How to Save an Art World:
The Resilience and Revival of Rakugo Traditional Storytelling in 21st-Century Japan

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Abstract

This thesis explores the resilience and revival of *rakugo* oral storytelling in contemporary Japan. At a time when many traditional arts suffer from a lack of generational turnover, the case of *rakugo* stands out: the number of professional *rakugoka* today is the highest ever recorded, and since 2005, Japanese media have reported on an ongoing "*rakugo boom*". How did the *rakugo* art world survive through periods of decline in popularity to eventually experience a revival in 21st-century Japan? Based on one year of ethnographic fieldwork in Tokyo from November 2020 to November 2021, including interviews with 66 *rakugo* fans, performers, and producers, the thesis contextualises the understudied puzzle of *rakugo*'s resilience by presenting recent developments in *rakugo* history and highlighting the factors which allowed *rakugoka* to turn a media-induced trend into what I call an ongoing "*rakugo renaissance*". The thesis builds upon Bourdieu's theory of capital to explain how certain structures, practices and ideologies within the *rakugo* world endow apprentices with all the resources (social, cultural, economic and what I call "artistic" capital) needed for a chance to succeed, and help maintain a diversified community of practitioners dedicated to the ongoing performance, adaptation, and transmission of *rakugo*. Methodologically, this thesis discusses the ethics of conducting fieldwork during a pandemic, assessing the impact of COVID-19 on my research and on the field of *rakugo*, arguing for combining in-person and digital ethnography. Beyond contributing to the emerging field of *rakugo* studies, the aim of this study is to uncover how traditional communities can adapt and build resilience in 21st-century Japan, producing lessons on how to save other endangered art worlds. Far from vanishing in the past, *rakugo* presents an alternative model in contemporary Japanese society, a testimony that another future for Japan is possible too.

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Introduction

Research Puzzle

In 2008, a study carried out by the Japan Council of Performers Rights and Performing Arts Organizations (also known as Geidankyō) reported the critical state of the "traditional performing arts" (*dentō geinō*) of Japan (Tokumaru et al. 2008). From the globally renowned *kabuki* and *nō* theatres, to the less celebrated *nihon buyō* dance and *sankyoku* music, Japanese traditional arts suffered from a lack of generational turnover, not able to attract enough young performers to replace ageing masters. The study, however, singled out one exception: *rakugo* (ibid, 109). Despite earlier voices forecasting the art's inevitable decline[1], since around 2005 *rakugo* has indeed experienced a great revival of popularity, labelled a "*rakugo boom*" by Japanese media[2]. Far from representing an existential challenge, the number of professional *rakugo* performers (*rakugoka*) has seen a threefold increase in the last thirty years[3], and at the time of my fieldwork in 2020, it was reportedly the highest ever recorded in the history[4] of *rakugo* (Hirose 2020). The number of live *rakugo* shows underwent a similar increase, and a variety of new venues dedicated to the art opened especially in and around the metropolitan areas of Tokyo and Osaka. And yet, only a few years before the so-called boom, *rakugo* had been facing a decline in popularity, defined by my informants as a "winter of *rakugo*"[5]. This is the research puzzle, or main research question, leading this doctoral dissertation: *what are the factors behind rakugo's resilience and ongoing revival in 21st-century Japan?*

In other words, what allowed the community of *rakugoka* to survive periods of decline in popularity, ignite a new wave of interest in the art, and capitalise on it to bring about an ongoing *rakugo* renaissance? In this thesis, I answer this question by, first, assessing the most recent developments in *rakugo* history through interviews with informants and written/audiovisual sources. I identify the main agents and events behind the 21st-century revival of *rakugo* (and its previous relative decline), individuating both the immediate "triggers", as well as longer-term causes and consequences. Then, building on ethnographic observations and interviews, I shift the attention to the

[1] As an example, as recently as in 2003, prominent *rakugo* performer San'yūtei Enjō dramatically affirmed on his blog that *rakugo* had "already died", as he noted how the audience was, at the time, composed almost entirely "of people in their 60s or 70s", while younger generations, including the middle-aged, "showed no interest in the art", a fact that heralded, according to Enjō, its irreversible decline. Available at http://enjoo.com/rakugo/old/ra_colm3.htm [Accessed 31 March 2025]. See Chapters 2 and 3 on the sense of crisis that preluded the "*rakugo boom*".
[2] See, for example, Yomiuri (2005/10/19), and Chapter 3 on the "*rakugo boom*" and the role of media.
[3] Data collected from the magazine *Tokyo Kawaraban* – see Chapter 3 for detailed statistics.
[4] See Chapter 2 for a review of *rakugo* history.
[5] See Chapter 2 on the winter of *rakugo*.

practices, ideologies and structure within the world of *rakugoka* which, I argue, enabled it to retain its resilience and liveliness needed to ultimately turn such a "boom" into a lasting revival of the art.

What is *rakugo*? As the experiences and voices of my informants will make evident throughout the thesis, *rakugo* sits in a somehow liminal space in between categories. Is *rakugo* a "traditional art" (*dentō geinō*), a form of popular entertainment (*taishū engei*), or yet again a form of comedy (*owarai*)? The above-mentioned study had classified it as a traditional performing art, but *rakugo* is also an art of the *yose* (vaudeville theatres), and as such, belongs to the same *engei* (popular performing art/entertainment) category as the popular comedy form of *manzai*, but also as other *wagei* (art of the speech/declamatory arts) such as *kōdan* and *rōkyoku*. *Rakugo* researchers have also classified the work of prominent *rakugoka* as "literature" (Miya 2013; Shores 2022). It is not my role, nor my intention, to engage in such classification, but I will show throughout the thesis how informants navigated these discourses and the tensions embedded in them. Historian Yamamoto Susumu affirmed that to discern "when the history of *rakugo* as we know it today starts" is "as difficult as to decide what *rakugo* is" (Yamamoto 2006, 6). Similarly, as I will show, defining who a "*rakugoka*" is creates more tension than what some simplistic discourses commonly shared in the field would have it[6]. Instead of providing normative definitions, I will include in this introduction a brief description of my first encounter with *rakugo*, and an ethnographic account of the first *rakugo* show I joined during my fieldwork, which would turn to be rather representative of the *rakugo* field – with its rituals, norms and contradictions – as I experienced it in Tokyo in 2020-2021.

My Encounter with Rakugo

In March 2017, while in Tokyo as an exchange student at Waseda University, I came across *Shōwa Genroku Rakugo Shinjū*,[7] an anime depicting the lives of fictitious *rakugo* performers in the Shōwa era (1926-1989). The characters brought back memories of the first *rakugoka* I had ever seen: funny comedians dressed in kimono who exchanged jokes on a TV show[8] over which, on many Sunday afternoons, I bonded with the Japanese-Peruvian family who hosted me as a high-school student in Sapporo in 2012-2013. Intrigued by this humorous art, after a quick online search, I discovered that *rakugoka* performed in theatres called *yose*, and that one *yose* in Shinjuku, central Tokyo, hosted late-night shows for an affordable 500 yen.

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[6] See Chapter 4 on the tension within the definition of "amateur" and "professional" *rakugoka*.
[7] First aired on TV in 2016-2017, *Showa Genroku Rakugo Shinjū* is the adaptation of a manga by Haruko Kumota serialised from 2010 to 2016, also adapted into an NHK drama in 2018. See Chapter 3.
[8] *Shōten* (Nippon TV), a comedy show aired since 1966. See Chapter 4.

On a cold night of March, I joined the queue outside the wooden entrance of Shinjuku Suehirotei. I bought a ticket on the spot (not having a booking system is a cherished characteristic of traditional *yose*) and entered, amused by the retro atmosphere of the building. As the curtains opened, a lone, young *rakugoka* appeared. She took her place, kneeling on a cushion at the centre of the stage, and bowed to the audience. *Rakugo* is sometimes translated as a "Japanese traditional form of *sit-down* comedy," and, indeed, the introductory section (*makura*)[9] of a *rakugo* performance somewhat resembles the English concept of stand-up comedy. The kimono-clad performer warmed up the audience, commenting on recent events and telling jokes. Then, she gave a few remarks about life in the Edo Period (1603-1868) and began to tell a story. With no costumes nor scenography, she played all the characters on her own, slightly changing the direction she faced and the way she spoke to differentiate the roles. In her hands, a handkerchief and a paper fan, her only props, seemed to turn into all kinds of objects: a wallet, a letter, a pipe. The story consisted entirely of humorous conversations between characters conveyed through direct speech, and it ended with a sudden punchline, or "drop" (*ochi*, or *sage*) – hence the name *rakugo,* "stories with a drop". The setting for the comedy was an unspecified time "when Tokyo was still called Edo"[10] – I would later learn that different types of stories, such as dramatic (*ninjōbanashi*) and even scary (*kaidanbanashi*) ones exist, and that the *rakugo* repertoire includes both "classical" pieces (*koten*) set in the past and passed down through generations of performers, and new creations (*shinsaku*). Finally, the *rakugoka* bowed and left the stage, accompanied by applause and *shamisen* music, leaving the space for the next performer.

At the time, I did not understand perfectly the *rakugoka*'s fast-paced language filled with old-Tokyo dialect (*edoben*), but I remember being deeply impressed by how, with the sole use of their body and voice, they could play characters so convincingly and entertainingly, "*recreating*," as later informants would put it, "a whole world inside the imagination of the audience" (Satō, *rakugo* fan. Interview with the author, 12 July 2019). To learn more about the art, I then joined Waseda's *Rakugo* Research Club, the student society dedicated to *rakugo*, where I met many dear friends and learned how to perform *rakugo* (see Chapter 4). Fascinated by this world and bewildered by how such a rich tradition could be so little known outside Japan, I decided to make *rakugo* the focus of my research. The discovery of a surprising revival of *rakugo* in the last 20 years, which saw the rise in the number of *rakugoka* to be the highest ever recorded in *rakugo*'s history, convinced me to dedicate this doctoral thesis to an anthropological exploration of the contemporary world of *rakugo* storytellers.

[9] See Shores (2021b) on the role of *makura*.
[10] That is, before 1868.

A Brief Overview of Rakugo Studies

A great number of books on *rakugo* have been published in Japan, the vast majority consisting of non-academic titles, such as transcriptions of *rakugo* tales performed by famous *rakugoka*, autobiographies of performers[11], or guidebooks on "how to enjoy" *rakugo*, including "introductions to *rakugo*" for children, or for businessmen hoping to improve their presentation skills[12]. All these publications, together with the monthly issues of the specialised magazine "Tokyo Kawaraban" – which contains interviews, announcements on upcoming shows, and essays by various intellectuals and celebrities on *rakugo* and other arts of the *yose* theatre – represented precious primary sources for my research.

As for academic publications, a modest field of *rakugo* studies has emerged compared to when historian Okitsu Kaname, in 1968, lamented the scarcity of serious research on *rakugo* considering its historical relevance for Japanese culture and literature (Okitsu 1968, 268). A relatively varied corpus of literature is available today, with publications focusing on *rakugo*'s history (Okitsu 1968; Sekiyama 1964; Yamamoto 2006; Yoshikawa 2009; Yamamoto et al. 2010; Toda 2014; Hirose 2020), linguistics (Nomura 1994, 1996), *rakugo*'s influence on Japanese literature (Mizukawa 2000; Onda 2023; Okitsu 1974) and even cognitive science (Ryota and Okada 2014). Of interest for this research are the few anthropological books on the topic, authored by renowned scholar Kawada Junzō (Kawada 1992, 2020). Kawada's latest publication, *Jinruigakusha no Rakugoron* (An Anthropologist's Theory of *Rakugo*), attempts to define *rakugo* in somewhat "objective" terms, and touches certain fundamental questions with which this research will engage, such as the social role of *rakugoka* and the ultimate appeal of *rakugo*. The biggest difference with other "theories of *rakugo*" I introduce below lies in the comparative nature of Kawada's work: he analyses Japanese *rakugo* alongside what he calls "*African Rakugo*" – hundreds of tales he listened to during his fieldwork in southern Burkina Faso – commenting on the fundamental similarities of mindset between unrelated human populations that the stories suggest (Kawada 2020, 131). The book also briefly compares *rakugo* to what is probably its most similar art outside Japan, Chinese *dānkǒu xiàng sheng*, but Kawada comments that while this is "said to be on the verge of extinction due to a massive decrease in the numbers of performers", *rakugo* is experiencing instead an ongoing revival (ibid., 11). This

[11] Accounts of one's early years as an apprentice under a famous – and often strict – master seem to be especially popular. See for example *Bekenya: Wa ga shi, Katsura Bunraku,* by Yanagiya Koman (2005), or *Akamedaka* (2008), by Tatekawa Danshun, also adapted into a TV drama starring Takeshi Kitano.
[12] See for example Inada (2018).

corroborates Malay performing arts researcher Amin Sweeney's pessimistic statement on the situation of professional storytelling in Asian countries besides Japan (Sweeney 1979, 26) and further highlights the peculiarity of *rakugo*'s success.

As with many other topics in Japan, a conspicuous third category of quasi-academic books completes the corpus of *rakugo* studies. Particularly insightful are a number of "theories of/on *rakugo*" ("*rakugoron*") authored by famous performers (Tatekawa Danshi 1965, 1984, 2009; Yanagiya Kosanji 2007; Yanagiya Tsubame 2009; Tatekawa Shiraku 2010) and commentators (Horii 2009). These mostly contain the authors' ideas regarding what makes good *rakugo*, what is right and what is wrong in the contemporary *rakugo* art world[13], and what performers, producers and fans should do in regard to the various dilemmas they encounter on matters such as preservation versus innovation, seeking governmental aid versus striving to keep *rakugo* commercially sustainable, inheriting the great masterpieces versus creating new stories, and so on. These books circulate widely among storytellers[14] and fans, stirring lively debates in which every *rakugoka*, either explicitly or implicitly, participates in their performances and their decisions off stage. I will therefore often refer to these books when discussing specific debates in the *rakugo* field, including when highlighting complaints, a precious insight into how members of any given field believe "things are [ought to be] done here" (Becker 2008, xv).

As for scholarship outside Japan, the first account of *rakugo* in a European language is Jules Adam's *Au Japon: Les Racounters Publics* (1899)[15], which provides an interesting description of the *rakugo* scene in the Meiji Period, with details on *rakugoka*'s income, the audience's social extraction, and satirical and "improper" performances. Then, the first academic articles in European languages worth noticing appeared, perhaps not by coincidence, in the late 1960s and 1970s, at the end of the so-called "Golden Era of Post-war *Rakugo*" (Yamamoto 2006, 105). Hrdličkova, a pioneering scholar in the field of Chinese and Japanese storytelling, authored three of them: "*The Zenza, the Story-teller's Apprentice"* (1968), "*Japanese Professional Storyteller*" (1969) and "*Gramophone Recordings of the Representative Tales of Katsura Bunraku, a Professional Japanese Storyteller*" (1972), the last one including an account on the life of *rakugoka* as seen through the (now legendary) Master Katsura Bunraku VIII's personal experiences. Just a few years later, Novograd (1974) presented a concise introduction to both the context and content of *rakugo* production, while also attempting a rough

[13] By art world, as I will later explain, I intend "all the people whose activities are necessary to the production of the characteristic works which that world, and perhaps others as well, define art", as defined by Becker (1982, 34).
[14] In this thesis I use "storyteller" as a synonymous of "*rakugo* performer", "*rakugoka*", or "*hanashika*".
[15] Translated to English by Osman Edwards as "Japanese Storytellers: from the French of Jules Adams" (1899).

classification of the existing types of stories. Most of all, these articles represented an introduction to the *rakugo* world for the English-speaking reader and an appreciation of the value of *rakugo* "from two points of view: the literary and the cultural" (Novograd 1974, 188) an approach shared by Orsi (1977, published in Italian), who focused on the literary significance of *kōdan*[16] and *rakugo* in the Tokugawa and Meiji periods. Of greater interest to this thesis is Sweeney's (1979) account of the *rakugo* world as seen from his perspective as an expert on Malay storytelling, based on six months of fieldwork in and around Tokyo. Sweeney's approach brings a much-needed injection of contextualization and theoretical considerations in the field of *rakugo* studies, an endeavour this research aims to emulate.

In 1990, Heinz Morioka and Miyoko Sasaki published *Rakugo: The Popular Narrative Art of Japan*, the first monograph on the subject published in English. The book represents a precious source of information, including a historical overview starting from the roots of the art in the work of 6th century Buddhist preachers up until the 1980s, as well as detailed descriptions of artistic conventions, of structural elements of *rakugo* stories, and of the various "houses" in which *rakugoka* are divided. The book represented an extremely valuable addition to the slowly emerging field of *rakugo* studies outside Japan and stimulated further research. A modest rise in interest in the matter is indeed testified by the number of doctoral dissertations on *rakugo* published since (Brau 1994; Masuyama 1997; Welch 1998; Young 2003; Shores 2014; Stark 2024; Şahin 2016).

In 2008, Lorie Brau published *Rakugo: Performing Comedy and Cultural Heritage in Contemporary Tokyo*, an ethnographic account of the *rakugo* art world, and perhaps the single most important reference for this research. This monograph is based on fieldwork among Tokyo *rakugo* performers and fans, which entailed becoming a temporary apprentice of a famous master. The book contains a great wealth of statements expressed by members of the *rakugo* art world on a variety of issues relevant to this research, as well as ethnographic accounts of norms, rituals, and happenings in the field. Beyond providing precious ethnographic data, the monograph contributes theoretical considerations to the field of *rakugo* studies by assessing the relationship between *rakugo* and discourses of *cultural heritage*. Brau conducted her ethnographic research in 1991-1992 but completed the book just in time to briefly note a revival of interest in the art in the early 2000s, which she explains as one aspect of a "Japanese Language and Literature Boom" (Brau 2008, 216), while

[16] *Kōdan* is another, less-humorous form of "traditional" storytelling, whose stories mostly originate from historical war chronicles such as the Heike Monogatari. Popular during the Edo period, Kōdan currently counts far less performers than *rakugo*, even though a young "star", Kanda Hakuzan, has attracted again attention to the art in the last few years – see Chapter 3.

also mentioning the impact of television in popularising *rakugo* among children, and the emerging role of the internet[17]. This dissertation builds upon Brau's work by returning to the field almost 30 years later, filling the gap on recent developments in the *rakugo* art world, and attempting to comprehensively tackle the puzzle of *rakugo*'s ongoing prosperity.

In recent years, perhaps as a consequence of the rise in interest in *rakugo* I describe in this thesis, a small but growing number of researchers have dedicated their work to *rakugo*. These include Matthew Shores, who worked especially on Kansai's Kamigata Rakugo (see Shores 2021a, 2021b, 2022, 2023), Till Weingartner, who authored works on performance and humour in *rakugo* and beyond (see Weingärtner 2013, 2016b, 2016a, 2021), Sarah Stark, who worked on apprenticeship and other aspects of the *rakugo* art world, from gender to stage name conventions (Stark 2022, 2023, 2024) and Esra Gökçe Şahin, whose anthropological study of rakugo focused on issues of gender, memory and semiotics (Şahin 2016, 2022).

Through this dissertation and the further publications that will come out of my doctoral research, I hope to contribute to this emerging field of *rakugo* studies, looking in particular at a problem largely unexplained by the above literature – the resilience, and 21st-century revival, of *rakugo*. Through the specific case of *rakugo*, I also hope to provide useful insights for the broader academic debates I engage with throughout the chapters, from the impact of COVID-19 on community resilience[18], to the role of forms of "capital" in fields of artistic production, to shifts in class consciousness in contemporary Japanese society[19].

Theoretical Framework: Art Worlds and Fields

Throughout this doctoral project, both at the time of fieldwork and in the write-up of this dissertation, I borrowed the term "art world" from Howard Becker's works on the sociology of art (Becker 1982, 2008) as a way to inform my understanding of the boundaries of the "*rakugo* world", which are not limited to the so-called "professional" performers but include amateur practitioners, students, fans, critics, writers, producers and owners of theatres and of other venues, from bars to temples, where *rakugo* is performed. This guided my gaze in the field, helping me notice connections and relevant actors and events which would have been missed had I fixated strictly on the community of professionals as defined by the ideological boundaries established by *rakugoka*. Also, at times,

[17] See Chapter 3 on the TV-induced popularity of the rakugo story *Jugemu* among children, and Chapter 1 on the digitalisation of *rakugo*, especially after COVID-19.
[18] See Chapter 1, a version of which I have published in the journal Asian Anthropology (see Di Francesco 2024).
[19] See Chapters 5 and 6.

informants proposed a somewhat "literary" understanding of *rakugo* – as a series of art pieces (*rakugo* stories) created by authors (*rakugoka*), among which we may identify a "canon" of important authors that any analysis or history of *rakugo* cannot ignore. Nakanishi, an amateur practitioner and my *senpai* (senior) at the Waseda Rakugo Research Club (and, incidentally, an English Literature researcher) argued for example that "you cannot talk about modern *rakugo* without mentioning the work of the late Yanagiya Kitahachi [1949-2016]" (interview with the author, 5 February 2021). While I appreciated the suggestion and purchased a few DVDs to fill in the gaps of my knowledge on Kitahachi's *rakugo* (indeed, masterpiece performances), the socio-anthropological perspective of my research, and in particular the idea, informed by the seminal works of Becker, that every cultural or artistic piece is the result of a collective effort (Becker 1974), allowed me to maintain a different lens from that embraced by such literary-minded informants, and look also at the contribution of members not celebrated in the "canon".

While Becker's theoretical concepts and practical advice (see Becker 1998) supported my research process, it was the work of another author, in some aspects antithetical to Becker's sociology of art, which helped me make sense of my observations when I tried to unpack and understand the dynamics of the world of professional *rakugoka*, and especially as I searched for an answer to *rakugo's* resilience that went beyond trends and "booms": Pierre Bourdieu.

As a philosopher turned social scientist who aimed at establishing a general "theory of practice" (Bourdieu 1977), it is perhaps unsurprising that Bourdieu covered – and influenced – a wide range of topics and disciplines. Researchers across the humanities and social sciences (see Medvetz and Sallaz 2018) have found fruitful applications for the theoretical concepts he helped coin or popularise, such as *field* (Bourdieu 1993b) and *habitus* (Bourdieu 2023), and the differentiation of *economic*, *social*, *cultural* and *symbolic capital* (Bourdieu 2002). Among the countless arenas of human activity on which Bourdieu's theory has been applied, the "field of cultural production", a category to which we may also ascribe the world of *rakugo*, is one on which Bourdieu personally conducted research (Bourdieu 1993a), a fact which may explain why his findings resonated as particularly relevant for the aims of discussing my observations in the world of *rakugo*.

While Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field, and capital have been mostly applied without modifications by a great variety of researchers (see for example Sallaz and Zavisca 2007), I argue that the world of *rakugoka* – a field presenting both striking similarities and radical differences from those of French literary production or primary education Bourdieu examined – presents the opportunity to expand Bourdieu's theory of capital. Bourdieu himself points to his concepts, such as that of cultural capital, not as dogmatic or exhaustive terms, but as "a theoretical hypothesis which

made it possible to explain [the problems and empirical data at hand, such as] the unequal scholastic achievements of children" (Bourdieu 2002, 282). In other words, I argue that if observations from the fieldwork and interviews so suggest, there is room to expand on Bourdieu's theoretical framework. In this thesis, I will do so by adding, alongside concepts of economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital, that of *artistic capital:* the content which *rakugoka* perform for audiences and on which they make a living, whose peculiar system of transmission and acquisition distinguishes the *rakugo* world from the praxis and ideological framework of many similar arts such as *kōdan* and *manzai*[20]. All necessary forms of capital (including the artistic one), I will then argue, are bestowed on new *rakugoka* through the practices, structures and ideologies I illustrate in this thesis, creating a rather unusual level field upon entry within the *rakugo* world, enabling *rakugoka* a chance to succeed relatively independently from previous connections, upbringing or education.

As I will show, this was possible in the context of the *rakugo* world's origins as a "place for people unfit" for mainstream society – a "safety net" for "those who can't make it" – as my informants put it. This situation entailed the need to provide all resources to apprentices bereft of any form of capital, so that they may learn the *rakugo* craft and embody the *rakugoka* ethos (or *habitus*, to remain within Bourdieu's framework), which may allow them to make a living, if at the margins of respectable society. As I will present in chapter 6, this structure and its ideological apparatus have recently experienced significant changes that may undermine it, and further research will be needed to assess the continued sustainability of the practices I describe in this thesis.

Still, notwithstanding the specificity of its origins and its increasing limitations, the overall organisational system adopted by *rakugoka* – in other words, *rakugo*'s *economy of practice* – represents, I argue, a useful example, from which significant lessons can be learned on how to save an endangered art, and on how to keep a community (or dare I say, a society) alive and resilient. Its implications, I hope, may be of use for both practitioners of other arts in Japan, as well as for researchers across the humanities and social sciences.

Outline of Thesis

Chapter 1 introduces the circumstances and rationale of my fieldwork and methodology, positioning them within the context which affected every step of my research process: the COVID-19 pandemic. I present the impact of COVID-19 on both my ethnographic research and on the world

[20] See Chapter 5.

of *rakugo*, showing how the pandemic caused the change or dismissal of many long-cherished practices and norms, but also created new opportunities for performance and research. I argue for the value of including digital spaces in one's ethnography but also discuss how finding ethical avenues to conduct research in the field in person enabled me to observe realities which I would have missed in the more self-conscious version of their art and discourses *rakugoka* presented online.

Chapter 2 provides the historical context for the research puzzle. First, I review the history of *rakugo* from its supposed ancestral origins to the 20th century, where most of the literature stops. I then present, through interviews with fans and performers, how the art experienced a period of decline in popularity at the end of the 20th century, which was prominent in the memories of my informants but almost entirely missing in the still-emerging academic field of *rakugo* studies. I then assess the evidence and the factors behind this so-called "*Winter of Rakugo*", and its significance in creating the space for a new image of *rakugo* to emerge in the 21st century.

Chapter 3 tackles the central matter of the thesis by presenting, through interviews, participant observation, and analysis of written and audiovisual sources, the events, agents, and discourses making up what I call an ongoing *21st-century Rakugo Renaissance*. I present the circumstantial triggers of the so-called *rakugo boom* (an increase in media interest and popularity of *rakugo* starting in 2005 and reinvigorated in 2016), and I show how specific groups of *rakugoka* were able to capitalise on momentary media trends to bring about a revival of the art with long-lasting consequences for the *rakugo* world. I discuss evidence for this revival, and assess the major factors behind it, from the role of media to the sense of crisis which pushed prominent *rakugoka* to take unprecedented steps on and off the stage, bringing about a new image of the art, and of the artists, more fitting the times. Chapters 2 and 3 also represent my contribution to the historiography of *rakugo* by providing extensive testimonies of understudied developments in the late 20th-century and 21st-century field of *rakugo*.

Chapter 4 introduces how informants become members of the *rakugo* art world, from their encounter with the art, development of a passion, and, in the case of *rakugoka*, acceptance under a master and apprenticeship. I look at the great variety of experiences in the field (as opposed to simplistic discourses often embraced by *rakugoka*) and at changing practices in apprenticeship. Mostly, by presenting the lived experiences in the *rakugo* art world of my informants, this chapter provides the context for Chapter 5, which contains the dissertation's main arguments related to the resilience and revival of *rakugo*.

If Chapter 3 described the events, discourse and actors which brought about the revival of *rakugo* in 21st-century Japan, Chapter 5 uncovers the structural factors which, I argue, created the conditions behind such a revival. These mostly consist of practices, structures and ideologies within the *rakugo* world which enabled rakugoka to retain a lively and sustainable community, able to attract and train enough performers and to pass on stories and knowledge, so that when public interest momentarily focused on *rakugo*, new audiences did not find a vanishing or frozen world, but a rather vibrant, diversified community of well-trained *rakugoka* skilfully performing a rich repertoire of *rakugo* pieces. I argue that beneficial practices and structures, whose continuation is sustained by certain ideologies, endow new *rakugoka* with all the resources (or forms of "capital", including what I call "artistic capital") needed to have a chance to succeed as professional storytellers.

Finally, chapter 6 looks at one factor behind the increase in the number of *rakugoka* (in turn a major factor behind the current *rakugo* renaissance): the shift in social status of *rakugoka*, from a marginal, "yakuza-like" occupation, to a respectable career as protectors of Japanese culture. The normalisation and increase in prestige of *rakugo* happened at the same time as hegemonic models of a stable career faced a crisis in post-economic-bubble Japan, ultimately making it easier for younger informants to "take the leap" into the world of *rakugo*. Each chapter includes a more detailed summary and conclusions to guide the reader.

Before delving into the body of the thesis, the next and final subsection of this introduction will act as an entry point, or a sort of "*makura*" introduction, to the world of *rakugo* as I experienced it during my ethnographic fieldwork in 2020-2021, by reporting a vignette from one of the first shows I attended upon finally reaching the field in Tokyo.

A Night of Contemporary Rakugo

14 December 2020. Authorities report just 30 cases of COVID-19 in the whole of Tokyo. The pandemic, momentarily, seems under control as I leave the apartment where I spent two weeks of isolation upon my arrival in Japan. Outside Shinjuku Station, I meet Satō, my friend and informant whom I met in 2019 during a brief period of fieldwork for my Master's degree. Besides being a well-dressed salaryman and an involved father (he is the head of the parent-teacher association at his children's school), Satō is a *rakugo* fan. Before the pandemic, he would attend an average of three *rakugokai* (*rakugo* shows, often referred to as *kai*, "gatherings") per week, mostly small-scale shows of *futatsume*, early career *rakugo* performers who have completed their apprenticeships as *zenza* but are not yet masters (*shin'uchi*). Young performers' shows are cheaper and more intimate, and besides,

Satō tells me, *futatsume* these days are particularly good. Gone are the days when aficionados would refuse to pay for the unrefined performance of a yet-to-be-master, when most *futatsume* had to make a living as emcees at wedding ceremonies and through other gigs unrelated to *rakugo*. Nowadays, fans flock to young performers' shows to support them through their journey, taking pleasure in seeing them improve their art. *Rakugo* producer Aoki Nobuhiro, the owner of *Rakugo Café* in Jinbōchō, Tokyo, would later explain these two modes of enjoying *rakugo* as "entertainment" versus "documentary" value. In the 1970s and 1980s, fans listened to the *meijin* (great masters) to experience the best form of "entertainment", the best "art". Today, fans support *futatsume*, enjoying the "documentary" aspect of seeing young people doing their best, trying new stories, failing, at times succeeding. Aoki sees in this a similarity with *kōshien*, the high school baseball tournament arguably even more popular in Japan than professional baseball: it does not matter who wins the baseball match or who performs the best *rakugo*, the audience is in it for the stories of these young people, and is excited to see what they will go on to do (Aoki Nobuhiro, interview with the author, 20 July 2021). Indeed, several informants referred to the *futatsume* period as a sort of *seishun* (youth, or "springtime of life") of the *rakugo* career.

As we walk, Satō tells me that today's show is a *benkyōkai* (literally a "study gathering"), a small-scale show in which a *rakugoka* can hone their art in front of an intimate and usually sympathetic public. The performer is Shōfukutei Ukō, a *futatsume* scheduled to become a *shin'uchi* in Spring 2021. The venue is Music Teito, a little shop in west-Shinjuku, specialising in *rakugo* CDs and DVDs, which, in the evenings, fifteen days per month, runs shows of young *rakugoka*. As we enter, some twenty fans are already in the room, sitting on foldable chairs, surrounded by shelves full of *rakugo* recordings and books. From what I can tell from the masked faces, the room seems equally split between men and women, and the age of the audience ranges from a woman in her early 20s to a majority of middle-aged fans, and a few elders. Most fans are quietly reading the flyers with advertisements of future shows they found on their chair when they arrived, or are taking a look at the recordings on the shelves near their seat. Satō breaks the silence as he introduces me to the man who runs the shop, from whom I buy the ticket for the night (1500 yen) and a copy of the monthly magazine Tokyo Kawaraban (600 yen). As we take our seats, Satō, who is a regular at Ukō's *benkyōkai*, tells me that until last month, the audience for this show counted half the people, but in the meantime, Ukō won the 2020 *NHK Shinjin Rakugo Taishō*, the most prestigious award for an emerging *rakugoka*. I am looking at the picture of Ukō raising the award's cup on the cover of the magazine I have just bought, when music starts playing. Fans go silent, put away the flyers, adjust their posture on the chairs, and then start applauding as Ukō, dressed in a kimono, walks in between the chairs from the back of the shop to reach the small red stage towards which we are facing.

The "stage" (*kōza*) is a small table covered with a long red cloth, with a purple cushion (*zabuton*) on it. The square cushion has one seamless side, which is positioned to face the audience as a wish for the bond (*en*) between the performer and the audience never to be interrupted – I would later learn this is but one of the many ways in which *rakugoka* try to attract good luck. At the side of the stage, a paper scroll (*mekuri*) displays the performer's name written in *yose moji*, a calligraphic style characterised by thick brush strokes that aim at leaving as little white spaces as possible on the paper as a wish for a full house in the theatre, with as few empty seats in the audience as possible (Inada 2018, 24). Ukō climbs up the few steps covered by the red cloth, stands on the little stage, and sits in a kneeling position (*seiza*) on the cushion. In his hand, he is holding a folded fan made of paper and bamboo, one of the only two stage props he will use for his performance, the other being a handkerchief (*tenugui*) he keeps inside his kimono. In *rakugoka* jargon, the fan is called *kaze* (wind), and the handkerchief *mandara* (mandala), and in the hands of a skilled *rakugoka*, they can transform into any kind of object in the imagination of the listeners, from a smoking pipe to a love letter, enhancing the ability of the *rakugoka's* body to suggest situations. As applause continues, Ukō positions his paper fan horizontally in front of himself, a gesture that symbolises the divide between the "real" world the audience lives in and the imaginary, rule-defying, humorous world that will unfold on stage, and bows.

Ukō is known for his *shinsaku rakugo* ("newly created" stories), often set in the present or even near future, as opposed to *koten rakugo* (the "classics"), passed down through generations of *rakugoka* and set in the past (often between the late Edo period and the Meiji period, 18th to early 20th century). It was his surreal sci-fi *shinsaku* story *Perapera Ōkoku* (*The Chattering Kingdom*) that won him the prestigious NHK award, testifying to the legitimacy enjoyed by *shinsaku* in the *rakugo* world today. At the *benkyōkai* at Music Teito, too, he performs three *shinsaku* stories, in the span of one and a half hours. One of the stories Ukō performed, *Replicant* – inspired by the 1982 movie Blade Runner – encapsulates tensions over what a "professional *rakugoka*" is. I present it here to point out that tension, and to provide an example of Reiwa (2019-) *rakugo* as I experienced it in the field:

> The year is 2030. Japan's economy is in shambles, and *rakugoka* are completely broke. Ukō himself is the main character. He and his fellow *rakugoka* cannot attract any fans. Meanwhile, non-*rakugoka* actors and celebrities start to make very successful *rakugo* shows. They take on *rakugoka* names and skilfully perform *rakugo* classics. But they are not considered "professionals" by the protagonist, Ukō, who is furious against these "semi-pros" which he calls *nisemono* (counterfeits), or *repurikanto* (replicants). He and a fellow *rakugoka* complain about one of these semi-pros at a bar, but the owner of the bar tells them to shut up, because

the celebrity they call “replicant” does a much better *rakugo* than they do, attracts more fans, and spreads *rakugo* among more people. In other words, he contributes to *rakugo* more than they do, and moreover, unlike them, who work part-time as food delivery drivers, he makes a living out of *rakugo*. Ukō angrily answers: “Who do these underground idols think they are! They might be good at *rakugo* and make a living out of it, but they don’t know how to fold a master’s kimono or how and when to give tea backstage to the masters – this is what makes a *rakugoka*!” [This solicits much laughter and applause in the audience – the story questions what a professional *rakugoka* is, teasing the boundaries, revealing the humour contained in accepted definitions]. Ukō buys a weapon and goes around Japan killing these replicants, which include many real names of semi-professional performers. The last of his enemies is San'yūtei Harashō, whom, in the story, Ukō sees as the origin of the problem.

Harashō, a real person, was the disciple of San'yūtei Enjō, but after 20 years was suddenly expelled (*hamon*) by his master for trivial reasons[21]. However, the master Enjō, famous for his irreverent *shinsaku rakugo* and, at times, erratic behaviour, later asked him to come perform at his show: “But master, am I still expelled?” “Yes!” “But should I come perform?” “Yes!”. Harashō, conscious of being expelled and therefore not a *rakugoka* anymore, appeared in a western-style suit instead of a *kimono*. Enjō scolded him and told him to wear something “more *rakugo*-like… something more kimono-like…”, “But master, I cannot wear a kimono because I am not a *rakugoka* anymore, right?” “Correct!” “But you don’t want me to perform if not in a kimono?” “Correct!”. Harashō thus performs since then in an unusual kind of kimono, an embodiment of his being a *rakugoka* in the sense that, de facto, his master accepted him back, but also of *not* being a *rakugoka* in the sense that, formally, his master never reinstated him as part of the artistic family, and so he is not considered a *rakugoka* by his peers and by the Rakugo Association (Rakugo Kyōkai) he used to belong to before the expulsion. He blurred the boundaries between *rakugoka* and non-*rakugoka*. In the story, Ukō sees this as the source of all problems and thus goes to his house to kill him. As he peeks inside the living room, however, he sees Harashō tirelessly attending to his dying master Enjō, showing great filial piety. Enjō dies. Ukō enters the room, and Harashō asks him to kill him, because he

[21] Ukō had the characters in his story explain this information for the sake of the fans not familiar with Harashō, who is a friend of his. I would later attend several shows starring Harashō, who confirmed in his autobiographic performances on stage and in personal communication what Ukō mentioned here.

wants to enter the afterworld with his master. Ukō, impressed, decides to spare him and tells him to go on living as the "last of the real *rakugoka*"[22].

The traditional aesthetic created by kimono or calligraphy and the performance of symbolic gestures might give the impression of *rakugo* as a world strictly regulated by *kata*, established ways to behave and perform, and embedded in "cultural heritage" and "Japanese traditions". This, however, misses one crucial side of the picture. Literature on *rakugo* contributes to this traditional image by focusing on the most orthodox institutions and performers in *rakugo*. In this dissertation, too, I will present the many long-held practices, rituals, and modes of social organisation that characterise the *rakugo* world, and how some of these, in particular, are behind the resilience and recent revival of *rakugo*. However, I will also show how the comedian's spirit embodied by *rakugoka* results in constant breaking and mending of the rules. In the world of *rakugoka*, the worst insult is to be a "*share no wakaranai yatsu"* – someone who cannot take a joke. As I came back from fieldwork, I found it quite difficult to render in writing what *rakugo* is about and how the *rakugo* world works. Every formal explanation of practices and norms did not feel right. Everything seemed to depict a world more akin to the descriptions of other "traditional performing arts" (*dentō geinō*) like *kabuki*, *nō-kyōgen,* or tea ceremony. A crucial feeling of the *rakugo* world was missing. Perhaps the nature of academic research cannot but bring me into the realm of "*majime*", or serious endeavour, that *rakugoka* and fans so often escape and make fun of. I will try to convey the mocking spirit with which performers engage in rituals and norms while also presenting the importance of those same rituals and norms. Embedding this tension in my writing will hopefully allow me to represent the mirroring tension between adherence to "traditional" rules and to an equally "traditional" spirit of irreverence in the world of *rakugo*, a tension that Ukō and all my other informants embrace through their lives and art, on and off stage.

[22] Thus implying that what makes a *rakugoka* is such filial piety towards one's master.

Chapter 1.
Fieldwork and Methodology:
Researching Rakugo in the Time of COVID-19

Chapter Summary

This chapter tackles two main tasks: first, it introduces my field – the *rakugo* art world in Tokyo – and the fieldwork methodology I employed to research its ongoing resilience and recent revival. Second, it assesses the impact of COVID-19 on said field and research experience, and in doing so, it represents a testimony of lived experiences and politics in Tokyo at the time of the pandemic. Upon discussing how I found an ethical way into the physical field in Tokyo, I will draw on observation and interviews conducted during one year of ethnography in the physical and digital spaces of the *rakugo* scene in 2020-2021 to uncover how COVID-19 forced – and at the same time, *allowed* – members of the *rakugo* world to make unprecedented decisions and modify or dismiss long-held practices and taboos. This negatively affected the livelihood of many performers and producers, but also created opportunities for change.

One major consequence was the sudden surge of activities of *rakugoka* in the digital realm, which created novel dynamics in the field and also provided, for my work, insightful research opportunities, evidence of the value and importance of incorporating digital spaces into ethnography. However, I will present how activities online could not tell the whole story of the pandemic-time *rakugo* field: as online shows granted anonymity to viewers, undermining *rakugo*'s traditional strategies for avoiding controversies[23], *rakugoka* exercised a higher degree of self-censorship when streaming or recording for online viewers. Only accessing the field in person, as a helper at small *rakugo* shows in Tokyo, enabled me to witness the quiet and often humorous subversion that was taking place in Tokyo at offline shows. Thus, the main methodological takeaway is that not only are "offline" and "online" research findings equally valuable, as shown by earlier assessments of digital ethnography in anthropology (Hine 2000; Miller and Horst 2012; Pink et al. 2016) and by the recent wave of digital research spurred by the pandemic (see Shah 2023); but that *combining* online and in-person research proved particularly insightful.

[23] As I will mention later in the chapter, *rakugoka* pay careful attention not to offend audience members at live performances, especially in the case of people with disabilities, pregnant women, children, or other easily recognisable categories. See Brau (2008, 203).

In terms of ethics, this thesis suggests that ethnographers working in situations in which their presence could represent a problem to their informants (such as in the case of a pandemic), should strive to find a way to contribute to the field through their very research process, rather than only planning to (rightfully) "pay back" the community they studied by amplifying informants' voices through publications. Finally, in line with the literature pointing at the categories worst affected by COVID-19 (Slater 2020; Trnka 2021; Giammaria 2020), and with the anthropologists of Japan who looked at forms of vulnerability and resilience in the communities they studied (Wadhwa 2020; C. Kondo and Lichten 2020), I will argue that the pandemic highlighted the vulnerability of *rakugoka* as "non-essential" workers, but also the resilience of the *rakugo* community in the form of solidarity between performers, fans, and organisers.

1.1 Introduction – an (un)Happy New Year

Everyone wishes to start the New Year with a laugh!

My friend and informant Shiori-san, a passionate *rakugo* fan, uncovered her smile from a surgical mask for a moment and sipped some coffee.

> *Even many people who would hesitate to describe themselves as* rakugo *fans make it an annual ritual to go see a* rakugo *show in early January.*
> Q: A bit like how not-so-devoted Christians fill churches on Christmas Eve?
> *I guess so* [laughs]. *Well, you should go see for yourself.* (interview with the author, 23 Dec 2020).

On a sunny morning on 8 January 2021, I put on an FFP2 mask and made my way to Ikebukuro, northern Tokyo, where one of the four regular *yose* theatres[24] of Tokyo is located. At the corner of a commercial street (*shōtengai*), next to a karaoke hall and below a Shōwa[25]-style retro café, a sign indicates that the stairs descending underground lead to the *Ikebukuro Engeijō*. Colourful banners carry the name of the day's headliner (*tori*), the one responsible for ending the show with a longer story after everyone else has appeared on stage. On any given day of the year, two shows are held at the *yose* – a matinee and a soiree. Exceptionally, in early January, a third daily programme is added

[24] A *yose* in its broader meaning indicates any venue in which *rakugo* is performed. A "regular" *yose* (*jōseki*) is a theatre that stays open every day of the year, providing the opportunity for dozens of *rakugoka* every day to perform in front of an audience. See (Brau 2008, p. 155-169)
[25] Shōwa refers to one of the eras of the Japanese calendar, lasting 1926-1989. Other modern eras are Meiji (1868-1912), Taishō (1912-1926), Heisei (1989-2019), and Reiwa (2019-).

to allow as many performers as possible on stage. In an interview, the owner-manager (a role called *sekitei*) of one of Tokyo's *yose* explained:

> *New Year's yose features more* rakugoka (rakugo performers) *than usual, each appearing on stage for 5 minutes compared to the usual 12-15, so that as many performers as possible will have the chance to wish the audience a Happy New Year. Despite tickets being slightly more expensive than usual, New Year shows are always the most crowded. We make a considerable portion of our annual profit in early January* (Suzuki Atsushi, *sekitei*, Ueno Suzumoto Engeijō. Interview with the author, 22 October 2021).

The headliner on 8 January 2021 was San'yūtei Yūza, an 82-year-old master of the art. However, as I paid for my student-discount ticket[26] and received the leaflet with the day's performers, another name attracted my attention even more: Shun'pūtei Shōta. A star of *rakugo*, head of the Rakugo Geijutsu Kyōkai (one of five existing *rakugo* professional associations in Japan) and host of the popular TV show *Shōten*, Shōta can easily fill a theatre with a thousand fans thanks to his storytelling ability and celebrity status[27]. Being able to see him in the more intimate atmosphere of the Ikebukuro Engeijō, with its 92 seats, feels like a great privilege.

However, January 2021 was no regular New Year's season. After the performance of the *zenza* (the apprentice *rakugoka*), who told a simple story without adding personal comments, the first *rakugoka* listed in the programme took his seat on the cushion (*zabuton*) at the centre of the stage and welcomed us:

> *Thank you for coming to this non-urgent, non-essential gathering. It is the first day of the new state of emergency in Tokyo, and yet, the emergency declaration does not seem to work: the audience has increased… sevenfold from yesterday!*

I looked around and counted seven people, including me. Ikebukuro Engeijō seats ninety-two people. The day before, apparently, only one fan showed up:

> *Yesterday, we had to stop the performance and wait for him when he had to use the restroom!*

As we laughed, I was also left to wonder: how can a community of professional performers survive if only one ticket is sold on what is supposed to be one of the busiest days of the year? I had come to

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[26] The regular fee for an adult at Ikebukuro in 2021 was 2500, increased to 3500 for the New Year's show, and discounted by 500 yen for students.

[27] Not by chance, Shōta is also one of the very few *rakugoka* to be the focus of academic research outside Japan - see Till Weingärtner's article *Whose Story Is It Anyway? Shunpūtei Shōta and the Individuality of the Performer in Contemporary Rakugo Storytelling* (2021).

Japan to investigate the puzzle of *rakugo's* resilience and increasing popularity in the 21st century. As it turned out, I would be there to witness how the *rakugo* world faced the unprecedented challenges of a global pandemic.

1.2 Methods and Positionality: Finding Ethical Avenues for Fieldwork

In the spring of 2020, I was scheduled to reach Tokyo from Europe and start a one-year ethnographic fieldwork period on which to base a doctoral dissertation. Following in the footsteps of Lorie Brau (2008), who conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Tokyo's *rakugo* world in the 1990s, I intended to spend the first months attending shows and getting to know fans, producers and performers, and eventually find a *rakugo* master who could take me as a temporary disciple for the remainder of my time in Tokyo. This would have allowed me to join an artistic family (*ichimon*) and to work backstage at the *yose*, giving me access to informants and to spaces of training, performance, and social interaction. Instead, in March 2020, Japan closed its borders, and for the following nine months, I found myself stuck in my hometown in Northern Italy. In November 2020, I finally reached my field, but Japan's "new normal" meant that even in Tokyo, I had to change plans due to practical and ethical concerns.

More than what is usually the case, the issue of "positionality" in my project took a literal, spatial meaning – the place where I decided to position myself became the most important ethical question. First, I was afraid of the possibility, as a disciple, of spreading the virus to elderly performers. Despite the increase in the number of young *rakugoka* I describe throughout this thesis, many *rakugoka* at the *yose* (where I would have trained as an apprentice) are elderly masters, since performing there is a hard-earned prestige usually obtained after years or decades of work. I was thus wary of spending extensive time in close contact with such an at-risk population. Moreover, while Lorie Brau in the 1990s was admitted to the *yose* backstages quite quickly, today, due to the very revival of *rakugo* I came to study, the number of *zenza* (in-training apprentices) is so high that new disciples must join year-long waiting lists (see Chapters 3 and 4). What is more, with the pandemic, the already limited number of *zenza* allowed backstage was further reduced at the time of my fieldwork:

> *I entered the community of* rakugo *performers in 2018, but I spent the first 16 months as a* minarai *(trial disciple, not yet allowed to train at the* yose*), waiting for my spot. […] Now, with COVID, only three of us are allowed backstage at any time; we follow a shift system. Instead of spending every day at the* yose *like it used to be, we only have a limited amount of*

time – and even then, interactions with other performers are kept to a minimum (Reireisha Miima, *zenza*. Interview with the author, 26 June 2021).

In other words, it would have been difficult to gain access to the *yose* within the time limit of my fieldwork, and even if I had managed to, considering how only a few *zenza* were allowed backstage, I would have stolen the increasingly scarce opportunity to train from an actual prospective *rakugoka*.

While embracing (as I will show below) new opportunities for digital research created by the pandemic, I knew from my contacts that a great deal of activities in the field were going on in person. I wanted to fulfil my ethical and civic obligations and avoid spreading the virus, but I also knew people were attending in-person shows, no matter what I did or what official discourses proclaimed. How could I observe this reality while minimising my impact on it? The solution came out of the pandemic situation itself. *Yose* theatres employ a relatively stable team of ushers to run shows. Smaller productions, instead, only hire occasional "helpers" (*otetsudai*) when needed. Due to pandemic regulations and self-imposed policies, these small productions limited the capacity of their venues to guarantee "social distancing" between fans. While their revenue decreased, extra labour was now necessary: beyond the usual tasks (setting the stage, collecting tickets), they needed someone to take temperatures, spray hand sanitiser, and write down names and contact addresses in case anyone in the audience was to test positive. I thus volunteered to become such an "anti-COVID-19" helper at several small-scale venues around Tokyo.

Working to prevent infections in the field and helping grassroots productions by providing much-needed labour seemed to me like the most ethical and practical way to fulfil the anthropologist's greatest desire – *being there*. This perhaps can be a suggestion for anthropologists in times of crisis – in a context in which our presence in the field might aggravate a problem (such as in a pandemic), researchers should strive to find a way to be part of the solution. Before (rightfully) thinking about "giving back" to the community upon completion of fieldwork, there might be a way for our research practice itself to help already.

Practically, my ethnographic fieldwork consisted of 12 months of participant observation at both public shows (in *yose* theatres, *hall rakugo*, small *rakugo*-focused venues [see Chapter 5], and alternative venues such as temples) and private shows (at Waseda University and in private houses of informants I befriended), as well as more informal gatherings of fans, performers and producers. The intensity and frequency of in-person ethnography fluctuated heavily depending on epidemiological and policy developments. Online, I joined *rakugo* shows on platforms such as YouTube, Pia, and

other streamed shows[28], participated to the online activities of the Waseda Rakugo Research Club on the platform Discord – including performing *rakugo* online for the Waseda University Festival – and joined international events related to *rakugo*, often on Zoom, such as the ones supported by the Japan Foundation London, for which I acted as a speaker and co-organiser. The discussion among performers, fans and other relevant members of the *rakugo* world on Twitter (now X) also constituted an important source of information on discourses in the field.

Alongside participant observation, I conducted in-depth interviews with members of the *rakugo* art world. Partially in response to the (in hindsight, unfounded) fear of not having enough material due to the pandemic, I conducted a rather large number of interviews: 66 in total, each ranging from one to five hours in length, with a total of 125 hours of recordings. All interviews but the one with San'yūtei Kōseinen (a Swedish-born *rakugoka*, with whom I spoke in English) were conducted in Japanese, and then translated into English to be quoted in this thesis (all translations are mine). Another reason for the large number of interviews was my attempt to portray a somewhat representative picture of the great variety of experiences in the *rakugo* world: I thus included performers from all *rakugoka* associations (Rakugo Kyōkai, Rakugo Geijutsu Kyōkai, Kamigata Rakugo Kyōkai, Tatekawa-ryū, Godaime Enraku Ichimon Kai) as well as freelancers (such as Rakugoka Rabuhei and Ramune). I interviewed performers at all career stages, from aspiring *rakugoka* to *zenza* apprentices, *futatsume* young performers, *shin'uchi* masters, and older ("veteran") artists. I included masters of classical *rakugo* (*koten*), creators of *new rakugo* (*shinsaku*), and performers famous for their adaptations of classics (*kaisaku*). I included several women *rakugoka*, who represent a small but growing minority,[29] and performers of different geographical and social backgrounds. Besides *rakugoka*, I interviewed amateur performers, fans of all ages, *sekitei* (yose owners/managers), large and small-scale *rakugo* producers (so-called *petit-sekitei*), researchers, and *rakugo*-related freelance writers. I also interviewed practitioners of other arts (*kamikiri*, *kōdan*, *rōkyoku*) to compare my findings in the *rakugo* world with their experiences. Both the interviews and the more informal moments of communication which enrich this dissertation have been made possible by means of being in the field in person, either as a member of the audience, but most often as a helper at various venues, such as Dōrakutei in Shinjuku or Reireisha Maruko's "Secret *rakugo* club" (*himitsu rakugo kurabu*) at Shibuya Salvabelcanto Studio.

[28] Most were publicised at the page https://hanashi.jp [Accessed 31 March 2025]
[29] I eventually cut a chapter on *rakugo* and gender due to time and space limitations, but I am preparing a publication about it.

Even after accessing the field in person, the pandemic heavily affected the interpersonal dynamics characterising my ethnographic experience. On the one hand, due to the risks posed by physical proximity, people were less open to starting up conversations with me (or anyone) compared to my pre-COVID experience. The effects of distance were perceived by *rakugoka* as well:

> *The space between fans at a show is usually so narrow that if someone laughs, the laughter spreads to others. But now there's a distance between fans, and the masks muffle laughter… People don't laugh much on their own; sometimes, they even feel bad about laughing. Why would you come to a comedy show then?* [laughs]. *At a show in a Buddhist temple where I performed, there were acrylic sheets separating each of the 30 or so fans individually. How could anyone laugh in such a space, all wrapped up in plastic?* [laughs]. (Reireisha Miima. Interview with the author, 26 June 2021).

On the other hand, however, I felt that sharing this small act of transgression (gathering at a non-essential, but legal, event), bonded people, creating a sort of light-hearted atmosphere of rebellion. *Rakugoka* on stage often used that for comic material:

> *Thank you for coming to this gathering against the recommendations of the authorities and your family. You are really putting your life on the line for* rakugo*! Well, if you expect me to do better than usual because of that, you will be disappointed…* (T., *rakugoka*, at Ueno Hirokōjitei, 27 Dec 2020).

In a way, this shared guilt overrode the risk of exclusion that my positionality as a non-Japanese man comported. Working at small *rakugo* shows at a time when very few foreigners were allowed entry to Japan, and when only the most passionate fans dared to risk infection or social shunning for the sake of *rakugo*, meant that fewer people could mistake me for a tourist or a casual passerby. Many, instead, took for granted my status as an insider: on many nights in which I took people's forehead temperatures with a gun-looking thermometer at the door of Shinjuku's Dōrakutei (a small venue in Shinjuku nichōme where I spent much of my time as a helper), fans asked me if I was a *rakugoka*, or who my *shishō* (master) was.

Eventually, despite pandemic-induced difficulties, being in the field in person allowed me to connect with members of the *rakugo* world and share their space of work and play, developing the social intimacy necessary for a successful ethnography (see Shah 2023), on which this thesis is based.

1.3 The Impact of COVID-19 on Rakugo: Changing Long-held Practices

> *Just before the pandemic hit, we were at the peak of a* rakugo *boom, with those who first initiated it in the early 2000s still in their best shape, and new young people also emerging. If we think about all the shows that were cancelled… We probably lost 80% of the money* rakugo *would have generated this year* (San'yūtei Kenkō, interview with the author, 7 Sep 2021).

> *It really is a pity, because the number of young fans was increasing… I hope people will not forget about us* (Reireisha Miima, interview with the author, 26 Jun 2021).

Before the arrival of COVID-19, the *rakugo* community had been thriving. As I will show in Chapter 3, since around 2005, *rakugo* has experienced a great revival in popularity (Hirose 2020), and the number of *rakugoka* had been steadily increasing[30]. Following waves of new performers and fans, small-scale venues dedicated to *rakugo* (such as Rakugo Café in Jinbōchō and Dōrakutei in Shinjuku nichōme) popped up all around the metropolitan area of Tokyo, where the number of monthly shows passed from 113 in July 1989 to 803 in July 2019, not including the regular *yose* (open every day) and the many non-advertised shows held in companies, schools, or private houses (see Chapters 3 and 5).

All of this outburst of activities, however, suddenly slowed down with the arrival in Yokohama of the *Diamond Princess* cruise ship, which on 3 February 2020 started Japan's COVID-19 era (see Nakazawa et al., 2020). The magazine *Tokyo Kawaraban* (2020a) reported that 385 of the ca. 1,000 shows listed in its March 2020 issue were cancelled or postponed. In April, the number of cancelled shows rose to 783 (*Tokyo Kawaraban* 2020b). This had a heavy symbolic relevance since, in the *rakugo* community, as in other Japanese performing arts worlds, cancelling a show is considered taboo. In the *rakugo* story *Otoko No Hanamichi* (*"Man's Path of Flowers"*)[31], the main character, a rising star of *kabuki*, at the climax of the plot, faces the dilemma of having to leave the theatre just before the start of his show to go save the life of an old friend – a doctor who once saved his eyesight and acting career. While he eventually chooses to go, the decision to cancel a show to save a friend's life and repay an old debt is portrayed as a painful one, and the *kabuki* actor is hailed as an exemplary

[30] Data on performers and shows was collected from the magazine Tokyo Kawaraban, volumes 177 to 588 (years 1989 to 2022) – see Chapter 3.
[31] Originally a 1941 movie and *kabuki* play, later adapted to *kōdan* and finally *rakugo*. Hanamichi, the "flower path", is a long, elevated platform passing through the audience and reaching the stage in *kabuki* theatres, mostly used by actors for entrances and exits.

friend. Performed by a skilful *rakugoka,* this story has a powerful emotional impact on the audience – the fans around me, and I, were no exception when I first listened to it performed by Shun'pūtei Koasa at Kokuritsu Engeijō Theatre in March 2021. However, as I stepped out of the theatre and dried my teary eyes, I found myself asking: *wait, wasn't the choice obvious, between a life and a show*? Throughout my fieldwork, many *rakugo* shows were cancelled, and many performers had to be replaced at the last minute. The pandemic turned what was a rare and dramatic occurrence into the norm. The mention of a positive COVID-19 case, even at the last minute, became an undebatable justification, something quite rare in a society where any excuse (*iiwake*) is usually viewed with suspicion (Kotani 2016).

The then-heads of the two main *rakugo* associations of Tokyo, along with the *sekitei* of the four regular *yose* theatres, decided to halt *yose* operations in the city from 3 April 2020, a few days before Prime Minister Abe declared a state of emergency requesting businesses to close on a semi-voluntary lockdown (*Asahi* 2020/04/07). As stated in a later interview, the decision to close the *yose* in Tokyo was also out of concern that some fans would force themselves ("*muri shite*") to come support young performers at their once-in-a-lifetime celebrations for promotion to the rank of master (*shin'uchi)*, originally scheduled in April and May (*Tokyo Kawaraban* 2021). As other researchers report, COVID-19 created many ethical dilemmas as people struggled with "multiple responsibilities" (Strong, Trnka, and Wynn 2021):

> *Neither the theatres nor the performers wanted to put fans in such a dilemma, nor could we take responsibility for any eventual contagion* (Suzuki Atsushi, interview with the author, 22 Oct 2021).

Once again, COVID-19 had justified an almost unprecedented decision: *yose* managers put great emphasis on the fact that their theatres are open every day "no matter what" (*Tokyo Kawaraban* 2021). This is one of the key discriminators between the "regular" *yose* (*jōseki*, often referred to as "*rakugo*'s home ground") and all the other venues where *rakugo* may be performed:

> *The concept of the yose is to be a place that is always open, so people who have some spare time know they can always drop by even at the last minute. There are no tickets sold in advance, and you can enter at any point of the show* (Suzuki Atsushi. Interview with the author, 22 Oct 2021)

> *The only times we closed the yose were the day of the funeral of the Showa Emperor (in 1989), and three days following the 3.11 triple disaster (in 2011).* (Matsukura Yoshiyuki, *sekitei*, Asakusa Engei Hall. Interview with the author, 20 Aug 2021).

At various points throughout the development of the pandemic, instead, *yose* theatres closed, opened up but only on certain weekdays, opened only for half-days, and even allowed booking tickets in advance. *Yose* managers, in other words, broke away from highly valued norms to adapt to the unprecedented situation. "My priority", Suzuki-sekitei told me, "is to prevent this space, where 300-400 *geinin* (performers) live, from disappearing".

As *yose* temporarily or partially closed, *zenza* apprentices saw their opportunities to train heavily reduced. Adding to that, to adhere to "social distancing" requirements, a shift system was introduced, meaning that the time each *zenza* could spend backstage was further limited. Trying to adapt to the situation, with her newly found free time *zenza* Reireisha Miima organised her first individual shows and even launched a YouTube channel and an Instagram page, all things that used to be prohibited to apprentices:

> *Yes, a zenza is not usually allowed to do it, but my master told me to set up a YouTube channel and advertise my show, saying that it is not the time now to think about the usual rules* ("sore dokoro janai"). *He told me we have to do everything we can to survive.* (Reireisha Miima, interview with the author, 26 June 2021).

Other practices that the pandemic forced – or *allowed – rakugoka* to dismiss include drinking get-togethers with fans after a show (*uchiage*), as well as formal and expensive parties for a *rakugoka's* promotion to the rank of master (*shin'uchi*) or to a prestigious stage name, which are occasions of celebration but also of considerable financial and mental stress (Brau 2008, 145-148). Shun'pūtei Ryūshi, who invited me to his promotion-to-*shin'uchi* party, did not hide his frustration every one of the several times he had to inform me that celebrations had to be postponed. Most of my informants shared similar feelings, but not all – some, like one *rakugoka* who asked to remain anonymous, welcomed the opportunity to avoid inconvenient rituals:

> *I am glad I could avoid doing a promotion-to-*shin'uchi *party without angering anyone. It costs so much, and it does not even suit me. I just want to do my art quietly* (K., personal communication, 2021).

Similarly, another *rakugoka* confessed to me off the record that he welcomed the flexibility of being able to cancel a show with fewer repercussions than before. It remains to be seen, however, whether the possibly "convenient" demise of long-held, symbolically emphasised practices such as the one I covered in this section will also have long-term consequences. In the next section, I will present another significant change induced by COVID-19 in the world of *rakugo*: a sudden embrace of the digital realm.

1.4 The Digitalisation of Rakugo: Novel Opportunities and Challenges

When theatres closed in spring 2020, some *rakugoka* tried their hand at online shows. Many informants disclosed they were sceptical as they considered *rakugo* unfit for online streaming, but some successful attempts paved the way. Among the first was Shun'pūtei Ichinosuke, who, in April 2020, was scheduled to headline at the *Ueno Suzumoto Engeijō* for ten days. Instead, for those ten days, he performed the same stories he planned to do at the *yose* but live-streaming them for free on YouTube[32] and accepting donations. Every night of streaming attracted hundreds of thousands of viewers: as a later interview with Ichinosuke put it, it was "a sensation", and showed other *rakugoka* that streaming was both a viable platform for the art and a possible source of income (*Tokyo Kawaraban* 2020d). My informants thus reported adding online shows to their repertoire as a way to survive:

> *At first, I was against it, but given the situation, I could not refuse any job, so I tried doing streamed* (haishin) *shows too.* (Kingentei Bakyū, interview with the author, 19 Aug 2021)

As the community grew used to the medium, performers and producers started selling tickets for paid streamed events, which often included a week of on-demand archival access to the recording. The number of channels by *rakugoka* on YouTube soared (*Tokyo Kawaraban* 2020c), while some performers experimented with international Zoom shows and monthly paid *rakugo* subscription services. By the summer of 2020, the once digitally averse *rakugo* community had embraced the virtual world.

Ichinosuke's initiative on YouTube allowed me to attend a live *rakugo* show from my home in lockdown Italy as I waited for access to the field. Indeed, people from all around Japan and beyond watched and commented on the shows – Ichinosuke poked fun at a viewer from Texas who asked if he could perform later to adjust for the time difference. In December 2020, the same *Ichinosuke Channel* posted a novel precious source of observation: the recording of a training session between himself and his disciple, Shun'pūtei Yoichi. Ichinosuke, addressing viewers beyond the camera before performing the story *Sokotsu no Kugi* ("The Careless Nail") for his disciple, mentions how rare of an opportunity this is for audiences:

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[32] See Shun'pūtei Ichinosuke Channel. (2020, April 21) *Shun'pūtei Ichinosuke no tōka renzoku rakugo nama haishin dai-ichiya* (Shun'pūtei Ichinosuke's ten consecutive days of live streaming *rakugo* – first night) [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/W6WYFzgUZ9w [Accessed 31 March 2025]

> *The camera is on, but I will act as if it weren't. When one teaches* rakugo*, they don't get excited performing* (ki ga notteinai)*, so don't tell me "it's not interesting!". If you want to see my* Sokotsu no Kugi*, you can find the recording* [on this YouTube channel]. *This is the "*o-keiko *version". Enjoy this as if you were peeking in and think, "Oh, so this is a* rakugoka*'s training"*[33].

As I will show, this sort of digitally-mediated observation became valuable ethnographic data, which in the case of Ichinosuke's training informed my argument on the crucial role of training sessions (*o-keiko*) for the reinforcement of certain practices and ideologies which ultimately enabled the survival of the *rakugo* community[34].

Among the many *rakugoka* who uploaded content online, I was particularly interested in the case of Katsura Yonesuke, who debuted as a YouTuber at the age of 72. As a senior performer, Yonesuke managed to use his social and cultural capital to create a channel of particularly high quality, with the technical help of younger performers. Yonesuke could leverage his seniority to invite popular performers to his *Yonesuke Channel* or to get away with things such as suddenly appearing at shows backstage. In one video, he even pranked his disciple by faking his imminent death[35], which allowed me to see how a disciple reacts to difficult demands made by a dying master – a situation that would surely otherwise be difficult to observe. This was a funny but also relevant scene for my research, as in this thesis, I will argue that feelings of obligation (*on*) towards one's master are an important ideological factor behind the resilience of the *rakugo* world[36].

Yonesuke Channel grew to become one of the most successful *rakugoka* channels on YouTube, with several videos counting hundreds of thousands of views. In terms of the impact of COVID-19 on *rakugo*, Yonesuke's case shows how long-established dynamics were affected by the sudden changes. Yonesuke, a veteran performer, had to learn a new craft (YouTube videos) and rely on digitally savvy younger *rakugoka* for it. At a career stage when he would be expected to only teach, Yonesuke suddenly found himself learning, and from *rakugoka* way below him in the hierarchy. His success may indeed stem from his ability to accept this relational change and avoid shaping his

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[33] Shun'pūtei Ichinosuke. 2020. *YouTube Hatsukōkai! Shun'pūtei Ichinosuke no Keiko Fūkei* (First time on YouTube! The training scene of Shun'pūtei Ichinosuke) in *Ichinosuke Channel*, 20 December 2020. YouTube video. *https://youtu.be/D2yYD_JQqHw?si=nbjLGyS5s2TSXX-_* [Accessed 31 March 2025]

[34] See chapter 5 for an analysis and discussion of the training session.

[35] Katsura Yonesuke. 2021. "First Prank attempt! I confessed to my disciple that I have 6 months left to live… to what extent will he accept 72 years old Yonesuke's final requests?" In *Yonesuke Channel*, 26 February 2021. [video] YouTube. https://youtu.be/Et-c4gKuUIE [Accessed 31 march 2025]

[36] See chapter 5.

interaction in the pattern of arrogance and servility which the strict hierarchy of the *rakugo* world can induce, as one fan mentioned:

> *I like that Yonesuke*-shishō *treats his young interlocutors on the channel with respect, speaking politely regardless of the career gap […]. Isn't this an example of how COVID-19 can be our chance, maybe our last chance, to rethink old systems?* (S., *rakugo* fan, interview with the author, 28 Sep 2021).

Yonesuke's example, perhaps, could be a hint for a way forward in an increasingly digitalised and aging society: instead of portraying the elderly only as victims left behind by the IT revolution(s), there is value in looking for ways to integrate and valorise the resources people of different age can bring to the table.

Another benefit of looking at such videos or joining live-streamed performances online, besides accessing scenes that might have been inaccessible in the field in person, is the presence of comments from viewers. As an example, comments under the second training session video between Ichinosuke and Yoichi reveal some of the discourses related to teaching in the *rakugo* world[37]. In the video, Ichinosuke affirmed he had a hangover and joked about how he might vomit when listening to Yoichi's attempt at telling the story:

> *He says he has a hangover, that he will puke, etc, but at the end of the day, he listens carefully and takes detailed notes, and gently shows the correct way, what a fantastic figure. Yoichi-san, you have been blessed with a great master!* (28 February 2021)

> *There aren't many chances to see a keiko session, so this is a precious video. You can feel the tension (kinchōkan ga arimasu ne). In the future, if I see Yoichi's Sokotsu no Kugi, I will think about how it all started with this video.* (28 February 2021)

One last digital source to mention is Hakuzan TV, the YouTube channel of the young rising star of *kōdan*[38], Kanda Hakuzan VI. His first series of videos presents glimpses of the backrooms and of the stage at the *yose* during the 30 days of celebratory shows for his promotion to the prestigious name Kanda Hakuzan VI[39]. The videos display a plethora of otherwise hidden interactions between

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[37] Shun'pūtei Ichinosuke Channel 2021 *Sokotsu no Kugi Age no Keiko Hatashite Kyoka ha Moraeta no ka...?* 28 February 2021. https://youtu.be/fpBUlpPIqsE?si=KcVQlS9Ax-M6LA4v [video] YouTube. [Accessed 31 March 2025]
[38] A more history-focused performing art similar to *rakugo*. While not technically *rakugo* performers, Kanda Hakuzan and other *kōdanshi* are members of *rakugo* associations and share the *yose* stage with *rakugoka*.
[39] See Stark (2022) on stage names.

performers, such as footage of senior *rakugoka* asking each other permission to use each other's jokes, which contributed to informing my argument on the importance of practices of sharing in *rakugo*[40].

Something peculiar is that videos were uploaded daily after each day's recording, meaning that performers and fans watched them while the 30-day show was still running. While the "digital" might have started as just a partial recording of the "physical", soon the two realms intertwined in a less unequal relationship. For example, when one of Hakuzan's *senpai* (seniors) pronounced, amid tears, an intense statement of envy, admiration and affection for her successful *kōhai* (junior), this was recorded and posted on YouTube, gathering the attention of fans and performers and dominating the discourse on and off the stage for the following days[41]. Not engaging with such digital content, as a fan as much as a researcher, would have thus meant missing out on much of the conversations happening in person as well.

Not only then are "offline" and "online" research findings equally valuable, as shown by earlier assessment of digital ethnography in anthropology (Hine 2000; Miller and Horst 2012; Pink et al. 2016) and the recent wave of digital research spurred by the pandemic (see Shah 2023); in this case, they were inextricably intertwined. To fully capture the experience of *rakugo* fans and performers, a researcher would have had to join *both* the digital and the physical fields. As Vainio and Pendleton argue:

> "[T]he digitalisation of people's lived reality means that it is pertinent that our conceptualisations of 'the field' come to reflect and account for this overwhelming presence of the digital in people's daily lives, interactions, and physical reality" *(Vainio and Pendleton 2023, 254-255).*

Even in the traditional world of *rakugo*, it is no longer possible for an ethnographer to ignore this "presence of the digital." All in all, while I would not argue that my project constituted a full "virtual ethnography" in the sense popularised by Hine (2000) and represented by such seminal works as Boellstorff (2008), the entwinement of digitally mediated interactions in the life of informants I experienced in the field required me to conduct observation in digital spaces too. Making sure one's ethnographic research does not unduly ignore the digital aspect of people's lives is a takeaway from this research that might be valuable, I suspect, in fields beyond *rakugo* too. In the case of *rakugo*, streamed shows on YouTube, Pia, and other services, together with conversations on Twitter (now X), represented the main arena of digital discourse making I witnessed, but each field will have its specific

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[40] See Chapter 5.
[41] See Hakuzan TV (4 march 2020). *Matsunojō ga Rokudaime Kanda Hakuzan ni natta hi* (The day Matsunojō became Kanda Hakuzan VI)*, #22.* [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/W1pChxKVio4?si=AvVte76EjdgOqgM_

media and platforms with which the ethnographer should be familiar. At the same time, as I will show in the next section, focusing on online research alone can obscure important aspects of a community – in the case of Tokyo's *rakugo*, the quiet forms of subversion that were taking place in person beyond the veil of online self-censorship.

