



JAPAN INFORMATION
AND CULTURE CENTER
在米国日本大使館広報文化センター

TEACHING TUESDAY

A BASIC INTRODUCTION TO ON'YOMI AND KUN'YOMI

Japanese kanji often have many different readings, divided into “on’yomi” and “kun’yomi,” which we also note in our Teaching Tuesday posts. This is because while Japan had a spoken language, it did not have a written language before kanji was brought over from China.

On’yomi, which means “sound reading,” refers to the approximate Chinese reading of a kanji. There are usually multiple on’yomi readings for kanji, each from different Chinese provinces, dynasties, etc. In general, you’ll use on’yomi when a word is made up of a multi-kanji compound.

Kun’yomi is the Japanese reading of kanji. Japan needed their spoken language to work with the imported kanji, so the meaning of a Chinese kanji would be paired with the pronunciation of an equivalent Japanese word. Japanese words are longer, though, and didn’t always fit with the kanji, so hiragana was used to finish the word. In general, kun’yomi is used when a kanji has hiragana attached to it or when it’s by itself.

Read more about the history of kanji at <http://www.tofugu.com/tag/kanjiweek/>