East Asia as the Sinographic Sphere

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The birth of Chinese characters

It is only when written symbols are divorced from their origins that they can function as characters.   An awareness of this fact must be our starting point in thinking about East Asia as the Sinographic Sphere.

It is well-known that the origins of Chinese characters lie in the oracle bone inscriptions that have been excavated from ruins of Yin (the Shang capital).   It is also perhaps well-known that this oracle bone script was not a writing system used for general secretarial purposes but was instead used for making accounts of the divinations performed by the king.   If we understood characters wholly in terms of their use for recording events, then we would expect that it should not matter where they are engraved.   Thus, it merits attention that we instead find that these divination-recording characters are inevitably fused with the instruments of divination: tortoise shells and animal bones.   Their existence was inseparable.   Even the very act of engraving characters was in this way subsumed by the entire sequence of ritual actions that is called divination.

Unlike "cuneiform," (from Latin *cuneus* "wedge-shaped") the term *jiaguwen* (甲骨文; "oracle

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bone script") is not a term that indicates an attribute of the characters' physical form. Nor does this term indicate a particular geographic location. It seems to indicate no more than simply the sites upon which the characters happened to be inscribed. Yet it is nevertheless certain that the characters were inseparable from these materials. Conversely, we can say that this script did not exist independently of physical things. In other words, oracle bone script was still a long way from acquiring the ability to circulate that characters have.

In oracle bone inscriptions, the things that are recorded naturally belong to the domain of the sacred. The miscellaneous affairs of everyday life were not recorded in them, nor do they contain messages directed toward anyone. No one kept diaries or wrote letters on tortoise shells or animal bones. Of course, those who bore responsibility for these writings were the priestly officials who carried out divinations, and this is why the development of Chinese characters was tightly connected to religious rites.

The *jinwen* (金文), or inscriptions cast onto Yin bronzes, likewise do not exist separately from the bronze vessels that were used for ritual purposes. The matters that were recorded on them inevitably had some connection to the vessels themselves; that is to say, the script formed an inscription that was itself a component of the ritual vessel. To cast writing on these bronze vessels required specialized skills, and the use of the script was monopolized by a particular group. It is said that the reason there are so many drinking vessels among Yin bronzes is that consuming wine to achieve communion with the divine was a part of ritual practice. We must therefore regard the *jinwen* bronze inscriptions as being, like oracle bone script, part of the domain of the sacred.

There is thus a qualitative difference between the way that oracle bone script and bronze

inscriptions functioned and the manner in which Chinese characters formed a cultural sphere for a certain geographical region, being employed so as to transcend the languages of the region's respective locales. Conversely, we can say that by recognizing the qualitative difference that lies herein, we are able to grasp the essential nature of Chinese characters. To be sure, both oracle bone script and bronze inscriptions are ancestral forms of Chinese characters, but *they are not Chinese characters*. Both the region of their usage and the purpose to which they were put were limited. We might say that they were "Yin characters" (殷字). In order for them to become "Chinese characters" (漢字), several ruptures were necessary.

One of these breakthroughs was the dynastic change from the Yin to the Zhou. Oracle bone script and bronze inscriptions were the characters of the Yin royal family and the priestly officials. The Zhou learned them. It is thought that the Yin and Zhou were different ethnic groups, and it seems that the languages they spoke also belonged to different lineages. This means that oracle bone script and bronze inscriptions came to have currency that transcended spoken language. If we are speaking of characters that were used within a particular ethnic group, it is not unlikely that there also existed writing systems other than oracle bone script and bronze inscriptions. The fact that these were lost and that the characters of the Yin spread as Chinese characters stems from the fact that the Zhou, a different ethnic group, conquered the Yin and adopted their characters.

Moreover, as the Zhou territory expanded, and as a feudal system formed in which fiefs were divided among various lords, these bronzes that had served as ritual vessels came to be used as symbols of enfeoffment. The content of the inscriptions on these bronzes likewise shifted to include writings from the king to the feudal lords: in other words they became the possessions of human beings, not gods. On Zhou bronzes, there are inscriptions that record nominations

to official posts, for these bronzes were used in the appointment ceremonies.

