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Japanese Nationalism and Cultural Memory: Creating Memories of a Native Japanese Writing System

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Abstract

Native Japanese writing or *jindai moji* (age of the gods script) discourse creates the cultural memory of a native Japanese writing system that never actually existed, and functions as a tool for establishing power and clarifying group identity. Another important function of this constructed cultural memory of native writing is to defend the honor of Japanese culture and argue for ethnic superiority over competing Asian cultures. This discourse attempts to proclaim the authority of those seeking divine legitimacy, using arguments based on the attribution of power to the Japanese gods. Here it will not be claimed that this native writing system was ever used to communicate messages. Rather, the conception of a native Japanese symbol system, one said to have been used by ancient Japanese authority figures, gods and their descendants who ruled Japan to demonstrate their superiority and the legitimacy of their rule, will be further explored.

Keywords

cultural memory, identity construction, nationalism, language, speech, writing, literacy

The Strange Discourse Concerning *Jindai Moji*

It is a well-documented historical fact that various hypotheses, opinions and beliefs about the native Japanese language, and about an accompanying secret writing system with divine status, have been used in various attempts from the medieval period up to present times to invent the “cultural memory” of a superior, native, sacred religious culture in Japan (Harada).¹ Cultural memory is the operative term here, because this writing system is itself ahistorical and its preservation is dependent upon group memories that are passed on—via literary but also oral and ritual means—in order to create and maintain a group identity that is not substantiated and supported by orthodox historical sources.

Furthermore, in Japanese literary and cultural discourse from ancient times up to the early modern period, the cultural memory of a superior, native sacred writing system has been based on a certain understanding of and attitude toward written communication. The latter takes acts of writing to be, at best, elite tools of governing authority, and, at worst, unnecessary, even dangerous, human challenges to the sacred truth. In very simple terms, *jindai moji* discourse was concerned with the effects of writing on culture, but had nothing to say about reading.² In this centuries-long *jindai moji* discourse, reading and writing were completely divorced from one another; that is, there was no recognition that there might be a natural connection between these two cultural skills.

¹ Harada’s 2007 *Zusetsu Jindai moji nyûmon (Introduction to Age of the God’s Writing)* provides a fairly objective overview of the variations of this discourse throughout Japanese history. Unfortunately such a source of information in English has yet to be published. However, in this essay no specific findings or conclusions of Harada’s work were used and so are not referenced. For the English reader I suggest Mori Mizue, “Jindaimoji,” *Encyclopedia of Shinto*.

² Japan’s early modern Shinto scholar Hirata Atsutane (1776-1843) is the best-known nativist proponent of *jindai moji*. However, *jindai moji* was only a short-lived sideline study for him, and his more interesting speculative theories, as well as those of his famous nativist predecessors, are not pertinent to this article’s purposes. For the best English language encapsulation of his importance to Japanese history, see McNally. For in-depth information on the history of Hirata’s predecessors in nativist studies, for example Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801), who rejected the idea of *jindai moji*, see Nosco.

Understanding *Jindai Moji* Discourse: Writing Without Reading?

Various cultural memories of a native Japanese writing have been created throughout Japanese history, reinforcing the need to write a new kind of narrative about Japan. This has resulted in a fictitious discourse about what was referred to as *jindai moji*, arrays of writing systems supposedly originating in the mythical age of the gods.³ The belief in *jindai moji* discourse led to a centuries-long attempt to create a memory independent of objective historical standards of evidence.⁴ However, it may be possible to shed more light on how this *jindai moji* discourse came about and how it affected Japanese culture and society through the centuries by identifying some of the effects of these memory formations on the groups responsible for creating them, as well as those who reacted negatively toward them.

In effect, these memory formations created, for those affected by them, a Japan that existed as a symbol devoid of any actual historical referent. Therefore it was sometimes unnecessary and even detrimental for anyone promoting these formations to remember actual historical actions or events. This symbolic Japan is not dependent on actions and events in themselves but only on the commemoration of actions and events, regardless of their facticity, their historical reality. Therefore, what is being studied herein is not history *per se* but rather the use and reuse of certain commemorations that relate the “re-presented” past to the “re-constitution” of tradition in the present.

What adds to the complexity of the nature of these *jindai moji* memories is the fact that their contents do not remain constant over the centuries, even in cases where the group in charge of the memories maintains a stable genealogy or bloodline focused on academic or narrative inheritance. Nevertheless, *jindai moji* cultural memories constantly generate representations that serve to create a group memory with a bonding force (Assmann 81-100). This bonding group memory is produced by those who intend to stabilize and reinforce an idea of identity by using *jindai moji* discourse as an identifier for their particular group. The reproduction or at least reconstitution of the bonding memory results in a representation of an

³ According to the earliest Japanese “history,” the *Kojiki* from 712 CE, the age of the gods was the time from the beginning of the world until the first human emperor of Japan, Jimmu Tennō.

⁴ “Memory” (like “myth”) does imply narratives which express certain important values for a specific community; however, the marginality of the community that believes in *jindai moji* does not merit the use of the term “myth,” which is more appropriately applied to the established traditional Japanese stories found in the *Kojiki* (mentioned in the previous note).

