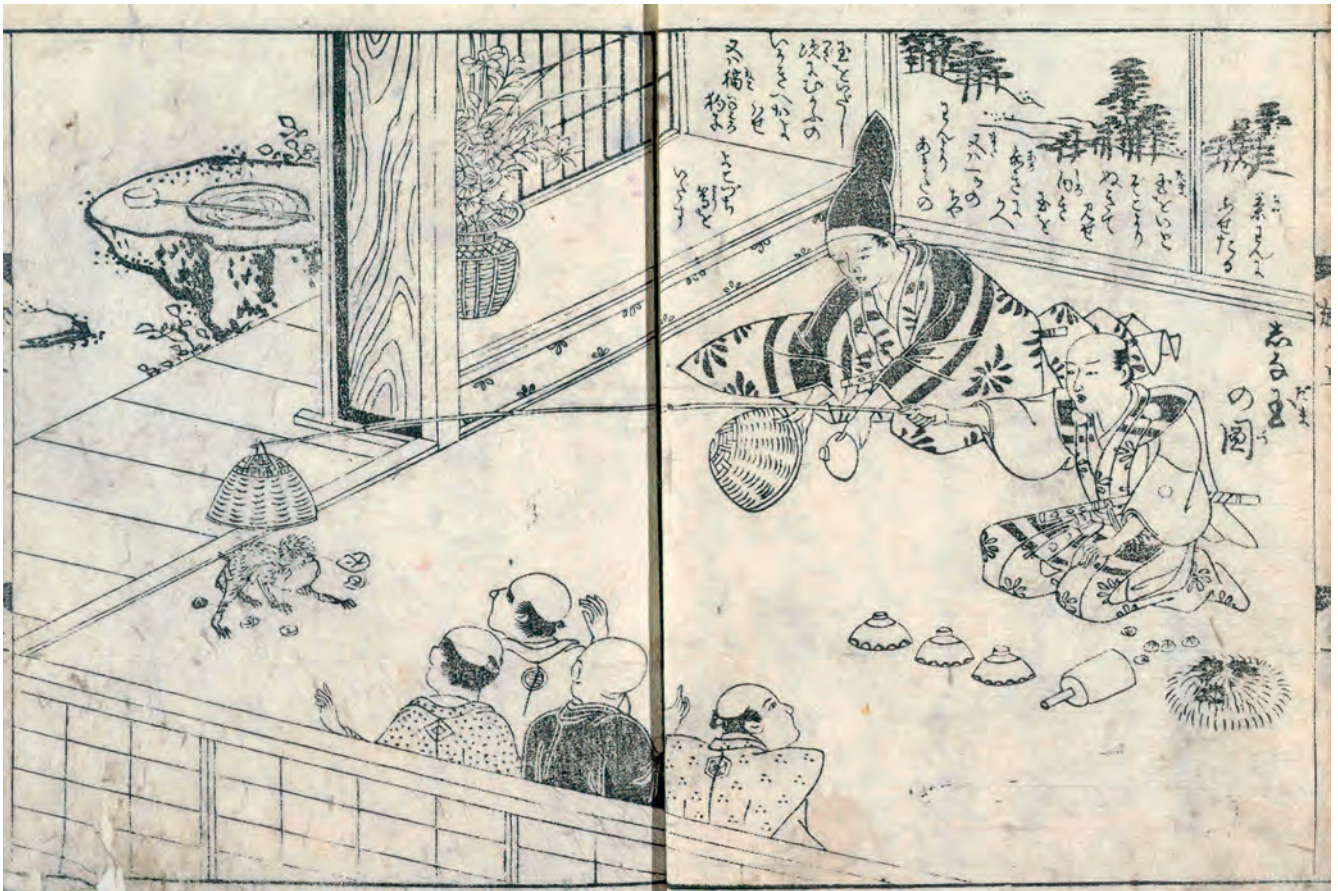
The earliest known woodblock-printed illustrations of *mizu karakuri* are in the two-volume 'Secret China sea' (*Morokoshi himegoto umi* 唐土秘事海) by Tagaya Kanchūsen, published in 1733.²⁶ Figure 5 shows four Chinese men dressed as government officials of the Tang Dynasty (618–907) performing *mizugei*.²⁷ Some *mizu karakuri* were complex if, for example, pulleys and levers were needed to raise water high above a surface. Other devices were simple, such as the one depicted in fig. 6, which relies on gravity and a tall vertical conduit. Bamboo tubing from an elevated tub of water connects to a hidden thinner tube that comes up from under the floor to emit water behind a lighted candle. According to one principle, water flowing down three metres will create enough pressure to push the water out from a tube to a height of one metre.²⁸

Humorous tricks are commonly encountered in images of Japanese magic. In the already cited *Tezuma hayadenju*, conjuring rain under an umbrella is illustrated (fig. 7). The trick involves filling an oil-paper bag with water and securing it out of sight to the underside of an umbrella. When the umbrella is opened, a temporary wax seal on the bag is broken, allowing water to escape in streams to the ground.²⁹



7.
Jippōsha Ichimaru 十方
舎一丸
Rain under an umbrella,
'Passing on the early magic
tricks' (*Tezuma hayadenju*
手妻早傳授), Osaka, 1849,
Woodblock-printed *ehon*
with hand colouring, 170 x
118 mm.

John Fiorillo Collection.



