

The Current State of Japanese Yokai Studies in North America

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The Current State of Japanese *Yōkai* Studies in North America

Michael Dylan Foster

Over the last several decades the supernatural has become an increasingly common theme within both popular culture and academic studies in Japan. Within these discourses, particular attention has been paid to *yōkai*, a word that might be loosely translated as monster, goblin, spirit, supernatural being or any other sort of unexplainable or mysterious phenomenon. Historically *yōkai* have been found in legends, folktales, and beliefs throughout the country; more recently they have become the subject of numerous manga, anime, films, and novels. The academic study of *yōkai* through history, art history, religious studies, literary, and folkloric perspectives has gained more and more momentum over the past several decades, in large part due to the interdisciplinary workshops organized by Professor Komatsu Kazuhiko at Nichibunken.

While *yōkai* have received considerable attention in this context within Japan, the academic study of *yōkai* in North America has remained rather limited. In the pages that follow, I briefly outline the current state of *yōkai* studies in the United States and Canada, introducing a number of the monographs on the subject and examining some current trends. Of course, this brief review is from my own limited perspective and will certainly overlook important current research, but hopefully it will provide a general sense of the place *yōkai* and their study occupy within American academia in the early twenty-first century. Some of the works noted below are not strictly published in the United States or Canada, but since they are written in English and are readily available, they are part of the discourse in those locations.

Contemporary Popular Culture

Before focusing on academic work per se, I want to note the increasing relevance of *yōkai* within English-language popular culture. I note this here because (1) such popular cultural products inform student interest and knowledge and will presumably lead to future academic research; (2) because the selection of material for translation and introduction into English shapes the body of accessible knowledge and therefore the framing of the subject of study; and (3) because even on the popular level, translation and introduction of materials are themselves forms of interpretation and analysis.

Two manga translations that seem to be particularly popular currently are *Natsume's Book of Friends* (2008–) translated from Midorikawa Yuki's *Natsume no yūjin chō* (2005–) and *Nura: Rise of the Yōkai Clan* (2011–) translated from Shiibashi Hiroshi's

Nurarihyon no mago (2008–).¹ It is only very recently (2012 and 2013) that major translations of the work of the preeminent Japanese *yōkai* manga-ka and expert Mizuki Shigeru have appeared in English.² The fact that Mizuki's seminal works are only becoming popular in translation *after* the works of authors influenced by his work suggests an interesting inversion of knowledge on the popular level in the English-speaking world; whereas recent manga and anime in Japan build on the foundation set by Mizuki's work, in the English-speaking world readers will only encounter this foundational material after they are already familiar with more recent manga and anime.

In addition to translations, there have also been several original books introducing *yōkai* on a popular level. These include *Yokai Attack!* by Hiroko Yoda and Matt Alt (2008; 2012), *The Great Yokai Encyclopedia* (2010) by Richard Freeman, and *Procession of One Hundred Demons* (2012) by Matthew Meyer.³ While all of these are illustrated, catalogue-style texts, and none of them would qualify as serious academic research, Yoda and Alt as well as Meyer are based in part on research with Japanese-language sources. The Freeman text is based only on work in English and is therefore extremely limited.

I mention the above texts not because they offer original or intensive academic research, but because of the real effect they have on transmitting knowledge of *yōkai*, however limited, to an English speaking readership increasingly influenced by Japanese soft power, as manifest in the manga-anime popular culture world.

Academic Monographs

While these popular culture products have inspired interest in *yōkai* and other supernatural topics, serious scholarship focusing specifically on *yōkai* remains limited. One of the earliest academic books on the topic is *Japanese Ghosts and Demons: Art of the Supernatural* edited by Stephen Addiss (1985), which introduces various *yōkai* and explores their renditions in art produced by a number of famous Japanese artists particularly

1 The dates given here are for the beginning of manga serializations in English and Japanese; different dates apply to the anime and other versions. In both cases, the English language translations are published by Viz Media, a Japanese-owned company headquartered in San Francisco, CA.

2 Shigeru Mizuki, *Non Non Ba*, trans. by Jocelyne Allen (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2012); Kitaro, trans. By Jocelyne Allen (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2013).

