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Monumenta Nipponica, Vol. 53, No. 4 (Winter, 1998), 499-515.

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Japaneseness and the History of the Book

HENRY D. SMITH II

The Book in Japan: A Cultural History from the Beginnings to the Nineteenth Century. By Peter Kornicki. Leiden: Brill, 1998. xii + 498 pages. Hardback \$83.25.

PETER KORNICKI has written a book about “the book in Japan.” It is an authoritative, informative, and provocative presentation of a topic that we too easily take for granted. Much of our professional life is spent buying books, lugging books, storing books, writing books, reading books, reviewing books, and generally despairing, in the epigrammatic protest of the late twentieth century, that we have “too many books, too little time.” For most of us, many of those books are Japanese, yet we are curiously remiss in thinking about the nature of a “Japanese book,” how it has evolved historically, or the complex relations between the physical thing and what we are often prone to take as disembodied content. Kornicki’s important new survey, both as a compendium of well-organized information and as a reflection on the particularities of books in premodern Japanese history, may help us start rethinking from the ground up our relationship with this most intimate partner.

First, some observations about this book as a book. It is published by the venerable Dutch firm of Brill Academic Publishers in Leiden, which means that it is rather costly, but it is worth the money. It provides all that we would expect from a real book in an era when corners are increasingly cut, and when the viability of the medium itself is often subjected to doubt. Brill may not provide many frills (in particular, more illustrations would have helped), but it is a book of substance, as intimated by the gilt crest on the cover with a Latin motto and a founding date of 1683 (before Genroku in Japanese time, a longevity matched

among the publishers mentioned by Kornicki only by Murakami Kanbei 村上勘兵衛 in Kyoto, in operation by as early as 1622 and still in business as Heirakuji Shoten 平楽寺書店). And so Kornicki's book as a whole is, well, *bookish*, complete with an organization into chapters with an orderly hierarchy of headings and sub-headings, cross-referenced by the classic section symbol “§.” It includes Japanese characters in the main text, in the footnotes, and in the end matter, a luxury found in few books about Japan published in English these days. Physically, it feels as if it will survive many rereadings and some rough handling.

Peter Kornicki brings solid credentials to his task. He has conducted important original research in diverse areas of the history of the book in Tokugawa Japan, including censorship, the distribution of both printed and manuscript books by commercial lending libraries, provincial publishing, and the reprinting of Edo books in the Meiji period. With Hayashi Nozomu 林望 he has edited the major catalogue *Early Japanese Books in Cambridge University Library*, which offers in its descriptive notes the most thorough exposition of premodern Japanese bibliography available in English.¹ Finally, again in collaboration with Hayashi Nozomu, Kornicki has directed for the past decade the “Union Catalogue of Early Japanese Books in Europe,” an ambitious project to catalogue the many premodern Japanese books scattered throughout European collections.²

Drawing upon these research achievements, Kornicki works here in a broader and more synthetic mode, incorporating extensive reading in the substantial Japanese scholarship on the history of the book. The result is a virtual encyclopedia of the history of physical texts in Japan, covering a wide variety of topics. The organization, in fact, tends to the encyclopedic, being composed of sixty-odd coherent and self-contained sections, each with its own bibliography. In general, the chapters are organized thematically, and within chapters, where relevant, chronologically—with 1600 as an inevitable divide (of which more below). The general topics considered include the material forms of books and the history of manuscripts, printing, and publishing; specialized chapters are devoted to authors and readers, imports and exports of books, censorship, and libraries and collecting. Some overlap and repetition is inevitable, but thorough cross-referencing keeps it to an orderly minimum. The sheer informational value is high, with the major episodes and trends in the history of books in premodern Japan presented in a readable and up-to-date form.

At the same time, Kornicki does not shy from broader analytical and comparative observations. These issue-oriented aspects of the book are introduced in summary form in the first chapter, which serves as an overview of what follows. This thirty-one-page essay, “The History of the Book and Japan,” can be profitably read independently, and will be provocative for all interested in the many broad issues that it raises. The title of this synthesizing chapter signals the hope

¹ Hayashi and Kornicki 1991, pp. 13–37 (pp. 57–67 in Japanese).

² The ongoing progress of the catalogue is documented in a periodical newsletter issued by Kornicki from the Cambridge University Library.

of the author to place Japan within a broader “history of the book,” or as he states elsewhere, to “globalize” and “internationalize” the Japanese book (pp. ix, 4). He is here clearly influenced by the French *l’histoire du livre* that first emerged as a distinctive discipline in the 1960s.³

Following this overview and a useful discussion of the physical forms of books in traditional Japan, Kornicki takes up the history of manuscript culture. The inclusion of this topic reflects the recognition by the most recent generation of French historians of the book that print may not have been quite the “revolution” that is often claimed, and that it made its debut within the matrix of manuscript culture.⁴ In accord with these French scholars, Kornicki observes that printing in no way meant the end of manuscripts, which in Japan continued to serve such critical functions as transmitting the secrets (*hiden* 秘伝) of cultural and artisanal lineages, providing an outlet beyond the reach of censorship for politically sensitive materials, and allowing a protected realm for erotic texts and images.

