

Classroom Resource 3

This classroom resource accompanies the article “Teaching *Gojira*: Godzilla in Japanese History, Folklore, Culture, and Film” by William M. Tsutsui

Is Godzilla a Yōkai?

Yōkai are the monsters of Japanese folklore and mythology, an integral part of Japanese culture whose origins are deeply intertwined with Shinto and Buddhist beliefs and practices. Japan has an incredibly rich tradition of monstrous creatures, demons, spirits, and shapeshifters. Dragons and giant spiders figured heavily in the *Kojiki*, Japan’s earliest literary work, compiled in the eighth century, which chronicled the mythological origins of the Japanese islands and the Japanese imperial system. Local legends of monsters—like the well-known *kappa*, amphibious creatures both cute and grotesque, playful and threatening—are common throughout the islands. Stories of monsters have been a major inspiration for Japanese art and literature, from dramatic medieval warrior tales to colorful woodblock prints. And monster lore in Japan has proven enduringly dynamic and vibrant, with old tales constantly being revived and elaborated—like stories of the obscure yōkai *Amabie*, which surged in popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic—and new urban legends emerging through social media. Today, yōkai are more popular globally than ever before: their appeal has been stoked through manga and anime (like the classic work of Mizuki Shigeru or the hit franchise *Demon Slayer*), movies, and other forms of popular culture, including Pokémon, the “pocket monsters,” many of which take inspiration from yōkai. Monsters remain a part of everyday life in Japan, notably through the annual Setsubun festival, which marks the beginning of spring and involves the beloved family ritual of driving away someone dressed like a demon with handfuls of roasted soybeans.

The study of yōkai is a huge, complex, and fascinating subject. Even understanding what yōkai are can be challenging: the kanji that make up the word yōkai (妖怪) both mean strangeness or mystery, suggesting something unusually odd or curious, and even academic specialists struggle to nail down a clear and coherent definition. The Japanese scholar Komatsu Kazuhiko, for example, has written that “Yōkai is a vague concept and not one easy to grasp. Yōkai can be broadly defined as perplexing, supernatural existences (or beings) and phenomena (events, incidences, things) that occur in dimensions beyond human understanding.”¹ The folklorist Michael Dylan Foster—whose article on “hometown yōkai” is featured in this issue of *Education About Asia*—has offered that: “a yōkai is a weird or mysterious creature, a monster or fantastic being, a spirit or sprite,”² or, even more suggestively, that they are “highly creative metaphors for things for which we have no words.”³ To Zack Davisson—an insightful authority on yōkai and Japanese culture, who also has an article featured in this issue of *Education About Asia*—they are “by their nature, undefinable. They are the mysterious manifest. They are the unknowable. . . . Yōkai are the expression of human imagination and creativity, and equally limitless.”⁴

Significantly, Godzilla is generally not considered a yōkai, either by scholars or by most Japanese. While in the United States we would probably consider both a *kappa* and Godzilla to be monsters, in Japan *kappa* are yōkai while giant movie monsters like Godzilla and Mothra are kaiju or “strange beasts” (怪獣), where the character *kai* (怪) is shared with the word yōkai. Michael Dylan Foster, for instance, is insistent in arguing that Godzilla and other kaiju are not yōkai because: (1) kaiju are huge; (2) they do not appear in Japanese folklore and thus are not “traditional” and did not spring from the imaginations

of the Japanese people; and (3) because **they are commercial creations, intended to make money and provide entertainment**. Although most Japanese scholars share this view, some experts do not, notably Zack Davisson, who defiantly declares *Gojira* a “yōkai film.”

Many American fans of Godzilla believe erroneously that the monster was directly inspired by Japanese legends and mythology. This might not be terribly surprising, as a character in the series’ first film, *Gojira* (1954), links the monster to the folk beliefs of Ōdo Island, the fictional location where Godzilla first comes ashore. But while Japan’s mythological dragons and yōkai like *hōnengyo*, a giant river fish, do bear some resemblance to Godzilla, the makers of *Gojira* based the cinematic monster on dinosaurs, using depictions in a 1953 *Life* magazine article, among other sources. That being said, Godzilla’s characterization in the franchise does resonate with the legendry of yōkai, where demons and monsters may be both protective and menacing, and the beliefs of Shinto, where gods (*kami*) are neither inherently good or evil.

