

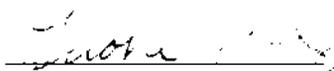
**A Brief Overview of Kanji in the Japanese Writing System: Its History and Current State**

**An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)**

**by**

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Guohe Zheng", is written over a horizontal line.

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**May 8, 1998**

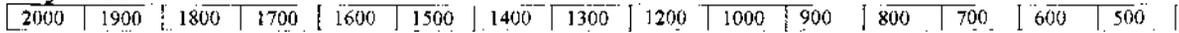
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## Purpose of Thesis

The purpose of this thesis is to present an historical account of the adaptation and evolution of kanji in the Japanese writing system, and to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of modern kanji usage. I will begin with a simple overview of the modern system, then review the history of kanji from its Chinese origin to its assimilation into Japanese. I will conclude with a discussion on the negative and positive aspects of kanji use in modern Japanese.

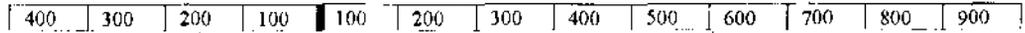
# Kanji Timeline

## Before Common Era →



**2000 BCE:**  
writing emerges in the Yellow River region of China

## Common Era →



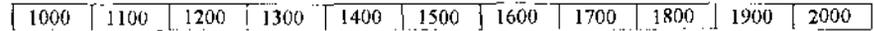
**2<sup>nd</sup> c. BCE:**  
Chinese cultural influence begins making its way into Japan

**2<sup>nd</sup> c. CE:**  
first known Chinese dictionary, *Shuo Wen Chie Tsu* written

**601 CE:**  
Lu Fayen completes the famous rhyming dictionary *Qieyun*, which lists nearly 12,000 characters

710-794: Nara period

794-1185: Heian period



Heian period →

**mid-Heian:**  
*kana* emerges

**12<sup>th</sup> c. CE:**  
*kanbun* and *wabun* merge into a single writing system

## ***Introduction***

Japan is a country rich in history and tradition, with a distinctive native language and culture. As with any culture, however, modern Japan reflects numerous historical influences, one of the greatest of which is its language, particularly written Japanese. The modern Japanese writing system has evolved over a period of many centuries and has undergone many changes. The original Chinese characters borrowed to adapt spoken Japanese to a written format are still used in modern Japanese writing, though in a different capacity. The modern writing system is complex, as is its history.

## ***Brief Overview of Contemporary Written Japanese***

The modern Japanese writing system employs three different alphabets—*hiragana*, *katakana*, and *kanji*, all of which can be used together in a given context. Since everything, from academic journals to daily newspapers and advertisements, is written this way, Japanese literacy requires knowledge of *hiragana* and *katakana* and knowledge of the most commonly used *kanji*. The basic alphabet is *hiragana*, and is used for writing words phonetically; *hiragana* is also used for grammatical functions such as particles and inflectional endings. Like *hiragana*, *katakana* is also a phonetic alphabet, but it is more simplistic in style and has limited usage. It is reserved for use in writing *gairaigo*, or foreign loan words, and in some onomatopoeic words such as are found in Japanese *manga* (comic books). *Kanji* is by far the most complex of the three alphabets. Borrowed from Chinese, these characters are often stylistically complex pictographic and ideographic representations of words and ideas (Shibatani 858).

The 1991 Kodansha's Compact Kanji Guide states in its introduction that, although there are approximately 3,300 kanji used in a typical newspaper, the most common 1,000 account for 94% of kanji used (Kaiser xii). The official Japan Industrial Standard codes list over 6,000 total kanji, but the 1981 *Jouyoukanjihyou*, a government “List of Characters for Daily Use” intended as an education guide, recommends familiarity with 1,945 kanji (in addition to the two basic alphabets) for reading proficiency. Therefore, it is considered that to be a proficient reader one must be able to read the 46 basic and 58 extended syllables of both the hiragana system and the katakana system and nearly two thousand kanji—a total of 2153 characters (Shibatani 858). This also involves knowledge of multiple pronunciations, as most kanji have at least two readings. Depending upon context, a kanji can be read by its *kun'yomi* or *on'yomi* pronunciation; *kun'yomi* is the Japanese reading assigned mainly to words formed by or including a singular kanji, whereas *on'yomi* is the Sino-Japanese reading used for compounds of two or more kanji. These *on'yomi* pronunciations were acquired over centuries of language contact with China, and are derived from the dialects of different regions of China over a period of centuries—therefore there is no definitive system for determining the Sino-Japanese pronunciation, aside from a thorough historical analysis of individual characters. Consequently, the learning of kanji *kun'yomi* and *on'yomi* requires a great deal of rote memorization (Shibatani 859).

