

Japanese names

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The study of Japanese family and given names is an extremely complicated and difficult subject, but only if you are trying to read them in the original. If you are reading a text written in a language using Roman letters, then all the problems associated with Japanese names will have been solved already. This paper is intended for indexers working with Western-language materials, but I shall make some references to the complexities of the name system which I hope will be of interest.

Name order

Perhaps the most important point – and the one where mistakes are most easily made in Western texts – is the order of names. Japanese, like all other East Asians, place the family name first, followed by the given name. Middle names are not used, except with people of mixed Japanese and foreign parentage. To give two examples from my own family (my wife is Japanese), my son is Michael Takashi Power and my daughter is Jennifer Satomi Power. Some Japanese living overseas adopt a Western given name, sometimes one similar in sound to their Japanese name, for use with their foreign friends, but this is an alternative name, not a middle one. Also, Japanese often shorten their names to make them easier for foreigners to say (e.g. ‘Kazuyuki’ becomes ‘Kaz’).

However, Japanese almost invariably give their names in the Western order when using Western languages. This practice, also universally followed in Western newspapers, magazines and most books, became established in the Meiji period (1868–1912), when Japan was opened up to the West. Confusion often arises because the Chinese and Koreans did not follow the Japanese examples; even in ordinary Western newspapers, Chinese and Korean names are given in the original order, although Chinese and Koreans living and working in the West will usually adopt the Western order.

The exception to the above rule is scholarly publications, which usually follow the Japanese order, especially if the author is a Japanologist. People who can speak and read Japanese have a strong resistance to switching Japanese names to the Western order. In most cases, however, there will be a note near the beginning of the book specifying that the Japanese order has been followed.

Transliteration of Japanese names

Japanese is a polysyllabic language. There are many single-syllable words, such as *e* (picture), *ta* (rice field), *me* (eye), and *u* (cormorant), but on the other hand there are such common polysyllabic words as *muzukashii* (difficult), *yashashii* (easy) and *utsukushii* (beautiful). Breaking down

muzukashii, we find it is made up of five syllables, that is, *mu-zu-ka-shi-i*. (Incidentally, the stress on each syllable is equal, although the pitch may vary; the biggest mistake English speakers make when speaking Japanese words is to stress one of the syllables English-style.)

By way of background information, we may note that the above words are all purely Japanese in origin. Beginning at least 15 centuries ago, Japanese was strongly influenced by the Chinese language. The Japanese had no written language of their own, so they adopted the Chinese writing system, along with many other elements of Chinese culture. There are many words of Chinese origin in Japanese, and in fact the role of Chinese in Japanese can be compared to that of Latin and Greek in English.

The rest of this section is an explanation of the Japanese sound system and how it is written. If you are not interested in this topic, please go directly to the next section.

Since classical Chinese was a mainly monosyllabic language, the Chinese writing system was completely unsuited to writing Japanese. Not only is it polysyllabic, but also it is highly inflected – for example, both verbs and adjectives are conjugated (although nouns are not declined). To give some examples, here is part of the conjugation of a verb, *kaku* (write). Two forms are given in some cases, the shorter one being informal, the longer one more formal or polite. (Note that the verb can make a complete sentence in itself, as pronouns can be omitted if the meaning is clear from the context. There is no person or number, so in that respect Japanese conjugations are simpler than Latin.)

kaku/kakimasu: (I, you, he, they) write
kakanai/kakimasen: don't write
kaite iru/kaite imasu: am writing
kaite inai/kaite imasen: am not writing
kaita/kakimashita: wrote
kakanakatta/kakimasen deshita: did not write
kaite ita/kaite imashita: was writing
kaite inakatta/kaite imasen deshita: was not writing
kakitai: want to write
kakitakunai: don't want to write
kakitakatta: wanted to write
kakitakunakatta: didn't want to write

There are more forms, but perhaps that is enough to go on with. Japanese conjugations are not as difficult as the above list may make them appear, as there are only a small handful of irregular verbs. As you can see, suffixes indicating tense, mood and negation are tacked on to the end of the verb, which makes Japanese an agglutinative language.

To overcome the difficulty of writing Japanese with Chinese characters, at first certain characters were used for their phonetic value. Over the course of a couple of

centuries, these were simplified, so that they became quick and convenient to use; in other words, they developed into a syllabary (explained below). The unchanging stem of the word *kaku*, that is, *ka-*, is written with the Chinese character for 'write' 書, and the inflections with the phonetic symbols. Thus, *kakimasu* is written 書きます.

