

Selections from NDL collections

## Nezumikozo and the Tokugawa Shogunate—The Man and His Legend

Tsutomu Kawamoto, Humanities, Maps, Rare Books and Old Materials Division, Reader Services and Collections Department

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Nezumikozo Jirokichi<sup>1</sup> was a master thief who lived in Edo (present-day Tokyo) during the 19th century and famously burglarized the residences of daimyo (feudal lords) and hatamoto (direct retainers of the shogun). His exploits have been celebrated in kabuki plays, *kodan* (storytelling), and *nishiki-e*, resulting in a popular image as a Robin-Hood-esque character who was a friend to common people suffering from poverty and injustice. This article discusses the historical facts of the man and how his exploits were fictionalized after his death, based on materials owned by the National Diet

Library (NDL) and other institutions.

Jirokichi was caught attempting to burglarize the residence of Matsudaira Kunaishoyu Tadashige in Edo's Hamacho area on May 4, 1832, and was taken the next day to the Kitamachi magistrate's office, where he was handed into the custody of Constable Oyagi Shichibei.

*Nanbokuseimeicho* (Photo 1) is a document that lists the names and backgrounds of the officers involved in Jirokichi's case, including Oyagi Shichibei, who was described as an experienced constable.



Photo 1: *Nanbokuseimeicho*, volume 3 of five volumes, NDL Call no. 809-52, also available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#). The document says "Oyagi Shichibei, 57 years old, has been a constable in Edo for 41 years since July 1792, following a year's apprenticeship."

*Nezumikozozokeicho* (Photo 2) is a document that describes the result of an investigation of Jirokichi's crimes by officers of the Kitamachi magistrate's office and indicates that lead investigator Sakakibara Kazuenokami Tadayuki was known for being fair and honest. Listing the

owners of 97 residences burglarized by Jirokichi as well as the value of the goods he stole, the document was submitted to *roju* (members of the shogun's council of elders) on May 10.

<sup>1</sup> Nezumi is the Japanese word for "rat."

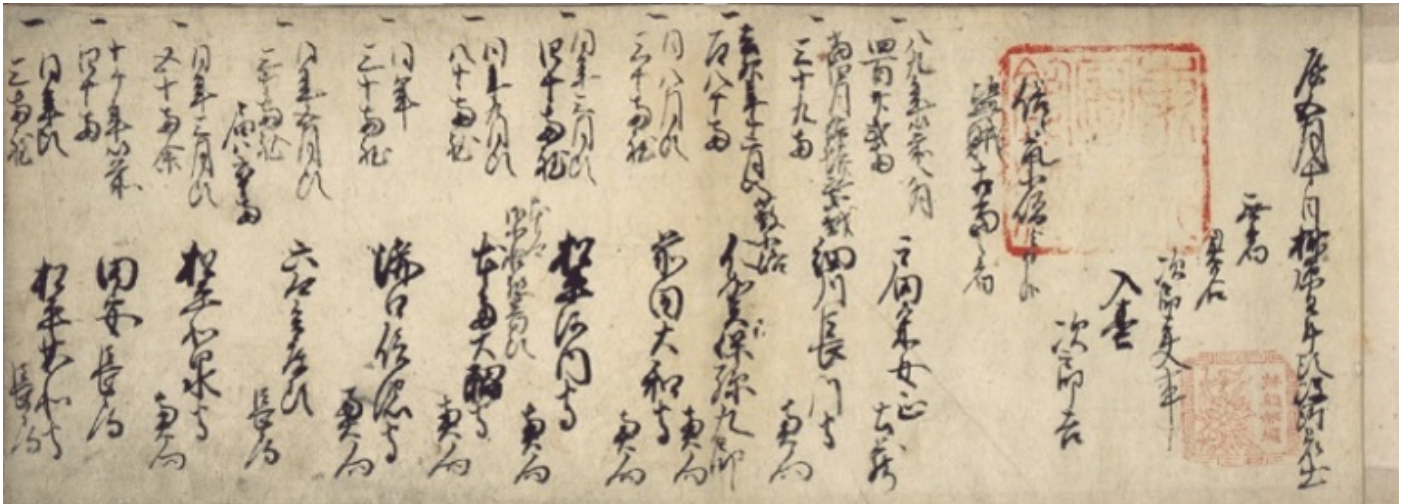


Photo 2: *Nezumikozozokeicho*, NDL Call no.157-48

The document says "On May 10, Officer Sakakibara Kazuenokami Tadayuki submitted to the proper authorities the records of an investigation of Jirokichi, aka Nezumikozo, tattooed, with no fixed address, who is accused of burglary." It also lists the places he burglarized and the value of the stolen goods.

