
Worlds Without Translation: Premodern East Asia and the Power of Character Scripts

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We are used to thinking that translation is indispensable. An English speaker without competence in Latin does not understand Virgil unless he is translated into English. But we forget that this is partly a function of the alphabetic script Latin and English use. Translation has not been a prerequisite for full mutual intelligibility with character scripts that rely heavily on logographic writing, in which each character stands for a word (more precisely a morpheme). As we will see below, into the twentieth century an educated Japanese, for example, could read a Chinese text by pronouncing it in Japanese, without any knowledge of Chinese or any need for translation. All cultures that were arguably independent sites of script invention developed scripts with a strong logographic component: Mesopotamian cuneiform, Egyptian hieroglyphs, Chinese characters, and Maya glyphs. Of these primary scripts only Chinese survives today, vigorously, from its already mature form in the thirteenth century BCE into our digital age. It is used in the sinophone world, in Japan, and to a limited degree in Korea, and it stands as a thought-provoking exception to the alphabetic scripts that dominate much of today's world.

Some scholars have, justly, downplayed the difference between logographic systems, where the relation between sign and sound is more flexible, and syllabic or alphabetic systems, which are more prescriptive and phonographic (recording sound). I. J. Gelb's (1963) scheme that assumes a progression from logographic to syllabic to alphabetic writing systems is questionable (Daniels and Bright 1996, 8–10). Even strongly logographic scripts like Chinese have systematic phonographic elements that make

the pronunciation of many characters predictable (deFrancis 1984). In turn, the spelling of alphabet-based languages such as English can be so resistant to historical change that it becomes unrecognizable as a phonographic rendering of contemporary speech, thus acquiring a logographic element. Still, I argue in this essay that we should remain sensitive to fundamental qualitative differences between scripts and pay more attention to their wide-ranging cultural and literary implications.

Alphabetic writing has often been considered the ultimate goal in the evolution of writing systems. Against the backdrop of this prejudice, this essay presents some distinctive advantages of Chinese characters and calls for more serious attention to script in translation studies. It explores how the Chinese script has shaped cultural traditions in East Asia, namely China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, all of which adopted it for administrative, religious, and literary uses and adapted it to their own vernaculars in the absence of an indigenous writing system. I focus on early Japan, although the arguments apply with variations to other East Asian cultures and until the twentieth century. We will see how the Chinese script explored dimensions of literary expression closed to alphabetic scripts and how it enabled a multilingual East Asian “world without translation,” unifying various Chinese dialects or languages that were mutually unintelligible in speech, but identical in writing. What is more, cultures beyond the Sino-Tibetan language family developed special reading techniques for Chinese texts using vernacular glossing (called *kundoku* in Japanese) and face-to-face communication through writing (so-called “brush talk”), which made translation unnecessary. These phenomena have so far received scant attention in translation studies, although Judy Wakabayashi has called attention to them. Their study would widen the theoretical scope of the discipline decisively. To strengthen my call for more serious attention to script I will show how early Japanese and Latin literatures – otherwise quite comparable in their high regard for their respective mother cultures, China and Greece – launched onto different paths partly owing to the different nature of their scripts.

Alphabetic Triumphalism

Modern prejudices against the complexity of the Chinese script are so pervasive that scholars have hardly dared to show its advantages. True, European Enlightenment thinkers such as Gottfried Leibniz admired the Chinese script and used it as inspiration for their own speculations about the existence of a universal language that could communicate meaning without being couched in any particular language. But since the turn of the twentieth century, the Chinese script has come under heavy attack in both East Asia and the West. It is decried as inefficient, unfit for achieving mass literacy, and even obstructive to creative thought (see Hannas 2003). Various alphabetization movements tried to remove this burden of tradition either by replacing characters with the alphabet, as in Vietnam, or by simplifying the characters, as in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Ironically, prominent Western scholars of East

Asian languages have encouraged such prejudices. John DeFrancis is scandalized by the “crippling influence of the characters” and the “incubus of . . . character scripts” (1989, 266) and claims that the Japanese devised “one of the worst overall systems of writing ever created” (1989, 138). Marshall Unger goes as far as faulting Chinese characters for the sharp drop in book sales and the rise of comic books in postwar Japan, although he fails to account for comparable developments in postindustrial alphabet-based societies (2004, 11).

