

**Why so sad, Sadako?**  
**An investigation into the development of the traditional  
Japanese female vengeance ghost from ancient myth to  
modern day cinema production**

*Emma Newbery*

**Abstract**

In this paper, I examine the evolution of the archetypal vengeful female ghost figure, otherwise known as the 'yurei', in the last century within Japanese literature and cinema. I feel this characters constant reappearance throughout the last century of Japanese horror cinema signals a persistent return to the traditional ways of feudal Japan by filmmakers, and symbolises the constant influence Japanese myths, and as such its ancient ideology, still has within horror cinema.

I will begin in the early 1900's, considering the literary works of Lafcadio Hearn and Akineda Ueda; work based on the Japanese common people's folklore, and also influenced by famous ukiyo-e (trans: "Pictures of the Floating World") pieces,<sup>1</sup> notably Utagawa Yoshiiku's Hyaku Monogatari (trans: "One Hundred Ghost Stories") series of prints (1833-1904).<sup>2</sup>

**Key Words:** Japan, horror, j-horror, cinema, film, mythology, yurei, ghost, sadako, kaidan.

\*\*\*\*\*

**1. Introduction**

...But these stories [of demons] are all of women; I have never heard one of a man. It is, after all, because of their perverse nature that women turn into shameless demons.<sup>3</sup>

Sadako: a young female Japanese girl cursed from birth with the ability to take the lives of whoever cast their innocent eyes upon her innermost thoughts and feelings, immortalised within an inconspicuous VHS cassette. Her appearance; the long white robe, the straggly black dripping hair hanging over her face, her shuddering and stunted staggering, is perhaps more notorious than her actions and underlying motivations, revealed through the course of four films; Nakata Hideo's *Ring* (1998), Iida Joji's *Rasen*

An investigation into the development of the traditional Japanese female vengeance ghost from ancient myth to modern day cinema production

(trans: *The Spiral*) (1998), Nakata's *Ring 2* (1999), and Tsuruta Norio's prequel, *Ring 0*.

But Sadako's appearance is not unique to this anthology. These now conventional aesthetic traits, adopted by Shimizu's *Ju-On* (2002 onwards) series, Nakata's own *Honogurai mizo no soko kara* (trans: *Dark Water*) (2003) and Miike's *Chakushin Ari* (trans: *One Missed Call*) (2003) to name but a few, find their roots within Japanese folklore and legends; a commonly-known fact discussed by many academics, significantly Collette Balmain, both within her book entitled *Introduction to Japanese Horror Cinema* (2009) and multiple conference papers, notably 'Vengeful Virgins in White: Female Monstrosity in Asian Cinema' (2004) in which she argues that the vengeful female figure in Japanese horror portends unique cultural and ancient myths and as such cannot be successfully removed from Japan for the purposes of Western academic discussion.

But to assume that only the *appearance* of the modern-day 'yurei' can be linked to Japanese legends and folklore I believe sells short the impact traditional myths, legend and folklore has on contemporary Japanese horror cinema; indeed, the very motivations and underlying reasons behind the female ghosts actions and their very being can be linked to the ancient tales of the Edo period, focusing on the thematic as opposed the aesthetic.

## 2. Japanese Mythology: Great and Little Traditions

Japanese mythology sets out a "template for doing"<sup>5</sup> within its themes for both the characters of old and their cinematic descendants, and these thematic mythological elements occur and continue to appear throughout the media of Japan, Ashekenazi, (2003) writes, "...in the form of films, historical series, samurai drama, advertisements and comic books"<sup>6</sup>:

Myths are ways in which people explain to themselves who they are, what they are doing, and why. Though myth does all of these things, the corpus of myth, however contradictory and fragmented, offers individuals an inventory of explanations about how they themselves came into being as the end product of a lengthy (therefore, respectable, worth adhering to and defending), process<sup>7</sup>.

In Ashekenazi's *Handbook of Japanese Mythology* (2003) the term, 'Japanese Mythology' is itself debated, considering what 'myth' actually is. Believing this term to encompass folklore, ghost stories and the actual myth, he argues that the three together form what we know today as Japanese

mythology; all consisting of beliefs regarding the origins, customs and culture of the Japanese people which, to many, are often unquestioned, and due to their other-worldly and larger-than-life narratives, are unquestionable<sup>8</sup>. But Japan's mythology is as dualistic in nature as Japan's popular culture today; a duality Martinez highlights in the introduction to his edited text, The Worlds of Japanese Popular Culture (1998), when considering which 'Japan' will be examined within the book: “[i]s it urban or rural Japan, the Japan of small nuclear families or of the single young woman? Is their one Japanese society?”<sup>9</sup>

Drawing upon US anthropologist Robert Redfield's work in Mexico, introduced in Tepoztlan, a Mexican Village: A Study of Folk Life (1930), Ashekenazi divides Japanese mythology into two categories: 'Great Tradition'; the mythology of the elite - printed myths established by the elite which glorify the nation, its religion and culture, to create the notion of a unified civilization under one ideology, and 'Little Tradition'; the mythology of the common people shared in small, self-contained communities, centred on themes of family, social roles, agriculture and health.

