

**FORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF JAPANESE CHILDREN'S
LITERATURE: A HISTORICAL AND LITERARY ANALYSIS**

Kosimova Gulnora

Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies

Senior Lecturer, Higher School of Japanese Studies, PhD

Abstract: *This article presents a comprehensive historical and literary analysis of the genesis, institutionalization, and evolution of Japanese children's literature, tracing its development from pre-modern roots to mid-20th-century paradigms. Challenging the Eurocentric assumption that specialized literature for young readers in Japan emerged strictly as a byproduct of Westernization during the Meiji Restoration (1868–1912), the study demonstrates a robust indigenous foundation. By examining oral folklore (mukashibanashi), medieval illustrated scrolls (otogi-zōshi), and early modern commercial woodblock publications (kusa-zōshi), the author outlines how traditional culture synthesized with Western genres. The paper further investigates pedagogical and aesthetic ideological shifts across the Meiji, Taishō, and Shōwa eras—highlighting the genbun-itchi linguistic reform, the artistic purity movement spearheaded by the journal Akai Tori, and the post-war shift toward hard realism catalyzed by the 1960 manifesto Kodomo to bungaku. Ultimately, the study concludes that Japan's century-long practice of merging verbal and visual narratives directly paved the way for the global triumph of its contemporary visual media, such as manga and anime.*

Keywords: *Japanese children's literature, Meiji period, otogi-zoshi, kusa-zoshi, Akai Tori, literary synthesis, visual culture, genbun-itchi.*

The history of Japanese children's literature represents a process of complex and multi-level transformation: from traditional syncretic proto-genres to an autonomous, highly differentiated artistic system. The very term jidō bungaku (児童文学 — children's literature) is a relatively late concept, calqued from European languages at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries [Torigoe (1982), 10 p.]. For a long time, Western Oriental studies were dominated by a simplified view, according to which specialized literature for the younger generation emerged in Japan exclusively as a byproduct of Westernization and educational reforms during the Meiji period (1868–1912).

However, a detailed textological and historical-literary analysis demonstrates that the deep soil for the institutionalization of children's reading had been prepared long before the opening of state borders. Texts oriented toward the child or actively appropriated by them functioned throughout the entire written history of Japan. The national model developed along a unique path: from the oral transmission of sacral-mythological plots and early medieval illustrated scrolls to the commercial boom of mass woodblock printing in

the Edo period, which created a solid autochthonous foundation for the subsequent accelerated modernization of the Modern era [Suzuki & Kimura (1985), 15 p.].

At the origins of Japanese verbal art oriented toward child perception stands a rich folklore prose, represented primarily by the mukashi-banashi (昔話 — ancient tales) genre [Torigoe (1982), 46 p.]. These texts, passed down orally from generation to generation, lacked fixed authorship but possessed a stable structure. Archetypal narratives about a tiny boy born from a peach (Momotarō) or a shining maiden from a bamboo stalk (Kaguyahime) accumulated basic Shinto ideas regarding the purity of the child and their immanent, protected connection with the sacral forces of nature [Torigoe (1982), 46 p.]. In this optics, childhood was perceived not as a deficient stage of development, but as a period of spiritual transparency.

With the penetration of the Buddhist canon and Confucian ethics, the oral tradition began to be purposefully saturated with rigorous didactic content. Early medieval written monuments, such as the Nihon Ryōiki (Japanese Chronicle of Miracles, early 9th century), although formally intended for an adult audience, were actively integrated into the practices of domestic upbringing and monastic education [Shingu (1974), 22 p.]. Through these texts, the younger generation was instilled with concepts of karmic retribution, filial piety, and obedience.

Later, in the 17th century, intellectual pursuits led to the creation of visual aids of a new type. The prominent scholar Nakamura Tekisai compiled a monumental work titled Kunmō Zui (訓蒙図彙 — Illustrated Collection for Enlightenment) [Suzuki & Kimura (1985), 87 p.]. This compendium became Japan's first specialized illustrated encyclopedia. Its key pedagogical innovation lay in the fact that abstract concepts, natural phenomena, and social roles were explained to the child through immediate visual fixation, setting a vector for the inseparable synthesis of word and image.

During the Muromachi and Azuchi-Momoyama periods (14th–16th centuries), a qualitative shift occurred in the Japanese literary process, driven by the secularization of culture and the growth of the urban population. The otogi-zōshi (御伽草子 — entertaining tales) genre emerged and flourished [Suzuki & Kimura (1985), 88 p.]. The word otogi originally denoted a quiet, soothing conversation intended to entertain a noble person or calm a child before sleep. The narrative fund of otogi-zōshi included hundreds of short stories that existed in the form of vibrant handwritten scrolls.

