

## SOME REMARKS ON THE DEFINITION OF JAPANESE BALLADRY

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The problem has been discussed whether or not there are, or were, ballads in Japan. But before attempting to answer the question, we should take some prerequisites into consideration: the definition of balladry in general, the adequacy of considering balladry as a genre, and the relationship between balladry and folksong, for instance; for, in a sense, balladry is a psychological reality and if the definition changes then we have a different concept, and vice versa.

Though the term "ballad" for a short narrative song or poem is, needless to say, a relatively recent English-language concept, there exist various usages and definitions of the word, partly because it refers to a certain internal poetic way of expression. The external mode of existence has, of course, some relationship with the way of linguistic or verbal expression (for example, the more narrative the more recitative), but the two are not necessarily interrelated. Whether a piece may be a song or poem, oral or written, we can call it a "ballad". From this point of view, the most distinctive element in balladry is to be a certain kind of narrativeness. It could be argued that narrative elements are more remarkable in epic poetry and that epics are the more central. Narrative poetry is not necessarily balladry, which must be given some more factors and elements when it is defined. The characteristics and nature can be revealed also in its way of expression and construction of story.

If the most distinctive element in balladry is considered to be its narrativeness (including its "tale-types" and "motifs" in the sense of the Finnish historical-geographical school), we can compare and contrast it with other literary genres: for example, *kōwakamai* or *yōkyoku* (Noh libretto). James T. Araki's English equivalent for the *kōwakamai* is the "ballad-drama", and he uses it as the title of his study<sup>1</sup>; Eachrow Harā summarizes his study on the British ballad and the Noh play as follows:

There are marked resemblances in narrative structure and *motif* between the Noh Plays of Japan and the English and Scottish popular ballads. There is a marked tendency in both *genres* to tell a story dramatically: action is centred on a single situation (with some exceptions in the Noh Plays), letting the story reveal itself through dialogue; both *genres* are ordinarily constructed on the five-act-structure.<sup>2</sup>

It could be possible to define balladry by non-folkloristic criteria and to find some balladic elements in Japanese literature outside the *kayō* ("song-literature"). Such studies, however, may not be significant until they are somewhat related with narrative literature in general or oral literature.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Ballad-Drama of Medieval Japan* (1964; rpt., Tokyo: Tuttle, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> "Baraddo to Yōkyoku" (The Ballad and the Noh Play), *Tenri Daigaku Gakuhō*, No. 65 (1970), p. 225.

There are many ballads as narrative songs in Japan. Some composed schoolsongs, for example, are purely narrative and balladic: "Tachibana Chūsa" (Lieutenant-Colonel Tachibana), "Dai Nan-kō" (The Elder Kusunoki), and "Yūkan naru Suihei" (The Valiant Sailor), to name only a few. The following is one of such songs, "Suishiei no Kaiken" (The Meeting at Suishiei), written by Nobutsuna Sasaki, a poet, in 1906:

1. Ryojun kaijō yaku narite,  
Teki no shōgun Sutesseru  
Nogi Taishō to kaiken no  
Tokoro wa izuko, Suishiei.
2. Niwa ni hitomoto natsume no ki,  
Dangan ato mo ichijiruku  
Kuzurenokoreru min'oku ni  
Imazo aimiru, ni shōgun.  
.....
9. "Saraba" to akushu nengoro ni  
Wakarete yukuya migi hidari.  
Tsutsu-oto taeshi hōdai ni  
Hirameki tateri, hi no mihata.<sup>3</sup>

Though we may conclude that balladry is narrative poetry, narrative song, or narrative folksong, it is beyond our concern and ability to discuss at once the three types as have been mentioned. In this paper I will limit the problem only to the third type, "traditional" ballad (more precisely "oral-traditional" ballad), though this might be for convenience' sake. In my opinion we had best treat the traditional ballad as oral literature,<sup>4</sup> or as verbal folklore from a folkloristic point of view. To be discussed as a type of oral literature, it has to make a genre with some common features with other types (folktale, oral epic, traditional nursery song, etc.).

