Tôyô Kanji 当用漢字

The Story of Modern Japanese Characters

By Max Küenburg, S. J., Tôkyô

I. Historic Part

In a special issue of the Official Gazette the Japanese Government on November 16, 1946, published a Cabinet Regulation1) by which for legislature and administration, for newspapers and magazines, for the general social life the number of Chinese characters is restricted to 1850, called Tôyô Kanji (当用漢字, Standard Kanji). The weighty document, which switches the cultural activity of a whole nation of eighty million people in a new direction shall be quoted here in full, as it reflects the motives and objectives of a measure of such far reaching import.


Since the number of Kanji hitherto used in this country is very great and their use complicated, there have been many inconveniences in the field of education as well as in social life. To limit the number of Kanji would contribute not a little to raise the efficiency of the population and to lift the level of our culture.

Therefore the Government has adopted the List of Standard Kanji fixed by the National Language Commission and publishes it today as Cabinet Notification No. 32. It is hoped that from now on all Government Offices, while using the Kanji according to this list, will widely enforce this use and endeavour to make the meaning of this enactment of the List of Standard Kanji fully understood.

The Prime Minister
Yoshida Shigeru.

For the history of this momentous undertaking the present writer is indebted to the very valuable book of Mr. Hosoi Fusao 細井房夫 of the Ministry of Education, which was published by the Ministry in

1) 官報昭和 21年 11月16日号内閣訓令第7号・内閣告示第32号 (Kampô, Naikaku Kunrei No. 7; Naïkaku Kokuji No. 32).
March 1949. According to the many documents quoted therein, the movement to simplify the Japanese script reaches back at least sixty years. As early as in October, 1887, an ordinance was issued limiting the Kanji to be taught in elementary schools (小学校 and 高等小学校) to about 2000. However, systematic and sustained efforts in this direction began only in 1900. In April of that year the Ministry invited eight scholars to take part in the respective consultations. Among them were the famous linguists Ueda Kazutoshi 上田萬年 (commonly, but erroneously, called Mannen), Ōtsuki Fumihiko 大槻文彦, the writer Tokutomi I-chirō 徳富豬一郎 and others. Already on August 21, 1900 the Official Gazette published an Ordinance limiting the Kanji to about 1200. It had little effect. The first standing commission working on the question was established in 1902, on March 24. It was attached to the Ministry of Education and composed of one chief and up to 15 members, among them besides those already mentioned—Inoue Tetsujirō 井上哲次郎, Haga Yaichi 芳賀矢一, Hoshina Kōichi 保科孝一 and Takakusu Junjirō 高輔順次郎. As chief of the commission was appointed Baron Katō Hiroyuki 加藤弘之. The official name was Kokugo Chōsa Iinkai 國語調査委員會. It existed officially until 1913, when it was suppressed by Ordinance (勅令) No. 178 of June 13, with effect from that day. However, it is interesting to note that from 1914 till 1917 still various publications appeared under the name of this commission, e.g. 國語法 in December 1916, and that it was for the second time abolished in 1921 (Kampō, June 24). Perhaps to lay stress on the transitory character of this institution the Government called its successor Rinji Kokugo Chōsakai 臨時國語調查會, Temporary Language Committee. It worked from 1921 till 1934, having up to 35 members, among them also Shimazaki Tōson (Haruki) 島崎藤村 (春樹). This commission was replaced in 1934 (Kampō, December 22) by the Kokugo Shingikai 國語審議會, also with 35 (later 40) members. The final Tōyō Kanji list is the work of this commission. It was formally abolished, but reorganized in 1949 together with the whole Ministry of Education, as its organ for language matters. Some of its tasks may, however, have passed to the new institute Kokuritsu Kokugo

2) Kokugo Chōsa Enkaku Shiryō 國語調査沿革資料・文部省教授局國語課發. At the same date the same Office published a very useful list of literature concerning the Kanji reform: Tōyō Kanji gendai kanazukai ni kansuru bunken mokuroku 当用漢字現代かなづかいに関する文献目録. I owe it to the kindness of the personnel of the Diet Library, Miyakezaka Section, to have been able to study the relevant literature, and I here want to express my hearty thanks to them.

