

24 - 26 October 2025

Geneva , Switzerland

Chinese Elements in the Japanese Kappa (river Boy)

Wai Ming Ng

Chinese University of Hong Kong

Abstract

Kappa, an amphibious humanoid creature, is a prominent figure in Japanese folklore, with legends spanning the entire archipelago from Hokkaido to Kyushu. During the Tokugawa period (1603–1868), the kappa was not only considered a mythical water spirit but also a mysterious being that many claimed to have encountered firsthand. Although the term “kappa” does not appear in Chinese texts, similar water spirit legends exist in China, such as the shuihu, shuiyuan, hebo, and wangliang. As Chinese literature became more prevalent in Tokugawa Japan, these Chinese water spirits began appearing frequently in Japanese writings, often associated with or conflated with the native kappa. This led to a growing belief that the kappa legend may have originated from, or been significantly influenced by, Chinese water spirit traditions. Based primarily on Japanese primary sources, this study investigates the role of Chinese water spirits in shaping the Japanese kappa mythos, examining the similarities, differences, and cross-cultural connections between Chinese and Japanese aquatic folklore.

Keywords: Kappa, Water Spirits, Chinese Elements, Tokugawa Japan