

Shogi: Japan's Game of Generals

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Similar to various types of chess found in many parts of the world, shogi is a game played by two contenders, moving their pieces alternately with the goal of capturing the opponent's king. A shogi board has a grid of eighty-one squares (nine squares on each side); forty pieces are used in the game (Fig. 14:1). The king, called *osho* (or *gyokusho*), is positioned at the center of the first row (i.e., the row closest to the edge of the board on each player's side). Moving outward from this center piece in the first row, on each side, are the *kinsho* (gold general), *ginsho* (silver general), *keima* (knight), and *kosha* (lance). The most powerful piece, the *kakugyo* (bishop), which moves in a manner similar to the bishop in chess, is positioned at the second square from the left in the second row; and the *hisha* (rook), which moves like the rook in chess, is placed at the second square from the right. The entire third row is fortified by *hohei* (literally, infantry), similar to pawns. *Osho* moves exactly the same way as the king in chess, but other pieces have characteristics slightly different from their chess counterparts. For example, *keima* is comparable to the knight, but can only move two squares forward. The pieces are identified by inscribed Chinese characters (*kanji*); the first characters in the names of the important pieces *gyoku*, *kin*, *gin*, *kei*, and *ko* are adjectives signifying rare and precious treasures.

One unique rule in shogi that differentiates it from any other chess-like game in the world is the rule that a player can use pieces captured from his opponent as his own, and may place them on almost any empty squares on the board as the game progresses. Those reused pieces, however, retain their characteristic mobility; thus, they cannot be placed where there is no space for them to make an advance move. For instance, *hohei* and *kosha*, pieces that only move forward, cannot be used in the first row of the opponent's territory. This rule was created to avoid confusion, as the pieces used by the two players are identical in design. This distinctive rule makes shogi a truly complex and fascinating game that requires meticulous thinking and a mastery of strategy.

14:1 Diagram of a shogi board and pieces

Row 1: A *kosha* (lance), B *keima* (knight), C *ginsho* (silver general), D *kinsho* (gold general), E *osho* (jewelled general); Row 2: B left *kakugyo* (diagon), B right *hisha* (flying chariot). Positions are reversed on opposing sides. Row 3: *hohei* (footsoldiers)

THE ORIGIN OF SHOGI

Significantly, there are no objects related to shogi in the Shosoin, the imperial repository at the ancient temple Todaiji in Nara that houses a wealth of cultural treasures, including board games, from the eighth century. Nor is there any reference to the game in the first encyclopedic volume in Japan, *Wamyo ruiju-sho* (compiled 931-38). Shogi is first mentioned in the eleventh century essay *Shin sarugaku-ki* (1058-64).¹ Rare material remnants are the sixteen shogi pieces, dated to 1058, excavated from the old precinct of the temple Kofukuji in Nara (Fig. 14:2).² There are also written documents and excavated materials from the eleventh and twelfth centuries that pertain to shogi.³ Therefore, it is thought that shogi was first played in Japan sometime in the second half of the tenth or early eleventh century. The first pictorial depiction of shogi players is found in *Choku giga* (*Scrolls of Frolicking Animals*, 1252) (Fig. 14:3).

14:2 Shogi pieces, Japan; Heian period (794-1185), 11th century, excavated from Kofuku-ji site
Wood; largest: 3.1 x 2.4 x 0.3 cm
The Museum, Archaeological Institute of Kashihara, Nara Prefecture

These shogi pieces, considered the earliest extant examples, were discovered alongside documents dated 1058 from the former precincts of Kofukuji, the head temple of the Hosso Sect of Buddhism and one of the Seven Great Temples of the ancient capital in Nara. Executed in ink on these pieces are the characters *gyokusho* (jewel general; king), *kinsho* (gold general), *ginsho* (silver general), and *hohei* (literally, infantry).

14:3 Monks Playing Shogi, detail from Choju jinbutsu giga (Scrolls of Frolicking with Animals) Japan; Kamakura period (1185-1333), 1252 Kozanji Temple, Kyoto

The earliest extant illustration of shogi play, this scene shows a group of monks gathered for a game around a makeshift grid drawn on the ground (or perhaps on a piece of paper). An older monk appears to be instructing a young boy, perhaps an acolyte. The Choju jinbutsu giga scrolls depicts many images of game play, including board games such as go and sugoroku as well as physical games.

Until recent decades, it had been assumed that shogi was introduced from China as a version of xiangqi. This assumption relied on the fact that the general principle of the game capturing the pieces of one's opponent is similar to that of Chinese xiangqi. Moreover, there is a basic correspondence in the types of pieces and their movements. Shogi pieces are identified not by their shapes, but by the Chinese characters inscribed on them. Therefore, the game was thought to have existed only in China, Japan, and Korea, where this writing system has contributed to the formation of a shared cultural sphere.