### ***Kanji Types***

Six of the seven categories of kanji that are defined in modern Japanese can be attributed to Chinese origin. The first known Chinese text to discuss this categorization

of kanji is the *Shuo Wen Chie Tsu*, written in the second century C.E. The seven modern categories are as follows (Kanji 1-2):

*shoukeimoji*: simple pictographs, such as *mountain* 山, *river* 川, and *person* 人

*shijimoji*: simple symbols for abstract concepts, such as *around* 囗 and *inside* 宀

*kaiimoji*: ideographs, which combine pictographs and symbols to express a complex idea

*keiseimoji*: phonetic-ideographs combining phonetic and semantic meaning—most kanji fall under this category

*tenchuimoji*: characters whose meaning and/or pronunciation have been altered through borrowing of the character for different semantic/phonetic use

*kashamoji*: purely phonetic characters used as a sort of syllabary

*kokuji*: Japanese-created kanji—this is the only category not originating from the Chinese model (these have only *kun'yomi* readings)

### ***Early Influence of Kanji***

The system of writing kanji is believed to have originated around 2000 B.C.E. in the Yellow River region of China (Kanji 1). When Lu Fayuan compiled the famous rhyming dictionary *Qieyun* in 601 C.E. he recorded approximately 12,000 characters (Ramsey 117). Around the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E. Chinese cultural influences began to spread into Japan via the Korean peninsula, facilitating a shift from nomadicism to agrarianism as Chinese technologies spread through Japan. The most important of these technologies included rice and silk cultivation, weaving, and building. There was limited Chinese-language borrowing this early in Japanese history (Loveday 30).

While there was some direct contact with China, the Korean peninsula remained the primary avenue of Chinese influence during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries (Loveday 27). Chinese-educated Koreans, immigrating across the narrow strait between the peninsula and the Japanese island of Kyuushuu, were the main purveyors of Chinese learning in early Japan (Kanji 1). Slowly this learning spread through the country and, over a period of several hundred years, Chinese became more widely known and integrated into the upper-class strata of Japanese society. The elite minority of the imperial family and courtiers—the imperial system itself a result of earlier Chinese cultural influence—was one of the first groups to integrate Chinese studies into its subculture. The other main group was comprised of Buddhist monks, who began using Chinese prayers and sutras. By the Nara period (710-94) a diglossic bilingualism was emerging within the court and monastic cultures (Loveday 31).

At this time Japanese existed only as a spoken language. Without a writing system with which to compare and equate Chinese writing, it became necessary to be able to read Chinese characters *in Chinese* in order to understand them. Therefore, scholars of Chinese writing were required to be bilingual. Such scholarship was unattainable—and most likely unknown about—for the majority of the Japanese people, whose time was occupied with the everyday labors of the peasantry. Thus only those whose situations did not require such labor (the imperial court) or whose religious devotions separated them from common society (Buddhist monks) were significantly influenced by Chinese learning during the early Nara period. The monastic culture in particular excelled in Chinese studies; perhaps this was rooted not only in simple

religious devotion, but also historical reverence, as Buddhism was introduced into Japan by students of Chinese Buddhism less than five hundred years before.

