

## Between Abjection and Nostalgia

— *The Vindictive Snake* and the 1930s Okinawan Diaspora in Hawaii —

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Horror and ghost narratives are often informed by temporal juxtaposition, as in the repressed past haunting the modernized present. This article examines such juxtaposition in the context of the filmic representation of modern Japanese emigration to Hawaii, specifically providing an analysis of *The Vindictive Snake* (Yoshino Jirō, 1932), a silent film produced by a successful Okinawan emigrant worker whose intention was to show it to the diasporic Okinawan community in Hawaii. Filmed in Hawaii and Okinawa, this revenge story centers on an Okinawan wife whose face has been disfigured by leprosy and whose husband subsequently abandons her in the foreign land. The film employs the Asian trope of a vengeful female ghost in the manner of *Ghost Story of Yotsuya in Tōkaidō* (1825), but this longstanding character type is reconfigured to complicate the received image of Japan's planned emigration propagated as a journey to a promised paradise. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection, I demonstrate how the film allegorizes the nation's abandonment of its people, with the nostalgia of the Okinawan diaspora being translated into the heroine's vindictive pathos. I then argue that the film's visual emphasis on both the machine-driven Hawaiian sugar manufacturing industry and the urban landscape of Naha effectively characterizes the abandonment and isolation of the heroine as inevitable conditions of modernity.

**Keywords:** silent film; immigration; abjection; nostalgia; anachronism; anachronism; anachronism; modernity.

### Introduction

*The Vindictive Snake* (Yoshino Jirō, 1932) is the oldest surviving narrative film set in Okinawa.<sup>1</sup> The making of the film was an ambitious international project that involved the filming in both Hawaii and Okinawa under the direction of Yoshino Jirō, a veteran Japanese filmmaker of the silent period. In December 1932, the completed film passed the censorship of the Japanese Home Ministry, after which it was screened at the Nihonkan Theater in Honolulu in February 1933. To date, the film has been given little attention in English language scholarship, other than sporadic, cursory reference fraught with errors. For example, Mika Ko erroneously describes the film as “a silent film made by the Okinawan director Yoshino Jiro in 1931,”<sup>2</sup> despite the fact that Yoshino was born in Tokyo and by the 1930s he was already an established director in Japanese cinema, having worked prolifically for such studios as Tennenshoku Katsudō Shashin (Tenkatsu), Shōchiku Kamata Studio, and Makino Productions' Omuro Studio.<sup>3</sup> Then, Ko's error concerning the film's production year is most probably mere unverified replication from Aaron Gerow's selective list of films featuring Okinawa,

<sup>1</sup> Sera Toshikazu, *Okinawa geki-eiga taizen* (沖縄劇映画大全) (Naha, Okinawa: Border Inc, 2008), 70-72.

<sup>2</sup> Mika Ko, *Japanese Cinema and Otherness: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and the Problem of Japaneseness* (London: Routledge, 2010), 78.

<sup>3</sup> Kinema Junpō-sha, ed., *Nihon eiga jinmei jiten: Kantoku hen* (日本映画人名事典 監督篇) (Tokyo: Kinema Junpō-sha, 1997), 891-92.

in which the production year of *The Vindictive Snake* is shown as 1931.<sup>4</sup> The scarcity and inaccuracy of scholarly literature probably testify to the film's current obscurity outside Japan. Furthermore, to make matters worse, the film's original Japanese title can be romanized in two seemingly different ways: *Shūnen no dokuja* and *Shūnen no dokuhebi*. Confusion is simply due to that in Japanese, the *kanji* character for “snake” can be pronounced and transliterated as either *ja* or *hebi*.

The mastermind behind the production of *The Vindictive Snake* was Toguchi Seizen, an Okinawan immigrant who served as the film's producer, scriptwriter, and leading star,<sup>5</sup> in addition to having provided the original story. Toguchi was originally from Motobu Village, located in the rural northern part of Okinawa's main island. The record of the issuance of his passport indicates that he emigrated to Hawaii either in November or December of 1915, following the emigration of his parents several years earlier.<sup>6</sup> Even though his life was seldom documented, it is surmised that in Hawaii he was engaged in a myriad forms of manual labor, generally food-related, before becoming a successful entrepreneur.<sup>7</sup> In order to produce *The Vindictive Snake*, he founded his own production company, Nippu Eiga Kabushiki Gaisha (Japan-Hawaii Film Corporation), and invited Yoshino Jirō to Hawaii in order to hire him as the film's director. Thus, as film historian Sera Toshikazu points out, the film can be seen primarily as the outcome of the determined efforts of one Okinawan individual, whose intention to entertain fellow members of the diasporic Okinawan community in Hawaii.<sup>8</sup>

