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The Onna-bugeisha: Redefining the Female Warrior

Las Onna-bugeisha: redefiniendo la figura de la guerrera

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Abstract

This work explores the historical impact of the Onna-bugeishas, Japanese female warriors who defied gender norms and patriarchal structures. Traditionally seen as isolated figures, the objective of this study is to reposition them as essential contributors to gender equality. By analyzing iconic figures like Empress Jingū, Tomoe Gozen, and Hōjō Masako, it traces their challenge to Confucian ideology and male-dominated social hierarchies. The theoretical framework integrates feminist historiography to assess the socio-political influence of these warriors. Methodologically, exploratory historical study validates their roles. Findings reveal a consistent resistance pattern among the Onna-bugeishas, establishing a symbolic and practical foundation for future gender equality movements. Their legacy is a testament to women's influence within historical Japanese society.

Keywords: Onna-bugeisha, Patriarchy, Empowerment, Gender Equality, Women's Autonomy

Resumen

Este artículo explora el impacto histórico de las Onna-bugeishas, guerreras japonesas que desafiaron normas de género y estructuras patriarcales. Tradicionalmente vistas como figuras aisladas, el objetivo de este estudio las reposiciona como contribuyentes esenciales a la igualdad de género. Analizando figuras icónicas como la Emperatriz Jingū, Tomoe Gozen y Hōjō Masako, el trabajo rastrea su desafío a la ideología confuciana y las jerarquías sociales dominadas por los hombres. El marco teórico integra la historiografía feminista para evaluar la influencia sociopolítica de estas guerreras. Metodológicamente, se emplea análisis de textos históricos, así como evidencia arqueológica, para validar sus roles. Los hallazgos revelan un patrón de resistencia constante entre las Onna-bugeishas, lo que constituye una base simbólica y práctica para futuros movimientos de igualdad de género. Su legado persiste como testimonio del empoderamiento femenino en la sociedad japonesa histórica.

Palabras clave: Onna-bugeisha, Patriarcado, Empoderamiento, Equidad de género, Autonomía de las mujeres

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1. Introduction

1.1 Unearthing the Onna-bugeisha

Women are constantly being erased from history, especially those who questioned and rejected the patriarchal model in which they were born and raised. Moreover, I refuse to allow this to continue to spread. "Women did what society demanded of them, but not without complaining about the inequalities they suffered" (Onaha, 2007, p. 4).

The notion of Japan as a land of submissive, weak women is a misconception. For instance, in their work *Legacies of the Sword* (1997), Friday and Seki, one of the most recognized authors in Japanese and samurai studies, clarifies that in their book, they use the pronoun 'he' as a neutral term, explaining that 'she' draws undue attention and substitutes a political statement for clarity and conventional usage. Could this practice have diminished women's presence in the narrative?

This paper focuses on one of Japan's most famous figures: the samurai.[2] It starts with the "Age of Samurai," understood as an age of men (Oyler, 2014, p. 43). This is why male martial artists from Japan are famous while female martial artists are not. However, as Tyler (1991) reminds us, many daughters of the samurai class took martial arts lessons (p. 129).

We can find two types of them: the Onna-bugeisha, female martial artist (女武芸者), and the Onna-musha, female warrior (女武者). In general terms, both were trained to protect their homes and villages; the second one would even carry their training into battle (Anderson, 2019) For consistency, this paper will use the term Onna-bugeisha to refer to all female samurai warriors.

Farris (2009) acknowledges that women managed businesses and took on roles as warriors and leaders. This challenges the notion that women's participation in warfare was uncommon.

These women were trained the same way as the samurais, following the bushido[3] teachings and showing the same enthusiastic loyalty, bravery, and courage as any man would. Among the responsibilities of the samurai's wife, we find:

2. A member of a powerful military caste in feudal Japan, especially a member of the class of military retainers of the daimyos.
3. The samurai way. Code of honor and morals developed by the Japanese samurai.

> to manage the household, take care of the children and even be ready to defend the home physically. Because of their need to protect the household while their husbands were away, the women of the samurai class trained in the use of a naginata.[4] (Force, 2012, p. 5)

Although most references to these women are often overlooked, they can still be found throughout historical accounts. One example is in Frédéric (1972), who notes that during the war, the *buke*[5] were sometimes compelled by the dangers of battle to defend their homes. War chronicles recount the exploits of samurai wives fighting to protect their households and even following their husbands into battle.

Archaeological findings suggest that women participated in combat in pre-modern Japan, particularly in times of crisis. For instance, the analysis of human remains at Senbon Matsubara in Numazu estimated that approximately one-third of the individuals buried at the site were female, based on the examination of temporal bones. Similar patterns have been observed in other excavations, reinforcing the notion that women were present in battlefield contexts (Suzuki, 1989).

Sadly, when talking about these women, some can be traced through historical accounts, while others have disappeared or were never recorded. The lack of information about these warriors may be due to the Onna-bugeisha figure challenging the masculine conception of samurais, or, in a broader historical context, due to periods of violent campaigns such as those carried out by Oda Nobunaga (which consisted of pillaging and raiding defiant villages, temples, and castles; Nowaki, 2015, p. 66) among other factors.

For practical purposes, the presentation of the Onna-bugeishas will be divided into three blocks. This paper considers as Onna-bugeisha, those women who were born into the warrior class and/or received an education that provided them with knowledge applicable on the battlefield, even if they rarely used it in combat or only did so for a short period, as is the case with the women in the third group.

However, it is important to clarify that the Onna-bugeisha were not homogeneous. Their experiences varied depending on their social class or marital

4. A traditional weapon for Onna-bugeishas, like a cross between a sword and a spear with a curved blade.
5. The Samurai class, their families, and the military households governed during Japan's Kamakura period.

status. As Haruko and Gay clarify when they state, "It should be added that Tomiko was hardly a typical medieval woman: she was able to seize power primarily because of her high status as widow of the shogun[6]" (1984, p. 91).