Michiko Iwasaka and Barre Toelken's Ghosts and the Japanese: Cultural Experience in Japanese Death Legends (1994) focuses purely on 'Little Traditions', the folklore of the Japanese common people, heavily influenced by Buddhist teachings from India and China, and collected orally; a focus not without its problems, such as certain beliefs and customs varying from village to village, and some villages tales containing underlying meanings specific to the community which is either misunderstood or invisible to the collector.<sup>10</sup> Also, as the majority of folklore is performed orally, many collectors, Iwasaka and Toelken point out, failed to note the tellers emotions, non-verbal communication and expressions in the process of converted oral into print, therefore perhaps losing the very thing which makes 'Little Traditions' so dissimilar to the elites 'Great Traditions'.<sup>11</sup>

The 'Great Tradition' was developed by the elite and manifested in two texts: The Kojiki: Records of Ancient Matters (presented to the imperial court in AD. 712), and Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from Earliest Times to AD. 697, (completed in AD. 720), commissioned by the Yamato state (the ruling kingdom from 500 – 781.AD) in a bid to control its newly-conquered towns and counties by religion: "...the local cult of the Yamato state became the paramount religious system ... their myths and rituals became absorbed into or made to align with the imperial Great Tradition",<sup>12</sup> and this amalgamation of local and Great myths became immortalised in the two aforementioned texts.

The Kojiki, one of the pair of oldest surviving Japanese books, focuses on the legends of the Gods and explaining the 'honke' (the imperial household line descending from the Sun Goddess and founder, Amaterasu-omikami to the emperors in AD 700's),<sup>13</sup> and Japan's native religious beliefs,

An investigation into the development of the traditional Japanese female vengeance ghost from ancient myth to modern day cinema production

---

known as Shinto. First published in this translation in 1896, The Nihongi includes a history of Shinto, variations on the basic myths and legends of the nation, all the while recounting the Asuka period (553-645 A.D), when the teachings of the Buddha from India entered Japan from China via Korea<sup>14</sup> signalling a break away from the Chinese culture dominating Japan at that time; the kingdom striving to produce an historic account of Japan free from Chinese and Indian influences; "... [i]n this work the Japanese are seen looking at themselves for the first time".<sup>15</sup> It rejects Chinese notions of a mans life being rules by natural law rather than free will, Indian beliefs which held society in low regard and saw only its gradually decline into decay, and harks back to the vernacular ways of the Shinto religion.

Ashekenazi divides the source of Japanese myths into three categories: the powerful (the creators of the Great Traditions but few in number), the powerless (those of the Little Tradition making up 90% of the Japanese population in ancient times), and the outsiders / rovers (travellers and traders who collect tales from all their destinations and cause the cross-cultural sharing of similar narratives and underlying themes). The powerless, their self-sufficiency evident in their folklore, Ashekenazi writes, created strange and fantastical tales filled with fox ghosts, spirits, ghosts, goblins and all manner of supernatural beings; beings which could only be dealt with by the village people or Buddhist monks, relying on prayer, cunning and intelligence, and not the outside government powers.<sup>16</sup> Due to the popularity of ghost lore and 'kaidan' tales embedded in the 'common-people's' folklore, and that Hearn's and Akinari's work is also based on folklore, orally recounted and collected, that this paper will focus on the 'Little Traditions' of Japan.

### 3. The Japanese ghost

Before appreciating the links between the ghosts of old and modern-day Japan, one first needs to comprehend the beliefs surrounding the Japanese ghost. Lafcadio Hearn's Kwaidan is perhaps the most famous collection of Japanese 'kaidan' (trans: ghost stories) from 19<sup>th</sup> century Japan, most of which are taken from old Japanese books including the Hyaku-Monogatari (trans: "One Hundred Ghost Stories");<sup>17</sup> the very text Utagawa Yoshiiku's 'Hyaku Monogatari' series of woodblock prints were based, and oral recounts from Japanese common people; tales which serve to teach the Japanese about their ghostly companions, their behaviour and beliefs:

---

If any person be killed while feeling strong resentment, the ghost of that person will be able to take vengeance upon the killer” (exert from ‘Diplomacy’).<sup>18</sup>

“...the last wish or promise of anybody who dies in anger is generally supposed possess a supernatural force” (exert from ‘Of a Mirror and a Bell’).<sup>19</sup>

