Maturing of a Literate Society

- Literacy and Education in the Edo Period (17th-19th century) -

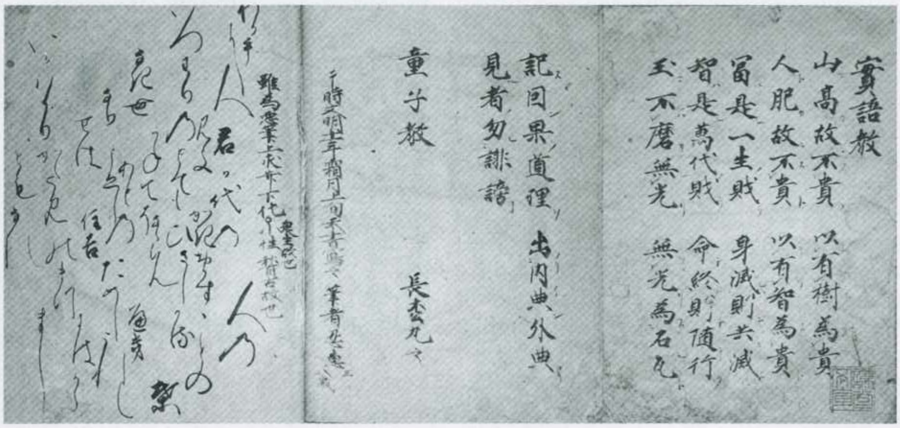
By Tsujimoto Masashi

1. Modernization and the Spread of Education in Japan

After the great political change of 1868 - the Meiji Restoration - Japan embarked on a strategy of modernization modeled on Europe and the United States. In less than half a century, it succeeded in becoming a modern nation on a level with its models. That is to say, having introduced a modern political system, promoted modern industry and capitalism, built up its military strength and won the Russo-Japanese War, Japan had by World War I achieved a status that ranked with that of the advanced European nations and the United States. Japan's rapid achievement of modernization was unprecedented. As it has no parallel, it would not be overstating the case to call it a "wonder of world history."

What made it possible? Indisputably, one important factor was the spread of national education. The rapid spread of education underpinned modernization, as it enhanced national unity among the people and produced a hardworking, high-quality labor force. So the effort to modernize was initiated in the sphere of education, too, by the Meiji Restoration.

In 1872, a national system of modern school education was begun. Needless to say, the model was the modern education systems of Europe and the United States. The government rejected the educational tradition of the past and introduced the European-North American style of school education to Japan. At the start, the new Western-style elementary schools being built all over the country were completely unfamiliar to anyone. By 1909, however, the rate of attendance for compulsory education (six years were compulsory at the time) was over 98 percent; to be sure this number does not account for dropouts. In less than forty years, elementary schools had become so widespread that there was barely a child in the nation - in city or country - who did not attend school. At least in terms of elementary education, the attendance rate was higher than in any of the developed nations of Europe or in the United States. There are some scholars who term the phenomenon of this rapid educational expansion the "education explosion."



Kendo bunko

Jitsugo-Kyo, *a widely used textbook on morals, in use from 11th to 19th century*

How can we explain this "education explosion," a spread of national education so rapid that in an extremely short period it overtook its European and North American models? Looking at the phenomenon only from the angle of the adoption of modern models will not provide the answer. In order to explain the success story of Japanese modern education, we must look at the Edo era, the period before the Meiji Restoration. The standard of education in the Edo period was extremely high.

2. The Literacy Rate in the Edo Period

During the Edo period (1600 - 1867), Japan was a feudalistic, class society. But even in the early part of the period, in the seventeenth century, the country had already moved towards becoming a literate society - a society where the use of reading and writing in everyday life is a commonplace event.

Owing to a shortage of historical data, it is difficult to get accurate figures on literacy rates in the Edo period. Moreover, there were variations between the cities and the countryside and between different historical periods. It is, however, possible to make a rough estimate on the basis of a variety of data and cultural phenomena that permit some level of appraisal as regards reading and writing. In my judgment, it seems certain that in the middle of the eighteenth century, the male literacy rate in the three great cities of Edo (now Tokyo), Kyoto, and Osaka was 60 percent or more at a low estimate, and the female literacy rate about 40 percent. An estimate of over 70 percent male literacy in the cities at the beginning of the nineteenth century is not at all unreasonable. In the countryside, levels were probably about 10 or 20 percent lower.

In any event, it is clear that the written word had permeated the society of the Edo Period. Indeed, it may even be more accurate to say that the society was founded on the premise that there were large numbers of literate people in the country. Compared with eighteenth-century Europe, Japan had a level of literacy inferior to none, with the exception of Sweden and parts of Germany that had particularly high literacy rates for religious reasons. To say the least, Japan's level of literacy was higher than that of England or France.

