Teaching Cultural, Historical, and Religious Landscapes with the Anime

By Ronald S. Green and Susan J. Bergeron

In 2020, the animated movie *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba the Movie: Mugen Train* (Japanese: *Gekijō-ban "Kimetsu no Yaiba" Mugen Ressha-hen*) was No. 1 in the world for box office revenue.[1] In the same year, it became the highest-grossing movie in Japanese history, surpassing *Spirited Away*, which had reigned No. 1 since 2001. Just as Miyazaki Hideo's animated classic *Spirited Away* has been a staple for teaching about Japanese folklore and culture in classrooms around the world, *Demon Slayer* is destined to achieve the same status. This is also true of the popular *Demon Slayer* animated series, available via online streaming. The authors of this article will use *Demon Slayer* as required viewing in our upcoming education abroad trip to Japan titled, Pop Culture Landscapes in Japan: Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka.[2] For students participating in this program, we will offer the religious studies class Japanese Popular Culture: Constructions of Religious and Historical Identity and a geography course called Topics in Cultural Landscape Study: Popular Culture Landscapes in Japan. Both of these courses are part of the Asian studies program at our university and share similar material to courses like Japan, a Cultural Odyssey taught at other schools.[3] This article explains some of the concepts and themes covered in our classes using *Demon Slayer* as a springboard likely to stimulate student attention and conversation. It is not necessary for students to watch the entire series or any particular episodes to benefit from these examples. Images and clips can be shared in classes. For our education abroad classes, we will show the movie, which is widely available for purchase online and from other outlets.

There are many points in the movie and series that can be useful in classrooms of various disciplines. For example, a number of scholars have pointed out that members of the Demon Slayer Corps wear Taishō-period military uniforms, and there is a leitmotif of characters following orders to kill without questioning, which the main protagonist opposes. It is easy to find parallels with the Japanese Army during this and surrounding time periods. Much could also be said about the transformation of Nezuko, the main female protagonist, into an *oni* (demon) in terms of granting agency to abjection and constructing an alternative view of the female body for undermining strict gender norms in Japan. While the series is rich with such potential teaching materials, we will focus on the cultural, historical, and religious landscapes as used in our courses, both in terms of physical geography and representations of traditional cultural icons such as *yōkai*.

Background and Plot of *Demon Slayer*

In 2021, Gotōge Koyoharu (b. 1989), the creator of the *Demon Slayer* franchise, was the only Japanese person to make *Time* magazine's 100 Most Influential People. This was the first time a manga (Japanese graphic novel) artist made the list. The franchise now includes manga, video games, a popular TV series entering its second season, a feature-length movie, merchandise, and more. In addition, she received the 2020 Noma Publishing Culture Award and the Newcomer Award for Fine Arts (Media Arts Division) for her contribution to the entire publishing industry due to the success of *Demon Slayer*.

Tanjiro's family wave goodbye outside their mountain home. Season 1, episode 1.

Telegraph lines tower over the Taishō Era village. Season 1, episode 1, "Cruelty".

Figure 1. Nighttime streetscape in Taishō Era Tokyo. Season 1, episode 7, "Muzan Kibutsuji."

Demon Slayer is set in the Taishō period (1912–1926), and much of its *mise-en-scène* (plot and visual settings) involves the cultural circumstances of that historical period. To summarize the plot of the series, the main character, Tanjiro Kamado, is the oldest son and successor to his late father, who made and sold charcoal to support the family. This vocation comes to be associated with fire spirituality throughout the series. One day when Tanjiro is not home, his family is murdered by a demon. The only other survivor is his younger sister, Nezuko, who had been turned into a demon.

A swordsman and demon slayer named Giyū Tomioka saves Tanjiro when he is attacked by Nezuko. Giyū tries to defeat Nezuko but realizes that the bond between the brother and sister is still strong and that the demon

sister still has emotions. Seeking a way to turn his sister back into a human, Tanjiro then goes to Sakonji Urokodaki, a "trainer" of demon slayers, and spends two years practicing swordsmanship. After that time, Tanjiro undergoes a screening test and joins the Demon Slayer Corps while carrying Nezuko in a box on his back. Demon slayers have taken on the task of hunting down demons, overcoming their magical abilities with martial arts skills, thereby killing them. In the episodes that follow, Tanjiro battles various demons, sometimes with the help of Nezuko and other demon slayers, but remains ambivalent about killing.

