

BOOK REVIEWS

Realms of Literacy: Early Japan and the History of Writing. By David B. Lurie. Harvard University Asia Center, 2011. 524 pages. Hardcover \$59.95/£44.95/€54.00.

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Realms of Literacy, by David Lurie, is an extraordinarily important book. It is a major contribution to the understanding of early Japanese language, literature, religion, history, and archaeology and largely supersedes earlier fine work by Roy Andrew Miller and others for the period and topics it investigates. Its treatment of the development of the Japanese language and its interaction with Chinese and Korean is superb.

A fundamental distinction is made in the book between writing that is representative of sound and writing that is representative of meaning: the “glottographic” (phonographic representation of language) and the “semasiographic” (logographic representation of meaning); the vast majority of pre-Heian texts, for example, are logographic. Lurie expands on this distinction to demolish received views of the linguistic opposition between Chinese and Japanese in early Japanese writing.

The adaptation of Chinese characters to write the Japanese language is often described in phonographic terms: characters that represented Chinese words were associated with Japanese syllables that had pronunciations similar to the original words. This kind of adaptation did play a major role, but a different approach to writing was more important. Characters that represented Chinese words were associated with Japanese *words* that had similar meanings, and entire texts written in accord with Chinese vocabulary and syntax were vocally rearranged and read off as Japanese texts, in a process traditionally known as *kundoku* 訓読 (literally, “reading by gloss”). This process, which combines reading and translation into a single integrated act, could be used to produce new texts as well as to comprehend existing ones. Rather than phonographic transcription, it was this method of reading / writing that dominated all modes of literacy in early Japan, from at least the mid-seventh century on. This means that we cannot describe texts arranged in accordance with Chinese vocabulary and syntax as being written ‘in Chinese’ (no matter what their origins), a conclusion that has profound implications for Japanese cultural history, which has been framed by a linguistic opposition between Chinese and Japanese. (p. 5)

Given how widespread the *kundoku* reading of texts was—and *kundoku* “can almost certainly be traced back to techniques used in the Korean states as early as the sixth century”—“it is impossible to distinguish between Chinese and Japanese writing in early Japan” (p. 10). Moreover, argues Lurie, “Phonography is certainly important, but

it is logography, in both Chinese and non-Chinese styles, and mediated throughout by *kundoku*, that provides the key to understanding the history of Japanese inscription, even up until the present day” (p. 183).

Lurie makes four major points about *kundoku*. First, *kundoku* is “interlingual.” As he explains, “because even texts that originated in China could be read as Japanese, traditional reading practices did not necessarily involve awareness of texts as written in one language or the other.” Second, *kundoku* is “reversible.” In other words, *kundoku* “is a method of writing as well as of reading. It was used to produce Japanese-language logographic texts (or at least, logographic texts that could potentially be read in Japanese) as well as to read / translate texts with non-Japanese origins” (p. 180). Third, it is “productive,” as manifested by the following: the enormous amount of conventional kanbun written well into the modern period; the generation of “a number of styles of logographic or principally logographic inscription that departed in varying degrees from literary Chinese order and usage” (p. 181), that is, *hentai kanbun*; and the transposition into Japanese of numerous locutions and vocabulary items (“The incorporation of Sino-Japanese readings was a major vehicle for the adoption of the Chinese loanwords that by the eighth century had already begun to reshape the Japanese lexicon” [p. 183]). And fourth, *kundoku* can be “invisible.” Absent diacritics or *hentai kanbun* locutions (either of which makes *kundoku* practice explicit), any logographic text can be read aloud with Japanese-language readings, regardless of where in the cultures that used Chinese characters (China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam) the text was written or by whom (i.e., no matter what nationality or ethnicity).

Lurie is diplomatic when pointing out how very much his argument undermines the received wisdom (and near-dogma for some) that writings in kanji were “masculine” and “Chinese,” while writings in kana were “feminine” and “Japanese.” As he explains and defines the terms, kana (“borrowed graphs”) and *mana* (“true graphs,” i.e., kanji) “refer to *graphic form*” (p. 324, emphasis added). In other words, “Graphic terms like *kana* or *mana* refer to styles of writing independent of any conception of linguistic difference” (p. 327). All of the pairings associated with the supposed opposition between Chinese-language writing and Japanese-language writing—“native and foreign, phonographic and logographic, flowing cursive and stiff ‘block’ graphs, informal and formal, private and public, and female and male” (p. 329)—are part of what he calls the “bilingual fallacy.” Or, as he elaborates, “It was not until the early twentieth century that modern notions of national language and literature, phonographic ideals for writing, and new nationalist attitudes towards contemporary China came together to firm up the notion that Chinese-style writing was written Chinese” (p. 333).

