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Inclusive Design in Esperanto and Romanization Movements in 1930s Japan

Joseph Essertier

Some leading Japanese researchers and activists in the 1930s campaigned vigorously to improve access to information for the illiterate and semi-literate by simplifying the difficult script that is used for writing Japanese. One such researcher was the linguist and Esperantist Saitō Hidekatsu (1908-1940). He founded and edited a journal entitled *Moji to gengo* (Script and Language, 1934-38), to which such notables as Takakura Teru (1891-1986) the activist and novelist; Tōjō Misao (1884-1966) the Japanese linguist; and Ōshima Yoshio (1905-92) the linguist and Esperantist contributed. He also translated writings on the Chinese Romanization movement by the great novelist and intellectual Lu Xun (1881-1936) and by the Romanization advocate and Esperantist Ye Laishi (1911-94).

To establish easy-to-learn written language, Hidekatsu and other Esperantists proposed that Japanese children first master the writing of their native language in the Roman alphabet and then learn Esperanto as a second language. The Roman alphabet would help children learn their native language as well as Esperanto. The fact that Esperantists had by then built a sizable worldwide community even without much interest in Esperanto initially demonstrated for Hidekatsu the feasibility of switching to easy-to-learn scripts and languages.

Long before the establishment of the “universal” or “inclusive design” concept in engineering in the 1960s, he and other

progressive intellectuals were proposing such “designs.” Their aim was to empower children with educational disadvantages stemming from physical disabilities, discrimination, and poverty. This article aims to be a preliminary exploration of *Moji to Gengo* with an eye to uncovering the history of early “inclusive-design” language reform in Japan.

1. Introduction

A missionary at Hsing-hua in Fukien Province once wrote, “China has a government of the literati, for the literati, and by the literati.”¹ Tao Xingzhi (陶行知 1891-1946) a renowned educator, once expressed the hope that China’s Romanization movement would make possible “a real education of the mass, by the mass, and for the mass.”² This is the main sense in which I mean “inclusiveness” in the design of writing, one that would, as much as possible, allow everyone to participate in society and government. This was once one of the core aims of the Romanization and Esperanto movements.

As sociolinguists know, the Roman alphabet is one of the most inclusive scripts ever in use, with a long history of facilitating literacy. According to the 1958 UNESCO definition of literacy, “A literate person is one who can, with understanding, both read and write a short, simple statement on his or her everyday life.”³ Employing that definition, I think it can be agreed that there were many people in the 1930s in both Japan and China who were not fully literate; that by definition, to not be fully literate is to be excluded, to not be able to participate fully in society; that in a society where some are fully literate but many are not, there is great inequality in terms of access to information, wealth, and control of one’s life; and that groups that are typically discriminated against, such as the disabled, the poor, women, and people of color, generally include a disproportionate percentage of the illiterate and semi-literate. The circle of researchers that Saitō Hidekatsu (1908-1940) was a part of sought to help such discriminated and disadvantaged groups by reforming the orthography.

2. Language Reform

Hidekatsu's circle of reformers was not the first. There has been a strong movement to simplify writing, both the style and the script, since at least the late nineteenth century. Many reformers have aimed to help members of the kinds of disadvantaged groups mentioned above to acquire the ability to read and write. Other reasons given for reform have included the hope of making writing more rational, economical, and efficient. For instance, around 1885 Taguchi Ukichi, who is sometimes remembered as the "Adam Smith" of Japan, advocated the use of the Roman alphabet for writing Japanese in the hope that writing would become easier to learn, that Japan's national wealth would increase, and that a flowering of civilization would ensue.⁴ Yamada Bimyo, who competed with Futabatei Shimei for the honor of having written Japan's first modern novel, advocated the "genbun itchi" (言文一致) or modern colloquial style because he believed that such a style would be easier to read and write, and that this, too, would lead to a more democratic society in which Japanese literature would blossom.

