

**AN INTRODUCTION TO *KUNTEN* GLOSED TEXTS
AND THEIR STUDY IN JAPAN**

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Japan has the best established tradition among all the East Asian cultures which developed strategies to interpret written Chinese based on their non-Sinitic vernaculars. Japan's particular vernacular reading practice, known as *kanbun kundoku* 漢文訓読, has been frequently interpreted as a kind of translation, especially by scholars in the West less aware of the actual details of this linguistic *habitus*, e.g. Robert.¹ Any attempt to associate *kanbun kundoku* with translation immediately runs up against a number of questions related to theories of reading and translation. Japanese scholars, for their part, prefer to reject the construal of *kanbun kundoku* as translation; they argue that, while *kanbun kundoku* may appear superficially similar to translation in that it renders a text “in” one language “into” another language, it is also fundamentally different. *Kanbun kundoku* does not produce a parallel text in the target language, and it leaves the Chinese original actively present in the reading context, using it as a “visual” outline to facilitate comprehension.²

It is nevertheless undeniable that, as a practice of textual decodification, *kanbun kundoku* represents a fundamental step in the process of acculturation to the cosmopolitan Sinitic norm and intellectual improvement on the part of the ancient Japanese elites, both lay and religious.³ By means of the vernacular text generated by *kanbun kundoku*, the Chinese characters of the original text were given, whenever necessary, an equivalent Japanese reading by the addition of small phonograms, or *kana* 仮名, to the right or left side of the lemma. The same technique also helped resolve the syntactic differences between Chinese an isolating language, and Japanese, an agglutinative one. The glosses supplied the inflectional endings for verbs and adjectives in the Japanese text. The different syntactic order resulting in the conversion from an SVO to an SOV language was indicated by dots, keys and other paragraphematic marks, commonly known as *kunten* 訓点, inserted on the lower side of a character.

The following example, showing a manuscript of the mid-twelfth century, can be taken as representative of a *kunten*-annotated text. Some of the main features of *kunten* glossing such as compound

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¹ Jean-Noël Robert, *Kanbun for the XXIst Century: The Future of Dead Languages*, Nichibunken Forum, 122, 2002. Jean-Noël Robert, *Hieroglossia – a proposal*, *Nanzan Institute for Religion & Culture Bulletin*, 30, 2006.

² Ishizuka Harumichi, *Kundoku*, in Yoshida et al., *Kuntengo jiten*, Tōkyō, Tōkyōdō shuppan, 2001, pp. 2-3.

³ For a more detailed explanation on this point, see Valerio L. Alberizzi, *Studio filologico sul manoscritto dello Hizōhōyaku del secondo anno dell'era Nin'an (1168 d.C) - Il giapponese medio attraverso le fonti in kanbun kundoku del periodo Insei-Kamakura (1086-1333 d.C)*, Venezia, 2004. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation.

marks (*on/kun gōfu* 音・訓合符), phonogram glosses (*kanaten* 仮名点), tone glosses (*shōten* 声点), inversion glosses (*kaeriten* 返点) and punctuation marks (*kutōten* 句読点) are all displayed in a brief single line from this text.

	LEMMA 〔Chinese text〕	SINOGRAPH MEANING	JAPANESE OUTPUT
	三 界	Compound-mark gloss “Three worlds”	<i>sankai</i>
	ノ	Phonogram gloss	GEN <i>no</i>
Tone gloss	○ 狂 	Compound-mark gloss “Madman”	<i>kyōjin</i>
Tone gloss	○ 人	ハ Phonogram gloss	TOP <i>wa</i>
Inversion gloss [ordinal number 3]	三 不	ス Phonogram gloss	NEG <i>zu</i>
Inversion gloss [ordinal number 2]	二 知	シラ Phonogram gloss	INF <i>shira</i>
Tone gloss	狂		
Inversion gloss [ordinal number 1]	一 狂	イフコトヲ Phonogram gloss	NMLZ <i>kuruu (to)</i>
Punctuation mark	ト		<i>iu koto ACC wo</i>

