
War and Literature in Japan

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Prologue

Since time immemorial, human beings have never been free from conflict. Of course mainly for survival, but sometimes driven by petty desires or “lofty” causes, they fought first within their tribes, then against other tribes, and much later, on a national scale. With the progress in civilization, mankind became equipped with more powerful and precise weaponry. Thus, the history of mankind could be summarized not only as a civilizing process but as a development of bloody fighting and killing as well.

Wars have unintentionally, perhaps, given birth to brilliant accomplishments of mankind: that is, some of the best literature ever written.

In the West, for instance, the “sacred” battle waged by Christians against the Muslim world produced *La Chanson de Roland*, a masterpiece in the twelfth century. This long epic poem is in praise of military exploits of the soldiers of Charlemagne. Likewise, Chinese literature recounts the famous story of the legendary tragic heroine Wang Zhao-jun. This tale resulted from the years’ long battle between the Han Dynasty and the Huns, a powerful nomadic tribe living in the northern part of China in the early centuries of the first millennium. Indeed, mankind has not fought solely in pursuit of literature; however, wars have inspired great writing from men and women, who might never have written otherwise. This essay will discuss the relationship between warfare and literature in Japan.

Japanese War Literature until Pre-modern

The beginning of the second millennium in Japan is characterized by the emergence of the samurai, or warrior class. Warriors, in the course of time, succeeded in driving the nobility from politics and to take control over the land themselves. In the process, two powerful clans, the Genji and the Heike, fought against each other. Their famous twelfth century struggles are retold in *The Tale of the Heike*. Dealing chiefly with the decline of the Heike, this lively narrative succeeds

218
(55)

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in depicting the events leading up to and following their downfall as well as a number of exciting battle scenes. *The Tale of the Heike* is sometimes compared to *La Chanson de Roland*. Similarly, *The Taiheiki*, although less famous, also succeeds in describing warriors in the fourteenth century. Nevertheless, this war literature is concerned, after all, with civil wars; they do not involve the inevitable cross-cultural experience of international wars.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Japan had possessed little experience of fighting wars against foreigners. A rare exception occurred in the thirteenth century when twice they fought off a Mongol invasion. Those historic battle scenes have been beautifully documented in a picture scroll from the period. However, no piece of work was added to Japanese literature then. Not until the advent of the new Japan in the nineteenth century, did literature finally generate from wars against foreigners.

The Turn of the Century

Meiji Japan was a turbulent era. The whole nation assiduously attempted to construct a powerful modern state to avoid being colonized by Western powers. Since the opening up of the country in the middle of the nineteenth century, equality with other nations had been among the main objectives Japan's diplomacy strove to attain. The attempt at gaining equal status in the international community was concurrent with the history of revising and relinquishing the unequal treaties concluded at the end of the Tokugawa period.

The year 1894, in which Japan achieved partial success in revising the treaties, should also be remembered as the beginning of the Sino-Japanese war. Japan's first international war in modern times was followed in the newspapers. They kept the people informed and contributed greatly to their enthusiasm through the many war stories reported there. Among the men of letters who wrote about the war are, according to a standard textbook of Japanese literature (Mizuta, 226), Tokutomi Roka (1868-1927), Kunikida Doppo (1871-1908), and Izumi kyoka (1873-1939). But special attention should be paid to two other works. One is Lafcadio Hearn's short essay, "After the War", the other, memoirs written by Mutsu Munemitsu (1844-1897), then foreign minister.

Hearn (1850-1904), better known in Japan as Koizumi Yakumo, succeeds in depicting with artistic skill how Japan finally matured into a strong nation by referring to the remarkable difference reflected in the soldiers before and after the war. Hearn also succinctly describes how the euphoria over the triumph was soon challenged and then cooled by the so-called Triple Intervention. The memoirs, *Kenkenroku*, on the other hand, clearly informs in an elevated style how people in

government at the time took pains to cope with the foreign policies of the powers. Besides, it gives a clue to understanding how the minister conceptualized the war within the context of the long history of Sino-Japanese relations and the contemporary world situation. Mutsu even said: "[I]t was patently clear to all that the real cause of friction would be a collision between the new civilization of the West and the old civilization of East Asia (Mutsu, 28)." For the first time in history, Japan consciously fought a war considering herself to be a nation belonging to the West. The minister's masterpiece exemplifies one unmistakable characteristic that modern warfare brought to Japanese literature: a narrative from the viewpoint of civilization.

More important than the Russo-Japanese War is the historical event known as the Boxer Rebellion that broke out in northern China at the very end of the nineteenth century. A textbook on international law, holding a large readership, referred to it as one of the three events in modern Japanese history which helped Japan to rank among the civilized communities in the world (Hall, 42).

