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NOTE

ON JAPANESE SYLLABARIES.

BY

SAMUEL WELLS WILLIAMS.

[The following statements by Mr. Williams, of Hong-kong, respecting the several forms of writing in use among the Japanese, and their origin, with the accompanying specimen of the Japanese type recently cut and cast in this country, a fount of which is in the possession of the Corresponding Secretary of the Society, form a suitable appendix to the foregoing article.

COMM. OF PUBL.]

THE influence which the language and literature of the Chinese have exerted upon the surrounding nations, during a long course of ages, dating even from before the Christian era, is almost unequalled in the history of the human mind. The Cochin-Chinese, Coreans, Tibetans, Manchus, Lew-Chewans, and Japanese, have all been more or less brought under the intellectual sway of Chinese philosophers, through the medium of their language, which they have studied with a zeal and patience worthy of a better reward than is afforded in the writings of Confucius and his disciples. All these nations have alphabets of their own, except the Cochin-Chinese, but none of them have so complicated a system of writing as the Japanese and Lew-Chewans, who, in respect to their literature, may be considered as one people.

Up to the time of the sixteenth *dairi*, or monarch, named Oüzin-tenwo, the Japanese had no writing, but during the

reign of this prince, about A. D. 284,* Chinese characters began to be employed. He sent an envoy to the southern part of Corea, to obtain learned men by whom the literature and civilization of China might be introduced into his dominions. The messenger returned with Wonin, a descendant of Kau-tsu, the founder of the Han dynasty, who was appointed instructor to two princes, and diffused among the people a knowledge of the Chinese characters, and explained the meaning of the classics. The pure Chinese characters are now employed principally in works of learning, but are also used throughout the country, to write names of places, persons and other things.

However, as the construction of the Japanese language differs materially from that of the Chinese, the use of the written characters of the latter, alone, was found to be attended with many inconveniences; one of which was that most of the common characters had several meanings, and consequently required a number of synonyms in the colloquial Japanese. It was not until the beginning of the eighth century, that a remedy for this inconvenience was found in the formation of a syllabary, by selecting Chinese characters, in whole or in part, as symbols for all the syllables in the language. The author of this syllabary is supposed to have been Kibi, and from its being derived from fragments of Chinese symbols, he called it *kata-kana*, or parts of characters. It is used in dictionaries, to explain the meaning of the Chinese; and in religious writings, and other works, by the side of Chinese characters, to indicate their pronunciation, or signification; or between them, to mark the grammatical forms of the idiom, rendered difficult by the use of isolated characters. This *i-ro-ha*, or syllabary, is formed on the same principle as the one invented by Guess, to write Cherokee; it consists of forty-eight distinct symbols, increased to seventy-three syllables by the use of diacritical marks, which affect the consonantal part. A fount of type for this syllabary has recently been cast in New York, of which a specimen is here introduced, with the pronunciation of each character:

* In the *Chinese Repository*, vol. x. p. 207, this date is erroneously stated as before Christ. The xvth Daïri reigned from A. D. 270 to 312. See Titsingh's *Annales des Empereurs du Japon*, p. 19.

イ i	ヲ wo	ノ no	ザ za
ロ ro or lo	ワ wa	オ o	キ ki
ハ ha or fa	カ ka	ク ku	ギ gi
バ ba	ガ ga	グ gu	ユ yu
パ pa	ヨ yo	ヤ ya	メ me
ニ ni	タ ta	マ ma	ミ mi
ホ ho or fo	ダ da	ケ ke	シ shi
ボ bo	レ re or le	ゲ ge	ジ zhi
ポ po	ソ so	フ fu	エ ye
ヘ he or fe	ゾ zo	ブ bu	ヒ hi or fi
ベ be	ツ tsu	プ pu	ビ bi
ペ pe	ヅ dzu	コ ko	ピ pi
ト to	子 ne	ゴ go	モ mo
ド do	ナ na	エ ye <i>and e</i>	セ she
チ chi	ラ ra or la	テ te	ゼ zhe
ヂ ji	ム mu	デ de	ス su
リ ri or li	ウ u	ア a	ズ xu
ス nu	井 i <i>and wi</i>	サ sa	ン 'n
ル ru or lu			

As in most Asiatic languages, so in Japanese there are no capital letters to designate proper nouns, nor are marks of punctuation always employed. The former are occasionally denoted by drawing one or two lines along the side of the characters, or syllables, standing for the name of a person or place. Fifteen out of the forty-eight symbols are Chinese characters still in use, the others are parts of characters arbitrarily taken to denote their respective sounds.

