

Book Project

Perceptions of the Past and the Formation of a National Identity: The Mongol Invasions of 1274 and 1281 and their Reinterpretations in Nineteenth-Century Japan (working title)

Keywords: Japan, Late Edo (1615-1868) and Meiji periods (1868-1912), National Identity, Construction of the Past, Mongol Invasions of Japan

1. Aim and Relevance of the Project

Studies of nineteenth-century Japanese nationalism and in this context of Japan's relationship with the West and the Asian mainland have mainly dwelled on the ideology and aspirations of political leaders and intellectuals. Most studies implicitly or explicitly build upon the concept of the nation, national myths, rites, histories and images of the foreign "other" as construed, consciously manipulated and imposed upon the population by a small elite. In contrast to conventional wisdom, it is my working hypothesis that the formation of a national identity was driven by geographically varying circumstances and traditions. Local actors elevated locally rooted historical memories to a national level and thereby played an important role in constructing a Japanese national identity. As a consequence, Japan's nation-building process at the end of the nineteenth century was not homogenous and centrally directed, but on the contrary arose from the interplay between political actions and mentalities at both the local and national levels.

To substantiate this hypothesis I explore the historicisation of the two Mongol invasions of Japan in 1274 and 1281 from the late eighteenth century to the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05. The aim is not to present a chronological, linear development of certain historical constructions but to uncover so to say concurrent perceptions of the past. I analyse what actors remembered the Mongol invasions and which events in Japan and abroad influenced written and visual representations of the Mongol invasions. The focus is on three periods: first the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, second the 1860s and third the time from the first Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 to the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05. The reason for this temporal categorization is that these periods witnessed a conspicuously intensified interest in the Mongol invasions and marked turning points in the way how people in Japan remembered the Mongol invasions. The claim I am making is that the perceptions of the Mongol invasions tell us not so much about the event itself but all the more about the sensitivities of the population, the opening to the outside world and the formation of a national identity in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Japan. Based on recent approaches in

Japan and the West, I show that the formation of a national identity was not solely the work of the elite in Tokyo. Local actors influenced the rising national consciousness, creating their ideas from regionally based traditions and memories and direct contacts with the outside world.

2. State of the Art

Scholars in the West interested in the nation-building process in nineteenth-century Japan have devoted attention to legal, political and institutional aspects. Fields of interest are the creation of the Meiji constitution, the *tennō*, Emperor, and national rites as symbols of national identification, the institutionalisation of history as an academic discipline, the introduction of Marxist thought or the evolutionary theory from Europe, the creation of a Japanese "orientalism" vis-à-vis China, the reflection of the official state philosophy in the educational system or public health issues as specific aspects of nation-building. If the subject is on people's biographies, the focus is on the educated classes, namely the adherents of the two most prominent schools of thought of the *bakumatsu* period, the conservative Nativist and Mito schools. Or the attention is directed to the intellectuals of the Meiji period, who initially enthusiastically embraced the tradition of Western learning and thought, only then at a later stage to transmute into conservative forces, promoting the consolidation of the *tennō* rule at the apex of the unique Japanese national entity, the so-called state ideology of *kokutai*.

Not least due to this strong focus on political and institutional developments, the nation-building process in Japan is conventionally perceived as a process, exclusively driven and shaped by an intellectual and political elite at the centre. This discourse has certainly been influenced by the scholars Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner and Eric Hobsbawm, who have argued that nations and nationalism were the products of the growth in state power and of the formation of a mass literate society, i.e. as a process mainly construed from the top down. Few scholars have addressed the self-image and awareness of the foreign "other" by uneducated people. Studies then are confined to townsmen and villagers in the area of Tokyo, i.e. the centre of political or economic changes in the nineteenth century, or to social fringe groups, in particular the outcaste communities and the ethnically different Ainu.

Recently scholars in Japan have indicated that despite changes in politics, law and economy during the nineteenth century, the nation-building process in Japan was also marked by continuities. The transition from the Edo to the Meiji period was an evolutionary process varying from region to region. This view fits into a general new strand of comparative and transnational history that emphasises the interaction or transfer of people, ideas and

technologies across national boundaries and thus questions the importance of the state as a framework for cultural flows.

4. Status of the Book Project

The two Mongol invasions of Japan in 1274 and 1281 first attracted scholarly interest during the eighteenth century. Under the influence of *kokugaku*, nativist school, scholars gathered the historical material of Japan's past and in this context turned to the Mongol invasions. Thereafter, scholarly dedication to the historical event experienced three waves: A first wave is discernible in the mid-nineteenth century as the awareness of the Mongol invasions, which up to then had represented the greatest external threat to the Japanese archipelago, grew in response to the pressure of Western imperial powers. A second wave extended from the eve of the first Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 to the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05. A third wave of scholarly interest took place between the Manchurian Crisis in 1931 and the end of World War II. Clearly, scholarly interest in the Mongol invasions rose when Japan felt threatened by foreign powers.

