

The Gods of Rakugo: Commemoration in Japanese comedy

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Abstract

Rakugo and other genres of popular comedy are increasingly used as themes and topics in popular culture. Manga, television shows and popular essays often emphasize the importance of genre masters for younger performers. This article explores the different forms of commemoration and the various strategies of commemoration that are employed within the comedy culture of Japan. The first part of the paper explores how San'yūtei Enchō, one of the most respected masters, is frequently used as a point of reference in commemoration to define and promote rakugo and to establish a connection between fans and performers. This is achieved by examining references to Enchō in an interview in a popular Japanese television programme and the relevance of a popular festival acting as a space of interaction between performers and members of the rakugo audience. The second part of the article explores questions of cultural politics, and the relevance commemoration has for comedy culture in the Kansai region. The case of the Osaka Prefectural Museum of Kamigata Comedy and Performing Arts (Wahha Kamigata) is examined and the recent discussions regarding its necessity, fuelled by the plans of the former prefectural governor, Hashimoto Tōru, to move and downsize the institution, are described.

Keywords: Comedy, Commemoration, Cultural Politics, Heritage, Manzai, Rakugo

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Introduction

In Japanese Vaudeville and Comedy performances, especially in those genres that are frequently described and perceived as “traditional”, such as the story-telling genre of rakugo (落語), the interest of performers and audiences in the veterans and masters of their domain is key. Younger performers often introduce themselves to their audience by making reference to their better-known master. Female rakugo performer Kawayanagi Tsukushi (川柳つくし), for example, adds flavour to her introductory chit-chat by relaying the latest gossip about her often too-drunk-to walk master Kawayanagi Senryū (川柳川柳). In doing so, she positions herself in the role of something of a caretaker of the elderly gentleman, a topic that is frequently mentioned during media interviews and in her autobiography, the latter of which focuses on her unusual situation as a female rakugo performer.¹ The special impact of certain rakugo masters have on their art is explored in numerous books of various scholarly levels.

The relationship between a rakugo master and his or her disciples is not only of interest to performers, scholars and critics, it has also developed into a common topic within popular culture. The successful manga series *Shōwa Genroku Period and Rakugo Double-Suicide* (*Shōwa genroku rakugo shinjū*, 昭和元禄落語心中)² and its anime adaption features young rakugo performers struggling to develop their individual performance style while defining their relationship with their own masters, many of who, not only teach their apprentices about the art of rakugo, but also play the role of substitute fathers. The masters of the story do so by taking their disciples into their family as young boys or by offering homes to young ex-gangsters who have recently been released from prison. The release of the anime on the international streaming platform ‘Crunchyroll’ recently increased the interest of anime fans and Japanese culture aficionados’ for rakugo and the special role the masters play in this genre. While the characters of *Shōwa genroku rakugo shinjū* bear fictional names, other works of popular culture explicitly deal with real-life performers and their famous masters. For example, rakugo artist Tatekawa Danshun’s (立川談春) collection of autobiographical essays entitled *Aka medaka* (赤めだか, The Red Killfish)³ focus on the impact Danshun’s own master, Tatekawa Danshi (立川談志), had on his entire life. The essays start by describing Danshun’s memories of watching Danshi perform at his junior high school, his decision to go against his parents’ wishes to graduate from high school and to instead become Danshi’s disciple. Later essays explore Danshun’s relationship with his fellow disciples (who not only studied under Danshi but who were also required to clean his house and run errands for their master), and many other hardships often related to a rakugo performer’s apprentice years under the guidance of a master who, quite literally, controls his or her entire life. In 2015, Danshun’s essay collection attracted an even wider readership when the story of his apprenticeship under Danshi was turned into a television drama special that featured famous comedian “Beat” Takeshi (ビートたけし), who film fans around the world know well as a prolific film director under his real name Kitano Takeshi (北野武).

¹ The artist also does this in her book, in which she focuses on her experience as a female rakugo performer and refers to her master frequently: Kawayanagi Tsukushi, *Onna rakugoka no futatsume shugyō* (女落語家の「二つ目」修行) [The Training of a Female Rakugo Companion] (Tokyo: Futabasha, 2010).

² Kumota Haruko, *Shōwa genroku rakugo shinjū 1* (昭和元禄落語心中 1) [Shōwa Genroku Period and Rakugo Double-Suicide Vol.1] (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2011).

