

Japanese Spirit and Chinese Learning: Scribes and Storytellers in Pre-modern Japan

H. Mack Horton

Ever since the disappearance of the land bridges that linked Japan to the Asian mainland in the Pleistocene epoch, the history of the archipelago has been animated at a profound level by the interaction between native traditions and foreign importations. Nowhere is that dynamic more apparent than in the literary history of the country.

I would like to review briefly here the history of reading in Japan by exploring the dynamic between orality and orthography that developed as the Japanese gradually learned both to manipulate the Chinese language and its writing system and to devise ways to adapt Chinese orthography to their own very different native language and its rich corpus of oral literature.¹ I will then explore a few of the implications of that dynamic for strategies of reader reception of pre-modern Japanese texts.

The interaction between the written and oral Japanese traditions is demonstrated in microcosm by the etymological development of the word "to read" itself, *yomu*. In its earliest sense, *yomu* means "to count." This meaning survives in modern Japanese phrases like *saba o yomu*, "to count mackerel," meaning, to inflate one's count or cheat at counting. A second early meaning of *yomu* is "to chant." And the word also came to mean "to compose poetry," possibly deriving from the fact that Japanese poetry is based on syllabic meter and hence is both composed and chanted on the basis of "counting" syllables.

Those meanings for the word *yomu* focus on oral counting and oral telling, an etymological phenomenon that has numerous Western parallels. In Old English, for example, the verb *tellan* means both "to count" (as in to "tell" one's rosary) and "to narrate" (to "tell" a "tale"). Likewise in French, *compter*, "to count" and *conter*, "to tell a story," both derive from the same Latin root *computare* and are reflected in the English similarity be-

tween "count" or "compute" and "give an account," or "recount a story." And Hebrew seems to possess a very similar bivalence in the word *hagah*, which in Psalm 1 means "to murmur [prayers]" (the King James Version translates it to "meditate day and night" but the word more accurately involves orality). In Psalm 2, however, the word means "to count" (Dahood 1965:1, 3).

Considerable correspondence appears to exist, therefore, between the Japanese word *yomu* and Western concepts of counting and chanting and tale telling. But none of these meanings of the word *yomu* directly relates to what we mean by "to read" in modern English, or for that matter, in modern Japanese. The application of the verb *yomu* to the apprehension and recitation of a written passage could have occurred *ipso facto* only after Japan acquired a writing system. That began to occur in the first centuries of the common era, when Chinese orthography was gradually introduced from the Asian continent. The very word for "civilization" in Chinese, *wen²ming²* 文明, is based on the concept of literacy, being rendered by the characters for "writing" and "clarity" or "understanding."

It was then that the great bifurcation occurred in Japan between oral and written apprehension. Where *yomu* continued to mean "to count" and "to chant," it also acquired the meanings of "to decipher written Chinese," "to read written Chinese" (either silently or aloud), and "to render Chinese into Japanese." The word *yomu* at this point can variously mean to read silently, read aloud, or to compose; the person performing *yomu* can thus either be a "reader" or an "author."

According to a legend recorded in Japan's oldest extant book, the *Record of Ancient Matters* (*Kojiki* 古事記, 712), Chinese writing was first introduced into Japan by an immigrant from the Korean kingdom of Paekche (J: Kudara) during the time of Emperor Ōjin, whose reign is traditionally dated from 270 to 310 c.e. The account runs as follows:

Emperor Ōjin addressed the King of Paekche thus: "Present to me a wise man." In accordance with this command, the King sent in tribute Wani Kishi 和邇吉師, together with the *Confucian Analects* in ten volumes and the *Thousand-Character Classic* in one volume, for a total of eleven volumes. (Tsu-gita, 1980:2:224)

Archaeological evidence, however, demonstrates that the Japanese, known as the Wa people by the Chinese of the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.–200 C.E.), were introduced to Chinese writing far earlier than the purported date of the legendary account. The oldest extant material evidence of that transmission is a seal thought to have been presented to a Japanese king by the Chinese emperor Guangwu 光武 in 57 C.E. The seal, which reads, "King of Na in Wa, [Vassal of] Han," is believed to be that mentioned in the earliest known account of contact between a Japanese kingdom and the

Chinese mainland, the "Chronicle of Wa" (C: *Wo zhuan*, J: *Waden* 倭伝) in the *History of the Later Han Dynasty* (C: *Hou Han shu*, J: *Gokanjo* 後漢書):

In [57 C.E.], the Land of Na in Wa offered up tribute and congratulations to the Emperor. The envoys from Na styled themselves ministers. Their land is in the southernmost region of Wa. A seal of state was bestowed on them by Emperor Guangwu.²

Swords bearing Chinese inscriptions on their blades have also been unearthed from second- and third-century Japanese sites. The extent to which contemporary Japanese could actually decipher those inscriptions, however, is unknown. Malformed characters on bronze mirrors manufactured in Japan in the same period suggest that Chinese characters were initially applied with more symbolic than semantic intent (Fujii 1985:160). It is likely that Chinese characters were valued first as potent magical signs, and only later as a means of linguistic communication. But by the fifth century Chinese was being employed by the central government for record keeping, and scribes had been assigned to each province.³ It is probable that those scribes were either immigrants or the descendants of immigrants from the continent.

The adoption of the Chinese writing system was but one reflection of the pervasive influence of Chinese culture on early Japan. Buddhism was introduced from the continent in the mid-sixth century, bringing with it an immense pantheon, sophisticated philosophy, and awe-inspiring temple architecture. A century later the Taika Reforms of 646 and then the Taihō Codes of 701 instituted a wholesale restructuring of the Japanese state after the Chinese model. The Japanese adopted, with modification, the Chinese legal system and its policy of land tenure, and Japanese courtiers assumed Chinese-style offices, ranks, and costumes. In 710 the court moved to the new Heijō Capital in Nara, which was laid out on the model of the Tang capital of Chang'an. The city eventually included numerous Buddhist temple complexes and a massive palace compound of several hundred buildings. The main hall of the largest temple, Tōdaiji, is still today the largest wooden building on earth, though only two-thirds its eighth-century size. Envoys and scholars were frequently sent to the continent, and Japanese aristocrats became familiar with Persian glass and goods from central Asia imported via the Silk Road. Though the Japanese provinces remained far less sinified, the Nara capital was doubtless compatible with the expectations of continental emissaries and traders who walked along its broad thoroughfares.