Photo 3 shows a draft copy of the sentence that was handed down to Jirokichi, which is included in the chapter "Thieves" of the *Oshiockireiruishuu*, a criminal casebook compiled by *hyojosho* (a supreme court in the Edo period). For his crimes, Jirokichi was sentenced to be dragged through the streets, after which he was beheaded and his head put on public display on a gibbet.

Jirokichi admitted to having burglarized 98 homes a total of 122 times by sneaking into back rooms, the living quarters of servants, and other private areas, where he broke into safes and stole 3,121 pieces of gold, approximately 72,000,000 yen in today's money according to the author's calculations, which he spent on drinking, gambling, and other entertainment.

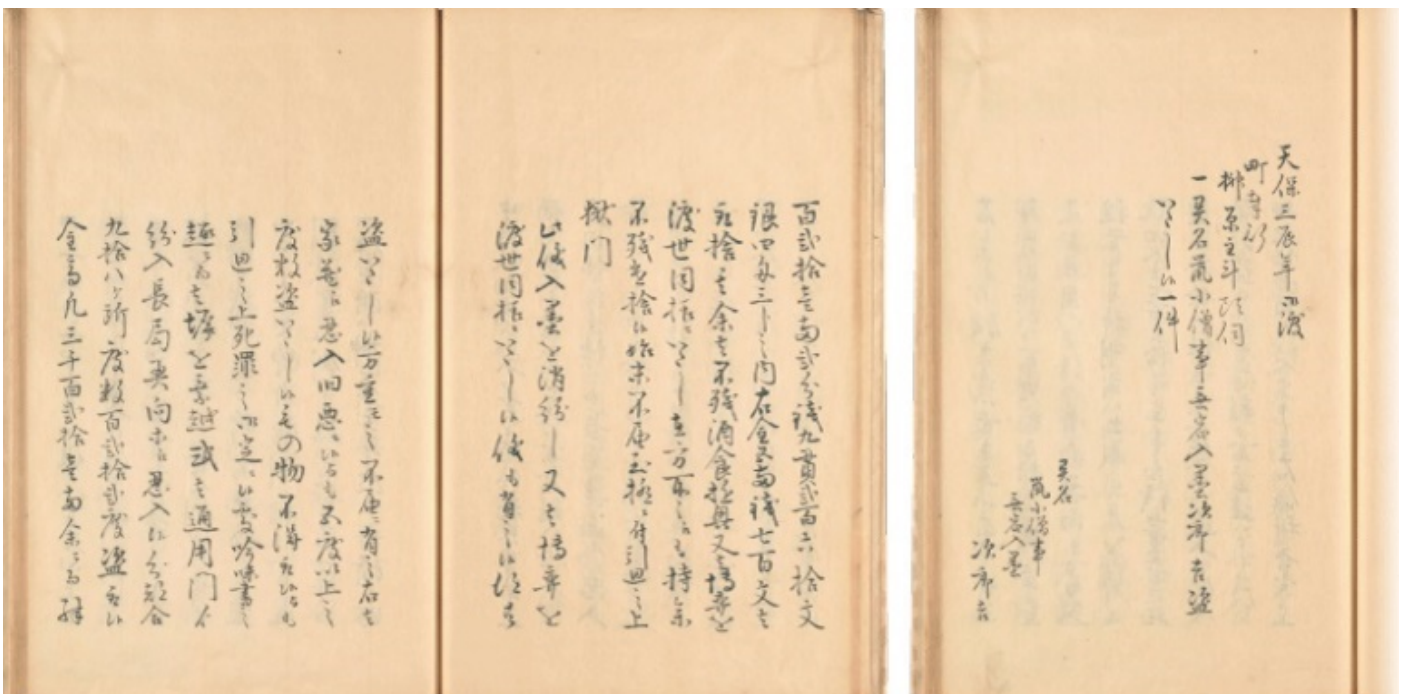


Photo 3: All 273 volumes of *Oshiockireiruishuu* created between 1771 and 1839 are available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#). NDL Call no.: 817-3

The document shown is a draft copy of the sentence that was handed down to Jirokichi.