Note that all such uses were ways of protecting transmission from public or official intrusion. One wonders what to make of the vast range of more ordinary handwritten material that proliferated exponentially in this period, and is nowhere mentioned—such as letters, diaries, bureaucratic paperwork, merchant account books, and so forth. Most of it may not have been intended for transmission to posterity, but some of it surely was, a circumstance that indicates the importance of a generous definition of the nature of “manuscript culture” in early modern Japan. (When it comes to the world of print, on the other hand, Kornicki gives due and refreshing attention to items that are often not included within the proper realm of the “book” in Japan, such as maps, calendars, handbills, and other ephemera.) Little of this vast body of handwritten material survives, of course, but the very fact of its production suggests that we need to consider the act of *writing* much more broadly, together with the issue of literacy and reading, which Kornicki properly emphasizes. It is too easy to forget that readers tended to be writers, if not the full-fledged “authors” of published works, whom Kornicki does consider in revealing detail (chapter 6).

In the end, the world of manuscripts receives little sustained attention in this survey, which is overwhelmingly dedicated to printed books and to the Tokugawa period, when print culture in Japan reached a level sufficient to justify a claim to global importance. My only frustration in assessing Kornicki’s advocacy of this claim, with which I am in total sympathy, is the absence of a clear framework for such a global history of the book. If we simply provide the raw data about Japan to the increasingly lively community of “historians of the book” in Europe and North America, experience suggests that they will find it difficult to stand apart from their understandable preoccupation with the intricate history of the book in the West, and that East Asia will remain something of a footnote

³ See Chartier 1987, pp. 299–329.

⁴ Chartier 1987, pp. 309–10.

in the established narrative of the progress of Gutenberg's invention to global dominance.

In the work that inaugurated *l'histoire du livre*, Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin's *L'apparition du livre* (1958),⁵ for example, the book in East Asia was relegated to a six-page section delegated to a specialist at the Bibliothèque Nationale, who grudgingly granted China an "indirect" connection via the invention of paper, asserting that "nothing so far suggests that we owe China any more than that."⁶ East Asia reappeared later in this work under the heading "Printing Conquers the World," but the only issue raised was how the West managed to "establish itself" within civilizations that had older but "more rudimentary" techniques of reproduction that somehow had become "better adapted to local needs."⁷ The entire legacy of Chinese print culture since the Tang was thus reduced to a local backwater. In Martin's much broader and more ambitious recapitulation of the history of all writing, *L'histoire et pouvoir de l'écrit* (1988), the information is better, but East Asia continues to be treated as a mere appendix to the broader canvas of the "history and power of writing."⁸ The heights of sophistication and complexity that Chinese print culture had reached long before Gutenberg still remain difficult for European historians of the book to grasp.

It is thus incumbent upon us as historians of East Asia to take the initiative and propose the appropriate global framework, rather than hold to Kornicki's generous assumption that the historical data will make the case. Research on the history of the book in East Asia has, in fact, been far skimpier than for Europe, but we certainly know enough to propose a tentative scheme.⁹ The prologue of such a world history of the book would be the invention of writing itself (in the sense of a system of symbols that fully represents human language), independently in the civilizations of Sumeria, China, and the Maya at successive intervals of about 1,500 years.¹⁰ The last (recognized only relatively recently as true

⁵ Febvre and Martin 1976. This is the English version translated by David Gerard.

⁶ See the section on "The Chinese Precedent" by M. R. Guignard. Febvre and Martin 1976, pp. 71–76.

⁷ This section, entitled "The Far East," is by Henri Bernard-Maître. Febvre and Martin 1976, pp. 212–15.

⁸ See Martin 1994, pp. 19–25, 224–26, 393–96. For a recent criticism of the narrowness of a Eurocentric history of print culture by a historian of Chinese art, see Clunas 1997, pp. 29–31.

⁹ In Western scholarship, no synthetic work on the history of the book in China or Korea comparable to Kornicki's for Japan has yet appeared, although Tsien 1985, while focused on the technology of printing, offers much essential information on Chinese book history. Important new monographic work on the history of print culture in China that draws on the themes of French *l'histoire du livre*, is beginning to appear; see, for example, Cherniack 1994 and Drège 1991. For abstracts of research in progress on the book in late imperial China, see "Spreading the Word: The Book Trade, Book Collection, and the Dissemination of Knowledge in Late Imperial China," in Association of Asian Studies 1994, pp. 88–90, 97–99.

