‘The restaurant of Many Orders’ (henceforth ‘Chūmon’) is a satire on material desire that ultimately signifies the Buddhist ideal of immateriality. Kenji wrote the tale of ‘Chūmon’ in Tokyo 1921 while he was away from his beloved Iwate and in search of higher spiritual fulfillment. In the 1920s, Japan’s decade of modernism, the effects of modernisation had “penetrated deep into the grain of everyday life.” Mechanised technologies and commodification had accelerated the representations of mass culture and pervaded even the most privileged domains of academe and the arts. A new Western ‘modern life’ had arisen amidst a cityscape (Tokyo) that had been transfigured with streetcars and tall buildings, cafés and dancehalls. Such modernity, with its “motion pictures, phonograph records, one-yen books, and the rhythms of Jazz,” must have been a complete anathema to Kenji’s spiritual journey, and ‘Chūmon’ registers his objections to the unquestioning embrace of rampant consumerism. While the story is anti-materialist in its protest against commodification and consumerism, it is also a protest against classism. ‘Chūmon’ was first published in 1924, as the third in a collection of nine tales under the same title, and in the advertisement for this collection Kenji wrote that the tale reflects “the antagonism felt by children of villages with little food towards urban civilisation and the self-indulgent classes.” The story was adopted into the primary school curriculum (at fourth grade) after World War II. It has since been on both the primary school and senior high curricula (at grade 5 and in the final year respectively). ‘Chūmon’ is still being widely read and taught in schools and universities today, and is one of the most commonly published and illustrated of all Kenji’s tales.

Although Kenji was writing within and against a Japan in the throes of a cultural revolution where many perceived the ‘authentic culture’ to be under threat, he had readily absorbed and utilised many scientific advances from the West. Rather than being motivated by any elusive Japanese authenticity, or nativist or political ideologies, Kenji’s concerns were of a more spiritual nature, based on deeply held Buddhist convictions in which all substantial matter is a construction, all ‘reality,’ is but a mere illusion. ‘Chūmon’ offers a thought-provoking

Shimada Mutsuko (1937–); p. 11, Chūmon no Ōi Ryōriten; Kaiseisha, 1984.
exposé of the deeper relationship between materialism and materiality when the tale’s climax signifies the entrapment of the two protagonists in their own material embeddedness. This is the inverse of spiritual release from worldly concerns, exemplifying the futility of grasping at any material desire. The men’s thoughtless pursuit of modernity, as registered through their desire for status for instance, leads to the downfall that threatens their extinguishment. The story reveals their pursuits as underpinned by a false sense of ‘reality’ that contradicts the natural order of the cosmos.

SYNOPSIS OF ‘CHÛMON’

The tale begins with two snobbish city ‘gentlemen’ out hunting in the mountains. Dressed in English military uniforms with gleaming new rifles, they relish the idea of killing a deer. They are obviously out of their depth and soon find themselves in difficulty when their guide disappears and their dogs suddenly keel over and die. Instead of showing any concern for the well being of these dogs, the men complain about how much they paid for them. Losing their way, they become tired and hungry, but stumble upon ‘Wildcat House’ (Yamaneko ken). A sign describes it as a Western-style restaurant. After (mis-) reading another sign they think they will receive a free meal so they proceed inside, only to find themselves obeying a series of signs or ‘orders’ on a seemingly never-ending hallway of doors. They gradually disrobe in response to the written orders on each door, rationalising the strange orders as indicative of a high class restaurant. After daubing themselves with vinegar and cream (they think they are near the main dining room), they come to another order that requests they rub themselves in salt. Here they overhear two apparently inept waiters behind another door and they finally come to the realisation that all the commands have been to prepare them as the meal (for Wildcat). Confusion reigns as they try to flee in terror. At this point, their ‘dead’ dogs suddenly reappear, flying in through one door and out through another as if chasing the cat away. The whole inn then disappears and they find themselves cold and naked, standing safely outside in the grass, their clothes strewn about. Their dogs are at their side and their ‘lost’ guide is in the distance. After purchasing some game on their way home (so that they don’t come back from their hunt empty handed), the men return to Tokyo. The story concludes with the explanation that no matter how much they soak in hot baths, their skin, still crumpled with fear, will not return to normal.

The narrative demonstrates the men’s breach of at least two Buddhist precepts. One is related to the equality of all sentient beings. Buddhist law teaches that no one should kill or hunt for a living, and even fraternisation with hunters, for example, is frowned upon. As discussed in Chapter 6, the issue of autophagy (life feeding on life itself) as a fundamental cause of suffering was a major source of concern to Kenji. No animal should be hunted or killed unnecessarily, let alone for sport, and there is no salvation for any individual if there is even one suffering being in the world.

In ‘Chûmon’ then, the men’s excitement at the prospect of killing a mountain deer contrasts markedly with the precept of equality amongst all sentient beings and, together with the men’s pursuit of gentrified status, foregrounds their estrangement from nature.

The second precept is that any sense of an essential reality is an illusion. This underlies the first in that it constitutes alienation from nature, and ego is a major part of the illusion. To achieve nirvana it is essential to free oneself from the illusion of one’s special place in the world, so the men’s pursuit of gentrified status is ultimately the pursuit of ego. All aspects of existence are interconnected in that there are no enduring substances; there is only illusion and representation. As there is no individual existence, nothing should have an ego. It is ego that influences all dispute, opposition and struggle, so it is also a fundamental cause of unnecessary suffering. It is ego that leads the two men to seek the unattainable; materiality, of image, of substance, of desire. These material pleasures are foregrounded in their concerns with attire, with finances and with status. Consumerism and pursuit of status, by their