Commentary on Wilkie: Warriors Are Tools

DAVID SPAFFORD
University of Pennsylvania
spafford@sas.upenn.edu

Taizong (r. 636–649), the second emperor of the Tang (618–907), is often said to have described his ministers as mirrors in which he, as ruler, could examine his own virtue. The statement, for instance, is quoted in an early sixteenth-century Japanese war tale, Shōin shigo (The Private Words of Shōin, 1509). This text goes on to attribute another aphorism to the Chinese sovereign as well: “Warriors are weapons.”

I could not help but recall this observation when reading Rodger Wilkie’s fascinating analysis of epic heroes as cyborgs. To my knowledge, no Japanese warrior—heroic or otherwise—undergoes the sort of reconfiguration that makes Cethern Mac Fintain such an arresting figure. Yet the analytical possibilities opened up by Wilkie’s essay seem particularly promising in the context of Japan’s diverse canon of heroes. From the point of view of someone not specializing in Irish literature, of course, the strength of Wilkie’s essay lies not in the specifics of his argument that we should, indeed, consider Cethern Mac Fintain a cyborg, but rather in the ways in which, by accepting this premise, we are drawn into his discussion of “the involvement of the society that helps to construct [a hero], in the actions for which he is constructed.” While most heroes may be less literally or obviously “constructed” than Cethern, in other words, they remain, nevertheless, tools.

As Japanese war tales go, Shōin shigo may be less epic than most. Still, like the multitude of other medieval texts categorized as war tales, it too concerns itself with the lives and triumphs of men of warrior stock. Violent clashes and cunning stratagems fill its pages, no less embellished for having been written down shortly after they took place. That it should invoke the wisdom of a celebrated Chinese ruler of the past in describing the lot of late fifteenth-century Japanese warriors, then, is significant.

1. 兵凶器也 (Chinese: bīng xióng qì yě; Japanese: tsuwamono kyōki nari); Gunma kenshi shiryō hen 5:797b. The phrase is fairly ubiquitous in Chinese sources long before Tang Taizong: it is found, attributed to the Filial Wen, in Lidai mingchen zouyi (book 324); it also appears in Zhouyi kouyi (book 2) and other commentaries to Yijing; and in Shangshu (books 15 and 27, among others). In Japan, long before Shōin shigo, an analogous sentiment was expressed in a letter by Minamoto no Yoritomo, the first shogun: “[A warrior] is an instrument for the defense of the sovereign” (teiō o go mairasuru utsuwa mono nari), in Hanawa Hokinoichi, comp., Gunsho ruijū, 3rd ed., vol. 27 (Tokyo: Zoku Gunsho Ruijū Kanseikai, 1978), 157.
When the author of this little-known text characterizes the warriors he is extolling as weapons (literally, “evil tools”), he is certainly being more explicit than most about warrior’s instrumentality—in fact, in claiming that warriors are dangerous weapons, he is painting a portrait that would fit nicely with Wilkie’s metaphorical cyborgs. Yet, while Shōin shigo may well be more forthright and more self-reflective than most other works in the same vein, it is far from anomalous in its characterization.

Indeed, what is startling about the notion that heroes are cyborgs is how fruitfully it can be applied to Japan’s heroic canon—across the centuries. Most immediately works like the Tale of the Heike (Heike monogatari) come to mind, works that are central to the very definition of the genre of war tales and that constitute a crucial part of Japan’s literary canon. The Tale of the Heike, which evolved gradually in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, narrates the events surrounding the Genpei War of 1180–1185, in which two warrior families, the Heike and Genji, vied for supremacy over Japan. The Tale follows the declining military fortunes of the Heike to the family’s ultimate demise, presented as a manifestation of the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence—“the truth that the prosperous must decline. The proud do not endure, they are like a dream on a spring night; the mighty fall at last, they are as dust before the wind.”

Several of the protagonists of the Tale are epically larger than life, and their deeds, as immortalized in its pages rather than elsewhere in the historical record, soon became models for warriors of subsequent generations (or at least, for warriors portrayed in war tales of later generations): Taira no Kiyomori, the tale’s arch-villain, dying of fevers so hot they made his bath water turn to steam, impiously cursing his enemy with his last breath; Imai no Kanehira fighting against fifty warriors, alone, to give his master Kiso no Yoshinaka a chance to take his own life with dignity; Minamoto no Yoshitsune leading his warriors on horseback down an impassably steep precipice at the battle of Ichinotani (“A horse can certainly go where a deer goes”); Nasu no Yoichi on the beach at

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2. For the links between the canonization of the Tale of the Heike (and samurai epic more broadly) and discourse about the Japanese nation, see David T. Bialock, “Nation and Epic: The Tale of the Heike as a Modern Classic,” in Inventing the Classics: Modernity, National Identity, and Japanese Literature, ed. Haruo Shirane and Tomi Suzuki (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), 151–78.