8.

Hirase Hose [Sukeyo] 平瀬輔世

'Street-performing collection' (*Hōkasen* 放下筌), *ehon*, 1764, 'Sleight of hand' (*shinadama* 品玉), *Bowls and balls* (*Owan no tama* お碗と玉), Woodblock-printed *ehon*, 220 x 320 mm (2 pages).

National Diet Library, Tokyo (ndljp/pid: 2533792).

Bowls and balls (*Shinadama* or *Owan to tama*)

The third jewel of Japanese magic, 'Bowls and balls' (*owan to tama*), or 'cups and bowls', is a familiar sleight-of-hand trick practiced around the world for millennia, from the Roman empire (or possibly earlier in Egypt c. 2,500 BC) to the present day. Thus, it warrants little discussion here, although a diverting variant is shown in fig. 8. The text explains that "A ball is placed under a teacup and pulled out through the bottom rim and shown. A white ball is turned into a red ball, and numerous balls are taken out of one cup. Next, they move to a basket across the room, from which you remove a cat, a puppy, or a hammer".³⁰

Top-spinning (*kyokugoma*)

Top-spinning appeared in Japan as early as the Nara period (710–794), likely imported from China or the Korean peninsula. During the Edo period, top-spinning tricks (*kyokugoma* 曲独楽) were performed by peripatetic hawker-entertainers (*yashi* 香具師 or 野師 or 弥四) operating at the fringes of society; many were notorious for selling unreliable or barely legal merchandise.³¹ These street vendors, who also worked on or near temple and shrine grounds, used their top-spinning skills to attract passers-by and then entice them into purchasing cosmetics, medicines, potions, dental treatments, candies, and knick-knacks. Despite its humble

and often less-than-honourable origins, top-spinning eventually developed into a sophisticated entertainment art closely associated with conjuring tricks.

The Matsui 松井 lineage of *yashi*, whose founder was Matsui Genchō (active 14th C.), included celebrated top-spinners by at least the late seventeenth century. The polymath Hiraga Gennai (1728–1780) once noted that the Gensui performers spun tops “as if they were ensouled”.³² The entrepreneurial Matsui ‘street doctors’ (*tsuji ishi* 辻医師) promoted herbal medicines and various panaceas while also taking up dentistry, whereupon they became the best-known artificial-tooth makers.

An illustration in ‘The dappled fabric of famous things of Edo’ (*Edo meibutsu kanoko*) from 1733 (fig. 9) signed by Arashita (dates unknown) depicts a Matsui-family *yashi* named Gensui 源水 performing tricks with a spinning top. The lacquered case identifies Gensui and a medicine called *kinmeigan*.³³ Two years later, in 1735, three types of street acts—sword unsheathing, ball juggling, and top spinning—qualified officially as ‘Medicine selling with charming arts’ (*Aikyō geijutsu baiyaku shōnin*).³⁴

Well along the lineage was Matsui Gensui XIII 松井源水 (1824/25–1870), an enormously popular *yashi* who conducted business at Sensōji in Asakusa, a centre for both prayer and, since the mid-eighteenth century, playful entertainments, including *misemono*.³⁵ Gensui XIII would set up a roadside stall, attract crowds by deploying his top-spinning act, and then offer to pull or fit teeth on the spot.³⁶ When Gensui XIII’s troupe of top-spinners, acrobats, and dancers were granted passports on November 25, 1866 by the soon-to-be-deposed Tokugawa government, they numbered twelve performers. Gensui XIII left for Europe on December 2, reaching France first, and then England on February 2, 1867. Less than three months later, he was given the

honour of performing before the British royal family at Windsor Castle on April 15, 1867.³⁷

A reviewer for the London newspaper *The Era*—an unidentified Westerner who struggled with the ‘strangeness’ of it all—reported on February 10, 1867, that, “Gaensee [*sic*, Gensui], top spinner to the Tycoon [shogun], and possibly the Champion of his peculiar profession, performs some extraordinary exploits. Japanese tops, like everything else Japanese, are peculiar; and Gaensee has them in complete subjection. He holds them, spinning, on the end of a cane, allows them to slide down, throws them up and catches them on the cane aforesaid, and keeps them spinning furiously on the top of a fan, and on the edge of a sword.... Every separate performance is accompanied by native music, which is of that eccentric nature which defies description”.³⁸ Research for the present essay did not yield a full-colour woodblock print (*nishiki-e*) portraying Matsui Gensui XIII; however, Western photographs and illustrations survive (figs 10, 11).

9.

Arashita

嵐夕

‘The dappled fabric of famous things of Edo’ (*Edo meibutsu kanoko* 江戸名物 鹿子), 1733, by Toyoshima Rōgetsu 豊島露月, Toyoshima Yaemon 豊嶋弥右衛門, and Kimura Senshū 木村仙秀, Matsui Gensui spinning a top while selling the medicine *kinmeigan* 金命丸, Woodblock-printed *ehon*, 1733, vol. 2, 225 x 155 mm.

National Diet Library, Tokyo (ndljp/pid: 2533784).



10.

Matsui family (L-R):
Daughter Saki, age 13;
Matsui Gensui XIII, age 43
or 44; wife Haru; son Saki,
age 6 or 7. Detail from a
carte de visite, 1867, photo-
studio of Camille Brion,
Marseille, France.

