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Yōkai and "Old Japan" in Lore, Art, and Film

Studying Japan through Studying Yōkai

by Joyce Mihara Boss

Includes Instructor Resources (Lesson Plans and Discussion Questions) and Screening Guides

Abstract

Yōkai, understood broadly as supernatural beings or forces, are rooted in elements of traditional Japanese beliefs, practices, and lore. In the modern (post-Meiji) era, and especially in recent decades, yōkai often function as nostalgic iconographic callbacks to an "Old Japan," a world which is regarded as already lost or actively fading in a modern world which privileges efficiency, dominance, and a rather humorless rationalism. While stereotypical assumptions and depictions of Old Japan can be problematic, the elements of the traditional Japanese past as represented in yōkai texts, particularly recent films, can serve as useful wayfinders in identifying elements that were, and are, important in various facets of traditional Japan. This article discusses three yōkai-related films in which specific details invoking and portraying Old Japan—in this instance, agrarian landscapes, community rituals, and social relationships—can be identified and analyzed: ***My Neighbor Totoro*** (dir. Miyazaki Hayao, 1988); ***The Great Yōkai War*** (dir. Miike Takashi, 2005); and ***Destiny: The Tale of Kamakura*** (dir. Yamazaki Takashi, 2017). These films serve as examples of the ways in which yōkai—as characters, story elements, and metaphors—can serve as evocative guides within various areas of Japan studies.

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Introduction

In the way of folkloric beings everywhere, yōkai have made themselves comfortably at home in the various nooks and hollows of our transnational media landscape. The term *yōkai* itself is notoriously difficult to define with precision[1] (which seems entirely appropriate), but a working definition for our purpose here might be helpful: **yōkai can be commonly understood as supernatural creatures, beings, or apparitions, or as personified embodiments of natural features or phenomena, all of which congregate and circulate in the shadowy liminal spaces (geographical and psychological) of human perception and experience**. The closest equivalent terms in English might include "monster," "spirit," "shapeshifter," and to some degree "ghost," but with the important distinction that yōkai are not *de facto* understood as evil. They are a well-established presence in Japanese culture, storytelling, and visual art, being represented since the earliest recorded Japanese narratives and later becoming ubiquitous as a stock element in published stories and art during the Edo period (1600–1868)[2]. Yōkai may be unsettling, terrifying, or comical (or all of those); they might be monstrously powerful or childlike; they can sometimes be negotiated with, even as they may not abide by human societal norms; and given their unpredictability and potential volatility, they are best approached with a healthy amount of caution and a good dose of respect. Some yōkai may observe spatial, temporal, or relational boundaries appropriate to their status as spirit entities, but as narrative characters and metaphors, they have effectively slipped their original cultural-geographical bonds and now roam the world.

In 2023, Yamazaki Takashi's film *Godzilla Minus One*[3] enjoyed widespread international success (to the surprise of some who assumed the Godzilla movie franchise had run its course), capped by its winning an Academy Award—the first for any Godzilla film—for Best Visual Effects.[4] In the United States during September 2025, building on the worldwide popularity of the *Demon Slayer* (*Kimetsu no yaiba*) media mix comprising the manga, the multiseason anime series, a previous film, and the typical smorgasbord array of merchandise, the film *Demon Slayer: Infinity Castle* became the first anime release in the U.S. to top the box office two weekends in a row.[5] And in Japan, the literal homeland of yōkai, the popular 2025–26 morning serial drama (commonly called *asadora*) on NHK/national television (the Japan Broadcasting Corporation), titled *Bakebake* (literally and playfully "ghost ghost," but officially rendered into English by NHK as "The Ghost Writer's Wife"), tells the fictionalized story of the writer Lafcadio Hearn and Koizumi Setsu, his Japanese wife.

Hearn, an American of Irish and Greek descent who arrived in Japan during the Meiji era, is in fact a pivotal figure in the spread of yōkai lore beyond their original borders. Hearn famously became so enamored of traditional Japanese culture that he took a Japanese name (Koizumi Yakumo, the family name being his wife's) as well as Japanese citizenship, and during his years in Japan (where he died in 1904), he wrote and published numerous books for the world's English-reading audience, with titles such as *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* (1894), *Kokoro: Hints and Echoes of Japanese Inner Life* (1896), and—often with his wife's assistance as informant, translator, and collaborative partner[6]—several volumes of his re/telling of supernatural accounts, among them *Japanese Fairy Tales* (1898, plus sequels), *In Ghostly Japan* (1899), and perhaps most famously, *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things* (1904). These latter works have been widely read and have long served as foundational material for yōkai accounts in English. But placing them in context with Hearn's earlier writings about Japan—or more specifically, the Japan of his experience—points to the extent to which yōkai are associated, both within and outside Japan, with the nostalgic conceptual category invoked as "Old Japan."

Beongcheon Yu, a scholar, literary critic, and translator of twentieth-century Japanese literature, asserted in his study of Hearn: "If Hearn's position as interpreter of Japan has been unique, it is because he was able to explore and appreciate the soul of Old Japan, the unchanging part of Japan."[7] Yu's reference to "the unchanging part of Japan" can and should be unpacked and challenged, as this concept can come dangerously close to an idealized exoticism. However, it can also be true that the association between yōkai and this image of Old Japan was not simply a literary device that Hearn projected onto the Meiji-era

Japanese zeitgeist; it was deeply felt in Japan during this time and, it can be argued, it has endured to the present day in the wake of rapid massive societal changes over the past century and a half.[8]

This is evident in many recent films featuring yōkai in which they function, whatever their form or comportment, as iconographic callbacks to an Old Japan, a vanished or vanishing Japan, in a way that is not simply nostalgic but is also still recalled in living memory, with one of its most important characteristics being the primacy of reciprocal relationships – between individuals as well as between human communities and the natural world. As such, the aspects of Old Japan evoked in such yōkai films can serve as a gateway by which we can explore and better understand actual elements of Japanese history, geography, religion/philosophy, and culture. The three films approached here through this lens are *My Neighbor Totoro* (dir. Miyazaki Hayao, 1988); *The Great Yōkai War* (dir. Miike Takashi, 2005); and *Destiny: The Tale of Kamakura* (dir. Yamazaki Takashi, 2017). These discussions are not exhaustive but are intended to suggest some ways in which we might study Japan through studying yōkai.

