Ghosts And The Japanese
Toelken, Barre, Iwasaka, Michiko

Published by Utah State University Press

Toelken, Barre and Michiko Iwasaka.
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An Introduction to the Left Stairway

Of the many popular stereotypes about Japan, two of the most common are curiously in opposition. One, based on current successes in business and finance, depicts the Japanese as narrowly ethnocentric and internationally aggressive, and sees their behavior as a holdover from the samurai era. In this view, Japanese business leaders are feudal lords who have only thinly disguised their true identity by shifting from kimono and sword to three-piece suit and computer. One approaches a business meeting with them using the same delicate caution associated with visiting a daimyo in his castle. Americans who want to initiate relationships with Japan study Zen Buddhism, samurai behavior, and elite pastimes ranging from archery to flower arranging. From this perspective, the Japanese system is perceived as pervasive, monolithic, unavoidable; we read phrases like “The Japanese believe...” and “Japanese businessmen always...” and “When in Japan, you must never....” This stereotype represents Japan as having changed little since olden times, as a country
which maintains an aggressive stance toward other cultures' land, money, and property.

As with all stereotypes, this one may contain a grain of accuracy; for instance, the very powerful *uchi/soto* (insider/outside) considerations which animate much Japanese corporate activity probably informed samurai behavior as well, and the foreign observer may simply be mistaking a certain popular historical model for an ongoing process. The real error of the stereotype is the conclusion that all Japan runs on a single, deep-level system of belief and behavior. The much touted *uchi/soto* distinction, which may indeed provide a foundation for judgment and action, is found throughout the world, and even in Japan, it is not encountered under all circumstances or in the same way. And it does not account for a myriad of other significant phenomena which one meets daily on the streets, at work, or in conversation. Clearly many other cultural processes are at work.

Even the casual visitor to Japan will notice after a few days that the visible aspects of everyday custom and traditional behavior do not fit into one monolithic system. Typically the same family that uses a Shintō ceremony for weddings will observe Buddhist rites for funerals; a businessman who espouses Confucian precepts in his profession may be a practicing Christian, a nonchalant Buddhist, or—perhaps most often—a member of no religion at all. Eventually, if the visitor is not confused by this amalgam, the Japanese will emerge as a people who have been able to adopt, adapt, translate, reform, and integrate the ideas and values of many cultures and religions into their own system.

While this cultural dynamism and eagerness to absorb may not impede our study of Japanese art, religion, philosophy, and written language, they often deeply affect our ability to understand more recent developments in Japan and lead directly to the second popular stereotype: the Japanese have become too "Westernized." They have neon lights, computers, television, transistors, Kleenex, automobiles, a Disneyland, and Kentucky Fried Chicken. Without pausing to wonder whether the Japanese may have invented some of these items themselves, and instead accepting another of our favorite preconceptions that the Japanese are always "copying" things which originated elsewhere, we visitors may easily conclude that the "old Japan" no longer survives because its graceful cherry-blossom viewers have
been replaced by rude, ambitious throngs of office workers who cram themselves suicidally into modern trains running at 200 percent capacity. The geisha has given way to the bowing department-store zombie, we think, and the samisen has been blasted off the stage by karaoke and the electric guitar. Japan is not what our romantic stereotypes have prepared us to expect: couples are now married in New England-style churches (often on package tours to Hawaii), and picturesque farm houses display a forest of television antennas which spoil our scenic photos. So much for the wonderful, artistic, "authentic" Japanese way of life, we lament, forgetting that similar changes in our own culture do not puzzle us at all and that a few years ago, we were at war with these people whose culture was then considered unalterably alien, unfathomable, and frightening.

We are also inclined to overlook in both of these stereotypes that the most meaningful and enduring parts of a culture may not be its most visible or conscious ones. A complex of shared cultural values animates much of what can and cannot happen in Japan, and these are seldom consciously articulated even though they can be experienced daily on the street.

For example, the outsider often becomes a part of dodging games when encountering Japanese pedestrians, or worse, finds himself on the wrong (that is to say, right-hand) side of a public stairway. Americans or Europeans will try to exit a subway during rush hour by sticking doggedly and "properly" to the right-hand railing while being carried grimly and unremittingly back down the stairs by what is surely half of Tokyo's population. The Japanese, if they notice what is happening at all, do not speak or apologize. In fact, they may glare briefly at the unfortunate gaijin who has again managed to get into the wrong place and is inconveniencing and embarrassing several thousand Japanese citizens who deserve something better than crude idiosyncrasy in crowded places.