Public Domain.



11.

Matsui Gensui XIII
spinning a top upon a
long smoking pipe at St.
Martin's Hall, London,
Illustrated London News,
Feb. 23, 1867.

Public Domain.



Takezawa Tōji II in Osaka

By the early 1840s, a dentist and manufacturer of dental prostheses named Takezawa Tōji II (written on prints as 竹澤藤次 or 竹沢藤次) had become so adept at top-spinning that he helped to incite a craze for the entertainment that swept through Edo.³⁹ In what seems to have been his most celebrated show, at Ryōgoku, Edo in 2/1844 (fig. 12), Tōji II performed tricks using spring-loaded tops. Most unusual for typically short-lived *misemono*, Tōji's spectacle ran uninterrupted for six months until the fall of 1844.⁴⁰

Tōji II was by far the most frequently portrayed top-spinner in *nishiki-e*. His acts were memorialised, in particular, by Utagawa

Kuniyoshi (1798–1861; figs 14, 16) and his students Yoshitsuya (1822–1866; fig. 12), Yoshiharu 1828–1888; fig. 13) and Yoshikatsu (act. c. 1845–50). Kuniyoshi portrayed the Takezawa family of topspinners in more than twenty *nishiki-e*. Moreover, he was prolific in designing prints depicting other magic-tricks. All-told, these *misemono-e* number at least around 50 woodcuts.

As it happens, a top-spinning *nishiki-e* featuring Tōji II inspired the present essay (fig. 1). The design is notable for having been published in Osaka where kabuki was the nearly exclusive theme for its *ukiyo-e* market. The artist Yamashatei Utagawa Kunitsuru (1807–1878) trained with Utagawa Toyokuni II (1777–1835, before 1826 called Toyoshige).

A small number of Kunitsuru's *nishiki-e* were issued by Osaka publishers from 1835 until the mid-1840s, following upon his brief sojourn in Osaka in 1835. In one edition of the 'Chronicle of recent years' (*Kinrai nendaiki* 近来年代記) by the Osaka City History Compilation Office (Osaka Shishi Hensanjo 大阪市史編纂所) in 2/1846, Takezawa Tōji II is recorded as having performed top-spinning tricks in the Shinchi pleasure quarter of Namba, Osaka during the spring of 1843.⁴¹ So both artist and performer had connections with Osaka. Given that Kunitsuru's design lacks both a censor seal (required in Edo) and a publisher mark, it appears that the Takezawa family privately commissioned a portrait of Tōji II for sale in Osaka, c. 1843–1845. Kunitsuru knew his audience's preferences, as he 'softened' Tōji II's physiognomy (less angular) to suit the Osaka taste (compare with the Edo-Utagawa style, figs 12, 14, 16). In fig. 1, Tōji II spins three tops, including one paired with a water illusion. The print includes the family crest repeated no fewer than fifteen times—a surfeit of self-promotion conjured across the pictorial space. Curiously, the crests read 'Matsui'.⁴²

By the time the West forced Japan to open its borders to foreign trade in the 1850s, the most accomplished top-spinning acts were elaborate entertainments presented by troupes of professionals, far removed from the humble origins of *kyokugoma* as a street-hawking ploy. An American businessman and correspondent for the *New York Tribune* named Francis Hall lived in Yokohama from 1859 to 1866. A page from his diary for November 14, 1864, mentions an exhibition of top-spinning attended by Western diplomats and dignitaries. The performers spun tops on the edges of upright folding fans, on the sharp blade-edges of swords, on the surfaces of eggs, and within cups as water (seemingly) spouted through the tops of the spindles. Hall was amazed at the complexity of the top-

courses, which he judged to be as much as 40 feet in length, along which the tops travelled, side-spinning upon elevated tracks with switchbacks and vertical drops through miniature landscapes and architectural structures (fig. 12).

Hall further remarked that some tops were impressively large, "weighing forty or fifty pounds, spun by a loose cotton cable as large as my arm".⁴³ A giant top illustrated in a print by Ichibaisai Yoshiharu depicts one of the best-known magicians of the late Edo period—Hayatake Torakichi (早竹虎吉, died 1868), an acrobat originally from Osaka (fig. 13). At the New Year in 1857, he brought his show to Edo where it found success at Nishi-Ryūgoku near the Ryūgoku Bridge. He also toured with his troupe in Ise, Miyajima and Tokushima. A program in Yokohama for Risley's American circus in 1866 included Japanese performers, among them Matsui Tsune (born 1857), the eight-year-old daughter of the headlining top-spinner Matsui Kikujirō (1836–1868; died in London; younger brother of Matsui Gensui XIII). To the audience's delight, a huge spinning top, about three and a half feet in diameter, split open to reveal the girl, who emerged to perform a dance.⁴⁴

As with the Matsui family, top spinning was vital to the Takezawa family business, located in Ueno-Yamashita, Edo.⁴⁵ By 1849, when Tōji's son Manji (found written on prints as 萬治 or 万次) joined him for a revival performance, they had already introduced magic illusions and water tricks to complement their top-spinning act, as well as dramatic lighting, mechanical devices, and musical accompaniment. Such an array of entertainments, skilfully delivered, attracted very large crowds.⁴⁶

In 2/1849 Takezawa Tōji II changed his stage name to Takezawa Baishō 竹澤梅升, whereupon Manji became Tōji III. The show they presented on this occasion was an even greater success than their 1844 break-through

12.