3) Mombushō Setchihō, May 31, 1949. 文部省設置法 (昭和 24 年 5 月 31 日 • 法律第 146 號 • 官報昭和 24 年 5 月 31 日号外第 58 号).
Kenkyūsho 国立国語研究所 which was established by Law No. 254 of December 20, 1948.

In the process of the Kanji reform (reduction and simplification) we may distinguish several steps. The first is to decide, which signs should be selected, and which discarded. A second question concerns the shape or form of a character (jitai 字体) and includes the eventual choice of abbreviations, which sometimes differ entirely from the full form, but are identical in meaning (e.g. 體 and 休, 売 and 売, 彈 and 弾). A third concern is the reading, or the readings, of a certain character. Let us see, what was done in the course of the new reform regarding these three items.

1. Number of characters. This question was much agitated. We mentioned the proposal of 1900: viz., 1200. A similar low number was still proposed by the commission in April 1946 (1295 characters), but not accepted. The pretensions of the Ministry were rather high: about 2600 (in 1919), 2669 (December 1942). The different committees formulated different projects, e.g. Jōyō Kanji Hyō 常用漢字表 (May 1923) with 1962 characters and 154 abbreviations. Unfortunately the whole bureau with all the papers was burnt down in the big earthquake, September 1, 1923. But an emended sketch was published later, June 3, 1931. In 1937 Kanji Jitai Seiri An 漢字字体整理案 was published with 1858 characters. The next proposal of the Committee was Hyōjun Kanji Hyōan 標準漢字表案 (2528 ch.), June 1942. Finally on November 5, 1946, at the 12. General Meeting of Kokugo Shingikai, 1850 Tōyō Kanji were fixed. They had already been used in the new Constitution of Japan promulgated two days before, and were made obligatory by the Regulation which we reproduced at the beginning of this article.

2. Form of the standard characters. This matter was not settled at once, when the list appeared, but two years and a half later, by the Cabinet Regulation No. 1\textsuperscript{4)} of April 28, 1949. Rather long discussions preceded the last decision on the form of Tōyō Kanji, especially in the Kokugo Shingi Kai. In the book of Mr. Hosoi mentioned above, the titles of 181 proposals in this matter are enumerated, the fruit of the studies of this commission between 1935 and 1945. The result of these numerous efforts will be dealt with further down. Here only the abbreviations would seem to call for special mention. The Tōyō Kanji list of 1946 comprises 131 abbreviations (简易字体). The second list (Jitai-hyō) adds over 20, e.g. 仏 for 佛, 広 for 广, 序 for 序, 伝 for 傳.

\textsuperscript{4)} Tōyō Kanji Jitai Hyō 常用漢字字体表. It was published not only in the Kampō, but also in form of a special pamphlet by the Kokugo-ka of the Ministry of Education.
転 for 鑽. 固 for 圓. 尽 for 悶. 光 for 寶. 応 for 應. 来 for 來. 条 for 梳. 価 for 價. 單 for 單 (also in compounds). 県 for 郷. 桜 for 櫻.

3. *Readings.* The first list of November 1946 simply enumerated the 1850 standard *Kanji*, in their usual order, viz., according to the 214 keys of Emperor K'ang-hsi's dictionary, but without any readings. The readings were determined by a Cabinet Regulation of February 16, 1948. The order in which the characters are given is the same, but to every character one or two *on* 音 or *kun* 調, or both, are added. It is very characteristic for the scope of the whole *Kanji*-reform that the real Japanese words (*Yamato kotoba*) should be written mostly in *kana*, as there are not so many homonyms creating a risk of misunderstandings, as is the case with many like-sounding *on*. Consequently the *On-kun-hyō* lays down for 843 characters (or 45.5% of all *Toyo* *Kanji*) that their usage should be restricted to the rendering of their *On*. To make this point clear by a few examples, take e.g. 倫. This character belongs to the *Toyo* *Kanji*, but its reading is now restricted to the *on*-sound HAKU. A real *kun*-reading (oji, uncle) was discarded, and if you want to write this word, you have to use *kana*. 列 has the *Yamato*-reading *tsuranaru*; but this has to be written now in *kana*, while 列 is admitted only for the *on*-sound RETSU. The second big group (44.5%) are the 823 characters with one *kun*, and, besides, nearly all with one *on*, thus generally with two readings. Ten per cent only (184) have more than two readings, viz. 148 characters 3 readings, 30 characters 4, three characters five, two characters (生 and 行) six, and one character (下) seven readings allowed.

