

## ZASHIKIWARASHI, THE GHOST THAT IS SAVING JAPAN

LINDA KINSEY SPETTER

Zashikiwarashi is a ghost which is well known in Japan but not well known in the western world. Richard Dorson did briefly mention this ghost in his *Folk Legends of Japan* (1962), a book that he began with high praise of Kunio Yanagita, the “father of Japanese folklore,” who first wrote about Zashikiwarashi in 1910 in his *Tono Monogatari* (which translates Legends of Tono). Michiko Iwasaka and Barre Toelken also mentioned the ghost briefly in their book *Ghosts and the Japanese* (1994), and they pointed out that the spirit of Zashikiwarashi has been associated with the spirit of unborn children, either through abortion or through *mabiki*, which was an old practice of killing some children right after they were born so there would not be too many mouths to feed. Even though Zashikiwarashi is not well known outside of Japan, for the past few years Japanese culture has been inundated with Zashikiwarashi stories in numerous manga, anime, TV dramas, novels, movies, stage plays, musicals, computer games, short stories, newspaper articles, magazines, Internet websites, folklore books and children’s books. In my opinion, these stories relate to a number of social problems that Japan is now experiencing: a low birth rate because young people do not marry until they are almost 30, a high suicide rate, bullying, a phenomenon known as “hikkikomori” (young men and women who withdraw from society to stay in their rooms because of their inability to interact with society), and the economic necessity of families often having to live apart because of their jobs. This is not to even mention the depression and despair of the 2011 tsunami which killed more than 15,000 people and displaced more than 340,000 people in Japan.

Zashikiwarashi literally means “tatami mat child.” Tatami mats are the traditional flooring made of woven rice straw in most Japanese homes. In the older versions of this tale, Zashikiwarashi is a child ghost only seen by children; it brings good luck to the homes it visits and bad luck to the homes it leaves. The oldest, most traditional version of Zashikiwarashi is of a little girl, dressed in a kimono, with a topknot on her head (see Figure 1). Sometimes an extra child in the counting of children is Zashikiwarashi.

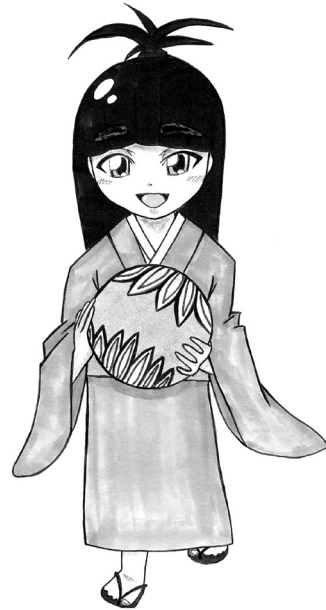


Figure 1. The traditional form of Zashikiwarashi, a little girl in kimono with a topknot on her head. Sketch by Kiyomi Nakano.

Always, the spirit of Zashikiwarashi has been associated with abandoned or aborted or lost children. In recent versions, there seems to be a thematic element emphasizing the desire of the child to be born or taken in. An example of this kind of story can be seen in the 2007 anime film, *Mononoke: Zashikiwarashi*, by Takashi Hashimoto. A pregnant woman is traveling and is caught in a rainstorm. She begs the people at an old hotel to let her stay there, but they refuse because the hotel is full. She keeps begging for the sake of her unborn child, so at last they put her in “that” room which is usually never used because it is full of Zashikiwarashi spirits. The hotel had previously been a brothel, and prostitutes had buried their unwanted children below the tatami mats in that room. All night long, the Zashikiwarashi spirits haunt and torment the woman, until at last she agrees to give birth to them, removing the talisman from her stomach that had prevented their entry into her body.



Figure 2. *Zashikiwarashi* portrayed as a baby, as in Osamu Tezuka's 1974 manga "Enai Enai Baa." Sketch by Kiyomi Nakano.

In an earlier manga comic book story entitled "Enai Enai Baa," published in 1981 by Osamu Tezuka, probably the most beloved manga artist ever in Japan, a man goes to a resort hotel to study for his exams, but he is constantly tormented by a mischievous Zashikiwarashi ghost baby, who wants to play (see Figure 2). Finally the man gives up trying to study, and plays with the ghost. Magically, the man does very well on his exams, and he credits it to the lucky ghost. The ghost gets the man to promise that he will one day marry and allow the ghost's spirit to enter his baby. The man marries and takes his bride on a honeymoon to the same resort hotel. When the hotel catches on fire, the couple escapes, but the man rushes back into the burning hotel to rescue the tatami mat which houses the Zashikiwarashi spirit, even though everyone thinks he is crazy to

risk his life for a tatami mat. He takes the smelly tatami mat to his home, and his wife often tries to throw it away, but he rescues it every time, leading the wife to wonder what kind of crazy man she has married. She becomes pregnant, and at the hospital he drags the smelly tatami mat into the hospital room, and as she gives birth to the child, we can see that the spirit of Zashikiwarashi has happily entered the child, and the ending is quite happy for everyone. Again, in this story we see the desire of children to be born.

