

Masaki Kobayashi's *Kwaidan*

Horror, History, and Culture

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ABSTRACT

This essay engages with Kobayashi's *Kwaidan*, an anthology of four short films about ghosts, to foreground its uniqueness in the horror genre at the intersection of Japanese history and culture. For instance, hair is not merely an abject figure but is symbolic of the avenging spirit of a wronged woman. Similarly, the ears signify the musician and his nuanced skills and finesse, but more importantly, Kobayashi's personal history during the Second World War. The final episode, often dismissed by critics, is an affective invocation of the specter to indict the erasure of homosexuality in the official history of the male-centric Samurai world and, thereby, wartime Japan. Additionally, the second story of the *Yoko-onna*—the snow woman—deconstructs the angry ghost by positing it as the mindless victim of the militarist system by disavowing any personal reason for her murderous action. Thus, *Kwaidan* compellingly addresses the specters that haunt the Japanese psyche.

MASAKI KOBAYASHI'S *Kwaidan* (*Kaidan* 1964) is a celebrated film in the Japanese sub-genre of horror and has attained a cult status due to its matte shots and experimental score by Toru Takemitsu. Art historians and film studies scholars, particularly Kobayashi specialist Prof. Stephen Prince, have taken keen interest in the film and analyzed its socio-cultural backdrop in detail. I share the cinephilia for the Japanese cinema of the 1950s and the 1960s, particularly the cinema of Kurosawa and Kobayashi. In this article, I engage with his seminal research and scholarship on Kobayashi, mainly through his detailed reading of *Kwaidan* in his monograph on Kobayashi: *A Dream of Resistance: The Cinema of Kobayashi Masaki* (2017). My objective is to add an (East) Asian dimension to his extraordinary work as a homage to him.

My analysis of *Kwaidan*, which is an anthology of four short films about ghosts, fills in the gaps regarding the specificity of the film at the intersection of Japanese history and culture by using horror as a critical lens. While elements of shared beliefs and customs do play a key role in *Kwaidan*, I focus on history and culture. For instance, hair is significant not only as an abject figure, but also as symbolic of the avenging spirit of a distinct woman, a common trope in Eastern cultures. Similarly, the ears are significant to the musician: they have to do with art, as detailed by scholars, but more importantly,

with Kobayashi's personal history during the Second World War. The final episode, often considered inferior to the other episodes by critics, is the most affective invocation of the specter to indict the erasure of homosexuality in the official history of the male-centric Samurai world, and, thereby, wartime Japan. Additionally, the second story of the *Yoko-onna*—the snow woman—deconstructs the angry ghost by positing it as the mindless victim of the militarist system by disavowing any personal reason for her murderous action. Through such a reading I want to draw attention to the cultural specificity of *Kwaidan* as a horror film to address the specters which haunt the Japanese psyche. For Derrida,

Cinema is an art of phantoms (*phantomachia*), a battle of phantoms. I think that's what the cinema's about, when it's not boring. It's the art of letting ghosts come back ... I believe that modern developments in technology and telecommunication, instead of diminishing the realm of ghosts ... enhances the power of ghosts and their ability to haunt us ... I say, "Long live the ghosts." ("The Science of Ghosts")

Nonetheless, as Murray Leeder astutely points out, one must necessarily think of cultural specificity when it comes to the ghosts:

The editors of the collection *The Victorian Supernatural* (2004: 12) observe that ‘for Derrida, history is structurally and necessarily haunted, but where is the supernatural to be found in this kind of haunting? The problem is that the ghost is only one in a series of deconstructive tropes.’ They argue that Derrida’s conception of the ghost, though evocative, is necessarily an ahistorical one. It is not sensitive to how the supernatural means different things in different cultures and at different times, and is not well suited to considerations of people’s actual experience of the supernatural. (9)

Similarly, Freud’s concept of the uncanny comes in handy to explain the “unfamiliar” within the familiar spaces of home in these ghost stories, but these narratives in *Kwaidan* also markedly differ in their invocation of ghosts as figures seeking justice rather than as evil forces/spirits, which is primarily an Eastern understanding of the supernatural, as exemplified by the figure of the *Yurei*. While Eurocentric approaches point to the understanding of the unfamiliar as an interruption or an aberration, which could be explained through the unraveling of the subconscious, *Kwaidan* asks us to accept the coexistence of the unfamiliar with the familiar and anticipate their intrusion when the balance of justice regarding traditional values like fidelity and trust/honesty is tampered with. I argue for how *Kwaidan* recalls the Buddhist *Dharmachakra* or the Wheel of Justice by its invocation of ghosts in varying forms through its carefully chosen anthology of short films.

The disregard of a loving and caring wife, the inattention to the words of a wife who is seductive but part of the system, and the experimental possibility of music to evoke nostalgia and simultaneously mourn loss/destruction point to *Kwaidan*’s investment in evoking the sensuous through sight and sound. Nonetheless, the use of visuals and sound in *Kwaidan* is in the service of the plot. The images and sounds enhance the element of suspense and shock through the backdrop/milieu and foreground the turbulence in human nature, both physical and moral, unlike in much horror cinema, where the psychological subsumes the moral/ethical.

Furthermore, the teacup invokes a past and simultaneously threatens the present and leads us through the eruption of transgressive desire to the rupture of the apparent calmness and control of heteropatriarchy. This representation undermines the notion of the teacup leading to a meditative state, as entrenched in the popular imaginary regarding the Eastern ritual of tea drinking. Most important, Kobayashi’s ornate sets, stylized framing and mise-en-scène combined with Toru Takemitsu’s experimental music point to their predilection for art and sensuousity to create depth and layers, delineate the uncanniness of the specter, and play with the spectre’s ephemeral quality through presence and absence rather than one of unswerving fearsomeness and devastation/conquest. The latter is common in much of Western cinema where the ghost is posited as a binary opposite

to be yielded to or challenged. Thus, my point of entry into *Kwaidan* is in reading it as a specter of history, particularly of WWII, and my departure is in analyzing it as an exemplar of the horror genre predicated on the specificity of culture that privileges the mythos surrounding ghosts. I am not analyzing the aesthetics of cinematography and music in *Kwaidan*; it is beyond the scope of this essay and eminent scholars like Prince have done this in depth. Rather, my focus is on reading *Kwaidan* as a quintessentially Japanese horror film. To this end, I am invested in exploring the specificity and significance of Japanese culture and the context of Kobayashi’s background to foreground the darkness surrounding history as it continues to haunt, and the resonance of myths in contemporary life. I am also trying to make a case for Eastern aesthetics, which I believe can enable us to understand the complexity of *Kwaidan* beyond its surface.

