

## Writing in Japan

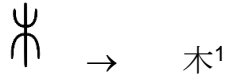
### Overview

The Japanese writing system today is a peculiar blend of Chinese characters and Japanese grammar. Approximately 1300 years ago, Japanese elites decided to import Classical Chinese and make it the official language because there was then no written form of Japanese. Over the course of time, Chinese characters were eventually adapted for use in the Japanese language as well, even though Classical Chinese and Japanese were in no way connected. These languages shared neither syntax nor grammar, were mutually incomprehensible in their spoken forms, and were not even members of the same family of languages. In spite of these difficulties, the Japanese found a way to successfully adapt and employ Chinese characters for written Japanese. Some of the Chinese characters used in written Japanese today are still familiar to contemporary Chinese, but many have changed to such a degree that they are unrecognizable by Chinese.

There are three writing systems (orthography) in the contemporary Japanese language: *hiragana*, *katakana* and *kanji* (Chinese characters). All three can be used in any given sentence, but their form and function is different. *Hiragana* is a syllabary derived from Chinese characters and today forms the basis of written Japanese. All syllables (and sounds) in Japanese can be rendered in *hiragana*. *Hiragana* is most often used when Japanese grammar is expressed in a sentence. For example, the conjugated portion of all verb endings are written in *hiragana*. *Katakana*, which is also derived from Chinese characters, is used to render foreign loan words only or when using direct quotations. In general, *kanji* are used for most nouns and pronouns, the unconjugated parts of most adjectives and the unconjugated elements of verbs. It should be noted that the Japanese language can be written in the Latin alphabet (*romaji*) as well. However, using *romaji* (an alphabet...not a syllabary) makes it extremely difficult for the reader to distinguish grammatical structure and to determine where words begin and end in a sentence. Efforts to adopt *romaji* were abandoned in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and have not been seriously undertaken in recent decades.

## The Ancient Period

*Kanji* are ideographs, which means they are symbols representing ideas. Scholars believe that ideographs evolved in central China from pictographs sometime in the Neolithic period (10,000-1900 BCE), and with no cross-pollination from other ancient civilizations. An example of a late Neolithic character is the pictograph for tree. Over the millennia, this character evolved into the modern Chinese character for tree.



In addition to changes in morphology, the meaning of Chinese characters has evolved over time as well. The character 森 (forest) is composed of three trees. However, a forest is most often composed of more than three trees. The character 森 is therefore best described as an ideograph. The distinction between a pictograph and ideograph might seem small, but it is important because ideographs allow for a more sophisticated and fuller expression of the human experience than is possible with only pictographs.

Japanese scholars believe that sometime during the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE (at the earliest) Buddhist missionaries brought the Chinese writing system to Japan. Its utility was quickly recognized by the emerging imperial household and it was enthusiastically adopted. The imperial household, however, had to employ immigrant scribes because it was a completely foreign language for Japanese and very few could actually use it. These immigrant scribes were also instructed to teach Classical Chinese to Japanese. This was a difficult and extremely rigorous task, and many Japanese scribes learned the language incompletely or incorrectly. As more and more Japanese wrote Classical Chinese, which came to be known as *kanbun* (literally “Chinese writing” 漢文), it began to undergo organic change within a few generations and slowly came to reflect Japanese sensibilities. This led to the development of many different variants of the official language.

Among the identified variant forms of *kanbun* are *jun kanbun*, *kanbun kundoku*, *kanbun chokuyakutai*, *kanbun kuzushi* and *kanbun kakikudashibun*. Each of these styles evolved from that which was once the official language of the Nara period (710-794 CE). *Jun kanbun* is pure Chinese and reflects Chinese syntax with no attempt to impose Japanese structure upon it. *Kanbun kundoku* is Chinese written with the addition of diacritics and other marks that enable those with limited ability to render its meaning understandable in Japanese. Other forms of *kanbun* used *katakana* (Japanese orthography) to indicate the Japanese pronunciation of obscure Chinese characters.<sup>2</sup> Often, sentence structure was modified to reflect a writing style that more closely approximated Japanese grammar. Even at this early stage of language development, the various shades of *kanbun* had begun to blur, presenting language scholars today with the dilemma of what to call each variant form. Nonetheless, knowledge of the language offered access to power in the Nara era. Many strove to master it. Those who did were revered as learned and erudite. *Kanbun* became the language of the elite, the cultured and the refined.

