Poetics of Japanese Naming Practice

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The present study examines naming of newborn babies in Japan. Based on an existing survey on given names, literature on naming, and concrete examples, I will give an overview of the naming patterns. Further, I will argue that naming of babies in contemporary Japan is more than choosing a name from a limited set of options. Rather, it is an act of sign creation that has rich implications for sociocultural meanings within the bounds of societal control. As linguistic signs, names have phonological as well as visual forms. Naming in Japan is inseparable from the decision on which Kanji characters are used to write the name. Balancing all aspects of names—linguistic, semantic, legal to aesthetic—name givers express their envisioned identity of the baby in the name.

Introduction

People's names are symbolic of individual identity and cultural heritage, and Japanese language users play with multiple dimensions of forms and their meanings in choosing first names for their children. First names are used to uniquely identify people as individuals. Also, names are reflections of the identities as they are envisioned by the people who give them. In any language, the act of naming a person involves considerations that are far more complex than simply producing a social security number for distinguishing one individual from another. Since giving names to people is one of the most universal, essential, and significant acts that involve linguistic signs, examination of this act reveals what language as a system means to its users.

Japanese names not only refer to people, but also exhibit multiple layers of phonological impressions, semantic content, and cultural meanings. Naming in Japan reflects the relationship between the language and its users as well as their cultural values. Double, triple or even quadruple entendre observed in Japanese naming is deeply ingrained in the general relationship Japanese speakers have with their

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writing system. The written representation can be semiotically manipulated, because, while a family name cannot be created freely, giving a name to one's child offers an opportunity to exercise one's creativity.

Names that I examine in the current study are limited to legally registered names of Japanese babies. Family names, nicknames, and diminutives are not within the scope of this paper. First, I will give an overview of the Japanese writing system because understanding the multiplicity of correspondences among characters, their readings, and their meanings is essential. I will also give general principles of naming and examine cultural meanings of naming further by discussing restrictions that exist in naming.

Script Options

Some names have only one way of spelling them, while other names have many different spellings. In English, there can be interplay among the phonological form (e.g., /kristiy/), written representations such as spellings (e.g., "Christy," "Christie," or "Kristie"), the referent (e.g., Kristie Yamaguchi), and the meaning of the name. In Japanese, however, the written name can vary not in spelling, but in the type of script one can choose to write it in, as well as in which character is used to represent the sound. For this reason, the written form is an important dimension that Japanese name givers need to contend with in addition to the phonological form of names.

The Japanese writing system uses three types of script: Hiragana syllabary, Katakana syllabary, and Kanji (or Chinese characters). Hiragana and Katakana are phonetic in that a letter is used to stand for a specific syllable and it has no meaning by itself: for example, さ is always read as *sa*, あ is always read as *a*. On the other hand, Kanji characters have meanings and readings. Kanji characters were originally borrowed from Chinese, a language very different from Japanese. This borrowing and integration of the Chinese characters into Japanese contributed to multiplicity of reading of the characters (Nakada 1982). For example, *sake* 'rice wine'

can be written in Hiragana, さけ, or with a Kanji character, 酒. But, the Kanji has two readings: *sake*, which is a Japanese reading, and *shu*, which is a Sino-Japanese reading that came from Chinese. Regardless of the readings, the character means '*sake*, alcoholic beverage.'

The name *sakura*, a popular girl name in recent years, can be written in Hiragana, in Katakana, or with Kanji. In Hiragana, *sakura* is written with three letters because there are three syllables in the name: さ, read as *sa*, く, read as *ku*, ら, read as *ra*. Likewise in Katakana, the name can be written in three letters: サクラ. In Japanese *sakura* is an independent word that means 'cherry tree, cherry blossom,' and the Kanji 桜 means 'cherry tree, cherry blossom.' Based on the meaning of the Kanji, the Kanji is used to write down the word. When 'cherry tree, cherry blossom' is the intended meaning of the name, that particular Kanji is used to write the name.

In addition to the choice of script, name givers can play with the sounds in the name and manipulate them to express more than 'cherry blossom.' Instead of treating *sakura* as one unit, it can be divided into **咲** *saku* 'bloom' and **良** *ra* 'good' (See Table 1 below). In this case, the phonological form means 'cherry,' but the written form means 'bloom and good,' creating a poetic network of associations. Similarly, the name can be divided into three syllables and assigned characters whose readings match each syllable of the name, as in 沙 *sa* 'sand,' 久 *ku* 'eternity,' and 蘭 *ra* 'orchid.'

