

The World of Japanese Chronicles. War Stories in the Japanese Historiography

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The Japanese historiography had an early beginning. Its tradition started with the chronicles *Kojiki* and *Nihongi* compiled for the Imperial Court in Kyoto in the 8th century. There were created a lot of other historical works – official histories, biographies, diaries etc. – during the Heian Period. However, with the rise of the samurai class and its seizure of political power, the character of Japanese medieval historiography changed. The new type of chronicle (*gunki monogatari*) was a combination of official histories, war tales and historical anecdotes written in a high literary language. Their goal was not only to record history but also to serve as a model of behaviour for the members of the military class. These chronicles therefore combined reality with fiction quite freely and can be considered not only as scholarly but also as literary works. Their popularity was at its peak in the Kamakura and early Muromachi Periods. Since the 15th century the changes in political and cultural climate in Japan lead to their gradual decline. They were replaced by a new type of historical works more corresponding to the taste of contemporary readership.

[Japan; Historiography; Chronicle; Samurai; Literature; Culture; Medieval Ages]

Introduction

The Japanese literature is by right considered as one of the richest and most varied of all national literary traditions.¹ During the first millennium of its existence there developed a huge spectrum of genres in the Land of the Rising Sun corresponding to its opposites in other countries and civilizations. It is however not without interestingness that at the beginning of Japanese literary history is a chronicle (or more precisely two chronicles). The history writing and storytelling than play a key role in the history

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¹ S. KATO, *A History of Japanese Literature*, Vol. 1, Tokyo, New York, London 1979, p. 4; D. KEENE, *A History of Japanese Literature*, Vol. 1, New York 1999, pp. 1–2.

of Japanese literature. It is not without coincidence, that the first portrayal of Japanese history – the chronicles *Kojiki* and *Nihongi* – are up to date such an important part of Japanese culture, that they are still obligatory reading for all Japanese pupils and help to create a national identity of the young Japanese. They are also a subject of a serious interest of Japanese historians, linguists and other scientists.² Several hundred of historical works were written in Japan during the medieval and premodern periods. These include genres such as chronicle, biography, diaries, war stories, annals and much more. This study intends to analyse this complex topic of the development of Japanese historiography in the mentioned period through the most important works of 11th to 15th century. In this period the traditional war tales (*gunki monogatari*) transformed itself slowly into a more conservative and historically accurate tradition of chronicles writing.³

The traditional war tales *gunki monogatari* originated in the era of the rise of the samurai (to power) in the 11th and 12th centuries, when the disputes between noble families around the Imperial Court led to a series of uprisings and civil wars, during which the warrior class seized the political power.⁴ They are as a whole often considered as a blend of historical reality and fiction and are therefore sometimes considered rather as a literature and not as scholarly works. They are in most cases a compilation of a greater number of other sources, which were dramatized and completed by some historical anecdotes, which however often were a product of the authors' imagination or previous oral tradition, which was subsequently recorded in the written form. In regards of their emphasis on literary and stylistic quality, the historian must consider these sources very carefully. The goal of many of their authors was not only to record history, but to create a work of art subsequently publicly performed in the form of recitation or dramatic performance. *Gunki monogatari* therefore are a mixture of fiction and reality, which helped to create a colourful shape of older Japanese history.⁵

² Kodžiki. *Kronika dávného Japonska*, Praha 2012, p. 26; H. BORTON, A Survey of Japanese Historiography, in: *The American Historical Review*, 43, 3, 1938, p. 489. The chronicles were part of the learning of Japanese students even in the premodern era of Japanese history, especially in the Edo Period, when they constituted an important subject at the clan private schools. Y. OKITA, 藩校・私塾の思想と教育, Kyoto 2011, p. 73.

³ P. VARLEY, *Warriors of Japan as Portrayed in the War Tales*, Honolulu 1994, pp. xi.–xii.

⁴ *The Tale of Heike*, New York 2012, p. xxvi.

⁵ *Yoshitsune. A Fifteenth-Century Japanese Chronicle*, Stanford 1966, p. 63.