## **Kana**

There is little evidence that the Japanese tried to develop a writing system for the Japanese language before Chinese characters were introduced. Instead, early Japanese scholars simply used the Chinese characters they had to hand. However, Chinese characters had to be adapted to meet Japanese requirements. Over the course of many generations, this resulted in the development of the Japanese syllabary known today as *hiragana*. The Japanese language is syllabic, which means that sounds are rendered in the written form as a syllable. This is different from a language that uses a symbol for each sound (an alphabet), with groups of letters representing each syllable. In Japanese, syllables are grouped to construct a word.

It was relatively easy to adopt Chinese characters for Japanese nouns and pronouns. Japanese scribes simply selected a Chinese character to stand in for a Japanese noun. Often, there was meaningful similarity between the original meaning of the Chinese character and the Japanese meaning of a word. Using Chinese characters for verbs and other parts of speech, however, proved very challenging because of how Japanese verbs are conjugated. But the Japanese were up to the challenge and developed ways of coping by using *hiragana* for the conjugated endings of verbs and adjectives. Given the constant use of certain Chinese characters in Japanese, they were slowly simplified and short-hand versions appeared. Examples are below:

安 → あ (pronounced “an” in Classical Chinese and “a” in Japanese),

天 → て (pronounced “ten” in Classical Chinese and “te” in Japanese).

All Japanese words can be rendered in *hiragana*.

Foreign loan words were also originally written in Chinese characters. This type of Japanese orthography is now known as *katakana*. Examples are below:

川 → ツ (pronounced “chien” in Classical Chinese and “shi” in Japanese),

也 → ヤ (pronounced “jia” in Classical Chinese and “ya” in Japanese).

In this way, Japanese scribes adapted Chinese characters to meet the needs of the Japanese language. Along the way, however, they saddled the Japanese language with a very complicated method of writing. These three different orthographic systems one must master in order to have attained a basic level proficiency in the Japanese language are time consuming to learn and tax Japan’s contemporary educational system. One of them (*kanji*) requires learning 2136 different characters known as *jōyō* (basic use) *kanji*. Each *kanji* in Japanese can have multiple meanings and pronunciations and can be grouped in different combinations with other *kanji*, leading to a vocabulary numbering in the tens of thousands.

## **Classical Period**

### **Literary Writing**

Some of the earliest examples of Japanese writing in *kanbun* can be seen in works produced in the seventh century, during the time when a strong central

government was emerging. One of the most prominent is the *Kenpo Jūshichijō*, known in English as the “Constitution of Seventeen Articles.” Many scholars believe that Prince Shōtoku (574-622 CE), revered as one of the most able statesmen in all of Japanese history, wrote or supervised the writing of this document. He was impressed with all things Chinese and probably visited that country on at least one occasion. Indeed, many historians attribute to him the honor of being one of the first Japanese to recognize the importance of Chinese writing. The *Kenpo Jūshichijō* is one of the first works outlining the form and function of the state. Most official documents of the Nara and early Heian periods (794-1185 CE) were written in *kanbun*. Among the famous works of literature written in *kanbun* was the *Nihon Shoki* (A.D. 720).<sup>3</sup>

## Post Classical Period

### Medieval and Early Modern Periods

*Kanbun*, in one form or another, continued to evolve in Japan. Eleven centuries after its introduction, it still retained its position as the most learned form of writing. While its fortunes rose and fell based on the political, social and economic conditions in Japan, as late as the mid-nineteenth century it was considered the most proper form of expression. It continued to be closely associated with the state and the power of the elites. Due in part to the Tokugawa revival of Confucianism in the Edo period (1600-1868), *kanbun*'s popularity and widespread usage likely rivaled that of the early Heian period. However, few still wrote in *jun kanbun* or pure Chinese. Indeed, official documents were often written in a variant form called *wakankōbun*.<sup>4</sup> As Japan was ushered into modernity with the Meiji Restoration in 1868, *kanbun* began to lose its authority.

