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## SINO-PLATONIC PAPERS

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**Schriftfestschrift:**  
Essays on Writing and Language  
in Honor of John DeFrancis  
on His Eightieth Birthday

edited by  
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*Okinawan Writing Systems, Past, Present, and Future*  
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BACKGROUND

*The aims of this paper* My aims here are to introduce basic information about the writing systems of Okinawan since the inception of written records in Okinawa, to place them into a typological framework, and to point out their differences from and similarities to the Japanese writing system from which they are derived. I close by looking at the future of Okinawan writing.

*The Kingdom of the Ryukyus and Japan* The Kingdom of the Ryukyus began as the state of Chuuzan, which had become a small entrepôt trading nation by the late 1300's. By the early 1500's it had asserted its control over all of the Ryukyus. In 1609 it was subjugated by the Satsuma feudatory, had its territory north of Okinawa island taken away, and was made to pay onerous taxes. In 1879 it lost its last shred of sovereignty to the newly formed centralized Japanese state, and henceforth became Okinawa prefecture. (For details see Kerr 1958:60-392.)

*Okinawan and Japanese* Okinawan is, broadly speaking, the speech of Okinawa island, part of the Northern Ryukyuan language, which is spoken in innumerable highly varying dialects, many mutually unintelligible, from Okinawa island in the south to Amami Oshima and Kikai islands in the north. All of the Ryukyus are well south of Kyushu and northeast of Taiwan.

I will, however, use the term "Okinawan" here specifically to mean the closely related dialects of the Naha-Shuri area, long the cultural and political center of the Ryukyu kingdom and now of Okinawa prefecture.

Northern Ryukyuan constitutes one of probably four Ryukyuan languages, the others being Miyako, Yaeyama, and Yonaguni. All these languages are mutually unintelligible, and all are also mutually unintelligible with any dialect of Japanese. The commonly held but largely unexamined notion that the Ryukyuan languages are dialects of Japanese is one based on politics, not on any linguistic criterion. This notion is inadvertently abetted by the fact that the Ryukyuan languages are genetically closely related to Japanese. Further, it is one-sided, since no Japanese go around saying that Tokyo Japanese is a dialect of, say, Okinawan.

*Writing systems and society* Previous Okinawan writing systems were *de facto* standards. As far as we know, no central body was laying down the rules. There simply was a tradition that was followed.

There is no standard modern Okinawan writing system, because the Okinawan language is being "ignored to death" by those who might save it, namely government, media, and educators. If Okinawan is to survive, a *de jure* writing system is needed, one in which a lively written communication may once again develop.

## OKINAWAN AND THE DE FRANCIS CLASSIFICATION OF WRITING SYSTEMS

The writing systems of Okinawan all fall within the DeFrancis (1989:58) classification scheme under the rubric of either pure syllabic or a mixture of pure syllabic and morphosyllabic. DeFrancis gives Japanese (1989:131-143) as an example of these, since it has developed two so-called kana syllabaries. Yet it has never managed to break free of the thrall of the morphosyllabic kanji. That Okinawan should also have had such systems is no accident, since it has borrowed and adapted Japanese writing.

## TIME/TYPE-CLASSIFICATION OF OKINAWAN WRITING SYSTEMS

*Archaic age* The writing of this age is the earliest available to us, with records from 1501 to the first half of the 1600's. The earliest materials are royal steles (Tsukada 1968:184-185, 307-308), and the writing system reached its zenith (and its end) in the compilation, over a period of nearly a century (from 1531 to 1623), of the *Omoro sooshi*, or book of *omoro* songs (Ikemiya 1987a, Hokama and Saigoo 1972).

Typologically this system is largely pure syllabic, using a syllabary, namely hiragana, with only a sprinkling of kanji, to write the Okinawan, then in use as a language of narrative and song. While we discern no important writing-system distinction between the steles and the *Omoro sooshi*, the language of the two is slightly different. I assume that the stele language is formal narrative language, while that of the *Omoro sooshi* is the language of song, and preserves earlier elements. In addition, Japanese language is frequently intermixed in the case of the steles, but not in the *Omoro sooshi* (Serafim 1990). Writing is said to have been introduced from Japan around 1200. (Sakihara [1987:8] gives it as 1187.)

Examples of the stele writing system are as follows, with explanations immediately below. (Examples are from Serafim 1990 [Tsukada 1968].)

