

The Tale of the Heike and Japan's Cultural Pivot to the Art of War

By Fay Beauchamp

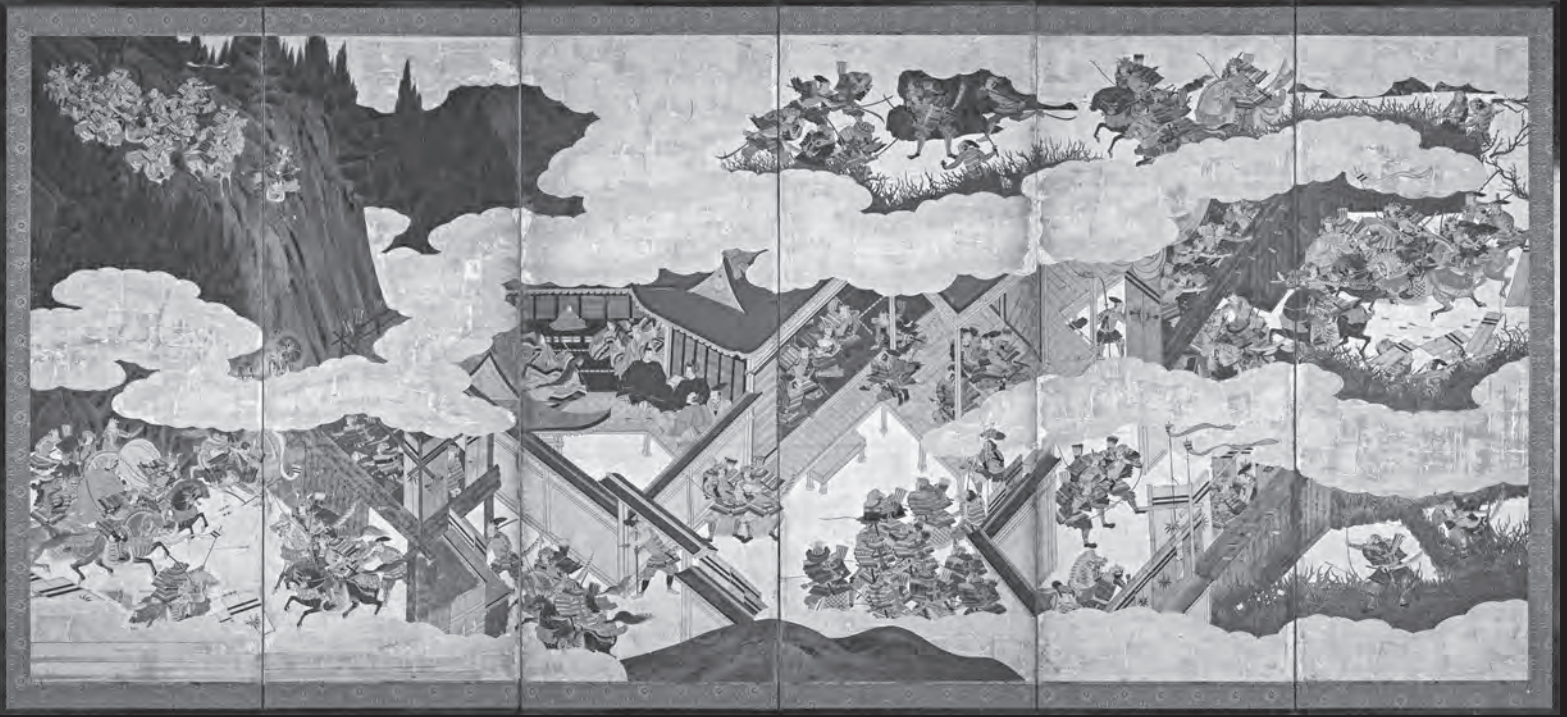


There are two main reasons to teach *The Tale of the Heike*, one literary and the other historical. Its subject matter, the Genpei War (1180–1185 CE), marked a pivot in social, cultural, and political life in Japan. This civil war ended four centuries of the Heian period (794–1185), characterized by the cultivated life described so beautifully in Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji* (c. 1000 CE). In Murasaki's time, an aristocracy dominated society, linked by family ties with the emperor's court in Kyoto. The fictional Genji himself, an emperor's son, exemplifies the virtues of the Japanese elite class—he creates and appreciates subtle poetry and music, for example. Not only does Genji excel exclusively in the arts of peace, there is no glimpse of any warrior in Murasaki's worldview. Buddhist aesthetic values of sensitivity and transience have become considered essentially Japanese both by Japanese themselves and by Americans. Yet a shift in societal values after the Heian period created a new type of Japanese hero, not displacing the literate and refined aristocracy, but captivating a much wider audience.

