

Undergraduate Course on Japanese Folk and Mythology

A project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
Interdisciplinary Studies at George Mason University.

ENGH 315: Japanese Folklore and Mythology

Class meeting time: Tuesdays and Thursdays from 2:00 PM - 3:15 PM

COURSE DESCRIPTION & GOALS

This course will explore the rich narrative traditions of Japan. We begin with mythological material from two ancient texts created during Japan's Nara Period (710-794 AD) called the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki*; the earliest surviving texts produced in Japan. We will look at some of the many folktales that have emerged throughout Japanese history and have been collected and chronicled by the first pioneer of Japanese folklore scholarship, Yanagita Kunio. We will look at how these narratives have developed and adapted over time as well as their continuing relevance in modern society in a variety of forms.

During this course, students will be expected to engage analytically with the material, particularly the texts of the various myths and folktales. Students will learn to identify common symbols, motifs, and other patterns that appear in Japanese folklore and mythology and what these elements say about Japanese culture, values, and worldview in the past and present. Students will also learn to identify these patterns when Japanese folklore and mythology is presented in other non-literary formats.

The first part of this course will follow a genre-historical pattern as we introduce some of the basic concepts of Japanese mythology, beginning with Japan's creation myth and cosmology, the pantheon of major gods and spirits, collectively known as *Kami*, and the Shinto tradition. We will also discuss a major figure in Japanese folklore and mythology known as the *yokai*. We will then move on to the introduction of Buddhism into Japan and its effects on Japanese folklore and mythology by examining several folktales and legends with strong Buddhist motifs and morals.

From here, we will move into a major genre of Japanese folklore that is characterized by a strong warrior culture. This genre includes major legends and epics that focus on various types of warriors and other military heroes. We will read several of these types of narratives and explore how they reflect the prominent military culture of Japan and the values and views associated with it.

Next, we will examine Japanese folklore in a wider context. We will study the scholarship of Japanese folktales that has developed within the last century, analyzing the various types of tales. We will also compare these Japanese tale types to those of familiar Western folktales. We will end the course by looking at more modern representations of Japanese folklore and mythology in theatre, film, and television.