In a 2006 young people's novel, *Yuta and His Strange Friends* (Yuta to Fushigina Nakamatachi), by Tetsuro Miura, a young boy is being bullied by many of his classmates. He becomes friends with five Zashikiwarashi, who teach



Figure 3. Zashikiwarashi as a wild-haired boy, as in the 2006 children's novel *Yuta to Fushigina Nakamatachi (Yuta and His Strange Friends)*. Sketch by Kiyomi Nakano.



Figure 4. Zashikiwarashi as an old man, as in the 2008 musical stage play of *Yuta to Fushigina Nakamatachi (Yuta and His Strange Friends)*. Sketch by Kiyomi Nakano.

him self-defense. They like him because his friend is a girl who always carries a baby doll on her back. The Zashikiwarashi like her because she seems to like babies. In the young people's novel, a Zashikiwarashi who befriends Yuta is a wild-haired boy (see Figure 3). However, in the 2008 musical stage play from the same novel, the Zashikiwarashi are not in the form of young children but rather look like old men (see Figure 4). They are still wearing diapers, and since their diapers have never been changed, their rumps have grown big and they smell bad. Because they like the bullied boy, they encourage him and teach him how to defend himself against the bullies. When he fights with the bullies, their fighting magically changes into a dance every time, and the bullies find that dancing is more fun than fighting. The musical stage version of this novel was presented by the famous Shiki Theatre Company all over Japan, and I was lucky to see one of the presentations in Kitakyushu City. It was fun watching the five Zashikiwarashi fly through the air above the audience. In the novel and the stage play, Yuta the boy learns that rather than withdrawing from society, he can become a positive force in society. This story seems to address the current Japanese problem of "hikkikomori." Hikkikomori is a social phenomenon which is said to be affecting as many as 20 percent of Japanese adolescents now; the young people withdraw

from society into their rooms and do not emerge, possibly because of some perceived socially devastating experience they have suffered. The story about Yuta and his experiences with the Zashikiwarashi teaches children to make themselves strong and to value their lives.

Another film version of a Zashikiwarashi story, “Natsushojo” by Gyo Hayasaka, has been shown in private audiences since 1995 but has never been distributed in theaters. I learned about it in a book called *Atomic Bomb Cinema* by Jerome F. Shapiro, a Hiroshima University professor (Shapiro 2002, 258-59, 261-63). In this film, a link between Zashikiwarashi and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima is made. A man and his wife were caught in the bombing. They were separated, but they both survived. The man saw his high school classmate, a young woman, dying in the burning river. There was nothing he could do to save her. His wife, who was pregnant, lost her baby. Later, they moved to an island near Hiroshima. When a very young little girl came to their door a few years later looking for a place to find shelter, both the man and woman thought she was a Zashikiwarashi. The man thought she was the spirit of his lost classmate whom he felt guilty about for not being able to help. The woman thought the child was the spirit of her lost baby. The man seems not to value his own life and behaves recklessly, while the mother learns to value her life even more and gladly accepts the little girl as her own child.

Incidentally, after the atomic bombing at Hiroshima, the abortion rate in Japan was the highest it has ever been. People were worried about the effects of radiation on their unborn children. Now, in modern times, the abortion rate is again high. Birth control pills are illegal in Japan; they can only be prescribed to help a woman regulate her period. So, aside from using condoms and the rhythm method, abortion is the most common form of birth control, and Japan’s current birth rate is the lowest or second lowest in the world. Recently I have been collecting information about *mizuko kuyou*, which is a religious ceremony to honor the spirit of an aborted baby. *Mizuko* literally means “water baby” and refers to a child that has been aborted or otherwise died before birth. Single motherhood is still a stigma in Japan, so abortion often seems the only choice for young girls who become pregnant. After the abortion, girls usually contact a Buddhist temple on their own without their families’ knowledge to purchase a small *mizuko jizo* god in the shape of an infant. These actions are usually pursued not so much because of guilt but because of a fear that the spirit of the dead infant will come back to



Figure 5. Zashikiwarashi in the form of a *mizuko* statue. Mothers often place such statues at temples in memory of their lost children. Sketch by Kiyomi Nakano.

haunt and cause trouble in the person's life, so annual visits to the *mizuko jizo* to deliver presents, and to dress it up in baby clothes, are ways that women who have aborted their children can appease their spirits. You can see many of these when you visit a temple, little statues of babies lined up side by side, usually in red hoods and bibs. In the *Mononoke* anime film which I mentioned earlier, in which the pregnant woman stayed in a room full of Zashikiwarashi spirits, the spirits were in the form of small *mizuko* statues (see Figure 5).

