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), *yasashii* (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 examp̄le, 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	ゎ	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	ボ	– po ぽ

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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