[Utagawa 歌川] Yoshitsuya
芳艶
'First-class spinning tops
by Takezawa Tōji' (*Ichiryū
kyokudokuroku Takezawa
Tōji 一流曲燭樂竹澤藤次*),
Woodblock print, *chūban
nishiki-e*, 1844.

Photo courtesy of Chūō City
Kyobashi Library, Tokyo, Public
domain.



event at Ryōgoku (fig. 12).⁴⁷ The 'name succession' (*shūmei 襲名*) is commemorated on a print by Kuniyoshi in which Tōji III plays a xylophone-like instrument called a *mokkin* 木琴 while balancing a spinning top at the hardwood-capped end of his left-hand percussion rod (fig. 14). Two other tops spin at either end of the cradle-shaped, wooden-body resonator. In the background lurks a giant toad printed in pale grey, linking this top-spinning show to the popular practice of showcasing the supernatural on theatrical stages.

Magic and the supernatural

The supernatural flourished within everyday cultural discourse in Japan. Popular wisdom held that fantastical beings could take on human shapes or "transform themselves into visible forms such as lightning or fire, or into audible forms of thunder or noise" ... [or] into living creatures, acquiring supernatural powers".⁴⁸ In 1808, belief in ghosts had become so widespread and their depiction in arts, crafts, and literature so pervasive that "the government legislated against the ghost stories which featured flying heads, animal goblins, serpent monsters [and] fire demons...".⁴⁹

Japanese engagement with the spectral realm was reflected in folktales, legends, popular literature, and theatrical performances. There is ample evidence for this worldview in many thousands of *ukiyo-e* designs. The spellbinding nature of magic tricks established an imaginative conceptual coupling between staged illusions and the metaphysical sphere of existence. Unsurprisingly, woodcuts depicting Japanese magicians along with supernatural beings were part of the conventional pictorial repertoire in *ukiyo-e*.

One type of ghost found in books related to magic was the *ōnyūdō* 大入道 or *taka-nyūdō*

13.

Ichibaisai Yoshiharu
一梅齋芳晴
'Hayatake Torakichi from
Osaka' (*Ōsaka kudari
Hayatake Torakichi 大坂下
り早竹虎吉*), Spinning a
huge top with his feet at
Ryōgoku, Edo, Woodblock
print, *ōban nishiki-e*, 1857.

Metropolitan Museum of Art, acc.
2009.434.4, Public Domain.



高入道, huge monsters with tonsured or bald heads who grew larger if you stared at them. They were sometimes depicted with extremely long necks, and their bodies ranged from about two metres tall to gigantic proportions. Some *ōnyūdō* were dangerous, menacing people and inflicting illness or death; others were harmless. In certain instances, they could take on animal forms, mostly raccoon-dogs (*tanuki*), foxes (*kitsune*) or river otters (*kawaso*). In the previously mentioned *Tezuma hayadenju*, a terrifying *ōnyūdō* materialises from behind a floor-screen (*byōbu*; fig. 15). Although the way to outwit *ōnyūdō* was to stand fearless, the hapless fellows in Jippōsha's design fall all over themselves attempting to escape. The *ōnyūdō* illusion, conjured on a dimly lit stage, featured a monstrous visage painted on a large rigid fan (*uchiwa*) and an oversized body constructed with draperies wrapped around lengthy bamboo supports.⁵⁰

One of the standout renderings of magic and the supernatural in *nishiki-e* is Kuniyoshi's macabre *ōban* sheet from around 1843 (fig. 16). Takezawa Tōji II is shown at the lower right spinning a top on the edge of a raised battledore paddle (*hagoita*). A cloud emerges from the crest near his right shoulder, expanding to reveal a view of the Inari shrine performance venue. There is an enormous, disembodied head of Kasane, drawn with a crude but effective Western-style chiaroscuro. Kasane was an uncontrollably jealous woman whose husband Yoemon murders her at the Kinu River by Hanyū Village. Near Kasane's head there is a burning paper lantern from which emerges a top spinning on a spirit flame (*shinka*), alluding to the ghost of Oiwa. She is the sad heroine of the 1825 kabuki play 'Tōkaidō ghost story at Yotsuya' (*Tōkaidō Yotsuya kaidan*) who is murdered by her scheming, unfaithful husband, Tamiya Iemon. Finally, at the lower left, there is a well frame (*izutsu*) with yet another blue spirit flame



14.
Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi
一勇齋國芳
Takezawa Tōji II changing
his name to Takezawa
Baishō 竹澤梅升 and
bestowing the name
Takezawa Tōji III 三代目竹
澤藤治 upon his son Manji
萬治, Woodblock print,
ōban nishiki-e, 2/1849.

Tokyo Metropolitan Central
Library, (5893-C3-3 / East
C5893-C003-00), Public Domain.

lifting a spinning top. This refers to the ghost of the maidservant Okiku in the 1741 (revised 1824) play 'The dish mansion at Bانشū' (*Banshū sarayashiki*). Okiku, unjustly accused of breaking a precious plate, drowns herself in a well, whereupon her spectre appears each night until she is finally appeased by a symbolic counting of all ten plates, thus 'retrieving' the missing dish.

