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Introduction: Languages in East and South Asia, 1000–1919

*Benjamin A. Elman*

Today, we still premise study of premodern East Asian languages on the stark dichotomy between “the classical” and “the vernacular.” Influenced by European models explaining the transition from Latin as a classical language to local vernaculars as indigenous, scholars of East Asian cultural history have tended to view classical/literary/Sinitic Chinese, on the one hand, and spoken/written vernaculars, on the other, as different languages that did not interact and developed along separate tracks. Peter Kornicki, while recognizing the problematic nature of doing so, has defined the term “vernacular” “to refer to locally spoken, and later written, languages like Korean, Japanese and Vietnamese, in contrast to literary Chinese, the written language that enjoyed high prestige and that spread throughout East Asia in the form of texts.”

Our “research cluster” (see below) considered new views of the classical versus vernacular dichotomy that are especially central to the new historiography of India. Based on recent Indian/South Asian findings, we examined alternative frameworks for understanding East Asian languages between 1000 and 1919. Using new sources, making new connections, and reexamining old assumptions, we have asked whether and why East Asian languages should be analyzed in light of a Eurocentric dichotomy. This discussion encouraged us to explore whether European modernity is an appropriate standard at all for East Asia. Individually and collectively, we have sought to establish linkages between societies without making a priori assumptions about the countries’ internal structures or the genealogy of their connections.

Recent scholarship, some of it presented at our workshops and at our November 2011 final conference, entitled “Asian Languages, Vernaculars, and Literacies,” has presented a strong challenge to earlier models for understanding early modern languages in East Asia. Following the lead of Sheldon Pollock,

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1 Sincere thanks and acknowledgments are due Daniel Barish (History), Yulia Frumer (History of Science), Magnus Ribbing Gren (East Asian Studies), and Bingyu Zheng (History), who as Princeton graduate student rapporteurs or commentators for our workshops and final conference prepared succinct summaries and penetrating critiques of our discussions. Each of them is a coauthor with me of this introductory chapter.

who described the spread of Sanskrit in ways often diametrically opposed to the history of Latin, Peter Kornicki, Wang Sixiang, John Phan, Haruo Shirane, Daniel Trambaio, Atsuko Ueda, Shang Wei, and myself present essays in this volume that in aggregate challenge accepted distinctions between classical and vernacular languages in East Asia. In so doing, this volume presents a new conceptual framework that recognizes that in East Asia the literary and vernacular registers historically interacted and influenced each other as part of a unified, if hybrid, language system that was mastered by Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and Vietnamese according to their own unique linguistic resources.

Pollock has shown how, despite their similarities as early modern cosmopolitan languages, Latin and Sanskrit had very different histories. Whereas Latin was disseminated by the military force of the Roman centralized state, Sanskrit spread instead through trade and religious activity in a more decentralized environment. In this way, Latin represented a “coercive cosmopolitanism” while Sanskrit typified a “voluntaristic cosmopolitanism.” A central concern emerging from our conference volume is the need to understand—but not reduce East Asian languages to—Pollock’s model of “voluntaristic cosmopolitanism and a vernacularism of accommodation, where very different principles are at work inviting affiliation to these cultural-political orders.” Rather than the “Latin of East Asia,” perhaps a closer analogy for classical Chinese might be Sanskrit.3

We first met in fall 2008 as a “research cluster” under the auspices of the Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies and the East Asian Studies Program. At two “brainstorming sessions” in fall 2008 and 2009, we compared and contrasted how people in East and South Asia used languages. We also discussed the historical conditions under which Asian languages changed. We hoped to fathom in a non-Eurocentric way how and why aristocrats, warriors, officials, scholars, physicians, Buddhists, and teachers, who shared a “cosmopolitan-like” classical language originally from China, were able to forge an East Asian education revolution, circa 1500–1800, for elites, commoners, and women. A precocious, “early modern–like” woodblock print revolution that began in Song China (960–1280)—three centuries before Europe—and slowly expanded to Chosŏn Korea (1392–1910) and Tokugawa Japan (1600–1867) was certainly an important enabling factor.4

Our focus initially was on East and Central Asia after 1000 CE, with precolonial India as a parallel example. Our “nested” research groups included two core groups from Princeton and Columbia, who could meet frequently enough

3 Pollock 2000, 596.
to study historical connections between regions, thus yielding more interesting results than a purely comparative methodology. We asked ourselves in what ways consideration of parallel issues in Central Asia and Japan, Korea, and Vietnam in the “early modern” period, 1500–1800, might enhance our understanding of language processes in China and India. We also queried whether “early modern” was an appropriate chronology to apply to our findings.

When Sheldon Pollock addressed the group in fall 2008, he focused on the case of Sanskrit, which at first glance appeared to be a “classical language” that paralleled Latin in Europe. Nevertheless, Sanskrit differed from Latin because its expansion was facilitated by local conscious decisions to have a homogeneous language for cultural purposes, rather than by warfare and conquest. Furthermore, unlike in early modern Europe, the infiltration of local languages into the so-called higher culture of Indian classical languages was motivated neither by power struggles nor by appeals to nationalism. Could East Asian languages before 1800 be understood in this sense? If so, then literary practices in East and South Asia could not be described as “early modern” in the European sense. Nor would an “early modern” methodological framework based on the “rise of the West” adequately explain the processes by which local languages came into the public domain and successfully competed with the literary traditions of Sanskrit in South Asia and classical Chinese in East Asia.

Simplifying it greatly vis-à-vis Latin and Sanskrit, the East Asian case of a “cosmopolitan language” uniquely had a single center and centrifugal flows of classical Chinese texts, in contrast to the European and Indian cases of multipolar flows of texts and languages. This difference is not a major part of all the essays presented in this volume, but it means that this introduction has to be clear about the issues at stake in the comparisons between East and South Asia in light of what Pollock called “cosmopolitanism.” Some authors at our final conference in fall 2011 used “classical versus vernacular(s)” rather than “cosmopolitan versus vernacular(s)” to make their points, but the former also has its problems because Heian Japanese circa 800–1200 may have been a “vernacular” vis-à-vis classical Chinese in Japan (kanbun 漢文), for instance, but it attained its own “classical” voice in Japanese later, in the Tokugawa period. We have tried to explain the similarities and differences in East Asia relative to the European and Indian cases.

In this volume, we expand on our current knowledge of premodern East and South Asian intellectual and cultural history to globalize the centrality of classical languages and vernaculars in Asian daily life. Can we prepare ourselves and our graduate students to envision a cultural history in comparative terms, which will match and improve on the globalized work accomplished by
economic historians. Rather than just “follow the money,” can’t we impartially measure the “velocities” of local languages as “linguistic currencies,” when they were exchanged/translated daily for classical educations, religion, art, literature, science, philology, antiquities, and so on.