¹⁰ Disagreement persists as to whether these three were the only cases of the independent appearance of writing in human history. Coulmas 1989, p. 57, among others, tends to support the independent invention of Egyptian hieroglyphs, while Daniels and Bright 1996, p. 2, write that "there seem to have been at least three—and possibly as many as seven—distinct, independent origins of writing in the ancient world." They do not, however, specify the other four candidates. The "ancient world" in any event refers to ancient Southwest Asia.

writing¹¹) disappeared without spreading beyond its isolated domain, whereas writing in Southwest Asia and Egypt diffused and gave rise to many new systems of transcription, including descendants of the Semitic consonantal system (such as modern Arabic and Hebrew), Indian scripts of the “abugida” type (using core symbols for consonants plus an implicit vowel “a” that can be modified with diacritical marks), and the full alphabet of separate symbols for vowels and consonants that spread from Greece through the rest of Europe and beyond.

By the beginning of the Christian era, these descendants from one (or possibly more) Middle Eastern ancestors accounted for the writing systems of all living civilizations in the “Old World” ecumene (geographically, Afro-Eurasia north of the Sahara) with the critical exception of East Asia, where the Chinese system of logographic writing has continued vigorously for over three millennia to the present day.¹² Since Korea has in recent decades converted largely to its distinctive alphabet devised in the fifteenth century, Japan remains the only country outside China to use Chinese characters, supplemented by the two syllabaries, a distinctive combination with no real parallel elsewhere in living systems of writing. The nature of this system, and its implications for the history of the book in Japan, is an issue nowhere explicitly discussed by Kornicki, who doubtless presumed that it would be obvious to most of his readers, as it is, of course, to the readers of this review. Perhaps, however, we need to think through the implications of this peculiar system, an issue to which I will return shortly.

This thumbnail world history of writing points up that for over two thousand years, Eurasia has been divided into two distinct parts, East Asia using Chinese logograms, and the remainder using some form of phonetic writing. Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen have recently proposed in *The Myth of Continents* a system of charting the major “civilizational boundaries” of the globe, in which the highest-order division within the Old World ecumene is precisely East Asia versus the rest. The “most clearly evident” divergence between the two, they argue, lies precisely in the writing systems.¹³ This divergence extends logically to the modes of preservation of written records—in short, to books, which thus become a critical physical deposit of East-West differentiation, with many implications for the writing of history itself.

Given the unbroken longevity of the Chinese writing system, and the sheer size and coherence of Chinese civilization (encompassing perhaps one-fourth of the world’s population in 1000, and one-third today), we may conjecture that when the printing of texts began in the Tang dynasty, a majority of the world’s then extant written records were in Chinese. And we can be certain that the multiplying effects of woodblock printing in China over the next five centuries

¹¹ For a readable account of this intriguing story, see Coe 1992.

¹² Notice should also be taken of “Siniform” scripts such as Tangut, Khitan, Jurchin, and Yi, which were inspired by Chinese characters and maintained a logographic component; see Daniels and Bright 1996, pp. 228-43. Most of these were relatively brief experiments, and only Yi seems to have survived into modern times.

¹³ Lewis and Wigen 1997, pp. 143-44.

before Gutenberg further widened the gap. Even after printing began to spread rapidly in Europe, moreover, printed books in China were reaching new levels of diversity, numbers, and geographical reach throughout the Ming empire. The influence of this development then extended to Korea and Japan as well. While Korean printing tended to be limited to large state and Buddhist projects on the one hand and small-scale private and family printing on the other, Japan from the seventeenth century developed the thriving and diverse print culture that Kornicki illuminates in persuasive detail.

The surge of printing in Europe thus occurred late in comparison to East Asia, but it had a far-reaching momentum; the printing press quickly began to function not only as an engine for the spread of information and fantasy that drove Western expansion, but also as one of the key tools by which Western agents—notably missionaries—sought to extend their cultural realm. It was through this development that printing intruded into those Eurasian civilizations that had until then been conspicuous for the *absence* of print. Of the many complex reasons for this absence, the most important were the preference for oral rather than written transmission of sacred texts in India, and the religious prohibition of printing in Islam. These religious constraints in other major civilizations of Eurasia contrast decisively with the positive role of Buddhism in pioneering and spreading print in East Asia from as early as the sixth century.

The overall shape of the history of the book, then, at least in terms of the crucial dynamic of printing, looks something like a seesaw out of balance. For a thousand years from the mid-ninth century, weight lay to the east in the continuous and vigorous development of block-printing within the confines of the Chinese cultural sphere. Beginning in the mid-fifteenth century, weight gradually shifted to the West, with print in the form of movable type on a mechanical press suddenly spreading outward from Europe and eventually taking over the alphabetic remainder of the globe at uneven rates. Until the industrialization of printing began in the 1830s, the world history of the book consisted of two parallel realms, for the most part isolated one from the other, using wholly different technologies with often differing societal impact. And yet this is not the way that the history of either the book or of printing has been written until now, at least in European languages: the few scholars, such as Henri-Jean Martin, who have aspired to survey the global history of the book, have been handicapped by the lack of access to data on the book in East Asia that is in any way comparable to that available for Europe. For China to take center stage for at least the first third of any world history of the premodern book, as it properly should, it is necessary to put the standard narrative of the triumph of Gutenberg's invention into a broader context. Kornicki's book will hopefully serve as a critical beginning in this basic reconceptualization of the shape of the world "history of the book."

