

On the history of Chū Shōgi

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Dr. Peter Banaschak

This short article describes the outlines of what is currently known about the historical development of Chū Shōgi.

1. The beginnings of Shōgi

Although the earliest known Shōgi in a way closely resembles other Asian chess games (that would be Song period *Xiangqi* [Chinese Chess], and Persian *catrang* as well as Arab *shatranj*), it is still unknown how these games might be connected to Shōgi.

What we know, however, is that by the early 11th century something that must have been quite, but perhaps not totally, like Shōgi was around. In a text on calligraphy, the [Kirinshō], dating from about 1027 we first hear something about Shōgi. The text describes how Shōgi pieces are inscribed. They seem to have looked much alike the Shōgi pieces we all know. Dating from only a few years later (1059, to be precise) there are the first excavated pieces. These 16 pieces were found on the compound of the Kōfukuji in Nara (and they are very much alike modern pieces). Alongside them was found a *mokkan*, a wooden tag used for writing purposes, on which Japanese archaeologists have identified the characters for *Suizō*, meaning “Drunk Elephant”¹. As we do not have *any* reference to a game called Chū Shōgi, it is assumed that the Drunk Elephant was a piece used in the Shōgi of the day.² The first text that gives a description of any Shōgi game is the [Nichūreki] dated to the early 13th century. It offers a description of a *Shōgi* as well as a *Dai Shōgi*. This Dai Shōgi must have been replaced by a new type of Dai Shōgi during the 13th century which is almost like the Dai Shōgi described in the Shogi Association (TSA) rule leaflet. Proof for that is found in the [Futsū shōdōshū].

Some pieces dated to the 13th or 14th century that had up to now been classified as Chū Shōgi pieces now have a doubtful status; they could be either Dai or Chū Shōgi pieces. Thus the oldest reference to Chū Shōgi dates to about 1350: the [Yūgaku ōrai] mentions Shōgi, Chū Shōgi, and Dai Shōgi. The next text which explicitly reports something about Chū Shōgi would then be the [Aro kassen monogatari] of 1476. The text enumerates some Chū Shōgi pieces but gives no details.

It now seems that Chū Shōgi is a derivate of Dai Shōgi, that is, Dai minus all the boring bits³ with the board size and number of pawns adapted accordingly. Eight kinds of pieces were dropped from Dai, all of which promote to Gold General:

1. Angry Boar

2. Cat Sword
3. Evil Wolf
4. Flying Dragon
5. Iron General
6. Knight
7. Stone General
8. Violent Ox

It is safe to say that Chū Shōgi, originated somewhere in the earlier 14th century and began to spread shortly after. Shō Shōgi was not yet a competitor, as the game most probably was not yet being played with drops, featured at least a Drunk Elephant, perhaps even two Ferocious Leopards, but no Rook and Bishop.

2. The beginnings of Chū Shōgi and what became of it

Again, we know next to nothing about the beginnings of Chū Shōgi. The game simply begins to pop up in diary entries, without any description. Thus we know that something was there, but we lack information on what it was like. However, we can rest assured that a game by the name of Chū Shōgi was already being played in the early 15th century.

For several reasons it seems more probable today than in John Fairbairn's days (see [Shogi history ... and the variants]) that the [Shōgi rokushu no zushiki] might really date from the mid-15th century. The text does not describe Chū Shōgi, apparently taking knowledge about it for granted. There are on-and-off mentions of Chū Shōgi in the diaries of the second half of the 15th century. Real freaks played quite frequently. We know, for example that

- Yamashina Tokitsugu jotted down that he played 82 games of Chū Shōgi, as compared to 27 of Shō Shōgi, and 108 games of Shōgi (unspecified, so these games might have been Chū Shōgi games as well);
- Yamashina Tokitsune played 55 games of Chū Shōgi, but only 32 of Shōgi (unspecified; same as above) and 19 games of Shō Shōgi.

We know that Chū Shōgi was rather widely played, as the [Shōgi koma nikki] of Minase Kanenari tell us from 1590 on until 1602, he and his sons produced 618 sets for Shō Shōgi, 106 sets for Chū Shōgi, two each for Dai and Dai-dai, three for Maka-Dai-dai, and four for Tai Shōgi. (So who would still claim that these large Shōgi games could not have been played?)