At the same time, the enlargement of territory opened up the characters of the Yin to a diverse array of linguistic arenas that went far beyond simply Yin and Zhou. This was the genesis of the Sinographic sphere, that is to say, the birth of Chinese characters as multivalent characters. From the Western Zhou to the Eastern Zhou (the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods), Chinese characters spread across the continent as multivalent characters, and as such they were qualitatively different from their ancestral forms on oracle bones and bronzes. The content written with them was diverse, as was the geographical arena where they were used. In recognition of the relationships that existed with the respective local languages, phono-semantic compound characters (形聲; C. *xingsheng*), composed of a semantic unit and a phonetic unit, were produced in great numbers.

It was around this time that the *shi* (詩), which is considered China's oldest form of poetry, became anchored to characters. The *shi* poetry that has been transmitted down to us as the *Shi jing* (Classic of Poetry) is based upon a fundamental rhythm of four characters per line. While its contents range widely from ritual songs performed at ancestral temples to love songs prevalent among the populace at large, when we consider that it contains words that were presumably used by shamans, it seems that the origins of the form lie in their hands. At the same time, in order for these poems to be transmitted as *shi*, it was necessary for the shamans who were their origins to be forgotten.

For example, it has become clear in modern times that the technique called the *xing* (興), or "affective image," a fixed form of verse used at the outset of a poem, was originally connected to the worship of spirits. However, these origins could be dispensed with when *shi* poetry

was sung at diplomatic ceremonies held between feudal states, or when it propagated as a form of entertainment in city-states.   Or rather, it is precisely because its origins were forgotten that *shi* poetry prospered and came to be preserved in written form.   The *shi* that proliferated and were collected like this eventually become one of the Five Classics.

The "gentleman" (*shi* 士) and the "middle kingdom" (*Zhongguo* 中國)

In this way, Chinese characters were severed from their origins as the script of the priestly officials, and with the amnesia about these origins came their establishment as Chinese characters.   This is when "China" as the "Middle Kingdom" came into being.

In his article "The problematique of Shirakawa Shizuka: the range of grammatology," Miura Masashi writes:

> What Shirakawa Shizuka elucidated with his poetic intuition was the world that existed prior to this amnesia: a world that, depending on one's vantage point, might appear beautiful or might appear forbidding.   But, to look at things from the side of Yoshikawa Kōjirō, what had to be considered was instead the path and significance of this thoroughgoing amnesia.[2]

Both Shirakawa and Yoshikawa produced annotated commentaries on the *Classic of Poetry*, and this difference in their attitudes runs consistently through them.   I would like to follow Yoshikawa's example, and focus here on an examination of this process of forgetting, for when we speak of "China as a Sinographic sphere" what we mean is the world that came into being in the wake of this amnesia.

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[2] Miura Masashi 三浦雅士, "Shirakawa Shizuka mondai" 白川静問題, *Asteion (Αστειον)* 67 (2007).

We may ask then, who were the agents of this process of forgetting? It was carried out by the new bearers of script, the *shi* (士) and the *ru* (儒; "scholars").

To say that characters passed from the gods to the hands of men does not mean that they were instantly transformed into the possessions of the populace at large. The reading and writing of characters remained, ultimately, a special privilege. The *shi* were a lower-level stratum of the gentry that was permitted to bear arms, and by wresting characters away from the realm of shamans, they obtained the ability to participate in governance. Recorded on slips of bamboo and wood, or on silk, the words that they read and wrote began to circulate. Unlike oracle bone script and bronze inscriptions, these characters did not lose their meaning when they were transcribed. Or, we might even say, *it was precisely because they were transcribed that they had significance*. Documents that were written using Chinese characters became the very lifeblood of governmental administration. It was the geographic area in which Chinese characters circulated that was "the Middle Kingdom" and the "Sinographic sphere." The rise of the *shi* social stratum and the foundation of the Sinographic sphere proceeded along the same axis.

