A Tale of Ghosts, Vengeance, and Greed (Except For When It Is Not): The History of *Yotsuya Kaidan* and its Adaptations

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Abstract

This paper discusses the evolution of the traditional Japanese Yotsuya Kaidan ghost story by analyzing its two main characters within Japanese cinematic adaptations in the U.S. occupied period of 1949 and culturally confused period of 1959. This analysis is then compared against the original kabuki play written in 1825, in order to understand why the adaptations made certain changes, and to what effect. This analysis intends to show the way a story's message is a reflection of the beliefs and values of the time in which it was produced, and how contemporary history and events—like occupation, censorship, cultural confusion—will inevitably bleed into the media that is created during them, and thus are important context to recognize when analyzing film. Through thorough analysis of both film and contemporary history, this paper finds that there is always more nuance beneath the surface of what a film is trying to say, and how it chooses to say it, and the best way to uncover this nuance is through deeper understanding of historical and cultural context.

I. Introduction

The tale of *Yotsuya kaidan*, or the ghost of Yotsuya, is often lovingly titled one of the most well-known ghost stories in Japan. It is a tale of a dishonourable samurai and his scorned wife bent on revenge, and has captivated audiences for centuries. *Yotsuya Kaidan* was originally a play written in 1825 by Tsuruya Nanboku IV, and has been adapted over 30 times since it first entered Japanese culture.

Of those 30, there are two of particular interest due to the time period they were produced in. *Yotsuya Kaidan* (1949), directed by Keisuke Kinoshita, was produced in the time after World War II when Japan was under occupation by the United States and facing strict media censorship in order to "modernize" and "westernize" the perceived backward and pre-modern country. *Yotsuya Kaidan* (1959), directed by Nobuo Nakagawa, was made seven years after occupation had ended, when Japan was at a crossroads within its own national identity; the years of forced occupation had left them with a modern and prosperous economy, but to the detriment of their own culture and traditions. Consequently, these adaptations are more than just the original story retold—and in many cases even contain drastic changes to characters or plot.

Leaning heavily on historical context as an explanation, this paper seeks to answer the question of why these changes were made and what effect they served on the greater themes of each respective iteration of the story. By analyzing both the 1949 and 1959 film in comparison to the original 1825 play, this paper will offer understandings of what each respective story is trying to say, and why that message is relevant and indicative of the time period it was produced in.

II. Literature Review and Methodology

This paper adopts a historical approach to film, building on the work of key scholars, including LeGacy, Brothers, and Donovan, in order to investigate why the Yotsuya Kaidan adaptations make certain narrative changes, and assert that the answer lies within the time period in which they were created.

LeGacy uses reception theory—which states the importance of an audience in ascribing meaning to a text—to argue that "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" is a reflection of Cold War anxieties in the U.S, and that is why it was so popular upon release. He highlights the role of the U.S. audience in ascribing meaning to the film through their own lived experience at the time, regardless of the creators' intentions. Alternatively, Brothers uses a social and political institutional approach when discussing the 1954 movie "Gojira." He describes the public sentiment of the United States in Japan at the time and the political climate of the country after World War II and the U.S.'s occupation of Japan. He asserts that these are extremely relevant in the creation of the film, even directly quoting the creator of the film describing his desire for the film to be a strong allegory for the bombing of Japan and a way for the public of Japan to feel represented in their trauma. Though the two approaches differ, both writers describe the historical context of the film, either using it to explain the mindset of the creator or of the audience to support their respective points about the allegorical nature of the two films. Similar to both Brothers and LeGacy, Donovan employs the historical context of each time period discussed to explain why and how the yōkai (traditional Japanese demon) trope evolved the way it did in Japanese cinema. Donovan ultimately argues that the evolution of yōkai in Japanese fiction can be seen as a direct reflection of the historical evolution of Japanese values and identity, and specifically touches on how J-horror films post-U.S. occupation, commonly featuring faithful yokai interpretations, can be seen as a return to traditional Japanese culture that was not encouraged or even allowed during the censorship of the U.S. occupation. These are the main film theories that are utilized throughout this paper.

The Yotsuya kaidan myth is the focus of this paper because of its significant presence in Japan as a quintessential ghost story. Thus, it is a good reflection of Japanese culture and values through the years as they change and evolve. The two adaptations in 1949 and 1959 respectively were chosen because these time periods feature important cultural shifts and chaos within history. This heightened historical relevance further enhances the ability to assume changes within the respective plots are influenced by these significant eras.

III. Iemon's Timeline

This section of the paper will focus on the main character of Iemon and his transformation and changes in the adaptations discussed. His personality and narrative treatment change and evolve within these adaptations, respective to their eras of creation.