We will not examine written balladry here, because expressing in singing and understanding in listening are essential factors in traditional balladry. Balladry as well as folksong in general does not happen to be sung; it is not poetry which can be sung, but poetry which must be sung. Words plus music may make a song as text, but balladry as existence requires singing, the singer and audience, setting of time and place, style of singing (with facial expressions and gestures), and the functional purpose (even if there is none). Singing is also communication; if no one is around to hear it, there is no singing but sound waves. When we go on to examine balladry as narrative folksong, there arise a lot of problems concerning the natures of folksong and narrativeness. But we should keep in mind the fact that singing and recitation are relative terms; so are prose and poetry.

This frame of reference is, naturally, the limitation to and preserver of the existence, when balladry is folksong. The linguistic expressions (or verbal side of folklore) are better to be thought of as such, because the speech is the language. But I hasten to add here that

<sup>3</sup> "(1) The surrender of Port Arthur was decided on. The place where the enemy (Russian) general Stessel was to meet General Nogi was Suishiei. / (2) There stood a jujube tree in the yard. On the trunk there were seen too many bullet holes. The two generals at last met together in an almost ruined house. / (9) "Good-by," they said, shaking hands friendly, and parted right and left. Above the fort, where no sound of gunfire was heard, there went up and fluttered a Rising-Sun flag (Japanese national flag)." —Quoted from K. Horiuchi and T. Inoue, eds., *Nihon Shōka shū* (Japanese Schoolsongs) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1958), pp. 154–55.

<sup>4</sup> M. Sakurai, "Kōshō-bungei toshite no Denshō-baraddo" (The Traditional Ballad as Oral Literature), *Random*, No. 5 (1979), pp. 36–47.

to eliminate written literature from our consideration is a method of our study; studies of the common features to all verbal arts, whether spoken or written, are no less important.

We can say that there is, or was, balladry in Japan, while it is also reasonable to say that there is no such thing. The answer depends on the definition. If we should approve of Richard Chase's too strict, yet very misleading, comment on balladry:

The genuine *ballad* is only one type of folksong. Your "ballad" is not a true *folk ballad* unless it is closely kin to one of the 305—no more, no less!—in Professor Child's great collection,<sup>5</sup>

we have to assume that ballads are British products. On the other hand, if we hold quite adequate William J. Entwistle's and G. Malcolm Laws, Jr.'s definitions, which they formulated when they attacked the problem of discussing "balladries" outside the British Isles,—“any short narrative poem sung, with or without accompaniment or dance, in assemblies of the people”<sup>6</sup> and “a narrative folksong which dramatizes a memorable event”<sup>7</sup> respectively—we can conceive of Japanese balladry.

Japanese folksongs (*min'yō*), even when discussed folkloristically, are almost always categorized and classified according to regions and/or occupations. It is true that the term *min'yō* is applied especially to “the work and occupational songs of farmers, communal labor groups, teamsters, fishermen, lumbermen, tea and silk workers, etc., and the banquet and festival songs of villagers”<sup>8</sup>, but we should not forget the fact that it is not in the nature of *min'yō* but by folklorists and others that such a categorization is made. There are several classifications of Japanese folksongs ready to our hand, the most classical of which was made and proposed by Kunio Yanagita, the founder of Japanese folklore, in his *Min'yō Oboe-gaki* (Notes on Folksong), first published in 1940: (1) *ta-uta* ('rice-field song'), (2) *niwa-uta* ('yard song'), (3) *yama-uta* ('mountain song'), (4) *umi-uta* ('sea song'), (5) *waza-uta* ('occupational or work song'), (6) *michi-uta* (lit. 'road song'), (7) *iwai-uta* ('celebration song'), (8) *matsuri-uta* ('festival song'), (9) *asobi-uta* ('entertainment song'), and (10) *warabe-uta* ('children's song').<sup>9</sup> Yanagita classified *min'yō* according to the functional purposes and the places where songs are sung, without regard to the content. Moreover, *katarimono* (lit. 'recited things') are, even when they are narrative songs, treated differently from *min'yō*, for he says,

