

Yoshitsune's Voyage Among the Islands – Folklore Tale Type and Its Variants in Japanese Culture

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A specific type of medieval tales, often anonymous, short and very simple, could be found in many different cultures, and Japan is not an exception: collections of such stories sprang up all over it in 17th century. However origins of these stories can be found as far back as the Muromachi period (1336–1573), when *otogizoshi* (御伽草子, “companion stories”) appeared. Otogizoshi stories consist of elements of Buddhist stories, Confucian parable, fairytale and comic stories, which are exactly forerunners of a medieval urban tales. Story line¹ of such stories is generally one-twist, their ending is didactic, the language is simple and colloquial, and stylistic is formulaic – these elements are attributes of oral tradition in general.

One of the most popular characters of Japanese medieval literature is well-known military commander Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159–1189), who is the protagonist of the otogizoshi “Onzoshi's Voyage Among the Islands” (御曹子島渡)² – one of the most popular stories in the Japanese culture. Otogizoshi about Yoshitsune base more on legendary other than historical material and continue to unwind the story line that is connected with his childhood and his last years.

However when it comes to the one of the oldest and the fullest source that contains legends about Yoshitsune's childhood and his last years – “The Chronicle of Yoshitsune”³ (義経記, 15th century), – a very similar story line can be found in the second part of it. Furthermore there can be found at least three variants in the Japanese tradition: otogizoshi stories “The Priest Oniichi” (鬼一法眼) and “The Tengu Palace” (天狗の内裏), and the ainu legend, which has no title. As a result, there are at least five variants of one story line, so let us compare all these variants within the Japanese culture and with some variants that can be found in other cultures.

And first of all it would be better to outline a general story-line structure that simplifies our analysis:

- 0) An introduction;
- 1) A (fantastic) journey;

¹ Story line is a free interpretation of a Russian term “syuzhet”, which means the way a story is organized. The same meaning has a term “tale type” but in relation to a fairytale. There is also used a term “motif” in the article that means a small, elementary part of the story line.

² Onzoshi (御曹子) was a denomination of the youth of noble blood in medieval Japan, which is later attached solely to Yoshitsune; he is also called by his child name Ushiwaka in “The Tengu Palace”. Therefore his customary name Yoshitsune would be used in this article to avoid confusion. Plus further the short title “Onzoshi's Voyage” would be used for the “Onzoshi's Voyage Among the Islands” with a view to economy.

³ Further there would be also used short title (“The Chronicle”) for “The Chronicle of Yoshitsune” with a view to economy.

- 2) A theft of a military treatise (with an additional love motif): a hero learns about the military treatise that is kept in a house of an uncommon keeper (a man or a creature) and for obtaining of which he enters into relationship with a daughter of the keeper;
- 3) A chase: the keeper finds out the deceit and sends the chase; the daughter advises the hero to escape; he runs away; the daughter dies.

The introduction is not important for the present research so let us observe it for short. There are two variants of the introduction: 1) the main character – Yoshitsune – talks with the ruler of the North domain *Oshu* – Fujiwara no Hidehira (“The Chronicle” and “Onzoshi’s Voyage”), or 2) there is no introduction itself: the story begins with the arrival to the place (“The Priest Oniichi”, the ainu legend and “The Tengu Palace”, which is preceded by another story line that is not logically connected with the present one).

1. Journey

This motif itself is very interesting for the present research, however it is omitted in all variants but “Onzoshi’s Voyage” that is very graphic and detailed.

Primarily, Yoshitsune comes to the Tosa bay on Shikoku Island – this place in the original text raises researchers’ doubts. On the one hand, there could be a mistake: considering that Hidehira’s place located in the Oshu in the north of Honshu, commenters think it should be the same-named bay in the north of Honshu⁴. On the other hand, the story line is fantastical and Japanese perceptions about Ezo and other north islands were extremely muzzy for the period of formation and prevalence of the “Onzoshi’s Voyage”, so perhaps the problem lies in this confusion. Moreover there is a reference in the original text about setting off from this bay to Goryeo state⁵, and as it is known Japanese ships always set off from Kyushu Island (but not from the north lands). Anyhow it had to be a long way for Yoshitsune: he travels between other islands before entering Chishima, for example in the Island of Naked he shows ability to magic before the treatise’s theft, and gives islanders unfamiliar with clothes some fabric; he also comes to the Ainu Island, but it is not the island that Yoshitsune searches for, so he goes further to the Chishima Island⁶.

It should be noted that such *island-voyage* legends have more likely Indian origins and had come to Japan through China no later than Nara period (710–794). There is no specific prototype of an *island-voyage* motif in Japanese folklore, but there are analogous motifs in other Japanese stories and fairytales.

