

Modern-Day Kaidan: Japanese Horror Storytelling as Popular Culture

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This article explores the history and modern developments of the Japanese horror storytelling tradition known as *kaidan*. It traces its origins from the first period of mass popularity in the Edo period, through the scepticism that permeated the social climate of the Meiji period, to the 20th century, when the introduction of film and television enabled *kaidan* to diversify into different media. The 1990s are examined as an especially transformative period when *kaidan* entered the mainstream through the popularity of J-Horror, TV shows and dedicated books and magazines that invited readers to experience the narratives firsthand by venturing out to haunted locations. Along this rich horror mediascape, oral storytelling also experienced a resurgence, taking the form of competitions, live performances and themed bars hosting *kaidan* events. The author explores these phenomena using media analysis, field observations and interviews.

KEYWORDS: Japan, storytelling, legends, *kaidan*, horror, media, popular culture

Članek raziskuje zgodovino in sodobni razvoj japonske tradicije pripovedovanja grozljivih zgodb, imenovanih *kaidan*. Predstavi zgodovino te tradicije pripovedništva od obdobja množične priljubljenosti v obdobju Edo, prek skepticizma, ki je prežemal družbeno klimo v obdobju Meiji, do 20. stoletja, ko je uvedba filma in televizije omogočila, da se je žanr grozljivk razvil v različnih medijih. Devetdeseta leta so obravnavana kot posebej prelomno obdobje, v katerem je *kaidan* vstopil v popularno kulturo skozi J-Horror, televizijske oddaje ter specializirane knjige in revije, ki so bralce nagovarjale, naj pripovedi doživijo neposredno z obiskovanjem strašljivih lokacij. Ob tej bogati medijski krajini je tudi klasično pripovedništvo doživelo preporod v obliki tekmovanj, nastopov v živo in tematskih barov, ki gostijo *kaidan* dogodke. Avtor raziskuje te fenomene prek analize medijev, terenskih opazovanj in intervjujev.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: Japonska, pripovedništvo, povedke, *kaidan*, grozljivka, mediji, popularna kultura

INTRODUCTION

In 2011, Japan was devastated by a deadly tsunami in which many people lost their lives or loved ones. Seeking ways to help survivors overcome their grief, Jikisai Minami, a Buddhist priest, organised gatherings that provided people with an opportunity to share stories of ghostly encounters with their deceased relatives. Through these meetings, survivors were able to obtain at least some degree of closure. This was not, however,

a new phenomenon. For centuries, the Japanese have been telling and retelling stories of the supernatural, some of which have been passed down through the generations. Although their popularity has fluctuated over time, their presence can be seen in many aspects of Japanese culture and contemporary popular media. According to Minami, these stories also contain an important existential element:

This is partly where our appetite for ghost stories comes from /.../ Good ones point us towards a well-founded anxiety about the stability of our own existence. These do not necessarily induce a fear of being close to death or of our existence coming imminently to an end, but rather indicate something suspiciously thin or fragile or insubstantial about that existence to begin with. (Harding, 2018)

In Japan, ghost stories are known as *kaidan* – a compound word consisting of the Chinese characters for weird or strange (kai 怪) and tales (dan 談). The term can thus be defined as “a discussion or passing down of tales of the weird, strange or mysterious” (Davisson, 2015: 149) or simply as “a narrative of the strange” (Reider, 2001: 80). In the context of folklore studies, we can consider them as legends, due to their anonymity, constant variation and repeated retellings. Regardless of the extent to which they contain factual information, they have the ability to trigger a rich and complex set of deeply shared cultural values in their audiences (Iwasaka, Toelken, 1994: 71). As legends, *kaidan* are therefore “orally performed stories which relate to something that actually happened, an event which occurred in the same world in which the teller and listener live” (ibid.: 86).

This paper will delve into the origins of *kaidan* and its development over the past 400 years, exploring its connections with other cultural forms, such as theatre, literature and film. The examples provided show that the horror genre has been – and continues to be – present in Japanese popular culture. After the decline of oral storytelling, the horror genre was most frequently portrayed through media such as popular literature and film, the latter dubbed J-Horror, and reaching a peak of popularity in the 1990s. Since the turn of the 21st century, *kaidan* has regained popularity in its original storytelling form and is once again performed before live audiences – albeit within modernised contexts that include live bars, competitions and an online presence.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

The first part of the paper is based on historical and academic sources and shows the origins of horror storytelling and its evolution across successive periods of Japanese history up until the 1990s, which marked a turning point in Japanese horror culture. The period from the 1990s to the present day is explored not only through existing scholarly literature, but also through an analysis of Japanese media sources, websites, forums and published interviews. These materials were translated and contextualised together with personal narratives from interlocutors who grew up during that era and are now part of the current

horror scene. While the text does not adhere to a specific theoretical framework, respective sections provide concrete examples supported by concepts from folklore studies such as performance theory, ostension and legend tripping, in order to situate kaidan within the folkloric genre of legends.

The idea to explore kaidan in more detail emerged during two research visits to Japan in 2025, originally undertaken to conduct fieldwork on Japanese Buddhism – a tradition that, as will be shown, bears certain connections with horror storytelling. During this fieldwork, I observed not only that horror is present in multiple facets of Japanese popular culture, but also that the tradition of telling horror stories is still alive today. It was through a chance meeting with one of my interlocutors that I was introduced to the contemporary kaidan scene.

I was walking through Kichijōji, a Tokyo neighbourhood known for its alternative culture, when I passed a venue in front of which stood a lifelike doll of a girl in a kimono. The event had just finished, and the man standing next to the doll was thanking visitors as they exited, exchanging a few words and business cards with many of them. After the crowd had dispersed, I decided to approach him out of curiosity. He had quite an intriguing appearance: long hair, glasses, and an all-black outfit, with Buddhist prayer beads around his neck and wrists. It turned out he is a *kaidanshi* (怪談師), a teller of kaidan, who performs under the stage name Megane Oji-chan.¹

He told me that he came to Tokyo for this event but that he lives in Osaka, where he runs a horror-themed bar that hosts similar events, and he suggested I come visit when I am in Osaka. We kept in touch through social media, and when I finally came to his bar a month later, he introduced me to another storyteller, Napoli. With their help and through some networking on social media, I was able to gather further information regarding the contemporary kaidan scene. All the interlocutors included in this paper gave their full consent for the publication of the information they shared, as well as for the use of their names. It should be noted, however, that Megane Oji-chan and Napoli are stage names under which they perform within the kaidan scene and online.



Figure 1: Doll Yukiko in front of horror storytelling venue (Photo by the author, 22.3.2025)

¹ Literally Uncle Glasses, *megane* (眼鏡) are glasses, which he does in fact wear, and Oji-chan is an endearing term for an adult male, akin to “uncle”.

To supplement the interviews included in this paper, I took photographs, reviewed promotional materials and posters, and ultimately conducted digital ethnography after coming back from Japan. The language barrier was a significant obstacle in the field, as events and information were exclusively in Japanese. Not having seen any foreigners visiting Megane's bar or the events I attended, and given the global popularity of J-Horror, I suspect it is the language barrier that has kept the kaidan scene relatively closed, with "outsiders" remaining uncommon for the time being. My Japanese is decent enough to be able to hold a conversation, but my reading ability is limited, which meant that I had to resort to anglophone literature and secondary sources for the historical overview of kaidan.

Despite trying my best to include research by Japanese scholars as well, it is neither within the scope of this paper nor within my competence to present the current state of kaidan scholarship in Japan. I therefore refrained from attempting to translate academic literature written in Japanese, as doing so without adequate language ability would likely be counterproductive. However, I invested considerable effort in translating blog posts, websites and other online materials, as well as the interviews, which I conducted mostly in Japanese. Follow-ups with the interlocutors via social media messaging also helped clarify some details and nuances which would otherwise have been lost in face-to-face conversations alone.