1.5 Turning Off the Lights on The Audience

An adage often quoted by *rakugoka* suggests "never to mention religion, politics or baseball on stage" because you never know what "team" people in the audience will be on. *Rakugoka* do not always adhere to this rule, but most of them will go to great lengths not to irritate anyone in the audience. (Brau 2008, 203-204) A major challenge posed by COVID-19, therefore, had to do with how digitalisation undermined the system *rakugoka* have long used to avoid controversies, which is based on knowing who is in the audience. Unlike in many "western-style" theatres, lights are usually kept on at *rakugo* shows, allowing *rakugoka* to see audiences. At the *yose* and other large venues, performers will also receive information from the staff on the presence of someone from a certain category (a blind person, a pregnant woman) so that they may avoid jokes and stories that could be upsetting for that individual. (Brau 2008, 203-204; Shores 2021b, 463-468) This does not mean that *rakugoka* always avoid "risky" humour: at certain regular shows, I witnessed how some performers established a trust relationship with their recurring fans and seemed at ease with telling political, sexual, or otherwise "dangerous" jokes.

In contrast, however, online shows *turned off the lights* on the audience, granting anonymity to the viewers and undermining trust relationships:

> *At a small show in person, I know they are all my fans, so they are not going to make a fuss if I get carried away and say something a bit risky. But online? I have to contain myself, and I cannot mention problematic issues. Who knows who is going to watch…* (Ryūtei Komichi, interview with the author, 27 Apr 2021)

A *rakugoka* who risked making "dangerous" jokes online, Kairakutei Burakku II, ended up involved in a case of defamation as he did not know the target of his joke (the girlfriend of his disciple) was listening to the streamed show[42]. Many of my informants said they instead opted for toning down

[42] I dedicate an upcoming publication to political satire in *rakugo* and the case of Kairakutei Burakku II and his legal misadventures, which I cut from the dissertation due to wordcount limitation.

their satire online. This was particularly evident at hybrid shows in which recordings would be streamed at a later time.

On 4 January 2021, I attended in person such a hybrid solo-show by Tatekawa Koshira, a notoriously irreverent *rakugoka*, at Oedo Nihonbashitei (Tokyo). The first half of his show consisted entirely of *makura* (free-talk introduction), in which he joked about COVID-19, his experiences among the homeless in Osaka's Nishinari area, wacky theories correlating virus immunity with the absence of frontal teeth, and gossip about rival *rakugoka*. In other words, it was some 45 minutes of highly risky, politically "incorrect" jokes. As he finished his *makura*, he announced: "*What a waste, I will have to cut all of this before I can post the recordings online*." If I had attended the online, edited version of the show, I would have missed all that "dangerous" material. Indeed, with all the opportunities digital ethnography created, only "*being there*" in the field in COVID-time Tokyo allowed me to see the quiet subversion taking place beyond the polite façade that online shows created.

1.6 Online Self-Censoring Façade, Offline Comedic Subversion

One form of subversion I witnessed was how, at physical venues in Tokyo, many in the *rakugo* world and beyond exploited the ambiguity and specificity of certain rules to find loopholes in COVID-19 regulations. For example, at a time when serving alcohol was prohibited to establishments that wanted to receive COVID-relief funds and avoid public shaming, a *rakugoka* mentioned how a restaurant hung the following sign on a fridge full of beers:

> "*Items in this fridge are not on sale due to COVID-19 restrictions. Customers illegally taking a beer against the rules will be fined 500 yen* [i.e., the cost of a beer]."[43]

Similarly to the restaurant owner who technically adhered to COVID-time restrictions (not selling alcohol) but *de facto* let customers take beers, *rakugoka* and *rakugo* producers made use of loopholes to survive and to poke some fun at rules they may not have agreed with. As a helper at *rakugo* shows, I witnessed, for example, *rakugoka* on stage who told audiences that after show parties were prohibited, but mentioned, tongue-in-cheek, that they were going to drink alone at a certain bar at a certain hour: "*Do not follow me! But if other people happen to go drinking alone, at that certain bar, at that certain hour, what can I do about it…*," resulting in hearty laughter and conniving glances among the audience.

[43] While I am not really convinced that this was a true story, the audience's enthusiastic reaction to the joke well testifies to the mood of comedic subversion in the field.

While I witnessed these and other forms of subversion, to do justice to Japanese people's sense of civic duty I should report that, according to my informants, the initial efforts to prevent the spread of the virus were accepted in good faith by most people. What changed by the time of the third or fourth declarations of emergency in Tokyo was the credibility of the politicians who declared them, tainted by scandals in which they broke the very rules they promulgated, and by general dissatisfaction over the management of the pandemic. A symptom of this generalised discontent is the fact that *rakugoka* started making fun of Prime Minister Suga even from the *yose* stage and at online shows – that is, in the more "official" venues, where satire was usually avoided – as I witnessed on numerous occasions. Some *rakugoka*, in other words, no longer considered this a topic that might divide the audience:

> *As a* rakugoka, *I don't want to talk politics, I don't want to upset and divide the audience, a* rakugoka *should aim to make everyone laugh together. But currently, the government and parliament are acting so poorly that really, everyone can laugh about them. I doubt there's anyone who will come to complain if I mention Suga's steak dinner party* [a COVID-time political scandal] (Shun'pūtei Ryūshi, interview with the author, 8 Nov 2021).

Ryūshi's statement may thus indicate that caution in political humour among *rakugoka* stems from a fear of upsetting audiences rather than political authorities: when discontent with the government rises to the point that it is felt as the general sentiment of "the people" rather than a partisan opinion, *rakugoka* can feel confident in embracing such sentiment on the stage, if they wish to do so.

Academic literature on *rakugo* rightfully points at the art's historical potential for transgression (Morioka and Sasaki 1990; Shores 2021a), but today a casual observer watching *rakugo* shows online or on DVDs might get the impression of relatively "tamed" humour compared to other forms of comedy (see Kawada 2020, 19-21). This is understandable if we consider that most *rakugo* available online or on DVDs is part of that kind of performance "with the lights switched off" I described in this chapter, in which *rakugoka* tend to avoid problematic topics. Even more, seeing *rakugo* as apolitical is not a simple matter of ignorance of casual viewers – many *rakugoka* themselves told me they prefer to avoid any political or delicate issue, and thus it is not that easy to find risky, subversive humour in the field today (see Nobuhiro, Futamura, and Nakagomi 2002, 44). If I had only watched online performances from home, I would have had the impression of a very tamed (if still artistically interesting) *rakugo* scene. What was relevant in my experience in the field (which also pointed at the importance of conducting both digital and in-person ethnography) is the gap I saw between this tamed "surface" (or "façade") presented online, and the presence instead of offline shows in Tokyo where *rakugoka*, even in the times of COVID-19, still engaged in that kind of

subversion that the literature traced in Edo or Meiji-era *rakugo*. Attending shows in-person, especially in one of Tokyo's many smaller venues, can instead reveal the great degree of witty subversion that characterises much of the *rakugo* world.

1.7 Yose's Rebellion to Pandemic-Time Policies

Eventually, *rakugo*'s witty subversion and official COVID-19 discourses clashed when, in April 2021, *yose* theatres unexpectedly made national news for the *sekitei*'s decision not to follow governmental suggestions and to remain open, declaring their theatres to be an "activity necessary to the preservation of social life" (*Asahi* 2021/05/17). This unusually put *rakugo* under the spotlight, with popular TV talk shows and even Japan's Parliament debating the issue, a matter that elicited the most emotional (even angry) responses in interviews with my informants:

> *After the* yose *made their declaration, people on TV discussed whether we can really call entertainment "essential", and politicians took the chance to redirect public attention away from their mishandling of the pandemic. Professed* rakugo*-fan Koizumi Shin'ichirō asked the* yose *to abide by the governmental requests, as did Chief Cabinet Secretary Katō Katsunobu. But how can we take seriously a Chief Cabinet Secretary who does not even know how to read the* kanji *for "*yose*" and calls it "*yoseki*" instead?* (Tatekawa Danshirō, interview with the author, 4 Oct 2021).

Reporting here the explanation of the accident as narrated to me by the *yose* manager at the centre of it all can be a valuable insight into the daily working of Japanese politics in the time of COVID-19:

> *First of all, the government never asked us to close the* yose*. They told us we could keep it open but without letting any audience in* (mukankyaku)*. That sounded like a joke, some quick wit* (tonchi)*. What do you mean you can open with no audience? Our business is selling tickets to audiences. […] It was a trick politicians and bureaucrats often use not to take responsibility, since they said we can keep open but with no audience, then if we close, it is our responsibility, so they will not help us financially. They used wit, so we responded with wit as well: the document with the request mentioned that the request excluded "those activities necessary to the preservation of social life"* ("shakai seikatsu no iji ni hitsuyō na mono")*, so we said, well, that is the case of the* yose*. It was a* share (joke, witticism) *to complain about the disingenuous way they made their request. In 2020, we would not have done that, but in 2021, under such*

an ambiguous government that lacked leadership, we took a stand, and many thanked us for that. (Suzuki Atsushi, interview with the author, 22 Oct 2021).

Eventually, however, the *yose* did close its doors for the duration of the state of emergency. I asked what happened to the *sekitei* who made that decision:

*Well, we made the news and got miscalled as "*yoseki*" in the parliament* [laughs]*, but it is not like we wanted to be unreasonable. We talked with officials, who apologised for the way they put their request, and they changed it to a less hypocritical "please close the* yose*", so we agreed.* (Suzuki Atsushi, interview with the author, 22 Oct 2021).

The *sekitei*'s decision to criticise through wit what they believed to be insulting behaviour, but "without wanting to fight with the authority" (*kami ni sakarau tsumori wa nai*), well reflects the spirit of *rakugo* characters, who, as Brau notes, "may be antiauthority, but they do not incite revolutions" (Brau 2008, 56). Not all informants welcomed the unexpected attention, claiming that "making declarations is not the style of *rakugo*" (R., *rakugoka*, interview with the author, 2021), but many instead praised the act of the *yose*, seeing in it the fundamental goal of *rakugo* of voicing the discontent of "the people" (Tatekawa Danshirō, interview with the author, 4 October 2021).

1.8 Vulnerability, Resilience and Solidarity

Finally, the consequences of the pandemic described so far had the effect of highlighting the *rakugo* world's vulnerabilities and resilience. Anthropological research has shown how the negative impact of the pandemic fell disproportionately along the usual lines of race (Wynn 2021; Rouse 2021), sexuality (Strong 2021), and class (Trnka 2021), but also on a number of novel factors such as occupation or place of residence (Slater 2020; Trnka 2021; Giammaria 2020). Researchers in Japan, in particular, have shown different forms of resilience and vulnerability in communities affected by COVID-19 (Wadhwa 2020; C. Kondo and Lichten 2020).

In the case of *rakugo*, performers found themselves financially and psychologically vulnerable to the crisis due to their activity being considered "non-essential." The decrease in the number of shows resulted in significant income losses. Moreover, backstage regulations and restrictions on after-show parties reduced informal interactions with fans and other *rakugoka*. Such interactions provide valuable opportunities to cultivate new fans and learn from other artists through co-presence, but also the much-needed chance for younger performers to receive some pocket money or be offered a meal. On a psychological level, many *rakugoka* found themselves vulnerable to

pandemic-time discourses, which heightened the perception of an underlying hierarchy of "useful" versus "useless" jobs (and people):

> *I now know that in bad times, we will be the first that society will cut down. We always joked about being useless to society, but that was just some cheerful self-deprecation… Now this feeling is very real and very heavy.* (Kingentei Bakyū, pers. comm., 19 August 2021)

However, the community of fans, producers, and *rakugoka* themselves showed extensive support to *rakugoka*. Performers disseminated among each other information on how to receive pandemic-time subsidies for freelancers (a "modern" sounding category, many joked, they had no idea they belonged to). Some fans took on the task of setting up recurrent small-scale, quietly advertised shows for their favourite *rakugoka*, providing much needed work opportunities during the pandemic without keeping a single yen for their trouble, as I witnessed by working at one of such shows organised by Shiori (one of my guides in the field) for her favourite performer, Reireisha Maruko. Some *rakugo* show organisers, like Dan, the owner of Yunion Shokudō (a restaurant in central Tokyo which organises *rakugo* performances in the evenings), kept on holding shows, paying performers the same amount as before, even though limitations on the maximum number of people allowed in the audience meant that tickets could not cover the costs. Dan paid *rakugoka* out of his pocket, getting himself heavily into debt, mentioning that:

> *My life has been blessed by rakugo, through which I have priceless memories and friends, and even met my wife. To think that without* rakugo*, I would not have even met my own child… When COVID arrived, I thought it was my time to repay this lifetime debt to* rakugo. (Dan, restaurant manager and rakugo producer, interview with author, 20 October 2021)

Similar feelings were shared online by the thousands of people around Japan who sent donations to streamed shows. A crowdfunding initiative to save *yose* theatres garnered 103,770,000 yen. Comments by donors ranged from "*Please protect Japanese culture!*" to "*Laughter is needed in this world, please keep it going!*" (Yose 2021). Indeed, the psychological burden of feeling useless was soothed, for some, by the thought of being of use to those who need *rakugo*:

> *In the beginning, I got kind of depressed thinking that we* rakugoka *were not helping in any way. But then I thought of* rakugo *fans who may feel unhappy that they can't listen to* rakugo*… Hey, I heard you over there saying 'who the hell wants to listen to you!'* [laughs]. *Anyway, regardless of the times, fun is something we need in life* (Yanagiya Kyōtarō, online show at Haremame Engei, 20 Oct 2020).

As Tatekawa Danshirō put it, “There are people for whom *rakugo* is important. We may not be essential for society as a whole, but we are essential for them” (interview with the author, 4 Oct 2021). Whether through mutual help, affection for one’s favourite performer, or feelings of gratitude to the *rakugo* world, the *rakugo* community could rely on this network of solidarity, and thereby demonstrate considerable resilience in such critical times.

Chapter Conclusions

This chapter has presented the impact of COVID-19 on the world of *rakugo* and on my research, presenting the methodological and ethical implications of conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Tokyo and online during a global pandemic. COVID-19 forced members of the *rakugo* world to change or dismiss long-held practices and taboos, heavily affecting the livelihood of *rakugoka* but also, for some, providing a chance to avoid inconvenient rituals and norms. One major consequence was the sudden digitalisation of *rakugo*, which created novel situations and dynamics in the field (as in the case of Yonesuke’s YouTube channel) and provided, for my work, new research opportunities: further evidence of the importance of digital spaces for ethnographic research. Having found an ethical way to access the field in-person, I showed, however, how activities online could not tell the whole story of what was happening in the *rakugo* field: as online shows undermined traditional strategies for avoiding controversies, *rakugoka* had to present online a more tamed version of their art. As a helper at small *rakugo* shows in Tokyo, I witnessed instead how a great deal of quiet subversion was taking place in Tokyo at the time of COVID-19. Finally, the chapter looked at the vulnerabilities of the *rakugo* world that the pandemic exposed, but also at the forms of solidarity and resilience which helped its members navigate and survive harsh challenges posed by COVID-19.

Chapter 2.
Rakugo's History and Late 20th-Century Decline

Chapter Summary

This chapter will, first, provide a brief overview of the centuries-old history of *rakugo* based on existing literature, highlighting factors that contributed to the popularity of *rakugo* and its prototypes. Then, through interviews, biographies, and accounts from the field, I will show how Tokyo's *rakugo* scene experienced a period of decline at the end of the 20th century that is barely mentioned by the literature but plays a central role in the memory of *rakugoka* and other members of the *rakugo* art world. This temporary decline in popularity, I will argue, also played an important role in the reshaping of *rakugo*'s image, ultimately contributing to the revival of *rakugo* in 21st-century Japan. As I will show, unlike premodern *rakugo* history, the late 20th century and 21st century are periods still very scarcely covered by *rakugo* literature both in English and Japanese. Thus, beyond setting the context for the research puzzle that this dissertation aims to solve – how the traditional art world of *rakugo* managed to survive and even thrive in 21st-century Japan – this chapter will also double as my contribution to the still-emerging historiography of *rakugo*.

2.1 Introduction – We Are Used to Empty Audiences

I began the previous chapter by describing my visit to an almost empty Ikebukuro Engeijō theatre on 8 January 2021 to showcase the impact of COVID-19 on the *rakugo* art world. Performers on stage joked with the audience about how only one person had come to the theatre the previous day. Throughout my twelve months of fieldwork in 2020-2021, I witnessed many *rakugoka* recalling times when only one person, or even none, had come to a show. Those situations are fertile ground for funny, surreal moments that *rakugoka* recounted on stage and in interviews:

> *I remember, when I was a* zenza*, one of the first times I went on stage to perform, the curtains opened, and no one was there. Zero people in the audience.* Senpai *told me to start performing anyway. The old lady working at the reception selling tickets came inside and sat so that I would have someone to perform for, and I performed for her.* [laughs] *When I was almost done with the hanashi, a spectator arrived, so the old lady screamed "*Irasshaimase!*"* ("Welcome!") *and left the audience to go sell them the ticket - so my audience disappeared!* [laughs] *So, I said the punchline with no one listening and left, and two more spectators*

entered as my senpai *was going on stage. This is how little popularity* rakugo *had.* (Yanagiya Karoku, interview with the author, 27 October 2021)

Besides being a testimony to the ability of *rakugoka* to turn any problem or mishap into comedic material (a useful skill to keep morale high in challenging times), these tales were particularly interesting for the fact that many *rakugoka* added to them some mention of a great shift in recent *rakugo* history which will be the topic of this and the following chapter. Going back to that same Ikebukuro Engeijō New Year's show, the popular performer Shun'pūtei Shōta ended his playful recalling of the one-spectator-show with these remarks:

"Rakugoka *from my generation don't panic at all about these COVID-time empty theatres. We are used to empty audiences because we experienced the* rakugo *world before 2005. Back in those days, it wasn't unusual for the* zenza [apprentices] *to go out on the streets and try to lure some innocent passerby into the* yose*! It's the youngsters who don't know how to deal with this.*" (Shun'pūtei Shōta, 8 January 2021)

In other words, when reflecting on the harsh impact of COVID-19 on the *rakugo* world, older *rakugoka* often compared it to a period "back in the days" when *rakugo* was not popular, before a revival of *rakugo* that started around 2005 and lasted until the dawn of the pandemic. Memory is fallible and time boundaries were often blurred, but putting together the testimonies of the *rakugo* performers, fans, and producers I interviewed, as I will show, we can approximately identify those "bad old days" as the last quarter of the 20th century, from the 1970s to the turn of the century. Many of my informants referred to it as the "Winter of Rakugo" (*rakugo no fuyu no jidai*), coming after a "Golden Era" of Post-War Shōwa (*rakugo no ōgon jidai*, ca. 1950s-early 1970s) and before the 21st-century "Rakugo Boom" (*rakugo būmu*, starting around 2005).

2.2 A Brief History of Rakugo

2.2.1 Tracing the Origins of Rakugo

To discern "when the history of *rakugo* as we know it today starts" is "as difficult as to decide what *rakugo* is" (Yamamoto 2006, 6). *Rakugo* researcher Sekiyama Kazuo traced *rakugo*'s roots as far back as the beginning of recorded history in Japan, identifying Buddhist preaching (*sekkyō*) – first appearing in Japan in the 6th century – as the predecessor of Japanese oral storytelling arts, including *rakugo* (Sekiyama 1964). We could argue about the ideological factors that pushed researchers to "trace" *rakugo*'s roots in ancestral times and to individuate certain "progenitors" of *rakugo* – in the

1960s, at the time of Sekiyama Kazuo's publications, several *rakugo* critics and performers were trying to establish *rakugo* as a classical art worthy of preservation and respect (see Okitsu 1974; Yanagiya Koman 2005). Rather than debating when *rakugo* "actually" started and engaging in ideological diatribes, however, I will simply report in this section what historians of *rakugo* usually include as the origin of the art, as that provides the basis of the shared understanding of *rakugo*'s history among performers and informed fans. Moreover, including in this section such "ancestral roots" is also a way to point out how prototypes of *rakugo* benefitted from cultural and technological transformations, such as new forms of Buddhism or copperplate printing. This is fitting, as *rakugo*'s adaptability to new technologies and socio-cultural milieus, as we will see, will emerge at different turning points of *rakugo*'s history as a basis for the renewal and revival of the art.

Buddhist preaching, originally limited to aristocratic courts (with some exceptions[44]), underwent a radical popularisation during the Kamakura Period (1192-1333) (Morioka and Sasaki 1990, 214), when members of the newly established Jōdo Shū and Jōdo Shinshū[45] Buddhist schools began preaching at crossroads, and "the main focus of their appeals shifted quickly from explanations of a doctrine to mere entertainment" (ibid., 215). While some well-read fans and performers I interviewed mentioned this link with Buddhism, more referred to a later figure as the ancestor of modern *rakugoka*: the *otogishū,* quasi-professional entertainers employed at the court of warlords in the Sengoku Period (1467-1600).[46] These entertainers "were expected to inspire their masters with anecdotes about heroic deeds of the past, or to divert them between battles with humorous stories" (Morioka and Sasaki 1990, 232). Accordingly, *rakugo* is often presented as a traditional performing art with "more than 400 years of history",[47] and most authors locate the origins of the art in the late Sengoku (1467-1600) to early Edo (1603-1868) periods (Okitsu 1968, 268; Orsi 1977, 5; Sweeney 1979, 28; Yamamoto 2006, 6).

The link between the *otogishū* court entertainers and previous Buddhist preachers is embodied by the figure of Anrakuan Sakuden (1554-1642), a monk of the Jōdo School often dubbed "the progenitor of *rakugo*" (Yamamoto 2006, 8). Anrakuan earned himself a name as a popular travelling preacher who inserted "amusing tales" in his sermons in order to "attract the attention of the audience"

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[44] One such exception is the monk Gyōki (668-749), whose crossroad sermons – frowned upon by other priests as "preaching at random without permission" – would become the "prototype of the mid-Edo crossroad storytelling" (Morioka and Sasaki 1990, 212)

[45] The 'Pure Land School' and the 'True Pure Land School' were founded respectively by the monks Hōnen (1133-1212) and Shinran (1173-1262) and catalysed the spread of Buddhism among all social classes. (see Matsuo 2007)

[46] Websites of *rakugo* associations and performers, as well as most informants I have interviewed, subscribed to the idea of the *otogishū* as the founders of *rakugo*. See, for example, *Rakugo tte nani?* ('What is *rakugo*?'), available at https://www.geikyo.com/beginner/what.html [Accessed 31 March 2025]

[47] See, for example, Embassy of Japan in the UK (2014) and Byard-Jones (2023).

and was eventually admitted to the courts of warlords such as Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598) and Tokugawa Iemitsu (1604-1651) (Morioka and Sasaki 1990, 228). His collection of tales, *Seisuishō* ("Laughter to Shake off Sleep", 1628), as well as numerous handbooks of stories compiled by *otogishū*, achieved a "relatively wide circulation" (Morioka and Sasaki 1990, 229). Notably, this "was made possible by the recent introduction of woodblock printing" and by the fact that "copperplates and printing instruments had been brought from Korea" as part of the spoils of Toyotomi Hideoyoshi's invasions of the continent (1592-1598), fostering the improvement of copperplate printing and its development "on a commercial basis" (Morioka and Sasaki 1990, 232).

2.2.2 The Emergence of Professional Rakugoka

Professional *hanashika* (or *rakugoka*) appeared in urban Kansai and Edo by the late 17th century (Morioka and Sasaki 1990, 234), with the emergence of legendary figures such as Tsuyu no Gorobee (1643 – 1703) in Kyoto, Shikano Buzaemon (1649 – 1699) in Edo, and Yonezawa Hikohachi (d. 1714) in Osaka. While storytellers in Kansai worked prominently on the streets, Buzaemon and his successors in Edo moved the performances indoors, entertaining samurai and merchants at so-called *zashiki* (a term referring to a room where guests are entertained, and by extension, a party held in such a room) – one of the factors which contributed to the two traditions of "*Kamigata rakugo*" and "*Edo rakugo*" developing a distinct flavour (see Shores 2021a). At the turn of the 18th century, Katsura Bunji I (1773-1816) and Sanshōtei Karaku (1777-1833) founded the first *rakugo yose* in Osaka and Edo, respectively (Morioka and Sasaki 1990, 240). "As it was difficult to make a living by storytelling alone, Karaku ran a *senbei* (rice-cracker) shop on the side" (Morioka and Sasaki 1990:241): odd jobs, as we will see, would remain an important source of income for many *rakugoka* and thus one of the ways in which the career of *rakugoka* can retain its sustainability in times of dwindling demand, but also an area of negotiation and boundary-making over what it means to be a "professional" *rakugoka*, and who can identify as such[48].

During the Bunka and Bunsei periods (1804-1829), "when the Edo *chōnin* (townsmen) culture flourished, *kabuki* reached the height of its prosperity" and heavily influenced *rakugo* (Morioka and Sasaki 1990, 245). At the same time, as a much more minimal art, *rakugo* "established itself as a cheap alternative"[49] to the more expensive *kabuki* shows (ibid.). Still today, the price of tickets

[48] See Chapters 4 and 5.
[49] Admittance to the *yose* would cost 20-30 *mon*, while *kabuki* shows would cost around 150 *mon* (Morioka and Sasaki 1990:25).

remains a reason for aficionados of the performing arts to attend *rakugo* shows: *rakugo* fans with an interest in other Japanese performing arts I interviewed all stressed the great difference in cost between *kabuki* and *rakugo* as a relevant reason for their preference for *rakugo* shows.

2.2.3 Rakugo in Meiji Japan

The number of *yose* in Tokyo heavily fluctuated throughout the years[50], but *rakugo* survived the great sociocultural changes of the 19th century. Historians attribute much of the merit to San'yūtei Enchō (1839-1900), the "father of modern *rakugo*", who "established *rakugo* as a refined art of narration which was acknowledged and appreciated not only by the common people but by the educated classes as well" (Morioka and Sasaki 1990, 252). As I will discuss throughout the thesis, *rakugo* has since continued to complicate categories such as "literature" (*bungaku*), "traditional performing art" (*dentō geinō*) and "popular entertainment" (*taishū engei*). Many situate *rakugo*'s origins and ongoing identity in popular entertainment and pre-modern working-class culture, what Okitsu Kaname encapsulates in the expression "*minshū no tame no minshū no rakugo*" (lit. "people's *rakugo* for the people") (Okitsu 1968, 32-37). Within the process of modernisation and nation-building that characterised the Meiji Restoration (1868), *rakugo* was not elevated to the status of national art form to be promoted and protected the way *kabuki* was[51]. Still, while remaining a form of entertainment associated with urban working classes, *rakugo*'s entwinements with cultural and political elites were numerous, and indeed, fans and performers I interviewed showed a wide range of opinions when asked to identify *rakugo* as a form of "popular" or "high" culture [52].

San'yūtei Enchō's work, besides contributing to the elevation of *rakugo*, played a key role in the establishment of stenography (*sokki*) as a key technology within the nation-building project of the unification of literary and spoken Japanese language (*genbun itchi*) (Morioka and Sasaki 1990, 253-256). This resulted in a period of great circulation of *rakugo* stories. The stenographic transcriptions of Enchō's stories, which first appeared on the pages of some of the earliest Japanese newspapers and were later published as books ("*sokkibon*"), became a hit across social classes (Okitsu 1968, 156), appealing to the public as well as influencing the work of many Meiji novelists (Morioka and Sasaki

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[50] From 24 legalised *yose* in 1842, to 392 in 1854, 163 in 1880, 230 in 1886, but only 80 in 1901 (Morioka and Sasaki 1990:249-251)

[51] The shift of *kabuki*'s status, from a popular theatre seen with suspicion by the authorities to a source of national pride, started in the late 19th century – a symbol of it being the *kabuki* show performed before the Emperor, for the first time, in 1887 (Payne 2007:333).

[52] A senior fan affirmed that "in my age, people like Kuma-san and Hattsan [*rakugo* characters, embodiments of the Edo down-town workers] would come to the *yose*… but now the culture has changed, *rakugo* includes old words, so you need to be educated now to understand it…" (Shimoishi S., personal interview, 12 July 2019). See more on class in Chapter 6.

1990, 268). Similar to its predecessors (Buddhist preaching and *otogishū* stories), *rakugo* adapted to new technologies and socio-cultural changes, successfully "riding the new means of mass communication" (Okitsu 1968, 152).

2.2.4 *Edo Rakugo*'s Popularity in the 20th Century

In 1905, some of the most eminent *rakugoka* gathered to establish the Rakugo Kenkyūkai[53], regular meetings in which *rakugoka* would perform longer stories than those allowed by the time limitations of the *yose*, and which "were greatly appreciated by the audience" and resulted in "classical *rakugo* [rising] considerably in public esteem" (Morioka and Sasaki 1990, 261). Meanwhile, *rakugoka* from the many schools which had formed in the Edo period[54] created various professional associations, from which, in the aftermath of World War II, the Rakugo Kyōkai (Rakugo Association) and the Rakugo Geijutsu Kyōkai (Rakugo Artistic Association) would eventually emerge[55].

Rakugoka's debut on the radio in the 1920s caused "the indignation of *yose* owners" since "the *yose* were empty whenever *rakugo* was on the air" (Morioka and Sasaki 1990, 266). However, soon "broadcasting began functioning as a powerful means of advertising for master performances at the *yose*" (ibid.), such as when Katsura Harudanji II masterfully performed the story *Iwai Zake* ("*A Celebratory Sake*") on the radio on 7 December 1930, and "people who had heard him on the air streamed to the *yose* to see and hear him in person" (ibid.). *Rakugo* suffered a brief period of crisis during and after World War II (Morioka and Sasaki 1990, 265), and its future looked gloomier, considering how small the number of young *rakugoka* had become (Yoshikawa 2009, 16-19)[56]. However, the art regained its popularity through, once again, new technological opportunities: in 1951, the introduction of private radio broadcasters resulted in the proliferation of commercial radio channels in Japan, and the number of *rakugo* shows on air increased drastically, launching what some authors dub the "radio *rakugo* boom" (Okitsu 1968, 239), or the "first post-war *rakugo* boom" (Yoshikawa 2009, 20).

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[53] This first Rakugo Kenkyūkai closed down after the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923. A second one was established in 1928 and came to an end in 1945. (Morioka and Sasaki 1990:264). These are not to be confused with the homonymous university-based societies, which are clubs of amateur students dedicated to the appreciation and practice of *rakugo*. (see Chapter 4)

[54] Such as the Yanagiya and the San'yū schools.

[55] The main difference (originally at least), was that the Rakugo Kyōkai focused on *koten* ('classical') *rakugo*, while members of the Rakugo Geijutsu Kyōkai often produced *shinsaku rakugo* ('newly created' stories).

[56] Yoshikawa connects this crisis with the fact that there few young men in general in Japan after the war.

The introduction of television in Japan in 1953 had an impact like that of radio before it: "some *yose* halls had to close down, but others gained more popularity than ever before… In spite of the dwindling number of regular (*jōseki*) *yose* halls, *rakugo* fans increased year by year." (Yoshikawa 2009, 20). *Rakugoka* signed contracts with various broadcasting companies, seeing their lifestyles improving drastically. At the same time, skilled *rakugo* performers, especially in Tokyo, started to win prestigious cultural awards, raising the status of the art as well as its popularity (Yoshikawa 2009, 20-21; Yamamoto 2006, 106-107). To meet the audience's demand for long performances starring the most famous *rakugoka*, one specific type of show gained prominence: *hall (hōru) rakugo*, events featuring a small number of renowned performers, held in large halls and "sponsored by department stores or broadcasting stations […] which eventually started to be repeated monthly due to their success" (Yamamoto 2006, 105).

The great masters (*meijin*) of the Shōwa Era (1926-1989), such as Kokontei Shinshō V, Katsura Bunraku VIII, Katsura Mikisuke III, San'yūtei Enshō VI, Hayashiya Shōzō VIII, and Yanagiya Kosan V, had meanwhile started to nurture a generation of ambitious young *rakugoka*, such as San'yūtei Enraku V, Tatekawa Danshi VII, Kokontei Shinchō II, and Tachibanaya Enzō VIII (Yamamoto 2006, 113), who often earned great popularity on TV and radio. Eventually, the success of "*hall rakugo*" (Yoshikawa 2009, 36), the popularity of *rakugo* on TV and radio, the efforts of the Shōwa great masters to ever improve their art, and the lively activities of the new generation of performers all combined to bring about, between 1955 and 1975, a so-called "Golden Age of Postwar Shōwa *Rakugo*" (Yamamoto 2006, 105). It is interesting here to note the different terms employed for this period compared to the 21st-century *rakugo* "boom". A "golden age" seems, qualitatively and quantitatively, on a higher level than a "boom", and indeed, Yamamoto's *History of Rakugo* (2006) ends with the hope that "the present boom will continue and bring about a new Golden Age" (Yamamoto 2006, 129).

2.3 The "Winter of Rakugo": Late 20th-Century Decline

Rakugo had to die once so that it may be reborn.

-Yanagiya Kyōtarō (2018)

2.3.1 A Gap in the Field of Rakugo Studies

A decline in popularity of *rakugo* towards the end of the 20th century plays a prominent role in the memory of many performers I interviewed, but it is barely ever mentioned in academic literature, besides some brief reference to a decrease of audiences in the *yose* (Kashiwagi 2012, 161-

163; Morioka and Sasaki 1990, 293). This is not too surprising considering that even among Japanese scholars, rigorous academic literature on *rakugo* only began to emerge rather recently. *Rakugo* historian Okitsu Kaname, in 1968, lamented that:

> *"Rakugo has a history of 400 years, and yet, maybe because it is an art that we feel too close to us, it has not been researched much. A serious history of rakugo has not been written as of today. And yet, rakugo has influenced the work of authors such as [Ihara] Saikaku, [Shikitei] Sanba, and [Jippensha] Ikku, as well as the literature of [Natsume] Sōseki and Isamu Yoshii – an example of how much rakugo is a performing art deeply rooted inside us Japanese. This is why I have decided to try and present the 400 years of history of rakugo, including its contacts with such authors." (Okitsu 1968, 268)*

Miya Nobuaki, a *rakugo* researcher at Waseda University I interviewed, blamed the underdevelopment of the field of *rakugo* studies, and especially the scarcity of work on contemporary *rakugo*, on the demands of the academic career in Japan:

> *As a PhD student, my supervisor told me that if I only worked on* rakugo*, and especially on contemporary performers, I would not get a job. He told me to combine* rakugo *with something else, like literature. That was good advice, as rakugo is not much in demand in university…* (Miya Nobuaki, interview with the author, 28 August 2021).

Miya thus worked extensively on San'yūtei Enchō, a figure that allowed him to conduct research at the conjunction of *rakugo*, literature, and media history, given Enchō's prominent status in Meiji Era literature and in the establishment of stenographic books (*sokkibon*). On the other hand, Miya admitted to "not following that advice too closely", as he ended up dedicating most of his research to *rakugo* (see Miya 2016, 2022). While a rare case, in recent years, Miya is not alone as an author working on *rakugo*. *Rakugo* producer and writer Aoki Nobuhiro, in an interview we had at the Rakugo Café he manages, recalled:

> *When I was a young freelance writer in the 1980s,* rakugo *was not popular, and publishing houses would not accept proposals to write a book on it. Now, instead, there are at least ten or so people who write about* rakugo*, even though they all also cover some other fields, in my case, travel writing. Who would have thought, back then, that this book on* rakugo *I*

published[57] *would become such a long seller, with more than 50,000 copies and steadily going!* (Aoki Nobuhiro, interview with the author, 20 July 2021).

The "ten or so people who write about *rakugo*" mentioned by Aoki contributed, among various avenues of research, to the historiography of *rakugo*. The situation has indeed improved since Okitsu's 1968 lamentation of the scarcity of historical work on *rakugo*, and a number of histories of *rakugo* have now been published, including a handful of works covering more recent years. Yamamoto Susumu's *Rakugo no Rekishi* (*"History of Rakugo*") (2006) offers a broad overview of the art's history since the Edo period in both Kansai and Edo, ending with the mention of a new revival in the making as of 2005. Yoshikawa Ushio's *Sengo Rakugo-shi* (*"History of Postwar Rakugo"*) (2009) covers, unsurprisingly, *rakugo's* history since 1945, but it focuses particularly on the Tatekawa-ryū, the artistic family headed by popular rakugoka Tatekawa Danshi (1935-2011), which splintered out of the biggest *rakugo* association (Rakugo Kyōkai) in 1983. Kashiwagi Shin's *Rakugo no Rekishi: Edo-Tokyo wo Butai ni* ("*History of Rakugo: Edo and Tokyo as the Stage"*) (2012) focuses on Edo *rakugo* from the time of Shikano Buzaemon (see above) to the situation in the early 2010s. *Rakugo no Ōgon Jidai* ("*The Golden Era of Rakugo*") (2010) by Yamamoto Susumu, Nobuhiro Shinji, and Kawazoe Yū, focuses on the heydays of the great postwar masters who set the standard for "classical *rakugo*" in Tokyo in the 1950s to early 1970s, and in Kansai in the 1960s and early 1970s. Finally, Hirose Kazuo's *21-Seiki Rakugo-shi* ("*21st-Century Rakugo History*") (2020) covers in detail the first two decades of the 21st century. Noticeably, all these books touching on recent *rakugo* history fall into that genre of "quasi-academic" literature with which scholars of Japanese things will be quite familiar: books published for a relatively wide audience, at times (as in this case) by authors not employed in research roles nor publishing any peer-reviewed work, but still respected in the field and following a certain degree of rigour[58].

I relied on these and other publications for the overview of *rakugo's* history up to the "Golden Era of Postwar Shōwa Rakugo" (1950s - early 1970s) presented earlier in this chapter, and I will often refer to Hirose (2020) when discussing the 21st-century revival of *rakugo* throughout this thesis. However, this literature mostly ignores the decline in popularity that the art experienced in the three decades between these two "booms". When covering this period, historians describe in detail the internal struggles that led to the establishment of two new associations (Godaime Enraku Ichimonkai and Tatekawa-ryū) which splintered out of the larger Rakugo Kyōkai in 1978 and 1983 (see

[57] Aoki, Nobuhiro. *Rakugo No Meisaku Arasuji 100 [100 Plots of Rakugo Masterpieces].* Tokyo: Nihon Bungeisha, 2017.
[58] The absence of academic publications on recent *rakugo* history is in line with Miya's observation that contemporary *rakugo* is not yet considered by most academics as an avenue of research.

Kashiwagi 2012, 179-187; Yoshikawa 2009), and other news-worthy events such as the award of the title of *Ningen Kokuhō* (Living National Treasure) to Yanagiya Kosan V in 1995, the first for a *rakugoka* (Yamamoto 2006, 122). Names of the most famous performers and of the most successful shows are also reported in detail, with an emphasis on the growing popularity of so-called *hall rakugo*. Many of my informants who were active as *rakugoka* in those times do admit that a handful of popular *rakugoka* kept attracting large audiences to individual shows, but the issue the literature overlooks is the overall decline experienced in the *rakugo* art world. The majority of performers struggled with getting by with *rakugo* alone, audiences at most shows were quite empty, and in general, the image of *rakugo* as the main form of comedy had been displaced by the wave of new TV comedians performing *manzai* or *konto*. As San'yūtei Karuta, a pioneer woman *rakugoka* I interviewed after her show at Suehirotei, recalls:

> *When I entered it* [1981]*, the* rakugo *world was going through a long winter* ("fuyu no jidai"). *Fans would come to the most special, fancy shows, but on normal days the* yose *were empty. Even when the* meijin *(great masters) performed, there was no need to open the second-floor gallery of Suehirotei.* (San'yūtei Karuta, interview with the author, 29 October 2021).

This gap in the Japanese literature extends to the field of *rakugo* studies in English-language academia. Morioka and Sasaki's *Rakugo: The Popular Narrative Art of Japan* (1990) was the first monograph on *rakugo* written in English and contains to this day the most comprehensive history of *rakugo* available. The authors talk of a "boom" of *rakugo* in the 1960s: what the Japanese literature and my informants referred to as the "Postwar Shōwa Golden Era of Rakugo". However, being published in 1990, its historical account of *rakugo* stops in the early 1980s. Since the publication of this first monograph, the still-emerging corpus of academic literature on *rakugo* in English has not added much in terms of a history of *rakugo* after the 1980s. Howard Hibbett's (2002) *The Chrysanthemum and the Fish*, while rich in historical descriptions of *rakugo* and other forms of comedy, focuses on the Edo period (1603-1868). McArthur (2013) provides a fascinating depiction of Meiji-era (1868-1912) *rakugo* by focusing on the life and work of Henry Black (1858-1923), Japan's first foreign-born *rakugoka*. Lorie Brau's *Rakugo: performing Comedy and Cultural heritage in Contemporary Tokyo* (2008) is of particular interest for this thesis as the only ethnography of *rakugo* published in any language so far, but it does not go beyond Morioka and Sasaki's work in its section on the history of *rakugo* (Brau 2008, 60-70), even though the book itself, mostly based on Brau's fieldwork in Tokyo 1991-1992, represents a precious account of the *rakugo* scene of the early 1990s. The one publication that touches significantly on more recent developments is Matthew Shores's (2021a) monograph *The Comic Storytelling of Western Japan*. Shores, however, took on the

challenging task of filling the large gap of knowledge in English-language literature on *kamigata rakugo*, covering at length its origins within the merchant culture of Osaka and its features through the centuries. The book can thus only reserve a short section to any developments from the 1980s onward[59].

In other words, readers of English-language sources can gain a good grasp of the history and features of *rakugo* since pre-modern times through the 19th and early 20th centuries, but developments in the contemporary *rakugo* scene of the last three to four decades are practically unknown. It is one of the main aims of this thesis to fill this gap, continuing the work of the pioneers of *rakugo* studies.

2.3.2 Testimonies of the Winter

Rather than academic publications, it is the memories of members of the *rakugo* world I interviewed, together with autobiographies penned by *rakugoka*, that show a clear consensus that *rakugo* underwent a period of decline towards the end of the 20th century, as I will show in the following sections. *Rakugoka* I interviewed who did their *zenza* apprenticeship between the 1970s and 1990s – which entailed training every day at the *yose* while also accompanying masters at other shows, hence getting a good sense of the number of fans attending theatres – recall many empty audiences. The earliest such testimony was that of Yanagiya Sankyō:

> *Rakugo was popular when I was a kid (in the 1950s) but less so after I became a zenza (1967), as TV had spread, and fewer people went to the yose.* (Yanagiya Sankyō, interview with the author, 24 August 2021).

"Golden eras" and "winters" are terms that indicate trends rather than any formal, clear-cut period, and indeed, Sankyō's testimony suggests we may shift the end of the "Postwar Golden Era" back a few years. In any case, *rakugoka* I interviewed who trained after Sankyō consistently confirmed the state of decline of *rakugo*'s popularity in the following decades. Tatekawa Danshirō recalled that there would often be no one in the audience when he was a zenza (1970-1975), as did San'yūtei Karuta (zenza 1981-1987). San'yūtei Kenkō affirmed that:

[59] Shores mentions the continued strengthening of community ties between *kamigata rakugo ichimon* (artistic families) and local fans and venues; the arrival of the internet as a mean of advertisement; and the establishment of the first regular yose in Kansai since the end of WWII: the Tenma Tenjin Hanjōtei, opened in Osaka in 2006 (2021a, 85-90).

> *I was a zenza* [1998-2002] *towards the end of the winter of* rakugo. *Fewer people came to the* yose *compared to today, and the number of tickets sold would rarely exceed one digit.* (San'yūtei Kenkō, interview with the author, 7 September 2021).

Kokontei Komaji reported that as recently as the turn of the century, the "spring" of *rakugo* had yet to come:

> *I started going to the* yose *as a fan in 1999, and it was not popular at all* […]; rakugo *was experiencing a long winter. The revival only happened after I had become a disciple* [i.e. after 2003]. (Kokontei Komaji, interview with the author, 12 July 2021).

Rakugoka's autobiographies reflect a similar timeline. Yanagiya Karoku, in his *Boku ga, rakugo wo kaeru* (*I will be the one to change rakugo*) (2001), affirms that *rakugo* was in full bloom in the Meiji and Taishō (1912-1926) eras, experienced a boom linked to the radio in pre-war Shōwa, a further boom in the 1950s, and that "now, people say *rakugo* is in decline (*shayō*, lit. 'a setting sun')", even though he personally believed the art would recover (Yanagiya Karoku and Kobayashi 2001, 11). At the very end of this period of decline is the experience of Takigawa Koito, an ex-biker-gang leader turned *rakugoka*. In his autobiography, *Tokkō Suru Hanashika* (*The Hanashika with the Biker Gang Jacket*) (2021), Koito affirms that he became a *zenza* in 2005, just before the arrival of the *rakugo boom* and that he saw one final glimpse of a *rakugo* world in decline just before the revival:

> *It was not unusual to have fewer than 10 people in the audience at the* yose. *If I had been the type who studies and anticipates the future, I would not have entered such a world – but I was stupid, and so I could jump into it.* (Takigawa Koito 2021, 97-98)

2.3.3 Factors Behind the Winter of Rakugo

What factors can we identify behind this decline? We observed how, throughout history, the ability of *rakugoka* and their predecessors to adapt to new technological advances and socio-cultural milieus proved central to the survival of the art. The arrival of TV in 1953 at first worked similarly to what happened with radio – causing worries, but eventually launching some *rakugoka* to national fame, and attracting new fans to the *yose*. However, as time passed, another art proved more fit to the demands of television, as recalled by rakugo *producer* Aoki:

> *After the war,* rakugo *was explosively popular:* rakugoka *were on TV and radio, and people would use* rakugo *terms in normal conversation, saying things like "he is such a Yotarō[60]". That's how much everyone knew* rakugo*. But with time, TV started showing shorter comedy performances, while* rakugo *needs 15, 20, even 60 minutes. And so, eventually,* rakugo *did not fit any more on TV, where now comedy gags are 3 minutes at the longest, and you need to make people laugh every 30 seconds. That started at the time of the* manzai boom *in the late '70s and '80s. […] Rakugo fits very well the radio, but it looks too plain* (jimi) *when on TV - there's no set, it's just an old man grumbling!* Manzai *thus took* rakugo's *spot.* (Aoki Nobuhiro, interview with the author, 20 July 2021)

By the end of the 1970s, not only did *rakugo* prove less fit than *manzai* to the demands of the technological medium in vogue (fast-paced television), it also seemed to start falling behind with the "spirit of the times":

> Rakugo *was not "pop" anymore. It smelled of old people* ("toshiyori kusai")*. My father used to say that, after the war, after defeat, there was nothing left – Tokyo had been burned, you could see Mt. Fuji from the centre of the city. From that desolation, the only way to start again was going with a positive attitude, with that kind of silliness* ("bakabakashisa") *of* rakugo*, that "it can't be helped"* ("shōganee na") *attitude.* Rakugo *resonated with people, so its popularity increased. But when the scent of the bubble economy appeared in the '70s, the popularity of* rakugo *started to fade. The great masters of the postwar golden era had died. There were new ones like Danshi, Shinchō, Enraku[61], but only the few most famous* rakugoka *could still attract fans.* (Aoki Nobuhiro, interview with the author, 20 July 2021)

Aoki was not the only member of the *rakugo* art world who considered *rakugo's* winter a reflection of the success of *manzai*. Indeed, the same had happened in Osaka as early as the 1920s. At the end of the Taishō era (1912-1926), the production company Yoshimoto Kōgyō, which would go on to exert overwhelming influence over the Kansai comedy scene, began promoting a new style of fast-paced *manzai* heavily influenced by Western comedy films such as those of Charlie Chaplin. This modern-style *manzai* gained great popularity and supplanted *rakugo* as the main form of comedy in Kansai, heavily impacting the livelihood of and limiting the opportunities to perform for all but a handful of the most famous *rakugoka* (Shores 2021a, 76-78). For several decades, Osaka's *rakugo* scene faced "difficult circumstances", barely surviving thanks to the great efforts of generations of

[60] A *rakugo* stock character known for his lack of common sense.
[61] Tatekawa Danshi VII (1935-2011), Kokontei Shinchō II (1938-2001), San'yūtei Enraku V (1933-2009).

rakugoka (ibid.). In Tokyo, it was not until the late 1970s that a "*manzai boom*" arrived (see Weingärtner 2013), but when it did, it had a similar impact, as the *yose* manager of Asakusa Engei Hall recalled:

> *In the 1980s… it was the middle of a manzai boom, so rakugo was not popular. It is one of the reasons why our yose here in Asakusa struggled those years.* (Matsukura Yoshiyuki, *sekitei*, Asakusa Engei Hall. Interview with the author, 20 Aug 2021).

Manzai and *rakugo* are generally categorised under the same label – "*engei*", or popular performing arts with a strong connection to the *yose*[62]. However, while the *manzai* art world in the 20th century abandoned many of its traditions in terms of style, training, and social organisation (shifting from a master-disciple apprenticeship model to a paid, school-like system), *rakugo* went the opposite direction. In an effort to preserve *rakugo* at times of great social changes, *rakugo* critics and performers active in the postwar years promoted a "classical-isation" (*kotenka*) of rakugo:

> *In the Shōwa period, differences in lifestyle between rakugo characters and today's life became too big not to be noticed, most of all due to the post-war economic boom, and so rakugo started to feel obsolete. In order to turn that into "good-old Japanese culture" (furukiyoki nihon no bunka), the term koten rakugo (classical rakugo) was created. It was the plan of critics and writers to elevate the status of rakugo by turning it into a traditional performing art (dentō geinō), and accordingly, in Shōwa 30s and 40s (1955-1975), hall rakugo spread. (Hirose 2020, 360).*

The efforts resulted, as we saw, in a golden era of masterful performances in the 1950s to early 1970s, but *kotenka* meant straying away, at least partially, from *rakugo's* roots as popular entertainment[63]. Eventually, as the general public moved onto different forms of entertainment, a tendency emerged among many *rakugoka* to cater to a small group of hardcore fans (referred to as *rakugo mania*, lit. "*rakugo* maniacs") rather than chasing a wider appeal. This was a logical choice on the part of performers who relied on them for their livelihoods, but targeting hardcore fans might have made it difficult for curious new audiences to approach the art:

> Rakugo *is a peculiar performing art. For a period, it went all the way towards so-called* koten geinō *(classical performing art) and forgot the* taishū *(general public) part of it. The more you perform for* "mania" *fans, the more you cater to them, so* rakugoka *started making inside*

[62] When I asked them what other art they felt closest to, many *rakugoka* I interviewed indeed indicated *manzai*.
[63] See chapter 6 on class and shifts in rakugo's social status.

> *jokes in their performances that were a hit among expert fans. But so,* rakugo *became more difficult to approach for normal people.* (Aoki Nobuhiro, interview with the author, 20 July 2021)

As *rakugo* became increasingly the realm of "expert" fans, casual viewers visited the *yose* not as much to enjoy *rakugo*, but to see celebrities and listen to their *mandan* (comedic free talk). Reireisha Maruko, who became a *rakugoka* in 2003 before the rakugo boom, recalls:

> *Rakugo was a maniac's art back then. Lots of audiences came to the yose on weekends but they didn't want to see* rakugo*, they wanted to see famous people and laugh, so most masters did* mandan*. The headliners would be masters who were famous on TV before the arrival of comedians and manzaishi such as Drifters or Kitano. They did* engei *shows on TV before I was born* [1980]*, and people came to see these stars of the past. My master, Reireisha Bafū, was famous as a TV talent and even as a ring announcer for kickboxing. So, the general public knew the headliners and came to see them, not* rakugo*. Me too - I was not super passionate about* rakugo *at first. I first entered this world to learn* mandan (Reireisha Maruko, interview with the author, 29 January 2021).

Adding to the gatekeeping issue created by catering to devoted fans, another matter that discouraged many from attending the *yose* was that, while *rakugo* was gradually gaining prestige[64], *yose* theatres were still located in somehow shady places, making it difficult for certain categories – namely women and children – to access them (Nobuhiro, Yamamoto, and Kawazoe 2003b, 238).

Yanagiya Karoku pointed at another detrimental form of gatekeeping, which regarded, this time, professional *rakugoka* themselves: the lack of collaboration between different *rakugo* associations (interview with the author, 27 Oct 2021). Karoku was appalled by the waste of possible talent and opportunities and eventually spearheaded cross-association collaborations with other popular *rakugoka* – one of the factors, as we will see in the next chapter, that brought about the 21st-century *rakugo* boom. Luckily, at least, such a lack of collaboration did not happen *within* the associations. *Rakugo* associations are composed of several *ichimon* (artistic families), and in Chapter 5, we will look at the many practices of sharing and training that the various *ichimon* implement. A lack of collaboration between artists, and, in particular, having masters who do not pass down stories and skills to the next generations nor share their art with those outside their own artistic family, is for

[64] See Chapter 6.

several artists I interviewed one reason for the decline of other performing arts adjacent to *rakugo*, such as *rōkyoku*:

> Rōkyoku *was popular in times that are now in history books. They say it was even more popular than* rakugo *for a while. Kunimoto Takeharu, who passed away a few years ago, was very popular and revived* rōkyoku *for a while. But when such a star dies, and the next young people are not trained enough, an industry goes into decline. So the training* ("keiko") *is important. If you get jealous of your art and do not teach it, the industry withers. I imagine that such a thing might have happened to those arts that did not make it.* (Yanagiya Karoku, interview with the author, 27 October 2021).

How *rakugo* managed to avoid the same fate as *rōkyoku* even amid a period of decline will be one of the main matters of discussion throughout the rest of the thesis (see especially chapter 5). Before we turn to the 21st-century revival of *rakugo*, the next section will point out the significance and consequences of the winter of *rakugo* that I have presented in this chapter.

Chapter Conclusions: Significance and Consequences of the Decline

Accounts of empty *yose* audiences are in line with the few remarks found in the literature on *rakugo*'s situation in the late 20th century, which described the emergence of hall *rakugo* and the decline of the *yose* (Kashiwagi 2012, 161-163; Morioka and Sasaki 1990, 293). Was this just a matter of *rakugoka* moving the venue of performances outside the *yose*? Was it a winter only of the *yose*, rather than of the whole *rakugo* world? Perhaps partly due to the *yose*'s strict connection with the community of *rakugoka* as the main place of training and socialisation, this was not what the testimonies of members of the *rakugo* art world I interviewed seem to indicate. The "winter" does not simply indicate a drop in the number of tickets sold at the *yose*, but rather a broader sense of decline and eventual disappearance of *rakugo* from the public discourse, starting from the vocabulary of Tokyoites:

> *There is always someone good at making people laugh in each class at school, right? My father always tells me that in the past, people used to say to the "clown" of the class that he should become a* rakugoka*. But when I was young, in the late 1980s and 1990s, people would not say that anymore.* (Oono, rakugo producer, interview with the author, 15 July 2019).

However, the disappearance of *rakugo* from the public imagination was not only a symptom of the art's decline but also, according to popular performer Yanagiya Kyōtarō, one of the factors behind its resurgence:

When I was a high school and then university student in the 1980s, people thought that rakugo *was an "uncool" performing art.* Ochiken *(*rakugo *research clubs) were synonym to "people unpopular with the other sex". […] The reason why nowadays young people have no such prejudice against* rakugo *is because at a certain point,* rakugo *disappeared from the surroundings of young people. In other words, it is because* rakugo *died once. If they do not know it, they will not think* rakugo *is "uncool" ("*dasai*") […], nor will they care if it is* koten *("classics") or* shinsaku *("new"), they will simply appreciate and laugh at interesting stuff* (Yanagiya Kyōtarō 2018, 1).

Interviewing young fans of *rakugo* confirmed Kyōtarō's impression. Kaburaki, a fellow member of Waseda University's Rakugo Research Club in her 20s, commented:

In our generation, we have no prejudices about rakugo*; people just don't know it. So, since we have no filter, we can enjoy it and find it interesting. Probably, if in the past one had published a manga or a movie on* rakugo*, young people would have found it uncool* (dasai).
Q: So, the fact that *rakugo* was unpopular for a while made it possible for prejudices to fade away?
Yes, I think that our parents' generation doesn't have a good image of rakugo*; it sounds dull to many of them.* (Kaburaki, ochiken member, interview with the author, 16 July 2019).

Interestingly, the very state of decline of *rakugo* attracted some into the *rakugo* world. The first show I attended in person upon arriving in the field in December 2020 was a solo show by Hayashiya Hikoichi – a master of *shinsaku* rakugo – for members of the Waseda Rakugo Research Club. When asked why he became a *rakugoka*, Hikoichi recalled:

"The first time I went, by chance, to the *yose* – it was the late '80s – there was only one other person in the audience. And yet, the *rakugoka* seemed so happy and carefree. 'What kind of world is that?!' I wondered. 'It looks like a fun life!'" (December 2020, at Waseda University)

Being part of an "endangered" art world can also create a sense of purpose in one's career choice and efforts. A testimony of this came from interviewing fellow Waseda University's Rakugo Research Club members Inaba and Nakayama, who were final-year undergraduate students at the time:

Would you like to become a *rakugoka*?

I. *It depends on the period. Now there are too many, it's the largest ever cohort in* rakugo's *history, right? If there were fewer* rakugoka*, I would become one since it's such an interesting*

art, and it would be a waste for it not to be thriving. But it's already thriving. I can't even imagine myself in today's rakugo *world.*

N. *If it's either yes or no, no, I don't want to become a* rakugoka*. I want to become a* rōkyokushi *after graduating. I thought about becoming a* rakugoka, *but I liked Enshō and Shinshō, old masters, rather than the living ones. If Enshō were alive, I'd think about becoming his disciple. There's no* rakugoka *today that I could say I like so much I am almost in love with* (horeteru)*, the way I am with Enshō. But there's one* rōkyokushi *like that. I researched about him, and I really want to become his disciple.*

Why did you think you wanted to become his disciple?

N. Rōkyoku *is still not very solidified* (katamatteinai) *as a classical art. There are amazing people now doing* shinsaku*, but* koten *is not yet well solidified. I would like to lay down the foundations for that. That master I will apply to wrote on his homepage, "I like* koten*"!* [laughs]. *Also, unlike in today's* rakugo*, in* rōkyoku, *the* hanashi *you can do depends on the school* (ryū/ha) *you belong to. And that person, exceptionally, can do* hanashi *from two schools. So, if I enter under him, I can do a lot of* koten*. I also, of course, liked his performances. So I thought he was perfect.*

So you want to protect classical *rōkyoku*?

N. *Well, if no one performs it, it disappears.* Rōkyoku *is on the verge of disappearing. Today, they try to make it popular with young people; they do a lot of* shinsaku*. But it's in decline, we are at risk of not being able to inherit the art anymore, we need someone to inherit the* koten*. In 30 years, if nothing changes,* rōkyoku *will disappear, and the world of* rōkyoku *will collapse. It's not like I have such high aspirations, like "I will save the* rōkyoku *world", but… I feel like that. I feel like I am not needed in* rakugo*. In* rōkyoku, *there are still so few people, some sixty performers in total. And there's no Living National Treasure yet. We need to pass down the art; we need someone who wants to inherit and pass over the art to join the* rōkyoku *world.* (Inaba and Nakayama, Rakugo Research Club members, interview with the author, 28 September 2021).

In other words, within a few decades, *rakugo*'s situation passed from attracting a young Hikoichi for its ability to remain a fun-looking world despite "being in decline", to have the opposite effect on amateur practitioners Inaba and Nakayama, who were discouraged from entering the *rakugo* world due to it being in "too good of a shape" for them to contribute meaningfully to it. What happened in between is the topic of the next chapter: the 21st-century Rakugo Boom.

Chapter 3.
21st-Century Rakugo Boom

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I will present the events and discourses making up what I call the 21st-century *rakugo renaissance*. This revival, while rooted in longer shifts taking place inside and outside the *rakugo* world, emerged especially in 21st-century Japan in the form of a media-induced boom, starting around 2005 and reinvigorated around 2016, which was capitalised on by various groups of mostly young *rakugoka*, with great consequences for the *rakugo* scene. In 2005, the year generally referred to as the start of the "*rakugo boom*", the TV series *Tiger & Dragon* attracted public attention to the art, presenting a new image of *rakugo* and bringing new audiences to *rakugo* shows. Members of the *rakugo* world heavily invested in rescuing the art from a possible decline, such as Takada Fumio and Shun'pūtei Shōta, were involved in the inspiration for and creation of the show. I highlight through quantitative data extracted from online archives of Yomiuri Shinbun and Asahi Shinbun (Japan's two best-selling newspapers) that since around 2005, journalists have circulated the term "*rakugo boom*" and increasingly covered *rakugo*. I then move the focus from media products and discourses to the *rakugoka* at the centre of the 21st-century revival of the art. The Rokunin no Kai, a group of six *rakugoka* led by Shun'pūtei Koasa, greatly contributed to the surge of interest in *rakugo* by overcoming walls between associations and establishing high-profile shows, including a Grand Rakugo Festival in Ginza. The unit SWA, including members such as Shun'pūtei Shōta and Yanagiya Kyōtarō, attracted large crowds by experimenting with *shinsaku rakugo*, turning newly created *rakugo* into a mainstream style. The innovative and "free" approach to the art championed by SWA became the norm also for the many performers of classical (*koten*) *rakugo*, who, freed from the pressure to imitate the great master of the past (*meijin*), more openly adapted the art to their idiosyncratic styles, while still paying homage to ideas of "heritage" and "inheritance", including by creating new traditions, such as Hayashiya Shōzō's grand parade. I then shift the focus geographically to Kansai, where the establishment of the *yose* Tenma Tenjin Hanjōtei and the impact of the NHK morning series *Chiritotechin* brought about, with a slight delay, a revival similar to the one enjoyed by the *rakugo* scene of Tokyo.

The great ferment of public interest and *rakugoka*'s activities since the early 2000s had some lasting consequences, such as the establishment of many small venues dedicated to the art, and the increase in the number of *rakugo* jobs available to young performers, supported by a similar increase of semi-professional organisers and producers (the "*sekitei-san boom*"). This eventually created the

conditions for a second wave of media interest in *rakugo* around 2016, which critic Hirose Kazuo termed a "*petit rakugo boom*". This second wave focused on the activities of young performers such as the Geijutsu Rakugo Kyōkai group Narikin, and was sustained by the manga, anime, and TV series *Shōwa Genroku Rakugo Shinjū*, greatly popular, especially among a younger and more female fanbase than is typical for *rakugo* audiences. I will show how this shift towards younger performers signalled the spread within the *rakugo* art world of a practice common in other subcultures in and beyond Japan of fans finding purpose in supporting young hopes. This is what producer Aoki christened a shift "from *rakugo* as entertainment to *rakugo* as documentary". Similarly, this signalled an increased interest in performers rather than performances, which prompted informants to consider the recent revival a "*rakugoka boom*" rather than a "*rakugo boom*". Several interviewees produced this and other specifications or perplexities regarding the "boom", but ultimately, data evidence and widespread consensus allow the chapter to argue that, indeed, a renaissance of *rakugo* has taken place in 21st-century Japan. The chapter ends with a summary of the factors behind the recent revival, with an assessment of the present and future of the art, and with considerations, based on the case of *rakugo,* about what ultimately constitutes a "boom".

3.1 Introduction – A Foretelling of the Coming Wave

> *It all began with children. An NHK TV programme for kids called* Nihongo de Asobō ("Let's play with Japanese") *featured the* rakugo *story* Jugemu*. All of a sudden, the* yose *was full of children. Someone noticed it was probably because of* Jugemu*, so the masters asked if anyone could perform it. We panicked - it was such a boring story that no one had learnt it. We got scolded and were told to go learn it as fast as possible. This, I think, was the first step of the* rakugo boom*: a sudden arrival of people not usually seen at the* yose [in this case, children and their families] *coming to the theatres and asking for* rakugo. (Reireisha Maruko, interview with the author, 29 Jan 2021).

The *hanashi* (= *rakugo* story) *Jugemu* opens with the scene of a couple choosing a name for their soon-to-be-born son. Not knowing what to choose, the father visits a Buddhist monk, who suggests a series of auspicious names of various degrees of absurdity. Not to miss out on any of the promises of luck and happiness each name contains, the parents decide to give the son all of the

names[65]. Then, a performance of *Jugemu* usually continues with a few funny episodes related to the child's long name. For example, a classmate passes by Jugemu's[66] house to pick him up for school, but by the time he and the parents call his name to wake him up, school is over. Another classmate comes to complain about being punched by Jugemu, but by the time they have discussed what happened, the swelling on his head he points at as evidence, has fully healed. Perhaps thanks to the simplicity of its humour, based entirely on the absurdity of the main character's extremely long name, Jugemu is often employed as an entry point to *rakugo*: besides shows for children and educational textbooks, it is often performed by *rakugoka* targeting audiences with no previous knowledge of *rakugo*. Not by chance, when Reireisha Maruko asked me to appear in a YouTube video in which I would listen to his *rakugo*, he performed *Jugemu*[67]. Katsura Sunshine, a Canadian-born *rakugoka*, turned the story into a song, which he uses as a soundtrack for his shows in London and New York, as well as in his many videos on social networks.

However, while today it is ubiquitous, according to Reireisha Maruko, *rakugoka* rarely performed *Jugemu* until 2003, when the educational TV programme *Nihongo de Asobō* spread its popularity among children as wordplay. In the show, Yanagiya Karoku performed the story at different speeds (normal, slow, fast), making its amusing tongue twisters a hit among children. As a mix of silly-sounding words and complex vocabulary with literary references, Jugemu can be appreciated by both children and educators, as testified by its appearance in school textbooks and on educational websites: one example is the NHK website for schools[68] in which still-shots of Karoku's performance accompany explanations of the text. Noticeably for this dissertation, which argues that the increase in the number of performers is both a symptom of and a reason behind *rakugo's* renaissance in the 21st century, the appeal of *Jugemu* lay not only in listening to it but in performing it as well. One example of a child who discovered a passion for *rakugo* to the point of eventually becoming a professional thanks to *Jugemu* is Shun'pūtei Ichihana, currently a popular *futatsume* (the rank earned after the end of the *zenza* apprenticeship):

> *By chance, my mother took me to a* rakugokai*, it was Yanagiya Karoku's. He performed* Jugemu*. I bought a CD on the way out and decided then to perform* Jugemu *in front of my*

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[65] The full name is Jugemu Jugemu Gokō no Surikire Kaijarisuigyo no Suigyōmatsu Unraimatsu Fūraimatsu Kuunerutokoro ni Sumutokoro Yaburakōji no Burakōji Paipopaipo Paipo no Shūringan Shūringan no Gūrindai Gūrindai no Ponpokopī no Ponpokonā no Chōkyūmei no Chōsuke.

[66] I shall call him by just the first of his names here not to run out of words by the end of this section.

[67] The other reason for this choice was that Jugemu's story is based on a name, and a name is what brought us together – the video is aptly titled "Maruko (the *rakugoka*) performs *Jugemu* for Marco (the Italian)".
See https://youtu.be/i_xyFW9rndI?si=ATQq1w77wX301Y4o [Accessed 31 March 2025]

[68] *Rakugo Jugemu*, available at https://www2.nhk.or.jp/school/watch/outline/?das_id=D0005150091_00000 [Accessed 31 March 2025]

> *relatives. That was the start. With time, the world of* rakugo *felt right to me – how the characters are silly but do not "diss" each other, it felt like a comfortable place to live in…* (Shun'pūtei Ichihana, interview with the author, 30 July 2021).

In other words, with the initial help of a TV programme, *Jugemu* has been attracting new audiences and even future performers to *rakugo*, including categories (children, non-Japanese people) scarcely represented until then in *rakugo* theatres. Reireisha Maruko, in line with Hirose Kazuo (2020, 108) sees this as a sort of foretelling, or first step, to the "*rakugo boom*" (29 January 2021, interview with the author). Two years later, indeed, another TV programme would do for *rakugo* as a whole what *Nihongo de Asobō* had done for *Jugemu* – making it a hit, and attracting new fans to the theatres.

3.2 Tiger & Dragon: A New Image for Rakugo

> *Then,* Tiger & Dragon *came out. That was a real boom. Until then,* rakugo *was seen as antiquated* (furukusai)*, people at the* yose *laughed with* makura *and* mandan (free talk), *but when the* rakugo *stories would start, they yawned from boredom. Of course, at* hall rakugo[69] *shows some famous masters like Yanagiya Sankyō kept attracting their own fans, but at the* yose*,* rakugo *was not popular.* Tiger & Dragon *suddenly made it interesting… So many more people came to the* yose*. And they wanted to see* rakugo*. Beyond the* yose *too - as long as it included the word* "rakugo"*, any show would sell out, it didn't matter who performed.* (Reireisha Maruko, interview with the author, 29 Jan 2021).

Among the many events that contributed to the revival of *rakugo*'s popularity in the 2000s, my informants mentioned one more than any other: the TBS TV drama *Tiger & Dragon*, aired in 2005. Some mentioned the series as almost a synonym for the 2005 *rakugo boom*:

> Q: You started in 2003, so you were an apprentice at the time of the *rakugo boom*?
> *Ah, Tiger & Dragon. Yes, I was a* zenza (apprentice) *back then.* (San'yūtei Mankitsu, interview with the author, 1 June 2021)

This TV series is the reason why, in line with Hirose (2020) and many of my informants, I indicate 2005 as the year of the "*rakugo boom*" (I will also call this "the 2005 *rakugo boom*" elsewhere in the thesis), even though, as we will see, other events in the immediately precedent and following years contributed to said boom.

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[69] See Chapter 2.

Q: Did a *rakugo boom* take place?

Yes, it started in 2005 with Tiger & Dragon*, then news such as Shōzō's promotion, then the manga* Shōwa Genroku*, and so on. It is a quiet boom* ("shizuka na būmu") *that continues to this day.* (Matsukura Yoshiyuki, *sekitei* of Asakusa Engei Hall, interview with the author, 20 August 2021).

How was *rakugo* selected as the theme for a prime-time TV series starring some of the most popular actors of the time, and written by one of the most renowned screenwriters of the early 2000s? According to *rakugo* producer and critic Hirose Kazuo, in 2003, Takada Fumio, a writer and TV personality who occasionally performs *rakugo* as a member of the Tatekawa school's "B course"[70], asked popular television screenwriter Kudō Kankurō to write him a *shinsaku rakugo* story to perform (Hirose 2020, 109). This TV series was "Kudō Kankurō's way of answering that request" (ibid.).

Another factor that might have played a role in the creation of a *rakugo*-themed show is the personal interest in *rakugo* of screenwriter Kudō Kankurō (who indeed, in 2019, would then work on another *rakugo*-related major production, the *Taiga* period-drama *Idaten*). While *rakugo* might have experienced a decline in popularity among the general public (see Chapter 2), interest in *rakugo* among those working in creative industries reportedly remained common: several of my informants started listening to *rakugo* either because their favourite radio or TV celebrity was into *rakugo*, or because, while trying to become a TV comedian, they heard that successful ones listen to *rakugo*. Many authors, including the popular *mangaka* Oda Eichirō (the author of the best-selling manga of all time, One Piece) have reported to be *rakugo* fans and to have been inspired by *rakugo* stories (Oda 2015, vol 77; One Piece Magazine 2017, pp 106-109).