Eric A. Havelock, a classicist who tried to understand the linguistic and cognitive changes that happened in Greece as it moved from the archaic oral world of the Homeric epics to the textual culture of the classical and post-classical age, has arguably advanced the most sweeping argument for the superiority of alphabetic languages. He identifies a single cause for the “Greek miracle”: the invention of the alphabet. Making blanket arguments for Western exceptionalism, he asserts that

those peoples and cultures who had adopted the Greek invention had set the pace in the development of law, literature, science, and philosophy, culminating in the industrial revolution – had in fact invented “modernism.” Those using other script systems – Arabic, Hindu, Buddhist, Chinese, Japanese – had tagged along, employing the alphabetic script in varying degrees of “modernism” . . . None of them could be imposed easily upon the genes of small children so successfully as to meld into an automatic reflex at the unconscious level. (Havelock 1987, 1)

The fact is that conceptual syntax (which means alphabetic syntax) supports the social structures which sustain Western civilization in its present form. Without it, the lifestyle of modernity could not exist; without it there would be no physical science, no industrial revolution, no scientific medicine replacing the superstitions of the past, and I will add no literature or law as we know them, read them, use them. (Havelock 1986, 147)

Havelock loved analogies from modern science, and his argument for the superiority of the alphabet relied on a reductive notion of technical efficiency. Perhaps because he is mainly appreciated as a pioneer of orality/literacy studies through his influence on Walter J. Ong, he triggered surprisingly little outrage with his raw alphabetic triumphalism. Havelock’s vision makes so many simplistic assumptions about literacy that it would be equally preposterous to prove him wrong by positing the superiority of any other script. Yet we can make his and other alphabetic fetishists’ claims productive by asking what kinds of impact the Chinese script has had on East Asian cultural history.

The Power of the Chinese Script in East Asia

Western translation studies have paid little attention to how script affects translation and impacts broader cultural patterns of whether, why, and how translation occurs. This is partly due to the temporal and geographic disjunction between the develop-

ment of the world's scripts and the history of the field of translation studies. The logographic writing systems of the ancient world are dead and the philologists who study these defunct languages have no stake in translation studies. The Chinese script is of course the exception and certainly not negligible, since it represents more than a fifth of the world's population. But the dominant languages that drive theorization in translation studies are alphabet-based European vernaculars: the entry on "script" in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation* devotes more space to Guillaume Apollinaire's fanciful *Calligrammes* than to a serious engagement with non-alphabetic scripts and their implications for translation cultures. Also, certain focal concerns in translation studies – economic and digital globalization and their ethical and technical implications for translation; translation in international affairs, entertainment, science, and technology – are unlikely to intersect with the interests of ancient world philologists. Quite apart from this disjunction between scholars, their concerns, and the scripts they use or research, linguistics – one of the central mother disciplines of translation studies – tends to favor language and speech over script. Even when script does become the center of attention, it is treated more as a technology deserving comparison to other writing systems than as a generative force in the creation and development of complex literary traditions.

To underscore the need to pay closer attention to script, let us explore some examples of the sweeping effects the Chinese script has had on textual traditions in East Asia.

Literary opportunities

Linguists have, rightly, emphasized that the Chinese script includes systematic phonographic elements (especially for "compound characters," which combine a semantic determinative or "radical" and a phonetic element that suggests approximate pronunciation). Still, the relation between graph and pronunciation is much more variable in strongly logographic scripts than in alphabets or syllabaries. When the Chinese script was adapted to record Japanese, that relation became even more variable. Thus Japanese is more strongly logographic than Chinese.¹ In early Japanese texts such as the first vernacular poetry anthology, the *Man'yōshū* (Collection of Myriad Leaves, c.759), Chinese graphs are used in three ways: for meaning, for sound when read in Chinese, and for sound when read in Japanese. The Chinese graph denoting "person" 人, for instance, could be used for its semantic value when writing the Japanese word for "person," and would be pronounced *hito* in Japanese-style pronunciation. When read in Chinese-style pronunciation, the Chinese graph would be pronounced *jin*, or *nin* (in modern Mandarin it is *ren*). Or it could be pronounced *hito* while not meaning "person" at all, but simply referring to that sound value. For example, the name of one of the *Man'yōshū*'s prominent poets, Hitomaro, could be written with the "person" character signifying the phonetic element "Hito." (Linguists call this fundamental inscription strategy the "rebus principle," "writing through {other} things.") This inscription system,

which meant that thousands of Chinese characters worked on three different levels, allowed for a literary playfulness impossible with alphabetic languages where graphs are more closely linked to pronunciation.

