# Japanese Writing System I

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(When romanizing words in Japanese, I used contemporary Japanese spelling wherever possible and avoided more correct spelling according to historical linguistics, in order to avoid some complexity not relevant to the main line of exposition.)

## Early Development, Kanji, Man'yōgana, Katakana, and Hiragana

The decision to write Japanese using Chinese characters--or kanji--was not made with the conscious knowledge of the repercussions that the decision would later entail. If the question of adopting a foreign script like Chinese (which is linguistically not similar to Japanese at all) were under consideration today, the Japanese would certainly not consent to such an adventure. Anyone studying Japanese now can attest to the awkwardness and the challenge the Japanese writing system poses. This is true not only for learners of Japanese as a foreign language but for Japanese themselves. It might be of interest to trace the history of the writing system and find out how, like anything else adopted from a foreign land, the Chinese writing system was modified to fit the Japanese language.

A Chinese book entitled *Gokansyo waden* 後漢書倭伝, dated A.D. 57, tells of a country to the east of China. This description presumably refers to a part of present-day Japan, probably in the island of Kyūshū. This area was apparently ruled by a king and therefore, we may assume, this country had a structured socio-political life. This very early description of Japan received more credence when a Chinese gold seal was unearthed in 1784 in Fukuoka, a city in northern Kyūshū. Measuring 2.3 cm x 2.3 cm x 0.8 cm and weighing 109 g, it bore the inscription kan no wa no na no kokuō 漢委奴国王 "King of the country of Wa, tribe Na, under the Han rule." This seal is thought to be one that the Tang Emperor Kōbu 光武帝 (the first emperor of the Late Han Dynasty, 6 B.C.-A.D. 57) presented to the Japanese emissary. It is therefore plausible that contact between China and Japan existed around the beginning of the Christian era. And by

implication, it is possible that the practice of adopting Chinese to write Japanese began around this time.

On the other side of the Japan Sea, other records are useful in learning more about how kanji was adopted. According to the description in the *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*, kanji were brought from China during the reign of Emperor Ōjin ((王神天皇, fifth century A.D.) by a man named Wani (王仁) from the Korean kingdom of Paekche (Ch. 百済, Jp. Kudara), one of the three major political states then occupying the Korean Peninsula. Wani is said to have brought the ten-volume Analects of Confucius 論語 and Senjimon 千字文, a textbook for learning and teaching kanji. Wani is credited with teaching kanji to the imperial prince Uji no Wakiiratsuko 菟道稚郎子.

It was not until the fledgling country of Japan sent scholars to China for study beginning around A.D. 600 that the effort to write Japanese in Chinese began in earnest. These scholars were called kenzuishi or kentōshi. Kenzuishi means "emissaries to the Dynasty of Sui (589-619)" and kentōshi means "emissaries to the Dynasty of Tang (618-907)." Until the program was abolished in A.D. 894 because of political instability in the Tang dynasty, the Japanese government sponsored more than ten trips, each trip numbering between 500 to 600 bureaucrats and scholars who would stay in China for two to three years to learn and observe all they could in one of the most civilized cultures in the world. At the conclusion of their studies, the students returned to Japan with documents of all sorts, including Buddhist scriptures written in Chinese. It is these Buddhist scriptures that served as the major seed for the development of the Japanese writing system.

Chinese has been written exclusively using characters since the inception of the writing system, which can be traced back to about 3500 B.C.E. It began as incisions on bone and turtle shell for the purpose of divination ceremonies, politics, and warfare. Many inscribed pieces dating back to 1200 to 1500 B.C.E. (during the Yin Dynasty) were found toward the end of the 19th century. Two to three thousand characters, or about a half of those characters discovered, were still in use at the time of the discovery.

By the time the Japanese scholars and bureaucrats who went to China were reading documents in Chinese, the Chinese system of writing had long been developed. It had a comprehensive dictionary of characters. A lexicographer named Kyoshin (Ch. 許慎, A.D. 30-124) compiled a dictionary of characters (whose title is read as Setsumonkaiji (説文解字) in Japanese), which contained more than 9,300 characters. By this time, a large number of character compounds had also developed. Calligraphy was also gaining status as a high form of art. (The reader may think the number of characters is staggering, but consider this: In 1716 the Chinese Emperor Kōki 康熙 (1662-1722) commissioned a dictionary of characters. When completed, it listed an impressive 47,035 characters.)

At the beginning, Chinese characters were not used for writing Japanese. Instead, those who could write—scholars, government bureaucrats, and monks, for instance—simply wrote their documents in Chinese. The first Japanese constitution, the Seventeen Article Constitution promulgated in A.D. 604, for instance, was written by Prince Shōtoku (574-622) in Chinese—using Chinese characters, vocabulary, and grammar.