Moreover, it was not just characters that circulated. With the steady crumbling of the feudal order centered around the Zhou kings, people also began to move widely. The *shi* who had taken part in official ceremonies and government as hereditary successors attempted to display their abilities independently of their former lords. The particularly capable among them gained skill in argumentation and became wandering persuaders (遊説; C. *youshui*), with disciples who followed them around. The *shi* social stratum capitalized on its literacy and its mobility.

When Confucius instructed his disciples, "Unless you study the *Odes* you will be ill-equipped to

speak," and when he cautioned them, "Unless you study the *Rites* you will be ill-equipped to take your stand,"[3] it was so that they could "speak" and "take their stand" as *shi*. The *shi* who fashioned themselves by cultivating their abilities in this way were in turn then tested by the king and feudal lords, who took them on as retainers, aspiring to enlarge and legitimate their states. When seen as the Sinographic sphere, the Middle Kingdom was, for the king and his feudal lords and for the *shi* as well, an arena of contestation for such power and virtue.

The classics were edited, the words of the philosophers of the Hundred Schools of Thought were recorded, and histories were written. A new world of writing took shape among the *shi*, and more particularly with the intellectual group known as the *ru* at its center. Upon this foundation, the empires of Qin and Han were born. To put it baldly, the incident known as the "burning of the books and the burial of the scholars" (焚書坑儒; C. *fenshu kengru*) erased the new origins of this world of writing that had been created by the *ru*, marking an attempt by the emperor to establish a new world of writing. It was precisely because this would be the founding basis of the empire that its origins had to be seized.

Having learned a lesson from the failure of the Qin, the Han instead assimilated this world of writing and used it, gradually shifting its origins and making the Sinographic sphere the bounds of the empire. The fact that we refer to Chinese characters as *hanzi* (漢字; lit. "the characters of the Han") seems at first glance to be almost a historical accident. Superficially, they were called *hanzi* because they were recognized by those outside the Han Empire as the characters used within its confines. But when we really think about it, we realize that this term in fact

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[3] The quoted phrases appear in Analects (XVI.13): 不學詩、無以言; 不學禮、無以立. The translation is D. C. Lau's.

reflects the true nature of Chinese characters.

Today, the area that is indicated by terms like "the Sinographic sphere" (漢字圈) or "the Sinographic cultural sphere" (漢字文化圈) is roughly coterminous with the East Asian region. However, the original Sinographic sphere was China. So let us call it "the first Sinographic sphere." The present Sinographic sphere is a secondary extension of it. Furthermore, the principle that enabled the present Sinographic sphere to be established as such – or to put it more precisely, the principle that allowed this to happen in premodern times – coincides with the principle that allowed China to become the Middle Kingdom. Let me explain what I mean.

I will put it bluntly. The Sinographic sphere could not take shape simply through the circulation of Chinese characters and literary Chinese. Indispensable to this process was the existence of *shi* whose self-identify was formed by reading and writing Chinese characters and literary Chinese. The Sinographic sphere was established as such with these *shi* at its core. When the domain of the Sinographic sphere expanded, its fundamental principles were perceived as the "literary Chinese context" (漢文脈 J. *kanbunmyaku*; lit. "the literary Chinese vein").

In his commentary on *Confucius and Mencius*, Kaizuka Shigeki explains as follows the reason that the *Analects* was read so fondly in Japan:

> I think that fundamentally it is because the society into which Confucius was born at the end of the Spring and Autumn period bore many similarities to the society of Tokugawa Japan… We can say that Confucius's academy admitted the young men who belonged to the rising military class, and taking the *junzi* (gentleman) as an image of the ideal human, sought to instill in

them the cultivation befitting a member of the military aristocracy. When it comes to Confucius's disciple Cengzi, he took the model of the *junzi*, one aspect of which was to be a warrior, and replaced it with *shi*, which referred to the rising warrior class. Since Cengzi's theories became the orthodox line of later Confucianism, ancient Chinese warrior values circulated strongly within the centers of Confucianism. Tokugawa Ieyasu listened to lectures on the *Analects* and encouraged his subordinates to read the text because he saw that Confucian values internalized the military values that took the *junzi* and *shi* as ideal human figures, and he discerned that this would be extremely helpful in giving shape to the Tokugawa shogunate's way of the warrior.[4]

