

The Shogunate vs. the People: Gallants and Thieves in Kyokutei Bakin's *Lives of the Gallants: Read Them and Wonder*

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Until the sage is dead, great thieves will never cease to appear.
—*Zhuangzi*, “Rifling Trunks”

1. Introduction

Among the many character types that enliven early modern Japanese fiction, the *kyōkaku* 俠客 (Ch. *xiake*, gallant) was one of the most popular, particularly in the mid- to late nineteenth century. These anti-hierarchical and at times lawbreaking figures often embody moral ambiguity, but they consistently also honor their commitments, and are willing to sacrifice their lives to protect the vulnerable. Their marginalized status empowers them to challenge the prevailing social hierarchy, their focus on the welfare of common people allowing them to contest top-down political ideologies. Even today, the bravery and righteousness associated with *kyōkaku* continue to influence popular culture, as amply manifested in a variety of genres, especially boys' manga, historical dramas, and action movies.

Among the numerous Edo-period (1603–1868) works addressing the theme of *kyōkaku*, Kyokutei Bakin's 曲亭馬琴 (1767–1848) *Kaikan kyōki kyōkakuden* 開卷驚奇俠客伝 (*Lives of the Gallants: Read Them and Wonder*, 1832–1835; hereafter abbreviated as *Gallants*) stands out, both for its distinctive interpretation of the *kyōkaku* spirit and for its enduring influence on subsequent literary works. This article analyzes the meaning and portrayal of the *kyōkaku* in *Gallants*, particularly in contrast to that figure's negative counterpart, the *tōzoku* 盜賊 (thief or bandit). Through close reading, contextualization, and comparison, I argue that the characterization of *kyōkaku* in *Gallants* reflects both a societal anxiety over disorder and a collective yearning for justice, while simultaneously questioning the practical efficacy of the inherently fictional *kyōkaku* spirit in bringing about real-world change. Furthermore, I argue that, through his portrayal of the Ashikaga 足利 shogunate as a kind of metaphoric *tōzoku*, Bakin critiques the moral corruption of those in power as the root cause of such societal disorder, thereby conveying his pessimism on the possibility of restoring the grand peace.

2. Brief Introduction to *Gallants* and Survey of Previous Scholarship

The story of *Gallants* is set temporally in the aftermath of the Nanbokuchō 南北朝 period (Southern and Northern Courts period, 1336–1392). Historically, this period saw the coexistence of two imperial courts, namely the Northern Court (the Jimyōin 持明院 line) backed by the Ashikaga shogunate, and the rival Southern court governed directly by the emperors of the Daikakuji 大覚寺 line. After decades of conflict, the Southern Court at length capitulated to the Northern Court in 1392. *Gallants* follows the descendants of families that supported the erstwhile Southern Court, who prior to any open fight against the shogunate in defense of the Daikakuji line, must for long years navigate a path of endurance and conceal their identities. Yet the fate of these protagonists was ultimately left hanging in the air, after Bakin stopped writing partway through the story. Despite the anticipation for a sequel, *Gallants* remained unfinished, leaving Bakin's intended conclusion unknown.¹ Nevertheless, the work's incomplete status did not impede its popularity, which proved enduring both in Bakin's own era and long after his death.

The initial four volumes of *Gallants*, written by Bakin himself, were serialized from 1832 to 1835. The publisher was Kawachiya Mohei 河内屋茂兵衛 in Osaka, and different illustrators were used for each installment.² The suspension of the project was the result of several factors. Correspondence from Bakin to the publisher indicates that he was displeased by the publisher's unjust accusations that he was delaying the whole publishing process.³ Moreover, health issues in 1833 with Bakin's son, Sōhaku 宗伯, and the latter's subsequent death in 1834, deeply disheartened Bakin, ultimately dissuading him from continuing the project.⁴ Yet even as Bakin himself ceased working on the project, its popularity continued. One year after Bakin's demise in 1848, a fifth volume was published, this time written by Hagiwara Hiromichi 萩原広道 (1815–1863). And in 1865, amid the transition from the Edo period to the modern Meiji period (1868–1912), *Gallants* found its way onto the kabuki stage.⁵ Indeed, the work continued to enjoy popularity well into the Meiji period, influencing subsequent writers and scholars such as Tsubouchi Shōyō 坪内逍遙 (1859–1935),⁶ Kōda Rohan 幸田露伴 (1867–1947), and Kitamura Tōkoku 北村透谷 (1868–1894).⁷

¹ Tokuda, "Gonanchō hiwa," p. 53.

² The first installment was illustrated by Keisai Eisen 溪斎英泉 (1791–1848); the second was illustrated by Yanagawa Shigenobu 柳川重信 I (1787–1832); Utagawa Kunisada 歌川国貞 (1786–1865) was responsible for the third installment; and Yanagawa Shigenobu 柳川重信 II (n.d.) illustrated the fourth. See Hattori, "*Kaikan kyōki kyōkakuden* no kuchie, sashie," p. 795.

³ Kyokutei Bakin, *Bakin shokan shūsei*, vol. 4, p. 34.

⁴ Kyokutei Bakin, *Bakin shokan shūsei*, vol. 3, p. 118–119.

⁵ Hattori, "*Kaikan kyōki kyōkakuden* no kuchie, sashie: Keijō," p. 124.

⁶ Tokuda, "Gonanchō hiwa," pp. 72–73.

⁷ Maeda, "Bakin to Tōkoku," pp. 134–135.



Figure 1. Front and back covers. *Kaikan kyōki kyōkakuden* 開卷驚奇俠客傳, part 1 (pub. 1832), vol. 1. Hiroshima University Library. <https://doi.org/10.20730/100302090> (images 2 and 35).

Neither has modern scholarship neglected *Gallants*. For instance, Tokuda Takeshi 徳田武 has discussed its political implications, Hattori Hitoshi 服部仁 has analyzed its illustrations, and Mizuno Minoru 水野稔 and Miyake Hiroyuki 三宅宏幸 have explored Bakin's Chinese sources. Three scholars moreover in particular—Asō Isoji 麻生磯次, Maeda Ai 前田愛, and Uchida Yasuhiro 内田保廣—have specifically discussed the meaning of *kyōkaku* in the work.

Asō, one of the earliest scholars to analyze *Gallants*, utilizes it as a prime example to showcase the substantial influence of Chinese vernacular novels on Bakin; and in *Edo bungaku to Shina bungaku* 江戸文学と支那文学 (Edo Literature and Chinese Literature, 1946), he highlights Bakin's advanced compositional skill in integrating such Chinese antecedents in a way that expressed his own ideas.⁸ He

⁸ Asō, *Edo bungaku to Shina bungaku*, pp. 144–174. Asō's book was later retitled *Edo bungaku to Chūgoku bungaku* in 1972. Asō points out that Bakin utilized a variety of Chinese vernacular novels as sources when composing *Gallants*. These include *Nüxian waishi* 女仙外史 (J. *Josen gaishi*, Unofficial History of the Female Transcendent, 1704), *Pingyaozhuan* 平妖伝 (J. *Heiyōden*, The Three Sui Quash the Demons' Revolt, late sixteenth century), *Haoqinzhuan* 好逑伝 (J. *Kōkyūden*, The Fortunate Union, seventeenth century), *Kuaixinbain chuangqi* 快心編伝奇 (J. *Kaishinben denki*, Tales to Delight the Heart, seventeenth to eighteenth century), *Chuke pai'an jingqi* 初刻拍案驚奇 (J. *Shokoku bakuan kyōki*, Slapping the Table in Amazement, seventeenth century), and *Shuibuzhuan* 水滸伝 (J. *Snikoden*, The Water Margin, mid-fourteenth century).

also suggests that Bakin's obsession with Sima Qian's 司馬遷 (J. Shiba Sen, 145?–89? BCE) anti-Confucian interpretation of *kyōkaku* casts doubt on the common perception of Bakin as a supporter of Confucianism. However, as Asō's primary objective in analyzing *Gallants* is to support his broader argument regarding the connection between Edo literature and Chinese literature, his discussion of *Gallants* is largely confined to identifying those Chinese sources, particularly in popular fiction, that Bakin drew upon. A comprehensive analysis of the significance of the *kyōkaku* spirit in Bakin's works would not emerge until the late 1970s.