As early as the fifth or sixth century, however, scholars realized that Japanese could be written or transcribed using just the sound value of Chinese characters. This method of writing was possible because Japanese had only a small set of distinct sound combinations and Chinese had a large inventory of sounds. Thus a method was devised to write Japanese using Chinese characters. That is, to write a Japanese sound ("syllable" or, more properly, mora), a character having the same or similar sound was chosen from among the Chinese characters. Note that when characters were used in this way, the original character's meaning was often disregarded. This system of writing, using Chinese characters for their phonetic value only, is called man'yōgana.

Man'yōgana, along with Chinese proper, was used for Japan's oldest poetic anthology *Man'yōshū*, a collection of more than 4,500 poems, which is thought to have been compiled around A.D. 760. During the Nara period (710-784) documents were written in styles ranging from purely Chinese (examples include the first constitution of Japan

mentioned above, the *Nihonshoki*, and an anthology of poems written in the Chinese language by Japanese called Kaifūsō) to a mixture of Chinese and Japanese. Much of the *Man'yōshū* was written in this mixture. For instance, the following *Man'yōshū* poem illustrates this interesting blending of the two languages. The poem *Man'yōshū* 1:8, attributed to Nukata no Ōkimi (Princess Nukata) reads as follows (in romaji flanked by Japanese as written in this blended language, followed by an English translation):

### Romaji: Original Japanese/Chinese blend:

Nikitatsu ni 熟田津爾

Funanori-semu to 船乗世武登

Tsuki mate ba 月待者

Shiho mo kanahinu 潮毛可奈比沼

Ima wa kogiide na 今者許芸乞菜

### Translation:

At the harbor of Nikitatsu

To travel on a boat

We waited for the moon to rise

The tide just came in

Let us now embark!

Several observations may be made about the state of the written language using this *Man'yōshū* example. First, the characters 世武登 in the second line are the man'yōgana characters representing the syllables /semuto/. Each kanji character in this group, from left to right, represents the sounds /se/, /mu/, and /to/ respectively. As mentioned before, the meanings of these characters are not relevant here; only their sounds are. The

remainder of the that line, 船乗, is a Chinese compound meaning "traveling by boat, voyage" and is read in Japanese as funanori. This word in the poem is not written in man'yōgana; it is rather a Japanese word having the same meaning as the Chinese. That is, the Chinese word 船乗 was assigned the pronunciation funanori, which meant 'sea voyage'. Similarly tsuki 月 and shiho 潮 (shio in Modern Japanese) are not written in man'yōgana. Again, 月 and 潮 are Chinese words representing their meaning equivalents in Japanese vocabulary tsuki and shiho. As one can see, this poem contains a mixture of both Japanese and Chinese elements. Overall, *Man'yōshū* poems contain man'yōgana as well as many lexical and grammatical elements of Chinese.

The general idea of using Chinese to write Japanese was consistent among practitioners of this writing system, but the ways they chose characters to represent Japanese sounds were not. Each practitioner was relatively free to choose any Chinese character which had a similar pronunciation to the Japanese sound. Thus the set of Chinese characters for sound-character substitution quickly became very large; as many as 1,000 characters were known to have been used by the 10th century just to represent about a hundred distinctive syllables (moras) then existing in Japanese. In time, for instance, the sound /si/ could be written with any one of 38 characters including 斯, 志, 之, 師, 紫, 新, 四, 子, 思, 司, 資, and 芝.

During the Heian period (794-1192), using kanji for writing - in Chinese or in man'yōgana - continued. It was in the tenth and eleventh centuries when two other writing systems (based on syllabary principles) developed. These systems are called katakana and hiragana. Recall that the Japanese language has only a small number of distinctive sound units called mora (analogous to syllables); thus to write this language, it was only necessary to devise a system in which each distinct syllable could be assigned to a symbol.

Katakana refers to a system of shorthand symbols which were used mainly by monks, scholars, and government officials to make a pronunciation indication for an unfamiliar Chinese character when reading Chinese. If an unknown character appeared in a text, the reader would note its pronunciation with a kanji or a shorthand abbreviation of it -

such as those used in man'yōgana - whose pronunciation the reader knew. For instance, to note the pronunciation of the Chinese character 歟, which would have been pronounced /ka/ in Japanese, the scholar might have written next to it 加 , a man'yōgana for the sound /ka/, or its abbreviation (i.e. the left side of the character) 力. The people who employed this system, who by the way were mostly men, each had a slightly different system of annotation, thus making it difficult, if not impossible, to read someone else's annotation. (Because it was men who were reading these documents, katakana is called "man's hand".) It was not until the mid-Heian period that katakana conventions began to be standardized.