Of course, we must not uncritically equate the warrior values that prevailed under the Tokugawa's *bakuhan* (幕藩; "shogunate and domain") system with those of China's Warring States Period. Yet in spite of the historical discrepancies that do exist, we can nevertheless agree that for the warrior class in Japan's early modern period, the idealized human images of the *junzi* and the *shi* that are depicted in the *Analects* played a significant role in determining their individual position.

To be more precise, the criterion for what sort of person was deemed a *shi* varied according to time and place. As Kaizuka discusses, the warrior aspects peaked in the Warring States period and declined steadily thereafter; the carrying of swords, which had been mandatory for the *shi*, likewise came to be abandoned. In exchange, intention (志) and virtue (徳) were esteemed. If participation in government was obstructed, the position of the recluse was available, and even women were called *nüshi* (女士; lit. "female *shi*") if they carried out conduct

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[4] The quotation comes from Kaizuka Shigeki 貝塚茂樹, *Kōshi Mōshi* 孔子 孟子 [Confucius, Mencius], vol. 3 of *Sekai no meicho* 世界の名著 [World's classics] (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha 中央公論社, 1966).

befitting a *shi*.[5]   In modern Chinese, incidentally, the term *nüshi* is a polite term of reference for women, and is used as a translation for the English word "Lady," but the roots of the term can be traced here.

In any case, the model of the *shi* can be sought in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods.   We can directly locate this in the *Analects* and other written works from that time period, but in addition to these texts, later histories of the period, in particular the *Shi ji* (Records of the Grand Historian), played a significant role.   The readers of the basic annals and "arrayed traditions" (列傳; "biographies") were captivated by the appearance there of numerous *shi*.   They even tried to fashion themselves in the model of some of the profiled individuals.   The author Sima Qian for his part also attempted to fulfill his duty as a *shi* in the capacity of an official scribe who read and wrote history.

In order for this sort of reading and writing space to take shape, Chinese characters alone were insufficient; the classical language that is now called "literary Chinese" (in Japanese, *kanbun* 漢文) needed to be born.   The "Five Classics," which are texts written prior to the Warring States period, are difficult to read.   There are phrases where it is unclear how the words corresponded to everyday language.   But when it comes to the writings of the various philosophers, we find that the difficulty of reading them decreases markedly.   They are written in a style that is possible to correlate to everyday language and in a style that accommodated multiple purposes.   The advent of such a style made studying the texts much easier.

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[5] Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574-648), *Mao shi zheng yi* 毛詩正義 (The true meaning of the *Classic of Poetry*).

Of course, the "Five Classics" are written in Chinese characters, so in that sense they are literary Chinese (漢文; J. *kanbun*). But even though we might tend to lump all classical Chinese texts together as "literary Chinese" or *kanbun*, there are in fact distinct historical levels therein. To sketch a rough outline, the first layer is the "old prose" that took shape in the Warring States period; the second layer is the *pianli* (駢儷) prose of four and six character lines that was refined from the Later Han to the Wei and Jin; the third level is the old prose that took shape in the Tang and Song and thereafter. In addition there are texts deriving from Buddhist scriptures and from vernacular speech, and it is only by identifying these forms and understanding them comprehensively that one can become able to read so-called classical Chinese. In the present educational climate in Japan, all of these forms are treated as being the same thing, subsumed under the category "kanbun." It is truly regrettable that instruction typically falls into the trap of being simply a matter of following the reading marks. But in any case, what is important here is the fact that the first stratum, the old prose of the Warring States and Qin and Han periods, became the basis of reading and writing in the Sinographic sphere.