II. *Systematic Part*

To allow those readers who are familiar with the older condition of using characters in Japanese a judgment on the purport of the new legislation, it may be appropriate to compare the modern list with two older ones.

The little dictionary for school-children, published by *Sanseidō*, 常用漢字新辞典 (emended edition 6) September 1932) brings the 1858 characters (including 155 abbreviations) of the then official list 常用漢字, but it adds, for convenience' sake, the respective full forms of the abbreviations, and consequently contains 2039 signs. If we compare the new *Toyo* *Kanji* list with this dictionary, we find the following

5) 内閣調令第 2 号・内閣告示第 2 号・当用漢字音調表 (*Toyo* *Kanji* *On-kun-hyō*).
6) The first edition, based upon the first *Jōyō Kanji Hyō*, appeared in 1923 and had 1962 characters and 154 abbreviations.
alterations:

1. 150 full forms were discarded and 163 characters entirely eliminated. This means lowering the number from 2013 to 1700.

2. The rest of 1700 either remained in their old form (1175), or were modified (275), or were replaced by abbreviations and simplifications (250).

3. The number of 1700 is to be increased by 150, viz. by the 150 characters which *Tōyō Kanji* introduced anew. Thus we arrive at 1850.

A few remarks on the alterations just mentioned may be welcome.

*Eliminated characters.* Among these are, first, characters for common words, which can easily be written in *kana*, like 也 (*nari*, in bills), 之 *no*, 皿 *sara*, 此 *kore*, 其 *sore*. Also eliminated were a number of characters meaning animals and plants, like 猫 *neko* 猫, 豹 *tora* 豹, 蛇 *hebi* 蛇, 蛙 *kaeru* 蛙, 鳥 *hachi* 鳥, 蜻蜓 *mitsu* 蜻蜓, 鳥 *suzume* 鳥, 魚 *koi* 魚, 鳥 *hato* 鳥, 鷹 *tsuru* 鷹, 熊 *shika* 熊, 亀 *kame* 亀, 鶴 *tatsu* 鶴 and 龍, and 桃 *sugi* 桃, 柿 *kaki* 柿, 柿 *kuri* 柿, 鳥 *kiri* 鳥, 梨 *nashi* 梨, 木 *kusunoki* 柿, and even 筆 *fuji* 筆! The *Yamato-proclase* (訓) of these words is scarcely to be confounded with homonyms, wherefore it was deemed advisable to let them be written in *kana*, in order to reduce the number of characters. Similar reasons stood for eliminating 崎 and *oka* 岡 in spite of their frequent occurrence in place names.

The last character gives occasion to mention what seems to be an inconsistency in the new selection. In several instances it can be shown, that a character as such was eliminated, whereas the children have still to know it, because it is an element included in another character which was kept. Thus the sign of the dragon 龍 was discarded; but there remained a character 豚 which includes it. 亀 瓜, the melon, was eliminated; but there are 豚 and 豚. And the same happens with 岡 in the characters 鍬 and 鍬.

