







# A Brief Note on the Kanji

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THE KANJI represent the only writing system that dates from the ancient world. Egyptian hieroglyphs, Mesopotamian cuneiform writing, and Indus characters, also dating back to the beginnings of civilization, have since disappeared from use. The origins of the kanji are lost in the mists of history, but the primitive forms of the kanji found on bone fragments and turtle shells in China date back to a time between 4800 and 4200 BCE. Later inscriptions on bronze, dating from the Shang period (1523–1028 BCE), are often more complex than the earlier bone and shell fragments, leading some scholars to think that they may actually be older. In any case, both these forms of writings are more pictographic than present-day kanji, but as they came into wider and wider use as a means of writing the spoken language, their form became more abstract and simplified. As these abbreviated shapes increased in number, periodical revisions simplified the form still further and gradually brought the whole system under the control of guiding principles.

MEANING	ORACLE BONES	BRONZES	TODAY
eye			目
ear			耳
deer			鹿

The kanji are commonly referred to as ideographs. Unlike phonetic alphabets, individual symbols do not indicate pronunciation but represent a specific meaning, concrete or abstract, which can then be combined with other characters to form more complex meanings or ideas. Since the kanji began in China, the sounds assigned to these ideographs reflected the spoken languages of China. As the kanji spread to other countries and other language groups—Korea, Malaysia, Vietnam, and finally Japan—their pronunciation and usage changed accordingly.

When the kanji were first introduced into Japan in the late fifth century CE, there was no existing system of writing for the Japanese language, only a language with a different structure and different sounds. In the process of adjusting the kanji to Japanese, two things happened. First, kanji had to be chosen to represent the sounds of the language. This was done by approximating these sounds to already existing pronunciations of the kanji. Second, Japanese sounds were used to form new words, not previously existing in Japanese.

In other words, it was not a mere phonetic system that was being introduced, but a means to express complex ideas that spoken Japan had no equivalents for, ideas that in many cases required a written language to standardize. In time, the purely phonetic kanji were simplified into syllabaries that functioned more or less like Western alphabets to reproduce all the sounds of the spoken language. Today there are two such syllabaries in use, the hiragana and katakana, which contain 46 characters each. Kanji assigned to represent indigenous Japanese words kept a “Japanese reading” (*kun-yomi*), while kanji belonging to Chinese terms not previously existing in Japanese survived with “Chinese readings” (the most common of which are the *on-yomi*).

The most complete list of kanji that exists counts some 80,000 distinct characters, but they have never all been used in any given period. In the case of Japan, a list of 1,945 characters have been nominated as “daily-use kanji” in 1981, and these are the kanji that are taught to all children in the schools and have produced virtual total literacy in what is certainly the most complex writing system in the world today.

## SOUND AND MEANING IN THE KANJI

The easiest way to understand how sound and meaning are carried by the kanji in contemporary Japanese is by way of an example. The Chinese city of Shanghai writes its name with two kanji 上海, meaning literally “on the sea.”

The first character 上, for “on” or “above” is drawn with a horizontal baseline and a 卜 above it. The oldest bone inscriptions wrote the upper part with a shorter horizontal line: 二, about by the eighth century it had 𠂇 the upper stroke had become vertical, giving us 上. Later revisions of the kanji changed it to what we have today. (As you might expect, something similar happened with the character that means “under.” It evolved from 下 and 冫 to get to its present form 下.) Chinese pronounces the character 上 *shang*.

The second character, 海, means “sea” and it is made up of three parts. To the left you see 氵, the three drops of water, indicating that it has something to do with water. The upper right two-stroke combination 厶 is an abbreviated form of 艸 which is one of the many forms for grass and anything that flourishes luxuriously like grass. Below it is a slightly simplified form of 母, the pictograph of two breasts, meaning “mother.” Together, the right side is an image of a woman with her hair up. It has had a wide range of meanings: always, often, luxuriant growth, trifling, dark. Today it means simply “each.” Putting these two sides together, the “water” was seen to combine with an image of “dark, wide, and deep” to create an image of the sea. It is pronounced *hai*.

