

Stories of Words: Chinese & Japanese Words



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Learning About Words

A B C D E F G.... You're probably singing the rest of this song in your head right now. It's such a simple song, but it may have helped you learn the alphabet, and so begin your reading life.

Of course, you have to know the alphabet that is used in English to read this book, but students in other parts of the world have to learn other systems for building and reading words.

Children in China and Japan use very different systems of writing from the one used in English. The Chinese system consists of more than 50,000 different characters, although people need to learn only a few thousand to read well. These symbols are not based on sounds, as they are in English. Instead, Chinese symbols are pictures that represent ideas or objects.

Both the Chinese and Japanese languages have more than one system of writing. This means that there could be more than one way to write the word *hello!*

One system of writing in Japanese came from the Chinese language. This system of writing is called Kanji. For example, the Japanese Kanji character and the Chinese character for *water* are the same. But they are pronounced differently. In Chinese, *water* is pronounced *shua*. In Japanese, *water* is pronounced *mi zu*.

You'll read in this book about many words that came into English from Chinese and Japanese. Because the writing systems used in these languages are quite different from the one used in English, some words are spelled in a few different ways. This often happens when people try to spell a word from another language the way it sounds in their own language.

English



Japanese

Chinese

China and Japan have a long history with each other, so they have a large number of common words and terms. You'll notice, too, that a number of words from these languages are words you use every day.

Here are three examples of words written in Chinese and in Japanese. You'll notice that the words for *horse* look quite similar, but the words for *friend* and *dog* look quite different. Changes like these take place over time, as people use the language.

Chinese

Japanese

Horse

馬

馬

Friend

朋友

友人

Dog

狗

犬

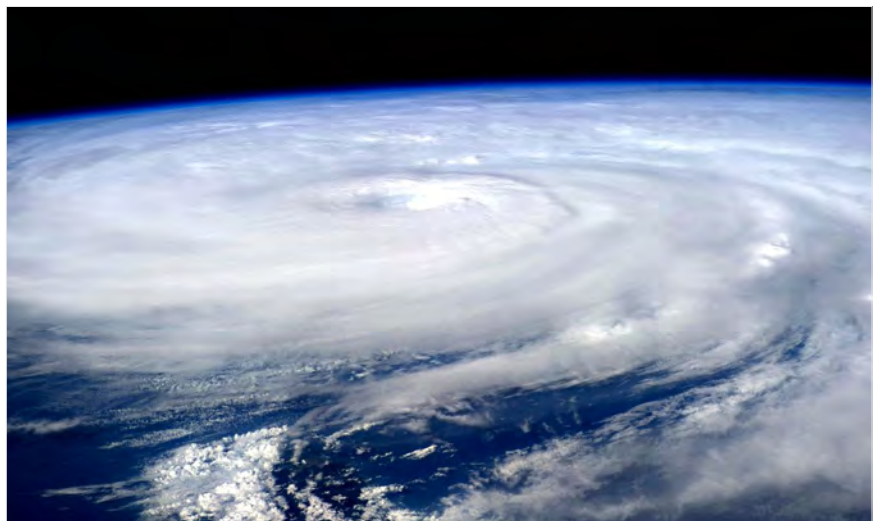
1

WHAT'S THE WEATHER FORECAST?

China and Japan are located in east Asia, on the western side of the Pacific Ocean. The weather in the western Pacific is unique, partly because of the ocean's immense size. In fact, the Pacific Ocean covers about one-third of Earth's surface. All of the continents could fit inside the Pacific Ocean and still have room left. It has twice as much water as the Atlantic Ocean.

Large, dangerous storms sometimes form over huge bodies of water. These storms have different names in different parts of the world. In the Atlantic and eastern Pacific oceans, a huge storm, or cyclone, is called a hurricane. However, in the western Pacific it is called a typhoon.

The word *typhoon* comes from the Chinese term *tai fung*, which means "a great wind."



The National Weather Service names storms so that they are easy to refer to. Hurricanes that form in or near the Atlantic Ocean are given people's names. Those that form in or near the Pacific Ocean have different kinds of names. Here are a few names of typhoons that caused a lot of damage in Asia.

