

# Emperor Gotoba and the Gobankaji

Paul Martin (Japanese Sword Specialist)



*Hyakunin issu no uchi. Gotoba no In. Utagawa Kuniyoshi ga*  
by Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798-1861).

The Emperor Gotoba is said to have been a master of many things; poetry, kemari, martial arts, equestrianism, and so forth. However, it is recorded in the Masu Kagami (14<sup>th</sup> C.) that he was also a connoisseur of Japanese swords.



Kiku-Gosaku. Ishihara Showa period, Emperor Gotoba Museum.

Although there is no contemporary documented evidence to substantiate whether Gotoba actually ever took part in sword making or not, the story that he invited some of the greatest swordsmiths in the land to make sword with him in monthly rotation at the imperial palace in Kyoto is a firmly embedded in Japanese sword lore. The smiths who are said to have worked with the emperor became known collectively as the *Gobankaji*.

Swords attributed to having been made by Emperor Gotoba are referred to as either, Kiku-gosaku, Gyo-saku, or Gosho-yaki (quenched), which roughly translates to, *Made (or quenched) by Imperial Hand*. Swords said to have been made, or at least quenched, by Emperor Gotoba bear a hairline engraving of a chrysanthemum under the retaining collar (habaki) at the base of the blade. About twelve known examples of these swords survive today. However, in some cases, due to adjustments made to the blades by later owners, the engraving is now further in the tang, and some of them have lost the hairline engraving altogether. Most of the extant chrysanthemum engravings have 16-petals, while another two examples have 24-petals. The engraving is claimed to be the origins of the use of the chrysanthemum as the imperial crest.

According to the sword compendium, *Kanchi-in bon Mei-zukushi* (1423), the members of the original Gobankaji were,

*First and Second Months*

*Norimune of the Ichimonji school, Bizen province*  
*Sadatsugu of the Aoe school, Bitchu province*

*Third and fourth months,*

*Nobufas of Bizen province*  
*Kuniyasu of Yamashiro province*

*Fifth and Sixth Months:*

*Tsunetsugu of the Aoe school, Bitchu Province.*  
*Kunitomo of the Awataguchi school, Yamashiro province.*

*Seventh and eighth months:*

*Muneyoshi of the Ichimonji school, Bizen province.*  
*Tsugue of the Aoe school, Bitchu province.*

*Ninth and tenth months:*

*Sukemune and Yukikuni, both of the Ichimonji school, Bizen province*

*Eleventh and twelfth months:*

*Sukenari and Sukechika, both of the Ichimonji school, Bizen province.*

Following Gotoba's swift defeat in the Jokyu-no-Ran, he was exiled for the remainder of his life to the Oki Islands (Okinoshima). However, it is said that, in order to make him more comfortable, the Hojo regent, Yoshitoki, sent swordsmiths in bi-monthly rotation to the island so that Gotoba could continue to pursue his sword making. These swordsmiths became known as the *Oki Gobankaji*.

According to the sword compendium, *Koto Mei-zukushi Taizen* (1791) the swordsmiths sent to Oki Island were,

*First and Second Months*

*Norikuni of the Awataguchi school, Yamashiro province*

*Third and fourth months,*

*Kagekuni of the Awataguchi school, Yamashiro province*

*Fifth and Sixth Months:*

*Kunitsuna of the Awataguchi school, Yamashiro province*

*Seventh and eighth months:*

*Muneyoshi of the Fukuoka Ichimonji school, Bizen province.*

*Ninth and tenth months:*

*Nobumasa of the Fukuoka Ichimonji school, Bizen province*

Eleventh and twelfth months:  
 Sukenori of the Ichimonji school, Bizen province.

