Chapter 2

Weird Tales

怪談

“…Shogakan Gahakudo was a legendary gathering place for hyakumonogatari kaidankai. At the entrance hung a permanently burning lantern, of the sort normally only used for the Obon festival of the dead. You didn’t even need to plan the event—such was the passion for the game that on any given night you could be assured a spontaneous round of storytelling would begin, with members alternating turns, exchanging their favorite kaidan.”

—Translated and excerpted from Nihon no Yūrei, 1959, Ikeda Yasaburo

When Maruyama Ōkyo roused from sleep that morning in 1750, he awoke in the unprecedented era of peace and refinement of Edo period Japan (1603-1868). Japan was busy transforming itself into the country we all know today, and many of the things Japanese—the aristocratic samurai and the artisanal geisha; the elegant theater of bunraku and the wild spectacle of kabuki; the floating world of ukiyo-e artists—sprouted and flowered during the Edo period. Threaded throughout each of these were ghost stories, kaidan. And yūrei.

The Edo period was a renaissance of the weird. Noriko Reider says in her book Japanese Demon Lore that the Edo period was “an interesting time and space in Japanese culture in which individuals from all walks of life, on some level or other, seem to unite in their belief in the supernatural.” The touch of the supernatural was in everything in the Edo period. And the touch of the Edo period is in all of Japan’s supernatural folklore. They are intimately intertwined.

What was so special about the Edo period that made it ripe for the otherworldly? A number of different elements came together to create the perfect storm that was the Edo period kaidan boom—to begin
with, the closure of Japan’s long history of civil wars.

Japan must have heaved a collective sigh of relief when almost 150 years of fighting finally came to an end. Proceeding the Edo period was the Sengoku, or Warring States, period. From the start of the Ōnin War (1467–1477) to the final defeat of the Toyotomi clans by Tokugawa Ieyasu at the Siege of Osaka (1614–1615), Japan had endured almost constant warfare.

Periods of war do not easily breed kaidan. People do not want to read or be entertained by gruesome tales of blood and vengeance when there is the very real chance that they might have their head chopped off or be skewered on a spear just for the crime of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or find themselves in the sights of a hungry and desperate soldier on the run.

With the peace of the Edo period, people finally felt safe enough again to seek amusement in the supernatural, to play with the grave that they no longer felt themselves a hair’s breadth from occupying. The ghosts of Japan were only waiting in the dark for their chance to rise again. The foundations had been laid long ago.\(^4\) To know the full story, we must delve into Japan’s literary past.

Japan’s gods and monsters were born in the *Kojiki* (*Record of Ancient Matters*). The oldest known work of Japanese literature, the *Kojiki* dates to the eighth century, most likely 712. Claiming to be a historical record of Japan, in truth it concerns itself with creation myths and the hijinks of gods—like Izanagi and his sister-wife Izanami, the proto-yūrei about whom we will learn more later.

The *Kojiki* was a commissioned work by the ruling family meant to authenticate the divine lineage of the emperor and cement the Yamato clan’s right to rule. Rumors persist of older books, such as the *Kujiki* (*Record of Former Matters*), which claims a publication date of 626, or the *Tennōki* (*Record of the Emperor*) and *Kokki* (*National Record*), both of which claim publication dates of 620. However, no authentic copies are known to have survived. These books are largely considered either forgeries or apocryphal.

Not that the common people cared. While the emperor and the ruling family fretted over their bloodlines and magical ancestors, the rest of Japan did what people do everywhere—gathered round the fire to swap myths, legends, yūrei tales, and occasionally a few true stories.

\(^4\) This section owes a great debt to Noriko Reider’s groundbreaking study *The Emergence of Kaidan-shū: The Collection of Tales of the Strange and Mysterious in the Edo Period.*
thrown in for good measure. Scholars started writing down this oral folklore around the Heian period (794–1185), when Buddhist monks created the genre called *setsuwa*.

The monk Kyōkai wrote the first *setsuwa*, called the *Nihon Ryōiki* (*Japanese Chronicle of Miracles*), sometime between 787 and 824. Kyōkai was a self-ordained monk; a wanderer with no order or temple. According to his own admission, he was not particularly learned in the esoterics of his faith. But he was passionate and devoted to sharing the lessons of Japan’s latest religion, Buddhism.