This work is structured so that the women discussed possess origins or qualities that make them true Onna-bugeisha in the strictest sense, in contrast with the lost causes of Japan's popular male heroes, as Chieko Irie Mulhern (1991) noted it.

1.2 Samurai women's lifestyle

Certain historians and archaeologists propose that the Japanese culture may have originated from a matriarchal system (Pérez, 2016). Archaeological studies reveal that about half of the individuals found in ancient tombs were female, indicating that women once held considerable political power and economic influence. This hypothesis is further supported by the constancy of records about existing ruling empresses, Kōken Tennō[7] being the last to rule Japan in the seventh century (Castillo, 2017, p. 15).

Farris indicates that between 690 and 800, women held the throne more than half the time. Contrary to popular belief, they were not merely pawns for male politicians (2009, p. 45). However, as the samurai gained prominence, the presence of female rulers diminished.

The Heian Period (794-1185) marks a pivotal time for the emergence of the samurai and the changing roles of women, particularly within the aristocracy, where they flourished in artistic expressions like literature.

The Genpei War (1180-1185) paved the way for the rise of the warrior class, emerging from the conflict of interest between the Minamoto Clan and the Taira Clan. This brutal struggle not only reshaped the political landscape of Japan but also marked a significant turning point in women's roles within this context.

Before 1300, the high status of women was a defining feature of Japanese society. However, the installation of the first shogunate,[8] the Kamakura

6. The shogun was a "Barbarian-quelling generalissimo" hereditary military leaders technically appointed by the emperor.
7. Heavenly sovereign. The word used to refer to the emperor.
8. Military government established in Japan from 1192, with brief interruptions, until the Meiji Restoration in 1868.

Shogunate (1185-1333), represented a suppression of women due to the influence of Confucianism and Buddhism.

During the Muromachi Period, or Ashikaga Shogunate (1336-1573), the samurai achieved great prestige while women's status was in decline. Brown (1998) illustrates this by stating that Tomoe Gozen became a cross-dressing shaman in the kabuki theater.[9] One might wonder what happened, as Farris (2009) questions in his book *Japan to 1600*, suggesting it may have been connected to the extended period of warfare, where men held a dominant role. However, evidence such as suits of armor designed to fit the female form indicates that skilled women warriors existed (p. 163).

Chronologically, we reach the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1868), which imposed even stricter measures for women during this era (mainly due to the introduction of the Onna-daigaku; see below). Initially, the administration established a period of stability known as the Tokugawa Pax, transforming warriors into civil officials. The samurai developed into a cultured class due to the establishment of educational institutions. The circumstances that had previously enabled women to hold prominent roles declined with the return to peace. Now, with political influence and financial resources, the emperor could appoint men as scribes, treasurers, and negotiators—roles that had once been filled by women (Butler, 2002, p. 240).

At the same time, around 1729, the Onna-daigaku, or Woman's Manual of Confucianism, emerged, defining the ideal woman. This manual, among other provisions, set forth specific rules for a man to divorce his wife, mainly focusing on her ability to have children. During the Tokugawa period, there was a strong belief that continuing the ancestral bloodline was a moral obligation.

The Onna-bugeisha continued to be guided by bushido, remaining loyal to her clan, with her husband acting as its representative. Her training during this period primarily focused on protecting her against sexual assault. Nevertheless, Michiko Tanaka states, "the stabilization of the hierarchical feudal society with Confucian norms of human relations and the almost complete alienation of women in public life formally affected the social status of the warrior class woman" (2011, p. 140). As a result, the status of the Onna-bugeisha declined significantly.

9. Traditional Japanese theater featuring only male actors.

However, by the end of the Edo Period, the battle of Aizu, within the Boshin War[10] (1868-1869), showed that the fighting spirit of the Onna-bugeisha could not be extinguished. Two of these warriors would lay down their weapons to begin a new kind of intellectual battle, championing women's rights and roles in society, marking a transformative shift in the legacy of the Onna-bugeisha.

2. Theoretical Framework

The identity of the Onna-bugeisha was shaped within a society governed by a patriarchal structure rooted in Confucianism, which sought to relegate women to the domestic sphere. However, the social rules of the class to which they belonged—the warrior class—allowed them to challenge these norms.

It is also interesting to examine the power dynamics that enabled this challenge, as each woman experienced different circumstances. To analyze their identity and historical impact, this study utilizes tools from feminist historiography, the concept of gender in the construction of power, criticism of Confucian patriarchy, and postcolonial studies.

2.1. Gender in the construction of power

As cited in Zazueta & Stockland (2017) Joan Scott states, "gender is a primary way of signifying relations of power," (p. 18) shaped by the interests of men to politically and economically subordinate women. In this sense, the Onna-bugeisha contradict the narrative of women as passive figures of history. However, their participation in warfare did not necessarily entail a true transgression against patriarchy; in many cases, it occurred within structures that still maintained their subordination.

For this very reason, historians have struggled to present an account of women as significant contributors to historical change. However, these women serve as an example that this absence is due to the reinforcement of male power structures. The way in which they have been portrayed reflects this tendency, as they haven't been represented as historical agents with their agency (Zazueta & Stockland, 2017).

10. Civil war between the supporters of the Tokugawa Shogunate in power and the faction that wanted the return of political power to the imperial court.

2.2. Confucian Patriarchy and Omission

Confucianism reinforced a gender hierarchy based on the doctrine of separate spheres, in which women were expected to remain in the domestic realm (Ko, 1994). However, it is paradoxical that the responsibility of maintaining these oppressive boundaries fell on the women themselves.