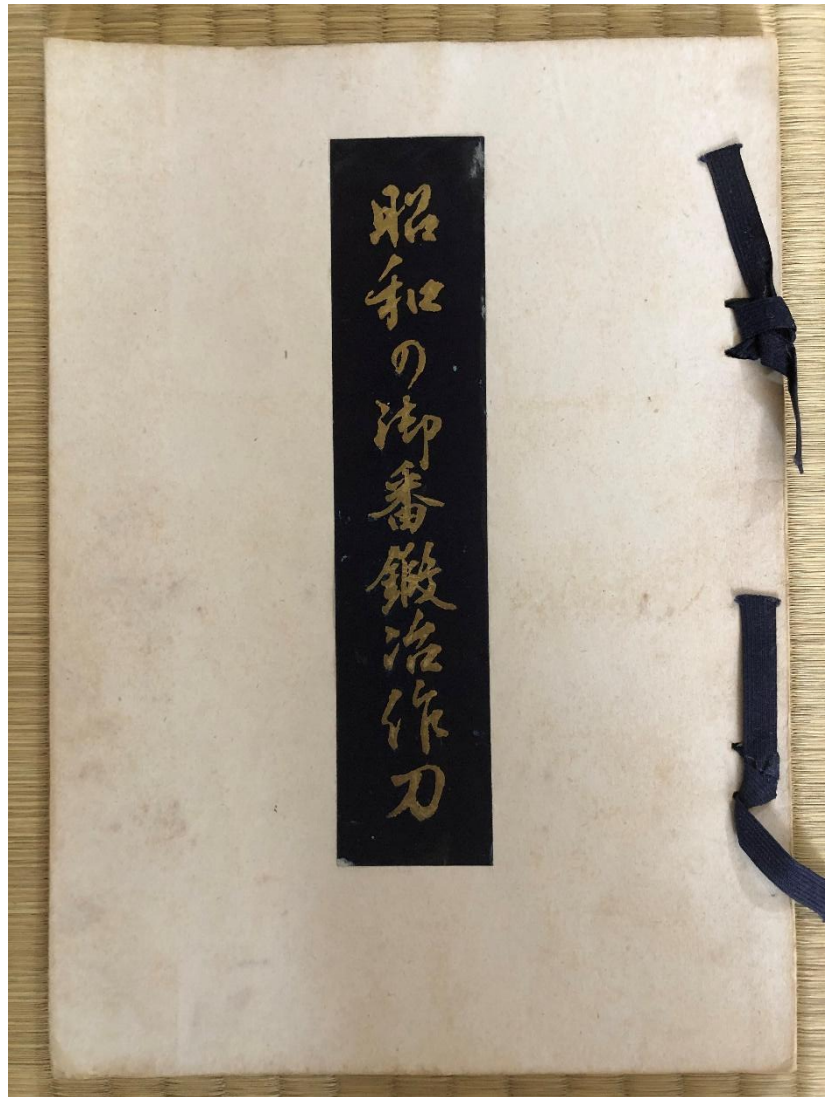
The document is a vertical list of entries in Japanese, organized by month. The rightmost column lists the months from 七月 (July) down to 十一月 (November). The text describes various activities, names of individuals, and specific events related to sword making and the Oki Shrine area. Key entries include names like 宗隆 (Munehisa), 宗正 (Munetada), and 宗正 (Munetada) associated with different months. The text is dense and written in a traditional style.

Sword Compendium, Koto Mei-zukushi Taizen (1791) listing the Oki Gobankaji.

The Emperor Gotoba Museum and the nearby Murakami former residence house many artifacts from Gotoba's time on the island. Both are in close proximity to the former site of Genpukuji temple, and the site of his funeral pyre, which has become a sacred site. Among the objects in the Emperor Gotoba Museum, there is a sword signed, Sukemitsu, that was bestowed by Gotoba upon the Kajiya family along with a set of bellows (fuigo) used for sword making. As the fuigo is in disrepair, it is kept in a bespoke wooden box bearing a lengthy inscription that states it was used by the emperor himself when taking part in sword making on the island.

### Modern Groups of Gobankaji

In 1939, in commemoration of the 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Emperor Gotoba's death, Oki Shrine was constructed close to his grave, and he was enshrined as the residing divinity. Emperor Gotoba's influence on Japanese sword making is so great, that a contemporary Gobankaji were formed as part of the festivities. The group of swordsmiths known as the Showa (1936-1989) Gobankaji forged twenty-five swords in his honor. Ten swords were devoted to Oki shrine, while the other fifteen were devoted to Minase shrine in Osaka. Then, in 1974, Living National Treasure smith, Gassan Sadaichi, along with his son, Sadatoshi, came to Oki island to forge swords in front of Oki shrine in honor of Emperor Gotoba's legacy to sword making.



**Cover of the Showa Gobankaji Catalogue (1941)**

Emperor Gotoba's influence, on not only sword making, but also in other areas of Japanese culture is immense. On this occasion, the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his arrival on the island, we are hoping to form another modern Gobankaji from the current generation of greatest swordsmiths in the land. We hope to keep Emperor Gotoba's legacy and spirit alive by maintaining the traditions of the past, preserving them and passing them on for the education and enjoyment of future generations.

For further information on Japanese swords, please see the links.

[The Japanese Sword \(You-Tube Channel\)](#)

[The Society for the Promotion of Japanese Sword Culture \(NBSK\)](#)

[The Japanese Sword Museum](#)



**Author: Paul Martin (Japanese Sword Specialist)**

Paul Martin is a former curator in the Japanese section at the British Museum, London. He holds an M.A. in Asian Studies (Japan) from the University of Berkeley, California, and has resided in Japan working as a Japanese sword specialist for over fifteen years. A two-time winner of the sword appraisal contest in Tokyo, he is also a trustee of the Society for the Promotion of Japanese Sword Culture (NBSK), and a recognized specialist by the Ministry of Land Infrastructure, Tourism and Transport. He has his own column on Japan-Forward (Sankei Shinbun), and has published several books and DVDs on Japanese swords.