

## Minutes of the 298<sup>th</sup> meeting – Tuesday Feb. 12<sup>th</sup> 2008

### Murder, Mayhem, and Malarkey: An Evening of Japanese Detective Fiction

A talk by Ivan P. Hall

**Present:** Hans & Sangdao Bänziger, Jim Campion, Lorenz Ferrari, Carole Beauclerk, Carol & Bob Stratton, Celeste Holland, Louis Gabaude, June Hulley, John Cadet, Mark and Dianne Barber-Riley, Barbara Tyrell, Juergen Polte, David Blair Brown, John Daly, Bennett Lerner, Bodil Blokker. An audience of 19.

#### The full text of Ivan's talk

Thank you Brian, and thank all of you for coming. Let me say right off that I read Japanese murder mysteries strictly for pleasure, and, during my years in Japan did it in the same way that most Tokyoites do – on the subway! So please accept that this is not going to be one of your usual fine scholarly presentations. I merely hope to convey to you through my own personal enthusiasm some idea of a niche in Japanese popular literature that is intensely human as well as rollickingly good fun.

In fact, whereas my professional duties during 35 years' residence in Japan involved writing *seriously* about Japanese History, or participating in the often *polemical* debates over Tokyo's domestic and foreign policies, it was always a sheer relief to come back to a familiar, fanciful realm that I could enjoy together with my Japanese friends, simply for enjoyment's sake!

By way of introduction, I would like to give you, first, a brief historical context, and second the plot summaries of two novels – The Inugami Clan and Terror at Triangle House that represent the two poles in the interplay of Japanese material and Western technique that has characterized the genre since the early 1920's. And then, for the body [no pun intended!] of my talk, narrate to you, in good old storytelling fashion, the tale told in Murder at the Old Daimyo Inn, one of Japan's all-time favorites, where Western form and Japanese subject matter achieve their purest balance.

My interest in Japanese detective fiction was first sparked three decades ago by the chance spotting at a Tokyo subway platform kiosk of a Japanese-language paperback featuring on its dust jacket the face of a terrified damsel in distress and the malevolent image of a mysterious older woman, both set against the background of an old Edwardian style half-timbered mansion badly in need of repairs.

Aha! thought I. Perhaps there was more to Japanese detective fiction than flashing samurai swords, *yakuza* (gangster) shootouts on the Yokohama waterfront, car chases down the Tokyo-Nagoya Expressway, or other inanities of the crime-as-raw-violence school à la américaine? Perhaps there might be a sub-genre replicating the magnificent mood settings, the social portraiture, and the ratiocinative suspense building of a good Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot yarn?

To my great delight I discovered the Japanese had all of that, and in spades. But it all came with unique Japanese twists to those very three aspects that have endeared me to the masterpieces of Agatha Christie and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Like Doyle's Dartmoor Japan has its own brooding natural settings. Like the simmering family hostilities and high-low status tensions of a Christie country-house weekend, the Japanese have their own distinct human web of motivating values and sentiments. And, goodness only knows, they have their own unique set of stage props for rigging up the tale. However, like so much else in Japanese culture since the 1870s, a lot of Western stuff has gone into the mix, too. European and American writers and their best known Whodunits have provided everything from general inspiration to specific plot models for the Japanese mystery craft.

The two writers I am presenting to you tonight are very briefly Edogawa Ranpo (1894-1965) and at greater length Yokomizo Seishi (1902-1981). I use their surnames first, Japanese style. These two men were the acknowledged doyens and pioneers of the orthodox Western style of mystery writing in prewar and early postwar Japan. That is to say, they succeeded in introducing Western-style, detective-centered, rationally structured, plots driven by intellectually challenging clues and psychologically cumulative suspense. I have likened their appeal to that of Doyle and Christie although other influences and affinities would include Edgar Allan Poe and John Dickson Carr. Both men were characterized as "Romantic" --- a powerful literary current in 1930s Japan. In point of fact, however, their great breakthrough was in cutting loose from the ancient pre-modern genre of ghoulish horror-for-horror's sake stories so brilliantly preserved for us by Lafcadio Hearn in his "Kwaidan" --- those spooky tales of jilted mistresses rising vengefully from the grave, their long tresses caked with blood, or of legless ghosts hovering in the humid mid-summer night's air.

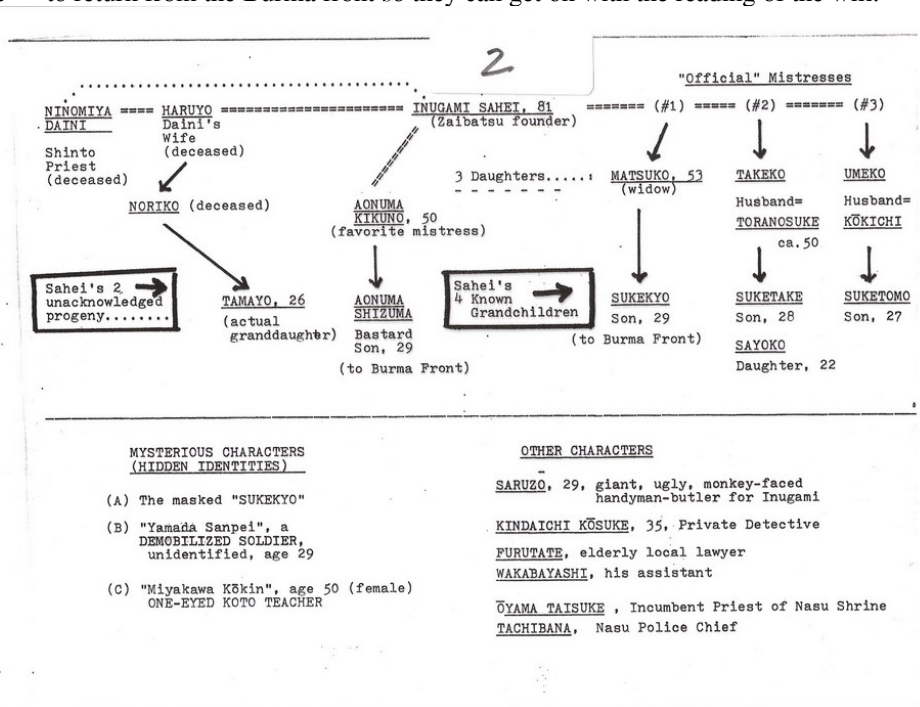
(There has been, to be sure, a prodigious development of Japanese detective fiction from the 1960s. This ranges from the socially conscious themes of Matsumoto Seicho, to the train murders Nishimura Kyotaro ties to the strict timetable punctuality of Japan's rail system, to a full-circle return to the ancient ghoulish & ghostly thanks to the box-office promise of our latest hi-tech visual technology. But I shall stick to my own preferences tonight!)

