

Writing and Literacy in Chinese, Korean and Japanese Insup Taylor and M. Martin Taylor Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1995. Pp. xiii + 412. US\$75.00 (hardcover). ISBN 1-55619-319-X.

Reviewed by William J. Poser, University of Pennsylvania.

This wide-ranging book is a general survey of writing and literacy in the three East Asian countries of the Sinitic cultural sphere. Vietnam, whose dominant language also used to be written in Chinese characters, is omitted. Insup Taylor, the primary author, the “I” of the text, is a scholar of East Asian languages. Her husband Martin Taylor has collaborated in studies of the psychology of reading.

The book begins with a chapter introducing basic notions such as word, morpheme, syllable, and segment, and some generalities about writing systems. Otherwise, the book consists of three separate parts on Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, each with its own bibliography. The three parts could be read independently by those interested in only one country, though readers interested only in Japan or Korea and unfamiliar with Chinese characters would do well to read Chapters 3-7 from the Chinese section.

Each of the three parts has a similar structure: an initial chapter on the language, one or more chapters on the writing systems used for that language, and chapters on learning the writing systems, education and literacy, and a discussion of attempts at reform and the reasons for retaining the use of Chinese characters.

The three chapters on the languages contain more than the obviously necessary description of the sound system and discussion of Chinese loans into Korean and Japanese. They also include brief descriptions of salient aspects of the languages not related to writing systems, such as case marking, numeral classifiers and honorifics. The chapter on Chinese avoids the all too common view that each Chinese character represents a single word and discusses the existence of morphologically complex words, a topic now treated in detail in Jerome L. Packard’s *The Morphology of Chinese: a Linguistic and Cognitive Approach* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

One of the few topics omitted is that of dialects. There is little discussion of Korean or Japanese dialects and none of how and when they are written. The existence of the Chinese dialects is briefly mentioned, but there is no discussion of the use of non-standard Chinese dialects in writing and of the existence of dialect characters, generally used for morphemes not cognate to their standard translation equivalents, e.g. Cantonese $k^h\ddot{o}i$ ‘(s)he’, which is not cognate to Mandarin $t^h a$. Similarly, there is no discussion of the non-Sinitic languages of China, Ainu, or Ryukyuan. The focus is very much on the standard form of the dominant language.

A virtue of the book that increases its accessibility and utility for the non-specialist reader is the inclusion of background material on the geography and history of the three countries, together with a considerable amount of ancillary material on aspects of the culture related to literacy. These include: folk etymologies of Chinese characters, Chinese aphorisms, the magical use of writing, the examination systems for government officials, calligraphy, and the history of the national literature. Some of these may seem like digressions, but they contribute to an understanding of the role of writing in the Sinosphere.

Considerable attention is given to the psychology of reading in the various writing systems and combinations thereof, an area to which the authors have made a number of contributions. Such advantages of Chinese characters as the speed with which they are recognized are among the arguments adduced in favor of the retention of a modest number of Chinese characters in Korean and Japanese.

Although these arguments include some good points, they tend to confound the retention of Chinese characters with the retention of morphemes borrowed from Chinese. It is of course perfectly possible to write Sino-Korean and Sino-Japanese morphemes in *hangul* and *kana*. Thus, the non-existence of native words for some concepts, and the utility of Sino-Korean and Sino-Japanese compounding, whose role is rather like that of Latin and Greek in English, are valid arguments for retaining these words and morphemes, but have no bearing on the use of Chinese characters.

Among the reasons cited for retaining Chinese characters is the assertion (128) that they have the same meanings in all three languages. There are in fact some differences. For example, the character that in Chinese means 'jade' or 'gem' in Japanese has in addition to these the more general meaning of 'ball, sphere'. Similarly, the character used in Chinese to write the name of the Tang dynasty, whose basic meaning is 'boasting, rude, rash' may in Japanese when read /kara/ refer to China in general, as in *kara-age*, a kind of Chinese-style deep frying. Compounds of two Chinese characters are even more prone to having different meanings. I own a book entitled *Onaji Kanji de mo* 'Although they are the same Chinese characters', which explains such *faux amis* to Japanese readers of Chinese. A recently created example of this type is Mandarin *airen*, Japanese *aijin*. In Japanese this retains the original meaning of '(illicit) lover', but in Mainland China by government fiat it has replaced the words for 'husband' and 'wife' and now means 'spouse'.

An issue taken up at several points is the surprisingly influential idea put forward by Marshall McLuhan that science, technology, and the dominance of Western civilization are the result of the use of alphabetic writing. This is briefly but effectively debunked.

The book's strength lies in its treatment of the cultural, educational, and psychological aspects of writing. Its greatest weakness is in the more

technical linguistic areas, particularly phonology. The statement (124) that Pinyin <x> represents <ss> as in English *sissy* is incorrect. <x> is a palatal fricative, similar to English [š] but without lip rounding. More common are problems of analysis or of failure to make statements precise. For example, the assertion (189) that “Korean stops are all voiceless” is incorrect at the phonetic level, which is how most readers are likely to take it. At the phonemic level it is correct, in that there is no voicing contrast in Korean, but the unaspirated series are voiced between sonorants.

