

■ Approaching the Monstrous: A Few Thoughts on Monster Studies in Taiwan

Yung-chao Liao
National Taiwan University

In recent years, Taiwan's academic scene has seen the rise of various discussions on the monster, or its companions in different forms, such as Yokai, Kaiju, Yurei, and ghost. This rich exploration into the a-human, ex-human, trans-human, or non-human dimensions of life/*zoe* has caused reverberations in many disciplines, ranging from genetic engineering, computer science, literary studies, animal studies, cultural studies, and literary theory, to name but a few. The sheer force the monster or monstrosity exerts on these disciplines further extends itself and echoes the so-called "nonhuman turn." As Richard Grusin states clearly in his anthology bearing the same title, the nonhuman departs from post-humanism in that it does not take the human as the center and then seeks to go beyond it; rather, the nonhuman turn takes cues from Bruno Latour's claim that "we have never been human" and looks at the relations that the human and the nonhuman get involved/evolved with (Grusin ix-x). Grusin further cautions us against the pitfalls of social constructivism, as it focuses solely on the construction of the human subject to the neglect of the ontological agency of the world (xi-xii), which consists of agencies other than the human subject defined by human exceptionalism.

Grusin's call for the nonhuman turn and the agency of the ontological,

Yung-chao Liao is Associate Professor of Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at National Taiwan University and editor-in-chief of *Chungwai Literary Quarterly*. He has written articles and book chapters on popular music, posthumanism, Japanese anime, and the monster in literature and popular culture. His research interests include gender/sexuality studies, monster studies, and popular culture, and he is currently working on monstrosity and critical theory. Email: yungchaoliao@ntu.edu.tw.

(Received 22 September 2019; Accepted 22 November 2019)

though strangely neglecting the monster,¹ may still be taken as a point of departure for our current review of the concept of the monster or monstrosity, whether defined as the uncanny, the aberrant, or relationality. These three adjectives that I adopt to describe the monster correspond to three different conceptions of monstrosity that I find common in today's monster studies (aside from the more traditional take on monsters).² The first one, the uncanny, seeks to define monstrosity by defamiliarizing the familiar; that is to say, to problematize the clear-cut boundary between the normal and the abnormal, the homely and the unhomely, and the everyday and the carnivalesque. Defined by Freud as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (220), the uncanny produces the effect of otherness-in-self and self-in-otherness, which, from Freud's analysis of the etymology of the word *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, can be likened to a Möbius strip.³ This conception sheds light on monster studies in that it cancels the dichotomous opposition of the monster and the human so cherished in western metaphysics: if the monster is what human beings are not and vice versa, then the uncanny intricately and insidiously rips open the opposition only to assemble the bits and shreds in an unhomely, or even unholy, conglomerate. In this light, the monster and the human form a hybridized entity in which a clear-cut separation of the two is strictly impossible. This in-separateness of the uncanny is further taken up by Barbara Creed to develop her famous ideas of "the monstrous feminine" and "the primal uncanny," which suggest how the notions of the uncanny, the Kristevan abjection, and the feminine can be combined as a theoretical concept to tackle the other-monster-feminine phobia in patriarchal culture.⁴

¹ Grusin singles out actor-network theory (ANT), new media theory, and affect theory as three major areas for the nonhuman turn (xv). Though the studies of the monster can be welded into these fields, it is still a pity that the monster *per se* is not included in the nonhuman turn.

² What I refer to here as the more traditional take on monster studies mainly points to the metaphorization of the monster; that is, treating the monster as something other than itself, be it human evil, moral degradation, the ruthlessness of governmentality, or simply the detrimental power of Nature. Due to the length of this article, I cannot discuss the limitations of this approach in detail, only pointing out that the metaphorization of the monster risks transforming the ontological aspect of monstrosity into a linguistic entity in which the nonhuman aspect of the monster gives way to human-centered values. Though it may prove constructive in analyzing certain aspects of "human" society, this approach mainly centers on human issues instead of the monster or monstrosity *per se*.