1825: The Original Iemon

Yotsuya Kaidan was originally written by Tsuruya Nanboku IV in 1825 and performed as *kabuki,* a traditional form of Japanese theater. Iemon, our *ronin*, or masterless samurai, is set to be divorced from his wife, Oiwa, because Oiwa's father Samon has discovered that Iemon stole from Samon in order to marry Oiwa in the first place. Iemon cannot stand this injustice, and thus murders Samon. Iemon claims innocence to his wife, and promises he will enact vengeance on the killer. Instead of pretending to keep his promise, Iemon is occupied by his rich neighbor Kihee, whose granddaughter is deeply in love with Iemon and desperate to have him. Kihee schemes how to get Oiwa out of the way, and sends her an ointment that horribly disfigures her. After Oiwa uses the ointment, Iemon then threatens his servant and tells him to go and force himself upon Oiwa in order to give Iemon a valid reason to divorce Oiwa on the grounds of cheating. Iemon instead is left with Oiwa's corpse, as she discovered Iemon's plot and accidentally killed herself while in a rage. He thinks little of it and simply hides her body, claiming

she ran off to have an affair. Iemon then goes to his wedding and remarries, but the next day he sees Oiwa's ghost next to him, and he stabs her, only to realize it was actually his new wife. Oiwa's angry spirit has returned to haunt Iemon for his wrongdoings, and Iemon flees in terror to the mountains trying in vain to escape Oiwa. In the end, Iemon's brother-in-law, Yomoshichi, after receiving visions and pleas from Oiwa's ghost, finds him in the mountains and kills him.

In Tsuruya Nanboku IV's play, Iemon is the model of sinful and dishonourable behaviors that are to be punished. He is a samurai, sworn to bushidō, a specific set of codes that align with traditional Japanese values based on Confucian principles like loyalty, altruism, and trustworthiness. However, he blatantly disregards these codes within the story. His loyalty to his wife and her family is quickly pushed aside when he realizes he has a better opportunity with his rich neighbor's granddaughter, and he goes to cruel lengths to achieve his own personal goals. As Balmain put it, Iemon unflinchingly "places his self-interest before the needs of the community" (54).

This is uniquely problematic under the context of Japan's *ie* system, which is the traditional Japanese social structure that denotes the flow of responsibility and duty (Balmain 36). For example, familial responsibility fell to the head of household (typically eldest son), who then was held responsible to their large community, and then to the emperor (Balmain 36). The *ie* system is based upon a strong sense of obligation to your community, but also a generosity and sympathy towards each other that discourages conflict and takes precedence over any obligation you might have (Balmain 37).

Iemon acts in direct opposition to this system by weighing his own personal goals as more important than the harmony of his family and community. His actions and hubris are "threatening to the very structures of Japanese society according to which the individual should put duty and obedience before personal desire" (Balmain 57). Consequently, Iemon's immoral actions must be punished. Donovan describes the way that in traditional Japanese storytelling, people who transgressed moral obligations were punished by yōkai (loosely translated to monsters), who would uphold justice and order (13). Thus, Oiwa returns as a ghost to enact her vengeance on her cruel husband Iemon. This narratively enforces the idea that violating "the moral and ethical laws of the community" (Balmain 56) will not go unpunished, and Iemon serves as a warning created to scare people about the idea going against cultural codes and beliefs.

1949: Iemon as Japan

Keisuke Kinoshita's *Yotsuya Kaidan* (1949) sees Iemon's (Ken Uehara) immorality and responsibility displaced onto other characters, most notably well-known criminal gangster Naosuke (Osamu Takizawa), who is on the lam after escaping prison and narratively described as the "literal incarnation of evil" (1:25:15). Iemon's original crimes are either erased entirely—in the case of Iemon murdering Oiwa's (Kinuyo Tanaka) father and lying about it—or transferred to Naosuke. Additionally, Iemon becomes an unintentional participant in his own demise because of his subservience to Naosuke, falling in line with common western rhetoric of the importance of individual free will and agency (Geary). Iemon, in his complicity to Naosuke evils, ends up having to murder his own wife out of compassion, his hand being forced by the painful and disfiguring ointment that Naosuke secretly poisoned. He then is tormented by extreme hallucinations from his shame and cannot recover from his actions, scaring off his new wife and making his reputation worse than it ever was before. At the end of the film Naosuke and a blackmailed Iemon attempt to steal from Iemon's new wife's household, only to accidentally start

a house fire and die. Iemon is punished within the narrative time and time again for going along with Naosuke's plans without exerting his own agency over his life. Kinoshita's film stresses the importance of actively pursuing your own goals, because the alternative is to wind up like Iemon.