A Japanese person walking alone in this crowd would normally move to the left (for the same reason an American would move to the right) because it is customary, especially at rush hour, when space is limited and people are in a hurry. The flow of the larger group is not impeded, and the individual—by conforming to the group dynamic—reaches the goal without difficulty. Indeed, in some Tokyo subway stations where foreigners are most likely to appear, there are
now footprints painted on the floor to indicate the way to the correct stairway or escalator.

When walking together in groups (among friends, relatives, business colleagues), however, Japanese pedestrians, like those in other countries, seem to use another model; the group, moving together like a bubble in the larger stream, may take up an entire sidewalk or stairway, regardless of who else—Japanese or gaijin—may be coming in the opposite direction and keeping properly to the left. In this case, the group exerts a right-of-way (a kind of cultural easement) over others in the stream, often forcing them into the street or up against the wall. After spending a year in Japan trying to figure out these movement patterns, Professor Stephen Kohl of the University of Oregon decided that “walking in Japan is a full-body contact sport”; an unwary foreigner might be inclined to describe them as life threatening if encountered under rushed and stressful circumstances.

Yet the Japanese model (if there is one) is no more threatening in and of itself than the American one; neither practice is obstinate or contrary or arrogant. At the same time, neither one can be clearly and unequivocally articulated by those for whom the pattern is “normal.” Both systems are relatively consistent, and both are based on doing what feels right according to assumptions which, though seldom openly stated, are so deeply integrated into the values and actions of everyday life that they do not require conscious thought. Anthropologist Edward T. Hall has suggested that because these cultural values are so basic to our sense of normality, and because we do not deal with them consciously, we often become aware of them only when someone threatens us by acting “abnormally.” The anxiety or anger which results may be demonstrated by glares on the Japanese subway staircase, or in physical actions like those of a well-dressed woman who encountered the coauthor of this book during Christmas season, walking on the left side of a German sidewalk, and thrashed her with an umbrella, yelling, “Shameless! Shameless! In Germany, we walk in the right place!”

Every culture which remains alive is well supplied with these codes of everyday behavior and value, along with attendant emotions, regardless of how many other philosophies it may have borrowed and how literate and sophisticated its members may be. America has thousands of these customs of cultural and social communication, and so has
Japan. Usually our customs are learned by example (or by consistent omission) and through the stories, jokes, anecdotes, remarks, and actions of those closest to us as we are forming our concepts of normality, that is, from our families. Such ideas and values remain unstated and unquestioned most of the time because they represent self-evident, usual ways of behaving; they are quickly mentioned, however, if we transgress the unstated rule, when we suddenly hear a parent thunder, “Don’t ever let me catch you doing that again!” These, then, are the least likely subjects to come up when we consciously or intellectually discuss our culture or that of others: when was the last time you talked about which side of the staircase your culture uses, or how close you stand to a stranger of the opposite sex while conversing, or the cultural variations in the meaning of eye contact?

Reaching and recognizing this dynamic and underlying level of cultural communication can be one of the most exciting adventures, though, for we suddenly find windows opening up, lights going on, things making sense that were previously clouded, confusing, or even seemed dangerous. We begin to watch for the unspoken, the automatic, the “obvious”; for the patterned ways in which things do or do not happen; and for the subtle and unmentioned “normalities” that lie at the heart of the familiar—and thus enduring and sustaining—parts of everyday life. Figuratively speaking, we should be willing to experience both sides of the stairway, to become aware of the familiar (as obvious and simple as that may sound) in such a way that cultural practices different from our own will register as adventures in the kaleidoscope of human meaning rather than confirmation that other peoples are crude or backward.

Many are unwilling to go this far, and perhaps do not even consider it an alternative. A friend of ours, an American woman long familiar with Japan and its language, confided that after her first year in Tokyo, she could not take the daily beating any longer and exchanged her soft leather handbag for a hard-shell briefcase—the better to protect herself from subway crowds. She is still convinced, years later, that the Japanese at rush hour simply suspend the norms of human consideration, and would even ignore the Geneva Convention to reach their trains on time. We believe the truth is—embarrassingly—far simpler: she probably never considered that the left side of the stairway was a normal place to walk.
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It is not with the aim of helping businessmen or tourists to avoid embarrassment in the subway, but in the hopes of suggesting where people might find the right (left) side of the Japanese cultural stairway (and be willing to consider using it) that we have put this book together. Since the everyday codes are so numerous, however, we have decided to focus on one area of great interest and significance in modern Japan (as well as in times past), yet one which people do not generally articulate in spite of the anxieties, fascinations and routine avoidances prompted by it. It is a subject now widely discussed among psychologists as well as folklorists and anthropologists: death and dying, and includes all the culturally interpreted interfaces between the world in which we live (kono-yo) and the world beyond (ano-yo), most obviously, of course, ghosts and spirits.

