The Funeral Director's Blowout-Sale Circular

"Sōshichi yasuuri no hikifuda seshi koto"

A vignette from *Newfangled Spiels*
(*Imayō heta dangi*, 1752),
a *dangibon* by Jōkanbō Kōa

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INTRODUCTION

Humor must not professedly teach, and must not professedly preach, but it must do both if it would live forever. By forever, I mean thirty years.

—Mark Twain

Sometime during the dawn of the Edo period (1600-1868), no doubt after a night of hard partying in the pleasure quarters, the Fleeting World of Buddhist sorrows gave way to the Floating World of hedonistic delights. This paradigmatic shift in sensibilities occurred neither with a bang, nor a whimper, but with a pun (though there was certainly plenty of banging and whimpering, judging by even a few writings on the *ukiyo*). Of the various genres of eighteenth-century popular literature reveling in such puckish wordplay, one of the most underrated is the "mock-sermon book," or *dangibon*.

"The dangibon," Donald Keene has declared, "never attained much literary importance."[1] This may well be the case, for the genre did not survive the Kansei Reforms of the early 1790s.

Yet rumors of its inconsequentiality are greatly exaggerated. Along with the Chinese vernacular novel, the character sketches of Ejima Kiseki, the stage farce, and so on, the mock-sermon book was a vibrant mode of humor, contributing significantly to the development of the popular literature of the late Edo period.

Reaching its apex of influence during the middle of the eighteenth century, when the center of literary, cultural, and publishing activity was swinging from the Kyoto-Osaka region to the shogun's new capital (thereby tracing the trajectory of political power), the mock-sermon book was steeped in the vernacular of that city's townsmen.

The genre therefore cleared the way for Edo's own chirpy, dialogue-heavy fashionbook. Moreover, the *dangibon* was, by at least thirty years, a forerunner of the funnybook, a post-Reforms genre epitomized by Jippensha Ikku's *Hoofing It Along the East-Sea Highway* (*Tōkaidōchū hizakurige*, 1802-1822), which has

been hailed, albeit somewhat fancifully, as "Japan's great comic novel."[2]

The term *dangibon* means something like "homily volume," though this better indicates the genre's roots than it describes the content of individual pieces. Originally a public sermon employing earthy humor in order to popularize Buddhist teachings, especially those of the Nichiren Ritsu and Jōdo sects, the *dangi* proper was delivered on the grounds of the temple, mostly during the festivities of the Spring Equinox. The preface to one of the major works in the later genre nods to this derivation by spoofing a well-known poem, and its headnote, by the monk Sosei (*Kokinshū 56*):

On looking out at the capital when the cherry trees were in full bloom:

miwataseba	Seen from a distance
yanagi sakura o	willows and cherry blossoms
kokimazete	all intermingled:
miyako zo haru no	the imperial city
nishiki narikeru	in truth a springtime brocade

The *dangibon* version runs:

Toward the end of the second month, when the skies turn glorious:

miwataseba	Seen from a distance
jiji to obaba o	grannies and old geezers
kokimazete	all intermingled:
miyako zo haru no	the imperial city
higan no nakabi	in truth a springtime parade[3]

Inevitably, preachers ventured beyond the temple precincts to less spiritual, though no less spirited, venues. It was there, in demotic sites like the marketplace, that the so-called "cross-roads sermon" (*tsuji dangi*) not only was hatched, but flourished beyond the passing of spring.

Once the merits of this expressive vehicle had been established, proponents of Soraigaku and other Neo-Confucian types hopped on the bandwagon. Before too long, garden-variety street performers were assuming the persona of the public sermonizer to put on any kind of entertaining skit without the slightest whiff of moralizing religious conviction.