³ For Freud's discussion of the two words and how each of the terms starts from the opposite but eventually joins together in its linguistic ambivalence, see "The Uncanny," 220-26. Though Freud does not use the Möbius strip to describe the uncanny here, the linguistic trajectory in which *heimlich* slides into *unheimlich* can actually be regarded as a Möbius strip, in which one starts from the outside and joins the inside as it travels on the surface of linguistic dissemination.

⁴ See her *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis and Phallic Panic: Film, Horror and the Primal Uncanny* respectively for the two concepts. For another example that takes the Freudian uncanny to discuss the notion of horror in cinema, please see Steven Schneider.

Unlike the uncanny, which blurs the familiar and the unfamiliar, the aberrant in monster studies is more related to the model of mimesis and its deviation/divagation. The aberrant deviates from the origin, the norm, and the normative with its relentless unfaithfulness to the paternal morphology and law. As Marie-Hélène Huet suggests in her influential study on the concept of monstrosity since the Renaissance, the western definition of monstrosity can be traced to Aristotle. In the fourth book of *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle provides a model of mimesis to explain the concept of monstrosity: any deviation from the norm (that is, the male) produces monstrosity, and the female and the monster are two exemplary cases of this deviation (Huet 3).⁵ This doctrine of “like produces like” points to not only the morphology of the monster but also its underlying metaphysical assumption: namely, a fixation on the ideal and transcendental Origin. This line of thinking further paves the way for studies on the monster in different areas, such as law, body, and gender/sexuality.⁶ Central to these studies on the monster is a common concern to tease out the power relations and various discourses created to define “the proper body,” which, as these studies demonstrate, can vary dramatically from context to context. Under the dictates of these regimes of power, the aberrant body is defined as the monstrous body, whereas the “normal” body is taken as the measure with which normalization is carried out. By allying scientific, medical, juridical, and political discourses with the state apparatus, the discourses and practices of the normative body form an imaginary of the “healthy” body politic to rule out the aberrant body: examples such as the rise of teratology in nineteenth-century Europe, or the discourses on Yokai in the Meiji period (1868-1912) in Japan, can be taken as maneuvers of the state apparatus to construct a wholesome body politic by either controlling the abnormal/monstrous body medically, or

⁵ The female is monstrous insofar as she does not resemble the father/man, whereas monsters are regarded as monstrous because they bear a kind of false resemblance to other species (such as a man who looks like a frog or a lobster).

⁶ Discussions on these issues in monster studies are legion, and it is not my purpose here to provide a comprehensive review of these texts. Issues such as how the law defines what is human and what is not often encounter problematic bodies and/or ambivalent genders and sexualities (such as hermaphrodites, conjoined twins, or even pregnant women), and then the concerns would further focus on how to control or manage these aberrant life forms (discussions on biopolitics and teratology follow suit). Suffice to say that in monster studies, discussions on the aberrant have been channeled into different areas that often intersect with one another. For a discussion on how British Law seeks to define monstrosity, see Andrew N. Sharpe's *Foucault's Monsters and the Challenge of Law*; for monstrous bodies, see Margrit Shildrick's *Embodying the Monster*, 48-67; for discussions on gender and sexuality, see Rosalind Sibielski's “Gendering the Monster Within.”

debunking the pre-modern folkloric beliefs named Yokai.⁷ In both cases, the regulation and disciplining of monstrosity, though situated in different historical-geographical contexts, actually adhere to the values of modernity in which order, rationality, and transparency preside over chaos, superstition, and opacity.

