

Demonology and *Demon Slayer*

鬼神学と鬼滅の刃

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Abstract

この論文では、日本の鬼がどのような存在として捉えられていたのかに言及し、それを踏まえて人気漫画及びアニメの鬼滅の刃を分析する。鬼は古来より人間の暗黒の部分象徴する分身として捉えられていた。またこの世に人間として帰りたいものとしても存在していた。鬼滅の刃では鬼殺隊と鬼との戦いが描かれているが、人と鬼がただ敵対する関係ではなく、主人公の鬼殺隊の一員である竈門炭治郎や鬼と変貌した妹の禰豆子（ねずこ）を通して、読者や視聴者が鬼に対して共感できる部分を提供しているところが、人気の秘密の一つではないかと指摘する。特に主人公の竈門炭治郎が鬼を殺す使命を遂行しながら、その鬼が人間だった頃の苦しかった経験に共感するところが重要な点である。

I. Introduction

When I went to a bookstore near Nagoya station in the middle of February 2020, I noticed a section with a “Sold Out” sign. I wondered what kind of books were sold, and it turned out to be comic books under the title *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu No Yaiba*. The volumes nineteen and twenty, which were the latest volumes, were not available. The empty section in the bookstore testified that *Demon Slayer* was extremely popular, and this led me to become interested in it.

Demon Slayer started to appear in *Weekly Shonen Jump*, a weekly comic magazine

in February 2016, and the latest episode was in May 2020. The sale of the comic books, *Demon Slayer*, from volumes one to fourteen, reached four million fifty thousand copies, before the animation on the television started in March 2019. Surprisingly, after the animation programs on TV ended in September 2019, the total sale of volumes one to sixteen were twelve million copies. Clearly, the animation boosted the sale of comic books. As of July 2020, the total sale of *Demon Slayer* exceeded eighty million copies.

In this paper, I would like to examine the historical background of the story in the animation and analyze why *Demon Slayer* is unbelievably popular, both among young men and women, even though there are some cruel and scary scenes in comic books and animation series. In addition, I will talk about demonology in Japan and show you how the study on demons is embedded in *Demon Slayer*. I have read from volumes one to twenty-one of the comic books, and I have watched from episodes one to twenty-six on TV.

II. Demonology in Japan

What comes to your mind when you hear the word “demon” or *oni* in Japanese? I assert that most Japanese people imagine an angry face with two horns and a red body with a loincloth made of the skin of a tiger. A demon is a familiar creature because on the last day of winter, according to a lunar calendar, people throw and scatter roasted soy beans inside and outside their houses, and they shout, “get demons out of the house, invite happiness into the house.” In this case, a demon is considered an evil that causes trouble.

Demon, *oni* in Japanese, appeared in *the Chronicles of Japan, Nihon Shoki*, which was completed in 720 AD (Komatsu, 2020). *The Chronicle of Japan* explains the history of Japanese emperors until the time when Emperor *Jito* abdicated the throne in 697 AD. *The Chronicle of Japan* is one of the oldest documents, and a demon was mentioned twice in the document (Kamata, 2001). One demon lives in a boat on the north shore of Sado Island, and he eats fish. Sado Island is located off the coast of Niigata Prefecture. Another episode tells us that when Emperor *Kinmei* (539 AD – 571 AD in the throne, but the years are not confirmed) ordered the construction of a new palace, many trees were cut to build the palace. Subsequently, god became angry at the deforestation and destroyed it, and the fire set by the demon spread an infectious disease. Consequently, many people serving the Emperor were dead. It is inferred that during that period, a demon was referred to as either a human-like creature or strange natural phenomena.

During the period of the northern and southern dynasties from 1336 to 1392, a famous

demon, Shuten Douji appeared in a picture scroll whose title was *Picture Language on Ooe Mountain: Ooeyama Ekotoba*. Shuten Douji headed many demons who lived on Ooe Mountain near Kyoto, and they sometimes went down the mountain and visited Kyoto. They would abduct young girls of high rank and steal treasure. Upon the request of Emperor, MINAMOTO Yorimitsu—a strong warrior—he, and his followers visited the mountain and exterminated the demons.

