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The Appeal of *Kaidan* Tales of the Strange

Abstract

Kaidan are tales of the strange and mysterious, often considered by contemporary Japanese to be frightening ghost stories. During the Edo period (1600–1867), *kaidan* enjoyed great popularity. Gatherings called *hyakumonogatari kaidankai* (Gatherings for One Hundred Kaidan Tales), in which people told one hundred stories to induce a supernatural phenomenon, were common among all classes of people. The popularity of oral-derived literature, which reflected the popularity of *kaidan*, reached a peak in the middle of the eighteenth century. *Kaidan* told orally and in print were a favorite leisure activity for people living in Edo Japan. This paper attempts to elucidate the appeal of *kaidan* in the Edo period as a leisure activity that provided entertainment to the Japanese with (1) frightening parody, (2) explanations for the inexplicable events in daily life, (3) exoticism, and (4) mild criticisms of social and political institutions.

Keywords: *kaidan*—storytelling—*hyakumonogatari*—oral-derived literature—Edo

CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE widely refer to frightening ghost stories as *kaidan* 怪談. Though *kaidan* need not evoke fear in the minds of an audience, frequently there is a revenge motif with an element of horror. Etymologically, the character for *kai* 怪 in *kaidan* means “strange, mysterious, rare, or bewitching apparition.” *Dan* 談 in *kaidan* is similar to the Japanese words *hanashi* or *katari*, i.e., “talk,” or “recited narrative.” In other words, *kaidan* literally means “to narrate the strange.” The appellation “*kaidan*” does not appear in extant historical records until the early Edo period (1600–1867).¹ At this time, collections of oral-derived literature of the strange and mysterious known as *kaidanshū* 怪談集 came into their own because it became popular for people to get together to relate tales of the supernatural (TAKADA 1989a, 391–95).² Now, as in the past, *kaidan* are stories broadly modeled as tales of the supernatural, which are sometimes surrealistic and may strike us as strange, weird, and frightening. Some *kaidan* today still retain their oral heritage.

ORAL AND ORAL-DERIVED LITERATURE OF *K Aidan*

As the character *dan* (talk or recite) indicates, the oral elements in *kaidan* are important. The appearance of the term *kaidan* in the Edo period and its popularity through the Edo period can be attributed, in part, to the storytellers of an earlier age.

The development of a commercial economy in sixteenth-century Japan brought enhanced communication as the growing integration of a national economy exposed Japan’s urban culture to rural areas and vice versa. Traveling merchants, performers, travelers, and itinerant priests were popular agents of change who spread entertaining tales between the countryside and old and new urban centers. Sources of stories were as varied as the agents, from recent events in local areas to classical Chinese texts; and the tales included a wide range of topics from the strange and scary to the funny, silly, and exotic. The rise in popularity of this entertainment created a demand for professional storytellers. Some served as *otogishū* 御伽衆—the

professional storytellers who served provincial lords.³ As storytelling grew in its popularity, it became integrated with popular events, including village gatherings and religious events such as funerary watches and a ritual named *kōshinmachi* 庚申待, a nightlong vigil during which no one should sleep. Tales about the strange, weird, and/or frightening—*kaidan*—served to keep people awake particularly well on these occasions.⁴

The social stability at the beginning of the seventeenth century made the terror and death associated with civil war a thing of the past. Thus, people could regard terror and strange phenomena as entertainment. With this tendency, a gathering called *hyakumonogatari kaidankai* 百物語怪談会 (Gathering for One Hundred *Kaidan* Tales)⁵ became quite popular. It was believed that when a hundred *kaidan* stories were told at a midnight gathering, their telling would evoke a strange event. Probably reflecting the popularity of oral *kaidan*, the oral-derived literature of *kaidan* steadily grew in its popularity. The adoption of printing in the early seventeenth century made popular literature possible, and people could enjoy interesting stories orally and/or in print (KEENE 1976, 2). In the middle of the eighteenth century, the popularity of *kaidan* literature reached one of its peaks.

HYAKUMONOGATARI KAIKANKAI

TACHIKAWA Kiyoshi (1987, 354) suggests that the *hyakumonogatari kaidankai* were behind the thriving publications of collections of *kaidan* tales capped with a title of *hyakumonogatari* (One Hundred Tales). There is a format for telling these stories. Asai Ryōi 浅井了意 (d. 1691), a Buddhist priest and the author of a collection of *kaidan* tales entitled *Otogi bōko* 御伽婢子 (Hand Puppets, 1666), writes:

On a dark night, one puts a light on an *andon* [paper-covered lamp stand]. The paper for the *andon* should be pale colored. One hundred wicks are placed in the lamp, and every time a tale is told, one wick is pulled out. Gradually the room becomes darker and darker. The pale-color of the *andon* flickers in the room, and the atmosphere becomes ghostly. If stories continue to be told, it is claimed that a horrible and/or mysterious thing will happen without fail. (ASAI 1910, 145)

Wakan kaidan hyōrin 和漢怪談評林 (Comments on the Japanese-Chinese *Kaidan*, 1717) says the following about the origin of the gathering: “It is not certain when *hyakumonogatari kaidankai* first started nor who started them.... It does not appear in the dictionaries.”⁶ Its author explains about the appearance of the strange:

When the number of recounted tales reach one hundred, the night will already deepen; one's consciousness deteriorates, and one becomes sleepy. The light is covered by pale-colored paper. At first there are one hundred lights [in the room] and [the room is] bright, but gradually it becomes darker and foreboding. As sleepiness creeps in, one's state of mind becomes dreamy.... The purported experience of a few prompted others to attempt their contact with the supernatural by *kaidan*.⁷

The Preface to *Shokoku hyakumonogatari* 諸国百物語 (One Hundred Tales from Various Provinces, 1677), another collection of *kaidan*, explains that the origin of the book was a gathering for one hundred scary tales conducted by a masterless samurai named Takeda Nobuyuki in Shinano Province (present-day Nagano Prefecture). Nobuyuki and three other accompanying young samurai, we are told, got together on a rainy night to talk about all sorts of things. Nobuyuki suggested that they should try *hyakumonogatari* since from ancient times, when one told one hundred tales, strange things would happen without fail. They sat on a ring, placing a lamp with one hundred wicks in it.⁸ This “appeal to tradition” (BAUMAN 1984) is a key to oral performance. The Preface to *Shokoku hyakumonogatari* comments that nothing strange happened. A tale from a collection of *kaidan* entitled *Tonoigusa* とのい草 (another name for this work, written in 1660, is *Orogimonogatari* 御伽物語 [Nursery Tales]), on the other hand, describes that something strange did happen. Young men of full vigor got together one night to tell one hundred *kaidan* tales and see the strange conjured by their actions. At the end of the ninety-ninth tale, a big hand appears from the ceiling. When one of the men cuts the hand with one strike of his sword, it turned out to be a three-inch-long hand of a spider.⁹ Apparently people undertook gatherings for one hundred *kaidan* tales out of curiosity and for entertainment.

The popularity of gatherings for one hundred *kaidan* tales seems to have declined about the middle of the eighteenth century.¹⁰ But the books that included in their titles the term *hyakumonogatari* (an abbreviation of *hyakumonogatari kaidankai*) remained in print. *Kaidan* stories themselves were as popular as ever, possibly even more popular in print, for the publication of *kaidan* literature reaches its peak around this time (TACHIKAWA 1987, 359). Books on *kaidan* appeared in quick succession, including *Seiban kaidan jikki* 西播怪談実記 (True Records of *Kaidan* in the Western Parts of Harima Province, 1754), *Shokoku kaidanchō* 諸国怪談帳 (*Kaidan* Notes from Various Provinces, 1757), just to name two (NODA 1970, 49).

Tales of the supernatural with haunting elements have appealed to people all over the world and throughout time. The fascination with such tales

is partly due to the quest for stimulation, or a subconscious longing to associate with nature.¹¹ In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Japan, each Japanese would have reasons and expectations that would vary with their different socio-economic background and experience. Overall, however, the general appeal of *kaidan* appears to be fourfold: (1) fascination with the grotesque, (2) plausible explanations for unexplained common occurrences, (3) attraction to the exotic, and (4) social commentary.

FASCINATION WITH THE GROTESQUE

According to Mikhail M. BAKHTIN, carnival festivities were very important in the life of medieval man. Carnivalistic laughter was a significant part of life in medieval Europe, and these carnivals were sharply “distinct from the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonials.” The carnival experience “demanded ever changing, playful, undefined forms.... It is to a certain extent a parody of the extracarnival life, a ‘world inside out.’” Bakhtin stresses that laughter or folk humor denies, but that it also revives and renews at the same time (1984, 5–11).

One of the legacies of medieval European folk humor is what Bakhtin conditionally calls grotesque realism—“the images of the material bodily principle.” BAKHTIN explains the fundamental principle of grotesque realism as follows:

The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity.... Degradation here means coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time... it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. (1984, 19–21)

Though Bakhtin deals with medieval European tradition, it is useful and applicable here as a description of the experience of much popular culture in the Edo period.

For example, in a collection of *kaidan* entitled *Kii zōtanshū* 奇異雑談集 (Collection of Miscellaneous Strange Tales, ca. 1650s), there is a kind of parody of the deity of fortune 福の神. Usually, the image of the fortune deity, who brings fortune and blessings into a house, is that of a plump, smiling old man. Yet, the man who brings wealth in this story has neither a nose nor eyes, i.e., he is the degradation of a deity.¹² The story is told as an experience of a monk who went to a wealthy farmer’s house. After a maid served him a meal, the wife of the house came out and told the monk, “Though we are

well-off, my husband is mysterious and handicapped. [But] he is the good luck charm of this house and we are prosperous.” Then she guided the monk to her husband’s room, where everything was brilliantly decorated. Like a fortune deity enshrined in a special place, her husband was situated in a specifically bedecked quarter of the room. Her husband was dressed in gorgeous clothes. His build was slender and his skin color resembled that of cherry blossoms. His head, however, had a gourd-like shape with no eyes, nose, or mouth. Since there were no eyes, the monk considered that the splendid dress had no meaning to her husband. There were very small ears with big ear-holes on both sides of the face. On top of the head was a mouth like that of a crab. When the wife put rice into the mouth on the top of his head, the rice fell in while the mouth moved with a nervous twitch. The monk could hardly bear to look upon such a sight, so he left the house.¹³

As the monk (or narrator) commented, the sumptuous clothes worn by the mysterious man were of no use to the strange man because he did not have eyes to see them. In this sense the story could be taken as a parody of the rich who decorate themselves without appreciating real value. Though the husband is not a typical deity of fortune, he is an auspicious being who generates wealth and who symbolizes regeneration or renewal through the grotesque. The story shows, in effect, that people living in Edo Japan found entertainment in unconventional ideas. In the highly structured society of Edo-period Japan, which had a rigid class system, ideas outside the norm had appeal for those who felt trapped in the system.