Despite the broad pattern of mutual isolation between the eastern and western histories of print, interaction between the two in fact occurred from the sixteenth century in ways that were critical for Japan (if less so for Europe). As Kornicki

emphasizes in his chapter on “transmission” (by which he refers to transnational movement of books, mostly among China, Japan, and Korea), one major instance was the role of Dutch books in fueling the Rangaku 蘭学 movement of the later Edo period. But an earlier moment of contact between the parallel histories of print in Europe and East Asia came in the pivotal decade of the 1590s, the crucial transition in the history of the book in Japan. One problem with Kornicki’s thematic organization is that the historical significance of this critical period from the late sixteenth into the mid-seventeenth century, when printing came to be practiced in Japan on a scale and with a diversity never known in the past, is somewhat muted.

The story begins with the dramatic coincidence of the simultaneous appearance in Japan of the separate movable-type technologies of Korea and Europe. In 1590 the Jesuit Press began production of Western-style books using kana and roman script. Just three years later Hideyoshi’s invading armies obtained through plunder Korean state-owned stocks of movable metal type, a technology that had been developed independently in Korea prior to Gutenberg. In the end, neither technology survived for long: according to Kornicki, the Jesuit Press, which was tiny in output and isolated in westernmost Japan, had no influence at all on the Japanese transition to commercial printing, while Korean-style movable type was abandoned in favor of traditional woodblock printing by the mid-1620s. This development, it should be noted, is often presented as a perplexing “reversion” to a more primitive technology, a view that, for reasons clearly recapitulated by Kornicki, ignores the many advantages of block printing for Japan. Movable type is much like the alphabet: it makes sense for certain languages and cultures, but not for all; too much opinion on this subject, both in Japan and in the West, has simply taken for granted the inherent superiority of movable type, which comes to be seen as itself a mark of progress. In Japan, however, block printing was the obvious choice, and within two to three decades of the catalytic encounter with movable type from both Korea and Europe, a thriving commercial printing network had emerged in Kyoto that would soon spread to Osaka and eventually to Edo.

What remains unclear are the exact dynamics of this entire process, although Kornicki does offer some suggestions. He proposes, following recent arguments for the case of Europe,¹⁴ that “printing succeeded because a literate public already existed.” While, as he notes, exactly how this happened in Japan “has yet to be explored” (p. 22), we can at least speculate on the likely underlying circumstances. Various accounts point to the importance of the social and political situation in the city of Kyoto with its creative intermingling of samurai, priests, and aristocrats with the upper-stratum merchants who were the first printers. (The close linkage of commercial printing and elite politics in this early stage is reflected in the intriguing fact reported by Kornicki that one of the first new books to be published—as opposed to reprints of existing classics—was the *Kan’ei*

¹⁴ Kornicki cites Clanchy 1993.

gyōkōki 寛永行幸記 of 1626, an illustrated account of Emperor Go-Mizunoo's 後水尾 procession to Nijō-jō 二条城 in the same year.)

These groups did not necessarily constitute a literate “public,” but they were certainly literate as well as prosperous, and their yearning for the stable culture of the aristocratic past after a century and more of warfare fostered an urge to stabilize and propagate that past, a task for which print was well suited. What was truly novel about the new world of print was the production of books in the Japanese language, whether literary classics or the wide range of informational and how-to books that appeared in the course of the century. As Mary Elizabeth Berry has argued, the demand for printed maps in particular marks the seventeenth century as a wholly new era.¹⁵ All of this fits into the pattern of “secularization” that Kornicki identifies as one specific impact of the Korean model of state-sponsored publication of Chinese Confucian texts. Kornicki points out that the Korean example spurred the reprint of Chinese secular works in Japan. The variety of book genres involved, however, went far beyond Korean prototypes.

Of equal importance, although not directly mentioned by Kornicki, was the great boom in printing of the late Ming period, which was reaching its highwater mark precisely at the end of the sixteenth century. The influence of the Chinese book was seen in more popular illustrated texts as well as “serious” works. Such illustrated texts included not only those on Buddhist themes as in the past, but a wide range of works on history, biography, divination, astronomy, mathematics, and military tactics. As Craig Clunas has recently emphasized, the book in China was then “exploding with a quantity of pictures greater than at any previous time since the invention of printing almost 1,000 years previously.”¹⁶

The direct impact of Ming illustrated imprints became most pronounced in woodblock editions of the 1650s when, Jack Hillier observes, “there was a positive vogue for illustrations copied from Ming exemplars.”¹⁷ Although almost none of the serious Confucian tracts reprinted in Japan were illustrated, in more popular works we can see strong and direct Chinese inspiration for the Japanese practice of illustration. Kornicki makes the important observation that “illustration was itself a token of a Japanese book” (p. 60), but since it was also very much a token of the late Ming book, questions remain about the particular visuality of the Japanese form. Kornicki devotes little space to the question of illustration in books, perhaps because it has been treated at length in English by art historians,¹⁸ but it is surely a topic of concern if we are to grasp basic issues such as the nature of reading and the societal functions of the book in Japan. In the long run, illustration may indeed have been more of a token of the book in Japan

¹⁵ Berry 1995.