Our impression, after having worked on this project for some thirteen years, is that death is not only a common subject in Japanese folklore but seems indeed to be the principal topic in Japanese tradition; nearly every festival, every ritual, every custom is bound up in some way with relationships between the living and the dead, between the present family and its ancestors, between the present occupation and its forebears. We would venture the hypothesis that death is the prototypical Japanese topic, not only because it relates living people to their ongoing heritage, but also—as the legends we’ve selected show—because death brings into focus a number of other very important elements in the Japanese worldview: obligation, duty, debt, honor, and personal responsibility.

For Europeans and Americans, death has been until recently a relatively touchy subject, one that is not publicly very popular or comfortable. In Le Vieillesse, Simone de Beauvoir shows how repugnant the topic has been in Europe. To get old, to decompose, to disappear from the scene are realities that many Westerners have had trouble confronting. And yet, since the Middle Ages, there has been as well a macabre fascination with death in literature and art. Fear and apprehension about it are found in Asia as well, the difference being the varied ways in which death can be viewed; thus, in Japan, death can be a symbol of the transience of life, although the soul is perceived as not transitory; death even constitutes a kind of aesthetic, in spite of one’s abhorrence of the process; it can inform a sort of romanticism, especially as expressed in the Edo Period (one finds it even
A standard depiction of a woman’s ghost. 
Artist: Maruyama Ōkyo (1733–1795).
today). Nonetheless, in their everyday lives, the Japanese assiduously avoid unlucky words or numbers suggestive of death; clearly a dialectic tension exists between the philosophical and the everyday perceptions of death, and these contradictions and ambiguities are given narrative form in the legends.

Besides being dramatizations of fear, uncertainty, and ambiguity, the legends richly illustrate a worldview in which the realms of the living and the dead interpenetrate in a system of mutual responsibility. While trying to avoid any suggestion of death in daily conversation, a typical Japanese will be constantly involved with funerals and anecdotes and legends and family obligations which continually keep the topic alive. It can be said without exaggeration that the Japanese busy themselves with death their whole lives long.

As the legends vividly illustrate, and as Yanagita Kunio pointed out in his influential book About Our Ancestors, the traditional Japanese world of the dead lies not far from the world of the living, and the souls of departed relatives remain among the survivors, or at least close enough to visit the family during Obon season, for example. Also their world, the world of the dead, remains “alive,” even after death in this world has occurred. This attitude toward death, and human relationships with those who have passed on to the other world, is originally based on neither Neo-Confucianism nor Buddhism, but rather on the much earlier “ancestor cult” (or “ancestor complex,” as Professor Yamashita Shinji has more recently called it). This Shinto-based ancestor complex, which had already been in place for a thousand years by the time of the Tokugawa era, characterizes the whole Japanese social structure, even if it is not consciously recognized or intellectually articulated.

The origin of the much discussed Japanese family system also lies within this set of values and is further reflected in the character of practically every institution, including modern corporations. Knowing something about the ancestor system allows anyone, Japanese or not, to read the culture from the inside out, rather than starting with the façade and trying to guess what lies behind it.

Many of the legends we include in this book were published in a journal devoted to Japanese and East Asian folklore, Tabi to Densetsu (Travel and Legend), between 1928 and 1932 by various collectors. In these first years of publication, the journal did not present the legends as separate,
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discrete texts with explanatory notes, but rather mentioned
them in connection with essays on broader themes and
topics, often elliptically, but sometimes with surrounding
commentary on the context and occasion. Since this is the
way legends usually appear in conversation—as illustra­
tions of larger issues such as the nature of spirits, the return
of the dead, and so on—we have also tried to present them
without decoration, adding only what may be necessary to
allow the reader a fuller understanding of the story and its
possible meanings. This book thus does not pretend to offer
a full collection of Japanese death legends, but rather a se­
lection of a few culturally typical narratives which illustrate
some of the Japanese assumptions about the nature of death.

