

“Clairvoyant ability” - was it true?

From Kaleidoscope of Books (13) “Senrigan Affair and Its Time”

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Introduction


“The Ring” is one of the most popular Japanese horror movies. It was produced in 1998 and was remade by Hollywood in 2002. In the series of movies, the scene in which scary character Sadako crawls out from the monitor with her hair draped over her face was frightening and shocking. The original story “Ring” (鈴木光司『リング』角川書店, 1993, 【KH573-E309】 / Suzuki Koji, *Ringu*, Kadokawa Shoten, 1993) depicted Sadako’s background as her mother Yamamura Shizuko had supernatural powers, especially clairvoyance. It also characterized her father Iguma Heihachiro as a scholar who studied about Shizuko’s unbelievable abilities. Their experiments on supernatural powers were taken up by the media as a scandal and they were persecuted as doing fake experiments. This victimization made Sadako hold grudges against society.

In fact, Sadako’s parents are modeled after real persons. One of them, Dr. Fukurai Tomokichi (1869-1952), an associate professor of Tokyo Imperial University, studied about people with supernatural power who were called “Senrigan” (lit. clairvoyants) and argued that the ability really exists. His assertion caused controversy in the academic community and the mass media. This incident, called the “Senrigan Affair,” ignited a craze in society: influential scientists showed various opinions based on the latest knowledge such as radiation and evolution theory; open experiments of clairvoyant powers were much-heralded. NDL’s small digital exhibition series “Kaleidoscope of Books” (Japanese only) introduces various themes using the NDL collection. We focused on this “Senrigan affair” for the 13th Kaleidoscope of Books. I would like to introduce the contents of this exhibition concisely.

*Front page of the Kaleidoscope of Books: <http://www.ndl.go.jp/kaleido/>

*(13) Senrigan Affair and Its Time : <http://www.ndl.go.jp/kaleido/entry/13/index.html>

Chapter 1 Reading about the clairvoyance experiments

Dr. Fukurai, grappling with research on clairvoyance, was a psychologist famous for his hypnosis study. Western hypnosis introduced in the Meiji period spawned social problems such as being used in dubious folk “healing.” Fukurai tried to clarify such hypnosis scientifically. At that time, the basis of experimental psychology was formed by Matora Yujiro, Fukurai’s academic supervisor, and laboratory instruments were gradually being organized at the Tokyo Imperial University. At the outset of Chapter 1, materials from which you can learn about the psychological experiments of the time are introduced. (東京帝国大学文科大学心理学教室編『実験心理写真帖』弘道館, 1910, 【337-3】  / Psychology Laboratory, Literature Department of Tokyo Imperial University, *Jikken Sinrigaku Syashin*

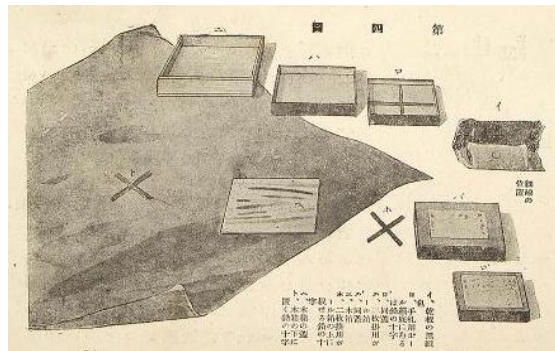
Cho (lit. *Photo Book of Experimental Psychology*), Kodokan, 1910).



<<Portrait of Mifune Chizuko, "Senrigan,"
said to be a model of Sadako's mother>>

The latter half of this chapter introduces two women, Mifune Chizuko and Nagao Ikuko, who were claimed to be people having supernatural powers by Fukurai. It is said that Chizuko, from Kumamoto Prefecture in Kyushu, had gained the power of clairvoyance when she was hypnotized by her brother-in-law, who provided her with the autosuggestion of having the ability. Fukurai visited Kumamoto to test Chizuko and was convinced of her ability. He gathered physical scientists, philosophers and biologists, and conducted an open experiment in Tokyo in September 1910. The experiment was to read characters written on a slip of paper in a lead pipe. Because of some mishandling such as the misidentification of experimental tools, the authenticity of her ability remained uncertain.

Nagao Ikuko was the wife of a judge in Kagawa Prefecture in Shikoku. It is said that she succeeded in clairvoyance when she tried it after hearing Chizuko's story in the news. Some strange phenomena happened when Fukurai visited Nagao's home and did a clairvoyance experiment. When he made Ikuko see through characters on a photographic plate, the dry plate was exposed although the clairvoyance itself failed. Fukurai named this phenomenon "Nensha" (lit. thoughtography). Continued experiments made her able to print an image of her mind on photo plates. However, her ability of thoughtography was not verified, because of the inadequate results of experiments which were conducted in Kagawa by physicists from Tokyo Imperial University.



<<Dry plate and experimental tools used for psychic photography>>

Although Fukurai continued to train them so as to manifest their aptitude in public, Chizuko committed suicide mysteriously in January 1911 and Ikuko died of a disease in the following month. So, clairvoyance was neither verified nor recognized as a science in the academic world. Fukurai was forced to leave the university as the mass media played it up as a scandal and since then, the study of supernatural powers has been regarded as a taboo in the academic world. However, some people continued to assert the truth of clairvoyance on the grounds that there were undeniable experimental results by Fukurai and bungled experiments by his opponents.

This chapter is mainly based on Fukurai's book depicting the experimentation with Chizuko and Ikuko (福来友吉『透視と念写』東京宝文館、1913, [\[349-121\]](#) デジタル化資料 / Fukurai Tomokichi, *Toshi to Nensya*, Tōkyō Hōbunkan, its English version: T. Fukurai, *Clairvoyance & thoughtography*, Rider, [1931?][\[SB391-A46\]](#)) and a record of thoughtography experiments conducted by physicists (藤教篤・藤原咲平『千里眼実験録』大日本図書、1912[\[327-420\]](#) 拡大画像 / Fuji Noriatsu and Fujiwara Sakuhei, *Senrigan jikkenroku*, Dainihon Tosho).

Chapter 2 Reading about controversy among scholars

Over the Senrigan Affair, scholars from various disciplines participated in the experiments and released their opinions in the media. This chapter classifies their opinions according to their major fields and organizational affiliations. It is interesting to see not only the point whether they are positive or negative about the supernatural ability, but also the difference of approach to verify the matter depending on their academic fields. For example, physicists explored the possibility of the action of radioactive rays or unknown rays. Some biologists illustrated that it is possible for human beings to have such ability during the evolutionary process, giving an example of a kind of bee, with scientific name "*euurobracon yokohamae*," can lay eggs in bugs inside a tree through the bark.

Chapter 3 Reading about the Senrigan craze

This chapter introduces various books and magazines published in the boom of the Senrigan Affair. Various how-to books were published, some gave spiritual exercises to gain supernatural ability, showing how to actualize clairvoyance by magic, and telling how to use supernatural power to reap profits in the rice futures trading market. There was also a novel titled “*Wagahai wa senrigan*” (lit. I am a clairvoyant), a parody of “*Wagahai wa neko de aru*” (lit. I am a cat) by Natsume Soseki, prominent Japanese novelist of this period (八千代・弦月『我輩八千里眼』田中書店, 1911, [【特 13-204】](#) / Okada Yachiyo and Gengetsu, *Wagahai wa senrigan*, Tanaka Shoten, 1911).



<<Cover art of *Wagahai wa senrigan* (lit. I am a clairvoyant) >>