Despite these limitations, I hope this article provides an overview of the horror storytelling tradition in Japan and, especially in its final part addressing its present state, serves as a stepping stone for further research.

HISTORY OF JAPANESE ORAL STORYTELLING AND ITS POPULARISATION IN THE EDO PERIOD

Stories concerning strange and mysterious occurrences predate the term kaidan, which only came into use to describe such narratives in the 17th century (Reider, 2001: 80). The earliest records of such tales come from collections of Buddhist stories called *setsuwa*, compiled in the Heian period (794–1185), such as the *Nihon ryōiki* and *Konjaku Monogatarishū*. The latter consists of over a thousand tales and is widely regarded as the first work of kaidan, even though it did not bear that designation at the time (Davisson, 2015: 30). Beyond literature, elements of horror and the grotesque were also present in the visual arts from at least the 9th century onwards, particularly in the form of hanging scrolls and handscrolls, brought to Japan with the spread of Buddhism (Negrych, 2021: 66), which depicted images of hell and supernatural beings. However, these earliest examples circulated primarily among Buddhist monks and the elite, rather than among the common people (De Antoni, 2017: 152). It was not until the Edo period (1603–1868), a time of relative peace after centuries of civil war, that conditions enabled such narratives to enter the vernacular sphere through the medium of oral storytelling (Davisson, 2015: 27).

As the commercial economy and trade developed, urban centres came into increasing contact with rural areas and vice versa. Travelling merchants, performers, priests and pilgrims were just some of the agents of transmission, spreading entertaining tales from

one place to another. They drew not only from recent events and local rumours, but also adapted them from the aforementioned collections of Buddhist literature and art. Buddhism played an integral role in the early dissemination of kaidan, with monks employing such stories as didactic tools (Donovan, 2024: 6). Buddhist settings and characters have remained recurring themes in kaidan to this day:

Buddhist temples are common settings for ghost stories. Especially temples with cemeteries, since they are strongly associated with the dead. There are also many depictions where Buddhist priests perform exorcisms, or even where priests themselves appear as supernatural beings. Priests are imagined to possess spiritual power, but since they are also still in training, there is an idea that they could become either good or evil. In any case, in Japan, it is often Buddhism that plays the role of giving rise to, dispelling, or pacifying unseen spiritual beings. (Megane Oji-chan, 2025)

As kaidan expanded beyond its Buddhist origins and gained popularity during the Edo period, its themes began to diversify and were subject to secularisation. The narratives increasingly took the form of entertaining stories covering a wide range of topics from the strange and scary to the funny, silly and exotic (Reider, 2000: 266). This surge in popularity also created a demand for professional storytellers, of whom ever greater narrative skills were expected:

In an oral tradition, the story is supplemented by the tellers' gestures, intonation, facial expressions, and the teller's ability to spontaneously interact with the audience. It was thus a true interactive experience. If the storytellers were so inclined, they could tailor their stories to accommodate the varying aptitudes, attitudes, and atmosphere of each audience. (Reider, 2001: 81)

ELEMENTS OF HORROR IN JAPANESE TRADITIONAL PERFORMING ARTS: RAKUGO, NOH AND KABUKI

This kind of storytelling is closely connected to the theatrical art of *rakugo*, a popular form of commoner entertainment in the Edo period (Figal, 1999: 26). This is typically a one-man play in which the storyteller, seated on a cushion before the audience, uses nothing more than his voice, gestures and a folding fan to lead the audience through an imaginative story (Davisson, 2015: 92).

One of the most famous rakugo storytellers and writers was San'yūtei Enchō. Later in life, he became associated with the Zenshoan temple, where he exclusively performed kaidan. His legacy remains important: to this day master storytellers gather in this temple each summer to pay respects to him and share supernatural tales (Iwasaka, Toelken, 1994: 25). Additionally, his private collection of ghost paintings – which he used to study their gestures and themes – is exhibited every year in August during the Obon season, the time

of year when, according to Japanese tradition, the spirits of the ancestors return to the land of the living.

In addition to rakugo storytelling, *kaidan* – in one form or another – became present in practically every Japanese performing art. Noh plays, for example, constitute a symbolic encounter between the living and the dead (Suzuki, 2023: 103–105). Like *kaidan*, Noh draws inspiration from Buddhist tales, often featuring monks in dialogue with supernatural entities. Noh plays were originally directed at those spirits who could be pacified through the combined effects of storytelling, imitation and spirit possession on stage (Swift, 2011: 2). Additionally, in the context of commoner entertainment during the Edo period, adaptations of *kaidan* into kabuki plays further consolidated their place in popular culture. Several famous *kaidan* from that period are still being performed and reinterpreted today (Donovan, 2024: 5).

Beyond the entertainment industry, people also began organising informal gatherings known as *kaidankai* (怪談会), at which people would share stories with each other. A specific format of storytelling gained popularity: a parlour game called *hyakumonogatari kaidankai*, meaning “a gathering of 100 weird tales” (Davisson, 2015: 34). Although it is not known exactly who invented the game and when (Reider, 2000: 267), we know that it was initially enjoyed by the aristocratic and warrior classes, but soon spread among the common people and was eventually known and played all over Japan, providing a forum for exhibiting and exchanging mysterious narratives (Foster, 2009: 52).

During such gatherings, a group of people would take turns telling stories until a total of one hundred had been told, in an attempt to induce supernatural phenomena. After each story, the storyteller would blow out one of the hundred candles illuminating the room, so that the space grew progressively darker. Finally, when the last story had been told and the last candle extinguished, total darkness descended upon the participants. It was rumoured that this moment created the possibility of contact with an otherworldly presence – although in practice the storytelling was usually stopped before reaching that point, as a precaution.

COLLECTIONS OF HORROR STORIES IN EDO PERIOD POPULAR LITERATURE

As *kaidan* established its presence in the daily lives of common people, the public developed an insatiable appetite for it, and storytellers were constantly on the lookout for new stories that would impress and shock their audiences. Demand was high and collections of *kaidan* called *kaidanshū* (怪談集) began to be published, designed to provide stories for the game. Their quality varied considerably, however, as they were “produced quickly to meet a need rather than satisfy any sort of artistry” (Davisson, 2015: 35). The *kaidan* in such collections were frequently very short, merely recounting some strange occurrence that happened.

The adoption of the printing press was one of the key factors that made *kaidan* literature possible (Reider, 2000: 86; De Antoni, 2017: 152). One of the first *kaidanshū* to be

printed in large numbers was the *Inga Monogatari*,² written in 1660 by the monk Suzuki Shōsan (Davisson, 2015: 32). Like his predecessors, he aimed to use the supernatural as a tool for moral instruction. In addition to Buddhist motifs, authors also drew on Chinese sources and Japanese folklore (Reider, 2001: 90). All three of these influences can be clearly seen in the literary work that marked the zenith of the kaidan literary genre – Ueda Akinari’s *Ugetsu Monogatari* (*Tales of Moonlight and Rain*) from 1776. His collection transformed kaidan from simple orally derived tales into literary narrative fiction (Reider, 2001: 94), and it continues to exert considerable influence on Japanese literature (Davisson, 2015: 138).

Although the popularity of gatherings declined in the middle of the eighteenth century, the books remained in print – kaidan stories were as popular as ever, and publication numbers reached their peak during this period (Reider, 2000: 267). According to a researcher of Japanese literature and folklore, Noriko Reider, we can identify four dimensions of kaidan’s popularity at the time: “(1) fascination with the grotesque, (2) plausible explanations for unexplained common occurrences, (3) attraction to the exotic, and (4) social commentary” (Reider, 2000: 269).