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assumed true history of the group, which the group treats as a history of actual events. Some members may wish to dissent from the majority based on their own self-interests, but the group's ideological leadership is adept at political positioning and will achieve a consensus. This expectation is fulfilled time and again in the history of the discourse of *jindai moji* memory.

An unspoken embarrassment seems to motivate the discourse of these *jindai moji*-based cultural memories in early modern Japan.⁵ The “nativists” stood facing a question that left unanswered was tantamount to belittling the whole of Japanese history and culture: “if the Japanese islands had their own thriving culture thousands of years in the past as was claimed by all those supporting the discourse of Japan's uniqueness, given its isolation from the Asian continent, why in all those generations of isolation was there never a need to create a native writing system?” The nativists recognized that early Japanese histories were clear in denoting that at some point it became necessary to establish a written record.⁶ This challenged the nativists to respond as to why such a response came so comparatively late, especially in comparison to the very long and well-documented history of China, and why the Japanese response resulted in Japan's adoption of the Chinese writing system.

It seems that in early modern Japan, which is by no means the period of the origin of *jindai moji* discourse but, instead, its zenith, this writing concerning the establishment of writing was already taking an apologetic stance in its defense of Japanese cultural honor. First of all, what obviously could not be denied was that everything written that narrated the story of the acquisition of writing occurred in a non-native script of Chinese origin. Secondly, this story of the development of *jindai moji* did not seem to follow the order it had in all other literate societies; that is, human memory followed by an expansion into written memory. Instead, *jindai moji* commences in statements written in a foreign (Chinese) script that lament a lost human memory of a lost written script, and then proceeds immediately to an explanation and apology based on the varieties of possible so-called ‘native’ scripts on display, but not in use, with all the phonemes described and explained in foreign script (Hirata). In fact, the discourse on *jindai moji* from the early modern period seems to be more accurately portrayed as an example of a recovered cultural memory, along with an explanation of its initial loss.

⁵ In particular this would include Atsutane and the hundreds of students in his academy.

⁶ See the Preface in *Kojiki* 37-44, or the Introduction in *Nihongi* xi-xxii.

What should also be included in the early modern Japanese discourse concerning *jindai moji* is an important nativist voice that denied any history that advocated a theory that an ancient and divine native script, *jindai moji*, ever existed in Japan. This voice denied that any such written system could have existed in the age of the gods. Perhaps the greatest nativist advocate of a theory of Japanese racial and ethnic superiority, Motoori Norinaga, vehemently denied any nativist claims that Japan had its own independently-developed writing script (Nosco). However, Norinaga's main argument in denying a *jindai moji* was to deny that writing was an advance in the human ability to retain or communicate truthful information.

Despite the contradictory stances, Norinaga's anti-*jindai moji* argument is fundamentally consistent with previous arguments affirming and valuing the use of native writing systems in ancient Japan. This consistency lies in the extraordinary but firm assumption, by both pro- and anti-*jindai moji* theorists that no nativist Japanese discourse on writing claims or even suggests that writing might prove to be a superior means of accurately storing or communicating truthful information. There is no claim that written texts can precisely and accurately store information for a future time when those human orally-transmitted sources of memory have passed away or have lost their biological ability to store and reproduce accurate information. In other words, there has been no claim that writing used for storage is in any way superior to oral communication used for storage.

In essence, to understand *jindai moji* discourse in Japan, one should start by regarding such discourse as being itself premised first and foremost on the creation of a new cultural memory. This new nativist cultural memory insisted that Japan's established history was itself negatively impacted by an unreliable writing system, that is, Chinese. This position was based on presumptions of language corruption associated with prejudice against Chinese culture. The category of "cultural memory" more readily allows for variations in the narrative of events than does history. The category of history also tends to be granted the power to authorize a consensus because it is the property of those in power, while cultural memory is more likely to be employed by minority groups and smaller social units who lack the power to rewrite an authoritative history and establish a favorable consensus suited to their purposes.

Jindai moji discourse as cultural memory comes in a great variety of forms because it continues to change through the years of its varied existences, and through the voices of its many advocates, defying dominant historiographic trends that do not allow such freedom of transformation. Furthermore, too often *jindai moji* discourse is portrayed in standard histories as being only early modern

Japanese nationalist discourse. In actuality, such varieties of nationalist and nativist discourses, theorizing as they do about the origins of writing in Japan, already stand closer to the end of the *jindai moji* cultural memory story. However, for a fuller understanding we must begin the *jindai moji* narrative at a time before the dawn of written history in Japan, a starting point that also favors the more subjective method of ordering events allowed by cultural memory theory (Assmann).

