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NOTES ON THE GUNKI OR MILITARY TALES
Contributions to the Study of the Impact of War on Folk Literature in Premodern Japan

Carl Steenstrup

The gunki or military tale was an important literary form of the Kamakura and the Muromachi ages (1180-1573). Two gunki have undisputed literary value: the Heike monogatari and the Taiheiki. Another is factual enough to serve as a first-rate historical source: the Shokyuki. The rest of the gunki owe their importance to the simple fact that they influenced people’s way of thinking. Gunki, irrespective of literary qualities, were the contents of performances by wandering, often blind, minstrels or biwa-hoshi who chanted them to the accompaniment of a lute or biwa. The tradition of such recitals was strong and continuous until 1868 and lingered on to the present.

The gunki form stands midway between chronicle and novel. To the Chinese-style annals or Rikkokushi the gunki owe little. The Rikkokushi were organized chronologically and contained no lively descriptions of the appearance and characters of the protagonists. Further, only what the court perceived as important mattered to the chroniclers. Meticulous accuracy as to recorded fact thus went hand in hand with fundamental disinterest in long-range developments. In particular, what the rough warriors did in the edges of the civilized world, in Kantō or Kyushu, where the bushidan or war bands had been gathering strength at least since the ninth century, went unrecorded. To the national historical form or kagami literature on the other hand, the gunki owe certain features. The kagami have much
more literary value than the *Rikkokushi*. The original device of the *Okagami* to have the story told by two old men who correct and supplement each others' storytelling made a *dialectical*, sometimes critical, view of events possible. The device also invited the inclusion of exciting tales, as the *Kojiki* and even the *Nihongi*, but not the later *Rikkokushi* had done. Further, the *kagami* saw events as produced by interacting human wills, and consequently took an interest in the delineation of character. By introducing these improvements the *kagami* may have prepared the way for the *gunki*. In their view of events, however, the *kagami* were court-centered, and their values were those of the court.

If we want to find the roots of the *gunki*, we may have to look also in the direction of the *setsuwa* or short stories and of the *zuihitsu* or miscellanies. The former grew out of popular preoccupation with the variations of human character, and the joy of spinning or hearing a good yarn. *Setsuwa* are basically democratic in outlook. Their setting is the strict class society of late Heian, but the characters are praised more for their power or their ability to cope with critical situations than for their pedigrees. Conversely, persons of high ranks are sometimes depicted as dunces. The *gunki* are fascinated with pedigrees, and fierce warriors like Yoshitsune could be lured by the granting of court title and rank. But the *gunki* have in common with the *setsuwa* that respect must be earned by *deeds*—good or bad. The formal organization of most of the *gunki*, too, shows traits of the *setsuwa* tradition. The *gunki* are generally divided into episodes, each with a title. These may just be devices inserted by *biwa-hoshi* as mnemonic tags or in order that customers might order this or that episode chanted which pleased them most. But in the forms in which both *setsuwa* and *gunki* have come down to us, the episodic character of both is often striking. Many *setsuwa* look as *disjecta membra* of planned but never executed novels. And even in the
Taiheiki the thread of narration often breaks. To the zuihitsu the gunki owe their realistic, even fatalistic, view of life. This fact is probably due to two specifics of the zuihitsu: they were written by people of some learning, and much learning came in through Buddhist channels; the mujo-kan or view that everything in this world is fleeting and somehow unsubstantial was shared by most educated people, priests and laymen alike. Further, the zuihitsu and the nikki or diary genre were closely related. Diaries were of two kinds: those written by women of the upper classes who had ample time to rummage into their own minds and thus produced psychological masterpieces; and those written by officials who had to keep track of who did or said what when. Every courtier who kept a diary and looked back over the years must have been struck by the massive reduction in the prestige of the court. First, in the eleventh century, the insei system and the privatization of government. Then, in the twelfth century, factions grown out of the insei system fought for power and in the process enlisted warriors to do the dirty work, upsetting the delicate power balance between reigning emperors and retired emperors (insei) and between the noble families competing for influence. Finally, since 1156, these warriors took command and ushered in a new era whose outward manifestations were executions, torture, and the burning of mansions with the people in them. To the Kyoto nobles, the years from the Hogen rebellion 1156 to the Shōkyū War 1221 must have appeared as the beginning of the end of the world, even without the accompanying whining of Buddhist priests. One might have expected a gunki literature gloating over the destruction of the old culture, such as is found in the chronicles of the Mongols. “There are now good pastures where such and such great city stood” etc. Such sentiments, the morbid joy of destruction, turn up now and then in the chronicles of the Onin War (1467-77) when the militarization process had
gone much further, and the ashigaru, vindictive serfs armed with torches, were the most important arm of war. But in the thirteenth century they are not found. Some gunki are supposed to have been written by aged men who had seen war and its horrors and who shared at least some of the cultural assumptions of Kyoto. Nor should it be forgotten that Azuma ebisu or "eastern barbarians"—the name Kyoto people called the Kanto warriors—were led by scions of noble families from Kyoto. Both the Minamoto and Hojo had strong ties to the culture of Kyoto. This, too, changed in the Muromachi and Sengoku ages: many of the warlords who laid Kyoto waste had their roots and their strength in the provinces. The basic tragic feeling people derived from hearing the biwa-hoshi sing of the Hogen, Heiji, Gempei, Shokyū and other wars was their knowledge ex-post: the worst is yet to come—the dynastic wars of the fourteenth century, the Ōnin War, and the Sengoku period of incessant warfare (1477-1600). Those who read or listened to gunki in the centuries before the Tokugawa peace were more often than not surrounded by the horrors of war themselves. By adding the gunki perspective to their present experience they learnt that their own tribulations were re-enactments on an even more horrible scale of basic motifs of strife—between center and periphery, between Taira and Minamoto, between classes and groups—which had their roots in the age of the gunki events. They also learnt that the past—which the entire mood of the age and its concomitant literature tended to glorify at the expense of the present—had at times been as turbulent as the era in which their karmic load had immersed their own existence. This may have acted as sort of solace in gloomy hours when armies marched and villages went up in flames. The focus of nostalgia remained the peaceful days of Nara and Heian, before the rise of the warriors. But since these days would not return, one might vicariously enjoy tales and songs of the thrilling deeds of
those warriors. Even the Tokugawa townsman, living in an era of peace which he surely viewed as an improvement upon the preceding eras of strife, admired the swashbuckling heroes of these eras, increasingly forgetful of the destruction they had wrought. His samurai masters held similar ambivalent views, and so did thoughtful seventeenth century Europeans: they bemoaned the passing of "chivalry" while praising the order going with absolutism. But out of this bipolar thinking grew, first, a strong consciousness of historical continuity, next, national consciousness, and, finally, the idea of progress, that is, the knack of turning primitive vitality to increasingly sophisticated ends.9)