Note to Teachers: see the General Introduction in the accompanying Instructor Resources for discussion prompts to begin exploring the topic of yōkai in class. Students can be prompted during the lecture to do quick on-the-spot research to provide some answers or names that can be shared with the class.

My Neighbor Totoro: Nature and People in the Rural Landscape

My Neighbor Totoro ("Tonari no Totoro"), released in Japan in 1988 and in the United States in 1993 (Streamline Pictures) and 2003 (Walt Disney Pictures), introduced the work of Miyazaki to the world. The story features two young sisters, Satsuki (age 10) and Mei (age 4), who move to a countryside village with their father, Tatsuo Kusakabe, a university professor. It is eventually revealed that the girls' mother is suffering from an unnamed illness and resides away from the family at a nearby sanatorium.[9] As the sisters navigate their place in their new rural community and their emotions regarding their mother's situation, they encounter various creatures that can be classified as yōkai, some initially alarming but all ultimately benevolent, that adults cannot see. Chief among them are several *totoro* (furry spirits of various sizes), including the largest and most powerful, O-Totoro ("great Totoro," simply referred to as Totoro), as well as

Figure 1: The satoyama landscape in *My Neighbor Totoro* (*Tonari no Totoro*). © 1988 Hayao Miyazaki/Studio Ghibli.

Figure 2: Rice fields (human activity), forest (nature), and torii gate (spirituality). *My Neighbor Totoro* (*Tonari no Totoro*), © 1988 Hayao Miyazaki/Studio Ghibli.

the memorable multilegged Catbus, who is able to traverse fields, forests, streams, and power lines without hindrance. Totoro and Catbus assist the girls in their greatest moment of crisis, and the story concludes with the girls being reassured of their mother's health, after which there is a credit-sequence montage featuring additional comforting images of the sisters with their parents and friends (both human and supernatural) from the subsequent autumn and winter seasons.

The straightforward simplicity of *My Neighbor Totoro* is enhanced by its setting in a traditional agrarian community, a corner of Old Japan characterized by wooden thatched-roof houses, rice paddies, protective Jizō statues (Japanese Buddhist figures), and tucked-away hillside Shintō shrines. This nostalgia is foundational to the film's intended themes. As Helen McCarthy states, "[Miyazaki] decided to return to the pastoral innocence of a country childhood before the advent of television and before the expansion of Tokyo had consumed so much of the rural landscape, sometime around the end of the 1950s."[10]

More specifically, a significant element of the Old Japan evoked in this film is the traditional historical *satoyama* landscape layout, in which cultivated or arable flat land is adjacent to, or ringed by, forested mountain slopes, with a border area that can include grasslands, irrigation canals, ponds, and other mixed-use features. Communities situated in satoyama areas would also have a village with shops and schools, scattered home compounds, local shrines and temples, cemeteries, and other such features connected by a network of pathways and roads.[11] This satoyama setting is instrumental in the film's depiction and celebration of a not-so-long-ago past in which neighbors (human and supernatural) coexisted harmoniously providing mutual aid and support, with humans, nature, and the supernatural all in harmonious balance—a past and a world that is now invisible, as Totoro and Catbus in the film are to adults who have grown out of their child's sense of wonder, and which can now be glimpsed only through the medium of films like this one.

Note to Teachers: see section 2 (Film: *My Neighbor Totoro*) in the Instructor Resources for a list of learning objectives that can be shared with students prior to screening the film along with a screening guide that students can use for notetaking during the film and for discussion reference afterward. The Instructor Resources also includes discussion points on the film's narrative and visual techniques in its representation of nature and the importance of relationships for the film's characters. As well as discussion and analysis points on the traditional *satoyama* landscape of the film's setting.

The Great Yōkai War: Family, Matsuri, and the Power of the Collective

The Great Yōkai War ("Yōkai Daisenso"), directed by Miike Takashi and released in 2005, is a yōkai-themed action adventure movie that shares a title with, and repurposes some elements from, the 1968 film of the same title (rendered in English as "Yokai Monsters: Spook Warfare"), produced and distributed by Daiei Film. At its core, the Miike film is a coming-of-age story for the protagonist, the young boy Tadashi, who has moved with his mother to a small rural town to live with his maternal grandfather following his parents' divorce. He is alienated from his father and speaks only occasionally and secretly on the phone with his sister and is bullied as an outsider by classmates. Tadashi's journey begins when, at a local *matsuri* (traditional community festival), he is selected as that year's Kirin Rider (a legendary protector figure), winning a gift box of adzuki beans and rice and a white tenugui (scarflike piece of cloth) printed with an image of the mythical *kirin* creature. Tadashi is subsequently pressed into service by a group of local yōkai who wish to protect themselves and the human community from the villainous spirit Yasunori Katō, who is fusing yōkai with discarded machinery to create *kikai*, violence-driven hybrid machines that exist only to maim and kill. Eventually Tadashi and the yōkai are successful in their battle against Katō, but the closing scene and images suggest that Katō survives in his own hybrid spirit form.

The film's story and visuals exuberantly draw on a broad array of Old Japan lore and associations: the yōkai collectively are portrayed as ragtag, salt-of-the-earth types, rural-shabby in their appearance and in their habitat, both outdoors—in the woods and mountains—and indoors—in the dilapidated traditional farmhouse where they meet. In this film, as Zília Papp observes, "[yōkai] are treated as a fragile and vulnerable endangered species, the symbols of a nostalgic, rural Japanese communal life."[12] These elements of Old Japan are sharply juxtaposed as conflicting (literally battling) with the "new Japan," represented by the skyscraper-dominated cityscape of Tokyo (which ironically becomes the locus of the *matsuri*, or traditional community festival, for which yōkai across Japan come to fight the kikai).