Cinema can serve on multiple levels as a significant medium for immigrant communities. On the one hand, the shared experience of viewing images from the homeland quenched their nostalgia, while confirming their national identity. In both Hawaii and Latin America, screenings of Japanese cinema were received enthusiastically by Japanese immigrants, with a strong sense of festivity.<sup>9</sup> In Hawaii, immigrants paid attention also to the educational potential of cinema; unlike in the homeland where children's attendance at the cinemas was frowned upon as a possible sign of delinquency, in overseas Japanese communities cinema attending by children was encouraged, as it was considered to be an effective means for maintaining their competence in the Japanese language and for facilitating their understanding of Japanese culture.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, since its earliest history, cinema has both recorded and fictionally represented the experiences of immigrants. As Kiyō-oka Tomohiko outlines, films such as *The Immigrant* (Charles Chaplin, 1917) have immortalized European immigrants' experience of arriving in America, an experience visually symbolized by the iconic encounter with the Statue of Liberty.<sup>11</sup> As a film on immigrants produced by an immigrant for immigrants, *The Vindictive Snake* was an important film for the 1930s diasporic Okinawan community in Hawaii in terms of both exhibition and representation, presumably endowing the Okinawan immigrants with a sense of achievement.

*The Vindictive Snake* recounts a ghost story centering on an immigrant Okinawan couple working for a sugarcane plantation in Waipahu, on the outskirts of Honolulu. The couple, named Ōshiro Seiichi and Kimiko, has been working there for three years. They have been living happily until the wife gets diagnosed with leprosy. As she develops the disease considered then to be incurable, her face becomes disfigured. Out of the fear that her leprosy may be contagious, Seiichi returns to Okinawa with all their savings, leaving the ill wife abandoned and

<sup>4</sup> Aaron Gerow, “From the National Gaze to Multiple Gazes: Representations of Okinawa in Recent Japanese Cinema,” in *Islands of Discontent: Okinawan Responses to Japanese and American Power*, eds. Laura Hein and Mark Seldon (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 307.

<sup>5</sup> In the cast credits, Toguchi Seizen uses his pseudonym “Toguchi Seinosuke,” even though Toguchi also appears as himself in a shot inserted in the staff credits, along with shots of director Yoshino Jirō and cinematographer Suzuki Kyōichi.

<sup>6</sup> Nakahodo Masanori, *Hawai to Okinawa: Nisshi, eiga, nisei tachi, horyo tachi* (ハワイと沖縄 日誌・映画、二世たち、捕虜たち) (Naha, Okinawa: Border Inc, 2019), 189.

<sup>7</sup> Sera Toshikazu, “Ryū Nichi Fu gassaku no musei eiga *Shūnen no dokuja* wo megutte” (琉日布合作の無声映画『執念の毒蛇』をめぐって), *Kin gendai engeki kenkyū* 4 (2013), 20.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Hosokawa Shūhei, *Shinema ya, Burajiru wo yuku: Nikkei imin no kyōshū to aidentiti* (シネマ屋、ブラジルに行く——日系移民の郷愁とアイデンティティ) (Tokyo: Shinchō-sha, 1999), 49-53.

<sup>10</sup> Suzuki Kei, “Hawai no Nihon eiga” (ハワイの日本映画), in *Hawai kenkyū e no shōtai: Fīrudowāku kara mieru atarashii Hawai zō*, eds. Gotō Akira, Matsubara Kōji, and Shionoya Tōru (Nishinomiya, Hyōgo: Kansai Gakuin University Press, 2004), 158.

<sup>11</sup> Kiyō-oka Tomohiko, *Pari imin eiga: Toshi kukan wo yomu—1970 nen kara genzai* (パリ移民映画 都市空間を読む——1970年代から現在) (Tokyo: San'yō-sha, 2015), 43-44.

alone in the foreign land. Two years later, Kimiko too manages to return to their homeland in search of her husband, although back in Naha, the capital city of Okinawa, she becomes a beggar. By chance she encounters the husband, who has become well-off and is now living with a new lover. Unfortunately, Kimiko ends up being murdered when her former husband pushes her off a cliff. But that night, Kimiko's ghost appears to Seiichi's sleeping chamber in the form of poisonous snakes. Hallucinating, the husband mistakenly kills his lover, before he himself dies of shock and horror.

This revenge narrative of the victimized wife has striking commonalities with other Japanese and Okinawan horror tales, employing the Asian trope of a vengeful female ghost in the manner of Tsuruya Nanboku's celebrated *kabuki* play, *Ghost Story of Yotsuya in Tōkaidō* (*Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan*, 1825).<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Sera Toshikazu points out the film's similarities with *The Upside-Down Ghost of Makan-michi*, an Okinawan folktale on the vindictive ghost of a devoted wife abandoned by her husband, which has been adapted into the film *Okinawan Horror: Upside-Down Ghost – Chinese Horror: Breaking a Coffin* (Kobayashi Satoru and Shao Luo-hui, 1962).<sup>13</sup> However, the film reconfigures this longstanding character type of the victimized female ghost to complicate the then-received positive image of Japan's planned emigration propagated as a journey to a promised paradise. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection, this article will demonstrate how the film allegorizes the nation's abandonment of some of its people, with the nostalgia of the Okinawan diaspora being translated into the heroine's vindictive pathos. Then, through analysis of the film's spatio-temporal representations, in particular those characterized by anachronism and anatopism, I will argue that the film's visual emphasis, both on the machine-driven Hawaiian sugar manufacturing industry and on the urban landscape of Naha, effectively characterizes the abandonment and isolation of the heroine as inevitable conditions of modernity.