### ***Wakankōbun*: The Official Written Language**

Most official documents of the Meiji era, including Imperial rescripts, were written in the *wakankōbun* form. *Wakankōbun* was a literary form of *hentai kanbun* that emerged no later than the tenth century, and probably before. It wedded the use of *kana* and *kanji*.<sup>5</sup> *Kana* were used as an aid in the partial translation of Chinese characters to indicate Japanese grammar. The *wakankōbun* form relied on simple Chinese syntax and vocabulary interspersed with Japanese grammar.<sup>6</sup> This form was often used by religious figures reading and writing sutras. One of the most famous early works in the *wakankōbun* style is the *Hōjōki* (An Account of My Hut) written by the Buddhist monk Kamo no Chōmei, in 1212.<sup>7</sup> *Wakankōbun* was also used in some of the famous “war tales” of the Kamakura period (1192-1333). The most well-known example was the *Heike Monogatari* (Tales of the Heike). Due to the influence of Buddhist institutions and because the Kamakura rulers broke the monopoly on power the Fujiwara and Imperial households held, the

*wakankonkōbun* form was designed to be read by or recited to a much greater audience than just the aristocrats of the Heian period.

### **Sōrōbun: The Epistolary Style**

As Japan moved into the Early Modern Period, the form of writing used with the highest degree of frequency was *sōrōbun*. *Sōrōbun* was a hybrid form of writing which incorporated elements of Chinese syntax and vocabulary and Japanese orthography and grammar. It emerged in the Kamakura period (1185-1336), an era marked by more practical considerations than the Heian era. The *sōrōbun* form is characterized by the use of the verb *sōrō*. It is descended from *hentai* or variant *kanbun* and actually describes a wide range of variant *kanbun* styles. While the term *sōrōbun* cannot be used to describe *jun kanbun*, it can be used to describe many other forms of the language that did not meet the standard of pure *kanbun* and that used *sōrō* as an ending verb or copula.

The word *sōrō* was used in the spoken language of the Heian period to mean “to serve,” although it eventually lost that meaning. Later, it ceased altogether to be used in the spoken form. Eventually, *sōrō* in the written form came to mean “to be.” At that time, probably in the thirteenth or fourteenth century, it diverged from the *hentai kanbun* form and became the *sōrōbun* linguists can identify today. Most prominently, it was employed by the samurai class in the late Edo period in both official and unofficial documents. It often accompanied official pronouncements written in *kanbun* or *wakankonkōbun* thereby greatly facilitating the spread of information. For example, the well-known sword hunt proclamation issued by Toyotomi Hideyoshi in 1588 was written in both *kanbun* and the hybrid form.<sup>8</sup>

Education played a key role in the popularization of the *sōrōbun* form. Years of study were required to become proficient in *kanbun*. This seemed incompatible with the rough and tumble life of a samurai, who would as both children and adults, also be required to learn and practice the art of warfare. However, because samurai also administered the realm, it became necessary to learn the official language to some extent. The popularization of the hybrid form was the inevitable outcome. In the early Muromachi period (1336-1573), a copybook entitled *Teikin Ōrai* (The Home Letter-Writer), written in *hentai kanbun sōrōbun*, appeared and began to be used to instruct pupils in the proper epistolary style.<sup>9</sup> It was meant for those with some *kanbun* education. However, this guide also came to be used by commoners in *terakoya* (temple schools) and was adopted for use by those writing in the *kanamaijiri sōrōbun* style.<sup>10</sup> Women also used the *sōrōbun* style but with a larger proportion of Japanese vocabulary and *hiragana*.<sup>11</sup>

### **Wabun: The Colloquial Style**

The development of *kana* in the Heian era is the key innovation which allowed for the spoken language to find expression in the written form. *Kana* evolved from the Japanese practice of writing Chinese characters in cursive script. While it is impossible to determine exactly when *kana* diverged from Chinese characters, *hiragana* was certainly an identifiable orthographic system

by the ninth century. *Wabun*, as the name suggests, is literally Japanese-style writing and was rendered, largely, in *hiragana*. However, some Chinese characters were interspersed in the narrative depending on the author and time period in which it was written. It was the language spoken by the Japanese aristocracy of the mid to late Heian period. Heian aristocrats were very fond of poetry and sought to express themselves through this medium. However, women were not sufficiently educated in the Chinese language to use *kanbun* to write poetry and began to write using the spoken language instead. In this way, *wabun* emerged as an identifiable form by the tenth century.