Not to be confused with the playful child ghost Zashikiwarashi is another Zashiki figure called "Zashikionna" (Zashiki Woman). This creepy female ghost, as portrayed in a graphic 1993 manga novel by Mochizuki Minetaro, does not bring joy or luck, but rather stalks young men in classic horror fashion (see Figure 6). She seems to be a modern blend of an inverted Zashikiwarashi and the vengeful Japanese demon ghost *Oiwa*.

A new movie about the traditional Zashikiwarashi came out in April 2012. The movie is entitled "Home: Itoshi no Zashikiwarashi" which translates Home: Our Dear Zashikiwarashi. It is based on the 2008 novel, *Itoshi no Zashikiwarashi*, by Hiroshi Ogiwara. In this story, a family with many problems is forced to move to the country because of the father's job transfer. The father is having troubles with his new supervisor, the boy has asthma, the girl is being bullied at school, the mother is overwhelmed with caring for the huge, old-fashioned house, and the grandmother is showing signs of dementia. But gradually, Zashikiwarashi, the ghost of the house, a mysterious little girl in kimono with a topknot on her head, makes herself known first to the boy, then the grandmother, then the girl, and finally the mother. The family's luck begins to improve in every aspect. In one of the most touching scenes of the movie, the child ghost is seen sleeping on the mother's back as the mother is cooking. The father is offered a chance to go back to Tokyo with a big promotion, and at a family meeting, the group decides they should stay together and so they agree to go as a family group. Guess who goes with them? Even though the father himself has never seen the ghost, he accepts the ghost, and at a restaurant on

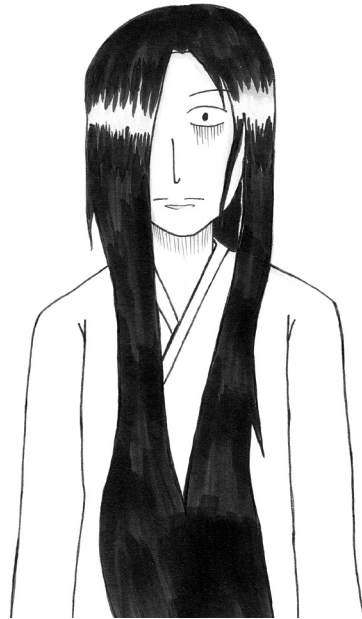


Figure 6. Zashikionna ("Zashiki Woman"), who seems to be an inverted variant of Zashikiwarashi combined with the demon spirit *Oiwa*. This evil ghost stalks young men. Sketch by Kiyomi Nakano.

their way back to Tokyo, he asks for a table for six, and after the family of five has been seated, he pulls out the sixth chair for Zashikiwarashi, a fully accepted member of the family. In ordinary Japanese life, when a family has children well situated in schools, the father normally would have gone on to his new job alone and commuted to home on weekends, but this film emphasizes the importance of a family living together.

One of the elements in this story is that as the grandmother descends into dementia, she begins to think that the Zashikiwarashi ghost is the embodiment of her brother who died as a child, just as the Hiroshima film characters also saw the ghost as the embodiment of an abandoned friend or lost child in their lives. Thus, Zashikiwarashi comes to be very personal for people who have lost someone. At the same time, Zashikiwarashi spreads joy and happiness everywhere. The people who are willing to accept Zashikiwarashi into their lives have good luck. This element is exaggerated in one of the manga cartoon magazines called "*Jigoku Sensei Nube (Hell Teacher Nube)*" in a story by Shou Makura, in which a little Zashikiwarashi girl (Figure 1) just walks down the street and everything she passes suddenly turns to good: a dog that had just died from eating insecticide suddenly springs back to life, a couple with their baby suddenly sees the baby stand for the first time, children who only had mudpies for their party suddenly have a real cake, and a man discovers he has a winning lottery ticket (Makura and Okano 1996). Good luck is certainly something that the people of Japan need right now, and it seems that this friendly ghost is being called upon to deal with many of Japan's current social problems. The problems of hikkikomori, the young men and women who withdraw from society, and also the phenomenon of young women who decline to marry and who choose to stay in their parents' home without beginning new families of their own, are contributing to talk about "Japan's lost generation," i.e., a generation of babies not being born. The Japanese government is actually working on ways to induce women to marry and have babies, as the old-age pension system will eventually collapse without the birth of new babies. One of the results is that companies are being encouraged to build day care centers so that mothers can work and have their children cared for at their place of work. I cannot help but think that the proliferation of Zashikiwarashi stories at this time is somehow functioning in a special way to help Japan deal with its current social problems.

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