The value of our dialogue among scholars and students working on different regions was immediately demonstrated by a brief conversation that occurred on the first day of our 2011 conference and that concerned the role of printing in shaping “early modern” European and Chinese cultures and languages but not those of India. Many scholars of European and East Asian history have tended to grant printing technologies a profound role in shaping cultural developments. We see many of the same developments in South Asia and Japan before 1650, however, in the absence of any extensive use of printing, suggesting that the importance of printing in the European and Chinese cases may be either overstated or misinterpreted. Printing empowered languages, but it did not decide their raison d’être. Meetings of specialists working on these different regions have allowed us to refine our insights into the history of our own regions without necessarily—and preemptively—subsuming them into broadly comparative or theoretical models.

The ambitious goal that we set for our workshops was to come up with a new research methodology, detached from the teleological tendencies of Asianists to draw on the European model, on the one hand, and remaining sensitive to issues specific to broader East Asian perspectives, on the other. The core issue that was echoed in most of our discussions was the need to come up with an alternative that would go beyond the classical/vernacular dichotomy and thus be more reflective of the actual uses of languages rather than subsuming them under the general story line of the rise of vernaculars in emerging nation-states. Our comparative approach allowed us to focus on Central, East, and South Asia in order to learn about how the local uses of spoken and written languages were related to the cosmopolitan classics written in Chinese script but also pronounced using local dialects.

The difference between the European case and that of East Asia continued to be the main theme when we discussed how languages traveled. Classical Chinese, for example, became dissociated from its geographical origins and was increasingly identified as a literary language in Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and the Ryukyus. Moreover, classical Chinese traveled mainly in a written form, so

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5 Pomeranz and Topik 1999.
7 The essays in Brokaw and Chow 2005 present printing in “late imperial” China as intellectually determinative. See the caveats in Elman 2001, 178–207.
that the term “lingua franca,” which implies verbal communication, can be applied only to its written place in East Asia. Another important point that should be taken into account when talking about the scope of East Asian literacies is the scale of expansion, in both geographic and demographic terms. As in India, even when a language appeared to travel among a small percentage of people in East Asia, that percentage translated into an aggregate number of millions of people who shared a spoken or written language.

One of our conference discussants, Constanze Güthenke, who comes from a Western Classics background, posed several universal questions and themes. She first pointed to the question of how people deal with the classical text, a conundrum faced by the historical actors in European, as well as Asian, situations. She pointed out that among scholars of European history it was also very difficult to talk about linguistic issues without falling into the national paradigm of state building. Güthenke highlighted for us the issue of the anxiety over language in the recent past when, influenced by modern Western linguistics, people began to see language as a single marker of individuality. Modern classicists have also struggled with the concept of the coexistence of two separate linguistic registers in one language, even though the original writers never shared the same worries. She compared the commentary traditions of East Asia and Europe and pointed out that in Europe, from Petrarch down to Ranke, there was an awareness of the foreignness of the classical texts and a desire to “hear the voices of the past” in their natural registers. She asked whether such questions of language were tokens of a new modernity. Martin Kern also pointed to the other functions of commentaries for constituting, securing, and asserting the superiority of the master texts while at the same time setting the limits for reading them. Janet Chen suggested that since language registers still suggested a sense of hierarchy, “spectrum” may be a better word to describe the classical/vernacular relationship in “classical” Chinese.

Pollock has shown that “vernaculars” rarely emerged on their own. They were the self-conscious projects of elites within a society. Hence, the categories of classical and vernacular languages we deploy must be problematized. How are we to understand the production and spread of normative styles and forms of writing and speech in premodern East Asia? Do we have the vocabulary to adequately describe the nature of premodern East Asian languages while not teleologically presuming the national boundaries for spoken vernaculars or making simple-minded categorizations of classical Chinese as a “dead,” written language?
Peter Kornicki (Cambridge University)

The high degree of cultural commensurability achieved through the use of the Chinese script by Japanese, Koreans, and Vietnamese has long been acknowledged. According to Peter Kornicki, however, the adoption of the Chinese script was not the only linguistic option for peoples and states within East and Central Asia. The Tangut Empire (called the Xixia dynasty, 1032–1227) embarked on a much different project to achieve political commensurability. Kornicki thinks that the Tangut script was devised and promulgated by the Xixia ruler in 1036 partly to facilitate vernacular translation of Buddhist texts for a Tangut audience. This is remarkable because the encounter with Chinese texts in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam did not at first stimulate an equivalent search for a vernacular script or the urge to translate per se. The question of why the Tanguts, who developed a thriving print culture producing large quantities of Buddhist works in several languages, decided to embark on projects of vernacular translation is puzzling. Kornicki posits a few possible explanations, ranging from the Tanguts’ exposure to numerous scripts and the multilingual nature of the monastic community. Although a definitive answer for why the script was created remains elusive, Kornicki presents a compelling case that “the Tanguts provide a counterexample to other East Asian societies in their response to Chinese writing.”

To get at the role of Tangut vernacularization in the twelfth century, Kornicki uses Tangut texts hidden in Buddhist temple pagodas to find clues. These texts consisted of Buddhist canons translated from Chinese, Tibetan, and Uighur, which were printed using movable type by the Xixia state three centuries before Gutenberg. The northwestern Tanguts were engaged in a massive translation project at the behest of their rulers and were committed to using the latest technology for its dissemination. At their height the Tanguts founded an empire that rivaled the Han Chinese Song dynasty (960–1280) in its power and independently developed their own script and vernacular literature.

Why did the Tanguts invent their own script? The peoples from the steppes northwest of China such as the Tanguts, Uighurs, Tibetans, Khitans, Jurchens, and Mongols all developed their own scripts when founding their middle imperial states, as did the late imperial Manchu Qing dynasty (1644–1911; see the essay by Mårten Söderblom Saarelma). Khitan Liao (907–1125) rulers first perceived such scripts in terms of political legitimation vis-à-vis the Tang dynasty (618–907). Countries located east and south of Song China, such as Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, did not develop their own writing forms until much later in

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8 See also Kornicki 2008; Lurie 2011, 343–347.
their histories. Kornicki contends that the steppe people were constantly at war with Tang and Song China and were thus more inclined to establish their own language as distinct from Chinese than were Korea and Japan, which were placed in subordinate positions to China and accepted the dominance of Chinese culture. In the case of the Tanguts, they were early on exposed to scripts such as Tibetan and Uighur that were distinct from Chinese and could decide which scripture tradition to follow. Such a luxury was available to the early Koreans, Vietnamese, and Japanese but to a lesser degree.\footnote{Cf. Lurie 2011, 344–345.}

While the Tangut invention of their own script represents a more explicit example of vernacular translation into a non-Chinese script, the use of Chinese characters by early Vietnamese, Koreans, and Japanese, as the following chapters by John Phan, Wang Sixiang, and Haruo Shirane show, also involved a process of vernacularization and translation. We should also note, however, that no translations of classical texts into the Chinese vernacular language appeared, although reading primers may perhaps be seen as an in-between stage. Both Korea and Japan invented neologisms using Chinese graphs to create new words that were unintelligible for contemporaries in China. In this way, each country localized the more cosmopolitan classical Chinese to challenge China’s claim to the ownership of the writing system. Kornicki’s conclusion that the Tangut invention of their own script presented a challenge to the traditional Chinese cultural order can also be applied later to Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. After 1400 each claimed the classical Chinese writing system as their own to assert their potential status as “second Romes” for cultural supremacy in East Asia.