3 Hiroko Yoda and Matt Alt, *Yōkai Attack! The Japanese Monster Survival Guide*, revised edition (Tokyo: Tuttle, 2012); Richard Freeman, *The Great Yokai Encyclopedia: The A-Z of Japanese Monsters* (North Devon: CFZ Press, 2010); Matthew Meyer, *The Night Parade of One Hundred Demons: A Field Guide to Japanese Yokai* (Self-published, 2012).

from the Edo period.⁴ In 1994, Barre Toelken and Michiko Iwasaka published *Ghosts and the Japanese: Cultural Experience in Japanese Death Legends*; while not about *yōkai* explicitly, the book takes up several supernatural legends and conceptions of ghostliness from a folkloric and culturally analytic perspective.⁵

The first serious historical monograph dealing with *yōkai* specifically is *Civilization and Monsters: Spirits of Modernity in Meiji Japan* by Gerald Figal (1999). In this detailed intellectual history, Figal introduces and analyzes the discourse on *yōkai* during the seminal transitions of the Meiji period. Of particular relevance is his discussion of Inoue Enryō, *yōkaigaku* (*yōkai* studies, which he translates as “monsterology”), Yanagita Kunio and the foundational role of *yōkai* in the early development of *minzokugaku* (Japanese folkloristics).⁶

The next significant monograph dealing explicitly with *yōkai* culture is my own book, *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai* (2009). This work traces the discourses on *yōkai* (and the “things” that would come to be labeled *yōkai*) from the early Edo-period through the early twenty-first century. It focuses on four historical moments when *yōkai* were especially relevant within the cultural imaginary: the natural-history discourses of the mid-Edo period; the scientific discourses of the Meiji period; the folkloric discourses of the early twentieth century; and the media-driven popular cultural discourses of the postwar and late twentieth century.⁷

In recent years, several monographs have appeared that focus completely or in part on specific *yōkai*. These include Noriko Reider’s *Japanese Demon Lore: Oni from Ancient Times to the Present* (2010), a literarily informed cultural history of *oni* from the earliest records through to recent anime; and Michelle Osterfeld Li’s *Ambiguous Bodies: Reading the Grotesque in Japanese Setsuwa Tales* (2009), a study of *setsuwa* literature with a particular focus on the grotesque, including *oni* and other *yōkai*-like presences. Recently two monographs with the word “Tengu” in the title have also been published. *When Tengu Talk: Hirata Atsutane’s Ethnography of the Other World* (2008) by Wilburn Hansen focuses on Hirata Atsutane’s *Senkyō ibun*, detailing a boy’s journey to the realm

4 Stephen Addiss, ed., *Japanese Ghosts and Demons: Art of the Supernatural* (New York: G. Braziller, 1985).

5 Barre Toelken and Michiko Iwasaka, *Ghosts and the Japanese: Cultural Experience in Japanese Death Legend* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1994).

6 Gerald Figal, *Civilization and Monsters: Spirits of Modernity in Meiji Japan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

7 Michael Dylan Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

of *tengu*. *The Seven Tengu Scrolls: Evil and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy in Medieval Japanese Buddhism* (2012) by Haruko Wakabayashi demonstrates the role of *tengu* in medieval (twelfth and thirteenth centuries) Buddhist rhetoric and institutional rivalries.⁸

A number of other books, though not specifically published in North America, also discuss *yōkai* from various perspectives. Zilia Papp's two volumes, *Traditional Monster Imagery in Manga, Anime and Japanese Cinema* (2010) and *Anime and Its Roots in Early Japanese Monster Art* (2010) both offer an art historical and visual cultural overview of art and anime concerning *yōkai*, with a particular focus on manga artist Mizuki Shigeru. *Tengu: The Shamanic and Esoteric Origins of Japanese Martial Arts* by Roald Knutsen focuses (as the title suggests) on the *tengu*'s association with martial arts.⁹

Research Articles and Book Chapters

In addition to the works mentioned above, *yōkai* are increasingly making an appearance in academic journals and edited volumes. In most cases, articles on *yōkai* are written within the framework of a broader academic discipline, most commonly literary studies or media studies. In particular, there have been several important articles focusing on *yōkai*, or their various individual manifestations (particularly *oni* and *tengu*), in *setsuwa* and *otogizōshi*.¹⁰ Research has also been done on the role of the supernatural and ghosts in kabuki, and there are occasional articles on specific *yōkai*, such as the *tanuki*.¹¹ In addition to focus on early literary and artistic manifestations, the study of *yōkai* and the fantastic more generally seems to be a growing theme within the study of manga, anime

8 Noriko T. Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore: Oni from Ancient Times to the Present* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2010); Michelle Osterfeld Li, *Ambiguous Bodies: Reading the Grotesque in Japanese Setsuwa Tales* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Wilburn Hansen, *When Tengu Talk: Hirata Atsutane's Ethnography of the Other World* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008); Haruko Wakabayashi, *The Seven Tengu Scrolls: Evil and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy in Medieval Japanese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012).