Komatsu (2020) points out that different kinds of demons are depicted in *Picture Language on Ooe Mountain*. There are demons without any horns, one with three eyes, and another one with the face of a horse. However, in the Edo period from 1603 to 1868, the images of a demon were fixed, and other demons that did not fit in the typical images were classified as monsters.

The typical and fixed images of a demon included are ones with two horns on the head, sharp teeth, having a golden stick, wearing a loincloth made of the skin of a tiger, muscular body, red, black, or blue skin color, and human-like appearance. I think that to date, many Japanese people apply these images to a demon who may live in their imagination.

Baba (2019) analyzes the meaning of an *oni* in a Chinese character, and she suggests that the *oni* in Japanese means the soul of the deceased that wants to return to this world. She indicates that *oni* represents people who hid themselves in the dark side of prosperous periods that were governed by emperors and aristocrats. In other words, the people who were classified as *oni* symbolically showed their oppression and disenfranchisement, while hiding themselves in the darkness.

The general characteristics of a demon are to eat the human, destroy the human society, kill human beings with resentment, appear at night to abduct young women, rob treasure, drink alcohol, and enjoy a feast by forming a group. In *Demon Slayer*, a demon does not form a group because a demon may eat another one, and to avoid this kind of unproductive conflict, a demon is programmed to act alone. I would like to point out that a demon originally tends to form a group, but demons in *Demon Slayer* do not have such a tendency.

In Japan, a demon has existed for a long period of time because it represents an alter ego of the human being (Komatsu, 2020). The demon shows the immoral and anti-social nature of the human being and is inseparable from the human. Even today, the influence of a demon exists. For example, when a woman marries, she wears traditional clothes that are all white. The bride wears a hood with a Japanese-style wig, and the hood is believed to prevent the bride from becoming a demon at home. This is a superstition to support the idea that any woman can be a demon. This tradition seems to be based on gender stereotypes, but I would like to indicate that a demon is in our

mind.

I would like to mention the quintessential features of demons in *Demon Slayer*. All demons in *Demon Slayer* came from KIBUTSUJI Muzan, who became a demon in the Heian period from 794 AD to 1192 AD. He was physically very weak and was destined to be dead at age 20. However, a doctor gave him a medicine called blue cluster amaryllis, and he became a demon who could live forever with a muscular body. KIBUTSUJI Muzan injects his blood into the body of a male and a female, who could be fierce demons. The more a demon has the blood of Muzan, the stronger he or she becomes. In addition, demons become wilder and more violent when they eat a human being. The demons are not supposed to mention Muzan in any way. As soon as they talk about Muzan, they are killed by him instantly. The demons do not like wisteria flowers and they cannot reach the area where wisteria flowers bloom. The demons are dead when their neck is cut by a special kind of a sword, called a sun blade, or when they hit the sun.

The reason why KIBUTSUJI Muzan transforms a person to be a demon is not so clear in the story, but it is assumed that he approaches a person who faces tragedy and helps them overcome their sadness or predicament caused by tragic accidents. For example, in episode twenty-one on the TV animation, Rui, one of the demons, was a child and he could not run because he was weak and fragile. Rui's father tried to kill his son because he could not see a good future for his son. However, Muzan appeared in front of Rui and shared his blood with him, and consequently, Rui became a strong demon and ate his parents.

III. Anime

KAMADO Tanjiro is a protagonist in *Demon Slayer*. He has a family on the hill of a mountain, and he became a charcoal seller to support his family, even though he is very young. One day he goes down a mountain to sell charcoals, and on the way back to his house, he is stopped by his acquaintance, who tells him that he should not walk on the mountain because a demon would appear on the way back to his house. Tanjiro accepts the acquaintance's advice, and he spends one night in that acquaintance's house. After breaking dawn, he walks back to his house. As he approaches his house, he smells someone's blood. He has an incredibly keen nose. When he arrives at his house, he sees that his mother, brothers, and sisters are assumedly killed by a demon. The only survivor is his younger sister, Nezuko, and he takes her to a doctor. Since she is bitten by a demon, she is supposed to become a demon. However, she continued sleeping for two years and regained consciousness. Tanjiro determines that he would find the way

of transforming the demon-like Nezuko to a human and decides to carry her with a box on the back.