*Kudoki* and other folk poems for narrating must be distinguished from ordinary *min'yō*, even if the former type has the forms common to *kayō*.<sup>10</sup>

Another classification, presented by Kashō Machida and Kenji Asano, is similar at least in this point. Their *min'yō*, when interpreted in the broadest sense, are divided into the following classes:

1. regional *min'yō*
  - A. natural *min'yō*
    - a. *riyō* (songs made and performed by unsophisticated farmers)

<sup>5</sup> *American Folk Tales and Songs* (1956; rpt., New York: Dover, 1971), p. 229.

<sup>6</sup> W.J. Entwistle, *European Balladry* (1939; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), pp. 16–17.

<sup>7</sup> G.M. Laws, *Native American Balladry*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: The American Folklore Society, 1964), p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> T[heresa] C. B[rakeley], “min-yo,” in *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend*, vol. II (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1950), pp. 729–30.

<sup>9</sup> *Teihon Yanagita Kunio shū* (The Standard Collected Writings of Kunio Yanagita), vol. XVII (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1969), pp. 185–91.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

- b. *zokuyō* (*riyō* performed by urban professionals with technical skills)
    - c. dance songs
  - B. composed *min'yō*
- 2. children's songs
  - A. children's natural songs
  - B. children's composed songs
- 3. popular songs
  - A. natural popular songs
  - B. composed popular songs.<sup>11</sup>

If we want to examine the existence of Japanese balladry, we, first of all, have to discard these conventional categorizations, and to take recourse to some other ones with due regard to the content: that is, narrativeness and the way of verbal expression. But, since the classification of folksongs is not our main concern, suffice it to say here that the standards of classification should consist of the form and the content as well as the mode of existence.

Difficulties which confront us in discussing Japanese balladry may be partly derived from the terminology, that is, using the term "balladry." As I have said before that balladry is a kind of narrative folksong, let us give a consideration to what folksong is. Many scholars have tried to answer this question. Some speak of the song "produced" by the folk; others consider it as the song "received" by the folk. If we mean by the "folk" only peasants or somebody like those, folksongs will die out in the near future, or there is no folksong in the society where there is no peasant, as in the United States. Folksong may be defined as oral-traditional song. Some scholars, however, speak of "ballads and folksongs," where, in their definition, ballads are not folksongs. Others include folksongs in the category of "oral poetry" and discuss them with other types of oral poetry: oral epics, oral rhymes, etc. If all "folksongs" are oral and all oral songs are folksongs, then the term "folksong" might be misleading and unnecessary.

Folksong can be considered an item of folklore, by which we mean here an object of study, not a branch of study. If we study it folkloristically, where folksong is a type of folklore or oral literature, the study is folkloristics. But the term "oral literature" may not be an adequate one, for some maintain that literature cannot be oral and that not all songs are literary because there are non-literary songs. If we understand that literature is a form, not an aesthetic content, we are allowed to use the term. Folksong is a popular and convenient term, but, when it is not a scholarly but merely popular name, in order to study it we have to invent a new one, for example, "folkloristic song," which is not my invention but a literal translation of the French *chanson folklorique*. Since folksong has many aspects and elements, it has been studied by students of several branches: literary criticism, musicology, folkloristics, sociology, history, etc. In order to define folksong, we must begin with putting in order these aspects and elements. Though I stress that a fairly clear-cut definition is needed for study, what we call a rose by another name would smell as sweet. Taxonomy is necessary also in the fields of humanities, but it is often a method.

Balladry is not only a Western concept but also a composite one, which consists of several features. These features should be universal and, though temporarily, be considered separately in order not to complicate the matter. Then, I will dissolve balladry into features,

<sup>11</sup> K. Machida and K. Asano, eds., *Nihon Min'yō shū* (Japanese Folksongs) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1960), p. 409.

for which other names could be conceived instead: characteristics, elements, aspects, traits, qualities, etc.