三界ノ狂人ハ狂 (ト) イフコトヲ知シラ [不] ス
Sankai no kyōjin wa kuruu (to) iu koto wo shirazu

The crazy dwelling in the three worlds doesn't know they are.⁴

KUNDOKU PRACTICE IN ASIA

Supplementing a text with glosses showing the correct punctuation to follow during the reading process was a common practice in China beginning in the sixth~seventh centuries CE. Other types of notations, such as explanatory glosses about the content, were also frequently added at the margin of the document. The most interesting and innovative method, however, was to mark the center of a character with a red dot to indicate a secondary reading or an alternate meaning – the practice was known as *po Yin* 破音.⁵

The presence of these techniques on the Asian continent, first discovered on wooden or bamboo tablets from Dunhuang and other peripheral regions of China, shows how the practice of integrating an original Chinese text with glosses was known at least one century before the first occurrence of *kundoku* in Japan in the second half of the eighth century, and allows us to imagine its gradual diffusion from China into its neighboring countries. According to the *History of the Northern Dynasties* — *Beishi* 北史:

文字亦華夏兼用胡書有毛詩論語孝經置學官弟子以相授雖習誦之而皆為胡語

The characters adopted at Gao Chang [Turfan] are, again, the same as those used by the Chinese, although a type of native writing system is also practiced with them. [The people of Gao Chang] devote themselves to the

⁴ *The precious key to the esoteric treasure* — *Hizōhōyaku* 秘藏寶鑰 — held at the University of Tōkyō (1168), page 1 (recto), line 6.

⁵ This notation method would later sustain the development of the *si sheng* 四声, a way of marking the hypothetical square perimeter of a character with a point to indicate its tone accent. Ishizuka Harumichi, *Shōten no kigen*, Tsukishima Hiroshi, *Nihon kanjionshi ronshū*, Tōkyō, Kyūko shoin, 1995. An English translation is available in Ishizuka Harumichi, “The Origins of the Ssū-shêng Marks,” *Acta Asiatica*, 65, 1993, pp. 30-50.

study of *Maoshi*, *Lunyu* and *Xiaojing* in public schools where there are teachers and students. Even if they study the Chinese classics they do not do so in the original language but use their own words instead.⁶

Further evidence from the oldest Korean historical chronicles, the *Samguk sagi* 三国史記 and the *Samguk yusa* 三国遺事 (twelfth century), highlights the extent of this phenomenon. The *Samguk sagi* attributes the invention of the Korean vernacular reading to Seol Chong 薛聰 (660-730), one of the so called “ten sages of Silla.” A similar passage hinting at a method of reading the Chinese classics through the use of the Korean language is also reported in the *Samguk yusa*.

聰性明銳生知道待以方言讀九經訓導後生至今學者宗之

Seol Chong was brilliant; from a young age he was well versed in the principle of things. He read the nine Classics using the language of Silla and taught the young. These days he is considered the patron saint of scholarship.⁷

There are substantial similarities among these strategies – for instance, the adoption of paragraphematic marks to indicate syntactical inversion, or the cursivization of signs selected as phonograms – but the technique of notation and its frequency in use vary greatly depending on the linguistic system. In Old Uighur and in late Koryŏ period Korean, for example, only the syntactic order was modified while the lexemes were read in Chinese, or more properly, Sinoxenic, the nativized version of the original Chinese pronunciation of the characters. In Silla~early Koryŏ period Korean, on the other hand, characters were read as the corresponding vernacular lexical item, the reading known as *kun* 訓. Japanese, as previously mentioned, developed a sort of hybrid system.

Numerous languages in the Sinosphere have attempted to develop an integrated system to read Chinese. Some scholars have also found traces of a practice similar to *kundoku* in Vietnamese documents, extending the range of action of this method even to this Austroasiatic language.⁸ The success achieved by vernacular reading varied: in Japan it was established as the “official” method of reading Chinese texts, in central Asia, the region where Uighur was spoken, it had a narrower development, and in Korea it was gradually abandoned after an initial enthusiastic adoption.

THE ROLE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH ON *KUNDOKU* MATERIALS

At present, Japanese scholars universally acknowledge the significance of *kunten* glossed materials in studies on Japanese language, synchronic and diachronic alike. When compared to traditional disciplines, however, the results achieved in this field by the narrow circle of specialists who began their research in the early twentieth century are still relatively new.