- (1) <kerai-wa- tihe, konomi-yowa- tihe>  
build-HONORIFIC-ing, plan -HONORIFIC-ing  
'building, planning'  
From the Yarazamori Fort stele (1554)
- (2) <ore- mesiyowa- tihe>  
descend-HONORIFIC-ing  
'descending'  
From the Madama-Minato stele (1522)
- (3) <tasikiya-kuki, tui- sasi- yowa- tihe,>  
*dashikya*-spike stick-thrust-HONORIFIC-ing  
'hammering in the *dashikya*-wood spike,  
asaka-'ne, to-'me-wa- tihe,>  
*asaka-geen* stop- HONORIFIC-ing  
placing the *asaka* wood and the *geen* reed'  
From the Yarazamori Fort stele (1554)
- (4) <inori-mesiyowa- tiyaru>  
pray -HONORIFIC-PAST  
'(the one) who prayed'  
From the Yarazamori Fort stele (1554)

The angled brackets enclose transliterated writing, with the value of each kana given in Kunrei-style romanization. The double apostrophes indicate a ditto mark in text. Commas are as in the originals, but I have placed hyphens and spaces to aid the eye in analysis of text.

Examples of the writing system in the *Omoro sooshi* are as follows (Serafim 1990 [Nakahara and Hokama 1967:136A, 270A]):

- (5) <siyori mori kusuku, tari siyo, kerahe-wa>  
Shuri grove castle truly indeed build- HONORIFIC  
'indeed, constructs Shuri castle'
- (6) <kami-teta no, maburi- yowaru ansi-osoio>  
gods-sun SUBJECT protect-HONORIFIC lord-ruler  
'our lord, whom the gods and the sun protect'

All examples in earliest surviving texts are done in brushwriting, or in an imitation thereof on steles. Voicing marks are frequently omitted, and the orthography in many other respects does not match the pronunciation of modern Japanese kana. Variations in the spelling of a word show that there was not a one-to-one correspondence of spelling to pronunciation.

I know of no English-language sources for the stele inscriptions other than what is discussed here. English-language sources for the *Omoro sooshi* are Sakihara (1987) and Drake (1990), though neither dwells on the writing system as such. In addition there are Serafim (1990, 1977, [in preparation]). The latter two treat the writing system in detail. Japanese-language sources include Nakamoto (1990:783-871), specifically on the writing system, and Hokama & Saigoo (1972) and Nakahara & Hokama (1965, 1967). Many interesting recent exegeses of *omoro* have appeared, in a long series by Nakamoto, Higa, and Drake (1984-present), and a series recently collected into a book (Ikemiya 1987b), to which I have also contributed (Serafim 1987).

*Classical age* The writing system of the classical age developed during the first few generations under the suzerainty of Satsuma, and was fully formed by the 1700's. Typologically it is a mixed kana-kanji system, in that respect mimicking the Japanese writing system. By this time well educated Okinawan males of the ruling class could read Japanese as well as Okinawan (and Chinese).

The writing system differed from that of the Archaic age in two important respects: (1) as already noted, this system was a mixed one; (2) the spelling conventions for the syllabary portions differed from those of the Archaic age of only a few generations before.

The variety and amount of available texts for the study of the writing system of this period are also greater than those for the Archaic period. Text types include the *kumiodori* (dance dramas); *ryuuka* (Ryukyuan songs); and written histories, compiled at the direction of the court. The latter provide a bridge, since at least the book that I cite below attempts to use archaic orthography for songs, though not always successfully. I give here a brief example from the *Nakazato kyuuki* (Takahashi and Ikemiya [1972:3]), where Classical orthography has intruded:

- (7) <mesiyauro>  
mishooru  
'says/does'

Note the treatment of the equivalent of Archaic <yowa-ru> here. Cf. (2) and (4) above, and (9) and (10) below. In examples below, for kanji (in caps) I cite in Japanese or English.

An example of a piece of song from a *kumiodori* is as follows (KKKJ 1963: 167A, from the *kumiodori* called *Kookoo no maki* [The book of filial piety]):

- (8) <kaniyarū MOMO KA HOO ya / YUME yatiyaumo MI- danu>  
 kaneru mumukwafuya / !imi yachon n- dan.  
 (kaneeru mumukwafuuya / !imi yachon nn- dan.)  
 such happiness TOPIC / dreams-even see-not  
 'I do not see such happiness even in dreams.'