What was groundbreaking about *Tiger & Dragon*, however, is that this was not simply a show inspired by a *rakugo* tale – it was a TV series about *rakugoka* and the *rakugo* world, starring popular young actors and written by a then-trendy screenwriter. Given the importance of *Tiger & Dragon* as a catalyst for the *rakugo boom*, I will present here its content, structure, and some relevant themes and tropes the series touches on. Hopefully, the series can also represent an introduction to elements of *rakugo* for readers of this dissertation in the same way it has done for TV audiences in Japan in 2005.

[70] The founder of the Tatekawa School, Tatekawa Danshi (1935-2011), established, alongside an "A course" for regular apprentices, a "B Course" for celebrities interested in acquiring a *rakugo* stage name and performing *rakugo* with Danshi's approval. This includes, for example, the *manzai* comedian and movie star Takeshi Kitano, also known as Beat Takeshi.

Tiger & Dragon tells the story of Yamazaki Tora (played by Johnny's & Associates "idol" Nagase Tomoya), a member of a *yakuza* gang who is sent to collect a debt from an acquaintance of his boss, Nakatani Ken (played by *rakugoka* Shōfukutei Tsurube). While chasing after the man to ensure he does not run away, Tora ends up in a *yose*. As it turns out, the indebted man is a *rakugoka* called Hayashiyatei Donbei (played by Nishida Toshiyuki)[71]. The serious Tora, who struggled with making interesting conversation and "had never laughed since he was a child", is flabbergasted by the *rakugo* performance and decides to ask Donbei to make him his disciple, in order to learn to tell "*omoshiroi hanashi*" (interesting stories) and become an "*iki de otsu na otoko*" (stylish and refined man)[72]. The boss allows him to leave the *yakuza* to become a *rakugoka* as long as he can finish his last job, collecting 4,000,000 yen from Donbei. Hence, Tora strikes a deal with the penniless master Donbei: Tora will pay Donbei 100,000 yen per *rakugo* story Donbei teaches him, and Donbei will use that money to pay off, little by little, his debt with the *yakuza*. Every episode ends with a switch between their different personae: Tora politely and gratefully pays Donbei the teaching fee (embodying the roles of disciple-master)[73], and the next moment, he will shout and take back the money with an intimidating attitude (embodying the roles of debt collector and debtor).

Alongside the setting of the story, what enabled *Tiger & Dragon* to cast a new light on *rakugo* is the structure of the series. Each episode is framed based on one *rakugo* story Tora will learn, which is presented to the audience on three continuously shifting levels. We see (1) the *rakugoka* telling the story on stage or in training sessions, (2) the same actors moved to an Edo-period setting, playing as the characters inside the *rakugo* story, and, meanwhile, (3) the various characters in their 2005 Tokyo setting facing situations similar to those of the classical *rakugo* story. As an example, in the pilot episode, Tora falls in love with *rakugo* when he sees Donbei at the *yose* performing *Sanmai Kishō* ("The Three Vows"), a classical story about a courtesan who tricks customers with false vows to marry them. While he listens to Donbei's performance, characters in the audience and on the stage suddenly appear in Edo-time costumes, and the scene moves to Edo. Tora himself becomes one of the Edo characters fooled by the courtesan: he and his friends proudly show the written promise of

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[71] Incidentally, in an occurrence of life imitating art, in August 2005 one of my informants experienced the same misadventure of having debt collectors coming for him at the *yose*. Rakugoka Rabuhei contracted a debt when a friend for whom he acted as a guarantor ran away with a large sum of borrowed money. Debt collectors came to the *yose* and sat in the front row, from where they started shouting at Rabuhei as he appeared on stage to perform. He then asked his master to expel him (*hamon*) in order not to cause any further trouble to his artistic family (*ichimon*), to his association (*kyōkai*) and to the *yose*. He has since been working as one of the very few unaffiliated professional *rakugoka* to pay off his debt (Rakugoka Rabuhei, interview with the author, 21 October 2021).

[72] See chapter 5 on the ideology of *iki*, or detached coolness.

[73] As will be discussed in chapters 4 and 5, a disciple does not pay any fee to their master – it is an unusual deal Tora struck with Donkichi to convince him to teach him. The only masters who require disciples to pay them are a handful of *rakugoka* part of the splinter group Tatekawa-ryū, founded by Tatekawa Danshi VII.

eternal love and marriage they received from the courtesan, only to find out they all received one. Meanwhile, in the 2005 Tokyo setting, a *kyabakura*[74] hostess similarly tricks various characters (the son of the *rakugo* master Donbei, a *soba* seller, a *yakuza*, a tattoo artist…) into believing she wants to marry them, only to disappear. Instead of a written vow on paper, the modern men are left with a tattoo of a heart with her initials that they had inked to show their dedication to her.

In other words, through a dynamic screenplay and a cast of popular actors, *Tiger & Dragon* shows an image of *rakugo* that is light-hearted, young, and relevant to the lives of people in 2005 Tokyo as much as it was to 19th-century inhabitants of Edo. The two stories (the classical *rakugo* performed on stage but also shown in costume as if a historic drama; and the modern version of it happening to characters in current Tokyo) proceed in parallel, through comedic situations and some emotional moments, and eventually reach the *ochi*, or the witty punchline that signals the end of a *rakugo* story. The modern misadventures, while shown played out by the actors, are then framed as being narrated by Tora on stage, who, lacking talent for classical *rakugo*, is pushed by his master to tell these "real" stories as he and the other characters experienced them instead.

At times, the show mentions how some knowledge is needed to understand certain passages of classical *rakugo*, but it does not present that knowledge as a gatekeeping piece of information that would prevent audiences from enjoying the story, but rather as an extra step an already enthralled fan can take to enjoy *rakugo* even more. In the pilot episode mentioned above, the *rakugo* story *Sanmai Kishō* ends with the courtesan reciting a *dodoitsu* (a witty poem), saying that she "wished to kill all the crows of Edo so that she may finally sleep in in the morning". The master Donbei explains to the confused Tora that, as crows are messengers of the gods, there is a saying that "breaking a vow causes the death of a crow". Courtesans in the Yoshiwara red district used to work at night and tried to catch up on sleep in the morning, but crows kept them awake. The courtesan in *Sanmai Kishō*, thus, is expressing through the *dodoitsu* her hope to break many vows given to just as many men, which would result in the death of the crows, finally allowing her to catch up with her sleep. Tora (and the audience of *Tiger & Dragon*) could enjoy the story even without an understanding of this punchline, but learning about the cultural references that often appear in classical *rakugo* can deepen one's appreciation of it. In the words of critic Hirose:

[74] A portmanteau of "Cabaret" and "Club", most commonly known in English as Hostess Clubs. See Allison (2009), *Nightwork: Sexuality, Pleasure, and Corporate Masculinity in a Tokyo Hostess Club*.

> *The hurdle* [*to enjoy* rakugo] *is quite low, it is easy to overcome… Perhaps this "*rakugo *boom" is nothing else but a new generation finding out how easier and more pleasurable than expected it is to surpass that hurdle* (Hirose 2020, 6).

Similarly, while presenting a new image of *rakugo*, in other episodes, *Tiger & Dragon* also portrayed those *rakugoka* and fans who embrace a more conservative approach to the art, as opposed to the innovative style embodied by Tora and by the series itself. Episode 7 focuses especially on this tension between, on one side, *rakugo* as associated with "*dentō bunka*", "*dentō geinō*", or "*geijutsu*" ("traditional culture", "traditional performing art", or "fine art"), and on the other, *rakugo* as "*taishū engei*", "*shomin no goraku*", or "*owarai*" ("popular performance", "common people's entertainment", or "comedy"). Without dismissing either of the two, the show presents how traditional *rakugo*, both in terms of art and of *habitus*[75] of performers and fans can coexist with more innovative styles. Indeed, looking at the cast, popular young actors completely unrelated to the world of *rakugo* – such as the Johnny & Associates sensations Nagase Tomoya and Jun'ichi Okada (who played Ryūji, Tora's rival and friend, the titular "dragon" [*ryū*] to the "tiger" [*tora*]) – appeared alongside *rakugoka* such as Shun'pūtei Shōta (portraying one of Tora's *anideshi*, or big-brother *rakugoka*) and Shōfukutei Tsurube (who played the *yakuza* boss).

As the episodes progress, the characters acknowledge the revival of *rakugo*. In the pilot episode, the *yose* Tora visited was half empty, and several people were sleeping on their seats. In episode three, within a plot focused on the concept of "trendy" ("*kiteru"*), the characters proudly announce that "*rakugo* is now trendy" ("*rakugo ga ima kiteru*"). By episode 8, the main character acknowledges that "lately we are in a *rakugo* boom" to explain why TV news cameras are coming to the *yose* for the first time in years. It is not clear whether this was Kudō Kankurō's foretelling, or a reaction to the real-life movement Tiger & Dragon had created – but what is for sure is that, much in the show and outside of it, by the time the last episode aired in June 2005, an unusually large number of cameras were pointing at *rakugo*, and an unusual number of new fans were visiting the *yose*.

We will see below how this revival of interest first started in Tokyo and only reached Osaka (the other epicentre of *rakugo*) after a slight delay. However, I must point here at one last effect that *Tiger & Dragon* (and other media products I will touch on below) had on the widening of *rakugo's* popularity and community of practice: the increased *nationalisation* of *rakugo* from its origins as a local, urban culture limited to the metropolitan areas of Tokyo and of Osaka-Kyoto. In an interview, Okinawan-born Kamiunten, a fellow member of Waseda University's Rakugo Research Club,

[75] See Introduction and Chapter 5 on Bourdieu's concept of habitus.

highlighted the great impact of media products in the process of nationalisation of *rakugo*. Kamiunten encountered *rakugo* through the radio, but he mentioned the story of a *rakugoka* from Okinawa who first learned about *rakugo* by watching *Tiger & Dragon*:

> *The only places where you can always go see* rakugo *are Kansai and Kantō. I have the impression that what the* rakugo boom *boils down to is that people in Kantō interested in similar subcultures, such as radio and comedy, started to like* rakugo *too. If you are in the countryside, there are not that many people interested in those subcultures, and you do not feel [the revival of* rakugo's *popularity] much. But TV shows had a big influence. Tatekawa Shōji entered the Tatekawa-ryū from Okinawa, and he learned about* rakugo *through* Tiger & Dragon. (Kamiunten, Waseda Rakugo Research Club member. Interview with the author, 3 September 2021).

In the next section, I will explore the nature of the *rakugo boom* as a media phenomenon by looking not only at the media products, such as TV shows, which apparently contributed to its ignition, but also at the discourses that mass media, and specifically, newspapers, created around it.

3.3 The Rakugo Boom Discourse in Newspapers

What is a "boom"? The voices of my informants will hint at an answer to this question throughout the chapter, but we shall start here from one aspect of the matter. Media scholar Yoshimoto Mitsuhiro sees booms as media phenomena, and as phenomena of especially high relevance in a country, Japan, which he describes as a "boom-based society" (Yoshimoto 1989, 9). Indeed, we can describe the *rakugo* boom as a media event not only in the sense that it was triggered by media products, but also because the concept of "*rakugo* boom" itself was created and circulated by mass media. We have seen (and we will see through the rest of the chapter) how TV shows and other cultural products contributed to a revived interest in *rakugo*, but at the same time, that revived attention was both reported and perpetuated by coverage of *rakugo* and of the *rakugo boom* in the news. The very concept of "*rakugo boom*" was mostly circulated by mass media, to the point where some informants wrote it off as media sensationalism[76]. That might be an exaggeration, but nonetheless, given the fact that most of my informants cited "mass media" when asked about the

[76] I will explore at the end of the chapter such scepticism as well as, on the other hand, forms of evidence of a revival of *rakugo*. See below, section "Can we call it a Boom? Evidence and Memories".

reasons behind the *rakugo* boom, an analysis of the phenomenon could not be complete without looking at media discourses around it.

When investigating the discourses surrounding the 21st-century *rakugo* boom, two different layers can be identified: the emergence of a narrative related to the specific concept of "*rakugo boom*", and the increasing amount of discourse related to *rakugo* in general. I have investigated both levels of discourse by focusing my attention on the two most-read newspapers of Japan (Yomiuri Shinbun and Asahi Shinbun)[77]. Figures 1 and 2 show the number of articles mentioning "*rakugo boom*" per year in the Heisei Era (1989-2019)[78]. Yomiuri and Asahi have respectively published a total of 149 and 184 articles mentioning a '*rakugo* boom', mostly between 2005-2010, with a relative return of interest in the topic between 2016-2018.

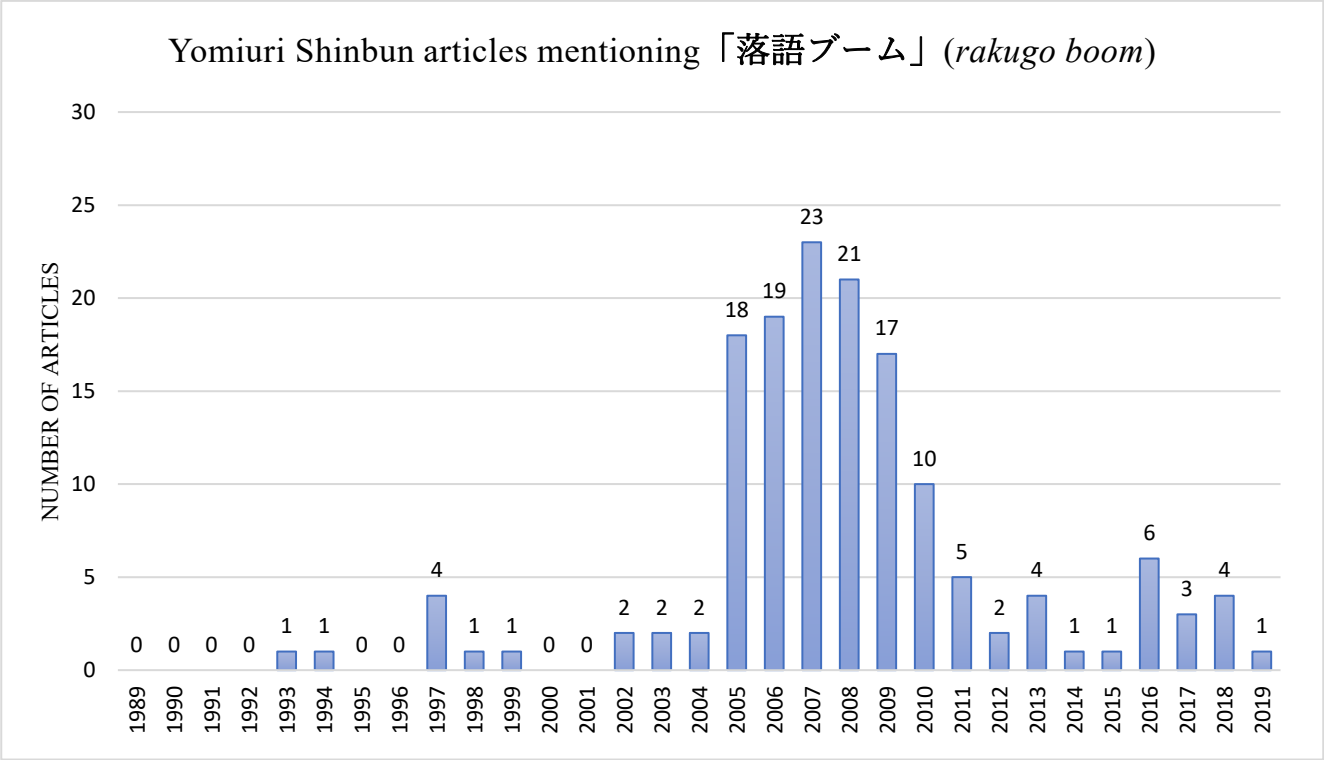


Figure 1. Yomiuri Shinbun articles mentioning "rakugo boom"

[77] All information is based on the online databases of the two newspapers, 'Yomidasu Rekishikan' and 'Asahi Shinbun Kikuzō II'.

[78] A few mentions of a '*rakugo* boom' have appeared in both newspapers before the Heisei era, but they all referred to previous periods of popularity of *rakugo* (such as the "postwar golden age" – see chapter 2). I hence focus my analysis on articles published after 1989. I have stopped at 2019 as the last year with data not affected by COVID-19.

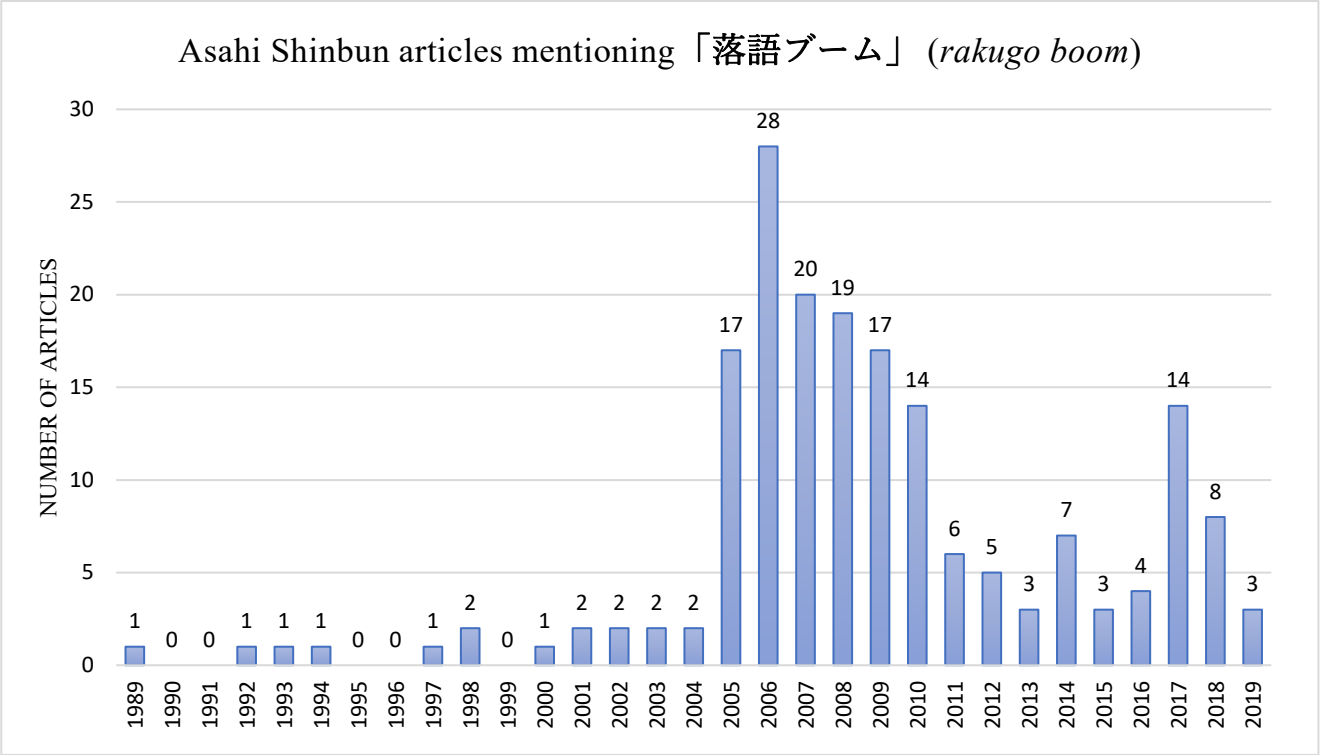


Figure 2. Asahi Shinbun articles mentioning "rakugo boom"

Until early 2005, articles mentioning a "*rakugo boom*" either referred to past periods of popularity (Yomiuri 1997/10/23, 2002/11/25; Asahi 1998/05/07, 2002/03/22), or quoted *rakugoka* hoping "for a *rakugo* boom to come" (Asahi 1989/02/10, 1993/08/26) or predicting "a *rakugo* boom in the near future" (Asahi 2001/01/04). A voice out of the choir signalled, in 1992, that "while the number of *yose* has shrunk, the *rakugo* boom among young people continues" – referring not to the audience but to the growing number of young people who decided to become *rakugoka* (Asahi 1992/01/17). Since 2003, articles also quoted Katsura Bunshi VI's intention to eventually make a *boom* happen, affirming that "there have never been so many *rakugoka* of so many different ages, from teenagers to people in their 80s; there are the grounds for a *rakugo* boom" (Yomiuri 2003/7/23, 2003/7/27; Asahi 2003/07/24, 2004/08/13). The growth of the number of performers is thus framed as an ongoing phenomenon which is not in itself a *symptom* of the boom, but which could become the *basis* for a boom[79]. Then, since the spring of 2005, journalists in Osaka and Tokyo, but also in areas such as Nara, Shizuoka or Nagoya (Yomiuri 2005/05/23; Asahi 2005/04/10, 2005/07/19), started to talk about an "ongoing *rakugo* boom". Some sporadic pieces, as soon as September 2005,

[79] For a discussion on the increase in the number of *rakugoka*, see section "Can We Call It a Boom?" below.

affirmed that "the boom has slowed down a little" (Asahi 2005/09/24; Asahi 2011/08/01), but only as a rhetorical device to introduce some factor which allegedly "has given the boom new life", such as the opening of a new bullet-train line which brought more visitors to *yose* areas[80] (Asahi 2005/09/24), or the fact that a *rakugoka* inherited a famous stage name 'with the deliberate aim of reviving the boom' (Asahi 2011/08/01).

Apart from the specific topic of the "*rakugo boom*", both Yomiuri Shinbun and Asahi Shinbun have increasingly published articles mentioning the word *rakugo*, a sign of increased media attention to the art. Figures 3 and 4 show the number of articles mentioning "*rakugo*" per year, as per the two newspapers' respective databases. The yearly articles published by Yomiuri increased from 142 (1989) to 434 (1998) to a peak of 873 (2007), while Asahi's articles rose from 348 (1989) to 1041 (1999) to a peak of 1251 (2008). Asahi Shinbun published an average of 887 articles mentioning *rakugo* per year in the Heisei Era, while Yomiuri published an average of 558[81].

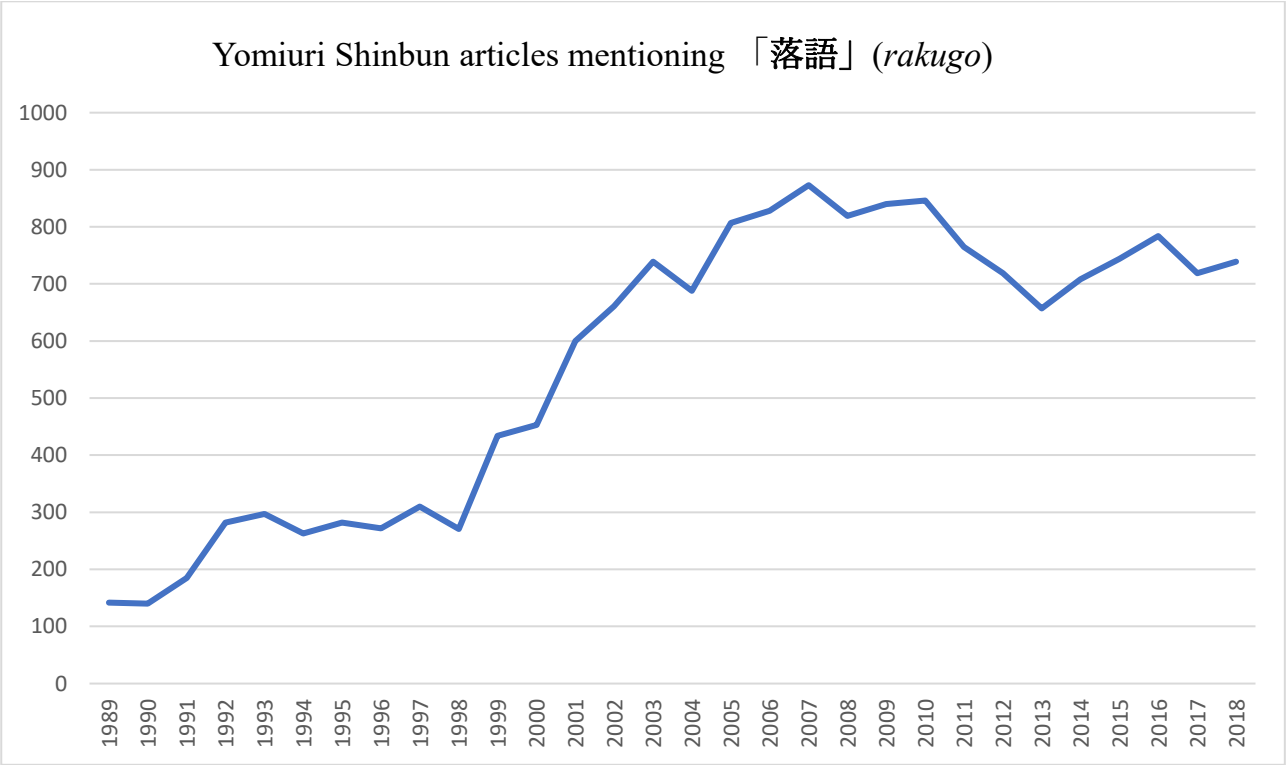


Figure 3. Yomiuri Shinbun articles mentioning "rakugo"

[80] The train connected the city of Tsukuba to central Tokyo areas including Asakusa, where the Asakusa Engei Hall is located.

[81] Articles range from reviews of *rakugo* shows and of new *rakugo*-related media products, to interviews with *rakugoka*, to reports on activities of professional and amateur performers involving specific local communities.

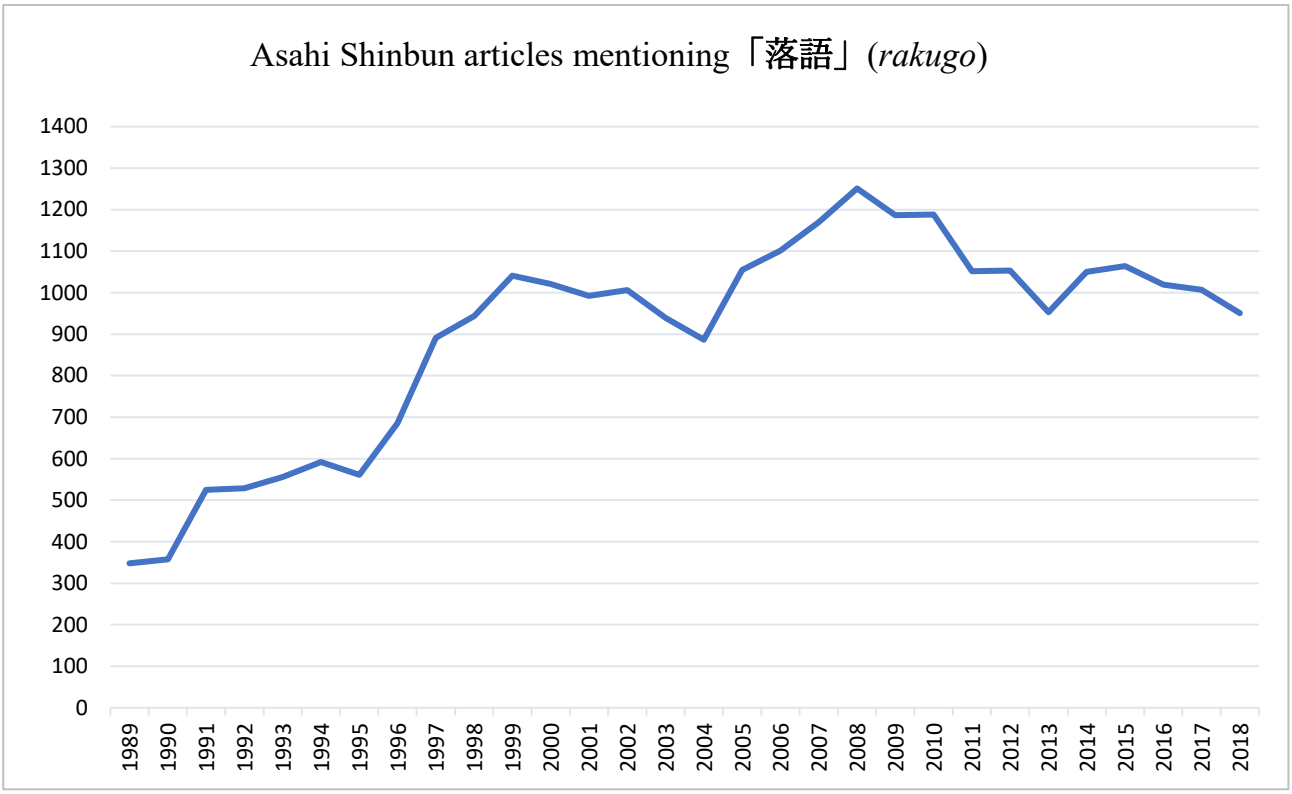


Figure 4. Asahi Shinbun articles mentioning "rakugo"

As more articles about any topic in a newspaper's online database could simply be the result of an increase in the total number of articles published online and recorded on said database, I have also looked at the percentage of articles mentioning *rakugo* instead of absolute numbers. In these terms too, the two newspapers increasingly covered *rakugo*, and Asahi Shinbun did so in particular: on average, every year, the 0.32% of all Asahi articles mentioned *rakugo*, with a peak of 0.40% in 2018, (compared to Yomiuri's average of 0.22% and peak of 0.30% in 2016)[82]. If we look at these percentages instead of sheer numbers, the impact of the "*rakugo* boom" (which we have seen to have started, as a media phenomenon, in 2005) becomes even more evident, especially in the case of Asahi Shinbun: the percentage of articles mentioning *rakugo* remained around 0.30% from 1991 to 2004, but then suddenly grew since 2005 until it peaked at 0.40% in 2008, slightly decreased for a few years, and then started growing again since 2014 (see figure 5). This trend reflects the above figures on articles mentioning a "*rakugo boom*".

[82] It is important to look at percentages as the rise and decrease of the number of articles on a certain subject could sometimes just be the reflection of the rise and decrease of the total number of articles published by that newspaper. Since the data I analyse is based on the online databases of the two newspapers, the fact that in past less articles were saved online might also undermine the validity of looking at absolute numbers.

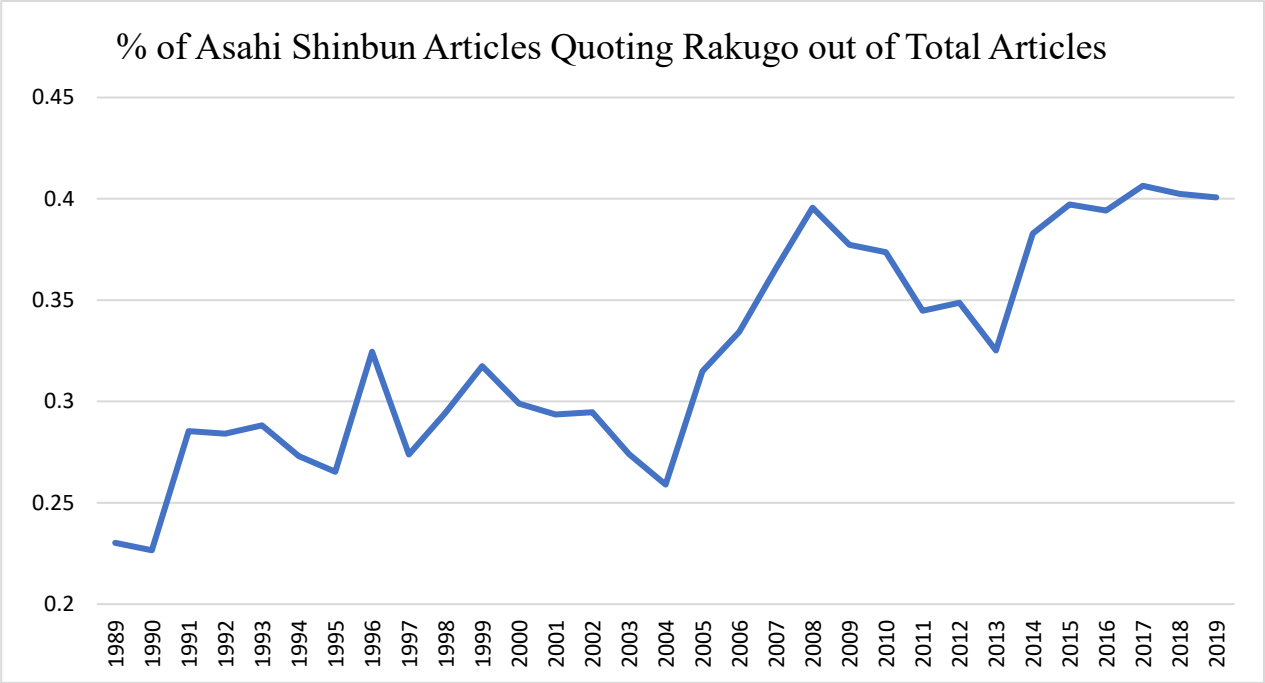


Figure 5. Percentage of Asahi Shinbun articles mentioning "*rakugo*" out of total articles

When we consider the media aspect of the boom, we can thus affirm that not only has the specific narrative of a "*rakugo boom*" emerged in the two major newspapers of Japan, but also, that discourses on *rakugo* in general have gradually become more frequent throughout the years in the Heisei era (1989-2019), with a substantial increase around 2005-2010, a momentaneous decrease[83], and then a further peak around 2016-2018. The two peaks roughly correlate with two waves of *rakugoka* and media products, which I will present in detail throughout this chapter. The first wave (or "boom") is that of the *rakugoka* groups Rokunin no Kai and SWA, and of the dramas *Tiger & Dragon* and *Chiritotechin*. The second, sometimes dubbed a "*petit rakugo boom*" (Hirose 2020), is the one represented by the group Narikin and other so-called *wakate* (young) *rakugoka*[84], and by the manga, anime and subsequent NHK drama adaptation Shōwa Genroku *Rakugo* Shinjū[85]. Articles from different periods tend to attribute the "boom" to the most recent events alone, so that we might actually consider talking of *several* "*rakugo booms*" – however, we must note that in the "boom-based society" which is Japan (Yoshimoto 1989), media "booms" are often characterised by a "strong sense of the here-and-now" and a "disregard for past phenomena" (Skov 1995, 175-176), which may mislead us into missing the overall picture. In the next sections, we shall look at some further triggers

[83] The temporary decrease might simply reflect the short-lived nature of media booms in Japan, but the triple disaster of 11 March 2011 and its aftermath could have also played a role.
[84] Names worth mentioning are Shunpūtei Ichinosuke and Kanda Matsunojō – the latter being a Kōdan performer, who nonetheless attracted many new fans to the *yose*, fuelling the *rakugo* boom as well (Yomiuri 2018/12/18).
[85] Focusing on the life of fictitious *rakugoka* in the Shōwa era (1926-1989), this anime aired between 2016-2017 and is the adaptation of a manga serialised between 2010-2016, also adapted into a NHK drama aired in 2018.

of the *rakugo* boom and at the *rakugoka* who managed to fan its flames and turn fleeting media trends into an ongoing renaissance of the art.

3.4 Breaking Walls: The Group of Six and the Great Ginza Rakugo Festival

3.4.1 Working for the Revival of Rakugo: Shun'pūtei Koasa

Even in the time of relative decline of *rakugo*'s popularity in the 1980s and 1990s, a handful of *rakugoka* still achieved considerable fame and could gather crowds at their own personal shows[86]. Among them was Shun'pūtei Koasa (1955-). Active as an amateur *rakugo* performer since a very young age, Koasa became the disciple of Shun'pūtei Ryūchō V (1929-1991) while attending high school. After a mere four years as a *futatsume*, in 1980, Koasa was awarded the rank of *shin'uchi* (the highest rank in Tokyo's[87] *rakugo*, which allows a *rakugoka* to perform as headliner at the *yose* and to take on disciples) with a so-called *batteki* ("exceptional") promotion. I shall spend a few words here on the promotion system to contextualise the exceptional role of Koasa and of some of the other performers I will introduce here, as well as the community's wish to turn promotions into moments of media attention for the art. Since the 1980s, virtually all *rakugoka* in the main associations have been promoted to the rank of *shin'uchi* based on seniority. Exceptionally, some *futatsume* are promoted to *shin'uchi* before their turn, in what are called *batteki* promotions. The resulting change in power dynamics is a serious matter in the hierarchical world of *rakugo*, where anyone who became a *rakugoka* even just one day earlier is a senior to be addressed as *anisan/anesan* (older brother/sister) or *shishō* (master), with all the implications of such vertical relationships seen in Japan in many other social environments (use of formal/informal language, expectation to treat/be treated to meals, etc)[88]. Koasa, through his *batteki* promotion, surpassed 36 of his seniors, gaining in the way media fame as well as a large following of devout fans, including Lorie Brau, who describes some of Koasa's performances in her monograph on *rakugo* (see Brau 2008, 2). At a time of scarce public attention for *rakugo*, Koasa was among the few who kept expanding the possibilities of the art, such as when in 1997 he performed at a sold-out Nippon Budōkan[89] in front of more than 10,000 spectators, a first for a *rakugoka* (Asahi 1997/10/18). In 2000, he published the book *Kunō Suru Rakugo: 21Seiki e*

[86] How the *rakugo* world managed to keep attracting and training such talented performers will be explored in chapter 5.
[87] No such rank system exists in Kamigata *rakugo* - see Chapter 4.
[88] For a classic (if often criticised) work on vertical relationships in Japan, see Nakane 1970.
[89] Built as a martial arts arena for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, Nippon Budōkan (known in English also as "Budokan") became an iconic venue for concerts, hosting international bands from the Beatles to ABBA (who ended their last tour here on 27 March 1980). Accordingly, an Asahi Shinbun article on Shun'pūtei Koasa from 1999 includes in its introduction of the *rakugoka* that he "performed at a sold-out Budōkan, as if a rockstar".

Mukete no Senryaku ("Rakugo in Agony: A Strategy for the 21st Century"), in which he lamented that "the media never covers the world of the *yose*", and that "the only times *rakugo* makes the news nowadays is when Takada Fumio or the Tatekawa-ryū are involved. These 10 years, if Tatekawa-ryū and [the TV show] Shōten did not exist, *rakugo* would have never been mentioned by the media" (Shun'pūtei Koasa 2000). We saw how Takada Fumio was involved in inspiring *Tiger & Dragon*, the TV show which arguably triggered the *rakugo* boom in 2005, but Koasa, too, intended to take action to change the situation. In the same book, he noted: "Aren't there many great young performers able to attract fans? […] it would be a waste to neglect this" (ibid.), expressing his wish to overcome barriers between associations and put on shows that gathered all those talented performers. Among the "great young performers" Koasa would turn to was another rising star of *rakugo* who worried about the future of the art: Yanagiya Karoku (1971-).

3.4.2 From "Good" Rakugo to "Fun" Rakugo: Yanagiya Karoku

I first met Karoku on the night of 1 October 2021, after one of the celebratory shows for the promotion of his disciple Yanagiya Hanaichi to the rank of *shin'uchi* (*shin'uchi shōshin hirō kōgyō*, arguably the most important series of shows in the life of a *rakugoka*[90]). After the show, I waited outside the entrance of Suehirotei for Karoku to exit, feeling somewhat akin to the many stories I had heard in interviews and read in memoirs of aspiring apprentices approaching their future masters outside the *yose*. Like some of the luckier apprentices, I had an intermediary to introduce me: I attended the show with my friend and informant Satō Futoshi, a regular fan of both Hanaichi and Karoku, who knew them on a personal level. As Karoku, who had changed from the formal black kimono (*kuro montsuki*) he wore on stage to a smart Western-style suit, came out of a side door, Satō stopped him on the street and introduced me. Karoku thanked us for supporting his disciple Hanaichi at this important moment of his career and agreed to have an interview a few weeks later, appearing quite glad of my taking an interest in *rakugo*. Indeed, maybe simply out of kindness and interest, but perhaps also as a sign of his will to support *rakugo* and whoever works for its survival, he was generous enough to dedicate a whole afternoon to what ended up as a five-hour-long semi-structured interview.

Karoku is among the small minority of *rakugoka* born in a family of *rakugo* performers – his grandfather was the great master Yanagiya Kosan V (1915-2002), the head of the Rakugo Association between 1972 and 1996 and the first *rakugoka* to receive the title of Living National Treasure (*Ningen*

[90] See Brau (2008, 142-148).

Kokuhō, also known with its formal definition *Jūyō Mukei Bunka Zai*, or "Important Intangible Cultural Asset"). Performing as an amateur since the age of 9, learning stories from his uncle (*rakugoka* Kosan VI, son of Kosan V), Karoku officially became an apprentice of Kosan V in 1987, right after graduating middle school – a timing that was once a normal occurrence, but by the late 1980s was a rarity among the mostly high-school or university educated *rakugoka*[91]. In 1994, after only seven years as a professional *rakugoka*, Karoku was promoted, like Koasa, through a *batteki* promotion:

> *Mass media started talking about it one year before the promotion, saying I was the youngest* shin'uchi *since the end of the war, and that I was the grandson of Kosan…*
> Q: How are *batteki* promotions decided?
> *In the Rakugo Kyōkai, there are* riji (board directors) rakugoka*. Back then, there were a dozen or so. They and the* sekitei (manager) *of each* yose *must give the okay for you to become a* shin'uchi*. In my case […] I don't think that happened because I was incredibly talented or anything, but because it was the "winter of* rakugo*", and so they wanted an excuse to make mass media talk about* rakugo*, since, you know, I was so young, and the grandson of Kosan. Also, there were no stars among those who became* rakugoka *in the same period as me. I was lucky to perform often with Kosan, I was interviewed often, had jobs in the media, and so my seniors thought that if they made me into* shin'uchi, *I would sell well. My* rakugo *was sustained mostly by my youth and energy, I don't think I was particularly good at it yet. I suppose I was okay, though* [laughs]. *I was still unripe, but you could paint that as "fresh", and so I was made* shin'uchi *with that nuance in mind.* (Yanagiya Karoku, interview with the author, 27 October 2021).

As a disciple of Kosan V – the face of classical *rakugo* for almost a century – Karoku started his career as an orthodox performer of classical (*koten*) *rakugo*. However, in 1993, he formed, with young performers from other associations, a "unit" (*yunitto*, a group of *rakugoka* doing shows together) called *Rakugo Kiheitai* (Rakugo Irregular Militia), whose motto was "to become interesting (*omoshiroi*) performers, rather than good (*umai*) performers". This collaboration changed Karoku's views on the art:

> *My art was not funny for those my age, such as my girlfriend of the time. But* [*Shun'pūtei*] *Shōta and* [*Tatekawa*] *Shiraku, both older than me, could make people my age laugh. I was*

[91] See Chapter 5 and 6.

shocked. [*Tatekawa*] *Danshun noticed that and told me*: *"You should try like crazy to make your girlfriend laugh. Only do the kind of art that would make her laugh"* (Yanagiya Karoku, interview with the author, 27 October 2021)

Karoku recalled how he "*ureta*" ("sold", i.e. became a hit, the ultimate goal for most *rakugoka*[92]) just before the arrival of the *rakugo boom*. Hirose indeed argues that at the turn of the century, "Karoku was the spokesman for *rakugo*", his efforts the very embodiment of "the shared feeling, especially among young and middle career *rakugoka*, that something needed to be done" to prevent the "torch of *rakugo* from being extinguished". (Hirose 2020, 27). Those efforts, which included experimenting with new material and forms, bore fruit when a Sony producer picked an interest in his ability to play the piano:

*This Sony producer asked me to publish a CD of "*Karoku no Piano Banashi" ("Karoku's Piano Stories")*. I played Chopin as background music and adapted a Shakespeare piece into Edo Rakugo. Thanks to Sony's influence, NHK covered that – I was the first* rakugoka *to star, in 2001, in* Top Runner*, an NHK documentary programme that would pick up young hopes from various industries. I became quite famous from there. I appeared in many NHK shows, someone even told me I was more famous than NHK news announcers… There was a show about great people who passed, and each episode I would perform that person's life as a* rakugo *story in three minutes, wearing a suit and sitting on a chair [instead of wearing a kimono and sitting in formal* seiza *on a* zabuton *cushion, as customary]. That was the peak of my fame on TV, we reached 10% of share* (Yanagiya Karoku, interview with the author, 27 October 2021).

In 2001, Karoku published the poignantly titled *Boku ga, Rakugo wo Kaeru* ("*I, Will Change Rakugo*"). In a passage containing a conversation Karoku had with the co-author of the book, writer Kobayashi Teruyuki, on the way to Karoku's first *rakugo* show of the new millennium, the two depict a *rakugo* art world at a delicate juncture:

Within the increasing diversification of entertainment, the flow of spectators to rakugo shows is unstable, and it is not a comfortable situation. Unlike in the 1970s, when rakugoka were publicly known as they appeared on many media, from TV to commercials, the audience of [Ikebukuro] Engeijō now is not only composed of people who like comedy. It is people who

[92] "Selling" not only provides financial remuneration and prestige to the *rakugoka*, but also constitutes perhaps the only way to repay part of the debt to one's master, who will benefit from the prestige of having raised a popular disciple. See Brau (2008, 30).

collect information through magazines and websites and go out to enjoy musicals, theatre, cinema and restaurants, younger people who think "let's try rakugo too". […] "If people who enjoy various forms of entertainment come to see rakugo for the first time, their impression of rakugo will be whatever I perform. Thinking that there will be people who never saw rakugo on TV, and their only impression will be me, Karoku… it is scary. What if they think 'What the heck, rakugo is boring'… I always keep such a sense of impending danger in my head." (Yanagiya Karoku and Kobayashi 2001, 12)

In 2002, Karoku published a second book – *Yanagiya Karoku to Rakugo e Ikō* ("*Let's Go Rakugo with Yanagiya Karoku*") – for which he interviewed some of the most celebrated *rakugoka* of the time, including Tatekawa Danshi VII and Shun'pūtei Koasa. As part of the interview, he showed them a list of names he envisioned for a "dream *yose*" gathering the best performers of different associations. On this occasion, Koasa told him to "just wait a little bit, and I will give shape to what you want to do", and that "first of all, everyone needs to follow their individual vocation and improve their skills. In the future, when, for whatever reason, the spotlight is cast on the *rakugo* world, if we don't have the talents to answer that, that will be a problem" (Karoku, interview with author, 27 October 2021).

3.4.3 Establishing the "Group of Six" and the Great Ginza Rakugo Festival

Perhaps inspired also by Karoku's "dream", in 2003, Koasa established a new group of performers: the Rokunin no Kai (*rokunin* meaning "six people" and *kai* meaning group, meeting, or, in the context of *rakugo*, a show). Centred around Koasa, the group was composed of Shōfukutei Tsurube II (1951-), Hayashiya Shōzō IX (1962-), Shun'pūtei Shōta (1959-), Tatekawa Shinosuke (1954-), and Yanagiya Karoku (1971-). The members came from different associations and artistic families and embodied the various strands of *rakugo* that Koasa intended to gather. Tsurube belonged to Kamigata Rakugo Kyōkai, representing Osaka, and at the time had mostly abandoned *rakugo* to perform as a "*tarento*" (personality) in television and as an actor in movies, achieving notoriety with the general public. Shōzō (at the time known as Kobuhei), from the Hayashiya family in the Rakugo Kyōkai, was also known mostly for his television appearances. Rather than disdaining such performers who had "sold out" to television, Koasa brought them back to *rakugo*, where they could attract new fans with their popularity. While Shōzō focused on orthodox, classical *rakugo*, Shun'pūtei Shōta (representing Tokyo's second largest association, Rakugo Geijutsu Kyōkai, of which he is today the head) was known for his modern *shinsaku*, or new creations. Tatekawa Shinosuke belonged to the Tatekawa-ryū, the artistic family established by maverick *rakugoka* Tatekawa Danshi VII, which splintered out of the Rakugo Kyōkai in 1983 and has been banned from regular *yose* since. Another

familiar presence on television, Shinosuke excelled in both *shinsaku* and *koten rakugo*. In other words, the *Rokunin no Kai* broke down all kinds of walls: between associations (Rakugo Kyōkai, Rakugo Geijutsu Kyōkai, Kamigata Rakugo Kyōkai, Tatekawa-ryū), artistic families (Yanagiya, Hayashiya, Shun'pūtei, Tatekawa, Shōfukutei), geography (Tokyo vs Osaka) and styles (orthodox and experimental, *koten* classics and *shinsaku* new creations). It did so while gathering performers known to the general public through their activities on television (Hirose 2020, 53), including some who rarely performed *rakugo* anymore, and bringing them back to *rakugo* shows. From the beginning, the aim of the group was "to attract mass media and turn the spotlight on *rakugo*" (Hirose et al. 2021, 125). As Hirose points out, *rakugo* aficionados would say that at the end of the day, a show with those performers was not anything extraordinary – programmes combining different *rakugo* stars were not unheard of (Hirose 2020, 60). Koasa's target, however, was not *rakugo* aficionados – it was new fans, to whom he sold the shows of the group as a special event worth attending. By gathering famous *rakugoka* into a unit and presenting them in a flashy way, Rokunin no Kai gained an aura of novelty.

In 2004, the group established a grand *rakugo* festival: the Dai Ginza Rakugo Sai (Great Ginza Rakugo Festival), which they announced at a press conference (Yomiuri 2004/06/21). The idea was to make *rakugo*, which was usually "attended in one's daily sandals" and belonged to the realm of the "mundane", into the realm of the "festive", making the day of the festival a "special day" (*hare no hi*) (Hirose 2020, 68). It is not by chance that Koasa chose Ginza, a fancy neighbourhood of Tokyo, as the location – a far cry from the more informal, low-city neighbourhoods (*shitamachi*) where the *yose* are located. For many of my informants, the Dai Ginza Rakugo Sai was one of the major initiators, together with Tiger & Dragon, of the 2005 *rakugo boom*. San'yūtei Kenkō calls it "the trigger of the *rakugo boom*" (interview with the author, 7 September 2021), and for Katsura Sanshirō, the festival is what "started a series of major *rakugo* events in Tokyo and beyond" (interview with the author, 27 September 2021). According to Karoku, the *yose* managers at first were against the festival, as they thought it would steal their spectators. Instead, even on the days of the festival, the *yose* received more attendance than usual[93] – people had seen *rakugo* in newspapers and on television thanks to the activities of the Rokunin no Kai, and either decided directly to go to the *yose*, or tried to attend a show within the festival but had to settle for the *yose*, as many of the shows in Ginza sold out quickly. *Rakugoka* performing in Ginza would perform on the same day both at the *yose* and other venues (a practice called *kakemochi* in the *rakugo* world), and thus, fans would spread around the city (Yanagiya Karoku, interview with the author, 27 October 2021). The festival in 2004 gathered

[93] This is not dissimilar to what happened with the introduction of *rakugo* on the radio – see Chapter 2.

hundreds of *rakugoka*, attracted some 15,000 spectators, and became a yearly recurrence. By 2008, in its final edition, 400 rakugoka performed in the three-day events in Ginza and attracted 55,000 spectators (Hirose 2020, 82). As a testimony (and a declaration) of the revival of *rakugo*, Koasa published *Rakugo in Gestation* (2006), a title that well describes the sense of rebirth experienced in the *rakugo* community when compared with his previous *Rakugo in Agony* (2000). *Rakugo in Gestation* covers the long road Koasa walked to establish and manage the Rokunin no Kai and describes a *rakugo* world Koasa saw as being finally reborn. In it, Koasa points to overcoming barriers between associations and giving space to young performers (after some of the most respected masters, or *meijin*, passed away) as crucial factors:

> *"In a not far away future, even though we will have the frame of associations, hanashika will be much freer to do what they want. Some senpai will try to control them, but they won't have astonishing skills to boast, so they won't be able to control them, and young talents will do what they want"* (Shun'pūtei Koasa 2006, 32).

3.5 Turning Shinsaku Rakugo Mainstream: SWA

3.5.1 Shinsaku: New Rakugo

Soon after the establishment of Koasa's group, another influential unit of *rakugoka* coalesced around Shun'pūtei Shōta, the Rokunin no Kai member famous for his *shinsaku rakugo*. The unit was called Sōsaku Wagei Association, or SWA – *sōsaku* being another term for *shinsaku*, newly created pieces, as opposed to *koten*, classics, while *wagei*, sometimes translated as "verbal arts", indicates performing arts focusing on words and oral storytelling, and includes *rakugo*, *rōkyoku*, *kōdan*, and *manzai*. Beyond Shōta, SWA was formed by *rakugoka* Hayashiya Hikoichi (1969-), San'yūtei Hakuchō (1963-) and Yanagiya Kyōtarō (1963-), and *kōdanshi* Kanda San'yō (1966-). However, San'yō left the group in 2007, making SWA a *rakugoka*-only group despite its more inclusive name. If Rokunin no Kai aimed at attracting media and popular attention and overcoming organisational barriers, SWA was instead formed mostly to support and experiment with *shinsaku rakugo*. Its members would "brainstorm new ideas for *shinsaku*, share each other's *shinsaku*, write new pieces for one another… it was a gathering to help *shinsaku* rakugo" (Hirose 2020, 84-85).

Shinsaku has always been a part of the *rakugo* tradition. Not only were all *koten* classics a *shinsaku* at some point, but forefathers of modern *rakugo,* including San'yūtei Enchō (1839-1900), were skilful writers and believed that performers should craft their own stories. However, the process

of "classical art"-isation (*kotenka*) of *rakugo* resulted in the elevation of *koten* to orthodoxy[94]. The "Postwar Golden Era of Shōwa Rakugo" was an era of *koten rakugo* performed by *meijin*, or great masters, such as Katsura Bunraku VIII and San'yūtei Enshō VI. *Shinsaku rakugo* was relegated to the margins, embraced mostly by members of the Rakugo Geijutsu Kyōkai, which, until at least as recently as the 2010s, was a much less popular association than the larger Rakugo Kyōkai. *Shinsaku* pieces in early Shōwa usually consisted of adapting old stories to contemporary settings and characters – acting as Yamada-san and Tanaka-san instead of Kuma-san and Hattsan (Edo stock characters).

From within the artistic family of San'yūtei Enshō VI (one of the *koten* great masters), however, emerged a performer who completely changed the image of *shinsaku*: San'yūtei Enjō (1944-2021). Enjō attracted attention within the community of practice with his *jikken rakugo* (experimental *rakugo*), in which he dismantled norms and constrictions of what was considered *rakugo*, introducing sci-fi stories or nonsense and, at times, bizarre plots, settings, and techniques, aiming for the kind of fast-paced and modern humour that had launched the *manzai boom* of the 1980s. Far from the usual nostalgic images of *nagaya* rowhouses of Edo, Enjō's *rakugo* talked of sad trains in Tokyo's concrete suburbia and of autobiographical tales of his childhood in postwar Japan. Enjō's influence was such that at many shows I attended, *rakugoka* would talk of "pre-Enjō *shinsaku*" and "post-Enjō *shinsaku*" (something Enjō would get angry about on stage, as that made him sound like a long-dead historical figure even though he was still alive and performing). Members of SWA are part of that generation of *rakugoka*, which also includes prominent performers from Kansai such as Katsura Bunshi VI, heavily influenced by Enjō. This is most evidenced by how SWA members would often refer to themselves on stage as "Enjō's children" (*Enjō chirudoren*). Enjō himself often complained that he "was the one who put in the work [to revolutionise *shinsaku rakugo*], but it was Kyōtarō and the others [SWA members, Katsura Bunshi…] who became rich off it" (San'yūtei Harashō, disciple of Enjō, personal communication, March 2021).

3.5.2 Rakugo as Exciting Entertainment

SWA presented to audiences a renewed image of *rakugo* as "exciting entertainment to enjoy" rather than a "traditional art to appreciate" (Hirose 2020, 107), attracting new categories of fans. The group started organising shows in 2004, which soon became "some of the fastest selling tickets" of the *rakugo* scene and "a catalyser of the *rakugo* boom" (Hirose et al. 2021, 125). Compared to other

[94] See Chapters 2 and 6.

rakugo performances, audiences at SWA tended to be younger and predominantly female (ibid., 125-126). Among the fans attracted to *rakugo* by SWA was Kaburaki, a fellow member of the Waseda Rakugo Research Club:

> *In my second or third year of middle school, I went to a bookshop, and they were having a special sale of rakugo books and CDs. I bought one of Shōta […] and it was extremely interesting, so I started listening to CDs of SWA, a group that did shinsaku* (Kaburaki, interview with the author, July 2019).

SWA members were at the very centre of the rakugo *boom* from its beginning, but they kept attracting new fans and entertaining old ones through the years with their modern, and often postmodern, creations. In an online performance posted at the height of the pandemic in October 2020[95] Hakuchō, one of SWA's members, recalled the *rakugo* boom, "which was going on until COVID-19 arrived", and how the number of *zenza* greatly increased since the time he had entered the *rakugo* world. In the ensuing *shinsaku* piece, he imagined, however, that due to Japan's declining birth rate and ageing population, *rakugo* associations would have to hire external temporary workers as *zenza*. He thus told the story of *Rōjin Zenza Jijitarō* ("*Elderly Apprentice Jijitarō*"), dispatched from the "Silver [i.e., elderly] Human Resource Centre" to work for a day as a *zenza* at the *yose*. The setting, which includes a *rakugo* performance within the *rakugo* performance, enables Hakuchō to create humorous situations and poke fun at fellow *rakugoka* and *rakugo* fans, often blurring the line between character and performer. Hakuchō's experiments with *shinsaku* at times attracted him scolding and angry reactions from *rakugo* fans and masters (including Tatekawa Danshi, who angrily left the TV programme *Rakugo no pin* when Hakuchō performed, and later told him, "it's not your fault, it's the fault of fans that laugh at that *rakugo* of yours"). For many years, Hakuchō's *shinsaku* did not sell well with audiences, as reflected by the many episodes describing his poverty (Brau 2008, 81), but since the turn of the century, and especially with the establishment of SWA, he has earned considerable popularity among fans. His prolific production of *shinsaku* includes plenty of parodies of classics, but also completely new stories now performed by other *rakugoka*, which are thus in the process of becoming "the classics of tomorrow".

However, SWA's experimental performances did not *replace* classical *rakugo* – rather, new styles coexisted with older ones, as is often the case with Japanese arts (see Katō 1971). This is

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[95] See San'yūtei Hakuchō 2021 "Rōjin Zenza Jijitarō", Shinsaku Mamire no Kai, fourth night. YouTube Video. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xgCPdVZYJwY [Accessed 31 March 2025].

reflected in the experience of Kaburaki, who, on that fateful visit to the bookstore, bought not only a CD by SWA but also one by Shōwa *meijin* Kokontei Shinshō, and learned to appreciate both:

> *Shōta from SWA was interesting because he is easy to understand. He doesn't use old words, he wants to use current words, contemporary Japanese, as much as possible. And he speaks with the speed of a current comedian. The* makura *makes you laugh like a modern comedian. So even when he speaks about very old things, he makes you laugh so much… That made me very interested. On the other hand, Shinshō is very difficult to understand. But little by little you start to understand what is interesting about it... The first CD I listened to was "*Kawarime*". In it, the dialogues are for sure impossible to ever happen in real life, and yet they are somehow realistic... For example, a husband saying to a wife, "Your face looks like a lizard from millions of years ago!" – a kind of sentence that you would never think of in real life, and yet it makes you chuckle, it is strangely realistic. So, I liked both SWA's modern* rakugo *and Shinshō's classic* rakugo (interview with the author, 16 July 2019).

3.5.3 Embodying the duality of *rakugo*: Yanagiya Kyōtarō

An embodiment of this double nature of *rakugo* is the popular SWA member Yanagiya Kyōtarō. Born in 1963 in Setagaya, Tokyo, Kyōtarō joined the *rakugo* research club at the Nihon University College of Commerce, where he studied business administration. As a student, he "immersed himself in *rakugo*" and won awards for his *shinsaku*¸ and was expected by his peers to become a professional *rakugoka*, but upon graduation he entered instead a major publishing house, "as I was afraid of making *rakugo*, which I liked so much, my work […] and besides, I wanted to live a normal life" (Kyōtarō 2009). After one and a half years as an employee, however, he quit his position to follow his passion and became the first disciple of Yanagiya Sankyō (1948-).

Sankyō, the disciple of Living National Treasure Kosan V, was known for his orthodox *koten rakugo* and to this day is respected as one of the champions of classical *rakugo*, as evidenced also by his recent appointment as head of the Rakugo Kyōkai in 2024. Since 2021, I have had the chance to collaborate as an interpreter and MC at a number of events with Sankyō targeted at foreign audiences, which gave me the chance to witness his work up close and ask for an interview. In it, Sankyō talked at length about the importance of preserving traditions, comparing those who make excessive changes to *rakugo* to "a gardener making yellow cherry blossoms, or blue roses… There may be someone out there who likes them, but I for sure won't decorate my house with a blue rose" (interview with the author, 24 August 2021). Sankyō argued that without preserving the "fundamentals", the basic "rules

of the game", any art, including *rakugo*, would fade away as a passing fad. How come, then, did a student interested in *shinsaku* like Kyōtarō decide to train under such a traditionalist master? In *Why is Yanagiya Sankyō the Master of Yanagiya Kyōtarō*? (2018), master and disciple recall how many in the *rakugo* world posed exactly that question:

> *Sankyō: "I knew that Kyōtarō was going through some conflict, as some people would say things like 'why on earth is he a disciple of Sankyō if he wants to do* shinsaku*?'"*
>
> *Kyōtarō: "Back then, just 25 years ago, fans were more divided between those who liked* koten *and* shinsaku*. […] When I became a* futatsume*, I became interested in doing* koten *too, and then the* shinsaku *fans would say, 'Which one is he? That damn bat![96]'*(kōmori yarō)*"* (Yanagiya Sankyō and Yanagiya Kyōtarō 2018, 50-51).

And yet, perhaps a sign of his leadership, but also of the acceptance of *shinsaku* and innovation even among traditionalist *rakugoka*, Sankyō never stopped Kyōtarō from performing both *shinsaku* and *koten*. Kyōtarō developed a wide repertoire of *shinsaku*, *kaisaku* (adaptations of classics) and more traditional *koten*, eventually emerging as one of the most (if not *the most*) popular *rakugoka* of the 21st century.

> *Sankyō: I felt some jealousy as well, but also […] the responsibility not to destroy this great talent that had arrived in the world of rakugo* (Yanagiya Sankyō and Yanagiya Kyōtarō 2018, 52-53).

What Kyōtarō and the rest of SWA did, thus, rather than changing *rakugo*, was to expand its possibilities and its image by producing entertaining performances and making *shinsaku* (which had always existed but had been relegated to a marginal position) mainstream. According to Hirose, SWA's *shinsaku* revolution also affected the world of *koten*, as SWA proved how successful a style of *rakugo* that is done by and for modern people can be (Hirose 2020, 90). In the next section, we will look at some of the performers from that "classical" camp and how they also played a role in 21st-century *rakugo*.

[96] "Damn bat" is an insult directed to a person who changes position depending on the situation or that does not belong to either party, just like a bat is in between the world of "beasts" and "birds".

3.6 Classical Rakugo in the 21st Century – Modern Meijin

The innovative unit SWA made *shinsaku rakugo* mainstream, and together with the Rokunin no Kai, it may have contributed to changing *rakugo*'s image, but this does not mean that classical (*koten*) *rakugo* disappeared. A great number of *rakugoka* kept the art and its various styles alive, passing down and polishing stories, techniques, and knowledge. The presence of a large pool of interesting and well-trained performers is what, I argue, enabled the *rakugo* world to turn a passing fad (a "boom") into an ongoing renaissance. How the community of *rakugoka* managed to keep attracting and retaining new practitioners while other arts struggled with an absence of generational turnover will be the focus of the next chapters, where I will explore the structures, practices and ideologies behind this phenomenon. Here, however, it is noteworthy to look at the many performers of classical *rakugo* who kept the more "traditional" image of *rakugo* alive.

3.6.1 Kosanji, Danshi, and other Modern Masters of Classical Rakugo

After the death of Kokontei Shinchō in 2001 and Yanagiya Kosan V in 2002, many lamented the disappearance of *meijin*, or the "great masters" (Hirose 2020), but some performers of comparable status actually remained. One obvious example is Yanagiya Kosanji (1939-2021). A disciple of Kosan V, Kosanji was the head of the Rakugo Association from 2010 to 2014, and in 2014, he became the third-ever *rakugoka* (after Kosan V and Katsura Beichō III) to receive the title of Living National Treasure. A further example of how, in the world of *rakugoka,* orthodoxy does not equal conservatism, Kosanji "is a *meijin*, but his art does not feel *meijin*-like" (Hirose et al. 2021, 8). He became famous for his very long *makura* introductions and for being a "modern man" who wore leather jackets, listened to rock music and travelled by bike around the country, impressing with his looks, among others, researcher Lorie Brau (see Brau 2008, 13). Despite this "modern" style, during my fieldwork, informants always talked about Kosanji as one of the champions of classical *rakugo*, often referring to him as "National Treasure" (*Kokuhō*). In 2001 (second ed. 2007), Kosanji published *Rakugokaron* ("*Theories of a Rakugoka*"), a collection of writings on *rakugo* and on the *rakugoka* life, mostly originally written in the 1980s for young *rakugoka* to read (Yanagiya Kosanji 2007). In an afterword written for the first edition in 2001, Ozawa Shōichi affirms that "Kosanji is a precious *hanashika*, one of the few who is passing on the style of Shōwa *meijin*. Riding bikes, listening to tapes, playing golf and bowling, he is a so-called 'modern man', and yet, when he is on stage, he makes us feel the scent of Shōwa, and even Meiji" (Yanagiya Kosanji 2007, 316). Among the many insightful passages presenting Kosanji's advice to young *rakugoka*, it can be useful here to report one that, once again, supports the idea of change and adaptation being essential even to classical *rakugo*:

> *"No one ever became a fully-fledged* rakugoka *by just doing* rakugo *the way they were taught […] The lines may remain the same, but absolutely, one must act with their own emotions and way of speaking. Absolutely* (Yanagiya Kosanji 2007, 31-35).

The title of Kosanji's book, *Rakugokaron*, is an homage to *Gendai Rakugo Ron* (Theories on contemporary *rakugo*, 1965), a seminal book authored by another modern *meijin* I must mention here: Tatekawa Danshi VII (1935-2011). Born in Koishikawa, Tokyo, Danshi quit high school to become a disciple of Kosan V at the age of 16. Often discussing the tension between tradition and modernity, Danshi contributed to the *rakugo* world from a wide variety of angles. He published a number of seminal books, such as *Gendai Rakugo Ron* (1965) and *Anata mo Rakugoka ni Nareru* ("You Too Can Become a Rakugoka") (1984), through which he affirmed many influential arguments, such as the need for *rakugo* to adapt to the times and avoid becoming an art belonging to a museum, or that "*rakugo* is not about telling a story, it is about laying bare (*sarakedasu*) yourself". In 1966, Danshi established the TV programme *Shōten*, which would come to represent for many the first point of contact with *rakugoka* (see Chapter 4). Danshi often catalysed attention with his actions, such as running for the National Diet as an unaffiliated candidate. After failing in 1969, he was elected to the House of Councillors in the 1971 election, but even as a politician, he kept embodying the ethos of the jester. He ranked 50th in the number of votes out of the 50 Parliamentarians of the national constituency who won the election, remarking that "in the world of *rakugo*, it is customary for the *shin'uchi* to come at the end"[97]. In 1975, he was appointed as Deputy Minister for the Development of Okinawa in the LDP Miki government, but appeared hungover at a press conference, and when asked by local media "do you care more about your official duties or about alcohol?", replied "Alcohol, of course (*sake ni kimatteru daro*)" and later missed a following press conference organised as an apology, saying he needed to attend the *yose* instead, eventually losing his position[98]. In 1983, Danshi exited the Rakugo Kyōkai, headed by his *shishō* Kosan V, and founded his own association, the Tatekawa-ryū, which he shaped as an "*ie*" system with himself, the *iemoto*, as the head – something often seen in other Japanese arts but never seen before in *rakugo*. While at times a divisive figure, all of the informants I have talked with about Danshi agreed that he greatly contributed to the *rakugo* world, contributing to the postwar golden era of rakugo, keeping the figure of the *rakugoka* known even at times of decline of interest, training a large number of disciples, and pioneering

[97] See *Tarento Kōho no Nakiwarai – San'insen* (Tears and Laughter of Entertainer Candidates – House of Councillors Election), Chūnichi Eigasha. Available at https://youtu.be/-6CcDRkwjpA?si=BuUjzgllRl9Navlm&t=198 [Accessed 25 June 2025].
[98] See Tatekawa Kiwi (2021) *Danshi no Hanashi*, available in part at https://bunshun.jp/articles/-/49790 [Accessed 31 March 2025].

concepts (such as the need to make *rakugo* into a vessel to express oneself) that have become the norm in today's *rakugo* (see Hirose 2020, 41-52, 214-242).

In an interview in November 2004 for the magazine Tokyo Kawaraban, Tatekawa Danshun, Danshi's disciple, asked, "There are many now who develop and evolve *rakugo* in their own way, but how many *hanashika* are serious about preserving *rakugo*, transmitting it, and not letting it die? (*nokosu*, *tsutaeru*, *togire sasenai*)" (2004, 7). SWA and the Group of Six attracted new fans and media attention, but plenty of other *rakugoka* besides the couple of legendary *meijin* mentioned above kept the tradition alive. These included those who adapted classic *rakugo* or expanded its possibilities, and those who instead focused on passing it down the way they inherited it. Two living examples are Gokaidō Kumosuke (1948-), who, upon the death of Kosanji, was awarded in 2023 the title of Living National Treasure (the third *rakugoka* of Tokyo to receive the honour, and the fourth in all of Japan), and the already mentioned Yanagiya Sankyō, who was awarded the Medal of Honour with Purple Ribbon in 2017, and was appointed the new head of the Rakugo Kyōkai in 2024.

3.6.2 An Unprecedented Parade Celebrating the Inheritance of a Name

Within this classical camp, going back to 2005, one event heavily invested with discourses of inheritance and "passing on the tradition" is often listed as having contributed to the *rakugo boom* by attracting much media fanfare: the inheritance of the prestigious name Hayashiya Shōzō IX by Hayashiya Kobuhei (1962-). I mentioned Kobuhei earlier as one of the Rokunin no Kai members. Grandson of Hayashiya Shōzō VII (1894-1949) and son of *rakugo* sensation Hayashiya Sanpei I (1925-1980), Kobuhei was born as the eldest son in a rather rare, pure-bred *rakugoka* family. However, for much of his career, Kobuhei had mostly been known as a TV personality (*tarento*), usually referred to with the "cute-sounding" nickname Kobu-chan. The name Shōzō had moved in 1950 from his grandfather to the unrelated Hayashiya Shōzō VIII (1895-1982), who would become one of the great masters of the Shōwa period, for reasons I explore in Chapter 6. However, Shōzō VIII had promised to eventually "give back" to Shōzō VII's family the name he had "borrowed", so that when Kobuhei's father (Shōzō VII's son), the greatly popular Sanpei, passed prematurely in 1980, Shōzō VIII renounced the name, "gave it back" to the family[99] and took on the apprentice-like name Hikoroku, which he retained until the day of his death in 1982. Thus, the name Shōzō remained vacant for decades (a common fate of names which belonged to particularly famous masters), but the Rakugo Kyōkai and Kobuhei's family, particularly his influential mother Ebina Kayoko (1933-), deemed the

[99] I will discuss the interaction between the ideologies of blood kinship and what I call "artistic kinship" in chapter 5.

time right for a new Shōzō to be born as the *rakugo boom* approached. In March 2005, a great procession (*oneri*) of seven trucks passed through the streets of Ueno and Asakusa, completed by some 120 people parading along with it. Reportedly, 140,000 people saw the parade in person, in addition to the many more who will have been reached by the extensive media reporting of it (Hirose 2020, 114) Such a procession, inspired by those in celebration of *kabuki* actors' promotions, was unheard of in the *rakugo* world, constituting in all respects an "invented tradition" (see Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). According to Hirose, some *rakugo* fans, unimpressed by Kobuhei's rather average *rakugo* skills, complained that he did not deserve such over-the-top celebrations and attributed it to his powerful family and connections. However, for Hirose, the very fact that he had the connections to host such unheard-of celebrations is what eventually enabled the parade to attract media attention and contribute to the cause of *rakugo*: "The event celebrated *rakugo* as part of a 'Japan that passes down its traditional culture', thus contributing to the *rakugo* boom from a different angle compared to Tiger & Dragon" (Hirose 2020, 115). In the next section, we will see how this boom then moved on from the streets of Tokyo to reach the other centre of *rakugo* culture – Osaka.

