

THE FORGOTTEN SCRIPT REFORM: LANGUAGE POLICY IN JAPAN'S ARMED FORCES

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In 1867, Japan's two and half centuries of seclusion came to an end when the Tokugawa shogunate agreed to return its political power to the emperor. For the new Meiji government, the transformation of Japan from a feudal state into a modernized country was of vital importance in order to squarely meet the threat of the Western imperial powers, who, having made inroads into the Asian continent, had, it was feared, fixed their eyes on Japan as the next target of colonization. Thus, under the slogan of *fukoku kyōhei* (wealthy nation, strong military), it set out to build an army and navy strong enough to confront the danger. In 1869, long before the creation of an elected assembly or basic framework of constitutional law, the handful of powerful bureaucrats who had helped overthrow the Tokugawa regime and put an end to feudalism created the Ministry of War, and four years later, declared universal conscription.¹ The presence of the colonialists in Japan's backyard was not the only menace that warranted expeditious implementation of the conscription law; the need for a standing army to suppress domestic uprisings – of peasants, who had hoped for some benefits from the Restoration but had received none, and of samurai, who had had their privileges stripped away – demanded action be taken. Thus faced with the twin perils of subjugation and insurrection (and compelled to draw mainly on the pool of shopkeepers, craftsmen, laborers and other townsmen until social conditions stabilized), the government acted without delay.²

¹ What distinguished the Japanese military was the law which established its conscription system, promulgated in 1873 (and revised in 1882), predated the establishment of a national assembly or the promulgation of the constitution. See also E. H. Norman, *Soldier and Peasant in Japan: The Origin of Conscription* (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1943), p. 52.

² Japan's rush to militarize step toward the military institution cut many corners which would otherwise be the prerequisites for a healthy

Once conscripts were summoned and gathered from every region of the country, differences in language among them immediately became apparent. An Imperial guard, having eavesdropped upon some of their conversations, reported that they sounded like foreigners, or used words that were “vulgar” or had “strange endings.” Though infantry regiments consisted for the most part of men from the same regions, there were instances in which under-strength formations had to fill in with drafters from other areas, causing communication problems. In one such instance, when a sergeant from the north tried to issue orders to his men, who were from the west, both the former and the latter, after a series of repetitions and rephrasings, gave up in exhausted frustration.³ All levels of command quickly realized that the barriers to clear oral communication that were coming to light would hinder the efficient functioning of the Army, perhaps to the point of paralysis.

Of equal or even greater concern to the armed forces was the state of written Japanese, which at the time was nearly indistinguishable from written Chinese due to the influx of Chinese vocabulary and stylistic obscurity. The tumultuous encounter with the West in the mid 19th century made the Japanese painfully aware of the convoluted aspects of their written language, consisting of logographic symbols, or *kanji*, two sets of syllabic characters, or *kana*, and drove many of them to look for ways to make their spelling strictly phonological. Actually, an idea of script reform, though crude and vague, sprang up long before the Meiji era, when Arai Hakuseki, a 17th century politician and linguist, learned of the Western writing system through an encounter with an Italian priest who was under house arrest in Tokyo for having entered the country illegally. There followed a few other users of the Roman alphabet, called *rōmaji* in Japanese, such as Shimazu Nariakira, a

development of a democratic society: i.e., the recognition of the rights of individuals, public education, and the establishment of government by elected representatives. For instance, in many European nations, the granting of voting rights was granted in exchange for acceptance of universal conscription; in others, at least the rationale for obligatory military services was explained to and understood by those to be conscripted. However, Japan’s military came into being with no thought given to the laying of a democratic groundwork for it, as a result of the decision made by the despotic power.

³ Yutaka Yoshida, *Nihon no guntai* (Tokyo: Iwanami, 2002), pp. 30–31.

daimyō of what is now Kagoshima who taught himself how to read the alphabet and wrote personal letters and diary entries employing it.

These sporadic instances of interests in writing in *rōmaji*, though they remained in the realm of individual practice and hobby, were the forerunners of the full scale writing reform movement launched shortly before the Meiji Restoration in 1868. The bureaucrat Maejima Hisoka, for one, proposed an all-*kana* system and a stylistic change; Fukuzawa Yukichi recommended a cap on the number of *kanji*; and Nanbu Yoshikazu submitted a petition in which he urged the use of the Western alphabet as the only way to bring about a revival of the nation's study of its language.⁴ In the years since, many attempts have been made to reform the Japanese script.