In 1977, however, I proposed a theory that refuted this belief.⁴ This theory clarified the following differences between shogi and xiangqi: 1) In xiangqi, pieces are placed not inside the squares but on the intersections of the grid lines, and move along these lines; 2) xiangqi pieces are round and color coded for each player; 3) each xiangqi piece has only one inscribed Chinese character, while in the Japanese version each has two characters; 4) the positioning and number of the pieces at the start of the game are different in the two versions; 5) in xiangqi, the king cannot move beyond a certain area assigned to it; and 6) some xiangqi pieces are not allowed to cross a line, sometimes called *Chu he Han jie* (Chu river, Han border), which divides the players' territories.⁵

Ancient Japan was influenced strongly by Chinese culture, much of which it emulated. If shogi had been transmitted from China, it would have shown a closer resemblance to xiangqi, as in the case of Korean *janggi* (Culn: *tjyang keul*). Extant excavated pieces for xiangqi in China, dating from 1100 or later, are identical to the round pieces used for this game today. By 1058, however, Japanese shogi pieces were in their standard pentagonal shape. On the twelfth day of the ninth month of Koji 1 (1142), the Minister of the Right, Fujiwara Yorinaga, wrote in his diary, *Taiki*, that he played shogi using the pentagonal pieces unique to Japan.⁶ It is clear that in the eleventh and twelfth centuries xiangqi was played in China, while a completely different game of shogi existed in Japan. It is, therefore, difficult to assume that shogi was brought to Japan from China.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF *SHOGI*

The current form of shogi in Japan followed a number of other incarnations of the game. The medieval encyclopedia *Nichureki*, thought to have been compiled between 1210 and 1212, includes descriptions of a miniature version of shogi (lacking *hisha* and *kakugyo*) and an expanded version called *o-shogi* (large shogi).⁷ *O-shogi* used a board with thirteen squares on each side (for a total of 169 squares) and thirteen types of pieces, making the game more challenging than the standard version. The total number of pieces used in this game was sixty eight, and this number generally remained the same in *o-shogi* of other periods. In addition, *Futsu shodo-shu*, compiled by the monk Ryoki from 1297 to 1302, records an improved version of *o-shogi*, further enlarged to use a board with fifteen squares on each side and twenty nine types of pieces, with 130 pieces in total.⁸

This enlarged version of *o-shogi* involved so many kinds of pieces (each with a different characteristic movement) that it was extremely difficult to memorize all of the rules. Adding to the complexity was a standard rule, still in effect in today's version, that enables the pieces to move in a completely different manner when they reach the territory of the opponent, at which time these pieces, called *narigoma* (promoted pieces), are reversed to indicate this change. One match would, then, take a long time to complete. In addition, this version of shogi was a game suitable only for the highly literate who could read all of the characters identifying the many pieces. As a result of its excruciatingly convoluted rules, this version quickly lost popularity. The next version of the game to appear was *chu-shogi* (medium shogi), conceived probably in the fourteenth century. It was so named because it was between the miniature version and *o-shogi* in scale, using a board with twelve squares on each side and twenty two kinds of pieces, with ninety two pieces in total. In this version, captured pieces were not reused by the players.

Chu-shogi involved a manageable number of pieces with enough variations to hold the interest of the players and thus became widely popular. It would not be an overstatement to call it the standard version of shogi in the medieval period (thirteenth to sixteenth century). Records of *chu-shogi* matches may be found in many diaries of courtiers and monks of the time. For example, the courtier Nakahara Yasutomi wrote that he played the game in his journal entry for the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month of 1444.⁹ Others, such as Kanroji Chikanaga (d.1500), Sanjonishi Sanetaka (d.1537), and Yamashina Tokitsugu (d.1579), also enjoyed playing this game on many occasions.