To give you some idea of its contents, the *Nihon Ryōiki* is occasionally known by its full title of *Nihonkoku Genpō Zen’aku Ryōiki* (*Miraculous Stories of the Reward of Good and Evil from the Country of Japan*). Kyōkai intended the *Nihon Ryōiki* to be a teaching tool about the laws of karmic causality. He gathered local legends and supernatural stories, and coupled them with didactic Buddhist teachings.

The stories had titles like *Of an Evil Daughter Who Lacked Filial Respect for Her Mother and Got the Immediate Penalty of a Violent Death* or *Of a Monk Who Observed the Precepts, Was Pure in his Activities and Won an Immediate Miraculous Reward*. Simple and direct, the tales in the *Nihon Ryōiki* had uncomplicated plots that showed how good deeds are rewarded and evil acts punished in this lifetime. No one ever accused Kyōkai of subtlety.

Like the *Nihon Ryōiki*, the majority of *setsuwa* were written with an educational motive in mind. Arduously hand copied, most *setsuwa* were intended to be used by traveling Buddhist monks to give sermons and frighten the population into behaving. The idea of the supernatural as entertainment was still waiting to be discovered.

Sometime after the year 1120, stolid, high-minded Buddhist morals momentarily yielded to low-minded fun as the massive, multi-volume *Konjaku Monogatarishū* (*Collected Tales of Times Now Past*) was published. Although it did borrow stories from the didactic *Nihon Ryōiki* and makes a good show of being a Buddhist lesson book, the *Konjaku Monogatarishū* was also pure pleasure reading.

Collecting over one thousand stories in thirty-three volumes, the *Konjaku Monogatarishū* burst with fairy tales and legends and gods and monsters. The stories dealt with all level of people, both noble and naughty—including the supernatural *tengu* and *oni* and a variety of transformed animals collectively called *henge*. Also in contrast

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5. The kanji for *setsuwa* (説話) translates directly as “speaking tales.”
to previous *setsuwa* collections, the *Konjaku Monogatarishū* collected together the folktales and legends of the three countries that were considered to be literarily and religiously important at the time: India, China, and Japan.

The *Konjaku Monogatarishū* is a mystery unto itself. No one knows precisely why it was written, or for whom. Like many works of such age, the author and publication are disputed. Some say it was written by the scholar Minamoto-no-Takakuni, author of *Uji Dainagon Monogatari* (*Tales of Great Councilor of Uji, 1052-1077*), while others say the true author is Takakuni’s son, the Buddhist monk Toba Sōjō and supposed artist of the *Chōjū-jinbutsu-giga* scroll (*Animal-Person Caricatures, twelfth and thirteenth centuries*). Still others point to an anonymous monk living somewhere near Kyoto or Nara. Some say it has several authors, each contributing a chapter or a story here and there over the years. This is to say, nobody knows for sure. It is an anomaly.

Only twenty-eight volumes of the *Konjaku Monogatarishū* still exist. Many well-known Japanese kaidan, like *How a Man’s Wife Became a Vengeful Spirit and How Her Malignity was Diverted by a Master of Divination*, originally hail from the *Konjaku Monogatarishū*—although few are aware of that ancient tome as the origin. Stories from this collection have found their way into texts as dissimilar as Akutagawa Ryūnosuke’s adaptation of *In a Grove (Yabu no Naka)*, which was itself adapted into film as Kurosawa Akira’s award-winning *Rashomon* (1950). A version of *How Tōsuke Ki’s Meeting with a Ghost-Woman in Mino Province Ended in His Death* even appeared as far away as the American comic book *Hellboy* by writer/artist Mike Mignola.

The influence of the *Konjaku Monogatarishū* cannot be overestimated. The book opened the door to stories of the strange and mysterious excommunicated from religious teaching. Books such as the *Uji Shūi Monogatari* (*Tales Gleaned from Uji, thirteenth century*) copied directly many of its stories.

However, the entertaining and non-didactic nature has often taken it out of the realm of serious literature. *Konjaku Monogatarishū* is rarely a candidate for English translation and study. This first kaidan collection has always lived under the shadow of that titan of Heian literature *Genji Monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji, eleventh century*), which was published around the same time. As of this writing, *Genji Monogatari* has eighty-eight separate editions in publication and has been translated into every major language including Braille. *Konjaku Monogatarishū* has no complete translation.
Although the *Konjaku Monogatarishū* is widely considered the first work of kaidan, the book itself did not carry that name. The word kaidan, in fact, had not yet been created. That would require a sick emperor and a crafty doctor.