As Japan itself became a colonial power in East Asia – a result of the Sino-Japanese War in 1894 and the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 – there arose the renewed necessity to streamline its notoriously complex writing system, so that its new colonial subjects, and the soldiers conscripted from among them, could acquire Japanese with less difficulty than they would otherwise have had. Central tasks in this reform were to (1) eliminate antiquated and rarely used *kanji*, (2) assign one and only one reading to each *kanji*, and (3) match *kana* representation with pronunciation. Though the civilian leadership recognized script reform to be a high priority and an imperative for the nation as a whole, it was the Army that took the lead in improving the written language.

To fully understand the reasons why Japanese orthography came under scrutiny in the late 1800s and early 1900s requires some familiarity with the state of linguistics in the West in that era. By the first decade of the 20th century, the field had benefited from over a hundred years of scientific inquiry, and many important findings had been made that shaped its various branches. Most noteworthy was the progress made in phonetics and phonology, particularly the formation of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), which first appeared in 1886, and the recognition of the important distinction between phonemes, the fundamental structural sound units of a language, and allophones, the predictable variants of phonemes. The by-product of these accomplishments was the firm establishment,

⁴ Nanette Twine, “Toward Simplicity: Script Reform Movements in the Meiji Period,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 38/2 (1983): 117–128.

among linguistic researchers, that spoken language has primacy over written language.

Soon, as Japanese scholars began to be influenced by these Western advances in linguistics research, the progress made in the study of speech sounds turned out to be of particular interest to them, stimulating a thorough re-evaluation of *kanji*, and leading to a devaluation of its status to that of an inferior writing system. More than 90% of *kanji* characters are based primarily on phonological principles; nevertheless, they were at that time (and still are) widely perceived as symbols representing meaning, to the exclusion of sound.⁵ It was this perception that led to the slighting of *kanji* and to the exalting instead of the native Japanese system of *kana*, which represent syllables, and therefore are indisputably phonological in nature.

One other factor in the increasingly negative perception of *kanji* was the Russo-Japanese War, during which more than a million Japanese soldiers came into direct contact with the illiterate and impoverished Chinese inhabitants of Manchuria and the Korean peninsula. The massive and unprecedented scale of this exposure engendered in many a soldier a sense of contempt and scorn (where before had existed an inculcated respect and admiration) for China and its culture. When they returned to the homeland, disillusioned by their encounter and filled with enhanced esteem for their own society, their greatly diminished regard for the long-time model and mentor spread far beyond their ranks, and into the general population and encouraging some extremists to go so far as to demand the total elimination of *kanji*. It was against this background that orthography reforms were given the impetus within Japan's armed forces.

Such reforms were urgently needed, for the Japanese phonetic-logographic mixed writing system was a construct which the British Japanologist Sir George Sansom (1968) famously derided as "surely without inferiors"⁶ Sir Sansom was not alone in his negative evaluation; its complex and outdated condition was both well known and troubling,

⁵ John DeFrancis, *Visible Speech* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), pp. 89–121; and J. Marshall Unger, *Ideogram: Chinese Characters and the Myth of Disembodied Meaning* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), pp. 1–20.

⁶ George Sansom, *An Historical Grammar of Japanese* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).

markedly so within the Japanese military – first because the number of *kanji* had become too large to memorize without an exceptional effort, and second because the assignment of sounds to *kana* had become so archaic that they no longer reflected pronunciations then current in the language. The average fighting man, having received only an elementary-level education, was not a master of *kanji*, much less a student of historical spelling, and therefore the likelihood that he would misunderstand written instructions, or worse, fail to execute orders, if such were composed in traditional text, was intolerably high.

