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**GENESIS OF KANA and its relationship
with Japanese art and nature**

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Introduction

As Hittites got the cuneiform from Mesopotamia, the ancient Japanese got Chinese characters from China. While mastered the writing system of the Chinese and used Chinese characters, *kanji* in Japanese, for formal documents of state and temples, Japanese scholars developed ways of writing their own language. The process of development took more or less three centuries to complete. Though clear evidence of its early stages has mostly been lost, the oldest surviving examples of Japanese writings were Chinese characters, *kanji*, found on late fifth or early sixth-century unearthed iron swords in Eastern Japan.

Kanji and Kana

By the ninth century, the Japanese has more or less completed a method of writing the sounds of their own language with phonetic symbols called *kana*, which meant “temporary, borrowed, or informal” writing. To write the sounds of their own language, they chose certain Chinese characters, *kanji*, whose pronunciation approximated Japanese syllables, mostly disregarding their ideographic meanings.

Although most of the *kana* for Japanese syllabic writing, were based on *kanji* simplified in ways that the Chinese themselves had taken in their *sosho* (*ts'ao-shu*, cursive style) writing, some were radically changed, stroke very much simplified. This kind of *kana* syllabary written in flowing cursive script was afterwards called *hiragana*, which meant “commonly used” *kana*.

More precisely speaking, there existed *manyogana* in between Chinese characters and Japanese *hiragana*. It was a method to utilize Chinese characters to express Japanese language, though its use was first limited to the representation of proper nouns such as place or personal names. It was a method to use *kanji* as phonetic symbols of Japanese syllables. Included among *kanji* incised on the late fifth or early sixth-century iron swords were in a sense early *manyogana*.

This kind of Japanese usage of *kanji*, started in proper nouns, gradually spread to common nouns, and afterwards whole sentences and compositions was primarily in *manyogana*. Much used in the *Manyo-shu*, the oldest existing collection of Japanese

poetry, which literally meant the "Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves," it was called *manyogana*. The *Manyo-shu* was compiled sometime in the late *Nara* or early *Heian* periods, the compiler or final compiler having been Otomo-no-Yakamochi (718-785), major parts of the collection represent the period between 600 and 759 AD.

In *Sakaigire* attributed to Fujiwara-no-Yukinari, a renowned calligrapher, we can observe *hiragana* written on the same sheet of paper on which *kanji* are also written. Because it was very cursive, a few *hiragana* syllables could be written without lifting the brush from the paper. It was perhaps developed from the practice of the literate class, scholars, officers, and aristocrats, who used many *manyogana* when they wrote everyday texts. It was primarily used for everyday writings such as letters or notes.

Because it was thought that women did not need to learn Chinese characters, *kanji*, they wrote most texts in *hiragana*. It was called "on-na-de" which literally meant "women's hand." However, men also used *hiragana* when they wrote to women. It was also used in traditional Japanese poetry including some love songs. Since *hiragana* was apt for the writing of everyday language, it was used in the writing of narratives and essays, the most famous example being the *Tale of Genji*.

Manyogana was also used in *Senmyo-gaki*, a mode of writing in which content words such as nouns and verbs were written in large Chinese characters, *kanji*, while subordinate elements such as particles or suffixes were written in small *manyogana*. *Senmyo-gaki* was used in more official documents such as *Senmyo*, Emperor's order or *Norito*, ritual *Shinto* prayer.

There is another form of *kana* script, called *katakana*. It meant "fragmentary or partial" *kana*, its form being angular, using only a part of a Chinese *kaisho* (*k'ai-shu*, square style) character, or in a sense a part of *manyogana*. One of the oldest surviving examples of *katakana* is in a Buddhist text copied in 828. While *hiragana* had a rounded shape because it was made to increase the speed of writing, *katakana* got an angular shape because it was made to be used along with the main lines of Chinese writing, and in harmony with their angular shapes.

While *hiragana* was used, not only commonly but also perhaps more artistically, *katakana*'s use was relatively limited. In *Sakaigire* again, *katakana* is used in supplemental positions to main texts in *kanji*. The fact it was used in such a way and still being used to transcribe the sounds of foreign words may show its foreign or auxiliary position. Therefore, it is generally admitted that *hiragana*, rather than *katakana*, represents the more authentic aesthetics of Japanese writing. Some may even claim that *hiragana* is an essence of Japanese aesthetics.

Letters and Images in the *Heian* period

Concerning this study theme, there are several important examples of *hiragana* writings on/over images in the *Heian* period, roughly from the 9th to 12th century when Kyoto was the real center of Japan that should be compared with a particular example in *kanji*, in their relation to its supports on which those letters and characters were written. It is

another very important and interesting aspect of the cultures of writings and drawings, from which we may be able to start another investigation into the relationship between logos and image.

