Gender in Japanese Names Today

Ivona Barešová

Francis Bond

Palacký University Olomouc

Gender in Japanese Names Today

イヴォナ　バレショヴァー　　フランシス　凡 士

Ivona Barešová and Francis Bond

Olomouc 2026

This research was supported by the Czech Science Foundation
[grant number 22-08916S].

Reviewed by: James Breen, BSc., MBA, PhD.
Giancarla Unser-Schutz, PhD., MA, BA

Unauthorised use of this work is an infringement of copyright and may give rise to civil, administrative or criminal liability.

1st edition

© Ivona Barešová, Francis Bond, 2026
© Palacký University in Olomouc, 2026

DOI: 10.5507/ff.26.24465500
ISBN 978-80-244-6550-0 (print)
ISBN 978-80-244-6551-7 (online: iPDF)
ISBN 978-80-244-6782-5 (online: ePub)

Table of Contents

Foreword

This book represents the culmination of a three-year research project focused on the phenomenon of gender-neutral names in Japan. As the principal investigator, I had the privilege of working closely with a dedicated team of researchers, particularly Tereza Nakaya and Martin Šturdík from the Department of Asian Studies, and Klára Machů from the Department of Psychology at Palacký University Olomouc. Throughout this project, we sought to deepen our understanding of the linguistic characteristics, social perceptions, and evolving trends surrounding gender-neutral names in contemporary Japan.

Over the course of the project, we published several studies that explore different facets of this topic. Together with Vladimír Matlach from Palacký University's Department of General Linguistics, we analyzed the phonological and semantic features that signal gender and shape gender perception (Barešová et al., 2024). We also examined gender-neutral names themselves, identifying their linguistic characteristics and the mechanisms that influenced their development (Barešová & Nakaya, 2025). In a qualitative study, we investigated how individuals with gender-neutral names perceive and experience their names over time (Barešová et al., 2025). We further explored how Japanese high-school students perceive gender-neutral names and how open they are to names that deviate from traditional gender norms (Barešová & Machů, 2025). Finally, we analyzed the motivations behind choosing gender-neutral names and found that while gender awareness plays

a role, parents often select such names unintentionally, guided instead by personal criteria and aspirations (Barešová & Nakaya, 2025). Parts of these studies, including their methods and findings, are incorporated into this book (particularly in chapters 7 and 8) and further developed to offer additional insights.

This book was created in collaboration with my colleague Francis Bond. Together, we combined several data sources to compensate for the lack of comprehensive nationwide data and to present a clearer picture of contemporary trends in diversity and gender expression in Japanese naming. We hope this book offers a more nuanced perspective on naming practices in Japan and provides useful insights into the broader sociolinguistic dynamics of names and gender in contemporary society. Thanks to Francis, it is accompanied by a website that gives access to the interactive datasets used and allows for further exploration of not only gender expression, but also other phenomena related to given names.

The research project and this book would not have been possible without the generous support and collaboration of many individuals and institutions. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Francis Bond, alongside my colleagues Tereza Nakaya, Klára Machů, Martin Šturdík, and Vladimír Matlach for their unwavering commitment and invaluable contributions throughout the project. I am also very grateful to Yuji Nakaya for his help and support in organizing our research activities.

My thanks go as well to Jane Pilcher, sociologist and Honorary Visiting Research Fellow in the School of Social Sciences at the University of the West of England, Bristol, with whom we collaborated on the special issue *Dis/Continuity in the Representation of Gender in Names Across Cultures* (2025), which also influenced this book. I am also grateful to the reviewers Giancarla Unser-Schutz and Jim Breen: Giancarla for her thorough and constructive feedback which

helped us enhance the text and Jim for his valuable comments on both the manuscript and the accompanying website.

I extend my appreciation to Palacký University Olomouc for providing the institutional support that made this research possible. I would also like to acknowledge the support of the Czech Grant Foundation (grant number 22-08916S), whose financial assistance was instrumental in enabling this project.

Ivona Barešová

Editorial Note

This book uses the Hepburn system of romanization for Japanese words and names. Long vowels are indicated with macrons (e.g., Tarō) to aid accurate pronunciation, except in cases where a word – such as Tokyo or Showa era (properly transcribed as Tōkyō and Shōwa, respectively) – has an established English spelling. The names of Japanese authors of publications in English are presented in the transcription style used in the original publication.

Japanese words are italicized, except for those that are more commonly used in English. For example, *moji* is italicized, whereas kanji, hiragana, and katakana, which are more familiar to English readers, are not. Japanese given names that are discussed in the text or presented as examples are also italicized.

We generally refer to the written form of a name as its graphic form and to its pronunciation as its phonological form. As will be explained in Section 3.2, a Japanese name written in kanji can often be read in more than one way. When examples of names are listed, only one or two of the most common readings (phonological forms) are provided, unless the aim is specifically to show multiple possible readings.

A Note on Terminology

As the title suggests, the two main keywords in this book are "name" and "gender." To refer to the name given to a child at birth, this book uses the term "given name" rather than "first name" or "forename." Although "first name" and "forename" do not necessarily imply the initial position in a full name (according to ICOS onomastic terminology), "given name" seems more appropriate in the Japanese context, where the family name typically appears first. The terms "family name" and "surname" are used interchangeably. Unless otherwise specified, "name" refers to the given name.

The term "gender" is used here as a broad umbrella concept encompassing both gender and sex (see Haig, 2004). While these terms are not interchangeable – sex typically denotes biological characteristics, and gender refers to the social, cultural, and psychological aspects of being male, female, or nonbinary – they are closely related, and both aspects are often relevant. The term "sex" is reserved for contexts where biological classification is specifically relevant, such as identifying the sex of a newborn.

A Brief Introduction to Japanese Writing

One of the authors of this book previously worked at NTT, the Japanese telecommunications company. At the time, the laboratory had developed a support system for Japanese telegram operators. When a customer called to send a telegram and said, for example, "I would like to send a telegram to Mr Shirai," the system retrieved all possible names pronounced *Shirai* (there are at least six variants)[1] and ordered them by frequency. The system then prompted the operator with disambiguation questions: How many characters does the name have? Does the first character mean "white"? Does the second character mean "well"? By guiding the operator through these questions, the system reduced entry errors and sped up name input by more than 50 percent. The fact that this system was needed shows how complicated the relation is in Japanese between the spoken and written forms of names.

Japanese has a distinctive and intricate writing system. Modern written Japanese uses three main scripts: hiragana, katakana, and kanji. Latin letters and Arabic numerals are also used in certain contexts, but they are not permitted in Japanese personal names (see Section 3.1).

[1] 白井，市来，白居，白飯，志良以，白猪

Kanji are morphographic characters that represent meaning as well as sound. They were originally borrowed from China, although some additional characters were later created in Japan. Each kanji typically has multiple possible readings, generally classified as:

- *on'yomi* (Sino-Japanese readings derived historically from Chinese pronunciations),
- *kun'yomi* (native Japanese readings), and
- *nanori* (special readings used only in names).

For example, the character 花 'flower' can be read /hana/ (*kun*-reading) or /ka/ or /ke/ (*on*-readings). In contemporary given names, it is also frequently read /na/. In addition, many characters have both traditional and simplified variants (cf. 櫻 – 桜 for sakura).

Hiragana and katakana – collectively known as kana – are phonographic scripts. Each character represents a fixed sound unit (more precisely, a mora). Although the two scripts encode the same sound inventory, they differ in shape and usage. For example:

- *ka*: か (hiragana), カ (katakana)
- *ki*: き, キ
- *sa*: さ, サ
- *n*: ん, ン

Historically, both kana scripts were derived from kanji. Hiragana developed from cursive handwritten forms of kanji and was used by women at the imperial court in classical Japan. Katakana, in contrast, originated from components of kanji and was initially employed as a scholarly annotation system in Buddhist texts (Iwasaki, 2013, pp. 24–25). Over time, both scripts were standardized and became integral parts of the Japanese writing system.

In contemporary Japanese, hiragana is mainly used for grammatical elements and native words, while katakana is used for

loanwords, foreign names, and emphasis. In personal names, kana may be used instead of kanji, particularly for given names. For example:

- さくら (*Sakura*) written in hiragana
- サクラ (*Sakura*) written in katakana

For concise introductions to the Japanese writing system, see Bond and Baldwin (2016) for a computational perspective, Backhouse (2004) for a more accessible overview, and Robertson (2021) for a deep dive.

1 Introduction

When expectant parents are asked about their baby's name, many respond with something like, "If it's a boy... and if it's a girl...". Indeed, gender is one of the most crucial factors in name selection, and most parents think about names with a particular gender in mind. Baby name books typically list names separately for boys and girls, including names that are given to both, even in countries where names are not legally required to indicate the gender of their bearers. Gender is the most commonly conveyed piece of information through a name, and many language communities mark it explicitly (Alford, 1987, p. 52; Anderson, 2007, p. 112, 114; Oelkers, 2003, p. 40, 125).

Names, much like hairstyles and clothing, often reflect societal stereotypes associated with gender and evolve alongside the changing perceptions. They reflect both short-term trends and deeper, fundamental developments in society. As society changes, so do names, adapting to new norms and values over time. While many names that were used a century ago are still given to babies today, even a brief examination of a larger list of names reveals that names and the ways gender is expressed through them have changed as dramatically during this period as the fashions in clothing or hairstyles.

An increasingly common opening when talking about the name for one's child can be noticed in contemporary Japan. In addition to "If it's a boy ... and if it's a girl ..." it is not unusual to hear: "Whether it's a boy or a girl …". In Japan, the names given

to babies in the twenty-first century reflect significant shifts in name preferences that emerged in the last decades of the twentieth century (Satō, 2007; Kobayashi, 2009; Makino, 2012). These changes are multifaceted and influenced by profound societal changes, including transformations in family structure (Rebick & Takenaka, 2006), the renegotiation of gender roles (Sugihara & Katsurada, 2002), the spread of individualistic culture (Ogihara, 2018), and globalization.

In postwar Japan, decisions about a child's name typically involved the father, grandparents, or other family members, and sometimes even outsiders like the father's workplace superior (Sakuma, 1964, pp. 65–66). However, over time, this process gradually shifted toward the more intimate sphere of the nuclear family – primarily involving both parents and sometimes older children – with the mother often taking a dominant role in the decision-making process (Makino, 2017; Barešová & Janda, 2023). As Kobayashi (2009, p. 18) explains, this led to a shift from perceiving a name primarily in terms of the individual's future role in society (*kōkyō kūkan*, or public space) to their role within the close family circle (*shinmitsu kūkan*, or private space), thus prioritizing different criteria during the selection. The heightened attention given to children within nuclear families is also evident in the increased deliberation with which names are chosen, strongly encouraged by baby-naming guides and parenting magazines that became increasingly influential in the last two decades of the millennium, advising parents to choose an original name that reflects their child's unique individuality (Kobayashi, 2009) and is suitable for a globalized world.

As a result, the names of today's children are significantly more diverse, both in their phonological forms and the kanji used to represent them in writing. They are noticeably different

from the names of their grandparents and older generations, which typically followed gender-specific patterns and clearly distinguished between men and women (Jugaku, 1979). One of the most common gender-specific features of women's names for most of the twentieth century was the onymic (name-related) suffix *-ko* 子. At the height of its popularity between the 1930s and 1950s, seven or even eight out of ten girls were given names such as 和子 *Kazuko*, 幸子 *Yukiko*/*Sachiko*, 洋子 *Hiroko*/*Yōko*, or 美智子 *Michiko* (Sakuma, 1969; see Section 5.2). The vast majority of men's and women's names could be distinguished at first sight.

Contemporary names express gender in new ways (Unser-Schutz, 2016). The feminine suffix *-ko* 子 is now just one of several feminine end syllables, each represented by a variety of kanji. The currently most popular feminine end syllable, *-na*, appears in only one or two out of every ten girls' names (see Chapter 7). Names without a distinctive end syllable or kanji express gender through their semantics or other features, and a growing number of names lack clear gender distinction (Satō, 2007; Barešová, 2020), being associated with neither gender or, conversely, with both.

Gender is one of the key issues defining our era, characterized in many countries by a rising focus on gender equality and greater recognition of diverse gender identities and sexualities. While the majority of Japanese names remain gender-specific, the growing popularity of names given to both boys and girls reflects a broader cultural shift away from traditional gender stereotypes and toward more inclusivity and diversity in naming. The following name selection story published on the parenting website Baby Calendar illustrates this situation:

> *Our son, Sakura* 咲来 ['bloom' + 'come'], *is the youngest of three siblings. We used the character* 咲 *in his name just as in his sisters'*

> *names because it also means 'smile'. The name expresses our wish for him to have lots of opportunities to bloom in the future, and to make everyone smile. Sakura sounds like a girl's name, and his sisters' names sound more like boy's names. We want them to have flexible minds that are not bound by gender.*
>
> Mother of *Sakura* 咲来, boy, 2019, Baby Calendar (transl. from Japanese)

Sakura has been a popular name for girls in recent decades. In addition to being written as 桜 (or 櫻, an older version of the kanji), meaning 'cherry blossom', or in hiragana, a script considered feminine in names, it is now also written using a variety of kanji combinations. These combinations convey additional meanings, including aspirations for the child, as illustrated by this example of 咲来, and can make the name distinct or even unique. This is an unconventional, although not uncommon, practice as these kanji are assigned to the phonological form based on the sound they represent, but not their meanings. As will be explained later, these graphic forms do not follow any traditional gender-based name patterns, but the kanji may give a more feminine or masculine impression. The kanji combination 咲来 is more common for girls, as is the name *Sakura* itself, although in this particular case, the bearer of this name is a boy.

1.1 Aim and Scope of This Book

Our main goal in this book is to examine how gender is expressed in contemporary Japanese baby names and the current preferences governing its expression, while highlighting cultural specifics and their interactions with global trends. In particular, we will address questions such as: How common are gender-neutral names in

Japan, given that some sources claim they are widespread while others suggest the opposite? Are these names more prevalent among boys or girls? Do they typically originate from boys' names or girls' names? Are boys' names becoming less masculine and girls' names less feminine? Why do we find more gender-neutral phonological forms than graphic forms? What is the connection between unique names and gender-neutral names? Are gender-neutral names chosen specifically for their gender ambiguity, or are they a byproduct of the desire for originality and uniqueness? While some of these questions may seem easy to answer, relying on assumptions based on European or American cultural norms could lead to misleading conclusions.

