Chushingura Nishiki-e and Sengaku-ji Temple

OKUBO Jun’ichi

“Kanadehon Chushingura” ("The 47 Ronin in Kana Text"), the most popular of all Kabuki dramas, has provided themes for many other genres of popular culture, including Gesaku (lit. “playful” fiction), Senryu (a form of poetry) and Kyoka (comic tanka poetry). In the field of nishiki-e too, an enormous number of works have taken material from Chushingura. In addition to nishiki-e depicting stage scenes from actual performances of Chushingura, there are works associated with Chushingura featuring varying themes and styles, and most previous research has focused on this variety.

This paper seeks to examine Chushingura nishiki-e from the standpoint of the history of publishing. It pays particular attention to the relationship between Chushingura and the Sengaku-ji Temple, thereby illustrating the close ties that this famous Edo site had with the production of Chushingura nishiki-e.

First, “Fujikokaya Nikki” - an extensive diary kept by an Edo merchant - tells us that a large number of nishiki-e were printed when the treasures of Sengaku-ji were opened up to the public in 1848, though most of these were of human figures with brief biography series.

What is more, most of the prints in the series of popular scenes from each stage of Chushingura portrayed with elaborate background illustrations, which comprise a distinctive form of Chushingura nishiki-e, are published by Izumiya Ichibei and other publishers from Shiba Shinmeimae in Edo. The close proximity of Shiba Shinmeimae to Sengaku-ji in Takanawa suggests that it had some influence on the publishing of Chushingura.

The graves of the retainers who committed ritual suicide after revenging their master, and whose loyalty is the basis for Chushingura, are located within the grounds of Sengaku-ji. Despite the fact that as one of the foremost famous sites of Edo many people gathered there to pay homage, there was not one print of this famous Edo site by Hiroshige and other artists even when the print of famous sites became popular from 1830 onwards. Later on it became customary for the twelfth and final print in the complete series to depict an incense burning scene set against a seascape reminiscent of the Takanawa coast. We may conclude, therefore, that this final drawing also functioned as a drawing of Sengaku-ji as a famous site.