

# *The Battle of Ichi no Tani — It's Influences on the Genpei War and Japanese Culture*

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**Abstract:** In year 1184, the Battle of Ichi no Tani broke out between the two major samurai clans in late Heian Period, the Minamoto Clan and the Taira Clan. In this paper, the impact of this battle is examined from the aspects of its military significance in the Genpei War and its influences on the Japanese Culture. The author would argue that from these two aspects, the influence of the Battle of Ichi no Tani could be shown on its heavy blow to the Taira Clan, leading to their final defeat and the heroic figures like Minamoto no Yoshitsune and Taira no Atsumori who fought in it. Through studying this topic, a better understanding towards the military history of medieval Japan and the Japanese culture of sympathy towards the failed side can be developed.

**Keywords:** Genpei War, Minamoto no Yoshitsune, Atsumori

## 1. Introduction

The Genpei War, which lasted from 1180 to 1185, has been one of the most renowned wars in the history of Japan. Heroes and legends were generated in this long struggle between the two major samurai houses of that time: the Taira clan, or Heike, and the Minamoto clan which could be also called Genji. The war ended in the complete destruction of the Taira clan, with all its members either killed in battle or executed after capture and the leader of the Minamoto clan Minamoto no Yoritomo(源頼朝) unifying the country and setting up the first samurai regime in Japanese history, the Kamakura Shogunate. It was a long process for the Taira to fall from the strongest power in Japan to extinction, which included numerous battles, and I would focus especially on one of the battles during the Genpei War, which is the Battle of Ichi no Tani. I would argue that the influence of the Battle of Ichi no Tani has been significant in two different aspects: its influence on process of the Genpei War itself and its influence on the culture of Japan through the stories of the heroic figures involved in this battle.

## 2. The History — Why Ichi no Tani was important in the Genpei War?

The Battle of Ichi no Tani was fought in February of year 1184, by this time, the war was already on its last stages. It was usually considered that first action of the Genpei War was the rebellion of Minamoto no Yorimasa (源頼政) and Prince Mochihito (以仁王) [1]. Yorimasa, who had served the Taira in the Hōgen and Heiji rebellion, grew increasingly unsatisfied towards his masters, and in the June of year 1180, Yorimasa, supporting a prince, Prince Mochihito, raised their flags

towards the supremacy of the Taira. Their attempt ended eventually in failure, as the Taira quickly sent forces to suppress their rebellion, destroying the forces of Yorimasa in the Battle of the Uji River. Yorimasa committed hara-kiri, and Prince Mochihito was killed during his escape from the hunt of the Taira forces. Taira succeeded in this suppression, but it was only the beginning of their final destruction.

A proclamation was sent by Prince Mochihito during his rebellion, calling the Minamoto, Fujiwara and other great clans to join his campaign against the Taira clan [2]. Although this proclamation failed to save Prince Mochihito and his companions, it did make the Minamoto Clan members on the east of the country start to rebel against the Taira, leading to the initial failures of the Taira clan. Minamoto no Yoritomo was among these rebellion forces. Son of Minamoto no Yoshitomo (源義朝), the leader of the Minamoto Clan against the Taira clan in the Heiji Rebellion, Yoritomo was kept alive by Taira no Kiyomori (平清盛), the leader of the Taira clan. In exile in the Ise peninsula for 20 years, Yoritomo finally seized the chance to revive his clan. Yoritomo declared himself as the successor the court authority in the east, and through promising the Minamoto Samurais in the Kanto area high rewards [3], he soon assembled a large army. In response, the Taira sent an army of 70,000 men [4], lead by Taira no Koremori (平維盛), and the two armies meet at Fujigawa in November 1180. It turned out to be a disaster for the Taira. The Taira army with little moral due to long supply lines [5], mistaken the wild birds as the soldiers of the Minamoto army in the night. Struck with fear, the Taira army fell into disorder and retreated back to Kyoto, allowing Yoritomo to put the entire Kanto region under his control. Yoritomo had not been the only problem for the Taira. Minamoto no Yoshinaka (源義仲), another member of the Minamoto clan, raised his army against the Taira and soon controlled Hokurido area. In June 1183, Yoshinaka defeated the main force of the Taira army in the Battle of Kurikara Pass, with more than 70,000 soldiers of the Taira falling into the abyss of the Kurikara Pass [4]. As the army of Yoshinaka pushed closer and closer to Kyoto, the Taira decided to abandon Kyoto in July of the same year, taking the young emperor Antoku and the three treasures of Royal family with them.

