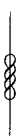


## The Subterranean Archives of Early Japan: Recently Discovered Sources for the Study of Writing and Literacy

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It is rare for an ancient society's transition to literacy to be as well documented as is that of the Japanese archipelago over the first nine centuries A.D.<sup>1</sup> Rich literary and historical texts transmitted through manuscript traditions, and some scattered troves of documents and inscriptions, had long provided scholars with considerable insight into how and why books and writing first came to Japan. Recent discoveries, however, have transformed scholars' understanding of the emergence of literacy in the archipelago: in particular, over the past four decades, archaeologists have unearthed many tens of thousands of inscribed wooden tablets, or *mokkan* 木簡. In addition to these tablets, large numbers of inscribed potsherds (*bokusho doki* 墨書土器) and lesser quantities of lacquer-impregnated paper documents (*urushigami monjo* 漆紙文書) have been found. These new materials have stimulated dramatic advances in nearly every field of study concerned with early Japan, from archaeology to literature, from political history to linguistics to art history, and of course they have proved particularly decisive for research into early writing and literacy. This paper complements several other English-language introductions by describing how recently discovered sources have opened

up new frontiers for the study of texts themselves—that is, the study of how, why, and by whom, written materials were produced and used in early Japan.<sup>2</sup>

### *The Earliest Writing and the Importance of the Seventh and Eighth Centuries*

Objects bearing inscriptions in Chinese characters are found in Japanese sites of the mid-Yayoi period, from around the first century B.C. or so, but these are all coins, mirrors, and other imported objects. There is little reason to believe that much reading of such inscriptions took place at the time, and while a few scattered fragmentary characters scratched or daubed on pots have been found, it is also unlikely that many in the Japanese archipelago were yet able to write.<sup>3</sup> This situation persisted until the fifth century A.D. when swords—and one mirror—bearing inscriptions referring to kings of the central Yamato region begin to appear. These were almost certainly written by elite scribes from the more advanced states of the Korean peninsula, but despite their obvious political significance, it is likely they were meant to be seen more than to be “read”. In the following two centuries there seems to have been little change in the functions of writing in the archipelago: texts were produced by elite scribes, mostly of Korean origin or extraction, and were used as means of displaying political might and cultural prowess, rather than as methods of language-based communication and information storage.

During the seventh century A.D. circumstances changed with surprising rapidity. Under pressure from domestic political upheaval and foreign conflict with Tang China and its Korean ally, the state of Silla, the Yamato kings embarked on a crash program to engineer a more centralized regime. In the latter half of the seventh century, this program produced a newly named state, Japan (*Nihon* 日本), and a title for the newly elevated kings and queens who ruled over it: *Temō* 天皇, often translated as “Emperor”, but perhaps better rendered as “Sovereign” or “Heavenly Sovereign”.<sup>4</sup> The new polity depended on written communication to an unprecedented degree, and it emerged in tandem with a complete transformation of Japanese literacy.

In less than a century, government offices, court salons, great religious institutions, and the residences of the high nobility became the setting of a vibrant world of libraries and scriptoria. Most of the books that made up this world were texts imported from Sui—and then Tang—China, and from the Three Kingdoms of Korea, or domestic copies thereof. They included classics like the *Analects* 論語, the *Book of Songs* 詩經, the *Spring and Autumn Annals* 春秋左傳, histories like the *Shiji* 史記, *Hanshu* 漢書, and *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書, literary collections like the *Wenxuan* 文選 and the *Yuzai shinyong* 玉臺新詠, works on astronomy, calendars, medicine, lexicography, and so on; and immense numbers of Buddhist sutras, commentaries, and treatises. Moreover, from the late seventh century onward, domestically produced works on history, geography, genealogy, lexicography, and literature also began to take their place in early libraries. With the exception of Buddhist texts, which were produced by the tens of thousands during the eighth century, no original copies of these early books survive intact, but the range and importance of those that are not preserved in later manuscripts can be reconstructed from citations and quotations in contemporary and subsequent sources. A fair number of domestically produced works of this period do survive through transmission in more recent manuscripts; among the earliest and most important of these are well-known texts like the *Kojiki* 古事記 (712) and *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 (720), both histories, and the *Kaifūsō* 懷風藻 (751) and *Man'yōshū* 萬葉集 (after 759), both poetry collections.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the libraries that contained such works, another important type of collection was the official government archive, or chancery. From the end of the seventh century on, the government itself was envisioned as the embodiment of written laws, based on adaptations of the Tang penal and administrative codes, and on domestically produced edicts and protocols. This meant law books—copies of the codes and commentaries on them—but also a wide variety of documents, records, reports, official proclamations, and drafts thereof.<sup>6</sup> Happily, a portion of such an official archive survives in the form of the *Shōsōin* documents (*Shōsōin monjo* 正倉院文書), a collection of over 10,000 paper documents, mostly from an official scriptorium associated with Tōdaiji 東大寺, the largest temple of eighth-century Japan. In addition to revealing much

about the structure of the scriptorium and the lives of its copyists, many of these records and reports were written on the blank reverse sides of discarded central government documents, and thus they also provide unique examples of census registers, tax surveys, directories of official communications, and so on. Preserved for over twelve centuries, this huge trove of material was subjected to increasingly careful and sophisticated scholarly attention from the mid-nineteenth century through the post-war period.<sup>7</sup>

The Shōsōin documents, as well as the aforementioned transmitted historical and literary works mentioned above, combine with a few dozen epigraphic texts to provide a picture of the world of writing in early Japan.<sup>8</sup> But important components are missing: the picture shows little of how the new world of writing came into being, and much of that world—especially the role of writing in daily life and outside the capital—is invisible, or at best visible only in rare glimpses. It is a stroke of good fortune, then, that the past four decades have seen the excavation of new collections of early texts that supplement pre-existing materials in precisely those respects. But the importance of this subterranean archive goes beyond simply filling in gaps in what is already known; it has transformed scholars' understandings of almost every aspect of early Japan.