From the early 17th century, literature on Chū Shōgi was written and published. Amongst it there are the following works:

1. Chū Shōgi horoku shū by Yamagata Yahachirōemon, 1778 (contains the six historical games);
2. Chū Shōgi kineburui by Tsurumine Shigenobu, dated 1818;

3. Chū Shōgi shinanshō, dated 1703 (apparently contains 30 problems) [Chū Shōgi shinanshō];
4. Chū Shōgi shoshin shō, not dated;
5. Chū Shōgi tsukurimono, by Itō Sōkan, not dated (contains problems);
6. Chū Shōgi tsukurimono hyakuban, not dated (contains hundred problems, according to the title);
7. Chū Shōgi tsukurimono tsume sho zukesanjūban, not dated (contains 30 problems);
8. Chū Shōgi tsumemono, not dated (contains problems);
9. Chū Shōgi zushiki by Itō Sōkan, dated 1663.

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Of course additional information can be found in the various other works of the time that deal with the diverse Shōgis.⁵

Judging from the diaries it seems that Chū Shōgi was more popular with noblemen and high-ranking monks. It seems reasonable to assume that Shō Shōgi began to steeply rise in popularity after the “Office of Shōgi affairs” had been established in 1612, and nationwide rules for this game were fixed. The first head of the “Shōgi dokoro”, the former merchant Ōhashi Sōkei seemingly preferred to play Shō Shōgi with drops (which undoubtedly makes a good game). Thus this variant of Shō Shōgi became the standard and a fierce competitor for Chū Shōgi.

As the opening of Chū Shōgi is slower than that of Shō, and the middle game of Chū Shōgi is far more intricate than that of Shō, it seems that problems became the center of attention of authors. This might have contributed to the descent in Chū Shōgi’s popularity.⁶ Howsoever, Chū Shōgi faded out of the public mind. Rumour has it that the game continued to be played after the first half of the 19th century in the remote rural villages of Western Japan; this is unconfirmed.

Knowledge about the game was thus limited mainly to the few remaining players; information was well hidden in the books and unavailable to non-Japanese until the 1970s. At that time, George F. Hodges began unearthing the Shōgi variants, starting with Chū Shōgi (admittedly the TSA rule leaflets for Wa and Dai are from 1980, as well, but they don’t really count, do they?). The [Chū Shōgi rule leaflet] was the first *informed* Western publication on Chū Shōgi ever (don’t hesitate to correct me — I wouldn’t count Murray’s knowledge on Chū Shōgi, as demonstrated in [A History of Chess], as informed).

Beginning with the rule leaflet, and continuing with [MSM], Chū Shōgi began to rise in popularity, this time in the West. What will further become of it, we shall all see.

A Chu Shogi Bibliography

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Kirinshō, , Akihira no Fujiwara, 31 ka, *Zoku gunshō, ruijō*, Zoku gunshō, ruijō, 1-72, 1924-30.

completed about 1027

Nichūreki, , unknown, 5, *Shiseki shūran*, Nosogawa, , 1967.

completed about 1230

[Futsū shōdōshū] ““Futsū shōdōshū” no Shō kankei kiji ni tsuite — Kamakura kōki no ‘Shō-Shōgi’ to ‘Dai-Shōgi’”, Futsū shōdōshū, Shin’ichi Saeki, *Yūgishi kenkyū*, 5, .

The Futsū shōdōshū was completed about 1300 by the monk Ryōki

Yūgaku ōrai, , unknown, 13 ka, *Gunshō, ruijō*, *Zoku gunshō, ruijō*, 1-30, 1939-43.

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Aro kassen monogatari, , Kanera Ichijō, 33 ka, *Zoku gunshō, ruijō*, *Zoku gunshō, ruijō*, 1-72, 1924-30.

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[Shōgi koma nikki] “Shōgi koma nikki”, Kanenari Minase, 33-34, *Ei*, 6, 3.

completed in 1602

“Chū Shōgi shinanshō”, unknown, 1, 212-232, *Zatsugei sōsho*, Kokusho kankōkai, 1915.

completed 1703

Kokusho sōmokuroku, , Iwanami shoten, 1-8, 1963-72.

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A History of Chess, , Harold James Ruthven Murray, Clarendon Press, 1913.

reprinted 1962, 1969, 1988

Notes

1. In fact, the literal meaning of the inscription on this *mokkan* is something like “lively (or energetic, or animated) person”.
2. There are good reasons for that — but this article isn’t the place to discuss the intricacies of Shōgi history in general.
3. I feel I should add that this remark represents a purely personal opinion, without any basis but my own preferences . . . no offense meant.
4. It is difficult for me to connect any of these works to the sources mentioned and used in the preparation of [MSM]. Perhaps someone who has access to any of these works ought to check them against [MSM].
5. The [Kokusho sōmoku-roku] has 256 works with titles on Shōgi and Shōgi variants. Only six of these are available in recent (that is, after 1900) reprints. (Isn’t that a shame?)
6. Of course, that’s not my opinion, but that is how it might seem to your average Shō Shōgi player, isn’t it?

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