(1) The ballad is *oral-traditional*. This may be interpreted as “oral and traditional” or “of oral tradition.” The ballad needs to be both oral and traditional, because what is oral is sometimes nontraditional, as we can see from the anthology entitled “oral poetry,” in which the editor includes nontraditional songs, say, by John Lennon and Paul McCartney, expressing her position as follows:

However, though exact definition of ‘oral poetry’ may not be feasible, it is only fair to say that in this volume I am taking a fairly wide approach to what can be counted as ‘oral’. I am not insisting, in other words, that a poem must have been in every respect composed, transmitted, and performed orally, without any significant contact with writing, for it to count as ‘oral’. Probably many of the poems included here would qualify as oral, even on a fairly narrow definition. But, adopting my wider approach, I have also included some possibly marginal categories, those where the poems may not be ‘oral’ in every respect.<sup>12</sup>

For this reason, the ballad can be a type of folklore, which may be defined as “those materials in culture that circulate traditionally among members of any group in different versions, whether in oral form or by means of customary example.”<sup>13</sup>

(2) The ballad is *verbal*. This does not have to be explained.

(3) The ballad is *metrical*. This is not only because the ballad is a poem but because it is a song. “Rhythmical” might be a better adjective, but what are not metrical cannot be called songs and free verse has rhythms.<sup>14</sup> Thus many subclasses of *katarimono* are not ballads, because they are rhythmical but not metrical.

(4) The ballad is *melodious* or *tuneful*. This needs some qualification, because there is no oral poem without any melody or tune, but the only thing I can say here is that the ballad is tuneful because it has a fixed tune to which it is sung and that the concept of “tune” and “melody” is a relative thing and may not be an absolute criterion.

(5) The ballad is *narrative*. Narrativeness means recounting happenings or events in story form. This is why a ballad is “a story told in song” or “a folk-song that tells a story.” This quality must be distinguished from descriptiveness, for the ballad is a story or tale, but not a description. We have to take care that we do not confuse the two, especially when we talk of the Japanese *joji-teki kayō*, which can be epic, balladic, or descriptive. Furthermore, as folk narratives are essentially divided into folktales and legends, so narrative folksongs can be subcategorized as folktale-like songs and legendary ones, to which we can add historical songs. Though F. J. Child did not include in his collection songs that tell animal tales, as “The Frog’s Courting”, the reason for the exclusion is not obvious.

According to these five features, we can recognize narrative folksongs, though the third and fifth ones presuppose the second, which might be redundant. Probably all of these features are not constant, absolute, or universally acceptable, because drawing the line may be variable and prescribed in each culture, but their existence cannot be denied. In addition, we must have some more features. What A. B. Friedman thinks to be “certain con-

<sup>12</sup> Ruth Finnegan, ed., *The Penguin Book of Oral Poetry* (London: Allen Lane, 1978), pp. 2-3.

<sup>13</sup> Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction* (New York: Norton, 1968), p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Sadanori Bekku, *Nihongo no Rizumu* (Rhythms in the Japanese Language) (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1977), pp. 131ff.

stants” in balladry are:

- (1) Ballads focus on a single crucial episode or situation. The ballad begins usually at a point where the action is decisively directed toward its catastrophe . . . .
- (2) Ballads are dramatic. We are not told about things happening: we are shown them happening. Every artistic resource of the genre is pointed toward giving an intensity and immediacy to the action and toward heightening the emotional impact of the climax . . . .
- (3) Ballads are impersonal. The narrator seldom allows his subjective attitude toward the events to include. Comments on motives are broad, general, detached . . . .<sup>15</sup>

With these eight features, let us turn our eye to Japanese literary forms. Then, we find a lot of examples to hold good for the above case. For example, many *kudoki* songs tell stories dramatically and impersonally, focussing on a single episode; so do *sekk'yōbushi*-derived songs (as *goze* songs, *bon-odori* songs, or *daikoku-mai* songs). Lafcadio Hearn translated three *daikoku-mai* songs into English, and called them “popular ballads”, though one of them, “The Ballad of Oguri-Hangwan,” does not concentrate on a single situation or episode but has twelve parts (similar to *fyttes* in “A Gest of Robyn Hode”). Another piece, “The Ballad of O-Shichi, the Daughter of the Yaoya,” begins like this (though the original, of course, is in verse):

In autumn the deer are lured within reach of the hunters by the sounds of the flute, which resemble the sounds of the voices of their mates, and so are killed.