The ancient Japanese considered the syllable the basic unit of language and did not feel the need to distinguish between consonants and vowels in writing. Therefore, they developed a phonetic syllabary, not an alphabet. Actually, they developed two exactly parallel syllabaries (much to the regret of all beginners learning Japanese), *hiragana*, which is the main one, and *katakana*, which is used like italics or to write foreign words and names in Japanese. They are collectively referred to as *kana*.

There are two well-established systems for transcribing Japanese in Roman letters: the Hepburn and the Kunrei-shiki. Hepburn was popularized by an American medical missionary, James Curtis Hepburn (1815–1911), who was one of the pioneers in compiling Japanese–English dictionaries. Hepburn came to Japan in 1859, first founding a medical clinic, then a school, which much later became Meiji Gakuin University. In the 1887 edition of his dictionary, he adopted a system developed by a committee established to devise suitable Romanization for Japanese, and the system became known by his name, although he did not invent it. It can be considered the norm as, in slightly modified form, it is followed by the great majority of Western publications and by all English-language newspapers. Kunrei-shiki was developed later by the Japanese Ministry of Education for use in schools. In a way, it can be considered more logical, insofar as it is easier to derive the Japanese phonetic symbols from the spelling, but is misleading as far as actual pronunciation is concerned. Unfortunately, many Japanese confuse the two systems.

Table 1 shows the Japanese syllabary written in the Hepburn system, with Kunrei-shiki in brackets. Note that there is just one symbol representing an independent consonant, namely *n*, which always follows a vowel or a syllable. (Approximate pronunciation of vowels: *a* = ah, *i* = ee, *u* = oo, *e* = eh, *o* = oh.)

Table 1 gives the basic 45 syllables plus *n*, used in modern Japanese. The individual sections are referred to as 'lines', i.e., the *a*-line (*a*, *i*, *u*, *e*, *o*), the *ka*-line (*ka*, *ki*, *ku*, *ke*, *ko*), and so on. As indicated above, the Hepburn system is a better approximation of the Japanese pronunciation, but the Kunrei-shiki is more 'logical' – the 'chi' sound is in the *ta*-line, so it should be written 'ti'. Logic is fine, but in my personal experience of teaching Japanese, I have found that beginners trust their eyes more than their ears, so they pronounce 'tsu' as 'tu' or 'chi' as 'ti' even if imitating a tape in which the Japanese speaker says 'tsu' or 'chi'.

The utility of the basic 46 symbols given above is multiplied in two ways. Two dots placed next to symbols in some lines change the pronunciation of the consonant (an unvoiced consonant becomes a voiced one). There are some irregularities, so the complete lines are listed in Table 2, with Kunrei-shiki in brackets.

Also, as indicated below, with a circle instead of two dots, the *ha*-line becomes 'pa, pi, pu, pe, po'. (The dots and circle are technically known as 'voicing signs': they change an unvoiced consonant to a voiced one.)

In addition, there are compound syllables made by combining a line with the *ya*-line written smaller than ordinary size. Three lines are listed in Table 3, with the symbols used to write them in brackets, followed by Kunrei-shiki, if different, in square brackets.

One point I am ignoring in this article is the problem of long vowels. Vowels are often lengthened to almost double their length; this is indicated by writing the *kana* symbol for the vowel small. The Hepburn system uses a macron, which is a diacritic mark like an *en* sign placed above the vowel, for example, *o* or *ū*, to give the two vowels most often lengthened like this. However, Microsoft Word doesn't permit one to print macrons over vowels. Actually, Western newspapers and books also ignore the macron, although scholarly presses will give it. If you are using such a source, don't feel bad if you are unable to reproduce the macron, as you will be in good company. Some writers get around this problem by using the circumflex, viz. *ô* or *û*. Another solution, used by some Japanese when writing English is to add an 'h'; for example, the 'o' in the name Ito

Table 1 The Japanese syllabary written in the Hepburn system, with Kunrei-shiki in brackets

a	あ	ka	か	sa	さ	ta	た	na	な	ha	は	ma	ま	ya	や	ra	ら	wa	わ	n	ん
i	い	ki	き	shi (si)	し	chi (ti)	ち	ni	に	hi	ひ	mi	み			ri	り				
u	う	ku	く	su	す	tsu (tu)	つ	nu	ぬ	fu (hu)	ふ	mu	む	yu	ゆ	ru	る				
e	え	ke	け	se	せ	te	て	ne	ね	he	へ	me	め			re	れ				
o	お	ko	こ	so	そ	to	と	no	の	ho	ほ	mo	も	yo	よ	ro	ろ	(w)o	を		