China also exerted a far-ranging influence on the literature of those centuries. The Japanese court subscribed to the Chinese concept that poetry was a mirror of character and an aid to government, and the first extant Japanese poetic anthology was of Chinese, not Japanese verse. The first

surviving anthology of Japanese verse, the *Man'yōshū* (c. 760), was to some extent a memorial to a tradition already in decline, as hundreds of its verses show the heavy influence of the Chinese poetry of the Six Dynasties (222–589). It was Chinese verse that dominated the court for the next hundred years, so much so that the period from 750 to 850 is known in Japanese literary history as "the dark age of Japanese poetry."

The pervasive nature of Chinese influence is already apparent in the oldest nonepigraphical example of writing that remains, the *Seventeen Article Constitution* (*Jūshichijō no kenpō* 十七条憲法), reputed to have been composed by Prince Shōtoku 聖徳 (574–c.622) in 604. Selections from its first several articles demonstrate the extent to which Confucian principles of harmony and social order, together with veneration for the Buddhist Law, were being actively imported from the continent together with the Chinese writing system:

1. Harmony is to be valued. . . . [W]hen those above are harmonious and those below are friendly, and there is concord in the discussion of business, right views of things spontaneously gain acceptance.
2. Sincerely reverence the three treasures. The three treasures, viz. Buddha, the Law, and the Monastic orders . . . are the supreme objects of faith in all countries.
3. When you receive the imperial commands, fail not scrupulously to obey them. The lord is Heaven, the vassal is Earth. Heaven over-spreads, and Earth upbears.
4. The ministers and functionaries should make decorous behavior their leading principle. (Tsunoda, et al., 1969:48)⁴

By the eighth century, the aristocracy and clergy were probably nearly all literate.⁵ Indeed, courtiers of this and succeeding centuries prided themselves on, and in a sense defined themselves in terms of, their mastery of reading and writing and of the concomitant literary tradition. Even after actual political power had passed from the civil bureaucracy into the hands of the Minamoto and then the Ashikaga warrior governments in the medieval period (thirteenth through sixteenth centuries), courtiers in the capital still commanded immense respect for their role as living repositories of the exalted cultural traditions of the past. And as warriors rose to positions of wealth and responsibility, they too often devoted considerable energy to literary pursuits, for such activities marked them as civilized and helped legitimize before the world their newly acquired political and economic power. Some military potentates patronized literary gatherings in the capital and invited courtiers to their provincial domains to serve as tutors in the literary arts.⁶

But the far-reaching appropriation of the Chinese episteme that began in the sixth century took place against an ancient and well-developed native

tradition of oral myth and song preserved and transmitted by lineage groups that specialized in oral recitation. This is reflected in part by the formulaic coda of certain of the songs handed down in *The Record of Ancient Matters* and other early sources. The coda, which reads, "This was transmitted/ By word of mouth" (*Koto no katarigoto mo/ ko o ba*), indicates that the song had been aurally apprehended by the scribe rather than copied from an earlier written source. Much of this prehistoric material was religious in nature, a characteristic that led Origuchi Shinobu to assert that Japanese literature began with incantations to the gods (Origuchi 1954:124 ff.).⁷ While Chinese literature was cultured and sophisticated, Japanese was divine, its very words pregnant with spiritual power, called "word-mana" (*kotodama*). Words orally pronounced in the form of spells (*kotoage*) were thought to effect magical results (Fujii 1985:33-37).⁸

Even after the introduction of Chinese writing and the development of a technique for using Chinese orthography for Japanese words, oral delivery of the native vocabulary was believed to be essential if the word-mana of songs and incantations was to be effective. The names of gods too had to be given correct oral pronunciation if prayers addressed to them were to receive a divine hearing, and *The Record of Ancient Matters* therefore included notes on the proper reading of godly names in the long divine genealogies (Mōri 1985:171).

The introduction of Chinese characters and their gradual application to the transcription of the Japanese language inevitably meant a gradual weakening of the belief that the word-mana could only be activated through the human voice. Oral traditions, however, were so deeply ingrained by the time the Chinese writing system was introduced that they never entirely disappeared. But before discussing the influence of Japanese oral and Chinese orthographic principles on the subsequent history of Japanese literature, it is necessary to review in somewhat more detail the process through which Chinese characters were introduced into Japan and the mechanics through which they were eventually applied to the transcription of native Japanese.

The importation of Chinese characters, known in Japanese as *kanji* 漢字 (C: *hanzi*, lit. "Han characters" after the Chinese Han Dynasty) and Chinese writing (*kanbun* 漢文) did not originally mean the appropriation of just the Chinese writing system but of the entire Chinese literary episteme. When the Japanese needed to commit something to paper, silk, or wood, they first did so not in their own language but in Chinese. Moreover, they read Chinese books in the Chinese language. This approach of course parallels the process of literary acquisition in northern Europe, where previously illiterate cultures learned to read and write Latin and to pronounce the writings in Latin as well, as a matter of course. But in Japan the process was made far more complex by the logographic nature of the Chinese writ-

ing system. To be sure, most Chinese characters contain some phonetic hints, but meaning and pronunciation remain largely separate; the pronunciation is not built into the word as it is in most Western languages.⁹ Arabic numerals have of course functioned exactly the same way in the West. Just as the numeral "1" can be read "one" in English or "un" in French, or "eins" in German, or understood visually without being pronounced at all, Chinese characters can be recognized by sight, and then pronounced in any language. Initially, therefore, there was a total divorce in Japan between the spoken and written languages. The subsequent history of Japanese reading is one of the adaptation of the Chinese writing system to Japanese needs.¹⁰