Yet, the failure to decipher texts and messages from superiors was not the worse problem; that was the inability to read and write the names of weapon parts, a liability which would, more than any other weakness, stall a war machine, especially a modern, mechanized one. When the Imperial Army and Navy were first founded, soldiers and sailors were trained in the use of Western weaponry whose parts were given Japanese names written in *kanji*. As advancing technology resulted in finer and finer divisions of parts, the lexicon inevitably expanded. In an extreme case, one piece of equipment consisted of more than one thousand parts, with each of them assigned a designation intelligible only to the literate few. In order to familiarize enlisted men with these, a significant amount of time had to be spent teaching individual *kanji*. It is not hard to imagine the difficulty of the soldier's task: memorizing the terms was daunting enough; during battle, the job of matching these terms to the items they referred to had to be done rapidly, without mistakes and under great stress. Naturally, the correct identification of the necessary parts, the accurate transmission of that information to the rear, and the error-free transport of the materiel to the frontline became extremely time-consuming, adversely affecting the ability to execute tactics during combat and ultimately threatening to compromise national defense itself. It was a tenacious problem, one that would bedevil commanders in every conflict from the Sino-Japanese War onward. The overriding importance of clear communication, which, on the battlefield, could make the difference between life and death, victory and defeat, pushed the War Ministry into the very vanguard of radical orthographic reform.

The streamlining of spelling rules became yet more pressing after the annexations of Taiwan in 1895 and Korea in 1910; the young men who might be conscripted from among the populations of the new possessions would be even more likely to misread or misunderstand *kanji* (and outdated *kana*) than would their Japanese counterparts, unless guidelines for “easy-

to-learn Japanese” were drawn up and put into effect. Since it would have been highly impractical, if not unworkable, to issue two sets of orders, one for native speakers and the other for non-native speakers, or to command units through translators or language instructors, changes had to be made with a promptness born of urgent necessity.

Though it had to be carried out, it did not promise to be a simple or straightforward undertaking. The *kanji* inventory at the turn of the century was enormous; estimates ranged from 5,000 to 50,000 characters, since no one had bothered to count exactly how many there were. A large proportion of them, perhaps over half (if one accepts to figure of 5,000), were rarely used. To make matters worse, many of these were the very ones used in the spelling of weapon names, leading to numerous cases in which soldiers in the supply chain, naturally confused, sorted parts in the wrong containers or delivered wrong ones. These symbols had to be abolished, then, before weaponry could be properly maintained. Another difficulty involved the phonological opacity of *kana*. For examples, by the early 1900s, the disyllabic sequences /siya/ and /siyu/ had evolved into the monosyllabic /sya/ and /syu/, respectively, but the latter were still represented, in writing, by <siya> and <siyu>.⁷ And the syllables /kehu/, /keu/, /kyau/, all formerly distinct from each other, and therefore spelled differently, had been merged into /kyoo/, but the three distinct spellings were left untouched. As a result of these and a number of other mismatches, many Japanese were unable to correctly spell, even in phonographic characters, what they knew how to pronounce. It is illustrative of the problem that, when a rear admiral gave a spelling quiz to the top 42 of 700 new recruits in 1922, instructing them to write the names of 10 battleships in *kana*, to the officer’s chagrin, only 49% of their answers were correct.⁸

Naturally, the twin issues of *kanji* overabundance and *kana* inconsistency were also concerns of the Ministry of Education, the government agency formally charged with the task of script reform. Among the members of the Ministry’s Ad-hoc Syllabic Character Investigation Committee, formed in 1908, there was general agreement that it would be necessary to reduce the number of characters and to eliminate multiple pronunciations of those that remained. However, when it came to outdated

⁷ Angular brackets are used for spelling and slashes for sounds.

⁸ Kawazoe Kaitirō, *Nihon romajishi* (Tokyo: Okamura shoten, 1922), p. 104.

kana spelling, the so-called “historical *kana* usage,” the members of the Committee were divided into three camps. The first insisted on the imposition of the traditional *kana*, however outmoded, upon learners in the colonies, and its retention in the homeland. The second proposed abolishing archaic *kana* usage altogether and substituting for it, both in and outside Japan, orthography more faithful to pronunciation. The third, advocating a double-standard of sorts, called for separate language education models for native speakers and for non-native ones that would require the continued use of the historical *kana* in the domestic education sphere, but introduce more phonological spelling elsewhere.