*Wabun* has long been identified as women's writing. While men used it in correspondence with family members, other women, and with very close friends, it never attained the same cultural status as *kanbun*. In fact, *wabun* was sometimes called *onnade* (woman's handwriting) or *onnamoji* (woman's letters).<sup>12</sup> *Wabun* is often described as soft, flowery and richly descriptive. It reflected the privileged lifestyle of the Heian aristocracy. Some of Japan's greatest literary works were written in *wabun* by women. These include *Genji Monogatari*<sup>13</sup> (The Tale of Genji) by Murasaki Shikibu and *Makura no Sōshi* (The Pillow Book) by Sei Shōnagon, both of which were written around the year A.D. 1000.

By the middle of the twelfth century, *wabun* was no longer the written form of the aristocratic spoken language. It had not continued to evolve as less refined elements had made their way into Japanese language and culture. As the Heian period drew to a close, the spoken language devolved to become less sophisticated and to reflect the privileged culture of the Heian aristocracy less and less. At roughly the same time, *wabun* moved into the realm of "classical Japanese" and became both a mode of communication and an art form in much the same way as had *kanbun*. *Wabun* continued to be used by authors, chroniclers, and diarists throughout the Kamakura and Muromachi periods.

## 19<sup>th</sup> century

### Writing Contemporary Japanese

Japanese elites struggled to find a written language that could be used by all Japanese after the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Communication difficulties at the time of the Restoration were compounded in the written form because the various spoken dialects bore little resemblance to *kanbun*, the official written language and language of instruction. Because fewer than 40% of boys and 10% of girls ever attended school at some point in their lives, literacy rates were very low.<sup>14</sup> Of course, some segments of Japanese society were literate in their own dialect and many, particularly in the Osaka and Tokyo areas, used the language of commerce. Those with training in a specific job or profession could also communicate. For example, doctors could communicate with doctors, merchants with merchants, craftsmen with craftsmen and priests with priests. Nonetheless, as Japan entered the Meiji era, neither the written nor the spoken forms of the language were capable of acting as a unifying force for the new nation.

## 20<sup>th</sup> Century

By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Japanese linguists led by Ueda Kazutoshi (1867-1937) began the process of codifying all three writing systems. It was a relatively straightforward, but difficult, task to select 50 *hiragana* and 50 *katakana*, standardize their morphology and determine the spelling of words...and use them to teach students nationwide standard Japanese. A chart of *hiragana* currently used is below:<sup>15</sup>

わ <small>wa</small>	ら <small>ra</small>	や <small>ya</small>	ま <small>ma</small>	は <small>ha</small>	な <small>na</small>	た <small>ta</small>	さ <small>sa</small>	か <small>ka</small>	あ <small>a</small>
	り <small>ri</small>		み <small>mi</small>	ひ <small>hi</small>	に <small>ni</small>	ち <small>chi</small>	し <small>shi</small>	き <small>ki</small>	い <small>i</small>
	る <small>ru</small>	ゆ <small>yu</small>	む <small>mu</small>	ふ <small>fu</small>	ぬ <small>nu</small>	つ <small>tsu</small>	す <small>su</small>	く <small>ku</small>	う <small>u</small>
	れ <small>re</small>		め <small>me</small>	へ <small>he</small>	ね <small>ne</small>	て <small>te</small>	せ <small>se</small>	け <small>ke</small>	え <small>e</small>
を <small>wo</small>	ろ <small>ro</small>	よ <small>yo</small>	も <small>mo</small>	ほ <small>ho</small>	の <small>no</small>	と <small>to</small>	そ <small>so</small>	こ <small>ko</small>	お <small>o</small>
ん <small>n</small>									

