

# Signs of Decline of the Printed Word

By Hiroyuki Yamamuro

**T**he Japanese are reputed to be among the world's most avid readers, and one often used to hear such sayings as "autumn, the season for reading" and "it's time to read books by lamplight."

But the Japanese penchant for the printed word may be on the decline. Young people are said to have a lower level of reading ability than their elders. The newspaper where I work boasts the world's largest circulation—more than 8 million copies a day. With such a huge circulation, we are read by people in all walks of life, and the articles we print must be understandable to all.

The key to writing easily understood Japanese lies wholly in short sentences. A single column in a Japanese newspaper is 13 characters across and contains both Chinese ideographs and Japan's own kana syllabary. The maximum sentence length we allow our writers is five lines, or 65 characters.

## Books or television

Any sentence longer than this runs the risk of not being fully understood by the average reader. In an experiment at a national university, students were once asked to read two sentences, one containing more than 70 characters and the other less than 70, and summarize their contents. The study found a clear drop in comprehension the longer the sentence.

That this ability to understand written matter also affects the time people spend reading books was endorsed by a survey my own newspaper conducted last year of 3,000 adults above the age of 20.

The survey revealed that 51% of respondents had not bought a single book in the past month, and that 37% had not even read one. Some 21% of the respondents said they read for 30 minutes a day, up two percentage points from the previous time the survey was taken. But the number of respondents saying they read for an hour or more declined, and time spent watching television increased.

Some 71% of the respondents said they watched television more than two hours a day, while only 2% said they seldom turned on the set. That compares with 28% who said they never read books.

I've watched this happening in my own home. We recently bought a video cassette recorder for our 11-year-old son, a fifth grader. Our family's education policy consists of the following five points: (1) active participation in sports; (2) no cram schools during elementary schooling; (3) attentive listening to classroom lectures; (4) at least one hour of book reading every day; and (5) no more than 30 minutes of television a day.

My son, a fanatical soccer and baseball player, faithfully followed this policy. Until recently, that is. Because he is so engrossed in sports, he often cannot make it home in time for his favorite television program. At his request, we decided to buy a VCR to record these all-important television programs.

Since buying the machine, we've noticed a big change. The program he wants to see is always videotaped. Yet when he comes home, he usually finds another program on the air which interests him. So he winds up watching both the recorded program *and* the show on television. The extra time for television comes out of his daily book-reading time.

Yet another sign. Last year, so-called "cassette-books," books on cassette, suddenly became popular. The first cassette-book—oral readings of literary works—was issued on January 22 last year by Shinchosha, a major publishing house. According to a Shinchosha spokesman, such "books" began catching on in the United States two or three years ago, and they have grown there into an annual

market of ¥30 billion. One reason for the popularity of books on cassette in America is that it is easier for busy businesspeople to listen to recorded books than to read books, as car stereo and other audio equipment are now so readily available when driving to and from work.

## No time to read

The same should be true in Japan, Shinchosha thought, and after six months' preparation they put their first cassette-books on the market.

The hunch paid off. Last year, 350,000 cassette tapes of 37 books were sold. With each tape costing ¥1,600, Shinchosha's experiment should have brought in about ¥560 million last year alone.

Shinchosha started the boom. Such big publishing names as Tokuma Shoten, Chuo Koron-sha, Iwanami Shoten and Kodansha have helped keep it going. By last summer 25 companies were mass-producing cassette-books; by autumn it was up to 35. The tapes are especially popular with consumers in their 20s and 50s, but buyers are also fairly evenly distributed through all other age groups.

Cassette-tape magazines are scheduled to start this spring. Who knows, eventually there may even be cassette-book comics.

I've been arguing for a long time now that young Japanese are drawing away from the printed word. What is behind this trend? Some say it reflects diversifying lifestyles and a broader range of hobbies. But it seems to me that an even bigger reason must be Japan's new affluence, which makes it possible for people to do more things with their free time, and a situation where so much of office workers' time is spent on the job or in the commuter train that they have no private time of their own to sit down, get comfortable, and have a good read.



Books that talk: a display of "cassette books"

Photo: Kondo Book Center

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