In Japan, the state's gender segregation strategy assigned women a place in history, not as warriors, but as what Chizuko Ueno (2006) defined as "mothers of gods of war." Rather than being recognized as combatants, they were reduced to symbolic figures of sacrifice and motherhood. The Japanese state, even when acting as a patriarchal protector, assumed the role of "protecting" women (Mackie, 2003).

2.3. Orientalism and the Distorted Representation of the Onna-bugeisha

Edward W. Said (1979) argues that Orientalism created a biased view of the world, where the East was exoticized. The Onna-bugeisha were not only marginalized in Japanese historiography but also misrepresented in the West through an Orientalist lens that oversimplifies their role in history. Their history is deeply tied to the social, political, and economic structures of their time, yet the circumstances that led them to warfare are often overlooked. Their struggle was not about "empowerment" in the modern sense but about survival, loyalty, and family or community protection.

Their role as warriors is frequently emphasized, while their impact on politics and clan administration is neglected. As Orbaugh (2007) points out, this mirrors the contradiction of World War II, where women were seen as both producers of future soldiers and essential workers. Similarly, the Onna-bugeisha exemplifies how historical contexts redefined women's roles, forcing them to navigate conflicting demands within a system that constrained them.

2.4. Rewriting History: Toward a New Interpretation

As Chizuko Ueno (2006) points out, history is constantly rewritten based on ideological changes and historical awareness. By applying feminist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks, it is possible to recover a more nuanced and complete understanding of their role in history.

The Onna-bugeisha were not simply "women who fought"; they played strategic roles in politics and warfare. Their history should not be understood as a mere curiosity within a male-dominated world but rather as a manifestation of the contradictions within Japan's gender system. Rewriting their history involves challenging dominant narratives and recognizing them as a dynamic part of history, rather than as relics of a distant past.

3. Methodological Approach

This paper integrates discourse analysis, comparative analysis, and historiographical critique. Through primary and secondary sources, it reassesses normative history from a gender perspective to reveal how the Onna-bugeisha challenged patriarchal narratives. The goal is to reclaim their role as key figures in the fight for gender equality, debunking the misconception that they were isolated or insignificant cases.

To achieve this, three historical periods were identified to analyze the Onna-bugeisha. Within these periods, primary sources such as the *Azuma Kagami* and *Heike Monogatari* serve as key records, marking pivotal moments in the search for secondary sources that have reinterpreted or focused on them. These original chronicles provide a solid foundation for examining the social and cultural context in which they were written and the events they describe.

Within the study's limitations, it is acknowledged that consulting primary sources posed challenges, as many are hard to access. To reduce bias, various sources were compared, and analysis was conducted carefully in the original language when possible. It is important to note that for figures such as Empress Jingū, whose historical existence and exploits are debated, the focus of this paper is not to verify their factual accuracy but to examine how they have been perceived and represented in historical narratives

4. Rediscovering the Female Heroes of Japan's Past

4.1 Female Figures Who Shaped Japan's Early Era[11]

4.1.1 EMPRESS JINGŪ: DEIFIED IN LIFE

Empress Jingū, who reigned from AD 170 to 260, is recognized as the first Onna-bugeisha and the widow of Emperor Chūai. Her husband received a divine mandate to conquer Silla (Korea), granted by a god through his wife. The emperor, believing the god was deceitful, refused to heed the message. At that moment, Jingū became pregnant with the child destined to rule those lands. After her husband passed away, she chose to undertake the expedition, which succeeded and resulted in the surrender of the ruler of the kingdom of Silla: "Hereupon the King of Silla feared and trembled, and knew not what to do … he took a white flag, and of his own accord rendered submission, tying his hands behind his back with a white rope" (Aston, 1972, p. 230). She then gave birth to the future Emperor Ojin.

However, there are no records of Jingū's rule in Korea, and Japan lacked a writing system until the fourth or fifth century. This absence of documentation casts doubt on the historical accuracy of her exploits. While this suggests a constructed narrative to reinforce national identity, she may represent a composite of multiple historical female rulers. After all, as Aoki (1991) notes, Empress Jingū's presence in Japanese history likely stems from the remnants of a matriarchal society.

"The basis of the Jingū legend may well be the authentic female rulers of ancient Japan who had a priestly role" (Turnbull, 2012, p. 7). We know about them thanks to the Kojiki and Nihon Shoki, which blend early Japanese history with Shinto[12] myths. The line between fantasy and reality is unclear, and this paper does not aim to define it. Regardless of historical accuracy, the mythical figure serves as a precedent for women's ability to hold significant roles in early Japan.

11. Here, this temporal delimitation is understood from the 3rd century to the 13th century.
12. Japanese religion that incorporates the worship of ancestors and nature spirits and a belief in sacred power.

4.1.2 TOMOE GOZEN, THE HEROINE OF THE *HEIKE MONOGATARI*

The most renowned Onna-bugeisha is Tomoe Gozen, "Gozen" being an honorary title. The only record of her existence is found in a passage from the *Heike Monogatari*, a thirteenth-century epic poem regarded as one of the classics of Japanese literature. It narrates the story of the Genpei War, a conflict that showcased the valor of warriors. These passages have been accepted as historical facts and considered exemplary representations of the Japanese warrior code (Butler, 1969).

The passage mentioning her states:

> Tomoe was especially beautiful, with white skin, long hair, and charming features. She was also a remarkably strong archer, and as a swordswoman, she was a warrior worth a thousand, ready to confront a demon or god, mounted or on foot. She handled unbroken horses with superb skill; she rode unscathed down perilous descents. Whenever a battle was imminent, Yoshinaka sent her out as his first captain, equipped with strong armor, an oversized sword, and a mighty bow, and she performed more deeds of valor than any of his other warriors. (The Tale of the Heike, 1988, p. 291)

After Yoshinaka is gravely wounded, he asks Tomoe to leave so he does not die before a woman, reflecting traditional views on honor and gender in battle. However, Tomoe defies societal expectations and stays, seeking one last fight worthy of Yoshinaka's witness, undersocring her determination to give him time to complete *seppuku*,[13] with dignity and honor.