Some top-spinning magic acts incorporated the mythology of nine-tailed foxes—supernatural vixens capable of assuming human form. Famous among them was Tamamo-no-mae 玉藻前, a powerful and evil fox spirit immortalised in legends about the Emperor Toba 鳥羽天皇 (1103–1156, r. 1107–1123). In one version she became the emperor's favourite courtesan but caused him to become seriously ill. Ultimately, she was exposed as a fox spirit and hunted down. Her corporeal form was destroyed, whereupon her spirit embedded itself in a so-called *sesshō-seki* 殺生石 (killing stone,) located in Nasu. Some believed that the stone continually released poisonous gases, killing anyone who touched it.

A Kuniyoshi print from 1844 (fig. 17) indeed includes a signboard identifying a killing stone. Takezawa Tōji II, while spinning two tops, also conjures the golden-haired, nine-tailed fox, releasing her from the 'rock-prison'. She ascends into the sky upon a black cloud, her nine tails visible above as she emerges from beneath her elegant (human) courtly robes while clenching a spinning-top in her jaws.

Fox-legends live on today. Recently, around the start of April 2022, news outlets in Japan reported that a 'killing stone' cracked in half in Nikko National Park, purportedly releasing an evil fox spirit.

Comic relief

Kuniyoshi also had some fun with the top-spinning craze by producing *giga* 戯画 ('comic pictures') for his 'Series of fashionable comic spinning-tops' (*Ryūkō dōke koma zukushi* 流行道外こまづくし) published around 1843. These works do not portray particular top-spinners, but Kuniyoshi was spoofing their celebrity and the mania of their most ardent fans. In the examples shown here (fig. 18), there is in the upper half of an uncut *ōban* sheet (the images were carved two per block, but intended to be sliced in half horizontally), a 'sea woman' or

15.
Jippōsha Ichimaru
十方舎一丸
Taka-nyūdō 高入道,
'Passing on the early magic tricks' (*Tezuma hayadenju* 手妻早傳授), Ōsaka, 1849, Woodblock-printed *ehon* with hand colouring, 170 x 236 mm (2 pages).

John Fiorillo Collection.





16.

Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi 一勇
齋國芳

Spinning-top monsters,
koma no bakemono 独楽の
化物, Takezawa Tōji 竹澤
藤次 at the Inari Shrine in
Edo conjuring visions of the
head of Kasane, the lantern
ghost of Oiwa, and Okiku at
the well, Woodblock print,
ōban nishiki-e, c. 1843.

Public domain, Photograph
©Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

diving girl (*ama* 海女) is identified as *Komatori-hime* ('Princess spinning-top taker'). She has a top for a head and brandishes a short sword as she clutches a precious top. This is actually a spoof of the fabled *Tamatori-hime* 玉取姫 ('Princess jewel-taker'), a subject that Kuniyoshi otherwise took up more than once in serious fashion. *Tamatori* was reputedly an *ama* who married an imperial courtier named Fujiwara no Fuhito 藤原不比等 (659–720). She became famous in legend when she recovered a precious pearl stolen by the Sea God or Dragon King. The mythical jewel was associated with spiritual energy, wisdom, prosperity, power, and immortality. In Kuniyoshi's print, a fierce dragon swoops down from the top right in pursuit, with a spinning top in its mouth. Three male figures, also with tops for heads (as is the case for all the figures in this Kuniyoshi series), join in the chase.

In the lower scene, we have the famed government official, poet, and calligrapher Ono-no Tōfū (Ono no Michzane, 小野の道風, 894–966; also Fujiwara Tōfū 藤原道風),

here called *Koma no Tōfū* ('Spinning-top Tōfū'). One of the so-called 'Three Brush Traces' (*Sanseki* 三跡), along with Fujiwara no Sukemasa 藤原佐理 (944–998) and Fujiwara no Yukinari 藤原行成 (972–1027), Michizane is considered the originator of 'Japanese-style calligraphy' (*wayōshodō* 和様書道). Here, Kuniyoshi presents an irreverent rendering of the parable of the leaping frog. The amphibian tried and failed repeatedly to leap upon an overhanging willow branch, until finally succeeding when a breeze bent the limb closer. Michizane took it as a lesson in diligence to be followed in his own life. In Kuniyoshi's print, the eminent calligrapher has a spinning top for a head, and his umbrella takes on a similar though gigantic form, while the frog's body has been transformed into a top.



17.
 Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi
 一勇齋國芳
 'First-class spinning tops
 by Takezawa Tōji', (*Ichiryū
 kyūdokuroku Takezawa
 Tōji 一流曲燭樂竹澤藤
 次*), conjuring the fox
 spirit Tamamo-no-mae
 玉藻前 from the killing
 stone (*Sesshō-seki 殺生
 石*), Woodblock print, *ōban
 nishiki-e*, 1844.

Public domain (location unknown).



18.
 Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi
 一勇齋國芳
 'Series of fashionable
 comic spinning-tops'
 (*Ryūkō dōke koma zukushi
 流行道外こまづくし*), Top:
 Komatori-hime こまとりひ
 め ('Princess spinning-top
 taker'), Bottom: Koma no
 Tōfū こまの道風 ('Spinning-
 top Tōfū'), Woodblock
 print, *ōban nishiki-e*, c. 1843.

Public domain (location
 unknown).

