



Iowa Research Online
The University of Iowa's Institutional Repository

Department of Anthropology Publications

1-1-2002

Review of: Gerald Figal, *Civilization and Monsters: Spirits of Modernity in Meiji Japan*.

Scott Schnell
University of Iowa

Copyright © 2002 The Nanzan Institute for Religion & Culture. Posted by permission.

Asian Folklore Studies, Vol 61:1 (2002), pp.186-188.

Hosted by Iowa Research Online. For more information please contact: lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

FIGAL, GERALD. *Civilization and Monsters: Spirits of Modernity in Meiji Japan*. Asia-Pacific: Culture, Politics, and Society. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999. xi + 290 pages. Figures, glossary, bibliography, index. Paper US\$17.95; ISBN 0-8223-2418-0.

The term “modernity” evokes images of enlightenment and progress, and of extending advanced technologies into needy backward regions. These images are so persuasive that we seldom question the purported benefits that modernization entails. Thus the Meiji Restoration is recognized as an impressive leap forward, whereby Japan cast off the shroud of feudalism and assumed a respectable position among the industrializing nations of the West. Historical accounts convey the optimism of progressive thinkers—embarking on fact finding missions, creating strong, centralized political institutions, and eagerly embracing the latest advances in industrial and military technology. Little attention is given to the collective angst or trauma that such dramatic and far-reaching changes must surely have engendered among the population at large.

Gerald Figal provides an important corrective to this oversight by analyzing notions of the fantastic and monstrous that haunted the popular imagination throughout the Meiji period. Drawing on Komatsu Kazuhiko’s theory that images of monsters emerge during times of crisis and symbolize threats to the social order, Figal proceeds to demonstrate how such images were employed by folk studies advocates to challenge the goals and strategies of the modernization. At first the government tried to discredit folk knowledge as irrational and superstitious. Eventually, however, the popular fascination with awe and mystery came to be woven into the rhetoric of the state in defining the essence of national identity. In short, Figal argues that “a discourse on the supernatural, the mysterious, and the fantastic—what I refer to as *fushigi*—was constitutive of Japan’s modern transformation” (7).

The book also stands in refreshing contrast to the many treatises on the development of Japanese folk studies that are dominated by Yanagita Kunio. While Figal gives ample attention to Yanagita, he also introduces a number of other influential folklorists and folk-oriented literary figures who remain underappreciated outside of Japan. There is Izumi Kyōka, for example, whose fascination with “twilight” provides a recurring metaphor for the transitional nature of the Meiji period. Moreover, Kyōka (customarily referred to by his given name) “wrote tales that ... often furnished in their reinvested forms the basis for a penetrating critique of the route Japan’s rationalized modernity was taking” (156). Inoue Enryō, on the other hand, attempted to find rational explanations for strange or unusual phenomena using a science-oriented approach he called *yōkaigaku*, or “monsterology.” Perhaps the most fascinating character, however, is Minakata Kumagusu, who seems intellectually to have been well ahead of his time. Much of Minakata’s opposition to the modernization revolved around the issue of shrine mergers, whereby a myriad of small localized shrines were either abandoned or amalgamated into a select number of centrally located and officially favored shrines. We see here the focus of Shinto being wrested from the landscape and redirected toward the authority of the state as symbolized by the emperor. Moreover, the newly designated and centralizing “official” shrines were permitted to confiscate and sell the communally-held forests that the smaller shrines had encompassed. Minakata recognized these forests not only as sacred groves dedicated to the spirits but also as resource preserves that were vital to village ecology.

Yanagita, too, seems remarkably prescient in several respects. His interest in *tengu* (goblins or similarly inexplicable figures) was motivated by a desire to recover the “mind” of the people that imagined them, and (though not mentioned specifically by the author) the struc-

tural approach he used—comparing related versions of popular folktales to isolate the common elements—is strikingly similar to that employed by Claude Lévi-Strauss several decades later. Yanagita and Kyōka both denied the kind of detached, objective description favored by the Naturalist school of writing that was influential within literary circles at the time. This seems to anticipate the so-called “literary turn” that beset American anthropology during the late 1980s, in which the ethnographer was permitted, even encouraged, to incorporate his or her own subjective impressions. Indeed, Figal notes that Yanagita’s approach differs from simple participant observation in that “it openly suggests a more radically subjective and emotional involvement of the observer with the observed” (127).

Though Yanagita sought to transcend the bounds of detached academic writing, he was also anxious to gain acceptance and legitimacy for folk studies as an academic discipline. Figal uses this to explain the dramatic shift in Yanagita’s focus—away from the marginality of *yamabito* (mountain dwellers) and *tengu* and toward the delineation of a homogeneous and unified mainstream population, the *jōmin*, “characterized by ancestor worship, rice cultivation, and a fixed domicile” (173). Thus while he abandoned the marginal he retained an affinity for the unseen and mysterious, now conceptualized as “the ancestors.” This, in turn, paved the way for co-optation by the state. Local manifestations of the supernatural “were redefined as products of a common Japanese sentiment toward the ancestors” (210), who, through their ever-present watchfulness, served as a kind of moral conscience for the living.