Figure 2. Tanjiro arrives on Mount Fujikasane in a forest covered in flowering wisteria. Season 1, episode 4, "Final Selection."

Reading the Cultural Landscape

The viewing of an anime like *Demon Slayer* as part of an introductory geography or anthropology course can be a valuable approach in introducing the concept of a cultural landscape, the imprints that cultural practices leave on the places we inhabit. In preparation for field experiences in cultural landscape interpretation in Japan, assigning a work like *Demon Slayer* offers students the opportunity to identify elements of a cultural landscape in visual form. In the anime, the creators have carefully selected the landscape features that are depicted, and the choice of these features and the meanings that those elements convey can lead to insightful discussion into the ways in which people imbue places with meaning.

Understanding how the landscapes we move through and live in reflect culture can be a powerful tool in exploring cultural concepts in geography and other disciplines. The ability to "read" a landscape can lead to compelling insights into how a people inhabit, adapt, and modify the world around them.[4] In discussing the concepts of a cultural landscape with introductory geography students, utilizing examples of constructed landscapes of meaning, such as in paintings, film, or anime, can be valuable in demonstrating how to identify and interpret cultural elements. *Demon Slayer* provides several excellent opportunities to explore how the anime's creators use the landscape itself to hint at themes within the story.

As mentioned above, *Demon Slayer* is set during the Taishō Era in Japan, a period of rapid change that saw the continuation of the diffusion of modern Western technology and culture into the country that had begun in the Meiji period. As Western influence spread outward from Japan's urban centers, these new ideas and technologies were often met with resistance and reluctance to deviate from traditional cultural and religious practices.

In the first episode of *Demon Slayer*, the role of the landscape portrayal in providing visual cues to the Taishō setting and even narrative themes in the anime is illustrated by Tanjiro's journey from his isolated home down the mountain to the town to sell charcoal for his family. Both the Kamado family home and Tanjiro's clothing are strong expressions of the traditional Japanese lifestyle of the rural areas of Japan during the Taishō Era, and contrast with the Western elements that mix with the traditional in the urban areas that Tanjiro visits in the anime. The telegraph poles and lines that subtly hint at the arrival of new technologies in Japan are prominent in the scene where Tanjiro looks down the snow-covered street in the town, even as they parallel the traditional wooden shops and homes.

Perhaps more than any other scene in *Demon Slayer*, Tanjiro's walk through the brightly lit nighttime urban landscape of Tokyo highlights the dizzying mix of traditional Japanese and modern Western culture that was characteristic of Japanese cities in the Taishō Era (Figure 1). The crowded streets are filled with people of all ages in a wide variety of fashions, from kimonos and *haori* coats to Western suits and dresses. The modern, Western-style buildings that line the streets, with their brightly colored traditional banner signs, would be recognizable even in today's Tokyo. In discussing this scene with students and calling attention to the visual details of the streetscape, it is possible to demonstrate how changes within a culture are reflected in the layers of the cultural landscape, as in the mixing of building and clothing styles.

In addition to the landscape clues that hint at the historical setting and larger cultural forces at work in *Demon Slayer*, the cultural landscapes portrayed in the anime also give visual expression to aspects of Japanese spiritual and religious traditions that are reflected in Japan's unique cultural landscapes. An example of this can be seen in the setting for the beginning of Tanjiro's trial to become a demon slayer. In season 1, episode 4, the mountain where the selection trial is held, Fujikasane, is covered in wisteria, and Tanjiro makes a note of the flowers as he moves through this space to the top of the stairs and into the starting area for the trial.

Wisteria Flowers for Restraining Oni

There is much fan speculation on the internet about why demons are restrained by wisteria flowers in the series. *Demon Slayer* features many scenes and references to this, and wisterias are in bloom year-round on Mount Fujikasane (literally "wisteria attack") when aspiring demon slayers train (Figure 2). Fans have suggested that demons hate the smell, that there is a toxic ingredient in the flowers, and that wisteria are exposed to a lot of sunlight, which is a weak point for demons. Perhaps the best of the fan explanations for teaching about Japan through *Demon Slayer* is that wisteria is in the legume family whose *mame* ("beans") are used during the *Setsubun* ("seasonal division") festival in February to throw at oni's eyes because of a double entendre, "oni eyes" (mame). This practice is also known as *mame*, meaning "destroy demons." The second kanji in the latter compound, meaning "destroy," is the one found on the back of Tanjiro's uniform jacket.