Ross, in *Supernatural and Mysterious Japan* (1996), writes that powerful emotions, such as hate, revenge, sorrow and jealousy, cause a Japanese soul to transform into an avenging spirit (known as an ‘onyrou’)<sup>20</sup> whilst residing in the state of limbo, and their emotions compel them to return the realm of the living until something or someone releases them so that they may continue their journal to eternity.<sup>21</sup> But other emotions, such as a feeling of debt towards their family and loved ones, has been known to cause many souls to return to the living to fulfil their debts, Iwasaka and Toelken (1994), write.<sup>22</sup> The Japanese spirit, existing in the ‘anoyo’ (“the world over there”) as opposed to the ‘konoyo’ (“this world here”), still maintains a connection to their family and an interest in their welfare and the survival of their family name.<sup>23</sup> As such, before the spirit is fully emerged in the ‘anoyo’ which takes up to 49 days, the being can be called back or return by their own desires to complete unfinished business, unfulfilled obligations, seek vengeance, or to request further rituals and offerings to assist their journey into the ‘anoyo’.<sup>24</sup> All these attributes of the Japanese ghost, many in stark contrast to Western supernatural beliefs, and the understanding of these traits, is essential to fully appreciate the cultural role the ‘kaidan’ played and continues to play in Japanese society:

In other words, it is not enough to simply acknowledge that the Japanese may believe in ghosts; ghosts are thought to express certain dilemmas which require culturally acceptable solutions. It is the values represented by these problems and reflected in their resolutions that the legends dramatize.<sup>25</sup>

#### **4. The ‘yurei’s’ evolution from myth to cinema**

The female vengeance ghost; her appearance, motivations and themes feature prominently in many ‘kaidan’ works of literature, art and theatre of the Edo period, establishing conventions which would later be adopted by young film directors to scare the youth whilst all the time subconsciously reminding and enforcing upon the spectators their history, their origins, and the ancient social rules and ideologies once so prolific in

An investigation into the development of the traditional Japanese female  
vengeance ghost from ancient myth to modern day cinema production

ancient Japan, perhaps reminding each member of the behaviour expected of them when identifying as a Japanese individual.

The opening paragraph of Akinari's 'The Kibitsu Cauldron' featured in *Tales of Moonlight and Rain* (2007) originally published in 1776, epitomises the ancient prejudices against women, explains the female ghost in Japan, and also offers the reader a insight into the social morals and teachings embedded within the tales of the 'yurei':

A jealous wife in intractable, but with age one knows her merits.'  
Alas! Whose words are these? Even if the harm she does is mild, she interferes with making a living and ruins everything ... and when the harm is severe, she loses her family, brings down the realm [aka Japan], and everywhere becomes a laughingstock. There is no telling how many people since ancient times have suffered this poison. The kind who, after death, vents her wrath by turning into a serpent or a violent thunderbolt will never rest ... The husband who behaves uprightly and instructs his wife carefully can surely escape this affliction; and yet with some trivial thing, he will incite her perverse nature and bring grief upon himself. It is said that 'what controls a bird is the human will; what controls a wife is her husband's manliness.' Truly, this is so.<sup>26</sup>

Misogynist attitudes dominant Japanese folklore; tales of heroic samurais and brave Buddhist monks juxtaposed against love-sick, irrational and weak females fills the pages of Hearn and Akinari's texts. Smith's *Ancient tales and folklore of Japan* (1995) further illustrates these earlier Japanese gender issues:

Women are queer things, and, as the saying goes, when you see water running up hill and hens laying square eggs, you may expect to see a truly honest-minded woman (exert from 'The Kakemono Ghost of Aki Province').<sup>27</sup>

Stabbing her five or six times he did so, and then moved away. Rukugo, resuming his way homewards, thought what a good friend must be the man who had killed the unfaithful wide. A bad woman justly rewarded with death, he thought (exert from 'The Snow Tomb').<sup>28</sup>

Many of the Edo 'kaidan' tell of males dominating powerless females in life, but it is death that the roles become reversed and the females

return as powerful supernatural forces to exact revenge on those she feels wronged her whilst she still lived. These tales contain the very foundations of modern-day Japanese 'kaidan' horror cinema both thematically and aesthetically, though somewhat developed for the contemporary audience members.

The artists of Edo, Ross (1996) writes, created the now infamous image of the 'yurei': "...a fragile form with long flowing hair ... [d]ressed in pale or white clothing".<sup>29</sup> One ghostly tale of female vengeance which perhaps solidified the image and traits of the 'yurei' is Oiwa, the tortured wife featured in Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan (trans: The Ghost Story of Yotsuya), taken from the Kabuki script penned by Tsuruya Nanboku first performed in 1821 and seen on the Kabuki stages of Japan repeatedly since that time.<sup>30</sup> The very opening of the tale, recounted by Ross (1996), strikes a cord with any spectator familiar with Nakata's depiction of Sadako:

Some say she walks the streets of Tokyo, a forlorn figure in white, her long hair hiding her face. As she approaches, she suddenly reveals her horribly scarred features, a face twisted by death agonies.<sup>31</sup>

Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan tells of Iemon; a ronin in hard times, and his sweet wife Oiwa. Iemon is lured into marrying the granddaughter of his rich Japanese neighbour, who has fallen in love with Iemon. The rich family and Iemon attempted to poison Oiwa and kill their son to clear the path for the new marriage, but the poison only disfigured her. Upon seeing her face melting, her hair falling out, and realising her husband's betrayal, Oiwa died and rose as a 'yurei' to exact vengeance on her husband. Iemon, tormented by the ghost of his wife, was driven insane, haunted by Oiwa's disfigured face which appeared upon all manners of inanimate objects, as well as on the face of his new wife, resulting in Iemon's swift slaughter of his blushing bride, and the eventual vengeance Oiwa sought, delivered to Iemon by the hands of her loyal brother.<sup>32</sup>

