Portrayals and Prejudice Concerning Women in Folktales:

A Comparative Study of Japanese and American University Students

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Abstract

This project examines select folktales that have influence in the United States and Japan respectively, both for their purveyance today and due to their "monstrous" and sometimes demonic portrayal of the female. In order to understand how these portrayals have developed, to grasp its scope and the effects it has had on society, we also look at their historical context and how they have been involved in the systematic discrimination of, and in the most serious cases, the condemnation of women. Viewing folktales and portrayals of women from two distinct cultures and histories allows us to examine the roots of gender based social power structures that still exist today. By further incorporating dialogue around such folktales and their full historical context into public education, perhaps as we have outlined, a healthier dialogue concerning gender based power structures in society could be reached. In order to get a general idea about how American and Japanese people perceive folktales and gender issues, their connection and how they feel about its potential should it be studied in education, we have surveyed university students in each respective country. In short, our findings suggest that the majority in these two groups of university students recognize a lack of inclusion of these studies in their education while also viewing these studies as beneficial to understanding the respective societies and cultures connected to those folktales.

Introduction

Folktales can be regarded as a kind of window into the common perception of underlying issues in their respective cultures and the various hierarchies and powers present. As such it seems only logical that this window could be used as a tool for understanding the power structures of a relative historical period of a given culture as well as how they have carried over into society today. In our examination of select figures of folktales that are common in the United States and in Japan respectively, we highlight not just the influence of gendered power structures but also how these portrayals have carried over into modern society. In order to accurately grasp how people today perceive these same female figures of folk tales, we have conducted a survey of American and Japanese university students and discussed the results accordingly. Due to time and resource constraints, our survey is limited to university students.

    1.   **Significance of the Study**

We have taken a number of Japanese Language and Cultural Courses both at CSUMB and at respective universities while studying abroad in Japan, and one important thing we have learned from our education is that you can come to understand the circumstances of that culture much better by immersing oneself in that country's folklore. During our study abroad, something that really caught our attention was how characters, specifically women, were portrayed in folktales. From this, the connection between portrayals of groups in folktales and how those groups are regarded by society at large became clear to us. What we hope to gain from this research is key insight into what effect folktales can have on university students' perception on education and social issues. We also wish to see if university students feel that cultural

misunderstandings can be mitigated with prior background knowledge concerning a given

country's folklore.

2.   Research Questions

1. How do American and Japanese college students differ in their awareness

of folktales' influence on the perception of women in their respective

cultures?

2. How do folktales connect with social structures of power?

3.   Research Background

3.1.   **Defining Folklore**

According to the American Folklore Society (AFS), "Folklore is the traditional art,

literature, knowledge, and practice that is disseminated largely through oral communication and

behavioral example", and folk traditions are the things that people traditionally believe , do,

know, make, and say (AFS, n.d.). Needless to say, the extent of the discipline of folklore is vast,

and a folktale itself is merely one form of folklore.

Defining what constitutes a folktale is by no means simple due to there being much

debate within the field of Folkloristics. This difficulty of classification is mentioned both by Stith

Thompson, a deceased American scholar of Folklore, and Jun'ichi Oda, a Professor at the Tokyo

University of Foreign Studies, the latter of which attributes this difficulty to it being more a of a

dispute of genre (Oda, 2006). Thompson, ILCAA, and Kunio Yanagita, who is largely considered

the father of Japanese Folkloristics, all provide definitions with very similar defining criteria as

to what folktales are, that being stories which were originally told amongst the folk/people, large

by word of mouth (Thompson, 1946)(Yanagita, et al., 2013)(Oda, 2006).

Both Thompson and Yanagita also bring up another important defining trait of folktales in their own separate works: the inherent plasticity of the tales themselves. A particular folktale can be found to have regionally differing versions for a number of reasons such as translation and localization; furthermore, previously oral stories will be archived, becoming written works. As Thompson argues in his folktale anthology, *the Folktale*, "If use of the term 'folktale' to include such literary narratives seems somewhat broad, it can be justified on practical grounds if on no other, for it is impossible to make a complete separation of the written and the oral traditions. Often, indeed, their interrelation is so close and so inextricable as to present one of the most baffling problems the folklore scholar encounters" (Thompson).

One more area to touch upon is the folktale's importance when thinking about society at large. Towards the end of Thompson's chapter in *Folktale* titled "Universality of the Folktale", he makes this point: "The same tale types and narrative motifs are found scattered over the world in most puzzling fashion. A recognition of these resemblances and an attempt to account for them brings the scholar closer to an understanding of the nature of human culture" (Thompson). We ourselves are in agreement with this statement by Thompson that folktales, like many other types of folklore, provide us key insight to understanding human culture and consequently the human condition.

Woman of Ancient Folktales

Among ancient cultures, Greek mythology is arguably one of the most personified. Each god and goddess is described in great detail, highlighting a strict set of human traits matching their positions, titles, genders and heavenly roles. The way each god and goddess is personified answers to some facet of human identity within some facet of a civilization's societal structure,

in this case Greece (Cohen, 1995). For the purpose of this essay and due to limitations in length,

we're going to focus on the distinct relationship between Athena and Zeus as described in the

famous epic, *The Odyssey*.

Athena is a warrior goddess with unmatched skill in weaving both, literally and

metaphorically, patron deity to Athens, second only to Zeus (Cohen, 1995). Her skill in weaving

might seem to stand out among her other traits, but it is in tune with the Greek belief that

weaving, a feminine practice, holds with it the metaphorical attributes of plotting and cunning

(Cohen, 1995). As a matter of fact, these attributes are visible in the telling of *The Odyssey* as a

whole, where the story is one of Athena's design, laid out and introduced by Athena to her father

Zeus in the beginning of the story. In doing so, the epic is signaling "both its concern with issues

of gender and its finally conservative position on those issues" (Cohen, 1995). This becomes

more notable as the epic goes on into its many books where eventually Athena's role becomes

more and more direct in the human realm. Her distinct role in the mythological tradition becomes

clear as "a figure who resolves conflicts between male and female powers", the resolutions she

puts into effect acknowledge female strength, but also establish the "hierarchies in which the

female is subordinated to the male" and serves to try and explain or justify these aspects of Greek

society (Cohen, 1995). In the events of Athena's birth (when Zeus eats the pregnant Metis and

Athena is birthed via Zeus's head), Zeus is affirming his power as the one ruler by eliminating

any possibility of a son who could displace him (Cohen, 1995); no more heirs can be birthed and

Athena's place cemented. Athena bears the strength and cunning in war, like Ares, but none of

the irrationality; "Athena's warrior identity is tempered by her femaleness" (Cohen, 1995). By

way of "her own origins and nature and through her interventions in human situations, Athena

neutralizes the threats that the female is felt to pose for the male and enlists female figures as willing participants in stable, male-dominated social structures" (Cohen, 1995). In Eumenides there comes a point where there is a deadlock between characters. Orestes, who commits matricide, is essentially being held at trial by furies and others who demand his death. The trial is orchestrated by Athena who gets the final deciding vote, which she uses to free Orestes of punishment "making it clear as she does that she is carrying out the wishes of her father, Zeus, and expressing her ultimate allegiance to the male over the female" (Cohen, 1995). She does this by convincing "Erinyes to accept her judgment in Orestes favor and to take on an honored but subordinate role in the reconstituted social order that her decision has made possible" (Cohen, 1995). While Athena is no witch, she is a woman from mythology and folklore who's story is a brilliant example of the relationship between a folktale character and the societal expectations and power structures placed on the women in a given society.