The same work contains tales in which a monk transforms into a woman. When a certain monk named Bunchō was thirty-two years old, one day his penis felt terribly itchy. So he put a hot compress over it many times. While doing so, it fell off, along with his scrotum. The monk said, “I picked them up and looked at them. But as I found them useless, I threw them away. After that, a vulva formed, just like that of an ordinary woman. I then married and had two children.”¹⁴ Normally a monk strives for enlightenment, avoiding the secular life, but the monk in this story becomes heavily involved in the worldly life and for a monk to change into a woman is retrogressive from a Buddhist viewpoint. As revealed in the Buddhist expression *henjō nanshi* 變成男子 or changing from a female to a male to attain buddhahood, a woman cannot attain buddhahood unless she is reborn as a man first. By transforming into a woman, the monk has taken one step back. In this sense, the story is a parody of religious ideology and/or text. Yet, it is not entirely negative because after changing to a woman, the monk gives birth to two children. Again, the story shows a grotesque realism, and includes symbols of regeneration.

In the latter story, the monk is studious, and neither crooked nor lust-

ful. There is no cause and effect principle for him to change into a woman. The story is even somewhat humorous while being grotesque. Unlike supernatural tales of previous ages, one sees very few moral examples in these stories. The appeal fundamentally lies in how strange things can be. It is quite plausible that, like Bakhtin's explanation for European popular culture, the people of Edo Japan were also fascinated by this type of carnivalistic story.

Furthermore, in relation to the aforementioned grotesque realism, BAKHTIN writes about the Romantic grotesque that "[A]ll that is ordinary, commonplace, belonging to everyday life, and recognized by all suddenly becomes meaningless, dubious and hostile. Our own world becomes an alien world. Something frightening is revealed in that which was habitual and secure.... The images of Romantic grotesque usually express fear of the world and seek to inspire their reader with this fear" (1984, 39). The sudden change or alienation of the ordinary was frightening perhaps because people were unprepared to see anything ghostly in a routine activity or place. According to UCHIDA Tadayoshi, a scholar of cultural geography, the people living in Edo Japan considered mysterious occurrences to be associated with ordinary structures such as toilets, sheds, *kamado* 竈 (kitchen ranges), or *nando* 納戸 (storage rooms) (1990, 129).¹⁵ In one tale of *Shokoku hyakumonogatari*, an ordinary and indispensable place turns into a frightening realm. While returning from his outhouse, a man encountered a page who smiled at the man in a most peculiar way. Surprised, the man hurried to the main building and told people about the peculiar page. No sooner was the laughter of the page heard from the outhouse than the man died.¹⁶

Intangible entities such as *shūnen* 執念 (obsessions) are also frightening because they can make the familiar suddenly horrible by means of excessiveness. Love is another example. A collection of *kaidan* entitled *Shin otogi bōko* 新御伽婢子 (New Hand Puppets, 1683) contains a story about two women whose obsessive love for the same man ends in his gruesome death. It is a tale about a man in Kyoto who has a wife and a son. Because of his business, the man spends only one-fifth of each year in Kyoto and spends the rest of the year in Edo, where he secretly has another wife and son. Neither the Kyoto nor Edo wife knows of the other. One day, when the man leaves for Edo, his Kyoto wife complains to him that he does not spend enough time with her and that he should come back as soon as he can. He agrees. Arriving in Edo, his Edo wife grumbles that she has heard he keeps a woman in Kyoto. While she complains that he should not go to Kyoto any more, her face becomes demon-like. Fearing her, the man assures her that the rumor is wrong but runs back to Kyoto. On his way, he realizes that the Edo wife and her child are coming after him, and he hears the wife shout-

ing that she will never let him go. The man tries to escape from her but she soon catches up with him and grabs his right arm. Suddenly, his Kyoto wife appears and grabs his left arm. The angry Kyoto wife, who now appears as a demon, tries to drag him in the direction of Kyoto, while the Edo wife pulls him in the opposite direction toward Edo. Neither woman gives up, and finally, the man is physically torn in half. The women, each carrying half the man's body, depart in their respective directions and disappear.¹⁷ We thus see in this story that love, which should be all embracing, becomes a frightening obsession and changes the appearance of the two women into that of demons. Their obsession to be with the husband leads to his frightening end.

PLAUSIBLE EXPLANATIONS FOR UNEXPLAINED COMMON OCCURRENCES

Readers of *kaidan* also found in the stories cogent explanations for inexplicable events that they encountered in daily life, including the experience of being disoriented in a completely familiar environment. People still believed in the magic of the supernatural, and such simple disorientation was often attributed to the mischief of tricksters like foxes and raccoon-dogs (*tanuki* 狸).

