

Japanese and Chinese Characters Show the Beauty of Language

People are learning languages all the time. Infants are listening to words and sentences and through an amazing process, coming, in time, to communicate themselves. Sometimes people are faced with the challenge of learning a language, and often feel frustrated by a multitude of unfamiliar sounds, grammar, and spelling.

I learned from Aesthetic Realism, the education founded by the American poet and philosopher Eli Siegel, that every subject, including a language, is a means to know the world from which that language comes and to honestly like it. “The world, art, and self explain each other,” stated Eli Siegel, “each is the aesthetic oneness of opposites.”

A language I have loved for many years is Japanese, and essential in knowing how to speak and read it is learning the Chinese characters used in the writing of it. These

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characters are called kanji which means literally symbols from China of the Han Dynasty. Japanese is written with a combination of Chinese characters and two Japanese phonetic syllable systems: hiragana, and katakana.

In A Guide to Remembering Japanese Characters, Kenneth G. Henshall writes:

The characters from which kanji are ultimately derived originated between 2000- 1500 B.C. in the Yellow River region of China. About 3000 characters have been discovered from this early period, mostly inscribed on bones and tortoise shells and often connected with divination. At the outset they were mostly simple

pictographs, but with the passage of time became increasingly complex and abstract.

These characters, representations of things and ideas arrived at by people thousands of years ago, give evidence for what Eli Siegel explains about the meaning of a “word”:

Every word is about the universe as a whole. A word says, “The universe can be this way: and I, the word, show it.” If man accepts the word, he is saying the word does do something good in the way of organizing the universe as manyness or as entities.

[from: *Definitions and Comment: Being a Description of the World*]

Kanji were brought to Japan via Korea beginning around the 4th century A.D. and were gradually adapted to write the spoken Japanese language. In this paper I will be speaking about the meaning of the characters

as used in Japanese. In some cases the same character will have a different though related meaning in Chinese.

Every language “organizes the universe as manyness or as entities” as Mr. Siegel wrote, and each language does it in different ways. The English alphabet, for instance, shows that all the items of reality can be expressed in writing using thousands of different combinations of just 26 letters. There is a beautiful economy in the alphabet at one with tremendous richness. Chinese characters on the other hand start with richness--there are tens of thousands of individual characters, though today about 3,000 kanji are needed for everyday reading in Japanese, still quite a challenge for foreigners trying to learn them. But this manyness also has great concision because the meaning of a whole word or complex

idea is represented within one symbol.

For example this is the character for ‘reverberate’: 響 and this is the character for encourage: 励. And while the characters themselves can be intricate, they are made up of different components which often give logical clues to their meaning. The lower portion of the character for reverberate or echo 響 for example, is the character meaning sound 音.

In an Aesthetic Realism class Eli Siegel asked me: “Did you study Japanese writing?” I answered yes, and he asked further, “Do you see the desire to be accurate?” I learned that what the originators and users of kanji wanted to be accurate about was the structure of the world itself, which all people live on and share. Before studying Aesthetic Realism, I made the common mistake that people can when they find something they like: of seeing it as the only interesting thing in the world and using it to downgrade other things. I did this with the Japanese language. But by seeing it as superior to other things, I was also lessening its meaning and beauty because I couldn’t see its large universal significance and relation to all humanity. Changing about this

has enabled me to love Japanese even more.

Kanji show the Sameness and Difference in the World and Ourselves

With each new character I learn, I see confirmation of what Aesthetic Realism explains—that everything in the world is a oneness of opposites. In *Beauty the Making One of Opposites?*, Eli Siegel asks about Sameness and Difference:

Does every work of art show the kinship to be found in objects and all realities? --and at the same time the subtle and tremendous difference, the drama of otherness, that one can find among the things of the world?

There is for example, the character for “few” 少, a term of quantity. As it combines with other characters or portions of characters to create new ones, we feel something logical and also wonderful. When few is joined with the character for rock 石 we have the new character for sand 砂, which can be seen as bits of rock when infinitely small. When few is placed above the character for power 力, it become 劣 which has the meaning of inferior; when few is placed to the right of the character for woman 女 it becomes a

new character meaning exquisite 妙. This, it has been conjectured, comes from the notion of a slender woman. As you see a common component in different characters, you feel the continuity of an idea, while it also changes.

I have also been thrilled to see the many words in which the character for hand appears. The character for hand is 手. Often when it appears as part of other characters it is on the left side in an abbreviated form. Seeing the different things that a hand can express, it makes for a big feeling about sameness and difference in the world and in ourselves. To give only a few instances, hand is part of the words: skill 技; hit or strike 打; embrace 抱; throw 投; invite 招; discard 捨. This has me think of something Mr. Siegel would do in Aesthetic Realism classes: ask a person to make a fist and then open the fingers wide showing how the opposites of hard and soft, tight and expansive are in us at any moment.