Conclusion

Conjuring and acrobatics evolved from early amateur side-shows and street-huckster entertainments into spectacles staged by hereditary magic-dynasties such as the Matsui and Takezawa families. Coinciding with the explosion of *misemono* in Edo beginning in the 1840s, ukiyo-e publishers ramped up production of single-sheet woodblock prints depicting magic tricks, primarily during a fifteen-year period (1843–1857) in Edo. Moreover, for about five years at the start of this timespan, the publication of *misemono* prints helped to fill a void in theatrical prints due to a shogunate ban in 7/1842 against woodcuts and books portraying kabuki actors (Tenpō Reforms, *Tenpō kaikaku*, issued 1841–1843). Just as ukiyo-e collectors acquired images of their favourite kabuki actors, so, too, they purchased woodcuts of the latest celebrity illusionists.

Magic appeals to a sense of wonder in those who are open to its mysteries. Some traditional *tezuma misemono* still thrive today. The 'Dancing Butterfly' continues to enthral audiences (videos can be found on the Internet). Magicians specialising in water tricks also attract modern-day crowds (again, there are Internet videos). Top-spinning remains popular, even enjoying institutional cachet through the Japan Spinning-Top Museum (*Nihon Koma Hakubutsukan*) in Nagoya.

Acknowledgments

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NOTES

- 1 'An Evening with the Jugglers', in: *New York Post*, taken from the *Jamesville Gazette*, May 11, 1867, quoted in Schodt, F., *Professor Risley and the Imperial Japaneset troupe: How an American acrobat introduced circus to Japan*. Stone Bridge Press, Berkeley, CA, 2012, pp. 161, 282.
- 2 Peep shows featured optical devices called *nozoki-karakuri* 覗機関. For life-size dolls (including 'people from strange lands'), see Salter, R., *Japanese popular prints from votive slips to playing cards*. University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2006, p. 35. no. 25.
- 3 Markus, A., 'The carnival of Edo: *Misemono* spectacles from contemporary accounts', in: *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*. vol. 45, no. 2, 1985, p. 505. The *Bukō nenpyō* (12 vols. compiled 1849–1878; first published 1849–1850, plus a sequel *Bukō nenpyō zokuhen* 武江年表続編 in 1881–1882) was first assembled by Saitō Gesshin (also called Saitō Yukinari 齋藤幸成), then extensively supplemented by Kitamura Nobuyo 喜多村信節 (1783–1856) and Sekine Shisei 関根只誠 (1825–1893). The title is sometimes given as 'Chronology of Edo in Musashi Province'.
- 4 Markus 1985, *op. cit.*, pp. 499–500. The author adds, "The *misemono* show was in many cases a first point of contact between the average citizen and novelty of any sort".
- 5 This essay does not discuss the many thousands of ukiyo-e print designs and woodblock-printed picture books (*ehon*) that portray magicians or sorcerers from folklore, legends, kabuki and puppet dramas, and popular storytelling. Acrobatic circus acts have also been excluded. Two illustrious post-Edo-period magicians have been omitted: Shōkyokusai Ten'ichi 松旭齋天一 (1852–1912), the "Japanese Father of Modern Magic", and Shōkyokusai Tenkatsu 松旭齋天勝 (1886–1944), the 'Queen of Japanese Magic'.
- 6 Goto-Jones, C., *Conjuring Asia: Magic, Orientalism, and the making of the modern world*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2016, p. 123. Other terms for 'magic' include 'Japanese lightning' (*wazuma* 和妻), 'hand-thing' (*tejina* 手品) and 'strange art' (*kijutsu* 奇術).
- 7 Groemer, G., *Street performers and society in urban Japan, 1600–1900: The beggar's gift*. Routledge, New York, 2016, pp. 49–50. Among the occupations of street outcastes cited in a document from 1725 were the *hōka* 放下 (lit., 'cast off' or 'lay down'), referring to jugglers, conjurers, and acrobats (*op. cit.*, pp. 55–58).
- 8 Goto-Jones, 2016, *op. cit.*, p. 302; also, Kawai, M., *Nihon koten kijutsu 'kochō no ma' ni tsuite* ('About the butterfly trick in Japanese classic magic), in: *Aichi Kōnan Tanki Daigaku Kiyō*, (*Bulletin of the Aichi Kōnan Junior College*), vol. 37, 2008, p. 150, states that there were as many as 150 magic instruction books (*tejina denju hon* 手品伝授本) during the Edo period and an impressive 350 during the Meiji period.
- 9 Kawai, 2008, *op. cit.*, pp. 137–173. *Shinsen gejutsu* is first mentioned on p. 138.
- 10 Hayek, M., 'Correcting the old, adapting the new: Baba Nobutake and the (relative) rejuvenation of divination in the seventeenth century', in: *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*. vol. 40, no. 1, 2013, p. 174.
- 11 Yokoyama, Y., *Hijutsu no kōkai: Edo jidai no tejina hon ni mi rareru maji nai ni tsui te* (Publication of secret arts: Incantations in books of magic tricks during the Edo Period), in: *Kokuritsu rekishi minzokuhakubutsukan kenkyū hōkoku* (Bulletin of the National Museum of Japanese History), National Museum of History and Folklore Research Report, vol. 174, 2012, pp. 43–55 (see p. 45 for *Zoku shinsen gejutsu*). Yokoyama introduces *Hiji hyakusen* on p. 50. Also, National Diet Library (<https://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/2536928> accessed 2 July 2022) and Tokyo Metropolitan Central Library (Call no. 25-17-4). The sequel was published by Kawachiya Genshichirō 河内屋源七郎 and Itamiya Zenbei 伊丹屋善兵衛; University of California, Berkeley Library (East Asian 4-40-38).
- 12 Goto-Jones 2016, *op. cit.*, p. 302.
- 13 Tagaya Kanchūsen, an herb doctor in Kyoto, authored books on magic, supernatural events, *karakuri* からくり (mechanical trick dolls), and recreational mathematics (or puzzles). His *Chinjutsu zoku zange bukuro* of 1727 was reprinted at least once (in 1764).
- 14 Hirase was a vender of medicinal herbs in Osaka (advertised at the end of *Hōkasen*), as well as a book seller, editor, painter, book illustrator, and publisher, the latter as Chigusaya Shinemon 千種屋新右衛門 or Sekishōkaku 赤松閣. As an editor he was also cited as Hirase Tessai Teruo 平瀬徹齋光生赤松閣.
- 15 Kawai 2008, *op. cit.*, p. 141, points out that the same illustrations and texts from Jippōsha's *Tezuma hayadenju* were included in *Tejina denju shū* 手品傳授集 ('Collection of transmitted magic tricks', 1862) and *Tezuma hayakeiko* ('Early lessons in sleight of hand', 手妻早稽古1862), the latter with small changes in the inscriptions. Jippōsha also authored and illustrated another volume on magic in 1849/1850 called *Shuseki ikkyō tezuma hayadenju* 酒席一興手妻早伝授 ('A banquet of early instruction in magic tricks'); see Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (no. 1997.716).
- 16 Hur, N.-I., *Prayer and play in late Tokugawa Japan: Asakusa Sensōji and Edo society*. Harvard University Asia Center Publications Program, Cambridge, MA and London, 2000, p. 63.
- 17 Matsuyama, M., 'An investigation into magic in Japan after the opening of the country, Part II: Magicians in the Yanagawa Family, Forerunners of Internationalism', in: *Gibecière*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2 Winter 2007, pp. 47–84. Matsuyama cites the chapter '*Tejina geigyō ganso choki*' ('Notes on early magicians') in *Yugei yuisho gaki* ('Description of the history of