Therein lies the ironic ambiguity in Yanagita’s later work: “On the one hand, it presented a critique of the state’s path of modernization; on the other, it produced a concept of the Japanese folk that could lay the ideological bedrock for that path” (198). The ambiguous, “in between” quality thus itself became a distinguishing feature of the Japanese essence—*fushigi* was “fetishized.”

Figal also addresses the role of foreign observers like Lafcadio Hearn, whom he interestingly suggests might be considered the first *nihonjinron* theorists. *Fushigi* could now be presented to the West as part of an inscrutable Japanese mind, an impression nativist ideologues were all too willing to encourage.

Kyōka and Minakata, however, appear to have remained steadfast in their use of folklore to critique the modernization project. Kyōka was particularly critical of modern medical practice, which he saw as being motivated by profit rather than the desire to heal: “his interest (besides writing a good story) was not in representing what folk feelings were or still are, but in strategically utilizing them to question what modern feelings had become” (192). Likewise, Minakata considered the destruction of local shrines as tantamount to erasing the history of the common people, leaving no alternative but the government’s “official” version. The role of folk studies, as Minakata understood them, was to preserve what historians gloss over or ignore. In my humble opinion, the attitudes of Kyōka and Minakata still ring true today.

My only reservation about Figal’s worthy and compelling effort is his own tendency to dwell upon prominent scholars such as Inoue, Kyōka, Minakata, and Yanagita. Beyond a few passing references (23, 30), strategic evocations of monsters by the “abiding folk” themselves are conspicuously missing. Without such concrete examples, we cannot be certain whether these major scholars were faithfully representing popular attitudes or simply invoking folk tradition as an idiom for expressing their own concerns.

Figal’s book is without question an important contribution to the intellectual history of the Meiji period and a necessary counterpoint to the standard recitations of progressive reforms. It effectively demonstrates the significance of fantastic and mysterious images during times of transition. It also provides a plausible explanation for Yanagita’s dramatic mid-career shift in focus and how he could be considered both an advocate for local people’s per-

spectives and a major contributor to the nationalist ideology emanating from the center. Finally, by focusing on a range of influential theorists, the book provides a more well-rounded account of the development of folk studies in Japan, transcending the notion that the discipline was invented by Yanagita alone.

Scott SCHNELL
University of Iowa

CHINA

REED, CARRIE E., transl. *Chinese Chronicles of the Strange: The "Nuogao ji."* New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2001. 232 pages. Bibliography, index. Hardcover US\$54.95; ISBN 0-8204-5116-0. (Asian Thought and Culture, vol. 44)

Chinese Chronicles of the Strange is a translation of the "Nuogao ji" (Records of Nuogao), a text featuring accounts and anecdotes on the supernatural and/or the strange. The stories are presented in five volumes, which are part of a large collection of the ninth-century Chinese miscellany entitled *Youyang zazu* written by Duan Chengshi (c. 800–863). Volumes fourteen and fifteen of *Youyang zazu* are entitled "Nuogao ji" and are included in their entirety, a total of seventy accounts. In addition, 78 stories come from the other three volumes entitled "Zhi Nuogao." Some of the "Records of Nuogao" stories have previously been translated into English, notably, for example, the Entry *Xu* 3 (111–13), which Arthur Waley rendered as "Chinese Cindellera."¹ But the present work is the first complete translation of "Nuogao ji" in English, making the entire work accessible to English readers for the first time.

The author writes that "[Records of Nuogao] is a highly worthwhile subject of study for students of folklore and literature who are interested in early informal Chinese narrative. 'Records of Nuogao'... happens to be written in a variety of styles that may prove thought-provoking to teachers and students of Chinese fiction. ... [I]t is useful for students considering issues of change and continuity in the development of early Chinese *xiaoshuo* styles."² Indeed, "Records of Nuogao" is a very intriguing resource of folklore and literature for not only those who are interested in early informal Chinese narrative but also for those interested in the supernatural in general. For example, entry number 596 recounts a merchant with a sore that resembled a person's face:

This merchant had fun by dripping drops of wine into the mouth of the sore whereupon its face would become red. He fed it, and it would eat anything. When it ate a lot, he would feel that the muscles on his shoulder were swollen, and he wondered if that was where its stomach was.(95)

After the merchant put some medicine into the sore, it became a scab and was healed. Such an episode reveals the relationship of supernatural to natural. Through "Records of Nuogao" the reader sees the beliefs of Tang people, customs, folk-belief, and their wary nature as "a realm where the usual limitations of the physical world do not apply, where the grounds of identity and reality constantly shift, where boundaries are real but immaterial at the same time" (14).

The view of the supernatural or supermundane by the Chinese of the ninth century has many similarities to those of other cultures, making this collection a rich source for compar-