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Author(s): James H. Buck

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SOME OBSERVATIONS ON kokuji

James H. Buck (University of Georgia)

The Japanese writing system includes various syllabaries and Chinese characters (kanji) supplemented by conscious creations of the Japanese usually termed kokuji, or national characters. These inventions are also called waji, wazokuji, or most aptly, perhaps, waseiji 'made-in-Japan characters'.

Specific reasons for these inventions -- or the occasions for such activity -- are by no means entirely clear, although Professor Tsukishima has suggested that kokuji are relatively recent creations, probably because there was no need for them during the early periods of massive borrowing of kanji from China and adequate infusions of additional kanji were possible during the periods of subsequent lesser borrowing. He also has written that kokuji may have developed from a need for the Japanese to represent graphically certain gainen 'ideas' which existed in Japan, but which did not exist in China.¹

Certainly many kokuji are of relatively recent origin, yet Douglas E. Mills has pointed out their existence in the Shinsen Jikyoo, a dictionary completed in the years 898-900.² Analysis of kokuji found in current Japanese dictionaries leads one away from Professor Tsukishima's second point: namely, to a conclusion that kokuji were most often created to represent words for things, not ideas. Nevertheless, many of the things so represented by no stretch of the imagination pertain exclusively to Japan.

Not only is there some difficulty in ascertaining the "when" and the "why" of kokuji, a problem is also presented by the "what". There is no argument about defining kokuji as a generic term, but there is not universal agreement concerning which individual characters do, in fact, constitute kokuji. The most extensive list of kokuji (250) I have found is contained in the appendix to the Lehmann and Faust Grammar.³ The Ueda Daijiten list 213 of the characters on this list, but "recognizes" only 183 of them to be kokuji. To further complicate matters, one may find other kokuji in such dictionaries as that by Nelson⁴ and in the Shin Kanwachuu Jiten⁵ which are not listed either by Ueda or Lehmann and Faust. To finesse the obvious difficulties presented by this lack of consensus, most of my observations are limited to the kokuji recognized by Ueda.

As a percentage of total listings, the kokuji in Ueda form 1.2% (183 of 14924), a percentage nearly identical to that in Nelson (77 of 5446). This is perhaps statistically insignificant, but kokuji present interesting comparisons with kanji in such matters as principles of formation, grammatical function, semantic classification, compound formation, stroke count, and pronunciation.

Means of Formation

It is usual to classify kanji according to the criteria for character formation known as roku-sho, the six categories traditionally assigned by

Chinese dictionaries. Such classifications are assigned to 74 of 183 kokuji in Ueda. The vast majority (66) are noted as kai-i, "suggestive" or "logical" characters in which the combination of two or more elements suggest a logical meaning. An example of this category is hanashi (1536) 'speech, a story, talk'. The meaning is "suggested" by combining kuchi-hen 'mouth' with shin or atarashii 'new' (or should one interpret it as 'news'?). As a general rule, none of the elements controls the pronunciation, although there are exceptions, e.g. tsuma (10735) 'skirts of a garment' is written by combining koromo-hen 'clothing' with the character for 'wife' (tsuma).

Two kokuji are listed as kei-sei 'form-sound' characters and six are considered a combination of kai-i and kei-sei. The paucity of characters in the kei-sei category forms a genuinely remarkable contrast with kanji as a whole. It is estimated that 90% of Chinese characters fall into this classification.

Within the scope of what are termed kokuji there is considerable latitude for creativity. The best-known characters of this type, however, show little imagination, principally the three dozen or so characters invented to denote Japanese pronunciations for foreign words designating measures of weight, capacity or distance. For instance, the Chinese character for rice, pronounced mei, is used phonetically to represent meetoru 'meter'. For kirumeetoru 'kilometer' the Japanese simply combined the character for mei with sen '1000'. Similarly, other characters were combined with mei to show the seven basic units of the metric system, from millimeter to kilometer. This process was also followed for units derived from the gram and the liter. Although such characters are generally well-known to Japanese, the Ueda Daijiten excludes three of them from any listing at all. Such oversight makes one wonder whether the Lehmann and Faust listing may not be more reliable.

