

Galan, Christian and Jacques Fijalkow (eds.): *Langue, lecture et école au Japon*. Arles: Edition Philippe Picquier, 2006, 405 pp., € 20.00

*Reviewed by Patrick Heinrich*

*Langue, lecture et école au Japon* features 18 papers in French addressing the issue of learning how to read and write Japanese. Five papers deal with issues concerning the Japanese writing system and four papers each discuss Japanese schools, pedagogy and history, respectively. The book closes with an epilogue by Jacques Fijalkow. It further includes an introduction by the editors and a brief explanation of the Japanese writing system. The book under review adds to existing Western literature on written Japanese, which so far has explored issues as various as the history of writing, script reforms, language and technology, writing systems and language on signs. Extending the topic to written language learning represents a welcome contribution to the field. The issue so far has only been addressed in Galan's (2001) doctoral thesis, albeit with a narrower and more historical focus.

Since the book results from a conference which was convened in Toulouse in 2003, some papers partly overlap in their contents and at times even make contradictory claims (for instance whether Chinese characters are ideographic or not). Rather than a coherent monograph, *Langue, lecture et école au Japon* thus is a collection of papers approaching the issue of learning how to read and write in Japan from various perspectives. Since 18 papers on more than 400 pages constitute a hefty task to the reader (and the reviewer), papers adding new insights to the issue of written Japanese will be given more attention in the following.

The first three papers by Jean-Pierre Jaffré, Anne-Marie Christin and Irène Tamba discuss general characteristics of the Japanese writing system. Since they address issues which have largely been dealt with in previous works of Japanese Studies (e.g. Seeley 1991, Twine 1991) and on writing systems (e.g. Coulmas 1996), they are mainly relevant to French students with no or limited knowledge of Japanese. The fourth paper by Patrick Beillevaire traces the history of writing in Okinawa. It attends to issues as broad as diglossia (with Chinese and Japanese as high varieties and the local languages as low varieties), the adaptation of Japanese kana in order to write down the local languages, pre-modern language learning and scholarly exchange, modern linguistic studies and language policy in the archipelago.

Beillevaire's account is followed by Yazawa Makoto's comprehensive description of Japanese text processing. His account of the development of word processors in Japan of the late 1970s and the codification as well as the input and conversion of written characters on personal computers and, later on, mobile phones, provides the reader with many fascinating details. On the basis of this meticulous overview, Yazawa, argues that recent technological changes should be considered more thoroughly in language education as recent technology has forever changed the practices of reading and writing in Japan.

Four papers deal with language education in Japanese schools. Horio Teruhisa's contribution criticizes existing teaching practices. He singles out several problematic points including missing pedagogic freedom, lack of psycholinguistic knowledge, social inequality arising from more specific training in private schools as well as lack of consideration of pre-elementary school education. It is argued that the reduction of schooling from six to five days a week in 2002 has led to a stronger reproduction of social inequalities. A first key issue to counter such negative consequences of the education reform, Horie argues, would be to relieve teachers from too heavy administrative responsibilities and to increase their autonomy in lesson design.

Nanba Hirotaka's contribution sheds lights on how current practices of teaching written Japanese underlie the Japanese performance in the PISA test. Despite Japan's comparatively high scoring, a weakness in grasping the broader meaning of texts, in particular regarding explanatory and argumentative text types, was noted among Japanese students. This, according to Nanba, is due to the fact that discussions of texts focus strongly on tracing particular information while discussions of one's own position towards the contents is treated rather lightly, if treated at all. He argues for a shift in paradigm, from trees to forest, in his own words, and, towards this end, suggests specific measures of how spaces of argumentations, in which all texts are embedded, can be taught in Japanese classes. Next, Claude Lévi Alvarés gives an account of national language teacher training and recruitment practices as well as the criticism of these very practices by the Japanese Teacher Association. The retirement of the baby-boom generation teachers and the large-scale increase of new recruitments have put existing practices under further pressure. Shutō Hisayoshi's paper, which concludes this section, is a historical overview of teaching reading and writing in Japan.

Four papers on pedagogy follow. Norimatsu Hiroko examines pre-elementary kana studies by means of capped verses (*shiritori*). The presentation and discussion of several large scale empirical studies on capped verses on one hand, and reading and writing abilities on the other, reveal

that it is easier for children to cap the initial rather than the final syllable, that the ability to find a word starting with the capped syllable is strongly linked to the ability to read and write, but that teaching of written language is already possible when children can isolate the initial syllable. Finally, children's ability to recognize syllables develop from initial to final and then to complex syllables.