Table 2 Unvoiced and voiced consonants

ka – ga	が	sa – za	ざ	ta – da	だ	ha – ba	ば	– pa	ぱ
ki – gi	ぎ	shi – ji (zi)	じ			hi – bi	び	– pi	ぴ
ku – gu	ぐ	su – zu	ず	tsu – zu	づ	fu – bu	ぶ	– pu	ぷ
ke – ge	げ	se – ze	ぜ	te – de	で	he – be	べ	– pe	ぺ
ko – go	ご	so – zo	ぞ	to – do	ど	ho – bo	ぼ	– po	ぽ

Table 3 Three lines of compound syllables with the symbols used to write them in brackets, followed by Kunrei-shiki, if different, in square brackets.

kya (ki + ya) きや	sha (shi + ya) [sya] しゃ	cha (chi + ya) [tya] ちゃ
kyu (ki + yu) きゆ	shu (shi + yu) [syu] しゅ	chu (chi + yu) [tyu] ちゅ
kyo (ki + yo) きよ	sho (shi + yo) [syo] しょ	cho (chi + yo) [tyo] ちょ

is a long ‘o’, so the name is written Itoh. (This practice is not usually followed by Japanologists, however, for whom it’s the macron or nothing.)

Another diacritical mark you may see in names is the apostrophe. Like ‘h’ above, this is not a standard feature of the Hepburn system, but it is sometimes used to avoid confusion. For example, with a name like ‘Junichi’, it may not be clear if the pronunciation is split ‘Ju-nichi’ or ‘Jun-ichi’. Using an apostrophe, that is, Jun’ichi, solves this problem, but not all writers will avail themselves of it, so you may find inconsistency. The main thing is to remember that ‘Junichi’ and Jun’ichi’ are not separate names (although, ‘Ju’nichi’ and ‘Jun’ichi’ would be). My inclination as an indexer would be to follow the usage of the source you are dealing with, but to bear in mind that leaving out the apostrophe will never be an actual mistake.

Note that the above explanation of transcribing Japanese is far from complete. If you are interested in a full explanation of the sound system and how it is written in kana, please refer to a language textbook.

Japanese family names

Both family and given names are almost always written with Chinese characters. A family name written in hiragana is possible but very rare (except for some pen names of writers), but given names in hiragana are seen more often. When a child is born and is given a name, it is entered in the family registry (*seki*), which is kept at the village, ward, town or city office. The given name must use characters on the government-sanctioned list of 2,200 or so for official use in education, newspapers and books. (Before the war, there was no limit on the number of Chinese characters in use. These days, a high school graduate is expected to know 2,000; a college graduate would know another 1,000 or 2,000, depending on his or her field. Only very well-educated Japanese would know much more than 4,000, although a specialist in classical Chinese texts might know 10,000. The largest character dictionary lists almost 50,000. The main compiler, Prof. Morohashi, is said to have been the only person who knew all of them. Memorizing characters is arduous and time-consuming, which is why the Ministry of Education set the above limit. At the same time, many complicated characters were simplified to make them easier to learn.) The officials have discretion to refuse to register strange names – for example, in 1993, a couple tried to register a child with the name of Akuma or ‘devil’ 悪魔, but the name was rejected, even though the two characters used to write it are both on the official list.

The typical Japanese family name consists of three or four syllables and is written with two Chinese characters, but there is no rule. Five-syllable names are also very common

and longer names are not rare. One-syllable names are fairly rare. Likewise, the number of characters used also varies. The most I can think of offhand is four, but you could probably find names with more if you combed a name dictionary. (Note that the number of syllables is not dependent on the number of characters; ‘*hayashi*’ is three syllables but is written with one character.) In contrast to England, where many names are related to occupations or to place of origin, the majority of Japanese names seem to be related to geographical and topological features. Anyone with a few Japanese friends will recognize the following extremely common elements in names: *ta* (rice field), *naka* (in), *yama* (mountain), *oka* (hill), *kawa* (-*gawa*) (river), *ki* (-*gi*) (tree), *mori* (forest), *hayashi* (-*bayashi*) (grove). (The variants given incorporate euphonic changes that may take place when an unvoiced consonant [k, s, h] is preceded by another syllable. For example, *ko* [small] and *hayashi* when combined are pronounced *Kobayashi*, which is a common name.)

