

Monster Pedagogy

Sources and Strategies for Unleashing Yōkai in Your Classroom

by Mindy Landeck

Abstract

For some time now, Japanese monsters have been enjoying a moment in the spotlight. Yōkai, the supernatural “monsters” drawn from traditional folklore and given material form by early modern visual artists, dominate much of the public face of Japanese popular culture in recent years. The international Pokémon craze of the early aughts has extended more recently to the popularity of Gotōge Koyoharu’s *Demon Slayer* manga series and the newest iteration of the venerable Godzilla franchise (Takashi Yamazaki’s *Godzilla Minus One*, 2023). A search of the term “yōkai” in one’s Amazon search bar will reveal that Japan’s mythical creatures have never been a more appealing global commodity.

More than simply the denizens of the Japanese collective imagination, yōkai have come to function as recognizable cultural avatars responding to historical moments such as the COVID-19 pandemic or reflecting broad social shifts such as the disintegration of the nuclear family and the looming threats of climate change. This resource article will explore the wealth of pedagogical opportunities that yōkai content offers to educators and offer a compelling rationale for introducing these materials to students at the secondary and undergraduate levels. Suggested models for individual assignments, group projects and immersive classroom activities designed to engage students in gaining a deeper understanding of Japan’s cultural values will be augmented with a resource list of classroom-friendly literature, films, podcasts and other materials.

Mindy Landeck is a cultural historian of early modern Japan and chair of the East Asian Studies department at Austin College, a private liberal arts college in north Texas. At Austin College, she has previously taught three courses focused on yōkai to undergraduate students and has additionally offered public seminars on Japanese monster narratives through the Five College Center for East Asian Studies, at the Kansas City Japan Festival, and through various public libraries.



Introduction

As detailed in the articles—by William M. Tsutsui, Zack Davisson, Michael Dylan Foster, Rachael Hutchinson, Anne Marie Davis, and Joyce Boss—in this special section of *Education about Asia* dedicated to Japanese monsters and yōkai, students are increasingly arriving in our classrooms with heightened levels of awareness for the monsters, both modern and folkloric, that populate multimedia franchises such as Pokémon, Gotōge Koyoharu’s massively successful *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba* and Level 5’s *Yo-Kai Watch*. These series and many others like them share a common feature: the prevalence of *yōkai* characters, which hail from or are inspired by Japan’s long tradition of monster narratives. Not only are our students more likely to be pre-acquainted with representative *yōkai*, but their early exposure through popular culture predisposes them to be receptive to *yōkai* as a topic for academic exploration, opening up a window of particular opportunity for educators.

Classroom Monsters: A Rationale

As a teacher of Japanese language and culture courses at the undergraduate level, this article will detail how I and other educators have “unleashed” *yōkai* within our classrooms as a topical framework within which students may develop useful skill sets: creative writing, literary analysis, historical speculation and cross-cultural comparisons among them. At the close of this teaching resource, readers will find a list of recommended resources and materials for introducing *yōkai* into their own teaching.

Yōkai: Responsive to Current Events

We are living in a moment that seems well-suited to teaching about monsters. My initial course, dedicated entirely to *yōkai*, was designed during the early pandemic, cobbled together quickly in response to a call from my private liberal arts college for online summer courses that would engage incoming freshmen and introduce them to our college community in a season when student retention felt precarious. Optimizing the uncanny and amusing facets of *yōkai* narrative and image to attract students not only quickly filled that first course, but led to a second, in-person offering within six months. Given the tenor of the times, both courses opened with a case study of the *amabie*, a little-known *yōkai* appearing on a single woodblock print dating to 1846, in which a beaked, mermaid-like figure is depicted emerging from the ocean to warn local citizens of an impending epidemic and urging them to create images of itself as talismans to ward off illness (see Figure 1).