### *Post-war Archaeology and the Excavation of Inscribed Artifacts*

As both a byproduct of and a contributing factor to its dramatic economic growth, post-war Japan saw an explosion of new buildings. Cities expanded, suburban communities sprang up on their outskirts, and government money poured into rural construction projects. Archaeologists scrambled to investigate and record as much as they could of the historical sites that were being revealed and destroyed at a breakneck pace, and the result was a torrent of new information about the Japanese past.<sup>9</sup> In the midst of these many rescue archaeology projects, researchers employed by universities and government-sponsored institutes have also excavated important historical sites that were not directly threatened by imminent construction. One center of such research has been the site of the palace of the great capital city of Heijō, or Nara, which was the center of the Japanese state

for most of the eighth century. Ongoing excavations there, and elsewhere at other capital sites in and around the modern cities of Osaka, Nara, and Kyoto, have produced a rich record of the political and cultural centers of early Japan.

In January 1961, only a few years into the first modern excavations of the palace site in Heijō, archaeologists were surprised to discover wooden tablets with ink inscriptions.<sup>10</sup> Such tablets, or *mokkan*, were not entirely unknown at that point. About 60 wooden tags or labels were preserved along with the paper documents in the eighth century Shōsōin storehouse, and a few such artifacts had been unearthed earlier in the twentieth century. Few suspected, however, that these *mokkan* had been a fundamental medium of communication in early Japan, and certainly no one dreamed of the immense numbers of them that were preserved underground. But in the four decades since the initial post-war discoveries, the extent and importance of these materials have become abundantly clear. To date, several hundred thousand *mokkan* have been unearthed, and they continue to be discovered in great numbers. Most of them have been found in capital sites, especially in Heijō and the earlier capital of Fujiwara, just to the south, but they have also been discovered in hundreds of other sites, many in far-flung provincial areas, ranging from the southern island of Kyushu to Akita, in the distant northeastern region of the main island of Honshu. These tablets range in size from a few centimeters in length to, rarely, as much as a meter, and carry a wide variety of inscriptions. Most are fragmentary, but in the rich contexts provided by controlled archaeological excavation and detailed knowledge of transmitted historical and literary sources, even a single character can provide decisive information.

As the number and impact of the new finds became clear to archaeologists, historians, and linguists, scholars rapidly developed specialist knowledge of *mokkan*. In doing so they were assisted by the high level of research on transmitted texts and manuscript sources. In 1978, the *Mokkan gakkai* 木簡學會, a society dedicated to the study and preservation of wooden documents, was established; it continues to hold annual meetings, put out an annual journal (*Mokkan kenkyū* 木簡研究), and publish lavishly illustrated collections of important finds.<sup>11</sup>

Researchers working with mokkan generally group them into three categories, based on their content and format: documents, labels, and miscellaneous. Documents (*monjo mokkan* 文書木簡) are usually rectangular wooden slips, between 10 to 30 centimeters long and 3 to 4 centimeters wide. They include work orders; requisitions for tools, supplies, foodstuffs, and payments; reports on labor performed or items dispensed; official summonses; receipts for payments and shipments; and records of evaluations of bureaucratic performance. Labels (*tsukefuda* 付札/*nijfuda* 荷札) are tags that were usually sharpened at one end and notched at the other, or notched at both ends, so that they could be struck into or tied onto packages. Some of them were attached to goods kept in palace storehouses, but many were affixed to provincial shipments to the capital of tax goods, such as rice, salt, dried fish and shellfish, seaweed, coins, and so on. As a catch-all for *mokkan* that are neither documents nor labels, the miscellaneous category is harder to summarize, but it includes such things as public notices on stakes in the ground at roadsides, magical talismans meant to ward off disease and other misfortunes, and slips used by clerks and scribes to practice calligraphy and composition of official document forms.<sup>12</sup>

In early China, the strips of wood and bamboo that are the direct ancestors of *mokkan* served individually as media for short messages and, strung together into bundles (*ce* 冊), bore book-length texts as well.<sup>13</sup> Despite the obvious genealogical connection between these earlier practices and the wooden tablets of seventh- and eighth-century Japan, there are also important differences between them. These include the materials employed (for example, bamboo was not used in Japan because the domestic varieties were not large enough to produce usable flat strips) and also formal differences in calligraphic style and document format, but the most fundamental is that while the use of strips and tablets in Zhou, Qin, and Han China predated the invention of paper, in Japan *mokkan* were used from the start alongside paper documents and books.<sup>14</sup> Mid-seventh-through ninth-century sources show there was a division of labor in media: paper was employed for books, longer letters, formal government documents, and so on, while *mokkan* were used for shorter communications, labels and passes, and rough drafts of documents or reports.<sup>15</sup>

There were also positive factors behind the reliance on wood despite the availability of various types of paper. *Mokkan* were easier to make, they were sturdier and longer lasting, and by boring holes in them and linking them with string, they could be made to serve as a database or filing system.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps most importantly, with a sharp knife their content could be shaved off and they could be re-used; indeed, as much as eighty percent of the tens of thousands of *mokkan* that have been discovered are fragmentary shavings bearing incomplete texts—sometimes even only a single character, or portion of a character.<sup>17</sup>

Because of their greater durability, wooden texts are more likely to survive underground, but in special circumstances paper documents have also been excavated. Paper that had been written on both sides and was no longer needed was used as a cover to prevent containers of lacquer from drying out; once permeated by lacquer, it became much more durable. The dozens of lacquer-impregnated documents (*urushigami monjo*) that have been discovered to date offer further insight into the parallel uses of paper and wood, as well as supplementing the existing trove of eighth-century paper documents in the Shōsōin repository. They are particularly valuable because they have been found at sites far from the capital, many of them in northeastern Honshū.<sup>18</sup>