Another complexity that name givers take advantage

Table 1. Written Forms of Japanese names

Usage Situation	Phonological Form	Written Form
Multiple Written Forms for a Single	*sakura*	さくら (Hiragana) サクラ (Katakana) 桜、咲良、沙久蘭 (Kanji)

Phonological Form	*yuuki*	裕紀、裕樹、優樹、優輝、裕輝、etc. (48 ways)
	yui	結衣、優衣、結、唯、由衣、友唯, etc. (21 ways)
Multiple Phonological Forms for a Single Written Form	*daiki, taiki hiroki, masaki*	大輝
	Mirai, miku, misaki	未来

*Real examples taken from *Meiji Seimei* (2002)

of is the existence of Kanji characters that have homophonous readings. When Chinese characters were borrowed into Japanese, the phonological distinctions that Chinese made but Japanese did not were lost. The loss of tones and other phonological differences between the two languages resulted in many homophonous Kanji in Japanese. For example, 輝、樹、and 紀 all have a reading of *ki*. Each of them has a different visual image as well as a different meaning: 輝 'to shine', 樹 'tree', 紀 'beginning'. For this reason, if parents wish to name a boy *yuuki*, they have several options for writing the name, and depending on which character is used, they can alter the meaning of the name (see Table 1 above).

Among the most common names for newborn babies born in 2001 in the Meiji Seimei survey, a male name *yuuki* was the most popular phonological name, and it was written in forty-eight different ways (see Table 1 above for examples). That means that there are many boys whose name is pronounced as *yuuki*, but their name is written in forty-eight different ways. The most common name for newborn girls in 2001 was *yui*. There were twenty-one different ways of writing this two-syllable name for the seventy-seven babies who were given the phonologically identical name, *yui*. The name was written as

結衣、優衣、結、唯、由衣、由依、佑衣、to give several examples. The second most popular name for girls in 2001 was *haruka,* which had 29 ways of writing it, and the third most popular was *yuuka,* which was written in 20 different ways (*Meiji Seimei* 2002). The written form functions to differentiate individuals who have phonologically identical names, creating more individualized meanings associated with each named person.

The paragraph above described the effect of many Kanji characters corresponding to phonologically identical names. There is another consequence of multiple correspondences between readings and the written forms of Kanji. What the multiple readings mean for Japanese names is that names written in Kanji can be read in more than one way: For example, the character 大 'big' has more than one reading. Thus, the most common written name of 2002, 大輝, has four different readings, or the written form represent four phonologically different names, *daiki, taiki, masaki,* and *hiroki* (*Meiji Seimei* 2002), as shown in Table 1 above. In this case, the first Kanji has four different readings. For this reason, when one is presented with the written form of a name, often times the reader cannot be sure what the reading of the name should be for that particular individual. All four readings are possible, but the name bearer uses only one of them as his name. Another example of multiple readings of the same written form is a popular girl name 未来 which has four possible readings: *mirai, miku,* and *miki.*

This section has shown that there are multiple options for writing the same phonological name, and depending on the character chosen, the meaning of the written name can be adjusted. At the same time, Japanese names operate under the situation whereby the written form of a name does not necessarily determine its reading completely, but only designates a set of possible readings. Even though some may share the same written form, their phonological names can be different.

Naming Principles

There are several naming principles at work when parents choose a name for their own child. As I have stated earlier, the principles address multiple levels of language use: phonology, semantics, writing, and cultural implications, to name a few. It is not a single principle, but a combination of principles that usually determines a name, and not all the principles are at work for each naming. I have consulted naming books that are sold commonly in the bookstores to survey the current range of names and what they recommend (Katoo and Hironaka 1999, Kindaichi 2001). Naming books are read mostly by parents who are expecting a child, and they list naming types, explain legal procedures for birth registration, and give examples of names and anecdotes regarding names. Parents usually select a name based on their preference and their individual needs and desires to accommodate other relatives' opinions with regard to traditions passed down to the particular family or community. The books and the advice they give are not strict rules, but they are meant to offer ideas and assist parents in determining their baby's name. The following shows a non-exhaustive list of the most common principles parents use in naming.

1) Meaning of the name

The meaning of the name is very important in Japanese naming, although few names have completely transparent meanings. This is because the meanings of the names can vary depending on the meanings of Kanji characters used. Some names have more transparent meanings because of clear associations with regular lexical items on the phonological level.

The first factor is whether the particular name has positive meaning(s). For example, *hiroshi* 'being generous, big' is a good name. This name is associated with an adjective *hiroi* 'being wide, generous, spacious,' whose historical form is *hiroshi*. In this case, the general meaning of the name is clear from the phonological form of the name, but the exact

meaning of the name becomes more evident when one sees the written form. The name *hiroshi* can be written with several different Kanji characters, and I show three of them below to illustrate the point.

a. 広 'wide, spacious'
b. 洋 'ocean, Western'
c. 裕 'affluent, generous'

All these Kanji characters can be read as *hiroshi*. The first Kanji character in *a* means 'wide, spacious,' but also has an extended meaning of 'being generous and open-minded' in expressions such as *kokoro ga hiroi* 'the mind is wide (=being open-minded.) The second character in *b* means 'ocean' and 'Western' because from the Japanese viewpoint, the West lies in *seiyoo* 'Western ocean.' The ocean projects an image of spaciousness and grandness. The third character *c* means 'affluent' but also means 'being generous, easy going' when it is used in compound nouns that refer to mental qualities. (Please see Section 2 Script Options for more examples.)

There are gender differences in preferred meanings. According to a survey done by *Meiji Seimei*, an insurance company, preferred meanings of the most common names for male babies in 2001 include elements such as *dai-* 'big', -ta 'robust,' while the most common names for female babies include symbolically Japanese elements, such as *sakura* 'cherry blossom', *mizuki* 'beautiful moon', and *kotone* 'sound of Japanese harp.' (*Meiji Seimei* 2002).