It is fascinating to me that a very "inclusive" approach to written language reform emerged, in the 1930s or possibly earlier. This I label an "inclusive design" or "universal design" approach, but this was also a new vision of written language in which language diversity would be protected, like the protection of biological diversity. Even today this vision, the one I consider here, seems fresh and worth considering. It advocates three aspects of written language change:

1. Acceptance of the value of dialect and using it in public school education
2. Recognition of the value of the Japanese spoken in all regions of Japan (including stigmatized dialects), not only the privileged Japanese that gained prominence as the "National Language".⁵
3. Use of Esperanto for communication between Japanese and non-Japanese speakers

I have found these three pillars of written language reform in the writings of the Esperantist, Romanization advocate, and sociolinguist Saitō Hidekatsu. After a preliminary survey of the writings of intellectuals at the time connected to Hidekatsu in the 1930s, I have seen much evidence that his views were shared among a small but significant network of progressive sociolinguists, historians, and other intellectuals in his day, in Japan, China, and other countries.⁶

3. Who was Hidekatsu?

In 1939 the Japanese authorities charged Hidekatsu with being the ringleader of a Comintern conspiracy, aimed at overthrowing the government of Japan, but there is no evidence for that level of anti-government resistance.⁷ It is true that he was critical of the “national polity” or *kokutai* (国体) ideology, that he took a scientific approach to language, that he advocated the use of dialect even in writing, that he advocated the democratization of writing in various ways, and that he actively promoted Esperanto, but the consensus in postwar research is that the notorious Special Higher Police fabricated a story to portray Hidekatsu as Communist ringleader.⁸

Like many other liberal and progressive Japanese intellectuals, Hidekatsu was opposed to the Second Sino-Japanese War. It is his vocal opposition, in fact, for which he has been remembered as a “friend of China.” But the variety of ways in which his recommendations for social reform were advanced is reflected in the variety of labels attached to him. He is also remembered as a man who fought against linguistic imperialism, who fought against language discrimination, and who fought for international peace.⁹ Much recent research has focused on the restoration of Hidekatsu’s honor, since he was unfairly punished under the “Public Security Preservation Law of 1925” (治安維持法) by being imprisoned for a long period that ended with his death through tuberculosis.

Setting aside his fascinating life story, I am focusing today on

his ideas and those of the network of intellectuals that he was a part of—a network that communicated via Esperanto and other languages. He was active in language reform on a number of fronts—Esperanto, Romanized Japanese, and research on dialects. One of the journals that he edited and probably the most oriented toward scholarly research was *Moji to gengo*. (13 volumes were published between September 1934 and May 1938). The journal *Moji to gengo* tended to focus on reform-related sociolinguistic research. Hidekatsu's arrest and imprisonment in 1939, along with the arrest of many of its contributors by the secret police, meant that this journal was short-lived, but in its pages one finds a variety of interesting articles on topics such as the present state of the Esperanto and Romanization movements in East Asia, how best to Romanize the dominant Tokyo dialect and other Japanese dialects, and ongoing struggles against linguistic imperialism in Japan's colonies.

There was an Esperanto movement in both China and Japan, and of course, in other East Asian countries. There was also a Romanization movement in China and Japan, and it overlapped with the so-called “proletarian Esperanto movement,” a movement that aimed to fulfill the dream of Zamenhof, the inventor of Esperanto, i.e., linking Esperanto to a global movement for world peace.¹⁰ Back to the overlap between Esperanto and Romanization, Hidekatsu himself was one of the most well-informed people in Japan about the situation in China. He said that the Romanization advocates were, for the most part, Esperantists.¹¹ Chinese experimented with Romanizing their language for at least a few years around 1940 and those experiments seemed to show that Romanization could easily be adopted as an alternative script in China.¹² It was a success in Japan, too, according to Marshall Unger, during a slightly later period—the late 1940s, in an experiment involving 100 public schools using textbooks written in Romanized Japanese, directed by the American occupation authorities (GHQ/SCAP).¹³

I think the best quote summarizing Hidekatsu's views on written language reform is the following:

