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## The Human-Fish

### Animality, Teratology, and Religion in Premodern Japan

This article focuses on the cultural valence of the human-fish (*ningyo*), a hybrid aquatic creature with a human face and a fish body, in premodern Japan from the eighth to the nineteenth century. Located at the intersection of religious, political, and scientific discourses, the *ningyo* becomes an exclusive observation point for better understanding the mechanisms of interweaving and mutual fertilization between apparently unrelated semantic fields such as those concerning deities, humans, and animals. Although heteromorphic bodies, here symbolized by the uncanny physicality of the *ningyo*, are usually dismissed as marginal elements within the broad panorama of relevant intellectual productions, this study problematizes this assumption and argues that hegemonic stances are constantly validated, or invalidated, according to their relationships with those on the fringes. Being an interstitial entity, that is, something that lives in the pleats of discourse, the *ningyo* is characterized by a continuous inclusion within networks of meaning and, at the same time, is doomed to perennial exclusion. This article sheds light on the hermeneutical dynamics that generate the exceptionality of the *ningyo*, and its never-ending role as a haunting mediator of reality.

KEYWORDS: animality—natural omens—Shōtoku Taishi—*yōkai*—cryptids—sirens

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INCLUDED among the countless objects that German physician and naturalist Philipp Franz von Siebold (1796–1866) shipped back from Japan to Holland is a small water-dropper (*suiteki* 水滴) for diluting ink made of Arita porcelain (FIGURE 1). Seen from the right side, this writing tool looks like a white fish emerging from the foam of sea waves. Upon closer inspection, a thin arm, a smooth mane, and a tripartite sword-tail are a prelude to the uncanny spectacle awaiting the viewer on the other side. Here, the left hand of the fish pushes back a wisp of hair revealing a sneering human face protruding from a scaly neck. The water-dropper transforms into a human-fish (*ningyo* 人魚) staring at its observer.

This article focuses on the historical stratification of cultural discourses, which concur in assembling and shuffling meanings, practices, and values related to the *ningyo*, a hybrid aquatic creature whose physicality is constituted by a mixture of human elements, generally limited to the face or the upper part of the body, and other attributes derived from fish or amphibians constituting the lower half. Analyzing different cultural conceptualizations related to the *ningyo*, I aim to shed light on the modalities of mutual fertilization between apparently disjunct hermeneutical fields such as the religious, political, and scientific discourses and the generation of polysemic networks between animals, humans, hybrid creatures, and deities.

Because of the heteromorphic nature of the *ningyo*, which is permanently oscillating between zoo-sphere, anthro-po-sphere, and terato-sphere, this mysterious natural omen automatically rejects any type of fixed taxonomical order. Respecting the antinomic aura of the *ningyo*, the present study highlights the amalgamations as well as the fractures in the perpetual semantic proliferations, which characterize the interactions between this aquatic wondrous creature and different classes of social actors from the eighth to the nineteenth centuries. Although this vast temporal arch may seem intimidating, we should also consider the fact that premodern visual and textual sources about the *ningyo* are relatively scarce, especially before the sixteenth century, and a purely synchronic approach cannot escape being implemented by a diachronic one. This methodological choice also has the benefit of providing a broad panorama of the semiotic and semantic modifications concerning the *ningyo* on the *longue durée*.

To write this fragmented history of the *ningyo*, I relied principally on Buddhist tales (*setsuwa* 説話), collections of miscellaneous essays (*zuihitsu* 随筆), origin tales for temples and shrines (*engi* 縁起), as well as official chronicles such as the *Nihon shoki* or the *Azuma kagami*. To expand the comprehension



FIGURE 1. *Ningyo*-shaped water-dropper, Siebold Collection of Munich Museum of Five Continents, nineteenth century. © National Museum of Japanese History-Database of the Siebold Family Collection. All Rights Reserved. [www.rekihaku.ac.jp](http://www.rekihaku.ac.jp)

of these written sources, I flanked them with coeval visual materials such as painted story-scrolls (*sōshie* 草子絵), illustrated ritual tablets, and various types of print productions, ranging from brocade prints (*nishikie* 錦絵) to tile prints (*kawaraban* 瓦版). Besides the specificities of each literary and figurative genre, all these sources show how the conceptualizations of the *ningyo* transversally developed through different social classes and were by no means limited to the subaltern ones. On the contrary, if we concentrate only on classical and medieval sources, it is clear that the ruling elites were particularly concerned about the manifestation of mysterious natural omens such as the *ningyo* due to their dreadful political and social implications. In other words, the figure of the *ningyo* has survived through the centuries because it has been embedded in a loop of orthodox and heterodox theories equally produced by a multiplicity of social actors who tended to prioritize one interpretation over the other according to their hermeneutical will and historical contingencies.<sup>1</sup> For instance, in a pioneering article on the displays of anatomically spectacular items (*misemono* 見世物) during the Edo period, Andrew Markus states that members of the intelligentsia usually paid great attention in recording the details and commenting on these oddities, which never lost their aura of mysterious natural omens but were simply readapted within a ludic atmosphere (MARKUS 1985, 518). Even in the Meiji period, Inoue Enryō 井上円了 (1858–1919), the father of Japanese teratology (*yōkaigaku* 妖怪学), believed that in order to make Japan a modern country the study of ambiguous entities and monsters (*yōkai* 妖怪) was a necessary step to

1. On the relational loop between orthodoxy and heterodoxy as well as hegemonic cultures and subaltern cultures, see LACAPRA (1996, 58, 64–65).

liberate Japanese citizens from the unenlightened and anti-modern superstitions (*meishin* 迷信) of the past.<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, Inoue's fervor in analyzing monsters, ghosts, and hybrid creatures for immolating them on the altar of modernity demonstrates, yet again, the unrivaled power of these extraordinary agencies in inspiring the production of hegemonic discourses such as those linked to the paradigm of civilization and enlightenment (*bunmei kaika* 文明開化).

A distinguished trait of heteromorphic entities such as the *ningyo* is their marginality and, at the same time, centrality. Hybrids work as what can be thought of as unstable mirrors, which keep interrogating, expanding, and churning a vast range of cultural models linking together hitherto separated fields of knowledge such as religion, politics, science, or sexuality and, in so doing, generate a mutual fertilization between different levels of reality. A relevant aspect of the *ningyo* is its considerable heuristic power, which constantly questions the human and non-human modalities of interaction, with the present fostering the emergence of unthinkable possibilities and opposing the creation of comforting certainties. In other words, an aquatic hybrid such as the *ningyo* is not only a perversion of reality but also a new epistemic twilight zone, which emphasizes the complex interweaving of human and non-human agencies. For example, during the Edo period the *ningyo* started to be interpreted as a prophetic hybrid whose predictions could condemn or save humans in times of crisis. Locating itself at the fringes and, at the same time, intersecting zones of pivotal networks such as those concerning animals, humans, extraordinary natural omens, and deities, the *ningyo* continually establishes communicative links with the center. Taking into account these considerations on the strategic relationships between monsters and hegemonic discourses, Michael Dylan Foster points out that marginal entities are actually crucial elements for articulating legitimizing, or delegitimizing, discourses on behalf of, or against, the center (FOSTER 2009, 26).

At this point, it is clear that the notion of hybridity constitutes the cornerstone of teratological discourses. But what exactly is a hybrid? Again, Foster problematizes the idea of hybridity in relation to heteromorphic creatures underlying their structural similarities with the oxymoron (FOSTER 2009, 24). This figure of speech is based on the sense of displacement, which is generated through the juxtaposition of two contrastive elements. These two oppositional factors, which in the case of the *ningyo* are the animal and human features, do not merely repel each other but also produce a semiotic boost for transcending the original dyad and creating a third pole similar and, at the same time, different from the starting animal and human halves. Analyzing the representations of hybrids in the

2. For a critique of the intellectual production of Inoue Enryō, see FOSTER (2009, 77–87, 117–118) and FIGAL (1999, 40–45). For the original work of Inoue Enryō, see Tōyō DAIGAKU INOUE ENRYŌ KINEN GAKUJUTSU SENTĀ (2001).

zoologies and teratologies produced by Greeks and Romans, Pietro Li Causi notes that certain hybrids can also be conceptualized as a living crasis because their physicality is not merely constituted by a jumble of heterogenous bodies but each part harmoniously merging into the other without rupture (LI CAUSI 2008, 17).<sup>3</sup> The hybrid is, at the same time, an oxymoron and a crasis because it emanates a sort of “harmonious noise” that constitutes an overflow of meaning, thanks to which the hermeneutic system itself can regenerate and expand its structure. Due to this smooth amalgamation between impossible anatomies, which in the case of the *ningyo* is symbolized by a human face bulging out from a fish or amphibian body, a third heteromorphic as well as unpredictable liminal creature looms up to confront the human world.

The metamorphosis of the *ningyo*, which unveils the porosity and lability of the borders between animals and humans, has a direct implication on what Giorgio Agamben defines as the “anthropologic machine.”<sup>4</sup> In *The Open: Man and Animal* (2004), Agamben writes that the anthropological machine is an ironic dispositive made from deforming mirrors, which perennially twist the human figure in the guise of an ape. In order to overcome the scorn, which derives from the necessity to contemplate himself only through the image of an anthropomorphic animal—that is, a non-human agency—man is always forced to fictionalize his nature as something radically different from the animal (AGAMBEN 2004, 26–27). This is the reason why the anatomist Caspar Bartholin (1655–1738) defined the siren—the bodily structure of which will incidentally merge with that of the *ningyo* during the Edo period—as *homo marinus* because of its capability to remind of human features in an oceanic environment, just as the ape does on the land (AGAMBEN 2004, 24–25).

Following a similar logic, it can be said that the *ningyo* exists in a “zone of indifference” where the order (*táxis*), which separates humans, animals, hybrids,

3. Pietro Li Causi has recently studied textual and material sources on the theme of the transformation from fish to man and from man to dolphin in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and in relation with the Dionysian cult in ancient Greece (LI CAUSI 2017).

4. Agamben deploys the concept of “anthropologic machine” to describe the circular interactions between man and animal. He borrowed the concept from an essay, “Conoscibilità della festa,” written by the theorist Furio JESI (1977) to explore the mutually constitutive process between the ethnographer and the subjects of her analysis. For Jesi the “anthropologic machine” is a complex device based on various gnoseological models such as anthropology or ethnography, which does not simply create the illusion of a research subject as always other/different and therefore permanently watchable/knowable, but also fosters the auto-description of the ethnographer’s self as an induced projection on an imaginary other (JESI 1977, 15). Unveiling the other (*il diverso*) through the fictitious objectivity of the anthropological machine, the ethnographer is generating nothing more than a pathetic doppelgänger, the epiphany of whom preludes to an actual concealment of all the human and non-human agents who are mesmerized by the impenetrable structure of the “anthropologic machine” (JESI 1977, 27–28).

and deities is suspended and continuously reinvented (AGAMBEN 2004, 37). The hybrid life of the *ningyo* freely flows through the nodes of discursive networks such as the zoological, anthropological, or the teratological one, both menacing and alluring in their apparently oppositional, but ultimately convergent, taxonomies. Thanks to the tricky mechanism of the anthropologic machine, which Agamben stigmatizes through the adjective “ironic,” what the humans ostracize and label as alien must always necessarily come back disguised in a different form such as, for example, the *ningyo*, to haunt and admonish its discriminators from within their own sphere. Even Michel Foucault underlines this revelatory role played by the animal, which obliges humans to stand naked in front of their own disturbing truth. Specifically, Foucault describes a transition of the animal from a representative of the values of humanity in the Middle Ages to a free beast with a fantastic nature during the Renaissance (FOUCAULT 2005, 21). If we return to the cultural context of premodern Japan, it is possible to understand that the anthropo-theriomorphism of the *ningyo* exalts the revealing (Lat. *monstrare*) power of this hybrid, making it an authentic monster (*monstrum*) whose body stands out as a wondrous monument (*monumentum*) for admonishing (*monère*) and, at the same time, reminding humans of their condition. Observed through the etymological lens of Latin the monstrosity of the *ningyo* becomes a sort of anatomic debunking memory through which what was previously repressed—that is, animality—is inexorably reincorporated within the limen of humanity and vice versa.