3.7 The Rakugo Boom Arrives in Osaka: Tenma Tenjin Hanjōtei and *Chiritotechin*

3.7.1 A Yose for Kansai

As mentioned earlier, the Rokunin no Kai had overcome geographical and organisational barriers by including Kansai's Shōfukutei Tsurube among its members. The group also organised highly publicised "East-West" *rakugo* shows, but at first, that mostly meant *rakugoka* from Kansai coming to perform in Tokyo and contributing to a mainly Tokyo-centred revival of the art. Osaka, at first, had not experienced the 2005 boom to the same degree. Katsura Sanshirō, a Kamigata *rakugoka* active in both Tokyo and Osaka, saw the 2005 boom as a "Tokyo Rakugo Boom":

> *I did* nyūmon (became an apprentice) *in April 2004 […]. Right after I entered,* Tiger & Dragon *by Kudō Kankurō came out, and it was a hit; it attracted attention to* rakugo*. The Great Ginza Rakugo Festival was held, and the number of major* rakugo *events increased. Tokyo's* rakugo *was looked at again. It was a* Tokyo rakugo boom*.*
>
> Q: Not that much in Kamigata?
>
> *Not at all. There was no* yose*; we had to create our shows. My* shishō *is famous, so we would perform at his shows in nice big halls, but apart from that, all the other shows were in restaurants and the like.* (Katsura Sanshirō, interview with the author, 27 September 2021)

Similarly, Shun'pūtei Shōshō, today a Tokyo *rakugoka*, in 2005 was a university student in Osaka active in a *rakugo* research club and reported "not realising that a *rakugo* boom was taking place due to being in Kansai" (interview with the author, 12 October 2021).

By 2006, however, the efforts of Kamigata *rakugoka*, above all those of Katsura Bunshi VI (1943-), resulted in the opening of Tenma Tenjin Hanjōtei, Kansai's first stable *yose* (*jōchigoya*, what in Tokyo is usually referred to as *jōseki yose*) since at least the end of the war (Katsura Bunshi 2017). Bunshi had been heavily involved with the performers who built the momentum for the *rakugo boom* in Tokyo, as evidenced by his presence at all press conferences of the Rokunin no Kai (Hirose 2020, 69). Under Bunshi's guidance as the newly appointed head of the Kamigata Rakugo Kyōkai, *rakugoka* managed to instil momentum to the *rakugo* scene in Kansai too, widening the geographical scope of the *rakugo* boom. Sanshirō acknowledges this and points at one more media product mentioned by many informants which directed the national spotlight towards Kamigata *rakugo*: the NHK "*asadora*"[100] (morning drama) *Chiritotechin*.

> *After I became an apprentice* (in 2004) *the words "*rakugo boom*" started being used, and a movement to build a* yose *in Osaka was created. Eventually the Tenma Tenjin Hanjōtei was opened. It had been 60 or 80 years that Osaka did not have a* yose*, all the way since WW2. And while finally a* yose *was built, the NHK Chiritotechin drama was aired, and so* rakugo *in Osaka too gained momentum.* (Katsura Sanshirō, interview with the author, 27 September 2021)

3.7.2 The NHK Morning Drama Chiritotechin

Aired in 2007-2008, *Chiritotechin* centres around the life of Wada Kiyomi (Kanjiya Shihori), a girl from the small coastal town of Obama, Fukui prefecture, who moves to Osaka upon graduating high school and, after a chance encounter with a *rakugo* master, starts training to become a *rakugoka*. As Kiyomi is born in a family of *nuribashi* artisans (lacquered chopsticks, a traditional craft of Obama), the show engages in issues of tradition, inheritance and innovation, often drawing parallels between artisans and *rakugoka*. Indeed, it might be argued that the theme of the drama, alongside *rakugo*, is the inheritance of traditions. Considering that Chiritotechin was produced by public broadcaster NHK, which has been shown on several occasions to be influenced by governmental

[100] See Harvey (1998); and Scherer (2022) on NHK morning drama.

policies[101], this theme may have resonated particularly well within the context of a new political discourse increasingly focusing on rediscovering a traditional, "beautiful Japan" – Prime Minister Abe Shinzō had just published the book *Utsukushii Kuni e,* or "Towards a Beautiful Country" (Abe 2006).

Compared to *Tiger & Dragon*, *Chiritotechin* follows a more conventional and even formulaic style in terms of plot, characters, and structure of each episode. Still, drawing from the experience of my informants and written memoirs of people involved in the *rakugo* world, several aspects of this drama appear to have been particularly relevant in expanding the presence and possibilities of *rakugo* in the shared imaginary. As an *asadora*, the sheer length of *Chiritotechin* (151 episodes) kept *rakugo* a daily presence on mainstream television, but instead of just presenting a generic image of *rakugo*, the show focused on a young woman training to become a *rakugoka* in Osaka. In other words, the gender of its protagonist and the geographical setting presented two elements of novelty that complemented the image of *rakugo* that *Tiger & Dragon* had popularised two years earlier. Women are still a minority in the world of professional *rakugoka*, and the first women to achieve the rank of *shin'uchi* did so as recently as 1993[102]. I explore the many obstacles women faced and still face in *rakugo* in an upcoming publication[103] through the experiences of the many women *rakugoka* I interviewed – from pioneer San'yūtei Karuta, to the woman *shin'uchi* who appeared most often at the *yose* at the time of my fieldwork (Ryūtei Komichi), to up-and-coming *futatsume* (Shun'pūtei Ichihana and Tatekawa Shirarin), *zenza* apprentices (Reireisha Miima and Rakugoka Ramune), all the way to students currently aspiring to become *rakugoka* (Ozawa M.). The increasing gender diversity in the *rakugo* world is, however, a very recent development. Thus, in 2007, an NHK drama centred on a young girl training to become a *rakugoka* projected a still quite rare image of what a "*rakugoka*" is, and it did so on the TV screens of millions of Japanese houses every morning for six months. The novelty attracted attention to *rakugo* as a form of entertainment but also as a career option. Ryūtei Komichi pointed at the importance of woman *rakugoka* role models to attract girls to *rakugo* and to pave the way to get rid of obstacles young *rakugoka* can face because of their gender (27 April 2021, interview with the author); in line indeed with literature on the importance of role models for increased female participation (see Löwe 2021).

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[101] See Japan Times (2006) https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2006/11/11/editorials/closing-a-respectful-distance/, Asahi (2024) https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15416754 [Accessed 31 March 2025].
[102] In Tokyo, two women (San'yūtei Karuta and Kokontei Kikuchiyo) were promoted to the rank of *shin'uchi* in 1993. In Osaka there is no *shin'uchi* system, but the first woman to reach a career level akin to that of a master was Tsuyu no Miyako, who had first entered the *rakugo* world in 1974.
[103] A chapter on gender was initially planned but I had to exclude it from this dissertation due to limitations of space.

However, perhaps unsurprisingly for an NHK TV series, *Chiritotechin* falls somehow short in presenting an entirely new model. In his analysis of NHK morning serialised television novels (or *asadora*), Harvey points out that the dramas "proclaim an ideology of 'social progress' with regard to the status of women: promoting the ideal of women working outside the home, but at the same time holding up for emulation traditional values such as filial loyalty and self-sacrifice" (Harvey 1998, 133). Upon having faced all sorts of obstacles navigating the world of *rakugoka* as a woman, Kiyomi, who marries a fellow *rakugoka* by the end of the series, instead of finding her way to be a successful performer, decides to retire from performing to embrace her role as a mother. An older Kiyomi narrates that she will be the mother of her child but also of her husband's apprentices and, metaphorically, of the newly established *yose* theatre. The show portrays this as her own way of contributing to *rakugo*. In all fairness, even path-blazing women *rakugoka* such as Ryūtei Komichi affirmed that the role of the "*okamisan*" (the wife of a *rakugoka*), which Kiyomi decides to embrace, is crucial in the training of disciples[104]. Still, this finale prevents the series from presenting a truly new image, and it reflects a *rakugo* world in which women *rakugoka* had just begun to appear as an emerging but still minoritarian force.

Even so, it seems that presenting new career possibilities (regardless of gender) might have partly been the intention of the NHK: after each episode, some sort of short "commercials" advertised no specific product or company but a variety of careers. A worker (often, but not always, belonging to what we may refer to as a "traditional" occupation) would appear for a few seconds, showing their workplace, compounded by the words "*sagyōchū*" ("working"). Most of them were various kinds of artisans, but the career advertised after the last episode of *Chiritotechin* was that of "*rakugoka*" (*Chiritotechin* 151, 2007, available on NHK on-demand).

Similarly to *Tiger & Dragon*, through the episodes, *Chiritotechin* portrays the changes in the *rakugo* world, to which the series itself was contributing. In the beginning, the show presents a sleepy, lacklustre *rakugo* scene. Audiences, in particular, are portrayed as more interested in *manzai*[105], and they are shown yawning or leaving their seat to go to the toilet when a *rakugoka* starts telling a *rakugo* story (episode 21). However, through the efforts of the protagonist and other *rakugoka* characters, public attention is attracted again to *rakugo*. In Episode 105, the protagonist's master gathers his disciples and announces he wants to create a *jōchigoya* (a stable *yose* with daily *rakugo* performances) in Osaka. He had tried in the past but failed, as the head of the comedians' association had deemed

[104] See Chapter 5 on artistic kinship and the role of *okamisan*.
[105] See Chapter 2 on how the popularity of *manzai* overshadowed *rakugo*, especially in Kansai.

rakugo not popular enough compared to *manzai*. By episode 144, the characters managed to establish the yose. Resonating with interviews of *yose* managers I conducted in Tokyo[106], the narrator of the show talks about the importance of a place where to listen to *rakugo* everyday, so that people "who are feeling down or are worrying about something may come anytime to the *yose* to laugh and recover some energy" – a place for audiences to enter light-heartedly, and for performers to improve their skills (episodes 144-145). The series ends with the grand opening of the *yose*, which had just happened in 2006 in reality too[107], thus celebrating the arrival of the *rakugo boom* in Osaka.

A stable *yose*, however, is not the only place where *rakugo* is performed. Having introduced the main agents and events which triggered the *rakugo* boom in Tokyo and in Osaka, the next section will move on to exploring the aftermath of this sudden surge in popularity, starting with the emergence of a great number of small venues offering a place for new audiences, and performers, to experience *rakugo*.

3.8 The Aftermath of the 2005 Rakugo Boom: Small Venues for Young Performers

The *rakugo boom*, triggered by TV shows and concretised by the work of the above-mentioned groups of *rakugoka*, had lasting consequences for the *rakugo* scene. My informants mention, above all, the creation of a great number of *rakugo* jobs for *rakugoka* outside the *yose*. It was now also possible for young *rakugoka* (*futatsume*), who rarely have a chance to perform at the *yose* or at prestigious "*hall rakugo*" shows, to make a living by performing *rakugo*. Previously, the majority of *rakugoka* would have to take on side gigs such as acting as MCs in cabarets or at wedding ceremonies to make a living[108]. As Reireisha Maruko recalls:

> Q: How did performers adapt to this boom*?*
> *Almost everyone started doing* rakugo *instead of free talk. Even my* shishō Bafū [*famous for his free talk, or* mandan] *sometimes started performing classical* rakugo*. Everyone trained more, as people wanted to hear* rakugo*. Masters like my* shishō [born 1939] *and* [*Shun'pūtei*] *Icchō* [born 1950] *say they had no* rakugo *job when they were young, so instead, they worked as MCs at cabarets and the like, doing all kinds of funny things. Shinchō, Kosanji or Danshi, the great masters, did* rakugo*, but the youngsters under them either got popular as personalities on TV, or they had to produce their own shows. "*Hall rakugo" *like Mitsukoshi*

[106] See Chapter 1 on the importance of keeping the *yose* open every day.
[107] Indeed the timing of the opening of the Hanjōtei *yose* might have played a role in the creation of the NHK drama.
[108] See chapter 5 for a discussion of the ideologies regarding appropriate and inappropriate "side jobs" for *rakugoka*.

existed, but only the best performers performed there. After the boom, rakugoka*, young or old, have been called to do* rakugo*. Old people say they are jealous of us who never had to work at a cabaret. Personally, I proactively accept non-*rakugo *jobs to have a wide range of experiences, but I could get by even without it, and many* rakugoka *do.* (Reireisha Maruko, interview with the author, 29 January 2024).

Capitalising on the new demand for *rakugo*, a number of venues fully or partially dedicated to *rakugo* emerged all around the metropolitan area of Tokyo (and, to a smaller extent, throughout the rest of the country). It is at these relatively smaller venues that most up-and-coming *rakugoka* make much of their living and build up their fanbase, and it is here that I conducted much of my fieldwork as a paying spectator and as a volunteer helper. This is not entirely new – *rakugo* has a long history of small shows taking place in venues such as *soba* restaurants and temples. Arguably, historical references to the "hundreds" of "neighbourhood yose" that existed at the heydays of *rakugo* in the late Edo and early Meiji era point to similar small and informal venues (Morioka and Sasaki 1990). Indeed, Aoki, the manager of Rakugo Café, sees the current increase in performances at such smaller locations as a sort of "return to the origins" of *rakugo* (interview with the author, 20 July 2025).

However, if not a complete novelty, such shows and venues evolved in terms of both quantity and quality as a consequence of the *rakugo* boom. Quantitatively, the increase in the sheer number of shows is evident from both the oral testimony of performers and fans and the written records of the magazine Tokyo Kawaraban[109]. A wider range of locations have been accommodating *rakugoka*, and a wider range of events have included *rakugo* shows[110]. Qualitatively, the years following the *rakugo* boom saw the emergence of several venues which focus their efforts on *rakugo*, rather than being businesses or institutions with a different main purpose (such as temples or restaurants) occasionally renting a space to self-producing *rakugoka*. Several *rakugo* aficionados and critics took on the challenge of setting up small businesses focused on *rakugo*. These include venues where I conducted much of my fieldwork: Dōrakutei in Shinjuku Nichōme, Rakugo Café in Jinbōchō, and ShibuRaku in Shibuya:

There are now 7 or 8 small venues dedicated solely to rakugo *in Tokyo. Rakugo Café was the first. There used to be cafés or* izakaya *that did* rakugo *once or twice a week, but this was the*

[109] See "Can We Call It a Boom? Evidence and Memories" section below.
[110] To list some examples of venues where I personally attended *rakugo* shows, these included, beyond theatres of all sizes, temples and shrines, cafes, bars, night clubs, restaurants (from more traditional *soba* noodles eateries to Italian diners), cultural centres, bath houses, ferries, companies, private houses, and centres dedicated to international tourists. While singularly any such place might have been used even before the *rakugo* boom, here I am highlighting the increase in the number of such places, especially smaller-sized shows.

> *first venue created expressly for* rakugo*, with a proper stage and backstage. Cafes and* izakaya *would use tables or boxes of beer as the stage…* (Aoki Nobuhiro, interview with the author, 20 July 2021).

In particular, Rakugo Café and ShibuRaku often appear in memories and news articles as key factors and evidence of a continuation of the *rakugo* boom into the 2010s (Hirose 2020, 322-330), and so it will be worth focusing here on these two locations.

3.8.1 Rakugo Café

I first visited Rakugo Café on 22 December 2020, upon a suggestion of my friend and informant Satō. I entered what looked like just one of the many tall buildings of Jinbōchō filled with bookstores, and indeed found myself surrounded by shelves of second-hand books. After several involuntary detours, I finally reached the entrance of the Café, almost hidden in the back of the fifth floor – it was surely not the kind of café one might stumble upon by chance[111]. Inside, some twenty people were sitting on foldable chairs looking towards a small stage, and there was no sight of tables or any similar furniture that reminded one of a café. In fact, due to COVID-19, the venue had halted the café-side of its business, and it was only used to hold shows. I mentioned my name at the entrance (unlike the *yose*, the café takes bookings) and took the last remaining seat, thinking I was lucky to have secured my spot in what looked like a sold-out show. In our interview, Aoki would later reveal this as "one little magic trick of the Rakugo Café":

> *Having foldable chairs and thus being able to change the layout, means that no matter how many people booked the show, it is always a full house – if 15 people got a ticket, 15 chairs are put in the audience. If someone suddenly shows up without booking, we even have to add another chair! It always feels like the performer is doing well! That makes it such a better atmosphere than if we had 30 or so fixed seats, and half were empty when only 15 people showed up* (interview with the author, 20 July 2021).

December 22 was a Tuesday, and indeed, while at the time I was not aware of that, the show I had come to see was part of the ongoing series of Tuesday shows produced by Aoki featuring promising young performers. With their *rakugo* pieces and a free-talk interlude as a group, three disciples of Yanagiya Karoku – Kannosuke, Rokkun and Hanaichi – elicited hearty laughter that surpassed the masks everyone in the audience was wearing. Hanaichi, in particular, turned the classic

[111] On Café culture in Japan, see Coffee Life in Japan by Merry White (2012).

story Shinigami (the god of death) into a bizarre but highly entertaining love story between the main character (a man who died at the end of the original story) and the king of hell, Enma. As it turns out, I would end up attending shows of young, innovative *rakugoka* at Rakugo Café several times throughout my year of fieldwork – from Kingentei Bakyū (who specialised in exhuming seldom-performed classical stories) to Ryūtei Komichi (who performed classics readapted from the point of view of female characters). Notably, different informants I met in unrelated places (Waseda's *rakugo* club members, fellow researchers, friends of relatives…) invited me to those shows. This was a sign of the importance the Café had earned in the *rakugo* art world, and also of how widespread, by 2020, the practice of attending shows of up-and-coming young performers had become.

Rakugo Café opened in December 2008 in Jinbōchō, a central Tokyo neighbourhood known for its concentration of second-hand bookshops and publishing houses. In an interview we had at the Café, the founder and manager Aoki Nobuhiro mentioned that he chose the location for both a practical reason (he grew up there), but also to pay homage to *rakugo's* history. The full name of the neighbourhood is Kanda-Jinbōchō, "and Kanda is the area where *rakugo* was born… it was sad not to have any *rakugo* venues in any place called Kanda anymore" (interview with the author, 20 July 2021). In the book *Nama Rakugo no Susume* ("an encouragement to live *rakugo*" – a play on Fukuzawa Yukichi's classic *Gakumon no Susume*), authored by a group of *rakugo* producers and critics in 2021, the Café is described as "a place for aficionados to gather for a coffee during the day, and to watch *rakugo* shows in the evenings" (Hirose et al. 2021, 132). Similarly to the choice of location, the nature of the business as a "Café" also has a romanticised and a more mundane reason. The former, which we may describe as *tatemae*[112], is that "A place like the Café was missing for *rakugo* fans, they couldn't stay in the *yose* to chat after a show, and so a place like a community salon was needed" (interview with the author, 20 July 2021). The latter, which we may describe as *honne* (if not in the sense that it is the "true" reason, at least in the sense that it is the one less publicly shared), is that "it is difficult to create a theatre, there are many regulations, all the way to the number of toilets you need to have, so it was easier to create a café" (interview with the author, 20 July 2021).

Perhaps due to the rather "trendy" name Rakugo Café, which perhaps evoked the maid cafes, cat cafes, and hedgehog cafes that were popping around Tokyo, Aoki recalls that "mass media talked a lot about us, but many fans and producers were worried I was some random amateur who created the *rakugo* café just like you would create a manga café. But upon getting to know who I am – an expert on *rakugo* – they trusted me". (interview with the author, 20 July 2021).

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[112] See (Sugimoto 2021, 55)

Aoki had started listening to *rakugo* as a child, when his father (an ex-teacher from Miyagi who had picked up *rakugo* in Tokyo to learn how to speak in a way that would stop his peers from making fun of his rustic accent) would put *rakugo* cassettes to help him sleep while both parents were busy working. Living in central Tokyo, Aoki started attending *rakugo* shows in middle school, often receiving free tickets from *sekitei* given the rarity of such a young boy being passionate about the art at the time of the "winter of *rakugo*" (see Chapter 2). He joined a *rakugo* research club in high school and befriended later stars of *rakugo* Tatekawa Danshun and Shinosuke, who at the time were up-and-coming (but financially struggling) young performers. Aoki gave up on the idea of becoming a *rakugoka* after seeing how "even such amazing performers were struggling", and realising the dire lack of opportunities the *rakugo* career offered compared to most other industries within the booming Japanese economy of the 1980s. Still, upon a chance encounter with an aspiring *rakugoka* at Waseda University (which he had enrolled in after several years of work), Aoki reconnected with the *rakugo* world and made a name for himself as a prolific freelance writer and small-scale producer. Regardless of this expertise, Aoki recalls that at first, even those who knew him had reservations about the idea of the Rakugo Café:

> *Everyone tried to stop me; they said they didn't want to see me go bankrupt, but I decided to try anyway. So [Tatekawa] Danshun said that okay, he would perform at the first show of the café, and nine more times, once a month for ten months, for free. He usually performs for audiences of 2000 or more people, so he often jokes on stage about performing for 50. He said he'd do that, but in exchange, I had to do everything I could to make this Café work, and in particular, he made me promise to keep the Café going for at least 3 years, no matter what. The worst thing that can happen to the* rakugo *world is for a place like this to be opened and then go bankrupt after 6 months. So, no matter how, you have to keep it open, he said. In exchange, he didn't keep a single yen of the revenue – half went to the Café, while he used his half to pay for dinner for the disciples performing with him, and even gave back any money leftover to the café.* (Interview with the author, 20 July 2021).

Aoki affirms that eventually the Café belied the concerns and went beyond expectations. Every year, "the Café holds around 500 shows, of which around 80 are produced by me, while the rest are people renting the place" (interview with the author, 20 July 2021). Kōdan storyteller Kanda Shun'yō, who happened to be in the Café at the time of my interview, explained that, for example, the show he had just performed for was produced by Aoki (meaning that Shun'yō received a fixed quota, or *gyara*), but that usually he produces his own show at the Café. Among the shows managed by Aoki, he highlighted the weekly series which embodies his main dream of providing a space for young

rakugoka to perform: the *Iki no ii futatsume no ninin-kai wo tanoshimu kai* ("The show where to enjoy two energetic *futatsume*"), held every Tuesday since the opening of the Café. As a sign of the venue's success, in 2019, the Café celebrated 10 years in business with a grand show at Budōkan, the martial arts stadium made internationally famous by the Beatles in 1966. The show, held in front of a sold-out audience of 10,000 seats, included the singer and *rakugo* enthusiast Sada Masashi, the *rakugoka* Tatekawa Danshun and Tatekawa Shinosuke, and many members of the Tuesday shows. As Aoki recalls in a passage of *Nama Rakugo no Susume*:

> The Café went well beyond my ideal. Many young performers and sometimes veterans too use this place as their main "battle ground", and we now have more than 400 shows per year, including also *Kamigata rakugo*, *kōdan* and *rōkyoku*. We successfully celebrated 10 years of the Café with a *rakugo* show at Budōkan. Also, many other *engei* venues and live houses of similar size have opened around the city. I am so happy about this, it really is a future that went beyond my imagination. (Hirose et al. 2021, 134).

3.8.2 From Entertainment to Documentary: Supporting Young Hopes

The new image of *rakugo* that the *boom* brought about, which moved away from the supremacy of the art of the *meijin* (great masters), meant that more fans began attending shows of young performers instead of only going to those of the most famous and accomplished ones. This enabled in the world of *rakugo* a phenomenon that exists in other subcultures in Japan (and beyond), from *kabuki* to baseball: fans supporting inexperienced practitioners, despite their sub-standard performances [113]. This is what Rakugo Café owner Aoki baptised a shift from *rakugo* as "entertainment" to *rakugo* as "documentary":

> *In the past, I had no such culture of going to see* futatsume*; I would listen to the kind of performers that today are [Shun'pūtei] Shōta and [Tatekawa] Shinosuke, great masters, perfected forms of entertainment. But by watching various* futatsume*, I realised that they were not entertainment, they were a documentary. Like* Kōshien *(a popular high school baseball tournament), which is probably more popular than professional baseball in Japan, it doesn't matter who wins or loses; it's about the stories of these young people doing their best. Some will become professionals, some will get a different job, and some will go back to the family farm. Same with* futatsume*: you see some big failures of shows, but also at times some big*

[113] For more on fan cultures in Japan, see *Fanning the Flames: Fans and Consumer Culture in Contemporary Japan* by William W. Kelly [ed.] (2004).

> *"home runs", a young performer able to perform a grand story you wouldn't have expected. I remembered befriending Shinosuke and Danshun in the '80s, when they were young and had this great passion, which, as I told you, made me give up on the idea of becoming a* rakugoka*, but which now made me think I wanted to create spaces for young* rakugoka *to perform like Danshun and Shinosuke used to perform. So, I realised what my contribution to the world of* rakugo *could be: creating a place for young* rakugoka *to perform.* (Aoki Nobuhiro, interview with the author, 20 July 2021).

Dr Miya Nobuaki, one of the few researchers in Japan working on *rakugo*, also highlighted the role of fans wanting to support young performers, and connected it with larger trends in Japanese fan culture:

> *A characteristic of the* rakugo *world and perhaps traditionally of Japan in general is that many want to support "unripe people"* (mijukuna hitotachi)*. That's true for* kabuki*, where fans watch over the child actors with a warm heart, with the feeling that they are all raising* (sodateru) *them. Same for idols. And same for the current* futatsume boom*. Many fans get a feeling of satisfaction from watching over them until they become* shin'uchi*. So, a thing* rakugoka *struggle with now is that you cannot just do your art on stage; you also have to cater to the fans, saying goodbye at the door, etc.- the full package. Fans tend to go to the* rakugoka *who are good at that* miokuri *(seeing off), like Shōtarō and Miyaji. Instead, those who are good at their art but don't like interacting with their fans lose fans. A clear example is [anonymised]. He hates doing* miokuri *and he is shy with strangers. He is good-looking and does* rakugo *in fashionable taste* (imappoi)*, so he could have so many more fans, especially young women, if he improved his interactions with fans. But he doesn't like doing that. He used to be on TV too as a presenter, he was supposed to get big then, but it didn't work - it's not only about the art, your behaviour with the fans is important, just like idols.* (interview with the author, 28 August 2021).

This position of *wakate rakugoka* as "young hopes to support" may be one of the factors enabling fans to feel like a helpful part of a community. Especially at small shows such as the ones held at the Rakugo Café, *rakugoka* are often easy to access, and fans are thus able to establish personal relationships – as one fan described them, they are like "idols you can meet" (*aeru aidoru*)[114]. As an

[114] See for example *Islands of eight million smiles: idol performance and symbolic production in contemporary Japan* by Hiroshi Aoyagi (2005), and more specifically on male idols (which still represent the vast majority of *rakugoka*), *Beyond the Male Idol Factory: The Construction of Gender and National Ideologies in Japan Through Johnny's Jimusho* by Yunuen Ysela Mandujano-Salazar (2024).

example, on that same first visit at the Café, I was approached by a lady in her 80s dressed in a kimono, Kurihara, who would eventually turn into a friend and informant. She complained that one of the performers (Rokkun) turned down her invitation for tea after the show, and so she fell back on me. Among the many things she talked about was the fact that she has been so happy ever since becoming a *rakugo* fan, because it enabled her to meet so many people – performers and fans. Kurihara spoke of *ibasho* (a place of belonging) and of how the *rakugo* world "does not exclude anyone" – ideas I will discuss in more detail in the next chapters. It will be useful here to focus for a moment on one of the performers she had been supporting for years, who, by chance, I would later happen to meet at the same Rakugo Café.

3.8.3 Shun'pūtei Ichinosuke: from Super Futatsume to Urekko Master

New stars of the art emerged among the young *rakugoka* performing in the years following the *rakugo* boom. At the start of our interview at the Rakugo Café, Aoki asked me who was the currently most popular *rakugoka* in my opinion, as a way to make the point that regardless of the boom, most Japanese people nowadays would not know the name of even the most famous *rakugoka* and that, therefore, there was still much work to do. The first name that came to my mind was that of Shun'pūtei Ichinosuke, who had become a *shin'uchi* in 2012 and by 2021 was often mentioned as "one of the *rakugoka* whose tickets are the most difficult to get" (a set phrase often heard to introduce the biggest stars of the art). That very Ichinosuke would appear some thirty minutes later, interrupting my interview with Aoki and turning it into an impromptu podcast recording session. He had performed at one of the *yose* and was on his way to record a piece for a TV show, and decided to stop by the Café to relax a little – another sign, if it was needed, of how the venue had become a cherished place of community for both fans and practitioners. Ichinosuke is a so-called *urekko* (a top-selling performer), and, in the eyes of many of my informants, a future *meijin* (a "respected great master" – both *urekko* and *meijin* are not formal titles but epithets used by fans and performers). In line with what I mentioned earlier on the less rigid style that had been established also due to the *rakugo boom*, Ichinosuke performs classical *rakugo* in a rather "free" way, while also recognising the importance of what was passed down to him[115]. Ichinosuke was still an exception among his peers as a popular *futatsume* (a "*super futatsume*" according to Hirose), but in a sense, he was a precursor of a new era. The *yose* manager (*sekitei*) of Asakusa Engei Hall, asked about the *rakugo boom*, recalled:

[115] See in chapter 1 and 5 an analysis of Ichinosuke's training session with his disciple Yoichi, in which he clearly separates what he learned from his master and what he personally added.

> *Yes, it started with Tiger & Dragon and news such as Shōzō's promotion, then that manga… It is a quiet boom that continued. For example, when Ichinosuke became a shin'uchi, so many people came to the yose, to the point we were surprised. Why did they come? Because more and more people want to support young performers doing their best. Pushed by the popularity of young performers such as Ichinosuke, now we sekitei keep an eye on young performers* (Matsukura Yoshiyuki, sekitei, Asakusa Engei Hall. Interview with the author, 20 Aug 2021).

Young performers would usher in a new wave of popularity for *rakugo*, soon dubbed by the media (and by my informants) as "a *futatsume boom*". Besides the Rakugo Café, another venue would often be included in media coverage as a sign of this new or renewed "*boom*": ShibuRaku.

3.8.4 ShibuRaku: Rakugo in the Mecca of Youth Culture

Shibuya Rakugo, most commonly known as ShibuRaku, shares with Rakugo Café a trendy name, a central location, and a manager with close ties within the *rakugo* community. Its founder and "curator", as he likes to be referred to, is Sankyū Tatsuo, a *manzai* comedian (part of the duo Kometsubu Shakyō together with the irreverent Orishima Ippei), Waseda University Rakugo Research Club graduate, and a university professor researching Japanese comedy culture. ShibuRaku focuses expressly on employing young performers. One reason behind this is that, as mentioned earlier, when supporting young performers, the audience can feel "the joy of looking forward to their futures, finding new hopes before they are famous" (Hirose 2020, 327). Two other relevant factors are that young *rakugoka* are cheaper to hire and "that it is easier for young audiences to feel closer to them" (Hirose 2020, 327). Sankyū Tatsuo openly states that one of the main objectives of ShibuRaku is attracting young people to *rakugo*[116]. Suggesting to inexperienced people that they go to the *yose* can have its dangers, as many performers there are old, and not all are necessarily interesting, so a young person visiting the yose for the first time might come out of the experience thinking that "*rakugo* is a boring thing for old people" (Hirose 2020, 328). Instead, at ShibuRaku, most performers are young, meaning that, at least, "young people who have given *rakugo* a chance will not come out of the theatre thinking that the art is just for old people" (ibid.).

In March 2021, I visited ShibuRaku for the first time in several years (I had been there in 2017 while a student at Waseda University). On top of the general student discount, as a member of an *ochiken* (a *rakugo* club, see chapter 4), I enjoyed an additional discount at the ticket office – a sign of

[116] See *Euro Live Shibuya Rakugo* http://eurolive.jp/shibuya-rakugo/ [Accessed 31 March 2025]

the venue's hope to attract young people interested in the art. Sankyū Tatsuo appeared at the beginning of the show to explain the rules related to COVID-19 and to introduce the performers. His role as "curator" is rather unheard of in the world of *rakugo* – at the *yose*, managers don't appear on stage, and there is no explanation of pieces or performers, also because stories are decided by the *rakugoka* at the last minute. Instead, ShibuRaku's website, curated by Tatsuo, offers a preview and post-show review of each of the shows it hosts, highlighting the points worthy of note (*midokoro*) of each *rakugoka* and each *rakugo*. The aim, Tatsuo explains, is to enable beginners, too, to enjoy *rakugo*[117].

Despite his extensive knowledge on *rakugo*, however, as Hirose points out, Tatsuo downplays his connection to the art and presents himself first and foremost as a *manzai* comedian, a researcher of *owarai* (comedy), and an expert on "anime and other youth cultures" (Hirose 2020, 329-330). The venue's website even contains a manifesto compiled by Tatsuo, whose main points are the following: 1) He chose Shibuya in order to have young people come see *rakugo* with ease; 2) He wants to start a new trend, and wants to make sure even newcomers can enjoy the shows; 3) He wants *rakugo* to stand alongside other cultures such as theatre, movies, and comedy[118]. The objective, in other words, is to eliminate from young people's minds the image of *rakugo* as a "difficult to approach classical performing art" (Hirose 2020, 330).

Shibuya, and even more so a contracted, slang-like "Shibu", evokes images of young girls, fashion, subcultures, and nightclubs. Beyond attracting tourists at its world-famous pedestrian crossing, Shibuya is the neighbourhood where young Tokyoites go out for fun. For mass media, which, as often happens in the present-focused ahistorical cycle of media news (Skov 1995, 175-176), had already forgotten the 2005 *rakugo* boom, the fact that young people would line up in Shibuya to go see *rakugo* was a bizarre scene worth of news coverage. ShibuRaku would indeed end up featuring prominently in a second wave of media interest for *rakugo*, alongside a new pop cultural hit revolving around *rakugo*: the manga, anime, and TV drama *Shōwa Genroku Rakugo Shinjū*.

[117] See *Euro Live Shibuya Rakugo* http://eurolive.jp/shibuya-rakugo/ [Accessed 31 March 2025]
[118] Ibid.

3.9 The 2016 "*Petit Rakugo Boom*": Shōwa Genroku Rakugo Shinjū

3.9.1 A Second Wave of Media Interest

Within this context of interesting young performers, of the emergence of new venues, and of a new image of *rakugo* that lowered the barrier for young people to attend shows, around 2016 a second wave of media attention arrived: what Hirose (2020) calls the "*Petit Rakugo Boom*". Hirose complains of sensationalised news of young people lining up for *rakugo* shows in Shibuya – for him, the reporters are simply ignorant, as this is not a new *boom* but simply the continuation of *rakugo's* revival from 2005:

> Why does the media now talk about a *rakugo boom* then? That is because many people in the media still think about *rakugo* as "an old-fashioned entertainment for the elderly" or as "a traditional performing art like *kabuki* or *nō*". Those who think that this is a *boom* do not know *rakugo*. So, if young people gather in Shibuya to see a *rakugo* show, they are surprised. They think, "How is an old-fashioned thing like *rakugo* popular among young people? Is it a *boom*?!". They are, in other words, ignorant. I am often surprised by the ignorance of those who ask me to write a piece on *rakugo,* "because it is now booming" (Hirose 2020, 4).

Hirose reports receiving more requests from magazines to write about *rakugo* since around 2016-2017, "be it business magazines or women's magazines" (2020, 314). His annoyance with such questions is in line with a remark from Tatekawa Danshi VII, who affirmed, "They say there is a boom. When there is a boom, people who know nothing about that field start saying things about it, it is horrible" (Tatekawa Danshi 2009, 153-154) However, from the "very ignorant" questions that editors asked Hirose, such as "Are you free to wear what you want when you go watch a show at the *yose*?" [answer: yes], he realised on the one hand that regular (*ippan*) people still know so little about *rakugo*, but on the other, that even people so uninterested in *rakugo* are being reached by this *rakugo* boom (ibid.).

3.9.2 Shōwa Genroku Rakugo Shinjū

One of the factors which attracted both media attention and at least some of the fans covered in the news was the release, in 2016, of the anime *Shōwa Genroku Rakugo Shinjū*, based on the homonymous manga by Kumota Haruko serialised in the magazine *Itan* (Kōdansha) from 2010 to 2016. The manga had received discreet success, but it was the anime version which would come to attract a relatively large audience, to the point that the series would also be adapted into an NHK TV drama in 2018. If *Tiger & Dragon* and *Chiritotechin* included young people in their target audience, *Shōwa Genroku* was even more explicitly targeted at young fans, and especially women. The genre

through which Kumota had earned a name as a *mangaka* is "boys love" (BL), a hit among women in Japan and beyond (see Welker et al. 2022). *Shōwa Genroku* presents some traces of it in the abundance of charming men sharing intense (even if not romantic or sexual) relationships.

The title *Shōwa Genroku Rakugo Shinjū* points at the key themes of the manga/anime/drama: while the story moves across different decades, much of it is set in the Shōwa era (1926-1989), and in particular in the so-called "Shōwa Genroku" years, a nickname crafted by Prime Minister Fukuda Takeo in 1964 which would come to refer to the 1960s and early 1970s, a period of particular prosperity for Japan. In an interview, author Kumota Haruko affirmed that she first decided to write a manga about *rakugo* because she was interested in Edo culture (Kumota 2016), a taste that, she explains in a different interview, she had developed through watching period dramas (*Taiga Drama*). Rakugo is often associated with the culture of Edo, but many *rakugo* classics are actually set in Meiji (1868-1912), Taishō (1912-1926) and even early Shōwa. In the same way, the manga and anime Shōwa Genroku Rakugo Shinjū are set in a rather vague recent past that "conveys the scent of the Shōwa period" (Kumota 2018).

The other keyword (besides "*Rakugo*") in the title is *Shinjū*, a euphemism composed of the characters for "heart/mind" and "inside/together" that refers to the practice of double suicide, a leitmotif in the story. The plot contains an instance of an actual double suicide, and mentions the *rakugo* piece Shinagawa Shinjū, a parody of the classic cliché of romantic double suicide often seen in Japanese literature and theatre. But beyond that, the main sense of *Shinjū* is symbolic. The plot revolves around a young man, Yotarō, who upon being released from prison becomes the disciple of the great master Yakumo, whose life is narrated in a long flashback making up much of the manga itself – from his apprenticeship as a child, to his friendship with another *rakugoka* called Sukeroku, to his rise to the status of the greatest master in the *rakugo* scene. As Kumota notes, being a small community, the *rakugo* world can be heavily influenced by even a single person. Masters Katsura Beichō III (1925-2015) in Kansai and Yanagiya Kosan V (1915-2002) in Tokyo raised such a large number of disciples that without them, the *rakugo* world today would be in a very different shape. In this sense, the manga is set in a slightly alternative version of reality in which the efforts of those great *rakugoka* never existed. That of *rakugo* is shown as a world on the verge of disappearing, an aesthetic much favoured by Japanese audiences (see Ivy 1995). Unlike his real-life alter egos, the great Yakumo, instead of raising the next generation, has chosen never to take any disciples and is willing to die together with the art. In other words, Yakumo intends to commit *shinjū* with *rakugo* itself. The young protagonists (Yotarō and Sukeroku's daughter Konatsu) show instead the energetic new face of the art, which refuses to disappear with the old master.

To the extent of what I managed to uncover with my research, no scheming behind closed doors to support *rakugo* seemed to have been in place to result in the creation of *Shōwa Genroku Rakugo Shinjū*. The author Kumota Haruko had been rather successful with her BL manga, and thus her editor at the magazine *Itan* (Kōdansha) trusted her new endeavour. Kumota recalls thinking that, when she started her project in 2011, the *rakugo* boom had at that point calmed down, and so she worried that a product about *rakugo* would not be well received. Instead, while it might not have reached the level of *Tiger & Dragon*, *Shōwa Genroku* still gained considerable success and attracted new attention to *rakugo* (Hirose 2020, 285-286). Similarly to what *Tiger & Dragon* and *Chiritotechin* had done, *Shōwa Genroku Rakugo Shinjū* also showed a new side of *rakugo* less commonly perceived by the general public: a world made of cheerful performances on stage, and dramatic experiences of loss and endurance behind the curtains. "There are many manga, drama, and films about *rakugo*, but most are 'home dramas', stories of pseudo-families formed by [a master with] many disciples. Those are beautiful, but I often felt something else in *rakugo*, and wanted to draw that" (Kumota 2016).

Hirose argues that one beneficial aspect for the *rakugo* community of the anime version of *Shōwa Genroku Rakugo Shinjū* is how skilfully the scenes of characters performing are recreated, which is what prompted fans of the anime to give live *rakugo* in theatres a chance (Hirose 2020, 325). Also, the anime succeeds in conveying some of the key notions behind *rakugo* fans' enjoyment, such as the fact that "*rakugo* changes depending on the performer" and that "*rakugo* adapts to the changing times" (ibid.). The aim of Kumota was to make "a manga about *rakugoka*, rather than about *rakugo*", and to induce readers to "go see the real deal live" – she chose not to depict the *rakugo* stories directly but portray scenes of *rakugoka* telling those stories, "because the stories themselves are better enjoyed when told by *rakugoka* anyway" (Kumota 2016).

This focus on the charm of *rakugoka* would be at the centre of this second wave of interest for *rakugo*, which some of my informants dubbed a "*rakugoka* boom" rather than a "*rakugo* boom" (see below). Interestingly, on the occasion of the series' adaptation into an NHK TV drama, Kumota recalled in an interview how she first became a fan of rakugo "when *Tiger & Dragon* and *Chiritotechin* brought about the so-called *rakugo* boom" (Kumota 2018), further evidence of the ongoing consequences of the boom discussed in the first half of this chapter. The next section looks at the group of *rakugoka* who both helped to ignite and capitalised on the renewed interest in *rakugo* that *Shōwa Genroku Rakugo Shinjū* had helped create around 2016.

3.10 Narikin – the New Young Stars of Rakugo

Just like SWA and the Rokunin no Kai had capitalised on the surge of media interest around 2005, in the mid-2010s, a number of *rakugoka* were able to reignite the flame of the *rakugo* boom and turn casual new audiences into regular fans. Most of my informants talked about *wakate* (young performers), and more specifically *futatsume* (the stage of a *rakugoka*'s career after the apprenticeship), as the main agents behind this renewed boom. In particular, while many acknowledged the ongoing influence of some of the masters presented earlier in this chapter (Yanagiya Kyōtarō, Shun'pūtei Ichinosuke…), most fans and producers I interviewed mentioned the members of a new group: the unit "Narikin"[119].

Narikin is a group of young *rakugoka* from the Rakugo Geijutsu Kyōkai, the second largest association of *rakugoka* in Tokyo, known for being less "orthodox" in style and attitude than its older sibling, Rakugo Kyōkai. As recounted by founding member Shun'pūtei Shōshō, it was Kanda Hakuzan and Katsura Shin'emon (at the time respectively known with their *futatsume* names Matsunojō and Raita) who had the idea of creating Narikin as a group of performers who would take turns holding a regular show at Music Teito, a CD shop in Nishi-Shinjuku specialising in *rakugo* where Narikin members performed every Friday from 2013 to 2019:

> *I was lucky to be in it by chance, as that group would eventually become very popular. I did not have that many gigs back then, so it was perfect as a place to perform often, as a place for training* (shūgyō no ba)*. It is not like at the beginning we wanted to make it specifically as a group of eleven people, it was simply that we wanted a place to perform and so we organised that.* (Shun'pūtei Shōshō, interview with the author, 12 October 2021)

The group was formed by Ryūtei Kochiraku, Kanda Hakuzan (then Matsunojō), Sekisekitei Atarō, Takigawa Koihachi, Katsura Shin'emon (then Raito), Katsura Miyaji, San'yūtei Koshō, Shun'pūtei Shōshō, Shōfukutei Ukō, Shun'pūtei Ryūjaku, and Shun'pūtei Shōya. At the point of the unit's foundation in 2012, all members were *futatsume*, the intermediate stage between being zenza apprentices and shin'uchi masters. They agreed to keep the group going until one of them would be promoted to *shin'uchi*, something that happened in 2019 when Kochiraku earned the title. Throughout

[119] According to member Shun'pūtei Shōshō, the name was chosen because the shows would take on Fridays (*kin'yōbi* in Japanese, often abbreviated as *kin*), because they felt like "pawns" of Japanese chess (*shōgi*) who hoped one day to be promoted to gold generals (*narikin* in *shōgi* refers to such promoted pieces), and because they hoped to become rich (the most common meaning of *narikin* is nouveau riche). *See Narikin to wa? Kanda Hakuzan, Katsura Miyaji wo Haishutsu! Rakugokai wo kaeta 11nin*¸ Yonesuke Channel. 18 May 2011. YouTube Video. Available at: https://youtu.be/MEq4RQvUZ5o?si=agoqSnuLfwklz3qH&t=283

my fieldwork in 2020-2021, without even realising it at first, I ended up attending a great number of shows starring Narikin members, including several shows celebrating members' promotions to the rank of *shin'uchi*. Many of the *rakugo* aficionados I befriended would turn out to be Narikin fans, a sign perhaps of the group's relevance in today's *rakugo* world. I interviewed three of its founding members (Ryūtei Kochiraku, Shun'pūtei Shōshō and Shōfukutei Ukō) and a member of the staff of Music Teito, who reflected on the group's success. Once again, it seems that connections between the *rakugo* world and mass media industry (especially television) played a role:

> Q: How did Narikin get so popular, with the Friday shows at Music Teito almost legendary?
> [Laughs]. *It took some 3 years to get very popular. One of the reasons it got popular is that someone I knew, a director at NHK, made a special about young* rakugoka *that covered our group in the news. After that,* Shōwa Genroku Rakugo Shinjū *got popular, and Shibuya Rakugo started too. Due to various factors, somehow* (nantonaku) *it became a* rakugo *boom, focused especially around young* rakugoka*. Magazines also talked about us, we got interviewed many times.* (Shun'pūtei Shōshō, interview with the author, 12 October 2021)

Hirose argues that what made Narikin refreshing was that they "were not just a group created to perform at a certain show" (even though, as we saw, that was the group's start) "but an actual group of friends who happened to experience this special time of their careers together" (Hirose 2020, 332). The NHK special which attracted attention to Narikin focused on their lives as much as, if not more than, the *rakugo* they performed. This is in line with the impression shared by many informants of the wave of interest being a "*rakugoka* boom" rather than a "*rakugo* boom", and with the shift of many fans from chasing the perfect performance of great masters, to supporting promising young *rakugoka*, what Rakugo Café's Aoki had described as a change from "*rakugo* as entertainment" to "*rakugo* as documentary" (see above). This shift affected not only fans but also theatre managers and *rakugo* associations:

> Q: What kind of changes did you see in the *rakugo* world from the time you entered it?
> *An atmosphere of "let's support young performers" took hold of the Geijutsu Kyōkai ever since Narikin got popular. Now, young performers can be headliners* (tori) *at the* yose*. Also, there is the impact of COVID: since audiences decreased, the* sekitei *started trying new ways to attract fans, like using young performers.* […] *It was the case in the past that the* futatsume *period was considered a "hell" in which you could not make enough money, but in my time, instead,* futatsume *were popular. Now* [that he is a young *shin'uchi*], *we should create a young* shin'uchi *boom* [laughs]. (Shun'pūtei Shōshō, interview with the author, 12 October 2021)

A few Narikin members even reached national fame. Katsura Miyaji in 2012 earned the NHK Shinjin Engei Taishō, the most prestigious prize for emerging *rakugoka,* and eventually became a regular in the popular TV show *Shōten*. After Miyaji, it was the turn of Matsunojō, the one non-*rakugoka* in the group, who almost single-handedly revived the popularity of the storytelling art *kōdan* and is now a well-known celebrity known as Kanda Hakuzan VI. As one after the other Narikin members became household names within the *rakugo* community, fans seemed interested in the different "character" of the members, which entailed both their persona off the stage, and their style of *rakugo*:

> *The first of us to sell well* (ureta) *was Miyaji… Then, Kochiraku and Shōshō, being handsome, attracted many women fans. After some time, Hakuzan became incredibly popular. We were eleven, so we all needed our own character; so I picked as my peculiarities Kamigata rakugo and risqué stories.* (Shōfukutei Ukō, interview with the author, 18 October 2021)

The impact of Narikin's success went beyond the unit itself, as reported by another highly popular young *rakugoka*, San'yūtei Ryūshi:

> *I was in the same generation as Narikin, who created a* wakate *boom… I often performed with them. In the previous generation,* futatsume *had no opportunity to perform, while in our time, they became the ones with the most jobs* (San'yūtei Ryūshi, interview with the author, 8 November 2021).

Narikin and other successful young *rakugoka* such as Ryūshi have then been instrumental in continuing a gradual shift of demographics within the *rakugo* world, away from the image of an art "for old men" to one enjoyed by younger audiences, including many women.

Having presented the main actors and events triggering the revival of popularity of *rakugo* in the 21st century, and before moving on to an analysis of the structures, practices and discourses I encountered in the field which, I will argue, enabled those changes and revivals we covered so far, in the rest of this chapter I will engage with a discussion that lies at the heart of this dissertation's premises: can we call this a *rakugo boom*? Is this just a media bubble, or is there evidence to support the notion of a true "revival" of *rakugo*?

3.11 Can we call it a Boom? Perplexities in the Field

Did a "*rakugo* boom" happen? Or was it just some media sensationalism? Having covered above all the developments of the *rakugo* world of the last few decades, the answer seems a clear

"Yes, a boom did happen", and indeed, that was what most of my informants replied in interviews. Still, plenty of well-informed members of the *rakugo* world had doubts, which are worth reflecting upon. Ultimately, a "boom" is not a precise phenomenon that is possible for a researcher to "prove". Rather, it is a discourse, and what is interesting to see here is how it was embraced or denied by members of the *rakugo* world.

Hirose starts his 2020 *History of 21st-century Rakugo* by affirming that calling what is going on in the *rakugo* world a boom is an offence to the potential of *rakugo*, and a symptom of ignorance (2020, 3):

> *If this were truly a boom,* rakugo *would be broadcast on live television every day,* rakugo *shows would be held in halls of thousands of seats sold out for several days in every location, and everyone would be able to say the name of a few rakugoka and their best stories. When the 'manzai boom' happened, everyone in Japan knew about Two Beat, B&B, Shinsuke Ryūsuke, or The Bonchi* [famous manzai comedians]*, and knew their best skits. But in reality, the number of people who engage with* rakugo *in their daily life is extremely small. The* rakugoka *that the average person knows are* Shōten *members, Shun'pūtei Koasa, Shōfukutei Tsurube, and Katsura Bunshi* [all appearing on television]*. Of course, Tatekawa Shinosuke, the* rakugoka *who can boast the largest number of fans in Japan, is quite well-known, but unfortunately, he is not known as a skilful performer of the masterpieces* rakugo *stories* Sorai Dōfu *or* Hyakunenme*, but as the presenter of the TV show* Gatten*!* (Hirose 2020, 3-4).

However, Hirose's initial disagreement with the use of the term "*rakugo* boom" seems more of an exercise in rhetoric, and a sign of Hirose's belief in the potential of *rakugo*, rather than a real denial of *rakugo's* recent resurgence in popularity. Throughout the book, Hirose describes in detail the 2005 *rakugo* boom and the 2016 "petit" *rakugo* boom, without shying away from using that term. He wanted, however, to highlight the ignorance of the general Japanese population regarding *rakugo*. This resonates with how Rakugo Café's Aoki commented on how *rakugo* is still not mainstream and only a few people would know the names of even the most popular performers, such as Shun'pūtei Ichinosuke (see above). What Hirose argues against when denying the recent "boom" is the notion that a new, sudden boom happened unexpectedly in the late 2010s. Instead, as we have seen, this was the result of longer trends:

> *I don't think that a "*rakugo *boom" suddenly happened in the last couple of years. Rather,* rakugo*, which was in decline at the end of the 20th century, revived its popularity at the start of the 21st century, and that continues until today* (Hirose 2020, 14).

3.11.1 A "Rakugoka Boom" rather than a "Rakugo Boom"

Many of the more sceptical informants I interviewed conceded that a boom did happen, but that it was not exactly a "*rakugo boom*". As mentioned also saw above, many contended that we should call it instead a "*rakugoka boom*":

> *This* rakugo *boom is not a* yose *boom; it is maybe a young*-rakugoka-*boom.* (Yanagiya Kosan VI, interview with the author, 15 July 2019)

> *I am not sure what* rakugo boom *points at, but in the past, there were not many small* rakugo *shows, the ones where 20 people or so can fill the venue. Now there are, and it is not something to take for granted. The generation of Kyōtarō*-shishō *was the instigator* (hitsukeyaku) *for that, I think. But then, even if they say it is a* rakugo *boom, the afternoon shows at the* yose *on weekdays are still only 20% occupied. On the weekends, maybe 80% or 90%... Well, it depends on who performs. So, it is not a* rakugo *boom, it is a* rakugoka *boom. The popularity of specific people like Kyōtarō and Ichinosuke carries it on, rather than* rakugo *in general being popular.* (Kokontei Bungiku, interview with the author, 24 June 2021).

> *It is a* rakugoka *boom rather than a* rakugo *boom: fans follow a specific* rakugoka (Suzuki Atsushi, *sekitei*, Ueno Suzumoto Engeijō. Interview with the author, 22 October 2021).

Others point to the geographic limitations of the boom. Katsura Sanshirō and Shun'pūtei Shōshō highlighted the initial delay of the boom in Kansai, and Sanshirō argued that even today, the culture of supporting young performers is not as widespread in Kansai as it is in Tokyo (interview with the author, 27 July 2021). Kamiunten, a fan from Okinawa, argued that it is mostly the metropolitan areas of Tokyo and Osaka that have seen a surge of *rakugo* live shows, as it is in those areas that all the regular venues are located. Researcher Miya Nobuaki argues that, based on the sales of CDs as reported by an informant within Sony, the overall number of *rakugo* fans in Japan did not change, and the main change has been instead the number of fans within Tokyo who have started attending live shows rather than limiting themselves to recordings. Still, even if *rakugo* remains a culture closely embedded in the urban landscape of Tokyo and Osaka, the *rakugo* boom acted as a catalyst for the already ongoing process of nationalisation of *rakugo*, with *rakugo*-related media products reaching every corner of Japan, and *rakugo* festivals akin to the one in Ginza at the centre of the 2005 boom being held in places such as Hakata in Kyushu and Sapporo in Hokkaido (see above).

3.11.2 An Increase of Fans and Performers, even for the Sceptics

Many of the sceptics of the overly optimistic word "boom", still conceded that, at the very least, "more people now know about *rakugo*" (Muramatsu and Kaburaki, *rakugo* fans and Waseda University Rakugo Research Club members; Rakugoka Ramune, *zenza*, interviews with author, 2019 and 2021), or that more people come to shows. Living National Treasure Yanagiya Kosanji X (1939-2021), in the preface to the second edition of his collection of essays, *Rakugokaron* (2007), writes: "They say it is a *rakugo* boom, but I did not notice anything […] but compared to the first time this book came out (in 2001), it is true that there are now more people in the audiences, including more new faces" (Yanagiya Kosanji 2007, 4-5). Hirose also affirms that "it is true that now there are many new fans who say 'I recently started listening to *rakugo'*... I realised that by going to many shows" (Hirose 2020, 14).

The increase in the number of small venues for shows is another point that informants agnostic on the "boom", such as Kokontei Bungiku, pointed at (see above). This aspect was emphasised by pioneer woman *rakugoka*, San'yūtei Karuta: "I think that this boom is a *sekitei*-san boom (a boom of managers), the idea is '*even you can become a sekitei'* ['*anata mo sekitei ni nareru*', a wordplay on Tatekawa Danshi's famous book *You Too Can Become a Rakugoka* (Tatekawa Danshi 1984)]. It is easy now to organise *rakugo* shows, and the magazine *Kawaraban* is now very thick [because of all the shows it lists]." (Interview with the author, 29 October 2021).

However, one important limitation was reported by Reireisha Maruko. Once the peak of popularity and attention passed, the effects of the "boom" did not necessarily last for everyone:

> How did you get by as a futatsume? *I was living in a flat with no bath, paying 25,000 yen rent per month, and somehow, I survived. Also, I had a part-time job. After spending years doing menial work as an apprentice and being worried about making my master angry, I lost the will to do things. I washed dishes in restaurants, etc. I had lost my goal. The boom was still on - there were many jobs. At the beginning of the boom, any* rakugoka *was called to perform, and any show that said* "rakugo" *was sold out. But with time, those who did not train were not called to perform anymore. So, I was not called anymore. A vicious circle: I had no jobs lined up, so I didn't train, and since I didn't train, I didn't get jobs. Those who trained well got a lot of jobs. Sanza, Hakushū, and Ichinosuke were futatsume back then; they were performing a lot. SWA members, too, were selling a lot.* (Reireisha Maruko, interview with the author, 29 January 2021).

I will cover in the next chapter the effects of the apprenticeship and training system on *rakugoka*, including the great deal of endurance (*gaman*) that they require. It is important to note how a revival of *rakugo* and even a "boom" of popularity does not equate to a life of riches and comfort for every *rakugoka*. Still, even if not every *rakugoka* managed to reap the benefits of the boom, the presence of new *rakugo* venues mentioned above, and the increase in the number of producers and fans, does mean that the possibility of success, for a talented *rakugoka* who puts in the effort, is there. This is exemplified by Maruko himself, now a successful *shin'uchi* who has won prestigious awards (such as the *NHK Shinjin Rakugo Taishō* in 2012), performs at plenty of shows, takes care of his family with what he earns through *rakugo*, and is raising a promising disciple, Miima, who was recently promoted to the rank of *futatsume* (interview with the author, 29 January 2021).

3.11.3 A "Doughnut Empty at the Centre"?

Finally, one perplexity over the nature of the boom is its being limited, in the eyes of some informants, to the realm of media. As we saw, *Tiger & Dragon*, *Chiritotechin*, and *Shōwa Genroku Rakugo Shinjū* are the most often mentioned shows, but many other *rakugo*-themed media products attracted some attention to the art: from other manga (such as *Dōraku Musuko*, 2010-2018) to light novels (*Isekai Rakugo*, 2018-ongoing), TV shows (*Rakugo The Movie*, 2016-2018), films (*Akamedaka*, 2015), and even pop music videos (*Shinigami*, by popstar Kenshi Yonezu, 2021)[120]. While many informants pointed at these as triggers of the boom, Yanagiya Sankyō, the current head of the Rakugo Kyōkai and one of the most respected masters in today's *rakugo* scene, describes this increase of *rakugo*-themed media products as an "empty doughnut":

> *I don't think this was a* rakugo *boom. Things related to* rakugo *became very popular: TV dramas about* rakugo*, CDs about* rakugo*, books about* rakugo*... But it was like a doughnut - the centre,* rakugo*, was empty.* Shibai *(theatre), manga, drama, and CDs were very popular, but the "living"* (ikita) rakugo *in the middle did not change that much. But mass media stirred up for us* (moriagete kureta) *a "*rakugo *boom", and so thanks to that, many young women and the like would come to see the yose and say, "This is where they filmed* Tiger & Dragon*!". Now, how many of them became "repeat" fans? Maybe 20%... That's how booms are, aren't they? Like a fashion trend that lasts one year. So, it was a boom not of the main thing in the*

[120] The video, set in the yose Shinjuku Suehirotei and developed with the supervision of *rakugoka* Ryūtei Saryū, is available on YouTube at https://youtu.be/8nxaZ69ElEc?si=vQa1y1oAxOpEMEL5 [Accessed 31 March 2025].

centre, rakugo*, but of the things around it, like a doughnut.* (Yanagiya Sankyō, interview with the author, 24 August 2021).

Besides listing the most famous media products, we can also get an indication of the sheer amount of TV and radio programmes related to *engei* (the umbrella term which includes *rakugo* and adjacent arts such as *kōdan* and *rōkyoku*) by looking at the magazine Tokyo Kawaraban. In July 1997, the magazine listed 12 radio and TV programmes related to *rakugo* and adjacent arts airing during the month (Kawaraban n. 273, July 1997). By 2016, the number had increased to 49 programmes (Kawaraban n.514, July 2016), and in 2024, it had risen to 65 radio and TV programmes (Kawaraban n.614, July 2024). Going back to Sankyō's "empty doughnut" metaphor, it does seem that everything "around" *rakugo* surely increased. But what about *rakugo* itself? In the next section, I will provide evidence that the "hole" Sankyō described is, instead, rather full.

3.12 Can we call it a Boom? Evidence and Memories

3.12.1 The Increase in The Number of Rakugoka and Rakugo Shows

One key piece of evidence to argue that a revival of *rakugo* did indeed take place is the great increase in the number of professional *rakugoka*. When confronted with this phenomenon, some (such as Karoku) suggested that it is "just a matter of people living longer" and that since *rakugoka* do not retire, the number is inflated (interview with the author, 27 October 2021). Several informants argued that some of those who are counted as members of a professional *rakugo* association are not really performing anymore. For this reason, I did not rely on association membership numbers to count *rakugoka*. Instead, I collected data from the magazine Tokyo Kawaraban, which every month publishes a list of *rakugo* shows taking place in the greater Tokyo metropolitan area, and conveniently indexes the shows by name of performer at the end of the magazine, so that fans may check all the shows where their favourite *rakugoka* will perform. In such an index, in other words, only *rakugoka* who have at least one show happening in that specific month are listed, giving a more reliable indication of fluctuations in the number of *active* rakugoka, avoiding the issue of including those who de facto retired while keeping their membership of a professional *rakugo* association.

Figure 6 shows the number of *rakugoka* active in July of each year since 1989 (the start of the Heisei era, during the so-called "winter of *rakugo*" – see above), to 2019 (the last year not affected by COVID-19). While for the first five years the number stably remained around 185 *rakugoka*, it started to increase gradually in 1995, doubling by 2004 (396) and almost tripling by 2017 (544). It is

perhaps noteworthy that 2004, the year just before the first rumours of a "boom" started to circulate in mainstream media, registered the greatest increase of performers (22% more than 2003).

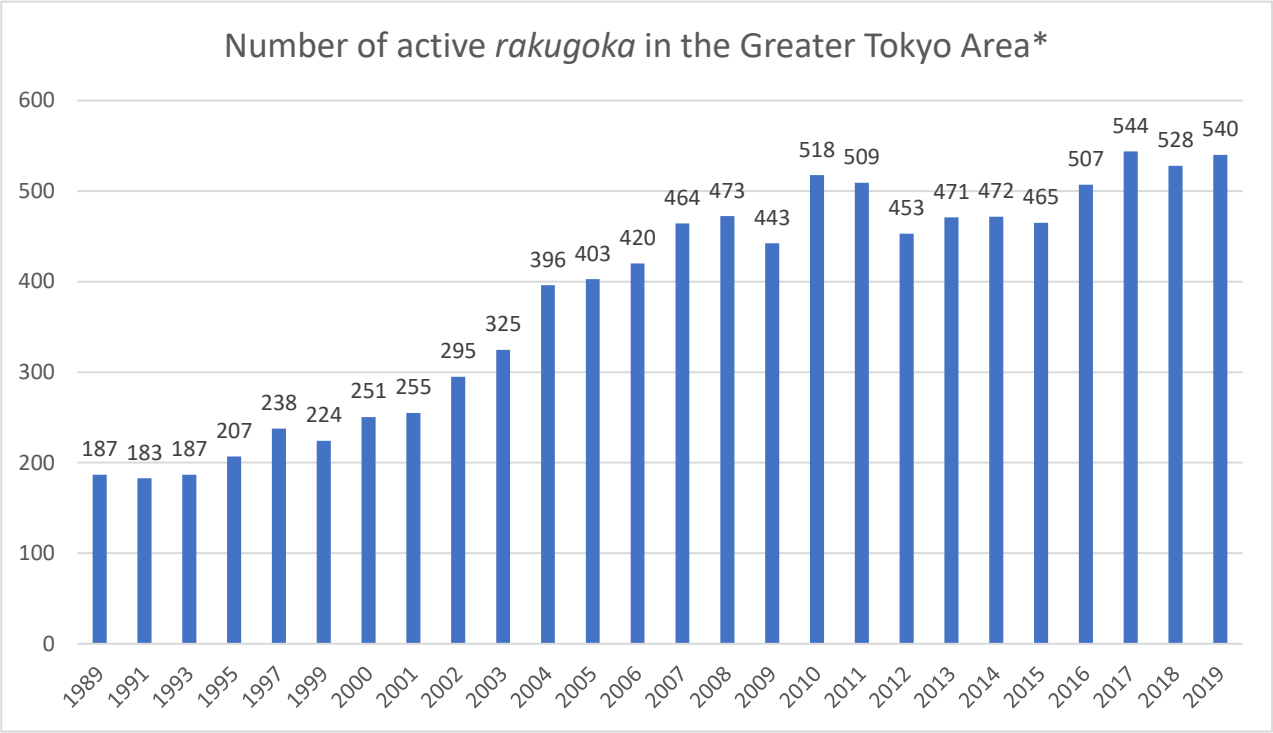


Figure 6: Number of active rakugoka *in the Greater Tokyo area. Data gathered from each year's July issue of Tokyo Kawaraban.*

It is not that more performers have been competing for the same number of shows, either. Even without including Tokyo's handful of regular *yose*, which have an afternoon and an evening programme every day regardless of the popularity of *rakugo*, the number of other shows held each month increased from 154 in July (ca. 5 per day) in 1989, to 309 (ca. 10 per day) in 1999, to 579 (ca. 19 per day) in 2009, to 1070 (ca. 35 per day) in 2019 (see figure 7).

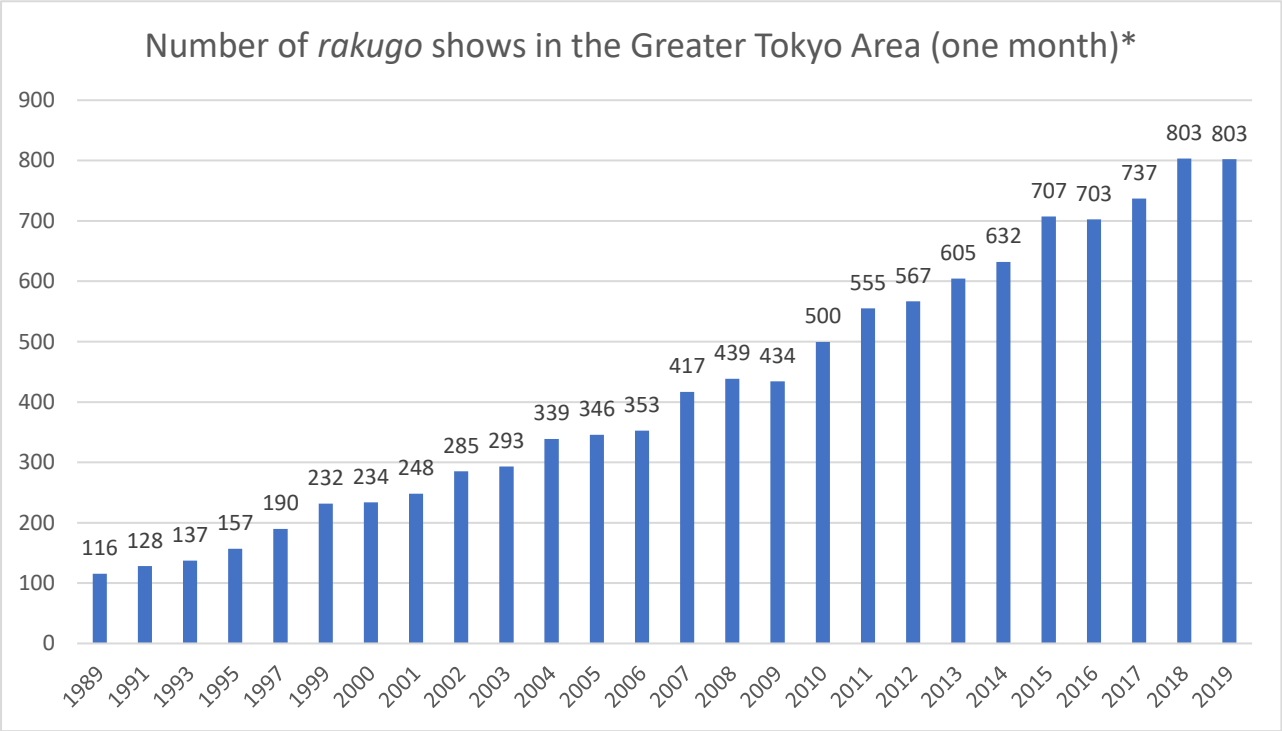


Figure 7: Number of rakugo *shows in the Greater Tokyo Area in the month of July. Gathered from Tokyo Kawaraban* (1989-2019).

This data does not include the great number of shows in private spaces (companies, schools, hospitals, prisons, nursery houses, private houses) which are not open to the general public and thus are not advertised on Tokyo Kawaraban. We cannot grasp fluctuations in the number of such private shows and of performers involved solely in such shows, and it is possible that during the "winter of *rakugo*" (see Chapter 2), more performers relied on such sources of work and income outside the public market. I understand this as one limitation of the data I gathered, and I hope that further evidence will be collected in the future. Still, it does not seem likely that, in recent years, such shows might have diminished compared to the past – if anything, the impression of my informants was the opposite. I myself attended plenty of non-advertised shows in private houses or talked with *rakugoka* who had just performed for a certain company, school, or other institution. In other words, even if we account for some limitations of the data at hand, evidence seems to overwhelmingly suggest that the number of *rakugo* shows and of active *rakugoka* greatly increased since the beginning of the 21st century.

3.12.2 The Length of Minarai Probation

Further evidence of the increase in the number of people wanting to be *rakugoka* can be found in the length of *minarai*, the probationary period after one is accepted as a disciple by a master but before they are permitted to work backstage and perform at the *yose*. Only a limited number of *zenza*

can work backstage at the *yose*, so when the number of apprentices increases, this probation period in between acceptance to a master's house and entrance to the *yose* lengthens, as apprentices need to wait for one of the working *zenza* to graduate out of their rank so that the next on the waiting list can enter the backstage. In other words, with more *rakugo* apprentices, the queue to the *zenza* apprenticeship becomes longer, and the initial waiting period gets longer. The number of regular *yose*, where *zenza* would do their *shūgyō* (training), did not change in the last three decades (four for the Rakugo Kyōkai, three for the Rakugo Geijutsu Kyōkai)[121], so it is reasonable to attribute longer waiting periods to a more crowded pool of aspiring *rakugoka*. There seem to be differences between artistic families, with some "stricter" ones keeping apprentices in the probationary period for longer, but *rakugoka* I interviewed still noticed overall trends. Kokontei Komaji (who entered the *rakugo* world in 2003), recalled:

> *I did six months of* minarai, *and people thought it was exceptionally long, as expected from a Kokontei – everyone else did only one or two months.* (Kokontei Komaji, interview with the author, 12 July 2021)

That exceptionally "strictness" of the Kokontei family had become the norm by the start of the *rakugo* boom, as reported by Yanagiya Kisaburō (who entered the *rakugo* world in 2005):

> *In my generation, minarai was 6 months. Before us, there was almost no* minarai *period, and after us, it became one year or even longer".* (Yanagiya Kisaburō, interview with the author, 17 June 2021)

Asked why there was almost no *minarai* period before his generation, Kisaburō argued that "It is because *rakugo* was not popular, there were not enough *zenza*". Kisaburō did suggest a further reason for the increased length of *minarai* in the association's wish to have better-trained apprentices working at the *yose.* However, a decision to enforce a probation period for all artistic families to ensure better-skilled backstage workers still denotes that there were more than enough apprentices to run the *yose*, allowing the association the luxury of implementing such a policy. San'yūtei Rakubō, a *zenza* at the time of my fieldwork (who entered the *rakugo* world in 2018), affirmed that:

> *The number of* zenza *has greatly increased, and as a result of supply and demand, nowadays, the* minarai *period is at least one year long* (interview with the author, 8 June 2021).