9 Zilia Papp, *Anime and its Roots in Early Japanese Monster Art* (Folkstone, Kent: Global Oriental, 2010); *Traditional Monster Imagery in Manga, Anime and Japanese Cinema* (Folkstone: Global Oriental, 2010); Roald Knutsen, *Tengu: The Shamanic and Esoteric Origins of the Japanese Martial Arts* (Folkstone: Global Oriental, 2011).

10 See, for example, R. Keller Kimbrough, "Battling *Tengu*, Battling Conceit: Visualizing Abstraction in *The Tale of the Handcart Priest*," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 39:2 (2012), pp. 275–305.

11 On ghosts in kabuki, for example, see Satoko Shimazaki, "The End of the 'World': Tsuruya Nanboku IV's Female Ghosts and Late Tokugawa Kabuki," *Monumenta Nipponica* 66:2 (2011), pp. 209–246; for *tanuki* in modern legends, see Michael Dylan Foster, "Haunting Modernity: *Tanuki*, Trains, and Transformation in Japan," *Asian Ethnology* 71:1 (2012), pp. 3–29.

and other contemporary media.¹²

Although “monsters” have been examined from a theoretical perspective for several decades now in North America and Europe, it is rare to find any mention of *yōkai* in these contexts, though occasional reference is made to the *Godzilla* (Gojira) franchise and other Japanese monster movies (*kaijū eiga*). In major works, such as *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (1996) and *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (2011), *yōkai* and the long history of Japanese discourses on the monstrous are overlooked.¹³ However, the recently published *Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous* (2012), an edited volume with chapters on monsters from all over the world, contains two articles dealing with Japan: one on *oni* and one on *yōkai* culture (and research) from the Edo period to the present.¹⁴ Moreover, the liveliness of *yōkai* studies is noted by John Block Friedman in the forward of the volume: “In recent years, there have been books, films, stories, comics, video games and websites about these monsters so that perhaps among all the cultures studied in this Companion, the Japanese monster has the most current and active life.”¹⁵ As “monster studies,” broadly construed, continues to develop within and between different academic disciplines, it is likely that *yōkai* will play an increasingly noticeable role in this expanding field.

Trends, Students, Conferences

With regard to both articles and monographs published on *yōkai* in English, the most important point to note is that research on these subjects, though more and more vibrant, tends to proceed from within existing academic disciplines. *Kitsune*, for example, have

12 See, for example, Deborah Shamoan, “The *Yōkai* in the Database: Supernatural Creatures and Folklore in Manga and Anime,” *Marvels & Tales* 27:2 (Fall 2013), pp. 276–89; Melek Ortabasi, “(Re)animating Folklore: Raccoon Dogs, Foxes, and Other Supernatural Japanese Citizens in Takahata Isao’s *Heisei tanuki gassen pompoko*,” *Marvels & Tales* 27:2 (Fall 2013), pp. 254–75.

13 Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome, ed., *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Asma, Stephen T., *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

14 See Michelle Osterfield Li, “Human of the Heart: Pitiful Oni in Medieval Japan,” in Asa Simon Mittman and Peter Dendle, eds., *Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), pp. 173–96; Michael Dylan Foster, “Early Modern Past to Post-Modern Future: Changing Discourses of Japanese Monsters,” in Asa Simon Mittman and Peter Dendle, eds., *Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), pp. 133–50.

