Special Lecture
A Character of Japan’s Medieval Historical Documents Comparing with Other East Asian Countries

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Summary

The civilization of Japan developed based on an overwhelming influence of China. Historical accounts also use Chinese kanji characters, and they have been made by following the styles cultivated in Greater China. However, the six ancient Japanese historical collections that are called “authentic history” in Japan were of the style of authentic records that are in chronological order, and in the end they were not completed as biographical history books and ended up being discontinued in 887. This is in contrast with Korea, which completed the biography “The History of Goryeo” and had “The Korea Dynasties Fact Record,” which continued to the beginning of the modern era. However, the samurai government that emerged at the end of the 12th century produced “Azuma Kagami” and “Tokugawa Jikki,” which followed the examples of the six ancient Japanese historical collections and China’s authentic records.

After discontinuation of the six ancient Japanese historical collections, the diaries of aristocrats functioned as a national memory system. As opposed to China and Korea, which had sound centralized bureaucracy systems, the actual situation of the medieval state of Japan was that an aggregation of “families” that divided the duties of national functions was being formed, and it was “families” that handled the accumulation and succession of national information. The main medieval historical materials were types of documents guaranteeing rights that were conveyed to “families” and that supported their existence and continuation. Compared with China and Korea, that form of survival is remarkably decentralized and unsystematic, but it has an abundance of primary sources that retain the situation at the time of formation.

The samurai government had recording organizations and document forms that imitated previous nations, but on the other hand there were things that should be looked at in the independent document architecture that used a master-servant system as an authority-formation principle and the legal historical materials that sublimated the customs of samurai society. In addition, the influence of Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines (temples and shrines) comprised a part of government power by playing a specific religious role, and as organizations they conveyed historical materials related to religious ceremonies, while on the other hand, as owners of large plots of land who represented the Middle Ages they possessed many historical materials related to manors.
Biography

1949  Born in Osaka City
1972  BA, Faculty of Letters, the University of Tokyo
1974  MA, Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology, the University of Tokyo
1974  Joined Historiographical Institute, the University of Tokyo
1991  Transferred to the Faculty of Letters of Tokyo University
1993  Ph.D. in Literature, the University of Tokyo
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“A Character of Japan’s Medieval Historical Documents Comparing with Other East Asian Countries”

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1. Japan’s “Authentic History”

The civilization of Japan developed under the overwhelming influence of China. When the Japanese began to record their own history in words, they used Chinese characters—the first character encountered by the Japanese—as their means of expression, and wrote in a style of historical description developed over many years in Greater China. In this style, a chronological jitsuroku 実録, or “authentic record,” is first written for each emperor based primarily on records of the emperor’s words and actions, as well as on records kept by government agencies. The next generation of the dynasty then refers to the jitsuroku of previous emperors to write a seishi 正史, or “authentic history,” in a biographic-thematic style.

This style of historical account was followed faithfully in Korea and used through early modern times, starting with the basic annals of Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla kingdoms, which are included in the Samguk Sagi 三国史記 (History of the Three Kingdoms), and continuing on to the Goryeosa 高麗史, Goryeosa Jeolyo 高麗史簡要 (Essentials of the History of the Goryeo Dynasty), and Joseon Wangjo Sillok 朝鮮王朝実録 (Annals of the Joseon Dynasty). The Joseon Wangjo Sillok in particular is included in the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Memory of the World Register not only because it seamlessly covers over 500 years of Joseon Dynasty history, but also because it is one of the world’s most extensive historical records, surpassing even China’s chronological records in detail and accuracy.

Both China and Korea had strong, centralized state structures and supporting bureaucratic systems throughout the pre-modern era. Many of the historical materials that these structures and systems generated were compilations, which came to have a remarkably continuous and systematic character. However, given the alterations that took place during the process of compilation, the more complete forms of history books those historical materials have, the more they need to be criticized from a historian’s perspective.