After investigating Jirokichi's crimes, Sakakibara Kazuenokami Tadayuki made reference to the punishments handed down to eight other notorious thieves, including Bozu Seinosuke and Inaba Kozo Shinsuke, and proposed a punishment to senior official Matsudaira Suonokami Yasuto, who approved the draft sentence. About 100 days after his arrest, on August 19, Jirokichi was beheaded at a prison in Kodenmachi, after which his head put on public display in Kozukahara until his burial at Ekoin Temple in Honjo. He was 36 years of age at the time of his death. The swordsman Fujikawa Seisai wrote an account of the Tempo period in which he indicates that Jirokichi described his dying sentiments as "Like all famous thieves, my wrongdoings eventually came out to light."

There are two historical documents that are enormously valuable in establishing a factual account of Jirokichi's life. The first of these is *Sozoku hakujoki*—a record of Nezumikozo's confession, which is owned by the [National Archives of Japan](#). The second is *Kasshi yawa*—a collection of essays on contemporary topics written by Matura Seizan. For example, *Kasshi yawa* describes Jirokichi's face as having a "flat, circular face with fair yet pockmarked skin and small eyes, a type often seen in craftsman." Another work of non-fiction that mentions Jirokichi is *Mikikigusa*, a book of personal reminiscences by Shogunate officer Miyazaki Narichika. This type of non-fiction writing was a popular seller in Edo bookstores and often contained information about Jirokichi that had been leaked by officials at the Kitamachi magistrate's office, which is testament to public interest in the Nezumikozo case.

Nezumikozo also became a popular character in *shiranami*—a genre of storytelling in which the protagonist is a thief. Kawatake Mokuami was a popular writer of *shiranami*, who wrote the kabuki play *Nezumikomon haru no shingata*<sup>2</sup> (Photo 4) in 1857. In this play, the character Inaba Kozo<sup>3</sup> was based on Nezumikozo and performed by Ichikawa Kodanji IV, who was well known for playing such villainous roles. This play was also depicted in *nishiki-e* (photo 5) and adopted into a type of illustrated novel known as *gokanbon*.

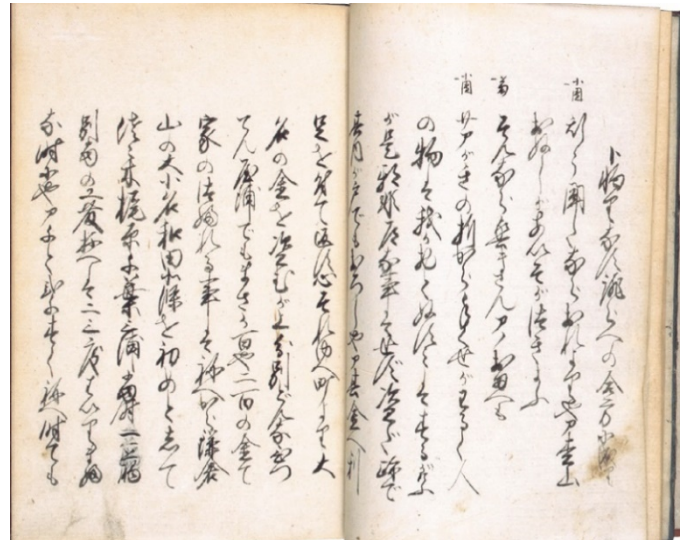


Photo 4: *Nezumikomon haru no shingata*, script no. 23 of 40, 7-cho reverse to 8-cho front, NDL Call no. 114-77. This part of the script shows one of the most popular scenes from the play as performed by Kodanji.