By the end of the medieval period, however, *sho-shogi* (small shogi), which is identical to the current version of the game, had become increasingly popular. This form had developed out of the miniature shogi played during the thirteenth century with the addition of two pieces, *hisha* and *kakugyo*. It is not certain when these two pieces were added to the miniature version, but they were in use by the fifteenth century. (With the addition of another piece called *suisho*, a variant of *sho-shogi* using forty-two pieces in total was played for a brief period of time.¹⁰) According to the record left by the courtiers Minase Kanenari and his son Chikatomo, who made shogi pieces, the duo produced 735 sets of pieces from 1590 to 1608, among which eighty-three percent were for *sho-shogi*, fourteen percent were for *chu-shogi*, and the remaining three percent were large pieces intended only for display.¹¹ In recent years, pieces dating from the sixteenth century have been excavated in various regions of Japan; the majority of these are thought to have been made for *sho-shogi*.¹² No shogi boards, however, dating from this time have been discovered, perhaps due to the fact that they were more likely to be discarded than the pieces.¹³

THE POPULARIZATION OF *SHOGI*

During the peaceful Edo period (1615-1868), shogi developed rapidly. At this time, *sho-shogi* with forty game pieces, in which captured pieces were reused, was more common than *chu-shogi* and gained popularity among many. *Chu-shogi* gradually lost its footing, and from about this time forward, *sho-shogi* was commonly recognized as the standard version of the game.

Kyoto turned out famous shogi players, such as Ohashi Sokei, in the sixteenth century. Sokei's first son, Soko, formalized the rules of the game and succeeded his father as head of the main lineage of the Ohashi family. At the same time, Sokei's second son created another lineage, and Soko's son-in-law Sokan established yet another shogi line, the Ito. All of these families came under the sponsorship of the Tokugawa shogunate (military government) based in Edo. The official sponsorship received by the three shogi lineages was similar to that enjoyed by the *go* families (see section 16). Players were given salaries, stipends, and places to live in return for certain duties, including attendance at ceremonies and the annual *oshiro-shogi* (castle shogi) event at the shogun's castle. The shogi lineages were also obliged to relocate from their hometown, Kyoto, to Edo, the seat of the shogunate, in 1667.

The selection of *meijin* (experts) and *shogidokoro* (liaisons between the shogi families and the shogunate), and the issuing of *dan-i* (official skill rankings) also were handled much as they were in *go* (see section 16). The first complete list of shogi players with *dan-i* certification was compiled in 1717. It included a total of 167 players, among which ninety held the rank of *sho-dan* (elementary level) and thirty, *ni-dan* (second level).¹⁴ The nationwide popularization of shogi is owed to the efforts of the masters of the three lineages in Edo and the players who remained in Kyoto. These aficionados spread the game through teaching and maintained the tradition by organizing regular gatherings of players. By 1799 the number of students affiliated with the main branch of the Ohashi family reached eighty-four. Moreover, increasing access to printed instruction books, and the geographical proliferation of people with knowledge of the game that resulted from the shogunate's policy of *sankin kotai* (alternate residence duty, in which feudal lords were required to spend one of every two years in Edo), made it possible for those in the provinces to learn the game without going to metropolitan areas such as Edo and Kyoto. One record states that Osaka, the largest commercial city in Japan at the time, shipped 580 shogi sets (boards and pieces) to markets all over the country.¹⁵

Shogi's popularity further increased in the nineteenth century, when the game became familiar to all classes of people. According to one record, there were 592 public bathhouses in the city of Edo in 1841, and each one of them had a room with shogi boards on the second floor (often full of players), functioning effectively as a shogi salon.¹⁶ Barbershops also provided shogi equipment for the use of their customers. Town dwellers thus were able to play the game not only at home but also at various public places. The 1857 list of shogi players with *dan-i* certification names 283 individuals,¹⁷ yet it is likely that there were at least a hundred times this number of enthusiasts in the mid-nineteenth century. Regional tournaments were held frequently, and broadsheets listing the names of players, called *banzuke*, were printed. The Senshu region south

of Osaka, for example, printed such *banzuke* for thirty years. The names of five hundred shogi devotees can be found in those sheets, although only two are identified as holders of *dan-i*. The popularity of the game overwhelmed even the shogi families, and, in effect, regional masters without *dan-i* often attained more prestige than did the *meijin* selected from the official lineages. Shogi's immense popularity is attested by the fact that, in the Edo period, shogi sets, along with those for *sugoroku* and *go*, frequently formed part of the bridal trousseau (Fig. 14:4).

14:4 Nakajima Raisho (1796-1871) Shogi board with Four Noble Friends, shogi pieces and containers
Japan; Edo period (1615-1868), late 18th early 19th century
Maki-e, lacquer; 20.5 x 35.5 x 32.3 cm, largest shogi piece: 3.0 cm x 2.5 cm
Kozu Kobunka Kaikan Museum, 6A-24

Orchid, chrysanthemum, plum, and bamboo when depicted together represent a prized subject matter in literati painting known as the "Four Gentlemen," or shikun-shi (Chinese: sijunzi). The image on this board accompanies the signature of "Uejima Raisho," indicating that it was commissioned to Nakajima Raisho, an important Kyoto painter of the late Edo period. The bulb shaped legs, commonly known as kuchinashi (gardenia) type, are distinctly those of the Edo period, compared to the narrow legs of medieval boards.