The dynamic between Japanese orality and Chinese orthography is illustrated early on by the circumstances behind the composition of Japan's oldest extant book, *The Record of Ancient Matters*. Its preface records that an imperial scribe, Ō no Yasumaro 太安万侶, was commanded to edit and record (*senroku* 撰録) material "recited" by Hieda no Are 稗田阿礼 (Tsugita 1986, 1:30). The account is written in Chinese, of course, and the character for "recited" is 誦 (C: song,⁴ J: *zu, shō, tonaeru, yomu*, etc.). In Chinese the word represented by the graph means to read aloud, to explicate, to recite from memory, or to read to a rhythm. No one knows, therefore, whether the passage means that Hieda no Are recited the orally transmitted body of national myths or whether he (or she) had memorized the correct way to read aloud earlier texts written in quirky, uncertain orthography so that Yasumaro could transcribe them in a more regular and up-to-date orthographic style. The process probably involved both written and oral aspects (Konishi 1984:161-162).

The problem of recording the oral Japanese myths centered not on the stories themselves, which were relatively easy to translate into Chinese, but on the names of Japanese gods, place names, and other native proper nouns for which there were no Chinese equivalents. The solution the Japanese reached was borrowed from one the Chinese themselves had used for transcribing Sanskrit and other foreign terms. The process involved ignoring the semantic value of each character and using it only for its phonetic element. Characters used this way constituted a phonetic syllabary, albeit one of extreme complexity and inefficiency. When faced with the Sanskrit term *asura*, "titan king," for example, the Chinese transliterated it using three characters (nearly forty written strokes) meaning "hook-shape hill" (阿 Ancient Chinese *a*; Modern Chinese *a*¹), "to put in order" (修 Ancient Chinese *xiu*; Modern Chinese *xiu*¹), and "net" (羅 Ancient Chinese *la*; Modern Chinese *luo*²) and read them "a-siəu-la" ("Ancient Chinese" refers to the language of the Sui [581-618] and Tang Dynasties [618-907]; Chinese phonological reconstructions are after Tōdō [1984]).

The Japanese appropriated this system, learning to use these and other

Chinese characters to represent their native sounds /a/, /su/, and /ra/.¹¹ The process became extremely complex in Japan, however, for several reasons. First, there was no initial limit on the number of Chinese characters that could be chosen to represent any one Japanese syllable. 天 (Ancient Chinese *t'en*, "heaven"), 帝 (*tei*, "thearch"), 亭 (*den*, "belvedere"), 轉 (*tuen*, "turn"), 傳 (*duen*, "transmit") and other characters, for example, could all be used to represent the Japanese sound /te/. "Playful writing" (*gisho* 戲書) appeared as well, where, for example, the two characters meaning "bee sound" (蜂音) could be used to stand for the one syllable /bu/. Second, while appropriating many Chinese characters for their phonetic values alone, the Japanese also continued to use them for their semantic values, often in the same sentence. Where, for example, the character for "heaven" 天 might be used simply for the sound /te/ in one place, it might actually represent the word *ten*, "heaven," in another context.

Adapting the Chinese writing system to Japanese was further complicated by the fact that Chinese and Japanese are phonologically and structurally as different as any two languages on earth; Chinese has an SVO word order while Japanese is SOV. Chinese is a monosyllabic language and now a tonal one, while Japanese is polysyllabic, agglutinative, and atonal (though it has pitch accents). It was perhaps unfortunate from an orthographic point of view that Japan was closer to China than to Rome, for the Latin alphabet would have been far better suited to their purposes.

After the introduction of Chinese, Japanese also began adopting thousands of loan words from Chinese and inserting them into native Japanese sentences, while pronouncing them in imitation of the way they were pronounced in Chinese. This is to some extent analogous to the English practice of borrowing words from Latin and French, inserting them into native sentence structures, and pronouncing them with an English accent. In Japan, those borrowed pronunciations became the so-called Sino-Japanese or *on* 音 readings. For example, the two Chinese characters for "years and months" or "time," *nian²yue⁴* (Ancient Chinese *nengjue⁴* 年月), went into Japanese as the phonetically similar *nengetsu*. But the two characters could also be read according to the preexisting native words for "years" and "months," *toshitsuki*. These became known in contradistinction as native Japanese or *kun* 訓 readings. This is much like English borrowing the word "journal" from French via Latin, but gradually coming to pronounce it somewhat differently from the French *journal*, all the while retaining the native "daybook."

To illustrate the literary ramifications of this linguistic bifurcation, let us consider a couplet of five-character phrases (*gāthās*) from the *Lotus Sutra* (Skt. *Saddharma-pundarīka-sūtra*; J. *Myōhōrengekyō* 妙法華蓮經, abbrev. *Hokekyō* 法華經). The *sūtra* was translated from Sanskrit into Chinese, and it later made its way to Japan, where it continued to be "read," as it were, directly from the Chinese text, but in various ways.

The phrase in question is, in Japanese, *shoashuratō kozai daikaihen* 諸阿修羅等, 居在大海辺, which translates as "the various asuras and the rest dwell by the great sea (Sakamoto and Iwamoto 1977, 3:96)."¹² Asuras again are "titan kings," Hindu and then Buddhist deities variously conceived of as benevolent beings or as enemies of Indra (Taishakuten 帝釈天 in Japanese). The Japanese reader could approach this line in several ways. He (or, rarely, she) might read it in Chinese, with the Chinese pronunciations of all the words, more or less as it would have been read by a Chinese (see table 1). As time went on, however, and Japan's contact with the continent lessened, fewer and fewer Japanese could acquire that mastery of Chinese. But they *could* read the characters in their Sino-Japanese (*on*) pronunciations. The phrase could be read off in the same word order as Chinese, simply changing the Chinese pronunciations to Sino-Japanese ones: "Shoashuratō, kozai daikaihen." That style of reading is known variously as "plain reading" (*hakudoku* 白読), "unadulterated reading" (*sodoku* 素読), or "straight reading" (*bōyomi* 棒読).

