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Far East on Film

Rich Johnson

Week 3

STRANGE APPARITIONS

A look at Far Eastern spooks inherent in ancient lore. Through Japanese woodcuts and modern examples of manga – from Katsushika Hokusai, Junji Ito – examples will be shown of traditional and modern ghost stories that have had an influence on Far Eastern films over the years including Yokai monsters, anthologies (portmanteau) and the rise of J-horror.

Main films:

Japan

Kwaidan (1964)

Director(s): Masaki Kobayashi **Studio(s):** Ninjin Club

Ring (1998)

Director(s): Hideo Nakata

Studio(s): Ringu / Rasen Production Committee

Pulse (2001)

Director(s): Kiyoshi Kurosawa

Studio(s): Daiei Film / NTV Network / Hakuhodo / Imagica

Hong Kong

A Chinese Ghost Story (1987)

Director(s): Ching Siu-tung

Studio(s): Film Workshop

Hong Kong/Singapore

The Eye (2002)

Director(s): The Pang Brothers - Danny Pang Phat
and Oxide Pang Chun

Studio(s): Applause Pictures



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Notes:

Lafcadio Hearn (author, translator, and teacher) American-Japanese: aka Koizumi Yakumo (born: 1850, died: 1904).

Greek-born and Irish-raised, Hearn became one of America's most well-known writers; eventually becoming the beloved cultural icon Koizumi Yakumo in 1896, just as Japan transitioned from an ancient feudal society into an industrial power.

Known primarily for introducing Japanese culture and literature to the West, his collections of legends and folklore help further define him as the "master of yōkai stories".

Folklore has existed as a means to understand our own existence, passed down from generation to generation.

At their most extreme, anxieties and fear in society have manifested more ghoulish tales, giving birth to monsters, ghosts and demons.

Folklore (Japan: Minkan denshō, transl. "transmissions among the folk"). Interest in the fantastic and horrific creatures that populate Japanese folklore still resides in modern horror.

The monstrous stories (and imagery) are unforgettable; these mukashi-banashi (tales of "long ago") invented and spun by writers during the Edo Period (and earlier) in ghost stories known as "kaidan".

In Japan ghosts are known as 'yūrei'. There are many categories.

There are also 'yōkai'; which is a collective name used to describe the supernatural; ghosts and other unexplained phenomena. In ancient times, people attributed negative and mysterious events to the actions of such yōkai.

The difference between the two is that the yūrei are tethered to a place or person, often in a vengeful act, while the yōkai are free to wander the land.

Yōkai represented darkness during the Edo period of Japan but, over time, they were accepted as something more light-hearted as artists and writers created their own yōkai in literature, artwork and eventually film.

Cultural events known as *hyaku-monogatari* or (*100 stories*) grew out of these creations where people would gather and share yōkai tales. For each story that was told, a lantern was extinguished. After the 100th and final lantern was extinguished, the surrounding area was plunged into a darkness, from which a yōkai would appear.

This craze is further illustrated by Toriyama Sekien's supernatural bestiary of a book *Gazu Hyakki Yagyō* (*The Illustrated Night Parade of a Hundred Demons*, 1776). Echoes of the yōkai parade can be seen in Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* (2001).



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One of the most infamous designs is ‘rokurokubi’, a disturbing female entity whose neck seems to stretch... endlessly.

Kwaidan (1965) is a masterpiece of Japanese cinema and portmanteau horror. The film boasts some of the most striking set pieces and cinematography, melding traditional Japanese folklore with flawless film direction.

Premiered at the Yūrakuzā Theater — the most prestigious theater in central Tokyo — on December 29, 1964. General release (in Japan) for *Kwaidan* began on February 27, 1965.

Similar films *Yotsuya Kaidan* (*Yotsuya Ghost Story*, 1927) by director Kiichirō Satō; arguably, the most famous Japanese ghost story of all time. *Oiwa* is an onryō (“vengeful spirit”) a ghost who seeks vengeance.

She shares common traits of the Japanese ghost — white burial kimono, long ragged hair, and deathly pale face (a touch of indigo), the ghost makeup in kabuki theatre.

Kobayashi’s horror segments, in particular, are based mainly on stories from the collection of Japanese folk tales, *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things* (1904) by Lafcadio Hearn.

A yōkai Japanese folklore known as yurei are (persistent) ghosts haunting a specific location at a specific time and turning their victims insane. Their appearance is often of wearing a white kimono, black hair and lifeless limbs.

In *Ring* (1998), *Sadako* is heavily influenced by the concepts of yurei.

Both J-horrors, *Ring* and *Pulse* (2001) are not only reminiscent of folklore but also Japanese urban legends, reinventing these tales for the digital age. The ‘Red Room’ curse in particular.

The Eye (2002). The Pang brothers were inspired to write the film after reading a Hong Kong newspaper report 13 years previously, in which a 16-year-old girl, who had received a corneal transplant, tragically committed suicide soon after her operation.

A Chinese Ghost Story (1987) is (loosely) based on a short story from the Qing dynasty, *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (1740) by writer Pu Songling. It also takes influence from the 1960 Shaw Brothers Studio film *The Enchanting Shadow* (1960).

Hong Kong pop star, Leslie Cheung (1956-2003) lived and performed openly as a gay man with crucial (breakout) roles in *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) and Wong Kar-wai’s *Happy Together* (1997).

The 2011 remake (produced by Tsui Hark) is dedicated to the memory of Leslie Cheung.