In Kinoshita's film, evil Naosuke is the one actually responsible for most of Iemon's cruelty and aggression, and is even explicitly blamed by Iemon. He is the one who comes up with the evil scheme to divorce Oiwa in favor of the rich doctor's daughter, Oume (Hisako Yamane), and pushes Iemon to go through with it. At every step of the way, Kinoshita's Iemon is hesitant to go along with Naosuke's scheme, and even outright rejects Naosuke when he says Iemon should kill Oiwa to easily get rid of her. Oiwa only dies when she is horribly disfigured by an ointment Naosuke sneakily gave her, and Iemon mercily kills her because of the unbearable pain she is in. But even as Iemon kills his wife with his own two hands, he blames Naosuke for what has happened: "Naosuke, you did that to her face!" (*Yotsuya Kaidan Part One* 1:21:18). This furthers the parallel of Iemon and Japan, as Iemon's cruelty is seen as his hand being forced by Naosuke's manipulation, much like Japan rewrote their imperial aggression as simple defense (Lowenstein 91). Later, a witness to the crime confesses to the police that in fact "[Naosuke] is the one who killed Oiwa" (*Yotsuya Kaidan Part Two* 0:59:05), completely erasing the role that Iemon had in the murder and placing all the blame on Naosuke, paralleling how Japan erased its own aggressive role in World War II after the fact. The audience also eventually learns that Naosuke is even to blame for Iemon's condition as a poor rōnin, as Naosuke robbed Iemon's lord under his watch, causing Iemon to lose his position. So Naosuke is not only to blame for Oiwa's death and Iemon's cruelty, but also for the financial desperation Iemon lives in that pushed him to such extremes in the first place.

Kinoshita's unique interpretation of Iemon can be seen as a direct parallel of what Lowenstein describes as the "pronounced shift in Postwar Japanese cultural representation that covers over Japan's pre-Hiroshima imperial aggressions in favor of post-Hiroshima national victimhood" (86). This shift can be seen in the change of common national imagery in Japan. During the war, Japanese propaganda consisted of images of young men bravely going to fight for their country, showcasing Japan as a strong and heroic nation. After Hiroshima in 1945, however, Japanese national imagery shifted starkly to featuring things like the "A-Bomb Maiden," or a young (and innocent) woman tragically suffering from illnesses reminiscent of bombing victims (Lowenstein 86). Japan's cultural shift from belligerent champion of the East Asian peninsula to the victim of western aggression is incredibly important context in order to properly understand Iemon's character in Keisuke Kinoshita's adaptation.

Kinoshita's version of Iemon inverts the traditional 1825 villain, uniquely going to great lengths to pardon Iemon and view him sympathetically as a victim of Naosuke. Kinoshita's sympathetic Iemon suggests a direct parallel to Japan and its national identity and the victimization complex in the Postwar era. After all, it's no coincidence that as Japan was entering a new era of deflecting blame and responsibility, a century-old villain was suddenly depicted as tragic and innocent.

This divergence from the original serves to tell a different story about Iemon, one that is ultimately in line with Japan's own narrative of innocence and victimhood at the time. No longer is Iemon (Japan) a cruel and aggressive patriarch, so hungry for increased power and money that they will abandon their own moral duties to achieve their goals. Rather, Kinoshita's Iemon (and Postwar Japan) is a battered and down-on-their-luck soul living in poverty and disgrace, making them unfortunate victims of manipulation and prodding.

This fear of passivity and complicity is a new addition to the Yotsuya Kaidan story, and is likely due to western influence during occupation. In terms of values and ideologies that the United States wanted to embed in Japanese society, individualism was near the top. Pre-Hiroshima Japan was known for its intense patriotism and religious reverence for their emperor, and such a strong sense of duty to their nation that they would welcome death over surrender. The United States' greatest fear was, at this point in time, history repeating itself in Japan, with a dictatorship or worse: falling to communism. Their perceived solution to the issue was to jam the concept of individualism down a staunchly collectivist country's throat, and *Yotsuya Kaidan* (1949) is a great example of this. Kinoshita's lesson of the film thus differs greatly from the original story, due to the historical context of World War II and manipulative dictators, and the western idea of the importance of agency and free will.