various performing arts') of 1882. Yet he also mentions *Bukō nenpyō*, which claims Itchōsai learned the Butterfly Trick from Tanigawa Sadakichi (from Osaka) in 1819, which conflicts with the 1802 date.

18 Goto-Jones 2016, *op. cit.*, pp. 280–281.

19 Sherard, O., *A Cruise in Japanese waters*, Blackwood and Sons, Edinburgh and London, 1859, pp. 191–193, quoted in Schodt 2012, *op. cit.*, pp. 132 and 134.

20 Schodt 2012, *op. cit.*, p. 161, as quoted in 'An Evening with the Jugglers', May 11, 1867, *op. cit.*

21 Kawai 2008, *op. cit.*, p. 139, referencing Tagaya 1727, *op. cit.*

22 Kawai 2008, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

23 Goto-Jones 2016, *op. cit.*, p. 276.

24 See Matsuyama 2007, *op. cit.*, pp. 50–51.

25 Fujiyama, Shintarō, *Tezuma no hanashi : ushinawareta Nihon no kijutsu* ('The story of magic: the lost strange art of Japan'). Shinchōsha, Tokyo, 2009, pp. 236–268.

26 National Diet Library (<https://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/2533787>, accessed 2 July 2022).

27 Kawai, M. and E. Nagano, *Nihon kijutsu bunka-shi (History of Japanese magic culture)*. Tōkyōdō Shuppan (ed. by Japan Professional Magicians' Association), Tokyo, 2016, p. 343.

28 Kawai and Nagano 2016, *op. cit.*, p. 217; also, Kawai, M. and N. Saito, *Hon koten kijutsu [mizugei] ni tsuite 本古典奇術「水芸」について* ('About the classic magic water art', titled in English in the article as 'A study of water fountain illusion of Japanese classic magic') in: *Aichi Kōnan Tanki Daigaku Kiyō (Bulletin of the Aichi Kōnan Junior College)*, vol. 39, 2010, pp. 111–112, 115–116.

29 For a similar illustration and explanation, see Kawai and Nagano 2016, *op. cit.* p. 218.

30 Hirase, H. [Sukeyo]: *Hōkasen 放下筌* ('Street-performing collection', 1764), Trans. by Dan Sherer. Magic Land, Tokyo, 2015, pp. 4–5.

31 Groemer 2018, *op. cit.*, pp. 268, 281–287; and Paget, R.: 'Utagawa Kuniyoshi's *misemono-e*,' in: *Cirque et Japon: estampes des périodes Edo et Meiji*. Silvana Editoriale, Milano, 2021, pp. 104 (French), 141 (English) sections.

32 Quoted in Groemer 2016, *op. cit.*, p. 285, from *Hōhiron*, 1780, p. 246, in: *Fūrai Sanjin-shū (Nihon koten bungaku taikai*, vol. 55, (M. Sumito ed.), Iwanami Shoten, Tokyo, 1961.

