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## **TRANSFORMATION OF IMAGE OF YŌKAI IN JAPANESE CULTURE: FROM ARTS TO THEORIES**

In different periods, the very approaches to determine types of yōkai differ significantly, and it seems the researchers have not yet developed a unified view on principles of yōkai categorization. The objective of this article is to conceptualize the phenomenon of yōkai and frame some theoretical and methodological approaches to its considering in the traditional Japanese culture. The research methodology covers a set of general methods, such as objectivity and historicism, analysis and synthesis, deduction and induction. In addition, a critical method was applied, through which both Japanese folk beliefs and trends in the Japanese fine art were compared in different periods. The scientific originality comes to complex research of theoretical and methodological approaches of the phenomenon of yōkai as an important factor of development of the Japanese culture. On Japan's example, the authors show the phenomenon of yōkai in the light of developing a cultural tradition and highlight some milestones of evolution of this phenomenon, which is still important in the contemporary Japanese culture. It is discovered that yōkai had turned into a subject for academic research in Meiji period (mid-19<sup>th</sup> century), after a categorization and classification of this phenomenon by Inoue Enryō, Lafcadio Hearn, Ema Tsutomu, Yanagita Kunio, etc.

References to yōkai can be found from ancient monuments and sources of Japanese history to popular culture and entertainment industry. When tracing the evolution of the phenomenon of yōkai throughout various periods of Japanese history, we can find evidence of shaping the approaches to its interpretations by both researchers and creative artists. From ancient time till present day, yōkai implications are essential for the Japanese culture, come through numerous traditional and modern arts, that indicates their importance over many generations of people.

**Key words:** Japan, Japanese culture, China, transformation, methodology, yōkai, fine arts, folklore studies.

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## **ТРАНСФОРМАЦІЯ ОБРАЗУ ЙОКАЙ В ЯПОНСЬКІЙ КУЛЬТУРІ: ВІД МИСТЕЦТВА ДО ТЕОРІЇ**

У різні історичні періоди істотно відрізнялися самі підходи до визначення типів йокай, і натепер ще не вироблено єдиного дослідницького погляду на принципи їх класифікації. Метою статті є концептуалізація

феномену йокай та визначення теоретико-методологічних підходів до його розгляду в традиційній японській культурі. Методологію дослідження становить комплекс загальнонаукових методів: об'єктивність та історизм, аналіз і синтез, дедукція та індукція; також було застосовано критичний метод, за допомогою якого зіставлялися як японські традиційні вірування, так і тенденції японського образотворчого мистецтва в різні періоди. Наукова новизна полягає в комплексному дослідженні теоретико-методологічних аспектів феномену йокай як важливого фактору формування японської культури. На прикладі Японії авторами показано феномен йокай у процесі формування культурної традиції, виділивши етапи еволюції цього явища, яке не втратило значення в сучасній японській культурі. Встановлено, що йокай стали предметом академічних досліджень у добу Мейджі (сер. XIX ст.), коли відбулася ґрунтова категоризація і класифікація цього явища зусиллями Іноуе Енрьо, Лафкадіо Гірна, Ема Цутому, Янагіта Куніо, Міята Нобору, Комацу Кадзухіко та ін.

Згадки про йокай можна знайти як у стародавніх літературних пам'ятках і джерелах японської історії, так і в популярній культурі та сучасній індустрії розваг. Простеживши еволюцію феномену йокай протягом різних періодів історії Японії, можна знайти конкретні підтвердження про зміни підходів до їх осмислення в роботах як науковців, так і митців. З'явившись у давні часи, сьогодні уявлення про йокай займають важливе місце в культурі Японії, маючи прояви в різних традиційних і сучасних видах мистецтва, що свідчить про їх значимість протягом життя багатьох поколінь людей.

**Ключові слова:** Японія, японська культура, Китай, трансформація, методологія, йокай, образотворче мистецтво, фольклористика.