This juxtaposition of the old and the new is also evident in the metallic saw-toothed violence of the hybrid kikai monsters contrasted with the traditional yōkai who are so alive that they bleed, and especially in the pacifist message of the Great Yōkai Elder near the end of the film: "War only makes you hungry."

Figure 3: Yōkai are summoned to the matsuri in Tokyo. © 2005 Yokai Daisenso Film Partners.

Figure 4: Mizuki Shigeru as the Great Yōkai Elder. © 2005 Yokai Daisenso Film Partners.

Figure 5: Tadashi's grandfather and the family's koinobori flagpole, flying the tenugui cloth that Tadashi won in place of the traditional koi carp streamer. © 2005 Yokai Daisenso Film Partners.

Tadashi's crushing alienation from his family is visually assuaged and resolved near the film's end, indicated by the *koinobori* carp-streamer flagpole on which Tadashi's grandfather flies the *kirin*-embellished *tenugui* cloth that Tadashi received as the Kirin Rider.

Koinobori are the carp-shaped streamer flags traditionally flown by families on May 5, Children's Day (*kodomo no hi*), celebrating the pride that families have in their children. The grandfather's action in this scene, then, is an emotionally charged affirmation of his pride and affection for Tadashi.

Structurally, the two *matsuri* (festival) sequences in the film—the first one set at Tadashi's small community's shrine and second in the midst of a post-apocalyptic Tokyo—provide an intriguing throughline by which the power of Old Japan—as embodied in the matsuri tradition—is shown to be enduring and resilient, capable of maintaining its core function of pulling the community together regardless of the larger changes taking place in the cultural setting. As Michael Ashkenazi observes in his study of matsuri, "they take place in a modern society that has undergone and is still undergoing radical change."[13] Whether in a sleepy rural village celebrating an annual ritual or a massive urban center in the aftermath of a monster-rampage apocalypse, the Kirin Ride appears and the *matsuri* abides.

At the conclusion of the film, the spiritual zeitgeist of Old Japan has succeeded in keeping the inhumanity of the new spiritual forces at bay, but the final shot – of a Katō who has clearly survived – suggests that the struggle between the two is ongoing and perhaps a perpetual cycle.

Note to Teachers: see section 3 (Film: *The Great Yōkai War*) in the Instructor Resources for a list of learning objectives that can be shared with students prior to screening the film along with a screening guide that students can use for notetaking during the film and for discussion reference afterward. The Instructor Resources also include background information on Mizuki Shigeru and the historical and thematic implications of his appearance as a respected voice of yōkai wisdom, what is suggested by the film's narrative and visual techniques in the sequence of shots showing the Kirin tenugui on the koinobori flagpole, and the cultural contexts and thematic implications of matsuri sequences in the film.

Destiny—The Tale of Kamakura: Cultural Geographies and Ancestral Ties

Destiny: The Tale of Kamakura ("Destiny Kamakura Monogatari") released in 2017, might best be described as a "yōkai cozy." Notably, it was directed and co-written by Yamazaki Takashi (*Godzilla Minus One*), and while both films share monsters as a common element (yōkai in one, *kaiju* in the other), *Destiny* tells a tale—the *monogatari* of its Japanese title—that weaves together the spookiness of yōkai, a series of related mysteries, a fated, time-transcending romance, and the nostalgic appeal of Old Japan embodied in the Kamakura of its setting. At the same time, however, the temporal setting remains vaguely indeterminate, as it does in *My Neighbor Totoro*. In his film review, Matthew David Surridge observes that "the look and feel of this Kamakura is timeless, an old-fashioned but not primitive place."[14] This simultaneous specificity of place and vagueness of time in the film's setting allows *Destiny* to interweave elements of past and present, real and fantastical, in its representation of Kamakura—in the words of its main characters—as a "magical place."

The film's evocation of Old Japan can be explored along two facets. First, its emphasis on Kamakura as location focuses attention on the real-life Kamakura, which may or may not be "magical" but is exceptionally important in its history as well as its iconic religious sites. And secondly, the poignant storylines of two of the characters demonstrates a traditional understanding of the enduring relationships—and obligations—between family members that extend even beyond death.

The significance of Kamakura in Japanese history would be difficult to overstate, especially the aftermath of the Genpei War (1180–1185) between the Taira and Minamoto clans which concluded with the establishment of the Kamakura shogunate.[15] This era marked the beginning of nearly 700 years in which political and military power was held by successive *shōgun* (the supreme clan warlord) until the Meiji restoration in 1868, when power was restored to the emperor, marking the beginning of modern Japanese history.

The most important of Kamakura's religious sites are iconic such that they are instantly recognizable to many. In the film's opening sequence, Masakazu Isshiki (the main protagonist) is driving his new bride, Akiko, to his family home to begin their life together after their honeymoon. During this drive, we glimpse

Figure 6: The Daibutsu (Great Buddha) at Kōtoku-in temple in Kamakura.
©2017 "DESTINY: The Tale of Kamakura" Film Partners.

both Kamakura's Daibutsu (Great Buddha statue) at Kōtoku-in temple, and the entrance to Jochi-ji temple (specifically the hillside main gate, on which roughly translates as "the treasure you seek is already with you").

An additional Old Japan element of this story—and perhaps the most important—lies in the film's portrayal of *giri,* a term which refers to duties and obligations especially toward family members that can extend into ancestral relationships. The principle of *giri*, in fact, is crucial for understanding the major story arcs of two characters whose spirits remain on the earthly plane in order to care for (and, for one, to await the passing of) beloved family members. One of these characters is Yuko Seto, whom Isshiki introduces to Akiko in the scene at the Night Bazaar. Yuko had actually died the previous year but, as Yuko explains to Akiko, she petitioned the Death God (*Shinigami*) and was granted extended living time in her corporeal body to care for her bedridden husband, whom she did not wish to leave.

