

## ***Spirits, Monsters, Ghosts, Oh My!: Texts to Understand the Supernatural Japan***

**Possible Partnerships:** Department of East Asian Languages & Literature, University of Pittsburgh Department of Religious Studies, The Japan-America Society of Pennsylvania

**Grades:** 7-12

**Resources:** Resources are cited below in MLA format

### **Proposal:**

This proposal/lesson part of the NCTA Integrative Initiative works a little differently than all the other ones. All of the other proposals dealt with rather concrete aspects of culture or learning that can be quantified or experienced in real-time. Whether it be reading literature, learning about *kendo*, or taking part in learning and making art as an educator, most of the ideas that have heretofore been mentioned are mostly tactile to an extent. Not so with this proposal. The subject matter presented here deals far more with understanding, explaining, and *comprehending* the importance of certain cultural ideas.

Japan's sense of the religious, spiritual, and supernatural can be different from the way Westerners understand these concepts. As such, the Japanese views, history, and traditions related to these concepts are not as well known as other aspects of Japanese history and culture such as *samurai*, *noh* and *kabuki*, and *anime*. In this regard, an educator who is teaching or discussing Japan with their students should do their best to give their students the resources and experiences necessary to fully integrate these ideas into the overall picture of Japan they may develop during their time in the classroom. As such, the teacher can use textual resources to supplement any textbook material they may be using in their classrooms, or for the sake of teaching a unique lesson altogether.

### **Possible Textual Incorporation**

- 1) **Japan's "Religion":** Students need to understand there are traditional cultural institutions that communicate a certain mindset, belief system, and access to ceremonies that contribute to a generational continuum. In order to accomplish this,

an educator could use excerpts from texts such as *A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine* and *The Essence of Shinto*.<sup>1</sup> Using these texts will give students a deeper understanding of the ideas and trappings behind certain practices and ceremonies, and will expose them to the importance and meaning behind objects such as *gohei* and *shintai*, which these students could see in pictures of Japan or Japanese shrines but never fully understand. The educator does not need to devote a whole lesson to Shinto or Japanese traditions - they could even be a small part of a larger lesson on something such as the Japanese *matsuri*. If there is a teacher in the Pittsburgh area who is thinking of doing such a lesson, they could even contact The Japan-America Society of America to further display to students the various ceremonies, festivals, and celebrations that Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples are a part of - a way of showing how the more spiritual aspects of Japanese culture are incorporated into everyday life.

- 2) **Ghost Stories:** When students think of monsters, they may think of such things as Bigfoot or the Loch Ness Monster (or more modern equivalents they have been exposed to on the Internet). The American version of stories of the supernatural themselves focus more on the spirits/ghosts of actual historical individuals than such things as nature spirits or a type of “spirit” within certain objects. In this regard, Japan has a much richer history of ghost stories and possibly terrifying interactions with the supernatural. Any English teacher who may want to focus more on World Literature could use this fact to their advantage in grabbing the attention of their students, no matter the grade level.

On the middle school level, texts such as *Yokai Attack!* or *Yurei Attack!* would work perfectly in giving students not only brief descriptions of all of the various traits/aspects of Japanese monsters and ghosts, but visual aids as well. If this lesson

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<sup>1</sup> *A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine* is, at heart, an anthropological study of Shintoism, while *The Essence of Shinto* is more of a philosophical treatise written first-hand by a Shinto priest. Therefore, these texts may be more advanced than the usual information communicated in the classroom via textbook and therefore certain passages should be used with certain context given, or the texts themselves can be used in 11th or 12th grade classrooms to go into a deep dive of the cultural moorings and repercussions of Shintoism itself.

was aimed at high school students, the same texts could still be utilized, but along with Lafcadio Hearn's *Japanese Ghost Stories*, providing students with a point of view not only different from their own, but one much more steeped in a time where these types of tales may still have been taken to be more fact than fiction. The comprehension of the stories and different types of monsters and ghosts the students have been exposed to through these texts could be reinforced through writing activities, such as students creating their own types of *yokai* with backstories and particular traits, or having students do research projects into the origins of particular stories or ideas that have since become a typical part of Japanese mythology.

**3) Nature & Spirits:** One aspect of the Japanese worldview educators would need to explain or show their students is how intertwined the Japanese conception of the everyday world around them is intimately connected with notions of the supernatural. So intertwined that many Japanese do not consider it to be spiritual or religious in any sense - it is simply the way the world around them works. This is an aspect of cultural or societal understanding that may not be totally understood by the 21st century student. In this particular case, an educator would have two avenues to take: use two particular texts, or two movies to illustrate how interconnected the aspects of the spiritual and natural are still viewed by most Japanese, a view not held by most people of European ancestry for centuries.

- a) An educator could use *Onibi: Diary of Yokai Ghost Hunter* or *NonNonBa*, a manga written and drawn by Shigeru Mizuki. *Onibi* highlights two individuals in the 20th century traveling in Niigata Prefecture to places that are supposedly spiritually charged or connected to *yokai*, monsters/spirits within Japanese folklore. Instead of seeing spirits outright, the two protagonists of the graphic novel begin to see a side of Japan that is different from the one shown to outsiders on a daily basis. *NonNonBa* could be used in tandem with this text to show how much has changed within the span of a century. Instead of taking place in a Japanese

setting that may or may not have *yokai*, this manga taking place in pre-World War II Japan shows that Japan is brimming with so many different kinds of *yokai* that it does not know what to do with them! Featuring the author as a young boy, the manga shows him learning from an elderly woman he refers to as NonNonBa about all the different spiritual facets of the world and all the different rules and characteristics that govern the *yokai*. After having read both texts, the educator can have students break down what the similarities and differences were, the impact of history and modernity on the view towards *yokai*, and the natural draw that individuals seem to have towards *yokai* in the first place.

- b) If the educator is teaching elementary or middle school grade levels, the movies *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Princess Mononoke* could be utilized instead of the texts mentioned earlier. Both movies are created and directed by famed animator Hayao Miyazaki, and are about characters interacting with the natural/spiritual world around them in new and imaginative ways. *Totoro* is more meant for children, telling the story of what happens when two young girls move to the countryside and encounter the local forest spirits. *Mononoke* is meant for more mature audiences, and is not afraid to show the consequences of man's avarice and ignorance in the face of forces they do not quite understand. Using these films as visual resources, and hopefully together, could be used to highlight the very fine line between art and cultural transmission to an extent. They also act as a much better visual reference for what the Japanese may have in mind when they think about spirits and ghosts. A lesson used in response to both of these movies could have students create their own types of "forest spirits" - since forest spirits were featured in both films, just in different ways - and explain the importance of the forest to these stories and how the characters in each film react differently to encountering them.

Using resources is incredibly important for any educator to keep in mind, but especially when teaching about Japanese culture to many students who have only had a limited experience up until a certain point in their lives. This proposal seeks to make it clear to a certain extent that a student has to take into account *all* the different aspects of a culture, even those ones that seem fantastical if not foreboding. The important history and markers of a culture are not always those aspects which you can see with your own two eyes.

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