Tanjiro has a strong kinship with his sister, Nezuko. To kill a demon, Tanjiro joins the Demon Slayer Corps, but he protects Nezuko, who becomes a demon. When Nezuko attacks Tanjiro, he protects himself and tries not to injure Nezuko. At that time, TOMIOKA Giyu, one of the best demon slayers appears on the scene and he attempts to kill Nezuko. However, Tanjiro tries to protect Nezuko from Giyu. This action is beyond what Giyu can understand. The mission of the Demon Slayer Corps is to kill a demon, and what Tanjiro does violates the rules. However, Tanjiro desperately guards his sister, and Giyu finally succumbs to Tanjiro's desperate petition. When Giyu leaves the scene, he says to Tanjiro, "Don't give others a chance to kill your sister." Implicitly, Giyu recognizes Tanjiro's attitude toward his sister, even though it is against the rules of the Demon Slayer Corps.

The distinctive difference between Nezuko and other demons is that she does not attempt to kill humans. Rather, she tries to protect humans against a demon when necessary. Her combat ability is very strong, and she is as strong as high ranked demons. She usually has a small bamboo in her mouth, so that she does not bite anyone by mistake. She shrinks herself to fit inside a box, and Tanjiro carries the box with himself.

One of the reasons why the animation of *Demon Slayer* is so appealing is that Tanjiro sympathizes with demons who used to be humans. When he cuts the neck of a demon, he tries to understand the life before becoming a demon. Each demon has a tragic history in his or her life, and he shows some sympathy to them. For instance, in episode twenty-one on TV, Tanjiro fights Rui, a spider-like demon, who is classified as the Waning Moon in Lower Rank Five. Tanjiro finds it difficult to attack his enemies, including Rui, and TOMIOKA Giyu kills Rui. When Rui is dead, he recalls how he makes up his family without any genuine blood connection. Tanjiro smells sadness from Rui and sympathizes with him. Tanjiro touches the disappearing Rui's face. In this scene, Giyu tells Tanjiro that he should not show compassion to the demon who eats human flesh. Tanjiro argues that he understands how hard it is for a very young man like Rui to have a broken family and an in-born fragile body, which is the main cause of his transformation into a demon.

Another example of showing Tanjiro's compassion to a demon is when he encounters a demon with several small drums embedded in the body, as shown in the episode thirteen on TV. The demon used to have a dream of becoming a writer and accumulates the pages of his manuscript, but his master tells him that his manuscript looks like a garbage and it does not have either aesthetics or gruesomeness. When Tanjiro fights

the demon, he sees the demon's messy manuscript that was scattered across the room. Tanjiro is very careful not to trample any of the manuscripts' pages in the room while defending himself against the demon's attack. Even though the demon is a fierce enemy, Tanjiro respects the demon's dignity as a writer. In my opinion, this scene is very impressive because it shows Tanjiro's compassion.

There are two unique characters that accompany Tanjiro. One is AGATSUMA Zenitsu, and the other HASHIBIRA Inosuke. Both pass the final selection to join the Demon Slayer Corps. Zenitsu is a boy with golden hairs because when a thunder hit him, he somehow survived, but his hairs turn yellow from black. He is cowardly and very nervous, and he easily faints in front of a demon. He repeats the phrase, "I am going to be dead." He does not have confidence in himself and is unwilling to fight a demon at first. Furthermore, Zenitsu tends to love a woman at first sight, more than any other character, and as soon as he meets Nezuko, Tanjiro's younger sister, he falls in love with her instantly. Interestingly, the reason he decides to join the Demon Slayer Corps is that he must pay his debts that he owes, as he was deceived by a woman. However, his master takes over the debts and pays them on his behalf. Therefore, he must pay the money that he owns to his master. His fighting style is unique. In the beginning or in the middle of the fight, he usually faints and loses consciousness because of fear. However, he transforms himself into a strong warrior and defeats an enemy through his thunder-like sword. He only knows one pattern of the surefire assassination method with one pattern of breathing. He is very strong and can quickly kill a demon.