5. McCullough, Heike, 209–12.


7. Ibid., 305.
Yashima, striking with his arrow a fan set up as a target atop a pole on a Heike boat, almost three hundred feet from shore.8

Yet run through as war tales like the *Tale of the Heike* are with bombast and over-the-top heroics, they are also suffused with the pathos of loss, the overwhelming horror of violence, and the realization—by winners and losers alike—of the fragilities and contradictions of the human condition. In what is arguably the most famous scene in any medieval war tale, Kumagai no Naozane, a Genji soldier, easily defeats his opponent, Taira no Atsumori, a nephew of the evil Kiyomori. As he is about to finish him off, Kumagai realizes that his foe is but a youth of sixteen—the same age as his own son. Kumagai, overwhelmed by emotion, considers letting Atsumori live, only to see other Genji warriors approaching and realize that the youth is doomed anyway. In tears, Kumagai decides that he must take Atsumori’s head himself and offer prayers for his rebirth. “Alas! No lot is as hard as a warrior’s. I would never have suffered such a dreadful experience if I had not been born into a military house. How cruel I was to kill him!”9 The narrator glosses, “After that, [Kumagai] Naozane thought increasingly of becoming a monk.”10 The scene was so powerful that in the centuries to come it provided the material for countless retellings, in drama but also in short fiction.11

Over the years, scholars have often turned to the *Tale of the Heike*, looking for evidence that what had become a literary model was also an ethical template of sorts. Most usefully scholars have examined the tale (and others like it) as reflecting and propounding a fundamentally spiritual view of the world—in this view, which the narrator’s voice itself explicitly endorses—the tale is an account of Buddhist concerns as they play out in a violent society. But scholars once were also interested in finding a mold for what would later become the Way of the Warrior (*bushidō*).12 This sort of reading sought to measure characters’ conduct not against the standard of Buddhist piety, but of warrior honor. Characters like Taira Atsumori or Imai no Kanehira, who charged unblinking against enemies they could never match, become early paragons of selflessness and fearlessness before death. We have long known that the code of the

8. Ibid., 366–68.
9. Ibid., 317.
10. Ibid.
warrior (the abiding western admiration for which is so neatly embodied by Tom Cruise’s character in _The Last Samurai_) was only formalized in the early modern period, once warriors had little to do but push papers and contemplate their growing redundancy in society. And even at the time there were those who plainly saw the way of the warrior for what it was: the early modern author and satirist, Ihara Saikaku (1642–1693), lampooned samurai ideals of conduct by placing his characters in situations that exposed the inherent absurdity of the rules they were presumably to live and die by. Yet in some ways views of samurai valor predicated on the formulation of a code of conduct have had a long half-life, as testified by not only Tom Cruise but by academics more interested in their source material.

How does all of this relate to cyborgs? In a recent essay Umezawa Furumiko has convincingly shown how the epic ideal of warrior conduct was subjected to fundamental reconceptualization over the course of the centuries. Not only were the origins of the idealization of warrior conduct—once sought (and all too readily found) in Japan’s canonical epos, _The Tale of the Heike_—actually the product of a later age (the early modern period). In prizing blind and selfless loyalty over reflection on the violent destiny of warriors, early modern accounts of warrior virtue were fundamentally at variance with those shining medieval examples that had already been enshrined as canonical. The piety of Kumagai Naozane, who took Buddhist vows and renounced the world after killing the young Taira no Atsumori in battle, had become positively incomprehensible by the early modern period: not only had Kumagai acted impulsively in taking the tonsure (without asking his lord for permission); his very desire to atone for his violent act was at odds with the sensibilities of early modern Japanese, who viewed Kumagai’s deed on the battlefield as nothing more than the proper manifestation of the service he owed his lord and commander.

