Records of Military Exploits: From the Medieval Period through to Early-Modern Times

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It is commonly considered that after distinguished war service or performing acts of valor, their recording and the acquiring of rewards in recognition are the most fundamental and important practice of a bushi (warrior), and many studies have been conducted on gunchūjo (requests for recognition of military success and heroic deeds) made during the period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties (1336–1392). However, it has not been completely clarified how gunchūjo changed, disappeared, and reappeared during the period of the Warring States (1493–1590) and later were used in early-modern times during which internally Japan was at peace. To explore both the differences and common points found in documents from the archives of samurai families of the medieval period and early-modern times, this paper focuses on historical materials that record meritorious service in war and examines changes to their content, style and the system of application.

In 1869, just before the return of the han (domain) registers to the Meiji Emperor, a survey on military exploits in the Boshin War and other wars was systematically conducted among samurai families in the Hagi han. In compliance with the directions given by the han, the chief retainers submitted records with phrasing typical of medieval period gunchūjo. The han then returned these records to the samurai with a seal of proof similar to those used in the medieval period. When these records are compared with other records of military exploits submitted by volunteer corps including peasant soldiers, war casualties and war dead are commonly described, but a significant distinction is whether they were written in the typical format and style of gunchūjo or not. In other words, it can be considered that han and retainers in the closing days of the Tokugawa Shogunate positioned gunchūjo as a symbol of their rank as bushi.

Now the question arises: What is the historical meaning of this gunchūjo? According to the historical sources, in early times the reporting and acknowledgement of martial exploits to receive rewards was made verbally in the presence of a commander. However, during the battles of the Mongol Invasions (1274 and 1281), the Shogunate government who were the arbitrators of rewards resided in Kamakura, far from the battle area. The battles were on a large scale and the number of bushi wishing acknowledgement of military exploits numerous; therefore, for the first time bureaucratic work to confirm acknowledgement of military exploits by means of documents was carried out. Afterward, documents related to military affairs were standardized, and procedures concerning acknowledgement of military exploits were systematized, consequently becoming those documents on military affairs used during the period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, in which battles were fought in many regions over a prolonged period.
In the late 15th century, however, most documents on military affairs changed to a simple citation to praise military exploits, and throughout Japan the remaining examples of gunchujo and other documents to record and report military exploits significantly decreased. Later, however, daimyo (feudal lords) and bushi in the western part, who wanted to display their strong connection with the Shogunate, started to use gunchujo and kubichumon again, reviving the old customs and manners of samurai families of the Muromachi Shogunate, and in the high season of the Warring States period, they were increasingly drawn up in the domains of the Otomo and Mori clan warlords.

Moreover, after the establishment of the Hideyoshi administration, a system to acknowledge military exploits was further refined in the form of a military exploit report and a document confirming its acceptance, as symbolized by hana uketorijo (the nose receipt documents) issued during the attempted conquest of Korea. After the Battle of Sekigahara (1600), and the two Sieges of Osaka (1614 and 1615), a massive amount of military exploit record documents were created; the Shimabara Uprising (1637–1638), which is regarded as the last battle in the beginning of early-modern times, also gave rise to numerous gunchujo created by “outside” daimyo families and their retainer families in Kyushu. Gunchujo at this period specifically described details of a bushi’s military action and deeds, and formal elements are minimal. In addition, these documents were kept, managed, and stored in the residence of a daimyo as a basic material to report military exploits to the Tokugawa family, as well as to provide evidence for the allocation of rewards to retainers. In due course, even after the formal completion of the actual acknowledgement procedure, many samurai families came to collect their military exploit records and incorporated them into their family tradition and history as very important evidence confirming their relation with the Tokugawa family. The Shogunate as well came to compile such records of military exploits.

As described above, by following the genealogy of military exploit records, it has been found that gunchujo, which first appeared for the very practical purpose of acclaiming military exploits and receiving rewards, subsequently developed in two directions. In one direction their function as a document for administrative procedure was further refined, and they came to be kept as a record of an application by the side granting acknowledgement, not by the side making the application; and in the other direction they were absorbed into the family tradition as a “memory of the family,” becoming a kind of physical verification to be handed down through the generations, in other words, a reliable source for honoring and commemorating the memory of a family’s ancestors.

The gunchujo of the Hagi han in the last days of the Tokugawa Shogunate can also be positioned in a genealogical record where the record of military exploits changed from the Warring States period through to early-modern times, and reached the end with the Shimabara Uprising. One can safely state that this also suggests an aspect whereby the military soldier of modern times tenaciously carried on the mores of medieval and early-modern bushi.

Key words: gunchujo, record of military exploits, Hagi han, archives of samurai families, old customs and manners of samurai families