The other unique character is HASHIBIRA Inosuke. He also passes the final selection, but he does not appear in the scene where surviving competitors choose a stone for a sword. Inosuke suddenly appears in a house where Tanjiro fiercely fights a demon with several small drums embedded in the body. Inosuke wears a boar mask, whose upper body is naked and muscular, runs in the hallways of the house, and he tries to kill a demon with his two swords in both his hands. Inosuke even tries to fight Tanjiro, who is not a demon. Inosuke's aggressive and bellicose attitude shows that his aggression is without restraint. However, Inosuke could not sever the neck of a monstrous demon, who is a father figure in Rui's family. He is assisted by TOMIOKA Giyu, but he completely loses confidence in his combative spirit and skills. After he is rested and rehabilitated, Inosuke recovers from the loss of confidence. One interesting fact about Inosuke is that he usually wears a boar mask because of the effeminate traits of his face, which does not fit the appearance of a warrior.

IV. Comic Books

As of July 2020, the volume one to six of the comic book *Demon Slayer* is converted into animations on TV. It is expected that more volumes of the comic book will be animated soon. Moreover, a *Demon Slayer* movie will be released in October 2020.

In the comic books, readers have more fighting scenes between worriers of Pillars and Waxing Moons in Upper Rank. The Pillars consist of nine demon slayers with stronger attack skills, and each of them has unique ways of breathing that are closely connected to the peculiar styles of killing demons. They are chosen by UBUYASHIKI Kagaya, a leader of the Demon Slayer Corps. He has skin disease and passes away, and his position is inherited by his son. Regarding the Waning Moon in Lower Rank and Waxing Moon in Upper Rank, there are six demons in Lower Rank and Upper Rank, respectively. After Rui, the Waning Moon in Lower Rank Five, was killed by Giyu, Muzan put the remaining five demons in the Waning Moon in Lower Rank together, and he tells them that he is dissatisfied with their killing ability. Therefore, Muzan kills four of them instantly and injects his blood to the last demon in the room and let him kill one of the Pillars with more powerful blood.

In volume nine, one of the Pillars, UZUI Tengen decides to visit the red-light district in Yoshiwara, Tokyo, because he wants to contact his three wives who sneak into the district as spies and look for information on demons. Tengen firmly believes that demons feel comfortable hiding themselves in the red-light district because it is secluded by a moat from the rest of the nearby communities, and it provides demons with secret spaces in a house. All three wives lose their contact with Tengen, and it makes him worried about their safety. The red-light district is regarded as a place where many prostitutes work. They are ranked according to their beauty and culture. The higher-ranked prostitutes are called *oiran*, and they master Japanese traditional dance, calligraphy, flower arrangement, and playing Japanese harp. In addition, they learned Japanese classic literature to amuse their guests. Besides *oiran*, there are many young girls who are abandoned by their parents and perform miscellaneous tasks for houses where prostitutes work or stay. Tanjiro, Inosuke, and Zenitsu disguise themselves as young girls pretending to be poor and have no choice but to work for a house in the red-light district. When they search for Tengen's wives, they find that one of those wives is rumored to have run away from the red-light district. The second one is an *oiran* who still works, and the third serves for a house where prostitutes receive training to enhance their cultural knowledge and learning skills.

Rich guests, usually merchants at that time, frequently visit the red-light district to meet their favorite prostitute, and they spend a lot of money to be entertained by a

highly ranked prostitute. Even though guests expected prostitutes to sleep with them, it was customary that the prostitutes would not sleep with them before the third or fourth visits. The rich guests value refinement and sophistication in highly ranked prostitutes, and the red-light district in Yoshiwara, Tokyo, flourished for a long period of time until the anti-prostitution law came into force in 1957.