This article introduces teachers to the literature describing the warrior/general Yoshitsune, because the literature of Japan, perhaps more than that of the United States and most countries, illustrates a dichotomy between the attractions of peacetime and the attraction of, as well as the terrors of, war.

At the end of the Genpei War, Japan's capital city moved from Kyoto to Kamakura, and political power shifted from an emperor to a shogun. Court life in Kyoto continued, but the rise of a samurai class, skilled in arrow and sword, secured admiration. By the Tokugawa period (1600–1868), samurai topped an official four-tiered social structure, stratified by regulations differentiating samurai from farmers, artisans, and merchants in matters of dress and freedom of movement.¹ Despite the enforced peace of the Tokugawa period and in post-World War II Japan since 1945, warriors have fascinated writers and artists, first in popular drama and woodblock prints, and then in films, manga, anime, and games. After 1185, the winners of the Genpei War, and those who identified with them, created in the warrior/general Yoshitsune a new type of hero. Oddly, Yoshitsune, just as Genji, was not a muscle-bound figure, as students even nominally familiar with Gilgamesh, Achilles, or

In the Heike tale, attitudes toward war shift constantly, with vivid dialogue boasting but also complaining; winning is celebrated, beheadings are factually noted, and deaths deeply lamented.



Battle scenes from *The Tale of the Heike*. Early eighteenth century. Pair of six-panel screens, color and gold on paper. Source: *The Art Gallery of South Australia* website at <https://tinyurl.com/yxudlrbf>.

Beowulf might expect. I would argue that Yoshitsune was described as ethical and beloved, as well as a master of the art of war. Over time, the portrait of Yoshitsune transforms according to different points of view and later appears more feminine or youthful, with the skills of an elusive underdog.

The magnificence of *The Tale of the Heike* as a work of literature has much to do with its origins. Multiple oral storytellers over a 200-year period honed dramatic episodes into narrative arcs containing wit and humor, triumph and pathos. Written texts emerging in the fourteenth century linked stories focused on many different historical figures. This literary genesis led to narrative complexity. Japanese literature scholar and translator Royall Tyler prefaces his 2012 translation of *The Tale of the Heike* with a glossary of eighty-two “principal figures”; the high number reflects the reality of many families with conflicting and shifting loyalties interacting at home and afield. There is merit in complexity. Tyler’s annotated list includes verifiable details of place and time. In the *Heike* tale, attitudes toward war shift constantly, with vivid dialogue boasting but also complaining; winning is celebrated, beheadings are factually noted, and deaths deeply lamented. Neither side is uniformly vilified or glorified. This complexity enabled this unified collection of tales to influence all of Japanese society—those who identified with the fallen Heike (the Taira) of Kyoto and with the upstart Minamoto in their new power base in Kamakura.

While complexity may be admirable, it poses problems to a teacher. How are we to choose our texts? If we present only a few episodes from an anthology, how do we gain from the variety, unity, and historical impact of the whole? How do we teach *The Tale of the Heike* in interdisciplinary courses, such as my college’s Humanities 101, which mandates that three-fourths of the content be on Western texts and one-fourth on East Asian cultural traditions of religion, art, history, music, and literature? As a general principle, our interdisciplinary humanities courses require analysis of primary texts. Rather than depending mostly upon lecture, textbooks, or scholarly expositions, faculty encourage critical thinking through discussion and assignments. Analysis of a primary text reveals the attitudes and biases of the time it is produced, as well as the time it describes. This article, therefore, introduces one version of *The Tale of the Heike*, a historical chronicle



This print illustrates a scene from a Kabuki play where the Minamoto seasoned warrior Kumagai (left) has removed the helmet of the aristocratic Heike warrior Atsumori and hesitates to kill him because his youth reminds Kumagai of his son. The setting is the Suma beach during the Battle of Ichi-no-tani (1184). Woodblock print, *Kabuki Shikishi—Kumagai and Atsumori* by Sadanobu III Hasegawa, 1881–1963. Source: *Artelino* website at <https://tinyurl.com/y3wacz9y>.

about people and events about which much is known from other sources. It focuses on a primary text considered literature because of its evocative language. The article invites teachers and students to explore certain episodes very famous in Japan. These episodes can reveal attitudes and values of the Japanese authors and audiences, as well as the practices and events of a pivotal period in Japanese history.