Figure 7: Yuko Seto's spirit escorts her recently deceased husband as they leave their home.
©2017 "DESTINY: The Tale of Kamakura" Film Partners.

Later, Isshiki and Akiko watch from a distance as Yuko and her newly deceased husband, along with others who have died that day, depart for the afterlife (where, as it turns out, they will be warmly welcomed by loved ones who preceded them in death) on the phantom Enoden train car that departs once per night.

Figure 8: The nightly Enoden train ferries the spirits of the dead to the afterlife.
©2017 "DESTINY: The Tale of Kamakura" Film Partners.

The other character who remains bound to the earthly realm due to *giri* is Honda, Isshiki's editor, who wishes after death to remain in the vicinity in order to care for his wife Satoko and young daughter HIroko. Despite being denied his human form and being reincarnated instead as a giant anthropomorphic frog, Honda does what he can to provide for his widow and daughter, eventually coming to terms after an anguished emotional struggle with the prospect of Satoko marrying her coworker, a man who will care for her and Hiroko.

The Old Japan evoked by *Destiny: The Tale of Kamakura* is, then, comprehensive and multifaceted; it comprises history and religion as well as relational obligations and includes physical locations as well as metaphysical bonds.

Note to Teachers: see section 4 (Film: *Destiny—The Tale of Kamakura*) in the Instructor Resources for a list of learning objectives that can be shared with students prior to screening the film along with a screening guide that students can use for notetaking during the film and for discussion reference afterward. The Instructor Resources also includes additional information on Kamakura's historical importance, examples and information regarding some of Kamakura's best-known religious sites, and information about cultural patterns that help illuminate the film's depiction of various familial obligations and ancestral relationships.

Conclusion

Satoyama (rural landscape); ***matsuri*** (festival); and ***giri*** (sense of duty and social responsibility). Taken at face value, these are simply examples of longstanding elements of quotidian life in a Japanese context. Yet place them in a yōkai story, and the lighting seems to shift toward a slightly sepia-toned haziness; shadows intensify; we may find ourselves drawn into a spiritually charged dimension of strange creatures and unexplained phenomena—a dimension conceptualized as Old Japan.

This strong association between yōkai and Old Japan in lore, narrative, art, and film make these films useful tools for exploring and researching—and unpacking—what Old Japan might be metaphorically (or may have been historically) across various contexts. And while the society in which these stories are rooted has undergone tremendous change over a relatively short period of time, Old Japan, as well as the yōkai in the stories staged therein, are still very much with us in the stories we continue to tell and enjoy across an ever-broadening cultural imaginary.

Note to Teachers: see section 5 (Conclusion and Activities) in the Instructor Resources for summative activities that underscore the learning objectives that students have accomplished and for creative activities by which engagement can be encouraged in additional ways.)

Notes

[1] In his book *An Introduction to Yōkai Culture: Monsters, Ghosts, and Outsiders in Japanese History* (tr. Hiroko Yoda and Matt Alt), Komatsu Kazuhiko offers this observation: "*Yōkai* is a tricky word, complicated by multiple definitions…. Rather than agonizing over the details, the easier route is to take *yōkai* at its literal meaning of strange or mysterious things" (pp 64-65).

[2] For an accessible and detailed history and introduction to yōkai, see Michael Dylan Foster, *The Book of Yōkai, Expanded Second Edition: Mysterious Creatures of Japanese Folklore* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2024).

[3] While there is ongoing debate regarding whether Godzilla and other giant monsters of Japanese cinema, called *kaiju* or *daikaiju*, can be considered yōkai, the *kai* in both yōkai (妖怪) and kaiju (怪獣) are the same kanji, meaning "mysterious" or "strange." Given this overlap, Godzilla can be included generally as a yōkai for the purpose of this discussion.

[4] Mark Schilling, "'Godzilla Minus One' fought the odds and won big at the Oscars," *The Japan Times*, March 14 2024, https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2024/03/14/film/godzilla-minus-one-oscars-significance/.

[5] Auzinea Bacon, "'Demon Slayer: Infinity Castle' breaks another record, tops box office for second weekend," CNN, September 21, 2025, https://www.cnn.com/2025/09/21/business/demon-slayer-infinity-castle-anime-box-office.

[6] Minari Sayaka, "Koizumi Setsu: Lafcadio Hearn's Wife and Creative Partner," Nippon.com, September 26, 2025, https://www.nippon.com/en/japan-topics/g02545/.

[7] Beongcheon Yu, *An Ape of the Gods: The Art and Thought of Lafcadio Hearn* (Wayne State University Press, 1964, p 184). Quoted in Burnett, Katharine A. "Lafcadio Hearn's Traveling Regionalism." *The Global South* 3, no. 2 (2009): 64–82. https://doi.org/10.2979/gso.2009.3.2.64. Importantly (but beyond the scope of this article), Yu continues: "For this reason, however, many have questioned whether he really saw Japan in her entirety. Even well-meaning admirers have somewhat apologetically conceded that as a romantic wanderer Hearn failed to do justice to New Japan."

[8] For an analysis of the ways in which beliefs regarding the supernatural were repressed, manipulated, and channeled into state-directed modernization efforts during the Meiji period, see Gerald Figal, *Civilization and Monsters: Spirits of Modernity in Meiji Japan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

[9] The film does not specify the mother's illness, but Miyazaki's mother "was hospitalized or bedridden with spinal tuberculosis for most of his childhood," and the novelization of the film by Tsugiko Kubo identifies the illness as tuberculosis. (McCarthy 120)

[10] McCarthy 120.

[11] For a detailed description of *satoyama*, see Hiromi Kobori and Richard B. Primack, "Participatory Conservation Approaches for Satoyama, the Traditional Forest and Agricultural Landscape of Japan" (AMBIO: A Journal of the Human Environment, 32(4) June 2003: 307–311. Interestingly, the authors describe an initiative called the Totoro Project which aims to revive this traditional approach to rural land use.