The question of whether Godzilla should be considered a yōkai presents an opportunity for classroom discovery, discussion, and learning. Watching *Gojira* provides an excellent chance not just to better understand postwar Japan, but also to introduce the concept of yōkai and explore Japan’s rich monster culture. Alternately, a class or unit on yōkai can be supplemented and deepened by including the debatable case of Godzilla. Either way, **discussing whether or not Godzilla is a yōkai can lead to productive consideration of the differences between Western and Japanese conceptions of monsters as well as the nature of folklore**, what it means, and how the ways cultures create and transmit stories may have changed in an age of movies, new media, and rapid technological change.

Objectives

- **Explore the rich culture of yōkai**, Japan’s folkloric monsters, including the complexities of defining the term yōkai.
- Engage with the debate over why Godzilla and other **kaiju** should (or should not) be considered yōkai, providing insights on the Japanese cultural understanding of monsters.
- Understand what **folklore** is, as well as how and why legends of monsters have emerged in Japan and other cultures.
- Explore how **Japanese understandings of yōkai and kaiju** compare to Western understandings of monsters.

Suggested Student Readings

The articles in this special issue of *Education About Asia* are an excellent resource for classroom use: they are accessible to students at a variety of levels and are suitable as required readings in a wide range of subject areas.

Michael Dylan Foster’s *The Book of Yōkai*, 2nd Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2024) is a widely used classroom text and extracts would be suitable for use at the advanced secondary and college levels. Foster’s first chapter, in addition to giving a sweeping overview of the concept of yōkai, includes a brief and enlightening introduction to folklore. Zack Davisson’s *The Ultimate Guide to Japanese Yokai* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 2024) is also based on strong scholarship and is pitched to audiences deeply immersed in Japanese pop culture forms like anime and manga.

Discussion Questions

- What is a yōkai?
- Michael Dylan Foster notes that yōkai often developed as a way for Japanese people to make sense out of strange, unexplained phenomena that they could not fully understand. Can you imagine a new yōkai that could help us explain something in our world today that is mysterious, unfamiliar, or difficult to comprehend?

- Is Godzilla a yōkai? Why or why not?
- How would you define a “monster”? How does your definition compare to how the Japanese view yōkai?
- How would you compare yōkai (and kaiju like Godzilla) to celebrated Western monsters like vampires or Frankenstein?
- What is folklore? What is mythology? What are some examples of folkloric and mythological monsters from outside the Japanese tradition? Can you think of any folkloric monsters created in the United States?
- Why do you think yōkai, like Godzilla and other kaiju, are so popular globally right now?

Instructor Resources

There are countless resources on yōkai available online. Among those that might be useful to instructors, including as sources of historic artworks and other forms of material culture featuring yōkai, are:

- “Yōkai Senjafuda,” featuring a collection of illustrated votive slips traditionally used to mark visits to Shinto shrine and Buddhist temples, University of Oregon Libraries and Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, <https://glam.uoregon.edu/yokaisenjafuda/page/welcome>.
- “Bakemono no e Scroll,” featuring annotated images from an Edo Period handscroll illustrating *bakemono* (“shapeshifters,” a term closely related to yōkai), Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, <https://bakemono.lib.byu.edu/>.
- “Yōkai: Ghosts & Demons of Japan,” materials from a 2019–2023 museum exhibition, including useful lesson plans and other resources, Museum of International Folk Art, <https://yokai.moifa.org/#/>; lesson plans: <https://moifa.org/assets/files/learn/lessonplans/Yokai%20-%20Lesson%20Plans%20.pdf>.

In addition to Foster’s *The Book of Yōkai* and Davisson’s *The Ultimate Guide to Japanese Yokai*, valuable print sources include Michael Dylan Foster’s research monograph, *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009) and Toriyama Sekien, trans. and annotated by Hiroko Yoka and Matt Alt, *Japandemonium Illustrated: The Yokai Encyclopedias of Toriyama Sekien* (New York: Dover Publications, 2016).

Notes

¹ Komatsu Kazuhiko, “Supernatural Apparitions and Domestic Life in Japan,” *Japan Foundation Newsletter* 2, no. 1 (June 1999), p. 1.

² Michael Dylan Foster, *The Book of Yōkai*, 2nd Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2024), p. 5.

³ Michael Dylan Foster, “Yōkai: Fantastic Creatures of Japanese Folklore: About Japan, A Teacher’s Resource,” <https://aboutjapan.japansociety.org/yokai-fantastic-creatures-of-japanese-folklore#sthash.hxFTeSPD.dpbs>

⁴ Zack Davisson, *The Ultimate Guide to Japanese Yokai* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 2024), pp. 9–10.