

# Yōkai in japanese psyche, its origin and the evolution of its perception

[Literature](#), [Mythology](#)



Among the various beliefs shared by the Japanese psyche, a lot could not escape the provisions of the Meiji era, which proclaimed the following slogan: bunmei kaika (civilization and enlightenment). As the Japanese government desired to westernize the country, it had to question the foundations of whatever it found to be irrational. One of those things was the yōkai, a word which can be translated by spirits, demons, monsters, etc. yōkai is constituted of the kanji 妖 which means “bewitching; attractive; calamity”; and 怪, “spectre; apparition; mystery; suspicious”. Yōkai used to be a huge part of Japanese culture. What are the yōkai and what happened to them throughout Japanese history? The following text will describe yōkai, their origin and the evolution of their perception.

The existence of yōkai was first recorded in the kojiki, or “Record of Ancient Matters”, a sacred text from the 8th century. This sacred text relates the myth of the creation of Japan. Shinto, the state religion of Japan, carried this sort of animism, claiming that each living thing or object inhabits a spirit. The popularity of yōkai reached its apogee during the Tokugawa period, when the country was secluded from the rest of the world the civil war ended. Yōkai went from fragile oral tradition to being represented in artwork and encyclopedias by folklorists and artists. Yōkai can be malicious creatures, but they can also bring good fortune to those who see them.

There was a major shift in Japan’s daily life due to modernity, residing in its tradition. During the Tokugawa period, yōkai culture was part of everyday life. The blame was very often put on them to explain an accident or other unfortunate happening. People feared them, and there was no distinct line

between the world of humans and the world of yōkai: they were everywhere. The re-establishment of a line between the two worlds came naturally with bunmei kaika: as Japan needed to become more civilized, stories of yōkai represented superstition and a lack of education. They became a source of laughter among scholars. In fact, during the early 20th century, yōkai became merely an embarrassing reminder of the premodern past. Representation of yōkai in games became more and more scarce and marginalized.

Among the plethora of yōkai, one of the most famous must be the tanuki. Even though tanuki are real animals indigenous to Japan, they are highly present in Japanese folklore. During the Tokugawa period, when yōkai culture was vibrant, they were considered to be shape shifters, and to carefully imitate whatever they transformed themselves into. One of the best examples of yōkai culture taking a turn for the worst due to modernity is definitely the story of the tanuki and the train tracks. One of the most significant signs of modernity is the development of new methods of transportation, such as the building of trains. From the Meiji to the Taisho period, trains became more and more common across Japan. When one night, a train was running through the tracks and the sound of an incoming train was heard from the opposite side, the train was stopped in order to verify the state of the situation, which represented the lingering fear of yōkai. Upon realizing that there was nothing wrong, the train restarted and continued its trip. The next morning, a tanuki was discovered dead on the train tracks. This story is a perfect metaphor for modernity (the train) taking

away the essence of yōkai, and turning it into a relic that can be observed, examined, and put into a museum. People aren't afraid of yōkai's presence anymore.

In the works of Natsume Soseki, a novelist of the Meiji period, "modern" characters are confronted with the reappearance of yōkai, which had been rejected. In *Koto no sorane*, a short story, he shows a character aware of the new scientific and psychological discourses and how he deals with superstition and the belief in yōkai.

Another notable author, Yanagita Kunio, the founder of minzokugaku or Japanese folklore studies, had tried to observe what remained of yōkai culture in a place where modernity hadn't reached: the countryside. However, even though yōkai culture technically still existed in those areas, Yanagita was forced to observe it from a scientific eye. One of his most famous works, *Tono monogatari* or "Tales of Tono", published in 1910, came at a time when "it had become inescapably clear that western capitalism would not only bring civilization and enlightenment but would efface much of an older Japanese world." This nostalgic text illustrates his desire of rediscovering an authentic Japan. Throughout his studies, Yanagita concludes that yōkai are the victims of modernity: while humanity and modernity progress, yōkai degenerate. They become part of museums where modern Japanese can appreciate the traces of a mysterious and authentic past. Yanagita thought that in the end, it will reunify the Japanese culture. If the works of Soseki and Yanagita were to be compared, whereas Soseki

showed an individual internal struggle, Yanagita tried to retrieve the relics of past Japan to bring a sense of Japanese identity.

In conclusion, yōkai are a trace of premodern Japan that managed to survive the changes that occurred during the Meiji restoration. In modern times, yōkai were revisited and are now very popular in Japanese cultural industry. Take for example the famous anime series where the eponymous character called Inuyasha is a half-demon dog. More recently, a famous franchise called Yōkai Watch whose main product is a role-playing video game where the player must fight the evil yōkai and befriend the nice ones. These productions revisit traditional Japanese folklore, modernize it and make it accessible for the younger generations. The characters and stories are not purely fantasy and invention, but are rather based upon creatures that were said to exist hundreds of years ago. In sum, even though yōkai are not what they used to be, they continue to stimulate the imaginations of people of all ages, and that not only in Japan, but also all over the world.