KWAIDAN: THE CONTEXT

Kwaidan, literally ‘ghost stories’ in Japanese, is an anthology of four short films, mainly based on Lafcadio Hearn’s *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things* (1904), which provides the material for the narratives of the second, *Yuki-onna*, and the fourth short film, *Hoichi the Earless*, in the anthology. Whereas the first one, *The Black Hair*, draws from Hearn’s “The Reconciliation” in his collection *Shadowings* (1900), the fourth and the last one, “In a Cup of Tea,” draws from his other collection of short stories, *Kotto: Being Japanese Curoos with Sundry Cobwebs* (1902). *Kwaidan* was received well upon its release, winning the special jury prize at the Cannes film festival in 1965 and getting nominated for the academy award under the Best Foreign Language Film category. Kobayashi has spoken about how he “condensed the Oriental and Japanese beauty [he] learned from Professor Aizu in this film” (Prince 199):

Kobayashi’s intensive formalism emphasizes the surface features of design, and this emphasis, along with the attention devoted in the art direction to period architecture and visual art, represents a return by Kobayashi to the art- historical passions that he developed with Aizu Yaichi. ... The intensity and precision of the film’s design ... is not present to this degree in any earlier work ... especially the passion, intensity, and ambition ... As Hearn [who taught at the university] had been an inspiration for Aizu, Aizu was, in turn, for Kobayashi, and in crediting Hearn as the source for the film’s adaptation, Kobayashi honours Aizu by pointing to his mentor’s mentor. (Prince 198-205)

Lafcadio Hearn, who was born in Greece and lived in many countries including France, the West Indies, and the United States, spent the last fifteen years of his life in Japan. When Hearn taught at Waseda University, Aizu took classes in Greek literature and was inspired by Hearn to search for his own Japanese roots in their similarly ancient culture. Hearn himself



Fig. 1 | The wife at the loom in Kobayashi's *Kwaidan*, 00:25:59. Bungei, 1964.

***Kwaidan* asks us to accept the coexistence of the unfamiliar with the familiar and anticipate their intrusion when the balance of justice regarding traditional values like fidelity and trust/honesty is tampered with.**

loved Japanese culture, converted to Buddhism, and took a new name, Koizumi Yakumo, by which he is credited in *Kwaidan*. Hearn was a prolific writer and published several anthologies of stories from Japanese myths and folklore. Nevertheless, he was not well versed in the Japanese language and it was his wife who helped translate the stories for him. Unfortunately, his wife Setsuko Koizumi, belonging to a local family of Samurai lineage, is not credited as a collaborator. According to Prince, Hearn's search for the Japanese "golden age of artistic and cultural accomplishment" (205) led to his falling in love with Meiji-era Japan. All the stories in Kobayashi's *Kwaidan* have their provenance in Hearn's meticulous retelling of the Japanese folk literature of the past. Hearn was in New Orleans for a decade, where he honed his skills as a writer contributing to newspapers and magazines, as exemplified by *Creole Sketches* and *Lafcadio Hearn's America: Ethnographic Sketches and Editorials*. Such anthologies exemplify Hearn's investment in oral histories and folk tales and his keen observation of quotidian life—qualities undergirding the aesthetics of Aizu and Kobayashi, as refracted through Japanese art and culture, particularly in *Kwaidan*. The music composer Takemitsu Taru's similar investment in the Japanese past and experimentation with music and sound effects and his passion for reinventing the sounds of traditional instruments like the Shakuhachi and Biwa added another layer to Kobayashi's adaptation. Since Takemitsu Taru's music has been discussed in detail by most scholars I am referencing in this article, I am going to focus on what has not been addressed in the context of Kobayashi's *Kwaidan*—its cultural root and specificity. Otherwise *Kwaidan's* cult status is premised rightly on Kobayashi's ambitions and technical flourish, which does not fully explain its uniqueness as a singular horror film from the celluloid cinema of Japan of the last century.

THE BLACK HAIR

The title, "The Black Hair," would immediately bring to mind Julia Kristeva's seminal theorization of abjection and hair as one of the primary and inescapable "abjects." But in the East, long hair marks the beauty of women and the honour of both women and men, particularly of the samurais in Japanese culture. Consider, for instance, the *chonmage* or the topknot haircut of the samurai in Japanese films, like Kobayashi's *Harakiri* (Seppuku 1962). However, as a *yūrei* or a ghost, the hair may have another dimension—of vendetta. Nonetheless, the revenge-seeking women focus on seeking justice, so that rather than foregrounding their monstrosity, their representation serves as a reminder of the injustice done to them when they were in their helpless human form as women, as Ellen Enderle elucidates regarding the *yūrei* ("The Art and Cultural Significance").

If a person dies tragically, a murder or suicide, or if they are possessed by an intense emotion such as passionate love or intense hate, jealousy, or profound sorrow upon the moment of death, their spirit is bound to the world of the living as a *yūrei*. These ghosts are akin to heat seeking missiles: they single-mindedly go after that which caused their suffering in life until the conflict is resolved, occasionally by religious ritual, but almost always by personal revenge or satisfaction. Most *yūrei* are female seemingly because women were thought to be more passionate and emotional, and less likely to die a 'good death' and achieve enlightenment as they were thought "morally and spiritually corrupt" from a Buddhist perspective (qtd in Enderle, *Ibid*). In my survey of this particular type of ghost, I have noticed that *yūrei* are usually people who were powerless in life, such as common women and poor servants. However, in the spirit form they possess the full agency and power to avenge wrongs and seek justice that they could not in life. (*Ibid*).