In 1977, Uchida Yasuhiro published “Bakin no kyō: *Kaikan kyōki kyōkakuden izen*” 馬琴の俠：「開卷驚奇俠客伝」以前 (Bakin's Gallantry: Before *Lives of the Gallants: Read Them and Wonder*), in which he traces the development of *kyōkaku* figures in works by Bakin predating *Gallants*. Uchida's study highlights how Bakin strove gradually to remove those traits of immorality and outlawry traditionally associated with *kyōkaku*, ultimately redefining the concept in a way that shaped its influence on subsequent writers and literati.⁹ However, as his title suggests, Uchida limits this analysis to works predating *Gallants* and does not engage directly with the latter text itself. While I concur with Uchida's argument that Bakin sought indeed to redefine *kyōkaku* as a group of righteous people, I would argue that in *Gallants*, Bakin nonetheless simultaneously acknowledges the moral ambiguity of *kyōkaku* when measured against Confucian ethical standards. Moreover, Bakin also consciously juxtaposes *kyōkaku* with *tōzoku*, intentionally blurring the line between the two categories.

In contrast to Uchida's interest in *kyōkaku* before *Gallants*, Maeda Ai is more intrigued by the reinterpretation of *kyōkaku* in the context of Japan's modernization. In “Bakin to Tōkoku: ‘Kyō’ o megutte” 馬琴と透谷：「俠」をめぐって (Bakin and Tōkoku: About “Gallantry”, 1976), he explores this idea through an analysis of writings by Kitamura Tōkoku. He shows that in Tōkoku's view, the *kyōkaku* embodied ordinary people's hopes for freedom and justice, noting that Tōkoku even compared the surviving supporters of the Southern court in *Gallants* to his own comrades after the failure of the Freedom and People's Rights Movement in the 1880s.¹⁰ Although Maeda's analysis has little to do with Bakin's work itself, such a connection between the *kyōkaku* spirit and the desire of the marginalized for voice and for justice is indeed in accord with the main theme of *Gallants*.

In short, while the research conducted by these three scholars is certainly groundbreaking, none of them focuses on *Gallants* exclusively, or on the specific meaning of *kyōkaku* within that text. Given Bakin's significant status in early modern Japanese literature and the profound influence of *Gallants* on subsequent literary works exploring similar themes, however, a thorough analysis of the *kyōkaku* spirit in *Gallants* is both essential and long overdue. This article seeks

⁹ Uchida, “Bakin no kyō,” pp. 182–183.

¹⁰ Maeda, “Bakin to Tōkoku,” pp. 134–136.

to address this gap, hoping thereby to contribute to a deeper understanding of this remarkable work of fiction and its enduring cultural impact.

In the sections that follow, I begin by first examining Bakin's theoretical articulation of *kyōkaku* through a close reading of his preface to the initial volume of *Gallants*. Drawing inspiration from Sima Qian, in this piece Bakin carefully positions *kyōkaku* on the side of good by emphasizing their people-centered intentions, even while also acknowledging their moral limitations. After this, I proceed to examine in detail Bakin's depiction of an ideal *kyōkaku* character within the narrative, with a focus on such a figure's intrinsic fictionality: although he represents a source of hope for the oppressed, the possibility of true salvation seems to exist only in the realm of fiction. The pessimism of this view is also reflected in Bakin's portrayal of *tōzoku*, the evil counterpart to *kyōkaku*. Inspired by the discussion of the "great thief" in *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (c. 369–286 BCE), Bakin highlights the difficulty of distinguishing between *kyōkaku* and *tōzoku*, and critiques the shogunate as itself the great thief, exposing its hypocrisy.

3. The Definition of *Kyōkaku*

The historical roots of the term *kyōkaku* can be traced back to ancient China.¹¹ In *Shiji* 史記 (J. *Shiki*, Records of the Grand Historian, late second century BCE to early first century BCE; hereafter referred to as *Records*), Sima Qian highlights *kyōkaku* as a group of outlaw heroes who were largely ignored in earlier, ruling-class-centered historical records.¹² Their role as protectors of the people makes these figures a popular subject in Chinese literature, notably influencing the vernacular novel *Shuǐhúzhuan* 水滸傳 (J. *Suikoden*, The Water Margin, mid-fourteenth century). The protagonists in *The Water Margin* are portrayed in a positive light as marginalized outlaw heroes or, conversely, as a violent gang of bandits who

¹¹ The term *kyōkaku* lends itself to various English translations. Burton Watson often translated it as "knight" because of shared qualities such as bravery, righteousness, and compassion. However, the term "knight" evokes images of a loyal horseman of high social status in medieval Europe, which may not accurately encapsulate the essence of *kyōkaku*, a term that does not necessarily imply loyalty to a given lord or any high social rank (or indeed the use of a horse). Another possible translation is "chivalry." Nitobe Inazō offered an early analysis of the similarities between the concept of chivalry and *bushidō* 武士道 ("the way of the samurai"), a term sometimes associated with *kyōkaku*. See Nitobe, *Bushido*, pp. 5–9. Although it is difficult to summarize the concept of chivalry, which has a long and complicated history, its origin as a medieval ethical code of conduct for elite, noble, and Christian knights makes it a possible translation for *bushidō*, which is also rooted in elite culture, noble class status, and religion. However, *kyōkaku* differs significantly from both chivalry and *bushidō* by virtue of its iconoclastic nature. Rather than being followers of the elite and nobility, or the guardians of dominant religious and political ideologies, *kyōkaku* adhere to their own moral codes, which sometimes run counter to those of authorities. Hence, Glynne Walley's translation of *kyōkaku* as "gallant," emphasizing courageous and heroic attributes, seems more fitting. See Walley, *Good Dogs*, p. 8. Thus, while here I predominantly utilize the Japanese term *kyōkaku*, I occasionally employ "gallant" when contextually appropriate.

¹² Chiba, "Kyōkaku oyobi kyōkaku shisō," pp. 31–32.

morally diverge from dominant Confucian ideology. Even still, the novel's suggestion that the societal margins can become centers of influence contributed to its widespread popularity in both imperial China and early modern Japan.¹³

In Japan, *kyōkaku* were closely associated with popular culture, in which they were represented as figures that were powerful yet rebellious, attractive yet dangerous. Although the term could be applied to different groups of people, all were generally perceived as socially disruptive forces that straddled the line between justice and lawlessness. Unlike many other popular warrior figures, *kyōkaku* were distinct for their lack of interest in serving the upper class. For example, the loyal retainers of *Chūshingura* 忠臣蔵 (The Treasury of Loyal Retainers) are not *kyōkaku* because they are celebrated for their willingness to sacrifice themselves to avenge the death of their lord; and the dog warriors in Bakin's own renowned *Nansō Satomi bakenden* 南総里見八犬伝 (The Lives of the Eight Dogs of the Satomi of Southern Kazusa, 1814–1842; hereafter referred to as *Eight Dogs*) should strictly speaking not be counted as *kyōkaku* either, because they are spiritual descendants of the Satomi clan and the story ends with their becoming loyal retainers of Lord Satomi Yoshinari 里見義成. In contrast, *kyōkaku* figures were admired not for their loyalty to a lord but for their anti-hierarchical nature and their willingness to fight the ruling class to protect the weak.

Takasu Yoshijirō 高須芳次郎 traces the origins of *kyōkaku* back to the *gekokujo* 下克上 (inferiors overthrowing their superiors) practices and the *tsuchi ikki* 土一揆 (peasant uprisings) phenomenon of the late Muromachi period (1336–1573).¹⁴ During this time of political instability, as the central authority collapsed and social order unraveled, mid-/low-ranking samurai sought to replace their superiors, while peasants rose up to resist oppressive rule. The shared resistance against the ruling class by these groups laid the foundation for the eventual appearance of *kyōkaku*.

Takasu further argues that the *batamotoyakko* 旗本奴 (“young samurai who served high-ranking *batamoto*, or shogunal vassals”) of the early Edo period should be regarded as precursors of *kyōkaku* because their emphasis on cultivating mental endurance and physical sturdiness sharply contrasted with the luxurious and decadent lifestyles of the increasingly bureaucratized *batamoto* class as a whole, and because their distinctive appearance and behavior embodied a form of resistance to the progressively class-solidified social customs of the time. Their rebellious spirit gradually spread to the commoner class, eventually giving rise to their commoner counterpart, the *machiyakko* 町奴 (“young townsmen”).¹⁵ *Machiyakko* generally indeed hailed from commoner families, and they actively resisted the oppression of the ruling class. However, as Takasu points out, both *batamotoyakko* and *machiyakko* tended to overemphasize spirit and the importance

¹³ Hedberg, *The Japanese Discovery of Chinese Fiction*, pp. 3–4.