The gunki took a long time to mature. First came the matter-of-fact stories of isolated attempts by warriors to seize power: the Masakado-ki and the Mutsu-waki.10) The former was written shortly after Masakado’s rebellion 935-40. It has occasional glimpses of admiration for its main protagonist, but ends on a note of reprobation: Masakado was an evil episode. Different in basic outlook is the Mutsu-waki describing Minamoto Yoriyoshi’s campaigns against another clan who were building a rival satrapy in northern Honshū, 1050-63. Whereas the Masakado-ki was written by an eye-witness or a person who had interviewed eye-witnesses, the Mutsu-waki was written on the basis of reports from the Minamoto generals to the capital, with only occasional orally transmitted adjuncts. The strange thing is that in between the detached officialese of the Mutsu-waki one finds many expressions of those sentiments which later became so prominent in the gunki: loyalty, contempt of death, the excessive regard for honor etc. These may be either literary flourishes, or quotes from the reports of the Minamoto staff.11 The Mutsu-waki is tentatively dated to the end of the eleventh century, but may have later accretions. As its basic outlook is court-centered, the language pure Chinese, and the author a courtier, the Mutsu-waki is not consid-
ered to be within the *gunki* tradition. But the *Masakado-ki* is. Its language is a mixture of Chinese and Japanese, its author hardly a courtier, and the mode of presentation centered on the battles, the arms, and episodes of personal bravery. Thus, long before the *gunki* came up to the surface with the *Hogen* and the *Heiji monogatari* (both presumably written in the first decades of the thirteenth century), there seems to have existed a tradition of wartales among the *bushidan* or war-bands, probably transmitted orally or, when a priest or other literate person was employed to write down the traditions of a clan, becoming part of the clan’s *kakun* or precepts for descendants.

The existence of such a tradition makes it easier to understand why the *Hogen* and the *Heiji* are, as literature, so much advanced over the *Masakado-ki*. Where the latter is dry, they are vivid. Where the latter’s focus flounders, the former keep the reader spellbound by focusing on one person drawn up in heroic scale so that the other characters seem to revolve around him—a basic and always effective novelist’s trick. The *Hogen monogatari* deals with the factional strife between princes eager for the throne, but the class which carries the action forward is that of the warriors, and the central warrior of the story is the great archer *Tametomo*, one of the many and characteristic “tragic heroes” in Japanese literature. In the sordid world of intrigue which was Japan’s capital in 1156, he stands out as a blunt, brutal, honest “Colonel Blimp” who gains the respect not only of his mates, but even of the wily, cowardly courtiers, through his selfless sticking to a lost cause. In the *Heiji*—which deals with the clash between Taira and Minamoto in 1159—we find fully developed other traits of the *gunki* ideals: The heroic warrior’s even more heroic wife, Tokiwa *Gozen*, and the tribulations befalling her; and many battles which are actually duels of the type known from Homer, with long-winded description of armor, recitation of ped-
igrees, challenges, taunts, and lots of gory and essentially unreal fighting—the protagonists go on slashing at each other when they should according to normal human experience be dead or totally incapacitated. Much of this must have been added by minstrels.¹⁴

