

Japanese Colonial Textbooks in Taiwan: Grade-School Language Readers

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Introduction

Japan established a mass public education as soon as it colonized Taiwan from 1895 until 1945. Children in colonial Taiwan were segregated into four school systems depending on their ethnicity: Japanese elementary schools (Jp. *shōgakkō*) for Japanese (Jp. *naichijin*), Taiwanese elementary schools (*kōgakkō*) for Han Taiwanese (*hontōjin*), Indigenous elementary schools (*banjin kōgakkō*) for Plains Indigenes (*jukuban*, then *heibozoku*), and Indigenous children's education centers (*bantō kyōikusho*) for Mountains Indigenes (Jp. *seiban*, then *kōzanzoku*).¹⁴ This segregation was based on the Japanese colonial officials' perceived level of civilization of each group: Japanese whose home country had undergone modernization as the most civilized, Han Taiwanese who were greatly influenced by the Chinese civilization as the lesser civilized, Plains Indigenes who engaged in agriculture as the lesser uncivilized, and Mountains Indigenes who engaged in hunting and gathering as the most uncivilized.

The main goal of primary education was to transform the colonized population into loyal Japanese subjects (*kokumin*), defined as Japanese-speaking people loyal to the emperor. This meant that teaching the Japanese language (*kokugo*) and ethics (*shūshin*) lessons became crucial to this assimilation effort. The colonial government set up language centers all over Taiwan beginning in 1895, in which most of them were converted to grade schools starting in 1898 after the government promulgated the *Elementary School Ordinance of Taiwan* (*Taiwan kōgakkō rei*). Grade schools were established to meet increasing demand from the local population who saw the need to learn Japanese to communicate with Japanese officials and conduct business with Japanese companies. Primary education was initially funded by the Japanese national treasury, but the colonial government soon imposed taxes on the local population to fund school operations. The colonial government formalized a complete educational system from primary to secondary education for the Taiwanese population in the *Taiwan Educational Ordinance* of 1919 (Jp. *Taiwan kyōiku rei*) with a revision in 1922, *New Educational Ordinance of Taiwan* (*Shin Taiwan kyōiku rei*). The primary education curriculum changed little between 1898 and 1945. Throughout most of the colonial

period, grade school children were required to take Japanese, ethics, arithmetic, Classical Chinese, singing, and physical education. Agriculture, commerce, and industry were required of boys and sewing and handicrafts were required of girls in the upper grade levels.

The documents below provide a glimpse of how colonial authority sought to modernize Taiwan based on the Japanese model from the early to the mid-colonial period (1901-1937). The colonial government published textbooks specifically for Han Taiwanese children attending Taiwanese schools, which was different from Japanese children attending Japanese schools who used the same textbooks and followed the same curriculum as children in the metropole. The colonial government published a total of five sets of grade school language readers for Han Taiwanese children between 1901 and 1943. There is a total of twelve volumes in each set of language readers published by the Governor-General Office of Taiwan. Each reader was assigned to students each semester for a total of two volumes per grade level, for a total of twelve volumes for grade one through grade six. Volume 1 was used by Taiwanese children in their first semester of primary school as first graders. The lessons in Volume 1 (first semester of first grade) are written in katakana. Chinese characters are introduced in Volume 2 (second semester of first grade). Hiragana is introduced in second grade or third grade depending on the set. Below are three lessons: one lesson from each of the first three sets of readers published by the colonial government.

Citation

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Citation of Original Source (In Order of Document)

Taiwan kyōka-yō -sho kokumin yomihon kan 6 (National Reader for Instructional Use in Taiwan, Volume 6). Taihoku: Governor-General of Taiwan, 1901-1903.
Translated by Fang Yu Hu. Primary Sources on Taiwanese History, 2021,
<http://taiwanprimarysources.com>.

Kōgakkō yō kokumin yomihon kan 4 (National Reader for Grade School Use, Volume 4). Taihoku: Governor-General of Taiwan, 1913-1914. Translated by Fang Yu Hu. Primary Sources on Taiwanese History, 2021, <http://taiwanprimarysources.com>.