In a collection of *kaidan* entitled *Taihei hyakumonogatari* 太平百物語 (One Hundred Tales in the Great Peace, 1732), there is a story about a doctor's disorientation. In a year when influenza and measles were prevalent, a doctor named Matsuoka Dōsetsu was visited at night. The visitor asked Dōsetsu to come with him to examine his son, who, the visitor said, had a terrible case of measles. Dōsetsu said that he would require five silver coins if the worst symptoms were gone that night, and then got in the palanquin prepared by the visitor. The visitor's house was a splendid mansion. As soon as Dōsetsu saw the mansion, he regretted asking for such a small amount of money. While Dōsetsu was examining the son, the child died. Yet, people attending the son begged Dōsetsu for medicine. So, Dōsetsu lowered his head to compound some medicine. When he looked up to hand out the medicine he had just mixed, there was nobody around him. Thinking it very odd, Dōsetsu went to examine his deceased patient again and found a stone image of Buddha, and instead of a mansion, he was in a grave yard with many stupas. Dōsetsu thought it must have been a fox's trick and ran home quickly. From then on, he decided that whatever the emergency, he would never go to a patient's house.¹⁸

There are many such tales on disorientation of varying degrees, and very frequently, it was considered to be a trickster's mischief. Generally speaking, characters in *kaidan* tales do not realize they have been the victims of mischief until the very end of the story. Tricksters often appear as foxes, but regardless of the manifestation of the mischievous spirit—raccoon-dog,

snake, spider, cat, or aged being—the stories have enough of what was perceived as reality in them that the supernatural was a plausible extension of that reality.

Supernatural explanations were also a way to rationalize extremely gifted people. As in the West, superhuman abilities were attributed to birth. The aforementioned collection of *kaidan* entitled *Tonoigusa* contains a tale about an excellent supporting actor (*waki* 脇) of Noh named Hazama. As the tale has it, he was born from the stupa of his dead mother. Before his inception, his father went to a different province to make a living. While Hazama's father was absent, his mother died from loneliness and the toil of farming. Her ghost, in her living shape, appeared at her husband's place to live with him and gave birth to Hazama. Three years after her death, a servant visited Hazama's father to inform him of his wife's death. Hazama's father was angered by the information, saying that she was living with him and had had a child. When Hazama's father looked for his wife, however, she had disappeared and only her stupa was left in the room. The servant recognized the stupa as that of his mistress. Hazama's father then realized that it was her ghost he had been living with who had given birth to a child. Hazama's remarkable acting skills were attributed to his special birth.¹⁹

If someone has supernatural origins, it explains the incredible ability of the individual. The aforementioned example may strike one as similar to tales in Japanese medieval literature about some religious power. Yet, unlike tales in the previous ages, the narrative emphasis in *kaidan* is clearly not on religious power and/or praise for religious efficacy, but on how a human being changed to a supernatural being and did something strange and mysterious.

Kaidan also explained strange phenomena rationally by frequently employing the theory of yin-yang 陰陽. For example, in the book entitled *Hyakumonogatari hyōban* 百物語評判 (Explanations to the Strange and Weird Tales, 1686),²⁰ Yamaoka Genrin 山岡元隣 (1631–1672), a widely recognized intellectual of the day, gives reasons as to why and how strange events happen. The phenomenon of *kamaitachi* 鎌鼬 (splitting of the skin that was widely believed to be caused by a whirlwind produced by weasels with supernatural powers), for instance, is explained as follows:

South is yang 陽 [positive element] and warm, therefore, things grow. North is yin 陰 [negative element] and cold, therefore, things diminish. This is an ongoing truth. Since a *kamaitachi* happened in the far north where *ki* 氣 [the energy] of killing the grass with cold air gathers, it must be the doing of *bakemono* 化け物 [goblins and apparitions] in the mountains and valleys. They do so by borrowing the power of the strong wind and cold air.²¹

Furthermore, Yamaoka Genrin gives the following account regarding ghosts:

When a person's energy (*ki*) declines, his shape 形 withers, and he dies of illness; it is like a fire disappearing in due course and no warm energy remaining in its ashes. Those who die with a grudge or by the sword are perishing while both energy and shape are still active. Their death is so sudden that it is like pouring water into the flaming fire—only energy remains.²²

Similarly, in the *Tonoigusa*, the narrator recounts unusual fires at the site of a battle ground. In 1634, when the narrator went to Wakae (in the eastern part of present-day Osaka) with his friends, he saw several brilliant flames about five feet high in front of him. Yet, the closer he and his friends approached the flames, the further the fires receded, maintaining their distance. The sight of the flames was just like the waves in the ocean. The man who led the party to this place explained that many dutiful and brave warriors had died there during the Battle of Osaka in the summer of 1615, and their souls were still burning.²³ Perhaps to help create a still more plausible atmosphere by exploiting widely held beliefs in the supernatural, the narrator comments that “it has been over twenty years since the battle, but because [the soldiers] souls still remain here, they continue flaring so brightly like that.... [I] returned home reciting the name of Buddha. I indeed saw this with my own eyes.”²⁴ As BAKHTIN states, “The work [i.e., tale] and the world represented in it enter the real world and enrich it, and the real world enters the work and its world as part of the process of its creation, as well as part of its subsequent life, in a continual renewing of the work through the creative perception of listeners and readers” (1981, 254). This was a society in which beliefs in the supernatural were quite familiar. With such a plausible and believable explanation, readers found the *kaidan* materials interesting, and to some extent realistic.