The Tangut vernacular translation of Sinitic texts and their meager output of their own vernacular texts suggest, however, that classical Chinese was the cosmopolitan language for political reasons. Was this because as the northwestern Xixia, the Tanguts (and the Uighurs and Tibetans) were closer to the medieval Tang metropolitan cultural centers, while the Khitan Liao and Jurchen Jin (1115–1234) were from more peripheral areas in the northeast where the power of Chinese as a cosmopolitan language was still quite limited or resisted until the Jurchens captured North China? Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, as “second Romes,” must have struggled with containing the cosmopolitan power of Chinese in their midst, something they were ambivalent about, unlike the Tanguts, who had lived under and saw the Xixia as a legitimate successor to the Great Tang. Saarela’s chapter shows that the supporters of the Qing state languages of Manchu and Mongolian also had to devise ways to prevent their lan-
guages from playing second fiddle to the Chinese “Rome,” even when all three were officially authorized by the dynasty.

Political commensurability took precedence in Central Asia, while cultural commensurability was the main target in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. The rulers of Central Asian dynasties and the peoples of East Asia strove to keep up with each other in a political and cultural race, so they were constantly moving across borders, using literary Chinese as the cosmopolitan language. The formation of vernacular scripts among the Central and East Asian peoples surrounding China came in waves. The initial pioneers included the Tibetans, Uighurs, Khitans, Tanguts, and Mongols. Contrary to modern nationalistic discourses, these peoples were actually closer to the Chinese cultural center during the eighth to twelfth centuries and had greater claims to be the inheritors of the Tang Empire. Korea and Vietnam, who developed their scripts centuries later, can be seen as reacting to the developments in the steppes. Kornicki’s chapter initiates a theme that many of the subsequent chapters return to: the use of a written and spoken language to carve out a distinct identity within the East Asian world. Such voluntary linguistic subordination appears also to have paralleled different forms of political subordination, including parallel forms of insubordination after 1850.

Wang Sixiang (Columbia University)

Wang Sixiang’s chapter highlights the performative power of language in East Asia. Language was more than simply a tool for communication, because it also transmitted significant symbolic power in its words and forms. Possession of the right language was crucial to winning the linguistic warfare that foreign envoys faced when making tributary visits to imperial China. Wang contends that the Chinese interpreters from Korea mediated between the royal and imperial courts of Chosŏn Korea and the Ming and Qing (1368–1911) dynasties through language and translation. Many interpreters rose from humble backgrounds, and they were often despised by the elites for their lowly origins and their palace intrigues. Their expert knowledge, however, made them valuable assets to both states, particularly in the arena of foreign relations.

Korean interpreters had to be not only proficient in classical and spoken Chinese but also expert in Chinese ritual behavior and literature. When envoys demonstrated an expert understanding of China to Chinese rulers and dignitaries, their expertise implied that Korea was civilized. During the Yuan–Ming transition (1350–1400), after which Mongol speakers in Korea were no longer useful in diplomatic exchanges with China, the new, Ming dynasty expected
Korean diplomats to speak and write in Ming Chinese (at first, the version spoken in the capital in Nanjing and then that spoken in Beijing). The first Ming emperor, for example, belittled a Korean envoy for his inability to understand “contemporary” Chinese. This drove the Korean court to promote proficiency in literary and spoken Chinese by establishing the Office of Interpreters to recruit and train new interpreters. Wang’s account shows how mastery of the Chinese language was important not only in facilitating political discourse between Korea and China but also in establishing Korea as a civilized state and society.

The use of classical Chinese poetry as a lingua franca in interactions between China, Japan, and Korea meant that regulated verse in particular, with its set patterns of rhymes and limited numbers of graphs per line, served as a universal medium for intellectual exchange and diplomacy in northeastern Asia. Envoys of emperors, kings, and local Japanese elites enjoyed good company, negotiated with their hosts, and complained about their treatment through verse.\(^{10}\)

Wang, however, complicates our traditional understanding of the linguistic exchange between China and Korea by showing that a shared written language was not the only requirement. The important role that translators played on official missions to the Ming court meant that spoken Chinese was also important in the interactions between the Korean and Ming states. The use of classical Chinese may have authenticated Korean claims to classical antiquity, but the brush could not totally replace the tongue in efforts to overcome differences in spoken language. When Ming emperors ridiculed Korean envoys for their poor spoken Chinese, the Korean court tried to ameliorate the loss of face. We learn that the Korean han’gul 한글 script was invented in large part to teach people how to pronounce Chinese script according to the contemporary standards of the Ming court. Neither side considered proficiency in literary Chinese sufficient to consummate the required cultural, political, and economic exchanges. The classical written form was not enough for full fluency in the language, which further demonstrates that the modern distinction between the classical and the vernacular, as well as between writing and speaking, has distorted the historical realities of the nature of East Asian languages.

The voluntary adoption of literary Chinese to affiliate verbally within a simultaneously cultural, political, and economic order is reminiscent of Pollock’s narrative of the cultural spread of Sanskrit. Language empowered “cultural commensurability,” whereby each side communicated through classical Chinese to adjudicate both cultural and political associations between

\(^{10}\) Goble 2011, 11.
China and its neighboring states and empires. Korea’s expert use of classical Chinese gave it a special place in the imagination of the Ming Empire. When Korean envoys communicated with their Chinese hosts using the brush to compose poetry, this brought honor to the envoys and empowered Korea as a civilized state in the eyes of the Ming court.

John D. Phan (Cornell University)

John Phan explores how Vietnamese Confucian and Buddhist scholars tried to bridge the distance between literary Chinese and the native Nôm 喃 script (also known as chữ Nôm 字喃, lit., “characters for talking”) beginning in the fifteenth century. Literary elites seeking civil service appointments in Vietnam legitimated the new forms of Song classical learning, which had become early Ming orthodoxy, by mastering the Classics and composing the appropriate Confucian commentaries in classical Chinese. Marginalized Buddhist scholars, on the other hand, because they were increasingly disinherited from state power from the fifteenth to the sixteenth centuries embraced the heterodoxy of the vernacular and enunciated their views in temples using Nôm writing as the preferred alternative.\footnote{Elman 2013, chap. 1.}

One product of these parallel developments, which Phan focuses on in his chapter, is the dictionary entitled 
*Explication of the Guide to Jeweled Sounds (Chí nam ngọc âm giải nghĩa)*. This work glossed terms commonly used in Confucian intellectual discourses. Its two prefaces, one in Nôm and one in Chinese, reveal a surprising overlap between the classical language and Vietnamese. The compiler, likely a Buddhist monk, contended in the Nôm preface that semantosyllabic was the form through which the ancient sages invented characters, the foundation of the Chinese writing system. According to the monk, Nôm was also constructed in accordance with semantosyllabism. In the Chinese preface, the author specified that the semantosyllabic Chinese script was devised to enable the Chinese to pacify the world culturally by assigning proper names to the myriad things. By comparing the two prefaces, Phan shows that they provide a defense of both Chinese and Nôm. On the basis of semantosyllabism, Nôm could be seen as an authentic extension of literary Chinese and proof that Vietnam was analogous to China and hence civilized in universal terms.