The expanding Sinographic Sphere

Having acquired the greatest political might in Asia, Chinese characters began to expand their ambit into areas at the periphery of the continent. Or, to look at the situation from the other side, the regions that had, however belatedly, come to form their own respective cultures came face to face with the power of Chinese characters. Of course, matters did not stop with characters. One after another, new questions arose. First, how to enter into the diplomatic sphere of states like Wei and Wu, and then Sui and Tang? How should reading and writing of texts written in Chinese characters be carried out? How should transplanted intellectuals

from the Sinographic sphere be incorporated into society? What should be done with the *lüling* (律令; J. *ritsuryō*) administrative and penal codes, the civil service exam, and other such institutions? While the Sinographic sphere was a geographically defined region, it was also an episteme. As such, in addition to extreme responses (abandoning everything and entering the sphere on the one hand, or completely shunning it on the other), there was room to move around, searching out a position that struck a balance somewhere in between. We should recognize that the formation of the secondary Sinographic sphere took place through a considerable expenditure of time and effort.

The dissemination of Chinese characters did not merely provide a stimulus in the direction of integration, as in the case of the consolidation under the Qin and Han. Within the expanded Sinographic sphere, it served rather to increase awareness of the respective particularities of each constituent region, providing the impetus that allowed each society to come into being as a state. It was precisely because the "Wo" (倭; J. Wa) acquired Chinese characters that they came to adopt the name "Nihon" as a term of self-reference, and rather paradoxically, that they were led to write a history that does not make use of the name "Nihon" in the title or text.

In his book *Multiple Antiquities*, Kōnoshi Takamitsu discerns the difference between the *Kojiki* (古事記; *The Record of Ancient Matters*) and the *Nihon shoki* (日本書紀; *The Chronicles of Japan*) as follows:
> The *Kojiki* attempted to assert that the original form of its authors' 'antiquity' was one that existed apart from writing. We might say that because it was strongly conscious of the fact that writing had come from abroad, it did not address the question of its origins. … In contrast to this, we must say that the *Nihon shoki* narrated an 'antiquity' that was situated along the path of

development into a cultured literate state.[6]

If we regard the formation of the Sinographic sphere in the Warring States Period as having occurred by the forgetting of the world that preceded it, then we might well say that in place of forgetting, what we see in ancient Japan is the compilation of the *Kojiki*.   While the *Kojiki* uses Chinese characters, it departs from proper literary Chinese, and plainly reveals its orientation toward a world without Chinese characters.   "Nihon," the term of self-reference that had currency in the Sinographic sphere, was also ignored.   The *Nihon shoki*, however, adopts the name "Nihon" as a term of self-reference and records its history in literary Chinese, thereby demonstrating its status as a member of the Sinographic sphere.   Chinese characters demanded the updating of cultural origins.

Through this sort of struggle, the Sinographic sphere took shape across the Korean peninsula, the Japanese archipelago, the Ryukyu Islands, and the eastern part of the Indochinese peninsula, meaning that literary Chinese was used as a diplomatic language and the ability to read and write it was regarded as a condition for membership in the intellectual class.   This is the Secondary Sinographic sphere.   Techniques for reading literary Chinese were devised, and literary styles emerged that used Chinese characters while not depending on the syntax of classical texts.   In each of these respective localities, a social stratum that corresponded to the Chinese *shi* eventually appeared, though there were variations in form and differences in how speedy the process was.   The *yangban* of Koryo and Chosŏn Korea, as well as the samurai class during Japan's early modern period, are two readily apparent examples.

