

The Characteristics of Early Modern Society and its Literate Populace: From the Perspective of the Lettered Society*

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Education in Japan has drawn attention widely from overseas, including a quantity of research pointing out that the context of Japan's modernization and its present-day advanced science and technology can be found in the high literacy rates and prevalent education of Japanese society. However, there has been insufficient examination of the effect of high literacy rates in early modern society on everyday life. Pointing out that at the beginning of the early modern period, character formats, grammar, writing styles et cetera became used in common throughout the country, while the use of written text became compulsory as well, this paper asserts that the establishment of this lettered society was deeply involved with Japan's modernization.

Keywords: Theory of Japanese modernization / literacy / document-based society / lettered society

Introduction

The premise of the issue of “overseas development of Japan-style education” is in the attention paid to Japanese education overseas and, in some cases, the positive assessment thereof. This attention is, in fact, the latest iteration of a repeating phenomenon, which in many cases has focused on the high literacy rate and prevalent education in Japanese society.

For example, early on, Francisco Xavier (1506-1552, the first European to arrive in Japan in the 16th century) wrote, in a report to the Society of Jesuits, “most of them can read, and this is a great help to them for the easy understanding of our usual prayers and the chief points of our holy religion¹,” mentioning the high cultural standard, particularly in terms of

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literacy, of the Japanese.² The next notable instance was the Westerners who came to Japan in the late 19th century (from the end of the Edo period through the early Meiji period), whose observations of Japanese culture also include numerous mentions of the high literacy rate.

Elsewhere, attention from an economic perspective focused on Japanese culture, including education, in the “theory of Japanese modernization” which became popular from the 1960s on. This line of discourse and thought has already been extensively analyzed and interpreted, with no need for repetition here. Thereafter, attention to Japanese education can be found in, for instance, *A Nation at Risk*³, the 1983 report of the US National Commission on Excellence in Education, as well.

The scope of the Commission’s interest was broad, but its basic sense of the issues at hand was expressed in the phrase “our nation is at risk.” The excellence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation that had once led the world was now about to be overtaken by its global competitors. Sixteen items were cited as indicators of this crisis, of which the second was that some 23 million American adults were “functionally illiterate by the simplest tests of everyday reading, writing, and comprehension⁴,” while the third was that about 13% of all American seventeen-year-olds were likewise considered functionally illiterate. In short, a considerable number of American citizens were struggling with the basic social function of literacy. In *Illiterate America*, Jonathan Kozol quotes these survey results and raises the literacy issue as a fundamental problem of American society.⁵

In the context of a sense of crisis regarding educational problems in the US, *A Nation at Risk* discussed educational reform from social, economic, and political perspectives. Its tone of surprise and alarm regarding the then-thriving economy of Japan, which was becoming a world leader in automobiles and electrical appliances, cannot be denied. There, its interest was in the high educational level of the ordinary Japanese populace.

In the same year, the Education Commission of the States likewise issued a report, entitled *Action for Excellence: A Comprehensive Plan to Improve Our Nation’s Schools*. Like *A Nation at Risk*, this report presented proposals for educational reform in response to the decline of economic competitiveness with newly industrialized countries like Japan and (then-) West Germany. It dwelled in particular on education in Japan. The report pointed out that “the Japanese government after World War II...explicitly pursued a goal of universal high school education for Japan’s young people: an innovation for that hierarchical society⁶.” It added that “Japan’s improvements in education...correspond in time to Japan’s postwar economic miracle—a correspondence which suggests a direct link between education and productivity.”⁷ Led by this classical educational investment theory, the discussion addressed education reform in the US, examining the expansion of the concept of “basic skills.” Regarding “literacy” in particular, “in the nation’s early days, to be literate meant simply to be able to write one’s name. Later, literacy came to mean the ability to read and write. Today, to most of us, basic literacy implies the ability to read, write and compute.”⁸

Along with *A Nation at Risk*, this report seems to suggest that the US federal and state governments considered literacy to be the starting point of education reform. This paper, then, examines literacy—one of the major foci of the attention given to Japanese education in the 1960s through 1980s in the US—and in particular the foundational literacy of the early modern period. Through this examination, the paper clarifies the characteristics of education which led to modern education in Japan.

Chapter 1 Focus on Japanese education in the “theory of Japanese modernization”

With regard to the “modernization” theory, the foundation for the basic historical viewpoint of the discourse known as the “theory of Japanese modernization,” Kimbara Samon’s summary is that “the origin of the ‘modernization’ theory which appeared [from the 1960s on] was the reassessment, through US research on Soviet Russia, of Japan, the only non-Western European country to succeed in ‘modernization,’ and the appearance of the issue of ‘modernization’ for developing countries modeling themselves on Japan.”⁹ Kimbara adds that “the attitude toward ‘modernization’ at the time was based on grasping its conditions quantitatively: GNP (gross national product), national literacy rates, population urban concentration, development of mass communications networks, and so on.”¹⁰ Given the stance in which quantitative development was used as an indicator for historical development, no wonder the 1980s US government focused on Japan’s economic development and cited its major factors as technological innovation and scientific progress, rooted in widespread education.