Neither the *Heiji* nor the *Hogen monogatari* has any philosophy, except the Buddhist commonplaces that misfortune now is due to evil acts in a former life. There is little reflection on what the protagonists stand for, and which way society is heading. That important element comes in with the *Heike monogatari* describing the Gempei War 1180-85, but containing facts ranging from 1132 to 1213.¹⁵ The original story was probably written about 1220 by a learned man who had access to chronicles and who knew about the intellectual breakthrough of the time: the discovery that history is linear, not circular, that it does not repeat itself, but that clusters of events *seem* to do so, and that some events are triggered off by impersonal factors such as changes in the economic underpinnings of various classes. These findings were not new—the Sung historians, in particular Ssu-ma Kuang, had already made them. What the Japanese added, was the discarding of the Chinese idea that good government is brought about by fiat: the only fiat the Japanese would accept was the ultimately deriving from Buddhist thought, viz. that there is a built-in decay factor in all human institutions. A spokesman for these ideas was the abbot Jien, head of the Tendai sect and brother of the pro-Kamakura premier Kanezane.¹⁶ Jien’s ideas appear in the *Heike* not only in the opening chapter, but also in various places where political ideas are discussed: here, Jien’s ideal of a government which could bring about some sort of cooperation between the courtiers and the warriors is brought forth.¹⁷ As is well known, these ideas foundered, in particular because the ex-emperor Go-Toba wanted to crush the Kamakura government as such, and started the ill-fated war of 1221 in which the court

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definitely lost out to the warriors.

The author of the “Ur-Heike” may have been an employee of Jien, the Kyoto scholar Yukinage, who wrote a straight chronicle, based on documents, eyewitness accounts, and contemporary anecdotes. His version, however, was worked over by biwa-hoshi, and not only smoothed for recitation, overlaid with many dramatic elements, giving all those warriors who had families or retainers who wanted to hear about their masters’ exploits one or more moments of glory. It has been shown that most of these accretions lack a foundation in fact. What the persons did was not improbable: they acted out of the book, and the book was the sum of previous gunki. But it was normally not true, when this or that heroic action was stated to have been carried out by this or that specific warrior. The Heike became the catechism of the warrior class for centuries to follow, and many of the characters became known to everybody, and were held up by educators as models. Yet, the exploits were, on the whole, fiction. Exactly the same thing happened with the Chanson de Roland. Round a thin skeleton of fact were ranged all the famous characters the minstrels knew, irrespective of geographical or chronological probability, probably because the wandering minstrels were paid for singing the exploits of the customers’ ancestors: it even happened that a person who had taken part in a campaign described in a medieval European epic was punished by elimination from the story because he had been stingy towards the compiling minstrel. One wonders if the “Ships’ catalogue” of the Iliad and the interminable lists of Cid’s co-fighters did not originate in a similar way. What makes the Heike more valuable than the Roland as a historical source is the nearness to the events of the Heike compilers. The Roland was written more than 300 years after the events, on the basis of an oral tradition among illiterates. The Heike, on the contrary, began in a milieu where the upper classes were
literate, and when the "Ur-Heike" was written there were still people around who had lived through the Gempei Wars; when the first major revision was being undertaken, peace reigned, and the Hojo rulers took an active interest in the preservation of records of their forefathers, the Taira. The *Heike* in the expanded and dramatized form in which we have it is still as old as about 1370.

The prevalence of the Hojo may be one reason why the *Heike* does not depict the Taira as such in an unsympathetic light. Some of their leaders are described as inept, or lacking in martial qualities, but on the other hand many of them are provided with a hero's death: there is nothing of the tedious malignant invective against the enemy found in the *Roland*. What the *Heike* emphasizes is the instability of earthly glory and the above-mentioned "decay factor" in institutions. It could hardly have been otherwise: former warriors were probably among the first generation of biwa-hoshi, and some of them had fought on the Taira side; among their audiences, there must also have been people with pro-Taira sympathies; and, as mentioned before, the Hojo rulers of Kamakura, the shikken or major domos of increasingly inactive shoguns, were themselves of Taira stock.

Three things made the *Heike monogatari* fascinating to readers and listeners: it was easily comprehensible, it simplified history into a game of persons interacting, and it fitted the audience's religious beliefs, whether they were Amidists, Zenists, or adherents of the older sects.

The basic requirement of literature meant to be heard—and that was, thanks to the biwa-hoshi, the way in which most people met the *Heike*—is that its language is easily comprehensible. To us, the *Heike*, of course, is rough going. But to the Japanese of the time it seems to have been fairly understandable. There are many conjunctions, antitheses, and parallelisms to help
the flow of the story along. We know from the *setsuwa* that the vocabulary of Japanese changed in the direction of more Sino-Japanese and fewer “classical” words: the *Heike* followed that trend. It is believed that the dialogue is in the spoken language of the thirteenth century. Dramatic passages are heightened through the use of rhythmical prose, easy to remember.

The “Ur-Heike” probably had all the sophistication of Jien’s philosophy of history. But of course only scraps of that philosophy went into the final version as the *biwa-hoshi* sang it. It must also be remembered that they sang it episodically. When the audience clamored for “Yoshitsune’s descent into the Hiyodorigoe pass” or “Antoku’s death” or “Go-Shirakawa’s visit to Kenreimon-in” they got just that. With tremuloes and ornamentation such singing takes a lot of time. What the *biwa-hoshi* dwelt upon was, first of all, to conjure up before the mind’s eyes of his audience how the protagonists looked, “dressing the hero” as in the Iliad. We now know that this was commonly done through *etoki*, that is, spreading or hanging pictures and pointing to them in the intervals of singing or chanting, and these pictures represented the main characters of the story.\(^{23}\)

