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The Motif of Vengeful Spirits in Japanese Urban Legends

*^{1,2}Nguyen Thanh Trung, ¹Nguyen Diem Quynh

About Article

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About Author

¹ Department of Linguistics and Literature, HCMC University of Education, Vietnam

² Center for Religious Studies, Vietnam Institute of Buddhist Studies, Vietnam

Contact @ Nguyen Thanh Trung
trungnt@hcmue.edu.vn

ABSTRACT

While urban legends have become increasingly widespread with the development of the Internet, systematic research on urban legends, especially in regions with a prominent urban legend culture like Japan, remains scarce. Aiming to clarify the crucial element of 'motif' within narratives, this paper focuses on studying the motif of vengeful spirits in Japanese urban legends. It does so by identifying the characteristics of the vengeful spirit motif in relation to the cultural characteristics of Japanese urban legends and by examining how this motif is artistically expressed through characters, plots, and symbols within urban legends. Employing a combination of three specialized methods – historical-cultural analysis, semiotics, and structural analysis – the study will examine the three key characteristics of the motif: mutability, punishment, and reflection. These characteristics will be analyzed in terms of their corresponding aspects and meanings. The findings of this research can contribute to the theoretical understanding of urban legends, provide a research model for approaching popular culture and literature, and be introduced into undergraduate and graduate foreign literature curricula.

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1. INTRODUCTION

While urban legends have gained significant popularity, the field of research into them, especially Japanese urban legends, remains relatively new. This is particularly true for the sub-category that combines collective psychology with mythical elements, especially the theme of vengeful spirits. The motif of vengeful spirits in Japanese urban legends raises questions about the nature of reality and life, offering fresh and intriguing perspectives on everyday existence. Research in this area can provide a scientific foundation for analyzing and clarifying the dynamics of traditional motifs in modern environments and the relationship between literature and society. From a practical standpoint, urban legends have increasingly become a form of popular entertainment. Familiar tales about food, crime, sex, technology, and so on, consistently captivate audiences, particularly from a sociocultural perspective. In the context of globalization, the demand for cultural exchange between nations is growing. This research contributes to clarifying the characteristics of Japanese culture while also helping to identify similarities and differences in the cultural consciousness of various nations. Finally, from an educational perspective, studying Japanese urban legends with a focus on the vengeful spirit motif can supplement research and teaching materials on Japanese culture and literature, providing a broader perspective and addressing multifaceted issues related to both traditional and contemporary Japanese culture.

The objective of this paper is to analyze the meaning and development of the vengeful spirit motif in Japanese urban legends, aiming to examine the connections between folk culture, the expression of worldviews, and reference materials for research and teaching. The object of this paper is the motif of the vengeful spirit, a common, recurring, and fundamentally complete unit that serves as a basis for gradually generalizing the entire system. According to Harper (2009), "Typically the Vengeful Spirit is a woman who has suffered at the hands of men, either being murdered, forced to commit suicide, or simply abandoned and left to die. Tied to the place of their demise, the ghost remains on the earthly plane until her desire for vengeance is satisfied." This motif has a structure that can be represented in the following table:

Table 1. The structure of vengeful spirit motif

Cause	Directly killed
	Harmed and then committed suicide
	Harmed and then abandoned to die
Behavior	Directly
	Indirectly
Result	The perpetrator was eliminated
	The perpetrator lives in torment
	The perpetrator got away

Overall, the fundamental theme of urban legends remains death and the macabre. The motif of vengeful spirits has been placed at the center of this research, with approximately fifteen stories being analyzed due to their widespread popularity on

the internet. Secondly, this group of stories fulfills the criteria of containing the motif of vengeful spirits with all three components. Finally, while a sample size of 15 may not be exhaustive, it allows for an initial overview of a significant and noteworthy portion of Japanese urban legends.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yokai* (2009), Michael Dylan Foster delved into the diverse types of mysterious creatures in Japanese culture, providing interpretations through folklore, literature, art, science, games, manga, film, and more. Nguyễn Thành Trung, in his article "The Art of Narrative in Latin American Urban Legends in Relation to Liberation Theology" (2018), emphasized the contemporary nature of urban legends by analyzing their development in modern media environments. This group of researchers has placed urban legends within the framework of indigenous culture; however, the question remains whether the nature of urban legends is fundamentally folk or modern. From this, the research hypothesis (H1) is formed: The motif of the vengeful dead in Japanese urban legends is subject to transformation (inheriting and continuing folk culture).

