

Confucian Learning and Literacy in Japan's Schools of the Edo Period

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Abstract

With the political stability, economic growth and cultural revitalisation of Japan after its unification by Tokugawa Ieyasu, the educational infrastructure also grew to meet new literacy demands. Governmental schools endowed by the shogunate (*Shōheikō*) and by the domains (*bankō*), which catered to the upper military class of the samurai, focused on classical Chinese studies, particularly the Neo-Confucian canon taught in *kanbun*, a style of classical Chinese. Given the prestige of Neo-Confucian Chinese learning and of the *kanbun* writing style, these were taught also in temple schools (*terakoya*) and private academies (*juku*) that were open to the lower classes, thus contributing to the spread of this particular type of literacy. However, Chinese learning in these schools often involved memorising rather than reading, both because of educational traditions and socio-ideological factors, and also because of the sheer difficulty of reading *kanbun*, a de facto foreign language. The present article investigates the contrasting implications of Neo-Confucian learning and of the *kanbun* writing style for the development of education and literacy in Japanese society: while the prestige of Chinese learning contributed to the demand for and development of educational facilities, its complexity also acted as an obstacle to the development of widespread functional literacy.

Keywords: literacy, Confucianism, Tokugawa period, history of education in Japan

Konfucijansko učenje in pismenost v japonskih šolah obdobja Edo

Izvleček

Potem ko je Tokugawa Ieyasu združil Japonsko, se je s politično stabilnostjo, gospodarsko rastjo in kulturnim preporodom ter zaradi rastoče potrebe po pismenosti razvila tudi izobraževalna infrastruktura. V šolah pod okriljem šogunata (*Shōheikō*) in provinc (*bankō*), kjer so se izobraževali samuraji, so poudarjali študij kitajskih klasikov, zlasti neokonfucijanskega kanona zapisanega v slogu *kanbun*, tj. vrsti klasične kitajščine. Zaradi velikega ugleda tako neokonfucijanskih kitajskih študij kot tudi pisnega sloga *kanbun* so se te vsebine učile tudi v šolah pod okriljem templjev (*terakoya*) in zasebnih šolah (*juku*), ki so bile dostopne nižjim družbenim slojem. To je prispevalo k širjenju te vrste pismenosti, toda učenje kitajskih vsebin v teh šolah je pogosto potekalo v obliki pomnjenja na pamet

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bolj kot branja in razumevanja, tako zaradi družbeno-ideoloških dejavnikov in japonske vzgojne tradicije, kot tudi zaradi težavnosti branja sloga *kanbun*, ki je bil dejansko tuj jezik. Članek obravnava nasprotujoča si vpliva neokonfucijanskega učenja in uporabe pisnega sloga *kanbun* na razvoj izobraževanja in pismenosti v Japonski družbi: po eni strani je ugled kitajske učenosti prispeval k povpraševanju po izobraževalnih ustanovah in k njihovemu razvoju, po drugi pa je kompleksnost tega sloga in sistema pisanja delovala kot ovira k razvoju splošne funkcijske pismenosti.

Ključne besede: pismenost, konfucijanstvo, obdobje Tokugawa, zgodovina izobraževanja na Japonskem

Introduction

After the demilitarisation and relocation of “country samurai” (*jizamurai* 地侍) to castle towns ordered by Toyotomi Hideyoshi 豊臣秀吉 in 1588 stimulated the growth of urban areas, and when the political and military unification of Japan by Tokugawa Ieyasu 徳川家康 at the start of the 17th century brought relative stability, economic prosperity and cultural revitalisation to Japan, conditions were met for the growth of educational facilities to meet the new needs for literacy of the warrior class with diminished military duties, of the growing merchant class and of village headmen in new administrative roles.

Headmen of farming villages were invested with new administrative duties following Hideyoshi’s decree in 1591 that divided society into four hierarchical classes: the samurai (*shi* 士 or *bushi* 武士), the highest class, followed by farmers (*nō* 農 or *hyakushō* 百姓, high on the social scale because they produced food), artisans (*kō* 工) and merchants (*shō* 商), officially the lowest class because handling money was ideologically despicable, but in fact a wealthy class. Warriors and peasants became two legally distinct classes and rural samurai were confronted with the choice of staying in the country and be classified as farmers, or moving to the daimyo’s castle town and become bureaucrats, and most chose the latter. These administrators who lived in the castles were thus physically separated from their villages, and supervised farming villages by means of written documents, rules and regulations. As a consequence, village headmen throughout the country were entrusted with local administration and had to acquire reading and writing skills on the level of their samurai supervisors (Rubinger 2007, 14–15).

