

Introduction

Eine falsche Hypothese ist besser als gar keine; denn daß sie falsch ist, ist gar kein Schade, aber wenn sie sich befestigt, wenn sie allgemein angenommen, zu einer Art von Glaubensbekenntniß wird, woran niemand zweifeln, welches niemand untersuchen darf, dieß ist eigentlich das Unheil woran Jahrhunderte leiden.

A false hypothesis is better than none at all, for that it is false does little harm. But if it becomes entrenched, if it gets generally accepted as a kind of creed that no one dares doubt or dares to examine—that is just the kind of mischief on which centuries come to ruin.

—Goethe, *Analysis and Synthesis*

Not so very long ago, when psychiatrists expected patients to free-associate “mouse” with “trap” rather than “pad,” the word “inscrutable” was often heard in colloquial English followed by “Oriental.” The phrase “inscrutable Oriental” had yet to become an embarrassing cliché. Times have changed, but a dinner menu full of Chinese characters remains for most Americans and Europeans the very picture of inscrutability.¹

I have taught the Japanese language since 1975 to students in New Zealand, Hawai‘i, Maryland, and Ohio. Before that I was officially a student of Japanese myself for ten years—though with Japanese, a native speaker of English never really stops being a student. Over the years, I have come to know hundreds of aspiring learners from just about every part of the world. Wherever I go, I am sure to find a knot of bright-eyed enthusiasts fascinated by those inscrutable Chinese characters, some so intensely that they lose sight of virtually all other aspects of the Japanese language. I know I am not misinterpreting their behavior, for I was once bitten by the bug myself.

This attachment to Chinese characters is in part just practical. If you want to read and write Japanese, then *kanji*, as the Japanese call them, simply must be learned. With a solid foundation in the spoken language, this can be a rewarding and enjoyable task. But the lure of *kanji* also has an

aesthetic aspect that often leads to an infatuation with the tastes of East Asian calligraphy. The kind of people who find formal gardens oppressive or museum galleries crammed with treasures too overwhelming to enjoy may discover a new world of understatement and elegance in the casual asymmetries and quiet palette of brush writing and ink drawing. In extreme cases, the attachment becomes an obsession: the enthusiast begins to perceive a grand pattern underlying all the characters, evidently unnoticed even by generations of East Asians themselves. Like a chess player memorizing openings, he commits each new character to memory as if taking a steroid for the brain or stashing away a newfound pearl of wisdom in some inner lockbox of intellectual wealth.

Sooner or later, almost every student of an East Asian language falls prey to such feelings or knows a fellow student who has done so. This book is for them—not to discourage their efforts or lessen their enjoyment of the great forest of *kanji*, but to enhance both by placing the forest in a larger, sunnier landscape. Each of its nine chapters is, to use the quaint antiquarian phrase, a curious tale about Chinese characters. Some are long, some short, but all have unexpected twists and turns. Although I have added some cross-references and tried to arrange the chapters roughly on a scale from “popular” to “academic,” the reader is invited to dip in at whatever place seems most intriguing. Each chapter takes up a different aspect of the lore of the so-called ideogram and raises questions that will, I hope, transform mere enchantment into deeper understanding. Some chapters may be a little rough for those without some background in linguistics, but none is beyond the grasp of the general reader—especially those contemplating a few months, if not a lifetime, of monkish devotion to a rosary of Chinese-character flashcards.