

Yokai and the Japanese Mind's Eye

Yokai are one representation of the mental images of the Japanese. Various yokai have been depicted since the middle ages and are believed to be the roots of modern animation and horror works. The closest translation of “yokai” would be “monster”—a strange creature created within the context of the human world. Every culture in the world has a version of this, using different symbolism and forms, yet few have actually depicted them symbolically as the Japanese have. **Kazuhiko Komatsu**, a professor at the International Research Center of Japanese Culture, discusses the world of Japanese monsters.

It is believed that monsters were created when humans felt fear. For example, the fear of thunder is an animalistic instinct, but humans began to believe it had a spiritual cause, or that it could endanger their lives. Faced with such difficult-to-comprehend events or phenomena, humans began to think about the presence of something non-existent or invisible, and created monsters. Every culture in the world has created its own characters.

Snakes and *oni* (demons) are typical forms of ancient Japanese

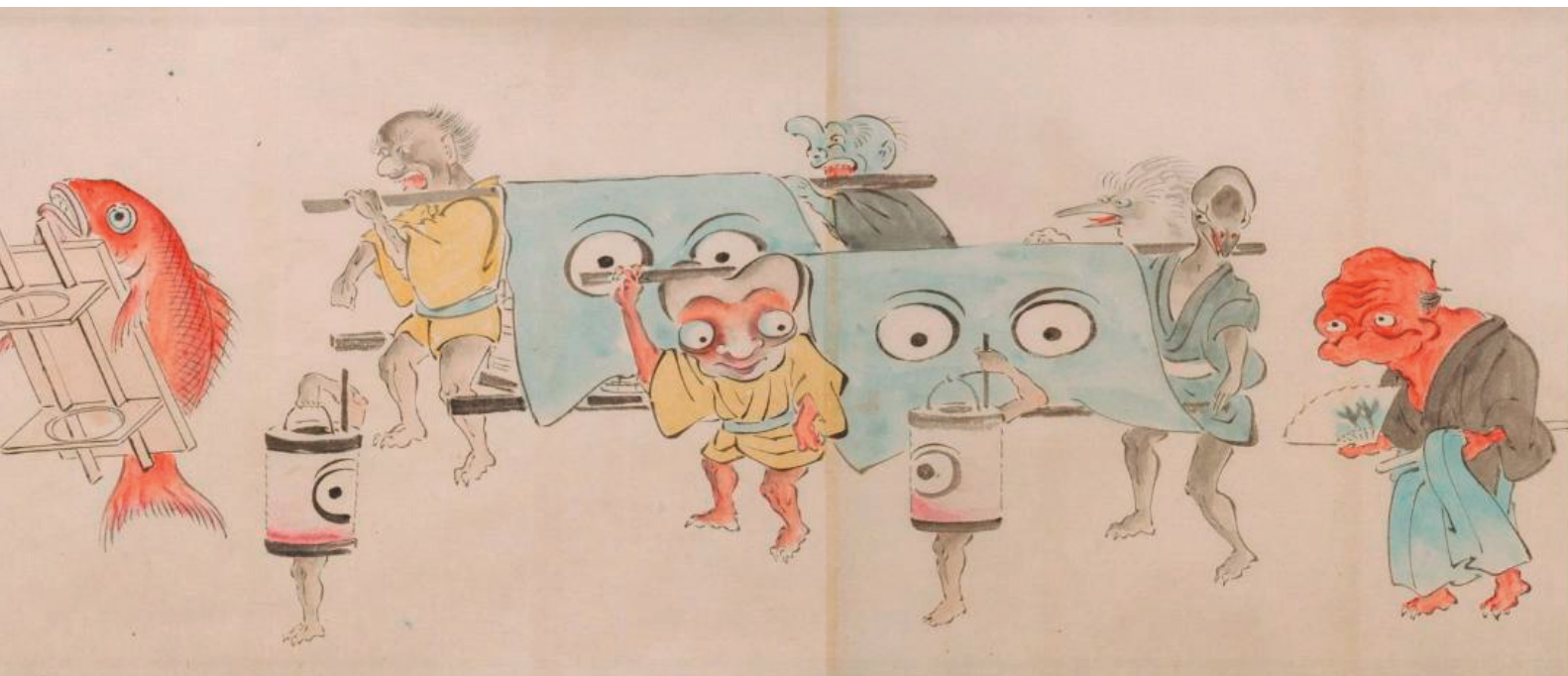
yokai. Under the animistic belief that every being that has existed before humans possesses a spirit, the snake held a significant role as the most fearsome creature.