This means that when modern Western-style schools were introduced in the latter part of the nineteenth century, Japan was already a society with literacy levels not lower than those of European countries. Certainly, when the modern schools were first introduced, they were unfamiliar. As the government established schools in every part of the country, however, the people came to regard it as normal to study at school. The reason was that the literate population already formed a majority in Japan. Moreover, it was easy for people to see that education was the indispensable route to success in the new society, where the class system had been abolished. Considering these factors, it is not strange that school education in Japan expanded in less than half a century to overtake its European and North American models.

But then the question arises: Why was the study of the written word so widespread during the Edo period, prior to the modern era? In Europe, religious factors conditioned the spread of literacy. It has been pointed out (by E. Todd, 1990, for instance) that the growth of literacy was rapid in Protestant and significantly slower in Catholic regions. In Japan, however, it was not religious but political and economic factors that were of primary importance. In order to appreciate this, we need to consider the social mechanisms of the Edo Period.

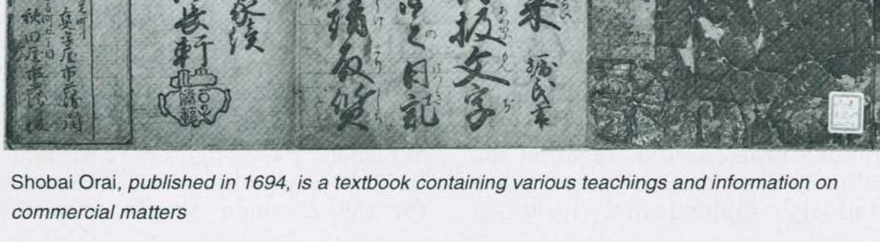
3. Why was literacy necessary?

To put it simply, the society of the Edo period was one in which even the common people would suffer disadvantage if they could not read. This was true both politically and economically.

Edo-period Japan was a feudal society. The aristocratic military class called *bushi* or samurai, a minority numbering no more than 7 or 8 percent of the total population, had to govern a common populace that constituted an overwhelming majority (farmers made up about 80 percent of the total). Samurai therefore monopolized arms-bearing; they lived in the towns, governing the commoners at a distance through intermediaries. The farmers, who had been forcibly disarmed, lived in villages, where politics and daily life were ruled by self-government. In other words, this was a system in which the samurai, a minority residing in the urban areas away from production, governed the majority of producers - farmers and fishing families - who lived in the villages. As there was a physical distance between the rulers and the ruled, however, the samurai did not carry out their authority directly in person; rather, their domination of society took the form of a system of laws and ordinances, which were issued in the form of written documents and bulletins. These were posted in places where people gathered; the illiterate, of course, could not read them. This, in short, was a society in which the information that was important for people took the form of the written word. Further, the government accepted no reports, petitions, or appeals that were not written down. The political system worked through the medium of the written word, and the inability to read therefore meant exclusion from the political world.

The farmers had to pay their taxes *(nengu)* in rice. The allotment of tax for individual farmers was entrusted to the self-government of the farmers, so the village officials (the influential farmers in charge of village administration) needed a high level of numeracy. Had the ordinary farmers not had a certain level of literacy and numeracy, moreover, they would have been unable to detect the occasional injustice and unfavorable treatment that took place in the allotment of taxes.

The urban samurai, who lived away from production, had a consumption economy based on cash. Merchants and artisans gathered in the cities to supply the clothes, food, and housing that the consumption economy of the ruling class demanded, so the cities expanded. As mentioned, however, taxes were paid in rice. The daimyo (lords of regional domains) needed to commodify the rice they received as taxes, that is, exchange it into cash. Accordingly, there was a need for a central market where rice from all over the country and the necessities of life could be bought and sold. The central market was established in Osaka, which had convenient water transport and an accumulation of commercial capital. Goods from all over the nation were gathered in Osaka, where they were transhipped to Edo, a metropolis of one



Kendo bunko

Shobai Orai, *published in 1694, is a textbook containing various teachings and information on commercial matters*

Kendo bunko

Nogyo Orai, *published in 1785, is a textbook containing information on agricultural matters and farming in general*

million people. That is to say, a national distribution system for goods came into existence in Japan in the second half of the seventeenth century. The nodes of this national economic network were located in Edo, the city of politics, Osaka, the city of finance, and Kyoto, the city of culture and industry. Needless to say, the development of the national community market was accompanied by the growth of a cultural and information network, within which literacy and numeracy were essential. The circulation of money and the development of a commercial economy made the ability to read the written word and carry out calculations absolutely necessary. Politically, Japan remained a feudal system in which regional lords controlled the land and the people. In terms of economics and culture, however, there was an increasing trend toward national integration.