In the past century, male given names often reflected the political and ideological climate of the era in which the babies were born, while female names did not. Female names tend to express abstract qualities that are deemed feminine according to the Japanese culture, but which are not affected directly by the social and political conditions at the time of birth.

According to the database compiled by *Meiji-Yasuda Seimei* (2005), the name of the era influenced male baby names considerably during the 1910s and 1920s.[1] Japan uses the

Western calendar, but it also maintains a separate calendar system according to which an era is named after the emperor's reign: namely, when a new emperor is crowned, a new era begins. The year 1912 is the first year of the Taishō Era (1912-1926), during which the Taishō Emperor reigned. According to *Meiji-Yasuda* Life Insurance's survey, the most popular names in the first three years of the era have the second character of Taishō as a part of them (see Table 2 below).

This suggests that the male names were inspired by the name of the new era. The first character for the name of the era, *tai* means 'big,' and the second character *shoo* means 'correct, right.' The most popular name for the first year of the Taishō Era begins with the character 正 that is read as *shoo*, with a long vowel. The name of the era is usually spelled with 'ō' in English to indicate that it is a long vowel. When the pronunciation is represented, the long vowel is represented by '*oo*' in this paper. After the first few years of the Taishō Era, 清 *kiyoshi* 'clean, decent' continued to be popular. During the twelve years between 1915 and 1926, it was the most popular name every year except in 1916, 1917, and 1919.

Similarly, when the Taishō Emperor passed away at the end of 1926 and the new emperor Hirohito was crowned, the name of the new era changed to Shōwa, which also influenced naming. The first character of the name of the era 昭 reads as *shoo*, but it is different from the character used in Taishō as shown in Table 2 above, and it means 'bright.' The second character 和 *wa* means 'peace, calm,' as well as 'Japan.' The most popular name for the first year of Shōwa was 清 *kiyoshi*, which does not seem to show any influence of the name of the new period; however, the first year of Shōwa lasted only six days. The Taishō Emperor passed on December 25, 1926, and the first year of Shōwa lasted from December 26 to December 31, 1926 (Reischauer 1981). The most popular male baby name of 1927, the second year of the

Table 2 Common Names at the Beginning of the Taishō Era and the Shōwa Era

Era	Year	The most popular name by written form	readings
大正 Taishō	1st year (1912)	正一	*shooichi, masakazu,etc.*
	2nd year (1913)	正二	*shooji, masaji, masatsugu, etc.*
	3rd year (1914)	正三	*masami, shoozoo, masazoo, etc.*
昭和 Shōwa	1st year (1926)	清	*kiyoshi*
	2nd year (1927)	昭二	*shooji, akitsugu, etc*
	3rd year (1928)	昭三	*shoozoo, akimi, akizoo*

from *Meiji-Yasuda Seimei* (2005)

Shōwa Era, begins with the same character as the name of the era (see Table 2 above). The second character 二 *ji* means 'two.' In the third year of Shōwa, 昭三 *shoozoo /akimi* was the most popular male baby name.

During WW II, the influence of the on-going war is evident. The name, 勝 *masaru/shoo* 'to win, to be superior,' was the most popular male baby name from 1942 to 1945. The second most popular male baby name during the same period was 勇 *yuu/isamu*, which means 'being brave.' After the war that ended in defeat, the two names quickly fell out of favor: they appeared in the top ten most popular male names only three times after 1945. The name 勝 *masaru* appeared as the seventh favorite in 1957, and the name 勇 *isamu/yuu* appeared as the eighth favorite in 1946 and as the ninth favorite in 1947.

In the years following WW II, 誠 *makoto/sei* 'sincerity' dominated as the most popular male baby name eighteen times during the twenty years between 1957 and 1978. Between 1979 and 1986, 大輔 *daisuke*, 'big' and 'assistance,' was the most popular name for seven years in a row. Between 1987 and 2000, 翔太 *shoota* 'fly' and 'robust, thick' was the most popular male baby name seven times. When the new emperor was crowned in 1989, and the name of the Japanese era changed to 平成 *heisei*, it had no apparent effect on naming as far as the survey's top ten most popular names are concerned. The lack of effect may be attributable to the change in the role of the royal family in the Japanese culture. Other names that rose to the most popular male baby name status include names such as 達也 *tatsuya* (達 *tatsu* 'to achieve, reach' + 也 *ya* '[emphasis]'), 拓也 *takuya* (拓 *taku* 'to open' + 也 *ya* '[emphasis]'), and 大輝 *daiki* (大 *dai* 'big' + 輝 *ki* 'to shine'), but they do not dominate the top ranking for a long time. The recent popular names do not seem to reflect political ideologies, but general aspirations for freely exploring and accomplishing in life.

