Yōkai Repurposed: A Historiography of Present-Day Yōkai

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Yōkai, supernatural creatures and phenomena of Japanese folklore, often appear in modern media in various reimagined forms. All of these creatures and phenomena originate from different regions of Japan and encompass diverse folkloric practices that evolved under the syncretic blend of premodern and early modern Shinto and Buddhism. Yōkai lore dates back to the eighth century, with myths and legends, and later, artistic traditions developed to visually depict these monsters and spirits. The Edo period marks the first surge in yōkai popularity; yōkai thrived in Japan's art, culture, and stories of ghosts, monsters, and strange phenomena. During the Edo Period, scholar, poet, and artist of yōkai folklore, Toriyama Sekien compiled a catalog and code of yōkai in his book, *Gazu Hyakki Yagyo* (1776). This book changed how people consumed yōkai as content. Originally, yōkai were oral traditions associated with local legends. Sekien pinned local legends and gave yōkai visual form, transforming imaginative figures into recognizable characters in one place: his books.

During the Meiji Restoration, yōkai's popularity plummeted as Japan shifted toward a cultural emphasis on modernization and science, which led to debunking yōkai to inspire rational thinking nationally.[1] Yōkai then resurfaced in post-World War II through the work of Shigeru Mizuki. Mizuki incorporated yōkai into the comic series *GeGeGe no Kitaro*, then sparked a second wave of popularity in contemporary Japan. While these supernatural beings rose to fame during the Edo period, they disappeared from the media during the Meiji Restoration. Given these characters' lack of trademarking, how did scholars examine the survival of yōkai from the Edo period to modern Japan? In contemporary Japan, people continue to alter these supernatural

[1]Michael Dylan Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 204.

creatures for consumption. While earlier scholarship views modern yōkai as commodities stripped of their original context, recent research suggests that yōkai have not lost their power but have evolved from folklore into psychological tools for marginalized groups. Noriko T. Reider and Michael Dylan Foster agree in their early work that modernization destroyed yōkai identities and folklore. At the same time, Deborah Shamoon and Foster argue whether or not the encyclopedic mode effectively turned folklore into a database of free-agent characters. In recent research, Reider finds herself agreeing with Hiromi T. Dollase that the public benefits from the evolved media portrayals of yōkai.

Commodification of Monsters

In Reider's chapter "Oni in Manga, Anime, and Film" in *Japanese Demon Lore*, she argues that traditional *oni* lore changed from fearsome ogres with horns, fangs, and tiger-skin loincloths to commodified characters with standards of attractiveness and sex appeal. Reider emphasizes cultural analysis and contrasts traditional folklore figures, such as the *yamauba* (mountain witch), with their modern anime counterparts. For instance, she discusses the manga and anime series *Urusei Yatsura* (1981), which features Lum, an oni protagonist with classic oni traits such as horns and tiger-skin clothing. However, her mouth, large enough to eat humans, now appears with cute canine teeth for appeal, and her personality is that of a cute-sexy, domesticated wife. Lum exhibits oni traits and supernatural powers but behaves like a regular human, experiencing emotions like jealousy and anger, making her relatable to mainstream audiences.[2] Reider claims that Lum's total devotion to her husband "contained" her powers, thereby reducing her to a dependable, safe, and traditional wife for male viewers rather than a threat.[3] The domestication of Lum exemplifies a

[2] Noriko T. Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore: Oni from Ancient Times to the Present* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2010), 157.

[3] Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, 158.

"media mix" strategy that spreads content across multiple platforms to achieve a broader audience.[4] The changes to Lum's *oni* identity only emphasize the character's monetary and appeal aspects, thereby diminishing the importance of this particular yōkai. This transformation makes the frightening more acceptable, and this trend isn't limited to Japanese demons.

