

Morgan Pitelka, Reiko Tanimura, and Takashi Masuda. *Letters from Japan's Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: Correspondence of Warlords, Tea Masters, Zen Priests, and Aristocrats*. Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 2021.

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BOOK REVIEW BY PATRICK SCHWEMMER

MANY unique and rewarding linguistic challenges await the student of Japanese history and culture. Who can forget the thrill of successfully following a long, sinuous sentence in *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari* 源氏物語) as it twists and turns on axes of mood, aspect, honorifics, benefactives, and other constructions that have no Indo-European (or sometimes modern Japanese) equivalent? Meanwhile, it is for the best that we non-native speakers repress the memory of all our hours at Japanese academic conferences earnestly hanging on every word, poring over jumbo A3 handouts black with tiny text, understanding half, two thirds, three quarters, until finally we can keep up. But perhaps the highest peak of visual interest and linguistic challenge, if not usually of literary beauty, is the corpus of medieval diaries, letters, and other historical documents handwritten in extremely cursivized logographic quasi-Chinese script. Such documents are traditionally mounted on ornate hanging scrolls, and when displayed in the alcove of a tearoom their contemplation functions as an ancestor ritual in the anthropological sense.

To read them, not only must we jump around according to pan-Asian conventions for reading Han

text non-sequentially in any given vernacular (*kanbun kundoku* 漢文訓読),¹ we must do so with characters that are at least as abbreviated as your average kana (*mu* 武→む, etc.). Sinitic verbal prefixes, which become verbal suffixes when read as Japanese, as well as sentence-ending graphs and honorifics, are reduced to simple, schematic brushstrokes attached to the top, bottom, or corners of the character for a verb or noun, so that the resulting writing system may have more in common with the radically agglutinative and non-sequential Aztec hieroglyphs, or some early cuneiform inscriptions, than with Chinese writing.² For example, a conglomeration looking something like 成 is read from center, to top, to lower left: *na-sare sōrō* 被^レ成候. I learned to read these texts via direct oral transmission, at a Japanese university, in Japanese, with Kodama Kōta's dictionary of cursive script in hand.³ However, many instruction manuals now exist in Japanese under keywords like *komonjo* 古文書 (old documents),

1 Lurie, "Introduction," p. 15; Kornicki, *Languages, Scripts, and Chinese Texts*, p. 157.

2 Whittaker, *Deciphering Aztec Hieroglyphs*, p. 90; Nissen, *Archaic Bookkeeping*, pp. 106, 123.

3 Kodama, *Kuzushiji yōrei jiten*.

kuzushiji 崩字 (collapsed characters), *hentai kanbun* 変体漢文 (nonstandard Han text), or *sōrōbun* 候文 (texts with *sōrō* [for the copula]). In the English-speaking world, the UCLA/Waseda Hentaigana App,⁴ Laura Moretti's Summer School in Japanese Palaeography in Cambridge, and websites such as Tom Conlan's (komonjo.princeton.edu) have provided many new and exciting resources in this general area, but I know of nothing substantial in print for the beginning reader of this particular kind of document.

Nothing, that is, until now: Morgan Pitelka, Reiko Tanimura, and Takashi Masuda have produced an English-language collection of letters between notable late Muromachi- to early Edo-period (16th–17th c.) personages with photos, transcriptions, translations, and historical essays, geared toward learners and organized around the theme of the elite cultural networks that connected warriors, clerics, courtiers, merchants, and artisans in the culture of civil war. Working through it is an inspiring experience, and it is well worth the price of US\$20.

The collection is prefaced with three very helpful introductory essays. Morgan Pitelka's general historical introduction hits all the traditional notes while sometimes gesturing toward updates and adding his own spin. He includes from William Wayne Farris⁵ the fact that Japan's population was growing steadily throughout the "middle ages" (p. 2) but nevertheless allows Jeffrey Hall's⁶ high-modernist interpretation of the "unification" to dominate (p. 5), with its old Cold War concern to enshrine Japan as an honorary member of the white chivalric–capitalist West.⁷ Pitelka brings his unique insights on the first Tokugawa shogun Ieyasu (徳川家康, 1542–1616), "the power of bodies in motion" (p. 6), and conversely the power of art objects to be historical actors, ideas more fully explored in his classic *Spectacular Accumulation*. Another area where an

explicit historiographical update would have been possible is the comparison to the European Renaissance (p. 9): it is long established that Europe's own "unification," as well as its entry into and eventual domination (though only by 1800) of an already dynamic and "modern" Afro-Asiatic economy, was made possible not by any rediscovery of a Greco-Roman heritage but by the appropriation of capital networks and innovative science and technology from the Islamic world, as well as mountains of stolen resources and labor from Africa and the Americas.⁸ This means that Japan's "Renaissance" was consummated first and more truly a *Renaissance*: what new light might this inversion shed on the documents in this book? In any case, Pitelka has prioritized brevity here.

