THE COMIC STORYTELLING OF WESTERN JAPAN

Rakugo, a popular form of comic storytelling, has played a major role in Japanese culture and society. Developed during the Edo (1600–1868) and Meiji (1868–1912) periods, it is still popular today, with some top contemporary Japanese comedians having originally trained as rakugo artists. Rakugo is divided into two distinct strands, the Tokyo tradition and the Osaka tradition, with the latter having previously been largely overlooked. This pioneering study of the Kamigata (Osaka) rakugo tradition presents the first complete English translation of five classic rakugo stories, and offers a history of comic storytelling in Kamigata (modern Kansai, Kinki) from the seventeenth century to the present day. Considering the art in terms of gender, literature, performance, and society, this volume grounds Kamigata rakugo in its distinct cultural context and sheds light on the "other" rakugo for students and scholars of Japanese culture and history.

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Frontispiece (and chapter headings): Calligraphy in the *yose moji* style that reads *Kamigata rakugo*, by Tachibana Uichirō (b. 1946). Courtesy of Tachibana Uichirō, with thanks to Hayashiya Someta (b. 1975).

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Satire and Social Mobility in Kamigata Rakugo

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On 1 March 2020, the Kamigata Rakugo Kyōkai, the professional guild for comic storytellers in Osaka and the surrounding area, announced on its website that it would in two days begin canceling shows at its premier *yose* (rakugo hall), the Tenma Tenjin Hanjōtei. It promised refunds to all ticket holders. COVID-19 infections were spiking around the globe and it was feared that it was only a matter of time before this would come to Japan. Many wondered how Japanese politicians could continue issuing statements about the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games going ahead as planned in spite of the pandemic. Political scientist Jules Boykoff wrote in the *New York Times* that there were powerful interests intent on seeing that the 2020 Games get staged. This included Japan's Prime Minister Abe Shinzō and other politicians who had "sunk enormous sums of political capital into the Games." Money was obviously an issue too – the price for the Games had skyrocketed by nearly $20 billion since the initial bid.[1] The pandemic only became worse and Abe announced on 24 March that Japan had reached an agreement with the International Olympic Committee for the Games to be postponed until summer 2021, "at the latest."

After the initial March notice about show cancelations and ticket refunds, the Kamigata Rakugo Kyōkai was forced to make further similar announcements. Over the months that followed, "*kōen chūshi*" (show canceled) could be seen so frequently on storytellers' social media accounts that it felt like a vexing trending topic that would never go away. Like their guild, artists apologized for the unfortunate situation and promised to refund all tickets. Some even waited outside venues, donning masks, just in case their fans had not received word about cancelations.

Since the turn of the nineteenth century, rakugo (though not always called this) has catered to the masses and depended on them to gather in

[1] Jules Boykoff, "Cancel. The. Olympics," *New York Times*, 18 March 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/03/18/opinion/tokyo-olympics-coronavirus.html. Accessed 8 February 2021.

small, often packed venues. Obviously, this is not something that goes over well during a pandemic. Rakugo was not the only performing art affected by COVID-19 of course. Everything from rakugo, kabuki, and nō to Cirque du Soleil and Broadway shows had to be suspended. And just like entertainers everywhere, rakugo artists – many of whom struggle to make a living wage – suddenly found themselves out of work. What did they do? They did what other artists around the world did. They took their shows online. Some did this with nothing more than a smartphone while others invested in advanced cameras, microphones, and other equipment in order to produce high-quality online shows, both streamed live and recorded. Some storytellers built makeshift stages in their homes. Perhaps it was fortunate that rakugo is a minimalistic art that requires very little to perform – one needs only a *sensu* (folding fan) and a *tenugui* (hand towel), and a kimono. In adapting and delivering their art remotely, some storytellers organized for-fee events, but the majority did this free of charge. They hoped to lift people's spirits, stay in touch with fans, and stir interest in their art at home and abroad.

COVID-19 elicited various responses, artistic, social, and political. Some storytellers simply hunkered down, doing their part to not add to the problem. Like all of us, rakugo artists experienced personal and professional highs and lows. COVID-19 left no one untouched. This is something that world history will always remember, and it is something that rakugo history, too, shall recall. What gets written about rakugo during this time will not be bleak and depressing. Or at least not everything. After all, rakugo is an art that aims to make people feel good, make them laugh, put them at ease. It will be remembered that – thanks especially to social media and video conferencing services – storytellers helped people get through the COVID-19 era with a few smiles. Take, for example, the following tweets from Kamigata rakugo artists.