Typhoon Names (year)	Meaning of Name	Language
Fengshen (2002)	god of wind	Chinese
Longwang (2005)	dragon king	Chinese
Washi (2011)	eagle	Japanese
Haiyan (2013)	petrel (a sea bird)	Chinese
Usagi (2013)	rabbit	Japanese
Kujira (2015)	whale	Japanese

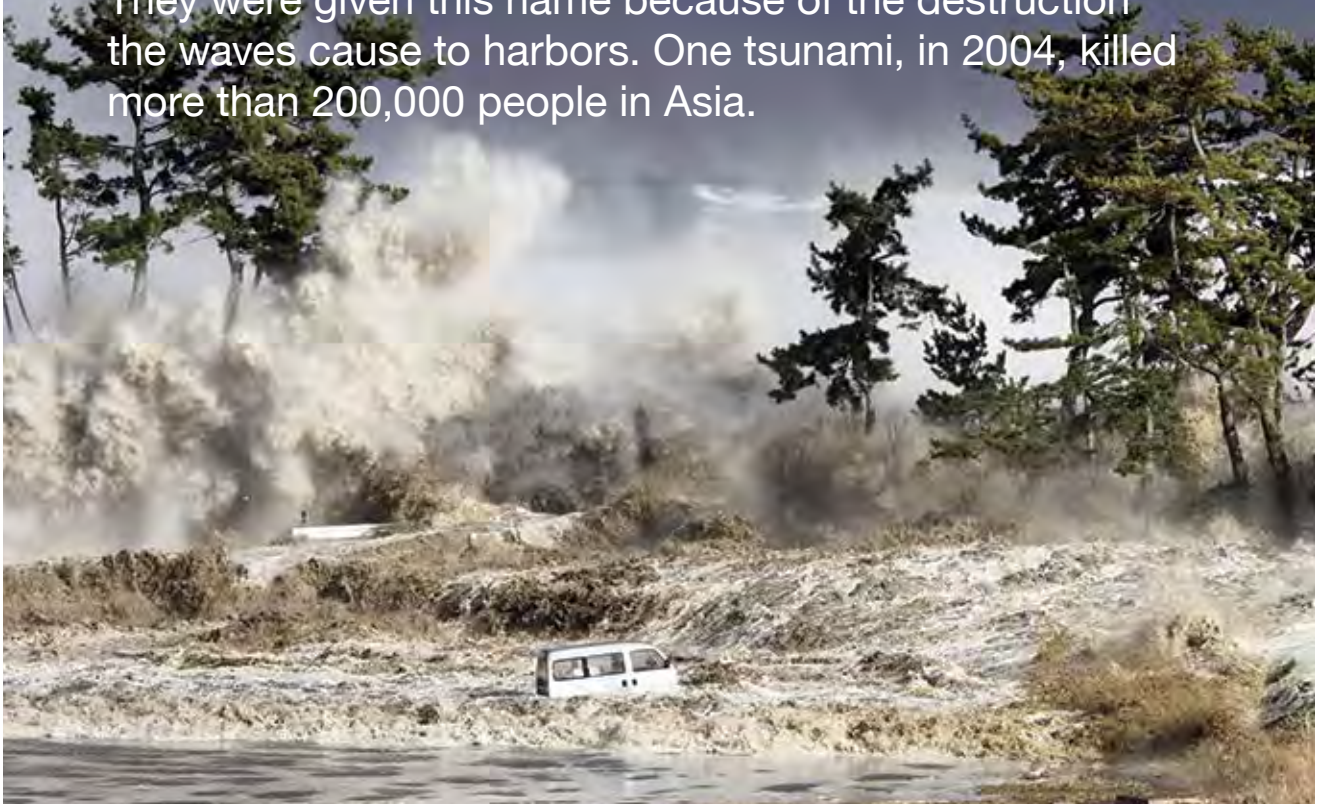


Danger From Waves

Even though the world's oceans are huge, ocean events can affect areas that are thousands of miles apart. You can see how this happens if you drop a stone into a pond or puddle. The stone will create waves that run across the entire pond.

Tsunamis are a type of ocean event. These huge waves are created when large amounts of ocean water are displaced. The water can be displaced by an earthquake or an erupting volcano.

Like a stone dropped into a pond, tsunami waves can roll across an entire ocean. They can travel as fast as a jet plane, then slam onto the shore thousands of miles from where the waves began. The word *tsunami* is originally from the Japanese words *tsu* (harbor) and *nami* (waves). They were given this name because of the destruction the waves cause to harbors. One tsunami, in 2004, killed more than 200,000 people in Asia.





2

MARTIAL ARTS

Which sports do you like to play or watch? Today, many children and adults around the world practice the martial arts. Several forms of these exercises originated in China and Japan.

In many countries, tai chi is a popular form of gentle exercise. It is often practiced by older people, to help them develop their balance and stay flexible. It often has a slow pace and gentle movements, and it may involve meditation. The name *tai chi* means “supreme ultimate.”

In China, though, tai chi is practiced as a martial art. This form of tai chi is done more quickly, but it is not often seen outside China.