Non-metric measures also had to be dealt with, e.g. yard, mile and pound. 'Yard' is represented by an old Chinese character (8036) given a new reading. The character for ri (sato-hen) 'a distance of 2.44 miles' was altered by addition of kuchi-hen and pronounced mairu, 'a land mile'. Addition of san-sui 'water' produced a character read notto or kairi 'nautical mile'. The word pondo 'pound' (1231c) was represented by using the character for kin 'catty' (4362) with kuchi-hen. But not all 'pounds' are alike, so an existing kanji (8039) was adopted to denote the British monetary measure.

Another interesting technique for kokuji formation consists of the invention of a single character which takes on the pronunciation of a regular Chinese compound -- in fact, becomes a substitute for it.

Five examples of this are:

<u>jinrikisha</u> , <u>kuruma</u>	(347)	jinricksha
<u>bosatsu</u>	(3015)	Bodhisattva
<u>neehan</u>	(3022)	Nirvana

<u>hanzoo</u>	(5178)	a type of water dipper with a hollow handle
<u>kanjoo</u>	(11450)	a bill (amount due)

All of these are "recognized" as kokuji in Ueda's Daijiten, but those for bosatsu, neehan and kanjoo are also used in China. The presence of polysyllabic on-yomi for single kokuji is a distinct departure from the treatment of individual kanji.

Grammatical Function

By far, kokuji were created to represent sounds of words used as nouns -- 87% of the total. An additional 9% are verbs, with the remainder being a miscellany which includes the interjection appare (12058), the name kume (8642) and the personal pronoun maro (14686).

Semantic Classification

For the criterion of determining semantic classification, I have used the rather arbitrary item of the radical under which the kokuji are listed. Based on this loose standard, slightly more than one-half of the kokuji belong to five radical groups, fish (38), tree (25), mouth (11), bird (10) and metal (9). The proportion of kokuji to kanji under any given radical generally does not vary significantly from the overall ratio of these two types of characters. Although the 38 fish characters are 13% of the total under that radical, the 25 tree characters form only 3% of the 925 listed in Ueda. The extreme case is with mi-hen 'body' where 6 of 31, or about 20% are kokuji.

Compound Formation

Kokuji are rarely used as the initial element in compounds. Ueda lists only 17 which are so used; only two, tsuji (11928) 'crossroad' and sasa (8420) 'bamboo grass' appear as initial elements in more than five compounds. In all 17 cases, the pronunciation is kun-yomi.

In contrast, four kokuji appear only in single compounds and only with on-yomi. These are the koo of ankoo (14144, 14314) 'the angler; frogfish; a sea-toad', both characters in aikyou (14342, 14341) 'a fish similar to the ayu', and the u (13605) of udon 'noodles'.

Stroke Count

Most of the kokuji are relatively complicated in terms of the number of strokes required to write them. The range is from two strokes for shime (80) 'closed' to twenty-nine strokes for tsuki or katakumi (5554b) 'a tree of the species *Zelkova*'. More than half consist of 10 to 18 strokes. The average stroke number of about 13.1 is not appreciably higher than the average for the 1,850 tooyoo kanji (about 10.4). It is, however, nearly double the average of 726 simplified Chinese characters.⁶

Kokuji in Chinese Dictionaries

Several kokuji appear to have been exported to China and now are included in Chinese dictionaries -- most importantly, perhaps, those inventions to denote measures in the metric system. Two kokuji mentioned earlier, pondo and mairu, are used in Chinese, but with entirely different meanings. The character for pondo is the accepted abbreviation for t'ing 'to hear', and mairu is pronounced li and used as a final particle and in transliterating names. Three kokuji for medical and anatomical terms have been accepted by the Chinese, gan (7667) 'cancer', sen (9517) 'gland', and sui (9556) 'pancreas'.

