

## Kyôkai no Rinne \* 境界の RINNE

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I find it hard to imagine that the first episode of a Rumiko Takahashi series can possibly tell us everywhere we're going to go. Maybe the only one who has that much imagination is Takahashi-*sensei* herself. I don't.

But I can imagine quite a bit, as somebody once said. And I'm already curious about a number of questions that arise from the first episode of the new series. Starting with the names – of the series and the few characters we've been introduced to. Why start there? Because one reason I love Japanese is that it's just about as open to wordplay as English. And one reason I love Takahashi-*sensei*'s work is that she doesn't let many opportunities go by for good (or bad) puns – any kind of useful multiple or ambiguous meanings.

When I first learned the name of the series, I tried out my old-fashioned hard-copy Japanese-names dictionary on “Rinne” – and the online name dictionary at NihongoResources.com, too. The most likely *kanji* for *RIN* did seem to be *wa* (輪) – circle, ring, wheel. But there was also the *RIN* that means *hayashi*/forest (林). And one closely related to it (琳) meaning jewel or the tinkling of jewelry. Oh, and here was one which could mean either ethics or companion (倫). Hmm. And another one that could be read as *kibishii*, meaning cold (凜). And don't forget the little bell or buzzer (鈴), also read as *REI* or *suzu*. Hey, we could even read *nashi*/pear (梨) *RIN*.

On the other end, *NE* might seem to be an easier *kanji* to guess, *ne*? (Though neither name dictionary I checked seemed to value 値 all the roots 根 of words I thought of.) The sound of that bell or buzzer (鈴音) was one natural combination. I could also easily imagine the sounds of a forest (林音). Or the tinkle of that jewelry (琳音). But there were alternatives. Huh – I didn't know *mushiro* (寧) could be read as *NUI* – or *NE*. And I hadn't thought about the other *on-yomi* of *KAI/mawa(ru)* and so on (廻) being *E* . . . but *RIN-E* could turn into *RINNE* with an easy turn of the wheel 輪廻. And **then** I found another combined listing which fascinated me: *RIN/suzu* 鈴 could team up with *ne* 寝 as in *ne(ru)* . . . or *nekasu* or *inu* or *yameru* . . . or *mitamaya*?! What's that? Well, I looked it up separately – and it was . . . 御霊屋 . . . a mausoleum. Now **that** sounded right in tune with the “spirited” theme of the advance promotions. So maybe 鈴寝 was a word to watch for.

But that was a lot of work – so I took a rest by moving on to the next name we knew. The character named in those “coming soon!” announcements has a relatively straightforward name: Sakura Mamiya (真宮桜), roughly “cherry blossom of the true temple”. And no, she's not a camera – but she does see some interesting things.

And then there's our other main character: Rinne Rokudô (六道りんね). Well, it figured Takahashi-*sensei* wouldn't give **everything** away – so his given name was given in *kana*. But the last name itself tells us a lot. We don't even have to wait until both he and she mention the magic word 輪廻. At least, not if we either know something about Buddhism or know enough to look it up on the Web. Here's where I found some answers:

<http://www.onmarkproductions.com/html/six-states.shtml>

六道輪廻 is almost directly translatable as “the Six Paths on/of the Wheel of Life” (and Death.) Six roads to reincarnation, or transmigration. Six realms of existence in which beings suffer – and through which they, well, **cycle** until they reach enlightenment. Six levels of being – including ghosts (hungry ghosts), animals, and some beings in hell. Apparently there can be more realms and levels and types of being, lots more. And that's **before** Takahashi-*sensei* gets her imagination in gear. But I'm still a beginner here myself, so I'm going to stick to the basics. But there are a few more basics, too. Karma. Retribution. Gods. Godlike beings who may be slipping down toward the human realm. And powerful, fierce, and quarrelsome demigods who may want to climb up.

A promising start. (Surprise, surprise!) Well, what else can we glean from the first episode?

Let's see . . . we've heard from four of Sakura-*chan*'s first-year section 4 classmates, and the teacher. But we don't know any of their names, not even the talkative one who sits on her left, the other side from Rinne-*kun*. So far, the girls are more interested in his hair; the one guy who's spoken asks, "What's with the jersey?" But we know the real question is why they can see either one – or him – at all.

My first guess is that the answer to this question, and a few more, may be tied up with the other character we know so far . . . at least, the one who's likely to re-appear. (Though, come to think of it, this is a series where we may have to expect characters to re-appear . . . even if they do it in different forms.) Anyway, I wouldn't put it past Takahashi-*sensei* to have that down-in-the-dumped young man decide he likes Sakura-*chan* better than anyone he meets on the wheel. (Or hey, how calm and resigned to its destiny can even a Buddhist Chihuahua be?) But the character I'm thinking of is . . . "Auntie".