Before proceeding to discuss the third approach in monster studies, I would like to take this opportunity to say something about the studies on the monster in Japan and Taiwan. In Japan, studies on the monster or Yokai have a very strong folkloric tradition. Ever since Inoue Enryo founded *yokaigaku* (yokai-ology) in the Meiji period, the term “Yokai” has been taken up by scholars such as Yanagita Kunio, Komatsu Kazuhiko, Miyata Noboru, Tsutomu Ema, and Kagawa Masanobu, and subsequently enjoyed a popular boom in the work of the famed Japanese manga artist Mizuki Shigeru (with his manga *Gegege no Kitano*).⁸ What makes this discussion on Yokai special, in comparison with the more “western” approaches of the uncanny and the aberrant, is its historical-geographical specificity: the meaning of Yokai, or its predecessors such as *mononoke* (in the Heian period) or *bakemono* (in the Tokugawa period), takes on a different trajectory from western definitions of the monster. As Michael Dylan Foster indicates, these terms depict not so much the monster *per se* but more the changing or transformation of things, or simply “the instability of things” (7). The shape-shifting phenomenon characteristic of Yokai, though it may also be found in western monsters, proves to be an embedded and embodied representation of the supernatural in Japanese society, as these Yokai were once deeply related to and imbricated with the everyday life of Japanese people aside from their fearsome qualities. *Tsukumogami*, for example, are a group of household objects obtaining lives of their own when reaching one hundred years in age. They are uncanny insofar as they were once familiar and close objects to humans

⁷ Teratology, defined as the scientific study of the anomaly of bodily functions and the scientific classification of monsters, was established by Etienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire and Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire in the nineteenth century. They defined monstrosity not by its cause, but by its function; that is, the monstrous body is monstrous not because it is induced by external forces (such as the famous “maternal impression theory,” in which the monstrous body was thought to be the “imprint” of a mother’s wild fancy or fear), but because it lacks certain “normal” function, such as reproduction. Later Camille Dareste would further found “terageny” to seek control of the variables that induce monstrosity. As Huet indicates, this can be regarded as an attempt to take over the power of reproduction previously granted to women/mothers by forging a (paternal) artificial womb in the lab (this echoes many SF texts, from *Frankenstein* to the *Alien* series). As for the scientific discourse on Yokai in the Meiji period, Inoue Enryo, who established *yokaigaku* (yokai-ology), adopted a more folkloric approach to classify and demystify the Yokai imaginary emblematic of the pre-modern Japan (especially the Tokugawa period, in which Yokai were developed into a way of entertainment).

⁸ According to Gerald Figal, this folkloric tradition is strongly influenced by Yanagita Kunio’s discourses, which dominated the academic scene until the late 1970s, when a group of scholars started to reflect on the limitations of Yanagita’s works (9).

and their familiar/familial surroundings, but they depart from the western interpretation of the uncanny in that they actually obtained great popularity in the traditional Japanese society, particularly since the Tokugawa period, in which *bakemono* acquired a function of entertainment for ordinary folks (for instance, *Hyakkiyagyō emaki*, scrolls depicting these *bakemono*, often pictured these weird things in playful and entertaining ways). This distinct way of allying the monstrous with the everyday may pave the way for a new understanding of what it means to study “the monster”: instead of obsessively classifying the monsters, we need to pay more attention to how monsters or the monstrous work in concert with or in defiance of the socio-cultural-political network in which they are situated. As for monster studies in Taiwan, similar trends can also be observed. Recently Taiwan has seen a monster boom both inside and outside of the academic scene: academic books and articles, popular publications, exhibitions, games, and movies on Taiwanese monsters are legion.⁹ Though not homogenous in terms of their objectives, these texts and practices often combine indigenous images or tales of Taiwanese monsters with the local regions, thereby constructing a cultural-geographical imaginary that consolidates a certain sense of “Taiwanese-ness.” This folkloric investigation/excavation of Taiwanese monsters bears resemblance to the Japanese model of Yokai studies, as they both adopt a system of classification and stories of local knowledge (*folklore*) to support national-cultural identity (though in the case of Taiwanese monsters, it contributes more to a loosely defined “Taiwanese-ness” than its Japanese counterpart, which was subsumed by the Meiji regime to endorse its national identity and solidarity). In his *Civilization and Monsters*, Gerald Figal cautions against this subsumption by the nationalist agenda of the Meiji regime. He points out that the folkloric