The description of Korean syllable structure (190) incorrectly lists CVCC as a possible syllable type. However, the final consonant is realized only when followed by a vowel. In other words, while **morphemes** may end in a cluster, Korean **syllables** contain at most one coda consonant. The basis for this error is probably the writing system. *hangul* writing generally organizes segments into syllabic blocks, but when a morpheme end in two consonants, the division between graphical blocks follows the second consonant.

The discussion of Korean vowel length (193) is peculiar. Taylor observes that Koreans have difficulty perceiving vowel length distinctions, with older people more sensitive to them than young people. She suggests that this is due to the fact that vowel length is not written, and contrasts Korean with Japanese, where vowel length is easily perceived, because, she suggests, it is written. In fact, vowel length has effectively been lost in standard Korean but is maintained to some extent artificially by the educational system. Older speakers are more sensitive to it because more of them acquired vowel length distinctions naturally, prior to formal education.

Indeed, the book would have benefitted from the introduction of some additional phonological concepts, namely phonological rule, phoneme, allophone, and morphophonemic rule, followed by the exposition of certain aspects of Korean and Japanese phonology. Without this background, the reader cannot be expected to make sense of a number of aspects of Japanese and Korean writing. For example, the /s/ series of Japanese *kana* contains the graphs representing [sa], [ši], [su], [se], and [so]. This reflects the fact that there is no phonemic distinction between /s/ and /š/; [š] is the allophone of /s/ before /i/ and /j/. The Hepburn system of romanization, generally favored by non-Japanese, spells [ši] as <shi>, reflecting the allophony, while the National system favored in Japan spells it phonemically as <si>. None of this is explained, nor could it have been without the introduction of the relevant phonological concepts.

These basic phonological concepts are even more important to an understanding of Korean writing. As mentioned above, voicing is not distinctive, but the voiceless aspirated stops and affricates have voiced allophones. The McCune-Reischauer romanization, used in this book, and generally favored outside of Korea, is subphonemic; the Yale romanization is phonemic. Korean *Hangul* writing is still more abstract. /k/ and /ŋ/ are phonemically

distinct, but /k/ becomes /ŋ/ before nasals. For example, when /hankuk/ ‘Korea’ and /mal/ ‘language’ are compounded to form ‘Korean language’, the result is [hanguŋmal]. *Hangul* spelling reflects the morphophonemic representation and writes /k/, not /ŋ/. Taylor refers to this fact in discussing the way in which morphemes written in *hangul* do not change their spelling in combination, but never really explains it.

All of these facts would make much more sense if the reader was aware that there are different levels of phonological representation, that different writing systems reflect different levels, and that different levels of representation are arguably most appropriate for different purposes.

A similar example is the failure to give due attention to the distinction between syllable and mora, which is critical in understanding Japanese phonology and writing. Although a brief explanation of the notion of mora is given, Taylor then (284) says that she will treat mora and syllable as the same. One result is a gross undercount of the number of syllables in Japanese. Pace her figure of approximately 110, which is actually a mora count, there are 998 distinct mono- or bi-moraic syllables in Japanese, as well as marked and rare trimoraic syllables. This means that the degree of homophony that would obtain if Chinese characters were not used is not as great as she suggests.

Another consequence of the failure to distinguish mora from syllable is the book’s adherence to the received view that every phonological writing system that is not an alphabet is a syllabary, the falsehood of which should be clear to anyone familiar with Japanese *kana* writing. Although the two *kana* systems are often called syllabaries, they plainly cannot be. In a syllabary, each syllable is written with a single, unanalyzable graph. However, only light syllables are written with a single *kana* symbol. Heavy (bimoraic) syllables must be written with two *kana* symbols. In fact, abstracting away from the use of an additional diacritic symbol to write /j/ as the second member of an onset cluster, there is exactly one *kana* letter per mora. *kana* writing is based on the mora, not the syllable.

At points, the book could have used more careful editing. A paragraph about the phonological adaptation of loanwords begins (237): “Rule 3 is about spelling European loan words. Only the available *Hangul* letters should be used in writing them. (In Japanese special *Katakana* letters are available for writing foreign words.)” This falsely suggests that *Katakana* provide a means of writing non-Japanese sounds for which *Hiragana* make no provision. *Katakana* represent exactly the same sounds as *hiragana*. Anyone who reads carefully the description of the two *kana* systems will discover this, but others may be misled. Similarly at one point (117) the author asserts that Koreans and Japanese use Chinese characters mainly to represent loans from Chinese. This is true of Korean, in which the only native morphemes written with Chinese characters are the numbers, but not of

Japanese in which many native morphemes are written with Chinese characters, as described in the Japanese section.

In the bibliographies, only a minority of titles in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean are given in the original language; most of the time, they are translated. This makes it more difficult to look them up. Titles should always be given in the original language, perhaps supplemented by translation.

Overall, this is a valuable book. In view of the weakness of its handling of phonology, it is not the best source for the reader who desires a detailed understanding of the relationship between speech and writing in these languages. For the reader who is not a specialist in East Asian languages, it provides a great deal of information about writing and literacy that would otherwise be hard to find in one place. Due to its broad scope, even specialists are likely to find new information on some topics.