**Introduction.** Throughout the history of mankind, representatives of any culture attributed unidentified phenomena to the images of monsters and spirits. In this regard, Japan is no exception since unexplained phenomena and supernatural creatures have always been a part of Japanese imagination. Komatsu defines them as “transcendent things or beings associated with fear” (Komatsu, 1994, p. 31). In broad terms, mysterious and compellingly fascinating phenomena in Japan are usually marked as *yōkai* 妖怪 – a general concept that can be translated as “spirits”, “demons”, “fantastic creatures”, “monsters”, etc.

In fact, *yōkai* belong to the cultural heritage of many countries, having absorbed some common features of Japanese mythology, Chinese folklore, an *Onmyōdō* tradition, and Buddhist doctrine. It is sometimes quite difficult to distinguish *yōkai* in Chinese folklore tradition from the Japanese one, due to the fact that many Chinese demonological creatures successfully complied with the Japanese context and were enriched with local legends and myths. Gradually, Chinese ideas related to interpretation of natural phenomena and the harmonization of human life were combined with Japanese ideas about spirits, nature and rituals. Today, according to various data, about 70 % of the prototypes of Japanese *yōkai* come from China, 20 % – from an Indian Buddhist tradition, and only 10 % can be considered as the Japanese (Xiao, 2021).

**Degree of problem development.** Analysis of sources shows that classification

of *yōkai* is an important and complex problem, and until recently its solution was reduced to several approaches. In different periods, the very approaches to determine types of *yōkai* differ significantly, and it seems the Japanese researchers have not yet developed a unified view on principles of *yōkai* typologization. E.g., in works of the artist of the Edo period (1603–1867) Toriyama Sekien, *yōkai* are arranged without any selection criteria, based on the author's discretion. Mizuki Shigeru, manga and anime artist, follows similar approach in a number of catalogs, but in some versions he puts *yōkai* in alphabetical order of the Japanese phonetic alphabet (Mizuki, 2016). Based on the same method, the *yōkai* dictionary by Murakami Kenji was compiled (Murakami & Takahashi, 2008). Chiba Mikio divides *yōkai* by region of their placement, while Itō Ryōhei goes beyond the environment and distinguishes *yōkai* of rivers and swamps, *yōkai* of the ocean, *yōkai* of slopes and mountains, and domestic *yōkai* (Shimura, 2011). Ei Nakau describes about 70 *yōkai* with a basic introduction to the story of each creature and addresses them to the ukiyo-e art pieces (Nakau, 2017). Komatsu Kazuhiko locates them by type and environment involving regional names (Komatsu, 2017). We also agree with Abe Kazue who suggests three groups of fantastic creatures under the general name *obake*, although he omits some categories of supernatural beings, like demons *oni*, etc. (Abe, 1971).

Traditional *yōkai* culture is now a subject of research in many countries around the world, not limited to Japan. A significant contribution

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to development of the yōkai characters problems and their impact on Japanese culture, both traditional and contemporary, was made by Christy (2012), Figal (2007), Foster (2004; 2009; 2015), Hrvatin (2022), Kuhn & Kobayashi (2020), Papp (2010), Reider (2010), etc. Analysis of evolution of yōkai visual image would be difficult to imagine without their efforts. As for Ukraine, it is quite difficult to find up-to-date research on this topic.

In view of the above, the main **purpose** of this article is to conceptualize the yōkai phenomenon in traditional Japanese culture and frame some theoretical and methodological approaches to its classification.

**Methods.** This study is based on principles of objectivity and historicism. In addition to general research methods of analysis and synthesis, deduction and induction, a critical method was applied, through which both Japanese folk beliefs and trends in the Japanese fine art were compared in different periods of its development.

**Main part.** It is necessary to highlight the historical stages of emergence of ideas about yōkai and evolution of this phenomenon in the mentality of Japanese people. References to yōkai can be found in ancient monuments and sources of Japanese history and culture. E.g., their prototype includes a mythical eight-headed and eight-tailed dragon Yamata-no orochi presented in one of the legends in the Kojiki (“An Account of Ancient Matters”, 712) (The Kojiki, 2014, p. 58–60). This plot is one of the earliest examples of *yōkai taiji* (taming/eliminating yōkai) where a human hero usually conquers or kills a supernatural creature. It is still the basis of literary, theatrical, animation and cinema scenes.