In addition to growing use in worship services, Chinese was becoming the dominant language system of the imperial court. By the end of the Nara period in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century, written Chinese was used for academics and official documents as well as private writings. Spoken Chinese was considered the formal, intellectual standard (Loveday 30-31). The influence of written language also gave rise to a new academic arena—literature indigenous to Japan. This was impossible prior to the Nara period because of the lack of a written language, but the growing presence of Chinese learning in the academic realm led to a method of writing called *man'yōgana*. The word *man'yōgana* is taken from *Man'yōshū*, the title of an early anthology of native Japanese verse compiled in 759 C.E. This collection, the title of which means “collection of myriad leaves,” uses Chinese characters as phonetic symbols. In this usage, the poems were written in Chinese characters, but were read in Japanese. Since the Chinese kanji are used solely as phonetic representations of Japanese sounds, the pictographic and ideographic significance of the characters is irrelevant to the understanding of the piece (Shibatani 859).

The *man'yōgana* way of writing, while fairly simple in concept, was in fact quite complicated. Many kanji shared the same pronunciation; in Chinese, spoken and written context allowed differentiation of meaning of identically pronounced characters. The purely phonetic nature of Japanese *man'yōgana*, however, meant that any number of kanji could be used to represent a particular sound, and the choices multiplied with each component of a polysyllabic word. In his article entitled “Japanese,” Masayoshi

Shibatani cites as a basic example the word for “mountain”—*yama* in Japanese. In order to write the word, two kanji must be used: one to represent the syllable *ya* and another for *ma*. Therefore the word which in Chinese is depicted by the simple pictograph 山 would have been written in Nara Japan using two most likely semantically unrelated but phonetically applicable characters. One of several possibilities is 夜麻. In Chinese 夜 (*ya*) means “evening,” and 麻 (*ma*) means “hemp” (857). Another example is 野魔, in which the 野 (*ya*) means field and 魔 (*ma*) means polish or brush.

It can be assumed that there was some variance within the elite academic community concerning knowledge of kanji, affected by variables such as the nature and orientation of the source, generations of current study from the original Chinese source, and human memory. Perhaps a Buddhist monk would tend to use kanji more frequently associated with religious terms, whereas a court scholar educated in Chinese poetry may have been more familiar with nature-oriented kanji, some characters not as commonly used as others may not have gotten passed on to students; and there was always the possibility of human forgetfulness. This is speculation, of course, but it seems logical that, with the number of kanji and variety of sources of Chinese learning in Japan, there would be different characters used in different groups. What has been established is that there was no set syllabary for *man'yōgana*, and much knowledge of kanji was required to fluidly read such a text.

### ***Expanding Use of Kanji***

As the Japanese reading of Chinese characters developed, it became less necessary for scholars to know and use the Chinese language. The earlier diglossic

bilingualism established in the academic communities of the court and monastic cultures was shifting toward a diglossic monolingualism. Kanji began to be used more according to their ideographic rather than phonetic significance, facilitating the shift from Chinese-language skill to Japanese (Loveday 31). A distinction between the Nara and early Heian and the middle to late Heian years is made by contemporary scholars, dividing the bilingual and monolingual phases of Japanese culture. During the latter time period, the social use of Chinese diminished greatly, and Chinese became a purely academic rather than socially proscribed language (Loveday 32). Japanese written in the *man'yōgana* style was reserved for use only in high-status spheres. Loveday sums up the situation neatly: “After several centuries of intense sinification, the Japanese had reached a level of cultural autonomy allowing separation from their Chinese model” (34).

Despite the declining necessity of bilingualism, Chinese words began making their way into Japanese vocabulary. Literature of the Heian period shows an integration of Chinese loan-words into Japanese writing. This presence of Chinese loans in written Japanese suggests that the loan-words were also present in the spoken language (Loveday 31). As the Heian period progressed, Chinese loans filtered down the social ladder, gaining recognition among lower-ranking priests and warriors (Loveday 34).

### ***The Emergence of Kana***

A new phonetic alphabet developed in Japan, derived from simplified Chinese characters. These characters were called *karina*, meaning “temporary letters,” as opposed to the “true letters” or *mana* of Chinese writing. Eventually the term *karina* was shortened to its contemporary form *kana* (Shibatani 857). There were two types of kana:

“plain kana” and “side kana.” These two alphabets remain in use, and their contemporary usages were discussed earlier. “Plain kana,” or *hiragana*, came from a simplification of the cursive “grass style” of writing kanji, and were originally considered as a women’s alphabet. They were not used in conjunction with any other characters. “Side kana” or *katakana* were developed as a mnemonic aid, and were written alongside kanji to indicate pronunciation (Shibatani 857-8).