“The main purpose of the Romanization movement is to make the acquisition and presentation of knowledge easier, and to disseminate knowledge. In order to broadly disseminate knowledge among the people, there is no way forward except to use *kana* or the Roman alphabet rather than Chinese characters. As long as the Japanese language uses the Chinese character-kana-mix style [漢字カナ交じり文] the masses, who do not have the time or money to sufficiently learn it, will not be able to acquire knowledge, and knowledge will be monopolized by the ruling class, which is only one segment of society as a whole. The role that the Roman alphabet performs domestically will be performed by Esperanto internationally. Language, too, is created by human beings as a means of production, and when you think about the fact that it has been developed by human beings, one can recognize the possibility of improving and reforming language according to our needs. The fact that Esperanto has overcome such opposition and indifference and spread so widely proves the possibility of artificially and intentionally constructing language. The Roman alphabet serves the important function of democratizing Japanese, so what function does Esperanto serve? It serves two functions: introducing dialectic language theories and providing people with experience when imagining the creation of Esperanto. That also helps with the democratization of Japanese. The democratization of Japanese will accelerate the development of Esperanto. The linguistic liberation of the colonies (in Korea, Taiwan, and Manchuria) is necessary. We should not force people in the colonies to use Japanese but should promote the movements to Romanize their local languages [民族語] in the colonies in order to let those local languages develop freely. And we should use Esperanto for communication between the colonies and Japan.”¹⁴

4. Chinese Written Language Rationalization Movements

A significant number of Chinese upheld the same three pillars as Hidekatsu and his group in Japan: the Roman alphabet, dialects, and Esperanto. In

Shanghai, there was a very strong movement. It included the great writer, literary critic, and social reformer Lu Xun as well as a group of Shanghai Esperantists. In August 1934 a group of Shanghai Esperantists set up the first organization for the promotion of Latinxua, which is Latinxua Xin Wenz in full (拉丁化新文字), and their first pamphlet *The Latinization of Chinese Writing* was very popular. (The Esperantists of China were, in fact, the first to systematically advocate Romanization of Chinese).¹⁵

In June 1935 Ye Laishi 葉籟士 (1911-1994, You Raishi in J. pron., penname Jelezo) published *An Outline of Latinization* 拉丁化概論. (“Latinization” is another word for “Romanization”). Ye Laishi’s book explains how illiteracy in China can be eradicated by adopting the Roman alphabet. He sent a copy of it to Hidekatsu in Japan, and along with it a letter explaining that due to severe censorship the main point of the book had been distorted.¹⁶ Communication between Japanese and Chinese intellectuals was carefully monitored, of course, but the Esperanto movement and Romanization movements seem to have been heavily suppressed in China also. Hidekatsu was so impressed with Ye Laishi’s ideas that he translated the book at his own expense into a 50-page booklet entitled *The Theory behind Chinese Language Romanization* Shinago Roumaji ka no riron 『支那語ローマ字化の理論』.

Lu Xun himself shared Hidekatsu’s core views on reform. He believed that someday the human race would need to have a common language and he demonstrated a solid understanding of the Esperanto movement.¹⁷ A quick perusal of his writings on Esperanto and the Romanization of Chinese indicates that his vision of where written Chinese needed to go was essentially the same as Hidekatsu’s vision of where written Japanese needed to go. Lu Xun went beyond merely favoring phonetic scripts. He envisioned ordinary people communicating via utterances in their native dialects that were transcribed via the Roman alphabet.¹⁸ Hidekatsu respected Lu Xun to the extent that he translated and explicated some of Lu Xun’s writings on Romanization and the transcription of speech. In March 1937, five months after Lu Xun’s death,

Hidekatsu wrote a short piece “Rojin wo tomurau” (Holding a Memorial Service for Lu Xun. Apparently, Hidekatsu was one of the first to write about the significance of Lu Xun’s life after his death). This shows considerable commitment, considering the political context in Japan.

People were panicking so much about the growing popularity of Latinxua, in fact, that Qu Qiubai, (瞿秋白; 1899-1935), a celebrated leader of the Communist Party of China in the late 1920s, was “seized and put to death by a KMT firing squad.”¹⁹ That was in 1935. In fact, 1935 to 1936 was a pivotal moment in East Asian history. (One should keep in mind that one of the major events of the 20th century, i.e., the Spanish Civil War was also underway). There were mass arrests of anarchists in Japan; the Japanese Communist Party collapsed; the established and liberal scholar of constitutional law Minobe Tatsukichi (1873-1948), was basically de-established; Japanese “national polity” (国体) ideology (or “emperor worship”) became completely dominant; the February 26 Incident (二・二六事件) attempted coup d’état occurred; members of small progressive Esperanto groups such as Marŝu-sha, Frato, and the Kyoto Pro-Es Kenkyūkai were arrested; and the Kōminka (皇民化) process started in Taiwan, explicitly making people on the island subjects of the Japanese emperor. Linguistic imperialism was underway in Japan as well as in Japan’s colonies. Throughout China, too, the Roman alphabet in the form of Latinxua “was interdicted and publications dealing with the system were confiscated and suppressed.”²⁰

