INTRODUCTION

Books in one form or another, imported or domestically produced, have been a part of Japanese cultural life for around 1,500 years. Superficially the continuities are impressive, and so too are the use of printing in the eighth century, the vast resources of medieval temple libraries, and the relative weakness of systems of censorship and political control. The history of the book in Japan is thus not the history of a marginal form of cultural production and consumption but of a central one over at least a millenium.

The bookishness of Japan is partly a result of the essentially literate character of Buddhism and Confucianism: written texts were central and indispensable for their transmission. On the other hand, oral traditions have existed in Japan in abundance, and some are still alive today, so there is inevitably a danger, in an account which privileges the book as a means of cultural construction and dissemination, of distorting the relationship between literate and oral cultures in Japan. Some measure will be taken here of that relationship, but the focus will be overwhelmingly on books and written texts, which have themselves created the authority and orthodoxy of literate culture in Japan and continue to do so. Oral texts have been squeezed into a subordinate position, at least until textualized in the form of writing, and will only have any place here to the extent that they impinge on the production of written texts and books.

What, then, is the subject of this book? It is easier first to say what it is not, for it does not purport to be a history of the Japanese book. The very concept of ‘Japanese book’, or in Japanese kokusho 国書, is one of only limited historical and analytical value, for it represents only a portion, at times a small portion, of the encounter with the book in Japan, which until the late nineteenth century was as likely to be with Chinese books or Chinese texts as with Japanese. One of the most graphic illustrations of the limitations of the concept of kokusho is Kokusho sōmokuroku, a monumental bibliography of pre-modern Japanese books and manuscripts which is now supplemented by a sequel, Kotenseki sōgō mokuroku. These exceptionally useful, indeed indispensable, compilations have one major shortcoming, and
that is that they concern themselves only with *kokusho*. They therefore casually omit all the Chinese texts copied by hand in Japan or printed in Japan whether or not they contain glosses, annotations, or additional material written by Japanese. This fundamental distortion of the history of texts and books in Japan is largely attributable to the genetically close relationship between the development of Japanese literary studies and scholarship and the Kokugaku or so-called Nativist tradition of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with its inbuilt antipathy towards sinology and insistence on the value of Japanese texts. These two essential bibliographies have their roots in that tradition, and its pervasiveness is apparent from the major exhibition on ‘The cultural history of books and publishing in Japan’ held in Kyoto in 1996, which paid scant attention to books other than those written by Japanese and printed in Japan.¹

But why is it that a preoccupation with Japanese books is such a distortion? In the case of Buddhism the answer is obvious, for the textual history of Buddhism in Japan is the history of the transmission to Japan of Chinese translations of Sanskrit sutras and of exegetical works in Chinese, and the history of how they were copied, printed, circulated and interpreted in Japan. Not one, however, of the innumerable manuscripts and printed versions of these Chinese translations and original commentaries appears in the pages of *Kokusho somokuroku* or its sequel. The same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of works of Chinese literature or Confucian texts, which at times enjoyed a huge circulation in Japan, to say nothing of Daoist or medical texts from China. Since most Chinese texts reproduced in Japan, with the exception of Buddhist texts, customarily came equipped with diacritics and glosses inserted by Japanese editors to make it easier for Japanese readers to construe them, in addition to prefaces and postfaces contributed by Japanese scholars, they were to a greater or lesser extent ‘japanized’, and to omit them is to exaggerate the importance in Japan of texts written wholly by Japanese in the Japanese language and ultimately, as I have suggested, to distort the history of books in Japan.

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The two catalogues mentioned above have a second shortcoming, which is just as serious in its consequences. With but one or two exceptions, they do not list works preserved in libraries outside Japan. Many of the great collections of books from Japan now to be found in Europe and North America were originally put together in the second half of the nineteenth century by diplomats, missionaries, globetrotters and the first generation of enthusiastic japanophiles. Some critics have suggested that these collections are a testimony to the cultural plunder of Japan by the Great Powers, but it is essential to remember that the collections were built up at a time when old books were valued far less in Japan than contemporary books such as translations from or adaptations of works in European languages, which served more practical if mundane ends. In this connection we are fortunate that we have a full list of the prices paid by the Swedish explorer Adolf Nordenskiöld when he acquired his books in Japan in 1879, which shows that he paid more for a bundle of current newspapers or for recent works of fiction than for a Gozan edition printed in 1296. As a result of the fact that books of previous centuries were undervalued by comparison with new publications, it was possible for a shrewd collector to make some good acquisitions, and now in many cases the copies preserved in libraries from Moscow to San Francisco are the only ones that have survived. Books printed or produced by hand in Japan have, therefore, to be sought outside Japan as well as within, for the literary patrimony of Japan is not confined to Japanese shores, however much that might now be regretted by those of nationalistic persuasion.

There is yet another sense in which too much focus on Japan can lead to distortion. Throughout the entire history of books in Japan the transmission of texts across the seas has been of crucial importance. The history of the book in Japan must, therefore, include the importation of books from China, from Korea and, from the sixteenth century onwards, from Europe. Some, but not all, of these books were transformed in Japan into new texts, as mentioned above, while others circulated in manuscript or in the printed form in which they arrived. But for the transmission of texts in this way, the transplantation to Japanese soil of Chinese Buddhism, of Confucianism and the other intellectual traditions of China and Korea, and of Western

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² Edgren 1980: 5 #10, 89 #263, 343 #1068.
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medicine and astronomy, could not have taken place. Further, it would be mistaken to conceive of Japan as merely a passive receiver in this process. In the first place ‘passive’ is the wrong word, for a process of active selection was at work. In the second place, it is abundantly clear that Japan also acted as a transmitter, exporting texts overseas, and this is important irrespective of the reception accorded to those texts, for it is expressive of a desire to transmit and to participate in the learned culture of East Asia.