The rebellion was a xenophobic uprising by Chinese peasants in North China. The climax came in June 1900, when the court allowed the Boxers to enter Peking. Japan sent a large expeditionary force to China to rescue the residents of the powers confined in Peking "in accordance with the wishes of the powers." The behavior of the Japanese troops in suppressing the rebellion was highly admired, because they not only demonstrated bravery in the battlefield, but after victory treated the people in occupied land with affection as well. In contrast, other foreign troops, in particular Germans and Russians, attracted the global attention by their looting and raping.

Mori Ōgai (1862-1926) is among the Japanese intellectuals of the time expressing their interpretation of this rebellion. His view is found in his published lecture, "One Aspect Observed in the Boxer Rebellion [Hokushin Jiken no Ichimen no Kansatsu]". Ōgai gives a stimulating account of the suppression: an aspect of cross-cultural contacts. The Boxer Rebellion gave Japan's soldiers first-hand experience with foreigners. That is, the rebellion served as a direct cross-cultural exchange for the Japanese. Again, a narrative written in terms of civilization.

Cross-cultural and racial issues were among Ōgai's chief concerns throughout his literary career. Not only did Ōgai try to inform his contemporaries of the negative side of Western civilization, but also, he never failed to emphasize the fact that Japan was still morally far behind the West. Ōgai also played an important role in the literature produced around the time of Japan's first war against a Western power, the Russo-Japanese War. As a medical officer, he himself was in the Manchurian battlefield, where he expressed his feelings in the form of poems, "Uta Nikki". The poetry mainly praises the brave and unhesitating behavior of the

Japanese soldiers. Some might argue that this work is a product of the Establishment perspective on the war, in sharp contrast to Tayama Katai (1871-1930)'s *One Soldier* [Ippeisotsu], in which the writer, accompanying the army as a journalist, even revealed the brutality and senselessness of the war (Mizuta, 226). A woman poet, Yosano Akiko (1878-1942), also should not be overlooked. Her published long poem, "Never Let Them Kill You, Brother; Our Love [Kimi Shinitamou Koto Nakare]", a lyrical work expressing a woman's feeling against the war, aroused hot debates in the newspapers.

From Fragile Peace to the Other Sino-Japanese War

After the triumph over Russia, Japan did not actively engage in warfare except for a limited regional participation in World War One. Throughout the 1910's and 1920's to the Manchurian Incident in 1931, war literature in Japan was, however, far from unproductive. The period is typically characterized by the emergence of a new type of fiction, dealing mainly with a future war between Japan and America. Some of the writers of this new genre were military and naval officers, such as Mizuno Hironori (1875-1945). The literary quality is generally poor, satisfying only a public's appetite for sensationalism. Ironically, the predictions and warnings presented in the literature proved to be true after all (Saeki, 100).

The Marco Polo Bridge Incident in 1937 was the beginning of another Sino-Japanese war. Regrettably, unlike the time of the Boxer Rebellion, when Japan's behavior was highly admired, the Japanese army in the Showa period did not behave so morally as their predecessors. Some of them followed instead the crucial examples set by the German and Russian.

Ishikawa Tatsuzo (1905-85), then a promising novelist, was sent into northern China by the prestigious magazine, *Chūō Kōron*, to report on the war. Immediately after returning to Japan, Ishikawa published in the magazine the novel, "The Living Soldiers [Ikiteiru Heitai]", in which he described the atrocities committed against the Chinese by Japanese soldiers. One could readily be reminded of the infamous "Rape of Nanking". The book was banned soon after its publication, and the author was interrogated by the secret police. Another widely read young novelist, Hino Ashihei (1907-60), wrote one book after another about Japanese soldiers in China, among which is *Wheat and Soldiers* [Mugi to Heitai]. Like Ishikawa, Hino did not question the status quo; in other words, he did not attempt to analyze the nature of the war against China. He became popular precisely because of the lively manner in which he described the chauvinistic spirit among the Japanese soldiers.

The Pacific War

The war against China after 1937 seemed to bog down rather than developing as the Japanese military strategists had expected. The outbreak of the Pacific War, therefore, contributed to clearing away the accumulation of gloom over the deadlock military operations in China. In other words, the news of their initial triumph served as a catharsis to the whole nation. The startling victory of the army and navy of Imperial Japan against Western civilization sent most of the Japanese into raptures. Men of letters were no exception. In July the following year, a group of distinguished intellectuals, academics, and literary critics were summoned to Kyoto by the Literary Society, *Bungakkai*, to discuss the theme of *Kindai no Chōkoku* (overcoming the modern). All of the participants believed that the debate would mark the end of “modern civilization” in Japan and would reveal the outline of a “glorious new age”.