I: Yokomizo Seishi, THE INUGAMI CLAN (*Inugamike no Ichizoku*) 1951

To start with that kiosk book, The Inugami Clan, which first appeared in 1951 not long after the war. It was a cultural phenomenon in its own right when Kadokawa Publishers issued a new release in 1976 as part of their celebration marking 10 million sales of Yokomizo mysteries. During 1976 it reappeared as a full-length cartoon book and was made into a box-office hit by the internationally acclaimed film director Ichikawa Kon. [FYI, I have just learned that Kon's recent remake of his old film will be showing here in Chiang Mai at Kad Suan Kaew starting February 21, 2008.]

This novel structures the clue-hunting game on a massive scale. But its plot and props are very Japanese --- if I may put it that way. Indeed, some of Yokomizo's later novels tend to drag with their detours into antiquarian detail, medieval legends, and unintelligible local dialects that overwhelm the original suspense line. The Inugami Clan, though a Gothic Horror of sorts, remains culturally accessible to the Western reader.

The story takes place at the mountain lake home of a wealthy industrial *zaibatsu* family in the bleak first fall and winter after Japan's surrender, 1945-46. Let's take a look at the cast of characters [see #2-GENELOGICAL CHART]. The deceased Inugami Sahei, the founder of the family's fortune, has written his will in such a way that all of his heirs have plausible motives for murdering one another. On the right side we have Sahei's "official" family, three daughters --- Matsuko, Takeko, and Umeko --- sired by three separate concubines, each of them in turn having a son. The three daughters have been coldly treated by their father, and are on rotten terms with each other, so each of them is determined to grab the entire fortune for her own son. To be sure, there is no love lost between old Sahei's the three grandsons either --- Sukekiyo, Suketake, and Suketomo. The family is all waiting impatiently for Matsuko's son, Sukekiyo --- the eldest of the three --- to return from the Burma front so they can get on with the reading of the will.



The left side of the chart shows Sahei's "unofficial" family. (I should explain that the witches' brew here has been spiced by early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Japan's sexual hierarchy of wives, legally recognized concubines, and non-recognized mistresses). Sahei has made unusually generous provisions --- no one can figure out why --- for Tamayo, the granddaughter of a deceased Shinto priest, Ninomiya Daini, he was friends with. There is also Sahei's bastard son Aonuma Shizuma, the son of Aonuma Kikuno, his favorite mistress. Shizuma bears a close resemblance to Sukekiyo, and was also sent to the Burma front. On being driven out of the house, his mother Kikuno reminded the three daughters of an old curse involving the family's three treasures --- their garden full of life-sized chrysanthemum dolls; a *koto* (the traditional Japanese harp), and a ceremonial ax.

And, lo and behold, we get in rapid succession second grandson Sukekiyo's severed head impaled on one of those trellised chrysanthemum dolls; third grandson Suketomo is strangled with a *koto* string; and the bastard Shizuma (who had come home disguised as Sukekiyo) is found stuck head downwards in the ice of the frozen-over lake. It occurs to someone that the reverse (i.e., the upside-down) reading for *Su-ke-ki-yo* would be *Yo-ki-ke-su*, meaning "to ax!" (This last fancy is pure Yokomizo.) In the final denouement, it turns out that it was Matsuko, the haughty eldest daughter, who dunnit all. Her blameless son Sukekiyo gallantly tries to cover for her, but the police see through his stratagem, let him off with a light sentence, and he ends up marrying Tamayo and living happily ever after on a goodly portion of Sahei's legacy.

I'm afraid that's more than enough of a frightfully convoluted plot, but let me dwell briefly on some very Japanese aspects:

(1) The tale ends, as do so many Japanese TV murder mysteries today, with a long drawn out confessional at the scene of capture. This takes place in the presence of the law and of the grieving loved ones of the assorted victims, where everything is explained by the criminal who begins to make his or her amends to society right then and there. Although she is the murderer extraordinaire, Matsuko commands the scene, is spoken to honorifically by her juniors, and prescribes an equitable distribution of the inheritance among all family members!

(2) Military combat being a great equalizer, a very positive camaraderie emerges between Sukekiyo and his bastard cousin Shizuma. They meet on the Burma front, where the privileged Sukekiyo decides that the wretched Shizuma should get his fair share of the family fortune. Then Shizuma, hearing mistakenly that Sukekiyo has been killed in action, returns to Japan first, and tries to convince Matsuko that he is Sukekiyo with a badly scarred face. Crafty Matsuko isn't completely convinced, but in any case she needs her son to claim Daddy's money, so she has Shizuma wear a white rubber mask to fend off the identity skeptics.



The heads of the two parallel households are twin brothers now seventy years of age --- Hirumine Kensaku and Hirumine Kozo. They have been bound into a life of rivalry, enmity, and now deadly hatred by their long since deceased father's will. (Another nasty, troublemaking will!) Their father was something of a health nut, who, wishing to keep his twin sons in trim had specified that his entire fortune would go to whichever of the two lived the longest. The septuagenarian master of the right wing of the house is the powerfully built, athletic KENSAKU. Having also lived the life of a roué, however, he is now on the brink of death. That means that his twin brother in the left wing --- the shy, overly-cautious, KOZO --- will win the race. Unless of course, he is murdered, which he is, by some unidentified member of the two families.

The surviving Kensaku, however, is struck by remorse and pity for Kozo's children, who will now have to go penniless. And so --- being on the threshold of a natural death himself --- he rewrites his own will dividing the total family fortune four ways, equally, between his own two children and Kozo's two. That, however, does not sit well with somebody who murders Kensaku before he can sign the new will. Here we see the poor fellow, Kensaku, in a wheelchair in the elevator. He has been felled by a large family heirloom dagger, the loosely fitting handle of which was attached to the elevator pulley in such a way as to shoot the blade down through the transom grill in the elevator ceiling after someone on the third floor pushed the "Down" button.