Then:

> Tomoe galloped into their midst, rode up along Moroshige, seized him in a powerful grip, pulled him down against the pommel of her saddle, held him motionless, twisted off his head, and threw it away. Afterward, she discarded the armor and helmet and fled to the eastern provinces. (The Tale of the Heike, 1988, p. 292)

Her story ends there. Some assumptions about her destination include that she became a nun, while others say that she was defeated in battle against Wada Yoshimori, who later took her as his concubine and fathered a son with her.

13. A form of Japanese ritual suicide by disembowelment.

Another unresolved mystery is the relationship between Tomoe and Yoshinaka. Sometimes, she is understood as his assistant, while other times, she is viewed as his concubine and sometimes as his wife, further complicating their bond.

It is impossible to know with certainty, and accounts like her defeat against Yoshimori or her alleged love affair with Yoshinaka may attempt to subdue a woman who refused to be oppressed. Her relationships with men did not define her achievements. Moreover, assuming Yoshinaka was her husband implies Tomoe's disobedience in refusing to leave him alone when injured, contradicting the teachings of a good wife's behavior.

As with Empress Jingū, it is impossible to distinguish between myth and reality. The whereabouts of Tomoe Gozen's grave, if there is one, is still unknown. Tomoe's figure becomes legendary in Onna-bugeisha history—a beautiful warrior ready to face demons or gods.

4.1.3 HANGAKU GOZEN: COURAGE, BEAUTY, AND REBELLION IN THE KAMAKURA ERA

Also known as Itagaku Gozen, a contemporary of Tomoe Gozen. Her story unfolds after the fall of the Taira clan, to which she belonged. Hangaku was the daughter of Jou Sukekuni, an influential clan leader who allied with the Taira. Along with her uncle and nephew, she led the Kenin Rebellion against the Kamakura shogunate in 1201, raising an army in Echigo province and becoming an integral part of their defensive operations at Torisaka Castle.

Beard (1953) notes that Hangaku held a high standing among her people because of her exceptional archery skills, surpassing her father and brothers as marksmen by "shooting a hundred arrows and hitting a hundred times" (p. 72), and she killed countless enemies from a tower above the fortifications. This earned Hangaku recognition for her leadership and bravery during the three-month defense (Nowaki, 2015).

In the *Azuma Kagami*, Hangaku is portrayed with her hair tied up like a boy, shooting arrows from above and killing enemy soldiers one after another. She is only stopped when one of the attackers immobilizes her by shooting her in the thighs. At this point, she is captured and taken to Kamakura as a prisoner at the request of the shogun, who was interested in the warrior woman who had caused him so much trouble. Then, she was presented, entering with dignity and unfazed by all the warlords present, a detail that the *Azuma Kagami* seems to emphasize, along with her beauty.

Perhaps this duality of beauty and courage caught the attention of Yoichi Yoshito, who requested the shogun to grant him Hangaku as his wife "to have a child who would be a brave warrior, loyal to the shogunate" (Azuma Kagami, n.d., author's translation). This made the shogun laugh as he pointed out that while Hangaku was beautiful on the outside, her interior was that of a warrior; nonetheless, he granted her to him. She is then compelled to marry.

After this, tracking her story becomes complicated. The victor achieved his goal: her beauty and recognized skill on the battlefield turned her into a sought-after war trophy. She was stripped of her identity as an Onna-bugeisha and relegated to the role of the enemy's wife. They even took care to prevent her from having the chance to commit ritual suicide. To die as a samurai or live as the enemy's wife was understood that for her, trained in the samurai way, even this option was not available. However, they did not quite succeed, for she is remembered as the legendary Hangaku Gozen in the end.

4.1.4 HŌJŌ MASAKO, THE NUN SHOGUN WHO RULED FROM THE SHADOWS

After his victory in the Genpei War (1180-1185) against the Taira clan, Minamoto Yoritomo established himself as the first shogun of the Kamakura Shogunate. However, his story ends in 1199, when an accident on horseback cost him his life. Faced with the imminent chaos produced by a struggle for power, the figure of Hōjō Masako brings stability and avoids an internal war.

Hōjō Masako was the daughter of Hōjō Tokimasa, the leader of the Hōjō clan, which was related to the Taira clan and thereby connected to the imperial family. She was born in a historical context marked by wars, which accounts for the combat-oriented education she received. This upbringing instilled in both her warrior skills and a keen sense of leadership, crucial for the power dynamics of her era.

It is challenging to recount her life before her relationship with Yoritomo brought her into the public eye; even then, our knowledge of her derives from accounts that depict her as a secondary character. Nevertheless, her inclusion in this study is warranted precisely because of her role in wielding power. While Jones (1997) claims that she fought alongside Yoritomo as his most capable general and was never defeated in battle—an accomplishment that, in theory, would categorize her as an Onna-bugeisha—what is truly remarkable about Hōjō Masako is not her military prowess on the battlefield, but her ability to dominate men through strategic power plays within the shogunate, providing a broader perspective on what it means to be an Onna-

bugeisha—not in the traditional sense of a warrior in combat, but as a figure who leveraged the samurai system to consolidate her authority.

When widowed, Hōjō Masako decides to turn to religion and become a Buddhist nun. Having previously experienced submission to a man, in this case, her father, the decision to become a nun could be a way of guaranteeing reducing the possibility of submitting to a man again. In any case, this does not imply a decrease in her power. Proof of this is the nickname by which she was known, *Ama Shogun* or "Nun Shogun," since everyone knew that she was the one who ruled in the shadows (López-Vera, 2013).

