

Menko Corner

Hitokage Menko or Portrait Menko

by Ryan Laughton

There are 13 different shape types or categories of sumo menko ranging from typical squares to elaborate die-cut and flower-cut menko. Every sumo menko and/or sumo card is categorized by one of these types and is the basis for the sumo menko catalogue number system. In my previous three articles, I presented Version One of the catalogue number database system and will periodically update it as I find new sets or correct any faulty information. However, to really understand the system it is important to have good knowledge of the 13 type-categories. Over the next several articles I will provide more detail on each of these categories, giving several examples of each.

This issue will focus on what I have termed the Rikishi-series or (R)-series of menko. The Japanese word for the R-series menko is 'Hitokage Menko,' (literally: 'Portrait Menko') and these are very popular on the secondary market because of their unique shape. In fact, they will usually command a premium two to three times that of a rectangular menko. The earliest known R-series set is the 1911 Kyoiku Rikishi 8-10-11-12-13 set printed by the Kyoiku Gangu Company (see Picture 1). This set was presumably printed to teach kids about large numbers in both Japanese kanji and English. There are probably less than a dozen R-series sets made between 1900 and 1930 that survive today – I have only seen about five in all my years of collecting.



Picture 1 (R111 Set): Ozeki Nishinoumi printed by the Kyoiku Gangu Company, 1911

Between 1930 and 1961 there were more than 50 R-series sets printed with the most being from the 1930s era. Unfortunately, there is very little information on which companies printed which sets and so this data has probably been lost to time. The very unique aspect of the late 1930s and early 1940s sets is the depiction of war images on kesho mawashi which show a general sense of patriotism (see Picture 2). It is amazing that any of these sets even survived the war and the destruction to Japanese cities. Even more surprising were all the sets that survived in spite of the large number of paper drives that the Japanese government ordered to support the war effort.

After the war, from 1945 to 1950, there were only a handful of sets even printed because of the severe economic hardships that the Japanese people were enduring. Many Japanese could not even afford food, let alone "frivolous" items such as toys and games. In the early 1950s, however, there was an emergence of menko printed in an effort to increase the general knowledge of Japanese



Picture 2 (R391 Set): Maegashira Itsutsushima with a tank on his kesho mawashi, 1939

children especially in the area of maths. One such set was the 1950 Rikishi 2 Set which has a simple math problem for kids to solve and would be used to play menko (see Picture 3).



Picture 3 (R501): Yokozuna Azumafuji with a simple math problem for the Fighting Number, 1950

The 1950s saw a modest reemergence of the R-series menko which resulted in the colossal 1953 Kagome Rikishi 7 set, historically significant because

of the seven yokozuna and four ozeki that appear in the set at various stages in their career. For those that collect American baseball cards, this set is comparable to the 1952 Topps set in terms of rarity, physical size and star power.

By the early 1960s, the sumo menko era was coming to a close because of Japan's increased status across the globe and the pressure for kids to focus more on schoolwork and less on games. Also, television sets were in almost

every Japanese home, occupying more of kids' free time and leaving less time for menko. The last R-series menko was made in 1961 by the Hoshi Gangu Company and included Taiho and Kashiwado, two men who would carry sumo through the 1960s. However, this set was a half-hearted attempt and the quality control and images were very poor. It was thus an unfortunate sad ending to an otherwise popular and unique category of Hitokage Menko, Portrait Menko and Rikishi Series sets.



Picture 6(R611): Maegashira Kitanonada printed by the Hoshi Gangu Company, 1961



Picture 4(R531-1 and R531-2): The 40th-46th Yokozuna. Note red and green versions of Azumafuji, Chiyonoyama and Wakanohana



Picture 5(R531): The 40th-46th Yokozuna from the back