

〈Research Note〉

Sherlock Holmes in Shinjuku: Intertextuality and Community in *Case File n°221: Kabukicho*

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Summary

This research note explores how the Japanese anime *Case File n°221: Kabukicho* creatively reinterprets the iconic Sherlock Holmes within Tokyo's Shinjuku ward. This adaptation transposes Conan Doyle's characters from Victorian London to the modern, bustling district of Kabukicho. The note examines how this new setting not only mirrors London's East-West class divides but also captures Kabukicho's unique local dynamics, reflecting themes of social fragmentation and crime in ways similar to Conan Doyle's stories.

The study delves into the intertextuality of *Case File n°221: Kabukicho*, illustrating how it combines classic detective storytelling with Japanese storytelling devices such as rakugo (落語), which adds a distinctive layer to the character of Sherlock. The construction of the setting is compared to Charles Booth's poverty maps of London, which serves to represent social stratification and characters' movements across economic divides. These elements provide a framework that highlights urban issues relevant to both historical London and modern Tokyo.

In the anime, the characters' actions underscore their outsider status and their complex relationships within Kabukicho's unique community. This research note suggests that the anime's detective figures embody a new form of individualism within a layered social network, blending traditional detective themes with contemporary social realities. Ultimately, the anime is commended for extending the Holmes legacy by preserving the spirit of Holmesian deduction while exploring contemporary urban life and social nuances in Kabukicho.

Key words

Sherlock Holmes, *Case File n°221: Kabukicho*, intertextuality, poverty maps, Kabukicho

I Introduction

In the 1840s, the American writer Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) introduced the world's first modern detective story with *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841). Following this, Irish-Scottish writer Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930) would create the *Sherlock Holmes* series, which was distinguished by its focus on the characters solving mysteries through "reasoning" and "deduction" (Lu, 2013). This series not only solidified the detective fiction genre but also helped ignite its "Golden Age" and inspired the first generation of detective fiction enthusiasts (Nakao, 2018). The adventures of the famous detective, Sherlock Holmes, and his assistant,

Dr. John H. Watson, have been continuously reinterpreted to reflect societal and historical changes.

The 2020 anime *Case File n°221: Kabukicho* (『歌舞伎町シャーロック』), produced by the Japanese animation company Production I. G., is set in modern Tokyo, specifically in the vibrant and chaotic Kabukicho (歌舞伎町) district of Shinjuku (新宿). The primary characters are detectives living in a boarding house (*nakaya*, 長屋) run by Mrs. Hudson. The story revolves around the detectives solving various crimes in Kabukicho in a competitive format, blending logical deduction (*honkaku*, 本格推理) with comedic elements.¹ The primary plot follows a series of murders by a modern-day Jack the Ripper in Shinjuku, with subplots involving other cases throughout Kabukicho. The title, *Case File n°221: Kabukicho* (also known as *Kabukichō Sherlock*, henceforth *Case File*), makes it clear that this work draws direct inspiration from the *Sherlock Holmes* series. Just as Doyle’s original stories captured life in Victorian London, *Case File* skillfully weaves the themes of reasoning and mystery-solving into its narrative while vividly depicting modern-day Kabukicho. Despite this entirely different setting, the anime demonstrates a deep understanding of the spirit of the *Sherlock Holmes* series, engaging with it in an intertextual dialogue.

The relationship and dialogues between texts can be understood through the concept of intertextuality. Coined by Julia Kristeva (b. 1941), intertextuality suggests that a text is not merely a static “product” but rather a dynamic “process of production and consumption,” which occurs in a space where the meaning of the work is shaped and transformed through the dialogue and interpretations of both writer and reader (Iwamoto, 2001). Kristeva emphasized it is deeply rooted in intersubjectivity. Each text is seen as a subject, and subsequent texts—created through ongoing dialogue and interpretation—also gain autonomy as subjects. These autonomous texts are not merely influenced; they actively engage in signifying. Thus, intertextuality challenges the notion of a self-contained, singular text and diverges from traditional “influence/acceptance” studies, opening new interpretive possibilities for textual analysis (Martínez-Alfaro, 1996). The concept of intertextuality encompasses all discursive practices while granting subsequent texts meaningful independence.

