

The Four Graves of Giō: Cultural Heritage Sites and Local Legends

Statues, graves, monuments, and landmarks of many kinds, ancient and modern, are found in every corner of Japan. They commemorate the life and achievements of historical figures such as military and religious leaders as well as fictional characters from literature, theater, and local legend. Those who cross the Gojō Ōhashi bridge in Kyoto, around the area where Minamoto no Yoshitsune is said to have met the monk-warrior Benkei, will find playful stone sculptures of the two in the act of dueling. In Sumadera, in Kobe, striking life-size bronze statues of Taira no Atsumori and the Minamoto warrior Kumagai, both on horseback, stand prominently in a central open space of the temple. The two statues—Kumagai calling out to the young Taira general, and Atsumori turning around to confront his enemy—replicate a famous scene that, according to the *Heike monogatari*, happened in 1184 on the nearby shore at Ichinotani. A sizable (460 cm high) grave claimed to be that of Atsumori is also found in the area. Graves consisting of memorial stones—often stupas, with no body or ashes—are particularly common, and it is not unusual for the same person to have more than one such marker. One of the most intriguing examples found in Japan of this kind of monument is the grave of Jesus Christ, located in Shingō in Aomori Prefecture. Supposedly, after avoiding crucifixion by trading places with his brother, Jesus reached Japan and settled down in Shingō, where he lived to the age of 106.¹

Not surprisingly, most characters from the *Heike monogatari*, whether their existence has been verified or not, have at least one monument bearing their name. *Heike monogatari no tabi Genpei jidai o aruku* (A *Heike monogatari* Journey: Walking the Genpei Period), a book by Shimura Kunihiro, lists over four hundred of these sites, located in all of Japan's twenty-one prefectures, with a high concentration in the Kansai area.² Shimura's book is just one of several compendia of geographical places connected to *Heike* characters and events.³

1 Lidz 2013.

2 Shimura 2003.

3 A multivolume series, Kimoto Seiji's *Yōkyoku no yukari no kiseki taisei* (A Compilation of Remains Related to Noh Theater) contains pictures and explanations of monuments inspired by plays for the noh theater, some of which derive from the *Heike monogatari*. Kimoto 1983.

Written to entertain fans of the *Heike monogatari* (and its related works, such as plays for the noh theater) and to provide impetus for travel, books like this summarize the stories related to these monuments and explain how to reach them.

I refer to the places and monuments related to Giō and Hotoke as “literary tourism sites”—as Giō and Hotoke are most probably literary characters, and not historical people—or more generally as “cultural heritage sites.”⁴ These sites are extremely common in Japan, but are of course found in other parts of the world. A well-known example is the Casa di Giulietta (House of Juliet) in Verona, Italy. The building, originally a medieval-era lodge for travelers, was renovated in several phases to resemble the setting of Shakespeare’s sixteenth-century tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*. Since the early twentieth century it has become a major tourist attraction.⁵ Another famous example in Canada’s Prince Edward Island is the house of Anne of Green Gables, the heroine of L.M. Montgomery’s celebrated book. It is visited every summer by thousands of tourists, a great many of them, as it happens, from Japan.⁶

Giō and Hotoke are not weapons-toting mounted warriors famous for their heroic feats. Theirs, as we have seen, is a quiet tale, mostly taking place within domestic walls. And yet, monuments, objects, sites that remind us of their story are as numerous as those of the more prominent warriors, and are to be found in at least five different areas of Japan. This may be seen as a sign of the popularity of their story both in the Tokugawa period, the time of origin of most of these monuments, and also today, as these sites, although not particularly famous, are still maintained and visited by tourists.⁷

4 Cultural heritage sites are defined as places that are valuable from the point of view of history, aesthetics, anthropology, and so on. For a possible definition of “cultural heritage” see the 1972 *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* on the UNESCO website. http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13055&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html. Accessed March 10, 2017. On heritage and communities see Smith L. and Waterton 2009. Heritage as a hegemonic discourse is at the center of Laurajane Smith’s book, *Uses of Heritage*. Smith L. 2006.

5 Höttemann 2011, pp. 228–232.

6 On Prince Edward Island see Fawcett and Cormack 2001. On literary tourism see also Smith M. 2003 and McKercher and du Cros 2002.

7 These monuments are not associated with special religious practices; people do not visit Giōji in Kyoto because of its religious significance or to perform acts of religious devotion towards Giō and Hotoke (although they do pay homage to them and to the *honzon* Nyorai). The thousands of people who visit Giōji and other Giō-related monuments every year would be more accurately defined as tourists.