Media in Transition 6: From Stone to Papyrus at MIT
April 24-26th, 2009
"Re-thinking the Love and Labor of Reading"
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INTRODUCTION:

Recent popular critique of digital media might have us believe that our communication is no longer subject to a configuration of cumbersome physical space and time, and that our recent addiction to instantaneous connection and a stranger's intimacy in cyberspace dictates the sense and sensibility of the twenty-first century.[1] The changes in the communication ground rules seem so immediate and perfectly intuitive that one hardly remembers what it is like to *wait* in abeyance for correspondence. These days we can scarcely wait for a screen to open, jump and reload, or messages to promptly appear, disappear, and re-appear with appropriate responses. Our *impatience* with a slow-moving tempo, inconvenient disruptions and unstable connections of any kind bespeaks a distinct *tempo* and *temporality* through which we have come to occupy and experience the *affect* of our encumbered ontological existence. By way of *Wahon*, a pre-modern Japanese-style publication, this paper explores the culturally specific articulations of digital media technological intervention and other ramifications of reading/writing practices in contemporary Japan.

The world of *Wahon*, whose repertoire ranges from colorful woodblock print masterpieces and elegant cursive style scripts in brush and ink created for a select few in the ancient aristocracy, to well-circulated periodicals produced for the masses during the feudal era, testifies to something radically different, something like an 'analogue' tempo and temporality. While *Wahon* remains popularly available in Japan, the world of *Wahon* is still very much an uncharted terrain for scholarly investigation.[2] I argue that *Wahon* not only offers a historical perspective on an ongoing paradigm shift in reading/writing practices, but also illuminates the nature of the changing psychosomatic relationships we form with text.

Between December 2006 and August 2008, I conducted anthropological research in Tokyo in order to examine a moment of crisis in Japan. Inconsistent with Japan's national imperatives to institutionalize a successful socio-technological transformation into a "digital information society," in 2005 the state unanimously passed legislation to preserve and promote traditional print text culture. Like everywhere else in the world, the advent of digital communication media technology and ever-growing infrastructure that supports

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[1] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York, Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books ; Distributed by MIT Press, 2002), Vicente L. Rafael, "The Cell Phones and the Crowd: Messianic Politics in the Contemporary Phillipines," *Public Culture* 15, no. 3 (2003).

[2] While there exists a considerably body of literature on the mystique surrounding the mercantile practices of Wahon specialists, biographies of distinguished booksellers/collectors, and material aesthetics of Wahon and other antiquarian books, very little scholarly engagement with Wahon as a form of media has been conducted, except for a very informative, thorough bibliographic work recently produced by one of Kanda/Jimbo-cho bookstore owners, who is also a professor of bibliography, Hashiguchi Kônosuke. 橋口侯之介, *続和本入門ー江戸の本屋と本作り（Wahon for Beginners)* (東京: 平凡社, 2007), ──, *和本入門ー千年生きる書物の世界（Wahon for Beginners)* (東京: 平凡社, 2007(2005)).

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a fast (wireless) connection has engendered a novel form of sociality and incentives for innovative socio-politico-economic projects. Nevertheless, the disembodiment and disfiguration associated with digital writing practices have also generated pervasive social anxieties surrounding traditional reading/writing practices and the integrity of national culture in Japan.

During my fieldwork in Kanda/Jimbo-cho, an antiquarian bookstore quarter at the heart of Tokyo, I worked closely with *Wahon* specialist booksellers. Having changed countless hands and outlived 'their' generation, *Wahon* is fetishized as having miraculously retained '*aura*,' thus posing itself as antithetical to the regime of global capitalism and advancing digital technology. In contrast to digitally rendered texts on a screen, *Wahon* offers a tactile pleasure of leafing through delicate yet sturdy pages of special *washi*-paper, and an encounter with the *presence* of time. It forces us to *stop* and *enter its* time, rather than stopping its time at our disposal. [3] By re-positioning our bodies vis-à-vis the text, this paper tries to re-think the love and labor of reading.

National-Culture Crisis

My project offers an unusual point of intersection for the studies of the culturally specific articulation of technological effects on the everyday practice of writing/reading texts, the historical significance of the poetics and politics surrounding print culture, and the imagination of a national culture that is ushered in by the technological as well as social conditions.[4] Some social critics have argued that the nature of a social schism emanating from both the generational and technological gap is a source of contemporary problems in Japan, while others have problematized such a discourse.[5] Yet another popular

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[3] John Berger, *The Sense of Sight*, 1st American ed. (New York: Pantheon, 1985).