Until modern times (usually dated from the Meiji Restoration of 1868), only nobles and warriors had surnames. In the 1870s, the government ordered all citizens to adopt surnames; it is easy to imagine that people drew on their surroundings in creating their names.

Newcomers to Japan are often struck by how many people have the same family name: Japanese equivalents to the Smiths and Jones are Suzuki, Saito, Kobayashi, etc. But if you stay here longer, you will be more struck by the remarkable multiplicity of names. In fact, for Japanologists names can be a nightmare, as the Japanese have a total of 300,000 family names, second only to the United States, which is estimated to have a million. Obviously the large number of migrants to America accounts for this extraordinary total, but Japan has not been an immigrant society, which makes its total all the more impressive. There is a big drop to the country in third place, which is Finland with 60,000, while England, in fourth place, boasts barely 10,000. Just for the record, China is in fifth place, according to my source, with almost the same total as England, but Liqun Dai refers to a total of 4,100 in her article, ‘Chinese names’, in the October 2006 issue of this journal. The total probably varies depending on which ethnic groups in China are included.

At the same time, this total for Japan is a little misleading, as 96 per cent of the population share 7,000 names, and the top five names all boast over a million holders. The top ten, with their meanings, are given in Table 4.

The second to fifth and seventh to ninth names in Table 4 are made up of purely Japanese words, so their meanings are obvious to anyone who knows Japanese. The two elements in the first name are the Sino-Japanese readings

Table 4 The top ten Japanese names

1. Sato (nearly two million) (meaning 'helping wisteria') 佐藤
2. Suzuki ('bell-flower tree') 鈴木
3. Takahashi ('high bridge') 高橋
4. Tanaka ('in rice field') 田中
5. Watanabe (literally, 'crossing edge', but probably originally meaning 'ferryman') 渡辺
6. Ito ('that wisteria') 伊藤
7. Yamamoto ('mountain base') 山本
8. Nakamura ('in village') 中村
9. Kobayashi ('small grove') 小林
10. Saito ('Buddhist food'/'wisteria') 斎藤

of two characters meaning 'help' and 'wisteria', so no one would think of this meaning when saying the name (the ordinary native Japanese word for 'help' is *tasukeru* and for wisteria *fuji*). (Just for the record, Hiroshi is a very common boy's name, so Sato Hiroshi is the most common name in Japan, being shared by 50,000 people.)

Japanese names are often difficult to read because the characters used to write them have multiple readings. All the Chinese characters used in Japanese have at least one Sino-Japanese pronunciation (a Japanese version of the original Chinese pronunciation) and sometimes more; in addition, the native Japanese word for the same concept is also attached to the same character. To give an example, the character for 'water', 水, is pronounced *shui* in Chinese, which becomes *sui* in Japanese. It is also read *mizu*, which is the native Japanese word for 'water'. Imagine if English had adopted Chinese characters as its writing system – the one character would be read either 'water' or 'aqua' (not to mention 'hydro'). In practice, the Sino-Japanese reading is most often used in compound words, including ones that were invented by the Japanese. For example, when trains were introduced in the 19th century the word *kisha*, literally, 'steam vehicle', was coined. Acting independently, the Chinese chose to combine the characters for 'fire' and 'vehicle' for the same concept. As this shows, there is a rough similarity between the way the Japanese coined new words using Sino-Japanese roots to the use of Latin and Greek in European languages. Another good example is 'automobile', translated as *jidosha* and written with characters meaning 'self-moving vehicle'.

In most names consisting of two or more characters, the native Japanese pronunciations are combined, but there are many names combining the Sino-Japanese pronunciations (referred to as 'readings') of the characters. However, there are also names in which one character has the Chinese reading and the other the Japanese reading. One example is the name Honda, 本田, which is written with the characters for 'base' or 'root' and 'field'. 'Hon' is the Sino-Japanese reading of the character for 'base', for which the native Japanese word is *moto*. Honda is a common name, but when encountering an unusual name for the first time, even native speakers may not be able to guess how to read it.