ATTRACTION OF THE EXOTIC

Another reason for the popularity of *kaidan* was the attraction of the exotic. The attraction was enhanced by blending *kaidan* with an exotic culture, in particular, China. During the Edo period, Chinese books were a major element in a secular intellectual expansion unmatched in any previous period of Japanese history. No doubt this is partly due to the fact that the Tokugawa government adopted Neo-Confucianism as the official ideology to buttress its political control. KŌDA Rohan writes that with the appearance of Ogyū Sorai 荻生徂徠 (1666–1728), an influential Confucian scholar, the influence

of Ming Confucianism became extremely popular, to the extent that some Japanese adopted Chinese names (1926, 15). Similarly, YAMAGUCHI Takeshi states that “Chinese culture and books were revered [in the Edo period].... For the people living in Edo Japan, China was unknown, profound, and remote. There was a general feeling that China’s many mysteries were not easily rationalized or comprehended by Japan’s standard of reality” (1933, 318). Since the Japanese in the Edo era were strictly banned from travel abroad, their adoration for China and its mysterious aura about which they heard or read much would have been greatly enhanced.

A number of *kaidan* support this observation. One example is a story in *Otogi atsugeseshō* 御伽厚化粧 (Nursery Makeup, 1734), a collection of *kaidan*.²⁵ The protagonist is the owner of an established sake shop, who has a treasured type of sake called “one-thousand-day sake.” This sake was brought to Japan from China generations earlier by one of his ancestors. It was said that if a man drank this sake, he would be intoxicated for 1,000 days. In order for the prized sake in this story to have a special aura, its origins had to be either Chinese, or a gift from a supernatural being. In his *Hyaku-monogatari hyōban*, Yamaoka Genrin cited various examples from Chinese sources to substantiate his point. Likewise, his student cited an example of a supernatural phenomenon from the Chinese classic *Zuo chuan* 左伝 (Zuo Commentary, ca. third century BC), and called the source authentic.²⁶

A great number of translations from Chinese supernatural literature are manifestations of such exoticism. One of the earliest known works that contains the word *kaidan* was by the Confucian physician Hayashi Razan 林羅山 (1583–1657); it was completed in 1627 or 1628 and entitled *Kaidan*, but became more popularly known as *Kaidan zensho* 怪談全書 (Complete Works of Strange Tales). This work in five volumes contains Japanese translations of thirty-two mysterious and fantastic tales that were originally written in classical Chinese.²⁷ While the third Shōgun, Tokugawa Iemitsu 徳川家光 (1604–1651) was ill, Razan, as a physician, related to the Shōgun stories of Chinese origin as entertainment (FUJI 1992). The stories in “Complete Works of Strange Tales of Earthly Paradise” that depict *tōgenkyō* 桃源郷, an unfamiliar and utopian Chinese setting where nobody ages, must have been quite appealing to the sick Shōgun Iemitsu as well as to Razan himself.

The unknown author of *Kū zōtanshū* writes: “There is a newly-imported book [from China] entitled *Jian deng xin hua* 剪燈新話 (New Tales Under the Lamplight). This is a book which collected strange and weird tales. Three tales from the work are presented here.... [I] shall soften the language of classical Chinese and record it in Japanese.”²⁸ This author seems to have been impressed by the fantastic events and strange customs in *Jian deng xin hua* (YAMAGUCHI 1927, 39). He incorporated an explanation of exotic

Chinese customs into his own text. For example, in the original Chinese text entitled *Mudan dengji* 牡丹灯記 (Record of the Peony Lantern), the opening goes: “When Fang Guozhen had occupied Eastern Zhejiang Province, every year on the day of *yuan xi*, a lantern festival was held for five days. People in the city could go and watch these lanterns.”²⁹ Since neither the Chinese lantern festival nor the word *yuan xi* was familiar to Japanese readers, the author of *Kii zōtanshū* translates as follows:

In Tang China, on the fifteenth day of the first month, there is the custom of lighting a fire and hanging lanterns of various shapes about the gate. [Chinese] men and women enjoy watching [the lanterns] and loitering till dawn like the Japanese at the Bon festival. There are three times a year when Heaven 天帝 descends from above to record the good and bad deeds of humans. These are called “the days of three *yuan* 元 descent.” The fifteenth day of the first month is called *shang yuan* 上元. It is also called *yuan xiao* 元宵.... Therefore, in Tang China, people light a fire at the gate and worship Heaven.³⁰

The conscientious explanation helps make an unfamiliar custom comprehensible to many Japanese readers, and remains true to the exotic atmosphere of the story.