¹⁶ Clunas 1997, p. 29.

¹⁷ Hillier 1987, vol. 1, p. 69.

¹⁸ In addition to Hillier, see also Chibbett 1977. Although Chibbett's work has now been wholly superseded by Kornicki in the area of the history of printing and publishing, it remains useful as a general introduction to Japanese book illustration.

than in China; the kind of integrated mixing of text and image that one finds in the comic-book-like *kusazōshi* 草双紙 genre in particular seems to constitute a distinctively Japanese visuality. Still, the comparison with China deserves more sustained attention.

The relation between “Chinese” and “Japanese” books goes far deeper than the matter of pictures alone; it links with questions about the very structure of culture and politics in early modern Japan. Kornicki argues that the steady flow of Chinese books into Japan throughout the course of premodern history suggests a “colonial orientation” of Japan towards China, manifested most notably in the “dominance of sinology in Japanese intellectual life of the Tokugawa period” (p. 19). The term “colonial” seems inappropriate in the absence of any political or military subordination, but the almost exclusively one-way movement of books between Japan and China or Korea (with some minor exceptions detailed in the chapter on transmission) is certainly linked to basic issues of Japanese identity.

This is reflected in revealing ways in the concept of a “national book” (*kokusho* 国書) that has been given definition by the great Iwanami catalogue of premodern books in Japan, the *Kokusho sōmokuoku* 国書総目録. On the first page of his survey, while conceding the indispensable utility of this “monumental” work, Kornicki argues that “the very concept of ‘Japanese book’ (*kokusho*) is one of only limited historical and analytical value” (p. 1), since it excludes most Chinese books and thereby obscures the central role of sinology in the intellectual life of premodern Japan. Kornicki’s point is well taken, as are his charges of other exclusions from the *Kokusho sōmokuoku* (such as Japanese books in non-Japanese libraries, as well as the holdings of many provincial libraries in Japan). The explanatory notes of the *Kokusho sōmokuoku* forthrightly indicate that the contents are limited to “works written, edited, or translated by Japanese,” and explicitly reject “writings by foreigners,” even when punctuation and readings marks have been provided (a specific reference to texts in Chinese), unless they have been “reorganized and edited” (*kaishū hensan* 改修編纂) by Japanese.¹⁹

And yet I wonder if we can dismiss the notion of the “Japanese book” simply

¹⁹ *Kokusho sōmokuoku*, vol. 1, p. v. The 1989-1991 “revised edition” (*hoteiban* 補訂版) of *Kokusho sōmokuoku* provides minor corrections, and adds symbols to indicate titles that also appear in the “supplement” (*hoi* 補遺) in volume 8 of the first edition and in *Kotenseki sōgō mokuoku* 古典籍総合目録, a supplementary work published in 1990, but it does not include any new entries. The renaming of *kokusho* as *kotenseki* (“old *tenseki*,” a term that, according to the Shōgakukan *Nihon kokugo daijiten* 日本国語大辞典, explicitly encompasses “*washo*, *kanseki*, *butten*” 和書・漢籍・仏典: Japanese books, Chinese books, and Buddhist books) is suggestive of a shift in the concept and coverage of the project. The introductory comments to *Kotenseki sōgō mokuoku* do not, however, provide any explanation for this change of title, and the stated principles for the selection of books remain the same except for one deletion: the passage in *Kokusho sōmokuoku* stating that “In many cases, historical materials of the common people in the Edo period (*kinsei no shomin shiryō* 近世の庶民史料), which are huge in number and many of which remain uncatalogued, have been excluded.” Cf. *Kotenseki sōgō mokuoku*, vol. 1, p. iii. It is unclear whether the current policy is to include, or to continue to omit, such materials.

because of such patent chauvinism. It is revealing that in earlier Chinese and Japanese, *kokusho* referred to diplomatic documents exchanged *between* states, rather than to documents particular to a single state. The situation in the Tokugawa period, however, as described by Kornicki, was conducive to the notion of *kokusho* as a purely “Japanese book,” if only to designate a book written or printed in the Japanese language, including the various hybrid (*kana-majiri* 仮名まじり) forms of Chinese and Japanese. Within the Tokugawa polity, the prefix *koku-* referred as much to the separate daimyo domains as to Japan as an international actor, but in the Meiji period it quickly took on the trappings of modern nationalism. Following the precedent of Kokugaku 国学 as “national learning,” *kokushi* 国史 and *kokugo* 国語 came to designate a “national history” and the “national language.” So also *kokusho* underwent a progressive transformation from an international document, to a book in Japanese, and finally to a book that is essentially “Japanese.”