In Foster's reinterpretation of Yōkai in *Pandemonium and Parade* chapter "Yokai Culture: Past Present, Future," he emphasizes nostalgia, a bittersweet longing for an idealized home. In his book, he argues that modern Japan views yōkai as comforting symbols of the *furusato* (hometown) and Japan's national identity. This role of yōkai involves removing their frightening and dangerous traits, making them safe and uncontroversial characters suitable for marketing. For example, Foster cites Tokyo-Mitsubishi Bank for adopting the DC Card Kappa as mascots for their DC Cards. In the Edo period, Kappa were "slimy water creatures threatening to kill unsuspecting children," according to their lore, but now, "Kappa are cute and (almost) cuddly cartoon characters." [5] They have lost their eerie, mysterious qualities and become appealing icons in the national consciousness, changing their personalities from those depicted during the Edo period, as recorded in Sekien's catalogue. Foster argues that yōkai cleansing is a social process that weakens yōkai. Yōkai's lack of otherworldliness makes them "untainted, uncontroversial, and…safe for fetishistic consumption."[6] Therefore, this simplification of frightening yōkai lore into cuddly mascots supports Reider's observations about the loss of yōkai's original folklore and power in the process of consumption.

Reider and Foster offer a critical view of how modernization affects yōkai: Japan's process of commodification leads to a loss of yōkai's grit and original powers. From Reider's perspective,

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[4] Noriko T. Reider, "Demon Slayer Kimetsu no yaiba: Oni, Vampires, and Sexuality," *Japan Review* 39 (2024) 203-220: 204.

[5] Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade,* 207.

[6] Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, 156–57.

"tamed" *oni* help boost the fame of entertainment franchises and traditional gender roles in women.[7] Lum's successful media mix, as Reider suggests, is because a cannibalistic monster cannot generate "copious spin-off marketing efforts," but a "cute and sexy" girl in a tiger print bikini promotes "veritable entertainment."[8] Foster argues that modern yōkai act as cute mascots but have lost their fear factor. Foster's view of the cute *kappa* reflects a sense of national nostalgia, and both scholars argue that the widespread consumption of yōkai indicates that they no longer retain their powers or their intimidating factors. From a child-murdering water creature to a sanitized commercial mascot, the cuteness endows the character with a new role as a vessel for the nation's collective memory, erasing Japan's lost folklore. Foster and Reider's shared concerns imply that, as we shift from the encyclopedic approach of the past to today's commercial markets, yōkai lose their mysterious "otherness" and instead reflect modern human desires. Foster and Reider agree that the sanitation of yōkai means losing their grit. Although commercialization strips yōkai of their traditional contexts, it does not eliminate their usefulness to people.

Database of Yōkai

Shamoon, the scholar behind "The Yōkai in the Database: Supernatural Creatures and Folklore in Manga and Anime," agrees with Foster on the idea of the Encyclopedic mode but takes a different view of the database.[9] Shamoon offers structural explanations of how yōkai survived into the 21st century. Shamoon introduces the "encyclopedic mode" and argues that the cataloging of yōkai in the Edo period acts as a precursor to the modern "database" for Otaku culture.[10] Otaku culture refers to the consumption of anime, manga, or video games by obsessed fans in Japan.[11]

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[7]Reider, 158.

[8] Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade*, 207.

[9] Deborah Shamoon, "The Yōkai in the Database: Supernatural Creatures and Folklore in Manga and Anime," *Marvels & Tales* 27, no. 2 (2013) 276-289: 277.

[10] Shamoon, "The Yōkai in the Database," 286.

[11] Shamoon, "The Yōkai in the Database," 277.

Shamoon uses Azuma Hiroki's academic analysis of database consumption, suggesting that Otkau fans' interest in stories relies heavily on "*moe* elements" (traits such as cute-ified horns, fangs, and personality types) that authors or artists rearrange for audience appeal and consumption.[12]