Yes, *oba-chan* is used to mean the typical next-generation-older woman in general (typical?!). . . just as *onê-chan* is used for women of about the age to be one's older sister, even if they're not. But Sakura-*chan* was visiting at her grandmother's house, up toward the mountains, when the incident in the first scene takes place. Maybe it was just *oba-chan*'s time to ride the wheel. And maybe she was just a friend of the family. But I don't think it's impossible that she really was Sakura-*chan*'s aunt. Or that she still is, but Sakura-*chan* doesn't know it.

Going back to those six realms . . . maybe *oba-chan* is a Deva. According to my main reference, they live for a long time. If they're going around in the human realm, they might want to change identities every generation or so. (Why am I suddenly thinking of *The Questor Tapes*?) Maybe telling Sakura-*chan* to call her *onê-chan yo!* was intended to be a pre-hypnotic instruction leading into the temple-rubbing induction Sakura-*chan* felt both while it was going on and when she was found in the mountains. It was clearly intended, and expected, to stick. And we've seen Sakura-*chan* eating at home, but we haven't met any of her immediate family yet. Maybe we'll see big sister at the dinner table one of these nights – and nobody will notice how much she looks like Auntie.

Or maybe they will know, and just not want to tell Sakura-*chan*. Yet, anyway. Guiding spirits may be a "family business". (Though that would raise the question, among others, of why Rinne-*kun* didn't know about her.) Or maybe Sakura-*chan* was accompanying *oba-chan* because of the natural affinity and at least the potential or latent gift of seeing spirits. And this incident activated the gift.

But let's move on to compare *oba-chan* with Rinne-*kun*. Take those robes, to start with one of the more obvious parallels. The flame patterns and 輪廻 motifs seem identical. (A six-spoked wheel . . . I've seen this before.) So do their calm attitudes, though we've seen Rinne-*kun*'s wear thin a bit more. (But then we've seen him in "action", and her not so much.) His hair isn't quite as bright red – or the same shade of red – as the flowers in her hair . . . hair as white as his is red. So this could be a commonality of red – or a difference between red and white. Different teams of spirit guides? Maybe. (Though Ashura would seem more likely than Deva to be so competitive.) Or *la différence* may *vive* in a reversal of the traditional assignment of red to women and white to men. Think of the metaphor of one man in a crowd of women as a single white flower in a red bouquet. Or just remember that New Year's Eve tradition, the *Kôhaku-Uta-Gassen* (紅白歌合戦).

So – does that mean *oba-chan* was (or is) what Rinne claims to be . . . a sort-of *shinigami*? Maybe. Or maybe there's a bigger rivalry going on. (Again, where Takahashi-*sensei* is involved, you can hardly rule out any grand scheme you can think of. Except hers are likely to be grander.) What do we know so far – what have we seen?

Perhaps the difference in hypnosis technique means something. If nothing else, it might explain why Rinne-*kun*'s coin-trick pendulum effort didn't stick. (We know it didn't fail entirely, because Sakura-*chan* did lose some time between the end of the adventure and the end of dinner. I can almost taste that *tonkatsu* now. . . .) Maybe *oba-chan*'s charm got in first, and blocked his from working. Maybe they'll wipe each other out of

Sakura-*chan*'s mind, and she'll start remembering about *oba-chan* too. Hard to tell about that right now. But one thing we do know: it hasn't affected her ability to see or remember Rinne-*kun*.

In fact, the whole incident seems to have affected him more than her. He's clearly surprised that she remembers him. But he doesn't seem to be surprised that their classmates can see him. Does he have the choice to be seen or unseen? Or is it that he did before but doesn't now? The other thing different about Rinne-*kun* on his second day in class is that he isn't wearing that robe with the spirit-flame/wheel-of-life pattern. Before that, we always saw him either wearing or carrying it. Sometimes it was out of view in an unseen hand, but we could tell from the other panels that it was there. I suppose he may be wearing it under the jersey now – but I doubt it.

Has he lost the robe? And is that important?

Could it be that *oba-chan*'s robe was what helped or enabled her to vanish from young Sakura-*chan*'s view and then re-appear? Is it an essential part of the standard “kit” of the well-dressed spirit guide/quasi-*shinigami*? If so, what else does it help the wearer do? Put another way, what else can't Rinne-*kun* do without it that he needs to do to be a working spirit guide? (And I do mean working; those ¥50 and ¥500 fares to ride the wheel add up. There's a thought. Is it a paying job for him? Is he as young – as recently reincarnated – and inexperienced as he looks? Or is he just young for a Deva? Or is he just not very good at the job? Either way, is that why he only has one outfit to wear aside from the robe – that jersey?)

But back to the previous question. Is Rinne-*kun* going to fail miserably, significantly, or both at this job if he doesn't get that robe back? Is the robe essential to some of the abilities he needs for the job? Such as . . . oh, I don't know . . . maybe – seeing spirits?? (What does a sting of Buddhist Church Lady organ music sound like?)

Is this how or why Sakura-*chan* and Rinne-*kun* will get thrown together to stay? (To start with, anyway.) Does he need her to spot spirits for him so he can console them and guide them to the wheel? Could he be unable to find the robe without her help? Or at least without either her help or the need to confess to his superiors that he's lost it? With whatever dire consequences that would bring him? Will one of those consequences be a more-than-just-business relationship? (Somehow, that – pardon the phrase – human aspect always seems to sneak into a Takahashi series, doesn't it? If I were a betting man, I'd bet it will here too. And I sure hope so.)