An additional difficulty is that many character combinations used in names have special readings used only in names. For example, the surname 'Shoji', 東海林, which is fairly common, is written with the characters for 'eastern sea grove'. Individually, the Sino-Japanese (given in capitals,

which is the convention in character dictionaries) and Japanese readings of these characters are: eastern: TO, *higashi*; sea: KAI, *umi*; grove: RIN, *hayashi*. Even if you know these characters, there is no way of guessing that their combination is read 'Shoji' – you either know or you don't. Not only does 'Shoji' have no relationship to the phonetic readings of the characters being used, one would actually expect, from the sound, that the name would be written with two characters. To complicate the issue further, there are also people writing their name with these characters who use the 'regular' reading of 'Tokairin', although it is uncommon. There are many names like this in which the readings can be regarded as 'arbitrary' (that is to say, they can't be worked out using a character dictionary – you have to consult a specialized name dictionary and even then, if there are two possible readings, you won't know which one it is).

Let's take a closer look at one example of how a character, the one for 'east', functions in names. There are actually two Japanese words for 'east': *higashi* and *azuma*. The latter is rarely used as an ordinary word, but it is not uncommon as a name. I once worked part-time at a company where there were both a Mr Higashi and a Ms Azuma on the staff. However, the same character is used to write both of them. As an ordinary word, there's no problem, as the reading *higashi* predominates, but as a name there's no way of knowing which way to go. The above two readings, along with *TO* (from Chinese *dong*), are given in ordinary character dictionaries. However, there is a way of helping the reader with printed texts. Hiragana indicating the correct reading is printed very small beside the character; in this usage, it is called *furigana*. Nearly all Japanese books will have varying amounts of furigana, depending on the target readership. Books meant for young children, for example, might have furigana on every character.

In a sense, for Japanese, personal identity resides in the characters used to write one's name, more than in the pronunciation. For example, a colleague of mine is named Kawachi, a contraction of *kawa* (river) and *uchi* (inside). The same character compound can be read Kochi. When people call him Kochi, he answers cheerfully, without bothering to correct them.

To conclude this section, let's give the next ten most popular family names.

11. Kato
12. Yoshida
13. Yamada
14. Sasaki
15. Yamaguchi
16. Matsumoto
17. Inoue
18. Kimura
19. Hayashi
20. Shimizu

The top 20 account for 19.5 million people. Most long-term residents of Japan would have no trouble fitting faces to all of these names. (Sixteen of them appear among my 150 colleagues.)

Given names

In the modern period, that is, in the 20th and 21st centuries, certain suffixes have been very common with boys' and girls' names. These are listed in Table 5.

To take the boys' names first, the 'o' is the stem of the words for 'man' or *otoko*, 男, 'husband' or *otto*, 夫, and 'male' or *osu*, 雄, and these three characters are all used to write it. (With a name written in Roman letters, there is no way of guessing which of the three has been used, though the second one is the most common.) Another extremely

Table 5 Common suffixes for boys' and girls' names

Boys	Girls
-o	-ko
-ro	-e
-to	-yo
-hiko	-ka
-suke	-mi
-ta	
-shi	

common ending is 'ro', 郎, written with a character meaning 'man' or 'husband' (just to confuse the issue, it is occasionally read 'o', one famous example being the early 20th-century writer Arishima Takeo, 有島武郎). Many male names also end in 'to', often written with the character for *hito*, 人 or person; others end in 'hiko', 彦, a now-obsolete word for 'boy'. 'Suke' is very common both as an ending and as the first element (in the latter case, it can be written with at least 65 different characters). 'Ta' is often written 太; although this character means 'fat', the sense here is 'stout' as in 'stout-hearted'. 'Shi' is written in too many different ways for it to be worth commenting on here.

Other common elements (coming either first or second) in male names are: *-aki*, *-fumi*, *-haru*, *-hisa*, *-hide*, *-hiro*, *-hito*, *-kazu*, *-masa*, *-michi*, *-mitsu*, *-naru*, *-nobu*, *-shige*, and *-tada*.

It may also be of interest to know that numbers are often used in boys' names, especially in the past. Even now, you often see the names Ichiro, 一郎 (first son), Jiro, 次郎 (second son, with *ji* being either the character for 'next', as given here, or 'two') and Saburo, 三郎 (third son).