We use a multi-faceted approach, including an in-depth analysis of online name selection stories, a cross-selection of baby name guides from various periods, and a statistical analysis of various name ranking lists. We also survey existing research on names in the twentieth century. Access to the names of all babies born each year is restricted in Japan. Consequently, previous research on Japanese names and gender has typically relied on small datasets (e.g., Komori, 2002) or focused on the most popular names from annual rankings (e.g., Mutsukawa, 2007, 2010; Ogihara et al., 2015; Unser-Schutz, 2016). Our study differs from previous research by utilizing a relatively large dataset of over 15,000 names and their selection explanations, collected over the past 15 years from the parenting website Baby Calendar. Additionally, we make use of the significantly larger online database Heisei Namae Jiten, which provides the graphic forms and frequencies of hundreds of thousands of names from 1989 to 2009. Finally, we look at a collection of popular names compiled by Meiji Yasuda Insurance Company.

In this book, we take advantage of all these available sources. The rankings from Meiji Yasuda and Dai'ichi Life Insurance Company

are used to complement an overview of naming patterns over the past century, which draws relevant information primarily from academic and popular literature, including baby naming books from that period. Data from Heisei Namae Jiten and Meiji Yasuda are used to provide insights into the growing diversity of names during the period leading up to the last 15 years, which are the primary focus of our study. We discuss the datasets in more detail in Chapter 4.

1.2 Organization of the Chapters

In the following two chapters, we set the scene for our focus on the expression of gender in Japanese names. In **Chapter 2**, we first briefly examine legal regulations regarding the gender of given names in various countries, a country-specific factor that may significantly influence naming, including the latest tendencies toward more diverse and inclusive naming practices. Next, we review how gender, the most frequently conveyed piece of information in names (Alford, 1988, pp. 66–68), is encoded in names across different language cultures, including their phonology, morphology, and semantics. Additionally, we review earlier findings on gender-neutral names, their characteristics, and evolution. This enables us to view Japanese names in a broader context rather than as an isolated case and makes it possible to direct our focus toward particular issues that emerge from this wider perspective.

Chapter 3 provides information about Japanese names and their selection process. We begin by outlining the criteria necessary for a name to be successfully registered. Then, we describe the unique aspects of kanji pronunciation (reading) in names, explaining how one phonological form of a name can have multiple graphic

representations and vice versa, and how the connection between a name's phonological form and the kanji assigned to it has weakened recently. Using data from an online survey conducted by the Japanese company Miki House (Miki House Editorial team, 2022), we present the key criteria current parents consider when choosing a name for their child. Understanding the relatively loose legal restrictions, the relationship between phonological and graphic forms, and the selection process, including the most common criteria, helps to explain the diversity of contemporary names and recent trends such as the blurring of gender distinctions. This chapter also explains the role of morae and syllables in names, which will be crucial for the analyses in the following chapters.

Chapter 4 describes the primary sources of data used in our analyses. We explain why we rely on several diverse datasets rather than a single unified source and discuss the limitations of the available data. This chapter also outlines how these datasets were constructed and provides a summary of the data in the form of a table and several figures showing the size of the data compared to the number of births during the examined period. It also provides information about the data repository, noting that all datasets and code are openly available on GitHub and permanently archived on Zenodo in line with FAIR principles. The chapter further introduces the project's interactive website, which allows users to browse name lists, explore statistical patterns in more detail, and view examples of names with its orthography–phonology mapping and distribution over time.

Chapter 5 provides an overview of how Japanese names bestowed in the twentieth century distinguished gender. It introduces the main gender-specific name patterns used for boys and girls during the twentieth century up until the 1970s when new, markedly different types of names began to gain popularity. Consequently,

certain traditional patterns that clearly distinguished gender either declined in use or gradually lost their gender specificity. Additionally, this chapter highlights names that began to achieve prominence in the 1950s and 1960s for being gender-ambiguous. The overview is primarily based on scholarly literature, books aimed at expectant parents, and name rankings by Meiji Yasuda.

Chapter 6 examines the increasing diversity of contemporary Japanese baby names and their gender distribution. Using the datasets introduced earlier, this chapter demonstrates a steady rise in both graphic and phonological diversity over the past three decades, influenced by a greater emphasis on sound-based name creation, the expansion of kanji permitted in names, and the growing acceptance of irregular readings, especially in girls' names. These developments reveal how contemporary naming practices have moved away from earlier, pattern-based conventions toward more flexible and creative choices. The chapter also highlights the gradual blurring of gender boundaries, as an increasing number of names appear in both boys' and girls' naming pools. Together, these developments provide essential background for the focus on gender expression in contemporary names in the following chapters.

The main aim of **Chapter 7** is to provide a comprehensive description of how gender information is encoded in contemporary Japanese names, which are more diverse and significantly different from those of earlier periods. We draw on recent quantitative research by Barešová, Nakaya, and Matlach (2024), which identifies the key aspects that contribute most to gender distinction in Japanese names today. Building on these findings, we expand the analysis by examining additional aspects and, more importantly, shifting the focus from distinct name forms to the frequencies of name instances (tokens). While the former approach allowed for investigating various aspects of names related to gender without

being biased by their frequency of occurrence and for uncovering broader connections between features and genders, this new approach – utilizing all instances – provides deeper insights into contemporary name popularity trends, shedding light on shifting societal preferences and the cultural dynamics that shape Japanese naming practices.

While the previous chapter dealt with gender-specific features of current names, **Chapter 8** focuses on names that do not possess such features and are given to both boys and girls. We attempt to demonstrate that while genuinely gender-neutral names remain relatively uncommon, the number of phonological and graphic forms used to some extent for both boys and girls is substantial. In this chapter, we characterize currently given names that can be defined as gender-neutral and explore the basic mechanisms behind their development. We highlight them as notable examples of a broader trend in current Japanese naming: the diminishing distinction between boys' and girls' names, and offer possible explanations for this phenomenon. Additionally, we seek to determine whether these tendencies are reciprocal or if they stem from children of one gender more frequently receiving names typically associated with the opposite gender. While earlier American studies (Barry & Harper, 1982, 1993; Lieberson et al., 2000) suggest that gender-neutral names usually originate from boys' names, the trend in Japan appears to be less clear-cut.

Chapter 9 situates recent preferences for expressing gender in Japanese names within a broader global context. Drawing on findings from the United States, Canada, China, and several European countries, it shows that rising name diversity and growing interest in gender-neutral options correspond to wider international patterns. It also highlights the features that make Japan distinctive, particularly the structural variety of boys' names and the role of

kanji in shaping gender associations. The chapter further discusses how social change and international influences have broadened naming repertoires and reshaped gender associations, and compares the development of gender-neutral names across countries, noting that Japan often diverges from Western trends in the direction of these shifts.

Finally, **Chapter 10** serves as both a summary and a reflection on the findings discussed throughout the book, while also speculating on future trends in Japanese naming practices. It summarizes the results of our analysis: a blurring of traditional gender boundaries, with an increase in gender-neutral names and a softening of masculine name characteristics. These trends reflect broader societal changes in Japan, including evolving gender roles and family structures. While some gender-specific patterns persist, the overall movement is toward greater diversity and flexibility in naming. This phenomenon is not unique to Japan; our cross-cultural comparisons highlight similar trends in other countries, suggesting a global reconsideration of gender expression in personal names.

2 Names and Gender

Names are more than mere linguistic labels; they are powerful social instruments that influence how individuals are recognized, interpreted, and situated within society (Alford, 1988). As semiotic signs, names encapsulate meanings that are deeply embedded in social and cultural systems, serving as markers of identity, belonging, and difference (Bodenhorn & vom Bruck, 2006). The act of naming is not neutral; it positions individuals within particular ideological frameworks, encompassing aspects such as ethnicity, class, and – central to this chapter and the broader book – gender (Sue & Telles, 2007; Pilcher, 2016).

As Pilcher (2016) emphasizes, names are integral to the everyday enactment of gender. They function not only as personal identifiers but also as gender cues, often serving as one of the first indicators through which others assign and interpret gender. From birth, names serve as one of the earliest mechanisms through which individuals are symbolically integrated into a gendered social world. In many social contexts, there exists an implicit expectation that names will conform to established gender norms. When a name does not align with these expectations – when it is perceived as ambiguous or at odds with conventional masculine or feminine categories – it can provoke confusion, reinterpretation, or even attempts to correct the perceived incongruity. Such responses underscore the normative force of naming practices in maintaining and reinforcing the boundaries of gender.

Beyond signaling gender, names also contribute to its production. In other words, they do not simply reflect existing gender norms – they help to construct and sustain them. Through their phonetic features, orthographic patterns, and cultural associations, names mark bodies as gendered and embed individuals within broader social frameworks. Naming practices often "do gender" by reinforcing shared ideas about what is appropriate, expected, or desirable for boys and girls (de Klerk & Bosch, 1996; Lieberson, 2000). This aligns with West and Zimmerman's (1987) influential argument that gender is not a fixed attribute but an ongoing accomplishment – something that is actively performed in everyday social interactions. Naming, as a socially regulated and symbolically loaded practice, constitutes one of the early and persistent ways in which this performance is initiated and maintained. These norms are not fixed; they shift alongside evolving social values and gender ideals. Naming, then, is not merely a private or individual act – it is a culturally structured practice that plays an active role in shaping how individuals come to understand and perform gender in everyday life (Bodenhorn & vom Bruck, 2006).

2.1 Regulations and Standards Regarding Names and Gender

While naming functions as a socially embedded and symbolically powerful act, it is also shaped by formal regulations that govern which names are permissible within a given society. The names that parents can legally give to their children are restricted by naming laws of varying strictness across countries—laws that both reflect and reinforce cultural norms, including those related to gender.

These laws typically regulate the scripts in which names can be written, often prohibiting the use of numerals, titles, symbols or special characters without phonetic significance (such as @ or !), as well as unconventional spellings or scripts. For example, Japanese names cannot be registered using the Latin alphabet. Some laws also impose restrictions on the meaning of names to prevent those that are obscene or offensive or otherwise not in the best interest of the child. In several European countries, including Czechia, Denmark, Hungary, Iceland and Slovakia, given names must be chosen from an official list and exceptions require special approval (Walkowiak, 2016).

Regulations and standards also vary in their flexibility regarding the gender of names. In countries such as Czechia, Denmark, Finland, and Estonia, it is prevented by law to give a girl's name to a boy or a boy's name to a girl, and names given to children of both genders are rare (Zákon č. 301/2000 Sb. [Act on Civil Registration, Name and Surname] for Czechia; Ministry of Social Affairs and Housing [Denmark], 2015; Ministry of Justice [Finland], 2017; Ministry of Justice [Estonia], n.d.). In Austria and Portugal, at least the initial given name must correspond to the child's gender (Federal Chancellery of Austria, n.d.; Instituto dos Registos e do Notariado [Ministry of Justice, Portugal], n.d.). However, there is evidence that such restrictions have become looser in the last few years. In Germany, for example, it was once common practice for registrar's offices to require that a child's name align with their assigned sex at birth. In 2008, however, the Federal Constitutional Court ruled that there was no obligation for a name to be gender-specific. Today, parents can choose a gender-neutral name, and while it is still recommended to pair it with a second, gender-specific name, this is no longer a requirement (Balbach, 2025). Up until recently, Icelandic names were also required to indicate the gender of the

child. However, since 2019, names in the national registry are no longer categorized as male or female and can be used regardless of gender (Kyzer, 2019). In Czechia, a list of more than 4,000 gender-neutral names was issued in 2023 in response to the growing demand for gender-neutral names among transgender people, and their use is not limited to transgender people (Ministerstvo vnitra ČR, 2024). In Spain, it was previously prohibited to give names that could make identification confusing, especially regarding gender. However, this regulation was modified through a new law in 2023 that protects trans and LGTBI rights. The law now states that when determining whether a name is confusing for identification purposes, the correspondence of the name to the person's sex or gender identity should not be given importance (Ley 20/2011 [Law on Civil Register]).

There are also many countries with no limitations regarding gender, such as the United States (National Center for Health Statistics, 2011) and Australia (Attorney-General's Department, 2015) and in Europe, for example, the United Kingdom (General Register Office, n.d), Bulgaria (Zakon za grazhdanskata registratsiya [Civil Registration Law]), and Croatia (Ministry of Justice, n.d.). Similarly, in East Asian countries, such as in China, Korea and Japan, names are not required to indicate gender and a person's gender cannot always be identified from the name (Slaměníková, 2018; van de Weijer, 2020; Barešová, 2020).

As can be seen from these examples, legal regulations regarding the gender of given names are country-specific, shaped by each country's unique linguistic and historical background. These regulations significantly influence naming practices, including recent tendencies toward more diverse and inclusive names. In countries where names have to be chosen from a list of approved names that align with the child's sex at birth, names are classified by gender

and officially recognized as masculine, feminine, or gender-neutral. Conversely, in countries where names are not restricted to an official stock of names and are not strictly designated as masculine, feminine, or gender-neutral, the gender classification of names is generally determined by cultural conventions, traditions, and established practices and may change over time.

2.2 Expression of Gender in Names across Languages and Cultures

Gender can be encoded in names in various ways. In a comprehensive study of naming practices in sixty different societies, Alford (1988, pp. 65–68) determined that gender can be conveyed in names through their meaning, which may refer to a specific gender or gender roles. For example, names denoting flowers, such as the English *Rose* and *Lily*, carry stereotypical associations with women in many cultures. More commonly, gender distinction is achieved through morphology, typically gender-specific prefixes or suffixes. Furthermore, names such as *Ludwig* (m) and *Hedwig* (f) or *Boris* (m) and *Doris* (f) are conventionally recognized as men's and women's names, respectively.

Onomasticons in societies with larger and more diversified name inventories typically contain names that convey gender through all these diverse means. For example, American names are predominantly attributed to men or women by convention (Alford, 1988), but there are also feminine names that are derived from their masculine counterparts, such as *Patricia* from *Patrick*, or names that are semantically transparent, such as the above-mentioned *Rose* and *Lily*. Similarly, most names used in Germany are conventionally recognized as men's or women's, but many others express gender

through suffixes (Oelkers, 2003). In most societies the majority of names are recognized as boys' or girls' by convention or express gender through gender-specific affixes (Alford, 1988, p. 79).