Just as Wang Sixiang forces us to reconsider the interaction of the spoken and the written language in the Korean missions to Ming China, Phan shows
that classical Chinese had a significant impact on both the spoken and the written Vietnamese language. Phan contends that the push toward semanto-syllabicity in Vietnamese led to many dropped initial sounds and the adoption of Chinese grammatical particles in the spoken language. Problematizing the previous language paradigm that separated the written classical from spoken vernaculars into different spheres, Phan also shows that the two interacted significantly. Through a close reading of the two prefaces we see that Vietnamese intellectuals viewed their script, Chữ Nôm, as a fully formed sagely script, capable of the same intellectual and imaginative expressivity as literary Chinese—and not as a vernacular alternative to the classical.

Just as Koreans valued literacy in classical Chinese as well as knowledge of the Ming spoken language, the Vietnamese idealization of the Chinese script led to significant changes in both the written and spoken forms of Vietnamese. Whereas in royal Korea, Chinese was explicitly tied to communicating culturally with the Ming Chinese court, Phan argues that although the Vietnamese may have venerated the Chinese script, they never explicitly referenced the Chinese political world when they did so. This claim leaves open, however, how Vietnamese tributary missions to the Ming and Qing courts affected language policy in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{12}

Haruo Shirane (Columbia University)

Haruo Shirane’s chapter focuses on the interactions between commentary, vernacular, and translation to understand vernaculars in ancient Japan. Shirane points out that medieval Japanese commentaries to the Chinese Classics, such as the Collection of Japanese and Chinese Poems to Sing (Wakan rōeishū 和漢朗詠集; compiled 1012), served multiple functions in the medieval period, including explicating words and phrases, serving as models for writing and learning, giving the source of the original text, providing fundamental cultural and historical knowledge, serving as modern translations, and interpreting the ancient texts. Martin Kern added at the conference that commentaries also clarify the pronunciation in the Classic, something very important for Chinese commentaries because different pronunciations implied different meanings. Often a phonetic gloss sufficed, because the commentator assumed that the reader would know the particular meaning that went with the pronunciation.

Other functions that the commentary exerts, according to Kern, include constituting the text in its wording, boundaries, and format; securing the text

\textsuperscript{12} Ge 2012.
against competing versions of the text; limiting the ways in which the text can be interpreted; tying the text to a distinct body of other texts and hence situating it within the larger textual universe; constituting the “textual community” that shares the text as a common point of reference; elevating the text above other texts and simultaneously censoring and silencing its competitors; and constituting the discursive voice of the commentator as the mediator between text and audience. In these diverse ways, the commentaries initially mediated between the original texts written in the cosmopolitan literary Chinese and the popular works vocalized and written in more vernacular forms. Such ancient and medieval forms contributed to the evolution of Japanese classical registers of language paralleling classical Chinese (kanbun).

Shirane also rethinks the written/oral dichotomy by showing that many commentaries originated from oral lectures or sermons, which were later written down. Instead of just assuming that the written automatically had cultural authority and influenced the lower-brow oral registers, Shirane proposes an initial two-way recycling process between cosmopolitan and vernacular languages caused by the dual interaction between written and oral presentation and elite and popular works. Shirane outlines the various literary genres that were based on the vernaculars of ancient Japan and were developed by various social groups for different purposes. He contends that contemporaries recognized the differences between the various genres. The tension between what was considered to be “highbrow” and what was considered to be “lowbrow” was consciously deployed as a literary device. The discussion of hierarchies of genres of writing is often seen in Japanese literature, yet the hierarchies themselves changed over time and reflect specific periods.

For India too, neither vernaculars nor cosmopolitan languages were homogeneous. In her presentation of linguistic practices in early modern India at our first workshop, Allison Busch stressed the influence not only of Sanskrit but also of Persian in forming modern vernacular Hindi. In the sixteenth century, the interest in poetry led to the proliferation of manuals written in the Braj language using both Hindi and Arabic scripts and thereby incorporating ideas from Sanskrit and Persian poetry into Hindi. Under British colonialism, however, a different ideal about literacy and education emerged, obviating Braj and rendering it outdated. The linguistic engineering of modern-day Hindi separated it from Braj as part of a “de-Islamization” of the language. This process parallels the fate of Chinese language and script in the formation of modern Japanese, which Atsuko Ueda describes in her chapter below in light of “de-Sinification.”

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13 Busch 2010.
For Shirane, commentaries in premodern Japan were catalysts for intellectual and cultural activity. They formed a body of discourse that related the canonical text not only to other classical texts but also to contemporary Japanese state and society. Shirane also suggests that the practices of commentators likely paralleled or preceded the paratextual adaptations of ancient texts by vernacular writers, playwrights, and artists. The full-fledged translation of a Chinese text into another language such as Japanese, on the other hand, suggests a Japanese readership unable and probably unwilling to engage the original text. Translations—if not the product of a modern type of scholarship—were presumably geared toward readers whose attitude toward the source language and its culture was more of curiosity than engagement.

Such distinctions are worth reconsidering when addressing why, initially, the Japanese, Koreans, and Vietnamese did not fully translate Chinese texts, whereas the Tanguts, Mongolians, and Uighurs did. Based on the Dunhuang manuscripts, Kornicki has shown that the first stage in making Sinitic texts accessible to a reading audience was the addition of punctuation, which required a prior grammatical understanding of the text. Koreans by the seventh century read Sinitic texts in a new way known as idu 史譜 (lit., “clerical reading of documents”), which was based on hundok 訓讀 (lit., “markings for reading”). It entailed adding glosses to encode the missing grammatical particles needed for Korean inflections. Korean monks transmitted this technique to Japan, where, after additional development, it formed the foundation for the reading strategy known in Japan as kundoku 訓讀, which added glosses to “translate” the text via punctuation.\textsuperscript{14}

David Lurie has suggested that Japanese kundoku practices for reading and writing in effect produced “invisible vernacular texts.” Although these were not translations in a strict sense, Japanese readers produced from the Chinese text a reading that differed from the original not only phonetically but also syntactically. Lurie has shown how the text could be read in more than one language simultaneously. Moreover, characters could be read both phonographically and logographically.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Daniel Trambaioiolo (University of Hong Kong)}