1959: Iemon As Modernity

Nobuo Nakagawa offered his interpretation of the popular ghost story in *Yotsuya Kaidan* (1959). His film is the one most often brought up when discussing the story and its legacy, and for good reason. Nakagawa's film is a faithful adaptation and triumphant return to the traditional story of Iemon (Shigeru Amachi) and Oiwa (Katsuko Wakasugi). Iemon is back to being the greedy and selfish rōnin he is known as, and any changes to the original story serve to *worsen* his actions. Oiwa's death here is not caused by accident or mercy killing, but by a knowing and willing Iemon poisoning his wife's tea. But although Nakagawa's character is extremely similar to Nanboku's, due to the historical and cultural context of post-occupation Japan, his actions and personality take on a new meaning as reflections of new western ideals of individualism and personal ambition.

After the occupation, the enforced modernity and development of consumerism and urbanization in Japan led to a miraculous economic growth and their GNP (gross national profit) increased to second only to the United States (Balmain 53). However, as Standish points out, this drastic change to Japanese society did not come without faults. With men constantly at work fueling the new Japanese economy, women were left fending for their children with little or no help, and the individual became increasingly alienated from those around them (Standish 309). This degradation of prewar Japanese society at the hands of western and modern ideals did not go unnoticed. The writer Yukio Mishima, in 1961, published the book *Patriotism*, promoting the code of bushidō and its traditional morals, in response to what he viewed as spiritual degeneracy in Japan (Balmain 53). Mishima even went so far as to form a private militia, the *Tatenokai*, or Secret Society, in order to preserve traditional Japanese national identity, and attempted a failed uprising at a Japanese Self-Defense Forces military base, after which he committed ritual suicide or *seppuku* while crying out "Long live the emperor."

This pushback against modern ideals within Japanese society through occupation paints Iemon's character in a new light. He is no longer just breaking bushido and rejecting his filial duties, but also actively pursuing western ideals of personal greed and ambition. From the very moment Iemon is introduced, he is a man desperate to raise his social status. In Nakagawa's film, Iemon starts out as an unmarried man, pleading for Oiwa's hand in marriage to her father, Samon (Shinjirō Asano), in hopes that aligning himself with their family will give him more opportunities and greater respect. However, Samon rejects Iemon and insults his pride and honor in the same breath, which prompts Iemon to lash out in anger and kill Samon. He then lies and manipulates Oiwa to marry him, promising he will seek vengeance for this murder. Then, when a better opportunity presents itself in the form of young, wealthy Oume (Junko

Ikeuchi), Iemon sees it as only natural to move on from his nagging wife to bigger and brighter things.

These actions, especially after U.S. occupation, read as uniquely targeted towards the western idea of individual ambition and ruthless pursuit of goals. This was the cultural shift occurring in Japan at the time, as their economy quickly became a competitive capitalist market that naturally emphasized the individual over the community. Salecl describes the way that consumerist economies are inherently focused on catering to an individual, and the way it promotes individuals constantly improving and bettering their own lives. Iemon is falling in line with this thinking as he attempts to improve his own individual life through marriages. He rejects traditional Japanese values and beliefs in favor of personal betterment and ambition; he kills Oiwa—here representing tradition and Iemon and Japan's literal past—in order to move forward into the modern future with Oume.

Nakagawa, however, rejects the notion of the supremacy of western and modern ideals through his narration. Iemon, after killing and manipulating those he needed to, seems to achieve his "happy ending," with Oume and his newfound riches and social status. Ultimately, though, Oiwa's ghost is sent to teach Iemon, and also the audience, a lesson about the consequences of abandoning your national identity, and your cultural ties and responsibilities. While Iemon's modern ideals and values do for a time help him achieve his ambitions, Nakagawa stresses the fact that there is no way to move forward without leaving some ghosts behind that will come back to haunt you.

In his inception in 1825, Iemon was a disgraceful samurai who served as an example of the punishment that would be inflicted on those who broke traditional Japanese societal codes and norms. His inability to put the good of his community above himself leads him to pursue his goals to violent extents, and his death at Oiwa's hands is the satisfying conclusion to his arc of selfishness and dishonour. A century later, in 1949, Japan was undergoing a shift in their own national identity from Asian heroes to post-war victims. Thus, the Iemon seen in Kinoshita's film is a sympathetic man who is less "evil" and more gullible to being manipulated to do cruel things. Iemon's heinous crimes in the original play are completely omitted from this version of the play, paralleling the way Japan as a country would censor their war-time losses and fatal mistakes. Iemon's main crime in 1949 is his passivity and allowing other characters make decisions and choices for him. With the context of the U.S. occupation at the time attempting to enforce and imbue western and modern ideas on a traditional Japan, this narrative messaging is read as yet another parallel to contemporary issues. When Nakagawa adapted the myth in 1959, Japan was no longer under occupation, but still under the influence of western ideas that actively jeopardized and contrasted their traditional beliefs. Nakagawa's film reflects this conflict between tradition and modernity in its main characters' conflict. Iemon is the picture of western greed, attempting to get rid of his traditional wife in order to financially prosper, and he is scorned and punished within the narrative accordingly. This again showcases the way that historical and cultural context greatly impacts the films produced within them. Throughout the years, Iemon has had changes done to his character and narrative role, and these changes create a different message or meaning to the original story that falls in line with the contemporary moment.