Gender-distinctive prefixes can be found, for example, in Lahu (Tibeto-Burman language), where masculine names begin with *ca-* (also transcribed as *za-*) and feminine names with *na-* (Matisoff, 2006, p. 46 cited in Handschuh, 2019, p. 556). Boys can have names such as *Zado*, *Zae*, *Zafa*, *Zahe*, or *Zazu*, while girls may be named *Nado*, *Nae*, *Nafa*, *Nahe*, or *Nazu* (Anghelescu, 2019). Similarly, in South Efate (Oceanic), masculine names begin with *kal-* (e.g., *Kalsarap* or *Kaltapau*) and feminine names begin with *li-* (e.g., *Limas* or *Litapurog*) (Thieberger, 2006, p. 125, cited in Handschuh, 2019, p. 556).

In languages that possess grammatical gender, personal names may reflect the gender-marking of common nouns. Latin, which has significantly influenced onomasticons of modern European languages, irrespective of whether they possess grammatical gender, expresses gender in proper names through the same inflectional endings as in common nouns. One might compare, for example, the following pairs of Latin common nouns and proper names (adopted from Handschuh, 2019, p. 552): *fili-a* ('daughter') – *Corneli-a* (feminine name) and *fili-us* ('son') – *Corneli-us* (masculine name). In European languages, many feminine names end in *-a*, reflecting the most common ending of nouns classified as feminine. In others, this ending is specific to given names. In German, for example, which also possesses grammatical gender, *-a* does not mark the feminine gender of nouns but is used as an onymic marker, adopted from Latin. Similarly, *-e*, another frequent gender marker of feminine names, was adopted from French (Handschuh, 2019, p. 553).

Gender can be encoded in names in a symmetrical way, i.e., in both masculine and feminine names, as evident in the Latin names *Cornelius* – *Cornelia*, or the Spanish names *Julio* – *Julia* and

Antonio – Antonia. It can also be expressed – and more often is – in an asymmetrical way, usually with the women's name being marked, as in *Robert – Roberta* and *Paul – Paula*.

As will be described in more detail in the following sections, suffixation as a means of gender distinction is also utilized in Japanese names. The suffixes used to form masculine and feminine names are exclusive to given names and are not used in common nouns. For example, the name *Masao* is generally recognized as a men's name because of the onymic suffix *-o*, whereas *Masako* is recognized as a women's name because of the suffix *-ko*. Interestingly, more than a century ago, masculine names typically utilized a variety of suffixes, while feminine names were formed mostly by the onymic base. A boy might be named *Masao*, *Masahiko*, *Masakichi*, *Masasuke*, or *Masashi*, with each name consisting of the onymic base *masa* complemented by an onymic suffix. In contrast, a girl would simply be named *Masa*. This form of asymmetry differs from that commonly found in European languages. Prefixation can also be found in Japanese names, though it is not all that common. The prefixes *ko-* 'small'[2] or *mi-* 'beautiful' are gender-distinctive, predominantly used in girls' names. Historically, *ko-* was often used to denote the relationship between a mother and her daughter or between an older and younger sister (Tsunoda, 1988, pp. 204–205), such as *Haru* ('spring') and *Koharu* ('small' + 'spring').

Significant gender cues can also be found in the phonology of names, even in societies where names are predominantly categorized as girls' or boys' by convention, according to Alford's classification.

[2] It should be noted that this *ko-* (written with the kanji 小) differs from the commonly used feminine suffix *-ko* (子), despite their phonological similarity.

In these languages, speakers intuitively recognize whether a name sounds feminine or masculine based on its phonotactic properties, such as the inclusion or exclusion of specific sound segments or sequences. A growing number of studies covering various languages have identified phonological differences that exist between girls' and boys' names, such as name length, type of syllables, name-initial and name-final phonemes, and prosody. Feminine names used in English-speaking countries are generally longer, i.e., often have more syllables than masculine names and their initial syllables are frequently unstressed (Slater & Feinman, 1985; Cutler et al., 1990; Cassidy et al., 1999). They also end significantly more often in a vowel or sonorant sound (Slater & Feinman, 1985; Barry & Harper, 1995, 2000; Cassidy et al., 1999) and, on average, contain more vowels than masculine names (Whissell, 2001; He, 2020). More recent studies have identified similar phonological distinctions in German names (Oelkers, 2003; Ackermann & Zimmer, 2021) and also in French names (Sullivan & Kang, 2019). In all three languages, girls' names tend to have more syllables, more sonorant consonants and end more often in a vowel than boys' names. Additionally, Slepian and Galinsky (2016) found that voicing also contributes to gender distinction; American names – and similarly, names from India – with voiced[3] initial phonemes are more frequently boys' names while those with unvoiced initial phonemes are more frequently given to girls.

The phonological differences observed in closely related languages may not be universally applicable. For instance, in their

[3] Voiced phonemes are those pronounced with a vibration of the vocal cords, making them sound 'harder'; unvoiced phonemes are pronounced without a vibration of the vocal cords, making them sound 'softer'.

study involving a sample of popular given names from 13 countries, Ackermann and Zimmer (2021) discovered that while the sonority of the final sound distinguishes gender in names used in European countries such as Poland, Hungary, and Germany, it does not do so in Japanese or Chinese names (for Chinese names see van de Weijer et al. 2020). Japanese words, including names, are mostly composed of open syllables (see 3.3), which means that both boys' and girls' names typically end in a vowel. However, when we look at the final syllable, not just the final sound, these can be indicative of gender (Mutsukawa, 2007; Barešová, 2016, 2020; Unser-Schutz, 2016). For example, *Haruto* and *Haruta* are boys' names, whereas *Haruko* and *Haruka* are typically girls' names.

As mentioned earlier, given names can also be gender-marked semantically, i.e., through their meaning, which can either directly denote or be associated with men or women or refer to gender-specific stereotypes in a particular culture. For example, English names such as *Charity*, *Grace*, *Modesty*, and *Patience* express what Alford (1988, p. 146) describes as laudable qualities and were predominantly given to girls, reflecting culturally recognized ideals of femininity. Similarly, names derived from flowers are often associated with women, reflecting the qualities they are thought to represent. However, unlike these names, which are still semantically transparent, most names that have been in use for centuries have become semantically opaque (Anderson, 2007, p. 86) or come from a different language, making it difficult to discern their meaning from the name itself. The names *Anna* or *Hanna(h)* also mean 'grace' but the meaning is not as readily understood as from the name *Grace*.

Moreover, many meanings, whether transparent or not, are common to both masculine and feminine names, which are distinguished through affixation. For example, both the names *Paul*

and *Paula* (and their variants, such as the Czech *Pavel* and *Pavla*) are derived from the word *paulus*, which means 'small' or 'humble' (Knappová, 2010, p. 279, 521).

Although semantically transparent names are more common in smaller and less complex societies (Alford, 1988, p. 79), semantic marking of gender is also observed in Chinese names, which are written in logographic Chinese characters, hanzi, representing lexical constituents (morphemes, words) (Kałużyńska, 2016, p. 164). Many Chinese characters used in names or their components are semantically associated with a particular gender (e.g., Gao, 2011). Most Chinese speakers perceive the name *Meiling*[4] 美玲 as feminine because 美 means 'beautiful' and 玲 means 'delicate' or 'elegant'. In contrast, the name *Weijun* 伟俊 is more likely to be perceived as masculine due to the meanings of 'great' or 'mighty' (伟) and 'handsome', 'talented' or 'ambitious' (俊). As will be demonstrated later, the meaning of kanji also plays an important role in the gender distinction of Japanese names.

2.3 Gender-Neutral Names

While names in a vast majority of cultures express gender in one of the above-mentioned ways or are attributed to a particular gender by convention, there are also names that are not explicitly associated with a specific gender. These names are commonly used for both boys and girls without implying a particular masculine or feminine identity. In English, such names are often referred to by various

[4] Chinese names are transcribed using the Hanyu Pinyin romanization system without tone marks.

interchangeably used terms, including gender-neutral names, unisex names, androgynous names, and more recently, gender-fluid and nonbinary names. The term 'gender-neutral' suggests that these names do not display any distinct gender features, whereas 'unisex' may instead suggest that the names are used for both boys and girls and does not really imply that they lack gendered characteristics. Although each term may carry slightly different nuances, they all refer to names that can be used for individuals of any gender without strongly evoking masculinity or femininity. We employ the term 'gender-neutral' in this book.

Several insightful studies on the characteristics, evolution, and development of gender-neutral names come from English-speaking countries. Research by Barry and Harper (1982, 1993) supports the assumption that gender-neutral names often transition from being initially boys' names to becoming gender-neutral and eventually being predominantly given to girls. This shift is influenced by the notion that women with names associated with the opposite gender are perceived more favorably than men, as men are subject to more rigid gender stereotyping than women (also, e.g., Slovenko, 1986; Lieberson et al., 2000). As a consequence of these perceptions, once a gender-neutral name gains popularity for girls, it tends to lose appeal for boys, eventually becoming more commonly associated with girls (Barry & Harper, 1982, 1993).

Additionally, the association of a famous personality with a particular name is an important factor in the evolution from a gender-neutral to a gender-specific name (Barry & Harper, 1982; Lieberson et al., 2000). It is more common for girls to receive a name borne by a celebrity or a popular character, as boys more frequently receive traditional family names (Barry & Harper, 1993, p. 236).

Barry and Harper (2000) identified a higher frequency of girls' names ending with letters predominantly found in names given to

boys, compared to boys' names ending with letters more common in names given to girls. This, in their view, indicates a preference for a masculine characteristic and further supports their account of the evolution of gender-neutral names. Cassidy et al. (1999) found that names given to both genders were more typically feminine in their phonology and that a structural similarity to girls' names may encourage the shift to a gender-neutral name.

Gender-neutral names are more frequent with girls than boys (Barry & Harper, 2014), as they are potentially more advantageous for them, positively affecting gender discrimination (Slovenko, 1986; Lieberson et al., 2000). The choice of a gender-neutral name may also be related to the desire to choose an unusual and distinctive name (Barry & Harper, 1982), which is more common for girls than boys (Alford, 1988; Barry & Harper, 1982; Lieberson & Bell, 1992; Lieberson et al., 2000).

Lieberson et al. (2000) analyzed trends in the use of gender-neutral names in Illinois between 1916 and 1989, as well as 1995, employing the Index of Androgyny, which assesses the overlap between names given to boys and girls in a given year (p. 1260). Building upon Barry and Harper's findings (1982, 1993), they reinforced their assertion that gender-neutral names are unstable and short-lived because they tend to become less popular with one gender as a result of increased popularity with the other and eventually transition to a single-gender name (in most cases they shift from boys' names to gender-neutral and from gender-neutral to girls' names).

Seguin et al. (2021) directly engage with this account and offer a refined interpretation of the instability of gender-neutral names. While they similarly observe that gender-neutrality is often temporary, their analysis shows that, for most gender-neutral names, popularity among boys and girls tends to rise concurrently rather than popularity with one gender diminishing the name's appeal

for the other. Only approximately 5% of names that evolved from being single-gender to gender-neutral and back to single-gender actually switched gender, while the majority returned to their original gender. They also demonstrated that many of the names that evolved from boys' to gender-neutral to girls' names ended in the long-e sound (e.g., *-ie*, *-ey*, and *-y*) and "were part of a larger shift in the gender connotations of the long-e suffix" (2021, p. 13).

A different perspective is provided by Van Fleet and Atwater (1997), who focused not on usage patterns but on social perceptions of gender neutrality. Their study shows that not every name recommended for both boys and girls is actually perceived as gender-neutral, suggesting that gender neutrality is unevenly recognized at the perceptual level. This highlights an additional layer of complexity in the study of gender-neutral names, as formal classifications or usage patterns may not align with how names are socially interpreted.

These various studies differ in their criteria for defining gender-neutral names. As Lieberson et al. (2000, p. 1259) aptly put it, "[i]t is easy enough to develop an operating notion of what is meant by androgynous first names" but "[s]traightforward as this may be, it is another matter to develop suitable measures of androgyny." Barry and Harper (1993, p. 229), analyzing names of children born in Pennsylvania in 1960 and 1990, defined a name as gender-neutral if it was given to at least 20 boys and 20 girls during these two years. Lieberson et al. (2000, p. 1263) consider a name unambiguously gender-neutral when "each gender comprises at least one-third (and hence, no more than two-thirds) of the children bearing the name." Seguin et al. (2021, p. 4) use a different gender distribution ratio. They define girls' and boys' names as "names given to 80% or more of children of the respective gender." Names that do not meet this threshold are classified as gender-neutral. In

their study of Finnish names, Leino (2004, p. 806) classified a name as gender-neutral when each gender accounted for at least 5% of the name-bearers.

In addition to the criterion of relatively balanced gender distribution, Lieberson et al. (2000, p. 1264) also consider the minimal occurrence of a name within the examined sample. In their study based on the data of all white births in Illinois in 1916–1989 and in 1995, they determined a name as gender-neutral if it appeared at least one year among the 200 names most frequently given to boys and girls, not necessarily the same year. Although setting a frequency criterion seems reasonable, it is evident that this particular limit cannot be universally applied to names across all countries due to significant variations in the number of names in use and differences in the availability and quality of data.

Leibring (2018, pp. 306–307) provides a more nuanced categorization of names based on their gender distribution, recognizing gender-contrary and gender-crossing names in addition to gender-specific and gender-neutral names. Gender-contrary names are described as "names traditionally attributed to one gender, but occasionally given to persons belonging to the other." Gender-crossing names are "names used mostly for individuals of one gender, but increasingly also in use for individuals of other genders." While she does not establish fixed boundaries between these categories, suggesting that gender distributions evolve over time, it is difficult to apply this framework to a particular onomasticon or dataset.

As with other names, gender-neutral names have various characteristics shaped by the grammatical structure of their languages. In languages with rich inflection, such as Czech, names given to both genders, like other names and nouns in general, are marked for gender through declension, often taking gender-specific endings

in cases other than the nominative. For instance, the dative form of the name *Alex* remains unchanged (*Alex*) when the bearer is a woman but takes the ending *-ovi* (*Alexovi*) when the bearer is a man. Similarly, the dative form of *Nikola* is *Nikole* for a woman and *Nikolovi* for a man. Thus, while these names are referred to as gender-neutral because they are given to both genders, their declension can reveal the gender of the name bearer.

In English-speaking countries, some names commonly regarded as gender-neutral have distinct spelling variations predominantly associated with one gender or the other, such as *Francis* and *Frances* or *Bobby* and *Bobbie* (Lieberson et al., 2000, p. 1265). Strictly speaking, these names are gender-neutral only in their phonological form. In Japanese, the use of kanji and the naming conventions allow for a single phonological form to have multiple written forms, and vice versa. Consequently, it is common for a gender-neutral phonological form to have gender-specific written forms, while a gender-neutral written form may have gender-specific phonological variations.

