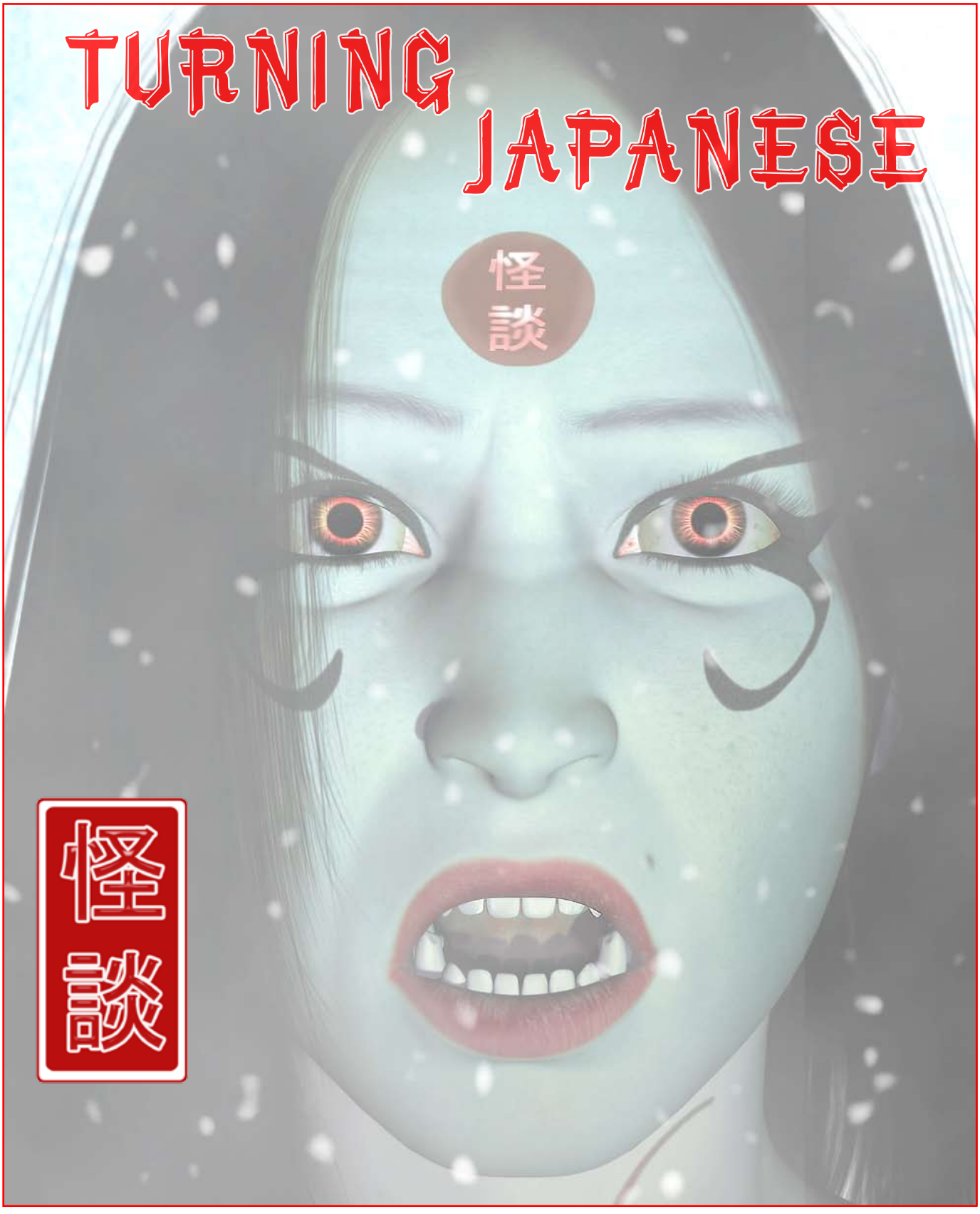
TURNING JAPANESE



BEING A GAMER'S GUIDE TO BLUFFING YOUR WAY THROUGH A JAPANESE GHOST STORY

'You Really Think So?'