There is probably no clear parallel to this “cinematization” of epic narrative in the European tradition. But the ploy of awakening the interest of the audience through placing about the mounted warrior his faithful vassals and servants—that is, people with whom the audience could easily identify—was used in Japan as in the Greek epic: Achilles-Patrocles and the irrelevant but amusing minor characters surrounding their doings spring to mind. Finally, to spellbind the audience through recounting stirring deeds, defiant words, proclaiming pride of ancestry, contempt of death, undying loyalty to the lord etc., etc. were central elements of the Japanese as well as the Western epic tradition, from Homer to “*chansons de geste*”. The acts of battle as described in the Japanese tradition had scant relation to
the horrors of real war. One never hears about all those who died slowly, agonizingly, of infected wounds or camp fever. And we only get occasional glimpses of the trading of heads for lucre which had to be counteracted through grisly “head identification” ceremonies. Trading of live prisoners for ransom was virtually unknown in Japan. The aim of fighting was “Let there be no second time”—Kiyomori’s fatal blunder of pardoning Yoshitomo’s sons, among them Yoritomo, after the Heiji War, was well known. All this seeped in, and no doubt had its share in the duration and the extension in depth of the ensuing Sengoku anarchy. In civil wars in China, only landless peasants joined the ranks voluntarily. In Japan, every farmer was basically also a warrior until Hideyoshi confiscated weapons through a nation-wide “sword-hunt” in 1588. Every ashigaru had his first lessons on the mentality of war from the biwa-hoshi. On the other hand, the Heike recitations also propagated civic virtues: loyalty, steadfastness in adversity, and pride of family honor. In Europe after 1600, the chansons de geste became bound up with the anti-monarchical rearguard battle of the feudal nobles against emerging absolutism; but in Japan, every feudal ruler supported actively or passively the indoctrination in useful modes of behavior which was also a part of the Heike heritage. Even in the Tokugawa age, the government did not interfere against recitations of old war tales to the lower orders, nor did it hinder townsmen from decorating their walls with color prints of famous warriors. Imagawa Ryoshun, statesman and historian of the Muromachi age, wrote about 1400 a small tract, much of which does not tally very well with the hereditary class hierarchy of the Tokugawa. Yet, it was used as a schoolbook and incessantly reprinted. Ryoshun was a belated “flower of chivalry”, a maverick in his time, deeply imbued with the spirit of the Gempei age.

Finally, the Heike did not contain any religious controversy. Every sect and creed agreed on the mujo-kan
view that nothing is permanent, and priests of every denomination could not but relish the obvious piety displayed by many of the characters. The basic problem, viz. that a Buddhist must not kill, was glossed over by the doctrine that fidelity to one’s lord is in itself a religious act. And on behalf of one’s lord one must go to any length, including taking life.\(^{26}\)

The textual evolution of the *Heike* did, of course, not stop with the creation of the first *biwa-hōshi* versions of the tale around 1235-50. In the first place, schools of *biwa-hōshi* developed, each with their pet theories of aesthetics, and each with “secret” teachings on how to rivet the audience with subtle gags, which they jealously guarded from each other. In the second place, the *kirokuteki* or documentary tradition with which the *Heike* had started, reasserted itself with the *Gempei Seisui-ki*, an expanded, less lyrical, more factual—at least in the mode of presentation—version of the *Heike* theme. It has often been called a “padded” version of the *Heike monogatari*: others have asserted that the latter is a distillate of the *Gempei Seisui-ki*. However, just because the tradition was so alive and kicking, new needs constantly spawned new versions. One such was a “reader”, in which all the various accretions which the singers had invented to suit their audiences were gathered together for perusal. Such a version would lack the frills which belonged to each group’s “secret” traditions: thus the final product would be long, easily readable (to the Japanese), and a bit tedious (which is just what the *Gempei Seisui-ki* is compared to the *Heike monogatari*\(^{28}\)).

Another fusion of the *kirokuteki* style with glowing accounts of individual battles was achieved with the *Shokyuki* written by a contemporary of the war between Kyoto and Kamakura which ex-emperor Go-Toba unleashed in 1221.\(^{29}\) It is basically a chronicle. It has little of the pithy *gravitas* of the *Azuma kagami* or official history of the Kamakura shogunate (whose value as
literature grows proportionally as it proves to the historians to be full of inventions). It has none of the lyrical grandeur which parts of the *Heike* possess. Yet, it is strangely moving, even in translation. That comes from the drive of the story. It is divided into episodes, but the story does not fall to pieces. It flows inexorably like a good professional novel. It starts with a "zoom-in" from the creation of the world, roams over the great ancient civilizations of India and China, gets down to the Japanese island world, and then focuses more and more until it settles on the scheming ex-emperor in Kyoto and the haughty colonels in Kamakura. The bias of the unknown author is moderately pro-Kamakura. The "rise and fall" pattern used in the *Heike* is employed with much skill. It appears at all levels. At the top, we follow the ex-emperor's emotional curve from self-reliance through exuberance, *hubris*, misgivings, fear and remorse to the ultimate abject blaming of his ministers. At the bottom, we have the ex-emperor's messenger, a petty bureaucrat whose mission to Kamakura and back carries him through a similar curve. What above all makes the story readable, apart from its source interest, is that no character is hypostatized, not even the victors. There are no lyrical parts, yet it may well have been recited: there are some passages where, e.g., an already quoted message is recounted in just the same words, providing rest for the reciter and the joy of recognition to the audience.