In this book, we examine both names with gender-neutral phonological forms (8.1.1) and those with gender-neutral graphic forms (8.1.2). As Lieberson et al. (2000, p. 1259) admit, defining androgyny "inevitably […] involves a certain level of arbitrariness that in turn can affect the results." Given the various criteria and the limited size of our corpus, we define gender-neutral forms as those applied 20–80% of the time to the opposite gender, following the approach of Seguin et al. (2021).

2.4 Summary

Names play a key role from birth in both signaling and constructing gender identity. They position individuals within gendered social frameworks and help maintain gender boundaries through their phonological, morphological and semantic features, orthographic patterns, and cultural associations.

Legal regulations governing names vary significantly across countries. While some nations (such as Czechia, Denmark, and Finland) require names to align with a child's assigned sex, others (including the United States, United Kingdom, and Japan) impose no gender restrictions. Recent trends show movement toward more flexible naming practices, with countries like Germany, Iceland, and Spain loosening gender-specific requirements to accommodate diverse gender identities. These regulatory differences influence not only which names are permitted but also how gender categories are maintained, challenged, or redefined.

Gender expression in names varies considerably across languages and cultures. Many languages mark gender morphologically, often through suffixes, or derivational patterns, while others rely more on convention. In English and other languages, phonological features like syllable count, vowel endings, and consonant sonority typically distinguish masculine from feminine names. However, these patterns do not apply universally – Japanese names, for instance, mostly end in vowels regardless of gender, with distinction instead carried by the choice of final syllable. Semantic marking also plays a role, particularly in languages such as Chinese and Japanese where character meanings convey gender associations. Chapter 7 examines these mechanisms in Japanese names in more detail.

Gender-neutral names have been studied extensively in English-speaking contexts. Research suggests these names often evolve from boys' names to becoming gender-neutral before shifting predominantly to girls' names, although this pattern is less rigid than previously thought. In many countries, gender-neutral names are more commonly given to girls and may be associated with desires for distinctiveness and reduced gender discrimination. We will look at Japanese gender-neutral names in Chapter 8.

3 An Introduction to Contemporary Japanese Names

3.1 Naming Restrictions in Japan

In Japan, a name for a newborn child is not selected from an official list of permitted names, as is common in many countries. Since there is no official list of approved names, there is no official classification of names by gender either. Although names are usually listed in various naming books as girls' or boys' names, nothing prevents a boy from receiving a name that is generally considered a girls' name or vice versa.

A name that can be registered upon a child's birth in the family register still has to meet certain criteria. It has to be written in kanji, kana, or a combination of both, and cannot include letters from the Latin alphabet or Arabic numerals. For example, the name *Hinako* may be written as 日奈子 (kanji), ひなこ or ヒナコ (kana), or ひな子 or ヒナ子 (kana and kanji) – with multiple other kanji combinations also possible. In addition, names may include iteration marks when repeating the immediately preceding character – "々" in kanji (e.g., the name *Nana* written as 奈々), and "ゝ" or "ゞ" in hiragana (e.g., *Nana* written as なゝ, or *Suzu* written as すゞ). They may also utilize the long sound mark "ー" to extend the preceding character (e.g., アイミー read as Aimī).

The kanji permitted for use in names are regulated, and it is not possible to register a name using a kanji that is not on the approved list. After the Second World War, in 1947, the kanji that could be used in names were limited to the set of 1,850 *Tōyō kanji* (当用漢字 lit. kanji for general use),[5] which, in 1981, was replaced by the 1,945 *Jōyō kanji* (常用漢字, lit. kanji for common use) and further expanded to 2,136 in 2010. Since 1947, the pool of kanji that can be used in names has also been repeatedly extended by irregular, variously numerous additions of *Jinmeiyō kanji* (人名用漢字) – additional characters for use in names – often due to public pressure, opinion polls, and, in some cases, lawsuits filed by parents requesting specific kanji (Atsuji, 2005). The most recent addition of a single kanji was made in 2017. As a result, Japanese names can currently be written using the 2,136 *Jōyō kanji* and an additional 863 *Jinmeiyō kanji* (see also Chapter 6).

While the written form of a name has long been regulated, its pronunciation had not been officially recorded until very recently. Following the recent amendment to the Family Register, names have been recorded with their readings only since May 2025. In addition, new registrations are expected to use generally recognized readings of kanji (as specified in the 2025 amendment of the Family Register Act, Article 13, Paragraph 2), although what counts as "generally recognized" has not been clearly defined yet, and is left to the discretion of the local registry offices.[6]

---

[5] The list of 1,850 kanji considered necessary for functional literacy was released on November 16, 1946, following the reform of the Japanese writing system.

[6] For a comprehensive discussion of the debates preceding the amended Family Register Act and the anticipated changes to naming practices, see Unser-Schutz (2024).

3.2 The Reading of Kanji in Names: How Can a Name Have Multiple Readings?

The move to register names with their readings is justified because it is impossible to read many Japanese names written in kanji with certainty. This is especially true for given names and also applies to many surnames. For example, a person registered as 西原大翔 could just as easily be *Nishihara Hiroto*, *Nishibara Haruto*, *Saibara Daito*, or any other combination of the possible readings of the surname and given name.

As a result of historical development, the majority of *Jōyō kanji* now have two types of pronunciation or readings: Sino-Japanese (*on'yomi*) and Japanese (*kun'yomi*). For example, 大 ('large', 'big') from the name 大翔 has Sino-Japanese readings /tai/ and /dai/, the latter used in the phonological form *Daito*, and a Japanese reading /ō/. However, unlike common words, names utilize additional specialized readings (*nanori*) primarily used in names, particularly given names. *Nanori* readings for 大 include /hiro/, as in *Hiroto*, and /haru/, as in *Haruto*, along with other readings such as /futo/, /futoshi/, /hajime/, /hiroshi/, /masa/, /masaru/, /moto/, /naga/, /o/, /ta/, /takashi/, /takeshi/, /tomo/ and /yutaka/.[7] The second kanji, 翔, is a *Jinmeiyō kanji*, which was added to the list in 1981. It has a Sino-Japanese reading /shō/ and Japanese readings /kake(ru)/ and /to(bu)/, meaning 'to soar, fly'.

Since one kanji can have multiple readings and many kanji share the same readings, it is possible for one graphic form to have multiple phonological forms, as seen above, and for one phonological form

[7] Possible readings in names differ across dictionaries. These are from *Shinkangorin* (Kamata & Yoneyama, 2011).

to be written in various ways. In addition to 大翔, the name *Hiroto* can also be written, for instance, as 啓斗, 博人, or 裕仁, the name Haruto as 陽翔, 温斗, or 暖人, and the name *Daito* as 大斗, 大仁, or 大都. Furthermore, as the readings of kanji are not regulated – perhaps because it is expected or considered common sense that the phonological form of a name and the readings of the individual kanji used to write it should match – many contemporary names utilize kanji in ways that make them difficult to read (Satō, 2007).

For example, the name 大翔 also exists with the phonological form *Kakeru*, which corresponds to the reading of the second kanji, while the first kanji is not reflected in the phonological form but only in the meaning of the graphic form. Another example is the phonological form *Tsubas*a, which does not correspond with any possible readings of the kanji. The word *tsubasa* (翼) means 'wings' and is also used as a name given to both boys and girls. The kanji 大翔 express a wish to 'fly high' (大きく翔んでほしい！ [I want you to soar far and high]), that is, to achieve great things or spread one's wings boldly. In this context, it is clear that the kanji were not chosen ad hoc and that there is a semantic connection between the phonological and graphic form of the name, despite the non-standard reading.

3.3 Name-Selection Criteria

A name is like a kimono – it is for life (Sakuma, 1964, p. 12). Name changes are relatively uncommon, and most individuals carry the name given to them at birth throughout their lives. This lifelong nature, among other factors, makes the selection of a name a process approached with great care. The formation of a name is often a complex process that encompasses not only legal considerations

but also phonological, semantic, orthographic, and cultural factors (Watanabe, 2005, p. 45). Typically, it begins with an initial idea, inspiration, or intention, such as a favorite sound or kanji, motivated by a particular person, hobby, or other influences. Parents may also consider the preferred length of the name, a desire to create connections between the child's name and those of the parents or siblings through shared elements, or an aspiration to commemorate an event or convey a hope for the child's future. From this starting point, the formation of a name is shaped by a range of criteria and personal preferences. One illustrative example concerns the naming of a daughter:

> *I love traveling. Especially Italy – I absolutely love it! I want my daughter to travel the world and spread her wings globally, not just in Italy, so I thought of naming her* 伊都 [*Ito*; 伊 refers to Italy and 都 means 'metropolis, capital'], *inspired by Rome, the capital of Italy. However, when I considered the balance with our family name,* 伊 *felt somewhat stiff, so I changed it to* 衣 ['garment', commonly used in girls' names] *to lend a softer, more feminine impression. I also included my wish for her to become someone who connects people* [*Ito*, though written with different kanji, also means 'thread' in Japanese] …
>
> Mother of *Ito* 伊都, girl, 2010, Baby Calendar (transl. from Japanese)

Here, the parents' personal attachment to Italy and hopes for their daughter's global future are combined with aesthetic considerations, resulting in a name that embodies multiple layers of meaning and aspiration.

A second example describes the naming of a son:

> *Since our baby was due in August, we hoped to choose a name that would feel summery. My husband's father's name is Seiichi* 清一, *so*

we decided to incorporate 清 [meaning 'pure' or 'clear', capturing the freshness of the season]. *As it would be our first son, we also wished to take one kanji from my husband's name, Hiroshi* 博志, *and selected* 志 ['will' or 'aspiration']. *We initially considered Kiyoshi* 清志 *but ruled it out because a relative already had that name, and rejected Kiyoshirō* 清志郎 *due to its association with a famous celebrity.*[8] *Name fortune-telling indicated that Seishirō* 清士郎 [士 means 'samurai' or 'one who is well-respected'] *was the most auspicious choice. If we have another child in the future, we would like to use* 心 *in their name* [士 forms the upper part of 志, and 心 the lower part, thus symbolically linking both children's names to their father's].

Mother of *Seishirō* 清士郎, boy, 2015, Baby Calendar (transl. from Japanese)

In this case, an initial aspiration to evoke the season of the child's birth led to a name that also honored familial bonds and invoked symbolic meanings associated with strength, purity, and future aspirations.

Together, these examples illustrate how parents often integrate personal meaning, cultural references, aesthetic considerations, and symbolic associations into the act of naming. The thoughtful negotiation of these factors is reflected more broadly in contemporary naming practices, where a range of criteria – such as sound, meaning, visual appearance, cultural resonance, and auspiciousness – inform the final decision.

In a September 2022 online survey on name selection conducted by the Japanese children's clothing and product company Miki

[8] Imawano Kiyoshirō 忌野 清志郎

House among registered users of its services[9] (Miki House Editorial team, 2022), respondents were asked to choose one or more of 18 suggested factors that they considered when deciding on their child's name. The following factors received the most attention:

1) Auspicious stroke count of the chosen kanji (*seimei handan*, a form of fortune-telling) (59%);
2) Good-sounding name (36.6%);
3) Reflection of aspirations for the child's future (36.2%);
4) Avoidance of so-called *kira-kira* or 'sparkly' names[10] (36.2%);
5) Ease of reading the kanji (33%);
6) Good visual appearance (image) of the graphic form of the name (32%).

The results demonstrate that both practical concerns – such as readability and appearance – and symbolic or aspirational considerations – such as hopes for good fortune or future success, often expressed through meaningful kanji or favorable stroke counts – play major roles in the naming process. Interestingly, the auspicious stroke count emerged as the most highly rated factor, which might at first seem surprising. However, research by Barešová and Janda (2023) indicates that, regardless of whether

[9] A total of 2,626 respondents participated (88.3% women, 11.4% men, 0.3% no response). Most of the respondents had a small child or were expecting one. Of these, 727 respondents answered this particular question.

[10] These are names that utilize kanji seldom seen in names, uncommon kanji combinations, rare kanji readings, or highly inventive readings that do not follow standard conventions (as, for example, the name *Tsubasa* 大翔 discussed in 3.2. While there is no definite way to distinguish unique names from *kira-kira* names, such names have been increasing in number since the last decades of the twentieth century (Kobayashi, 2009).

parents personally believe in the power of auspicious numbers, most still check the graphic form of the name to ensure that it is at least not inauspicious. This practice reflects a broader cultural tendency to approach naming with great care, tailoring the name not only to the child's identity but also to their future prospects.

Other, less frequently considered criteria included reflecting the season of birth, ensuring the name's uniqueness, providing a global dimension (such as ease of pronunciation in English), or conversely, emphasizing its Japaneseness. Some respondents also considered how well the name lent itself to creating nicknames. 28.4% of the respondents consciously considered the gender aspect when selecting a name, focusing either on its femininity or masculinity (17.7%) or its gender neutrality (10.7%).

Reflecting the complexity of the naming process, the Japanese book market offers a large number of naming guides. The popular Tamahiyo series, for instance, publishes a new edition every year. These naming books typically allow readers to search for names based on phonological form, kanji, certain images (such as seasons or particular qualities and aspirations), or stroke count. In addition to printed books and magazines, there are numerous parenting websites and forums where expectant parents can draw inspiration and seek advice. Many online tools also enable parents to assess the auspiciousness of a name in combination with the surname.

As this discussion illustrates, the naming process in Japan is multifaceted, balancing personal, cultural, and practical considerations to arrive at a name that reflects both the aspirations and the identity of the child. The variety of factors influencing this process highlights the deep significance attached to names in shaping not only individual identity but also imagined future paths.

3.4 Name Length and Structure: Mora or Syllable?

During an interview about naming practices conducted by one of the authors in fall 2021, one of the interviewees replied with the following in response to a question about whether her sons' names, *Kandai* 幹大 and *Gendai* 玄大, are anyhow related to the names of other family members:[11]

> *Yes. My husband's name* [*Hiroyasu* 浩康] *consists of four moji. So he wanted the same for our sons. The older son's name,* 幹大*, could also be read as Kanta, but that would be only three moji.*

While the sons' names *Kandai* and *Gendai* will most likely sound shorter to an English speaker's ear than the father's name *Hiroyasu*, a Japanese native speaker used to moraic units may perceive them as of the same length, as all three names consist of the same number of morae (cf., /hi-ro-ya-su/, /ka-N-da-i/, /ge-N-da-i/).