[121] I am not considering here the splinter groups Enraku V Ichimon Kai and Tatekawa Ryū, which are excluded from the *yose*. The two *yose* in Kansai have only been built after the *rakugo* boom, so no comparison is possible.

On a train ride we shared on the way back from a private show in Yokohama, Yanagiya Kosen introduced me to his disciple, who was currently in his second year of probation. Incidentally, it was at this time that I learned that I would not be able to become a *zenza* at the *yose*, as the wait would take longer than my one-year fieldwork. Kosen (who entered the world of rakugo in 1997) noted that "there are now so many *rakugoka*, unlike when I started… perhaps even too many" (personal communication, 2021). Finally, the same situation seems to apply, even if with a short delay, to the Kansai *rakugo* scene – Katsura Sanshirō affirmed that compared to when he was an apprentice in 2004, the wait to perform at the newly established yose of Kansai has grown much longer, "maybe because of the boom, and maybe because there is an image now that you can somehow get by with *rakugo*, unlike with *manzai*…" (interview with the author, 27 September 2021).

3.12.3 Testimonies of the Boom

We can thus affirm with good certainty that the number of professional *rakugo* performers and shows gradually increased in the 21st century, but what about audiences and fans? Has the popularity of *rakugo* experienced a "boom"? For this, in addition to the events I described throughout this chapter, we can rely on oral history[122] – the memories of my informants. While many had reservations over the nature and scope of the "*rakugo boom*", almost all of the 66 informants I interviewed agreed that a boom did happen. These included *rakugoka* of all associations and career stages (such as Yanagiya Karoku of Rakugo Kyōkai, San'yūtei Kumahachi of Rakugo Geijutsu Kyōkai, Tatekawa Danshirō of Tatekawa-ryū, San'yūtei Kenkō of Enraku Ichimon, and Katsura Sanshirō of Kamigata Rakugo Kyōkai), yose managers (such as Suzuki Atsushi of Ueno Suzumoto Engeijō and Matsukura Yoshiyuki of Asakusa Engei Hall), producers (such as Aoki Nobuhiro of Rakugo Café), fans (including many *rakugo* research club members at Waseda University), academics (such as Dr. Miya Nobuaki), and performers of other traditional arts (such as *kōdanshi* Kanda Shun'yō and *rōkyokushi* Tamagawa Nanafuku). The consensus in the field is widespread, and, similarly to the "winter of *rakugo*" covered in Chapter 2, the memory of the "*rakugo* boom" is still fresh in the minds of many practitioners and audiences.

Rakugoka such as San'yūtei Kenkō remember "the increase in audience numbers" (interview with the author, 7 September 2021). Dan, the manager of the restaurant doubling as *rakugo* venue Yunion Shokudō, affirms that "The *rakugo* boom was there at the time we began organising shows here, some fifteen years ago. In the surveys [that many *rakugoka* and organisers distribute at the end

[122] See Perks and Thomson (2016) as a useful resource on methods and examples of oral history.

of shows to collect comments from audiences], there were many people new to *rakugo* who mentioned that they had heard about a '*rakugo* boom' and so came to see a show. For many, it was the first at a small venue like ours" (interview with the author, 20 October 2021). A worker at Music Teito, the CD shop in Shinjuku that specialised in *rakugo* recordings where Narikin held its weekly shows, affirmed that:

> *Yes, a boom surely happened; CDs sold out like they were flying out… It lasted a few years and then it slowed down a little* (Music Teito employee, interview with the author, 1 March 2021).

Chie, a snack bar owner (a so-called *mama-san*) and *rakugo* fan, commented that:

> *I think I am personally one of those who jumped on the boom. And I was surprised to find out that, actually, so many people I knew listened to* rakugo*, even girls… Many regular clients [in the snack bar] are also fans. So many people around me had rakugo DVDs and the like, so I think it was truly a boom.* (Chie, rakugo fan, interview with the author, 12 July 2019)

San'yūtei Mankitsu reported not to have thought too much of the *boom* because he "became a *futatsume* in 2007, so only started looking at the world as a *rakugoka* after the boom already happened", while as a *zenza* he was "too busy working backstage to think about whether the audiences had increased in number". But in our interview, he reflected in hindsight about the fact that apprentices of his generation (who entered in 2003, just before the boom) "were the last ones who had to go outside the yose to pull people in because there was not a single person in the audience" (interview with the author, 1 June 2021). Shun'pūtei Shōshō, who reported not realising a boom was happening in 2005 due to being a university student in Osaka back then, recalled clearly instead the beginning of the *futatsume* boom since around 2016, ignited by the group he belonged to, Narikin. Other performers of his generation, even those outside Narikin (such as Shun'pūtei Ryūshi and Yanagiya Kisaburō) depicted the Narikin phenomenon as a "boom" of young *rakugoka*, for which they themselves were grateful. Matsukura Yoshiyuki, the *sekitei* of Asakusa Engei Hall, affirmed that "the *rakugo* boom continues as a quiet boom up until today" (interview with the author, 20 August 2021).

3.13 What Caused the Rakugo Boom?

I have covered through the chapter some of the events and actors which took central stage in eliciting and inflaming the revival of *rakugo*'s popularity since the turn of the century. The rest of the

thesis will tackle the factors (structures, practices, discourses) which enabled the *rakugo* community to survive previous periods of decline and keep training enough new skilled performers to capitalise on the "boom" when it eventually arrived, as well as on the long-term shifts in terms of image of *rakugo* that enabled the current revival of the *rakugo* world. Here, however, it will be useful to highlight some of the reasons that members of the *rakugo* world indicated as triggers for the boom – summarising those I have already covered and briefly discussing a few more factors connected to the events described so far.

The chapter has already presented in detail the factors my informants mentioned more often: the role of media, the efforts of young performers, and the emergence of small venues. The impression of the boom reported by researcher Miya Nobuaki and by *rakugo* fan Satō summarises these points well:

> *We can say that the* rakugo *boom of the 2000s started with the drama* Tiger & Dragon *and the* asadora [Chiritotechin]*, so it originated from the media. The boom of five years ago also originated from media such as* Shōwa Genroku Rakugo Shinjū *and* Akamedaka[123]*. But when the media created such booms, rakugo had the force to catch* (uketomeru) *that. In the 2000s, it was Kyōtarō and the like. In the late 2010s, when the* futatsume *boom happened, young people like Narikin had the force to catch that.* (Miya Nobuaki, researcher. Interview with the author, 28 August 2021).

> *There was an image of* rakugo *being for old men* (ojisan no imeji)*, but these 15 years, young rakugoka have gone through great efforts and managed to attract many fans… they grabbed the heart of young people. Women, in particular, started to come listen to* rakugo*. I am talking about Kyōtarō, Shōta, etc. Before that,* rakugoka *were mostly following tradition. It was the era in which* rakugo *was only at the* yose*, but then young ones started doing* rakugo *outside of the yose. Young* rakugoka *understood that 'if we continue this way, the culture of* rakugo *will end', so they started doing things that fit the times. And many followed, after Kyōtarō, it was the likes of Ichinosuke.* (Satō, *rakugo* fan. Interview with the author, 12 July 2019).

Satō's comments point to a sense of crisis felt among young *rakugoka*. This urgency for action seems to be a catalyst behind the sudden acceleration of activities at the turn of the century. In *Rakugo in Agony* (2000), Shun'pūtei Koasa mentions trying to set up a three-day *rakugo* festival in Ginza, overcoming barriers between associations in the late '90s, commenting that, back then, he finally

[123] A 2015 film adaptation of the bestselling homonymous book by Tatekawa Danshun (Tatekawa Danshun 2008), depicting his experience as an apprentice under maverick master Tatekawa Danshi VII (see above).

judged it impossible to do so, as "the *rakugo* world is not able to gather energies towards a common goal" (Shun'pūtei Koasa 2000). As mentioned above, he and the Rokunin no Kai he created would, however, manage to achieve that goal just a few years later. Hirose argues that what made it possible was "the sense of crisis that had developed in the *rakugo* world, especially in the Rakugo Kyōkai", after "Kokontei Shinchō died in 2001, and the next year Yanagiya Kosan V, Living National Treasure, passed too" (Hirose 2020, 26). Yanagiya Karoku's impressions are in line with this. In *Yanagiya Karoku to Rakugo he Ikō* (Yanagiya Karoku 2002), Karoku affirms that "The *rakugo* world recently moves very fast. Things that could not be done in 10 years are now done in a few months […] Everyone wants to improve the *rakugo* world, and all of the efforts are towards that direction. The death of Shinchō and of my grandfather Kosan had a great impact, I think" (ibid.).

Hirose argues that the death of *meijin* (great master) Kokontei Shinchō, who symbolised the perfect *rakugoka*, "how *rakugo* should be", while tragic, triggered a series of reactions that led to the *rakugo boom* (2020). Beyond creating the sense of crisis just described, and generating some media coverage, Hirose argues that Shinchō's death contributed to "free *rakugoka* from the spell of the *meijin*", allowing each *rakugoka* to create their own style rather than following the ideal of the *meijin*. This resonates, ironically, with some of the words of one of the great *meijin*, Yanagiya Kosanji. Kosanji did argue that the presence of great performers stimulates *rakugoka* throughout the community and can raise other *rakugoka'*s level – "when Kosan was becoming famous, those above him felt the pressure, couldn't rest on their laurels and had to improve… They say Enshō thus suddenly became better in his last years." (Yanagiya Kosanji 2007, 51) However, he also offered a cautionary tale – Kosan had become so famous, "that everyone started doing stories the way he did… it's a great thing in a sense, but also, it means stories are told in only one way…". We saw how, freed from the pressure to emulate such great masters, groups of young performers such as SWA in the 21st century managed to present new, innovative styles of *rakugo*. To the death of Shinchō and Kosan highlighted by Hirose, I would add that the "winter of *rakugo*" I described in the previous chapter created the premise for this sense of crisis to rise, while also creating the necessary space in the shared imaginary to launch a new image of *rakugo* (see chapter 2).

Another factor I touched on has been structural – how *rakugoka*, especially the Rokunin no Kai, managed to overcome barriers between associations. Breaking these walls and, perhaps just as importantly, turning this act into a widespread discourse by organising grand festivals and press conferences, seems to have contributed to the revival of *rakugo*, unlocking new opportunities and generating public interest. The spirit of the Great Ginza Rakugo Festival covered early in the chapter was carried on by another *rakugoka* keen on breaking barriers between associations: San'yūtei Enraku

VI (1950-2022). In 2007, Enraku established the Hakata Tenjin Rakugo Matsuri in Kagoshima, Kyushu, which has been attracting some 20,000 people every fall for the last 17 years ("Hakata Tenjin Rakugo Matsuri" 2025), and in 2019, he launched a similar festival in Sapporo. According to Karoku, these festivals helped further turn *rakugo* from a local, urban culture to a nationwide culture and contributed to the overall cohesion and improvement of the nationwide community of *rakugoka*:

> *At the* uchiage (banquet) *after the festival, which is a rare and festive occasion where most* rakugoka *in the country come together, I have seen on several occasions people who used to be on such bad terms that they wouldn't perform on the same stage, solving their old grudges... Enraku really contributed to the ongoing health of the* rakugo *world* (Yanagiya Karoku, interview with the author, 27 October 2021).

A comparison with similar arts here can be useful. I asked *kōdanshi* Kanda Shun'yō and *rōkyokushi* Tamagawa Nanafuku, performers of other *wagei* ("verbal arts", or "speech arts", a category which includes *rakugo*), why they thought *rakugo* fared better in recent decades than their respective arts. Both agreed that a big problem in their respective communities is that, unlike in modern *rakugo*, "walls" between associations and artistic families are quite tall, thus impeding collaboration. This means fewer interesting shows for audiences and less circulation and refinement of the best stories and techniques. Disciples of a *kōdan* or *rōkyoku* master are usually not free to learn from others to develop their style the way *rakugoka* are – something I will explore in Chapters 4 and 5.

Chapter Conclusions – A Rakugo Renaissance

How did the *rakugo* art world experience a revival in 21st-century Japan? In this chapter, I have presented how *rakugo* attracted an upsurge of media and popular interest triggered by certain cultural products since around 2005, and how specific groups of *rakugoka* were able to turn these passing moments of media spotlight and increased audience attendance into a prolonged revival of the art, with lasting consequences for the *rakugo* scene. The underlying structural and discursive factors that, I argued, enabled *rakugoka* to survive the previously mentioned "winter of *rakugo*" and capitalise on this "*rakugo* boom" will be explored throughout the rest of the thesis. This chapter focused instead on the more immediate triggers of the *rakugo* boom: the media events and the efforts of specific *rakugoka*, which brought along the 21st-century revival of *rakugo*.

Is the *rakugo* boom continuing? At the time of my ethnography in 2020-2021, COVID-19 complicated the picture, so that it was difficult to judge whether, going forward, *rakugo*'s revival

would persist. Despite worries from several informants (see Chapter 1), however, there are signs that *rakugo* managed to overcome the unprecedented obstacle of the pandemic. What's more, recently, a new media product focused on *rakugo* has been attracting interest again: *Akane Banashi*, a manga written by Suenaga Yuki and illustrated by Moue Takamasa, which centres on a young girl (Akane) trying to become a *rakugoka*, has been serialised in the magazine Weekly Shonen Jump since 2022. Japan's best-selling manga magazine, Shōnen Jump, is famous, as the name suggests, for *shōnen* (young boy's) *manga*, especially those focusing on action and fighting (so-called "*battle manga*"), with publications including household names such as *Dragon Ball*, *One Piece*, or *Naruto*. The fact that a *manga* about *rakugo* with a girl as the protagonist appeared in Shōnen Jump is, in itself, a surprising event. The author, Suenaga, commented that he sees it as a form of "*battle manga*" in which performances are the way *rakugoka* characters "fight" with each other. Despite its unusual theme for the magazine, the *manga* is rather successful – now in its fourth year of serialisation, *Akane Banashi*'s 155 (and counting) chapters have been collected into 16 *tankōbon* volumes so far, which have sold more than 2 million copies as of April 2025, and have been translated into several languages, including English, French and Italian.

As with previous media projects, *rakugoka* are involved in the *Akane Banashi* series. Hayashiya Keiki (born 1991, active in the *rakugo* world since 2010) serves as the series' "editorial supervisor" (*kanshū*), ensuring that its depiction of *rakugoka* life remains faithful to the lived experiences of performers. He corrects details, such as the precise use of insider jargon,[124] contributing to a level of accuracy that has earned the *manga* praise from many performers. However, no *rakugoka* was involved in the initial planning of *Akane Banashi* – Keiki was only contacted by the editor Shūeisha after the draft of the first chapters had been completed, and that happened almost by chance, after Keiki had written a column on *rakugo*-related themes found in the *manga* One Piece for the homonymous magazine (ibid.). *Akane Banashi*'s author, Suenaga, had no connection to the *rakugo* world before starting this work, nor was he particularly a fan of the art. On the contrary, according to Keiki, Suenaga at first came up with the protagonist Akane, a young and energetic girl, and only then asked himself the question, "What is the thing you would expect this high school girl to do the least? What is the most unlikely thing that she could do? And the answer was *rakugo*" (ibid.). In other words, while the choice of *rakugo* as the theme of a *manga* published in Shōnen Jump might signify the level of public interest that *rakugo* enjoys in 21st-century Japan, on the other hand,

[124] See Jump Manga "Akane Banashi" First Volume Release Celebration! The Editorial Supervisor Hayashiya Keiki Reveals What Happened Behind the Scenes? Available at https://youtu.be/_uYLAabqTKw?si=vgn6TRIUr41FWEpd). [Accessed 31 March 2025]

Suenaga's explanation employs that connotation of *rakugo* as something "old" and far away from the image of a fashionable young girl like Akane, which the boom seemingly had helped getting rid of.

What is a Boom?

The contradiction implicit in the origins of *Akane Banashi* points to the core of the concept of "boom" (*būmu*). According to media scholar Yoshimoto Mitsuhiro, something has to feel "different" to be a boom:

> To put it briefly, the boom artificially creates a new difference, which is exploited through the process of massive commodification, and is over when mass commodification makes it impossible for that particular difference to function as a difference any longer (Yoshimoto 1989, 9).

If *rakugo* had really become mainstream the way *manzai* did since the 1980s, it might not have been possible for it to experience consecutive waves of interest so close to one another (i.e. the boom in 2005 and the "petit boom" in 2016). *Rakugo*, however, gained some popularity without reaching the sort of permanent mainstream relevance that would prevent media from claiming a new "boom" after only a few years. Thus, the art could be "discovered" again after only a few years. The fact that Suenaga chose it as a theme to be "as far away as possible from the image of a young girl" means that while the image of *rakugo* might have changed enough to prompt Shonen Jump editors to approve of the project, it did not change to the point of being widely associated with young people and women. This way, once again, young people and media can "discover" the art, which is "what the *rakugo* boom boils down to", according to Hirose Kazuo (2020, 6). Upon developing a passion for *rakugo* (what they called a "*my-boom*"), some informants were surprised to discover that some relatives or friends were *rakugo* fans. One reason for this surprise might also have to do with the tendency among fans and performers not to discuss *rakugo*, following a sort of aesthetic of understatement that rewards not talking about the art as the "cool" way of being a real fan/performer (see Chapter 5 on *iki*). This is something I realised personally by receiving cold stares from fellow *rakugo* research club members after a masterful performance by Gokaidō Kumosuke (the only current *rakugoka* with the title of Living National Treasure) at Waseda University, when I enthusiastically commented on the show and asked for others' impressions of it. This aesthetic may further contribute to creating the conditions for *rakugo* to be "discovered" again and again by new people, as the increased popularity does not turn into *rakugo* being a common topic of discussion. In other words, I argue here that for it to be described as a "boom", the art (or activity, or object) must be perceived by media outlets as something that the general public would not expect to be popular, something different has to be discovered.

There is a difference, however, between a mere fading trend and the term "Renaissance" which I use to describe the situation *rakugo* experienced since the turn of the century. When public

interest was pointed towards *rakugo*, if the *rakugo* community had not been ready to capitalise on it, the boom would have soon faded. As Akane Banashi's author, Suenaga, affirmed:

> "*The only ones who can fuel the fire of the* rakugo *boom are the* rakugoka*, but if my work,* Akane Banashi*, can function as one of the factors that widen the entrance to the world called* rakugo*, I would be delighted*" (Suenaga 2023).

Far from being an ephemeral "boom", the revival of *rakugo* seems to have had lasting impacts, and statistics on the numbers of performers and shows I presented in this chapter indicate long-term trends that go beyond specific trends or triggers. Several factors created the underlying conditions for audiences to feel like giving *rakugo* a chance and for performers to be numerous (and well-trained) enough to turn those first-timers into returning audience members. In the next chapters, I will explore these factors.

Chapter 4.
Becoming a Member of the Rakugo Art World

Chapter Summary

The first half of this thesis has illustrated how the *rakugo* world experienced a decline in popularity towards the end of the 20th century and a significant resurgence since around 2005. Chapter 1 introduced the circumstances of my fieldwork, Chapter 2 set the historical context from which *rakugo* re-emerged, and Chapter 3 looked at the specific agents and events – the immediate "triggers", so to speak – behind the 21st-century *rakugo* boom. The rest of the thesis will then explore deeper structural and ideological factors behind the resilience and revival of *rakugo*, pointing to relevant practices within the field of *rakugo* fans and professional performers.

This chapter, based on interviews with informants and participant observation at *rakugo* shows and other gatherings of members of the *rakugo* art world, presents the development of a passion for (in the case of fans) and career in (in the case of performers) *rakugo*, starting from the first encounters with the art, through the nurturing of an interest including at places such as *rakugo* research clubs (*ochiken*), acceptance under a master, and apprenticeship. In the process, I highlight the variety of circumstances and life courses which led my informants to the world of *rakugo*, presenting the rich diversity of experiences in the *rakugo* world to counter the field's often simplistic discourses and ideologies. The chapter touches on many of the factors that attracted fans and performers to the art, providing a context for Chapter 5, where I will present the main arguments of this thesis to answer the puzzle which has led the whole project: *rakugo*'s resilience and revival in 21st-century Japan.

4.1 Deai: Encountering Rakugo

As the Japanese proverb goes, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step[125]. The *rakugo* life of every performer and fan I met in the field began with an encounter with the art. In this section, I will present the most common initial entryways into *rakugo*, portraying then what captivated my informants to the point of embracing *rakugo* as their passion and, for *rakugoka*, their career.

[125] I could have opened this paragraph with the even more fitting expression *ichigo ichie* – "one time, one meeting", if years of unlearning Orientalism and Nihonjinron did not make me sense an awkward scent of the "exotic" in it.

4.1.1 Rakugo on The Radio

Unsurprisingly, age (or rather, generation) affected the answers of informants[126]. Older performers and fans described a childhood in which *rakugo* was a more familiar presence, entering homes carried by radio waves, as recalled by Yanagiya Korin:

> *There was no TV when I was born* [in 1948]. *We would listen to the radio. Six days a week, at least one channel would be broadcasting* rakugo *within the golden time.* Rakugo *was a familiar presence* (mijika ni atta). *My family would go to* kabuki *and the* yose *and bring me along. There might have been people who didn't like* rakugo*, but no one who had never listened to it. It was an era in which* rakugo *would flow naturally as part of daily life. […] all kids knew at least a few* rakugo *pieces, especially the ones about weird names like Kinmeichiku, Jugemu, Tarachine, or the Yotarō jokes* (kobanashi). (Yanagiya Korin, interview with the author, 22 Feb 2021).

Shimoishi, a fan in her 70s, also recalled "a time before television, when we would sit at the dinner table and listen to the radio; my grandmother, my parents, and us children, listening to *rakugo* altogether" (interview with the author, 12 July 2019). Yanagiya Sankyō (1948-), the current head of the Rakugo Kyōkai (Rakugo Association, the largest such association in Japan), used similar words to his brother-disciple Korin:

> *My encounter with* rakugo *was a long time ago. When I was six or seven, TV was not yet diffused, we listened to the radio. On the radio, among Japanese people,* engei *programmes were popular, and among* engei*,* rakugo *was the most popular. So,* rakugo *was familiar* (mijika) *even for a child like me. My father and grandfather would bring me to the* yose*, which was nearby, and* rakugo *became even more familiar. As you know, at the time I was a student, there were many kids in Japan, and so the competition was tough, and studying for exams was very tough. So, a way to recover* (hiyashi) *from the exhaustion of studying was listening to the radio.* (Yanagiya Sankyō, interview with the author, 24 August 2021).

While time might have distanced *rakugo* from the daily life of many, the radio surprisingly remained a common first point of contact with the art through generations, perhaps a testimony to *rakugo's* fitness, as an oral storytelling tradition, to this medium. *Rakugoka* San'yūtei Karuta (1962-),

[126] On generational divide in Japanese society see Sugimoto, Yoshio. (2020). Generations and geography: variations in an aging society. In *An Introduction to Japanese Society* (pp. 84–106). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Shōfukutei Ukō (1972-), and *rakugo* research club member Inaba (1999-), among others, first listened to *rakugo* on the radio, at times together with family members, and at times hiding from them:

> *I listened to a programme in which [Shun'pūtei] Koasa happened to join as a host, and got interested in him and [Tatekawa] Danshi. I started attending a cheap yose in Ginza on Saturdays, using my lunch money and skipping prep school* (San'yūtei Karuta, interview with the author, 29 October 2021).

> *There was an* eikaiwa *(English conversation) channel on the radio, so I pretended to be listening to that for my studies, but I would actually listen to other channels. In one of those, a* rakugoka *worked as a radio personality, and that is where I first learned that* rakugoka *existed* (Shōfukutei Ukō, interview with the author, 18 Oct 2021).

While Korin, Sankyō and Shimoishi talked about *rakugo* performances being aired on the radio, for younger informants, the radio-mediated encounter was with *rakugoka*, rather than with *rakugo*, perhaps a further symptom of that shift of interest towards the performers which I touched on in Chapter 3:

> *I think that before* rakugo *itself, I got interested in the people: Tatekawa Danshi, in particular, on the radio. My father liked him, and I thought he was an interesting person, with a sharp tongue* (doku ga aru). (Inaba, interview with the author, 28 September 2021).

Indeed, several *rakugoka* work as radio hosts, one of the side occupations a professional *rakugoka* can engage in without the risk of losing face[127]. Current *rakugo* star Shun'pūtei Ichinosuke (1978-) has worked as a host on several radio programmes, and even dedicated a book to the medium titled *The Radio is the Perfect Background Music for Life* (Shun'pūtei Ichinosuke 2021). Since 2023, that same Ichinosuke would also join another media product that represents the first point of encounter with *rakugoka* for many members of the *rakugo* world (including myself): *Shōten*, one of Japan's longest-running variety TV shows.

4.1.2 Shōten: Rakugo's Public Face since 1966

Shōten is a popular comedy show which has been aired continuously on Nippon Television every Sunday since 1966[128]. The programme is based on *ōgiri*, a festive variation of *rakugo* held on special occasions, which consists of a host posing questions or acting out the initial line of a

[127] See Chapter 5 on the taboo of part-time work for *rakugoka*, and the jobs which are exempted from this unwritten rule.
[128] See ("Shōten Daihyakka (Shōten Large Encyclopaedia)" 2025) [Accessed 31 March 2025].

conversation to a group of six *rakugoka*, who must produce funny remarks in response. A witty reply earns the performer one or more cushions (*zabuton*) to sit on, while an answer judged negatively by the host will result in the cushions being taken away. The first to sit on ten cushions (a rather rare occurrence) is promised a grand prize. The contestants are dressed in colourful *kimono*, each with their own colour, to help audiences memorise their respective personae, on which they base much of the humour (see Weingartner 2021 on the persona of one of *Shōten*'s members, Shun'pūtei Shōta).

The show was created by Tatekawa Danshi VII, the innovative performer whose contributions to the *rakugo* world I have mentioned throughout the thesis[129]. Danshi feared that *rakugo* might fade into a relic of the past to be preserved, and strove to keep the art relevant to modern audiences (Tatekawa Danshi 1965). Danshi would eventually leave the TV programme in 1969, officially because of his decision to run for the National Diet. Behind this *tatemae* reason, as several informants including a disciple of Danshi mentioned to me, was a dispute regarding the style of humour Danshi wished to direct the programme towards – he favoured black humour, but other members argued that Japanese audiences were not used to it, and their line of committing to family-friendly humour prevailed (personal communication, 2021). Still, *Shōten* would turn out to be one of Danshi's great contributions to *rakugo*. Even when the art experienced a period of decline (see Chapter 2), *Shōten* remained one of the most popular shows on Japan's television, keeping at least *rakugoka*, if not *rakugo*, a part of the collective imagery. This is what even a voice critical of the programme, Tatekawa Shiraku (Danshi's disciple), affirmed on the show when covering the absence of San'yūtei Enraku VI due to illness:

> "I criticised the programme in my book, because I did not want the image of *rakugoka* to be *Shōten* […] but I think that *Shōten* kept the show going (*tsunaide kureta*, an expression used also to indicate a performer who filled any unexpected time gap on the stage, keeping the show going) for *rakugo* at the time of the winter of *rakugo*. I feel a sense of gratitude (*on*) to this programme as a *rakugoka*, therefore I am here as a guest to pay that debt (*ongaeshi*)". (Tatekawa Shiraku, *Shōten* episode 2810, aired 15 May 2022).

For many of my informants, *Shōten* was the first encounter with *rakugoka*. This includes, incidentally, the author of this thesis. As a high school exchange student in Sapporo in 2012-2013, watching the show on Sundays created precious moments of bonding with my host family, and a curiosity about the funny kimono-clad men I had seen there contributed to eventually developing a research interest in *rakugo*. Watching *Shōten* does not necessarily turn audiences into *rakugo* fans – for both me and

[129] See in particular Chapter 3 and 6.

many of my informants, it was some further chance encounter which started our journey into the art – but it surely creates a first level of familiarity. For some, an interest in a specific *rakugoka* seen on the show started their passion, as is the case with A., a retired *rakugo* fan I befriended at one of San'yūtei Rakuhachi's shows:

> *I have watched* Shōten *for fifty years, every week. Then Katsura Utamaru* [1936-2018]*, whom I liked, passed away, so I decided to check out his* rakugo *on YouTube, and I fell in love with the first story I watched,* Take no Suisen (The Bamboo Narcissus). (A., *rakugo* fan, personal communication, April 2021).

Similarly, K., a middle school girl with a passion for *rakugo*, answered that she first met *rakugo* through *Shōten*, which she described with great enthusiasm: "*suggoi* [sic] *omoshiroi!"* ("It's soo interesting!") (email communication, 15 August 2019). The fact that a retired man, a middle school girl, and an exchange student from Italy could all enjoy the same comedy programme points to the wide target audience of *Shōten*, a show that includes various forms of humour, catering to all sorts of viewers. The simplicity and innocence of many of the jokes attracted the scorn of many of my informants, who preferred more subtle, clever, or dark humour[130]. Still, it is undeniable how *Shōten* represented a first chance for a great number of people in Japan to encounter the figure of the *rakugoka*.

4.1.3 Rakugo in Mandatory School Events

Another place where many informants first encountered *rakugo* was at school. This was especially the case for younger informants. Some schools organised *rakugo* classes as part of "traditional performing arts classes" (*dentō geinō kyōshitsu*) or brought the students to the *yose*. Most commonly, schools organised art appreciation events (*geijutsu kanshōkai*), which included several performances, including *rakugo*. Still, this did not necessarily have an effect on the students: of her school visit to the *yose*, aspiring *rakugoka* Ozawa "only remembered the *chankonabe* (stew) they had for lunch". San'yūtei Rakubō recalled that the *makura* section of the *rakugo* performance he saw in school was interesting, but it did not turn him into a fan after that. Both of them later re-encountered *rakugo* at different times.

[130] For a taste of *Shōten*'s humour, the programme is available at https://www2.ntv.co.jp/sho-ten/ [Accessed 31 March 2025].

The prevalence of younger informants among those who watched *rakugo* as a school activity is indicative perhaps of the new image *rakugo* has earned among Japanese institutions as a form of "Japanese culture" to be preserved and disseminated (see chapter 6 on the increase of *rakugo'*s respectability, and Brau 2008 on *rakugo* as heritage). The benefit of this inclusion of *rakugo* within curricular activities is not entirely clear – many informants remember this first encounter with *rakugo* as, at best, inconsequential and, in the worst cases, off-putting. Some performers accused *gakkō yose* (*rakugo* shows in schools) of presenting a watered-down version of *rakugo* for children, which has the opposite effect of creating a "boring" image of the art in students' minds. Moreover, it seems that schools favour a certain type of *rakugo*: Shun'pūtei Shōshō, mostly known for his innovative *shinsaku* (new stories), laughed when I asked if he performs those *shinsaku* in schools: "Of course not, there I have to do *koten* (classics)" (interview with the author, 12 Oct 2021). San'yūtei Rakubō, however, recalled watching a *shinsaku* performance by San'yūtei Enjō in school, so the extent to which classical *rakugo* only is presented as heritage to be preserved and "appreciated" in schools is not clear. Despite its limitations and even possible drawbacks, *gakkō yose* represents a source of income for many *rakugoka*, and it has contributed to keeping *rakugo*, if not necessarily appreciated, at least *known* among the general public.

In a similar situation to students obliged to watch a *rakugo* performance, San'yūtei Kenkō first went to the *yose* as part of a team-building exercise of his then company – a phenomenon I have seen occasionally in various theatres around Tokyo. He describes the experience in a similar non-enthusiastic way as some of the students mentioned above, but also points to the possible importance of such a first experience:

> Q: I have read about your encounter with *rakugo* in various interviews. You said that you were not that impressed by the first *rakugo* you saw.
> -*Yes, I just went for work. I don't remember much.*
> Q: But then, you went to the *yose* a second time, and you say you remember that clearly and that it was very interesting. What was the difference between the two experiences?
> -Rakugo *needs focus* (shūchūryoku). *The first time, I was brought by someone else and had no interest, so I didn't focus. I couldn't even say if it was interesting or not. But then I went on my own, so I actively wanted to listen. That's the main difference between being brought by someone and going on my own. But then again, if I wasn't at first brought by someone, I would have still thought that rakugo had a high threshold to enter* (shiki ga takai) *and wouldn't have entered. Maybe I had somehow absentmindedly* (bonyari) *thought it was interesting, and that*

is why I went on my own and developed an interest. (interview with the author, 7 September 2021).

4.1.4 Rakugo as Local Culture: Language and Geography

Kenkō visited the *yose* simply as a form of *tsukiai* (socialising, fellowship) with his coworkers, but others instead were attracted to *rakugo* through their work with a specific goal in mind. Dan, the owner of the *izakaya* and *rakugo* venue Yunion Shokudō, was advised to listen to *rakugo*, and especially *makura*, the free-talk introductions, to improve his communication skills, something valuable for a restaurant manager often engaging with clients. Others hoped to learn the dialect of Tokyo through *rakugo*, an art deeply embedded within the cultural and linguistic milieu of the capital. An example is the father of Rakugo Café owner Aoki:

> *He was from Miyagi and had a strong accent, studied Japanese* (kokugo) *at a university in Tokyo, and wanted to become a teacher and researcher. He became an intern teacher, but Tokyo students laughed at him for having an accent, saying, "How can we learn Japanese from someone with such a strong accent?" Still, he wanted to teach and live in Tokyo, so he decided to study the Edo accent of* rakugo (Edo-ben) *since he had listened to* rakugo *on the radio for a long time. Every day, he would go to the* yose *to lose his accent. He became a* rakugo *fan for this objective. If you listen to* rakugo *every day*, *your speech starts to get influenced by it, so students won't notice the accent. He thus managed to become a teacher.* (Aoki Nobuhiro, interview with the author, 20 July 2021).

Aoki's father listening to *rakugo* to learn Tokyo's variant of the Japanese language to avoid marginalisation points to the cultural capital inherent in *rakugo* as an urban art of the metropolis[131]. The language employed in *rakugo* is associated with *Edo-ben*, the historic dialect of the capital spoken especially by inhabitants of the *shitamachi* (lower city), and in particular, by the *Edokko* (see Brau 2008, 84-85). In reality, *rakugoka* today speak a sort of fictional language that creates an *image* of the past comprehensible to modern audiences. This resembles the case of the "old-sounding" Japanese language of historical dramas on television. Indeed, many productions hire *rakugoka* as consultants in charge of checking the *Edo kotoba* – to cite just the most recent example, Yanagiya

[131] While here I focus on *Edo rakugo* in Tokyo, the same seems to be the case for *Kansai-ben* and *Kamigata rakugo* in Osaka. On Kamigata Rakugo, see Shores (2021a).

Saryū collaborated with the NHK as an "Edo language consultant" for the *taiga dorama* (period drama) *Berabō*, broadcast since January 2025 (personal communication, November 2024).

Rakugo's *language* contains a large vocabulary of idioms and of terms not in use in current Japanese, which are passed down through generations and to which *rakugoka*, as artists whose living is predicated upon words, are particularly attached. Plenty of linguistic unwritten rules are also passed (and adapted, and re-created) by performers of classical *rakugo*. An often mentioned one is that of avoiding "horizontal characters" (i.e., words of foreign origin written in *katakana*), such as *toire* (toilet), which should be instead called with Japanese expressions such as *habakari*. An apprentice mistakenly inserting modern *gairaigo* in a *rakugo* story will often attract the ire of *rakugo* masters. *Kango*, words composed by more than one *kanji* (be them of Chinese origin or vocabulary originated in Japan), are also preferably to be avoided. The idea is that they have a "hard" (*katai*, also meaning "formal") feeling to them, while *rakugo*'s speech should flow "softly" (*yawarakai*), the way *yamato kotoba* (words of Japanese origin) supposedly do.

Rakugoka affirm that *rakugo* was long considered the realm of the *Edokko* (child of Edo), and it was thus hard for someone not used to the capital's dialect to become a performer due to the linguistic barrier. With time, however, more and more aspiring performers from around the country (and even a couple of performers from outside of it[132]) joined the ranks of *rakugoka*. This was especially the case as new media – stenography first, and then radio, television, and the internet – spread the culture of *rakugo* nationally[133]. The language used by *rakugoka* on stage today will vary based on the preference and ability of performers and on the content of the performance, with *makura* introductions and *shinsaku* pieces generally resembling standard current speech much closer than *koten* classical stories. Still, *rakugo* maintains its link to an imagined past through its language, and *rakugoka* engaging in classical performances learn its old-sounding dialect regardless of their geographical background, slowly incorporating *rakugo* speech in their communication as a part of their socialisation into the community of *rakugoka*. In this sense, *rakugoka'*s speech may be comparable to *kuruwakotoba* (also called *oirankotoba* or *arinsukotoba*), the sociolect adopted by women employed in the red-light districts of Edo, which hid regional cadence (see Yuzawa 1964).

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[132] See (McArthur 2013) on the first *rakugoka* not born Japanese. Currently, at least two other professional rakugoka not born in Japan have undergone the *rakugo* apprenticeship and are active in the rakugo scene: Canadian Katsura Sunshine and Swedish San'yūtei Kōseinen. An increasing number of amateur and semi-professional (see introduction) *rakugoka* of foreign origin also exist.

[133] See Chapter 2.

Geography often plays a central role in my informants' encounter with the art: those from Tokyo, especially from older generations, talked of a spatial proximity to the spaces of *rakugo*, referring to both the settings within classical stories and the venues where these are performed. Professor Hatasa Kazumi, a long-time champion of the use of *rakugo* and *kobanashi* (short stories) in Japanese Language education for non-Japanese learners of the language (see Hatasa 2012), recalled listening "to *rakugo* sometimes as a teenager because I lived in the area which is the birthplace of *rakugo* [in central-eastern Tokyo]… In the first story I listened to, the main character asked for directions, and I knew personally all the places he mentioned" (personal communication, June 2021). Going to *rakugo* shows was a part of family life for those born in the *shitamachi* (lower city) of Tokyo, such as Yanagiya Korin. Inversely, many informants from different regions, such as Kyushu or Okinawa, included as one reason for first going to the *yose* the fact that they wanted to experience the "local culture" of Tokyo. The Asakusa Engei Hall *yose* openly embraces this idea of *rakugo* as a tourist spot (*meisho*) of Tokyo by collaborating with a bus tour company to bring visitors from outside the capital to see *rakugo* as part of their trip to the metropolis (Matsukura Yoshiyuki, *sekitei*. Interview with the author, 20 Aug 2021).

4.1.5 Rakugo Recordings as Lullabies: An "Ibasho for the Heart"

The father of Rakugo Café owner Aoki, as I showed above, turned to *rakugo* to hone his language and find work in the capital as a teacher of Japanese (*kokugo*). Eventually, however, he changed occupations, which would result in Aoki himself developing a relationship with *rakugo*:

> *He started a factory, and my mother also worked there, so as a child, I slept alone. My father put* rakugo *cassettes on to make me sleep, like a lullaby, every night. By the time of middle school, I started laughing at the cassettes… that is how I got into rakugo* (interview with the author, 20 July 2021).

Several other informants, such as fans Hagiwara and Takahashi and *rakugoka* San'yūtei Kumahachi and Ryūtei Komichi, also first listened to *rakugo* through recordings owned by their parents or grandparents. Listening to *rakugo* while falling asleep, in particular, seems to be not only a trope in *rakugo*-themed TV shows (such as *Chiritotechin*) but also a reality for many fans. When asked what *rakugo* was for him, *rakugo* research club member Takahashi answered, "a medicine that helps me sleep" (interview with the author, 28 September 2021). Shun'pūtei Ukō also spoke of *rakugo* as a cure for his insomnia at a time when he struggled with depression:

It was mostly a rehab from depression for me. At the time when I gave up on manzai *and* manga [two careers he had parallelly pursued for years]*, I had forgotten about* rakugo*. I couldn't sleep, but I started listening to Beichō's and Enshō's* rakugo *CDs, which I used to like as a university student. I listened to those stories while sleeping and would dream about them. That was the* kikkake (chance, catalyst) of *my becoming a* rakugoka*. Listening to the stories felt like being inside the* rakugo *world, and so I was able to sleep until morning, which helped with the depression. When I first entered the Suehirotei Yose and saw the brazier* (hibachi) *that looked like something from the past, and the* hayashi-san (shamisen players) *dressed in kimono, it felt like the world of my dreams; it was as if I was led there somehow. When I was depressed, even if I watched comedy on TV or read manga to distract myself, it would remind me of my failures, so I didn't want to do that. When I wanted to do something separated from real life, the world of* rakugo nagaya [row houses, the setting of many stories] *and Edo stories was my only healing* (hiyashi)*, a place for my heart* (kokoro no ibasho)*, and when I entered the Suehirotei* yose*, it felt like it was my place* (boku no ibasho)*. Time goes fast, and you get tired, but in the* rakugo *world, time is frozen; it's comfortable. I had felt that way in the* ochiken (rakugo research club in university)*, and after many years, I felt it again* (Shōfukutei Ukō, interview with the author, 18 October 2021).

The experience of Ukō, who found a place of belonging in the *rakugo* world after struggling as a *manzai* comedian (and *mangaka*), is not an isolated one, as will be explored in the following section[134].

4.1.6 Manzai Comedians Finding Refuge in Rakugo

While a variety of professions may benefit from the skills and other forms of value (cultural capital, emotional solace…) that can be found in *rakugo*, one category in particular often ends up swelling the ranks of *rakugoka*: practitioners of other performing arts. San'yūtei Harashō (1977-) used to be the leading actor of a theatre troupe (*gekidan*), but on the day of a certain competition, no other member showed up, and so he had to fill twenty minutes of performance time by himself. Apparently, the audience reacted much better to his solo show than to what his troupe had produced all the other times, so he decided to keep performing alone. Looking for the right art, he came across a show by San'yūtei Enjō (1944-2021), the *rakugoka* who revolutionised *shinsaku rakugo* (see Chapter 3).

[134] Chapter 6 will further examine the place of *rakugo* as offering an alternative to the precarity and disconnectedness of the "freeter" neoliberal life experienced by *manzai* comedians and many other inhabitants of Japan's metropolitan areas.

Through Enjō's art, Harashō discovered that "*rakugoka* can freely perform in their own style", and thus he applied to become his disciple (personal communication, 16 December 2020).

While it might be rare for a whole troupe to leave their leader the way Harashō experienced, being left alone can happen much more frequently in *manzai*, the popular comedy form performed by two people. Ukō, mentioned above, was one such *manzaishi*, but several other informants revealed a past in *manzai*. Tatekawa Shirarin (1975-) first moved to Tokyo from Sapporo to become a voice actress, but as she was not getting many gigs, her agency, which hired both voice actors and *geinin* (entertainers, see Introduction), suggested she try comedy. For one year and a half, she paired up with a childhood friend and performed *manzai*, but her partner eventually "escaped back to Sapporo without telling her anything", and so she suddenly had to perform without her partner at the shows they had booked. Wondering how to keep performing, she thought she might do it alone: "…and what is the art of doing comedy alone? *Rakugo*. So, I went to the *yose* to see it, and it was amazing, so I became a *rakugoka*. If my partner had not run away, I might not have been here as a *rakugoka* today" (Tatekawa Shirarin, interview with the author, 8 October 2021).

Similarly, the life story of Reireisha Maruko (1980-) can illustrate the example of someone who passed through *manzai* and other forms of *o-warai* (comedy) to arrive to *rakugo*, hinting at developments in Japanese comedy of the last decades, differences in humour and social structure between *manzai* and *rakugo*, and at some of the factors which, I will argue in the next chapter, enabled the *rakugo* world to keep attracting and retaining new performers. First, Maruko contextualised the comedy scene as he experienced it at the turn of the century:

> *Comedians like The Drifters and Takeshi [Kitano], who were part of the generation of comedians who created the "*manzai boom*"* [especially 1980-1982, see Weingärtner (2013)]*, were already old for us kids born in the 1980s. A new generation of comedians led by Downtown appeared, and with them, a new sense of humour* (owarai no kachikan)*. They changed the speed. A representative gag is* The Math Problem*: "Tarō has 300 yen and enters the candy shop. What's the answer* (sate dō)*? -What!!". The punchline is much earlier than expected; it cuts the initial, boring setup. Earlier comedians would have used more time in the setting and then made him buy something not found in a candy shop, or inappropriate for a child, etc. Downtown changed the time axis, the sense of speed. They also changed the "items"* (aitemu) *used. At a show, they were asked, "Who is your rival?" An amateur could think of mentioning another* manzaishi *of their generation, or famous ones like Drifters and Takeshi and then go with the tsukkomi* (comeback) *punchline "They are way too major* (ōgosho) *for us!". Or maybe they could say the Prime Minister. But, instead, the year before*

there was a boy named Costantin who was brought to Japan from the USSR to undergo an emergency surgery, and the media had talked a lot about him. Downtown said Constantin was their rival. Not a comedian nor a politician… It was something new. Everybody in my generation admired comedians (Reireisha Maruko, interview with the author, 29 January 2021).

Manzaishi such as Downtown, according to Maruko, revolutionised the style and values of comedy. What is more, they had been doing so as the first generation of performers not trained within the traditional art world structured on master-disciple relationships:

Warai geinin (comedians) used to have to become disciples of a master, like Takeshi did. But then, a school for comedians was created. Downtown were in the first class of it, and they became so successful. So, now you didn't need to have a shishō to become a geinin*; by going to the school, you could do such new things!* (29 January 2021)

Rakugo and *manzai* share a long history as *yose* arts. However, unlike *rakugo*, which continued to be organised around the relationship of master and disciple and of artistic families, the *manzai* world in the second half of the 20th century parted ways from many of its traditions[135], innovating both in terms of content and of training style, implementing a school-like system and a sort of "free market" of comedians. Maruko was among the many who saw in this booming comedy scene a chance for success:

In March 1999, I arrived in Tokyo and wanted to be a manzaishi*, but the school asked for advanced payment. Today, you can pay in instalments, but not at the time. I didn't have the money, so I just found someone on an internet notice board where you could find comedian partners, and did* manzai *with them while going to university and working part-time. I would watch many forms of comedy, including* rakugo*. It didn't go well, I'm not good at collaborating with others* (29 January 2021).

Struggling to satisfy audiences, he listened to various arts, including *rakugo*, and, coming from an experimental take on humour, was surprised by how a seemingly old-fashioned form of comedy could be so well-received. By attending a variety of *rakugo* performances, he also eventually encountered the sort of *rakugo* that resonated with his needs – a *rakugo* that felt "freeing":

[135] See (Tsurumi 2010) on the origins and social developments of *manzai*.

While I was struggling to make a hit, I witnessed young people laughing a lot, even at old-style sketches I thought were out of fashion, and I realised old-fashioned things, too, can be liked if they are done well. I got rakugo *CDs at the library and started going to very cheap shows of* futatsume *and* zenza*, and to the 100-yen show of [Shun'pūtei] Shōchō [a non-profit* rakugo *show organised with the support of Nerima-town, attended by many students due to the cheap price]. Then, at a show, I found the flyer for the* Tondemo Rakugokai *of Kairakutei Burakku [II]. At the time, there was no social network; there was only mass media, in which only one version of the truth was allowed. You couldn't have a different opinion, only a politically correct one. But not at* Tondemo Rakugokai*. You could release those feelings, those ideas you couldn't talk about or see on TV… Those* rakugoka *were people who told you things different from the mainstream common sense. It was a "free" place. Burakku was an adult who said whatever dirty joke* (shimoneta) *he wanted, going against the common sense that you shouldn't talk of such things in public. He taught me that there could be freedom in* rakugo (29 January 2021).

The fact that Maruko could find a niche within *rakugo* that he appreciated is not just a fortunate coincidence, but the result of the large number of performers active in the *rakugo* world (see Chapter 3), and of the artistic independence each *rakugoka* enjoys upon having completed apprenticeship due to the economic condition of *rakugoka* being, essentially, freelancers making a living by attracting audiences (see Chapter 5). Even the great influence of certain *meijin* (famous masters) on their peers and *kōhai* (which, as we saw in chapter 3, was weakened at the start of the 21st century by the passing away of the most respected performers), is often limited to a certain association, and can thus be avoided by attending shows of *rakugoka* from different groups. Kairakutei Burakku II, whose *rakugo* fascinated Maruko, is, in particular, an expelled member of the Tatekawa-ryū, a group created by Burakku's master, Tatekawa Danshi VII, which in turn had splintered out of the larger Rakugo Kyōkai. In other words, the large number of *rakugoka* and the artistic and financial independence between them create the premises for the sort of variety which allows each perspective fan to find their own niche, as in the case of Maruko.

Having been captured by the content of the art, Maruko also noticed the advantages that becoming a *rakugo* apprentice would endow him with:

I entered a small production company as a solo comedian (pin geinin)*, leaving university and my part-time job, but the company went bankrupt. I was not making people laugh anyway, and I had no expertise in side tasks like setting a stage either. After the bankruptcy, I had nothing at all. I had watched* rakugo *to become a good comedian, but I thought, now was my*

chance to try it. As a zenza, *I could learn all the side skills. Also, I had not earned a single yen so far since leaving university. How could I get by as a* geinin (performer)? Zenza *are employed at shows by the masters... So, I realised that the fastest way to get by as a* geinin *was* rakugo*. Other people tend to enter the* rakugo *world because they like it so much that they don't care if they can't make money. But I had experienced a condition financially even worse than that. Also, I had actually tried* rakugo *without asking* (katte ni) *before, and I thought it suited me well, but back then, I had the university, the part-time job, a* manzai *partner... to become a* rakugoka*, you have to throw everything away. Now, I had nothing. And so, I started looking for a master* (29 January 2021).

Maruko's experience hints at two fundamental arguments of this thesis. Chapter 5 will explore how the structures and practices of the *rakugo* world contribute to a system which provides all necessary forms of resources (or "capital") for apprentices, regardless of their life path before entering their master's artistic family. This system, however, is predicated upon operating a clear cut between one's previous life and one's *rakugoka* life, a "jump" that not many are ready to take. As I will show in Chapter 6, Maruko's situation, in which he decided to give *rakugo* a chance since "now, [he] had nothing", reflects a larger shift in Japanese society in the decades of economic stagnation since the 1990s. The price to pay for entering the *rakugo* world – "leaving it all behind" – is not as daunting when one's perspectives are grimmer (I will also show how the increased prestige of *rakugo* meant that the forfeiting of all previous bonds is less strict, and families of younger performers I interviewed tend to be more supportive). Eventually, attracted by the atmosphere of the *yose*, Maruko chose to undergo his apprenticeship with Reireisha Bafū, a performer known for his *mandan* free talk, a sort of extended version of a *makura* introduction. From him, he aimed to obtain one more resource which the practices of the *rakugo* world allow professional performers to obtain – what I will call artistic capital (see Chapter 5):

The atmosphere of the audience felt so warm. It was a type of comedy that, for me, felt old-fashioned, but people were laughing. It was not a particularly refined sense of humour. But only following my sense, getting an audience who likes my sense, was not enough. I thought I needed to learn from this person. Old people would be into it, and they are the ones with the money. There was an enka *[Japanese ballad] singer who entered the Bafū family* (ichimon) *when* enka *stopped being popular. He could easily gather two thousand people in the audience for his* mandan*, mostly old people. So, I entered to learn, rather than* rakugo*, Bafū's* mandan*, as it could be a hit with old people.* (Reireisha Maruko, interview with the author, 29 January 2021).

Maruko's recollection also points out how two different types of comedy, *manzai* and *rakugo*, diverged since the 1980s, and how that affected the respective communities. Both arts are usually categorised as *engei* (a term meaning entertainment or performance), and both have long been performed in *yose* theatres (Tsurumi 2010). However, *manzai* developed a short and fast-paced style of exchanges between the two comedians (usually one *tsukkomi*, akin to the anglophone comedy's concept of straight man, and one *boke*, or funny man), which better suited the times and needs of television, generating high views and a commercial interest on the part of talent agencies and broadcasters. The modern history of *manzai* moves in parallel to Yoshimoto Kōgyō Holdings, a company that started as a traditional theatre in 1912 and grew to become one of Japan's most prominent entertainment conglomerates (ibid.). In the wake of the "manzai boom" of the early 1980s, Yoshimoto established a school for comedians in Osaka in 1982 and a second branch in Tokyo in 1995. As Maruko noticed, the school replaced the previous master-disciple system, in a way mimicking the shift from traditional apprenticeship to school education which had affected so many other professions within the process of modernisation of Japan[136]. Maruko embraced the freedom of not having to follow a master, something which some of the current aspiring comedians I interviewed at Waseda University also mentioned as a reason to choose *manzai* over *rakugo*.

However, while a handful of the most popular *manzaishi* might become millionaire celebrities known throughout the country, Maruko's testimony above looks at the other side of the industry: a neoliberal free market in which one might become popular overnight but might also not make a single ye(Abe 2006)n even after years of struggles. This is in line with the many forms of precarious lives lived "following a dream" that the popular discourse has come to associate with the term "freeter" (see Chapter 6). Not dissimilar to the many aspiring musicians or stage actors who populate the capital, aspiring *manzaishi* and comedians like Maruko get by with part-time jobs while trying to join the small percentage of successful freeters who "made it". However, in the process, Maruko ended up losing all his resources and realised he lacked the necessary technical skills (cultural capital), as well as the artistic skill and repertoire (what I will call "artistic capital") to make it, all while having not enough money (financial capital) to enrol into Yoshimoto's school for comedians. He turned to *rakugo*, which, as I will show in Chapter 5, followed a system that, while not enough to assure anyone's success, still endows new apprentices with all the forms of capital needed to have a chance to "make it".

[136] See Tsujimoto and Yamasaki (2017), *The History of Education in Japan (1600-2000)*.

4.1.7 A Way to Connect with Home: Encountering Rakugo Abroad

Finally, there is one more path to encountering *rakugo* I must mention here, which appeared in more life stories than I expected. A number of young informants – *rakugo* fans or current *rakugo* apprentices – first encountered *rakugo* while being abroad as children or as university exchange students. This is perhaps more of a sign of the shift in class background (see Goodman 1990 on class and *kikokushijo*) of aspiring *rakugoka* than anything else (see Chapter 6), but the association of *rakugo* with Japanese heritage and culture (see Brau 2008) certainly played a role. One *minarai* (on-probation) apprentice of Yanagiya Kosen enrolled in graduate school in Scotland after earning a degree in politics and economics at Waseda University. There, he "missed the Japanese language", and so he started watching online videos until he came across a *rakugo* performance, developed a passion, and came back to Japan to become a *rakugoka* (personal communication, January 2021). More common among my informants was the case of *kikokushijo* – children of Japanese employees or civil servants sent abroad, who followed their parents outside the country for some part of their childhood. Many of my peers at the Waseda University Rakugo Research Club belonged to this category:

> *I am now 21, but I first encountered* rakugo *at the age of 10, when I was in Brussels. I liked books, and found a book about* rakugo *in the library. Also, in a Japanese language textbook, there was a* rakugo *story, Jugemu*[137]*. I like comedy in general, so I got interested and asked my parents to buy CDs of* rakugo *at the Book-Off* [a Japanese book shop chain] *in Paris. They bought a CD of San'yūtei Kinba III, who is easy to understand even for beginners.* (Muramatsu, Waseda Rakugo Research Club member, interview with the author, 19 July 2021)

If Muramatsu developed a passion for *rakugo* while abroad, others instead explored after returning home to Japan what had only been a casual interest:

> Shimogami: *I was born in Aichi Prefecture but grew up in Southeast Asia - Thailand and Malaysia. Currently, I study medicine here at Waseda. I first saw* rakugo *in my [Japanese] elementary school abroad at some kind of school event, but I don't remember that clearly. I only started to like it after entering the* ochiken (rakugo research club) *in middle school.*
> Me*: Why did you enter the* ochiken*?*
> Shimogami*: There was no deep reason. I did not know about Japanese culture, and so I was interested in learning about it.*

[137] See chapter 3.

Nakayama*: Ooh, as* "Japaniizu Karuchaa"*!* (Shimogami and Nakayama, Waseda Rakugo Research Club members, interview with the author, 28 September 2021).

The experience of Shimogami points to the identification of *rakugo* as a receptacle of "Japanese Culture", as well as to the scarce impact of mandatory events within schools, which I have presented above. It also hints, however, at the central role of one specific institution within schools and universities, which greatly contributes to the creation of *rakugo* fans, performers, and more: the *rakugo* research clubs (*rakugo kenkyūkai*), which will be the focus of the following section.

4.2 Ochiken: A Nurturing Ground for Performers, Producers, Researchers, and Fans

Rakugo kenkyūkai, often shortened as *ochiken* (from *ochi*, "drop", a different reading of the first *kanji* of *rakugo*, and *ken*, "research", the first *kanji* of *kenkyū*), are clubs dedicated to the art which exist at all levels of schools and in companies across the Japanese archipelago, akin to other sports or cultural societies like baseball or kendo. The most prominent of *ochiken* in terms of institutional fame and of how often it was mentioned by informants in the field are those in universities, on which this section will mostly focus.

Many members of the *rakugo* world I engaged with, from performers to fans and producers, first met *rakugo* at *ochiken*. Reireisha Miima played music throughout her education, but missed the date to join her university's brass band club and ended up in the *ochiken*, which got her interested in the art and led her to start performing (interview with the author, 26 June 2021). Shun'pūtei Shōshō accepted an invitation to join *ochiken* when he entered Kwansei Gakuin University, as he "had just moved from Kanto and had no friends in Kansai, and that was my encounter with *rakugo*" (interview with the author, 12 October 2021). Professor Koakimoto Dan, an expert on medieval Japanese literature at Hōsei University and a *rakugo* aficionado "liked to make people laugh and to tell stories as a child", "so when I entered middle school, I wanted to do such an activity, and since there was an *ochiken*, I joined it" (interview with the author, 10 July 2019). The *ochiken* can act as introducers to the art also to people who are not members, through *rakugo* shows and similar outreach activities, and at times even just by existing as a gathering of people who like to chat: M., the owner of a café that occasionally hosts *rakugo* shows, first started listening to *rakugo* because "the puppet-theatre society I belonged to at university was on good terms with the same institution's *ochiken*, and so I would often go there for a chat or to play mahjong" (interview with the author, 12 July 2019).

4.2.1 Researching Rakugo at Waseda University's Rakken

The "research" (*kenkyū*) in most *rakugo* research clubs does not point to any form of academic enquiry – rather, most *ochiken* (see also Nomura 1994, 320) focus on learning to perform *rakugo*:

> *Our* ochiken [at Hōsei University]*, like many others, is focused on performing. We do* imon (performing at an external place) *twice a week at nursing homes and the like. The imon is our core activity. Twice a year, we rent the Asakusa Kōkaidō hall, and we do a "Hōsei Yose", for free. We tell the grandpas and grandmas around the area that we are doing a free* yose*. Also, once a week, we book a* washitsu (Japanese-style room) *and do* o-keiko (training, see Chapter 5)*. And then, those who want to go to see rakugo at the yose or join tournaments.* (San'yūtei Rakubō, interview with the author, 8 June 2021).

However, that is not the case for Waseda's Rakugo Research Club. As an undergraduate exchange student at Waseda University in 2017, I had the chance to join the oldest *rakugo* research club of the country, founded in 1948 by a group of students including Ozawa Shōichi, Oonishi Nobuyuki and Katō Takeshi, actors and researchers who would eventually come to play a prominent role in Japan's mid-20th-century theatrical scene. Waseda University's club proudly embraces the appreciation of *rakugo* as an art and as an object of academic research. Unlike many other *ochiken* where all members must perform *rakugo* and, in some cases, learn a certain quota of stories, at Waseda, no such mandate exists. Both during my year abroad in 2017 and at the time of my fieldwork in 2020-2021, approximately half of the students were part of the club as audience members and researchers rather than performers. Perhaps to distinguish itself from more recent and less academically inclined clubs, Waseda's *rakugo* research club's members shorten the name to *rakken*, instead of the more common *ochiken.* As a testimony to the academic focus of *rakken*, several members conducted undergraduate final year dissertations on the subject of *rakugo*. For her thesis, Ozawa, an aspiring *rakugoka*, compared different versions of the ending of the story *Shinigami* ("God of Death") inspired by the Grimm Brothers (see Nobuhiro, Futamura, and Nakagomi 2002, 86). Kamiunten, a student from Okinawa aiming to become a *kōdan* performer, compared Christianity and *rakugo* as two ongoing traditions whose participants need to reconcile the original texts with current values:

> *I am a Christian, and besides rakugo, I am researching contradictions between LGBTQ issues and Biblical teachings. Traditional arts, including* rakugo*, are like the Bible; there is an original text, and there is meaning, culturally, in the fact that it was passed down through generations, but on the other hand, the things written in that text are at times at odds with*

modern values. They may be outdated, but they have been passed down for so many generations, is it okay to throw them away? The solution for me is the same for both the Bible and traditional arts: interpretation. Keep the same text but interpret it differently. In the Bible, there is the episode of Sodom and Gomorrah, in which gay men get killed by God. Today, LGBTQ people can interpret it differently: in that episode, the gay people of Sodom and Gomorrah don't welcome the travellers who arrive. So, they are killed by God not because they are gay but because they did not show hospitality - you can interpret that the sin is not the sexual activity but something else. Reading it that way, you can change little by little how you read that text.

Q: You can do the same with *rakugo*?

Yes, I think so, to a degree at least. There is a story called Kawarime*, in which a drunk husband comes home and the wife takes care of him, but he is drunk and does not listen to her. He scolds her. But when she leaves to buy something, he tells himself out loud how lucky he is to have her, how grateful he is. But she actually hasn't left yet and hears it. The punchline is him saying, "You are still there?!". It is difficult to perform this because when he is scolding her, he is quite rude and direct, and that sounds like misogyny. But you can switch the genders here, and it would still work. Of course, using slurs is bad, but the core of the story - someone usually being very strict and rude with someone, but when that person leaves, admitting their real feelings* (honne)*, which is that they really like that person - can still resonate today. If you emphasise that, it might still be good, by changing the way you perform, or changing the characters. Most gender problems in* rakugo *are wife-husband or father-daughter situations. Usually, what happens is not a big deal, but the man says very bad things; in our era, those words are considered verbal abuse. But if you change the story a bit, it can work.*

Q: So, for example, switching the roles of husband and wife in Kawarime?

Yes, or changing the way he scolds her, the content of the insults. The part where he says bad things, rather than being funny, is a document, in the sense that there are husbands in real life who say such things, and [through rakugo] *we are saying that that is bad* (Kamiunten, Waseda Rakugo Research Club member, 3 September 2021, interview with the author).

4.2.2 A Network of Fans, Helpers and Amateur Performers

Like most clubs in Japanese universities, *rakken* also constituted a place to make friends and situate oneself within a network of peers and of *senpai-kōhai* relationships. While some were drawn

to *rakken* because of an interest in *rakugo*, several members I interviewed indicated the social aspect as the main reason they entered the club. While some other *ochiken*, such as the one attended by Shōfukutei Ukō in Osaka, "were so strict, like a classic military-like Japanese sports club" (interview with the author, 10 October 2021), *rakken* at Waseda, as well as most of the clubs reported on by my informants in interviews, reflected the general atmosphere of the world of *rakugo* stories in terms of relaxedness and tolerance of idleness and eccentricity:

> *You can be part of* ochiken *even without performing. There was a guy who only knew one story,* Shibahama [laughs]. *He just hung around. That's something similar to the world inside* rakugo *stories: you can be there even if you are a weirdo* (henna yatsu demo ite ii)*. He would come to the summer camp* [laughs]*. We don't select people* (hito wo erabanai)*. That's one good aspect of* rakugo*, its easy-going nature* (oorakasa)*, how weirdos are not excluded.* (San'yūtei Rakubō, interview with the author, 8 June 2021).

Even if not necessarily forming the strict hierarchical junior/senior relationships Japanese clubs are known for (see Nakane 1970; Ono and Shoji 2015), at *rakken* too these vertical connections had an important role in social organisation. *Senpai* and *kōhai* engage in a form of passing down of gigs, contacts and roles that exist in many Japanese social contexts, including, as we will see, in the world of professional *rakugoka*. *Rakken* members inherited contacts with certain *rakugo* venues or producers, who would occasionally contact the student in charge at any given time to ask if they may want to come work as helpers for a show (in exchange for some pocket money) or, other times, to come fill up the audience for free. Once a student who developed (or inherited) such a contact reached their final year of university, they would pass that down to a *kōhai*. I myself started working as a volunteer helper at Dōrakutei – the small *rakugo* production where I conducted participant observation and developed many of my contacts – through the invitation of another *rakken* member in charge of that contact. *Senpai* also pass down more stable forms of part-time jobs, including those unrelated to *rakugo*, such as working at a local *ryokan*.

While performing was not mandatory, still, several members of *rakken* were active as amateur performers, and performance was a core presence in the club. Indeed, at least in the years I have observed (2017 to 2021), all members had to go through a sort of initiation ritual involving a short *rakugo* performance. Unbeknownst to me, the day I first attended a *rakken* meeting in April 2017 happened to be the time of that initiation. *Rakken* members had gathered at one of the Japanese-style rooms that clubs can book in the Gakusei Kaikan – Waseda University's eleven-floor building

dedicated to the activities of the more than 600 clubs that populate the university[138]. I introduced myself, and for a while we just sat leisurely on the *tatami* mats chatting, while more people kept arriving. When enough members had gathered, one at a time first year students sat in front of the rest of the members in a *seiza* formal position (the one used by *rakugoka* when performing), and began interpreting *Sakekasu*, a short story about a young boy who brags about being drunk after having eaten the titular *sakekasu*, a leftover rice mash that remains as a byproduct of *sake* production, and only contains minimal traces of alcohol. Another character advises him to pretend at least to have drunk real *sake*, but his attempts end up in failure as his words always reveal he actually just ate *sakekasu*. Nakanishi, a final-year member of the club, presented the piece to me as "a *rakugo* nobody performs because it is too boring" – the first out of an endless series of surprisingly outspoken assertions which would end up attracting me to the peculiar people of the *rakugo* research club. Indeed, the performances were only in name supposed to be a "selection" or a "trial" – the worse the performance, the more people seemed to enjoy it. One of the new students forgot almost every line, provoking uncontrollable laughter in the group. I decided to join *rakken* and ended up performing at various occasions, such at a nursing home in 2017[139], in preparation for which I rehearsed in front of the club during one of the weekly gatherings; or later on, in 2021, as part of a live-streamed show we organised when pandemic related measures forbid *rakken* from performing in front of audiences[140].

4.2.3 Rakugo Tournaments

Several members of *rakugo* research clubs also joined tournaments organised for student performers, such as "Sakuden Taishō" (Sakuden Great Prize) and "Tenshikihai" (Tenshiki Cup) in Gifu prefecture, the native land of the legendary progenitor of *rakugo*, Anrakuan Sakuden (1554-1642), to which the tournaments are dedicated (see Morioka and Sasaki 1990, 229-231). Reireisha Miima, a *zenza* at the time of the interview, recounted meeting Maruko, who would later become her *rakugo* master, at such a tournament:

> *There are two national student* rakugo *competitions in Gifu. The biggest is Sakuden Taishō, supported by Gifu City. I met my master, Maruko, at the smaller one, Tenshikihai. It's a direct elimination tournament style: of hundreds of candidates, twelve reach the tournament stage. It is 1vs1 matches, the jury votes and the one who gets the most votes continues. It is like Pro*

[138] See https://www.waseda.jp/inst/weekly/feature/2017/04/17/24349/ [Accessed 31 March 2025]
[139]See a short documentary about *rakken* activities I made while at Waseda, available at https://youtu.be/x1Qq0Hlh1sc?si=wIHs5OPELMpNjeri [Accessed 31 March 2025]
[140] Available at https://youtu.be/0AoU9NGfA4o?t=2898 [Accessed 31 March 2025]

*Wrestling; there are theme songs, and Maruko-*shishō *was the commentator, saying "in the red corner…"* [laughs]. *Winners raise their arms up, the ring goes "gong gong gong"* [laughs]. *A* senpai *I was close with went, and so I decided to go mostly just as a trip, but I actually started winning. You needed a new story every match, but I only knew three! I won three times but had to withdraw then* [laughs]. *There was an interview corner, and Maruko interviewed me. I was shy, so Maruko told me to just say* "hai" (yes) *to all his questions. He made them so that the correct answer was always* "hai" [laughs]. *The audience laughed; it was so fun.* (Reireisha Miima, interview with the author, 26 June 2021).

Not everyone is interested in competing in a tournament: several amateur and professional *rakugoka* I interviewed pointed to the absence of "losses and wins" as one of the very aspects of *rakugo* that attracted them (Yanagiya Sankyō, 24 August 2021, interview with the author). Still, even those who did not intend to join tournaments recognised their prominence within student *rakugo* activities:

The ultimate goal for students doing rakugo is to win the Sakuden Taishō… It is a good thing to have a tournament because it elicits competition and stimulates the level of performers. Those who win often become rakugoka*, or perhaps it is the opposite: those who want to become* rakugoka *try their skill at the tournament before becoming* rakugoka*. High school and younger students also have their own tournaments now. […] But personally, as a policy, I don't join tournaments. Because you have to prepare short performances of six minutes or so, and my stories are long. Also, I don't want to be judged and ranked on a set of narrow criteria. I do peculiar things, so if I am told by someone that they don't like it, I will take it personally. I'd rather use the time to create more. My* rakugo *is mixed with my identity, so I don't want to go get judged on it.* (Nakanishi, interview with the author, 5 February 2021).

As Nakanishi mentioned, many *rakugoka* who started as *ochiken* members won tournaments as students, but there is no direct pipeline between a student award and a career in *rakugo* – the fact that many winners go on to become *rakugoka* seems most of all a matter of selection (those talented in *rakugo* tend to both win tournaments when students and to become professional *rakugoka* as adults). What student awards might do, however, is reinforce in the winners' minds the conviction that they have a talent for *rakugo* and might want to make a living out of it. At times, an award may also help convince a master that a prospective disciple has potential (Reireisha Miima, personal interview, 26 June 2021), but the boundary between amateur and professional is, at least in the eyes of professional *rakugoka* and many of those who support them, clear-cut. No matter what achievements one might have obtained in their "previous life", once they are accepted under a master, an apprentice should

forget about all the stories they have learned as an amateur and start from scratch, and are only allowed to perform stories for which they have received training under a professional *rakugoka*. In this sense, Rakubō, a *zenza* at the time of the interview, recounted how a student *rakugo* tournament was instrumental in igniting his passion for the art, but at the same time, he also expressed a sort of shame regarding his past as a student performer:

> Q: Did you join a student *rakugo* tournament?
> *Yes, even though it's a part of the past, I want to delete* [laughs]. *When I entered* ochiken*, there weren't many links with other* ochiken*; mostly we did* imon *on our own. I followed my* senpai *to Gifu to the tournament, where they do the finale in a hall of 1,200 seats. So there would be students on stage performing in front of a thousand people and in front of judges like Katsura Bunshi and Tatekawa Shinosuke* [famous *rakugoka*]*, and those students are making people laugh so much. Seeing this… I liked* rakugo*, but even more than that, seeing people my age doing a contemporary style of* rakugo *and making the audience laugh so much, it lit a fire in me. So, I joined the two tournaments four years in a row. In my fourth year, I reached the finals in both, and so I performed in front of a thousand people. It is a drug. The pleasure you get from making so many people laugh as a student is a poison* [laughs]. *You get addicted to it. And when I performed there, I had just decided to enter this world* [of professional rakugo]. *I didn't win awards, but just having made so many people laugh is a feeling I will never forget. But as I say again, it's a past I want to delete* [laughs]. […] *At my master Rakusuke's place, I am the first disciple who went to* ochiken*. So, he told me, "I think you know it already, but forget all you have done at* ochiken*, it doesn't matter what story* (neta) *you learned, that has no connection to this world, if you want to do those stories you go learn them from a* shishō*, and do it the way that* shishō *does it." It's a reset.* (San'yūtei Rakubō, interview with the author, 8 June 2021).