During the third year of Kan’ei, which was the twenty-fourth year of the Edo period (1627), the third shōgun-regent of the Tokugawa dynasty, Tokugawa Iemitsu, lay bed-ridden from illness. His attending physician, Confucian scholar Hayashi Razan, sought to entertain Iemitsu and take his mind off of his sickness and inactivity. Razan translated a collection of strange and mysterious Chinese tales and read them to Iemitsu. It is said that the story of the wondrous land of Tōgenkyō, where nobody ever ages or dies, was a particular favorite of the ill ruler. Tokugawa Iemitsu dreamed of a land where he could be healthy and vibrant.

As a further present, Razan compiled thirty-two of the more popular legends into five volumes and presented them to the shōgun. Razan titled his collection *Kaidan* (怪談), but it is more commonly known by the title *Kaidan Zensho* (Complete Works of Kaidan). The compilation was written exclusively for the entertainment of the shōgun and was never intended for popular consumption. However, innovation rarely stays hidden, and by creating a new word, Razan inadvertently named a genre.

Literary development and a lack of general scholarship ground along at this centurion pace due to the toilsome process of handwriting all books. When it came to mass-produced volumes and an expansion of a literate population, Japan was late to the party. Johannes Gutenberg developed his first printing press in Germany around 1440, but it was not until more than 150 years later that a printing press with movable type would find its way into Japan and thus literature into the hands of the masses.

Jesuit Alessandro Valignano arrived in Japan in 1579 holding the official title of Visitor of Missions and with the stated task of reforming missionary efforts in Asia. Valignano identified the problem as one of language. By 1590, he had established a stable of printing presses in the Port of Nagasaki, all of them busily churning out Japanese language copies of the bible and the lives of saints. His instincts were wrong; Valignano’s mission was a failure and he was recalled by the Vatican in disgrace.

Valignano did not trust the Japanese. He had always been careful to keep the deepest secrets of Western technology from his Japanese
converts, using his influence to ensure that no native Japanese convert could ever rise above the rank of Brother in the Jesuit order. When Valignano went, his printing presses went with him.

Although Japan was now aware of the wonders of the printing press due to Valignano, it was not until the capture of a Korean machine a few years later in 1593 that the country would see any significant impact from the new technology. Brought over as a spoil of war from Korea and presented as a gift to Emperor Go-Yôzei, the printing press was seized following Japan’s defeat in the Siege of Pyongyang, a battle significant for another display of new technology: the then cutting-edge tools of firearms and cannons.

The emperor was pleased with this gift and commanded his staff to reverse-engineer its secrets. Made of metal, the Korean press was unsuitable for Japanese characters. But four years later in 1597, a wooden press was created, and for the first time Japan had a mass media. After taking power in 1603, the first shōgun, Tokugawa Ieyasu, made the secrets of the printing press available to the public, encouraging the publication of classic texts and creating a literate, reading population. For the first time publishers were able to create enormous amounts of cheap books and have an audience available to read them.

Publishers soon saw the value in printing kaidan collections, called kaidan-shû, which the public rapidly snatched up in the newly established book trade. The first kaidan-shû to come literally hot from the presses imitated the earlier Nihon Ryôiki. They used the supernatural as a tool for Buddhist and Confucian moral education.

The kaidan-shû Inga Monogatari (Tales of Cause and Effect), published in 1660 and attributed to the monk Suzuki Shôsan, was one of the first to bridge the gap, although inadvertently. Two separate versions of Inga Monogatari were published, each aimed at a specific audience. The hiragana version had pictures and was considered easier to read and used a simpler language. The katakana version, on the other hand, was printed to rectify the supposed mistakes made in the hiragana version. The katakana version was meant to lead people to religious awakening. The hiragana version was full of fabulous tales for children to enjoy.

Even in the katakana version, several of the tales of Inga Monogatari seem devoid of Buddhist lessons. One tells the story of a young priest who wakes up ill one morning and finds that his penis has fallen off. The priest takes this in stride, becomes a woman, gives birth to two children and makes his/her living selling wine. There is no obvious moral here, no reason for the transformation other than sensationalistic
entertainment. Another story featured a type of yūrei known as an *ubume*, meaning a woman who dies in childbirth or while pregnant.