Power was maintained among the Hōjō due to her leadership through a ruling council of family members. For this, she had to strip her son and heir to the title of Shogun, Yoriie, of any power, whose regent was her father, Hōjō Tokimasa. Ultimately, he was forced to abdicate by a group that included his uncle Hōjō Yoshitoki (Masako's brother), with her influence evident in the outcome. Yoriie was later assassinated during his exile. This drastic action highlights her determination to uphold the family's influence and authority, showing her willingness to make tough decisions for political stability and to secure her legacy.

Later, her grandson, Kugyo, the son of Yoriie, jumped over in the line of succession to the Shogun. Masako placed her second son, Sanetomo, who was only twelve years old, instead. Uwayokote Masataka argued that Masako had supplanted the personal authority of her husband after Yoritomo's death, in effect rendering her son, the new shogun Sanetomo, powerless (Werner, 2021). Highlighting, Masako wielded extraordinary authority and influence by bypassing established lines of succession and underscoring her formidable power within the Hōjō clan, as she took it upon herself to shape the future of the shogunate.

Consequently, Tokimasa became the regent of the young shogun Sanetomo, but Masako's influence remained so strong that he sought to impose his own Shogun. He plotted his grandson's assassination, but strong-willed Masako's determination saved her son's life. She rescued him and quickly rallied an opposing force under her brother, who became the shogun's regent (Sansom, 1990, p. 374). In response to her father's uprising, Masako could have taken decisive action to assert control over the political landscape and influencing the fate of her father's chosen shogun. Records from this period are incomplete and sometimes contradictory, but these account highlight her determination to maintain the family's authority.

Within the teachings of the Onna-daigaku, we find the Sanju, which outlines the three figures a woman was expected to obey: her father in her home before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her children after her husband's death (Sugano, 2020, p. 257). However, Hōjō Masako's life and actions challenged these traditional expectations.

Regardless of whether her participation as a general in her husband's campaigns is genuine, Hōjō Masako stands out as Onna-bugeisha by going against one of the central precepts that preached the submission and obedience of women to men. She not only rebelled against her father, but she also cut her son from the succession line. There is no obedience to the father or the son. Faced with insubordination, she acted with an iron fist. The *Azuma Kagami* presents Hōjō Masako as a key authority figure in the Kamakura government, possessing the power to influence decisions and shape political outcomes.

Calvo García explains that, for Confucianism, women's evils could be summarized in five points: disobedience, envy, lies, hatred, and lack of intelligence, hence their inferiority to men (2016, p. 21). The Onna-bugeishas, by placing themselves at the strategic level of their male counterparts, rejected their inferiority to men and lack of intelligence.

4.1.5 HINO TOMIKO, THE MISCHARACTERIZED VILLAIN

Regarding Hino Tomiko, I must make an exception to the criteria for selecting her and her role in this paper because, unlike the other women discussed, no chronicles depict her fighting in battle. Therefore, in the strictest sense, she cannot be considered an Onna-bugeisha. However, as the wife of a shogun, she became part of the warrior class. Tomiko and Hōjō Masako are similar in this regard, as both women overshadowed men and claimed the shogunate's authority.

She was born during the Muromachi period, under the Ashikaga shogunate, about two hundred years after the death of the Ama Shogun. She was the wife of shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa. Although *The Ōnin War* indicates that Tomiko was initially one of his concubines before becoming his wife, most authors, myself included, seem to find this irrelevant, as it does not diminish her perception of as a powerful woman. I would even venture to say that, rather than discrediting her, the possibility of having risen from concubine to wife merely reflects the same ambition that propelled her to achieve her current position. As Varley (1967) himself acknowledges, she "was one of the more strong-willed women in Japanese history."

Tomiko had her aspirations clearly defined, and her priorities were securing the shogun's power through a male heir. However, achieving this proved challenging for her since her first children were daughters. Before Tomiko could bear a son, Yoshimasa adopted his younger brother, Yoshimi, as his son and designated heir. This decision displeased Tomiko, who, despite the setback, never abandoned her ambition for power. Months later, she gave birth to Ashikaga Yoshihisa, which ignited a fierce power struggle between him and Yoshimi. This conflict resulted in a significant division within the Shogunate, fueling intense rivalry. "From what we know of Tomiko's strength of character, we could hardly expect her to have hesitated for even a moment in pressing with the utmost vigor the candidacy of the infant Yoshihisa" (Varley, 1967, p. 127).

In the meantime, the Shogun remained distant, merely observing the struggle. He acted solely as a bystander while she engaged with the courtiers and officials of the Shogunate to secure the appointment of Yoshihisa as heir. Beard (1953) even claims that Tomiko forced her husband to retire and made the child Shogun (p. 79). The conflict over succession fueled a continuous struggle for military dominance, known as the Ōnin War. Ultimately, no clear victor emerged, leading to the Sengoku period.

She declared that "the words of the Shogun's wife rule from heaven to earth," accustomed to exerting her will, and for this, "later verdicts condemned her for humiliating her husband in her attempt to gain all the glory for herself" but "she actually earned the glory, if that was what her successes meant, with her keen political and financial insight" (Beard, 1953, p. 80).

The difference between the Nun Shogun and Hino Tomiko lies in their contrasting approaches to power. While Hōjō Masako governed discreetly behind the scenes through an official regent, utilizing subtle confrontations and internal maneuvers, Hino Tomiko positioned herself in the public eye as an authoritative figure, openly challenging the shogun and imposing her will over his. Her approach was much more visible and direct in her pursuit of power.