Following was the long retreat of the Taira clan on sea, back to their bases in western Japan. An attempt to escape to Kyushu failed as the local clans in Kyushu also rebelled against the Taira. Returned back to sea, the Taira settled in their base in Yashima. In this process, the Taira has actually fought back the chase of the Yoshinaka forces in the battle of Mizushima in November 1183, defeating his fleet. Unlike the failed expeditions the Taira had made previously, now back on the sea of western Japan, the Taira were on their home ground and were able to exploit their naval strength [6]. Furthermore, the Minamoto Clan itself had fell into a civil war. Yoritomo and Yoshinaka fell out with each other, and a battle between them started in the beginning of 1184. Staying at his base in Kamakura, Yoritomo sent out his younger brother Minamoto no Yoshitsune (源義経) to chastise Yoshinaka. The two army meet at the Uji River again, and Yoshinaka was defeated by his talented young cousin, was forced to move out from Kyoto and was killed after a short time. During this time, the Taira had gradually regained their power in the Kinki region. Fukuhara, the city Taira no Kiyomori had built and had been the capital of Japan in 1180, which was abandoned and destroyed earlier in the Taira escape from Kyoto, was also reclaimed. Fukuhara, which was built on where nowadays Kobe lies, was pretty close to Kyoto. and a hope for the Taira to reclaim their capital appeared. The Taira did not chose to defend Fukuhara, however, but to raise a fortress at Ichi no Tani to use as their outpost next to Kyoto [6]. For Yoshitsune who just arrived in Kyoto after his victory against Yoshinaka, Ichi no Tani would no doubt be his chance to fight against the true enemies of his clan—the Taira.

The battle broke out between the two armies In March 1184 when Yoshitsune with his another brother, Minamoto no Noriyori (源範頼) rode towards Ichi no Tani. The fortress was located

beneath steep cliffs and its gate opens towards the south, where the Taira fleet was anchored on the sea. Defense line was set on the east of the fortress, lead by Taira no Tomomori(平知盛), as the Taira expected the Minamoto army would march from the east through Fukuhara. This line was of some distance from Ichi no Tani, which could be safely abandoned even the situation was unfavorable for the Taira, while buying time for the Taira to retreat back to their fleet [6], where they would have advantage. Their arrangements did not work out, as Yoshitsune applied a bold but clever strategy. Separating the Minamoto army into two parts, Noriyori lead a main force of 50,000 men, and march along the coasts of the inner sea, attacking the fortress from the east, just as the Taira had anticipated. Yoshitsune, however, took a different route, leading his army of 10,000 men, he went along the mountains behind the fortress, trying to capture it from another direction. After destroying a Taira outpost at Mikusayama on the night of 18th march, Yoshitsune further separated his army, sending Doi Sanehira (土肥実平) to lead 7,000 men and attack from the west of Ichi no Tani, while himself had took the rest of the 3,000 men to ride down directly from the cliffs behind the fortress. This turned out to be decisive in the results of the battle. The armies of Sanehira and Noriyori engaged directly with the defense lines of the Taira army, where they experienced strong resistance. Many Minamoto samurais fought valiantly but the fortress of Ichi no Tani still stood undamaged. That all changed when Yoshitsune and his army charged down from the defenseless north side of the fortress, a cliff called Hiyodorigoe, launching a surprise attack on the Taira defense lines. Relatively less defenses were set on the north as the Taira never expected anyone would be able to charge down from the stiff cliffs. Terrified by the enemy that suddenly appeared behind them, the lines of the Taira army crumbled, and everyone started their escape to the sea.