Then, in 1666, the Buddhist priest Asai Ryōi wrote one of the most influential kaidan-shū of all time, *Otogi Bōko* (Hand Puppets).

Containing sixty-eight tales, seventeen of which were taken directly from the 1378 Chinese collection *Jian Deng Xin Hua* (New Tales under the Trimmed Lampwick), *Otogi Bōko* liberally adapts Chinese folk tales. Asai rewrote them completely, removing the Buddhist overtones and changing them to Japanese settings more familiar to readers. Most importantly, *Otogi Bōko* adapted the Chinese folktale *Botan Dōrō*, one of the most famous yūrei tales ever written. *Botan Dōrō* featured the lonely Otsuyu, who we will meet in later chapters.

As popular as these early kaidanshū were, something was still missing. Yūrei appeared in these stories and even took on physical form. But they were much more fluid and undefined. Sometimes in the shape of animated bones or a rotting corpse, they were most often in no way different from a regular human. In fact, for most of Japanese history, yūrei had no stereotypical appearance.

Up until the ends of the Muromachi period, the Azuchi–Momoyama period, and even into the early Edo period, yūrei looked no different than when they were alive. They were indistinguishable from the living. Many of Japan’s oldest yūrei tales are characterized by the hero not realizing he is speaking to a dead person until the grand reveal is made at the climax. This can be taken to extremes: in stories such as *The Yūrei Wife Who Came to Bear a Child*, a dead woman is able to return as a yūrei, live with her husband, and even bear his children all without the husband ever suspecting that his wife is deceased—until the twist is revealed.

In 1750, Ōkyo’s *The Ghost of Oyuki* gave a focus to these tales, an image people could hold on to and understand. Artists copied Maruyama’s yūrei and cranked out artwork as fast as they could manage. Several of the more popular yūrei, like Oiwa, Otsuyu, and Okiku, became something like celebrities. They appeared over and over again in different artists’ interpretations, but always recognizable as yūrei, always following Maruyama’s basic image of a pale-faced, white-robed person with long black, disheveled hair and no feet.

Another important element of kaidan and all kaidan-shū collections,
from the *Nihon Ryōiki* to the *Konjaku Monogatarishū* on down to *The Ghost of Oyuki*, is that they all promised to be true stories. They professed to be written “from life” and provable by the people who wrote them.

There was no question amongst Edo period Japanese regarding the existence of the supernatural. Yūrei stories were taken at face value, many explaining some local phenomenon, perhaps an oddly shaped rock or an ominous tree at the local shrine that refused to bend or sway in strong winds. Often the kaidan in a kaidan-*shū* collection were very short, without a beginning or an end but merely recording some strange occurrence that they had seen or heard of. This aspect of the collections was a powerful selling point, appealing to the public’s taste for true kaidan and yūrei tales. The public was known to reject stories that had too much of the stink of literature about them.

One such famous story that had no stink of literature whatsoever occurred in 1749—a year before *The Ghost of Oyuki* was painted. The Inō House in the Bingo area of Miyoshi city, Hiroshima, had been a beehive of supernatural phenomena for over a month. Poltergeist-like, furniture moved on its own. Strange lights and sounds emanated from the building. Crowds gather around the building every day, straining their eyes to catch a glimpse of mysterious forces at work in the famous haunted house.

The occurrence was heavily publicized and documented. Famed scholar Hirata Atsutane—ranked as one of the four great men of *kokugaku* (nativist) studies—sketched the building itself as well as the daily crowds of onlookers. The legend of the Inō House passed rapidly by word of mouth, and soon everyone was trading stories and flocking to supposed hauntings, hoping to witnesses some bizarre phenomena or supernatural manifestation.

This interest in ghostly storytelling transformed from a fad to an actual obsession due to an emerging parlor game—*hyakumonogatari kaidankai*, which translates as “a gathering of 100 weird tales.”

The way to play was simple. Late at night, a group would gather together and light 100 candles about the room, sometimes in a circle, sometimes wherever there was space to put them. The guests would tell kaidan, one after the other, and each time a story was told, they would reach over and extinguish a single candle. The room would slowly darken, and the tension would heighten.

The game was rumored to serve as an evocation, summoning evil spirits to the home where it was played. When the final candle was
killed, something was supposed to be waiting in the dark.

