

On Engelbert Kaempfer's "Ginkgo"

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Many authors have discussed the question why Engelbert Kaempfer (1651-1716) presented the name of the *ginkyō*-tree in such an awkward spelling in the *Amoenitates Exoticae*. Other misspellings in his book do not draw much attention, but this one was introduced into botanic nomenclature by the eminent Carl von Linné (1707-1778) and therefore GINKGO BILOBA will be with us as long as botany exists. Like many others I have always thought that this is a mere misprint, laying the blame on the publisher in Lemgo, the Meyersche Hofbuchhandlung, where the *Amoenitates Exoticae* was printed under Kaempfer's supervision in 1712. But the culprit turned out to be Kaempfer himself, not the poor typesetter.

Kaempfer's usage of the *Kinmōzui*

During his two years stay at the Dutch trading-post Dejima (Deshima) in Nagasaki Kaempfer had managed to get hold of two copies of a pictorial dictionary *Kinmōzui* (1), edited by Nakamura Tekisai (1629-1702). Both are nowadays kept in the British Library (Oriental Collections). The *Kinmōzui* is a woodblock-print that was used for educational purposes and exerted a great influence on later similar books. Some Western authors call it an encyclopedia, but this is a gross exaggeration. The *Kinmōzui* does not deal with abstract or complex notions, it explains 1484 plants, animals, instruments and other artifacts, the human body, clothes and other concrete objects. Each page shows four frames with four simple illustrations depicting the respective object. Its name is carved in big Chinese characters. A short text provides various readings of these characters and further alternative names used in Japan.

Kaempfer's linguistic information about GINKGO was taken from Book 18 (*Fruits*) in the second edition of the *Kinmōzui*. This edition, printed in 1668, shows an arrangement slightly different from the first edition (1666), but its contents is identical, at least as far as GINKGO is concerned (fig. 1a/b).



Fig. 1a "GINKGO" in *Kinmōzui* (1666, private collection).

Fig. 1b GINKGO in *Kinmōzui* (1668,



private collection). For copyright reasons I cannot reproduce the picture from Kaempfer's volume in the British Library.

As Kaempfer was not able to read this book he inserted a reference number into each frame. Most of the botanical entries in the *Kinmōzui* show a second number used to mark the Chinese characters separately. These numbers appear again in notes he wrote down at Dejima. Probably it was his famous "assistant" Imamura Gen'emon who explained the *Kinmōzui* to him, but there were professional interpreters close to Kaempfer like Namura Gompachi or the highly educated Narabayashi Chinzan, who might have helped too.

Fortunately many of Kaempfer's notes are preserved. In a manuscript volume nowadays called *Collectanea Japonica* (British Library, Sloane Collection, 3062) we find several pages with the numbers referring to the Chinese characters in the *Kinmôzui*. Here the readings of the Chinese characters are given in Latin letters. The pronunciation of the 34th character is explained as "Ginnan" and wrongly as "Ginkgo" instead of the more appropriate spelling as "Ginkjo" or "Ginkio" (fig.2). This note shows that the incorrect spelling in Kaempfer's *Flora Japonica* (5th book of the *Amoenitates Exoticae*) is not a result of a simple misprint or misunderstanding by the typesetter in Lemgo. It was Kaempfer himself who made a small mistake with long-lasting consequences.

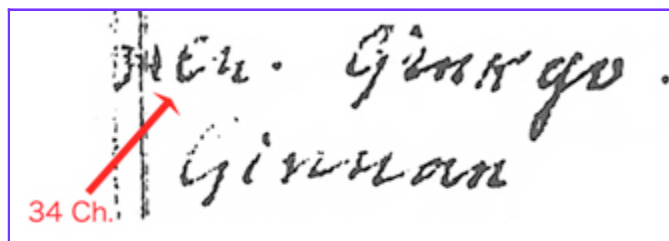
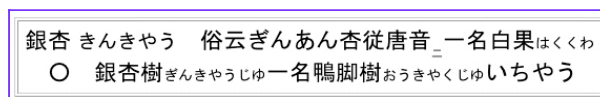


Fig. 2 Kaempfer's handwriting (British Library, Sloane Collection 2907, *Collectanea Japonica*).