Having obtained political unification, the Tokugawa, advised by the philosopher Hayashi Razan 林羅山, adopted and promoted Neo-Confucianism as a national doctrine that would help them preserve political stability. The doctrine embraced by the Tokugawa shogunate was a syncretic ideology comprising elements of Buddhism and local Shintoism, but mostly based on the Neo-Confucian thought

of Zhu Xi 朱熹 (Walker 2015, 126), and envisaging a static and hierarchically divided society whose order reflects the order of nature (Rošker 2016). In order to strengthen his control over feudal lords (*daimyō* 大名), Ieyasu introduced the system of *sankinkōtai* 参勤交代, under which feudal lords were forced to serve the shogun in Edo in alternate years, thus contributing to the development of a road infrastructure and the flourishing of commerce.

In such a period of political stability, the military class could devote more time to education, which mainly consisted of classical Chinese studies, revived also by the Neo-Confucian doctrine adopted by the shogunate. The military class, however, was not the only one to invest into education: growing commerce in urban centres called for more widespread literacy and numeracy among merchants, and higher standards of living brought about by economic growth favoured cultural endeavours, the spread of book publishing and lending and the rise of readership. At the same time, as the separation of the warrior class and the peasant class had shifted administrative work and tax-assessment in rural areas to village headmen of the agricultural class, literacy also spread among the farmers (Rubinger 2007, 14–15).

Educational Institutions and Literacy in the Edo Period

Up to the 19th century, classes below the samurai (peasants, merchants and artisans) had little access to formal education (Anderson Sawada 1993, 9–10). Nonetheless, they were not altogether precluded from attending school, as there were three different types of educational institutions in Japan during the Tokugawa period (1603–1867), two of which catered also to the lower classes. The first type were official governmental schools for elementary and advanced education of youth from the samurai class, including the Confucian academy of the shogunate (*Shōheizaka gakumonjo* 昌平坂学問所 or *Shōheikō* 昌平黌), some other institutions founded by the shogunate, and domain schools established by feudal lords (*bankō* 藩校). The second type were private elementary schools for commoners run by temples (*terakoya* 寺子屋) and attended by farmers, artisans and merchants. Thirdly, there were private academies (*juku* 塾 or *shijuku* 私塾), often run by a single scholar, that were open both to samurai and commoners (Dore 1965; Passin 1965; Rubinger 1982; Ishikawa 1929; Sasaki 1943).

While official shogunal and domain schools were focused on classical Chinese and Neo-Confucian studies, schools for commoners (*terakoya*) provided also more practical skills for vocational training besides reading, writing and abacus (Ishikawa 1960), whereas private academies had very varied educational contents, depending on their headmaster. Private academies (*shijuku*), which were open to all

classes and generally had no geographical barriers, were typically privately run, often at the home of the scholar who lead the academy. The curriculum was decided by the headmaster and there was no official control over its contents. These academies otherwise varied considerably in terms of size, level of education and organisation (Rubinger 1982, 196–7). To take an example, two of the most renown private academies offering Confucian studies in the Tokugawa period had distinctly different approaches to education: the academy *Shōka sonjuku* 松下村塾, lead by Yoshida Shōin 吉田松陰 and attended by many who later became leaders of the Meiji reformation such as Itō Hirobumi 伊藤博文 and Takasugi Shinsaku 高杉晋作, stressed character development through studying Confucian classics, but also through discussions on current affairs aimed at political action, while the very strict Chinese-studies academy *Kangien* 咸宜園 founded by the Confucian scholar Hirose Tansō 広瀬淡窓 at Hita (Ōita) had a wide ranging curriculum centred on Chinese studies, but comprising also Japanese and Western subjects of study (Mehl 2003, 14–16; Kassel 1996).

At the beginning of the 17th century, when a large part of the samurai class was relocated to cities, and villages became more self-administered, village headmen and other officials in rural areas needed to develop higher levels of literacy to carry out administrative duties. Headmen were the first farmers to develop administrative literacy, and use kanbun style, the Sino-Japanese hybrid language used by the samurai class, to write administrative and tax reports. Following the appointment of village headmen to the administration of taxes, other villagers were motivated to invest time and resources in improving their own reading skills, as can be inferred from several documented lawsuits filed by villagers regarding the tax records compiled by the village headman (Rubinger 2007, 30–32).