First, one needs to convey how *The Tale of the Heike* powerfully laments war; the most respected passages at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end could be the most poignant in world literature. Their emotional power comes with empathy and sorrow over the utterly defeated Heike clan, annihilated by Yoshitsune's rebellious Minamoto forces. Teachers could start at the very beginning with the famous Buddhist-imbued lines: "The voice of the temple bells / ring the passing of all things . . . Even the mighty cannot long endure / they are like a spring's night's dream."² Discussion of these sentences can reveal more about Buddhism in Japan than assigning chapters of esoteric explanation. Next, one could teach a two-page episode when a seasoned Minamoto warrior, Kumagai, reluctantly kills

his youthful Heike enemy Atsumori; the next class day could be used to analyze Zeami's great c. 1400 CE *Nō* play and debate whether Atsumori's ghost reconciles with a repentant Kumagai, who has become a wandering Buddhist priest. Also, teachers could consider assigning all or some of the final section, "The Initiates' Book," which has a clear narrative flow leading to a lone Heike survivor, the bereft mother Kenreimon-in, who has become a Buddhist nun. But inside the frame of mournful Buddhism beginning and ending *The Tale of the Heike*, there is humor, energy, quick thinking, and surprise. The point of view of the long tale as a whole is complex because the leader who crushes the Heike is the dynamic hero Minamoto Yoshitsune.

My strategy here is to analyze episodes from one seminal version of *The Tale of the Heike*, the Kakuichi-bon performance text dictated by a blind storyteller and written down in 1371. I recommend Tyler's 2012 translation to instructors because of its literary worth in English, where the descriptions and dialogue leap and tumble to mimic the varying poetic rhythms of the Japanese original. That this version begins with oral performances perhaps explains the exuberance of passages highlighting Minamoto Yoshitsune. For almost 200 years, storytellers captivated audiences—held them captive, as it were—by episodes featuring drama heightened by a quickened strum of a *biwa* (lute) evoking hoofbeats, warriors' voices, and action. The storytellers are primarily addressing men, women, and youth identifying with the winning side. Students can see authorial bias again at work, but this time leading the audience not to cry for the vanquished Heike but to root for the underdogs, the Minamoto. The most famous episodes describing Yoshitsune evoke laughter caused by wit rather than shock caused by slaughter.

So who was this Yoshitsune? Historically, Yoshitsune (1159–1189) was the younger half brother of Yoritomo, the leader of the Minamoto, the clan challenging the Heike ruling clan in Kyoto. Because Japanese through the ages were curious about Yoshitsune's early life story, prequels invented tales of Yoshitsune's childhood, hidden away from the capital to protect him from the Heike despot Kiyomori, similarly to Luke Skywalker growing up to fight Darth Vader. Sequels to the events recorded in *The Tale of the Heike* give Yoshitsune a faithful companion, Benkei, a very large, fighting monk. These fabricated stories were collected in *Yoshitsune: A Fifteenth-Century Japanese Chronicle*, translated by Professor Helen McCullough. In her comprehensive introduction, McCullough calls Yoshitsune "the greatest romantic hero, and probably the single most famous man, in all of premodern Japanese history."³

To introduce Yoshitsune to American students, a teacher can begin with three episodes believed to be historically based: "The First across the Uji River," "The Charge down Hiyodori Ravine," and "The Dropped Bow." As recounted in the 1371 *The Tale of the Heike*,



Woodblock print, *Ichikawa Danjuro as Minamoto no Yoshitsune*, from the series *Popular Kabuki Actors, 108 Heroes of Suikoden* by Kunisada (AKA Toyokuni III, 1786–1864). Source: The *Ronin Gallery* website at <https://tinyurl.com/uz2deer>.



the basic actions are believed to be true and can be used to contrast with later stories that embellish.