Shamoon challenges Foster's idea that the database destroys yōkai and argues that the "modular nature of many yōkai… allows for them to be used flexibly in various kinds of stories."[13] By treating yōkai as data points rather than sacred myths, Shamoon also implies that the artists Shigeru Mizuki and Takahashi Rumiko kept yōkai culture alive in the present. Mizuki created a modern yōkai database by drawing on folklore and creating creatures through popular media, such as *GeGeGe no Kitaro,* which preserves some of Sekien's catalogs. Rumiko's manga and anime *Inuyasha* is a remix of yōkai elements from the folklore database. Shamoon's approach offers a critical counterpoint to Foster's analysis of the encyclopedic mode as a form of taming yōkai. Instead of Foster's analysis, Shamoon sees it as a source of "creative possibility."[14] In fact, Shamoon says that fans enjoy learning about characters, monsters, weaponry, and machinery rather than following a linear story, meaning that yōkai stored in a database can be remixed and decontextualized for various audiences. Shamoon emphasizes that this does not degrade the folklore but instead constitutes a "playful interaction" from yōkai to fan.[15] Playful interaction enables fans to create their own worlds tailored to their needs. Yōkai are database creatures meant for reshaping and consumption according to Shamoon, but how does the malleability of these characters benefit Japan's consumers?

Influence of Yōkai: Internal and External Strength

[12] Shamoon, 277.
[13] Shamoon, 278.
[14] Shamoon, 287.
[15] Shamoon, 279.

Dollase examines the monsters in shōjo horror manga as deliberately unkempt for an adolescent girl audience and as vessels for teenage girls' catharsis. Dollase argues that shōjo manga functions as a cultural medium and an emotional outlet for young girls to express emotions labeled "dark."[16] A closer examination of these emotions includes jealousy, anger, fear, and frustration, as seen earlier in Reider's criticism of Lum. The shōjo horror manga genre challenges prevailing norms, in which most shōjo manga focus on cuteness and melancholy. Instead, horror manga employs yōkai to visualize the "fearful truths within themselves" arising from unresolved, unaddressed feelings.[17] Dollase uses ghosts and demons, such as *yamauba* and hannya (a woman turned serpent), to symbolize dark, grotesque feelings that often remain unexpressed in modern society, particularly regarding motherhood, sexuality, and social isolation. For example, in Umezu Kazuo's manga *Mama ga kowai* (I'm scared of Mama), a mother figure transforms into a grotesque *hannya*, symbolizing a truly malevolent mother whom most young girls would feel compelled to love. Dollase argues that monsters are not merely cute icons of comfort; they are projections of a girl's subconscious fears and serve as a cathartic outlet for intense emotions that require vivid expression. Dollase elevates yōkai from cultural symbols to tools of gender subversion, allowing young girls to confront the "abjection" of the maternal body and resist societal pressure to be "good girls."[18] In *Mama ga kowai*, Dollase argues that manga transgresses the societal pressure to conform to the "nurturing mother" ideal, allowing readers to visualize a frightening "maternal Otherness" and children controlled by a parent. While cute commodity yōkai prevailed in scholarship, we see that yōkai aren't limited to safety mascots but also serve as tools for emotional

[16] Hiromi Tsuchiya Dollase, "Shōjo Spirits in Horror Manga," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal*, no. 38 (2010) 59-80: 74.

[17] Dollase, "Shojo Spirits," 60.

[18] Dollase, 65.

catharsis for young girls in Japan. Like Reider's research on sexualized *oni*, Dollase's work focuses on the raw, frightening vessels of catharsis.

In Reider's recent research, "Demon Slayer Kimetsu no Yaiba: Oni, Vampires, and Sexuality," she shifts her focus to the study of Japanese folklore combined with Western Gothic tropes. Reider argues that modern interpretations of *oni* retain core traits while remaining culturally relevant, even as new media adopt Western elements, specifically those of vampires.[19] Reider's methodology involves comparing literature, specifically the mechanics of *Demon Slayer* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. The key concern is that the hybrid of *oni* and vampires produces a modernized "sexualized aesthetic," exemplified by Tamayo, a demon doctor who embodies the femme fatale trope.[20] In her case, the female *oni's* powers depend on a "sexy" presentation influenced by an "exotic Western ambiance."[21] Reider concludes that *oni* survive not through safety but by embracing Western aesthetics that "happen" to make them sexy, with underlying vampiric tropes. This shift suggests that for *oni* (and yōkai) to remain popular globally, they must adapt through globalization and sexualization. While Reider believes the monsters only evolve outwardly, her analysis, when paired with Dollase's argument, suggests otherwise: the relevance of yōkai lies in their emotional appeal to modern Japan.

