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Child Naming Practice and Changing Trends in Modern Japan

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In any country or culture, personal names function as a symbol of identification and are used on a daily basis. It is a common social phenomenon, in any language or culture, for (grand)parents to give their children names that contain their own hopes. According to Makino, parents' hopes in children's names are actually a missing component from specific societies at particular times (77, 83) and thus a clue to know what societies lack. During the past decade Japanese personal naming has been a focus for some researchers and a handful research studies have been conducted. Some of the studies are linguistic analyses of names (e.g. Satō, 2007; Tokuda, 2004), some are about classical names or surnames (e.g. Inuma, 1988; Okutomi, 1999), and others look at political or other aspects concerning naming (e.g. Enmanji, 2005; Makino, 2012). However, few studies have examined the background or projector of changes in Japanese naming practice for a long period of time.

This study is a literature-based research on newborn baby naming practice in Japan from 1912-2018. Sources of this study are mainly from the researches of notable authors of onomastics (e.g. Noriko Watanabe) and Internet publications, mostly Google, with such key words as "naming practice" and "popular baby names." Another important source is the Japanese Amazon, where my search criteria was focused on "maternity" and "naming a baby." Inasmuch as social, political, and cultural transformation affects naming practice, in this study, trends of popular baby names are discussed within a sociocultural framework.

Names examined in this study are limited to legally registered given names of Japanese babies. I use the word *kanji* "character" (漢字) for a letter/grapheme and "personality" (人格) for the character of a person in this paper. Only one or two pronunciations are suggested for each name and only one literal translation are offered due to space limitation. All names are transliterated into the Roman script. It must be pointed out that different pronunciations and different interpretations of the names are also possible and depend on an individual name giver.

1-1. Naming principles in Japanese

Watanabe calls naming a baby in Japan the "poetics of Japanese naming practice," which is an act of linguistic sign creation, by balancing its phonological, semantic, orthographic, cultural, and legal aspects (45). When Japanese parents name a baby, they take into consideration several aspects: the meanings of *kanji* (Chinese characters), the number of strokes in *kanji*, the balance of *kanji* between the last name and first name, as well as the sound/pronunciation of the name. Once the phonological form of the name is determined, the type of script (hiragana syllabary, katakana syllabary, or kanji), and kanji character(s) to represent the sound is chosen (22). It is usual practice for parents to choose a nicely sounding name for their child; but some parents choose the writing script of a name first, and then decide on the pronunciation of the name.

A Japanese written name can vary in spelling, in the type of script used (*hiragana*, *katakana*, or *kanji*), and which character is used to represent the sound. *Kanji* characters have various meanings and readings/pronunciation. Since *kanji* was originally imported from China, each character has a Chinese (*on*, Sino-Japanese) reading and/or a Japanese (*kun*) reading. Multiple readings of a *kanji*, which in turn, multiple *kanji* options for writing the same phonological name, provide many options for name givers to choose from. *Seimei handan* (onomancy) that is the luckiness of the number of strokes of *kanji* in

a name is often the motivating factor for choosing a *kanji* character over another. Name givers choose a name with positive meaning(s) by its sound and *kanji*, and there are gender differences in preferred meanings (Watanabe 26, 27, 37).

There are many naming books and websites for parents to survey basic knowledge of naming; recent popular baby names; lists of *kanji* characters by the number of strokes, pronunciation, or impression; a list of *new* names called *kirakira* (sparkling) names; and onomancy (e.g. *Be able to find a nice kanji – Dictionary for naming a baby*; Babynames.jp). Naming books recommend names that are easy to pronounce and remember (Satō 179; Makino 52).

1-2. Legal Restrictions

Governmental laws called *koseki-hō*, the Family Registration Act that came in effect in 1948, states that a newborn must be registered into a family's entry. Japanese people can have one surname and one given name with no other names. The Family Registration Act does not have any restrictions on the meanings of names, although it states that names that would cause harm to a child should not be given. However, it does have restrictions on *kanji* use: a total of 2,999 *kanji*, including 2,136 *jōyō kanji* (commonly used *kanji* characters) and 863 *jinmeiyō kanji* (*kanji* characters for personal names), can be used for children's names. *Katakana* and *hiragana* syllabaries can also be used, but the Roman alphabet is not accepted (Hōmushō).

2-1. Historical observation of popular baby names

Using data from an approximately 100 year period from Meiji Yasuda Life Insurance, Unser-Schutz examined how the characteristics of Japanese male and female names have changed. Fig. 1 shows variation of naming patterns from 1913 to 2015.

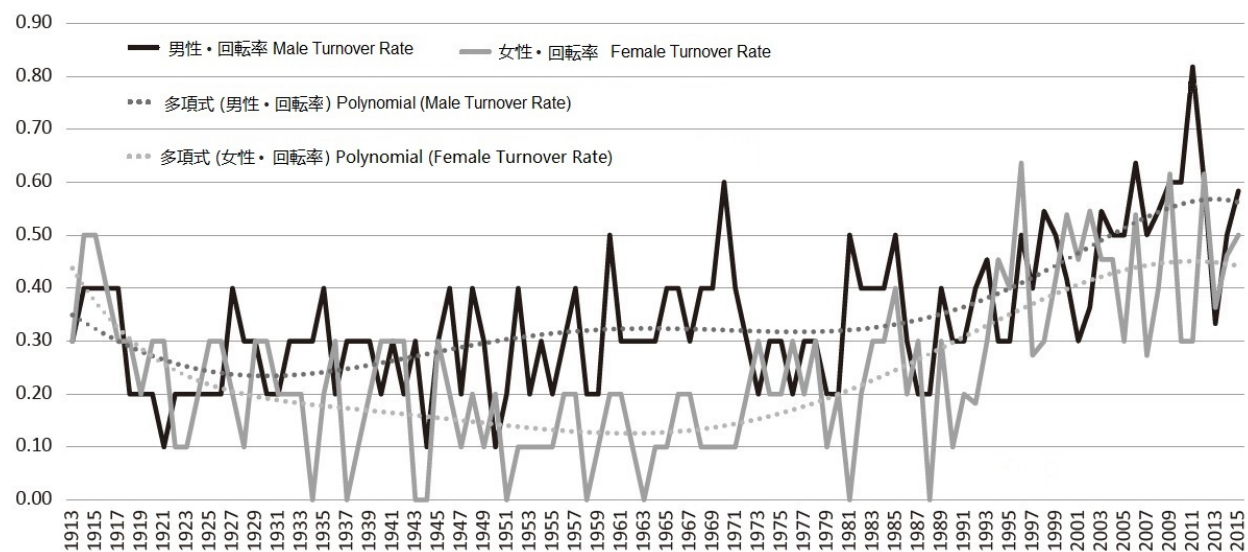


Fig. 1. Turnover rate of most popular male and female names from 1913 to 2015 (Adapted from Unser-Schutz, “Gendai” 92).