5. Japanese Written Language Rationalization Movements

Significant proponents of Esperanto and Romanization involved with Hidekatsu included Takakura Teru (1891-1986), who advocated both Romanization and Esperanto. His views were similar to those of Hidekatsu. In 1936 he wrote that people in the future should write as they speak and use the Roman alphabet.²¹ He wrote an article entitled “The Essence of the Romanization Movement” (ローマ字運動の本質) for *Moji to gengo*, a

journal that Hidekatsu edited.²² Hasegawa Teru (1919-1947), the antiwar activist and Esperantist, the woman who did antiwar radio broadcasts in Shanghai during the War, wrote for Ye Laishi's Esperanto magazine. And Hirai Masao (1908-1996), the scholar of Japanese language education and Japanese language studies, advocated Romanization. In the postwar period Hirai worked on education for the disabled, consistent with his goal of a more inclusive script, the alphabet. Hidekatsu edited a few journals, in fact. All these figures wrote articles for journals that Hidekatsu edited.

As I mentioned, the words “rational,” “economical,” and “efficient” had been frequently used between the Meiji period and the 1930s to describe the benefits of adopting the Roman alphabet as an alternative script for Japanese.²³ Similar expressions were used in the Chinese debates. Indeed, Hidekatsu himself used these words, and while many other eminent scholars and literati had made similar statements, the 1930s was not a propitious time for radical reform of writing, unfortunately for Hidekatsu and many of his contemporaries, both Japanese and Chinese. They were part of an international network of non-state, grassroots or even “public” intellectuals who worked hard for what some would call today an “inclusive design” of language. Governments in Japan and China have almost always opposed these inclusive design movements. That is true of Japan, not only under the government during the War but also under the US dictatorship of General MacArthur during the Occupation (1945-1952). In China, inclusive design was opposed by the Republic of China (1912-49) as well as the CPC-dominated PRC (1949-).

There have been only brief experiments with inclusive design, and their history has been suppressed due to their positive results—demonstrating that Japanese and Chinese could read and write in the Roman alphabet just as Vietnamese do. In Japan, there was the GHQ/SCAP experiment with Romanized Japanese instruction detailed by J. Marshal Unger. In China there was Mao Zedong (1893–1976)'s brief flirtation with Romanized Chinese.²⁴ In 1936 Mao said,

In order to hasten the liquidation of illiteracy here we have begun

experimenting with Hsin Wen Tzu—Latinized Chinese. It is now used in our Party school, in the Red Academy, in the Red Army, and in a special section of the Red China Daily News. We believe Latinization is a good instrument with which to overcome illiteracy. Chinese characters are so difficult to learn that even the best system of rudimentary characters, or simplified teaching, does not equip the people with a really rich and efficient vocabulary. Sooner or later, we believe, we will have to abandon characters altogether if we are to create a new social culture in which the *masses fully participate*. We are now widely using Latinization and if we stay here for three years the problem will be solved.²⁵ (Author's italics)

In the words of John DeFrancis, when “the new alphabetic writing system for Chinese seeped into China, it was enthusiastically taken up by the left-wing movement throughout the country.” The place where it seeped in from had a significant community of Chinese speakers using it. That was a Mandarin-speaking community in the Soviet Union, who used the Sin Wenz (新文字) system of Romanization that was developed in the Soviet Union by Qu Qiubai (1899-1935) and V.S. Kolokolov (1896-1979).²⁶

