

## Japanese Culture, Literature, and History

# Popular Culture's Distorting/Alluring Lens

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I am increasingly drawn to connecting Japanese popular culture with literary and historical texts. This is especially effective in interdisciplinary courses such as the ones that I have taught at Colorado College with my political science and history colleagues. In the not so distant past, I often used canonical films, but today I show more films without much artistic pretension that tend to catch the attention of our millenarian students.

For a recent team-taught introductory course "Fantasy and the Fantastic in Japanese History and Literature," I chose the following four films (among others) to introduce students to literature and aesthetics in a historical context: Super Kabuki with fantastical animals and flying spirits from the *Kojiki*; what my students refer to as the "Ghostbusters" of the Heian Period; ghost stories where the Heike dead seek respite; and a "slash and gurgle" samurai anime of the mercurial years just prior to the Meiji Restoration. The four films, presented in chronological order, require a knowledge of literature and history in order to fully appreciate the tales and so help motivate students to study the relevant background of each historical period.

### Super Kabuki

Kabuki is *the* iconic form of Japanese theatre. But, to the extent that my students are familiar with Kabuki at all, too often they tend to presume that its repertoire conveys a narrow range of supposed quintessential cultural values, most often in struggles between *giri/ninjo* (obligation vs. personal wishes). Few of my students appreciate Kabuki's complex historical evolution since the early 1600s or its successive innovations in staging and spectacle, to say nothing of the range of its themes or approaches. Super Kabuki developed in recent decades to attempt to entice a younger Japanese crowd into the theatre with fabulous costumes, acrobatics

and action and to produce new plays in modern Japanese language. An NHK film of a theatrical production of "Yamato Takeru" (1995) showcases the talents of its star, Ichikawa Ennosuke III (b. 1939) and astonishing special effects.

"Yamato Takeru" is set in a pre-historical past when Japan was not yet unified. Drawing on material from the earliest Japanese written text, the *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters, ca. 712), the historian Umehara Takeshi has created an enchanting twentieth century kabuki classic, revolving around the court intrigue in the mythic Land of Yamato. Prince Ousu, the younger twin son of the twelfth emperor of Japan, outwits the many plans of his step-mother to have him placed in dangerous situations where he would be gloriously killed by the enemy. He perseveres over the many enemies of the Yamato Court — including the aboriginal inhabitants of Japan to the south, the Kumaso, and to the north, the Emishi. In *The Nobility of Failure*, Ivan Morris portrayed Yamato Takeru as the archetype of the defeated hero that reverberated through Japanese history. The usual engagement with the

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### Ghostbusters

"Onmyoji" (2001), a commercially successful mainstream Japanese movie, de-



*Onmyoji*

picts the battle with malevolent forces that was behind moving the capital to Kyoto in 794 CE. In 784, Emperor Kammu ordered the capital moved from Nara to Nagaoka. Soon after-

wards, political rivalries culminated in the exile and assassination of the Emperor's brother, Prince Sawara. When natural disasters and misfortunes plagued the new capital, it was attributed to Prince Sawara's vengeful ghost. In an attempt to placate him, he was given posthumous promotion, and the capital moved again to the more propitious location of Heian, what would become Kyoto.

The film opens with the ominous vision of demons that have infiltrated the capital. Political jealousy and palace intrigue result in one family aligning with the evil Doson. Prince Sawara's grave is opened to enable him to return to the capital to seek vengeance and wreck havoc. Members of the Onmyoji, the office of yin-yang, are enlisted to try to find the source of the problems. Minamoto no Hiromaki, a court official, and Abe no Seimei (played by the kyogen master Nomura Mansai), a

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yin-yang sorcerer, are based on historical offices and eponymous characters.

Symbolism and imagery in this film are not difficult to interpret. It is fairly easy for students to read into the darker scenes of Dōson, the malign sorcerer, as he performs his magic, compared to the sunny spritelike Seimei. Popularization of historical references presents a distant past for young Japanese to imagine. The complex value systems on display help to make the unfamiliar more accessible and to visualize the spirit possession in literary depictions from *The Tale of Genji*. The central place of the fantastic, and the equal weight given to the seen and unseen, allow students to enter a world that we, and modern Japanese, have lost.

### Folk Tale

The 1964 film *Kwaidan*, based on Japanese folk tales retold by Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904), presents four separate ghost stories. I use the story “Mimi nashi Hoichi” (Earless Hoichi), set in the aftermath of the Gempei Wars that culminated in the defeat of the Heike in 1185. “Earless Hoichi” is the story of a blind monk who carries on the tradition of the wandering Biwa player. He recites *The Tale of the Heike* for any who wish to hear the tragic tale.