In summary, unconventional and grotesque themes held particular appeal for people living in Edo Japan, a highly structured and rigid class society. Furthermore, readers found in these stories explanations for inexplicable events that occurred in their lives. The themes kaidan explored were novel and those originating from China were seen as especially exotic. Finally, due to the strict censorship laws, kaidan functioned as a tool for revealing political and societal issues (Reider, 2000: 276). Kaidan narratives also highlight the particular relationship between the individual and the community in traditional Japanese culture, often dramatising moments in which individual desire is set against social or cultural demands (Iwasaka, Toelken, 1994: 65).

THE MEIJI RESTORATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF FOLKLORE STUDIES IN JAPAN

The Meiji period (1868–1912) marked a great shift in Japanese society, which opened up to the outside world after a period of isolation of more than two hundred years. Western technology, knowledge and ideas were introduced to Japan, leading many Japanese intellectuals to reinterpret beliefs in the supernatural as unrealistic or incompatible with modernity. San’yūtei Enchō, whose career as a storyteller coincided with this period, lamented that “the teachers of the Enlightenment thought that the supernatural was a product of the mind, and kaidan an extension of that neuropathy” (Reider, 2000: 278). The Meiji government even initiated an official programme banishing all references to superstitions and the supernatural, treating belief in the worlds depicted in kaidan as mental illness, as officials expressed concerns about the public’s obsession with such

² Eng.: Tales of Cause and Effect.

entertainment (Davisson, 2015: 142). However, these efforts were largely in vain as the public continued to believe in and consume kaidan.

In parallel with these efforts to suppress kaidan, there was also widespread interest in it among literati and scholars. This coincided with the development of the discipline of *minzokugaku* (民俗学) – folklore studies – as a means of recovering national traditions in response to the perceived loss of cultural identity resulting from westernisation and modernisation (Suter, 2019: 132). A major milestone in the field is usually attributed to Kunio Yanagita's hugely popular 1912 publication *Tōno Monogatari* (*The Tales of Tono*). The work contains 119 short tales, each describing a different encounter set in the Tōno region of northern Japan. Yanagita travelled to the region and compiled the narratives as recounted to him by the local folklorist Kizen Sasaki, subsequently rewriting them in a more literary style (Thurgill, 2023: 438).

Another prominent collector of ghostly tales and Yanagita's contemporary was Lafcadio Hearn, who later became a naturalised Japanese citizen and adopted the name Koizumi Yakumo, under which his collections were published in Japan (Figal, 1999: 221). The most famous of these was *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things*. Around the same time, translations of Western fantastic and supernatural literature began to be published, forming a literary genre known as *gensō bungaku* (幻想文学) – a literal translation of the English term “fantastic literature” (Shimokusu, 2019: 219).

The renewed popularity of kaidan in the Meiji period was affirmed by the founding of the Kaidankai (Ghost Story Association) in 1908 – a literary group dedicated to the research and retelling of supernatural tales circulating among the populace. The group was led by Mizuno Yōshū, a colleague of Yanagita and Sasaki (Figal, 1999: 167). Its gatherings provided a venue for academic discussion not only of kaidan, but of supernatural beliefs in general and resulted in multiple publications.

ADAPTATIONS OF KAIKAN FOR THE SILVER SCREEN

Around the beginning of the twentieth century, not long after the introduction of film, the Japanese film industry began producing horror films, adapting classic kaidan stories for the silver screen. Filmmakers were particularly fond of the figure Oiwa from the popular kabuki play *Yotsuya Kaidan*, which was first adapted to film in 1912 (Davisson, 2015: 83) and continues to receive new cinematic versions to this day (Reider, 2001: 82). The play has acquired something of a cult status, partly because multiple film productions have encountered problems both on and off set, including disappearing reels, fires, mechanical failures, and accidents involving cast members. Owing to this reputed “curse,” it has become an unwritten rule for actors to visit Oiwa's shrine in Sugamo, Tokyo, to pay their respects. Even today, her grave and the nearby Shinto shrine are constantly adorned with devotional offerings of candles and flowers (Ross, 2020). During my visit to the site, a woman was offering prayers in front of the well, and many different charms were available for purchase at the temple office – proving that the cult of Oiwa is still very much alive today.



Figure 2: Oiwa-Inari Yōun-ji Temple (Photo by the author, 24.3.2025)

During the war period, horror film production was brought to a halt, specifically by the 1939 Film Act, which discouraged “vulgar” subjects such as ghosts and monsters (Crandol, 2015: 156). Even after the war, cinema remained subject to censorship under the American occupation, banning themes such as karmic revenge, etc. (Donovan, 2024: 9). When the occupation ended, however, film production resumed, and the post-war period from the 1950s to the 1960s is regarded as a golden age of Japanese horror film. During this time, a genre known as *kaidan eiga*³ emerged (Davisson, 2015: 143), with films such as *Kwaidan* (1964), *Onibaba* (1964), and *Kuroneko* (1968), all of which are still regarded as classics. Despite the use of modern technologies and production techniques, these adaptations generally remained faithful to their *kaidan* sources.

The 1970s were characterised by the so-called “boom of the occult” (オカルトブーム), in which Western horror played a major role. For example, *The Exorcist* (1974) was a massive hit in Japan (De Antoni, 2017: 153). In a sense, this resembles the fascination with Western fantastic literature in the early 1900s, which also coincided with a renewed appreciation for *kaidan*. In the 1980s, this trend only continued to gain momentum, but it was not until the 1990s that horror culture became mainstream in Japan.

³ Eng.: *kaidan* movies.

CHANGES IN THE LOST DECADES

In the decades following the war, Japan underwent rapid and sustained economic growth in what was dubbed the “Japanese economic miracle”. This momentum was suddenly plunged into stagnation by the collapse of the asset bubble in 1990 (Yoshino, Taghizadeh-Hesary, 2017). The period that followed, known as the “Lost Decades”, was marked by high unemployment and the social climate was unstable, as people were filled with anxieties about the future. It was in these circumstances that horror fully entered the mainstream.

Ghost stories depict a mysterious and unstable world, that’s why they resonate with unstable social climates and easily attract people. They evoke a certain sense, suggesting that this world is not the only one, that there might be another world out there. (Odakura, 2025)

Television programmes about supernatural and occult topics became very popular and were moved to the Saturday night prime time when viewership was at its peak. Many celebrities began appearing in such programmes (Horie, 2009: 7). Yuki Yoshida, one of the most prominent experts on *kaidan* in Japan, researched the development of modern *kaidan* from the late Shōwa era (1970s–1980s), when television networks began experimenting with horror content, to the Heisei era (1989–2019), during which horror culture became systematised in magazines, books and regular television specials. In the past decade, this expansion has extended further into live events, internet forums and podcasts (Yoshida, 2021).

Between the late 1990s and the early 2000s, a new wave of Japanese horror films emerged, increasingly circulating beyond cinemas and reaching domestic audiences through formats such as VHS. Films from this period came to be known as “J-Horror” and became a worldwide sensation, with some even receiving Western adaptations (see Wetmore, 2009). Despite their contemporary settings, J-Horror films continued to draw inspiration from *kaidan*. For example, the antagonist Sadako Yamamura in the 2003 film *Ring*, is directly based on the character of Oiwa and visually resembles traditional depictions of Japanese ghosts with white robes and long black hair (Davisson, 2015: 143). In a modern twist, she haunts her victims through a cursed VHS tape, representing fear of rapidly evolving technology and encapsulating a “culturally-fostered response to the fear of chaos in the techno-centric orderly system” (Ancuta, 2007: 1) at the turn of the century.

The revenge story has been a staple of Japanese horror for centuries, and Sadako, like Oiwa, embodied the archetype of wronged women getting revenge on their abusers. In response to changing social conditions, many horror films offered poignant commentary on matters such as marital obligations, family betrayal and selfishness (Iwasaka, Toelken, 1994: 72). Closely linked to fears surrounding women’s emancipation is the disintegration of the traditional family, and many 21st-century Japanese horror films are in fact set within broken families (Pruett, 2010: 11).

