Introduction

In the world history of writing, Japan presents an unusually detailed record of a transition to literacy. Extant sources attest to the social, cultural, and political contexts and consequences of the advent of writing and reading, beginning with the earliest appearance of imported artifacts inscribed with Chinese characters in the first century BCE. The first texts produced within the Japanese archipelago date to the fifth century, whereas the emergence of widespread literacies and the simultaneous rise of a full-fledged state took place in the seventh and eighth centuries. These developments are of obvious importance for the study of Japanese history and literature, and for the history of writing in the broader cultural sphere of East Asia, but their implications extend far beyond those fields. Deeper understanding of early Japanese inscription will transform comparative discussions of literacy and reading practices, and remake our sense of the wider patterns of the world history of writing systems.

The early Japanese experience provides new perspectives on such crucial topics as the importance of ‘unread’ texts, the pragmatic contexts and varied natures of multiple simultaneous literacies, the relations between languages and systems of inscription, and the aesthetic dimensions of writing. Comparative studies of the place of writing in early societies often focus on the great scenes of invention (Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, Mesoamerica), but adaptation of an existing system has been a much more common advent of writing. Such adaptation has been conceptualized in largely alphabetic terms, and here as well attention to
the non-alphabetic context of early Japan provides an essential corrective. This study is, first and foremost, a history of writing in early Japan, but as the subtitle suggests, it also aims to rethink the wider history of writing in general.

The question of the first appearance of writing in the Japanese archipelago is an unexpectedly vexing one—not because of a paucity of sources, but rather because it is difficult to determine what it means to say that writing begins at a certain point. Pioneering and provocative work by theorists of a “Great Divide” drew attention to the social, cultural, and even psychological consequences of literacy, but subsequent critiques and counterarguments have called into question any straightforward opposition between ‘orality’ and ‘literacy.’ Just as the purported homogeneity of societies without writing has been denied, those in which it is present are increasingly seen as marked by a heterogeneous mix of differing relationships with texts. Such relationships are better described as plural literacies rather than as a singular literacy. This study starts with phenomena often dismissed as adjacent to ‘true literacy’: the use of written materials for such purposes as symbolizing social distinctions, political authority, or magical power. I describe such relations to texts as “alegible” rather than “illegible” because of the impossibility of establishing historically that a given text was not ‘read’ in our usual sense, but also because such relations do not necessarily precede or negate the ‘legible’ variety. (In ‘legible reading’ texts are closely coordinated with particular forms of language and integrated into patterns of human interaction that determine and are determined by changes in those linguistic forms.)

The earliest written artifacts found in the Japanese archipelago date back to the first century BCE or so: Chinese coins and mirrors with short inscriptions. The placement of these objects in tombs, and the emergence of artifacts with brief, haltingly incised marks that seem to be derived from such inscriptions, suggest that writing served as a significant pattern denoting status or promising magical effects independently of the potential linguistic ‘content’ of the texts themselves. This is dramatized by the emergence, in the third and fourth centuries CE, of domestically produced mirrors bearing hopelessly garbled copies of imported inscriptions or even incomprehensible writing-like patterns that modern scholars call “pseudo-inscriptions.” Such items are often
interpreted as signs of a preliterate society, but rather than fitting them into a narrative of orality followed by literacy, we should note that the readability of a text was simply not the major issue in the contexts in which those artifacts were being produced and employed. The role of the ‘unread’ at this early stage in the history of Japanese writing draws attention to the continuing importance of this class of relations to texts, even in contexts that also involve widespread acts of reading in the familiar sense. Such coexistence, which occurs worldwide in both pre-modern and modern contexts, involves familiar phenomena such as the use of graphs in amulets or logos, the magical power or social cachet of illegible inscriptions (whether in ancient books or on contemporary T-shirts and tattoos), and the aesthetic dimensions of writing considered as calligraphy or typography.

In Japan, there are instances from the fifth century CE of inscriptions written on swords by scribes from the Korean peninsula, but despite their legible content (describing relationships of fealty and patronage between central kings and local elites), the nature of these artifacts and the contexts in which they have been excavated suggest little change in the function of writing. It is not until the seventh century that we see unmistakable signs of the emergence of newly instrumental literacies. Traditionally, this transition has been linked to the spread of Mahayana Buddhism, a text-based faith centered on vast numbers of sutras, commentaries, and treatises translated into or originally written in Chinese. Eighth-century historical sources date the transmission of Buddhism to the Japanese court to the mid-sixth century, and traditional hagiographic accounts depict the early seventh century as a period of burgeoning religious literacy.