This development, however, mainly influenced the literacy rate among the male population, while women in rural areas had very limited access to schooling and literacy. Gradually, literacy spread to household heads and eventually to the lowest ranking individuals, women and servants, but regional disparities persisted up to the 19th century, and literacy rates varied considerably according to region (*ibid.*, 41–42, 134–6). Although the number of female scholars increased in the late Tokugawa period, they were an exception rather than the rule, often the daughters of scholars of Chinese learning (*kangaku* 漢学) (Mehl 2001, 580).

Gender disparities also varied conspicuously among regions. While in rural areas the male/female school attendance ratio was 20:1 (Rubinger 2007, 134), in urban areas the disparity was not as conspicuous. This regional variation in gender disparity may stem from the different motivations for learning to read in urban and rural areas. While in urban areas literacy was largely motivated by commerce,

where it was not uncommon for women to participate in commercial activities, in rural areas, on the other hand, literacy was needed mainly for administrative duties that were exclusively a male domain, thus implying no need for female education (Rubinger 2007, 140–2).

Exact figures and statistics are still debated, but it seems that by the late Tokugawa period, in a country with a population of 30 million, there were as many as 14,000 temple schools, 300 domain schools, and approximately 1,500 private academies (Dore 1965; Passin 1965). Factors influencing the literacy rates in different regions were political and economical: centres of politics and commerce (cities and wider commercialised regions) had higher literacy rates, confirming the strong relation of literacy to power in all its forms.

Up to the first half of the nineteenth century, despite spreading literacy levels, qualitative differences in the attainment of literacy remained, and most ordinary farmers only attained the most basic skills, if any (Rubinger 2007, 160–1). Regional differences finally declined only in the early 1900s, with the establishment of a thoroughly organised national education system (Spaulding 1983), while widespread functional literacy was hindered for centuries by an extremely complex writing system and by the continued use of multiple writing styles and linguistic variants that included *kanbun*, a de facto foreign language but considered as a *variant* of educated Japanese.

***Kanbun* and the Influence of Chinese Studies on the Concept of Reading and Literacy**

The reading of Confucian classics, which was the focus of learning at official shogunal and domain schools, as well as being taught in temple schools for commoners and in private academies, implied reading *kanbun* using the method of *kanbun-kundoku* 漢文訓読, literally “Chinese text read by explanation / in the Japanese manner” (Wakabayashi 2005a, 121), a technique of “reading through glossing” (Denecke 2014, 47), that had developed from the ninth century and consisted in using diacritic marks to annotate classical Chinese text to be “read” in (or rather interpreted and translated into) Japanese.

The development of *kanbun-kundoku*, a practice that has been attested in other civilisations within the Sinitic cultural sphere, including Japan, the Korean peninsula and Vietnam, is likely to have been favoured by the primarily logographic nature of Chinese writing (Frellesvig 2010, 258–9), since individual Chinese characters could be individually “read” or interpreted in an oral rendition that used

vernacular equivalents instead of the Chinese words these characters originally represented. However, a word-for-word translation or interpretation of single characters in the order they occurred in Chinese texts would not produce understandable Japanese sentences because of the marked syntactical and morphological differences between Chinese and Japanese. Chinese is an isolating language with no inflectional morphology, it expresses grammatical relations by means of word order, and categories such as mood and negation by means of grammaticalised preposed verbs and adverbs; Japanese, on the other hand, is an agglutinative language with relatively rich morphology (verbal and adjectival inflections), it specifies syntactic roles by means of grammatical particles (postpositions) rather than word order, and expresses modal categories by means of verbal affixes and clause-final auxiliary verbs (Frellesvig 2010, 259). The primary word order is subject-verb-object in Chinese, while Japanese has a basically free word order (except for verbs that always occur in final position) and is usually classified as a subject-object-verb language. Chinese texts could thus not be “read” and translated character by character, but rather needed to be parsed and reassembled into Japanese, adding grammatical information to produce understandable Japanese.