So 上海 is pronounced *shanghai* in Chinese and it means “on the sea.” The writing and meaning were taken over by the Japanese. Obviously, since they received their kanji from China long after the major changes in form had occurred, it would not have made sense for them to ignore the etymology and start shifting the elements around or introducing new ones. Japanese pronunciation is another matter. In the case of the city of Shanghai, they actually keep something close to the Chinese, but this is a very rare exception. On their own, these characters head off in a completely different direction. Let us look at just the first of the two characters of Shanghai.

Whereas 上 has only one reading in Chinese, *shang*, in Japanese it has at least 10 recognized pronunciations, 6 of which all school children have to learn:

- 2 standard Chinese (*on*) readings: *jō* and *shō*
- 4 standard Japanese (*kun*) readings: *kami*, *ue*, *a[garu]*, *no[boru]*, (and 3 more, if you include variations on these last 2)
- 4 rare Japanese readings: *hotori*, *kuwa[eru]*, *tate[matsuru]*, and *tattoo[bu]*

Which reading is used in which situation? It all depends on the context. You have to look at what comes before or after (sometimes both before and after) the simple character 上 to know how to pronounce it. Thus, if you see 上位 you should know it is read *jōi*; and that 上人 is read *shōnin*. The second character gives away the meaning of the term and hence the pronunciation memorized for that meaning jumps to mind. And if you see 上がる you know that it is read *a* from the hiragana *garu* that inflect it; or, similarly, that 上る is read *noboru*. Standing all on its own, you would have to look at the context of the phrase and decide if the proper reading for 上 is *kami* or *ue*.

This may seem like too much for a single mind to manage, but in fact we have something similar in English, even if on a much more modest scale. Take the following shape: 2. You look at it and immediately know what it means and how to pronounce it. But in fact there is no connection between the pronunciation and the written form. If you saw the letter in the middle of a Vietnamese novel, you would still know what it means, but you would no longer know how to pronounce it.

But wait—it isn't always pronounced "two" even in English. Adjust the context of surrounding symbols and you end up with four additional and quite distinct readings: 12, 20, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and ½. What your mind does when it adjusts the reading to the context is roughly what the Japanese-reading mind does when it locates a kanji in its context and decides on how to read it.

#### STUDYING THE KANJI

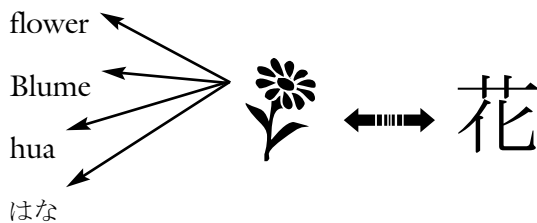
The big question is, of course, how to train one's mind to read and write Japanese. There are those who simplify matters by deciding that there is no need for persons educated outside of the Japanese school system to bother learning how to *write* the lan-

guage. If you can read, you will remember how to write a few hundred of the kanji along the way and you can leave the rest to computers to handle for you. Or so the argument goes. It has the full support of most Japanese who have never met a Western-educated individual who can write the kanji with the same fluency as they and have somehow decided that, without the benefit of an education in writing that begins at the pre-school level and goes all the way up to the last year of high school, there is no way they ever could. This is not only the case for ordinary readers of Japanese but also for the great masses of scholars of Japanese scholarship in the West. The hiragana and katakana, and perhaps a third-grade level of writing—but more than that is unreasonable to expect.

If you accept the argument, you are solidly in the majority camp. You would also be as wrong as they are. To begin with, there is no reason you cannot learn to write the kanji as fluently as you read them, and in a fraction of the time it takes to do it through the Japanese school system. What it more, without the ability to write, you are forever crippled, or at least limited to walking with the crutch of an electronic dictionary or computer. Finally, by learning to write you have helped to internationalize the fullness of the Japanese language beyond the present-day limits.

All of this is common sense to the Korean and Chinese who come to Japan to learn the language. The reason Westerners tend to dismiss it is their fear of not being able to learn to write, or at least not without devoting long years to the task. As I said, this fear is unfounded.