*Modifications and simplifications.* While abbreviations may, as we have seen, sometimes be quite different from the full form which they are to replace, *simplifications* could be called those characters in which the design is new, but still closely related to the original form, omitting some strokes, in order to facilitate the writing. Thus, e.g. the *Tōyō Kanji* *Jitai-hyō* replaces regularly in the respective compounds, the group 魚 by 魚, or the characters 半 and 了 by 半 and 了. Further, one could call the change a *modification*, if it consists e.g. only in adapting the printed forms of the *Ming-chô* types to the brush-forms. This was done, when in the *Jitai-hyō* 文 was chosen to replace 文, and 全平券羽 鐵食 instead of 全平券羽 貓食. It is easy to understand that the
introduced simplifications of characters affected mostly those written with many strokes. Consequently there were simplified—of the former list—all those with 25, 24, 23 strokes (19), and of the 22 stroke-group of 10 there remained only 3. The changes are in some cases very slight, e.g. when replacing 丰 by 々, 木 by 本 (without the hook called hane), 告 by 告, 亡 by 死, 来 by 来, 又 by 又, 青 by 青, 包 by 包, 聖 by 聖. But, of course, they affect not only these characters as such, but also all the compound characters in which they occur, e.g. 成 in 城盛誠. And there are many such, because more than 500 (27%) were modified in the new list.

Newcomers. The number of 150 additions was mentioned above; they represent 8% of the total and seem to supply rather the wants of educated adults, when compared with the selection for the purpose of general education which is reflected in the little dictionary quoted above. To show the scope of these additions we here give fifty of the most remarkable ones, which are needed for words in frequent use.

乾  KAN (hosu, to dry)
仮  HO (mohō, imitation)
儒  CHI, ne, atai, value
儒  JU (jugaku, Confucianism)
冠  KAN, kanmuri, crown
割  HO, to dissect (kaibōgaku, anatomy)
欠  mom-me (3.75 grammes)
圈  KEN, circle, sphere
婆  BA (samba, midwife)
孔  KÔ (used to write the name of Confucius)
宇宙  KAKU (kekka, ku, tuberculosis)
寂  JAKU (jakumetsu, Nirvana)
寧  NEI (teinei, politeness)
寝  RYÔ, dormitory
捲  SAKU (shiboru, to squeeze, milk)
暁  GYÔ, akatsuki, dawn
暫  ZAN (shibaraku, a short time)
析  SEKI (bunseki, analysis)
核  KAKU (kekka, tuberculosis)
瀬  se, a shoal
矛盾  the two characters used in mujun, contradiction
硫  RYÔ, ió, sulphur.
硝  SHÔ (shōshi=garasu, glass)
禅  ZEN (Buddhist sect)
髻  SHÔ (keshó, dressing)
織  SEN (senri, fibre)
背  KÔ (kōtei, affirmation)
B. H. Chamberlain proposes in his work on Japanese writing 7) “2350 common characters with which students must familiarise themselves, whether their ultimate object in learning Japanese be mission work, diplomacy, commerce, or learned research. Just these 2350 indispensable characters are here brought before their notice” (p. 7). A comparison of the new list with Chamberlain’s “indispensable” characters shows that 224 characters of the Tōyō Kanji (12% of the 1850) are not among those in Chamberlain’s catalogue. However, as an “Appendix” to his work (p. 47, 480), this author added a second list including 1961 Chinese characters “which occupy, broadly speaking, the second rank, and which the more ambitious student, perfect in the 2350 Common Characters, may look on as his next, his final prey”. Examining this second list we discover 190 of the lacking 224 characters, so that the remaining rest is reduced to only 34 (1.8%), which is not much. And we may remember that within the 50 years since Chamberlain wrote—a period of two World Wars and tremendous technical progress—also the needs regarding expression of ideas have somewhat changed. As a matter of fact, a good number of the newcomers, like 拭, 掚 and 掩, are used for technical expressions. So much for

the comparison of the new selection with older ones.