Kung fu is another type of Chinese martial art. It has several forms, which often involve sharp blows and kicks. In China, it is known as wushu or gung fu. The name means “a skill or accomplishment, especially if it was achieved by long or hard work.”



The Japanese martial art karate is another popular sport. It originated in China, and it was given the name karate in Japan. The word *karate* consists of two Japanese words: *kara* (empty) and *te* (hand). Like kung fu, karate involves sharp blows and kicks. The term *empty hand* describes the way hands are held in many forms of karate.



Ninjas Then and Now

Another martial art from Japan is ninjutsu, or the art of the ninja. In Japanese, *ninja* means “a person who endures.” The ninja was trained in the art of stealth, and he was often sent to spy on or sabotage the enemy. He attacked in secret.

Ninjas are not just historical figures, though. In online gaming, the word *ninja* means “someone who has taken an item without a group’s consent.” These “ninjas” are often put on lists of people to avoid.



3

WORKING TOGETHER

“Look at the runner in the third lane—she’s really gung ho! I bet she’ll set a new record!” How would you describe this runner? You’d probably say that she’s someone who really wants to win, and you’d be right. The term *gung ho*, which originated in China during World War II, means “being especially enthusiastic and dedicated.”



After their factories were captured by the Japanese army during World War II, the Chinese people built new ones in rural areas. They used the phrase *gongye hezhoushe* (industrial cooperative) to describe the new factories. When abbreviated to the first characters in Chinese, *gung he*, the phrase means “to work together or cooperate.” This phrase was used as a slogan for the new factories.

A military advisor with the US Marine Corps helped the Chinese in their rebuilding efforts. He was so impressed by the Chinese spirit of *gung he* that he adopted the term as the motto for his Marine battalion. It was later respelled as *gung ho*.



That spirit of people working together is important in Japan, too. Of course, people working together need leaders who will help them reach a goal.

In Japan, someone who is a leader may be called a *hancho*. In English, the word is spelled *honcho*. This word has two parts in Japanese. *Han* means “corps or squad,” and *cho* means “chief.” So, a honcho is the leader of a group. Sometimes people say someone is a “head honcho,” in English, but as you can see, that’s like saying that person is a “chief chief.”



Working Together in Business

People in an area have to agree on how to buy and sell things. In early times, people traded items and services, but today, most cultures use a form of money. When money was first created, people used things that were valuable to them, such as shells and stones.



Today, it is common to use money made from paper or some type of metal. People agree that each piece of paper or metal is worth a certain amount. Most countries have their own system of money, but sometimes countries form a union and create a currency that everyone in the union uses.

In China, the monetary unit is the yuan, while in Japan it is the yen. The words appear to be similar, and in fact, they have a common origin. The Chinese term *yuan* means “round object, circle, or dollar.” The Japanese borrowed this term and created the *yen* (or “en,” as it can be pronounced).



4

WHAT'S FOR DINNER?

What do you put on a hot dog or hamburger? Many people in the United States use ketchup. The first ketchup, though, was very different from what you know today.

The first form of ketchup was a kind of fish sauce used in Asia. The word *ketchup*, which comes from the Chinese word *ke'tsiap*, means “fish brine.” (Brine is water with quite a bit of salt.) English and Dutch sailors brought this sauce home and added mushrooms, cucumbers, and even oysters.

Ketchup only appeared as we know it in the 19th century, when American sailors began to add tomatoes to the recipe. It is also known as catsup in the United States; this is simply another attempt to pronounce the original Chinese word.



Soy sauce is often used today in the United States. It is frequently used in Chinese and Japanese foods, but it is used in the foods of other countries as well.



Like ketchup, soy sauce was originally a type of fish sauce that was made from soybeans. The word soy comes from the Japanese word *soyu*, which was borrowed from the Chinese *shi-yu*, meaning “fermented bean oil.”

