Efficiency Through Inefficiency

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When the Japanese adopted Chinese characters in order to write in around the 6th century (Toshiko 72), they not only used the writing system but used the entire language. China already had a literary tradition at this time so it was natural for the Japanese to learn the script for reading Chinese and, thus, for writing Chinese also. Eventually, they developed a method of reading and writing the text in Japanese through a process called kaeriten, which reordered the signs to match Japanese syntax (Kato 6). One did not have to know Chinese in order to read the writing using kaeriten but it is arguable whether this was even Japanese writing or not as, ultimately, it mirrored Chinese writing exactly. The difficulty inherent in always reordering phrases seems unnecessary. Why would they not just leave the signs ordered in a way that matches Japanese syntax? Why was it necessary to keep moving everything back to match Chinese syntax afterward? These types of questions have been repeated ad infinitum throughout the history of Japan's writing system both by foreigners and even some native people themselves.

Perhaps the height of the internal debate over the Japanese writing system reached its peak during the Meiji Era. During the last half of the 19th century, Japan went through the Meiji Restoration which enacted huge social and political changes to the country and eventually led to its modernization. Writing was also addressed in a large way during this process. Kato mentions that the use of kanji was a bad fit for the Japanese language (6). This can be seen in the fact that there were roughly 10,000 kanji in use during the Meiji Era to compensate for the way the Japanese language works (Twine 115). Strangely enough, literacy was not actually a problem at the time. Most people were literate but literacy is a vaguely defined term. For instance, if one can read nothing more complicated that a Curious George book, should they be considered literate? While government officials during the Meiji Era, through years of difficult study, could read anything, commoners, who received no officially sanctioned education, were able to read on at a level sufficient for “perusal of popular fiction” (Twine 115-116).

Arguably the first and most important man to take up the issue of the difficulty of the Japanese writing system was Maejima Hisoka—Japanese names in this paper will be given in the traditional order with family name coming first—who wanted to abolish kanji. Maejima had a keen interest in education to the extent that he wanted Japan to be competitive with the Western world. This desire was at the heart of much of the Meiji Restoration as the public was fascinated with the West at the time (Karatani 46). As such, the West had a huge influence on Japan. Dutch writings at the time were highly critical of the Japanese writing system, even condescending, yet they were taken to heart by the Japanese as opposed to rallied against (Twine 116-117).

In Maejima's case, an American missionary that he worked with greatly affected Maejima's view on kanji when the missionary argued that their use was “abstruse and confusing” when used in education (Karatani 45). This led to Maejima's belief that “the difference between Western and Eastern civilizations was condensed in the contrast between phonetic and hieroglyphic script” (Lee 25) and by 1866 he had put together a petition titled Reasons for Abolishing Chinese Characters (Twine 118; Karatani 45). The petition contained various arguments, one of which was the confusion over which word the signs actually represented. For instance, 松平 can be read as *matsutaira, matsuhira, matsuhei,* and *shōhei,* all of which have similar meanings (Karatani 53). Maejima believed that “true knowledge lies in 'things,' not in 'words'” and that time spent learning kanji was time spent learning “words” at the expense of learning “things” (Lee 25; Twine 118).

Toyama Masakazu, who was fanatical in his hatred of kanji, echoed Maejima's sentiment in 1884, suggested that any form of “tool knowledge” that takes so much time to learn that it detracts from time that could be spent on “true knowledge” must be abolished. He viewed this as a problem that would make it impossible for Japan to fight a war against the West (Lee 30). Interestingly, Toyama appears to have been implying that Japan's obsession with Western technology at the time was ironically due to a desire to be able to fight the West. This was a sort of nationalistic goal made possible

through globalization that speaks volumes for ultimate fate of the writing system at the end of the Meiji Era.

Maejima's petition was not just a pronouncement against kanji but actually offered a thoroughly planned course of actions that could transition the country from using mostly kanji to using purely kana, the much simpler native syllabary which was already widely understood. For instance, Maejima suggested psychological methods of promoting pure kana usage within the government by asking for a decree to be made that required all government documents to be written only in kana. This was meant to convince those in power of the feasibility of abolishing kanji (Twine 119).

Of course, Maejima's petition was ignored (Karatani 46) as there was a divide between people like Maejima and those in power. Few wanted to change the writing system because it was against a tradition that had been in place since the 6th century and because the difficulty of kanji was seen as a benefit as it created a clear measure of one's “erudition” (Twine 117). Intellectuals regarded writing as a way to show off as opposed to a practical tool (Twine 115).

While Maejima's petition was not even made public, others were soon taking over the cause. In 1874, Shimizu Usaburō attempted to put the idea of a pure kana writing system into practice by translating a German science primer using nothing but the hiragana syllabary. His idea was that the “urgent necessity of mastering Western technology” at the time would draw a great deal of attention to a book of this type and ultimately lead people to see the advantages of a pure kana system, which could more easily make use of the myriad of foreign loanwords required to partake in modern science (Twine 120).