Prior to 2020, the *amabie* was a little-known monster from Higa province (modern-day Kumamoto in southwest Japan), known only through that sole surviving woodblock print. But during the initial months



Figure 1. The 1846 woodblock image of the *amabie* found in a Kyoto archive that launched thousands of COVID-19 crafts representing the figure associated with protections from disease epidemics. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

for, and as writer and translator Zack Davisson correctly observes in the opening to his *The Ultimate Guide to Japanese Yokai* (the book that I will assuredly utilize as the primary text for the next yōkai course I offer), “without understanding yōkai, you can never truly know Japan.”³ In contrast to those yōkai which assume national proportions as they reflect Japanese identity and culture, equally worthy of attention are the “hometown yōkai” that Michael Dylan Foster discusses in his article in this issue. Like many facets of Japanese culture tied intimately to the notion of a fixed place, these localized monsters highlight the diversity of imagination and creativity present in specific communities tied to unique ways of life. Coastal villages, for instance, might feature the presence of monsters associated with the sea, whereas high-altitude mountain enclaves may create a very different sort of folklore. Thus, like regional architecture, dress, festivals and cuisines, yōkai provide one more framework for thinking through how geography and location impact the character of the arts, literary narratives and lifestyles.

Tracing the Historical Origins of Yōkai in Word and Image

Although yōkai narratives can be traced back as far as the medieval period, and recently some of these have been made available in English translation (see translated works by Reider, Kimbrough and Shirane included in the resource list below), it was Japan’s early modern era (also known as the Edo period, 1600–1868) in which yōkai culture fully coalesced in Japan, providing a rich legacy of images and narratives from which educators may pull. Of particular value is Toriyama Sekien’s various illustrated texts from the late eighteenth century, particularly the *Illustrated Night Parade of a Hundred Monsters* (*Gazu Hyakki Yagyō, ehon*, published 1776), an excellent resource to help students connect contemporary pop-culture versions of archetypal Japanese yōkai to early depictions and descriptions of the monster realm for the reading Japanese public. In the modern era, the influential work of celebrated manga artist Shigeru Mizuki further popularized and revived interest in yōkai, particularly through his long-running series *GeGeGe no Kitarō*. Studies and translations of Mizuki’s prolific body of work are also becoming accessible in English.⁴ Some readers may also already be aware of the nineteenth-century essay collections by American journalist Lafcadio Hearn which provided the English-reading public with some of the earliest accounts of the Japanese imaginary world in publications such as *In Ghostly Japan* (1899).

Several English translations of early modern kibyōshi stories, from the late 1700s to the early 1800s, are also wonderful to introduce to students. One that I have utilized with success in my East Asian Studies survey courses is an illustrated comic story by Jippensha Ikku (1765–1831) called “The Monster Takes a Bride,” accompanied by its original illustrations dating to 1807. All of the characters in this parody of a human courtship and wedding are yōkai, and the standards of romance applied to the rollicking plot are, fittingly, equally



Figure 3. Toriyama Sekien’s illustration of the *mukumokuren*, a yōkai known for its appearance mimicking a wall or door upon which a number of observing eyes appear, is a nice example of a *tsukumogami*, namely, an inanimate object that has come to life as a yōkai. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

monstrous. This tale is included among those translated in Japanese literature specialist Adam Kabat's *The River Imp and the Stinky Jewel and Other Tales: Monster Comics from Edo Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023), a work that contains several yōkai tales that reveal precisely how well monster lore served as a vehicle for parody and social critique. While the tales are brief, Kabat's thorough exegesis reveals how replete the stories and their accompanying illustrations are with references to the social milieu and values of early modern Japan.

Yokai as Creative Writing Prompts

As some of the literary resources mentioned above suggest, creative writing assignments can take full advantage of the broad range of Japan's imaginary world of yōkai. In his 2024 article on teaching yōkai through creative writing, Matthew Wiegand of Musashino University observed that educators may leverage the "immense and growing interest in yōkai in the international community" to present students with an "enjoyable topic" for creative writing assignments.⁵ I think this is best done after first allowing students to read a range of literature featuring yōkai characters so that they can think through how other authors have approached this task before attempting their own compositions. Fortunately, there are a number of authors producing short stories and other classroom-friendly materials that fit this description. Educators serving secondary students may wish to consider Charles Kowalski's young adult series of novels featuring protagonist Simon Grey, while older readers such as college students might enjoy the short stories of Thersa Matsuura, Aoko Masuda and Sequoia Nagamatsu, all readily available in English. In collaboration with illustrator Eleonora D'Onofrio, Zack Davisson has reworked sixteen traditional yōkai tales into English versions that even middle-school readers can access in *Yokai Stories* (details for all of these titles are available in the list of suggested resources below).

As a focus of academic study, yōkai offer educators a variety of fruitful avenues for scholarly investigation, which can leverage the baseline familiarity many students already possess through the media of video games and other popular culture formats. The facility with which yōkai adapt to cultural comparison pairs with their innate appeal as supernatural oddities. Immersed as they are in Japanese culture and history, yōkai proffer a playful malleability that can be adapted to any number of learning objectives.