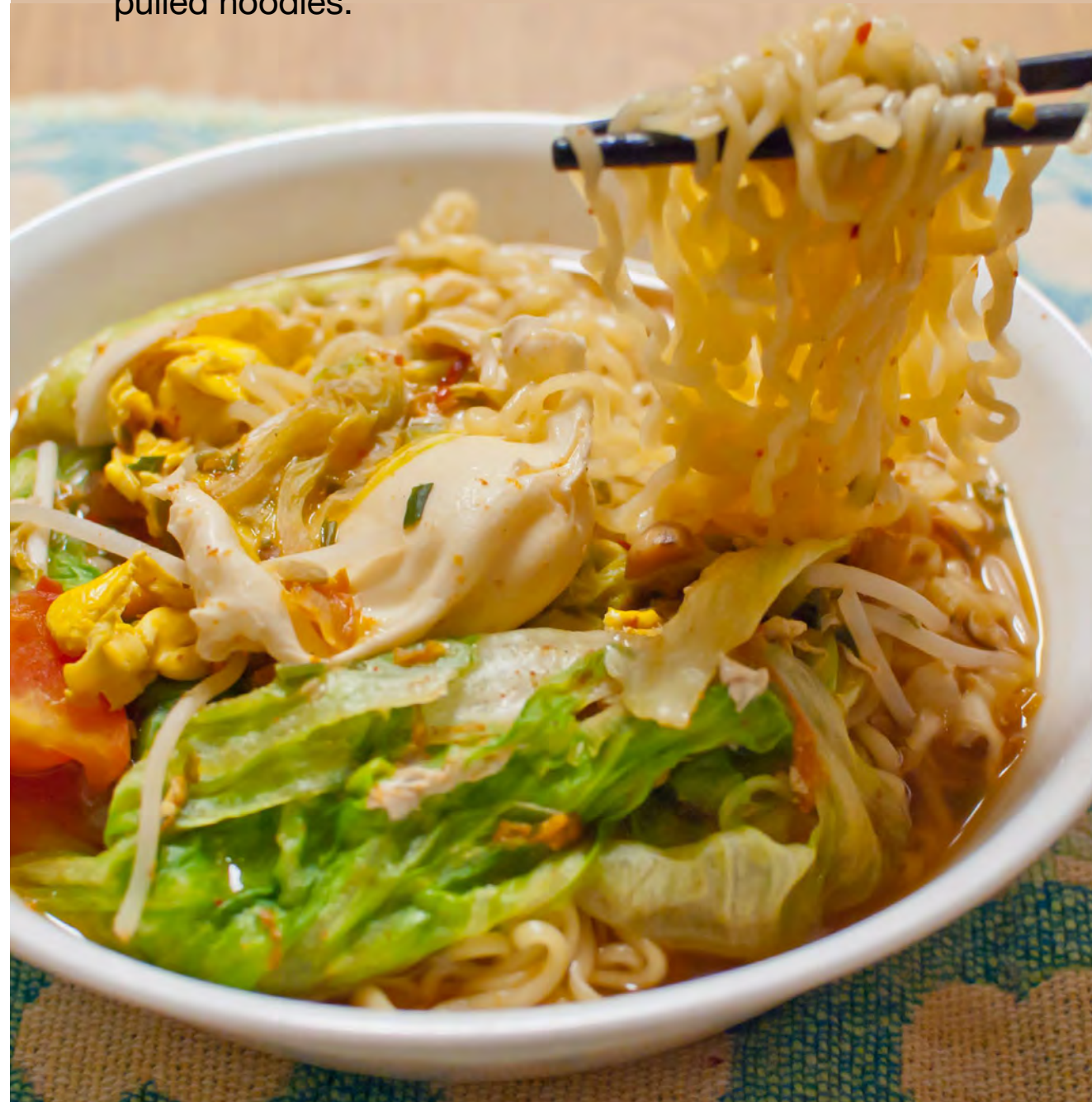
Another common food made from soybeans is tofu. The word *tofu* is Japanese, but again it was borrowed from Chinese. The original Chinese word was *doufu*, which literally means “rotten beans”!

Tofu

Soy sauce



Japanese food is also popular around the world today. You may have eaten a quick meal of ramen. This tasty soup usually has noodles, called ramen noodles, and it can be flavored with meat, vegetables, and soy sauce. The word *ramen* is from a Chinese word that means “pulled noodles.”



And have you ever tasted sushi? This is another popular Japanese food. You may think that the word *sushi* refers to the fish that's often served in sushi bars, but *sushi* actually means "it is sour." The name was chosen because sushi is usually prepared with vinegar. Originally, the sour taste was made by wrapping fish in fermenting rice.



Many Chinese and Japanese dishes are popular in the United States today. Here are a few you've probably seen on menus or tasted.

Name of the Food	Country	Ingredients	Meaning of the Name
chop suey	China	vegetables and meat in a brown sauce	"mixed pieces"
lo mein	China	noodles with vegetables and meat	"stirred noodles"
bento (box)	Japan	a single-portion meal served in a box	"convenient"
sashimi	Japan	thin slices of raw fish	"to stab meat"



Top row, left to right: chop suey, lo mein
Bottom row, left to right: bento, sashimi

Coffee or Tea?

What do your parents drink when they want a warm liquid? People around the world drink coffee, but in many countries, tea is the favorite drink.