The notion of *oni*, on the other hand, came from China as a ghost that did not go to the world of the dead, and instead remained among the living. What was known as *ki* was invisible in China but in Japan developed into a form resembling a human and that would hold grudges against humans, cause natural convulsions and thunder, and spread disease.

The Japanese attached a personality to everything. They believed that the gods of the mountain or water were angry. And shaping such fear into a form was far too enormous and difficult a task. They therefore considered the snake or *oni* the messenger or embodiment of these gods' anger.

Fearful mental images eventually segmented into more minute categories, and people began portraying them in individual forms. As they reflect human nature, these mental images were given personalities and emotions similar to humans, and people believed their spiritual power would grow stronger and cause various miracles the more they aged. People called these powers *tatari* (curses), and whenever directed toward humans, they became yokai.

In Europe, for instance, Christianity was the basis of this type of segmentation. Europeans clearly distinguished between good and evil or God and devil, and anything unknown that was not God was considered to be the devil. The Japanese yokai are based



A section of the *Bakemono konrei* (Monster marriage) *emaki*, in which yokai can be seen carrying betrothal gifts. The *tai* carp at left is walking to the feast by itself, carrying the tray upon which it will be served.

on the notion of *yaoyorozu no kami* (eight million deities) that possess human personalities, not necessarily distinguished as either good or evil. Due to the animistic notion that all things possess a spirit, every living being, including humans, is equal in nature, and no god or non-god is either ultimately good or evil. People gave every being its own story just as they would a human, and the negative emotions from these stories took shape and were transformed into oni, which artists made into pictures.

Shaping the Invisible

As yokai that began as snakes and demons took the form of pictures, they gradually took on more specific personalities and appearances. They were naturally influenced by China and the legend of Buddha, of which major parts were portrayed in pictures for those who could not read. This contained evil creatures such as a demon-like presences, animals and snakes that attack Buddha and thwart his practice.

Just when the Japanese oni took form is not known, but the thirteenth-century *Kitano tenjin engi emaki* depicts oni that create lightning and cause disease. The yokai appearing in the picture scroll are all minor characters.

The *Shigisan engi emaki*, a famous picture scroll and a national treasure, shows the presence of a *go-houdouji*, a guardian demon which a master priest manipulates when offering his prayers, and which is said to be invisible to common people. As with the *Kitano tenjin*, these scrolls portray yokai even though they are religious scrolls having no need for them. Despite their depiction of the bad aspects of humans, people are drawn to the fun aspects of yokai expressing a human trait, which is portrayed in their pictures.

Forms of oni in those times varied, including features such as horse heads, bull heads and horns, but ultimately the image of a brawny body with

horns and fangs became the typical representation of oni, and has remained that way up to the present. While oni are depicted nearly the same everywhere, each region has its own variation, with its own name and story.

For example, *tengu* was a yokai conveyed by priests of the Tendai sect as its religious enemy, often depicted in the form of a black kite or a crow. Tengu was always portrayed as a thief, as in a story of a tengu disguised as an Amitabha (Buddhist deity) that kidnaps a priest.

But in the Edo period (1603–1867), tengu was given a long nose,

popular in the Edo period, and tengu rankings were developed.

Yokai as Characters

The Japanese have always believed that even manmade objects possess a spirit, and anything with a name has aspects of both devil and god.