¹⁴ Takasu, “Kyōkaku no hassei oyobi hattatsu,” pp. 8–9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 12–16.

of accepting challenges without hesitation, which sometimes led them to recklessly charge forward without regard for right or wrong.

Bakin holds a critical view of both *batamotoyakko* and *machiyakko*, however, considering them unworthy of the title of true *kyōkaku*. In the preface to the first installment of *Gallants*, he asserts that these “gallants of the towns” (*ryokō no shi* 閭巷之士) are inferior to the “virtuous warriors of old” (*inishie dōtoku no shi* 古者道德之士). In his portrayal, “gallants of the towns” includes figures from both groups, such as Ōtori Ippei 大鳥逸平 (1588–1612),¹⁶ a pioneering *batamotoyakko*, and Banzuīn Chōbei 幡随院長兵衛 (1622–1650),¹⁷ a renowned *machiyakko*. Both are historical figures from the early Edo period who were later mythologized in popular culture. For instance, Banzuīn Chōbei became a celebrated character in kabuki theater, first appearing on stage in 1744. His popularity endured throughout the Edo period and continues even into modern times.¹⁸

Yet despite the iconic status of these two men, Bakin’s portrayal remains critical, suggesting that their actions and behaviors fell short of the virtues he associates with true *kyōkaku*. His negative evaluation reads:

而其所為、或未必合於義。畜立氣齊作威福、結私交以立疆於世者也。¹⁹

Some of their behavior cannot unreservedly be called righteous. They were impetuous, sometimes bullying others and sometimes aiding them. They formed their own groups and made a living through their brute strength.

In other words, Bakin disapproves of how such people exploit their power to oppress those weaker than themselves. In Bakin’s conception, true *kyōkaku* are brave and skilled in the martial arts, uphold their promises, and defend the vulnerable. While their sense of righteousness may diverge from the Confucian definition, they maintain humility and refrain from boasting about their deeds. Because of these traits, they are perceived as formidable threats by the government, as they adhere to their own moral code rather than serving authority. They harbor disdain for those who abuse power and are willing to sacrifice their lives to combat such tyranny. Moreover, their ability to evade detection complicates governmental efforts to control or regulate them. And while authorities may view them as more dangerous than ordinary thieves and bandits, the general public worships them as their protectors and saviors.

¹⁶ Ōtori Ippei formed his *batamotoyakko* group around 1610, and its members were renowned for wearing strange clothes and conducting villainous deeds. This group was composed primarily of low-ranking samurai, and aimed to both restrain the high-ranking samurai elite’s tyranny as well as to protect low-ranking samurai’s rights. Inui, *Nihon denki densetsu daijiten*, pp. 185–186.

¹⁷ Banzuīn Chōbei was from the *chōnin* 町人 (townsmen) class. He eventually rose to become the head of the *machiyakko* and competed with local *batamotoyakko* groups. His life came to an end when he was killed by Mizuno Nariyuki 水野成之 (1630–1664) and members of the latter’s own gang. For more details, see *ibid.*, p. 729.

¹⁸ Kawatake and Furuido, *Kabuki tōjō jinbutsu jiten*, pp. 659–661.

¹⁹ Kyokutei Bakin, *Kaikan kyōki kyōkakuden*, p. 6.



Figure 2. Inside front cover and the author's preface. *Kaikan kyōki kyōkakuden*, part 1 (pub. 1832), vol. 1. Hiroshima University Library. <https://doi.org/10.20730/100302090> (image 4).

In this preface to the first installment of *Gallants*, Bakin meticulously outlines his definition of *kyōkaku*, drawing heavily from Chapter 124, “Youxia liezhuan” 遊俠列伝 (J. “Yūkyō retsuden”; The Biographies of the Wandering Knights), in Sima Qian’s *Records*, as well as from the corresponding chapter in its Ming commentary *Shiji pinglin* 史記評林 (J. *Shiki hyōrin*, Annotated Records of the Grand Historian, sixteenth century; hereafter *Annotated Records*).²⁰ Nishimura Hideto 西村秀人 has observed that over half of the preface is comprised of excerpts from *Records* and this commentary, with Bakin contributing only some transitional sentences and the concluding portion. Nishimura interprets these excerpts as indicative of Bakin’s complete reliance on *Records* and his use of that text as a mere “justification” for having composed such a narrative so centered on *kyōkaku*.²¹ However, as mentioned previously, Bakin’s comparison between the

²⁰ Nishimura, “Chūgoku bungaku yori mita Bakin,” pp. 790–791.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 791.

“inferior” *batamotoyakko* and *machiyakko* and the virtuous *kyōkaku* of old indicates that he has a more nuanced definition in mind. In Bakin’s view, true *kyōkaku* are characterized by their willingness to protect the weak, an understanding that diverges from their conventional popular image as gangsters who impose their power on others. For Bakin, the essence of *kyōkaku* lies in their ethical commitment to defend the vulnerable, marking a stark contrast to the lawless behavior of some *batamotoyakko* and *machiyakko*. His conceptualization in these terms is moreover deeply rooted in the classical texts he cites, rather than in the prevailing popular interpretations of the time. Consequently, a careful analysis of this preface is essential to understanding the theoretical foundations of Bakin’s strategy in constructing the morality of *kyōkaku*.

4. Moral Degradation and the Appearance of *kyōkaku* and *tōzoku*

In the preface to the first installment of *Gallants* (Figure 2), Bakin establishes a worldview centered on societal decline. He contends that the deterioration of moral standards in society has contributed to the blurred ethical boundaries associated with *kyōkaku* figures. Furthermore, by considering *kyōkaku* alongside *tōzoku*, Bakin is able to distinguish the two, effectively setting aside the more “evil” elements traditionally attributed to *kyōkaku*. In doing so, he redefines *kyōkaku* as representatives of righteousness, positioning them as figures who embody the virtue of protecting the weak, and thus elevating them as symbols of good in contrast to their more nefarious counterparts.

The preface begins with a citation from the Chinese Daoist classic *Dao de jing* 道德經 (J. *Dō toku kyō*, fourth century BCE): “Laozi says, ‘When the Great Way declined, the words for benevolence and righteousness came in.’”²² This opening line sets the thematic tone for the entire narrative and establishes the context for *kyōkaku*: they emerge when the *Way*—the Daoist principle of natural order and harmony—is lost and society falls into disorder. (This idea also resonates with Takasu’s discussion of the *gekokujo* and *tsuchi ikki* practices during chaotic periods of war.) The whole relevant stanza in *Dao de jing* is as follows:

大道廢、有仁義。智慧出、有大偽。六親不和、有孝慈。國家昏亂、有忠臣。²³

And when the olden way of rule declined,
The words for love [benevolence] and serve [righteousness] came in.
Next came knowledge and keen thought,
Advent of lying, sham, and fraud.
When kinsmen lost their kind concord,
They honored child and parent love.
In dark disorder ruling houses
Turned to loyal devoted vassals.²⁴

²² Kyokutei Bakin, *Kaikan kyōki kyōkakuden*, p. 5.

²³ Laozi, *Rōshi Kensai kōgi*, vol. 1 (*Jō*), fol. 22v.

²⁴ Laozi, *Dao de Jing*, p. 68.

This stanza describes the decline of the Great Way, a natural state of order in which words for virtues are not needed. It is only after the decline of such a state that virtues like benevolence and righteousness are conceived. Therefore, benevolence and righteousness mark the decline of the Way rather than any reflection of the Way. In general, Daoism espouses a critical stance towards such Confucian virtues. For example, *Zhuangzi* has a similar or even more critical attitude: “That the Way and its Virtue were destroyed in order to create benevolence and righteousness—this was the fault of the sage.”²⁵

By citing Laozi’s teachings, Bakin highlights the degeneration of society and the inherently unreliable nature of Confucian virtues in such a context. He then extends this argument by stating that even virtues such as benevolence and righteousness have become corrupted: “There are fake people who pretend to be true, and that is why Han Fei criticizes them by comparing them to ‘Confucians and gallants,’”²⁶ a direct citation from *Records*. In other words, once the Way is lost, secondary virtues such as benevolence and righteousness emerge to fill the void; but when these virtues are tainted, distinguishing between good and evil becomes increasingly difficult. Through this reasoning, Bakin establishes a moral hierarchy that reflects the disordered nature of society. Although *kyōkaku* may also possess negative qualities like recklessness and deceptiveness, making them imperfect according to the Confucian moral standard, this is owing to the degradation of a disordered society. In this way, Bakin justifies the ambiguous morality of *kyōkaku* and aligns them with the good.

