

# Sugoroku games

## A snapshot of Japanese popular culture

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In 2014–15, as part of the Cultural Collections Projects Program at the University of Melbourne, I undertook a project that involved cataloguing, researching and translating an assortment of Japanese printed items from the East Asian Rare Books Collection, which is part of Special Collections in the Baillieu Library. The items had already undergone conservation treatment and encapsulation in Mylar (archival polyester film) at the Commercial Conservation Services unit of the university's Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, but required further documentation to raise awareness of their existence and enable easier access for scholarly research.

I worked on 18 paper-based items: concert advertisements, advertising handbills, handwritten letters, maps, posters and games. They include an eclectic mix of genres, from four mostly late 19th-century *bikifuda* colour lithographic prints advertising textiles, to three flyers announcing the application procedures for tickets to the 1966 Beatles concert in Tokyo. There is also a map of stalls at the 1903 Osaka World Fair Exhibition, and a detailed guide to the famous Nikko heritage site, depicting important landmarks and courtiers in traditional dress. A 1937 air-raid

poster for the Kanto region and a detailed survey of imperial Japanese dress regulations from the Meiji era (1868–1912) have potential as source material for military historians. Some of the information on the materials is handwritten, but most is printed. Although each category warrants a separate discussion, in this article I focus on a series of five examples of the popular Japanese game of *sugoroku*.

### **Sugoroku: backgammon, or snakes and ladders?**

The name *sugoroku* (literally 'double six') is given to two types of game. The first is a version of backgammon introduced to Japan from China in the sixth century.<sup>1</sup> This early form of *sugoroku* is more specifically known as *ban-sugoroku* and is usually played on a wooden board.<sup>2</sup>

The second type of game, known as *e-sugoroku*, is similar to Western board games such as snakes and ladders, where the players proceed through the squares from the beginning to the end. Unlike *ban-sugoroku*, *e-sugoroku* is thought to have originated in Japan.<sup>3</sup> It was a popular form of entertainment in Japan during the Edo period (1603–1868).<sup>4</sup>

*Sugoroku* was reportedly banned by the Japanese government in the years 689 and 754.<sup>5</sup> As *sugoroku* is

a game played with dice, perhaps it was used for gambling, which might explain why it was outlawed in the earliest centuries after its introduction to Japan. But the game's transition from potential vice to mainstream entertainment is revealed by its inclusion as supplements in early 20th-century magazines aimed at boys, such as *Hikō Shōnen* of 1916 (see page 47), and *Yōnen Danshi no Tomo* of 1927 (see page 49).

### **Sugorokus in the collection**

The *sugoroku*s in the University of Melbourne Library were made between about 1850 and 1935, and appear to belong to the *e-sugoroku* category. Taken as a series, they illustrate the transition from coloured woodblock prints in the mid-19th century to colourful mass-produced printing in the early 20th century. It is interesting to note that, in the earliest *sugoroku* in the collection (c. 1850), the images (in a muted blue, yellow and black) follow a rectangular 'spiral'; depending on where the player sits, the 'board' may need to be rotated to interpret the images and script (see page 46). In comparison, a *sugoroku* produced during the Taishō period (1912–26) contains vivid colours, with all illustrations and script neatly segmented into different shapes facing in a single direction (see page 47).

*Kokushi emonogatari sugoroku: Seugaku Sannensei shōgatsu gō furoku* [A sugoroku depicting the illustrated history of Japan: A supplement to the New Year's edition for third graders], Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 1936, game illustrated by Hiroshi Haneishi, printed on one sheet of paper, 55 × 79 cm. UniM Bail SpC/EA, 6859 K202 1936, East Asian Rare Books, Special Collections, University of Melbourne Library.

In this game, illustrations of important moments in Japanese history, such as the Battle of the Japanese Sea in 1905, form part of the manoeuvres. There are also instructions for players.





Left: *Fukujin taisha sankei meisbo dôchû sugoroku* (Seven Lucky Gods sugoroku game), place of publication not known: Yamamotoita, c. 1850, game illustrated by unknown artist, coloured woodblock print on one sheet of paper, 31 × 40 cm. UniM Bail SpC/EA, 6859 F552 [1850?], East Asian Rare Books, Special Collections, University of Melbourne Library.

In this game, the depictions of the Seven Lucky Gods among scenes of mountains and rivers face in different directions.

Below: *Gunkoku hikô sugoroku: Hikô Shônen Taishô gonen shinnen'gô furoku* [Military aircraft sugoroku: A supplement to the New Year's edition of the *Hikô Shônen* magazine], Tokyo: Nihon Hikô Kenkyûkai, 1916, game illustrated by Senma Tani, printed on one sheet of paper, 55 × 77 cm. UniM Bail SpC/EA, 6859 G658 1916, East Asian Rare Books, Special Collections, University of Melbourne Library.