However, the image of “Japan, the only country to have succeeded at modernization” was not limited to the focus on postwar economic development. This image also served to enhance interest in modern Japan with regard to its leap ahead in modernizing its industry in the 19th century, achieving national power equivalent to the Western colonial empires by the early 20th century. Representative commentators on this include Ronald P. Dore and Herbert Passin. Dore entitled the last chapter of his *Education in Tokugawa Japan* (translated into Japanese by Matsui Hiromichi) “Legacy,” identifying the characteristics of early modern education as “a trend of growth in the sheer amount of schooling provided” and “an evolution in its content and purpose.” Of these, he asks “Are they germane to an explanation of why Japan, alone among Asian countries, was able to keep her independence and carry through the process of politically directed change which has made her a highly industrialized nation?”¹¹ Dore offers a variety of responses to this question, spanning a wide range of fields including literacy education and relatively advanced Chinese and Western learning. With regard to the populace, one of these answers was “it constitutes a training in being trained.” This experience of training would, he writes, come in useful in the army or a factory;¹² it led, presumably, to the preparation of the populace for life within modern systems such as the modern military or manufacturing plants.¹³ Further, Dore points out “the diffusion of a simple notion of the possibility of ‘improvement’”: that is, the concept that social reform or rising in rank was possible through individual will. The fact that “[e]ducation was one of the major means of social ascent in Tokugawa society” was to lead to the *risshin shusse* or bootstrap philosophy through early Meiji schools, even if only for some classes.¹⁴ In addition, Dore also emphasizes the political significance. Relating the spread of literacy in early modern society to the governance of the populace, he notes that “[t]he chances of rumour growing wildly out of fearful suspicion and leading to obstruction and revolt were much reduced when a majority even of the peasants could actually read the documents they were required to set their seals to.”¹⁵

As for Herbert Passin, his *Society and Education in Japan* argues that the “Japan of 1855 was already a society showing every disposition and readiness for a modern transformation,” pointing out the centralized government along with the high percentage of literacy

throughout the country.¹⁶ Interestingly, there are differences to be found between the original version of this book and its Japanese translation. The original title is as quoted above, with parts one and two entitled “Japan as an Undeveloped Country” and “Education and Society in Modern Japan.” The translated title, however, is *Japanese Modernization and Education*, while parts one and two become “Toward Modernization” and “Industrialization and Education.” These differences clearly indicate a certain bias in the translated text which overlaps with the perspective of the “theory of Japanese modernization.”

Chapter 2 Examination of the literacy rate in premodern Japan

Even allowing for the criticism that the “theory of Japanese modernization” is premised on the specific historical perspective of the Cold War, it is an undeniable fact that Japan was a step ahead of the rest of Asia in achieving modernization (or industrialization). In that sense, we may consider that with regard to its influence on studies of the history of education in Japan, the “theory of Japanese modernization”—while calling for detailed examination—was generally accepted. This has also led to a reappraisal of early modern Japanese society, which in postwar Japan was often discussed with nuances of “an era of stagnation” or “a feudal era with no freedom,” and sometimes rejected altogether.

In a hypothetical consideration of early modern society as the preparation for and foundation of modern Japan, one typical example thereof might be the high literacy rate; however, estimates thereof have not necessarily been all that precise. Both Dore and Passin estimate the literacy rate based on previous research; many other researchers have made their own estimates likewise, from the prewar era through today. Various historical materials have been used for this purpose, including the impressions of foreigners, sometimes taken at face value. Of this research situation, Richard Rubinger writes that “the Japanese, who are justifiably proud of their achievements in education, have never taken much interest in the subject of literacy.”¹⁷ He has a point: one of the factors making it difficult to clarify the issue of literacy is, as Rubinger notes, the vagueness of the method of deriving estimates of the literacy rate from the school enrollment rate.¹⁸ The latter is itself unclear during the Meiji era and so on, and there is little basis on which to consider those with schooling equivalent to the literate population. An even more significant factor is the complexity of Japanese as a language. The combination of three writing systems (the hiragana and katakana syllabaries as well as kanji characters) makes it difficult to determine what counts as “being able to write.” The literacy surveys in the US, mentioned in the introduction here, use “being able to write your name” as a measure of literacy, one which has likewise been adopted as a criterion in modern Japanese literacy surveys.¹⁹ However, discussion is called for on the point of whether the name in question must be written in kanji or not.²⁰ As Rubinger points out, “[t]he meaning of literacy, therefore, can only be studied in a specific context,”²¹ an issue raising problems with the universal discussion of literacy in a social structure such as that of premodern society, with its diversity of ranks, classes, occupations, genders and so on. This research should be limited to a specific context—that is, era, region, rank/class/occupation, gender, and so on—and based on a thorough examination of function as well.

New research outcomes overcoming these difficulties have recently appeared as well,²² in a trend prompted by various occasions. One is doubt about the basis for the high literacy

rates found in the “theory of Japanese modernization” and so on, as noted above. Another is the literacy research now thriving within European social history studies. Evidential research in Europe based on the requirement of a signature for marriage has stimulated related research upon its introduction to Japan.²³ Further, there is the influence of popular history research, a major trend since the 1970s. In particular, as the study of the *ikki* popular uprisings proceeds, the formation of popular subjectivity has become an issue, with a focus within its elucidation on “farmers who knew their three Rs and were smooth talkers.”²⁴ The acquisition of literacy went beyond the framework proposed by Dore and company of connection to economic development and political stability, conferring the potential as well for critical thinking and action against the regime.

The problem of literacy in Japan is also, from a different perspective, that of the positioning of letters in society. From the viewpoint of text as media, a new field of vision may expand within educational history as well. Tsujimoto Masashi, a proponent of the “media history of education,” states that “modern prewar Japan was the era of the nation-state educating the people. It was the school system in this era that institutionalized national education. Seen from the perspective of media history, however, this was the ‘era of letters,’ and also that of printing. In this sense, modern prewar schooling became established as a giant ‘knowledge transfer media’ device, founded unmistakably on the ‘media of letters and printing.’”²⁵

How are we to approach the problem of literacy from the perspective of media? First, let us consider when and how the spread of literacy came to change society.

Chapter 3 Establishment of the lettered society

Section 1 Governance by letters, petition by letters

While both Dore and Passin applaud the high literacy rate of the populace in early modern society, their scope therefor is the latter early modern period through the end of the Edo era. Certainly, a focus on the increasingly advanced level of education, understanding of science and technology, and approaches to foreign information shows that, for instance, the domains took urgent measures to establish domain schools from the mid- through late early modern period, based on their approaches to coping with the stagnating feudal government.²⁶

However, the perspective of the formation of popular cultural capacity provides a view on a different landscape. We see a glimpse of the world in which written text had spread throughout the populace, making the study of reading and writing essential for everyday life and occupations, in Ihara Saikaku’s *Saikaku oridome* (1694), Vol. 3 “Play the Lottery, Get an Old Lady.”