The influence of a new era is observed in female names during the pre-WW II period, but with a different pattern. In 1913, the second year of the Taishō Era, 正子 *masako/shooko* was the most popular female baby name. The first character of the name is the same as the second character of Taishō, but that character in a female name is usually read with an alternative reading of *masa*. The name never appears in the ten most popular female baby names after that year, marking a short-lived influence of the name of the era on them. However, in 1927, which is the second year of the Shōwa Era 昭和, the most popular female baby name was 和子 *kazuko/wako*. This name has the second character of Shōwa as a part of the name, and this powerful name stays as the most popular until 1952, except in 1940, 1942, and 1949, when it was the second most popular. If it is the influence of the name of the era Shōwa (1926-1989), then it lasted beyond the WW II period, unlike the

influence on male names that encoded winning and courage. The meanings of *wa*, the first character for the popular name is 'peace, calm' and 'Japan.' The enduring connotation of the Kanji character may have contributed to the stability of the name. It is ironic, however, that the period during which the name was popular was the opposite of calm and peaceful for Japan, with political assassinations, wars, aggression toward Asia, and the chaotic period of readjustment during the American occupation.

The dominance of female names with the *–ko* suffix started during the 1910s and continued for almost six decades into the 1970s. The suffix itself is always written with 子 'child,' but it has an archaic use as a suffix of affect for both men and women. The only years between 1916 and 1980 for which most popular names did not have the *-ko* suffix were 1965, 1968, 1969 and 1970. For those four years, the most popular name in 1965 was 明美, whose characters mean 'bright' and 'beautiful,' respectively, and are usually read as *akemi*; the most popular name between 1968 and 1970 was 直美 *naomi* 'straight/direct' and 'beautiful.' The rise and fall of the popularity of *-ko* may be attributable to trends that are independent of social forces, as described in Lieberson (2000), who accounted for fashion in general. After 1986, no names with the *–ko* suffix appear in the top ten with the exception of *momoko* 桃子 and *nanako* 菜々子 popping up a few times each.

The popularity of the *–ko* suffix waned throughout the 1970s, and in 1980 the most popular status was taken over by *emi* 絵美, whose characters mean 'picture' and 'beautiful.' Names with the *–mi* suffix are popular throughout the 1970s and 1980s, but the most popular during the 1980s was 愛 *ai/mana* 'love,' which stayed at the number one rank for eight consecutive years between 1983 and 1990. The name ranked number two in popularity from 1991 to 1995.

During the 1990s, the most popular female baby name is 美咲, the first character of which means 'beautiful' and the second 'bloom.' Another popular name in the 2000s so far is

さくら *sakura* 'cherry blossom' written in Hiragana. *Sakura* ranked at the top of popularity in 2000, 2001, and 2004, sharing the rank with 美咲. Overall, the last several years have been dominated by names with the themes of flowers and beautiful plants. The themes are not only feminine, but also symbolically rich. Cherry blossoms fall into the general semantic category that is currently popular, but they are also semiotically profound in that they are linked to the past and present practice of cherry appreciation, to themes in traditional poetry and literary works, and to nationalism in the context of war (Ohnuki-Tierney 2002).

2) Phonological forms

One of the ways of determining a name for a child is to base the decision on the phonological forms and the images that they project. Historically speaking, loanwords borrowed from Chinese tend to have many stops and fricatives, while native Japanese vocabulary tend to have an open syllable structure with many vowels (Vance 1987). Naming books recommend names that are easy to pronounce and remember. In general, stops and fricatives are considered somewhat "tough" or "sharp" and are used frequently in male names. On the other hand, glides, liquids, and nasals are "soft" and "feminine." For example, Sino-Japanese suffixes such as *-ki, -to, -ya* and *-ta,* are very common for boys in recent years, as in many of the most common boy names in 2001, i.e., *daiki, hiroki, yuuki; yuuto, kaito; kenta, yuuta.* The once ubiquitous *-ko* suffix for girls, as in my name *noriko,* is currently out of fashion, and suffixes such as *-mi, -ne,* and *-ka* are becoming popular (Tahara 1991).

In terms of length of names, Tahara (1991) reports that the majority of male names in his data have three to four morae, while the majority of female names have two to three morae. Mora is a unit of length and often coincides with syllable, although one syllable may contain more than one mora. For example, *yuuta,* which has a long vowel *u,* has three

morae, two syllables, and likewise, *aiko,* which has two vowels in a row, has three morae, two syllables.

Although Tahara's database is relatively small with only 2,847 names, it covers all contemporary generations and the average lengths of both female and male names seem to be stable across generations. The most prominent recent change noted in the study is the rise of two-mora names for girls.

3) Naming after an individual

A baby can be named after another person who is important to the name givers, usually parents. The important person, real or fictitious, possesses qualities that are deemed desirable. Commonly, babies are named after a historical figure, genius, celebrity, athlete, or even a character in an animation movie. Although it is common in other cultures to share names among family members, naming a child after a relative is rare in Japan.