The episode “First across the Uji River” appears in *Heike’s* book 9; before this episode, there is scarcely a mention of Yoshitsune. A band of Minamoto forces under Yoshitsune’s leadership is chasing the retreating Heike forces. One notes that the Uji River itself becomes a formidable enemy, threatening death. Tyler presents the river’s challenge as a poem:

*The planks were gone from both bridges,
Uji and Seta, and abatis tied to stakes in the riverbed
strained against the rushing current.
It was the first month of the year
And well past the twentieth day.
From the banks of the mighty peak of Hira
From all the mountains of Shiga
From Nagara the winter snows
Had vanished; with the last of the ice
Melting now from every valley,
The river was rising. Foaming waves
Surged past on the mounting flood
Roaring rapids broke the current,
Eddies spun at dizzying speed.*

The verbs are masterful: rising, foaming, surging, roaring, breaking, spinning. It is a river rather than a warrior that rages and becomes an enemy. Our hero, Yoshitsune, steps forth: “The Commander Yoshitsune strode to the bank and gazed across. Perhaps he wished to try his men’s mettle, for he remarked, ‘This looks bad. Perhaps we should go around by Yodo or Imoarai. Or perhaps we should wait for the river to drop.’”⁴ Yoshitsune seems mild in gazing, wishing, remarking. His innocuous statements, however, make his warriors champ at the bit to get across. Here, Yoshitsune is quick-witted; the dismantled bridge and the state of the river are unexpected, and yet he is making a strategic move. He knows his followers will not settle down by the riverside waiting for the water to drop.

Book 9, chapter 2, then goes on to describe a series of tricks of warriors under his leadership. Two sets of Minamoto warriors compete to be the “first across the Uji River.” Trick one focuses on a pair of warriors who want a wonderful horse, Izeyuke. Warrior One has been awarded Izeyuke, with his “gilt-edged saddle and tasseled crupper, foaming mouth and spirited prancing,” but Warrior Two is ready to go home in a “pique of jealousy.” Warrior One then says that he was not given the horse; he stole Izeyuke and makes peace.⁵ When these two get to the Uji River, however, each wants to be “first across.” There is a second trick. Warrior One tells Warrior Two that his horse’s girth is loose, so

From the series of heroes and heroines in *The Tale of the Heike*. Samurai warriors Sasaki and Kajiwara are racing to get on the other side of the river to reach the enemy camp first. Woodblock print by Chikanobu Toyohara (1838–1912). Source: *Artelino* website at <https://tinyurl.com/yvsvhpgg>.

That the race at the Uji River and the plunge at Hiyodori Ravine become favorite episodes is evidenced by the number of artistic depictions over the centuries.



Yoshitsune Leading His Cavalry Down Hiyodori Pass at Ichinotani. Woodblock print from Utagawa Hiroshige's c. 1832–1834 series, *The Life of Yoshitsune*. The mountains have become quite high in the artist's imagination.

Source: Art Institute of Chicago website at <https://tinyurl.com/wy73ahg>.

Warrior Two stops to tighten it. Then, Warrior One, “riding none other than Izeyuki, the most marvelous steed in the world,” cuts straight across, scrambles up the other side, and announces victory. There is still a third trick before readers are across the Uji River. A young warrior washed off his own horse hangs on to an older warrior’s saddle. The youth cries for rescue, and the older one lifts him up and tosses him to shore—whereupon the young warrior who has been tossed and saved stands and declares he is the first across the Uji River!

In response, “friend or foe / all who heard him roared with laughter.” Yoshitsune’s role is to instigate competition by dissembling when he lays out the alternatives of going upriver for a day or two, or waiting for the water to calm down. Once across, Yoshitsune laughs along with his men. There are many Japanese woodblock prints illustrating this episode in the later Tokugawa period that attest to the fame of the story and can engage students in discussion.

The next feat that features Yoshitsune is ten “chapters” later, book 9, chapter 12. We see the same pattern here: There is a physical barrier from nature, this time a mountain rather than

a river. Yoshitsune has planned a surprise attack by leading part of his forces in a flanking move; a ravine bars the way. The Heike and Minamoto forces are fighting far below with no victor apparent.

Yoshitsune stands looking out over the fortress below:

“Let’s send some horses down there,” he said, “and see how they do.” They drove a number of saddled horses. Some broke their legs and fell, others got down safe and sound . . . Yoshitsune was convinced. “As long as the riders are careful,” he declared, “the horses can get down there perfectly well. So down we go! Do as I do!”

And down, he went, with thirty men. The whole force poured after him. The slope was so steep that those behind found the front of their stirrups bumping the helmets of the riders ahead. Swiftly, over mixed sand and pebbles, they slid for some two hundred yards, until on a flat spot, they halted. From there they looked down. Huge, mossy boulders dropped plumb fore them a good hundred and fifty feet.