In the story of *Demon Slayer*, there is a close association between the red-light district in Yoshiwara and a place where demons conceal themselves. The red-light district in Tokyo, known as Edo, before the Meiji Restoration in 1868, was created in 1617. At that time, Tokugawa Shogunate was in Edo, while the Japanese emperor stayed in Kyoto. Edo became a big city, but its brothels were scattered. SHOJI Jinnai, the owner of a tea house, suggested TOKUGAWA Ieyasu, the first shogun, that it might be effective to gather all the brothels in one place. Jinnai explained about two reasons. The first reason is that when many men visit unregulated brothels, they may be bankrupt by spending money excessively. If the shogunate regulates the red-light district, less men would be broken financially, and they would commit fewer acts of crime. The second reason is that the red-light district is a place where young girls are illegally bought by human traffickers. When parents could not pay back the debts, they had to sell their daughter to a human trafficker and the red-light district was the place where the daughter ended up staying and working as an indentured servant. Some of the girls become prostitutes, and the red-light district is regarded as a place where criminals and illegal traders in human trafficking hide themselves. Therefore, it would be easier for the shogunate to catch criminals and regulate illegal activities when the red-light district comes under the supervision of the government. The shogunate granted permission to run prostitution houses in the Nihonbashi district, which was a swamp at that time. However, as the population is growing in Edo, more people started to stay near the Nihonbashi district, and eventually, Nihonbashi became the center of Edo. There were many inconveniences due to urban planning as well as public morals, and the government decided to move the red-light district to an area close to Asakusa, a town in the northeast of Nihonbashi, in 1657 (Fukuda, 1993).

In the volume nine, it turns out that *oiran* Princess Warabi is the demon of the Waxing Moon in Upper Rank Six, whose name is Daki, which means Fallen Princess. She is beautiful and voluptuous. She attacks another *oiran* who decides to leave the red-light district the following day. Tanjiro, whose nose has the subtlety of smelling objects from far, recognizes that a demon has appeared in one of the houses in the red-light district, and Tanjiro fights Fallen Princess. In my opinion, Fallen Princess appears to be an amorous costume player, and her appearance and style are hypermodern. She uses sash belts as weapons to kill and swallow a person in the same fashion as that of a

giant snake. Tanjiro's fighting power is not strong enough to defeat Fallen Princess.

In the volume ten, Fallen Princess recalls her past memory. When she was a human, she suffered from poverty and pain caused by disease. When she transformed into a demon, she did not have to worry about poverty and sickness. A demon never grows older, worries about food shortages and hunger, or needs to be careful about health conditions. In addition, a demon has an eternal life and does not have anything to lose. Fallen Princess claims that a beautiful and strong demon can do whatever she wants, and she clearly refers to herself as a beautiful and strong demon.

While Fallen Princess and Tanjiro fight on the roof of a house in the red-light district, Nezuko, Tanjiro's younger sister, appears on the roof and joins the fight to attack Fallen Princess. At the beginning of the story, after being severely injured by a demon in her house on the mountain, Nezuko transformed herself into a demon. However, neither she attacks humans nor she eats them. Strangely enough, Nezuko slept for a couple of years and she was loyal to her elder brother, Tanjiro. Since Nezuko was the only survivor in the family, he decided to bring her with him to find a medicine that would help transform Nezuko into a human being again. Nezuko was asleep, but she somehow sensed that danger would approach Tanjiro. Therefore, she woke up and came to join the fight against Fallen Princess.

Nezuko's aggression is as strong as that of Fallen Princess. Her kick is so powerful that Fallen Princess suffers heavy injury. Fallen Princess cuts Nezuko's right leg, but her leg is restored instantly. Fallen Princess was surprised to witness her power of recovery. Nezuko has a more powerful fighting mode than Fallen Princess and a horn appears on her forehead. The horn indicates that Nezuko becomes a fighting demon. Nezuko faints Fallen Princess and keeps the fighting mode on, and then she attempts to attack a girl who works in a house in the red-light district. Tanjiro desperately prevents her from attacking the girl, and Nezuko does not kill anyone else.

When Fallen Princess is overwhelmed by Nezuko's attack, she asks her brother for assistance. Her brother's name is GYU Taro. Gyu is also the name of the profession in the red-light district. Gyu's responsibility includes collecting money from guests and soliciting guests' patronage. After the neck of Fallen Princess is cut, Taro appears from the back of Fallen Princess, and he meets Tengen in the room. Taro has scars, blemishes, and spots on his face. Taro admires Tengen's good-looking face and his muscular body, and Taro tells Tengen that he must be popular with women. While fighting against Taro, Tengen talks about his past. His ancestors are Ninja, professional spies who are highly trained in stealth and secrecy, but his father forced his children to have extremely hard training for survival; therefore, only two of them survived, and one of them was Tengen. He shows that he has a past that is hard to bear and tries to tell

Taro that he is as unlucky as Taro.