³ Tatekawa Danshun, *Akamedaka* (赤めだか) [The Red Killfish] (Tokyo: Fusōha, 2008).

These examples illustrate the extent to which the relevance of a master-disciple relationship in rakugo has turned into a common motive, the publicity of which has descended the inner circle of insider knowledge among rakugo performers and fans. This paper endeavours to gain a better understanding of the complex reasons as to why the commemoration of rakugo masters, which extends far beyond expressing one's gratitude to one's teacher, is so commonly practised and discussed. In this endeavour, this paper explores two distinct topics to a different extent. It begins by examining the role of rakugo master San'yūtei Enchō (三遊亭円朝, 1839-1900), one of the most prolific characters in the development of the Edo Rakugo practised in Tokyo today. The commemoration of Enchō is discussed both via a concrete example from a television programme as well as through examining the more institutionalised commemoration of a rakugo festival. In the second part, the paper progresses to explore the special situation of the commemoration of rakugo and comedy masters in the Kansai region from a political perspective, dealing with the establishment of the Osaka Prefectural Museum of Kamigata Comedy and Performing Arts in 1996 and the discussions regarding its relevance after a proposed downsizing in recent years.

Promoting Rakugo to New Audiences

Between 1994 and 2001, Japan's national broadcaster, NHK, presented the weekly show *Warai ga Ichiban* (笑いがいちばん), which became home to Japan's comedians. This program was screened every Sunday afternoon, both countrywide and on NHK's international channel. The show brought together veteran performers from genres such as rakugo or manzai (漫才, duo stand-up) with younger newcomers or performers from genres that had a smaller mass appeal. Often, the show contained a special talk corner, where veteran comedians would be interviewed about their career or interact with their younger colleagues. For the initial years, the hosts of the show were regularly changed and included the popular manzai duo Bakushō Mondai (爆笑問題). In 2007, a new set of hosts took over: Hayashiya Shōzō (林家正蔵), a rakugo performer who was famous among both rakugo and non-rakugo fans for his television appearances outside his genre, and the young TV starlet, actress and singer Nakagawa Shōko (中川翔子) as his young female assistant. Shōko took the role of an outsider and comedy-novice, eager and interested to learn about comedians and their art.

On the 4th of November 2007, Shōzō and Nakagawa welcomed veteran rakugo performer Katsura Utamaru (桂歌丸) to their talk corner. Utamaru was well-known to a wide television audience due to his role as the host of the weekly variety comedy show *Shōten* (笑点, Laughter Points). The talk mostly unfolded as an insider-expert discussion between the two rakugo performers: Shōzō and Utamaru. Nakagawa's main role was to serve as the novice listener who acknowledged her interest and surprise in the topics that were raised by uttering sounds of astonishment or approval, acting as the person fellow host Shōzō addressed when explaining any details of the conversation that non-rakugo experts may find potentially difficult to grasp, and holding boards up to the camera that featured photos or drawings to illustrate the current topic or theme for the television audience.

After discussing Utamaru's own career and his role in the popular TV show *Shōten*, the subject changed to the relevance of San'yūtei Enchō, taking up the cue that Utamaru regularly performs rakugo pieces that were written by San'yūtei Enchō. This progressed into general rakugo repertoire classics over the time, in their full length. The discussion of the relevance of this repertoire represents one example of a moment within the show in

which the relationship between the three participants of the talk can be clearly pinned down. Shōzō asked fellow rakugo performer Utamaru about his relationship with the work of Enchō. Utamaru approved of Shōzō's interest in Enchō's work while also reminding Shōzō about the popularity of Enchō's work among other performers. He referred to these performers using the Japanese word *renchū*, which translates as "the bunch" or "the boys", referring to the group of performers that both Utamaru and Shōzō are members of. During this exchange, Nakagawa Shōko acted as the curious outsider who Shōzō directly addressed to provide some key background knowledge. Shōzō acted very impressed when Utamaru declared that he regarded Enchō as a god (*kami-sama* 神様). The section of the talk that focused on Enchō ended on a slightly surprising note: While the importance of the material he created for the repertoire was acknowledged, the role of Enchō as a great performer remained somehow vague when Utamaru expressed his feeling of remorse over the fact that nobody who is alive had ever witnessed Enchō actually perform because he passed away long before even today's eldest performers were born or before rakugo performances were taped. This presents the ideal opportunity for Nakagawa Shōko to sum up her outsider's perspective on Enchō using the words: "I wished I could have listened [to his performances] (*kikitakatta*)!".