Well, it turns out the murders were not about money at all, but about love! The perpetrator was neither one of the four children --- the putative heirs --- nor the mad, monkey-faced butler, Saruzo, but the least suspected character in this double ménage, the wealthy businessman Hatano, the husband of Kozo's daughter Reiko. Hatano, living in Kozo's left wing, is madly in love with his own wife, but she, alas --- Keiko --- has lost her heart to Joji, the philandering second son of Kensaku of the right wing. Joji's only interest in Keiko is sharing in her money in case her father, Kozo, outlives his father, Kensaku, as had seemed most likely. The jealous Hatano realizes that the only way to keep his wife Keiko is to make her financially unattractive to Joji --- in other words, to assure Joji of his full inheritance. That means, first, killing the elderly Kozo so that his twin brother Kensaku (Joji's father) wins the longevity race. And then, when the victorious Kensaku decides to be generous after all and split everything four ways, to murder him before he can sign his new will.

Well, that's the story. But the "Rest of the Story" is even more intriguing. Many Japanese novels have an extensive *Atogaki* -- or Postscript --- at the end, penned by some scholarly authority who expatiates on the work just read. Here, for the first time, I learned that Edogawa Ranpo's tale was lifted hook, line, and sinker from an American detective novel, Murder Among the Angells [the family name] by Roger Scarlett, published by Doubleday Doran in 1932! Going all the way to the Library of Congress to view the English-language original, I discovered that Tokyo was actually Boston; the house was one of those Beacon Street mansions backing onto the Charles River Esplanade; the septuagenarian twins were Darius Angell and Carolus Angell; and the murderous son-in-law was the wealthy Mr. Whitney Adams, jealous for his wife Caroline!

If all this looks like an outrageous violation of copyright, let me make two points here. First, this is not a verbatim translation, but a transposition, an adaptation of everything to Japanese terms. What was "purloined" was not the actual words, but the plot --- the idea of the book, in great detail. [Sound familiar?] The Japanese traditionally have placed less emphasis than the West on propriety rights over intellectual material. Once in the public domain, a creative work was often viewed as a public good --- and copying and adaptation from Western works in particular tended to be seen as a broad service to Japanese culture rather than as an intellectual steal. There is evidence, moreover, that during the war years Edogawa may have turned his hand to reworking a politically innocuous foreign yarn as a way of keeping the government censors off his back.

Second, I would just note the ease with which the ambience of an old Edwardian home in Boston was transplanted to early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Tokyo, where the then modernizing elite tried to be more Western than the West --- with their top hats, their spats, their Rolls Royces, and the late Victorian Gothic spookiness of their sprawling brick and half-timber mansions. For Edogawa's transposition, it was a perfect fit.

### III: Yokomizo Seishi, MURDER AT THE OLD DAIMYO INN (*Honjin Satsujin Jiken*) 1946

Back to Yokomizo Seishi now, and his first postwar novel, Murder at the Old Daimyo Inn, published in 1946. This is a masterpiece of uncluttered ratiocination, working within genuine Japanese settings and psychologies, but without the melodramatic and antiquarian digressions that came to typify Yokomizo's later work. It is my own favorite Japanese mystery. Filmed several times over -- with superb early black-and whites -- many Japanese, I think, would agree. (Unfortunately I know of no Western-language translation.)

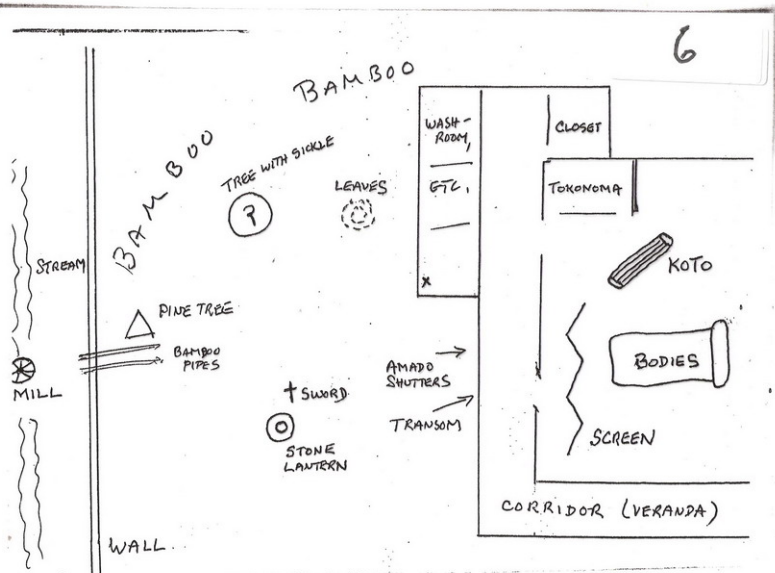
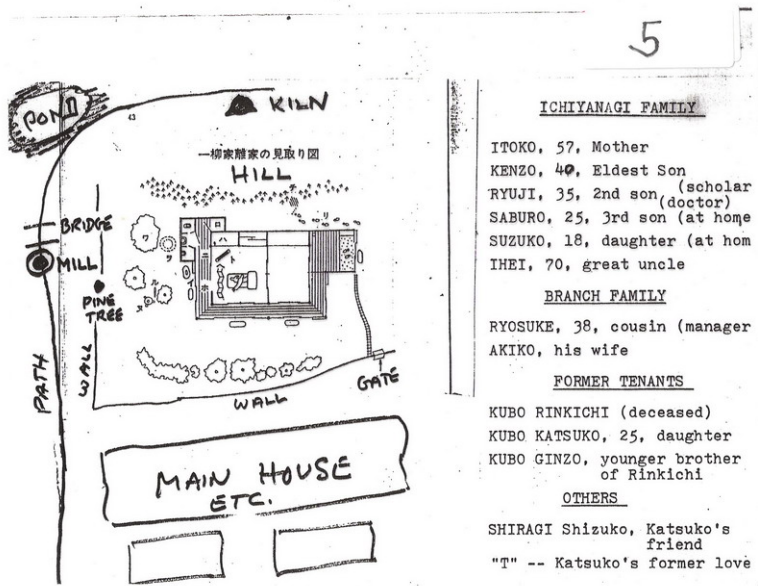
The action takes place in 1937, as reconstructed by the narrator who visits the scene years later, his curiosity piqued by rumors of a gruesome murder that, for some reason, was actually solved but never went to court or made the papers. 1937 was a rather dreary time for Japan, already in the grips of a military dominated government that was dragging the nation into a full-scale war with China.