Naming patterns appear to be increasingly typified by higher variation, with a faster turnover of popular names since 1980s. Male names were more diverse than female names based on the abundance and turnover rate, i.e., the percentage of names newly

found in the top-10 rankings compared to the previous year (Hirayama 39; Unser-Schutz, “Gendai” 95, 96, 97).

2-2. Trend of popular male baby names

Baby names reflect myriad sociocultural aspects, such as traditions, religion, law, norms of a society, as well as parental expectations that are implicitly reflected in baby names. Names also connotatively express aesthetics, education, economic/social status, and political ideology.

Japan uses two types of calendars: a Western calendar and a Japanese calendar. The Japanese calendar goes by an era that is named after an emperor's reign. During each era, some popular baby names have the *kanji* characters from each era name (*Taishō*, *Shōwa*, etc.) as a part of the baby names. For example, 和夫 (*kazuo*) is a popular male name during *Shōwa* era. The first character 和 (*kazu*) comes from 昭和 (*Shōwa*) era and means “peaceful, calm, or Japan.”

Male given names often reflect the political and ideological climate of the era in which the babies were born. The influence of the war period is evident during WWII (1939-45) with popular names such as 勝 (*masaru*, win) and 勇 (*isamu/yū*, brave). Years following WWII and between 1957 and 1978, 誠 (*makoto*, sincerity) dominated (Watanabe 27).

Names with numbers, 一 (*ichi/kazu*, the first), 次/二 (*ji*, next/second), 三 (*sabu/zō*, the third), appear in the top-10 most popular male names before 1980 (see fig. 2 or 4 and tables 1 and 2). The use of numbers in names are based on birth order. For example, 三郎 (*saburō*) means third son/male and indicates many children in a family. However, names with numbers rarely appear in the top-10 rankings after 1980. The decline of the use of numbers in male names based on birth order coincides with the change in the family dynamics toward individualism, away from traditional Japanese family roles (Watanabe 34), and in Japan's birth rate. The second baby boom ended in 1974, and total fertility rate fell below the replacement level fertility of 2.08 since then (see fig. 3). Parents are less likely to use a birth order indicator when naming a baby if they do not plan to have more than one child. Women's social advancement, late marriage, soaring costs of raising a child, the burst of stock market and property bubbles, and decades of economic stagnation are considered causes of low birth rates.

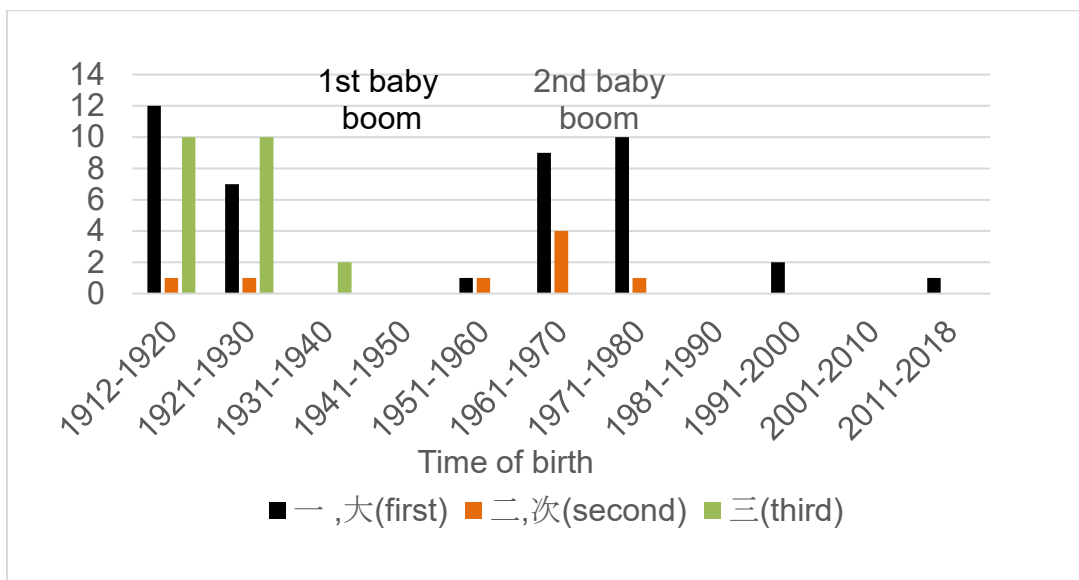


Fig. 2. Rate of names with birth order indicator in the top-10 rankings. (Source: www.meijiyasuda.co.jp/enjoy/ranking/year_men/boy.html.)

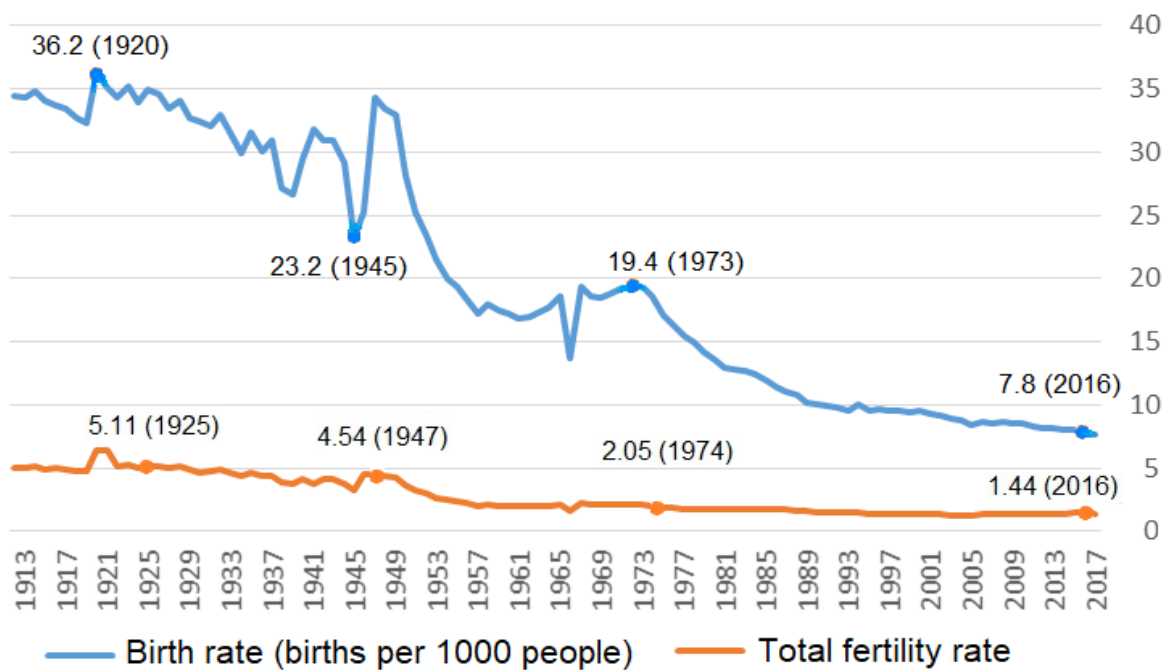


Fig. 3. Birth rate and total fertility rate of Japan. ¹ (Source: www.e-stat.go.jp/dbview?sid=0003214664.)