But the military could not afford to dither, for the probability of war with America, Britain and other powers was growing ever stronger. It was convinced that bringing *kana* spelling convention into conformity with pronunciation and culling the *kanji* inventory for the purpose of streamlining it were matters so vital to the expansion and defense of the empire that they had to be dealt with decisively. Thus, in 1940 and 1941, the War Ministry issued a series of directives: No. 1292, *Simplification of the Representation of Weapon Names and Related Terms*; No. 3231, *Standardization of Weaponry Terms*; and No. 1801, *Revised Simplification of the Representation of Weapon Names and Related Terms*.

Specifics of these directives were truly unprecedented. First of all, the War Ministry proposed to cut the number of *kanji* to the 1,235 it reckoned the maximum necessity, and divide them into two classes. Class One, consisting of 959 characters, including all those taught during the first four years of elementary school at that time, plus some easy ones introduced during the final two years. The ministry recommended that names of weapons and weapon parts be written using these characters, so that the average soldier, regardless of his educational background, could handle equipment properly. Class Two, comprising of 276 characters, was made up of the remainder taught in the last two years, as well as some others in general usage. Class Two characters were to be used only in those limited circumstances where Class One characters would not suffice and where the weapons and parts denoted were to be handled mostly by soldiers with a more advanced education. In 1942, the War Ministry contemplated taking the further step of eventually reducing the total number of necessary

kanji to 500 or 600,⁹ but never carried the measure out. To make weapon names even more understandable, the Army, which one would expect to have been particularly hostile to all things Anglo-American, did not shrink from using English loan words that had already gained wide currency in usage; e.g. *natto* “nut,” *boruto* “bolt,” *pisuton* “piston,” *supanaa* “spanner,” instead of equivalent Sino-Japanese words.¹⁰

Secondly, the Army took an approach to the mismatches between pronunciations and *kana* that was strictly phonological and synchronic, that is, it was focused on the pronunciations then current, without regard to any that may have existed at earlier stages. Thus, it ordered that all syllables were henceforth to be spelled the way they were pronounced. For instance, the syllable /o/, and the syllables /wo/ (under all circumstances) and /ho/ (only when preceded by a vowel) – all of which were no longer distinguishable from /o/ – were to be uniformly spelled <o>. Another example was the syllable /ha/, which, because it had become /wa/ when occurring after a vowel, was to be spelled <wa>. [To get a sense of these measures, imagine, if you will, a government institution in an English-speaking country formally and officially changing <through> to <thru> or <light> to <lite>.]

Actually, a similar measure to match *kana* representation to pronunciation had already been informally taken as early as the late Meiji period for those drafted into military service. A 1905 handbook published for newly conscripted soldiers, explaining how to write letters to family and friends, departed from the standard orthography and contained a great many examples of spelling pronunciation.¹¹

The Army’s *kana* directives were influenced by an Education Ministry’s proposal written almost two decades earlier, but withdrawn due to opposition not only from literary giants like Mori Ōgai and Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, but also from the public, who felt it showed a lack of respect for the nation’s literary traditions. Though the Army’s measures elicited

⁹ Hoshina Takaichi, *Dai-tōa kyōeiken to kokugo seisaku* (Tokyo: Toseisha, 1942), pp. 63 and 127–131; and Umegaki Minoru, “Sensō to Nihongo,” *Nihongo* 2/5 (1942): 127–131.

¹⁰ Of the 75 words that needed revision, 31 were replaced by foreign loan words.

¹¹ Kageki (reading uncertain) H., *Teikoku gunjin yoo bun* (Osaka: Kashiwabara keibundō, 1905).

praise among some linguists, there was strong resistance especially among officials charged with setting language policy, as they feared that such drastic changes might be seen as tantamount to repudiating the country's past and serve only to weaken the determination to endure the hardships that would make victory attainable. Some of them ascribed the Japanese success in the initial phase of the Pacific War to the mental toughness gained through the rigors of having to learn how to read and write difficult *kanji* and hard-to-decipher *kana*.

