The Development of Japanese *Kana*

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The introduction of Chinese characters to Japan and the development of man'yōgana

Japan never developed any form of autonomous writing. Therefore, when the need for a system of writing arose, the only choice left to the Japanese was to borrow Chinese characters — *kanji* 漢字 — from China. The introduction of Chinese characters dates back to the end of the fourth century or the beginning of the fifth, when they allegedly reached Japan via the Korean peninsula — i.e. the kingdom of Paekche. The *Kojiki* 古事記 (712) states that *kanji* were introduced to Japan thanks to Wani 和邇, an immigrant Korean scholar, and the same name is recorded, albeit with a with a different orthography (王仁), also in the *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 (720). Thus, it is most probable that this was the same person.

For the Japanese people, however, Chinese characters were not an easy writing system to master. The language *kanji* were meant to express — i.e. Chinese — differed widely in morphologic and syntactic terms from Japanese. Hence, at the beginning *kanji* were not an adequate script for the Japanese language and the gradual process of adaptation

required great efforts and a lot of time.

When Chinese characters were just introduced to Japan, documents could be written only according to orthodox Chinese — *kanbun* 漢文 — or its Japanized variant — *hentai kanbun* 変体漢文. Furthermore a closer look at extant documents in *kanbun* written in Japan during the fifth and sixth centuries reveals few or no native elements whatsoever. This was probably due to a lack of proficiency in writing in orthodox — i.e. syntactically correct — Chinese by the ancient Japanese, who had to rely heavily on immigrants from the Korean peninsula. In other words, the earliest texts in Chinese written in Japan were frequently written down by a foreigner's hand.

Many Japanese today believe that, with the introduction of Chinese characters, it became immediately possible to write easily in Japanese, but historical evidence does not corroborate this thesis, and in fact it tells us a completely different story.

In trying to write Japanese by means of Chinese characters, the Japanese were faced with one problem: *kanji* and orthodox Chinese were completely inadequate to render Japanese morphological characteristics. Even though it was possible to rearrange the Japanese word order according to classical Chinese syntax — i.e. translating a text into Chinese — some typical features such as proper names — e.g. personal and place names — had to be written in a way a native reader could easily recognize.

The Inariyama burial mound sword inscription (471, Prefecture of Saitama) — *Inariyama kofun shutsudo tekkenmei* 稲荷山古墳出土鉄剣銘 — offers a poignant example of one of the most ancient types of this script.

> 辛亥年七月中記。乎獲居臣。上祖名意富比垝。其児多加利足尼其児名弖已加利獲居。
> 其児名多加披次獲居其児名多沙鬼獲居。其児名半弖比。其児名加差披余。其児名乎獲居臣。世々為杖刀人首奉事来至今獲加多支鹵大王寺在斯鬼宮時吾左治天下令作此百練利刀記吾奉事根原也

> Inscribed in the seventh lunar month of a xin-hai year: Wo wakë omi: [his] remote ancestor's name, Öpö piko; his child's name, Takari tsukunie; his child's name, Teyö kari wakë; his child's name, Takapatsï wakë; his child's name, Tasakï wakë; his child's name, Pandepi;
> His child's name, Katsapaya; his child's name, Wo wakë omi. From generation unto generation, we have served as the sword-bearers' chiefs, down to the present time. When the great king Waka Takiru's court was in the Sikï palace, I, assisting in the governance of the realm, caused to be fashioned this well-wrought efficacious sword, recording my origins in service.[1]

The text of this inscription is written in orthodox Chinese and includes about ten proper names written using Chinese characters as phonograms: local influential family names such as Wo wake 乎獲居 and Öpö piko 意富比垝, the name of an Emperor (Great King) — Waka Takiru 獲加多支鹵 — and a toponym — Sikï 斯鬼. The *xinhai* year 辛亥年 is widely accepted by Japanese scholars to correspond to 471, suggesting that Chinese characters as phonograms were already in use during the second half of the fifth century.

Using of characters only for their phonetic value rather than for their meaning to express the proper nouns of a foreign language — i.e. phonogrammatic use — was common practice in China. To cite one example, in the *Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華経 (*Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra, The Lotus Sūtra*), translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 (344-413) all the names of Śākyamuni's disciples are recorded according to this orthographic convention.