Table 1

Top 10 Japanese Male Names in *Taishō* Era (大正時代 1912-1926), the Reign of Emperor Yoshihito^a

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1912	正一 Shōichi (right 1 st son)	清 Kiyoshi (pure)	正雄 Masao (right man)	正 Tadashi (right)	茂 Shigeru (to prosper)	武雄 Takeo (brave man)	正治 Shōji (right govern)	三郎 Saburō (the 3 rd son)	正夫 Masao (right man)	一郎 Ichirō (the 1 st son)
1913	正二 Shōji (right 2 nd son)	茂	正雄	正	清	三郎	正一	武雄	義雄 Yoshio (logical man)	正男 Masao (right man)
1914	正三 Shōzō (right 3 rd son)	清	正雄	三郎	正	正一	勇 Isamu (brave)	実 Minoru (ripen)	秀雄 Hideo (superb man)	茂
1915	清	三郎	茂	正雄	正	実	武雄	一郎	義雄	正一
1916	辰雄 Tatsuo (male dragon)	清	三郎	勇	一郎	茂	実	正雄	秀雄	辰男 Tatsuo (male dragon)
1917	三郎	清	勇	一郎	実	正雄	博	正一	正	茂
1918	清	三郎	勇	一郎	義雄	実	茂	正	博 Hiroshi (widespread)	正雄
1919	三郎	清	勇	実	一郎	義雄	正雄	正	茂	弘 Hiromu (big- hearted)
1920	清	茂	三郎	勇	実	一郎	博	弘	正	正雄

(Source: www.meijiyasuda.co.jp/enjoy/ranking/year_men/girl.html.)

a. Notes: *Kanji* are annotated at the first appearance in the table. *Kanji* character from an era name 大正 (*Taishō*). Name-exclusive suffixes: 郎 (-rō, male), 夫/男/雄 (-o, husband/male). Numbers in names based on birth order: 一 (*ichi/kazu*, the first), 次/二 (*ji*, next/second), 三 (*sabu/zō*, the third).

Japanese is a mora-timed language, not a syllable- or stress-timed language. Mora is like a music beat. Four-mora names using *nanori kun*, which is name-exclusive Japanese readings, were previously popular and seen in the top ranking for males until 1970, and then in 1992. Examples of four-mora names using *nanori-kun* include 勝利 (*masatoshi*, win + sharp), 博之 (*hiroyuki*, vast + to go), 貴大 (*takahiro*, noble/precious + big), 義継 (*yoshitsugu*, justice + to continue), and 和彦 (*kazuhiko*, Japan/peace + talented male). This type of names are considered archaic (古風 *kofū*) or Japanese style (和風 *wafū*) based on a military commander during Japan's *Sengoku* (Warring States) Period. The *Jōyō kanji hyō* (National List of Kanji for Common Use) does not contain *nanori kun*.

Other linguistic features of Japanese given names is name-exclusive suffixes. Name-exclusive suffixes usually express their owner's gender and are commonly used. Examples include 子 (-*ko*, child), 恵 (-*e*, blessed), and 美 (-*mi*, beautiful) for females, and 樹 (-*ki*, plant), 哉/也 (-*ya*, [emphasis]), 介/輔 (-*suke*, assistance), and 郎 (-*rō*, male) for males. A popular male suffix until 1950s was 夫/男/雄 (-*o*, husband/male). 哉/也 (-*ya*, [emphasis]) and 樹 (-*ki*, plant) were popular in 1960s, then 介/輔 (-*suke*, assistance) in 1970s. In the 1980s, 太/大 (-*ta*, thick/big) was popular and 人/斗/翔 (-*to*, person/dipper/fly) in 2000s (see fig. 4 and tables 1, 2, and 3). 大介 and 大輔 (*daisuke*, big assistance) were in the top-10 rankings between 1973 and 1994 consecutively, 哲也 (*tetsuya*, clever [emphasis]) was in the top rankings between 1963 and 1974 consecutively, and 翔太 (*shōta*, to fly + thick/big) was in the top rankings between 1986 and 2008 consecutively, then in 2012.

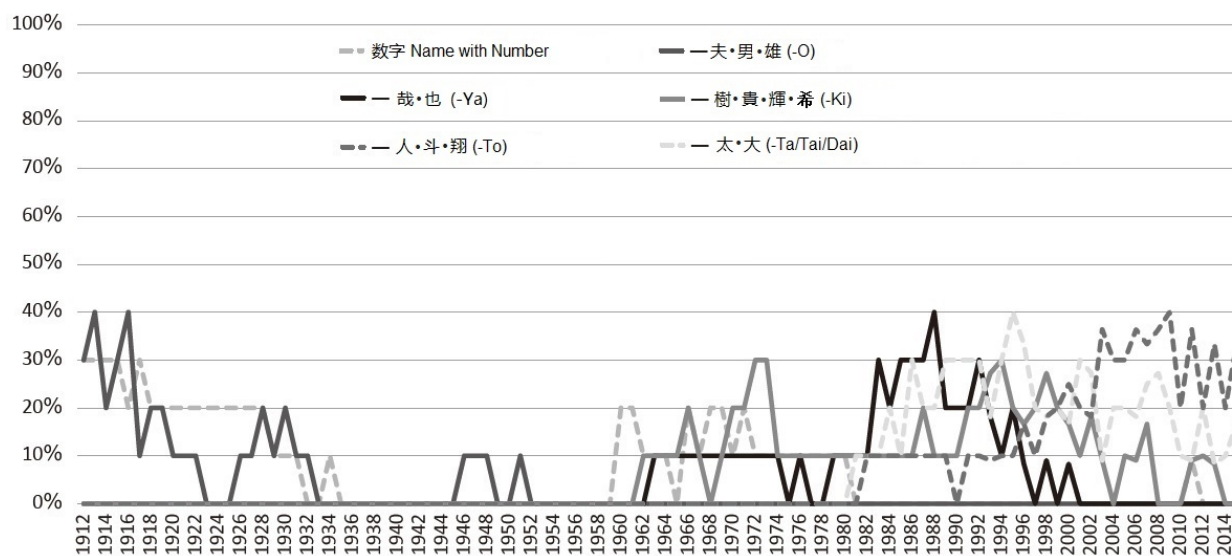


Fig. 4. Changes of name-exclusive suffixes and names with a number in top 10 male names over 100 years (Adapted from Unser-Schutz, "Gendai" 94).

