■「漢字」の成り立ち The kanji for 'kanji'

Have you ever thought about the origin of the characters for 漢字?

The right-hand side of 漢, from a picture of a pelt dried by fire, gives the pronounciation カン, as well as the meaning 'dried up', and the left-hand side gives the meaning of water. The earliest uses of 漢 were as the name of a river (with little water), and of the Milky Way (a river with no water). A kingdom of the 漢(Han) people emerged around the river, which eventually became the Han dynasty, and hence 漢 was used to refer to China.

The character 字 comes from a picture of a child, which gives the pronunciation ジ, under a roof. It originally meant 'have children', but came to be used for characters produced by the combination of other characters and was subsequently generalised to 'letter' or 'written character'. So 漢字 simply means Chinese letters!

Reference: 藤堂編 小学生版「漢字なりたち辞典」

■ 漢字の造語力 Kanji word-building

During Japan's period of modernisation in the late 19th century, the Japanese created many new words by combining kanji to translate new concepts from Western culture. Some examples are 哲学, philosophy, 労働, labour and 会社, company. Some of these words were even reimported

by the Chinese! As well as new kanji compounds, the Japanese created new characters, eg. the 「働」 of 働く, to work, 辻, crossroads, and 峠, mountain pass. These are referred to as 国字, ie. kanji created in Japan.

Playing with kanji

The Japanese continue to enjoy playing with kanji, creating their own original words. Here are two imaginative creations, from our colleague 佐々木さん, but be aware that they are not real words!

女怖 → 女 (woman) + 怖 (scary) = mother

茶乳 → 茶 (tea) + 乳 (milk) = milk tea

Created by Cathy Jonak