For all these reasons, many Japanese consider Hino Tomiko one of Japan's villains. Her hunger for power led to one of the bloodiest civil wars in Japanese history, or at least that is how she is portrayed on most public opinion websites. As Kabeyama (2022) notes, "her obsession with her son's succession and role in the Ōnin War meet the criteria of a villainous woman" (own translation). This image is reinforced by the perception found in the *Chronicle of the Ōnin*, as it states, "Rather than relying on his capable ministers, Yoshi-

masa ruled solely on the desires of politically naive wives and nuns [...] These women lacked an understanding of right and wrong and were unacquainted with public affairs and governance" (Varley, 1967, p. 139).

Was it really like that? Or rather, "Hino Tomiko used her political and financial resources to run the shogunate, which may have been necessary because her husband was not interested in the administration of the state"? (Reider, 2012, p. 67).

4.2 The heroes of Japan's fiercest battles[14]

4.2.1 ŌHŌRI TSURUHIME, "JOAN ARC OF JAPAN"

She was the daughter of Ōhōri Yasumochi, the head priest of the Ōyamazumi Shrine on the island of Ōmishima. When she was eight, a conflict erupted between the Ōuchi and Kōno clans, controlling the Ōyamatsumi Temple. During this conflict, her two brothers were assassinated, and eight years later, her father succumbed to an illness, leaving her as the sole heir to the position of chief priest. Turnbull stated that she had been trained in martial arts since childhood (2012, p. 38).

When Ōuchi sought to gain control of the island, Ōhōri took charge of the defense at just sixteen. Facing formidable opposition, she demonstrated remarkable leadership and courage during the crisis. This decisive action marked her rise to a position of authority and showed her dedication to preserving her family's legacy.

Her story deepens when she claims to embody Mishima Myojin, the guardian *kami*[15] of Ōmishima Island. Her dedication to her people shone through in her performance against the Ōuchi clan's troops: loyalty and bravery. Ready to sacrifice her life on the battlefield and honor the ideals of the Onna-bugeisha, she led with success and quickly pushed the Ōuchi back.

Ōhōri once again took it upon herself to lead the defense when the Ōuchi clan returned four months later. On this occasion, Obara Nakatsukasa, the commander of the Ōuchi, "was surprised by the unexpected attack and the fact that a woman was leading it" (Turnbull, 2012, p. 38). She challenged him to a duel, showing her courage despite his mockery. Obara dismissed her

14. This temporal delimitation encompasses the 16th century of the Sengoku period to the 19th century, marking the end of the Edo period.
15. The deities, divinities, spirits, phenomena, or "holy powers" that are venerated in the religion of Shinto are known as *kami*.

bravery with scorn, but his words were nothing compared to the sword she drove through him in response.

She continued to lead the resistance against Ōuchi attacks. Allegedly, in her final battle, she took her own life after her fiancé was killed, a tragic ending that highlights the personal sacrifices often faced by women in wartime. However, there are no solid records to verify this account. The assumptions mirror the pattern seen in the case of Tomoe Gozen and Hangaku Gozen, were, ultimately, the formidable warrior falls, one way or another, because of a man. This tragic narrative frequently overshadows the legacies of these powerful women.

4.2.2 TACHIBANA GINCHIYO: UPHOLDING THE SPIRIT OF HER LINEAGE

During the Sengoku period, the Shimazu clan launched an aggressive expansionist campaign in Kyushu, the third-largest island in Japan. The Shimazu clan managed to easily defeat powerful rival clans, which placed the Ōtomo clan, the clan to which the Tachibana family served, in danger.

Ginchiyo was born into a samurai family and received the corresponding education. Her father was Tachibana Dōsetsu, who, as the only daughter, named her the heir to the headship of the Tachibana clan after his death, refusing suggestions to adopt a son to pass on the title. His wishes were respected, and Ginchiyo became the lord of the Tachibana clan. Later, Ginchiyo married Tachibana Muneshige, transferring the clan's leadership to him.

Around 1580, Dōsetsu died in the Battle of Kitano while he was ill. The following year, the Shimazu launched an offensive against Tachibana Castle, a key stronghold resistant to the invasion in the northern region. Ginchiyo defended the castle with a determination to die. She was approximately 13 to 18 years old. It is said that she supervised the resistance, ordered the mobilization of troops, and prepared the fortress for the siege. However, she was eventually forced to flee, and Tachibana Castle fell into the hands of Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Ginchiyo and her husband decided to ally with Hideyoshi against the Shimazu clan.

Later, her husband took a concubine because she had been unable to bear children. This, along with rumors of ongoing confrontations over his policies, led Ginchiyo to divorce Muneshige, and, like Hōjō Masako, she became a Buddhist nun and retired.

After Toyotomi Hideyoshi's death, the power of the Toyotomi clan declined, and Japan would go to war again. According to Turnbull (2012), in

1600, during the Battle of Sekigahara, the Tachibana clan allied itself against Ieyasu Tokugawa. When Tokugawa's forces advanced upon Yanagawa Castle, in surprising loyalty to her ex-husband, Ginchiyo organized her fellow nuns in armed resistance against the advancing army (p. 50). This will explain why, after Ginchiyo's death, Mushinage returns to Yanagawa and makes a shrine in her honor.

The story of Ginchiyo is fascinating because it becomes unique as she inherits the title directly from her father without him seeking an alternative successor. In some way, this signifies his trust in her to carry out the required tasks. Ginchiyo demonstrated bravery, courage, and loyalty after supporting her ex-husband in the defense of Yanagawa Castle. These were all values that a samurai, an Onna-bugeisha, was supposed to demonstrate, and she did so very well.