Table 2

Top 10 Japanese Male Names in *Shōwa* Era (昭和時代 1926-1989), the Reign of Emperor *Hirohito*^a

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1971	誠 Makoto (truth)	哲也 Tetsuya (clever)	剛 Tsuyoshi (tough)	直樹 Naoki (straight tree)	健一 Ken'ichi (healthy 1 st son)	英樹 Hideki (superb plant)	学 Manabu (study)	浩二 Kōji (vast 2nd son)	崇 Sō/Takashi (noble)	淳 Jun/atsushi (humane)
1972	誠	哲也	剛	健一	学	直樹	秀樹 Hideki (superb plant)	徹 Tōru (to execute)	英樹 Hideki	淳
1973	誠	剛	哲也	直樹	健一	秀樹	学	淳	英樹	大輔 Daisuke (big assistance)
1974	誠	大輔	剛	健一	淳	哲也	直樹	学	聡 Sō/Satoru (clever)	大介 Daisuke (big assistance)
1975	誠	大輔	学	剛	大介	直樹	健一	淳	崇	亮 Ryō (clear)
1976	誠	大輔	直樹	剛	淳	大介	竜也 Tatsuya (dragon)	学	健一	亮
1977	誠	大輔	健太郎 Kentarō (healthy 1 st son)	剛	大介	学	健一	亮	直樹	洋平 Yōhei (ocean)
1978	誠	大輔	直樹	剛	亮	大介	聡/	健	健一	学
1979	大輔	誠	直樹	亮	剛	大介	学	健一	健	哲也
1980	大輔	誠	直樹	哲也	剛	学	大介	亮	健一	聡

(Source: www.meijiyasuda.co.jp/enjoy/ranking/year_men/girl.html.)

a. Notes: *Kanji* are annotated at the first appearance in the table. Name-exclusive suffixes: 郎 (-rō, male), 樹 (-ki, plant), 也 (-ya, [emphasis]), 輔 (-suke, assistance). Numbers in names based on birth order: 一 (*ichi/kazu*, the first), 次/二 (*ji*, next/second).

Table 3

Top 10 Japanese Male Names in *Heisei* Era (平成時代 1989-2019), the Reign of Emperor Akihito^a

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
2011	大翔 Hiroto (greatly flap) 蓮 Ren (lotus)	-	颯太 Sōta (gale)	樹 Itsuki (tree) 大和 Yamato (big + peaceful) 陽翔 Haruto (sun + to fly)	-	-	陸斗 Rikuto (land + dipper) 太一 Taichi (big 1 st son)	-	海翔 Kaito (ocean + to fly)	蒼空 Sora (blue sky) 翼 Tsubasa (wing)
2012	蓮	颯太	大翔	大和	翔太 Shōta (to fly + big) 湊 Minato (harbor) 悠人 Yūto (generous man) 大輝 Daiki (very shining)	-	-	-	蒼空 龍生 Ryūsei (dragon's life)	-
2013	悠真 Yūma (generous nature)	陽翔	蓮	大翔 湊	-	大和	颯太	陽向 Hinata (sun + direction) 翔 Shō (to fly)	-	蒼空 大輝 悠人
2014	蓮	大翔	陽向	陽太 Hinata (very sunny)	悠真	湊 悠人 陸 Riku (land) 駿 Shun (swift horse)	-	-	-	朝陽 Asahi (morning sunshine)
2015	大翔	悠真	蓮 陽太	-	湊	颯太 陽翔 颯 Hayate (gale)	-	-	陽向 大和 結翔 Yuito (to join + fly) 悠翔 Haruto (generous + to fly)	-
2016	大翔	蓮	悠真	陽翔	朝陽	樹	悠 Haru (generous)	陽太	湊 新 Arata (new) 葵 Aoi (hollyhock)	-
2017	悠真 悠人 陽翔	-	-	湊	蓮 蒼 Aoi (blue)	-	新	陽太 Hinata (very sunny)	陽太 大和	-
2018	蓮	湊	大翔	大和	陽翔	悠真	樹	陽太 朝陽	-	悠人 蒼

(Source: www.meijiyasuda.co.jp/enjoy/ranking/year_men/girl.html.)

a. Notes: *Kanji* are annotated at the first appearance in the table. Name-exclusive suffixes: 太 (-*ta*, thick/big), 人/斗/翔 (-*to*, person/dipper/fly). Numbers in names based on birth order: 一 (*ichi/kazu*, the first).

The most popular Chinese character (*kanji*) used for a male given name in 2004, 2011, 2012, 2014, and 2018 was 蓮 (*ren*). Cui proposes that the Japanese pronunciation of 蓮 (lotus) is *hasu*, which has a special meaning in Buddhism. Japan has been a country that advocates Buddhism since ancient times; it is therefore not difficult to understand that 蓮 (*ren*) can take the first place (139). Nevertheless, Cui's proposal may not be necessarily true giving the fact that Japanese young parents in 2000s or 2010s are not religious enough to connect 蓮 (*ren*) to Buddhism. Albeit "the visual simplicity of the one *kanji* character name is supported" ("*Kirakira keien*"), 蓮 (*ren*) is popular because of the way it sounds, as "the sound (*ren*) is appealing to young couples" ("*Kirakira keien*") and it is also because of the fact that "our psychical attitude [is focused] upon the sound of the word [i.e., name] instead of upon its meaning" (Robinson 127).

In addition to the change in the use of suffixes mentioned above, there is also a change in structural characteristics like the number of characters used in names. Three-character-long names are rarely seen in the top-10 ranking for men. Two-character names decreased from around 1915, while one-character names increased; on the contrary, one-character names decreased from around 1980, while two-character names increased. One-character names and two-character names moved in opposite directions (Unser-Schutz, "Gendai" 95) (see fig. 5).

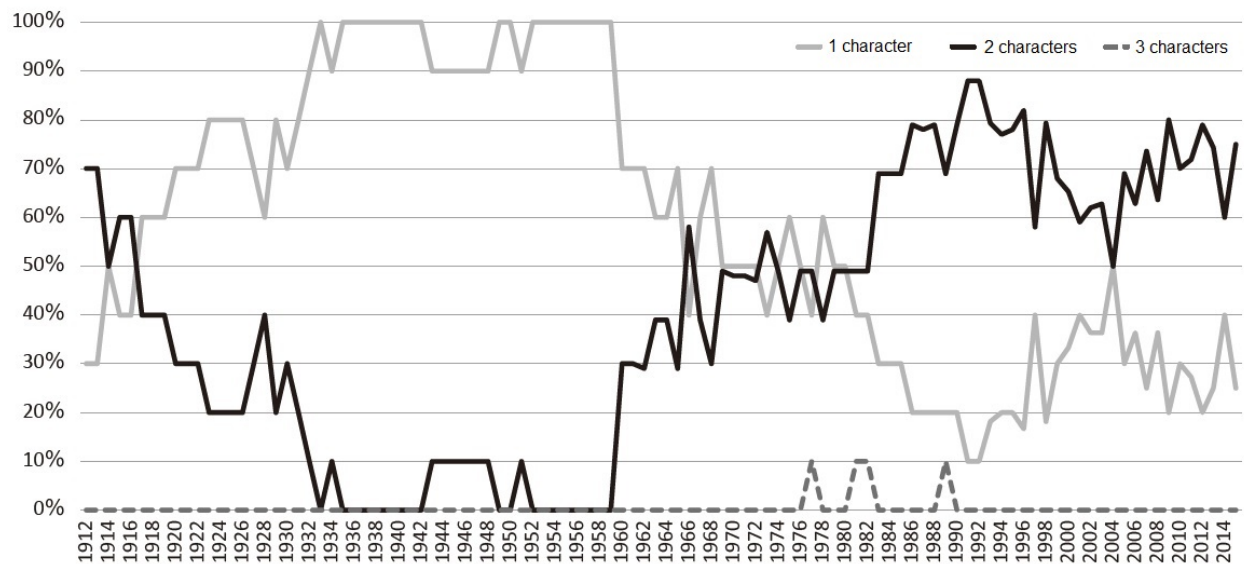


Fig. 5. Men's top 10 names with 1, 2, and 3 characters (Adapted from Unser-Schutz, "Gendai" 95).