Naming after a celebrity or a genius may not be unique to Japanese naming, but one type of "famous" person whose name can be used includes some members of the royal family. When the present Empress Michiko, who is not from the nobility class and therefore a commoner, married the Emperor, then Prince Akihito, many babies were named *michiko* after her. This is a unique case of naming in which the famous individual is a member of the royal family. Because Empress Michiko was a commoner by birth and the name was popular in her generation to begin with, there did not seem to be any inhibition to giving the name to newborn girls. On the other hand, naming a child after a princess was unthinkable during the era of the Imperial period, since that would have been interpreted as being insulting and disloyal. To bestow a name that is the same as a member of the royal family meant that one assumes the child has a status equal to the member of the royal family.

Even though the role of the emperor and the royal family was redefined as a symbol of Japan rather than a political and governmental authority after WW II, the

symbolic power may be in effect in the younger generations. Princess Aiko is the first child for the present Prince Naruhito and Princess Masako. *Aiko,* meaning 'lovely child,' or 'loving child,' is an existing name for girls. Throughout the 1980s, *ai* was always one of the ten most popular names for baby girls, but not in the past ten years or so. In 2002, the *Meiji Seimei* statistics reported a revival in the girl's name *ai.* Although it is not exactly the same name as *aiko,* what was termed as the *aiko*-effect may be present in the resurgence of the name *ai.*

Naming after celebrities and cartoon characters does exist, but it does not surface in statistical data, perhaps because various names are chosen. One example of a baby named after a cartoon character was one of the most controversial baby names in recent years. The case of a baby named *akuma* 'the devil' is discussed in detail in Section 4.

4) Birth order

Although it is no longer a common practice, children may be given fixed names based on their birth order, if the child is male. The fixed names incorporate numbers: the first son's name is 太郎 *taroo,* or 一郎 *ichiroo* 'the first son,' the next son is 次郎/二郎 *jiroo,* meaning 'next/second son', the third one is 三郎 *saburoo* 'the third son'; or the first son is 一男/一夫 *kazuo,* which is written with a Kanji that means 'one', read as *kazu,* and a Kanji that means 'man', read as *o.* This principle reflects the traditional Japanese cultural expectations according to one's birth order: the first son is regarded as the heir to the family tradition economically and socially. The first son inherits the family's assets, succeeds the family's business or the father's occupation, and is in charge of taking care of the parents in their old age as well as his younger siblings in the absence of their parents. Interestingly, the decline of the birth order principle coincides with the change in the family dynamics toward individualism and away from role-playing within the family unit. This is another example of social structure and cultural expectations that are reflected in a naming principle.

Morikoka and Yamaguchi (1985:64) state that numbers in names based on birth order started to lose their meanings as birth order, and now numbers that do not represent birth order are used in male names. Names that are reminiscent of the birth order, such as *ken'ichi, kooichi* and *kooji,* appeared in the top ten of the *Meiji Seimei*'s (2002) ranking during the 1960s and the 1970s. *Ken'ichi* which is a combination of *ken* 'healthy' and *ichi* 'one' was the most popular name in 1968 and 1970, but no name with numbers appear in the top ten most popular boy names after 1980. This means that although naming based on birth order is in decline, some names with numbers may be chosen for other reasons.

5) Place of birth

Name of a place that is meaningful to the parents or is related to the location associated with the child is incorporated in the name. For example, a girl may be named *ameri* for a child born in America, *minami* 'south' for a child who was born in the southern part of Japan.

Although Japanese surnames are known to have distributional variations according to regions (Morioka 1998), given names are not known to have quantitative variations across general geographical divisions. Although there are no statistics that specifically show that naming according to place of birth is less popular than other naming principles, this principle does not show popularity in the top ten lists of the *Meiji Seimei* survey.

Place of birth, however, has the potential to be symbolic of one's geographical and community affiliation even if frequency of employing this principle may be relatively low. In one publicized case, parents in Okinawa prefecture wished to name their son *ryuu* because of its association with *ryuukyuu,* an old name for Okinawa, but the birth registration was initially not accepted by the government because of the restrictions on Kanji character use (see the section on legal restrictions below).

6) Time of birth

Time of birth of a child can be incorporated in the naming. Common time frames can be time of day, month, or season. For example, archaic forms of names of the months: *yayoi* 'March', *satsuki* 'May' are female names. Not all month names are used as given names. Seasons appear in many names with or without suffixes, but when season names are used as personal names without suffixes, they are female names. *Haru* 'spring', *natsu* 'summer' are female names, and suffixes can be placed after them to make gendered names: for example, *haruko* and *natsuko* for girls, in which *-ko* is a female name suffix, and *haruki* and *natsuki* for boys, in which *-ki* is a male name suffix. Names of all seasons are also possible given names. In addition to spring and summer, *aki* 'autumn' and *huyu* 'winter' also appear in given names: *akiko, akimi, huyumi* for girls, *akihiko, akiyuki, huyuki* for boys, for example. Those straightforward names that mark seasons are easy to spot, and judging from the popularity of names that directly mention month, time of the day, or seasons, this naming principle is not very frequently employed.

