A valuable companion to Reider’s *Japanese Demon Lore* (Utah State University Press, 2010) is *Seven Demon Stories from Medieval Japan*. While both books stand as independent volumes, the author Reider describes the demon stories of the later as building on the demon lore of the former. The demonic oni stories of the medieval period reflect the time when the ubiquitous and transmutable oni functioned as the dominant cultural concept.

These uniquely Japanese oni stories originate from written sources rather than from the oral tradition. Written during the 14th to 17th century, the stories reflect Medieval Japan, a time marked by the rise of the warrior class and the decline of the power of the Imperial Court and its attendant aristocrats. Correspondingly, these stories together with their skilful illustrations reflect the shifts and struggles for power. Written for entertainment and edification, the themes remain a study in humanity and society. Consequently, these stories remain relevant in modern society.

As with her earlier book, Reider shares a plethora of detail. The context of each story is explained in an introductory essay which explores the historical and cultural significance of the characters, the motifs and the plot as well as noting the sources and illustrations employed. The arching arrangement of the seven chapters is in four sections which reflect the main character interacting with the oni: Samurai, Scholars, Woman and It. The focus of the Samurai stories is history; the Scholars stories is politics; the Women stories is gender roles; and the It story is religion. Regardless of their particular focus, all stories are interrelated. Such stories, however, are not for the faint of heart or mind.

The first section has two Samurai stories. The first is *The Drunken Demon or Shuten Doji*, Japan’s most renowned oni, noted for abducting and devouring maidens. Enraged by this provocative challenge to its authority, the Court retaliates by sending Samurai, who are the noble warriors of the incoming military class and include Raiko. Dutifully, they pray at four shrines en route, thereby gaining helpful advice and useful companions. The oni’s drunken stupor allows Raiko and his warriors to decapitate him. The severed head, however, bits back but to no avail and it finally comes to rest in the Treasure House of Uji.

In the second Samurai story, the oni appears as a spider. Titled *A Tale of an Earth Spider: the Emergence of a Shape Shifting Killer Female Spider*, the demise of the oni, now in the form of an evil spider, is again at the hands of the noble warrior Raiko and his warrior team. Lured into a haunted house by following a skull floating in the air, Raiko faces its owner, a beautiful woman who, being an oni, shape shifts into a monster which attacks Raiko. Finally, he kills it with his wonder sword.
Noteworthy is the fact that earth spider was a disparaging term for anti establishment figures. After killing the monster, Raiko slices into it, thereby releasing numerous smaller spiders. Akin to the maxim: you can kill the revolutionary but never the revolution, the presence of younger spiders is the justification for an ever vigilant military class. Their hold on power, however, required the allegiance and the alliance of religious institutions, here represented by the Guardian Kings of Buddhism.

Moving from Samurai to Scholars, the next section also has two stories. The first is The Illustrated Story of Minister Kibi's Adventures in China: Japanese Consciousness of Foreign Powers and a Secret Code. Noteworthy as only one of two scholars promoted to Minister of Right, Kibi is a brilliant scholar bureaucrat who has the misfortune to be held in captivity in China. Thanks to help from the oni and the spider, previously the evil protagonist in Section One, as well as the continued influence of Japanese Deities, he returns safely to Japan.

Historically, Japan wanted to surpass China in erudition and achievements. Using this single scholar as the Japanese envoy to the mighty but hostile China, Kibi symbolises the superior style of Japanese diplomacy and artful ways. Reider notes that Japan’s apparent inferiority complex masks its superior pride in own country.

The companion story in this section on Scholars is A Tale of Lord Haseo: Literati, Demons, and Creators of Human Life. The story centres on an oni who was originally an eminent scholar bureaucrat and helper to Kibi. Disguised as a man, this oni challenges Haseo, a famous scholar poet, to a game of Japanese backgammon, enticing him with the prize: the most beautiful woman in the world. If, however, the scholar loses, the oni gains all his treasures.