Perhaps no other field of study is more suitable for the analysis of multilingual etymologic reverberations than teratology. Of course, this does not mean that a comparison between historically and culturally specific terminologies enables us to grasp the definitive meaning of an elusive entity such as the *ningyo*. On the contrary, every type of lexical array is valuable because it cannot but jib and shake in front of the unfathomable agency that characterizes the otherness of the hybrid. Whether in Greek, Latin, Chinese, or Japanese, all of these linguistic devices work as provisional chemical reagents, which link emerging fragmentary visions of the substantial irreducibility of anthropo-teriomorphic creatures to a stable definition. In other words, the diastemic nature of the hybrid is never defeated by the human attempts to curb it with fixed verbal or written signs. What these signs cannot directly express but transversally allude to is the shadowy and polysemic territory where the *ningyo* shows its unrestrained power. Rather than for what they say, signs are important for what they do not say. In studying hybridity, we can learn more from the failure of languages than their accuracy in circumscribing something that cannot be constrained. Again, if we take into consideration the two Chinese characters that constitute the term *ningyo*, it is clear that both of them and, at the same time, none of them succeed

in fully representing the reality of a marine creature, which is always in between and beyond the human (*nin* 人) as well as the animal (*gyo* 魚) dimensions.

### *The Ningyo and the Prince*

The term *ningyo* can be considered a semantic umbrella, which provided a temporary nomenclature for different species of real animals in various historical periods. For instance, salamanders (*sanshōuo* 山椒魚), catfish (*namazu* 鯰), dugongs (*jugon* 儒艮), and even big fish such as sharks (*same* 鮫) or aquatic mammals like whales (*kujira* 鯨) or seals (*azarashi* 海豹) were defined as *ningyo* due to certain traits of their muzzles, extremities, or cries, which occasionally sounded eerily human-like. In premodern Japan, the appearance of uncommon fish, sea mammals, or rare amphibians was generally associated with the taxonomical category of *ningyo*.

The notion of *ningyo* was introduced from China to Japan most likely in the seventh century in conjunction with the concept of mysterious natural omens (*kaii* 怪異). These natural anomalies were supposed to indicate auspicious (*kichiji* 吉事) or, more often, inauspicious (*kyōji* 凶事) outlooks about the current governance of the country. Mysterious natural omens supplemented the political doctrine of the correlations between heaven and mankind (*tenjin kannō setsu* 天人感應說), which constituted the base of the administrative system (*ritsuryō* 律令) of the country. According to this doctrine, heaven bestows the celestial mandate to a human being of high virtue who becomes the emperor and administers the land. If the emperor does not govern according to virtue, heaven sends unlucky presages (*kyōchō* 凶兆), which materialize as aberrations of the natural environment, to admonish the ruler for his misconduct. If the emperor ignores these signs from heaven and persists in badly administering the country, it is appropriate for people to revolt and replace the sovereign (*ekisei kakumei* 易姓革命) (TAKATANI 2016, 24–25). Although in Japan the hypothesis of a violent removal of the emperor has never been taken into consideration, the manifestation of mysterious natural omens such as the finding of beached *ningyo* were meticulously recorded, ritually treated, and carefully analyzed in order to understand the gravity of their impact on the political agency of the governing elites. For instance, in the Heian period the court established an official divination protocol called “divination of the corridor” (*konrō no miura* 軒廊御卜) to determine what kind of kami were possibly involved in the manifestation of natural omens and which were the best modalities to deal with these dangerous events (YAMANAKA 2019, 7).

The first written record of the manifestation of an amphibian compatible with the category of *ningyo* goes back to the second decade of the Nara period. The *Nihon shoki* reports that in the summer of 619 during the reign of Empress Suiko



推古 (r. 592–628), a creature presenting human features was spotted in the Gamō 蒲生 River in the Ōmi 近江 domain (present-day Shiga Prefecture). Again, in the autumn of the same year a fisherman of the Settsu 摂津 domain (present-day Osaka Prefecture) cast his net in an artificial canal and discovered something similar to a child with ambiguous somatic traits, who was neither a human being nor a fish (*Nihon shoki* 2: 574–575).<sup>5</sup> These two entries of the *Nihon shoki* do not use the term *ningyo* to describe these half-human half-fish entities, which are simply defined as “things” (*mono* 物) without any additional comments.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that these apparently insignificant episodes were recorded in such a strategic text as the *Nihon shoki* suggests the existence of some sort of political discourse, possibly a negative one, associated with these natural omens, although it was not yet fully articulated in terms of lexicon at the beginning of the eighth century.

What is clear is that these two passages of the *Nihon shoki* became a sort of *loci classici* that inspired new discourses on the concept of *ningyo*, such as the creations of taxidermic manufactures molded on the idea of the human-fish that were made at least since the seventeenth century. These mummified hybrid bodies of *ningyo*, which were usually manufactured by joining together the lower part of a salmon with the torso of a small monkey after smearing them with lacquer to prevent the decomposition of the tissues, were often exhibited as anatomical and religious spectacular items in the proximity of Buddhist temples during periodic displays (*kaichō* 開帳) and festivals (ARAMATA 2009, 335).<sup>7</sup> For example, the mummified *ningyo* enshrined in the Karukayadō 荊萱堂 of the Nintokuji 仁徳寺 (FIGURE 2) at the step of Mount Kōya 高野 is accompanied by a short text, “On the Origin of the Human-fish” (*Ningyo yurai* 人魚由来), which identifies this specific spectacular item with the *ningyo* retrieved by the anonymous fisherman in the Gamō River as described in the *Nihon shoki* (WAKAYAMA KENRITSU KII FUDOKI NO OKA 2010, 26–27).

5. For an English translation of this episode, see ASTON (1998, 147).

6. In the Nara and Heian periods the term *mono* did not denote an inert object or a stable entity but an elusive, strange, and unspecifiable presence, which overcame ordinary understanding based on human senses (BARGEN 1997, 19).

7. Martha Chaiklin points out that while in *Manners and Customs of the Japanese*, Phillip Franz von Siebold attributes the creation of mummified bodies of *ningyo* to the “ingenuity” of certain fishermen, these manufactures actually required extremely complicated taxidermic techniques. For example, scans of the mummified *ningyo* preserved at the Museum voor Volkenkunde in Leiden reveal that these anatomical objects include a variety of physical parts from different animals, such as dog bones and shark teeth, all arranged together using various types of papier mâché (CHAIKLIN 2010, 253–254). Therefore, the mummified *ningyo* are not only material examples of hybridity between humans and animals but also represent the possibility of trans-specific amalgamations between heterogeneous faunal realms.





FIGURE 2. Mummified *ningyo*, Nintokuji, Edo period (WAKAYAMA KENRITSU KII FUDOKI NO OKA 2010, 26).

The mid-Heian period dictionary *Wamyōruijushō*, which presents a collection of Chinese terms along with their transliteration and explanation in the Japanese language, reports the word *ningyo* and refers to the nonextant Chinese encyclopedia *Jian ming yuan* 兼名苑 and the *Shanhai jin* as canonical Chinese sources to gather information about this creature. The *Shanhai jin* surely was one of the most influential texts for shaping the sociocultural perception of the *ningyo* among the Japanese elites in the classical period. Quoting from the *Jian ming yuan*, the author of the *Wamyōruijushō* specifies that sharks can be considered *ningyo* and, according to the *Shanhai jin*, a major characteristic of *ningyo* is to have a voice similar to the cry of an infant.<sup>8</sup> This is a common detail in the written sources of the Heian and Kamakura periods where the liminality of the *ningyo* is often underlined through a comparison with the body and voice of a child as a symbol of a not yet fully formed member of human society.

The earliest pictorial representation of *ningyo* in Japan can be found in the *Shōtoku Taishi eden*, which was illustrated by the court painter Hata no Chishin 秦致真 (d.u.) in 1069 and preserved in the Edono 絵殿 Hall of the Tōin 東院 at Hōryūji 法隆寺 until the Edo period when it was mounted on a separate set of

8. The word *ningyo* is included in a special section dedicated to dragons and fish (*ryūgyo rui* 龍魚類) in the nineteenth chapter of the dictionary (*Wamyōruijushō* 10). The presence of the same item in a later dictionary of Japanese words, the *Iroha jiruishō*, could testify to a progressive diffusion of this term.



FIGURE 3. Prince Shōtoku observes the *ningyo*. Detail from the *Shōtoku Taishi eden*, Edono Hall of Hōryūji, 1069. © National Institute for Cultural Heritage. All Rights Reserved. [www.emuseum.jp](http://www.emuseum.jp)

folding screens (FIGURE 3).<sup>9</sup> This painted story-scroll illustrates the most relevant episodes of the life of Prince Shōtoku 聖德 (574–622). Among the various events there is one in which a forty-eight-year-old Prince Shōtoku sits in front of an elegant Chinese-style table observing the lying body of a captured *ningyo* while giving an audience to the governor of Settsu. In the *Shōtoku Taishi denryaku*, Fujiwara no Kanesuke 藤原兼輔 (877–933) annotated a large corpus of oral legends about Prince Shōtoku, which were transmitted from the ninth to the tenth century, and provided one of earliest written descriptions of this encounter between the prince and the *ningyo*.

Twenty-seventh year (of the reign of Empress Suiko, 619), spring, fourth month: The prince made a pilgrimage to all the temples of the Kurimoto 栗本 District of Shiga Province. He stopped his horse at Awazu 粟津, and providing various instructions, said:<sup>10</sup> “Fifty years after my death there will be a sovereign who will move the capital in this place and will govern the country for ten years.” The governor of Ōmi said to the prince: “In the Gamō River there is something the shape of which is in between a man and a fish.” The prince replied: “It will provoke natural calamities. A human-fish (*ningyo*) is an

9. This set of paintings underwent several substantial repair projects during the centuries beginning in 1172 and ending with major changes in the 1780s. Nevertheless, art historians agree on the fact that most of the pictorial revisions were respectful of Chishin’s original outlines. For more details see CARR (2012, 122–126).