While this makes a good teaching point about Setsubun folklore, we would like to point to another possibility not mentioned by fans. In traditional Japanese culture, the name "wisteria" (*fuji*) is associated with "kindness," "intoxication by love," "faithfulness," and "never leaving." Since ancient times in Japan, it has been customary to plant wisteria with pine trees, in which case the wisteria is compared to women and the pine to men. Wisteria flowers are reminiscent of a glamorous woman in *furisode* (literally "swinging sleeves"), a style of kimono distinguishable by its long sleeves. It is said that a wisteria wrapping around a pine tree is associated with a terrifying obsession, and once caught, one will never be released. For this reason, wisteria has been known as *kesshite hanarenai* ("never leave"). Wisteria can be seen as auspicious because it grows strong and tall, and fuji (wisteria) is a double entendre with "immortality" (fuji). However, it is

Figure 3. Tanjiro and his mother watch as his father performs the *kagura* dance. Season 1, episode 19, "Hinokami "("Dance of the Fire God").

unlucky to send wisteria to a sick person because another double entendre with fuji is "incurable disease" (*fuji no yamai*). The wisteria has been the subject of tanka and other Japanese poems since ancient times.

Demon Slayers as Shamans

In academic study, the idea of what a shaman is has changed somewhat over the years. In his classical works**,** Mircea Eliada attempts to create a worldwide view of shamanism focusing on ecstatic trance in hunting and gathering societies for dealing with what he sees as timeless religious concerns about the nature of reality. Later studies of shamanism shift away from the ecstatic element, and instead, mastery over spirits and spirit possession come to define the role of the shaman in society.[5] While in season 1, episode 3 Tanjiro Kamado uses the ecstatic practice of *take no gyō* ("waterfall asceticism") found in both Japanese Buddhism and Shintō practice, the series largely has the same focus as the later shamanism studies do: mastery over spirits and spirit possession.

Studies specific to Japanese shamanism came about relatively late. These suggest, as Eliada found, that one became a shaman either by heredity or by feeling a powerful calling, both followed by initiation and intense training by older shamans or spirits.[6] While Tanjiro enters into intense training by older demon slayers, his reason seems to be neither heredity nor a calling, but a drive to turn his sister back into a human. However, as the series unfolds, we learn that his father had performed a *kagura* ("god entertainment") dance to arouse or shake the fire kami as his ancestral clan had done for generations (Figure 3).

Like Tanjiro, then, researchers suggest that shamans are born to their role, "as is evident in certain marks distinguishing them from ordinary people. For instance, a shaman may be born with more bones in his body—e.g., teeth or fingers—than other people."[7]A birthmark on the face and elsewhere is one such mark in East Asian and other shamanism.[8] As noted, Tanjiro's family works with fire. There is a Japanese folk belief that says if a pregnant woman stares at a fire, her baby will be born with a birthmark.[9] In Tanjiro's case, he received the scars on his forehead from his younger brother when he was young. However, we learn that his father had a similar birthmark or scar, and we also find that other demon slayers have similar marks on their faces. Tanjiro's scar later becomes even more pronounced when he is injured in the same spot in the battle with a demon. Researchers say it is typically in adolescence when the spirits begin to appear in the life of a shaman.[10] Although Tanjiro's exact age is unclear, the author reveals in an interview that he is thirteen years old at the beginning of the story and ages to fifteen as the adventures unfold.[11]

Studies on Japanese shamanism have focused mainly on female spiritualists, finding that there are two main types: *jinja miko* or *kannagi* (those linked to a Shintō shrine), who play a role in *kagura* and *yudate* (water purification) of worshippers; and *kichiyoshi miko* (wandering shamanic practitioners), who act as intermediaries between kami and people. We can point out in class that both historically and to the present day, there are also wandering shaman-like practitioners in Shugendō who are mostly male. Shugendō mixes Shintō, Buddhist, and Daoist spiritual practices to bring about balance and harmony in individuals and society.