33 Groemer 2016, *op. cit.*, p. 285. The Matsui performers also sold *hangoten*, a purported panacea to treat a wide range of ailments (pp. 282 and 326n17). Apparently, the name 'Gensui' appeared no earlier than the fourth-generation in the Matsui family.

34 Groemer 2016, *op. cit.*, p. 272. These three acts, grouped as one, were among thirteen so-called *kōgu* 香具 signifying not 'incense sticks' but street hawkers or *yashi*. The designations were the result of legal proceedings (pp. 270–274). The art of rapid sword-unsheathing (*iai-nuki* 居合抜き) was used by hawkers selling dentifrices (p. 276). The related *iaijutsu* 居合術 is a combative quick-draw sword technique and an old-style martial-art discipline.

35 See Hur, N.-L., 'Buddhist culture of Asakusa Kannon in Edo', in: *Asia Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1995, pp. 15–28, for a review of the cultural scene, both sacred and profane, at Asakusa. The author identifies two types of markets in the Sensōji area: (1) a temporary fair held on special days such as the New Year; and (2) a permanent street market along the major approaches to the Main Hall and in the spacious inner temple precinct. Examples of *misemono* exhibitions and performances are given on p. 23. He adds, "Acrobatics, top-spinning tricks and ball-juggling formed the core of this popular repertoire" (Hur 2000, *op. cit.* p. 64).

36 Harada, T., 'A brief history of dental education in Japan', in: *Journal of Nihon University School of Dentistry*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1962, p. 154.

37 Mihara, A. (Osaka Ohtani University), 'Professional entertainers abroad and theatrical portraits in hand', in: *Ko shashin kenkyū (Old photography study)*, no. 3, 2009, pp. 45–54 (searchable on the Nagasaki University Academic Output Site at <https://nagasaki-u.repo.nii.ac.jp/> accessed 2 July 2022).

38 'The Japanese troupe at St. Martin's Hall'. London, *The Era*, Feb. 10, 1867. (Author unknown; no byline.)

39 The first-generation Tōji was active around the late 1810s. See Groemer and Paget 2018, *op. cit.*, p. 287, who cite a top-spinning performance on October 9, 1818, before a shogunal heir on a pilgrimage to the Inari Shrine at Ōji.

40 Nishiyama, M., *Edo culture: daily life and diversions in urban Japan, 1600–1868* (trans. by G. Groemer). University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 1997, p. 249.

41 See *Misemono kōgyō nenpyō 見世物興行年表 (Chronology of sideshow entertainment)* posted 10/17/2020 at <http://blog.livedoor.jp/misemono/archives/52343744.html> (accessed 2 July 2022).

42 The Takezawa crest 'Matsui' 松井 was used from late Edo into the Meiji period. It is derived from *matsu* 松 (pine), plus the well-frame enclosure, *izutsu* 井筒. One conjecture suggests that the crest might link the Takezawa performers with the lineage of Matsui top-spinners, and that 'Matsui' could be an alternate surname for Takezawa Tōji II, but this remains unconfirmed. See *Misemono kōgyō nenpyō 2020, op. cit.*

43 Schodt 2012, *op. cit.*, pp. 135 and 137, taken from Hall, F. and F. G.

Notehelper, *Japan through American eyes: the journal of Francis Hall, 1859–1866*. Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 2001.

44 Reported in the *Bukō nenpyō* for 1866; cited in Nishiyama 1997, *op. cit.*, pp. 242–247, where Nishiyama also provides detailed lists of the performers and their acts. Also see Schodt 2012, *op. cit.*, pp. 129–131.

45 Satō, S., ‘Utagawa Kuniyoshi, *Natsukeshiki hana no ennichi*’, in: *Ukiyo-e geijutsu (Ukiyo-e Art)*, no. 170, p. 47, 2015 (cited in Paget 2021, *op. cit.*, p. 141).

46 Markus 1985, *op. cit.*, p. 532.

47 Nishiyama 1997, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

48 Yamamoto, A., ‘Introduction’, in: *Japanese ghosts & demons: art of the supernatural* (Addiss, St., ed.). George Braziller, New York, and Spencer Museum of Art, Lawrence, KS, 1985, p. 9.

49 Barrow, T., ‘Ghosts, ghost-gods, & demons of Japan’, in: *Japanese Grotesqueries* (Kie’ie, N., ed.), Tuttle, Rutland and Tokyo: 1973, p. 8. Barrow argues that “Japanese traditions of the supernatural ... combine Chinese ideas of demons, Indian notions of the transmigration of souls, and the native Shinto belief in nature and animal spirits” (p. 7).

50 Kawai and Nagano 2016, *op. cit.*, p. 322. Also, Hirase 2015 (*Hōkasen* 1764), *op. cit.*, pp. 8–9. There might be a connection with or influence from imported image projectors, so-called ‘devil lanterns’ (*oni-tōrō* 鬼灯笼), ‘magic lanterns’ (*kijutsu tōrō* 奇術灯笼), or ‘shadow-picture optiques’ (*kage-e megane* 蔭絵眼鏡). These devices were in use by the 1760s in Japan. In 1779 in Osaka, Hirase also wrote in ‘The trendy goblin’ (*Tengu tsū* 天狗通) that a “shadow-picture lens ... [could] make devils and spirits appear...”. See Screech, T., *The lens within the heart: the Western gaze and popular imagery in later Edo Japan*. University of Hawai’i Press, Honolulu, 2002, pp. 108–109.