10. Awazu is located in the southern part of Ōtsu 大津 in present-day Shiga Prefecture.



FIGURE 4. Prince Shōtoku staring at the *ningyo* and Hokikimi's death. Detail from the *Shōtoku Taishi eden*, Honshōji, Kamakura period (NARA KOKURITSU HAKUBUTSUKAN 1969, 145).

inauspicious thing (*zuibutsu ni arazu* 瑞物にあらず). Because a *ningyo* has suddenly manifested its presence, this country is now exposed to natural calamities.”  
 (*Shōtoku Taishi denryaku*, 279–281)

The atmosphere of the encounter between Prince Shōtoku and the *ningyo* is extremely gloomy and negative as in all the other classical and medieval period written and visual sources. The manifestation of the *ningyo* in the Gamō River works as the ultimate confirmation of an uncertain future, which will follow the death of the prince, and the incumbency of natural disasters that will strike the province of Ōmi shortly thereafter. The governor of Ōmi plays the role of the wise officer who decides to rely on the flawless knowledge of Prince Shōtoku to properly interpret the meaning of the natural omen, which represents a risk for the stability of the entire area.

In a different *Shōtoku Taishi eden* made of ten panels, probably painted in the Kamakura period and preserved at Honshōji 本證寺, the immense power of the curse (*tatari* 祟り) directly emanating from the body of the *ningyo* is visually emphasized through the juxtaposition of a chain of baleful moments (FIGURE 4). The scene where Shōtoku stares at the *ningyo* is depicted in the central sector close to the left frame of the last panel. On the right side of the *ningyo* is a scene showing the moment when Shōtoku had a strange dream (*imu* 異夢) about certain negative events, which mark the last years of his life. At this time Shōtoku was still forty-eight. Two years later his wife, Kashiwade no Hokikimi no Iratsume 膳部善岐々美郎女, dies. These tragic circumstances are displayed

through the depiction of Shōtoku and Hokikimi lying together under the same quilt surrounded by a crowd of crying ladies-in-waiting and officers. Only Hokikimi is deceased but Shōtoku also seems to rest motionless in a sort of cadaveric position as a prefiguration of his own death. This dramatic scene takes place in the same sector of the painting, which is dedicated to the manifestation of the *ningyo*, but is placed on the opposite corner close to the right side of the frame. Although the body of the *ningyo* is separated from the scenes above and below by curtains of silver clouds, these pictorial barriers cannot contain its cursing energy. Therefore, the sector immediately above the *ningyo* also shows the immense sorrow felt by Shōtoku and shared by all the members of the various social classes during Hokikimi's funeral and her subsequent enshrinement within a white stupa. The red and green body of this *ningyo* can be considered an anthro-theriomorphic matrix from which emanates an inexorable polluting curse which does not spare anybody, not even a Buddhist hero such as Prince Shōtoku.

The nature of classical and medieval discourses on *ningyo* was prevalently associated with political ideals about the governance of the country. The ability to immediately recognize and circumscribe the negative influences exuding from *ningyo* was considered a dangerous trial which could either validate, or invalidate, the administrative proficiency of the governors. For example, the *Sesshū Shitenmōji Edō Shōtoku Taishi goeden ryakkai* reports an interesting variation of the story about Prince Shōtoku and the *ningyo*.<sup>11</sup>

Following the order of the Empress [Suiko], Prince Shōtoku made a pilgrimage to all the temples of the Kinai region. When he arrived in the country of Ōmi the governor told him that in the Gamō River there was a thing the shape of which was in between a man and a fish. The prince said that the creature was a *ningyo* [and explained that] this was not an auspicious thing because the country will undoubtedly face natural calamities. Later on during the fourth month the governor of Settsu offered a *ningyo* to the prince who disliked it and ordered it immediately thrown away.

(*Sesshū Shitenmōji Edō Shōtoku Taishi goeden ryakkai*, 498–499)

In this passage, the *ningyo* marks the contrast between a wise administrator, the governor of Ōmi, and another who is not suitable to hold this position, such as the governor of Settsu. There is a sort of tragic irony in the ignorance of this officer who not only does not recognize the cursing and polluting nature of the *ningyo* but also considers it as a proper gift to pay homage to the prince. In other words, an essential quality for members of the Japanese governing elites was the

11. Although the *Sesshū Shitenmōji Edō Shōtoku Taishi goeden ryakkai* is a late eighteenth-century illustrated transmission (*eden* 絵伝) of Shōtoku's life, these kind of texts often worked as written repositories of much older oral legends (*densetsu* 伝説) and narratives.

capacity to properly interpret the political valence of natural omens such as the manifestation of a *ningyo* and to calibrate human actions in response to it. This sensibility and attention toward the insurgence of positive or negative signs in the natural environment not only presupposed the knowledge of Chinese political doctrines concerning the reverberations between heaven and mankind but also the ability to effectively put them into practice in order to assure the proper administration of the country.

### *Subjugating the Ningyo*

The Kamakura Bakufu was extremely diligent in recording, interpreting, and possibly deactivating the negative influences of mysterious natural omens such as *ningyo*, which could potentially undermine the authority of the military aristocracy (IKEDA 2015). For example, an entry in the *Azuma kagami* reports that in 1247 the carcass of a big fish (*taigyō* 大魚) was discovered on a beach near Tsugaru 津軽 (present-day Aomori Prefecture) in the Tohoku region. The dead body of the marine creature resembled that of a human and the blood oozing from it turned the sea red (*Azuma kagami* 2: 417). Because of the sudden appearance of this anomalous aquatic creature, the zoological family of which remains undetectable, the Kamakura Shogunate had to fight the Hōji 宝治 battle against the allies of the Hōjō 北条 clan in the same year. The text also points out that two similar events, which previously happened in the Tsugaru area in 1203 and 1213, respectively, triggered the slaughter of Shogun Minamoto no Yoriie 源頼家 (1182–1203) and the insurrection of Wada Yoshimori 和田義盛 (1147–1213). As in the Heian period, the sea played an ambivalent role. On the one hand, it was conceived as a site of purity, which hosted wonderful paradises such as the Nāga Palace (Ryūgū 龍宮) or Kannon's underwater Fudaraku 補陀落 (Potalaka) Pure Land.<sup>12</sup> On the other, it was also perceived as the abode of monstrous fish (*kaigyō* 怪魚), which acted as polluted and potentially lethal entities for humans. This ambivalence towards the marine environment and its mysterious creatures such as the *ningyo* seems to confirm Fabio Rambelli's theory of the sea as a "huge semiotic shifter," which not only turns negativity into positivity but also purity into impurity (RAMBELLI 2018, xvii).

In the *Hōjō godai ki*, Miura Jōshin 三浦浄心 (1565–1644) provides an updated version of the abovementioned passage from the *Azuma kagami*, replacing the original term "big fish" with *ningyo*. Jōshin points out that in the medieval period there were numerous findings of beached *ningyo*, specifically on the shores of

12. *Nāga* are Indian fluvial deities with ophidian bodies that act as guardians of the Buddha's relics (*busshari* 仏舍利). When the concept of *nāga* was transmitted to China and Japan the external appearance of these deities was visually translated into a dynasty of female and male serpentine dragons (*ryū* 龍) who inhabit the bottom of the sea.



the Dewa 出羽 domain and in the Michinoku 陸奥 region in general. In the case of the *ningyo* discovered in nearby Tsugaru in 1203, the Shogun Minamoto no Sanetomo 源実朝 (1192–1219) dispatched low-ranking monks (*zenji* 禪師) to remove the “evil” (*aku* 悪), which was thought to be emanating from this abnormal creature of the sea. In other cases, in addition to Buddhist monks, yin-yang masters (*hakase* 博士) were employed to make divinatory rituals to determine which deities sent such an inauspicious omen. Even soldiers were mobilized to get rid of the corpse (*Hōjō godai ki* 5: 160–162).<sup>13</sup>

*Zenji* were also known as *zenritsusō* 禪律僧, a category of religious professionals specialized in dealing with pollution (*kegare* 穢), disposing of cadavers, and performing funerary rituals (IHARA 2013, 2: 31–32, 63–64). This terminological detail allows for some fruitful considerations of the three main types of social actors who were typically requested to take action in response to the manifestation of mysterious natural omens during the Kamakura period. The first type of actors were the provincial officers who had to immediately send written reports to the bakufu regarding the nature of the omen, providing as many details as possible on the external conditions under which the abnormal event took place. The second type of actors were yin-yang masters who had to perform divinatory rituals (*bokusen* 卜占) to establish if the natural omen was positive or negative and, in the case of the latter, to ascertain when, where, and against whom the curse will strike again in future. The yin-yang masters also had to examine what kind of human misbehavior was responsible for the manifestation of the natural omen. The third type of actors were Buddhist monks who had to make exorcisms (*kaji kitō* 加持祈祷) and offering rituals (*kuyō* 供養) meant to tame the angry spirit of the abnormal creature, pacifying it after death, and eliminating all possible impurities (IKEDA 2015, 199–204). In the case of extremely dangerous natural omens, high-ranking monks (*ajari* 阿闍梨) were mobilized first to perform apotropaic rituals from their temples, and low-ranking monks such as the *zenji* were subsequently dispatched on the ground to actually remove the corpse and perform funerary rituals on behalf of such anomalous creatures as the *ningyo*. When the physical dimensions of the *ningyo* required it, soldiers could also be involved in these activities for the containment of pollution. These ritual and logistic actions presupposed a strict collaboration between different classes of religious professionals such as yin-yang masters and Buddhist monks as well

13. The passage about the *ningyo* is included in the fourth section, “Tōkai nite sakana kai tori-tsukusu koto tsuketari ningyo no koto” 東海にて魚貝取尽す事付人魚の事, of the seventh chapter of the *Hōjō godai ki*. Jōshin was probably the principal editor of the *Hōjō godai ki*, which gathers miscellaneous written materials associated with the Gohōjō 後北条 military clan of the Odawara 小田原 area. Before becoming a Buddhist monk, Jōshin worked as a merchant for the Gohōjō and had access to their private scripts, which he also used to write another similar passage on the *ningyo* included in the last section of the first chapter of the *Keichō kenmonshū* (43–47).

as administrative officers and members of the military class. The ritual technology to contain the cursing effects of natural omens was usually first deployed at Tsurugaoka Hachimangū 鶴岡八幡宮, which was the principal religious institution for the protection of the Kamakura Shogunate, and later on in all the provincial temples close to the site where the natural anomaly actually took place.

