

The writing system between chinese and japanese history essay



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Chinese characters, 汉字, have a long history, their earliest known form was discovered through oracle bones which was dated back 3,000 years ago. Since then, China has already developed a sophisticated writing system. Furthermore, its writing system has become more widely accepted. Many countries in East Asia looked upon the Chinese civilization as a pioneer and role models. Japan, was one of those countries who successfully adopted the Chinese writing system, and then revised them to their own form. Other than Japan, China's neighbor countries sent out a great number of intellectuals to China and imitate their civilization. Its civilization has a magnificent impact on the development of East Asia until the rise of western civilization in the late 19th century. However, as the world economy becomes more globalized, China's huge market has becoming more attractive to foreigners, which engaged many of them to learn the language. Thus, the Chinese writing system has once again come to the spotlight, making the Chinese writing system a prerequisite to those who are interested in doing business in China.

The earliest form of writing was based on brush and ink, which was dated since the fourth century AD, the writing system then become more developed during the time of the Han dynasty. Over the time of the Han Empire, more than 9,000 new characters were added to the original dictionary. The number of characters grew on a constant rate over the history in response to the increasing demand of expression of words. As of today, there were over 50,000 characters that have been recorded in the vocabulary database. More than 10% of those characters are still in use in the modern world, of which only about 3-4% are sufficient for a person to read a book or an article on the newspaper.

In the 20th century, the Communist Party of China has simplified the traditional characters extensively in order to promote literacy. Simplified characters are officially used in Mainland China and Singapore. Although the traditional characters are still used in some area, for instance, Taiwan and Hong Kong, its influences are way less than the past. Simplified Chinese and traditional Chinese can be distinguished simply by its outlook, in which simplified Chinese has less strokes, and much easier to write, for instance, 国 was the simplified character of China, on the other hand, 國 was the traditional version of the same character. The increasing role China plays in international politics has made the Chinese writing system a popular business language, which created a trend for foreigners to learn the language,

In compare to Japanese' writing system, Modern Chinese also borrowed some elements from the West, such as Roman letters, Arabic numerals, and Western punctuation. Furthermore, the Chinese created their own pronunciation system which is known as bo, po, mo and fo or pinyin. The pinyin system was created in the early 20th century and it has become widely used in China, the pinyin system, was also known for its easiness, making the Chinese pronunciation easier to pickup for English or western language speakers.

The letters of the English alphabet letters are indicated by a particular pronunciation system. Along with the spelling system, the English language become more versatile, additionally, spelling often tells us more than just the sound. But in the main, English spelling is tied to sound. The English pronunciation system has become a complementary system to the Chinese
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pinyin system, in which each Chinese character has an English based pronunciation notation, for instance, water 水 has a pinyin of shuǐ, which made the language easier to learn for foreign learners.

Chinese characters have many syllables that have a similar sound. The fact that many Chinese characters are associated with both form and meaning makes the Chinese language difficult to comprehend. In the Chinese writing system, even though the forms are sometimes pronounced the same, it could have different meanings, different characters are used. For example, the pinyin pronunciation of “ta” can have many different meanings like, he, she, and it. The multiple meanings does not necessarily mean they have different meanings, sometimes, they could be closely related.

In conventional terms, such a character is said to have different readings. For example: the character 乐 can have pronunciation “le” and “yue”, with different meanings are pleasure and music. The multiple characters is the reverse case is where the same form is written with different characters: multiple characters 转 and 旋 have the same meaning, which means “turn around” but each individual word has different meaning. For example, 转 is move and 旋 is swing. This demonstrates Chinese characters’ definition can vary when more than one syllable are used in the writing.

Characters are the fundamental elements of the written Chinese system, it has made Chinese speaker easier to communicate with each other. Ordinary Chinese speaker can interpret and analyze their language in terms of the strokes of the characters. Chinese dialogue can simply consist of one

single character, each having their own particular meanings. There are many monosyllabic words in Chinese. For example: the word 吃 “chi” means eat, and that 狗 “gou” means “dog”.

However, sometimes a syllable does not mean individually, it has to be in conjunction with another syllable in order to make up a vocabulary, so the Chinese speakers combined two or more monosyllables to form a wider vocabulary base. For instances: 葡萄 “putao”, grape, 玫瑰 “meigui”, rose, and 蜘蛛 “zhizhu”, spider. The individual syllables in these cases are meaningless on their own and always occur in tandem. These characters cannot be broken up, once its broke up, the word would not even make sense in its own, which result in a similar situation as misspelling or using inappropriate words in English. Chinese characters primarily combine words to make more words. Sometimes this is simply a case of adding a suffix or prefix to a character.

For Chinese characters, character form is very important. Without some attention to form, learning thousands of characters would be impossible. The characters as pictures, many people are under the impression that characters are picture. There are, indeed, some straightforward pictorial or symbolic representations. Chinese writing system consists of many factors that one must pay attentions to, for instance, repetitive pronunciations of different words can be confusing to non-Chinese speaker, but as the Asian culture becomes more prominent, people began to have better information and knowledge in regard to Eastern language. Chinese’s pioneer role in writing civilization has a significant impact in the development of East Asian

civilization, Japan, was one of the country, who benefited the most through learning and imitating from China.