The Army's resolve to make written Japanese more user-friendly did achieve some measure of success outside the homeland, notably in the occupied areas of the South Pacific. This was because the War and the Navy Ministries controlled language instruction in the Great East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere; though the Ministry of Education had nominal jurisdiction over Japanese education there, the Japanese teachers employed were actually military personnel. What is more, the military oversaw the production of all teaching materials; in Singapore and the Philippines, for instance, textbooks were printed in *kana* spellings conforming to pronunciations. Nevertheless, the citizens of the Japan proper had to wait till the thorough reformation instituted in the post-war era, by, ironically enough, the American military occupation authorities.¹²

Unfortunately, the benefits produced by high levels of proficiency were more than cancelled out by the harsh conditions of colonization, which embittered local populations wherever the Japanese held sway. In the Philippines, soldiers on their way to internment after surrendering witnessed one outcome of Japanese language education in a most unpleasant way: an angry crowd hurled profanities at them in fluent Japanese.¹³

Many outside the military knew of the organization's simplification and clarification of *kanji-kana* mixed writing, but few knew of its equally significant embrace of Romanization. An effort to replace *kanji* and *kana* with the Latin alphabet was one of Japan's many attempts to

¹² J. Marshall Unger, *Literacy and Script Reform in Occupation Japan: Reading between the Lines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 59–85; and Christopher Seely, *A History of Writing in Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000), pp. 142–167.

¹³ Tani Yasuyo, *Dai-tōa kyōeiken to nihongo* (Tokyo: Keisō shobo, 2000), pp. 192–193.

revise the method of writing after the installation of the Meiji government. At the turn of the century, there were two competing Romanization schemes. The older one, popularized by an American medical doctor, James Curtis Hepburn, the founder of Meiji Gakuin University, and thus known as the Hepburn System, was created for the convenience of English speakers learning the Japanese language, and therefore relied heavily on English orthography. From the outset, Hepburn has been utilized primarily to show the “outward face” of Japan, that is, as a foreigners’ pronunciation guide to place names and personal names. The other system, Nipponsiki, was created by Tanakadate Aikitu. One of the founding figures of Japanese physics, he was opposed to Hepburn’s English-centric spelling and was determined to devise orthography rules best suited to represent the Japanese language, a system that would put on an “inward face.”¹⁴

Hepburn naturally had a strong following among Japanese students of the English language, but Nipponsiki found much sympathy among not only Tanakadate’s colleagues in physics and chemistry, but European linguists as well. With its orthography seen to be the first practical application of the phonological theory propounded by the Prague Circle of Linguistics, an influential group of phonologists in 1920s and 1930s, the Nipponsiki System had the good fortune of receiving strong endorsements from overseas; prominent linguists, such as Nikolai Trubetzkoy, one of the nucleus members of the Prague Circle, and Otto Jespersen, a founder of the International Phonetic Association, wrote letters in praise of it.

Nipponsiki also drew support from the Imperial Army and Navy. In the Army, the Land Survey Division was an early adopter, switching allegiance from Hepburn to Nipponsiki in September 1917. The Navy, in which close to 200 officers had joined the Nippon Rōmajikai, an organization dedicated to the promotion of Tanakadate’s cause, began spelling place names in Nipponsiki in hydrographical maps in 1922, and

¹⁴ Even though disputes between these two camps were bitter, their differences actually came down to just one question: how to represent coronal consonants? In Japanese, the coronal consonants /t s n/ undergo palatalization before the high front vowel /i/, causing the tongue body to move toward the hard palate during articulation. As a result of this process, these consonants are realized in this environment as [ć ś ñ], respectively. This change is allophonic, that is, the output sounds are considered to be predictable variants of /t s n/.

employed the same system when Japanese became one of the seven official languages of the International Code of Signals in 1927.¹⁵ Since Nipponsiki Romanization was based on the sound system of the Japanese language without reference to that of any other language, one might naturally suspect that there was a nationalistic motive behind its adoption by the Army and the Navy. On the contrary, it was, once again, convenience and practicality that dictated their choice.

In December 1930, the debate between the Hepburn camp and the Nipponsiki camp reached the national level, when the government-formed Ad Hoc Romanization Study Board convened the first of fourteen meetings to decide once and for all on an official Romanization of Japanese. The meetings were attended by bureaucrats of the vice-ministerial level; as for the War Ministry, the impressive array of generals who represented it testified to the seriousness with which it took settlement of the issue.