Another important new source is inscribed potsherds (*bokusho doki*), which are found in a variety of sites, in the capitals and also in provinces ranging from Kyushū to northeastern Honshū. There are a few scattered earlier exceptions, but the bulk of these materials are from the late seventh century onward, and most of them consist of a few characters brushed in ink (less commonly, incised) on unglazed earthenware tableware and cooking vessels. Potsherd inscriptions provide information about government offices and the provisioning of their workers, about ritual offerings and official banquets, and about supernatural beliefs. They also encourage rethinking the nature and extent of early literacy, because of the wide range over which they are discovered—even from village sites with no other written material—and the frequency with which the characters they bear are abbreviated, fused into composites, or otherwise adapted into symbolic marks that probably were not “read” in the familiar sense.<sup>19</sup>

Over the past four decades, these new materials have transformed the study of early Japanese society, economics, culture, politics, language, and literature. All three classes of artifact mentioned here provide unique and important sources of information, but *mokkan* tend to dominate discussions of recently discovered written materials, this paper being no exception. A great deal more of them have been found, in concentrated caches and a wider variety of locations, than lacquer-impregnated documents, and as fragmentary as they normally are they are still more discursive and diverse than potsherds inscriptions.

Because they are excavated under controlled conditions, and were originally everyday communications written without thought of posterity, *mokkan* provide a substantial body of material with few of the knotty historiographical problems of official histories and anthologies compiled many years after the events they describe. Of course, working with them involves its own methodological problems, stemming in many cases from how fragmentary they so often are, but when considered in the context of the sites in which they are found and the artifacts that accompany them, their content can often be leveraged into important discoveries, even when it is only a matter of a few characters. In excavations of government offices, where it can be assumed that a *mokkan* had been discarded after being produced in that office, delivered from elsewhere, or sent elsewhere and then returned with requested goods or individuals, a location named on a single tablet can reveal the nature of an entire site. Given the huge number of them that have been and continue to be excavated, these subterranean texts offer much previously inaccessible information about sundry aspects of early Japan. Labels from shipments of tax goods provide insight into the economic foundations of the seventh- and eighth-century state; changing formats for notation of place names and dates help resolve longstanding debates about the extent and timing of early institution-building; records of bureaucratic promotion evaluations shed light on the social circumstances of low-ranking courtiers.<sup>20</sup>

Such contributions are just a small sample of the many uses of these new sources, but there is another area in which *mokkan* have revolutionized the study of early Japan: they also enable new consideration of the nature and functions of writing itself. As these new discoveries have been

investigated by scholars of language and literature and coordinated with other, pre-existing epigraphic and transmitted materials, it has become possible to see, in unprecedented detail, how and why Japan underwent its seventh- and eighth-century transformation into a land of books, libraries, and archives, of authors, scholars, and clerks. By virtue of distinctive or revealing content, style, date, or location, certain *mokkan* have been repeatedly cited in scholarly and quasi-popular discussions. Here, a handful of such near-canonical examples will serve to suggest some of the consequences of the masses of new materials for the history of writing.

### *Seventh- and Eighth-Century Mokkan and Early Writing and Literacy*

One of the largest single discoveries of *mokkan* was a trove of some 100,000 tablets discovered in the late 1980s in Nara, at and near the site of the early eighth-century mansion of a well-known political figure named Prince Nagaya 長屋王 (684–729).<sup>21</sup> These artifacts, about half of which were produced by or sent to the huge household staff of the prince's 60,000 square meter compound, have enabled detailed investigations of eighth-century elite lifestyles, and of the vast economic organization that made them possible. They also contain numerous document *mokkan* that attest to the technical innovations in writing that accompanied and enabled the rapid growth of literacy from the mid-seventh century onward. The best-known of such Nagaya household documents is the following, which, in addition to its value as a sample of the typical everyday style, is intact and unusually well-preserved. It is about 22 by 2 centimeters, and bears one message that flows unbroken from front to back.

On the twenty-first day of this month we finished reaping the prince's field, but as for the prince's great rice, because old sheaves/  
had been shifted into the granaries, we were unable to store it. Therefore your lordships should make haste and sojourn down here.

當月廿一日御田薊薨大御飯米倉古稻  
移依而不得收故卿等急下坐宜<sup>22</sup>

Like many other document *mokkan*, this is an everyday communication

related to the official business of clerks and other government functionaries (the high rank of the prince and his chief consort meant that the senior staff of his household held official government positions). A strikingly large number of such texts involve communications about the disbursement of rice, which was after all one of the chief commodities of the day. With messages of this sort, honorific and humilific elements acknowledge the status difference between the sender and the recipient(s), but the primary concern was that the relevant information be transmitted quickly and completely.<sup>23</sup>

The principle device that ensured this transmission was a complex of reading and writing techniques that linked the spoken language of the clerks and other functionaries to writing, techniques later termed, collectively, *kundoku* 訓讀 (literally, "reading by glosses"). Although it employs characters that originated in China, the text of the *mokkan* quoted above is not written in Chinese; indeed, much of it would make no sense to someone who tried to read it as Chinese. Rather, its characters serve as logographs associated with Japanese words (including honorific formulations); moreover, these logographs are generally arranged in accordance with Japanese rather than Chinese syntax.

The sentences produced by reading such texts would certainly have seemed unnatural if compared to the language spoken in the Nara basin in the centuries before writing had a substantial impact there. But this does not mean that they were a Sino-Japanese hybrid, at least not in the sense that utterances heavy with loanwords whose pronunciation and meaning approximates that of Chinese can be taken to be such a hybrid. The advent of *kundoku* reading and writing certainly coincided with an influx of large numbers of Chinese loanwords, but in its essence it is a combination of reading/writing and translation that could, and certainly did in many cases, function without any new vocabulary whatsoever. Strong Sinitic influence was inevitably apparent, of course, but in circumlocutions, redundancies, and other structural traces of translation, which were independent of the provenance of the specific vocabulary employed.<sup>24</sup> Far from being an exceptional case, this method of reading and writing character-texts in Japanese was the dominant means by which texts were read and written in early Japan, including those that had originated in

China, like the *Analects* of Confucius. And not just in the early period: *kundoku* continued to occupy a central position until well into the twentieth century.