Parallels between many contemporary Japanese 'yurei' and the doomed Oiwa can be found here; perhaps the most significant is between this tale and Shimizu's *Ju-On* narrative. In Shimizu's tale, Kayako's husband, Takeo Saeki, discovers her unfaithfulness and in an act of rage murders her and their son Toshio.<sup>33</sup> In Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan Iemon instructed the masseur to create the illusion of a love affair with Oiwa, thus tainting her with the stigma of being an unfaithful wife and providing Iemon with reason enough to kill her, as was law in ancient feudal Japan.<sup>34</sup> Both females transform into 'yurei', fuelled by their desire for vengeance for both themselves and their sons; Oiwa against her husband, and Kayako against

An investigation into the development of the traditional Japanese female vengeance ghost from ancient myth to modern day cinema production

any unlucky individual who entered her family home as, Iwasaka and Toelken (1994) write:

[i]f the deceased has been wrongfully treated, consciously injured, murdered, insulted, or the like, the ghost may wreak vengeance on the wrongdoer – or by extension, the culprit’s family, clan, village or region, even for generations (just as there are no limits for the debt to be paid, there are also none for some kinds of vengeance).<sup>35</sup>

Not only does Kayako’s behaviour hark back to this famous Kabuki play, so does her appearance. Upon returning to seek her vengeance, Kayako transformed into a gaping and gasping being often seen blue in the face alongside her similarly blue son Toshio, perhaps a result of Toshio being drown and Kayako suffocating on her own blood, or does this too hark back to Kabuki traditions? Ross (1996) writes that in Kabuki, ghosts had pale blue faces, and that the colour blue signifies death, pointing to the spirit as it leaves a newly dead body in the form of a blue ball of flames so named a ‘hito-dama’.<sup>36</sup> Traditional Kabuki make-up for ghosts features significant lines on characters face, and blue lines (‘ai guma’) signify an evil ghostly character.<sup>37</sup>



‘Kayako’ *Ju-On: The Grudge* make-up (2003, Shimizu).<sup>38</sup>



The ‘ai guma’ Kabuki face up design.<sup>39</sup>

It is not only Oiwa’s behaviour which can be seen to echo in the actions of some modern-day ‘yurei’; her appearance, made manifest in the classic ukiyo-e woodblock printworks, signals significant similarities

between this historic female figure and the some of the infamous female villains of present-day Japanese horror entertainment:



'The Ghost of Oiwa' by Shunkosai Hokushu.<sup>40</sup>



'Sadako' *Ring* (1998, Nakata)<sup>41</sup>

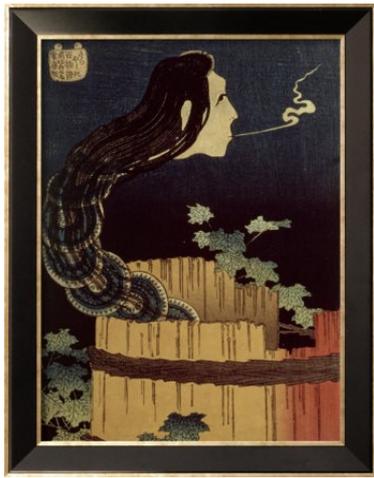


'Oiwa' by Utagawa Toyokuni III.<sup>42</sup>



'Maria' *Chakushin Ari* (2003,

Another ancient tale often linked to Sadako in particular is *The Dish Mansion at Banchō*, otherwise known as *Banchō Sarayashiki*, a popular tale within Japanese theatrical and artistic forms. The story itself has many versions; the folk version tells of a beautiful servant girl, Okiku, who resisted the seduction of her employee, a samurai named Aoyama. In an attempt to gain her love, he tricked her into believing she has lost one plate out of an ancient set of ten. Unable to find the plate and refusing the alternative option of returning Aoyama's affection, the samurai threw her down his well. Her ghost emerged as a 'yurei', and every night counted to nine, and upon reaching ten (symbolising the lost plate), a blood-curdling scream was heard by all in the household.<sup>44</sup> The well, symbolic of the passage to the underworld, immediately stimulates memories of Sadako's demise in a round stone well and her ascent from her watery grave as a 'yurei' to exact revenge on Japan as a nation (her choice of victims similar to that of Kayako's):



'Okiku' by Katsushika Hokusai (from the *Hyaku Monogatari* series).<sup>45</sup>



'Sadako', *Ring* (1998, Nakata).<sup>46</sup>

Not only do these figures appear in classic literature; their appearance, behaviour and characteristic themes also feature within 'Little Traditions', further influencing Japanese contemporary and classic horror cinema. In Hearn's *Kwaidan* (1904), the legend of the Mugen-Kane (Bell of Mugen), tells of a poor farmer who constructed and then shattered a representation of the original Mugen bell (a magical mental practice implied by the verb 'nazoraeru', meaning "to substitute, in imagination, one object or action for another, so as to bring about some magical or miraculous result")<sup>47</sup>

