Japanese Writing and Mythology

And a brief comparison with the Korean Hangul alphabet
Main Points of Discussion

- Shintoism and Japanese Mythology
- The *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*
- Japanese Creation Myth and the Story of Urashima Tarō
- Comparison of Japanese and Korean Writing Systems
Shintoism

- Comes from Chinese, 神道 (Shén dào). In Japanese, this is Shin (Kami) Tō (Way)
- Not so much an institutionalized, traditional “religion” as a way of life or philosophical thought
- Ancestor worship, loyalty to the Emperor, the motherland, and family
- Cleansing Rituals
Shintoism: Kami

- Not “Gods” in the way we think of them; they are not all-powerful or all-knowing, although they are extremely wise and regarded with the utmost respect.
- Often related with nature, almost like nature-spirits or essences that exist within all things: animals, people, wind, lightning, etc.
- Thus, all life and nature is held to be sacred.
- Over 100,000 shrines in Japan where offerings may be made to the Kami.
- There are innumerable Kami, and the collective body is referred to as 八百万の神 yaoyorozu no kami. Or, literally, hachi hyakuman no kami: “eight-million gods,” but basically just means “myriad kami.”
Japanese mythology is found mostly within the two earliest surviving Japanese works of literature: the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki*. These books provide much of the inspiration for Shintoist beliefs and traditions, and together are known as the “Kiki” Stories.
Kojiki – “Records of Ancient Matters”

- Completed in 712 by Ō no Yasumaru
- Anthology of songs, poems, and myths. Separated into 3 Volumes
- Kamitsumaki
- Nakatsumaki
- Shimotsumaki
- It was compiled before Japan had a formal writing system of its own, and so Chinese characters were originally used to phonetically or ideographically represent Japanese words; it was later properly translated it into Japanese.
Nihon Shoki – “Japanese Chronicles”

- Written after the Kojiki, in 720
- Written in classical Chinese so it could be more legible
- More coverage of the reigns of Emperors, described the virtues of the good Emperors and the errors of the worse ones
- More historical than Kojiki; contains the first known story of time travel: Urashima Tarō.
In the beginning, there are 5 Heavenly deities (kotoamatsukami):

- **Amenominakanushi no Kami**: “Deity Master of the August Center of Heaven”
- **Takami-Musubi no Kami**: “High August Producing Wondrous Deity”
- **Kamimusubi no Kami**: “Divine Producing Wondrous Deity”
- **Umashiashikabihikoji no Kami**: “Pleasant Reed-Shoot Prince Elder Deity”
- **Amenotokotachi no Kami**: “Deity Standing Eternally in Heaven”
Origin Myth: Izanagi and Izanami

- The last of the deities were Izanagi no Mikoto and Izanami no Mikoto (伊弉諾 and 伊弉冉)
- They were instructed by the other deities to create land. They were given the Amenonuhoko, which they dipped into the ocean.
- As they drew it back up, drops of water fell back to the ocean and condensed together to formed the island of Onōgoro-shima. This is where they chose to live.
- Their first two children were badly formed (physically), so they sent them out to sea on boats and appealed to the other divinities to give them advice on how to have well-formed children.
- The next 8 were good children, and became the 8 major islands of Japan.
Origin Myth: The Underworld

- They had a 9th child, Kagutsuchi, (the incarnation of fire), but Izanami no Mikoto died in childbirth.
- Izanagi was so angry that he killed the child and traveled to the Yomi himself to retrieve Izanami. However, upon finding her he realized that she had been monstrously deformed by the Yomi, and fled.
- Izanami sent shikome (foul underworld women) to chase him; he eluded them, eventually throwing peaches at them to delay them enough to escape.
- He declared peaches to be “Ohokamudzumi no Mikoto” (Exalted Great Divine Fruit) for helping him.
- Finally, Izanami came herself to stop him, but he blocked her escape from Yomi by placing a huge boulder in the way of the entrance.
- She screamed that she would kill 1000 people every day in retaliation for this, but Izanagi retorted angrily that he would then give life to 1500 people every day to counter her.
- Upon his return home, he cleaned himself from the journey to Yomi; as he washed his face, from his left and right eyes came Amaterasu and Tsukuyomi.
- A third deity, Susanou, came from his nose.
Myth from *Nihon Shoki*: Urashima Tarō

- One day Urashima saves a small tortoise from a bunch of mischievous children and returns it to the sea. The next day, the tortoise returns to him, huge in size. It thanks him for saving its life and offers to take him to the Palace of the Dragon God, Ryūgū-jō. He rides the turtle's back to the palace, which is at the bottom of the sea.

- When he gets there, it is revealed that the turtle was actually the daughter of the Emperor of the Sea. Her name is Otohime. She thanks him for saving her life, and tells him that he may stay with her for as long as he wishes, and will never grow old. Tarō gratefully accepts.

- But, after a few days, even though the palace is amazing, he begins to miss his parents and his people, and asks to return home. Otohime agrees to let him go, giving him the parting gift of a mystical box called the Tamatebako, which she warns him never to open. Urashima goes back to the mainland to find everything he knew changed.
Urashima Tarō (cont.)

- He stops a random passerby, who is amazed to meet him, claiming that a man named Urashima Tarō disappeared 300 years ago and had not been heard of since. In his parents’ house, his family no longer remains, and the entire town has changed.