An examination of popular male baby names as of 2018 shows that Japanese parents named their son with hopes to "grow up carefree and big-hearted" and want him to be "globally successful." Recently, names describing grandeur nature are popular for males (Mamanote, *Boys' Names*). In contrast to the *kanji* used by female, *kanji* characters used in male names set off the expectation of the parents and even the family clan for the boy to have "moral quality, aspiration, honesty, perseverance, outstanding" and "to be out of the common run" as well as "to bring honor to one's ancestors" (Cui 138).

2-3. Trend of popular female baby names

Unlike male names, names written in *hiragana* or *katakana* syllabary are one of the characteristics of female names (Taylor & Taylor 334). In the beginning of the 20th century, female names tended to be written in *katakana*, which was, when compared to *kanji*, easier for females with less education to read and write (Watanabe 46). Names written in *katakana* syllabary lastly seen in the top-10 rankings was in 1920 (see table 4 or fig. 6). Names written in *hiragana* syllabary were seen in the top rankings in 1910s, 1970s, 1980s, 2000s, and 2010s.

Table 4

Top 10 Japanese Female Names in *Taishō* Era (大正時代 1912-1926), the Reign of Emperor *Yoshihito*^a

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1912	千代 <i>Chiyo</i> (1000 generation)	ハル <i>Haru</i> (spring)	ハナ <i>Hana</i> (flower)	正子 <i>Masako</i> (honest child)	文子 <i>Fumiko</i> (literate child)	ヨシ <i>Yoshi</i> (good)	千代子 <i>Chiyoko</i> (1000 generation child)	キヨ <i>Kiyo</i> (pure)	静子 <i>Shizuko</i> (quiet child)	はる <i>Haru</i> (spring)
1913	正子	千代	静子	キヨ	文子	ヨシ	ハル	フミ <i>Fumi</i> (literate)	マサ <i>Masa</i> (honest)	きみ <i>Kimi</i> (noble)
1914	静子	キヨ	千代子	ハル	きよ <i>Kiyo</i> (pure)	ヨシ	キミ <i>Kimi</i> (noble)	トミ <i>Tomi</i> (prosperous)	フミ	光子 <i>Mitsuko</i> (radiant child)
1915	千代	千代子	文子	静子	キヨ	ハル	清子 <i>Kiyoko</i> (pure child)	きよ	きみ	はる
1916	文子	千代子	千代	清子	キミ	八重子 <i>Yaeko</i> (gorgeous child)	フミ	キヨ	静子	貞子 <i>Sadako</i> (chaste child)
1917	千代子	キヨ	キミ	文子	八重子	愛子 <i>Aiko</i> (loving child)	静子	ハル	美代子 <i>Miyoko</i> (beautiful generation child)	貞子
1918	久子 <i>Hisako</i> (long child)	静子	千代子	キミ	文子	清子	キヨ	貞子	千代	ハル
1919	久子	千代子	和子 <i>Kazuko</i> (peace child)	貞子	静子	文子	ヨシ	キヨ	清子	キミ
1920	文子	久子	千代子	静子	貞子	芳子 <i>Yoshiko</i> (fragrant child)	愛子	清子	キヨ	君子 <i>Kimiko</i> (noble child)

(Source: www.meijiyasuda.co.jp/enjoy/ranking/year_men/girl.html.)

a. Notes: *Kanji* and *kana* syllabaries are annotated at the first appearance in the table. Italicized names are written in *hiragana* or *katakana* syllabary. Name-exclusive suffix: 子 (-ko, child). Popular *kanji* in female names: 美 (*mi*, beautiful), 愛 (*ai*, love).

Meaning of *kanji* or *hiragana/katakana* syllabaries used in female names show that the idealization of internal traits, such as being wise, truthful, quiet, trustworthy, shrewd, chaste, pure, and honest, was predominant (Loveday 565). Female names tend to express abstract qualities that are considered feminine according to the Japanese culture (Watanabe 27).

Another dominant naming pattern is name-exclusive suffixes as in male names. The dominance of female names with a 子 (-*ko*, child) suffix started in 1910s and continued until 1980s (see fig. 6 and tables 4, 5, and 6). After 1985, no name with a 子 (-*ko*) suffix appeared in the top-10 rankings with a few exceptions such as 桃子 (*momoko*, peach child), 菜々子 (*nanako*, vegetable child), and 莉子 (*riko*, jasmine child).

Historical significance of a 子 (-*ko*) suffix is that a 子 (-*ko*) could be given only to Japanese nobility before the *Meiji* era (Cui 138; Komori 68). Cui speculates that the popularity of a 子 (-*ko*) suffix stems from an ancient Chinese practice, that is only those who were knowledgeable and were respected as great masters can be referred to as 子 (-*ko*) as in 孔子 Confucius (138).

Popular female suffixes have changed from 子 (-*ko*, child) to 花/香 (-*ka*, flower/fragrant) in 1980s, then to 奈/菜 (-*na*, fruit tree/vegetable) in 1990s (see fig. 6 and tables 5 and 6). 美香 (*mika*, beautiful + fragrant) was in the top rankings from 1972-74 and 1983-84. 彩香 or 彩花 (*ayaka*, coloring + fragrant/flower) was in the top rankings from 1989-97 and 1999, 2001, and 2003. 陽菜 (*hina*, sunny + vegetable) was in the top rankings from 2003-2016 consecutively.

