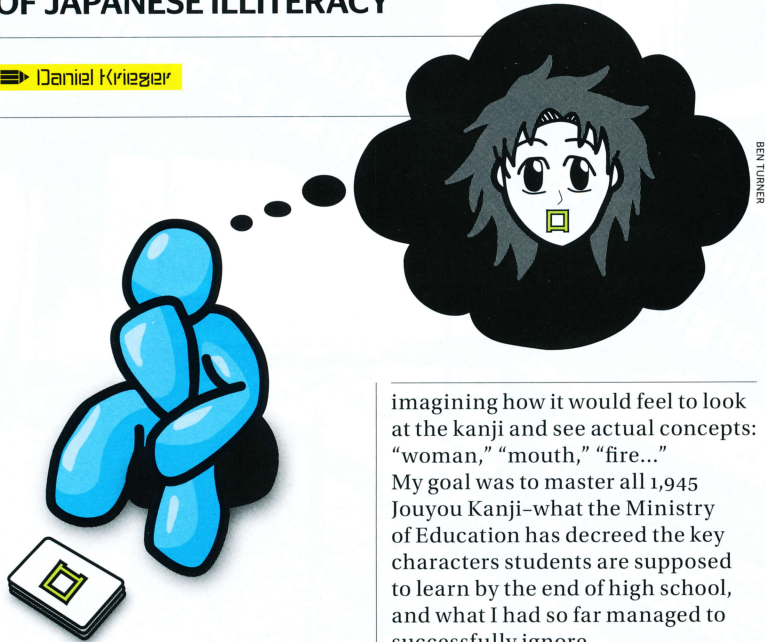


Perverting kanji

OR HOW I WAS SAVED FROM A LIFETIME OF JAPANESE ILLITERACY

► Daniel Krieger



imagining how it would feel to look at the kanji and see actual concepts: “woman,” “mouth,” “fire...”

My goal was to master all 1,945 Jouyou Kanji—what the Ministry of Education has decreed the key characters students are supposed to learn by the end of high school, and what I had so far managed to successfully ignore.

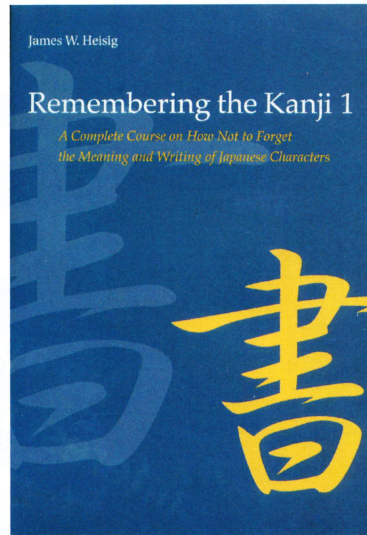
The list begins appropriately with 一 (one), followed by 右 (right), and then 雨 (rain), my favorite. What I couldn't figure out was what 林 (grove), a word I had only a vague sense of, was doing there. Even more bewildering to me was that I'd told a book agent in New York I was going to document this in a memoir. "If you're ever interested in writing about your experiences in Japan, I'd love to consider it," she said. Researching the idea, I found 12 memoirs written by foreigners in Japan within the last two decades, so it was clear the world really needed another. But what about?

After almost four years, my Japanese illiteracy no longer felt like an endearing shortcoming I could poke fun at. I came up with the narrative of a man who submerges his mind in the matrix of kanji lists, eventually emerging having mastered it all. I'd call it "Cracking the Kanji Code". I promised heartwarming Helen Keller-esque moments of revelation as I went about my business, but so far, the only epiphany was that I was unfit for the task.

Sitting in a cafe in Kyoto sipping coffee, I stared at a crumpled piece of paper with indecipherable writing covering it. I was setting out to learn the starter set of 80 kanji characters, the exact set that all Japanese first-graders must reckon with. Gazing at the list, I imagined what had taken place a millennium ago, when a few Japanese noblemen, hanging out with some Chinese Buddhist monks, got turned on to their exotic brush-to-paper methods. Excited by this, one of them got an audience with the Emperor and said something like, “You know, since we're in the market for a writing system, this could do the trick. And besides, wouldn't these symbols make awesome tattoos?” An adviser to the Emperor replied, “Are you kidding? This stuff is Greek to me. And what about our descendants? This is going to seriously mess them up.”

Not to mention me.

I'd carried my coffee-and-wine stained list around for weeks,



What I needed was a guide to show me how to unlock the kanji mystery.

I stumbled upon the sensei I needed: James Heisig, a Japan-based philosopher who devised “imaginative memory”: a way to painlessly learn the characters he describes in his book, *Remembering the Kanji*. He says, rather than traditional rote memorizing, it's better to create Rorschach-like scenes and stories for each character. So for 日 (day/sun), I saw a window through which the sun shines; and for 百 (100), I saw the TNT detonator used by the coyote who wanted to blow Road Runner into 100 pieces.

I was getting the hang of it.

And then, one day, walking through Yodoyabashi station, I saw a sign with two kanji I had learned individually, that side-by-side, formed a new word. 出 (go out) and 口 (mouth). “Go out mouth”? It must be... exit! A jolt of excitement ran through me that was, for lack of a better term, Helen Keller-esque.

[Remembering the Kanji: A Complete Course on How Not to Forget the Meaning and Writing of Japanese Characters Vol. 1 \(516pp, Japan Publications Trading Company\).](#)