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# **Memory, modernity and children's literature in Japan: premodern warriors as national icons in nineteenth and twentieth century literature and curriculum**

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## Summary

This thesis examines the role of children's literature in Japan's nation-building process and the formation of a modern society. Meiji period (1868-1912) children's literature has been characterized as a literature that was behind the developments in the West as well as Japanese literature for adults, or as lacking the modern insights into the child that defines modern children's literature. Yet the intense efforts of Japanese authors and publishers to create a dedicated literature for children from the 1890s onwards bespeaks a deep-felt need for children's literature to exist as a separate literary category and a new mode of expression. This thesis on the one hand addresses the instrumental role of Japanese children's literature in the Meiji and Taishō (1912-1926) period; on the other hand, it asks what this new genre meant to the self-understanding of the adults who developed it. Focusing on a literature mainly aimed at boys of the primary school age, this thesis elucidates how Edo period (1600-1868) warrior legends circulating in cultural memory were canonized and adapted in youth literature to fit various modern ideals, and how these concurred or contrasted with the metaphors of good citizenship in textbooks. By taking the perspective of children's literature, this thesis furthermore throws new light on Japan's transition to modernity, the use of cultural memory and iconographic pictures in this transition, and the development of (gendered) childhood as a discursive category within the Japanese nation-state.

The first chapter focuses on Edo period notions of childhood that preceded the influx of Western concepts, and the meaning of 'books for children' in this context. This thesis shows that even though a specific literature for children did not exist, children were seen as an audience of books, independently from modern (Western) concepts of childhood or children's literature. Associated with the interests of children were folktales and warrior legends, and adults were keenly aware of children's interest in pictures. Representations of famous warriors in didactic texts (*ōraimono*) and picture books from Edo (*kusazōshi*) familiarized children with widely circulating sets of characters, plots, and iconographies upon which popular entertainment was structured. The main case study focuses on the representation of the general Minamoto Yoshitsune (1159-1189). Edo period illustrated biographies introduce the main episodes of his entire life, but especially popular with

children were the boyhood legends in which the small, agile warrior battles with mythical *tengu* and the warrior monk Benkei. The ideals represented by (the young) Yoshitsune are bravery, loyalty, studiousness. Didactic texts about Yoshitsune teach a Confucian lesson about slander, and the proper relationship between lord and vassal, or older and younger brother. Furthermore, the chapter explores alternative exemplary (childhood) dispositions in Edo period and early Meiji period representations of Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-1598) and Murasaki Shikibu (born around 973). Hideyoshi's biographies not only focus on his remarkable social ascendance and loyalty, but also on his unruliness as a boy. In late Edo period biographies of Hideyoshi, unruliness, flaunting one's studies, self-determination, but also loyalty, culminates in martial success and a much higher social status in later life. The lady-in-waiting and author Murasaki Shikibu represented erudition, beauty, modesty, and chastity, but only the quality of erudition is connected to a commonly depicted 'good' childhood disposition, namely the diligent study of writing. Murasaki Shikibu would become the only female exemplar who had a stable presence within the male-centered modern history curriculum.

In chapter two, I discuss the development of a canon of historical icons and exemplars in the modern elementary school curriculum. Following the promulgation of the Imperial Rescript on Education (1890), elementary education started to be interpreted as a place for creating loyal subjects. Yet the creation of metaphors was based on the pedagogical ideals of Herbartianism and 'progressive' insights into the child's cognitive development. Late nineteenth-century German Herbartians proposed to appeal to the child's imagination through narratives and pictures, and present material that relates to the nation, such as heroic tales. This idea was translated to the Japanese sphere, by making selective use of warrior legends. The heroes functioned as ethics exemplars and an expedient means for imparting 'historical consciousness' (*rekishiteki kannen*), in the sense of a collective identity. Yoshitsune was incorporated into the national language (*kokugo*) textbooks for the lowest grades as the brave boy Ushiwakamaru who beat Benkei on Gojō bridge. Both Ushiwakamaru and the audience became younger in the process, while references were made to future lessons about this hero. Hideyoshi was taken up in the history curriculum as a man of ambition, the unifier of Japan, and a figure who almost provided Japan with a precedent for the colonization of Korea. Whereas his social ascendance became one of the chief metaphors of the Meiji slogan *risshin shusse*, textbooks obscured the legends of his disruptive behavior. Murasaki Shikibu became one of the rare female historical exemplars in