The *Man'yōshū* brims with linguistic playfulness and excitement over the still rather new medium of writing that was just starting to be put to use in the composition of longer texts. Let us look at an extreme case, a poem attributed to Emperor Tenmu when in 679 he visited the venerable site of Yoshino (meaning “Goodfield” in one etymology) in the context of a loyalty oath between six of his sons:

淑人乃	yoki hito no	Good ^{virtuous} men of old
良跡吉見而	yoshi to yoku mite	Took a good ^{auspicious} look at its goodness
好常言師	yoshi to ihishi	And declared it good ^{beautiful} :
芳野吉見与	yoshino yoku miyu	You too, good ^{obedient} fellows,
		be so good as to
良人四來三	yoki hito yoku mi	look at Good ^{fragrant} -field's goodness.

(Kojima et al. 1994, 41)

There is a slightly different version of this poem in the poetical treatise *Kakyō byōshiki* (Models for the Waka Poetry Canon, 772), which is recorded in phonographic fashion, using Chinese characters to transcribe each of the Japanese syllables. In this version of this phonetically repetitive poem circling around “yo-shi/yo-ki/yo-ku” (“good”) and the place name of “Yoshi-no,” Chinese characters function like a syllabary, with each instance of “good” recorded with the same characters: 美与旨能呼与旨止与俱美与 与旨等伊比旨 与岐比等与旨能 与岐比等与俱美 (Okimori 1993, 76). This style of inscription is in principle no different from the alphabetic transcription above. The version from the *Man'yōshū*, in contrast, takes full advantage of the semantic depth of the Chinese characters. It cleverly plays phonetic repetition against graphic variation: Five different characters are used for the same morpheme for “good.” The “good men of old” 淑人 and “good fellows” 良人 in the opening and closing lines occur in the Chinese *Classic of Poetry* (c.600 BCE). They give the lines an authoritative, archaic flavor and in the relevant poems they refer to people who are “good” because they are “virtuous” and “obedient.” Adding the graphic overtones with superscript, as done above, is a faint attempt to translate semantic depth.

We don't know whether Tenmu or later compilers were responsible for this exuberant version. And it is an interesting, not a good, poem. Given that the future Tenmu visited Yoshino before a succession war in which he killed his nephew and claimed the throne, the place and its name had a particular significance for the emperor and lent itself to a loyalty oath that would bind his sons from different mothers to each other. Is the incantatory repetition part of the oath's oral word-magic? Or could it be a written parody, inspired by the possibilities of contrasting phonetic repetition with graphic variation? The poem is as simple as it is indeterminate. What we can say, however, is that it shows the fantastic literary opportunities that logographic writing

affords and illustrates the excitement of the earliest poets and compilers as they were exploring them in their nascent written literary tradition.

But what is a boon to literature can be a vice to linguists. My line of argument here only confirms linguists' worst nightmares. Roy Miller sees these very opportunities as

eloquent testimony to the enormous leisure enjoyed by the Japanese upper classes at the time. That tiny segment of the population that was at all concerned with reading and writing had in fact little if anything else to do with its time, and so quite naturally it delighted in any device that would make the process as time-consuming as possible. (1967, 99)

DeFrancis rails that

it is precisely this inferior [writing] system which has dominated Japanese writing despite the existence of a simpler system of syllabic signs [i.e., *kana*]. The literate elite which from the beginning has set the intellectual tone for Japanese society is notorious for its addiction to preciosity in this as in many other areas. A writing system that was complicated enough to begin with even became the subject of word games and deliberate obscurity of style. (1989, 140–41)

Graphic and phonetic punning has been a tremendously productive feature of Chinese and Japanese literature. But to convince more than poets and scholars of literature we need to find harder edges of character scripts to make our case.