IV. Oiwa Through The Years

Next, this paper will analyze Iemon's wife, and narrative partner, Oiwa. While Oiwa's character and personality stay relatively similar throughout the discussed adaptations, the

narrative changes how it views that personality and depicts it accordingly. She is always a traditional and loyal wife, but throughout Japanese history as cultural ideals have shifted and changed, so too does the story's representation of Oiwa.

1825: The Original Oiwa

In Tsuruya Nanboku IV's 1825 *Yotsuya Kaidan* kabuki play, Oiwa is an unhappy wife to rōnin Iemon, and is working with her father to divorce him when her father is murdered. This forces Oiwa to then stay her marriage with Iemon, as he is her only hope of seeking vengeance for her father's killer. But Iemon only continues to mistreat and neglect Oiwa, especially after she gives birth and struggles with postpartum sickness. She is sent a mysterious ointment that disfigures her, and Iemon comes home and insults her newfound hideousness. Oiwa's servant, Takuetsu, attempts to force himself on her, but is so disgusted that he takes pity on her and reveals her evil husband's plan to divorce Oiwa on the grounds of cheating and remarry their rich neighbor's granddaughter. Oiwa is so enraged by this news that she accidentally stabs herself with a nearby dagger, cursing Iemon and vowing vengeance as she dies. She returns as a spirit to haunt and terrorize Iemon on his wedding day, causing him to kill both his new wife and grandfather-in-law and flee in terror to the mountains. Oiwa then sends visions to her brother-in-law in his dreams to kill Iemon and enact her vengeance, and is finally able to rest peacefully.

In the original 1825 story, Oiwa, as a ghost, and a literal remnant of the past, represents the way dishonourable actions will come back to haunt their perpetrators. She serves the traditional purpose of yōkai in Japanese storytelling, keeping the world in a state of order that abides by national values and beliefs by punishing Iemon for his transgressive behavior (Donovan 13). She supports the main lesson of the play about the consequences of greed and unchecked ambition and the importance of respecting your duties and cultural identity. By contrast, Iemon acts in a dishonourable and cruel way and thus must be punished and shown the error of his ways by Oiwa, the representation of all the values Iemon lacks.

Oiwa shows consistent filial piety for her family throughout the play, in contrast to Iemon's selfish individualism. After her father is killed, she insists on Iemon finding the murderer and bringing justice to her father's memory. Under the *ie* system, whereby filial piety is valued above all else, Iemon is now the head of Oiwa's family, and Oiwa expects him to be loyal to his duties to her father above all else. As a woman in feudal Japan, there were limited ways that Oiwa and women like her could exert power and agency over their lives. For Oiwa, the only way to see her father's revenge brought about was for Iemon to pursue it. But, of course, Iemon demonstrates that he has no loyalty to Oiwa's family throughout the play. Oiwa remains loyal to Iemon despite his cruel words and reprimands towards her. After Iemon comes home when Oiwa has been disfigured, he insults her appearance, steals her things to pawn off, and says he has changed his mind about helping Oiwa find her father's killer. Iemon does all of these things as she is in immense pain from the medicine she has been given, but despite this, Oiwa rejects her servant Takuetsu's advances when he attempts to force himself on her: "Woman as I am, I was born a warrior's daughter and am now the wife of another" (Nanboku 68). Oiwa puts aside her personal desires and hatred for Iemon and remains loyal to her obligations as a wife and daughter of a respectable warrior. This ironically contrasts with Iemon at this same point in the play going off to marry another woman, completely disrespecting his duties to his family and thinking only of his personal desires.

Oiwa's character markedly contrasts that of Iemon. Thus, their conflict within the play represents a wider theme of loyalty to cultural ties and identity. Although Iemon achieved temporary victories through his manipulations and deceit, Oiwa achieves the final victory over Iemon as she kills him and is able to rest peacefully in the afterlife. Her triumph represents the play's messaging on the value of cultural identities and duties and the way that one will never really be able to leave this identity behind without dire consequences.