By expressing her interest in Enchō, a historical figure who, at first glance, only seems to be relevant for the historic development of the rakugo repertoire, Nakagawa expresses an inherent desire to bond with the performers and get closer to a group that she is not a member. In terms of profession, Shōko is active as a singer and actress; in terms of age, as she is younger than most of the established rakugo masters; in terms of interest, as she is typically known for her involvement in popular culture and cosplay as opposed to traditional performing arts; and in terms of gender, she is an outsider in an industry that remains dominated by male performers. While the talk discussed here could, therefore, also be analysed in terms of gender-relationship and could provide a superior example of the phenomenon of "mansplaining," I want to suggest that her role here should, rather, be seen as a means of attracting new audiences to the art of rakugo and increasing their general interest in Enchō, in particular, because many members of the television audience would normally identify with, or be interested in, Nakagawa Shōko and the part she plays in the entertainment world.

Institutionalising a Master

Comparing Enchō to a god and, thereby, positioning him in an elevated position to a performer's direct and individual master takes an institutionalised form in the annual Enchō Festival (*Enchō Matsuri* 圓朝まつり). The event can be traced back to a festive "Summer gathering", during which rakugo performers came together to express their debt to Enchō after his death in 1900 by performing rakugo recitals and attending a service at the Zenshōan temple, where Enchō is buried. Lorie Brau pointed out that Enchō is, in this context, often referred to as the "ancestor who rejuvenated *rakugo*" and that the gathering shared many traits with other Buddhist memorial services in Japan, such as the way in which people paid respect at Enchō's grave and enjoyed drinks and snacks afterwards.⁴

⁴ Lorie Brau, *Rakugo: Performing Comedy and Cultural Heritage in Contemporary Tokyo* (Langham: Lexington Books, 2008), 100-101.

The modern-day version of the festival version is organised by the performers' organisation. The annual *Rakugo Kyōkai* is a public festival for fans. The stalls, which are manned by rakugo performers, sell drinks and food or rakugo goods, turning the festival into "an event akin to a temple fair"⁵. For the fans, the festival represents a good opportunity to connect with the performers they admire. This aspect of offering a space in which performers come together is also expressed in the name the festival took up in its 2007 edition: The Commemoration of Enchō – The Thank-You-Festival of the *Rakugo Kyōkai* (Enchō Kinen – Rakugo Kyōkai Kansha-sai 圓朝記念・落語協会感謝祭). Rakugo expert Lorie Brau sums up her evaluation of the festivities by referring to the changes as "commercialization" and describing how the artists' relationship with their fans "has an influence on their professional success, supersedes the in-group act of honouring Enchō, that is, the celebration of professional heritage"⁶.

Enchō has also played an important role in two additional rakugo societies in Tokyo: The Rakugo Geijutsu Kyōkai did, indeed, serve as the co-organiser of the main Enchō event for many years. The Enraku Ichimonkai celebrates an annual Enchō Yose where many of the associated performers present stories from their master's repertoire.⁷ In any case, the reference to the grand master is used as a special offer to the audience, to attract them to come and see different performances and to invite them to interact with the performers in a different frame than the one encountered in the everyday setting of the normal yose theatre. Accordingly, the Enchō Festival has moved away from being an internal group event to one that markets and promotes rakugo. Indeed, one of the motivations that underpinned the changes in the way in which the character of Enchō was remembered was directly related to the decline of the contemporary rakugo performers' participation in commemorative gatherings. This indicates that, for many performers, the commemoration of Enchō is, indeed, less of an act of respect or an urge that could be traced back to the artist's mind, but rather part of promoting rakugo and maintaining a good relationship with the audience: "The commercialization of the even demonstrates that as a group, *hanashika* [rakugo performers] are striving to keep pace with other performing artists of traditional and non-traditional genres and exploit whatever opportunities they can to increase their audience base."⁸ In that respect, the act of commemorating Enchō through a festival can, indeed, be linked to a TV show in which a young and attractive TV starlet is presented as a possible new fan and admirer of the god of rakugo, thereby increasing the curiosity of young performers.

