

Haunted Japan: In Search of Modern Ghosts

By Catrien Ross

Among my more unusual activities in Tokyo is gathering information about Japanese ghosts. Right now, in fact, I am completing a book about supernatural and mysterious Japan, due for publication this year by Charles E. Tuttle. This is the same publisher of books on the strange and ghostly written by another foreigner, long since dead, Lafcadio Hearn. Like some modern-day Hearn, I have been collecting regional facts and legends concerning spirits, hauntings, and other intriguing mysteries such as the alleged location of Christ's grave in a northern Japanese village. To these I have added a topic more in line with 20th century interests—a look into paranormal phenomena and related scientific research.

Ghosts are rarely the first thing to come to mind when foreigners discuss Japan, so it can be surprising to discover just how deeply ghostly preoccupations have influenced Japanese culture. For one thing, many Japanese believe that when someone dies the spirit leaves this life, bound for an eternal world. Before reaching this destination, however, the spirit must spend some time in an in-between plane of existence, a limbo of troubling uncertainties.

While detained in this state the spirit can turn into a restless or unhappy ghost bent on haunting or otherwise disrupting those with whom it still feels a strong connection. Powerful emotions such as revenge, hatred, jealousy or sorrow can create a ghost, drawing the spirit back into the world of the living to wreak its havoc. Such ghosts typically continue to haunt the earth until someone or something releases them back to limbo to resume their journey toward eternity.

Haunted Tokyo

For most visitors to Japan, Tokyo is experienced as a megalopolis of 12 million people that impresses with its almost ceaseless kaleidoscope of glare and action. Beneath this frenetic façade,

however, beats a primitive heart still attuned to the world of ancient shadows. Japan's capital city may have become a behemoth of commerce and industry, but ghosts and hauntings remain very much a part of everyday life.

One convincing example can be found in the business district of Otemachi. Internationally regarded as a key center of trade and banking, Otemachi is also the headquarters of the leading newspapers *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* and *Yomiuri Shimbun*, as well as Keidanren and KDD. The main immigration bureau is here, as are the head offices of several trading companies and banks. There is also the unquiet grave of Taira no Masakado.

Set back from the road just beside Mitsui Trading Company, this unobtrusive memorial is a constant reminder that restless spirits retain the power to disturb. Most passersby do not give the grave a second glance, but business people around here know that greater respect is due. As the story goes, Taira no Masakado was a general of the Heike clan who fought for local hegemony during the Heian period (794-1185). Branded a rebel, he tried to seize power by naming an alternative capital and declaring himself the "new emperor." His rebellion was cut short when he was killed by an arrow in 940, at the age of thirty-eight. In death, however, he was to prove more troublesome than in life.

As a warning to other aspiring rebels, his severed head was sent to Kyoto and displayed. After three months, however, it had hardly changed at all: People swore the eyes and mouth were fiercer than ever.

One night the head, enveloped in a glowing light, is said to have taken off, flying toward its owner's former home in what is now Ibaraki Prefecture. Shot down by an arrow fired by a shrine monk, the head dropped down into a part of Edo (now renamed Tokyo),

where villagers buried it beneath a mound at Kanda Myojin shrine. Some 10 years later the mound began to glow and shake violently and the ghost of a haggard-looking samurai materialized. Terrified villagers finally appeased the spirit through prayers and offerings. When Kanda Myojin shrine was moved during the Edo era (1600-1867), the tomb remained, and since then all sorts of problems have been attributed to its presence.

Even now Otemachi business people remain guarded about this grave in their midst. Surrounding companies jointly formed the Taira no Masakado memorial committee, and employees are routinely dispatched to pray at the grave, usually on the first and 15th day of each month. A former president of Sanwa Bank reportedly gave a special offering merely because his building casts the grave into shadow. Rumor has it that no one likes to work with their back turned toward the grave, and that workers in rooms directly facing directly it frequently fall ill. Even the mass media is said to take precautions. Whenever a program is aired mentioning this 10th-century samurai or his burial, the film crew first visits the grave to pray. He may have failed to make himself emperor, but 1,055 years after his death Taira no Masakado's influence still endures.

Another haunting in Japan's centers of power is the weeping ghost on the eighth floor of the national Diet building. After World War II the eighth floor was used as a dance school for office workers. One woman, disappointed in love with a man she met there, is said to have jumped from the window, breaking her neck on the front lawn. Shortly afterward the weeping began and the eighth floor was then closed off, using "defense of public morals" as the excuse.