To give one specimen of the effects of the new regulation, we may quote some statistical data published in 1950 by the Tôkyô office of the Asahi Shimbun.8) The Ôsaka office of the Asahi Shimbun made an inquiry to catalogue the frequency of the characters used in that paper in 1941, and the Tôkyô office of the Mainichi Shimbun instituted a similar examination for 1946-1948. A total of 29,507,387 characters and signs was examined, belonging to 2,616 different signs. The 1850 characters of the new list (with 3 additional ciphers) occur in 16,659,841 of the total, in other words 56.46%. Second in rank are the hiragana-signs (9,808,243, or 33.24%). The third group are the katakana-signs (1,386,437, or 4.70%). Punctuation signs, brackets and such like occupy 914,075 points (3.09%), so that these four main contingents amount to 28,768,596 points, or 97.49%. In the little rest of 738,791 signs (2.51%) are included the comparatively few occurrences of discarded characters (technical term 外字), viz. 456,276 (1.5% of the total, 2.9% of the Chinese characters). Among the most frequent 2000 signs there are only 66 taken from the discarded ones. It can easily be seen that most of them came to be printed in a newspaper only because they form part of a family name or a geographical name. For instance number one of them (藤 TÔ, fuji) is used innumerable times in writing Katô, Satô, Saitô, Andô etc. Therefore it appears as No. 288 among the 2000. The next (No. 354) is oka 岡, used in writing Fukuoka, Okayama. Saki (Nagasaki), saka ( Ôsaka), kata (Niigata), sen (Sendai) furnish other examples of this category. A few tests taken last summer from leading Tôkyô newspapers showed that 外字 were used to a similarly small extent, mostly in the advertisement column. As a comparison of earlier conditions may stand a test of Tôkyô Nichi-nichi Shimbun of April 1934. Among 3400 Kanji only 40 different characters occurred from those which were now eliminated, that is a little more than one per cent.

Shall we attempt an outlook on the future development of the Kanji institution in Japan? No doubt that the use of kana, especially in novelist literature will make progress. For scientific books the official 1850 Kanji may be found insufficient, so that the writers of such books will inevitably exceed the limits of Tôyô Kanji. The United States Education Mission to Japan (March 1946) submitted to the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, General MacArthur, a Re-

8) Katsuya Shiyô Dosû Chôsa, Jukugo Shiyô Dosû Chôsa 活字使用度数調査・熟語使用度数調査, 東京, 昭和 25 年, 朝日新聞東京本社.
port 9) in which we read (p. 18-19):

“The common people, if they are to be well informed and fully articulate in both domestic and foreign affairs, must be given a more simple medium of reading and writing [than the Kanji] . . . . In the
judgement of the Mission, there are more advantages to Romaji than to Kana. . . . Recognizing the many difficulties involved, sensitive to
the natural feelings of hesitation on the part of many Japanese, and
fully aware of the gravity of the changes proposed, we nevertheless
propose:

1. That some form of Romaji be brought into common use by all means possible.
2. That the particular form of Romaji chosen be decided upon by a commission of Japanese scholars, educational leaders, and statesmen.
3. That the commission assume the responsibility for co-ordinating the program of language reform during the transitional stages.
4. That the commission formulate a plan and a program for introducing Romaji into the schools and into the life of the community and nation through newspapers, periodicals, books, and other writings.”

These proposals were not accepted by the Japanese Government, but the way of Tōyō Kanji was chosen, which we have tried to describe in this article. There were grave reasons for both plans. We must wait for the future to know, whether the actual choice was fortunate for the true cultural advancement of the Japanese nation, which we desire with all our heart.

Note. My studies on Chinese characters in Japanese extend over twenty-five years, and the material collected, especially on the problem of the phonetic elements in the characters, could warrant an enlarged and more complete reprint of the oldest list of phonetics which was published by a European, viz. that of Joseph Callery (1841), 10) with references to similar lists which appeared later. The question of “phonetics” is not undisputed after the more recent discoveries of, and studies about, the characters on the oracle bones. Even the whole usage of Chinese characters seems to be on the decline and on the verge of disappearing altogether. Hence studies of this kind seem to lose actuality and interest. If however a representative number of readers of this article were to judge the labour worth-while and encourage such a beginning, I would be willing to prepare such a publication as a number of the Monumenta Nipponica Monographs.