The practice was complicated, though, by the fact that Japanese has no tones and fewer sounds to distinguish syllables than Chinese does, with the result that this phrase is nearly unintelligible orally when read in Sino-Japanese plain reading; one must be able to *see* the characters to understand them. Plain reading, therefore, enables reading comprehension by *sight*, but not necessarily reading comprehension by *sound*.

A method was accordingly developed to read Chinese in Japanese word order, while concurrently changing some of the Sino-Japanese *on* readings

Table 1

諸	阿	修	羅	等	
tʃio	a	siəu	la	təŋ	Ancient Chinese (Sui-Tang)
sho	a	shu	ra	tō	Sino-Japanese (<i>on</i> readings in <i>sodoku</i>)
moromoro	a	shu	ra	nado	Japanese (<i>kun</i> readings, except "ashura")
moromoro (no)	ashura	nado			Japanese <i>kundoku</i>
居	在	大	海	辺	
kio	dzai	da	həi	pen	
ko	zai	dai	kai	hen	
[sumai]		ō	umi	hotori	
ōumi (no)	hotori (ni)	sumai (shite)			

to native *kun* readings. The phrase in question eventually came to be read "moromoro no ashura nado no ōumi no hotori ni sumai shite." This is called *kundoku* 訓読, "reading according to the *kun* readings," or as *yomikudashi* 読下, 訓下, "reading down" or as *kakikudashi* 書下, "writing down" or "writing out." Thus another meaning for *yomu* becomes "to read out Chinese in Japanese" or even "translate into Japanese."

But this style, though verbally intelligible, is translationese; no Japanese then or now would ever confuse it with a normal native utterance. And it was of course useless for reproducing Japanese oral ritual prayers, Japanese oral poetry, and Japanese vernacular conversation.

The situation was remedied by the development in the ninth century of two Japanese phonetic syllabaries, *hiragana* 平仮名 and *katakana* 片仮名. Both were derived from Chinese characters used for their phonetic values, but now written in simple cursive script rather than in their complete and highly complex forms. The sound /a/, for example, could now be written in *hiragana* as あ (taken from the more cumbersome 安), and in *katakana* as ア (taken from 阿). The system was quite irregular, with several cursive forms being available for each sound.¹³ The development of the two *kana* syllabaries finally made it possible to read and write Japanese quickly and effectively. It is not surprising that the greatest literature of Japan's classical period was composed not in Chinese, which after all was a foreign language, but in the native vernacular after the advent of *kana*. In these works, the most important being *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari* 源氏物語, c. 1010), the gap between the written and the oral came close to disappearing. Modern Japanese is still written in a combination of standardized *hiragana* and Chinese characters. *Katakana* is today, by and large, reserved for words of foreign origin and some onomatopoeia.

The rise of Japanese native literature corresponds with a general crudescence of native taste after centuries of wholesale adoption of continental customs. This began to occur in the last decades of the ninth century, when the Tang empire was in its final stages of collapse. The new inward-looking quality of the Japanese court, now located in the Heian capital, is demonstrated in diplomatic history by the cessation of missions to the mainland, and in literary history by an imperial order to compile a new anthology of Japanese verse. The *waka* poems in the resultant anthology, the *Kokinshū* (*Ancient and Modern Collection*, 905) came to be viewed as the template of basic *waka* style, and the format of the anthology became the model for twenty subsequent imperial collections that appeared over the next six centuries. The decision by the *Kokinshū* compilers to reject the *Man'yōshū* practice of transliterating Japanese with Chinese characters used mostly phonetically and instead to adopt the newly developed *hiragana* syllabary is believed to reflect a conscious decision on the part of the compilers to turn to native sources of inspiration (Konishi 1986:142).

The next century, the eleventh, was the apogee of the Heian Period (794–1185), Japan's classical age. The era is represented most memorably in literature by *The Tale of Genji*, which has been called the world's first novel.¹⁴ Its author, Murasaki Shikibu 紫式部 (b. c. 978), was only one of several highly talented literary ladies-in-waiting then serving at court, and their creations, which also include *The Pillow Book* of Sei Shōnagon and the first historical tale in Japanese (*rekishi monogatari*), *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, represent the early maturation of native literary prose.¹⁵

The court society for which those women were writing was small, highly sophisticated, and aesthetically sensitive.¹⁶ The reputation of a courtier or a lady-in-waiting depended in large part upon his or her dress, choice of fragrance, and particularly poetic skill and elegant calligraphy. The "rule of taste" that dominated court life was nowhere seen to more advantage than at poetry competitions, where teams of left and right matched verses for fame and prizes. Some competitions were of such scale and magnificence they were recorded in detail in diaries, such as that added to the record of the *Tentoku Waka Competition* of 960:

Four page-girls carried in the centerpiece [*suhama*]. They were wearing blue under lined willow-green robes that perfectly matched their hair in length. The embroidered centerpiece cover was dyed a deeper blue around the hem. The centerpiece rested on a cushion of pale blue gauze. The upper parts of the centerpiece were made of dark aloeswood wrapped in silver wire. The poems, written on fine paper, were presented as follows: *waka* on blossoms were tied to silver- or gold-blossoming branches, depending on their poetic topic. Poems on burning love were placed in the brazier of a miniature cormorant boat. Those on late spring were piled in the boat. Poems on the warbler were held in miniature warblers' beaks.¹⁷

Literary accomplishment and aesthetic sensibility were also linked to political power. Murasaki Shikibu's patroness, Empress Shōshi, was only one of two empresses and numerous other aristocratic consorts in the harem of Emperor Ichijō. Shōshi's success at wooing the Emperor away from his other ladies would be in part related to the brilliance of her salon, and her father accordingly took pains assembling it. *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes* records the process:

Shōshi . . . entered the Palace on the First of the Eleventh Month [999], some time after the Tenth, accompanied by forty ladies-in-waiting, six young girls, and six servants. Her attendants had been selected with the utmost discrimination. It was not considered sufficient for a candidate to be personable and even-tempered: even if her father held the Fourth of Fifth Rank, there was no hope for her if she was socially inept or lacking in the niceties of deportment, for only the most polished and elegant were accepted. (McCullough and McCullough 1980:218)

The restricted and self-contained nature of court society also meant that taste was to a large extent uniform. The writer of poetry or prose could assume that all his or her readers would have read and assimilated certain basic canonical Japanese and Chinese works. The expectation of a shared code in turn gave rise to a highly elliptical and allusive literature that cannot be read today without a commensurate appreciation of the cultural milieu in which the works were originally composed.