Horror media thus became a mirror through which cultural anxieties and societal issues could be explored. In this regard, the works of director Koji Shiraishi are particularly

noteworthy. His film *Noroi: The Curse* (2005) kick-started the horror mockumentary genre in Japan. His films blur the line between reality and fiction by incorporating elements of real folklore, paranormal investigation, and even casting real celebrities and idols as themselves. Narrative in his films unfolds through a collage of newspaper articles, variety show segments, and found footage, all of which is presented “as real”:

Only occasionally does the veil slip in the diegetic world, revealing the artifice – if not for these slips, it would take only a modicum of suspension of disbelief to read these films as non-fictional (especially if one is already predisposed toward a belief in the supernatural). (Ellis, 2021: 196)

NEW WAVE OF KAIDAN PUBLICATIONS AND “GHOST PHOTOGRAPHY” MAGAZINES

Alongside film, books and magazines constituted another major medium for ghost stories in the 1990s. Especially popular among younger readers was the novel series *Gakkō no Kaidan*,⁴ set in a school and later adapted into films and anime. The stories in the series were presented as fictional rumours, but were in fact originally collected by the folklorist and middle-school teacher Tōru Tsunemitsu (Horie, 2009: 7), and they even inspired serious academic discussion (Foster, 2009: 205). “Real-life ghost stories” based on personal experiences were also in high demand. In response, many horror magazines invited readers to submit their own stories.

Some magazines specialised in presenting selections of ghost photographs called *shinrei shashin* (心霊写真), accompanied by stories explaining the context and circumstances that led to the creation of the anomalous images. Spirit photography first appeared in Japan in the 1900s, mostly in connection with Western-style spiritualism or occultism, but it was not until the end of the century, when technology improved and cameras became widely accessible, that it became widely popular (Picone, 2017: 11). Anthropologist Richard Chalfen researched the phenomenon over a period of five years⁵ and found that it was mentioned by virtually every person he interviewed, although many were unwilling to discuss the topic, indicating that the subject was not treated lightly in Japan (Chalfen, 2008: 53). The stories that were conveyed to him often began with someone retrieving their developed pictures from the camera shop and noticing strange anomalies, which were then interpreted as messages from ghosts or their direct presence.

For the sake of personal wellbeing, it was highly recommended that such photographs be destroyed. They were usually taken to a shrine or temple for proper disposal, although some individuals opted instead to send them to magazines or television programmes (Chalfen, 2008: 64). When I raised the topic with a camera shop owner, he explained that ghost photography was common during the film era, but declined with the advent of

⁴ Eng.: School Ghost Stories.

⁵ From 1994 to 1999.



Figure 3: Horror section in bookstore (Photo by the author, 9.9.2025)

digital photography – either because film was considered especially suitable for capturing ghosts, or because digital photo editing tools undermined the perceived authenticity of such images. As a result, ghost photography is not as prevalent today as it once was. Horror literature, however, remains an important genre, and most bookstores have extensive sections dedicated to *kaidan*, horror and the occult. One of the biggest active publishers specialising almost exclusively in horror content, Takeshobo, releases five books per month and focuses on *kaidan* based on authors' own experiences or second-hand accounts (Odakura, 2025).

According to Professor of Death & Life Studies at Tokyo University, Norichika Horie, the largest consumers of such literature are middle-aged readers, while younger people tend to show more interest in experiencing paranormal phenomena firsthand (N. H., personal correspondence, 28.3.2025). To cater to these interests, some publications are designed as instruction manuals and guidebooks for visiting so-called *shinrei supotto* (心霊スポット) – haunted places and sites of paranormal activity – informing readers where they may have some supernatural experience (De Antoni, 2017: 145).

HAUNTED SITES AND LEGEND TRIPS

Research in Japanese folklore studies on urban legends regarding ghosts suggests that they emerged alongside urbanisation in the modern period, but are not limited only to cities. Such narratives are often set in locations such as tunnels, mountain ridges, bridges, abandoned hospitals and schools (Takaoka, 2006). As contact with nature has become increasingly limited for most urban Japanese, these “remote” and “dark” spaces within urban environments have become fertile settings for supernatural occurrences (Williams, 2015: 59–60). Kaidan that are tied to specific places – or types of places – reveal different attitudes towards the environments in which they are set, reflecting what “people think about the liminal aspects of the physical world” (Thomas et al., 2007: 49).

Interestingly, a quantitative analysis study of 114 sites in Toyama Prefecture conducted in 2020, which compared sources from 1910s newspapers with online ghost portals from 2018, found a noticeable shift of haunted sites away from urban areas, along with a reduction in the variety and interaction frequency (Koshiro, Yennan, 2020). This change can be attributed to the fact that urban areas in modern-day Toyama, like most cities in Japan, are highly built-up and leave limited space for locations that could potentially become haunted sites. As a result, locations on the outskirts of cities and in rural areas have become more viable candidates.

Claims about the authenticity of haunted sites are often supported by “historical sources”, such as excerpts from Edo-period kaidan literature or even the Konjaku



Figure 4: The famous haunted Kiyotaki tunnel in Kyoto (Photo by the author, 8.9.2025)

monogatari, cited as evidence to strengthen narratives surrounding a specific place or event (Picone, 2017: 2). In a sense, we can consider shinrei supotto as a modern iteration of the hyakumonogatari kaidankai – fuelled by legends, personal encounters, strange phenomena and, ultimately, commercialism:

Turn on the TV in Japan, especially around the summertime when the yūrei⁶ roam the country, and you are almost guaranteed to see a program about a late-night visit to a yūrei spot, also known as a shinrei spot. These are essentially haunted locations; scenes of murder, suicide or horrific accidents. These spots are where the ghost hunters go with their night vision goggles and electronic recording equipment, hoping to catch a physical glimpse of the other world. (Davisson, 2015: 118)

Unsurprisingly, haunted sites flourished in the mediascape of television content, publications, blogs and websites, and became targets of social practices such as “courage testing” and even tourism. Andrea De Antoni has researched the tourism of haunted sites through a case study of organised ghost tours in Kyoto. In these tours, participants travel by bus from one haunted site to another, while a storyteller tells stories connected to each location (De Antoni, 2017; 2023).

The main character on the bus was the guide, U-san, a male in his early sixties, from Kyoto Prefecture, always dressed in black. /.../ U-san not only entertained the people on the bus during the journey from one place to another with various stories about ghosts or supernatural phenomena, but he also provided information about history and the ghosts in the places that the tour would visit, thus playing a major role in constructing places as haunted. (De Antoni, 2017: 153)

KIMODAMESHI: COURAGE-TESTING LEGEND TRIPS

Organised visits to haunted sites stand in contrast to the phenomenon of courage testing called *kimodameshi*, literally meaning a “test of the liver”, as the liver is associated with courage in Japan. In folklore studies, this phenomenon is called a “legend trip” – a ritual visit to an allegedly haunted or marginal site that involves the ostension, or literal enactment, of local supernatural legends (Ellis, 1991: 279). These trips are often prompted by supernatural narratives that provide context for the destination and enable participants to encounter these narratives directly (Thomas et al., 2007: 51). Just like the hyakumonogatari kaidankai, kimodameshi was originally a past-time of adult warriors, and the motif of seeking encounters with supernatural beings already appears in early kaidan literature.

⁶ Yūrei (幽霊), literally faint spirit, is a Japanese term for a ghost.

In Japan kimodameshi usually involves a group of friends deciding to visit a haunted location at night. While the rest of the group may wait in the car, one or two people venture out to the chosen spot and either bring something back or leave some sort of mark that can be observed the next day. In some extreme cases, it even involves spending the night at the haunted site.