"Thirty-Six Poets Works" of 1110's kept at the Nishi-Honganji temple of Kyoto is an early example of "letters on images." Poems by 36 celebrated poets of medieval Japan were written on beautiful *ryoshi*, specially made papers, combining various colors, textures, and techniques in interesting combinations. Letters written on the papers are precisely speaking *sogana*, more cursive style of *manyogana*. *Hiragana* is even more simplified form of *sogana*. We can see patterns like plants or flowers. We can also see shapes like mountains or waves in it. We can also find poems written on a drawing of plants.

Famous "Tale of Genji" painting scroll was made around 1120. It is kept as several pieces in a few different collections in Japan. In this case, each text comes first, followed by corresponding painting or illustration for various scenes of the "Tale of Genji." However, we can see some plants or various crest-like shapes beneath cursive and continuous *hiragana* letters.

Fan-shaped "Hokke" Sutra (*Senmen-Hokekyo*) kept at the Shitenno-ji Temple of Osaka was produced in the 1150's. This Buddhist scripture is written on a series of interesting genre paintings, depicting everyday life scenes such as "a lady in a room and a woman hanging out the washing on the bar to dry" or "women gathering around a well." "Hokke" Sutra is written in *kanji* on those paintings.

"A gentleman reading letters with a girl" is particularly interesting, because it depicts then popular taste for this kind of illuminated book or scroll in general. However, the relationship between these *kanji* and images in this example seems to be very different from that in *kana* letters and images discussed before and going to be analyzed afterwards. In this example, interesting drawing is glorifying the Buddhist "hokke" sutra, by being sacrificed to dense Chinese characters and for the Buddhist teaching. There is no harmony in this relationship between letters and images. Harmony was not very important in this example. Important thing was glorification or illumination.

The date of the "Dedicated Sutras of the Heike" is very clear, because it was donated to the Itsukushima shrine in 1163. The Sutras were written in Chinese characters, *kanji*. They are separated from background images, framed by thin golden lines and frames. But, if we take a close look at each background image, we can also find various letters on or among images.

In this part showing a typical *fukinuke yatai*, house transparent excepting for pillars, three disciplines of Buddhism are depicted. A lady below right is perhaps reading sutra, a gentleman above right is probably copying a sutra by hand, and a monk near the center is praying in a simple hut.

Beneath the monk in a simple shed, there are three letters, from right to left, "sho" "shu" and "gyo" in *kanji*. "Sho" means "various," while "shu" and "gyo" together means "training." On the bottom, there are another set of three characters, "toku," "do," and "sha." They altogether mean "Learners," particularly those who comprehend the teaching

of Buddha through religious training. Therefore, these two sets of *kanji* are a kind of captions for this painting. But, it is curious to find these letters among plants and rocks or stones, as if these letters are hiding or born from nature.

Ashide and Ashide-e

Though these letters are Chinese characters, *kanji*, this is also a kind of *ashide*, which is a decorative style of calligraphy developed during the *Heian* period (794-1185) in which the shapes and lines of the indigenous Japanese *kana* syllabary were rendered as pictures of reeds, waterfowl, streams, rocks, and other objects associated with waterside scenery.

Among numbers of *ashide* in the "Hoto-Bon" of the "Dedicated Sutras of the Heike," *hiragana* "a" is included as a plant, reed. It is "a" of "ashi" which means "reed" If it is in English, it should be "r" of reed or rush. A letter "r" could be placed among reeds in this painting. But, it is strange for English and many other European languages, because alphabet is a set of pure symbols, mostly without any particular meaning. It is the same in *hiragana*. In Japan, however, we can somehow understand the intension of this strange practice, "ashide," because *hiragana* are children or grandchildren of *kanji*, which were born from nature.

In the "Tale of the Hollow Tree," *Utsubo Monogatari*, written in the late 10th century, there are descriptions of Chinese *kaisho* (*k'ai-shu*, square style) and *sosho* (*ts'ao-shu*, cursive style) characters, as well as five different *kana* styles. Though these descriptions of *kana* writings permit various interpretations, *hiragana*, *katakana*, and another style *ashide* are at least included. *Ashide* is a decorative style of calligraphy developed during the 9th century in which the shapes of *kana* were rendered as pictures associated with waterside scenery such as reeds (*ashi*), streams, waterfowls, or rocks.

I interpret *ashide* as follows. While the people of ancient China made *kanji* from nature, the people of medieval Japan returned its children or grandchildren to nature. At least, they tried to return *hiragana* to nature. This intimacy between letters and nature or words and nature, in addition to that of man and nature, formed a basis of Japanese art, culture, and everyday life.