Next, Bakin proceeds to define the qualities of *kyōkaku*, citing Chen Renzi’s 陳仁子 (J. Chin Jinshi, Song dynasty) comments in *Annotated Records* and Sima Qian’s *Records*:

夫俠之為言、彊也持也。輕生高氣、排難解紛。孔子所謂殺身成仁者是已。司馬遷及伝游俠、其序援韓子。且曰、季次原憲閭巷人也。讀書懷独行君子之德、不苟合当世。当世亦笑之。又曰、今游俠、其行雖不軌於正義、然其言必信。其行必果。已諾必誠。不愛其軀、赴士之阨困。既已存亡死生矣。而不矜其能、羞伐其德。蓋亦有足多者。²⁷

Gallants are powerful and they protect people. With high moral integrity, they are not afraid of death. They help people in trouble and solve disputes. This is what Confucius meant when he remarked, “to die to achieve virtue.” When Sima Qian composed *Records*, he cited Han Fei in the preface. He also wrote, “Ji Ci and Yuan Xian were simple commoners living in the village lanes. They studied books and cherished independence of action and the virtues of the superior man; in their righteousness they refused to compromise with their age, and their age in turn merely laughed at them.” Furthermore, he wrote, “as for the wandering

²⁵ Zhuangzi, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, pp. 66–67. 毀道德以為仁義、聖人之過也。Zhuangzi, *Soji Kensai kōgi*, vol. 3, fol. 54r.

²⁶ Kyokutei Bakin, *Kaikan kyōki kyōkakuden*, p. 5. 而有似而非者。故韓非比儒俠擯斥之。

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

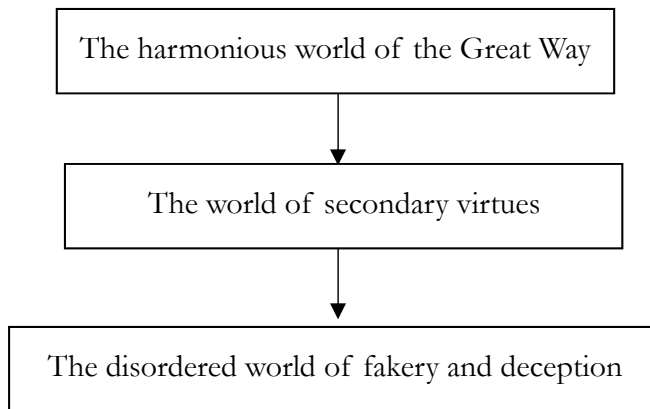


Figure 3. The three phases of the world's degradation, according to Bakin.

gallants, though their actions may not conform to perfect righteousness, yet they are always true to their word. What they undertake they invariably fulfil; what they have promised they invariably carry out. Without thinking of themselves they hasten to the side of those who are in trouble, whether it means survival or destruction, life or death. Yet they never boast of their accomplishments but rather consider it a disgrace to brag of what they have done for others. So there is much about them which is worthy of admiration.”²⁸

The opening sentence of this passage underscores two pivotal attributes of *kyōkaku*—bravery and righteousness.²⁹ The following citation of the stories of Ji Ci 季次 (J. Ki Ji) and Yuan Xian 原憲 (J. Gen Ken) from *Records* elucidates three further qualities of *kyōkaku*: they are not confined to noble lineage; they diligently study texts and cultivate virtues; and they may face misunderstanding or ridicule from contemporary society.³⁰ The text continues to emphasize their unwavering commitment to their words and their readiness to sacrifice themselves for others in distress; it states furthermore that they refrain from boasting of their deeds, and that and their righteousness may not always align perfectly with societal norms.

Yet because of the marginalized status of *kyōkaku* and the falsity of society, it is extremely difficult to identify them. *Records* continues to explore in more detail those people who pretend to be *kyōkaku*—thieves and bandits, or *tōzoku*.

²⁸ I rely on Watson's translation for the citations from *Records*. See Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian*, vol. 2, pp. 409–410.

²⁹ Sima, *Shiki hyōrin*, vol. 124, fol. 1r. Bakin cites part of Chen Renzi's comment with slight revisions. The original reads: 陳仁子曰、〔中略〕夫游者、行也。俠者、持也。輕生高氣、排難解紛。(Chen Renzi says, "... *Yōu* 游 means 'to travel' and *xia* 俠 means 'to guard.' With high moral integrity, [gallants] are not afraid of death. They help people in trouble and solve disputes.")

³⁰ Ji Ci and Yuan Xian are Confucian scholars rather than *kyōkaku*, but Sima Qian discusses them to highlight the qualities they share with *kyōkaku*.

鄙人有言曰、何知仁義。已嚮其利者為有德。故伯夷醜周、餓死首陽山、而文武不以其故貶王。跖躋暴戾、其徒誦義無窮。由此觀之、窃鉤者誅、窃国者侯、侯之門仁義存。非虛言也。³¹

Ignorant people have a saying, “Why bother to understand benevolence and righteousness? Whoever does you some good must be a virtuous man!” Bo Yi hated the Zhou dynasty and chose to starve on Shouyang Mountain rather than serve under it, but Kings Wen and Wu did not give up their thrones on that account. Zhi and Qiao were cruel and lawless bandits, yet their own followers never tired of singing their praises. From this we can see that “he who steals a fishhook gets his head chopped off, but he who steals a state becomes a great lord, and when one is a great lord, he automatically acquires benevolence and righteousness.” These are no empty words!³²

Sima Qian cites instances where ignorance leads people to equate real benevolence and righteousness with actions only consequentially beneficent, regardless of the actor's true character. For instance, the Confucian saint Bo Yi 伯夷 (J. Haku I), critical of King Wu's 武 lack of loyalty and filial piety, starved himself in protest but failed to dissuade the king from assuming the throne. Similarly, despite Zhi 跖 (J. Seki) and Qiao's 躋 (J. Kyō) notoriety as ruthless bandits, their followers lauded them. Sima Qian further draws from *Zhuangzi* to challenge conventional notions of right and wrong, positing that a great thief, if benevolent toward his subjects after usurping power, can be transformed into a virtuous ruler. Sima Qian delineates a crucial distinction between *kyōkaku* and *tōzoku*: whereas *kyōkaku* uphold their principles and commitments steadfastly, even if it necessitates solitude, *tōzoku* employ deception and adapt their principles opportunistically to amass fame, power, and wealth. The motif of the *tōzoku* serves as another thematic axis in *Gallants*, to be examined further in section 6.

In summary, drawing upon Chinese classics, Bakin divides the moral degradation of the world into three phases: the harmonious world of the Great Way, the secondarily good world of virtues, and further beyond that the disordered chaotic world, as shown in **Figure 3**. *Kyōkaku* are situated within the third phase, where their imperfect morality can still be considered good, albeit inferior to the first two phases. Furthermore, the moral superiority of the *kyōkaku* is confirmed by their foil, the *tōzoku*, who are defined as possessing evil characteristics. In the following sections, I will explore how Bakin puts these theoretically defined images of *kyōkaku* and *tōzoku* into practice in *Gallants*.

5. The *Kyōkaku* Ideal and the People's Hopes for Justice

The quintessential *kyōkaku* character crafted by Bakin in *Gallants* is Nogami no Fuhito Akinobu 野上史著演, a *gōshi* 郷士 (country samurai) whose detailed

³¹ Sima, *Shiki hyōrin*, vol. 124, fol. 2v.

³² Sima, *Records of the Grand Historian*, vol. 2, p. 410.



Figure 4. Frontispiece. *Kaikan kyōki kyōkakuden*, part 1 (pub. 1832), vol. 1. Hiroshima University Library. <https://doi.org/10.20730/100302090> (image 8). The character on the far right, holding a scroll, is Nogami no Fuhito Akinobu.

introduction marks the beginning of Chapter 1.³³ Akinobu's lineage extends back to the Kamakura shogunate. During the Nanbokuchō period, his grandfather had allied with the Southern Court and transported rations for General Nitta Yoshisada's 新田義貞 (1301–1338) army; but upon learning of Yoshisada's demise, he withdrew from political affairs. Akinobu's own father, incapacitated by illness, followed scholarly pursuits instead of serving a lord. Heir to such a family legacy, Akinobu strives himself to hone his skills in both literature and the martial arts. His principles prioritize loyalty and filial piety, as manifested in his refusal to pledge allegiance to the contemporary Ashikaga shogunate due to his familial ties to the Southern Court.