Katsura Fukumaru (1978–, @fukuma_lism) tweeted in response to Japan's toilet paper hoarders on 12 March 2020:

> To all those wanting to buy up all the toilet paper!! The homes of rakugo performers are now filled with flyers for canceled shows – we have a ton of paper! We'll divvy it up for cheap! (LOL) Okay, I better take all this paper to the neighborhood association for recycling …[2]

In a flurry of tweets on 2 April, Katsura Akashi (1971–, @katsuraakashi) poked fun at the new words coming into use:

[2] https://twitter.com/fukuma_lism/status/1237986794890604544?s=20. Accessed 8 February 2021.

11:35 a.m.

> Then I heard "social distance." I could gather that this referred to the attempt to prevent the spread of coronavirus by maintaining physical distance and avoiding heavy contact with others. But don't you think this word is a bit too dressed up for something meant to stop the spread of infection?

11:37

> To start, when one hears "social" one thinks of things like social dancing. It has an elegant ring to it. (my impression) As for "distance," in Japan this makes one think of things like, "the distance of the starry sky." (again, my impression)

11:38

> Well, there might not be a perfect term to convey that people need to be careful, but how about "danger distance" or "If-you-get-any-closer-don't-blame-me distance"? … I better stop before I turn this into a sideshow act. I was just thinking, names have a lot to do with impressions.

11:39

> Who knows, if "social distance" refers to something meant to prevent the spread of infection, the day may come when we call virus droplets "romantic flight" (I know this would never happen – No Surprise Exercise.)[3]

Tsuyu no Maruko (1986–, @2yu0), known for being among the growing number of female rakugo artists – and for becoming a Tendai monk in 2012 – tweeted the following on 5 April:

> It seems that there are many serious people out there feeling down, telling themselves, "I'm at home but just end up loafing around. I'm not doing anything important – no work, study, reading, cleaning. I'm a terrible human being." But right now, it's enough to stay alive. Don't get caught up in an "ideal life of self-restraint." Today, let's give ourselves 100 points for simply having a life.[4]

Katsura Beishi IV (1974–, @beishi_katsura) on 13 April posted a photo of himself wearing a white cotton mask adorned with cute cats. His tweet read:

[3] https://twitter.com/katsuraakashi/status/1249150021901193217?s=20. Accessed 8 February 2021. No Surprise Exercise (*Atarimae taisō*) is a sketch comedy routine that brought fame to the duo COWCOW – Tada Kenji and Yamada Yoshi – in 2011. Akashi is using it as a play on "Obviously!"

[4] https://twitter.com/2yu0/status/1246779330455199744?s=20. Accessed 8 February 2021.

> These days I've been doing my best to wait things out at home, but today had to go out for a bit to tend to some unavoidable business. This is one of my favorite masks. What I like about it is that its degree of fanciness stops just short of being too embarrassing for a 46-year-old man to wear.[5]

Finally, Shōfukutei Kakushō (1960–, @kakushow1960), known for his unique "puppet rakugo," posted a series of fifty videos to his Twitter account between 1 April and 20 May 2020. The stars – two curious finger puppets, one with a green head, the other red – presented a range of material from handwashing and puns to slapstick comedy, all with an aim to lift up those stuck at home during lockdown. His fortieth video on 10 May was titled "Marathon" and featured the duo in a goofy footrace through the mountains. Kakushō's accompanying tweet read, "Staying inside got you feeling out of shape?"[6] As one might expect, followers – fans and otherwise – engaged with these posts. They "liked" them, retweeted them, and replied to them. Exchanges were on the whole positive and uplifting and continued throughout the year and into 2021.

There was another response to COVID-19 that was somewhat unique to rakugo. A number of fans fashioned cloth masks out of tenugui and sent them to storytellers. Many people around the world took to making homemade masks during the COVID-19 era, but the significance and personal nature of rakugo tenugui deserve be highlighted. To start, they are one of just two stage properties that all storytellers employ onstage. Unlike the sensu, which is made with plain white paper, tenugui put on display storyteller individuality. They are decorated (dyed) with stage names, crests, traditional Japanese patterns, caricatures, and more. Storytellers often give these to fans and colleagues as gifts. During the pandemic, a number of fans decided to return these in the form of fashionable and comfortable face masks.