While rooted in traditional folklore, urban legends exhibit many modern characteristics. The term 'urban' itself carries a dual meaning, serving as both the setting for the story and a reflection of its contemporary nature. Jan Harold Brunvand, in his work *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings* (1981), laid the foundation for this field of study, defining urban legends as tales "too good to be true" that are spread by word of mouth, publication, or social media, and "have a persistent hold on the imagination because they are suspenseful or humorous, plausible, and morally significant" (Brunvand, 1981). Bill Ellis's *Legend and Belief: Dialectics of a Folklore Genre* (2001) further explored the contemporary social and moral dimensions of urban legends through their dialectical relationship with belief, highlighting their role as vehicles for exchanging values and fears within society. This is why urban legends are so saturated with death; but what do these deaths signify? They symbolize a form of cultural and psychological punishment (H2), akin to the motif of vengeful ghosts in Japanese urban legends.

Of course, literature not only reflects but also impacts society, and urban legends are no exception. In the dissertation *The Evolution of Yōkai in Japanese Horror Cinema from the 1950s to the Present* (2024), Fiachra Donovan studies the development and transformation of supernatural creatures in Japanese horror culture and cinema from the 1950s to the present, recognizing their role in reflecting the psychology of the populace or societal anxieties. Similarly, Samantha Landau's *Passionate Women, Vengeful Spirits: Female Ghosts and the Japanese Gothic Mode* (2024) discusses the role of female ghosts in 20th and 21st-century Japanese literature, from the perspective of Global Gothic theory, as symbols of female oppression in patriarchal societies, and simultaneously as embodiments of resistance, playing a crucial role in critiquing social and cultural systems. Clearly, urban legends have the power to transform cultural models and social relationships, but specifically, how does the relationship between urban legends and popular culture unfold



and by what principles is it governed? Here, a third hypothesis is established, stating (H3) that the motif of vengeful spirits in Japanese urban legends is reflective (influenced by popular culture and the narratives of urban legends).

3. METHODOLOGY

A study of the motif of vengeful spirits in Japanese urban legends should clarify how Japanese cultural codes have influenced this group of stories and how societal and temporal factors have shaped the nature and content of these legends. Therefore, the first specialized method applied to this research topic is the cultural-historical analysis method. Bakhtin applied this method in his work *Rabelais and his world* (1968) when placing Rabelais' work within the context of medieval European culture to determine how traces of festivals and public square culture influenced the characters' actions and language. Accordingly, the cultural-historical research method allows us to examine the historical, social, and cultural context in which urban legends about vengeful spirits emerged and developed. By examining historical changes and cultural interactions, the study clarifies the formation and popularization of the motif in modern life. This method focuses on analyzing factors such as the changes in Japanese society over time, the influence of traditional folklore, and the impact of modernization on the interpretation of the vengeful spirit motif.

However, placing the object within a socio-cultural context is merely the initial, mechanical stage of analysis. The real challenge lies in identifying the overarching, abstract, and artistic expressions of the object. Therefore, semiotics is employed as an in-depth research method to elucidate the specific characteristics of literary and artistic works. Roland Barthes, in *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), asserted that the ultimate level of writing style is neutrality, exemplified by the simple style of Albert Camus in *The Stranger*; the most crucial aspect of literature is expression,

that is, using signs to create meaning. Accordingly, semiotics is applied in this study to analyze the symbols, imagery, and language used in Japanese urban legends related to the motif of vengeful spirits, including the symbolism of darkness and the emotionless narrative style. This method helps to decipher the deeper layers of meaning hidden behind the constituent elements of the motif and thereby clarifies how these symbols and stories reflect the psychology, values, and beliefs of Japanese society. Finally, to determine the roles and relationships of the aforementioned elements within the whole, structural analysis was employed as a systematic linking framework. Structural analysis is a methodology that examines the nature, function, and interconnections of elements within a system. This approach was pioneered by Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), where he analyzed the relationship between the signifier (sound-image) and the signified (concept). Saussure argued that the meaning of a sign derives not from its inherent qualities but from its position within a system of signs. Building upon this, Claude Lévi-Strauss applied structural analysis to cultural anthropology in his *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949). He used this method to examine kinship exchange patterns and understand how they function to prevent incest. The core principle of structural analysis involves identifying individual elements, their positions within the system, their interconnections, and how a change in one element can have cascading effects on the entire system. In this paper, structural analysis is applied to investigate the constituent elements of the revenge-seeking ghost motif in Japanese urban legends. Using this method, the study aims to uncover the underlying operating mechanism of this motif and, consequently, to reveal its cultural significance. Based on the research objectives, subject matter, scope, hypothesis, and methodology, the research model of this paper is illustrated as follows:

Table 2. Research model

Research Hypothesis	H1. Urban legend inherits and absorbs elements of folk culture.	H2. Urban legend conveys social messages	H3. Urban legends are influenced by mass culture.
Research Methodology	Cultural historical analysis	Semiotics	Structural analysis
Characteristics of Japanese Urban Legends	Modern and traditional combination	Subtle and fantastic	Universal and popular
Characteristics of the Subject	Adaptability or transformability	Punishment	Reflective quality
Research Aspect	Character	Symbol	Plot
Significance of the Research	Relationship with Japanese culture	Relationship between culture, psychology, and society	Literary and realistic significance

Therefore, urban legends, as a genre of modern folklore, respond to and are influenced by societal needs and convey societal messages. "Legends belong to tribes and clans; while urban legends have increasingly expanded their boundaries, transcending tribes and clans, their communal nature remains evident" (Nguyen, 2021). Thus, they are influenced by popular tastes. A historical-cultural analysis can clarify the combination of modernity and tradition, elucidate the transformation of the vengeful ghost motif, and explain the character aspect in

relation to Japanese culture. Semiotics can be employed to illuminate the subtle and fantastical nature of Japanese urban legends and the punitive aspect of the vengeful ghost motif through symbolism linked to socio-psychological relationships. Thirdly, the literary-realistic meaning conveyed through the plot can clarify the reflective nature of the vengeful ghost motif within the universal characteristics of Japanese urban legends through the process of structural analysis.



4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Adaptability or transformability

Firstly, the ability to transform is a fundamental characteristic of the motif of the vengeful dead in Japanese urban legends, particularly evident in their physical appearance. This transformation in appearance is an intrinsic part of the act of revenge, where the character takes on a horrifying and mysterious form because of their unique backstory. For instance, Teke Teke, having been severed in half by a train, lacks a lower body and seeks revenge by tearing victims in half and stealing their lower halves. In the Gashadokuro legend, “These people die with anger and pain in their hearts. That energy remains long after their flesh has rotted from their bones. As their bodies decay, their anger ferments into a grudge against the living, which twists them into a supernatural force” (Meyer, 2024a); consequently, they “catch their victims, crushing them in their hands or biting off their head” (Meyer, 2024a). Unlike ordinary ghost stories, the horror and transformative nature of death in these urban legends help to explain the motivations and forms of revenge of the vengeful characters. Secondly, the transformation of appearance in these narratives is structured on a principle of equivalence rather than causality; Toire no Hanako-san—the schoolgirl ghost associated with a red dress—links the main character to blood, resentment, and the power of a ghost. Influenced in part by Chinese culture, where those who commit suicide while wearing red become vengeful spirits (red-clothed female ghosts), the Toire no Hanako-san legend is structured based on common psychological responses. As a result, although not universally held, there is a segment of opinion that sympathizes with the ghost’s fate; this is a clear indication of the interpretative process aimed at reassuring people and giving them a sense of mastery over the mysterious entity in their minds.

The second aspect of transformation within the vengeful ghost motif in Japanese urban legends is the transformation of the inner self. That is, through death, the deceased do not cease their revenge but instead continue it endlessly. This is reminiscent of Japanese cultural and societal circumstances where men held a dominant position, especially during and after World War II, and women’s roles were devalued. “The image of ghosts as jealous and vengeful women can be seen as something that has formed within a male-centered culture and society” (Takaoka, 2014). Therefore, girls like Teke Teke were raped and abandoned to die – Teke Teke: ‘was assaulted and raped by American military personnel. She crawled all the way to a train station and was seen by an attendant. Instead of trying to help her, the station attendant just covered her with a plastic tarp’ (Meyer, 2024d). As a result, the victims themselves refused or were unable to reincarnate due to their desire for revenge against those who caused them suffering or death. In this aspect, the pain of injustice is a tool that breaks the boundaries between life and death, granting ghosts the power to return and seek justice. This is a form of resistance by the oppressed against an unjust society, a call for justice through the power of grievance. From this perspective, the misfortunes in Japanese urban legends are no longer merely individual problems, but rather societal issues such as gender inequality and cultural oppression. After death, this pain helps characters awaken and liberate themselves