Perhaps the most well-known and often-cited scholar of Japanese shamanism and folklore after WWII is Hori Ichirō (1910–1974), who focused on the social function of shamans, particularly in connection with the occurrence of abnormal social events. Hori describes the role of Japanese shamans in terms of making *ajasutomento* ("adjustments") in society to specific historical conditions of *anomi* (anomy), that is, social instability and anxiety, loss of social values, or collapse of the social structures. This fits the character of Tanjiro in *Demon Slayer*, operating under such conditions in the Taishō period as mentioned above. In this way, the shaman is a mediator in particularly difficult personal and social situations.[12]

Kami, Oni, Yōkai, and Demon Slayers

Traditionally and throughout the ages, Japanese people have conceived and represented supernatural forces in various anthropomorphic, animalistic, and geographical forms. When discussing such concepts in introductory religious studies courses, it is often useful to look at how supernatural entities are represented in literature and other media. For example, kami are the subject of veneration and awe in Shintō. In Japanese, the word "kami" can generally denote "gods," like those of ancient Greece, or "God," as in monotheistic religions. However, as used in Shintō, the meaning of "kami" refers to a particular Japanese conceptualization that is different from either polytheistic or animistic notions. Today, most Shintō kami do not dominate or intimidate people, but this was not always the case. In the past, rituals were performed to placate their anger. Historically, Japanese have prayed at a kami's shrine in hopes that the kami will grant wishes or maintain good weather and other conditions.

There is a saying in Shintō that there are "eight million kami." This number is not to be taken literally, but denotes that they are everywhere. That being the case, are oni (demons), which is the word used in *Demon Slayer*, and yōkai (ghosts and monsters) kami? This is not an easy question to answer, but in class we can describe changes in Japanese beliefs about spiritual entities over time as follow and relate to *Demon Slayer*.[13]

Defeat of the Earth Spider (*Tsuchigumo*), by Katsukawa Shuntei (Shôkôsai), 1770–1824. Source: *Museum of Fine Arts Boston* website at https://tinyurl.com/unzu38s7.

The Paleolithic period, before 14,000 BCE, has been called "the age of the kami." According to the two main foundational works for Shintō—the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*—this is when Amaterasu's grandson, Ninigi, and Ninigi's great-grandson, Jimmu, legendary first emperor of Japan, were active on earth. Based on excavations, the Jōmon period (14,000–300 BCE) was a time of hunting and gathering when there was belief in animism, and the spiritual importance of natural elements was common. During the Yayoi period (300 BCE–300 CE), wet rice agriculture was introduced to Japan. Archeologists have dated mirrors, swords, and magatama jewels to this time and believe the shaman queen Himiko was the leader of an area called Yamatai (ca. 190). Ise Shrine, which houses the Sun Kami Amaterasu, was founded in the fourth century BCE, according to the *Nihon Shoki*. In this period, the taboo on death began, and there was a spiritual importance placed on rice. During the Kofun and Asuka periods (300–710 CE), tomb mounds were built for leaders. Many of these mounds are keyhole-shaped, although the significance of this is unclear. During this time, Buddhism was officially introduced to Japan. The *Kojiki* (712) and the *Nihon Shoki* (720) were written during the Nara period (710–794 CE). With the spread of Buddhism, Shintō shrines were created in imitation of temple construction, and soon, images of kami were created in the form of Buddhist paintings and statues. Festivals also changed to include chanting in a similar manner to the reading of Buddhist sūtras.

During the Heian period (794–1185 CE), kami were matched to their so-called "original forms" as buddhas and bodhisattvas. Buddhist priests were also charged with the task of manipulating natural forces and engaged in a spiritual version of rainmaking. In the Kamakura and Muromachi periods (1185–1573 CE), Shugendō mountain asceticism became popular in the Kumano Mountains, and ascetics traveled to villages, performing rituals for purification for evil influences, similar in that way to the Demon Slayer Corps.

During the Tokugawa period, also called the Edo period (1603–1867 CE,) people found new careers in cities, away from places where traditional rural kami were enshrined. In cities, they sought kami of good luck to help them in their new endeavors. Under these circumstances, various kami, including the Inari fox spirits, suddenly became popular among people praying for money and asking for other personal wishes to come true. Scrolls were made describing and depicting yōkai-like *tsuchigumo*, the spider yōkai that appears in *Demon Slayer*. These images began to become standard and likely helped people feel more at ease with their cartoonish figures. The scared demon slayer Zenitsu in the series says the older woman living in the wisteria crest house is a yōkai, and there are many overt and subtle references to them in *Demon Slayer*. The Edo period is also when Kyokutei Bakin (1767–1848) wrote the famous 106-volume *Nansō Satomi Hakkenden* (*The Legend of the Eight Samurai Hounds*) that Tanjiro mentions at the end of season 1, episode 13.[14] It's interesting to note that in that epic, each of the eight samurai hounds has a bruise somewhere on his body like Tanjiro and some other members of the Demon Slayer Corps. One of the most obvious adaptations and extended treatments of yōkai in the series is of the Spider Family encounter that spans three episodes.