What early modern audiences had lost—and what we miss out on, if we focus on warrior ideals and on Buddhist morality alone—is a chance to view Kumagai’s lament as more than an expression of personal grief. If the warrior is a cyborg—if the warrior is a tool, and his violence is not his alone, but rather the violence of power, and society—then Kumagai’s lament becomes a moment of reflection that resonates beyond the particular; his rejection of the glory of triumph on the battlefield becomes

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a moment of clarity about the cost of valor, and the paradoxical lack of agency of the hero.\footnote{15}

If warriors \textit{are} weapons/tools, we can also resolve what may be a stumbling block in Wilkie’s initial position that in being a cyborg the hero does more than merely \textit{wield} a tool—for it remains unclear how the expansive definition of his premodern cyborgs can exclude anyone or anything from \textit{homo habilis} onward. Yet if by thinking of warriors as weapons we are freed of the need to discover an “intimate augmentation by means of weapons” that are more conventionally understood as artifacts, thinking of the links between Japanese warriors and their weapons along the lines proposed by Wilkie is nonetheless extremely fruitful.

Warriors in the \textit{Tale of the Heike} are certainly characterized by their associations with specific weapons—bows and arrows more often than swords, as in the case of Nasu no Yoichi and his archery contest. Warriors in war tales fight in individual duels rather than in organized formations. They are introduced by elaborate descriptions of their attire, which mark their wealth and status, and their weapons. They announce themselves to prospective foes by reciting their genealogy and martial credentials, in a performance that may not reflect actual battlefield practice, but that metaphorically reenacts the ritual dressing of the hero before his quest, setting the battle apart from the space of the quotidian.\footnote{16}

It was only as part of the process of abstraction of warrior conduct that occurred in the early modern period that the sword would come imaginatively to represent the “soul of the samurai”—a fanciful enough notion, perfectly suited for an epic; except that the sword never appeared so idealized in medieval epics. In the context of literary notions of heroism, the sword does not loom large, although, to be sure, actual historical practice clearly has made the sword “into something that is not just a tool, which would be human enough, but into something that is also an aesthetic object.” As Morgan Pitelka has argued, swords, for all their martial associations, functioned less as instruments of battle than as gifts, symbols of status, heirlooms.\footnote{17} The idealization of the function of the sword, so central to later samurai self-representation—and indeed perniciously associated with the platitudinous identification between tool, ethics, and the aestheticization of violence—persists to this day. But the


\footnotetext{16}{For a critique of the ritualistic reading of samurai battlefield conduct (as portrayed in war tales), see Karl F. Friday, \textit{Samurai, Warfare and the State in Early Medieval Japan} (London: Routledge, 2004), 135–63.}

Yet medieval war tales are not the only source of heroism in Japan’s epic tradition: Less central to Japan’s literary canon but far more important historically in the construction of a “national” myth for the imperial court is a far earlier hero, Yamato Takeru. The deeds of Yamato Takeru, whose name means “Hero of Yamato,” are told in several eighth century texts, most importantly in Kojiki (Record of Ancient Matters, 712) and Nihon shoki (Chronicles of Japan, 720). Kojiki briskly tells the story of Japan (equated with the world and the cosmos), from its mythical origins to the early seventh century. Nihon shoki begins similarly, but is far more detailed and continues all the way down to the end of the seventh century (the compilers’ present); it is structured as an official history, modeled on those produced by newly established dynasties in China. Of the two works, Nihon shoki was understood at the time to be the more important, the one meant to propagate the officially sanctioned past in the authoritative voice of its Chinese models. Textually, Kojiki’s profile only rose in the early modern period, when antiquarian nativists of the National Studies (kokugaku) school proclaimed it the repository of Japan’s truest history and truest spirit. As a result of the greater importance assigned to Nihon shoki from the start, perhaps, less of an effort was made to tidy up the narrative in Kojiki, which was presented as the transcription of ancient historical narratives handed down orally. Kojiki and Nihon shoki, in other words, do not always agree on the particulars of the past. So we have different versions of Yamato Takeru’s story.

In both Kojiki and Nihon shoki, Yamato Takeru, an imperial prince said to have lived at the turn of the second century, is sent off by the sovereign his father to quell enemies in the four corners of the realm. Both texts state explicitly that the task is given to Yamato Takeru out of concern

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for his potential for violence, after he has brutally dismembered his own brother, guilty of disobeying their father’s command. From the start, then, even before any heroic deed has been performed, Yamato Takeru’s rage places him physically and symbolically on the fringe of society. Part hero on a quest, part embarrassment and danger to be removed from the court, Yamato Takeru travels to the far west of the archipelago to subdue the rebellious Kumaso. Victorious, he is next sent to the land of Izumo to vanquish a local chieftain and subjugate that still foreign land—a task he performs cunningly and ruthlessly. No sooner is Yamato Takeru back at court than the emperor once again sends him on a quest: to travel east and crush the rebellious Emishi.