These liturgical collaborations between yin-yang masters and monks in dealing with *ningyo* demand a further reflection on the modalities through which the Chinese politico-religious concept of natural omens was transposed into Buddhist categories. Although it is difficult to provide a definitive explanation it is probable that premodern Buddhist monks interpreted extraordinary animals with human features such as the *ningyo* as living examples of negative rebirths within the three evil paths (*san akudō* 三悪道), specifically in the “realm of beasts” (*chikushō kai* 畜生界). The Japanese term “beast” comes from the Sanskrit word *tiryāṅc*, which denotes an enslaved living entity in constant need of being attended by humans in order to survive. According to canonical Buddhist texts such as the *Daibibasharon*, the only life purpose for beasts is to mechanically serve humans as zoomorphic slaves in order to receive nourishment, which merely prolongs their afflictions until a new rebirth. Beasts were relegated to a subaltern position compared to humans because they were principally characterized by nescience (*mumyō* 無明). The fact that beasts moved through space keeping their bodies in a horizontal position parallel with the ground, showing a twisting and turning gait typical of a confused mind (*zasshin* 雜心) was taken as confirmation of their lower status. The sea (*taikai* 大海) was specifically interpreted as the original abode (*honshojū* 本所住) from which all the animals came before climbing onto dry land. Fish and, in general, all the aquatic creatures such as salamanders, tritons (*imori* 守宮), or seals were thought to occupy an extremely low sector within the realm of beasts, most likely because of their proximity to this primordial matrix, the sea.<sup>14</sup>

Although medieval written sources are relatively accurate in recording the discoveries of *ningyo* per se, few words are spent on the actual ritual performances that were adopted to deactivate the polluting power of these findings. To shed light on this aspect we can take into account a painted wooden tablet (*Ningyo kuyō fuda* 人魚供養札, 20 cm x 85 cm), which was excavated in the city of Ikawachō 井川町, Akita Prefecture, in 1999. During the medieval period this area’s rural settlements, close to the lagoon of Hachirōgata 八郎潟,

14. For a preliminary analysis of the relationship between Buddhism and fish in Japan, see YANO (2016, 60–68). It is also important to note that the compound *dōbutsu* 動物, which literally indicates a “moving thing,” signifies this concept of a beast in contemporary Japanese. The word *dōbutsu* was coined in the Meiji period for translating the foreign term “animal,” although the semantic nuance of this term focuses on the idea of spirit (*anima*) rather than movement (PFLUGFELDER and WALKER 2005, xii).



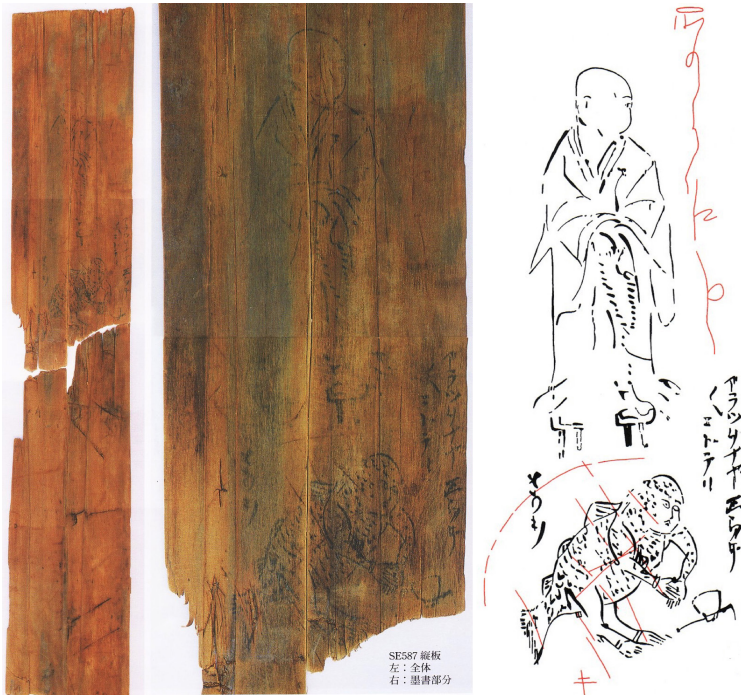


FIGURE 5. Ritual tablet of the offering for the *ningyo*, Ikawachō, 1286 (AKITAKEN KYŌIKU INKAI 2000, 5, 38).

underwent considerable development, the economic prosperity of which was based on agricultural and marine activities that were facilitated by the presence of the Ikawa River and the proximity of the sea. A characteristic of Ikawa Village was the creation of a capillary network of technologically advanced wells, which played a pivotal role in sustaining the life of the inhabitants, human and animal alike. The painted wood tablet, which depicts a monk standing behind a *ningyo* while providing offerings to the amphibian, was excavated from a hollow space between the external stone wall and the internal wooden one, which constituted the architectural structure of a circular well (FIGURE 5). A radiocarbon dating test established that the tablet was created in 1286. The occasion was probably the discovery of a *ningyo*, most likely a giant salamander (*ōsanshōuo* 大山椒魚), that had entered the well and remained trapped inside.

The *ningyo* in this piece is represented as a scaly fish with two legs and two arms protruding from the lower part of the body and a human face emerging from the head. Under the gaze of a monk who holds a long rosary while standing on a pair of high sandals (*takageta* 高下駄), the *ningyo* joins its hands in front of a

cup for food offerings placed on top of a tray. The human-fish is purposely placed in a passive position, surrounded by the presence of the monk from behind and the blocking disposition of the offering tray in front. On the right and left side the hybrid creature is tamed by a curtain of written characters drawn in red and black ink, which represent the spoken words and mantras (*shingon* 真言) recited by the monk. The same red pigment, which was chosen to visually display the magical orality of the mantra, was also used to paint a sort of grid made of red strokes directly on the body of the *ningyo*. Although the red line of the mantra characters is indecipherable, a portion of the text, which is written in black on the right side of the *ningyo*, says: “Oh, poor you! Your external aspect resembles that of a human.” On the left side of the creature the black ink reports the ritual exclamation: “May [the power of the gods] bless [you]” (*sowaka* そわ可), which represents the standard conclusive formula of many mantras (*Ningyo kuyō fuda*, 38).

The impurity and dangerousness traditionally associated with *ningyo* are visually tamed by representing the body of the human-fish as if it were imprisoned in a claustrophobic in-between space, which is sealed by a human figure (the monk) on the top, a plethora of written signs (*katakana* letters, *hiragana* letters, Chinese characters) representing the constricting force of the human and liturgic language on the right and left side, and a group of manufactured ritual objects such as the tray and the offering cup at the bottom. Within this oppressive cage of alien elements, the *ningyo* cannot help but be subjugated, annihilated, and ritually pacified. In other words, this painted wooden tablet of the *ningyo* can be interpreted as an excellent material example of the renowned binding power attributed to Buddhist mantras (*jubaku* 呪縛) for quelling impurities and stabilizing reality. This aspect is also amplified by the fact that the same circumvolved red line of the mantra, which departs from above the head of the monk, directly descends on the body of the *ningyo*, enveloping it in a skein of unescapable aural threads.

Another important question concerns the reasoning behind the ritual, which led to the creation of this painted tablet and its subsequent installation within the structure of the well. This wooden tablet was probably conceived as a protective talisman (*fuda* 札), which was thought to continue releasing its apotropaic and shielding power for many years after the Buddhist monk had ritually activated it on the occasion of the discovery of the *ningyo* and the funerary ritual for disposing of its body. In other words, the tablet served to enshrine the painted silhouette of a monk together with a graphic rendering of his pacifying vocal and material technology (the mantras and the food offering tools) within the ground of a heavily polluted site to preside over it, focusing on the exact point from where the incident developed. Because the construction of a well required a great amount of economic and technical resources, the inhabitants of Ikawa could not afford to simply abandon this expensive machine on which their lives

depended and most likely decided to restore its purity by including the talismanic object within the well's architectonic structure.

As the above examples show, most of the actors who produced socioreligious discourses in relation to *ningyo* during the classical and medieval periods can be considered members of the elite social class. Nevertheless, hermeneutical constructions are never univocal but always multivocal. The formation of epistemic models dealing with the notion of *ningyo* is not an exception and has always involved representatives of subaltern classes who dealt with the life of rare aquatic animals while independently creating new meanings to explain their biological existence. For instance, in the *Kokonchomonjū*, a collection of Buddhist tales, Tachibana no Narisue 橘成季 (d.u.) reports the following story:

When the ex-magistrate Taira no Tadamori 平忠盛 (1096–1153) moved his residence to Beppo 別保 in the Ise 伊勢 domain,<sup>15</sup> a fisherman was placing his nets and one day [he found] a big fish with a head similar to a man, endowed with hands, thick teeth like a fish, and a prominent mouth, which resembled that of a monkey. The body was like that of a normal fish. [The fisherman] pulled out [from water] three [of these creatures] and carried them on his shoulders with the help of another man while their tails trailed on the ground. When other people approached them, the voices [of the creatures] became high like those of human beings and they started shedding tears like humans. Recovering from the fright, the fisherman decided to donate two of these creatures to the noble Tadamori and keep one for himself. The noble Tadamori was probably afraid [of accepting the gift] and returned [the creatures] to the fisherman who cut and ate them all. Those [creatures] were not so strange and their taste was really good. What is called human-fish is this kind of thing.

(*Kokonchomonjū*, 400–401)

This narrative shows how approaches toward *ningyo* changed according to the social class of the human actors. Taira no Tadamori, a member of the ruling elite, was aware of the inauspicious and polluted aura associated with *ningyo* and accordingly refused what he considered to be a poisonous gift. On the contrary, the fisherman was not acquainted with the negative valence of *ningyo* according to the political doctrine of the correlations between heaven and mankind and decided to treat the unusual creature as a source of (tasty) nourishment for human life.

As in the case of the Ikawachō *ningyo*, the three human-fish mentioned in this Buddhist tale were probably also giant salamanders that got caught in the fisherman's net. The hybridity of the *ningyo*'s body is emphasized by a mixture of lexical terms, which usually refer to the sphere of human physicality together with others that recall anatomical peculiarities of ordinary fish or monkeys. Not

15. This locality corresponds to the present village of Kawagechō 河芸町 in Mie Prefecture. It is close to the city of Tsu 津 and is located next to the sea, which was the original fief of the Taira.

only is the voice of the *ningyo* similar to a human one but it is also described as capable of manifesting psychical emotions, emphasized by the shedding of tears, like a human being. This status of perennial anatomical exception places the *ningyo* in a sort of in-between area where its physicality meets some conditions of the anthropo-theriomorphic realm and, at the same time, rejects it all. It is this double taxonomical inclusion and exclusion that boosted fascination for *ningyo* through time and space.

### *Gendering the Ningyo*

Between the second half of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth century, the concept of *ningyo* underwent a further transformation after coming into contact with the European notion of a siren. The first textual source that may reflect an early stage of this hybridizing process between the *ningyo* and the siren can be found in the *Hekizan nichiroku*, a private journal of thoughts and short essays on random topics written by the Tōfukuji 東福寺 monk Unzen Tai-kyoku 雲泉太極 (b. 1421). The author reports that in 1460 there was a widespread rumor according to which a strange beast (*ijū* 異獣) emerged somewhere from the sea in the Tōkai 東海 region and was trying to reach the capital of Kyoto. This hybrid animal had “a human face, a fish body, and bird legs” (*Hekizan nichiroku* 1: 126). Although the term *ningyo* is not directly mentioned in the text, the physical description of the marine hybrid similar to previous descriptions of *ningyo*, as well as the hitherto never-mentioned detail of the bird legs, points to an intriguing scenario. This avian attribute of the *ningyo* could have been inspired by European iconography of the medieval siren, which can be retrieved from various bestiaries written since the twelfth century. For example, in the *Bestiaire* the Christian monk Philippe de Thaon (b. 1100) describes the siren as a creature with “big chicken feet and a posterior similar to a fish tail” (MORETTI, BOCCALI, and ZANGRANDI 2017, 28) (FIGURE 6). The anatomical hybridity of the European siren was due to the fact that in the classical period, Greeks and Romans assigned to the siren the physicality of a marine bird endowed with the fascinating face of a woman. In the eighth century other influential written sources such as the *Liber monstrorum* started defining the siren as a “marine girl” (*marinae puellae*) with a feminine body from the navel up and a scaly fish tail from the pelvis down (MORETTI, BOCCALI, and ZANGRANDI 2017, 23). It is possible to speculate that some visual materials containing European representations of sirens may have already reached Japan in the second half of the fifteenth century and Taikyoku decided to include this previously unknown detail of the bird legs in his description of the marine hybrid. It is also relevant to note that the first contact between Japanese and Europeans did not take place until 1542 when a Chinese junk carrying three Portuguese merchants shipwrecked on the island



FIGURE 6. Illustration of the siren in Philippe de Thaon's *Bestiaire*, Det Kongelige Bibliotek, fourteenth century (MORETTI, BOCCALI, and ZANGRANDI 2017, 29).