The Spider Family and Scary Creatures Past and Present

Perhaps the most bizarre and downright shocking scene in the entire *Kojiki* and *Shoku Nihongi*, which is loaded with them, is the battle between the Yamato imperial forces and the Tsuchigumo, or Earth Spiders. The Tsuchigumo are indigenous people of Japan, and as Michael Dylan Foster points out, they along with other yōkai are often based on marginalized people.[15] As the imperial army treks across Honshu "conquering" various localities to claim

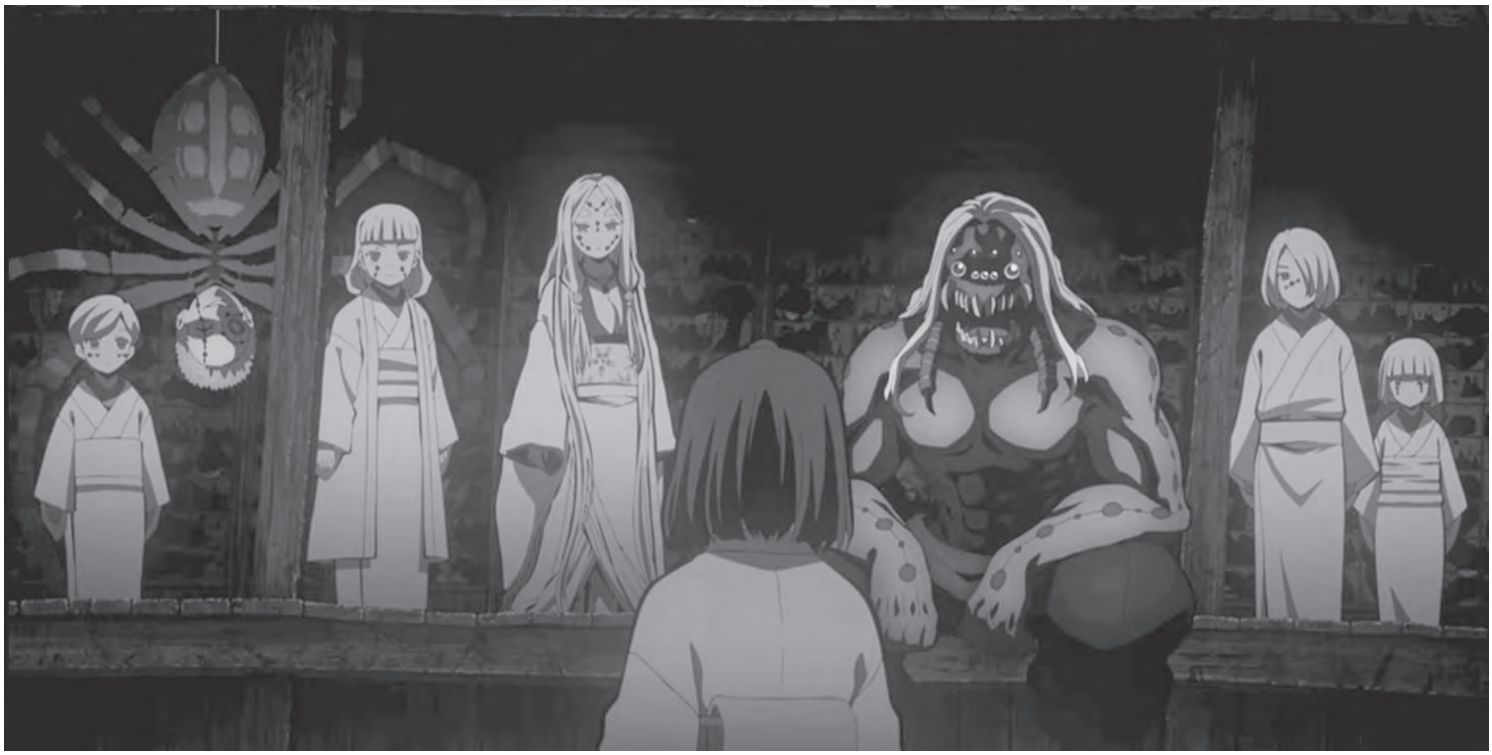

Figure 4. Members of the spider family welcome a new recruit. Season 1, episode 20, "Pretend Family."