A characteristic feature of many tales in this circle was the concept of gekokujō (下剋上), understood in this context as the victory of a weak but pure-hearted character over overwhelming forces of evil. This idea resonated incredibly well with the child audience. A classic embodiment of this concept is the story of Issunbōshi (The One-Inch Boy), who sets out for the capital in a soup bowl boat, defeats fierce oni demons with a common sewing needle, and attains normal size and wealth thanks to a magic mallet taken from his enemies [Torigoe (1982), 46 p.]. The structure of otogi-zōshi was built on syncretism: large, meticulously drawn illustrations occupied the greater part of the scroll while the text

was inscribed directly into the free zones of the artistic field, allowing young or illiterate readers to easily decode the plot.

In the Edo period (1603–1868), the establishment of a lasting internal peace and the rapid development of commercial xylography (woodblock printing) caused a genuine publishing boom. The widespread opening of urban primary schools, known as *terakoya* (寺子屋), led to a sharp increase in literacy among the townspeople (*chōnin*) class. In response to market demands, the phenomenon of *kusa-zōshi* (草双紙 — illustrated booklets) emerged, where graphic and verbal sequences formed an indivisible artistic whole.

Within this trend, there existed a strict classification by cover color, which reflected the age and thematic differentiation of readers. The first commercial form created directly for small children were *akahon* (赤本 — red books) [Suzuki & Kimura (1985), 89 p.]. Their bright red cover color, in addition to attractiveness, carried an apotropaic function—it was believed to protect the child from smallpox and evil spirits. It was on the pages of *akahon* that the final fixation and canonization of the five great Japanese fairy tales occurred, including *Momotarō*, *Kachi-kachi Yama*, and *Shitakiri Suzume* (The Sparrow with the Cut Tongue).

For older children, *kurohon* (black books) and *aohon* (blue books) were published, offering adolescents historical chronicles (*gunki monogatari*) and adapted plots from Kabuki theater. At this stage, the most prominent professional writers of the era began to contribute to the creation of children's books [Torigoe (1982), 108 p.]. The recognized master of comic prose, *Jippensha Ikku*, created unique educational game-books that developed spatial thinking, linguistic intuition, and a sense of humor in young readers.

The literary process of the Meiji period was characterized by forced modernization. The transformation of traditional genres into a modern institutional system of children's literature occurred in stages, passing through three clearly differentiated periods [Okada (1983), 41 p.].

In the first two decades after the Meiji Restoration, state policy developed under the slogans of *Fukoku Kyōhei* (Enrich the country, strengthen the armed forces) and *Bunmei Kaika* (Civilization and Enlightenment). During this period, the authorities and educators viewed children's books exclusively as a pragmatic instrument for the modernization of consciousness and the transmission of new knowledge. The artistic merits of the text were secondary to its ideological utility. A landmark event of this stage was the publication of a translation of Aesop's Fables titled *Isoho Monogatari* (1872) [Okada (1983), 112 p.]. *Watanabe* purposefully adapted European plots, layering them onto the familiar Confucian matrix to make Western moral imperatives understandable to the Japanese child. Simultaneously, the book market was flooded with translated adventure novels by Jules Verne and Daniel Defoe, which popularized ideas of Western scientific and technical progress, individual fortitude, enterprise, and rationalism among the youth [Shingu (1974), 10 p.].

By the beginning of the 1890s, especially against the background of the patriotic upsurge during and after the Sino-Japanese War, the utilitarian Westernization vector was replaced by a powerful wave of interest in domestic cultural roots. Society felt the need to protect its national identity. During this period, a large-scale state and public revision of the folkloric heritage unfolded. Ancient tales of Momotarō, Issunbōshi, and other heroes were extracted from the niche of "low," cheap popular literature of past centuries and underwent editing [Torigoe (1982), 15 p.]. They were purged of local dialectisms, coarse colloquialisms, and excessive medieval cruelty. The texts were reworked in accordance with new pedagogical tasks and the ideals of the 1890 Imperial Rescript on Education, transforming them into a flawless, ethically calibrated, nationwide canonical curriculum [Torigoe (1982), 15 p.]. Folklore characters began to be endowed with the traits of ideal, loyal subjects of the Japanese Empire.

Toward the end of the Meiji period, under the powerful influence of romantic and naturalist movements in "adult" literature, children's literature made a turn toward the inner world of the human. Straightforward didacticism was replaced by the concept of "child egocentrism" [Shingu (1974), 23 p.]. Childhood was proclaimed a sovereign, spiritually pure period of human life, possessing a unique type of thinking, deep psychologism, and a creative imagination free from social conventions.

The central figure who brought about a revolution in the artistic practice of Japanese children's prose was the writer, critic, and public figure Iwaya Sazanami. In 1891, he published the story Koganemaru, which is unanimously recognized by researchers as the first original artistic fairy tale of the Modern era [Torigoe (1982), 13 p.]. The plot of the work, which narrates the adventures of a loyal dog that overcomes severe trials to avenge the death of its father, was formally based on the traditional samurai ethical construct of katakiuchi (vendetta). However, structurally and aesthetically, it was a revolutionary type of text: dynamic, oriented toward independent child perception, and devoid of tedious moralizing.