The first short film in the *Kwaidan* anthology, "The Black Hair," opens with a Samurai (Rentaro Mikuni) who has now come on tough times and is without work in old Kyoto. We see his loving and caring wife (Michiyo Aratama) working hard by weaving on the loom (Fig. 1) in their home and promising to work even harder to keep their family and dignity intact.

However, the samurai has other plans and wants to leave her in search of greener pastures. He viciously turns down her pleas to stay by asking her to remarry and finds a wealthy woman for himself to offer him status and a job with the Governor. His new wife (Misako Watanabe), however, contrasts with his earlier wife. She is selfish and callous, indifferent, and belittling. He nostalgically remembers his ex-wife who used to continuously

work on the spinning wheels behind the loom at home, so that both can live happily. The second wife is furious when she comes to know of his designs to marry her for her wealth and his unabated longing for his ex-wife. When he is pressurized by her attendants to reconcile with his second wife, he refuses to budge by confessing his intention to return and make amends with his former wife whom he had wrongly deserted for selfish reasons. A few years pass before he can relieve himself from his service to the Governor. Thereafter we see him returning to his former home, which seems to be in a timeworn and desolate state with unruly weeds all around. However, upon entering he is happy to find his wife behind the loom calmly spinning the wheel. She seems, unlike the untidy entrance, to have not aged at all. She welcomes him and is in her usual demeanor and seems to be nonchalant and forgiving about his betrayal. She is large hearted, as in the past, and overlooks his apology and promises to make amends. When they are close, she relishes the proximity (Fig. 3).

Overcome by her beauty and benevolence, he gently strokes her long black hair when she rests her face on his chest as they talk about their lives. Then she prepares the bed with the striking red kimono as the cover—the red colour is ubiquitous in Japanese culture, as exemplified by their national flag and the gates of many Buddhist shrines. In this case, it is indicative of the protection and prosperity that the wife longed for. The lights go off and the samurai seems to be still caught up in his dreamy good fortune of having reunited with an angelic wife without much effort when he wakes up with a smile. But he is confused when he sees the house inside is as forlorn and desolate as the entrance when he arrived. Bewildered, he turns towards his wife who is lying covered by the kimono except for her long hair (Fig. 4).

As he pulls the kimono, he is shocked to know that he has been sleeping all night with her corpse—a skeleton with its long hair intact (Fig. 5). He is scared, and he runs through the house which is in ruins and tries to take cover by the wall (Fig. 6).

Meanwhile, the long black hair detaches itself from the skeleton and chases him to wreak vengeance. As he rapidly ages and deteriorates (Fig. 7), mirroring the overgrown weeds and the cracked walls inside the house, the black hair relentlessly follows him and attacks (Fig. 8). He desperately looks for an outlet to escape, but it chases him and encircles him, and flings him to the floor. Here it is pertinent to note the way Kobayashi's rendering differs from Hearn's story. As Stephen Prince notes, Hearn's "tale ends by gently invoking a Buddhist sense of life's impermanence, mutability, and transience," but Kobayashi's differs in his conclusion by focusing on the vengeful nature of the wife's spirit: "Her long black hair that he so loved becomes a demon spirit, pursuing him, winding around his face and neck, driving him insane" (209).

Here it is important for us to reflect on the cultural specificity of the ghost with black hair. Its dominance as a trope in the ghost stories from the East signify the ubiquity of injustice to women in the patriarchal and conservative milieu.



Fig. 2 | She grooms her long black hair, 00:15:28. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 3 | The forgiving and gracious wife with her apologetic samurai-husband, 00:30:17. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 4 | The shocked husband, 00:36:17. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 5 | The long black hair over the red kimono, 00:36:46. Bungei, 1964



Fig. 6 | The scared husband, 00:35:42. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 7 | The rapidly ageing and disoriented husband, 00:37:08. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 8 | The threatening/haunting long hair, 00:36:01. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 9 | The avenging and strangulating hair outside the house, 00:39:46. Bungei, 1964.

Reflecting on the spirits of the soldiers, who served the cause of the imperial ideology and who were later deified as Yasukuni Gods, Antony Klaus points to how they were “full of hatred and vengeance” since “their will to live was crushed” (127). According to [Masaji] Shimagawa, they became “in the very moment of their deaths ... bitterly hating, vengeful gods—onryogami [...], a specimen of deities whose cult flourished especially in the Heian period of Japanese history” (Klaus: Ibid). Therefore, the horror that Kobayashi alludes to is the dire poverty and loneliness of the abandoned wife at the point of her death through her vengeful spirit, which erupts despite the narrative’s apparent deification of her persona by portraying her, like the soldiers in the temple and their veneration of the King/nation, as a dutiful and forgiving wife toward her greedy and self-centred husband. Kobayashi’s past as a soldier/a reluctant recruit, who hated Japan’s predilection for war and conquest and its militarism, is reflexive of the goryo and its individualistic nature. According to Klaus,

The individual hatred and bitterness, the individual fear, do determine the fate of the soul in the afterlife. But in the case of the Yasukuni Shrine it is a fact that all of the souls of the war dead are enshrined as deities without regard to their former lives and the individual circumstances of their deaths. (128)

Thus, one could argue how Kobayashi, whose authorship is centred on his critique of the Japanese militarist past in his earlier works like *The Human Condition* (1959-61) and *Harakiri* (1962), finds in the vengeful ghost another acerbic form to create a space for interrogating the past and critiquing the violent and inhumane history of isolation and abandonment and the subsuming of the individual as common deities. In this regard, let us look at the two different endings of “The Black Hair”:

In the shortened version of the film released in overseas markets, the episode ends with the samurai’s efforts to escape from the house. The final image is a freeze-frame of the samurai’s deranged, prematurely aged face as it is reflected in a bucket of water. Kobayashi’s longer cut extends the action a bit. The samurai breaks out of the house only to be attacked outside by the demonic hair, with a final freeze-frame halting his frenzied efforts to fight it off [(Fig. 9)]. The freeze-frame suspends the time and space of the episode forever within the realm of the demonic, granting neither the viewer nor the character escape or deliverance from the forces of the spirit world that have gained entry to our own. (Prince 211)

But this ending has to be seen in its cultural context. The point of conclusion in any ghost story is deliberate and not accidental as it marks the way the aporia of the ghosts with material presence is addressed/resolved by the narrative. While scholars like Prince have preferred the shortened version where

the samurai's reflection in a bucket of water closes the film (Fig. 10), in the longer version, the black hair continuously chases him and forces him to climb the wall and get out of the house through the decrepit window only to find that he has no reprieve from the ghost even outside the house when, finally, he is overpowered, surrounded, and rendered immobile/frozen by the dynamic kinesis of its vengefulness. Just as the ending of the longer version recalls the myth of onryogami's uncontrollable and untameable vengefulness for the injustices of the past, the shorter ending of the reflection in water of the "deranged, prematurely aged" (Prince 211), face has its cultural moorings in the mythos surrounding the *yurei*.

Whether on the theatrical stage or the cinematic screen, depictions of popular kaidan regularly revolve around familiar, iconic images and conventions. In these stories, *yurei*, female ghosts, are often motivated by anger, seeking vengeance for their untimely and undeserved deaths. Often these murder victims are buried in dark, damp graves such as swamps and wells. When they emerge, these *yurei* are consistently depicted with long, black hair starkly contrasted to a pale, often disfigured face set off by staring eyes. The trope of the abject hair continues in contemporary horror films like *Ringu* (1998), *The Ring* (2002), and *The Grudge* (2004) (Wee 45).

By freezing the frame earlier on the reflection in a bucket of water, its wide circular surface mirroring a well, Kobayashi suggests the way the ex-wife's life should have come to its despondent and disconsolate ending after the betrayal of the husband: she might have committed suicide, an end which alludes to her being a *yurei*. Such an ending, overlooked by scholars, when read in the cultural context offers yet another dimension to her spectrality. It adds intricacy to the specters that come to haunt patriarchy, particularly in the East, known for its romantic imaginings of women as silent and graceful sufferers of the oppression by egocentric and avaricious men. The sameness of their lives, as variations on the theme of suffering, mirror the similitudes of the ghosts. "In Japanese folklore, the *yūrei* is a ghost or spirit held in the physical world by the manner of the person's death, by their thoughts or passions at the time of death" (Lyzmadness). Although the *yurei* need not be female, like in the case of the onryogami, "when the 18th century artist, Maruyama Ōkyo, was asked to paint a ghost, he responded with an image of a pale, emaciated, white-robed woman with long, black hair—and so crystallized the visual concept of the *yūrei*" (Ibid). Without an understanding of the cultural specificity, the black hair, as it takes a life of its own toward the climax will lack gravitas, since the subtext regarding ghosts and the pivotal history and the politics of vendetta will be missed, even if the technical finesse of Kobayashi has much to offer to discuss the aesthetics of "The Black Hair."



Fig. 10 | The ageing husband's reflection in the wide bucket of water, 00:38:45. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 11 | Minokichi and the Snow Woman, 00:55:42. Bungei, 1964.

But in the East, long hair marks the beauty of women and the honour of both women and men, particularly of the samurais in Japanese culture. Consider, for instance, the chonmage or the topknot haircut of the samurai in Japanese films, like Kobayashi's Harakiri (Seppuku 1962).

YUKI-ONNA (THE WOMAN OF THE SNOW)

The second in the anthology, "Yuki-onna (The Woman of The Snow)," revolves around the life and times of the woodcutter Minokuchi (Tatsuya Nakadai). On a snowy day in a forest, Minokichi, the intern, and his master, the old Mosaku, are hit hard by the blizzard, and they struggle to walk as they are wrapped and shrouded by the snow. Their search for a ferry is in vain, and the younger Minokichi has the energy to drag the exhausted Mosaku into the nearby solitary hut of a boatman—the one whose ferry they saw on the other side of the shore, on their way. The boatman's hut is sparse and rundown but it has a door to protect them as they collapse and retire for the day. However, when Minokichi wakes up at night, he sees the door that he had shut now open and the snowfall continuing with its flakes filling the hut. He is shocked to find a woman



Fig. 12 | Minokichi in a blissful moment with sandals for his wife, 01:47:50. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 13 | The frosty and cold-blue Snow Woman, 01:15:27. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 14 | The Cosmic Eye, 00:44:45. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 15 | The Snow Woman floats towards the Eye and vanishes, 01:19:53. Bungei, 1964.

in white—Yuki-onna/Snow Woman (Keiko Kishi)—kneeling over Mosaku. After she kills the old man with her frostiness, she turns her attention toward the younger Minokuchi and is impressed by his elegance. She is moved and takes pity on him and decides to spare his life, conditionally. She has a dire warning for Minokichi: He should not mention to anyone what happened there on that snowy night (Fig. 11). Otherwise, she will return instantaneously to take his life away. Thereafter, she glides through the rattling doors in the snow and floats away and vanishes. The overwhelmed Minokichi is almost paralyzed, and his affectionate mother (Yuko Mochizuki) supports him. Gradually he regains his health and spirit and resumes his woodcutting job. While returning home one day, he meets a woman, Yuki, who says she is on her way to Edo to find a job as a domestic helper. Night falls, so Minokichi offers her shelter at his home. She endears herself to the enamored Minokichi and his mother, and, thereafter, marries Minokichi and eventually bears his three children. The local women are intrigued by her unfading beauty despite giving birth to three children; she does not seem to age. Meanwhile, Minokichi has honed his skills as a sandal maker. He makes sandals for his children and Yuki and seems content as he looks at them, while his wife is busy sewing and making matching kimonos. During a blissful moment, when he looks at Yuki, Minokichi is struck by her graceful demeanor and haunted by the thoughts from the past (Fig. 12). He recalls the bizarre encounter with the Snow Woman. He slowly organizes his memory:

“You looked just like her just now,” he explains. “That’s why I remembered.”