Reiko Tanimura, a leading member of the Japanese Society for Studies of Chanoyu (i.e., the tea ceremony), brings an essay brimming with knowledge of the archive as she weaves the writers of the letters in the collection into short thematic narratives. On the topic of food, a major point is that the (male) warlords of medieval Japan take pride in cooking for one another and sending ingredients as gifts, with no suggestion that cooking is a menial or feminine occupation (p. 13): it is not spelled out, but this is remarkable because cooking is largely seen as menial and feminine in Japan today, and even those who oppose this view usually assume it to be "traditional" rather than a quirk of westernized, industrial modernity. Indeed, Jesuit missionary Luís Fróis (1532–1597) says more explicitly: "In Europe, women ordinarily prepare meals; in Japan, men do the cooking, and noblemen consider it something excellent to go into the kitchen to prepare food."⁹ Tanimura's essay has a section on kinship that is mostly about how distressing it must have been for the nuclear family that we know best today to be separated by practices like hostage taking (p. 15), but I would be curious to know what we can learn from these documents about the no less real ties bound or loosed in polygynous marriage,

4 "The Hentaigana App," alcvps.cd.h.ucla.edu.

5 Farris, *Japan's Medieval Population*, pp. 170–71.

6 Hall, "Japan's Sixteenth-Century Revolution."

7 For hints at other possibilities, see Amino, "Muen, Kugai, and Raku"; Graeber and Wengrow, *Dawn of Everything*, p. 326; Scott, *Against the Grain*, p. 211; Horne, *Race War!*, p. x.

8 Frankopan, *Silk Roads*, p. 219; Frank, *ReOrient*, p. 166; Saliba, *Islamic Science*, p. 22.

9 Fróis, *Striking Contrasts*, p. 76.

adoption, or the tonsure, which are less familiar to us in industrial society. Sections follow on identity groups like courtiers, warriors, and women, but perhaps the highlight is the section on tea culture: clearly the dense tissue of allusions and associations between our rich cast of characters (and, one suspects, much of the structure of the collection) is the fruit of Tanimura's countless hours spent communing with her ancestors in the way of tea through the traces of their brushes.

Finally, we have a wide-ranging general introduction to the topic of letter writing in traditional Japan by Takashi Masuda, an appraiser, collector, and all-around connoisseur of calligraphy and paleography, and the author of many guides to these materials in Japanese. Written in an accessible style with an international audience in mind, the essay nevertheless proceeds according to a recognizably (modern) Japanese logic and sequence of thought that beginning readers will find refreshing as they learn the details of ink, brush, paper, and everything else that went into the production of the documents, as well as what must be kept in mind when reading them. This includes even their authenticity, and one suspects that Masuda was responsible for the fun idea of including a counterfeit letter in this collection: for tea master Sen no Rikyū 千利休 (1522–1591), we get to compare one real letter and one fake, the latter nevertheless being a copy of an authentic original that is not extant, so that it is still valuable as a historical source. Likewise, we have one early and one late letter by cultural impresario Hon'ami Kōetsu 本阿弥光悦 (1558–1637), so that we may compare his calligraphic style at different times in his life. Touches such as these keep the reading experience fresh.

Some elements in the Masuda essay are redundant with the notes and guides situated immediately before and after the main body of the collection, but this may be a blessing as those really only gesture toward the skills needed to read the documents, and this connects to the book's one shortcoming: a lack of methodological coherence. The central challenge in producing a book in English on these materials is that the one textbook available in English for learning non-sequential *kanbun* reading is Sydney Crawcour's ancient, half-handwritten,

and extremely rare one.¹⁰ Accordingly, the first question our authors faced was surely whether they were going to write this book as its sorely-needed successor, so that anyone who truly needed the English would be covered. Evidently having decided against this, they provide only one example at the beginning of the collection with a full transcription into sequential order and a few remarks on the nature of *kanbun* in the “Notes on Transcription” at the end of the book (pp. 187–89), and otherwise it is sink or swim.

So far so good, as most people learn this in Japanese anyway, and here is a great collection with quick-and-ready English translations and commentary—but no: as declared in the foreword, this book is “intended primarily as a text for undergraduate students” (p. vii). Accordingly, the authors have resorted to idiosyncratic *furigana* 振り仮名 glosses in an attempt to obviate the need for ordinal reading marks (*kunten* 訓点) or indeed any grammatical or orthographic explanations that would move the book closer to textbook territory. Accordingly, the foregoing example 成 (which actually occurs at the end of line 9 on p. 92) would become 被成候—except that *sōrō* (and only that word) is rendered throughout in modern *kana* spelling (そうろう), apparently in consideration of the hoped-for undergraduate reader. The authors gloss every *dzi* and *dzu* (ぢ, づ), every repeater mark (いろゝゝ), even every katakana in the transcription (に, は). To avoid explaining the optional nature of voicing marks (*dakuten* 濁点) in premodern writing, they even supply these by means of glosses, as in つはき. All of which begs the question: who is this book for? Who are these Anglophone undergraduates who are starting to read cursive *hentai kanbun* but do not know their katakana? Nevertheless, none of this prevents anyone from enjoying the collection, and in this age of the University of Tokyo New York Office, the Yanai Initiative,¹¹ or indeed this journal, when Anglophone and Japanophone Japanology are

¹⁰ Crawcour, *An Introduction to Kambun*.