– The Vapours, 1980.

(God, I hate that song.)

Why 'Kwaidan'? Well the word is an old fashioned spelling of 'kaidan', which means 'weird tale' or 'scary story' in Japanese. We've retained the old spelling to acknowledge Lafcadio Herne's collection of ghost stories published under this name (*Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things*, 1904), and also *Kwaidan*, the visually stunning 1965 movie masterpiece directed by Kobayashi Masaki, which is based on stories from Herne's collection. Both rank high on our list of favourites and influences.

We love this stuff. We hope that love comes through in the module.

Pip & John Hughes
May 2008.

So, another Japanese systemless adventure huh? Lots of bowing, stoic bushi immobility, deferential female passivity, and endless bowls of noodles.

Well maybe not ...

Kwaidan was conceived as an exercise in genre. The story is a simple one—archetypal or stereotypical according to your bias. I mean it starts in an inn, and there's a surly stranger sulking in the corner. Okay, Prancing Pony territory, been there, done that. Sure, it will develop a few twists as we progress, but you get the idea. It's also typically Pip and John: five lost souls, exiles from self and society, all looking for a little *lurve* and understanding, and almost incidentally, to find a way to beat the badass demon and regain the magic widget. There is the possibility, if not of complete salvation, then at least a hint of redemption. There are choices to be made.

Oh, and there are ghosts.

But important as the story is, it's not the prime focus of this exercise. Our aim in *Kwaidan* is to present a Japanese story in a way that is, within the conventions of Australian systemless roleplaying, true to the spirit of Japanese storytelling while being both intelligible and enjoyable to your typical convention punter (and gm).

Now I know gamers who can think, speak and positively ooze Japanese. I know gamers who could write all they know about Japan on the back of a Pokémon card. Most of us are somewhere in-between. The important thing in reading this essay is to remember that the names, the details aren't important. Sure, they can add a lot of background colour, but you can breeze through this module without knowing your *wasabe* from your *wakizashi*. What *is* important are the broad strokes, the underlying concepts and attitudes, the insights and emotions that you will convey and share with your fellow players and gamesmaster.

So let's start with a few questions. What is the difference between a truly Japanese story and a story merely set in Japan? And how do we recreate such in our roleplaying?

Go away, make a cuppa, think about this a bit. We'll be coming back to it. But let's begin with some background. Many of the answers will suggest themselves along the way.

Tokugawa Japan

Kwaidan is set in late feudal Japan, the Western year 1656. At the cusp of the seventeenth century two powerful clan coalitions—the Tokugawa and the Toyotomi—battled for control of Japan. This struggle came to its bloody conclusion at Osaka Castle in 1614-15, with the final destruction of the Toyotomi and their allies. The new **Tokugawa Shogunate** or *bakufu* (military dictatorship) created a new capital in Edo (Tokyo) and set upon a steady consolidation of its rule.

The Momiji or Maple clan that features in *Kwaidan* were among the many losers in this epic conflict.

The early years of Tokugawa rule were a time of rebellion, famine, peasant uprisings and fierce repression. Many thousands of former samurai, stripped of their lands and possessions, became landless ronin, surviving as mercenaries or worse.

A social order was imposed based on a clearly defined and rigidly maintained caste system. At the top of this social pyramid was the nominal ruler of Japan, the emperor, and his court nobles. Second in rank, but first in power and privilege, was the ruling **samurai** warrior class, comprising about seven percent of the population. Their leader was the **shogun**, and under him served **daimyo**, or clan lords, who ruled domains called *han*. Then came the common people who comprised, in descending order, farmers, craftsmen, artisans, and finally, merchants.

(Merchants were despised as parasites under the Confucian value system, for they produce nothing by their own labour). Each person occupied his or her allotted place and was expected to stay in it. To further bolster social stability, the Shogunate demanded rigid conformity to orthodox values and habits of behaviour.

