Malaysian Students And The Japanese Writing System

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Judging from the high number of applicants seeking enrolment each year, the Japanese language courses are popular among students. This popularitiy, however, seems to be confined to one particular racial group and it is regrettable that the ethnic background of the students of Japanese does not mirror the multiracial composition of Malaysia.

One is forced to speculate why this is so. Circumstance points to one outstanding factor which, however widespread it may be, is based upon an unfortunate fallacy, namely, that Japanese is somehow related to Chinese. The origins of this misconception are many· geographical proximity, racial affinity, the apparent and very real similarity of the writing systems used in both countries, and perhaps some lingering remnants of the Japanese slogan *doobun-dooshu* (same writing — same race), used whenever it is expedient to harp on the string of kinship Yet the two languages are as closely related as Swahili and Greek. The Chinese language is tonal, analytic, and not inflectional, the Japanese is not tonal, is synthetic, affixing (agglutinative), and highly inflectional. A further characteristic of Japanese is the S(ubject) + O(bject) + V(erb) pattern which again is unlike Chinese. If Japanese is linguistically related to any language(s) at all it would be to the Altaic languages, though this is a moot question among scholars.

However, since more than ninety per cent of the students of Japanese at the University of Malaya are ethnic Chinese this article is written with a focus on the particular problems this group faces when learning to write Japanese

The results of yearly surveys conducted among those students who have chosen Japanese for a subject, be it as a unit or proficiency course, show overwhelmingly the prevalence of the 'Japanese-is-like-Chinese' fallacy Although none so far has been able to state in concrete form the foundation on which this belief of linguistic affinity is based, the answers indicate that most students suppose that the Japanese usage of Chinese logographs accounts for a relationship between the two languages. Some even go so far as to say that the writing systems of Japan and China are exactly alike But it is obviously a false analogy to imagine that the two languages must be related just because they employ similar writing systems. After all, no one would say that Malay is related to Icelandic just because of a common usage of the alphabet. This usage, like the usage by the Japanese of Chinese characters, can readily be understood when seen in the right persepective, as graphical habits often are the chance product of history

One could also ask whether the choice of Japanese by these students was not motivated, at least to a certain extent, by an expectation of few difficulties in learning this particular language since no one believed it to be different from Chinese. Conversely, the same belief among non-ethnic Chinese could have the opposite effect because the 'similarity factor' with its concomitant

idea of difficulty would act as a deterrent. Our questionnaries only hint at this, since a surprising number of students claim to have taken up Japanese because their friends have done so.

Since Japanese is so different from Chinese, why is it then written with Chinese characters? To answer this question, a small historical detour is necessary

Edward Sapir once said something to the effect that every language has enough sounds, structures and vocabulary to cope with its own needs. Yet when the speakers of a particular language come into contact with another civilization whose concepts and ideas transcend local models the former will often, if the new thoughts are found to be congenial, replenish their vocabulary with new words from the other civilization, descriptive of things or ideas which are lacking in their own. Thus it becomes possible to extend the limits of previously conceived reality and to add a new dimension to internal and external phenomena.

This was the course of action the Japanese took when their culture in the 3rd century absorbed some of the splendours from the Chinese mainland. But they did more than this. as they did not possess an autochthonous writing system they, like other countries within the cultural orbit of China, adopted her way of writing as well. In theory Japanese can easily be written with phonetic symbols because of the relatively simple phonetic structure of the language. Chinese, on the other hand, has a writing system based on morphemic rather than phonemic or phonetic principles. Since ancient Chinese inclined towards the monosyllabic, a writing system which represented each word with a symbol was workable, no matter how mnemotechnically taxing it might be. But for the polysyllabic and highly inflected Japanese language a more unsuited writing system is hard to imagine. For some time the problem of adaptation was solved, or rather avoided, by writing everything in Chinese. But in the long run this was unsatisfactory Eventually a system evolved through which Japanese could be written by abbreviating Chinese characters into phonetic symbols which represented whole syllables. The impetus probably originated in the Chinese practice of diacritics to indicate a character's tonal value. An Indian influence can also be detected since these phonetic symbols were systematized according to the principles of *Devanagari* The result was two syllabaries. *hiragana* and *katakana,* each consisting of 47 symbols.