The early dominance of *kundoku* and the Chinese-character-based logographs associated with it is apparent from everyday *mokkan*, but the same sources also reveal that a variety of other methods of writing existed from surprisingly early in the seventh-century expansion of literacy. Phonographs—characters used, regardless of the meanings originally associated with them, to spell out syllables—supplement logographs by specifying inflections and particles, or even entire words. There are even *mokkan* from the mid-seventh century that spell out vernacular poems syllable by syllable, a technique that had long been seen as a much later development. It is now clear that all of the core technical innovations in the inscription of the Japanese language had already taken place by the eighth century.<sup>25</sup>

Traditional accounts of literacy tended to conceptualize it as marked by a stark transition between states: either one was illiterate, or one was competent in reading and writing all manner of texts. One of the most valuable contributions of *mokkan* is that they reinforce the revisionist perspective arguing that it is not such a black-and-white phenomenon, that there is a spectrum of literacies ranging from complete unfamiliarity with writing to the ability to appreciate and compose complex texts like poetry and belletristic prose.<sup>26</sup> It is true that, in a surprisingly short time, a world of books and libraries and newly composed literary texts came into being in seventh- and eighth-century Japan, but that world was supported and enabled by a huge infrastructure of pragmatically literate clerks and scribes, many of whom were responsible for maintaining the state system that provided newly emergent elite authors and scholars with the material support for their literary pursuits.

So it is important to remember that almost all subterranean texts are examples of everyday, pragmatic uses of writing like the foregoing brief communication about the economic interests of Prince Nagaya's household. As mentioned earlier, an entire, very numerous class of *mokkan* is composed of labels or tags attached to items in storehouses or shipments of tax and tribute goods. Along with the sheer quantity of finds like the Nagaya

household *mokkan*, the ubiquity of such labels attests to the omnipresence of writing in certain contexts of Japanese society from the latter half of the seventh century onward.

Such omnipresence is vividly apparent in a *mokkan*, almost a meter long and just over seven centimeters wide, that was unearthed in 1969 from a roadside site along one of the principle thoroughfares of the old Nara capital of Heijō. The date does not include the year (itself is a sign of the ubiquity of written documents for the writer and presumed audience), but judging from other, similar items that accompanied it, it has been dated to the early ninth century.

告知 往選諸人 走失黑鹿毛牡馬一匹 在藤片目白

額少白

件馬以今月六日申時山階寺南花園池邊而走失也 九月八日

若有見捉者可告來山階寺中室自南端第三房之

Announcement to passersby: One runaway dark bay stallion (has distinguishing marks: one eye is white, some white on forehead)

At the hour of the monkey on the sixth day of this month, the aforementioned horse ran away from the side of the pond in the flower garden of Yamashina temple.

If anyone sees and captures him, please come and report to the third chamber from the southern end of the middle cloister of Yamashina temple.

The eighth day of the ninth month.<sup>27</sup>

From its comparatively large size, its sharply pointed bottom end, and the content of the inscription, it is apparent that this *mokkan* was stuck into the ground alongside a busy road to serve as a public notice, not unlike lost pet signs fastened to telephone poles in contemporary cities (though a “lost car” sign, were there such a thing, would be a better parallel).

The scholarly importance of newly excavated written materials is inestimable, but another value of these discoveries: is the pleasure and wonder provided by such glimpses of daily life some twelve centuries ago. In addition to lost and found notices, a variety of doodles, memos, good luck charms, and so on, reveal a thriving written culture, full of interesting,

and often unexpectedly familiar objects and practices. But such artifacts are also a window on the functioning of writing itself in this society: clearly, that someone took the trouble to write and position by the side of a road a sign like that quoted above evinces faith in the power of writing to communicate with significant numbers of anonymous passersby. Viewed in terms of the overall population, most of whom were subsistence farmers, the number of those who could have read such a sign must have been negligible. In the area around the capitals, however, with their concentration of government offices and centers of religious learning, the ability to read messages of this sort was clearly widespread enough for it to make sense to address signs to “the various people coming and going” on the road. Individual relationships with writing would have been diverse, but *mokkan* like this one suggest that in certain areas there existed a common space of writing, a built environment that approaches what, in a very different context, has been dubbed a “graphosphere.”<sup>28</sup>

Further insight into the nature of literacy in early Japan is provided by another class of chance survivals of ephemeral materials: *mokkan* and other everyday texts that show signs of writing practice, which involved honing the quality of one’s calligraphic hand as well as learning the nuts and bolts of textual communication. While the Nagaya household *mokkan*, from the early eighth century, and the roadside sign, from the early ninth century, were both excavated in the city of Nara, site of the capital (or former capital) of Heijō, the following discovery dates to the mid-seventh century. An unusually thick, 63.5 centimeter-long strip of wood that is about 3 centimeters wide, it was excavated in 1997 from a more remote location—a site thought to be the remains of a former provincial capital—in the modern city of Tokushima on the island of Shikoku. It is inscribed on front and back, as is typical of most non-label *mokkan*, but also on both sides, in a format that some archaeologists have suggested may be linked to a type of Chinese wooden tablet known as a *gu* 觚 (Japanese *ko*).<sup>29</sup> Unlike the other two examples introduced here, the writing on this *mokkan* is not intact: on three out of the four sides, only a few characters are legible. On the fourth, however, the following 24 graphs have been deciphered:

子曰 學而習時不孤口乎口自朋遠方來亦時樂乎人不知亦不慚<sup>30</sup>

Although it is garbled in a few places, this is clearly derived from the beginning of the *Analects of Confucius*, as translated by Arthur Waley:

The Master said, To learn and at due times to repeat what one has learned, is that not after all a pleasure? That friends should come to one from afar, is this not after all delightful? To remain unsoured even though one's merits are unrecognized by others, [is that not after all what is expected of a gentleman?]!