“This is it, then,” they muttered, frozen.

At this halfway point, Yoshitsune’s leadership again allows another to take the glory:

But Sato no Juro Yoshitsura stepped forward.

“In Miura, where I come from,” he said, “we gallop over places like this anytime, just chasing a bird. This is a Miura riding ground!” And down he went. Everyone followed. Stifling whoops and shouts to the horses. The drop was so steep they shut their eyes. The feat seemed all but superhuman—something for gods or demons, not men. Short of the bottom, they roared their war cry: three thousand voices, answering the echoes, swelling them to ten thousand strong.

The result: “The Heike men panicked, and most raced to save themselves by plunging into the sea.” There are, again, a number of tricks. The first involves basic military moves, splitting one’s forces and leading a surprise attack. Secondly, Yoshitsune is the one who sends horses down first, makes a decision, and initially leads the downward charge. Yoshitsune even challenges the men not to hurt the horses—if they are careful, the horses will be “perfectly well.” As with crossing the Uji River, Yoshitsune’s Minamoto followers take the challenge and boast, as Sato from Miura does, saying the hillside is like a “riding ground” at home. Yoshitsune—and the narrator—allows Sato to challenge others and take the lead. There is one other trick: that the men “stifle” their cries at first; their war cries make the group seem immensely bigger than it is, and the attack more surprising. Thirty men descend; then, the echoes sound like 3,000, and finally the Heike believe there are “ten thousand.”⁶ This reflects both narrative exaggeration and military strategy and deception.



The Battle of Yashima in the Genpei War, Yoshitsune Retrieving His Bow, by Utagawa Kokunimasa (1874–1944). Woodblock print. Source: *Let's Play Sekiro* website at <https://tinyurl.com/yywnc7mk>.

That the race at the Uji River and the plunge at Hiyodori Ravine become favorite episodes is evidenced by the number of artistic depictions over the centuries. The Uji River becomes rougher and the Hiyodori hill steeper as time goes by. A third such episode highlighting Yoshitsune is called the “Dropped Bow.” Time has passed since the Heike retreated to Shikoku across the Inland Sea from the Hiyodori Ravine. The Heike now fear “crafty” Yoshitsune, but come forward in boats to engage the Minamoto forces, which are again on horseback. In response to a Heike challenge, Yoshitsune asks a Minamoto marksman, Yoi-chi, to risk a spectacular shot, sending an arrow through a fan held up by a Heike woman standing on a distant boat as if to taunt the Minamoto. The next famous “Dropped Bow” episode takes only twenty-four lines:

*While Yoshitsune sallied forth deeper still,
men on the surrounding boats reached for his neckpiece with grappling hooks
and caught it several times, but with sword and halberd
his own warriors managed each time to knock the hook away.
Then somehow, one snagged Yoshitsune's bow, and he dropped it into the sea.
He bent down and tried several times to retrieve it with his whip.
“Let it go, let it go!” his men cried,
but he got it back in the end and returned, laughing, to the beach.
The older warriors snapped their fingers in disapproval.
“You should not have done that, sir!” they protested.
“How could you possibly trade your life for a bow, whatever its value in coins?”
“It was not the bow I wanted,” Yoshitsune replied.
“If mine, like my uncle Tametomo's
took two or three men merely to string it,
I might have dropped it for them on purpose.
But with their hands on this weak little bow,
they would have laughed: ‘Why, just look at that!’
This is the bow he draws, Yoshitsune,
the man who commands the Genji [Minamoto] force!
No, I could not allow that to happen.
That is why I risked my life for it.”
His words deeply impressed them all.⁷*



Tsuba (hand guard of a Japanese sword) with design of Yoshitsune recovering his bow at the battle of Yashima. Mito School (Japanese, eighteenth–twentieth century). Japanese Edo period mid-nineteenth century. Source: *Museum of Fine Arts Boston* website at <https://tinyurl.com/y3l33zne>.