4.2.4 Amateur and Professional Rakugoka

Rakugo stories and jokes, as we will see, are not protected by copyright but are regulated internally within the community of *rakugoka* through a non-monetary system of training (see Chapter 5). Similarly, that of *rakugoka* is not a category regulated by any kind of legally valid formal license. And yet, being a member of the community of professional *rakugoka* embeds one in a web of social ties accompanied by a series of advantages (as well as obligations). Perhaps due to this absence of formal or legal guarantees, *rakugoka* seem to deeply care about the ideology of division between

those who "are" professional *rakugoka* and those who "are not", establishing strict, clear divisions between insiders and outsiders. The practices and structures covered in Chapter 5 which sustain the continuation of the community of *rakugoka* seem indeed predicated on that community being open for anyone to enter, but being neatly (at least ideologically) delimitated. While a professional is expected to make a living out of *rakugo* (with the consequence of *rakugoka* feeling ashamed when financial circumstances lead them to resort to part-time jobs – see Chapter 1 and 5), *rakugoka* I interview placed the boundary not on money nor on artistic ability, but rather, on having undergone, or being currently in the process of, an apprenticeship under a *rakugo* master. Before entering the world of *rakugoka*, it will be useful to include a voice which chooses to remain outside of it and resists some of the discourses embraced by professional *rakugoka*[141]:

> Q: What is the definition of a *rakugoka,* then?
> A *master said on the radio that a* rakugoka *is someone who did an apprenticeship under a professional* rakugoka*. I think that is true. But thinking that only* rakugoka *do* rakugo *is arrogance on the part of* rakugoka*. I understand that only* "rakugoka" *should get money for performing as* "rakugoka"*. But* rakugo *is developed by other people too. There are various people in the countryside who identify as* "amateur rakugoka"*. Isn't that okay? They also are preserving* rakugo *culture in their own way. There are even those who get money. This Autumn, there was a girl who used a certain* rakugoka's shinsaku *for a streamed amateur show. She is a student at a vocational school* (senmon gakkō)*, so she was not in the frame of student* (gakusei) rakugo *but of amateur* (shirōto) rakugo*. She got scolded, they said, "She got money performing my* shinsaku*!". In a podcast, some* rakugoka *talked about this and were criticising her a bit too much.* (Nakanishi, *rakugo* research club member and active amateur performer, interview with the author, 5 February 2021).

Nakanishi, as a passionate amateur performer and organiser of shows, questioned the structure of *rakugoka* society, and its virtual monopoly on the art:

> *What is tricky about* rakugo *is that even though it is a whole genre of expression, it is contained in a single industry* (gyōkai)*. Theatre* (shibai) *has all kinds of different* gyōkai*, from* shingeki *to* shōgyō engeki*,* kabuki*,* nō*,* kyogen*... With* rakugo*, there is only the* rakugo *world* (rakugo gyōkai)*. Style-wise, there are actually so many types. I really like the kind of* rakugo

[141] See also the *shinsaku rakugo Replicant* by Shōfukutei Ukō, a satire inspired by the movie Blade Runner discussing the concept of "*professional rakugoka*", which I reported in the Introduction.

similar to nō*, those perfected* rakugo *classics such as those of Katsura Bunraku* [VIII, 1892-1971]. *The idea that only those who underwent training under one of the* rakugoka *associations can be a* rakugoka *is actually not protected by any law, and there's no copyright on the concept of* "rakugo". *What if someone who makes a living with* rakugo *but hasn't trained under professionals comes up in the future? No one should have the right to stop them. It's an entire genre for which a couple of associations claim total ownership, isn't it crazy? As if a Stand-Up Comedy Association was created and claimed ownership of stand-up. So weird! One can become a* warai geinin (comedian) *in an instant, why not a* rakugoka*? Also, it is such a capitalist way of thinking, to think that you are important* (erai) *if you take money for your performance. That's something else I don't like about professionals. Thinking one is respectable because they live off their art. I respect certain masters because their art is good, not because they get money out of it. Living off* rakugo *doesn't necessarily make your art good.* (5 February 2021)

In this thesis, I present how the structures and practices upheld by professional *rakugo* associations, with their obligatory training, helped *rakugo* survive. But is that an accurate statement? Those structures, practices and discourses certainly protected the *rakugoka* career. What if giving more freedom to amateurs would have made *rakugo* thrive, with more stories created and many more people performing? Would that be preferable for the survival of *rakugo* as an art? Or is fostering the figure of professional *rakugoka*, i.e. of people who strive to do only *rakugo* for a living, ultimately a better way to ensure that *rakugo* will thrive? Some amateur performers, including students like the ones I met at Waseda's *rakken*, might do more for *rakugo* with their innovative performances than some professional *rakugoka*. Ultimately, this sort of debate extends beyond the aims of this thesis. However, it is still worth noting here that the system whose features, I argue, helped *rakugo* survive and experience a revival in the 21st century, comes at a price: several *rakken* members affirmed to have decided not to become *rakugoka* because they did not want to undergo the apprenticeship and enter an artistic family under a *rakugo* master, practices whose beneficial effects I will point at in this chapter, but which require hardships and personal sacrifices (O. and I., interview with the author, 28 September 2021). My main argument in the next chapter will be that the world of *rakugoka*, as it is, allows new performers to obtain all the necessary forms of capital (economic, cultural, social, artistic) to have a chance to succeed in the field of *rakugo*. Still, other structures and discourses are conceivable, and this thesis does not claim that this is the best of all possible (*rakugo*) worlds.

In this section, we have seen how *rakugo* research clubs (*ochiken*), especially in universities, act as nurturing grounds for members of the *rakugo* world, allowing more people to encounter *rakugo*

and develop a passion for listening, performing, and even (especially at Waseda university) researching it, supplying an influx of fans, helpers, researchers, and performers – at first as amateurs, and some eventually as professionals. In this sense, *ochiken* act as sort of liminal spaces in between the world of *rakugoka* and that of non-*rakugoka*. While keeping in mind the ideological nature of a division between amateur and professional *rakugo* performers, the following sections will look at the world of "professional" *rakugoka*, analysing the discourses and practices that punctuate one's entrance into a career in *rakugo*. We will start, first of all, with the ritual that sanctions the separation between those inside and outside the world of *rakugoka* – becoming the apprentice of a master *rakugoka*.

4.3 Zenza Apprenticeship: Becoming a Rakugoka

4.3.1 Deshi-iri Rite of Passage

Like many moments of passage from one social position to another, the process of becoming a professional *rakugoka* is marked by rituals[142]. The first ritual consists of asking a *rakugoka* of *shin'uchi* level (or in Kansai, where no *zenza-futatsume-shin'uchi* system exists, asking a *rakugoka* with a comparable length of career to a *shin'uchi*, i.e. 10-15 years at least) to become one's master (*shishō*) and make one their disciple (*deshi*). This is called *deshi-iri* ("entering as a disciple") or *nyūmon* (entering the gate), and while it is not formally regulated, it follows patterns that mostly repeat in different *rakugoka's* memories of it:

> Q: Tell me about your *deshi-iri.*
> *It is the only moment that for every* rakugoka *in every association is usually the same* [laughs]. *No matter how eminent* (erai)*, everyone started the same way, usually waiting for their* shishō *outside* [a theatre]. *I waited for him outside the back door of the Suehirotei like a stalker* [laughs]. *I planned to just see him pass for a day and go again another day dressed in a suit. But there was a* deshi (disciple) *with him, and I didn't know much, so I thought he wouldn't take me if he had another* deshi*. So I got worried and just went straight that day, and asked "Please make me your disciple!"* ("deshi ni shite kudasai!")*, and he answered, "Today is a bit...". So, I said, "I will come back tomorrow!" The next day, he saw me there again and asked me to go to a café. He told me it is tough for women to become* rakugoka, *but I said I still wanted to. He laughed, said okay, and I cried so much, in front of him* [laughs]*, because*

[142] For a seminal work on rites of passage, see Gennep et al. (2019) [first ed. 1909] *Les Rites de Passag*e.

I didn't know what to do with my life if he said no, as I had quit my job. Thinking about it, a 60-year-old man and a young woman in a suit talking at a café, with the woman crying a lot, attracted a lot of attention from people around us - that was my first "screw-up" (shikujiri, a disciple's main fear) [laughs]. (Shun'pūtei Ichihana, interview with the author, 30 July 2021).

4.3.2 The (Absence of) Requirements to Become an Apprentice

Ichihana was mistaken in believing that a *shishō* could not take on more than one disciple at a time, but her hunch on the importance of timing was correct. Anyone can be accepted by a master, with no need for previous education, training, or connections – an absence of required cultural or social capital which, I will argue in Chapter 5, is at the basis of *rakugo*'s art world resilience and capacity to attract new performers who serendipitously encountered the art. However, a master might not always want to take on a disciple if, for example, they feel they already have too many or if they feel they are not ready to train someone (S., *rakugoka*, personal communication). At the peak of the "Postwar Golden Era" of *rakugo* in the late 1960s (see Chapter 2), Yanagiya Korin had to wait for three years before being admitted as a disciple under Yanagiya Kosan V. He had almost given up and considered entering under Kosan's disciple Kosanji, but suddenly one of Kosan's disciples quit, and Kosan's wife – *okamisan*, in many *rakugoka* families a figure just as important as the master in the education of in-house disciples – said they could take him as an in-house apprentice (*uchideshi*) (Yanagiya Korin, interview with the author, 22 February 2021).

The one requirement that the two largest *rakugo* associations in Tokyo have implemented recently is age. Since 2009, Rakugo Kyōkai has not accepted disciples above the age of 30, and since 2018, Rakugo Geijutsu Kyōkai has not accepted those above the age of 35 (Sankei Sports, 2018). Informants proposed a variety of explanations for this new limitation. One *rakugoka* mentioned a letter from "a man nearing retirement age" who said he wanted to dedicate his "second life" to *rakugo*. The heads of the Rakugo Kyōkai, who all dedicated their "first [and only] life" to the art, were apparently so offended by this lack of respect for their work that they established an age limit to avoid any other old person from fantasising about becoming a *rakugoka* as a post-retirement hobby (Y., personal communication, 2021). San'yūtei Jōsuke, on stage, claimed instead to be personally the reason why the limit was imposed – he entered the *rakugo* world at the age of 42 and was apparently "so bad" as an apprentice that the heads of the association decided to prevent taking on anyone like him in the future (San'yūtei Jōsuke, June 2021). Whatever anecdotal story might be closer to the truth, what is interesting to look at is the date of implementation of the age limit. Rakugo Kyōkai established it in 2009, after the peak of the *rakugo boom*, while Rakugo Geijutsu Kyōkai did so in 2018, right

after the *futatsume boom* (or *petit rakugo boom*) in which this previously less popular association reached great popularity through the efforts of young *futatsume* performers part of the unit Narikin (see Chapter 3). In other words, the two associations determined they had more than enough perspective performers, and that they could thus be more selective in their recruitment of new *rakugoka* – in line with the argument, upon which this dissertation is built, that *rakugo* experienced a significant revival in 21st-century Japan as described in chapter 2 and 3.

In any case, even this one requirement does not represent a complete exclusion from the *rakugoka* career due to the *rakugo* world being divided into different associations with different rules. The presence of five different associations of *rakugoka*, four in Tokyo and one in Osaka (in turn divided into a great number of artistic families), enables an aspiring *rakugoka* above the age limit to apply to a different association. Tatekawa Shirarin, for example, applied to the group established by Tatekawa Danshi, the Tatekawa-ryū:

> *At first, I went to Rakugo Kyōkai, but they didn't accept people over 30. I went to Geijutsu Kyōkai, but the* shishō *told me he wouldn't take women. And so, eventually, I found my shishō, Tatekawa Shiraku.* (interview with the author, 8 October 2021)

If one accepts this dissertation's argument that the absence of requirements for aspiring *rakugoka* (who are provided during and after their apprenticeship with all the necessary forms of capital to potentially succeed) is at the basis of *rakugo*'s resilience and ongoing capacity to produce enough new performers to thrive, then, the social organisation of *rakugo* into independent associations, and of mostly independent artistic families within those associations, should be pointed at as an important factor. As in the above case of Shirarin, certain masters might not take on a disciple not only because of a formal requirement (their age) but also because of a variety of idiosyncratic reasons, a common one being a latent resistance among certain *rakugoka* to take on women as disciples.[143] As rules besides age (and even that, only in two associations) are not standardised, an aspiring disciple can thus ask a different *shishō* to take them on. Timing and luck may still play a part:

> *I applied right at the time when he had no other disciples, and what's more, he just had a daughter. My license as a kindergarten teacher came in handy!* (Tatekawa Shirarin, interview with the author, 10 October 2021).

[143] See Şahin, Esra-Gökçe (2022) and (Stark 2023) on gender and *rakugo*.

At times, a *shishō* might make some requests to a prospective disciple. This usually includes getting the approval of one's parents or finishing one's studies, but each *shishō* might present their own peculiar conditions, such as getting a driving license or spending a year working at a fish market to learn about people (Tatekawa Danshun 2008). A disciple may, however, manage to avoid partially or in total such requirements:

> *He had one condition: I had to bring my parents to meet him before formally entering his tutelage. My mother eventually relented, saying, "It's your life; do what you want." But my father was firmly against it. Unable to convince him, I brought only my mother to meet my master. Surprisingly, he said, "That's fine. Your father will come around"* (Shun'pūtei Ryūshi, interview with the author, 8 November 2021).

> *I went to his show and waited for him outside, I gave him a letter and my CV and asked to make me his disciple* ("deshi ni shite kudasai"). Shishō *actually was in the Maritime Self-Defence Forces from age 18 to 24 before becoming a* hanashika*. So, he told me to join the Self-Defence Forces at first. I had read his book, so I expected it. But I didn't want to join it. He told me to spend 2 or 3 years in the Self-Defence Forces, but I just pretended not to hear that. The next day, I went to see him at Suzumoto* [yose] *and waited for him. He was friendly, and we went to eat curry. Momoe-anisan and Shin'yō-anisan were there too. Shishō ordered the spiciest curry on the menu and left, saying, "Take care of this guy" (koitsu no koto yoroshiku) [laughs]. I had to eat that, but the two anisan helped me. For a month, I continued to go wait for him outside. Eventually, he told me to bring my parents. We gathered at a restaurant where he offered us* unagi*. He told them that it's a tough world in which you can't get by, so it's better not to have your son enter it, but I said, "I will do my best! Please take care of me"* (Ganbarimasu! Yoroshiku onegai shimasu!), *and so I became a disciple the day after graduating from university.* (Kokontei Komaji, interview with the author, 12 July 2021)

Adherence to one's (already informal) requirements may also change with the times and with the age of disciples. Pioneer woman *rakugoka* San'yūtei Karuta hesitated when her prospective disciple applied to her without having her parents' approval. Her shishō, San'yūtei Enka – who had been rather strict at the time of her apprenticeship – told her to take on the disciple even without parents' approval "because she was already an adult" (she applied in her 30s) and "because the times have changed anyway" (San'yūtei Karuta, interview with the author, 29 October 2021).

4.3.3 Variety of Realities, Orthodoxy of Discourses

As a testimony to the flexibility of norms and variety of experiences in the *rakugo* world, a large portion of my interviewees affirmed that their path to becoming disciples was in some way "unusual". Concretely, what most confessions of "unusual" beginnings referred to was applying to a master who, for some reason, rejected them, and ending up as a disciple of some other master, often with the intercession of the first master. Many were, however, hesitant to disclose any such unorthodox beginnings in their *rakugo* career and often only answered questions after pondering for a few seconds. For their peace of mind, I have anonymised this section:

> Q: How did you choose your shishō?
> *I don't think I ever said this to others.*
> Q: You don't have to answer if you don't want to.
> *It's okay. But I don't want to lie. So, I first asked A to make me his disciple because he was the one who looked like he was having the most fun doing* rakugo (tanoshisō ni shiteiru)*. He had just turned* shin'uchi *recently and was in his 30s. He was very kind. He said he was happy I chose him, but that he was not ready to raise me yet, at that early level of his career. We met several times, and he kept saying it would be better to see if any other* shishō *was interested in me. But after three times, he told me that if I still wanted him as a* shishō*, he wanted to take me on, but he felt not ready to teach me enough, had not yet achieved an art worth passing down to me. He said, "So when will I be ready to pass you down something? in 10 years? I would feel bad about having you wait that long. So, if you are okay with it, I will entrust you* (azukeru) *to the one I respect the most in my artistic family: B. I will teach you the basics, such as folding the kimono, etc. And if something were to happen to B, I will take you on. If you are okay with this, I can make you a* rakugoka *this way." […] I never told this to anyone else. In this world, saying that you first entered somewhere but made a mistake* (shikujitta) *and were thus sent somewhere else is not a good thing, so I don't talk about it, as people may think this is what happened. Anyway, this is my peculiar start as a* rakugoka*.* (interview with the author, 2021).

The *zenza* above was not the only one who was pushed towards a different master than what he initially planned. In his case (and in the case of at least two other *rakugoka* I interviewed who shared similar stories), it was a problem of timing. In the next example, gender – and a clash between norms in the *rakugo* world and "common sense" in 21st-century Japan – caused the issue:

I was on probation (minarai) *for 6 months while still working. Actually, before that, I learned some rakugo with C shishō while working, and eventually decided to give him my CV and become a rakugoka.*
Q: So you are trained by C, but I know you are formally a disciple of D?
That's because C's wife didn't want him to have a female disciple. But it's understandable. Nowadays, why would you let a stranger (tanin) *into your house? Let alone* uchideshi *(disciples who live at their master's house), nowadays even* kayoideshi *(disciples who commute to their master's house daily to do chores) have decreased. But I wanted to train under him at any cost, so C did something that normally would be unthinkable, asking his own* shishō *to take me. Normally, you would go to a lower* shishō*, either his younger fellow disciple* (otōtodeshi) *or his own disciple* (deshi)*. D was old, so he wasn't convinced to take on a new* deshi*, but the wife (okamisan, see above) said, "why not?". For all matters, it is C who trains me, though.* (interview with the author, 2021).

This variety of lived experiences compared to the discursive adherence to simplicity and orthodoxy is perhaps a good representation of the *rakugo* art world as I have encountered it in the field and may play a role in its reproduction as a social world largely regulated by non-formalised but supposedly highly revered norms, practices, and aesthetics. An example of this divide between ideology and practice, or at least of the flexibility of what is often portrayed on stage or in interviews as unquestioned axioms of *rakugoka*'s social organisation and practice, is the idea that *rakugoka* "do not scout for talent". The life stories of most of my informants confirm this idea, as they decided on their own to apply to a master and often even had to almost "force them" to take them as disciples through a show of persistence. The usual practice of rejecting an applying disciple at least three times to check their determination plays into this discourse. What is more, the idea that disciples enter the *rakugo* world "without being asked to" (*katte ni haitta*) is instrumental in justifying practices and ideas within the *rakugo* world which may be deemed outdated (in terms of strict hierarchy, gender norms, or work-like balance), as any complaint can be dismissed by commenting that "nobody asked them to enter, they can always leave" (K, *rakugoka*, personal communication). Besides being used as a justification for conservatism, the idea that a *rakugoka* does not ask anyone to become their disciple serves to prevent disciples from thinking that their master will (or even should) be able to guarantee their success in the future – as an art world supported by ticket sales and built on solo performances, long-term economic security or success cannot be promised by even the most popular of *shishō*, and while proper training and connections will help, a *rakugoka*'s success is ultimately predicated on their own ability to attract audiences. Given the abundant use of discourses of "heritage" and "Japanese

culture" within the *rakugo* world (see Brau 2008), several informants also attributed this practice of avoiding any scouting to a "Japanese traditional attitude" of "not refusing who comes, not chasing who leaves" *(kuru mono wa kobamazu, saru mono wa owazu*).

Despite the recurrence of this discourse, I have encountered some exceptions to this norm in the field. A rather common, slight divergence, was that enacted by masters who, after having tested applicants with several rejections, voiced to their disciples or most loyal fans their "wondering of where that young fellow ended up", implying a will to take them on if they insisted even just one more time – a piece of information that would eventually reach the perspective disciples through other fans or other members of the artistic family (Reireisha Maruko, personal communication, 2021). A more open contravention to the above norm were the rare, but not unheard of, cases of masters who actively scouted some promising student or amateur performer. I have met at least three such cases, who asked, however, not to be named – once again opting to uphold orthodox discourses in the narration of their path to, and within, the *rakugo* world.

Incidentally, adjacent arts such as *rōkyoku* and *kōdan* do not subscribe to this discourse of "not scouting for disciples", a sign perhaps of their lack of generational turnover and dire need for more disciples. Tamagawa Nanafuku, a popular *rōkyoku* artist, claimed she had been "basically scammed [laughs] into becoming a *rōkyoku-shi*", explaining that:

> *On the day of the end-of-year performance of the* rōkyoku *class I had joined as a hobby, the master asked me on stage in front of everyone if I planned to become a professional, and it was difficult to say no in that situation* [laughs]*... She then told me to come play* (asobi ni oide) *at her house, and before I knew it, she started talking about the details of my admission. I countered that I had a full-time job as a company worker and could not become a disciple, but she said I could just do the weekends, and eventually, here we are…* (Tamagawa Nanafuku, interview with the author, 11 November 2021)

4.3.4 Minarai Probation

Other publications within the still limited field of *rakugo* studies have covered the topic of apprenticeship (see, for example, Brau 2008, or more recently, Stark 2024), a theme also explored in other social worlds in Japan by the contributors to the edited volume *Learning in Likely Places* (Singleton 1998). This subsection does not aim to provide an exhaustive account of apprenticeship and training within the *rakugo* world, as that would require more space and would often overlap with

existing literature. It will be useful however to explore some of the relevant practices and discourses related to the apprenticeship I encountered in the field, to answer the central research puzzle of this dissertation – how the *rakugo* world managed to experience a revival in 21st-century Japan – and to contextualise the arguments related to *rakugo*'s community resilience I will present in chapter 5.

A disciple (*deshi*) accepted by a *rakugo* master (*shishō*) will start their career with a "probation" period (*minarai*) in which they will learn some of the basic aspects of the *rakugoka* life while waiting to be admitted to the backstage of the *yose* as a *zenza* apprentice.[144] I have shown how fluctuations in the popularity of *rakugo* meant different amounts of apprentices crowding the backstage of the *yose*, and thus, different lengths of the *minarai* in-between period, from just a few weeks during the "winter of *rakugo*", to more than one year after the 21st-century "*rakugo boom*" or during the postwar golden era (see Chapters 2 and 3). In chapter 1, I also presented how, at the time of my fieldwork in 2020-2021, pandemic regulations limited the number of *zenza* allowed in the *yose*, thus lengthening the *minarai* period. The experiences of Reireisha Miima can provide an example of life as a *minarai*:

> Q: How was your *minarai* period?
> *As a* minarai, *you still can't enter the* yose *yet, so I would accompany my* shishō *to his shows, bringing his bag. At times, he made me perform as a* zenza [in this case, referring to the opening position within a show, from which the term *zenza* comes, rather than to the title of accepted apprentice]. *I had no money nor much to do, so when I was not busy with* shishō*, I would work at a part-time job* (arubaito) *in an* izakaya. (Reireisha Miima, interview with the author, 26 June 2021).

For apprentices within the major associations (Rakugo Kyōkai and Rakugo Geijutsu Kyōkai in Tokyo, and Kamigata Rakugo Kyōkai in Kansai), the main difference between being in probation and being accepted officially as an apprentice is that the latter conduct their training at the *yose* theatres. For those in the groups not admitted to the main *yose* – namely the Tatekawa-ryū and Godaime San'yūtei Enraku Ichimon, plus the very few independent *rakugoka* such as Rakugoka Rabuhei and his disciple Rakugoka Ramune – that difference is not as clear:

> Q: What kind of things did you do?
> *Cleaning, house chores, and helping at shows.*
> Q: What's the difference with being a *zenza*?

[144] Titles explained here do not apply to Kamigata *rakugoka*, who follow similar trajectories as apprentices and then independent performers but without formal rites of passage.

> *It's not very different. But you gradually learn new tasks, you start just with holding* shishō*'s glasses while he is on stage and then take on more responsibilities. Compared to* zenza *in other associations, our* yose *is less frequent, but I would go sometimes* (Tatekawa Shirarin, interview with the author, 10 October 2021).

In line with the above mentions on the variety of realities in the *rakugo* world, apprentices under different masters, even within the same association, had greatly different experiences. Shun'pūtei Ichihana, disciple of Shun'pūtei Icchō, recalled:

> *We are an* ichimon *in which you don't go to the shishō's house, so we are told to just do a lot of* rakugo *training* (o-keiko)*. Of course, as a* minarai *I would go with* shishō *to his shows carrying the bag, but I did no house chores. I would learn how to fold a kimono, play the* taiko*, and do* o-keiko*. I was also told to do* arubaito *and save up money.* Shishō *taught me some* rakugo*, and also each older brother disciple* (anisan) *taught me one story. That was so good, everyone had their own style. I was so blessed to have all those* anisan*. Our Icchō* ichimon *is very strict on* taiko *because* shishō *is good at it. There is a sort of mysterious keyword:* "Icchō ichimon dakara" *("because it is the Icchō family")* [laughs]*. We were told, because of that, you "cannot not be able to do it". Very strict about it.* [laughs] (Shun'pūtei Ichihana, interview with the author, 30 July 2021).

Before further exploring practices of training and other aspects of the *zenza* apprenticeship, it will be useful to point at this divide between those masters who expect their disciples to do chores at their houses and those who do not – a difference about which informants in the field, on both sides, had rather strong emotions.

4.3.5 Uchideshi, Kayoideshi, Kayowanaideshi: Changing Apprenticeship Praxis

Differences in opinions on whether one should focus on artistic training (i.e. learning and rehearsing *rakugo* stories) or engage in house chores as a fundamental part of one's apprenticeship align with a more general pedagogical divide between *rakugo* masters. On the one side are masters who believe that a whole range of activities unrelated to *rakugo* is fundamental to hone the person and thus the art. They draw from a long-established and widely spread apprenticeship style in Japan, especially within the traditional arts. Disciples working like house servants and engaging in physical activities such as wiping floors, through which they are believed to learn to behave but also gain

certain skills that will later be useful in their art or practice, are a relatively common trope[145]. Far from being only a media cliché, the emphasis on seemingly unrelated activities as part of an apprenticeship is widely documented in all kinds of "learning places" in Japan, from pottery workshops to public baths (Singleton 1998). *Rakugo* masters who believe in the importance of such chores have long represented the hegemonic pedagogical discourse in the *rakugo* world (Tatekawa Danshun 2008).

Through the second half of the 20th century, the norm for apprentices slowly shifted from *uchideshi* ("house disciples") living at their masters' place, to *kayoideshi* ("commuting disciples") who commute daily to their master's house from another place – which may be a small flat they rent privately, a second house that belongs to the master, or, for those born in Tokyo, their parents' place. This change is well documented by the literature, too – based on her fieldwork in the early 1990s, in her monograph, Lorie Brau reported a divide between *uchideshi* and *kayoideshi*, with the latter becoming increasingly more common (Brau 2008, 113-117). Some of the older masters I interviewed in 2021 commented on the differences between the two apprenticeship systems. Yanagiya Korin (1948-) conducted his apprenticeship under Yanagiya Kosan V (1915-2001), a popular performer who served as the head of the Rakugo Association from 1972 to 1996 and became the first *rakugoka* to earn the title of Living National Treasure (see Chapter 2). Kosan represented, under every aspect (including his large number of disciples), the most prominent current within *rakugo* for half a century, making the experience of Korin particularly relevant:

> *I was an* uchideshi *at the* shishō*'s place. I was a* minarai *for 3 years* [in the late 60s, at the peak of the rakugo golden era and at a time of turmoil related to the increase in the number of rakugoka]*, without going to the* yose. Kayoideshi *have their own time when they go home. But* uchideshi *don't have any personal time, so I am surprised I made it through 3 years...* [Minarai do not even go to the *yose*, so he spent all his time with the *shishō* and other members of the artistic family]. *I didn't quit because I really wanted to become a* rakugoka*. But also, because it was fun, we would pull pranks on other disciples, and my* shishō*'s place was not that strict.* (Yanagiya Korin, interview with the author, 22 February 2021).

San'yūtei Karuta, the pioneer woman *rakugoka*, first started as an uchideshi but later became a *kayoideshi* when a male disciple entered the house and her *shishō* deemed it inappropriate to have young disciples of different sexes under the same roof. She reflected on the trade-offs of the two,

[145] The cliché even reached western audiences through media representations (such as the 1984 film *Karate Kid,* with Mr. Miyagi's "wax on, wax off" karate training lessons)

recalling that as an *uchideshi*, she had "less freedom, but food and a room" (Interview with the author, 29 October 2021). Evolving house and family situations in modern Japan seem to have caused a decrease in the number of disciples who lived at their masters' houses:

> *Already at the time of my apprenticeship* [1981-1987]*, people started not liking* uchideshi*. Especially a family with a daughter would not like to have young men in the house. Houses also changed, they are smaller. And nowadays? Families don't tolerate even* kayoideshi *anymore. I think that is okay as long as the apprentices still learn to work smoothly…* (San'yūtei Karuta, interview with the author, 29 October 2021).

Another cause of this decrease, I argue, has to do with the shift in the social position occupied by *rakugoka* in Japan, from jesters at the margins of society to regular (if slightly peculiar) members of society (see Chapter 6). *Rakugoka* gained respect and a way out from the kind of discrimination that had led parents to disown children choosing to become *rakugoka*, but in their ascent to becoming respectable "*katagi*" citizens, unwritten social pacts had to be reformed (see Chapter 6). *Rakugoka* might have been given a free pass to say what a respectable citizen could not and to indulge in the vices that *rakugo* story characters portray, from gambling to drinking and womanising (see Brau 2008, 80), but that is not the case anymore. The lower tolerance for having disciples in the house is, I argue, another symptom of the same shift: someone marrying a *rakugoka* in the past would have been well aware of the peculiar social position they – in virtually all cases, *she* – would be putting herself in. Being the wife of a *rakugoka* meant becoming the *okamisan* of an artistic family, taking care of disciples and being aware (if not tolerant) of the unruly behaviour of a *rakugoka*. But as several younger *rakugoka* I interviewed affirmed, "*geinin dakara*" ("because they are an entertainer") is no longer a justification (Reireisha Maruko, interview with the author, 29 January 2021). A spouse of a *rakugoka* does not necessarily partake anymore in any unwritten pact involving compromises going outside of common sense because of the partner's occupation, such as "having strangers live in the house" (Ryūtei Komichi, interview with the author, 27 April 2021).

By the time I entered the field in 2020-2021, not a single disciple in Tokyo lived at their master's house. Rumours of one *uchideshi* in Kansai were met with fascination for this almost disappeared practice. From the accounts of *rakugoka* within every association, it is clear that a new change has occurred: some half of the *zenza* today do not even commute to their master's house. The divide, no longer about where the apprentices live, has now shifted to be between those who commute to their shishō's house (*kayoideshi*) and those who do not go at all to their *shishō*'s house (*kayowanaideshi*).

Masters such as Yanagiya Sankyō – the current head of the Rakugo Kyōkai, and a disciple (alongside the above-mentioned Korin) of the late Yanagiya Kosan V – still emphasise the importance of doing chores unrelated to *rakugo* at the *shishō*'s house:

> Zenza *apprenticeship starts with doing cleaning, cooking, etc, all the chores that women do* [sic]*, that way you learn how to do those things, and to enact them on stage. Everything is apprenticeship: from laundry to going on errands. Errands, for example, train you to use proper language. Because you are not just going to buy things for yourself, you are buying for the* okamisan*, it is very different. You try to get the best thing for the person you are buying something for, so the way you speak with the shopkeeper changes*.
>
> Q: Do you make your own disciples experience the same apprenticeship as you experienced in the 1960s?
>
> *Yes. I can't transmit everything I learned from the* shishō*, it is impossible. I myself absorbed only some, say, 70% of what* shishō *taught me, so those who learn from me will maybe learn 50%... If they had directly trained under Kosan, they would have got 70%, so I try as much as possible to tell them what Kosan taught me. This way, maybe they can absorb 60% of Kosan's teaching. As a little extra* ("plus alpha")*, I add the things that I personally think.* (Yanagiya Sankyō, interview with the author, 24 August 2021).

Other masters, instead, disagree with this style of training and do not ask their disciples to come to their houses, believing that "if you have the time for such things, you should practice your *rakugo* instead" (Shun'pūtei Ichihana, interview with the author, 30 July 2021). Some *rakugoka* who underwent harsh training at their *shishō*'s house claimed that "you can tell who does chores at the *shishō*'s house and who does not from their attitude", implying that *kayoideshi* are often better socialised as *rakugoka* – quicker at chores in the backstage, more polite, more attentive (Ryūtei Komichi, interview with the author, 27 April 2021). Because of this perception, and perhaps also out of sheer "envy for them not having to undergo the same ordeal", *hanashika* who trained under masters known for not requiring them to commute to their house for chores confided that they faced "a sort of discrimination" (S, *rakugoka*, personal communication). One of the most prominent *shishō* who does not require disciples to come to his house is Shun'pūtei Icchō (1950-), who inherited this (previously unusual) style of training from his master Ryūchō V (1929-1991). Shun'pūtei Ichihana, a disciple of Icchō, sees that discrimination crystallised in the remark, "It cannot be helped, she is a Shun'pūtei" (Shun'pūtei Ichihana, interview with the author, 30 July 2021).

However, the group of *rakugoka* who do not engage in house chores as part of their training seems to have been growing not only in numbers but in acceptance. The changing factor, perhaps, is

that some of the most popular performers in recent years emerged from such less strict schools of thought. Above all, *rakugo* superstar Shun'pūtei Ichinosuke (1978-), also a disciple of Icchō, is often dubbed as "the *rakugoka* whose shows are most difficult to get a ticket for" (Aoki Nobuhiro, interview with the author, 20 July 2021). Ichinosuke sits alongside Yanagiya Kyōtarō (1963-) as one of the two performers who virtually every interviewee mentioned when asked to name the most popular *rakugoka* alive. Kyōtarō, a disciple of the above-mentioned Sankyō, is a skilful performer of both classical *koten* and experimental *shinsaku*, and through his work both individually and within SWA (see Chapter 3) proved to the *rakugo* world that both *koten* and *shinsaku* were viable avenues for success in 21st-century Japan. Ichinosuke, besides proving that a modern style of *koten* could still be a hit with audiences in late Heisei (1989-2019) and Reiwa (2019-) Japan, also represents a living example of how a *rakugoka* who did not undergo the traditional ordeal of doing house chores and similar errands at a *shishō*'s house as part of an apprenticeship could still become highly successful. However, Ichinosuke's success is an argument for the validity of a particular apprenticeship style only if artistic fame and success are intended as the ultimate goal of apprenticeship. For many masters, as we will see in the next section, that is not necessarily the case.

4.3.6 "It is about Manners, not Art"

> *The* zenza *apprenticeship is not about your performing skills. It is the period in which you lose your personality. When you first enter, as someone who likes to perform, you have a self-impression of being interesting. That is a hindrance for a* zenza*. No one cares if a zenza is interesting* (omoshiroi)*. The performance comes after; the important part for* zenza *is being considerate* (kidzukai, kibataraki) *to all the* shishō *backstage. At the* yose*, a zenza is not written in the programme, and they perform before the start because they are not part of the ticket price, as they are not yet a saleable product* (shōhin). (San'yūtei Rakubō, interview with the author, 8 June 2021).

Many of my informants were adamant in affirming that the *zenza* apprenticeship in the *rakugo* world is not preoccupied with training performing or artistic skills but rather in socialising disciples into becoming well-adjusted people, able to run a theatre, to cater to the needs of the performers in the backstage, and to gauge what other people (the *shishō* and other masters at first, but eventually people in audiences) are thinking and feeling. As in many other artistic or professional worlds in Japan, emphasis is put on disciplining the self (D. Kondo 2009). Different *shishō* will focus on

different aspects of behaviour, but a few elements often recur. Reireisha Miima (a *zenza* at the time of the interview) summarised some of these:

> *They say the most important thing you learn as a* zenza *is apologising* (ayamaru)*, at times taking responsibility for others' mistakes. Those who try to give justifications* (iiwake) *or hide their mistakes are the ones who get expelled for not being sincere. My* shishō *would say, "It's okay to make mistakes, but don't lie. I will apologise to the person you angered". If you say, "No, I did no mistakes" and hide the fact that you were scolded by someone, creating problems for your* shishō *behind their back, that is the worst thing you can do. The apprenticeship is apologising* (ayamaru no ga shūgyō)*. Apologising again and again, you will eventually become a professional* (ichininmae) *or at least get halfway there* (nininmae)*, you will correct your character* (jinkaku wo kyōsei suru)*.* […] *Manners* (reigi) *are more important than the art* (gei)*. And it is a village community* (mura shakai), *if you do not apologise to that* shishō *they will complain about it and the rumour will spread, it will make it difficult to live in it.* (Reireisha Miima, interview with the author, 26 June 2021).

Often, especially in the eyes of *rakugoka* who entered this world before the recent increase of prestige the art experienced (see chapter 2 and 5), the pedagogic emphasis of the *rakugo* world on building "the person" is linked with the idea of needing to "turn people who were unfit for normal society, into people who could at least make it as *geinin*" (Shiori, *rakugo* fan and producer, interview with the author, 23 December 2020). This discourse continues today, as Miima explained:

> *Other rules… well, do not steal money. And do not blame others for your mistakes. It is obvious, right? But that of* rakugoka *is historically a job provided to those who cannot work in normal society. Anyone, even a kid, can give tea, right? But you are taught strictly from those fundamentals how to behave, to correct your character. The training starts with absorbing what a normal member of society (shakaijin) should know as common sense. Most zenza are kids who would not be able to make it in normal society* [laughs]*. They say* zenza *are not proper* geinin *yet, the apprenticeship corrects that. They become able to do greetings, learn manners.* (Reireisha Miima, interview with the author, 26 June 2021).

This justification may be less convincing now that many, if not most, *rakugo* apprentices are university graduates, with some such as Katsura Miyaji (a successful salesman) or Tatekawa Hanshirō (a Tokyo University graduate and an established salaryman) even having proved their ability to succeed in other industries before deciding to become *rakugoka*. The increasingly older age of

aspiring performers may also undermine the argument for having an apprenticeship focused on basic chores. San'yūtei Kenkō argues that the tasks entrusted to *zenza* – from folding kimonos and serving tea in the backstage of the *yose*, to doing house chores at the *shishō*'s place – are "doable by middle schoolers, and indeed the apprenticeship system was created at a time when aspiring *rakugoka* were, at most, of middle-school age" (interview with the author, 7 September 2021).

However, many *rakugoka* justified the traditional methods by arguing that for those who have already proved themselves in other fields (education, corporate career), the aim of the apprenticeship is to break one's ego and mould the self into a *geinin* (entertainer) by means of dealing with unreasonable or illogical (*rifujin*) things (Kokontei Bungiku, interview with the author, 24 June 2021). In this sense, Tokyo University graduate Shun'pūtei Shōkichi argues that *rakugoka* is "the job for which Tokyo University graduates are the least prepared" (Shun'pūtei Shōkichi 2013). Miima similarly remarked:

> *It is my own perspective, but* zenza *tend to have some pride when they start, and in the first year, everyone gets scolded a lot, for* rifujin (unreasonable) *things. So that pride is broken, then you have to start from scratch, you feel like you want to do your best* (ganbaru) *from zero. So, the apprenticeship is needed even for those highly educated* zenza*. Even if graduating from a top university, they might have bad habits* (kuse)*, and afterwards, having lost those, they are grateful they underwent the* zenza *apprenticeship. One's face* (kaotsuki) *changes. You become sharp* (kiritto shite kuru)*. Students who used to say whatever they wanted in a lively manner, get scolded so much as* zenza *at the* yose*, that they change, in a good way. Well, the bad side is that they may lose that liveliness* (ikiyoi)*, but I think that the* zenza *apprenticeship is needed to become a* rakugoka*.* (Reireisha Miima, interview with the author, 26 June 2021).

Miima's words resonate with what anthropologist Victor Sogen Hori experienced when training to become a Zen monk (1994), emphasising one element that plays a central role in many apprenticeships in Japan: scolding. A *zenza'*s central preoccupation is to avoid making *shikujiri* ("screw-ups"), or at least not to get their *shishō* so angry that they would expel them (*hamon*, the ultimate punishment). San'yūtei Mankitsu recalled how he "just tried not to be expelled because of irrational (*rifujin*) reasons. I did make mistakes, but I kept sending the message that I respected all the *shishō* in order not to be expelled. (San'yūtei Mankitsu, interview with the author, 1 June 2021). As for the reasons for scolding disciples, Yanagiya Sankyō's explanation is quite insightful (as well as, once again, influential, given his position as the head of the Rakugo Kyōkai):

> Q: What do you get angry about?

Mistakes. I would not get angry about breaking an object by mistake. But mistakes made when not understanding the situation and what the other person is thinking, those I get angry about.

Q: So, is it a way to train their ability to understand the situation and what other people think?

Yes exactly. To do rakugo*, you have to understand what people feel. I get emotionally angry when they make those mistakes, but more than that, I get angry as a way to train them to understand. Our* senpai *used to tell us, "Doesn't matter how angry a* shishō *gets, it's not simply about being angry, it's a teaching moment. It's not scolding; it's teaching* (kogoto janai yo, oshie da yo)*. Scolding is about fixing mistakes. The one listening should take it as a moment to learn. So instead of saying just "sorry",* rakugoka *also say "thank you" when getting scolded, because you are being taught how to fix your mistakes.*

Q: Where do you draw the line for a mistake you cannot forgive, which would make you expel (*hamon*) someone?

Lies to protect yourself. Saying the train was late as an excuse is still forgivable. But using other people as part of your excuse to protect yourself, thus causing problems to others, would end in hamon*. I only expelled one person. He would lie all the time. To protect himself or to put other people in trouble. I forgave him twice, but the third time I expelled him. Any mistake can be forgiven if you are honest about it. But if you lie, especially about other people, pushing the blame on them…* (Yanagiya Sankyō, current head of Rakugo Association, interview with the author, 24 August 2021).

Sometimes, answers partially contradicted each other – if Yanagiya Sankyō mentioned "lies" and "justifications" as something he would scold a disciple for, San'yūtei Mankitsu in contrast, mentioned "not coming up with a lie or justification", in the context of being late due to having overslept, as "a sign of a lack of respect" (interview with the author, 1 June 2021). Contradictions are not surprising, given that dealing with *rifujin* (illogical, unreasonable, or contradictory reasoning) seems to be the bread and butter of apprenticeship. It may even be argued that contradictions are part of the *rakugo* world by design: "becoming a *rakugoka* means learning to deal with illogicality (*rifujin*)" (San'yūtei Mankitsu, interview with the author, 1 June 2021). Like with other aspects in the *rakugo* world, not everyone experienced scolding and strict teaching to the same degree. Several *rakugoka* of different generations characterised the apprenticeship as "fun" (Yanagiya Korin, Reireisha Miima) or "actually easy" (San'yūtei Kenkō). Others, however, faced great hardships, like Ryūtei Komichi:

What kept me motivated was the will to do rakugo*. During the apprenticeship, I mostly just took care of the master's house, couldn't do much* rakugo*, nor learn much* rakugo*. I was like a dirty, worn-out rag, so tired every day. But when people have dreams, they can make it. It's not like my master was bullying me: it's that he didn't want people to think that I had it easy because I am a woman, or I would have had a bad reputation. So, he treated me strictly. They say, "The job of a master is to bully their apprentices"* (deshi wo ijimeru no ha shishō no shigoto)*, so he was very strict with me. I had to wake up earlier than everyone else and work more than everyone else; it was stricter than everyone else. I couldn't drink alcohol, for example, while many other* zenza *did. If I drank, I wouldn't have managed to work the day after, as I had to work so much and so early. It was 4 years of hell, but if you have a dream, you can make it.* (Ryūtei Komichi, Interview with the author, 27 April 2021).

Ryūtei Kochiraku similarly talked about the "joy and fear" of being scolded. He "had a habit of waking up late (*nebō*), and so was made to come to the *shishō*'s house every morning to do chores as a way of breaking that habit. I was often scolded and even declared expelled (*hamon*) by my *shishō* several times and had to apologise for him to reconsider". Quite telling was the episode in which his *shishō*, who often scolded him, did not say anything to him after a very bad performance on stage. Kochiraku recalls crying, thinking his *shishō* "did not care" about him anymore. However, the *shishō* then told him it was not because he did not care, but because Kochiraku had learned that specific story from a prominent *shishō* who gave him the okay [see training system in Chapter 5], so he did not feel in the position to scold him about it (Ryūtei Kochiraku, interview with the author, 25 May 2021).

"Hardships" and "scolding", which Komichi, Kochiraku and many others saw in a positive light as a form of thoughtfulness their *shishō* reserved for them, are not always portrayed as such. Right at the end of my fieldwork, one apprentice, Yoshiwara Bajaku, ended up suing his master, San'yūtei Enka IV, for power harassment and physical abuse, stirring debates on the need for master-disciple relationships fit to the 21st century (Yomiuri 2024/01/27). The widespread reprisal of Enka's actions among my interviewees is perhaps a sign that norms have already changed in the *rakugo* world regarding tolerance for psychological or physical *violence* (see Stark 2024).

Still, regardless of the many hardships, including aspects which they deemed outdated, interviewees of all ages argued for the usefulness of the *zenza* apprenticeship. Kokontei Bungiku talked at length about how the time spent with his strict master allowed him to break up from forms of attachment and ego that, "like an armour", constrained his person (interview with the author, 24 June 2021). If deconstructing ego and "humbling the apprentices" is a goal of the apprenticeship, then

the increased number of highly educated people trying to become *rakugoka* might justify the importance of apprenticeship, rather than being an argument against it.

In *zenza* apprenticeship, much of the learning, especially for more traditionalist masters, is conveyed through what Hori, speaking of learning and teaching in a Zen monastery, had dubbed "teaching without teaching" (Hori 1994, 11). Rakubō recalled how his master Rakusuke summarised *rakugoka*'s style of teaching:

> *My shishō told me that in the* rakugo *world, unlike in sports with coaches, they don't teach you things. You look at others and steal from them. Some might give you advice, but no one will teach you everything. That's why going to an* uchiage (an after-show meal usually involving alcohol) *is important, you see how even* shin'uchi *are attentive to fans' needs, you steal their behaviour. But no one teaches you things in detail. A* shishō *told me that stupid people don't get it even if you tell them everything in detail, while smart people get it even without saying anything. There is no manual for* zenza *times, no clear answers, neither on how to behave backstage nor how to perform, there is no clear path, you have to find it your way. So, it was tough at the beginning. When an* anisan *scolds me, they are telling me their own answer, but the problem is that the answer is different for each person. That's why no one teaches in detail, because everyone has to find their own style.* (San'yūtei Rakubō, interview with the author, 8 June 2021).

However, just as with other aspects of the apprenticeship we have seen above, the attitude of "teaching without teaching" is also subject to variations among different *rakugoka* and to changes through time. This is a further indication of *rakugo* being, despite its association with "tradition" and its image of having "strict rules", a social world characterised by a variety of experiences, ever adapting to the times. Yanagiya Sankyō's testimony will be useful here:

> Q: What have you changed compared to your shishō Kosan?
>
> *I think I mostly do the same. But he was outstanding* (idai). *I respect him so much. I am not such an* "idai" *person; I am not a person to be respected as much as him… So I… Well… Now that I think about it, what on earth have I managed to teach my disciples… Such a difficult question* [laughs]. *Ah! I got it. My shishō wouldn't tell things directly; he would let the person realise on their own. Instead of saying "I am angry because of this and that", he would say "Do you realise why I am angry?" and would make you think about it yourself. Instead, I explain everything by replacing myself with "people", saying, "Look, I can be patient about that, but people won't, so…". That's one difference. I tell them, "I understand what you were*

thinking; you were thinking this, right? I understand that, but in this situation, I don't think that is appropriate". That way, I make them realise that I am not just emotionally angry. I show them I understand their emotions, but that still that behaviour was not right. If I were a more sublime (sūkōna) *rakugoka, I could instead do the same as my shishō* [laughs]. (Yanagiya Sankyō, interview with the author, 24 August 2021).

Finally, the apprenticeship system turns new disciples into *zenza* – creating the space and time for them to embody the *geinin* "habitus*"* (see Chapter 5) – but also supplies the *rakugo* art world with a much-needed cheap labour force running *yose* theatres. *Zenza* learn the skills needed to run a show at the *yose* as well as when helping one or more *shin'uchi* at other venues (be it so-called *hall rakugo*, or a performance at a school). Their work thus helps existing *rakugoka* to run shows with limited costs but also provides current *zenza* with a valuable form of cultural capital they will be able to put to use later as independent performers. Informants thus justify *zenza* chores in terms of how they would turn useful in their future as performers trying to make a living through the support of audiences:

It has been a well-made system since the Edo period. They say a zenza's *job is to help* shin'uchi *perform well, and if they cannot make* shin'uchi*, who are part of the same group* (miuchi), *feel good, how can they make audiences feel good? That is the rationale. The only difference is whether you do that backstage or on stage, but the goal is the same: make people feel at ease, put them in a good mood.* (San'yūtei Rakubō, interview with the author, 8 June 2021)

Chapter Conclusions

In this chapter, I have presented how fans, producers, and performers become members of the *rakugo* art world. The first step is an encounter with *rakugo*, which can happen through a variety of circumstances but with some recurring trends. I have shown the role of the radio, especially for older informants who talk of a time when *rakugo* felt "closer" (*mijika*) to daily life, and of TV, looking especially at the programme *Shōten*. Many younger informants, as a sign of increased recognition of *rakugo* as "Japanese Culture" worth teaching, first encountered the art through mandatory school events. Various workers also saw *rakugo* as a valuable interest to develop skills related to communication, language, and local cultural capital related to Tokyo and Osaka. Another functional use of *rakugo* my informants mentioned has been that of a "lullaby", with *rakugo* stories presenting a comfortable "place of belonging for the heart" (*kokoro no ibasho*). The world of *rakugoka,* too,

became an *ibasho* for many informants, especially those disillusioned with careers in other performing arts such as *manzai*. The chapter then moved on to an institution, *ochiken*, which acts as an important nurturing ground for members of the *rakugo* world, enabling students to develop a passion and representing a liminal space between "amateur" and "professional" *rakugo* performers. After discussing the ideological nature of such titles, the chapter looked at the world of so-called professional *rakugoka*, presenting the (lack of) requirements to become an apprentice as well as the experiences of informants as prospective disciples (*deshi*), in-probation trainees (*minarai*), and finally, apprentices (*zenza*). Throughout the chapter and especially in the analysis of professional *rakugoka*, I have pointed out the variety of realities experienced by informants vis-à-vis the ideological simplicity of discourses related to "how to be" and "how to become" a *rakugoka*. One aspect worth noting in particular has been that of the content of apprenticeship, with a divide between masters expecting disciples to take care of house chores, and those who instead only ask their pupils to focus on practising *rakugo*. Following the historical sections in Chapter 2 and the more recent developments of Chapter 3, this chapter has thus contextualised this dissertation's arguments by providing a picture of how those who support *rakugo*'s resilience and ongoing revival first encounter the art and become members of the *rakugo* art world. The next chapter will then present the main factors that, I argue, enabled the *rakugo* world to survive and experience a renaissance in 21st-century Japan.

Chapter 5.
Paying it Forward:
Practices, Structures and Ideologies behind Rakugo's Resilience

Chapter Summary

This chapter will look at the factors that enabled the community of professional *rakugo* performers to retain the level of sustainability and resilience needed to overcome times of scarce popularity and prepare the groundwork for when the opportunities for a revival would emerge, keeping the profession viable for new performers. This was possible through a series of practices, reinforced by specific structures and ideologies (which those practices, in turn, perpetuated), which, I argue, benefited the *rakugo* community as a whole. These include a number of practices of sharing – sharing of stories, of jokes, of knowledge, but also of jobs and connections. *Rakugoka* take on disciples free of charge, accept them in a network of artistic families conceptualised as kin relationships, shape them to embody the *rakugoka* habitus through apprenticeship, and teach them their repertoire as well as all needed artistic and technical skills. Unlike *manzaishi* and other comedians who do not allow others to copy their routines, but also unlike other traditional arts such as *rōkyoku* in which each school or artistic family jealously protects certain stories, *rakugoka* can ask any other *rakugoka* to teach them, free of charge, their stories. This non-monetary system of transmission is based on one-on-one *o-keiko* (training) sessions and on a peculiar alternative model of intellectual property predicated on the concept of *mochineta* ("having" a story, see below). Besides *rakugo* stories and other forms of technical or cultural advice shared in training sessions, *rakugoka* also pass down gigs and connections, especially after being promoted to a higher rank. A *futatsume* becoming a *shin'uchi*, for example, is expected to only accept jobs paid above a certain amount of money, and will bequeath their previous gigs to their juniors. This practice can be rather selfless: informants mentioned passing their shows to juniors despite not having secured yet enough new, better-paid shows fit to one's new career stage. However, it is such norms that help ensuring that enough opportunities are available to early career *rakugoka* to perform and make a living, and that pays are not flattened down at the bottom of the hierarchical ladder.

Indeed, given the freelancing economic nature of the *rakugoka* career, such practices may appear counterproductive for the individual storyteller, but I will show how these helped build resilience in the community of performers. The motivations and processes supporting these seemingly "selfless" practices are to be found in a series of ideologies: first, what I name *artistic kinship*, based on the structure of the *rakugo* world into artistic families (*ichimon*); then, the sense of indebtedness

and gratitude (*on*) towards one's seniors and predecessors nurtured through the apprenticeship and training sessions, which is constructed as a debt too large to be "repaid" (*ongaeshi*), which thus can only be "paid forward" towards the next generation; finally, especially in Tokyo, the aesthetics of detached coolness known as *iki* and its closely related ethos of bravado and empathy of the *edokko* ("child of Edo"), which, coupled with the need to be admired by audiences and colleagues, induces *rakugoka* to do what is "cool" rather than what is convenient. Supported by these ideologies and structures, the practices I describe in this chapter allowed the best *rakugo* stories to circulate and be adapted through generations of performers, and by endowing new *rakugoka* with all necessary forms of capital (social, cultural, symbolic, artistic and economic), maintained a steady influx of well-trained performers dedicated to the art, even at times of decline in interest in *rakugo*. This, I argue, enabled the survival and resilience of the art and the chance for its eventual revival when the right circumstances arose at the start of the 21st century.

5.1 Social Capital: Artistic Kinship and the Yose Backstage Network

5.1.1 The concept of social capital

The absence or scarcity of a form of capital can create a barrier for one to enter – let alone succeed in – any given field. This is easily evident in the case of "social capital", a concept which points fundamentally to a rather simple idea: that connections are an important asset for an individual or group to succeed. In Japan, too, it is an often-heard adage that the means to success are "connections and money" ("*kone to kane"*). Indeed, the recognition of the impact of what is referred to as "social capital" anticipates the creation of this term. Portes (1998, 2), in a review of social capital's origins and developments within the social sciences, argues that the value of involvement and participation was highlighted by sociologists as early as in the work of Émile Durkheim and Karl Marx. As Portes argues, however, what was new in the formulation and employment of the concept of social capital by Pierre Bourdieu (1980) and later authors such as Loury (1981) or Coleman (1988) was the concept's "focus on the positive consequences of sociability while putting aside its less attractive features", and most of all, how it "places those consequences in the framework of a broader discussion of capital and calls attention to how such nonmonetary forms can be important sources of power and influence" (Portes 1998, 2-3). In *Making Democracy Work*, Robert Putnam expanded the boundaries of the concept from the individual to the social and even statal level, arguing for its importance in explaining the success of regional governments in modern Italy (Putnam 1994). However, in a more recent review of the of the trajectory of social capital within the social sciences, DeFilippis recognises the value of the boundaries of concept as popularised by Bourdieu and Loury,

who sought to reveal its role in determining the outcomes of an individual's life path, but argues against the utility of expanding this concept for the aims of community development as initiated by Putnam's work (DeFilippis 2001).

Within this context, in this section, I will mobilise the concept of social capital in the meaning given to it by Bourdieu as a resource that an individual may draw upon to achieve a certain goal or position within a social field, and hence ultimately as a possible source of inequality within a field. However, by pointing at how the *rakugo* world provides social capital to its new members, and arguing that this has allowed the community of *rakugoka* to keep attracting and retaining enough performers, building the conditions for *rakugo*'s survival and resurgence, I am also not distancing myself from the point of view that the provision of robust social capital can contribute to the resilience of a community as posited by Putnam (1994).

5.1.2 Artistic Kinship

The first element to account for in explaining how previously unknown apprentices are endowed with social capital is what I call *artistic kinship*, or the strong network of family-like relationship into which the *rakugoka* is embedded upon entering a master's artistic family (*ichimon*), which represents the fundamental unit of organisation in *rakugoka*'s society.

The study of kinship has played a prominent role in the development of anthropology as a discipline (Bamford 2019b, 5-6) and continues to be a fruitful area of research today[146]. In the study of Japanese society too, researchers highlighted the central role of the family and of the set of symbols and terms associated with it, not only in influencing all sorts of fields in which families play a key function – see for example Breaden and Goodman (2023) on family-owned universities – but also as an organisational model for the shaping of institutions, such as companies. The structure known as *ie seido*, or household system, has been identified in many influential works as the fundamental model of organisation for many institutions in Japanese society, with its tenets having transferred from pre-modern household-business organisations to modern corporations (see Nakane 1970, 4-8).

The use of kinship terms outside of the realm of families is not only a Japanese phenomenon – many publications demonstrated how kinship is not limited to blood relationships or biological reproductions (see Franklin and McKinnon 2001; Bamford 2019b). Anthropologists have recognised how a large portion of the discipline's early works on kinship consisted of projecting Western ideas

[146] See for example the variety of contributions in *The Cambridge Handbook of Kinship* (Bamford 2019a).

of family and kin onto other cultures. Instead, recent literature has problematised seeing blood ties, marriage and childbirth as the only possible building blocks of families, and made evident the abundance of kinship structures outside the "ruling sign of biology" (Franklin and McKinnon 2001, 6). In this sense, it is not so surprising that the hegemonic kinship framework of modern Japan, i.e. the *ie* system, is not strictly established on blood relationships (Nakane 1970, 6-8), even if this does not prevent the concept of blood and blood ties from playing a relevant role in the Japanese imagination (see Goldfarb 2018, 181-182). What matters for the aim of this dissertation, is that the use of kinship-related terminology outside the realm of nuclear or even extended family might have made it easier for *rakugoka* to establish and accept forms of "family" (or rather, of "household") which are not based on blood or marriage, creating the conditions for the artistic family system of the *rakugo* world.

A *rakugoka*'s artistic family, formed by a master and their disciples, is referred to as *ichimon*, or "one *mon*", written with the character for "gate". This is rather fitting for a sociocultural context in which kinship vocabulary tends to revolve around a location (household) rather than a set of characteristics (or, to use Chie Nakane's terms, "frame" rather than "attributes" – see Nakane 1970). Entering into the world of professional *rakugo* and becoming *rakugoka* is denoted as *nyūmon*, or entering the gate, which is the defining moment that turns a stranger into a member of an artistic family and into a "professional" storyteller (Brau 2008, 12). The general consensus among *rakugoka* I interviewed is that being a professional *rakugoka* has little to do with making money out of the art (even though that meaning of the world professional, or "pro" in Japanese, does exert some pressure and influence on *rakugoka*, as I could gauge from my informants' opinions on how shameful it is for a *rakugoka* to get by through side jobs unrelated to performing). While there is room for resistance to this norm (see Ochiken section in Chapter 4, and Shōfukutei Ukō's *rakugo* piece satirising this norm in the Introduction), most *rakugoka* gave a rather simple answer to the question of who is a professional *rakugoka*: "Someone who has undergone, or is currently undergoing, an apprenticeship under a *rakugoka*" (Reireisha Maruko, interview with the author, 29 January 2021).

The aspiring *rakugoka*, previously a stranger (*tanin*), upon embarking on a *rakugo* apprenticeship, is entrusted with a significant amount of social capital by being accepted as the newest "family member" of the *shishō*'s artistic family. As Brau remarks, disciples (*deshi*) "reap tremendous advantages from association with their *shishō*" (Brau 2008, 94-95). The hitherto unknown *rakugoka* can now draw on the reputation of their *shishō* to establish relationships of trust with key members of the *rakugo* art world (other performers, producers, patrons), develop opportunities for training or performance, and eventually attract audiences. *Rakugoka* are aware of the extraordinariness of such

an act on the part of the *shishō*, and often comment on how every *shishō* "takes a huge risk when taking on a disciple", as they are "letting into their house", physically and metaphorically, a stranger (Ryūtei Komichi, personal communication, April 2021).

The artistic family is centred upon the direct relationship between master and disciple (*shitei kankei*), which is characterised as similar to that of a parent and a child (Brau 2008, 93). The degree of strength of this relationship is well epitomised by the remarks I heard pronounced by Yanagiya Karoku on the stage of his disciple Yanagiya Rokuya's promotion to the rank of *shin'uchi*:

> *They often say the relationship between master and disciple is like that of parent and child* (oya mitai). *But that is incorrect. I am not "like" a parent. I* am *his parent* (Oya "mitai" janai desu. Oya desu.) (Yanagiya Karoku on stage at Shinjuku Suehirotei, 1 October 2021).

The disciple is thus embedded in a network of kin ties, which include, beyond the "parent", all sorts of relatives. Other disciples under the same *shishō* become one's siblings, with those who entered the *rakugo* world before being considered "older brothers" and "older sisters" (*anideshi* and *anedeshi*), and anyone who may start an apprenticeship under the same *shishō* afterwards becoming a "younger brother" or "younger sister" (*otōtodeshi* and *imōtodeshi*). A *shishō's* own *shishō* is one's *ōshishō*, "the great master", a figure akin to a grandparent and often exerting significant influence within the artistic family. Further relatives, such as a *shishō*'s sibling and their own disciples, are also connected in the same way as in "regular" families: (great)uncles and aunts, cousins, and so on. The next section will look at how these kin relationships interact with blood/marriage-based already existing family ones.

5.1.3 "Artistic" vs "Biological" Families – Overlaps and Contrasts

When discussing the inheritance of possible forms of capital, it is paramount to consider the role of the family. We have seen that *rakugo* is structured into (artistic) "families" which can exert significant influence, but those families are not based on blood ties, marriage, nor adoption, but on the parent-child like relationship established between a *shishō* and a disciple. This allows new *rakugoka* with no previous connection to the art to benefit from significant amounts of social capital, which, I argue, enabled the *rakugo* world to remain a viable career for anyone who chose to embark in it.

At times, however, artistic family relationships overlap or compete with "conventional" family relationships. This is the case, for example, of second-generation *rakugoka*. Unlike what happens in many other traditional art worlds such as Kabuki or Noh, *rakugoka* born in a *rakugoka*

family are still relatively rare, despite the positive value often associated in Japanese public discourse with "inheriting" a parent's job or business (*atotsugi*). Yanagiya Karoku, the grandson of Yanagiya Kosan V and nephew of Kosan VI, reflected on this in our interview:

> *I often ask my fans from the stage: don't you think it is strange that with 800 or so* rakugoka*, so few of their children continue their job?* [laughs] *Is it because they are bad parents* (hanmenkyōshi)*? Is it because it is not a good job, so they don't want their kids to do it? Or is it because second generation* rakugoka *have a bad reputation?* (Yanagiya Karoku, interview with the author, 27 October 2021).

Karoku and other second-generation *rakugoka* such as Ryūtei Kochiraku admitted that their personal ties with famous members of the *rakugo* world did open to them opportunities for performance and attracted audiences and media, and indeed, second-generation *rakugoka* at times face sarcastic comments from fellow performers who may imply their achievements are the fruit of their being "privileged children" (*obocchan*) (Yanagiya Karoku and Kobayashi 2001, 57). Favouritism received by children of famous *rakugoka* may seemingly undermine my argument that the *rakugo* world endows new disciples of all needed forms of capital, including social capital. However, while it may be true that children of famous *rakugoka* might receive even further benefits, any unrelated new disciple will also receive a significant amount of social capital by entering an artistic family and being embedded in a network of artistic kinship. The *rakugo* field is not entirely equal, but, I argue, it still provides opportunities to new disciples with no previous connections unseen in most other traditional art worlds or performing art worlds in Japan. What is more, as Karoku comments, an influential father will not be able to help a *rakugoka* once on stage:

> *Whatever the reason, not many push their kids to become* rakugoka*; it is a tough job. There is no way to help you – whoever your parent is, on the stage, it is just you and the audience. Those fifteen minutes or so, even if you are a* zenza*, you are the main character, you control the stage. That does not happen in theatre: if you are new, you can be a side character. But not in* rakugo*. There is no way to fake it* (gomakashi ga kikanai)*. So, maybe a parent would worry that their child may be unable to endure it mentally. My uncle and grandpa never pushed me to become a* rakugoka (27 October 2021).

Karoku also mentioned harsh criticism online as a reason why a parent might not want their child to become a *rakugoka*:

Nowadays, you can read a lot of critical opinions about you online. It does not matter if you are the son of someone; you are the one who must endure those. When I search myself online (ego sāchi)*, there are very positive comments, but also many negative ones. So that is why a father would refuse the son at first as a disciple; he would think about all the bad comments one must endure as a* rakugoka *and would want to make sure he really wants to become one. But perhaps in his heart, he is probably happy that his child wants to become like him* (27 October 2021).

While the number of legacy *rakugoka* remains small, the increasing prestige associated with *rakugo* (see chapter 6), as well as the opportunities for well-paid positions on media programmes such as the TV show *Shōten*, mean that some families of *rakugoka* celebrities did utilise their connections to obtain favourable positions, as several informants reported. This, and the overall importance of family relationships and influence in Japan, did at times create contrasts between the two paradigms of kinship. One example is the inheritance of famous stage names, which represent a source of prestige and an opportunity to attract audiences who may be familiar with previous, famous owners of said name. The "ownership" of a name is not a legally clear matter, and spouses or children of a *rakugoka* may clash with disciples as well as other interested parties over the passing on of a name, as in the case of San'yūtei Enshō (see Hirose 2020, 243-263).

Further complicating the relationship between artistic kinship and "conventional" kinship, in many *ichimon*, the wife[147] of a *shishō* also plays an important role in the nurturing of disciples (see Brau 2008, 115-118). Tatekawa Danshirō's wife identified with her husband's role to the point of introducing herself to me as "Danshirō" ("*Danshirō desu"*) when I met her while working as a helper at her husband's show at Shinjuku's Dōrakutei (19 March 2021). Older masters, such as Yanagiya Korin (1948-), often cut all ties with their own family to become *rakugoka*, accepting that the role meant separating oneself from respectable (*katagi*) society (see Chapter 6), and affirmed that spouses of *rakugoka* married them knowing that they would also enter a different social realm. With the increased "normalisation" of a *rakugoka*'s career (see Chapter 6), however, a number of spouses emerged who refuse to take on such a role, as they consider their partner's occupation as "just another job, even if a bit peculiar" and refuse to accept disciples in the family house (S., *rakugoka'*s wife,

[147] As of 2025, very few husbands of *rakugoka* exist, given how women still represent a very small percentage of *rakugoka*, and how some of them, such as San'yūtei Karuta, have decided not to marry in order to dedicate themselves to *rakugo*. Same sex marriage is still not legal in Japan, so no male *rakugoka* is married to a man.

personal communication). As more married women[148] *rakugoka* reach the career stage in which they might take on disciples, it will also be interesting to see whether husbands may take on a similar role to the *okamisan*. Ryūtei Komichi, one of the most popular women *rakugoka* in today's *rakugo* scene, thinks otherwise. She thus advises any perspective disciple to apply under a male *rakugoka* in order to benefit from the help of an *okamisan* (Ryūtei Komichi, interview with the author, 27 April 2021).

5.1.4 The Gakuya Network – Yose Backstages as Nerve Centres

Besides artistic kinship, the other structure which endows *rakugoka* with a network of close ties (i.e., with social capital) is the training period at the *yose* theatres, and more specifically, the time passed in the *yose* backstages, or *gakuya*. As reported by Lorie Brau, Tatekawa Danshi described in his 1965 book *Gendai Rakugo-ron* "the *gakuya* [backstage] as a kind of 'nerve center' for *hanashika* society. There the *zenza* gets to know a more extended 'family' of *anisan* ('elder brothers') and *shishō*" (Brau 2008, 118). In the sixty years since Danshi's book and in the thirty years since Brau's fieldwork, the extended families in which *zenza* are inserted have come to include *anesan* ("elder sisters") too, but apart from that, the role of the *yose* backstage rooms as centres of socialisation and connections remains the same.

Often, *yose* programmes are influenced by artistic family ties, but not entirely limited by them. The *sekitei* (*yose* owners/managers) of Asakusa Engei Hall and of Ueno Suzumoto Engeijō both explained to me in consistent terms the process of *kaodzuke* – choosing who will perform and in what order in a *yose* programme – which they described as a *sekitei*'s most important job (interview with the author, 20 August and 22 October 2021). Once the choice of who will be the headliner (*tori*) has been made and some of the most popular stars have been assigned, *sekitei* will try to fill the programme as much as possible with disciples or "siblings" of the headliner, which is a way to allow a broader range of *shin'uchi* (including those who otherwise would not be selected) to have a chance to perform. This familial system coexists with a more talent-based system, as the headliner and a number of other performers in each show are selected not for their artistic family connections but for their talent to please audiences (or at least, for the impression they have made with *sekitei* in this regard). Artistic family relationships are thus reinforced through this gathering of performers from the same of adjacent families operated by *sekitei*, but due to the presence of other performers too, the *gakuya* connects performers beyond families. Most importantly, *zenza* apprentices work at the *yose*

[148] As of 2025, only heterosexual marriage is recognised by Japanese law, so any husband of a *rakugoka* would be the spouse of a woman *rakugoka*.

regardless of who will perform at a certain programme, and so, throughout their apprenticeship, they are in the perfect position to connect with all of the *rakugoka* performing at the *yose*, creating a larger network encompassing their entire association.

Outside the *jōseki* yose (the traditional *yose* in the narrow sense), moreover, *zenza* are also employed by the many other venues where *rakugo* is performed. Most commonly, this happens indirectly when they accompany a master (either their own, or another master who took a liking of them). If the show stars multiple *rakugoka*, they may connect with other masters too, a precious chance to get to know performers beyond one's association (Ryūtei Kochiraku, interview with the author, 25 May 2021). As a volunteer helper at several small venues around Tokyo, I also witnessed how the producers and managers of those venues (such as the late Hashimoto Ryū of Dōrakutei in Shinjuku), may contact *zenza* directly to perform and/or help organise a show, creating a further layer of alternative networks.

Having presented how new *rakugoka* are endowed with social capital through artistic families and by working backstage at the *yose* and other venues, the following section will focus on cultural capital – how *zenza* learn how to be a *rakugoka*.

5.2 Cultural and Symbolic Capital: Embodying the Rakugoka Habitus

A second form of capital Bourdieu identified as playing a key role in many fields is "cultural capital" (Bourdieu 2002). As with social capital, its presence or absence can favour or hinder any individual, and its amount is not distributed equally, altering the playing field of social life. In this section, I will point out how *rakugoka* do not need any specific cultural capital to be accepted as disciples. *Rakugo*'s apprenticeship system and the idea of the *rakugo* world as a sort of safety net accepting those "unfit" for other occupations enable people lacking any specific cultural capital to obtain all necessary forms of it and succeed in the *rakugo* world. As summarised in the following passage, Bourdieu identifies three types of cultural capital:

> *Cultural capital can exist in three forms: in the embodied state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.), which are the trace or realization of theories or critiques of these theories, problematics, etc.; and in the institutionalized state, a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as will be seen in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee.* (Bourdieu 2002, 284).