The roots of their birth are however older than the end of the Heian period. They fall into the era of the birth of the samurai class in the 9th and 10th century. In that time the genre of war stories or battle records (*senki*) was created. This tradition was initiated by the Chronicle of Masakado's Uprising (*Shōmonki*), which influenced Japanese historical writing deep into the 12th century.⁶ It is a colourful description of the war in Eastern Japan in the years 935–940 in which the key role was held by the offspring of the Emperor Kammu (735–806) Taira no Masakado.⁷ The work was probably created shortly after the events it describes. It itself claims to be written in the sixth month of 940 – only four months after Masakado's final defeat.⁸ It's today unknown author was without doubt a well-educated man (this can be demonstrated by the high quality of the text) probably from among the close followers of the famous rebel. This is hinted not only by the detailed account of individual events and the measure of knowledge of the personal characters of the participants, but also by a sympathetic attitude towards the rebel leader. This can be traced in almost all parts of the chronicle up until the moment, when Masakado started to title himself as the “*new emperor*”.⁹ Since this moment the measure of criticism towards Masakado and his deeds is rising. This change of attitude is sometimes interpreted by the theory of several authors writing the text. That would mean, that while the first part is written by someone from the Masakado's followers or sympathisers, the second is written by an author representing the attitude of the Imperial Court.

Opposite to *Shōmonki* is the *Sumitomo Cuitō Ki*. This is a bare annalistic account of the events written from the point of view of those who suppressed the rebellion. It is however in any way an outstanding account – its literary quality is poor, and it only recapitulates the events without deeper assessment. It was therefore partially forgotten, although even this

⁶ KEENE, p. 613; T. HASEGAWA, The Early Stages of the Heike Monogatari, in: *Monumenta Nipponica*, 22, 1/2, 1967, p. 76.

⁷ J. CLEMENTS, *The Samurai. A New History of the Warrior Elite*, Philadelphia, London 2010, pp. 32–40.

⁸ VARLEY, p. 11. Some historians question this date. According to their opinion it is partially fictional reconstruction of the events originating at the beginning of the 11th century. W. W. FARRIS, *Heavenly Warriors. The Evolution of Japan's Military, 500–1300*, Cambridge 1995, p. 132.

⁹ E. IKEGAMI, *The Taming of the Samurai, Honorific Individualism and the Making of Modern Japan*, Cambridge, London 1999, p. 64.

work helped to create the tradition of Japanese war stories, which became exceedingly popular in the future centuries.¹⁰

The chronicle *Shōmonki* is interesting in many ways as the genre founding work. It is very detailed in the descriptions of battles and considerable idealization of the mentioned protagonists.¹¹ The particular events described in it are therefore often questioned, which is the same case with other chronicles which belong to the *gunki monogatari* genre. The core of the story is considered as plausible; however, the details are probably mostly fabricated. On the other hand, *Shōmonki* is an invaluable source to the question of the structure of warrior society in Eastern Japan in the first half of the 10th century (or the beginning of the 11th century according to which supposed date of the chronicles origin we accept). The protofeudal society, the warrior's ethos and code, their weaponry and style of living are described in meticulous detail. A considerable amount of attention is also dedicated to the suffering of common people due to the protracted conflict.¹² The chronicle is quite unique thanks to this fact, because many of the war tales completely neglect the lot of the commoners and concentrate mainly on the samurai class or the Imperial Courts elites.

The tradition of war tales or battle records continued throughout further decades, but only in the shadow of richer and complex court literature. It got to the forefront of the Japanese literary tradition only in the 12th and 13th centuries when a considerable amount of authors started to occupy themselves with writing the warrior tales thanks to the creation of the new ruling elite out of the members of the samurai class. The famous uprisings Hōgen (1156) and Heiji (1159–1160) are in depth covered in *Hōgen monogatari* and *Heiji monogatari*. Both were probably created during the 13th century and constitute the real beginning of the *gunki monogatari* tradition. Up to today there are several different manuscripts of both works surviving.¹³ The author therefore uses the translation (and variant) of the text by Royall Tyler created in 2012.

First of them the *Hōgen monogatari* (The Tale of the Hōgen Rebellion) was probably created at the beginning of the 13th century. However, the earliest preserved manuscript is dated into 1318. It describes an unsuccessful attempt of the imperial prince Sutoku to overthrow his half-brother

¹⁰ KEENE, p. 615.

¹¹ FARRIS, p. 131.

¹² VARLEY, p. 21.