One night when the young monk is left to look after the temple, a majestic samurai appears before him with the request that he go to a nearby manor and play for a group of visiting exalted personages. He goes, not realizing that the ghosts of the Heike have sent for him. Hoichi is taken not to a manor, but to the burial grounds that are within walking distance of the temple, and he recites the tale of the very ghosts before whom he sits. When the head priest of the temple realizes what is happening, he writes sutras on Hoichi to prevent him from being ripped

to pieces and taken to join the world of the ghosts. However, the samurai ghost sees the one area on his body that had failed to be covered with sutras, and Hoichi is left earless.

“Earless Hoichi” excels as a visual text. The lavish costuming overlaid by the sonorous intoning of the epic provides a glimmer of twelfth century aristocratic life, a striking contrast with the peasants who populate the era in which Hoichi resides. The scenes of the ghosts during the recitation, splendid in their late Heian court clothing, provide an especially rich source. The deceptively simple tale is comprised of at least four levels of interpretation: the historical defeat of the Heike Clan at Dan’oura, the literary text *The Tale of the Heike* as recited by the blind biwa player, the folk tale that grew up around the ghost story, and finally the interpretation by the foreigner Hearn.

### Anime

A favorite of many male students, “Samurai X” (2001) depicts assassination groups in the 1860s to show the complicated rivalry of various factions that played crucial roles during the Meiji Restoration. The story first ran as the manga “Rurouni Kenshin” serialized in *Shonen Jump* in the late 90s, and was made into a TV series, half a dozen OAVs, and a movie directed by Furuhashi Kazuhiro.

Kenshin, a sword expert who had been apprenticed to the famous swordsman Hiko, later worked for the Choshu clan as assassin, killing many members of the Shogunate over a four-year period. One episode from this anime in particular shows the fervor and plotting of the late Bakumatsu Period. In 1864, Choshu plotters had planned to set fire to the city to provoke instability and chaos, and members of the Shinsengumi crushed the ring. What came to be known as the Ikeda-ya Incident is portrayed in “Samurai X.”

This popular anime is particularly effective in portraying the chaos through its “slash and gurgle,” scene-by-scene detailing of not only the swordplay, but also the political maneuvering. Emotions interplay with clan obligations, but with

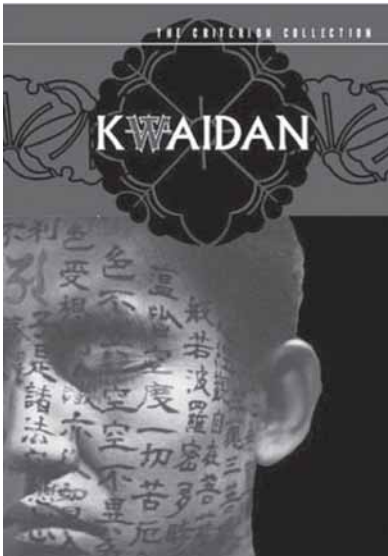
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more fluidity than conventional *giri/ninjo* tension. Unlike with “Yamato Takeru,” “Onmyoji,” or “Mimi nashi Hoichi,” there is no old historical text to consult, or complicated literary layering to unpack in analyzing this film. Fantastical elements have been replaced by the intricacies of political intrigue and the machinations of civil unrest. However, the medium of animation with its drama and melodrama often allows for a clearer visual text, with each detail consciously incorporated to advance the storyline.

By opening up the door to include popular films as legitimate text in my classroom, I have found that students are willing to use creativity and imagination in both class discussion and in their written assignments. They are unafraid to treat film as a literary text and readily employ strategies usually applied to a work of fiction (foreshadowing, symbolism, imagery, and the like). At the same time, they acquire deeper understanding through contextualizing the film and relating what they see to other historical or literary texts assigned for the course.

### Discography

- Super Kabuki: “Yamato Takeru” (Shochiku Home Video, NHK, 1995, 180 minutes)
- Onmyoji* (Takita Yojiro, Director, 2001, 116 minutes)
- Kwaidan* [excerpt “Mimi nashi Hoichi” (Earless Hoichi)] (Kobayashi Masaki, Director, 1965, about 60 minutes)
- “Samurai X: Trust and Betrayal, Director’s Cut” (Furuhashi Kazuhiso, Director. OAV, Vol. 1: Trust; Vol. 2: Betrayal; ADV Films, 90 minutes)



*Kwaidan*