Kornicki himself provides some of the most compelling evidence of the grounds for separating “Chinese” from “Japanese” books in his two final chapters, in which he deals with the history of libraries, collectors, and catalogues. He makes the revealing point that Japan developed no tradition of aspiring to a synthetic library of all books; rather, there was a persistent segregation and division among the three distinct categories of Buddhist, secular Chinese, and Japanese works—to which was eventually added a fourth category of Western works. Bakufu libraries and those of the bakufu-sponsored academy (Shōheizaka Gakumonjo 昌平坂学問所) and the various domains were heavily sinological in orientation. In the creation of catalogues, as well, Kornicki describes a “continuing tension between sinological texts and Japanese texts” (p. 413) that impeded the formation of a comprehensive system of organization encompassing Buddhist, secular Chinese, and Japanese books. A hierarchy of status existed among these categories, of course, but it varied by individual, and no overarching scheme for systematizing all knowledge in the Chinese or Western manner took shape. Although the Tokugawa period witnessed the assiduous development of bibliographic traditions and building of canons, in the end these enterprises remained sharply divided between sinology and Kokugaku, on what were, by this point, ideological grounds.

In his opening overview chapter, Kornicki addresses the issue of sinology more broadly, arguing that it was the “elite preoccupation with sinology which gave Japanese books room to manoeuvre” (p. 16); the state made little effort to direct the formation of a canon or to lay down guidelines for what could and could not be published. This is part of Kornicki’s broader argument about the relation of books and the state in Japan, which he sees as remarkably weak, particularly in comparison with China. In the chapter on censorship (chapter 8), one of the most informative and revealing in the book, he argues, in convincing detail, that the harshness of Tokugawa censorship has been exaggerated; in comparison to the policies of the Meiji state, it was haphazard and unsystematic, lenient in effect if not intent. The censorship system worked mostly to create a distance between

publishers and the state, he argues; thus, instead of being forced to adopt a posture of flattery and fawning, publishers could occupy a world detached from secular power, dependent on state for neither patronage nor approval. The Tokugawa regime, Kornicki concludes, “signally failed to appreciate the power and potential of print” (p. 12).

I find this general observation persuasive, but also in urgent need of real historical explanation. Left unanswered is the question of *why* the early modern state should have been so indifferent to the power of print. Or to look at the other and equally perplexing side of the coin, why did the potential opponents of the state not turn to print as a weapon? Kornicki actually takes up this last question in his afterword, responding to a remark that I myself once made about “the general absence of seditious publications” in Edo Japan,²⁰ and noting that in fact “there was a world of leaflets, graffiti and other forms of transient writing that were sometimes overtly critical of the Bakufu” (p. 446). The point is valid, but the very ephemerality of such writing, most of which was not in print and almost none of which was seditious or scurrilous in tone (particularly in comparison to France), still leaves us in need of a general historical explanation for the lack of any overt politics, either for or against the state, in Tokugawa print culture. Was it the absence of a truly public “civil sphere”? Was it a sort of ideological “denaturing” of politics of the sort that Carol Gluck has detected in Meiji Japan?²¹ Was it the displacement of politics to the sphere of play and allusion?²² Or was it rather, I would propose, that self-censorship, as one form of the pervasive principle of self-regulation underlying the Tokugawa polity, in combination with a calculated unpredictability of enforcement, created a relatively non-violent but peculiarly effective suppression of all political expression?

These and other arguments indicate how basic the issue is for understanding Tokugawa Japan. A recent essay by the critic Karatani Kōjin 柄谷行人 that can be linked directly to the world of writing suggests another way of approaching the relationship between print and the state.²³ Karatani first takes note of Maruyama Masao’s 丸山眞男 argument in *Nihon no shisō* 日本の思想 (1961) that in the absence of any overall framework into which they might be placed, ideas brought into Japan from the outside merely “cohabited” (*zakkyo* 雑居) the discursive space of Japan, never confronting one another. In Maruyama’s memorable metaphor, the situation was akin to an assembly of “octopus pots,” in which each system of thought was enclosed in its own isolated, comfortable space.²⁴

As with thought, argues Karatani, so also with power in Japan, where, lack-

²⁰ Smith 1994, pp. 332–52.

²¹ Gluck 1987, p. 49ff.

²² Harootunian 1989.

²³ Karatani 1998. This is an English translation and amalgamation by Sabu Kohso of two related articles originally published separately in Japanese. See Karatani 1993, pp. 99–115; and Karatani 1997, pp. 158–77. The argument outlined here appears mainly in the latter.

²⁴ Maruyama 1961, p. 129.

ing any unifying principle, “the center of power is always empty.”²⁵ Karatani parts ways with Maruyama, however, in denying that this is an autonomous and indigenous “deep structure” of Japanese culture.²⁶ He holds, rather, that it derives in the first instance from the geopolitical relationship of China and Japan, marked by a reciprocal tension between a large unified empire that strives to be complete and all-encompassing, rooted in abstract principle, and a peripheral island culture protected by natural borders that tends to accept easily whatever is brought in from outside and to be pragmatically free of dogma. What is often mistaken as an originary “Japaneseness,” Karatani proposes, is rather a characteristic of a universal structural relationship. Greece (versus Egypt) and England (versus the Continent) provide two other relevant examples.