[4] Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), Patricia Crain, *The Story of A : The Alphabetization of America from the New England Primer to the Scarlet Letter* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy : The Technologizing of the Word* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1988), K. ojin Karatani, *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*, Post-Contemporary Interventions (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993 (1980)), Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 1st MIT Press pbk. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), Marshall McLuhan, "The Gutenberg Galaxy," in *The Gutenberg Galaxy : The Making of Typographic Man* (New York: New American Library, 1969), ———, *Understanding Media* (London: Routledge, 2001), Lisa Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines : Representing Technology in the Edison Era* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), Nanette Gottlieb(Twine), *Language and the Modern State : The Reform of Written Japanese* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1991).

[5] Andrea Arai, "The "Wild Child" Of the 1990s Japan," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 99, no. 4 (2000), ——, "Killing Kids: Recession and Survival in Twenty-First-Century Japan," *Postcolonial Studies* 6, no. 3 (2003), 宮台真司, 藤井良樹, and 中森明夫, eds., *新世紀のリアル (Real in the New Millenium)* (東京: 飛鳥新社, 1997), 村上春樹 and 河合隼雄, *村上春樹、河合隼雄に会いに行く(Haruki Murakami Meets Hayao Kawai)* (東京: 岩波書店, 1996), Yumiko Iida, "Between the Technique of Living an Endless Routine and the Madness of Absolute Degree Zero: Japanese Identity and the Crisis of Modernity in the 1990s," *Positions* 8, no. 2 (2000), ———, *Rethinking Identity in Modern Japan : Nationalism as Aesthetics* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2002).

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discourse identifies the decline of handwritten textual proficiency and reading comprehension capacity as a cause for anxiety about the future well-being of Japan's national culture. In fact, a social grievance against a problematic cultural phenomenon now referred to as "the youth abandoning the print culture/text (若者の活字離れ)" has been growing steadily in the past ten to fifteen years, further aggravating the sense of urgency of the failing " 'national language' competence (国語力)" among the future generations to come.

The new state mandate, which amounted to the special legislation passed in July 2005, not only allocates considerable financial support for local public libraries to expand their collections and services in order to assuage the much-discoursed fear of failing 'reading/writing' proficiency among the contemporary Japanese youth, but also aims to hinder notorious new digital criminality by enforcing a moral education among the youth. Coincidentally, there has also been a proliferation of literature that thematizes a perverse obsession with the viscerality of bodies, or the monstrous criminality shrouded behind the pixilated elusive bodies in the urban Tokyo.[6] Despite the scandalized outcry against growing new genres of literature, whose experimental literary forms and contents or distribution channels fiercely challenge the existing 'aesthetic sensibilities' or conventional literary forms, its sales record suggests that it may be the direction where the future of Japanese literature is headed. I will return to this later.

The predicament surrounding what may be provisionally described as a generational literary clash lies in the view that the emerging forms and contents not only depart from the known literary aesthetics of the earlier, pre-digital generation, but also subverts the ideological foundation of Japan's national pride. Aesthetics of traditional calligraphy writing as well as a high literary rate have been the source of national pride and identity. Deformity in writing, such as has become conspicuous with digital writing, (as in pixilation or disfiguration of kana-syllabaries as in *Gyaru-moji*),[7] figures as a subversive

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[6] Hitomi Kanehara, *Snake and Earrings* (New York: Dutton, 2005), 綿矢りさ, *インストール* (東京: 河出書房新社, 2001), 桐野夏生, *Out* (東京: 講談社, 2002), ──, *リアルワールド* (東京: 集英社, 2006), Yoshi, *Deep Love* (Tokyo: Start Publishing Co.,, 2001), 宮部みゆき, *R.P.G.* (東京: 集英社, 2001). Mizuko Ito and Daisuke Okabe, "Intimate Connections:Contextualizing Japanese Youth and Mobile Messaging," in *The inside Text : Social, Cultural and Design Perspectives on Sms*, ed. R Haper, L Palen, and A Taylor (Springer, 2005), Mizuko Ito, Daisuke Okabe, and Misa Matsuda, eds., *Personal, Portable, Pedestrian : Mobile Phones in Japanese Life* (Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 2005).