子曰、學而時習之、不亦樂乎。有朋自遠方來、不亦樂乎。人不知而不慍、(不亦君子乎)

This is an example of a common type of *mokkan*: a slip used for writing or calligraphy practice. Given its status as one of the first books studied by those learning to read and write, it makes sense that many of these slips bear passages from the *Analects*. Other texts used for writing practice include the *Thousand Character Classic*, the *Laozi*, and the *Wenxuan*.<sup>32</sup> In some cases, blank wooden slips may have been devoted to this purpose, but it seems that more frequently old *mokkan* that were no longer needed were reused; in both cases, characters and passages that had been repeatedly written out were often shaved off to make room for more practice.

*Mokkan* of this sort provide valuable evidence of how literacy was acquired in early Japan. Writing practice inscriptions using passages from textbooks like the *Analects* or the *Thousand Character Classic* are found in sites of government and household offices. They are accompanied by clerical materials like document and label *mokkan*, and other common forms of writing practice include multiplication tables—necessary knowledge for any clerk—and repeated writing of important terms from official forms for bureaucratic reports and requisitions. In terms of the numbers involved, the typical student of writing in early Japan was not a young nobleman learning to write and read poetry and belletristic prose for the sake of cultural achievement, but rather a pragmatically literate clerk struggling to improve his handwriting and expand the range of official texts he could read and write.

Another edifying aspect of this *mokkan* involves the growing body of evidence of a wide range of Korean precedents for the uses of writing in early Japan. In 2000, a similar *mokkan*, also four-sided and also bearing a passage of writing practice taken from the *Analects*, was excavated in

South Korea from the Ponghwang-tong 鳳凰洞 site near Pusan.<sup>33</sup> Although their numbers have not yet begun to approach those found in Japan, since the 1970s a growing number of *mokkan* have been unearthed from sites associated with the Three Kingdoms states of Silla and Paekche, and from the subsequent state of Unified Silla.<sup>34</sup> The parallels between this *Analects* writing practice *mokkan* and that found near Pusan are typical: especially in the case of Japanese *mokkan* from the seventh century, connections with earlier and contemporaneous Korean artifacts are striking. Of course, these connections fit neatly with the plentiful evidence from historical and epigraphic sources that scribes from the Korean states were responsible for transmitting writing to the Japanese archipelago.<sup>35</sup>

This should not be seen simply as a matter of the Korean peninsula serving as a conduit for the transmission of Chinese texts and techniques. It is increasingly clear that scribes in Silla, Paekche, and also in the less-well-documented northern state of Koguryo, were responsible for a great many innovations of their own.<sup>36</sup> (Of course, it is also apparent from the transformation of the nature and extent of Japanese *mokkan* in the seventh and eighth centuries that the creation of new forms of written communication continued in the archipelago.) An important, related point is that the arrival of writing in the Korean peninsula and the Japanese archipelago was not the advent of a foreign method of writing inextricably linked with the foreign language of Chinese. As stressed in the earlier discussion of the Nagaya household *mokkan*, it is clear that from very early on, character-texts were also methods of reading and writing Japanese. Moreover, it is now almost certain that *kundoku* links between logographs and the Japanese language were based on pre-existing practices connecting the same characters and the languages of the Korean states, which means that “Chinese” writing was already a multilingual phenomenon when it arrived in the Japanese archipelago.<sup>37</sup>

Ultimately, the spread through East Asia of the Chinese writing system, and of collections of texts that employed it, is the story of the movement of a powerfully adaptable technology across multiple languages as much as—or more than—it is the story of the expansion of the Chinese language as such. The importance of that technology should be viewed in the context of all of East Asia—including Vietnam, and taking into



account developments on the western and northern peripheries of China as well.<sup>38</sup> This emerging vision of writings history in East Asia, and of the wider comparative world history of writing that beckons to us beyond it, would not be possible without the dramatic insights that have been made possible by newly unearthed sources, prominent among them the *mokkan* of early Japan.

### Conclusion

It is a happy irony that fragments of long-discarded trash, serendipitously preserved for over a millennium, are valuable for revealing so much about a story with relevance for concerns and historical venues extending far beyond the development of state, economy, and society in early Japan. This recently mined vein of documents is far from exhausted, but continuing development and policy decisions threaten still-unexcavated underground reserves of cultural materials, in the old capital sites of Nara prefecture and elsewhere. In the Nara basin alone, untold numbers of *mokkan* are being consigned to rot, undiscovered, and unread, as the water table falls. Perhaps this seemingly inexhaustible resource will turn out to be limited after all, leading future historians and archaeologists, confronting again a static archive of the sort their predecessors worked with before the 1960s, to look back with envy on the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries as a golden age of newly emerging sources.

### Notes

1. For an English-language overview of the history of writing in Japan from earliest times to the late twentieth century, see Christopher Seeley, *A History of Writing in Japan* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991); a more detailed consideration of writing through the early eighth century can be found in David Lurie, "The Origins of Writing in Early Japan: From the 1st to the 8th Century C.E." (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2001). Recent Japanese-language surveys include Kokuritsu rekishi minzoku hakubutsukan, eds., *Kodai Nihon, Moji no aru fuksei: Kin'in kara Shōsōin monjo made* (Asahi shinbunsha, 2002); Okimori Takuya, *Nihongo no tanjō: Kodai no moji to hyōki* (Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 2003); Hirakawa Minami, et al., eds., *Moji to kodai Nihon* 1–5 (Yoshikawa