“But—it probably *was* just a dream”, he concludes, laughing softly to himself.

“No”, Yuki tells him quietly. “It was *not* a dream...” (Ibid.)

Thus, when he recalls the dreamy but fatal encounter with Yuki-onna, a similar storm seems to be raging outside and we see the light inside changing from tungsten warm to cold blue as the Snow Woman reveals herself (Fig. 13). She hesitates to kill him as promised and commands that he treat their children well before warning him she will return and kill him if he does not do so. She glides out of the house into the snowstorm and vanishes. Minokichi places the pair of sandals he had made for her outside and we see the snow gather on them as they disappear, indicating the Snow Woman’s acceptance of Minokichi’s gift (Fig. 17). The most important thing about this episode in the film is Kobayashi’s stylization. The matte shot features a sky rendered in glowing orange and red, drawing attention to the production design. Similarly, the painted eye(s) that appear on the sky backdrop as a single large one or multiple smaller ones not only intrude into the narrative universe through their artifice but also draw attention by their significant placement in the set design and composition. They punctuate the key moments in the narrative: for instance, during Minokichi’s affair with Yuki, and, finally, when Yuki vanishes into the snowstorm into

the large eye in the backdrop. Further, the eyes in the backdrop also symbolize the surveillance of Minokichi and Yuki. Only in the end do we come to know that Yuki is not the victim but part of the eye, signifying the force of surveillance, which is centrally composed on the painted sky in the background when the credit titles begin and is present continually throughout the narrative (Fig. 14).

Prince draws our attention to the red flag that marks the ferry-stand where, at the outset of the film, Minokichi initially looks for the ferry and is disappointed to see that the boatman has left it on the other side of the shore. From that red flag, mirroring the red sun in the official flag, Prince reads the eyes—a motif that continues in Kobayashi's authorship from his earlier film *The Thick-Walled Room* (1956)—on the painted backdrop as signifying political surveillance, and as a metaphor for the intruding presence and control of the official authority during the wartime and Japan's militarist past (212-13). He also astutely notes that

[Yuki's] exit identifies her with the all-seeing eye, and the kind of absolute, unthinking loyalty that she demands is consistent with the service that all Japanese were expected to devote to the Emperor, the core figure around whom the ideological indoctrination carried out by the militarists was conducted. ... But the idea of betrayal cuts in different directions. On the one hand, [there is the] betrayal in terms of failure to honour the obligations owed to higher authorities. [While on the other,] many came to feel that military and political leaders had betrayed the people and led them to ruin and devastation. This became an enduring narrative of the war. Who, then, betrayed whom? Did Minokichi betray Yuki or has her rigid adherence to a vow she compelled him to make amounted to a betrayal of him, their home, and their children? (Prince 214-15)

While Prince argues compellingly for the specters of history, I would like to extend the argument to include the equally important cultural dimension. The “cosmic” eye of the film informs us as to why Kobayashi does not give the backstory of the Snow Woman's vengeance against the old woodcutter Mosaku. The eye(s) are present in the film as observers, a very foundational concept in Buddhism wherein being a silent witness is of paramount significance (Harvey 8-38). But as observers, Kobayashi dramatizes eyes by placing them on a flat backdrop and painting them with noticeable colours that keep changing according to the scenes. Thus, I argue that Kobayashi is drawing a parallel between ghosts who traverse time, and according to Buddhism, the specter of rebirths across lifetimes predicated on karmic causality. Thus, the eye, the surveiller par excellence, is also the silent observer of ethics and actions. The disappearance of the sandals at the episode's end along with the vanished Yuki marks karmic causality as constantly present through its absence (Figs. 15 and 17). While in the case



Fig. 16 | The All-Surveilling Eye, 01:20:02. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 17 | The sandals left outside by Minokichi, for his wife, are covered by snow, 01:22:32. Bungei, 1964.

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of Mosaku, we could only see the effect, his intern Minokichi is advised/alerted regarding the cause: if he is a good father to his kids, he will not be killed. The cosmic eye in the backdrop emblemizes karmic causality, predicated on the principle of reaping as you sow, or the Buddhist Dharma Chakra/Wheel of Dharma with its unflinching/unwavering rendering of justice (Ibid: 32-180). Without such a reading, Kobayashi's investment in pacifism is disconnected from his deeper engagement with Buddhism, and his painstaking work reduced to be a tour de force of production design and cinematography.

In all traditional Buddhist societies, as Bryan Cuevas and Jacqueline Stone observe, although Buddhist doctrine emphasizes a sharp break between the living and the dead, “the Buddhist dead are seldom really ‘dead’” (Cuevas and Stone 20). The realm of the dead is accessible to special individuals who



Fig. 18 | Hoichi plays the Biwa, 02:09:08. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 22 | The scared husband, 00:35:42. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 19 | The Child-Emperor with his Nurse, 02:13:02. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 23 | Hoichi is getting his face tattooed, 02: 21:33. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 20 | Hoichi appeasing the dead through his music, 02:14:47. Bungei, 1964.

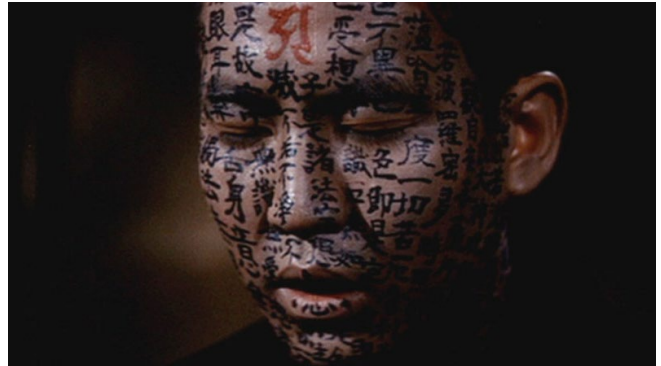


Fig. 24 | Text of the Heart Sutra on Hoichi's face, 02:24:03. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 21 | The ghosts from the iconic Battle of Dan-no-ura, 02:13:14. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 25 | Hoichi's growing popularity as a musician after he loses his ears, 02:36:08. Bungei, 1964.