When we look at people these days, none are even a little foolish. Long ago, when ten people assembled each and every one of them was uninformed, with hardly any who were even clear on the events of their own life. When it came to contracts with others, arbitrations, or settlements, no one had a thing to say that made sense. At trials in particular, they never thought to write down outlandish demands, cause others trouble, or be greedy. You could go half a dozen blocks without finding anyone who could read and write well enough to write down even natural and rational arguments one by one.

However, now there are no unlettered men in sight, and in everything they call on outside knowledge, never dealing with matters among themselves. This causes evil thoughts as well, with no concern for others' suffering; even in business or debts, knowing they have no part in it, they come up with arguments. You can't trust people these days.²⁷

This episode shows us that once "you could go half a dozen blocks without finding anyone who could read and write well enough to write down even natural and rational arguments one by one," but now "there are no unlettered men in sight." The spread of reading and writing had brought a certain change to popular society, typified by the popularity of trials such as arbitrations and settlements; the text shows the people standing up for themselves in various ways.

Likewise, in *Saikaku nagori no tomo* (1699), which depicts samurai society, Vol. 4 "The Unwritten Guestbook" notes that "there is nothing as shallow as being unable to write," describing an illiterate samurai. In one mansion, Saikaku writes, "there was a samurai of old family who could not write. While receiving two hundred *goku* of rice in salary based on his family history, he was a servitor unsuited to the age. At nearly fifty, he could not even write his name." When this retainer was stationed at the door to greet the New Year's guests, he could not write his visitors' names in characters. When his master examined the guestbook, he found "pictures of a shrine gate, a drum, and a mortar, so that he guessed 'this was Lord Miyagawa of Bizen.'" The shrine gate stood for *miya* (a shrine), the drum for *kawa* (leather, and also river), and the mortar was probably an association with Bizen pottery. Saikaku calls it "funny" to be getting by with these pictorial letters.²⁸ The textbook *The Warrior's Primer*, written by Daidoji Yuzan in the later early modern period, notes that "it was proper for...the warriors who were born in times of confusion to be skilled in...all the martial arts. They had hardly any time to face a book-prop and open reading materials, or to sit at a desk taking up a brush. Thus they were naturally unlearned and illiterate, being unable to write a single Chinese character. ...There were any number of warriors like this during the Warring States Period²⁹."³⁰ The unlettered retainer had probably likewise lived through times of confusion, but by the late 17th century, being "unlearned and illiterate" had actually come to mean being the target of mockery.

This permeation of literacy was also notable in rural areas. In the society of early modern farming villages, the ruling-class samurai were not in residence due to the *heino bunri* policy which kept them out of agriculture. The governance of farming villages was given over entirely to the village officials under financial self-governance, with interactions with the domain normally conducted by document. Therefore, a large volume of documents was created in the process of village governance and administration. Plentiful in type, from *shushi ninbetsu-cho* (or *shumon ninbessu-cho*, religious affiliation registers) for resident management through *goningumi-cho* (registers of neighborhood groups) and tax documents like land registers and tithe accounts, the documents were also vast in quantity. Because village officials had to prepare these documents, their qualifications included "being able to write and calculate." In the process of establishing this "document-based society,"³¹ thoroughly dominated by written documents, the professional role of the *hikko* (secretary) appeared.

Tomizen Kazutoshi has written of *hikko* in Hida Takayama thus: "The profession of *hikko* was taken up by Takayama townspeople under the Kanamori domain lords, using their ability to prepare documents, in accordance with the Genroku-era relocation of the domain

lord when Takayama came under the control of the bakufu national government. Specifically, they received a fixed scribe price from the village to prepare the documents required yearly, such as the religious affiliation registers, neighborhood group registers, horse and cattle registers, gun registers, village accounts, and various petitions.³² In Takayama they were contractors, but in Higo Amakusa the officials called *hissha* (likewise secretary) were employed by village headmen. In 1815, the Tomioka domain office pointed out that the headmen's practice of leaving even the copying of documents and circulars to their *hissha* meant that they failed to understand the content thereof later on, and ordered them to do the copying themselves without using *hissha* from then on.³³ This state of affairs continued in the Bunsei era as well; in 1825, a notification was issued to the effect that "although having learned to write themselves, village officials often make use of *hissha* for village documents and thus do not even know the tithing percentages themselves, putting their learning to nothing. From now on the young headmen are to write the documents themselves, without hiring *hissha*."³⁴

In 1789, Nakai Chikuzan submitted a statement of opinion entitled *The Layman's Warning* to Matsudaira Sadanobu of the shogun's Council of Elders (*roju*), noting that "those in the provinces skilled in writing and calculating are brought in to teach students, or to handle documents and calculate money and rice accounts for the village yearly papers both private and public."³⁵ This suggests that there were scribes and writing teachers working in villages across a wide range.

Tomizen also points out that the *hikko* of Takayama provided *goyado* inn services as well. *Goyado* were the inns used by village officials when visiting the domain castle towns or nobles' mansions, offering support for public trials as well as accommodation.³⁶ The fact that the Takayama *hikko* offered this function as well indicates that they not only prepared documents for dominion and governance but also provided support for the preparation of documents taking the villages' part. As noted in the Saikaku excerpt above, early modern Japan was a litigation-happy society. The policy forbidding the hiring of *hissha* in Bunsei-era Amakusa as well was almost certainly intended to ward off the preparation of village administration documents deriving from enthusiasm for trials.³⁷

Saikaku was not alone in seeing a cause-and-effect relationship between the spread of literacy and the increase of trials. The Tempo-era townsman-scholar Shoji Koki of Hizen Imari likewise wrote that "the teachers in *terakoya* village schools first teach the *Jitsugokyo* and *Dojikyō* along with Buddhist texts, and then the *Teikin Orai*, *Benkeijo*, *Gikeijo*, *Fugetsu Orai*, *Edo Orai* and so on, mainly writing and nothing more, which will be of no good to the common people. Over time this teaching leads to trials, which is the fault of the teachers in these schools to begin with."³⁸ Among the many trials taking place were those between villages, leading to a vast amount of clerical work as well, supported by the *goyado* trial inns and the *hikko*. It was recognized that the increase in literate human resources was connected to the increase in trials.