***Jindai Moji* Defined and Delimited**

Jindai is a compound word composed of two Chinese characters and translated as “age of the gods”; it signifies a prehistoric or mythic time period in which human activity is not recorded. We know about this from the two earliest myth-histories, from 712 and 720, respectively, *Kojiki, Record of Ancient Matters*, and *Nihon Shoki, Chronicles of Japan*.⁷ As “age of the gods” would suggest, what is recorded are the actions of the gods, that is, Japanese deities called *kami*.⁸

Here the second term *moji* is also a compound; it is made up of two Chinese characters that mean “letters,” “characters,” or “script.” Since Japanese does not usually designate singular or plural forms it might be the English reader’s first instinct to think of *jindai moji* as one script created by ancient Japanese wise men, but actually there are multiple scripts touted by a number of scholars, theorists, amateur linguists, and historians throughout hundreds of years of Japanese history.⁹ Those *moji* referred to as *jindai moji* would best be called phonemic letters, or mono-syllabic symbols designating particular sounds. Others are pictographs, partly symbolic or just simple pictorial portrayals of objects found in nature. Some of these arrays give clear hints as to their genesis and others have been created with recognizable structuring principles. However, none of them have a pre-historic provenance that is supported by reliable archaeological or textual evidence, and it is not the purpose of this inquiry to present evidence as to whether any of these arrays are the true native script of the Japanese people—whether developed by humans or divinely granted.

⁷ Humans did exist in the age of the gods according to both of these ancient sources.

⁸ *Kami* is commonly translated as god or deity, but it is not always to be seen as implying an anthropomorphic entity. Some looser translations define *kami* as something that produces the feeling of awe or wonder in human beings; for example, “sublime” natural phenomena such as mountains, oceans, or lightning.

⁹ The oldest location where we may find these arrays published together is Hirata. Another, more recent, location is Harada.

The age of the gods officially ended when, according to the earliest recorded myths, Jimmu Tennô, the first emperor of Japanese myth, led his army on an eastern campaign to conquer the other non-Japanese inhabitants of the Japanese islands and establish a stable territory which recognized him as its leader.¹⁰ There is a centuries-old convention, based on dates provided by the mythical/historical narrative in the *Nihongi*, that Jimmu officially founded the capital of the Yamato state in the year 660 BCE.¹¹ Therefore, the Japanese who claimed the historical validity of *jindai moji* were provided with a “mythic”-historical date which delimited the provenance of this native Japanese script, clearly locating it before 660 BCE and thus in the mythic age of the gods.

If accurate, this dating process would mean the creation of the *jindai moji* was unaffected by and, even more importantly for nativists, untainted by Chinese characters, which made their earliest appearance in Japan, according to the attested Chinese historical record, in the third century CE (Harada 175-76). The *Chronicle of Wei*, the Chinese document that provides the first evidence of the existence of a state on the Japanese islands, speaks of a place called Yamatai whose native inhabitants are led by the shaman-queen Himiko (Lurie 373). It further speaks of the use of Chinese characters in this Japanese state, and does not mention any (pre-existing) native script. The historically supported conclusion is that this written script—deemed necessary for the extended communication needed in order to establish this recently-organized, large-scale state—was imported early in the first millennium CE. In addition, there is no historical evidence of a native script that would correspond to something that could be called *jindai moji*.

Writing and Ruling in “Pre-Historic” Japan

There is said to be archaeological evidence of the existence of writing in Japan from the beginning of the first millennium of the Common Era. As we can learn from David Lurie’s detailed work on the history of writing in Japan, be it Chinese or otherwise, there is a vast difference between having the written word

¹⁰ The first emperor, Jimmu, is/was divine, or at least more than human; however, his story marks the beginning of the chronicling of periods of imperial reign, and mostly highlights specific actions within the human society. See Book 2, Chapter 47 of the *Kojiki* or Book 3 of the *Nihon Shoki* for the transition from the age of gods to the age of humans.

¹¹ In 1940, the two thousand and six hundredth anniversary of this birth of the so-called unbroken imperial line, which was considered at that time to be the unique imperial polity of the Japanese people, was celebrated in Japan as well as in Japanese diasporic communities such as those in Taiwan, Korea, Manchuria, and Hawaii.

and being able to read the written word. Lurie explains convincingly that literacy should not be so narrowly defined as to include only the ability to read written texts. He demonstrates that there are in fact various types of literacy that have existed and still exist today, in Japan and throughout the world.

However, Lurie's work also makes it clear that writing can be extremely meaningful, and culturally influential, even when the symbols are not "legible" to those for whom the text was written, particularly in cases where the writing is understood by most targeted readers in an "alegible" manner. That is to say, the written words do not have to be understood by readers as having clear and precise meanings, or as conveying *truths*. The written symbols merely have to be there; in fact, they only really require that the intended readers *believe* that they are there. That is, they can be hidden and unseen as long as the intended readers believe this writing to be visible, where even texts that are open to the public may not necessarily be "visible."¹²

Lurie says this about an inscription written in suspect Chinese on a mirror, one that was excavated from a royal tomb dated to 503 CE:

Appearing as it does in a contextual vacuum, it is dangerous to extrapolate too much about its reception, but its errors and incoherencies suggest something of the nature of the "audience" for all of these early inscriptions. Regardless of the capabilities of the scribe and/or artisan who produced this text, it would appear that its departures from "legibility" did not prevent its having been cast (at great expense), and then treated with sufficient care that it survived in such excellent condition. This is entirely in keeping with the expectation that the "alegible" impact of writing in this period was more important to its meaning and function than its capability to transmit or preserve information. (101-02)

It is important to note, then, for the purposes of the present analysis, the idea or belief that writing is not necessarily connected with the transmission of meaning through a "legible" message or text. In fact, *jindai moji* discourse in Japan, from its inception to the present day, almost never had anything to do with symbols within a

¹² Many of the most sacred and powerful material artifacts of politico-religious origin are well-known but not shown to just anyone. For example, the Ise Shrine to the Sun Goddess can be visited but not entered, and even when visited the view is purposely obfuscated. This, of course, adds to the power of the mystique.

system whose individual phonemes, words, syntax constitute an exactly reproducible stored message.