### ***Japanization of Chinese Kanji***

Although written language in Japan was a direct result of Chinese cultural influence, the Japanese developed their own rules for kanji use which persist today. The Japanese deviated from the Chinese system and established multiple-word readings for some kanji. For instance, the phrase for “once upon a time” is comprised of two words, *sono* and *kami*, but is represented by the single character 昔 . The Japanese also used two characters to write a single word (“newspaper”/*shinbun*/新聞), and developed compounds of three or more kanji (“library”/*toshokan*/図書館)(Loveday 38).

Despite the different grammatical structures of the two languages, some Japanese kanji compounds reflect the Chinese rather than Japanese grammar. In Japanese the verb is at the end of the sentence, and therefore the verb-oriented kanji generally appears at the end of a compound word. Compounds for customs and techniques acquired during the Heian period, however, conform to the Chinese morphological order of verb-noun.

With such an intensity of Chinese cultural influence during the Nara and Heian periods, it was inevitable that language, spoken and written, would influence the Japanese. It is important to remember, however, that despite the diglossic orientation of

academic society, a strict distinction was held between the two languages. This distinction extended to written language, and although *kana* developed in the mid-Heian period, it was not until the 12<sup>th</sup> century that *kanbun* (Chinese writing) and *wabun* (Japanese writing) began to be used in conjunction with one another (Loveday 35). Even in earlier *man'yōgana* texts, the Chinese characters were considered as being used for purely Japanese writing; while the Japanese used the Chinese writing, they were assimilating it into a uniquely indigenous format.

### ***Evaluating Modern Kanji Use***

As mentioned earlier, there are approximately 6,000 kanji in the Japanese lexicon, about half of which are commonly used. Over centuries of assimilation, the modern system of writing Japanese has emerged, and is firmly established as the standard written language. Utilizing three separate alphabets in a single language makes for a complex system. *Hiragana* and *katakana* are straightforward phonetic alphabets, with the parameters for each alphabet's use clearly defined, thus inspiring little or no debate. Kanji, however, are complex in style and meaning, and their prevalence in modern Japanese has many consequences, both positive and negative.

Beginning with the obvious, kanji can be quite a barrier to the person studying Japanese as a foreign language. The idea of thousands of characters, most with multiple pronunciations and numerous strokes conforming to a specific stroke order, is quite intimidating. With time and study, though, stroke order rules become simple and obvious, as does recognition of the proper context for *on* and *kun* readings. The sheer number of characters remains, however, and as one's vocabulary expands so must one's

knowledge of kanji. Although it is possible to understand spoken Japanese yet remain functionally illiterate, there are boundaries as to what can be achieved with such limited skill. Academically, one would be deprived of the educational value of classic and contemporary literature, and would not be able to read news articles on current events. Employment in a Japanese-language related field would be impossible. Without the ability to read and write, social communication would also be severely limited.

The nature of the Japanese language makes for innumerable homonyms—there are thousands of characters representing only 104 basic syllables. An educated person with a decent vocabulary can usually determine the meaning of a spoken homonym by context, but in some cases it is beneficial to know how a word is written to determine its meaning. For instance, there may be more than one possible meaning that fits into the context, or the word may pertain to a subject or area of expertise unfamiliar to the listener. Seeing how a certain word is written can often clarify its meaning. This applies to native Japanese as well as foreigners. It is not unusual for an ethnic Japanese student to “write” a kanji on their hand to help explain something to a fellow classmate, or to give an example of another word using the same kanji as a means of explanation. Of course this problem is not unique to Japanese—English contains many homonyms as well. Yet it seems the issue is greater in Japanese because of the number of kanji used. Because pictographic and ideographic significance is placed upon written words today, not all kanji combinations form actual words—thus reducing the numbers of possible homonyms. Still, considering the *on’yomi* readings of the 1,945 kanji recommended for daily use, the potential for homonyms is staggering. To cite only a few: there are two

characters that can be pronounced *ya*, 4 for *ma*, 31 for *ka*, and 48 different characters with *on'yomi* readings for *shi*.