Almost in like manner, one of the five most beautiful girls in Yedo, whose comely faces charmed all the capital even as the spring-blossoming of cherry-trees, cast away her life in the moment of blindness caused by love.

When, having done a foolish thing, she was brought before the mayor of the city of Yedo, that high official questioned the young criminal, asking: “Are you not O-Shichi, the daughter of the *yaoya*? And being so young, how came you to commit such a dreadful crime as incendiarism?”

Then O-Shichi, weeping and wringing her hands, made this answer; “Indeed, that is the only crime I ever committed; and I had no extraordinary reason for it but this:—<sup>16</sup>

These songs constitute a most narrative type of songs. *Kudoki* songs are sometimes sung as *bon-odori* songs; that is, *bon-odori* dances are performed to the songs. Otherwise *kudoki* songs are sung to other activities (e.g. as worksongs) or independently from any other activity (e.g. as entertainments). But, as we have seen before, Yanagita thinks that *kudoki* is not *min'yō* or at least marginal as *min'yō*.

In the repertoire of *goze* singers, itinerant blind female singers who are somewhat compared with European minstrels, *kudoki* songs and longer *saimon* songs, both purely narrative, are considered to be the most important. They sing the songs indoors before the audience with the accompaniment of the *shamisen* which they play themselves. Perhaps because *goze* singers, itinerant professionals, do not produce anything material while singing, their songs are not sung to particular activities, their style of singing is half-recitative, and their songs lack strong regionalism and localism, the songs are sometimes not considered as *min'yō*. But we must ask ourselves what folksong is and, because folksong is a type of verbal-musical

<sup>15</sup> A[llbert] B. F[riedman], “Ballad” in *Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by A. Preminger (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1965), p. 62.

<sup>16</sup> Lafcadio Hearn, *Kokoro* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1907), pp. 178-79.

folklore, it is difficult to see how anyone could exclude *goze* songs from the domain of folk-songs. And it must be noted that *katarimono* and *min'yō* are defined according to different standards (narrativeness and style of performance, and mode of existence and functional purpose, respectively), so that the two are necessarily intermingled especially in the case of *katarimono* for singing and *min'yō* for narrating. Otherwise we have to accept the fact that folksong and *min'yō* are different concepts, and give up examining Japanese balladry.

There is an interesting hypothesis claiming that there existed also in Japan narrative folksongs corresponding to British ballads. To cite Sōfū Taketomo's comment:

Though there were ballad subjects and ballad 'forms' in Japan, which are only slightly discernible, their development was impeded by the development of other types of literature with fixed forms and they did not make a definite genre. In other words, written literature was so fully developed that balladry could not flourish. Without the *chōka* (lit. 'long poem') and the *tanka* (lit. 'short poem') in ancient times and the *utai* (or *yōkyoku*) of Noh plays, Japanese ballads must have completely developed.<sup>17</sup>

Yasuji Honda is more careful at this point. He finds some ballad-like pieces in traditional Okinawan narrative folksongs and considers some ancient songs also to be ballads of a kind: for example, "Yachihoko-no-kami" in *Kojiki*:

The god / YA-TI-POKŌ [Yachihoko],  
 Unable to find a wife / In the land of the eight islands,  
 Hearing that / In the far-away  
 Land of KOSI / There was a wise maiden,  
 Hearing that / There was a fair maiden,  
 Set out / To woo her,  
 Went out / To win her.