Kōgakkō yō kokugo yomihon dai ichi shu kan 9 (Language Reader for Primary School Use First Kind, Volume 9). Taihoku: Governor-General of Taiwan, 1923-1926. Translated by Fang Yu Hu. Primary Sources on Taiwanese History, 2021, <http://taiwanprimarysources.com>.

Further Reading:

Tai, Eika. "Kokugo and Colonial Education in Taiwan." *positions* 1 May 1999; 7 (2): 503-540. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-7-2-503>.

Tsurumi, Patricia E. *Japanese Colonial Education in Taiwan, 1895-1945*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1977.

DOCUMENT 1 is a lesson on the convenience of postal services that the Japanese colonial government had established in Taiwan. Third-grader Han Taiwanese children used this reader in the second semester between 1901 and 1913 when the new set was published. The lesson is written as a story with dialogues.

Document 1: National School Language Reader, Volume 6, Lesson 16
Postal Service

Once there were a mother and a daughter. One day, the mother had an urgent matter with a relative who lives far away. However, she was unable to send a letter because she did not know how to write. As she agonized over the matter, her daughter A-gio came home from school. “Mom, please say what you need to say, and I will write it down. We will then send it through the postal service. If we do that, we will receive a reply,” A-gio suggested. The mother was very happy upon hearing her daughter’s suggestion and followed through with it. A reply came soon afterwards. The mother came to understand the convenience of postal service.

DOCUMENT 2 is a lesson on taking medicine after one gets sick. Second-grader Han Taiwanese children used this reader in the second semester starting in 1913 until 1923 when the third set of readers was published. Note that the lesson is written entirely as dialogue.

Document 2: Primary School Language Reader, Volume 4, Lesson 9
Taking Medicine

A-kao's mother is sick and sleeping. A-kao is worried and went to see her mother’s bedside.

“Mother, are you suffering?” She asked.

“I am well after taking the medicine,” her mother replied.

“Should I go to the doctor’s office and get some more medicine?” A-kao suggested.

“There is still some medicine left, please go see the doctor in the evening,” her mother agreed.

A-kao did what her mother told her and went to get medicine in the evening.

DOCUMENT 3 is a lesson on letter-writing between extended family members. Fifth-grader Han Taiwanese children used this reader in the first semester starting in 1923 until 1937 when the fourth set of readers was published. Note that the lesson is presented as two letters: one original letter from a niece and one reply from her aunt.

Document 3: Primary School Language Reader First Kind, Volume 9, Lesson 21 Letters

Part One: Letter

It has been a while, Auntie. The weather is getting cooler, how is everyone doing? (Has anyone changed?) A baby was born at 9 o’clock in the morning at our house. It’s a cute baby girl! I was the only girl among all brothers. I am very happy to have a sister now! Anyhow, I wanted to give you this news. Good-bye.

From: Kinshū. October 3.

To: Auntie

Part Two: The Reply

I read your letter. I am very happy that your mother had a safe child delivery on the Third (of October). Having only brothers before, you must be so happy that you have a sister now! For those living nearby, they can help out and see the baby. But for those who wish to do the same but live far away, it’s a shame that we can only think about it. Have you given the baby a name yet? I can only count my fingers and wait for a cute photograph to come. Please give your mother my regards. I am guessing

that you are busy helping out with household chores and other tasks. Enclosed is a parcel full of my heart's good wishes. Because I am also sending baby clothes, please use it as an opportunity to practice your sewing skills during your free time. Please give your parents and everyone my best regards. Good-bye.

From: Auntie. October 6.

To: Kinshū

Questions:

1. What take-aways (content-wise) does the colonial government want to teach in each lesson? Why does the colonial government think it was important for children to learn these things?
2. Besides content, what skill sets does the government want to teach children? (*Hint: pay attention to the format of each lesson*)
3. What modern infrastructure must have been in place for the activities discussed in each lesson to take place in Taiwan? Why does the colonial government want to talk about these infrastructures?