Previously, the great majority of girls' names ended in 'ko', 子, which means child. Recently it has lost popularity, but it is still very common, being used in about one-third to half of girls' names. The Japanese equivalent of 'Mary' is perhaps 'Hanako', which means 'flower child'. The second ending, '-e', can be written with a number of characters, including 'blessing', 恵 and 'picture', 絵; the third, '-yo', is often written with the character for 'generation', 世; the fourth, '-ka', 香, with the character for 'fragrance', among others; and the fifth, '-mi', with the character for 'beautiful' 美 (the same character as the one for *utsukushii* 美しい, mentioned earlier).

Other common endings in girls' names are '-ho' and '-saki'.

Quite often, parents will start with a sound they like and 'arbitrarily' choose characters they like to write it. One example is the girl's name Sakura, 桜 or 'cherry blossom'.

Some friends of mine recently named their daughter Sakura, a common name to which they gave a distinctive flavour by choosing to write it with the characters 咲良, meaning 'blossoming goodness'. Incidentally, 'blossoming goodness' may sound clumsy as a name, but from hearing it no one would guess this meaning, as 'ra' itself does not mean 'goodness'; it is a reading of the character for 'goodness' that is used only in names and cannot be found in an ordinary character dictionary. I mention this because non-Western names are often parodied by Westerners who don't understand how these names function in their own language systems. To give a reverse example, the common English name 'Wood' sounds natural translated into Japanese, but 'Carpenter' sounds ludicrous as a name. (Similarly, the Japanese use of 'honourable' is often parodied, but it's one syllable in Japanese, *o*, which has a rather different effect.)

Famous figures

Many famous historical figures from the pre-modern period are referred to by their given names, most notably the three great warlords who successively unified Japan in the 16th century, Nobunaga, Hideyoshi and Ieyasu. The practice is not followed in the modern period (after 1868). For example, Yamamoto Isoroku is the famous admiral who planned the Pearl Harbor attack; he is never referred to as Isoroku (except, perhaps, in a biography when referring to him as a child).

Even with these premodern figures, however, the index entries for Nobunaga, Hideyoshi and Ieyasu should just be a cross-reference to the main entries under their full names (Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu).

Good references for historical names include *Historical and geographical dictionary of Japan* by E. Papinot (Tuttle, 1972) and *Concise dictionary of modern Japanese history* by Janet E. Hunter (Kodansha, 1984).

Assumed names and pen-names

As in China, two customs have been popular in Japan that greatly complicate the question of names: the assumption of different names at different stages of one's life and career, and the great fondness for pen-names and artistic names of literary and artistic figures.

In the premodern period, in particular, names tended to multiply at an alarming rate, but fortunately this practice became less common as the 20th century progressed, at least for writers. Still, many artists and writers have adopted an artistic name or pen-name that is used in place of their given name, so this is always a possible source of confusion. Of course, some writers adopt a pseudonym which is just like an ordinary name, as in the common Western practice, but the pen-names referred to above are often elegant, euphonious names, and it is usually apparent at a glance that they are artistic creations, not the names that parents would have chosen for their children.

For example, the top novelist of the early 20th century was Natsume Kinnosuke, 夏目金之助, who wrote under the name

of Natsume Soseki, 漱石. Soseki is written with the characters for 'suck stone' and is taken from a classical Chinese text (the quote is 'sucking stones and using streams as pillows', referring to an eccentric personage who hates to give up). Soseki actually requested and received the name from a famous haiku poet, Masaoka Shiki (born Tsunenori), who is known to literary history by his penname of Shiki. He could well spare it, as he had an unusually large number of pen-names.

Usually different pen-names are not a problem for Western readers, as Western texts follow a policy of using only the name by which the person is best known, but it's just as well to be aware of them, so that one doesn't mistake a pen-name like Soseki or Shiki for the family name. I believe that a conscientious index should include these variants. It came as a bit of a shock to me to find that the index to Donald Keene's immensely authoritative *Dawn to the West*, a history of modern Japanese fiction, has no entries for 'Soseki' or 'Ogai' (the pen-name of another famous novelist, Mori Ogai), despite countless references to these writers by just their pen-names in the text. (Likewise, I would give a cross-reference entry for historical names such as Ieyasu, etc. mentioned above.)

Changing names

Another complication is that changing names is quite common for astrological reasons. There are schools of divination based on the analysis of personal names (given and family). Sometimes this divination is based on the number of strokes used to write a character (a name will be chosen with a total number of strokes matching one of the traditional lucky numbers in China). Sometimes the pronunciation of the name remains unchanged, but often a completely different name, written with completely different characters, is adopted.