Also from KKKJ (1963:175A) is the following *ryuuka*:

- (9) <danziyu kareyoshiya / irade sasi- miseru //>  
 danju kariyushiya / !iradi sashi-miseru //  
 (danju kariyushiya / !iradi sashi-miseeru //)  
 truly auspicious / choosing point-HON. //  
 'My, how auspicious (the day) that you choose!'

<o HUNE no TUNA TOre- ba / KAZE ya matomo>  
 !uni nu tsina turi- ba / kaji ya matumu.  
 !uuni nu tsina turi- ba / kaji ya matumu.)  
 HON-ship 's rope grasp-when / wind TOP. straight-on  
 'You but grasp your boat's line to have the wind come on full.'

It is an aspect of both styles that suprasegmental distinctions, including vowel length, vanish, since these are songs. Thus, the parenthesized material. I ignore other differences of the classical and modern language here. Spelling varies, as with ...<miseru>, which is more frequently seen as:

- (10) ...<mesiyairu>

for example in *Kookoo no maki* (KKKJ 1963:174B).

*Modern age* Since the late 19th century orthography has unraveled substantially, yet the *general* situation is not chaotic.

While *Ryuuka* are still written and performed, the way most people see Okinawan written most often is as loanwords in a Japanese text, for example in Okinawan newspapers or magazines. (Okinawa has an active publishing industry.) Thus, people see isolated words in katakana (just as with other "foreign" words), with no standard spelling.

Difficulties include the written differentiation between phonological smooth and abrupt onset of voice at the beginning of words, and between, e.g., *tu* and *to*, for which the Japanese syllabary is unequipped save through a digraphic spelling. Thus the suffix *-gutu* 'like, as' might be written <guto> (a carryover from Archaic and Classical spelling) or with a digraph, as in <guto> (an innovation following similar Standard Japanese innovations), though all agree that it should not be written <gutu>, which would be pronounced *gutsu* or the like. The problem with <guto> is that then one might be at a loss for how to write *-gutooru* 'which is like/as', since <to> is already in use to write *tu*. (Cf. the Rinken Bando <guto> and <gouto> as furigana for *-gutu* [1990:9]. For more on furigana see below.) This is essentially a problem in awareness and use (or non-use) of the Classical conventions, since one may choose some of the more well known ones, such as

<to> for *tu*, but be ignorant of the convention of <tau> for *too*. When only individual words are used in an otherwise Japanese text, such problems rarely come up, but they will either be dealt with when writing out an Okinawan text, or confusion will result.

First I take up the way isolated Okinawan words are handled in Japanese texts, and then I discuss how Okinawan texts are handled. I do not pretend to treat all possible types of cases.

The following example is from Nishimura (1990), an appreciation of the work of the movie director Takamine Goo. Underlining denotes use of katakana, and the equal sign denotes the use of a length bar, a common feature of katakana for showing that the vowel sound corresponding to the preceding syllabograph is to be lengthened. Nishimura is following the orthography for the movie title used by Takamine himself:

- (11) <utina= . imi . munugatai>  
 !uchinaa !imi munugatai (name of a film)  
 'Okinawa doriimu shoo' [sic] (name of a film)  
 'Okinawa dream show'

More on this presently.

The following examples are from Takamine (1990), a transcript from a talk by Takamine in Japanese. All but the first are from film titles:

- (12) <yamato>  
 yamatu  
 'Japan proper'
- (13) <tirudai>  
 chirudai  
 'despair/discouragement'
- (14) <untama giru=>  
 !untama giruu  
 'Untama Giruu' (personal name)

All are unexceptional in their use of kana for writing Okinawan, save for one point, and that is that (13) and (14) may be seen as entire texts of a sort. Perhaps Takamine uses katakana in his film titles because he sees his audience as not being limited to Okinawa, in which case they will treat the words they see as loanwords, and therefore as appropriate to write in katakana.

In the same talk Takamine says -- as can be determined from context -- *!uchinaa limi munugatai* (i.e., [11]), but this time the transcriber inexplicably writes the title in kanji, rendering the language spoken a guessing game:

- (15) <OKI NAWA YUME MONO GATARI>  
 !uchinaa !imi munugatai (name of a film)  
 'Okinawan doriimu shoo' [sic] (name of a film)  
 'Okinawan dream show'

So then let me take up the question of items written in kanji. In premodern times Okinawan words were being coined and written. Given the Classical writing system, they were frequently written with kanji. Now such words are used frequently in print media, especially in newspaper culture pages or intellectual journals, and of course in books, published even in