However, in recent years the authenticity or reliability of many of these sources has been called into question, and archaeology has revealed burgeoning quantities of economic and administrative documents beginning in the middle of the seventh century, with few signs of widespread writing and reading beforehand. This situation has obvious relevance to a long-standing problem in the world history of writing: the question of whether writing first developed (or was adopted) for religious or for administrative purposes. Even more importantly, the explosion of written material in seventh-century Japan, while obviously intimately linked to the concomitant process of state-formation, is strik-
ingly varied in terms of content, style, and media. Rather than a uniform transition from orality to literacy, these materials reveal different modes of writing appearing around the same time and coexisting in a variety of configurations. Attention to this variety yields a vision of different realms of literacy; indeed, the most pressing problem in this context is not that of religious versus administrative use, or of oral versus literate culture, but rather of whether, and to what extent, we can argue for a unified history of writing at all when different social groups are simultaneously using texts in radically different ways.

Especially in the context of traditional East Asia, where the dominant writing system is so different from the Western alphabet, discussion of the foregoing issues has usually been framed by notions of ‘efficiency’ and ‘ease of use,’ with the underlying assumption being that ‘true’ or ‘full’ literacy is impossible without a phonographic system comprising only a few dozen signs. For this reason, consideration of the history of Japanese writing has focused overwhelmingly on the emergence, from the ninth century onward, of graphically distinctive phonograph signs (ancestors of the modern *kana* syllabaries). Such an emphasis obscures the technical variety and sophistication of earlier systems as well as the extent of their application in everyday contexts of bureaucratic administration and record-keeping. Considering both the pragmatic contexts of such early written artifacts and the striking discontinuities among simultaneously existing realms of literacy, it is apparent that we must reevaluate notions of the overarching efficiency of particular writing systems, especially when those systems were the sole means of inscription available. It is also necessary to question links between the nature of those systems and the extent of putative ‘full’ or ‘partial’ forms of literacy.

Our sense of the process of adaptation of a writing system from one linguistic context to another turns out to be highly dependent on the alphabet. Scholars of writing do acknowledge the profound structural differences between primarily phonographic systems of writing—such as the Roman alphabet, Semitic scripts like Arabic and Hebrew, the Indian Devanagari script, and the Korean alphabet—and those systems that rely heavily on logographs (signs for words or parts of words), such as the earlier cuneiform script, Egyptian hieroglyphs, Chinese characters, and Mayan glyphs. However, discussions of how the latter systems were adapted to write new, unrelated languages tend to emphasize the im-
Importance of the phonographic transcription of the sounds of those languages, in many cases unconsciously modeling that process on the relationship between texts in languages transcribed by the alphabet—for example, between English and French or German. It is true that phonographic transcription (and ensuing adaptation or invention of graphs and diacritics) plays an important role in the movement of writing systems to new linguistic contexts. Moreover, I have no intention of denying that the development of phonographic writing is an important process that recurred independently in disparate contexts. However, historians of writing should do more to avoid teleological assumptions about progress towards phonography, assumptions that are often implicitly linked to claims about the (Greek) alphabet as a guarantor of cultural superiority.

The relevance of early Japanese writing to these issues is immediately apparent once we survey the technical dimensions of the aforementioned development of multiple literacies in the seventh century. The adaptation of Chinese characters to write the Japanese language is often described in phonographic terms: characters that represented Chinese words were associated with Japanese syllables that had pronunciations similar to the original words. This kind of adaptation did play a major role, but a different approach to writing was more important. Characters that represented Chinese words were associated with Japanese words that had similar meanings, and entire texts written in accord with Chinese vocabulary and syntax were vocally rearranged and read off as Japanese texts, in a process traditionally known as *kundoku* (literally, “reading by gloss”). This process, which combines reading and translation into a single integrated act, could be used to produce new texts as well as to comprehend existing ones. Rather than phonographic transcription, it was this method of reading/writing that dominated all modes of literacy in early Japan, from at least the mid-seventh century on. This means that we cannot describe texts arranged in accordance with Chinese vocabulary and syntax as being written ‘in Chinese’ (no matter what their origins), a conclusion that has profound implications for Japanese cultural history, which has been framed by a linguistic opposition between Chinese and Japanese.