The act of petitioning by the populace to their governors was a behavior format established by the medieval *ikki* uprisings. Medieval farmers, when standing up against their liege lords in dissatisfaction, followed a prescribed format to the effect of the *ichimi shinsui* (holy water tasting ceremony), followed by countersignatures on petitions and then by escape.³⁹ These countersignatures were complaints called farmers' petitions, which followed a specific format as well.⁴⁰ In the early modern period as well, the text used on the pleas of poverty used when petitioning for reduced or pardoned tithes was virtually standardized throughout

the country, with copying and learning processes relating to petition preparation.⁴¹

Section 2 Letters becoming common and compulsory

Let us revisit Saikaku once again. His writings suggest that in the late 17th century, literacy was taken for granted among the populace. One example is his masterpiece *Seken mune zan'yo* (1692), Vol. 5 “The Night Market at the End of the Year,” in which, strapped for cash on New Year’s Eve, someone attempts to auction off samples of a licensed calligrapher’s signature mark and gets only five *fun* (half a *monme*) in cash. When the seller argues that the paper alone is worth three *monme*, the customer retorts that that would be true if it were blank, but “no matter who it was who wrote on it, the handwriting is *fundoshi* underwear.” Asked “what’s that supposed to mean,” he replies “These days anyone at all can write as well as that, easy as putting your underwear to rights,” and laughs.⁴² The pun is on “wearing underwear,” pronounced *kaku* just as the verb for “writing” is: the customer says that anyone can write untidy characters as easily as they put on underwear.

This story is entertaining as an explanation of the “*fundoshi* handwriting” expression occasionally used even today for bad handwriting, but also notable for the fact that traditional calligraphy (Shoren’in style) was widespread among the populace as well. Handwriting formats were standardized nationwide by this time: the katakana text frequent in petitions from farmers in the middle ages had almost disappeared by the early modern period as a result.⁴³

Notable in addition is that the document-based society had led to common text formats as well as handwriting formats. One straightforward example is divorce notices, which became commonly written in three and a half lines of template text, leading to their *mi-kudari-han* nickname.⁴⁴ This standardization of document formats was seen in the formalized document examples in *shosatsurei* writing etiquette books and early *oraimono* textbooks as well.⁴⁵

While characters and writing formats were standardized and unified, Ohto Osamu notes that “in accordance with document uses, each organization from the bakufu government to domains, villages, neighborhoods, and houses often adopted unique styles for writing paper types and formats, writing formats, handwriting, text styles, use and type of seals, and so on.” Ohto also calls for attention to “common and standard aspects across organizations” and “uniqueness within each organization” in regard to early modern document styles.⁴⁶ For example, a baby nursing manual of 1833 extant in Kajiyama Village, Karatsu Domain, includes related documents such as contracts with the magistrate on the understanding and practice of the ban on abandoning or killing children, part of the Karatsu Domain law on raising babies. Among these, the documents entitled “commands” exist for each class from village headmen and village leaders through farmers, while the contracts entitled “petitions” or “memoranda” have separate formats by class and occupation, such as small farmers, doctors, *kozoe* maternity nurses and so on, also requiring the signatures of village officials such as headmen and leaders. There is also a format for reports on inspection of stillbirths.⁴⁷ That is, as each class and occupation created the documents concerned with childbirth, policy intent was absorbed into village society. This example offers us a glimpse of one aspect of the document-based society.

In relation to this overwhelming standardization of handwriting formats, phrasing, grammar, and writing formats, Tsujimoto notes that “knowledge related to writing became systematized and spread through nearly all regions,” calling this fact the “commonalization of let-

tered culture.”⁴⁸ Further, he calls the early modern society “a society in which the use of text was inevitably embedded,” and “a lettered society.”⁴⁹ These comments are extremely important. It can be said that this addition of inevitability to this commonality of letters created a communication system in which everything from handwriting formats to text formats was mutually interconnected, establishing document norms with a degree of social compulsion. In keeping with this commonality, then, document management became the basis of administration. This characteristic is immediately clear upon comparison with verbal communication or record-keeping, in which regional and chronological variations were quick to arise, leading to difficulty creating common or compulsory formats.

Making letters common and compulsory in this way also enhanced and deepened lettered education. Notable here is that “reading” and “writing” were not integrated into one. As Luís Fróis observed at the time,⁵⁰ traditional writing education from the medieval period to the early modern period was composed of “writing characters.” Nakauchi Toshio points out that “*terakoya* village school methods involved independent study based essentially in self-starting ‘writing,’”⁵¹ adding that this method “was likewise found in the mental structure of village lettered culture itself. The *setsuyoshu* dictionaries which became popular with the literate common people of the Edo period were not intended for reading ... they were phrasebooks, listing vocabulary in categories of meaning.”⁵² Nakauchi notes as well that the various *oraimono* writing and reading textbooks were “collections of characters and sentences composed of lists of practical knowledge.”⁵³ Regarding the expansion and normalization of this kind of writing practice, he also raises two possible perspectives: “the aspect in which the country was approaching a point from which a new nation-state system was in view, replacing the bakufu and the domains,” and “the aspect in which the bakufu and its domains were attempting to force the rising people of the villages to fit into their own order.” He points out that “among thousands of *oraimono*, each one...must be considered for its view on the changing aspects of the ownership relations in contemporary lettered culture.”⁵⁴ Given that “the world of letters is connected to the sense of systems and order,”⁵⁵ acquiring literacy means coming face to face with the world of those systems and that order.