Akinobu's family history and educational background shape his unique *kyōkaku* nature, making him willing to diverge from the norms of his society. He

³³ Kyokutei Bakin, *Kaikan Kyōki Kyōkakuden*, p. 715. Bakin often used the term *gōshi* to refer to characters born into samurai families but currently living in the countryside while keeping their samurai titles.

sympathizes with the defunct imperial line and refuses to serve the incumbent ruling authority, challenging prevailing notions of loyalty and righteousness. Despite his reluctance to perform obeisance to the rulers, he exhibits remarkable compassion toward the common people. Akinobu extends aid to all who seek it, dispensing resources without inquiry into their identities. Exceptionally, his empathy extends also to anonymous casualties of war: he purchases the skulls of the nameless dead scattered along the roadside, symbolizing his reverence even for the souls of those forgotten.³⁴

Akinobu's interpretation of filial piety similarly deviates from societal expectations. Despite his age, he and his wife remain childless, a situation traditionally viewed in Confucian doctrine as a failure to perpetuate the family line. Yet whereas his wife suggests taking a concubine to ensure lineage continuity, Akinobu attributes their childlessness to Heaven's will. He challenges the Confucian teaching of *shichikyo* 七去 (Ch. *qiqi*, seven reasons to divorce a wife), which allows a husband to put the blame of infertility entirely on the wife.³⁵ He argues that both men and women can be infertile and that perhaps his and his wife's lack of children is his own fault rather than hers.

In the largely government-oriented and hierarchical system of Confucianism, moral virtues such as benevolence, loyalty, and filial piety are keys to sustaining social stability on a grand scale. Consequently, groups of people who cannot, or who can no longer, contribute to this system, such as the anonymous dead in wars and infertile women, are often silenced and marginalized. Akinobu's allegiance and filial piety challenge such conventional definitions by prioritizing the welfare of the vulnerable over deference to authority. He aligns himself with the downtrodden populace, thereby underscoring Bakin's commitment to representing the voice of the common people.

At the same time, even as Bakin portrays Akinobu as an exemplary *kyōkaku* character, he subtly exposes the fictional nature of this depiction. Although Akinobu and his peers serve as beacons of hope for readers, the narrative effectively suggests that it is only through the lens of fiction that the grievances of the oppressed can be heard and addressed. Notably, his name, Nogami no Fuhito Akinobu 野上史著演, can be rearranged to signify "to write unofficial history and historical romance" (*yashi engi o arawasu* 野史演義を著す). Tonomura

³⁴ It was a common practice in war for samurai to gather the heads of famous enemy generals as proof of their military achievements, for which their lords would reward them accordingly. Akinobu is not motivated by utilitarian purposes, however. Rather, he chooses to collect the skulls of the nameless. This again shows his unique understanding of loyalty and righteousness.

³⁵ The seven reasons to divorce a wife are given as follows: "If the wife is not filial to her parents in law, she should leave; if the wife is childless, she should leave; if the wife is not chaste, she should leave; if the wife is jealous, she should leave; if the wife has an incurable disease, she should leave; if the wife is too talkative, she should leave; and, if the wife steals things, she should leave." This was a common Confucian practice in both premodern China and Japan. Gao, *Dadai Liji jinzhubujingyi*, p. 469.

Jōsai 殿村篠斎 (1779–1847), a friend of Bakin's, highlighted this linguistic play, noting: "Needless to say, this [Akinobu's] name means unofficial history and historical romance. How interesting!"³⁶ In the Edo period, "unofficial history and historical romance" often denoted fictional works in general, imbuing Akinobu with metaphorical significance as a representative of fiction within *Gallants*.

One particular episode involving an empty letter further underscores this fictionality. Dairoku Hidenao 大六英直 falls gravely ill en route to Sagami 相模 and entrusts his wife, Omoya 母屋, and son, Koroku 小六, to Akinobu through a letter. Akinobu receives the letter, only to find it empty upon opening. He thinks to himself,

ひでなほ われ いちめん ましは わがぎやうでう つたへき やから よ
英直 俺と一面の、交りあるにあらねども、俺行状を伝聞て、妻子を託せん
ほり かきしる うはがき せいめい しる しらかみ
と欲するに、書記すべきよしのなければ、標書にのみ姓名を、写して白紙を
ふう ふう まさ くろ い ちう しめ
封ぜしは、いはぬはいふに優るといふ、苦しき意中を示せしならん。³⁷

Hidenao and I have never met before. He heard about my conduct and wanted to entrust his wife and son to me. There is little he can mention, so he only wrote his name on the envelope and put a piece of white paper in it. [The empty letter] conveyed his painful intent: "silence is better than words."

Akinobu interprets the empty letter as a silent testament to Hidenao's character, attributing significance to the absence of words. This portrayal suggests that moral individuals like Akinobu possess an innate ability to recognize others' virtues, even through unreliable means such as hearsay or silence.

However, the episode also underscores the ambiguity and unreliability of words. Akinobu's trust in the empty letter reveals his acceptance of such ambiguity as well as his own fictional nature. Thus, while Akinobu, as an ideal *kyōkaku*, symbolizes moral integrity and virtue within the narrative, his encounters and interpretations simultaneously highlight the inherent limitations and uncertainties of human communication and narrative representation.

Another manifestation of Akinobu's fictionality is the episode of the brush tomb. After assisting Hidenao's son Koroku in retrieving the head of Wakiya Yoshitaka 脇屋義隆 (?–1404), a high-ranking samurai from the Nitta clan serving the Southern Court, and those of his retainers, Akinobu places the heads into six urns and inters them alongside Hidenao's body in a temple he frequents. He thereupon delivers a speech to the villagers:

³⁶ Kyokutei Bakin, *Kaikan kyōki kyōkakuden*, p. 715. 野史演義ノ意ヲ以テノ名ナルコトハイフマデモナク、オモシロシ。 Another hypothesis is that Akinobu's name hints at Bakin's pen name Chosakudō 著作堂, which can be interpreted as "the hall where the writer composes works." In this case, the character of Akinobu would represent the author's own fictional persona, an equation perhaps highlighting for the readers his fictional, created nature.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 36.

このかめ おさ
 這瓶に斂めしは、俺年八才ばかりなりし春の比、初て手習せし日より、五十
 ちか きのふけふ としころつかひふる ちびふで
 に近かる昨今まで、年来用敗したる、禿筆にて候也。これ等が資を得たれば
 まがりなり も じ うつ かいやりすつ
 こそ、曲倣にも文字をば写せ、搔遣棄べきものにはあらず、と思ひにければ
 おさ おき ねはち こよひ びん ぎ まか うづ ふでづか のこ
 蔵め置しを、廻今宵の便宜に任して、こゝに瘞めて筆塚を、遺さんとての所
 わざ
 為になん。³⁸

These vases contain the worn-out brushes I used from the spring of [my life] at the age of eight, when I started to learn calligraphy, up until yesterday and today, when I am almost fifty years old. Thanks to these brushes, I learned how to write, though my writing is not perfect, so I think I ought not to break them and throw them away. I have kept them till now, and because tonight [is my sworn brother's funeral], I decided to bury them here and make a brush tomb for them.

It goes without saying that this brush tomb enables Akinobu to conceal the fact that he clandestinely reclaimed the heads of Yoshitaka and his retainers, who were killed by the shogun's follower, Fujishiro Yasutomo 藤白安同. Yoshitaka, a supporter of the Southern Court, was perceived as a traitor by the Ashikaga shogunate, which put his head on display as a deterrent to potential dissidents. From Akinobu's perspective, however, Yoshitaka was a loyal samurai who remained steadfast in his allegiance until the end, motivating Akinobu to retrieve his head and properly bury it alongside his body. All the same, Akinobu's actions are illegal, necessitating the fabrication of the brush tomb pretext to conceal what he has done.

Both the empty letter and brush tomb episodes serve symbolic purposes.³⁹ Paper and brush, essential tools of fictional composition, hold significance for Akinobu, whose name implies a connection to fictional narratives. Akinobu himself, however, after first acknowledging the symbolic power of empty paper, subsequently then buries his own brushes, suggesting rather a skepticism toward the authenticity and efficacy of writing. The inability to convey reality through written words underscores the government-centric nature of official history, which often suppresses dissenting voices. Fiction, therefore, emerges as a unique realm—albeit an imaginary one—where such voices can in fact persist.

