

Formation of the Demon of Pestilence and its Influence in Japan:

— Etymology of the Word 鬼 (Oni or Ogre) and its Relationship
with Onryo (Grudge-Bearing Spirits) and Goryo (Evil Spirits) —

YAMAGUCHI Kenji

The Chinese character 鬼 came to be read “oni” in Japan when worship of the five chief demons of pestilence, 五瘟神, symbolizing the spirits of five people who died tragic deaths that came to be venerated as a guardian spirit to protect people from misfortune and harm like plagues, was introduced to Japan from China around the 8th century. The Chinese 瘟, “uən” changed to “oni” in Japan. Based on this theory, this paper will look at the relationship between Japanese ogres and two mythological spirits — onryo (grudge-bearing spirits) and goryo (evil spirits) — both of which became known between the 8th and 9th centuries with reference to materials from the Heian Period.

First, how the concept of the five chief demons of pestilence was formed amid the development of a folk ritual to drive away devils and diseases will be introduced. Second, the following five pieces of evidence that suggest that the demons were brought from China to Japan will be discussed in detail.

(1) According to the dictionary compiled in the Heian Period titled *Wamyosho*, 瘧鬼 (gyakuki) was defined as “the spirit or ogre of pestilence,” whereas it was 瘟鬼 in the original.

(2) In *Manyoshu*, or *The Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*, the 鬼 that appears in a foreword written in Chinese seems to refer to the spirit of pestilence.

(3) Ogres mentioned in *Nihon Ryoiki*, or *The Miraculous Stories from the Japanese Buddhist Tradition*, are either 疫神 or 疫鬼, meaning the spirit or ogre of pestilence, which are other names for 瘟神 or 瘟鬼 respectively.

(4) A ritual to drive away the spirit of pestilence that often took place in the 8th and 9th centuries was actually meant for 怨靈 (grudge-bearing spirits). These characters were read “oni ryau,” and the word was a synonym of “oni.”

(5) 御靈社 was originally written 五靈社, which meant “a shrine to worship the five chief demons of pestilence from China.”

From these proofs, it has been concluded that the ritual for onryo and goryo in the Heian Period was to worship oni and that it was a variation of the original Chinese version.