If one could only acquire the ability to read and write the characters and texts that had become common and compulsory, it would be easy to make one’s way in the document-based society. It goes without saying that this process of making writing common and compulsory became the basis for the formation of the modern nation-state to come and for the establishment and acceptance of the national education system.⁵⁶

Section 3 The reading populace and the formation of educated culture

The increasing presence of text as an essential part of everyday life, in accordance with the document-based society, brought great changes to various contexts. Saikaku offers us an example in *Saikaku oridome* Vol. 1 “The Juggler’s Mushrooms,” in which a couple who have found life impossible in Osaka try to earn a living teaching writing in a nearby farming village, and struggle when required to teach the children *utai* (noh chanting).

From that year on, the couple talked together and decided that in a world where money begets money, it would be good for everyone if they could earn something. Uncaring for their reputations, they decided that living happily was the best way to grow old and sold their Nara sandal shop for a song, leaving Osaka to live quietly in Oriono south of

Sumiyoshi, the wife's home town. They idled their evenings away and, based on being able to write a little, took in the local children learning to write. Finding noh chanting, as they did not know it, more trouble to teach than cutting wild grass and teaching half-wild characters to village children, they went to Osaka daily and studied with an old friend, then taught what they had learned. Finally they had learned the first part of "Kanehira," but when called on for "Ohara Goko," "Gendayu," or any of a hundred others, the teachers could hardly say they did not know them. Daily they would say "Let us hear it," and no matter how often the headman asked about difficult characters not found in the dictionary, they could be of no help, and matters began to look very black. At first they had thought themselves better off than doing business, with payment in autumn, spring and summer, but as they visited temple after temple, they grew sad and had no more than thirty *sen* in earnings to move on with their lives.⁵⁷

Various contexts involving writing can be found here. One is that "writing teacher" was established as a method of earning a living. According to the observations of Luís Fróis in the late 16th century, "we learn reading and writing from lay teachers. In Japan, all the children study at priests' temples."⁵⁸ In the Osaka suburbs of the late 17th century, as depicted by Saikaku, lay education at the temples⁵⁹ had already given way to the occupation of writing teachers. Saikaku's other works depict more examples of *terakoya* (writing classes) study than of lay education at temples; for example, the protagonist of *The Life of an Amorous Woman* (1686) also spends some time working as a writing teacher.

We may also note the teaching of *utai* noh chanting. It is well known that for the upper classes among the populace, *utai* was a required hobby. As well, *haikai* poetry was popular in the region at the time as well; Saikaku himself was active as a *haikai* poet. In addition to *utai* and *haikai*, we must note the dictionary (*setsuyoshu*) appearing in this excerpt as well, which shows that broad knowledge based in lettered culture had spread even to the suburbs of Osaka. The flood of lettered culture was swallowing up the populace.

A focus on "reading" finds the late 17th century to have been a major transitional period. Tsujimoto, quoted above, considers printing to be a characteristic of the era. This technology had existed in Japan since ancient times, with examples of letterpress printing introduced by the Jesuits as well, but it was not until the early modern era that books became readily available throughout society.

Bookstores specializing in book publication are said to have appeared during the Kan'ei era (1624-1644), with for-profit private publishers flourishing in Kyoto as print runs and store numbers increased and publishing became an established career: "a period when publications became products and primitive publishing journalism came to birth."⁶⁰ Imada Yozo lists the characteristics of Kan'ei publishing culture as the shift in publication of Buddhist books from temple workshops to professional publishers, the release and widespread distribution of the Japanese classics, the thriving publication of Chinese literature, the rapid publication of new works such as *kanazoshi* incidental writings and books of *haikai* poetry, and the appearance of publishers specializing in Buddhist sermons and *yoruri* books.⁶¹

While publishing thus became an industry in the Kan'ei era, it was not to develop more widely until the Genroku period (1688-1704). Imada calls the new bookstores, which pumped out large quantities of *chohoki* (guides to everyday life) and *ukiyo-zoshi* (novels, especially erotic works), "the bestseller publishers of the Genroku era," far outstripping the traditional,

temple-affiliated bookstores of Kyoto.⁶²

The kickoff for these “bestsellers” was unquestionably Saikaku’s major work *The Life of an Amorous Man*, published by a small Osaka bookshop in 1682. Thereafter he continued with various erotic works including *Five Women Who Loved Love*, as well as *choninmono* (books focused on ordinary townspeople) such as *Seiken mune zan’yo* and *Nippon eitaigura*, along with *bukemono* (samurai-centered works) like *Budo denraiki* and *Buke giri monogatari*, becoming the star author of the era with a string of hits in a short time.⁶³

Saikaku’s work, while using novel form to depict the lifestyles of the new era, is often based on classics like the *Tale of Genji* or *Tale of Ise*. For example, *The Life of an Amorous Man* is composed of 54 chapters, generally considered to be a reflection of the 54 books of the *Tale of Genji*. A precise reading of Saikaku requires background knowledge of the Japanese and Chinese classics, indicating as well a degree of the opening and commonalization of the classics which made strides among the populace from the Kan’ei period on.

Tsujimoto Masashi points out that “17th-century Japan established a ‘lettered society’ as well as becoming an era of large-scale commercial publishing. We may call the spread of literacy and the appearance of mass publishing the ‘media revolution’ of 17th-century Japan.”⁶⁴ Paired with the spread of common and compulsory literacy, this media revolution is thought to have allowed lettered culture to permeate the populace.

Chapter 4 People at the margins of the lettered society

We have thus considered the process and context through which early modern Japan became a lettered society. While the common and compulsory nature of writing would become even more universal in the modern era, the characters themselves had significance in another dimension again. Among these meanings was the view of characters in the world of folklore. In traditional society, writing was considered sacred, distinct from its purpose of the recording and transmission of information. Miyamoto Tsuneichi records that his grandfather, “in a world without writing, held writing to be the most revered of concepts. The people of long ago seem to have felt that characters held absolute truth. My grandfather told me never to blow my nose or wipe my behind on a piece of paper with writing on it.” His grandfather’s “feelings toward writing were those of religious faith.”⁶⁵ In this unlettered society of traditional folkways, the role and function of writing must be discussed in different terms; they may also serve as a hint toward relativizing the lettered society.