4.2.3 NAKANO TAKEKO AND THE JŌSHIGUN, THE WOMEN WARRIORS OF THE AIZU BATTLE

The sighting of the *kurofune*[16] and the arrival of Commodore Perry marked a turning point in Japanese history. They were accompanied by a period of instability due to the way they had to respond. Being isolated[17] from the world was no longer an option. Movements began to emerge then against and in favor of this opening of Japan to the world.

These movements came to be known as pro-Tennō or pro-Shogun movements. The samurai class's role in restoring the Tennō to power after the Shogun signed a treaty creating inequality between Japan and the United States must be highlighted. The Boshin Civil War and the Battle of Aizu occurred in this context.

This battle features the participation of exceptional Onna-bugeisha, including Nakano Takeko and the women of her defense unit, the Jōshigun, the independent women's army led by her. Nakano stood ready to defend Aizu-Wakamatsu Castle alongside a group of independent female fighters against Imperial troops. "The name Jōshigun was later assigned to the platoon of up to thirty samurai women who fought alongside the men in the defense of Aizu-Wakamatsu Castle when the enemy broke in" (Turnbull, 2008). They

16. Black ships in Japanese. It is the name by which the Western vessels that arrived in Japan were known, named after the smoke they gave off.
17. Remember that Japan had constant engagement with some of its neighbors, like the Chinese.

met the Satsuma and Chōshū soldiers with their naginata and swords, and they confronted the enemies with their rifles.

Then, he describes that when the imperial troops realized that they were facing women, they shouted to take them alive. However, holding their fire provided an advantage for the women, who quickly were upon them. Nakano Takeko managed to take the lives of around six men before she was killed. Some versions of the story describe how Nakano asked her sister to cut off her head to prevent it from becoming a trophy; in other versions, the sister is willing to do it without Takeko's request.

For most authors, the history of the Onna-bugeishas concludes with Nakano Takeko's death. However, three additional figures need to be examined before the fighting spirit of women can be regarded as complete.

4.3 Rising from the ashes and shaping Japan's New Era

4.3.1 YAMAKAWA FUTABA: FROM WARRIOR TO EDUCATOR

As mentioned above, the Boshin War period allowed many women to participate in the conflict. Nakano Takeko and the Jōshigun were not the only Onna-bugeisha participating in the Aizu conflict.

Among the identifiable figures in the defense of Aizu-Wakamatsu Castle is Yamakawa Futaba, who was raised in the warrior way as the daughter of Naoe Yamakawa, a samurai of the Aizu clan. When the castle's defenses were breached, she survived the siege and fled to safety.

From the little that is known about her life, we know that Yamakawa later decided to dedicate herself to education by going to work at the Tokyo Women's Normal School, founded in 1875, an institution specializing in the development of female faculties, known as an educational institution holding the highest standard in women's education at the time. Nowadays, it is Ochanomizu University. Her commitment to advancing and developing education for women earned her the title of jugoi.[18]

4.3.2 YAMAMOTO YAEKO, A WARRIOR OF AIZU AND VISIONARY BEYOND HER TIME

Yamamoto Yaeko, also known as Yamamoto Yae or Niijima Yae, is one of the notable Onna-bugeisha of her time. Born into a samurai family in Aizu, she

18. Junior grade of the fifth Court rank.

shared a similar fate with the previous two women featured, as her father was killed during the defense of Aizu-Wakamatsu Castle.

According to Wright, "Yaeko was competent with modern rifles as well as naginata and began participating in night raids armed with a Spencer rifle and samurai swords" (2001). She served with the classic naginata but also with modern rifles, something unusual in warrior women of the time since this weapon was new to Japanese society.

Given the option to flee before tensions erupted, Yamamoto Yaeko chose to stay and fight, like most female warriors of the Battle of Aizu. She played a dual role, serving as a defensive force on the battlefield and tending to the wounded. Showing the multifaceted contributions of women in wartime.

Eventually, Aizu-Wakamatsu Castle fell to the Meiji Imperial forces, forcing Yamamoto Yaeko into hiding. Once the situation calmed, she reemerged in Kyoto, looking for her brother. With his help, she found a job at a girl's school, where she taught young girls essential skills like writing and reading. This new role allowed her to continue making a difference in the lives of others despite the challenges she had faced.

In this period, she meets Joseph Hardy Niijima, a Christian reverend captivated by Yamamoto Yaeko's agile mind. Niijima saw her as a "woman who thinks and acts for herself without being hindered by common sense" (Pearl, 2018). Soon after they married, Yaeko did not care about being judged for converting to Christianity and marrying a Christian born of samurai origin, even when it cost Yaeko her job.

Although I did not delve into the romantic relationships of past Onnabugeishas, the connection between Yamamoto Yaeko and Niijima is significant because it contributes to the image I want to portray of her. Her husband's upbringing in the United States shaped their relationship, and his progressive views on women's rights fostered a bond based on mutual respect rather than her submission. In a society accustomed to traditional roles, this dynamic led many to label her as a bad wife and, by extension, an evil woman.

However, these societal judgments did not stop her from pursuing her aspirations and forging her path. Her husband founded Doshisha English School, now Doshisha University. Since it only allowed boys, Yaeko took it upon herself to find its counterpart, Doshisha Girl's School, now Doshisha Women's College of Liberal Arts.

When most of her colleagues turned against her after her husband's death, Yaeko decided not to wear herself out and focus her fighting spirit elsewhere.

The start of the Sino-Japanese War and later the Russo-Japanese War gave her the space she needed; her experience in the battle of Aizu allowed her to lead a team of nurses.

Her nontraditional ways led her to the Atsushi Women's Nursing Association, where she combated barriers nurses face in the medical field, such as discrimination from their male colleagues (Pearl, 2018). She was awarded the Order of the Precious Crown[19] twice for her struggle.

With her death in 1932, the era of the Onna-bugeisha ended.