Furthermore, although lack of surviving material still precludes an equally detailed understanding of the situation in early Korea, it is almost certain that this method of reading/writing was pioneered by scribes in
the sixth-century Korean states and then brought to the Japanese archipelago, which further expands the range of languages linked to the Chinese writing system at the time of its arrival there. Referring to ‘Chinese characters’ or ‘the Chinese writing system’ acknowledges the historical origin of that system in China (by the thirteenth century BCE), but a broader perspective on its subsequent use for writing and reading in multiple non-Chinese languages might lead to the adaptation of another term, such as ‘East Asian writing system.’ (Similar phenomena of adaptation appear later on in Vietnam, and also in central Asia, though the latter were comparatively short-lived.) Beyond this new vision of the history of writing in East Asia, it is also important to emphasize commonalities with phenomena in very different contexts, such as cuneiform graphs for Sumerian words being given Akkadian readings, or even the use of phonographically written Aramaic words as unit signs for linguistically unrelated Middle Persian words. Consideration of early Japanese writing and reading systems in such a comparative context threatens widely held assumptions about the place of phonographic adaptation in the world history of writing.

Another significant aspect of writing in early Japan was the variety of aesthetic effects that it enabled. Discussion of the aesthetics of inscription has been largely limited to calligraphy (and the related field of typography), where artistic play with graphs involves types of expression, free from all but the formal requirements of legibility, that have been compared to those found in music or abstract art. Connections between the linguistic ‘content’ of the text and its calligraphic expression are possible (synaesthetic and conventional though they often are), but calligraphy fits into the aforementioned rubric of alegibility: uses of texts in which their reading is largely or entirely incidental. However, early Japanese literary texts written in the aftermath of the seventh-century expansion of literacies also exhibit another, very different aesthetic dimension. In both prose and poetry, authors or scribes frequently manipulate the links among Japanese words, the graphs used to write them, and the associations of those graphs in Chinese literary texts.

In early historical writings (the eighth-century Kojiki 古事記 and Nihon shoki 日本書紀), stylistic differences resulting from this sort of manipulation are intimately related to contrasting strategies for legitimizing the new state and the recently emerged sovereigns who ruled it. In the
Man'yōshū 萬葉集 ("Collection of Ten Thousand Ages"), a late eighth-century poetry anthology, this kind of manipulation becomes a major mode of expression, to the point where it often pushes the reading/writing system to the brink of incomprehensibility. Where calligraphy can be seen as external to the linguistic functioning of writing, these uses of graphs involve internal aesthetic effects. Such effects are by no means unique to early Japan: interplay between words and the graphs that inscribe them persists in Japanese literature of subsequent eras, and similar uses of writing are apparent in such Chinese practices as the selection of semantically appealing or pejorative characters for the phonographic transcription of non-Chinese words. Outside of East Asia, there are parallels in controversies over spelling reform, which often involve the aesthetic sensitivities of literate individuals exposed to mistakenly or unconventionally spelled words.

Bringing a richer account of early Japan into contact with the world history of writing sheds light on both areas of study, but this interaction is not a simple matter of ‘applying’ theoretical perspectives to a collection of sources, or of using empirical data to complicate an abstract model. Because writing was such a fundamental part of the political and cultural transformations that took place in the Japanese archipelago during the first millennium CE, a clearer grasp of the comparative dimensions of literacy and script development illuminates not only what we make of sources, but also what we have conceptualized as sources in the first place. In the comparative history of writing and literacy, the specifics of the Japanese experience call into question a number of still-influential assumptions, affecting both overarching accounts of the historical development of inscription and also more technical discussions of the relations between script and language.

This book is divided into two parts. The first, “Literacy and Power,” considers the development of multiple literacies, their interaction with the diverse material bases of writing, and the overarching political significance of writing as both a vehicle for and a reflection of temporal power. This part moves in roughly chronological order from the appearance of initial fragmentary graphs around the first century CE, through the emergence of a handful of domestic inscriptions in the fifth century,
to the rapid expansion of widespread writing and complex literacies in multiple media during the seventh and eighth centuries.