After the death of Kibi, a second syllabary was invented by Kouïbo, which could be used to write Japanese, without having recourse to the Chinese, called *hira-kana*, or equal writing. Like the first, it is derived from Chinese characters, but instead of one symbol for each syllable, there are two, three, and in a few cases even five, modes of writing the same sound, the whole amounting to one hundred, exclusive of the diacritical marks. A fount to print the *hira-kana* would require even a larger number of types than this, because of the manner in which the different symbols unite, when written one after another in the column. The

kata-kana is held by Japanese authors to be appropriate to men, and the hira-kana to women; the two might be properly termed the Roman and the Italic, though they have little or no resemblance to each other. The hira-kana is employed for epistolary intercourse, in books of a light kind, and on all common occasions, and every scholar is taught to write it elegantly and rapidly; there seems to be no restriction as to which of the symbols standing for a single syllable shall be employed, and the writer chooses the one which coalesces with its predecessor the easiest.

A third syllabary was invented about A. D. 1006, by a Buddhist priest called Ziaku-so, who was sent on a mission to China from Japan. He did not understand the spoken Chinese, but, as he wrote it readily, he was directed to make out a list of Chinese characters, with their meanings and sounds in Japanese. He also made forty-seven letters for his countrymen, which are now used indiscriminately with the hira-kana, and it is not unlikely that some of the duplicate forms included under that, are derived from his syllabary.

There is still another ancient syllabary called *Manyo-kana*, because a collection of odes, styled the *Man-yo*, or Myriad Leaves, was written with it. It consists of complete Chinese characters, used phonetically, and written in full, or in abbreviated forms. It is mixed up with the two preceding syllabaries in a very perplexing manner, because, without a full acquaintance with the author's meaning, it is difficult to decide whether, in a given instance, he is using the characters phonetically, or lexigraphically. A Japanese writer is at liberty to employ the Chinese characters when his composition can be made more perspicuous, energetic, or accurate, and the popular taste favors their frequent insertion.

Another syllabary, made of other Chinese characters than those used in the *Manyo-kana*, considerably contracted, is called *Yamato-kana*, or Japanese writing. It is used in combination with the hira-kana, and the syllabary of Ziaku-so, the three forming the common writing of the people, and giving them the choice out of one hundred and forty-seven symbols, to express forty-seven sounds. In order to add to the labor of reading, other Chinese characters are interspersed here and there, sometimes with and sometimes

without the meaning, or sound, being given on the side, and generally written in the cursive and not the square printed form; so that, if the number of signs employed in the five syllabaries, and the variants allowed in the Manyo-kana, all of which cannot be much less than three hundred, together with the unlimited use made of Chinese characters, are all taken into consideration, it will be conceded that the scholars of Japan have succeeded in making their language one of the most difficult to read of any in the world, if indeed it be not the first in this respect. So close and so extensive is the connection between it and Chinese, that before a Japanese student can make satisfactory progress in his own literature, he must acquire a knowledge of three or four thousand Chinese characters, ascertain how they are used by authors in his own country, and learn the modes of combining them with his own syllabic symbols, and the modes of writing them. Much of his time, therefore, is consumed in merely learning to read and write the numerous symbols contained in the syllabaries, all of which are contracted or mutilated Chinese characters; and when these are mastered, he is constantly liable to be stopped in his reading by unusual Chinese terms, thrown in to show the writer's learning, or to illustrate his meaning, for which he must recur to a dictionary. The cause of this fondness for using Chinese, seems to be pedantry on the part of Japanese authors, rather than that their own tongue is meagre, or uncertain. It is allowable, when a Chinese character is a common one, to insert it in the text, without writing either the sound or sense, by its side; and if this explanation is given of unusual characters, it is omitted when the character is repeated in the same section. This license increases the labor of deciphering a page, inasmuch as the author's opinion of the commonness of a character may be far from coinciding with his reader's attainments, so that the latter is compelled to refer to a dictionary, or shut up the book.

The Japanese language is written in columns like the Chinese, Manchu and Corean, and reads from right to left. The books are printed in the Chinese manner, from blocks; and the skill exhibited in the cutting of the page in the tortuous hira-kana, and other syllabaries, united with the cursive form of Chinese characters, and the intellectual labor required to decipher them, together, form a striking instance

of misapplied ingenuity in blocking up the avenues to knowledge, and compelling the student to devote his energies to learning the means, rather than to making progress in the ends of knowledge. Books are printed upon paper made from a species of mulberry, which possesses much more tenacity and durability than the Chinese bamboo-paper. They are sold for a small price, and there is a greater diffusion of knowledge and acquaintance with the written language, among the mass of the people, than one would suppose, considering the labor of acquiring it.*

* See *Chinese Repository*, vol. x. pp. 207 ff., where is a note by myself on Japanese syllabaries, drawn chiefly from the *Nouveau Journal Asiatique*, vol. ii., which has furnished most of the facts here stated.