Tokyo and widely disseminated. The question then is: What language are these items *really* in? The answer is: It depends on who is reading. Kanji may be read in the original Okinawan pronunciation (typically by an Okinawan) or in a Japanese equivalent (by either Okinawans or others). If read off as Japanese, they may be seen as Okinawan loanwords, or simply as specialized Japanese terms. Since such loans are actually loan translations (i.e., item-for-item replacements), their status is easy to miss. Here are two closely related examples from Kadena (1982):

## (16) &lt;CROWN SHIP&gt;

kan sen (Japanese) /  
kwan shin (Okinawan)  
crown ship

'ship of Chinese emperor's envoy sent to crown the Ryukyuan king'

## (17) &lt;o- CROWN SHIP DANCEri&gt;

o- kan sen odo ri (Japanese) /  
!u- kwan shin' udu i (Okinawan)  
HON.-crown ship dance

'dances for the Chinese emperor's envoy'

As mentioned above, hiragana is also in use. It tends to be used when the entire text is Okinawan, and thus when Okinawan is not viewed as a foreign language, as opposed to the use of katakana in a Japanese-language text given above (*yamatu* in [12]). The example I give here is with mixed kana-kanji script, typologically just like Japanese. It may be either a continuation of the Classical system or an adaptation of the modern Japanese system. It probably is a little of both. It is seen for example in recent song lyrics. My example is from the popular group Rinken Bando, fronted by Teruya Rinken, producing a self-consciously Okinawan pop music, down to the lyrics. Here are excerpts from two songs. The first is from "Maa kai ga" [Where to?] (1987.2), and the second from "Nankuru" [Of its own accord] (1990.3):

(18) <ELDER\_BROTHER AGE-PLURAL ma-- kai- ga>  
nii see-ta maa- kai- ga

young-person-PLURAL where-toward-?  
'Young people! Where to?'

<yagatei SEVEN MONTH VILLAGE-PLAYbi>  
yagati shichigwachi mura- !ashibi

at last July village play

'At last it's the July village entertainment.'

<ELDER\_BROTHER> for *nii* of *nii*see goes against tradition, though it reflects the knowledge of the Japanese reading *nii* for the chosen character; it seems somehow to make semantic sense. The Classical equivalent is <TWO>, thus literally 'two-year-old' (KKKJ 1963:417A).

The length bar is used in Japanese hiragana text, too, for expressive lengthening, but it is regularly used for length (<ma> for *maa* above) in much modern Okinawan (including Funatsu [see below]).

Notice in the second lyrical line the spelling of *ti* as <te>, a digraph also widely in use in Standard Japanese for loanwords. Such spellings will appear frequently in Okinawan, since *ti* is part of the native phonology.

Note also that <SEVEN MONTH> is pronounced *shichigwachi*, a close relative of Japanese *shichigatsu*, and, in fact, a borrowing from Japanese. Note also the close (but irregular) correspondence for <PLAYbi> of Okinawan *!ashibi* and Japanese *asobi*. Recall the potentially variable readings of kanji compounds when there is no overt indication of pronunciation. That brings us to the following, from the 1990 book:

(19) < tiyu= waziyu nu asi >  
<NOW DAY ya ONE CORD n DRINKde; PLAYbana>  
chuu ya majun nudi !ashibana  
today TOP. together drinking let's-have.fun  
'Let's drink and have fun together today.'

Note that (19) includes furigana, that is, the readings of the kanji. This is a kindness both for Okinawans and Japanese, since few can figure out the kanji readings otherwise. Readers of Japanese will note that <ONE CORD> is also the Japanese *issho*, with a direct morphosyllabic relation to the kanji, whereas *maju* of Okinawan *majun* has only a semantic relation to them. In all the kanji-kana material note also the complex handling of predicates, typologically identical to the Japanese mixing of kanji and so-called okurigana, or following kana.

In Kina Shookichi's pop album "Blood line" (1989) the pattern of using furigana is also followed, but interestingly they are written in katakana, not hiragana, suggesting foreignness again; and indeed Kina tends to mix Japanese and Okinawan in his songs.

Even though, then, there are large-scale regularities still, the present-day scene in Okinawa is in a state of "every man for himself," with people simply coming up with an orthography willy-nilly, since the tradition of orthography has broken down with the abandonment of the language by the authorities in favor of Standard Japanese. What, then, of the future?