There are, however, other unique naming techniques that incorporate time of birth. A sixty-one-year-old woman wrote to a newspaper that her grandfather named most of his children according to the Chinese zodiac signs of each child. For example, her mother was born in the year of rabbit, and therefore named *tokie*: 兎 *to* 'rabbit' + 喜 *ki* 'joy' + 栄 *e* 'prosper.' Her uncle was born in the year of monkey, and was named *shinzoo*: 申 *shin* 'monkey' + 三 *zoo* 'three' (*Asahi Shimbun, koe* [voice], February 7, 1994). Since this is the author's grandrather's practice, and the author's age in 1994 was sixty-one, the naming method was definitely used in late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, although it may not be the most popular naming method today.

7) Fortune-telling

Fortune-telling based on the number of strokes in the Kanji or the Kana script is very common and usually used in

combination with other principles.[2] How heavily the fortune-telling principle weighs in each naming depends on the attitudes and beliefs of the name giver, but consulting fortune-tellers and fortune-telling naming books is still popular among name givers. After the phonological form of the name is determined, luckiness of the number of strokes is often the motivating factor for choosing one name over another. For example, one of the most common male baby names in 2001, 大輝 has 17 strokes: the first character has 3 and the second has 14. The number seventeen signifies that the person who has the name is "full of pioneering spirit, although slightly short tempered." If the same name is written as 大貴, the name has fifteen strokes: the first has 3 and the second 12. The number fifteen signifies that the person is "wealthy, lucky and life proceeds smoothly; also, he/she is kind to others." The most popular female name during the twentieth century, 和子, normally read as *kazuko*, has eleven strokes: the first has 8 and the second 3. The number eleven signifies that the person "develops steadily." However, if the same name is written as 一子, the name has four strokes: the first has 1 and the second 3. The fortune for number four is "not good at thinking deeply" (Kindaichi 2001). Thus, in order to achieve the number that signifies the luck and fortune desired, parents who care about the fortune-telling aspect of naming weigh their character alternatives in addition to other considerations for the above-mentioned principles. Multiple readings of a Kanji and multiple Kanji that correspond to the same reading provide an abundance of options in this respect.

Restrictions

It seems somewhat universal that naming is based on desirable qualities of the names given, whether they are phonological, semantic, or through modeling after exemplary individuals. Needless to say, desirable qualities vary by culture and by individual. In order to clearly see the possible range of names, the opposite sides of the principles may be explored: Are there any taboos, restrictions or aversions

toward certain names? I will briefly discuss restrictions on naming.

1) Semantic Restrictions

Contemporary Japanese naming has restrictions on negative meaning: for example, any meaning that indicates 'death', 'evil', or 'loss' is avoided. In August 1993, the municipal office of Akishima City, Tokyo, cancelled the birth registration of a baby and asked the parents to change the baby's name, 悪魔 *akuma*, 'the devil.' Subsequently, the parents filed a lawsuit against the decision, and the case of a child named 'the devil' made newspaper headlines. The parents who tried to name their child 'the devil' shocked the nation. The parents claimed that their motivation was that they thought the name was unique and easily remembered and that the birth registration was initially accepted by a clerk (*Asahi Shimbun*, January 14, 1994). Also, the father admitted that he named his son after a cartoon titled "*Akuma-kun*" in which the central character's nickname is *akuma* (*Daily Yomiuri*, February 28, 1994). There was no controversy over a *manga* cartoon and children's television program in the 1960s titled *Akuma-kun*. In *Akuma-kun* a boy whose alternative first name is *akuma* 'the devil' becomes the master of a devil named *mefisuto*, who must serve him. The boy used the magical power he and *mefisuto* possessed for benevolent purposes, including helping his friends in need and combatting evil spirits.[3]

What puzzled the public was that even though the name sounds outrageous, there seemed to be hardly any legal ground for the cancellation of the registration. There was no law against the name itself that specifically bans it, nor was there a law that prohibits parents from giving a name with negative semantics. On the other hand, this case clearly went beyond the accepted cultural norms and the incident stirred a nation-wide controversy not only about the legality of the negative naming, but also the moral responsibility of the parents regarding the semantics of the naming.

The parents filed a lawsuit to void the cancellation of the registration, and in February 1994, the Tokyo Family Court decided that the naming was an abuse of naming rights, but the name should be registered and the registration has to be completed because it was already accepted once (*Asahi Shimbun*, February 2, 1994). The city official vowed to appeal, and the father stated that he would not give up. The case ended, however, when the parents agreed to change the child's name to *aku*. Although the phonological form of the name is identical to *aku* 'bad', the name was accepted with alternative Kanji 亜駆, whose meanings are roughly 'secondary' and 'running, dash.' This compromise clearly shows that the local government official decided to refuse the name based on an unstated semantic requirement for a name and not based on the phonological form of the name. If it were the phonological form that was offensive, the new name would have been rejected again. The controversy that erupted from the *akuma-chan* incident was a focal point that has serious legal ramifications for who has the right to determine a name for a child: parents, the child, or the government.

2) Phonological Restrictions

Kindaichi (2001) recommends ease of pronunciation as a consideration to be included when giving names, although this seems to be a subjective criterion. He states that too many 'harsh sounding syllables' in a name are not good: for example, *kikuko*, has the same voiceless stop in all its syllables, or *hisashi*, which has fricatives in all the syllables. In particular, if the family name contains the same syllable, Kindaichi says, the name is not well balanced (ibid:28-29).