The mora plays a crucial role in Japanese phonology and morphology (Kubozono, 2015, pp. 16–18). It consists of a vowel (V) which can be preceded by an optional consonant (C), and it may also consist of a moraic nasal (/N/) or a moraic obstruent (/Q/). The Japanese phonographic syllabaries, hiragana and katakana, represent moraic units. One hiragana/katakana grapheme (in the example above referred to as *moji* 文字) represents, with some exceptions, one mora. Therefore, acquiring these scripts is assumed to increase awareness of moraic units (Tamaoka & Terao, 2004, p. 3).

[11] All interview data was collected with informed consent, and the interviewee agreed to the use of the names cited here for publication purposes.

In addition to the mora, the syllable is also a relevant phonological unit, indispensable for the description of various phonological and morphological processes in Japanese (Kubozono, 2015, pp. 19–22). Japanese syllables are mostly of the open type; the only closed syllables are those closed with the moraic nasal /N/ (as in the names *Kento* /keN.to/ and *Shin* /shiN/) and those closed with a geminate (long) consonant (as in the names *Issa* /iQ.sa/ and *Issei* /iQ.sei). A geminate consonant, however, cannot occur in the word-final position. Thus, like any other word, Japanese names end in a vowel or a nasal.

Syllables are usually monomoraic (light syllables) or bimoraic (heavy syllables). The name *Hiroyasu* consists of four light syllables /hi.ro.ya.su/. There are three types of heavy syllables: 1) syllables with a long vowel (as in the names *Yūka* and *Kōta*), 2) syllables with a complex nucleus – a diphthong (as in the names *Kandai* and *Gendai*), and 3) closed syllables (also found in the names *Kandai* and *Gendai*). *Yūka* and *Kōta* thus consist of 2 syllables (/yuu.ka/, /koo.ta/, but 3 morae (/yu-u-ka/, /ko-o-ta/), while *Kandai* and *Gendai* consist of 2 syllables (/kaN.dai/, /geN.dai/) but 4 morae (/ka-N-da-i/, /ge-N-da-i/).

It has also been noted that a sequence of two morae, called a "bimoraic foot," forms a prosodic unit above the mora in the prosodic hierarchy. Poser (1990) presents several phenomena that make use of a bimoraic foot, including hypocoristic formation, i.e., the formation of shortened or affectionate names. He demonstrates that the modification of a name is governed by phonological rather than morphological constraints and the modified form to which the diminutive suffix *-chan* is added is bimoraic, not necessarily dissyllabic. The name *Hiroyasu* will be modified to *Hirochan* and the names *Kandai* and *Gendai* to *Kanchan* and *Genchan*. Other common methods of hypocoristic formation, such as clipping the name to

one mora and lengthening its vowel (e.g. *Misaki* → *Mīchan*), or clipping the name to one mora and assimilating the next one to the suffix onset (e.g. *Misaki* → *Mitchan*) also involve modifying the stem to a bimoraic template (Poser, 1990, p. 84), matching the bimoraic suffix *-chan*.

In the following chapters, the phonological length of names will be measured and referred to in morae, but when analyzing the structure of names, larger units will come into play. For example, it will become apparent that it is the syllable (morpheme) *-dai* and not the mora (vowel) *-i* that makes the names *Kandai* and *Gendai* be perceived as masculine.

3.5 Summary

Japanese naming operates without an official list of approved names or formal gender classifications, yet the written form of a name is still shaped by restrictions on which kanji may be used (currently 2,999 characters). The complex relationship between pronunciation and writing is a distinctive feature of Japanese names. Multiple kanji combinations can represent the same phonological form, and the same kanji can have several possible readings, making names highly expressive but sometimes difficult to interpret without context. This flexibility has increased in recent years, with a growing number of names using unconventional kanji readings. While written forms have been regulated for decades, pronunciations were not officially recorded until May 2025, when reforms introduced the requirement to use "generally recognized" readings – although what qualifies as such remains loosely defined.

Name selection in Japan involves balancing numerous considerations. A wide range of naming guides – many updated every

year – helps parents navigate these choices. Aesthetic preferences, meaningful associations, family ties, and cultural expectations all play a role, and survey data shows that practical concerns such as readability often stand alongside symbolic ones, including auspicious stroke counts or hopes for a child's future.

Finally, the chapter has highlighted the importance of phonological units in understanding Japanese names. The mora and syllable both shape how names are structured, perceived, and modified, influencing everything from perceptions of name length to the formation of pet names. Together, these elements underscore the complexity of Japanese naming, where linguistic, cultural, and emotional dimensions intersect to shape the names given to children today.

4 Data Description and Online Resources

In some countries, it is possible to obtain a list of the names of all babies born in a given year. For example, US Social Security data is publicly available and contains names of babies born each year in the United States over the past one and a half centuries (Social Security Administration, 2024). However, Japan does not provide such data (Ogihara et al., 2015, p. 12; Unser-Schutz, 2016, p. 91; Barešová et al., 2024, p. 3). Furthermore, the official records of names, as registered upon birth in Japan's Family Registers, were recorded only in written form, without their readings (see 3.1), until 2025. Therefore, to study Japanese names, we have had to combine data from a variety of sources, each with its own strengths and weaknesses.

Data limited to the most popular names can be obtained from annual baby name rankings published by several private companies. Meiji Yasuda Life Insurance Company (hereafter referred to as Meiji Yasuda) publishes rankings based on the names of children insured with the company each year. It provides the ten most popular names (graphic forms) for each year since 1912 and more detailed data for recent years. Names from this source were analyzed, e.g., by Unser-Schutz (2016b) and Mori-Kolbe (2020). Over the past decade or two, similar annual baby name rankings have also been released by the Benesse Corporation (Tamahiyo) (used in, e.g., Ogihara et al., 2015) and Baby Calendar, based on names received from customers who purchased their products.

While Meiji Yasuda provides the top ten graphic forms for each year for most of the twentieth century, another major Japanese life insurer, the Dai'ichi Life Insurance Company (hereafter referred to as Dai'ichi Life), has published a book listing the top five most popular phonological forms of children born between 1906 and 1985 (Dai'ichi seimei kōhōbu, 1987) (used in Mutsukawa, 2007).

The online name database Heisei Namae Jiten [Dictionary of Heisei Era Names] is a significantly larger source of names, although limited to a twenty-year period and to the graphic forms of names. This publicly accessible database contains the names of children born each year between 1989 and 2009. However, it has to be used with caution, as the exact source of these names is unclear and the number of names recorded fluctuates widely, ranging from nearly a million to fewer than one hundred thousand per year.

A much richer source of data, with names, readings and additional information is available from the Baby Calendar website. We discuss these sources of data in more detail in the next three sections and then compare the amount of data with the number of children born per year.

4.1 Dataset Compiled from Baby Calendar

The richest dataset we have available for currently used names is collected from Baby Calendar,[12] an information website on pregnancy, childbirth, and childcare. In addition to annual baby name rankings, this social platform publishes *nazuke episōdo*, or 'name-selection stories,' contributed by parents, typically mothers, as part

[12] https://baby-calendar.jp/

of their participation in the *Akachan no Nazuke Episōdo Taishō* (Baby Name-Selection Story Campaign). In addition to the graphic form of the name, the source also provides its phonological form, the baby's gender, and the year of birth. These narratives offer valuable insights into the motivations and considerations behind choosing the name, including gender-related factors. They have been collected by one of the authors since 2008[13] and the dataset compiled from these names and the stories of their selection was utilized in several previous studies (Barešová, 2015, 2016, 2020, 2023; Barešová, Nakaya and Matlach, 2024; Barešová and Nakaya, 2025a, 2025b).

However, this data has limitations. The name selection stories for each particular year are collected in September and only concern children born within the first nine months of that year (as is also the case with the surveys conducted for the Meiji Yasuda, Tamahiyo, and Baby Calendar rankings). Additionally, the number of names recorded varies considerably, ranging from 435 to 1,666 per year, with only 245 entries in 2022, the most recent year included in our analyses.[14] The stories are shaped by the campaign instructions and represent a specific form of self-presentation. Many are written with the intention of making an impression, while others are brief and straightforward, suggesting that some parents simply wish to share their experiences rather than stand out or compete. Furthermore, since the website does not provide demographic data on its users,

[13] The original name of the website was *Akachan no namae rankingu & nazuke episōdo – happī mama.com* [Baby name ranking and naming stories – Happy Mama.com].

[14] We decided not to include data for 2023 and 2024 because the number of names for these two years is even lower. Moreover, in our previous studies, which we refer to in this book, we worked with this same time span, so we maintain it here for better comparability.

it is impossible to assess how well the dataset represents different regional and social contexts. However, given its widespread use – the official application attracting over ten million users each month[15] – it is reasonable to assume that the collected names reflect a broad spectrum of naming practices across Japan. This assumption is further supported by Unser-Schutz (2017), whose research found no significant differences in name choices between municipalities or between urban and rural areas, suggesting that naming trends are relatively consistent nationwide.

The source provided a total of 15,075 names of children born between 2008 and 2022. Seventeen names were excluded, including combinations of two names (e.g., *Sofia Makoto* ソフィア眞慧),[16] names written in the Latin alphabet (e.g., Ainesh), and a surname mistakenly used as the graphic form of a given name (*Hana*, written as 上野 /ueno/). Additionally, one name (*Yui* 結衣) was moved from the boys' list to the girls' list, as the name selection story clarified the misplacement. Several other names that raised doubts about their correct classification in the original source (e.g., *Shōta* 翔太 listed as a girl's name) but which could not be confirmed through the name selection story were retained in their original categories. The final dataset thus contained 15,058 names: 7,411 borne by boys and 7,647 by girls (Table 1). The ratio of boys' to girls' names is 0.97, indicating a nearly even balance. In terms of linguistic diversity, the dataset includes 4,370 distinct graphic forms for boys and 3,906 for girls, while the number of distinct phonological forms is considerably smaller (1,408 for boys and 1,224 for girls).

[15] https://baby-calendar.jp/static/about

[16] In Japan, having a middle name is not legally permitted unless the individual is of non-Japanese origin (Yui, 2011, p. 447).

Table 1

Number of names (Ratio M/F = 0.97)

	Distinct graphic forms	Distinct phon. forms	Number of names
Boys	4 370	1 408	7 411
Girls	3 906	1 224	7 647
Total			15 058

4.2 Dataset Compiled from Meiji Yasuda Life Insurance Company

The next dataset gives us a better longitudinal view. Meiji Yasuda, one of the oldest and largest insurance providers in Japan, publishes annual rankings based on the names of children insured with the company.[17] It provides the ten most popular names (graphic forms) for each year since 1912 and more detailed data for recent years, such as the top 100 graphic forms, 50 phonological forms, and the 25 most popular kanji used in names.

We have collected the top 100 graphic forms and the top 50 phonological forms from the Meiji Yasuda data spanning 2004–2024. As the data collection was quite complex, we released an easy-to-use compilation on our accompanying website. Data from 2006–2024 is available as PDFs on the Meiji Yasuda website, which we manually extracted. Additional data can be accessed via an API on the website, including the top 100 graphic and top 50 phonological forms from 2004–2006, as well as the top 10 graphic forms going back to 1912. Each name from 2004 onward includes rank, frequency,

[17] https://www.meijiyasuda.co.jp/enjoy/ranking/

and gender. If there is a tie (for example, three names sharing rank 99), the data includes all of them, so the number of distinct names per year may exceed 100 or 50. For the data from 1912–2003, only ranks are provided; frequency information is not available. The PDFs also included total sample sizes, for example, in 2024, 7,017 girls' names and 7,308 boys' names were collected. Information is available only for the top 100 of these names, totaling 1,486 girls' and 1,347 boys' names. Sample sizes for 2004 and 2005 were obtained from Ogihara (2020), as PDFs were not available.

Below, we present the total frequency of the full sample and that of the top 100 names, for which we have more information. It is apparent that the number of distinct names is comparatively small, as the top 100 names are often shared across years.

Table 2

Totals Meiji Yasuda (2004–2024) (Ratio M/F = 1.04)

	Distinct graphic forms	Distinct phon. forms	Top 100 graphic forms	Top 50 phon. forms	Number of names
Boys	496	133	26 905	50 408	128 104
Girls	497	124	28 650	48 334	122 634
Total			55 555	98 742	250 738

4.3 Dataset Compiled from the Heisei Namae Jiten

The final source we use, the Heisei Namae Jiten [Heisei Name Dictionary] [18, 19] contains the largest volume of name data, although it is limited to graphic forms only (Table 3). It presents a list of names along with their frequencies, categorized by gender. According to the website, the data covers individuals born between Heisei 1 (1989) and Heisei 21 (2009). However, there is minimal information about the source of the data. The FAQ states that it originates from a major data company, but the terms of their contract prevent the disclosure of its identity, and no data is available beyond 2009. Another issue that raises questions about the credibility of this source is the fact that, for the years 1999 and 2000, the dataset contains more names than the number of children actually born in those years.[20]

Table 3

Number of names for the Heisei Namae Jiten data (Ratio M/F = 1.03)

	Distinct graphic forms	Number of names
Boys	236 735	7 380 951
Girls	196 832	7 153 129
Total		14 534 080

[18] *Heisei* is the name of the Japanese imperial era (1989–2019), whose early years are often associated in Japan with the emergence of contemporary naming trends and shifts in naming aesthetics.

[19] https://www.namaejiten.com/

[20] The authors attempted to contact the owner of the website using the contact form provided. Although an automatic reply confirmed receipt of the inquiry, no further response was received.

The data includes some uncommon, but legally permitted, phenomena, such as the use of the hiragana repetition mark 'ゝ', which allows, for instance, こころ (*Kokoro*) to be written as こゝろ. As such characters are rarely used, they appear only in this large dataset.

The data is quite noisy, containing some names that are clearly not Japanese, including those that use non-permissible characters (239 names, including: 昂樹, Ｊ映美, すた～ら, 花菜＆太一 and some with characters that cannot be printed with standard Japanese fonts like ∧). We filtered out any names containing kanji not found in the official *Jōyō* and *Jinmeiyō kanji* lists (3.1), taking into account that the latter was expanded several times during the period. Despite these various issues, this source provides a large volume of data that enables us to measure name diversity (see Chapter 6).