from the long-suppressed individual under societal oppression. This can be seen as a journey of transformation, changing the character’s nature from passive, repressed, and oppressed to active and vengeful, breaking traditional norms about the role of women in Japanese society. This strong post-mortem personality also contributes to distinguishing this genre by inverting the nature of the characters in urban legends, setting them apart from traditional folklore characters.

The third aspect of transformation or change in the motif of a vengeful ghost is the character’s status. That is, the victims, from a position of weakness and vulnerability as women, become powerful and influential. In fact, from an aesthetic perspective, the appreciation of feminine beauty has been a long-standing tradition in Japan; when placed in an urban legend, this beauty further emphasizes the tragedy of Kuchisake-onna: beautiful, disfigured for suspected infidelity. “The original legend dates back to the Edo period of Japan (1603-1868) and tells of an extremely beautiful woman who married a samurai.”, or “Oume is too young and sexy”. Therefore, this motif is a continuation of the theme of beauty, both exalted and oppressed, or indeed the fate of beauty. Viewed from a societal perspective, the tradition of valuing martial arts also led to women being undervalued, but this was resolved in urban legends, with death. – “Oiwa’s onryō pursued him. Everywhere he went, Oiwa’s ghost was there” (Meyer, 2024c). This is precisely the yearning for equality and the desire to overcome injustice that Japanese women harbor. In fact, literature serves not only as a reflection of social consciousness but also as a means to address societal dreams, injustices, and emotional transformations. This role not only highlights the tragedies of characters but also conveys profound messages about the consequences of betrayal and greed. The motif of the vengeful dead, therefore, addresses the interplay between tradition and modernity, reexamining the concept of beauty and the delicate, ephemeral beauty of the Japanese soul, encapsulated by the concept of *mono no aware*. This aesthetic, moral, and cultural perspective offers a crucial complement to a purely sociological critique.

4.2. Punishment

The second characteristic of the vengeful dead motif in Japanese urban legends is punishment, which is the inevitable result of a conflict where the deceased transcends the boundaries of reality and law to seek revenge. The vengeful dead embody the concept of executing justice from beyond the grave; like the legend of Oiwa-san, who was plotted to be murdered by her own husband to marry a richer man. This was a result of an imperfect legal system that was influenced by status and power. Consequently, vulnerable women like Oiwa could hardly find protection or justice from the authorities and met a tragic end – “As Oiwa lay on the floor bleeding to death, she repeatedly cursed Iemon’s name until she could breathe no more” (Meyer, 2024c). Oiwa also realized that her grievance could not be resolved through legal means. Therefore, under such circumstances, she cursed her husband and sought revenge to restore the balance that had been disrupted by the unjust acts, laws, and society. The punishment inflicted by the vengeful spirit transcends the boundaries of space and time; like the story of Maruoka Castle in Fukui Prefecture, which was haunted by a woman named



Oshizu. She was promised that her son would become a samurai after her death, but instead, the lord of the castle moved away, and the promise could not be fulfilled. Therefore, "Every year thereafter, the castle's moat overflowed when the heavy spring rains came. The people of Maruoka blamed this on Oshizu's vengeance and called this rain "tears of Oshizu's sorrow" (Meyer, 2024b). It is also said that this water was foul and stinky, and it seeped straight into the castle windows. These stories want to prove that justice is always present, everywhere, even after death, and people can cross all moral boundaries to seek justice. The belief in justice also reflects the concept that the world of the living and the dead are closely connected and manifested through supernatural powers. This differs from the empirical and rational analysis of Western culture; Eastern people, and the Japanese in particular, still believe in a system of rituals and temples, which not only inherit but also develop the overall culture, including urban legends.