An attractive feature of the book is Lurie’s penchant for summarizing conflicting interpretations of a subject, endorsing one or the other (generally for reasons he states), and adding the proviso that future discoveries may modify that conclusion (since his work is especially informed by developments in archaeology). The reader is invited to participate in the scholarly dynamic: we are first shepherded through traditional views of a subject, then given a comprehensive introduction to recent dis-

coveries and interpretations in the field (with references to a wealth of ongoing scholarship), and finally presented with the implications of the scholarship on the subject, as it fits into the author's own brilliant framework. Along the way, Lurie frequently offers a range of corollary observations deftly teased from the material.

My greatest concern is that the book's sheer abundance—both in length and detail—will make it hard to digest. In addition to 364 pages of main text, the volume includes 53 pages of endnotes in smaller type, where many points are discussed in essays that are short to midsized. The arrangement generally works well, but there is necessarily some repetition between text and notes, and sometimes between parts of the text proper. It would be wonderful to have a hundred-page summary that simply outlines the work's basic arguments and conclusions. For those who might wish to focus on the book's main points, I recommend reading the introduction; chapter 4, "*Kundoku*: Reading, Writing, and Translation in a Single Script," especially the subsection "The Significance and History of *Kundoku*"; and the final chapter, "Japan and the History of Writing," in particular the sections "Overcoming the Bilingual Fallacy" and "The Latin of East Asia?" (a reference to *kanbun*). Students of Japanese history and literature will also find the chapters devoted to the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, and to the *Man'yōshū*, indispensable.

The opening three chapters, which lay the foundation for all that follows, are of special interest to archaeologists, historians, and students of religion (Buddhism in particular). They are, moreover, crucial to Lurie's later arguments about language. In the first chapter, the author introduces the concept of "alegibility." Many early materials that have writing on them (or what might seem like writing) were not "read" in the conventional sense; rather, they communicated political authority, social distinctions, and potency ("magic"). In the same vein, inscriptions—notably on coins—might be "read" by some, but any such reading was of distinctly less importance than either the utilitarian purpose of "establishing monetary value and guaranteeing authenticity" or the ceremonial function of "dramatizing the legitimacy of rulers, referring to cosmological ideas of their centrality, [and] demonstrating their ability to control time" (p. 148). As Lurie points out, "alegible functions of texts are actually foundational for all of their uses: they might be summed up as *primary* or *fundamental* forms of literacy, on top of which all others, including the more familiar varieties, are based" (p. 64).

Lurie reviews major early inscriptions in Japan and gives special attention to *mokkan*, the wooden tablets with brushed inscriptions in ink that first appeared around the middle of the seventh century. Whereas only a few dozen are extant from that century, excavations in capital cities have uncovered over 5,000 *mokkan* from a single Fujiwara palace site and 100,000 from a mansion in Nara.

Realms of Literacy is often a pleasure to read. The author frequently employs a concrete, even colloquial, mode of expression that is not only apt but also felicitous. Though many examples could be cited, the following two will have to suffice: "After the seventh-century transition, durable forms of writing depended on a vast cloud of ephemera that surrounded them" (p. 162). And in reference to diverse eighth-century

writing styles, Lurie observes that they “are all inconceivable without an extensive *kundoku* toolbox of association, transposition, and addition” (p. 185).

Only occasionally is Lurie’s choice of words problematic. The frequent use of “magic(al),” for example, needs some specification as to what is meant; reference to studies in anthropology and religion would help clarify its use. “Baroque” is employed when some other term would seem preferable; one gets a sense of what the author is aiming at, but is left wanting clearer explanation. The English fails when “pertain” is used, at least twice (pp. 16 and 369), where clearly “obtain” was meant. Finally, there are more than a dozen glaring grammatical mistakes—on the order of “A type of money known as . . . were minted” (p. 371)—that mar the text.

The author makes a host of useful points throughout the book. Some are especially notable, not because Lurie is necessarily the first to state them, but because his scholarship inspires confidence in the reliability of the conclusions he reaches. In reference to a number of issues of cardinal importance, some hotly contested, Lurie presents cogent arguments in support of the following conclusions: The first inscriptions in Japan that can be dated with confidence are from 623 and 628. There are few signs of writing and reading before the middle of the seventh century. The terms “*Nihon*” and “*tennō*” date from the late seventh century, and it is not until the same time that “solid attestation of Buddhist *texts* in quantity is . . . available” (p. 132). Buddhism was *not* a determining factor in the expansion of new forms of literacy. Early Buddhist inscriptions, like the sacred images some are found on, served *alegible* functions almost entirely, as did sutras of the period; in other words, early Buddhism was a religion of icons, not of texts.

Realms of Literacy is free of one of two major drawbacks seen in many studies of Japan by scholars in North America. Too often, China is the elephant in the room and disregarded, dealt with perfunctorily, or characterized simplistically; moreover, where the Chinese backdrop to Japanese topics is considered at all, this is frequently done via Japanese scholarship that is usually good, but not complemented by direct involvement with original texts and the ongoing dynamic of scholarship about them. Lurie is atypical in this respect, engaging profoundly with the Chinese dimension of his subject. He does a splendid job of contextualizing Chinese (and Korean) sources, influences, parallels, and divergences.

