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Blog Entry

En-Joying Kanji: A Review of Eve Kushner's Joy o' Kanji
David Jacobson
May 24, 2012

Many years ago, I took a language course with the famed Japanese translator Edwin McClellan. Before each class, I would prepare seven or eight hours to be able to read and translate the assignment. But no matter how much I studied, there was one question McClellan Sensei would pose that would always stump me. Tell me, he would ask, what is the nuance of such-and-such a word?

With only a calendar year of Japanese study behind me (though I had completed the equivalent of two years of coursework), I wouldn't have the slightest idea. 'How should I know?' I could only think to myself.

The problem was, I didn't have access to Eve Kushner's [Joy o' Kanji](#).

[Joy o' Kanji](#) is an audacious attempt by the freelance writer and self-avowed *kanji*-phile to profile each of the *Joyo kanji*, the 2,136 Japanese characters most used in daily life, which are required learning in Japan. It will take Eve 40 years to reach her goal, if she maintains her current pace of completing one 8-12 page profile, featuring a single character, each week. But if she accelerates to at least two per week, as she intends, she'll be done in a mere 20 years.

So far, she has published 39 such profiles at her website, [Joy o' Kanji](#). Another seven are complete, and 10 more are in various stages of research.

What's so audacious about [Joy o' Kanji](#) is not just the scale of the project. What Eve is attempting goes far beyond any other character study aids that I know of: she's aiming to get at the essential 'personality' of each character, through in-depth examples of its use in compounds and sentences.

"Nothing in the world of *kanji* makes sense in a linear or logical way," she says. "The same character can mean four very different things, so I try to understand what the through-line is. How can one character mean 'handle' and 'grip' and 'stature' and 'pattern'? It's just like when we get to know a person and find that they have 12 sides to their personality. Even as we try to keep those sides in mind so they do not throw us off, we do try to have one unified image of the person – and that's what I'm going for in [Joy o' Kanji](#)."

Take this example. The character 牙 appears perhaps most recognizably in the compound for "ivory" and means "fang" or "tusk." But it also appears, unexpectedly, in country names such as Hungary, Portugal, and Spain, and even in a compound with the character for "claw" that means "right-hand man," ostensibly derived from the fact that vassals once served as their lord's "claws and fangs."

By illustrating each character's uses from the very common to

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Eve Kushner
Thanks so much for writing this about Joy o' Kanji. It is an honor to be featured on Chin Music Press's blog!

google support
This is very interesting bio. I have ready your post and it gave me good idea for my music project on <https://googlesupport.co/blog/google-play-service-stopped/>

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the most obscure, Eve is calculating its nuances in a way that my former professor would be proud of. More importantly, she is giving non-native students the tools to infer the meaning of unfamiliar compounds -- an essential (though often untaught) skill for reading Japanese.

Eve's goal is to tease out not just the main vocabulary linked to a certain *kanji*, but "all of the cultural significance" of any related expressions. "For instance, you read the profile on 'lawn.' Who would guess that the lawn grass *kanji* would show up in words about performances, and therefore in words for 'pomposity' and 'theatricality'?"

"I feel like after 2,136 of these essays," Eve tells me, "I'm going to know about everything in life that's important because these *kanji* represent everything... I will have touched upon an encyclopedic amount of knowledge."

On a more subtle level, **Joy o' Kanji** offers the intermediate student a taste of the subtlety and sheer fun of Japanese, which, in my experience, was something I only came to realize as an advanced student. Beginning students are often overwhelmed by the drudgery in memorizing hundreds of characters and often quit studying the language before they gain enough fluency to appreciate its beauty... and humor.

"So much *kanji* instruction is dull and lacking in personality and if it's dull, then you can't make yourself engage with it and return to it day after day," Eve says. "But if you find yourself having a lot of fun and associating good things with it, then you're going to go back frequently, you're going to engage with it and spend a lot of time with it, and knowledge will seep into your head without your even knowing it."

For instance, in the profile of the character for "monkey," she notes that the famous Confucian trio "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" is depicted with monkeys because the classical literary ending *zaru* (used to turn the verb for "see" into "don't see" or in this case, "see no") rhymes with the Japanese word for monkey, *saru*, also pronounced *zaru*. Such wordplay is frequent because Japanese is a language rich in homophones, words that are pronounced the same but spelled differently.

