

JAPANESE HISTORICAL RESOURCES

Unlike the Chinese, the Japanese do not break down their national literature into the four groups of Classics, Histories, Philosophy, and Literary Collections. This does NOT mean that they do not study history! But, it does mean that there is no neat parallel organization of texts.

The Japanese do study the Chinese historical texts quite seriously. Japanese scholars make very nice concordances and indices of Chinese texts, which is one of the reasons that advanced students of Chinese history often must study Japanese as a third or fourth language. Students of Japanese history, of course, study classical Chinese also.

Histories

Japanese Imperial Histories (sometimes called “Imperially Commissioned Histories”) are the closest thing Japan has to China’s Dynastic Histories (see “Chinese Historical Sources” handout for this course). However, Japanese Imperial Histories have much less importance overall. This is largely due to the decline after the Heian period of the power of the imperial family. The scholars compiling the histories were just as ineffectual and uninfluential as those commissioning the histories in the first place.

Probably the most well known of these histories are the *Kojiki* 古事記 and the *Nihon Shoki* 日本書紀, both written in the early 8th century. These histories are compilations of myths, largely supporting the idea that the imperial family was descended from the heavens and thus divinely appropriate as rulers.

There is a good annotated bibliography of sources in Japanese in *Research in Japanese Sources: A Guide* by Herschel Webb, pp. 95-101. A quick glance at that will give you a good idea of what the canonical histories are. Note that many Japanese histories are written in Classical Chinese, which was considered the proper scholarly language until the modern era.

Private Histories also play an important role in Japan. These usually tell of one person’s experience, or one person’s take on history. There is a little bit of a blurring line between “literature” and “history” here. For example, *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes* 栄華物語, which was written by Akazome Emon 赤染衛門 in the late Heian 平安 period, is a history of the Fujiwara 藤原 clan. It contains the author’s opinions (subtly expressed), poetry, and descriptions of life at court. It is not considered a history as such, and is usually put in literary compendia, not historical compendia. That said, it is an important historical resource for information about the Fujiwara family.

Japanese are also very fond of diaries (日記). If you look through classical and modern literature, you will find hundreds of them. Diaries are certainly subjective, but they are also histories of individual lives and have been treated as such by scholars. They also have the advantage of being relatively entertaining reading!

There are volumes of unpublished historical sources, but these are the realm of a graduate student, not an undergraduate. You can visit the Meiji period collection of (mostly published) histories in the National Diet Library online to get an idea of the vastness of historical resources.

In a modern sense, probably the most important resource is the *Dai Nippon Shiryō* 大日本史料, which was a project begun in the Meiji period and continues today. This is a compilation of histories from throughout Japanese history. As you can imagine, it is voluminous! Tokyo University is in charge of the project. There was, as of 2002, an underway project to digitize this collection. As of this writing, the only online access to the information in this work is a digital index.

Organization

Prior to the computer age, possibly the biggest problem for Japanese historians was one of organization. There are many ways to organize a text—both historical and/or reference—but the best way often depends on what one needs the source for, not some higher principle. Histories are organized either by strict chronological order of events (*nembetsu* 年別), or organizes around the people involved in those events (*jimbetsu* 人別), or loosely organized in such a way that they follow various events in history from beginning to end (*jibetsu* 事別). For example, a *jibetsu* might tell you all about the Gempei 源平 war (1180-1185), but then also tell you about the various natural disasters that occurred in Japan 1181-1187. The two narratives will not overlap.

In the computer age, the hard copies don't change but our ability to search them improves with every text that is digitized. Of course, digitizing takes time and is still not available for most texts. Still, this promises to make a big difference in scholars' lives!

English Language Resources

By this point you're thinking, "OK, but I've only studied Japanese for two semesters. I can't use this stuff!" Don't give up hope! There are some very helpful English language resources available, even in our library. Please see [East Asian Historical Reference Works](#) for many examples.

In addition to the resources listed there, the following private histories (that straddle the line with literature) are available in our library:

A tale of flowering fortunes : annals of Japanese aristocratic life in the Heian period, translated, with and introd. and notes, by William H. and Helen Craig McCullough. (Mentioned above) PL 787 E5313.

Tales of times now past : sixty-two stories from a medieval Japanese collection, Marian Ury. PL 787 K6 E5 1993

The tale of the Heike, translated, with an introduction, by Helen Craig McCullough. PL 790 H4 E5 1988.

Yoshitsune; a fifteenth-century Japanese chronicle. Translated and with an introd. by Helen Craig McCullough. PL 790 G513.

These are all primary sources; there are many secondary sources in English also. The problem with secondary sources is that they are often too general (titles like *A Short History of Japan* should give you pause). In evaluating whether a source will help you, check out the index and the bibliography first. If it does not have an index or bibliography, it might be of marginal help. If the index is selective, your topic might not be there. If the bibliography is short, then the author might not have done the appropriate research. Most importantly, look for original language sources in the bibliography. **If the author of your secondary source does not read Japanese, then you should put the book down and forget it!** You might be shocked and surprised at how many people who do not read or speak Japanese publish books on Japan.