Preface

In spite of a growing interest among Westerners to understand and analyze Japan and the Japanese—much of it sparked by rapidly developing business connections—what largely animates and informs the “Janesenesness” they seek to fathom actually lies where they do not look. People are reading everything possible (and impossible) about Japan that they can lay their hands on. Yet this eager pursuit seems one-dimensional, since people tend to seek answers only in particular directions, guided by their own (or someone else’s) preconceptions, such as when they focus only on Confucianism, or Zen Buddhism, those impressive façades of Japan’s culture which fascinate and impress Europeans and Americans as exotic and deeply meaningful.

Meaningful they certainly are, but in mistaking the façade for the building, the Westerner is often joined, unfortunately, by many of the Japanese themselves, who may not know their own culture very fully, or who find it profitable to advertise their country in the exotic terms so attractive to outsiders. Quite apart from the Confucian ethic, or the Zen Buddhist art
of self-control, both of which have become something of a trademark for Japan’s business success, there are many far more basic elements of vernacular culture, lived out in the experiences of everyday people, which constitute basic Japanese attitudes toward life and death, toward family, toward individual responsibility and deportment, and toward society.

As we have tried to illustrate in this book, these basic elements are found abundantly in the ongoing traditions and customs through which Japanese people articulate their relationships to each other and the world around them. In every culture, traditional expressions incorporate these important cultural elements of meaning, or else they would die out; thus recurrent topics and themes are valuable means to help an outsider perceive something about the insider’s cultural values. For the Japanese, for example, one of the most persistent arenas of cultural concern through the ages has been death and its impact on everyday life. If our fresh look at Japanese death legends can give new readers a fuller sense of everyday culture in Japan, along with the opportunity and encouragement to reflect on the differences among cultures and their meanings generally, then we will be exceedingly pleased and well compensated for our efforts.

We would like to express our sincere thanks to those who have helped us to understand and articulate the complex dimensions of Japanese death lore in both contemporary life and historical retrospect: to Japanologists Klaus Antoni (University of Trier) and Stephen Kohl (University of Oregon), we owe particular insights into the relationships between older custom and modern cultural expression; folklorists Pack Carnes, Bruce Jackson, W. K. McNeil, and David Hufford provided extensive suggestions for examples and clarification; conversations with Yoko Elsner, Seiko Kikuta, Asako Marumoto, Akiko Tohmatsu, and Kanako Shiokawa helped us better understand the range of contemporary feeling and attitudes toward death among Japanese people. Midori and Kaori Ikematsu and Machiko Iwasaka established our first contacts with the monks of the Zenshōan Temple in Tokyo, where more than fifty portraits of ghosts are displayed yearly at Obon time.

We gratefully acknowledge the generous permission of the Kadokawa Shoten Publishing Co., Ltd., to quote from their massive folklore encyclopedia, *Nihon Minzokushi Taikei* (Tokyo: 1975); particular references are provided in the notes.
Much of our research would have been quite impossible without the friendly help of Dr. Andrée Belleville, Swiss specialist in Japanese Studies who was teaching German at Mie University. In response to our needs, she searched Japanese libraries and antique book stores for many of the works used in this study. Her skilled efforts enormously mitigated our problematic working distance from Japan.

Over the past thirteen years as the legend texts were translated and retranslated, and the chapters went through interminable revisions via overseas mail (Iwasaka lives in Germany, Toelken in Utah; their common language is German), several valiant typists learned more about Japanese customs than they had bargained for; for their patience, skill, and exceptional good cheer, we want to thank Susan Fagan at the University of Oregon, and Karen Krieger and Barbara Walker of Utah State University—the latter especially for her unfailing editorial insights and monumental good sense. Haruko Iwasaka generously supplied the calligraphy for the book.

Finally, a chance remark by a Tokyo taxicab driver led us to the Zenshoan Temple, near Ueno Park. Zenshoan, a Zen Buddhist temple, was founded in the Taito-ku district of Tokyo in 1883 by Yamaoka Tesshū (1836–1888) for the purpose of praying for the spirits of those who had lost their lives during the Meiji Restoration. Yamaoka was a confidant of the last Tokugawa Shogun, Yoshinobu, and when the shogunate returned power to the emperor, Yamaoka was chosen to be the court’s lord chamberlain. Among other assignments, he was put in charge of educating and training the young Emperor Meiji (1872–82). Famous as a swordsman, Yamaoka Tesshū founded a school of fencing and was also well known for his calligraphy. Although he never became a Buddhist priest, Yamaoka associated himself with Zenshoan during his final years, and his remains are buried in the temple’s graveyard.

In addition to Yamaoka, a number of other prominent artists and politicians are interred at Zenshoan, among them the rakugo master, Sanyūtei Enchō (1839–1900). Enchō (born Isubuchi Jirōkichi), was the son of another rakugo artist, Tachibanaya Entarō, and made his first appearance on the rakugo stage when he was seven, under the stage name Koenta. At his mother’s urging, he was apprenticed to a businessman and again later to the artist Utagawa Kuniyoshi, but both efforts were interrupted by poor health.

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The boy eventually dedicated his life to the art of rakugo, a stage presentation of engaging narratives in which the artist takes the roles of all the characters, using variations in vocal tone and employing a fan, a kerchief, and other everyday items as evocative props. When he was seventeen, he took his stage name, Sanyûtei (the name of his artistic school) Enchô, and when he was twenty, he wrote his first rakugo piece—a kaidan, a story of the supernatural—and performed it. Composing many of the stories which he performed, he became one of the best known and most popular rakugo artists in the country—so much so that fans even emulated his hair style.

Later in life he studied Zen philosophy with Yamaoka Tesshû, and associated himself with the Zenshôan Temple, where he performed ghost stories each year during the Obon season. To this day, the custom is being observed, as master storytellers gather at the Zenshôan to tell supernatural tales at Obon. Enchô’s private collection of more than fifty ghost portraits—which he had gathered for his study of ghost gestures and themes to be used in his works—was bequeathed to Zenshôan Temple at his death; they are exhibited each year during August, the Obon season. The pictures which accompany this book are a selection from that collection.

At the Zenshôan, we were kindly allowed to survey the temple’s extensive collection of ghost pictures, and subsequently we were permitted to reproduce those we found appropriate for this book. We would like to express our gratitude to Reverend Genkyo Hirai (recently deceased) and the monks of Zenshôan for their hospitality and cooperation, and for their permission to use pictures from their treasury. Travel expenses to do research at the Zenshôan Temple as well as support for the publication costs of reproducing the ghost portraits were generously supplied by Brian Pitcher, dean of the College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences at Utah State University.