In addition to Tanjiro, Inosuke and Zenitsu joined the fight against Taro and Fallen Princess. It is strange at first that even though the neck of Fallen Princess is cut, she remains alive. Then, Inosuke tells Zenitsu that they do not have to cut the necks of Taro and Fallen Princess at the same time; rather, while the body and neck of one of them is severed, the neck of the other should be cut. This results in the death of both demons. Since Tengen is poisoned by a spear that Taro fired, his aggression and mobility became slower. Tanjiro, Inosuke, and Zenitsu keep attacking Taro and Fallen Princess in difficult situations, as they are determined to kill them. As a result, Tanjiro finally cuts the neck of Taro, and Inosuke does the same to Fallen Princess.

It is interesting to note that both Taro and Fallen Princess recall their past when they are human. Taro was born in one of the houses in the red-light district. He was ugly. Everyone avoided him, and other children bullied him. When his sister was born, the situation around him changed. He became proud of his beautiful sister, and he acquired self-esteem to overcome his inferiority complex. He also noticed that he was physically so strong that he could be suitable for a debt collector in the red-light district because everyone is afraid of him. However, his sister inserted a hairpin into the eye of her guest while she entertained him, and she was burnt as a punishment. Taro was in complete despair. At that time, Doma, the Waxing Moon in Upper Rank Two, appeared in front of Taro with his sister's corpse and injected his blood to Taro and the diseased Fallen Princess so that they could live as demons forever unless they are under the sun or their necks are cut. In *Demon Slayer*, the background of the main characters is usually shown, and the readers can understand why they became demons or joined the Demon Slayer Corps.

When the heads of Taro and Fallen Princess are lying on the ground, separated from their bodies, they quarrel each other. Fallen Princess accuses Taro of not protecting her enough while she fights Tanjiro and other members of the Demon Slayer Corps. In contrast, Taro blames Fallen Princess for being a burden in his life, and he tells her that he wished she had never been born. At that moment, Tanjiro blocks Taro's mouth with his left hand and tells him, "You killed a lot of people, and many people hate you. No one protects or defends you. However, she is the only sister. You should not insult each other." Although they attempt to kill Tanjiro, he empathizes with them, and this is one of the heart-warming scenes.

As I illustrated the main characters, *Demon Slayer* provides us with the details of their background and predicament. Such descriptions of hard experiences in the past create a space where we freely sympathize with some of the characters, good or bad, and shorten the distance between the story of this comics and the reader's experience.

One of the devices that makes us feel closer to the characters is a monologue in the fighting scenes. We understand how Tanjiro thinks about his attack tactics and breathing techniques that enhance the power of his attack. While Tanjiro fights, I feel as if I am with him in the battlefield. Furthermore, he sometimes makes feeble complaints. I assure you that he is not a superhero. He is just an ordinary child, but once he determines to attack demons and protect innocent people, he becomes a fierce fighter. This metamorphosis is very appealing to us.

V. Conclusion

I have enjoyed watching the anime of *Demon Slayer* on TV, and I have read the comic version of it. I analyzed the historical background of demons, and found that demons have existed in our imagination for more than one thousand years and that they are intimate with us. The anime version of *Demon Slayer* vividly depicts Tanjiro's sense of justice and order, and he seems to search for the common good of the entire community where people live peacefully. Tanjiro is determined to exterminate demons while showing sympathy with them. He shows his humanistic side and demonic one in the story, so that he can keep defeating demons.

Many of the main characters in *Demon Slayer* are either handsome or beautiful. Particularly, I think that TOMIOKA Gyu is handsome and cool. He is usually quiet, but his skills of using a sword are speedy and precise. I also think that Fallen Princess, formally named as Warabi Hime or Dahi, is beautiful and attractive with a bikini-like short pant. Further, I think that the manga artist, GOTOUGE Koyoharu, is very good at drawing stylish clothes and attractive faces. In addition, some of the fighting scenes seem to be three-dimensional with exaggerated sound effects on pages, which creates a realistic atmosphere.

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