2. For early English-language discussions of *mokkan*, see Joan R. Piggott's "Keeping Up With the Past: New Discoveries Enrich Our Views of History", *Monumenta Nipponica* 38: 3 (1983), pp. 313–319; and "Mokkan: Wooden Documents from the Nara Period", *Monumenta Nipponica* 45: 4 (1990), pp. 449–470. Other introductions include Sarō Makoto, "The Wooden Tablets (*mokkan*) of Ancient Japan", *Acta Asiatica* 69 (1995), pp. 84–117; and William Wayne Farris, *Sacred Texts and Buried Treasures: Issues in the Historical Archaeology of Ancient Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), pp. 201–232. Two recent articles making use of *mokkan* materials are Nicholas Tranter, "The Asuka-ke Word List Slar and Pre-Sino-Japanese Phonology", in *Language Change in East Asia*, ed. T. E. McAuley (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2001), pp. 143–160; and Ellen Van Goethem, "The Construction of the Nagaoka Palace and Capital: Mokkan 木簡 as a Historical Source", *Nachrichten der Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens* 179–180 (2006), pp. 1–33. Among many Japanese-language introductions, see especially Tōno Haruyuki, *Mokkan ga kataru Nihon no kodai* (revised edition; Iwanami shoten, 1997); and Ōba Osamu (ed.), *Mokkan: kodai kara no messaji* (Taishūkan Shoten, 1998).
3. One question raised by these early fragments is what is meant by *reading* and *writing*. Before the fifth century, imported inscriptions and domestically produced "characters" seem to have had communicative functions, but without the systematic associations with relatively stable, vocalizable linguistic values that accompany the extensive use of writing to coordinate human activities across time and space. But it is also important to remember that the pre-fifth-century communicative functions of "written" material persisted even after more familiar (to us) acts of reading became widespread.
4. For discussions of these developments, see Joan R. Piggott, *The Emergence of Japanese Kingship* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 91–92 and 143–144; Mori Kimiyuki, "Tennō-gō no seiritsu o megutte", in *Kodai Nihon no taigai nanshiki to tsūkō* (Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1998), pp. 2–27; and Kōnohō Takamitsu, "Nihon" to wa nani ka: *Kōkugō no imi to rekishi* (Kodansha, 2005).
5. For introductions to these and other early Japanese works, see Edwin Cranston, "Asuka and Nara culture: literacy, literature, and music", in *The Cambridge History of Japan Volume 1: Ancient Japan*, ed. Delmer Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 453–486; and Donald Keene, *Seeds in*

- the Heart: Japanese Literature from Earliest Times to the Late Sixteenth Century (New York: Henry Holt, 1993), pp. 33–180. The scope of Buddhist material is revealed by Ishida Mosaku's classic *Shakkyō yori mitaru Narrachō bukkyō no kenkyū* (Tōyō bunko, 1930). For a monumentally erudite survey of imported works in general, with extensive references, see Haga Norio, "Man'yōshū hikaku bungaku jiten", in *Man'yōshū jiten*, edited by Inaoka Kōji (Gakutōsha, 1993), pp. 318–369 (reprinted in Haga Norio, *Man'yōshū ni okeru Chūgoku bungaku no jiyō* [Hanawa shobō, 2003], pp. 201–273). Another helpful introduction is Ikeda On, ed., *Nihon kodaiishi o manabu tame no Kanban nyūmon* (Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 2006). On citations and quotations of lost works, see Wada Hidematsu, *Kokusho itsubun* (revised and expanded; Kokusho kankōkai, 1995).
6. For introductions to law codes and their commentaries, see Inoue Mitsusada, et al., *Ritsuryō* (*Nihon shisō taikai* 3; Iwanami shoten, 1976) and Oshibe Yoshikane, *Nihon ritsuryō seiritsu no kenkyū* (Hanawa shobō, 1981). A survey of the various types of documents can be found in Akamatsu Toshihide, et al., eds., *Nihon komonjogaku kōza* vol. 2, *Kodaihen 1* (Yūzankaku, 1978).
  7. W. Wayne Farris, "The Changing World of the Shōsōin Documents", *Monumenta Nipponica*, in press. On Tōdaiji and the scriptoria that produced most of the documents, see Joan R. Piggott, "Tōdaiji and the Nara imperium" (PhD dissertation, Stanford University, 1987). For illustrated introductions to the documents, see Kokuritsu rekishi minzoku hakubutsukan, *Kodai Nihon, Moji no aru fūkei*, pp. 141–194; Maruyama Yumiko, *Tempyō no hikari to kage: Shōsōin monjo ga kataru kodai no Nihon* (NHK shuppan, 1999); and Sugimoto Kazuki, *Shōsōin no komonjo* (*Nihon no bijutsu* 440; Shibundō, January 2003).
  8. On seventh- and eighth-century epigraphic texts, see Nara kokuritsu bunkazai kenkyūjo Asuka shiryōkan, eds., *Asuka/Hakuhō no zaimai kondōbutsu* (Kyōto: Dōhōsha, 1979); Nara kokuritsu bunkazai kenkyūjo, eds., *Nihon kodai no boshi* (revised edition; Kyōto: Dōhōsha, 1979); Jōdai bunken o yomu kai, eds., *Kokuyō ibun chūshaku* (Ōfūsha, 1989); Kokuritsu rekishi minzoku hakubutsukan, eds., *Kodai no hi* (Kokuritsu rekishi minzoku hakubutsukan, 1997); and Tōno Haruyuki, *Nihon kodai kansetsuban no kenkyū* (Iwanami shoten, 2004).
  9. For a brief survey of the circumstances of the post-war archaeological boom, see Clare Fawcett, "Nationalism and Postwar Japanese Archaeology", in *Nationalism, Politics, and the Practice of Archaeology*, ed. Philip Kohl and Clare Fawcett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 232–246.
  10. This moment is movingly recounted in Tsuboi Kiyotari and Tanaka Migaku,