### 1. Abjection of Okinawan Immigrants

The emigration of Okinawans to Hawaii started at the end of the nineteenth century with twenty-six contract laborers having arrived in Honolulu on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1900.<sup>14</sup> As a result of the lobbying and negotiations of the Okinawan educationist Tōyama Kyūzō, those workers benefited from the 1885 agreement between the Japanese and Hawaiian governments on the export of Japanese workers to sugarcane plantations in Hawaii. However, subsequent to the U.S. annexation of Hawaii in 1898, the Gentlemen's Agreement between Japan and the U.S. resulted in a restriction on the number of permissible emigrants from 1907, well before the U.S. Immigration Act of 1924 effectively banned immigration from Asia. Nevertheless, already by the year of the ban, there were about 20,000 Okinawan immigrants in Hawaii, who became the fourth largest group of Japanese immigrants, following Hiroshima, Yamaguchi, and Kumamoto.<sup>15</sup> All of these were characteristically impoverished prefectures, for whose people emigration to Hawaii as well as Latin America was of urgent socio-economic necessity.

Under such circumstances, the feeling of being abandoned by the Japanese government was prevalent among those emigrants, some of whom had already begun to perceive themselves as *kimin* (literally, "abandoned people"), a self-deprecatory term expressing their sense of isolation from and abandonment by their mother country.<sup>16</sup> The Japanese government's encouragement of emigration during the Meiji period was part of its efforts to tackle the poverty in rural villages and to contain surplus in population, efforts which also reflected the country's inability to maintain the welfare of its people. With virtually no support from the government of their

<sup>12</sup> Tsuruya Nanboku, IV, *Tōkaidō Yotsuya kaidan* (東海道四谷怪談), 1825, ed. Kawatake Shigetoshi (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1956).

<sup>13</sup> Sera, "Ryū Nichi Fu," 17.

<sup>14</sup> Y. Scott Matsumoto, "Okinawa Migrants to Hawaii," *Hawaiian Journal of History*, vol. 16 (1982): 126.

<sup>15</sup> Shiota Chika, "Hawai no Nikkei / Okinawa-kei imin shakai no ayumi to ugoki: Hakubutsukan ni miru seikatsu bunka no kako, genzai, mirai" (ハワイの日系・沖縄系移民社会の歩みと動き——博物館にみる生活文化の過去、現在、未来), in *Hawai kenkyū e no shōtai: Firudowāku kara mieru atarashii Hawai zō*, eds. Gotō Akira, Matsubara Kōji, and Shionoya Tōru (Nishinomiya, Hyōgo: Kansai Gakuin University Press, 2004), 144.

<sup>16</sup> Roman Rosenbaum, "From Diasporic Communities to 'Abandoned People' (*Kimin*)," in *Recentring Asia: Histories, Encounters, Identities*, eds. Jacob Edmond, Henry Johnson, and Jacqueline Leckie (Leiden: Global Oriental, 2011), 152.

homeland, the immigrants toiled under harsh working conditions, invited their families and relatives to join them, and got married with picture brides, thereby gradually forming a Japanese (*Nikkei*) society within the overseas societies.<sup>17</sup>

Just as back in Japan, there was a social hierarchy within such Japanese immigrant communities. Okinawans faced discrimination from mainland Japanese immigrant communities in Hawaii as a result of the social and physical differences between the immigrants from Okinawa and those from mainland Japan. Okinawans exhibited distinctive physical traits and different customs, while their regional dialect was unintelligible to the immigrants from mainland Japan.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the mainland Japanese regarded as lowly and crude many of the Okinawan immigrants' cultural practices, such as pig-raising and *hajichi* (the tattooing of married women's hands and fingers). Such mainland Japanese attitude of prejudice against Okinawans was of long standing, harking back to the Japanese feudal period, when pigs were traditionally raised by the underclass and tattooing was associated with convicted criminals and socially maligned groups. In Hawaii, Okinawans were generally excluded from mainland Japanese social groups, and intermarriage was strongly opposed and resented. Nonetheless, the Japanese immigrant communities put emphasis on the Okinawans' comparable assimilation to the ideology of imperial Japan, in contrast to the attitudes of other Asian immigrants to Hawaii from Japan's more recently colonized lands such as Taiwan and Korea. Despite the ongoing discrimination against the Okinawans, the Japanese immigrants often noted their longer history of incorporation, which began with the Satsuma clan's invasion of the Ryukyu Kingdom in the seventeenth century.<sup>19</sup> According to Itakura Fumiaki, one of the reasons that this rhetoric of assimilation of Okinawans into Japanese national identity was foregrounded as something positive was simply that, at that time, Okinawans accounted for more than a negligible portion of the Japanese immigrant population in Hawaii. The immigrants from Japan recognized that it was necessary to associate themselves with the Okinawans in order to increase the size and strengthen the solidarity of the *Nikkei* society.<sup>20</sup> Although the Okinawan immigrants had an ethnic identity distinct from that of the immigrants from the Japanese mainland, many of them willingly accepted this Japanese ideology of assimilation and sought their offspring's adaptation to, and inclusion in, the Japanese community. Thus, they preferred to speak to their children in Japanese rather than in Okinawan, and some even adopted mainland Japanese surnames.<sup>21</sup>