¹³ *Before Heike and after: Hōgen, Heiji, Jōkyūki*, London 2012, p. 5.

the child Emperor Go-Shirakawa.¹⁴ It is in many ways quite a new and innovative piece of art. While the previous battle records (*senki*) were with a few exceptions only a sombre description of individual events, *Hōgen monogatari* raises this genre to a whole new level. The text of the chronicle is very lively, and it is also adapted for a possible theatrical performance or public recitation accompanied with music. The work therefore tries to capture the imagination of the viewer (or listener) by the story of strong and famous personalities. *Hōgen monogatari* therefore introduces a new style of storytelling into the Japanese historical literature, which in the Kamakura Period (1192–1333) gained considerable attention and popularity. There can be traced some characteristics of this type of works. Their authors – so called *biwa hōshi* (*biwa* – Japanese flute, *hōshi* – monk; the stories were often performed by blind Buddhist monks accompanied by the sound of a flute) – often compiled older sources (historical works or diaries), which they complemented with stories of travelling story tellers, anecdotes and other details, which aim was to create a dramatic popular story for the both the noble and common public.¹⁵

The genesis of *Heiji monogatari* was probably very similar to its predecessor. It was created from the simple historical records which were transformed into an epic saga by adding a lot of details, personalities descriptions and anecdotes. It describes the history of the uprising of Minamoto no Yoshitomo at the turn of the years 1159 and 1160. This piece of work is also preserved in several distinct copies which differ in detail, style of writing, some information and to some degree in the used language. It is therefore possible to assume, that it was a work of more than one author and that the parts of the chronicle could have different authors, whose work was later compiled together into one book. The narrative has two main basic storylines. The first one is a dramatic story of the rebellion itself, the second is a story of Tokiwa (wife of the defeated Yoshitomo), who was forced to become the lover of the victorious Taira no Kiyomori in order to save her young sons.¹⁶ The aim of the authors was not only to portray the battle scenes and the heroism of the individual actors, but also to engage the audience with a squeaking story of human misfortune and tragedy resulting from the pursuit of power and political strife.

¹⁴ U. WOLFF, *Rakushu: Spott- und Protestgedichte in den Gunki Monogatari des Japanischen Mittelalters*, in: *Oriens Extremus*, 31, 1987–1988, p. 13; VARLEY, p. 53.

¹⁵ KEENE, p. 617.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 628.

The same was the case with other war stories that were written during this period. If we analyse the *Hōgen monogatari* and the later *Heiji monogatari*, these are simply structured works (each of them has three main chapters only) that were to be narrated or performed in theatrical performance to a wider audience.¹⁷ Outside of this scope one of the most famous *gunki monogatari* stands out – The Tale of the Heike (*Heike monogatari*), which is one of best works of Japanese premodern literature.¹⁸ According to the work of monk Kenkō, this famous tale of the fall of the Taira family (in Chinese pronunciation of the same characters – Heike) was recorded by the scholar and courtier Yukinaga, whose activity at the Imperial Court in Kyoto dates from 1181 to 1213.¹⁹ It was him with high degree of probability who at the beginning of the 13th century rearranged the current texts about the Genpei War (1180–1185) into a text intended for public recitation and theatrical performance.²⁰ The chronicle was thenceforth used by professional storytellers or theatrical ensembles, who presented the fictionalized version of the recent conflict throughout the country. Thanks to this fact, the text evolved gradually, and its current shape was written down only in 1371, when an epilogue was added, and the different versions were united into one. In this way one of the most classical work of the Japanese literature was created.²¹

The above-mentioned authorship is currently under doubt and speculation because *Heike monogatari* (or its parts) was preserved in several manuscripts, which differ from each other considerably. Some of them are written in Chinese characters only, while others are written in phonetic script (hiragana) solely.²² There are differences also in the way how the story is told – some parts of the chronicle are in verse, some in the form of epic prose. What is however without doubt is a fact, that the author must have been a Kyoto aristocrat from the circles of the Imperial Court. This theory seems confirmed by the fact that *Heike monogatari* often refers to official histories, diaries or memoirs of the participants of the historical events. Also, the choice of the vocabulary, grammar of the text and abundant references to Buddhist texts give clues about the world

¹⁷ G. STRAMIGIOLI, *Heiji Monogatari*, in: *Rivista degli studi orientali*, 49, 3/4, 1975, p. 4.