The punitive nature of the motif of the vengeful dead reveals a correlation between suffering and the form of revenge, without a focus on psychological evolution or development, thereby maintaining these stories as a form of folk literature. The core argument of the vengeful dead motif is the initiative-taking, self-initiated struggle for justice. While the steps taken to achieve justice are personal, they must also be perceived as fair. Therefore, the vengeful characters often confront their victims directly, forcing them to face their past wrongdoings or placing them in an analogous situation. For example, the character Teke-Teke might ask a victim, "Do you need your legs?", Kuchisake-onna, a vengeful spirit, always covers her disfigured face and asks strangers if she is beautiful. Regardless of whether one answers "yes" or "no," a gruesome fate awaits; this question is rhetorical, reflecting a deep-seated personal tragedy related to appearance, honor, and dignity. Moreover, as a recurring act of vengeance, the dead seek retribution against others through similar means, embodying the urban legend principle of "I want to do to you what has been done to me" (Grétarsdóttir, 2012). Whether praised or criticized, Kuchisake-onna, in most variations of the tale, will use scissors to slash the victim's mouth, mirroring her own disfigurement. Other urban legends like Teke Teke and Kashima Reiko follow a similar pattern of actions. After posing a question to their victims, they begin to torment them. In the case of Teke Teke, "When she catches you, she will tear you in half and steal the lower half of your body" (Meyer, 2024d). These spirits aim to make their victims experience the same suffering they endured, sharing in their pain and helplessness. They represent a reenactment of tragedy through a ritual of sacrifice, blood for blood, and suffering for suffering. The deceased seeks vengeance to be remembered and not forgotten. Vengeful characters in Japanese urban legends often devise ways to make their victims experience fear and confront their own wrongdoing. Rather than punishing their enemies by killing them, they create situations that force victims to feel the same pain and horror they experienced, thus ensuring they are remembered; in reality, ghosts do not fear death but rather being forgotten.

The depth of the motif of vengeful spirits lies more in the concept of self-punishment than in gruesome imagery. After exacting revenge, the suffering remains with the avenger

themselves; the dead are led to suffering; hatred is both the source of their power and the chain that binds them, driving them down a path of blind vengeance, like Tenome. Murdered by a gang, Tenome's spirit wanders the land, seeking his killer. "But Tenome never saw the face of his attacker, so he simply kills whoever he can get his hands on. Although he has eyes in his hands, he is still figuratively blinded by his anger" (Meks, 2008). These ghosts fall into the abyss of evil, and Japanese urban legends serve as a stark reminder that revenge, in the end, is a negative emotion, an act of violence that cannot end suffering but only prolongs tragedy. Other characters like Teke-Teke, Kashima Reiko, Kuchisake-onna, and Gashadokuro also never achieve satisfaction; they are forever trapped in a state of psychological torment. This is the depth of Japanese culture, a resonance with the concept of *Yugen* (a profound, mysterious sense of the universe and one's place in it). Looking at these characters in the motif of vengeful spirits, we can draw parallels to a Japan that is constantly struggling to escape the traumas of its past, to seek freedom and peace of mind. The people of this country have always grappled with stagnation, unable to reconcile the traditional and modern, the Eastern and Western aspects of their society. These unresolved deaths are like Japanese society itself, where conservatism and nostalgia have become chains that hinder innovation and progress.

4.3. Reflective quality

The third characteristic of the vengeful ghost motif in Japanese urban legends is its reflective nature, which encapsulates intangible fears, hidden aspects, personal obsessions, and socioeconomic disparities as consequences of unresolved societal issues. The primary aspect of this reflection is its authenticity, as urban legends often originate from real-life events, people, or locations, thus carrying objective elements that reflect reality. They exist as a parallel narrative, a margin to the official historical record. For instance, the urban legend *Hitobashira*, involving the burial of people alive during construction to ensure safety, is linked to famous landmarks like Matsue Ohashi Bridge and Maruoka Castle. *Kiyotaki Tunnel*, built during the Taisho era, is notorious for its ghost stories. The strange phenomena and eerie feelings associated with these places are often explained based on their harsh construction history, where many workers lost their lives. Thus, historical and geographical elements lend objectivity to these urban legends, transcending the boundaries of ordinary fantasy to become an integral part of cultural heritage, reflecting a portion of historical reality. Behind these tragedies lies a glamorous Japan adorned with the modern beauty of Western civilization yet burdened by the loneliness and alienation of the industrial machine. Teke-Teke, consequently, is depicted as an unfortunate office worker who could have been saved but was left to die under a plastic tarp; they represent the isolated individual, subject to the indifference and neglect of modern Japanese society. These societal losses and traumas have led individuals to experience loneliness and a loss of connection with friends, family, and society.

