
Seven Demon Stories From Medieval Japan

By Noriko T. Reider. 2016. Logan: Utah State University Press. 312 pages. ISBN: 978-1-60732-489-8 (soft cover).

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It is easy to see why Noriko T. Reider uses “stories” in her title rather than folktale, legend, or myth. The stories are an amalgam of all three, and “history” could be added as well. These stories are well loved in Japan and are often celebrated in festivals, rituals, theater, anime, and paintings. One of Reider’s points is that some figures in the stories are based on real characters in medieval Japan, and that stories were sometimes manipulated as various factions moved into and out of power.

The book is organized into four parts, each part focusing on the type of main character who encounters demons: (1) samurai; (2) scholars; (3) women; and (4) inanimate objects which have gained souls.

Each chapter begins with an introductory analysis, including a detailed description of medieval picture scrolls from which the stories were translated, and of the location and ownership of the scrolls. Each analysis contains a history of the story, its changes over time according to what regime was in power, and comparative motifs, as well as a full translation. The process will be much more enjoyable for the reader who reads the translation at the end of the chapter first, and then goes back and reads the essay that precedes it. The stories are superb, and the analyses richly researched and enlightening.

The first section, on samurai, has a chapter focusing on Minamoto no Raikō and Fujiwara no Hosho, two generals who were summoned to slay an “oni” (demon) who was eating young maidens in the Kyoto area. One of Raikō’s assistants is Kintoki, in modern times known as Kintaro, who is the beloved boy in medieval helmet and armor seen in displays all over modern Japan on “Children’s Day.” After several harrowing experiences, the samurai Raikō slays the oni in its bedchamber. In the next chapter, Raikō encounters a giant human-eating spider. The accompanying analysis gives a good background on monster spiders in medieval Japanese literature, especially shape-shifting spider killers.

The second section, on scholars who match wits with oni, has two chapters. The first is about a Japanese envoy to China, Minister Kibi no Makibi, who finds himself sent to a tower to do residence with an oni. Previous ministers died of fright. However, this minister tells the oni about his beloved lost relatives in Japan, and in exchange the oni helps the minister pass some difficult tests that the Chinese put him through, winning his passage home. The second chapter in this section involves a wager made against an oni in a game of sugoroku, with a beautiful woman offered as a prize. The master of the game wins the woman from the oni, who warns that the woman must not be touched for one hundred days. However, the winner succumbs to his desires within eighty days, and the woman melts into water in his hands. It turns out that the oni built her from the parts of many dead bodies.

The third section, focusing on women who confront oni, begins with the “Tale of Amewakahiko,” which recounts the origin of Japan’s beloved Tanabata festival. This is the tale of two lovers who, through circumstances in the story, can meet only once a year, on the seventh day of the seventh month. The young woman’s father-in-law is an oni who imposes harsh conditions on her. The second chapter in this section

features the beloved “Blossom Princess” story, the Japanese version of Cinderella. Especially interesting is Reider’s analysis of “obasute” (old women who are deserted and left to die). In this case the old woman lives in the cave of an oni who befriended her. When the princess kindly cuts off some worms growing on the old woman’s head, the woman gives the princess advice which leads to her marrying the son of a councilor and reuniting with her father.

Finally, the last section, humorously titled “It,” features inanimate objects which become oni. Household tools thrown away in the alley turn into vengeful spirits seeking to harm their former masters. However, with training from the Shingon Buddhist sect, these object-specters are able to gain enlightenment and Buddhahood through ascetic practices. Reider suggests that the text over the years was “modified to suit an individual priest’s purpose” (211).

This is one of the best books on Japanese folklore to come out in recent years. It is thoroughly researched and gives generous insight into medieval characters still in the spotlight in Japan today. The stories themselves are absolutely delightful to read. The author successfully shows how certain stories were appropriated by prominent medieval families to gain prestige. Reider’s expert analysis and clear presentation of origins, etymology, and functioning of the stories in medieval Japan make it must-reading for any serious scholar of Japanese folklore.