The complexity in defining yōkai lies in the fact that in each historical period mysterious phenomena were given names, which were complemented and refined over time. E.g., in the Heian period (794–1192), they used a term *mononoke* 物の怪 (“strange thing”), which Komatsu (2017) describes as the name for an unknown supernatural presence where “mono” (“thing”) indicates something unformed and undefined, while “ke” like “kai” in “yōkai” means something suspicious.

We can find some references to mononoke in classical works of Japanese literature, such as “The Tale of Genji” (Genji Monogatari), from which the romantic literature of the 11<sup>th</sup> century begins. The authorship of this novel is attributed to the court

lady Murasaki Shikibu (10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries). The most convincing mention is in chapter 9 entitled “Aoi” where the spirit of Rokujō-no miyasudokoro, Prince Genji’s mistress, pursues his wife and brings her to death. The author emphasizes that she suffered from Mononoke (The Tale of Genji, 2015, p. 170–171).

Mononoke were feared not only because of their immateriality, unpredictability and unusualness. Foster (2009, p. 7) points out that “although such phenomena are undoubtedly not normal, they have always been possible”. Mononoke were part of daily life of Japanese people who still believed that the heart became vulnerable to bad influence due to anxiety and pessimism. Thus, supernatural phenomena gradually entered the folklore. Subsequently, visual description of these individual things began to be recorded in the form of paintings, sculptures and statues.

The evolution of mononoke in various yōkai characters moved to a further visualization of beings with a final form. The first clear images of mononoke appear in the Kamakura period (1185–1333) as a kind of *tsukumogami* 付喪神 where they served as objects that received a soul in hundred years later and started to “mock” people. The idea is that everything that exists for a long time eventually gets a soul, and here we talk again about the principle of transformation. These objects are not only endowed with life, but also get hands, feet and face. Stories related to similar yōkai were especially popular during the Kamakura and Muromachi (1333–1600) periods when appearing in *setsuwa* 説話 (“short stories”) collections and in a variety of fine arts (Koyama, 2022).

The world of yōkai became even more lively when the *tsukumogami* joined (Tokuda, 2018). The most famous *tsukumogami* image can be found on the Hyakki Yagyō Emaki (“Night Parade of One Hundred Demons”) by Tosa Mitsunobu (1434–1525) where among other objects there are some musical instruments with arms and legs presented in entertaining form. This “naughtiness” of yōkai is quite unexpected but turns out to be an important part of their presentation. This style was very popular during the Edo and Meiji (1868–1912) periods and became especially remarkable in the illustrations by Kawanabe Kyōsai (1831–1889). Since ancient time, an interaction between the terrible and the entertaining has

been an important component of *yōkai* evolution (Foster, 2015). In the Muromachi period, *yōkai* were portrayed with informality, and as a result they rather became a symbol of celebration.

One of the ways that led *yōkai* from local rural communities to regional and national level is considered a practice called *hyaku-monogatari*. People gathered in a large room, sometimes at the temple, and told each other *kaidan* – short horror stories about ghosts and spirits, and after each of them extinguished one candle or lantern until complete darkness.

A special contribution to the development of image of *yōkai* was made by the above-mentioned Toriyama Sekien who can be considered as founder of visualization of *yōkai*. His published collections, such as *Gazu Hyakki Yagyō* (“The Illustrated Night Parade of One Hundred Demons”), *Konjaku Gazu Dzoku Hyakki* (“The Illustrated One Hundred Demons from the Present and the Past”), *Konjaku Hyakki Shūi* (“Supplement to The Hundred Demons from the Present and the Past”), and *Hyakki Tsurezure Bukuro* (“The Illustrated Bag of One Hundred Random Demons”) contain illustrated notes on 207 *yōkai*. As Foster (2004) notes, one of the main reasons for an extraordinary role of these works in the development of *yōkai* is that Sekien first examined each *yōkai* separately and presented them in the format of an encyclopedia that became popular in late Edo.

Although Sekien was influenced by the works of his predecessors and partially introduced them in his arts, his endeavour to present *yōkai* as “separate data units” is considered the first. The *Hyakki Yagyō* scrolls of the Muromachi time were an attempt to visualize *yōkai* as previously invisible, being among their own, without names or descriptions. In encyclopedic form, Sekien tried to create order out of this chaos and bring a name and a short story for each *yōkai*.