“are able to mediate between the two realms, by either journeying to the realm of the dead or otherwise making contact with the deceased and relaying their messages to those left behind” (Ibid) (Esler 512-13).

Thus, the horror in *Kwaidan* is elicited not just because of the superficial shocks on the surface, but also due to the capacity of the woman of snow to travel between the realms and defamiliarize the familiar home of Minokichi by pointing to how the past, present, and future are porous and have implications for each other. The uncanny presence of Yuki-onna as the beautiful wife and mother creates a more profound horror through the existential anxiety/apprehension regarding the ephemerality of life through her rupturing of the stability of the present and the immutability of appearances. Her uncanniness also differs from the Freudian explication of the concept predicated on repetition and social taboo. In *Kwaidan*, Yuki-onna seems to be familiar and comfortable with quotidian life and activities and willing to move away from the repetitive chores, but not before reminding/warning Minokichi that she would return to seek justice in case a need arises.

HOICHI THE EARLESS

From eyes, the focus shifts to the ears in the third episode, “Hoichi the Earless,” to foreground the centrality of listening in Buddhism. I therefore engage with Buddhist culture to explore its centrality to *Kwaidan* and its significance to this episode revolving around the life and times of a blind musician. The narrative of “Hoichi the Earless” revolves around “the story of a blind musician who gains fame for his recitations, which he accompanies with his playing of the biwa” (Fig. 18). Because of his disability, he ends up as a musician in a temple where he is in demand because of “his uncanny skills in reciting a battle.” The episode, however, begins with the “famous 12th century naval battle” between the Genji and the Heike Clans, the latter getting decimated and its surviving members committing suicide rather than surrendering, including its six-year-old child-emperor, Antoku (Lyzmadness, *Kwaidan*).

[*Kwaidan*’s] presentation of the battle is highly stylised, almost like a *Kabuki* performance, with formal, deliberate movements and a distinct lack of bloodshed; in this version, the child-emperor dies when his nurse jumps with him into the churning red waters around his ship. Nevertheless, the totality of the slaughter, and the magnitude of the defeat of the Heike, is conveyed to the viewer [through] intense colours and contrasts, and with scenes featuring actors intercut with shots of a scroll painting depicting the decisive battle, and which is far more gruesome than the live-action battle. “And that sea and that shore,” the narrator concludes, “have been haunted for 700 years...” (Ibid). (Fig. 20)

Not only is it possible that Dankai might have left the ears of the blind musician open so that he can listen and keep reciting and playing his Biwa in tune with them, but also the spiritual significance of ears might have propelled him not to shield them.

Nearby in the Amidaji temple, which has been entrusted with the task of consoling the dead souls of samurais in that gruesome battle, is where Hoichi (Katsuo Nakamura) is playing his Biwa along with the recitation. One night, when Hoichi is alone, he encounters a newcomer in armor—Noritsune Notonokami (Tetsuro Tanba), the courageous leader of the Heike forces who died seven centuries ago. He asks Hoichi to come to the coterie of noblemen and their attendants, encamped near the site of Genji Clan’s interment and the Battle of Dan-no-ura, and sing his popular “The Tale of the Heike.” The reluctant Hoichi is persuaded and led by the wrist through the nearby woods, fortress, and the gates to the audience. Meanwhile the priest notices Hoichi’s absence during the night and asks his attendants Yasaku and Matsuzo to keep watch. Repeatedly, the visitor comes and fetches Hoichi for the nocturnal recitations to the tune of his Biwa which leaves Hoichi tired and sleepy during the day. When pressed for reasons, Hoichi denies any wrongdoing and does not reveal his secret outings at night. Thereafter, on a rainy night when Yasaku finds Hoichi outside his chambers and trails him with Matsuzo on the chief priest’s orders, we are exposed to Hoichi’s audience for the first time: the child-emperor, Antoku, and his entourage of attendants, including the samurai. Soon after, when Yasaku and Matsuzo arrive, they find him playing to an empty, haunted, and derelict gravestone-filled area covered by fog (Figs. 20, 21, 22).

Thereafter, when Hoichi confesses his secret trips at night to play music, the priest senses the danger in his being under the spell of the spirits. To protect his life, the priest entrusts Dankai with painting Hoichi’s body with sacred symbols to ward off the spirits (Figs. 23, 24). According to the priest, the symbols will act as a shield and protect him if he sits quietly in a meditative state. Though Hoichi is still when the spirits arrive and is almost invisible, his ears are visible since Dankai forgot to paint them. This enables the spirits to attack an unwilling Hoichi violently by pulling his ears and tearing them apart gruesomely and bloodily. The priest realizes the mistake but feels relieved that the spirits, having gotten their bargain, might leave Hoichi alone. Thereafter, Hoichi is in demand as a musician as he decides to appease the unfulfilled and the grieving spirits through his music. In the end, to the narrator’s commentary, we see the increasing popularity of Hoichi and people coming with sizeable offerings/presents to the temple (Fig. 25). “[T]he symbols painted on Hoichi’s body are the text of

the Heart Sutra, part of the much-larger *Prajnaparamita* (“Perfection of Wisdom”) Sutra, which deals with the vital Buddhist concept of *emptiness*.” The spirits were, thus, fended off by pointing to the “unreality of the world” they were part of (Ibid). Nonetheless, Prince is not convinced and criticizes the omission:

Why doesn't the priest or his assistant see what the camera reveals so clearly? Because the scene is visualized in such detail, this narrative question stands out in a way that it does not from the prose of Hearn's story. It's a narrative problem for which there is no good answer and that the viewer must accept so the story can move forward. It is not plausible that no one noticed the ears. (219)