Married names

The practice of women changing their legal surnames to that of the husband is almost universal (the marriage is legally established not by the wedding ceremony but by adding the woman's name to the entry for the husband in the husband's family register, mentioned earlier. However, women who already have an established career will often continue working under their previous name (maiden name or pen-name, as the case may be). Sometimes, a woman switches to her husband's surname some years after marriage, presumably after she has become more used to it. The problem is that in using material written at different periods one may confuse one person with two.

The personal name nightmare

As described above, reading Japanese surnames presents many problems, but personal names are the despair of foreigners working with Japanese-language materials. They are not a big problem for Japanese writing in Japanese, because they can just reproduce the name without having to indicate how it is pronounced.

Personal names are much more difficult than family names because there is an element of arbitrariness (I mean from the point of view of the reader, of course; the source of the 'arbitrariness' may lie in family or regional traditions that are far from arbitrary). Many characters have readings that are used only in personal names and are not the ordinary readings of the character (which means they cannot be found in an ordinary dictionary). On the other hand, the same phonetic element in a name can be written with many different characters.

The above paragraph will probably seem confusing if not inexplicable to those who do not know Japanese, so here are some concrete examples.

The character 洋 is a relatively simple character that in a standard character dictionary has only one reading: *yo*. This is actually the Sino-Japanese reading derived from Chinese *yang*. It means 'ocean'. In many names, it is actually read 'yo', but in P. G. O'Neill's *Japanese names*, a standard name dictionary, it also has the readings *hiroshi*, *nada*, *hiro*, *nami*, *mi*, *umi*, *kiyo* (given in order of frequency). So if one sees the girl's name 洋, how does one know how it is read? From experience, one knows that 'Yoko' is a popular name, but this combination is also often read 'Hiroko'.

This is not an unusual case. Many characters have five, six or seven different readings in names.

Coming at the problem from a different angle, many common elements in names can be represented by multiple characters. Take 'hiro', which is very popular in both boys' and girls' names. In the index to P. G. O'Neill's dictionary, one finds 112 characters that can be used to represent it. Used by itself, the character 洋 above can be read 'Hiroshi', a popular boy's name. However, one also finds 62 other characters that can be used to write Hiroshi, plus four two-character compounds. Bear in mind that the dictionary is a compact book that is not meant to be exhaustive.

Japanologists sometimes say that the only way to establish the correct reading of a person's given name is to go to the village where he was born and ask his relatives, preferably his mother.

In academic writing, it is considered acceptable to use the Sino-Japanese reading of a personal name (with a question mark in brackets) when you cannot establish the correct reading, although you are expected to try. While working on a project, a researcher will often acquire baggage: a list of names for which he or she doesn't know the correct reading. For example, it took me years to establish whether a certain early 20th-century politician was Tanaka Seizo or Tanaka Shozo (it was the latter). None of the Japanese texts I was reading felt the need to tell the reader which was correct. For that matter, a writer can cite a name without knowing how it is actually pronounced.

Here are a few more examples of problem names (or parts thereof) taken at random from the dictionary mentioned above:

'yoshi' can be written with 297 characters

'yasu': 124 characters

Shigeru: 42 characters

'shige': 85 characters (including many also used for Shigeru)

'kei' (in the girl's name Keiko): 70 characters (according to an Internet source; O'Neill gives only 48).

In closing, I should not leave the reader with the wrong impression. In ordinary daily life Japanese people can read nearly all of the names of the people they encounter, especially family names, and most of the given names. But there is no denying that they are an almost intractable problem for non-Asian researchers, who have to commit themselves to a reading of a name.

Sort order

In Japanese, the standard sort order in modern times is the syllabary, as given earlier. The telephone book starts with names beginning with 'a', 'i', 'u', 'e', 'o', then continues with 'ka', 'ki', 'ku', etc. The same order applies to the second, third, etc. syllables.

Here is a sequence illustrating the differences from an alphabetical ordering: Sato, Satomi, Sano, Shiba, Shibata, Shibuya, Shibota, Suzuki, Seto, Someno.

Other sources

The Internet is a very good source for names of Japanese who are at all well known. There are many potted biographies that include references to name changes. Indexers can often get a lot of assistance at the Library of Congress Online Catalog, to be found at: <http://catalog.loc.gov> (thanks to Jochen Fassbender for this information).

A Net search under 'Japanese names' will uncover a small number of articles which will supplement the information in this article. One of them is an excellent article in Wikipedia, although it may be directed more at people who can read Japanese.

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