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Civilization and Monsters: Spirits of Modernity in Meiji Japan (Asia-Pacific: Culture, Politics, and Society)

Gerald Figal

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Gerald Figal : Civilization and Monsters: Spirits of Modernity in Meiji Japan (Asia-Pacific: Culture, Politics, and Society) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Civilization and Monsters: Spirits of Modernity in Meiji Japan (Asia-Pacific: Culture, Politics, and Society):

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. A must-have for students of the weird. By C. Dunbar Given the popularity of yokai in anime, and anime fandom in the US, it's surprising how few books exist on the topic. *Civilization and Monsters* is definitely a recommended book for those looking into yokai history and lore. It's not so much a history of the creatures, nor is it an index of monsters for reference, though. This book is an exploration of how yokai figured into the modernization of the Meiji period, and how modernity changed both the cultural experience of yokai, and the perception of folklore in Japan. Figal does an amazing job tracing the educational reforms under Arinori, exploring the genesis of both Inoue Enryō's yokaigaku and Yanagita Kunio's minzokugaku schools, and spins a vast, comprehensive historiography of yokai as a product of Japanese culture. Those who have read Foster's "Pandemonium and Parade" will find much more information regarding the mutability of yokai in storytelling, and a much expanded discussion on the historical significance of yokai in the Meiji period. The book also explores the impact of science, social science, cultural exportation, art theory, and education on folklore, which is itself a fascinating look into Japanese history, social anthropology, and psychology.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Meiji Book By Robin C. Brown Absolutely fascinating! Thanks for a fine transaction.

11 of 11 people found the following review helpful. Here there be Monsters By Zack Davisson "Civilization and Monsters" is not a book for casual readers. It is nothing less than the author's dissertation put into book form, with all the readability implied by that. The language is thick and academic, and presented in the form of various defensible arguments as dissertations often are. This is a book only for serious scholars, people who want to study about the subject rather than learn about it, and would make a great reference text for those pursuing similar themes. That being said, the information contained here is brilliant, and Gerald Figal clearly knows his stuff. The subject is a fascinating one, the transformation of Japanese folklore during the modernization of the Meiji period where legislation was made regarding the non-existence of traditional creatures such as the mountain-goblin tengu. The Japanese government was embarrassed and worried about the persistence of such beliefs, especially as Japan emerged as a modern nation, and worked to erase them and replace them with scientific thinking. As could be expected, "Civilization and Monsters" goes heavily into the themes of Inoue Enryō, the so-called "Dr. Monster" whose seminal six-volume "A Study of Ykai" attempted to cure Japan of its ancient superstitions by showing how monsters were nothing more than psychology, and his counterpart Kunio Yanagita, whose "Tono Monogatari" was the foundation of serious folklore studies in Japan, as well as Minakata Kumagusu, the botanist who felt that there was still room for mystery in science, as seen by the ever-changing slime molds he so desired. Later authors such as Lafcadio Hearn are also touched upon, but they are more footnotes than focus. This is a hard book to read in one sitting, because the information is so thick it can not easily be absorbed. The author assumes that readers will have a some-what solid foundation on the subject already, as this is a graduate level study book and not suitable for beginners. He also makes heavy use of Japanese terminology, which while he does explain the words could possibly confuse non-Japanese speakers. However, if you have the necessary background then this book will be fascinating for you, as well as a good opportunity to learn some new words specific to the subject.

Monsters, ghosts, the supernatural, the fantastic, the mysterious. These are not usually considered the stuff of modernism. More often they are regarded as inconsequential to the study of the modern, or, at best, seen as representative of traditional beliefs that are overcome and left behind in the transformation toward modernity. In *Civilization and Monsters* Gerald Figal asserts that discourse on the fantastic was at the heart of the historical configuration of Japanese modernity that the representation of the magical and mysterious played an integral part in the production of modernity beginning in Meiji Japan (1868-1912). After discussing the role of the fantastic in everyday Japan at the eve of the Meiji period, Figal draws new connections between folklorists, writers, educators, state ideologues, and policymakers, all of whom crossed paths in a contest over supernatural terrain. He shows the ways in which a determined Meiji state was engaged in a battle to suppress, denigrate, manipulate, or reincorporate folk belief as part of an effort toward the consolidation of a modern national culture. Modern medicine and education, functioning as a means for the state to exercise its power, redefined folk practices as a source of evil. Diverse local spirits were supplanted by a new Japanese Spirit, embodied by the newly constituted emperor, the supernatural source of the nation's strength. The monsters of folklore were identified, catalogued, and characterized according to a new regime of modern reason. But whether engaged to support state power and forge a national citizenry or to critique the arbitrary nature of that power, the fantastic, as Figal maintains, is the constant condition of Japanese modernity in all its contradictions. Furthermore, he argues, modernity in general is born of fantasy in ways that have scarcely been recognized. Bringing unexplored and provocative new ideas to the Japan specialist, *Civilization and Monsters* will also appeal to readers concerned with issues of modernity in general.

Gerald Figal's powerful study persuades us that superstition, monsters, and the fantastic are at the very heart of Japanese modernity, an argument conveyed in splendid fashion. This is an exciting, fresh, and aptly provocative work. James Fujii, University of California at Irvine