

JAPANESE MAGAZINES

Japanese is so difficult that tales are told of Language Officers of foreign nations being shipped from Tokyo in straitjackets. One reason for this is that Japanese is written partly with Chinese characters. On the other hand, these characters are so fascinating in themselves that you can spend a lifetime with these symbols as your only friends. Dr. Gundert, a German authority on Japanese and a lover of the script, says in a brochure that foreigners able to read the Chinese characters will regret their abolition in Japan, but that in spite of their great beauty they have to go for the sake of the Japanese people. This opinion is shared by all foreigners who have ever seriously looked into Japanese; but do the Japanese themselves share his view?

Revolution in the Strokes World

Brush-wielders in Japan know that there are Chinese characters of twenty-five strokes and more. Little boys and girls have to devote many years of study to the puzzling astronomy of the character-heaven. Their minds become filled with complex hieroglyphics and the corresponding Chinese (*on* 音) and Japanese (*kun* 訓) pronunciations of each character (*kanji* 漢字). Even later on in life, a Japanese will constantly have to take recourse to dictionaries to find out the meaning of certain passages in old novels or modern short stories. Again and again he will chew his pencil because he does not know how to write the new address of his best friend. It will be worse if, because he is engaged in manual work, he has little time for reading; in this case he has no opportunity of learning new symbols and will even forget some of the ones he knew. On the other hand, it must be conceded that the necessity of being constantly occupied with a complicated script constitutes a big challenge to which many people respond magnificently and with good mental results.

However, experience has shown that the problem of the written language cannot be left solely to the care of the writing world, since writers naturally love to display learning at the cost of their readers. Associations have been active in Japan for many years advocating the abolition or restriction of Chinese characters. Recently the Government prepared certain steps by selecting 1,012 characters for daily use (*joyokanji* 常用漢字), a similar number of less frequent characters (*junjoyokanji* 準常用漢字), and about 70 *tokubetou kanji* (特別漢字) for special purposes. But this measure has yet to become law.

The Woman's Friend

In their May issues, all magazines give publicity to this question by discussing the advisability or possibility of restricting the number of the characters, but the women's magazines seem to take a special interest in the matter. Mothers are naturally deeply interested in the question of language reform, for they see what the children are up against in and out of school. Before the children

reach school age they generally know the *kana* script, i.e., the Japanese syllabary script of more than 50 not-so-difficult signs. *Fujin-no-Tomo* (The Woman's Friend), widely read in educated households, has sponsored a discussion party in which the editor, Mrs. Hani of *Jiyu-Gakko* (Free School for Girls) fame, and her daughter, a noted writer, took part, and in which the language question is dealt with.

Restriction Now

During this discussion Mr. Y. Harase, a member of the House of Peers, made the following remarks: "By and large a Japanese child of today knows five thousand words before entering school As soon as the children go to school, their chief aim of study is the script, which should therefore be as easy to learn as possible It should be known that blind Japanese learn to read Braille in four years, whereas seeing Japanese take six years to learn to read. Therefore it is absolutely necessary to restrict the number of characters in daily use, whereby general knowledge would be enhanced. There are still people who are ashamed to write with *kana*, although they should not be. The meaning of the word *gakko* (school) is not altered by avoiding the difficult characters 學校 and simply writing ガクコ instead."

Here Mr. Nasu put in a remark on recent historical developments: "I believe the big Kanto earthquake of 1923 stimulated the use of *kana* in the place of *kanji* very much. Through the destruction of newspaper companies and printing shops, sets of movable types were lost, so that the use of *kana* by Tokyo newspapers and magazines was upped conspicuously. I think this was a good thing, for *kana* should indeed be used whenever possible."

Mr. Sugimori, another participant in the discussion, however, said: "I feel the *kanji* should not be limited by interference of the law. If occasionally an unknown *kanji* or two meet the eye of the reader, this should rather excite his curiosity. In texts destined for all Japanese, i.e., concerning law or teaching, *kanji* must be avoided and the reading made easy. But literary works for specially interested readers should not be subject to a limitation of the *kanji*."