as their own, such encounters appear to modern readers as campaigns of ethnic cleansing accompanied by slurs. Likewise, when the female creator kami Izanami is dying, vomit and excrement become non-Yamato ethnic people of Japan. When the army encounters the Tsuchigumo, which have humanlike heads and spiderlike bodies, they smash them with "hammer swords." Historical Tsuchigumo depictions can be found in Foster's book and online. These can be useful for comparisons with members of the spider family in *Demon Slayer* (Figure 4). We would like to note, however, that as in other places in the series, the author Gotōge reworks the earlier mythology for modern times, making the spider family victims to be pitied even in being forced into a horrific situation. While Tanjiro consistently presses this point, other members of the Demon Slayer Corps refuse to accept any thinking that is not officially sanctioned by the institution.

Conclusion

In terms of its broader cultural context, *Demon Slayer* can also be viewed as opposing current Shintō fundamentalism that has reemerged in the form of postwar Japanese nationalism. This trend is seen in collaborations by the Liberal Democratic Party and the National Association of Shrines to restore Shintō as it existed before the Allied Occupation. The political agenda of these groups opposes postwar gains in democratic institutions and individual rights.[16] Analogous to today, the Taishō Era was a time of new gains in democracy and individual freedom, which Shintō- and Buddhist-supported nationalism destroyed in 1925. As the main protagonist in *Demon Slayer*, Tanjiro's continuous opposition of uncritical obedience to higher political authorities and those who fail to recognize the importance of an individual's circumstances gives an antiauthoritarian tone to the entire franchise.

In preparing for our short-term study abroad experience to Japan, focused on the theme of pop culture landscapes, we recognize the importance of selecting representative works of Japanese pop culture media that lay the groundwork for the concepts students will explore in multiple courses. As seen through the examples above, *Demon Slayer* is an excellent choice as a common media assignment for students to watch and discuss. Both the story and visual elements of the anime are rich with symbols of Japanese religious and cultural traditions, and the landscape settings in several episodes highlight the larger political and social changes that marked the Taishō Era. ■

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NOTES

1. See https://tinyurl.com/zbwh6xmt.
2. For information on this study abroad, see https://tinyurl.com/cs2t98ny.
3. Green also teaches a class on yōkai that will use this series in the future. The class syllabus is available at https://tinyurl.com/5bxnfzwj.
4. See Lewis, "Axioms for Reading the Landscape," Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, and Tuan, "Perceptual and Cultural Geography," 878–881 for a more thorough discussion of landscape interpretation.
5. For example, Roberte Hamayon, Åke Hultkrantz, and Emilio Comba.
6. For example, Yamaji Aizan, Yanagita Kunio, Origuchi Shinobu, and Makayama Tarō.
7. See https://tinyurl.com/2przv927.
8. *Shamanism: An Encyclopedia of World Beliefs, Practices, and Culture*, ed. Mariko Namba Walter, et al. vol. 1, 205.
9. Gwladys Hughes Simon, "Some Japanese Beliefs and Home Remedies," *The Journal of American Folklore* vol. 65, no. 257 (1952): 281–293, https://tinyurl.com/u3h35zrp.
10. See https://tinyurl.com/2przv927.
11. School of Jump (スクールオブジャンプ), "Sukujan Home Room Jump New Order Campaign!," "Kimetsu no Yaiba," "Samon-kun wa Summoner," "Black Clover," and "Yuuna-san of Yuragiso," last modified October 31, 2016.
12. See Marianna Zanetta, "Shamanic Practices in Contemporary Japan," https://tinyurl.com/yzaku2um.
13. See Green for a more detailed description of changes in beliefs over time periods.
14. A first English translation of *The Legend of the Eight Samurai Hounds* is being made and is available at https://legendofeightdogs.wordpress.com/.
15. Foster, *The Book of Yōkai*, 129.
16. See Mullins, *Yasukuni Fundamentalism*, for an extensive treatment of the trend.

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