3.2.   The Powerful Image of Baba Yaga

Athena is, of course, not the only ancient and powerful feminine figure of folklore. The slavic Baba Yaga too has long been a powerful visage. No one can be certain how far back the ambiguous conceptions of Baba Yaga date, but her influence is undeniable and far reaching (Forrester, Goscilo, Skoro, Zipes, 2013). In the West she stands in her own right, as visible in modern cartoons, films and other media, but has undoubtedly touched the societally held conceptions of witches, their traits and activities. While no two instances of Baba Yagas are the same, and often there are more than one in a story (such as three sister Baba Yagas, one that dies and returns to life, etc.), she is by description an ugly, sagging old woman who flies around on an enchanted mortar and pestle, living in the wild, long removed from society, in a hut that rotates

on chicken legs (Forrester et al. 2013). A Baba Yaga is cannibalistic but not evil, sometimes benevolent but other times cruel and vicious. "Baba Yaga" is not a name but a description, suggesting her to be old and frightening, so old in fact that she is a sort of "amalgamation of deities", "inscrutable and so powerful that she does not owe allegiance to the Devil or God or even to her story-tellers… she is her own woman" (Forrester et al. 2013). An encounter with Baba Yaga could result in the bettering of the self, the accomplishment of one's goals and desires, or the cruel end of one's life. She helps who she wants but can kill indiscriminately, playing with her food. In this way Baba Yaga is a force of nature, perhaps even an embodiment of nature, referred to by some as mother nature personified as she holds the secret to the water of life (Forrester et al. 2013). With an unknown origin, Baba Yaga is possibly "related to a pagan goddess" (Forrester et al. 2013), which allows for further comparison to the common concept of witches in the West. In fact, Baba Yaga is commonly regarded among Russians as being a witch and with her ambiguously pagan origins this classification coincides interestingly with the demonification of western witches by the Christian church, who were by large originally simply Pagan practitioners, unrelated to Christianity (Forrester et al. 2013). Unlike witches in the west though, stories of Baba Yaga have been kept apart of the dominating religion as "it had been impossible before and still was in the nineteenth century for the church and state to prevent the oral dissemination of wonder tales [in Russia] that were deeply rooted in pagan traditions" (Forrester et al. 2013).

3.3.   Spreading Baba Yaga

Stories of the Slavic witch Baba Yaga are typically untouched or influenced by Christianity, and notably Baba Yaga is not regarded as wicked or evil; she simply *is* (Forrester et

al. 2013). Witches as described in the broadly western Grimm tales, such as the witch in Hansel and Gretel, have peculiar similarities to descriptions of the timeless Baba Yaga. These descriptions are, however, notably influenced by the spread of Abrahamic religions, making reference to a singular God throughout their stories. Coincidentally the witches present in these tales are also often directly described as being wicked. The consequences of this demonification become much more prominent once colonial Europe and the America's begin to prosecute woman en mass, gripped by a fear of the discontented woman next door (Karlsen, 1998). In the Grimm tale of Hansel and Gretel there are many tropes present for both sides of witch dialogue, combining Baba Yaga esq characteristics and the tropes that guided witch prosecutions in puritan New England. Due to this weaving of witch portrayals, the witch in Hansel Gretel is a suitable middle ground amongst ideas of what a witch is, a factor that helps the story to allow readers of a variety of cultures to relate.

The witch from Hansel and Gretel's similarities to Baba Yaga serve to separate Hansel and Gretel's witch from the European/Christian narrative of the 1700's. She is depicted as an unattractive old woman in form only, who is supernatural and inhuman, eating people with a preference for male children, just like Baba Yaga (Grimm, n.d.)(Karlsen, 1998). Both characters live in isolation from society and interact with those who might enter their domain. On the contrary to this, the witch in Hansel and Gretel resembles later ideas of the witch by being decidedly wicked and having familiars, as well as a house designed perfectly to lure children in a region where more than a few starving families likely are forced to abandon their children, or starving children are otherwise separated from their families (Grimm, n.d.). In this case it is the act of seduction in one form or another that make the two resemble each other.

3.4.   **Witch Fear and the Puritans**

Witchcraft holds a very important place in women's history and as a contradictory image of women. "The story of witchcraft is primarily the story of women", violence towards women, fears about women, their place in society, etc., and one that has evolved parallel to the shifting and maintaining of power structures in human history (Karlsen, 1998). This shift in power structures is observable in folktales which are laden with representations of a groups notions of power and, often times, notions of what a witch is, does, and symbolizes. For the Slavic cultures, Baba Yaga represented the harsh environment that indiscriminately and harshly dictated ones survival. For the Germans, the witch in Hansel and Gretel goes further and perhaps represented the loss of humanity in a time of famine, etc. If we look at these portrayals in more recent history, specifically that of the Puritans of the New England colonies who came from generations of witch hunts in Europe, we might see how these prior images have evolved to fit the beliefs of a society with Christianity, more specifically Puritan beliefs (as opposed to Catholic) in the case of New England, at its foundation.

In New England society, at around 1620 CE, "belief in the existence and danger of witches was so widespread, at all levels of society, that disbelief was itself suspect" (Karlsen, 1998). Witches were blamed for anything perceived as an unusual occurrence. From a man "spacing out" and finding himself in front of the same house as earlier to minor accidents, problems in childbirth (sometimes the mother who lost the child is accused of "using means to destroy the fruit of her [own] body", or someone else is accused of causing it), losing a fight, crop damage, fires or a storm at sea, etc (Karlsen, 1998). The Puritans, and many other Christian groups, believed witches did this by performing maleficum, a form of magic based on malice, or

by using image magic, such as dolls. They were also believed to be able to fly, use animal or

animal-like (demon) familiars, or even by shapeshifting (Karlsen, 1998)(Zwissler, 2018). At this

time being a witch didn't mean you had a house made of candy or flew around on enchanted

mortar and pestles; it meant that you were perceived by your neighbors to be consorting with the

Devil, being led to do so by one's own discontent. "Puritans defined discontent as thinking

oneself above one's place in the social order", or thinking of yourself as "better then some whom

God hath preferred to us, either in honour, esteem, preferment, or wealth" (Karlsen, 1998).

Unlike in Europe, in Puritan society "the poor account for only a minority of the women accused.

Even without precise economic indicators, it is clear that women from all levels of society were

vulnerable to accusation", most of whom "were middle-aged or old women eligible for

inheritances because they had no brothers or sons"; being somewhat isolated, having reason to be

discontent and otherwise fitting the criteria of how people already envisioned a witch to be

(Karlsen, 1998).

       To the Puritans the idea of the woman and thus the witch were "two types of dangerous

trespass: challenges to the supremacy of God and challenges to prescribed gender arrangements".

That isn't to say that it was ever about women actively challenging the power structure, but

actually about a perceived relationship with the Devil brought about by discontent with

inequality, creating a vicious cycle of fear that strengthens the established gender hierarchy

(Karlsen, 1998)(Zwissler, 2018). In society and in the church, genders were only equal

spiritually, as it was believed that "equality of the sexes would threaten the very foundations of

New England's social hierarchy" (Karlsen, 1998).