The Chinese writing system and Japanese writing system had a lot of similarities and that was mainly because of the cultural diffusion between China and Japan. The origin of their writing system was also founded by imitating Chinese writing system. Originally, when Chinese literatures were first brought to Japan in the Han dynasty, they have begun to adapt the Chinese political system into their society. Additionally, the Japanese applied the entire Chinese writing system into their own written system. Lastly, in the last stage of the early development of Japanese system, people began to use the Kojiki to write Japanese. In order to express their phonetic sound, the Japanese use sentences that consist of words and conclude with Chinese characters. This early system was rather cumbersome, in order to simplify it, the Japanese eventually simplified certain characters for specifically phonetic purposes, which led to the development of kana syllabaries.

The writing system changed a couple of times over the next centuries until the Japanese finally reach a consensus in the late 19th century movement to unify their writing structure. Due to the rising Japanese imperialism in the mid 20th century, the success of Japanese aggression has made them arrogant, which led to a further movement of Chinese culture eradication, which erased some use of Chinese characters in the Japanese writing system, instead, they inclined more toward Western Culture. Furthermore, this system was subject to more simplification and reform after the Second World War, in response to the increasing influence of the Western world and also to the creation of Simplified Chinese.

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In the modern Japanese language, Chinese characters, which are also known as kanji, are used to write verbs, nouns, and adjectives, acting like a bridge to connect Japanese phrases. On the other hand, Hiragana is used as a grammatical tool to make the system works . The foreign words that do not exist in the original Japanese dictionary are written in katakana. The fact that the Japanese system conjoined more than three cultures made it relatively complex and difficult to learn than many other languages.

The modern Japanese used a combination of first, Chinese characters, known in Japanese as kanji. There are currently 1945 officially approved characters of use in the media, etc, although quite a few more are actually in use. As described by Professor White,

An interesting point that should be made here is that the Chinese characters used in Japan today do not look like the Chinese characters that are currently used in China. This is not so much due to the Japanese variances over time as it is due to the changes the Chinese have made in their written script. If one were to take a class on classical Chinese it would be easy to see that the characters used look much the same as the Japanese kanji today. (White, par 2)

Additionally, hiragana and katakana, the two main Japanese systems are based on alphabet syllables rather than single sounds. It has a total of 46 basic letters, more if modified letters are included. Japanese then borrowed roman letters and Arabic numbers borrowed from other countries, and implemented to their own.

The Chinese characters have the same used in Japan and in China, indicated how Japanese were so good at learning from other countries. Chinese characters used by the Japanese were originated from the same tradition as the simplified Chinese, which are the characters of the Classical language. The Japanese writing system is so flexible that it can adopt many different languages in their system. Besides Chinese, English and Portuguese were two languages that strongly influenced their system. Although Chinese characters are used in a different form in Japanese, but the entire set of traditional Chinese characters can be found in the Japanese writing system.

Although the Japanese adopted the Chinese writing system ever since the Han dynasty, they did not fully assimilate to the Chinese writing system, instead they only utilize part of the writing system to fit in to their own. After the Second World War, the Japanese restricted the number of kanji, which fixed the number to 1, 850 characters without undue problems.

Unlike the Chinese writing system, which required approximately 3000 to 4000 words to function, the Japanese use hiragana or katakana to express their language. The Chinese writing system, on the other hand, uses only characters. When the Japanese cannot find an appropriate Chinese character to express their feeling, they often created new words to match exactly how they feel, and those words are also known as kokuji. Interestingly, even the Chinese, the mentor of the Japanese writing system consider kokuji as part of the Chinese character and include them in the large, more comprehensive Chinese character dictionaries.

The kana system was established because Chinese characters could not represent the grammatical and verb factors in spoken-Japanese. Originally, the Japanese writing system used Chinese characters to write these grammatical and verb elements phonetically. Therefore, many Chinese characters were simplified over the year in order to fit in to the kana system. Although the Japanese writing system consists of many complex languages, the Kana system made the entire writing system more efficient to represent combinations of different language, as well as grammatical, and conjunction matters.

By the 19th century, the Japanese were fascinated about restoring the original emperor and their legitimacy in East Asia, which was also known as the Kana restoration era, so they made a wide range of adjustment to their existing language. In order to eradicate some of the Chinese influence to Japanese language, Japanese changed the pronunciation of Kana, making the system more confusing. In order to solve the problems, many reformers called for a change in Japan after World War II, kana usage was then changed to reflect the modern pronunciation.

Today the hiragana is always used when people particles, like the endings on each verb. In Japan the young people begin to learn to read and write is use hiragana. The foreign words like depaato stands for “ department store”, in the past few years, Japanese has established a lot of new words in response to the increase in technology, in addition, they made a lot of katakana and many other words are often written with Chinese characters for common user.

Furigana is often used in the past few year, and it is common and popular for the books or other public printed and the pronunciation in few hiragana of katakana based on the Chinese character, like ノボル (noboru). We can see it is an example of furigana, people do not use it anymore today, but is still found in public books for the young people.

In conclusion, globalization has taken place ever since the Han dynasty in East Asia, enabling countries to share the goods of knowledge among region, which created a starting point for countries to develop or success in the future. The Chinese and Japanese writing systems, as well as their cultures have a lot in common. The kanji that was widely used in the Japanese writing system have become part of their culture, along with the influences of western civilization, making the Japanese a versatile civilization that consists of many different great culture and knowledge. Their complex writing system indicated their wide acceptance of foreign culture, which setup the milestone for the Japan's future economic and innovative success in the world. On the other hand, China, has once again, raise upon their feet, and show-off their historical and sophisticated civilization to the world along with their increasingly important role in the international market, attracting more than millions of foreigners to learn their language. And as these two countries continue to rise, more and more foreigners will begin to pickup Chinese and Japanese.

Outside Sources- Reference

White, Matthew, " The Japanese writing system"

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