The origins of modern studies in this field can be traced back to 1903 and the activities of the *Kokugo chōsa iinkai* 国語調査委員会, the Japanese Language Survey Committee. Ōya Tōru 大矢透

⁶ Nagasawa Kikuya ed., *Wakokubon seishi Hokushi*, 3, *retsuden ge*, Tōkyō, Kyūko shoin, 1971, p. 1730.

⁷ Chōsen kenkyūkai ed., *Sangoku shiki genbun wayaku taishō, ge*, Seoul, Chōsen kenkyūkai, 1914, p. 420.

⁸ Albrecht Wezler and Ernst Hammerschmidt eds., *Proceedings of the XXXII International Congress for Asian and North African Studies, Hamburg 25th-30th August 1986*, Stuttgart, F. Steiner, 1992, pp. 649-650.

(1850-1928), an adjunct member of the Committee, was the first to carry out a detailed examination of a large number of manuscripts, mostly held by the Shōsōin 正倉院 — the treasure house of the Tōdaiji 東大寺 temple in Nara. His goal was to collect a large number of *kana* examples to be used for the standardization of the two syllabic writing systems of *hiragana* 平仮名 and *katakana* 片仮名.

The pioneering research of Ōya opened up a completely new field of research, revealing its latent potentialities. It is thanks to him and his successors that, since the beginning of the twentieth century, the number of scholars in the field has increased, gradually amplifying interest in the subject and prompting the discovery and publication of rare manuscripts and of detailed descriptions of their linguistic peculiarities. As such, in the first one hundred years of its young history research on Japanese *kundoku* has allowed scholars to retrace the evolution of this practice from the eighth to the twelfth century, and has achieved significant goals in the analysis of medieval Japanese resulting from glossed classical Chinese manuscripts. The ramifications of such findings have touched fields as diverse as linguistics or sociocultural studies, and have even influenced disciplines with much longer and more consolidated traditions such as grammar, history, and literature.

The discovery of remarkable differences in the way of notating Buddhist texts in Chinese as well as the secular Chinese classics is one of the most important contributions the study of *kundoku* materials has made to Japanese studies, and specifically to the area of sociolinguistics. The discrepancies between the secular and religious worlds, as well as the variations in the glosses of the same text found among Buddhist schools and lay scholars' families reflect different ways of reading that help us better understand the linguistic and cultural environment of the period.

From a strictly linguistic point of view, scholars have taken for granted that the Japanese codified in the glosses would show features similar to those of the spoken language. This assumption, incidentally, represents one of the most significant achievements of recent scholarship. Unfortunately, it is also very difficult, within the text, to distinguish spoken language elements from those pertaining to the written language. It is undeniable that the Japanese vernacular reading of a Chinese text was created and developed as an auxiliary interpretative method for a script and, therefore, that its main linguistic features pertain to written Japanese, but at the same time its nature as a temporary record taken during public lectures must have played a role in this process of contamination.

PIGMENTS AND TOOLS FOR GLOSSING

無上菩提因
近事智鏡
延曆二年十一月廿三日於東大寺與新
羅正本自校勘畢以此善根生々之中
殖金剛種斷一切障共諸含識入無尋門
以延曆七年八月十二日與唐正本相對校勘取捨
得失楷定此本後學存意所幸察耳自後諸
卷亦同此矣更不錄勘年日等也

The oldest extant glossed manuscript in Japan is the *Zokukegonkyō ryakuso kanjōki* 続華嚴經略疏刊定記, a commentary to the *Avatamsaka sūtra*. From the colophon we can assume that the text, transcribed by a layman named Chikyō 智鏡, has undergone two process of collation with “orthodox” texts. taken from Silla and Tang China (618-907) during two different meetings held at Tōdaiji temple respectively the second and seventh year of Enryaku 延曆 (783 and 788). The glosses are written using white and vermilion pigments and, according to their order in the manuscript, it is assumed that the first set of glosses date back to 783 and the second to 788, although the debate about this topic is still open. Further evidence that this text represents an early stage of the glossing practice in Japan is given by clear differentiation in the use of the marks with the white ones for punctuation only and the vermilion ones for reordering the syntactic order.⁹

To make the textual decodification expressed by the glosses as clear as possible, in addition to black ink marks, the writers frequently made use of colored pigments, and sometimes inscribed the surface of the manuscript with the help of a stylus. Based on the medium of inscription, Japanese scholars differentiate white glossed texts (*hakutenbon* 白点本), vermilion glossed texts (*shutenbon* 朱点本), black-ink glossed texts (*bokutenbon* 墨点本) and stylus glossed texts (*kakuhitsutenbon* 角筆点本), or, more often texts combining of two or more different types of glosses; but other colors were used too.