This section has examined the characterization of Akinobu as an ideal *kyōkaku*. By exercising virtues such as loyalty and filial piety in the service of protecting the marginalized and challenging governmental authority, Akinobu adopts a bottom-up approach to morality that departs from a conventional Confucian

³⁸ Ibid., p. 48.

³⁹ The brush tomb in *Gallants* may remind readers of the brush tomb that Bakin built for himself in 1809, which still exists today on the grounds of the Seijunji 青雲寺 Temple in Tokyo. In this sense, the character Akinobu might even symbolize the fiction's author, Bakin himself (as also discussed in footnote 36), and the emphasis on the deception of writing in these two episodes reminds readers of the fictional nature of *Gallants*, a work written by Bakin.

perspective. However, Akinobu ultimately remains a fictional construct within the narrative of *Gallants*. This harsh reality implies that the solace sought by the marginalized may be found only within the realm of fictionality.

6. *Tōzoku*: The Evil Counterpart of *kyōkaku*

The negative counterpart of *kyōkaku* in *Gallants* is *tōzoku*. Yet in many early modern narratives, the two groups are not always depicted as contradictory, as Uchida points out. In some cases, *kyōkaku* were even portrayed as morally corrupted *tōzoku*. Against this, Uchida argues, Bakin's conception of *kyōkaku* is distinct precisely because he seeks to strip *tōzoku* elements from *kyōkaku*.⁴⁰ I agree with this insofar as Bakin does indeed attempt to establish the category of *kyōkaku* as morally good and *tōzoku* as evil, yet a careful examination of two *tōzoku* characters from *Gallants* reveals Bakin's intentional blurring of the two categories. Although according to his proposed framework, *kyōkaku* and *tōzoku* are theoretically different in nature, in the narrative itself they are extensively misrecognized and prove to be indistinguishable.

While *kyōkaku* and *tōzoku* share many similarities, such as maintaining low profiles and adhering to their own codes rather than the laws of society, their motivations differ significantly. *Kyōkaku* employ their power and occasionally transgress laws for the betterment of others, whereas *tōzoku* typically act in pursuit of personal gain. However, discerning an actor's true intentions is challenging, making it in practice difficult to distinguish between *kyōkaku* and *tōzoku*. Even the *kyōkaku* exemplar Akinobu is often labeled as *tōzoku* by corrupt government officials. In Chapter 3, Fujishiro Yasutomo refers to Akinobu as “the head thief” (*kubinusubito* 首級盗人) and “the person who stole the heads of the traitors” (*gyakuto no kubi o nusumishi mono* 逆徒の首を窃みしもの).⁴¹

Conversely, skillful *tōzoku* often masquerade as benevolent and righteous individuals. An illustrative example is Ikazuchi Denji Takateru 五十槌電次隆光, a former samurai who turned to a life of crime after his lord's demise. By day, Takateru assumes the guise of a respectable *gōshi*, teaching martial arts in the Ishikawa 石川 area of Kawachi 河内 (a province in the eastern part of modern Osaka Prefecture). However, under the cover of night, he and his cohort engage in thievery elsewhere. Cunningly, Takateru refrains from plundering the local populace and even safeguards them from other thieves and criminals, fostering an atmosphere of tranquility in the Ishikawa area itself. As a result, the region thrives as a veritable haven of happiness, where “nobody picks up articles dropped on the street or locks their door at night”⁴²—a reference to the ideal world of the Great Way, though in an ironic sense. Even the local authorities

⁴⁰ Uchida, “Bakin no kyō,” p. 173.

⁴¹ Kyokutei Bakin, *Kaikan kyōki kyōkakuden*, p. 51.

⁴² Ibid., p. 396. 路に遺たるを拾ふことなく、夜鎖でも患ひなき、

remain oblivious to Takateru's true nature, regarding him as a dependable guardian of the community.

Clearly, Akinobu and Takateru form a juxtaposed pair of *kyōkaku* and *tōzoku*. Both are esteemed as *gōshi* by the populace, and both utilize their prowess to protect the locals. However, while Akinobu selflessly bestows his wealth upon those in need, Takateru's actions stem from self-interest in his own long-term survival. As readers, we possess an omniscient perspective, allowing us to discern the true character of the two individuals. Yet within the narrative, the inhabitants struggle to differentiate them. Ironically, it is Akinobu the government denounces as disloyal while lauding Takateru as an honorable gentleman.

Another similarity shared between these two characters is that both receive “abnormal” letters asking for assistance. In Chapter 31, another *tōzoku*, Yūbari Nijirō 木綿張荷二郎, escapes from prison with a beautiful widow from a high-ranking samurai family and seeks refuge with Takateru. Nijirō expresses his desire to join Takateru's gang, but Takateru stipulates that he must present a *tōmeijō* 投名状 (letter of recommendation) within seven days.⁴³ Puzzled, Nijirō queries how he can produce such a letter. One of Takateru's students clarifies that a *tōmeijō* need not be a written missive but may instead be a valuable commodity such as gold, silver, or a beautiful woman, demonstrating one's worth as a thief. Returning home, Nijirō persuades the widow to assume the role of *tōmeijō*. Impressed by what he takes to be an alluring “gift,” Takateru welcomes Nijirō into the gang. He praises Nijirō by pointing out how the initiate possesses the eight Confucian virtues (although he actually lists only seven):

おも まし ひと さいかん み ひとや つなが のがれさり すはち つみ
 思ふに優たる人の才幹。その身獄舎に繋れしを、脱去たるは即智也。その罪
 ならぬを憐みて、婦人を拯ひしは仁也。その折に那恨ある、姦夫淫婦を殺せ
 しは勇也。又美しき婦人を獲ながら、そを遊女に售もせず、みづから犯さ
 りけるは、是則信也義也。況件的美婦人を、遥杳我に贈んとて、将て来にける
 は礼也忠也。是等の仁義八行を、一箇也とも行ふもの、我党に誰かあらん。⁴⁴

Your talent surpasses my expectations. Although you were captured in a prison, you found a way to escape. This is “wisdom.” You pitied a framed woman and saved her. This is “benevolence.” After that, you killed that adulterous couple who you had a grudge with. This is “bravery.” Also, although you obtained a beautiful woman, you did not sell her to the pleasure quarters or rape her yourself. This is “fidelity.” This is “righteousness.” Furthermore, you brought the woman all the way here to present her to me as a gift. This is “propriety.” This is “loyalty.” There is no one in my team who can even follow one of the eight virtuous codes.

⁴³ Asō, *Edo bungaku to Shina bungaku*, p. 170. The model here for *tōmeijō* is Chapter 11 of *The Water Margin*. When Lin Chong 林冲 wants to join the gang, he is asked to provide a *tōmeijō*. Zhu Gui 朱貴 tells him that he needs to kill a person and bring his head back in three days to prove his loyalty to the gang.

⁴⁴ Kyokutei Bakin, *Kaikan kyōki kyōkakuden*, p. 452.

The cynical invocation of the eight Confucian virtues in the narrative echoes Bakin's renowned work *Eight Dogs*, in which each protagonist embodies one of these virtues. However, unlike the earnest portrayal in *Eight Dogs*, the depiction here is laced with satire and irony. Moreover, Takateru was actually himself deceived by Nijirō, and in fact, none of the actions he ascribes to Nijirō when praising his supposed virtues turns out to be true.

First, while it is accurate that Nijirō cleverly escapes from prison, he does so by deceiving and brutally slaughtering the jailer who aided him; therefore, his cunning should not be lauded. Second, Takateru praises him for kindly saving an innocent woman, but he is unaware that Nijirō was himself the thief who deceived and stole all her money in the first place. Third, Nijirō does not engage bravely with the couple against whom he has a grudge, but instead tricks them into opening the door for him by pretending to be the village head's errand boy, whereupon he launches a surprise nighttime attack. As for his fidelity and righteousness, the fourth and fifth virtues, although Nijirō claims to be treating the woman properly, he actually forces her into a sexual relationship immediately following their escape. Finally, regarding the sixth and seventh virtues, while Nijirō appears to be demonstrating his propriety and loyalty by presenting the woman as a recommendation letter, his true intention is to ultimately usurp the gang's headship himself and eliminate Takateru. In this regard, Nijirō emerges as an even more cunning *tōzoku* than Takateru: his intentions and actions are fundamentally malevolent, yet he artfully portrays himself as a virtuous individual.