[7] *Gyaru-moji* is a name given to a type of writing that first appeared in the cell phone text-messages exchanged among *gyaru* (teenage girls as well as girls in their twenties who identify themselves with the intense high-consumption Tokyo pop-culture). It is characterized by the use of emoticons, infantile language and cryptic writing, such as the followings: ⊇ωﾆちぁヾ(・ω・●) →こんにちわ or ⊇〃めωナょ±ぁレ↘*。:゜(´つω･*)゜･。+ →ごめんなさぁい

form or writing that not only destabilizes but also threatens the integrity of writing. Deformity is metonymically translated as a deformity of the future national body. Failure to secure viable cultural heirs is highly suggestive of the future predicament of the nation's inability to reproduce itself and ensure its perseverance. Furthermore, so-called 'playful' uses of 'wrong' characters or liberally interpreted and greatly modified grammatical rules (i.e. ":" no longer means what ":" is supposed to mean, but has become incorporated as a constituent of made-up characters) employed by youth in composing sentences on digital media devices is understood to foreshadow the eventual grammatical chaos and disintegration of the proper structure of writing in Japanese.

However, this sensationalistic reaction must be placed in a historical perspective. Although the anxiety associated with *gyaru-moji* stems from its subversive force to 'deconstruct,' it takes a moment of reflection to remember that the advent of the typewriter also figured as a decisively subversive moment insofar as it liberated writing from meanings by the sheer possibility of producing an unreadable, incoherent sequence of letters. As Kittler explains in his book, *Gramophone, film, typewriter*, "A spatialized, numbered, and (since the 1888 typewriters' congress in Toronto) also standardized supply of signs on a keyboard makes possible what and only what QWERTY prescribes."[8] Such sequence of letters does not abide by the rules of the earlier aesthetics and poetics, which he identifies as 1800 aesthetics. In his attempt to convey the 1900 aesthetic sensibility instituted by the technology of a typewriter, Kittler cites a poem entitled, *The Great Lalulā*. It is full of a series of nonsequiturs, onomatopoeias and symbols such as semi colon (;) and brackets () []. No voice can read this poem, but the subject enmeshed in and constituted by discourse network 1900 is undeniably and sufficiently attuned to be able to appreciate it unconsciously and effortlessly. This pneumatic impossibility is the very cultural threshold through which one might begin to entertain other possibilities.

Unlike the discourse network 1800, which premises the writer's literary creativity and authority as well as the reader's relationships with the author and texts, in 1900, writing is characterized by chaos and dismemberment, and acquired via bodily automaticity rather than the hermeneutic interpretive capacity:

> Writing, disconnected from all discursive technologies, is no longer based on an individual capable of imbuing it with coherence through connecting curves and the expressive pressure of the pen; it swells in an apparatus that cuts up individuals into test material.[9]

Nevertheless, the crisis in the literary forms or contents, albeit its different figuration, also constitutes a moment pregnant with potentialities insofar as the liberation of the

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[8] Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Writing Science (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 229.
[9] ———, *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990), 223.

cultural confines are concerned. Perhaps, therein lies the thrust of Jacques Derrida's thought-provoking deconstructionist approach. The rupture in the systematic, the orderly and the known instantiated by the realization of the impossibility to arrest and control the chain of significations is a field of possibilities for the future metamorphosis. By far, what these emerging genres and practices demand and push us to do is to keep perspective and question what has been long considered 'unquestionable' even if it may come off as slightly facetious.

What is Wahon?

Wahon is a generic term used to designate a pre-modern Japanese publication.[10] As briefly described above, Wahon comes in a variety of forms: scroll, folding booklet, hand-written manuscript, bound book. It may be printed in woodblock, wooden movable types, or cast iron movable types. The precious ones are often kept in a specially customized sheath, paulownia box, or a lacquered Japanese box in order to repel insects and prevent excessive moisture. Some are sold at astronomical figures, while others can easily be acquired for a couple of hundred dollars. Regardless of differences of form, style and perceived rarity and value, what all Wahon have in common is their commanding presences as surviving 'artifacts' of time and space. Wahon demands to be treated as an inherently perishable form of media that for some fortuitous reasons outlived its supposed expiration date. Each material alteration, content revision, physical fortification and disintegration sustained during the process of its survival bespeaks the nature of its cumulative value as 'antique.' In other words, the value of Wahon as a book does not derive solely from the information contained in the text. Rather its physical presence conveys information in a similar fashion as any excavated objects from the dig site might. While Wahon is susceptible to a form of entropy and corruption as digital writing might be, its departure from the 'original' format is not always viewed in negative terms. Instead, each 'modification' or a hint of 'deterioration' is weighed as a qualitative residual trace of the time and space it has lived through.