[12] Zília Papp, "Monsters at War: The Great Yōkai Wars, 1968-2005," *Mechademia* 4 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 234.

[13] Michael Ashkenazi, *Matsuri: Festivals of a Japanese Town* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), 7.

[14] Matthew David Surridge, "Fantasia 2018, Day 4, Part 1: *Destiny: The Tale of Kamakura* and *Aragne: Sign of Vermillion*," Black Gate: Adventures in Fantasy Literature (August 5, 2018), https://www.blackgate.com/2018/08/05/fantasia-2018-day-4-part-1-destiny-the-tale-of-kamakura-and-aragne-sign-of-vermillion/.

[15] The Battle of Dan-no-Ura in 1185, in which the Taira/Heike clan was decisively defeated, provides crucial context for the famous story of Hōichi the Earless ("Mimi-nashi Hōichi"), first popularized in English by Lafcadio Hearn and later included as one of the stories in Kobayashi Masaki's 1964 film *Kwaidan*.

Instructor Resources and Screening Guides

The instructor resources below are to accompany the *Education About Asia* feature article "**Yōkai and 'Old Japan' in Lore, Art, and Film: Studying Japan through Studying Yōkai"** by Joyce Mihara Boss.

Films Discussed in the Article

- ***My Neighbor Totoro***, directed by Miyazaki Hayao (Tōhō, 1988; USA: Disney, 2006).
- ***The Great Yōkai War***, directed by Miike Takashi (Shōchiku, 2005; USA: Tokyo Shock, 2006).
- ***Destiny: The Tale of Kamakura***, directed by Yamazaki Takashi (NTV International Sales, 2017; USA: streaming on multiple providers at the time of this writing; English-dubbed Region 3 DVD available from international media merchants).

General Suggestions

Screening in Class

This article discusses three films, which for teaching purposes would be best screened in class (as policy permits). Please see the attached Screening Guide for this and the other films discussed in my article.

Lesson Plans

Model lesson plans are provided below: (a) for a general introduction to the unit; (b) for each film; and (c) for concluding activities.

Screening Guides for Students

For each film, I suggest having a brief pre-screening introduction and providing students with a screening guide (print or digital) which lists the film's title, director's name, release year, names of major characters, and screening questions (e.g., what happens at major points in the story). Such guides can afford students valuable support in discussing the film afterward, especially for those who watching the film for the first time. (Sample screening guides are attached.)

Lesson Plans

1. General Introduction

Discussion: Knowledge/Preconception Check

Activity: Small group discussion followed by reporting out of the following questions:

- What comes to mind when you hear "traditional Japan," which is often called "Old Japan"? Examples?
- What comes to mind when you hear "modern Japan"? Examples?

- Do you know of any monsters or supernatural beings in Japanese culture?
- [Students will likely draw on their knowledge of popular anime films/series or video games from Japan, e.g., Pokémon, Godzilla, Studio Ghibli films, *Demon Slayer*, etc.]
- What do you know about the history of monsters or supernatural beings in Japan? Do you associate Japanese monsters with "traditional" Japan or "modern Japan"? Why? Examples?

Lecture: "Old Japan and Yōkai"

Activity: Lecture on the following points, possibly augmented with on-the-spot student research for the yōkai examples included:

- Yōkai legends and stories go back at least 1,000 years in Japan.
- Yōkai can be dangerous, but also just playful or even helpful.
    - Dangerous: ex. Kappa (water imp) drowning children in rivers
    - Mischievous: ex. Tanuki (raccoon dog) playing tricks or shapeshifting
    - Helpful: ex. Zashiki warashi (house spirits) bringing good fortune
- Yōkai are sometimes associated with forces in nature (earthquakes, wind, etc.)
- Yōkai are seen as powerful and sometimes dangerous, but not necessarily evil.
    - [Difference between Western and Japanese spiritual worldviews]
- Historically, Japan began modernizing (or Westernizing) in the Meiji era (mid-late 1800s), with a national drive to catch up with the technological advancements of Western societies. This meant that yōkai stories came to be regarded by Japan's educated and aspirational class as outdated and even embarrassing "backward" superstitions.
- However, the yōkai legends never disappeared; they persisted in local legends (especially in rural areas) and in popular media (books, art, manga, animation, etc.)
- These factors help us to understand the context in which yōkai are depicted today:
    - Today, yōkai are present everywhere in Japanese popular media;
    - They are still depicted as supernatural and may be cute, violent, frightening, silly, or nature-related, but always powerful;
    - And because of post-Meiji historical developments, they are often associated with the image or idea of "Old Japan."
- So, with this background knowledge, we are ready not just to enjoy Japanese media texts (films, series, manga, etc.) that feature yōkai, but we are also prepared to learn quite a bit about Japan from these texts—especially images, ideas, and practices associated with "Old Japan."
- As you watch, and as we discuss afterwards, look for the points we just covered and use the screening guide to keep track of additional details that can help us better understand some of the deeper meanings of each film.
- Finally, we will explore larger questions about what audiences see or feel in depictions "Old Japan":
    - What might be the reasons for the persistent nostalgia for "Old Japan" in modern cultural production?
    - What might be the appeal of "Old Japan" for non-Japanese audiences?

2. Film: *My Neighbor Totoro*

Please also see the Screening Guide for this and the other films discussed in my article.

Activities:

- Screening of the film in class, with students using the screening guide
- Instructor- or student-led discussion on the points below
- Small group in-class flash research, with on-the-spot reporting out via Google slides (or another shared-work platform for both text and images), on the topics below or elements seen in the film (e.g., what a *torii* is, what *Jizō* statues represent, why rice paddies are flooded, etc.)
- Summative activity for this film text: Small group presentations on the topics/themes below

Learning Objectives for *My Neighbor Totoro*:

1. Worldview: Representation of the natural world
2. Society: Importance of relationships
3. Geography: The traditional *satoyama* landscape

1. The Representation of Nature in *My Neighbor Totoro*

Elements for students to note and to explore in discussion:

- Specific shots and scenes in which the animation renders nature in great detail: the opening sequence in which we see the Kusakabe family's small van-type vehicle driving in a setting in which fields, forest, and sky are all visible; the numerous scenes in which moving water is seen; the sequence in which the girls are caught in a rainstorm; and depictions of living creatures such as snails and frogs.
- The power of the natural water, visually rendered in the depictions of moving water, rain, wind, and forest (particularly Totoro's massive camphor tree), and as personified by Totoro and Catbus, as well as Susuwatari ("soot sprites").
- The theme/s suggested by the attention to detail in these shots and scenes.