SHOGI FROM THE MEIJI PERIOD TO THE PRESENT

With the beginning of the Meiji period (1868-1912), the dawn of the modern era in Japan, the support that the three shogi lineages had received from the Tokugawa regime ended. As a result, the families became impoverished and disappeared by the beginning of the twentieth century. After the demise of these official lineages, Ono Gohei (d.1921) became *meijin*, followed by Sekine Kinjiro. Although this succession was disputed by some players, shogi itself was not affected, as its popularity already had been established among the general public in the first half of the nineteenth century. In the latter half of nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, regional tournaments continued to be organized as often as before, and *banzuke* lists were also in circulation. Many families owned plain shogi sets, and the game was taught by fathers to their children and by elders to the young. From the end of the nineteenth century newspapers included columns reporting the proceedings and results of shogi matches, and such articles were well received by readers.

At the time, it was difficult to make a professional career as a shogi player, and only a handful of players made their livings completely from prize matches and the support of wealthy politicians and entrepreneurs. In 1909 *Yorozuchoho* newspaper sponsored the founding of Shogi Domeikai (The Shogi Alliance), and other organizations of semiprofessional players and small groups backed by newspaper companies frequently came and went. Indeed, newspaper companies played a significant role in popularizing the game and bringing professional players to the interest of the public. At the same time, radio broadcasts of shogi lessons, which began in 1926, reached an even wider audience of potential players. In 1927 the newspapers began regular articles about the Hachidan-sen (Hachidan Tournament), in which six master players competed against each other. Readers paid much attention to the outcome of the tournament, as it decided who was the very best of the masters. When he retired from the tournament circuit in 1935, Sekine Kinjiro proposed abolishing the old hereditary tradition associated with the title of *meijin* and advocated the establishment of a system in which the title would be given to a truly skilled player instead. In 1938 Kimura Yoshio became the first to receive the title of *meijin* under this new system. At about the same time, all professional and semiprofessional players (with a few exceptions) decided to form an organization that would unite them, and Shogi Taisei-kai (Japan Shogi Association) was founded.

During World War II, the playing of shogi was curtailed. In 1946, however, several newspaper companies collaborated to support the founding of Nihon Shogi Renmei (The Japanese Shogi Federation), and all professional shogi players became affiliated with the organization. The distinction between professionals and amateurs was now clarified. In that same year, an annual tournament to decide the rankings of all fifty eight affiliated players was established, and this brought excitement back to the world of shogi. New magazines focusing on shogi began to appear, and the regular radio program, "Shogi Time" (*Shogi no jikan*), began in 1948. When television coverage of the NHK-hai (NHK Cup) first aired in 1962, the spread of shogi accelerated, with new appeal to the senses of vision and sound. Each time the title of *meijin* was conferred on a new player, the popularity of the game surged among the public.

Today, shogi remains the most popular board game in Japan. According to the Japanese government's *Leisure White Paper 2003*, the total number of shogi fans was 11.7 million in 1994,

12.4 million in 1996, and 9.1 million in 2002.¹⁸ Although the trend shows a gradual decline, the number of years in which young players won all the prestigious titles has increased. Despite the diversification of hobbies and pastimes, the large numbers of fans recorded in the most recent surveys indicate that shogi is still a popular game, especially among the young. In 2002, 26.1 percent - the largest group - of the total number of fans were in their teens, followed by those in their forties. Thus the player base for shogi could anticipate further growth in the future. A phenomenon of the last decade has been the spread of on line shogi games, a trend likely to increase, as fans now can find other players anytime they wish.

The rule of modern shogi mentioned above the ability to reuse pieces captured from the opponent gives this game a unique appeal. In China and Korea, people are beginning to enjoy the game, although the total number of players is still small. In other countries and in the West, where chess has formed a part of culture, shogi may gain appeal once the hurdle presented by the use of Japanese characters is surmounted. The further spread of this game in and beyond Japan is certainly possible in the future.

Translated by Miwako Tezuka

Original paper published in "Asian Games, The Art of Contest", edited by Colin Mackenzie and Irving Finkel, Asia Society, 2004.

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¹ Fujiwara Akihira, *Shin sarugaku-ki*.