The historiography of the Mongol invasions would appear to be closely linked to the nation-building process in Japan, involving as in all young nations the construction of national myths and histories and the differentiation from the foreign "other". In my book project I suggest quite the opposite, namely that the memory of the Mongol invasions belonged to the local commemorative system of northern Kyushu. Only in the wake of the Russo-Japanese War as Japan had gained a status equal to the Western powers did the Mongol invasions enter a national historiography. I discuss the historicisation of the Mongol invasions in three sections.

The first section is about the memory of the Mongol invasions in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. A first sign of the rising awareness of the Mongol invasions among intellectuals and leading warrior families in northern Kyushu during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is the heightened interest directed to the "Illustrated Story of the Mongol Invasions" (*Mōko shūrai ekotoba*) of the thirteenth century. There are various reasons for the reinvigorated interest in the story. First, intellectuals, in particular the representatives of *kokugaku*, explored historical events and exchanged information on source material. In this context scholars made and passed around copies of the scrolls. Second, the warrior families of northern Kyushu were keen on acquiring copies of the scrolls because the scrolls not only represented the merits of the protagonist Takezaki Suenaga but of other famous warriors. It is

no coincidence that copies of the scroll came into circulation especially in the area of Higo, the homeland of the descendants of the warriors depicted in the scroll.

The intensive study of the "Illustrated Story of the Mongol Invasions" was certainly not related to the growing awareness of the outside world but on the contrary mirrored the self-absorption of the ruling class at that time. The eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were a period of relative peace and economic growth, but also a period characterised by deep-seated social changes. The shifting socio-economic structures called into question the old hierarchic order. In this time of intellectual and political turmoil, the ruling class looked back to its own past. Intellectuals developed new ethnographical and historical approaches and the warriors who had given up warfare and evolved into bureaucrats, were increasingly interested in their belligerent ancestors.

The attention directed to the scroll thus fitted into a general interest in Japan's past. Not only intellectuals and influential warrior families but also lower levels of society in northern Kyushu rediscovered their ancestors who had fought against the Mongols in old documents. Ruling classes and commoners alike were establishing links to historical figures, thereby defining their identity in the present. Obviously the Mongol invasions were deemed a part of the local history of northern Kyushu.

The second section analyses the Mongol invasions as metaphors of anti-foreignism in the 1860s. The increasing appearance of foreign ships off the shores of Japan and accounts of Qing-China's defeat in the Opium War of 1839-41 let Western powers appear as an immediate threat. In 1853 the American commodore Matthew C. Perry compelled the opening of Japanese ports to foreign trade. The 1860s saw the emergence of anti-foreign movements, known under the slogan of that time "Revere the Emperor, expel the barbarians" (*sōnnō jōi*). Especially the warriors from Chōshū Domain, present-day Yamaguchi prefecture, converted the slogan into action by attacking foreign ships on the Kanmon Straits between the islands of Honshu and Kyushu in June and July 1863. The attacks that violated the official conciliatory policy of the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1868) towards the West escalated into several naval battles. Between the summers of 1863 and 1864, i.e. at the height of the *sonnō jōi*-movement, several artists created satirical prints on the naval battles fought by the Chōshū warriors against Western powers. A common pattern was to disguise these battles in the historical garb of the Mongol invasions.

By choosing the Mongol invasions that stood for Japan's perseverance against foreign influence as metaphors for then contemporary conflicts with the West, artists conveyed a clear political message without having to be explicit. They criticised Western aggression and even

more the conciliatory policy of the Tokugawa Shogunate towards the West. The prints indicate that the clashes in 1863 and 1864 attracted countrywide attention and that there was a sense of solidarity with the uprising warriors. Although rooting in a subversive and antiauthoritarian tradition and spreading convictions in contradiction with government policies, the prints anticipated a sense of national unity.

The third section covers the period from the Sino-Japanese War of 1894/95 to the Russo-Japanese War of 1904/1905. Following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the Mongol invasions featured in officially approved history textbooks, as design on the unified currency, a national historiography and other *lieux de mémoire*, "sites of memory." Nevertheless, the Mongol invasions were only one of many historical topics to be studied within a national framework. Moreover, the influence of local actors in northern Kyushu is obvious with respect to the founding of the "movement for the establishment of a monument for the Mongol invasions" (*Genkō kinenhi kensetsu undō*) in 1888 and the preparation of the standard reference on the Mongol invasions, published in 1891, the *Fukutekihen*. A chief promoter of the movement and the *Fukutekihen* was Yuchi Takeo (1847-1913), who came from Kumamoto. The story of the movement and the *Fukutekihen* show that although bureaucrats in Tokyo included the Mongol invasions in history textbooks, primary source editions and national currencies, the Mongol invasions remained a subject of the local historiography of northern Kyushu up to the late nineteenth century.

By exploring the nationalistic underpinnings of historiographies and visual media that were not necessarily associated with the intellectual and political elite in Tokyo, this research project adds a new perspective on the formation of Japan's national identity in the nineteenth century and its perception of Asia and the West.