¹⁸ VARLEY, p. 82.

¹⁹ HASEGAWA, pp. 66–67.

²⁰ KEENE, p. 629.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 629–630.

²² *The Tale of Heike*, p. xxiii.

view and high level of knowledge of the author.²³ On the other hand he must have been very well versed in military terminology and had to know detailly the way of life of the military class of Eastern Japan, because he often refers to the warriors' moral code and ethos.²⁴ Due to this fact, there emerged some theories, that he had to be a Buddhist monk from the east of Japan – he would have the necessary knowledge, social connections and education to create such a complicated piece of art.²⁵

In contrast to its much simpler predecessors *Heike monogatari* is well known for its complex structure and intricacy of the story. The chronicle is divided into twelve chapters and an epilogue, which was written at the end of the 13th century or during the 14th century (dates as late as 1371 are supposed).²⁶ The detail of the story is also extraordinary. Its framework is the Gempei War (1180–1185) and its consequences. The text itself is dedicated to the fall of the Taira family and its defeat from the hands of the Minamoto Clan (in Chinese reading of the same characters Genji). Although it starts with the Taira at the peak of their power, it is since the beginning clear that the author anticipates their inevitable fall: “*The Jetavana Temple Bells ring the passing of all things. Twinned sal trees, white in full flower, declare the great man’s certain fall. The arrogant do not long endure: They are like dream one night in spring. The bold and brave perish in the end: They are the dust before the wind.*”²⁷ The chronicle therefore considers the fall of Taira in Buddhist terms of a circle of rise and fall. The Taira at the apex of their power are deemed to their downfall because of their pride, greed and lust for power. This impression is an important part of the fact that it was mainly written from the point of view of the future victors. The reader therefore must not forget that the chronicle is not portrayal of a real history, but a military tale, which is partially fictitious. Although the framework of the narrative is considered as plausible, the details of the chronicle are in many ways overemphasized, fabricated or exaggerated (e.g. the numbers of the participants of the battles). Some are without doubt completely made up by the author.

²³ KATO, p. 258.

²⁴ K. D. BUTLER, *The Heike monogatari and The Japanese Warrior Ethic*, in: *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 29, 1969, pp. 93–108.

²⁵ All in all, at least sixteen people were supposed to be possible authors of the chronicle. VARLEY, pp. 83–85.

²⁶ For more information see H. C. McCULLOUGH, *Genji and Heike. Selections from “The Tale of Genji” and “The Tale of the Heike”*, Stanford 1994.

²⁷ *The Tale of Heike*, p. 3.

This can be also claimed about the participants of the described historical events. Most notably for the person of Taira Kiyomori, who in the first third of the text plays the role of the main antagonist of the story.²⁸ One of the characters – Minamoto no Yoshitsune however became one of the most beloved and respected personalities of the Japanese history thanks to the chronicle. Although it was his brother Yoritomo who usurped the political power and later became shogun of Japan after he destroyed his younger sibling, it is Yoshitsune, who “*lives securely in people’s imaginations as the ideal Japanese hero whose person and career, especially as developer in the legend, embody almost every characteristic that appeals to the national sensibility. In battle he was imaginative and daring, in private life spontaneous, trusting, and sincere. But above all he was loved for his misfortune and defeat. A peculiarly Japanese pathos marks his career from the time of his early youth when he wandered alone through the streets playing his melancholy flute until his last years as a hunted fugitive, the innocent victim of men more powerful, realistic, and cunning than himself, abandoned by everyone but a handful of outlaw followers, and finally betrayed and forced to kill himself at an early age*”.²⁹ Yoshitsune thus thanks to his military capabilities and personal traits became one of the prototypes of Japanese tragic heroes, who were paradoxically so admired throughout Japanese history.