² For the Kofukuji shogi pieces, see Shimizu Koji and Oguri Akihiko, *Nara-shi Kofukuji kyukeidai hakkutsu chosa gaiho (Summary Report of Excavation at the Old Precinct of Kofukuji, Nara)*, pp. 1-4, 8. The excavation of this site began in 1965. Among the wooden objects found in the ruins of an old well were sixteen shogi pieces (one of which was unfinished) and a wooden board of the type called *shusho mokkan*. Another wooden piece, with an inscribed date corresponding to 1058, was found at the same site. The sixteen pieces excavated from the well thus were dated to approximately the same year, and now are considered the oldest extant shogi pieces. They are pentagonal in shape, which is characteristic of Japanese shogi pieces. The sixteen pieces do not make a complete set, and were perhaps discarded into the well. Rows of characters for shogi pieces are written on the *shusho mokkan*. These wooden boards probably were used for practice in writing those characters. The excavated shogi pieces were made from this type of wooden board. For more information about the excavated Kofukuji pieces, see the report by Shimizu Koji, Oguri Akihiko, and Wada Tsutomu in *Mokkan kenkyu* (November 1994), pp. 26-30.

³ For example, a *shusho mokkan* documenting the names of shogi pieces, ca. 1080-90, was excavated from the Dazaifu site in Fukuoka (southern Japan); and a *hohei* piece, ca. 1094-96, was excavated from the Hidaka site in Hyogo (near Kyoto).

⁴ This new theory, based on the first historical research into shogi, received much enthusiastic response. See Masukawa Koichi, *Shogi 1: Mono to ningen no bunka-shi (Shogi i: Cultural History of Materials and People)* 23:1, pp. 76-84.

⁵ In 1994 I reported these differences for the first time at an international symposium for historical studies of chess. See Masukawa Koichi, "Der Ursprung des japanischen Schachs." *Homo Ludens 4: Der spielende Mensch* (1994), p. 97

⁶ *Shiryō taiki*, p. 73.

⁷ *Nichureki*, p. 240.

⁸ Saeki Shin'ichi, "Futsu shodo-shu no shogi kankei kiji ni tsuite - Kamakura koki no sho-shogi to o-shogi" (On the records related to shogi in *Futsu shodo-shu* "small shogi" and "large shogi" in the late Kamakura period), *Yugi-shi kenkyu (Study of Game History)* 5 (November 1993), pp. 3-5

⁹ Nakahara Yasutomi, *Yasutomi-ki*, p. 69.

¹⁰ *Suisho* was used originally in *chu-shogi*. The addition of this piece to *sho-shogi* does not suggest a period of transition from the former to the latter; rather, it was intended perhaps to make *sho-shogi* more exciting. It is not certain whether *hisha*, *kakugyo*, and *suisho* all were added at the same time, nor is it clear how long the version using forty two pieces was played. See Masukawa Koichi, *Shogi no koma wa naze yonju-ni mai ka (Why Are There Forty-Two Pieces in Shogi?)*, pp. 70-73.

¹¹ Orders came from fans of *chu-shogi* as well as from court nobles and warrior leaders, suggesting that the high proportion of *sho-shogi* sets cited above does not necessarily mean that *sho-shogi* already had overtaken *chu-shogi* in popularity. See Masukawa Koichi, *Shogi 2: Mono to ningen no bunka-shi (Shogi 2: Cultural History of Materials and People)* 23:2, pp. 109-14.

¹² For recently excavated shogi pieces, see Minami Hideo, "Osaka-jo ato no shogi goma" (Shogi pieces excavated from the ruins of Osaka castle) and "Osaka-jo jokamachi shutsudo no koma" (Pieces found in the castle town of Osaka castle), *Yugi-shi kenkyu* 4 (October 1992), pp. 21-23, 23-24; *Toyama-shi Mizuhashi Kanehiro, Nakabanba iseki hakkutsu chosa kokokusho* (Report on Excavation at Mizuhashi Kanehiro, Nakabanba Ruins); and Masukawa Koichi, *Shimizudo minami iseki shutsudo no shogi goma ni tsuite* (On the Shogi Pieces Excavated from the Shimizudo Minami Ruins), pp. 85-86.

¹³ The oldest known extant shogi board is a *sho-shogi* board in the collection of the Tokugawa Reimeikai Foundation, dated to about the late eighteenth century.

¹⁴ *Shogi zuikokan* (1717).

¹⁵ *Osaka hennen-shi* (History of the City of Osaka), vol. 8: p. 206.

¹⁶ *Shichu torishimari ruiju* (Civil Law), *Dai Nihon kinsei shiryō* (Modern History of Japan), pp. 170-344.

¹⁷ Handwritten document *Danshiki jinmei roku* (Chart of Players with Titles), 1857, in the Shogi Museum.

¹⁸ *Leisure White Paper 2003*, p. 33.