       3.5.   **The Witch Today**

In the United States today, the same nation that was once the androcentric Puritan

colonies of England, the witch is decreasingly a subject of condemnation though still actively

regarded through the same Christian narrative seen in notions of witchcraft throughout Europe

and the various European colonies and christian missions (Zwissler, 2018). That is not to say that

sentiments about the witch have become entirely positive, simply that previously anything

"marginal and other" that wasn't sanctioned by church officials was deemed Satanic and thus put

into a Christian frame (Zwissler, 2018). Today however, the image is consequentially

stigmatized at worst, and more often than not, even romanticized within that same framework

and, as is the case for some famous books like Harry Potter or various mahou shoujo anime, the

image is increasingly finding itself outside of that framework. Despite that, however, for most

the witch is still a demonified concept matching more with the "godless" image of Hansel and

Gretel's witch than the chaotic neutral force of nature that is Baba Yaga.

In movies like Disney's *Hocus Pocus* (1993), three evil witch sisters are featured who are

in perpetual pursuit of youth and power by way of magically stealing the life force of their

young victims. Looking at the tropes, this interestingly combines aspects of many Baba Yaga

stories about three Baba Yaga sisters (Forrester et al. 2013), etc., while also maintaining the

image of the colonial broom flying, pointy hat wearing demonic witch, black cats and all. For

more direct puritan witch fear representations we need only look at the movie *The Witch* (2015),

which does a beautiful job of cinematically portraying puritan New England witch fears. It

focuses on one angle of the perceived witch of that time, that of the isolated older woman who

dabbles in herbs and eats infants, acting as a vehicle for Satan to terrorize isolated families and

seduce the daughters into a pact with him (Bekerman et al. & Eggers, 2015). This depiction is

accurate to what puritans feared, but more so as a worst case scenario, ignoring the more commonly held fear of the discontented lone woman next door (Karlsen, 1998). Another image of the witch that is well known in cinema and prevails today is that of The Blair Witch Project (1999), which had viewers unsure of whether the film could have been fiction or not, something that helped the film sustain ideas of the witch as a demonic creature. The confusion caused around the reality of the satanic witch in the woods became famous in the horror genre in general, something many movies have attempted to emulate for the same effect, also displaying how common that notion of what a witch was/is in modern society (Schreier, 2004).

3.6.   **Monstrous Women in Japan**

Just like its Western counterparts, Japanese folktales also cover a wide range of genres and are composed of a number of distinctive archetypes. Furthermore, as products of folklore, they consequently have important social and cultural implications when it comes to Japanese society. There are a number of subgenres of Japanese folktales that we can look at to give this claim more concrete shape; the one that is of primary interest to us for our research is the folktales that contain the image that Raechel Dumas, an Assistant Professor of Humanities at San Diego State University, has termed as "The Monstrous Feminine" in her book, aptly titled *The Monstrous-Feminine in Contemporary Japanese Culture*. One of the opening claims that Dumas makes in relation to this monstrous feminine is that "Monstrous configurations of femininity have long occupied a place in the Japanese cultural imaginary, routinely emerging as sites for modeling deviant (and reinforcing normative) moral behaviors and social norms" (Dumas, 2018). She outlines this by providing examples both stemming from medieval and modern Japanese society, the former of which we will briefly touch on below.

One of these claims is made on the basis of how females are portrayed in particular accounts of medieval Japanese Buddhist tales, a few of which are outlined by Monika Dix in her essay *Saint or Serpent: Engendering the Female Body in Medieval Japanese Buddhist Narratives*. Dix opens her essay with this characterization concerning both the *Dojoji engi Maki* and *Kegon engi maki*, two representative examples of medieval Japanese Buddhist tales.

The *Dojoji engi Maki* and *Kegon engi maki,* two Japanese didactic Buddhist tales, present us with a dramatically compelling vision of a constructed conflict: while the Buddhist goal of enlightenment is to transcend sexuality altogether, it is female sexuality that becomes a major impediment, whereas male sexuality is the prerequisite for salvation (Dix, 2009).

To put the phrasing "major impediment" into perspective, there is a term recorded in the Lotus Sutra, *goshou* (五障) which refers to five inherent hindrances of women due to their sex that prevent them from reaching enlightenment (Kudoh, 2009). Due to these inherent hindrances, women are viewed sinful by birth represented as "the embodiment of desire and passion", and as such they must undergo a kind of "metamorphosis" in order to reach salvation (Dix). This theme has been depicted in a number of didactic Buddhist tales as a woman transforming into a serpent, specifically in one tale that Dix references in which a young woman having failed to seduce a passing monk transforms into a serpent and continues her pursuit "driven by her uncontrollable passion".

Another area very relevant to the conversation of women and buddhism is the sutra colloquially termed the Blood-bowl Sutra or Menstruation Sutra (*ketsubonkyou* 血盆経 in Japanese). According to Momoko Takemi, this sutra "teaches the way of salvation for women who have fallen into hell because of the pollution of blood" (Takemi, 1983). Depending on

which depiction we reference, the blood specified here could be that of which is spilled when birthing a child or can include menstrual blood. According to an excerpt from the *Bussetsu Mokuren Shoukyou Ketsubon Kyou,* referenced in Takemi's article, it was said that the aforementioned blood shed by women "pollute the deity of the earth", and after washing their dirtied clothes in the rivers, that same water was used to "serve tea to Holy men", and as a form of punishment where forced to endure torture in the pond of blood (Takemi).

The two previously listed examples of *Go Shou* 五障 and *Ketsubon Kyou*血盆経 are two clear examples of how certain sects of Buddhism not only held women as a whole in a very low regard, but in fact went as far to claim that their very existence, unlike their male counterparts, was spiritually polluted by birth and therefore they had to go to much greater lengths to reach enlightenment/salvation.

3.7.   Japan and its Female Ghosts

Ghosts are themselves another important presence in Japanese folklore and among them are a number of female representatives worth noting in this discussion concerning monstrous female characters of Japanese origin. As written by Brenda Jordan in her essay "Yurei: Tales of Female Ghosts*"*, it is thought that ghosts pass on from our world of the living to an eternal one, but sometimes enroute to this eternal world they become trapped in a limbo like realm, often times due to lingering, "powerfully gripping" emotions such as sorrow, spite, and hatred (Jordan, 2005). To add further, the ghost is unable to pass onto the eternal realm until these feelings are resolved, or as Jordan has phrased it, "until it [the ghost] is released of its obsession" (Jordan). In fact, according to Jordan, a great number ghosts depicted in Japanese folklore are female. Two fairly widely known examples of female ghosts are *Oiwa-san* (お岩さん) and *Okiku-san* (お菊

さん). Even today, the female ghost trope is still frequently visited in the modern Japanese

horror genre, and retains many of the same elements that can be found in the tales of those such

as *Okiku-san* and *Oiwa-san*, one modern example being *The Ring.*

3.8.   Influence from Modern Japanese Society

Shifting our focus to more recent times, another phenomenon that Dumas claims

to be connected to these monstrous feminine portrayals is the redefining of women's domestic

role in postwar Japanese society. As written by Anne Stefanie Aronsson who covers this topic in

depth in her book Career Women in Contemporary Japan: Pursuing Identities, Fashioning Lives,

> "...accounts of Japanese familial decline circulated widely throughout the postwar
> decades, and became increasingly prevalent in the 1980's, during a period of economic growth
> and restructuring that engendered both a rise in female workforce participation and an attendant
> decline in the number of women dedicated solely to domestic labor (Aronsson, p. 9)."