Based on this definition, *Case File* not only incorporates elements from the original *Sherlock Holmes* series but also draws upon other social and cultural texts, thus presenting its own distinct subjectivity. This article explores why *Case File* is an exceptional reinterpretation of the *Sherlock Holmes* series by examining its setting and character dynamics within this intertextual dialogue. The discussion focuses on how *Case File* integrates aspects of *Sherlock Holmes* series and Charles Booth’s poverty maps and illustrates how the “city dwellers” in *Case File* interact with their environment.²

II From London to Kabukicho

As discussed above, *Case File* follows the detective fiction model established by the *Sherlock Holmes* series. For instance, the clues presented to the detectives and the evidence they gather during their investigations are also available for viewers to observe throughout the show. This approach exemplifies the series’ use of the “fair

¹ *Honkaku* is a subgenre of Japanese detective fiction, contrasting with the later emergence of the *Shakaiha* (社会派) genre led by Matsumoto Seicho (1909-1992). Its content inherits the narrative style of the *Sherlock Holmes* series, focusing primarily on reasoning and puzzle-solving (Gonda and Shinpo, 2000).

² Please note that this research note contains spoilers for *Case File n°221: Kabukicho*.

play” technique common in detective novels, allowing the audience to participate in the process of deduction and enjoy solving the mysteries alongside the characters.

When *Case File* was first broadcast, many viewers praised the main character, Sherlock (シャーロック), for explaining events and his reasoning through the traditional Japanese performing art of *rakugo* (落語, literally “story with a fall”). The concept of “detective *rakugo*” (探偵落語) is certainly a clever innovation. However, I believe the most significant reason *Case File* stands out as an adaptation is not its deductive method, but rather how the story’s setting has been transposed to a fictionalized “Kabukicho.”³

The most significant commonality between *Case File* and the *Sherlock Holmes* series is the contrast between social environments in their respective settings. This characteristic can be traced back to the social context of late 19th-century London. During this period, entrepreneur, sociologist, and reformer Charles Booth (1840-1916) conducted a social survey of London’s districts and the lifestyles of their inhabitants. By examining the relationship between poverty and the urban population, Booth created his poverty maps to visualize abstract concepts such as poverty, urbanity, and social divides onto the real, lived realities of London.⁴ His work not only made substantial contributions to British social policy but also left a lasting impact on the history of social investigation and research.

Specifically, Booth’s maps illustrated the distinction between West London as an affluent area and East London as an impoverished area, highlighting the divide between the west and east sides of the city (Koike, 2010). The Industrial Revolution led to rapid population shifts in urban centers, as new industries attracted people seeking new opportunities. This resulted in large numbers of individuals moving from rural areas to cities, which in turn fostered the emergence of the middle class. However, this massive and rapid population movement also created a division between the middle and working classes, with the middle class settling in West London and the working class residing in East London.

During this period of rapid urbanization and class differentiation, the population excluded from social systems and their protections increased, leading to a rise in crime. As the police struggled to address these challenges, private detectives operating outside the formal system became a necessity, paving the way for fictional figures like Sherlock Holmes. In most stories in the *Sherlock Holmes* series, Holmes and Watson, who reside in middle-class West London, travel to East London and the suburbs to investigate crimes and restore order before returning to 221B Baker Street. Through these narratives, the series vividly illustrates the social and geographic divide between East and West London during that era.

After the British Broadcasting Corporation released the critically acclaimed television series *Sherlock* in 2010, the *Sherlock Holmes* series gained a broader contemporary global audience. The series and its adaptations have always been internationally popular, but this recent success led to an increase in adaptations and remakes set in the metropolises of the 2010s. Beyond *Sherlock*’s modern London, notable examples include CBS’s *Elementary* (2012-2019) set in New York, HBO Asia and Hulu Japan’s *Miss Sherlock* (2018), and Fuji Television’s *SHERLOCK: UNTOLD STORIES* (2019, 2022), with the latter two series being set in Tokyo. While these adaptations explore the relationship between detective fiction and urban environments, they seldom

3 In this research note, the real Shinjuku and Kabukicho are distinguished from their fictionalized versions depicted in *Case File* n°221: Kabukicho, which are presented as “Shinjuku” and “Kabukicho.”