Elsewhere, there were many who remained on the margins of the lettered society. For example, Noguchi Hideyo’s mother Noguchi Shika wrote him the following letter in 1912.

evryone was surprized at yur success . i am allso very happy . i went to prey to the nakata kannon-sama . sama . no such thing as studdying to hard⁶⁶

The letter is mostly in hiragana, with just a few kanji and katakana mixed in, and at least one incorrect kanji. The spelling of the hiragana also reflects the sounds of the Fukushima dialect of the time. She also does not seem to have been sure of how to use punctuation, with small circles doing duty throughout.

Another example is that of Asahara Saichi (1850-1932)⁶⁷, known as a *myoko-nin* or lay disciple and “spiritual person” of the Jodo Shinshu sect. The hand of his “writing book,” compiled from 1913 on, shows that he had never studied proper writing.⁶⁸ Almost the whole text is in hiragana, with occasional katakana here and there; nor is the spelling accurate. The

name of the priest Rennyō, usually rendered in kanji, is a mixture of hiragana and katakana, while the *namu amida butsu* prayer to the Buddha becomes *namu ami-ta futsu*, with the wrong kanji standing in for “ta” and modified as if it were kana.

○ i am so happy so happy, joy onnly becoms Deeper, to Finally undrstand RenNyo,
namu ami-ta futsu, namu ami-ta futsu

This poem has been evaluated as “a direct expression of the religious experience itself, set free from the framework of older Buddhist terms mainly composed of kanji.”⁶⁹ Leaving aside the ideological issues therein, this indicates to us an expansion of the world of faith from the teachings of Buddhism mainly using kanji terms to a focus on verbal expressions. We must bear in mind as well this expansive spiritual world existing at the boundaries of the lettered society and unlettered culture.

Conclusion

We have thus seen how the lettered society was established in early modern Japan, and how writing became common and compulsory. Thereafter, from the *Gakusei* Education System Ordinance of 1872 on, the Japanese public education system took shape and the learning of the populace became controlled. The characters, phrases, grammar, and writing formats already commonalized became entirely a part of the populace thereafter through school education. Although “commonalized,” they had not been regulated by any clear laws or ordinances in the early modern period; from the Meiji era on, through elementary school education, character formats were standardized, verbal expressions adopted into writing, and Japanese-language education established.

However, this common and compulsory nature was limited to written text. Spoken language remained widely divergent across regions, with its commonalization not to take place until the establishment of the modern school system.

- 1 https://archive.org/stream/thelifeandletter02coleuoft/thelifeandletter02coleuoft_djvu.txt (last accessed January 17, 2022)
- 2 Letter dated November 5, 1549 (translation supervised by Matsuda Kiichi, *16-17-seiki Iesus-kai Nihon hokokushu (16th/17th-century reports of the Society of Jesus on Japan)*, Period III Vol. 1, Dohokai, 1997, p. 43.
- 3 Japanese translation by Hashizume Sadao, 1984.
- 4 <https://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/risk.html> (last accessed January 17, 2022)
- 5 Jonathan Kozol, *Illiterate America*, Doubleday, 1985. (Japanese translation by Wakihami Yoshiaki, 1997). In this book, Kozol uses figures for the literacy rate differing from those in *A Nation at Risk*, pointing out differences in the definition of literacy itself.
- 6 https://books.google.co.jp/books?id=05ucAAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=ja&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q=Japan&f=false (last accessed January 17, 2022)
- 7 Education Commission of the States, *Action for Excellence: A Comprehensive Plan to Improve Our Nation's Schools*, 1983, p.19.
- 8 Ibid., p.15. See Sato Saburo, *America kyoiku kaikaku no doko: 1983-nen 'Kiki ni tatsu kokka' kara 21-seiki e (Trends in American education reforms: From 'A Nation at Risk' of 1983 to the 21st century)*, Kyoiku Kaihatsu Kenkyusyo, 1997.
- 9 Kimbara Samon, *'Kindaika' ron no tenkai to rekishi jojutsu: Seiji hendoka no hitotsu no shigak-*