An investigation into the development of the traditional Japanese female vengeance ghost from ancient myth to modern day cinema production

---

to obtain the dowry promised to he who breaks the cursed Buddhist temple bell. As the broken pieces fell to the floor, Hearn writes, "...out of the ground before him rose up the figure of a white robed woman, with long loose flowing hair ..."<sup>48</sup> Ross (1996) recounts that in 1992 a female ghost wearing a white kimono and long black hair was reportedly captured by an amateur camera operator. The figure, after much inspection of the evidence, was believed to be the famous Princess Takiyasha, a figure often cited in that specific area of Japan.<sup>49</sup> Akinari's *Tales of Moonlight and Rain* (2007) contains reference to the traditional female ghost in 'The Reed-choked house', one of the tales Mizoguchi Kenji's legendary horror masterpiece *Ugetsu Monogatari* (1953) re-envisions. The tale tells of a faithful wife who remained loyal to her husband as sought fame and fortune in serving his country; so loyal that her spirit lingered on in the world of the living long after her death, awaiting the final return of her husband. Upon his return, her husband, unaware of his wife's demise, was shocked at her appearance; "Her skin was dark with grime, her eyes were sunken, and long stands of hair fell loose down her back".<sup>50</sup> Holding multiple aesthetic similarities to Sadako and Mitsuko, the small female ghost who herself was a victim of drowning in Nakata's *Honogurai mizo no soko kara*, is the ghost of O-Sun. In 'The Secret of Iidamachi Pond', the ghost of O-Sun appears from a pond to signal to all onlookers the location of her body and indeed of her untimely watery death; "O so white, so wet, and so miserable to look at ... It was that of a girl of 18 or 19 years, with hair dishevelled and hanging looses over white and wet shoulders."<sup>51</sup> The iconic well-as-a-grave convention also appears in Smith's work, introduced in 'Ghost of the Violent Well' as the final resting place of O Shinge, a princess whose love was forbidden by Japanese social class systems, and who, in her grief and heartbreak, flung herself into the well; "...on wet story nights, they see the ghost of O Shinge san floating over the well..."<sup>52</sup>

But the influences these ancient Japanese tales of deceit and murder have go beyond just the aesthetic and character traits; they go to the very core of Japanese 'kaidan' folklore and cinema. Themes of marital obligations, family betrayals, selfishness, and spiritual emotional attachment are the foundations of the tale of Oiwa, Okiku, and many other classic ghost tales; In McRoy and Hand's 2007 book, *Monstrous Adaptations: Generic and Thematic Mutations in Horror Film*, author Linnie Blake describes the vengeful ghost as conventionally female with slow and twitching movements. It is usual, she writes, for these spirits to have been victims of a cruel murder, and for their killings to be indiscriminate but associated with justice and vengeance.<sup>53</sup> Oiwa's poisoning at the hands of her husband and Okiku's unjustly slaughter at her master's hand made manifest the crime required to

---

transform a female into a ‘yurei’ so explained in Japanese folklore; a convention which has continued through to contemporary horror (including the remake of Oiwa’s tale in both film – Nakagawa Nobuo’s *Yotsuya Kaidan*, 1959, and Manga - *Ayakashi - Samurai Horror Tales, Vol. 2 - Yotsuya Ghost Story*). Sadako’s lonely demise within the watery depths of a well at the hands of her father, Mimiko’s fatal asthma attack watched over by her suffering mother in Miike’s *Chakushin Ari*, Kayako’s and Toshio’s slaughter by their husband and father respectively, and Mitsuko’s accidental drowning as a result of her failing mother in Nakata’s *Honogurai mizo no soko kara*, all adhere to Blake’s description, but more so, they all share one crucial similarity – all were killed at the hands of their family, members they loved and trusted, and who betrayed that trust. Social issues now commonplace and well-documented in contemporary Japanese society appeared within these ancient tales, albeit significantly more obvious. These issues, passed down from age to age within these cultural folklores, have become embedded into the behaviour and culture of modern-day Japan, a behaviour represented in contemporary Japanese horror cinema: dishonest males overpowering females with their wit and minds, powerless women finding strength in death and returning for vengeance, the myth of the samurai warrior (aka the epitome of a Japanese man) – loyal to his nation until death, acceptant of misfortune, brave against the worst odds, putting his fellow man and nation above himself<sup>54</sup> – all concepts developed in a time of social upheaval and unrest as the Tokugawa empire fought against all outside forces and developed the ‘myth of Japanese uniqueness’ that Japan was a nation alone, a unique culture, special and inscrutable:<sup>55</sup> “...they [ghost legends] are the threads in the fabric of meaning which animates a whole culture.”<sup>56</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