Until 1977 a regular check was made of the aircraft alert light atop the Diet building, but it was removed after the Kasumigaseki high-rise was construct-

ed. Now few people venture up to the eighth or ninth floors and there is no one to vouch for whether the sad weeping continues.

Perhaps the most famous ghost in Tokyo is Oiwa-san. Some say she yet stalks the streets at night, 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-throe agonies. When people scream and run in terror, she disappears, laughing.

Oiwa-san's tragedy is the main story in a mix of unrelated incidents pulled together for dramatic effect in Tsuruya Nanboku IV's kabuki play, *Yotsuya Kaidan*, or *Yotsuya Ghost Story*, which since the Edo era has thrilled Japanese audiences with its gruesome details and avenging female ghost.

Beautiful but poor, Oiwa was married to a lazy samurai who begins to resent both his poverty and his wife. He accepts the attentions of a wealthy neighbor's granddaughter, who is keen to marry him, but first he must poison Oiwa, who sees her ravaged face in a mirror before she dies an agonizing death. Rage and lost love fuel her vengeance as a ghost. In one version of the story Oiwa soon begins haunting the lovers, wailing in ghostly misery night after night. Unable to bear the sound, the samurai rushes out to the garden, sword in hand, and sees before him Oiwa's twisted face in the moonlight. Crazed, he strikes her down, but when he rolls the apparition over he is horrified to find at his feet the still warm body of his dead, new wife.

Although Oiwa was eventually avenged, her spirit continues to haunt Tokyo. In recent times many superstitions have arisen around the annual staging of *Yotsuya Kaidan*, and actors and actresses have recounted numerous mishaps. The remedy is usually to visit Oiwa's shrine at Yotsuya or her grave in Sugamo to pay respects to a ghost who so far refuses to rest.

One of the oldest beliefs about ghosts in Japan can be traced to the popular 10th-century *hyakki yado*, or night parade of 100 demons. Night is considered the time when ghosts and

goblins appear to rule the hours of darkness before disappearing again at dawn. This became the basis for the game, *hyaku monogatari*, or 100 eerie tales, with its special form of storytelling well established by the middle of the 17th century. As night falls a group gathers to tell ghost stories. One hundred candles are lit and set behind blue paper, representing the color of the spirit as it leaves the dead body. One after the other, members narrate a ghostly tale. As each story is told, one candle is extinguished. Little by little the room grows dark. At last the final candle is put out. Huddled together, the storytellers await what the darkness might bring.

Today, Japanese have decreed the hot and humid month of August as an ideal time both for crushed ice and exchanging ghost stories. This is, after all, the season of Obon, the Buddhist festival honoring the dead. Amidst economic and technological advance, such stories have never lost their capacity to thrill or to chill. Indeed, a closer look around greater Tokyo uncovers tales of hauntings in a wide range of places, including temples, tunnels, parks, bridges, cemeteries, apartments, office buildings, museums, and even a horse racing track.

After starting my supernatural research I was quite pleased to learn that Hachioji, where I now live, has long been considered a gateway to limbo, and there are several entrances to the nether world. Among the spots I have visited are the ruins of Hachioji Castle, once an enormous compound spread over 154 hectares. When the castle was destroyed in 1590 by Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who later unified Japan as shogun, many women are said to have flung themselves from the walls to escape capture from the enemy. Here their spirits still linger, and the surface of the water is said to turn red on the anniversary of the castle's fall.

Another Hachioji haunting is a woman and baby who startle drivers headed toward Mt. Takao along the old Koshu Kaido highway. Suddenly emerging from the dark, they often cause accidents. The woman, obviously

searching for someone, will occasionally peer closely into a frightened driver's face and then intone, "wrong man," before vanishing.

Farther west is Yamanashi Prefecture, which recently gained notoriety as the base of the doomsday cult, Aum Supreme Truth. Along a picturesque mountain road is a spot named *oiran butchi*, or "prostitute gorge," where people can listen for the horrified screams of women falling. Gold has been extracted in these hills since the Heian period, but during the Edo era there was a working mine here, with brothels for the miners. When the fortunes of the Takeda family, the mine's owner, were ruined, it was decided to kill the 55 prostitutes posted here to stop them from disclosing the mine's location.