⁹ In terms of public publications, novelist He Jingyao has edited several books on Taiwanese monsters or yaoguai in which these monsters are categorized and provided with a historical overview and local stories (He *Yaoguai Taiwan and Yaoguai Taiwan ditu*). Other titles such as *Taiwan Monster (Taiwan yaoguai dizhi)*, *Report of Taiwan Yaoguai Research Studio (Taiwan yaoguai yanjiushi baogao)*, and those compiled by Taipei Legend Studio (Taibei difang yiwu gongzuoshi) also contribute to the promotion and popularity of Taiwanese yaoguai. Games on Taiwanese yaoguai include the tabletop game “Taiwan Yaoguai Douzhen” (Taiwan Monster Brawl) and mobile game “Yaoguai Minggelu” (Songs of Yokai). Movies include *The Tag Along* (2015) and its sequel, *The Tag Along 2* (2017). Exhibitions include “Yaochi City, Taiwanese Paranormal Literature and Contemporary Art Exhibition” (held from July 5 to Sept. 15, 2019, at C-LAB, Taiwan Contemporary Culture Lab, in Taipei) and “Eerie Island-An NMTL Special Exhibition on Paranormal Literature in Taiwan” (held from Mar. 29, 2018, to Feb. 24, 2019, at the National Museum of Taiwan Literature in Tainan), among others. Within the academic scene, aside from studies on more traditional Chinese texts such as *Classic of Mountains and Seas (Shan Hai Jing)*, *Six Dynasties Tales of the Anomalous (Liuchao Zhiguai)*, and *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio (Liaozhai Zhiyi)*, Lin Meirong and Li Jaikai’s *An Anthropological Imagination of Mō-sin-a* provides a solid anthropological study on the Taiwanese yaoguai Mo-sin-a, which can be said to be the most well-known yaoguai that captivates Taiwanese people’s mind.

practices in the Meiji period provided a modern discourse for Japan to “displace or identify diverse spirits with a Japanese Spirit,” as these folklorists “tended to define an underlying temporal if not spatial continuity of common spiritual sentiment in the national folk” (15). Taiwan’s folkloric texts and practices of indigenous monsters may not go that far, but they still seem to follow the trajectory of their Japanese counterpart in sometimes starkly similar ways (adopting folkloric approach to the study of Taiwan monsters; publishing local stories of monsters with stylish illustrations; or even geographically mapping Taiwan in terms of monsters and their localities). Though it is still too early to tell if these texts and practices will be subsumed by the nationalist agenda or provide lines of flight from it, I believe how to maintain the potentiality of the monster to politically subvert or intervene the restrictive delineations of identity, subjectivity, or life/*zoe* is the primary concern of future monster studies in Taiwan.

This call for intervention from the monster echoes the last definition of the monster that I propose at the beginning of the article: relational ontology. Relational ontology seeks to see the monster as assemblages, relationality, or connections that traverse a plane of various entities, both human and nonhuman. Concepts such as Donna Haraway’s Chthulucence or Patricia MacCormack’s Deleuzian teratology point to the possibility of treating the monster as tentacularity or becomings. Haraway, for instance, suggests that Chthulucence is sympoietic rather than autopoietic in that the tentacles that connect and disconnect are actually “feelers” capable of “sympoietic threading, felting, tangling, tracking, and sorting” (31). These assemblages constituted by critters, humans, and technologies thus form a monstrous epistemology that brings out the ethical concern of “becoming with” (40) and “response-ability” (11); that is, monstrosity is an ability to respond to and co-evolve with the Others in ways that can shift the ethical concerns from human exceptionalism to the critters-humans-technologies conglomerate. MacCormack, in a similar vein, takes Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis of werewolves as “wolfing” in *A Thousand Plateaus* to suggest that monsters should be regarded as always in the state of “interkingdom becomings” that are both singular and collective (141). This “verbing” instead of “nouncing” thus opens up the intra- and inter- aspects of a bounded or molar subject (146): the radicality of monstrosity for any subject based on the liberal humanist model not only lies in the deterritorialization of the body boundary but is intrinsic “within” the ontology of the body itself; that is to say, the body is a set of relations that traverse and transverse the inside/outside imaginary.