These glosses also show differing chronologies: in particular, white during the ninth and tenth century, light vermilion from the ninth to the tenth century, and deep vermilion from tenth to twelfth century, black ink from the tenth century on and stylus glossing covering a wide range from ninth to thirteenth century. Glosses in other colors are found in the same period as vermilion glosses.

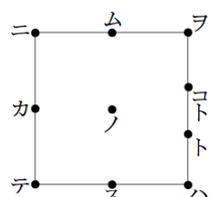
THE DEVELOPMENT OF MORPHOSYNTACTIC GLOSSES

Even without knowing the exact Chinese pronunciation, words could be easily recognized through visual memory, but the same result could not be achieved for postpositions and for the inflectional suffixes of verbs and adjectives.

In order to solve this problem, Japanese glossators placed around the perimeter of a character, or within its area, dots and other similar marks to indicate postpositions or functional words. The predominance of this method during the eight century was due not only to the inadequate development of a pure phonographic system of writing, but also to the advantages offered by a quick and small-sized technique of notation.

⁹ Tsukimoto Masayuki, *Daitōkyū kinen bunkozō Zokukegonkyō ryakuso kanjōki kan daigo no kunten ni tsuite*, Kamakura jidaigo kenkyūkai (edited by), “Kamakura jidaigo kenkyū, 23”, Tōkyō, Musashino shoin, 2000, pp. 130-140.

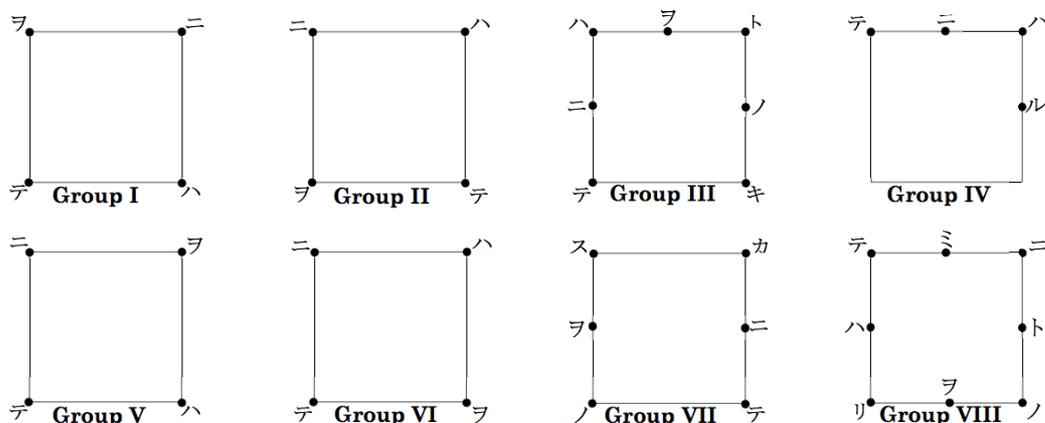
The *okototen* ヲコト点 system, never discovered previously in manuscripts from the Asian continent, was thus considered a unique and original contribution of Japanese glossators to the techniques of textual decodification of Chinese script. In July 2000, however, a Korean-Japanese joint research group of scholars found a very similar organized set of glosses in some eleventh century Korean documents opening up the way for the development of a new theory of the evolution of glossing in Korea and Japan.



The best known scheme is the one presented in the figure, which gives the name to the system itself. Reading clockwise, the functional morphemes represented by the first two points at the top right corner of the peripheral box (in Japanese *tsubo* 壺・坪 ‘jar’) we get the reading *wokoto*. *Wo* is the accusative postpositional particle, *koto* a bound noun used to form subordinate clauses, similar to English *fact (that)*. It should however be noted that this scheme is not identified until after the eleventh century, when the greatest efflorescence of this system occurred. By that time most of the more than two hundred types of morphosyntactic glosses schemes which were in use in ninth and tenth centuries had already disappeared.