15 John Block Friedman, “Forward,” in Asa Simon Mittman and Peter Dendle, eds., *Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), pp. xxv–xxxix.

been discussed quite extensively from a religious studies perspective, and the *Shuten Dōji* story has been examined from a literary and art historical perspective.¹⁶

In recent years, both undergraduate and graduate students have shown increasing interest in pursuing research on *yōkai*. In my experience, many of these students are first introduced to *yōkai* through manga and anime in translation (as noted above), and also through games and game products such as *Pokémon* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* that they played with as children. There are also more and more undergraduate courses offered on *yōkai* and related issues, most commonly within history, literature or East Asian studies departments. Universities where *yōkai*-related courses are (or have been) offered include University of Toronto, University of Pennsylvania, Adrian College, Columbia University, Wesleyan University, University of Kansas, and University of California, Irvine.¹⁷

Despite initial enthusiasm, however, very few students actually go on to graduate school to study *yōkai* in any serious capacity. One reason for this, of course, is the need to achieve a certain level of Japanese-language proficiency before undertaking original research. Those few students who do go on to further study usually pursue their research within the context of a graduate program in a discipline such as literature, history, religious studies, film or media studies and possibly anthropology or folklore. In many cases, a focus on *yōkai* or a related “supernatural” topic for an M.A. thesis becomes a student’s entry into other (more “standard”) subjects within a particular broader discipline.

It is also clear that attitudes toward the study of *yōkai* within American academia have changed subtly but meaningfully in the last several decades. When I first set out on my own dissertation research on *yōkai* in 1999, I was sometimes met with surprise (and once even laughter) when I told American academics of my project. I think this attitude has faded, as *yōkai* and the issues they raise have become increasingly recognized as representing meaningful approaches to more deeply understanding and analyzing Japanese culture; that is, academic work on *yōkai* is now considered “legitimate.” Again, however, there is no set discipline with which to approach such a study, but literature, religious

16 On *kitsune*, see Michael Bathgate, *The Fox's Craft in Japanese Religion and Folklore: Shapeshifters, Transformations and Duplicities* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Karen Smyers, *The Fox and the Jewel: Shared and Private Meanings in Contemporary Japanese Inari Worship* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999). For *Shuten Dōji*, see, “Sacred Charnel Visions: Painting the Dead in Illustrated Scrolls of *The Demon Shuten Dōji*,” in Kenji Kobayashi, Maori Saitō, and Haruo Shirane, eds., *Japanese Visual Culture: Performance, Media, and Text* (Tokyo: National Institute of Japanese Literature, 2013), pp. 35–47.

17 See for example: <http://www.coursemate.ca/index.php?r=course/view&id=626>; <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/ealc/pc/course/2012C/EALC055>.

studies, and history are among the more common disciplines that people work within. Area studies departments also provide a chance for interdisciplinary work on *yōkai*, at least at the M.A. level. While there are no recent collections of articles solely focusing on *yōkai*, it is more and more common to find an article on *yōkai* as part of a broader collection within a particular discipline. I suspect, for example, that future collected volumes of essays on Edo-period art will have at least one chapter dedicated to *yōkai*-related images.

In the last decade, several academic conferences in the U.S. have taken *yōkai* as an explicit theme. Indiana University, for example, has run two workshops: “Monsters and the Monstrous in Premodern Japanese History and Culture” (2007; directed by Thomas Kierstead) and “Monsters and the Monstrous in Modern Japanese History and Culture” (2008; directed by Michiko Suzuki); combined, a total of some seventeen scholars presented their research, and discussions were distinctly interdisciplinary.¹⁸ More recently (2013), the Donald Keene Center for Japanese Culture and the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at Columbia University organized an “International Symposium on Monsters and the Fantastic in Medieval and Early Japanese Illustrated Narratives.” Although genre and period were limited and presentations were not exclusively focused on *yōkai*, the fact that “monsters” (glossed as “*yōkai*”) were explicitly indicated as the conference theme demonstrates the increasing relevance of *yōkai* (both the concept and the word) within Japanese studies in the North America. Another important aspect of this conference was that several speakers were invited from Japan, allowing for a greater exchange of scholarship between Japan and elsewhere.

No Conclusion

Given the continued and growing influence of Japanese popular culture in North America and elsewhere, I would predict that interest in *yōkai* and similar subjects will continue to grow amongst students and the general public. Some of this interest will inspire academic studies, and ultimately much of the serious scholarship produced will only be of interest to a limited readership conversant in the esoteric discourse of the particular discipline. Having said that, I think there will also be an increasing role for so-called crossover publications that will be accessible to a general audience but at the same time be academically informed and contribute to the scholarly literature. *Yōkai* themselves have often been characterized as creatures of the borderlands and the grayzones, so perhaps it is only appropriate that academic work on *yōkai* can also help bridge divides between different fields of study, between different cultures, and between popular interest and academic scholarship.

18 See: <http://www.indiana.edu/~easc/programs/monsters/workshops.shtml>; <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/pmjs/1EFSmylZ89w>.