First of all there are some other stories that centers on Yoshitsune, for example “The Tale of

⁴ Tosa bay is located in the modern Aomori province, Honshu.

⁵ Goryeo (918–1392) was a Korean dynasty that also gave name to the state.

⁶ Chishima (千島) literally means “thousand islands”; it is also a Japanese name for the Kuril Islands. In the original text this island is also called Ezogashima (蝦夷島) that literally means “Island of the Ezo” (or ainu), that is also a name for modern Hokkaido.

Joruri in Twelve Episodes” (浄瑠璃十二段草子) where the hero stays in uncommon place on his way to the Oshu. “The Chronicle” text lacked this story line, which is probably appeared after its formation and what also explains prevalence of the same “Onzoshi’s Voyage” legend [9, p. 39].

Secondly, there are the most popular Japanese fairytales about Momotaro (桃太郎) and Issun-boshi (一寸法師) that reveal some similarities with the legend about Yoshitsune:

- 1) Hero is small: Issun-boshi during the whole tale is not only short but also young; Momotaro is becoming tall but staying young during the tale; Yoshitsune has just had an accession to manhood for the moment of the theft of the treatise, but he is still young (“The Chronicle”, “Onzoshi’s Voyage” and “The Priest Oniichi”), or he is called by his child name Ushiwaka (“The Tengu Palace”), therefore he hasn’t had an accession yet⁷.
- 2) Hero travels to the islands: both heroes – Issun-boshi and Momotaro – come to the island of the devils⁸, where they face a fearful forbidding castle; then they fight for treasures and come back home with honours; the same story line is found in the “Onzoshi’s Voyage”; another Japanese variants are more realistic, however the chasers have some demonic features (“The Chronicle”, “The Priest Oniichi” and “The Tengu Palace”).

Further development of the story lines about Momotaro and Issun-boshi differs from ones about Yoshitsune, so it is hard to deduce the way this influence could happened. However it is much more likely that fairytale story lines had appeared earlier than the same story lines of the otogizoshi’s literary variants (e.g. as it had happened to Issun-boshi).

2. Theft of the Treatise

When Yoshitsune reaches the place he sought for, he meets with a *castle* and its residents. And in all variants presented in this article treatise’s keeper is a character that has some secret knowledge or connected with the other world, so not only the treatise but also its location is specifically protected.

In “The Chronicle” the keeper is a monk-diviner (陰陽師) named Priest Kiichi (鬼一法眼). It is found out that he got the treatise for the state-protection (護国) prayers, so he is noticeable as a medium of an unusual knowledge, and that is why other people beware of him.

In the “The Priest Oniichi” the treatise’s keeper is also a man, yet in this case he is not a monk but a very famous military art master. It should be also pointed out that *oniichi* is another variant of reading of the same kanji *kiichi*, so this story refers to the same character as “The Chronicle” with the only difference in reading that emphasizes its demonic features (鬼).

In the “Onzoshi’s Voyage” the treatise’s keeper transforms into a giant fearful demon king with four sets of hands and feet and thirty horns on his head, and his young disciple transforms into two

⁷ In addition, there is no specific mention about the hero’s age in the ainu legend.

⁸ Or: island of giants in some other variants.

huge horny guards. Notice that the main character growing down by means of giant sizes of other characters. And it is also interesting that although Yoshitsune made up his mind to obtain the treatise, the main motivation is not up-to-the-minute desire to get the treatise (as that appears in “The Chronicle”) but because it is no good to come back to Hidehira empty handed.

And it is quite possible that two above-mentioned story lines exerted its influence on “The Tengu Palace”, because the hero makes two journeys: firstly he goes to Shikoku island⁹ where the Priest keeps the Buddhist orientation treatise¹⁰, and then he goes to the demon island where Hachimen-daio¹¹ and his daughter Celestial fairy Asahi¹² live.

Finally, in the ainu legend there is simplification of the whole story line in evidence, so the treatise’s keeper is the chieftain of some settlement who lives in an ordinary dwelling and depicted as a common man, but a very good warrior.

A separate point should be made about the treatise’s title. In “The Chronicle” Yoshitsune steals *Liu Tao*¹³ – an authentic treatise on civil and military strategy traditionally attributed to Jiang Ziya, or Tai-gong (太公、approx. 11th century BC). This treatise is the most famous and the most appreciated record of Chinese military thinking and that is why, perhaps, this title is mentioned in “The Chronicle”. So after studying the treatise Yoshitsune, for example, can fly up the wall three meters high (as in the fight with his future liege Benkei) – even though the compiler of “The Chronicle” wanted to make more real image of Yoshitsune.