While rooted, the motif of vengeful ghosts is reflected indirectly through cultural and psychological lenses. These spirits, though intangible, are considered supernatural entities



deeply connected to communal culture. Carl Jung, in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (1969) confirms that supernatural phenomena like ghosts are products of the collective unconscious, transmitted through feelings and imagery rather than direct experience: 'It is the mind of our unknown ancestors, their way of thinking and feeling, their way of experiencing life and the world, gods and men' (Jung, 1969). The specific aspects of direct and indirect revenge manifest in the form of retaliation. Half of the surveyed stories depict characters enacting revenge indirectly, meaning they do not appear directly but through intermediary forms. These seven stories can be categorized into two types of intermediaries: natural phenomena (3/7 stories) and spiritual signs (4/7 stories). For instance, when Masakado's grave is disturbed, natural disasters such as earthquakes, fires, or plagues occur. Over time, the legends surrounding his curse have evolved and spread, becoming modern urban legends among construction workers. Urban legends about the vengeful spirits of Gogo and Hitobashira also involve revenge through illness, storms, and floods. In stories like *Oiwa-san*, the *Kiyotaki tunnel*, *Rokurokubi*, and *Sadako*, vengeful spirits distort perception through various signs, forcing victims to confront their revenge. Instead of directly exacting revenge, they use these signs and traces to haunt and psychologically torment their enemies, causing them to live in fear and madness, such as the unlabeled videotape that projects Sakado's wrath and fear.

The vengeful dead motif in Japanese urban legends prompts readers to consider the relativity of individual and communal perceptions. It suggests that justice is a multifaceted issue, often requiring multiple perspectives. The deceased in these tales typically carry deep-seated pain and unresolved grievances. These ghostly figures in urban legends are often motivated by justifiable reasons, their actions are seen as a reasonable response to the injustices they have suffered. Legends such as Masakado's curse, *Gashadokuro*, the vengeful spirit of Gogo, *Hitobashira*, and the *Kiyotaki tunnel* all recount the suffering endured by innocent people, fostering empathy, and contributing to a broader theme: the condemnation of war and famine. This layer of meaning is possible only through a degree of positive sentiment toward the deceased, even if this sentiment is not universally shared.

This relativity is also linked to the characteristics of folklore as a genre with multiple versions. Tales like *Teke Teke*, for example, have various versions – in one, she is accidentally killed; in another, she commits suicide. Despite these differences, the underlying motif maintains a consistent meaning within the cultural context: the concept of causality and the interconnectedness of sin and retribution. This is closely tied to Japan's Buddhist culture. From a karmic perspective, revenge is seen as a form of justice. Influenced by Shingon esoteric Buddhism and the belief in spirits inherent in Shinto, Japan has become a fertile ground for urban legends. Hence, *Gashadokuro*, for instance, cannot be destroyed; the only recourse is to invoke Shinto charms. In conclusion, the motif of the vengeful dead in urban legends is strongly influenced by the concept of karma. From *Oiwa* and *Teke Teke* to collective tragedies like *Gashadokuro* and *Hitobashira*, these tales all contain elements of spiritual causality. These spirits return to seeking justice,

reminding humans that unjust and immoral actions will lead to grave consequences. This is a literary and artistic reflection of life, conveyed through compelling and universal narratives.

4.4. Discussion

A study of literature answers the question of how specific qualities and noble ideas are artistically expressed. Therefore, the commentary section of this paper is dedicated to analyzing the methods by which the three characteristics of adaptation, punishment, and reflection of the vengeful spirit motif in Japanese urban legends are expressed through the three aspects of literary works: characters, symbols, and plot.