The study of Zhu Xi played a significant role in the Secondary Sinographic Sphere.   This

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[6] Kōnoshi Takamitsu 神野志隆光, *Fukusū no 'kodai'* 複数の「古代」 (Kōdansha 講談社, 2007).

school's organized worldview and systematic method of study were extremely attractive to those who aspired to be *shi*. No matter how much of a resemblance the late Spring and Autumn period may have borne to Tokugawa society, it was impossible to perfectly recreate the world of the *Analects* in early modern Japan. Even if a person could grasp what a *junzi* and a *shi* were, he would still like to know what concrete steps he could take to become one. What gave Zhu Xi studies the wherewithal to respond to this desire was the fact that it was itself a body of learning, or a system of learning, that had been born in China's early modern world. In its slogan "one can become a sage through study" (聖人可學而至) are expressed both the importance of the act of learning and the practical assurance that if one went through the proper sequence of steps, even he could become a sage. But if we look in *Zhuzi yulei* (Classified conversations of Master Zhu) at the dialogues carried out between Zhu Xi and his disciples, we find that there is detailed discussion of precisely how the *shi* should live in a society where government and the economy have sufficiently developed, not to mention a painstaking explanation of how one should study texts like the *Analects*.

Moreover, the fact that a civil service exam system developed in China meant that a huge number of texts premised on preparing for the exam were published for the benefit of beginning learners. This in turn meant that the ease with which one might carry out one's studies markedly increased, which proved to be welcome news for people within the expanded Sinographic sphere. Classical poetry and prose were a foreign language, but the hurdle presented by the necessity to acquire skills in writing and reading it became markedly lower. Japan, unlike Korea and Vietnam, did not adopt the civil service exam, but it is fair to say that it received more than its share of benefits from it. If there were no civil service exam, then we can be certain that literary Chinese would not have been so easy for the Japanese to learn.

In this way, the Sinographic sphere expanded across all of East Asia while preserving regional specificity to a pronounced degree. Chinese language texts circulated, information was transmitted, and with some limitations, people also traveled back and forth. For example, the travel of Korean emissaries to Japan was a rare opportunity for exchange, and Japanese Confucian scholars leapt at the chance to meet with the envoys. In other words, they ardently wished for social interaction with *shi* from elsewhere within the Sinographic sphere. As East Asian intellectuals, they shared a common foundation. For them, the chance to engage in "brush talks" with the emissaries and exchange poetry with them was a rare opportunity to confirm one's belonging to the world of Chinese civilization's *shi*. Moreover, it is important to realize that the "brush talk" was their main and proper form of interaction, and was not an auxiliary measure undertaken because they could not communicate with one other in speech. They were *shi* of written discourse, not practitioners of speech, and thus it was appropriate for them to wield the brush with a serene air of perfect composure.

The modernity of the Sinographic sphere

With the appearance of the Western great powers in East Asia, the Sinographic Sphere experienced a major transfiguration. But this is not to say that the Western powers directly destroyed the Sinographic sphere. Rather, it became an opportunity to exploit and fully realize the power that lay stored within the Sinographic sphere, in the pursuit of new value.

When the great powers established their base of operations in Qing China, information about the West came to be disseminated within the East Asian world through the medium of literary Chinese. Printing by movable type was carried out by missionaries in Shanghai. Information about Western science, religion, and history was written in literary Chinese, or translated into it, opening up a crack in the wall of literary Chinese, the literary style based

upon the classics that constituted the cultivation of the *shi*. A pathway opened toward new Chinese compound words and new literary Chinese, and the classical framework began to waver.

Meanwhile, the carrying out of the Meiji Restoration by samurai who had been brought up on literary Chinese was a major event in the Sinographic sphere. The Five Article Charter Oath promulgated by the Meiji Emperor in 1868 was written in *kanbun kundokutai*, the Sino-Japanese reading of literary Chinese, meaning that it was a text that was based in literary Chinese, yet revealed a movement away from it. This Sino-Japanese *kundokutai* style made free and exhaustive use of the newly-coined Chinese compounds that had been produced by translations from Western languages. This was a phenomenon not limited to Japan. Liang Qichao, who took up refuge in Japan after the failure of the Hundred Days' Reform (戊戌變法; C. *wuxu bianfa*) of 1898, absorbed aspects of Western civilization through this type of Meiji written discourse. In the same way that Japanese read Chinese by inverting its syntax, Liang inverted the syntax of Japanese to read it, even authoring a book entitled *A Chinese Method for Reading Japanese* (和文漢讀法; Hewen Han dufa). He carried out translations from *kundokutai*, and created his own written language that made abundant use of Chinese neologisms. Liang Qichao's writings were greatly welcomed in late Qing China, and were also transmitted to Korean *sadaebu* (士大夫; "scholar-officials").