This mass-produced, brightly coloured game, published during World War I, depicts military and naval exploits and individuals; all can be viewed from the one direction.





The variety of themes featured in the games tells us much about trends and interests among the Japanese populace at different times. For example, topics of interest for young boys appear to be centred on animals and the military, as evidenced by the famous horses, historical events and aircraft featured in the sugorokus that appeared in boys' magazines. Nationalism and patriotism appear to be a recurrent theme, as such topics tend to be set in a Japanese context. The jacket of a sugoroku showing a die being caught instead of a baseball highlights the incorporation into sugoroku of Japan's national sport (see above).

Although most of the sugorokus are laid out in a landscape (horizontal) format, one is vertically oriented. This example depicts horses from various periods in Japanese history, ranging from the horse of the famous warrior Kumagai Naozane (1141–1207/08) to modern warhorses and racehorses (pictured opposite).

Changes in the format of Japanese script are also illustrated through the sugorokus from different periods. The script in the oldest sugoroku (c. 1850), depicting the Seven Lucky Gods, reads in the traditional Japanese way, from top to bottom, progressing from right to left (see page 46). In comparison,

the military-themed sugoroku issued as a magazine supplement in 1916 maintains this format with the exception of the title, which adopts a more Western style: the script is now horizontal but still reads from right to left (see page 47). The sugorokus issued during the 1920s and 1930s follow a similar format.

## Conclusion

Overall, the materials in the collection shed light on Japanese popular culture and history from the 1850s to the 1960s. In particular, the small group of sugorokus emphasises the popularity of such games and the changing interests of the Japanese people from the later 19th into the early 20th century. Such games also evoke feelings of nostalgia for an era where two-dimensional games were a form of social activity—a time before high-definition computer graphics and WIFI connection became the basis of modern entertainment.

Although I have attempted to translate information from Japanese to English to allow for greater access to the content, the use of traditional Japanese and calligraphy in some items makes it difficult to interpret the information in its entirety. Perhaps this short article will encourage historians and experts in Japanese linguistics to explore the material in greater detail,

**Left:** *Yakyū sugoroku* [Baseball sugoroku], publication details unknown, probably early 20th century, game illustrated by Chiyo-kichi Hirata, printed on one sheet of paper, 53 × 76 cm. UniM Bail SpC/EA, 6859 Y402, East Asian Rare Books, Special Collections, University of Melbourne Library. Shown here is the 'jacket' that would have housed the game when it was folded.

**Opposite:** *Meiba sugoroku: Yōnen Danshi no Tomo shinnen gō furoku* [Sugoroku with pictures of great horses: A New Year's supplement to the magazine for little boys *Yōnen Danshi no Tomo*], Tokyo: Gakushūsha, 1927, game illustrated by Yoshirō Senchi, printed on one sheet of paper, 55 × 40 cm. UniM Bail SpC/EA, 6859 M844 [1927], East Asian Rare Books, Special Collections, University of Melbourne Library. This game features horses from various periods in Japanese history.

to promote a greater understanding of this intriguing aspect of Japanese popular culture.

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The East Asian Rare Books Collection comprises Chinese- and Japanese-language items. The Chinese material includes 7,000 volumes of oriental-style works dating from the 1600s to 1935, as well as scrolls of painting and calligraphy, magazines published in the 1930s, and diaries from the Cultural Revolution period. The Japanese holdings are particularly strong in history, art, architecture, language learning and teaching, and popular culture. Items may be requested for use in the Reading Room on the third floor of the Baillieu Library; see [library.unimelb.edu.au/collections/special-collections/rare-books/international-rare-books/eastasian](http://library.unimelb.edu.au/collections/special-collections/rare-books/international-rare-books/eastasian).

- 1 'Bibliography', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 1, nos 3–4, November 1936, pp. 407–37 (434).
- 2 Rebecca Salter, *Japanese popular prints: From votive slips to playing cards*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006, p. 164.
- 3 Colin Mackenzie and Irving L. Finkel (eds), *Asian games: The art of contest*, New York: Asia Society, 2004, p. 77.
- 4 Laura Nenz Detto Nenzi, 'Intersections: The place of recreational travel in Edo culture and society', PhD thesis, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2004, p. 178.
- 5 'Cultural survey, 1988', *Monumenta Nipponica*, vol. 43, no. 4, Winter 1988, pp. 465–70 (468).



シタリフ

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