The immense prestige of things Chinese prevented the logographs from disappearing in spite of the fact that the Japanese had now succeeded in creating a phonetic script. And over the centuries there gradually evolved a way of writing in which it became customary to write un-inflected words with Chinese characters, the so-called *kanji,* and the morphological and syntactical elements with either *hiragana* or *katakana* This system is called *kanjikana-majiribun,* i.e. sentences mixed with *kanji* and *kana* Basically this system remains to the present day: nouns and verb-roots are written with *kanji,* inflections and sentence particles with *hiragana,* and non-Chinese loanwords and foreign names with *katakana.*

Since the Chinese impact on the language has been on the wane for a long time, people always ask why the Japanese writing system has not been changed. It is not for lack or effort that potential reformers have been unsuccessful The barriers they face are formidable. First, there is a very understandable

reluctance to let go of centuries of written records since a different writing system would inevitably cut off the past from the present. But more important than anything else is the scale on which lexical borrowings from Chinese have taken place. Chinese loanwords now exceed the original Japanese word stock by more than one hundred per cent. Since Japanese ignored the tonal aspect of the words assimilated, the result has been a massive amount of homonyms so that many words have to be seen written in order to be understood properly. A look in any Japanese dictionary will immediately convince even the greatest sceptic. The word *shinsei*, for instance, has more than 13 different meanings, but each one of them is clearly differentiated through separate *kanji*. The following example vividly illustrates the magnitude of the problem. *shikaishikaishikai*, i.e. the chairmanship of a conference for dentists.

The average beginner of Japanese is in a state of ignorant bliss since he is usually unaware of the time-consuming task ahead of him, necessary to master the written language. But since writing is an inseparable part of total language acquisition any pretence at knowing Japanese must entail a knowledge of the writing system. If an equal proficiency is desired in both the written and the spoken language, the usual estimate is that instructions should be given in the proportion of 1:1. In other words, for each classroom hour with conversation drills a corresponding hour with reading and writing exercises should be given. So when we compare the progress of students learning a language with an alphabet to that of students learning Japanese, the advance of the latter is theoretically about half as slow as that of the former because of the time required for writing practice.

There is a running debate among teachers of Japanese, unfortunately without any hope of a satisfactory solution, as to the level at which the student would most profitably be exposed to the Japanese way of writing. One group claims that since the writing is really a study in itself, it should be taken up at a later stage when the student has familiarized himself with the spoken language. Up to that point, they say, all teaching materials should use the Latin alphabet. Opponents counter this argument by saying that to postpone the inevitable is bad pedagogy, and a late introduction of *kana* and *kanji* might seriously discourage any learner of the language. When the student feels that his progress has become slow, something which automatically happens as soon as he takes up writing, he might quit out of sheer frustration because of this additional difficulty imposed on him.

At the University of Malaya a slightly different approach is being taken, which is a compromise between the two extremes. For the first two years of the Japanese language course there, the student is only required to master the two *kana* syllabaries, *hiragana* and *katakana*, but the textbooks used are written in the normal way of a mixture between *kana* and *kanji*. Whenever *kanji* appear in the text, they will be accompanied by explanatory *hiragana* to show the pronunciation. With this method it is hoped that a constant repetition of the basic characters will visually accustom the student to *kanji* so that when he in his third year begins to write characters for himself he will have a feeling of *deja vu*. By not simplifying the writing, one further avoids the impression of childishness which is usually associated with pure *kana* writing.

Mastery of the 47 *hiragana* symbols is in most cases a rapid process. Within

a few months the students have no difficulty in either reading or writing them. However, a special problem, which is mainly a phonetic one, arises when one deals with students whose first language is Chinese. This group finds it hard to distinguish between long and short vowels, palatilized, voiced and voiceless consonants, which actually is another way of saying the characteristic sound structure of the language. This is most unfortunate since modern written Japanese is a faithful mirror image of the spoken language. In other words, an incorrect pronunciation usually leads to faulty spelling. The only way to remedy this is intensive drills in pronunciation.