In “The Priest Oniichi” Yoshitsune steals the treatise titled *San Lue*¹⁴ that is another famous Chinese military treatise included in the “Seven Military Classics” – the main corpus of military texts of ancient China that was also popular in Japan.

Besides, the hero of Korean legends named Hong Gildong (who is comparable with Yoshitsune in popularity) studies military arts by *Liu Tao* and *San Lue* treatises as well while his “exile” from paternal home that is nothing else but confirmation of the meaning of these treatises in cultures connected with China.

In the “Onzoshi’s Voyage” Yoshitsune comes for the “Dainichi Buddha’s Canon” (大日の

⁹ Remember Tosa bay from “Onzoshi’s Voyage”.

¹⁰ There is *Ishitamaruta-jinzui* (いしたまるた神通) title in the original text. *Jinzui* (神通) is the denotation for the Sanskrit concept *abhijñā* that means “knowledge” and could be attained by meditation.

¹¹ Hachimen-daio (八面大王) literally means “the Great Ruler with Eight Faces”. Curiously, in the modern Nagano prefecture there is the statue of the demon with eight faces that ruled here, in accordance with the local legends, in times gone by. The question is whether the Azumino demon influenced on the one mentioned in the otogizoshi story, or some of the Buddhist images (such as the multi-armed goddess of mercy Kannon) did. Finally, there is also another ainu legend mentioned in the A. Yu. Sinitsyn’s research, in which the local chieftain also called Hachimen-daio [12, p. 194].

¹² Asahi (朝日) literally means “the Morning Sun”; the same name has a female character in the “Onzoshi’s Voyage”, but she is called so only at the beginning of the story – in the further narration she is called as Celestial fairy (天女).

¹³ *Liu Tao* (六韜、Japanese: *Rokutō*) literally means “Six Secret Teachings”.

¹⁴ *San Lue* (三略巻き、Japanese: *Sanryaku-no maki*, approx. 2nd century BC – 1st century AD) literally means “Three Strategies”. “Seven Military Classics” (武経七書) are seven important military texts of ancient China that were canonized during the 11th century AD *Liu Tao* is also included in this list.

法), so there is a shift to the Buddhist background. For example, Fujiwara no Hidehira tells Yoshitsune that this treatise *is the prayers' canon here below and the Buddha's path in all eternity* [5, p. 64]. However the main importance of this treatise is getting the military prowess to rule Japan. Dainichi Buddha (Vairocana in Sanskrit) played a very important role in the early Buddhist schools and appeared as the state protector – probably, that is why the Buddhist canon transforms into a powerful knowledge source, acquiring of which Minamoto family had come to power for years. Finally, it should be noted “The Tengu Palace” and the ainu legend, where “The Tiger Scroll” (虎の巻) title appears. In both variants, the treatise contains some secrets of the military strategy, with the difference that in the ainu legend the treatise is presented as an original ainu text.

At last, another element in the *theft of the treatise* story line is *the girl as helper in the hero's flight* motif: Yoshitsune gets the treatise with the girl's help in all variants presented in the article. Generally it can be considered as a trick¹⁵ that is common to a fairytale. And when it comes to Japanese folklore in the whole, it could be seen that there are few such-like story lines, the earliest of which appeared in *Kojiki*¹⁶ and narrated about Suseri-bime, the daughter of Susanoo-no mikoto, who helps Ookuninushi-no kami to flight from her father¹⁷.

So, it can be said that this part of story line has many fairytale motifs in general (a fearful treatise's keeper; searching for a wife by playing the flute; fairytale tasks, etc.), and there are undeniable relations with another story lines (a remote trip; meeting with a girl; crucial role of religious motifs, etc.).

3. Chase

First of all, let us figure out the source of anger of the treatise's keeper, which is exactly connected with the theft of the treatise in every variant except “The Chronicle”. In one of the variants (“Onzoshi's Voyage”) secret knowledge is literally lost – when Yoshitsune reads the treatise, kanji fades out the scroll. In another variant (“The Priest Oniichi”) knowledge is no longer unique after it's reading, so the Priest, who has kept out the treatise of anyone with his whole heart, burns it. And on the contrary, in “The Chronicle” the Priest gets very angry recognized that his daughter has relations with Yoshitsune because of which he could have had problems at service in the court.

Here *the girl as helper* motif arises again (except “The Tengu Palace” because of the omission of this motif in general): she hangs out her father and his disciple's ear and tells about it Yoshitsune (“The Chronicle”, “The Priest Oniichi”), or she steals the treatise and takes the fall (“Onzoshi's Voyage”).