The killers constructed a wide, wooden platform suspended above the steep gorge and the women were invited to dance and drink. At the height of the revelry the ropes were slashed, sending the women plunging to their deaths below. Male visitors are cautioned not to go too near the edge, where a female ghost might just be waiting for revenge.

Supernatural leanings

Female ghosts in Japan are generally known as *yurei*, and they are an important part of a panoply of supernatural phenomena that includes male ghosts, as well as demons, monsters, goblins, and changeling animals. Elements of the supernatural permeate Japanese lore and folklore, and it is not surprising that a belief in ghosts and hauntings persists. Origins of Japanese mythology reveal that Japan literally brims over with gods and goddesses, the so-called *yao yorozu*, or 8 million deities, who reside not only in heaven, but also everywhere on earth. In the ancient religious pantheon these deities are found in mountains, rivers, lakes, forests, rocks, and individual homes, and are thought to represent everything from scared Mt. Fuji to the kitchen cooking stove.

In addition to benevolent deities, there are countless demons, or *oni*, which are malignant forces mirroring the dark side of human nature. Inimical

to humans, they must be guarded against or purified. Millions of Japanese carry charms to ward off their influence and housewives expel any hidden demons in an annual cleaning ritual.

In addition to demons there are goblins, or long-nosed *tengu*, which look like ferocious Pinocchios. These winged creatures may have reached Japan from India by way of China, and they may related to the Buddhist guardian Garuda, a mythical bird deity able to transform its shape.

Tengu figure prominently in Japanese folk legends and have close ties to Buddhist lore, waylaying unsuspecting monks to lead them down the wrong path. They are also associated with the mountain ascetics known as *yama-bushi*, and tengu masks are most often seen at high mountain temples.

Animals, too, are given a vital role on Japan's supernatural stage. Creatures most likely to possess magical talents are foxes and raccoon-dogs, or *tanuki*, as well as snakes. But the magician's parade also includes cats, dogs, monkeys, frogs, turtles, wolves, deer, mice, birds, horses, spiders, butterflies, fireflies, and even the lowly earthworm. Foxes are commonly seen throughout Japan as the twin guardians of fox shrines, or *inari jinja*, and they are reputed to be consummate tricksters. A fox may appear as a beautiful woman who bewitches a man into madness and death. White snakes, on the other hand, are considered heavenly messengers, and almost all snakes, along with dragons, are believed to possess abundant mystical power. Serpent dragons, for example, control weather and water while protecting humankind from fire and other pestilence.

A different type of haunting is provided by monsters, or *yokai*. Yokai tales are found all over Japan, and each region



Kanda Myojin shrine grounds (left), were once the resting place for the spirit of Taira no Masakado. Today, his grave (below) continues to haunt those who work nearby.



seems to boast its own version of the same story line. Japanese believe that yokai do not arise spontaneously, but rather, are shapes reflected in the mirror of limbo, able to show all the evil human beings can do. Forever lurking in the deepest recesses of the mind, yokai are manifestations of our worst imaginings and fears: the childhood bogeyman, the dreadful figure in the corner, creeping shadows. At the right time and place yokai shift their shape to surface once more, terrifying us with their intensity and malevolent will.

Throughout history, ghost stories and the supernatural have been a way of maintaining a link, however tenuous, between the living and the dead. In Japan, too, the supernatural provides a context in which to interpret the phenomenal world. As folk belief in practice shows, it is also a framework

for controlling or transmuting the mysteries of existence. The tempo of modern society has all but shut off our daily access to the mysterious. Most moments have been reduced to a matter of money and machine. The mystic experience of forest and mountain are no longer handily available to the majority of big city dwellers.

Still, ghosts and ghost stories remain, frightening, comforting, entertaining, confusing. That there are so many tales of hauntings in Japan shows that Japanese recognize that the unknown of the imagination retains a crucial significance in an increasingly mechanized world. Shivers up the spine may horrify our hearts and trouble our dreams, but without awareness of the supernatural our waking moments would be darker and duller still. Ghost stories, as haunted Japan illustrates, remind us what it means to live.

When she is not researching the mysterious, Carien Ross runs *QRQ*, a healing arts clinic in alternative therapies. Frequently published, she also teaches at Yokohama City University School of Medicine. Her book on Japan's supernatural will be published by Tuttle in December.