Reading classical Chinese texts using the *kanbun-kundoku* technique required three layers of processing: 1) translation, 2) transposition and 3) interpolation (Frellesvig 2010, 259; Denecke 2014, 47). Readers firstly had to associate Chinese logographs with Japanese words, i.e. find suitable Japanese translation equivalents for both content and function words of the Chinese text, a process that required knowing both the character forms and the Japanese renditions normally associated with them. Secondly, they had to transpose and reorder the words to fit Japanese syntax. And thirdly, they had to infer and add grammatical particles and inflectional morphemes that were absent in the Chinese text.

A complex system of annotation developed through the centuries to aid readers using this demanding technique. The invention of this system has been ascribed to Kibi no Makibi 吉備真備, an eighth century scholar, politician and envoy to China (Wakabayashi 2005a, 121), but it was refined and developed in the following centuries. The reading marks are collectively known as *kunten* 訓点 and include different categories of marks and glosses that function as aids in each of the processing steps explained above (Frellesvig 2010, 259–60).

The oldest type of marks, dating back to the eighth century, are punctuation marks or *kutōten* 句読点 that show the division of a text into sentences and phrases, and “reversal marks” or *kaeriten* 返り点, smaller marks on the left side of the full-size characters of the main text that indicate the order in which words are to be read in Japanese, thus aiding the process of transposition. For example, the mark ㄣ,

originally used in Chinese texts to indicate the correct order of characters that had been mistakenly written in a wrong sequence, came to be used as a mark to indicate that two characters should be read in inverted order. The numbers 一, 二, the characters for up 上 and down 下 and other marks came to be used to indicate more complex inversions of multiple character sequences.

Another type of marks that developed mainly in the Heian period are *kana* 仮名 glosses, abbreviated characters in smaller size that indicate the pronunciation of a character, which could be either a Sino-Japanese word, i.e. a borrowed Chinese word phonologically adapted to the Japanese sound system, or a Japanese word used to translate the Chinese word represented by the character. This type of glossing is generally viewed as the origin of the *katakana* phonetic script.

A third type of marks, *okoto-ten* ヲコト点 or *tenioba* てにをは marks, indicate grammatical morphemes, particles, auxiliary verbs and inflectional endings. These marks are dots, lines, hooks and other shapes placed next to or on *kanji* characters according to one of several systems of positioning. For example, in the system given in Figure 1 (quoted from Frellesvig 2010, 260), a dot next to the top right corner of a *kanji* character would indicate that the word represented by that character should be followed by the particle *o*, indicating a direct object. Many different systems developed in the 9th and 10th century, as different temples and scholars created and standardised their own conventions; Tsukishima (1986) describes 26 different systems of *okoto-ten*.

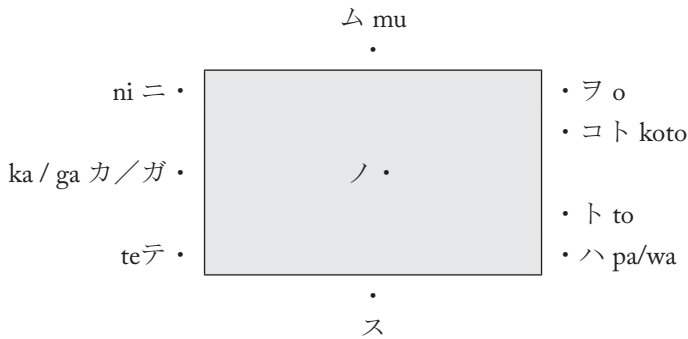


Figure 1. An example of an okototen system

Classical Chinese texts were thus annotated with marks and symbols to show the order in which the words should be rearranged, the “correct reading” of single characters, and the grammatical particles and inflectional endings that needed to be added to render the Chinese text orally. The rendition was in Japanese,

although in a variety of Japanese that was very much influenced by Chinese vocabulary and syntax, but nonetheless considered a style of Japanese and at the same time a faithful rendition of the Chinese original.

In the following example (quoted from Denecke 2014, 47), the opening of the Confucian *Analects* given in line b) below would be annotated as in Figure 2. Marks on the left-hand side of the vertically written text indicate the reading order: the mark ㄥ between 習 and the 之 indicate that the direct object 之 should be read before the verb 習, according to Japanese syntax, while the mark 二 (two) below the negation 不 and the number 一 (one) below 說 (pleasant) together indicate that the negative form 不 should be added after the adjective 說, again according to Japanese grammar. Smaller katakana characters on the right-hand side of the text indicate case particles to be added when reading or the pronunciation of the Chinese characters. The text in Figure 2 could be orally rendered as in line e) (or a similar variation). This oral rendering according to Japanese grammar is known as *yomi-kudashi* 読み下し (literally “reading down”). The romanized glosses in line f) show in boldface those parts of the Japanese sentence which are added during *yomi-kudashi* and not present in the Chinese text.