¹¹ Uniqlo CEO Yanai Tadashi has set up a fund for academic exchanges, most notably faculty teaching exchanges, between Waseda University in Tokyo and the University of California, Los Angeles (www.waseda.jp/culture/en/about/yanai/).

being cross-pollinated, methodological experimentation is surely welcome, and indeed Pitelka calls this book “experimental” in his interview about it on the New Books Network Podcast.¹²

One case in which embracing the collection’s catachrestic nature even further might have been productive is the final transcription, of a letter by the “Tokugawa Empress” Tōfukumon’in 東福門院 (1607–1678), also a central figure in Elizabeth Lillehoj’s great study whose influence is felt in this book.¹³ Tōfukumon’in writes in a kana-heavy feminine hand, but she uses several Sino-Japanese terms, proper names, and other words that are not so easy to identify when written only phonetically: *hakuryōdai* 柏梁台 (the cypress pavilion [of Emperor Wu of Han, known as a venue for poetry: here a byword for a poetry session]); *yaito* 灸 (moxa); *doiyō* 土用 (the late summer hot season), and so on. So as long as we are keeping the *furigana* column full, what if the authors had provided these kanji as glosses on the *kana*: 柏梁台灸と、どうよう? I wrote these in, myself.

Finally, this writing system is so cursive that it partially renounces the claim to record language fully, so that even if we could ask the original letter writer whether by a given twist and flick of the brush they meant *nite sōrō*, *no sōrō*, or *nite*, they might well neither know nor care. Nevertheless, I did find a few errors: the line numbers given on pp. 55–56 are all too high by two, except that the first reference to the first line is correct, and the second reference to the first line should be to line a. In the two letters by women (docs. 6 and 23), liberal use is made of the verb *mairasu*, but rather than kana it is written with the most cursive version of the kanji for *mairu* 參. The *mu* 厶 on top reduces to a few bumps, barely slowing the brush’s downward movement, and then the two legs of the *dai* 大 element and the *sanzukuri* 彡 combine into a clockwise *no* の -shaped loop that is so big here that we are left with two almost vertical swishes—which could just as easily be

read *yuku* 行. (See Kodama.) Conversely, the *tsuki* in *katatsuki* (shoulder jutting) at doc. 7, line 1; *cha* (tea) at doc. 15, lines 6 and 7; and *katahe* (our friend [Roku]) at doc. 19, line 11, are all in kana, not kanji: 肩つき, ちや, かたへ. At doc. 7, line 3, there is no *sōrō* 候 after *mōsu* 申 (as there is in the following line), and the next character is not *sunawachi* 則 but *bun* 分, followed by a small *ni* 二, so a new sentence begins: *Mōshibun ni* 申分 (My proposal is [to buy this tea caddy from you].) At doc. 21, line 6, *go-onshin no gi* 御音信之儀 should be rather *go-onshin no go* 御音信之期 ([I feel bad for not writing] at this time when you’ve been writing to me [in Edo so insistently]). Words are transcribed on the wrong line at doc. 7, line 10; doc. 13, line 3; and doc. 23, lines 4 and 8. Pitelka speaks in his interview of the pleasures of reading these letters communally in study groups, and indeed these minor errors provide a few opportunities for students to be initiated into this social practice of checking others’ transcriptions.

Pitelka, Tanimura, and Masuda are here very much revealing a secret society ritual in the anthropological sense,¹⁴ writing down and publishing its secrets for the first time in a foreign language (or anyway, one even more foreign than modern Japanese). Whereas the natives of Europe or the prosperous farmers of Vanuatu sculpt precious materials around the skulls of honored ancestors for display and use in ancestor rituals, in Japan the personality of a great historical figure is thought to inhere in the traces of their writing brush (see Masuda’s essay, p. 32). This is the context in which the letters in this collection will have been preserved: mounted with precious materials on hanging scrolls and contemplated in tea gatherings. Even outside the world of tea ceremony, reading this type of document has been a rarefied art taught mostly by direct transmission, so this book renders a great service to the field by democratizing this knowledge. I hope that it will also help to spread the associated social practices of reading to an Anglophone world increasingly bereft of social practices, but that is up to us teachers.

12 Li and Pitelka, “Letters from Japan’s Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries.”

13 Lillehoj, *Art and Palace Politics*.

14 Smith, “The Power of Secret Societies,” p. 51.

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