To investigate classical languages and literacies and how they interact, Daniel Trambaioiolo examines the language registers of traditional medical knowledge

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} Kornicki 2008, 5.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Lurie 2011.
\end{itemize}
in Tokugawa Japan. He points out that while in East Asia as a whole, literary Chinese was the language of the center and radiated outward to Japan and Korea, there was another, complementary process in the medical realm, namely the textualization of vernacular medicine. He shows that these two language registers were not exclusive and often overlapped, but they had different origins and developments. Tokugawa was a period of great change in social relations for doctors. In the medieval era, medical learning was usually confined to Kyoto and the Buddhist institutions. During the seventeenth century, however, the doctors were grouped together with the classical scholar (ru 儒). For medical texts, classical Chinese (kanbun) was considered the standard written language, but in the Tokugawa era, an increasing number of texts were written in Japanese (wabun 和文), enabling more people to read them. Utilizing Japanese commentaries on the medical classics and herbal (honzō 本草) encyclopedias, Trambaiolo shows that most medical names for diseases and medicinal plants were transmitted via vernacular Japanese rather than classical language.

The vernacularization of classical medical knowledge and the textualization of oral traditions of medicine were parallel processes. Some of us have referred to “literary Chinese” (classical Chinese, Sinitic, etc.) as a “cosmopolitan language” in Sheldon Pollock’s sense. Daniel Trambaiolo thinks that although literary Chinese was transregional, the actual historical way that literary Chinese created a unified regional culture in East Asia was very different in practice from Latin in Europe or Sanskrit in South Asia. Japanese vernacular literature developed through conscious decisions not to renounce an earlier cosmopolitan culture for more local and geographically limited ones. Trambaiolo stresses the differences rather than the similarities between kanbun in Japan and Sanskrit in India as cosmopolitan languages. For Pollock, vernacularization might mean something very different in a culture where adoption of the cosmopolitan language was voluntary. The Chinese language, of course, was never forcibly imposed on neighboring cultures. Nor did Chinese as a cosmopolitan language serve the sole purpose of promoting two-way communication between China and its neighbors. Japanese read Chinese texts and discussed them using modified forms of the Chinese language. The purpose, however, was seldom for Japanese works to circulate outside the Japanese archipelago, at least up until the latter part of the eighteenth century. Scholars in East Asia usually did not travel to meet each other, and even when they did meet, they often communicated solely through writing.

In her comments, Cynthia Brokaw noted that Trambaiolo’s chapter points to two flows of knowledge, one downward from the elites to the lower classes and one upward from the rural to the elite. Where exactly did these two flows converge? Brokaw also notes that the vernacular names used for diseases and
plants were probably given in Japanese because these diseases and plants existed only in Japan. Because much of Japanese medical knowledge was local, vernacular medicine could be prioritized over medical texts from China.

Mårten Söderblom Saarela (Princeton University)

By addressing both the Manchu language and its script under the Qing rulers as one of the three administrative languages of the empire (the others were Chinese and Mongolian), Mårten Söderblom Saarela shows how an alphabetical order based on the Manchu script was developed by relying on syllabaries used to teach literacy to both Manchu children and second-language learners, especially Chinese literati-officials. By comparing it to the Western history of alphabetization, Saarela contends that the Manchu alphabetical order in late imperial China was one of the most noteworthy by-products of the Qing dynasty’s encounter with Inner Asian alphabetical literacy as described by Peter Kornicki’s paper in this volume.

Indeed, despite the uncomplimentary comparisons of Chinese print culture with its Western counterparts that appeared in the writings of language reformers during the Republic of China and of Western Sinologists, Qing scholars had grappled with alphabetization for centuries. Although the Manchu schema offered certain advantages over extant Chinese models, its application was seemingly held back by implicit structural problems and a general lack of interest from a political and intellectual establishment oblivious, if not contemptuous, of its potential.

At times the untapped potential of the Manchu script was theorized in light of Qing dynasty treatises of Chinese phonology. More often, however, the dictionaries failed to stir up any debate or controversy among literati. Qing scholars of Manchu rarely wrote critically about the dictionaries they were using. Usually, any information about the progress of Manchu lexicography came from within the dictionaries themselves, not outside commentators. In the end, Manchu lexicography stagnated in the nineteenth century after a promising start during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. On the other hand, the Manchu script as an organizing device unexpectedly prospered and contributed to the linguistic experiments with alphabetic scripts that characterized the plethora of language reform efforts initiated during the Republic and early People’s Republic of China.
Benjamin A. Elman (Princeton University)

In my chapter I ask to what use was knowledge of the classical language being put in China? Because the civil service examination system doomed over 90 percent of its participants to the unofficial status of examination failures, how are we to understand the spread and use of classical knowledge through education? How does an institution that passes only 1 percent of its participants survive? The creation of a large literate population and the use of classical learning to pursue alternative careers and economic opportunities such as medical practice, book publishing, and pettifoggery were likely unintended consequences of the civil examination system.

If the unintended consequences of classical literacy in early modern China were dictated by the imperial examination system, then we cannot continue to focus on just the very few who passed the examinations. We must also address the overwhelming majority of examination candidates who were called “failures.” A large number of people were classically literate in late imperial China, but they were unable to reach their original goal of entering officialdom. Rather than being a dead end for the many “failures,” the examination system and its classical curriculum surprisingly helped these men land in other respectable positions.

In a society where about 10 percent of the Chinese population participated in the civil service examinations, and more than 90 percent of this group failed them, some means of justification was found for the decades spent memorizing classical texts. What candidates shared was knowledge of the classical language, memorization of key parts of the canon, and an ability to compose eight-legged essays. Even if social mobility in imperial China was limited by the competitive nature of the examination process, enough alternative careers were available for those who were classically literate that another unintended consequence of the examination system was the development of an alternative literati culture that reacted against and wrote against the grain of the demeaning examination process.

Atsuko Ueda (Princeton University)

Atsuko Ueda’s chapter unravels the rhetorical disguise surrounding Meiji calls for language reform. She compares, historically, what Meiji linguists actually claimed against the backdrop of the evolving historical context. Ueda perceptively rejects teleological hindsight in favor of working out “real-time” historical beginnings. Her account of the reforms presents the pace and cadence of
vernacularization in Japan, which linguists there saw as a means to unify the spoken and written languages. She also addresses the virulence of Meiji nationalism and Japanese calls for de-Asianization and de-Sinification that coursed through the language debates.

We should also note that Ueda elsewhere criticizes Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities” approach. This approach, when applied to Meiji Japan, posits the nation as the goal that inspired the language reforms, thereby becoming a self-fulfilling, teleological prophecy. Ueda discovers that the reformers did not posit the nation as a goal at the start. The 1880s were not the first stage of Meiji linguistic nationalism. Rather, when Ueda reexamines the historical conditions that made a new Japanese national language (kokugo 国語) thinkable, she finds instead that the keys to the story were the different linguistic approaches articulated in the early Meiji period. Ueda presents four linguists in this chapter: (1) Mori Arinori, who argued against Chinese script in favor of using Roman letters for their phonetic principles to make oral reading and writing commensurable; (2) Maejima Hisoka, who sought to replace Chinese script by phoneticizing all kanji with the kana syllabary; (3) Nanbu Yoshikazu, who favored the Roman alphabet to reform Japanese grammar based on the fifty-sound syllabary grid; and (4) Nishi Amane, who as a publicist also favored the Roman alphabet for the fifty-sound syllabary grid in order to reconcile spelling and pronunciation.