- Gina Barnes and David Hughes, trans., *The Historic City of Nara: An Archaeological Approach* (Tokyo: The Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies/ UNESCO, 1991), pp. 67–83.
11. The two collections compiled by the Mokkan gakkai are *Nihon kodai mokkan sen* (Iwanami shoten, 1990), hereafter NKMS, and *Nihon kodai mokkan shūsei* (Tōkyō daigaku shuppankai, 2003), hereafter NKMSS. A third collection, not directly related to the society, is Okimori Takuya and Sarō Makoto, eds., *Jōdai mokkan shiryō shūsei* (Ōfū, 1994), hereafter JMSS.
  12. For more on these categories, see Sarō Makoto, "The Wooden Tablets (mokkan) of Ancient Japan"; and Yokota Takumi and Kitō Kiyooki, *Kodaiishi enshū: Mokkan* (Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1979).
  13. For introductions to early Chinese media see Tsuen-Hsün Tsieng, *Written on Bamboo and Silk: The Beginnings of Chinese Books and Inscriptions* (second edition; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); and Edward L. Shaughnessy, ed., *New Sources of Early Chinese History: An Introduction to the Reading of Inscriptions and Manuscripts* (Berkeley: Society for the Study of Early China and the Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1997).
  14. Already paper-based at their inception in Japan, book-length works do not survive underground, so newly discovered materials have had a different kind of impact than in the study of early China, where the excavation of hitherto unknown versions of transmitted texts has been transformative.
  15. On this "division of labor", see Kitō Kiyooki, "Ki/kami/shōfū", in *Nihon no kodai 14: Koroba to moji*, ed. Kishi Toshio (Chūō kōronsha, 1988); and Hirakawa Minami, "Shutsudo moji shiryō to Shosoin monjo", in *Kodai monjo ron: Shōsōin monjo to mokkan/urushigami monjo*, ed. Ishigami Eiichi, et al. (Tōkyō daigaku shuppankai, 1999), pp. 187–225.
  16. For a classic discussion of a famous example of such a "database", see Tōno Haruyuki, "Jōsen tanzaku to Heijōkyū shutsudo no kōsen mokkan", in *Shōsōin monjo to mokkan no kenkyū* (Hanawa shobō, 1977), pp. 54–86.
  17. Ikeda On, "Chūgoku mokkan no tokushoku", in *Mokkan ga kataru kodaiishi (jō)*: Miyako no henssen to kurashi, ed. Hirano Kunio and Suzuki Yasutami (Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1996), p. 30.
  18. On lacquer-impregnated documents, see Hirakawa Minami's *Urushigami monjo no kenkyū*, (Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1989); and *Yomigaeru kodai monjo: Urushi ni fujikomareta Nihon shakai* (Iwanami shoten, 1994).
  19. On inscribed potsherds, see Hara Hidesaburō, "Doki ni kakarera moji: Doki bokusho", in *Nihon no kodai 14: Koroba to moji*, ed. Kishi Toshio (Chūō

- kōronsha, 1988); the articles collected in the November (no. 362) and December (no. 363) 1993 issues of *Gekkan Bunkaizai*; and Hirakawa Minami, *Bokusho doki no kenkyū* (Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 2000).
20. For introductory discussions of these three topics, see Farris, *Sacred Texts and Buried Treasures*, pp. 203–221.
21. On Nagaya himself and the significance of these *mokkan*, see Joan R. Piggott, “*Mokkan*: Wooden Documents from the Nara Period”, pp. 452–461; and Farris, *Sacred Texts and Buried Treasures*, pp. 221–230. Terasaki Yasuhito, *Nagaya-ō* (Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1999), is a full-length biography. For an introduction to the site and its contents, with transcriptions and photographs of selected *mokkan*, see Nara kokuritsu bunkazai kenkyūjo, eds., *Heijō-kyō: Nagaya-ō teitaku to mokkan* (Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1991). To sample some of the rich scholarship on these artifacts, see especially Tono Haruyuki, *Nagaya-ōke mokkan no kenkyū* (Hanawa shobo, 1996); and Mori Kimiyuki, *Nagaya-ōke mokkan no kisoteki kenkyū* (Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 2000).
22. JMSS, item 34.
23. As Komatsu Hideo suggests in a provocative study of a dedicatory inscription from Hōryūji, these are not necessarily separate: one function of the inscription of honorific and humilific forms is to clarify the (often implicit) subjects of the verbs with which they are associated (“Nihongo shokushi kara mita Hōryūji kondō Yakushibusu kōhainei”, in *Nihongo shokushi genron* [revised edition; Kasama shoin, 2000], pp. 211–272).
24. This is not to say, on the other hand, that Sinitic loanwords were necessarily not employed in *kundoku*; the point is rather that these reading/writing practices should not be conflated with more commonly discussed “borrowing” phenomena. Entirely logographic inscriptions like that of this Nagaya household *mokkan* do not provide explicit information about how their characters were vocalized, so it is impossible to be sure about such issues as to what extent Sino-Japanese loanwords were employed in reading them. But *mokkan* and other seventh- and eighth-century sources with readings written out phonographically, combined with manuscript annotations and dictionary entries from subsequent centuries, enable reasonably certain reconstructions of early *kundoku* readings (and, for that matter, of readings of logographic passages in transmitted works like the *Kojiki* and the *Man'yōshū*).
25. The much-vaunted formal simplifications that gave rise to the phonographic *kana* syllabaries over the course of the ninth century were undeniably important, but they were extensions of existing practices rather than revolutionary developments. For further discussion of discoveries of partially and completely