2. The Importance of Relationships for the Film's Characters

Possible topics for student reflection and analysis:

- The relationships between the human characters, both within and between families in the community (e.g., the search for Mei at the pond).
- The nature of the relationship between the human characters and the supernatural ones, especially as determined by character's ages.

3. The Traditional *Satoyama* Landscape as the Film's Setting

Environmental writers Hiromi Kobori and Richard B. Primack describe *satoyama* as "consist[ing] of a mixture of forests, wet rice paddy fields, grasslands, and villages…. [and] support[ing] a great diversity of plant and animal species, many of which are significant to the Japanese culture."[1] Possible topics for student observation and reflection:

- The symbiotic (and overlapping) coexistence in the film between elements of the natural world and the human presence in the landscape.
- The agricultural practice of wet rice cultivation, of crucial importance in Japan's history, economy, and land use, as depicted in the film.

3. Film: *The Great Yōkai War*

Please also see the Screening Guide for this and the other films discussed in my article.

Activities:

- Screening of the film in class, with students using the screening guide
- Instructor- or student-led discussion on the points below
- Small group in-class flash research, with on-the-spot reporting out via Google slides (or another shared-work platform for both text and images), on the topics below or elements seen in the film (e.g., what a *koinobori* is, what *matsuri* means, what a *butsudan* is, etc.)
- Summative activity for this film text: Small group presentations on the topics/themes below

Learning Objectives for *The Great Yōkai War*:

1. Family structure: the Kirin tenugui on the traditional koinobori flagpole
2. Tradition: the *matsuri* (community festival) sequence
3. Legacy: Mizuki Shigeru as the (pacifist) Great Yōkai Elder

1. The Kirin Tenugui on the Koinobori Flagpole

Toward the conclusion of the film, we see Tadashi's grandfather at a flagpole in front of the family home as the tenugui that Tadashi won—an emblem of his identity as the community's protector—flutters in the wind. The ornamental pinwheel yaguruma seen spinning at the top of the flagpole indicate that the pole is meant to display koinobori (carp flags), by which families have traditionally celebrated their members, especially the children. This cuts to a shot of the tenugui, now yellowed, faded, and frayed, bringing the story some years into the future; a portrait of grandfather has now joined those of the previously deceased family members above the butsudan, and we see Tadashi, now an adult, placing offerings. Possible topics for research and reflection:

- **Cultural contexts:** the traditions and symbolism of *koinobori*, including the variations and changes that have occurred in the practice; what is indicated or suggested by *koinobori* regarding family relationships and dynamics (perhaps idealized); the current status of the tradition.
- **Film themes:** Instead of a typical *koinobori* carp-shaped streamer, the grandfather flies Tadashi's white tenugui, which remains on the pole—yellowed and tattered, but still flying in the wind—for the film's final scene. Discussion might include the possible significance of this substitution, as well as what these elements of the film's ending might indicate about changes that have occurred at the societal level in family structure.

2. The Matsuri Sequence

As Tadashi prepares to become the Kirin Rider and fight Katō and his minions, yōkai around Japan (in a montage, sonically punctuated by a taiko drum and centering on an ersatz old-style map with Tokyo Tower at its center) receive the message that a huge and rowdy festival (matsuri) is gearing up in Edo, in response to which thousands converge on Tokyo and become circumstantial allies in the fight agains Katō's violent and untethered kikai creatures.

- **Cultural contexts**: Topics for student research and exploration might include specific definitions, characteristics, and examples of matsuri; their purpose and role in reinforcing community ties; and specific matsuri that are still held around Japan.

- **Film themes**: According to Michael Ashkenazi, in his analysis of a specific festival in northern Japan, "festivity involves a mass of people," and festival participants "do not constitute a single group, caste, or other social category."[2] This inclusiveness is represented in the broad array of yōkai in the film who arrive in Tokyo in common cause. Topics for exploration and discussion might include the types and characteristics of the yōkai portrayed in this sequence; the meaning of the taiko drum in a matsuri setting; and the necessity of community in achieving a collective goal.

C. Mizuki Shigeru as the Great Yōkai Elder

Mizuki Shigeru, a towering figure in yōkai media, appears at the film's end in a cameo role as the Great Yōkai Elder. Mizuki is best known for *Gegege no Kitaro* (often translated at "Spooky Kitaro"), a manga series that became a television anime program and then a series of films, which focus on a yōkai boy named Kitaro, his eyeball father Medama-Oyaji, and a cast of recurring yōkai characters.[3]

- **Historical contexts**: Students will easily be able to research Mizuki as well as the callbacks in this film to *Gegege no Kitaro*. Given the Great Yōkai Elder's lines, an especially important point would be the Mizuki's near-fatal experience as a soldier during World War II, particularly how Mizuki spoke of its impact over the course of his life and career.
- **Film themes**: These insights about Mizuki's life and philosophy provide a useful frame with which to approach what the Great Yōkai Elder, the character played by Mizuki in a cameo appearance, says about war near the end of the film.

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4. Film: *Destiny: The Tale of Kamakura*

Please also see the Screening Guide for this and the other films discussed in my article.

