Memory, modernity and children's literature in Japan: premodern warriors as national icons in nineteenth and twentieth century literature and curriculum

Ewijk, A. van

Conclusion

In the late nineteenth century, Japan saw an accelerated development of, and intensifying discourse on youth literature, a new literary genre introduced from the West. Many texts published in the new youth magazines and book series focused on historical generals, drawing upon textual and visual representations of premodern warrior legends and war tales, as canonized in Edo period popular culture. I have addressed the adaptation of warrior legends in youth literature from two angles: first, the development of youth literature as an instrument for creating certain dispositions in children, and second, as a process that sheds new light on the modernization of literary categories and identity-formation of adults during Japan's nation-building process.

Following the Meiji restoration, one of the most urgent and ambitious projects of the new government was the implementation of compulsory education, that redefined the nation's children as young citizens. The Imperial Rescript on Education (1890) and related educational directions defined the goal of elementary education as the formation of national subjects. Herbartian pedagogues concretely advised to make use of folktales and tales about historical heroes that appeal to the imagination of children, to impart ethics and a 'historical consciousness' in the sense of a national identity. In line with these ideas, Japanese history textbooks and *kokugo* textbooks by the 1890s started to introduce a (visual) lexicon of national symbols and short narratives of Japanese historical generals or 'Great Men'. These figures at the same time functioned as ethics examples representing such virtues as diligence, loyalty, and courage. During the 1890s, the government gradually wrested the creation of textbooks from the hands of private publishers. However, commercial authors and publishers gave themselves direct access to the minds of young citizens by way of new youth magazines and book series, that also offered them a way to develop and disseminate variant views on citizenship, as well as a sense of selfhood.

The pioneers of Japanese youth literature made extensive use of war tales, warrior legends, and premodern iconographies to develop and communicate their ideals. The idea that young people would not only benefit from, but also be particularly interested in the theme of warriors not only concurs with nineteenth century Western trends of dramatizing

national (imperial) history for children, but also had its roots in the Edo period. Even though a specific literary genre for children did not yet exist, the Bakufu and publishers did recognize children among the popular audience of picture books written in the vernacular and associated them with warrior legends (and folktales). *Kusazōshi* digests of warrior legends introduced young readers to (pre-Edo period) history, and to the repeated plots and iconographies that were continuously reworked in popular culture. Literate children, not limited by artificial lines drawn between themselves and 'adult' literature, moreover appropriated war tales and *gōkan*, illustrated and written in the vernacular, as their own reading material even if they were not explicitly intended for them. John Morgenstern in his study of the rise of British children's literature argues that children's appropriation of certain types of literature should be included in the history of children's literature.[1] Such an approach is essential for understanding the development and orientation of Meiji youth literature: warrior legends, whether repackaged for children in picture book format or not, were already before the appearance of modern history series in the 1890s associated with the interests of boys, and consequently selected as appropriate material for the creation of a literature for young citizens.

Popular plots and iconographic images played a pivotal role in the process of adaptation. The idea that children are attracted to pictures (of warriors) already existed in the Edo period, and by the late Edo period images were used as an expedient means in *ōraimono*. Originality led from inventive reworkings of recognizable plots, not from conjuring up something that would be entirely different. The artists who created *kuchi-e* and illustrations in modern textbooks and youth literature continued to rely on these iconographies: the illustrations were largely 'pre-determined'. Whereas the prevailing academic view is that 'illustrations' are secondary to the text or that meaning arises mainly from the interplay between text and image (based on modern picturebooks) such iconographical pictures are thus highly intertextual and should be seen as the 'symbols' (in Lotman's terms) through which narratives (plots) were carried over through time, into Taishō picture magazines for pre-readers, and beyond.

Cultural memory plays an important role in shaping identities, particularly when a 'new' identity needs to be negotiated. Historical fiction for children has a special place in

[1] Morgenstern, 'The Rise of Children's Literature Reconsidered'.

commemorative actions, as it is explicitly created to interpret society for the next generation but also forms a space for adults to reflect, comment and re-iterate the past or canonical literature, based on different rules and expectations from literature for adults. I analyzed Meiji youth literature through the lens of Yuri Lotman's theory of 'creative memory', a model that simultaneously throws new light on the role of cultural memory in the creation of the new genre, and Japan's modernization process (or the 'Edo-Meiji divide'). In Lotman's spatial model of culture, or semiosphere, foreign concepts travel from periphery to center of a given cultural (sub)sphere through amalgamation with established texts, in 'creative memory'. This is an ongoing process of the updating of texts, triggered by contact with other texts, that applies to the Edo period as well as modern context, from the discussed *kusazōshi* to picture magazines.