- phonographic *mokkan* inscriptions, and their consequences for one of the central debates of early literary history, see David Lurie, “On the Inscription of the Hitomaro Poetry Collection: Between Literary History and the History of Writing”, *Man'yōshū kenkyū* 26 (May 2004), pp. 1–50.
26. For an introductory textbook on the “New Literacy Studies” associated with such scholars as Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole, Brian Sreer, Shirley Brice Heath, and James Paul Gee, see David Barton, *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); a much more condensed survey is James Collins, “Literacy and Literacies”, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995), pp. 75–93.
27. JMSS, item 20. Similar signs, mentioning another missing horse and one that had been found, were unearthed from the same site. “Yamashina temple” is another name for Kōfukuji 興福寺, the tutelary temple of the Fujiwara kinship group, and the pond where the horse was last seen is Sarusawa no ike 養沢池, which can still be found, full of algae and turtles, outside the temple’s south gate, downhill from its pagoda. See also JMSS, item 21, and NKMS, pp. 136–137.
28. Amando Petrucci and Linda Lappin, trans., *Public Lettering: Script, Power, and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 46.
29. Fujikawa Tomoyuki and Wada Atsumu, “Tokushima: Kannonji iseki”, in *Mokkan kenkyū* 20 (1998).
30. NKMS, item 494 (commentary on p. 106).
31. *The Analects of Confucius* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1938), p. 83.
32. For a sampling of such writing practice *mokkan*, see JMSS, items 192–207.
33. Kokuritsu rekishi minzoku hakubutsukan, eds., *Kodai Nihon, Moji no aru fūkei*, p. 55. For photographs and transcriptions of the Korean *mokkan*, see *Han’guk ūi kodae mokkan* (Seoul: Kungnip ch’angwŏn munhwajae yŏn’guso, 2004), item 147.
34. Surveys of Korean *mokkan* can be found in Yi Song-si, “Kankoku shutsudo no mokkan ni suite”, *Mokkan kenkyū* 19 (1997); and Kokuritsu rekishi minzoku hakubutsukan, eds., *Kodai Nihon, Moji no aru fūkei*, pp. 27–35. *Han’guk ūi kodae mokkan*, published in both Korean and Japanese versions, collects photographs and transcriptions of the *mokkan* discovered to date along with introductory material, maps, tables, and an essential collection of essays.
35. For more on this point, see Lurie, *The Origins of Writing in Early Japan*, pp. 123–171 and 208–212; a brief discussion of writing in early Korea can be found on pp. 235–245.
36. The most extensive survey of early Korean writing in English remains that in

- Gari K. Ledyard, "The Korean Language Reform of 1446: The Origin, Background, and Early History of the Korean Alphabet" (PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1966; republished as *The Korean Language Reform of 1446* [Kungnip kugŏ yon gwŏn ch'ongsŏ 2; Seoul: Sin'gu munhwasa, 1998]); but see also Iksoop Lee and S. Robert Ramsey, *The Korean Language* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 45–55. For recent Japanese-language introductions, see Yi Sŏng-si's *Higashi Ajia bunkaken no keisei* (*Sekaishi ribureito 7; Yamakawa shuppansha*, 2000) and "Kodai Chōsen no moji bunka: Miete kita moji no kakehashi", in *Kodai Nihon moji no kita michi: Kodai Chūgoku/Chōsen kara retō e*, ed. Hirakawa Minami (Taishūkan shoten, 2005), pp. 32–65.
37. For discussions of Korean *kanjoku*, see Fujimoto Yukio, "Kodai Chōsen no gengo to moji bunka", in *Nihon no kodai 14: Kotoba to moji*, ed. Kishi Toshio (Chūō kōronsha, 1988); Kim Mun-kyōng, "Kani bunkaken no kundoku genshō", in *Wakan hikaku bungaku kenkyū no shomondai*, ed. Wakan hikaku bungakkai (*Wakan hikaku bungaku sōsho 8; Kyūko shoin*, 1988); and Kim Yōng-uk, "Kani/jkanbun no Kankokureki juyō: Shoki ritō to shakudoku kuketsu shiryō o chūshin ni", in *Nihongaku/Tonkōgaku/kanbun kandoku no shin tenkai*, ed. Ishizuka Harumichi kyōju raishoku kinenkai (Kyūko shoin, 2005), pp. 575–601.
38. See Nguyen Dinh Hoa, "Chu' Nôm: The Demotic System of Writing in Vietnam", *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 79: 4 (1959), pp. 270–274; and E. I. Kychanov and György Kara, "Sinitform Scripts of Inner Asia", in *The World's Writing Systems*, ed. Peter T. Daniels and William Bright (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 228–238. On the overall history of writing in East Asia, see Kōno Rokurō, "The Chinese Writing System and Its Influences on the Scripts of Neighboring Peoples", *Memoirs of the Research Department of the Toyo Bunko* 27 (1969), pp. 83–140; Victor Mair, "Buddhism and the Rise of the Written Vernacular in East Asia: The Making of National Languages", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53: 3 (August 1994), pp. 707–751; and Nicholas Tranter, "Script 'Borrowing', Cultural Influence, and the Development of the Written Vernacular in East Asia", in *Language Change in East Asia*, ed. T. E. McAuley (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2001), pp. 180–204.

## The Dunhuang Manuscripts: From Cave to Computer

Susan Whitfield

Over a century ago a cave was discovered near Dunhuang, in present-day Gansu province in Chinese Central Asia. It was full of manuscripts on paper, paintings on silk, hemp and paper, and some of the earliest printed material in the world. During the same decade tens of thousands of other manuscripts were unearthed from desert sites in neighboring Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. In over twenty languages and scripts, on a wide variety of media, and encompassing over 1,500 years of history, this corpus represents one of the earliest, largest, and richest manuscript resources in the world. The Dunhuang cave—probably a local monastery library<sup>1</sup>—is by itself one of the largest and earliest Buddhist archives. Yet it is dismaying that with over a century of Dunhuang scholarship behind us there has been very little exploitation of this resource either as a manuscript archive or as a record of contemporary Buddhism.

The site had originated as a retreat for Buddhist monks who, from the mid-fourth century, excavated small caves for living and meditation out of a friable cliff face about ten miles south-east of the Silk Road garrison and trading town of Dunhuang. It was one of scores, if not hundreds, of such sites along the Eastern Silk Road. The community grew and soon there

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