

## IS JAPANESE EASY OR DIFFICULT?

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IN an article published in a San Francisco newspaper, on Sunday, February 11, Professor Kiang, of the University of California, described Chinese as the "easiest language in the world." Many Occidentals who have studied Chinese agree with one of the first padres who believed it to be an "invention of the devil in order to torment the faithful," and will shake their heads in wild amazement just as the examiners did when listening to the strange answers of "candidate Jobs." "The candidate Jobs this answer making, there followed of heads a general shaking," as Kortum's clever translator, Brooks, puts it. Notwithstanding, Professor Kiang is quite right—*cum grano salis*.

The simplicity of his immortal mother tongue, the vernacular as well as written Chinese, by the absence of superfluous etymology, makes it look very easy for everybody. If, therefore, an Easterner seeks in the west a language or alphabet without superfluous difficulties, he must take up the study of an artificial tongue like Esperanto, not English, German or Russian, for he will find these tongues very absurd and difficult. So far, Mr. Kiang is quite right in lauding Chinese and condemning our tongues. That Chinese is much easier and more logical in its structure than other languages, is more obvious to Asiatics than to us. What the renowned Polish doctor made out of our Western languages, shaving them with the zeal of an American or Japanese barber in order to get his simple skeleton-grammar, Chinese is by nature—nay it is even more simple.

Zamenhof is still so thoroughly a Westerner that he conserved the plural and other superfluous forms of European grammar in his Esperanto, which he hoped must please every student who hates gender rules and irregular verbs, as it is nearly Chinese simplicity in its structure combined with a vocabulary known for the most part beforehand. Mr. Kiang may be quite right in stating that Chinese is especially easy, and what is much more important, he certainly is correct in stating that even the complicated Chinese written language in its structure, is by far simpler and more logical than our tongues. The grammatical difficulties which spoil the best hours of our youngsters do not exist, and the Chinese obliged to

learn them is fully entitled to laugh at them and unable to understand how reasonable men could make so difficult and unreasonable a language.

But the drawback to the study of Chinese is this: The simplicity and nudity of the most logical man in swimming does not convey to me quite clearly what he is. On the other hand, another, in full dress, with many superfluous adornments, may be very illogical and unreasonable in putting on so many awkward things, of interest only to "Professor Teufelsdröckh," in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, or people who prefer the exterior to the interior of the man. But this ridiculous fop shows us at a glance what he really is, whereas the simple logical swimmer conceals a good deal even by his simplicity and nudity. This is the other side of the picture. In reading Chinese texts we sigh for the European full dress, and are not content with the Chinese bathing suit, if there be any at all. We should prefer having some grammatical difficulties, and getting some headaches in learning Chinese, if afterward we could enjoy Chinese texts in "full dress." That is the weak point of Chinese, easy and logical as it is. Reading often becomes mere guessing and brooding if not a total misunderstanding of the text. Exaggerating a little, I should say: Reading Chinese is often a compromise between reading, as we understand it, and solving riddles. But to console my dear friend, Kiang, and his many students who, under his instruction, learn with enthusiasm, as I have seen myself, the "easiest tongue of the world," I am glad to add that there are consolations. The direct European influence on Chinese and the indirect one through Japan combined with some old devices, such as laws of position, helping particles and parallelisms, will minimize this waste of time and acrobatic performances of the human brain. That simplicity is the mother of difficulty and difficulty the mother of simplicity is not restricted to Chinese only. Take, for example, telegraphy, stenography, or "go." No easier style exists than that used on the wire, no easier and quicker jotting down than by the stenographer's nimble hand and pen, and no easier rules than those for learning *go*, the favorite game of the Chinese and Japanese. Now the average man of the States will best understand what I mean when I say: A telegram jotted down by a rusher, or a scare-line in our dailies looks simpler than a well shaped long note of Mr. Wilson or Mr. Balfour, but it is not. Often you cannot make it out at all. As to the simplicity of deciphering stenographic notes and of *go*, ask sincere shorthand writers and *go*-players. But the more striking example of difficult simplicity is plain English, with

her twenty-six letters instead of some thousands of Chinese characters, and in a lesser degree other languages, like French and German.

