

EAST ASIAN NAMES/BIOGRAPHIES

Basic Structure

In all three languages, the SURNAME (family name) comes first, followed by the GIVEN NAME. Example, for the name Mao Zedong, “Mao” is the family name, and “Zedong” is the given name.

Basic structure of names:

Country	Surname	Given name
Chinese	1 character	1 or 2 characters
Korean	1 character	1 or 2 characters
Japanese	1-3 characters (most 2)	1-3 characters

Here are some typical examples:

Country	Surnames (姓)	Given names (名)
China	張、陳、刘、王	居正、曉程、小農、~紅、~衛、建~
Korea	金 (김)、李 (이)、朴 (박)	相民 (상민)、珍英 (진영)、善熙 (석희)
Japan	はやし すずき みやた はせがわ 林、鈴木、宮田、長谷川	あきら きょうこ さちこ おさむ 明、京子、幸子、治

- There are approximately 3,000 surnames in Mandarin Chinese, but 張, 王, and 李 account for 16% of the total
- There are approximately 260 surnames in Korean, but 金, 李, 朴, and 鄭(경) account for more than 50% of the population
- There are over 100,000 surnames in Japanese. Very common surnames include: 田中,
やまもと すずき さとう
山本, 鈴木, and 佐藤.

As in many countries, there are trends in names. Here are some recent ones:

- In mainland China after 1949, names often include a political bent. For example, they often include the character for “red” (紅), as a reference to communism, or the character “agriculture” (農) to emphasize one’s connection with the proletariat.
- In Korea in the past 10 or 20 years, parents are increasingly giving children names that cannot be written in *hanja*.
- In Japan, women’s names today usually end in *ko* (子). 100 years ago, almost none did.

Readings

Reading Chinese and Korean names is relatively straightforward: the reading of the character that you find in the dictionary is the same reading as that character when used in a name. For example, if you look up the character 張 in a Chinese dictionary, you’ll find the reading is *zhang*. If you look up 金 in a Korean dictionary, you’ll find the reading is *kim*.

Reading Japanese names is much more difficult. In addition to the fact that parents like to give their children distinctive names, even surnames often take a different reading than what you might expect. For example, if you look up the characters 長谷川 in a typical Japanese dictionary, you’ll find that the possible readings for each character are:

長	chō(jiru), chō(zuru), naga(raeru), naga(meru), ta(keru), naga(i), naga(ki), naga(ku), naga(sa), naga(tarashii), osa, naga(no), tokoshi(e), naga(raku), chō
谷	koku, tani, ya
川	sen, kawa

But, when these three characters are put together in a name, they are pronounced “Hasegawa.”

Likewise, when you look up the characters 五十嵐 in a typical Japanese dictionary, you’ll find that the possible readings for each character are:

五	go, itsutsu, itsu
十	jū, tō, to
嵐	ran, arashi

But, the name 五十嵐 is pronounced, “Igarashi.”

There is very little in the way of rules here, except that MOST characters in names use their *kun yomi* or something like it.

What is a student to do? Use P.G. O’Neill’s *Japanese Names* (日本人名地名辞典—にほんじんめいちめいじてん in our library) or Hadmitzky’s *Japanese, Chinese and Korean Surnames and How to Read Them: From Readings to Characters* (extremely expensive and hard to find), or a Japanese じんめいじてん 人名辞典.

Note: Many people prefer to use complex characters when writing their names, even if simplification has been formally adopted in their country.

Cultural issues associated with names:

In China and Korean, women DO NOT change their surnames when they marry. Children take their father’s surname. In Japan, one person in each marriage MUST take his/her spouse’s name. Usually the woman takes the man’s name, but sometimes the man takes the woman’s name. This happens when the woman’s family has no male heir and needs someone to continue on the family line. There are exceptions to this rule if a Japanese marries a foreigner.

Naming practices

Chinese in particular has a complex naming practice. Many details are given in Wilkinson’s *Handbook*, but here are the basics. If you look up a pre-modern Chinese person in a biographical dictionary, the entry will most likely contain many if not all of the following:

1. *Xiǎomíng* (小名), a name for infants.
2. *Míng* (名), a name for children
3. *Zì* (字), a name given upon coming of age
4. *Hào* (號), a “nickname” (there are other English translations of this term, but this is common). There can be more than one *hào* for the same person (see the dictionary entry for Zhuxi, for example).
5. *Shìhào* (諡號), a posthumous name.