Given the ambivalent politics of inclusion and exclusion of the Okinawan immigrant group within the modern Japanese national identity, the Okinawans in Hawaii in the early twentieth century can be characterized as being "abject" in Julia Kristeva's sense. Abjection is psychological reaction imbued with the simultaneous feeling of repulsion and familiarity resulting from the ambiguous position of the abject. As Kristeva explains, "[i]t is [...] not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."<sup>22</sup> In her theorization, the quintessential example of the abject is the mother. For a newborn infant, it is still not clear whether the mother is part of the self or she is a distinct other. Being such a primordial other, the mother needs to be perceived as abject and to be cast off from the self in order for the self to enter the symbolic order of patriarchy. Representing the periphery of Japanese national identity, diasporic Okinawans in Hawaii could be seen as an object of abjection in multiple senses. First, as Okinawans, they were discriminated against within the overseas Japanese community, despite being included as subjects of imperial Japan. Second, as emigrants, they were geographically distanced from both Japan and Okinawa, as a result of the Japanese government's effective

<sup>17</sup> Yokokawa Shinken, *Hawai no benshi: Nikkei-jin imin to katsudō shashin no jidai* (ハワイの弁士 日系人移民と活動写真の時代) (Kamakura: Gatsu'un-sha, 2006), 158.

<sup>18</sup> Matsumoto, 128-129.

<sup>19</sup> Itakura Fumiaki, *Eiga to imin: Zaibei Nikkei imin no eiga juyō to aidentiti* (映画と移民 在米日系移民の映画受容とアイデンティティ) (Tokyo: Shin'yo-sha, 2016), 125-126.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>21</sup> Noriko Shimada, "The Emergence of Okinawan Ethnic Identity in Hawai'i: Wartime and Postwar Experiences," *The Japanese Journal of American Studies* no. 23 (2012): 117-138.

<sup>22</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

abandonment of the impoverished population. Yet, if one is to apply the notion of abjection to Okinawan immigrants, there arises an interesting question as to who abandons whom. In one sense, immigrants were people abandoned by the country. However, one could also argue that immigrants abandoned the country hoping to find a prosperous life in the new land. Consequently, their Okinawan *motherland* would evoke in them a sense of nostalgia and abjection at the same time.

As the horror tale of an abject female ghost, *The Vindictive Snake* should be understood in light of the abjection of Okinawan immigrants in Hawaii. Through depiction of the abandoned heroine's transformation into the vengeful, abject ghost, the film voices the Okinawan immigrants' ambivalence toward the homeland, as characterized by both nostalgia and abjection. In the next section, I will discuss the significance of the character type of the vengeful female ghost in East and Southeast horror films and its relationship with the notion of abjection.

## 2. The Vengeful Female Ghost, an Asian Tradition

Kimiko's revenge in *The Vindictive Snake* represents one of the hallmarks of Asian horror films: the tale of a vengeful female ghost who, having been victimized within the encompassing patriarchal society, subsequently returns after death to avenge herself. Despite having been a faithful wife, Kimiko finds herself unreasonably abandoned and is subsequently murdered by her husband. Therefore, her ghostly revenge is not to be seen as manifestation of evil but as justice served. Kimiko's victimhood and her facial disfigurement indicate one particular source of inspiration: Tsuruya Nanboku's *Ghost Story of Yotsuya in Tōkaidō*, which has spawned numerous film and television adaptations since the 1910s and continues to be performed frequently on stage even today.<sup>23</sup> In Tsuruya's classical play, unemployed *samurai* Iemon grows tired of his wife Oiwa, whose health has been precarious following her having given birth to a son. Meanwhile, Oume, the daughter of a wealthy family, has taken a fancy to Iemon. Sympathizing with her plea, Oume's grandfather gives the sick wife a poison that will disfigure her face, while asking Iemon to marry his granddaughter in exchange for mediating his employment. Having accepted this offer, Iemon tries to get another man to rape his wife so that on the basis of her adultery, Iemon can divorce his wife, whose face has now become grotesquely scarred. However, by accident, Oiwa dies as the man attempts to rape her. Iemon and Oume then get married, but on the night of their wedding, Oiwa's ghost appears to their sleeping chamber. Suffering from delusions, Iemon tries to kill the ghost with his sword, but ends up slaying both Oume and her grandfather. Subsequently, Oiwa's ghost continues to haunt Iemon, who eventually dies.