Scholars make a subdivision of the systems adopted into eight main groups based on the position occupied by the verbal gerund suffix *-te*, the dative/locative postposition *ni*, the accusative postposition *wo*, and the topic marking postposition *wa* usually placed at the corners of the box although with different orders depending upon the system. Scholars distinguish them in order of appearance, from oldest to most recent. This reflects the hypothesis that all of the morphosyntactic glossing schemes originated from a single source, a view commonly known as the “unitary theory of the origin of *okototen*”.¹⁰

The glosses belonging to groups one to four appear in the documents of the ninth century, while it is only with the tenth century that the remaining series from five to eight gradually appear. By the eleventh century, however, as the result of a selection process that took place over about four hundred years, only about a dozen of these schemes were still in use.



¹⁰ Nakada Norio, *Kotenbon no kokugogakuteki kenkyū, sōron hen*, Tōkyō, Kōdansha, 1954. Specialists used to distinguish between *seiten* 星点 (“star marks”), glosses formed by a single point, and *senten* 線点 (“line marks”), common term that gathers all the other kind of marks.

It is also common belief that morphosyntactic glossing schemes consist mainly only of one or at least two boxes, but actually they were quite complex and surely difficult to learn and retain. The *Nishi hakaten* 西墓点, one of the older and most complex systems adopted, showcases a total of 31 boxes and 230 morphosyntactic glosses in the form of dots and other marks.

The sacred texts that testify to the birth and development of a more sophisticated way of notation are, for the most part, related to the Kegon 華嚴宗 (ch. Huayan) school of Buddhism or can be otherwise linked to the so-called “Six Buddhist Schools of Nara”, all of which were studied at Tōdaiji temple in Nara. Following the evolutionary line drawn by the development of morphosyntactic glosses systems it is possible to assume the birth of techniques of textual decodification of the Chinese script first within Kegon literati monks followed by a progressive diffusion from the religious to the lay world achieved through the new Buddhist schools of the ninth century like Tendai 天台宗.

Basing their observations on the complexity and variety of *okoten* systems and on the differences between the schools certain scholars have even asserted an esoteric character for *kundoku*. This theory is difficult to support, however, because, as mentioned above, there is evidence for ongoing relationships between the different groups of scholars, and the texts were read and explained during public lectures. Furthermore, the notation is clearly ancillary to the reading and comprehension of the text, a point that emphasizes its practical function.

Studies on the evolution and use of morphosyntactic glosses in the Heian period (794-1086) have revealed the existence of cultural exchanges between the Tendai and Shingon 真言宗 schools, centered at Ishiyamadera 石山寺 temple, in modern-day Shiga prefecture, on the line linking Enryakuji 延暦寺 and Ninnaji 仁和寺 temples. At the same time, scholars have become aware of the role such exchanges played in the transmission of vernacular reading to lay scholars by means of such well known historical figures as emperor Uda 宇多天皇 (867-931).

PHONOGRAM GLOSSES

A further step towards the development of the annotations at the margins of the text was the adoption of Chinese characters as phonograms, although this was at first without any kind of standardization. The *Ōkutsu marakyō* 央掘魔羅經 uses Chinese characters as phonograms, whereas in other manuscript cursivization of Chinese characters can also be found.

In the development process from Chinese characters used as phonograms to *kana* phonogram glosses, the latter, as used at the beginning of the ninth century, were probably understood more as symbols for personal use or use by a small group of individuals, rather than real phonograms, as witnessed by a continuous change in the orthography, modifying its graphic traits rather than simply adopting the stylistic tradition inherited from previous periods.

Another trait that is evident from the analysis of the texts of the ninth century is the adoption, within

the same document, two or more graphic variants to represent a single syllable.

The tenth century saw the emergence of a group of texts in which the graphemes representing the forty-eight sounds of the Japanese language perfectly match, in spite of the fact that glossators and historical periods differ. This testifies to a transmission made by teacher to student within the same school, making it possible to overcome the individual choices reflected in the phonogram glosses of the ninth century. It also the beginning of the rise of the social value of *katakana*, albeit within the narrow world like that of Buddhist clerical study.

The progressive trend towards simplification was completed by the eleventh century, when the same glosses limited to a single variant were used in every document.

FINAL REMARKS

Kunten glossed sources have proven useful for a number of subfields of Japanese historical linguistics. They are particularly important in the analysis of hybrid literary styles showing contact between Sino-Japanese and indigenous writing traditions, such as the so-called *wakan konkōbun* 和漢混淆文 ‘mixed Sino-Japanese style’. However there are still many outstanding problems and issues in the field.