1949: There's No Ghosts in this Ghost Story

In Kaisuke Kinoshita's rendition of the popular tale, Oiwa (Kinuyo Tanaka) is a hollowed-out character that reflects the growing popularity and enforcing of western beliefs and ways of living under U.S. occupation. The 1949 film removes the supernatural elements from the original 1825 play in favor of a more rational western ideology around death. Kinoshita's Oiwa serves to also enforce the occupation ideals of the "right" woman, as she is directly contrasted with her sister as an example of how passive women are actually at fault for the violence and abuse perpetrated against them.

Kinoshita's film robs Oiwa of her ability to enact revenge by depicting her in an incredibly rational way, falling in line with the popular western belief at the time. Historian Scherer explains that "in intellectual discourse, belief in ghosts and other supernatural beings was treated as backward and belonging to the premodern past" (80). Oiwa in her ghostly form, then, could not be allowed to exist under occupation that was centered around modernizing Japan. Therefore Oiwa is no longer a moral yōkai seeking vengeance for the wrongs that were done to her, but rather cinematically coded with intentional framework (Scherer 85) as a figment of Iemon's guilt conscience.

Oiwa's drastic change within the narrative is reflective of the way U.S. occupation policed the way Japanese people, specifically women, could "correctly" express themselves. This can be seen in the way the film treats Oiwa compared to her sister Osode (also Kinuyo Tanaka). Oiwa is described as kind to a fault and too shy and retiring, which serves to place blame upon her for the abuse she suffers at the hands of her husband. She is narratively punished with death for being loyal to Iemon and refusing to divorce him, and his cruelties are seen as valid retaliations in the face of Oiwa's nagging neediness and devotion to her husband. This attempts to teach the audience that subservience and passivity are qualities to be avoided, which falls in line with the ideology that U.S. occupation officials wanted to get across. Even as Oiwa dies from her husband's own blade, she issues no cries of rage or vengeance, merely crying from the pain. Her passivity follows her all the way to the grave, and the perpetrators of her death are never properly punished or taught a lesson.

The qualities that spell disaster in Oiwa's life are then juxtaposed with Osode's character and her happy ending. Once her sister has died, Osode realizes something strange is afoot, and actively fights for an investigation into the disappearance of Oiwa. She works closely with the police and alongside her husband to see justice be brought to her and her family. She is an equal partner in her marriage and is often seen giving orders to her husband, Yomoshichi, in her impassioned search for answers. In this way, Osode blatantly rejects traditional Japanese beliefs of subservience to the husband and placing communal good above personal goals. However, this dismissal and outright shunning of traditional Japanese culture is never seen as a negative, because this dismissal is everything that the U.S. occupation is hoping to achieve. Osode is depicted as the perfect modern woman who "acts of her own volition [and] pursues her goals rationally" (Scherer 84). Her willingness to actively pursue her goals and fight for what she

believes in—regardless of how many traditional beliefs she rejects—is rewarded by her happy ending. She is able to get justice for her sister as she learns who is responsible for her death and attempts to capture them with the help of the police. Although the chaotic ending of the film instead features a burning house that kills both Naosuke and Iemon before they can receive proper punishment, Osode still ends the film walking off away from the burning house with her husband and future child. Kinoshita's depiction of Osode upholds the ideas U.S. occupation was trying to enforce. Osode is only able to get her happy ending *because* she breaks away from traditional Japanese gender ideals and instead prescribes to western ideals of free will, ambition, and modernity.

This film serves as a brilliant example of the way that directors can twist and change a character and story based on the political ideologies and historical context of the time. Oiwa's character in its essence does not change greatly—minus her ghostly identity. In both the 1825 play and Kinoshita's 1949 adaptation, she is a fiercely loyal and devoted wife who cares deeply for her community and family more than her own wellbeing, poignantly representing traditional Japanese standards and culture. The difference shines, however, in how this personality is treated within the narrative. In the play, Oiwa's traditionalism is what gives her power. She is quite literally a representation of the past that comes back to haunt and punish those that would scorn her. But Kinoshita's film views Oiwa's traditionalism as backward and pathetic, the ultimate reason for her downfall. Her traditional beliefs and filial subservience are narratively punished, similarly to how traditional Japanese beliefs were criticized and outright banned from films under occupation. Though the character is constant, different time periods interpreted the same character in vastly different ways due to their respective places in history. Under a harsh occupation that was designed to strip Japan of its national identity and replace it with western values, Oiwa's traditionalism was naturally seen as a clear disadvantage where it never had been in the past. By comparison, Osode's rejection of how a traditional Japanese woman should act in favor of new western and modern ideas is the direct reason why she can find justice and peace after her sister's murder. These characters, especially compared to their original counterparts, reflect the U.S. occupation's desire to convince Japanese people of the supremacy of modernity over traditionalism.