At this time in Japan, according to the written sources from China and judging by the archaeological evidence that continues to be found in ancient Japanese tombs, writing provided legitimacy to a hierarchical government or series of governments (Lurie 67-115). Their inscriptions tell us that such objects as swords and mirrors were gifts from powerful authority figures, kings if you will, who were establishing relationships of fealty with lesser authority figures in the chain of governance. That is, inscriptions, whether legible or “alegible” from the viewpoint of those providing or receiving them, were symbols of power and legitimacy. In other words, writing served as a marker of power and political authority, not as a conveyor of specific factual information.

This assertion is borne out in examples from one of the earliest Japanese histories—*Nihon shoki*, *Chronicles of Japan*—which was first presented to the imperial court in 720, just eight years after a similar but shorter history of Japan, *Kojiki*, *Record of Ancient Matters*. The clearest example of the linking of writing to political authority, and of using writing to establish and/or bolster said authority, comes from the Temmu Tennō chapter of *Kojiki*, where the emperor is said to have ordered a number of ranking court officials to commit to writing a chronicle of the emperors: this command led to the compilation of the earliest extant Japanese history, *Kojiki*, *Record of Ancient Matters*, in 712 CE (301-20). This collection of the earliest Japanese myths, along with what is sometimes called actual history, is considered to be the first clear proof, *in writing*, of the legitimacy of the Imperial family and the early Yamato court (350).

Another interesting example of this particular use of writing for political legitimacy came from the same source, *Nihon shoki*, and the same chapter, and also has piqued the interest of *jindai moji* seekers through the centuries. Here we read that the emperor commanded a court vassal, Sakahibe no Muraji, to compose a forty-four-volume document, the text of which was written in “new characters” invented by Sakahibe himself. In other words, not only was a document in support of imperial authority created, but a new writing system was recorded as having been invented in Japan. This new system, which is no longer extant, was said to resemble Sanskrit and was most likely an attempt to create a phonetic alphabet that could be used for writing Chinese characters. However, if these alphabetic characters (letters) were created in Temmu’s time then they clearly are not the *jindai moji* referred to in most Japanese discourse. Still, this example adds further weight to the claim that the

use and manipulation of writing was, during this very early period, the prerogative of those wielding governmental authority.

Jindai Moji: Tracing the History of Memory

An overview of the pre-modern *jindai moji* memory discourse used in the creation of a group identity, and that memory discourse's function and effectiveness in achieving the goals supposedly attainable once that memory could be sustained, should help to clarify specific examples from the history of Japanese *jindai moji* cultural memory. There is evidence from as early as the eighth century in Japan, almost immediately after the completion of the *Nihon shoki*, that special lectures were held in order to explicate the many intricacies of this text. As Bernhard Scheid explains:

As one of the first Japanese texts written in Chinese characters, the *Nihon shoki* was probably never readable without special expertise, and with the natural changes in language, even those who could read it gradually lacked an understanding of the ancient words. Already in the official lectures on the text, mentioned before, the language of the *Nihon shoki* was explained as different from ordinary speech, deriving from the age of the gods, and the pronunciation of certain words became an important topic. (288)

From these traceable historical beginnings as court lectures, the discourse on *jindai moji* began to serve the first of what would become a number of groups and their many and varied political purposes (Scheid 284-306).

Beginning from this time, it was said that only a family of ritualists and diviners possessed a knowledge of this special language and writing, this language of the gods, a secret knowledge which could be taught only by them. The continuing demand for secrecy did not mean that this knowledge must be limited but rather that access to it was officially recognized as the prerogative of a certain group. This memory of a special language developed by the Japanese *kami* thus came to identify a particular lineage; to become a part of this lineage one had to be initiated into the study of these symbols and this secret group, whose future existence relied on institutional and collective memory. At this time then, the memory rather than the history of *jindai moji* was used to establish an elite group of scholars of Japanese antiquity, one with certain select rights and privileges.

These original *Nihon shoki* language scholars later identified themselves as a unique group whose members all claimed their ancestors had been Shinto scholars, so that they were defined not only by their knowledge of *jindai moji*. This is thus an example of *jindai moji* memory being modified to allow for different individual and (political) group identities or definitions. Although the family lineage of those claiming this special *jindai moji* tradition was the same, the standards and requirements of group definition were changing (Inbe, *Jindai no maki kôketsu*, *Jindai kôketsu*). No longer was this group just defined by a family-based scholastic tradition: its members were soon vying for dominance within a more expanded field that included various culture-based political and religious groups. While political and religious power and lineage were important, the definitive factor was recognizing the need to retain the ahistorical memory of being *jindai moji* specialists.