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[1] Saitamaken kyōiku iinkai (ed.), *Inariyama kofun shutsudo tekken kinzōganmei gaihō*, Urawa, Saitamaken kyōiku iinkai, 1979. English translation by Murayama Shichirō and Roy Andrew Miller, "The Inariyama Tumulus Sword Inscription", *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 2, 1979, pp. 420-421.

如是我聞。一時佛住王舍城耆闍崛山中。與大比丘衆萬二千人俱。皆是阿羅漢。諸漏已盡無復煩惱。逮得己利盡諸有結。心得自在。其名曰阿若憍陳如。摩訶迦葉。優樓頻螺迦葉。迦耶迦葉。那提迦葉。舍利弗。大目揵連。摩訶迦旃延。阿㝹駄。劫賓那。憍梵波提。離婆多。畢陵伽婆蹉。薄拘羅。摩訶拘絺羅。難陀。孫陀羅難陀。富樓那彌多羅尼子。須菩提。阿難。羅睺羅。

This is what I heard:

At one time the Buddha was in Rajagriha, staying on Mount Gridhrakuta. Accompanying him were a multitude of leading monks numbering twelve thousand persons. All were arhats whose outflows had come to an end, who had no more earthly desires, who had attained what was to their advantage and had put an end to the bonds of existence, and whose minds had achieved a state of freedom.

Their names were Ajnata Kaundinya, Mahakashyapa, Uruvilvakashyapa, Gayakashyapa, Nadikashyapa, Shariputra, Great Maudgalyayana, Mahakatyayana, Aniruddha, Kapphina, Gavampati, Revata, Pilindavatsa, Bakkula, Mahakaushthila, Nanda, Sundarananda, Purna Maitrayaniputra, Subhuti, Ananda and Rahula.[2]

And in the *Da Tang xiyu ji* 大唐西域記 (*Record of travels to western lands*) edited by Bianji 辯機 during the Tang dynasty (618-907) the same expedient is used for listing the names of the thirty-four countries of the western lands.

阿耆尼國　屈支國　跋祿迦國　笯[奴故反]赤建國
赭時國　怖[敷發反]捍國　窣[蘇沒反]堵利瑟那國　颯秣建國
弭秣賀國　劫布呾那國　屈霜[去聲]爾伽國　喝捍國
捕喝國　伐地國　貨利習彌伽國　羯霜[去聲]那國
呾蜜國　赤鄂衍那國　忽露摩國　愉[色俱反]漫國
鞠和衍那國　鑊沙國　珂咄羅國　拘謎[莫閉反]陀國
縛伽浪國　紇露悉泯健國　忽懍國　縛喝國
鋭秣陀國　胡寔健國　呾剌健國　揭職國
梵衍那國　迦畢試國

(1) O-ki-ni; (2) K'iu-chi; (3) Poh-luh-kia; (4) Nu-chih-kien;
(5) Che-shi; (6) Fei-hun; (7) Su-tu-li-sse-na; (8) Să-mo-kien;

[2] Takakusu Junjirō (ed.), *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, 9, Tōkyō, Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1930, p.1. English translation by Burton Watson, *The Lotus Sutra*, *Journal of Japanese Studies*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1993, pp. 3-4.

(9) Mi-mo-hia; (10) K'ie-po-ta-na (11) K'iuh-shwang-ni-kia; (12) Ta-mi;
(13) Ho-han; (14) Pu-ho; (15) Fa-ti; (16) Ho-li-sih-mi-kia;
(17) Ki-shwang-na; (18) Ch'i-ngoh-yen-na; (19) Hwŭh-lo-mo; (20) Su-man;
(21) Kio-ho-yen-na; (22) Husha; (23) Kho-to-lo; (24) Kiu-mi-to;
(25) Po-kia-lang; (26) Hi-lu-sih-min-kien; (27) Ho-lin; (28) Po-ho;
(29) Jui-mo-to; (30) Hu-shi-kien; (31) Ta-la-kien; (32) Kie-chi;
(33) Fan-yen-na; (34) Kia-pi-shi.[3]

The system for recording Japanese proper names seen in the above-mentioned Inariyama burial mound sword inscription is clearly indebted to the use of characters as phonograms employed by the Chinese.