FIGURE 7. Kawahara Keiga's painting of a mummified *ningyo* in the Blomhoff collection, Museum Volkenkunde, Leiden Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, 1820–1823 (NAGASAKI SHIRITSU HAKUBUTSUKAN 2000, 159).



of Tanegashima 種子島 in southern Kyushu. The *Hekizan nichiroku* description of the strange marine beast could be interpreted as a narrative example of early contact between Japan and Europe via cultural objects such as illustrated books, before the actual arrival of human actors.

Beginning from the second half of the sixteenth century, the Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch spread their ideas about sirens and, at the same time, demonstrated a great interest in knowing the Japanese conceptions and representations of *ningyo*. For example, during his tenure (1809–1813) at the Dutch trading mission of Dejima 出島, Jan Cock Blomhoff (1779–1853) collected numerous mummies and paintings of Japanese fantastic animals among which there were also various *ningyo* (YAMANAKA 2019, 140–141) (FIGURE 7).<sup>16</sup> Neither Europeans nor the Japanese disputed the existence of anthro-theriomorphic marine creatures but rather they were eager to confront the different taxonomies and nomenclatures of such natural omens. This aspect is reflected in the encyclopedia *Jakushōdō kokkyōshū* of the Tendai monk Hakunyo Unshō 泊如運叡 (1614–1693) where the author felt the need to specify that there were two types of *ningyo*. The first one was the herbivorous *ningyo* that corresponded to the salamander, the principal characteristic of which was its fireproof body.<sup>17</sup> The second one was a female *ningyo*, which resembled a woman (*fujin* 婦人) with long red hair (*kōhatsu* 紅髮) to the elbows and lived in the seas close to the northern regions of the Korean Peninsula and Manchuria (*Jakushōdō kokkyōshū* 149, 276).

At the end of the entry, Unshō adds that the *ningyo* with feminine features should be considered as something distinct from the *ningyo* described in the famous Chinese encyclopedia on *materia medica*, *Bencao gangmu* written by the

16. The paintings of the mummified *ningyo* are attributed to Kawahara Keiga 川原慶賀 (1786–1860) who worked as painter of objects, social scenes, and portraits at Dejima. It is interesting to note that the mummified *ningyo* in Blomhoff's collection, as in the case of other late Edo-period taxidermic *ningyo*, depict both hands raised by the sides of the head as if the artists wanted to underline their human attributes over the fish ones. For more details on Blomhoff's collection of Japanese curiosities, see NAGASAKI SHIRITSU HAKUBUTSUKAN (2000, 158–161, 229–230). The nineteenth century was a unique historical time for the international diffusion of mummified *ningyo*. For example, in 1822 the American sea captain Samuel Berrett Eades (1792–1878) brought a mummified *ningyo* to London and displayed it in front of an enthusiastic crowd of onlookers. Eades purchased this taxidermic figure from Dutch merchants in Holland who claimed to have bought it from a Nagasaki fisherman who caught the *ningyo* alive in his fishing net. Later on, the proprietor of the Boston Museum bought this mummified *ningyo* and lent it to the American showman P. T. Barnum (1810–1891) who renamed it “Feejee Mermaid” and displayed it in a successful roadshow in New York in 1842. The Japanese “Feejee Mermaid” probably disappeared in a Boston fire in the 1880s. For more details on the “Feejee Mermaid,” see FOSTER (2015, 156), CHAIKLIN (2010, 257–261), and MARKUS (1985, 528).

17. The description of the salamander as a fire-resistant amphibian can be detected in many European legends, which Unshō was probably acquainted with.

botanist Li Shizhen 李時珍 (1518–1593). This text was introduced to Japan in 1607 and became extremely influential for the development of new hermeneutical discourses on flora, fauna, and the general “investigations of things” (*kakubutsu chichi* 格物致知) concerning the external world. In this work the mudskipper (*tobihaze* とびはぜ) and the salamander are defined as *ningyo* and are grouped under the sub-category of “fish without scales” (*murin gyorui* 無鱗魚類) within the larger section of “animals with scales” (*rinbu* 鱗部), together with catfish, eels (*unagi* 鰻), and jellyfish (*kurage* 水母).<sup>18</sup> Although it is true that the *Bencao gangmu* contributed to reframing the taxonomy of the *ningyo* by connecting this name with two species of amphibians, it is also true that the same text did not omit mentioning the fact that some written sources describe the *ningyo* as a half-woman half-fish hybrid marine creature with red hair (*Bencao gangmu* 10: 594–598). In other words, the *Bencao gangmu* kept unchanged the substantial hybridity associated with the concept of *ningyo*, specifying that amphibians as well as female marine creatures could be, at the same time, included within this taxonomical label.

Dutch merchants, too, contributed to reframing the idea of *ningyo* within the borders of new pharmaceutical discourses. There were six types of vegetal and animal *materia medica* the Dutch had a monopoly on, which included the frontal horn of the Narwhal (*ikkaku* 一角), saffron (*safuran* 泊夫藍), nutmeg (*nikuzuku* 肉豆蔻), myrrh (*miira* 木乃伊), a mushroom called *Laricifomes officinali* (*eburiko* 嘻蒲里哥), and the *ningyo* (WAKAYAMA KENRITSU KII FUDOKI NO OKA 2010, 23). In the second volume of the *Rokumotsu shinshi*, Ōtsuki Gentaku 大槻玄沢 (1757–1827), a scholar of Western things (*rangakusha* 蘭学者), dedicates a large section to revising the conceptualization of *ningyo* and emphasizing its therapeutic qualities according to the European scientific literature on sirens. To formulate his considerations, Gentaku largely quoted from the *Historie naturalis* of the Polish physician John Jonston (1603–1675) and the *Cruydeboeck* of the Flemish botanist Rembert Dodoens (1517–1585). For Gentaku, the flesh of a *ningyo* was a powerful anesthetic because it immediately inhibited the epidermal sensibility of the tissues on which it was placed. Additionally, the bones of a *ningyo* could be used as a remedy for hemorrhages. In referring to the bones of the *ningyo*, Gentaku uses the term *heishi murēru* 歇伊止武札兒, a translation of the Spanish expression *peixe mulher*, or “woman fish” (*Rokumotsu shinshi* 32: 121).<sup>19</sup> This lexical commixture not only exemplifies a continuous mutual

18. For a detailed analysis of the cultural valence of salamanders and tritons in premodern as well as modern Japan, see USUI (1993).

19. Although Gentaku defines *heishi murēru* as a Spanish expression it is probably Portuguese. In fact, in the thirteenth chapter of the *Yamato honzō*, Kaibara Ekiken 貝原益軒 (1630–1714) writes that in Portuguese the term *heishi murēru* specifically denotes the medicinal substance derived from the *ningyo*'s bones to cure melaena (*geketsu* 下血). In the *Wakan sansai zue*, Terajima





FIGURE 8. Otsuki Gentaku's illustration of female and male *ningyo*, *Rokumotsu shinshi*, 1786 (KUZUMI 2012, 34).

fertilization between European and Japanese conceptualizations of aquatic hybrids but also a progressive overlapping between the physicality of the *ningyo* and the female gender as embodied by the European sirens (FIGURE 8).<sup>20</sup>

These radical reinterpretations of the body of the *ningyo*, which shifted from a source of deadly pollution in the classical and medieval periods to a cornucopia of healing remedies in the Edo period, is also emphasized by the production of artificial *materia medica* focused on the *ningyo*'s anatomy such as the *ningyo*'s scalps (*ningyo no tōhi* 人魚の頭皮) or the *ningyo*'s fangs (*ningyo no kiba* 人魚の牙). These skillfully crafted medicaments, which alluded to the body of the *ningyo*, were displayed and sold as a sort of healing cryptid (*genjū* 幻獣), the therapeutic efficacy of which derived from their ambiguous belonging to pharmaceutical discourses as well as grotesque visions of taxidermic cabinets (FIGURE 9) (YAMANAKA 2019, 150–151). This overflowing of significations shows that the Edo-period *ningyo* is never completely reducible to a monolithic inter-

Ryōan 寺島良庵 (d.u.) reports that the bones of the *ningyo*, which are called *heishi mure* 倍以牟礼, serve for removing the effect of poison. For more details, see CHAIKLIN (2010, 251–252).

20. In the *Rokumotsu shinshi*, Otsuki Gentaku also observed that *ningyo* can be female or male and copied an illustration from Jonston's *Historie naturalis* in which a female *ningyo* and a male *ningyo* face each other in a specular position while standing on waves. Both the male and female *ningyo* have bird legs emerging from the lower part of the fish body.



FIGURE 9. *Materia medica* derived from the *ningyo*'s body, Edo period (YAMANAKA 2019, 151).

pretative discourse. In other words, the *ningyo* never abandons its terrific and polluting aura from the classical and medieval periods but merges it with new elements coming from hermeneutical reshuffles, which originate from internal as well as external influences.

It would be helpful now to pause and revisit the narratives about the encounter between Prince Shōtoku and the *ningyo* to more fully appreciate the effects produced by new cultural discourses about this multivalent creature during the Edo period. For instance, in the *Kannon reigenki shinshō*, Shōyō 松譽 (1638–1718), a monk of the Pure Land school, includes the following variation of the story:

During the twilight hours, a creature with a demon-face (*kimen* 鬼面) suddenly appeared in the Gamō River [and said]:<sup>21</sup> “In my previous life I was a person of this village but I fell into the hell of those who killed sentient beings (*shugō jigoku* 衆合地獄) due to my irresponsible behavior.<sup>22</sup> It is because of the karmic law if today the prince decided to pass from this crossroad (*chimata* 巷). Come here and bring me out from this sorrowful path. I ask you to help me abandon this rebirth (*saido shitamae* 濟度シタマへ) thanks to your compassion.” The prince replied: “In which way can I save you?” The demon explained, “I can escape this pain if someone performs the ritual of Senju [Kannon] (Senjuhō 千手法) on my behalf and builds here a temple in which is enshrined a ninety-centimeter statue of Senju Kannon made by that person.”<sup>23</sup> After seventeen

21. The term *kimen* was often used as a synonym for *ningyo*.

22. In this hell, beings are crushed together and compelled to enter a forest, the tree leaves of which are made of sword blades.