the canon, first in the history textbooks but eventually only in the *kokugo* textbooks. While representing feminine virtues such as modesty and chastity, she was also an exemplar of intelligence and studiousness for children of both genders.

In chapter three I discuss how authors and publishers after initially paying lip-service to the government started to create their own versions of ideal young citizens and historical heroes. I focus on magazines and book series of the successful Tokyo publishing house Hakubunkan, and the pioneering author and editor Iwaya Sazanami (1870-1933). I re-examine the early development of the genre of children's literature in Japan through the lens of Juri Lotman's theory of cultural memory. In Lotman's spatial model of culture, or semiosphere, foreign concepts travel from periphery to center of a given cultural (sub)sphere through amalgamation with established texts, in a process of 'creative memory'. The genre of youth literature was such a foreign concept. Following a discussion of exemplary heroes in Hakubunkan's magazines and history series of the early 1890s, I zoom in on Iwaya's essays and book series, in which he explores the codes of nineteenth century youth literature from the West in adaptations of Japanese warrior legends. He shaped his protagonists into exemplary boys who display *wanpaku* (spirited) dispositions, in opposition to moralism and 'narrow-minded nationalism' imparted at home and in schools. These dispositions he explored and disseminated in his fictionalizations of Ushiwakamaru and Hiyoshimaru (the young Hideyoshi). Most strikingly, he made the legends of Hiyoshimaru's unruliness a focal element of the story, in contrast to textbook interpretations in the ideal young citizen.

The fourth and last chapter examines the re-use of early modern warrior iconographies and asks how the Taishō period trope of the 'childlike child' and the modern family intersected with representations of the remote national past and national icons. Images of warriors in Hakubunkan's successful magazine *Yōnen gahō* ('Children's Illustrated') were largely based on premodern iconographies, as seen in early modern warrior prints and illustrated books. The re-interpretations construct the young middle-class child as a 'pre-reader' and connect warrior icons and young boys to future soldierhood. *Yōnen gahō* expects all members of the nuclear family to recall and tell the stories about the selected heroes and legends, thereby forging strong connections between personal and collective memory. Ushiwakamaru appears as the most popular hero, as a martially gifted little boy who beat the big monk Benkei. The 'progressive' children's magazines *Akai Tori* ('Red Bird') and *Kin no hoshi* ('Gold Star') are known for their Romanticism and focus on 'the child's (innocent) heart' (*dōshin*), yet they also introduced adaptations of war tales that

realistically represent violence and idealize notions of loyalty and sacrifice. In this remote past, the 'innocence and sincerity' of children shines as a sublimation of the warrior spirit.

This thesis challenges the idea that 'books for children' only developed in the West or in relationship to (early) modernity, and proposes to understand the conceptual shift to children's literature as modern genre in nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Japan as a process of 'creative memory', rather than the outcome of an universally applicable evolutionary development, or a sudden paradigm shift. This thesis furthermore shows that the development of a modern Japanese children's literature – that so far has been peripheral to Japanese Literature Studies and studies on the history of Japanese education – played a central role in the production of the necessary narratives and metaphors in Japan's nation-building process. The re-appropriation of warrior legends in a dedicated literary genre for children contributed to the coherence of culture during Japan's modernization and the formation of a national identity among 'young citizens'. It moreover signified Japan's status as a modern society that separates the sphere of childhood from adulthood and provides the latter with a sense of Selfhood and the right to guide both real and metaphorical children in their development.