Japanese horror clearly, from this investigation, has an established and historic interest with its folklore and tales of the supernatural. The aforementioned cinema releases adopt the traditional ‘kaidan’ narrative, aesthetic and thematic conventions; whether or not the term ‘kaidan’ appears in the title or description is beside the point. What is the point is that contemporary supernatural horror productions continue to draw upon the ancient social and religious teachings established within Japan’s spiritual and feudal history, exemplified by the consistent re-emergence of the ‘yurei’ throughout the last century in classic literature, traditional folklore, and film. Kaneto’s *Onibaba* (1964) and *Kuroneko* (1968), Nobuo’s *Yotsuya Kaidan* (1959), Masaki’s *Kwaidan* (1964) and Mizoguchi’s *Ugetsu Monogatari* (1953), write Iwasaka and Toelken (1994):

An investigation into the development of the traditional Japanese female  
vengeance ghost from ancient myth to modern day cinema production

---

... [all] testify to the fact that death and ghosts are still viable subject matters in Japanese popular films, but since these are recognised as being amongst the finest in Japan's filmmakers' art, they indicate the depth of creative possibilities available to serious artists who avail themselves of their cultures riches.<sup>57</sup>

Iwasaka and Toelken believe Japan's traditional ghost characters offer the filmmaker abundant creative possibilities if they allow themselves to become lost in their nations mythology. I feel Japanese filmmakers both consciously and subconsciously return to Japan's ancient legends; consciously, to discover characters and narratives somewhat unique and most definitely in sharp contrast to the imported Hollywood productions Japanese films compete against, and subconsciously due to the ingrained nature of Japan's myth system. The myths, folklore and legends morals, social instructions and underlying themes are embroidered within the very fabric of modern-day Japanese culture, therefore without even being aware, the filmmaker, when creating a male character who prefers his women pale and silent for example, is actually drawing upon motifs established in tales formed long ago in both the 'Great' and 'Little' traditions of Japan.

This dual-layered return to ancient mythology practiced significantly by Japanese horror filmmakers throughout the course of the last century I feel reflects, as well as the influence mythology still plays upon Japanese horror cinema, that Japanese society, far from evolving and moving on from its feudal roots, is still in-fact embroiled in its original social issues and anxieties; problems which I feel the inclusion of the traditional 'yurei' figure highlights; thus the reason why this archetypical female form is continuously inputted into Japanese horror cinema. From Okiku and Oiwa through to Kayako and Sadako, each possess their own individual traits, but, we find, there are many parallels in their history, demise and supernatural return; points which link to key social issues which resonate as much meaning now as they did in ancient times: gender inequality, family and marital issues, selfishness, the loss of the individual for the group, and the close relationship the Japanese people sustain with their dearly departed ones. The 'yurei', I feel, is written into a film to signify to its audience that the aforementioned themes will dominate the film in question; thus the 'yurei' serves as a convention in Japanese horror, linked to culturally-specific connotations, myths and ideologies. I believe this to be a conscious decision on the filmmakers' part, but a decision nevertheless influenced by the underlying mythology engrained within Japanese culture.

Myth operates two-fold in Japanese horror cinema, on a conscious and a subconscious level. I believe that as cinema has evolved, the role of

mythology has too evolved, from being consciously included in post WW2 literature adaptations through to being more subconsciously drawn upon when representing social issues within contemporary Japanese society. I feel this shift from conscious to subconscious is aptly represented in the continued re-emergence and concurrent development of the 'yurei'. Her appearance signifies certain themes and ideological messages, but the communication of these social templates continues to evolve with the audiences modes of reading and with popular culture. No one can say for sure how this communication of historic cultural expectations will develop in the future, but I can say with confidence that the 'Sadako-esque' character will rear her hairy head once more, ready to remind the Japanese people that the past cannot be buried or forgotten, no matter how much technology and distractions they fill their lives with. Japan was established on individual myths and legends, and these cannot be forgotten or erased easily, nor should they.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hans Olof Johansson (2007) *Ukiyo-e: The Pictures of the Floating World* [online] Available from <http://www.ukiyo-e.se/> [Accessed 22 July 2009]

<sup>2</sup> The Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum of Waseda University (2001) *Hyaku Monogatari by Utagawa Yoshiiku (1833-1904)* [online] Available from <http://www.enpaku.waseda.ac.jp/db/enpakunishik/results-1.php?Max=10&gadai=%A1%D6%C9%B4%A4%E2%A4%CE%B8%EC%A1%D7> [Accessed 22 July 2009]

<sup>3</sup> Akinari, U. 'The Blue Hood' in *Tales of Moonlight and Rain* (translated by Chambers, A), Columbia University Press, USA, 2007, p.194

<sup>4</sup> Balmain, C. *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film*, Edinburgh University Press, UK, 2008, p.47

<sup>5</sup> Ashekenazi, M. *Handbook on Japanese Mythology*, Oxford University Press, UK, 2003, p.65

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid p.3

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pp 1-2

<sup>9</sup> Martinez, D. (edt) *The Worlds of Japanese Popular Culture*, 10 Cambridge University Press, UK, 1998, p.1