Of course, these three approaches to the study of the monster are not meant to be exhaustive, and monster studies has yet to reach its multiple tentacles to other fields. Issues such as the mediality of the monster (how are mon-

sters translated and transmitted through medium, both technological and material?) and the non-relationality of the monster as proposed by Eugene Thacker's idea of "world-without-us" (5) are still waiting to be explored. It is important to note, however, that monsters and monster studies are actually two sides of the same coin, and we should never forget that immanent ferocity of intensities that is monstrosity itself.

Works Cited

- Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. Routledge, 1993.
- _____. *Phallic Panic: Film, Horror and the Primal Uncanny*. Melbourne UP, 2005.
- Figal, Gerald. *Civilization and Monsters: Spirits of Modernity in Meiji Japan*. Duke UP, 1999.
- Foster, Michael Dylan. *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai*. U of Chicago P, 1991.
- Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny." 1919. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, translated and edited by James Strachey, Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, pp. 217-56.
- Grusin, Richard. Introduction. *The Nonhuman Turn*, edited by Richard Grusin, U of Minnesota P, 2015, pp. vii-xxx.
- Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucence*. Duke UP, 2016.
- He, Jingyao 何敬堯. *Yaoguai Taiwan: sanbainian daoyu qihuanzhi—yaogui shenyou juan* 妖怪臺灣：三百年島嶼奇幻誌·妖鬼神遊卷 [*Taiwan Monster Story*]. Linking, 2017.
- _____. *Yaoguai Taiwan ditu: huandao souyao tanqilu* 妖怪臺灣地圖：環島搜妖探奇錄 [*The Map of Monstrous Taiwan: Recording the Monsters around the Island*]. Linking, 2019.
- Huet, Marie-Hélène. *Monstrous Imagination*. Harvard UP, 1993.
- Lin, Meirong 林美容, and Li, Jiakai 李家愷. *Mosbenzi de renleixue xiangxiang* 魔神仔的人類學想像 [*An Anthropological Imagination of Mō-sin-á*]. Wunan Book, 2014.
- MacCormack, Patricia. "Unnatural Alliances." *Deleuze and Queer Theory*, edited by Chrysanthi Nigianni and Merl Storr, Edinburgh UP, 2009, pp. 134-49.
- Schneider, Steven. "Monster as (Uncanny) Metaphors: Freud, Lakoff, and the Representation of Monstrosity in Cinematic Horror." *Horror Film Reader*, edited by Alain Silver and James Ursini, Limelight Editions, 2000, pp. 167-91.
- Sharpe, Andrew N. *Foucault's Monsters and the Challenges of Law*. Routledge, 2011.
- Shildrick, Margrit. *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*. SAGE, 2001.
- Sibielski, Rosalind. "Gendering the Monster Within: Biological Essentialism, Sexual Difference, and Changing Functions of the Monster in Popular Werewolf Texts." *Monster Culture in the 21st Century: A Reader*, edited by Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui,

Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 115-29.

Taibei difang yiwu gongzuoshi 臺北地方異聞工作室 (Taipei Legend Studio). *Taiwan yaoguaixue jiujiang* 臺灣妖怪學就醬 [This Is Taiwan Yaoguai Studies]. Qiyiguo wenchuang 奇異果文創, 2019.

_____. *Weiyuolun : taiwan shenguai benshi* 唯妖論:臺灣神怪本事 [Yaoism]. Qiyiguo wenchuang 奇異果文創, 2016.

_____. *Xunyaozhi: daoyu yaoguai wenhua zhi lu* 尋妖誌: 島嶼妖怪文化之旅 [Ghoul Hunters]. Morning Star, 2018.

Taiwan yaoguai dizhi 台灣妖怪地誌 [Taiwan Monster]. Chiao 角斯, 2014.

Taiwan yaoguai yanjiushi baogao 臺灣妖怪研究室報告 [Report of Taiwan Yaoguai Research Studio]. Xingren wenhua shiyanshi fushu yaoguai yanjiushi 行人文化實驗室附屬妖怪研究室 (Flâneur Culture Lab), 2015.

Thacker, Eugene. *In the Dust of this Planet*. Zero Books, 2011.