2010.01.21 -- FLJ342 -- **Observations on Japanese Writing and Language Structure**

Jared Diamond (in Guns, Germs, and Steel, 1997) observes that writing is a difficult thing to invent, but once invented, it can readily be appropriated across languages. Writing to represent speech in Japan was initially appropriated in the 7th century via Korea from China, where a system of writing had already developed for two millennia.

Evidence for China's earliest forms of writing (i.e., the examples that survive) are found in *oracle bones* surviving from as early as the 14th century bce. These were turtle shell fragments upon which were scratched various questions such as "Will there be a misfortune in the next ten days?" The bone would be strategically incised, then heated at the point of incision, producing a crack whose direction would constitute the 'answer' to the question. Immense numbers of these inscribed shells were destroyed prior to 1900 for medicinal purposes. Image of oracle bone (from Shanghai Museum): http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Orakelknochen.JPG

This early writing was *hieroglyphic* in that it was primarily based on pictorial rather than phonetic representation. Each symbolic unit (=character) corresponded to a Chinese spoken word, which functioned nicely since Chinese was not an agglutinative language. Simple units could be combined into complex characters. In many examples, one of the units would hint at the pronunciation of the word indicated, while the totality of units would hint at the meaning. Example (using modern typeset and modern Mandarin pronunciation):

王 (wang^{2}: king) + 里 (li^{3}: village) = 理 (li^{3}: reason/principles) ← combined into single character

Single words could also be concatenated to make compound words:

論 (lun^{2}: argument) + 語 (yu^{3}: language) = 論語 (lun^{2}yu^{3}: "analects" = The Writings of Confucius)

Due to the use of different media (scratching on bones, stone and metal; paint and ink on wood and paper), various writing styles developed, as did the complexity of the writing system. Although the system may be technically referred to as "pictorial," in fact the characters quickly evolved away from anything that can be considered pictorial. Image of early character forms:
http://www.hwjyw.com/zhwh/ctwh/zgfs/ld/200705/W020080229465635616154.jpg
Image of Song Dynasty writing (c950ad, by Mifu), shows contrasting styles:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Chinese_characters
In Japan, documents prior to the 8th century (inscriptions on stone and wood; mercantile records) were in Chinese. Because of the vast differences between Japanese and Chinese language structure, this proved an ill fit.

Some characteristics of Japanese language include:
Melanesian/Polynesian-style CV (consonant-vowel) structure: with a limited number of pure vowels.
Ural-Altaic word order: S(p)-O(p)-V(suffix); versus Chinese S-V-(p)O
Agglutination: often including multiple suffixes onto words: iku>ikaseru>ikasareru>ikasaremasendesita
Word accent organized by relative high-low pitch between CV units; versus Chinese accent within words

Three alternatives were possible:
(a) Forget about the indigenous language, and write everything in Chinese;
(b) Use Chinese characters purely for their pronunciational value to represent the indigenous Japanese language;
Images of *man'yôgana* (a codification of "b" above): http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Man%27yōgana
Note! These charts are hugely oversimplified. Multiple kana were used well into the 19th century.
The development of kana is often attributed to Kûkai, who knew Chinese and was also exposed to Sanskrit.
(c) Give indigenous Japanese pronunciations to Chinese characters in accord with the Chinese meaning.
(d) Give Japanese approximations of Chinese pronunciations and incorporate Chinese words into the text.
(e) All of the above in a huge, ad hoc melange: this is what prevailed by the 9th century, and continues today.

Terminology: *kanji* (=Han Chinese characters); *kana* (=phonetic alphabet); *man'yôgana* (=kana used in Man'yôshû)
In poetry, a single CV unit is referred to as an "*on*", while a single line of verse is called a "*ku*"
Thus, a *tanka* (5/7/5/7/7) has five "*ku*" with a total of 31 "*on*." (短歌/音/句)

In the course of the 9th century, the *man'yôgana* system stabilized, using calligraphic stylizations that followed Chinese precedent. The basic written *kana* forms lasted until the late 19th century, when typeset technology radically brought about a new systemization. Here is an image from a 1650 handwritten copy of Tale of Genji (from the Waseda University collection). Interspersed are some *kanji*, which are also highly stylized in accord with the written media: http://www.wul.waseda.ac.jp/kotenseki/html/he12/he12_00020/index.html (vol3):
http://archive.wul.waseda.ac.jp/kosho/he12/he12_00020/he12_00020_0003/he12_00020_0003.pdf (p4)
If you know some Japanese and wish to punish yourself, you can compare this to a modern, annotated, typeset version of the text at (cf 1.1.3; from the "Aoi" chapter, discussing Lady Rokujô):
http://www.genji-monogatari.net/html/Genji/combined09.1.html

In Japan after the 9th century, Chinese continued to be used for political documents and some Buddhist writing, and was considered to some extent 'male,' as opposed to the 'feminine' uses of kana for fictional writing. In the late 1700s, a style of annotation emerged, called *kanbun*, whereby phrases were 'numbered' so that Chinese writing could be transposed and read aloud in Japanese order.