The years from 1221 until the Mongol threats began in 1266 were peaceful. The great purge of the Miura in 1247 went unsung. More strange is that no great national epos came out of the Mongol Wars. Possibly the reason is that they never formally ended. For decades the shogunate had to maintain the country in a state of siege. In the process, the economy went from bad to worse. Those who flourished were the large money-lending Zen monasteries, which spent some of their wealth on the patronage of literature. That literature,
however, was Chinese, and so was the learning which the Hojo subsidized through the Kanazawa Bunko library and other cultural institutions. The Hojo shikken were skillful rulers, but not singable. Their activities were legislative and—apart from the martial vigor they showed in the Mongol Wars—peaceful. Only the end of their rule was spectacular enough to trigger epic writing. That was the celebrated Taiheiki or "Record of the Grand Pacification (brought about by Go-Daigo)".  

The Taiheiki covers the period 1318-67, that is, the reigns of Go-Daigo and Go-Murakami. These years were highly dramatic. The Hojo régime was corrupt; plot followed plot both in Kyoto and in the Kanto. After an abortive attempt at restoring imperial power, Go-Daigo succeeded in 1333. Kamakura was stormed by pro-imperial warriors under Nitta Yoshisada, while Kamakura's general Ashikaga Takauji changed sides and supported them. The Hojo committed mass suicide. Go-Daigo established an imperial rule under the motto "back to Engi" (a period, 901-23, when the emperors had some personal power and which looked golden in retrospect) which proved impossible to realize. Ashikaga turned again, this time on Go-Daigo. The latter fled while Ashikaga established a puppet emperor in Kyoto. Two warrior groups, each under a fainéant emperor, fought each other until (in 1392) the northern group, i.e., the Ashikaga and their puppet, won out.  

The Taiheiki was written about 1370 probably by a priest, Kojima, who belonged to the Tendai sect and was deeply versed in Chinese literature. The Taiheiki is a late and technically perfected gunki. It has all the stylistic knobs making it fit for recitation: a forceful, pithy prose style (the despair of westerners because it also contains allusions to mythology, only well known to Buddhist worshippers of the time); metrical passages; segmentation which facilitates memorization; and deft use of classical Japanese for lyrical
passages, e.g. *michiyuki* or expressions of sights and feelings during travel. The author’s problem was *focus*. The issues were more complicated than in the Gempei era. It was patent that there were very few heroes around. Men fought for power and land and did not conceal that. Even the victorious emperor was corrupt, and his general Ashikaga Takauji was a turncoat. Heroes had to be made out of the secondary figures. Most renowned was Kusunoki Masashige who fought for the southern dynasty against impossible odds and perished in the process. Kusunoki was a true "tragic hero", more so than Yoritomo’s younger brother Yoshitsune, who became the hero of historical novels of later eras. Yoshitsune had been lured by the splendor of the court to accept titles and contravene Yoritomo’s orders to keep clear of Kyoto influences: he was accordingly fired and hunted down. But Kusunoki fought deliberately for an emperor who wanted to return to a mode of government under which Kusunoki would probably have been no statesman, but an obscure policeman in the pay of the court aristocracy.

Apart from a few such heroes, who stand out as beacons, the characters of the *Taiheiki* are painted with more nuance than had been the case in earlier *gunki*. The author’s bias for the Southern dynasty did not make him conceal its lapses, e.g., Go-Daigo’s fundamental lack of reliability. The *Taiheiki* was a work of a more sophisticated age than the *Heike monogatari*. Probably for this reason, the *Taiheiki* was more popular than the *Heike* in the increasingly bureaucrat/bourgeois-dominated Tokugawa age. The public reciters (*koshaku-shi*) were often called simply *Taiheikiyomi*.³³ Many of its episodes were dramatized, and the figures were known to every commoner. It was part of Tokugawa policy to boost reading of the *Azuma kagami* which described the good government of the lords of Kamakura. The *Taiheiki* may have fitted these endeavors to perfection: In spite of the sympathy of its authors
for Go-Daigo and his cause, the readers or listeners would easily come to believe that warrior rule was the “normal” order of things, and personal rule by the emperor something that came about when warrior government occasionally lapsed into corruption; and that imperial government, once established, did not fulfill its promises: Had not Go-Daigo’s experiments with personal rule brought about the frightful mess of two rival dynasties, each claiming divine origins?

The war tale tradition continued to flourish in the eras of Muromachi and Azuchi-Momoyama. The fifteenth century saw the Ōnin-ki and the Gikei-ki, and the sixteenth many works on the exploits of the Sengoku daimyo. Nobunaga and Hideyoshi were likewise served by scholars who glorified their deeds. However, chronicle and novel now definitively parted company. The Gikei-ki is a popular, partially fantastic, story about the exploits of Yoshitsune and his men: it is a novel much more than a chronicle. The Ōnin-ki, on the other hand, is history with few literary frills. So are the stories of the warlord houses, such as the Imagawa-ki and the story of the five reigns of the later Hojo in Odawara, the Godaiki, as well as the Nobunaga-ko-ki and the Taiko-ki. They have value as history, but were not intended to be literature. Real life provided so much gore that popular literature, such as the Otogi-zoshi, chose other subjects, either Buddhism or tales of shrewd commoners.