Below is a chart of the *katakana* currently in use:<sup>16</sup>

# カタカナ

ン n	ワ wa	ラ ra	ヤ ya	マ ma	ハ ha	ナ na	タ ta	サ sa	カ ka	ア a
		リ ri		ミ mi	ヒ hi	ニ ni	チ chi	シ shi	キ ki	イ i
		ル ru	ユ yu	ム mu	フ fu	ヌ nu	ツ tsu	ス su	ク ku	ウ u
		レ re		メ me	ヘ he	ネ ne	テ te	セ se	ケ ke	エ e
	ヲ wo	ロ ro	ヨ yo	モ mo	ホ ho	ノ no	ト to	ソ so	コ ko	オ o

The task of selecting, standardizing the morphology, meaning and pronunciation of *kanji* was extremely contentious and time consuming. Linguists struggled for decades to create a comprehensive list of Chinese characters and then to find a way to limit and simplify the number of strokes. Some characters had changed little for a millennium, others seemed to change with each generation. Determining which was the most appropriate for modern usage remains a challenge today. In addition, linguists struggled to determine which *kanji* should be required for all Japanese students to learn at different levels of educational attainment. In short, the Japanese writing system is still changing today.

## Suggested Readings

Bjarke Frellesvig, *A History of the Japanese Language*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Yaeko Sato Habein, *The History of the Japanese Written Language* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1984).

Kazuki Sato. "Same Language, Same Race: The Dilemma of Kanbun in the Early 1900s." In *Racial Identities in East Asia*, ed. Barry Sautman. Hong Kong: Division of Social Science, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology Press, 1995.



Christopher Seeley, *A History of Writing in Japan* (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1991).

Nanette Twine, *Language and the Modern State: The Reform of Written Japanese* (London: Routledge Press, 1991).

Nanette Gottlieb [Twine]. *Kanji Politics: Language Policy and Japanese Script*. (London: Kegan Paul International, Distributed by Columbia University Press, 1995).

### Discussion questions

How does one distinguish between pictographs and ideographs? How did the transition from pictographs to ideographs in late Neolithic China change the development of Chinese society?

Do you think it was unwise of the early Japanese rulers to adapt a completely foreign script to the Japanese language? Did they have much of a choice? If so, what might that choice have looked like?

Discussions about the abandonment of Chinese characters in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century yielded no substantial changes to contemporary Japanese. Might there have been a third path between the adoption of the Latin alphabet and the maintenance of the status quo? How did the Koreans handle the problem?

To what extent did the adoption of the word processor change how the Japanese language was taught and used?

<sup>1</sup> Characters are in the public domain.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Burns, *Before the Nation: Kokugaku and the Imagining of Community in Early Modern Japan*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 36.

<sup>3</sup> Yaeko Sato Habein, *The History of the Japanese Written Language* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1984), 9-10.

<sup>4</sup> *Wakankonkōbun* is sometimes also called *kanamajiribun*. *Kanamajiribun*, as George Sansom wrote in his 1928 publication *An Historical Grammar of Japanese*, simply uses mixed phonetic script.

<sup>5</sup> Although scholars disagree on the exact date *hiragana* itself emerged as an identifiable, uniform orthographic system, it clearly began to take shape by the ninth century. Some language specialists attribute the development of *kana* to the Buddhist priest Kobo Daishi (AD 774-835), who is credited with standardizing their use and decreasing their number from approximately 300 to the 47 still recognizable today.

<sup>6</sup> Yaeko Sato Habein, *The History of the Japanese Written Language* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1984), 39.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 49-50.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Seeley, *A History of Writing in Japan* (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1991), 100-101.

<sup>9</sup> Nanette Twine, *Language and the Modern State: the Reform of Written Japanese* (New York: Routledge Press, 1991), 49.

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that elements of the *kanamajiribun/wakankonkōbun* form are reflected in the *sōrōbun* style. Indeed, by the Meiji era, elements of the various styles intersected to such an extent that for non-linguists, it is sometimes impossible to distinguish clearly one form from the other.

<sup>11</sup> Yaeko Sato Habein, *The History of the Japanese Written Language* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1984), 81.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

<sup>13</sup> Many scholars believe this work to be the world's first novel.

<sup>14</sup> Nanette Twine, *Language and the Modern State: The Reform of Written Japanese* (London: Routledge Press, 1991), 17-20. This contradicts Ronald Dore's assertion that literacy rates were high in pre-modern Japan.

<sup>15</sup> Chart in the public domain.

<sup>16</sup> Chart in the public domain.