The Wahha Kamigata and the Struggle for Regional Identity

In recent years, a specific place of commemoration for comedy veterans has turned into a contested space where the relevance and value that commemoration has for regional identity has been thrown into question: The Osaka Prefectural Museum of Kamigata Comedy and Performing Arts (Ōsaka Furitsu Kamigata Engei Shiryōkan, 大阪府立上方演芸資料館). This facility, which is also in allusion to a common onomatopoeia indicating laughter "wahha" referred to as the Wahha Kamigata (ワッハ上方), combines the traditional name for the Kansai region, Kamigata, with a word that represents the sound of laughter in Japanese (comparable to the chat laughter "Ha ha ha" in English). The museum was founded in 1996 as a prefectural museum under the guidance of the Osaka governor of

⁵ Lorie Brau: *Rakugo*, 101.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Personal communication with Enraku Ichimonkai member San'yūtei Ryūroku, 20 June 2016.

⁸ Lorie Brau, *Rakugo*, 101.

the day, Yokoyama Knock (横山ノック, 1932-2007), a former comedian himself.⁹ The Kamigata or Kansai region is often regarded as the home ground for popular comedy in Japan, and the genre of manzai stand-up comedy is, in particular, closely associated with the region¹⁰. The relevance and the pure existence of the museum came under scrutiny when right-wing politician Hashimoto Tōru (橋下徹), internationally infamous for his statements on the so-called “Comfort-Woman”, Asian females who were exploited as sex slaves by the Japanese military during the Second World War to increase soldiers’ morale during war times, was elected as governor of the Prefecture of Osaka for the first time in 2008.¹¹

During my own research on Japanese comedy between 2006 and 2008, I discovered that the Wahha Kamigata was very much regarded as a paradise and oasis for those interested in the local history of Japanese performing arts and comedy. Situated in the district of Nanba, in a tourist hotspot just across the famous Nanba Grand Kagetsu (なんばグランド花月) Comedy Theatre, the museum provided an interesting overview of the history of local comedy, its greatest stars, and its connection to contemporary comedians. A model of the district in the 1920s featured at the centre of the exhibition with its bustling comedy theatre scene, memorabilia linked to comedy veterans of those times, such as the hand-drum of manzai performer Sunagawa Sutemaru (砂川捨丸, 1890-1971), or a jacket worn on stage by local manzai legend Yokoyama Yasushi (横山やすし 1944-1996), even including a pair of glasses that featured in one of his most famous manzai routines in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The permanent exhibition was complemented by temporary exhibitions that introduced and explored the life and art of selected performers in more detail. For example, one exhibition started in September 2011 that focused on the duo Yumeji Itoshi and Kimi Koishi (夢路いとし, 1925-2003, 喜味こいし, 1927-2011), a few months after the death of Kimi Koishi, featured a selection of the following materials:

We present 97 video recordings from our library, as well as 44 sound recordings from the radio. On top of that, a number of activities will be organised and presented, such as a photo exhibition expressing the two performers’ stage performances or behind-the-stage photographs that show them practising their material. There are also photos of them [in their younger days] performing at the Takarazuka Shingeiza Theatre, photos from their regular television appearances and especially rare and valuable photos from their time as child-performers. In addition, we present examples of their manzai scripts or stage outfits, programme brochures from their appearances at theatres, such as the Dōtonbori Kadoza or the Sen’nichi Gekijō, and poster material. We also exhibit material illustrating Kimi Koishi’s activities as a film actor; for example, his role in the feature film *Hoshikage no Warutsu*.¹²

⁹ See Ōsaka Furitsu Kamigata Engei Shiryōkan (Ed.), *Kamigata engei taizen* (Osaka: Sōgensha, 2008), 59.

¹⁰ For a brief overview of the relevance of Osaka for Japanese humour and comedy, see Inoue Hiroshi, “Osaka’s Culture of Laughter”, in *Understanding Japanese Humor*, edited by Jessica Milner Davis (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006), 27-36.

¹¹ Eric Johnston, *Hashimoto takes flak for sex slave rationale*. In: *The Japan Times*, 14 May 2013. Available at: <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/05/14/national/bigtime-backfire-hashimoto-justifies-sex-slave-use-prostitutes-for-u-s-forces/> [accessed on 28.10.2016].

¹² This announcement originally appeared on the homepage of the Wahha Kamigata. It is here quoted from my own blog *Till no Warainetto*, available at: <http://tillchan.typepad.com/warai/page/5/> [accessed on 28.10.2016].