The Voice of the Village

In *Chuokoron*, Miss Takakura writes on village problems. How women feel about the language question can be inferred from the fact that Miss Takakura places the language question at the top of all village problems, starting off with a paean of gratitude for the anticipated measures of the Government. Her article is the real thing, as she fights the *kanji* on the spot by using *kana* right and left. This, paradoxically enough, does not make for easy understanding at first sight, because it is still so unusual. She says: "The Ministry of Education is now advocating a restriction of the

kanji. Although the character for the latter part of my name is also doomed to go, this is a matter for rejoicing, as it will advance the knowledge of the village population and help to develop Japanese agriculture. Of course, the present restriction to 1,012 characters is only the first step, and we will go forward to 500 and then 300. Furthermore, we must have a new and unified method of representing sounds in *kana*; for instance, *sho* should always be written シ ヌ ヨ."

Pure Japanese

Whatever doubts have been left in our minds as to the advisability of reforming the Japanese script are removed, temporarily at least, by J. Ishihara, writing in *Kaizo*, who disposes of the question as follows: "In former times, different readings for the *kanji* may have been regarded as a possibility for mental exercise; but in our age of progressing science we have no time for such pastimes. This means that we cannot stop at selecting *kanji* for daily use; we have also to fix their pronunciation. It happens over and over again that people wish to send a telegram of congratulation to some newly appointed official but cannot do so because they do not know how the Chinese characters of his name are pronounced. Moreover, in the present emergency, when the State has its hands full of writing work, all complications and additional work resulting from the *kanji* must go. If this leads to the adoption of purely Japanese words that can be understood at once without seeing the corresponding *kanji*, it is all the better, for in that case we kill two birds with one stone. We must foster the development of pure, *kanji*-less Japanese, because a language that can only be understood if the written word is seen has lost half of its original qualities anyway. The *kanji* problem is all the more important now that we are coming into contact with many Asiatic peoples who will hardly be able to learn our script. Hence, in the interest of the overseas advance of the language we must attain the maximum purity of Japanese."

No Futurism, Please

One of the best articles on the subject is by Sho Saito in *Koron*. The author's first name consists of a character (尙) which his educated countrymen cannot read without consulting a big dictionary. From this omen it may be guessed that his article is directed against a reform. While his opponents fetch their arguments from the realm of mere practicability, Mr. Saito uses far heavier ordnance: "It is true that the *kanji* are more difficult to learn than the alphabet; it is equally true that we live in an age of efficiency. But we must not only stare at the energy needed by the individual for learning the characters; the problem must also be visualized from a social and historical angle.

We must see to it that our Japanese civilization as a whole does not lose in level. If one man takes five years to learn the *kanji*, a society needs from 500 to 1,000 years to master them and to play a cultural role based on them. Accordingly, a reform aiming at a higher level of the individual would depress the level of the society in question, and another 500 to 1,000 years would be needed to lift it up again. Kemal Atatürk, revered as a god by our champions of the Latin script, may have been a great man, but his abolition of the Arabic script and adoption of the Latin alphabet will entail, for Turkey, cultural dependence on Europe for a long time, if not for the said 500 years. This may be permissible if the old Turkish script was really deficient; but would it not be foolish to throw the ideal combination of *kanji* and *kana*, as developed by Japan, overboard? It is impossible to pick out those among the *kanji* which are important in the opinion of some people; the only way would be to dump them all. For instance, taking *kana* as an example, we cannot say that the syllable *po* (ポ) is unimportant just because it is rare, for after all it occurs in the important word "Nippon." The process of gradually eliminating superfluous characters should be left to time."

Simplification Carries the Day

Regardless of whether the planned restriction of *kanji* will now become law, it appears to a foreign observer that restrictions of this kind, necessary as they may be, will be of practical consequence in certain fields only. A certain class of literature destined for people with a necessarily limited literacy will keep close to the suggested lists of *kanji*, while other classes of literature will not feel bound by them.

What will time, on which Mr. Saito has placed his hopes, do in this respect? If we watch the development of written Japanese, we see that certain extremely slow processes are taking place. Formerly the word "shikashi" (however) was always written 尙 止; now fifty per cent of the writers are getting rid of the *kanji* and writing シ 止 instead. Within a few years this *kanji* may have gone into complete disuse except in official documents. Therefore by mere action of time a Japanese page may look quite different ten years from now, with long stretches of *kana* and only tiny clusters of *kanji* in between. Another process is visible in the direction of simplifying the *kanji* themselves and adopting more and more *ryakuji* (略字) or abbreviated characters with the same meaning as the complicated ones. The great Japanese newspaper *Asahi* now prints, among others, the characters 發 (to emit) and 黨 (party) in their simplified forms of 發 and 黨. Superficially it seems that this process is now going on everywhere, if very slowly. But what does time mean in Asia?—P.