Though English has without any doubt the merit of dropping many superfluous difficulties existing in other European languages, she excels on the other hand by a so-called *orthography*, which certainly does not deserve that name without change to the standard alphabet of Lepsius or Pitman's reasonable writing of English sounds. Even in German it is pretty difficult for a foreigner always to know which of its eight pronunciations the simple letter *g* has in a given case, (in *Tag, Tage, Weg, Wege* it stands for six different sounds, in *Ingenieur* and *Agnes* it has two other sounds. When a student in Paris, I met Frenchmen of high standing who could not write a letter in French with its simple twenty-six letters without their *Littré*. So even learned Anglo-Saxons refer to their *Webster*, Germans to their *Duden*, to see which of the twenty-six simple letters are to be used. On the other hand, difficulties in learning often make understanding easy, as, for instance, the complicated grammar of the Germans, or the consonantal clusters and long words of the Slavs. My Japanese students were horrified by German, and still more by Latin grammar with male and female gender for things, the same endings for different functions, and different endings for the same functions, the declension, conjugation, irregular verbs, etc. All this must seem absurd for students whose cradles stood far from Indogermanic speech. Notwithstanding this, every Japanese declares that the German is easier for him to understand than English is, very likely on account of its difficulty in learning. So the long and difficult words of the Poles and Russians are hard to acquire for persons not born Slavs. But how good and clear they are! A word like *prezysiatelstwo* looks somewhat longer and more difficult than our "preside" or a Chinese monosyllable, but you are quite sure you will not find some dozens of homophones of this word all with different meanings as so often in Chinese and Japanese. Even chess, although difficult enough, is said to be easier than *go*, the favorite game of the Chinese and Japanese.

As to the study of Chinese characters, for Japanese or Chinese, the difficulty as a rule is exaggerated and is probably about the same. If De Rougé is right, in his statement in *The History of the ABC*, we may certainly say that Chinese writing—as to the forms of its characters used in books, papers and documents—was not so conservative and is not so clear as the hieroglyphics on the monuments.

But still it was and is much more so than the Semitic alphabets formed out of them and now used in Southern, Central and Eastern Asia. It was and is so even with regard to our own letters, though these show to this very day still more of their descent than the Semitic and the rest of these alphabets do. A trained eye may discover still a good deal in the Chinese characters that neither the law of evolution nor the use of paper and brush, nor the stupidity of scribes was able to destroy. It is true, it is difficult to learn them, as is usually done, mechanically in a stupid and tedious way, counting curves, strokes, and dots. It is highly interesting and comparatively easy to learn them from the standpoint of their development, as far as is of practical value and by adding explanations with the help of one's imagination or that of others, if we use the books by Chalmers or Wieger which tell us of the master-work of the good old Hsü and his followers. So Professor Kiang teaches them, and as to this method too, I agree completely with him. It was a great pleasure for me to see how such a system works on students in our city hall. Of these written symbols standing for root words, as Prof. von der Gabelentz fitly called them, there are, of course, many used more in China than in Japan, and many others more in Japan than in China. Besides, there are some formed by the Japanese themselves just as cleverly as by the Chinese of old. The meaning of the characters differs very often in both realms. By and by, however, Chinese on account of the military, political and commercial strength, not to say hegemony of modern Great Japan in the Far East, will take on more and more of the Japanese touch.

The characters were brought to Japan from China, via Korea, but their modern combinations for terms and idioms are brought, we may say, in a large measure, from Western thought through Japan to China. Apart from the study of the form of the characters, which is equally difficult, there is no question but that Japanese is far more complicated and difficult to learn than Chinese. In the first place, modern Japanese is a mixture of two quite different languages. Japanese not only shares the doubtful benefit of homophony with the Chinese, but also the perhaps still more embarrassing richness of polyphony with the Cuneiform of the old Assyrians and Babylonians and the modern Turks in an astonishing degree. Almost the whole Chinese dictionary is used by the Japanese, but, moreover, the characters have not one pronunciation but often are pronounced according to several Chinese dialects, besides in several Japanese ways. That is to say, we find not only doublets like "begin" and "commence" in English, *Akt* and *Aufzug* in German, but also

doublets similar to *frêle* and *fragile* in French, both French derivations of the same Latin word *fragilis*. For example, the simple sun and day character ☉, a pointed circle, changed by the stupid brush to 日, a double square, in Pekinese Chinese is always *jih*, in Cantonese *yat*, etc., but in Japanese it will read: *ni* in Nihombashi (Japanese, "bridge," that is, the center of Tokyo and Japan); *nip* in "Nippon Yusen Kaisha" (Japanese Mail Co.); *nichi* in *Nichinichi Shimbun* (Daily News); *Jitsu* in *senjitsu* (some days ago); *hi* in *higasa* (parasol); and *hi* and *bi* in *hibi* (daily); that means six different pronunciations, four Sinico-Japanese and two pure Japanese. So learning to read Chinese of the easy modern style, when you know Japanese, means hardly more than adding another pronunciation to many others you already know, which for catching the meaning is, of course, not necessary at all, and to get accustomed to read *between* the characters still more than in Japanese.

