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Noriko Reidner

Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, October 2016. 312 pages. \$33.95. Paperback. ISBN 9781607324898.

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Review

Seven Demon Stories from Medieval Japan by Noriko T. Reidner is, first and foremost, a translation of written stories about monsters originating from Japan prior to the year 1600. Every story is entertaining and well translated. Reidner points out that some of them lack narrative complexity through any struggle for the characters involved, but they are all still interesting stories.

Each chapter of the book follows the same structure: an introduction to the text (including locations and categories of copies used), plot summary, historical overview of the figures and time periods involved, and finally the translation itself. The chapters are also separated into categories by subject matter: Samurai, Scholars, Women, and It.

Historical observations are then emphasized differently in each section. "Samurai" is the most historically focused, "Scholars" is focused on politics, "Women" on gender roles, and "It" on religious conceptualizations. All of the stories do link back to the others, but are mostly contained in subject matter.

The reason I use the phrase, "historical observations," is simply that the book is relatively weak in terms of analysis. While Reidner does provide a great deal of detail on summary and historical background, the deeper breakdowns are restricted to only a few pages of each chapter. Depending on what the reader is looking for, that can either make for easy and informative reading or be somewhat disappointing. The final chapter is perhaps the strongest in analysis, while the first chapter is the weakest.

One problem with the book, which can be distracting while reading it, is that the chapters were very clearly not written with the intent of being part of a collection. Reidner mentions in the introduction that some of them were separate publications, and this shows. There is a disunity of style across the book, where some chapters use first person in reference to Reidner, while others refer to "the author." Likewise, certain concepts have an endnote in one section which says, "see chapter 1" for an explanation, but that in another section, will direct the reader to a different author's work. These shifts are all contained, and no single chapter changes between perspectives. However, these are minor complaints that would likely not bother most readers, especially considering the latter issue would go unnoticed by anyone not reading the endnotes.

The structure of chapters can also prove to be problematic at times. While the summary of the text is useful, it does lead to an incomplete picture of the story before the overview. This pitfall becomes apparent when discussion of the characters and historical period mention parts of the story not included in the summary. Unfortunately the fix for this is difficult, as reading the story in place of the summary would likely lead to confusion as to the specifics of the story if one were not already well-versed in the topic. On the other hand, a summary certainly cannot give a perfect description of a forty-page story in the space of a page or two.

Whenever poetry is included in a story, it is accompanied by a Romanization of the original text. The one exception to this is with a poem written in classical Chinese, where the Romanization is replaced with the original text. The translations of these are well chosen and focus on conveying the meaning of the verses, rather than trying to add rhyming or duplicating the structure of the original, as older translations of Japanese poems often tried to do.

Reidner's earlier book, *Japanese Demon Lore* (Utah State University Press 2010), is mentioned several times in the introduction and endnotes. While, given the subject matter, reading these two books in conjunction would likely be ideal and lead to a much fuller understanding of Japanese demonology, this is by no means a requirement. *Seven Demon Stories from Medieval Japan* does stand as an independent work.

Another important aspect of the book is the sheer diversity of knowledge that is presented to the reader through Reidner's sources. With so many categories at play, it would be difficult to find nothing among the works cited to interest the reader.

Though needing another layer of polish, this book is a greatly enjoyable read. Not only does it provide readers with a strong introduction to studies on Japanese folklore, it also provides a map to different avenues of studies. This includes not only monsters, but historical perspectives, gender, and religion in the medieval period in Japan. While geared more toward people new to the topic, it has value to anyone interested in these areas.

About the Reviewer(s):

Kenneth Valencich is an Independent Scholar.

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About the Author(s)/Editor(s)/Translator(s):

Noriko T. Reidner is Professor of Japanese at Miami University, where her research focuses on the supernatural in Japanese literature. She is the author of *Japanese Demon Lore* and *Tales of the Supernatural in Early Modern Japan*. Her articles and reviews have appeared in *Asian Ethnology*, *Japan Forum*, and *Film Criticism*, among other journals.

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