In response to the demand from the cities, the farmers increased their production of commercial crops. As a result, there were more opportunities for contact between farmers and merchants, and the farmers became caught up in the cash economy. In a cash economy, however, being literate and numerate is crucial to making a profit. Moreover, the farmers strove to develop irrigation and open up new land to cultivation in order to improve their standard of living; but such projects, too, required the ability to take measurements and a relatively sophisticated level of mathematical knowledge. These are the factors that made farmers aware of the importance of literacy and numeracy.

Looking at it this way, one comes back to the conclusion that, rather than assuming that Japanese society became literate after the Edo period began, it is more proper to say that Edo society was from its inception based on the premise that an extensive layer of literacy existed in the population. It was natural for the common people to turn all their energies to "reading, writing and arithmetic." In 1627, Yoshida Mitsuyoshi of Kyoto published *Jinkoki*, a practical mathematics textbook. Not only did this book remain a best-seller throughout the Edo period, more than four hundred similar works bearing the name *Jinkoki* were published. The long-running popularity of this text indicates how important practical mathematical ability was in the daily lives of ordinary people in the Edo period.

4. The Setting for the Study of the Written Word

Ordinary people's demands for instruction in the written word and arithmetic were filled by private schools called *terakoya*. This term is best translated as "writing school," although its literal meaning is closer to "temple school," reflecting the origins of the institution. Those origins were medieval. Buddhist temples had provided education for the common people from the thirteenth century onward. For a long time, temples played the role of schools with the priests acting as teachers of lay folk.

As the literate population increased in the Edo period, teaching the written word passed into the hands of lay people. The shogunate in Edo (the central government) and the daimyo (the regional lords) did not regulate the education system for the common people, so anyone who desired could open a writing school. The Edo period saw the end of war and the establishment of a peaceful, stable society; demand for military skills fell, and there resulted in a surplus of samurai. At the beginning of the period, it was common for warriors who had lost their employment to take on the role of teaching children how to read and write. From the end of the seventeenth century, a variety of people began to set up writing schools. Apparently, setting up either a *terakoya* or a sewing school to teach needlework to girls was a good way for a city widow to make a living. There was no shortage of female writing teachers. This explains why it was not uncommon for girls to study the written word.

How widespread were writing schools? As with the literacy rate, there are no accurate figures. There were variations according to time and region. In 1722, however, a Confucianist employed by the shogunate in Edo wrote in a letter, "There are more than eight hundred writing teachers in Edo." This notation was later included in the official records of the shogun, so the figure cannot have been totally incorrect. Of course, this Confucianist had not actually counted the writing schools. The number he gives, however, is about the same as that of the townspeople's residential blocks *(machi)* in Edo at the time; evidently, the writing schools had spread so much that this reporter was conscious of there being approximately one school per residential block. This means that if a child in Edo only had the desire to learn, there would undoubtedly have been a place to study close by. Kyoto and Osaka may have been even superior in this regard; certainly, they were not inferior. Even if there were not as many writing schools in the provincial cities and farming villages as in the three metropolitan areas, there was barely a region in the whole country where there was nowhere to study the written word. This is substantiated by the national government survey conducted in the 1880s on the Edo period's *terakoya*.

5. The Establishment of a Unified Literary Culture

Writing schools could be set up by anyone using a room in his or her house. Generally, when children reached the age of seven or eight years, the parents would select a good teacher and enrol their child. No date was specified either for entry into school or for graduation, and there was no fixed period of attendance (all that was decided by the parents), but most children left after about five years. The enrolment and tuition fees were usually low. They were not standardized but depended on the parents' economic circumstances.

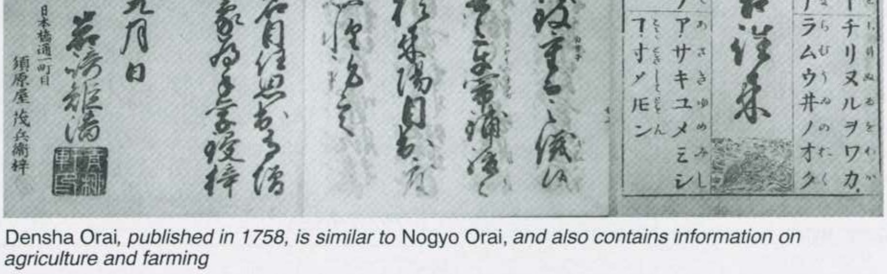
Education at the *terakoya* largely consisted of reproducing written characters with a writing brush. This was called *tenarai* (penmanship). In the cultural sphere distinguished by the use of an alphabet, the study of the written word stressed "reading" - or, rather, reading out loud - reflecting a culture that views speech as the essence of language and considers the written word as a means of recording it. In contrast to this, in Japan, "writing" was valued more than "reading." Not the simple ability to write was required, moreover, but fine penmanship, that is, the ability to write beautifully. Mastering that skill was essential for gaining people's respect and trust. The precondition for such attitudes was the existence of a literary culture that attributed special value to the written word, and that certainly was true of East Asia. In this cultural sphere, which was distinguished by the use of Chinese logograms, skill at shaping the written character was valued to such an extent that it was considered an art form.