In both *The Vindictive Snake* and *Ghost Story of Yotsuya in Tōkaidō*, the heroine's victimhood at the hands of her demonic husband is foregrounded to gain her the sympathy of the audience, even though her grotesque facial disfigurement induces a sense of horror. Yomota Inuhiko notes that such a character type can be recognized as a feature distinctive of the East and Southeast Asian horror genre, providing a stark contrast to the typically male monsters in Western horror films, who "have had either hugely grotesque bodies or held wickedly inhuman abilities, and have devoted themselves to the evils of tempting and attacking women."<sup>24</sup> Such evil monsters are presented as coming from outside the community to terrorize its members, but they are eventually vanquished by the good male who steps forth from within the community. The two different types of characters in Asian and Western horror films perhaps reflect the contrastive worldviews of the Western and Asian countries, one rooted in gendered victimhood within the patriarchal social system, and the other based on the Judeo-Christian dichotomy of good versus evil.

Nevertheless, it is also important not to overlook their commonalities: for example, these horror films often thematize conflicts of different temporalities, offering a response to social, cultural and technological modernity. In fact, many of the cinematic monsters that Yomota cites as examples of Western horror films derive from adaptations of nineteenth-century British Gothic horror novels, including Robert Louis Stevenson's "Strange

<sup>23</sup> Kyoko Hirano, "The Rise of Japanese Horror Films: *Yotsuya Ghost Story (Yotsuya Kaidan)*, Demonic Men, Victimized Women," in *Introducing Japanese Popular Culture*, eds. Alisa Freedman and Toby Slade (Oxon: Routledge, 2018), chapter 19.

<sup>24</sup> Yomota Inuhiko, *Kaiki eiga tengoku Asia* (怪奇映画天国アジア). (Tokyo: Hakusui-sha, 2009), ix.

Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde” (1886), Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818).<sup>25</sup> The theme of conflicting temporalities can be found in all three novels: *Dracula* symbolizes the grotesque residue of the aristocratic past continuing to exist in modern times; the scientist Victor Frankenstein’s creation embodies the fear of ahead-of-time technology going out of control; and the story of Dr. Jekyll and his alternative personality is an allegory of the repressed savagery and premodernity co-existent within a civilized modern man. Some of their film adaptations also focus on the conflict of modern versus premodern times, as in Hammer Film Productions’ *Dracula A.D. 1972* (Alan Gibson, 1972) and *The Satanic Rites of Dracula* (Alan Gibson, 1973), wherein Count Dracula resurrects in London in the 1970s. I argue that *The Vindictive Snake* similarly addresses the conflict of multiple temporalities, a theme pertinent in light of the history of modern Japanese emigration. Modern Japan’s encouragement of emigration from impoverished prefectures to work in industrialized plantations enabled the Japanese emigrants to experience modernity in terms of spatial dislocation: for the emigrants, the premodernity of the homeland and the modernity of the new land were contemporaneous but geographically separate from each other, with the premodern homeland that they had left behind being associated with the ambivalent feelings of nostalgia and abjection.

In employing the longstanding character type of the victimized female ghost, the film capitalizes on this ambivalence toward the premodern homeland, as can be seen in the film’s recurrent association of her abject quality with premodernity. The motifs of leprosy and snakes are two cases in point. First, according to K. M. Tanaka, leprosy came to be associated with non-European populations during the Meiji period.<sup>26</sup> In its process of modernizing—i.e. Westernizing—the nation, the government sought to contain this “national shame,” implementing the first counter-leprosy policy in 1907 and establishing facilities where patients were institutionalized, usually for indefinite terms.<sup>27</sup> In the film, Seiichi’s horror and immediate abandonment of his wife upon the onset of her leprosy can be understood in the context of the then-prevalent prejudice over leprosy as an incurable premodern disease, with the sense of abjection added further by the physical deformities of lepers.

Another example of the characterization of Kimiko as both abject and premodern is the use of *habu*, a viper typically found on the Ryukyu Islands.<sup>28</sup> The abject quality of Kimiko’s ghost is established through her association with this wild animal. Kristeva explicates that “the abject confronts us [...] with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism.”<sup>29</sup> Through rejecting the crude animalistic part within the self, the society was able to demarcate and develop its sophisticated human culture. Arguably, modernity was based on the similar abjection of the premodern, repressing the primitive, the irrational, the emotional, and the feminine within us. In the film, the outburst of such repressed premodernity can be seen most strikingly in the scene of Kimiko’s climactic revenge, where the two venomous *habu* sneak into the sleeping chamber of Seiichi and his new lover. Kimiko’s abject ghost represents premodernity, with the snakes associating her not only with nature, but also with Okinawa. By contrast, the two victims’ room, though being in the *tatami*-matted Japanese style, is presented as somewhat Westernized, as the *fusuma* paper doors are adorned with some English-language scripts. Through this contrast, the film characterizes Kimiko’s revenge as the return of the suppressed premodernity—the life that the Okinawan immigrants in Hawaii had abandoned coming back on the screen. Kimiko’s appearance as the

<sup>25</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*, ed. Maurice Hindle, revised ed. (London: Penguin, 2003); Robert Louis Stevenson, “Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde,” in *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Tales*, ed. Roger Luckhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1-66; Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, ed. Maurice Hindle (London: Penguin, 2003).