- Urashima realizes that the few days he spent were actually 300 years, and he is sad and lonely. He decides to break his promise and open the box, hoping that it might lead him back to the Palace and figuring he has nothing else to lose.

- It turns out that his old age was sealed inside the box; upon opening it, it is released, and he rapidly ages to become 300 years older. He crumples onto the ground and dies.

- “Little children, never be disobedient to those who are wiser than you for disobedience was the beginning of all the miseries and sorrows of life.”
Writing Systems Comparison

Japanese Kanji and Kana, and Korean Hangul Alphabet/Syllabary
Japanese: Introduction of Chinese Characters (Kanji)

- Chinese writing was introduced to Japan in the 4th Century AD.
- Seal found in Japan in 18th century; made in China in 57 AD, believed that a Chinese emperor gave it to a Japanese envoy. A few other objects bearing Chinese characters have also been found in Japan.
- Late 4th or early 5th century, two Korean scholars (Achiki and Wani) came to Japan bearing much knowledge of Chinese characters and volumes of Confucian literature. Mid-6th century, Korean Paekche king sent an image of Buddha and Buddhist texts written with Chinese characters to Japan.
- **Kanbun** system – still used Chinese characters for their semantic values, not using their phonetic values to pronounce Japanese words. However, it did contain diacritic marks to indicate the Japanese meaning of the word.
“The king of the state Na of Wa [Japan], [vassal] of [Han] Dynasty”
Japanese: Development of Man'yōgana and Kana

- **Man'yōgana** – First script developed for writing in Japanese
- Used kanji for their phonetic values to write the Japanese equivalent/ pronunciation of the word.
- Some Chinese words had no Japanese equivalent, so they would keep the Chinese pronunciation (on’yomi) and import the words directly. For Chinese words that already had a Japanese equivalent, they would keep the kanji but still use the Japanese pronunciation (kun’yomi).
- Hiragana and Katakana are syllabaries that were developed at about 800 AD, and were essentially a simplification of the man’yōgana. Now, Kanji are used for the roots of verbs and adjectives as well as nouns, while hiragana is used for verb and adjective endings; katakana is mainly used for onomatopoeia and loan-words from other languages.
Proposals for Kanji Reform

Arguments for:
- Latin alphabet is more convenient, whereas kanji is not widely used.
- Inconvenient for typewriters and computers
- Takes a long time to learn all the kanji

Arguments against:
- Generation gap
- Major cultural/historical investment for Japan
Transformation of Man'yōgana to Katakana
The Chinese language was introduced to Korea in 194 BC.

Wiman, the leader of a group of migrants who came to Korea to escape turmoil in China, established **Wiman Chosŏn** in North Korea. Other similar settlements were established at various times, and in this way Chinese characters were brought to Korea.

For a long time, Koreans used Hancha (Chinese characters) as a writing system for their own spoken Korean. The phonetic value of each Chinese character was approximated using a Korean pronunciation, and its meaning could either be used or ignored. However, this resulted in an immensely complicated system.

This situation was addressed by King Sejong the Great under the Chosŏn Dynasty, who took personal issue with his people’s inability to read or write in the language. The **Hangul alphabetic script** was created under his direction, and completed in 1443. Hangul became the primary script for Korea after it gained independence from Japan in the mid-20th century.
# Hangul: A Uniquely Korean Alphabet

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Notable Features of the Hangul Alphabet

- The script is essentially an alphabet, but not like an English alphabet because letters are not simply strung together to form words. Each individual consonant and vowel can be combined to form a CV, CVC, or CVCC combination, making it a kind of alphabetic-syllabary, in that the symbols represent syllables, but are composed of alphabetic signs, so that they are clearly readable.

- The letters are supposed to be shaped according to the shape of articulatory organs when pronouncing them.

- The vowels and consonants of the Hangul writing system are uniquely shaped; the vowels are mainly horizontal or vertical lines with small variations, while consonants have a wider variety of often less angular shapes.

- The explanation/justification of the alphabet is supposedly derived from Yin-Yang theory and the Five Phases, but this has not proven to be very relevant and was probably only used as an excuse for shedding the overly complex makeshift Chinese system they had been using.
Now, Korean can be written exclusively using Hangul, or a mixture of Hangul and Hancha.

모든 인간은 태어날 때부터 자유로우며 그 존엄과 권리에 있어 동등하다. 인간은 천부적으로 이성과 양심을 부여받았으며 서로 형제애의 정신으로 행동하여야 한다.

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Comparison

Main difference between Korean and Japanese writing systems:

- Koreans made an alphabet of consonant and vowel sounds to represent their spoken language to escape the inconvenience of using the Chinese Hancha characters to approximate spoken Korean.

- The Japanese kept the Chinese characters, and in addition developed 2 syllabaries to indicate pronunciation and serve specific purposes, such as verb endings.
Sources

Picture Sources

- Izanagi and Izanami:
- Kanbun Sample:
  - <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2a/Kaeriten.png>.
Picture Sources (cont.)

- Lightning Strike: <http://www.strangedangers.com/content/item/15089.html>.
- Man'Yōgana to Katakana Chart: <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/11/Katakana_origine.png>.
- Shintoism Symbol: <http://www.himalayanacademy.com/resources/books/dws/dws_r5_truth-majorreligions.html>.