The geographical setting is equally bleak. The crime takes place in the traditional residential complex of a wealthy rural family set miles back from the main railway line connecting Osaka to Hiroshima in the western part of Honshu, the main island of Japan. Here, in Okayama Prefecture, there are tiny villages scattered over the ancient rice growing plain. The "Honjin" residence, as it is known in the Japanese title, hugs the extreme northern edge of the flatland where it meets the steep, uninhabited hills leading upward to the mountainous central spine of Honshu. Today the entire region is a sprawling, semi-urbanized web of bullet-train lines, premium-yield rice paddies, hi-tech factories, and good French bakeries in nearly every town. Not so then, when transportation for more than a kilometer or two was by clambering, dust-covered public bus or taxi, and for shorter distances, if you were wealthy enough to afford one, a jinrikisha pulled by human power.

The title is a bit misleading. "Honjin" is a term from the pre-modern Tokugawa Period referring to the official post-stations, or hostleries, where the *daimyo*, or feudal barons, broke their journeys up and down the great highway along the Pacific Coast side of Japan. The Ichiyonagi family once owned such a prestigious "daimyo inn" but had long since made its fortune in modern industry and moved inland to the present site, joining the powerful rural gentry. As newcomers, however, they were not particularly popular among the local folk.

The "Honjin House" compound consists of two parts. On the south side we find the imposing traditional Japanese home and sundry out-buildings of the Ichiyonagi Main Family [see #5-MAIN HOUSE]. On the north side, closed off from the main house

by a stone wall with a single wooden access gate through it, stands the Annex (*hanare* or *bekken* in Japanese). This is an elegant, classical structure [see #6-ANNEX] used as a guest house. Off to the side of the compound somewhere stands the independent home of the Branch Family, headed by cousin Ryosuke.



The Annex consists of a single sleeping room floored with *tatami* mats. This is enclosed on three sides by a verandah which is separated from the sleeping room by delicate, sliding, rice-paper *shoji* panels and is closed off against the elements on the outer side by heavy wooden shutters, also sliding, known as *amado* (literally, rain doors). An expensive gilt folding screen stands at the west end of the room at the head of the mattresses (*futon*) that are rolled out at night but stored during the day in a spacious closet. The *futon* closet is located together with the toilet and the washroom in a facilities area in the northwest corner of the building. On the northern, permanently closed, wall of the sleeping room are the ceremonial niche or *tokonoma*, with its customary flower arrangement, and an expensive heirloom samurai sword displayed along the wall. When not in use the Annex is virtually air-tight save for a tiny screened window over the non-flush toilet facility and a rough-hewn, transom-like space about 5" wide running between the lintels of the sliding *amado* rain shutters and the crossbeams that run above and parallel to the lintels, holding up the eaves of the roof.

There is an entrance hallway on the east side of the Annex. All along the north side runs the steep uncultivated slope marking the beginning of the upland, an area run to wild grasses and thick bamboo. There is a broad traditionally landscaped garden surrounding the Annex on the south and west sides, especially on the west where stand a traditional stone lantern (*tora*) with the usual perforations and a paulownia tree with a pile of raked leaves under it. Hard by the west wall is a Japanese pine, its heavy horizontal branches supported by a typical brace of horizontal and vertical bamboo poles. Not far outside the compound wall a small stream runs along the western boundary of the family property. Straddling the stream right opposite the Annex is a small mill used from time by local tenants to husk their rice. On the far side of the stream is a path leading uphill, northward, to a small tarn and beyond that an old brick kiln for making charcoal out of firewood. The path leads on several kilometers to the isolated hamlet of Hisamura.

Does this setting seem ominous enough? Well, now meet the dramatis personae! [See again #5-MAIN HOUSE] Matriarch of the Ichiyanagi family is the proud, authoritarian, Mother ITOKO, brimming with feudal pride. Her Eldest Son KENZO, who must someday take a wife to assume the family headship, is at age 40 still unmarried. A prolific scholar and author who once even studied philosophy at Kyoto University, Kenzo has been forced by a respiratory ailment to abandon a public career and carry on his writing at home. Although originally exposed to the modernizing world of prewar Japan's great cities, Kenzo mirrors his mother in his punctiliousness for traditional values. Going her one better he is obsessively fastidious about cleanliness, a stickler for proper form, very earnest and uptight and unbending. Second Son RYUJI, 35, a successful M.D. in Osaka, seems like the only practical chap in the family. Third Son SABURO, 25, also living at home, is a junior-high dropout, basically dimwitted and lazy but also crafty and brilliant in peculiar ways, an avid fan of detective fiction, his own room crammed with murder mysteries. The one Daughter SUZUKO, 18, is similarly ambivalent. She is semi-retarded and sickly, yet plays the traditional Japanese *koto* harp beautifully and has an uncanny clairvoyance at times as to events and motivations. Finally, more often sloshed than sober, there is a Great Uncle IHEI, age 70, who lives some distance away in another village.

The branch family consists of Cousin RYOSUKE, 38, and his Wife AKIKO. Managing the family's business affairs he is worldly-wise and on bad terms temperamentally with the fussy and rigid KENZO. Former tenants figure prominently in the cast, too. The long-since deceased KUBO RINKICHI, having made it good in California (Ah, that Morning in America!), returned to establish a profitable vineyard. He left a daughter, KUBO KATSUKO, 25, who was brought up in completely Western fashion, having attended the top women's teachers' college in Japan, and is teaching at a prestigious regional girls' academy. An outspoken advocate of modernity, she has helped Kenzo in translating foreign texts and is now engaged to be married to him on November 25, 1937. Most of the Ichiyanagi family, however, still looks down on her as a former tenant. Her Uncle KUBO GINZO, her father's younger brother, has been in loco parentis to her, and is anxious for her happiness, perhaps even her safety, once she is absorbed into the Ichiyanagi household.

And finally, there is KINDAICHI KOSUKE, Yokomizo's answer to Sherlock Holmes. Or rather to Detective Columbo! Still only 25 he outdoes Columbo not only in dressing shabbily and hod-clopping around on noisy wooden *geta*, but by stuttering his way through the simplest conversational sentence and -- during deeply cogitatorial moments --- scratching his unkempt haystack of hair until the dandruff falls out! Ginzo originally met Kindaichi Kosuke (let's call him KK) in San Francisco (where else?) where KK was in training. He now happens to live conveniently nearby, where Ginzo can call on him in his hour of need.