Language reformers wished to standardize Japanese as a spoken language based on the Tokyo pronunciation. They hoped thereby to unify spoken and written Japanese through vernacularization. By defining an ideal Japanese language through sound rather than writing, Japanese linguists tied kanbun-style language in “Japanese” syntactical order (kanbun kundokutai 漢文訓詁対) to anti-Chinese and anti-elite sentiments based on the distinction between dead languages (Chinese and Latin) and living languages (Japanese and European vernaculars). More radical elements attacked the alleged ideographic nature of Chinese script and overlooked its phonetic elements. In the end, however, the advocates of kanbun kundokutai recognized the efficacy of the Chinese script for newspapers, textbooks, fiction, and composition. They successfully set aside the fears of the anti-kanji movement and stressed instead the useful phonetic aspects of kanbun kundokutai because the Chinese script could easily be phonetically marked by kana. Remarkably, the superior economy and conciseness of Chinese script, when coupled with the Japanese syllabary, meant that kanji could be exploited in the name of a Japanese-inspired language reform that reduced the number of required characters to three thousand.

The “new” orthography severed kanbun kundokutai from its pre-Meiji ties to kanbun and mobilized both anti-Chinese sentiments and pro-Western views of
language in its favor. *Kanbun kundokutai* became a version of the Japanese language that broke away from strictly *kanbun* readings. It became a new form for writing modern Japanese. New textbooks no longer needed to include the original *kanbun* texts; they could simply present the *kanbun kundokutai* with *kana* markings for the *kanji*. *Kanji* as a foreign medium had interfered with the “Japanese”ness of the language. Now *kanbun kundokutai* as a Japanese form of expression ironically was privileged over the Chinese script. Like *han'gŭl* in premodern Korea, *kana* writing techniques also had a long history in Japan, most of which was unrelated to nationalist sentiments. Loosely organized sets of phonographs derived but distinct from Chinese characters were developed before the ninth century, but it was only in the late nineteenth century, with the wide adoption of movable-type printing, that strict one-to-one correspondence between *kana* graphs and syllables was established.

Ueda shows how multiple translingual practices shaped the early and middle Meiji periods and precipitated the rise of a new national language. The space opened up by *kanbun kundokutai* was the key for the invention of a new national language. Nationalism was later constructed teleologically to be the end-all for everything, but in fact, a series of linguistic struggles were involved. The Japanese “nation” was the final result of the linguistic debates and not the single cause that motivated the language reforms.

Similarly, Joy Kim pointed out at our first workshop that scholarship on Korean languages had been influenced by the modern, anticolonial discourses, which favored anti-Sinitic sentiments and allegedly “pure” *han’gŭl* texts. In Korea, *han’gŭl* was invented in 1443, not as an act of nationalism, but to a large extent as a syllabary to facilitate the correct pronunciation of Chinese texts. We have seen that the Vietnamese language also was conceptualized more as an extension of, and an aid to, classical Chinese than as an alternative to it.

**Shang Wei (Columbia University)**

Shang Wei's concluding chapter moves us from post-1911 and May Fourth linguistic prescriptions for saving “China” to a historically grounded account of the spoken and literary aspects of Chinese language(s) since 1400. In terms of the descriptive issues, Shang has rehistoricized the May Fourth agenda by stripping away the cognitive illusions and modernist teleologies based on hindsight that informed earlier accounts of language reform in Republican
China. Like Atsuko Ueda’s theoretical work on Meiji language reforms, Shang aims to de-teleologize modernist views of premodern languages in China.16

Earlier ideological agendas and political debates have dictated that in both Meiji Japan and late Qing–early Republican China language reform was a race to catch up to Western Europe and the United States. This is a sobering lesson of how universal theory can be embedded in the individual autobiography of radical Chinese linguists, whose linguistic theories were really political weapons disguised as an objective methodology. A consensus emerged during the May Fourth era that held a derogatory view of the classical language. This May Fourth rhetoric then was enshrined as PRC state dogma after 1949. The modernist linguistic discourses that emerged were not really proofs for the superiority of vernaculars per se but a sign of insider, political, and social agendas used to advance the Cultural Revolution. May Fourth theories and analysis have until recently prevented acknowledging the cultural damage incurred during the turn away from the allegedly “dying” classical language to the allegedly “living” vernacular in Beijing.

Shang Wei’s chapter, accordingly, is a balanced critique that refutes the overly theorized linguistic claims of his predecessors and asks us to rethink the development of the Chinese “vernacular” (baihua 白話; lit., “plain speech”). May Fourth intellectuals posited a false dichotomy between classical 文言 and vernacular Chinese, according to Shang. Before the twentieth century, baihua was primarily the spoken language of well-educated elites (Beijing “Mandarin”). Far from achieving a standardized form, there were actually eight different branches of Mandarin. After the fall of the Qing dynasty, the newly established Ministry of Education tried to unify sound and speech under a national dialect, but a consensus was never reached. Northerners proposed Beijing Mandarin as the national tongue, while southerners put forth their own regional dialects as more “authentic” phonological traditions.

Shang also points out that both baihua and literary Chinese were usually found together in the so-called “vernacular” novels before 1900. No binary system of the Chinese language with a strict dichotomy between classical and vernacular ever existed. Shang suggests that we should perceive them as different registers of the same language line. An educated man in the early modern period used his own regional dialect to aurally render the texts that he read, regardless of whether they were classical or baihua. Like “modern” Japanese, the vernacularization movement in China, with its strict divide between classical and baihua and its intolerance for variants of an official baihua, emerged only through the modern processes of nationalism.

16 See Wu 2013 for a recent account of classical poetry and learning from 1900 to 1937.
By highlighting an ahistorical polarizing of the classical and vernacular into separate languages in Republican China, Shang relates in passing how the efforts of linguistic reformers to create a new spoken vernacular were misguided. Mandarin was already a transregional language that defied the definition of a vernacular. The Ministry of Education’s project to invent a Chinese vernacular was more sociopolitical than linguistic. The linguists claimed that a standardized pronunciation was needed to create a unified state composed of Chinese-speaking citizens. This effort was new in the early twentieth century and not an outgrowth from an imaginary bifurcation of Chinese into classical and vernacular elements before 1900. Shang adds that until 1912 no systematic efforts were made to promote Mandarin as the officially sanctioned spoken language while at the same time suppressing regional dialects. The unity of the empire, based in part on a common writing system focused on classical Chinese, was not achieved at the cost of reducing regional diversity in speech and vocalization. The empire encompassed linguistic diversity, including Manchu and other outside inputs to the pronunciation of so-called Chinese.