Let’s look at an example from the Goryeosa, a well-organized authentic history. A look at the chronological accounts in the sega 世家—which are the equivalent of běnjì 本紀, or basic annals, in official Chinese histories—reveals that the period between 1374 (the 23rd year of the reign of Gongmin-wang) and 1389 (the first year of the reign of Gongyang-wang) is not covered. This period is instead described in the yǒlchòn 列伝, or biography, of Shin Wu, at the end of the entire volume. Why was the volume compiled in such an odd manner?

Yi Seong-gye dethroned Gongmin-wang’s grandchild Shin Chang in 1388 and backed Gongyang-wang, who belonged to a collateral branch of the royal lineage. Then in 1392, after dismissing Gongyang-wang on grounds of his lack of virtue, Yi ascended to the throne himself.
This was how the Joseon Dynasty was established. In order to avoid criticism for his actions, Yi spread a rumor that Shin Chang’s father Shin Wu was not Gongmin-wang’s own son, but instead was an illegitimate son of the politically-active monk Shin Don, who had the king’s trust (refer to the family tree below). Although the truth remains uncertain, the Goryeo’s, which was compiled after the establishment of the Joseon Dynasty, of course supported Yi’s allegation. As a result, the chronology of the two reigns of Shin Wu and Shin Chang was placed after the chapter describing Shin Don’s treason.

This type of ideological manipulation in compilation resulted in adding an attribute which is troubling as historical materials to the biography of Shin Wu. Furthermore, in the sega, in principle each article includes day, month, and year, while the yŏlchŏn is written under a policy to give information of month and year only. As a result, if I take an example from my area of research, articles concerning the medieval Japanese pirates known as wako 倭寇 may appear ten or more times in a single month in the most frequent case, yet the day of the month is not given.

Several major differences exist between Japan’s authentic history, the Rikkokushi 六国史, a collection of six chronicles which includes the Nihon Shoki 日本書紀 (The Chronicles of Japan), and China’s authentic history including the Shih-chi 史記 and Kanjo 漢書, which were used as models for Rikkokushi. (1) The first difference is that in the Shih-chi, Huang-di is described from the start as the child of a human being, but in the Nihon Shoki the appearance of Emperor Jimmu is depicted as a seamless continuation of events stretching back to time immemorial. (2) The second is that the positions and specific duties required for the creation of the kikyochu 起居注, or record of the Emperor’s words and actions, were not stipulated in Japan’s statutes (ritsuryo 律令). Rather, the duties of naiki 内記 in the Ministry of Central Affairs, which is equivalent to China’s kikyoro 起居郎, are described in abstract terms as “creating imperial edicts and recording all matters relating to the Imperial Palace.” (3) The third major difference is that the Rikkokushi are chronological histories with sections in which China’s histories and biographies inserted midway through.

The first and second points I have just described indicate that while the Japanese emperor has strongly religious characteristics, he is not positioned as the central actor in national governance.
The third point is closely related to the fact that historical accounts compiled by the national government using the reigns of emperors as a means of marking off time end with the account for 887. This change was caused by the decline of the political system based on the *ritsuryo* codes. Maintaining the system of compiling national histories became impossible, and the dynasty itself having continued to exist without a formal regime change, an authentic history of the nation under the *ritsuryo* codes was never compiled in Japan, like in the case of Korea’s *Goryeosa*.

After the completion of the *Rikkokushi*, only simple chronicles written by aristocrats were created under the Imperial Court in Kyoto, such as the *Nihon Kiryaku* 本朝紀略, *Honcho Seiki* 本朝世紀, and *Hyakurensho* 百錬抄. National histories in the Chinese style were revived after the Meiji Restoration\(^3\), when the Imperial Household Ministry (renamed the Imperial Household Agency after the war) compiled the *Komei Tennoki* 孝明天皇紀, *Meiji Tennoki* 明治天皇紀, *Taisho Tennno Jitsuroku* 大正天皇実録, and *Showa Tennno Jitsuroku* 昭和天皇実録 (The Annals of Emperors Komei, Meiji, Taisho and Showa, in the modern and present ages).