Since the data from Meiji Yasuda and the Heisei Namae Jiten are sampled differently, and there were some concerns about the quality of the data, we wanted to ensure that both are capturing similar naming patterns. A direct comparison of the full distributions is not possible, as the Meiji Yasuda data includes only the top 100 ranked names. Therefore, we compared the two datasets by measuring the divergence between the top hundred names from each of the Meiji Yasuda data and the Heisei Namae Jiten data using Jensen–Shannon divergence (Lin, 1991), Earth Mover's Distance (Rubner, Tomasi & Guibas, 2000), and correlation analysis, for the years 2004–2009, the only years for which data overlap.

Jensen–Shannon divergence quantifies the similarity between two probability distributions on a scale from 0 (identical) to 1 (completely different), while Earth Mover's Distance measures the minimum "work" required to transform one distribution into another, with lower values indicating greater similarity. We present the overlap and Jensen–Shannon divergence values in Figure 1, and

the full values in Table 4. The analysis reveals consistently high agreement between the two naming datasets, with 72 to 79 names overlapping each year (72–79% overlap), and Jensen–Shannon divergence values ranging from 0.103 to 0.122, indicating relatively similar popularity distributions. Strong positive correlations ($r = 0.56–0.85$) further demonstrate substantial agreement in name rankings between the two sources.

The Chi-square tests show no statistically significant differences in name frequency distributions for all years ($p > 0.05$), with effect sizes remaining small to moderate (Cramer's $V = 0.048–0.065$). The Earth Mover's distance values are consistently low (0.0006–0.0011), suggesting minimal effort would be required to transform one distribution into the other. These results reinforce the conclusion that, despite being collected through different methodologies, the Meiji Yasuda records and the Heisei Namae Jiten data capture fundamentally similar patterns in Japanese baby naming preferences over this period.

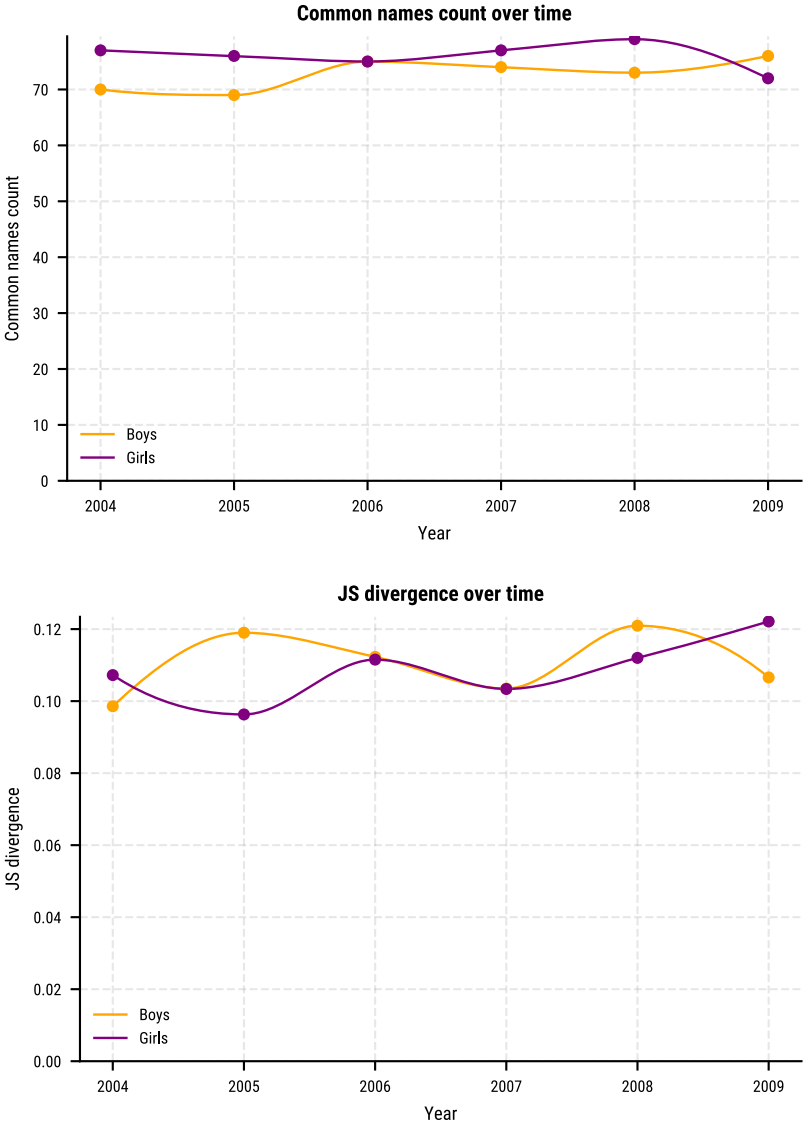
Table 4

Ranking agreement between Meiji Yasuda data and Heisei Namae Jiten data

Year	Overlap	JS divergence	EM distance	Correlation	Difference	P-value
2004	77	0.107	0.001	0.828	0.044	0.393
2005	76	0.096	0.001	0.852	0.040	0.944
2006	75	0.112	0.001	0.759	0.048	0.446
2007	77	0.103	0.001	0.834	0.049	0.849
2008	79	0.112	0.001	0.768	0.057	0.357
2009	72	0.122	0.001	0.560	0.065	0.064

Figure 1

Similarity of the Meiji Yasuda data and Heisei Namae Jiten data



4.4 Birth Data

In order to be able to see the total number of babies born each year, we use data from the Japanese National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (IPSS).[21] From 1989 to 2023, the number of births declined by 42%. There have been small irregularities, but the overall trend is strongly downward.

Table 5

Number of babies born 1989–2003 (Ratio M/F = 1.05)

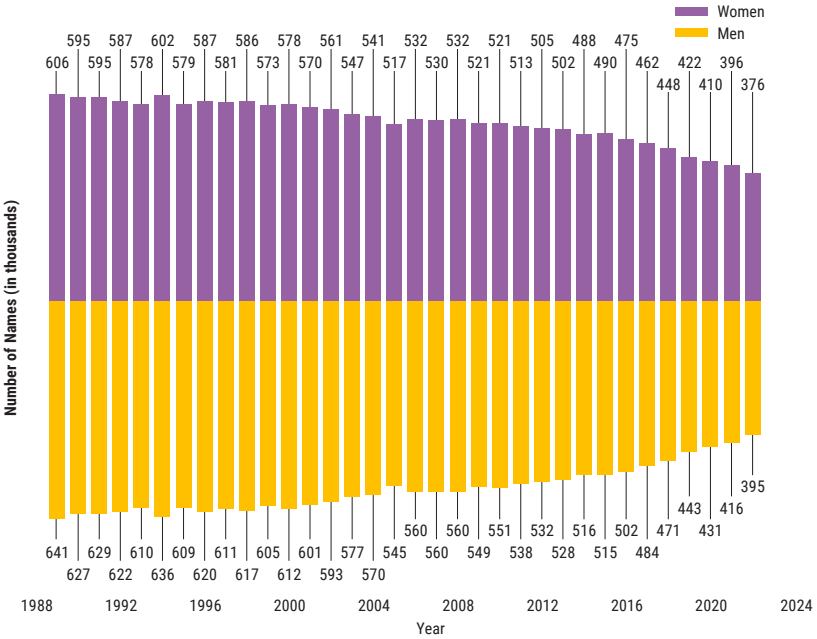
	Frequency
Boys	19 246 580
Girls	18 258 382
Total	37 504 962

At birth, the ratio of boys to girls is 1.05 (Table 5), meaning 105 boys are born for every 100 girls – the same as the global baseline (CIA, 2025). The Heisei Namae Jiten and Meiji Yasuda ratios are similar (1.03 and 1.04), suggesting they are demographically representative. In contrast, the Baby Calendar data shows a ratio of 0.97, indicating slightly more girls' names than boys'. This points to some sampling bias, which is typical of opt-in Internet datasets.

[21] Specifically, table 04-01 (https://web.archive.org/web/20230507202901/https://www.ipss.go.jp/p-info/e/psj2012/PSJ2012-04.xls).

Figure 2

Number of names per year, divided by gender (Births)



4.5 Data Summary

The following table and graphs provide a summary of the main primary data sources used in this book.

Table 6

Summary of the datasets

Source	From	To	# Names	#/year	Comment
Baby Calendar	2008	2022	15 058	1 004	Includes pronunciation
Meiji Yasuda	2004	2024	55 555	2 645	Most popular 100 names only
Heisei Namae	1989	2009	14 534 080	692 099	Noisy data
Births	1989	2023	37 504 962	1 071 570	Number of children born

To compare name frequency across years, we use two graphs – one showing a linear scale on the y-axis (Figure 3) and one with a logarithmic scale (Figure 4). These graphs display the total number of births alongside the number of names recorded in the Heisei Namae Jiten, Meiji Yasuda, and Baby Calendar datasets. A complete table with all frequencies is available on the website (see 4.6).

The data shows a marked decline in births, from over 600,000 per gender in 1989 to fewer than 400,000 in 2023. The Heisei Namae Jiten dataset provides the most extensive coverage but is unevenly distributed over time. On the linear scale, the Meiji Yasuda and Baby Calendar datasets are barely visible.

When we convert the y-axis to a logarithmic scale, where one tick on the y-axis shows the amount multiplied by 10, it becomes clearer that the Meiji Yasuda dataset captures about one-tenth the volume of the Heisei Namae Jiten dataset, and the Baby Calendar dataset about one-tenth of Meiji Yasuda's. All three datasets exhibit substantial variation in yearly coverage and contain different kinds of data. By combining them, we are able to give a more comprehensive view of Japanese names.

Figure 3

Names data coverage vs. total births (linear scale)

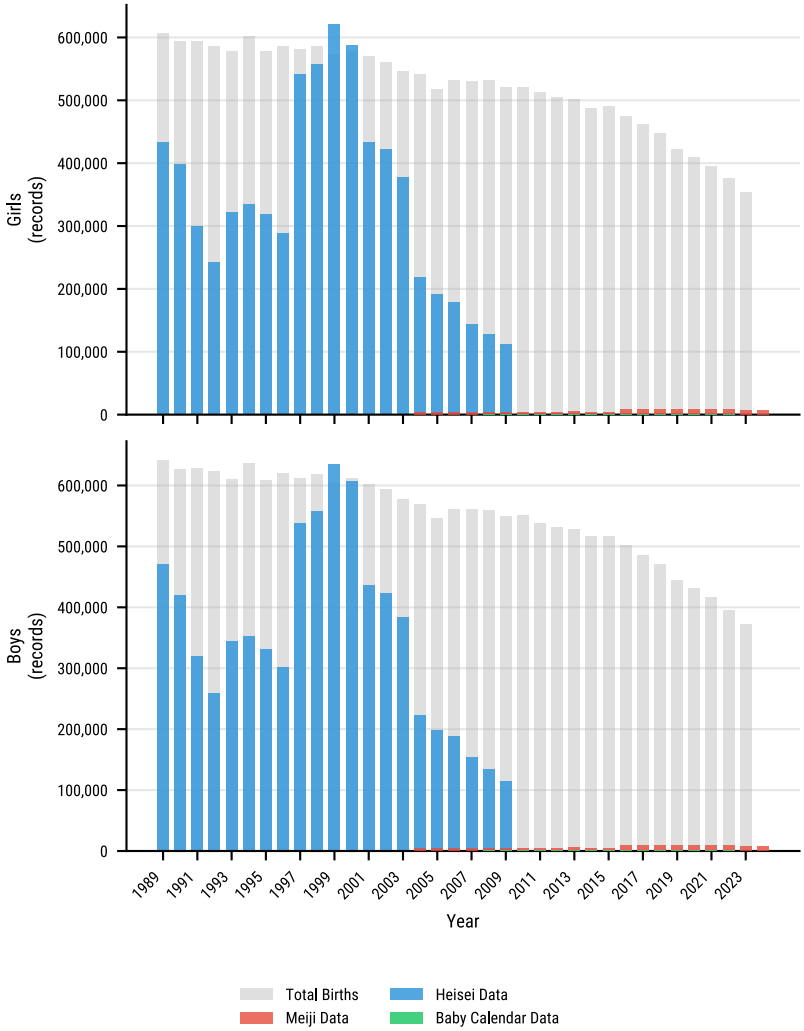
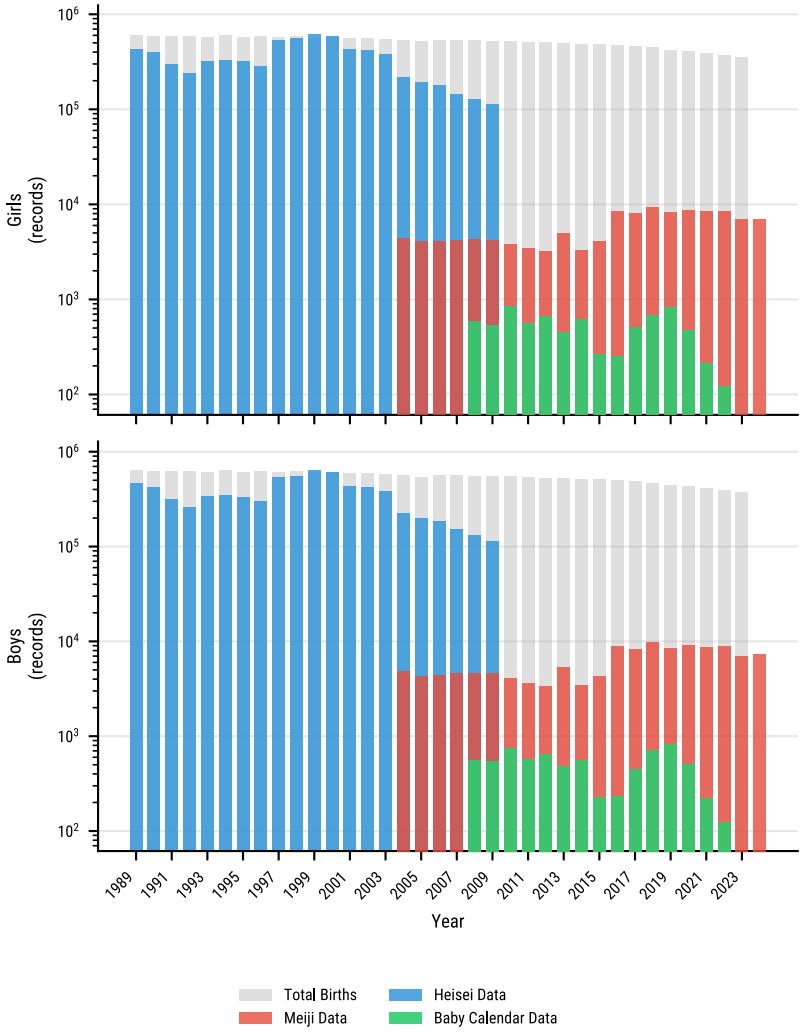


Figure 4

Names data coverage vs. total births (logarithmic scale)



4.6 Data Repository and Project Website

All the data referenced in this book, as well as the code used to process it and display it on the website, are openly available on GitHub <https://github.com/bond-lab/namae-bc> and archived in Zenodo <DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18591986>. The data remains the property of the original compilers, and our code is available under the Open MIT license.