Activities:

- Screening of the film in class, with students using the screening guide
- Instructor- or student-led discussion on the points below
- Small group in-class flash research, with on-the-spot reporting out via Google slides (or another shared-work platform for both text and images), on topics below (e.g., the Enoden line, what a *butsudan* is, the concept of filial piety, etc.)
- Summative activity for this film text: Small group presentations on the topics/themes below

Learning Objectives for *Destiny: The Tale of Kamakura*:

1. History: The Kamakura shogunate
2. Religion: Kamakura as a place of famous spiritual landmarks
3. Society: Familial obligations and ancestral relationships

1. Kamakura in Japanese history

While Kamakura's historical import is not directly evoked in the film, the location setting provides an opportunity for students to explore its role in, and some particulars of, Japan's feudal era.

- The Genpei Wars: their role in the establishment of the Kamakura shogunate
- The attempted Mongol invasions under Kublai Khan, and the effect of these attempts in the history of mainland Asia

- The chronology and legacy of Japan's feudal era (the centuries between the Heian/late classical and Edo/early modern periods)

B. Kamakura's Spiritual Importance and Religious Sites

In the film's opening sequence, several Kamakura-specific visuals, establish the location: the beachside road with Enoshima Island visible offshore, the Enoshima Electric Railway (known colloquially as Enoden) train, Kamakura's Daibutsu (Great Buddha statue), and Jochi-ji temple all appear in a 60-second montage. While all are iconic to Kamakura (especially the Enoden line, which now attracts anime and manga "otaku pilgrim" visitors from around the world), the two Buddhist temples which appear at the film's start provide a way to introduce students to basic tenets of Japanese Buddhism and Shintō, as well as the historical reasons (aligned with the first point above) for Kamakura's large number of important temples and shrines.

- Religious sites referenced in the film via characters' names or visual depictions:
  - Kōtoku-in, the location of the Kamakura Daibutsu statue: what this buddha (Amitabha) represents; other daibutsu statues in Japan and elsewhere; the meanings of offerings presented by worshipers. (One of the characters is named Police Chief Daibutsu.)
  - Jochi-ji, specifically the hillside main gate on which can be read "寶所在近" (roughly, "the treasure you seek is already with you"). (This gate is seen in the opening montage.)
  - References to other religious sites and associations in characters' names:
    - Detective Inari: a reference to the shrines located throughout Japan dedicated to the deity Inari, whose messenger is the fox (the shape into which Det. Inari transforms in the course of investigating Akiko's disappearance)
    - Detective Osoreyama: a reference to Mt. Osorezan, located in the Shimotika peninsula in northern Aomori prefecture; a sacred mountain in a volcanic landscape which has long been associated as an entrance to the afterlife for the dead.
- Kamakura's best-known Shintō shrine (not seen in the film): Tsurugaoka Hachimangū
  - The assassination of Minamoto no Sanetomo on its grounds, and the historical importance of this event in Japanese history

C. Familial Obligations and Ancestral Relationships

In the story, we meet two supporting characters whose spirits remain on the earthly plane to care for (and, for one, to await) beloved family members. In the scene at the Night Bazaar, Isshiki introduces Akiko to Yuko Seto, who had died the previous year but, as Yuko explains, she had petitioned the Death God (*Shinigami*) and was granted extended living time in her corporeal body to care for her bedridden husband, whom she did not wish to leave; later Yuko and her newly deceased husband, along with others who have died that day, depart for the afterlife on the phantom nightly Enoden train car. In addition to Yuko, the second character who wishes to remain after death to care for family members is Isshiki's editor, Honda, who (due to unfortunate bureaucratic reasons), is incarnated as a giant anthropomorphic frog, to look after his widow and young daughter.

The cultural nuances of reciprocal obligations among family members, and between the living and the dead, are more challenging to introduce to students than concrete facts such as historical events and religious locations, but this topic provides culturally relevant insights into characters' motivations, not only in this film but for many other Japanese texts across various media that students may be familiar with.

- **The ethic of filial piety**: its grounding in Confucian philosophy; the ways in which it manifests in (stereotypical) traditional cultural norms and behavioral expectations between marriage partners, parents and children, and generational tiers

- **The embodiment of these reciprocal ties in the Butsudan in traditional (and modern) homes**: its structure and placement; its elements and their symbolism; the ritual of daily offerings as well as during the summer days of *Obon*; the prayers offered and the nature of the relationships that they reiterate. (Note: a *butsudan* does not appear in this film, but the relationships that it represents do; we do see a *butsudan* at the end of *The Great Yōkai War*.)

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5. Conclusion and Activities

Discussion/reflection activity: questions for discussion or written assignments:

- How is the idea of "Old Japan" conveyed in the films?
- How are yōkai characters and stories used to evoke associations with "Old Japan"?
- In these portrayals and associations, how is "Old Japan" different from modern-day Japan? What are some general or specific differences?
- What might be the reasons for the persistent nostalgia for "Old Japan" in modern cultural production?
- What might be the appeal of "Old Japan" for non-Japanese audiences?
- What do you understand better now about Japan as a result of the work that you have accomplished on these films?

Creative activities:

- Create and design a yōkai that reflects a culture/society that you understand from your own experience. Write a legend-type story to explain your yōkai's origins and habitual activities. Create a visual depiction of its appearance. (Must be either G- or PG-rated.) Share these with the class.
- Cosplay a yōkai of your choice, either one from Japanese folklore (can be your own interpretation) or an original creation of your own, for our unit conclusion day. Be imaginative and have fun with it! (Must be either G- or PG-rated.)

Notes

[1] Hiromi Kobori and Richard B. Primack, "Participatory Conservation Approaches for Satoyama, the Traditional Forest and Agricultural Landscape of Japan" (AMBIO: A Journal of the Human Environment, 32(4) June 2003: 307–311. The articles notes, "In one particularly successful program, conservation efforts and fund-raising are linked to 'Totoro', an imaginary forest animal featured in a popular animated film."

[2] Michael Ashkenazi, *Matsuri: Festivals of a Japanese Town* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1993), 9.

[3] Michael Dylan Foster, in the book *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), provides a detailed account (Chapter 5) of Mizuki's life and work as well as their postwar media context.