What do all three of these incidents have in common that lead to Yoshitsune's military successes and to his appeal even as he undergoes metamorphoses in later storytelling? In his introduction to Zeami's c. 1400 Nō play *Yashima*, featuring the “Dropped Bow” incident, Tyler states that Yoshitsune's actions reveal one man's “insistence on honor.”⁸ Yet



Kenreimon-in depicted in the 1901 frontispiece illustration of the literary magazine *Bungei Kurabu*, vol. 7, no. 13. This picture depicts the surviving Heike aristocrat, the woman Kenreimon-in, in the layered colored silks associated with the height of the Heian Period. Behind her in the upper left are the faint outlines of her lonely life as a Buddhist nun after the war. The faint outlines resemble illustrations to Zeami's fifteenth century Nō play, *Ohara Goko*, about Kenreimon-in's final days. Source: *Wikipedia* at <https://tinyurl.com/y6yc6jqf>.

to his own men, Yoshitsune freely admits his relatively physical weakness. Why are they “deeply impressed”? The audience that concerns Yoshitsune are the enemy Heike, not his own troops. He is engaged in psychological warfare to make the enemy think his Minamoto troops are fearsome and invincible. At the bottom of the ravine, when his men’s shouts make the Heike think there are 30,000 instead of thirty, the Heike become off-kilter and unnecessarily retreat in disarray. In all three episodes, Yoshitsune provokes his warriors to overshadow him: the four Minamoto who compete to be the “first across the Uji River”; Sato from Miura, who mocks the dangers of Hiyodori Ravine and plunges forward; and finally, Yoichi, whose bow is strong and whose aim is superb. Yoshitsune’s quick thinking builds an important illusion, created to intimidate the Heike. In *The Tale of the Heike*, the stories present Yoshitsune as an underdog fighting successfully against “overwhelming odds,” using McCullough’s phrase. His military techniques are similar to the Chinese Sun Tzu’s *Art of War* and its central belief that all warfare is based on deception.

What conclusions can be drawn from these episodes and details about Yoshitsune’s character?

First, students need to be aware of the narrator’s point of view . . .

What is odd for a warrior, Yoshitsune does not kill anyone in these episodes. We see him defeat instead a river, a mountain, and the sea. He seems caring, sensitive, and ethical even in small details. My students note how Yoshitsune was concerned about horses plunging down Hiyodori cliff. After the Minamoto warrior Kumagai kills the youthful Heike warrior Atsumori and reports the incident to Yoshitsune, the story “drew tears from everyone present.”⁹ Much later, when a close friend is killed, Yoshitsune donates his beloved horse, the one he rode down Hiyodori, to a Buddhist temple and asks the priest to “copy the Lotus Sutra in one day” for the fallen comrade. All those present “wept,” and one says, “Any man would be only too glad / to give up his life for such a lord.”¹⁰ These tears seem more like Genji’s than toughened fighters’.

What conclusions can be drawn from these episodes and details about Yoshitsune’s character? First, students need to be aware of the narrator’s point of view, the anonymous storyteller who dictates this version to “Yua, a disciple of the Buddha” in 1370. Depending upon which episodes are selected to teach, *The Tale of the Heike* may seem balanced between the Heike and the Minamoto sides. The most poignant laments are for the defeated Heike—the first famous lines; the last lines at the death of the bereft Heike woman, Kenreimon; and middle description of the youthful Heike warrior Atsumori. But when it comes

to Minamoto Yoshitsune, the narrator is clearly on his side. Yoshitsune, like samurai centuries later, shares some of the characteristics of the sensitive Heian aristocrats. The storytellers first chose which episodes to lovingly describe in dramatic detail and let Yoshitsune's men comment positively. Why would the narrator be so biased? In brief, the Heike were all destroyed—his audience includes descendants of the Minamoto and their allies.

Secondly, students need to be aware that even though most of the details of speech and actions cannot be verified, this is a history of a literate population. Many written records were kept through the Genpei War of 1180–1185. The names so carefully included when the warriors boast are names of people that the Japanese recorded with birth and death dates. A bronze temple bell that Kumagai donated in sorrow for his son who looked like Atsumori exists on the island of Miyajima near Hiroshima. The bit of the horse Yoshitsune donated to a temple in Shikoku can be brought out for inspection. While a study abroad group can visit the settings described in the tale, one notices that details are embellished, but not imaginary. The hill that Yoshitsune's troops descended is a slope that gets higher and higher in artwork with passing centuries. The Uji River does rush as winter snows melt, but this river is not wide. The description of Yoshitsune as a “small, pale youth with crooked teeth and bulging eyes” that McCullough cites does not appear in this 1371 version but appears and disappears in later recountings, depending upon the bias of the text.¹¹