We Can Use Kanji to See More Justly

Learning Kanji, as in studying any language, one has the satisfaction of meeting the expected and unexpected, familiar and also strange. Too often in

life we can assume that the way we see something is the only right way, and be prejudiced against other ways of seeing. Studying Kanji is an opportunity to think about how people long ago saw things and felt about them. Our notion of house, for instance, is broadened when we learn through this kanji 家 that long ago it was natural to think of a house as depicted by a roof with a pig underneath. You can see the horizontal roof with a vertical line coming from it which looks like a chimney and, below it the pig, in the character 家. It also adds to our notion of beauty and of the feelings of Chinese men and women of the past when we realize that the character for beauty 美 shows the character for sheep 羊 placed over the character for large 大. We can ask: what was in the minds of early people who saw a large, luxuriantly woolly sheep as equivalent to beauty? In an issue of the international journal, *The Right of Aesthetic Realism to Be Known*, the Class Chairman, Ellen Reiss writes:

Words are evidence for what Aesthetic Realism shows to be the biggest desire of the human self: to like the world. The fact that human beings thousands of years ago wanted to name the items

and aspects of reality, was a love for them. Words are a means, perhaps the richest there is, of getting the world into ourselves: we can have within us knowledge of another person's feelings, of a happening 300 years ago, of what a certain plant is like—all through words describing these. And through words, what is within us can go out to the world and be known there: we can tell about our thoughts with words, so our thoughts can get into the thoughts of someone else.

The earliest characters were pure pictographs of “the items and aspects of reality” and have been simplified and stylized over the centuries. For instance 田 is a rice field and shows the land divided into four quadrants. And large, 大 which we just saw as part of the character meaning beautiful is a representation of a person with arms and legs stretched out wide. The whole idea of symbols, which all characters are, has to do with sameness and difference, because that symbol--in this case lines on a piece of paper, or earlier on bone--has been taken to stand for something. In writing the character for rice field we have in a concise form 田 an agreed on equivalence to the thing itself.

As we have been

seeing, other characters are composed of many parts, some of which may be whole characters themselves. For example the character for man as in male is 男 comprised of a rice field (on top) and the character for power 力. Right away we see evidence for what Mr. Siegel wrote in his preface to *Hot Afternoons Have Been in Montana*: Poems: “Poetry, like life, states that the very self of a thing is its relations, its having-to-do-with other things.” Persons in China felt that the best way to represent maleness was to show something a man had to do with. This character shows maleness can be described by things in the world itself. Many people felt that a man can be seen as showing power as he worked in a field.

Growing up, I felt, as most daughters have, including girls in China of say, the Tang Dynasty, that I owned my father and saw him essentially in relation to me. I came to have new respect and feeling for him through my study of Aesthetic Realism. In an Aesthetic Realism Consultation I was asked: “How much meaning do you think your father has?” I answered, “I don't know,” and was asked: “Do you think the meaning of the whole world is in him?” And I began to see that

it was. The character for male, comprised of rice field and power tells us that a man is related to the earth and the power of nature. This is part of the beauty of Chinese and Japanese characters which can have us see that people and things around us have to do with the meaning of the whole world.

And through characters, we can also see our own feelings in relation to other things. In his essay “Are Feelings Objects? or, The Alienation of Any Time” Mr. Siegel writes: *To see the outside world as the same stuff as that of which our most secret or unknown thoughts are made, is a fine necessity. Where people haven't, in any age, it has not been good for them....The first step in alienation is to regard what goes on within ourselves as having a different reality from that which goes on elsewhere.*

Look at this character: 困. It is a representation of a tree 木 pent in in an enclosure. Does it have anything to do with us and a feeling we might have had yesterday? The meaning of the character is to be troubled or to be in a quandary. When we are troubled by something it is so easy to feel it is only a personal matter, and not see our relation to what other people let along other

living things endure. To suffer is expressed in a character by a plant, grass or growing thing that is old: 苦. Can this have us see our own emotions better? I think it can, and knowing this can also make us kinder.

There is much more to say about how Japanese/ Chinese characters show that reality is made aesthetically, but I conclude with two instances that thrill me. The first is the compound character 添削 pronounced tensaku, which means correction, as in the editing a teacher might do on a student's paper. The two characters that come together to make this word are opposites: the first means to add to, and the second means to shave off, or chip away. This shows that people centuries ago agreed that correcting something is a oneness of opposites, to add what is needed and take away what is not. This is what we hope happens to ourselves. As I see how the composition of this word puts opposites together that I want to have together in myself, I know I will never forget this word. This is very important when you are trying to learn over 2,000 characters. I will also always remember the character for impart which is comprised of a hand on the left and

the character for receive on the right 受. This character 授 is used in terms of imparting knowledge—and is part of a word meaning teacher. At first I had a hard time remembering how to write it and didn't see how it was related to the character for receive which comprises its right side. But then it dawned on me that this character was showing something that Aesthetic Realism explains: that in order to express ourselves we first have to be impressed, or deeply affected by something. The character for impart affirms that a good

teacher gives knowledge and receives knowledge too. As Chaucer says of the Scholar in *The Canterbury Tales*, “And gladly would he learne and gladly teache.”

Although Japanese and Chinese words can seem very different from English, they show the deep kinship in the human mind and stand for the world that people of all nations are hoping to like.

I conclude for now with these beautiful sentences by Eli Siegel from his lecture “Poetry and Words”:

Every time we meet a language we should

bow to it and say: Here man worked instinctively and came to something! We should like every language. There are different effects to be had in every language. And in each instance, words are put together to bring help and to get help.

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