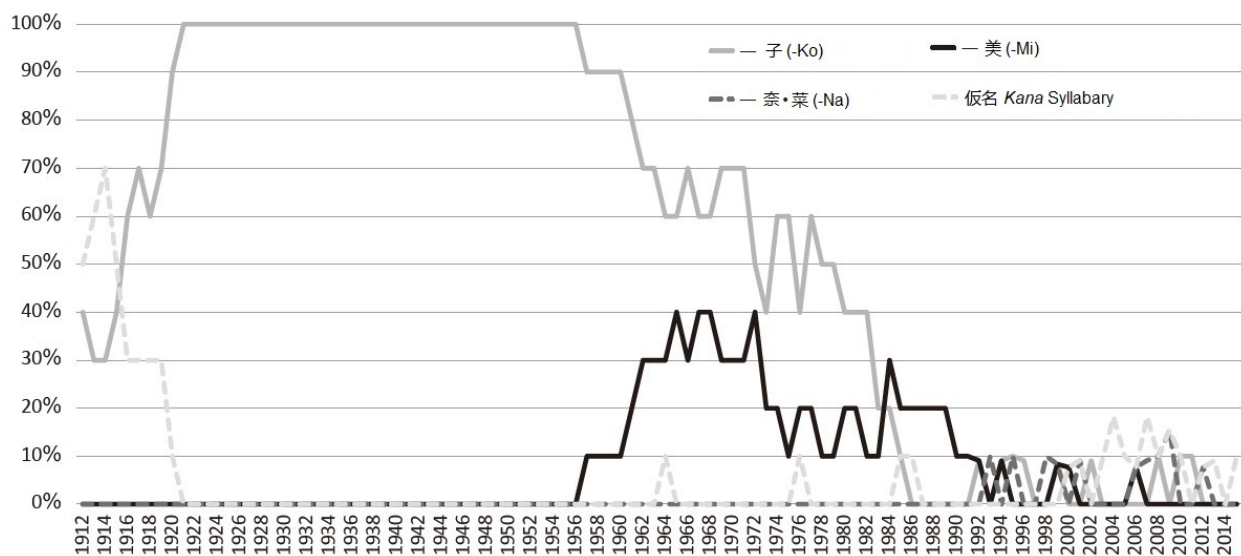


Fig. 6. Changes of name-exclusive suffixes and names in *kana* syllabary in top 10 female names over 100 years (Adapted from Unser-Schutz, "Gendai" 93).

Table 5
 Top 10 Japanese Female Names in *Shōwa* Era (昭和時代 1926-1989), the Reign of Emperor *Hirohito*^a

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1971	陽子 Yōko (sunny child)	智子 Tomoko (intelligent child)	真由美 Mayumi (truly exemplary beauty)	直美 Naomi (straightforward beauty)	裕子 Hiroko (prosperous child)	由美子 Yumiko (exemplary beautiful child)	純子 Junko (pure child)	由美 Yumi (exemplary beauty)	恵子 Keiko (blessed child)	久美子 Kumiko (eternally beautiful child)
1972	陽子	真由美	智子	裕子	純子	恵子	恵美 Emi (blessed beauty)	美香 Mika (beautiful fragrance)	直美	由美
1973	陽子	裕子	真由美	智子	純子	恵美	香織 Kaori (fragrant weaver)	恵 Megumi (blessed)	美穂 Miho (beautiful sheaf)	美香
1974	陽子	裕子	真由美	久美子	純子	智子	優子 Yūko (kind child)	美香	恵美	美穂
1975	久美子	裕子	真由美	智子	陽子	優子	純子	香織	美穂	美紀 Miki (beautiful discipline)
1976	智子	裕子	真由美	陽子	久美子	香織	裕美 Hiromi (prosperous beauty)	めぐみ Megumi (blessed)	恵	美穂
1977	智子	陽子	久美子	裕子	真由美	香織	裕美	幸子 Sachiko (happy child)	恵	優子
1978	陽子	久美子	智子	裕子	恵	理恵 Rie (logical+blessed)	香織	愛 Ai (love)	真由美	恵子
1979	智子	久美子	陽子	裕子	理恵	真由美	香織	恵	愛	優子
1980	絵美 Emi (picture beauty)	裕子	久美子	恵	智子	愛	香織	恵美	理恵	陽子

(Source: www.meijiyasuda.co.jp/enjoy/ranking/year_men/girl.html.)

a. Notes: *Kanji* and *kana* syllabaries are annotated at the first appearance in the table. Italicized names are written in *hiragana* or *katakana* syllabary. Name-exclusive suffixes: 子 (-ko, child), 花/香 (-ka, flower/fragrant). Popular *kanji* in female names: 美 (*mi*, beautiful), 愛 (*ai*, love).

A name-exclusive suffix 美 (-*mi*, beautiful) has been popular from 1950s to 2000s. The *kanji* character 美 (*mi*, beautiful) has been constantly popular in female names from 1910s to today (see tables 4, 5, and 6). This is not surprising because “everyone has a heart for beauty, and it reflects people’s psychological wish for pursuing good” (Cui 138). The most popular name of 1962 and 1975 was 久美子 (*kumiko*, eternally beautiful child), in 1963-64 was 由美子 (*yumiko*, exemplary beautiful child), and in 1965 was 明美 (*akemi*, bright beauty). In 1968-70, the popular name was 直美 (*naomi*, straightforward beauty), in 1980 it was 絵美 (*emi*, picture pretty), and in 1991-96, 2002, and 2004 it was 美咲 (*misaki*, beautiful bloom). Cui thinks that the popularity of 美咲 is a celebrity effect and related to actress 伊藤美咲 (*Misaki Itō*) who was popular at that time (139).

The most popular female name during the 1980s and 1990s was 愛 (*ai/mana*, love). Then in 2000s and 2010s it yielded its ranking to さくら (*sakura*, cherry blossom) written in *hiragana* (see tables 5 and 6). The rising popularity of *sakura*, according to Cui, is due to the fact that it is the national flower of Japan (139). Names with the themes of flowers and beautiful plants, such as *sakura* and *misaki* (beautiful bloom), have been favored over other types of names in *Heisei* era (see fig. 7). There were 160 plant-themed names out of 328 total names in the top 10 female names of *Heisei* era. The rest were other types, including personality (e.g. strong will) and beautiful objects (e.g. nice clothes, beautiful moon). Critics of this naming tradition argues that the “stereotypical reduction of females to performing a decorative function,” like a beautiful plant, is a reflection of Japan’s traditional sexism (Loveday 564). To this author, it is for fashion that parents named their daughters さくら in *hiragana* after the character name さくら/サクラ (in *katakana*) in manga/anime *Cardcaptor Sakura* or *NARUTO- ナルト*, as explained in Lieberson (2010), since parents grew up watching or reading these manga/anime. However, Japanese parents chose *hiragana* over *katakana* from a Japanese common sense of knowledge to select a writing system; that is, *katakana* is for a loan word from a foreign language. Representation in the *katakana* syllabic script would constitute a too radical step for name givers because it also implies non-Japanese ethnicity (Loveday 566).