For more than a year, COVID-19 robbed rakugo artists of their livelihoods. It muffled their voices figuratively and literally. Storytellers may have had to wear masks along with millions of others, but a few thoughtful fans deemed it appropriate to repurpose tenugui and let the world (or at least people on trains or walking down the street) identify the people behind the masks. With this kind gesture, they helped keep rakugo artists and their art safe. And these colorful repurposed tenugui served to remind one that, no matter how appealing, masks are meant to be taken off.

Now, strike up the yose music.

[5] https://twitter.com/beishi_katsura/status/1249587008457957377?s=20. Accessed 8 February 2021.
[6] https://twitter.com/kakushow1960/status/1259299806536593408?s=20. Accessed 8 February 2021.

Acknowledgments

I grew up in a small town in Oregon, USA. I had a lovely childhood there. My favorite pastime when I wasn't playing baseball or American football, or speeding around town on my bike, was listening to adults tell stories and jokes, and spinning yarns of my own. Surrounded by wheat and strawberry fields and evergreen ridges, my imagination could run wild. Perhaps it was this place and my experiences there that planted in me an early love for storytelling. It certainly wasn't school. It was something of a miracle that I managed to graduate. If I remember correctly, my grade point average in ninth grade – the first year that these things start counting toward college entrance – was less than 1 out of 4. Teachers, school counselors, and others expressed doubts about my prospects. This wasn't pleasant, but it lit a fire under me. It became my mission to prove them wrong and make my parents proud. It was hard work, but I wasn't alone. I'm grateful to the professors, artists, and friends who inspired me and helped open doors along the way. I'm fortunate to have had the experiences I've had to date, college through my Ph.D. and beyond, especially considering that I'm the first person in my family to go to university.

When I first learned of rakugo in 2002, I had no clue that I would spend the next two decades researching and writing about the art, and performing it from time to time. In fact, it was a coincidence that I came to work on Kamigata rakugo. When I was a sophomore in college, Professor Nishikawa Kiyohide of Tezukayama University invited me to join him in Nara and, a few years later, he encouraged me to pursue another degree in Japan. He introduced me to Professor Morinaga Michio, who would supervise my M.A. thesis (2004) on Kamigata rakugo. It was Morinaga-sensei who arranged for me to study rakugo with Katsura Bunshi V, one of the respected post-World War II greats of the art. And it was largely my time with Bunshi V that helped open doors for me to work with other professionals, namely Hayashiya Somemaru IV. I was truly fortunate to meet and work with the people I did.

Many people supported me during this decades-long project. Of course, I wish to acknowledge all the programs I studied and researched at – Portland State University, Tezukayama University, Ritsumeikan University's Art Research Center, Waseda University's Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum, and the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. I can't forget Professor Laurence Kominz, who was my B.A. and M.A. supervisor at PSU and (along with his wife Toshimi-san) has been one of my greatest champions. Learning from him was a joy, and I've particularly enjoyed our performing arts collaborations in the years since. Professor Robert Huey was one of my teachers and dissertation committee members at UH Mānoa. I learned a great deal from him, too, but especially appreciated getting his take on research methodology, navigating departmental politics, and the importance of loving the work one does. Kominz-sensei and Huey-sensei are models for the teacher I'm now working to become. I also wish to thank Professor Joel Cohn for taking me on as a Ph.D. student and holding me to high academic standards. I'm grateful to him and his wife, Suma-san, for the numerous homecooked meals and bike rides that we shared while I was in Honolulu.

After my Ph.D., I taught at Cambridge's Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies. I'm grateful to the colleagues and students who inspired me with their work and friendship. I'm particularly indebted to Professor Barak Kushner, who was my faculty mentor, friend, and running partner. He pushed me to be better both personally and professionally and showed great interest in the projects I was working on. Though some occasionally questioned the import or feasibility of my research topic, Barak assured me that my work was worthwhile and had to be done. Both Barak and his wife, Mami-san, were (and remain) dear friends. I also forged special friendships with Fellows from a wide range of specialties at Peterhouse. With them I loved attending many Evensong services, intimate candlelight dinners, and sumptuous feasts. Special thanks go to Master Adrian and Anne Dixon, Master Bridget Kendall and Amanda Farnsworth, Dr. John Adamson, Dr. James Carleton Paget, Revd. Dr. Stephen Hampton, Professor Andrew Lever, Dr. Michael Loewe, Professor Michael Moriarty, Dr. Saskia Murk Jansen, Dr. James Talbot, Professor John Robb, Dr. Magnus Ryan, Dr. Jennifer Wallace, Mr. Ian Wright, and Dr. András Zsák.

