Yōkai: Evolutions in Image, Definition, and Media
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Abstract

The uniqueness of *yōkai*, which can be defined as Japanese supernatural beings or monsters, lay not only in the numerous and diverse characters themselves, but also in the holistic impact of the concept of *yōkai* on Japanese popular culture. A historical survey of *yōkai* reveals that the meanings and categories of “*yōkai*” have changed according to the Japanese peoples’ perception of the unknown and of the supernatural world. Moreover, the *yōkai* 's image and the accompanying narrative evolved accordingly to cope with the unknown. Finally, this study attempts to gauge how the media has had a direct influence to how people visualize and narrate *yōkai*. These factors regarding *yōkai* 's creation and evolution affect how we recognize them in today's pop culture.
Questions and Key Changes

• Guiding Questions:
  – How have yōkai changed?
  – How does the change influence today’s yōkai and popular culture?

• Key Changes (bullets marked with *)
  – 1) Yōkai image/character story (*pink)
  – 2) Yōkai definition & categorization (*Purple)
  – 3) Media’s change & influence on Yokai (*Green)
Yōkai movies

Gegege no Kitaro characters
Origins to Kamakura Period (-1333)

- Shinto idea of *Yaoyorozunokami* (‘800 spirits / gods’)
- Regional monsters, gods, etc. Some which were very similar to each other in different regions
- Early terminology:
  - Heian period (794-1185) : *Mononoke* (lit. ‘thing/matter of mystery’) → *Bakemono* (lit. ‘changing thing’) (*)
- *Tsukumogami* (old objects that come to life): Image change from scary/terrifying to comical (*)
Edo Period (1600-1868)

• Time of Collecting and Cataloging things
• First catalogue/encyclopedia: *Kimouzui* (*)
  – Sorted by outer appearance (*)
• Toriyama Sekien’s *Yōkai* catalogue (*) (*)
  – First to focus specifically on *yōkai* in a catalogue
  – Included imported and created *yōkai* (e.g.: *Kyokotsu*) (*)
  – Changed the roles/stories of some of the *yōkai* (e.g.: *Nurarihyon*). (*)
• Scary storytelling called *Hyakumonogatari Kaidankai* becomes a popular way to title collections of scary stories (*)
Meiji Period (1868-1912)

- Influence from Western philosophy (*)
- Inoue Enryo
  - Created *yōkaigaku* (‘yōkaiology’), demystifying ‘false’ mysteries to modernize Buddhism
  - Founded *Tetsugakukan* University
- Inoue’s yokai definition (*):

- **Mysterious**
  - Can’t be explained
  - 不思議
- **Yokai**
  - 妖怪
- **Weird**
  - Can be explained
  - 異常
Meiji Period (1868-1912)

• Inoue’s Categorization of *Yōkai* : (*)
  – Based not on the many *yōkai* themselves, but instead the types of mysteries or strange happenings claimed to be their doing.
Showa Period (1926-1989)

• Books to television to movies (*)
• Mizuki Shigeru:
  – *Manga* artist; wrote the popular *Gegege no Kitarou* manga (Japanese comic book) & researched *yōkai* (*)
  – *The yōkai manga* became an *anime* (animated TV series) and a movie. (**) (**)
  – There were also a couple other *yōkai* movies made not related to *Gegege no Kitaro* specifically. (***) (***)
• Shigeru’s definition of *Yōkai*: (*)
  – “Anything that can not readily be understood or explained, anything mysterious and unconfirmed, can be a *yōkai*.”
Showa Period (1926-1989)

• Mizuki’s Categories (*)

変化 (henge): Shape-shifters

幽霊 (yuurei): Ghosts/spirits

怪獣 (kaijuu): The beasts

狐の嫁入り
“Kitsune no yomeiri”
Fox wedding

超自然 (choushizen): Supernatural Phenomenon

子育て幽霊
“Kosodate yurei”
Child rearing ghost
Baku (the dream eater)
Heisei Period (1989-Present)

• A “yōkai boom” (ie: Gegege no Kitaro, Yōkai Watch, etc.) brings yōkai into popularity causing creation of more yōkai manga, anime, movies, and even a few yōkai attractions. (*) (*)

• It is not uncommon for a character (even a minor one) in a manga or anime to have been inspired by an older yōkai (e.g.: Drowzee in Pokemon from yōkai Baku). (*)

• Yōkaigaku (yōkaiiology) exists today as a field of study within the International Japanese Culture Research Center. There is currently a yōkai database that has about 35000 yōkai entries.
Fox wedding festival (Mie)

Mizuki Shigeru’s Yōkai road

Baku (the dream eater)

Yōkai train
(from Shijo-omiya to Arashiyama)
Findings

• *Yōkai* image:
  – Gradually became less terrifying/scary

• Media changed storytelling:
  – *Yōkai* portrayal: illustrator/author has increasingly more influence on *yōkai*’s portrayal and image instead of the individual.

• Changing definition & categorization:
  – Enabled storyteller (author/illustrator) to create new *yōkai* from a vast range & number that already exists.
Works Cited