But the burgeoning of the native literary genius at court did not signal the complete abandonment of Chinese. Such was the prestige of the Chinese tradition that male courtiers often continued to write in that language and read it according to the rules of Japanese *kundoku* well after the Japanese syllabaries had come into common use. Male diaries were usually kept in Chinese (*kanbun*), though the grammar became progressively naturalized to the point that it might be opaque to a Chinese native. Hence the paradoxical situation where many Japanese continued to write in a language that sounded ungainly to them and could not necessarily be comprehended by Chinese either. But *kanbun* diaries continued to be written until relatively recent times.

And Chinese, when read aloud in *kundoku*, could indeed sound grand and impressive, rather like a Victorian speech larded with Latin locutions. Japanese with learning and perhaps some pretension thus began writing native Japanese according to many of the rules of *kanbun kundoku*. This resulted in a somewhat stilted yet learned *kanbun kundoku chō* 漢文訓読調 style that sounded as though it was read directly from a line of Chinese *kanbun*, though it had been written from the first in Japanese with the Japanese phonetic syllabary interspersed among the Chinese characters.

But Chinese-style Japanese, whether written completely in Chinese characters or mimicked in a combination of Chinese characters and Japanese syllabary, remained essentially a *written* language meant more for visual than oral apprehension. It could be reproduced orally as we have seen, but at best it retained a touch of the inkhorn, and at worst it was orally unintelligible.

Chinese-style Japanese required other adjustments, therefore, before it could be assimilated in an oral context. Let us return to the Asuras again. The passage was adopted into the greatest of Japanese war tales, *The Tale of the Heike* (*Heike monogatari* 平家物語).¹⁸ *The Tale of the Heike* was in its heyday essentially vocal literature; the text was memorized and then recited by blind priests who accompanied themselves on *biwa* lutes.¹⁹ The line in question was recited as follows:

諸阿修羅等, 居在大海辺とて, 修羅の三悪四趣は, 深山大海のほとりに
ありと, 仏の解きをき給ひたれば

Shoashuratō, kozai daikaihen to te, shura no san'aku shishu wa, shinzan daikai no hotori ni ari to, Hotoke no tokiokitamaitareba. . . (Ichiko 1973, 29:229)

Since the Buddha taught that "Shoashuratō kozai daikaihen," that is, that the three evil worlds and the four [evil] spheres of the Ashuras are by the deep mountains and the great ocean. . .

When the written sutra lines are delivered in an oral context, the sutra must be verbally explained; what reads as a tautology in written Japanese is required repetition for oral comprehension. This "running commentary" approach to narration was one technique that oral storytellers used to put written, Chinese-style Japanese into an oral vernacular context.

As was pointed out earlier, the Japanese eventually developed two very adequate phonetic syllabaries to reproduce the Japanese vernacular in written form. But just as Sino-Japanese remained a written style even when delivered orally, vernacular Japanese often retained a sense of the oral even when committed to paper. Just as one "reads" Sino-Japanese as a written language, one often tends to "read" vernacular Japanese as intrinsically oral. To be sure, this effect is more apparent in some Japanese genres than in others. But this phenomenon of reception is particularly well demonstrated in Japanese poetry and in vernacular tale literature (*monogatari*).

Even after the introduction of the Chinese writing system, Japanese poetry retained a great deal of its oral quality. It will be recalled that *yomu* means at once "to compose" and "to chant Japanese poetry aloud." The continuing oral nature of poetry was directly linked to the lingering and widespread belief in the mana of words, the *kotodama*, whose power was unlocked through the medium of the human voice. The prescription is given its most memorable expression in the *Kana Preface* to the first imperial anthology of Japanese poetry, the *Kokinshū*:

Japanese poetry has the human heart as seed and myriads of words as leaves. It comes into being when men use the seen and the heard to give voice [*iidaseru*] to feelings aroused by the innumerable events in their lives. The song of the warbler among the blossoms, the voice of the frog dwelling in the water—these teach us that every living creature sings. *It is song that moves heaven and earth without effort, stirs emotions in the invisible spirits and gods, brings harmony to the relations between men and women, and calms the hearts of fierce warriors.*

Our poetry appeared at the dawn of creation. (McCullough 1985:4, emphasis mine)

Moreover, those orally pronounced words had to be pure Japanese words (*Yamatokotoba*), not Sino-Japanese loans, as the word-mana existed only in traditional Japanese speech. The dynamic and often problematic relationship between native "Japanese spirit" (*wakon*) and imported tech-

nology or "Chinese learning" (*kansai*) that has characterized the whole of Japanese history to the present day is clearly intimated in Japanese poetic history.