6. Conclusion

It was the fervent hope of both the linguist who invented Latinxua as well as the linguist who invented Pinyin that China would become a democracy. Both were patriots who lived part of their life in exile. One was killed by the Nationalists or *Kuomintang*. Both were disliked by their government. Both knew what it was like to lack funds for their education. These two important figures were linguist Zhou Youguang (1906-1917), who died this year, and the linguist Qu Qiubai.²⁷ Why the authorities and those with a vested interest in preserving their intellectual status panic is not so hard to fathom. The scholar Florian Coulmas puts it this way: “Once written norms are established, they attract emotional attachment,” and

“discussions about the reform of a given orthography or script often resemble a religious war more than a rational discourse....”²⁸ Well, although it is true that many Chinese and Japanese can become emotional on the issue, both Hirai Masao and the Esperantist who wrote about Hidekatsu in his history of Japanese Esperantism, Oshima Yoshio, argued that class struggle is actually the driving force behind “emotion.”

Oshima Yoshio, the Esperantist who wrote about Hidekatsu in his history of Japanese Esperantism, argued in the following fashion:

“Feudalism continued for a long time in our country and influenced those aspects of our lives that related to language in various ways. One example that is often mentioned is how the ruling class built up thick walls between themselves and the common people that they dominated through Chinese characters and classical Chinese. Because of that, the Japanese language today has a number of different words and orthographies to express the same idea in speech or in writing, and this complexity causes confusion in our lives in various ways.”²⁹

Lu Xun worried about the intellectuals and literati, and wrote,

“The gentry deliberately kept the writing system difficult, fearing that if writing became easy the masses would no longer venerate it and would also no longer hold the gentry in respect. Characters were a fatal disease: China’s very life depended on getting rid of them.”³⁰

The same can be said about “colloquialization,” phoneticization, or other kinds of written language rationalization or democratization. It is striking that even in the case of a historical figure with the stature of Lu Xun, who attempted to radically modernize much of Chinese culture, few scholars have taken an interest in the Romanization and Esperanto movements in China and Japan that he supported.

¹ John de Francis, *Nationalism and Language Reform in China* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1950) 27.

² John de Francis, *Nationalism and Language Reform in China* 116.

³ “The Plurality of Literacy and its Implications for Policies and Programs”

(2004).<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001362/136246e.pdf>

⁴ Taguchi, *Romaji zasshi*.

⁵ Kudo Michihiro, *Tokko ni ubawareta seishun: Esuperantisuto Saito Hidekatsu no higeki* [Youth snatched away by the Special Higher Police: the tragedy of the Esperantist Saito Hidekatsu 特高に奪われた青春：エスペランティスト斎藤秀一の悲劇], (Fuyo shobo, 2017) 94.

⁶ One can get a picture of the size and impact of the Romanization and other phoneticizing movements, such as the *kana* movement, by perusing Yasuda Toshiaki's new book, *Kanji haishi no shiso shi* 漢字廃止の思想史 (Heibonsha, 2016).

⁷ This is what happened to Hidekatsu when he was arrested at the age of 29, according to Kobayashi Tsukasa: On 5 June 1939 Hidekatsu was arrested and taken in for questioning by the Special Higher Police. Takakura Teru (1891-1986), Hirai Masao, and others, including some students from Waseda University, were also arrested in connection with Hidekatsu. All the people arrested were supporters of Nippon shiki (Japan-style) romanization. They were falsely accused of being involved in a left-wing language movement and as a consequence were mercilessly forced to spend years in prison. Okubo Kakuzo, a Waseda student, died as a result of the shock. The official document detailing why Hidekatsu was arrested under the Peace Preservation Law was prepared by a Mr. Hayashi. When one reads it, one finds that he was guilty of the following crimes:

1. Submitting enlightening articles to various magazines
2. Publishing the journal *Moji to gengo*
3. Publishing *The Theory behind Chinese Language Romanization*

(Shinago roumaji ka no riron, mentioned above).

4. Corresponding with progressive intellectuals abroad

5. Publishing Latinigo

The police claimed without any evidence that Hidekatsu was instigated to do these things by Comintern and that these activities were connected with the Esperanto language movement. See Kobayashi Tsukasa, “Gengo sabetsu to tatakatta Saito Hidekatsu,” *Asahi Jaanaru* 12.15 (1978) 87.