Printed in sharp contrast to the color scrolls of the Muromachi, black-and-white works of Sekien with clear contours of the *yōkai* allow to convey visual information without an emotional shade produced by color reproduction. While Muromachi art shaped visual effects in the cinema of the 20<sup>th</sup> – early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the works of Sekien have a significant impact on the development of modern manga. Having derived *yōkai* from other texts and local legends, Sekien took them beyond the highly restricted environment and plots

where they were common. As a result, *yōkai* became more general and universal spreading in many spheres of culture: from folk art to the plays of Kabuki theater and rakugo miniatures.

Having become popular in *kusazoshi* 草双紙, early illustrated books of the Edo period, *yōkai* have seen the rise with the beginning of a new stage in this art marked by appearance of *kibōshi* 黄表紙 books (“yellow covers”), which were actively published between 1775 and 1806. *Kibōshi* was a kind of popular form of comics or graphic literature of the time. They were considered the most complex and satirical genre of literature. They also had room for humor, since no longer scared, but entertained people.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there appeared books where the process of marriage was depicted, and numerous wedding rituals were illustrated. Such books, in addition to the entertainment function, could serve as a guide for future brides. *Kibōshi* could often be a kind of parody of popular literature at that time. In *Bakemono-no yomeiri* (“Wedding of Bakemono”), by Gippensha Ikku (1765–1831), a famous writer of the Edo, human values associated with traditions of wedding ceremony are ridiculed. *Bakemono* 化け物 (“transformed thing”, “monster”, “ghost”) is very convenient word to convey the meaning of these creatures which had the ability to transform. For example, *kitsune* (“fox”) in many stories takes on different forms in order to deceive people. In the *Nihon ryōiki* (2013), in section “A Word about the Fox and Her Son”, common reasons for the tricks of fox-*yōkai* are described – an ability to turn into beautiful women in order to tempt males. A fox is considered the messenger of Inari, god of fertility, agriculture and rice, which once again emphasizes the principle of transformation, as basis of *yōkai*.

In the late Edo, the *yōkai* theme was addressed by masters of Japanese engraving including Takai Kozan (1806–1883), Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), Uchigawa Kuniyoshi (1797–1861), Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839–1892). The *yōkai* aesthetics became a milestone in the history of Japanese art. As researchers explain, this could be result of an acute crisis in political and social system of Japan (Figal, 2007). The central power of emperor, and then shogunate, emphasized its dominance over the supernatural. In 1860, shōgun Tokugawa Iemochi placed a sign in Nikko that “banned” *yōkai* enter this area (Visser, 1908, p. 27–32).

With the beginning of the Meiji period, Japan was involved in radical industrial, military, cultural and social transformations, and for the first time *yōkai* became a subject of academic research. One of the most active researchers was Inoue Enryō (1858–1919), a philosopher and Buddhist priest who established a special discipline *yōkaigaku* 妖怪学 (“monsterology/demonology”). Having laid foundations of *yōkai* research, Inoue divided them into two large groups: *jitsukai* (“real mystery”) and *kyōkai* (“false mystery”). In *jitsukai*, he, in turn, singled out *shinkai* (“true mystery”) and *kakai* (“temporary mystery”), and in *kyōkai* – *gikai* (“artificial mystery”) and *gokai* (“wrong mystery”). Pursuing the goal to protect the deceived Japanese people from various false mysteries, Inoue tried to clear their consciousness (*Yōkaigaku kōgi*, 2022).

The first Western author interested in *yōkai* is Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904). Moving to Japan in 1890, he wrote more than ten books on history, culture and life of Japanese people. For the Western world, he became an early interpreter of such a complex and interesting country as Japan, which opened up to the world after three hundred years of isolation. In his writings “Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan” (1894) and “Kokoro: Hints and Echoes of Japanese Inner Life” (1896), the author conveys the stories of people and cultural codes that make Japan a unique country. In the writings “In Ghostly Japan” (1899), “Kottō: being Japanese curious, with Sundry Cobwebs” (1902), “Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things” (1903), Hearn reveals images of ghosts, monsters from Japanese fairy tales and legends, and in the work “Japan: an Attempt at Interpretation” (1905) shares his personal understanding Japan (Hearn, 2021).