It is interesting to point out that this script treats Japanese the same way as a foreign language, doing so from the viewpoint of orthodox Chinese: this is exactly the same technique invented on the continent to insert Indian and Middle Asian proper names in a Chinese context. In this respect *man'yōgana* could be seen as a device to express Japanese as a foreign language within a classical Chinese text.

Therefore, the first step towards the formation and development of Japanese *kana* came from a distinct use of Chinese characters. Scholars universally agree that this method was devised by people aware of the phonogrammatic use of *kanji* made in China. Also, it is my opinion that it was not the Japanese but the Korean immigrants who introduced Chinese characters to Japan via the Korean peninsula.

This peculiar use of Chinese characters as phonograms has been called in Japan — probably since the eighteenth century — *man'yōgana* 万葉仮名 (also 万葉仮字). The term *man'yōgana* used here to describe a phonetic use of Chinese characters is, if not incorrect, at least inadequate, for it gives the impression that this peculiar use of *kanji* started in the eight

[3] Takakusu Junjirō (ed.), *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, 51, Tōkyō, Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1930, p 868. English translation by Samuel Beal, *Si-yu-ki : Buddhist records of the Western World*, Boston, J.R. Osgood, 1885, p. 7.

century with the *Man'yōshū* 万葉集 (759) — the oldest extant collection of Japanese poetry. In fact, as we have already seen, the Inariyama burial mound sword inscription that dates back to 471 A.D. already presented these features. Japanese scholars are well aware of this inconsistency but unfortunately at present there is no valid alternative to this term.

The so-called *man'yōgana* writing system relies on two different kinds of pronunciations. One is obviously the Sino-Japanese pronunciation (*on yomi* 音読み) introduced in Japan together with the Chinese characters. During the fifth century all the *man'yōgana* were based on it, in other words they were all *ongana* 音仮名. The other one is the native pronunciation given by Japanese to Chinese characters (*kun yomi* 訓読み).

Initially, all Chinese characters were probably read in Japan according to Sino-Japanese pronunciations. Later, native Japanese reading came to be associated with *kanji* on the basis of their semantic value that closely approximated the meaning of the character itself. For example, the character 山 used with the meaning of "terrain elevation" should have been associated at least with the following Japanese words: *woka* ヲカ, *mine* ミネ, *wo* ヲ, *take* タケ and, finally, *yama* ヤマ. Nonetheless, shortly after the introduction of Chinese characters *yama* was added as the proper reading for the sign and used until modern times.

It is probable — and I am incline to agree with this theory — that the idea of adding a native reading to a Chinese character was borrowed from the Old Korean tradition of associating an independent Korean word with a Chinese character — e.g. 珍 with *tor*.[4]

The theories regarding the consolidation of native readings for Chinese characters in Japan are manifold. According to Okimori Takuya 沖森卓也 the first four characters of the inscription 各田マ臣□□□素伯大

[4] Kōno Rokurō, "Kojiki ni okeru kanji shiyō", in Hisamatsu Sen'ichi (ed.), *Kojiki taisei*, 3, *Gengo moji hen*, Tōkyō, Heibonsha, 1957, pp. 155-205.

利刀 on the sword discovered in the Okadayama n. 1 burial mound (City of Matsue, Prefecture of Shimane) — *Okadayama ichigō kofun shutsudo tachimei* 岡田山一号古墳出土太刀銘 — are to be interpreted as 額田部臣 and read as Nukatabe no omi ヌカタベノオミ. Okimori states that this is the oldest example of a proper name recorded according to native readings — i.e. *kun yomi*. The burial mound dates back to the third quarter of the sixth century, suggesting the achievement of Japanese readings for Chinese characters around the middle of the sixth century.