When the oni loses, he provides a woman of exceptional beauty he fashioned from recycled body parts. She must, however, be left untouched for 100 days, the time needed to invest her body with a soul. By day 80, the scholar could wait no longer and touches her. Instantly, she melts into water. Infuriated, the oni attacks Haseo who immediately prays for help. As a result, the oni departs, defeated.

This story pokes fun at the scholar who acted not with his brains above but with his sexuality below. Attracted by the prize of a beautiful woman, he recklessly gambled his treasures. Although he won the prize, his carnal desires stimulated him to contravene the 100 day prohibition of touching her and to induce the wrath of the vengeful oni. As in past stories with a vengeful oni, the scholar resorted to religious intervention to survive.

One noticeable motif in this story is the woman of outstanding beauty who is speechless. She exists as the silent, soulless foil for the scholar’s unconstrained sexuality and reckless gambling. Thus, the story is a cautionary tale about the human frailty in risking all because of passion unbridled.

Women are the focus of the next Section. The two chosen stories are the Tale of Amewakahiko and the Blossom Princess.
"Husband" involves the youngest daughter marrying a snake to save her parents. A man in disguise, this snake is also the dragon king of the ocean. When he fails to return from a trip to the sky, she ascends to the sky and finds him. Their happiness is again curtailed when his oni father gives her four tasks. With secretive help from her husband, she completes the tasks and the oni allows her to live with his son but once a year.

This story mirrors others. For example, the Chinese love story of the Weaver Maid and the Cowherd as well as the Greek tale of Cupid and Psyche. Such popularity bespeaks of possible transmission along trading routes such as the Silk Roads. Originally, the oni was a Brahma, placed in the sky to reflect the Japanese world view of heaven and earth. For the women, however, this story is an adventure story for women at a time when many women were house bound.

The companion story, Blossom Princess. Japanese Stepdaughter Story and Provincial Customs, is a Cinderella style of story. Using a samurai, the evil stepmother abandons her stepdaughter on a remote mountain. The stepdaughter survives by assisting an aged female oni, herself an outcast from her family, who bestows advice and gifts which help conceal the stepdaughter’s beauty until her true love appears in a bride’s contest and all live happily thereafter.

This story depicts many cultural norms. Reider notes that this story reinforces certain customs around marriage and the distribution of wealth. In addition, the feared “other” is no longer the abstract figure of the oni but a real figure, the stepmother of folklore infamy and convenience. Rescue and recovery is intergenerational showing the cultural respect for elders.

The fourth and final section revolves around the uniquely Japanese concept of It, the animated object. The single story is The Record of the Tool Specters: Vengeance of Animated Objects and the Illustration of Shingon Truth. Cast aside after a 100 years of devoted service, various household tools exact their revenge on their human masters. Such action is possible because, after a 100 years, the tools receive souls, converting them into independent spirits with an ability to interact with people. Nonetheless, such spirited tools lack the absolute malevolence of such noteworthy oni such as the Drunken Demon of the first story because the soul laden tools fall under the influence of Buddhist teachings. Repenting of their murderous revenge, they enter religious life and gain enlightenment.

In this story, the Shingon teachings of Buddhism promote with remarkable unsubtly the message that if tools can be enlightened, then this option awaits you, too. In addition, this story parodies some elements of the first story of the Drunken Demon. For example, the fiercely dominant oni are now portrayed as everyday tools at the command of others. Reider maintains this parody exists to show that the noble warrior class have conquered and enslaved the invincible demons. Transformed into manual tools which gain souls after a century of dutiful labour, the oni tools abreacted but, thanks to Shingon teachings, they found compassion and peace. Once again, the warriors needed religion to ensure peace and a compliant citizenry whose only hope from earthly toil as chattels lay in esoteric enlightenment.
Thanks to Reider’s explanations, these seven stories make rich and rewarding reading. As stories, they are dynamic, outrageous folklore tales at their gripping best. Read with Reider’s understanding of Medieval Japan, these stories promote the political and power shifts of the Japanese Medieval era together with the behaviour decreed desirable along with the olive branch of religious enlightenment.

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