However, during the medieval period, samurai opposing the Imperial Court established a *shogunate* in Kamakura, and this *shogunate* compiled historical accounts of the period through the sixth shogun Munetaka in the *Azuma Kagami* 吾妻鏡 (year of completion unclear). The style of these accounts was modeled on the *Rikkokushi*, and, by extension, on China’s national histories. The Edo shogunate also used a similar style when compiling the history of the period through the tenth Shogun Ieharu in the *Tokugawa Jikki* 徳川実紀 (completed in 1846),\(^4\) and the history of the Muromachi shogunate in the *Nochikagami* 後鑑 (completed in 1853). However, these accounts were not accepted as authentic histories following in the line of the *Rikkokushi*, because there is a dominant theory that only the authority of the Emperor could be the basis of a legitimate nation, and the character of shogunate as a national government was paid scant attention.

### 2. From National History to Diaries

After the *Rikkokushi* ended in the late ninth century, the diaries of individual aristocrats took on the role of preserving memories for the purpose of national control. The bureaucratic system stipulated in the *ritsuryo* codes became a mere facade, and in actuality the nation became an aggregation of “families” that divided the various functions of the nation amongst themselves. The authors of the diaries included a wide diversity of people, from the Emperor and upper-class aristocrats such as regents, to middle- and lower-class aristocrats engaged in more practical work, but in all cases the family was the foundation of their existence. Diaries were passed on through the family to children and grandchildren, and in this way information pertaining to the nation was accumulated and inherited.\(^5\) For example, the *Mido Kanpakuki* 御堂関白記, the diary of the archetypal aristocrat of Heian period (794 - 1185), Fujiwara no Michinaga (996 - 1027), was passed on in its original handwritten form to the Konoe family, who were descendants of Michinaga, and today it is registered in UNESCO’s Memory of the World.

Both China and Korea have abundant historical materials passed down through impersonal national mechanisms separate from the “family”, such as China’s Archives and Korea’s National
Institute of Korean History and the Kyujanggak royal library, but in Japan such historical materials are extremely scarce. Almost all the historical materials related to the Imperial Family preserved in the Imperial Household Agency’s Archives and Mausolea Department were stored and passed down by families such as the Imperial Family, court nobles, and regent families. By contrast, the historical materials passed down by the Edo Shogunate such as a collection of the Momijiyama Bunko, currently held by the National Archives of Japan, are more characterized as the materials on a national mechanism rather than the materials on shoguns’ families.

In China and Korea too, the “family” was the original foundation unit of society. However, the features of the historical materials passed down by those families differ considerably from those of Japan. In contrast to the national framework that existed in Japan after the medieval period, both China and Korea had centralized state organs and supporting bureaucratic organizations that towered over society throughout the pre-modern era. For individuals and families alike, social status was assured by occupying an appropriate position in the bureaucratic structure, or by the historical memory of an ancestor occupying such a position in the past.

Given these circumstances, the examination for becoming an upper-level bureaucrat, called 科挙, had enormous social significance. Success or failure as well as scores on the 科挙 greatly influenced not only the career advancement of the individual taking the test but also the status of the family that raised him and, by extension, that of his local community. Accordingly, the family historical materials left behind include not only the items related to the examinations such as educational books, reference documents, score reports, excerpted writings, and examination papers, but also the items related to the knowledge on four elegant pastimes of harp, Chinese chess, calligraphy, and painting—in which was deemed necessary for a 科挙 government official.

In contrast, the most important condition for acceding to a high-ranking official position in Japan was the status of one’s family (the on’i-no-sei 隠位の制 system), while “countermeasures” equivalent to the 科挙 were nothing more than something extremely trivialized. As the centralized state apparatus lost its substance and the national government’s function of guaranteeing rights weakened, the key to supporting each family’s existence and continuity became the various documents guaranteeing rights, which were passed down from generation to generation through blood lines (including fictitious forms). These consisted primarily of documents including rights to land, or domains, and were handed down with great care even through times of war.