The founder of Yoshida Yuiitsu Shinto, Yoshida Kanetomo, also called Urabe Kanetomo (1435-1511), is known to have once given a lecture on the *Nihon shoki* in which he asserted that there were 13,709 *jindai moji* created by the gods, and that they were to be discovered through the practice of divination (*urabe*). His group further claimed that the *jindai moji* could be arranged in a fifty-syllable chart that included ways of describing pitch differences, one that seemed to assume their similarity to the musical notations in use by Buddhists. Kanetomo's successor Kiyohara Noritaka (1475-1550), adopted from the Kiyohara family, wrote in his *Nihon shoki shô* of a secret tradition maintained by the Yoshida family: according to this tradition there were 15,354 *jindai moji* complete with pitch signs, all discovered through ritual divinations (Kiyohara). This belief that in effect there were over 10,000 phonograms that had been preserved as a secret teaching had a great influence on later theory.

Jindai moji discourse was to take another turn in future centuries at the hands of restoration Shinto ideologues, after the passing of the highly influential Yoshida Kanetomo in 1511. In effect, after the medieval period *jindai moji* became a topic of nationalist interest. Now *jndai moji* was no longer the possession of a single family, and no longer just secret teachings learned through divination as practiced by a special and unique brand of Japanese religion. That is, *jindai moji* discourse was still to be used to establish a bonding memory but no longer a bonding memory that separated Yoshida Shinto from its competition. After it was adopted by nationalist nativists, called *kokugakusha*, *jindai moji* was to become the bonding memory that separated radical religious nativists from all others, especially those

nativists driven mainly by nonreligious antiquarian motives.¹³ This usage of *jindai moji* discourse is best represented by the writings and teaching activities of Hirata Atsutane in the first half of the nineteenth century.¹⁴

In the Tokugawa period there were rumors of the existence of secret *jindai moji* scrolls, and also of collections of bamboo slips that transmitted *jindai moji* handed down to shrines in Izumo and Atsuta. In addition, *jindai moji* theories other than those held, practiced and taught by the Yoshidas began to arise. The Shinto lineage called Kikke Shinto presented the twelve traditional horary characters as a concrete array of written script, and held that these characters were still *jindai moji*.¹⁵ As such they were declared to be a part of the tradition coming from Yamazaki Ansai (1618-82), the founder of yet another school of Neo-Confucian Shinto called Suika Shinto, and thus adopted as part of the traditional teachings of yet another house of Shinto.¹⁶ Another *jindai moji* theory was introduced in a dubious work called *Sendai kuji hongî taisei kyô* which appeared at this time. This text said that the sun goddess Amaterasu had proclaimed to the earth god Onamuchi an edict consisting of forty-seven sounds, one that could be represented as a sound chart which had been transmitted to certain shrines in ancient times.¹⁷

Unfortunately, according to the text, those particular *jindai moji* characters were not recorded. Instead, the text showed certain Chinese characters, supposedly chosen and exchanged by Shôtoku Taishi (574-622), which corresponded to each sound of the original *jindai moji* chart.¹⁸ Later, associations between the *jindai moji*

¹³ *Kokugakusha*, practitioners of national learning and specifically of the study of Japanese antiquities, is a general term for followers of the Japanese nativist movement of the Tokugawa period (1603-1867). Although these men were all united in their love of Japanese antiquities, they were of lineages and schools that emphasized different topics. In other words, not all *kokugakusha* were fervent nationalists with an interest in international politics.

¹⁴ For some of the latest work in English on this topic, see Hansen 129-33, where background information on *jindai moji* history is presented in more detail.

¹⁵ These are the Chinese characters representing the twelve-animal ordering system adopted from China, starting with the rat and ending with the boar.

¹⁶ Tachibana Kikke Shinto and Yamazaki Suika Shinto merged at times during the eighteenth century due to the fact that important adherents received their secret initiations and teachings from both traditions.

¹⁷ Amaterasu is claimed to have uttered the sounds, *hi fu mi yo i mu na ya ko to mo chi ro ra ne shi ki ru yu i tsu ku nu so o ta ha ha ku me ka u wo he ni sa ri he te no ma su a se e ho ke re*, an utterance which could be used as a spell for exorcising evil spirits and could be rearranged to adhere to the traditional Japanese syllabary. For more information in Japanese on more *jindai moji* theories considered like this one to be suspect, see Nagayama and Fujiwara.

¹⁸ Shôtoku Taishi was an important cultural figure; he was given credit for advancing Japanese culture through the importation of continental Asian culture.

and certain Chinese characters became part of the arguments used by religious theorists in support of unifying the three religions of Japan. Explanatory texts also appeared at this time showing various relationships between and among the Japanese sounds and the supposedly corresponding Chinese characters. However, the authors of these texts could not deny the fact that while arguing for the existence of *jindai moji* and their supposed sounds, they could not present the *jindai moji* themselves. In reality, these teachings about *jindai moji* were all based on sounds and meanings attached to Chinese characters.