URBAN LEGENDS ON THE INTERNET

In recent years, the widespread availability of cameras and mobile phones has led many legend trips to be filmed and shared online. This further reaffirms the typology of haunted sites and leads audiences to replicate such visits, even recording their own experiences, thereby becoming producers and not just consumers of horror content. Before the advent of modern social media platforms, however, paranormal experiences and stories were mostly shared on online forums and imageboards:

From the 1990s to the early 2000s, the creepypasta/urban legends stories were really popular. They were posted mainly on 2chan.⁷ With the rise of the internet, I think there was an atmosphere of expectation that something hidden in the world might be uncovered. Then we could kind of enjoy floating somewhere between the fake and reality ... It was a period when there was a good balance between the fake and the real to maximise the spread of urban legends/creepypastas. (Jumpei, 2025)

Many iconic urban legends, such as Kisaragi station, originated in such forum threads where anonymous participants also provided commentary and analyses of the stories themselves. According to Megane Oji-chan, the key difference between urban legends and kaidan lies in the identifiability of the source:

In ghost stories, the source is identifiable. For example, “I heard this from so-and-so.” Some people define that as the essence of a kaidan. You can clearly trace the person who experienced the strange event. But with urban legends, the experiencer isn’t clear. Take Japan’s famous urban legend “Hanako-san of the Toilet”. It’s a ghost story, but nobody knows who first experienced it. It’s more on the level of “apparently, people have seen her here and there”. The credibility of the story isn’t important – as long as it’s interesting, it spreads as a rumour. That said, the categories aren’t strictly divided. Some urban legends start as ghost stories, and some ghost stories arise from supposed sightings of figures in urban legends. The relationship between ghost stories and urban legends is best thought of as a gradient. (Megane Oji-chan, 2025)

⁷ Japan’s most popular online forum in the 2000s.

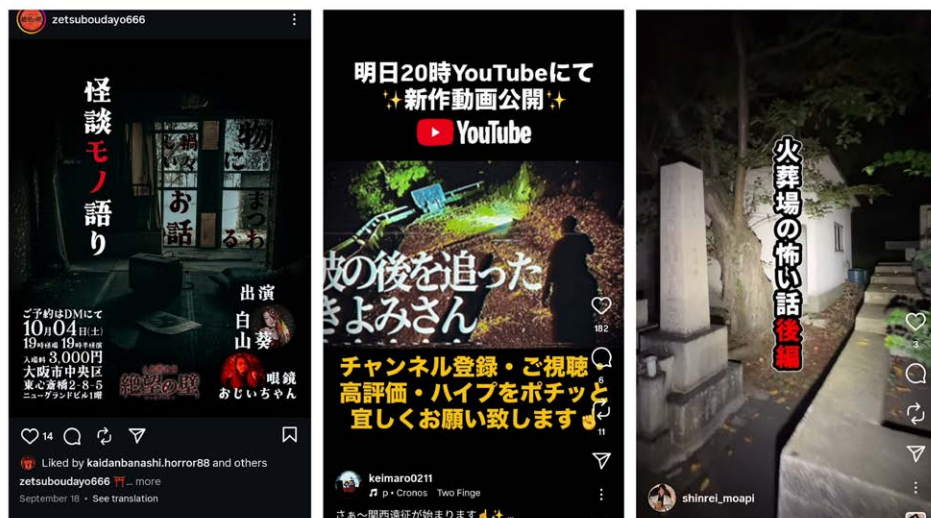


Figure 5: Horror Instagram reels (Photo by the author, 27.9.2025)

Today, numerous YouTube channels are dedicated to horror video content and during the summer season, when kimodameshi traditionally takes place, it is not unusual to see television specials in which celebrities and idols venture out to haunted sites and

whereas once warriors showed their courage by remaining impassive, most contemporary ghost videos include exaggerated amateur – often female – dramatizations of the terror supposedly felt by paranormal explorers. (Picone, 2017: 9)

Like other media content, horror-themed recordings have also started to adapt to short-video (reel) formats on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, presenting brief clips or even staged scenes of hauntings. In his book *The Scariest Kaidan as Liberal Arts: From the Kojiki to TikTok*, Yoshida argues that such formats can be understood as legitimate successors to the oral and printed traditions of kaidan (Yoshida, 2024).

THE “SLIT-MOUTHED WOMAN” AS AN EXAMPLE OF OSTENSIVE ACTION

One of the earliest examples of a contemporary urban legend in Japan appeared in December 1978, well before the rise of the internet, and spread through the country at an alarming rate. The legend was centred on the character of a Slit-Mouthed Woman – a new addition to the lineage of monstrous women within Japanese folklore, such as Oiwa. By the summer of 1979, a national newspaper identified it as one of the “buzzwords” (Foster, 2007: 699).

The Slit-Mouthed Woman serves as an example of ostensive action in Japanese urban legends. Dégh and Vázsonyi define ostension as a mode of legend communication in

which an action or event functions as the message itself – a “presentation” rather than a representation (Dégh, Vázsonyi, 1983: 6). This implies that “not only can facts be turned into narratives but narratives can also be turned into facts” (ibid.: 12). In practical terms, this process explains the acting out of fictional narratives, producing tangible social consequences through real-world enactment.

The circulation of stories about the Slit-Mouthed Woman’s existence led to the formation of organised groups for escorting children home from school and increased police patrols. At the height of the panic, one woman wanted to scare a restaurant manager. Putting on makeup and holding a knife, she went out but was spotted by a taxi driver who notified the police. She was taken into custody and the following day’s newspaper headlines read: “Has the frightening ‘Slit-Mouthed Woman’ finally been arrested!?” (*Shukan josei*, 1979: 30–31 in Foster, 2007: 718). Her legend has now become a modern kaidan classic, and its enduring popularity shows how “textual discourse can bleed into cultural practice, as the rumour plays itself out within a real-world context and then loops back into the discursive mass media forum” (Foster, 2007: 718).

HORROR THEMED ART EXHIBITIONS

Recently, some horror authors have begun experimenting with presenting kaidan narratives in the form of art installations and mixed media formats. A recent example is a pair of very popular exhibitions that toured multiple venues across Japan, created through a collaboration of Nashi, a famous kaidan writer, the haunted-house production company Yami, and Tokio Ōmori, a producer at TV Tokyo.

The first “Missing Exhibition” (行方不明) opened in Tokyo in 2024, and after going viral, travelled to both Nagoya and Osaka in 2025. After visiting the Missing Exhibition in Osaka, I had the opportunity to speak with Anakura – one of the organisers at the venue. The exhibition featured items, letters, videos and other forms of media with accompanying texts which provided context, creating a narrative through these objects, which were presented as material proof of their respective urban legends. Although visitors were reminded at the entrance that all stories were completely fictional, the exhibition carries an aura of eerie realism. Between different sections, texts by the authors directly implored the audience to reflect on how such stories construct their own reality.

According to Anakura, the exhibition was most visited by women aged between 20 and 29, followed by the group of women aged between 30 and 39. Most visitors came in groups or pairs, highlighting the importance of a shared experience. The follow-up “Fear Exhibition” (恐怖心) has since also opened in Tokyo, attracting between 100,000 and 120,000 visitors:

The exhibition brings together various fears that each human being has, and is organized into a spatial display. It is divided into four zones: “Fear of existence”, “Fear of society”, “Fear of space”, and “Fear of concepts”, and visitors are invited to relive these fears in order. (Hirozai, 2025)

Although these two exhibitions have attracted the most attention on social media, many more similar exhibitions and pop-up events are being organised across the country. In August 2025, one was held at Hiroshima PARCO's shopping centre event space, presenting kaidan drawn exclusively from Hiroshima Prefecture and inviting visitors to rediscover and explore local urban legends and folklore (Parco Art, 2025). EXPO 2025 in Osaka also organised a horror event with local storytellers, merchandise and even live music.