SOCIO-POLITICAL COMMENTARY

The last major appeal of *kaidan* could be its potential to act as a literary vehicle to make indirect comments on political and/or societal institutions. Tzvetan TODOROV writes that a reason for writing fantastic stories is that “for many authors, the supernatural was merely a pretext to describe things they would never have dared mention in realistic terms” (1973, 158). UEDA Akinari 上田秋成 (1734–1809), the author of the nine short stories of the supernatural entitled *Ugetsu monogatari* 雨月物語 (Tales of Moonlight and Rain, 1776) writes,

What is *monogatari* 物語 (tale)? In China, too, its equivalent solely concerns itself with allegory. Although there is no truth in it, an author’s concern is expressed without fail. Sometimes an author laments the insincerity of the world, other times the nation’s extravagance. However, considering the force of current time, and fearing the displeasure of the people of high rank, an author would set the story as an affair of the past to veil the present. (1992, 65)³¹

Interestingly, all nine stories of *Ugetsu monogatari* are set in the past. Under

the strict (but random) censorship of the military government, some *kaidan* were possibly used to express and examine political and societal ills. Edicts against the treatment of current events in books were issued in 1684 (RUBIN 1984, 17), and a later edict, issued in 1722, prohibited writings on heterodoxy, pornography, and writings which negatively reflect upon the house of illustrious samurai, or anything about the Tokugawa Shogunate family (HAMADA 1967, 35–37). The effect of these edicts was that any criticism of society, however minor, could be prohibited on the grounds that it was a criticism against the Tokugawa family or the major military lords which governed Japanese society.

Yet, these edicts were not readily obeyed. One story from a *kaidan* collection entitled *Inu hariko* 狛張子 (Paper Puppy, 1692) describes the extravagant lifestyle of Imagawa Ujizane 今川氏真, a military lord of the sixteenth century:

When [Imagawa Ujizane] heard about treasures from China and Japan, he would purchase them without heeding the price... the expenditure for luxury was limitless. Yet wealth does not fall from the sky or grow out of the earth. It is extracted from the peasants. He burdened the peasants with heavy taxes and corvee; he treated them like dust.³²

(YAMAGUCHI 1927, 331)

SAKAMAKI Kōta interprets this passage as a criticism of the political institution in the Edo period, for though the time of the story is set in the past, the dynamics of the system, i.e., extravagance of the lords and their harsh treatment of the peasants who supported the system, are fundamentally the same as that of the contemporary society (1990, 163).

Similarly, a story entitled *Kibitsu no kama* 吉備津の釜 (Cauldron of Kibitsu)³³ insinuates criticism of a social institution, namely, marriage. The story describes a love triangle of a female character wedded to a son of good family through an arranged marriage. While alive she was a model wife—beautiful, kind, and accomplished. Mortally broken hearted when her husband abandons her for another woman, she became a vengeful spirit—haunting, gruesome, and deadly to her husband. OGURA Reiichi sees the marriage between the heroine and her deceitful husband as both utilitarian and selfish. The mismatch of the characters is of minimal concern. The fact that the husband is licentious, while the heroine is well-educated, beautiful, and filial is totally ignored (1992, 91). Thus, OGURA states that *Kibitsu no kama* is a story that severely criticizes the general marriage system, which gives first consideration to the name of the family, ignores love, and allows men to have mistresses (1992, 91).

Entering the Meiji era (1868–1912), many intellectuals interpreted the supernatural as unrealistic and/or unenlightening. Sanyūtei Enchō 三遊亭円朝 (1839–1900), an oral storyteller of the modern age, famous for his *kaidan* narratives, including *Kaidan botan dōrō* 怪談牡丹灯籠 (Strange Tale of Peony Lantern), lamented that “the teachers of the Age of Enlightenment (i.e., the Meiji period) thought that the supernatural was the product of the mind, and *kaidan* an extension of that neuropathy.”³⁴ However, old customs and beliefs were difficult to dispel. Many rural Japanese continued to believe in fox possession into the modern era. For example, in 1922, the *Iwate Mainichi Shinbun*, a newspaper in northeastern Japan, reported a case of fox possession, and Mock JOYA noted that “modern city folks laugh at such stories, but many old men will narrate their own experiences of having been bewitched by foxes” (1960b, 15).³⁵

At the dawn of the new millennium, beliefs in the supernatural are certainly not the same as they were during the Edo period. Yet, the vogue of *Gakko no kaidan* 学校の怪談 and other *kaidan* magazines, demonstrate *kaidan* is still very popular in Japan,³⁶ suggesting that people in contemporary Japan enjoy the frightening and grotesque with enthusiasm just as they did in the Edo period. Japanese today, however, do not find *kaidan* as believable as in the Edo period when *kaidan* stories were regarded as plausible explanations as well as sources of entertainment employed by intellectuals to explain strange phenomena. The role of *kaidan* as expedient means for covertly expressing social and political criticism has also decreased since free speech is now legally guaranteed. While *kaidan* may be still pregnant with social commentary, contemporary Japanese society is no longer a rigid class system in which those who criticize governmental authority risk execution or even milder forms of punishment.

Because travel abroad was forbidden in the Edo period, there was a heightened perception of foreign lands, particularly China, as exotic places where mysterious things were believed to happen. After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, however, the Japanese reverence for mysterious exotica that was largely associated with China was replaced by that of the West. When modern Japanese became free to travel internationally, exotic images of foreign lands probably became less powerful than they once were.