1959: Oiwa's Return

In Nakagawa's adaptation *Yotsuya Kaidan* (1959), Oiwa (Katsuko Wakasugi) is a joyous return to her original character in the play as a representation of tradition and upholder of justice. Her ghostly return for vengeance is brought back, and she again symbolizes the return of tradition and pre-occupation culture where modernity would see them dismantled. However, Nakagawa's Oiwa's story is made more rich and intense than the 1825 original through the historical context of the moment.

Nakagawa's film affirms the right and supremacy of tradition six years after a brutal occupation that attempted to modernize Japan. To tell this classic Japanese ghost story so faithfully after so many traditional Japanese stories had been censored and blacklisted during the occupation sent forth its own message of the importance of respecting tradition and national history and identity.

Oiwa's return to her classic ghostly self is just one example of a broader cultural rejoicing in tradition through media. Donovan described the way that traditional yōkai post-occupation were depicted with astounding accuracy, and how this reflects the larger cultural shift of respecting and paying homage to national Japanese identity (9). He cites how Oiwa, specifically,

in the 1959 film is visually represented extremely similar to old woodblock prints of her in the 1800s, and how in her ghostly form she retains the outfit and wounds she had as she died, like traditional Japanese ghosts (Donovan 11-12). The commitment to Oiwa's visual and narrative representation can be seen throughout the entire film, and Nakagawa's valuing of tradition and classic Japanese culture is on full display.

Even though there was a large rejoicing in traditional Japanese beliefs in many parts of the country, Japan was still incredibly modernized when it came to their economy. Their economy had grown substantially on a global scale and it was all thanks to the adoption of modern and western ideas. This led to conflicting perspectives from citizens and confused personal identities. Many enjoyed the newfound wealth in the pockets of themselves and their great nation; others, however, saw Japan as bastardizing itself and hollowing out its own culture in order to simply be richer. This national tension and conflict between modern ideas and traditional values is the main breeding ground for Nakagawa's film.

Nakagawa's faithful interpretation of the original Oiwa allows for a distinct metaphor to emerge in which Oiwa is the representation of traditional Japanese beliefs that comes in conflict with the selfishly motivated Iemon, who here represents the modern ideas that are only possible by rejecting tradition. There is no clearer example of this than with Iemon's desire to socially and financially advance himself (like 1950s Japan) by remarrying, and needing to leave his old wife (tradition) behind to achieve this goal. But just like the past, and our own cultural identities, Oiwa comes back to literally and metaphorically haunt Iemon. Michael Dylan Foster writes about how ghosts in stories are "the banished Other [that] returns, causing [those around them] to anxiously question their modern ways of interpreting the world around them" (117-118). Within this framework, Oiwa's ghostly return is detrimental to Iemon's view of how to see the world. He believed he had achieved greatness by leaving his old wife (and likewise, tradition) behind, only to realize they were never truly gone, only waiting to reappear.

Unlike Kinoshita's 1949 film, which attempts to convince the public of the validity of modern ideals like free will and ambition, Nakagawa wholeheartedly depicts tradition as the inevitable winner of the contemporary conflict, as the film ends with Oiwa floating above Iemon's death, cradling her baby, smiling. Despite the push towards modern ideas supported by a growing economy, he clearly believed that, just like Iemon, Japan would face the consequences of completely renovating their national identity in the pursuit of more wealth.

Though Oiwa has stayed a similar character throughout the adaptations discussed, the specific way she is narratively seen and interpreted changes drastically depending on the cultural and historical context. In the original play, she represents the consequences of breaking samurai code and disrespecting your culture. Her ghostly return is an explicit example of how dishonourable actions will always come back to haunt those who make them. In Kinoshita's 1949 adaptation, due to the censorship of the U.S. occupation, Oiwa no longer returns as a ghost, and does not teach any lessons to Iemon. In fact, due to the conscious and subconscious effort by the occupation to enforce modernized ideals of agency and free will, Oiwa's passivity as a traditional wife is narratively punished and seen as a bad thing to fit the western narrative of the time. With Nakagawa's film in 1959, however, we see the brilliant return to the Oiwa of old, who comes back as a ghost to teach Iemon the lesson of pursuing modernity at the expense of tradition and national culture. This parallels Japan's actions at the time, as they modernized and followed western ideals within their economy which led to financial prosperity to the detriment of their national culture and identity that was being actively shunned. Analyzing Oiwa through these different lenses proves the importance of analyzing films further and always

asking questions about why a director made a change or decision regarding characters and their behavior or personality.