Following this success, Sazanami implemented a grandiose project — the anthology *Nihon Mukashi-banashi* (Japanese Ancient Tales) in 24 volumes, in which he recorded the reference models of the modernized national fairy tale [Nihon Jidō Bungakusha Kyōkai (1976), 43 p.]. Being an active participant in the influential literary association Ken'yūsha (Society of Friends of the Inkstone), Iwaya Sazanami successfully transferred the key aesthetic manifesto of this circle to the sphere of children's books. He became a consistent champion of the genbun-itchi (言文一致) linguistic reform, which proclaimed the need to bridge the gap between the spoken and written languages [Torigoe (1982), 27 p.]. Sazanami's children's prose decisively abandoned the heavy, archaic kanbun style, which was over-saturated with Chinese borrowings, and acquired a plastic, clear, and colloquial-literary language accessible to the child.

The development of poetic forms for children throughout the Meiji era followed the path of gradual liberation from rigid classical frameworks (tanka and haiku) and utilitarian

tasks. In the first decades, the genre of *shōka* (songs for learning) reigned supreme within the framework of the school reform [Torigoe (1982), 32 p.]. These were purely pragmatic, rhythmic texts of a didactic or patriotic nature, intended to be learned in chorus during lessons. At the turn of the century, romantic poets, such as Shimazaki Tōson and Susukida Kyūkin, turned to the folk song tradition, laying the foundations for the creation of *dōyō* (童謡 — children's artistic song) [Torigoe (1982), 32 p.]. This new genre focused entirely on the fixation of immediate child emotions, the musicality of the verse, and the aesthetic experience of the beauty of the surrounding world.

The process of institutionalizing children's literature as an autonomous subsystem of Japanese culture would have been impossible without the rapid development of specialized periodicals, which became the main creative laboratories of the era.

The main media platforms of this period were the following publications:

Shōnen Sekai (Boys' World) — the magazine was founded in 1895 and edited by Iwaya Sazanami. Its primary ideological orientation consisted of forming a type of active, courageous patriot oriented toward loyal service to the state; the target audience was boys and adolescents [Okada (1983), 145 p.].

Shōjo Sekai (Girls' World) — this periodical was founded in 1906. As a specialized magazine oriented exclusively toward the female youth audience, it became the starting point for the emergence and conceptualization of a specific national *shōjo* subculture [Okada (1983), 145 p.].

The development of dramaturgical forms is also connected with the activities of Iwaya Sazanami, who in the 1900s initiated the practice of holding so-called "storytelling evenings" (*danwakai*) [Torigoe (1982), 81 p.]. These public events included not only the recitation of artistic texts but also elements of costumed theatrical performances, lighting effects, and musical accompaniment. The enormous success of the *danwakai* revealed an acute need in Japanese society for original repertoire for children, which laid a solid structural and dramaturgical foundation for the subsequent formation of professional Japanese children's theater.

With the onset of the Taishō era (1912–1926), Japanese children's literature entered a period of its highest artistic flourishing. A turning point was the founding of the iconic magazine *Akai Tori* (Red Bird) by Suzuki Miekichi in 1918 [Torigoe (1982), 21 p.]. The country's best creative forces rallied around this publication. Miekichi proclaimed the unconditional priority of "pure art" and high artistry over any forms of commerce and state didacticism. This period saw the flourishing of the work of Ogawa Mimei, recognized as the creator of the original Japanese humanistic fairy tale, imbued with elements of lyrical mysticism, as well as Niimi Nankichi, a master of subtle psychological realism in short prose [Shingu (1974), 45 p.].

However, the tragic experience of the country's militarization and the Second World War required the postwar generation of writers to engage in a deep and critical re-evaluation of established traditions. In 1960, a radically minded group of young critics and

prose writers published a landmark theoretical manifesto, *Children and Literature (Kodomo to Bungaku)* [Shingu (1974), 142 p.]. The authors of the manifesto subjected the legacy of the Akai Tori school to scathing criticism, accusing it of excessive sentimentalism, cloying sweetness, and artificial idealization of childhood [Shingu (1974), 142 p.]. The manifesto called on writers to abandon "adult nostalgia for childhood" and begin creating fundamentally new works based on strict realism, logic, dynamic plotting, and genuine entertainment value. This theoretical intervention reconfigured the literary field, laying the foundation for the contemporary Japanese children's novella [Torigoe (1982), 86 p.].

Historical-literary analysis demonstrates that Japanese children's literature has traveled a unique path of accelerated and organic evolution. Over a relatively short historical span, the national culture managed not only to assimilate and digest complex Western genre models but also to deeply synthesize them with its own rich traditions. The centuries-old experience of the inseparable fusion of verbal and visual rows—stretching back to the medieval otogi-zōshi scrolls, developing in the color kusa-zōshi books of the Edo period, and consolidating in the illustrated magazines of the Meiji period—largely predetermined the phenomenal global triumph of contemporary Japanese visual industry, above all manga and anime.

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