I then taught briefly at the University of Colorado Boulder, where I had many long conversations and invigorating mountain runs with Assistant Professor Jae Won Edward Chung (now at Rutgers). And most recently, I have benefited from meaningful intellectual exchanges with colleagues inside and outside my department at The University of Sydney. All these people

were of great help and inspired me as I put the finishing touches on this book. Also, I could not have completed this project without generous funding and other forms of support from UH Mānoa's East Asian Languages and Literatures and Center for Japanese Studies, Ms. Hanayo Sasaki, the Consulate General of Japan in Honolulu, the Monbukagakushō (Japanese Ministry of Education, Science and Technology), The Japan Foundation, Cambridge's Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, Peterhouse, and The University of Sydney's School of Languages and Cultures.

Finally, there's family. I'll start with my rakugo families. I informally apprenticed with Hayashiya Somemaru IV from 2010 to 2012 and Katsura Bunshi V from 2002 to 2004. They brought me into the fold, so to speak, and their pupils, colleagues, patrons, and fans were more than kind to me as I researched Kamigata rakugo and learned the ropes as a performer. Next, my actual family in Oregon and beyond is a tight-knit and often animated bunch. Laughter has always been at the heart of our homes, but the Shores have also taught me why it's important to be good to others, love nature, and reflect on the bigger picture. I can't thank all my friends here, but I'd like to mention someone special. Suzuki Yuri – my "Japanese mom" – has been there in so many ways from the beginning. Finally, and most importantly, my colleague and wife, Song Yongsuk, makes it all worthwhile really – thank you for being my partner, making me laugh each day, believing in me, moving around the globe with me, showing interest in my work, and being patient as I finished this book. You are an absolute darling and I am lucky to play a part in *your* story.

A Note on Romanization and Conventions

All romanization of Japanese names and terms follows the Hepburn system. Japanese names are written in the traditional order (surname followed by given name), except in cases when a person publishes in English using their given name followed by surname. Romanized titles are in lower case after the initial letter, unless they include proper nouns. Terms in Japanese are italicized only when first introduced. Exceptions are words such as *sake* (the drink) and *hade* (flamboyant), which would look like different words or misspellings if left unitalicized. Macrons are added for long vowel sounds and apostrophes are added to indicate that two letters are to be pronounced separately, as in San'yū.

Like kabuki actors and other traditional Japanese performers, rakugo artists belong to artistic schools, or "families." Rakugo families are referred to as *ichimon*. Chief family/house names in the Kamigata tradition include Hayashiya, Katsura, Mori (no), Shōfukutei, Tachibana (no), Tsukitei, and Tsuyu (no). Rakugo names – called *geimei* (artistic name, stage name) – are written in the same fashion as Japanese names, family/house name followed by given name. For example, Shōfukutei Shokaku, Katsura Bunshi, Tsuyu no Gorobē. Illustrious names, such as Katsura Bunshi, are passed down from generation to generation (e.g., Katsura Bunshi I, II, III). If the ichimon name has been stated, sometimes only the artist's given name is written (e.g., Bunshi V, Somemaru IV, Beichō III, etc.).

Rakugo stories and their precursors often incorporate the lunar calendar, and Japanese units of distance, money, time, and other measurements. I use Japanese units for money (e.g., *mon*, *monme*, *ryō*, *sen*, *yen*), but convert others to aid readability, provided it does not obscure wordplay, etc., in the original. English translations for Japanese terms are given on the first instance and Japanese is used thereafter. Readers may later refer to the first entry for each term in the index.

A Note on the Cover Art

Jacket illustration: Woodblock print by Hasegawa Sadanobu III (1881–1963) featuring a rakugo artist on stage at the Ikuyotei in Senba's Awajimachi neighborhood (Osaka). The white lanterns appear to dawn the names Katsura Senshi and Katsura Kobunshi. The large plaque above the stage, brushed by Teranishi Ekidō (1826–1916), reads *kusuri* (medicine), a stylish reference to laughter being a cure-all for the soul. This print came attached to covers of *Kamigata: Kyōdo kenkyū*, no. 147 (1943). Courtesy of Osaka Prefectural Nakanoshima Library, with thanks to Suzuki Yuri.