<sup>10</sup> Iwasaka, M and Toelken, B. *Ghosts and the Japanese: Cultural Experience in Japanese Death Legends*, Utah State University Press, USA, 1994, p.10

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.49

<sup>12</sup> Ashekenazi, M. *Handbook on Japanese Mythology*, Oxford University Press, UK, 2003, p.27

An investigation into the development of the traditional Japanese female vengeance ghost from ancient myth to modern day cinema production

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p.26

<sup>14</sup> Barrow, T. in Aston, W. *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from Earliest Times to AD. 697*, Charles E. Tuttle Company, Japan, 1972, p.v

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.vi

<sup>16</sup> Ashekenazi, M. *Handbook on Japanese Mythology*, Oxford University Press, UK, 2003, p.24

<sup>17</sup> Hearn, L. *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things*, Houghton and Mifflin Co, USA, 1904, p.iii

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.46

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p.56

<sup>20</sup> Balmain, C. *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film*, Edinburgh University Press, UK, 2008, p.43

<sup>21</sup> Ross, C. *Supernatural and Mysterious Japan*, YenBooks, Tokyo, Japan, 1996, p.129

<sup>22</sup> Iwasaka, M and Toelken, B. *Ghosts and the Japanese: Cultural Experience in Japanese Death Legends*, Utah State University Press, USA, 1994, p.14

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p.16

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.15

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p.16

<sup>26</sup> Akinari, U. 'The Kibitsu Cauldron' in *Tales of Moonlight and Rain* (translated by Chambers, A), Columbia University Press, USA, 2007

<sup>27</sup> Smith, R. 'The Kakemono Ghost of Aki Province' in *Ancient Tales and Folklore of Japan*, Senate, Studio Editions, London, UK, 1995, p.236

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 317

<sup>29</sup> Ross, C. *Supernatural and Mysterious Japan*, YenBooks, Tokyo, Japan, 1996, p.129

<sup>30</sup> The Japanese Foundation (2008) *Japanese Film Festival 2008 The Hidden Treasures of Japanese Cinema - Masterpieces from its Golden Age 1950's - 60's* [online] Available at [http://www.jfbkk.or.th/event/jff2008\\_eg\\_07.html](http://www.jfbkk.or.th/event/jff2008_eg_07.html) [Accessed on 23rd July 2009]

<sup>31</sup> Ross, C. *Supernatural and Mysterious Japan*, YenBooks, Tokyo, Japan, 1996, p.155

<sup>32</sup> The Japanese Foundation (2008) *Japanese Film Festival 2008 The Hidden Treasures of Japanese Cinema - Masterpieces from its Golden Age 1950's - 60's* [online] Available at [http://www.jfbkk.or.th/event/jff2008\\_eg\\_07.html](http://www.jfbkk.or.th/event/jff2008_eg_07.html) [Accessed on 23rd July 2009]

<sup>33</sup> Kalat, D. *J-Horror: The Definitive guide to The Ring, The Grudge and Beyond*, Vertical Inc Publishing, USA, 2007, p.16

<sup>34</sup> The Japanese Foundation (2008) *Japanese Film Festival 2008 The Hidden Treasures of Japanese Cinema - Masterpieces from its Golden Age 1950's -*

- 60's [online] Available at [http://www.jfbkk.or.th/event/jff2008\\_eg\\_07.html](http://www.jfbkk.or.th/event/jff2008_eg_07.html) [Accessed on 23rd July 2009]
- <sup>35</sup> Iwasaka, M and Toelken, B. *Ghosts and the Japanese: Cultural Experience in Japanese Death Legends*, Utah State University Press, USA, 1994, p.20
- <sup>36</sup> Ross, C. *Supernatural and Mysterious Japan*, YenBooks, Tokyo, Japan, 1996, p.128
- <sup>37</sup> The University of California – Irvine (2009) *Kabuki Face Paint Patterns* [online] Available from <https://eee.uci.edu/clients/sbklein/images/EDOTHEATER/kabuki/pages/kabukipaint.html> [Accessed on 23rd July 2009]
- <sup>38</sup> Sanjuro (2005) 'Ju-On: The Grudge 2' review, LoveHKFilms.com [online] Available from [http://www.lovehkfilm.com/panasia/ju\\_on\\_2.htm](http://www.lovehkfilm.com/panasia/ju_on_2.htm) [Accessed 24th July 2009]
- <sup>39</sup> The University of California – Irvine (2009) *Kabuki Face Paint Patterns* [online] Available from <https://eee.uci.edu/clients/sbklein/images/EDOTHEATER/kabuki/pages/kabukipaint.html> [Accessed on 23rd July 2009]
- <sup>40</sup> Mandi Apple (2002) *Overview of the Ring Series: The Ghost of Oiwa by Shunkosai Hokushu (1826)* Mandiapple.com [online] Available from <http://www.mandiapple.com/snowblood/theringcycle.htm> [Accessed 22nd July 2009]
- <sup>41</sup> *Ring* DVD, directed by Nakata Hideo, Omega Inc / Ace Pictures, Japan, 1998
- <sup>42</sup> Mandi Apple (2002) *Overview of the Ring Series: The Ghost of Oiwa by Shunkosai Hokushu (1826)* Mandiapple.com [online] Available from <http://www.mandiapple.com/snowblood/theringcycle.htm> [Accessed 22nd July 2009]
- <sup>43</sup> 336 Weird Movies (2009) *Capsule: 'One Missed Call,'* 336 Weird Movies [online] Available from <http://366weirdmovies.com/tag/j-horror/> [Accessed 22nd July 2009]
- <sup>44</sup> Ross, C. *Supernatural and Mysterious Japan*, YenBooks, Tokyo, Japan, 1996, p.159
- <sup>45</sup> Tourneur, C (12<sup>th</sup> November 2008) *A ukiyo-e print by Hokusai depicting Okiku*, Thomas Ligotti Online [online] Available from <http://www.ligotti.net/showthread.php?t=2382&page=2> [Accessed 21<sup>st</sup> July 2009]
- <sup>46</sup> *Ring* DVD, directed by Nakata Hideo, Omega Inc / Ace Pictures, Japan, 1998
- <sup>47</sup> Hearn, L. 'Of a Mirror and a Bell' in *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things*, Houghton and Mifflin Co, USA, 1904, p.57
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid, p.59
- <sup>49</sup> Ross, C. *Supernatural and Mysterious Japan*, YenBooks, Tokyo, Japan, 1996, p.107-8