With *katakana* the problems are of a slightly different and more universal nature, since they are felt by most students irrespective of linguistic background. Japanese is probably unique among the major languages of the world in having a special syllabary for writing loanwords, but this is the primary function of *katakana* This is of course convenient to the etymologist, but to a learner it is only another burden which he could very well do without.

Lexical borrowings from China have virtually stopped. In fact, for the last 100 years or so the process has been reversed. But since they are written with *kanji* these borrowings pose less of a problem than the torrent of Western words which have entered the language in the post-war period. American English has left conspicuous marks on the vocabulary, but German and French loanwords are not totally unrepresented These latter accretions, all written in *katakana* are the source of many headaches. Once written in Japanese these words conform to indigenous phonetics, making it difficult to recognize the source of the original. And, as so often happens in the context of loanwords, a change in meaning is by no means rare. Who can blame a student who hesitates with a quick translation when confronted with words like *fuirumu* (film); *kooru* (English "*coal*" or German "*chor*"), not to mention idiosyncratic abbreviations such as *zene suto* (general strike), or 'Japlish' constructs, i.e , English words made in Japan, like *beesu appu* (base up?) meaning an increase in salary All these factors, combined with the less frequent usage and consequent reduced practice, make *katakana* unpopular with most students, and it is not unusual to come across students who after two years of study still feel diffident about *katakana*

A student without any previous knowledge of *kanji* will have to learn the hard way *Kanji* can only be memorized by numbing repetition and rote. It is doubtful whether he will take consolation from the fact that as a result of a *kanji* reform, the Japanese Ministry of Education has prescribed 1,850 characters, with an additional list of 90 for personal names, as being the most essential for common use and everyday communication.

But for a student with an educational background in Chinese, matters are somewhat more complicated. The mere existence of Chinese characters in a Japanese text is not likely to frighten or overawe him. It is on the contrary more plausible that he would be lulled into a false sense of security observing that there is so much 'Chinese' in the text. But he is in for a very unpleasant surprises when the *kanji* have to be read aloud and explained in terms of meaning. To explain this another detour is necessary

A fascinating aspect of the Chinese characters, or logographs as some prefer to call them, is that it is theoretically possible to write any language with them since they are not tied to pronunciation like an alphabet, but stand for ideas.

To illustrate this, one could think of the Arabic numbers, used worldwide, where the idea behind the number but not the pronunciation is agreed upon. For instance, '2' can be said in many ways: *dua, two, deux, zwei, ni,* etc., yet the meaning of the numerical concept does not alter whichever way it is pronounced. Likewise, the Chinese character for 'water' can be rendered as: *air, water, eau, wasser, mizu,* etc., yet the basic idea of 'water' remains

Since the Japanese have had more than 1000 years to tamper with the logographs, they have ended up with an unparallelled system, complex in the extreme. Most Chinese characters not only have several Sino-Japanese readings, but they also have Japanese readings as well, corresponding to the meaning of the Japanese word(s) they stand for For instance, the Chinese character for 'life', 'to produce', 'to be born', *sheng,* can be read in the Sino-Japanese style as either *sei* or *shoo,* and in the Japanese way as *ha(eru), i(kasu), na(ru), u(mu), nama, -fu.* So what in Chinese is *sheng* only, can be read in eight different ways, depending on the context.