In 1778, Buddhist scholar Fujii Masamichi declared that he had discovered a secret scroll containing forty-seven characters, which he called *hifumi*, a term that means Japanese script (Burns 105). Fujii also argued for the authenticity of additional arrays of cursive characters, which he claimed were based on transmissions from ancient shrines. After this, various other arrays and systems began to “appear” as interest in *jindai moji* theories grew. While on the one hand well-known Shintoists, Confucianists, evidential historians (*koshôgakusha*), and some *kokugaku* scholars such as Yoshimi Yukikazu, Dazai Shundai, Ise Sadatake, and Motoori Norinaga all denied there was such a thing as *jindai moji*, on the other hand there were also some famous and politically well-placed scholars such as Arai Hakuseki (1657-1725), who at least maintained a neutral stance (Endô).¹⁹

Atsutane wrote his most extensive *jindai moji* work, *Kanna hifumiden*, in 1821. In it he collected fifty different types of examples of “divine characters.” He examined and expounded on various theories, among them his colleague Yashiro Hirokata’s (1758-1841) theory that the twelve horary signs were Ryûkyû Island characters printed in the *Ryûkyû shintôki*. Atsutane’s conclusion was that there were two forms of block and cursive writing, *hifumi*, which were to be recognized as genuine *jindai moji*. His opinion gave a boost to arguments supporting the belief in true *jindai moji* in the late Tokugawa period. Nevertheless, arguments against this were very common. Ban Nobutomo reaffirmed the theory that the *kana* syllabary was derived from Chinese characters. He pointed out that Atsutane’s *hifumi* were very similar to *hangul*, and completely rejected the *jindai moji* theory. Yet this did little to dampen the Atsutane faction’s support for the theory (Hansen 129-31).

Atsutane made known some ancient charts that he deemed to be *jindai moji*. He set the block character forms and katakana readings alongside the cursive

¹⁹ A famous Confucian scholar and government official of the Edo period.

character forms. These arrays were arranged in a form called the *Hifumi uta*.²⁰ Atsutane felt confident about his *jindai moji* research because his chart showed a relationship of correspondence between two different types of character forms from two different textual sources. The block characters supposedly came from one secret source and the cursive characters from another. Atsutane called his detractors cultural traitors for supporting a *kana* syllabary sound chart established under the influence of Buddhism and Chinese culture. He also completely denied the *hangul* appropriation charges, claiming that any borrowing and appropriation had been done by the Korean culture (Hansen 131).

Nativist Language Theory: Norinaga's Apology for Japanese Illiteracy

The Japanese discourse on *jindai moji* becomes much more complex with the advent of the early modern period, and the commencement of nativism and its nationalism-inspired search for the “essence” of Japaneseness. Certain fundamental questions concerning language itself arose during this period. First of all, Japanese nativist scholars wrestled with the issues of reliability and the verity of visual signifiers. The great eighteenth-century Japanese nativist scholar Motoori Norinaga argued that language, both oral and written, in the Chinese case at least, served to disguise or confuse the simple truth of the words of the gods.

Norinaga claimed that the language spoken or expressed by the Japanese gods was the true reality. On the other hand, the language used by the Chinese was intended to obfuscate the truth. Norinaga argued that the written language was created by those who did not benefit from communicating the truth. The Japanese had not needed to create a written language because they had no need to store in static characters the truth they encountered and appreciated every day. However, Chinese language, and specifically Chinese writing as it was adopted by the Japanese, was inherently deceptive. The Japanese were not initially used to using language in this way, but were corrupted by the facility of this language that was so effective, particularly in its written form.

²⁰ A poem that helps one remember the syllabary in the mode of the traditional *Iroha uta*, where the latter is a poem that includes all the sounds of Japanese, each used only once, but produces a meaningful statement.

Language Theories: Constructed Memories of a Pristine Japanese Past

Norinaga was seeking to understand the importance of language that went beyond its use in everyday communication. What he sought to establish was a foundational premise from which he could assert that one language was better than another or that one language was good while another was bad. Or, more to the point and prescient of the religious argument that was soon to emerge, Norinaga argued for functional criteria according to which one language could be deemed sacred and another profane—for one language disclosed the sacred truth while another displaced it. The juxtaposition of two languages then in use in Japan provided him the opportunity to argue that one of them was superior to the other.

Norinaga's specific premise, then, was that originally the Japanese language had a transparency, an identity with the reality that it was assumed to represent, while Chinese had an opacity that obscured what it supposedly sought to represent, created a distance between itself and that reality, and actually displaced it. Furthermore, he claimed that both languages, in accordance with their very nature and their origins, necessarily functioned in this manner. Japanese, due to its divine origins, was a clear "lens" through which one would see the truth, while Chinese intentionally reflected or refracted the truth by creating an image that displaced it. For some believers in the superiority of the Japanese language, this theory helped to explain why there was only a spoken language, but for other Japanese theorists of language this dichotomy also held true for written systems that represented the two languages.

Norinaga's claim, then, was that the ancient Japanese language was a transparent medium that truly expressed direct experience. That is to say, there was no confusion of meaning, no deception. The gods communicated with humans in this language: through it humans directly experienced the truth of this language's words and responded truthfully. In Norinaga's theory, then, the gods did not write the Japanese language, since a written medium interfered with any direct experience of the words. The ancient Japanese communicated orally with the gods and with each other because oral communication was direct and truthful, at least in the ancient setting. The fact that the Japanese did not develop writing was for him a sign of nobility and virtue, not one of inferior intelligence or lack of ingenuity.