- ushi* (*Shifts in the theory of 'modernization' and historical narration: A history of history studies through political fluctuations*), Chuo University Press, 2000, p. 1.
- 10 Ibid., p. 2.
 - 11 Ronald P. Dore, *Education in Tokugawa Japan*, University of California Press, 1965, p. 291.
 - 12 Ibid., p. 292.
 - 13 See Sakurai Tetsuo, '*Kindai*' no imi: *Seido to shite no gakko/kojo* (*The meaning of 'modern': Schools and factories as systems*), NHK Books, 1984.
 - 14 Dore, op. cit., pp. 292-293.
 - 15 Ibid., p. 294.
 - 16 Herbert Passin, *Society and Education in Japan*, Columbia University Press, 1965. (Japanese translation by Kunihiro Masao, 1980; p. 11 of the 1982 Kadokawa edition referenced here. The translated text misprints 1855 as 1805 on p. 14).
 - 17 Richard Rubinger, *Popular Literacy in Early Modern Japan*, University of Hawai'i, 2007, p. 4. (Japanese translation by Kawamura Hajime, 2008).
 - 18 Ibid.
 - 19 See Yakuwa Tomohiro, "Meijiki Nihon ni okeru shikiji to gakko: Kokumin kokka to literacy (Literacy and schools in Meiji-era Japan: The nation-state and literacy)" in Matsuzuka Shunzo & Yakuwa Tomohiro eds. *Shikiji to dokusho: Literacy no hikaku shakaishi* (*Literacy and reading: A comparative social history of literacy*), Showado, 2010; Kawamura Hajime, "Meiji shonen no shikiji jokyō: Wakayama-ken no jirei wo chushin ni (The status of literacy in the early Meiji period: Focusing on the example of Wakayama Prefecture)" in Ohto Yasuhiro & Yakuwa Tomohiro eds. *Shikiji to manabi no shakaishi: Nihon ni okeru literacy no shoso* (*Social history of literacy and learning: Aspects of literacy in Japan*), Shibunkaku Press, 2014.
 - 20 See Kimura Masanobu, "Zenkindai Nihon ni okeru shijikiritsu suitei wo meguru hohoronteki kento (Methodological examination of literacy rate estimates in premodern Japan)" in Ohto & Yakuwa, op. cit.
 - 21 Rubinger, op. cit., p. 3.
 - 22 Kimura Masanobu, "Kinsei shikiji kenkyū ni okeru shushi ninbetsu-cho no shiryoteki kanosei (Potential of *shushi ninbetsu-cho* religious affiliation registers as historical materials in early modern literacy studies)" in *Nihon kyoikushi kenkyū* (*Journal of Japanese History of Education*) 14, 1995. Ohto & Yakuwa, op. cit. For details on recent trends in literacy history research, see Yakuwa Tomohiro, "Shikijishi kenkyū no kadai to tembo (Issues and prospects in literacy history research)" in *Nihon kyoikushi kenkyū* (*Journal of Japanese History of Education*) 32, Japanese History of Education Society, 2013.
 - 23 As an example introducing European research, see Lawrence Stone, "Literacy and Education in England 1600-1900" in *Past and Present* No. 42, 1969. (Japanese translation by Sada Genji, 1985)
 - 24 Aoki Michio, "Kinsei minshu no seikatsu to teiko (Lifestyles and resistance among the early modern populace)" in *Ikki 4: Seikatsu/bunka/shiso* (*Uprisings 4: Lifestyles/culture/ideology*), University of Tokyo Press, 1981.
 - 25 Tsujimoto Masashi, *Shiso to kyoiku no media shi: Kinsei Nihon no chi no dentatsu* (*Media history of ideology and education: The transmission of knowledge in early modern Japan*), Perikansha, 2011, p. 141.
 - 26 Ishikawa Matsutaro, *Hanko to terakoya* (*Domain schools and terakoya schools*), Kyoikusha, 1979, p. 28.
 - 27 *Saikaku shu ge* (*Saikaku Collection, Part 2*), Complete Edition of Japanese Classical Literature 48, Iwanami Shoten, 1960 (first edition), p. 375. Some repeated signs have been amended (quotations below likewise). See Kimura Masanobu, "Saikaku sakuhin ni miru 17-seiki koki no shikiji noryoku to kyōyo no keisei (The formation of late 17th-century literacy and liberal culture as seen in the works of Saikaku)" in *Kyushu Daigaku Daigakuin Kyoikugaku Kenkyū Kiyo* (*Bulletin of Kyushu University Graduate School Educational Research*) No. 20, 2018.
 - 28 *Budo denraiki / Saikaku okimiyage / Yorozu no fumi hogo / Saikaku nagori no tomo* (*Chronicle*

- of martial arts/A present from Saikaku/Throwing out all letters/Saikaku's old friends*), New Complete Edition of Classical Literature 77, Iwanami Shoten, 1989, p. 552.
- 29 https://books.google.co.jp/books?id=ps6bRp92y8AC&printsec=frontcover&hl=ja&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false (last accessed January 17, 2022)
- 30 Daidoji Yuzan, *Budo shoshinshu (The Warrior's Primer)*, Iwanami Shoten (Iwanami Bunko), 1987, p. 33.
- 31 See Hotate Michihisa, "Joho to kiroku (Information and records)" in National Institute of Japanese Literature Repository ed. *Archives no kagaku jokan (Archive science, Part 1)*, Kashiwa Shobo, 2003.
- 32 Tomizen Kazutoshi, *Kinsei sonpo bunsho no kanri to hikko: Minkan bunsho shakai no ninaite (Early modern village document management and hikko secretaries: The load-bearers of the private-sector document-based society)*, Azekura Shobo, 2017, p. 202. This book also discusses the example of Amakusa.
- 33 Ibid., p. 222.
- 34 *Hondo-shi kobunsho shiryoshu: Tenryo Amakusa oshoya Kiyama-ke bunsho Goyofure utsushi-cho dai-3-kan (Premodern historical documents of Hondo City: Documents from the Kiyama family of headmen, bakufu demesne of Amakusa, book of notifications Vol. 3)*, Hondo City Board of Education, 1998, p. 225.
- 35 *Sobo no kigen (The Layman's Warning)*, Keizaizasshisha, 1894, p. 139.
- 36 The Edo inns intended for the use of those staying for long periods due to trials were called *ku-ji-yado*. The same role was fulfilled by the *goyado* inns.
- 37 Tomizen, op. cit., p. 224.
- 38 Shoji Koki, "Keizai mondo hiroku (Secret record of economic questions and answers)" in *Nihon keizai daien (Great Encyclopedia of Japanese Economics)* Vol. 34, Keimeisha, 1929, pp. 79-80.
- 39 Irumada Nobuo, *Hyakusho moshijo to kishomon no sekai: Chusei minshu no jiritsu to rentai (The World of Sacred Oath Documents and Written Petitions by Freeman Commoners)*, University of Tokyo Press, 1986, p. 10. <https://ci.nii.ac.jp/naid/110002368798> (last accessed January 17, 2022)
- 40 Regarding farmers' petitions, see Kurokawa Naonori, "Chusei ikki shi kenkyu no zenshin no tame ni: Shiryō to hoho (Toward advances in historical research on medieval uprisings: Materials and methods)" in *Ikki 5: Ikki to kokka (Uprisings 5: Uprisings and the state)*, University of Tokyo Press, 1981; Kuroda Hiroko, *Mimi wo kiri hana wo sogi: Katakanagaki hyakusho moshijo ron (Cutting off ears and noses: A study of farmers' petitions written in katakana)*, Yoshikawa Kobunkan, 1995.
- 41 Yakuwa Tomohiro, *Kinsei minshu no kyoiku to seiji sankā (Education and political participation among the early modern populace)*, Azekura Shobo, 2001, p. 267. Kudo Kohei has also analyzed the composition of village officials' libraries, categorizing them into published books, copied books, and collections and discussing the formation of the intellectual world of these officials (Kudo Kohei, *Kinsei zoshō bunkaron: Chiiki "chi" no keisei to shakai (Theory of early modern private library culture: The formation of regional "knowledge" and society)*, Bensei Shuppan, 2017). Noting that these libraries contained various collections of trial records, Kudo points out that the various knowledge summed up as "knowledge of appeals" was passed down in villages in the form of documents.
- 42 *Saikaku shu ge*, op. cit., p. 295.
- 43 Kuroda, op. cit.
- 44 Takagi Tadashi, *Mikudari han (Three and a half lines)*, Heibonsha, 1987.
- 45 The *Shokan shogakusho (Primer for letters)* (1684), a typical example of letter formats at the beginning of the early modern period, is written in kanji, but the *Shosatsu chohoki (Notes on rules for letters)* 1695 edition uses a mixture of kanji and hiragana, predisposed for the readers of the middle class and below. This book contains educational content including various letter writing methods, vocabulary for daily life, and language use (Nagatomo Chiyoji, "Nihon kinsei ni okeru shuppan to dokusho (Publishing and reading in early modern Japan), in Matsuzuka & Yakuwa,