Architecturally speaking, Wahon as a book dictates a certain bodily engagement, and also prescribes a particular tempo and spacio-temporality for reading. Not too long ago when Amazon came out with Kindle, people were curious to know the specs of a forthcoming release of a novel hand-held reading device. Some even jokingly asked, "Can you cuddle with Kindle on a lazy Sunday afternoon?" This was surprisingly an illuminating and apt question since most of us are accustomed to a certain 'reading' habits. Reading often entails a tireless search for the 'right' reading chair or a spot and the 'right' positioning of one's body. Some like to sit up or sink in a chair. Others like to lie on their back or flat on

[10] Insofar as Wahon is translated literally as Japanese Books, any pre-modern publication including all the preceding periods since the introduction of Chinese characters and advent of official writing (mostly Buddhist scrolls and some bureaucratic documents in wooden plates with writings) is considered Wahon. But most of the Wahon in circulation, i.e. those not in museums or special collections, date back to Japan's feudal era (1603-1886). In late 18th and early 19th century, a century leading to the Meiji Restoration, Japan saw a surge of readership among the commoners in tandem with a growing publishing houses

their stomach. Whatever the most comfortable position may be, the position is ultimately a culmination of a constant adjustment and negotiation with one's body and the size, material, weight of the book one is reading. Perhaps, it is not an overstatement to suggest that the size and weight are the two biggest ruling factors that determine the level of comfortable reading experience. With most Wahon, you need a flat surface to lay the book. You do not, or rather cannot hold Wahon up for an extended period of time, because Wahon does not have a back spine to support being held upright. It is supposed to lie on a desk or a floor, and you are to simply lift the lower left hand corner of the page on the two-page spread in order to turn the page. You might also notice that most of bound-book-style Wahon's lower left hand corners are heavily worn. In many cases, the wear and tear is the result of countless page-turnings that have caused either the paper to become thin or the fibers of *washi*-paper to turn fluffy.

With scrolls, there is a whole different set of bodily positioning and viewing engagement. You roll the scroll out from left to right, both hands tightly holding onto the opposite ends of a scroll, on a flat surface. Each unfolding unveils texts and illustrations that accompany and supplement the main text. Interestingly enough, the width of a scroll surface taken up by a discrete passage and illustration is approximately equal to the shoulder width of an adult. That is, the distance between the readers' left hand to right hand matches the anticipated 'frame' of vision, allowing either the text or illustrations to appear forth as central focus of our viewing. A successive unfolding hence has a similar viewing effect as a roll of film that captures a movement in multiple shots and renders them a moving image. Reading a scroll is a little like watching manually projected cinema frames, except unlike film and its projector, the threshold of 'reading' is physically built-in to fit closely to a reader's bodily engagement with the very media. In this way, scrolls generate a kind of spacio-temporality dictated by one's own reading tempo as one's hands slowly scroll out from one side to the other. I argue that through Wahon; 1) we gain a historical perspective on the current shift observable in reading/writing practices – what can we say about our own finger-tip scrolling of a webpage article?, 2) we can address the need to investigate distinct bodily as well as intellectual engagements each different medium demands of readers, and 3) we may further our understanding as to the nature of our learned 'automaticity' in reading/writing practices by looking into forms and thresholds structurally inherent in the media.

Re-thinking the Love and Labor of Reading

In re-thinking the act of reading, as the recent heated discussion over the 'fate' of Japanese national culture and its people's 'national language' competency has stirred in Japan, the question of what constitutes "literature" has subsequently arisen in the age of digital reading/writing/ publishing.[11] Following a similar vein of argument presented