Generally speaking, when a nation undertakes script reform, the foremost consideration ought to be the benefit to speakers of its language; it would be an inversion of priorities to put the accommodation of non-native speakers before the needs of fellow countrymen. However, some committee members, greatly desirous of catering to “foreigners” (meaning, it seemed, just Englishmen and Americans), argued that Nipponsiki would greatly inconvenience them, and urged that the Romanization of Japanese be in accord with internationally accepted norms. At the outset of the second meeting, one of the members, apparently upset, asked why the War and Navy Ministries had discontinued employing the Hepburn system in their official documents. In response, a representative of the Navy stated that the conversion from *kana* characters to the Roman alphabet was simpler in Nipponsiki, since its spelling was based on Japanese phonology. He also pointed out that it had a superior economy of communication, explaining that, for instance, the number of letters needed to compose a telegram was less with Nipponsiki than with Hepburn. The Meteorological Agency, which had joined the Army and the Navy in adopting Nipponsiki, agreed, adding that Tanakadate’s system was easier to teach to someone who did not know English. One can assume that the Army and Navy’s espousal of Nipponsiki stemmed from their awareness that needlessly opaque spelling could stymie their personnel’s fighting effectiveness. At the conclusion of

¹⁵ The other six were English, French, German, Italian, Norwegian, and Spanish.

the meetings in September 1937, the Japanese government announced that the official Romanization of the Japanese language would henceforth be what it called the *Kunrei* (government instruction) system, which, though formally a compromise between Hepburn and Nipponsiki, was virtually identical to the latter in all crucial notations. It was a clear-cut victory for Tanakadate and his supporters.

Notwithstanding the Allied occupation authority's abrupt replacement of Kunrei/Nipponsiki with Hepburn upon the disbanding of the Imperial Army and Navy in 1945, the former system was (and still is) unquestionably better suited to represent the Japanese language and (it follows) more likely to be comprehended by native speakers. The results of a little known educational experiment conducted during the occupation left no doubt as to its superiority.¹⁶ In this experiment, elementary-school children in the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades were divided into three groups. Each group learned subject matter using textbooks written in one of the three versions of Romanization: Hepburn, Nipponsiki, and Kunrei. Each then took proficiency tests in language and arithmetic in its respective form of Romanization in three separate periods. The results were compared to those obtained in control classes (where students received instruction in the traditional Japanese writing system). Students educated in the Roman alphabet generally did better than those in the control classes, but within the Romanization group, most notably in the third proficiency test, the Nipponsiki classes significantly outperformed the others. The Civil Information and Education Section of the Supreme Commander of Allied Powers (SCAP), which had come to associate Nipponsiki and Kunrei with ultra-nationalism, killed the results of the experiment with silence, making only perfunctory mention of it, as if an afterthought, at the end of an intra-section memorandum entitled *1948–52 Romaji Experiment Program*, issued on 23 August 1953.

It was quite unfortunate that the Army and the Navy's strong backing of Nipponsiki and Kunrei led to a dismissal of their value. Though the Kunrei system made a comeback of sorts in 1954, when the cabinet validated its 1937 decision, it was little more than a symbolic one, for Romanization in today's Japan, limited mostly to reading aids for foreigners, is predominantly in Hepburn. Nevertheless, not only has the validity and utility of Kunrei continued to be recognized by a number of prominent

¹⁶ Unger, *Literacy and Script Reform*, pp. 86–118.

linguists in the fields of syntax and morphology, but, in 1989, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) bestowed another seal of approval on the Kunrei system when that body adopted it in ISO 3602: *Documentation – Romanization of Japanese*.

Historically, the Japanese as a whole have shown little interest in devising a system which would make possible effortless and unambiguous reading or quick and simple writing. As a consequence, they have allowed the haphazard addition of *kanji* into their lexicon, with no long-term and persistent attempt at trimming the excess. Even today, when Westerners, stumped by enigmatic place or personal names, complain about the dreadful nature of Japanese writing, it causes the Japanese to feel secret pleasure and pride in its complexity, and a disdain for exclusively phonetic writing. Furthermore, as the “Japanese Miracle” made possible double-digit economic growth, the traditionalists began to gradually embrace the idea that limits on *kanji* would infringe the freedom of expression guaranteed in the constitution. Since then more than a few attempts have been made to reverse earlier language policies.¹⁷ As Hannas observes, the Japanese, like other East Asians, “tolerate the inefficiency of character-based writing until a foreign threat causes them to take stock of their social institutions,” and that once the threat is gone, “retrograde practices creep back in.”¹⁸ True to this observation, the standard number of *kanji* approved by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, which now oversees Japan’s language policies, will be 2,131 in 2010, 15% more than the 1,850 announced in November 1946 in Japan’s first post-war script reform, and over four times the 500 proposed by the Army in 1942.¹⁹ The original role of the *kanji* list as the “ceiling,” that is, the *maximum* number of *kanji* needed to read and write Japanese, has been reversed to the “floor,” that is, the *minimum* necessary number.