Previous *kokugaku* scholars had focused on ancient Japanese poetry such as that of the *Manyōshū* period as the object of their studies.²¹ Norinaga studied poetry and literature, but believed that its ancient history or *Kojiki* was the best example of the ancient language, and that studying it was the best way to come to understand the true nature of the ancient Japanese people. He further claimed that the *Kojiki*, although written down in Chinese characters, was actually a record of the ancient Japanese language. The Chinese characters merely stood for the sounds of the actual Japanese words.

Moreover, the words of the *Kojiki* were orally transmitted by Emperor Temmu, who had received the story in the same manner, to Yasumaro, a scribe, who was charged with memorizing it and writing it down. Therefore, although it was a written document it was also a record of actual speech, and by nature different from and superior to writing intended as writing. Before Norinaga's valorization of the *Kojiki*, more importance had been given to histories in the *Nihon shoki*, a document produced a mere eight years later than the *Kojiki*, but considerably more detailed and thorough in its accounts.

Norinaga's magnum opus, the *Kojiki-den*, was according to him not an interpretation of the *Kojiki*.²² He believed an interpretation meant some meanings were added and others changed. Norinaga claimed that all he had done was to present the language of the text in the way it was meant to be heard. He thought that he had merely restored the text and made it readable to his Japanese contemporaries. As one Norinaga scholar wrote:

His study of the *Kojiki* rested on the assertion that the *Kojiki*, read "correctly" as *Yamato kotoba* [ancient Japanese words], revealed a mode of consciousness that allowed Japan to take form as a "natural" community, one in which laws, institutions, and ethical principles had no place. Thus community became something not produced from "outside" its members or by them but rather constituted from within them. In Norinaga's conception, Japan took form as the expression of an innate Japaneseness. (Burns 69)

In Norinaga's conception of ancient Japan, the emperor as a living god expressed the will of the gods. What he said was right and true, and the people did

²¹ The *Manyōshū*, dated to 758 CE., is the earliest collection of Japanese language poetry.

²² Norinaga's annotated version of the *Kojiki* is dated to 1798.

not try to change that will, or the form in which it was transmitted, according to their own desires and aspirations; they simply obeyed, sincerely and faithfully. Norinaga first and Hirata Atsutane after him often brought up the argument that the unbroken line of emperors was a testament to the nobility of the superior nature of the Japanese people. On the other hand, they were quick to point out that China was a country whose history included many violent regime changes, attesting to the inferior and violent, even parricidal nature of the Chinese people.

In accordance with the premise that a land with no writing was better than a land with writing, it was also argued that the sheer number of written religious and philosophical classics from China was proof of the depraved nature of the Chinese. For if, as Norinaga claimed, Japan was a “natural” community with no need of ethical principles and laws, and so did not produce even a written language to record them in, then conversely a country that did produce a written language and millions of written words about laws and ethical principles must be one greatly in need of them, that is, one that is essentially depraved. Norinaga therefore believed that the ancient Japanese language, wherein the word was the same as the direct experience of the thing, was superior to what the Japanese were using in his own time. In the same vein Japanese conduct, which had been as direct and pure as the language, had also become corrupted following the course of the language. In other words, Japanese language and Japanese conduct had both been corrupted and, of course, the source of this corruption was Japan’s contact with China.

For these nativists, the unfortunate use of Chinese writing brought with it Chinese ways of thinking. Before any contact with China the Japanese people simply followed the will of the gods as it had been passed on to them through their emperor. However, Chinese writings brought with them new ways of thinking and reasoning—that is, the idea that people could act on their own and had the knowledge to reason out what should be done. For the educated Chinese, people could be agents of power and change the world according to their own thoughts, hopes, and desires. The Chinese had begun to think conceptually, not directly. Words no longer expressed the direct experience of things. Words were no longer a transparent medium, as they had been in the original Japanese language.

This kind of thinking, which classified human experience in large categories such as “good” and “evil,” or “right” and “wrong,” or the stereotypically Chinese “yin” and “yang,” was called *karagokoro*, or the “Chinese mind,” and was criticized by Norinaga and later by Hirata Atsutane. The original Japanese mind, or *magokoro*, “pure mind,” was the ideal that these nativists hoped to recover.

Norinaga's distaste for theories that were so dependent upon codified polar distinctions led to his antipathy toward Chinese philosophy and religion. However, Neo-Confucian philosophy during the Edo period was largely concerned with the creation of good government and the formation of good subjects. Therefore, a focus on ethical categories was an essential part of any discourse on Neo-Confucianism. In addition, the Ancient Learning schools praised the yin-yang theory found in the Chinese classics almost as often as Neo-Confucian schools praised ethical directives. As a result, Norinaga was at odds with Neo-Confucians and Ancient Learning scholars throughout his career, as was Atsutane.²³

Norinaga believed that the gods were more authoritative than either Zhu Xi or the Sage Kings.²⁴ Zhu Xi and the Sage Kings were mere human beings, by definition no match for gods. In Norinaga and Atsutane's opinions the sinophilic scholars spent all of their time writing about how to rule and be ruled precisely because those functions were not being carried out successfully in China. They both believed the ultimate irony was that the root of the failure of Chinese rulers was their very dependence on this ancient Chinese metaphysical and ethical discourse.