The tale opens on a grey afternoon two days before the wedding (Nov. 23) when an odd stranger in rags and tatters and big dilapidated boots (he is described as a *Lumpen*, the German loan-word for "tramp") shows up at a roadside teahouse a kilometer or so south of the Ichiyanagi mansion, asking the way to it and requesting a glass of water. This he takes with a hand showing only three fingers -- the three central digits. The customers shudder and the proprietress puts the cup back on the shelf gingerly, with disgust, without wiping off the fingerprints. While this is going on a severe-looking gentleman, somberly dressed, rides by sitting ramrod-tall in a sleek black private rickshaw. It is Kenzo, everyone notes, as they openly speculate as to how his oddly matched marriage will work out --- one that so radically pits tradition against modernity and high social status versus low family origins.

Indeed, there is already a bitter spat at the family powwow the following day (24<sup>th</sup>), the last day before the wedding. Mother Itoko needles Kenzo, telling the groom-to-be what a pity it is that his Westernized fiancé can't play the *koto* and give the recital required at the marriage rite of all women marrying into the Ichiyanagi family. Kenzo retorts that Katsuko plays the piano, beautifully. Sister Suzuko saves the day by offering to play the *koto* in Katsuko's stead. Later that same day, Suzuko reappears mourning the death of her beloved kitten "Tama." Youngest brother Saburo promptly appears with a small wooden *mikan* (mandarin orange) box to serve as a coffin for the cat, which Saburo induces the poor Suzuko to bury in a remote corner of the property. Saburo also loudly repeats for all to hear the rumors about the mysterious Mr. Three Fingers who showed up the day before asking the way to Honjin House.

Indeed, on the very evening of the wedding (25<sup>th</sup>) Mr. Three Fingers shows up at the kitchen entrance at around 6:30 PM during the busiest preparations for the marriage feast. Holding a little slip of memo paper between his second and third fingers, he gives it to a maid with instruction to take it to Kenzo. The outer fold reads, in a rude penciled scrawl, "From Your Lifelong Enemy." Kenzo is missing for some time, but they eventually find him on the Annex verandah, where he glances at the slip of paper and pockets it almost casually. Few guests attend the ceremony starting at 8:00, since local society shuns this haughty outsider family. All the family members I mentioned before are there. Little Suzuko gives the *koto* concert as agreed but the bride, Katsuko, expresses regret that it was thus arranged behind her back since she, as a matter of fact, plays it quite well, too. Kenzo suggests that she play it at the convivial second-round celebration which always takes place to the accompaniment of much sake in the Annex late in the evening. The *koto* is taken to the Annex and is placed near the *tokonoma*, where it will remain for the rest of the tale. By midnight Great Uncle Ihei is stone drunk, so Third Son Saburo is obliged to take him home to a neighboring village and stay there for the night. By 2 AM the couple at last are alone in the nuptial chamber as snow starts to fall, deeper and deeper, throughout the night.

Katsuko's protective Uncle Ginzo had been sleeping in the corner room of the Main House closest to the Annex. At about 4 AM he is awakened by bloodcurdling screams coming from that direction. He hears the low muffled sound --- duh-duh-duh --- of someone walking around inside, followed by the wild strumming of the 13-stringed *koto*: koro-koro-koro-koro --- shaaaaan. By now everybody is awake and out, but the gate in the wall around the Annex has been locked from the inside! As they wait for a manservant to fetch a lantern and an ax to break in, the *koto* sounds again, but this time with a high plucking note --- piin, piin, piin, piin --- followed by buru-buru-buru-buruuuun. In English onomatopoeia the latter would be baw-yaw-yaw-yaaaawng --- something like that metallic snapping-and-dying sound we always hear at the end of Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*. And then, as the party breaks its way into the Annex area, total silence, a deep snow leaving no footprints, the Annex totally sealed except for a tiny ray of light through the transom on the shuttered west side. And, most uncannily, in the west garden, a samurai sword standing upright in the snow not far from the stone lantern!

The manservant climbs onto a stone washbasin set below the light-emitting transom to get a look inside. What he can see are two open rice paper *shoji* panels in front of him, and fallen back against them at a 45 degree angle the gilt folding screen, which blocks any further view. As the manservant takes the ax to break down the heavy outer *amado* a shadow moves across the garden. It is SHUHEI, a tenant who comes regularly at 4 AM to husk his rice at the mill since he is otherwise occupied during the

day. The sluice gate is normally closed, so he has to open it every morning to get the mill wheel turning. Upon hearing the screams and the wild sounds from the *koto* he had climbed up the hill to hide and see what was going on. But no fleeing villain appeared.

Once inside the Annex the party freezes at --- *horribile visu* --- the bloody spectacle of two bodies fallen across each other on the nuptial *futon*. Below is the bride, Katsuko, badly slashed in many places; and on top the groom, Kenzo, with a deep gash from left shoulder down the arm, and another to his heart. The *koto* that presumably played the “dirge” and the tilted gilt screen are both covered with blood from a three-fingered hand, but without fingerprints since the murderer was wearing the usual plectra for playing the *koto*. (These are attached to the under side of the fingers, thereby hiding the whorls.) The three blood-smearred plectra are quickly located in the *tokonoma* niche. Oddly, one of the thirteen mini-bridges supporting the *koto* strings is found to be missing. Known as *kotoji*, these are more like small pegs --- an upside-down “V” on two legs with a groove-like notch across the top --- than like the sturdy wooden arc of a violin or violoncello bridge. On the veranda under the transom lies a thin cotton Japanese bathing cloth (*tenugui*), streaked with fresh blood and rolled up in a coil. Every cranny of the Annex is checked, but no one is found hiding.

After daybreak as the police and medics arrive it is Ginzo, the outraged uncle of the murdered bride and himself deeply suspicious of the groom’s family, who impatiently pushes the investigation. By 11 AM, when the snow has melted, they discover dirt tracks leading from the hillside on the north down to the entrance door of the Annex. The marks are those of heavy, dilapidated boots, like those reportedly worn by Mr. Three Fingers! But they only come down from the hill – there are no tracks going back out. From the condition of the snow the police estimate that the killer must have entered the Annex about 9 PM the previous night and waited his chance. Indeed, there are signs of someone having sat on the bedding in the *futon* closet. So the initial hypothesis was that the murderer had hid himself in the closet, taken the sword from its place on the wall, put on the plectra, killed Katsuko without resistance, but had to fight Kenzo briefly, stabbing him in the arm and heart.