The Tokugawa peace gave the warriors leisure to study anew the gunki corpus. Kumazawa Banzan and Yamaga Soko mined it for guidelines on how true bushi ought to behave, and Chikamatsu Monzaemon glorified the prowess of warriors in historical dramas or jidaimono. Even the iconoclastic Ihara Saikaku grudgingly admired the warrior spirit in his Buke giri monogatari. In the Forty-seven Loyal Ronin, Takeda Izumo catered to the popular taste for martial dramas, and Bakin did the same thing in many and long
novels about heroic warriors. To all classes, the battles of yore had become a source of entertainment. But in its Confucian garb, the warriors’ basic ideology of loyalty to superiors had seeped into the consciousness of virtually everybody. The Meiji restoration gave these sentiments new directions and dimensions, but did not change them. Even today, the cult of social discipline remains as the core of the legacy of the *gunki*. The husk is the cult of violence represented by *chanbara* swordfight movies and the pseudo-traditional *yakuza* gangsters, who, in a drab world of pinball parlours, organized gambling, and pimps, try to build underworld *kyodotai* or *Gemeinschaften* based on loyalty to a leader, boss paternalism, and just sharing of unjust profits. With the business-like crime of the western world these belated would-be *samurai* have little to do.

Premodern warfare-inspired literature in Japan celebrated individuals, but after modernization had set in, and the Meiji government started its agressive politics against its Asian neighbors, the State became the object for patriotic effusions. This trend continued, in even shriller modes, during the “dark valley” period of militarism 1931-45. Today, the entire genre is stone dead: whether a militarized Japan will arise again, with a war-celebrating literature to match it, remains to be seen. It will, at any rate, not be folk literature, but government propaganda. The starvation and atomic warfare of the last war years, together with post-war democracy, prosperity and basic reforms of society, manners, and education, seem to have immunized at least two generations of Japanese against glorification of war, probably more so than in any European nation, because schoolbook-writers in Japan have, on the whole, chosen to tell the rising generations the appalling truths about the war rather than resorting to glossing-over and willed forgetfulness, the so-called “Vergangenheitsbewältigung”.

Steenstrup: Notes on the Gunki or Military Tales: Contributions to the Study
This recent development should, however, not blind us to the fact that Japanese literature shares with the literature of western Europe—and with few other literatures—the acceptance of strife and war as parts of the perennial human condition. The Buddhist tenet “Nothing lasts; the mighty must fall; man-made suffering is man’s common lot” and the Christian idea of original sin led premodern man in Europe as well as in Japan to an outlook of “fröhliche Verzweiflung” (jap. ganbaru, eng. “grin and bear it”) of which only the last two decades of consumerism have sapped the vitality. Some common ground remains. An educated Japanese can enjoy translations of chansons de geste, ballads, and Icelandic sagas, and we can enjoy the translated Heike monogatari and the Taiheiki, neither side needing the lengthy explanations necessary to understand the chronicles and songs of the middle East, India, China, Indonesia, or the Oceanic peoples. The common ground is the epic tradition, whose ancestry in Europe is well known, and whose origins in Japan are now being investigated. As is well known, the Ainu possessed in the Yukar songs a developed heroic-epic oral tradition. Some Japanese scholars think that some old battle songs preserved in the Kojiki chronicle (compilation terminated 712 A.D.) are vestiges of ancient Japanese epics. As for later periods, it has been the general verdict since Florenz that Japanese literature, however strong in the lyric mode, was weak in the epic vein. Until the end of the twelfth century when the warriors grasped power, this is true: long, narrative poems were rare, and when used, they described feelings rather than deeds. But at least from the time when the oral composition of the Heike began—that is, probably shortly after the final battles of 1185—the central form of the epic mode, the heroic epic, existed in maturing form, which is no wonder, as the Hogen and the Heiji monogatari preceded it in theme and probably also in composition. The Heike fulfills all the criteria
for a heroic epos. The contents are *res gestae regumque ducumque et tristia bella* as required by Horace. The form is rhythmic, apt for chanting. There are descriptions of arms, armor, war-councils, banquets, and battles interspersed with elegiac parts lamenting the mutability of life. The language has the formulaic elements necessary for the tyro bard to support his memory; the occasional panegyrics and divine interventions betray vocal origins, as do the subtle ways in which the variants show that the tale-singer developed his art from bland narration through fictitious observer’s reports into full-blown ability to keep the audience spellbound through shifting at will from one character’s viewpoint to another’s. The *Taiheiki* followed the same general pattern, and though its language was more overlaid with Chinese learning, recitals of it outshone those of the *Heike* in popularity during the Tokugawa era. Even quite epigonic pieces produced during the *Sengoku* when warfare had degenerated into mass slaughter retained their hold on large audiences. The blend of action and elegy was still irresistible. It is probably significant of the Japanese taste for epics that the alien *Odyssey* theme was incorporated into narrative literature and drama only a few years after Jesuit missionaries had told Japanese men of letters the story. And it will probably not be out of character to remember that the Tokugawa townsman, when he watched the now blood-curdling, now tearful events on the *kabuki* stage, no less than the samurai who pored over Bakin’s massive tales of infinitely brave and loyal heroes, was deliberately seeking the same thrills for his soul as was the Balkan mountaineer, the Kirghiz herdsman, the Norse warrior-farmer or the Russian peasant, when listening to tales of stirring deeds of old: loyalty to kin, physical bravery, revenge, grief, and tribal or even national patriotism. Last but not least he sought escape from oppressive social realities, from foreign occupation to pauperism. Yet, though mankind
has lived under oppressive material circumstances in most places, and at most times, and may sorely have needed the literary opiate which is the heroic epic, only a few cultures actually produced this kind of literature. A renewed comparative search for economic and social factors common to the cultures where such literature was created and enjoyed, Japan among them, ought to be undertaken.\(^6^4\) To the Japanese, at any rate, goes the primacy in pondering the rationale of such literature as the gunki; half a millennium ago an instruction manual for "singers of tales", biwa-hoshi, explained that,