Yamato Takeru’s violence is as impersonal as his victories are swift. The hero himself is an embodiment of his deeds rather than a recognizable (let alone fully fleshed out) human being. Yet so little rejoicing follows each exploit, at court, that in the *Kojiki* version the hero wonders—in his first display of feeling—whether his father actually wishes him dead, whether quelling distant enemies is not in fact only a way of casting him away, hoping perhaps he might be killed in the process. In the *Nihon shoki* version, too, Yamato Takeru emerges as an actual character at this juncture. In this account, though, father and son are more intimate, with the son offering to do his father’s bidding in the east, as a reluctant hero filially coming to his sovereign’s aid. In this version, the eastern Emishi are not just rebellious, but barbaric, in keeping with Chinese notions of cultural hegemony that the Japanese court sought to emulate; and the ruler is grief-stricken upon being informed of his son’s eventual demise. Compared with the version in *Kojiki*, the Yamato Takeru of *Nihon shoki* is given the chance to reflect on the purpose of his missions and to volunteer for them for the greater good of the realm. In *Kojiki*, Yamato Takeru is never given the opportunity to express any feelings about his deeds, or about his violence. He can only muse on his own lack of agency.

Yamato Takeru’s cyborg nature may not be immediately apparent, though his instrumentality is plain to see. In his early exploits his armaments do not figure prominently—what set him apart are his sudden, seemingly unmotivated explosions of violence. Yet in his final quest, his mission to the east, the most remote and forbidding of the lands he must subjugate (lands that somehow manage to be both part of the realm and beyond the pale), Yamato Takeru is equipped with a sword, Kusanagi, or “grass mower.” He receives the sword from the high priestess of Ise Shrine, which was and is the shrine most closely associated with imperial authority, where the Sun Goddess, divine ancestor of the ruling family, is enshrined. (And indeed, Kusanagi would go on to be numbered as one of the three imperial regalia, until it was lost at sea by the Heike, a thousand years later.) With Kusanagi, Yamato Takeru not only becomes the bearer
of the magical power conferred by the Sun Goddess of Ise Shrine, he also receives sanction to perform violence upon the enemies of that state to which the shrine is so intimately tied. The sword Kusanagi becomes central to the hero’s pacification of the east, living up to its prophetic name by allowing him to cut a firebreak in a field of tall grasses set aflame by a devious enemy.

When Yamato Takeru is felled, after subjugating the east and fulfilling his assignment, it is by a mountain deity he decides to take on barehanded on his way back to court. Explicitly (and puzzlingly) he leaves his sword with his newly married wife and heads up the mountain, only to be mortally cursed by the god, whom he has underestimated. After Yamato Takeru’s passing, his wife gives the sword to an important local shrine, in Atsuta, to be enshrined. The version in *Nihon shoki* tries to make sense of the hero’s casting aside of his sword by suggesting, in the hero’s own final words, that after pacifying the east, “I rolled up my armour, laid aside my weapons, and was returning peacefully.”20 Thus, in this version, Yamato Takeru, who is himself repeatedly described as a living god throughout the narrative, has already accomplished his goal and is undone after dispensing with the enhancement offered not only by his armor but also by his sword. He passes after marrying, and creating for himself the sort of quotidian domesticity for which he had seemed ineligible in his heroic and superhuman violence.

Like Cethern (or Achilles, for that matter), who chooses a brief but glorious life as a matter of course, Yamato Takeru exists to perform the deeds of a hero. The hero’s cunning in slaying the Kumaso and the lord of Izumo is set apart from the deviousness of the enemy who burns a field to stop him not by his greater humanity or higher morality—not in the *Kojiki* version, at least—but by his role as a tool of the court. Yamato Takeru’s violence is heroic rather than lowly because, really, it is not his own. In contrast, Kumagai Naozane’s reaction to his own moment of glory is fraught with anguish, for his deed is more difficult to explain away as the product of a higher ideal or a higher authority. Kumagai is fighting on the winning side, though in the *Tale of the Heike* motives remain more ambiguous: his violence he explains as a function of his birth as a warrior, but in the midst of a civil war his class’s role as the military arm of the state can be awfully hard to see.

**Works Cited**