That reference page I found suggests that Deva have a tendency to be proud of their powers, and somewhat blind (heh-heh) to the world of suffering. (Does that sound to you like where we find our hero? It does to me.) Deva are at the highest level in that world, but they're still in it – still able to suffer. (And goodness knows Takahashi characters have been known to suffer in one way and another. And another. And another. And. . . .) Is Sakura-*chan* going to have a hard struggle trying to reach enlightenment in a life filled with this overbearingly proud classmate – whom she later finds out really is above her in some ways?

On the other side, the reference page also says only beings in the human realm can attain enlightenment and escape the cycle of death and rebirth, at higher or lower levels depending on their karma. Is Rinne-*kun* going to be embarrassed to find out that he has things to learn from this human girl? Or is this why Rinne-*kun* had a seat in high school in the first place? To learn from humans, maybe approach enlightenment a bit sooner himself?

At some point, will one have to consider going on without the other? Into the wheel, on to another realm, or what-have-you? Will it surprise them both when they find out which one is which? Or will they be so busy popping in and out of realms that they wear out their psychic passports and have to settle down somewhere?

Or is Takahashi-*sensei* going to find yet another new way to split differences . . . and create characters who have a part in more than one realm? Are either of our lead characters half-human, half-Deva? And what would that mean – for them and everyone around them? Or are there six more impossible things I should think of – and believe are possible for her – before breakfast? If there is anyone whose impossible things I'd be willing to believe in, it's probably Takahashi-*sensei*.

That's about as much speculation as I can fit into one evening. If only because I want to get some time in on my other project related to Takahashi-*sensei*.

It was through the first anime episode of *Urusei Yatsura* that I first found out about Rumiko Takahashi . . . just about 25 years ago(!). But later at that same science-fiction convention, I also saw the beginning of *Maison Ikkoku* . . . and, with apologies and all due respect to Lum-chan, that was my *ichiban suki yo!*

I almost became a comic-book publisher back then. I did become a student of Japanese, inspired partly by the younger of my two younger sisters, who went to Japan for a Sister City visit early in her high-school career. When I went on a visit, a young Swedish woman who taught English in Nagoya (because few people there wanted to learn Swedish) convinced me that I might be able to get a job doing the same. But I was already too old for the JET (Japan Exchange & Teaching) program, it seemed. So I got a list of English schools from the Japanese Embassy, and wrote them all out of the blue. I got two offers – and one was at a *senmon gakkō* in . . . Niigata. I almost felt that, if I looked around carefully enough, I might actually see an invisible red thread linking me to the home country of my favorite comic author . . . and one of her best characters.

(By the way – can anybody tell me: if it's invisible, how do we know it's red?)

I only stayed in Niigata two years – unfortunately. And I never got my crazy wish to bump into Takahashi-*sensei* at the *shinkansen* platform when she was coming home to see family. But I did snap up the 13 volumes of *Maison Ikkoku* I hadn't been able to find in the US. Now I could read them, too. And I did. And I wished I'd been able to do it sooner . . . because I thought it told me more about the real Japan than the comic-book series about Japan Americans were supposed to read worriedly: *Nihon Keizai Manga Nyūmon* (日本経済漫画入門).

It's been 17 years now since I came back from that 2-year job. I did work as a translator for about 5½ years, but not at Viz (though I applied there) – at an auto-parts subsidiary. I did some *Maison Ikkoku* translating at home, but I let that idle thought of my “Takahashi project” fade away somewhere along the line.

And now, somehow, it's come back to life again. I think it was reborn before I heard about RINNE . . . but I'm not sure. (Maybe it's – well, I'm a bit shy about saying what it may be; I don't want to be hoping too hard.)

Anyway, I'm translating the full 15-volume set. I've gotten through Volume V, and am going back through that much to polish some of the earlier work. I'm doing it myself because I don't trust anybody else to catch as many of the jokes and subtle references. (I spotted a 2½-language pun a week or two ago while reviewing Volume II.) I'm hoping to finish at least a solid first draft this year – and maybe it won't be too long before I get it in good enough shape to offer it to Takahashi-*sensei*. As a labor of love, to repay the love she's shown all us fans.

And I'm going to go renew my passport . . . just in case. It's not enough by itself to let me ride the wheel of life on the road to Nirvana. And I just finished three years of law school, so I have to get busy finding some paying work of my own – counseling and guiding otherwise-lost souls through those realms I studied. But I'm going to be ready – just in case there's still a chance I might get to meet the one person I most want to meet in Japan . . . whether just to thank her in person . . . or to exchange ideas with her. (And who knows? Maybe, having written about the past, which we're told is another country . . . and other planets . . . and writing now about other realms . . . Takahashi-*sensei* would be intrigued to try writing something that brings Japan and the US together.)

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