KAIDAN AS PERFORMANCE

Following the spread and growing popularity of new forms of horror media, kaidan storytelling experienced a revival. Live events and competitions began to be organised across the country.

It seems that the same drive to experience a personal interaction with the mysteries and realities of the “other side”, which motivated audiences in earlier times to flock to performances of the One Hundred Tales, still draws people to modern rephrasings of the same cluster of values. (Iwasaka, Toelken, 1994: 42)

This performative aspect of storytelling elevates orally narrated kaidan above their written counterparts and increases their capacity to engage – and ultimately to scare – audiences. If we follow Bauman's definition of performance as a mode of verbal communication in which speakers assume responsibility before an audience (Bauman, 1984: 11), kaidan can be understood not only as narrative representations of belief, but also as interpretative events that bring the stories to life. When kaidan are performed, meaning emerges not only from the narrative content, but also from the interaction between storyteller, audience and the social context of the performance. Furthermore, the venue and its atmosphere further enhance the effectiveness of the performance, as subsequent sections will show.

REVIVAL OF LIVE EVENTS

According to Yoriko Ogawa, deputy editor-in-chief of the horror publishing house Takeshobo, kaidan events have become more popular again since the COVID-19 pandemic, and one of the biggest platforms for sharing information about them is social media.

After the COVID pandemic, the number of people telling ghost stories exploded. You could say that the real driving force behind the steadily growing occult boom of the past five years has been the pandemic. (Megane Oji-chan, 2025)

Jumpei, whom I interviewed about the kaidan scene together with his partner, started a project titled “Japan Makes Me Scared” (Japan Makes me Scared, n.d.), including a podcast, a blog where they post stories and a Discord community. He recounted his experience growing up and seeing horror culture change:

When I was a kid, when kaidan stories could only be discovered through TV, radio programmes or books, they weren’t always broadcast throughout the year (summer was the popular period). Kaidan was a bit like a nerdy hobby, and it was simply a seasonal, one-off type of entertainment for the majority. But again, with SNS,⁸ more and more people have the chance to listen to horror storytelling. And at the same time, more and more people also start telling stories online. (Jumpei, 2025)

In a sense, kaidan migrated from conventional forms of media to more independent outlets as the internet enabled people to share stories as they saw fit:

In the 1990s, TV and magazines were full of occult specials, but nowadays the mainstream is what we call “internet kaidan”. Mainstream media started to worry more about sponsors and compliance, and had to be careful about how they handled things, but internet ghost stories have the advantage of not being tied to sponsors. From the 2000s onward, the people who wanted deeper, more hardcore occult content started to enjoy ghost stories online, and that has since become the mainstream. (Megane Oji-chan, 2025)

JUNJI INAGAWA: THE GRANDFATHER OF CONTEMPORARY KAIKAN

The famous storyteller Junji Inagawa is often cited as one of the most influential figures responsible for transforming kaidan storytelling culture into its contemporary form. According to Jumpei (2025), before the 2000s, kaidan was mostly associated with rumours and the circulation of urban legends, which were not taken seriously. Then Junji Inagawa and his contemporaries established a style in the sense of “something that was directly experienced by the storyteller or was personally recounted to him/her”. This style of storytelling has since continued to be the norm, demanding a high degree of originality and novelty in stories. For a kaidan storyteller from Kobe who goes under the stage name Napoli, Inagawa is a legend in the field:

You know the famous old guy telling scary stories. Inagawa Junji. He was telling scary stories all the time when we were children. And we listened to him, to his scary stories, on television. So we all grew up on that, and now we are telling scary stories ourselves. Junji’s children. (Napoli, 2025)

⁸ SNS stands for Social Networking Service and is a term widely used in Japan to refer to social media.

Inagawa's career began on television, but unlike other horror shows airing at the time, which made use of special effects and studio crews, he relied on his rhetoric and storytelling skills in order to deliver fear to audiences. His enduring popularity today is attested by the fact that he has maintained his own fan club since 2002, and that some of his events are either member-exclusive or quickly sold out. He regularly tours the country on a "mystery night tour", which even has its own dedicated merchandise shop with shirts, caps, neck coolers, fans, stickers, posters and more. Many kaidan fans today belong to the generation that grew up with Inagawa's stories and those of his contemporaries, and they seem to constitute one of the strongest segments of the current kaidan scene:

The age group tends to be people in their 40s and 50s, although there are some younger attendees too. I think this has to do with the generation that grew up in the 1980s and 90s. That was the era when occult specials on TV and in magazines were getting high ratings. Whether or not someone was exposed to the occult during those formative years may determine whether they still enjoy it as adults. (Megane Oji-chan, 2025)

PROFESSIONALS, AMATEURS AND A BUDDHIST "KAIDAN MONK"

Inagawa is not the only "celebrity storyteller", however. Idol culture is something very prevalent in Japan, and the kaidan scene is not immune to it either. Napoli told me that "there are some good-looking guys, storytellers, that have lots of female fans!" (Napoli, 2025). In conversation with one fan of a particular storyteller, she told me that she often attends his events, buys his merchandise and constantly posts about him on her Instagram stories. The popularity of young male storytellers can perhaps be attributed to the fact that "around 70–80% of the audience at ghost-story events are women" (Megane Oji-chan, 2025). While storytellers initially tended to come from the entertainment industry, recent years have seen a growing number of amateur storytellers from all walks of life:

Before the pandemic, the main storytellers were comedians, writers and actors, but since then, the number of amateur storytellers has increased. These days, it's said that there are about 500 people, big and small, who tell ghost stories, and most of them are amateurs with a separate full-time job. The point about "having another profession" is especially interesting. When ghost stories include information that only someone from a particular industry could know, it adds depth and draws in the audience. (Megane Oji-chan, 2025)

Given the historical connection between Buddhism and kaidan, it is not surprising that a Kyoto-based Buddhist priest, Miki Daiun, also decided to take up kaidan storytelling. Drawing on years of experience with parishioners who reported all sorts of hauntings and even possession, he amassed a large collection of tales, which he shares with the

purpose of spreading Buddhist teachings, although he also recognises the entertainment value of his kaidan. Nicknamed the “Kaidan Monk”, he has an active YouTube Channel, attends a variety of events, and has published collections of his kaidan (Daiun, 2011). While Daiun remains first and foremost a Buddhist priest, some storytellers pursue their passion full-time, becoming professional storytellers:

If we define “professional” as someone who makes their living by telling horror stories, then it has become easier thanks to SNS. It used to be very hard because gaining fame was the first step in the past, but nowadays, people just share their stories on SNS pretty easily, and getting paid for it has also become easier. Still, most of the kaidan storytellers are not doing kaidan storytelling as their only job. They can also be comedians – as most of them are – presumably because comedians are generally good at telling stories. (Jumpei, 2025)

STORYTELLING COMPETITIONS

As live kaidan performances have grown in popularity, different competitions have emerged. Winning one provides an opportunity to kickstart one’s career in the scene, in addition to substantial prize money – sometimes in the range of 1–3 million yen.⁹ The biggest competitions are usually held in Tokyo, and although prize pools are smaller in Osaka, the organisers there still help the winners with promotion and event creation, etc. (Napoli, 2025). Yutaka Yoma, who recently won a competition, issued the following statement for the official website promoting the 2025 edition of the Scariest Kaidan Battle (怪談最恐戦):

Last year, I retired from the publishing company where I had worked for many years to become a full-time ghost storyteller and author. I’m not a celebrity or an influencer, but just a middle-aged office worker. Thanks to participating in the Most Terrifying Ghost Story Competition, I was able to make a modest living by telling ghost stories. I didn’t win the first year. But thanks to the attention of many people, my performance offers doubled. The following year, I won. The title of “Third Generation Most Terrifying Ghost Story Winner” has given me so much work! (Takeshobo, n.d.a)

Competitions may even be organised exclusively for participants under 30 years of age, to discover and develop young talent (Kaidanshi Tournament Shinpusen, 2025).