The numbers in Kaempfer's notes appear again in one of Kaempfer's two copies of the *Kinmôzui* (British Library, Or.75.ff.1). Here a frame numbered 29 shows a twig of the GINKGO and as an additional number 37 above the characters 銀杏. The reading of these characters is explained in Japanese as ginkyô using the syllables characters gi-n-ki-ya-u and as an alternative way of pronunciation (tôin) (2) ginan written with the characters gi-n-a-n(3). There can be no doubt that Kaempfer's Japanese counterpart who explained these readings had pronounced in the correct way:



Unfortunately Kaempfer's manuscript of the *Amoenitates Exoticae* is preserved only in parts (British Library, Sloane Collection no 2907). In relation to the *Flora Japonica* there is nothing left but a draft of 32 pages entitled "Fasciculus V". It deals with most of the plants in the *Flora Japonica*, but in a different order and gives only very short explanations of two or three lines for each item. A vertical line on each page crossing the text indicates that Kaempfer had written an advanced version and was finished with this part. In this draft we find a short remark on the "Itsjò noki" followed by the word "DESCRIP TIO" indicating that Kaempfer intended to add a description. There is no reference to other names of the GINKGO at this stage. Obviously this word came up, when Kaempfer an advanced version referring to the Chinese characters in the *Kinmôzui* (fig. 2).

杏銀 *Ginkgo*, vel *Gin an*, vulgò *Itsjò*. Arbor
nucifera folio Adiantino.
Kkk kk 2 Libe-

Fig. 3 *Amoenitates Exoticae* p. 811.
[Link to *Amoenitates Exoticae* p. 812ff.](#)

The letters y and g in Kaempfer's manuscripts

One might argue that the letter g in his notes (fig. 2) could have been intended as a y. But figure 4 demonstrates that both letters have several distinctive features.

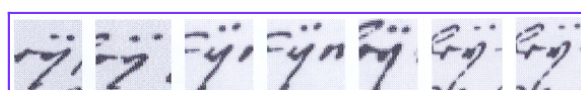




Fig. 4 The letters y (above) and g (below) in Kaempfer's manuscript *Heutiges Japan* (BL, SI 3060). Copy from *Engelbert Kaempfer - Werke 1/2* (iudicium, 2001).

The examples of figure 4 are taken from a German manuscript. When Kaempfer wrote Latin and other foreign words he used a different set of letters following the custom of his era. But here too he added two dots on the y. Even when he leaves out the dots, the descender of his y still differs significantly from that in his g (fig.5).

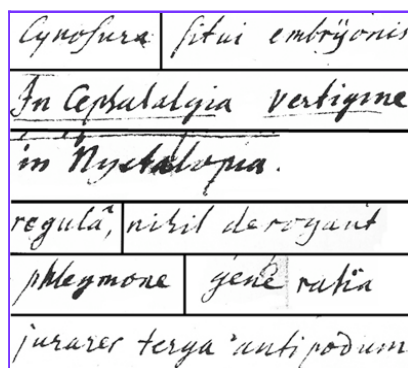


Fig. 5 The letters y and g in manuscript fragments of Kaempfer's *Amoenitates Exoticae* (BL, SI 3907). Copy from *Engelbert Kaempfer - Werke 1/2* (iudicium, 2001).

Kaempfer's writing of the Japanese syllables kyo or kyô in general

Furthermore we have to take a look at Kaempfer's spelling of other Japanese words comprising the syllable kyo or kyô (fig.6).

Kaempfer's spelling	Hepburn (Chinese character)
Kiobas	Kyôbashi (京橋)
Tei Gjo	Teigyô (帝堯), Chines. Diyao
Gjo / Gio	Gyô (堯), Chines. Yao
Gjogji	Gyôki (行基)
Gjosja	gyôja (行者)
Gjenno Gjosa	En-no-gyôja (役行者)
Nangjosi feja	nengyôji heya / nengyôjibeya (年行司部屋)
Nengjosi	nengyôji (年行司)
Dsjo Kio	Jôkyô (貞亨)
In Kjòo / In Kio / Jn Kjo	Ingyô (允恭)
Bugjos (pl) / Bugjo	bugyô (奉行)
Dsi Sja bugjo	jishabugyô (寺社奉行)

Kjo kai	gyokai (魚貝, 魚介)
Kingjo	kingyo (金魚)
Nítzi Jósi / Nítzi gjósi	nichigyôshi (日行使)
Dsjojosi	jôgyôji (常行司)
Kijo móri / Kio mori/ Kijomóri	Taira-no-Kiyomori (平清盛)
Kiomids / Kiomitz / Kijomitz	Kiyomizu (清見水)

Fig. 6 Kaempfer's spelling of Japanese words comprising the syllables *kyo*, *gyo* and *ki-yo* in the manuscript *Heutiges Japan* (BL, Sloane 3060)

Obviously Kaempfer had great difficulties in identifying Japanese syllables like *ji* or *ja*. Due to the characteristics of the German phonem system this is one of the problems native Germans have to cope with nowadays too. Until Japanese phonems alien to the German system are internalized every utterance of a Japanese speaker is processed by using a German filter. Thus certain phonems are completely ignored or wrongly attributed to "similar" German ones. But this is not the case with Japanese syllables like *kyo* or *gyo*. As figure 6 shows Kaempfer's writing as *kio*, *kjo*, *gio*, *gjo* is quite consistant. Sometimes he even could distinguish the pronunciation of the syllable *kyo* from the two syllables *ki-yo*, which is very difficult for many Westerners up to now.