Despite the fact that the Japanese poetic tradition became a largely written one in and after the tenth century, numerous poetic treatises continued thereafter to counsel poets to pay ample attention to the sound (*shirabe*) of their compositions and to avoid locutions difficult to comprehend by ear. Even in private, the Japanese poem was best apprehended by softly chanting it to oneself, as indicated by the practice of the great medieval poet Fujiwara Shunzei 藤原俊成 (1114–1204), described here by his son:

Very late at night he would sit by his bed in front of an oil lamp so dim that it was difficult to tell whether it was burning or not, and with a court robe black with age thrown over his shoulders and an old court cap pulled down to his ears, he would lean on an arm-rest, hugging a wooden brazier for warmth, while he recited verse to himself in an undertone. Deep into the night when everyone else was asleep he would sit there bent over, weeping softly.²⁰

The thirty-one syllable *waka* poem is still today chanted in formal situations in five separate parts. Linked verse (*renga*, an outgrowth of *waka* in which seventeen- and fourteen-syllable verses are combined into hundred-link sequences) was also primarily composed and apprehended aurally. Each verse was composed mentally and submitted by voice alone for the delectation of the assembled poets and the critical judgment of the scribe, who again chanted it; only when accepted by the scribe and the linked-verse master was the verse written down and then chanted again. The linked-verse master Kensai 兼載 (1452–1510) counseled a three-breath chant for three-unit (seventeen-syllable) verses and two breaths for those of two units (fourteen syllables).²¹ The chanted delivery no doubt helped give rise to the convention that prohibits beginning any of the five segments with a connective grammatical particle. That in turn contributed to each of the five segments a basic *aural* quality of self-containment. The fundamental oral quality of the genre, therefore, exerted a strong influence on the final written form of the verses.

In the case of the vernacular tale (*monogatari*) as well, the rhetorical stance is predominantly oral, one of a narrator speaking to an audience. The earliest extant collection of Japanese poetry, the *Man'yōshū*, includes this pair of verses (MYS 3: 236–237 [Kojima et al., 1971:199–200]) that demonstrates that much tale literature remained oral even after it was possible to write it down.

A verse bestowed upon the old woman Shii by the Empress:

It has been so long
since I had to listen to

ina to iedo
shiuru Shii no ga

those uninvited tales
old Shii would force upon me
that now I find I miss them!

shiikatari
kono koro kikazute
are koinikeri

A response presented by old woman Shii:

I would rather not,
but because of your command
to "tell one! tell one!"
Shii will tell one of those
tales you call uninvited.

ina to iedo
katare katare to
norase koso
Shii iwamōse
shiikatari to iu

In the same fashion that the English "tale" derives from the verb "to tell," so does the name for the tale genre in Japanese, *monogatari*, derive from the verb "to tell," *kataru*, plus "thing," *mono*. Even after tales came to be composed from the start with brush and paper, they retained elements of their oral beginnings. Thus even when the greatest of the *monogatari*, *The Tale of Genji*, was composed centuries later, the author appears to have adopted a layered narrative framework to give the impression that the written story was being orally delivered. That framework was first posited by Tamagami Takuya, who labeled it the "oral reading theory" or "oral performance theory" (*ondokuron*) (Tamagami 1966a).²²

The complete narrative construct he posited is as follows:

1. The events in the story are witnessed by various ladies-in-waiting.
2. Years later in their old age, they *tell* the story to another lady-in-waiting while adding their own occasional comments.
3. That second lady, the scribe and editor, writes down those accounts and edits them, while also adding the occasional comment or addition of her own.
4. This written account is then read aloud by yet another lady-in-waiting to an audience, with more occasional asides.

Tamagami's theory holds that one must therefore read with an awareness of not one but several levels of narrators and characterized readers. Current English translations of *The Tale of Genji* do not reflect the multi-layered program, perhaps out of consideration for western narrative conventions. For example, one English translation of the tale gives the following two paragraphs from "The Wormwood Patch" chapter (*Omogiu*), which clearly shows a narrated passage and then a characterized narrator making an appearance:

The princess [Suetsumuhana] stayed there for two years, after which [Genji] moved her to the east lodge at Nijō. Now he could visit her in the course of ordinary business. It could no longer be said that he treated her badly.

Though no one has asked me to do so, I should like to describe the surprise of the assistant viceroy's wife at this turn of events, and Jijū's pleasure and guilt. But it would be a bother and my head is aching; and perhaps—these things do happen, they say—something will someday remind me to continue the story. (Seidensticker 1985, 2:302)

The end of the second paragraph could also be translated: "... but my head is aching and I don't feel up to it. Perhaps there will another time when I can offer you the rest, *she said (to zo)*."²³ The first English translation above gives the impression that we are dealing from the first with a written medium, and that the author, like Jane Austen, was writing a story with one narrator who addresses a silently reading audience. But the underlying oral construct of the work suggests that the different reading indicated in the second English translation may be the more accurate. The structure of the passage may imply that it is actually being narrated by an old lady-in-waiting who then steps out of her role as a narrator and orally gives an aside about her reasons for not continuing. And finally a *second* lady-in-waiting records the oral remarks in written form, adding the final quotative particles *to zo*.

The second lady, the scribe and editor, is thus to some extent both reader and author, at least where she adds the quotation. In other passages the scribe comments at greater length on the testimony of the older witness. The question of the nature of the characterized and implied readers therefore becomes considerably more complex in the context of the *monogatari* tale.

The construct also affected point of view. If the tale were to be ostensibly based on the commentary of witnesses, complete narratorial omniscience regarding the minds of the principal characters became impossible. This narratorial formulation at once complicated the authorial task and made the resultant discourse more vague, conjectural, and in a sense truer to the reader's own limited experience than a completely omniscient text could have been. There are passages, however, where the author could not maintain her reportorial pose and entered directly into the minds of main characters (Stinchecum 1980:375–376).

Now, of course, this was only the narrative construct; Murasaki Shikibu was a single individual producing a *written* work, not an oral one. A rhetorical strategy that posited actual eyewitness accounts authenticated the tale and lent it credibility.

In addition, the oral construct of the narrative elegantly reflected the predominantly oral form in which the tales were initially received at court. *The Tale of Genji* and many other *monogatari* of the time were not originally composed as preconceived totalities then disseminated in written form. They were instead written as serials, with each chapter composed then read

aloud to the highborn literary patron or patroness for whom they were first intended. If the work proved popular, a sequel would be added, then another sequel, with the larger world of the story taking shape only gradually. Later the entire work might be copied and disseminated in written form, and even then it would as likely as not be read aloud to a group of listeners.