- op. cit., p. 140).
- 46 Ohto Osamu, “Kinsei no shakai/soshikitai to kiroku: Kinsei bunsho no tokushitsu to sono reki-shiteki haikai (Early modern society/organizations and records: The characteristics of early modern documents and their historical context)” in National Institute of Japanese Literature Repository, op. cit., p. 111. We must bear in mind additionally that character and text formats differ by gender as well.
 - 47 Mine Household Documents No. 333 (Karatsu City Ochi Library holdings)
 - 48 Tsujimoto Masashi, “Moji shakai no seiritsu to shuppan media (The establishment of the lettered society and publishing media)” in Tsujimoto Masashi & Okita Yukuzi eds. *Shintaikei Nihonshi 16: Kyoiku shakaishi (New Complete Edition of Japanese History 16: Educational social history)*, Yamakawa Shuppansha, 2002, p. 125.
 - 49 Tsujimoto, *Shiso to kyoiku no media shi*, op. cit., p. 144. The phrase “lettered society” (*moji shakai*) was first used by Amino Yoshihiko, calling “the world within Japanese society of those who did not know or use their letters the ‘unlettered society,’ and in contrast the world formed by the literate classes the ‘lettered society.’” By this definition, the “lettered society” has consistently been a part of Japanese society throughout history since the first importation of characters (*Retto no bunkashi (Cultural history of the archipelago)* 5, Japan Editors School, 1988, p. 20).
 - 50 In *Europe bunka to Nihon bunka (European culture and Japanese culture)*, compiled in 1585, Fróis points out that “our children begin by learning to read and then learn to write. Children in Japan learn to write first and to read after” (Iwanami Shoten (Iwanami Bunko), 1991, pp. 64-65).
 - 51 Nakauchi Toshio, *Kindai Nihon kyoiku shisoshi (A history of educational ideology in modern Japan)*, Kokudoshya, 1973, p. 234.
 - 52 Ibid., p. 235.
 - 53 Ibid., p. 238.
 - 54 Ibid., p. 239.
 - 55 Ibid., p. 241.
 - 56 Tsujimoto Masashi points out that “the remarkably widespread adoption and uniformization of early modern lettered culture formed the cultural premise for the modern nation-state and formation of citizens’ education to come” (*Shiso to kyoiku no media shi*, op. cit., p. 145).
 - 57 *Saikaku shu ge*, op. cit., pp. 329, 330.
 - 58 Fróis op. cit., p. 64.
 - 59 In medieval Japan, temples provided writing instruction to children separately from religious education. By the 17th century, institutions specializing in writing instruction had increased in urban areas, called *terakoya* (halls for temple-affiliated children) in West Japan as a remnant of the medieval temple education.
 - 60 Suzuki Toshio, *Edo no honya (jo) (The bookstores of Edo (Part 1))*, Chuo Koronsha (Chuko Shinsho), 1980, p. 44.
 - 61 Imada Yozo, *Edo no honyasan (The bookstores of Edo)*, NHK Books, 1977, pp. 30-31.
 - 62 Ibid., p. 40.
 - 63 See Nakajima Takashi, *Saikaku to Genroku media: Sono senryaku to tenkai (Saikaku and Genroku media: Strategies and developments)*, NHK Books, 1994. When considering publishing from the perspective of bestsellers, Kaibara Ekken’s writings are essential reading. Tsujimoto notes that “Kaibara Ekken can be considered the first Confucianist to focus on the new media of publishing” (Tsujimoto, *Shiso to kyoiku no media shi*, op. cit., p. 86).
 - 64 Ibid., p. 144.
 - 65 *Miyamoto Tsuneichi: Chosakushu (Miyamoto Tsuneichi: Collected Writings)* 6, Miraisha, 1967, p. 79.
 - 66 Hideyo Noguchi Memorial Museum holdings (Inawashiro Town, Fukushima Prefecture)
 - 67 The chronology of Asahara Saichi draws on Sato Taira, “Asahara Saichi nenpu (Chronology of Asahara Saichi)” in *Otani Joshi Daigaku Kyo (Bulletin of Ohtani Women’s University)* Vol. 20 No. 2, 1986.
 - 68 From materials held by Anrakuji Temple, Yunotsu-cho, Oda City, Shimane Prefecture. Listed in

part in Suzuki Daisetz ed. *Myokonin: Asahara Saichi shu (Collected writings of the myokonin Asahara Saichi)*, Shunjusha, 1967.

69 Sato, op. cit.