⁸ Kudo, *Tokko ni ubawareta seishun: Esuperantisuto Saito Hidekatsu no higeki* 100-104.

⁹ Kobayashi Tsukasa, “Gengo sabetsu to tatakatta Saito Hidekatsu” 86-91. Hidekatsu may be the one who coined the term “linguistic imperialism” as *gengo teikokushugi*. See Sato Jisuke, *Fubuku nozora ni: Esuperantisuto Saito Hidekatsu no shogai* 吹雪く野づらに : エスペランティスト 斉藤秀一の生涯 (Tsuruoka City, Yamagata Prefecture: Tsuruoka Shoten, 1997) 240. In January 1936 he attacked Japan’s linguistic imperialism in the 8th volume of *Moji to gengo* using this term.

¹⁰ Ian Rapley has written an entire doctoral thesis on the Esperanto movement in Japan, and in that fascinating thesis he includes discussion of the proletarian Esperanto strain. See *Green Star Japan: language and internationalism in the Japanese Esperanto movement, 1905-1944* (DPhil. University of Oxford, 2013).

¹¹ Hidekatsu, “Kokuji ron to Esperanchisto to no renkei,” *Gengo to moji*, p.22.

¹² John de Francis, *Nationalism and Language Reform in China*.

¹³ J. Marshall Unger, *Literacy and Script Reform in Occupation Japan: Reading between the Lines* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

¹⁴ Kobayashi Tsukasa, *Esperanto undou no tenbou* (Sekai Bunka Kenkyukai, 1978) 126. 朝比賀昇, 萩原洋子『エスペラント運動の展望』(世界文化研究会, 1978年) Most of this quote also appears in Asahiga Noboru, エスペラント運動の展望 (Perspektivo sur la Esperanto-Movado) (Sekai bunka kenkyuu kai: Tokyo, 1978) 10.

¹⁵ John de Francis, *Nationalism and Language Reform in China* 114.

¹⁶ From book Satō, *Fubuku nozora ni: Esuperantisuto Saito Hidekatsu no shogai* 242.

¹⁷ From book Satō, *Fubuku nozora ni: Esuperantisuto Saito Hidekatsu no shogai* 249.

¹⁸ From book Satō, *Fubuku nozora ni: Esuperantisuto Saito Hidekatsu no shogai* 249.

¹⁹ John de Francis, *Nationalism and Language Reform in China* 115.

²⁰ John de Francis, *Nationalism and Language Reform in China* 115.

²¹ Quoted in Hirai Masao, *Kokugo kokuji mondai no rekishi* 606. 「日本国民文学の成立 下」『思想』(1936年9月) 88-89.

²² *Moji to gengo* 12.

²³ Regarding Chinese, he uses these terms in his essay “The Use of the Roman Alphabet in Chinese Language Education” (志那語教育におけるローマ字の利用), *Sougou Kokugo Kyouiku* 30 Kou 『綜合国語教育三十講』(Kouseikaku 厚生閣, February 1939).

²⁴ *Literacy and Script Reform in Occupation Japan* (Oxford, 1996).

²⁵ John DeFrancis, “The Prospects for Chinese Writing Reform,” *Sino-Platonic Papers* (June 2006).

²⁶ <http://www.pinyin.info/romanization/sinwenz/index.html>

²⁷ Tim Hancock, “China Linguist's 109th Birthday Wish: Democracy,” <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/china-linguists-109th-birthday-wish-democracy-041610546.html>

Qu and a Russian, V.S. Kolokolov, collaborated on the initial Sin Wenz system of Mandarin romanization. John de Francis, *Nationalism and Language Reform in China* 91.

²⁸ İlker Aytürk, “Script Charisma in Hebrew and Turkish: A Comparative Framework for Explaining Success and Failure of Romanization,” *Journal of World History*, vol. 21, no. 1 (March 2010) 113.

²⁹ Oshima Yoshio, *Minzoku to kotoba* (Otsuki Shoten, 1956) 52. 民族とことば大島義夫編 (講座日本語, 第1巻) 大月書店, 1956.2

³⁰ John DeFrancis, *The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy* (U of Hawai'i Press, 1984) 249.