Chapter 1 ("Shards of Writing?") surveys the earliest evidence of the presence of writing in the Japanese archipelago, during the first several centuries CE. Such evidence consists of brief inscriptions on imported artifacts such as coins and mirrors, but also of writing-like marks domestically incised or painted on potsherds and other durable media. Such early items make sense as starting points for a survey of Japanese inscription, but they also provide an opportunity to address fundamental theoretical and methodological issues, and so this chapter also introduces the book’s approach to basic questions of the nature of writing and literacy. The underlying argument is that thinking in terms of multiple, heterogeneous literacies helps us to understand not only early fragments, but the entirety of the history of Japanese inscription. This approach also provides a way of avoiding some of the more difficult problems connected with defining what writing is and how it has been (or should be) related to spoken language. Ultimately how writing is defined matters less than how thoroughly we take into account the full range of receptions and appropriations of texts and inscribed artifacts.

A different kind of ‘beginning’ is explored in Chapter 2 ("Kings Who Did Not Read"), which takes up the links between a corpus of longer and better preserved inscriptions and the political changes that occurred in the Japanese archipelago as more powerful rulers emerged and interacted with kings and emperors in Korea and China. Just as the central imperial bureaucracy depended on written reports, records, and proclamations, traditional Chinese diplomacy used texts for detailed communication, as well as for symbolic expression of the dominance and legitimacy of the emperor and the submission of peripheral rulers. Such symbolism is most vividly exemplified by the seals that were used as insignia of the ranks with which ‘barbarian’ potentates were invested by the emperor, but mirrors and swords were also important media for the expression of authority through writing. Surveying the major surviving inscriptions from the first through sixth centuries CE, this chapter shows how this political mode of writing was adopted for communication between Korean rulers and the Yamato kings of the archipelago, and then taken up by those kings themselves as a means of expressing their own power and their relations with vassals and subordinate allies.
Despite these developments, writing remained a rare and largely ‘opaque’ medium: it was monopolized by scribes of Korean origin who were controlled by the kings, and there is little evidence that much ‘reading’ occurred.

Chapter 3 (“A World Dense with Writing”) shows how dramatically this situation changed in the mid-seventh century. Tracing the rapid emergence over a few decades of new media and new forms of written communication, most prominently wooden tablets known as mokkan 木簡, it argues that this transformation was the result of complex interactions among domestic political developments and foreign pressures connected with the rise of the Sui and Tang dynasties and the wars on the Korean peninsula that led to its unification by the state of Silla. Buddhism played an important role, but contrary to traditional accounts of this period, it cannot be seen as the determining factor in the expansion of new forms of literacy, not least because it itself incorporates a range of relations to writing, many of them just as ‘alegible’ as those predating the arrival of the new faith. By surveying the variety of media and modes of inscription that resulted from this seventh-century transformation, this chapter shows the diversity and complexity of early practices of writing and literacy, some tightly linked together, others largely separate in their functioning and social contexts.

The second part of the book, “Writing and Language,” turns to the internal workings of writing, focusing in particular on the complex interactions between spoken languages and inscription. Central to this part, and to the entire book, is a discussion of kundoku, the system of logographic reading and writing that drove the seventh- and eighth-century expansion of literacies, and that has remained fundamental to Japanese writing until the present day. This discussion lays the groundwork for more detailed consideration of written style and its implications, as embodied in the three great classics of eighth-century Japan, and it also provides the point of departure for the book’s concluding consideration of broader themes in the history of writing.

Chapter 4 (“Kundoku”) contains, or supports, most of the core arguments of this book. Beginning with a survey of the linguistic differences between Chinese and Japanese, it explains how kundoku serves as a method of reading and writing logographic texts. Individual characters are associated with Japanese words that have similar meanings to
the Chinese words originally written by those characters, and then sen-
tences are rearranged in reading to conform to Japanese grammar. The
resulting practice, which combines aspects of reading and of transla-
tion, was central to Japanese inscription from the eighth through nine-
teenth centuries, but evidence from mokkan and other sources shows
that it had much earlier origins: it was present in Japan from the be-
ginning of the seventh-century expansion of literacy, and can almost
certainly be traced back to techniques used in the Korean states as early
as the sixth century. Given how widespread the practice was, it is im-
possible to distinguish between Chinese and Japanese writing in early
Japan. Regardless of how thoroughly a text might conform to literary
Chinese style and usage, it could potentially be read in Japanese (or
Korean) rather than Chinese. Kundoku was also used to generate new
texts as well as to read existing ones. The chapter shows that the re-
sulting variety of inscription was a matter more of stylistic than of lin-
guistic difference, and argues that this realization yields a much more
subtle and convincing picture of the history of early Japanese writing.