Also on the day right after the murder (the 26<sup>th</sup>) they find on the inner side of the *amado* shutters and on the upright wooden pillars additional sets of three-fingered handprints. These, having been overlooked during the initial search in the wee hours of the morning, are in a darker-colored, since longer-dried, blood. They come with full fingerprints – which are found to match those left on the teahouse cup by the mysterious tramp! Ginzo suspects the men in the Ichiyonagi family. Cousin Ryosuke claims that the *amado* was bolted from the inside when he first reached in --- but could he be lying? Saburo claims he was with his drunken Uncle Ihei all night, but could he have come back early? Most suspicious of all is Second Son Ryuji, the Osaka physician and well-dressed urban gentleman who excused himself from the wedding altogether on the grounds of an urgent medical conference in distant Fukuoka City. But he suddenly shows up the very morning after explaining that the meeting had ended early and he had come post-haste on learning of the tragedy. Feeling himself surrounded by suspects, old Ginzo sends a wire to his private eye friend --- the shaggy, diminutive, plain-looking Kindaichi Kosuke --- asking for help.

Three additional things turn up before KK’s arrival on the second day of the investigation (27<sup>th</sup>). One, the missing *koto* peg is discovered in the pile of dead leaves under the paulownia tree, but it could not have been thrown out from the house since the toilet window is screened. Two, a sickle is found embedded in a branch of this paulownia tree, too tightly to be removed. The gardener had indeed been there the day before the murder but he only uses shears, never a sickle. Third, Ginzo tells the police a very odd thing he had failed mention earlier --- namely, that he had heard exactly the same sounds from the *koto* on the night *before* the murder! The mad strumming of koro-koro-koro-shaaaaan followed by those high plucking, then snapping, sounds of piin-piin-piin...buru-buru-buruuun.

By noon, however, KK is there and decides that Kenzo’s private diaries and albums may harbor some clues, especially as to the threatening note delivered by Mr. Three Fingers --- “From Your Lifelong Enemy” --- that was found in the sleeve of Kenzo’s kimono. The full message reads: “The vow made on the island will be carried out shortly, by any means possible.” This suggests that the three-fingered *Lumpen* had come for revenge, to settle an old grudge stemming from an encounter with Kenzo on some island years ago, when both men were still young. Indeed, Saburo conveniently remembers having seen a photo in one of Kenzo’s albums with the caption, “My Lifelong Enemy.” They find it --- it is a small snapshot of a youth, cut from a driver’s license and very, very worn. Detective Kindaichi Kosuke finds it fishy, however --- old as it is, the photo seems to have been pasted in recently. KK also finds in the charcoal-burning stove (used for heating traditional Japanese houses) five or six only partially burned pages of Kenzo’s diary on which some words about an island, a girl, and a vow of revenge can still be made out.. The San Francisco-trained KK finds the whole thing too neat, too deliberate – someone seems to be playing games here!

He then accompanies Third Son Saburo, the murder-mystery aficionado, into his own study, its bookshelves stacked to the ceiling with Western detective novels in Japanese translation. When KK grills Saburo as to his favorite murder mystery based on a “sealed room” scenario, Saburo is visibly rattled. It seems that Saburo is the sole beneficiary of Kenzo’s life insurance policy. That puts him in the highly motivated suspect category. But it also seems to rule out the hypothesis of a suicide since Kenzo was known to be very fond of his youngest brother --- and the law in case of suicide would have denied Saburo his 50,000-Yen benefit, a princely sum in those days.

Kindaichi then receives an urgent message from an old college friend of the murdered bride Katsuko, who is sure she knows the identity of the actual killer. Katsuko’s friend is a Miss SHIRAYANAGI Shizuko, who has been hospitalized in a nearby town --- again, how conveniently! --- following an automobile accident. When KK visits her at the hospital she tells him of an old but very brief affair that Katsuko had years ago with a certain “T” --- a young Mr. TATANI --- whom she jilted, although he fully expected her to marry him. In the weeks before her marriage, Katsuko wrote two letters in desperation to her friend Shirayanagi. In the first she told how she had confessed to Kenzo the fact that she was no longer a virgin --- better to get that minus out of the way, modern style, before the wedding rather than after. And how Kenzo seemed to have accepted it with equanimity. The second letter bewailed how, by pure bad luck, she had run across “T” recently, for the first time in years, in an Osaka department store. “T” had gone to seed, swaggering around like a gangster and making threatening remarks. Katsuko was convinced that something awful was going to happen at the time of her wedding.

Kindaichi in any case wants to check out his hunch that Mr. Three Fingers was not the killer. What if he was just an ordinary bum passing through the area and was only asking the way to some other place? Testing this hypothesis, KK goes to a tobacco stand near the teahouse where the tramp first appeared and asks for directions to the village of Hisamura, which lies over the upland to the north. As expected, he is told by the tobacconist, who is trying to keep things simple for the stranger, “Well, first

follow this road here to the big Ichiyanagi residence, you can't miss it, and then take the path over the hill from there." In other words, poor Mr. Three Fingers at the teashop may simply have been seeking confirmation for directions he had been given earlier in his trek, and had been seen stopping and looking at Honjin House merely to reset his bearings.

KK continues his researches elsewhere, too, discovering that in fact a couple of *koto* bridges, or pegs, have been switched around. It's an exasperatingly complicated digression, but upshot of it is that the peg found outside in the pile of leaves was removed by the killer well before the night of the murder. Another strange discovery is that two of the bamboo poles in the brace supporting the pine tree not only protrude horizontally over the west wall, but have had their joints hollowed out to make two open tubes pointing in the direction of the little mill.

In the waning hours of the ensuing night those strange sounds of the *koto* are heard once again. Koro-koro-koro-shaaan, followed after a brief interval by piin-piin-piin-buru-buru-buruun. Indeed, at the very same hour, 4:00 AM. They rush to find Third Son Saburo badly wounded in the entrance hall of the Annex, apparently having been attacked near the folding screen --- the very same spot where Kenzo was killed. From there he had managed to stagger over to the front door before falling down unconscious there. Bloody triple fingerprints are found all over the screen. Saburo however will survive, and as detective Kindaichi turns away from the scene a mysterious smile flickers over his face.....