Although less relevant for the popularity of *kaidan* today, the strong popularity of *kaidan* during the Edo period, both in oral mediums and print, may perhaps be equally attributed to their frightening elements, explanations for the inexplicable events in daily life, exoticism, and/or mild criticism of social and political institutions.

NOTES

1. One of the earliest examples of literature bearing the name of *kaidan* is entitled *Kaidan*, though it is more popularly known as *Kaidan zensho* (Complete Works of Strange Tales). The work *Kaidan* is a translation of strange and mysterious Chinese tales by Hayashi Razan (1583–1657) that was completed in 1627 or 1628.

2. Prior to the Edo period, written stories that fit the *kaidan* mold were included in literature, but as one part of a larger work. *Kaidan* was not identified as an individual genre. It was only during the Edo period that these stories were collected, compiled, and published under the rubric of *kaidan* (TAKADA 1989a, 391–95).

3. *Hanashi* はなし (talks) by *otogishū* were very popular during the *Sengoku jidai* 戦国時代 (Age of Civil Wars, 1467–1573). According to KUWATA Tadachika, their origin lies in the stories told before and after battles because they frequently refer to military undertakings. Whatever the contents were, the main purpose of the stories lay in the unification of thoughts among men of all ranks (1942, 3).

4. TAKADA Mamoru writes that oral-derived literature of *kaidan* was a natural outgrowth of an oral tradition that served the demand for such entertainment (1989a, 394–95). Clearly, however, the role of the storytellers of a previous age was significant in the formation of *kaidan*, but oral traditions are different from literary ones. In an oral tradition, the story is supplemented by the tellers' gestures, intonation, facial expressions, and the tellers' ability to spontaneously interact with the audience. If storytellers were so inclined, they could tailor their story to suit each audience, its aptitude, attitude, and atmosphere. Rarely does literature have this advantage. Extratextual context is lacking for writers who, therefore, must provide the context for the absent readers (ONG 1982, 102). In writing a story, the writer has to closely examine the story as a societal phenomenon and give more universality to it (MORIYAMA 1965, 39). On the other hand, an advantage of literature, as Walter J. ONG writes, is that "The writer finds his written words accessible for reconsideration, revision, and other manipulation until they are finally released to do their work. Under the author's eyes the text lays out the beginning, the middle and the end, so that the writer is encouraged to think of his work as a self-contained, discrete unit, defined by closure" (1982, 148).

5. For more information on *hyakumonogatari kaidankai*, see TACHIKAWA 1979.

6. Quoted in TACHIKAWA 1979, 23. According to Tachikawa Kiyoshi, the first appearance of the word *hyakumonogatari* 百物語 (one hundred tales) in literature would be in 1659 with the publication of *Hyakumonogatari*. It should be noted that this *Hyakumonogatari* is not a collection of *kaidan* but rather of funny tales. Although the book *Hyakumonogatari* contains a story about the gathering for one hundred *kaidan* tales, the origin of the gatherings is not explained, for by this time it is considered as an established custom (TACHIKAWA 1979, 28).

The taxonomy of books in the early Edo period placed both funny stories called *shōwa* 笑話, and *kaidan* under the rubric of *hanashi*, for they were all considered miscellaneous stories. Gradually these miscellaneous stories were divided into *shōwa* and *kaidan* (TACHIKAWA 1979, 42).

7. Quoted in TACHIKAWA 1979, 20.

8. *Shōkoku hyakumonogatari* is contained in TACHIKAWA 1987.

9. *Hyakumonogatari shite kumo no ashi o kiru koto* (Telling One Hundred *Kaidan* Tales and Cut a Spider's Leg) in *Tonoigusa*, included in TAKADA 1989a.

10. Kizaki Masatoshi 木崎正敏 (1689–1766) writes the following in his *Shūi zatsuwa* 拾遺雑話 (Gleanings from Idle Talks, 1757): "recently it is rare for people to gather for one hundred *kaidan* tales." See TACHIKAWA 1979, 109.

11. According to MIYATA Noboru, a folklorist, "a strange and incomprehensible world is

filled with the mysterious and fantastic, which, relatively speaking, reflects the imagination of the urban populace rather than the rural. The supernatural is deeply rooted in a junction of nature and civilization; the supernaturalistic phenomena are depicted in the subconscious mind of people belonging to the civilization" (1992, 56).

12. MATSUDA Osamu writes that "Physically deformed persons were considered to be deities and spirits precisely because their deformities were both sacred and profane" (1993, 303).

13. *Hito no omote ni mehana nakushite, kuchi itadaki no ue ni arite, mono o kū koto* (A Man Who Has No Eyes or Nose, But Has a Mouth on Top of His Head) in *Kii zōtanshū*, included in TAKADA 1989a.

14. *Gōshū Edamura nite kyakusō niwaka ni onna ni narishi koto, narabi ni Chizōbō no koto* (A Visiting Priest Suddenly Transformed into a Woman at Eda Village in the Province of Ōmi; About Priest Chizōbō) in *Kii zōtanshū*, included in TAKADA 1989a.