If we think back to Dumas' claim that monstrous feminine depictions in Japan society are

"sites for modeling deviant (and reinforcing normative) moral behaviors and social norms," it is

not too far of a stretch to imagine how such a shift in domestic and social roles for women (and

consequently men) during this period in Japanese society naturally brought about much

uncertainty in regards to previously established moral behaviours and social norms, one example

among many being women forgoing having children in order to advance their own career.

In the sections below, we will analyze two well known Japanese folktale characters that

are representative of the monstrous feminine and consider how their depictions can inform us of

the surrounding society they find themselves in.

3.9.   Yuki-Onna

According to Tada Katsumi a researcher of Chinese and Japanese folklore, Yuki-Onna's origins as a folktale character can be traced back to the Muromachi period to what is now present day Niigata prefecture (Tada, 2000); however, according to Yoko Makino who has done extensive research on the character of Yuki-Onna herself claims the folktale featuring Yuki-Onna in Lafcadio Hearn's collection is quite possibly the closest to the original work in terms of contents (Makino, 2013).

Minokichi, the male protagonist of the folktale Yuki-Onna appears in, describes Yuki-Onna as a women "dressed in all-white", and being very beautiful while simultaneously possessing eyes that struck fear in him (Ikeda, 2017). Yet the contrasting nature of her entire character seems far more emphasized when Yuki-Onna switches from her *youkai* form to her human form.

Being a non-human entity, and naturally by having killed Minokichi's companion, it is not difficult to understand why Minokichi regards her as frightening. Yet for Yuki-Onna to spare Minokichi's life after he broke the promise so that their children wouldn't be left parentless (Ikeda), one can truly begin to see the true human-like qualities of Yuki-Onna's character. One more important point to make concerning Yuki-Onna's character is that the feeling of solitude is something that Yuki-Onna herself knew well. As Ikeda pointed out in her article focused on Hearn's telling of the folktale, Yuki-Onna's existence is an icy, isolated one, and for her to pursue love ("a very human" emotion) with Minokichi in his human world, there is clearly something more human to Yuki-Onna's character than one might assume at a first glance.

3.10.   Kuchisake-Onna

Among the many representatives of the monstrous feminine stemming from Japanese folklore that we will touch upon in this literature review, Kuchisake-Onna is the most recent in origin her legend thought to be only being birthed as an urban legend 40 years prior. There are a number of different theories concerning her origin. One origin story that is often referenced by researchers familiar with the folklore of her character can be traced back to an article published in the 1979 January 26th edition of the *Gifu Daily* newspaper (Nakao, 2005). She was described as being a beautiful women wearing a red coat and a large mask that covers a gaping wound stretching from the corner of her mouth up to her ear, hence the common english translation for her name "Slit-mouthed Woman" (Nakao). According to the urban legend, she will call out to passersby and ask them "Do you think I'm pretty?", and depending on how one replies to this question they will either be killed by her immediately with the kitchen knife (or scissors depending on the legend) she brandishes or they are chased down by her at a pace of 100 meters per 5-6 seconds (Nakao). Simply by taking these previously mentioned attributes into consideration, one can readily understand why her character would be perceived as frightening or monstrous.

Kuchisake-Onna has been analyzed on a much deeper level by those coming from a background in psychology and folkloristics. Satoko Akiyama, a specialistic in the field of child psychology, has put forward two seperate theories concerning the formation of the urban legend of Kuchisake-Onna, both of which are reflective of women and society at large. The first theory put forward is that Kuchisake-Onna's character could very well be the manifestation of sexual anxiety and instability that arises during young women's pubescent years. The second theory is

that her character in some regards may have been inspired by the negative behavioral traits that

overprotective, overly affectionate mothers are thought to have (Nakao).

What is particularly interesting, though, is that very similar to the portrayal of

Yuki-Onna's, Kuchi-sake Onna's character is far more complex in nature, especially after taking

deep look at her origin story as portrayed in a variety of media forms.

As portrayed in *Carved: The Slit-Mouthed Woman*, one among many of the live action

films concerning Kuchisake-Onna's urban legend, as a young girl she was assaulted by an

assailant who maimed her face with acidic chemicals, and from that point on it was necessary for

her to wear a surgical mask in order to mitigate the bullying and negative attention she received

due to her maimed appearance from the surrounding community (Yabe, et. al & Shiraishi, 2007).

In other widely spread version of her origin story, that fact that she has a slit-mouth can be

attributed due to a botched plastic surgery attempt which resulted in the irreversible scar

(Nakao).

4.   The Study

4.1.   Demographics

45 American University Students (Undergraduate)

45 Japanese University Students (Undergraduate)

4.2.   Research Method

Google Forms survey, done in English and Japanese

4.3.   Background Questions

11. What kind of character do you think the witch from the story of Hansel and Gretel is? Please mark the choice that matches with your opinion.
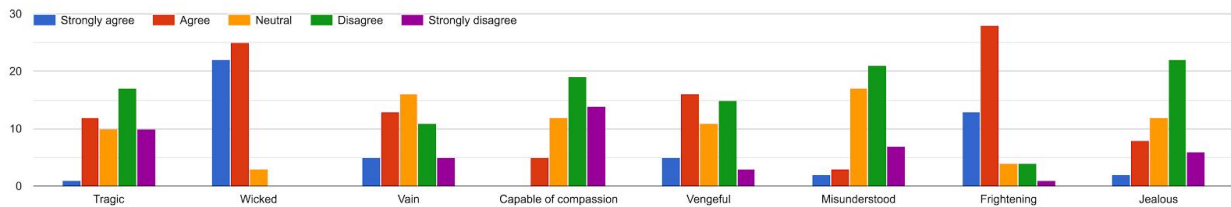
Graph 1. Of the available choices, a majority of the American respondents chose "wicked" and "frightening" to describe the witch from Hansel and Gretel. Also worthy of note is that over half of the respondents did not think of the witch as "tragic" and over 60% of the respondents did not think of the witch as "capable of compassion".

12. Which of the following do you feel best expresses the portrayal of witches since the 17th century? Please mark the choice that matches with your opinion.
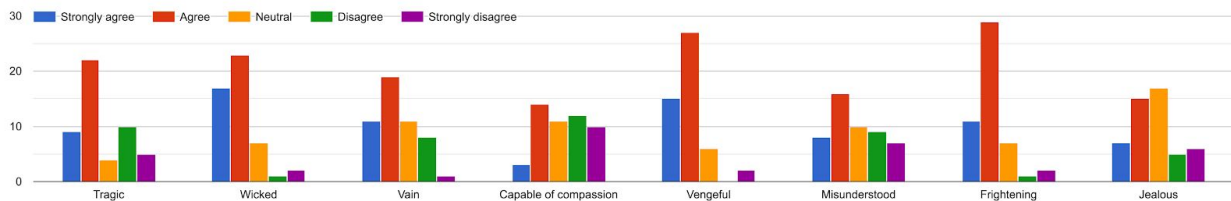
Graph 2. Just like the witch from Hansel and Gretel, a majority of the American respondents chose the responses "wicked" and "frightening" to describe witches as imagined since the 17th century. In contrast with the results from the previous question, the number of respondents who chose the response "tragic" were over 60%. In addition, those who chose the response "misunderstood" accounted for nearly half of the respondents. This can be thought to suggest

that unlike the witch from Hansel and Gretel, there is much more general sympathy for the

humanized witch.