Though they cannot be conceptualized in terms of writing in differ-
ent languages, there are profound stylistic contrasts among early Japa-
nese works. Chapter 5 (“Governing in Prose”) addresses these con-
trasts by comparing two sets of parallel texts. An introductory section
discusses the juxtaposition of continental precedents and local innova-
tions in short dedicatory inscriptions from the prominent early temple
Hōryū-ji 法隆寺, but the bulk of the chapter is devoted to the different
written styles of the two eighth-century histories: the Kojiki (712) and
Nihon shoki (720). Once kundoku is taken into account, much that was
confusing about the differences between these works becomes clear.
The prose of the Kojiki is largely logographic, and like mokkan and other
quotidian writings it uses a mixture of Chinese and Japanese syntactical
order; but because the work was clearly meant to be read through kun-
doku, this does not mean that it involves a mix of the Chinese and Japa-
nese languages. On the other hand, the logographic prose of the Nihon
shoki is consistent with literary Chinese usage and style, but it was
not necessarily meant to be read ‘as Chinese.’ In both cases the nature
of the works is clarified by original interpolated notes that specify kun-
doku readings. In place of a linguistic distinction, the chapter argues that
these works employ contrasting styles. The Nihon shoki conforms to a
transregional textual standard, and thus relies on a universal source of written authority, whereas the Kojiki pioneers a local style whose authority stems from its departure from the transregional standard. A concluding look at senmyō 宣命, royal proclamations of the eighth century, shows how yet another style serves as a source of authority, in this case one closely linked to the voice of the sovereign.

Chapter 6 ("The Poetry of Writing") addresses the inscription of poetry and the place of phonography in early writing, especially in the enormous Man'yōshū. There has traditionally been a strong association between vernacular poetry (uta or waka) and phonographic writing, in which words are spelled out syllable by syllable with characters used for their sounds. It is true that the poems included in the histories and those found on seventh- and eighth-century mokkan are written in this manner, as is the vast majority of poetry from the ninth century onward. But that is not the case in the Man'yōshū. Although a significant minority of the works it contains is written phonographically, as a whole the anthology is dominated by logography. The central concern of this chapter is why the various logographic styles of the Man'yōshū were selected over phonographic alternatives. In addition to the inherent authority of that principle for writing, examination of the technical dimensions of the inscription of poetry reveals that logography—and more fundamentally, the coexistence of logography and phonography—enables a range of internal aesthetic and expressive effects. Moreover, many of these effects depend on the contexts provided by poems, individually and as parts of anthologies or other collections. In addition to providing a new perspective on the emergence of literary writings in the seventh and eighth centuries, this survey of the inscription of the Man'yōshū undermines many preoccupations of traditional histories of writing, which have generally assumed that variety and complexity—as well as logography itself—are inefficient and inferior to simple phonographic systems.

These criticisms are taken up and expanded in Chapter 7 ("Japan and the History of Writing"), which concludes the book with a discussion of the place of writing in the history of Japan and the place of Japan in the world history of writing. An opening section provides an epilogue, tracing the development of Japanese inscription from the ninth century until the present day. A major argument is that logography remained central even after the emergence of visually distinctive phonograph
scripts (Heian *kana*). This leads to a renewed consideration of the significance of *kundoku*, which shows it is impossible to conceptualize Japanese culture in terms of a linguistic opposition between Chinese and Japanese. Abandoning this “bilingual fallacy” is a prerequisite to understanding the real complexities of linguistic and textual difference in Japanese history. But *kundoku* has much broader implications: it inspires a reconsideration of the nature of the Chinese script and its place in the East Asian region. Chinese writing has always involved a mixture of logography and phonography, but the system—or rather, the system of systems—has taken on radically different forms at different times. The version adapted in Korea and Japan, which stabilized in China during the fourth and fifth centuries CE, included metalinguistic lexicographical and commentarial traditions that provided the matrix from which *kundoku* developed. The regional influence of Chinese writing has been conceptualized as a “character cultural sphere” or an “East Asian Latin.” Such formulations raise—but do not resolve—fundamental questions about the interaction of writing and culture. At a time when scholars of writing have largely abandoned assumptions about unilinear development toward increased phonography, the early Japanese experience surveyed in this book encourages us to question the notion of absolute differences in efficiency, and invites us to imagine a world history of writing less centered on the alphabet.