Hiragana developed directly from man'yōgana. It was a cursive version of man'yōgana. It was mentioned earlier that the sound /si/ could have been written using any one of 38 characters. Thus cursive and sometimes very abbreviated versions of these characters began to be used by writers to represent /si/. Hiragana was called "woman's hand" since it was developed and used mainly by women courtiers and writers. Hiragana developed around the same time as katakana.

The habit of using katakana and hiragana without any standardization regarding form continued until 1900, when, for the first time, the shape for each symbol was standardized by a government decree. A set of 46 symbols for hiragana and another set of 46 for katakana were chosen. Today, for instance, 力 is the only standard katakana rendition of the sound /ka/. The hiragana し, which is a cursive equivalent of 之, represents the sound /si/. Other shorthand katakana symbols used through history are no longer used. However, other man'yōgana and especially their cursive versions are still used today in calligraphic writing of poems. Man'yōgana appearing in this context are called hentaigana. Hiragana and katakana overlap each other in function in that they are both capable of representing all Japanese sounds equally efficiently, but in today's writing they are used differently. As discussed elsewhere, katakana are used for mimesis, foreign names, names of fauna and flora, etc., while hiragana are used to write function words and inflectional endings.

## Reading Kanji

Even after learning about the development of syllabaries in Japanese, one may still wonder about how Chinese characters became assimilated into the Japanese language. Recall from above the cases of 月 and 潮. Now consider a Chinese character 山, which means "mountain". In Chinese, this character had the pronunciation [shan]. When this character was brought into Japanese, the character retained the same meaning, but its pronunciation changed to /san/ so that it would fit into the sound pattern of the Japanese language. The meaning of this character also corresponded to a native Japanese word yama "mountain". As a result, the character 山 became associated with two pronunciations—/san/ from the Chinese [shan], and /yama/ from the Japanese word for "mountain". In other words, the character 山 would now have two ways of being pronounced: /san/ and /yama/—one of Chinese origin and another of Japanese origin, but with both referring to "mountain". This is the case with the majority of Japanese kanji. There are ordinarily both Chinese and Japanese readings. The Chinese reading is referred to as the on reading—the sound reading, sound value of it—and the Japanese reading is referred to as the kun reading, representing its semantic value. Typically, then, a kanji may have several ways of being pronounced. Which pronunciation to choose depends on how it is used in a word: on reading when appearing as part of a Chinese compound, or kun reading when appearing as part of a native Japanese word or compound.

Thus there are situations in which the same kanji may be read in different ways depending on the context in which it appears. Take, for example, the character 生. In Chinese, this character basically means "life" or "come to life," and it has a single reading [sheng]. When it was brought into Japanese, however, it was applied to an array of words with many different readings: 生かす /i-kasu/ 'let live', 生う /o-u/ 'grow', 生える /ha-eru/ 'grow', 生む /u-mu/ 'give birth', 生まれる /u-mareru/ 'be born' and others. From these examples, we can see that this character 生 can be read as /i, o, ha, u/. These are readings in addition to the on readings of this character, which are /sei/ and /shō/.

In some cases, the same character was brought into Japanese from three distinct places at different times. One such exmple is the character 行, with the basic meaning

of 'go'. This character now appears in words such as 行者 gyōja 'practitioner of Buddhism', 行路 kōro 'route', and 行宮 angū 'temporary imperial palace', thus demonstrating that 行 can be pronounced in three different ways (/gyō/, /kō/, and /an/). And unlike 生, these three readings are on readings, i.e., they are all "original" Chinese readings. The first pronunciation is the Wu pronunciation for this character, the second represents the Han sound, and the third is referred to as the Tang sound. The Wu pronunciation was the pronunciation prevalent in the area known today as Nanjing (南京). Words with this regional pronunciation were brought into Japan by merchants before and during the Nara period. Buddhists scriptures, when read out loud even today, are read using the Wu pronunciation. Accordingly, words having to do with Buddhism are typically read with the Wu pronunciation. The Han sound refers to those sounds in kanji compounds which merchants and monks brought back from China after the Kamakura period (1180-1333). Lastly, the Tang sound refers to the Chinese pronunciations which the Japanese borrowed during the Tang dynasty (618-907). These pronunciations were part of a dialect spoken in the Chōan (長安, now called 西安 Xi'an) and Rakuyō (洛陽) areas in the central part of China, where kentōshi missionaries spent most of their time. Due to these historical complications, a kanji may have several on readings, thus creating the need for a learner of Japanese to determine which reading/pronunciation is used in which context.

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**Suggested Reading**

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