13. Do you agree with the following statement: "The portrayal of witches today is fairly different than it was 50 years ago. "

50 responses
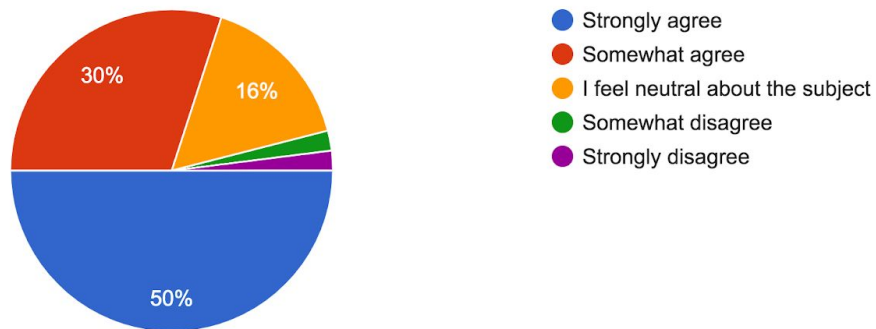
Graph 3. 80% of the respondents agreed that the portrayal of witches today is fairly different

than it was 50 years ago.

10.
口裂け女を知っている人にお尋ねします。口裂け女というのはど...ターだと思いますか？下の表の該当欄に印をつけてください。
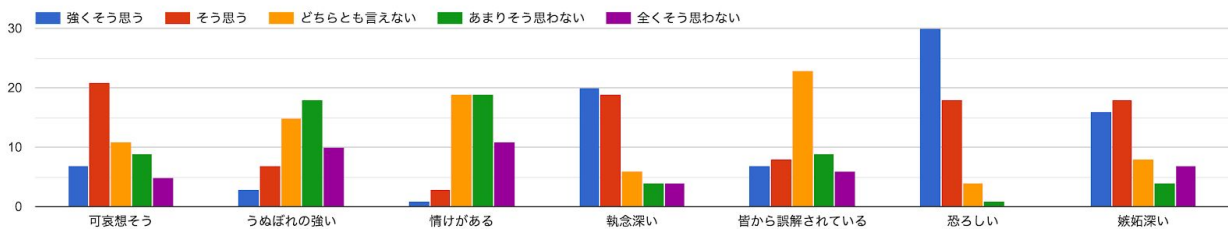
Graph 4. A majority of the Japanese respondents think of Kuchisake-onna as "frightening" or

"vengeful" while roughly half of the respondents think of Kuchisake-onna as "tragic". In terms

of whether Kuchisake-onna's character is "misunderstood", the participants are for the most part

neutral.

12.
お岩さんを知っている人にお尋ねします。お岩さんというのはど…ターだと思いますか？下の表の該当欄に印をつけてください。
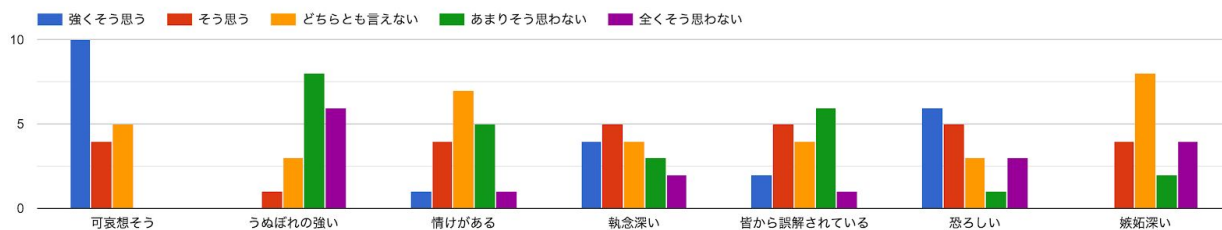
Graph 5. Over 70% of the respondents think of Oiwa as a "tragic" character and over 60% of the

respondents thought of her as "frightening". It is also notable that among the Japanese

respondents, those that were familiar with Oiwa came out to only 18 people, accounting for just

over ⅓ of the total respondents.

9.
以下の民話のキャラクターのうち、化...性を扱う民話を全て選んでください。
53 responses
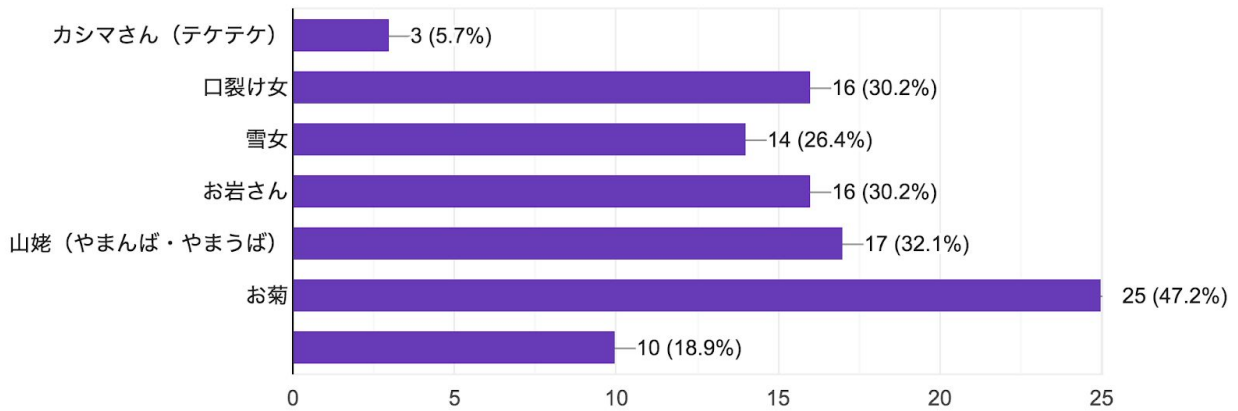
Graph 6. Over 90% of the respondents that are familiar with Oiwa and 100% of the respondents

that are familiar with Okiku responded that they treat these two characters as actual women.