<sup>26</sup> K. M. Tanaka, “Contested Histories and Happiness: Leprosy Literature in Japan,” *Health, Culture and Society* 5, no. 1 (2013): 100.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> The motif of snakes also appears in some of the film adaptations of *Ghost Story of Yotsuya in Tōkaidō*, including *The Ghost of Yotsuya* (Nakagawa Nobuo, 1959) and *Summer of Demon* (Ninagawa Yukio, 1981). The snakes in these films replace rats in the original play. In Kyoko Hirano’s discussion on Nakagawa’s 1959 film, the reason for this change is deemed unknown. However, it seems that the snakes may add to erotic nuances by underscoring the tactile sensation of their sleek, glistening skin, whereas the rats would symbolize decay and defilement.

<sup>29</sup> Kristeva, 12-13.

traditional Japanese female ghost, not unlike the theatrical and cinematic portrayals of Oiwa in *Ghost Story of Yotsuya in Tōkaidō*, also emphasizes the pastness, making this scene the culmination of the film's dramatization of the conflict between modern and premodern temporalities.

The theme of conflicting temporalities as identified in the characterization of the female ghost is key to understanding the historical significance of *The Vindictive Snake*. As with the Gothic horrors of the nineteenth century, the film voices anxieties over modernity, reflecting particular experiences of immigration and associating the abject with the premodern. In the next section, I will offer close analysis of the film's spatiotemporal representation in order to demonstrate further how this theme is visually presented throughout the film.

### 3. Conflicting Temporalities of Modernity

The story of *The Vindictive Snake* is set in 1904, early in the period of Okinawan immigration. Though the title credits indicate that the film is based on a true story, as yet no records of any specific incidents resembling the events of the film have been found.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, my position is that the film's presentation of the events as shown is mainly for relating a ghostly tale of a wife's post-mortem revenge. The film's employment of a tale of revenge has greater significance for its symbolic value than for the presentation of a historical record because it visually documents both conflict and contrast evident during the transition from premodern to modern conditions, the accompanying adjustments to the present and the rejection of the past, and the seeking of a new life versus the clinging onto the old one that the immigrants had left behind. The starkness of such a contrast begins with the film's three-minute opening sequence, where the modernity of life as it was experienced in Waipahu is emphasized. The intertitle "Panoramic landscape of Waipahu farmland" introduces shots of factories, the inside of a sugar factory, the working machinery that processes the harvested sugarcane, exterior scenes of farmers in the sugarcane fields, and a meal camp with immigrants dressed in formal Western clothes (figures 1 and 2).<sup>31</sup>



Fig. 1-2 The machinery of the sugar factory (left); camp meal-time with workers in Western clothes (right)

The sequence presents the productivity of the Hawaiian sugar industry which employs immigrants, who are shown as having successfully adapted to their new life. However, the state-of-the-art machinery, which was later to become the emblem of modernity as displayed in *Modern Times* (Charles Chaplin, 1936), might well be recognized as anachronistic within this particular story, which is presented as having occurred twenty-eight years before the actual filming took place. Immediately following this informative opening sequence, another title establishes the time period: the three-line title reads, "the thirty-seventh year of the Meiji Period [i.e. 1904] / Pioneer immigrants to Hawaii / Mr. and Mrs. Ōshiro Seiichi," followed by a scene showing the couple working in a field of sugarcane. The fact that the opening sequence precedes the time-marker "the thirty-seventh year of the Meiji Perio" may suggest that the scenes prior to the characters' appearance do not necessarily belong to the narrative but are meant to remind the spectator of the modernity of their life in Hawaii, particularly in implied reference to the conditions of the lands the immigrants had left.

<sup>30</sup> Nakahodo, 194.

<sup>31</sup> Hereafter, all English translations of the film's Japanese intertitles are mine, unless otherwise stated.