5. Onna-bugeishas' enduring influence

Even if the history of these powerful women may fade, their names cannot be overlooked. Museums and memorials have been created to honor some of them, though they pale compared to their male counterparts, the samurai. Furthermore, as if that were not enough, many names would remain lost, and many stories would be forgotten.

Among the Onna-bugeisha, the one with the most commemorations in her name is Tomoe Gozen, celebrated at the Jidai Matsuri (Festival of the Ages), one of Japan's three most significant festivals honoring historical figures. Her figure has also inspired a historical fantasy trilogy and a character in the Type-Moon video game franchise bearing her name. Likewise, she appears in various silk paintings and sculptures displayed in multiple museums across Japan. A notable sculpture of Tomoe alongside Yoshinaka welcomes visitors to the Yoshinaka Museum.

On the other hand, the tale of Hangaku Gozen has been showcased at the National Theatre through a bunraku play called *Wada Kassen Onna Maizuru*, or The Battle of Wada and the Dancing Female Crane. The play emphasizes her strong character and bravery while taking creative liberties to extend her story beyond the conclusion of the *Azuma Kagami*. Nevertheless, it maintains her essence by featuring scenes where she continues confronting her opponents with the same courage.

Meanwhile, Hōjō Masako has been depicted in several tv shows often portrayed as a woman of great intelligence and determination, such as *Kusa Moeru* or *the 13 Lords of the Shogun* and has several silk paintings of her. Ki-

19. An order established by the Meiji Emperor and mostly reserved for female recipients, since the Order of the Rising Sun at that time was an Order for men.

kuchi Yosai painted the best-known paintings from the nineteenth century. In the case of Hino Tomiko, in 1994, the NHK network produced a drama about her called *Hana no Ran*. However, it is pretty biased, as it reinforces her image as an ambitious and, to some extent, manipulative figure.

Ōhōri Tsuruhime's armor remains on display at the Oyamazumi Shrine. Likewise, there are two statues of her in the precincts. On the other hand, the impact of Tachibana Ginchiyo's legacy endures through Ryosei-ji Temple in Yanagawa, Fukuoka Prefecture, named after her posthumous Buddhist title. Additionally, her tomb in Haraaka village remains a site of veneration, known as *Botamochi-san*.

Finally, the Aizu Festival recreates the world of the samurai during the battle of Aizu-Wakamatsu Castle. However, the festival's highlight is the Aizu Hanko Gyoretsu, which shows a procession of the lords from the Aizu Domain. Nakano Takeko's fight, the Jōshigun, Yamakawa Futaba, and Yamamoto Yaeko are forgotten.

Is this how the merits of Onna-bugeishas are exalted? Did their fights only earn them a mention in a parade? A small sculpture of an unidentified female warrior. The Onna-bugeishas were creating a path in Japanese women's participation history, waiting for the moment to bring them out of the shadows. The transition seen by Yamakawa Futaba and Yamamoto Yaeko is proof of this.

6. Conclusions

Even though the last Onna-bugeisha has passed away her fighting spirit remains. The figures of Yamakawa Futaba and, primarily, Yamamoto Yaeko represent a shift in the discourse surrounding the history and essence of Onna-bugeisha. Yamaga Soko, a well-known samurai philosopher of the seventeenth century, questioned the role of the samurai in a society that had moved away from war. According to Friday and Seki (1997), he concluded that warriors served a greater purpose: to exemplify virtue and morality and function as national symbols. This is exactly what these women achieved. They indeed became national symbols, embodying that virtue through their legacy.

In a changing world, where the process of opening Japan to the world is reforming it, the presentation of the conflicts that the Onna-bugeishas faced has changed. These women lay the foundations of the women's struggle, which is constantly evolving.

Each woman's social context differed; this illustrates their varied involvement in warfare, politics, and social life. The historical context also had an impact; the Sengoku era's warfare did not provide the same opportunities as the transition from the Battle of Aizu to the Meiji era, which enabled Nakano Takeko and Yamamoto Yaeko to transition from warriors to roles in education.

What they did have in common was a struggle against their time's patriarchal structure and social conventions. They navigated and questioned the power structures of their era, whether on the battlefield or in the political institutions. Yamamoto Yaeko, for example, moved from being a warrior in the Battle of Aizu to a defender of women's rights, becoming an agent of change in another area of Japanese society.

The figure of the Onna-bugeisha challenged the traditions of their culture. They challenged the conception of the weak woman and found the ideal space to fight it, to show themselves worthy.

There is no doubt that the lack of information in this regard represents a barrier to disseminating their story and its impacts. Nevertheless, this is not a justification for them to be overlooked. To talk about samurai, it is necessary to speak of Onna-bugeishas. For many authors, it is more comfortable not to recognize them. Some choose to villainize them, as we saw with Hino Tomiko and, to a lesser extent, Hōjō Masako. In an essay titled "Was Hino Tomiko a villainous woman?" which specifically addresses this perspective on both Masako and Tomiko; the conclusion is that the only shared reason for their unfair labeling is that they were women of wealth, power, and seemingly personal ambitions that, in reality, served the nation's interests.

Recognizing these extraordinary women is a constant struggle in a society that often seems intent on forgetting them. When discussing the Onna-bugeishas, only two or three are typically highlighted (Tomoe Gozen as an example), portrayed as isolated cases that vanished as spontaneously as they emerged. However, this narrative overlooks the reality: many more names and stories demonstrate that these women were not alone in their experiences. Their collective presence reveals a pattern of resistance against the patriarchal model and signifies an evolution in the discourse surrounding the challenge to the oppressive norms they faced.

The Onna-bugeishas, then, played an especially key role in channeling the fighting spirit in Japanese women. They gave the guidelines for its development.

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