As we have seen, *man'yōgana* relied both on Sino-Japanese and native pronunciations of Chinese characters. For example, the *kanji* for the number two 二 became the *man'yōgana* for *ni* ニ on the basis of his *on* reading and, in the same way, the Chinese character for the number three 三 was the *man'yōgana* used to express the sound *mi* ミ on account of its Japanese pronunciation — i.e. *mi*.

Thus, by the seventh century it became possible to write texts in Japanese — not orthodox Chinese — relying solely on *man'yōgana*. In the same time period documents were also produced that combined, in the same context, Sinicized expression and native ones. Still, the presence of texts written in pure Japanese is undeniable. This strategy of recording the native language in *man'yōgana* began in the seventh century, but it was only during the eight century that this practice achieved its full development.

The Shōsōin Repository preserves a poignant example of a document — dating from about 762 A.D. — written almost entirely in phonograms. The *Shōsōin man'yōgana monjo* 正倉万葉仮名文書 consists of a couple of letters — quite obscure in meaning — related to some kind of economic negotiation. Although the content of these two documents has been only partially understood, it is possible to reconstruct the reading of the entire text deciphering the *man'yōgana* used within it.

和可夜之奈比乃可波　利尓波於保末之末須美　美奈美乃末知奈流奴　乎宇気与
止於保止己可都可佐乃比止伊布之可流　可由恵尓序礼宇気牟比　止良久流末

毛太之米　弖末都利伊礼之米太末　布日与祢良毛伊太佐　牟之可毛己乃波古美
於可牟毛阿夜布可流可　由恵尓波夜久末可利太　末布日之於保己可川可佐奈
比気奈波比止乃太気太可比止　□己止波宇気都流

我が養ひの代りには、おほましますみみなみの町なる奴を受けよと大床が官の人言ふ。然るが故に、其れ受けむ人ら車持たしめてまつりいれしめ給ふ日、米らも出ださむ。然も、この運み置かむも危ふかるが故に、早く罷り給ふべし、おほこか官なひなけば、人のたけたか人□(ぞ)事は受けつる。[5]

In this way the Japanese were able to write a text in their own language with the aid of *kanji* without having to render the content of the message in orthodox classical Chinese.

Nonetheless, *man'yōgana* had a major drawback in terms of performance: compared to other orthographies, it required a lot of time and accuracy. In the aforementioned document, for example, each syllable of the Japanese language is represented by a single character, showcasing the main strategy adopted during the second half of the eight century. In other words, the utterer of the message had to write a Chinese character for each syllable of the text, which translated into a great waste of time and paper.

Actually, there were various different methods of expressing Japanese language by means of Chinese characters.

東　野炎　立所見而　反見為者　月西渡
ひむかしの　のにかぎろひの　たつみえて　かへりみすれば　つきかたぶきぬ
On the eastern fields
I can see the flames of morning rise.
Turning around,
I see the moon sink in the west.[6]

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[5] Shirafuji Noriyuki, *Nara jidai no kokugo*, in *Kokugo ronsō*, 1, Tōkyō, Tōkyōdō shuppan, 1987, pp. 36-37.

[6] Takagi Ichinosuke, Gomi Tomohide and Ōno Susumu (eds.), *Man'yōshū*, in *Nihon koten bungaku taikei*, 4, Tōkyō, Iwanami shoten, 1957, pp. 34-35. English translation

Poem n. 48 from the first book of volume 1 of the *Man'yōshū* adopts fourteen characters to represent thirty-one syllables. Nonetheless the correspondence between each character and the way it should be read is anything but clear and only studies conducted in the tenth century properly decoded this and other cryptic poems. Given the high level of complexity of such a writing, scholars tend to believe that even around 700 A.D. — when the poem was written — only few were able to understand the correct Japanese that underlay the string of characters.

In a way similar to the *Shōsōin man'yōgana monjo*, the orthographic convention of character-by-character rendering, whereby one *kanji* is used in lieu of a single syllable, was thus adopted in order to avoid misunderstandings. Efficiency was the price to pay for clarity. In other words, the Japanese were forced to write a large number of Chinese characters to express accurately the morphology of their own words and to transmit the contents without ambiguity.