*The future* Needless to say, the Okinawan language may not survive. It is already endangered, as are thousands of other minority languages around the world. Therefore it may seem like folly to discuss the future of a writing system and orthography. Indeed, future Okinawan may be nothing more than a few loanwords in Japanese with Japanese pronunciation. If so, nothing more need be said beyond the statements above regarding the importation of Okinawan words into Japanese text using katakana. Even non-Japanese pronunciations will eventually become naturalized.

Let us suppose, though, that Okinawan does have a future. It will surely require standardization, then, and two main issues in such a standardization are the setting of appropriate stylistic variants (about which I have nothing further to say here) and the (re-)establishment of a fully developed writing system. (See also Serafim 1991.) Typologically that system may be (a) an alphabetic system, (b) some sort of syllabary system, or (c) a mixed kanji-kana system like Japanese.

A syllabary system might be a spelling-only adaptation of either or both of the Japanese syllabaries (analogous to computer software modifications), or an adaptation including new letters (analogous to hardware modifications). The latter has been proposed in a book by Funatsu (1988). He has invented 25 new kana, merged from existing kana, such as:

- (20) <to> + <u> → <tu> = tu (1988:12)  
 <te> + <i> → <ti> = ti (1988:16)  
 <ku> + <wa> → <kuwa> = kwa (1988:26)  
 <u> + <wi> → <wi> = !wi (1988:52)

An alphabetic system makes sense for Okinawan, because it is easy to learn, can be easily typed, and will make Okinawan easy and quick for foreigners to learn as well. It will also be a clear break from Japanese, which is what is threatening to displace Okinawan in the first place. It is a clear reaching out to the international community.

If such a step is taken, it will be easy to modify the phonemic alphabetic system in the *Okinawago jiten* (an Okinawan-Japanese dictionary [1963]), which has more phonemic oppositions than ordinary Okinawan, for example by deleting diacritics and accent notations, and by finding an easily typed symbol for the glottal stop, which looks like a question mark without a dot underneath.

- (21) KKKJ 1963
- |                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| New                | Here  |
| <ci> & <ci> → <ci> | = <i>chi</i>  |
| <si> & <si> → <si> | = <i>shi</i>  |
| <zi> & <zi> → <zi> | = <i>ji</i>   |
| <Q> & <Q> → <!>    | = ! (in complementary distribution)                   |
| <N>                | → <n> or <n'> = <i>n</i> or <i>n'</i> (as in Hepburn) |

Alternative (b) is an all-kana system. (Note the similarity to the Archaic period.) Such a system also has much to recommend it, though it will result in the language being much less available to non-Japanese. It will also require writing with spaces between "words." This problem is identical to that of the alphabetic approach, solved there by writing as separate those items with phrasal accent. The kana-based system must take the same approach. Since this all-kana writing resembles the Japanese technique used to write books meant for little children, it will take a great deal of self-esteem on the part of Okinawans to go ahead and implement it, considering likely jeers from the Japanese media.

Adopting an alphabetic system, a firm break with Japanese writing, steers clear of this problem, though it brings with it its own social penalties, such as that initially the older generation will not feel comfortable with it, and that Okinawans, rather than face only sneers in the case of kanji-less kana writing, may now face much nastier Japanese media comments, since they will turn their backs on an important cultural symbol of Japan, i.e., the entire writing system.

Note that Funatsu's innovation may be used with an all-kana or a mixed system. Funatsu himself, without ever stating why, has adopted a mixed system, but one in which he insists furigana always be present thereby making the writing system difficult to learn, fully as difficult as that of Japanese, yet rendering kanji redundant. It is unfortunate that Funatsu has taken the kanji road, but it is easy to adapt his system to an all-kana one.

Let me, then, discuss the mixed kanji-kana alternative. Those who assume that the Okinawan system ought to resemble the Japanese system will adopt this approach. Such an assumption may never be conscious, given the blinders that people wear. The problem then simply becomes one of adapting the Japanese system for writing in Okinawan.

This has occurred twice before, first in the Archaic system, adapted from the Japanese probably in the early part of the Kamakura period (1200's), and then again in the Classical system, adapted in the late 1600's. Certainly it would not be surprising to see yet a third adaptation, though in this case third time is *not* a charm!

Such an adaptation is essentially what Funatsu has done, though using his modified syllabary. A similar approach could easily be taken using presently existing letters to make digraphs. Included in any adaptation project will have to be determinations of which kanji may be used in what combinations (and therefore in what readings), what constitute correct kanji-and-kana sequences (i.e., okurigana rules), and so on, the very same rules that consume so much effort on the part of the Japanese in determining and learning what is correct in the Japanese writing system.

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