There are more general phonological restrictions that come from the way in which syllables are structured in Japanese. Japanese syllables are open with few consonant clusters: a syllable usually ends with a vowel, and every consonant is followed by a vowel. Therefore, when foreign words are adopted, a vowel, normally *u* or *o*, is inserted after a consonant if it is not already followed by a vowel. Nasal stops,

such as *n* and *m*, are exception to this rule, and can be at the end of a syllable.

3) Legal Restrictions

Governmental laws called *koseki-hoo*, the Family Registration Act, apply to officially registered names. First of all, one can have only one name other than the family name. It is therefore impossible to have a first name and a middle name both registered as legal names. Some circumvent the problem by registering two names as one, e.g., *kathrinemitsuko*, instead of *kathrine mitsuko* (Kato and Hironaka 1999). There are no social security numbers in Japan, but a newborn must be registered into a family's entry, usually under the parents' family registry. The family registration is the document that proves one's legal identity. The Family Registration Act did not have any restrictions specifically on meanings of names when the *akuma* incident discussed above occurred, although it states that names that would cause harm to the child should not be given.

Another legal restriction relevant to the issue is Japanese language policy on Kanji use. There are guidelines to restrict which Kanji can be used in official documents. The guidelines are intended to produce clear and accessible public documents that are free of rarely used Kanji characters. The guidelines stipulate that use of Kanji be limited to those within a predetermined set, and newly registered names must follow the guidelines. This is because the child's registration is considered to be an official public document. At present, the governmental policy recommends using the set of 1,945 Kanji characters known as *jooyoo kanji* 'the List of Kanji for General Use' in all official governmental documents and in the media. That means that official governmental documents and other documents for the public must avoid using Kanji that are not on that list. Since names have symbolic meanings and the impact of changing them is profound, the government allows an extra set of characters specifically aimed at characters used in names (Takebe 1981, Twine 1991, Unger 1996, Gottlieb

2000). Since its establishment in 1951, the List of Characters for Personal Names grew with time, with the latest addition in October 2004 being the most extensive. As a result, a total of 2,928 Kanji, including the List of Kanji for General Use (1,945 charcters) and the List of Kanji for Personal Names (983 characters), can be used in given names today. Katakana and Hiragana syllabaries can also be used, but the Roman alphabet is not accepted (Hōmushō 2004).

As I mentioned in the section on naming principle based on place of birth, an Okinawan couple filed a lawsuit regarding use of a character for *ryuu* in 1997, and the case posed a question as to the validity of the government lists of approved characters. Okinawa, a prefecture of Japan, used to be an independent kingdom called *ryuukyuu* prior to its integration into Japan in the nineteenth century. The parents who filed the lawsuit wanted to name their child *ryuu* using the character used for the traditional name of the region, *ryuukyuu* or 琉球. The character, however, was not on the government-approved lists of Kanji characters, and therefore the name was refused. The parents subsequently filed a lawsuit, expressing their frustration that such an important character was not included in the government's lists. The local courts, as well as a representative to the House of Councilors, appealed to the Minister of Justice (*Sangi-in*, Diet Record 1997). The exclusion of the Kanji character from the lists of approved Kanji suggests that there is no need to write the traditional name of Okinawa in Japanese public documents. The political implication of the exclusion is damaging to the relationship between the local people and the central government, and is obviously not acceptable for the people of Okinawa. The suggestion to include the Kanji character in the approved list encountered little opposition. On December 3, 2004, the character for *ryuu* was added to the List of Characters for Personal Names (*Asahi Shimbun*, December 4, 1997).

The case of *ryuu* demonstrates that the name of a place to which local residents have a strong psychological

attachment can be a source of personal names in the particular locale. The absence of the character in the approved lists sends signals as to who the members of the national community are. The case also makes it clear that for the Okinawan parents, substituting the specific character for *ryuu* 琉 with Hiragana りゅう was unacceptable. They strongly felt that the name must be written with that character. In this case, local identity, personal identity, and national identity all converge in the written form of the name. The dispute regarding the particular character highlights the psychological depth of the relationship between the scripts and the users of Japanese language.

Recent trends

There are always trends in given names that depend on which generation people are in. In general, while most common American names stayed relatively stable during the twentieth century (U.S. Social Security Administration), most common Japanese names shifted with generations, especially male names, as I have discussed above. There is a new, emerging pattern that has existed for some time in a very minor form but is now becoming more common: i.e., choosing names that have global currency. Many naming books now offer names whose phonological forms are consonant with Japanese, yet sound like foreign names, especially western names. For example, Katoo and Hironaka (1999) is dedicated to names that are international, although their definition of being international is skewed toward Euro-American names. In a regular name book, renowned linguist Kindaichi Haruhiko gives examples of such 'international' names: *Sara* which resembles Sarah, *Maria* which sounds like Maria, *Rei* like Ray, *Ken* which is a traditional Japanese name that resembles Kenneth, etc. It should be pointed out that even those names, especially male names, are written in Kanji instead of simply writing them in phonetic syllabaries of Kana. This is meaningful in that if the motivation is to name a child with a name resembling a western name, using Kana will

suffice. Usually, Western loan words, such as *Konpyuuta* 'computer', are written in Katakana syllabary, and when George Bush's name is written in Japanese, it is written in Katakana because it is a foreign name. The Katakana script signifies foreignness and thus carries an international image.[4]