Though the road system was extensive and well-maintained, the Shogunate prohibited wheeled traffic on roads for its own military protection. Thus, most goods moved overland on the backs of horses or humans. Contact with countries beyond Japan was forbidden.

Samurai lived and died by the code of *bushido*, which stressed total obedience to their superiors. They had the right of 'cut and walk', which meant they could kill anyone of lower station without fear of reprisal. They were also increasingly influenced by forms of Buddhism, including zen, that emphasised personal enlightenment through discipline and meditation. So we can regard the bulk of samurai as philosopher warriors following a highly refined code of honour, or as concentration camp guards in a country-wide prison camp. Both views contain elements of truth.

The Holy Mountain

Kwaidan is based in the wilderness about the holy mountain of Kôya, or **Kôyasan**, in the isolated Ki ranges to the east of Osaka. Japan is a mountainous country, and mountain worship has always been a strong part of Japanese tradition. Mountains are revered as a home to the gods, the land of the kami. The land of the dead.

Kôyasan is the centre of Shingon Buddhism, a form of esoteric or tantric Buddhism introduced to Japan in the 9th century. Situated midst the cedar forests of Kôyasan is the sacred area known as the Danjô Garan, a complex of several hundred temples and pavilions. Okuno-in, the Inner Sanctuary, is the setting for a vast cemetery containing the mausoleums of numerous Japanese nobles and priests, including emperors and shoguns.

Pilgrimage to sacred places has always been a strong part of the Japanese tradition. In the Tokugawa era, when oppressive travel restrictions were universal, pilgrimage was the only way for many commoners to ever venture beyond their village. So as well a genuine religious act, pilgrimage also became a holiday, an excuse for travel, and a grand adventure. Also, fleeing criminals, military deserters and the mentally ill often took to the roads as pilgrims or **henro**. (Those of course, that didn't enter the monasteries.) Not all pilgrims were necessarily pious.

Kwaidan is set in late autumn: the sad season, a period of spectacular beauty, but also the traditional time to reflect on death and the transient beauty of life. Travel so late in the year is misery, and the pilgrim roads have become nearly deserted.

Land of a Million Gods

It is claimed that the Japanese have a million gods. Deities include **buddhas** (*Nyorai Butsu*), who offer enlightenment and release from the bonds of karma; **bodhisattvas** (*Bosatsu*), enlightened beings who have put off buddhahood to help the suffering; **kami**, the powerful gods and spirits of Japan; and **oni**, demon-like beings of myriad shapes and motivations.

The two great faiths of Buddhism and Shinto are blended together in the minds of most so as to be largely indistinguishable, and are overlain by a dominant, largely secular Confucian social philosophy emphasising piety and obedience, self-cultivation and morality. It is also important to note that most Japanese religion is concerned with practice, discipline and training (*shugyõ*) rather than theological erudition or debate (*kyõ*).

The Shinto deities include Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess, Queen of Heaven; Hachiman, who is Amaterasu's son and the god of warriors; Inari the kami of rice and prosperity; and Uke-Mochi-No-Kami, the god of wealth.

The main Buddhas include Shaka (Gautama), the historical Buddha, Amida (Amitabha), the Buddha of the Western Paradise; and Dainichi (Tathagata) the Cosmic Buddha. Bodhisattvas include Kannon (Avalokitesvara), the Goddess of Compassion (the Chinese Quan-Yin); and Jizo (Ksitigarbha), who offers salvation from suffering, and is the guardian of deceased children, pregnant women, travellers, and pilgrims.

Demons and Shapeshifters

There are many, many forms of Japanese supernatural creatures.

The term **yûkai** can be translated as 'apparitions', 'spirits', or 'demons'. Certainly some yûkai are considered dangerous and evil, but many are just mischievous and playful, pranksters and tricksters. Some are even kind and helpful, given the right circumstances. Many respond well to kindness, giving gifts and warnings out of gratitude if well treated.