This opening sequence becomes especially significant when contrasted with another film, *Report on Notable Places and Historic Sites of Okinawa Prefecture* (*Okinawa-ken no meisho koseki no jikkyō*; hereafter, *Report*), a 35-mm silent documentary film that Toguchi Seizen filmed in Okinawa back-to-back with the shooting of *The Vindictive Snake*.<sup>32</sup> In the 1930s, it was common at the film screenings in overseas Japanese communities for the main feature films to be accompanied by non-narrative short films, including *jikkei eiga* (“actual-landscape” film) or *bunka eiga* (cultural film).<sup>33</sup> *Report* was produced for presentation as a double-bill with *The Vindictive Snake*. As the title suggests, the film presents historic places around the Okinawa Island, including ancient temples and shrines, medieval castle sites, tombs of prominent historical figures, traditional festivals, villages, the natural scenery, and so on. Although the film includes images highlighting modern-day Okinawa, such as showing factories and densely populated residential areas of Naha City, it focuses primarily on the heritage, history, and traditions of the island. This theme of Okinawa’s heritage is presented most strikingly in the scene featuring the bronze statue of Tōyama Kyūzō in Kin Village (present-day Kin Town). With this monument of the “father of Okinawan overseas emigration”<sup>34</sup> looming in the background, we see Toguchi descending the staircase leading from the statue, with the camera following his movement (figures 3-4). The scene seems to indicate Toguchi’s pride in the historical connection between Tōyama, who helped initiate the emigration of Okinawans, and himself as an Okinawan who has successfully established himself in Hawaii. These familiar images of Okinawa’s antiquated sites probably induced in the audience of Okinawan immigrants both nostalgia and pride for their old home. Yet, when set in contrast to their modern, new life in Hawaii as presented in the opening sequence of the main feature film, the sense of the past that is associated with those images of the homeland might also have signified the abject premodernity that the immigrants had abandoned. Thus, those two films, screened together, would have arguably appealed to the shared ambivalence that the immigrants surely felt toward their homeland.



Fig. 3-4 Toguchi walking down the staircase in *Report*

In *The Vindictive Snake*, the contrast between the modern and the premodern is highlighted further by the representation of different temporalities. On the one hand, the scenes centering on Kimiko present a temporality which is both independent of clock time and associated with nature. In the scene of her being abandoned in Waipahu, the passage of time is indicated extra-diegetically by intertitles inserted between shots of wild flowers juxtaposed with those of Kimiko lying between *futon*, with leprous scars on her face (figures 5-7). When the couple’s former servant says to her that her husband might have abandoned her, she confidently retorts, “He’ll come back with the doctor in two or three days,” as if she were—like flowers in the wild—completely oblivious to the fact that a whole month had already passed.

<sup>32</sup> The film reel of *Report on Notable Places and Historic Sites of Okinawa Prefecture* was found in the vault of the Sakurazaka Theater in Okinawa in 2016. Even though the condition of the original 35-mm film—409 meters long according to the record of Japanese censorship in 1932—was already poor when it was found, 15 minutes and 30 seconds of footage has been restored digitally from two Betacam videos recorded in 1998 by two of Okinawa’s local television networks, QAB and OTV. Sera Toshikazu, “*Okinawa-ken no meisho koseki no jikkyō no sai sai hakken*” (『沖縄県の名所古蹟の実況』の再々発見), paper presented at the symposium “Okinawa no kioku to kiroku,” held at the 14<sup>th</sup> annual conference of the Japan Society for Cinema Studies, Osaka University, Osaka, December 8, 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Hosokawa, 59. In Japanese cinema, *jikkei eiga* (actual-landscape film) is a term to describe non-narrative films focused on landscape. See Yuriko Furuhashi, “Returning to Actuality: *Fūkeiron* and the landscape film,” *Screen* vol. 48, no. 3 (2007): 345-362.





Fig. 5-7 Juxtaposition of shots of the flowers and Kimiko, preceded by an intertitle indicating days

By contrast, Seiichi's life after his return to Okinawa is depicted as being dominated by clock time. At the fancy *geisha* house in Tsuji, where he is entertained by *geisha*, a wall clock is shown hanging over him (figure 8). Then the passage of time into late night is indicated not by the intertitle but diegetically by presentation of a close-up of that wall clock. When Seiichi wakes up and begins to seduce a *geisha*, who later becomes his new lover, we also see a calendar hung in the background (figure 9). In Japan the Gregorian calendar and the Western-style timekeeping were both implemented nationwide in 1873, six years after the Meiji Restoration. In the film, the use of both the wall clock and the calendar can be seen as signifying the modernity of Seiichi's lavish life in Okinawa. Therefore, the film presents two kinds of temporality, one that associates the victimized heroine with nature, being distinctively independent of clock time, whereas the other, dominated by the modern, omnipresent clock, is associated with the demonic husband.



Fig. 8-9 The wall clock (left) and the calendar (right) at the *geisha* house in Tsuji

As can be seen in the use of the clock in the Tsuji *geisha* house scene, Okinawa is not presented simply as the premodern in contrast to the modernity of Hawaii. Rather than merely allegorizing the relationship between Hawaii and Okinawa as that of the modern versus the premodern, the film complicates this dichotomy by presenting Okinawa as excessively modernized in some scenes, even to the extent of introducing a series of anachronisms and anachronisms, or temporal and spatial misplacements. For example, when Kimiko manages to return to Okinawa, the island manifests itself not as a comforting homeland but as an alienating space, with the sense of her isolation created by the film's depiction of the urbanity of Naha. This is done through presentation of new landmarks such as the Taishō Theater, built in 1915, or the fourth year of the Taishō period, an era name which the theater adopted (figure 10). Even though this theater is featured prominently with its name presented in an intertitle, this is a flagrant example of anachronism, because all narrative events take place in the Meiji period, not in the Taishō period that ensued. The building would have been unfamiliar for the film's producer Toguchi, too, for he had left Okinawa for Hawaii two years before this theater was built. Even at the cost of temporal consistency, the filmmaker probably felt the need to include this unfamiliar building in the film to highlight the heroine's isolation within the modern urban city.