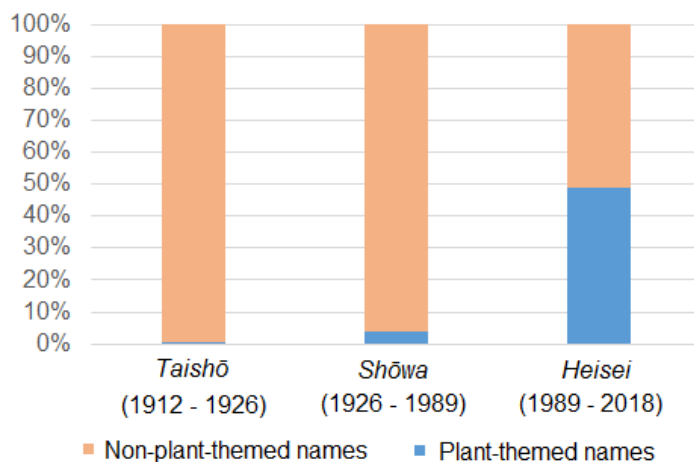


Fig. 7. Plant-themed female names by Japanese era.
(Source: www.meijiyasuda.co.jp/enjoy/ranking/year_men/girl.html.)

Table 6

Top 10 Japanese Female Names in *Heisei* Era (平成時代 1989-2019), the Reign of Emperor *Akihito*^a

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
2011	陽菜Hina (sunny plant) 結愛Yua (nice love)	-	結衣 Yui (nice clothe)	杏An (apricot)	莉子 美羽Miwa (beautiful wing) 結菜 心愛 愛菜Aina (lovely plant)	-	-	-	-	美咲Misaki (beautiful bloom)
2012	結衣	陽菜	結菜 Yuina (nice plant)	結愛 ひなたHinata (sunny spot) 心春Koharu (heart of spring)	-	-	心愛Kokoa (heart of love)	凜Rin (strong will)	美桜Mio (beautiful cherry) 芽依 優奈Yūna (graceful fruit) 美結Miyu (beautiful + nice) 心咲Misaki (heart blooming)	-
2013	結菜	葵Aoi (hollyhock)	結衣	陽菜	結愛	凜	ひなた	愛菜 美結 陽葵Himari (sunny hollyhock)	-	-
2014	陽菜 凜	-	結菜	葵	結愛	愛莉Airi (lovely jasmine) 美咲	-	結衣	桜 Sakura (cherry)	心春 杏 愛梨
2015	葵	陽菜	結衣	さくらSakura (cherry)	凜	花 Hana (flower)	結愛 花音Kanon (flower sound) 心結Miyu (heart of nice) 陽葵	-	-	-
2016	葵	さくら	陽菜	凜	結菜 咲良Sakura (bloom well) 莉子	-	-	結衣	結愛	花
2017	結菜 咲良	-	陽葵	莉子Riko (jasmine child)	芽依Mei (bud divine)	さくら 結衣 杏	-	-	結愛 凜	-
2018	結月 Yuzuki (nice moon)	結愛	結菜	杏	さくら 凜	-	芽依 葵	-	紬Tumugi (Silk fabric)	莉子 陽菜 美月Mizuki (beautiful moon)

(Source: www.meijiyasuda.co.jp/enjoy/ranking/year_men/girl.html.)

a. Notes: *Kanji* and *kana* syllabaries are annotated once in the table. Italicized names are written in *hiragana* or *katakana* syllabary. Name-exclusive suffixes: 子 (-ko, child), 奈 / 菜 (-na, fruit tree/vegetable). Popular *kanji* in names: 美 (*mi*, beautiful), 愛 (*ai*, love).

Like male names, there is also a change in the number of characters used in names. Two-character names are frequently seen during any time period. One-character names were seen in the top-10 ranking for the first time in 1973 and have been steadily increasing since then (Unser-Schutz, “Gendai” 94) (see fig. 8). Names written in *kana* syllabaries are not included in Unser-Schutz’s figure; but it is the parents’ purpose or intention to choose *kana* over *kanji* for their children’s names.

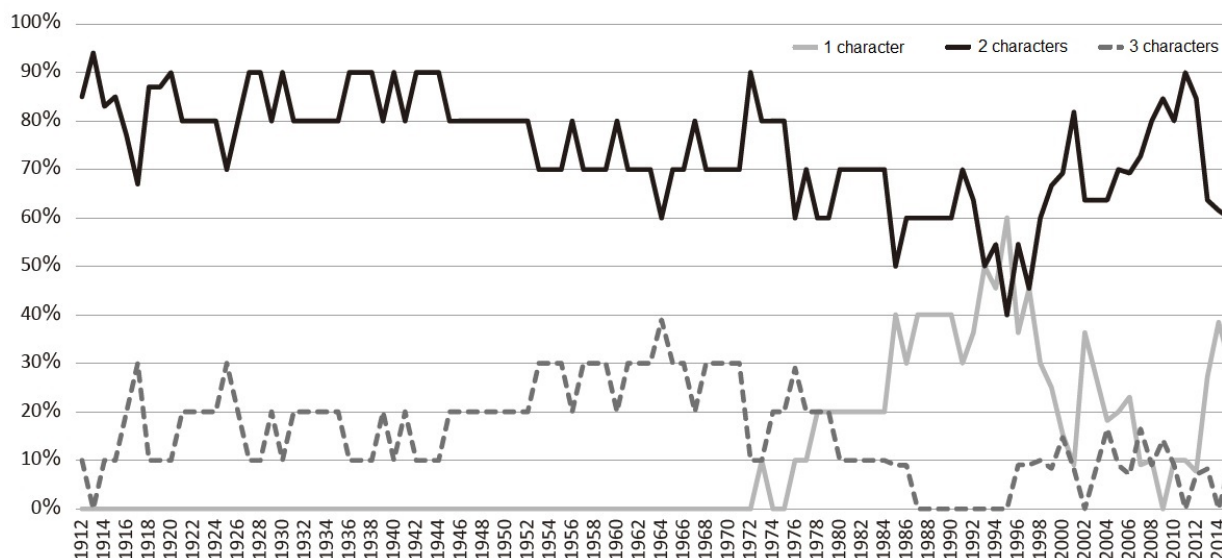


Fig. 8. Women’s top 10 names with 1, 2, and 3 characters—excluding names in *kana* syllabary (Adapted from Unser-Schutz, “Gendai” 94).

However, I am not in favor of the analysis based on the number of *kanji* characters as there are names written with more *kanji* characters but with less moras, i.e., a shorter sound. For example, 恵子 (*keiko*, blessed child) is written in 2 *kanji* characters but has 3 moras vs. 恵 (*megumi*, blessed) is written in 1 *kanji* character but also has 3 moras.

The pool of *kanji* characters used for both male and female names was small. Only 17 *kanji* characters were common out of a total of 95 *kanji* characters for males or 101 *kanji* characters for females from 1912-2014 (Unser-Schutz, “Gendai” 96). The first *kanji* character ranked in top 10 for both males and females was 葵 (*aoi*, hollyhock) in 2016. Thus, the use of the *kanji* themselves might help differentiate the gender of any given name (Unser-Schutz, “Gendai” 97).