The first form is what Bourdieu refers to as *habitus*, or embodied culture, a sort of disposition of the body and mind, a "feel for the game" (Bourdieu 1993a, 5). Bourdieu's studies on school children in France, similarly to those of researchers who employed this concept after him (see Bennett 2005), looked at how certain dispositions, and taste, are cultivated from a very young age, creating a disparity of distribution of such embodied cultural knowledge (Bourdieu 2010):

> *The initial accumulation of cultural capital, the precondition for the fast, easy accumulation of every kind of useful cultural capital, starts at the outset, without delay, without wasted time, only for the offspring of families endowed with strong cultural capital* (Bourdieu 2002, 285).

However, unlike the French literary field or other prestigious fields studied by Bourdieu, the *rakugo* world is arguably situated at the margins of Japanese society (see Chapter 6), and predispositions nurtured in privileged families do not tend towards earning the forms of capital needed to succeed as a *rakugoka*. If anything, several *rakugoka* described their worlds as a safety net for "unfit" members of society (Shun'pūtei Ichihana, interview with the author, 30 July 2021): new disciples are expected to lack basic common sense, let alone any "feel for the game" of *rakugo*.

The often physically demanding apprenticeship is then conceptualised as a system to teach *zenza* how to behave, turning unfit young people into properly functioning adults (San'yūtei Kenkō, interview with the author, 7 September 2021). To employ Bourdieu's terms, the *zenza* apprenticeship aims to turn whoever enters the *field* of professional *rakugo* into a *rakugoka*, imbuing the habitus of the *geinin* (performer) into the apprentice. Working at the master's house and in the backstage fosters the social and practical skills of young *rakugoka*, helping them learn how to earn the benevolence of both masters and fans and how to run a show smoothly. By providing the necessary cultural capital to survive in the *rakugo* world and practical skills to run shows, the apprenticeship system helps create a class of disciplined, likable, skilled performers. This also reduces the need for external staff and keeps the (limited) flow of funds in the hands of performers, making shows affordable for producers.

As per the second and third forms of cultural capital highlighted by Bourdieu, no special instrument, book, or object must be inherited to perform *rakugo*. Compared to many other traditional performing arts, *rakugo* is rather minimalistic, not requiring the support of artisans. Most importantly, no educational titles nor any other qualifications testifying to an individual's expertise are needed to become a *rakugoka*. "Being" a *rakugoka* (i.e., having undergone apprenticeship under a *rakugoka* – see Chapter 4) is the only necessary "qualification". Regardless of educational background or previous experience with *rakugo* as fans or amateur performers, new apprentices are treated as completely ignorant; all rules and norms of the *rakugo* world and of how to behave properly and be

liked by people are thoroughly instilled through the apprenticeship. If anything, a higher educational background is even seen at times as a problem (see Chapter 6).

While no cultural capital is needed to enter the *rakugo* world, by participating in it, *rakugoka* are endowed with a certain degree of "symbolic" capital (i.e., prestige), too. Some fans talked about an aura of wisdom, an image of *rakugoka* being guardians of history and of Japanese traditions that can be mobilised to secure shows and side gigs at cultural institutions or companies (K., Waseda University Rakugo Research Club Member, interview with the author, 2021). In Tokyo, the title of *shin'uchi* expands such prestige, even though it does so mainly for those unfamiliar with *rakugo* – any fan or performer knows that today, becoming a *shin'uchi* is just a matter of seniority.

The change of *shin'uchi* from a title assigned to the best performers to one attributed to every *rakugoka* was the result of a struggle in the late 1970s between Yanagiya Kosan V, then head of the Rakugo Kyōkai, and his predecessor San'yūtei Enshō VII (see Chapter 2). As Bourdieu argues, "the material and symbolic profits which the […] qualification guarantees also depend on its scarcity" (Bourdieu 2002, 285). While Enshō wanted to preserve the prestige of the title, Kosan argued that "there are *rakugoka* who blossom after having become *shin'uchi*" (Yanagiya Karoku, interview with the author, 27 October 2021), deeming the occasion of promotion to be a possible catalyst for their growth. After a series of troubles and factional shifts, Kosan's view prevailed, and Enshō exited the Rakugo Kyōkai to establish, with a small part of his own artistic family, including his disciple Enraku V, what is now known as the Enraku V Ichimon. The schism, referred to as the "Rakugo Association Division Turmoil" (*Rakugo Kyōkai Bunretsu Sōdō*), is described in detail by Enshō's disciple San'yūtei Enjō in his 1986 bestseller *Goranshin*, republished in 2018 as *Shishō! Goranshin!* (Master! You went insane!).

Other forms of prestige and symbolic capital include stage names (see Stark 2022), winning a *rakugo* competition such as the NHK Shinjin Engei Taishō (see Introduction), or, at the highest level, receiving recognition from the state in the form of medals for cultural merits or the title of Living National Treasure (Ningen Kokuhō). Being a member of one's association board (*riji*) or even working as the head of such an association is also considered a source of prestige. Notably, all these titles are earned during a *rakugoka*'s career: there is no need for any educational achievements or other forms of qualification or award prior to entering the *rakugo* world.

It may be argued that one's talent as a storyteller is influenced by one's upbringing and one's knowledge of the world. Tatekawa Danshi, in that sense, stated that the modern *rakugoka* must be well-versed in matters of the world to be able to entertain cultured audiences (Tatekawa Danshi 1965,

1984). However, the historic position of the *rakugo* world at the margins of Japanese society, and its role as a safety net for people "unfit" to other occupations, result in the apprenticeship being structured on the premises that new disciples are generally ignorant and need to be trained to be turned into professional *geinin*. In other words, new members are assumed to be lacking in cultural capital, and thus, they are provided with all the necessary resources to earn it, allowing *rakugoka* from all sorts of background a chance for success. Besides learning "how to behave" and how to be liked, apprentices also need to absorb knowledge about the art, acquire the skills required to set up a show and to perform, and of course, they need to learn *rakugo* stories. These are learned through one-on-one direct oral teaching sessions (*o-keiko*) around which *rakugo*'s peculiar system of sharing and transmission is centred, which will be the focus of the next section.

5.3 Artistic Capital: Sharing One's Rakugo Stories

Through working for their *shishō* or in the *yose* backstages, apprentices are socialised to behave like a *rakugoka*. However, how do they learn the content of the art – i.e. the *rakugo* stories and the artistic skills required to perform them successfully? Practically, training *rakugoka* hear stories so often while working in theatres that they will know at least the gist of most stories through sheer repetition (Brau 2008). Many, moreover, have a personal history as fans or amateur performers before entering the professional *rakugo* world, and thus may already know how to perform some stories. However, professional *rakugoka* must undergo a session of training (*o-keiko*) with a master who "owns" (*motteiru*) a story in order to "own" it themselves and add it to their repertoire of "owned stories" (*mochineta*), and thus obtain the permission to perform it in front of an audience. No formal copyright or intellectual property law is involved, but performing a story without permission is taboo, and a *rakugoka* caught red-handed may suffer serious consequences, such as ostracism (Shun'pūtei Shōshō, interview with the author, 12 October 2021). Thanks to this rule, even in times of widely available online recordings, professional *rakugoka* are forced to undergo training sessions which, as I will explain below, sustain the transmission and dissemination of knowledge and skills, while also fostering a sense of belonging and obligation (*on*) to the world of *rakugo*.

5.3.1 Rakugo Training: A Non-Monetary System of Knowledge Transmission

On 13 March 2021, I met master Reireisha Maruko and his disciple Miima at Shibuya station. They had kindly agreed to let me attend a private training session, and we would take the opportunity to also film Maruko teaching me the *rakugo* piece *Jugemu* (see Chapter 3) and post it on his YouTube

channel[149]. *O-keiko* sessions take place in all sorts of venues: some *shishō* teach in their homes, some book tatami rooms such as the one located on the upper floor of the Rakugo Kyōkai's building, and others yet have sessions in *karaoke* booths. I followed Maruko and Miima to an incredibly narrow and tall building near the station, which consists of a series of small rentable rooms stacked one over the other. We climbed the stairs to the fifth floor and entered the room. I helped them set up a sort of small stage by putting together two foldable desks. Miima, who came dressed in a kimono, positioned a *zabuton* (square cushion)[150] on the desks and took her place. She would be performing the story *Chiritotechin* (revolving around an arrogant man being pranked into eating rotten tofu), which Maruko had taught her in a previous session.

Teaching styles might vary, but *rakugo* training tends to follow the same general structure. As Kosan VI, son of Living National Treasure Kosan V, explained to me, the traditional system for teaching a *rakugo* piece was the so-called *sanben-geiko*, or "three training sessions": the teacher would perform the story for the learner on three sessions, usually on consecutive days, and on the fourth day the learner would have to perform it back. Nowadays, all *rakugoka* I interviewed allow learners to record the audio of the session, thus reducing the teaching part to just one session. In the following weeks, the learner memorises the story on their own, and at a later training session, called *age no keiko*, they will perform it back to the teacher, who may give them permission to do the story in front of an audience or instead request further training.

During both the first and following session(s), the master gives technical advice to the trainee regarding the use of voice, timing, and gestures. They also often provide knowledge about the content of the story (for example, explaining outdated objects and practices that characters engage with) and encourage the trainee to better understand the motivations (*ryōken*) of the characters so that they might better embody their attitude and thinking. Just as importantly, a master may provide information about the genesis and transmission of the story, usually distinguishing between the story as they learned it from the one who passed it to them, and the many changes they themselves implemented, leaving the decision over what to keep and what to dismiss to the trainee. This situates

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[149] "*Maruko (the rakugoka) performs Jugemu for Marco (the Italian)*" See https://youtu.be/i_xyFW9rndI?si=ATQq1w77wX301Y4o [Accessed 31 March 2025]

[150] In the recorded training session Shun'pūtei Ichinosuke posted on his YouTube channel, he remarks how the rule would be for the learner not to use a *zabuton* until they have learned the story and received permission to perform it to audiences. However, both in the video and in the session I joined with Maruko and Miima, the *shishō* let the trainee use a cushion given the hard surface of the stage. This is in line with the many occasions throughout my fieldwork in which rules of the *rakugo* world were revealed to be rather flexible. See 21 Dec 2020 *Youtube Hatsukōkai! Shun'pūtei Ichinosuke no keiko fūkei https://youtu.be/D2yYD_JQqHw?si=nbjLGyS5s2TSXX-_* [Accessed 31 March 2025]

the trainee at the (current) end of an imagined inter-generational community of *rakugoka*, a lineage of performers thanks to whom that story has been created, improved, and transmitted.

> *Miima asks Maruko if she can record on her phone and then starts her performance. After just a few seconds, Maruko interrupts her to ask if he did not teach her to start with the line "if there are ten people, there will be ten different shades of personality" (jūnin ireba ki wa toiro), a commonly used introductory line said before a story featuring characters with different and often peculiar personalities. Miima starts again, and Maruko soon stops her to suggest that, since one of the characters is far away, she needs to change her voice and adjust for that. Throughout the session, Maruko gives more advice on many of the lines and gestures: how to create the illusion that the character has many plates full of food in front of them, how to pronounce more clearly and with the correct intonation certain words, how to drink from an imaginary cup in a way that makes the sake look delicious.* (Reireisha Maruko and Miima training session, 13 March 2021).

A training session, besides transmitting a story and making sure the trainee has learned it, often includes, as in the example above, technical and artistic advice. In all sessions I have observed – the one between Maruko and Miima, Shun'pūtei Ichinosuke's broadcasted session with his disciple Yoichi, and the one instance in which a *rakugoka* (Katsura Sunshine) taught me a story, the teacher tends to focus mostly on gestures, including the position of the body, and on the voice. Ichinosuke, Maruko and Sunshine often mentioned *kamishimo*, or the direction in which the performer should turn to when enacting the different characters. Generally, the rule of thumb is that the character who is hierarchically superior stays on the right, in the deeper part of a room or house, and looks towards the left when speaking. This, however, can change based on the characters moving in a scene or based on the decision of the performer:

> *I change the* kamishimo *based on the power dynamic: this specific wife has a stronger personality, so she is on the side that is supposed to be for the superior, originally the husband's side. Whenever a wife is stronger, I switch their positions this way. Some other* rakugoka *might notice this and tell you that you are wrong. If it is someone very important* (erai)*, just say "yes, sorry"* (hai, sumimasen)*. If it is someone at about the same level as you, just explain the reason and say that your* shishō *does it this way. As long as you have a reason, that is fine.* (Shun'pūtei Ichinosuke and Yoichi training session, 21 December 2020*)*

Such advice, in the first place, helps the trainee enhance the illusion created by the *rakugo* performance through better gestures and lines, creating a three-dimensional space in front of the

performer in which objects and characters interact in a spatially consistent manner. Maruko gave Miima detailed suggestions on how to perform eating *sashimi* with wasabi, how to use the paper fan (one of the only two props of a *rakugoka* together with a hand towel) as if it were a wooden spoon to mix food, and how to show that characters are moving around the room. The sessions I observed, however, do not stop at the physical reality but help the learner understand the feelings of the characters to better embody them on stage.

> *A fundament of this story is that this wife and husband are on good terms (naka ii). My version of it turns into a sort of a fight, but still they are on good terms, and the wife is amused by the silly husband. It is important to have that as the basis.* (Shun'pūtei Ichinosuke and Yoichi training session, 21 December 2020).

The two aspects – physical gestures and internal values of characters – often overlap. In the story Chiritotechin, one of the characters finds the rotten tofu. Maruko showed Miima how to use her kimono sleeve and paper fan to simulate the foul smell, but at the same time, he suggested to have the character laugh while coughing and almost throwing up for the odour: "this retired man (*inkyo*) is already thinking of pranking the arrogant man, he is a psychopath… that is the theme of this story". Similarly, the other collaborator in the prank, who overly praises every dish served to him, is revealed through subtle gestures as another "actual bad guy of the story: he is a brown-noser (*yoisho yarō*)... so, while I taught you how to convey enjoying the *sake*, you can make that part short, because he is not even feeling the taste, he is just praising everything the *inkyo* gives him" (13 March 2021).

The *rakugoka* teaching the piece also often acts as a guide to the historical setting of the story. *Rakugo* classics often feature objects not used anymore in daily life, such as the *hettsui* (a wood-fuelled or charcoal-fuelled cooking stove), and an apprentice will often need explanations on how to enact using such objects. Words, too, are dependent on the historical setting. Miima, for example, asked Maruko if she could use the loanword *koppu* ("cup") in the story, and he replied that the story Chiritotechin was made in the Showa period (1926-1989), not in the Edo period (1603-1868), so she could use it. What matters, however, is perhaps not accuracy but rather giving a "sense" of a historic period, which can remain ambiguous as an imagined past[151]. Indeed, at another moment within the session, Maruko taught Miima about the sociocultural context of *sake* production in the Edo period:

> *At that time, in the Edo period… well, it is Edo in this part even though I said it was Showa earlier* [chuckles]. *Anyway, they were not good at making sake in the city of Edo; good* sake

[151] Incidentally, the loanword koppu comes from the Portuguese copo or the Flemish cup, languages which influenced the Japanese vocabulary already during (and at times prior to) the Edo period.

would come from Kamigata. Everyone wanted to make money, so both the sake *seller and the* izakaya *would add water. So, people would not get drunk and think "this is like water", and would try and put a goldfish in it. If it swam and stayed alive (because it was almost water), they would call that* kingyo-zake (goldfish sake). *So, the arrogant character here expects the sake to be like water, but the retired man has good money, so it is the real deal. But even though he is impressed, the arrogant man feels like if he says it, he will lose. He does not want to show that he liked it. You would use these facial expressions* [makes faces] *to show that.* (Maruko and Miima training session, 13 March 2021).

5.3.2 Learning Any Story from Any Rakugoka

The peculiar aspect of the system of training is that any *rakugoka* can learn from any other *rakugoka*. Depending on the *ichimon*, some disciples start by learning from their *shishō*, others from their older artistic siblings, and others again are encouraged to "get away from their master" from the start and go find unrelated *shishō* to learn from. The right timing is important – a new apprentice will not learn straight away long complicated masterpieces, and will be encouraged to learn at first simple stories and to just "do them loudly":

Sanza-shishō *taught me* Yakan *in a karaoke booth and gave me very detailed feedback for one hour and a half. He told me to do it again and again: "No! louder!"* (Chigau! Motto daseru!)*, telling me that as a* zenza *I should not try do it well* (umai) *but just to do it loud.* (San'yūtei Ōraku, 18 March 2022).[152]

Besides consideration of what may be appropriate for a certain stage of artistic development, and unless the prospective learner might have somehow offended them through lack of manners or other incidents, *rakugoka* generally do not refuse to teach any other *rakugoka* a story. This is different not only from *manzai* and other forms of comedy such as stand-up in which routines are not shared but also from traditional arts such as *rōkyoku* in which stories tend to be the preserve of a certain artistic family or association. Nakayama, at the time an aspiring *rōkyokushi* studying at Waseda University, intended to train under a specific master because he wanted to learn stories only taught by that master (interview with the author, 28 September 2021).

[152] Shichidaime San'yūtei Enraku no Rakugo Heya (18 March 2022). [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7rFpUb4Rlk [Accessed 31 March 2025]

For the individual *rakugoka*, this system takes away the need to create one's own stories (even though any good performer will adapt the story to one's style) and endows one with the needed repertoire – what I call "artistic capital" – to make a living as a *rakugoka*. Reireisha Maruko, who initially intended to perform as a *manzaishi* (see Chapter 4), mentions how *rakugo* provides the performer with a wide range of classics which can be used to easily set up shows long enough to satisfy an audience, even when performing solo. He compares this with *manzaishi*¸ who instead must spend a long time and effort to create short routines of fast-paced jokes, and thus have to divide the revenue of any show not only between the two members of the pair, but in most cases with many other performers, as each one tends to have a short routine.

For the *rakugo* world, a system in which stories are shared between artists and even across artistic families and associations (especially after the *rakugo* boom and the work of units such as the Rokunin no Kai – see Chapter 3) means that the most appreciated stories are transmitted, adapted and improved through generations of *rakugoka*, keeping the *rakugo* scene lively and engaging for audiences.

Knowledge about the creation and transmission of the story tends to be included in the *o-keiko* sessions. Ichinosuke mentions in his training with Yoichi (see above) that the story he is teaching him, Sokotsu no Kugi (*The Careless Nail*), was a specialty (*o-hako*) of Shun'pūtei Ryūchō V (1929-1991), the *shishō* of Ichinosuke's *shishō* Shun'pūtei Icchō. The genealogical knowledge is portrayed as important by Ichinosuke, who differentiates the "original" version from his own in his teaching:

> *I changed the story a lot, as you know* [zenza, by being often together with their shishō, tend to be well aware of their versions of any story]*, but I will teach it to you the way I was taught it. You can use my own extra gags* (kusuguri)*, but it is probably better if you come up with your own. Well, you know all this.* (Shun'pūtei Ichinosuke and Yoichi training session, 21 December 2020).

Rakugoka thus teach not only the content of a story but also knowledge about its creation, mentioning who added what parts, tracing back as much as possible the lineage of *rakugoka* through which the story reached them. They often teach both the story as it was taught to them, and how they perform it now, giving the trainee the choice to decide what to adapt and what to keep.

5.3.3 Mochineta – An Alternative to Copyright

The fact that *rakugoka* may share that precious form of capital that is their stories does not mean that no system is in place to regulate the transmission and sharing of such capital. A zenza will

often have already learned stories when still a fan or amateur performer, or as the collateral benefit of spending extended periods of time at the *yose* as an apprentice (Brau 2008). But to be allowed to perform and add a *rakugo* piece (*neta*) to one's repertoire of "owned stories" (*mochineta*), a *rakugoka* needs to undergo an o-*keiko* session with someone who already "owns" that story. This is, in other words, a system of sharing that is not predicated on ideas of "copyright" but that still requires performers to gain a form of permission. Performing a story without having gone through o-*keiko* is considered taboo, similar to copying someone's routine in the world of *manzaishi* or stand-up comedians. Because of this rule, performers, especially younger ones (according to my informants the rule tends to get laxer as one becomes older) are forced to go through the training sessions, creating connections with other active performers, becoming part of decades-old (if not at times centuries-old) lineages of *rakugoka* who passed down a certain story through generations, and increasing one's opportunities to improve one's art and to gain knowledge related to stories and their historical setting, as explained above.

Rakugoka are jesters and often play with rules and taboos, admitting at times to have performed without having received permission (usually, my informants admitted having performed a story while in that in-between period between having undergone the first o-*keiko* session but not having managed yet to organise the *age no keiko* session). Still, even cases of behaviour against this taboo I have encountered in the field furthered the sense of importance attributed to it. On the stage at ShibuRaku (see Chapter 3) in March 2021, Yanagiya Kohachi shared memories of his late *shishō* Yanagiya Kitahachi (1949-2016), known (and appreciated by many) for his playful persona. Kitahachi once wanted to perform a *rōkyoku* story, so he asked a *rōkyokushi* to say that she taught him the story and that thus he had permission to use it. Apparently, he did so other times, too – Kohachi laughed on stage about being told by some *shishō* that "Your *shishō* is a thief". In other words, Kitahachi did not follow properly the rule of inheritance of stories and was thus called a thief, but at the same time, he still went through the effort of paying homage orally to the rule by asking someone to pretend they had told him the story.

The discursive power of the rule of *mochineta* ensures that *rakugoka* go through training even in times of widely available recordings. It also ensures that the memory of who created or improved what story will last – often a matter of great interest for *rakugoka* and fans, whose conversations on this topic I have often heard in the field. This means that while no copyright is paid, a *rakugoka* is recognised for having created, improved, or transmitted a story and is paid for such service to the community in terms of prestige. Few things signify success as much as having one's version of a story

become the mainstream, most-performed one (Yanagiya Sankyō, interview with the author, 24 August 2021).

While prestige could be seen as a form of "payment", in economic terms all forms of sharing of capital discussed so far are conducted free of charge. Unlike practitioners of arts such as *nō* or tea ceremony, which rely on teaching as a primary form of income, *rakugoka* do not earn money by training other *rakugoka*. This brings us to the next section – the lack of need for economic capital to become a *rakugoka*.

5.4 Economic Capital

> *...so, I teach them* rakugo *for free. That is the point, that it is for free, that you do not make money from it. I can earn from my art through other sources that are not training and teaching. This spirit is fundamental.* (Yanagiya Karoku, interview with the author, 27 October 2021).

Money will benefit any member of any social or cultural field, *rakugo* included. However, the system I have explained in the previous sections is structured in a manner that allows new *rakugoka* to obtain all the necessary resources and forms of capital without needing previous economic capital. The cultural, technical, artistic and social training under a *shishō* is conducted without the need for any fee, and so is the system of *o-keiko* sessions. As Brau (2008, 93) reports, "because the relationship is regarded as absolute, today there is rarely any financial transaction involved in becoming a shishō's disciple." There is no guarantee that a *rakugoka* will be successful, and so many masters advise incoming disciples to save a certain amount of money through part-time jobs before starting their *zenza* apprenticeship at the *yose* to be on the safer side. However, once the apprenticeship starts, the expectation is that a *rakugoka* will not need any external form of income. How do *rakugoka* get by? The next sections will summarise the economic system of *rakugo*.

5.4.1 Getting By as A Zenza

Historically, *shishō* would take care of disciples staying at their house, providing them with room and board and some occasional pocket money. I have shown, however, how almost no such *uchideshi* exist in the *rakugo* world today (see Chapter 4). How do commuting apprentices get by?

> *As a* zenza *you get 1,000 yen per day at the* yose*, 30,000 per month, but you can't get by with just that. Back in the day, you would live at the shishō's house, but now, almost no one does that. Instead, you go bring the bag* (kabanmochi) *of other masters around and get what*

Americans would call "tips" (chippu)*,* or pocket money (okodzukai)*. So, my* shishō *would tell me to go send a letter for him, even though he could actually do that himself on the way to work. He did it to give me a task and give me some money.* (Ryūtei Kochiraku, 25 May 2021).

While celebrity performers such as Katsura Bunshi VI might even provide flats for their disciples to live in for free (Katsura Sanshirō, interview with the author, 27 September 2021), most *shishō* will help at least with food and/or pocket money, as Kochiraku mentioned. While not a life of luxury, Yanagiya Kisaburō compares this with the situation of poverty he came from before the apprenticeship:

Our ichimon (artistic family) *did not give us much cash but gave us food instead. I was used to being very poor, so I was so grateful to eat such delicious food. There are* ichimon *in which* shishō *gives you the rent money and you live in a flat near the* shishō (Yanagiya Kisaburō, interview with the author, 17 June 2021).

Kisaburō did save up some money by working part-time while being a *minarai* (in-probation) disciple, but as soon as the *zenza* apprenticeship at the *yose* started, he had to stop. Yet, he managed to make a living, also benefitting from the demographic changes that took place in the *rakugo* world:

You cannot work while a zenza*. So how do you get by? The base pay from the* yose *is low, but every time you work for any* shishō *– not only yours – you can get some money. And now the demographic pyramid is inverted, there are many* shin'uchi*. The* shin'uchi *who do not perform at* yose *are the majority, and what do they do? They organise shows of their own, and they need* zenza *to run the shows - it would be troublesome to hire a random person and teach them everything. So as a* zenza *you can get 10,000 yen for working half-day for some* shishō*. And that way, you can pay rent. That is why you work hard backstage, because it is also the place where you do your "sales"* (eigyō no ba) [laughs] (Yanagiya Kisaburō, interview with the author, 17 June 2021).

With the shift to *kayoideshi* (disciples not living at their master's home, see Chapter 4) and the normalisation of *rakugo* as a career choice (meaning that one does not need to cut all ties with one's family, see Chapter 6), *zenza* lucky enough to have family in Tokyo (or Osaka in Kansai) might commute from their house. While those privileged to commute from a family house might not even need to pay rent, some *rakugoka* I interviewed argued that this does not work against the success of those coming from outside the metropolis – if anything, the opposite. Ryūtei Komichi affirmed that learning to get by as a *zenza* makes one a good apprentice. Her *shishō* instructed her to get a "proper

place", as having to pay for rent would force her to be liked by many *shishō* and get called to help at their shows, giving her more chances to improve both her social skills and her art[153]. Tatekawa Shirarin, originally from Sapporo, similarly affirmed that "it is tougher for those who came from outside Tokyo, but then those who come from outside do not quit" (interview with the author, 8 October 2021).

Compared to those *zenza* able to commute from home who may even rely on their parents for their necessities, San'yūtei Kenkō was on the other side of the spectrum, having to take care of a stay-at-home housewife and two children. Being part of the group Godaime San'yūtei Enraku Ichimon, which splintered out of the Rakugo Kyōkai, he also did not even have access to the *yose*, where *zenza* receive some income (only the main associations – Rakugo Kyōkai and Rakugo Geijutsu Kyōkai in Tokyo, Kamigata Rakugo Kenkyūkai in Osaka – train in the regular *yose*). Still, he managed to get by as a *zenza* through a combination of pocket money from masters and solidarity within the artistic family:

> Q: How did you get by as a zenza?
>
> *Good question, I wonder too* [laughs]. *My wife was not working, and we had two kids in kindergarten. I had some savings from when I was a salaryman, but not that much. Well, my* shishō [San'yūtei Kōraku, a regular member of TV show *Shōten*] *is famous, so if I went to bring his bag around, I would get 1,000 or 2,000 yen. If I went to some other* shishō *show in Tokyo, I would get 5,000. If I went to help at regional* (chihō) shows outside Tokyo, I *would get more, like 10,000. And if other Shōten members were there, they would also give me maybe 5,000 or 10,000, while a random* shishō *would give 1,000 or 2,000. Every month I went to some 20 shows like that. Some 200,000 per month. And* shishō*'s wife would give me food, saying, "We received too much from a fan" – now that I think about it, she probably went to buy them for my family. She could not give me money directly, so she would give me food.* (San'yūtei Kenko, interview with the author, 7 September 2021).

All informants reported relying on the kindness of one's *shishō* and other seniors within and beyond one's artistic family and association, but many also mentioned the help of other members of the *rakugo* art world. As a frequent helper at the small bar and *rakugo* venue Shinjuku Dōrakutei, I personally witnessed on several occasions Hashimoto Ryū, the late manager and producer, helping

[153] Incidentally, Komichi reported, laughing, that on another occasion her *shishō* asked Komichi how much she was paying, and commented, "Oh, I think you can find cheaper places!" – once again an example of how norms and discourses in the *rakugo* world are not necessarily taken too seriously.

zenza with pocket money, at times giving them more than what he had promised if more fans than expected came to a show. Other sources of help are fans, fellow disciples, and even people living in one's neighbourhood:

> *People in the neighbourhood would see* zenza *going around doing chores in kimono and might give them food. And among* zenza*, we are all rivals but help each other. We somehow make it through these horizontal connections* (yoko no tsunagari). (Reireisha Miima, interview with the author, 26 June 2021).

Some *zenza* even voiced the impression that the job conditions of a *zenza* are too good to be true, compared to other jobs:

> *The job as a* zenza*, is normally unthinkable* (arienai)*. As a* zenza*, you go to a show, for example, the one organised by Dōrakutei from 12:00 to 16:30, you only do one performance on stage and fold kimonos, etc, and you get 10,000 or even 20,000 yen. From the perspective of a regular member of society* (shakaijin), *it is unthinkable* (arienai)*. Because you are not doing anything productive, and the hourly pay is too high for what you do. If you have 10 such shows per month, you may get 200,000. If you add the tips from the* shishō*, you might even earn more than a salaryman. As a* zenza*, your performance skills do not matter; as long as you are good with people, you may get even 300,000 or 400,000 yen per month. That is probably one reason so few* zenza *quit!* (San'yūtei Rakubō, interview with the author, 8 June 2021).

Apprentices, in other words, enter a system in which they are able to make a living while accumulating all the necessary experiences and forms of capital (social, cultural, symbolic, artistic) without needing to invest economic capital. With the end of the apprenticeship, however, the economic life of a *rakugoka* suddenly changes.

5.4.2 Entering the Market: Making a Living as a Futatsume and Shin'uchi

With the end of the apprenticeship (usually three to four years), the *zenza* is "liberated" from the task of working backstage at the *yose* and often also from that of helping at the *shishō*'s house through chores. The apprentice is now an independent artist – in Tokyo[154], they will receive the title

[154] In Kansai no such system of titles exist, but *rakugoka* tend to follow a similar career path.

of *futatsume* (second one, referring to the position of such performers in a *yose* programme after the *zenza*). After ten to twelve years (or much earlier for exceptional performers nominated for a *batteki* promotion – see Chapter 3), the *futatsume* will become a *shin'uchi*, which signals one's ability to perform as headliner at the *yose* and allows one to take on disciples.

Suddenly, however, the income generated at the *yose* and through helping various *shishō* run their shows as a *zenza* stops. A *futatsume* will have to get by through their art – either setting up one's own shows or being good enough to be called by producers or by other *rakugoka* to co-star in their shows. If a *zenza* only needs to be likable and efficient in the backstage, a *futatsume* and later *shin'uchi* survives on their *rakugo* performance skills. Rakubō notices the importance of realising this sudden switch:

> *It is important not to get too comfortable just because you can get by as a* zenza*. After you become a* futatsume*, you will have to change your job suddenly - from getting by thanks to your ability of taking care of* shishō*, you then have to get by through your* rakugo*. Especially so-called "*super zenza" [particularly efficient and likable apprentices] *have troubles after becoming* futatsume *at times. They say that in the past, some quit right after becoming* futatsume*. They forgot why they became* rakugoka*, they smoothened their fangs and personalities too much. The more you cancel yourself, the better* zenza *you become, but you get further away from being a good* rakugoka*. So yes, as a* zenza*, you should hide your weapons – do not show off how funny you are. But do not delete those weapons too much. [Ryūtei] Kochiraku told me so.* (San'yūtei Rakubō, interview with the author interview with the author, 8 June 2021).

The venue most traditionally associated with *rakugo* is the regular (*jōseki*) *yose*, but most *rakugoka* do not make a living by performing there. At the *yose*, a great number of performers will appear on stage, so once the sales of the tickets have been divided between all performers and half is given to the venue, usually, each *rakugoka* is left with very little – perhaps enough to cover the train ticket home. Still, the *yose* system is helpful for the business and culture of *rakugo*. I have shown how the *yose* is the place where apprentices are socialised into becoming *rakugoka*, receiving a variety of needed forms of capital: social (connecting with other *rakugoka*, earning new fans), cultural (getting trained, as *zenza*, into how to embody the rakugoka *habitus* by means of extensive copresence with fellow *rakugoka*), symbolic (performing at the *yose* is a source of prestige, especially if covering roles such as that of *headliner*), and artistic ("stealing" the stories by listening to masters performing from the side, but also getting the chance to ask to be trained in a certain story, and practicing in front of a large audience of people who are not necessarily one's fans). It is also the place where fans might

get to know a certain *rakugoka* and decide to go see them at external shows, either solo shows or co-starring production of two, three or a handful of performers (Inada 2018, 21). It is at such "other shows" that *rakugoka* can earn a living through *rakugo*.

Since the time of the 2005 *rakugo boom* (see Chapter 3), more *rakugoka* can survive through *rakugo* alone. Several older informants expressed their surprise at seeing how young *rakugoka* nowadays can get by with just *rakugo*. Before the emergence of new venues and the revived interest in the art (and especially in younger performers) I described in Chapter 3, an inexperienced *rakugoka* would have to take on many "*rakugo* adjacent" gigs, such as acting as MC at company parties or wedding ceremonies, to supplement one's income.

Now, young *rakugoka* can earn their bread without ever taking on such side gigs. San'yūtei Karuta argues that one first factor behind this, that goes beyond the *rakugo* world, is that the number of such "side gigs" for entertainers is lower today: many disappeared with the end of the bubble economy as companies cut the budget for parties and would instead encourage employees to entertain their own colleagues with *manzai* skits and the like (San'yūtei Karuta, interview with the author, 29 October 2021). New forms of entertainment, first and foremost *karaoke*, also reduced drastically the available jobs for *geinin*, as people could instead enjoy group outings on their own without inviting some stranger to tell a story (ibid.). Then, since the mid-2000s, the number of available *rakugo* gigs for *rakugoka*, including young rakugoka, greatly increased:

> *After Tiger and Dragon, any* rakugo *show was full of fans. I heard that the four regular* yose *made some 40,000,000 yen more than the previous year. Before, only the very top stars got called for* rakugo *jobs. The others were performing non*-rakugo *things at cabarets and the like. The previous generation grew up without* rakugo *jobs.* (Reireisha Maruko, interview with the author, 29 January 2021).

While I have covered extensively the revival of *rakugo* in Chapter 3, what is interesting to note is how even at the time when *rakugo* jobs were not sufficient, instead of quitting as *rakugoka* and finding another career (as would be expected in many other fields in which demand might not meet the offer), so many remained *rakugoka*. They were able to continue to perform, pass on the art, and be considered "*professional rakugoka*", I argue, because of all the resources provided by the system of *rakugo* world I have presented above, but also because of the presence of "side jobs" (*yōkyō*, see Brau 2008, 141-150) related to the use of the voice available to *rakugoka* which are not considered "*arubaito*" and can thus be taken on with no shame by professional *rakugoka*. These may include acting as emcees, radio personalities, or even commentators at wrestling matches:

Where is the line of what is an acceptable job for a rakugoka *and what is not? Yanagiya Kyōtarō [1963-] often says that when his generation was young, there were no* rakugo *jobs for them, and they had to do "other jobs". Young people now can get by with just* rakugo*, and he is worried about it. They lack the experience of struggling* (mogaku)*, so their latent energy* (sokojikara) *as performers* (geinin) *is low.* (Miya Nobuaki, interview with the author, 28 August 2021).

In 2016, the magazine Weekly Diamond (Shūkan Daiyamondo) published a special issue dedicated to *rakugo*, signalling the revival of interest in the art. However, one article in it argued, by calculating the number of advertised shows and dividing it by the number of professional *rakugoka*, that only a few of them actually could get by as *rakugoka*. Reireisha Maruko disagreed passionately with the argument of this article. According to Maruko, the article misses many of the forms of revenue through which *rakugoka* survive. The *rakugo* jobs are not as few as the article posits: all of the private shows at companies, schools, nursing homes, prisons, cruises, local cultural centres, and even national organisations set up shows which are not publicly advertised but represent an important source of income for many. Maruko also mentioned another interesting form of income for *rakugoka*:

Surely, many more than the "100" rakugoka *the article claims are getting by through rakugo. They only looked at the surface. They based their estimates on the number of fans existing, but there are* rakugoka *who get by with having only one fan – a rich patron. If a CEO takes a liking to a rakugoka, it does not matter how many shows they publicise; they just need to get good at flattering the CEO when playing golf. Or yet again, there are those who dedicate all of their art and energies to one fan: their spouse who maintains them. They are still* rakugoka *living a* rakugo *life* (interview with the author, 29 January 2021).

Throughout the history of *rakugo*, side jobs represented an important source of income for many *rakugoka* (see Morioka and Sasaki (1990, 241), and the idea that certain jobs are acceptable for a professional *rakugoka* is one way in which the career of the *rakugoka* managed to retain its sustainability in times of dwindling demand for the art. During the COVID-19 pandemic, more *rakugoka* had to temporarily break the taboo on "unrelated" part-time jobs, but this was seen as an exception:

The other day in the makura, *Ichinosuke said that "recently, young* rakugoka *who cannot get by are doing* katagi [civilian; respectable – see Chapter 6] *part-time jobs". Him noting this recent development, means that normally, [before COVID-19], they did not work in such "*katagi*" part-time jobs.* (Miya Nobuaki, interview with the author, 28 August 2021).

All in all, many professional *rakugoka* effectively get by through *rakugo*. Those who do not, still often make a living out of the benefits of being *rakugoka* – securing side gigs in which the title of *rakugoka* helps or inheriting jobs from seniors. Moreover, the strict ideological boundaries between amateur and professional means that even those *rakugoka* who do not earn enough with *rakugo* are not perceived as "*freeters*" the way struggling musicians and comedians are (S., *rakugo* fan, personal communication).

While not everyone is guaranteed success, this chapter has shown how apprentices are endowed with all needed forms of capital to have a chance to succeed. The reasons why *rakugoka* can draw from all of the resources listed in this chapter without the need for economic investments will be the focus of the next section.

5.5 Why Do All This for Other Rakugoka? Ideologies Behind Practices

5.5.1 Beneficial Practices of Sharing

> *The* rakugo *world is a narrow village society* (mura shakai)*. Even people who are not popular on media can get by just with* rakugo*, without doing part-time jobs, because among* rakugoka*, we pass jobs to each other. There is mutual aid* (sōgo fujo)*. Comedians* (owarai geinin) *such as* manzaishi *have to make it with their own skills, so until they get popular they have to do part-time jobs. It is important that* rakugoka *have good skills too, but even if you are not very good, as long as you are able to find your place in this village society that is the* rakugo *world, if you are good at managing your personal relationships, you will receive jobs, you will be helped. People call each other to their own shows, helping each other this way.* (San'yūtei Rakubō, interview with the author, 8 June 2021).

Rakugoka are not paid for taking on disciples nor for teaching stories to their juniors. If anything, the strict hierarchy requires seniors to be the ones paying for food or drinks, so it will not be unusual for them to treat disciples or junior siblings to a meal after giving them a training session. They will provide them with pocket money at shows, and at many events (promotions, new year's celebrations) they will give them gifts. Besides the money, we have seen how *rakugoka* will give away their own stories and jokes, regardless of the possibility that this may create competitors. Adding to that, *rakugoka* often give away their jobs and connections, too. When a *rakugoka* is promoted to a new rank or reaches a certain degree of popularity, the pay they should accept for a performance is expected to rise. Throughout the ten to twelve years as a *futatsume* (an early career *rakugoka* who

finished their apprenticeship but is still not a master), *rakugoka* will have painstakingly built, through great efforts, a network of small-scale productions and venues where they perform regularly and on which they base their livelihood. According to my informants, *futatsume* should accept to perform at shows paid around 30,000 yen. As they are promoted to the rank of *shin'uchi* (headliner), however, *rakugoka* are expected to only accept jobs paying at least 50,000 yen. They might not yet have many new, better-paid jobs, but still, most will pass down the connections and gigs to their juniors (Shun'pūtei Ryūshi, interview with the author, 8 November 2021). Not doing so would flatten the value of the *rakugo* career, forcing young performers to compete for jobs with their seniors or accept poorly paid offers, ultimately making it impossible to get by as an early career *rakugoka*. This and the above practices are examples of unwritten rules in the field which greatly benefit the overall sustainability of the *rakugo* world but seem to make little sense for the interest of the individual performer. Why do *rakugoka* follow such rules?

5.1.2 Kinship, Belonging, and Feelings of Unrepayable Debt

One first answer lies in the system I named "artistic kinship" examined above. I have shown how strong parent-child-like ties are created between *shishō* and *deshi* and how disciples are embedded in extended artistic families. While it may seem strange to do something financially counterproductive for the sake of a stranger or competitor, doing it for a family member is another matter – informants often talked about receiving help from their *shishō* (their "parent") and fellow "siblings".

Moreover, just like what happens in discourses surrounding "real" Japanese families, the care received from parents/masters comes with a feeling of obligation (*on*) that the child/disciple develops. This, I argue, is the second factor behind much of *rakugoka*'s seemingly selfless behaviour. Giving back (*ongaeshi*) is a matter of the greatest importance for many of the *rakugoka* I interviewed, just as it is a recurrent trope in *rakugo* stories. This desire to pay back is felt towards the master (and often their spouse, *okamisan*), but also towards the many other *senpai* who showed them how to behave or taught them their stories, and to any other person (fans, theatre owners) who may have helped them throughout their apprenticeship, including, for some, the great masters of yesteryear who passed down the stories through generations. This wish to pay back may be channelled through putting in the hard work to become a successful performer (*shussei barai*) (Shun'pūtei Ryūshi, interview with the author, 8 November 2021), or through avoiding getting into trouble (Ryūtei Kochiraku, interview with the author, 25 May 2021). Ultimately, however, almost all informants mentioned that the debt to one's master and seniors is considered "so big that it can never be paid back". The only option, thus, is

"paying it forward". Hence, when I asked *rakugoka* why they teach others their stories or take care of their juniors in the ways I mentioned above, most of them simply answered that it is "because the same was done for them by those who came before".

5.1.3 Iki Coolness and Edokko Bravado

Finally, one more ideology that sustains *rakugoka*'s adherence to the practices upon which, I argue, the *rakugo* world's resilience is built is connected, particularly in Tokyo, with the aesthetic of *iki*. *Iki* is a complex concept employed in many different artistic and philosophical fields and would require a dissertation on its own to do it justice, but it generally denotes a sense of detached, understated coolness (Nara, Rimer, and Mikkelsen 2004). For *rakugoka* in Tokyo, *iki* is interlaced with the values of the *edokko*, the inhabitants of Edo at the centre of most classical *rakugo* stories. It entails a sort of bravado or "coolness", a way of nonchalantly engaging in selfless or otherwise demanding actions. This is often constructed as a result of great confidence in one's skills: an *edokko* in a *rakugo* story will show no attachment to his money out of a belief in their ability to earn more through their great work skills. Similarly, when I asked *rakugo* masters whether they feared creating competition by freely teaching their stories and jokes to other *rakugoka*, or why they gave away their hard-earned jobs to their juniors, their answers expressed a similar "cool" confidence:

> *Competition? They can try, but I know I can tell those stories better than them anyway!* (Yanagiya Sankyō, interview with the author, 24 August 2021).

> *Of course, I would like to keep those gigs, but if I do it, there would be consequences for the entire industry… it is a well-made system worth preserving. And besides, it is not a problem: I would not call myself a* shin'uchi *if I could not find better-paid shows!* (S., *rakugoka,* personal communication, 2021).

Chapter Conclusions

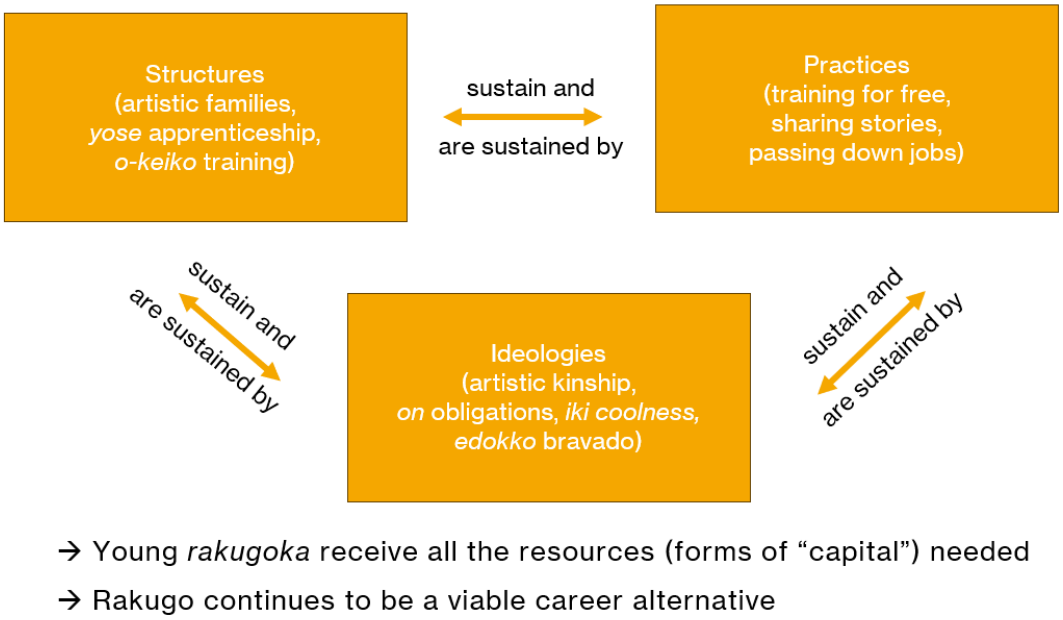


Figure 8: Chapter 5 Conclusions (Main Arguments)

To succeed in any given field, its members deploy a variety of resources, from social connections to knowledge, academic titles or financial assets. As the work of Bourdieu and of the many researchers who followed in his footsteps demonstrated, these resources – or types of "capital" – tend to be distributed unequally and to be often inherited through one's birth and upbringing. However, in this chapter, I have shown how, in the case of *rakugo*, as a result of the systems, practices and ideologies characterising the world of professional *rakugoka*, new performers are bestowed with all the needed forms of capital. These included being inserted into a web of family-like relationships and accessing a network of performers backstage at the *yose*, being socialised as *rakugoka* through the zenza apprenticeship, inheriting knowledge, technical skills and stories to perform through o-*keiko* sessions, all free of charge. Beneficial practices, such as sharing one's stories and even gigs with other *rakugoka*, are supported by ideologies embedded in the structures and practices I described in this chapter: from what I call artistic kinship, to the feelings of belonging and obligations towards one's seniors and predecessors causing *rakugoka* to "pay it forward", reproducing the practices they received in their training.

This does not mean that every aspiring *rakugoka* will succeed in making a living out of *rakugo*, let alone achieving fame or wealth through performance. I have talked with many informants who struggled to get by as *rakugoka*, and some of them dropped out of the profession by the time I finished writing this dissertation: the *rakugo* career, as masters tend to remind new applicants, offers no guarantees. However, what is peculiar about the *rakugo* world is the absence of barriers. The forms

of capital I covered in this chapter constitute virtually insurmountable obstacles in many fields, both in the arts and beyond. Even when they do not represent rejection criteria, forms of social, cultural or economic capital often create significant disparities within a field. A *kabuki* actor tends to be born in a *kabuki* family and to start performing as a child; a practitioner of *ikebana* needs to invest in years of paid lessons to achieve a professional level; many professions, of course, require degrees and qualifications. A prospective *rakugoka*, instead, is not expected to possess any such resources or experiences at the time of entering the *rakugo* world, providing a fair chance to succeed as a *rakugoka* to a variety of applicants regardless of previous connections or qualifications, and thus managing to attract and retain a sufficiently large and diversified community of performers. One reason for such a system of practices providing all resources to apprentices can be traced, I showed, in the fact that *rakugo* developed as a world at the margins, making it what my informants named a sort of "safety net" for people "unfit" to regular society. In the next and final chapter, I will explore issues of marginality and respectability in the *rakugo* world, looking in particular at an increase in prestige and normalisation of the *rakugo* career.

Chapter 6.
From Riverside Beggars to Living National Treasures: Shifts in Class and Respectability in Contemporary Rakugo

Chapter Summary

As shown throughout this thesis, one of the main characteristics of *rakugo*'s revival in 21st-century Japan is the significant increase in the number of professional *rakugoka*, today the largest ever recorded in history. I argue that one factor behind this increase is a change in the social status of *rakugoka*. Like other *geinin* (= "performers"), *rakugoka* experienced a history of marginalisation and low social standing, but gradually, within the lifetime of current veteran performers, the art saw an increase in prestige and respectability. This shift in the *rakugo* world has much to do with class: *rakugoka* nowadays come more often from privileged educational and social backgrounds and enjoy better lifestyles than their masters did. Evidence from the field prevented me, however, from seeing this as simply a matter of an art and community moving from working-class to middle-class, or from "popular" entertainment to "high" art. *Rakugoka* and fans still hold dear the idea of *rakugo* as an art "of the common people", and poverty is not only an aesthetic but a reality for many *rakugoka*. At the same time, from its historical beginnings in the late Edo period, the professional *rakugo* world in Tokyo always encompassed elements of both high culture (as an elite divertissement at private parties, *o-zashiki*, grown out of literary clubs) and of working-class culture (as a cheap form of entertainment in Tokyo's *shitamachi*). Both fans and performers come from all kinds of social backgrounds. The change is, thus, better explained by combining class with further concepts. I point at two opposing terms often employed by my informants: *yakuza*-like occupations (*yakuza na shōbai*) and *katagi* (respectable) occupations. Rather than being absolute terms, the two constitute a sort of gradient, or spectrum, of respectability, which informants referred to when discussing the social standing of *rakugoka*. I thus argue that *rakugo* experienced, alongside the more sociologically grounded shifts in class or educational background, a shift in terms of *katagi* respectability, also due to the art's dissociation from its earlier links with the "actual" *yakuza* (organised crime). On the one side, *rakugo* experienced a de-marginalisation and an increase in respectability, shifting, so to speak, towards the centre of an imagined spectrum of *yakuza* and *katagi* occupations. At the same time, socioeconomic conditions upon the burst of the asset price bubble in 1991 and subsequent decades of stagnation, undermined the appeal (and attainability) of a stable career. Several informants mentioned how, during the years of economic growth, it would have been too much of a waste not to take on a stable position in a respectable career, and so some of them did not become *rakugoka*, but "if they were

young now, they would take the leap". Indeed, in this chapter, I ultimately argue that the increased respectability of *rakugo*, alongside the decreased appeal and normative influence of more stable careers, resulted in more people being able to "take the leap" as the ideological gap between a *rakugo* life and a "normal" life narrowed.

6.1 Shady Theatres and Disowned Children

I am very happy that you study our art.
However, you must know that Japanese society is not very kind to rakugo.

(San'yūtei Mankitsu, interview with the author, 1 June 2021)

Rakugoka, alongside other *geinin* (performers), have a long history of marginalisation and discrimination in Japanese history (Ozawa 2005). Professional *geinin* in the Edo Period (1603-1868) occupied a position at the margins of respectable society (Yamamoto 2006, 17), not part of the four castes (*shinōkōshō*: samurai, peasants, artisans, and merchants) around which the social order was supposedly structured. Cultural historian Kurata Yoshihiro points at how, in the early days of the Meiji restoration, actors were still numbered with the counter *hiki*, commonly used for counting animals the size of pigs or dogs (Kurata 2006, 21). While animal comparisons are rather unheard of after the Meiji era (1868-1912), the most common derogatory terms for performing artists, *kawaramono* and *kawarakojiki* ("riverside people", "riverside beggars"), instead, survived well beyond that (Ozawa 2005). In the 1980s, Tamagawa Nanafuku, one of the current stars of *rōkyoku*[155], was shocked by the extremely negative reaction of her working-class family when she decided to join her high school theatre club. Her grandmother, in particular, told her they "did not put her through middle school for her to become a *kawarakojiki* (riverside beggar)" (interview with the author, 11 November 2021).

Kabuki actors, once the most prominent target of such discrimination, experienced a sudden increase in prestige during the Meiji era, as their art, already massively popular but looked down on by the Tokugawa government, came to represent Japan's theatrical culture as part of the construction of a modern nation-state (Imao 2000). It took *rakugo* much more time to experience a similar change. As late as 1948, Waseda University did not allow the then-student (and later actor and writer) Ozawa Shōichi to establish a *rakugo kenkyūkai* ("*rakugo* research society"), forcing him to call what would become Japan's first university club dedicated to *rakugo* a "*geinō bunka kenkyūkai*" ("arts and culture research society") instead. Ozawa and his fellow *rakugo* enthusiasts felt "as if the university

[155] A musical form of storytelling, belonging to the same category of "*engei*" (=variety entertainment) as *rakugo*.

considered their activities ought to better lie in hiding" (Nobuhiro, Yamamoto, and Kawazoe 2003a, 4).

For the *rakugoka* I interviewed, families were the most common enforcers of such discrimination. "Today's generation might be different, but for sure one generation ago absolutely no one would want their children to become *geinin*" (Miya Nobuaki, interview with the author, 28 August 2021). Becoming a *rakugoka* meant facing disownment, in worst cases cutting all ties with one's family (*kandō*). The story of Yanagiya Korin (1948-) is indicative:

> *I wanted to be a* rakugoka *when I was in middle school. We were four siblings, me and three sisters. I don't know how it works for you in Italy, but here it's common to inherit one's parent's business* (oya no ato wo tsugu)*. My dad had a small business in Asakusa. The business had actually closed down once, so he had no particular intention to make me continue it, but still, he did not want me to become a* geinin*. I was his only son, so it was not an option. He stopped bringing me to the* yose*. I went to consult my teacher in middle school, who liked* rakugo, and […] *he told my parents I wanted to become a* rakugoka*, so they prohibited me from listening to* rakugo. […] *After I graduated high school, my parents finally told me that I was free to become a* rakugoka*, but they would disown me and cut our bonds as parents and child.* (Yanagiya Korin, interview with author, 22 February 2021).

It was not only parents who would abhor the idea of someone in the family becoming a *rakugoka*. After he started his apprenticeship, Korin recalls:

> *Once, I went back home, and my younger sister was there playing with a friend, who asked who I was. My sister, a middle schooler, said I was an employee* (shiyōnin) *who used to work there. She wouldn't even call me brother!* [laughs] *She didn't like to have a* rakugoka *for a brother. Back in the day, every normal family hated a child becoming a* geinin *because it was not a respectable job* ("katagi no shōbai janai kara")*.* (22 February 2021).

One reason for this discrimination was the perception that *geinin*, including *rakugoka*, were at the "lowest possible level" in the social hierarchy. When Yanagiya Kosan V (1915-2002) took up the profession of *rakugoka*, his mother shed tears while buying him the *obi* (kimono belt) he needed to wear on stage, and reminded him that "From now on, there will be no one who is lower [in social status] than you. Everyone else is higher" (Yanagiya Kosan 1994, 34). Linguist Nomura Masaaki sees a legacy of such historical low social status in the humble honorific language used by *rakugoka* to address the audience (Nomura 1994). Similarly, an episode recounted by Takigawa Koito (1984-) highlights the idea, prevalent especially among older *rakugoka*, of being "below" the general

population. In his autobiography, Koito recalls waiting at the station with master San'yūtei Koyūza (1947-), a famous *rakugoka* and TV personality. When the train arrived, Koito bowed, pointing both his arms towards the door and making way for Koyūza, exclaiming, "After you, master!". Koyūza scolded him: "You fool, a *geinin* lets the audience [*okyakusan*, i.e. everyone else but them] get on the train first, and only then enters, last in line!"(Takigawa Koito 2021, 114-115).

Contributing to this discrimination is the fact that *yose* theatres (the variety halls most commonly associated with *rakugo*) used to have a somehow shady reputation (Kaburaki, *rakugo* fan and Waseda *rakugo* research club member, interview with the author, 16 July 2019). The Tokyo neighbourhoods in which they are located, such as Asakusa and Shinjuku, were considered dangerous, even though the gentrification of central Tokyo today would make it difficult to notice. The theatres themselves too had, for some, an "unsafe" atmosphere, not devoid of occasional "hooting and jeering" from drunk members of the audience (Miyashita Chie, *rakugo* fan, interview with the author, 12 July 2019).

6.2 Rakugo's Increased Prestige

Things had greatly changed by the time of my fieldwork in 2020-2021. Part of the merit for elevating *rakugo*'s prestige must go to the efforts of performers and critics who strived to have *rakugo* recognised as an art worthy of appreciation. A style of *rakugo* that aims at creating a refined performance of artistic and even literary value can be traced back at least as early as the work of San'yūtei Enchō (1839-1900). This style always coexisted, especially in Tokyo, with the kind of *rakugo* more focused on eliciting laughter (Morioka and Sasaki 1990, 252-256). Indeed, Morioka and Sasaki argue that it was precisely the presence of both these two styles of *rakugo* – the refined narrative art of Enchō and the lighter, irreverent comedy of the like of the Meiji era "4 demigods" – that laid the foundation for the ongoing success of *rakugo* (1990, 261). *Rakugoka* wishing to preserve and pass on longer, more complex stories than what the yose programmes allowed, established a series of shows called *rakugo kenkyūkai*[156], which started in 1905 and has been interrupted and revived several times throughout the following decades. In 1966, San'yūtei Enshō VI (1900-1979), a great master recognised for his efforts in developing the whole *rakugo* art world beyond his specific association (Yoshikawa 2009), helped launch the fifth incarnation of the *rakugo kenkyūkai*, sponsored by TBS radio and television, which has continued to be held ever since. With the support of mass

[156] Not to be confused with university clubs dedicated to *rakugo*, confusingly also called *rakugo kenkyūkai*.

media, the purpose of the *kenkyūkai* shifted "from studying to presenting masterpieces nationwide" (Morioka and Sasaki 1990, 266).

The *rakugo kenkyūkai* was not the only show that helped expand *rakugo* from the realm of short comic entertainment to that of cultural performance of artistic significance. From the 1950s, *rakugoka* started performing at larger, Western-style halls built by industrial conglomerates or broadcasting companies: it was the start of the so-called "hall *rakugo*" (*hōru rakugo*). Famous *rakugoka* performing at such halls started winning prestigious cultural prizes, enhancing both their popularity and the image of the art (Yamamoto 2006). At the same time, with the arrival of mass media, starting with the radio in 1930 and television in 1953, many *rakugoka* signed remunerative contracts with broadcasters (NHK, TBS, Bunkahōsō), drastically changing their lifestyle (Yoshikawa 2009).

Eventually, the Japanese state began recognising *rakugo* as a form of "Japanese culture" to be preserved and promoted. Katsura Bunraku VIII was the first *rakugoka* to be awarded the Medal of Honour with Purple Ribbon (awarded for artistic or scholarly achievements) in 1961. He was followed by Kokontei Shinshō V in 1964 and Hayashiya Shōzō VIII in 1974, but the frequency of such appointments has since increased – in the 2010s, seven *rakugoka* received the medal. Lorie Brau (2008) traces the increasing value of "heritage" that *rakugo* enjoyed in the second half of the 20th century, culminating with recognition by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Yanagiya Kosan V in 1995 and Katsura Beichō III in 1996 as "preservers of important intangible cultural properties" – a title commonly referred to as "Living National Treasure" (Brau 2008)[157]. The increased governmental recognition of *rakugo* from the 1990s and into the 21st century can also be seen in the despatch of *rakugoka* as cultural envoys representing Japanese culture abroad[158], including the frequent *rakugo* shows held online and in-person at Japan Foundation branches around the world.

In the 1980s and 1990s, such trends towards a certain elevation of *rakugo*'s prestige overlapped with (and were in part caused by) what many informants dubbed the "winter of *rakugo*" (see Chapter 2). I discussed in previous chapters how this period of decline impacted the *rakugo* world and prepared the basis for its revival. A consequence of the winter of *rakugo* relevant here is that, as a clear image of *rakugo* faded away in the mind of younger generations, this created an

[157] Since then, the other *rakugoka* to receive the title of Living National Treasure have been Yanagiya Kosanji X, who received it in 2014 and passed away while I was in the field in 2021, and Gokaidō Kumosuke in 2023.
[158] See Agency for Cultural Affairs, Government of Japan (2021) *List of Japan Cultural Envoys.* [online] Available at: https://www.bunka.go.jp/english/policy/international/cultural_envoy/index.html [accessed 31 March 2025]

opportunity for performers, producers, and fans to create a new image for the art, one less "shady" and more open to newcomers and hitherto under-represented demographics, such as young women. The somehow shady atmosphere of earlier *rakugo* remains only at shows of certain notoriously "dangerous" *rakugoka*: at a gathering in support of Kairakutei Black II on the occasion of his appearance at the Tokyo District Court in 2021, which attracted local television broadcasters, I could not help but notice how a significant number of fans, while loudly vocal, were wearing wigs or hats and masks, and seemed to walk at a certain distance from the main group parading towards the Court. One fan later explained to me, laughing, that many of them would be in trouble if caught on camera. Such "shady" fans and performers, however, are a very rare sight in today's *rakugo* world[159].

6.3 The Rise of Elite University Graduates Turning Rakugoka

The shift in the social status of *rakugo* is also reflected by the higher number of elite university graduates who decide to become *rakugoka*, many of whom have first tried their hand at *rakugo* in a university club[160]. In 2021, I attended the celebrations for the promotion to *shin'uchi* (headliner) rank of Shun'pūtei Shōkichi, the first professional *rakugoka* who graduated from Tokyo University. Shōkichi penned a book on *rakugo* and on his experience as an apprentice titled *Tōdaisei ni motto mo mukanai shokugyō* ("The Job for which Tokyo University Graduates are Fit the Least", 2013). Some of my younger informants dismissed the title as just a provocation, saying that "There is no such job in which being a smart person [such as a Tokyo University graduate] is not a plus" (Ozawa, interview with the author, 9 September 2021). However, some older *rakugoka* disagreed. It is not uncommon for performers to make fun, on stage and backstage, of top university graduates who have become *rakugoka*. I have witnessed mainly three arguments for such an attitude. First, as expressed by Tatekawa Koshira at a solo show I attended:

> *It is a waste of a well-educated person, who should be leading the country forward as a top bureaucrat instead of being one of those who pull it back from the legs.* (4 January 2021)

Koshira was criticising the Kyoto University graduate Shōfukutei Tama. He proudly affirmed, as a high school graduate, to be following the righteous way (*ōdō*), unlike Kyoto University graduate Tama, who was following the wrong way (*jadō*) – a flip of usual narratives, which elicited roaring

[159] I explore the legal misadventures of Black II and the fascinating underground (and heavily political) *rakugo* world surrounding him in an article I am preparing for publication.
[160] See Chapter 4.

laughter and applause from the audience. The second argument is what Yanagiya Korin tells aspirant disciples:

> Rakugo *is not something you should aim for, but something you do only if that is the only thing you can do; if you can, it would be better to do something else* (Yanagiya Korin, interview with the author, 22 February 2021).

Finally, and this is in line with the title of Shōkichi's book, many *rakugoka* believe that elite university graduates, being highly "logical" people, do not fit well in the "irrational" (*rifujin*) world of *rakugoka*, where your seniors are always right even if you think they are wrong. (Brau 2008, 111) Lorie Brau reports how, shortly after she left the field in 1991, a Tokyo University graduate allegedly quit for such reasons after just a few weeks of apprenticeship. Stories of "unfit" graduates of elite universities continued to occasionally populate conversations among fans and performers I witnessed in the field in 2020-2021.

A negative attitude towards the entrance of elite university graduates in the *rakugo* world can also be explained by the view shared among many *rakugoka* and fans that *rakugo* is a sort of "safety net" for those who cannot otherwise fit into Japanese society[161]. What I argue, then, is that *rakugo* today changed, or rather expanded, one of its social functions: from a safety net for those who cannot make it, to one for those who *do not want* to make it. Evidence of this, beyond the university graduates, is the increasing number of *rakugoka* who successfully worked in other industries (including career-track employees at large companies, such as Katsura Miyaji or Tatekawa Hanshirō) before transferring to *rakugo*.

6.4 Class and Rakugo – Not a Simple Matter

Given the above considerations, it would be tempting to frame the change in social status of *rakugo* as simply a matter of a form of "popular culture" being elevated to the rank of "high culture" or of a once working-class community being infiltrated by middle-class newcomers. However, the reality of the *rakugo* world does not reflect such a storyline, as we will see in this section.

In terms of the perception of *rakugo* as "popular entertainment" or "high culture", it is true that the work of some performers and critics contributed to the appreciation of *rakugo*'s artistic value by constructing concepts such as "*koten rakugo*" (classical *rakugo*) (Kawada 2020, 12). However, at

[161] See Chapter 5.

the same time, many *rakugoka* worried about such "traditional art-isation" (*dentō geinōka*) of *rakugo*. The most prominent voice in this regard was that of popular *rakugoka* Tatekawa Danshi VII, who famously warned of the peril of *rakugo* "walking the same road of *nō*" and becoming, in other words, a refined cultural product to be "preserved" rather than a "living" art (Tatekawa Danshi 1965). Aware of that risk, *rakugoka* thus continue to emphasise the live aspect of *rakugo* as a communicative art born out of the interaction of performer and audience (see Masuyama 1997). This emphasis was particularly evident at the time of COVID-19, when many *rakugoka* who tried audience-less *rakugo* ended up refusing further work offers of shows without fans (Ryūtei Kochiraku and San'yūtei Mankitsu, interviews with the author, 25 May and 1 June 2021).

Moreover, *rakugoka* and fans I interacted with in the field held in high regard the idea that *rakugo* is an art "of the people". Humorous personal flaws and heart-warming traits can be equally found in *rakugo* characters from every social class, from samurai, monks and garbage collectors in classical *rakugo*, to company owners and *freeters* playing instruments on the streets in *shinsaku*, or newly created, *rakugo*. However, the vast majority of *rakugo* stories star first and foremost the "common people" (*shomin*) of the late Edo to the Taishō era (i.e., 19th to early 20th century) living in *nagaya* row houses in *shitamachi* (lower city) neighbourhoods. *Rakugoka* thus tend to (and are trained to) empathise particularly with such "common people", a label with which *rakugoka* and many fans identify:

> *"Rakugo is a story of the common people (shomin no monogatari). If you protect yourself with a tradition detached from the real world, can you really tell such a story?" (Tatekawa Koshira 2019, 154).*

Famous performers such as Kokontei Shinshō V (1890-1973) proudly embodied a life of poverty – not in the sense of monastic frugality, but rather in the style of the penniless *edokko* (habitant of Edo) who never lets a day's earnings see the light of tomorrow (Kokontei Shinshō 1964). Some masters and fans believe that experiencing poverty improves a *rakugoka*'s art, better allowing them to embody the *geinin* spirit, even though others such as Tatekawa Danshi point out that to satisfy a modern audience and succeed in today's entertainment world, a *rakugoka* must be familiar with forms of culture or leisure that a life of poverty might prevent one from experiencing (Tatekawa Danshi 1965).

Whatever its utility or hindrance for developing one's art, poverty is not only an aesthetic stance but a concrete reality for many *rakugoka*. The first lesson Takigawa Risshō taught his disciple Koito when he started his apprenticeship in 2005 was on how to recognise which weeds on the streets

are edible and which are not (Takigawa Koito 2021, 150). The second lesson was that "if you have to sleep outside covered by a newspaper, the coloured pages are warmer, so it is better to choose a sports newspaper. You'd better remember this" (ibid.). Risshō, now a popular master of the art, spoke from experience, having lived homeless for several periods while being a young *rakugoka*, struggling for years with affording rent (ibid.). Similarly, San'yūtei Hakuchō does not hide in his autobiographic performances the absolute poverty he lived in (see Brau 2008, 116-117). He is not alone, as the tales of financial hardships among many of my informants revealed (Yanagiya Kisaburō, interview with the author, 17 June 2021).

At the same time, it would be imprecise to unequivocally identify *rakugo* as only an "art of the people", both in terms of social background of performers and of artistic contents and target. From its beginning, *rakugo* also encompassed elements that we would associate with "highbrow" culture. The first professional *rakugoka* in Edo, Shikano Buzaemon (1649-1699), performed at exclusive indoor parties for affluent merchants and samurai, and the first *rakugo* shows with multiple performers – precursors of today's *yose* – emerged out of literati gatherings (Morioka and Sasaki 1990, 234-237). Similarly, some *rakugoka* in the Meiji period, such as San'yūtei Enchō, were also considered distinguished writers (Edwards 1899), and, as we have seen, helped establish *rakugo* "as a refined art of narration which was acknowledged and appreciated not only by the common people but by the educated classes as well" (Morioka and Sasaki 1990, 252). The exclusive indoor format, called *o-zashiki*, continued well into the 20th century, most famously carried on by Katsura Bunraku VIII (1892-1971), who counted even Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida among his patrons[162].

In an essay in the *rakugo* magazine Tokyo Kawaraban in January 2021, *kabuki* critic Watanabe Tamotsu claimed to dislike current *rakugo* because of its "lack of that understated perfection" he found in Katsura Bunraku's art (Watanabe 2021). In contrast, Nakayama, the head of Waseda's *rakugo* research club in 2020, claimed to dislike the style of *rakugo* championed by Bunraku. Bunraku performed a relatively small repertoire of stories, which he refined to the point of what he deemed perfection, deciding ahead every single word and even the timing of when to breathe. Such *rakugo*, Nakayama laments, is more of a perfect cultural product to be "appreciated" (*kanshō*) rather than a living art, unique every time, created by "synching one's breath with the audience" (interview with the author, 28 September 2021). The preferences of fans and the style of *rakugoka* thus greatly vary to this day, across generations, making it impossible to categorise the entirety of *rakugo* as either "popular entertainment" or "high culture".

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[162] On Katsura Bunraku, see Hrdličkova (1972); and Yanagiya Koman (2005)

In terms of social background too, people from all walks of life can end up as *rakugoka*: children of samurai (Katsura Bunraku VIII) and of working-class families living in rowhouses (San'yūtei Enraku VI), people with experience as highly paid salarymen (Katsura Miyaji) and freeters (Tatekawa Kisshō), graduates of Yale University (Tatekawa Shinoharu), and high school dropouts (Ryūtei Kochiraku), former biker gang leaders (Takigawa Koito), comedians (Reireisha Maruko), *mangaka* (Shōfukutei Ukō), and lately also working mothers (San'yūtei Arama).

Audiences and fans also come from very different class backgrounds (Morioka 1990 p252). Famous *rakugo* fans range from the once Environmental Minister Shinjirō Koizumi to singer Sada Masashi. At *hall rakugo* shows in Ginza, I befriended affluent fans dressed as if they were attending an opera gala. At smaller venues around Tokyo, I have met, at the same show, a construction worker who at 6 pm interrupted our conversation as he "had to rush out of the theatre to go get the discounted bento boxes at the supermarket", and a ministerial bureaucrat who patronised his favourite *rakugoka* by buying tickets for half of the people in the audience. *Rakugo* has been performed in front of the Meiji Emperor and inside prisons. As members of Waseda's *rakugo* research club, we performed for students and for elderly patients in nursing homes. Shirahase (2014) points at Japan's distinctive pattern of inequality as one in which single-person households are particularly impoverished and in which single elderly women are especially at risk of falling into poverty. My friend and informant Kurihara, in her late 80s at the time of fieldwork, lives in an area of Yokohama "mostly known for prostitution and drugs" and proudly brings around her ridiculously low utility bills "to show people that you can survive with almost nothing". As an avid *rakugo* fan, she tells me that *rakugo*, a cheap form of entertainment and socialisation, is "the perfect hobby for an old lady like her" (2021, personal communication). Notions of working-class vs middle-class, in other words, cannot satisfactorily describe the situation I have encountered in the field. Further concepts, which I introduce in the next section, are needed.

6.5 Yakuza Occupations and Katagi Respectability

That of rakugo is not a respectable (katagi) *job.*
It is rather a yakuza-*like occupation* (yakuza na shōbai)

(Yanagiya Korin, interview with the author, 22 February 2021).