"... through the Four Battle Records (sc. the Hogen, the Heiji, the Heike, and the Shokyuki). one comprehends righteous obligation (giri); learning of tribulations and pondering the prologues, one discerns natural order; hearing of death and destruction one apprehends transiency..."\(^6^5\)

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Notes


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3Monks and artists in *setsuwa* often behave with warrior-like heroism in the pursuit of their aims; see Murakami Manabu, “*Setsuwa* Tales and *Hijiri* Ascetics” in *Acta Asiatica* 37 (1979), pp. 85-103.

3Lewin, pp. 529-30. See also Miki Sumito, “*Essays and Journals in the Medieval Period*”, in *Acta Asiatica* 37 (1979), pp. 80-84, esp., p. 75.


17See Kenneth Butler, "The Textual Evolution of the *Heike monogatari*", in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* XXVI (1966,
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pp. 5-51, esp. pp. 20 and 25-29.


20Butler, in “The Textual Evolution of the Heike monogatari”, pp. 23-29, convincingly demonstrates that the “Ur-Heike” can be dated 1218-21, and the first major revision 1242 post.

21Ibid., pp. 33-38.

22If Yukiinaga was indeed the author of the Heike, he had personal reasons to favor the Taira, see ibid., p. 21. On the “decay ideology”, see, e.g., Taira no Shigehira’s speech before Yoritomo in the “Senju no mae” chapter of the Heike monogatari, trl. Kitagawa and Tsuchida, pp. 603 ff.


26See Kakehi Yasuhiko, Chūsei buke kakun no kenkyū (Tokyo: Kazama shobo, 1967, “Shiryo-hen”, p. 69, col., 7, and the author’s Hojo Shigetoki (1198-1261) and his Role in the History of Political and Ethical Ideas in Japan (Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies Monograph Series No. 41), London and Malmö: Curzon Press, 1979, pp. 163 and 258. For efforts—not successful—by Honen’s adherents ab.1235 to make the Heike a vehicle for their propaganda, see Butler, “The Textual . . .”, pp. 35-36.

27Ibid., variant stemma, p. 34.


29William McCullough Shōkyuki, Monumenta Nipp. XIX (1964), pp. 182-84, translates the famous story about Go-Toba’s fateful
intervention on behalf of the dancing-girl Kamegiku. The episode may well be true, but it was not true reason for the war. For the bakufu's version of the story, see William McCullough, trl., "The Azuma kagami Account of the Shōkyū War" in Monumenta Nipp. XXXII (1968), pp. 102-55. For the court's, see the work by Ingrid Siegmund quoted in note 16.

The Mokō shurai e-makimono is no such epos, but an expanded affidavit supporting a plea for a veteran's reward, see Florenz, Geschichte der Japanischen Literatur, p. 315. It is characteristic that tragic heroes like Yoshitsune (see Helen Craig McCullough, trl. & ed., Yoshitsune: a Fifteenth-Century Japanese Chronicle (Stanford U.P., 1966) and the Soga brothers (see Florenz, p. 316, and Laurence Kominz, ‘The Noh as Popular Theater: Miyamasu's Youchi Soga’ in Monumenta Nipp. XXXIII (1978), pp. 441-59) spawned epic literature (the Gikeiki and the Soga monogatari), but there is no Tokimune monogatari on the victor of the Mongol wars.

30See Lewin, Chrestomathie, I: 197-99 McCullough: Taiheiki, Introduction; Wilson, Hogen monogatari, pp. 113-17; Florenz, pp. 308-15; Putzar, p. 79.

31The first chapters may be up to forty years older (McCullough, Taiheiki, Introduction, p. xviii).


34Gikei is Sino-Japanese reading for Yoshitsune; for the work, see note 30, trl. Helen McCullough.


36Ibid., items 964 and 965.

37Ibid., items 976 and 977.


39For their efforts to make Confucian paragons out of the bushi or warriors, see Ryusaku Tsunoda, W.T. de Bary and Donald Keene, Sources of Japanese Tradition (Columbia University Press paperback edition in two vols., 4th printing, 1968), I: 384-401.

40On Chikamatsu's oeuvre, see Florenz, pp. 587-601. On Saikaku's
Buke giri monogatari, see Caryl Callahan in *Monumenta Nipp.* XXXIV (1979), pp. 1-20, “Tales of Samurai Honor.”