23. The Senjuhō is an esoteric ritual in which the statue of Senju Kannon is venerated to prevent natural calamities, erase misdeeds, prolong life, propitiate fertility, and subjugate enemies.

days from the creation of the karmic tie (*kechien* 結縁) [with the demonic creature] a celestial being (*tennin* 天人) appeared in a dream of the prince and, expressing his gratitude in front of him, said, “After seventeen days I still had a demonic form but today the prince performed the Senju [Kannon] ritual and a funerary ceremony for me. Thanks to these actions I could obtain a rebirth in Tuṣita Heaven.” For this reason the name of this site will be Araragi 蘭 (orchid). If one comes here even in these days, buddhas and kami manifest their power in response to the prayers. (*Kannon reigenki shinshō*, 115–116)

In this tale the *ningyo* is described, following the Buddhist transmigration theory (*rinne* 輪廻), as a lower rebirth of a human being who used to kill animals and had to exhaust this negative karmic load by enduring a rebirth as a human-fish. Nevertheless, the most striking passage of the text is the radical change of Prince Shōtoku’s attitude toward the *ningyo* compared to the other classical and medieval tales. Not only is the presence of Prince Shōtoku close to the Gamō River interpreted as a beneficial karmic tie for the *ningyo*, but the prince himself is willing to take action by building the Kannonshōji 観音正寺,<sup>24</sup> carving a votive statue of Senju Kannon, and performing the Senjuhō ritual to propitiate a better rebirth for the *ningyo*. In the Edo period, then, the *ningyo* is not only saved but is also able to transform its body into a celestial being who resides in Tuṣita Heaven of the future buddha Miroku Bosatsu 弥勒菩薩.

Notably, in a 1858 brocade print designed by Utagawa Hiroshige 歌川広重 II (1826–1869) and Utagawa Kunisada 歌川国貞 (1786–1865), the celestial being of this tale is gendered as a beautiful young lady with a blue carp tail protruding from the lower part of a white tunic, the turquoise stole of which shows a shining scaly design.<sup>25</sup> The sensual female *ningyo* is emerging from the water of the Gamō River while facing the eyes of a Prince Shōtoku who is dressed in formal attire. Immediately under the surface of the Gamō River a big carp with a prominent human face is standing between the couple as a bestial and, at the same time, extremely positive karmic tie between the two anthropomorphic figures (FIGURE 10). It is not an overstatement to say that much of the popularity of the Kannonshōji is derived specifically from this link with the *ningyo*. For

24. The Kannonshōji is located in the city of Ōmi Hachiman 近江八幡 in Shiga Prefecture and is included in the pilgrimage route of the Saikoku Thirty-three Sacred Sites of Kannon (Saikoku sanjūsan Kannon reijō 西国三十三観音霊場).

25. The fish portion of the *ningyo*’s body is consciously displayed as a “carp” (*koi* 鯉) to make a pun with the homophonous term “passion” (*koi* 恋). Sherry Fowler points out that the celestial being of this print is said to have achieved a rebirth not in Tuṣita Heaven but in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three [Devas] (Tōriten 忉利天). This paradise was considered to be particularly suitable for hosting women like Queen Maya, the mother of Śākyamuni, who succeeded in overcoming the “five obstacles” (*goshō* 五障) that were supposed to prevent women from gaining the status of Brahmā, Indra, Marā, Cakravartin King, and Buddha (FOWLER 2018, 247).

FIGURE 10. Prince Shōtoku sights the *ningyo* near the Kannonshōji. *Kannon reigenki Saikoku junrei 観音靈驗記西国巡礼*, illustration by Hiroshige II and Kunisada, 1858–1859 (YAMANAKA 2019, 169).



instance, the *Kannonshōji monjo*, a register of the sacred items showed to the public during periodic displays and religious festivals, reports that among the treasures of the temple there was also a mummified *ningyo* (*ningyo no miira* 人魚のミイラ). The *Kannon reijōki zue* reports the following story about the origin of this taxidermic attraction:

Because the prince performed a funerary service for the *ningyo* [this creature] obtained enlightenment (*bukka* 仏果) and appeared in a dream of the prince as a buddha who belonged to the retinue of Kannon. The prince had a vision of the corpse of the *ningyo*, which was floating close to the beach as a sign of its [transformation into a buddha]. The prince went to the beach to verify the presence of the *ningyo*'s corpse and the waves brought it close to him. The corpse of the *ningyo* was removed from the beach and was included within the treasures, which prove [the power of] this temple (*kono tera no shōko* 此寺の証拠) and are transmitted from generation to generation.

(*Kannon reijōki zue*, 120)

The mummified corpse of the *ningyo* was probably displayed as material proof to validate the historical factuality of the encounter between Prince Shōtoku and the *ningyo*. The storytellers (*etoki* 絵解き) of Kannonshōji orally described this episode of Shōtoku's life to a large audience of pilgrims and visitors using four painted scrolls. For a temple like the Kannonshōji, whose fame was based on

the aura of a salvific site constantly emanating worldly benefits (*genze riyaku* 現世利益) on behalf of its devotees, the mummified *ningyo* became a tangible extension of the visual narrations displayed on the four painted scrolls.<sup>26</sup> The taxidermal body of the *ningyo* provided a total sensorial engagement that mesmerized the visual, aural, and tactile senses of the visitors. The manifestation of the *ningyo* was no longer merely associated with Shōtoku's premonitory dream about his grim future, as in earlier tales and painted scrolls, but its mummy provided onlookers with the unique chance of establishing visual karmic ties with an enlightened being who belonged to the celestial retinue of the bodhisattva Kannon.

Moreover, the fact that the sea waves pushed the corpse of the *ningyo* close to the body of Prince Shōtoku transformed the mummified *ningyo* into a contact relic, the soteriological power of which came from its original proximity to the body of the prince. By contemplating the mummified *ningyo* on specific days at Kannonshōji, pilgrims and devotees could establish salvific karmic ties with Prince Shōtoku, casting their eyes on the same hybrid creature that the prince observed and saved during a pilgrimage to that very site many centuries before. On the one hand, the relics of the *ningyo* produced an actualization of the protective aura of Prince Shōtoku, allowing Edo-period devotees to continue turning to him for their needs, and, on the other hand, it transported pilgrims back to a mythical past, creating the illusion of a somatic, spatial, and temporal continuity.

Another type of Edo-period thaumaturgic *ningyo* is one enshrined in the guise of bones and a painted image at the Ryūgūji 竜宮寺, a Pure Land temple located in the Reisenmachi 冷泉町 district of Hakata 博多. According to the *Shōjinki*, in the second half of the fifteenth century only two small halls, the Nagahashi Kannon 長橋観音 and Nagahashi Kōjin 長橋荒神, constituted the structure of what would be called Ryūgūji in the seventeenth century (*Shōjinki*, 344, 358).<sup>27</sup> These two halls were built in a crucial position for Hakata, by the side of the Nagahashi Bridge, which was conceived as a gate toward the ocean and a landmark for the mouth of the Naka 那珂 River. Nagahashi Kannon and Kōjin were probably venerated as protective deities of commercial activities, which took place in this strategic location. This is also the reason why the Lord of Chikuzen 筑前, Ōuchi Masahiro 大内政弘 (1446–1495), donated numerous offerings, such as thirty-three scrolls of the “Universal Gate” chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*

26. Unfortunately, the four painted scrolls of the Kannonshōji are not extant and the mummified body of the *ningyo* was lost in a fire in 1993. Nevertheless, in 1987 Ian Reader took a picture of the taxidermic body of this *ningyo*, which can be seen on the website of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture. <https://nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/en/publications/photo-archive/nc-image/295/> (accessed 6 September 2020).

27. The *Shōjinki* is a private record of historical events written by Sagara Tadatō 相良正任 (b. 1430), a general of the daimyo Ōuchi Masahiro, during his stay at Hakata.





FIGURE 11. *Ningyo* with *nāga* princess features, *Ningyo zu*, Ryūgūji, eighteenth century. Courtesy of the Ryūgūji. Photo by the author.

and three hundred and thirty-three scrolls of the *Heart Sūtra* to propitiate the benevolence of these two local emanations of Kannon and Kōjin.

From 1600 to 1613 the warlords Kobayakawa Hideaki 小早川秀秋 (1582–1602) first and Kuroda Nagamasa 黒田長政 (1568–1623) later ordered the construction of a massive embankment, which contributed to fortifying the port of Hakata but, at the same time, annihilated the logistic relevance of Nagahashi as a gate toward the sea and the prosperity of the religious institutions associated with this marine and urban zone of the city. In 1600 the two halls of Nagahashi Kannon and Nagahashi Kōjin were dismantled and relocated to the present site of Reisenmachi to serve as a first defensive belt around Kuroda's castle (HAYASHI 2010). Given the harshness of the historical vicissitudes, which characterized the existence of Ryūgūji at the beginning of the Edo period, it is not surprising that the temple had to find a way to continue attracting the devotees and patronage that it had in the previous two centuries. Therefore, during the An'ei 安永 era (1772–1781), a box containing the bones of a *ningyo* was excavated from the precinct of Ryūgūji together with a written and illustrated scroll, *Ningyo zu*, about the origins of the *ningyo* (FIGURE 11). The written part of the scroll narrates the following story:

In the past this [temple] was called Ryūgū Ukimidō 竜宮浮御堂 [Floating Buddha Hall of the Nāga Palace]. After [Reizei Chūnagon 冷泉中納言] came to pacify [the spirit of the *ningyo*] the name changed into Reizeizan Ryūgūji 冷泉山竜宮寺. The people of Hakata have been supporting this temple for 1,959 years, from the beginning to the present year of the Eiroku 永祿 era (1558–1570).

On the fourteenth day of the fourth month of Jōō 承応 1 (1222; year of the horse, water *yang*), a *ningyo* of almost one hundred forty-seven meters emerged from the realm of the Nāga Palace (*ryūgūkai* 龍宮界).<sup>28</sup> Because its body could not be removed using poles it was transformed into the present Nagahashi Bridge. If this bridge rots away, the entire city of Hakata will be invaded by the stench of decay. If this bridge is preserved, it becomes a symbol of wealth and honor [for the city]. This shore was renamed Reizeitsu 冷泉津 after the dispatch of Abe no Ōtomi 安倍大富 and the imperial envoy Reisei.

(*Ningyo zu*)

The bones of the *ningyo* functioned as a sort of retrospective time machine, which virtually brought back the Ryūgūji to its lost marine identity and commercial prosperity when it stood by the side of the Nagahashi Bridge. The manifestation of the *ningyo* is backdated to the beginning of the Kamakura period when a member of the court, Reizei Chūnagon, was dispatched together with the yin-yang master Abe no Ōtomi to inspect the huge corpse of a *ningyo*, probably a whale, which was beached near the Nagahashi Bridge. The presence of Reizei Chūnagon and his large retinue in Hakata during the medieval period may have a historical foundation, as various districts of the city are still named after the appellative of this figure. Regardless of the factuality of this event, the talismanic role played by the corpse of the *ningyo*, which transformed itself into a fundamental architectonic element of Hakata, namely the Nagahashi Bridge, bestowing prosperity to the entire urban community, can be considered a typical Edo-period cultural reframing of the human-fish.