Karatani’s particular twist lies in his turn to language—but not by reiterating the familiar essentialist stress on linguistic structure (such as the absence of personal pronouns) as the key to national character. Rather, he claims, we must look to the script (*moji* 文字) in which Japanese was written, in particular to the peculiar tripartite system of Chinese characters plus the two distinct syllabaries that emerged in the Heian period. Chinese characters were transformed by the Japanese according to the principles of kana formation and *kun* 訓 reading, while at the same time the characters were kept external as “Chinese” writing when used in Chinese order with *on* 音 readings. So also katakana in the modern period has served to perpetuate in writing (although not in speech—an important point) the foreignness of loan words from other languages. Karatani’s model is rough and tentative, and needs grounding in a dynamic historical context, especially one that takes account of the truly hybrid styles in which most Japanese came to be written and of important historical changes in usage.²⁷ But his basic point remains provocative: the “strange writing system” (*kikai na shokihō* 奇怪な書記法) of Japan that continues to function to this day in all its tripartite complexity lies “at the very core of all other ideologies and institutions.”²⁸ The segregated and endlessly recombinatory system of writing, in short, accounts for the absence of a system of coordinate axes in Japanese thought, and thereby helps explain the “empty center” of power.

In this model, I would propose, the printed book in the Tokugawa period, as an increasingly effective vehicle for the dissemination of the written word, becomes crucial to sustaining the centerless structure of both institutions and ide-

²⁵ Karatani 1993, p. 115.

²⁶ Karatani 1997, p. 160. Here Karatani refers to Maruyama’s analysis of the *Kojiki*, which attempts to uncover an “ancient substratum” (*kosō* 古層)—to use Sabu Kohso’s translation—of the Japanese historical consciousness. See Maruyama 1972, pp. 3–46.

²⁷ For some revealing insights on this issue by a historian of medieval Japan, see Amino 1988. In particular, Amino suggests that katakana was often used in medieval texts to express oral utterances (such as oaths), a usage that links naturally to the mobilization of this separate syllabary for foreign words, distinguished by their strange sound. Katakana would seem to be the pivotal “third man” in the Japanese writing system, and its changing historical functions deserve much closer scrutiny.

²⁸ Karatani 1997, p. 168; English translation is from Karatani 1998.

ologies in Japan. To return to the key issue raised by Kornicki, one explanation for state indifference to the power of print is the dispersal of cohesive authority inherent in the segmented system of writing. Similarly, writing dictated precisely the mutual isolation of the “Japanese book” and the “Chinese book” that Kornicki so persuasively lays out as the central feature of books in premodern Japan. So there was indeed such a thing as a “Japanese book,” which was constructed and maintained in the course of the Tokugawa period.

In fact, we can even isolate a prototype of the “Japanese book” in print, in the remarkable *Sagabon* 嵯峨本 imprints produced in Kyoto in 1599–ca. 1610 by the merchant intellectual Suminokura Soan 角倉素庵 and the multiskilled artist and connoisseur Hon’ami Kōetsu 本阿弥光悦—men at the core of the urban elite that gave birth to print culture in Japan. Produced by movable type, *Sagabon* for the first time put the Japanese classics into print, on decorated paper with added full-page illustrations in the style of the Tosa 土佐 school of court painters. These works were thereby transformed, both virtually and literally into “literature.” Almost as if by design, *Sagabon* editions were everything that the movable-type “Chinese” books being printed in precisely the same years by Tokugawa Ieyasu and by Emperors Go-Yōzei 後陽成 and Go-Mizunoo (see Kornicki, pp. 129–31) were not. The letters were flowing hiragana, ingeniously designed with ligatures to erase the spatial separation of characters inherent in Chinese (and European) print, and the decorated paper confounded the distinction of figure and ground rigidly maintained by the framing lines of an unillustrated Chinese text. Although an extreme case, *Sagabon* editions reveal in a dramatic way the separation by writing and language of “Japan” from “China” in books. Of course both types of text were Japanese books: the “Japaneseness” lay rather in the relational structure between the two, “cohabiting” the same cultural space without confronting one another.

A final issue singled out by Kornicki as of particular importance in the history of the book in Japan is that of readership and the related problem of literacy. While admitting that in the absence of any serious research in this area the evidence remains largely anecdotal, he devotes a major chapter to these matters. Some of the themes he introduces are highly suggestive, such as the possible impact of Zhu Xi’s 朱熹 famous “Rules for Reading” (*Dushu fa*, J. *Dokushohō* 読書法) of 1270, in which the great Neo-Confucian scholar more than eight centuries ago essentially lamented “too many books, too little time,” and urged reading slowly and carefully. In Tokugawa Japan, Kornicki suggests, echoes of this theme were to be found in Kaibara Ekiken’s 貝原益軒 instructions for bringing up children (*Wazoku dōjōkun* 和俗童子訓, 1710), which warned that “books should not be thrown about, stepped over, used as pillows, have their pages folded back or turned with fingers moistened with spittle” (p. 261). But I wonder if a certain Japanese inflection is not at work here. In an provocative article on the impact of print on textual transmission in Song China, Susan Cherniack has shown how Zhu Xi’s tirade bespoke that impact. In thirteenth-century China, he was already so fully embedded in the culture of print that he looked back with nostalgia to