Firstly, the vengeful spirit character in Japanese urban legends is portrayed based on the principle of absorbing and adapting Japanese culture. Therefore, from the folk character of Yotsuya Kaidan to the characterization of female ghosts in modern Japanese horror stories such as the urban legends about Kayako and Kuchisake-onna, they are all associated with the jealous nature of husbands, leading to tragedy and creating lasting resentment and hatred. From the ritual of sacrificing living people in ancient architecture to Maruoka Castle in the *Hitobashira* urban legend, there is always a guarantee of the selection, continuation, and adaptation of cultural events and characters. Therefore, the dead characters in urban legends easily reach the modern audience while maintaining a certain national depth. In terms of shaping, the beauty of Japanese women's culture is associated with traditional kimono clothing; in urban legends, ghosts wear buried kimonos on the ground, with long, messy black hair covering their faces and pale complexions; *Kuchisake-onna*, after having her face cut by her husband, 'roamed around clad in Kimono, the Japanese formal wear, and hid her face with her sleeve or a fan' (Grétarsdóttir, 2012). These horrifying images remind us of the transience of beauty, the connection between beauty and danger in Japanese culture. Furthermore, associated with the image of urban legend characters is a series of escalating actions that serve to intensify suffering. Specifically, Teke Teke was attacked, raped, hit by a train, and abandoned; Okiku was falsely accused, beaten, hung upside down, dipped in a well, killed, and her body thrown into the well; this process creates a strong impression on the reader and is logically linked to the act of revenge as well as the way the character is shaped - the ghost moves with a 'teke teke' sound as it rubs its legless lower body against the ground. The vengeful actions of the ghost are amplified by the technique of exaggeration, increasing the horror of the story and affirming the underlying belief: injustice that cannot be resolved in reality will be completed by supernatural forces. The severe and mysterious punishment, therefore, reflects the helplessness and sympathy of the community towards the victim; people sympathize to the extent of creating a version of Teke Teke carrying a hammer to chop victims in revenge. The cultural adaptation of the vengeful spirit literary image is also associated with the modern Japanese context - subways, public toilets. Even this space becomes an image - 'including those of workers who succumbed in accidents or harsh working conditions, victims of railway incidents, and people who were executed around the area' (Dougill, 2021) - symbolized by the *Kiyotaki Tunnel*. *Kuchisake-onna* is described as wearing a



mask and is linked to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Of course, these variations have a degree of deviation, but their high popularity has demonstrated the social unrest in Japan. The second artistic aspect of urban legends structured around the motif of vengeful spirits is the construction of punitive symbolism, most notably represented by darkness. While symbolism is abundant in Japanese urban legends, this analysis will focus on darkness as a means of blurring the lines between reality and the supernatural, allowing for the concealment of secrets and the perpetration of transgressive acts. For instance, *Kashima Reiko's* story states, "One legend claims that one night the young woman was ambushed by several men that beat and abused her so badly that she could no longer walk" (Grétarsdóttir, 2012), and *Oiwa's* ordeal involved her husband hiring a man to seduce her, providing grounds for an accusation of adultery. The ghosts of *Okiku* and the *Kiyotaki Tunnel* serve as clear examples of the interplay between the physical and spiritual realms. Furthermore, tales such as *Teke Teke*, *Kashima Reiko*, *Kiyotaki*, *Tenome*, and *Gashadokuro* often unfold in nocturnal settings, in secluded places like public restrooms, tunnels, and train stations, further intensifying the fear of darkness and solitude. Beyond specific settings, Japanese urban legends are enveloped in a sense of darkness, contributing to the oppressive, gloomy atmosphere characteristic of modern

Tokyo society. Thus, darkness in Japanese urban legends represents not only a physical or temporal absence of light but also a profound darkness of the human soul.

From a structural standpoint, Japanese urban legends centered around the motif of vengeful spirits tend to be concise and to the point. This brevity can be attributed to the oral nature of these tales and their widespread dissemination through the internet. In today's fast-paced digital age, information tends to be condensed, and entertainment formats are becoming increasingly streamlined. Consequently, elaborate, time-consuming narratives struggle to compete with shorter, more attention-grabbing content. Based on our analysis, Japanese urban legends typically follow a three-part structure: introduction, development, and conclusion. This structure represents a simplified version of traditional five-part narratives, with a reduction in extraneous details. As a result, the structure of these legends can be summarized as follows: (1) an introduction that introduces the characters and setting; (2) a development section that focuses on the crime and subsequent revenge—the longest part, often following a linear or causal structure; and (3) a conclusion that serves as a moral, a scare tactic, or a means of escape. The table below provides a general overview of the structure of Japanese urban legends centered on the motif of vengeful spirits.