In addition to being an exhibition space, the Wahha Kamigata also served as a performance venue and a material archive and library. A small stage on the same floor as the exhibition would feature several performances of younger comedians during the day for the museum's visitors to enjoy – sometimes as an unplanned surprise during their visit to the museum. The stage in the museum would be sometimes rented out to individual groups of performers, small agencies, or troupes so that they could present their latest performances. The Wahha Hall on the corridor on top of the exhibition rooms served as a grand performing space with a proper stage and seating for up to 307 visitors. Both local and visiting performers from other areas of the country would deliver shows in this venue. The library of the Wahha Kamigata, which visitors could access free of charge, offered a wide selection of reading material as well as video and audio recordings both from television screenings and regular releases. As a graduate student who was learning about the history of modern comedy in the Kansai region, it was this archive and, especially, its video recordings of classic Manzai shows, such as the Kamigata Manzai Matsuri (上方漫才まつり, Kamigata Manzai Festival, Mainichi Broadcasting, 1979), that turned me into a regular visitor of the Wahha Kamigata.

One of the biggest contributions the Wahha Kamigata made in creating a canon of local performance culture was the introduction of the so-called “Induction to the Hall of Fame of Kamigata Performance Entertainment” (*Kamigata engei no dendō iri* 上方演芸の殿堂入り), which the museum first launched in 1996. At the first ceremony, eight artists from the early 20th century history of local comedy were announced as the first members of the hall of fame, including the forefathers of contemporary manzai the duo Yokoyama Entatsu (横山エンタツ, 1896-1971) and Hanabishi Achako (花菱アチャコ, 1897-1974)¹³ or rakugo legend Katsura Harudanji I (初代目桂春団治, 1878-1934).¹⁴ Later editions would often also include living veteran artists, but emphasise certain aspects or topics. For example, in 2004, the manzai duos Yumeji Itoshi-Kimi Koishi and Yokoyama Yasushi-Nishikawa Kiyoshi were introduced to represent different generations of performers but both duos as leading manzai acts within their own generation. In 2010, the induction featured only a single still-living but already retired artist: local rakugo veteran Katsura Beichō (桂米朝, 1925-2015) and celebrated the contribution he made to the survival of the rakugo tradition in the Kansai region following the Second World War¹⁵. The celebration of the artist, who had been declared a living national treasure in 1996, included performances and presentations by fellow artists of his generation as well as appearances by younger artists, such as Beichō's son and rakugo-performer Katsura Kobeichō 桂小米朝¹⁶. The event, which I was privileged to attend, provided a fascinating mixture of lightness and joy through sharing entertaining stories about the younger days of the veterans. There was also a distinct atmosphere of nostalgia when all of the speakers hinted at the idea that the world of Kamigata rakugo might never again be privileged by the

¹³ For the relevance of the duo for the history of manzai, see: Joel F. Stocker, “Manzai: Team Comedy in Japan's Entertainment Industry”, in *Understanding Japanese Humor*, edited by Jessica Milner Davis (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006), 57-61.

¹⁴ For a full list of performers inducted to the hall between 1996 and 2007, see: *Kamigata engei taizen*, 503.

¹⁵ For further information about the history of kamigata rakugo and the relevance of Katsura Beichō, see: Toda Manabu, *Kamigata rakugo no sengoshi* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2014).

¹⁶ Katsura Kobeichō received a new stage name in 2008: Katsura Yonedanji (桂米團治).

presence of such a great master as Katsura Beichō¹⁷. Celebrating members of the hall of fame, therefore, reinforced the connection to a perceived tradition of great veteran performers. A tradition that confirmed younger performers in their actions and activities, but that also evoked a nostalgic notion of a glorious past of local culture that is, ultimately, lost forever, but the memory of which must be valued and celebrated.

A travel website introduced the Wahha Kamigata as a museum full of Osaka-esque atmosphere.¹⁸ In an interview on the same website, the museum's director, Itō Yūzō (伊東雄三), first pointed out the value of the material and documents available to visitors and summed up the goals of the museum's organisers with the slogan: "Let's save Kamigata Performance Entertainment, the culture of comedy of Osaka!"¹⁹ Later in the interview, Itō himself refers to his institution as the "Assets of Osaka" and the culture introduced as "Precious cultural heritage that must be transmitted to later generations".²⁰ Again and again, he expressed the opinion that the material collected represented the culture of Osaka: "All this makes you feel the energy, the power of Osaka. It makes you feel better. We are the base to transmit [this aspect of Osaka]. I hope that not only the people of Osaka but people from all over the country will come [and visit the museum]".²¹ Here, he expressed the thought that the comedy culture is, indeed, not just something that needs to be valued and literally kept in a museum to look at, but is something that is an asset that has a positive impact on everyone throughout Japan. In addition, he highlighted how Osaka is a unique part of the region that is able to offer things that are not available anywhere else in the country. As a tourist attraction, it can attract visitors and, thereby, money and capital to the region.