As a result, the primary historical materials of medieval Japan are family-related documents, and compared to historical materials in China and Korea, they are remarkably decentralized and unsystematic. On the other hand, a great number of documents remain in the same state as when they were written (although of course many of these are handwritten copies). Such an abundance of primary sources is believed to exist in only one or two places in the world, a fact to which the previously-mentioned inclusion of the Mido Kanpakuki in the Memory of the World registry attests.
3. The Culture of Anthologies in Japan

Anthologies of writing by individuals comprise a good portion of the historical materials of China and Korea. In contrast to history books compiled by the national government, these anthologies provide us with information that moved from individual to society. State organs in China and Korea included both civilian officials and military officers, but civil officials traditionally held the overwhelmingly superior positions. The texts and poems that these officials wrote over their lifetimes were considered proof that they possessed abilities appropriate to the social classes from which government officials were drawn, such as the shidaibu 士大夫 or yanban 両班 classes. Many of these works were therefore organized and compiled into countless anthologies by disciples and descendants.

In addition, anthologies of writing or sayings by Buddhist monks, often called analects, were frequently created in relation to temple events, but their style and manner of classification closely resemble laypeople’s anthologies. This is because members at the upper level of temple society belonged to essentially the same social class as that which produced most government officials. The similarities are particularly striking in the poems—called geju 偈頌 in the case of monks—that were esteemed as a sign of cultivation, and in the biographical sketches on people’s conduct, chronological records, or pagoda inscriptions.

In Japan, pursuant to the rise of Chinese studies in the Heian Period, anthologies of writings by prominent government officials such as Sugawara no Michizane, Shimada no Tadaomi, Miyako no Yoshika, and Ki no Haseo were compiled. However, as the central cultural product of aristocrat society shifted from Chinese poems to waka 和歌 poetry, Japan’s indigenous literature, anthologies emphasizing political and philosophical content went out of fashion. In their place, two major genres of anthology were established that focused exclusively on waka poetry: chokusenshu 勅撰集, compiled by the government, and kashu 家集, collected work of individual poets. The culture of anthologies was revived in Edo period due to the flourishing of Confucianism, and many collections of writings by Confucian scholars were created.

Beginning in the middle of the thirteenth century and due in part to policy guidance from the Hojo clan, which held the true power of the Kamakura shogunate, an increasing number of people moved back and forth between Japanese and Chinese Zen Buddhism. A network of Zen Buddhist temples was established in Kamakura and Kyoto based on the Chinese model and it was called the Gozan 五山. Chinese habits of daily life and culture were greatly admired at the Gozan temples, and as a part of this trend, disciples compiled anthologies or analects of work by their teachers. This genre of compilations is called “Gozan literature,” and it can be said that the genre reflects the anthology culture that existed in China during the same era, in an “unchanged” manner.

Numerous analects of China’s prominent Zen monks were brought to Japan and used as models to create analects of both Chinese monks living in Japan and Japanese monks. Many Japanese monks also traveled to China and knocked to the gates of eminent monks there. Japan’s analects emerged from the blending of Chinese and Japanese Zen Buddhist cultures, and they resemble each other so closely that on the surface they cannot be differentiated.
In the background of these developments lies the active coming and going of private-sector trading ships during the Nansong through Yuan Dynasties. However, as the Ming Dynasty strengthened national control over this trade, Chinese monks ceased their travel to Japan, and travel by Japanese monks to China was limited to envoys in the nation’s name. Except during the early fifteenth century, these official diplomatic delegations took place approximately once every ten years, and the influence of China’s Buddhist society therefore diminished greatly in comparison with previous generations.

As a result, an increasing number of apprentice training schools in the Zen Buddhist tradition welcomed chief priests only from specific Buddhist lineages. Rather than training at the main temple, it became preferred that masters and pupils lived together at sub-temples affiliated with the main temples. The pattern, we might say, resembled that of Japan’s family-based medieval society.

4. Japan’s Medieval Society and Historical Materials

a. The Shogunates: Military Power that Shaped the Nation

The shogunate established in the end of the twelfth century with the samurai class at its base had a unique record-keeping system, and servants are thought to have kept diaries that became the materials for the Azuma Kagami. However, only traces remain from the Kamakura Period, and their quality and quantity cannot be compared with the diaries of aristocrats. At the end of the medieval era, variety of diaries by shogunate bureaucrats, feudal lords, and their retainers were created, and they conveyed information about the shogunate and provincial society.