Table 3. Structure of Japanese Urban Legends

Component	Characteristics	Function	Example
Beginning	Short, 2-3 sentences	Directly introduces the vengeful character	"According to legend, <i>Kashima Reiko</i> was a young woman who lived in northern Japan on the island of Hokkaido" (Grétarsdóttir, 2012). "Once upon a time, there was a woman named <i>Okiku</i> who worked as a dish washer at Himeji Castle" (Meyer, 2024c).
		Indirectly introduces through a person or place	"A story once told to me by local historian, Mr. Konishi" (Yamaguchi, 2009). "Some famous castles in Japan are associated with the legend of <i>hitobashira</i> ." (Meyer, 2024a).
Development	Longest part	Main events, development following a chronological and causal chain	"There was an old blind man who was attacked by robbers [...] Because he died in such an angry and painful state, the blind man returned as a ghost named <i>Tenome</i> " (Meyer, 2024d).
Ending	Short, 1-2 sentences	Creating a strong impression	"There are rumors of a woman who jumped to her death from the road above the tunnel entrance, and there are stories that her spirit can still be seen" (Dougill, 2021).
		Offering a solution or resolution	"Later, a memorial was erected for <i>Oshizu</i> within the castle grounds to appease her spirit" (Meyer, 2024b).

This structure bears the marks of ancient fables – concise, clear, easy to read and understand; as a result, urban legends achieve an elevated level of popularity. Besides their brevity, Japanese urban legends also possess a crucial element that captivates readers – the fantastical element that instills fear through death, ghosts, revenge, and so on. Japanese urban legends, particularly those with the motif of vengeful spirits, effectively utilize the fantastical to drive the narrative, through solitary ghosts like *Kuchisake-onna*, *Okiku*, *Masakado*, and *Oiwa-san*, to collective spirits like *Gashadokuro*, ghosts in the *Kiyotaki tunnel*, and the

Vengeful spirits of Gogo. These stories provide readers with a deeper awareness of the harsh realities and challenges of modern Japanese society. The narratives also deliberately emphasize the fantastical element through detailed, specific information and gruesome illustrations, which supplement the imagination and contribute to the story's conclusion, lessons, and reflections. Through the journey of death and revenge undertaken by the characters, listeners could re-evaluate and reinforce the values of their moral system and their belief in the supernatural world. Focusing on the narrative's progression, the rhythm is created



through a rapid listing of details and crimes, or alternatively, through a slow, steady pace that builds suspense and fear. The language of Japanese urban legends is simple and direct, avoiding figurative language and instead focusing on accurately describing actions and their consequences. It meticulously details the cruelty of the perpetrator and the suffering of the victim, while completely concealing the narrator's emotions – “an office worker in Muroran, Hokkaido was assaulted and raped by American military personnel. She crawled all the way to a train station and was seen by an attendant. Instead of trying to help her, the station attendant just covered her with a plastic tarp” (Meyer, 2024c). This technique balances the rhythm, distributes the plot, enhances realism, highlights the cruelty of society, and emphasizes the ever-present danger in modern life.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study of the vengeful spirit motif in Japanese urban legends, through the examination and analysis of a prominent literary motif, has established a connection between this motif and the Japanese psyche, culture, and society. It has contributed to the field of study by highlighting the potential of urban legends as a serious and valuable research subject. Given the often-underestimated status of urban legends as a complex cultural phenomenon, this research elevates their position by providing a rigorous analysis of key elements such as characters, symbols, and structures within the context of Japanese culture and society.

The combination of historical-cultural analysis, semiotics, and structuralism has offered a multifaceted and rich perspective on the ‘vengeful spirit’ motif, not only in Japanese culture but also suggesting a model for studying other motifs in various forms of folklore. Additionally, the identified characteristics of Japanese urban legends and the proposed research model can serve as a framework for future studies of similar phenomena, such as American or Vietnamese urban legends.

However, due to the limitations of scope and time, this study has certain shortcomings. The sample size of 15 stories is insufficient to provide a comprehensive overview of Japanese urban legends, and the conclusions drawn require further verification given the lack of in-depth research on this topic. Furthermore, the boundaries between urban legends and other literary genres, particularly in the Japanese context, remain unclear. Finally, due to language constraints, this study could not examine original Japanese language sources of Japanese urban legends to explore deeper cultural layers embedded in the language, which would be a promising direction for future research.

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