Notes

¹ David D. Gilmore. *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

² Gilmore, 1.

³ Zack Davisson. *The Ultimate Guide to Japanese Yōkai: Ghosts, Demons, Monsters and Other Mythical Creatures from Japan*. Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 2024. 9.

⁴ Two such examples by Shigeru Mizuki are *Yokai: The Art of Shigeru Mizuki*. Drawn and Quarterly, 2024, and the *The Definitive Yokai Field Guide*, trans. Zack Davisson, forthcoming from Drawn and Quarterly in April 2026.

⁵ Matthew Wiegand, "Inventing Yōkai Stories," *ART Gallery: The Journal of Art, Research and Teaching*, Vol. 1 Issue 1 (January 2024): 4.

Suggested Yōkai Activities/Assignments

Yōkai Case Study

Individually or in groups, have students develop a case study on one particular yōkai that they must then present to the class. Define the required components of each case study and determine the presentation format (short video, written profile utilizing a template provided by instructor, visual infographic, narrated slideshow, etc.). Group all student products into a centralized, accessible location so that all students can review the work of their peers and provide feedback. Consider assigning a follow-up journal post or class discussion identifying connections between yōkai that belong to similar groups or types.

Cross-Cultural Comparisons

Individually or in groups, students compare and contrast a specific yōkai with a monster from another world culture distinct from Japan, identifying and analyzing both points of resonance and difference. Student work should think through the specific cultural values, worldviews or experiences that inform each monster and the way in which its lore has taken shape.

Thinking through Classification Systems

Scholars have adopted different systems by which they classify and categorize monster “types.” Working outside of the context of Japan, David Gilmore applies a set of types intended to supersede cultural differences, but my students correctly observed that most of Gilmore’s universal “types” do not map neatly on to Japanese yōkai. Even those working within the confines of yōkai studies (Japanese, *yōkaigaku*) are not agreed on a unified model: thus, Michael Dylan Foster’s categories and those of Kazuhiko Komatsu likewise do not entirely dovetail. In this exercise, students comparatively evaluate and test applications of various systems of classification. In my classroom, students picked a system and then identified monsters from various cultural contexts that fit into given categories, effectively undertaking the construction of a cross-cultural monster taxonomy.

Yōkai Gazette

Adopting a journalistic style, students draft short articles chronicling “monster sightings” situated in historical or modern Japan, situating a particular yōkai in an environment either in alignment with its typical habitus (e.g., a *kappa* in the river) or, alternately, in an unexpected location (e.g. a *kappa* in a Ginza department store, for instance). As an extension assignment, have students create “photographic” images and captions of the sighting to accompany the article. Compile student submissions into a mock publication called something like the *Yōkai Gazette*.

Yōkai Picture Scroll

Have students work in groups to create an illustrated handscroll (*emaki*) of yōkai utilizing extant models which could include those translated in Keller Kimbrough and Haruo Shirane’s *Monsters, Animals and Other Worlds* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018). Students may adapt a translated tale or invent one of their own, but all handscrolls must include their own calligraphy for the tale and original illustrations, inspired by traditional techniques. The class could then arrange for a “gallery showing” of all of the *emaki* produced by students, or consider disseminating them digitally within a learning community.

Monster Lab

Individually or in groups, students design an entirely new kind of monster based upon a specific social problem or modern challenge. Use a portfolio format to create a cluster of related assignments and have students imagine and describe the monster’s habitus, origin story, folklore, behavior and physical appearance. Some portion of the portfolio should undertake a comparison between the newly invented creature and specific Japanese yōkai that may have inspired facets of the new monster. Portfolio components could include creative writing components such as a folktale connected to the newly invented monster.

Recommended Resources

General Resource Texts/Possible Course Texts

Recommended for Students at All Levels

- Davisson, Zack. *Kaibyō: The Supernatural Cats of Japan*. Portland: Mercuria Press, 2021.
- . *The Ultimate Guide to Japanese Yōkai: Ghosts, Demons, Monsters and Other Mythical Creatures from Japan*. Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 2024.
- . *Yōkai Stories*. Illustrated by Eleonora D’Onofrio. Seattle: Chin Music Press, 2018.
- . *Yūrei: The Japanese Ghost*. Seattle: Chin Music Press, 2015.
- Matsuura, Thersa. *The Book of Japanese Folklore: An Encyclopedia of the Spirits, Monsters, and Yokai of Japanese Myth: The Stories of the Mischievous Kappa, Trickster Kitsune, Horrendous Oni, and More*. Boston: Adams Media, 2024.
- Yodo, Hiroko, and Alt, Matt. *Yōkai Attack! The Japanese Monster Survival Guide*. Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 2012.