Given the aforementioned it is not surprising that Yoshitsune and his life has become a theme for a number of other historical works. Outside *Heike monogatari* the parts of his life are mentioned in *Heiji monogatari* or in *Gempei seisuiki* – one other chronicle (historically much more accurate) dealing with the Gempei War.³⁰ However it was *Gikeiki* that became the work which was dedicated entirely to the life of the famous warrior and helped to spread his legend (in many ways it had almost a hagiographic character).³¹ The creation of this work is again somewhat shrouded in a mystery and there are some contradiction about its authorship. Modern historiography claims it to be a work of early Muromachi Period (1336–1573). It was written probably at the end of the 14th century.³² Its author is completely unknown, although we can speculate, that the chronicle was created by more persons because the text is somewhat heterogenous and even its style changes in various chapters. What is

²⁸ KEENE, p. 630.

²⁹ I. MORRIS, *The Nobility of Failure. Tragic Heroes in the History of Japan*, Fukuoka 2013, p. 80.

³⁰ *Yoshitsune. A Fifteenth-Century Japanese Chronicle*, p. 32.

³¹ KEENE, p. 893.

³² *Yoshitsune. A Fifteenth-Century Japanese Chronicle*, p. 62.

without doubt a little bit peculiar is the fact that the chronicle does not deal with Yoshitsune's military career or his political exploits. These are mentioned only superficially. Most of the text is dedicated to the years when Yoshitsune with his retinue escaped a lot of traps and intrigues set up by his brother Yoritomo. It deals with his life as a refugee and his untimely and glorious death.³³

The importance of *Gikeiki* is not in its historical value or precision. Its worth is in its literary quality and cultural heritage. It also constitutes a whole new genre of war romances which became extremely popular in the Muromachi Period. Besides *Gikeiki* we now know several dozens of such works. One of the most important is *Soga monogatari* (The Tale of the Soga Brothers), which became famous thanks to the kabuki play adaptation (this can be also said about *Gikeiki*).³⁴ Its creation is again (and as is the case in the most cases of *gunki monogatari*) a subject of speculation, and several different texts of the story are preserved. Its plot itself is however quite simple – it is a motive of a vendetta and a question of punishment. Two brothers had lost their father in the child's age, who was killed because of a land property strife. When they grow up, they become master's in military arts whose goal is a retribution for their father's death and an effort to regain their heritage.³⁵ Stories like this became very popular in the Edo period when they served as a template for kabuki plays, ukiyo-e paintings and a to the creation of a lot of following similar stories thanks to which the romances were preserved in many versions and it is now quite difficult to reconstruct their original phrasing.

Soga monogatari belongs to the last of the genre of *gunki monogatari* chronicles. However, there were compiled a lot of such works in the Kamakura and Muromachi period. Many of them have high degree of historical accuracy and now constitute an invaluable source to the medieval Japanese history. One of them is *Jōkyūki* written in the second half of the 13th century (although the eldest preserved manuscript can be dated by the year 1374). It is a description of the so called Jōkyū War³⁶ which occurred in 1221, when the former Emperor Go-Toba rose against the rule of the Hōjō Regents who gained their power at the

³³ KEENE, pp. 893–894.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 888.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 889–891.

³⁶ The Jōkyū War is also depicted in the chronicle *Azuma kagami*. W. McCULLOUGH, The *Azuma Kagami Account of the Shōkyū War*, in: *Monumenta Nipponica*, 23, 1/2, 1968, p. 102.

expense of the Minamoto family.³⁷ The work is considered to be a climax of the so called *Shibu Gassenjo* – four war stories among which the author has already mentioned *Hōgen monogatari*, *Heiji monogatari* and *Heike monogatari*. It therefore has a much similar structure and a story form as the previous chronicles. The reader can again enjoy a lot of battle scenes, details about the protagonists, stories of treason, bravery, punishment and rivalry. Because the chronicle was written from the point of view of the victors, the ex-emperor Go-Toba is shown as a person who “*must pay the price of unkingly behaviour; but his suffering ultimately makes him worthy of our compassion*”.³⁸ The same motive as in previous works is therefore repeated again. It is the defeated who comes to the centre of the authors and through the story of his fate and fall the reader is reminded about the unpermanency of this world and humans’ destiny.