On the other hand, for a Chinese to learn Japanese would mean beginning the study of quite a new language together with a remodeling of a known one. So far, of course, Japanese is much more difficult than Chinese. We may add some other difficulties, existing for the study of Japanese, but not for the study of Chinese. One of them is that the "grass" method of writing, or running hand, is more used in Japan than in China, but this is not so important for most Western students. But two other difficulties of Japanese are its grammar and the two syllabaries called *katakana* and *hiragana*. Why two? Nobody can tell. It is just the same *embarras de richesses* as the two kinds in German. But again, in regard to the grammar and *kana*,—difficulty makes it, I shall not say easy, but easier. There are texts from purest Chinese to purest Japanese in Japan, but as a rule the golden middle reigns there. Instead of Chinese nakedness, horrible to western eyes, and instead of the superfluous decorations of our western tongues, horrible to Chinese, Japanese grammar has a simple and reasonable dress, a light kimono so to say, avoiding both extremes. As in Chinese there are no plurals, genders, and such difficulties, but there are particles and verbal endings of practical use. As to *kana*, the invention of the two *kana* syllabaries may be called overzealous and regrettable. The *kana* invention in itself was a splendid thing for naked Chinese. Often the Japanese are said to be the most receptive nation on this globe, lacking productiveness. Not quite so. Certainly they are imitators, and not bad ones, as their famous struggles with two big nations have shown to the stupefied world—1894-5 and 1904-5. On the battlefield and on the ocean, in plants and shops, in science and

politics, they are working like ants and bees, progressing, and imitating, with astonishing cleverness. But they are reformers, too, let it be remembered. Their *furigana*, a translation, so to say, at the side of the characters for the little man, and especially their *okurigana* between the characters, is a help for the readers. The *furigana* is the consolation of the masses, the *okurigana* is not even despised by learned men. Wise old Japanese preferred reading to brooding, just as we do, as to the tools of thought. The old Japanese, shaking their heads at the nakedness of the Chinese, just as we do now, invented *kana*. So modern Japanese is certainly more than an imitated, distorted, mispronounced Chinese, mixed with a harmonious native tongue reminding us of Castilian or Malay, it is a better, clearer, developed Chinese, the queen of the tongues in the Far East, just as her speakers and writers are the kings of the Orient.

But even Japanese, alas, has some simplicities, for example, like Chinese it often has the bad fashion of dropping the subject, a simplicity leading as we know to another difficulty, and moreover another apparent simplicity is the very small number of sound-combinations in Chinese-Japanese as well as in pure Japanese. Dropping the tones and aspirations of Chinese characters, Chinese-Japanese has more homophones and less sound-combinations (syllables) than any Chinese dialect, even Pekinese not excluded (altogether upward of two hundred), and pure Japanese has still less syllables. This simplicity in learning becomes another difficulty for understanding. This will be sufficient to show that Japanese, like Chinese, is only easy *cum grano salis*.

Now I don't know whether the best Japanese themselves, be it for their belief that their language and writing is awfully difficult only, or for their love of imitation and reform, or for both reasons together, try again and again to get rid of the old-fashioned Chinese characters and *kana* and to simplify their language, especially the written one. So they did when thirty years ago I became a student of Japanese, and so they do now. A society for Latin letters published books, pamphlets and periodicals in our letters in 1887, and a similar society published this printed matter in 1917, but with little success. For the Far East, as it seems, the complicated writing systems are either far above our "twenty-six simple letters" or at least a necessary evil. But the Japanese spirit of enterprise is daring, keen and hopeful notwithstanding. My dear friend here, Mr. T., hopes to find a simple solution of this very great problem of his country in the following reform, I think I must say, revolutionary idea: "Down with the old-fashioned characters which are

out of date (the *kanas* included)! Down with the sinization of pure Japanese! If necessary foreign evils must be, let us prefer a modern one! We must learn European and American thought and express it in Japanese. All right! One foreign thought, one foreign language (English). Why two (Chinese and English)? Why learn the thoughts in English and translate them from English into old Chinese characters? This means nothing more nor less than changing modern Japanese, that is, Chinese-Japanese, into English-Japanese." Of course, if this revolution were possible to-morrow Japanese would be able to write their new tongue with our simple twenty-six letters to-morrow too, and better than we do ours. There seem to be unsurmountable difficulties against this plan similar to that of the unlucky Japanese Minister of Education, Mori, who thought of replacing Japanese by English and who fell a victim to his progressiveness about thirty years ago. But who knows? We are living in a very pugnacious and revolutionary period. In his "Modern Japanese Literature," *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan*, 1913, Professor Dening of Sendai, Japan, tells us what other eminent Japanese scholars and journalists think of the Japanese writing of the future. Of these statements by far the most interesting is that of my old teacher, Prof. Dr. Inoue Tetsujiro, Dean of the Faculty of Letters of the Imperial University of Tokyo. Though an advocate of Romanization, he is convinced that for hundreds of years both systems,—Chinese-Japanese and Western writing—must be used together before dropping the Chinese characters completely, as they link us with the past written in them. It would be just like the simultaneous use of two modes of writing, cuneiform and the alphabetic, before the fall of the Assyrian Empire. In the meantime, perhaps for the rest of our lives and longer, let us hope that by intelligent instruction and study and by Europeanization and Americanization of the dictionary, Japanese as well as Chinese may be made as easy as possible for foreigners and Far Easterners—easy—*cum grano salis*.