A look at the Japanese plant names printed in the *Amoenitates Exoticae* leads to the same result - with the only expection being "Ginkgo".

Kaempfer's spelling	Hepburn (Chinese character)	Amoenitates Exoticae
Kikjo	kikyô (桔梗)	p.823
Uikio	uikyô (茴香)	p.825
Kjoo	kyô (薑)	p.826
Kio	kyo (菖)	p.831
Kjókuso	gyokusho (玉黍)	p.835
Kjo	kyô (蕎)	p.835
Sokio	sôkyô (皂莢)	p.841
Jen no gjosa	En-no-gyôja (役行者)	p.463
Rengjo	rengyô (連翹)	p.907

Kaempfer's spelling of Japanese words comprising the syllables *kyo*, *gyo* and *kiyo* in the *Amoenitates Exoticae*

Conclusion

In general, Kaempfer's representation of Japanese words is very inconsistent when it comes to certain phonems. He also did not care much about the significant difference between long and short vowels. But a word like *ginkyô* should have been no match for him. As both syllables *kyo* and *gyo* are consistently written as *kio/kjo* and *gio/gjo* in his manuscripts he should have written "Ginkjo" or "Ginkio" instead of "Ginkgo". Back in Lemgo there was no way to check the validity of his notes on plant names taken in Japan. Therefore the wrong writing "Ginkgo" was transferred from his notes into the *Amoenitates Exoticae*.

If Kaempfer's listening abilities were sufficient, one wonders what has caused this simple mistake at the Dutch trading-post Dejima in 1690 or the following year. Maybe it was one of those many sticky days in Kyushu, when life slows down. The shrieking of the cicadas in the garden was ear-battering as usual, the moscitos were relentlessly attacking. Maybe Kaempfer and his Japanese

counterpart had sipped from the liqueur he mentions in the preface of *Heutiges Japan*. For a second or two he did not pay enough attention. Between may and september there are many moments when things loose their importance and sense.

Footnotes

(1) 中村◆U60D5◆斎編『訓蒙図彙』[出版地不明]: 山形屋[=山形市郎右衛門], 寛文6[1666]年。10冊、22巻。

Kaempfer used the second edition: 貞享3 [1668]年。5冊。

(2) 唐音 (tō-in/tō-on): Chinese readings introduced into Japan since the Kamakura period. This term is sometimes combined with later Muromachi-era readings (sō-on, 宋音) to tōsō-on (唐宋音). These readings are not systematic. They are confined to certain words, like futon (蒲団), andon (行灯), min (明), brought to Japan by monks and traders.

(3) The reading and writing of plant names in Japan shows a great variety depending not only on the century in which the respective Chinese name was introduced. In the vast Chinese empire sometimes different characters (names) were used for the same plant or the same character was applied to different plants. When such names arrived in Japan further misunderstandings happened. Therefore modern botanical books prefer to use the botanical name and an established Japanese name in kana syllables, adding the Chinese characters only for historical reasons.

GINKGO is one of the easier cases. Modern dictionaries give the readings of 銀杏 as ginnan (ぎんなん) and ichō (いちょう). But the latter pronunciation goes back to the Chinese name yajiao (鴨脚), i.e. duckfoot, that refers to the shape of the GINKGO leaves.

Another Chinese name used in Japan under the reading ichō is 公孫樹 (chin. gongsunshu), meaning "grandfather-grandson-tree". This is said to be an allusion to the long time necessary to grow the GINKGO-tree until its nuts can be harvested.

Recommended Readings:

* For the history of the GINKGO in China and its transmission to Japan, see the extensive research of MAYANAGI Makoto, my most esteemed fellow in the board of the Japan Society of Medical History: [Ichō no shutsugen to Nihon e no denrai](#) (真柳誠「イチョウの出現と日本への伝来」).

** For many other aspects of GINKGO, see Cor Kwant's stimulating [GINKGO PAGES](#).

*** For a palaeolontical outline, see Walter Jung's comprehensive paper [Der Ginkgo - Baum, ein Unikum mit Vergangenheit](#). (courtesy Jens Rickmeyer)