Screening Guides

These screening guides are to accompany the *Education About Asia* feature article "**Yōkai and 'Old Japan' in Lore, Art, and Film: Studying Japan through Studying Yōkai"** by Joyce Mihara Boss.

My Neighbor Totoro (*Tonari no Totoro*)

1988; Dir. Hayao Miyazaki

Genre: Anime

Setting: Rural Japan, during the 1950s.

Major Characters:

Satsuki Kusakabe (10 years old)
Mei Kusakabe (4 years old)
Tatsuo Kusakabe (father)
Yasuko Kusakabe (mother, not named in film)
Kanta (neighbor boy)
Nanny
Totoro
Catbus

Images to look for:

1. The relationship between humans and the supernatural creatures (Totoro and Catbus):

   Who can see them?

   Who cannot?

   Why this difference? What does it suggest?

2. Images related to Japanese religion:

    Shintō elements: what are their associations/meanings?

        Torii gate

        Shimenawa (rope around the large camphor tree)

        Small fox statues

    Buddhist elements:

        Jizō statue (in small "house")

        Row of Jizō statues

    3. Images depicting nature (landscapes, water, rain, clouds, etc.)

What would you say is the major theme/s in the film? Based on what specific details (visual images, dialogue, characters' actions, etc.)?

The Great Yōkai War (*Yōkai Daisensō*)

2005; Dir. Takashi Miike

Genre: Fantasy

Setting: Present-day Japan

Major Characters (in general order of appearance):

Tadashi Ino	Yōkai: Yomotsumono (flame machine monster)
Tadashi's mother	Sunekosuri
Tadashi's grandfather	Shōjō (red "sea spirit")
Yasunori Katō	Kawahime ("River Princess")
Agi	Kawataro (Kappa)
Sata (reporter)	Daitengu ("Great Goblin")
Tadashi's sister	Ippondatara (blacksmith)
	Azukiarai ("bean washer")

1. At the start of the story, why is Tadashi's life less than ideal?

2. During the village festival, what title is bestowed on Tadashi, and by whom/what?

3. The photos displayed over the *butsudan* (home Buddhist altar) in Tadashi's house indicate that which people in his family have passed away?

4. Why do Tadashi's classmates tell him that he needs to go to "Great Goblin Mountain"?

5. What does Tadashi help the yōkai to do?

6. Why do yōkai from all over Japan converge on Tokyo?

7. Why is the azuki bean important for the resolution of the conflict?

8. After the yōkai "win" the war, what does the Great Yōkai Elder say about war?

9. In the concluding scene, what is Tadashi's situation?

10. This film draws on a number of yōkai elements that we have discussed and seen in the other films. What are some of those common elements that you see in this film?

Destiny: The Tale of Kamakura (*Kamakura Monogatari*)

2017; Japan. Dir. Takashi Yamazaki

Genre: Fantasy

Setting: Kamakura, Japan

Characters:

Akiko Isshiki

Masakazu Isshiki

Honda (Isshiki's longtime editor) / Satoko (his wife) / Hiroko (his daughter)

Kin

Yuko Seto (woman that Akiko meets at the Night Bazaar)

Kamakura police: Inari / Chief Daibutsu / Osoreyama (séance interrogator)

Reiko Kanimitsu (murder victim) / Kazuo Kanemitsu (her estranged husband)

Shinigami (a death god)

Itsushiro Kotaki (writer from the past)

Binbogami (a jinx/bad luck god)

Isshiki's mother and father

Tentoki

Pointers:

- Kamakura is a well-known seaside town outside of Tokyo.
- In the original Japanese dialogue, Akiko addresses her husband as *sensei*, which is his title. This is typical in Japanese tradition. The English subtitles unfortunately translate *sensei* as "mister," which sounds unfortunately strange.
- The word *kami* ("deity") used in names or titles becomes *-gami*, seen in some names.
- The references to "body" in this film refer to the material (as opposed to spiritual) dimension of a human, not to a corpse.

- The green- and yellow-colored trains in the film are the Enoden trains, a famous and beloved local line in Kamakura. The green/yellow colors are iconic for the Enoden line.

As you watch this lighthearted film, take note of the connections you see with our previous materials, films, and discussions about:

- Yōkai and yūrei (ghosts)
- The relationship between the human and spirit realms
- Obligations and relationships
- Ideas and attitudes about death
- Anything else you see

1. What is the first supernatural creature that we glimpse in the film?

2. When Akiko enters the storeroom, she unrolls a scroll painting. (Make a visual note of what it depicts.) What does she say about one of the human figures depicted?

3. What does Akiko learn from Kin about ~

- Isshiki, his father, and his grandfather
- How Isshiki felt about Akiko upon first meeting her

4. What does Isshiki tell Akiko about the small tusk charm?

5. What is the reason that Yuko, even though dead, has been given more time in this world by the local Death god?

6. What is the problem with the mushrooms that Akiko got at the Night Bazaar? And why does Kin tell her to be careful?

7. On his way home, Isshiki meets Yuko with her husband (who has died earlier that day), along with Shinigami (a local Death god). How will Yuko and her husband travel to the afterworld?

8. (Take note of the items in the Bad Luck god's sack.) What trade does Akiko make with the Bad Luck god?

9. At night, what happens to Akiko as she runs to find Isshiki?

10. Honda (in his post-death form) is working at a local amusement park. As he watches his wife and daughter, whom does he glimpse that confuses him?

11. What does the restaurant owner give to Isshiki? Why is this important in the next scene?

12. What does the Death god tell Isshiki about Akiko's lifespan?

13. What does Isshiki discover had happened to Akiko's body?

14. After he arrives in the afterworld, Isshiki learns from the Death god that Tentoki is responsible for Akiko's situation. What is Tentoki made up of?

15. What does Akiko learn from Tentoki about her relationship with Isshiki?

16. What object saves Akiko and Isshiki from Tentoku?

17. This film is clearly a lighthearted take on many of the supernatural elements we have encountered. What connections do you see between this film and the other materials discussed?