Among the historical materials left by the shogunate, the most outstanding are their statute books. The Imperial Court’s stance toward the law never went beyond complying with statutes, and laws and ordinances (kyakushiki 格式) were compiled in the beginning of the Heian Period only to supplement the ritsuryo system. During the Heian to Kamakura period, a number of reference documents were compiled for legal professionals and several independent laws also emerged under the shinsei 新制, or new system, but a unified legal code was not created.

In contrast, the Kamakura shogunate established a judicial system that aimed to arbitrate disputes based on samurai concepts of justice, and which developed under the administration of the Hojo clan, to a degree extraordinary even in the pre-modern era. The Goseibai Shikimoku 御成敗式目, formulated in 1232, crystallized this system into a legal code. This law had a great influence not only to other laws of the Kamakura and Muromachi shogunates and the family codes of Sengoku-era daimyo 大名 (feudal lords), but even to the laws of the Edo shogunate. Many collections of individual laws, which were enacted from time to time for political reasons, were handed down from the Kamakura period, such as the Shinpen Tsuika 新編追加 and Shinshikimoku 新式目. Although fewer in number, similar volumes from the Muromachi shogunate were left as well, such as the Kenmuirai Tsuika 建武以来追加. Under the Muromachi shogunate, judicial precedents from cases heard by the Imperial Council at the Muromachi Palace were also compiled in a collection of documents called the Hikitsuke 引付.
In a certain sense the shogunate was a newly arrived family that made inroads into government power, and therefore it adopted the broad outlines of aristocrat society's document system. However, when the shogunate grew to surpass the Imperial Court in actual power, a new system that exceeded the boundaries of the older conventions was developed. The written orders called *gechijo* 下知状 are an excellent example. Rather than being given to individuals under direct personal control, they were given to parties subject to government or administrative action, and in particular were the preferred format for written court decisions (*saikyojo* 裁許状, or sanction letters) and certificates to pass through checkpoints (*kasho* 過書).

In addition, within samurai society, which placed the master-servant relationship at the base of power structures and specialized in military affairs, various document formats were developed in relation to the master-servant relationship, war, and military service. Constables called *shugo* 守護 and the samurais they oversaw, together implemented military affairs and governance in the provinces under the shogun's direction. They involved in enforcement of verdicts regarding land control with legal sanctions, which was called the *shitaji-jungyo* 下地遵行 and many historical documents on the *shitaji-jungyo* were left.

**b. Temples and Shrines: The Religious Function of the Medieval State**

During Japan’s medieval period, Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines existed in parallel to the Imperial Court and shogunate, with their own organizational structures and logic. Specific religious roles required by the nation were assigned to the larger temples and shrines, and the majority of historical materials passed down at temples and shrines were related to the performance of prayers, memorial services, rituals, Buddhist teachings, funeral rites, and similar activities. Diaries that served as public record-keeping systems also existed. Among Shinto shrines, Kasuga Shrine in Nara and Kitano Shrine and Gion Shrine in Kyoto have extensive diaries of this sort. Many precious historical materials remain at Buddhist temples, particularly among diaries from the late medieval period, and these documents provide information not only about the inner workings of the temples but also about society in general. In contrast to the diaries of aristocrats, the outstanding religious diaries were written and preserved not by individuals but rather by organizations. Multiple people wrote entries in turn, and in the case of the records called *hikitsuke* 引付, created by the monks at Toji Temple in Kyoto, the writer was chosen by the yearly elections.

Temples and shrines were guaranteed ownership of manors and other property, which provided the financial resources they needed to carry out their functions, and in this sense they were not very different from the secular owners of large estates. It was in fact the temples and shrines were the medieval era’s iconic landowners. Many of the historical materials related to manors, which comprised the medieval era’s fundamental system for owning large plots of, have been passed down by shrines and, above all, by Buddhist temples. Those materials include an abundance of legal documents pertaining to the battles each level of society fought in relation to the manors for rights over land, and provide us with a vivid image of medieval society.