The officials of the new Republic and May Fourth intellectuals self-righteously imagined their task as undoing what they deemed to be the unnatural relationship between the written and the spoken language and between the classical and the vernacular. The project of constructing the nation-state required a healthy synthesis of the spoken and the written vernacular, both of which were valorized as essential to overcoming the decrepit classical language. The dichotomy between baihua and wenyans as two opposed writing systems was further rationalized in the twentieth century, when modernist Chinese linguists, for political reasons, imagined the Chinese case as analogous to the turn to “modern” European vernaculars from “medieval” written Latin.

Shang’s view of vernaculars in China does not fit Pollock’s South Asian model of cosmopolitan versus vernacular languages, since the written language of vernacular Chinese fiction was also a cosmopolitan (transdialectal) form of written communication. By addressing the question of the relationship between classical Chinese, vernacularization, and modernity, Shang has presented a revisionist argument that relies on a partial bifurcation of orality (“plain speaking”) and literacy (classical texts). Adoption of a written vernacular close to the spoken language could not have happened, however, unless a language for transcription had already been constructed. Much of Ming fiction, for example, was clearly the work of educated literati, but the vernacular registers were likely based on the spoken language. Well into the twentieth century, Chinese writers remained bilingual orally and textually.
Judging from prefaces and colophons by Ming and Qing writers of vernacular fiction, it is clear that their writing in the vernacular intentionally accessed a wider readership than did writing in the classical language, a social phenomenon that angered classicists to no end! This further substantiates the argument that such texts were sufficiently close to the spoken vernacular to make them comparatively easy reading. The language of vernacular fiction, of course, contained classical elements. The merit of the novel was its use of both colloquial and classical language. By getting rid of classical Chinese grammatical particles, so essential to classical punctuation, Qing storytellers, and their recorders, further developed the novel as a seamless language uniting speech and writing before 1900.  

**Final Comments**

Peter Kornicki has noted that it is not clear whether the vernacularizing process in imperial China paralleled the processes in the non-Chinese cultures discussed above. To put it another way, are the inventions of new indigenous scripts in non-Chinese cultures and the presumed vernacularization that took place within China comparable? The invention of an indigenous script, described above in the cases of Japanese, Vietnamese, and Korean, initially did not serve the purpose of transcribing the indigenous spoken language. That came later. Moreover, earlier script reforms had no direct and necessary relation to vernacularization until the rise of the nation-state declared them as such. In order to address vernacularization in these non-Chinese cultures, it is necessary to move beyond the level of the script and make distinctions regarding how the script was used, for what aims, and with what relation to the spoken language.  

The chapters by Atsuko Ueda and Shang Wei describe modern attempts by groups in Japan and China to create new vernaculars that would serve as a marker of a person’s cultural and national identity. Creation of a unified national language entailed different problems for China and Japan, however. While a written classical language theoretically unified China, the multitude of regional dialects resulted in mutual unintelligibility when the texts were locally vocalized even as the alleged “official speech”（guanhua 官話）of Mandarin. The infusion of regional dialects into written baihua complicated the registers of the writing system. In Japan, the continued use of Chinese

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17 Blader 1977. See also Pastreich 2011 on early modern Japanese “vernacular” stories.
18 Kornicki 2008.
characters was inimical to the project of severing the present from the past in the construction of the Meiji state. Yet there was no easy solution to linguistic reform without using the Chinese script, and as Ueda shows, the early Meiji period was a time of great experimentation, which reauthorized the use of kanji in a translated form called kundoku punctuation.19

Japanese kana in the ninth century, Vietnamese Nôm in the eleventh, Korean han’gül in the fifteenth, along with the evidence from the Dunhuang manuscripts written in Central Asian scripts, show that a first stage in making Sinitic texts more accessible was the provision of punctuation, which depended on a prior interpretation of the text. Kornicki and others regard this linguistic operation as a form of a “bound translation” in which “the original is preserved visually in the form of the Chinese characters, even when they are used in obscure senses, although they are pronounced in accordance with vernacular phonology.” Considered a form of translation (“circumlocutionary translationese”) by David Lurie, these reading traditions likely developed primarily to complement and not to replace the direct reading of classical texts, which the Meiji reforms, for example, accomplished. Translations and punctuation using kana, Nôm, or han’gül increased the audience to those whose reading skills of Chinese script were limited.20

In East Asia, as long as the prestige of classical Chinese was accepted among elites and among those who aspired to become elites (i.e., until roughly 1900), Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese elites embraced it. Except for Manchus and Mongols, most Central Asian Tibetans and others had stopped aspiring to master classical Chinese as a cosmopolitan language. Ueda and Shang, reveal, however, that once the language fell further from grace as a lingua franca in the late nineteenth century, East Asians, including Chinese revolutionaries, ran away from it as fast as possible. The dual forces of colonialism (in Korea and Vietnam) and nationalism (particularly in Japan and China but also in Korea, Vietnam, and Central Asia) affected the valorization of baihua, han’gül, kana, and Nôm readings. Such notational forms no longer were ways to master or reduplicate classical Chinese. Rather, the native forms were revaluated using modern linguistic tactics to invent new vernaculars that parted with the official language of the sick empire called Qing China.21

Before “flight” from Chinese became the norm in Central and East Asia, the authority of the teacher of classical Chinese outside China was tied to his mastery of the corresponding Tangut-Uighur-Mongol-Vietnamese scripts or

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21 Yang 2010.
Chinese-Japanese-Korean marking techniques for reading, writing, and translating the classical Chinese language. Such teachers were able to introduce students to the texts through a series of practical steps of instruction. This process centered on parsing the Chinese into its constituent parts: (1) types of written characters 文字; (2) correct phrases and sentences 章句; and (3) forms of reasoning 文理. Like their Chinese counterparts, the Central and East Asian grammarians served as preservers and transmitters of the classical language. They represented the repository of fluent and coherent utterances in high culture by marking correct punctuation and readings, incorporating voicing marks, and adding interlinear glosses for particles 助字 (lit., “connectives,” i.e., prepositions, particles, endings), concrete graphs 實字 (lit., names of things), and “insubstantials” 虛字 (i.e., adjectives and verbs).22

The top teachers transmitted the articulations of the Five Classics; lesser, more technical teachers taught the medical classics and the mathematical classics. Korean and Vietnamese mastery of the canon was tested for the civil service as in China, while in Japan the leading classical teachers quickly found their niches among the merit-sensitive commoners and merchants who lacked but also disdained the marks of high birth. Many Japanese commoners rose in social standing because of their classical literacy, while landless, aristocratic warriors fell into poverty and disrepute because the style of life to which they were bred submerged them in debts to merchants. Many samurai, recognizing that success required classical literacy rather than martial arts, now studied to become scholars or doctors.23

Words became the entry to a world of formalism and pedantry, rules and categories, and rare lexical discussions. The classicist’s command of a few classical texts saved him from the base occupations of the unlearned. Weighing individual words, phrases, and verses allowed him and his students to write their way to fame and fortune—or at least to teach and write for others. Because classical knowledge enabled a prestigious form of writing and speech in the eighteenth century, it also appealed to East Asian rulers, who came to depend on a literate bureaucracy to administer their domains.