A few of the more common yûkai include:

Kitsune are shapeshifting foxes. Sometimes a powerful fox will take on a human form and marry a human, sometimes out of love but sometimes just to make trouble.

The **Yukionna** is a snow demon who takes the form of a beautiful woman. She lies in wait for unsuspecting travellers and sucks all the heat out of their bodies, leaving them as frozen corpses. There are stories of the Yukionna falling in love with a mortal man, marrying him and raising children.

Tengu are birdlike demons who live in mountain eyries. They are shapeshifters who can appear as birds or humans. Their favourite pastime is tormenting pious monks with visions and hallucinations. They are particularly well known to *yamabushi* (mountain priests).

Bakeneko are demon cats and are usually dark tricksters out to cause chaos and death in human households. As with most shapeshifting creatures, the older they are the more intelligent, skilled and dangerous they become.

Tanuki is the Japanese word for raccoon dog. The tanuki is reputed to be mischievous and jolly, a master of disguise and shapeshifting, but somewhat gullible and absent-minded. Statues of tanuki can be found outside many Japanese temples. These statues often wear big, cone-shaped hats and carry bottles of sake in one hand, and a promissory note (a bill it will never pay) or empty purse in the other hand. Tanuki statues have large bellies and even larger testicles. Tanuki are often depicted with their testicles flung over their backs like travellers' packs, or using them as drums. Less intelligent and cunning than foxes, they tend to end up as the butt of jokes, rather than their instigators. They sometimes disguise themselves as monks or even inanimate objects.

Oni is usually translated as 'ogre' but again, this implies that they are evil and this is not necessarily the case. They are usually found in groups or gangs. Their appearance is uniformly chaotic and bizarre, with strangely coloured skin of blue, green, red or black. Their hair is usually wild and shaggy and many have horns. Some may have only a single eye, some may have many. Some have no faces at all, but merely a smooth surface, like an egg.

There is a special class of yûkai known as **mononoke**, which are unnatural spirits in the human world. They often have sinister motives, having been affected or

'merged' with the strong emotions of humans, for many demons take form based around the evil or suffering of the human heart.

All yokai also have different motives and agendas from human beings, which are often difficult to discern, if not completely incomprehensible.

Beware the *karakasa*, the one-eyed, one-legged umbrella monster!

Ghosts

Japanese ghosts, or **yurei**, are far more common and usually far more dangerous that their western counterparts. Although there are exceptions, generally speaking they are women who were betrayed by their husbands or lovers and, because of their anger and desire for vengeance, have remained connected to the people and circumstances under which they died. Sometimes they don't do much harm, but cry, wail and wring their hands, or act out a small part of their tragedy until some kind soul performs whatever actions are necessary to free them. Others, however, are far more violent and will go after their murderer with the intent to see him suffer and die. There are still others who are bound by their love for a spouse or a child and will stay to care for them, even after death. How a yurei behaves is always related to the circumstances under which the person died and the strength of their emotions at the time.

A yurei can not be destroyed, but it can be placated and sent to its rightful rest in the land of the dead. This may involve righting the injustice which binds them to the land of the living, or providing them with proper burial and funeral rites.

(As an aside, in much kaidan we see an exaggerated and hypocritical veneration of the female. Does this perhaps reflect a Japanese male fear of and guilt over their treatment of women? Do Japanese women experience ghost tales of vengeance differently from men?)

Turning Japanese: Attitudes and Ways of Being

There are three key concepts in understanding Japanese society that are particularly relevant to *Kwaidan*.

- **Status is everything**

The iron law of feudalism is 'Know One's Place'. Your place in society—man or woman, samurai or commoner—defines everything about you. Do not fall below your place. Do not dare to rise above it. You have an extremely sensitive inner sense of who is above you and who is below you, and you act to this at all times.

- **Family is everything**

You exist not as an individual but as part of family. The only politics is family politics. The only honour is family honour. Anyone who does not have a family is less than complete. *Sorei*—that is, obligation, duty, debt—is always owing to your family and to your ancestors. Family obligations rag you like a mortgage, and that mortgage will never be repaid.