Efforts towards a full kana writing system were not always made by lone advocates, either. Three clubs, meant to promote the usage of kana, were brought together in 1883 to form kana-no-kai. By 1887, there were over 10,000 activists working under this umbrella in various forms. Unfortunately, each group actually differed on the specifics of how kana should be used, an issue that would prove to work against the movement (Twine 122).

Even though the idea of using a full kana writing system had clear support, there was no lack of support for a simpler solution to the difficulty of the writing system: limit the number of kanji in use. In 1872, Ōki Takatō of the Ministry of Education set Tanaka Yoshikado and Ōtsuki Shūji to creating the Shinsen Jisho, a dictionary containing 3,167 kanji that essentially ended the debate on cutting down the amount of kanji, for the time being at least. Fukuzawa Yukichi still suggested a more serious limitation in 1873. He believed only roughly 1,000 characters were needed for normal day to day life and put his theory into practice with a children's book called moji-no-oshie which used only 928 different kanji. This was the only attempt Fukuzawa made as the rest of those arguing for the limitation of kanji were satisfied with the less extreme Shinsen Jisho (Twine 118).

Another idea with strong support was converting to rōmaji, the Roman script. By 1888, a club in support of this solution also found itself with over 10,000 supporters, just like kana-no-kai (Twine 125). Earlier efforts were also made to promote rōmaji. In 1874, a magazine called Meiroku Zasshi was created written solely in rōmaji. The magazine included founders like Nishi Amane who believed that if Japan wanted to “feverishly” assimilate Western technology, they should also use the Western alphabet to ease the process (Twine 123-124), a sentiment very similar to Shimizu's when he created the kana translation of a German science primer.

The rōmaji club may have been unique in that it had as a member Basil Hall Chamberlain, an English linguist teaching in Tokyo. He recognized that, if the club wanted their efforts to be seriously considered, they would need to address stylistic issues in the writing system, not just the script. He suggested writing in a colloquial style, which he believed to be both necessary and easy to achieve. He advised the club to read their works to uneducated people before publishing them to ensure they were understandable with the expectation that doing so for one year would lead to writing normally in a colloquial style (Twine 127-128).

This brings to light one of the most serious problems all these reform suggestions overlooked: writing style. Writing during the Meiji Era was done in an awkward version of Classical Japanese

mixed with Chinese that was not a great leap from the original style that used the kaeriten system of translation, which certainly was not a language spoken by anyone in Japan at the time. In fact, Maejima was one of the few who was somewhat cognizant of this problem as he warned against writing in Classical Japanese in his petition—although style reform was not his main concern and he was even against abolishing of kango, words of Chinese origin (Lee 26).

Maejima's spiritual successors, kana-no-kai, had no interest in style reform. Their publications were essentially in the same exact form of all other writings of the time with kanji simply replaced by kana. This had the adverse effect of making full kana writing more difficult to read than writing with kanji because kanji helped to supply the meaning of a word even when the pronunciation might be awkward due to it being of an archaic form (Twine 123).

The rōmaji club created a bulletin called Rōmaji Zasshi in 1885 but initially used the Classical Japanese style, making the same mistake as kana-no-kai, even though there had been some internal suggestions for writing in a style matching that of the language spoken by those in Tokyo with a standard education. Rōmaji Zasshi suffered the same fate as kana-no-kai's publications because it was too difficult to read Classical Japanese in a phonetic script (Twine 125-126).

Nishi, one the founder of the rōmaji magazine Meiroku Zasshi, actually did recognize the stylistic issues of the writing system. Oddly, though, he supposed that using an alphabetic script specifically would naturally cause a colloquial style of writing to arise (Twine 124). The mystery here is how he came to this conclusion. If true, one would expect writing in kana to also bring about a natural stylistic change but this was clearly not the case and, ultimately, Nishi was proved incorrect also.

Taguchi Ukichi was one of those in the rōmaji club that believed writing in a colloquial style was “ideal.” The advantages, he suggested, would include being able to use special trade jargon, which was not possible with kanji, and the ease of printing in a simple script (Twine 126). These were actually echoes of Nishi's reasoning from 1874. Taguchi's case is interesting because he wrote specifically about

issues that he encountered after his writing his first publications in rōmaji. While he did not say much about stylistic issues, he did complain about having to write out long words all the time such as *gozarimasu* as well as *watakushi*, meaning *I*, which, in kanji, would simply be 私. Ironically, he also made suggestions on how to avoid this annoyance: *gozarimasu* and *watakushi* could be shorted to *g* and *w*, respectively, yielding morphograms along the same lines as kanji (Twine 126-127).

Not all the reasons for the failure of these reforms involved poor implementation. Early on, Maejima's argument that the myriad of pronunciations for each kanji created too much difficulty was used by Karatani Koji in 1993 as a strength of kanji. Karatani, being concerned mostly with literature, finds the vagueness of kanji to lend a poetic air to Japanese writing that would not be possible with pure phonemic writing. He implies that kanji detaches speech from writing and allows for visual interpretations in much the same way as Yosa Buson's poetry did in the 18th century (53). It would not be far-fetched to assume that this, at least on a subconscious level, went through the minds of people in the Meiji Era.