The Sino-Japanese *kundokutai* style, which intersperses Chinese characters with Japanese *kana*, was a deviation from literary Chinese and represented an aspiration toward a national language. The same sort of phenomenon happened in various areas of the Sinographic sphere. The use of Hangul is one such example. In China as well, a movement advocated the use of the vernacular instead of the classical literary Chinese. This happened because literary Chinese

was the province of the *shidafu* scholar-officials and *was not something that belonged to the nation's people*. In other words, the issue is not simply whether to write or to speak. Rather, the literary language was something that one could only begin to write after first having read many classical texts, whereas this was not true for the colloquial language. The difference is important here. Needless to say, the colloquial language did not appear fully formed out of nowhere. Literary language served as a resource for its words and grammar. However, it was no longer necessary to trace one's way back to the classics.

In this way, the linguistic resources that had been stored up in the Sinographic sphere were consumed in the formation of the respective national languages. Perhaps it would have been possible to create new shared resources, but such resources were not reconstructed, and the origins in the classics were forgotten. In the early stages, the origins of the new Chinese compounds could in some manner be traced to a classical source, but gradually these gave way to newly-coined words. While Japan was one major base for the production of these new words in the Sinographic sphere, it came to undermine the foundations upon which the Sinographic sphere had functioned as such.

People realized that they were able to use Chinese compounds without knowing the classics. The status of the "scholar-official" no longer existed. Although an examination for higher level literary officials that resembled the traditional civil service exam was introduced, the modern bureaucrats were not *shi*. Of course, even during the earlier Qing and Chosŏn periods, the scholar-officials had persisted only in name, while the true nature of this category was known to all. Perhaps it was just as well that this veneer of pretense, which had remained like a thin layer of ice, was shattered completely. The argument that the scholar-official class was something that belonged to China and Korea, and not to Japan, also

could emerge.   After all, with the new values of the modern nation apparent now before everyone's eyes, it was the people who ought to take up the role of subject instead of the *shi*.

In the wake of this rapid change, however, people began to wonder if this world existed only in words and not yet in reality – a suspicion that engendered their sense of hunger for substance.   Who were the people who would be the bearers of these words?   I wonder if we can't say that this sense of lack became transformed into a demand for the mobilization of the national populace and calls for the systematic organization of East Asia.

Tradition had to be discovered for Japan, for its own was ambiguous.   Perhaps the fact that the Imperial Rescript on Education adopted a *pianli* prose-like structure that recalls Yasumaro's preface to the *Kojiki*, or the fact that the phrase "All eight corners of the world under one roof" (八紘一宇) was dusted off and called into service from the *Nihon shoki*, was a new attempt to rewrite the origins of the Sinographic sphere.   But as Japan became more zealous to create new spheres of language, the absence of subjects to bear these words was brought into ever clearer relief.   Many of the slogans that were vacantly chanted after Japan's invasion of China, such as "One hundred million hearts beating as one" (一億一心) or "Harmony among the five races" (五族協和), are phrases composed of four Chinese characters.   More than yearning for a discarded world, might this have been a means of compensation: a counteraction to make up for the lack?

If we are to tell the story of Sinographic culture in contemporary East Asia, we must strive to do two things.   We must discern the process by which East Asia took shape as the Sinographic sphere, and we must investigate the ways in which this cultural asset has been treated since the advent of the modern era.   To put it differently, perhaps unraveling the

history that has in this fashion been folded into Chinese characters, clarifying the sequence by which they were forgotten and consumed, is the task left to us today who read and write them.