<sup>34</sup> Brian Niiya, ed., *Japanese American History: An A-to-Z Reference from 1868 to the Present* (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 332.



Fig. 10-12 The Taishō Theater (left) and shots of urban streets (center and right)

Another example is the brief footage of urban streets that is inserted to the scene where Kimiko is seen begging on the street (figures 11-12). Sera Toshikazu notes that the footage used in this scene was not filmed in Okinawa, because there are two streetcar lanes on the boulevard.<sup>35</sup> In the 1930s, Okinawa had only a single-lane streetcar, not the double lane, so the footage was most likely filmed in larger cities in mainland Japan, such as Tokyo or Osaka. Speculating on the reason for this anachronism, Sera suggests the possible self-censorship by the filmmaker: fearing that the Japanese Home Ministry might order a substantial cut, the filmmaker might have hastily replaced some scenes of the *geisha* house of Tsuji with stock footage of some mainland Japanese city.<sup>36</sup> Sera's speculation is persuasive, yet my focus is more on what the film text came to mean as a result of this insertion of anachronistic footage. Along with the anachronism of presenting the Taishō Theater, showing an urban street which was not shot in Okinawa would have the effect of rendering Naha as an unfamiliar, modern metropolis.

By situating the immigrant characters at the disjuncture of modern and premodern temporalities, the film expresses an ambivalence toward modernity and its ramifications for diasporic Okinawans in Hawaii. Kimiko's tragic end results not only from her husband's maltreatment but also from the painful and irreversible dislocation from her homeland as a consequence of her emigration, with Kimiko subsequently feeling herself estranged even in Okinawa. The sympathy of the audience, both for Kimiko's tragedy and revenge, was therefore inseparable from their own particular experience of emigration to Hawaii.

## Conclusion

This article has endeavored to illuminate the significance of *The Vindictive Snake* by situating the film in the historical context of modern Okinawan emigration to Hawaii. The generic use of the victimized female ghost, commonly seen in East and Southeast Asian horror narratives, here serves to evoke a sense of abjection which can be understood as paralleling the shared ambivalence that the Okinawan immigrants of that period felt toward their homeland. One of the principal thematic concerns of the horror genre, the conflict of multiple temporalities, can also be found in this film, where it takes the form of contrastive juxtaposition of the modern against the premodern. For example, close analysis has revealed that this theme of conflicting temporalities is manifest not only in the storyline but also in the film's representation of time and space. In the scenes featuring the suffering, bed-ridden heroine, the passage of time is indicated outside the diegesis, and the editing juxtaposes her with nature, whereas Western-style modern timekeeping is associated with the antagonistic husband. In addition, anachronisms and anachronisms establish the spatial juxtaposition of multiple temporalities, with the effect of characterizing the heroine's victimhood as a consequence of modernization.

In the history of Japan, the beginning of modernity is marked by the Meiji Restoration of 1868, when the feudal political system of the shogunate was abolished. Thereafter, Japan embraced the Western social system, technology, and ideas; hence, in the Japanese context, modernization has become akin to Westernization. Japan's

<sup>35</sup> Sera, "Ryū Nichi Fu," 22.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

colonial expansion, beginning with the annexation of the Ryukyu Kingdom in 1879, as well as encouragement of overseas emigration of Japan's impoverished populations, were two of the consequences of such Western-style modernization. Therefore, the abjection of the Okinawan immigrants, represented in the film as the abandonment and isolation of Kimiko, should be considered as having resulted from conditions of acquired modernity. The conflict and contrast of premodern versus modern temporalities encapsulate the diasporic Okinawans' specific experience of modern overseas emigration, as does the heroine's tragic alienation from her homeland.

The Honolulu screening of *The Vindictive Snake*, coupled with *Report*, was surely to have incited nostalgia in the audience of Okinawan immigrants by showing them images of their distant homeland. However, as this article has demonstrated, the contrast presented jointly by the two films would render as ambivalent the viewers' perceptions of their homeland, with their nostalgic sentiment being accompanied by a sense of abjection. Kristeva's theorization of the abject mother is helpful for comprehending the nuanced relationship between the immigrants and their mother country as being that of a simultaneous yet conflicting attachment and abandonment. While having been abandoned by their mother country, they also willingly abandoned their premodern life in the homeland in order to adapt themselves to the new land. Even so, their repressed attachment to the homeland could not be eradicated completely. It would continue to haunt the immigrants and inevitably emerge, surfacing in the manner of the vengeful ghost returning to confront her nemesis.

### Filmography

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