Manors were a mechanism for controlling the common people through land ownership. The
substance of positions such as manor manager and village headman was nothing more or less than control over the rights to land and the profits it generated. The account books related to manorial control were essentially the land ledgers, and while they clearly list information such as the location, size, and harvest from the land, they lack even the most basic data about people, such as the numbers of manor residents. Figures for the total population of Japan, it goes without saying, remain unknown.

In contrast, at the end of the Shizū bênjī zhi yuán 28 (1291) in the Yuanshi (History of Yuan), China’s Ministry of Revenue reported “the number of households in the world” as 1,999,444 households in the interior, 11,430,878 households in Janfai and Szechuan, for a total of 59,848,964 people in households, and 429,118 drifters. The accuracy of these statistics aside, the existence of such records is incredible to anyone familiar with Japan’s historical materials.

c. The Uprisings and the Sengoku Daimyo: Prerequisite of Unified Power in the Early Modern Era

At the end of the medieval period, the unifying force of central powers such as the shogunate and the Imperial Court declined. As a result local communities moved away from national guarantees of rights and began to form independent legal worlds. The bearers of public power expanded to include members of local society and the lower classes, and people who had previously engaged only passively with documents and records began to emerge as the central actors in creating and conveying them. For example, in the course of controlling common property, fighting with outsiders, and regulating themselves, the village communities called so 惣 came to pass down documents guaranteeing their rights. Another example is that of the local samurai associations called to 党, in which samurais joined together on the basis of shared interests, became a law-making body, and developed their own style of documents.

The latter half of the medieval era was a period during which this type of cross-cutting political relationship between members of the same class—whether those in control or those being controlled—emerged in many different places. The basic principle underlying these links was that of “working together with a single mind,” or in other words, of overcoming individual interests and to bring everyone together with a single intent. The cooperative spirit created through this process was embodied in the word ikki 一揆, meaning both “one way” and “uprising.”

At the end of the medieval era, king-like figures emerged who autonomously and exclusively controlled territories on the scale of one or several provinces. These were the Sengoku-era daimyo (feudal lords). They belonged to two types: those who started as members of an insurgency and put aside principles of equality to become a leader, and those who started as shugo-daimyo, or former provincial military governors, and became Sengoku daimyo. Both types of daimyo faced groups of insurgent vassals and they transformed themselves into the feudal lords of the Sengoku era by dismantling these insurgent groups in the battles with blood relatives.

During this process, the Sengoku daimyo began to see the aggregate of common people of their territory as citizens subject to control. The document that emerged to suit this new area was the
sealed letter, or inpanjo 印判状. Many Sengoku daimyo also drew up legal codes in order to rule their territory uniformly. These are referred to collectively as the Sengoku kaho 家法 (family codes) in documents such as the Date clan’s Jinkaishu 墾芥集, the Imagawa clan’s Kana Mokuroku かな目録, the Takeda clan’s Koshuhatto no Shidai 甲州法度之次第, and the Rokkaku clan’s Rokkakushi Shikimoku 六角氏式目”

1 This tradition was written in the Imperial rescript of a History of Yuan compilation, February 1369, excerpt from the Annals of Ming Taizu（明太宗実録）.
3 This is a faithful record of the Emperor’s vestige not applying a least bit of modification to the facts, and yet adding descriptions on every political and societal fact deemed necessary to illustrate the background. This record is written in the chronological style with the entries arranged by date. However, the topical-annalistic style is also used when it is more appropriate to arrange entries by topic. (Excerpt from the Annals of Emperor Meiji’s explanatory notes)
4 “The style is based on the Annals of Emperor Montoku and the Annals of the Three Emperors (the fifth and the sixth of the Rikkokushi), and also following the standards in China after the Annals of Emperor Shunzong of Tang and those of the Ming and the Qing dynasties.” (Excerpt from the explanatory notes, Tokugawa Jikki)
6 The Japanese diplomatic monks who visited China in the 15th and 16th centuries had great interest in the various forms of culture related to kakyo, as something that did not exist in Japan (Shoun Zuikin, Shoun Nyumeiki (Shoun’s Travel Journal in Ming), Sakugen Shuryo, Shotoshu (Sakugen’s diary on his first trip to China).