It was one of the tasks of ladies-in-waiting to make copies of popular stories for a larger court readership. Murasaki Shikibu attested to this practice in her diary:

We now learned that the Consort [Shōshi] was preparing to have us copy a book for the royal collection. . . . We selected writing paper in several shades, arranged them, matched each booklet of the *monogatari* with an appropriate amount of paper, and sent them off to other quarters with notes requesting those ladies' participation. This was labor enough; but once the copying was completed, I worked day and night assembling and binding the booklets.²⁴

Serial production and corporate copying meant that each chapter was separately bound, a practice that inevitably gave rise to variations in chapter order. Fascicles of *Sarashina nikki*, for example, were later bound in the wrong order and continued to be read that way until 1924, when rigorous textual criticism unequivocally demonstrated the errors that had caused earlier scholars to dismiss the work as "a vague, rambling account" (Morris 1971a:30–34). Serial production also meant that an author was free to go back and add earlier chapters to flesh out a good story. Most scholars agree that some of the fifty-four chapters of *The Tale of Genji* were not written in their present order (Gatten 1981).

Konishi Jin'ichi has even suggested that stylistic changes in some *monogatari* may have been the result of a change in patronage as the writing continued (Konishi 1986:274). The first duty of the author was, after all, to her highborn mistress, who provided the copyists and the extremely expensive paper for the project. A change in audience could very likely bring about a change in authorial approach.

The original oral delivery could also constitute a critical baptism of fire for the work, and the author was free to rewrite the story after seeing in person the effects of her work on the group of listeners. There are numerous manuscript variants of Sei Shōnagon's *The Pillow Book*, some of which may represent later emendations by the author herself (Konishi 1986:385).

Fittingly, a passage in *The Tale of Genji* itself makes specific reference to the contemporary oral mode of *monogatari* reception, in which the tale, after being written down, was read aloud by a lady-in-waiting to her highborn mistress, who listened while looking at painted illustrations. The passage reads, "[Nakanokimi] had pictures and such brought out, and [she and

Ukifune] looked at them while Ukon read the texts."²⁵ The twelfth-century *The Tale of Genji Scroll* (*Genji monogatari emaki* 源氏物語絵巻) contains an illustration of the scene (that illustration is reproduced here).²⁶ The full narratorial schema, then, that Murasaki Shikibu seems to have had in mind for reader reception of *The Tale of Genji* is as follows:

The "Oral Performance Theory" of *monogatari*

1. Fictional world of the characters
2. Recollections of aged witnesses, with comments
3. Scribe/Editor's transcription, with comments
4. Reader of the transcription in the text, with comments
5. Actual reader/reciter of text
6. Highborn audience

Though the tale was certainly often read in private, diary evidence shows that *The Tale of Genji* continued for centuries to be read aloud to groups of listeners. *Saga no kayoi* 嵯峨の通ひ (*Visiting Saga*) by the medieval courtier Asukai Masaari 飛鳥井雅有 (1241–1301) chronicles a two-month period in 1269 in which the work was read aloud to a group of court literati by the wife of Fujiwara Tameie 藤原為家 (1198–1275), the master of the house and head of the main poetic school of the period. Masaari's entry for the seventeenth of the ninth month, 1269, reads in part as follows:

Seventeenth. I called about noon. They began *The Tale of Genji* and asked the mistress of the house to read and comment on the text. She read from behind the blinds. It was fascinating, far better than when read [*yomu*] by the usual sort of person. It would seem the *Genji* traditions of her house have been transmitted to her. We read to the "Lavender" chapter.

When evening came we drank sake poured by two ladies summoned by the master of the house [Tameie]. The mistress called me over to her curtain and said, "... Few are the times in the past that poets have met at this acclaimed house at Ogurayama and refreshed their spirits with elegant conversation about tale literature [*monogatari*]. I thought there were none left, but I find that you indeed are like the men of old." She favored me with these and other elegant remarks. The host was a kind man well on in years, and when in his cups, his tears overflowed. We parted at dawn. (Tanaka 1985:61–62)²⁷

The "mistress of the house" herself was a well-known literata; after the death of her famous husband she took Buddhist orders and as "The Nun Abutsu" 阿仏尼 (d. 1283?) went on to write *The Diary of the Waning Moon* (*Izayoi nikki* 十六夜日記), a classic of the medieval travel diary genre. Her oral delivery plus commentary on *The Tale of Genji* was necessary in part because that was the way the tale had often been traditionally apprehended, and in part because the vernacular in which the text was originally composed had in the intervening centuries already begun its development into a



"[Nakanokimi] had pictures and such brought out, and [she and Ukifune] looked at them while Ukon read the texts." *The Tale of Genji Scroll* (*Genji monogatari emaki*, twelfth century). Courtesy of the Tokugawa Reimeikai.

written, classical style, increasingly divorced from colloquial speech and current customs.

The most famous of the "war tales" (*gunki monogatari*), *The Tale of the Heike*, likewise demonstrates the essential orality of the *monogatari* form. It will be recalled that though the vulgate version of the text was written down, its primary form of reception throughout the medieval period was through vocal performances by blind lute players who chanted segments of the memorized text to their own lute accompaniment. Kenneth Butler has proposed that the textual history of *The Tale of the Heike* is one of reoralization, wherein an original *kanbun* text was gradually reworked into chantable form (Butler 1966a, 1966b). Like *The Tale of Genji*, then, the predominant form of reception of this most famous of war tales was oral, delivered via a written text, though here not read but memorized.