And those who die without children will have no one to sustain them in the afterlife. This is a terrible fate.

- **Life is fleeting, everything changes**

The Buddhist notion of the impermanence and brevity of life suffuses much of Japanese culture. It can lead to resigned acceptance, even a deep fatalism. It is also part of the Japanese sensitivity to nature, and its deep appreciation of beauty. Yet often, beauty and sadness are inextricably linked.

Japanese call this resigned sadness towards life '*mono no aware*'. However, it is often contrasted with the rich humour of 'low culture', called '*rokugo*'. Player characters are immersed in this culture of sadness and beauty, but they are also free to immerse themselves in the humour and earthiness of *rokugo* as well. The balance will depend on your character interpretation.

Sex and the Single Samurai

Unlike the West, in Tokugawa Japan sex was not viewed in terms of morality, but rather in terms of pleasure, social position, and social responsibility. The Japanese have always had a remarkably direct, uncomplicated attitude to sex.

However, beyond the leisured life of the courts, there was no ethos of romance or romantic love. Arranged marriages were the norm, and romance was seen as a fleeting thing, unruly, and sure to bring disharmony, suffering and shame. As women were severely restricted in their freedom of movement, chances for casual liaisons were few. For warriors, excessive love for a woman was regarded as an effeminate failing.

(The samurai way to overcome fear of death was to quell weakening emotions, especially romantic love and passion. (Affection, however, was not seen as an obstacle). Therefore, woman was a weakening influence.)

Open expressions of love were also extremely rare, in keeping with Confucian standards of decorum. There is a Japanese saying from the period, 'To love a wife is to spoil a mother's servant.'

Like the premodern West, only sexual acts themselves were seen as being homosexual or heterosexual, not the people performing such acts.

Same sex acts were not uncommon, at least between men. The incidence of their prevalence among women is lost to history.

Originally, *nanshoku* was one of the preferred terms to refer to male to male sex. This term did not imply a specific identity; but rather, a type of sexual behaviour.

Buddhist monasteries appear to have been early centres of homosexual activity in ancient Japan. Kükai, the founder of the Shingon Buddhist sect, is said to have introduced *nanshoku* into Japan after returning from China in the 9th century. Kôyasan, the seat of Kükai's monastery, eventually became a by-word for same-sex love.

Although chastity among monks is one of the precepts of Buddhism, this came to be understood, perhaps just a trite disingenuously, as sex with women.

From religious circles, same-sex love spread to the warrior class, where it was customary for a young samurai to apprentice to an older and more experienced man. The young samurai would be his lover for many years. The practice was known as **shudo**, the way of youth, and was held in high esteem by the warrior class. Often, these lord-vassal relationships were valued above those between men and women.

In western terms, bisexuality was more prevalent than homosexuality.

The three great shoguns who unified Japan—Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu—all had ongoing same-sex relationships with young men in the courts, as did Miyamoto Musashi, the legendary swordsman and author of 'The Book of Five Rings'.

Women: Not Seen and Not Heard

The status of women in Tokugawa society was quite low. They were required to obey fathers, husbands and brothers, and could not venture out in public alone. They were expected to use more formal and polite speech than their male counterparts.

The Confucian and Buddhist attitude toward women was that they were inferior creatures, scarcely worthy of serious attention. Shinto, with its extreme focus on purity and pollution, feared menstruation and childbirth. As a result, women were barred from many holy places and temples.

Turning Hakujin: Playing out Kwaidan

So, let's get back to our original question. What is the difference between a truly Japanese story and a story merely set in Japan? How do we recreate such in our roleplaying?

Well of lot of it has to do with appreciating the cultural background; the Japanese ways of feeling and doing, the way that typical Japanese of the Tokugawa era see their world. Its about appreciating the difference between their way of being and ours, and surfing the differences for our roleplaying enjoyment.

But of course, a lot of 'turning Japanese' is to do with cultural restraint. It's about keeping emotions, thoughts, opinions—at least in public—to yourself, about not rocking the boat.

