

Chunori sugoroku—kabuki actors flying in the air

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(Photo 1) Chunori sugoroku

Artist: Toyohara Kunichika (国周)

Publisher: Etsuka (越嘉)

Published in 1868

Size: 89.2×50.0cm

Printed in "Sugoroku," NDL call no.: 本別 9-27

Character names and actor names on the picture are,  
clockwise from top, *Nekoishinosei (Tanosuke SAWAMURA)*, *Tadanobu (Kikugoro ONOE)*, *Iwafuji (Hikosaburo BANDO)*, *Usagi (Tossho SAWAMURA)*, *Tennin (Mitsugoro BANDO)*, *Tojin (Nakatato NAKAMURA)*, *Yakkodako (Kikugoro ONOE)*, *Tenjiku Tokubei (Hikosaburo BANDO)*, *Masaki Mondo (Tossho SAWAMURA)*, *Oumi-no-Gengoro (Shikan NAKAMURA)*, *Yobaiboshi (Taro BANDO)*, *Tengu-no-hikyaku (Nakazo NAKAMURA)*, *Shigetamaru (Beisho ICHIKAWA)*, *Musobyoe (Kuzo ICHIKAWA)*, *Kengyu (Gonjuro KAWARAZAKI)* and

*Orihime (Shijaku IWA)*.

Sugoroku is a Japanese board game, similar to backgammon and snakes and ladders. Although we now encounter it only in the New Year season, it once was a common entertainment that both adults and children enjoyed daily.

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The goal of the game is to navigate one's game piece from the start to the finish, rolling dice and moving one's own piece accordingly on a sheet of printed paper. During the Edo period a number of versions of the Sugoroku game were produced, and people enjoyed the colorful and attractive world depicted upon the paper as pictorial art. Chunori sugoroku (lit. Wire-flying actors' sugoroku, Photo 1) is one of the most admired artistic works.

There are two types of Sugoroku: one is Ban (board)-sugoroku similar to the western backgammon and the other is E (picture)-sugoroku in which players roll dice and move a playing piece through a lot of squares drawn on the beautiful picture board. Ban-sugoroku was introduced in Japan during the Nara period (7th century); however it declined in the Warring States period (15th to 16th century) and rapidly disappeared at the end of the Edo period (19th century). Another form, E-sugoroku, familiar to present-day Japanese people, appeared in the Edo period and made progress along with the rise of Nishikie (multicolored prints).

E-sugoroku is divided into the two categories: Mawari (round tour) -sugoroku and Tobi (flying) -sugoroku. Mawari-sugoroku is the game in which basically the players move their own pieces from the start position to the goal in accordance with the instructions indicated, sometimes jumping over or going back on the orderly lined squares. Generally, Japanese people think of this type of game when they hear the word Sugoroku.

In Tobi-sugoroku, on the other hand, the squares are not lined up in order. In many cases, the playing piece moves from picture to picture instead of from square to square (see photo1). The player moves his or her own piece in accordance with the die roll and advances toward the goal as he skips around the world of pictures.

Some boards of Tobi-sugoroku have so many illustrations that you cannot see there to move to; some even conspicuously lack instructions to move the pieces. Among them are boards with realistic portraits of the famous actors of the day which could really be regarded as Sugoroku-style Nishikie.

Chunori (flying on wires in kabuki) sugoroku is a kind of Tobi-sugoroku with portraits of the popular Kabuki actors flying in the air, looking down from skyscrapers or taking various aerial roles above the stage such as a star in the sky, Tennin (a kind of angel in the old Japanese tales) or Tengu (a creature in Japanese folklore with wings). Each square has the actor's name and character's name on a strip of paper, although two persons, presumably *Ishikawa Goemon* (acted by *Shikan*) and the other *Gion-no-Oritsu* (acted by *Shijaku*), have no strip of paper. *Goemon* was one of the most successful roles for *Shikan IV* (see photo 2).



(Photo 2) Portrait of Nakamura Shikan depicted by Toyokuni UTAGAWA  
Printed in “*Toyokuni gajo*” published by Kinkaido (錦魁堂) in 1861, NDL call no.: 本別 7-521  
Shikan in this portrait is putting on a wig backstage.

At the start stands *Tenjiku Tokubei* riding on the back of a giant toad with a makimono (hand scroll) opened out. You can see the indications to the target spot (a portrait) according to the pip of a die in the makimono (see photo 3). In the other spots, such as photo 4, are written instructions of where to move the pieces on each spot. When there is no instruction on the spot, players have to wait until their next turn.



(Photo 3)  
Starting point



(Photo 4)  
Example of the instruction

Tobi-sugoroku is such an unpredictable game. The fun of the game seems to lie in the dynamic movement of the playing piece over the board and admiring the picture at the target spot rather than

competing to get to the finish. From such a point of view the theme of this illustration, actors flying through the air, best represents the spirit of Tobi-sugoroku.

Actually, not all of Kabuki characters in the picture are required to fly in their performances. For example, the scene set on the clouds is represented by dancing. So, this work shows the hypothetical flight of fantastic characters, a flight of imagination in itself. This is Tobi-sugoroku at its best.

It is unlikely that such an all-star performance depicted in the Sugoroku ever actually took place. Imagine that these actors acting the various characters of the different works, closely working, fiercely competing on the same stage- it is another great pleasure of the work.

\* Chunori sugoroku is in the Rare Books and Old Materials Room, Tokyo main library of the NDL.

\* Digital image of Chunori sugoroku is available in the National Diet Library Digitized Contents on the Internet: <http://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/1310613>

#### Reference (in Japanese):

- Koichi Masukawa, *Sugoroku 1,2, Mono to Ningen no Bunkashi 79-1,2*, Hosei-daigaku Syuppanyoku 1995, NDL call no.: KD958-E403
- Yasuko Kato, Noriko Matsumura, ed., *Bakumatsu Meiji no E-sugoroku*, Tosho kankokai, 2002, NDL Call no.: KD958-G664