East Asia Seminar Series

At the University of Cambridge

Professor Satō Katsura

Female Actors in Kabuki: Retrieving a Forgotten Tradition

Kabuki is known as a form of Japanese traditional theatre. One of the features of contemporary kabuki is that it is performed only by male actors. Male actors who play female roles are called onnagata and in order to become an onnagata they need special acting training and skills. This paper introduces the audience to the neglected presence of women on the kabuki stage. It is thought that kabuki itself originated from the dance performed by a woman called Izumo no Okuni around 1600. But in 1629 the Edo Shogunate prohibited women’s kabuki, because it was considered to corrupt public morals. As a result, after that date, only male actors were allowed on stage. However, starting from the middle of the 18th century, there have been kabuki plays secretly performed only by women. In the Meiji era (1868-1912) these female kabuki actors were called onna-yakusha and Ichikawa Kumehachi (1844?-1913) was the pinnacle, being admired by both male kabuki actors and critics. She used to play both male and female roles. But how did she perform these roles? This paper retrieves the activities and the performances of these forgotten kabuki female actors, who have now disappeared from the main stage. In doing so it will shed light on a variety of shapes that the kabuki theatre displayed over time and that have been substantially under-researched.

Satō Katsura is Professor at the Department of Comparative Arts in the College of Literature at Aoyama Gakuin University (Tokyo, Japan). Prof Satō was awarded her PhD in Japanese Literature at the University of Tokyo. She works on the theatrical tradition of kabuki, with a focus on the under-researched area of minor kabuki theatres that were extremely popular in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. Her more recent research project explores the neglected history of female kabuki actors. Her major publication is the monograph Kabuki no bakumatsu Meiji: koshibai no jidai (Kabuki at the end of the Edo Period and in the early in Meiji Era: the epoch of koshibai; Perikan- sha, 2010). Prof Satō has been teaching Japanese traditional performing arts at Aoyama Gakuin University since 2012.

All are welcome
Tuesday 21 November // 2017 // 5 - 7pm
Stay after for wine and a chance to chat

Rooms 8/9
Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies
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