The two written sections of the *Ningyo zu* are separated by an illustration of the *ningyo* in the guise of a *nāga* princess with a female body from the breasts up and a scaly fish body from the breasts down. The connection with the Nāga Palace is emphasized by the fact that the *ningyo* is holding two flaming wish-fulfilling jewels (*nyoi hōju* 如意宝珠) with golden tips in both hands, representing two Buddha relics (*shari* 舍利), and another big jewel on the tip of the tail. This iconographic representation of the *ningyo* is based on the visual conflation of different socio-religious hermeneutics about the conceptualization of the human-fish. The feminine aura of the *ningyo* can be traced back to the influence of European discourses on sirens starting from the sixteenth century, discussed above. However, the female gendering of the *ningyo* is not a mere appropriation

28. This representation of the *ningyo* as an emissary of the Ryūgū is a typical Edo-period theme.



of the European model but is a meticulous visual transliteration of that paradigm into a Buddhist equivalent, namely the attractive female body of the daughters of the *nāga* kings (Ryūō 龍王). The lower part of the *ningyo*'s body still maintains its grotesque and terrifying aspect, but the polluting power of its theriomorphism is tamed through the juxtaposition of fragments of the Buddha's body in the guise of wish-fulfilling jewels for saving sentient beings.

As in the case of the pictorial representation of the Kannonshōji *ningyo*, the Ryūgūji *ningyo* also relies on the charisma of bodily remains—that is, bare bones—to prove its historical existence from the distant past (FIGURE 12). Up until the end of the Meiji period, once a month these *ningyo* bones were inserted into wooden basins (*tarai* 盥) and covered with water. Using ladles, Ryūgūji parishioners and visitors could drink the healing water, which was empowered by contact with the *ningyo* bones, receiving permanent protection from every type of disease.<sup>29</sup> The bones of the Ryūgūji *ningyo*, like the mummified body of the Kannonshōji *ningyo*, were therefore not interpreted as mere passive objects but ritually behaved as authentic contact relics, originally gaining this status due to their proximity to sacred figures or sites such as Prince Shōtoku or the Nāga Palace and, later on, released worldly benefits for those human devotees who activated them through visual or gustative interactions.

During the second half of the Edo period, the body of the *ningyo* went through a progressive fetishization and eroticization. For example, in 1791 Santō Kyōden 山東京伝 (1761–1816) participated in the production of a humorous illustrated booklet (*kibyōshi* 黄表紙), *Hakoiri musume menya ningyo*, which was probably meant to be sold to clients who were about to enter a spectacle booth (*misemono goya* 見世物小屋) displaying some sort of artifacts concerning the *ningyo*. In the booklet, the female protagonist is a *ningyo* from the Nāga Palace. The father of the *ningyo* is the famous Urashima Tarō 浦嶋太郎 who married a daughter of the *nāga* king, Bakatsura Ryūō ばかつら龍王, while the mother is a beautiful carp-courtesan with whom Urashima has an affair. Faced with the impossibility of keeping the newborn *ningyo* with him, Urashima decides to abandon his hybrid daughter to the sea currents, which push the infant-*ningyo* into the net of Heiji 平次, a fisherman working in the Hacchōbori 八丁堀 canal of the Kanda 神田 District in Edo. Moved by the adverse destiny of the young *ningyo*, Heiji decides to take care of her and, at the same time, gain some kind of economic return in exchange. After a problematic attempt to make the *ningyo* work as courtesan in the pleasure quarter of Yoshiwara 吉原, Heiji

29. This detail is based on a personal communication (9 December 2019) with the Ryūgūji abbot Rev. Okamura Ryūsei 岡村龍生 who also explained that the original stele (*itabi* 板碑) dedicated to the *ningyo* in the precinct of the temple was disintegrated by parishioners continuously breaking off pieces of the stone to take as protective amulets. The present stele is a 1958 replica of the old one of which only the base remains relatively intact.



FIGURE 12. Mammal bones worshiped as osseous remains of the *ningyo*. Ryūgūji, unknown period. Courtesy of Ryūgūji. Photo by the author.



FIGURE 13. *Ningyo*-licking spot for obtaining longevity, detail from the *Hakoiri musume menya ningyo*, Santō Kyōden and Utagawa Toyokuni 歌川豊国 (1769–1825), 1791. © Waseda University Library, Kotenseki sōgō database of Japanese and Chinese Classics. All Rights Reserved.

contrives another way to commercialize the *ningyo*'s body and its power to prolong human life. The man sets up in his home a *ningyo*-licking spot (*ningyo oname sho* 人魚御なめ所) where visitors could lick the scales of the *ningyo*, ingesting the precious life-prolonging salt which was continuously produced by her skin (FIGURE 13). Given the therapeutic as well as erotic nature of the interaction with the *ningyo*'s body, the business immediately became extremely remunerative for Heiji and the *ningyo* who eventually decide to marry. Mad with joy, Heiji starts licking the entire body of the *ningyo*, regressing to a seven-year-old boy. At this point Urashima Tarō intervenes using his legendary time-box (*tamatebako* 玉手箱) to restore the appropriate biological age of Heiji. The booklet ends with a happy marriage, which is attended by Urashima Tarō and his carp-lover. The last illustration shows the sudden opening-up of the scaly portion of the *ningyo*'s body (*ningyo no nukegara* 人魚の脱殻), which reveals the silhouette of a perfect human female physicality (*Hakoiri musume menya ningyo*, 431–451).

In this *kibyōshi*, the *ningyo* and its body are interpreted as positive sources of financial prosperity and longevity for humans. In the eighteenth century, the trope regarding the possibility of extending the life span beyond the usual biological limits by ingesting the flesh of a *ningyo* was a well-known theory. This aspect is demonstrated by the numerous local variations of the oral legend about the Buddhist nun who lived eight hundred years (*happyaku bikuni densetsu* 八百比丘尼伝説) after having accidentally eaten the flesh of a *ningyo* during her youth.<sup>30</sup> Faced with immortality, the woman decides to become a nun to cope with a life doomed by eternal youth while all others get old and die around her. In the booklet described above, Santō Kyōden turns the logic of the legend upside down. For Kyōden, the *ningyo* is the trigger of economic and sentimental affairs between a human being and an extraordinary aquatic creature rather than the impetus to embrace a Buddhist monastic path. On the contrary, Heiji becomes a rich householder married to a female *ningyo*, licking the body of his betrothed to restore his vital energy whenever he approaches old age. The post-marital prosperous condition of Heiji not only concludes the booklet but also functions as a narrative seal, which testifies to the realization of the positive karmic tie between the fisherman and the plague-god (*yakubyōgami* 疫病神) of the Shinagawa 品川 district. At the beginning of the story, immediately after catching the *ningyo*, Heiji makes a fish offering to this terrific kami to show his gratitude for the unusual encounter with the strange sea creature. In other words, for Kyōden, the *ningyo* is to be interpreted as a divine precious gift in the guise

30. One of the oldest written versions of this legend is reported in the *Honchō jinja kō* written by the Confucian scholar Hayashi Razan 林羅山 (1583–1657). For a study on the regional variations of this legend, see YANAGITA (2014, 134–137).

of a woman-fish, bestowed by the pestilence deity to a humble fisherman of Edo in order to assure his economic prosperity and perennial longevity. The semantic reversal from the classical and medieval *ningyo* as a cursing and polluting hybrid to the early modern *ningyo* as an auspicious and benevolent anthropotheriomorphic creature is perhaps nowhere else more overtly exemplified.

Another popular type of Edo-period print medium that allows us to analyze various narratives and illustrations of *ningyo* are the so-called *kawaraban* (tile prints), a rough type of print material similar to present-day commercial news-sheets.<sup>31</sup> The fascination for *kawaraban* derived from their multi-usage for marketing as well as religious discourses. One function of *kawaraban* was as a cheap way for specific businesses to advertise activities such as the roadshows of anatomical oddities. At the same time, *kawaraban* were also conceived of and functioned as protective talismans, which could shield roadshow visitors from various misfortunes. The *ningyo*, which appear in the stories printed on the *kawaraban*, often have names such as Shrine Princess (Jinja Hime 神社姫) in the region around Edo, Princess Human-fish (Hime Ningyo 姫人魚) in Osaka, or simply *ningyo* in other domains like Owari 尾張 (present-day Aichi Prefecture) (SASAKATA 2018, 279). The *ningyo* of *kawaraban* usually manifests herself in front of a male character to act as an envoy of the Nāga Palace. However, there are of course interesting variations to this standard plot. For example, one *ningyo* is identified as an after-death transformation of a young lady who threw herself in a river and became a member of the retinue of the marine god Takekoma Myōjin 竹駒明神 because her father was a priest devoted to this kami.

The *ningyo* of the *kawaraban* can also be interpreted as prophetic beasts (*yogen jū* 予言獣) because they invariably delivered oracles (*takusen* 託宣) to humans, often referring to seven years of prosperity, followed by the outbreak of an epidemic of cholera (SASAKATA 2018, 273). In order to save themselves from certain death, humans were to contemplate the shape of the *ningyo* printed on the paper. Following this visualization, the *ningyo* would prolong human life by shielding her devotees from any type of contagious disease, the infective power of which would be deactivated thanks to the vivid red color of the scales on her stomach.<sup>32</sup> The narrative portion of the prophecy enunciated by the *ningyo* therefore served two purposes. On the one hand, it generated in the potential

31. *Kawaraban* are usually constituted of a single printed sheet and derive their name from the terracotta tiles (*kawara*) on which texts and designs were engraved before being smeared with ink and pressed on the paper's surface. Although the graphic techniques of these prints do not seem particularly sophisticated, the image quality of certain *kawaraban* is extremely high.

32. Because infective diseases like smallpox (*tōsō* 痘瘡) or measles (*hashika* 麻疹) left red pockmarks on the skin of the patients it was believed that red objects, animals, or hybrid creatures had the power to fight back the evil spirits that were thought to spread the epidemics. For more details, see IRŌ (2001, 32–93).





FIGURE 14. *Ningyo* with ogress face, *Yasuda bunko kinsei kindai fūzoku shiryō harikomichō* 安田文庫近世近代風俗史料貼込帖, 1805. © Waseda University Enpaku Hakubutsukan. All Rights Reserved. [www.waseda.jp/enpaku/collection/3170/](http://www.waseda.jp/enpaku/collection/3170/).

customer the need to buy the *kawaraban* to protect themselves from future diseases through the contemplation of the image of the *ningyo* and, on the other hand, it reinforced the conception of the woman-fish as an apotropaic and benevolent hybrid creature of the sea.<sup>33</sup>

The illustrated parts of the *kawaraban* that depicted *ningyo* also played a pivotal role in expanding the talismanic function of this printed object. For example, a *kawaraban*, which was printed in 1805, reports the story of a *ningyo* beached at Nishigataura 西方浦 in the Fukuyama 福山 domain (present-day Hiroshima Prefecture). The human-fish is represented with a prominent ogress face (*han-nya men* 般若面), which testifies to the progressive female gendering of the more neutral demonic face of the medieval *ningyo* (YOSHIOKA 1998, 77–79) (FIGURE 14).<sup>34</sup> On the left side of the hybrid body is a triangle made of three open eyes that

33. Cornelis Ouwehand points out that the *kawaraban* dedicated to catfish had a similar apotropaic function against earthquakes. It can be concluded that both *ningyo* and catfish were respectively effective against viral agents and telluric movements thanks to their talismanic representations diffused via *kawaraban*. For the catfish *kawaraban*, see OUWEHAND (1964, 22).