The birth of the phonogrammatic syllabaries

The creation of the two new phonogrammatic syllabaries of *hiragana* and *katakana* was the answer to this inconsistency. At the beginning of the ninth century two spheres struggled with the problem of writing lots of characters to respect the morphology of the Japanese language: the world of bureaucracy and the world of Buddhism.

After the eight century, the bureaucrats of ancient Japan heavily relied on a non-orthodox variant of Chinese for the communications related to everyday work; in the meantime, they also produced documents

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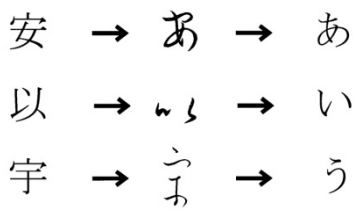
by Ian Hideo Levy, *Man'yōshū: a translation of Japan's premier anthology of classical poetry*, Tōkyō, University of Tokyo Press, 1981, p. 62.

in Japanese, thus becoming aware of the need for a faster and more straightforward way of writing.

Buddhist monks — on the other hand — read in vernacular the sacred texts transmitted from China and Korea. Initially, the written Chinese that reached Japan was understood and pronounced as a foreign language, but with the passing of time Japanese or Sino-Japanese reading were assigned to the different characters and the word order reorganized according to the native one. This kind of textual decodification — known as *kanbun kundoku* 漢文訓読 — is believed to have been a common practice in Japan at least since the second half of the seventh century. With the late eight century, the monks began to record the process of textual decodification on the interlinear space of the main text by means of different marks — i.e. *kunten* 訓点. Almost at the same time, the *kugyeol* practice began to be adopted in the Korean peninsula.

Scholars have postulated that these marks used to help reading a text were added to the text itself during lectures held in the main Buddhist temple's hall. Listening to the teaching of the master, the disciples recorded along the side of the main text the proper way of interpreting it. Thus, in order to keep the pace with the teacher's explanation they needed a fast way of writing similar to modern shorthand. This need marked the transition from *man'yōgana* to *hiragana* in the world of the vernacular reading of Buddhist texts.



Hiragana was created by cursivizing a matrix Chinese character. It was adopted both in the bureaucratic and in the religious worlds. As Fig. 1 illustrates, the *man'yōgana* for the Japanese sound [a] — i.e. 安 — underwent a first morphological modification, showed at center, before consolidating a graphic form similar to modern orthography presented on the right. For instance, the matrix characters for [i] い and [u] う were respectively 以

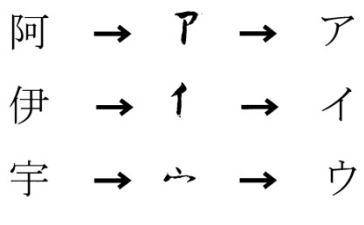
and 宇. It is very important to notice that *kanji* weren't immediately transformed into *hiragana* but were obtained from *man'yōgana* via cursive script. The process — which unfolded during the first half of the ninth century — can be summarized as follows: 1) cursivization of a matrix Chinese character; 2) occurrence of the cursivized variant of a *man'yōgana*'s sign — i.e. *sōgana* 草仮名; 3) appearance of *hiragana*.

The pivotal role played by *sōgana* in mediating from *man'yōgana* to *hiragana* should not be overlooked. Heian-period (9th-12th century) aristocrats recognized it as a special purpose writing designated by a specific name within the broadest category of *kana* — i.e. *sō* 草 + 仮名 *kana*. The field where this cursivized script — not a mere temporary orthographic form but a real script with its set of conventions — found wide applications was calligraphy.

Waka 和歌 — Japanese classical poetry — was often written in *sōgana*. The *Akihagijō* 秋萩帖 — a collection of poems dating back to the tenth century — and the manuscript of the *Kokin wakashū* 古今和歌集 of the Gan'ei era 元永 (copied in 1120) were written in *sōgana* even if at that time the process of formation of *hiragana* was already completed. The reason for this choice was that, once its standardization was complete, *hiragana* still looked plain and scarcely appealing in the eyes of the aristocrats who considered the complex and soft lines of the cursivized script visually more attractive.