An investigation into the development of the traditional Japanese female vengeance ghost from ancient myth to modern day cinema production

---

<sup>50</sup> Akinari, U. 'The Reed Choked House in *Tales of Moonlight and Rain* (translated by Chambers, A), Columbia University Press, USA, 2007, p.100

<sup>51</sup> Smith, R. 'The Secret of Iidamachi Pond' in *Ancient tales and folklore of Japan*, Senate, Studio Editions, London, UK, 1995, p.255

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p.26

<sup>53</sup> Blake in McRoy, J. and Hand, R. *Monstrous Adaptations: Generic and Thematic Mutations in Horror Film*, Edinburgh University Press, UK, 2007, p.236

<sup>54</sup> Ashekenazi, M. *Handbook on Japanese Mythology*, Oxford University Press, UK, 2003, p.21

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p.7

<sup>56</sup> Iwasaka, M and Toelken, B *Ghosts and the Japanese: Cultural Experience in Japanese Death Legends*, Utah State University Press, USA, 1994, p.44

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, pp 36-7

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p.39

## Bibliography

Akinari, U. *Tales of Moonlight and Rain* (translated by Chambers, A), Columbia University Press, USA, 2007

Ashekenazi, M. *Handbook on Japanese Mythology*, Oxford University Press, UK, 2003

Balmain, C. *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film*, Edinburgh University Press, UK, 2008

Barrow, T., in Aston, W. *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from Earliest Times to AD. 697*, Charles E. Tuttle Company, Japan, 1972

*Chakushin Ari*, DVD, directed by Miike Takashi, Kadokawa – Daiei Eiga, Japan, 2003

Chamberlain, B.H. (trans) *The Kojiki: Records of Ancient Matters* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed), Tuttle Publishing, Boston, USA, 1981

Hearn, L. *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things*, Houghton and Mifflin Co, USA, 1904

*Honogurai mizo no soko kara*, DVD, directed by Nakata Hideo, Oz Productions, Japan, 2003

---

Iwasaka, M and Toelken, B. *Ghosts and the Japanese: Cultural Experience in Japanese Death Legends*, Utah State University Press, USA, 2003

*Ju-On: The Grudge*, DVD, directed by Shimizu Takashi, Pioneer LDC, Japan, 2002

Kalat, D. *J-Horror: The Definitive guide to The Ring, The Grudge and Beyond*, Vertical Inc Publishing, USA, 2007

Martinez, D.(ed) *The Worlds of Japanese Popular Culture*, Cambridge University Press, UK, 1998

McRoy, J. *Nightmare Japan: Contemporary Japanese Horror Cinema*, Rodopi, Amsterdam-New York, 2008

McRoy, J. and Hand, R. *Monstrous Adaptations: Generic and Thematic Mutations in Horror Film*, Edinburgh University Press, UK, 2007

*Ring*, DVD, directed by Nakata Hideo, Omega Inc / Ace Pictures, Japan, 1998

Ross, C. *Supernatural and Mysterious Japan*, YenBooks, Tokyo, Japan, 1996

Smith, R. *Ancient tales and folklore of Japan*, Senate, Studio Editions, London, UK, 1995

**Emma Newbery** is currently in her third year of her PhD. Her thesis examines the influence Japanese 'Great' mythology had and has upon Japanese horror cinema. She is also the Programme Leader of Film and TV Productions at Blackpool and the Fylde College, and a Higher Education lecturer in Critical Studies.