15. Uchida also writes that in the city of Edo the occurrence of miraculous happenings was concentrated in the downtown Asakusa area, while strange phenomena related to foxes and raccoon-dogs (*tanuki*) were centered in the uptown area, especially around the artificial hills in the gardens of the residences of daimyo. He concludes that Edo residents considered those places strange and mysterious (UCHIDA 1990). Also, MIYATA Noboru writes that people in the city of Edo believed a special power existed where different spaces overlapped. Such places included crossroads (*tsuji* 辻), roadsides, ridges, slopes, bridges, beaches, and riverbeds (1992, 56).

16. *Secchin no bakemono no koto* (A Goblin in a Toilet) in *Shokoku hyakumonogatari*, included in TACHIKAWA 1987.

17. *Ryōsai otto o saku* (Two Wives Tear Their Husband Apart) in *Shin otogi bōko*, included in TAKADA 1989b.

18. *Matsuoka Dōsetsu kitsune ni bakasareishi koto* (Matsuoka Dōsetsu Being Duped by Foxes) in *Taihei hyakumonogatari*, included in TACHIKAWA 1987.

19. *Sotoba no ko o umu koto* (A Stupa Giving Birth to a Child) in *Tonoigusa*, TAKADA 1989a.

20. *Hyakumonogatari hyōban* was compiled by either a student or the eldest son of Yamaoka Genrin and printed fourteen years after Genrin's death. The work is in the form of a question and answer session between Genrin and his students. The questions posed by the students reveal contemporary views of supernatural beings and the nature of their interests. Its topics concern supernatural beings such as ghosts, *oni* 鬼 (goblins), and *tengu* 天狗 (flying goblins).

21. See *Hyakumonogatari hyōban* in KOKUSHO KANKŌKAI 1970, 3–4. TACHIKAWA observes that by offering a rational explanation for this case, Genrin is endorsing the popular belief in *kamaitachi* (1979, 58, 61, and 71).

22. See *Hyakumonogatari hyōban* in KOKUSHO KANKŌKAI 1970, 17–18.

23. The battle was fought in Osaka in the summer of 1615 between the Toyotomi family, whose deceased head, Hideyoshi, helped unify Japan, and the Tokugawa family, who had founded the Shogunate in Edo in 1603. The Toyotomi family was eradicated in this battle.

24. *Senjō no ato hi moyuru koto* (Fires Burning at a Battlefield Site) in *Tonoigusa*, TAKADA 1989a.

25. *Otogi atsugeshō* is included in KOKUSHO KANKŌKAI 1970.

26. Genrin's student asks: "How do you explain things such as the wailing sounds of humans at the site of a vacant battleground? Such happenings are seen in the original sources. *Zuo chuan*, for example, records the story of Peng Sheng who, after his death, became an avenging ghost." See *Hyakumonogatari hyōban* in KOKUSHO KANKŌKAI 1970, 17–18.

27. *Kaidan* was published by a Kyoto bookseller in 1703, forty-one years after the death of Razan, under the title *Kaidan zensho*. The bookseller/publisher printed the work for commercial sale and probably benefited from the popularity of *kaidan* at the time (FUJI 1992, 67). *Kaidan zensho* is included in YAMAGUCHI Takeshi's *Kaidan meisakushū* (1927).

28. This is stated in *Ane no konpaqu imōto no karada o kari otto ni chigirishi koto* (The Elder Sister's Spirit Borrows Her Younger Sister's Body and Marries Her Husband) in *Kii zōtanshū*, TAKADA 1989a.

29. Quoted in YAMAGUCHI 1927, 31.

30. *Nyonin shigo otoko o hitsugi no naka ni hikikomi korosu koto* (A Woman who Dragged a Man into a Coffin and Killed Him) in *Kii zōtanshū*, TAKADA 1989a.

31. This was also a standard form in Kabuki plays. The playwrights of Kabuki displace the story in time so that its commentary on the present is hidden.

32. *Imagawa Ujizane botsuraku* (Decline of Imagawa Ujizane) in *Inuhariko*, included in YAMAGUCHI 1927, 331.

33. *Kibitsu no kama* is included in *Ugetsu monogatari* (Tales of Moonlight and Rain, 1776). For a full translation of *Ugetsu monogatari* with an introduction and annotation, see Leon Zolbrod's *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1974.

34. Quoted in SEKIYAMA 1973, 345.

35. Also see JOYA's jotting on *Kitsunetsuki* (1960a, 136–37).

In the Province of Izumo (present-day Shimane Prefecture), there existed a strong belief in *kitsune-mochi* 狐持ち, people who presumably manipulate foxes for personal gain. Those who were suspected of being *kitsune-mochi* had no prospect for marriage and were barred from property transactions. The folklorist YANAGITA Kunio relays a story about a family of *kitsune-mochi* whose house was burned to the ground by villagers (1973, 381). The Matsue clan in Izumo Province had issued a ban against such superstition as *kitsune-mochi* in 1790, but to no avail. They executed the leading exorcists of *kitsune-mochi*, but even in 1844 the Matsue clan still had to tell people to report for punishment if anyone talked of severing one's relation because of the rumor of *kitsune-mochi*. Superstitions die hard and malicious customs relating to *kitsune-mochi* lasted well into the modern period (FUJIOKA 1981, 116–17).

36. NAKAMURA Mareaki asserts that the *kaidan* boom such as *Gakkō no kaidan* reflects people's anxiety in a socially transitional period (1994).

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