Beneath that stoic bushi immobility, that warrior many be filled with indecisive, pusillanimous fear, ready to hop it as soon as he is alone. And those deferential, silent women? Brimming with unvoiced feeling and desires, perhaps wanting to jab a hairpin through that man's scrawny neck as they smile and serve tea.

But unless we get those hidden thoughts and emotions into the shared realm of the game, they're lost, they're useless. We need to get them into play.

Pip and Johns' experience of multiforming and systemless gaming (nineteen years now since *Memory*), is that it has been primarily about experiencing emotional force and catharsis. In *Kwaidan*, we are encouraging players to shift the focus to sharing emotions, describing emotions, telling stories of emotion.

We are western people with a western culture seeking a western style of fun. We can immerse ourselves in a thoroughly Japanese story, but only if we turn it 'hakujin' (western) by adding a layer of commentary about what our characters are thinking and feeling.

Here are a few suggestions as to how we can both immerse ourselves in the Japanese elements while making it accessible to our western ways of play:

- **Third person point of view**

Most systemless roleplaying is first person, 'I'. 'I shoot the cop.' 'I read the dread footnote in the Dark Tome™.' We need to push up the storytelling aspect of our game by using third person—'he' and 'she', even when we are talking about our own characters.

Shiki looks across to see Tomoe's face, ruddy with firelight. He sighs to himself, vainly seeking some thought, some memory just beyond his grasp. He glances up to the midnight sky, where the River of Heaven shines in silent majesty. Each individual star stands out from the rest, so clear is the night. He finds himself reciting a favourite poem...

It is deep midnight
The River of Heaven
has changed its place

And yes, don't be afraid to claim description and evocation back from the gamesmaster. Co-create the environment. And mine your character sheet. It's there to be used!

The key here is to share the character's internal world: the thoughts, doubts, fears, and cutting insights. And you have to *voice* that inner stream: you are primarily a storyteller, you have a rich story to share. Reach into your repertoire, expand your technique: use physical description and evocation.

Tomae ascends the stairs tentatively, her arms clenched close to her breast, eyes fixed to the weathered stone. It's cold, so cold. She shivers. And she is hungry.

Share your character's internal dialogue, even when it would not be shared character tor character. Speak player to player, describing your character's inner world.

- **Tell stories**

Most *Kwaidan* characters have a character sheet story primed for them to tell in game. But tell your own stories as well: about your character, their past, their hopes. A story can be very effective even if it is only a few sentences long.

- **Talk *around* your feelings**

Your characters will seldom if ever talk directly about love or deep passion. But they will talk about the mountains, and the forest, and the moon. Despite their restraint, Japanese people know how to address emotions indirectly. And it's a lot of fun.

If you want to go pillowing, talk instead about the moon. If you mention 'jade' anything—that's hot stuff! Mention a jade flute or a jade portal and it's positively hardcore.

(A note however: anyone mentioning that 'the phoenix can fly only when its feathers are grown' will be sent to stand in a corner. No saving throw.)

As gamesmaster, John will do his part to draw out those inner thoughts and feelings, mainly by asking questions. We'll try out a few other devices as well. There is one scene that I hope nearly everything can be conveyed just by the group's breathing.