Those that chose Yuki-onna and Kuchisake-onna made up less than 35% of the respondents.
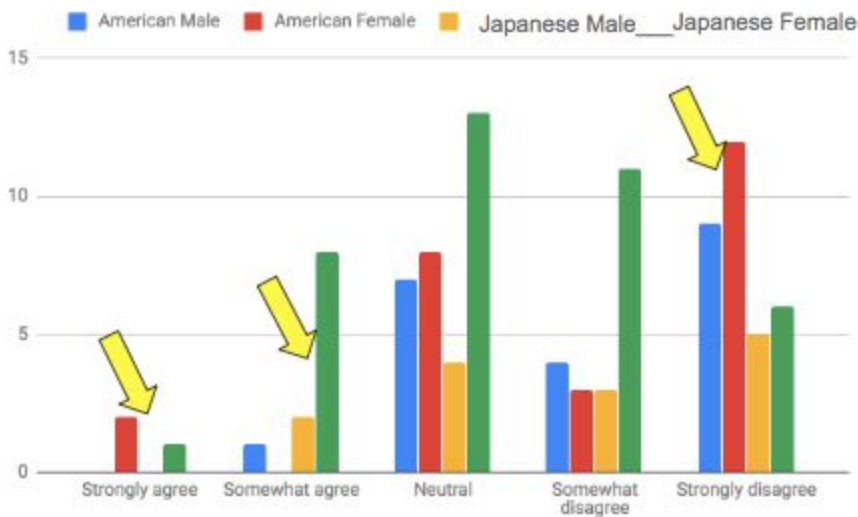
Graph 7. A large majority of respondents were either neutral or disagreed with this statement. Among written responses from Japanese woman who agreed with the statement, five wrote responses such as, "I prefer men to lead", "If a women gets pregnant there is an expectation to leave the workplace", and "In a society in which it's difficult to return to one's company after getting married or pregnant, it would certainly be tough for a woman to be in a higher-up position." While among written responses from American men and woman who agreed with the statement, a number of people cited that "there are situations/environments that require considerable physical strength" and "it should be decided based on qualification, not sex.". This comparison in reasoning for agreement suggests that Japanese respondents who agree are more willing to disqualify women for reasons based on their sex than American respondents.

.

Graph 8. A majority of all respondents (American and Japanese) do think there is prejudice in their respective countries directed towards women. While Japanese female respondents where

the largest demographic to reply neutrally, American female respondents were the largest

demographic to reply with conviction.

4.4.   Summary of Research Question 1 Results

In regards to the question "How do American and Japanese college students differ in their

awareness of folktales influence on the perception of women in their respective cultures?", it was

very interesting that contrary to our assumptions, if we were to compare responses in terms of

population ratio, less Japanese men than women think that there are cases in which men should

be placed in a higher social position based on their sex. Furthermore, in comparison to American

respondents, the Japanese respondents were more neutral on whether there is prejudice towards

women in their own country.

While all of the characters we referenced were thought of as frightening by the

respondents, there were a number of characters that were simultaneously thought of as tragic. In

terms of perception of these characters, the ghost like and otherwise human by nature and origin

characters were regarded with more sympathy and empathy than the spirit-esq and otherwise

inhuman characters.

### 4.5.   Background Questions Continuation

17.

日本の教育の中で、下記の日本文化の要素は...か。下の表の該当欄に印をつけてください。
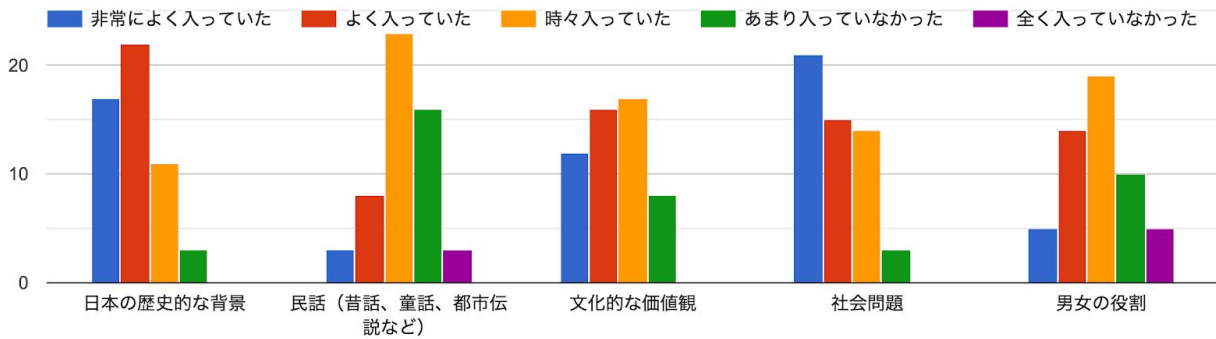
Graph 9. While 43% of respondents think that Folktales were sometimes included in their

education, 36% think that it was included "not very much" or "not included". In comparison to

the other options (historical background, cultural values and societal issues) Folktales and

Gender Roles were not included that often.

18. In your experience of American high school-level education how much were the
following factors of Western culture included?
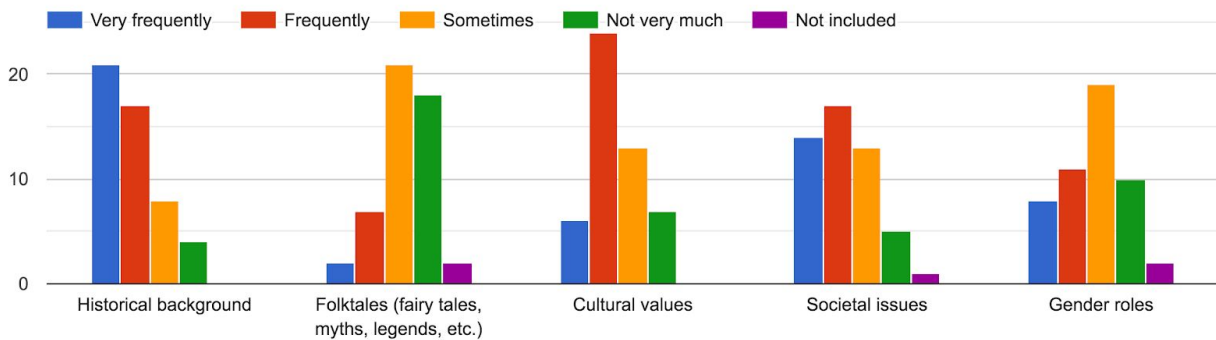
Graph 10. 42% of American respondents believe that folktales were "sometimes" included in their high school education. On the other hand, 40% of American respondents believe that folktales were included "not very much" or "not included" in their high school education.

18.
日本の教育の中で、日本文化についてもっと…か。下の表の該当欄に印をつけてください。
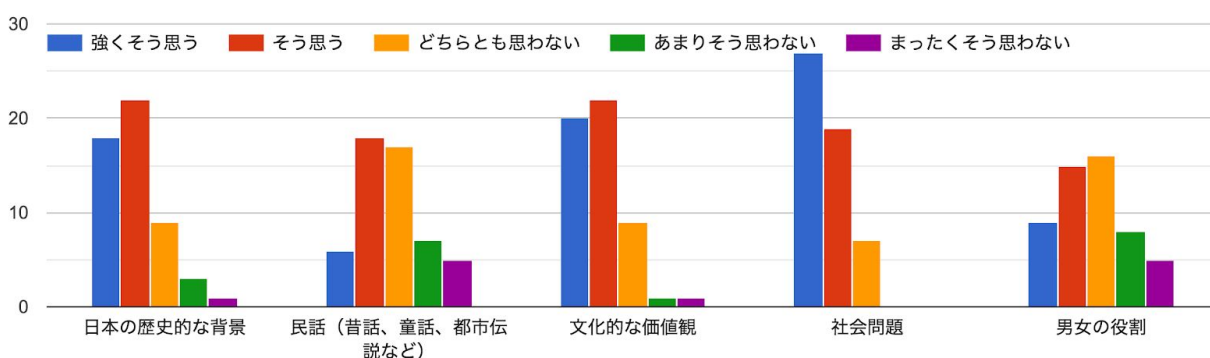
Graph 11. For the most part, the Japanese respondents would have liked to have learned more about "societal issues" and "cultural values" in regards to their own culture. In this question as well, "folktales" and "gender roles" were the least popular amongst the choices. Suggesting that, amongst other possibilities, Japanese students are either simply not interested in further knowledge about this aspect of their own culture or that perhaps they feel they have learned all they can from these aspects of their own culture.

