David B. Lurie


On September 19, 2013, the Educational Council of Nomi City, Ishikawa Prefecture, announced that, thirty-six years after it had been unearthed from the Matsujiyama tumulus, scratch marks on a late fifth-century ceremonial earthenware pot (*sueki* 須恵器) had been identified as graphs. This finding made the pot Japan’s oldest inscribed piece of earthenware and attested once more to the early, albeit narrow, spread of writing outside Japan’s ancient cultural centers (*Asahi shinbun*, September 20, 2013). The three characters on the pot and the council’s press release illustrate the insights of the first half of David Lurie’s new and groundbreaking book, *Realms of writing*.

Lurie’s book treats two connected relationships with regards to early Japan (the first through eighth centuries): writing and power, and writing and language. Both subjects are fascinating in their own right, but Lurie proposes them as two outer ends on the scale of functions that writing has. The first part, entitled ‘Literacy and power’, consists of chapters 1 through 3 and traces the history of writing in Japan until some point in the mid-seventh century when Japan witnessed a veritable explosion of literacy. The best visible traces of this explosion are the archaeological finds of enormous numbers of *mok–kan* 木簡, wooden tablets that bear inscriptions of various kinds. Chapter one, ‘Shards of writing’, explores what writing means in a society that has had no contact with it and how to understand the nature of literacy. A central concept here is ‘alegibility’, indicating that graphs are seen but not read. In fact, being read is not the main goal of script in the early stages of writing; rather script had a ceremonial and religious role and its function was primarily to communicate relations of authority and potency. (pp. 63-66) Alegibility as a ‘primary or fundamental form of literacy’ is taken up further in Chapter two, ‘Kings who did not read’. The existence of scribes working for kings does not seriously alter the almost exclusively ceremonial use of writing in the first through sixth centuries. It is Chapter three, ‘A world dense with writing’, that marks the extraordinary change in seventh-century Japan, when within the span of about five decades the Japanese kingdom became peopled with a rapidly growing number of active users of writing. Although writing did not lose its ceremonial value in the seventh and eight centuries, writing now also assumed a more directly utilitarian function of, for example, record keeping. Lurie emphasizes that these different roles and appreciations of writing intersected to a high degree, hinting at the complexity of expanding literacies in this period. The main explanation for the rapid expansion of writing in the seventh and eighth
centuries ultimately is the increased complexity of state organization with an expanding bureaucracy. Histories of writing often point out that writing makes possible complex forms of social organization; Asuka and Nara Japan prove that point once more.

The second part of Lurie’s book is called ‘Writing and language’. This part is less the continuation of a chronological history than an exploration of how people in seventh- and eighth-century Japan used graphs to express language. ‘Language’ in Lurie’s case ultimately means Japanese (or more properly, I suppose, Old Japanese) and the main quibble I might have with this rich and ambitious book is that in this respect it seems not ambitious enough. Below I will try to explain why.

Chapters five, ‘Governing in prose’, and six, ‘The poetry of writing’, deal with three major texts of the eighth century: the histories Kojiki (712) and Nihon shoki (720) and the poetry anthology Man’yōshū (mid-eighth century). The stereotype labels tag Kojiki as (in) ‘Japanese’ (and indeed it is an important source for our knowledge of Old Japanese) and Nihon shoki as (in) ‘Chinese.’ Lurie’s innovative reading of the latter text especially posits that it, too, relied on a form of translation called kundoku as a mode of text production; in other words, differences between these two early histories are not so clear-cut. A kundoku reading of Nihon shoki, suggested chiefly by its reading notes, implies a ‘local’ reading, making this text a history for readers with Japanese-language competence. The chapter on the inscription styles of Man’yōshū reveals a heady amalgam of potential ways to record the Japanese language, incidentally demonstrating that there is not one, but many types of man’yōgana, the precursors of the later syllabary system. Confronted with this diversity Lurie observes: ‘In the abstract, it is clear that radically different principles of inscribing Japanese coexisted from the mid-seventh century on, but in practice there were generally strong links between particular styles and particular contexts of content. . . . This diversity depends on . . . the contrast between phonography and logography. . . . “Efficiency” and “clarity” are local rather than transcendent values, . . . in certain contexts, variety and multiplicity themselves are valuable. This simple insight leads to a radical reappraisal of the overall history of writing in Japan, and beyond that of writing in general.’ (pp. 259-260)

The concluding chapter, ‘Japan and the history of writing’, is a welcome overview and analysis of the existing debates on writing in East Asia and elsewhere. It is especially rich in its argument that ‘no aspect of the writing system used in Japan was a priori foreign to the language or the culture, no matter what its origins or formal similarity to graphs used to write other languages’. (p. 333) That this was so has everything to do with the concept of kundoku.