Recommended for College Students

- Foster, Michael Dylan. *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.
- . *The Book of Yōkai: Mysterious Creatures of Japanese Folklore*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015.
- Kabat, Adam. *The River Imp and the Stinky Jewel and Other Tales: Monster Comics from Edo Japan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2023.
- Komatsu, Kazuhiko. *Introduction to Yokai Culture: Monsters, Ghosts and Outsiders in Japanese History*. Tokyo: Japan Publishing Industry Foundation, 2018.

Yōkai in the Visual Arts

- Japandemonium Illustrated: The Yokai Encyclopedias of Toriyama Sekien*. Translated and edited by Hiroko Yoda and Matt Alt. Beijing: Dover Publications, 2016.
- Japan Supernatural: Ghosts, Goblins and Monsters, 1700 to Now*. Edited by Melanie Eastburn. Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2020.

This comprehensive visual catalog features a wide range of visual arts spanning Japan’s past and present, ranging from Toriyama Sekien’s pioneering eighteenth century prints to contemporary artists including Chiho Aoshima and international art darling Takashi Murakami.

Premodern Yōkai Narratives in English

- Jippensha Ikku, “The Monster Takes a Bride.” In *An Edo Anthology: Literature from Japan’s Mega-City, 1750-1850*. 137–167. Edited by Sumie Jones and Kenji Watanabe. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013.
- Monsters, Animals and Other Worlds: A Collection of Short Medieval Japanese Tales*. Edited by Keller Kimbrough and Haruo Shirane. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.
- Reider, Noriko T. *Seven Demon Stories from Medieval Japan*. Denver: University Press of Colorado, 2016.
- . *Mountain Witches: Yamauba*. Denver: Utah State University Press, 2021.

Contemporary Creative Writing Featuring Yōkai

- Kowalski, Charles. *Simon Grey and the March of a Hundred Ghosts*. Excalibur Books, 2019.
- . *Simon Gray and the Curse of the Dragon God*. Excalibur Books, 2024.
- Masuda, Aoko. *Where the Wild Ladies Are*. Trans. Polly Barton. Soft Skull, 2020.
- Masuda's collection of original modern stories features feminist retellings of folktales involving a variety of yōkai figures such the *yamauba* (mountain crone).
- Matsuura, Thersa. *A Robe of Feathers and Other Stories*. Counterpoint, 2009.
- Nagamatsu, Sequoia. *Where We Go When All We Were Is Gone*. Black Lawrence Press, 2016.
- Scalzi, John. *The Kaiju Preservation Society*. Tor Trade, 2023.
- Wiegand, Matthew. "Inventing Yōkai Stories," *ART Gallery: The Journal of Art, Research and Teaching*, Vol. 1 Issue 1 (January 2024) 3–10.

Recommended Feature Films for the Classroom

- The Great Yokai War* (Dir. Takashi Miike, 2005).
Tadashi Ino is a young boy who finds himself at his grandparents' rural home following his parents' divorce. At a local festival, he is chosen to be that year's Kirin Rider, a hero charged with overcoming the chaos being caused by Katō, an evil entity causing havoc in the yōkai realm that Tadashi must now enter and protect.
- A Letter for Momo* (Dir. Hiroyuki Okiura, 2011).
After the death of her father, 11-year-old Momo and her mother move to a rural island town where she encounters three goblins that only she can see in this animated film.
- Pom Poko* (Dir. Isao Takahata, 1994).
This Studio Ghibli animated favorite features a colony of sentient Japanese *tanuki* living in a region targeted for human expansion as the group strives to hone their shapeshifting powers as animal yōkai to magically save their habitat from impending destruction.

Online Clearinghouse Resources

- Yokai.com: The Illustrated Database of Japanese Folklore*. <http://yokai.com>.
- Yokai: Ghosts and Demons of Japan*. <https://yokai.moifa.org>.
Online resource tied to a previous exhibition by the Museum of International Folk Art in New Mexico. While the exhibition is long since ended, many useful images, expert essays and activities such as yōkai coloring sheets remain available on the site.