V. Conclusion: Putting It All Together

The Yotsuya kaidan myth, since its introduction to Japanese culture in 1825, has changed and evolved in its many adaptations through the years. These changes can be read as explicit references and responses to the cultural and national shifts that were occurring at the time of each films' production. This paper specifically highlighted these changes through analysis of the main characters of the myth in each adaptation.

In 1825, the story serves as a reflection of contemporary cultural values. Iemon's character disregards Japanese customs about the importance of community and filial loyalty, instead pursuing his own selfish ambition and desires. This puts him at odds directly with Oiwa, who is killed to further Iemon's dishonorable pursuits, and thus he is punished within the narrative by Oiwa to teach the lesson that one's breaking of cultural codes will always have consequences deeper than one can understand. Oiwa comes back to show the way that the past can come back to haunt you, literally. Nanboku's kabuki play asserts the importance of the cultural hierarchy of loyalty and respect within Japan through both of the main characters.

In 1949, the story being told by Kinoshita is vastly different. Under U.S. occupation bent on modernizing a "backward" country, Kinoshita was unable to fully adapt the story faithfully due to strict censorship restrictions. This is seen most clearly in the lack of Oiwa's ghostly return for vengeance against Iemon, which hollows out her character. Oiwa's character is also viewed in a much more negative light compared to how Nanboku represented her. Although her actual character stays constant, the western occupying force that was subtly affecting Japanese thoughts saw Oiwa's passivity and traditional wifely behaviors as a symptom of Japan's "backward" culture, and therefore necessitated a different approach. In order to properly introduce western ideas of a modern woman, the film spends substantial amounts of time blaming Oiwa for her own death and abuse because she was simply too passive and kind-hearted. Through this, the western ideals of the proper way a woman should act bleed into the film by demonizing Oiwa's previously proper behavior in favor of a more assertive and independent woman, as seen in her sister, Osode. The other largest change occurs in Iemon's character, and can be traced back to the cultural shift in national identity after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, wherein Japan swapped their previous aggressive imperialist attitude for a victim complex that left them completely innocent of the crimes they committed during and directly preceding the war. Thus, Iemon's personality as a cruel and greedy villain is changed in a way that subtly parallels Japan's own cultural shift. He is now an ultimately innocent husband who is simply manipulated into doing evil deeds by the true villain Naosuke. Furthermore, Iemon's weakness lies not in his breaking of cultural codes, but of his passivity in the face of Naosuke's manipulations. This new direction with Iemon's character can further be supported by western influence with ideas about independence and individual free will. Ultimately, in the 1949 film, both Oiwa and Iemon's main flaw is their passivity, which leads to their respective unfortunate endings.

In 1959, Nakagawa's film is a joyous return to the original story and characters, falling in line with the cultural trend of the time. After occupation ended, Japanese artists were able to depict traditional Japanese tropes and yōkai without fear of censorship. This return to tradition in many cases also reflected a cultural pushback that many citizens felt after the forced modernization of the occupation. Although this modernizing of Japan had some positive effects,

primarily the enhanced economy, many felt that these accomplishments came at the cost of the Japanese national identity. This conflict can be felt in Nakagawa's depictions of Iemon and Oiwa. Although they're very faithful to their original characters, the story they tell and themes they symbolize are unique to this time period. Iemon's greed and personal ambition now parallels the darker contemporary urge to pursue modernity at the expense of one's own culture. Oiwa, then, represents the tradition that the Japanese needed to hold onto, according to Nakagawa. Though Iemon tried to get rid of Oiwa to further his own social and financial status, she came back to haunt him, literally, and remind him of the oaths he had broken. Iemon and Oiwa's conflict reflects the wider cultural confusion of a country caught between modernity and tradition, and the film, when understood in the full context of that historical moment, can be seen as a reminder to any Japanese citizen who would try to leave tradition behind, like Iemon did. The film asserts the longevity and dominant nature of tradition and past values.

The evolution of the *Yotsuya Kaidan* myth and its adaptations traces the evolution of Japan's national identity and cultural shifts throughout the decades. The two inform and affect each other, and analyzing one allows for a deeper understanding of the other. To fully appreciate the stories that are told in certain historical moments, it is paramount to analyze the aspects of history that inevitably bleed into the media. Conversely, deeply analyzing film can open a doorway into understanding its respective history and culture. When decisions are made in the filmmaking process, culture and history are always behind the scenes, working in some way or another, as seen in the example of the many *Yotsuya Kaidan* films.

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