In several important respects, therefore, the history of the book in Japan has to take account of the international context of book production in Japan, which owed much to parallel developments in China and Korea, and of the multiculturalism of pre-modern Japan in which Japanese literary and cultural production was balanced by a leaning towards that of China, particularly the Confucian classics and the fiction of the Ming dynasty, and later towards that of Europe. As Gavan McCormack has recently argued, the prominence of the slogan ‘kokusaika’ (internationalization) since the eighties has not engendered any significant internal transformations in Japanese society or shifts in the interpretation and presentation of Japan’s past. Yet books, and the bookish culture they represent, cannot be adequately situated in Japan’s past unless the conventional vision of Japan as a monocultural society and the ideology of Japanese homogeneity are recognised as the distortions that they are.3

As in other societies, it has been customary for discussions of the book in Japan to omit certain categories of publication, particularly those emanating from the commercial press in Tokugawa Japan. Examples include printed ephemera, which are revealing of the outreach of print and the penetration of literacy; commercial reprints of classical literature, which are ignored because they have nothing to contribute to the textual tradition, even though they have much to tell us about the circulation and marketing of the classics in the Tokugawa period; and commercial maps, because many have little to add to cartographic knowledge, though they are important for what they reveal of perceptions and demarcations of space. These all deserve fuller treatment than it is possible to give them here, but they

are an important component of the thick texture of print culture in the Tokugawa period, which reached a level of penetration that was matched in few other societies in the nineteenth century.

It is obvious that there can be no precise starting point to a history of the book in Japan, since we are never likely to know when the first books were imported from the Korean kingdoms and China. The problem, then, is where to conclude this history. The book is very much alive in Japan today, in spite of the development of electronic media, and the publishing industry still produces a prodigious number of new titles every year. In that sense the history of the book is seamless and any break must be acknowledged to be an arbitrary one. How can we separate the contemporary publishing industry from that of the early nineteenth century, or from earlier periods, without distorting the picture?

A strong argument could be made for resorting to 1600 as a boundary marker. Before 1600 there was no publishing industry to speak of and quantities of books printed were small. After the imposition of the Pax Tokugawa and the sponsorship of printing by Tokugawa Ieyasu, however, a commercial publishing industry grew to maturity in Kyoto in a remarkably short space of time and transformed the production and consumption of books. The marriage of commerce and books, then, starts around the year 1600 and continues to the present day. Commerce, however, is not all there is to the history of the book in Tokugawa Japan, and there are also important continuities between the Tokugawa period and what came before it, such as the dissemination of Chinese books.

The dividing line that has been borrowed to mark off the ‘modern’ on so many occasions in many different fields is the year 1868, the year in which the Tokugawa Bakufu collapsed and the Meiji Restoration launched the Meiji period: the year in which Japan is supposed to have suddenly become ‘modern’. It goes without saying that this is completely arbitrary in fields other than politics, as well as highly unsatisfactory for our purposes here. Nevertheless, it continues to be used in literary and historical studies; 1868 is the cut-off year for entries in Kokusho sōmokuroku and its sequel, and numerous studies of the book start or finish around that year. What is wrong with that is that it is difficult to determine what of importance changed in the Meiji period.

Western books, for one, were not new to Meiji Japan. As chapter
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seven shows, Western books had been making an impact on Japan since the early eighteenth century, and after the ‘opening’ of Japan in the 1850s had become more easily available and in a variety of languages. It is true that the supply increased and the market grew after 1868, but there is no dramatic shift to be identified here. What of printing, then? Woodblock printing continued to dominate the printing industry for more than ten years after the Restoration and only gave way to metallic movable type and steam presses around 1890. And in any case movable type was not new to Meiji Japan either, for it was extensively used in the early seventeenth century and was becoming more widely used again in the middle of the nineteenth century. The shift from manual printing to the steam press was a dramatic one, but that did not happen in 1868 or even early in the Meiji period. Furthermore, the tastes of readers, far from undergoing any sudden transformation, remained wedded to the recent literature of the late Tokugawa period: this is as true of intellectuals as it is of the ‘common reader’. There are, then, strong continuities between the late Tokugawa and Meiji periods that need to be addressed.

This is not to say that the new technologies and intellectual orientations did not make a difference, simply that the changes in book production and the new intellectual climate of Meiji Japan were far slower to take effect than is commonly appreciated. By 1900 books, and the products of the newly emergent periodical press, were vastly different in technologies of production and in appearance from anything that had been available in 1800, and more closely involved with the state and the holders of political power; they also pose quite different sorts of bibliographic problems. There is some sense, then, in detaching the output of the capital-intensive publishing industry of the twentieth century from that of earlier centuries and less industrialized conditions of production, but in response to the powerful continuities that cannot be ignored I have resorted to a fuzzy boundary in this book. It will therefore overspill the Tokugawa period, but by an indeterminate amount which will vary from chapter to chapter. In the case of censorship there is a clear shift in the institutions responsible for supervising publications in the early Meiji period, but some of the principles do not change so quickly and furthermore the exercise of censorship in those years reveals by contrast how much more severe the censorship system in the Tokugawa period could have been. In similar ways, in each chapter something,
I feel, has been gained by crossing that tyrannical year 1868 and examining the developments of the early Meiji period. The modern publishing industry, however, in its capital-intensive, technologically-sophisticated and market-oriented variety is now far removed from its roots in the nineteenth century and must be the subject of a separate study.