The results were disastrous for the Taira. The casualties were high. It was recorded on the Tale of Heike that ‘the plains in front of Ichi no Tani had turn from green to light red, countless were shot or hacked to death, and more than 2,000 heads were taken by Minamoto soldiers alone.’ [4]. What’s more was that in this battle, many high rank generals of the Taira were either killed or captured on their escape to the coast. Taira no Tadanori (平忠度), a Taira general who possesses both excellent battle skills and talent in writing poems were surrounded and killed by Minamoto warriors. Taira no Shigehira (平重衡), 5th son of Taira no Kiyomori, who had also been the victor of the battle of Uji River and the one responsible for the destruction of the buddhist temples in Nara, was captured alive as his retainer abandoned him. And Taira no Atsumori (平敦盛), a warrior with no higher rank compared to the two person mentioned before, but died much more famous than anyone else. Among the sons of Kiyomori, now the only competent general left was Taira no Tomomori (平知盛). The rest of the Taira clan returned to Yashima with their fleet, losing Fukuhara forever this time, also their chance to return to Kyoto. Waiting for them was the endless pursue of Yoshitsune and Noriyori from both land and sea, until they were driven out of their base Yashima in March 1185. And then in April 1185, the clan faced their final destruction on the sea of Dan no Ura, went through a complete defeat on ocean and all members were killed.

### 3. Minamoto no Yoshitsune — the Beginning of Houganbiiki

Besides its significance in the process of the Genpei War, the Battle of Ichi no Tani also contributed many great heroes in the history of Japan. One of them that must be mentioned is no doubt Minamoto no Yoshitsune. Being one of the greatest tragic heroes in Japanese history, a word was even created by the Japanese in order to describe a Yoshitsune-style tragic hero: Houganbiiki (判官鬮), as the word Hougan refers to the rank of Yoshitsune in the court. In the legend of Yoshitsune, Ichi no Tani had been the first major battle of him against the Taira, beginning his series of great victories against the Taira. With him charging down from the Hiyodorigoe, the cliff on the north of Ichi no Tani and breaking the defense lines of the Taira, the victory of the Minamoto was settled. In the Tale of Heike,

his march from Kyoto to Hiyodorigoe and his charge down it was described in Chapter 9, depicting an image of a brave and talented general.

After marching out from Kyoto, Yoshitsune first showed his talent in his action against the Taira outpost at Mikusayama, where he burnt the houses besides the road to Mikusayama, enabling the Minamoto army to march at night and launch a surprise attack on the Taira who were still asleep [4]. In his later march towards Hiyodorigoe, he as a courageous military leader was shown. The mountain road has been steep and dangerous, and according to the local residents, only deers were able to pass these roads. The Minamoto soldiers were terrified, some complained that they would rather die fighting the enemy than slipping down into the valley. Warriors such as Kumagai Naozane (熊谷直実) left Yoshitsune at the night before the battle to join Doi Sanehira's forces and attack from the front gate of the fortress. Towards their suspicions, only a simple statement was made by Yoshitsune: 'If deers can pass, why can't horses?' [7]. Through asking the local residents to act as guides, the small Minamoto detachment lead by Yoshitsune successfully arrived at the cliffs of Hiyodorigoe on the morning of the day of the battle. Instead of directly sending riders down the steep cliff, Yoshitsune first sent two riderless horses down the cliff, in order to confirm that it would be safe to charge down from the cliff. Seeing the horses were not hurt, with him on the forefront, Yoshitsune charged down the Hiyodorigoe with his soldiers, shouting out war cries and burning down Taira fortifications, creating chaos behind the Taira lines, leading the victory of Minamoto.

This tactic Yoshitsune used at Ichi no Tani became typical later in his command style. Military actions under his command were marked by their panache, speed and the ability to predict the reaction of his enemies [7]. This was seen again in his victory in the battle of Yashima in 1185, driving the Taira out from their base at Shikoku. Like Ichi no Tani, again Yoshitsune acted with a small detachment of Minamoto soldiers, this time with only about 80 riders. Separating the 80 riders into small groups of 10 riders, Yoshitsune ordered the small groups to attack from all directions, rising the white flags of the Minamoto Clan and setting fires on the buildings on Yashima. Afraid of another night attack, the Taira quickly returned to the sea with their fleet, abandoning Yashima. Before long, the Taira realized that they were deceived and tried to retake Yashima, which was just as Yoshitsune had anticipated, who prepared for it and fought back the Taira, completely driving the Taira out from Yashima. About a month later, Yoshitsune forced the Taira into desperate situation at Dan no Ura, the strait that separated Honshu and Kyushu. There Yoshitsune defeated the Taira in naval battle, an area where they had significant advantage, as the tides had turned out to be in favor of the Minamoto navy. The victory at Dan no Ura had turned Yoshitsune into the most famous military leader in Japan at that time, and he was only at an age of 26. Although the final victory of the Minamoto was the outcome of the political skills and preparations of Yoritomo, the war would have turned into a long struggle between Kamakura and Yashima instead of a quick ending in five weeks if Yoshitsune had not participated in it [7].