The same model is followed also in one of the most famous works of the Muromachi Period the *Taiheiki* – or The Chronicle of Great Peace. Similarly, as in other *gunki monogatari* it is a mixture of reality and fiction. According to current theory it was written by a monk named Kojima (died in 1374) and it was retold and rewritten later by a score of other authors.³⁹ Out of the war chronicles it is the longest one (with the exception of *Gempei seisuiki*) and deals with the longest period of time (1318–1368).⁴⁰ All in all it is comprised of 40 books dealing with the Genkō War (1331–1333) and the subsequent wars of the southern and northern court (Nanbokuchō Period). The time of gekukujō when Japan was thrown into a period of constant civil wars, which led to a political chaos lasting more than two centuries.⁴¹ Like other works of this genre, *Taiheiki* has its heroes (in this case the famous imperial loyalist Kusunoki Masashige)⁴² and antagonists, presenting a number of battle details, names and data. Its general credibility is quite high, but many details are nevertheless considered as fabricated. Despite this it became a model for some chronicles written in the Edo Period.⁴³

³⁷ [https://japanese-wiki-corpus.github.io/literature/Jokyuki%20\(A%20Chronicle%20of%20the%20Jokyu%20Disturbance\).html](https://japanese-wiki-corpus.github.io/literature/Jokyuki%20(A%20Chronicle%20of%20the%20Jokyu%20Disturbance).html) [2020–08–04].

³⁸ KEENE, p. 872.

³⁹ L. FRÉDÉRIC, *Japan Encyclopedia*, Harvard 2002, pp. 923–924.

⁴⁰ *The Taiheiki. A Chronicle of Medieval Japan*, Tokyo, Rutland, Singapore 1959, p. xvi.

⁴¹ KEENE, p. 882.

⁴² See K. KOIKE – J. ROGGENDORF, Kusunoki Masashige. Auszüge aus dem Taiheiki, in: *Monumenta Nipponica*, 4, 1, 1941, pp. 133–165.

⁴³ BORTON, p. 491.

In the Muromachi era, *Taiheiki* level was reached by only a few chronicles. The most significant of these is one of the last examples of the *gunki monogatari* – *Meitokuki*. The preserved parts depict the years 1392–1396, describing the end of the government of the Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu and the end of the southern and northern court disputes.⁴⁴ In comparison with *Taiheiki* it is however much less precise and credible. Some authors therefore consider it mostly as a literary work.⁴⁵ The subsequent period of civil wars gave rise to a number of works of regional importance, biographies or official histories. These have often been written by persons much less associated with the Imperial Court, as was the case with the authors of *gunki monogatari*. An example is the chronicle of the government of Oda Nobunaga, whose author was one of the vassals of this important warrior.⁴⁶ The chronicle *Kōyō Gunkan*, written by a samurai Obata Kagenori (1573–1663) from the family that served the Takeda clan (1573–1663) is also worth mentioning in this regard.⁴⁷

In the Edo Period, monumental compilations of Japanese history such as *Dai Nihonshi*⁴⁸ were created from the pens of the most important scholars. However, these works differ greatly from their predecessors – especially the *gunki monogatari*. It was a completely new type of works with sources that were abundantly “cited”, relying on the authors own or eyewitness accounts, and a more sober and measured style of narrative. This is because *gunki monogatari* were the product of an era when a samurai class was taking over Japan and was greatly influenced by the court aristocracy and its refined culture. At a time of the political turmoil of the 15th and 16th century, there was a trend of a strong separation of samurai from the court environment, which led to the emergence of a completely new genre of chronicle, which was no longer primarily a literary work, but was to fulfil a new mission. This was not only to record history as such, but to highlight the importance of the authors own clan or province. The chronicles thus regionalized to some extent, or better specified their themes. The birth of a new generation of samurai authors

⁴⁴ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/264288463_Meitokuki_Spirit_Pacification_and_Political_Legitimacy_in_the_Late_Medieval_Japanese_Epic [2020-08-04].

⁴⁵ KEENE, p. 887.

⁴⁶ G. OTA, *The Chronicle of Lord Nobunaga*, Leiden, Boston 2011, p. 23.

⁴⁷ H. SATO, *Legends of the Samurai*, New York, London 2012, p. 205.

⁴⁸ For more information see H. WEBB, What Is the Dai Nihon Shi?, in: *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 19, 2, 1960, pp. 135–149.

led to a significant transformation of their structure, language and diction. Although *gunki monogatari* continued to maintain considerable popularity, the new chronicles were created on a completely different basis, and the former classic genre of Japanese chronicle gradually faded and was eventually replaced.