Now the plot thickens, or shall we say sickens... Later in the morning of that third day of the investigation (28th) Kindaichi and Ginzo decide to dig up the cat's grave. During the past two nights Daughter Suzuko has been seen sleepwalking in the direction of the cat's burial spot, claiming that she has seen Mr. Three Fingers at the gravesite. And indeed, bloodied three-fingered prints have been found on the diminutive softwood grave marker. Someone, obviously, has been messing around here! KK and Ginzo trade knowing glances as they remove from the coffin an object that is the same size as the kitten and was placed under it -- an object wrapped in oilskin paper and tied with string. Without opening it KK and Ginzo quickly set out on the uphill path to Hisamura, the path the poor tramp must have taken. Obviously in search of a body, they are disappointed to learn that the small pond, or tarn, was drained long ago. Inside the old brick kiln, however, they find the shabby hat, overcoat, and large tattered boots of Mr. Three Fingers resting in a pile. Scraping the surface of the dirt floor and unearthing a leg, they immediately call over the police, who dig up the rest of the body. It's the tramp, all right, except that his entire right hand has been cut off, and he bears a deep gash across his chest -- clear evidence that he has been murdered. Only at this point does KK triumphantly open the oilskin package and show the stunned police a severed right hand with only three fingers!

Now we are ready for the final denouement, in two stages. First, Kindaichi Kosuke demonstrates for the benefit of the gendarmes and Ginzo exactly how Kenzo and Katsuko were murdered. Then, before the entire family assembled, KK reveals Who Dunit and Why.

Summoning the police into the Annex, KK has in hand a continuous line of resilient *koto*-string wire, of which the family storage barn has an ample supply. With this he fashions a double loop which he passes over the hilt of an unsheathed samurai sword, securing the loops snugly below the hand-guard. He lets the sword hang loosely from the once again upright folding screen. The two strands of parallel wire lead from the sword up over the top of the screen, through the aperture of two rice-paper *shoji* panels slid open, across the veranda, through that little transom-like space above the closed *amado* rain shutters, and out into the garden beyond. Instructing an officer to start the mill wheel turning, Kindaichi quickly picks up a life-size straw puppet made expressly for this demonstration, drives the sword into the puppet's chest, then throws the straw man down on the floor. The force of the fall suffices to pull the sword out partially. Then, as the turning of the mill wheel starts to take up the slack of the parallel wires, the sword slides out of the straw man and is hoisted up over the top of the folding screen, which keeps it from leaving marks on the tatami floor. Knocking the screen over at a 45 degree angle, the sword is then pulled to the top of the shuttered *amado* where it catches briefly on the near edge of the transom before getting pulled all the way through. A clean little rolled-up *tenugui* bathing cloth that KK had placed on the transom edge now falls back onto the veranda floor. Its function was to prevent the sword's leaving blood or scraping marks on the wooden lintel and crossbeam as it banged its way through the opening between them.

Then, as they step out into the west garden, a full moon illuminates for the party the murderer's elaborate mechanical contraption. The left-hand or southern strand of the *koto* wire has been strung straight out to and through the perforations of the stone lantern [see again #6-ANNEX]. From there it continues onward to and through the left-hand bamboo tube on the west wall and ends up coiled around the thick ropes rotting away on the millwheel --- where no one will notice it. The right-hand or northern strand of wire first goes rightwards and upwards to a little *koto* peg that has been fastened to the eave of the roof over the toilet area. Passing between the two legs of the peg it then swings down and across to that sickle driven deep into the wood of the paulownia tree. Here it passes through a "V" formed by the angle between the sharply honed inner curve of the sickle and a rising branch of the tree. From there the northern wire passes through a small stand of tall bamboo stalks, to and through the right-hand tube on the west wall, and so on to the millwheel. The purpose of the *koto* peg on the roof is keep the sword sufficiently elevated as it comes out the transom so as not to leave dragging marks on the snow. As the slack tightens, however, the rooftop peg collapses, shooting over to the little pile of dead leaves. Now the sword dangles in mid-air, suspended between two points of stress --- the stone lantern and the sickle. As pressure from the millwheel increases once again, the ever tightening right-hand wire bends down the tall stalks of bamboo beyond the paulownia tree, then suddenly releases them to the sound of piin-piin-piin. (I myself used to hear this uncanny tinkling sound of upward-springing bamboo in Japan whenever the heavy mantle of snow melted off the bent-over stalks of my own bamboo patch.). Seconds later the northern wire finally breaks against the blade of the sickle, emitting that metallic snapping sound of buru-buru-buru dying off in a buruuun, and sending the sword twirling into the air to land upright in the snow near the lantern.

Finally Detective Kindaichi calls family and police together in the main mansion to explain that what actually took place was neither an apparent double murder, nor as some had surmised a traditional lovers' suicide, but a murder-suicide perpetrated by KENZO. After slashing to death his bride Katsuko the eldest Ichiyanagi son ended his own life. But not before taking a couple of seconds to pluck a frenetic koro-koro-koro and strum a wild chilling shaaaaan on the *koto*, and to leave behind those three-fingered marks with the bloodied plectra. Kenzo's elaborate mechanical setup was intended to make it all look like a double murder committed by some mysterious outside stranger with a lifelong grudge against him. The first requirement was to get the murder weapon out of an apparently sealed room without leaving any tracks. The second was to concoct a plausible story about some archenemy threatening to kill him. The solutions to both problems were fortuitously suggested to Kenzo during that family

spat over who was going to give the *koto* concert. When Third Brother Saburo came in to relate the local gossip about a Mr. Three Fingers roaming the neighborhood, Little Daughter Suzuko playfully wiggled three digits in the air in imitation of someone playing the instrument with only three fingers. Aha, thought Kenzo --- *koto* string wires to lift the sword out of the nuptial chamber, and Mr. Three Fingers as the putative murderer! That left only one more hurdle, as Kenzo discovered on the night of his practice run when the tightening *koto*-string wires produced those strange metallic noises from the garden, noises he was afraid might give away his wire-&-pulley scheme to an alert investigator. That was why he decided at the last minute to make those demented *koro-koro-shaaan* noises himself on the *koto*, to suggest that all the odd sounds were no more than a wild dirge played on the instrument intermittently by some maddened intruder. Kenzo, far from accepting Katsuko's loss of virginity, is driven to blind hatred by her confession and the jeopardy in which she has placed his own reputation and that of his family. Bound by family pride, puritanical morality, and an unbending "feudal" personality --- powerful attitudes that many Japanese can still relate to today --- he decides he will have to kill her, and then himself, but only after going through with the wedding ceremony as though nothing were amiss. Kenzo is scared stiff that Katsuko's jealous ex-lover "T" might show up any moment making a public scene and causing irreparable loss of face to the family. Better that her secret die with her, immediately, and that his own suicide be dressed up as a murder to prevent embarrassing questions being asked and bringing on a different type of family shame.