The rise of youth literature in the 1890s can be understood as an 'explosion', a period of accelerated text-production during which codes that are very different to the internal conventions are translated into a given culture or cultural sub-sphere. The serialized adaptations of premodern warrior legends by Ōwada, Iwaya, and others represent this process on a small scale, as they combined the exploration of the codes of nineteenth century youth literature from the West, with the exploration of models of modern (male) citizenship through adapting 'known' premodern warrior legends. Youth literature played an important role in salvaging the 'unmodern' in modernizing Japan by shifting warrior legends from the spere of popular literature (including the woodblock and copperplate-printed *kusazōshi* for children of the 1880s) to the sphere of a legitimate literature for teenagers and children, where they were 'educational', would fit to the 'stage of development' of the audience, and stimulate the imagination and the formation of a Japanese identity.

The Meiji period magazines *Yōnen zasshi* and *Shōnen sekai* repeatedly addressed the question 'what is a Japanese boy?' Although elementary education officially offered equal access to girls, and words like *yōnen* and *shōnen* before the diversification of audiences referred to young people of either gender, this question was clearly considered the most pressing one. As discussed in the first chapter, a concept of 'Japanese boys' did not yet exist in the premodern period: the popular imagination in Edo focused on heirs to the household or *ie*, ideally a healthy and diligent boy, and boisterous boys who represented apart from

'health' also the playful spirit of the urban commoners of Edo, the Edokko. The conceptualization of 'Japanese boys' started with bringing into existence the magazines and book series that identified this group in society: they had a future responsibility not foremost to their individual households, but to the nation-state.

Authors of *Shōkokumin*, *Yōnen zasshi* and Hakubunkan's book series gradually developed specific modes of address for the young audience, as well as views of the young citizen by selecting and embellishing different elements from the warrior legends than the government. In the Edo period, till about 1890, Yoshitsune appeared in *kusazōshi* aimed at children that introduced the famous episodes of his life. In this way, a young audience was introduced to the cycle of plots and iconographies that formed the Yoshitsune *sekai* (world), but also to various customs and the proper nature of human relationships according to the Confucian worldview. In *ōraimono*, and to a lesser degree in the more 'action-oriented' *kusazōshi*, Yoritomo's failure to maintain the proper relationships between lord and retainer, and between brothers, served as an example of disarray that should be avoided. Modern textbook makers however gradually shifted Yoshitsune to the realm of *kokugo* and re-invented Yoritomo as the indisputable founder of the first stable military government: instead of the dramatic 'rise and fall' of warrior clans, there had to be a linear history leading to only one thing: the modern nation-state. The figure of the brave 'child' Ushiwakamaru and his loyal retainer Benkei came to serve as a story for beginning readers. In the context of the genre of youth literature, Ushiwakamaru/Yoshitsune was redefined as a national hero representing such virtues as perseverance, courage, and self-determination. Yoshitsune's early years were by modern authors identified as most relevant to the intended audience. Furthermore, through gradual 'infantilization' of Ushiwakamaru in Taishō picture magazines, he became a preschooler's hero. Hideyoshi was identified as one of the 'Great Men' in the elementary history curriculum, and a paragon of *shusse*, loyalty, and expansionism. However, the stories about Hiyoshimaru's rebellious nature were carefully avoided. Iwaya Sazanami on the other hand selected and embellished the episodes in which Hiyoshimaru busted the Amida statue or picked a fight on Yahagi bridge. Focusing on an audience of primary school children, he selected episodes that were obviously not history, but would stimulate children's imagination, and above all, prove that Japanese boys should be more *wanpaku* or 'spirited', if they were to do anything great in the future.