The relevance of the Wahha Kamigata and thereby of the commemoration of comedy veterans for the Kansai region came under scrutiny when Hashimoto Tōru was elected to the role of governor of the Osaka Province in 2008. Hashimoto started his career in the public eye as a television celebrity. The lawyer Hashimoto appeared as a television lawyer in the show *The Legal Advisory Office that People Queue Up For* (*Gyōretsu no Dekiru Hōritsu Sōdanjo*, 行列のできる法律相談所) in which fictional law cases were discussed in an entertaining manner between a group of lawyers and television celebrities. Among the lawyers of the show, Hashimoto soon gained popularity and the support of the show's host, former manzai comedian Shimada Shinsuke (島田紳助).

Hashimoto's background in the entertainment industry made him an unlikely enemy of the local comedy culture; nevertheless, the future of the Wahha Kamigata came under scrutiny when Hashimoto raised budgetary concerns after entering into office. Specifically, on 6 February 2008, he questioned the existence of 81 institutions in the prefecture. In addition to the Wahha Kamigata, this list of institutions included sport and cultural centres as well as establishments that cared for women or young people in difficult situations. Hashimoto did not leave any doubts as to what his opinion was in terms of the organisations under question. He referred to all the named institutions that were run by the prefecture, with the exception of two major libraries, as "unnecessary (*fuyō*, 不要)" – a term that the

¹⁷ This recount of my memories from the ceremony are based on notes I took on the day of its execution, 23 August 2010.

¹⁸ Available at: <https://allabout.co.jp/gm/gc/65510/5/> [accessed on 28.10.2016].

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

governor's opponents soon criticised him for using.²² Hashimoto argued that the annual costs of running the institutions, 427 Million yen,²³ was too high and proposed downgrading and relocating the Wahha Kamigata to a different location to reduce the high costs of running the institution on the prefecture's budget. A large chunk of the money paid by the prefectural government did, indeed, go directly into the pockets of comedy agency Yoshimoto Kogyo, which owned the building in Nanba in which the museum was hosted. This fact was problematic considering that the Yokayama Knock, governor of the time of the set-up of the Wahha Kamigata, was a former comedian linked to Yoshimoto Kogyo.

Many of Hashimoto's former friends from within the comedy business did, however, perceive Hashimoto's actions as a direct attack on their culture and harshly criticised him for failing to acknowledge the Wahha Kamigata's importance as a place for celebrating local culture through the means of commemoration. In one press conference, manzai-legend Kimi Koishi and comedy writer Nanba Toshizō (難波利三) called for a continuation of the Wahha Kamigata, calling the Nanba district of Osaka the "birthplace of comedy (*o-warai no hasshō no chi*, お笑いの発生の地)".²⁴ Nanba emphasised the economic value of the local comedy culture describing any abolishment as representing a problem for the future, while Kimi Koishi expressed his anger about the plans to abolish the Wahha Kamigata just because of debt, referring to the institution as a "place of study for younger people".²⁵ On 1 April 2008, signatures were collected under a big banner that directly replied to Hashimoto's statement that the Wahha Kamigata was unnecessary. The banner, which was written in Osaka-dialect claimed, "Wahha Kamigata – [We] need it! (*Irimasse! Wahha-kamigata*, いりまっせ! ワッハ上方)".²⁶ Over 6000 signatures to save the Wahha Kamigata were collected, many from established comedians both from within the regions as well as from other parts of the country, including rakugo-master Katsura Utamaru (see above)²⁷ who, in his role as speaker of the Tokyo Rakugo Art Association, emphasised the value that the Wahha Kamigata had for the entire country.