19. Which of the following categories of Western culture would you have liked to have learned more about in your American high school-level education?
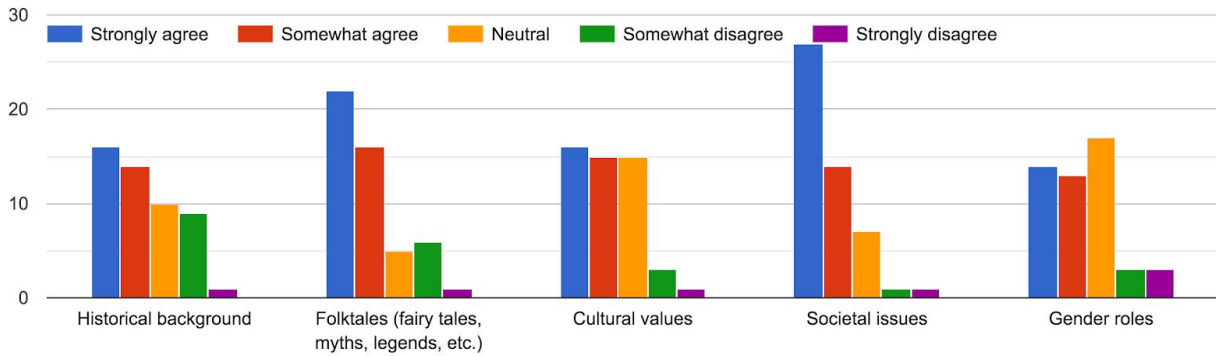

Graph 12. In comparison to 45% of the Japanese university students who would have like to have learned more about their own culture's "folktales" and "gender roles" in their education, 76% of American university students were in agreement.

19.
高校の英語の授業にはどのくらい西洋文化の...か。下の表の該当欄に印をつけてください。
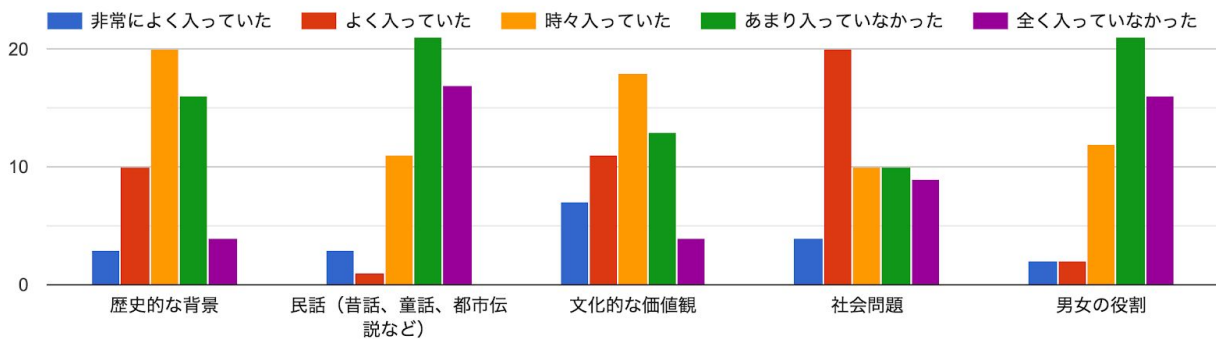
Graph 13. Of the five chosen aspects of culture in regards to the west, both "folktales" and

"gender roles" were thought of as "not very much" included or "not included" in Japanese high

school english classes by roughly 72% of the Japanese respondents. These respondents displayed

much more interest in studying more about these aspects of Western culture than was displayed

for their own culture.

20. How frequently were the following categories included in your high school-level foreign language classes?
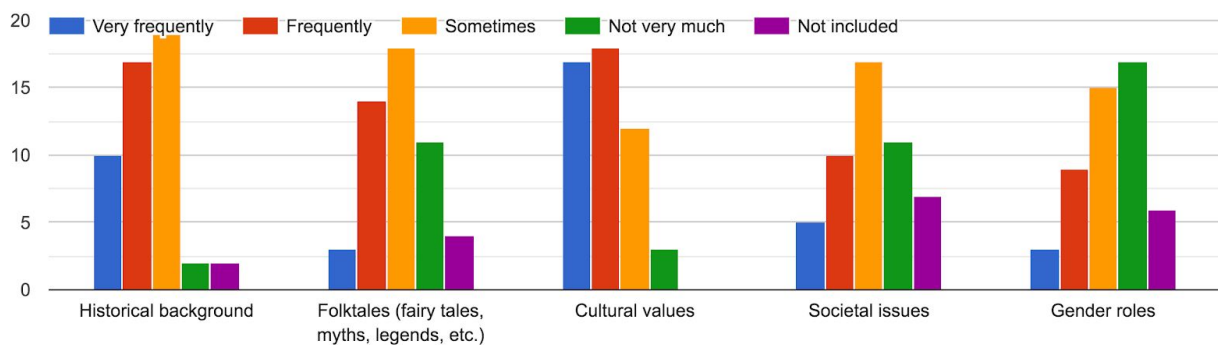
Graph 14. In the same fashion as Japan, in American students foreign language education,

"folktales" and "gender roles" were among the least included elements. However unlike the

Japanese respondents, "societal issues" were equally not included.

20.
高校の英語の授業の中で、西洋の文化につい...すか。下の表の該当欄に印をつけてください
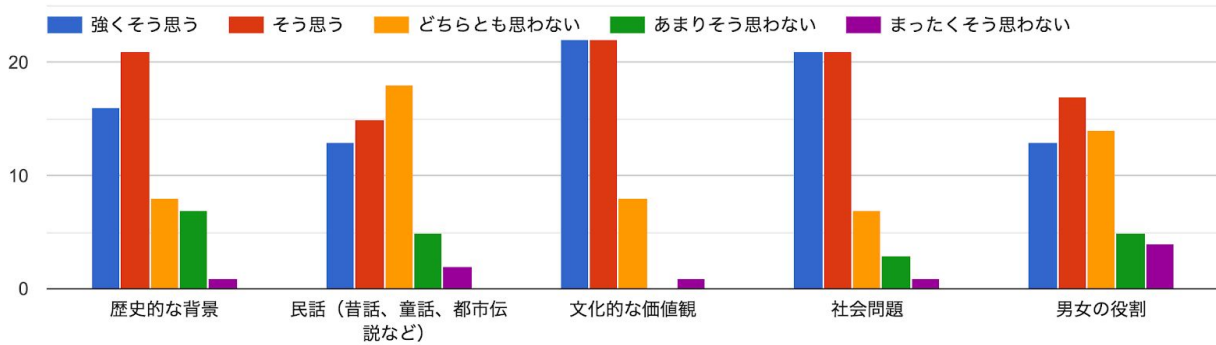
Graph 15. A majority of the Japanese respondents wish to have studied each of the listed

elements of Western culture more in their high school English classes. However it's worth noting

that just over half of the respondents (53%) wish to have studied folktales more, which is

markedly less than the supermajority displayed by the western respondents.