However, Yoshitsune would not be what he is today if his life experiences end at the victory at Dan no Ura. As a tragic hero, Yoshitsune's experiences in the later half of his life, when he fell from the highest point of his life straight into disaster, was the part the most legends about him were created. Returning to Kyoto after his victory, Yoshitsune received great honor from the Retired Emperor Goshirakawa (後白河), the actual leader of the Court at Kyoto who appointed him Lieutenant of Imperial Police and granted him the privilege of waiting in the Senior Courtiers' chamber [8]. After a few week's stay in Kyoto, Yoshitsune set out to Kamakura to report to Yoritomo in person, but he never made it to his destination. On a post station called Koshigoe close to Kamakura, Yoshitsune was told to 'wait for further instructions.' There the young hero was left for weeks, with no permission to enter Kamakura and no praise or reward from Kamakura. In increasing anxiety, Yoshitsune sent several protests to Kamakura, but there were still no response. Grew desperate, Yoshitsune sent the famous Koshigoe letter to Yoritomo, trying to prove his loyalty and claiming his identity as a warrior

and a member of the Minamoto Clan [9]. He complained that although he had destroyed Yoritomo's enemies, no rewards were given, and now he was prohibited from entering Kamakura because of slender from others. He also mentioned the oaths he had sworn to Yoritomo and the fact that they were brothers. None of these moved Yoritomo, who now already saw Yoshitsune as a threat, and once again seeing that there were no responses, Yoshitsune returned to Kyoto. Followed was an assassination attempt from Yoritomo, which marked the complete broke down between the relationship between the brothers. Koshigoe became the change in his life experience, and from then Yoshitsune spent the rest of his life, 4 years escaping from the pursue of his brother.

The end of Yoshitsune had been fierce but tragic. After 4 years of hiding, Yoshitsune reached the end of his life at Koromo river in Oshu. Only a small band of nine followers were left to face the pursuing Fujiwara army of 30,000 men. One by one, the followers fall, even Benkei, the most loyal and capable follower of Yoshitsune was killed after slaughtering dozens of enemies. Seeing his end is close, Yoshitsune first killed his wife and child then committed hara-kiri, burning his body with the mansion he was hiding in, dying at only 30. His miserable situation in the last 4 years of his life was so different from his military career, that one can hardly find anything in common between the courageous young general at Ichi no Tani and the desperate, inactive figure presented in the Noh Play Ataka (the main content of the play is about Yoshitsune and his followers including Benkei trying to pass a checkpoint on their escape). The play had been a representation of the change in the image of Yoshitsune in artworks, which became more feminine: slender, pale and delicate [10], far different from what a powerful warrior should look like, relating to his tragic experiences in the final 5 years of his life, also protected by others, sad and impressionable. Under this comparison, if we now look back at the image of the talented and brave military leader depicted in the story of the Battle of Ichi no Tani, the sense of tragedy we have towards Yoshitsune would only become deeper, as we know that this glory would not last. The more the Battle of Ichi no Tani and Yashima made Yoshitsune seemed great, the more sorry would we feel towards his later tragedy, sympathizing the fall of the hero. Through comparing the experiences of Yoshitsune, this sense of sympathizing the failed side, Houganbiiki, was created, and become a part in the Japanese aesthetics.

#### 4. Atsumori — Death and Redemption

After the great defeat at Ichi no Tani, the generals of the Taira ran separately for their lives, with Minamoto soldiers close on their heels, trying to take the heads of the enemies. Eventually most of them were killed or captured, and among these deaths, one has been especially famous, which was the death of Taira no Atsumori, a young member of the Taira clan.