Hashimoto continually emphasized that his criticism of the Wahha Kamigata as an institution should not be understood as an attack on the local entertainment culture. He summed up his stance on the issue in a Twitter post on the 11th of November 2015²⁸: "The abolishment of the Wahha Kamigata is based on the actual facts. In no way does this mean the extinction of the culture of Osaka. A central part of the Wahha Kamigata's budget went into the costs of management (personnel costs and rent) and the costs of renting the hall. The province of Osaka was running an enterprise of renting out the hall. This was an issue that needed re-evaluation. We have moved money into actually supporting performers active in the entertainment industry."

A preliminary agreement with Yoshimoto Kogyo relieved the prefecture of the costs of running the Wahha Kamigata, which would be managed by the company itself. The agreement with Yoshimoto Kogyo was commented on once more by Hashimoto, emphasising the fact that, in the end, the company had agreed that running the Wahha Kamigata would, ultimately, not be a profitable business and the venue would always be in

²² "Hako mono 'ware wa hitsuyō' 'fuyō' hatsugen, hirogaru hamon Hashimoto-chiji asu shisetu (Osaka)", *Asahi Shinbun*, 16 February 2018, 36.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ "Wahha Kamigata o nan toka nokoshite' Manzai-shi no Kimi Koishi-san-ra (Osaka)", *Asahi Shinbun*, 17 March 2008, Evening Edition, 2.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ "Wahha Kamigata o nokoshite' Manzai-shi-ra shomei katsudō Ōsaka-fu shisetsu minaoshi (Osaka)", *Asahi Shinbun*, 1 April 2008, Evening Edition, 12.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Available at: https://twitter.com/t_ishin/status/664578252862676993 [accessed on 28.10.2016].

the red.²⁹ In 2015, the prefecture regained its control over the institution. However, it is now run on a much smaller scale. The big performance venue on the upper floor is no longer in use, and a greater emphasis has been placed on the collection of material.³⁰ Ideally, this will strengthen the role of the Wahha Kamigata as a place of commemoration of the past of the local comedy culture without entanglement with day-to-day comedy business questions. The compromise does, indeed, emphasise the role of the institution as an archive and, thereby, as a place that is essential for making any act of commemoration possible.

Conclusion

Commemoration of comedy masters, veterans, and traditions take many forms in contemporary Japan. Through examining examples of commemoration, this paper has shown that it plays an important role in connecting traditions with questions of contemporary performance or the creation of identity.

The commemoration of a rakugo master like San'yūtei Enchō can be traced back to an almost religious commemoration of a master who performers would worship as one of their ancestors. With an increasing timely distance to the historical figure of the master, this aspect of commemoration is taking more and more of a back seat. Instead, Enchō is increasingly turned into a character that is used to promote rakugo and attract new audiences, especially younger consumers. Alternatively, the institutionalised commemoration of him is turned into a popular festival that enables contact and communication between performers and audiences to strengthen the bond and to flourish future continuation of support from rakugo fans. Ultimately, commemoration establishes a bridge between performers and audiences and advertises the art of the genre. From the perspective of the performers, commemoration can attract audiences and is linked to financial interests, comedy being their business and breadwinning profession.

The fact that financial interests can, indeed, collide in the realm of commemoration is illustrated by the fate of the Wahha Kamigata. Originally established as a place to celebrate the comedic heritage of Osaka, its high running costs ultimately increased the extent to which the institution was under scrutiny. Politician Hashimoto Tōru was criticised by professional performers for a lack of understanding of the relevance that comedy culture has for the region. Unfortunately, a compromise failed to keep the institution alive in its original form, and a smaller, more cost-effective venue emerged that emphasised the character of the institution as a place to preserve and to commemorate but weakened its position in the actual comedy and entertainment business.

As long as comedy performances continue to be mainly a part of an entertainment industry in which agencies want to do business and artists perform to make money in order to survive, commemoration will continue to be linked with financial interests. Commemoration is, and always will be, a means of attracting new audience members or strengthening the bond between comedy fans. While the cultural meaning of the Wahha Kamigata was openly acknowledged by professionals and industry members, its economic value for the entire region was thrown into doubt by prominent politicians. The question of the relevance of commemoration will likely continue to be a contested issue in the field of Japanese cultural politics.

²⁹ <http://www.asahi.com/special/08002/OSK200912280083.html> [Last Access 7 September 2016]

³⁰ "Wahha Kamigata, Ōsaka-fu eigyō ni shiryō chikuseki ni jūten", *Asahi Shinbun*, 6 September 2014, Evening Edition, 2.

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