The problem of understanding spoken homonyms is not unlike previous difficulties in Japanese language history. Though *man'yōgana* related to written Japanese instead of spoken Japanese, the problem is quite similar—both involve interpretation of meaning based on phonetics. *Man'yōgana* replicated sounds without relationships between characters and words, leaving any homonym interpretation to context. Likewise, there is only contextual understanding with oral interpretation. In both situations there are multiple ways to represent a given word, but in modern Japanese the way the word is written is relative to its meaning. In this respect the contemporary system is far simpler to read and comprehend. What this difficult examination of homonyms reduces to is that, to be truly fluent in Japanese, it is necessary to have knowledge of written Japanese, particularly kanji.

Another issue concerning the use of kanji involves semantics. As with any language, there are many synonyms in Japanese; oftentimes the origin of a particular word dictates its semantic implication. Words of Chinese origin, i.e. words written in kanji, are generally construed as being more intellectual than equivalent native or foreign loan words. Technical, academic areas of study employ numerous Chinese words in their lexicons. Just as an American may find the jargon of their family doctor to be very technical and difficult to follow, so is the situation with Japanese. The regarding of Chinese words as being loftier than native words is similar to the attitude toward Latinate words in English. One possible explanation for this attitude toward words of Chinese origin is the simple fact that, throughout Japan's history—through 1200 C.E. in

particular—China has played a fundamental role in the development of Japanese culture. Agriculture, building and textile technologies, religion, medicine, and writing were all introduced to Japan from China. The method was usually indirect, but the origin of such influences was still clearly Chinese. Therefore, out of this mentor-apprentice relationship Chinese words concerning specific areas of technology and higher education have attained an air of importance superseding that of indigenous vocabulary.

Despite the intricacy and difficulty of the kanji system, kanji are an integral part of Japanese language and culture. The modern Japanese writing system is the product of centuries of linguistic evolution, throughout which Kanji have been a fundamental part—even the indigenous alphabets of *hiragana* and *katakana* are derivations of simplified kanji. Throughout the ages there has been sporadic debate over whether kanji should remain in everyday use; most recently in a 1996 proposal drafted by China’s Deputy Minister of Culture, Wei Yuu Lai. His *Assertion of Principle Regarding Indigenous Language* demands that Japan acknowledge China as the true “owner” of kanji, and begin a 20-year phasing out of the characters, reserving them for private and limited public use (Henderson 2). This would reduce the burden of memorization and learning on students, certainly, and the absence of kanji would have only minimal effect on understanding of basic things such as street signs. Yet beyond this, removing kanji from Japanese would be devastating. Kanji enrich the language by providing subtleties of meaning beyond that of phonetic interpretation, and allow differentiation between homonyms beyond contextual interpretation. As one Japanese mused,

“‘What about our ‘Proverb for Today’ on our Day-To-A-Page calendars?...If we write *Hana yori dango* (Better to have dumplings than flowers) phonetically in *hiragana*, how will anyone know that ‘*hana*’ refers to ‘flower,’ not ‘nose,’ which it also means? How will anyone guess that ‘*dango*’ means ‘dumplings’ and not ‘industrial bid-rigging’? Is

it better to have bid-rigging than noses?” (Henderson 4)

Though this is a somewhat humorous take on a hypothetical situation, it is still a valid example of how confusing Japanese would become without the kanji alphabet. Despite the difficulties of kanji, the difficulties of understanding Japanese *without* kanji are at least, if not more so, culturally impacting. Though the kanji writing system originated in China, it has been adapted through time into part of a distinctly Japanese writing system. The use of kanji in modern Japanese is intricate, as is the history of its evolution into the language; kanji is an integral part of Japanese language heritage, and provides invaluable enrichment to modern Japanese that far outweighs the difficulties involved in its learning and mastering.

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