The author intentionally frames both Takateru and Nijirō through the lens of the *kyōkaku* spirit: Takateru is recognized by the local people and the government as a noble gentleman, while Nijirō is applauded by Takateru as a man embodying the eight Confucian virtues. However, both characters ultimately harbor selfish, profit-oriented intentions, suggesting that their feigned virtues only exacerbate the chaos within an already disordered society. Nevertheless, they are not the root cause of societal degradation. By referring to *Zhuangzi's* discussion of the great thief, Bakin implies that it is in fact the hypocritical Ashikaga shogunate that bears responsibility for pervasive disorder in the realm.

7. The Ashikaga Shogunate and the Great Thief Metaphor

The usage of *tōzoku* in *Gallants* extends beyond its literal meaning of thief or bandit to encompass the concept of usurpation, particularly in the context of the Ashikaga shogun, who sets up a puppet emperor in the Northern Court while effectively himself becoming the actual ruler of Japan. Such disorder at the highest levels of authority catalyzes systematic social unrest, creating an environment in which *tōzoku* can thrive. Although *kyōkaku* emerge to confront them, the persistence of disorder at the level of governance ensures, per the narrative, that *tōzoku* will continue to appear.

Bakin's interest in exploring the connection between *tōzoku* and usurpation is

evidenced by his extensive incorporation of episodes featuring the legendary thief, Zhi. Indeed, Takateru's speech praising Nijirō's eight virtues as discussed above can also be seen as deriving in part from discourse on this Zhi, at least in a rhetorical sense. It is closely akin to a dialogue on Confucian morality between two *tōzoku* found in *Zhuangzi*'s "Quqie" �篋 (J. "Kyokyō," Rifling Trunks) section. There the text reads:

故跖之徒問於跖曰、盜亦有道乎。跖曰、何適而無有道邪。夫妄意室中之藏、聖也。入先、勇也。出後、義也。知可否、知也。分均、仁也。五者不備而能成大盜者、天下未之有也。⁴⁵

One of the Robber Zhi's followers once asked Zhi, "Does the thief, too, have a Way?" Zhi replied, "How could he get anywhere if he didn't have a Way? Making shrewd guesses as to how much booty is stashed away in the room is sageliness; being the first one in is bravery; being the last one out is righteousness; knowing whether or not the job can be pulled off is wisdom; dividing up the loot fairly is benevolence. No one in the world ever succeeded in becoming a great thief if he didn't have all five!"⁴⁶

In "Rifling Trunks," Zhi humorously delineates the virtues inherent in thievery, equating aspects of the criminal enterprise with Confucian virtues such as sageliness, bravery, righteousness, wisdom, and benevolence. In *Gallants*, Takateru's similar enumeration of Nijirō's virtues seems to parallel this humorous exploration, emphasizing the fusion of criminality and moral conduct. Although Bakin suggests that there are eight virtues, in listing these he also divides them into five groups. Furthermore, the eight virtues in *Eight Dogs*, which were long established and were well-known to readers, do not include *yū* 勇 (Ch. *yong*, bravery); nor does the common understanding of the "five eternal verities" in Confucianism include *yū*.⁴⁷ However, both Takateru in *Gallants* and Zhi in *Zhuangzi* consider *yū* to be one of the canonical Confucian virtues, again confirming the connection between the two passages.⁴⁸

The legend of Zhi is also referenced in *Records*, in which Sima Qian questions the meaning of good and evil through his pairing of the infamous Zhi, who was celebrated by his admirers, and the saintly Bo Yi, who spent his life attempting

⁴⁵ Zhuangzi, *Sōji Kensai kōgi*, vol. 4, fol. 2r.

⁴⁶ Zhuangzi, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, p. 69.

⁴⁷ The eight virtues in *Eight Dogs* are *jin* 仁 (benevolence), *gi* 義 (righteousness), *rei* 礼 (propriety), *chi* 智 (wisdom), *shin* 信 (fidelity), *chu* 忠 (loyalty), *kō* 孝 (filial piety), and *tei* 悌 (fraternity). Walley points out that these virtues are not necessarily a canonical grouping. Bakin's eight virtues might be inspired by the traditional Confucian "five eternal verities (*jin*, *gi*, *rei*, *chi*, and *shin*)," "four principles (*jin*, *gi*, *rei*, and *chi*)," and "eight forgettings (*kō*, *tei*, *chu*, *shin*, *rei*, *gi*, *ren* 廉, and *chi* 恥, the latter two meaning "frugality" and "shame")." They might also be influenced by the Eightfold Path of Buddhism. See Walley, *Good Dogs*, pp. 190–193.

⁴⁸ The inclusion of bravery here might be related to the nature of *kyōkaku*. As discussed earlier, one of the most important qualities defining the *kyōkaku* figure is the evidence of a special bravery.

to dissuade King Wu from taking the throne but failed. Considering the fact that *Records* was one of the main sources Bakin referred to in composing *Gallants*, it is quite likely that Bakin drew inspiration from this particular juxtaposition, leveraging the Zhi episode to explore the concept of *tōzoku*.

Moreover, Bakin's earlier writings indicate his long-standing interest in the story of Zhi and the treacherous nature of *tōzoku*. For example, in the last paragraph of *Geppyō kien* 月氷奇縁 (The Miraculous Destiny of Moon and Ice, 1803), he wrote, "Thief Zhi makes jokes of Confucius; Wang Mang 王莽 is compared to the Duke of Zhou 周."⁴⁹ The first half of the sentence refers to another section of *Zhuangzi*, in which Confucius himself attempts to confront Zhi in argument but fails. There Confucius suggests that Zhi might become a great man if he were to quit thievery, but Zhi refutes him, pointing out that lords are no different from *tōzoku*, killing people at will as they do in the name of benevolence and righteousness. The second half highlights the similarity between the Duke of Zhou, a paradigmatic loyal minister in Chinese history who suffered from baseless gossip, and the usurper figure of Wang Mang, who only pretended to be humble and kind until he was able to carry out his planned treason. This comparison underscores Bakin's exploration of the blurred lines between good and evil in a world of moral decline, as well as the connections between *tōzoku* and usurper. Elsewhere in "Rifling Trunks," *Zhuangzi* offers a similar view:

彼窃鉤者誅。窃国者为諸侯。諸侯之門而仁義存焉。則是非窃仁義聖知耶。
〔中略〕此重利盜跖而使不可禁者、是乃聖人之過也。⁵⁰

He who steals a belt buckle pays with his life; he who steals a state gets to be a feudal lord—and we all know that benevolence and righteousness are to be found at the gates of the feudal lords. Is this not a case of stealing benevolence and righteousness and the wisdom of the sage? . . . This piling up of profits for Robber Zhi to the point where nothing can deter him—this is all the fault of the sage!⁵¹

Zhuangzi critiques the moral ambiguity inherent in governance and the appropriation of moral codes by usurpers. By equating the actions of usurpers with those of thieves, Zhuangzi highlights the perversion of morality and the complicity of sages in enabling such usurpations.

The use of *tōzoku* as a metaphor for usurper is explicit in *Gallants*, too, particularly in the context of the Ashikaga shoguns. In the third installment of *Gallants*, Kurohime 九六媛, a Daoist immortal character who assists the protagonists, presents a discourse on the history of the Nanbokuchō period that highlights this metaphorical interpretation, depicting the first three Ashikaga

⁴⁹ Kyokutei Bakin, "Geppyō kien," p. 104. 盜跖、孔子に戯れ、王莽、周公に比す。

⁵⁰ Zhuangzi, *Soji Kensai kōgi*, vol. 4, fol. 4r. Sima Qian also cited this section in "The Biographies of the Wandering Knights" in *Records*.

⁵¹ Zhuangzi, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, p. 70.

shoguns as usurpers who seized power like thieves. In particular, she points out how Ashikaga Takauji 足利尊氏 (1305–1358), the first Ashikaga shogun, along with his son and successor Ashikaga Yoshinari 足利義詮 (1330–1367),⁵² simply pretended to be loyal to the emperor because they did not want to be called *kokuzoku* 国賊 (state thieves).⁵³ Similarly, she criticizes Ashikaga Yoshimitsu 足利義満 (1358–1408), the third shogun, for his interest in taking the Three Sacred Treasures from the emperor like “a thief sneaking into people’s houses” (*sen’yu no nusubito* 穿窬の盗).⁵⁴ The Three Sacred Treasures being unambiguous symbols of imperial power, Yoshimitsu’s desire for them signifies his transition from mere thief to full-fledged usurper.