¹⁵ Especially in the ainu legend, in which Yoshitsune fakes sickness and resents his wife for hiding the treatise. Consequently his wife shows him the treatise, but puts it back while Yoshitsune spies her and steals the treatise.

¹⁶ *Kojiki* (古事記、AD 712) literally means “Records of Ancient Matters”.

¹⁷ A tale type #313 presented in both Japanese [7] and Western [15] type indexes.

When the keeper learns about theft, he sends a chase. In more realistic variants (“The Chronicle” and “The Priest Oniichi”) a chaser is a disciple-cutthroat Tankai who has very demonic lineaments:

...he wore a black blouse and knickers surmounted by a corselet dyed in a meandering pattern of white, pale blue, scarlet, and he carried a gold-trimmed sword, a great naked halberd, and a foot-long dagger encased in a scabbard <...> The stubbly growth on his unshaven monk’s pate was covered by a small black Buddhist cap [9, p. 104].

Tankai is also taller than the others including Yoshitsune who has a very delicate constitution. However this fact hasn’t turned him from winning, so he comes to the Priest with Tankai’s head. In the “Onzoshi’s Voyage” Yoshitsune is strived by fearful devils (鬼), but he also copes with them by acquired knowledge. On the contrary, in the ainu legend heroes do not use any magic skills. It is noticed that the chieftain is a good warrior nevertheless Yoshitsune is crafty enough to escape the chase.

The story line ends with the girl’s death which is caused by lovesickness in all Japanese variants except the “Onzoshi’s Voyage” in which the demon king tears daughter to eight pieces. It is also said that underneath Celestial fairy was an incarnation of Benzaiten goddess¹⁸ who came to Yoshitsune in mercy to impart military secrets of Dainichi Buddha that would help him and the Minamoto family to rule Japan. And it has to be said that the very essence of all otogizoshi variants is much the same: Yoshitsune conquers the Taira family with help of the gain knowledge. “The Chronicle”, as opposed to it, finishes with the didactic comment in the mould of Buddhist *setsuwa* (説話) stories: in addition to the fact that the Priest is bereaved of relatives, he also raises up enemy in the person of Yoshitsune: “Indeed ... people ought to treat one another kindly in this world” [9, p.108].

The Japanese variants noted above for a reason. Actually, the ending of the ainu legend is very much different from the Japanese ones. Consequently, this leads to extensive matters, which will be examined below.

Comparative study of the Japanese variant and variants of other cultures

First, it has to be said that the ainu legend concerned in the article was recorded by English missionary John Batchelor in the late XIX century in Piratory (southwest Hokkaido). He also recorded some legends with Yoshitsune in this place, as well as his contemporary A. H. S. Landor who traveled virtually the whole island in the same time. Landor did not hear such-like legends

¹⁸ Benzaiten (辯才天、弁財天、Sanskrit: Saraswati) – a goddess of everything that flows (water, time, eloquence (辯才), knowledge, etc.). Lastly, she became one of the Seven Gods of Fortune (七福神) that changed her name emphasizing the role in bestowing monetary fortune (弁財).

anywhere, besides ainu from another places had never heard about hero called Yoshitsune [8, p. 283–284]. So probably Piratory's habitants, as the nearest to the Japanese settlement in Oshima peninsula, adopted some legends about Yoshitsune adding *couleur locale*.

Anyway, the legend ends not so much with the theft as with the total loss of the literacy, and Yoshitsune steals more than a military treatise – he steals the ainu literacy in the whole. Therefore there can be seen a combination of two story lines in the legend: the theft of the treatise and the loss of the literacy, so the latter brings together this legend with legends of Southeast Asia.

The similar motif is found in cultures of the B'laan (Philippines) [14, p. 29], the Kachin (Burma) [6, p. 26], the Apatani (north-east India) [2, p. 116–117] and the Hayu (Nepal) [3, p. 611]. The story line is virtually the same in all variants:

- 1) There are representatives of several people, who are given literacy (i.e. books, scrolls, etc.).
- 2) Other people bring their books quite successful, however one of the people listed above loses the book (it flows away (the B'laan, the Apatani), it is eaten (the Kachin), or the cause is not specified (the Hayu)).

Hence, these story lines are not exactly identical to the ainu one but the main point is the same: the literacy, encased in the book, flows the river away. Herein can be seen a compounding of the Japanese and the Southeast Asian, the medieval and the archaic that is fancifully connected in the ainu legend.

Now let us turn back to the theft of the treatise story line.