However, if one looks at the cultural specificity of Buddhism, the centrality of chanting, listening, sutras, and ears becomes clear. Not only is it possible that Dankai might have left the ears of the blind musician open so that he can listen and keep reciting and playing his Biwa in tune with them, but also the spiritual significance of ears might have propelled him not to shield them. While “Buddhist chanting practices [dating back to the] Tang dynasty (618–907 CE), ... could also [argued to be] a type of music, an educational tool, a means for manipulating the supernatural, and a cure and cause of illness” (Seymour v.), listening is even more important as it can lead you to wisdom:

[The Buddha] emphasized the importance of listening in his earliest teachings and methods. He did not write a single word of his sermons during his lifetime (ca. 563–483 BCE). He spoke them. ... For hundreds of years ... Buddha's teachings [were] transmitted orally in memorized musical chants. ... The Mahayana sutras stress the importance of listening as a means of receiving wisdom. ... The importance of listening is also expressed in the iconography of images such as that of Milarepa, the eleventh-century Tibetan poet and meditation master. In a gleaming sculpture, he is shown listening with his entire body. His head is cocked, leaning into his cupped right hand, fingers curled gently, suggesting that he hears even the slightest sound. His smiling lips gently part, suggesting that he is simultaneously singing and listening to his own voice, vividly embodying the idea that one may gain wisdom through listening. (Soundfly 2018)

Hoichi's gradual development into a musician who could appease the spirits is enabled by his ears and sensitivity to listen. In retrospect, Dankai's decision to leave the ears open without the cover of the sutra seems to be deliberate, reflecting a probable belief in the power of ears to protect themselves and Hoichi through their (access to) wisdom, keeping in mind the temple's vicinity to and purpose of helping the lost souls whose lives ended abruptly through suicide at the conclusion

of the Battle of Dan-no-ura. Such sorrowful spirits could be offered solace only by listening to their predicament and the chanting of the sutras. But totally insulating oneself from them with the sutras is not going to deliver their wandering souls and help them be at rest. Bereft of the cultural context, the tearing of Hoichi's ears underscores only the horror and the ghastliness of the rendering of flesh and the goriness of flowing blood. The entire episode of Hoichi is propelled by the centrality of listening and ears as much as by the sound of Biwa and his recitation. The finesse of the music, cinematography, and music are there to lead us to the spiritual core of solace, appeasement, and deliverance. It also recalls the predicament of Zensaku in *Youth of Japan* (1968), which Kobayashi has labelled “a post-war Human Condition.” The commanding officer beats Zensaku “so severely that he became deaf in one ear and has but partial hearing in the other” (Prince 242). Beaten ears, thus, in the case of Kobayashi, are signifiers of the “army's brutal treatment of enlisted men.” Therefore, they play a complex role in this episode: ears provide the space for the spirits to violently express the disgruntlement against their tragic predicament as well as they are the conduits for what they are yearning for—the release from their liminal state. This episode also showcases the power of art to traverse realms, like the specters in the film, and heal not just the characters but the creators of the narrative as well:

‘Hoichi the Earless’ is an eerily beautiful meditation on the power of art to conjure the past and bring it vividly to life, and so serves as a *mise en abyme* of Kobayashi's own period film, which itself resurrects and reenacts not only stories from two different Japanese historical eras, but also the 60-year-old text of Lafcadio Hearn who, having himself lost one eye in his childhood and suffering myopia in the other, was nearly as blind as Hoichi. Closed off through sensory deprivation from this world, Hoichi serves as a medium to the next. (Bitel “Discover This”)

IN A CUP OF TEA

The final episode of *Kwaidan*, “In a Cup of Tea,” bookends the unique sensorial trajectory of *Kwaidan*: Beginning with the sense of touch (“The Black Hair”), and traversing through sight (“Yuki-onna”) and sound (“Hoichi the Earless”), it culminates with taste and smell (“In a Cup of Tea”). While scholars have not paid enough attention to the sensorium in *Kwaidan*, Kobayashi's meticulous attention to aesthetics enables the distinctive juxtaposition of the ghost stories with the canvas of the senses—anchoring the narratives with the noticeable black hair, cosmic eye(s), ripped ears, and a cup of tea. “In a Cup of Tea” frames the narrative via a writer in 1899, most probably Lafcadio Hearn during the Meiji era, busy at his desk and warning us via narration that the story is going to be “curiously unfinished.” Thereafter, the narrative takes us back 220 years

to reveal samurai Kannai (Kanemon Nakamura) as he is halting at a temple to have a cup of tea (Fig. 26). However, when he is about to have his tea, he has a strange and troubling experience of a young man's image appearing in his cup (Fig. 27). To his embarrassment, the young man, (the spirit of the samurai) Heinai, seems alluring (Figs. 28-29).

The face in the cup upsets the world as the samurai has understood it, and Kobayashi uses an orthogonal pivot to visualize this deracination, this violation of the empirical laws of nature. ... Lafcadio Hearn writes that the face in the tea looks young and beguiling and almost feminine, and Kobayashi presents actor Nakaya Noboru, as the spirit of a samurai named Heinai, in a way that is very consistent with this description. The face is both threatening and inviting. The flirtatiousness of the face—its smile is virtually a come-on—is part of what makes it seem so strange and inexplicable and doubtless helps to provoke the samurai into the heedless action of swallowing the tea along with the face in the liquid. (Prince 221)

When the spirit revisits Kannai, he has no answers to its query regarding his swallowing of its soul. Prince acknowledges the subtext of homosexuality but does not consider it central to the plot: “[H]omosexuality was a coded and ritualized aspect of the samurai world, but it wasn’t licentious and promiscuous, and the way this spirit seems to be flirting could, perhaps, be counted as a transgression.” Therefore, he is unsure why Heinai’s soul became disconnected from his body, “making this tale the oddest in the film,” whereas “the other spirits had motives for their actions” (Prince 222). Here I would argue that in the homosocial world of the samurai and the attendants of the Lord, people like Kannai are driven by their desires for same sex that they do not want to accept and thus they remain conflicted. Therefore, the spirit here is not the Other with a motive. Rather like the fluidity of tea, it is about sexuality and desire being porous—Kannai’s flinging the cup away and breaking it cannot keep his fluid desire away. The spirit, therefore, keeps reappearing in the cup of tea, exemplifying the return of his own repressed desire, which disavows the rigid formal codes of the samurai/military world. Prince’s apprehensions regarding “Heinai’s inscrutability, his insistence that the samurai has wounded him, [and his incomprehensibility, making] him seem more sinister, capricious, and cruel than the other spirits” (Ibid.) is understandable. Nevertheless, Heinai’s spirit is distinctly different, inviting and allowing itself to be swallowed, unlike the avenging black hair or the surveilling/warning eye or the defiant and bleeding ears.