42*Florenz,* pp. 601-02, surveys Takeda Izumo’s historical dramas. On the *Forty-seven Loyal Ronin* (Kanadehon-Chushingura) which still draws enthusiastic audiences on screen, stage, and television, see Lewin, *Chrestomathie,* I: 357-62.

43*Florenz,* pp. 524-48, esp. pp. 530-39. Kyokutei Bakin (1767-1848), the most erudite and most respected novelist of the Edo period, carried on the legend of Minamoto no Tametomo where the *Hogen monogatari* had left him, in his novel of high adventure, the *Chinsetsu-Yumiharitsuke* (1807-12) written in the language of the *Hogen monogatari;* see Lewin, *Chrestomathie* I: 326-29.


49*Florenz,* op. cit., p. 626.


If we assume that the "oral battle tale singers" (Butler's term) began working up the Gempei War events relatively soon after they ended in 1185, it seems plausible that they embarked on the Hogen/Heiji events (1156-60) in the 1160's. But the first written fixation of the stories of these events may have place almost contemporaneously with that of the Heike story, ab. 1220. See Lewin, Chrestomathie I:187, and Kadokawa Shoten's Nihonshi-jiten (Tokyo 1977), s.v. Hogen monogatari & Heiji monogatari. For manuscript stemmas, see Wilson, Hogen monogatari, pp. 123 & 129.

The rhythm of much of the language in the Heike is an alternation of 5 and 7 syllables, the preferred Japanese metre. Thus, though the text looks like ordinary prose at first glance, it invites chanting. The poems embedded in the text enhance this tendency.

The idea that elegy is no part of a proper epic is probably wrong: elegiac parts are found in most recognized epic traditions; see C.M. Bowra, Heroic Poetry (London: Macmillan, 1964 reprint), pp. 8-23, 29, 34, 128, and 380. I venture to disagree with the renowned British scholar Douglas Mills who argues, on p. 6 of his now famous paper, "Nihon bungaku no miryoku: chusei bungaku wo chushin to shite," in Kokuhungaku kenkyu shiryo kanpo, March 1979, no. 12, pp. 1-7, that elegy over the characters' sad fates, or over the general transience of earthly things, belongs to the features which in his view render the Heike lyrical rather than epical.—Elegy over the transience of earthly things (Jap.: shogyomujo) is not found in Buddhist civilizations only; for examples from medieval Europe, see Frederick P. Pickering, "Historical Thought and Moral Codes" in H. Scholler, ed., The Epic in Medieval Society, pp. 1-17; several of these occur in clearly "epic" contexts.

To the formulaic elements belong the year indications with which each book of the Heike starts, and the fairly stereotyped ways in which the heroes' accoutrements are described before they venture into battle, and the pedigrees they proclaim just before attack. See Butler, "The Heike monogatari & the Japanese Warrior Ethic", pp. 105-06. But epitheta ornantia, such as "the cherry-
blossoming capital”, or “hair as black as a snail’s innards”, or
“foot-wearying mountains”, which are a prominent part of po-
etry, whether chanted or spoken from the Nō stage, are not con-
spicuous in the Heike. Economy of language befitted the tragic
events, and such mnemonic props could be done without because
the biwa-hōshi operated in an increasingly literate milieu, pos-
sessing prompt-books with established canons for the texts rec-
58See Yamashita Hiroaki, “The Structure of “Story-telling”
(Katari) in Japanese War Tales—With Special Reference to the
Scene of Yoshitomo’s Last Moments,” in Acta Asiatica 37 (1979),
pp. 47-69; Kajiwara Masaaki in Kubota & Kitagawa, Chūsei no
bungaku, pp. 66-68; and Butler in “The Textual Evolution,” pp.
11-12 and 23-26.
59Florenz, p. 315. This is no wonder. The Taiheiki warriors and
commoners resembled those of the Tokugawa age more in men-
tality and outlook than those of the Heike did. Popularity is not
always determined by literary quality, in which the Heike
probably ranks higher. What counted here was the fact that the
Heike age closed the world of Heian, but the Taiheiki age opened
that of Sengoku/Tokugawa. Thus, average listeners and readers
could empathize more easily with Taiheiki characters.
60On the Sengoku gunki, see Yamashita Hiroaki in Kubota and
Kitagawa, Chūsei no bungaku, pp. 321-25.
61See James T. Araki, “Yuriwaka and Ulysses: the Homeric Epics
at the Court of Ouchi Yoshitaka” in Monumenta Nipponica
62See above, note 43).
63Old Norse literature, the most austere of the great epic traditions,
and one of the least accessible outside its home area, since Norse
mythology was not kept artificially alive by the Renaissance poets,
as the Mediterranean-mythology was, sells commercially in Japan,
in meticulously annotated but literal translations; see, e.g.,
Sugawara Kunishiro, trans. & ed., Völsunga saga (Hokuō bunka
shirizuu, Tokyo, Tokai Daigaku Shuppankai, 1979).
64The foundation work has already been done by H.M. and N.K.
Chadwick, The Growth of Literature (3 vols., Cambridge Univer-
sity Press 1932-40, reprinted 1968), which, however, only inci-
dentially treats ancient Japanese literature, notably the Kojiki.
65Quoted from William R. Wilson, trans. & ed., Hōgen