As of 2018, an examination of popular female baby names shows that Japanese parents named their daughter with hope of becoming a kind, emotionally calm, bright, and gorgeous girl (Wedding Park, *The Girl’s Name*). *Kanji* characters that convey positive meanings such as “affirmative, upward, progressive, friendly” reflect the psychological consciousness of “true, good and beautiful” while people pursuing beautiful appearance and gentle personality (Cui 138). By examining naming practice of both genders in Japan, it seems that gender difference does exist, but no explicit gender discrimination or roles exists in naming.

3-1. Recent trends of popular baby names

Loveday, a native English speaker from United Kingdom, conducted research in Japan to investigate his university students' names that were given between 1991 and 1995 in Japan. The study shows the perspectives of non-Japanese nationals on Japanese naming practice. For instance, he lists *seimei handan* (onomancy) and the maintaining of ancestral continuity of a patrilineal line under “constraints” in a name selection process, instead of “traditions” (562). Loveday’s sociolinguistic conclusions that naming baby females in 2000s are resistance and subversion to the traditional naming practices, and identified five strategies by the name givers: (i) discarding the *belittling* suffix 子 (-ko), (ii) discarding moralistic naming practice to mold personality traits, (iii) invoking a Western identity, (iv) androgynous naming, and (v) linguistic surrealistic branding of キラキラネーム (*kirakira nēmu*, sparkling name) or DQN ネーム (*dokyun nēmu*, stupid/ill-educated name) (560). Regarding (iii) invoking a Western identity, name-givers who give their daughters a Western-sounding name are bending Japanese orthographic rules to create a Western-sounding name, wishing easy mobility to an international world by giving names that are easy for non-Japanese to use (Loveday 566). Examples of *international* names, whose phonological forms are consonant with Japanese but sound like Euro-American names, include *Sara* which resembles Sarah and is written as 沙羅, *Maria* which sounds like Maria and is written as 真理亜, *Emiri* which sounds like Emily and is written as 絵美里, *Rei* which sounds like Ray and is written as 零/怜. Some naming books have a list of foreign-sounding names (e.g. *Be able to find a nice kanji – Dictionary for naming a baby* 361).

3-2. New names: DQN (*dokyun*) *nēmu* (stupid/ill-educated name), *kirakira nēmu* (sparkling name)

Both *DQN nēmu* and *kirakira nēmu* are *new* names. Examples include 宝冠 (*tīara*, treasure + crown) for females, whose common pronunciation is *hōkan* (bejeweled crown), キック今日中 (*kikku kyōjū*, kick today) for males, and + (*purasu*, plus) for males (*Akachan meimei jiten*; *DQN nēmu*). From 2007, *DQN nēmu* started to spread on Google Trend, which tracks standardized search volumes for keywords over time. *DQN nēmu* refers to names given by people lacking in common sense and is a burden to others struggling to read (Unser-Schutz, “Kirakira” 38).

Kirakira nēmu started to spread on Google Trend from 2010. *Kirakira nēmu* is also a burden to others struggling to read and often used in ways that implicitly suggest sarcasm. The bearers of unusual names feel embarrassed and might experience disadvantages due to their overly unique names. Children given *new* names might become the target of bullying (Nakata qtd. in Unser-Schutz, “Kirakira” 44) or object of sympathy. Therefore, it has become common to warn about the potentially negative impact of *new* names on children (Makino 42, 54).

3-3. Characteristics of the new names

One of the characteristics of *new* names is that common name-exclusive suffixes (e.g. 子 -ko, child) and *nanori kun* (name-exclusive Japanese readings) are not observed (Satō 162; Unser-Schutz, “Gendai” 89).

Other characteristics is low readability due to unusual uses of *kanji*, use of non-standard readings called *ateji*, and mixing *kanji* reading types. These may require readers

to make unfamiliar semantic associations (Hirayama 38; Satō 166; Tokuda 623; Unser-Schutz, “Kirakira” 37). The fact that it is generally impossible to correctly identify the intended pronunciation of *DQN* and *kirakira nēmu* from its *kanji* characters frustrates people. Most Japanese people consider this type of name impractical and linguistically destructive. This naming strategy exploits a loophole in the Japanese law that does not control the pronunciation of names (Loveday 568). However, this trend is not new as names similar to 万葉仮名 (*man'yōgana*), for which Chinese characters were employed to represent Japanese phonetic sounds without relation to meanings of the names, were seen since 1960s (Enmanji 151).

Possible reasons for the popularity of overly unique names include the desirability for individuality, changes in senses of the public and private spheres, and changing family relationships. Changes in social values may encourage changes in naming practices. Values like “unique name is good” contribute to motivation of naming a child a *new* name, and values like “a name giver should consider others’ struggle to read a *new* name” lead to criticism of the parents (Makino 44; Unser-Schutz, “Kirakira” 43).

I think that computerization contributed to emergence of *new* names. The way people communicate has changed over time because of communication technologies such as Internet, text messaging, and video calling. People communicate more through machines than before. People use informal language and *emoji* (icon) when texting, rather than formal language. Information transmission method and modes of communication have changed. I think that this change contributed to how digital natives² name their children in a different way than older generations. Naming practice by digital natives is like creating a new *emoji* with linguistic novelty.

4. Conclusion

This literature-based study has described the changing patterns and trends of naming practices in Japan in the past 100 years. This kind of study examining baby name popularity and trends throughout the century provides information on events, features and the states of living in the past, and could serve as a historical reference to both culture and society in modern Japan.

Japanese parents hope for both sons and daughters to possess positive internal traits and to be a global citizen that has international awareness and conscientiousness. As it has been observed throughout the decades, parents hope for daughters to be good looking (more so than males), as evidenced by adopting the *kanji* character 美 (*mi*, beautiful), and with the themes of flowers and beautiful plants used in their girls’ names. Parents have more expectations of success (economical, business, or otherwise) for their sons than daughters, resulting their sons’ names often reflect political and ideological climate of a given era.

Various naming practices in Japan produce many kinds of popular baby names: archaic Japanese style names, names written in *hiragana* or *katakana* syllabary, names written in *kanji*, names with name-exclusive suffixes, and *new* names. Even with the Japanese Family Registration Act which has restrictions on *kanji* use, people always find a way to express themselves in their naming practices. Similar to an author who names a character in a novel, parents nowadays choose a baby name that appeals to people’s “senses of sight and hearing, and to their intuitive grasp of how a given name looks and sounds just right” for their child (Robinson 126).

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Notes

1. The dip in the fertility and birth rates of 1966 was due to a 丙午 (*hinoeuma*, fire horse) year in which parents avoided giving birth to a child, because an old Japanese superstition, a woman born in that year is destined to kill her husband ("*Hinoeuma*").
2. "Digital native" is a term coined by Mark Prensky in 2001 and is used to describe the generation of people who were born or brought up during the age of digital technology. The opposite of "digital natives" is "digital immigrants," generation of people who have become familiar with computers, the Internet, and other digital technology as a young adult or later in life ("Digital immigrant"; Prensky 1).