Together, Reider and Dollase offered rebuttals to the idea of yōkai losing their assets and locating them in opposite ways: Reider and the exterior, and Dollase internally. Yōkai are not merely cute and tame; they remain frightening and robust. Reider examined the evolution of the *oni* and the Western vampiric influence in response to the visual demands of the global media mix. Despite the overwhelming evidence, Dollase focused on the monster's interior, arguing that yōkai

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[19] Reider, "Oni, Vampires, and Sexuality," 212.
[20] Reider, "Oni, Vampires, and Sexuality," 214.
[21] Reider, 216.

power persists through psychological service and shapes the "repressed emotions" of Japan's marginalized female audience.[22] While we see *oni* acquire sexually aesthetic traits, they also gain vampiric strengths from hybridization, expanding their supernatural abilities beyond their folklore. Alternatively, Dollase sees grotesque empowerment for specific audiences. It's worth noting that Reider and Dollase focus on widely different topics for analysis: hybridization and physical sexuality, and unchanged yōkai and internalized emotions. Yet, Reider and Dollase prove the strength of the yōkai in their supernatural abilities, new or old. Reider and Dollase confirm Shamoon's "creative possibility" from two ends of the scale and the flexibility of yōkai characters to benefit various kinds of stories.

The historiography of modern yōkai reveals a shift from "failed folklore" to "successful modern adaptations" that is equally relevant. In their analyses, Reider (2010) and Foster proposed that tragic commodity victims of "media mix" and modernization stripped yōkai of dangerous folklore to serve a commercialized nation. In service of a culture of service and sexualized aesthetics, Japanese creators repurposed yōkai for marketability and creative adaptation. Foster and Reider's analysis of yōkai modernization tells a story of loss and argues that yōkai serve the mass market, from mascots to domesticated wives in anime. The modernization of yōkai erases their "otherworldliness," allowing them to shine in their contemporary repurposing. From Reider and Foster's perspective, contemporary Japan seeks a supernatural presence that aligns with national identity and provides without a grotesque characterization hanging over its cute characters. While most research focuses on what consumers want to hear or possess regarding merchandise and sexuality, Dollase proposes a new concept.

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[22] Dollase, 64.

Dollase and Reider (2024) complicate this overwhelming narrative. While Reider continues to prove her point that the commodity is a primary focus of Japan, she adds a new layer to the yōkai's assets beyond their original folklore. *Oni* evolution in *Demon Slayer* stems from global gothic vampire tropes; raising their aesthetic appeal also increases their physical strength in *Demon Slayer's* lore. In her research, Dollase reveals the internal dynamics underlying the persistence of yōkai in contemporary entertainment: the emotional survival of marginalized young women. The young female audience consuming shōjo horror manga sees an "untamed" monster, not to be comforted or treated as a consumer product. These monsters are vessels of cathartic rage and gender subversion from societal expectations.

The scholarly consensus confirms that yōkai in contemporary Japan's entertainment industry remain vital to Japan's cultural imagination. Despite this, new research suggests that yōkai remain relevant not because they stay the same or tell the same story, but because they are infinitely adaptable and susceptible to evolution. Repurposing of yōkai can take many forms: national nostalgia, sexualized characters for profit and consumption, or grotesque avatars for personal empowerment, among others. Yōkai continue to thrive and reflect the shifting wants and needs of the contemporary world. These characters are no longer oral traditions from the Edo period. Ultimately, these scholars reveal that yōkai are not static entities from the past but fluid characters subject to change. Yōkai endure popularity because they lack specific attributes that define them as yōkai; thus, they can be anything from data entries to business mascots to vessels for marginalized voices, among other things. Yōkai popularity persists not because of their old folklore, but because of their fluid cultural material, ready for remixing and repurposing for generations to come.