From the black hair, which was a distinct object outside, to the remoteness and proximity of the omnipotent eye, and the speedily traveling, yet caressing sound, the sensorial flow in *Kwaidan* is centripetal—toward the centre. Here the motive is clear and the specter that haunts is the hypocrisy of



Fig. 26 | Samurai Kannai is about to have his tea, 02:40:04. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 27 | Samurai Heinai's face appears in the teacup, 02:40:22. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 28 | Samurai Heinai's inviting smile, 02:42: 19. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 29 | Samuria Kannai is troubled by the transgressive face in the teacup/urn, 03:02:00. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 30 | Samurai Kannai fighting the phantom ghost(s), 02:43:33. Bungei, 1964.

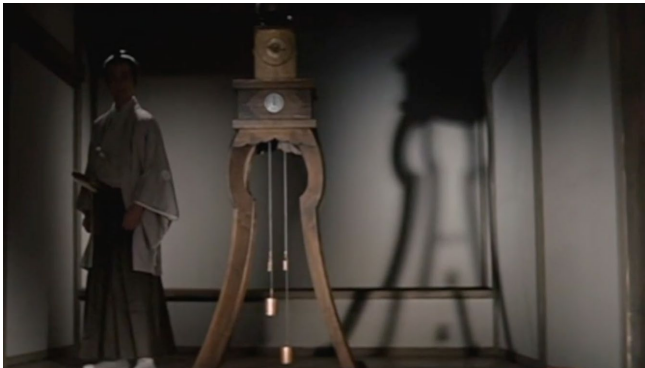


Fig. 31 | The Time Portal where the ghost appears and disappears, 02:45: 29. Bungei, 1964.



Fig. 32 | The Writer caught in the urn, 03:02:29. Bungei, 1964.

Here the motive is clear and the specter that haunts is the hypocrisy of heteropatriarchy, symbolized by the macho samurai world, which does not want to acknowledge and accept the differential orientation of Kannai's sexuality.

heteropatriarchy, symbolized by the macho samurai world, which does not want to acknowledge and accept the differential orientation of Kannai's sexuality. Instead, later when the three attendants of the samurai Heinai—the name rhyming and mimicking the protagonist Kannai, alluding to his subconscious (desire)—come in search of their missing master, he duels with the ghosts and fights a losing battle with the shadows and their unfathomable movement (Fig. 30).

There is the large mechanical clock in Kannai's chambers “that becomes a portal to the other world and a manifestation of the malicious spirit of Heinai.” Prince (astutely) suggests “a relationship between demonic forces (personified by Heinai) and history (recorded time as enabled by the clock). ... If history for Kobayashi is a force of trauma, then in this episode of *Kwaidan* it becomes a portal for malicious spirits to gain entry to the material world and sunder its anchor points. Kobayashi recasts his quarrel with history in a format appropriate for the genre of ghost tales, and plenty of precedent supports this move. Clocks and ghosts often are connected in folktales and in reports of psychic and paranormal phenomena (Prince 222-23). (Fig. 31).

During the denouement, we are back in 1899 with the writer and his apartment with his unfinished works. As we anticipate the closure to the fourth episode, we are informed by the narrator that he would prefer to leave it to the imagination of his readers. Thereafter, when the publisher (Nakamura Ganjiro) arrives to enquire with the madam (Haruko Sugimura) of the house about the author (Osamu Takizawa), they are shocked to see that he has disappeared. Scared, as they flee from the scene, they find the author caught in an urn (Fig. 32). As the camera focuses on the urn, the writer seems to invite us beyond the sensorial into a spectral world to experience a realm beyond the senses. “In his efforts to evoke the ineffable and to portray the limits of the material world, Kobayashi pushed his stylized designs much farther than he had done in *Harakiri* (Prince 223). The story thus remains “curiously unfinished” as the writer presaged. In Hearn's original story there was no device of the frame—the whole episode takes place in the long past, 220 years before the Meiji era. The frame story of the writer (Hearn) is introduced by Kobayashi as a homage to Hearn and to traverse between time. Similarly, the time portal with a large mechanical clock is also absent in Hearn. The frame story with the narrator, thus, involves the voice of two storytellers. One is that of Hearn, whose narrative makes the body, the other, Kobayashi, is the inventor of the frame to posit the original writer (Hearn) and bookend the film. Therefore, as Hearn keeps writing, it is Kobayashi, the other author/narrator, who alerts us to the impossibility of the ending to “In the Tea Cup.” It is because Kobayashi knows the long struggle forward of men in the closet like Kannai to accept who they are, come out, and fight together for their rights. It must begin by accepting their natural inclination and fighting the specters around them that disallow difference. The portal, thus, could be argued to symbolize the temporality of desire which seeks

a temporary refuge but keeps coming back. Thus, Kobayashi is invested in deconstructing the world of samurais, who make fun of Kannai when he confesses about the haunting image of Heinai in his teacup by taunting his ostensible delusion. He also deconstructs their hyper-masculinity driven homosocial

world by pointing to the specter of sexuality at the core of their universe that is disavowed.

Kwaidan, thus, retains its preminent status among the Japanese horror films because of its profound engagement with specters deeply rooted in Japanese psyche and culture. ■

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