¹⁷ Nanette Gottlieb, “Language and Politics: The Reversal of the Postwar Script Reform Policy in Japan,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 53/4 (1994): 1175–1198.

¹⁸ William C. Hannas, *Asia’s Orthographic Dilemma* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), p. 46.

¹⁹ On May 13, 2009, it was reported that the agency received request from the general public that 302 more characters be added to the list. Shiraishi Akihiko, ed., “‘Hawk,’ ‘porcelain’ ...the new kanji,” *Asahi shinbun*, May 14, 2009 (accessed May 23, 2009, http://www.asahi.com/showbiz/news_entertainment/TKY200905130306.html).

Those opposed to change feared that “the trend of events might very well have led to the legal acceptance of rōmaji as an alternative script at least – perhaps to more than that. The idea that the government list of *kanji* as a clearly defined goal had to be replaced with the idea that it was only an entrance requirement to Japanese society.”²⁰

In 1980’s, it was widely speculated that, its written language, multilayered and complicated, would force Japan to make enormous technological adjustments to more effectively store, organize, and retrieve information. However, a series of advancements in computer memory volume has virtually eliminated the problem of storing *kanji* and *kana* characters (which are encoded in two bytes instead of the one byte for Roman alphabet). And the introduction of word processing software, which has revolutionized Japanese typing by producing what is no less than a quantum leap in its ease, has weakened the earlier arguments for script reform.²¹

Recently, traditional Japanese orthography has gradually made inroads into the World Wide Web as well. In November 2007, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), the organization responsible for assigning domain names and IP addresses, decided to allow the use of *kanji* in URLs. Such technical progress and such recognition, however, should not divert attention from the inherent impediments to manipulating and mastering Japanese script without undue stress or strain. As for manipulation – the creation of a typed text for instance – despite the advancement of word processing technology Japanese typing is by nature much slower than English touch-typing, since it involves multiple steps: the typist inputs the Roman alphabet that represents the sound of a *kana* syllable; another few key strokes brings up in a look-up dictionary a list of possible (though not necessarily complete) homophonous *kanji* choices; and a final key stroke selects (hopefully) the most suitable candidate. This tedious procedure demands a constant and unbroken attention to the monitor. As for mastery, children and adolescents are still (as in the Meiji era) subjected to a course of study that constrains them to spend an excessive amount of time in the tiresome memorization of a plethora of characters. An even heavier burden is put upon non-native learners of Japanese, who, after their initial infatuation with *kanji*, awaken to the

²⁰ Unger, *Literacy and Script Reform*, pp. 121–123.

²¹ Gottlieb, “Language and Politics,” pp. 1175–1198.

disturbing fact that even knowledge of one thousand characters leaves well short of reading fluency. Left in its current form, written Japanese will continue to perpetuate the myth (accepted as true even by native speakers) that the language is the world's most difficult to learn.²²

Yet, the Japanese public and the Ministry of Education persist in their unwillingness to break away from the linguistic shackles of the past. How ironical then, that Japan's pre-war and wartime armed forces, quite infamous in the conduct of their profession, were, as far as the efficiency and accuracy of reading and writing was concerned, so remarkably perspicacious and liberal in their thinking. Driven by unavoidable circumstances to devise a user-friendly method of written communication, they were keen and steadfast supporters of spelling reform, and many of the fruits of their suggestions and proposals have found a place in modern Japanese orthography. Echoes of its ideas still resonate, particularly among those scholars who doggedly call for the improvement of Japanese writing.

²² Despite the many publications introducing basic Japanese grammar as something that can be learned in five weeks due to the regularity and rule-governed aspects of its morpho-syntax, and despite assurances of those who have learned the language that spoken Japanese is easier than French or German, this collective belief tenaciously keeps regenerating itself.