Modern China is simpler: for people who came of age since 1949, almost all of the formal naming practices have disappeared. The demands of modern population registration mean that

children are given their personal names right at birth. No *zì*, *hào*, or *shìhào*. There is an informal practice of using infant nicknames, usually referred to as *xiǎomíng* (but not really the same as traditional *xiǎomíng*). In some cases, these become substitutes for their regular names. Authors sometimes take alternate names (pen names or *bǐmíng* 筆名).

One further complication: Whereas in the PRC, women do not change their names when they get married, there was, at least for awhile, a fashion for women from Taiwan to adopt their husband's surname along with their own (at least when dealing with Westerners), so you will see the equivalent of hyphenated names for some Taiwan women.

Korea

In pre-modern Korea, the Chinese system (above) was used:

1. *Somyeng* (小名), a name for infants
2. *Myeng* (名), a name for children
3. *Ca* (字), a name given upon coming of age
4. *Ho* (號), a “nickname”
5. *Si* (諡), a posthumous name

In the modern era, these conventions disappeared (as they did in China). In 1939, the occupying Japanese government declared that all Koreans MUST take a Japanese-style name. (This was called the “Name Order” 創氏改名). After the war, reverted their surnames; however, many of the given names from that time remain “Japanese style.”

Authors sometimes take alternate names (筆名).

Japan

In **early** Japan, a man from the upper ranks would often have the following:

1. *Yōmyō* 幼名 or *dōmyō* 童名 (child name), which was used until he came of age.
2. *Tsūshō* 通称 (current name)
3. *Jitsumyō* 実名 (true name)

The “current name” was the commonly used name; the “true name” was intimate and rarely used.

The Japanese also often used part of the Chinese system described above:

1. *Azana* or *ji* (字), a name given upon coming of age
2. *Gō* (號), a “nickname”
3. *Shihào* (諡號), a posthumous name.

In modern Japan, this practice has all but disappeared. The exception is the posthumous name, of which two types are still important: the *okurina* 諡 (conferred name) and the *kaimyō* 戒名 (precept name). The *okurina* is the name that the emperor (or some other exalted person) takes

after death (e.g., Hirohito was called Hirohito while alive, but then the Shōwa emperor after he died). A *kaimyō* is a Buddhist posthumous name.

Authors and artists sometimes take alternate names (筆名^{ひつめい} or 芸名^{げいめい}).

History of names

In China, to quote Wilkinson, “[m]ost surnames were by origin the names of ancient states, topographical features, official titles, or occupations.” (p. 97) The widespread use of surnames in China—for all people, regardless of social status—was established by the Qin and Han dynasties.

In Korea, a “clan” can be very large (witness all the Kims and Lees), but that does not imply a close familial relationship. Rather, the small number of surnames indicates the importance of clan and family identity in Korean history.

In Japan, most surnames are relatively new. Briefly, the imperial and upper-ranking families had surnames early on (e.g., Fujiwara 藤原, Taira 平, Minamoto 源, etc.). Such surnames were restricted to the aristocracy, military, and a few select artisans. Everyone else used their given names.

In 1868, this restriction was lifted and all Japanese were permitted to take a surname, if they chose. Then, in 1875, the government required EVERYONE to take a surname. Names that people typically chose had something to do with where they lived (Tanaka 田中, Yamada 山田, etc.) or what they did as a profession. Consequently, many Japanese have pastoral surnames. Sometimes an entire village would be assigned the same surname by a government official.

The main fall-out of the 1875 law was that there was a rush to give everyone a name, which resulted in hasty errors that became permanent, rather like all the immigrant surnames that got changed by hasty clerks on Ellis Island in the U.S.

Resources for names and biographies

Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans are experts at compiling biographical dictionaries. One can find specialized dictionaries of just about every demographic group--for example, a biographical dictionary of Japanese who traveled to the West between the years 1585 and 1900. Your main resources are:

- ❑ General bibliographical dictionaries, which are called 人名辞典 (Ch. *ren ming ci dian*; J. *jinmei jiten*; K. *inmyong sajon*). They are organized either phonetically or by characters/radicals.
- ❑ Many comprehensive dictionaries also contain biographical entries, such as Morohashi’s dictionary. The advantage to trying something like Morohashi first is that it covers more than one country, so if you are not sure what country the person is/was from, it does not matter.
- ❑ Increasingly, there are good online biographical dictionaries. Links to good databases are on the [course web site](#) under “Names/Biographical Resources.”