The two subsequent papers, by Kawakami Sachiko and by Amano Kiyoshi, deal with teaching practices of written language. They give many details on learning problems and the way they are dealt with in Japanese national language education. It is revealed, amongst other things, that children have started learning to read and write Japanese at an increasingly young age in the last half century, beginning today mostly at the age of three. The shift from active to passive mastery of Chinese characters in the course of school education results in the fact that, starting from the third year of elementary school, approximately one third of a class experience difficulties in writing some characters they were supposed to have already mastered. This is a figure which corresponds to that of other countries. In 1999, nevertheless, the Ministry of Education has reacted to this gap between active and passive kanji proficiency and now requires children only to be able to correctly write those characters which have been taught in the previous school year. The section on pedagogy concludes with an analysis of recent textbooks by Yasuhiko Tsukada.

In the history section, Kobayashi Akemi explores reading in Japan in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century. The period under consideration experienced emancipation from reading as practiced in China, resulting in the development of Japanese pronunciation norms after enormous efforts had been made to keep in sync with the Chinese readings for two centuries. Reading Chinese characters in Japanese required that knowledge of reading Chinese characters in Chinese stopped being a requisite for those recognized as language specialists (*oto no hakase*). The paper thus gives fascinating insights into the language management efforts of that period. Similarly intriguing is Peter Kornicki's account of female readers of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a period which marked the beginning of a popularization of reading and writing in Japan. What was considered to be adequate reading for women was a controversial issue as many female readers preferred the Japanese classics over the Chinese moral and didactic literature recommended to them (by men). Besides gendered ideologies on reading, the paper describes how Japanese women turned to the Heian period as a source of aesthetic inspiration at a time when reading and erudition in general largely meant being versed in Chinese matters. Women's choices on literature, in a way, projected a more general shift which took place two centuries later during the Meiji Restoration. The following paper by Richard

Rubinger on illiteracy in Meiji Japan is largely based on a previously published paper in English (Rubinger 2000).

The last paper in this section is by Christian Galan, who sets out to deconstruct what he calls the myth of total literacy in Japan. This is overdue since the idea that Japan has achieved a rate of literacy unmatched by any other society in the world is both long standing and often repeated, despite the lack of empirical data to support such staunch claims. Rather, as Galan emphasizes, total literacy is wishful thinking of powerful language ideologues that hides language problems of a large part of the Japanese society (see Mashiko (2001) for a similar criticism). Galan traces back the origin of this view in post WW II Japan to works of Dore (1965) and Passin (1965) and demonstrates how their ideas were repeatedly reproduced and recontextualized. Just as many other countries already do, Japan, Galan argues, must differentiate between the history of education and the history of literacy. While he severely undermines the credibility of the claim that Japan has a literacy rate unparalleled by that of any other developed society, Galan does not tell us why such beliefs exist in Japan, and nowhere else. In other words, he does not trace them back to modernist Meiji language ideology which had to prove to the West that Japan, its language and its culture, was just as good as its Western counterparts. As the first country ever to overcome the Western bias towards non-Western countries, Japan needed to develop thick layers of empowering ideology (Gluck 1985). The myth of total literacy is a manifestation thereof – deconstruction of such discourse a requirement for overcoming (linguistic) modernity.

In the epilogue, Jacques Fijalkow discusses the contributions of the book in the light of psycholinguistic and pedagogical findings as well as ongoing debates in these two fields. He calls out for more comparative research which takes the case of Japanese into account.

As can be inferred from Fijalkow's concluding remarks, the book under review does not only address students of Japanese Studies but specialists of language pedagogy as well. For both target groups, the book presents a plethora of fascinating details. No other book in Western language provides information as concisely and comprehensively on the teaching and learning of written Japanese. Even though a few papers are not based on original research, the book presents details otherwise widely dispersed and not easily available outside Japan. If this is the major benefit of the book, and I believe it is, then its language might prove problematic. The fact that half of the papers have been translated manifests that many scholars of Japanese Studies are not proficient in French. It is unfortunate that *Langue, lecture et école* will be accessible only to people with sufficient knowledge of French, since the book certainly would deserve a wider

readership. The question remains whether the editors are to blame for this or whether Western students of Japanese Studies and language learning who have not learned to read French are to be blamed. The editors, it seems, have made their choice.

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