4 Unless otherwise indicated, all references to the poverty maps come from the London School of Economics & Political Science, “Charles Booth’s London: Poverty maps and police notebooks.” Accessed November 12, 2024. <https://booth.lse.ac.uk/>

attempt to replicate the East-West divide that was so central to the original *Sherlock Holmes* series.

In contrast, *Case File* centers its setting specifically in the Tokyo ward of Shinjuku, specifically the district of Kabukicho. In this context, the “Shinjuku” and “Kabukicho” depicted in *Case File* serve as a microcosm of larger urban realities. Additionally, the map shown at the end of the first episode, “Hello Detectives” (「初めまして探偵諸君」), discusses how Shinjuku is divided into two distinct areas: the West, centered around the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building and home to the upper class, and the East, where the common folk gather in districts like Kabukicho. These two areas are separated by Shinjuku Station (新宿駅), a boundary marked by train tracks and walls.

The “Shinjuku” depicted in *Case File* is thus shaped by the mutual interaction and blending of its two distinct, opposing spaces. In the anime, Sherlock, originally from a noble family in West Shinjuku, moves to the East Shinjuku to pursue his dream of becoming a *rakugo* artist. Similarly, John (ジョン), a former doctor from the West Shinjuku, crosses the boundary to East Shinjuku in the first episode to seek Sherlock’s assistance. The characters’ crossing of these borders, along with the Jack the Ripper case that spans both sides of Shinjuku, reflects the East-West divide found in the original *Sherlock Holmes* series, where Holmes and Watson navigate between the affluent West End and the impoverished East End to restore order. The “Kabukicho” of *Case File* is thus modeled after the chaotic East End of London, further reinforcing the cultural and social connections between the two works.

That said, there is one significant contrast in *Sherlock Holmes* series and *Case File* necessitated by this change of setting. During the Victorian era of Conan Doyle’s lifetime, the middle class placed great importance on respectability, leading to the rejection of deviant behavior and the repression of topics related to sexuality (Tomiyama, 2015). As a result, while detective fiction often explores themes of money and sex, Conan Doyle’s works were shaped by the values of his time and constrained by notions of respectability, as was the publishing industry. Consequently, the *Sherlock Holmes* series includes few explicit references to sexuality, and when they appear, they are portrayed ambiguously. In contrast, *Case File* is set in Kabukicho, famously known as the red light district of Shinjuku, and sexual matters thus play a prominent role in many of the anime’s mysteries. This, however, does not deviate from the essence of the *Sherlock Holmes* series. Instead, it is used to reflect on societal repressions of sexuality (such as those of the Victorian period), resistance to such repressions, and the East-West divide, all depicted through the complex human relationships of *Case File*’s characters.

III Shinjuku and “Shinjuku”

As previously discussed, *Case File* inherits the reasoning and mystery-solving framework of the *Sherlock Holmes* series, utilizing the actions (and transgressions) of its main characters to construct a space and narrative stage that mirrors the oppositional settings of London in the original series. However, *Case File* also establishes its own distinct identity, particularly through the creation of the local community of “Kabukicho” and the intricate interpersonal relationships that emerge within this vibrant, dynamic setting.

The history of Shinjuku as part of Tokyo’s urban landscape dates from the early modern period, when it developed around post stations, or *shukuba-machi* (宿場町). While early Shinjuku, along with its downtown area (*shidamachi*, 下町) areas like Nihonbashi (日本橋) and Ginza (銀座), were considered remote “outskirts”

(*basue*, 場末) at the time, urban development was still in its infancy. By the Taisho era (1912-1926), the introduction of streetcars connecting to the city center and private railways extending to the suburbs began shaping Shinjuku into a major transportation hub. However, during this period, development efforts remained focused on the old area around the post station rather than shifting toward the area around the new railway station and its square.