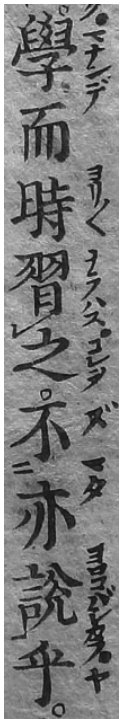


Figure 2. Text with kunten marks

a) original word order	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9		
b) Chinese text	學	而	時	習	之	不	亦	說	乎		
c) modern Mandarin pronunciation	xue	er	shi	xi	zhi	bu	yi	yue	hu		
	1	2	3	5	4	7	8	6	9		
d) <i>kanbun-kundoku</i> word order	學	而	時	之	習	亦	說	不	乎		
e)	學	而	時	之	習	亦	說	不	乎		
f)	manabi	te	toki	ni	kore	o	narafu	mata	yorokobashikara	zu	ya
g)	learn	and	at times	this	review,	also	pleasant		NEG.	EXCL.	

“to learn and sometimes review what one has learnt, is that not pleasure?”
(Denecke 2014, 47)

The widespread use of *kanbun-kundoku* as a reading technique lead to the use of the same conventions in reverse, also to write down (according to classical Chinese syntax and word order) texts that were meant to be read in the *kanbun-yomikudashi* style of Japanese in the first place. This method of writing and the literary works written in this style have been alternatively termed Sino-Japanese (Rabinovitch 1996; Wixted 1998; see especially Kornicki 2010 for a thorough discussion of this terminology and its implications) or Chinese style (Seeley 1991, 25), since it is not always possible to ascertain whether a text was meant to be read in Chinese or in Japanese.

With time, the *kanbun-yomikudashi* rendering of Chinese texts came to be written down also in full, in Japanese word order and spelling out all grammatical information that would be less explicit in *kanbun* style, but the ability to read and write *kanbun* remained an essential skill of educated Japanese speakers up to the 20th century, and even today the technique of *kanbun-kundoku* is taught as a compulsory subject in Japanese schools, thus attesting to its importance in the Japanese literary tradition.

Alongside the technique of *kanbun-kundoku*, Chinese texts could also be read as Chinese, as a foreign language, retaining the original word order and approximating Chinese pronunciation, a reading technique known as *ondoku* 音読, used for the recitation of poetry, chanting of Buddhist texts and memorisation (Denecke 2014, 47). This way of reading Chinese introduced a very large amount of Chinese loanwords into Japanese.

Given the presence of the original text that could be read either in Chinese (maintaining Chinese word order and a more or less Chinese pronunciation of the single words), or in Japanese (substituting one part of the Chinese vocabulary

with equivalent native Japanese words and rearranging word order), such texts were not perceived as foreign texts to be translated, but rather as texts in one of the two main “styles” (*buntai* 文体) that had to be mastered by literate Japanese of the time: Chinese style (*kanbun* 漢文) and Japanese style (*wabun* 和文). While the Japanese style was indeed a style of Japanese, albeit following archaic conventions of spelling and style, the Chinese style could be seen as a foreign language, but it was often not recognised as such. The question whether *kanbun-kundoku* is a special type of translation, a “highly source-oriented approach to translation”, or a style of Japanese, or a reading technique, is still debated, and neither Japanese nor foreign theoreticians have yet reached a consensus on this point (Wakabayashi 2005b, 24; Semizu 2006). Indeed, words such as *hon'yaku* adopted to describe translation from European and other languages from the 16th century onwards (Wakabayashi 2009) have never been associated with the rendering of written classical Chinese texts into *kanbun-kundoku*.

This reading technique enabled highly literate readers to read the Chinese texts while mentally translating them directly into Japanese (Seeley 1991, 25; Wakabayashi 2009). In this style of writing and reading, most of the vocabulary was borrowed from Chinese, and readers were thus expected to master both Japanese domestic vocabulary and an almost equal amount of loanwords. Reading *kanbun* thus required an exceedingly high level of literacy, including the knowledge of thousands of characters for an essentially foreign vocabulary and their native Japanese equivalents, and the mastering of syntactical and transposing rules used to mentally translate the text into Japanese.