The stories themselves give us a dramatized view of many
customs, legends, tales, and the like which were still in wide
use before World War II. The choice of legends from this era
is deliberate: for one thing, this was the high point of early
Japanese field collecting, and thus the narratives constitute
the first extensive body of folk materials collected intention­
ally from oral tradition by folklorists in Japan. As well, they
provide us with a range of narratives which were common in
Japan prior to the time when Westerners became interested
in Japanese culture. Since World War II, we have known
Japan better (comparatively), and have become more famil­
iar with some Japanese themes through translated novels
and poems, the arts, and films, even though we have simul­
taneously concluded that Japan is now solidly Westernized.
These legends from the 1920s and 1930s supply a link be­tween the present and the relatively distant past (which we
can still perceive at least partially through earlier Japanese
writings and the world of wood-block prints) and indicate
that our Westernization model—while it may describe part
of the façade—does not account for the persistence of deeper
and older aspects of Japanese culture.

While many of the particular legends may have died out
of oral tradition in the meanwhile, other similar ones have
developed; clearly, as in the folklore of all societies, the de­
tails and current interests may change continually, but the
culturally important themes and issues remain. For this
reason, we have also referred to legends collected more re­
cently. Still, the interested reader would do well to read far
beyond this book, especially into the research of contempo­
rary Japanese folklorists, which is slowly becoming more
available. And, even better, those with language capability
should try encountering the stories alive, in their natural habitats among the everyday people of Japan.

The particular legend texts we’ve used are colored by other factors not under our control; for one thing, they were collected from people in all parts of Japan by folklorists who wrote down the stories as best they could, some of them no doubt catching the original wording and nuances better than others. In addition, certain beliefs and customs vary from one part of Japan to another, and the same story or legend may well have local meanings which the collector did not understand and which we can no longer find out about. Still further, many of these stories are told with a logic which suggests that Buddhism or Shintōism or Confucianism may have co-opted or adapted the text over the course of time; a legend, for example, which might have represented an entirely local ancestor complex may have been rationalized later to illustrate filial piety; a story about a dead mother’s concern for her coffin-born child may be told in one province to demonstrate the need for Buddhist sutras and in another to warn about the ritual danger of a dead fetus. In all cases, the beliefs and reactions of the collectors, their own notions about what the legend might mean, may have played a part in the way they conveyed the text to their reading audiences.

Still other details of immediate context—though of central importance to the ultimate meaning of any text—are simply not given in the originals. A folklorist or ethnographer collecting these legends today would feel it important to note where a narrator laughed or an audience gasped, where gestures were made and how they were received, where certain words or phrases were puzzling or particularly pleasing to the audience. That is because the living texture of performance as it proceeds from the immediate context of narration is a part of the meaning of the text—at least provisionally. If the actions of a particular character are obviously stupid or unnatural, if a certain gesture or word is archaic or out of place, if a certain term is impolite or ironically used, the narrator and the audience will register that in the live context—even though no specific words to indicate it may enter the text. Since many of the legends in this book were elicited from rural people by scholars doing research, however, we can suspect that in many cases the live performance was not identical to the narrations that would have occurred among the people on their own.
For these reasons, there are multiple possibilities here for misunderstanding, limited appreciation of meaning, or impaired reception of a clear cultural picture. We have tried to account for as many of the central issues as we can, working from a generalized knowledge of familiar themes and motifs in Japanese folklore, but the important dimension of immediate performance context remains for the most part unknowable.

Even so, in our treatment of these customs and legends, we want as much as possible to stress their live, performative aspect, because these are cultural expressions which normally continue to exist because they are performed by people among themselves, not read about in books. Of course, there persists a dynamic dialectic between the printed page and contemporary culture, between formal and informal, between "elite" and "folk," between consciously learned and unconsciously absorbed expressions; it would be strange if it were not so. But the oral component of any culture, that part which is maintained in the mundane, out-of-awareness grind of everyday life and cultural normality, is the element that most deeply animates the culture and its range of understood meanings—even though it is so normal and everyday that we seldom take the effort to look at it—or hear it—analytically. Thus we have chosen some fossils as examples, but we are really talking about the living system they belong to—even though the topic is death.
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The ghost of a decadent monk who was turned into the spirit of Gaki (one of the least fortunate Buddhist categories in the afterlife).

Artist: Gyōshin (other information unknown).