In 1923, the Great Kanto Earthquake caused widespread destruction in Tokyo, prompting many to relocate to western areas such as Setagaya (世田谷), Suginami (杉並), and Nerima (練馬). At the same time, residential developments along the Chuo Line (中央線), Odakyu Line (小田急線), and Keio Line (京王線) transformed these areas into bustling residential districts. Commuters from these areas would travel to Shinjuku for shopping or to transfer to the city center. In this context, the focus of development soon shifted to the area around Shinjuku Station. These commuting residents would contribute heavily to the vitality of prewar Shinjuku. After World War II, as Tokyo again rebuilt itself in the wake of the extensive air raids, these residential areas absorbed more newcomers from the city center and continued expanding. During this period, Shinjuku also hosted the emergence of the largest black market (*yami-ichi*, 闇市) in Tokyo (Ishigure, 2013).

According to urban sociologist Ishigure Masakazu, Shinjuku's black market was primarily organized by street vendors (*tekiya*, 的屋), who established a sizable marketplace near Shinjuku Station after securing a fixed location. This marketplace (and its attached black market) persisted until 1950, when land development projects for East Shinjuku led to its restructuring and transformation into a leisure and entertainment center. In the latter half of the 1950s, with the construction of more railway-related buildings on the western side of the station, West Shinjuku further evolved into a political and business hub. Despite the diverse and complex development patterns in and around Shinjuku, by the 1960s, the eastern side—particularly Kabukicho—had solidified its reputation as a prominent pleasure district, while the West developed as a sub-central urban area (Ishigure, 2016).

Against this backdrop, Shinjuku has inherited the festive street character (*sakariba*, 盛り場) of the Edo period's (1603-1868) Asakusa (浅草) district. Over time, it has evolved into a ward that balances historical richness and diversity while hosting multiple distinct local communities. This transformation was heavily influenced by the multiple urban reorganization and reconstruction efforts following the Kanto Earthquake and World War II. In this process, local government agencies, police institutions, and community organizations (such as neighborhood associations [*chonaikai*, 町内会] and revitalization groups [*shinkoukumiai*, 振興組合]) have played a crucial role in shaping contemporary Shinjuku.

Here, "local communities" (*chiikishakai*, 地域社会) refers to the transparent relationships among residents of the area, characterized by the sharing of information and a sense of mutual trust. While this trust fosters cooperative relationships, it also entails competition and conflict. However, these dynamics generally do not infringe upon the personal or collective interests of a community's members. Within a community's shared living space, norms are established to preserve the residents' living environment, forming a system of mutual benefit. Over time, local communities tend to cultivate shared values that further strengthen their cohesion and identity (Nishizawa and Shibuya, 2008). In Kabukicho, such local communities are centered around mixed-use buildings (*zakyo biru*, 雑居ビル), shops, and street areas. Community members actively move between and engage in various activities within these interconnected spaces. They navigate between these shared spaces, participating in consumption, production, labor, education, healthcare, entertainment, sports, performing arts, festivals, and

the like. Through these interactions, they sustain and reproduce the diverse service industry activities that define Kabukicho (Takeoka, 2017).

In *Case File*, “Kabukicho” retains the historical characteristics of the real pleasure district and integrates them into the fictional construction of its local community. For instance, the *nakaya* where Holmes and Watson reside is within a mixed-use building, reflecting Kabukicho’s urban structure. Furthermore, the relationship between the police and detectives in the story is mediated through Mrs. Hudson, a member of a local revitalization organization who acts as an intermediary. The incidents depicted in the anime frequently revolve around disputes in the sex or service industries, highlighting both Kabukicho’s local identity and the significance of information networks within this space. This network parallels the role of the Baker Street Irregulars in the *Sherlock Holmes* series. Such elements not only draw direct connections between the fictional “Kabukicho” and its real-world counterpart but also reaffirm the intertextual relationship between *Case File* and the *Sherlock Holmes* series.