Change in general is difficult and this played out largely to the detriment of writing system reform attempts. Taguchi, for all his desire for change, was himself trapped in the old system, evidenced by his desire to shorten alphabetic writing into, essentially, morphograms. He was not alone. Suematsu Norizumi, who offered advice to supporters of both kana and rōmaji, suggested that the rōmaji movement in particular was having difficulty because it took so many signs to write what could be done in half the amount of kana or even fewer kanji. He believed people used to the conciseness of kanji found this writing unwieldy.

Yano Fumio, who would prove important near the end of the reform debate, was particularly against major reforms because he did not believe Japan could afford all the time it would take to accustom people to completely new ways of writing (Twine 129-130). This particular critique was ironic considering many of the original arguments for reform were based on the amount of time

involved in learning kanji. Here one finds a poignant example of the difference between the needs of the learner and the user which constantly plays out in debates of the Japanese writing system. While the difficulty in obtaining knowledge of the various systems making up the entirety of Japanese writing creates a huge hurdle for those just starting out, it also provides high levels of convenience and expression to those who have already learned the system via requiring fewer signs and allowing multiple ways of writing the same thing respectively.

It can be difficult to get into the minds of the Meiji Era Japanese people but Lee states that today, when the Japanese people see a word like *sanso* written in kana, they do not imagine that as the "genuine script" but simply as a transcription of the kanji for *oxygen (29).* This implies that before Fukuzawa's translation of this word (Lee 29), people did not think of Japanese writing as having multiple forms but only one. It would not have even entered their minds that it would be possible to write *sanso* with kana if they forgot the kanji for it.

People in the Meiji Era also had difficulty detaching themselves from the standard writing of the time in the failure to use spaces when writing in pure kana or rōmaji (Twine 128). Writing in a mixture of scripts provides natural breaks between words as kanji generally represent free morphemes while kana is generally used to spell out the more variable bound morphemes that come, normally, after kanji. Without this mixture, thewritingwouldlooksomethinglikethis, which is exactly the way reformists wrote, leading to a more difficult system than what using kanji yielded.

Maejima and, later, Suematsu did propose spaces in writing, to their credit, but they were part of a severe minority (Lee 26; Twine 128). This was a recurring problem in the various reforms movements: a lack of unification. Even kana-no-kai, placing three kana groups under one umbrella, made no attempt to compromise the ideas of each group to create a specific and focused plan. Instead, members were constantly arguing over these details and coming to no conclusions (Twine 122). This led to the kana groups, and essentially the whole kana movement, dissolving in 1889 (Twine 123).

Even the rōmaji club, which started as one entity, eventually split over the issue of whether the

alphabet should retain its European pronunciations for each sign or completely reassign each sign to sounds that are more appropriate for the Japanese language (Twine 125-126). Without a unified, clear direction for all these reforms, they added chaos to the writing system debate more than anything. If kanji was difficult, attempting to peruse the various publications in all these realizations of similar writing systems would be a nightmare.

Ultimately, the nail in the coffin of writing reform was time. Timing was a crucial factor against reform efforts every step of the way. Maejima's petition, for instance, was not available to the public until 1899, when he published it himself and long after the various clubs had disbanded. Meajima also published a newspaper fully in kana early on, in 1873, which failed, not because his script ideas were poor, but because newspapers were not widely used at the time (Twine 120). There was even a huge lag between when Nishi first suggested his rōmaji ideas in 1873, which included establishing a club, and when an organized effort actually took place eleven years later (Twine 124).

Most importantly, the end of the 19th century saw a huge rise in nationalism in Japan which created a backlash against the script reform debate (Twine 128). Japan seemingly went from an obsession with the West to an isolationist frenzy over night. Toyama's strange desire to abolish kanji and create a system more like the West's in order to fight the West was clearly a sentiment shared by a large portion of the population who must have recognized that they could simply fight the West by fighting the West by the time this nationalist spike occurred.

Yano's opposition to both phonetic writing and style reform in 1886, suggesting that all that needed to be done was to reduce the number of kanji to no more than 3,000, was ultimately the strategy that won out (Twine 129). More reforms did occur but almost exclusively in the form of style reform under the name genbun-itchi, a literary movement focused on writing in a colloquial style.

It is arguable whether the Meiji Era reforms could have taken hold even if all of the mistakes made be the reformers were avoided. Writing is nearly as personal as speech in defining one's identity as evidenced by art forms such as calligraphy. While Maejima's deep desire to improve education in

Japan was extremely noble, his failure to recognize the way writing can help define one's cultural identity, his failure to recognize how writing connects one to one's past, and his failure to recognize writing as more than just a practical tool, may have doomed the movement before it ever began. It is no surprise that calls for reform often originate from outsiders. Even today there are calls for reform by prominent linguists such as Victor Mair, an American who specializes in Chinese (Mair), but these challenges are looked at with puzzlement by those in Japan. As a Japanese commenter on Professor Mair's blog so succinctly puts it:

> “As a Japanese who can read Japanese much faster than any other language, it is always surprising to see someone who wonders why Japanese does not abandon kanji. I'm sure Japanese language would not malfunction by getting rid of kanji — there would be workarounds, but of course that cannot be the reason to throw away the cultural assets“ (Yoshi).

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