What does “Literature of Correspondence” Mean?
An Examination of the Japanese Genre Term ōraimono and its History

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Introduction

In the following pages we search for the origins and development of the genre term ōraimono in Japanese history. With reference to the original meaning of the word ōrai, we may expect style—or etiquette—related information for ‘correspondence’ or ‘a thing which is sent’ (epistle). This may also include writings which use the style of letters or written communication for a purpose other than letter-writing. However, in general the modern term ōraimono means much more than that: educational literature used in lessons at home or at school as can be seen in early compilations, such as Okamura Kintarō’s (1867–1924), but also in modern editions by Ishikawa Ken and Ishikawa Matsutarō.1

Starting with current articles as well as encyclopaedias, the term is broadly used in the sense of booklets for calligraphy, writing, or copying. Copying served not only to train vocabulary, orthography, and phrases, but also moral and elementary skills and subjects. The pupils are imagined mainly to be Early Modern schoolchildren in temples. Indeed there existed a wide range of educational materials for children, but for what reason are they called ōraimono?

This question rises since there exist a number of words researchers use instead: tenaraibon 手習本 (models for hand writing), the modern kyōkasho 教科書 (writings for teaching), and others. The word ōrai, meaning “to go and to come”, is also applied for “giving and taking [presents]” in the Chinese classics. It seems that the term from early times on also had the meaning of “to say and to respond” (c. yanwu; j. gengo 言語) or “to ask and to answer/

1 Ōraimono bunruī mokuroku, ed. Okamura Kintarō (Keimōkai Jimusho, 1925); Ōraimono taikai, ed. Ishikawa Matsutarō (Ōzorasha, 1992–94); Ishikawa Ken, Koōrai ni tsuite no kenkyū—jōsei, chūsei ni okeru shotō kyōkasho no hattatsu (Kōdansha, 1949); Ishikawa Ken, Nihon sho-min kyōikushi (Tamagawa daigaku shuppanbu, 1972); Ishikawa Matsutarō Ōraimono no seiritsu to hatten (Yūshōdō shuppan, 1988).
explain” (c. wenda; j. mondo 問答) and thus is related to a wide spectrum of communication between teacher and adepts, parents and children, and priests and monks.

Here we have to raise the question why ‘correspondence literature’ is used to fix this scheme of comprehension. There is also a need for discussion or clear definition of what kind of literature can or should be termed sub voce “correspondence”. In premodern times it definitely does not apply to all kinds of transmission material, textbooks and educational writings.

Premodern Manuals and Their Titles

Chinese Forerunners

To start with, let us look at its Chinese forerunners. According to the Book of Rites (Liji; j. Raiki), young children were to be educated early in the skills of writing and calculating as well as in the “[written language of] tablets and unsophisticated oration” (qingyi jianliang; j. kanryō o seii su 請肄簡諒) at the age of ten. Unsophisticated oration included the idea of “salutation and response” (yanyu zhi mei, j. gengo no bi 言語之美), which is the verbal facet of the “rites” in their general meaning of “going and coming” or “give and take” (li shang wanglai; j. rei wa nao ōrai nari 禮尚往來). Here the term in question appears for the first time in the classics. In Chinese classical literature on rites educated men were thus admonished (jiao; j. kyō/oshiu 敎) to be diligent when talking and giving answers.

A high number of didactic writings demonstrate that there was a remarkable demand for learning according to this principle. Many of these materials used in the Song, Tang, and Sui Dynasties are listed up in Chinese annalistic records like Suishu 随書, Jiu Tangshu 旧唐書, and Xin Tangshu 新唐書. Some of these manuals have survived, some in Chinese and Japanese libraries, others among the Dunhuang documents. Common titles were “writing paradigms” (shuyi; j. shogi 書儀), “paragons for the months” (yueyi; j. getsugi 月儀),

3 Liji, 126a, l. 19; Couvreur, Li Ki, vol. 2.1, 11.