In this discussion, the literary critic Hayashi Fusao (1903-75), for instance, went so far as to declare that the “civilization and enlightenment of the Meiji period meant the adoption of European culture, and resulted in the submission of Japan to the West (Kawakami, 239).” This kind of discourse could be regarded as a “traditionalistic” reaction to the modernizing process or for that matter a Japanese revolt against the West. Nonetheless, the meeting’s significance becomes apparent by reading the proceedings of this discussion. It could be ascertained how intellectuals at the time interpreted civilization both in Japan and in the West, no matter how superficial or merely emotional their contentions sometimes seem.

The government, on the other hand, established an information center to control cultural activities by promoting popular enthusiasm for the war. A lot of writers and journalists were sent overseas to serve as information officers in the newly acquired territories and sent back to Japan their writings on the war and the region. Some of them formed patriotic associations of their own accord. The number of articles and books relating to the war proliferated accordingly.

After the Banquet

Following Japan’s unprecedented defeat in 1945, war literature turned to reevaluating writers’ experiences during the war. Some, such as Takamura Kotarō (1883-1956), resumed their literary career after expressing sincere regret for their positive commitment to the war policy of Imperial Japan. Others sought to depict in novels their war experience, whether on the battlefield or on the home front. Ōoka Shōhei (1909-88) and Noma Hiroshi (1915-91) are among those who succeeded in putting their horrible experiences as low-rank soldiers into serious novels which

even questions the human existence. Likewise, the historian Aida Yūji (1916-97), based on his experience of being a prisoner of war in Burma, published a critical essay filled with profound insights into the very nature of Western civilization. Other literary men dealt with the horror of the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Among the typical works are Ibuse Masuji's (1898-1993) *Black Rain* [Kuroi Ame], Hara Tamiki's (1905-51) *The Summer Flower* [Natsu no Hana], and Tōge Sankichi's (1917-53) *Hiroshima Poems* [Genbaku Shishū].

These are excellent works, to be sure, but the most widely read at the time is probably *Harp of Burma* [Biruma no Tategato] by Takeyama Michio (1903-84). Takeyama, by profession a professor of German literature, had seen his former students sent to the battlefield never to return. Thus, this novel functioned as a kind of requiem for the dead. Furthermore, although usually considered a juvenile novel, *Harp of Burma* has a passage challenging the interpretation of the pre-war Showa period prevalent in contemporary Japanese journalism (Takeyama, Harp, 90).

Another unique literary outcome that should not be overlooked is a collection of letters from Japanese students who died in World War Two. The collection was entitled *Hearken to the Ocean's Voice!* [Kike Wadatsumi no Koe] and published posthumously four years after the end of the war. A moving document that tells the very tragedy of warfare, and has no equivalent in literature in other countries.

The defeat brought another new and unexpected event: war crimes trials conducted by the Allied powers. These trials, which had nearly 1,000 Japanese put to death all over the world, led to the birth of another sorrowful but memorable work: *Testament of Century* [Seiki no Isho], a collection of the posthumous manuscripts of those who were executed or died in jail. These prisoners of war were sent abroad to fight and after the defeat of their nation were tried by foreigners. These war trials thus provided the Japanese with first-hand opportunities to get in touch with foreigners. For most of them, it was a first time experience. A reading of these records of class B and C war criminals will help to reveal the views of civilization among the ordinary people. Also, their posthumous manuscripts and prison notebooks are all the more important because nothing could show so vividly how the Japanese at the time conceptualized "the other".

Along this line, the emphasis of the civilization aspect in war crimes trials is worth considering. The chief prosecutor of the Tokyo war crimes trial, for instance, made a declaration at the opening statement that the Allied powers represented the civilization. Takeyama Michio was among the first who responded to this framework of a trial by civilization. Only about five months after the opening statement, Takeyama completed a short essay entitled "Mr. Hyde's trial [Haidō shi no Saiban]", where he makes an acute analysis of the fate of modern civilization in an attempt to repudiate the view that the Allied powers are none other than "civilization", and

contends that this modern civilization is really the accused. He even points out, although implicitly, the importance of examining world history, including the history of the countries on the prosecution's side. This challenging essay could have evoked many responses had it been published then; however, it was not allowed to be published by the censorship of General Headquarters.

This short literary work, together with his later publication on his view of the Tokyo trial, gives a clue to understanding the discourse on or against civilization in post-war Japan. His literary career in short exemplifies the fact that war literature in Japan is closely related to civilization.

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