GitHub provides a collaborative platform for version-controlled software development, making the analytical code easy to inspect, reuse, and extend by other researchers. Zenodo, a general-purpose open repository operated by CERN, ensures long-term preservation and citation of the dataset through a persistent DOI. By linking GitHub and Zenodo, we combine flexible, ongoing development with permanent archival access.

These practices align with the **FAIR guidelines** for scientific data management (Wilkinson et al, 2016):

Findable: The data and code are assigned persistent identifiers and described with clear metadata.

Accessible: Both repositories provide open access without login barriers.

Interoperable: The materials are shared in widely used formats (json and Python) compatible with standard tools.

Reusable: The resources include documentation and information on licensing, enabling verification, replication, and extension of the results.

Together, this ensures that the work not only remains accessible and citable over time but also maximizes its value for future research and teaching.

In addition, to make the data more generally accessible, we have created an interactive website <https://compling.upol.cz/namae/>. It presents the lists of names, allowing sorting by various criteria. The site also displays statistics for the various phenomena we discuss in Chapters 6–8, with data organized by features, overall statistics based on name length, and descriptions of interesting phenomena (reduplication, permissible kanji for names, and diversity measures). For most phenomena in the book, we show only a subset. For example, when presenting which characters are more strongly associated with a particular gender, we include only those with statistically significant differences. The website provides access to all the characters, along with the strength of association, and includes a search function for the individual names.

An example of the results for the name 蓮 (with the phonological forms /ren/ and /hasu/) using the Baby Calendar dataset is shown in Figure 5. It displays the orthography, its split into morae and syllables, and the mapping between the orthography and phonology. We then show how often the name occurs, the genders it is used for, and its distribution over time. Finally, we link to other names with the same orthography or the same pronunciation, if any exist.

Finally, the website archive contains all the scripts used to clean the data and to generate both the underlying values and the graphs shown in this book (and more), along with tables summarizing the results. For this reason, we have not included the tables alongside the graphs in the book.

Figure 5

Screenshots of the search results for 蓮

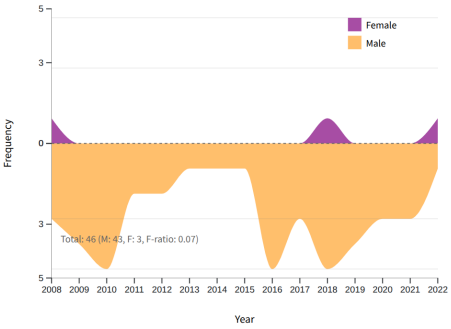
蓮 (れん /ren/)

Orthograpy	蓮	1	kanji
Morae	れ.ん /re.n/	2	
Syllables	れん /ren/	1	
Mapping	蓮/れん/on		

Frequency = 46 (Male 43, Female 3)

F-Ratio (F/M+F) = 0.07

Frequency Over Time



Other pronunciations: はす /hasu/

Other names pronounced the same: 憐 恋 漣 廉 蓮恩 連 蓮生 怜 怜夢 恋音 漣

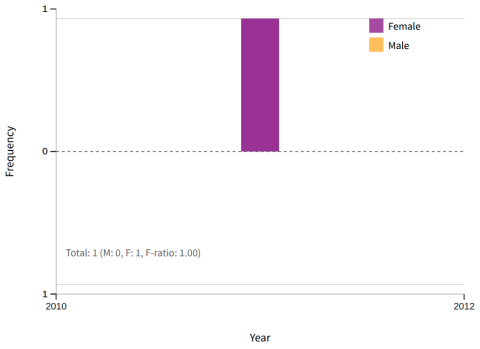
蓮 (はす /hasu/)

Orthograpy	蓮	1	kanji
Morae	は.す /ha.su/	2	
Syllables	は.す /ha.su/	2	
Mapping	蓮/はす/kun		

Frequency = 1 (Male 0, Female 1)

F-Ratio (F/M+F) = 1.00

Frequency Over Time



Other pronunciations: れん /ren/

5 Expression of Gender in Japanese Names from the 1900s to the 1970s

This chapter provides an overview of how Japanese names bestowed in the twentieth century distinguished gender. It introduces the main gender-specific name patterns used for boys and girls during the twentieth century up until the 1970s when new, markedly different, types of names began to gain popularity, and some traditional patterns that clearly distinguished gender either declined in use or gradually lost their gender specificity. Additionally, this chapter highlights names that started drawing attention in the 1950s and 1960s for being gender-ambiguous. The overview is primarily based on scholarly literature, books aimed at expectant parents, and name rankings by Meiji Yasuda.

5.1 Masculine Name Patterns

Up until the second half of the nineteenth century, men, particularly those from the upper class, typically had multiple names during

their lives: a childhood name,[22] a true name,[23] and one or more other unofficial names[24] by which they were commonly known, addressed or referred to in everyday life. The number of names and the name patterns varied based on social class. A true name typically adhered to a two-kanji four-mora pattern, i.e., consisting of two auspicious kanji, each utilizing a Japanese reading (*kun'yomi*)[25] (Sakata, 2006, p. 38). The most common names used instead of the true name usually expressed birth order or were derived from office titles[26] (Koop & Inada 1923, pp. 70–71; Watanabe, 1980, p. 240).

After the Meiji Restoration (1868), a new system of registration was established based on the Family Registration Law (*kosekihō*)

---

22 Known as *yōmyō/yōmei/osanana* (幼名), *warawana* (童名), etc. (Watanabe, 1980, p. 239).

23 *Jitsumei/jitsumyō* 実名 (true names), also known as *imina* 諱 (taboo names), were used only in official situations, such as religious ceremonies, in official documents, or when dealing with a person of higher social status (Sakata, 2006, p. 17). They were usually bestowed during the coming-of-age ceremony, *genpuku* (元服), and replaced a childhood name.

24 This practice is related to what Hozumi (1926) refers to as *jitsumei keihizoku* 実名敬避俗, the avoidance of using one's real name because it was believed that it was possible to control a person by saying aloud their name. According to Ōno (2013, p. 54), only the closest family knew a person's true name. It was, therefore, customary to address people, especially those of higher social status, by a name other than their real name, called *tsūshō* (通称), and also *kemyō* (仮名), *zokumyō/zokumei* (俗名) and *yobina* (呼び名) (Watanabe, 1980, p. 238; Okutomi, 1999, p. 179; Kida, 2002, p. 22–23).

25 For an explanation of *kun'yomi*, *on'yomi* and *nanori* readings, see 3.2.

26 Names based on office titles (*kandona* 官途名) became increasingly prevalent in the second half of the fifteenth century, with their numbers particularly surging in the seventeenth century (Sakata, 2006, p. 78, 112).

introduced in 1871 and implemented in 1872 (Ueno, 2006, p. 22; Chapman, 2011, p. 6). Under this system, each individual, regardless of social status, was permitted to register only one name. The various name patterns, which had previously represented different types of names bestowed in different life periods and serving different purposes began to be used as a name received at birth and officially registered with the surname.

Men's names are typically written in kanji, and the morphological structure of traditional naming patterns is closely tied to the kanji used for each morpheme. This stands in contrast to more recent *ateji*-type names, where the kanji are chosen solely for their sound, with little regard for their meaning – or, in some cases, chosen for their meaning even though their reading does not match the pronunciation they represent. Due to this strong link between the morphological structure and the kanji used, the naming patterns that appeared in men's names throughout the twentieth century are categorized here according to the number of kanji.

These patterns, however, did not occur with equal frequency during this time. The popularity of individual patterns and particular onymic suffixes evolved over time. While the Meiji Yasuda rankings of the top ten boys' names are dominated by single-kanji names (see Table 7 below), the most common pattern throughout the examined period is two-kanji names (Komori, 2002, pp. 70–71). Due to the variety of masculine name patterns, it is more difficult for a multi-kanji name to rise among the most frequently given names without any special influence or popularization. Single-kanji names accounted for ten to twenty percent of boys' names during the period (Komori, 2002, p. 70). Three-kanji names have decreased in popularity since the Taisho era (1912–1926) (Sakuma, 1969, p. 186; Jugaku, 1979, p. 183). Generally speaking, names given to

boys show a trend toward shorter forms, with single and two-kanji patterns increasingly utilizing Sino-Japanese (*on'yomi*) readings.

Table 7

The most popular top 10 boys' names by Meiji Yasuda (1912–1970)

	1912	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970
1	正一	清	清	勇	博	浩	健一
2	清	茂	勇	清	茂	浩一	誠
3	正雄	三郎	実	進	隆	誠	哲也
4	正	勇	進	博	実	浩二	剛
5	茂	実	茂	弘	清	隆	博
6	武雄	一郎	博	勲	進	修	直樹
7	正治	博	和夫	勝	明	徹	学
8	三郎	弘	三郎	武	修	浩之	博之
9	正夫	正	弘	稔	豊	聡	英樹
10	一郎	正雄	幸雄	茂	誠	博	修

1) Single-kanji names

Single-kanji names can be traced back to the ninth century, when Emperor Saga gave several of his sons names such as *Makoto* 信, *Hiromu* 弘, *Tokiwa* 常, *Hiroshi* 寛, and *Akira* 明 (Watanabe, 1980, p. 236). These names fall into two types. The first type, illustrated by the examples above, uses trimoraic Japanese readings (*kun'yomi* or *nanori*). Until the second half of the 1950s, Japanese readings of single-kanji names were more common. The second type of single-kanji names, utilizing bimoraic Sino-Japanese (*on'yomi*) readings, began to grow in popularity in the second half of the century (Sakuma, 1964, p. 80; Yasuda, 1998, p. 19).

1a) Japanese reading (three-mora) type

These names may take an adjectival form ending in *-shi* (e.g., *Hiroshi* 博/宏/弘/浩/洋/寛, *Hisashi* 久/寿, *Hitoshi* 仁/整/斉/準, *Kiyoshi* 清/潔, *Masashi* 雅/正, *Satoshi* 諭, *Takashi* 隆/孝/享, *Takeshi* 健/武/毅, *Tsuyoshi* 毅/強, *Yasushi* 康/靖), a verbal form ending in *-ru* (e.g., *Itaru* 到, *Mamoru* 守 *Masaru* 勝/優, *Minoru* 実/稔, *Noboru* 昇/登, *Shigeru* 茂/滋/繁), *-mu* (e.g., *Susumu* 進, *Tsutomu* 勉/務, *Tōru* 徹), *-bu* (e.g., *Manabu* 学), etc., or, less frequently, other parts of speech (e.g., *Akira* 昭/晃/彰, *Chikara* 力, *Hajime* 一/創, *Iwao* 巌, *Makoto* 信/真).

1b) Sino-Japanese reading (two-mora) type

Examples of this type include *Ei* 映/栄, Gen 言/源/玄, *Iku* 育/郁, *Jun* 淳/準/純/潤, *Kei* 慶/佳/計, *Ken* 謙/健, *Kō* 航/好/功, *Rei* 玲, *Ryō* 涼/亮/良, *Ryū* 竜/隆, *Sei* 整/聖, *Shin* 伸/真/信, *Shō* 将/唱.

2) Two-kanji names

Two-kanji names were the most common type of men's names throughout the twentieth century (Komori, 2002, p. 70). They can be further divided into several basic subtypes.

2a) Two-kanji four-mora names

This typically masculine pattern consists of two "equally important" kanji, which utilize bimoraic Japanese readings, often expressing moral qualities and virtues. As previously mentioned, this pattern was typical for "true names" in the past. The kanji can be usually used in either order: *Hideyoshi* 秀義 – *Yoshihide* 義秀, *Yasuhiro* 康弘 – *Hiroyasu* 弘康, *Masayuki* 正幸 – *Yukimasa* 幸正, *Yoshihisa* 義久 – *Hisayoshi* 義久, etc. This type was popular especially in the first half of the twentieth century but was also frequently used in the 1950s and 1960s.

2b) Ending in a numeral

This is another typically masculine pattern, exemplified by names such as *Shin'ichi* 真一, *Shōji* 正一, and *Kenzō* 健三. The numeral usually, although not exclusively, refers to birth order as counted within the line of sons, indicating a boy's position among his male siblings: 一 (*-ichi/kazu* 'first', meaning 'first-born'), 二 (*-ji* 'second'), 三 (*-zō* 'third'), etc. The kanji denoting numbers utilize Sino-Japanese readings, except for 一, which also has the Japanese reading /kazu/. For instance, the name 宏一 is usually read as *Kōichi*, combining two Sino-Japanese readings, or *Hirokazu*, combining two Japanese readings.

Sakuma (1969, p. 233) points out that while assigning the eldest son the number one in his name gives a positive impression, numbers two and three do not hold favorable connotations. 一 has remained popular in boys' names in recent years and continues to also be used in the final position, whereas the use of 二 and 三 is marginal (Barešová, 2019).

2c) Masculine suffixes (name-final kanji)

There are a number of kanji that are used, some of them exclusively, in the final position of a name.[27] Sano (1988, p. 98) defines them as kanji that merely express gender and have no specific meaning, or, more precisely, have some meaning but it is secondary to their function in expressing gender. Some of the masculine end suffixes/kanji, such as *-suke* 介/輔/助, were derived from the office titles

[27] They are most commonly referred to as *tomeji* (止め字; 'final character') (e.g., Satō, 2007; Makino, 2012) or *soeji* (添字; lit. 'attached character') (Sakuma, 1969; Sano, 1988; Tahara, 1991), and also as *jinmeiyō setsubigo* (人名用接尾語; 'name suffix') (e.g., Jugaku, 1979; Satō, 2007).

and court ranks used in premodern Japan (Ōno, 2013, pp. 82–84). Several others have the meaning 'man' (男, 雄, 夫, 彦, 郎). The following list, which is not exhaustive, is organized in alphabetical order based on the syllable (morpheme) they represent. It includes suffixes that were commonly used throughout the examined period or its latter part. Those that were used in the Meiji (1868–1912) and Taisho (1912–1926) eras and later ceased to be used, such as *-kichi* 吉 or *-zō* 造/蔵 are not included.