21. Which of the following categories would you have liked to have learned more about in
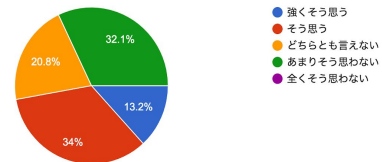your high school-level foreign language classes?
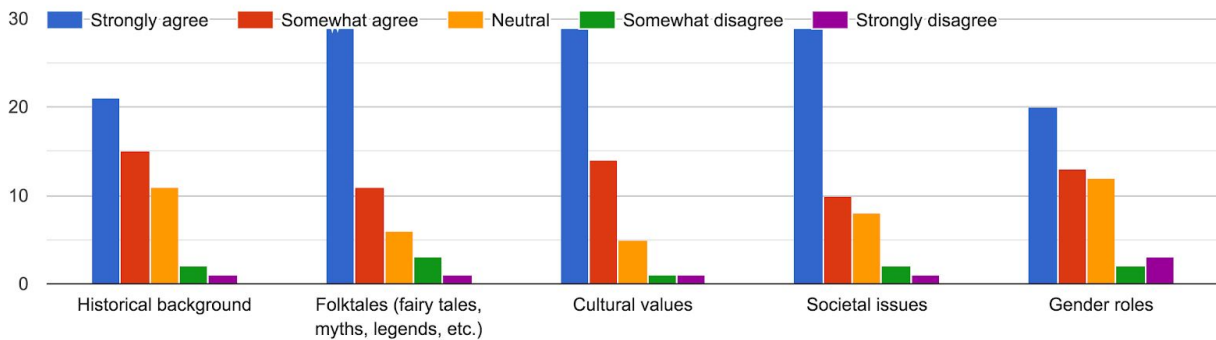
Graph 16. By supermajority, American university students wish to have learned more about all

listed elements in their high school-level foreign language classes.

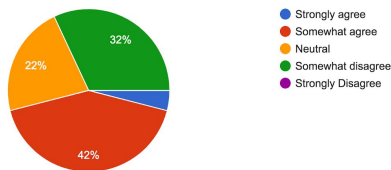22. 外国人は日本の民話をよく知っていると思いますか。
53 responses

- ● 強くそう思う
- ● そう思う
- ● どちらとも言えない
- ● あまりそう思わない
- ● 全くそう思わない

50.9%   22.6%   15.1%   11.3%
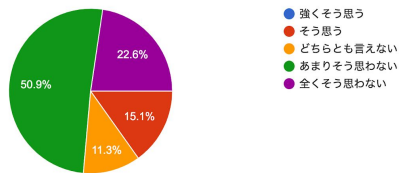
23.
外国人が日本の民話を勉強したら、日...もっとよく理解できると思いますか。
53 responses

- ● 強くそう思う
- ● そう思う
- ● どちらとも言えない
- ● あまりそう思わない
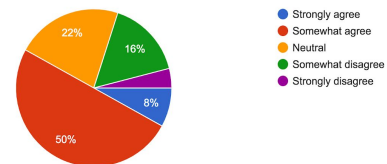- ● 全くそう思わない

32.1%   20.8%   34%   13.2%

Graph 17. The number of Japanese respondents who feel that foreigners are not familiar with

Japanese folktales accounts for nearly 74%. Nearly half of the respondents agree with the

sentiment of the sentiment that if foreigners study Japanese folktales they will have a better

understanding of Japanese culture.

23. Do you feel non-Western cultures are familiar with American/Western folktales?
50 responses

- ● Strongly agree
- ● Somewhat agree
- ● Neutral
- ● Somewhat disagree
- ● Strongly Disagree

32%   22%   42%

24. Do you think studying Western folktales would help a non-Western person to understand Western society and culture?
50 responses

- ● Strongly agree
- ● Somewhat agree
- ● Neutral
- ● Somewhat disagree
- ● Strongly disagree

22%   16%   8%   50%

Graph 18. Nearly half of the American respondents believe that non-Western cultures are

familiar with American/Western folktales. While more than half of the American respondents

think studying Western folktales would help those from non-Western cultures to understand

Western society and culture better.

4.6.   Summary of Research Question 2 Results

In regards to our second research question "How do American and Japanese college students differ in their awareness of folktales influence on the perception of women in their respective cultures?", both Japanese and American university students concerning studied their own culture's gender roles and folktales to some degree. The American university students studied both folktales and gender roles to some degree in their foreign language education. However, Japanese university students responded that both folktales and gender roles were not commonly included elements in their English courses. In comparison to the Japanese students, the American students would have liked to study both folktales and gender roles more in general. Within that, a point worthy of notice is that the American students who studied folktales more in their foreign languages classes wished to have studied them more, where as the Japanese students who studied them less in their English classes do not wish to have studied them further as much. Despite having studied folktales and gender roles in their foreign language classes less than their American counterparts, Japanese university students are also less interested in the prospect of having studied them more.

Finally, folktales, gender roles, and societal issues not being included in education and their association with understanding one another may suggest a connection between folktales and social power structures in any given society.

5.   Conclusion and Consideration

There is a strong correlation between the context/content of folktales and historical as well as modern societal issues. Folktales, gender roles and societal issues not being included in education and their association with understanding various aspects of society may suggest a connection between folktales and social power structures. As such, receiving a formal education

on the context of a variety of folktales may help one separate their perception from the historical

portrayal.

While both groups generally have an understanding of these particular folktale characters

from their own cultures as portrayed in their original stories, it doesn't seem common to consider

them in relation to their historical context over a long scope of human history. However this

dissonance between general knowledge of the characters and deeper contextual knowledge of the

characters in terms of their societal implications seems to be something both groups have a sense

of as both groups want to know more about these aspect of other cultures as well as their own. It

does seem, however, that American university students as a whole in comparison to Japanese

students are more interested in these elements.

These conclusions raise a few further questions for consideration: Why are Japanese

University students less interested in learning more about these aspects of culture than their

American counterparts? What are the potential long-term societal effects of including expanded

lessons on folktales in their chronological historical context in public education? How about the

cultural effects? Would this study being included in general knowledge influence the direction of

cultural growth?

6.   Limitations of the Study and Future Studies

The subject pool for the study was limited to students currently enrolled in university,

most of whom on the American side were largely limited to students living in California. On the

Japanese side, a majority of the respondents were female. Another limiting aspect of how this

survey was conducted was the period in which we collected survey responses, which was less

than one month. Due to various time restraints the depth of the literature review was limited to

only a handful of characters pertaining to each nation.

In the event in which we conduct a future study we would like to have been able to ask

more questions in a follow-up survey. Furthermore, there are a vast number of character

candidates for comparison from countless folktales, as such this study could be strengthened by

increasing the number of characters to cover as many periods as possible. This would likely

reveal many outliers as well as proponents for the arguments presented in this study.

7.   Acknowledgment

Finally, we are thankful to the professors who kindly guided us, the friends and

family who supported us and all of the people who took the time to take our survey and help us

progress this study.

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