Worlds without translation: *kundoku* and “brush talk”

The greatest advantage of the Chinese script – if we argue from a perspective of efficiency – is that it enabled literate people in premodern East Asia to communicate directly in the absence of a common spoken language. Chinese-style writing was the East Asian lingua franca, or we should rather say scripta franca, because unlike elites who wrote *and* conversed in Latin in medieval and early modern Europe, Chinese-style writing was written language, a grapholect. When reading a Chinese text, Koreans, Japanese, and Vietnamese would voice them in their own vernaculars. Traditional East Asia was united by the Chinese script and elite education in a shared canon of Chinese texts and has therefore been called the “Sinographic Sphere.” From the beginning of the written record in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam during the first millennium CE to the early twentieth century, when training in the Chinese classics ceased to be the shared basis of education, the Chinese canon and Chinese-style texts produced throughout East Asia constituted the most authoritative corpus of texts in this part of the world. Classical Chinese was the language of government, of the Buddhist clergy, of scholarship, and of highbrow literature.

The unifying power of the Chinese script in the sinographic sphere stands in stark contrast to the radically different languages that came to use it. Classical Chinese has largely monosyllabic words (morphemes) and shows little inflection or affixing; it is therefore called an “isolating” language with a word order on the SVO (“subject-verb-object”) model. Vietnamese is also an “isolating” language and thus not unlike Chinese. Japanese and Korean, however, are at the opposite end of the linguistic spectrum: Japanese morphemes are usually polysyllabic; verbs and adjectives are highly inflected and heavily affixed; and objects precede their verbs (following an SOV model). This disjunction between a shared script and radically different language families created distinctive patterns of literate communication in East Asia.

Because Japan developed the most complex and consequential reading methods, I will focus on the Japanese case. The common reading technique for Chinese texts in traditional Japan was *kundoku* 訓読 or “reading through Japanese glossing.” Comparable to Chinese commentators, who would gloss ancient words with contemporary language (*kunko* 訓詁), a Japanese reader would vocalize a Chinese phrase in accordance with Japanese syntax and pronunciation. In Modern Mandarin the famous opening of the Confucian *Analects* reads *xue er shi xi zhi, bu yi yue bu* 學而時習之、不亦說乎 (“to learn and sometimes review what one has learnt, is that not pleasure?”). A Japanese reader would voice these characters *manabite toki ni kore o narau, mata yorokobashi- karazu ya*.² The Japanese vocalization of a Chinese sentence through *kundoku* involved three procedures. First, the association of Chinese logographs with Japanese words (e.g. the logograph 習 (“review”), pronounced *xi* in Mandarin with the analogous Japanese word *narau*). Second, the transposition of the phrase into Japanese word order (e.g., by placing the object before the verb: inverting the Chinese *xi* (“reviewing”) *zhi* (“that which [one has learned]”) into the Japanese *kore* (“that which [one has learned] *narau* (“review”). Third, the addition of suffixes and particles (e.g., the Japanese object marker *o* in *kore o narau* (“review what one has learnt”).

From the late seventh century to the early twentieth century, the Japanese used *kundoku* only for reading Chinese texts. They also wrote texts in “reverse *kundoku*,” producing Chinese-style texts in Chinese word order and without Japanese grammatical markers. Except for hybrid genres such as courtier diaries, these were perfectly readable throughout East Asia. This rich textual tradition has been called “Sino-Japanese literature” (*kanbun* 漢文).³ The extraordinary efficiency of Chinese characters in the sinographic sphere was exploited for a last time by the throngs of Chinese who went to study in Japan in the early twentieth century. The prominent Chinese reformer and intellectual Liang Qichao (1873–1929) wrote a treatise on how to use *kundoku* to help his compatriots learn Japanese more quickly and gain access to the wealth of Japanese translations of Western works—a more efficient route than having to learn European languages (Kin 2010, 82–6).

Scholars have struggled to conceptualize *kundoku*. Although sometimes described as “translation” of sorts (“mental translation” [Wakabayashi 2005, 24] or “invisible translation” [Semizu 2006, 283]), *kundoku* is not translation in any conventional sense,

because there is only one text (not an original and a translation).⁴ Also, most Japanese practitioners of *kundoku* were monolingual and did not conceive of Chinese texts as texts in a foreign language. Learning *kundoku* did not involve learning a foreign language, it simply required a certain kind of literacy training. As Judy Wakabayashi notes, if scholars use the term “translation” for *kundoku* they usually put it in quotation marks, indicating that they know it is *not* really translation but have no better term (1998, 59).