The examples above clearly establish a connection in Bakin’s eyes between the great thief metaphor and the Ashikaga shoguns. His narrative further explores this connection through the female protagonist Komahime 姑摩姫, also a *kyōkaku* character, and her quest for revenge against Yoshimitsu and Yoshimochi 義持, respectively the third and fourth Ashikaga shoguns. Ultimately Komahime succeeds in assassinating Yoshimitsu, but her attempt to kill Yoshimochi is thwarted. Yoshimochi, moreover, though allowing her to escape, takes the precaution of assigning a retainer to secretly watch her movements: should she show any sign of rebellion, she is to be immediately captured and put to death. In other words, confined to her residence and under surveillance, Komahime is given no further chance to kill Yoshimochi.

Furthermore, the story is set in the 1400s and 1410s, meaning that if Yoshimochi were to be killed at this point in the narrative, it would contradict his actual death in 1428, and thereby immediately betray the fictional nature of the story. Bakin, who cited a large number of historical sources to construct a sense of veracity, would have found such an obvious mistake intolerable. If, however, Yoshimochi himself is to remain out of reach, how can Komahime enact her revenge? Bakin ingeniously navigates this narrative challenge by introducing in Takateru a surrogate for the shogun, providing the lady *kyōkaku* with another opportunity to pursue her vengeance.

Takateru leads his gang members to break into Komahime’s residence and steal the gold she had received from Emperor Gokameyama 後亀山. The significance

⁵²The most common pronunciation of 義詮 is Yoshiakira, but in *Gallants*, Bakin glosses it as Yoshinari. In volume two, Bakin leaves a note explaining why he chooses Yoshinari: 義詮の和訓 ^{ワケン} 太平記にハヨシノリとす。又一説にヨシアキラとす。義教・義昭この子孫にあれば、同訓いぶ ^{イツセツ} ^{ヨシノリ} ^{ヨシアキ} ^{ドウケン} ^{セン} ^{シュ} ^ギ ^{ジツ} かしきこと也。詮に就の義あれば、実ハヨシナリなるべし。(義詮 is glossed as Yoshinori in *Taiheiki* (Chronicle of Great Peace). Another possibility is Yoshiakira. Since one finds [the names] 義教 (Yoshinori) and 義昭 (Yoshiaki) in later generations [of the Ashikaga clan], it seems questionable [for his name] to have the same reading. Given that 詮 has 就 as one of its meanings, then, the actual pronunciation ought to be “Yoshinari”). See Kyokutei Bakin, *Kaikan kyōki kyōkakuden*, p. 200.

⁵³Kyokutei Bakin, *Kaikan kyōki kyōkakuden*, p. 307.

of the gold is similar to that of the Three Sacred Treasures, representing imperial power threatened by the Ashikaga shogunate, here embodied by Takateru. Komahime's residence thus serves as a metaphorical stronghold of imperial authority, containing and defending the imperial power against external threats. Keith McMahon uses the term "containment" to describe "the ideology of the control of desire, and more concretely, [for] the containing aspects of physical things such as walls."⁵⁵ The imperial power should by all rights be securely contained in the residence, but as "cracks" spread in the walls of said container various "doors" and "windows" open up, allowing those on the outside to have their peek within. And when the treasure once concealed inside is thus exposed, desire is aroused.

The confrontation between Komahime and Takateru serves as a symbolic battle between the emperor and the shogun for the legitimacy of rulership over Japan. Although most of the gang members are killed in the battle, Takateru manages to escape, and the text says, "Though like a bird wounded by an arrow, only Takateru escaped—an example of slipping through the loophole in the heavenly net."⁵⁶ This outcome underscores the precariousness of imperial power and the persistence of danger. There is, moreover, the following episode to consider, which implies that Komahime in actual fact failed to protect the residence.

When Takateru returns home, he meets Nijirō, who had not been harmed in the previous night's fight. Nijirō tells Takateru that he had managed to sneak into Komahime's living room and steal a black treasure box with the *kikusui* 菊水 pattern, the family crest of the Kusunoki clan. Thereafter he escaped secretly through a dog door. Inside the treasure box, Nijirō found several clan flags, various imperial rescripts from the emperor of the Southern Court, and some documents and letters written by Komahime's own ancestors. Nijirō intends to use one of these letters in forging a letter of rebellion, in order to frame Komahime for treason.

Nijirō, the man praised by Takateru for possessing the eight virtues, thus emerges as another great *tōzoku* within the narrative, showcasing his cunning and resilience in outsmarting both Komahime and Takateru. As it turns out, his scheme goes on to be exposed, and the schemer is punished by having his face tattooed. Nonetheless, he finds some way into the service of a high-ranking samurai, and at the end of the work's fourth installment, he is still on the run and with plans to kill more people. Because Bakin failed to finish the *Gallants* series, we can never know what he intended to happen to Nijirō later in the story.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 313.

⁵⁵ McMahon, *Causality and Containment*, p. 2.

⁵⁶ Kyokutei Bakin, *Kaikan kyōki kyōkakuden*, p. 474. 只五十槌隆光のみ、天羅〔左訓：○アミ〕
を漏れしに似たれども、他も亦是矢傷の鳥也。

⁵⁷ In the fifth volume, Nijirō has a change of heart and decides to help Komahime before his death. However, because this volume was written by Hiromichi, Nijirō's intervention in this di-

However, the unfinished text as it stands allows this great *tōzoku* seemingly to escape forever, a conclusion well in line with the famous saying from *Zhuangzi*: “Until the sage is dead, great thieves will never cease to appear.”⁵⁸

This great *tōzoku* metaphor serves as a critique of the Ashikaga shogunate’s usurpation of imperial authority, as represented by Komahime’s struggle against Takateru and Nijirō. Despite Komahime’s victories over both Yoshimitsu and Takateru, her failure in the case of Yoshimochi and Nijirō underscores Bakin’s pessimistic assessment of the *kyōkaku*’s ability to restore peace for the populace, or to rectify the disordered hierarchy of governance. While Bakin’s narrative universe may appear ostensibly to offer its readers something of a utopian allure, in other words, subtle undertones within his work serve to expose the underlying dystopian realities that pervade his fictional construct.⁵⁹ The ideal *kyōkaku*, who as agent of good represents the people’s hopes for justice, is thus ironically proven to be merely fictional, while the great *tōzoku* figure, symbolizing the oppressive and hypocritical nature of the shogunate, seems perpetually to elude capture.

8. Conclusion

This article explores the construction of the *kyōkaku* and *tōzoku* archetypes within Bakin’s *Lives of the Gallants*. In a chaotic world where virtues such as benevolence and righteousness have become obsolete, the Ashikaga shogunate usurps the emperor’s ruling power, positioning itself as the actual, though illegitimate, ruler of Japan. The emergence of such a great thief at the pinnacle of society gives rise to numerous petty thieves, further exacerbating societal confusion. In this context, the *kyōkaku* emerge as symbols of hope for the oppressed, bravely protecting the general public and confronting both ordinary *tōzoku* and the Ashikaga shogunate itself. Within the narrative, however, *kyōkaku* are often misrecognized as *tōzoku* because of the need to conceal their true identities, and from an extra-narrative standpoint, they are revealed to be every bit as fictional as the genre to which they belong. Thus, even as *Gallants* offers readers a mirage of hope, it hints subtly at the underlying realities that cruelly undermine this hope.

Bakin’s work stands as a pivotal example of early modern Japanese popular literature’s ability to engage with complex moral and ethical questions. His portrayal of the *kyōkaku* figure highlights the anti-tyranny impulse latent among the oppressed, illustrating the potential to repurpose Confucianism—originally endorsed by the ruling class to maintain social hierarchy—as an effective means for

rection should not be taken as representing Bakin’s original plan.

⁵⁸ Zhuangzi, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, p. 70. 聖人不死、大盜不止。Zhuangzi, *Sōji Kensai kōgi*, vol. 4, fol. 3v.

⁵⁹ Bakin’s other works such as *Eight Dogs* also provide readers with a fictional utopia and a historical reality. See Walley, *Good Dogs*, pp. 344–346.

challenging that very structure. The enduring popularity of *Gallants*, evidenced by its influence on modern writers and literati, underscores the timeless appeal of its themes and the *kyōkaku* spirit. The work's impact extends moreover beyond literature, influencing cultural expressions in genres such as manga, historical dramas, and yakuza films, demonstrating the versatility and lasting significance of the *kyōkaku* concept. As *Gallants* continues to inspire reinterpretations and adaptations, I hope further research will be conducted to deepen our understanding of its development and cultural significance.

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