Since the antiquity, *hiragana* has also been known with the alternate name of *onnade* 女手 — women's script. This definition helped spread the misconception that *hiragana* was invented by court ladies at a time when the study of writing — notably Chinese characters — was reserved for lay noblemen and Buddhist monks. In fact, as we have seen, *hiragana* originated from the cursivization of Chinese characters, therefore knowledge of *kanji* was a prerequisite for its development. Noblewomen, who lived in the same social environment in which noblemen created

hiragana, learned it from them, and used it to convey their feelings in writing.



Together with *hiragana*, the early ninth century saw the creation of *katakana* and its subsequent refinement as an orthographic form adopted exclusively in the world of Buddhist studies. Whereas *hiragana* was created cursivizing the Chinese characters selected as *man'yōgana*, *katakana* was generated by reducing a sign — i.e. a *kanji* — to one of its elemental components. As shown in Fig. 2, the phonogram for [a] ア is obtained from the allophone Chinese character *a* 阿 by leaving only its left part that, successively, will undergo some morphological changes before reaching its final graphic form. The same goes for the *katakana* for [i] イ that is obtained from the left part of the allophone 伊.

In Japan it was a common practice to simplify the graphic form of a Chinese character and it is supposed that this habit was then applied to *man'yōgana*. Another hypothesis about the origin of the *katakana* is based on the phonetic interrelation between a sound and its matrix character. In other words, when an ancient Japanese looked at the sign ア his mind recalled its matrix character 阿 — pronounced /a/ — and properly decoded its reading. In the same way イ was read /i/ because of its relation with 伊.

Unlike *hiragana*, *katakana* was created and developed in a contained environment: the world of scholarly monks. In a way similar to *hiragana*, the motivation that prompted its creation was the need for a quick and efficient way of recording the teachings of the master during lectures on Buddhist scriptures.

The invention of these systems of writing forces us to ask a question that has been almost entirely overlooked by Japanese scholars: Why was there a need for two distinct phonogrammatic scripts?

In fact, there is an important difference between *hiragana* and *katakana*. When *hiragana* was created — modifying the shape of Chinese characters — the discrepancies in the cursivization process were minimal. Hence, anyone with a proper knowledge of *kanji* would have been able to read *hiragana*. On the other hand, in the simplification process that led to the birth of *katakana* the differences were numerous.

For instance, there were monks who preferred the left part of the character 伊 — i.e. イ — for the *katakana* for [i] and others who adopted its right part — i.e. 尹 — instead. Some chose the lower part of 宇 — i.e. 于 — to express [u] and others the upper one — i.e. ウ. At the time of its formation, *katakana* was a non-standardized orthography and each monk had its own set of signs to use for personal notations. Fig. 3 illustrates one of these sets used by an anonymous scholar-monk in 828 A.D. to write the glosses on a copy of the *Jōjitsuron* 成実論[7] at Tōdaiji 東大寺.

When compared to the motivations that lead to the invention of *hiragana* in the world of bureaucracy, the differences between these two scripts become strikingly clear.

Hiragana was intended as a system of writing for communicating with colleagues and supervisors at work. Therefore, it had to be easily interpreted by everyone. *Hiragana* was also present in the world of Buddhist

[7] The *Tattvasiddhi-śāstra* (or *Satyasiddhi-śāstra*). A scholastic text that analyzes all factors of cognitive experience into eighty-four types while giving extensive treatment to the concept of emptiness, asserting that all existence is nominal in a way that is close to that of Mahāyāna. The doctrine of this work is to be regarded as the pinnacle of philosophical development attained by the Hīnayāna schools, and thus constitutes a transitional stage between Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna. It teaches the attainment of nirvāṇa through the destruction of attachment to names, elements, and emptiness, yet its understanding of emptiness is still analytical emptiness, rather than the "essential emptiness" of the later Mahāyāna schools. Cited in the *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism* (http://buddhism-dict.net/ddb/index.html).

studies but to a lesser degree than *katakana*. The latter was used by scholar monks as a mere set of signs for personal comments and auxiliary explanations. There was no need for it to be read by others, it was enough that the writer himself understood its meaning.