Applying Kanji to the quasi-western names signifies more than a simplistic adoration for the western culture. Such names with perceived global currency have at least three layers of signification in Japanese: the Japanese phonological level, *Sara*, the Sino-origin visual façade, e.g., Kanji 沙羅, and the meta-phonological level of another code, i.e., the global interface level. They represent a vision of contemporary identity in Japan, i.e., Japanese self, dressed and armed with the highly literate garment of the Chinese influence, with a flare for westernization and global ambition.

There are other names that can double as Japanese and Western names: *ken*, sounds like Ken and is written as 健、謙、研 for a male; *mari*, which sounds like Mary and is written as 真理、麻里、万里、茉莉 and so on. An actress mother, Mika Mihune, and a musician father named their son *renon*, which rhymes with 'Lennon' in Japanese. The Japanese language does not recognize the phonological contrast between *r* and *l*, and therefore the two sounds are interchangeable. The characters assigned to the name are: 蓮 *ren* 'lotus' and 音 *on* 'sound.' The newspaper reports that the baby was named after John Lennon (*Sankei Zakzak*, November 9, 2004). This is a case of emulation, but the person to emulate is a foreign musician. The name *renon* sounds completely new as a Japanese name, unlike *sara*, *ken*, and *mari*, but they are all similar in that Western names influenced the naming.

Another notable example shows that increased contact with foreign individuals may have an impact on adopting foreign names or names that are inspired by foreign practices. In October 1994, a father in the southern prefecture of Kagoshima gave his son his own given name followed by "Jr." as the baby's name. Initially, the name was refused by the city

official, because the Roman alphabet is not accepted in birth registration. When the father changed the script to Katakana syllabary as ジュニア pronounced as *junia*, the local officials had no reason to reject the name because Katakana is accepted in the document. Katakana script is used to write down special groups of words, such as loan words from English and other foreign languages, foreigner's names, and onomatopoeia expressions. The city official, however, withdrew the decision, saying that it is not customary for Japanese to have a suffix such as 'Junior.' Indeed, succeeding fathers' names is unheard of as a modern practice in Japan, except for stage names and other professional names in traditional fields. For example, Kabuki actors have names that they assume on stage when they are young, and later when they become more accomplished, they deserve to take on their fathers' stage names. In the case of *junia*, the Ministry of Justice, however, decided that the name with the suffix was acceptable, citing that the naming right is with the father. If the name bearer wishes to change them, given names can be changed with justifications, especially if they are seriously inconvenienced by them. The father who named the baby with the suffix *junia* is quoted as saying, "I have positive feelings for the child of my Filipino friend who is called Junior. I named my son as my junior because I sincerely want him to take over my name" (*Mainichi Daily News*, October 23, 1994). His statement clearly shows that a specific acquaintance from a different culture influenced his decision.

Conclusion

In Japanese naming practice, the name givers, usually parents, attempt to express their visions of their child's life, personality, and wishes for what kind of person they want the child to be. But, they do so by carefully paying attention to the phonological forms, as well as to the visual forms of the name and its cultural ramifications. Furthermore, there are boundaries drawn by governmental policies on the language as well as a policy on how to register a child. Naming a child

in Japan involves dancing with form and meaning within the legal and cultural boundaries. Within the demarcated space, the name givers express their creativity and visions by choosing the right form and meaning for their child, producing, for example, 48 different ways of writing the name, *yuuki*. Despite the complexity of the orthography and readings of the names, the intricacy is not seen as a liability, but as flexible and enriched resources for creating meaningful signs and individualization. By writing the most common name with certain characters, the name holder's identity is further differentiated from those of others who have the same phonological name.

A Japanese name is a linguistic sign that embodies parents' aspirations for the child, the aforementioned desirable semantics, and representational conventions within the culturally and legally endorsed arena. Naming of a child is thus an act of balancing phonological, semantic, orthographic, cultural, and legal aspects of a linguistic sign. This is what I call the poetics of Japanese naming practice.

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Notes

1) Meiji Life Insurance Company, or *Meiji Seimei,* merged with Yasuda Insurance Company, and is now *Meiji-Yasuda Seimei.* The name database that the company has been compiling is one of the most comprehensive name databases in Japan in the absence of a comprehensive governmental database.

2) Zhiqiang Yu has pointed out to me that the origin of fortune-telling that is based on the number of strokes in Kanji is a Chinese practice.

3) The American TV program *Bewitched* may serve as a point of comparison for the Japanese children's show. The heroine of

the American show is a witch who is married to a human being and leads an average middle class family life. She uses her magical power sparingly only when she needs to save herself from trouble or for other benign purposes.

4) In the beginning of the twentieth century, Katakana carried different meanings. For example, women's names tended to be written in Katakana, which was, compared to Kanji, easier for women with less education to read and write.

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