Hearn’s legacy is to promote specifics of *yōkai*, which he tried to convey to Western readers, unlike Inoue, who tried to clear Japanese culture from them. His books were translated into Japanese and became a favorite part of *yōkai* literary genre. Hearn’s method of organizing legends, beliefs and myths was used by Japanese researchers. E.g., in 1923, Ema Tsutomu (1884–1979) published a book ‘Nihon *yōkai* henge shi’ (“History of Japanese *yōkai* and henge”). As a recognized expert in *fujokushigaku*, a science related to history of customs and rituals, he saw his main goal in study of *yōkai* for understanding how the Japanese people interacted with them previously (Ema, 1976).

Although the words *yōkai* and *henge* 変化 (“werewolf”) can be used as substitutes for each other, Ema offers a rigid distinction of these concepts and their semantic meaning. So, in his opinion, *yōkai* is something “incomprehensible, mysterious; something hard to describe”, while *henge* is something that has changed its appearance (Ibid, p. 67). Having developed a complex typology that classified *yōkai* and *henge* according to their ability to change form, place and time of appearance, Ema shows that regardless of belief in *yōkai*, their connections with people have been preserved since ancient time.

Ema did not try to find out whether *yōkai* exist or not, which ones are true, and which are false, to get rid of them. Unlike Hearn, he did not try to save them and prolong their lives in the plots of horrible stories. Ema recognized an importance of *yōkai* in Japanese history and culture, thereby believing they deserve thorough research.

A similar position can be traced in cultural approach to *yōkai* of the founder of *minzokugaku* (folklore studies) Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962). He did not set out any explicit method of interpreting the *yōkai*, but the following three main notions of his position can be distinguished: 1) an embracing of ambiguity; 2) collection and categorization; 3) a degradation theory (Yanagita, 2021).

“Embracing ambiguity” means that Yanagita was not concerned with whether *yōkai* really existed. He rather supposed if people had believed in *yōkai* or talked about them, then it should be investigated. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Yanagita’s position, different from Inoue’s views and methods, laid the foundations for future *yōkai* studies.

Collection and classification of *yōkai*, which started during the Edo period, was followed up by Yanagita through the field expeditions, in particular, in 1938–1939, and he published the *yōkai* glossary after that.

The third aspect of Yanagita’s approach to *yōkai*, a “theory of degradation”, is that by “when old beliefs were oppressed and made to surrender to new beliefs, all the [old] deities were degraded and became *yōkai*” (Ibid, p. 21). Observing the progress of human society and its transition to the modern standard of living, Yanagita suggested that supernatural beings gradually degraded from *kami* (deities), as objects of serious faith, into *yōkai*, which can sometimes even be comic.

In some way, Yanagita's attitude toward *yōkai* is still important for modern scholars and writers. Like Ema Tsutomu, when recognizing an importance of *yōkai* to Japanese culture, Yanagita believed that researchers should not deny or prove their objective existence; if *yōkai* were part of people's lives, they existed as a significant and relevant aspect of culture, and therefore are worthy of study. Taking *yōkai* seriously and giving them a central role in the development of the folklore studies as a new discipline, Yanagita advised that any study of culture could not be associated with ignoring the supernatural underlying it.

Yanagita attributed *yōkai* to the most important part of the Japanese imagination, even in the difficult period of country's recovery after the World War II. Collected *yōkai* were now perceived with nostalgia about the pre-war times. A manga and anime artist Mizuki Shigeru (1922–2015) skillfully combined folklore and the stories invented and was able to create convincing stories and memorable heroes. His story about *yōkai* boy Kitaro released in 1969 as a black and white anime received a successful sequel in color in 1971–1972, 1985–1988, 1996–1998 and 2007–2009 with total number of episodes as of 432 (Mizuki, 2016). In the city of Sakaiminato, Tottori Prefecture, in Mizuki's homeland, a museum and Mizuki Shigeru Street are organized, where about 150 figures of the characters of his manga and anime are located. In order to increase tourist attractiveness, buses and commuter trains throughout the prefecture are decorated with attributes of the *yōkai* from his works, and each station in the prefecture is named after some *yōkai*.