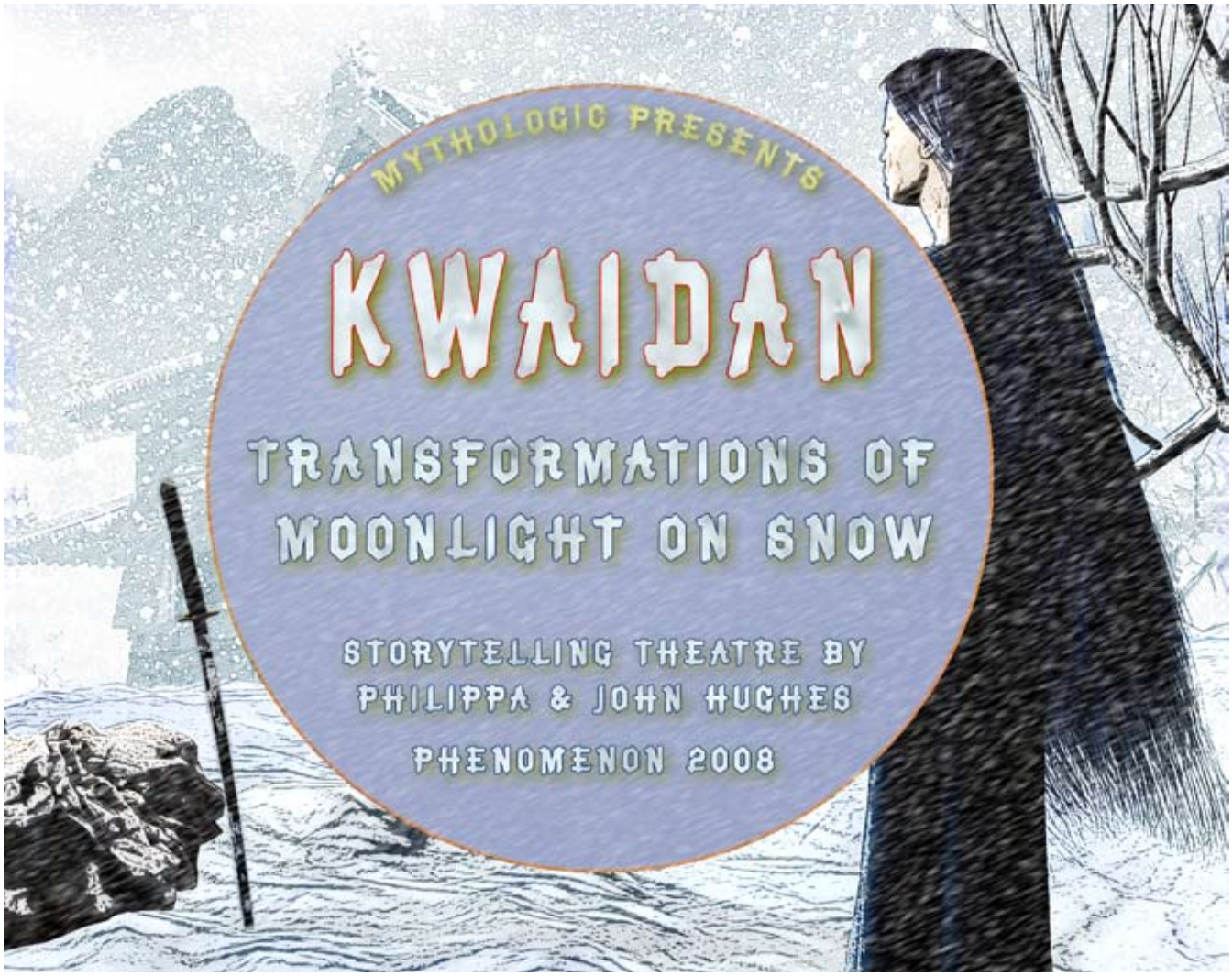
Our common story in *Kwaidan* can resolve itself in many different ways. Each team will bring its own style, its own way of telling the story. And it will be fun.

You might create your story in a naturalistic way, or as a genre piece, with an undercurrent of knowing humour, or perhaps as a stylised *kabuki* tale, all measured gestures and stately cadence. Or you might enact it as if you are, quite consciously, telling a story that is well known to all, using the flow of the game to reflect on how story and reality, teller and listener, all react together to create something new. All of these are open to you, all of these, and more.

Let us play *kimodameshi*, the game of confronting ghosts!

Practice those bulging, goggle-eyed stares of horror. Try out a few of those shrill, stifled screams. We are all, in the strongest sense, storytellers to each other. And *Kwaidan* is a ghost story. We're here to scare each other.

So, do you want to share a scary story?



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