It was *de rigueur* for social gatherings in Edo period Japan. Public houses such as the Shogakan Gahakudo in Ginza were home to ongoing games, where fanatics gathered every night to share their stories and douse the candles. A stranger could not walk into the Shogakan Gahakudo without being instantly set upon to give a kaidan of his native region for the crowd, hopefully something new and interesting that had not been heard before.

No one knows exactly how *hyakumonogatari kaidankai* came to be played. Some say it has its origins in a Buddhist ritual called *hyakuza bodan* (*100 Buddhist stories*), where 100 Buddhist stories were told over 100 days, after which it was believed a miracle would happen. Others believe that the game was originally created by the samurai as a test of courage. With the wars ended, the samurai class went through an identity crisis. Of what use was a standing army of trained warriors with no one to fight? Still, they clung to their old codes of bravery. As proof of this, the grizzled veterans of old campaigns would gather the young pups together to play the game as a test of courage, to see who was brave enough to withstand the gruesome tales and who would shiver when the final light was doused.

A version of the game is described as early as 1660, in Ogita Ansei’s *kaidan-shū Tonoigusa* (*The Tales of the Straw Bed*), more popularly known as *Otogi Monogatari* (*Nursery Tales*).

In a dark cave high in the mountains, a group of samurai gathered to test each other’s courage with tales of horror. The candles cast flickering shadows on the wall, and with each tale told in succession, the nerves of the young men began to fail along with the fading firelight. With only one candle remaining, the last storyteller reaches out to complete the ritual and plunge the cave into total darkness. Suddenly a great black hand reaches down from the top of the cave, sending the samurai scattering. One warrior keeps his wits however, and a quick swipe of his sword severs the body of a spider gently lowering itself near the final candle—a spider whose shadow was the origin of the enormous hand.

Spreading in popularity, *hyakumonogatari kaidankai* slowly found its way down from the high castles of the aristocratic warrior class to the low markets of the working classes of peasants and townspeople. Eventually it was known and played everywhere in Japan.

The public developed an insatiable appetite for kaidan. People played the game so much that they were on the lookout for new kaidan that would impress and shock the other members of the gathering. It
wouldn’t do to be the boring guest who tells the same stories over and over again. They demanded even bloodier and scarier tales, and artists, storytellers, and entertainers worked like mad to meet the demand. All different forms of entertainment played off of the fad and reinforced each other to keep the profits coming and the fires burning.

Where there is demand, supply soon follows, and a cottage industry sprang up to take advantage of this. Special kaidanshū were designed to provide stories for the game. Many of these kaidanshū books even had the word “hyakumonogatari” (“100 tales”) in the title. They were of varying quality, produced quickly to meet a need rather than satisfy any sort of artistry.

China, India, and other foreign lands maintained a mystical quality during the Edo period. They served as appropriate backgrounds for tales of the supernatural, and accordingly the first book to use the name hyakumonogatari was published in 1677 and was called the Shokoku Hyakumonogatari (One Hundred Tales of Many Countries). As suggested by the title, it gathered together mysterious tales from several countries.

After the success of the Shokoku Hyakumonogatari, there were numerous imitators, such as Shokoku Shin Hyakumonogatari (One Hundred New Tales of Many Countries), Oogi Hyakumonogatari (One Hundred Companion Tales), Taihei Hyakumonogatari (One Hundred Tales of Peace), and Bansei Hyakumonogatari (One Hundred Tales of Eternity). All of them used the term hyakumonogatari in the title. All of them hoped to capitalize on the reading public’s fascination and frenzy.

Writers scoured Japan for grisly legends and folktales, climbing up the tallest mountains, through the darkest forests, hunting out the most remote villages looking for horror, trying to be the first to get them into printed format. Artists supplied the illustrations, dedicating long scrolls to depict the various creatures in the tale, such as Toriyama Sekien’s famous Gazu Hyakki Yakō (The Illustrated Night Parade of A Hundred Demons, 1776) or Tsukioka Yoshitoshi’s Shinkei Sanjuroka Isen (New Forms of Thirty Six Ghosts, 1889-1892). The vast majority of the yurei and yokai stories and images known today came from this period, and they still form the spine of Japanese horror storytelling. This was the Golden Age of the yurei.

One final element fed into the perfect storm that was the Edo period kaidan boom and the development of yurei—perhaps the most influential and lasting player to join in the craze: kabuki theater.