In the *Sherlock Holmes* series, the relationships between characters like Holmes, Watson, Professor Moriarty, and Irene Adler have long captivated readers and researchers. Notably, the dynamics between Holmes, Watson, and Moriarty are closely tied to the concept of homosociality, as proposed by sociologist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985). Moreover, the social desires and connections between detectives, their assistants, and their archenemies are deeply intertwined with the dandyism fashionable in 19th-century England. When the dandy detective replaces the *flâneur* as the new subject exploring urban pathology and restoring order while expressing his own esthetic, he—despite his connections with assistants or archenemies—ultimately represents an independent individual. This highlights the relationship between detective fiction as a symbol of modernity and the development and reinforcement of individualism, even within a wider community.

Meanwhile, the crimes that occur in “Kabukicho” in *Case File* metaphorically encapsulate the helplessness, emptiness, decadence, and dissatisfaction that arise from social inequities. The detectives commercialize their success in solving these crimes, assessing their commodity value to decide whether to engage in competition, thereby reflecting the necessities of contemporary capitalism and commercialization. This dynamic suggests that the detectives’ professional services enable “Kabukicho” to sustain itself through its productive service industry. In other words, *Case File* not only constructs and reinforces the local community characteristics of “Kabukicho” but also imbues the narrative with a distinct subjectivity, setting it apart from the *Sherlock Holmes* series.

In the *Sherlock Holmes* series, Holmes and Watson’s eastward journeys to solve cases and restore order before returning west symbolize the spatial and social distance between detective and criminal. These movements also reflect the opaque, fragmented relationships of urban dwellers experienced in industrialized London. In this setting, the detective’s ability to solve cases hinges on the application of scientific theories and techniques. Conversely, as stated on the official website of *Case File*, the story centers around the grotesque murder case of “Jack the Ripper.” The cooperation and conflict between the detectives in Kabukicho and the bureaucratic organization form the main narrative axis, while the relationships among Sherlock, John, and Moriarty interweave to shape the fabric of the story. The story’s realism is rooted in the overlapping spheres of activity among detectives, police, and revitalization organizations within “Kabukicho’s” local community. While individual interests do not always align, they remain closely interconnected, reflecting the complex dynamics of this shared urban space.

It is important to emphasize that the detectives in “Kabukicho” are outsiders (*yosomono*, よそ者) and migrant workers. These outsiders converge at the *nakaya*, forging new interpersonal relationships within the local community and forming a unique collective. Through this process, the detectives become integrated into the lifestyle and economic system of “Kabukicho.” In this context, relationships between the people in this space are characterized by their mutual transparency, and the distance between the detectives and criminals becomes notably smaller. Unlike traditional detective stories, the investigations in this setting do not rely on scientific techniques, allowing the reasoning and mystery-solving to retain a sense of purity and simplicity.

In *Case File*, the characters can be categorized into three main groups based on their backgrounds. The first group comprises individuals from the affluent West Shinjuku, including Sherlock, John, and Moriarty, who are drawn to Kabukicho by their respective desires. The second group includes Kyogoku, a native of East Shinjuku with aspirations to escape poverty and move to the West, and Kobayashi, a former *yakuza* (ヤクザ). Finally, there are characters from rural areas, such as the gambling-addicted former police officer Belmont, and the Moston sisters from Aomori, who have come to Tokyo in search of employment. From the perspective of urban modernity, these characters are solitary outsiders, each with a distinct story to tell. As detectives, however, they traverse the urban landscape of “Kabukicho,” encountering life’s challenges through their involvement in various events. Their actions are deeply embedded within the local community, as they navigate spatial boundaries, grapple with conflicting values, form alliances, and confront rivals, creating a complex web of interconnected relationships. This apparent “instability” of modern interpersonal relationships is portrayed as a defining feature and a significant charm of life in “Kabukicho.” The characters showcase their unique talents on the vibrant stage of the neighborhood. Their investigations do not rely on advanced tools or scientific theories but instead embrace the pure essence of classic detective fiction. These stories are deeply intertwined with the diverse interpersonal dynamics and value systems within the “Kabukicho” community. Through these connections, the characters establish a home to which they can continue to provide meaningful contributions, enabling the community to thrive and regenerate. In doing so, they truly “continue to love this world.”