In the history of *ashide*, the *Ashide-e Waken Roeishu*, kept at the Kyoto National Museum is very important. In this anthology, renowned Chinese poems were written in *kanji*, while renowned Japanese poems were written in *hiragana*. This kind of practice was not unusual. In a version of the *Manyo-shu*, *manyogana* rather than *kanji* and *hiragana* were reciprocally written. In *kana* preface included in a version of *Kokinwakashu*, "Anthology of Ancient and Modern Japanese Poetry", Japanese poems were written on Chinese papers with Chinese motif. The Japanese people and their artists of the *Heian* period became conscious of this kind of contrast between China and Japan, and seem to have liked it very much.

Returning to the *Ashide-e Wakan Roeishu*, what this particular collection of renowned poetry means is very different from that of the *Manyo-shu* and *Kokinwakashu*, because it is a total artistic competition of Chinese and Japanese culture; Chinese versus Japanese poetry, and *kanji* versus *hiragana*. The most interesting aspect of this collection is the fact that *ashide* was mediating between two cultures and two writing systems.

The cover illustration of *Motosuke-shu*, kept at archives of the Reizei family in Kyoto, is an important example that suggests a possibility of the existence of full line-up of *ashide* as a nearly complete syllabary in the 10th - 11th century. Though compiled in 1175, the cover of *Motosuke-shu* seems to have illustrated an earlier practice of *ashide*, which afterwards turned into a set of ornamental motif, losing its former function as a writing system.

Sotastu and Koetsu

Though turned into a set of ornamental motif, *ashide* remained as an important element in the work of Japanese artists and craftsmen. It was a media or in a sense a symbol of intimacy between letters and nature, or words and nature, or man and nature in Japan. Lastly, I would like to analyze the best example of "letters on images," *Shiki Soka Wakan*, a painting scroll of four seasons poems by Tawaraya Sotatsu and Honnami Koetsu.

By request, Sotatsu added his painting of deer to the *Heike Nokyo* (Dedicated Suturas of the Heike) kept at the Itsukushima shrine. Therefore, at least Sotatsu, perhaps both Sotatsu and Koetsu, knew its *ashide* and Japanese tradition of "letters on images," which must have been a part of knowledge most artists and craftsmen in Kyoto shared.

This is a work of the early *Edo* period. Painted by Sotatsu, poems written on it by Koetsu, the picture scroll was completed in the mid-1620's. Twenty-five poems of cherry blossom by celebrated Japanese poets were written in cursive *kanji* and *hiragana*. Koetsu sometimes avoided overlaying letters on images by Sotatsu, but, in some cases, he boldly superimposed bold letters on beautifully drawn plants by Sotatsu.

Ryoshi, paper for the scroll, is of four colors; beige, light sky blue, sky blue, and white. Ten papers are connected together to form an approx. 9 meter long scroll. This combination is not only for variety, but also for logical effect. The scroll starts from spring when cherry blossom is in full bloom. Paper changes from white to light sky blue, while drawing changes from cherry blossom to cherry trees. Then, paper changes to warm beige, wisteria replaces cherry trees. The season is changed from late spring to early summer.

White paper comes again, *kikyo*, Japanese bellflower of late summer and early autumn appears on the bottom. Then, paper changes into sky blue, wisteria hangs above, bellflower grows from the bottom. *Hagi*, an autumn flower starts to appear on its left.

Paper again changed into beige, the season is cool autumn. *Hagi* is added by another autumn plant, silver grass, *susuki*. The next paper is white expressing the season is even cooler fall. Then, it changes into sky blue, and a big half moon appears behind autumnal leaves and flowers. This change of color paper signifies not only seasonal change but also time change from afternoon to evening, in this case.

On the next white paper, forests of old pine trees are drawn in gold, while a large flock of plovers are represented by numberless small silver crosses. They fly up toward sky. The last two papers are both white. This is the only exception in this scroll. This is perhaps to

gorgeously conclude the picture scroll even in a cold winter scene by using long white paper, twice as long as before, and silver and gold.

It is perhaps very strange to know all twenty-five poems written on four seasons nature scenes are all on cherry blossom. But, we could perhaps interpret it that they tried to mean that there are four seasons even in a short life of cherry blossom, most beloved flower by the Japanese people for its beauty, fragility, and transience.

There is a Japanese sense of seasonal change. The Japanese saw letters and words in nature, among forests and even in a flock of small birds on seashore or riverside. They were finding poems in nature and in everyday life.

While the people of ancient China made *kanji* from nature, the people of medieval Japan returned its children or grandchildren to nature. At least, they tried to return *hiragana* to nature. Intimacy between letters and nature or words and nature is a common base of Japanese culture still living now, when picture scrolls seems to have been replaced by *manga* and animation.

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