This kind of explanation may seem a bit awkward. Nonetheless, the development of Japanese *kana* clearly shows that *hiragana* was intended as a mean of communication between people and *katakana* as a set for private notation. In this respect, it is likely that only *hiragana* was considered a true orthographic system at the time, while *katakana* was conceived of as a mere set of symbols.

Soon after its invention, however, *katakana* went on to reach full maturity as a means of communication. Intellectual exchanges between monks were instrumental in the improvement of Buddhist studies, but they would have been impossible without a common set of characters shared by the whole community. No exchange of ideas was possible if one wasn't able to decipher the symbols written on a manuscript by a fellow monk. This was the reason why — after about one century since the invention of *katakana* — groups of monks belonging to the same school of a certain temple felt the need to adopt the same set of characters for their studies. This trend, eventually, spread to different Buddhist schools and — by the twelfth century — *katakana* reached a standardization in the religious world. This situation is showcased in Fig. 4 which illustrates the set of characters used in 1138 by a Shingon school monk for the glosses of a manuscript copy of the *Bunkyō hifuron* 文鏡秘府論 — a treatise on Chinese poetry written by the school founder Kōbō Daishi 弘法大師

(Kūkai 空海, 774-835). It's evident that the orthography of the characters shown in the table is very similar to those used now in the twenty-first century.

The birth of two different orthographic systems, then, is due to the presence of two distinct groups that developed separate scripts suited to their specific needs.

Hiragana and *katakana* differ also from a functional point of view. The former is an independent orthographic form intended since the beginning as a set of characters for writing a full text in Japanese. The latter is strictly related to the presence of Chinese characters and of a text in classical Chinese.

As a result, *hiragana* was developed as a writing system to be used without the mediation of *kanji*. This purely phonogrammatic script, however, was written on paper without any break between words and sentences, making it difficult to understand the meanings it conveyed. Ironically, to solve this problem, at the beginning of the eleventh century a few Chinese characters were inserted within a text in "pure" *hiragana* and, with time, their number increasingly grew.

Katakana was invented by scholar monks and, then, widely used in documents and texts related to the world of religion. Shortly after its creation — during the first half of ninth century — it was adopted in documents with the purpose of writing a full text in Japanese in combination with Chinese characters.

In ancient Japan only two social groups were versed in the letters:

aristocrats and monks. As we have seen, *hiragana* was used by both of them; at a later time, noblemen started using *katakana* — the orthographic form characteristic of the religious world — in their writings too. By the tenth century, both the educated classes had mastered and were using the two scripts.

Conclusions

The writing of a text in Japanese by means of *hiragana* and *katakana* underwent two different processes.

A) Pure *hiragana* script → mixed script of *hiragana* and *kanji*
B) Reading glosses in *katakana* auxiliary to a text in Chinese → mixed script of *katakana* and *kanji*

Modern Japanese is written by means of an orthographic form that uses a mixed script of *hiragana* and *kanji*. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to easily identify its formation process with A). In fact, the modern script is the result of a complex and manifold process of interplay between A) and B) that should be further investigated by new and innovative research approaches in the near future.

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Discussion: The Development of Japanese *Kana*

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1.

"The process — which unfolded during the first half of the ninth century — can be summarized as follows: 1) cursivization of a matrix Chinese character; 2) occurrence of the cursivized variant of a manʾyōganaʾs sign — i.e. sōgana 草仮名; 3) appearance of hiragana."

Your mention on the appearance of hiragana to be the first half of the ninth century is different from the Dr. Tsukishima's explanations as the end of the ninth century. I wonder what kind of new materials or new interpretations you have.

2.

You gave us the poem n.48 of Manyoshu as an example of the efficient writings.

As you know, the wooden tablet (木簡) of Manyo poem, Asakayamano Uta, which is excavated from Sigarakinomiya (紫香楽宮) and deciphered in May 2008 shows character-by-character writing (阿佐可夜麻 加氣佐閇美由流 夜真乃井能; relics underlined) as contrary of the writings in Manyoshu poem n. 3807 (安積香山 影副所見 山井之…). I wonder you don't think this gives us new intuitions to the process of the development of Japanese text including poetry.