A third point is also important in teaching the tale as literature rather than history. In world literature, it is tempting to place *The Tale of the Heike* within a Western tradition of epics, alongside long narratives such as *The Iliad*, which recounts heroic deeds of warrior leaders with supernatural allies. Both *The Iliad* and *The Tale of the Heike* started with an oral tradition of blind traveling storytellers accompanying themselves with a stringed instrument. But I found that asking for a comparison between Achilles and Yoshitsune baffled students. The basis of comparison wore thin. *The Iliad* starts with an invocation of a muse to sing the wrath of Achilles; rage defines him until he tears his enemy, Hector, apart. Achilles desperately needs to be recognized as the “best of the Achaeans.” He complains to his mother, a demigoddess, and provokes the goddess Athena to grab his hair and jerk him back from rash action. Yoshitsune, on the other hand, epitomizes cool: he is slight; he calmly maneuvers others to gain honor. Readers can laugh at those who declare they are first across the Uji River rather than wince when warriors die at the hands of “man-slaying” Achilles.

In the Western tradition, Achilles never changes; his Achilles's heel never heals. But over time, other epic heroes perhaps are intermediaries to Yoshitsune. Their storytellers also travel with a lute, and the heroes gallop along the way of the horse and the bow. Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (980–1010 CE), written at the same time as *The Tale of Genji* (i.e., before *Heike*), traveled from Persia (the Iranian area) throughout South Asia. It features, among other motifs, the love of the warrior Rostam for his horse, Rakhsh. In *Chanson de Roland* (written c. 1115), a French national epic, Roland's headstrong courage and “overweening” pride carry on the tradition of Achilles. For both *Shahnameh* and the *Song of Roland*, the romance of dashing around on horseback reflects the military skills displayed in the Genpei War of *Heike*. In glorifying individual combat, the Western epics follow in the tradition of *The Iliad*.

This similarity leads to a problem that might prevent many American faculty from teaching about Yoshitsune at all. Over the decades, my only teaching about war has been antiwar literature. Antiwar poems and novels at the end of World War I helped to end the romanticizing of war in Europe. Wilfred Owen, killed in 1918, exposes the hypocrisy in



Taira no Atsumori Riding a Horse into the Sea by Katsukawa Shunsho (1726–1792). Woodblock print. Source: Art Institute of Chicago website at <https://tinyurl.com/yyekkkuma>.



*The Giant Twelfth-Century Warrior-Priest Benkei Attacking Young Yoshitsune for His Sword on the Gojo Bridge, 1881, by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839–1892). Benkei has turned into a giant of folklore; Yoshitsune appears to be flying or quite adept at jujutsu. Yoshitsune’s face is delicate, not only youthful, but feminine, as his face is disclosed in the 1945 Kurosawa film *The Men Who Tread on the Tiger’s Tail*. Source: Philadelphia Museum of Art. Purchased with funds contributed by the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, 1989-47-267a—c. <https://tinyurl.com/uqot54x>.*

his poem “Dulce et Decorum Est”—its bitterness exposes the “old lie” that to die for one’s country is “sweet.” Owen and other authors—Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves—felt that the elite British educated to study *The Iliad* in Greek and *The Aeneid* in Latin destroyed a younger generation of Englishmen of all classes in the 1914–1918 World War I.

In a variety of courses, one can pair selections from *The Iliad* and *The Tale of the Heike* to explore a central question of how much literature contributes to cultural values and/or reflects beliefs. Do these texts primarily mourn the slain or glamorize slayers? For courses without chronological limitations, one can pair *The Tale of the Heike* with John Hersey’s 1946 nonfiction *Hiroshima* or Masuji Ibuse’s 1965 novel *Black Rain*. A flood of testimonies of *hibakusha* (atomic bomb survivors) has been gathered and published by peace activists for the last seventy-five years. Asking how much literature contributes to significant cultural change of values is central to this article. How much did the oral and written transmission of *The Tale of the Heike* contribute to a cultural pivot from valuing the arts of peace during the Heian period to admiring the art of war?

The slight Yoshitsune defeats the giant warrior monk with jujutsu-like moves, and the two leave as lifelong friends.



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“Gionshōja no kane no koe, Shogyōmujō no hibiki ari. Sarasōju no hana no iro, Jōshahissui no kotowari wo arawasu. Ogoreru mono mo hisashikarazu, tada haru no yo no yume no gotoshi. Takeki mono mo tsui ni wa horobin(u), hitoeni kaze no mae no chiri ni onaji.”