The key to learning to write is to forget the way the Japanese learn and pay attention instead to the way the Chinese learn Japanese, and then adapt it to the West. Consider the following diagram.



For the English speaker, the word *flower* is linked with the memory or visual perception of an actual flower, 花. This link goes both ways, so that thinking about or seeing a 花 the word *flower* comes to mind at once, just as speaking or reading the word *flower* calls up an image, however vague, of a 花. The same is true for the German, Chinese, or Japanese speaker, each of whom associates the 花 with the equivalent term in their own language: *Blume*, *hua*, はな. The phonetic symbols for that that word—in the examples here, the alphabet and the Japanese kana—have no necessary connection with the actual 花 itself. They are linguistic conventions that differ from language to language.

The kanji on the far right, in contrast has no phonetic value, as the words on the right do; nor has it any pictographic link to the actual 花. It is ideographic, that is, it represents the pure meaning or idea of the flower without specifying any sound or image. For one who knows the meaning of the kanji, there is a link to the actual 花, just as the actual 花 (or even a mere idea of it) is linked to the memory of the written kanji 花.

When the Japanese study the kanji, they have only one step to take: はな → 花. When the Chinese study Japanese, they, too, have only one step to take, and it goes in the opposite direction: 花 → はな. But when someone comes from a Western language learns the kanji, both steps have to be taken: *flower* → はな ⇨ 花. The problem is, these two steps are completely different and have nothing in common such that the learning of one might aid the learning of the other. Nevertheless, the traditional way of studying the kanji is to try to take them both at the same time. One ends up walking in one direction with one leg and another direction with the other. Little wonder that progress is so painful and so slow.

The conclusion should be obvious: *If you want to learn to read and write all the general-use kanji, you should study them separately.*

Which one do you start with, the reading of the writing? You might be surprised, but the answer is—the writing. There are two reasons. First, by doing so you end up in basically the same position as the Chinese coming to the study of Japanese kanji: you know what they mean and how to write them, but you still have to learn how to pronounce them. Second, the writing is a rational system that can be learned by principles, whereas the readings require a great deal of brute memory.

The kanji? Rational? Actually yes. As mentioned at the beginning, the evolution of the kanji over nearly seven millennia has not taken place haphazardly. Writing is, after all, a highly rational activity, and the refinement of a writing system naturally tends towards simplification and consistency. Without knowing a good number of kanji, it is hard to explain this in the concrete, but suffice it to say that with only a couple of exceptions, the present list of general-use kanji *obey rational principles completely*. What this means is that they are based on a limited number of pieces joined by a limited number of rules.

This brings us to a second conclusion: *The most efficient way for an adult to learn a rational system of writing is to learn the underlying principles, which can then be applied to blocks of information*. Or, put the other way around: *The most inefficient way for an adult to learn them is by repetition, the way Japanese school children, lacking the powers of abstraction, begin learning them*.

Once the meaning and writing of the kanji have been learned, it is possible to introduce a limited number of principles for reading, which again help to learn blocks of information at one time, rather than have to study the kanji one by one. And, as you might expect, the best order for learning to write the kanji is very different from the best order for learning to read them. All of this is spelled out in more detail in a series of books I wrote some years ago under the general title *Remembering the Kanji*.<sup>1</sup>

The 160 samples of kanji that appear in the “Kanji Dictionary” that follows is intended only to serve as a reference index for the lessons that make up this book. A sample of possible readings and examples are provided, along with the stroke order for writing the kanji.

<sup>1</sup> *Remembering the Kanji I: A Complete Course on How Not to Forget the Meaning and Writing of Japanese Characters*. (Tokyo: Japan Publications Trading Co., 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 2001); *Remembering the Kanji II: A Systematic Guide to Reading Japanese Characters* (Tokyo: Japan Publications Trading Co., 1987); and, with Tanya Sienko, *Remembering the Kanji III: Writing and Reading Japanese Characters for Upper-Level Proficiency* (Tokyo: Japan Publications Trading Co., Ltd., 1994).