The teacher prepared a *tehon* (penmanship copybook) for each child, with the contents adjusted according to the children's abilities and the parents' occupations. The texts used by a merchant's and a farmer's children were different. When the children arrived at the school in the morning (there was no set time for the beginning of school; the children's own schedule had priority), they were given the copybook for that day by the teacher and began their study. The study consisted of repeatedly copying the text until the child was able to write the letters as they appeared in the copybook. The children studied by themselves. The teacher simply went around the room and occasionally checked the children's work, giving each some instruction.

In short, the lessons consisted of self-study and individual instruction. There were no group lessons, so the desks were not neatly arranged to face the teacher, as in modern classrooms, and the children's seating positions were flexible; the classroom must have been rather disorderly and noisy. The desks were portable, light, and simple so they could be stacked in a corner of the classroom after school.

The study of penmanship usually began with the letters of the *iroha* (that is, *kana,* the Japanese syllabary analogous to the alphabet). Then, after studying numbers, students learned the Chinese characters for things familiar from everyday life, personal names, place names, and the heavenly directions. Next, they progressed to a text that was a compilation of phrases commonly used in letters, idiomatic expressions, and standard sentences. In addition, they studied texts that contained complete patterns of the epistolary style, that is, formulas for conducting correspondence. In the case of the common people, the standard objective of learning how to write was, to start with, acquiring the ability to exchange letters with ease. In Edo society, there was a custom of sending letters even to next-door neighbors on formal occasions. Communication through the medium of the written word was highly valued. There was a wide diversity of patterns in the epistolary style, depending on the purpose, the season, and the recipient of the letter. In order to master these patterns, collections of all kinds of model letters were edited into textbooks, printed on wood blocks, and marketed.

Texts did not only cover ordinary correspondence, however. The prescribed forms for all kinds of documents needed in daily life were organized into texts. In addition to deeds of sale or credit, contracts and guarantees, and documents concerning inheritance, there were also documents related to marriage and divorce. Examples of documents submitted to the government were also included; on occasion, even a petition issued by a popular uprising might be studied. Ten-year-olds learned the correct form for letters of divorce. There was no sense that it was unnecessary for children to study such matters. At the writing school, students



Kendo bunko

Densha Orai, *published in 1758, is similar to* Nogyo Orai, *and also contains information on agriculture and farming*

Kendo bunko

The terakoya played a key role in spreading education throughout Japan during the Edo period

Kendo bunko

Poems written on sheets of plain paper were displayed at a festival of arts and science

were meant to acquire all the knowledge and skills regarding the written word that they needed for life in society.

More than seven thousand different *terakoya* texts have been identified. Representative are the ones that were printed and circulated nation-wide. The same texts were in circulation throughout Japan from north to south, in the cities as in the countryside. This means that Japan developed a common speech, style, and format of expression at least as far as the written language is concerned.

Indeed, the appearance of the written character itself was the same nation-wide. The style of penmanship studied at the writing schools was the Japanese cursive style known as *oie-ryu*. The Edo shogunate used it in public documents; its fiefs, the provincial domains, followed suit; and then it spread among the common people almost without exception. Without any compulsion from anyone, this style diffused throughout society from high to low, penetrating both the public and the private spheres. Signs written in the *oie-ryu* were seen all over towns, and handbills were also printed in it. Books, too, were printed in this style - except, that is, for scholarly books written in classical Chinese, for which the square character style was generally used. The government's obsession with documents had determined the writing style of the common people.

In the Edo period, there were large regional differences in the spoken language. Provincial accents or dialects were distinct enough to pose major problems for oral communication. In the world of the written word, however, there were no regional variations in the shape of the letter, the style of the sentence, or the form of the document. There were major class differences, but there were no regional differences in modes of expression. A unified literary culture developed across Japan. This was an astonishing cultural phenomenon and a first in Japanese history. The establishment of a common culture in the written language contributed an important cultural precondition for the rapid development of the nation state in modern times.

The study of the written word at the writing schools of the Edo period was what formed this unified literary culture, one shared by the majority of the common people who had been *terakoya* pupils. This shared culture made possible the rapid spread of modern education and the emergence of Japan as a modern nation state. JJTI

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