The classicist’s instruction was embedded in a social system where wealth, distinction, and eloquence differentiated elites from those who were mainly poor, anonymous, and illiterate. Those without classical educations were now more noticeable; before, only the Buddhists in Korea and Japan, as among the

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22 See the Tokugawa kanbun textbooks collected in Yoshikawa, Kojima, and Togawa 1979–1981. These grammatical divisions derived from Song through Ming period classical scholarship.

Tanguts, Mongols, and Tibetans, had been the masters of Chinese language. Classical scholars provided the language and values through which a changing social and political elite recognized its own aspiring members. The governing classes of courtiers and warriors, once totally aristocratic in Japan and Korea, now shared elite status with commoners with classical educations. Classical “letters” 文 signalled increased social status. Classical studies provided upward social circulation, particularly access to urban networks of patronage\(^2\)\(^4\).

As in China since the Song dynasty, literacy and print culture now mattered for East Asians. They were no longer simply window dressing for aristocrats or a calling for monks. The value of “letters” amid the pervasive illiteracy of East Asian societies made grammar the first step upward for mobile students who were drawn to literary culture 文化. In turn, the social and cultural elite valued the classical teacher and hired him to train their young. By opening their own schools and preparing their own textbooks, classical teachers also became the agents of language transmission and the civilizing process. Because study of grammar incorporated memorization for a classical education, students had to master many technical rules. Since the grammarian controlled access to the classical language, his profession was thereby embedded in the shared life of the elite. Chinese was a useful measure of classical success because it worked so well and smoothly—unlike the “vulgar” vernacular language 俗語 of the marketplace. Grammarians taught the forms of classical, medical, and literary analysis and conceptual categories inherited from the past in China and now reproduced in East and Central Asia; some even taught colloquial Chinese\(^2\)\(^5\).

Classical scholars led profitable careers as grammarians who also taught literary style. Their textbooks established a basic grammar and sentence structure, which enabled East Asian students in the eighteenth century to master Chinese classical syntax, even if they mentally transposed sentences into native word order. What attracted the elites to such classical teachers, in addition to careerism, was that Chinese classical learning affirmed the conventional virtues and the socioeconomic status quo. Novelty or change, if any occurred, usually was an unintended by-product of learning to read and write. Classical learning became the guide to the right choices. Virtue and letters upheld each other\(^2\)\(^6\).

In Japan, unlike in China, Korea, and Vietnam, urban or village grammarians depended on their public reputations because there was no civil examination degree to mark their expertise. Classical teachers displayed a considerable

\(^2\)\(^4\) Ikegami 2005.
\(^2\)\(^5\) Pastreich 1999.
\(^2\)\(^6\) Cf. Kaster 1988 on Roman grammarians in antiquity.
range in social origins and fortunes. They were subordinate to patrons, who provided them with their sons as students. They enjoyed middling respectability among urbanized elites, particularly aristocrats and samurai officials in the various Tokugawa domains. As teachers they had some chance for professional, social, and geographic mobility within their domains and within the shogunal government, but lacked access to the highest positions, which were held by the military and imperial court aristocrats. Often they became primary consultants in their domains. From samurai, commoner, and medical backgrounds, they represented the respectable classes in the growing cities. Despite their skills and accrued respect, they remained closer to the middle than the top of the social pyramid, unlike the unmitigated cultural prestige that a small number of Chinese, Koreans, and Vietnamese achieved through the esteemed civil examinations.

Although their role as grammarians created an aura for classicists as masters of texts, they could overcome the limits of their social status only up to a point. Their role as social and cultural mediators allowed them to mix with the aristocrats and warrior-officials, particularly their sons, but the rural teacher was never far removed from his modest beginnings. Successful classical grammarians were drawn to the major cities and regional centers, which provided more pupils from the middle and upper elites for their schools. Classical teachers were motivated by the hope for fame in the increasingly fluid urban world, but their equivocal social standing often prompted them to despise the aspiring doctors or merchants just below them. Classicists criticized doctors as nouveau riche who equated their “lesser” classical learning with knowledge of the Confucian classics. In early modern Japan, samurai who became scholars enviously remarked how classical physicians exploited the Chinese Classics to rise in urban society. Many sons of doctors became classicists throughout East Asia; classicists in turn became masters of the medical classics.

One of the major themes that emerges from this volume is the remarkable changeover in East and Central Asia from the desire to reach cultural commensurability with China via classical learning to the desire to escape into cultural incommensurability by sustaining native vernaculars. In the early modern eras, states outside the Chinese cultural center tried to measure themselves against Chinese classical civilization, using language as a gauge for that ecumenical, hence “cosmopolitan,” culture. These states modeled themselves as empires vis-à-vis “Greater” China and tried to position themselves politically as viable successors to the Chinese cultural tradition in case a “second Rome” (lit., a “little China” 小中華) was needed—for example, after the 1280 Mongol or the 1644 Manchu conquest. In the twentieth century, however, the nation-state narrative took over, and the Japanese, Koreans, Vietnamese, and even the
Chinese themselves, not to mention the Mongols, Manchus, and Tibetans, sought to distance themselves from imperial China and its classical language. The inability to completely excise the Chinese past from their language or from their cultural and intellectual discourses became a source of anxiety that had not been shared by their classicist predecessors, who had taken pride in their orthodox accomplishments.

The chapters in this volume also demonstrate that beyond its linguistic functions, a classical, cosmopolitan language should also be thought of as a philosophy of action enunciated through poetry and prose, that is, as the “performative utterances” of a classical community of students, teachers, aristocrats, and officials. The ability to speak, read, and write in the correct language in each specific time or geographical space, such as being fluent in literary Chinese in Korea during the fourteenth century or understanding (and helping to invent) modern Japanese during the Meiji period, granted the speaker or writer tremendous cultural and intellectual prestige.

Several chapters rethink the relationship between cosmopolitan and vernacular languages in East and Central Asia. Classical Chinese and East Asian vernaculars in particular should not be overdetermined as an oppositional binary. Rather, we should see them as East Asians saw them, namely as two registers of the same language system or as parts of a broader spectrum of linguistic possibilities. The twentieth century championed an alternative linguistic agenda that modern intellectuals temporarily accepted as universal and normative. We are now deconstructing that position. The May Fourth narrative in particular should be historicized in light of its ROC and PRC teleologies and re-understood in light of the longer-term possibilities that encouraged East Asians to seek cultural commensurability with imperial China and its classical language since medieval times.

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