Both the history curriculum, and the dramatizations in literature for teenage boys and a mixed audience of younger children, presented national history as a patrilineage and a homosocial undertaking. The represented women in primary school textbooks, that initially included a selection of literati women and some other *retsujo* (exemplary women), by the turn of the century consisted only of Murasaki Shikibu and the wives of famous men. They represented virtues relevant to both genders (loyalty and diligence in one's studies) next to virtues reflecting ideal female traits (such as modesty). The absence of the word 'beauty', so important for the appreciation of *retsujo* in the premodern period, might indicate that children, whether boy or girl, were not to occupy themselves with the looks of adult women. In both Iwaya's *Ushiwakamaru* and in *Yōnen gahō*, Tokiwa gozen appears as a devoted mother, yet the world in which boys like Ushiwakamaru must consequently prove themselves is homosocial. *Yōnen gahō* addressed a mixed audience of young children but used the opportunity to teach gendered forms of play and interests: boys are invited to emulate historical warriors, whereas girls stay in the present and cheer on them.

Yōnen gahō, under Iwaya's supervision, brought middle-class families a confident national identity in a colorful, recognizably Japanese, *and* modern style. It invited older family members to remember and retell the legends while looking at the pictures together, thereby connecting personal and collective memory. Siblings were to be taken as role models, and fathers were invited to take part in the cultural education of their children. Meiji authors (like Iwaya) associated oral storytelling (including warrior legends) in early childhood with their mother or grandmother. In other words, even though the focus in academic research lies on the *ryōsai kenbo* and self-made women, it seems that the modern middle-class father was also consciously allotted a new role.[2] According to *Yōnen gahō*'s ideals, he is involved in the family's 'leisure time', contributing to the development of his little pre-readers.

In contrast to Iwaya's striving for an unambiguous Japanese identity and strengthening of the connection between the national past and the playfulness, positivity and potential of young children, the authors of *rekishi dōwa* newly adapted sections from the war tales seeking for deeper emotional layers. They found in childhood a 'purer' state than

[2] Mark Jones describes a case of a father who is deeply involved in the preparation of his child for the primary school (Jones, *Children as Treasures*, 216–17.), and mentions admonitions to fathers to 'come home early' but does not theorize on ideals of fatherhood in his study.

adulthood, and a sublimation of the warrior spirit. This state could only be truly dichotomous by barring children from developing into adults, in various narratives expressed through the 'noble sacrifice' of young people's lives. By shaping 'the child' and the constituent stages through youth literature, authors, illustrators, and publishers thus also gave shape to its opposite, namely 'the adult'. The adult is not only someone who is internally different but also entitled to guiding the child in its steps towards adulthood.

The importance of the latter notion for Japan's nation-building project, might be illustrated by returning to Iwaya's visit to the exhibition 'Die Kunst im Leben des Kindes' in Berlin. He was, as mentioned in the last chapter, hurt by the remark that Japan had yet no concept of children's literature.[3] This is to be expected from someone who finds his efforts entirely overlooked. In a more general sense, Iwaya's encounter shows why it was so important for the Japanese nation to 'have' children's literature and not just children reading books. First, the catalogue observed that Japan did not *yet* have a concept of children's literature, implying that Japan was not *yet* able to distinguish the sphere of children from the sphere of adults in their literature or cultural expression. Second, the 'charming' drawings made by Japanese artists were considered to have the qualities of art for children, which reflects the lines of thought of primitivism. Both observations put Japan at a lower level of civilization. Iwaya in his report points out that the exhibited pictures are merely the lesser works of Edo and early Meiji period artists. He wins back some ground by distancing himself from Chikanobu's and Hiroshige's 'unmodern' creations: *recently*, there are much better artists. Recognizing their favorite illustrators, the young audience would applaud. Moreover, if such an exhibition were to take place again, he will donate Japanese children's books and 'properly introduce Japan'. In other words, Japan is much more grown-up than the Germans think (or want to think). Youth literature gave its makers agency over these hierarchies by identifying, separating, and cultivating the childlike. Mastering the Western concept of childhood, adulthood, and especially the 'development' from the first to the latter, in other words, mastering the discursivity of this concept, enabled them to identify their position and try and make it negotiable.

[3] Iwaya, *Iwaya Sazanami yōkō miyage*, 163.