One is the very large number of documents that have yet to be properly investigated. According to the nationwide data collected by Tsukishima Hiroshi 築島裕 (1925-2011) between 1945 and 1995,¹¹ the distribution of *kunten* materials dating from eighth to thirteenth century is as follows:

Table 1

	783-900	901-1000	1001-1100	1101-1200	TOTAL
<i>With colophon</i>	14 (7.7%)	40 (21.2%)	364 (62.5%)	1546 (64.3%)	1964
<i>Without colophon</i>	166 (92.2 %)	149 (78.8%)	218 (37.5%)	858 (35.7%)	1391
TOTAL	180 (100%)	189 (100%)	582 (100%)	2404 (100%)	3355

By comparison, the number of manuscripts that have been thoroughly studied up to the present amounts to approximately one hundred. It is then easy to understand how the picture we have of ancient *kundoku* is far from complete.

The problem arises from the difficulties in investigating the original documents and from the limited number of scholars who have access to these materials. Almost all glossed sources are held by temples, museums, or private organizations. Obtaining the authorization to see a manuscript often takes a long time. In most cases, a letter of reference written by someone who has already visited the temple or institution for research purposes is necessary, further complicating the formalities. Once official permission is granted, the facility holding the document sets a specific date and time to see it. Considering such difficulties, it is

¹¹ Tsukishima Hiroshi, *Heian jidai kuntenbon ronkō — kenkyūhen*, Tōkyō, Kyūko shoin, 1996, p. 26. In 2001 Tsukishima presented a new but less detailed version of the data in table 1 in the pages of *Kuntengo jiten*. According to such version, late Heian period (1001-1100) documents amount to about seven hundred and Insei period (1101-1200) documents increased to two thousand five hundred. See Yoshida Kanehiko, Tsukishima Hiroshi, Ishizuka Harumichi, Tsukimoto Masayuki eds., *Kuntengo jiten*, Tōkyō, Tōkyōdō shuppan, 2001, p. 38.

not surprising that the number of young researchers devoted to this field is actually in decline.

In order to overcome these practical problems, numerous photographic reproductions of some of the main collections held by such famous temples as Kōzanji 高山寺 or Ishiyamadera have been published in recent years. They include excellent critical comments – and yet the changes in the field scholars hoped for are yet to come. As already mentioned, to facilitate the textual decodification expressed by the glosses, writers made frequent use of colored pigments in addition to black ink marks. Unfortunately the photographic editions of the manuscripts are mostly in black and white, making it almost impossible to distinguish these types of notation. Once again, it becomes necessary to see the original or to rely on the works of other scholars.

The reading and the subsequent transcription of a manuscript as the result of a decoding process can vary depending on the scholar – another latent ambiguity embedded in this complex field of study. As a consequence, a new examination becomes necessary to systematize the results achieved not only with the documents that, lacking a clear colophon, are difficult to date, but also for the studies hitherto published.

All these difficulties can be called “internal” because they are due to causes that reside within the discipline itself. Aside from such internal limitations there is also a major “external” impediment to establish a widespread knowledge about Japanese *kundoku*. Many literary and linguistic scholars consider vernacular reading as a device for those who are not able to understand a Chinese text directly, and relegate it to a lesser “didactic” position among the studies on Chinese language and its reception among foreign cultures.

It is true that one must be careful when using these sources as evidence for the historical evolution of Japanese, not only because the glosses in many cases were provisional notations jotted down quickly on the interlinear space of the main text, but also because they are closely linked to the learning level of the writer and because errors were anything but uncommon. Nevertheless, *kundoku* is a highly refined system with a long tradition, has played an active role in the evolution of Japanese written language, and has supported an array of intellectual activities over the centuries, many of which are worthy of consideration among scholars.¹²

¹² For a more detailed study on the translation of the vocabulary on vernacular reading in Japan see John Whitman, Miyoung Oh, Jinho Park, Valerio Luigi Alberizzi, Masayuki Tsukimoto, Teiji Kosukegawa, Tomokazu Takada, “Toward an International Vocabulary for Research on Vernacular Readings of Chinese Texts”, *Scripta*, 2, 2010.