

Learning letters on cold nights

ANNA BEERENS

Professor Rubinger has produced a study about early modern literacy, that is both captivating and concise. This is no mean feat, given the vastness and complexity of the subject. With the help of original and often unfamiliar source material (one of the book's greatest assets) he manages to present a clear picture of the "the period before schooling became universal and regular" (p.2), that is, from the beginning of the Tokugawa era to the early years of the 20th century. His focus is on "commoners", mainly "the rural farming class" (p.2). Crucial to the book is the notion of persistent and dramatic "gaps in literacy attainment between leaders and followers in peasant villages", the so-called 'two cultures' phenomenon that "lasted well into the 19th century and possibly beyond" (p.7).

A broad scope

Rubinger is very much aware of the complexities of his subject. He refrains from using a "rigid definition" of literacy "beyond the notion of some ability to read and write" (p.2), because "...literacy takes different forms at different times for different sectors of the population" (p.3). Another key concept that remains undefined is 'village elite', in order to leave room for the diversity of the rural communities he describes. Of course he could have done otherwise, but this might have resulted in an altogether different book; the story of Japanese popular literacy can perhaps only be told by maintaining maximum openness. Rubinger's nuanced approach makes quite some demands of his readers, but I do not think he is 'vague'. He genuinely takes care to consistently put matters into context. It is a great achievement that he carries it off so well, and not only man-



ages to reveal patterns in the development of popular literacy (which is more or less what we expected him to do), but also to demonstrate again and again what difference literacy made in real people's lives.

Three centuries of history

Rubinger's book covers three centuries. The table of contents shows that he devotes 70 pages to the 17th and 82 pages to the 19th century, but only 32 pages to the 18th century. We will return to this imbalance below. Let us first take a look at the course of the argument. Rubinger begins by outlining the important role of (often highly literate) village officials in a country saturated with rules and regulations. These are the core of the 'village elite', that over the years also came to include wealthy farmers, local entrepreneurs, village physicians and the like. Rubinger's fascinating exploration of 17th-century writing skills, through the analysis of signatures, ciphers (*kaō*), carved seals and marks for the illiterate on 'Town Rules' (*sadame*), registers and apostasy oaths (*nanban kishōmon*) is entirely new to the study of literacy in Japan (for this part

of his research Rubinger took as an example the internationally acclaimed study of François Furet and Jacques Ozouf, *Reading and Writing: Literacy in France from Calvin to Jules Ferry*, Cambridge 1982). Rubinger contends that, during the 18th century, the quality of rural literate culture improved as a whole, but that very few people outside the 'village elite' moved beyond rudimentary literacy. To illustrate the general "enrichment of country culture" (p.94) he mentions amongst others the home encyclopedias (*setsuyōshū*) of the 'village elite', and the highly accessible agricultural manuals (*nōsho*) that could even be of use to farmers who were barely literate. However, remarkably, Rubinger does not investigate the level of actual skills present in the 18th century. "For the most part", he concludes, "literacy remained as it had been in the seventeenth century, the prerogative of the village leadership class" (p.110). Only in the first half of the 19th century literacy began to "expand beyond the limited confines of the provincial leadership group" (p.113). However, the 'two cultures' phenomenon persisted and there were still

pockets of illiteracy in rural areas in the early years of the 20th century. Here again Rubinger presents a number of fine sources that shed light on skills and literacy levels, including a village literacy survey from 1881, village election ballots (*ire-fuda*), and data from the *Rikugunshō* (Office of the Army) and *Monbushō* (Education Office).

The missing middle ground

What about this stagnation in the 18th century? Rubinger gives an excellent account of the dynamics of the ongoing urbanisation process and the positive impact this, on the whole, had on popular literacy. But he seems to wonder about the whereabouts of a middle group (between the 'village elite' and the poorest farmers) whose improved literacy skills might have shaken the notion of 'two cultures' (p. 111-112). Why was he unable to find them? The answer must lie in the bias of his approach, both in his focus on the rural situation and in his preference for documentary sources. Biographical sources indicate that throughout the Tokugawa period people made good use of their talents and achievements to fundamentally improve their circumstances. There can be little doubt that many of those who left for the urban centres, taking their accomplishments with them, belonged to this very middle group. Maruyama ōkyo (1733-1795, one of Japan's greatest painters), Yosa Buson (1716-1783, master of *haikai* and the *haiga* style of painting), Katayama Hokkai (1723-1790, *kanshi* poet and founder of the famous Kontonsha poetry society), and Hanawa Hokiichi (1746-1821, the revered blind *kokugaku* scholar), to name but a few, were from farming backgrounds. The first two settled in Kyoto, the others in Osaka and Edo respectively. They were no longer 'rural' and out of Rubinger's sight. Geographical and social mobility should not

be ascribed only to the very end of the 18th century, as Rubinger does (p.160). They were part of the mechanisms of the urbanisation process that, as Rubinger himself rightly points out, "had begun in the late sixteenth century" (p.82). Moreover, they should have been integrated into his treatment of the 'two cultures' phenomenon, for those who went to the cities not only left behind the ones who were not doing so badly, but also a lot of poor creatures, physically and mentally weighed down by their poverty, who had no opportunities whatsoever.

But all this does not fundamentally affect the story of popular literature in early modern Japan as presented by Rubinger. In fact the inclusion of mobility would have thoroughly supported his idea that literacy can "push some people forward while holding others back" and in this way may "actually increase the social distance between haves and have-nots" (p.1). This is an excellent book for those who want to gain insight into some fundamental aspects of early-modern Japan.

The title of this review is taken from a poem by Kobayashi Issa (1763-1827), quoted by Rubinger on page 158.

Anna Beerens studied Japanese and classical Chinese at the University of Leiden. She is affiliated to the Research School of Asian, African and Amerindian Studies (CNWS) at this same university and the author of *Friends, acquaintances, pupils and patrons, Japanese intellectual life in the late eighteenth-century: a prosopographical approach*, Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2006, also available as an on-line publication at www.dissertation.leidenuniv.nl. a.m.j.j.beerens@let.leidenuniv.nl