Firstly, it should be noted that *the journey for something valuable (knowledge, an artifact, etc.)* motif is not rare for Japanese folklore, but such journeys are limited to the trips to the backwoods or to the upper / lower world, i.e. the main character usually “domesticates” the “us” territory, that is why *the island-voyage* motif in particular could be called a unique for Japanese folklore.

As for the story line in general, it should be noted that it is widely distributed in different cultures. Thus, the “Onzoshi's Voyage” surprisingly resembles the myth of Odin's abduction of the Poetic mead:

- 1) Odin puts himself under Baugi's orders (who is a brother of Suttungr – the mead's keeper).
- 2) The mead is hidden in the mountain.
- 3) Suttungr's daughter guards the mead.
- 4) Odin seduces the girl, so she gives him to drink the mead.
- 5) Odin turns into an eagle, so the chaser cannot catch him up (the Prose Edda's variant), or the girl helps Odin to escape (the Poetic Edda's variant).
- 6) Odin gives the mead to the gods and the poets.

And suchlike story line could be found in some other cultures (the Karelian-Finnish epos, the Turkic epos, the paleo-Asiatic cycle about the crow, etc.). Concerning more close cultures to the Japanese, it should be noted that although this story line got through China, apparently it did not leave any specific traces. Therefore it can be found in the Korean medieval tales about Hon Gildong. For example, in one of such tales the hero goes to Chaedo Island that is settled by demons-*uldon*. Hero kills the demons, releases two girls and takes them in marriage. Another interesting parallel that should be noted is that Hon Gildong's stepmother hires a killer named Teuk Chae with whom he outfights by using magic and brings his head to stepmother.

It has also to be said that Hon Gildong perfectly plays the flute thereby draws attention to himself. Yoshitsune is also presented as a talented flute player. For example, this motif can be found in "The Chronicle" however within the story line concerned in this article, or in the "Onzoshi's Voyage" in a stronger form: the hero avoids a conflict with the guards and the king skillfully playing the flute; he also attracts the attention of the girl who falls in love with him and helps him later ("The Priest Oniichi" as well). *The flute-playing* motif is not infrequent to Japanese folklore in general¹⁹ and probably it is connected with the continent traditions (probably, India). But the similar *flute* (or another instrument) *playing* motifs in such cultures are ones of dissimilar nature (for example, Väinämöinen – the main character of Finnish epos Kalevala – puts the inhabitants of Pohjola to sleep by playing the kantele, thereby stealing a magical Sampo).

Therefore in spite of the accordance of this story line with the overall context, the unique Japanese motifs can be found as well.

Conclusion

Having considered five variants of the one story line, it can be highlighted a structure with two main elements: the journey and the theft of the treatise. On the one hand, both story lines have parallels between otogizoshi stories and fairytales in Japanese culture that is more interesting in the context of studying "The Chronicle" for the purpose of its connection with the different fairytale types and motifs. On the other hand, many of these motifs are connected with the continent tradition, so it can be found a lot of typological parallels in other cultures, e.g. remote Scandinavian culture, or more familiar Korean culture.

Nevertheless one of the important features of Japanese story line is the value of the written word – a hero steals a treatise in all variants – whereas in other cultures a hero obtains a spoken word (cf. the Poetic mead).

Then turning to feasible development of this story line in Japan in general. Firstly, it has to be noted that the origins are fabulous (unlike the legends of "The Tale of Heike" (平家物語) that

¹⁹ For example, a tale type #312D is common in northern Honshu [7]; significantly, this tale type has nothing to do with *the theft of the treatise* story line, however there is an interesting motif: the girl comes down to the ground hearing a wonderful flute playing. And Celestial fairy notices Yoshitsune because of his music abilities as well.

have more historical origins). Secondly, it is fair to assume that “The Chronicle” or “The Priest Oniichi” (or both of them) had probably given an impetus to the development of other variants, one of which was later variant of the fantastic “Onzoshi’s Voyage”.

Within this framework, it is interesting to examine “The Tengu Palace”. On the one hand, the story contains two travels – to the Priest and to the Island of demons – so it is safe to say that “The Tengu Palace” was developed having the antecedent variants. On the other hand, many details connect “The Tengu Palace” with the ainu legend (the title of the treatise, the name of the ruler, etc.).

Finally, the present article shows that Japanese culture in general wasn’t immured to such an extent, so it is possible to trace Japanese as well as Southeast Asian, Indian, etc. cultures in it. Thereby all these issues open up a new area of research: searching for the other motifs and story lines in Japanese folklore and parallels between other cultures, especially relating to a source of larger scale – “The Chronicle of Yoshitsune”.

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