On his escape to the Taira fleet on the sea, Atsumori heard someone calling him from the back. Looking back, Atsumori saw Kumagai Naozane, a low rank but powerful Minamoto samurai. 'I see that you are a commander in chief!', shouted Naozane: 'It is dishonorable to run away from your enemy.' [11]. Hearing this, Atsumori stopped and returned to face and fight Naozane. The result was soon clear. Atsumori, who first faced actual battle was no match for an experienced warrior like Naozane. However, when Naozane removed the helmet of Atsumori to take his head, he hesitated, as Atsumori's face behind the helmet was so young and beautiful, and he don't know how to hurt such a beautiful face. Just as he decided to spare the life of Atsumori, other riders of the Minamoto Clan appeared on the coast. Knowing that even Naozane freed him, he would still be killed by the coming Minamoto riders, Atsumori urged Naozane to took his head, and the latter, under great compassion, unwillingly cut off the head of Atsumori.

The death of Atsumori had been adapted to various artworks, and among them one of the most famous one is the Noh drama Atsumori. Written by Zeami, who was now seen as the father of Noh plays [12], Atsumori was a representative play of Noh dramas. The story of the play happened years after the death of Atsumori. Naozane, who felt the cruelty of war after killing Atsumori, became a

monk and changed his name to Rensei (熊谷蓮生). One day, Rensei met a strange grass cutter, who said that he has some connection with Atsumori and ask Rensei to pray for his soul. After Rensei did so, the grass cutter implied he was the ghost of Atsumori then disappeared. At night, the ghost of Atsumori appeared again, and told Rensei the story of the Taira escape from Kyoto, and his experiences in the Battle of Ichi no Tani. In the end, Atsumori said that he was happy to see Rensei was praying for his soul, and believed that they have become friends instead of rivals.

If the original story of Atsumori was more about praising some of the respected samurai ethics that Atsumori had in the duel, such as valuing of honor and courage towards death, the play was more like a Buddhist redemption for both warriors. Before their duel, Atsumori and Naozane were completely different: one born in the court of Kyoto, raised under the aristocratic atmosphere, and was famous for his skills at flute instead of fighting; the other a pure warrior grown in the mountains of the eastern provinces, who had already slaughtered a lot of enemies before encountering with Atsumori. The duel had changed the lives of the two warriors, setting punishment on them. Atsumori's death had been in relation with the Buddhist Karma that appeared often in the Tale of Heike, stating that as the Taira had done various evil deeds during their rule in Tokyo, their destruction was the punishment from gods and buddhas [13], and Atsumori had paid for the wrong doings of his family with his life. As for Naozane, he had been living in the guilty for killing Atsumori since the battle, making him to become a monk. In the play, the two eventually understood each other, with Atsumori's soul no longer suffering because of the prayers of Naozane, and Naozane was finally free from the sense of guilty that had caught him, knowing Atsumori had forgiven him and seen him as a friend.

## 5. Conclusion

In the anime series Heike Monogatari which was released earlier this year, the Battle of Ichi no Tani was adapted again, this time into anime [14]. What makes this battle 800 years ago to be remembered and discussed by people was its influences in different aspects. In its influences on war process, the defeat of the Taira at Ichi no Tani became lethal for them, as they have already suffered continuous defeats before 1184, and their failure at Ichi no Tani destroyed their last chance to retake the capital, Kyoto. The high casualties of high rank generals at Ichi no Tani was also a heavy strike to the Taira, causing a lack of military commanders. Besides the battle's effect on the process of the war, the two heroes emerged in this battle also had an influence on Japanese culture. For Minamoto no Yoshitsune, the battle had been the beginning of his military success, but also the beginning of a larger tragedy of his life. His valiant image in the battle made his experience in the last years of his life more tragic, turning him into an example for the Japanese failed heroes. As for Taira no Atsumori, his death had contributed to the creation of one of the most famous Noh plays in Japan, which discussed the theme of Buddhist Karma and redemption. These factors together, overall, made the Battle of Ichi no Tani a vital battle in Japanese history.

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