Once the great *monogatari* were written down, their language was necessarily fixed in time. But spoken language is never stable, and as the centuries passed the old vernacular tales became increasingly difficult to comprehend aurally. By the early modern (*kinsei*) period (1600–1868), *The Tale of Genji* was normally read in book form in conjunction with commentaries. The style of the Heian-period *monogatari*, which had originally been very close to the spoken vernacular, therefore became a written, literary form, imperfectly understood without recourse to scholarly annotations. Indeed, by the early modern period Japan boasted a literary history of more

than a thousand years, and most writers worked in literary styles more or less influenced by earlier classical forms divorced from current oral speech. It would not be until the late nineteenth century and the Western-influenced advent of the *genbun'itchi* 言文一致 movement to unify speech and writing that the gap between spoken Japanese and the language of high literature would again come as close to disappearing as it had in *The Tale of Genji* of nearly a millennium before.²⁸

NOTES

This is a revised and expanded version of a paper presented at a colloquium titled "Is Reading a Universal?" with Brian Stock (University of Toronto) and Daniel Boyarin (University of California, Berkeley) at the Townsend Center for the Humanities, University of California, Berkeley, November 13, 1990. I would like to thank Professors Terry Kleeman, William McCullough, and Marian Ury for helpful suggestions made during the preparation of this study. Japanese names throughout this article appear in Japanese order, with given name following surname.

1. For an introduction to the Chinese language, see Ramsey (1987) and Norman (1988); for Japanese, see Miller (1967), Martin (1988), and Shibatani (1990).

2. Adapted from Konishi (1984:81). For a translation of the entire account, see Tsunoda 1951:1-6.

3. The first mention of this practice occurs in the *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 (720), fourth year of the reign of Emperor Richū, whose traditional dates are 319-409 c.e. (Sakamoto et al. 1965-1967, 1:426).

4. Together with these Confucian and Buddhist concepts, the Seventeen Article Constitution also incorporated Chinese Taoist and Legalist concepts. The original version of the work does not survive; we know it through a copy preserved in the *Nihon shoki* (Sakamoto et al. 1965-1967, 2:180-187).

5. The presence of graffiti on the walls of eighth-century structures suggests that a broad section of the nonaristocratic population had also acquired a degree of literacy by this period.

6. For more on the cultural activities of provincial warriors, see Horton (1986).

7. On the religious and political uses of early song, see Ebersole (1989).

8. The early Japanese terms for "word" and "thing" (*koto*) were identical. I use for convenience the modern Hepburn romanization for ancient as well as modern Japanese. The phonology of the language of the eighth century (to say nothing of even earlier forms) was considerably different from that of modern Japanese. See Lange (1973).

9. Most graphs do, however, contain a phonetic hint as to their pronunciation. Bernard Karlgren holds that fully 90 percent of Chinese characters include a "significant" and a "phonetic" element. See Karlgren (1924:4).

10. For more on this process, see Miller (1967) and Kōno (1969).

11. 修 is, however, not usually used as a cursive model for /su/.

12. The passage appears in the *Hosshi kudokuhon* 法師功德品 chapter. Hurvitz (1976:266) translates the phrase, "The asuras, / Dwelling by the edge of the great sea."

13. The orthographic system was not regularized until after Meiji Restoration of 1868 when Japan emerged from its more than two centuries of seclusion. It was at that time that one *hiragana* character and one *katakana* character were chosen to represent each of the forty-eight separate syllables in the language. The system was further refined to its current two sets of forty-six symbols after World War II.

14. See Bowring (1988) and Shirane (1987).

15. All three works are available in English translation; see Waley (1960), Seidensticker (1985), Morris (1967), and McCullough and McCullough (1980). For more on the literature of ladies-in-waiting, see Horton (1993).

16. For more on the culture of Japanese society in the Heian period, see Sansom (1984) and Morris (1969).

17. Adapted from Konishi (1986:378).

18. For an English translation, see McCullough (1988).

19. There were also versions of the tale meant purely for reading. See Butler (1966a and 1966b) and Ruch (1991). My use of "vocal literature" is based on Barbara Ruch's distinction between "oral literature," which "is a product of and flourishes in a world of illiteracy," and "vocal literature," which "has . . . firm ties to the written language . . . [and] was usually based upon written texts." See Ruch (1977).

20. The reminiscence was handed down by the linked-verse poet Shinkei 心敬 (1406-1475). See Ijichi et al. (1973:136). The translation is adapted from Brower and Miner (1961:257).

21. Kensai 兼載, *Shuhitsu no omomuki* 執筆之趣 (*The Duties of the Scribe*) (Kaneko 1987:128).

22. For an examination of the implications of Tamagami's work, see Nakano (1971).

23. The passage in the original reads:

Futotose bakari kono furumiya ni nagametamaite, Higashi no in to iu tokoro ni namu, nochi wa watashitatematsuritamakeru. Taimen shitamau koto nado wa, ito katakeredo, chikaki shime no hodo ni te, okata ni mo wataritamau ni, sashinozoki nado shita-maitsutsu, ito anazurawashige ni motenashi kikoetamawazu.

Kano Daini no Kitanokata, noborite odorokiomoceru sama, Jijū ga, urshiki mono no, ima shibashi machikikoezarikeru kokoroasasa o hazukashū omoeru hodo nado, ima sukoshi towazugatari mo semahoshikeredo, ito kashira itō, urusaku monoukereba, ima mata mo tsuide aramu ori ni, omoiidete namu *kikoyu beki, to zo.* (Tamagami 1966b, 3:156)

24. Adapted from Konishi (1986:273). For a translation of *Murasaki Shikibu Diary* (*Murasaki Shikibu nikki*), see Bowring (1982).

25. The passage appears in "The Eastern Cottage" (*Azumaya*) chapter (cf. Seidensticker 2:958). The original reads: *E nado toriidesasete, Ukon ni kotoba yomasete mitamau ni. . .* (Tamagami 1966b, 9:167).

26. For a reproduction and discussion of the picture scroll, see Morris (1971b).

27. It will be noted that the lady of the house did not simply read the text, but she also provided a running commentary. "It would seem the *Genji* traditions of her house have been transmitted to her" is the editor's interpretation of the problematic *narai abekameri*, literally "it seems there must be a custom."

28. For an introduction to the *genbun'itchi* movement, see Twine (1978 and 1988).

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