The reading of classic texts was particularly difficult for pupils learning to read, and involved considerable amounts of memorisation. One of the most popular copybooks used in schools of the Tokugawa period was *Teikin Ōrai* 庭訓往来, a collection of letters written by aristocrats centuries earlier, widely used for the moral teachings they included and that were meant to serve as both examples of writing style and as models of personal conduct. However, in line with culturally grounded teaching practices that emphasised rote learning, and also given the difficulty of these archaic texts in *kanbun* style, pupils learned to “read” the texts by memorising them rather than by understanding the actual words (Ingulsrud and Allen 2009, 76).

At the same time, the difficulty inherent in such a writing and reading practice encouraged the spread of a subsidiary writing system, i.e. pronunciation glosses (*furigana*) alongside the Chinese characters to enable readers with limited knowledge of Chinese characters to read more complex texts. This practice helped the spread of more difficult Confucian and other classical readings even among the less literate.

Conclusion: *kanbun* and Forms of Literacy

By the middle of the 19th century, literacy rates as estimated from rates of school attendance were relatively high. Different estimates and calculations can be found in the literature: Dore (1965) estimates that 40 to 50 percent of Japanese boys and 10 to 15 percent of girls were attending school in 1870, while Tone (1981), who studied temple schools (*terakoya*) in the Kanto region, found different attendance rates in the three groups of schools he distinguished on the basis of their different socioeconomic settings. He found that in traditional farming villages school attendance was 20%, in post-towns 38%, and 50 to 70% in commercially active villages (Tone 1981, 83, 186; as cited by Rubinger 2007, 131–2), which compares favourably with major contemporary centres in Europe. The high levels of literacy stemming from the value ascribed to education and the considerable amount of time and resources invested voluntarily into education at all levels of society in the Tokugawa period have been cited as one of the bases for the social transformations and fast economic and military growth of the Meiji period (Dore 1965). When compared with contemporary countries of the Western world, Japan had indeed relatively high rates of literacy in the Tokugawa period. However, literacy should be defined not only in quantitative, but also in qualitative terms: the literacy levels attained were qualitatively uneven, given the extremely complex system of writing and the widespread use of *kanbun*, i.e. annotated but not translated Chinese texts in official administration and even in basic schooling, where such texts were often chosen for their moral value rather than for their accessibility to pupils. The complexity of *kanbun*, both as a script and as a language variety, was such a formidable challenge that “widespread literacy” did not necessarily entail “the ability to read any written document” (Twine 1983).

As Unger (1991, 549) points out, while it can be said that Japan was a relatively literate nation even during the Tokugawa period, this only holds true for literacy as usually defined in technical studies, i.e. a minimal ability to read and write, while “literacy as a vehicle for full and free participation in society” was not as widespread. In the Japanese context, a minimal ability to read and write could simply mean reading and writing the phonetic script hiragana, but not knowing Chinese characters and not being able to read documents in the *kanbun* style used in official transactions.

Nonetheless, the prestige of the Chinese learning tradition and the inherent interest of the upper literate classes to keep standards of acceptable writing high enough so as to limit access to such elite status, contributed to the maintenance of an exceedingly complex writing system through the Tokugawa and Meiji period and up to the present day (Culiberg 2011 and 2015).

Indeed, after the end of the Tokugawa regime and the advent of the Meiji restoration in 1868, when rising the literacy and educational level of the whole nation, seen as a prerequisite for building a strong centralised nation that could withstand the pressures of Western colonial powers, became one of the priorities of the Meiji government (Visočnik 2015 and 2016; Ichimiya 2011), the problem of rising literacy was approached from both sides: on one hand by imposing compulsory education of four years upon the entire school-age population of Japan, and on the other hand by embarking in several reforms aimed at standardising the spoken and written language, discouraging the use of cumbersome stylistic conventions entailed in the Sino-Japanese *kanbun* style of writing, and simplifying the elements of the writing system itself, limiting the number of Chinese characters for public use and simplifying the forms of the more complicated characters (Gottlieb 1995).

The complex writing system and the unwieldy practice of *kanbun* sight translation that endured for centuries because of the prestige enjoyed by the classical Chinese tradition, were thus at the same time a motivating force for the investment of resources into education, but also an obstacle to the spread of literacy both in terms of width, among all classes of society, and in terms of depth, allowing each literate individual to fully participate in society.

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