[11] Dana Goodyear, "I ≡(Love) Novel: Young Woman Develop a Genre for the Cellular Age," *The New Yorker* 2008. The increasing popularity for a serialized novel composed by amateur writers and distributed via cell-phones has given birth to a new genre called, "cell-phone novel (携帯小説)" in the past decade. In particular, cell-phone novel readership among the teens, twenties and thirties is remarkably prevalent. As a

above, I would like to bring our attention again to our acquired 'automaticity' in reading/writing practices. At this point, it might also be a helpful exercise to delve into the definition of 'reading' in Japanese, since our inclination to go 'auto-pilot,' as it were, derives from our unquestionable faith in the regime of signification that dictates our understanding on 'reading.' A Japanese word for reading can be written phonetically in *kana*-syllabary as よむ or in *katakana*-syllabary as ヨム. As they stand, the meaning of either よむ or ヨム cannot be definitively determined by itself since Japanese has many homonyms. Only when appropriate Chinese characters are assigned to the phonetic sounds, can よむ／ヨム be written either as 読む or 詠む. The connotation conveyed by the use of Chinese character 読む ranges from a simple act of reading aloud, ability to comprehend and speculate to an acquired skill to narrate, whereas the use of latter Chinese character 詠む is usually reserved for a purposeful poetic rendering of speech as is in composition of poem, songs, etc. From the countless conversation and interviews I conducted during my fieldwork, I have come to wonder whether the practice of 'digital' reading could use a new language away from either of these words and a language much better attuned to its poetic connotation in the future.

As a matter of fact, in the online version of an Asahi newspaper article that appeared on June 10, 2008, the Japanese literary critic, Sanae Ochiai offered an interesting meditation on the direction which Japanese digitally-rendered literature may be headed. Speaking on the recent success of the digital publishing industry and its most lucrative merchandise - digitally composed, distributed serialized short stories, she wondered whether some of the cell-phone novel best sellers indeed have the potential to become the classics, true literature as 文学 (*bungaku*) in the future. Upon sharing her inner reservation as well as her hope to facilitate a constructive discussion on the status of the 'cell-phone novel' genre, she resorted to something unexpected. Instead of jumping on either the pro or anti-cell-phone novel bandwagon, she posited a third alternative. She argued, that if cell-phone novel cannot gain legitimacy to call itself 文学, cell-phone novelists would have to contend with a dream to assert itself as ブンガク(*bungaku*). Phonetically speaking, when 文学 or ブンガク is read aloud by the reader, it sounds exactly the same, *bungaku*. However, since the connotation of 文学 is that it suggests that the work in question is worthy of a public recognition as a literary work, and is not a frivolous writing by an amateur writer (what cell-phone novelists are often accused of being), Ochiai is insinuating that perhaps in the future our sensibility will be different, and that we will have fully acquired and mastered the 'right' tempo and 'temporality' for the digital reading/writing practices. But for now, it will be as ブンガク. As *katakana*-syllabary suggests, ブンガクwill be a kind of writing that is not quite up to the par of our current conception of 文学, thus figuring as somewhat foreign, not entirely deserving of our

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matter of fact, four of the top ten best sellers in 2007 Japan were initially distributed as a 'cell-phone novel' and was later picked up by the major publishing firms to publish in trade paperback.

'serious' literary attention, but entirely free of any pre-existing connotation, be it aesthetic or political.

What Wahon reminds us is that each technological intervention in history has always demanded that we acquire a new set of practices through trial and error, and that our current shift may not be such a novel phenomenon. As the new configuration of 'reading' and 'writing' via digital communication devices continue to challenge our existing 'ideas' about our acquired skills and habits, we might first separate information from literature. Then, we may be ready to ask what constitutes literature and how we might imagine relating ourselves to the evolving digital reading/writing practice. Many concerned parents, librarians, school teachers expressed their frustration with 'the youth' over their 'inability' and 'impatience' not only to read, but also to appreciate literature – the kind of literature they have in mind here is clearly the one written as 文学. Their grievance echoes over the difficulty of teaching children how to sit patiently to be "led into the world of fiction/fantasy without the help of illustration or other multi-media, but only by the printed text." They unanimously argue that children's reading habits have been irrevocably affected by advances in digital communication media and its speed, and that those who are immersed in the digital 'tempo' and 'temporality' can no longer understand the beauty of analogue 'tempo' and 'temporality,' which is thoroughly integrated in their total bodily engagement. I wonder if we are still in the midst of negotiating and trying to figure out a work-in-progress reading/writing practices. We may simply be still the prisoners of the 'by-gone analogue era' regime of signification and a paradigmatic shift toward the 'digital' era has yet to be completed. The bright side of the story for many of the Kanda/Jimbo-cho booksellers is that digital writing has resurrected antique, analogue books and elevated them to the status of cultural 'artifacts.' This, in return, freed the products of the 'by-gone analogue era' from engaging in a futile competition with the digital printing industry against whom paper-base information media have no way of competing on the account of speed, or distribution and circulation perimeter.

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