“Continue to love this world” is a significant line in *Case File*. It appears in the twentieth episode, “Moriarty Savors” (モリアーティ、享受), spoken by Moriarty’s twin sister, Alexandra.⁵ She expresses the belief that in this world—perhaps specifically within “Kabukicho”—the interconnectedness of people, events, and things fosters a continuous cycle of life. This theme encapsulates the essence of “Kabukicho” as a local community in which individuals coexist and grow alongside one another and their surroundings. It serves as a poignant interpretation of how *Case File* transcends the intense individuality found in the original *Sherlock Holmes* series, offering a more holistic and interconnected vision of community and space.

5 “享受” and “教授” share the same pronunciation (*kyoujyu*) in Japanese, highlighting the intertextual ingenuity of *Case File* in its attempt to connect with the *Sherlock Holmes* series.

The original line spoken by Alexandra is, “In this world, there’s James [Moriarty], there’s me, there’s Dad, there are close friends, and there are strangers. Everyone is different, and everyone has their own individuality. That’s why it’s okay—living, being alive together with all kinds of people, is such a wonderful thing, isn’t it? James, I will always love you. So please, continue to love this world too [この世界には、ジェームズがいて、私がいて、お父さんがいて、親しい人がいて、見知らぬ人がいる。みんな違って、みんな別々の個性を持ってる。だから大丈夫、生きてるって、いろいろな人と一緒に生きてるって、とってもステキなことだよ。ジェームズ、ずっと愛してるよ。だからあなたもこの世界を愛し続けて].”

IV Conclusion

Mattias Boström's *From Holmes to Sherlock* (2017) provides a historical narrative that traces the evolution of Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* series to 21st-century adaptations like *Sherlock* and *Elementary*, which are set in modern-day London and New York, respectively. In doing so, Boström constructs an intertextual genealogy of the *Sherlock Holmes* series, highlighting its enduring cultural impact (Boström, 2017). While Boström's work does not explore Japan's reception and adaptation of the series, Japanese detective fiction from the Meiji period (1868-1912) to the present reveals a rich tradition of translations and reimagining's that reflect the profound and continued influence of *Sherlock Holmes* series on Japanese literature and media.

Case File n°221: Kabukicho thus holds a significant place in the genealogy of the *Sherlock Holmes* series, as it demonstrates that these stories are not just a singular set of works but a continually evolving entity. *Case File* also highlights how the detective fiction genre has been embraced by readers and viewers worldwide amidst industrialization, globalization, and the births of various storytelling mediums. As a result, the characters from these stories have become a shared resource, preserved in people's minds across diverse forms.

Of course, *Case File* has its shortcomings. Although the work attempts to present the coexistence of diverse cultures through its characters' varying identities, it lacks attention to the presence and local culture of Korean and Chinese communities in Kabukicho. However, this does not detract from the value of the work as an adaptation that insightfully transposes the story into the Japanese context (specifically Kabukicho) and asserts its own subjectivity. While the settings and story developments of the two works may initially seem vastly different, *Case File* inherits and expands upon the thematic exploration of 19th-century London as a metropolis in the *Sherlock Holmes* series, showcasing the distinctive characteristics of Kabukicho within the narrative. Thus, in its journey from understanding to expressing and reinterpreting Conan Doyle's themes, *Case File* is an outstanding adaptation of the *Sherlock Holmes* series.

【Acknowledgments】

This research was supported by the K. MATSUSHITA FOUNDATION.

NOTE

This paper is a revised and expanded version of the article entitled 'Holmes, Shinjuku wo kakeru: Kabukicho Sherlock ni okeru monogatari no butai kouchiku [in Japanese],' which was submitted to the Japan Sherlock Holmes Club journal *The World of Holmes* Vol. 43 (2020), with additional translation and proofreading. The submission of this paper has been approved by the Japan Sherlock Holmes Club.

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