We can show how *kundoku* was not translation and how the Chinese script saved a vast amount of human and economic resources by way of an empirical, historical example. The spread of Buddhism into China necessitated the translation of a vast number of Buddhist texts from Sanskrit, Pali, and various Central Asian languages into Chinese. This effort continued for about a millennium, from the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 CE) through the Song Dynasty (960–1279). Famous individual translators such as Kumārajīva (344–413) or Xuanzang (c.602–64) worked at times alongside large-scale collaborative teams employed by government-sponsored translation bureaus.⁵ Compare the translation-mediated linguistic conditions under which Buddhism spread from phonographic languages in Central Asia and India into China with the translation-less conditions, thanks to the logographic script, under which it spread from China into East Asia. It is impossible to quantify the tremendous resources spent on the production of Buddhist translations into Chinese. We can only point to the final product: the Chinese Buddhist Canon, which in its latest edition consists of fifty-five volumes of about a thousand pages each. Once the Buddhist texts were translated into Chinese they were directly accessible to Koreans, Japanese, and Vietnamese without the need for further translation. We can assume that, without the power of the Chinese script, Buddhism would have taken a dramatically different turn in East Asia, with a slower spread and a decisive dependence on local government resources.

That translation was not necessary in premodern East Asia does not mean that there were no interpreters. Obviously, diplomacy required multilingual individuals who knew several East Asian vernaculars and could navigate the practical challenges of foreign travel and cultural differences. The Chinese court employed translation officials, and various interpreters accompanied the missions that connected the East Asian polities amongst each other and to the Chinese tributary system (Lung 2011). This system, through which China projected its cultural hegemony by receiving embassies from rulers of surrounding polities who in turn sought to gain prestige and power from their association with the Chinese empire, existed for almost two millennia, from the beginning of the Common Era into the nineteenth century. But for cultures within the sinographic sphere, crucial diplomatic interactions were not negotiated by interpreters, but rather occurred between high-ranking members of the diplomatic corps through a procedure called “brush talk” (筆談 Chinese *bitan*, Japanese *bitsudan*): the foreign ambassadors would directly “converse” with Chinese officials with brush and paper.

Beyond efficiency: scripts and the trajectory of literary traditions

The example of the sutra translation movement demonstrates that, historically, character scripts show remarkable forms of efficiency. We could also adduce practical evidence for their efficiency. For instance, Gregg shorthand, a stenographic notation system developed in the early twentieth century, has much in common with the Chinese script. Marshall Unger explains that “although Gregg’s fundamental idea was to create a phonographic writing system, the system he perfected was heavily logographic. Even structurally, *kanji* and Gregg outlines have much in common” (Unger 2004, 100).

Yet instead of proving Havelock’s alphabetic triumphalism wrong by working within the constraints of his paradigm and showing the “efficiency” of character scripts, we should question the very assumption that “efficiency” is the principal factor in the invention, cultural impact, or disappearance of scripts. Rather, it is the fixation of modern language reformers on their mission to expand mass literacy (deFrancis 1989, 262). The Egyptologist John Baines, blessed with an intuition for *longue durée*, reminds us that our assumptions about script are biased by the relatively recent colonization of the world by alphabetic scripts; that it was common in many cultures of the ancient world to use several scripts that carried cultural prestige; and that the goal of universal literacy is a recent obsession (Baines 2008, 350).

The case studies in *The Disappearance of Writing Systems* (Baines et al. 2008) range from Aegean Linear A and Mesopotamian cuneiform, Maya and Manchu, to pre-Roman Italic scripts and the Indic Kharoṣṭhī. They repeatedly prove the myth of alphabetic efficiency and phonographic teleology wrong on historical grounds (see also Trigger 1998). The case of Hittite, to give just one example, illustrates how purpose, material, and prestige determined the choice of language and script. The kings of the Hittite empire in Anatolia (c.1800–1200 BCE) deposited correspondence on clay tablets written in Hittite in cuneiform script in their royal archives. But monumental inscriptions for public display were inscribed in stone and recorded in the related Luwian language – like Hittite, an Indo-European language – in hieroglyphic script. When the royal administration declined around 1200 BCE, Hittite cuneiform vanished with it. However, Neo-Hittite successor states continued to use Hieroglyphic Luwian for commemorative monuments until these states vanished in the seventh century BCE (Hawkins 2008, 31–32, 36). This is an extreme but not unusual case of a multilingual society operating in multiple scripts of different prestige and longevity. Also, none of the scholars in the volume by John Baines, John Bennet, and Stephen Houston (2008) explains the disappearance of older logographic scripts in the ancient Near East with recourse to the evolutionary pressure from the emerging alphabetic lingua francas of Aramaic and Greek.