an imagined golden age of the internalization of texts by memory and direct oral communication from master to disciple rather than external transmission in print.²⁹ Almost five hundred years later, Ekiken remained firmly within the general ambit of Chinese print culture; yet his emphasis was revealingly different. Whereas Zhu Xi's mind was firmly fixed on principle and transmission through time, Ekiken's eye was trained on practice and place; the contrast replicates the fundamental structural relation between "China" and "Japan" that Karatani has emphasized. The Chinese preoccupation is one of philosophy, while the Japanese is one of etiquette.

Is it possible in the end to detect any "Japaneseness" in the history of the book comparable to the "Frenchness" posited by Roger Chartier in his often-cited lecture on "Frenchness and the History of the Book"?³⁰ Chartier did not have in mind any essentially "French" character of books in France; on the contrary, he opened his lecture with an implicit rejection of the notion of national character (the sort of "Frenchness" that Robert Darnton detected in French proverbs³¹). He proposed a "more serious" use of the term to refer to the particular trajectory of the discipline of *l'histoire du livre*. The strength of this new discipline as it emerged in the 1960s—the stress on quantitative and social history associated with the contemporary mainstream of French historical scholarship influenced by the *Annales* school—became in time, Chartier proposes, its greatest limitation. This limiting "Frenchness," as Chartier tells the story, was then overcome by adopting approaches that "had already been opened elsewhere by others," above all a recognition of the importance of the book as a physical object and an emphasis on the act of reading. This new synthesis, in effect an overcoming of earlier "Frenchness," was reflected in the ambitious four-volume *Histoire de l'édition française* (1983–1986).³² If any "Frenchness" remained in the history of the book, Chartier concluded, it was perhaps a certain preference for breadth, "a desire to put history of print culture at the service of wide-ranging questions," and "the taste for long-term evolutions."

And so Peter Kornicki's book might suggest directions for redefining "Japaneseness," first by rejecting, as he proposes, any parochial conception of the *kokusho*, the "Japanese book." Just as the "new" Frenchness described by Chartier involved turning elsewhere for ideas, insisting on a comparative framework, so perhaps "Japaneseness" in the history of the book can be used to subvert the all-too-familiar connotation of essential Japanese national character, and to draw our attention rather to the critical *position* of Japan, initially within the history of writing and reading in East Asia, and then as the East Asian culture that was earliest and most aggressive in incorporating the printing technology and book culture of the West in the nineteenth century.

²⁹ Cherniack 1994, pp. 50–55.

³⁰ Chartier 1987.

³¹ Darnton 1984, p. 61; cited by Chartier 1987 on p. 299.

³² Chartier, Martin, and Vivet 1983–1986.

It is this latter story, finally, of the Meiji transformation of Japanese book culture, that leaves hanging some of the most intriguing questions raised by Kornicki's survey. In determining a cutoff point for his book, Kornicki resists the "tyrannical year 1868" as often meaningless, and, depending on the issue, lets himself spill over into Meiji, leaving a "fuzzy boundary" (pp. 6-7). Although I found this system of multiple timetables useful in charting the demise of Tokugawa print culture, I also sensed that in the end Kornicki tended at once to exaggerate and to underestimate the nature of the rift between Tokugawa and Meiji. To give one critical example of the former, I wonder if the Meiji state was really so much more draconian in its censorship of print than the Tokugawa bakufu. In absolute terms, there can be no question of the contrast; but if allowance is made for the profoundly transformed historical context, I wonder if all that much had changed. In the 1930s, when repressive censorship in Japan should have been at its height, one still finds the same dynamics of a centerless system of irresponsibility that Maruyama Masao detailed in his comparison of fascism in Japan and Germany.

At the same time, Kornicki's "fuzzy" divide between Tokugawa and Meiji leaves us unsure about just what constituted the revolution of print culture in the Meiji period, and how it was actually carried out. We view things only from the perspective of the old regime, not from that of the new, so that Meiji print culture is defined primarily as what Tokugawa print culture was not. The task ahead is to take a more bridging perspective, to see the circumstances behind the momentous change from handicraft to the industrial production of books, from the prohibition of all comment on current affairs to a vigorous national press, and from local distribution by foot to national distribution by train.

Kornicki's book in the end does what any important piece of historical writing should do; it raises as many questions as it answers. He has provided a solid foundation of data and sources on which to build a true discipline of the sort that France has boasted for four decades and that is now booming elsewhere in the world, one that may use the crucial position of Japan within the world history of the book to reformulate our understanding of both reading and writing. *The Book in Japan* should be required reading for all historians of Japanese culture, and will hopefully become the seedbed for a new generation of innovative scholarship.

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