The sound of the Gion Shōja bells echoes the impermanence of all things; the color of the sāla flowers reveals 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.—Chapter 1.1, Helen Craig McCullough's translation of *The Tale of the Heike*.

If antiwar literature changed Western attitudes toward war after 1918, can literature by and about hibakusha ever change world attitudes after 1945? Do American students need to study an old text glamorizing an out-of-date art of war?

Answers might lie in how the Yoshitsune legends have proliferated and changed over hundreds of years. The stories of Yoshitsune are not just medieval. Austere fifteenth-century Nō plays make way for later colorful kabuki dramas and then change radically in film. One favorite story has Yoshitsune and Benkei quarrel when they first meet on a bridge; the slight Yoshitsune defeats the giant warrior monk with jujutsu-like moves, and the two leave as lifelong friends.¹² Another story about the pair is told in the famous director Akira Kurosawa's 1945 film *The Men Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail*: the bluff Benkei can only protect a disguised Yoshitsune by hitting him; no one would believe a lord would permit such a disgrace.¹³ But readers of the *Heike* are not surprised when Yoshitsune forgives the trembling Benkei—Yoshitsune is the one who understands strategy in an instant, a trusted comrade with no false pride. To identify with this hero, one can be urban, skinny, and nerdy. One needs only an avatar. And if films, games, manga, and anime can ever replace actual war, all the better.

In my opinion, Achilles remains frozen as a Greek statue, regardless of Brad Pitt's cinematic efforts at impersonation. Yoshitsune stays alive for new generations, pivoting with deft authority. ■

NOTES

1. See <https://tinyurl.com/y35vhl5> for a nuanced discussion of the role of the samurai in this four-class system by three prominent US historians: Robert Oxnham, Carol Gluck, and Henry D. Smith. The dialogue was excerpted from Ryusake Tsunoda, Wm. Theodore de Bary, and Donald Keene, *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 330.
2. At a Japan Studies Association workshop in Kyoto, 2014, Professor Michael Watson gave teachers a taste of the text in Japanese. In the very first lines, the heavy, drawn-out vowel sounds of the first part contrast with the quick, short vowels of the second part of each line, underlining a sense that all things are transient. Watson, professor at Meiji Gakuin University, has posted many excellent teaching materials about *The Tale of the Heike* at <https://tinyurl.com/wdszdex>. Students can chant: *Gion shōja no / kane no koe, shogyō mujō no / hibiki ari*.
3. Helen McCullough, *Yoshitsune: A Fifteenth-Century Japanese Chronicle* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1966), 5.
4. Royall Tyler, *The Tale of the Heike* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2012), 457.
5. The whole story of crossing the Uji River is in book 9, Tyler, 453–460.
6. The famous Hiyodori Ravine incident is told in two pages, book 9, Tyler, 494–495. Tyler's translation on page 495 sets up the last two sections as poetry, with frequent line breaks, to convey a rhythm different from prose.
7. Tyler, 599.
8. Royall Tyler, *Japanese Noh Drama* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 331. In the Nō play *Yashima*, Yoshitsune shows much more regard for “glory” than in the earlier *The Tale of the Heike*.
9. Tyler, 506.
10. *Ibid.*, 594.
11. McCullough, 5.
12. Minamoto no Yoshimitsu (1045–1127 CE) is tenuously credited with creating the early Japanese martial art Daito-ryu-jujutsu. See the *Wikipedia* entry “Daito-ryu Aiki-jujutsu” at <https://tinyurl.com/gpv7jd6>. Yoshimitsu was Yoshitsune's grandfather's uncle; see the genealogy by Tyler, 716. The name Yoshimitsu is used in multiple recent “Tekken” Japanese films and video games. Other sources credit a more supernatural source for Yoshitsune's military tactics than family inheritance. In a Japan Studies Association talk, June 2019, Maggie Ivanova, Senior Lecturer at Flinders University, Australia, referred to the fantasy creature Kurama Tengu bestowing upon Yoshitsune access to powerful military treatises such as the Chinese *Six Secret Teachings*.
13. I thank Professor Linda Chance, who teaches courses on *The Tale of the Heike* at the University of Pennsylvania, for first introducing Kurosawa's film as part of a US Education Title UISFL grant in fall 2014, and then being willing to share her knowledge at a national workshop supported by Penn's Center for East Asian Studies in June 2019.

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