The concept is to breathe a breath of fresh air into the world of kaidan, in other words, to “discover young talent”. If you look at the kaidan scene today,

⁹ As of September 2025 this converts to around 5,000–17,000 euros.



Figure 6: Live storytelling event billboard in Osaka (Photo by the author, 26.3.2025)

there are far too few young storytellers. But there must be some undiscovered newcomers who tell truly scary stories. Our goal is to find and nurture such young people. (Itoyanagi, n.d.a)

In addition to its annual competitions, Takeshobo also hosts monthly contests with applicants sending in recordings of their performances (Takeshobo, n.d.b). The application guidelines list some interesting criteria: ghost stories may be true or fictional, however, if they are based on material provided by a third party, permission must be obtained to avoid copyright issues. Furthermore, although there are various definitions of *kaidan*, stories involving only humans and incidents that do not contain any bizarre appearances or occurrences (i.e. supernatural elements) are not eligible. Competitions are usually separated by format, and calls for written submissions are sometimes based on specific themes. Criteria for evaluation differ between competitions, but juries generally assess originality, scariness and delivery, and sometimes audience votes are also taken into account.

In addition to the storytelling and writing contests, there is also *kaidoku* (怪読) – the recital or reading aloud of *kaidan*, where “*you just read the stories which were written by someone like Koizumi Yakumo. So you really have to show your individuality in kaidoku*” (Napoli, 2025). Organisers usually provide a selection of works that can be read, and performers use different voices, breathing and rhythms when narrating the story (Takeshobo, n.d.a).

THE PROCESS OF COLLECTING AND ADAPTING KAIDAN

Besides being a talented narrator and performer, every good ghost storyteller should also have a good repertoire of stories for every occasion. Although it is possible to fabricate stories, it is greatly valued if they are based on some true events or were personally shared with the storyteller:

In my case, I usually collect ghost stories in bars, izakayas, or concept cafés – basically nightlife places. Other people go around asking coworkers or friends, or they might ask taxi drivers, or even someone sitting next to them on a park bench. As for storage, I just use the notes app on my smartphone. I hardly organise them at all – but that depends on the person. Some people transcribe everything carefully, and others keep handwritten notes. (Megane Oji-chan, 2025)

Napoli keeps her stories organised on her laptop and collects them not just from her Japanese friends, but also from people she meets abroad. During our interview, she even asked me if I had a ghost story to share, and after I narrated it to her, she asked for permission to tell it at one of the events she is planning to attend in the future. *“Every story is based on the truth, but yes, I make a little adjustment. In competitions, you cannot steal the stories from someone else or borrow articles from SNS”* (Napoli, 2025).

Likewise, storyteller Toshiaki Itoyanagi said he prefers to collect kaidan in person as opposed to online:

I collect ghost stories the old-fashioned way, by going around. I feel that many of them are more interesting than the ghost stories collected through social networking sites. Also, I often talk to older people; they are interesting to talk to. (Itoyanagi, n.d.c)

Once collected or written down, kaidan are often transformed and tailored to the delivery of each individual storyteller. In folklore studies, we differentiate between verifiable first-person accounts (memorates) and more distant stories (fabulate). Kaidan, as legends, oscillate between both ends of the spectrum. Often, a story can be transformed from its less credible abstract form into something that gives the audience a feeling of a more immediate encounter. Rather than presenting a fixed narrative, the repeated performance of a kaidan actively renews its relevance and places a story either into the recent past or the present. On the other hand, kaidan as legends can “sometimes regain their credibility and appeal by reverting to their memorate-form, only to later return to their third-person version” (Dégh, Vázsonyi, 1983: 21).

EVENT ORGANISATION

In 2007, Itoyanagi founded the company Kwaidansha (怪談社), which specialises in organising live kaidan events. Although horror writers were already active and ghost stories were being shared on the internet at the time, very few people were telling ghost stories at live performances. The idea proved successful and they never had trouble attracting an audience, with shows often selling out and typically accommodating around 100 people (Itoyanagi, n.d.b). Unlike elsewhere in the entertainment industry, customer satisfaction at kaidan events is assessed somewhat differently: “If an audience member says, ‘I’ll come again,’ it’s a failure. I only consider it a success when they say, ‘It was scary. I’m never coming again’” (Itoyanagi, n.d.c).

Live events and competitions are currently one of the most popular ways to experience kaidan, and many fans will attend an event featuring their favourite storyteller even if they have already heard the same stories online. Perhaps reflecting the rise of short-video formats and the increasingly fast pace of modern society, online kaidan stories have grown shorter (Ross, 2020). Submission guidelines for video contests often impose strict time limits, leaving little room for longer, more elaborate tales – which are usually reserved for live performances:

What really sets them apart from the kaidankai online or on TV is that they really go into much more detail. Especially on TV, there is a time limit – you have to finish the story in five minutes – so they have to drop some details from the stories, or some intense topic is avoided for reasons of security or privacy. But in live shows, probably because they are not recorded, they cover these details and share them with the audience, which makes the stories more real and scary! (Jumpei, 2025)

Kaidan events are often held at so-called “live houses”,¹⁰ often due to ease of organisation and greater accessibility, but some venues are fully dedicated to kaidan, such as the Wall of Despair bar (絶望の壁) in Osaka, where Megane works as a bartender and tells stories between pouring drinks. The bar also attracts customers for its extensive collection of cursed dolls and objects:

The owner of our place wanted to meet a ghost – that’s why the bar was founded. They thought about how they might encounter one and decided to collect lots of cursed objects. But just collecting them costs a lot of money, so the idea came up: why not open a bar and display the collection there? That way, the expenses could be recovered. Our bar’s concept is: “an izakaya where you can listen to ghost stories while surrounded by real cursed objects.” (Megane Oji-chan, 2025)

¹⁰ Live house (ライブハウス) is a Japanese term for a type of venue that hosts live music performances and can also be rented for different events.



Figure 7: Wall of Despair Bar, Osaka (Photo by the author, 26.4.2025)

Advertisement is usually conducted by word of mouth, as the kaidan scene is a close-knit community and many storytellers know each other. Information on upcoming events is shared through SNS and can also be viewed on dedicated websites such as Kwaidan GTR, which also lists past competitions, interviews with storytellers and other news regarding upcoming publications, etc. (Kwaidan GTR). There are so many different events, promotions and competitions scheduled that one can pick and choose where to go and who to listen to. In summary, the contemporary kaidan scene in Japan is steadily growing and shows no signs of slowing down.

CONCLUSION

From the earliest written sources and oral folklore to the present day, kaidan has gone through successive waves of renewed popularity, each bringing new forms and changes to the genre. The first major boom took place in the Edo period, when hyakumonogatari kaidankai gatherings set a precedent for today's storytelling events. Beyond oral storytelling – closely connected to the theatrical art forms of rakugo, noh and kabuki – this was also the first time ghost stories entered the literary world, producing classics such as Ueda Akinari's *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*.

The Meiji period introduced debates over the supernatural, with intellectuals arguing and interpreting beliefs in spirits and their reality. Still, *kaidan* continued to thrive among the populace and its cultural importance was reinforced at the beginning of the 20th century with the emergence of folklore studies in Japan. Soon after, film technology allowed new degrees of expression for artists to frighten their audiences, but it was not until after the Second World War that Japanese horror entered its golden era.

Some of the most significant changes and advances in horror culture came in the 1990s when the Japanese economic bubble collapsed, and the population was thrown into a period riddled with financial insecurity and anxieties about the future. Shows about paranormal investigation and urban legends became part of mainstream television, and J-horror films became a worldwide sensation. Furthermore, *kaidan* was widely disseminated through books and magazines, the latter even including sections on spirit photography and haunted sites.