Unfortunately, some Western scholars of East Asia still evoke the efficiency principle and criticize characters on that ground. But giving up their defensive ambivalence over the complexity of the Chinese writing system and taking our cue from philologists of the ancient Near East can open our eyes to the qualitative differences

between alphabetic and logographic scripts and to the impact of script on the trajectory of entire literary traditions and translation cultures.

A comparison of early Japanese and Latin literature is a case in point. Both early Japan and ancient Rome were young cultures looking up with admiration to their “reference cultures,” China and Greece, respectively; and writers in these cultures created their own literature through (and against) Chinese and Greek literary precedents. But, arguably due to the difference in script, they launched on different trajectories. Roman literature started as a “translation literature.” By the age of Cicero its iconic beginning was dated to the year 240 BCE, when a Greek of southern Italy named Livius Andronicus translated two Greek plays into Latin for the Roman Games. Today only about sixty fragments of his writings survive, mostly from plays and from his pioneering translation of Homer’s *Odyssey*. In contrast, Chinese-style literature in Japan was a local *continuation* of sorts of the Chinese tradition and was readable throughout East Asia without the need for translation. And from the eighth century, the first century that produced longer texts, two large historical chronicles, two poetry anthologies (including the *Man’yôshû* mentioned above, with more than 4,500 poems), and various other texts survive intact.

What did it mean that Latin started as “translation literature”? And why are the preservation patterns of early Latin and Japanese literature so different? Thanks to *kundoku* Japanese authors did not need translations of Chinese texts. In contrast, the very possibility (and everyday practice) of putting a Greek original next to a Latin translation encouraged a Latin inferiority complex vis-à-vis Greek. Aulus Gellius (130–180 CE) gives a gripping example of the psychology behind this pervasive perception of a “poverty of our forefathers’ language [*patrii sermonis egestas*],” in Latin literary culture:

I often read the comedies by our Latin poets, in which they adapted and translated Greek . . . comedy writers. And while I read them nothing really displeases me at all: they seem indeed to be elegantly and attractively written, so that you might think there could not possibly be anything better. But if you then put it next to the Greek originals, from which they derive, you compare them, and subject single passages to careful and fitting synoptic and alternating reading, then the Latin certainly starts to fall flat and look shabby. In this way the Latin [translations] lack the wit and sparkle of the Greek originals, which they cannot emulate.⁶

The topos of linguistic poverty, so prevalent in Rome, is notably absent in early Japan. There simply was no Chinese “original” that would have made Japanese “translations” look deficient. Japanese poets, such as the above-mentioned Hitomaro, took pride in the powers of their own language. Latin literature from Livius Andronicus’s time into the first century BCE only survives in fragments, except for Plautus’s and Terence’s plays and Cato’s treatise *On Agriculture*. Because early writers like Livius Andronicus were by Cicero’s time considered the awkward literary initiators of a fledgling literature and not worth a second read, their works ceased to be transmitted as texts of cultural,

let alone canonical, authority. Early Japanese texts, however, came to be cherished, canonized and often preserved largely intact. Early Latin texts merely served as a quarry for grammatical and lexical treasure hunters and survived in quotations in their scholarly treatises. Obviously many factors influenced the preservation patterns of Latin and early Japanese literature, but this one has rarely been considered.

A Script for Translation Studies?