Photo 5: Odori keiyo gedai zukushi *Nezumikomon haru no shingata Oke no kuchi no ba*, in *Haiyu nigao azuma nishikie*, illustrated by Utagawa Toyokuni, 1857, is available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#).  
Nezumikozo evades capture and makes his escape.

<sup>2</sup> *Nezumikomon haru no shingata*, Written by Ryusuitei Tanekiyo, illustrated by Utagawa Kunisada, published by Koeido, Minamidenna-cho (Toto), 1858. Call No.: ~ 13 04049, [Waseda University Library](#).

<sup>3</sup> There is a famous legend called the Hare of Inaba (*Inaba no Shirousagi*)" from the ancient province of Inaba, now the eastern part of Tottori Prefecture. The name of "Inaba" evokes an image of a hare, not a rat.

At the theater, the play, setting the story in the Kamakura period so as not to irritate the Shogunate, ends with Nezumikozo heroically escaping the iron-fisted investigators at the *monchujo* (courthouse in the medieval period). Shorin Hakuen II wrote a number of popular stories, titled *Tempo kaisoden* (photo 6), in which he created an image of Nezumikozo as a gallant anti-hero from Edo.



Photo 6: *Tempo kaisoden* cover page. Transcription of kodan performed by Shorin Hakuen II, written in shorthand by Sakai Shozo, 1897-1898. Monochrome images of the material are also available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#).

During the Meiji period, numerous "true" stories such as *Nezumikozo shiranamizoshi* (Photo 7) and *Ehon Nezumikozo jikki* (Photo 8), appeared that romanticized Nezumikozo as a Robin-Hood-esque hero who eased the suffering of common people. Although historically inaccurate, this popular image of Nezumikozo survives to this day.



Photo 7: *Nezumikozo shiranamizoshi* (picture book 5), Edited by Maki Kinnosuke, 1888. Monochrome images of this material are available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#). This book has stories printed with kana alongside the Chinese characters to make reading easier.



Photo 8: *Ehon Nezumikozo jikki* first edition. Illustrated by Ogata Gekko. Editor unknown, pp. 2-3. Kinsendo, 1885. Monochrome images of this material are available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#).

This is a very famous scene illustrated by the popular illustrator Ogata Gekko, in which Nezumikozo Jirokichi gave money to a poor boy named Kikumatsu and his father, who were selling shijimi (small clams) on Eitaibashi bridge in Ryogoku. This scene, called "shijimi uri (shijimi seller)," appears in kodan, kabuki and rakugo.

This popular yet inaccurate depiction of Nezumikozo was sharply criticized by Meiji-period historian Mitamura Engyo and others, but the image of a heroic outlaw who fought for justice endured in the imaginations of the common people living in the chaos of the late-Edo and early Meiji periods.

(Translated by Yuko Kumakura and Mika Oshima)

#### Reference (in Japanese):

- Yokoyama Katsuyuki. *Nezumikozo hakujoki*, published by Yokoyama Katsuyuki, 1997.
- Watanabe Tamotsu. "Mokuami no Meiji ishin (7) Dai 1 ban me oozume, Dorobo hakuen, Dorobo yakusha, Dorobo sakusha — Nezumikozo", *Shincho* 93 (7), 1996.7 pp. 326-336.
- Nakagome Shigeaki. "Nezumikozo no jitsuroku to kodan", *Edo bungaku* 29, 2003.11 pp.145-155.

#### Articles written by the same author from the National Diet Library Newsletter:

- [Sumo Wrestling during the late Edo Period as Seen Through the Eyes of the Popular Writer Tatekawa Enba](#) (No. 219, August 2018)
- [Kokkei doke anmon—Writing summer greetings to a thunder god](#) (No. 213, August 2017)
- [Odori hitorigeiko: Textbook of dance drawn by Hokusai](#) (No. 199, April 2015)
- [Obiya Ocho Sanze Monogatari: the Ghost Story of the Edo Period](#) (No. 174, August 2010)
- [Nishiki-e depicting Iki-ningyo](#) (No. 155, June 2007)