Kun-yomi and on-yomi

Nearly all kokuji bear only kun-yomi. Some exhibit the strange phenomenon of having multiple on-yomi (such as hanzoo mentioned above). A few have single on-yomi, such as gan and sui. Others have both Chinese and Japanese readings. Examples of the latter are doo / hataraku (485) 'work' or 'to work' (which combines freely as second element in compounds), byoo (12495) 'rivet' which may also be read ribetto or kashime; and joo or gojoo (11061) 'the command of a superior' which may also be pronounced oose. In view of the numerous exceptions to the expectation that kokuji should have only Japanese readings, it seems difficult to derive any generality except that, for the most part, one may expect Japanese readings most of the time.

Other kokuji

As stated in the introduction to the Lehmann and Faust listing, the authors included characters "which are generally regarded in Japan as kokuji, although some may not fall strictly within that category."⁷ Certain other characters were deliberately excluded which were:

". . . created by them (the Japanese) merely for purposes of amusement, such as erebeeta gaaru, meaning 'elevator girl' and containing elements meaning 'woman', 'up', and 'down'; and hamu raisu, meaning 'ham and rice', and made up of the radical for 'rice' and an ideographic element resembles the katakana symbols for ha mu."⁸

To be sure, I have no quarrel with such distinctions. What is interesting is that the principle used to invent such a diverting character as erebeeta gaaru has the sanction of previous use in recognized kokuji. By way illustration, the following may be cited:

tooge (2579) 'mountain pass'. Consists of mountain radical plus 'up' and 'down'.

kase (4951) 'a reel for spinning thread'. Composed of tree radical plus 'up' and 'down'.

kamishimo (10699) 'a male dress worn during Tokugawa Era, divided into upper and lower portions, both of the same color'. Consists of clothing radical plus 'up' and 'down' (the characters for which may be read, respectively, kami and shimo.)

kohaze (13162) 'a clasp' (for leggings or tabi). Composed of leather radical plus 'up' and 'down'.

Additionally, among the characters included by Lehmann and Faust which were "generally regarded by Japanese as kokuji" (but omitted by Ueda), a few mimic precisely the principle of hamu raisu. For instance, the katakana symbol ra is added to the ship radical to denote ranchi 'launch' (not 'lunch'). A similar example is the use of ship radical with sui 'water', to denote the more usual three-character compound suiraitei 'torpedo boat'.

Conclusion

Kokuji are the result of an attractive creativity on the part of the Japanese, and have served several purposes: The designation of certain concrete objects or living things with a high degree of specificity; the denoting of new forms of measures; the simplification of the writing effort (in the case of single kokuji for Chinese compounds); and the providing of amusement.

The invention of kokuji is certainly an ancient activity, as Douglas Mills has pointed out. A few of the kokuji "recognized" by Ueda are noted as having appeared in the Manyooshuu, Shinsen Jikyoo, and Wamyooshoo. For the future, however, it seems that the recognition of kokuji is much less promising.

Only three kokuji are approved for use on the list of 1,850 tooyoo kanji. These three are do / hataraku (485) 'work, to work', hatake (7506) 'a dry field', and tooge (2579) 'mountain pass'.

FOOTNOTES

1. Hiroshi Tsukishima, Kokugogaku Yoosetsu, Tokyo, 1959, p. 81.
2. See the extremely interesting note by Douglas E. Mills "Some Characters of Japanese Origin in the Ninth-Century Japanese Dictionary Shinsen Jikyoo," Journal of the American Oriental Society, 87/3, 1967, pp. 297-300.
3. W. P. Lehmann and Lloyd Faust, A Grammar of Formal Written Japanese, Harvard, 1951.
4. A. N. Nelson, The Modern Reader's Japanese-English Character Dictionary, Tuttle, Tokyo, 1963.
5. Shin Kanwachuu Jiten, Kinrei-sah, Tokyo, 1955.
6. Eugene Ching, "The Simplification of Chinese Characters," Papers of the CIC Far Eastern Language Institute University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1963. p. 55. The average stroke number of the 726 Chinese characters which were simplified was reduced from 14.1 to 7.3.
7. Lehmann and Faust, op. cit., p. 4 of appendix.
8. Ibid.