Readers were encouraged to visit the locations presented in these stories, which were subject to a degree of typologisation – the backdrops to ghost stories became liminal urban areas such as tunnels, bridges and abandoned buildings. Groups of mainly young people began visiting these sites as part of courage-testing practices, while older generations participated in organised ghost tours. Eventually, with the rise of the internet in the 2000s, stories, rumours and urban legends were further shared through forums, blogs and social media.

Today, *kaidan* is once again thriving, its popularity surging after the COVID-19 pandemic, with live events, competitions, podcasts and themed bars attracting dedicated fans and even generating idol-like followings around some famous storytellers. Far from being a fading relic, *kaidan* has re-entered the mainstream, showing remarkable adaptability across oral, print, cinematic and digital platforms.

Through examples, this paper shows that *kaidan* can be considered as a form of legend that is collected, adapted and retold by storytellers. Yet *kaidan* as a phenomenon is not just a scary story – performance constitutes an essential aspect, as does the relationship between the storyteller and the audience. Its contemporary reception is also evident in the way *kaidan* narratives evolve into urban legends with media presence, generate examples of ostension and inspire a rise in legend tripping to haunted sites.

The enduring popularity of horror storytelling in Japan cannot be attributed solely to cultural continuity but also reveals a shared existential appetite for scary stories across generations. Encounters with organisers, storytellers and fans during fieldwork confirmed that *kaidan* is not merely a form of entertainment or a hobby. For many, it is a lived practice of negotiating the relationship with the unknown. Its appeal lies precisely in this ability to adapt, to mirror social anxieties, and to offer a way of confronting the instability of existence through the telling and retelling of supernatural tales.

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SODOBNI KAIDAN: JAPONSKO PRIPOVEDNIŠTVO GROZLJIVK KOT POPULARNA KULTURA

Japonska ima dolgo in bogato tradicijo pripovedovanja zgodb s strašljivo in nadnaravno vsebino, imenovanih *kaidan*. Zаметki te folklorne in literarne zvrsti segajo v obdobje Heian (794–1185), ko so se pojavljale v zbirkah budističnih poučnih zgodb, imenovanih *setsuwa*. Te zgodbe so bile sprva znane predvsem budističnim menihom in elitam, v obdobju Edo (1603–1868) pa so se začele širiti med širše prebivalstvo. V tem času je po stoletjih nasilnih konfliktov nastopilo obdobje miru in gospodarskega razcveta. Potujoči trgovci, romarji in duhovniki so začeli pripovedovati in prenašati zgodbe med različnimi regijami, gradivo pa so črpali iz resničnih dogodkov ali krajevnih govoric. Kmalu so se pojavili tudi poklicni pripovedovalci, kaidan pa se je razvijal skupaj z gledališkimi umetnostmi, kot so rakugo, noh in kabuki. Poleg gledaliških predstav so ljudje začeli organizirati tudi srečanja, imenovana *kaidankai*, na katerih so si med seboj pripovedovali strašljive zgodbe.

Vsak si je želel nabora dobrih, predvsem pa čim bolj strašljivih zgodb, s katerimi bi se lahko izkazal v družbi, zato so se zgodbe začele zapisovati in zbirati v knjižicah, imenovanih *kaidanshū*. Pisatelji so začeli ustvarjati dela, ki so prirejala elemente popularnih zgodb in jih obogatila z umetniško izraznostjo – kot na primer delo *Pripovedi deževnega meseca* Uede Akinarija, ki še danes velja za klasiko japonske književnosti.

V obdobju Meiji (1868–1912) so bili kaidan deležni kritik intelektualcev in razsvetljencev, ki so si prizadevali za izkoreninjenje japonskih »vraževerij«. Njihovi poskusi so bili neuspešni, saj je javnost še naprej uživala v poslušanju in

branju strašljivih zgodb. Hkrati je zbiranje pripovedi postalo eden izmed temeljev razvoja japonske folkloristike v začetku 20. stoletja, ki se je začela z objavo zbirke pripovedi *Tōno monogatari* Kunia Yanagite. V tem obdobju je bilo ustanovljeno tudi društvo Kaidankai, katerega namen je bil vzpostaviti akademski diskurz o kaidanu.

Filmska industrija je kmalu po uvedbi te tehnologije na Japonskem začela snemati priredbe znanih kaidanov. Produkcija grozljivk se je med drugo svetovno vojno prekinila, po vojni pa je bila zaradi cenzure ameriških okupacijskih oblasti še vedno omejena. Po odpravi omejitev so v petdesetih in šestdesetih letih nastopila zlata leta japonskega grozljivega filma, kar je sovpadalo z obdobjem gospodarskega razcveta.

Okoli leta 1990 je zlom nepremičninskega trga državo pahnil v obdobje, imenovano »izgubljena desetletja«. Veliko ljudi je postalo brezposelnih, v družbi pa se je razširil pesimizem glede prihodnosti. V teh okoliščinah so strašljive zgodbe ponovno našle plodna tla in televizijski programi o nadnaravnih temah so postali izjemno gledani. Na prelomu tisočletja se je pojavil tudi nov val grozljivk pod imenom »J-Horror«, ki je bil postavljen v sodobnost. Zaznamuje ga preplet folklornih elementov z modernimi tesnobami, kot so urbana okolja in strah pred tehnologijo.

Izhajati so začele tudi publikacije, knjige in revije, ki so trdile, da vsebujejo resnične grozljive zgodbe. Nekatere so bile celo namenjene zbiranju fotografij duhov in so bralce pozivale, naj pošiljajo svoje fotografije in zgodbe; druge so opisovale kraje, kjer naj bi domnevno strašilo, zato so se številni bralci odločili te kraje obiskati in preveriti resničnost teh trditev. Govorice in povedke so se začele širiti tudi po spletu, zlasti na različnih forumih. Tovrstne vsebine so danes vseprisotne na platformah, kot sta YouTube in TikTok.

Poleg teh novih oblik grozljivih vsebin se je v zadnjih desetletjih ponovno populariziralo tudi samo pripovedovanje zgodb. Največje spremembe so moji sogovorniki zaznali po pandemiji koronavirusa, saj se od takrat organizira vedno več dogodkov, poleg tega pa se je povečalo tudi število aktivnih pripovedovalcev. Večina pripovedovalcev ima druge službe in pripovedovanje izvaja v prostem času, nekateri pa delujejo profesionalno. V zadnjih letih je to vedno lažje zaradi organizacije tekmovanj, ki zmagovalcem ponujajo visoke denarne nagrade in predvsem promocijo. Tako si je mnogo pripovedovalcev uspelo zgraditi kariero v zabavni industriji. Poleg tekmovanj so se v mestih začeli pojavljati tudi tematski bari s strašljivo dekoracijo, kjer lahko obiskovalci ob pijači poslušajo zgodbe.

Fenomen kaidana lahko v okviru folkloristike razumemo kot obliko legend, ki jih pripovedovalci zbirajo, prirejajo in vsakič nekoliko drugače pripovedujejo. Kaidan ni zgolj zgodba, temveč tudi performans, pri katerem je pomemben odnos med pripovedovalcem in občinstvom. Nekatere zgodbe so prerasle v urbane legende z močno medijsko prisotnostjo, pa tudi v primere ostenzije in obiskovanja krajev, kjer naj bi strašilo – t. i. *legend tripping*.

Spoznanja iz terenskega dela in spletnih virov kažejo, da se kaidan na Japonskem danes nenehno razvija in širi. Poleg prisotnosti v različnih medijih je

ponovno v ospredju tudi sama tradicija pripovedovanja. Lahko rečemo, da kaidan ni zgolj oblika zabave in kratkočasenja, temveč tudi zrcalo družbe, hkrati pa tako pripovedovalcem kot poslušalcem ponuja orodje za osmišljanje lastnih prepričanj o nadnaravnem.

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