34. Regarding the progressively female gendering of the human face of the *ningyo* it is interesting to remember that in 1852 Akatsuki Kanenari 暁鐘成 (1793–1860) illustrated a comic-erotic book, *Bankōku no shinwa*, in which the human-fish is depicted with a carp-body and a vulva-shaped face. The *ningyo* is caught masturbating, with the fingers of the right hand penetrating the labia of the mouth/vagina (*gyokumon* 玉門) and the fingers of the left hand titillating

emerge from the scales and directly stare toward the onlooker. The three dorsal eyes on the body of the *ningyo* recall a similar characteristic of the *hakutaku* 白沢, a fantastic unguulate with eight eyes located on the back and on both flanks. The *hakutaku* manifests itself when a benevolent sovereign rules the country and is considered to be a positive omen. This conglomerate of observing eyeballs also serves to catch the attention of human eyes, the gaze of which activates the apotropaic functions of the *kawaraban*. In this thaumaturgic mirror game the human eye plays the role of the trigger, which switches on the ocular-luck (*ganpuku* 眼福) generated from the contact between the body of the *ningyo* and the spectator's gaze, facilitated by the very materiality of the *kawaraban*.

In other *kawaraban* images of *ningyo*, three precious pearls of longevity (*chōju chōkyū no meigyoku* 長寿長久の名玉) are piled up on its chest to form a triangle similar to certain pyramidal dispositions of the Buddha's relics. Additionally, the shape of the tail changes into the blade of one or three large swords, resembling the wisdom sword (*chiken* 智劍) usually held by bodhisattvas.<sup>35</sup> In other words, on the one hand, the Edo-period *ningyo* alludes to its classical and medieval valence of polluting and cursing natural omen, as testified by the presence of the demonic face, which loses its neutral aspect and acquires a new feminine aura, probably under the influence of European discourses about sirens. On the other hand, beginning in the seventeenth century, the baleful valence associated with the *ningyo* was counterbalanced, reversed, and paired with an oppositional one, which transformed the human-fish into an auspicious and benevolent aquatic hybrid.

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the scalp/pubic hairs. Kanenari visually expanded the semiotic and semantic ambiguity of the *ningyo*'s physicality by merging together erogenous zones of the female body with the sensual overtone traditionally associated with the carp (PUSHAKOVA and DANELYA 2016, 339; HANASAKI 1978, 107–110).

35. One of the earliest visual examples of fish displaying Buddhist wisdom swords in the guise of fins can be detected in the illustrated frontispiece of the Devadatta chapter of the *Heike nōkyō* 平家納経 version of the *Lotus Sūtra* (NARA KOKURITSU HAKUBUTSUKAN 1990, 140). Since the seventeenth century there have been *kawaraban* representing the various provinces of the Japanese archipelago in a style similar to the medieval "Gyōki maps" (*Gyōkizu* 行基図) encircled by the scaled body of a marine dragon/snake, which bites its sword-tail while holding a jewel on the top of its head. It is possible that the single or triple sword on the tail of the *ningyo* was an iconographic borrowing from this type of talismanic map of Japan. The oceanic creature, which includes the Japanese territory within its coils, is often defined as "earthquake-insect" (*jishin no mushi* 地震の虫) and worked as protector of the country against telluric shocks and external menaces. Ouweland points out that in the Edo period the term *mushi* was also used to indicate amphibious animals such as dragons, snakes, and catfish, which were traditionally associated with earthquakes (OUWEHAND 1964, 37, 54, 285–287; SMITS 2012, 44). On the meaning of apotropaic dragons in medieval maps of Japan, see DOLCE (2007).



### Conclusions

Analyzing the relationship between beliefs surrounding the earthquake catfish and the production of religious geographies, Gregory Smits suggests that real, as well as imaginary, powerful zoomorphic creatures can be included within the broad group of the so-called “moot deities” (SMITS 2012, 59). Teeuwen and Rambelli define moot deities as a “category of numinous powers that was approached from both kami and Buddhist angles,” as none of these heteromorphic entities specifically belonged to a clearly definable religious discourse (TEEUWEN and RAMBELLI 2003, 25). The relationship between strange deities (*ijin* 異神) and teratomorphic creatures had also attracted the attention of the folklorist Yanagita Kunio. In *Hitotsume kozō*, Yanagita states that *yōkai* can be considered a category of fallen kami, the worship of which had declined comports with the end of public recognition for this group of deities (YANAGITA 2013, 22). Starting from Yanagita’s definition of *yōkai*, Komatsu Kazuhiko has focused on the role of human actors in upgrading or degrading spiritual presences (*reiteki sonzai* 霊的存在). For Komatsu, spiritual presences, which receive a eulogizing worship (*matsuriage* 祀り上げ), turn into kami. On the contrary, those that receive a discriminating worship (*matsurisute* 祀り棄て) become *yōkai* (KOMATSU 2015, 200–202). The problem with this theorization of kami-*yōkai* interactions, as Komatsu also recognizes, is that such an oppositional binary structure is actually constituted by a devotional loop where eulogizing and discriminating discourses are constantly shuffling the equilibrium between kami and *yōkai* and alternatively blurring or consolidating the boundaries between them. Both Yanagita and Komatsu principally emphasize the hegemonic role played by human actors in defining kami or *yōkai* according to anthropocentric practices and logics.

However, the example of the *ningyo* demonstrates how the unpredictable manifestation of non-human actors such as rare aquatic animals had their own agency within the recalibration of the interactions between humans and deities. In other words, an aquatic hybrid such as a *ningyo* can be thought of as a member of the porous and flexible ensemble of divine mediators operating between kami and humans. In the particular case of the *ningyo*, its numinous character resides in the fact that it behaves as an “oracular automaton” (CRIPPA 2013, 34). The *ningyo* unilaterally manifests its presence in front of humans, transmitting a message from certain deities, which immediately affects the ordinary world and requires the performance of ritual counteractions on the human side. Whether the message is a negative one, such as in the classical and medieval periods, or a salvific one such as in the early modern period, the appearance of a *ningyo* is always unpredictable and completely overcomes the human’s will, who is forced to take action only *a posteriori*.

If the principal feature of moot deities is to play the role of mediator between the human and the divine sphere, it is clear that they do not simply transport chunks of meaning back and forth from two stable poles of discourse—as uncritical intermediaries do—but creatively modify and expand the sense of the message they are entrusted with.<sup>36</sup> The horror and, at the same time, the attraction for the heteromorphic anatomy of the *ningyo* derives from this ability to dissolve taxonomical boundaries between different classes of human and non-human actors as well as creating hitherto unthinkable amalgamations. In other words, the *ningyo* occupies that zone of “undecidability” or “place of intersection” between animals, humans, and gods creating a semantic and semiotic “limitrophy” between all the actants (DERRIDA 2008, 135, 50, 29; CALARCO 2008, 120). Bernard Faure’s definition of kami as “ever-changing nodes” of meaning within a fluid network of ordinary as well as extraordinary actors can surely be applied to the *ningyo* (FAURE 2016, 10). What is important to keep in mind is the impossibility to decrypt the ultimate reasons according to which a knot of meaning attracts toward itself certain connecting links with specific sectors of discourse while excluding others. The only possible analytical operation is the study of the modalities through which these boundaries, knots, and links are created within the interstices of different networks. The motivations, which underline their generation, will probably keep hiding themselves from our scrutinizing eye.

Returning to the history of the *ningyo*, it is possible to see how in certain periods religious as well as non-religious actors alternatively produced epistemic models for imposing a sort of teleological order on the hermeneutics concerning this hybrid creature. For instance, Nara- and Heian-period narratives foster an interpretation of the *ningyo* as a mysterious natural omen, the appearance of which foreshadows a crisis of the ruling authority. Therefore, in the classical as well as medieval periods the *ningyo* was predominantly encapsulated within the overlapping spheres of politics and religion. Kamakura-period written sources provide a slightly more detailed panorama about the ritual procedures to deactivate the cursing energy of the *ningyo*, as well as the human agents involved in these processes such as provincial officers, soldiers, high- and low-ranking Buddhist monks, and yin-yang masters. A mid-thirteenth century Buddhist tale reports for the first time the approach of subaltern class members to the *ningyo*. The protagonist of this narrative is a fisherman who ignores the devastating effects of the *ningyo* on the political governance and instead exalts its nourishing qualities for sustaining human life. Toward the end of the medieval period and the beginning of the seventeenth century two heterogeneous elements generated hitherto unknown hermeneutical fractures in the conceptualizations of the *ningyo*.

36. For the difference between mediators and intermediaries in actor-network theory, see LATOUR (2005, 39).

First, the diffusion of new Chinese intellectual discourses about the natural realm and its therapeutic as well as taxonomical implications added complexity to the zoomorphic origins of the *ningyo* while keeping undisputed its contiguity with the human body. In the eighteenth century, scholars of Western things such as Ōtsuki Gentaku wrote about the medico-naturalist dimension of the *ningyo* from the perspective of the European natural sciences. At the same time, various organizers of roadshows began a large-scale exploitation of the titillating and thaumaturgic allure of this hybrid creature to attract visitors. Second, Europeans—especially Dutch merchants—contributed to a sort of hybridization between hybrids during which some characteristics of the European siren were inoculated into the Japanese *ningyo*. The main results of this hermeneutical criss-cross were a progressive feminization and eroticization of the *ningyo* together with an emphasis on its soteriological and apotropaic powers. For instance, the Edo-period version of the archetypal encounter between Prince Shōtoku and the *ningyo* is often portrayed not only as an occasion for creating positive karmic ties but also as a sensual vision of the wondrous metamorphosis of a sea creature into an attractive heavenly goddess. From the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, certain *ningyo* absorbed the iconographical aura of the daughters of the *nāga* king, becoming female guardians of the Buddha's relics. Meanwhile, others, such as the *ningyo* described by Santō Kyōden, turned into benevolent emissaries of marine pestilence deities.

Interestingly, this progressive eulogization of the *ningyo* never completely crushed its demonic dark side. For example, talismanic objects such as the tile prints always displayed its lethal nature to emphasize the awesome otherness of the *ningyo* and, at the same time, reassure humans about the *ningyo*'s intention of temporarily using its dreadful power for apotropaic purposes. In each of the abovementioned hermeneutics the hybrid agency of the *ningyo* satisfied all the parameters of the discourse and, inexorably, scorned them all by carving itself a resilient niche, which never perfectly overlapped with any one specific taxonomy but always transcended it.

This perennial instability of the *ningyo* transforms it into a sort of noise within communicative networks. And yet, as pointed out by Michel Serres, these “losses, flights, wear and tears, errors, accidents, opacity” are indispensable moments not only for perpetuating the network itself but also for supporting its expansion toward new territories of signification (SERRES 1982, 12–13). Thanks to the marginal but, at the same time, omnipresent harmonizing noise produced by the disordered body of the *ningyo*, multiple religious and non-religious systems are free to experience cracks in the apparent fixity of their structures and are finally allowed to fertilize each other. The *ningyo* lives and moves within the interstices of heterogeneous discourses like a sort of wondrous rhizome, which extends its ramifications in all directions informing, or disinforming, theories

and practices performed by human as well as non-human actors in different historical and spatial circumstances. In other words, the ultimate key feature of the *ningyo* is its substantial irreducibility to a mono-directional analysis and its unrestrainable disrupting and, at the same time, condensing power over the interweaving networks of reality.

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