There is a legend in China that tea was discovered more than 5,000 years ago when some leaves fell into a pot of water that the emperor Shen Nung was boiling. It's hard to trace the history of something that's been used for so long, but it's certain that tea has been used both as a drink and as a medicine.

The word *tea* in China can be pronounced either as *ch'a* or *t'e*. This, of course, is where we get the English word *tea*. The Dutch were the first to import tea into Europe around 1610. It was the English, however, who went crazy for tea, and it became their national drink.



4

DOGS WITH JOBS

How many breeds of dogs do you know? There are more than 300 dog breeds in the world. And there are more than 73 million dogs of all kinds just in the United States! That's a lot of dogs.

Over the years, dogs have been bred to do many "jobs." They've been bred to herd sheep, to run long distances, and to be human companions. Dogs are usually happiest when they're doing whatever job they've been bred to do, so you have to think about that before you adopt a dog.



What would you want a dog to do? Would you want one to hunt or to guard your possessions? If so, you might consider adopting a Chow Chow. Commonly known as the Chow, this breed was developed in China and was owned by Chinese emperors more than 2,000 years ago. It first appeared in its current form about 4,000 years ago. In China, the Chow is known as the *Songshi Quan*, which means “puffy-lion dog.” This name accurately describes its appearance, since it has a heavy coat and a large head. The Chow was also likely a model for the Chinese “Foo” dog, a stone statue that is often placed outside Buddhist temples as a kind of guardian.





Maybe you don't want a dog who can hunt or guard your possessions. Maybe you want a dog that doesn't need much exercise. If so, the Pug may be a good choice. Like Chows, Pugs were bred in China and are also said to be models

for the "Foo" dog. They are much smaller in size than Chows, and they were bred to lie in the laps of Chinese emperors. They were so prized that they were sometimes guarded by soldiers. The word *pug* is actually Old English, and it means "playful little devil or monkey."

Several types of dogs were bred in Japan to hunt and guard, too. One is the Akita. Named after the district in Japan in which it was developed, Akitas were bred to guard and to hunt big animals such as deer and bears. They don't bark very much because they were bred to be silent hunters.

Because Akita is in the cold north of Japan, Akitas have heavy coats. Their full name is Akita Inu, with *Inu* meaning "dog." They are very smart and need lots of attention and exercise.



Shiba Inus, which are smaller than Akitas, are also bred to hunt and guard. Some people think *Shiba* means “brushwood,” for the area in which it hunted, but it seems more likely that *Shiba Inu* means “midget dog.” These dogs are sometimes compared to cats because they are very independent, and they use their front paws to clean their faces. Also, they’re very hard to train. They like to find their own jobs.





Our Changing Language

Languages change a lot over the years. When a language is first developed, the few people who speak it live close together, and they create words that communicate information that's important to them.

As time goes on, people move to other areas. If these people don't communicate, the new words and pronunciations they create can't be understood by others. At that point, people who once spoke the same language can no longer understand one another.

That's what happened with the Chinese language. More than 1,000 years ago, an emperor directed his scholars to invent a written language that would unite his country. China is a big country, and travel over large areas was hard. People continued to be able to read their language, but pronunciations changed.

Today, the people in China can understand their language as it is written, but people in different areas can't understand each others' speech. People from Shanghai, for example, can't understand the speech of people from Hong Kong.

The Japanese language did not change in this way. The smaller size of the country and the control of the rulers ensured that Japanese people around the country continued to understand one another.



In the United States today, although most people speak English, they speak somewhat differently in different regions. Pronunciations for some letters are different, and there are some words that are used only in a small area. These are not different languages, but different dialects, or varieties of a language.

Today, easy travel, plus access to the Internet, radio, and TV make it easy for people to learn new words and new meanings for existing words. Languages keep changing, but people today can keep communicating because they can keep in touch with one another. They can keep speaking “the same language.”



Glossary

characters the letters or signs of a language

dialect a variety of a language that may include different words, grammar, and pronunciations of words in the standard language

district an area of a country

symbol something that represents something else; in a language, a letter or character is a symbol of a word or sound

writing system the way a language is represented in print



Think About It

- The Chinese and Japanese languages use characters that look very different from the ones used in English. Work with a friend to create a new system of writing. Choose a few words and decide how you will represent them.
- Dogs are bred to do a wide variety of jobs. What are some jobs you know about that dogs can be trained to do? How would you train a dog to do a job?
- Listen to some people speak who came from another part of the United States. Talk to family members, neighbors, or classmates, or listen to TV shows. Compare how people say a few common words, such as *dog*, *car*, and *off*. What differences in the sounds of the words can you hear? (Hint: Pay close attention to the vowels and the way people pronounce the letter *r*.) Report your findings to the class.



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