A concept that often came up when talking about *rakugoka*'s position in society was "*katagi*", usually in the context of calling *rakugo* a "non-*katagi*" job. I first learned the Japanese word *katagi* by watching movies about Japanese organised crime, the *yakuza*. Members of violent groups would

refer to those who are not part of their criminal underworld as *katagi* – someone with a "respectable occupation". I was, therefore, slightly surprised to hear *rakugoka* describing themselves with such words. As Muramatsu, a *rakugo* fan in her 20s (and my senior at Waseda's *rakugo* kenkyūkai) put it:

> *In Japanese, there is a word called* katagi*, which means normal people, salarymen, etc, while the opposite is* yakuza*, people outside society. I am part of* katagi *right now, while the* rakugoka *are slightly into the other part"* (interview with the author, 19 July 2019).

Other fans shared the same feeling of difference, at times jokingly explaining that "unlike us, *rakugoka* never really worked in their life!" (Shiori, *rakugo* fan, interview with the author, 23 December 2020). Indeed, the reason parents did not want their children to become *rakugoka*, affirms *rakugo* scholar Miya Nobuaki, was "because *geinin* are not *katagi*; to say it a bit extremely, they are like *yakuza*. *Rakugoka* is not a *katagi* occupation, and for a long time, there was a perception that to choose that path meant to be excluded by *katagi* society" (interview with the author, 28 August 2021).

I will touch below on the links between *rakugo* and the "actual" *yakuza*, but it is clear that the terms *katagi* and its opposite (which informants alternatively referred to as "*yakuza"* or simply "not *katagi*") also have a broader meaning that can be applied to occupations beyond the context of organised crime. In this broader sense, as we will see, *katagi* is associated with productivity, usefulness, stability and respectability, while a *yakuza na shōbai* is an occupation considered unproductive, useless, unstable, and not respectable.

What emerged from my observations in the field is that *katagi* is not simply an on-off characteristic that a job or person can or cannot have, but rather, it is a sort of gradient. Shun'pūtei Ichinosuke, in a conversation on stage with his *shishō* (master) Icchō, recalled the arrival in the artistic family of his fellow disciple Ichizō, who used to be a "muscular truck driver" and "had a piercing on the ear". Ichinosuke laughed, saying that when Ichizō first arrived at the *shishō*'s house, he looked "even *less katagi* than us *rakugoka*" (*rakugoka ijō katagi janakatta*)[163]. Similarly, in the series *Tiger & Dragon*, characters involved with the *yakuza* on several occasions refer to *rakugoka* as *katagi*, while those in the series *Chiritotechin* refer to non-*rakugoka* as *katagi*[164]. *Katagi*, in other words, is a relative quality rather than an absolute one.

We may therefore conceptualise a spectrum of respectability, linked with ideas of stability and productivity, that goes from *yakuza* on one extreme, to *katagi* on the other. As I will explain, changes

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[163] See Yume Kūkan Channel (2020) *Shun'pūtei Ichinosuke Kyōdaikai Guest: Shun'pūtei Icchō, 5th Night.* https://youtu.be/dFK0CA8pRPo?si=mkcXf-KVlWKeHvMO [video] YouTube [Accessed 31 March 2025].
[164] See Chapter 3.

in social status of *rakugo*, which made entering the *rakugo* world easier and thus supported the increase in the number of *rakugoka*, can be better explained as a shift of *rakugo*'s position on this *yakuza – katagi* spectrum of respectability, rather than in terms of working-class vs middle-class identity. As we will see, this gradual change overlapped with what I argue was a shift in the opposite direction, from *katagi* to less *katagi*, of the expectations of what a "normal" life for a young Japanese would be as the burst of the bubble economy in 1991 put an end to the long era of post-war economic growth.

What exactly is associated with the word *katagi*? Respectability would be the most closely equivalent translation, and indeed, the word *mattō* ("proper") is often mentioned in pair with *katagi*. However, the elements deciding whether a job is "*katagi*" vary and stem from specific narratives that the English word "respectability" does not necessarily encompass. For this reason, and not out of a desire to exoticise the matter (or to appeal to *nihonjinron* narratives of Japanese "unique uniqueness"), I choose to use the Japanese terms *katagi* and *yakuza*. What, then, makes an occupation, or person, more, or less, *katagi*?

One of the recurrent ideas mentioned by my informants is that of productivity, stemming from both the Edo-period ideology of caste and more recent industrial-capitalist narratives. Yanagiya Korin claims that originally, everyone doing a job outside the *shinōkōshō* (the caste system dividing society, at least ideologically, into samurai, peasants, artisans, and merchants), be they artists or gambling organisers, would be considered not-*katagi*, no matter how rich they were:

> Q: But in Meiji times, some *rakugoka* were considered akin to novelists, right? Would not that make them part of the cultured "elite"?
> *Novelists, too, are not* katagi*; they are not needed for society to keep going. All those involved in* bunka (culture) *are good for nothing!* [laughs]. *It is those making things, that are proper people.* (Yanagiya Korin, interview with the author, 22 February 2021).

This respectability of those who "make things", from farmers to manufacturers, overlaps with discourses on the "usefulness" of a certain job, and thus person, for society. A saying often quoted by *rakugoka*, attributed to San'yūtei Enraku V (1932-2009) goes:

> *"There are occupations in this world, which it would be okay whether they stayed or disappeared* (atte mo nakute mo ii shōbai). *As for* rakugo*, it would be okay whether it disappeared or disappeared* (nakute mo nakute mo ii shōbai)*"*

At the time of my fieldwork, the debate on the (un)necessity of *rakugo* and other arts was re-ignited by COVID-19 when the line between what is "essential" and what is "superfluous" suddenly

assumed very practical consequences for theatres forced to close[165]. In this chapter, I see "*katagi*" as a concept working on the discursive level of perception, but not all of my informants saw it in that way. Yanagiya Korin, who experienced being disowned by his family due to the non-*katagi* nature of his job, did not see the idea of *rakugo* not being "*katagi*" as a sort of old-fashioned discrimination to be forgotten, but rather as a symbol of the characteristics of the *rakugo* career which could create trouble for someone embarking in it, regardless of people's perception. Because of this, Korin makes sure that every time a perspective apprentice knocks at his door, both the apprentice and the apprentice's parents are well aware of the fact that *rakugo* is a "yakuza-like" job. In our interview, he justified this by referring to a hypothetical apocalyptic scenario in which humanity has to escape on a new version of Noah's Ark. The *geinin* (including *rakugoka* like him), he says, would not be let on board, as they are not needed for society. In the eyes of Korin and the *rakugoka* who agree with him[166], forgetting the distinction between them and other "more needed" members of society does not mean such distinction disappears. Indeed, when COVID-19 arrived, young *rakugoka* such as Kingentei Bakyū (1985-), who "had never been much troubled" by their social position as a *rakugoka*, told me they suddenly "discovered" that their kind would be the first to be cut out in times of emergency, and felt the vulnerability of their position (interview with the author, 19 August 2021)[167]. In other words, *rakugoka* such as Korin see this idea of *rakugo* not being a "proper" job not as a form of discrimination in itself, but as a reminder of the fact that a job like that of the *rakugoka* is vulnerable due to its being an unstable occupation not considered "necessary" or even "productive" by Japanese society at large.

The image of workers earning "hard-earned money" by "the sweat of their brow" farming, or burning the midnight oil at the company desk, was often mentioned by informants as an example, instead, of *katagi* occupations (Ryūtei Kochiraku, interview with the author, 25 May 2021). Compared to that, a job that consists of idly chatting on stage, like *rakugo*, or one that may make you rich overnight, is not *katagi*. Rejecting my observation that an association with famous novelists in the Meiji era would make *rakugo* a prestigious and respectable art, Yanagiya Korin replied:

> *There is no job that is more* yakuza *than publishing, especially back then! If even just one publication went very well, you could build a multi-store building with the money. Compared*

[165] See Chapter 1.
[166] At various shows I have listened to *rakugoka* telling a similar episode with slight variations (such as a spaceship instead of Noah's ark). Some informants pointed at Katsura Shijaku II as the first to come up with the idea.
[167] See Chapter 1 on the impact of COVID-19 on *rakugo*.

to those who make rice with hard work and sweat, it is such a yakuza na shōbai*!* (interview with the author, 22 February 2021).

Other qualities which informants attributed to a *katagi* job were it being "serious" (*majime*) – a word much abhorred by many *rakugoka* – and "stable" (*antei*). As a world of jesters with no stable income (Ryūtei Komichi, interview with the author, 27 April 2021), perhaps it is no wonder that *rakugo* lies on the *non-katagi* side of the spectrum. Finally, San'yūtei Kenkō also pointed at the "vagueness" of *rakugo*'s content and aims to explain why it cannot be considered *katagi*. A *katagi* job, he told me, is one in which you sweat your forehead, and you are useful for someone. It is not clear instead, he says, for whom is *rakugo* useful:

As a rakugoka*, I am not even answering to the audience's demands.*

Q: Aren't you? They pay a ticket to see your performance.

Yes, but think of the difference with the waiters at the café we are sitting in. It's not like we pay some money at the entrance, take a seat and get whatever the waiter feels like giving us. You get what you chose; if it's coffee, it's coffee; if it's tea, tea [unlike at the *yose*, where you do not know what story will be performed[168]]. *Also, if you buy an object in a shop, like a spoon, you get a spoon that corresponds to the money you paid. If the spoon they give you gets broken right away, that's not okay. But in the case of* rakugo*, it is different. You just know they'll talk about something on stage, so you pay, and they talk about something. Even if it doesn't correspond to the price you paid, the* rakugoka *have no responsibility. Even if it's boring or if they forget the story on stage, you don't get your money back. That "ambiguity"* (aimaisa) *is not* katagi*. The product called "*rakugo*" is very ambiguous. The fact that you don't really know what you get for your money is not* katagi*, but rather* yakuza-*like* (San'yūtei Kenkō, rakugoka. Interview with the author, 7 Sep 2021).

6.6 Rakugo's Relationship with the (Actual) Yakuza

Partly, the use of the terms *katagi* and *yakuza* in the context of *rakugo* stems from the fact that the art, like other forms of entertainment, historically had links with the "actual" *yakuza*, i.e., members of organised crime groups. *Rakugo* historian Yoshikawa Ushio reports how a famous *rakugoka* of the early Shōwa period, Chōkarō Baraku VI (1895-1982), was supported by the *yakuza* boss who

[168] However, in many smaller shows outside the *yose*, such as *benkyōkai*, stories are advertised in advance.

controlled the market stalls of Asakusa, Tokyo (Yoshikawa 2009, 17). In 1950, this boss threatened to destroy the house of the head of the leading *rakugo* association (Rakugo Kyōkai) after the association decided to assign to another *rakugoka*, instead of Baraku, the prestigious name "Kosan". The boss was placated by letting Baraku use another prestigious *rakugoka* name, "Shōzō", which belonged to an aristocratic family from which Baraku was allowed to borrow it for one generation[169]. A "man of honour", he returned the name before his death, taking on in his final years the humble name of Hikoroku (Yoshikawa 2009, 17)

Older *rakugoka* and fans I interviewed were unanimous in affirming that, while nowadays a producer is a normal, *katagi* occupation, most producers of *rakugo* and other arts were essentially *yakuza* "back in the day" (a vague expression that I came to understand as meaning, accordingly to the informant, from the Meiji era all the way to the end of the 20th century). Mid-career *rakugoka* like San'yūtei Kenkō (1970-) recall that by the time he was a disciple in the early 2000s, only a couple of production agencies backed by *yakuza* were left, and today "they have all turned into respectable *katagi* companies" (interview with the author, 7 September 2021).

Ryūtei Chiraku V (1951-2009) was one of the last *rakugoka* who openly engaged with members of the *yakuza*. One of his fans, K., told me that as having a relationship with the *yakuza* became increasingly problematised even for *geinin*[170], Chiraku was asked to cut ties with them or he would not be called anymore for jobs on the radio or TV – a request which he refused. Chiraku's son, the up-and-coming *rakugoka* Ryūtei Kochiraku III (1988-), also affirmed that his father's generation was "the last generation in which a small number of *rakugoka* still had links with the *yakuza*" (interview with the author, 25 May 2021). In his autobiography, Kochiraku discloses his fascination with the world of *yakuza* as a child and his desire to become a member (Ryūtei Kochiraku 2019, 56-62). As a middle schooler with a penchant for fights and a poor record of class attendance, Kochiraku asked his father to introduce him to a *yakuza* boss so that he might "enter that path". After a few days, his father called him while he was at school, and told him to take a plane to Fukuoka immediately. At the airport, a group of men in black awaited him and escorted him via car to a golf course, where he joined his father and another man, whom he had met a few times as a child and remembered as a kind "uncle". As it turned out, the "uncle" was a local *yakuza* boss, and later on that day, he explained to

[169] See also Chapter 5 of this thesis, and Stark (2022), on stage names.
[170] See the "*yami eigyō*" (underground business) scandals involving *geinin* found to have performed at parties of organised crime groups, selected as one of the top 10 buzzwords of 2019 (Tokyo Weekender 2019, available at https://www.tokyoweekender.com/japan-life/news-and-opinion/2019-year-in-review-the-news-headlines-in-japan-that-got-us-talking/) [Accessed 31 March 2025].

Kochiraku what it would really mean to enter such a world. Scared, he apologised to his father for making such a request. Chiraku, in turn, showed him another possible path – *rakugo*:

> *"What yakuza and rakugoka do is the same; we take away money from people. But the difference is the feelings those people are left with: whether you make them laugh or you make them cry. Which one do you choose?" asked my father. One year later, I chose the path that makes people laugh. (Ryūtei Kochiraku 2019, 62)*

In an interview we had in May 2021, Kochiraku listed other similarities between the two worlds, most of all the fact that both *rakugoka* and *yakuza* aim to "follow a way to its end" (*michi wo kiwameru*, two words which, put together, can also be read as *gokudō*, today a synonym for *yakuza*). Moreover, according to Kochiraku, both *yakuza* and *rakugo* are occupations at the lowest level in the social hierarchy, as "you make a living out of simply chatting on stage instead of working hard like the rest of society". Finally, Kochiraku affirmed that both *rakugoka* and *yakuza* give great importance to a moral code (*jingi*) and to lineage (*suji*):

> *You could perform without learning the story from someone and just pretend you did. For example, since Shinshō*[171] *is not alive, you could think to learn from a video of Shinshō on YouTube. But instead, you find someone who descends* [artistically] *from him – it can be a disciple of a disciple, someone related*[172]*- and you learn the story from them*[173]*. That is the same as the old day's* yakuza (interview with the author, 25 May 2021).

In our interview, Kochiraku also added a detail that his publisher preferred to omit from his autobiography. Shortly after his father passed away, Kochiraku was promoted to the rank of *futatsume*. As is customary at such moments in a *rakugoka*'s career, he brought his newly made *tenugui* (a handkerchief that doubles as a stage prop and as a sort of business card in the world of *rakugoka*) to all those who, in any way, had supported him so far. This included paying a visit to a *yakuza* group that had ties with his father, as he remembered them being kind to him as a child. However, the group congratulated him but respectfully gave him back the *tenugui*:

> *"Not because we don't want it, but because if one day your* tenugui *was found at our office, it would mean that you have links with us and it would cause trouble to your job". They said, "Yūchan (my childhood nickname), you played with us since you were a child, and so we are*

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[171] Kokontei Shinshō V (1890-1973), one of the most celebrated artists in *rakugo*'s history.
[172] Incidentally, Kochiraku uses the word *ketsuen*, indicating blood, even though the artistic relationships he refers to are not blood-related, as I explain in Chapter 5.
[173] I discuss in length the system of training and transmission of knowledge, as well as the other norms and practices that structure the world of *rakugoka*, in Chapter 5.

happy you remembered us and came to greet us, but now your father has passed away, you don't need to come. We are not a nice business (ii shōbai janai)*, so it's better if you don't come anymore. You would not be able to go on TV and you'd be feared by your peers, you better stop seeing us" – so I cut all links with them more than 10 years ago. I don't want to pretend as if that past did not exist, though. There was kindness and coolness* (yasashisa to kakkō yosa) *in their ways.* (Ryūtei Kochiraku, interview with the author, 25 May 2021)

Kochiraku's story well epitomises the relationship between *rakugo* and *yakuza*: it is today practically non-existent, but the historical roots of performing arts in Japan, and the presence of certain narratives pointing at similarities between the worlds of *rakugo* and *yakuza*, cannot be ignored when discussing whether *rakugo* is perceived as a "*katagi*" or "*yakuza*" world.

6.7 De-Marginalisation: A Shift of Rakugo towards "Katagi" Society

*I am just a regular member of society ("*shakaijin*"),*
with a wife and two kids that I bring to kindergarten.

(Reireisha Maruko, interview with the author, 29 January 2021)

Findings from the field did not corroborate the idea that the shift in social status of *rakugo* was simply a matter of *rakugoka* passing from being a working-class community to a middle-class one, nor can we say anything similar for *rakugo* fans. "Popular" elements and what we can call "highbrow" elements long coexisted in *rakugo* in terms of the artistic content, target, and community of professional *rakugoka*, and continue to do so. Instead, what the voices from the fields show is that *rakugoka* experienced a change in terms of respectability, or of *rakugo*'s degree of association with "*katagi*".

Evidence of this is the less common perception among younger *rakugoka* informants of being outsiders of "regular", mainstream *katagi* society. Asked about it, Reireisha Maruko affirmed that he did not feel like an outsider at all (interview with the author, 29 January 2021). Among aspiring *rakugoka* (still university students at the time of interview), it was particularly uncommon to find the perception of *rakugo* as something different from respectable "*katagi*" occupations. Kamiunten, head of the Waseda *rakugo* research club in 2022, attributed this change to a sort of general respect "towards those who are believed to know history", "and since the setting of classical *rakugo* stories is now so different from our world, *rakugoka* are some sort of specialists… in the past, they would be just people telling stories about their own time, but now, as stories are set in the past, they are some sort of experts of the past… that knowledge is respected" (interview with the author, 3 September

2021). Similarly, Kamiunten's predecessor, Suzuki, did not feel any sort of unrespectability in *rakugo* (interview with the author, 8 September 2021). Nakanishi, my senior at the same research club[174], even joked that contemporary *rakugoka* who still say they are "not *katagi*" do so only "out of their own narcissism" (interview with the author, 5 February 2021).

Other fans and performers (including some young ones) did still claim that *rakugo* today is a non-*katagi* world, so we may argue that *rakugo* is still occupying a somehow liminal position between the "*katagi*" and the "*yakuza*" worlds, leaving room for different opinions and perceptions. However, without a doubt, *rakugo*'s position has shifted towards the *katagi* side throughout its recent history. While the family of Yanagiya Korin (born in 1948) disowned him for his decision to become a *rakugoka*, Shun'pūtei Ryūshi (born in 1981) faced only some initial opposition from his father, who eventually became a passionate supporter of his art (interview with author, 8 November 2021). Ozawa (born in 2001), a university student who intended to become a *rakugoka* at the time of interview in 2021, even reported instead being scolded by her mother for not practising *rakugo* enough (interview with the author, 9 September 2021).

6.8 A Narrower Gap

> *In the 1980s, I considered becoming a* rakugoka*, but getting a proper job was so easy and jobs were so well paid that it felt like a waste, so I did not. If I were young in today's Japan, I would definitely become a* rakugoka*.*
>
> (Aoki Nobuhiro, Rakugo Café owner, interview with the author, 20 July 2021)

Informants who chose not to become *rakugoka*, such as Aoki (quoted above), mentioned the precarity of a *rakugo* career and the attraction of a "regular", *katagi* job, as a reason not to have entered the *rakugo* world. However, while on the one side *rakugo* experienced increased prestige and respectability, at the same time, Japan's socioeconomic changes since the burst of the so-called economic bubble at the start of the 1990s undermined the attraction of the hegemonic ideal of a "stable", respectable career. In other words, the gap between a *rakugoka* life and a "normal" life narrowed, turning the decision to become a *rakugoka* a relatively easier one to make.

When I mention "a normal life", I am not postulating the existence of a homogenous "normal" life, of a common experience that all or even most Japanese experienced as if part of a classless

[174] See Chapter 4.

society. Inequality and stratification, of course, always existed, as the extensive literature on social class in Japan highlights (see Ishida and Slater 2010). Even in times of miraculous economic growth, many, especially from the working class, would eventually end up in poorly paid, precarious jobs. Not everyone qualified (or was married to someone who qualified) for the so-called "Japanese-style employment practices" of lifetime employment and seniority-based wage increases (see Dore 1973). Estimates show that no more than about 30% of working men enjoyed these coveted positions in middle to large companies even at the peak of the "bubble" economy (Allison 2013, 23). My emphasis, instead, is on expectations – ideas of what a normal life "will" or "should" be, of what the future will look like. With 75% heads of families describing themselves as salarymen in the 1970s (Roberson and Suzuki 2003), the normative ideal for oneself and one's children during the years of economic growth was that of the stable salaryman (and wife) family life. Informants who entered the workforce at the time of the "bubble" economy in the 1980s, in particular, affirmed that there was a perception that obtaining a stable job was easy (San'yūtei Kenkō, interview with the author, 7 September 2021), and that alternative forms of employment were not recognised as respectable options (Aoki Nobuhiro, interview with the author, 20 July 2021).

The situation changed drastically with the burst of the "bubble" in 1991, and in the consequent decades of economic stagnation. To cope with the sudden economic slowdown, companies implemented "restructurings", letting off employees and reducing the number of new hirings. The unemployment rate had stably remained around 2% since data collection started in 1953 throughout the postwar years of economic growth, but beginning in 1993 it started to increase, peaking at 5.5% around the turn of the century and only returning to pre-bubble levels in 2018 (Statistics Bureau of Japan 2023). Non-regular work, in particular, doubled in the span of two decades: the number of "contingent workers" (workers not in stable employment) increased from 17% of Japan's workforce in 1986 to 34% in 2008 (Asano, Ito, and Kawaguchi 2011). By 2015, workers employed in non-regular work constituted the 38% of the workforce (Osawa and Kingston 2015, 58). Osawa and Kingston (2015) also point out that for most non-regular workers, this condition is permanent: only 20% of those non-regular workers will be able to switch to regular employment, and this number shrinks to 7% for women (Osawa and Kingston 2015, 60).

In other words, lifetime employment as a stable, career-track employee became a less easily attainable position. This resulted in the emergence within the public discourse of more space for alternative models of work, from workers dispatched by agencies (*haken*) to so-called *freeters* (see Kosugi 2002). Whether such modes of work are a matter of personal choice to retain a degree of freedom (one informant in his third year of university claimed he would not seek occupation in the

private system through the conventional process of job-hunting, *shūkatsu*, because he did "not want [his] humanity to be negated") or the symptom of structural issues and increased inequality in contemporary Japan, they resulted in an increased range of life paths becoming acceptable (or at least, accepted):

> *I have decided that I am okay with being a freeter. But if I am a freeter, I might as well be one on a stage.* (Inaba, member of Waseda's rakken, interview with the author, 28 September 2021).

6.9 What Rakugo Can Offer in Contemporary Japan

Rakugo does not offer the stability of a position as a career-track employee at a large company – a *rakugoka*'s income depends on the fans they can gather and the tickets they can sell (see Chapter 5). Masters usually remind prospective disciples that "you may not make a living with it" (San'yūtei Manmaru, interview with the author, 18 June 2021). *Rakugoka* do not receive a salary and can be classified as freelancers[175]. Working hours are not regulated, and work tends to concentrate in evenings, weekends, and holidays. As many performers such as Ryūtei Komichi put it, it is "an unstable life" (interview with the author, 27 April 2021). Still, the world of *rakugo* can provide things that informants reported lacking in contemporary Japan.

In a country in which work and affiliation to a company long acted as the primary source of lifelong identity (Allison 2013, 7; Nakane 1970), when lifetime employment becomes increasingly scarce, companies no longer provide that form of stable identity for all those who do not expect or plan to be permanently employed. This includes non-regular workers and the many permanent employees who decide to embark on *tenshoku* (changing job), a buzzword in contemporary Japan and "a certainty" according to some of my younger informants (Inaba and Nakayama, members of Waseda's *rakugo* research club, interview with the author, 28 September 2021). Looking at data from the Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare, of those workers who graduated from university in 2016 (I choose this year as it is the latest dataset we can observe that was not affected by the disruptions caused by Covid-19), 32% changed or quit their job within three years of employment. The percentage is higher for smaller companies (57.7% for those with less than 5 employees, 49.7% for those with 5-29 employees), but even in the largest and thus usually more coveted companies (>1,000

[175] Indeed, during the pandemic, *rakugoka* were eligible for governmental aid for freelancers, or "*furiiransaa*" – many old masters, immersed in their old-fashioned, traditional world, were much amused to discover that the Japanese government classified them with such an "exotic" English word.

employees) 25% of newly hired university graduates did not stay in employment for more than 3 years. As for junior college graduates hired in 2016, 42% did not remain in the same company for three years, while the percentage for high school graduates was 39%. As Ishida and Slater point out, this "perceived death of lifetime employment and increased occupational mobility (with a loss of security) has led many to question the feasibility of staking some sort of social identity on institutional affiliation and loyal participation" (Ishida and Slater 2010).

In this context, *rakugo* can instead offer an occupational identity for life. The amount of work (and thus income) of a *rakugoka* fluctuates greatly, but their identity as *rakugoka* is stable. The boundary between professional and amateur is strictly policed by the *rakugo* community (see Chapter 4), and the identity of "professional *rakugoka*" is not predicated on one's ability to earn an income with *rakugo*, but on having undergone an apprenticeship under a master *rakugoka* (see Chapter 5). Unless one decides to quit or is expelled by their master during their formative years (in which case they may still convince another *rakugoka* to accept them) *rakugoka* remain *rakugoka* for the rest of their life (Tatekawa Koshira 2019, 200). The idea that one should find one path in which to focus all of one's efforts still has hegemonic value in Japan, as evidenced by its prevalence in much pop cultural production – from the pressures put on the young tenants of the Fuji TV and Netflix show's eponymous *Terrace House*, to the "big dream" that each protagonist of the most popular *shōnen* manga fight for. In such a cultural environment, getting by through various different "gigs" or being passionate about too many different things can attract unfavourable judgment. A *rakugoka*, however, can treat all kinds of side jobs and interests as part of their "training" to better hone their art (Tatekawa Koshira 2019, p154). There are *rakugoka* who own restaurant chains (such as Hayashiya Kikuō), others who are certified weather forecasters (such as Shun'pūtei Shōkichi), and others yet who sell salt online and travel the world on *rakugo* tours with the sole objective of capturing rare Pokémon (Tatekawa Koshira 2019). No matter what lateral projects one ends up working on, as a *rakugoka* they will first and foremost be a *rakugoka*, for life (ibid.).

Incidentally, this also means that there is no such thing as a retirement age for *rakugoka*[176], avoiding that post-retirement identity crisis that many elderly people face in ageing Japan. Beyond the title and the identity, the content of the job lends itself well to being performed by someone who has passed the usual retirement age. As Yanagiya Korin put it, "as long as you can sit down and talk, you can do *rakugo*" (interview with the author, 22 February 2021). The fact that many of my informants wished for the rest of society to learn from *rakugo* stories and become a "society in which

[176] Of course this does not prevent older *rakugoka* from receiving a citizen's (*kokumin*) pension.

it is okay to go senile" (*bokete mo ii shakai*), also helps create a positive environment for older *rakugoka* and fans alike (K, elderly *rakugo* fan, personal communication).

Another major issue of 21st-century Japan is that of loneliness, a feeling of desperation in a "disconnected society" (*muen shakai*) (Allison 2013). The widespread sense of loneliness and disconnection perceived by ethnographers in the field is also reflected in various grim statistics: the suicide rate rose significantly in the late 1990s (33,300 deaths per year in 1998), and so did the number of those who died home alone (32,000 in 2009), a reflection of the fact that one-third of the population of Japan lives alone, including 23% of the elderly (Allison 2015, 42-45). As a lone fieldworker in pandemic-time Tokyo, it was not difficult to imagine how life in the metropolis can become very isolated. At such times of "disconnectedness", the world of *rakugo*, as I show in other chapters of this thesis, situates *rakugoka* in a web of "sticky" human relationships. It gives the new *rakugoka* an artistic family with kinship relationships not dissimilar from those found in blood-based families, and thus provides a form of *ibasho*. Fans tell me they, too, find solace in listening to *rakugo* stories, whose characters are bound by humorous and warm human relationships.

Plenty of social issues highlighted by the literature cannot be solved by *rakugo*, but some of the discourses and practices in the *rakugo* art world can help its members endure and, in a way, reframe those issues. Allison pointed at "precarious workers" who "as part of the new 'disposable labor power' felt superfluous, unvalued" (Allison 2013, 64). *Rakugoka,* too, often see themselves as superfluous[177]. The discourses embedded in the *rakugo* world however allow *rakugoka* to reclaim that superfluousness, making it part of their identity. Informants were unanimous in affirming that one of the beauties and values of *rakugo* lies exactly in its "uselessness" (Kingentei Bakyū, interview with the author, 19 October 2021). There is meaning in engaging in the meaningless; value in spending efforts in something "unproductive". For some, it is a sign of a country at peace (*heiwa*), a society that has that "room" (*yoyū*) so desperately needed in precarious Japan (Suzuki, then-head of Waseda rakugo research club, interview with the author, 8 September 2021). As Ozawa, a young aspirant *rakugoka* in her late teens, put it:

> *Isn't* kudaranai [=silly, useless] *the best?* (kudaranai tte saikō janai desu ka?)" (Ozawa, interview with the author, 9 September 2021).

Poverty too, as we have seen, has long been reclaimed by *rakugoka* as something to be proud of (see Kokontei Shinshō 1964). Besides such romanticisation of it, more importantly, quite differently

[177] See Chapter 1.

from the poverty of the like of "internet café refugees" mentioned by Allison, who "lived on the edge and, for the most part, all alone, […] deprived of a safety net, social support system, or reserves of almost any kind"(Allison 2013, 45), the poverty of *rakugoka* is experienced while being part of a community whose structure provides various forms of support[178]. Indeed, I have presented in Chapters 4 and 5 how *rakugo* can represent a relatively more stable condition compared to other performing art worlds such as *manzai* or to the isolated poverty of other unstable occupations. For many informants, *rakugo* still today represented a safety net: a social world underpinned by humour, a lifelong career with a clear aim and hopes. The fictional characters in *rakugo* stories live unstable lives – they get by with what they earned on that day, are often late for rent, and accumulate debt. And yet, it is a kind of "precarity" that seems easier to accept and face than the ones described by Allison, perhaps because it is faced while being part of a community of other characters. *Rakugoka* too face poverty and precarity – they are freelancers earning irregular income and not always able to attract enough work. But they are part of a community, and they have an identity and place of belonging (*ibasho*) for life. Perhaps, that is one reason the community of *rakugoka* managed to keep attracting and retaining performers in 21st-century Japan.

Chapter Conclusions

The words of Aoki Nobuhiro, manager of Rakugo Café, who did not become a performer despite his great passion for *rakugo*, well summarise the chapter:

> *One reason* [rakugoka increased] *is that the parents now support them, thanks to the* kotenka (classical art-isation) *of* rakugo*.* In the past… Tatekawa Danshun *was told that a* rakugoka *is like a* yakuza*, an outlaw; you needed the determination to cut all ties with your family to become one. Now, there are* rakugoka *whose mom and dad come to support them at their show*. *The second reason is that the economy is not doing well; all industries, besides maybe IT, are in a dire situation. So, rather than struggling while doing a job they don't like, might as well become a* rakugoka *no*? *I would become a* rakugoka *if I were young today.* (Interview with the author, 20 July 2021)

In this chapter, I have presented a historical shift that the *rakugo* world experienced within the lifetime of my informants, from a social world at the margin of respectable society to one valued by the Japanese government as a receptacle of Japanese traditional culture. I have

[178] See Chapter 5.

shown how the change had much to do with class, but that it was best understood by also combining class-related concepts with ideas of respectability, and more precisely with the terms "*katagi*" and "*yakuza (na shōbai)*" which my informants referred to when discussing the position of *rakugoka* within Japanese society. I have then argued that the perceived gap between a "normal" life and a *rakugoka* life used to be vast: to become a *rakugoka*, the discourse went, one would have to give up on the promise of a stable and secure future and would thus often be disinherited by one's family. Today, that gap is much narrower: "It takes less courage now to take the leap" (Shun'pūtei Ryūshi, interview with the author, 8 November 2021). This, I argued, was one of the factors behind the increase in the number of *rakugoka* – in turn, one of the major elements behind the revival and resilience of *rakugo* which this thesis has endeavoured to assess.

Conclusions

Summary of Findings

This thesis has investigated the factors behind the resilience and revival in contemporary Japan of *rakugo* oral storytelling, an art world singled out for the great increase in the number of professional performers (*rakugoka*) at a time when many traditional arts struggle to attract enough new forces to replace ageing performers, which experienced a significant wave of media and popular interest since around 2005, dubbed a "*rakugo boom*". I have investigated the puzzle of *rakugo*'s ongoing "renaissance" (made even more significant in the context of a previous decline of *rakugo*'s popularity in the late 20th century) by conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Tokyo between November 2020 and November 2021. This included participant observation at *rakugo* shows as a member of the audience or as a volunteer helper at a variety of venues around Tokyo, as well as joining other gatherings of members of the *rakugo* art world – from paying a visit to San'yūtei Enchō's tomb with fellow *rakugo* fans, to performing at a streamed show in Waseda University with members of Waseda's *rakugo* research club (*rakken*), to attending hearings at the Tokyo Regional District Court for a case of defamation against *rakugoka* Kairakutei Burakku II. I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with a total of 66 members of the *rakugo* world, including performers from all *rakugo* associations and career stages, fans, producers, organisers, amateur performers, and practitioners of arts adjacent to *rakugo*, such as *rōkyoku*, *kōdan* and *kamikiri* (paper cutting, performed at the *yose* in between *rakugo* stories). I have integrated my findings from interviews and field observation with written and audiovisual primary sources, from *rakugo* magazine articles (in particular, Tokyo Kawaraban), to *rakugoka*'s memoirs, collections of essays and of stories, recorded performances, streamed shows, online interviews and posts on social network, and other relevant forms of material.

In Chapter 1, I contextualised my fieldwork and the historical phenomenon which so heavily affected both my ethnographic experience and the lives of the informants I interacted with – the COVID-19 pandemic. Methodologically, combining in-person ethnography with observations in the digital realm proved particularly useful. In terms of ethics, I have argued for the need for ethnographers to strive to contribute through their very fieldwork to the community they study, in my case by working as a helper at *rakugo* venues at a time when pandemic regulations limited funds but required extra labour. I have reported how the pandemic forced the change of long-held practices and norms, such as the taboo related to cancelling shows or discourses related to the *yose* schedule (previously open every day and not allowing advanced booking), but also how it allowed *rakugoka* to dismiss certain "inconvenient" obligations such as expensive celebrations for rank promotion, or

prohibitions on the use of social network for publicity for apprentices. One major change brought about by the pandemic was the sudden digitalisation of *rakugo*, with a great number of *rakugoka* moving their activities to YouTube and other digital platforms, creating new opportunities for performance and research. This also created new dynamics in the field, such as with the case of Yonesuke, a veteran *rakugoka* who collaborated with younger performers to create one of the most popular *rakugo* channels on YouTube, which I argued to represent a hint, in an increasingly digitalised and ageing society, for a way forward – integrating the resources brought about by people of different ages, rather than simply portraying the elderly as victims left behind by IT revolutions. I have then shown how online performances anonymised the audience, thus hindering long-held practices of selective self-censorship operated by *rakugoka*, who thus often had to play it safer on online stages. Being in the field in person allowed me, however, to also observe the great deal of quiet subversion that took place in Tokyo, including a small rebellion of *yose* theatres against the style of politics carried out by the Japanese government in 2021. Finally, I presented how COVID-19 highlighted vulnerabilities of the *rakugo* world as an "unnecessary and non-urgent" occupation, but also how the community of *rakugoka*, fans and producers demonstrated a great deal of solidarity and resilience, a factor contributing to answering the overall research puzzle of this dissertation.

Chapter 2 provided the historical context for the research puzzle. First, I reviewed the history of *rakugo* through secondary sources, focusing in particular on the popularity of the art. *Rakugoka* (and their predecessors) proved able to adapt to changing sociocultural conditions and benefit from technological innovations, from printing to stenography, radio and television, demonstrating the flexibility of *rakugo*. Then, based on interviews with informants and (mostly primary) written sources, I presented an historical trend almost absent from the literature but prominent in the memories and memoirs of *rakugoka*: a decline in popularity of the art at the end of the 20th century dubbed a "*winter of rakugo*" by many informants, coinciding for some with the boom of *manzai* as the main form of comedy since the 1980s. I argued that this period of decline prepared the conditions for the subsequent revival by weakening some of the negative images of *rakugo* as an "old-fashioned" or "boring" art. This decline also contributed to a sense of crisis (that critic Hirose Kazuo attributes to the death of famous performers at the turn of the century), which acted as a catalyst for the outburst of activities bringing about an ongoing *rakugo* boom in the 21st century.

Chapter 3 tackled the phenomenon at the heart of this project: the revival of *rakugo* in 21st-century Japan. Lorie Brau had noted a wave of interest in *rakugo* among children and parents, sparked by the TV show *Nihongo de Asobō* (2008, 216). As I showed, this would be just the foretelling of an impressive "*rakugo boom*". In 2005, the TV show *Tiger & Dragon* (a title used as a synonym for the

"*rakugo boom*" by some informants), written by Kudō Kankurō and starring popular actors such as Nagase Tomoya alongside *rakugoka* such as Shun'pūtei Shōta, attracted attention to the art and portrayed a new, younger and "cooler" image of *rakugo*, relevant to the lives of the youth in Tokyo as much as it was to Edo citizens. I looked at the media nature of the boom also in terms of how newspapers (Yomiuri and Asahi Shinbun) disseminated the discourse of a "*rakugo boom*" and how they increasingly covered *rakugo* since around 2005.

I then shifted my attention to the *rakugoka* who capitalised on this momentary trend and turned it into a lasting revival. First was the group Rokunin no Kai led by Shun'pūtei Koasa, which overcame barriers between associations and established grand *rakugo* shows such as the Great Ginza Rakugo Festival, attracting much media and popular attention. Breaking from the limits of specific associations or artistic families seems to have played a key role in fostering the *rakugo* scene, as did allowing younger *rakugoka* to experiment away from the model of the great masters (*meijin*) – a key example was the unit SWA, who turned newly-created (*shinsaku*) *rakugo* mainstream, and popularised a more entertaining style of *rakugo*, affecting even the activities of more traditionalist *rakugoka*. I have shown how the *rakugo* boom eventually reached Osaka, which saw the opening of its first permanent *yose* theatre in 2006, also thanks to the 2007-2008 NHK drama *Chiritotechin*, and to the activities of *rakugoka* involved with the above-mentioned festivals, such as Katsura Bunshi VI.

One significant consequence of the boom was the increase in demand for *rakugo*, allowing more *rakugoka* to make a living through their art, and stimulating the emergence of a significant number of small-scale venues dedicated to *rakugo*, such as Rakugo Café and Shibuya Rakugo. This created the conditions for a new wave of interest (a "*petit rakugo boom*") based especially on the activity of *futatsume*, or young performers, such as the group Narikin. Informants such as producer Aoki Nobuhiro saw this as a shift of interest from "*rakugo* as entertainment" to "*rakugo* as documentary", with audiences taking pleasure in supporting young hopes despite their still unrefined art. In 2016, the activities of such performers and venues combined with a new *rakugo*-themed media hit (the manga, anime and later TV drama *Shōwa Genroku Rakugo Shinjū*) to attract renewed media coverage.

Some informants shared perplexities on the definition of the "boom", calling it a "*rakugoka boom*" rather than a "*rakugo boom*", or comparing it to a "doughnut empty at the centre" with *rakugo*-themed products surrounding the art, rather than *rakugo* itself, becoming popular. Still, all informants agreed on an increase in the number of people in audiences and of performers. I corroborated these impressions through quantitative data evidence showing a great increase in the number of shows and active performers in the last three decades, as well as reporting more oral testimonies of the boom. I

then summarised some of the immediate factors behind the boom: the role of media (among whose professionals *rakugo* has long held considerable influence), the efforts of performers who overcame institutional barriers and who experimented with the art, and the emergence of small venues supporting young performers. Key actors such as Shun'pūtei Koasa and Yanagiya Karoku affirmed that many of these activities seemed impossible until a few years before the boom, but a sense of crisis, caused by the decline of the art and by the death of famous masters such as Kokontei Shinchō, reinvigorated the efforts of young performers. Finally, I discussed the nature of "booms" and assessed the state of the *rakugo* boom after COVID-19, and noted that what I called a 21st-century Rakugo Renaissance seems to be continuing – now helped by a new media hit, the Shōnen Jump manga *Akane Banashi*.

Chapter 4 presented how my informants became members of the *rakugo* world – be it fans, performers or producers – providing the context on which I built, in the following chapter, my arguments regarding the role of specific practices, structures and ideologies in supporting the resilience of the *rakugo* world. I showed the great variety of points of entrance through which informants encountered *rakugo* and developed a passion. These included radio and television, but also, more recently, school events. Many arrived at *rakugo* to earn some skill or cultural capital related to *rakugo*'s status as a metropolitan storytelling art, while others found in *rakugo* a lullaby and "*ibasho* for the heart". Several *manzai* comedians, such as Reireisha Maruko, found refuge in *rakugo* after facing the more ruthlessly competitive world of comedy (*owarai*), and enjoyed the (relative) stability and community offered in comparison by *rakugo*.

I then looked at one institution acting as a nurturing ground for members of the *rakugo* world: the *ochiken*, or *rakugo* research clubs, and in particular the one at Waseda University, of which I have been a member since 2017. I showed how not all informants accept established ideas of what an "amateur" and a "professional" *rakugoka* ought to be, and finally moved my attention to the world of *rakugoka*. I presented the ritual of acceptance under a master and the almost entire absence of requirements to become a *rakugoka*. I highlighted the variety of experiences of my informants, quite different from the often-seen adherence to "standard" discourses in the *rakugo* world, and argued that this coexistence of cherished norms and ideologies with flexibility of practice might play a role in the sustainability of *rakugo*. I then analysed the minarai probation and zenza apprenticeship, also highlighting the more recent changes in praxis, such as the emergence of apprentices who not only do not live at their master's house, but do not even commute there to help with any house chores. Finally, I argued that the content of the apprenticeship is mostly manners and socialisation – the imprinting of a "habitus", to use Bourdieu's concept – rather than art.

Chapter 5, building on all previous sections, presented my main answers to the question of how the *rakugo* world managed to remain a resilient community, able to eventually capitalise on the boom described above. I argued that a series of practices, especially practices of sharing (of knowledge, of stories, of connections and of jobs), benefitted the community as a whole, as did the perpetuation of structures such as the artistic family system, the yose apprenticeship, and the *o-keiko* training system. These practices and structures are supported (and in turn, support) certain ideologies: family-like relationships I termed *artistic kinship*, but also an aesthetic of detached coolness (*iki*) and bravado requesting one to do what is "cool" rather than what is convenient in order to maintain an admired persona in front of audiences and colleagues, and finally a sense of belonging and indebtedness (*on*) to one's seniors and predecessors so big it "cannot be repaid" (*ongaeshi*) and that can, thus, only be paid forward to the next generations.

All these, I argued, contribute to creating a system in which new *rakugoka*, regardless of their upbringing or previous education, are endowed with all the necessary forms of capital to succeed. Social capital is earned through suddenly belonging to a network of family-like relationships (starting with the parent-child-like bond with one's *shishō*) and by undergoing apprenticeship backstage at the *yose*, which acts as a place of socialisation and sort of "nerve centre" for the *rakugo* world. Cultural capital is earned through the apprenticeship, which socialises the *rakugoka* into the *rakugoka* habitus, and no educational qualification is needed. Similarly, symbolic capital is gained within the *rakugoka* career by advancing to new rankings (based today on seniority), winning awards or inheriting stage names, and no previous form of qualification is needed.

I then built upon Bourdieu's theory to include what I call "artistic capital", or the content of performances, on which *rakugoka* make a living. *Rakugoka* learn classical stories through one-on-one *o-keiko* training sessions, which entail the transmission not only of the content of a story but also of useful technical advice and cultural knowledge regarding the setting as well as the genealogy of the story. As one of the most peculiar aspects of the *rakugo* community, *rakugoka* can ask any other *rakugoka* to teach them their stories, without being limited to one's artistic family. Instead of "copyright", *rakugoka* police this non-monetary system of transmission through the idea of "*mochineta*" (owned story). It is taboo to perform a story without having first (l)earned it from someone who already "owns" it through an *o-keiko* session, guaranteeing the training of artistic skills as well the transmission of knowledge, including the knowledge about (and subsequent feelings of belonging and obligation to) who helped create, transmit and adapt a specific story.

All these forms of capital are bestowed to junior performers without the need for any economic capital, and *zenza* apprentices are able to make a living by helping masters at personal

shows. While upon completion of the apprenticeship *rakugoka* need to start surviving through their art (and many end up relying on side jobs), all the practices mentioned above provide, if not any guarantee, at least a fair chance for success to anyone entering the world of *rakugoka* regardless of previous connections or resources. All of this enabled the *rakugo* world to keep attracting and retaining a numerous and diversified class of well-trained, skilful performers and to keep transmitting and adapting the best stories and artistic skills, ultimately creating the conditions for the community of *rakugoka* to survive periods of decline and to capitalise on moments of resurgence of interest in the art.

Finally, Chapter 6 looked at one of the factors which I argue to be behind the increase in the number of *rakugoka*: the shift in the social status of *rakugo*. *Rakugoka* share with other *geinin* a history of marginalisation: older informants talked about being disowned by their families for becoming *rakugoka* and mentioned memories of the shady atmosphere of *yose* theatres. However, through the efforts of critics and performers striving to establish *rakugo* as an art worth of appreciation, and also thanks to the increased living standards of *rakugoka* who signed contracts with media companies, gradually throughout the second half of the 20th century, *rakugo* experienced an increase in prestige and de-marginalisation, culminating in the nomination of Yanagiya Kosan V in 1995 and Katsura Beichō III in 1996 to the title of "Living national treasure".

The shift in social status of *rakugo* – once a world considered as a "safety net" for those "unfit" to mainstream society – is also reflected, as I showed, in the number of elite university graduates as well as people successful in other careers becoming *rakugoka*. While this shift had much to do with class, I also showed how the relationship between *rakugo* and class remains complicated, and the change is better explained by also implementing ideas of respectability, or, to use my informants' words, of "*yakuza na shōbai*" (yakuza-like occupations) versus "*katagi*" (respectable) occupations. Within the lifetime of my informants, *rakugo* shifted away from the "*yakuza*-like" side to the more respectable side of occupations, all while post-economic bubble Japan saw a weakening of the attraction and obtainability of a "respectable" career. Thus, the gap between a "*rakugo* life" and a "normal life" is now narrower, making it easier for young *rakugo* enthusiasts to "take the leap" into *rakugo*.

How to Save an Art World: Lessons for Other Arts

The *yose* and the other venues where I saw *rakugo* performed also host practitioners of other arts. These include examples I have mentioned throughout the thesis, such as *manzai*, *kōdan*, and

rōkyoku, but also less celebrated genres. Sakamoto Raikō, one of Japan's very few *katsudō benshi* (narrators of silent films) still performing, commented in a conversation we had after a show organised by Shinjuku's Dōrakutei that "the number of arts which disappeared is way higher than those which survived… It is a miracle when an art survives, and there is a reason it did." (personal communication, 21 April 2021). This thesis aimed at finding what that "reason" was for the case of *rakugo*, and possibly learning valuable lessons from it for other arts.

I mentioned in the introduction how researchers of other storytelling art traditions in Asia marvelled at the lively state of the community of professional *rakugo* performers in contemporary Japan (Sweeney 1979; Kawada 2020); and how a 2008 study by the Japan Council of Performers Rights and Performing Arts Organizations (or Geidankyō) isolated *rakugo* as the one traditional performing art in Japan not suffering from a lack of generational turnover. The sheer number of factors and events I needed to assess in order to satisfactorily answer the question of *rakugo*'s resilience and revival meant that I ended up dedicating this thesis mostly to *rakugo* itself, stopping short of pursuing a full-fledged comparative project – something I hope to undertake in the future. However, throughout my fieldwork, I did interact with many performing artists besides *rakugoka*. Many of the practices I highlighted in the *rakugo* world are entirely or partially absent from other traditions.

One key example is the fact that *rakugoka* do not need any previous form of capital to succeed, as I argued in Chapter 5. Thanks to the artistic family system and yose backstage network, apprentices who may have knocked on their master's doors as complete strangers are endowed with the necessary social capital, embedded in a network of what I called *artistic kinship*. This is unlike many arts such as *kabuki*, where the vast majority of practitioners are born in *kabuki* families, but it is also of course quite different from a great number of fields outside the traditional arts and outside Japan[179]. Various forms of cultural capital – be they educational background, qualifications, skills, the ability to learn, or Bourdieu's idea of "the sense for the game" – are needed to access many artistic worlds and indeed most fields of work, including, of course, corporate Japan; however, I showed how, due to the legacy of the *rakugo* world as a safety net for people "unfit" to mainstream society, no such qualification or skill is expected from *rakugoka*, who face almost no specific requirement upon entrance and will earn all above mentioned forms of capital through their apprenticeship and *rakugo* career. I also showed how economic capital is not necessary for the apprentice, as training, teaching, and all practices I have mentioned which provide *rakugoka* with the needed resources are provided to junior performers

[179] For an egregious example of the influence of families over an individual life's outcomes, see Barone and Mocetti , which found that, in their case study of Florence, the same families have been consistently at the top of the socioeconomic ladder for over six centuries.

free of charge – unlike what happens in the many art worlds, from tea ceremony to *ikebana*, in which teaching is the main source of income for professionals. Finally, I also pointed out how, unlike comedians such as *manzaishi* who may jealously treasure their own routines, *rakugoka* give away that very previous material to other *rakugoka*, sharing the repertoire of *rakugo* stories I called artistic capital. The peculiar non-monetary system of transmission and sharing helps the best *rakugo* stories to freely circulate and evolve, and prevents *rakugoka* from being limited by the style of their specific master or artistic family, so that they may develop the *rakugo* best fit for themselves.

At the end of my stay in Japan, I discussed my findings from the world of *rakugo* with two prominent performers of two of the most similar arts to *rakugo*: *kōdan* (a more historical oriented art) and *rōkyoku* (an art including singing and improvised shamisen music), both of which have been struggling to reach the level of popularity and sustainability of the *rakugo* world. My conversations with *kōdanshi* Kanda Shun'yō and *rōkyokushi* Tamagawa Nanafuku provided valuable insights into the lessons *rakugo* might provide to help save other endangered art worlds.

Both Shun'yō and Nanafuku agreed that one crucial difference in the social organisation of *rakugo* compared to their arts is how *rakugoka* can learn stories from any other *rakugoka*, regardless of artistic family or association. I have highlighted the importance of *rakugoka* overcoming institutional barriers (see Chapter 3) and sharing stories and skills across the entire community (Chapter 5) in creating the conditions for the resilience and revival of the *rakugo* world. Indeed, the same Geidankyō study I mentioned in the introduction touched on the peculiarity of *rakugoka* sharing repertoires "without being limited by the master-apprentice relationship", something unseen in other performing arts (Tokumaru et al. 2008, 109). Shun'yō agreed on the value of such a system and on its absence in the *kōdan* world:

> *Yes, sharing the stories is a crucial aspect. That way, the best [stories and versions] spread. And even though you learn it from someone, it's not like you will do it the exact same way as that person; you have to make it your own. That is what is amazing about* rakugo*. In* kōdan*, there are still many masters who say, "This one, I don't teach it". Especially if that story is their selling point… Well, it's not like I don't understand that.* Rakugoka *have confidence, saying they are not scared of teaching their art to others!* (Kanda Shun'yō, interview with the author, 11 October 2021).

Nanafuku also commented on the same difference, and agreed that the sharing of stories and skills might have helped rakugo survive and thrive, and could help *rōkyoku* too:

> *The* rakugo *repertoire is treated as a community property* (kyōyū zaisan). *In* rōkyoku*, instead, there are stories that only one school does. […] I also think that we should implement the same system as* rakugo*, but some older people don't want that; their idea is that the treasures they inherited from their masters shouldn't be performed by others.* (Tamagawa Nanafuku, interview with the author, 11 November 2021)

Both in our interview and in her book, *Katari Gei Perspective* (The Perspective of the Narrating Arts) (2021), Nanafuku supported the idea of performers sharing across families and associations:

> *In one of the shows and interviews I have done for the project Katari Gei Perspective, I talked with Katsura Kujaku and Osada Sadao sensei about Kamigata rakugo, which, just like rōkyoku, risked disappearing after the war. I asked them how Kamigata rakugoka managed to revive it and turn into the thriving world it is today. The answer was what you suggested:* rakugoka *went beyond specific schools and taught each other all of the stories. As a master, you don't know if the stories of your school will match well with the disciples you take – that is why allowing everyone to learn across associations improves the quality of the art so much.* (11 November 2021)

Both Nanafuku and Shun'yō commented that some signs of their respective arts partially implementing such a system of sharing have appeared, and perhaps this played a role in the (still small) increase in performers and fans of *rōkyoku* and *kōdan*. Interestingly, discourses similar to the ones I highlighted in this thesis (see especially Chapter 5) have been mobilised for such actions:

> *Master Kanda Aizan recently decided to teach everyone, and he says he does that because he was taught by those above him, and this is his way of paying back* ("ongaeshi") *to his* senpai (Kanda Shun'yō, interview with the author, 11 October 2021)

Shun'yō also mentioned other systems *kōdanshi* have been taking from *rakugo*, such as the *zenza-futatsume-shin'uchi* ranking system, which "makes things easier". I have argued that practices of passing down jobs upon promotion (for example, from *futatsume* to *shin'uchi*) helped maintain the market for *rakugoka*, and indeed, Shun'yō noted an absence of such norms as a danger in *kōdan*:

> *There was a kōdanshi, quite popular, who would accept any gig, even cheap ones. That was such a problem for us below him, because then the organisers would get angry at us, saying, "If that master can perform for 10,000 yen, why can't you!!"* (11 October 2021)

Ultimately, Shun'yō identified the number of dedicated, passionate performers as the main factor supporting the growth of an art community. Shun'yō argued that *rakugoka* attracted more performers

due to *rakugo* being more familiar (*mijika*) than *kōdan* with the general public, thanks to TV programmes, *rakugoka* becoming celebrities, or *rakugo* research clubs (see Chapter 4). But one young star of *kōdan*, Kanda Hakuzan (see Chapter 3), has been single-handedly increasing the presence of *kōdan* in the cultural zeitgeist, attracting young performers and fans, similarly to what great *rakugoka* such as Tatekawa Danshi or Yanagiya Kyōtarō did for *rakugo*. Art worlds such as *kōdan* and *rōkyoku* might then be able to learn from the beneficial practices of the *rakugo* world I presented in this chapter to attract such dedicated performers and endow them with the needed resources to succeed as practitioners of the art, possibly opening the way for future revivals of interest and vivacity of the art akin to the "*rakugo renaissance*" I have described in this thesis.

All in all, alongside the specific practices of sharing or transmission which may be helpful if implemented in other art worlds, I argue that the case of *rakugo* I presented in this thesis indicated hints for a way forward, perhaps, for Japan at large. I have shown throughout the thesis how *rakugoka* managed to adapt their art to the times while benefiting from long-held practices, structures and ideologies. *Rakugo* experienced a resurgence of interest, or "boom", in particular when young forces were given the space and resources to experiment, but they did so while many other *rakugoka* kept cherishing and transmitting a more traditional style and image of the art. While perhaps cliché, this combination of respected, helpful "traditions" and space for individual experimentation and "innovation" proved particularly helpful for the world of *rakugo*.

Limitations and Future Research

As I hopefully conveyed through this dissertation, the world of *rakugo* is a complex, diversified community of performers, fans and producers, connected through strong relationships but also each exercising a great degree of autonomy from one another. Due to the nature of ethnographic fieldwork, I was only able to report the voices of a small part of this community, and future research may unearth rather different practices and discourses – more attention to *rakugoka* from the Kamigata area, and to those active beyond the traditional two poles of Kansai and Kantō, would probably result in findings of great interest. Even within the conversations and interactions I had in the field, many topics, happenings, and opinions did not appear in this dissertation for reasons of cohesiveness and coherence. One area to which I dedicated a significant portion of interviews and observations but ended up cutting from this thesis is that of gender – women *rakugoka* are a small but growing minority among *rakugoka*, and their experiences insightfully pointed to relevant tensions and discourses in today's *rakugo* field. The increase in gender diversity both among audiences and on the stage represents indeed one of the most evident developments of contemporary *rakugo*, and the sensibilities

of women *rakugoka* and fans expanded the possibilities of *rakugo* while tackling numerous challenges. To do justice to the topic, I decided to dedicate a future publication to it, as I will do with the issue of political satire in *rakugo* – another significant locus of tensions and of surprising findings. As I mentioned above, this thesis focused mostly on the specific case of *rakugo* in order to provide a comprehensive answer to the question of its resilience and revival; comparisons with other art worlds and traditional communities facing 21st-century challenges would represent fruitful avenues of research. Within the case of *rakugo* and of its revival, I have described in this thesis the practices and structures which I argued to be crucial for its sustainability and revival, but also highlighted how long-held practices and discourses have undergone changes, especially at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. It will be necessary to assess in the future how those changes will affect the overall resilience of the art. Finally, the thesis has relied and focused heavily on empirical research and on debates within the field of *rakugo*. While I employed Bourdieu's theory of capital and field to explain my findings, I suspect that embedding the case of *rakugo* into a variety of other theoretical frameworks and debates in the fields of Japanese Studies, Anthropology, and other relevant social sciences could result in fruitful contributions to knowledge. I aim to explore these and other avenues of research in future publications and projects.

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Selected Newspaper Articles

Asahi Shinbun (1989/02/10) *Suiyō dorama, 9-kagetsu-buri saikai asakusa kamikiri geinin no seishun NHK* (After 9 months, a Wednesday drama again – the youth of paper-cutting performer in Asakusa – NHK)

Asahi Shinbun (1992/01/17) *Katsura konan-san rakugo-ka (yohaku o kataru)* (Katsura Konan Rakugoka. Talking about the margins)

Asahi Shinbun (1993/08/26) *Owarai de wa? Shin'uchi ranzō Ōta Hiroshi (koramu: watashi no mikata)* (What is happening in comedy? The overproduction of Shin'uchi - Ōta Hiroshi. Column: my point of view)

Asahi Shinbun (1997/10/18) Kindaisei to jibun no ikioi de miryoku: Shun'pūtei Koasa no dai dokuenkai (Charming audiences with a modern spirit of the times: Shun'pūtei Koasa's great solo show)

Asahi Shinbun (1998/05/07) *`2 Chōmegekijō' rajio-ban nekki Yes - fm no gōgōnaito [Ōsaka]* (2-chome theatre, enthusiasm for the radio version: the go-go-night of Yes-fm. [Osaka])

Asahi Shinbun (2001/01/04) *`Shōfukutei rokaku' Ōsaka rakugo, genki tsuken to [Ōsaka]* (Shofukutei Rokaku: Osaka Rakugo needs energy [Osaka])

Asahi Shinbun (2002/03/22) *7-Nen-buri ni iza shōbu, rakugo Sōkei-sen hantei wa okyaku-sama shinbashi/ Tōkyō* (after seven years a new match, Waseda-Keio rakugo-fight, the judge is the audience. Shinbashi/ Tokyo)

Asahi Shinbun (2003/07/24) *Katsurasanshi-san 6-daime kamigata rakugo kyōkai kaichō ni eraba reta [Ōsaka]* (Katsura Sanshi VI chosen a head of the Kamigata Rakugo Association [Osaka])

Asahi Shinbun (2004/08/13) *Katsurasanshi-san (kono hito to furaidē intabyū)/ Hyōgo* (Katsura Sanshi, a Friday Interview /Hyōgo)

Asahi Shinbun (2004/10/25) *Chibikko `hanashika' ni shishō mo 'maitta' Fukagawa Oyako yose/ Tōkyō* (Even the masters 'concede' to the small hanashika – parent-child yose in Fukagawa / Tokyo)

Asahi Shinbun (2005/04/10) *(Tōsei shizu o ka yose jijō: Shita) Tanimachi nakama to mimamoru Edo no iki/ Shizuoka* (The situation of current Shizuoka yose, part 2, by Tanimachi. The Iki of Edo, to protect with one's friends / Shizuoka)

Asahi Shinbun (2005/07/19) *(koe) Tsurube ya Sanshi ni uttori no watashi [Nagoya]* (Voice. Me, fascinated by Tsurube and Sanshi [Nagoya]).

Asahi Shinbun (2005/09/24) *(Yose) 'ni kkan tobikiri rakugo-kai' Momotarō, shitatakana wagei* (Yose. 'Nikkan Tobikiri Rakugokai' Momotarō, a strong storytelling art).

Asahi Shinbun (2005/10/17) *(Entame Kenkyūsho) Rakugo no Kansai jijō, donaidekka?* (Entertainment Research Centre. How's the Kansai Rakugo going?)

Asahi Shinbun (2005/11/08) *(Shūmei hayashiya shōzō)-mei ni makeji to imēji isshin* (The assignment of the name Hayashiya Shōzō. Without losing to the name, a new image)

Asahi Shinbun (2006/03/13) *Hōsō ūman-shō, Isoyama Ōhara-shi ni josei hōsō-sha-kon* (Broadcasting Woman Prize to Isoyama and Ōhara, Female Broadcasters Gathering)

Asahi Shinbun (2006/03/27) *Wakai hito mo rajio kii te yo NHK dai 1 hōsō, risunā kakutoku sakusen raigetsu kara shūmatsu no yoru* (Young people, please listen to the radio! NHK's first broadcasting, Listener-acquisition strategy, on weekends' nights starting next month)

Asahi Shinbun (2006/04/06) *BS CS ni rakugo no nami fan-sō kakudai kitai [Ōsaka]* (The wave rakugo on BS and CS, great expectations for an expansion of the audience)

Asahi Shinbun (2006/06/16) *Rakugo būmu, okurebasenagara… nagoya ni mo ko-san Shinchō rajio de [Nagoya]* (Rakugo Boom, even if late… also in Nagoya. Kosan and Shinchō on the radio [Nagoya])

Asahi Shinbun (2006/06/20) *Senmon gakkō-sei ga kōhō bangumi kikaku jimoto no meisho, CATV de hasshin toyoshimaku de rainen hōsō/ Tōkyōto* (Vocational School students plan an advertisement programme, 'Local Famous Places', transmitted on CATV, broadcast starts next year in Toshima Ward / Tokyo)

Asahi Shinbun (2006/07/24) *(Yose) Mitsukoshi Meijinkai Engei tokusen' zashiki-gei ni oshikakeru josei kyaku* (Yose. 'Selected Performances at the Mitsukoshi Great Names-show' female audiences barging in on a zashiki-art)

Asahi Shinbun (2007/05/09) *`Chiritotechin' omona shutsuen-sha kimaru NHK asanorenzokuterebishōsetsu [Ōsaka]* (The main actors for Chiritotechin has been chosen – NHK morning serialised TV novel [Osaka])

Asahi Shinbun (2007/06/23) *Itarian de rakugokai o hayashiya shōjaku-san, edokawaku no mise de 30-nichi/ Tōkyōto* (Rakugos how at the Italian restaurant – Hayashiya Shōjaku, 30 days in a restaurant in Edogawa Ward / Tokyo)

Asahi Shinbun (2007/07/30) *(Entame kenkyūjo) chiiki yose hyakkaryōran, tedzukuri miryoku [Ōsaka]* (Entertainment Research Centre. Regional Yose – Hundreds of flowers, handmade charm [Osaka])

Asahi Shinbun (2007/11/06) (*Kanryū) Rakugo-ka no shūmei karusugiya shimasen ka nē* (Point of view. Isn't the assignment of names to rakugoka a bit too much carefree?)

Asahi Shinbun (2008/08/24) *Rakugo San'yūtei Rakutarō ga Enraku shūmei, Enshō wa… `tome-na' nozomu izoku mo* (Rakugo: San'yūtei Rakutarō gets the name Enraku, while Enshō… There are also descendants who hope for the 'Tomena' [highest-rank name])

Asahi Shinbun (2009/05/30) *indekkusu gogatsu sanjūnichi* (Index, 30 May)

Asahi Shinbun (2010/06/19) *Katsura utamaru `shōten' no shikai-sha kaenai `warai' ni sekinin* (Katsura Utamaru, chairman of Shōten – the responsibility of the unchanging comedy)

Asahi Shinbun (2011/03/11) *Rakugo-ka no nichijō, honshoku ga megahon hayashiya shinpei ga kantoku shippaidan neta ni riaruna kodōgu* (The everyday life of the rakugoka, 'My main job is megaphone', directed by Hayashiya Shinpei. Tales of failures and real stage props)

Asahi Shinbun (2011/08/01) *(Nyūsu ga wakaran!) Katsurasanshi-san no namae ga kawaru n datte* (I don't understand the news! Apparently, Katsura Sanshi will change name)

Asahi Shinbun (2015/04/19) *Man'nerina n no `shōten' hōsō 50-nen-me-kō shichō-ritsu no himitsu wa* (It's the mannerism: the secret behind Shōten 50 years of high audience ratings).

Asahi Shinbun (2017/05/18) *(Tazuneru) saka to kaidan kōyō-zaka kaiwai Yokohamashi Nishiku Nakaku* (Visiting. Slopes and stairs – the Momijizaka Neighbourhood, Nishi-ward and Naka-ward, Yokohama)

Asahi Shinbun (2017/08/09) *(Entame-tsū) `taifū no me' seizoroi [Ōsaka]* (Entertainment. 'The Eye of the Thyphoon' gaining momentum [Osaka])

Asahi Shinbun (2017/11/02*) (+ C evening) 10-shūnen, ninki-sha seizoroi `dai Nagoya rakugo-sai' raigetsu kaisai [Nagoya]* (+C evening. Tenth year of 'Nagoya Rakugo Festival', array of popular performers, starts next month [Nagoya])

Asahi Shinbun (2017/11/15*) Wakate ōmono… rakugo-kai kasane 100kaime `Minamiōtsuka hōru' de asu kōen/ Tōkyōto* Young Performers and Great Masters… 100th rakugo show at 'Minami-Otsuka Hall', held tomorrow / Tokyo)

Asahi Shinbun (2018/07/13) *Sōda, anime o miyou! Shinia-muke gensen 11-pon* (Yes, let's watch anime! 11 carefully selected shows for seniors)

Asahi Shinbun (2018/12/25) *Kōdan no kyūseishu, mattemashita matsunojō kanbai tsudzuku dokuen-kai, rajio TV mo shutsuen tsugitsugi* (The saviour of Kōdan, finally arrives! Matsunojō: sold out solo-shows one afteranother, many appearances also on TV and radio).

Asahi Shinbun (2020/03/31) *Higashimurayama wo ookiku shite kureta hito corona kansen, Shimura Ken san itamu shiminra* (The man who made Higashimurayama great – Corona infection, towns people grieve over Ken Shimura).

Asahi Shinbun (2020/04/07) *Kinkyū jitai sengen, konyū 7-tofuken ni, kokkai he jizen hōkoku* (State of emergency declaration to be issued in 7 prefectures from tonight, advance report to be made to the parliament)

Asahi Shinbun (2021/05/17) "*Mukankyaku kaisai" no mujun ni "kyūgyō nara yōsei o"* (To the contradictory "keep open without letting audiences in", responded "if they want us to close, request it)

Sankei Sports (2018/08/30) Koyūza kaichō daikō ga shinkakumei Rakugo geijutsu kyōkai, zenza ni nenrei teiin seigen (A revolution from the acting head Koyūza An age limit and fized number for the zenza apprentices of the rakugo geijutsu kyōkai)

Yomiuri Shinbun (1997/10/23) *Kamigata Housou Owaraishi (94) Rakugo Boom Wakate de kessei* (History of Warai in Kamigata Broadcasting 94: The formation of the Rakugo Boom on behalf of young performers)

Yomiuri Shinbun (2002/11/25) *Yomiuri Ōsaka hakkan 50 shūnenkinen-gō kamigata rakugo yō koko made Katsurabeichō-san funtō* (Yomiuri Osaka 50th Anniversary Issue -Kamigata Rakugo so far- Katsura Beichō's fight)

Yomiuri Shinbun (2003/7/23) *Kamigata rakugo kyōkai-chō ni katsurasanshi-san* (Katsura Sanshi as head of the Kamigata Rakugo Association)

Yomiuri Shinbun (2003/7/27) *Kamigata rakugo kyōkai kaichō ni natta katsurasanshi-san* (Katsura Sanshi has become the head of the Kamigata Rakugo Association)

Yomiuri Shinbun (2024/06/21) *Koasa-ra rakugo sai prodyusu "Ginza no machi, makikomitai"* (Koasa and others produce a rakugo festival "We went to include the city of Ginza")

Yomiuri Shinbun (2005/05/23) *shōta, butai to futaridzure* (Shōta, the stage and bringing two people)

Yomiuri Shinbun (2005/07/04) *Dai Ginza Rakugosai 'rokunin no kai' ga Tōkyō Ginza no nanakaijō de* (the Great Ginza Rakugo Festival 'six men show' held in seven places in Ginza, Tokyo)

Yomiuri Shinbun (2005/10/29) *Rakugo Boom wakate ga shinsaku, wakamono tobitsuku* (Rakugo Boom: young performers create shinsaku rakugo, attracting young people)

Yomiuri Shinbun (2006/03/13) *[Hayari mo no kō] rakugo būmu Edo jōcho to ninjō, wakamono ni mo shintō* (reflections on trending things: Rakugo Boom, the humanity and emotions of Edo, spreading also among young people)

Yomiuri Shinbun (2006/06/19*) Rakugo būmu wa korekarada daiginzarakugosai, hipparu Koasa 7 tsuki 15-nichi kara 3-kakan* (Rakugo Boom is from now on: Great Ginza Rakugo Festival, Koasa taking the lead, for three days from 15 July).

Yomiuri Shinbun (2008/02/01) *[Eiga] `kanki no uta'= shinekanon Shinosuke-ryū, warai ari namida ari* (Movie: ‘Song of Delight’ = Shinekanon, Shinnosuke-style, laughter and tears)

Yomiuri Shinbun (2008/03/01) *NHK ‘chiritotechin' shūroku shūryō hiroin kanjitani `kanshanokimochi de ippai'* (Chiritotechin by NHK has been completed, the heroin Kanjiya: ‘I am full of gratitude’)

Yomiuri Shinbun (2008/04/04) *[Yakata o tazuneru] rakugo myūjiamu kibun wa chiritotechin = Ōsaka* (‘Visiting the Building’: the Rakugo Museum – feeling ‘chiritotechin’ = Osaka)

Yomiuri Shinbun (2009/02/25) *Engei bangumi `shōten' 40-nen koe zekkōchō 20-pāsento-chō no kō shichō-ritsu mo Nittere-kei de* (The entertainment programme Shōten turns 40 years old in great condition – high audience rating of even more than 20% - on Nippon Television)

Yomiuri Shinbun (2016/12/05) *[Miru] wakate ga ninau rakugo būmu* (The Rakugo Boom carried on by young performers to ‘look at’)

Yomiuri Shinbun (2018/12/18) *Dentōgei sandai dōji shūmei sanjūnananen buri* (In the traditional performing arts three names are assigned at the same time, it last happened 37 years ago)

Yomiuri Shinbun (2021/05/29) *Yose shien he rakugo 2-kyoukai danketsu* (The 2 *rakugo* associations united in support of the *yose*)

Yomiuri Shinbun (2024/01/27) Pawahara Enka san ni baishō meirei (Power Harassment [San'yūtei] Enka ordered by court to pay reparations)