Translation is indispensable only with phonetic scripts. Educated elites in traditional East Asia had direct access to Chinese texts (and audiences) without the need for translation. True, in the twentieth century Classical Chinese lost its role as East Asia's lingua franca owing to linguistic and pedagogical reforms under Western influence. Nowadays Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and Vietnamese have to learn each other's languages or communicate in English rather than "brush talk." And most languages now use alphabetic scripts. But these are very recent developments. Today a third of the world's languages, some 2,000, are spoken in Africa; 25 percent of them have a written form and the overwhelming majority uses the Roman script (Daniels and Bright 1996, 689). But this has little to do with particular advantages of the Roman alphabet. These languages had no writing systems when their alphabetic colonizers arrived. The hegemony of the alphabet is an artifact of colonialism, ultimately going back to the Hellenistic and Roman empires and to the particular success of their heirs in the early modern period in spreading their script to the entire globe.

Since historical contingency elevated the Roman script to a universal category, the issue of script has barely begun to come to the attention of translation scholars. Judy Wakabayashi has courageously pointed to this cognitive gap from the perspective of Japanese; she calls on translation scholars in Japan to bring Japanese translation traditions and issues to bear on Western translation studies rather than following their lead (Wakabayashi 2012). Paying more serious attention to script opens up a whole new dimension of pressing questions for literary and cultural studies as well as translation theory. On the broadest level of cultural history, we should ask how script impacts cross-cultural interactions. How does it affect the particular culture of foreign relations and diplomatic encounters? Did the absence of a necessity for translation create a type of intimacy among people from different East Asian countries that translation-mediated cross-cultural encounters did not allow? What did it mean for the perception of one's own language and identity and the construction of notions of cultural otherness? And how can script affect the trajectory of entire literary traditions?

More specifically, the East Asian case can help us think in more depth about culture-specific translation practices. Phenomena such as *kundoku*, which question our assumptions of what might count as translation, have a generative potential for translation theory. But attention to script also promises to bring new evidence to age-old questions in European translation debates. *Kundoku*, for example, upsets the common polarity of "foreignizing" versus "domesticating" strategies of translation, a debate that has been particularly central to German Romanticism and to modern translation

scholars such as Lawrence Venuti, but arguably appears as early as Cicero's distinction between translating "as an orator" ("domesticating" a text by tuning it to the cultural and rhetorical conventions of the target language) versus translating "as an interpreter" (translating word by word and allowing for influence by the source language). Although *kundoku* is in some ways not translation at all, it is not unlike an extremely source-language-oriented, Sinitic and thus "foreignizing" adaptation. The Western debates around that term have focused on domestication and foreignization as stylistic device or ideological choice; if we add *kundoku* to this debate we find that the particular form of "foreignization" that it produced is linguistically inscribed and inevitable; that it was highly productive in Japanese history as a continuous nexus between vernacular Japanese and Chinese-style registers; and that bringing it into dialogue with European debates about "foreignization" can be quite fruitful. This is just another example of how translation studies would benefit from writing the issue of script prominently into its script for the future.

SEE ALSO CHAPTER 13 (CHEUNG), CHAPTER 30 (HENITIUK), CHAPTER 40 (HARE), CHAPTER 45 (EMMERICH)

NOTES

I would like to thank John Baines, Daniel Boucher, David Damrosch, and Judy Wakabayashi for their responses to queries and invaluable comments on drafts of this essay.

- 1 Japanese figures as the most logographic language in a chart ranging from Finnish, which is closest to the International Phonetic Alphabet, to Chinese and Japanese at the opposite end (Unger 2004, 32).
- 2 *Kundoku* readings changed over time and depended on school affiliation. For different readings of this sentence through history see Kin 2010, 72–73.
- 3 For an overview of the complex issues surrounding the nomenclature see Kornicki 2010. For *kundoku*, see Kin 2010 or (in English) Lurie 2011, ch. 4.
- 4 One can of course note down the Japanese gloss-reading of a Chinese text syllable by syllable, which then results in a separate text from the Chinese original. This is called a *kakikudashi* ("written out") version of the original text, but the most common form of reading Chinese texts was to read them either off a clean page or with *kundoku* marks that helped with the gloss-reading.
- 5 For an introduction to the Buddhist translation movement see Ch'en 1964, 365–72, and Hung 2005. To get a taste of the enormous difficulties facing early translation teams and modern scholars trying to reconstruct the translation process see Boucher 1998.
- 6 *Attic Nights* II.23, 1–3. The Latin text is from Rolfe 1946, 192. The translation is mine.

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