The two most puzzling characters in the tale are then explained. Poor Three Fingers is, indeed, just an indigent Tokyo taxi driver who, having survived a bad accident with unsightly facial injuries is on his way to relatives in nearby Hisamura village. Deathly weak, he expires climbing the hill north of the Ichiyangi estate. Finding him there, Kenzo with cold-blooded efficiency dons his clothes to deliver that threatening note to the kitchen; lifts his driver's license photo to fake that snapshot of "Your Lifelong Enemy" in his own album; hides him in the *futon* closet the night before the murder prior to using the corpse to practice the eventual sword-thrust into his own chest; plants those heavy boot tracks coming down from the hillside; and buries the body hastily under the floor of the charcoal making kiln.

Younger brother Saburo, the hyper-imaginative detective novel fan, plays the role of inspired facilitator. By sheer chance Saburo catches Kenzo red-handed during his practice run. Acceding to his eldest brother's appeals to family honor and that big insurance windfall, Saburo agrees to go along. It is he who comes up with Gothic touches like the severed three-finger hand, the kitten's coffin to hide it in when not in use, and the semi-incineration of his elder brother's diary pages. Finally, driven by sheer fantasy to his own bloody reenactment, he nearly kills himself with a sword in the Annex on the third morning. Drafted into the army before the court can convict him as an accomplice, Saburo dies a soldier's death in Manchuria.

Read in a dark and quiet place without distraction Yokomizo's Honjin House can give you the goose bumps. Like The Hound of the Baskervilles it thrills with the double whammy of a desolate landscape populated by sinister eccentrics. Having said that, it is a yarn that only a Japanese mind, with Japanese props, could have cooked up! Thank you.

#### WESTERN TRANSLATIONS:

1. Edogawa Ranpo, Japanese Tales of Mystery and Imagination, [an anthology] trans. James B. Harris, Charles Tuttle, 1956.
2. Yokomizo Seishi, The Inugami Clan: A Gothic Tale of Horror from Japan's Master of Crime, trans. Yumiko Yamazaki, Stone Bridge Fiction, PB Sept. 2007.
- Yokomizo Seishi, La Hache le Koto et le Chrysantheme [date & publisher unknown]
3. No translation that I know of for Yokomizo's *Honjin Satsujin Jiken*, but we do have the 1976 English-language version titled Death at an Old Mansion

After an informative question and answer session, the meeting adjourned to the Alliance Cafeteria where members of the audience engaged Ivan in more informal conversation over drinks and snacks.

**PLEASE NOTE:** The film "Murder of the Inugami Clan" by Japanese cinema master Ichikawa Kon is now running at the Vista Kad Suan Kaeo cinemas with subtitles in both Thai and English. It is supposed to run for one week from Feb. 21.

From Thomas Ohlson's Bulletin (<mailto:thomasohlson@hotmail.com>thomasohlson@hotmail.com)

Murder of the Inugami Clan: Japan Thriller/Mystery (In Japanese, with Thai and English subtitles) - 133 mins - Legendary Japanese director Ichikawa Kon's 1976 film *The Inugami Family*, a.k.a. *Inugamike no Ichizoku*, holds a very special place in Japan's long tradition of supernatural suspense. Based on Yokomizo Seishi's epic work, the slow-burning family murder mystery is a highly influential title in the director's celebrated filmography and just about required viewing for Japanese cinema fans. In 2006, the 91-year-old auteur returned to the director's chair to remake his own most representative work, updating the classic film for contemporary audiences. A fitting follow-up to the original film, the unsettling *Murder of the Inugami Clan* delves into a tangled web of murderous lies and deceptions that is tearing apart a wealthy multi-generation family. Ishizaka Koji, who also featured in the original *Inugami Family*, leads the all-star cast as the famous detective Kindaichi Kosuke.

When tycoon Inugami Sahei passes away, he unexpectedly leaves the family fortune to outsider Tamayo on the condition that she marry one of the Inugami grandsons - Sukekiyo, Suketake, or Suketomo - pitting blood against blood. Soon afterwards, members of the family begin to show up dead, one by one. Detective Kindaichi Kosuke is called in to investigate the murders, and the truth is slowly revealed as he happens upon years of hidden skeletons and a shocking family secret.

In 1976, the book publisher Kadokawa Herald enlisted the esteemed director Ichikawa to direct its first cinematic effort. The highly successful film became Japan's number one box office hit, acquiring a *Gone With the Wind*-like halo. Three decades on, the 90-year-old director was recruited again by the conglomerate, not only as a nod to his mastery but as part of a 30-year anniversary celebration of the book publisher's film production arm.

A black-and-white pre-titles sequence, set in the idyllic, post-war rural town of Nasu, finds the Inugami family gathered round the deathbed of pharmaceutical executive and ruthless patriarch Sahei Inugami.

The group includes Inugami's three grown daughters, by three women he never married. Two of them are accompanied by their husbands and sons; only the eldest daughter Matsuko sits alone. Also present is Tamayo, a much younger woman who was brought into the family fold by the dying patriarch more recently.

When Inugami dies before identifying his heirs, family lawyer Furudate says the will cannot be read until all the family members are present. Matsuko is therefore forced to send for her son, who has been in a convalescent hospital in Fukuoka since the end of WWII.

The visuals then switch to color and the script introduces the film's part-Tora-san, part-Columbo, detective hero, Kosuke Kindaichi (Koji Ishizaka recreating his role from Ichikawa's original film).

Kindaichi has been summoned by the lawyer's assistant, who believes one ruthless Inugami family member has already viewed the will and foul play will soon ensue. The assistant's fears are quickly realized when he is fatally poisoned before he can tell the detective his source.

When Matsuko's son, Sukekiyo (Kikunosuke Onoe), arrives, his face is obscured by a skintight, white latex mask which arouses the suspicions of the other family members until Sukekiyo rolls up his mask uncovering a horribly burned visage.

The will names the attractive Tamayo as the sole heir to the Inugami family fortune on the solitary condition that she marry one of the patriarch's three grandsons. If she doesn't, she will forfeit the inheritance.

From here, the yarn follows a classic whodunit formula, with detective Kindaichi trying to solve the initial killing, amidst red herrings and false leads, while the body count grows.

Ichikawa has fun with the material - the script is reportedly faithful to the original book - and keeps things moving at a brisk pace. The storytelling style and the special effects -- including a distinctly rubbery decapitated head -- may be old fashioned, but the mystery remains unpredictable and you will be kept guessing throughout.

The film is not easy going; expect to work for your pleasure. Pay close attention to the plot details and I think you will be richly rewarded.

At Vista only, and thanks to them for once again bringing something unique to the Chiang Mai film scene!