In reality, Atsutane's pro-*jindai moji* discourse and Norinaga's anti-*jindai moji* stance had the same end in mind. The main point of both discourses was to assert strongly that the Japanese experience with writing was an essential foundation for the superiority of the Japanese people as a race, and for the superiority of the culture that race produced. In short, these two scholars' common goal was to create a memory of a distant past that had been dominated by the ideal of a fully independent Japan, an ideal that the modernizing Japanese culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, much influenced by Chinese philosophical principles, was seen as desperately needing to get back to.

The nativist critique of Chinese thought and writing could be carried out by means of two completely different strategies. One strategy was based on the idea that the Japanese had their own ancient script that had been abandoned; the other was based on the idea that the Japanese never needed their own script. These share the assumption that written language need not be used as a storage system that is superior to human memory. In fact, both strategies propose that language, whether oral or written, is only to be trusted when it is a transparent communication system created by the gods. Even in the examples of "alegible" writing systems used in

²³ Atsutane's brand of native Japanese religious studies is often referred to as the Ancient Way, while Ancient Learning refers to scholars with new interpretations of Chinese classics, ones that specifically differ from Medieval Neo-Confucian interpretations.

²⁴ That is, both historical and mythical Chinese Confucian champions.

early Japan, written language was seen not as a system for the communication of detailed factual information but rather as a symbolic system that conveyed the hierarchical structure of ancient societies. However, any written language that seems to be in control of non-legitimate, non-divinely-inspired sources is seen as being subject to the limitations of human ambition and manipulation.

Aliterate Literacy: Seeing as a Type of Reading

In the United States today, supporters of the teaching of Christian “creationism” continue their struggle to overcome the dominant secular model that privileges scientific and historical evidence in support of the theory of evolution. Something similar to this battle between a marginalized narrative and a normative narrative was quietly waged for centuries in Japan. During that time, various hypotheses and opinions surrounding the belief that the native Japanese language possessed an accompanying writing system, one with a secret and divine status, were constructed and employed. These were attempts to invent the cultural memory of a native sacred religious culture in Japan, one that was superior to the dominant Chinese and Indian religious models that still define much of the religious landscape in South and East Asia. This native script discourse supported a vital Japanese cultural memory, one which was ahistorical and as such, dependent upon group memories passed on in various ways—literary but also oral and ritual. In practical effect, this discourse served to create and maintain a group identity that was never substantiated or supported by orthodox historical sources or any credible archeological evidence.

In Japan, then, writing was recognized as a source of power and means of maintaining it, one first used by ancient, illiterate Japanese kings to demonstrate their control over their subjects, and to designate the hierarchical order of their subordinates. Modern *jindai moji* discourse still functions in the same way. In all *jindai moji* discourse throughout Japan, the common denominator seems to be that *jindai moji* does not have to communicate a legible message. It exists in order to proclaim the authority of the Japanese gods, or better yet that of those seeking divine legitimacy by using a discourse partially dependent on the attribution of power to these gods. *Jindai moji* discourse does not claim that native writing was ever actually used by a significant number of individuals to communicate messages. Rather, it only claims that certain seminal Japanese symbols were used by Japanese authority figures, gods and their descendants who ruled Japan, in order to show their legitimacy, their authority to reign and rule.

The early modern nativist Motoori Norinaga claimed that writing in the normal or empirical sense was unnecessary and inappropriate for the native Japanese character or essence. Here he was arguing against the use or practice of writing by humans unless they had sacred authority, for otherwise they would merely be attempting to establish a rhetorical position and advance certain personal ideas and interests. This pragmatic or rhetorical use of written language is never associated with *jindai moji*, even by the fiercest proponents of an ancient and original native Japanese script. Norinaga's most important point was that the Japanese language was created and empowered by the gods, and that Chinese writing was a human tool with no sacred authority, thus one incapable of an honest and authoritative representation of truth and fact. *Jindai moji* theorists like Hirata Atsutane agreed with Norinaga's central position regarding Chinese writing.²⁵ Moreover, they were able to use the Norinaga-like argument that written language could also have its source in the sacred. This was because they understood that writing was so important in ancient Japan precisely because it functioned as an "alegible" script for a populace—even those in charge of the government—that was mostly illiterate.

This analysis of the Japanese discourse on written language was inspired by the following questions. How can we explain a seeming deficiency, even retardation in the early development of what today is seen as a very modern, highly civilized culture—how can we explain the ancient Japanese fascination with, worship of a "sacred illiteracy"—in a positive way, as the foundation for what today some Japanese may still see as their own cultural, if not also genetic, superiority with respect to the rest of the world? Or, how could an ancient culture which worshipped "divine illiteracy" later come to depend on the mundane, "earthly" Chinese writing system, while still maintaining that Chinese culture, in particular its writing system, was inferior to Japanese culture and "writing," something to be denigrated and maligned? Or, how could Motoori Norinaga have developed a new conception of the function of language, one that sees it as being itself essentially critical of the usage of written symbols?²⁶ This essay cannot claim to have really answered these perhaps unanswerable questions—unanswerable because we are forced to write them down?—but rather simply to have reflected on them.

²⁵ Atsutane portrayed himself as Norinaga's legitimate successor in studies of the Ancient Way of Japan; however, they never met except once, famously, in Atsutane's dreams.

²⁶ In fact, this view of language has been seen before and after Norinaga in the arguments of certain Western philosophers.

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