Not even untying / The cord of my sword,  
 Not even untying / My cloak,  
 I stood there / And pushed and shook  
 I stood there / And pulled and shoved  
 On the wooden door / Where the maiden slept.<sup>18</sup>

and "Urashima of Mizunoé" in *The Manyōshū*:

When, in spring, the sun misted,  
 And going out on Suminoé's shore  
 I see rocking fisher-boats,  
 They remind me of the things  
 That happened long ago.

Urashima of Mizunoé  
 Went a-fishing to the sea;  
 Proud of his plentiful catch  
 Of sea-bream and bonito,  
 He did not come back home  
 Though seven days came and went;  
 But beyond the bounds of sea  
 He rowed out his little boat;

<sup>17</sup> Sōfū Taketomo, *Shi no Kigen* (The Beginnings of Poetry) (1929; Tokyo: Azusa Shobō, 1930), pp. 217-18.

<sup>18</sup> *Kojiki*, translated by Donald L. Philippi (Tokyo: Univ. of Tokyo Press, 1968), pp. 104-5.

Then it happened that he met  
 The Sea God's daughter.  
 They talked, agreed, pledged love,  
 And hand in hand they reached  
 The Land Everlasting.<sup>19</sup>

Honda goes on to say that he can recognize the survivals of ancient ballads in traditional songs of today, e.g. *fuzuku-odori* songs and rice-planting songs. His point of argument is as follows:

... Japanese ballads, which had not been common but existent since the times of *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*, became quite popular probably at the Kamakura and Muromachi periods, and, while they were seldom written down, perhaps developed into the *jōruri* [epic-like songs for *bunraku*] or the *nagauta* [narrative songs for dances in the Kabuki theater], though they were widely transmitted and have been in tradition as the words of folk-dance songs.<sup>20</sup>

Another claim is that the *bon-odori* song "Hiyo-Hiyo" and many other related songs enable us to re-construct a narrative song in the form of a series of *kouta*.<sup>21</sup> The author says that there was once a fairly complete story song and that pieces of the song survive in various places. But the conclusion is not reached deductively. "Hiyo-Hiyo" and "Kamakura wa" might be proved to have been narrative songs, but it would be a high speculation to say that such songs constituted a group and that they were dissolved into other genres of literature such as the *jōruri*. We are not saying that because of the lack of any record there is no possibility, but that the "survival" theory is not acceptable, for we are concerned with certain songs and the folk group which transmitted and handed down the songs.

The relationship between narrative songs and dance songs is sometimes discussed, with reference to European balladries. But British balladry, one of the most famous balladries, has been sung without dancing. The etymological consideration (the word "ballad" is derived from the Latin *ballare* 'to dance') proves nothing and gives no clue to the understanding of the nature. Even if British ballads may have been derived from dance songs, they developed and established long after they ceased to be dance songs, for the golden age of balladry was probably the eighteenth century. If the history of British ballads can be generalized and adapted to that of Japanese ballads, it may well be said that Japanese balladry as a genre did not develop or exist, and the theory that fully developed ballads once existed in Japan and that pieces of them have survived in various places is quite doubtful and not acceptable.

<sup>19</sup> *The Manyōshū*, published for the Nippon Gagujutsu Shinkōkai (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1940), pp. 216-7.

<sup>20</sup> Yasuji Honda, *Nihon Koyō shū* (Old Japanese Songs) (Tokyo: Miraisha, 1962), p. ii.

<sup>21</sup> "Bon-odori-uta 'Hiyo-Hiyo' wa 5-7-7-4-shikei no Joji-kayō ka" (Is the *Bon-odori* Song 'Hiyo-Hiyo' a 5-7-7-4-syllable Narrative Song?) in *Nihon Min'yō Taikan: Kyūshū hen, Hokubu* (A Survey of Japanese Folk-songs: Northern Kyushu), ed. by Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai (Tokyo: Nippon Hōsō Shuppan Kyōkai, 1977), pp. 440-59.