In addition to manga and anime, Mizuki has also produced numerous illustrated catalogs resembling Toriyama Sekien's bestiaries. In general, Mizuki Shigeru can be presented as a modern Toriyama Sekien who also used popular ways of information transfer common for his time. As Sekien's images had an impact on future generations, Mizuki's arts currently have an impact on Japan image-making (Suzuki, 2019).

Followers also steadily adhered to the views of Yanagita Kunio. In 1985, folklorist Miyata Noboru (1936–2000) published a book *Yōkai no minzokugaku* ("Yōkai Folklore") where he used the concepts of *kyōkai* ("boundary") and *toshi* ("city"), which allowed to save folklore *yōkai* from a simple census, giving them an opportunity to move to modern culture. He demonstrates

heredity not only in the image, but also regarding the geographical, emotional and social factors that generate *yōkai*.

Miyata relies on Yanagita's early assumptions that *yōkai* appear on the borderline. He develops these ideas by exploring examples of strange occurrences at intersections, bridges and no man's land, outside the safe space of contemporary life. In fact, Miyata developed a field of study on urban folklore that did not deny connections with the past and the countryside but recognized that "the folklore of supernatural is constantly changing in the shining space of modern large urban centers" (Miyata, 1990, p. 248).

While Miyata focused on exploring strange manifestations in urban folklore, cultural anthropologist Komatsu Kazuhiko began developing a new *yōkaigaku*. Since more detailed consideration of this topic may be a subject of future research, here we note only some aspects of his position. According to Komatsu (1999), the key concept associated with *yōkai* is *kami* 神, which means "god" or "deity". *Kami* in Japan may be objects of worship and prayer, but they do not possess an almighty power of God in monotheistic religions. There are many *kami* found in all possible kinds of things throughout the natural world. In the Japanese tradition, almost anything can be spiritualized and called *kami*.

Speaking about Komatsu's position in analysis of the cultural phenomenon of *yōkai*, we should keep some distance from system of values based on the belief that they are clearly good or bad creatures. These are not absolutely peaceful or absolutely wrathful gods, while all supernatural things have positive 和 (*nigi*) and negative 荒 (*arami*) aspects. In view of this, all gods and spirits have the potential to transform, change, or become *yōkai* if they are not sufficiently honored to maintain their positive image. Thus, the same spirit of the river at the same time can be called both *kami* and *yōkai*: in case when, thanks to its actions, the river floods the rice fields of one village, positively affecting his harvest, it is considered as *kami*, while for another village it is *yōkai*, because its actions cause a drought. At the same time, if the "bad" *yōkai* does a good thing, they start to consider it *kami*, and vice versa.

**Conclusion.** Thus, *yōkai* became the subject of academic research in the Meiji period (mid-19<sup>th</sup> century) when a thorough categorization

and classification of this phenomenon took place. Tracing the evolution of the yōkai phenomenon during different periods of Japanese history, we can find particular evidence of changes in approaches to its understanding in the writings of both scholars (cultural anthropologists, philosophers and folklorists) and artists. Having appeared in ancient time, today an idea of yōkai occupies an important place in the culture of Japan, with manifestations in various traditional and modern forms of art, which indicates their importance throughout lives of many generations of people.

Although the semantic emphasis of research views on yōkai shifted at the beginning of the New Age with the development of rationalism, yōkai

still serve as a very popular image in entertainment industry, which can be seen, for example, through fashion for images of ghosts and monsters in anime, movies, modern literature and painting, etc. In present day, such phenomenon is not so much part of faith as something incorporated into the popular culture of Japan.

We consider Japanese scholars' interpretations of yōkai as attempts to shed light on it within a globalized popular culture paradigm. We hereby suggest that modern understanding of yōkai has been shifting from a simple component of Japanese folklore and arts to the important part of the contemporary global perspective on yōkai where they have been transformed in common cultural phenomenon.

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