What she's getting at is the complex way Japanese play around with the sounds and meanings of characters to subtly shift a nuance or to make a joke. It's in this spirit that Eve named her method **Joy o' Kanji**, itself a pun on the Japanese *Joyo kanji*, the official name for the 2,136 general-use *kanji*.

"I think there's a really childlike sense of joy I get whenever I find a witticism inside a compound... I find them so, so delightful, in that there's a joke waiting for me if only I have the tools to discover it."

Though she claims to have experienced no eureka moment in deciding to laser-focus her career on *kanji*, it is perhaps inevitable that Eve should find herself doing so. A freelance writer since 1999, she has published 315 articles in 35 different markets ranging from architecture to book criticism. But with the collapse of the U.S. economy, and especially the housing market, many of her writing outlets dried up. So she turned to her passion: *kanji* (also the name of one of her two dogs, by the way).

So what does she love so much about *kanji*?

"There are so many, many things. I love that every time I look at a character deeply, I find things that I didn't see there before."

A Japanophile since age 13, Eve began studying the language in 2002, and took to writing articles about Japan and things Japanese. In 2006 she wrote a popular book on *kanji* called **Crazy for Kanji** and the following year, initiated a weekly blog about Japanese characters called "*Kanji* Curiosity," which she

A Tale of Two Noodles

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Cali Kopczick
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maintained until 2010.

"It's crazy that I care about them so much. At some level, they're meaningless. I hate to say that because they are the most important thing in my life. But to those of us not living in Japan or not intending to go there, at some level it doesn't matter, and yet it matters, and I can't stop making it matter."

Eve has found that she is not alone in being crazy for *kanji*. Following the book's publishing, she posted what she calls an incredibly difficult contest on the blog, and some 41 people submitted answers. Even more improbably, 21 of them won.

"That really drove home how far-flung *kanji* enthusiasts are because I had one winner from Iceland, one from Guam, and one from Vietnam. Several were Dutch. Some were expatriates. One was an Italian living in Germany, and on and on.... In America, we're pretty lucky that we can take Japanese classes (at least here in California it's not hard to find one), but a lot of people elsewhere are scrambling for any kind of crumbs so that they can learn the language."

Some of her international fans have since become part of the **Joy o' Kanji** team. She has a research team in Japan. Her graphic designer is in Indonesia and her top developer until very recently was British but living in Japan.

Regardless of its international fandom (and contributors), **Joy o' Kanji** is not for everyone. It requires knowledge of at least *hiragana*, one of the two phonetic alphabets used in Japanese, and assumes some familiarity with basic characters and grammatical patterns. Eve has decided to begin her encyclopedic study with profiles of intermediate-level *kanji*, which involve fewer compounds but offer greater complexity.

But it's priced to enable you to try the system, with little risk. You can download a single profile for \$1.99. If you like what you see, Eve offers discounted packages of multiple profiles, and even an annual subscription, now set at an initial rate of \$65.

If I had my druthers, I'd ask Eve to put more emphasis on learning to draw *kanji*. While most non-Japanese these days ultimately migrate to the wordprocessor to write characters, learning the stroke order is the surest way, I feel, to interpret the most difficult characters (with 20-plus strokes), especially handwritten *kanji*. [Eve responds, correctly, that each PDF includes a stroke-order diagram. However, I don't think that's enough. I'd like to see an explanation for beginners of the systematic way that characters and parts of characters are drawn. This is neglected in Japanese language classes, I feel, in much the same way that handwriting is neglected in American schools.] I would also like to see her put more emphasis on how to read people's names and place names, both of which can be idiosyncratic and difficult.

My petty requests aside, I believe Eve has created a tremendously valuable study tool that should be required for every *kanji* learner, especially after they've mastered the most basic characters. So I can't understand why **Joy o' Kanji** isn't yet on the syllabus of every intermediate or advanced Japanese class in the country. Maybe university professors are still pushing flashcards.

Disclosure: Eve Kushner has been a friend and supporter of **Chin Music Press** for several years, and has contributed an interview of one of our authors to our blog. We have also supported her **Joy o' Kanji** venture through advertising purchases on her site and have an ongoing relationship with her book publisher, **Stone Bridge Press**. However, as students of the Japanese language, we, too, are forever learning new *kanji* and relearning old ones, and are thus intrinsically interested in her work. We hope that our business connections do not detract from the sincerity with which we have reviewed her endeavor.

[Kodawari Can Render the Prosaic Profound](#)

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