Accordingly, in one *dangibon* story, titled "Old Man Bellybutton of Hachiōji Delivers a Party-Room Sermon" (*Hachiōji no saiō zashiki*

dangi no koto), the eponymous clown makes do with materials at hand to side-splitting —or, as the contemporary idiom had it, to "navel-dislocatingly" droll—effect: "Improvising, Old Man Bellybutton took the quilted table as his platform, an ashtray as a sutra box, and his tobacco pipe as an incense stick, and launched into his silly sermon."[4]

Such shtick set to print was the humorous *dangibon*. Although it typically ran only three to five mid-sized volumes in length (in hand-stitched chapbook form), relief from its anomalous cursive scrawl was forthcoming, perhaps, only in one or two illustrations of key moments from the story.

Mercifully, most of these stories contain nary a serious sermon, and are didactic in name only, their occasional ranting character making much ado about nothing. What religion-flavored lessons there are to be had, if any, are meant to be taken lightly, as self-mocking pieties. *Biographies of Limp Dicks in Seclusion* (*Naemara in'itsuden*, 1768), for instance, or the inimitable *Treatise on Flatulence* (*Hōhiron*, 1774), for that matter, can hardly be considered didactic by any stretch of the imagination, at least not in the usual Neo-Confucian sense.

Simply put, the *dangibon* derives more from the soapbox oratory of comedians than from the fire-and-brimstone jeremiad of hardcore moralists. This is why it might best be regarded as a book of *mock* homily, containing a smattering of humorous stories, most of which play up colloquial dialogue in a variety of registers, and preachy only so far as the novel can still be described as new.

The great exemplar of the *dangibon*, generally considered the first of its kind, is Jōkanbō Kōa's *Newfangled Spiels* (*Imayō heta dangi*, 1752), from which the following story is gleaned. A bestseller in its day, *Newfangled Spiels* garnered critical acclaim, had its overnight imitators, and ultimately lent one of its titular words to the genre itself. Not unlike brothers James and Horace Smith's *Rejected Addresses*, which parodies the literary styles of the likes of Byron and Scott—or D.G. Scragg's *Vercelli Homilies*, which manages to accomplish something similar, only in Latin —*Newfangled Spiels* spoofs a range of familiar rhetorical modes.

The present piece, which deals just as much with various reactions to a leaflet promoting the special deals of a funeral home as it does the leaflet itself, travesties

the contractual jargon and advertising lingo of the day. Granted, poking fun at the styles of such discourse was nothing new, particularly in the *dangibon*. *The Hickish Zhuangzi* and *Preposterous Dying Words* had done as much. *The Modishly Playful Enchanted Cave* did it in a way, too, lampooning the public notices of Enma, King of Hell.[5]

Beneath the frivolous veneers of these works, though, lurks genuine sociopolitical satire. As Kōa himself put it in the preface to *Newfangled Spiels*, his stories may, on the surface, seem to be "festooned with flowery elegance, though deep down they are rife with the fruits of dissent."

What, then, does "The Funeral Director's Blowout-Sale Circular" satirize in particular? The arbitrary, socially constructed nature of contemporary funerary practice—a critique of which no doubt derived energy from the time-honored sardonic discourse on ecclesiastical corruption? The prestige, in a consumerist society, attached to showy funerals? The overzealousness of the funeral director Sōshichi, whose very name is echoic of "funeral" (*sōshiki*)—not unlike a mortician, perhaps, named Mortimer? The way that this lummox subordinates human decency to the

pursuit of profit—a caricature, to be sure, though one that nonetheless captures something of the disdain for mercantilism run amok? The resentment that some people—like the fourth and final of the circular's fictional readers—harbored toward townsmen for having all but eclipsed samurai in terms of actual social power? The inability of a few readers to agree on any single, unambiguous meaning of a seemingly straightforward text?

So impassioned is this last reader's tirade, it is conceivable that Jōkanbō Kōa may have been using him as a mouthpiece to express his own personal views. Still, Kōa wrote just as much to make a killing as to make a point, as he himself acknowledges in the preface to the book. Then again, to the extent that the comic writer resembles his fictional undertaker in profiting by death, the story soars above mere *comédie noire* to the lofty heights, as it were, of sly self-reflexive commentary on the scavenging nature of authorship itself.