In contrast, Lurie does not engage scholarly work in Western languages other than English—thus exhibiting the other major flaw one frequently sees in studies by scholars with North American training. No French- or German-language studies that might complement, modify, or challenge his arguments are cited in the book; the author might have included, for example, Emmanuel Lozerand’s 2005 volume, which stresses the centrality of kanbun in Meiji times, and a 2009 article by Robert F. Wittkamp on the *Man’yōshū* that is especially germane to his argument.¹ This short-

¹ Emmanuel Lozerand, *Littérature et génie national: Naissance d’une histoire littéraire dans le Japon du XIXe siècle* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2005); Robert F. Wittkamp, “Schriftspiele mit Landschaft und Erinnerung: Zur Zeichenverwendung im *Man’yōshū*,” *Oriens Extremus* 48 (2009), pp. 251–70.

coming in Lurie's scholarship is comparatively minor given the cornucopia of material in Japanese, English, and Chinese he actively engages with—as recorded in the volume's fifty-six page bibliography—but it should not go unnoticed.

The author is generous when citing other scholarship. For example, while this book and Lurie's 2001 dissertation largely supplant Christopher Seeley's fine study, *A History of Writing in Japan* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), the volume under review cites the earlier work more than once in positive terms. Similarly, it is heartening to see references to studies that in general have not gotten the attention they deserve, such as Charles Holcombe's *The Genesis of East Asia, 221 B.C.–A.D. 907* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2001).

Still, there are bibliographic omissions. These include Felicia G. Bock's studies of the *Engishiki*, John R. Bentley's grammar (with its short treatment of *senmyō* [imperial edicts] and *mokkan*), and Robert Brower and Earl Miner's *Japanese Court Poetry*.² References in the book to Jurchen scripts, *Hou Han shu* vocabulary, and the *Youxianku* as “intertext” could have profited from the inclusion of Daniel Kane's studies of the first and Ronald C. Egan's articles on the latter two.³ At least two items cited in the body of the text are not included in the bibliography: “Rabinovitch and Bradstock 2005” (p. 303) and “Skyaervø 1996” (p. 360).

Also helpful—to make the subject more approachable to nonspecialists—would have been a mention of introductions to kanbun in English-language books by Sydney Crawcour and by Akira Komai and Thomas H. Rohlich, in German by Astrid Brochlos, and in French by Jean-Noël Robert.⁴

Further, it is disappointing to see that the bibliography cites Japanese titles only in romanization; kanji for scholars' names, at least, might have been provided. A glossary of the many Japanese terms ably defined in the course of the text—for example, *hitai ōkun* 非對應訓 as “non-equivalent logographs” and *koyū kunji* 固有訓字 as “distinctive logographic characters” (p. 280)—would have been welcome. A more substantive reservation concerns Lurie's distinction between verse and poetry (pp. 254ff.),

² Felicia Gressitt Bock, trans., *Engi-shiki: Procedures of the Engi Era*, 2 vols. (Sophia University Press, 1970–1972); Felicia G. Bock, *Classical Learning and Taoist Practices in Early Japan, with a Translation of Books XVI and XX of the Engi-shiki* (Center for Asian Studies, Arizona State University, 1985); John R. Bentley, *A Descriptive Grammar of Early Old Japanese Prose* (Leiden: Brill, 2001); Robert H. Brower and Earl Miner, *Japanese Court Poetry* (Stanford University Press, 1961).

³ Daniel Kane, *The Sino-Jurchen Vocabulary of the Bureau of Interpreters* (Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies, Indiana University, 1989); Daniel Kane, “Khitans and Jurchens,” in *Tumen Jalafun Jecen Aku: Manchu Studies in Honour of Giovanni Stary*, ed. Alessandra Pozzi, Juha Antero Janhunen, and Michael Weiers (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006), pp. 121–32; Ronald C. Egan, “The Prose Style of Fan Yeh,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 39:2 (Dec. 1979), pp. 339–401; Ronald Egan, “On the Origin of the *Yu hsien k'u* Commentary,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 36 (1976), pp. 135–46.

⁴ Sydney Crawcour, *An Introduction to Kanbun* (Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 1965); Akira Komai and Thomas H. Rohlich, *An Introduction to Japanese Kanbun* (University of Nagoya Press, 1988); Astrid Brochlos, *Kanbun: Grundlagen der klassischen sino-japanischen Schriftsprache / Kanbun no kiso 漢文の基礎* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2004); Jean-Noël Robert, *Lectures élémentaires en style sino-japonais (kanbun)* (Université Paris VII, 1986).

which is ultimately unsustainable. And while one appreciates the helpful maps identifying archaeological sites mentioned in the first five chapters, would it be churlish to point out that kanji are not included?

Notwithstanding the minor criticisms noted in this review, *Realms of Literacy* is a splendid work, one that has far-reaching implications for the study of language, literature, religion, history, and archaeology. I seriously doubt anyone will read the book without having fundamentally held premises about the Japanese language—and about both Japan's interaction with continental Asia and its later cultural development up to the very present—profoundly changed if not overturned.