The Japanese usually break down the possible ways of reading characters according to the following scheme:

1.	*on-yomi*	the Sino-Japanese way of reading a character The *on*-reading is further divided into three types, *go'on, kan'on* and *too'on,* approximately indicating the period during which these sounds were first imitated in Japan in order to pronounce Chinese words.
2	*kun-yomi*	the pure Japanese reading of a Chinese character as a semantie gloss of the Chinese word.
3	*ateji*	a combination of Chinese characters which are read according to their phonological value and where semantic values are ignored.
4.	*juubako-yomi*	compounds where the first part is read in *on* and the second in *kun.*
5	*yutoo-yomi*	compounds where the first part is read in *kun* and the second in *on.*

These intricacies make the reading of any *kanji* a problem in both pronunciation and interpretation, the result being what is probably one of the most complicated writing systems devised by man. It is only a minor consolation that the Japanese have tried to solve some of the inherent difficulties of this tortuous system by adding small *hiragana* beside characters with difficult readings to assist with the interpretations. This has led the scholar, G.B. Sansom, to make the following remark. "One hesitates for an epithet to describe a system of writing which is so complex that it needs the aid of another system to explain it" (Sansom. 1929, p. 44). But to return to our imaginary student, he still has obstacles ahead of him.

Surveys have shown that on the average sixtly-five per cent of the *kanji* used in a given text have the same meaning as in Chinese, twenty-seven are only comprehensible toa Japanese, and eight per cent have approximate meanings This means that once the student has learned how to prononce a *kanji* he would then have to find out whether he is dealing with a deceptive cognate

or not. These *faux amis* are unfortunately well distributed among the most commonly used everyday words. The Chinese characters for 'car' mean 'steam locomotive' in Japanese, 'to run' in Japanese means 'to walk' in Chinese, and the Japanese *kanji* for 'study' becomes 'force', certainly not the most felicituous association for an otherwise pleasant activity

Another group of words which is also frequently the source of misunderstanding, but only in the etymological sense, is usually disregarded out of ignorance. Many neologisms coined in Japan from Chinese loan morphemes have re-entered Chinese in their new guise and are thought to be original Chinese words — at least by the Chinese. 'Revolution', 'socialism', 'philosophy', 'economics', 'production' and 'trade' are only a minor selection, yet in the political field there are so many that someone once quipped that Mao would just have been another insurgent if it had not been for the armoury of words which the Japanese had so kindly created.

To summarize then. the student with a Chinese educational background will have a visual acquaintance with *kanji,* his psychological attitude towards them will not be coloured by any notions of mystery or esotericism, and he knows from experience that they serve a practical communicative function. The difficulty of writing this particular way will be taken more or less for granted, much in the same way as northern Europeans complain about but accept the coldness of winter since nothing can be done about it.

In the intial stages, this attitude is of very little help to the student, when he is confronted with the complexities of the Japanese language as such, its highly developed sense of aspect, tense, mood and voice. As mentioned earlier, all these grammatical parts of the language are written in *kana* and a knowledge of *kanji* in this connection is of no avail. A familiarity with Chinese characters is helpful in the sense that it aids in the understanding of individual words or compounds, in the same way as a knowledge of Latin and Greek is helpful in identifying many European words, but it does not assist in giving a consecutive and structural understanding of a Japanese sentence. The totally different syntax of Japanese precludes this.

The advantange lies in the time saved when one comes to think in terms of characters and their nature and to visualize them as a link between the written and spoken word. Character dictionaries also pose no problem since both Chinese and Japanese dictionaries of this kind are made according to exactly the same principles, so the lengthy process of memorizing radical numbers and learning how to count the strokes of an individual *kanji* are already a thing of the past. On a more advanced level the sheer number of Chinese loanwords in Japanese will naturally facilitate a more rapid understanding of the overall context of a written sentence, yet in terms of deceptive cognates, this advantage can easily turn into a liability if the student is not alert and deceives himself by equating Chinese with Japanese.

A final caveat should be mentioned. The character reforms which have taken place in China and Japan, where simplified forms of writing have been adopted, have not been conducted along the same lines. This means that characters that formerly were written alike are now quite different in appearance, causing a break in the visual comprehension of *kanji.* For this reason it is not unusual in a classroom to hear Chinese students exclaim reproachfully

that 'this is not Chinese' when they see the new Japanese characters. To this one can only say: No, of course not; after all, Japanese is *not* Chinese!

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