Snakes and oni represented fear in the form of a yokai, but in time yokai would come from manmade objects. This meant that such objects would also possess mystical powers over time. If they were not treated carefully, their devil would arise and inflict



A section of the *Hyakki yagyo* (Night parade of 100 demons) *emaki*. Here a *biwa* lute appears to be tugging along a reluctant *koto* zither.

influenced by Western missionaries. Every monastery built in mountains around the country would have a hermit practicing Buddhism, and a tengu would always be there. Originally created within the Buddhist world, tengu were related as beings possessing knowledge and sword skills, and as a presence close to humans. Stories told of tengu protecting humans, guarding the capital city, or granting humans sword skills and knowledge. Another interesting point is that tengu around the country, each with its own personality, were given ranks. People entrusted strong powers to tengu in creating their stories. Thus some people saw the tengu as a master practitioner with superhuman traits. Tengu became

illness on people or become an oni seeking vengeance on them. This has led to the moral of caring for one's possessions. The *Tsukumogami emaki* illustrates this well. The word "tsukumo" symbolizes "99," which represents a multitude of time, experience or types. The yokai that appear in the picture scroll are disposed tools, with eyes and mouths, and they turn into oni to take revenge on humans. But from a certain point, people began portraying them as yokai with an oni personality, but clearly defining their origins as tools. From this point on, objects did not evolve into oni. These yokai arose from tools with eyes and mouths, partially donned an oni trait, and took on an animal form. By clari-

fying their traits and separating the paths that various mental images took in becoming an oni, the Japanese took their yokai in diverse directions.

Yokai pictures were drawn purely for fun. For example, the idea and

a mouth, nose, hands and legs, which it does not possess, creates a grotesque image, and this is believed to have started yokai culture. By providing each yokai with a story and personality, people made characters out

some, sometimes comical. Modern creators can, in a sense, emulate this tradition while adding new elements to create new stories and works.

A recent example is the animated movie *Spirited Away*, directed by Hayao Miyazaki. The film, which received worldwide critical acclaim, beautifully portrays the traditional world of Japanese yokai.

Interestingly, the film's characters are soundly rooted in the traditions of yokai. For example, the personified frog that also appears in the *Yokai emaki*, is not a ghost; it becomes a monster when placed inside the group of yokai. And, as mentioned, tools become yokai in the *Yokai emaki* and play when humans are not around. "Spirited Away" portrays this essence of yokai as free-transforming beings.

Creators—of the Miyazaki film, among others—develop their works beyond the yokai classifications and definitions offered by religion, folklore or studies. Clearly they are inheriting the traditions of Japanese culture, without being consciously aware of it.

They simply use their own methods and perceptions to portray Japanese culture's joy of turning everything into a character.

In sum, Japan has a history of creating numerous yokai or characters, which goes back to its tradition of personifying everything and creating a story for each character. Today's yokai, comics and horror culture are in line with this tradition.

Yokai have symbolized people's mental images as well as the social customs, culture and ideals of the time. In that sense, yokai are tools for studying Japanese people and culture. Looking at the presence of yokai today, which is well beyond a fad, we find that yokai may be tools not only for viewing the past but also the future.



Kazuhiro Komatsu is a professor at the International Research Center of Japanese Culture.



A section of the *Shigisan engi* (Legends of Shigisan temple) *emaki*, a national treasure, showing a dashing *gohoudouji* guardian demon

method of personifying animals existed from the Heian period (794–1185) when the *Chojugiga*—known as the root of manga—was drawn. This gave clothes to four-legged animals and made them stand on two legs and perform human actions and chores.

One medieval story goes something like this: A traveler staying at a noble house hears voices. He hears the furniture having a discussion: "It's night now, let's sing poems." Though the furniture is quiet during the day it starts moving during the night and sings poems. But as soon as the traveler shines a light on them, they all return to being normal furniture.

In giving frogs and rabbits clothing and making them play, people personified tools. Giving a mouth and nose to an animal, as with the *Chojugiga*, does not create a yokai, but by personifying a tool by giving it

of them. This culture turned into the yokai pictures loved by people in the Edo period. Townspeople also enjoyed a bit of eeriness in their fashion by lining their staid kimonos with yokai-print fabric. Yokai, in other words, diverted themselves from becoming an oni and diversified, turning into characters, and ultimately into entertainment.

The Roots of Modern Culture

The creators of modern animation, comics and horror movies are taking good advantage of these traditions. A rough example of a yokai tradition is that ukiyo-e are, in a sense, comics that have a laugh at society, and yokai artists are similar in that they drew their characters creatively as an alternate form of humans; sometimes fear-