- ***-hei*** (平)
  This masculine onymic suffix, originally linked to an office-title element (Collazo, 2016, p. 29), rose in popularity in the second half of the twentieth century. *Yōhei* 洋平 appeared among the most common names in the late 1970s, and names ending in *-hei* gained further momentum with the beginning of the Heisei (平成) era (see 7.3.2).

- ***-hiko*** (彦)
  The morpheme *-hiko* carries the meaning of 'accomplished young man' and has a long history of use in men's names. One theory suggests that it originated from 日子 (*hi* 'sun' + *ko* 'child') (Sakuma, 1969, p. 218) and, in ancient Japan, functioned as an honorific term for regional chiefs or nobles (Plutschow, 1995, p. 19).[28] It became particularly popular as a suffix/name-final

[28] The Japanese politician Kanehiko Shindō (born in 1963) has his name *Kanehiko* written as 金日子. The final 子 may give a false impression of a feminine name, but this is the ancient way of writing *-hiko* (彦). While three-*kanji* names ending in 子 are typically feminine, they consist of three morae. Four-mora names are typical of men's names.

kanji in men's names during the 1960s. According to Meiji Yasuda's name rankings, the name *Kazuhiko* (和彦) consistently appeared among the top ten most popular names almost every year in that period. As in *Kazuhiko*, *-hiko* 彦 can complement a kanji with a Japanese reading (e.g., *Takahiko* 隆彦, *Takehiko* 健彦) as well as a Sino-Japanese reading, e.g., *Tatsuhiko* 達彦, *Tetsuhiko* 哲彦).

- ***-ki***（樹, 記, 希, 基, 紀）
  Names ending in 樹 rose quickly in popularity after World War II as names for boys (Sakuma, 1969, p. 210). Some of the most common are *Naoki* 直樹, *Hideki* 秀樹/英樹, and later 大樹, most commonly read as *Daiki*, *Hiroki* or *Taiki*. Unlike the other onymic suffixes and corresponding name-final kanji listed here, *-ki* is now also used in girls' names, especially represented by 希 and less frequently by 樹 and 紀, alongside newly popular kanji (see 8.1.2).

- ***-o***（男, 雄, 夫, 郎, 朗, and 生）
  Except for the last kanji, all of these have the general meaning 'man.' 雄 also includes the meaning 'brave', 夫 the meaning 'husband', and 郎 the meaning 'son'. This type of name-final kanji was not very common until the Taisho period, when it began to gain popularity (Ōno, 2013, p. 116) and became widespread during the Showa period (1926–1989). In the 1960s, it was still used – especially 夫 – although not as frequently as before the war (1969, p. 213). 生 ('to live'), 郎 and 朗 can also be read as /o/, but the last two are more commonly read as /rō/ (see *-rō* below).

- ***-shi*/*-ji***（士, 志, 司, 史, 嗣, 詩, etc.）
  As explained above, there are single-kanji names (1a) that utilize Japanese readings – adjectival forms ending in *-shi*. For example,

浩 can be read as /hiroshi/, meaning 'broad.' The kanji, however, also has the reading /hiro/, in addition to /hiroshi/. Thus, the name *Hiroshi* can also be composed of the kanji 浩 complemented with a name-final kanji representing /shi/, resulting in combinations such as 浩史 or 浩士. Similarly, the name *Kiyoshi* ('pure') can be written with one kanji as 清 or with two kanji as, for example, 清志 or 清司. /shi/ can be combined not only with Japanese readings but also Sino-Japanese ones, and may undergo voicing to /ji/, as in *Seiji* 誠史, *Kōji* 浩士.

- ***-rō*** (郎, 朗)
  郎, meaning 'son,' was already in use during the late Heian period (11th–12th centuries) in childhood names (Ōno, 2013, p. 70). This kanji is typically used in name patterns indicating birth order, such as *Ichirō* 一郎 or *Tarō* 太郎, *Jirō* 二郎/次郎, *Saburō* 三郎, *Shirō* 四郎, *Gorō* 五郎, etc. These two-kanji combinations can also be preceded by another kanji. Three-kanji names ending in 太郎 or 一郎 (see below), according to Sakuma (1969, p. 228), are reminiscent of the Meiji and Taisho eras and became less common in the 1960s. Instead, two-kanji names such as *Tatsurō*/*Tatsuo* 達郎/達朗 ('bright', 'cheerful') became more prevalent.

- ***-suke*** (介, 助, 輔, etc.)
  This onymic suffix, written in various kanji and derived from an office title meaning 'second office' (次官 *suke*), increased in use in boys' names in the latter half of the last century. The name *Daisuke* 大輔 appeared in the Meiji Yasuda rankings among the top ten boys' names in the 1970s and remained there for two decades.

- ***-to*, *-hito*** (人), ***-hito*** (仁)
  人 ('person') appears in names that express expectations regarding the bearer's character, as in *Masato/Masahito* 正人 ('honest person'), *Yoshito/Yoshihito* 義人 ('righteous person'), or *Naoto* 直人 ('straightforward, honest person'). The character 仁 carries the classical meaning of benevolence or humaneness and has long-standing prestige: it appears in the personal names of all modern Japanese emperors, including *Mutsuhito* 睦仁 (Meiji), *Yoshihito* 嘉仁 (Taisho), *Hirohito* 裕仁 (Showa), *Akihito* 明仁, and *Naruhito* 徳仁 (Reiwa).

- ***-ya*** (也, 矢, 哉, 弥)
  Names ending in *-ya* were not commonly seen before World War II. The suffix gives masculine names a somewhat softer, more fluid, sound. *Tetsuya* 哲也 was among the most popular names in the 1960s and 1970s, and *Tatsuya* (e.g., 達也/竜也) was also highly favored.

3) Three-kanji names

Men's names consisting of three kanji usually follow one of the following patterns. The first combines one kanji with a two-kanji compound expressing the birth order, creating five or even six-mora names such as *Kōtarō* 幸太郎 or *Kōichirō* 幸一郎 (see -rō above).

The second pattern consists of a desired kanji complemented by the masculine compound *-nosuke* (e.g., *Ryūnosuke* 竜之助, 隆之輔, 龍ノ介), represented by combinations of *no* 之/乃/ノ and *-suke* 介/助/輔 (see above), where *no* functions as a genitive particle and lends the name a historical flavor.

A less common type of three-kanji name, resembling a feminine name pattern popularized in the second half of the last century, is the so-called *ateji* type (see above). This type is based on two-kanji

names such as *Hirohiko* 博彦 /hiro.hiko/, but the morpheme represented by the first kanji is written with two kanji, i.e., each mora is represented by a separate character, for example, *Hirohiko* 飛呂彦[29] /hi.ro.hiko/.

5.2 Feminine Name Patterns

Before the Meiji Restoration, women's names – even among the upper classes – were recorded less consistently than men's, and most women received only one name in their lifetime, a situation that Sakata (2006, p. 161) attributes to women's generally low social status. This combination of factors limited variation, which helps to explain why women's names appear less diverse than men's. Female commoners typically had bimoraic names (Jugaku, 1979; Kida, 2002), less frequently trimoraic, usually written in kana. Upper-class women generally had names written in kanji, with the bimoraic base often complemented by the suffix *-ko* 子 or *-hime* 姫 (Ōno, 2013, p. 159).[30] When addressing or referring to an upper-class woman with a bimoraic name, it was common to add *-ko* 子 as an honorific suffix or courtesy title.[31]

[29] This is the pseudonym of the Japanese manga writer Toshiyuki Araki (born in 1960).

[30] In the Edo period, girls in aristocratic families (*kuge*) typically received 子, and girls in feudal lord (*daimyō*) families or upper-class samurai families received 姫.

[31] A female commoner with a bimoraic name would be addressed or referred to using the honorific prefix *o-* (cf. *Haru-ko* for an upper-class woman and *O-haru* for a lower-class woman).

Up until the first decades of the twentieth century, women's names written in kana prevailed and continued to be widely used for several more decades. According to Tominaga (1957, pp. 40–41), kana was used for writing women's names to establish a clear distinction between men and women and to make them appear feminine at first glance.

Over the examined period, names bestowed upon girls underwent a significant shift from bimoraic names written in kana to trimoraic names written in two or three kanji, typically with a feminine suffix. This shift was accelerated by the surge in popularity of *-ko* names toward the end of the Meiji period and in the following decades. As mentioned above, names containing *-ko* had long been associated with higher status, and *-ko* was also used as a courtesy title, both of which contributed to its popularity. In the first decades of the twentieth century, many women used it unofficially as part of their names, and women with bimoraic names were often presented with *-ko* appended (for a detailed description of the *-ko* phenomenon, see Hashimoto and Itō, 2011; Barešová, 2020b). This feminine suffix became the dominant gender marker of women's names in the twentieth century, a development clearly visible in the Meiji Yasuda rankings (Table 8).

Table 8

The most popular top 10 girls' names by Meiji Yasuda (1912–1970)

	1912	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970
1	千代	文子	和子	紀子	和子	恵子	直美
2	ハル	久子	幸子	和子	洋子	由美子	智子
3	ハナ	千代子	節子	幸子	幸子	久美子	陽子
4	正子	静子	美代子	節子	恵子	智子	裕子
5	文子	貞子	愛子	洋子	節子	浩子	由美子
6	ヨシ	芳子	久子	弘子	京子	裕子	真由美
7	千代子	愛子	文子	美智子	悦子	洋子	直子
8	キヨ	清子	光子	久子	恵美子	明美	久美子
9	静子	キヨ	孝子	文子	順子	幸子	由美
10	はる	君子	敏子	悦子	由美子	和子	恵子

In the following overview, women's names are classified based on their phonological form which better reflects their development. Nonetheless, the structure of women's names is closely connected with kanji even when they are written in kana. The patterns are ordered in a way that partially reflects their development. Similar to men's names, a shift in preference toward Sino-Japanese readings can be observed in the second half of the century.

1) Bimoraic names written in kana

These names are usually monothematic,[32] corresponding to a morpheme represented by one kanji, but more frequently written in kana: *Hana* はな/ハナ (花; 'flower'), *Yuki* ゆき/ユキ (雪; 'snow'), *Kiyo* きよ/キヨ (清; 'pure'), *Nao* なお/ナオ (直 'honesty'). These names were widely used until the first decades of the twentieth century when they gradually started being written in kanji and complemented with *-ko* 子 (see below). The last name of this type to appear in the Meiji Yasuda rankings among the top ten was *Kiyo* (キヨ), in 1920.

2) Trimoraic (or bimoraic) names with feminine suffixes

These names typically consist of a bimoraic semantic base (as in 1) complemented with an onymic suffix represented by one kanji. Unlike masculine suffixes, feminine suffixes are one-mora (light syllable) morphemes.

[32] Monothematic = one word or element of meaning; dithematic = two words or elements of meaning (compound nouns combining two roots linked by connecting vowels or affixes).

- ***-e*** (枝, 江, 恵, 栄), ***-no*** (乃), ***-yo*** (代)
  These are part of a larger set of suffixes (*-i*, *-e*, *-no*, *-yo*, and *-o*) which, according to Tsunoda (1988, p. 204), were documented in women's names in the Nara and Heian periods (8th–12th centuries) and then again in the Edo period, when they were widely used in women's names in certain areas of Japan (see also Komori, 2002). In the first half of the twentieth century, *-e*, *-no*, and *-yo* came to be used throughout Japan (Kida, 2002). In Jugaku's survey of names of girls born around 1960,[33] *-e* (枝, 江, 恵, 栄) and *-yo* (代) were represented in 4.3% and 4.6% of names, respectively, while *-no* (乃) appeared only marginally (Jugaku, 1979, p. 189).

- ***-ko***（子）
  As mentioned above, the spread of *-ko* in names went hand in hand with the wider adoption of kanji, making girls' names written in kanji distinctively feminine. Between 1921 and 1956, all of the top ten girls' names in the Meiji Yasuda rankings ended in 子. According to Sakuma's research, during its peak in the 1940s, over 86% of girls received a name ending in *-ko*, and even in 1958 the proportion remained high at 68% (Sakuma, 1969, p. 98). Jugaku's survey reveals similarly high levels of use, at over 70% (Jugaku, 1979, p. 189).

- ***-mi***（美）
  The suffix *-mi* ('beautiful') first appeared in girls' names in the late Edo period (Tsunoda, 1988, p. 205) and remained relatively

[33] A survey conducted in several high schools during the 1970s, during which the author collected 8,825 girl's names.

uncommon at the beginning of the twentieth century (Barešová, 2017, p. 47). It initially tended to occur in positions other than the final one, especially in *-ko* names such as *Miyoko* 美代子, *Michiko* 美智子, *Emiko* 恵美子, *Yumiko* 由美子, and *Kumiko* 久美子. From the 1950s onward, it increasingly appeared in the final position, in names such as *Akemi* 明美, *Mayumi* 真由美, *Naomi* 直美 and others. In Jugaku's survey, 美 was the second most frequent name-final kanji in names of girls born around 1960, appearing in almost 11% of them (Jugaku, 1979, p. 189).

As follows, trimoraic (bimoraic) names with feminine suffixes can be written in several ways: by combining kana and kanji, entirely in kanji (which is most common), or entirely in kana.

2a) Trimoraic names combining kana and kanji

This type frequently appeared in the first decades of the twentieth century, most often combining the bimoraic base written in kana and the suffix written in kanji: e.g., *Hanae* はな江/ハナ江 (花; 'flower' + 江), *Yukie* ゆき恵/ユキ恵 (雪; 'snow' + 恵), *Kiyoko* きよ子/キヨ子 (清; 'pure' + 子), *Naoko* なお子/ナオ子 (直 'honesty' + 子). While this pattern gave way to the two-kanji pattern, Sakuma and Sakuma (1966) mention its revival and list this pattern among the newest patterns in the 1960s: *Natsumi* なつ美, *Haruna* はる奈, *Sumie* すみ絵, *Kaori* かお里. As is evident from the last example, this pattern is not limited to names consisting of a bimoraic base and a feminine suffix but can also apply to monothematic names: *Kaori* 香 → *Kaori* かお里. In this case, *-ri* is reinterpreted as a suffix.

2b) Three-mora two-kanji names

These names consist of a bimoraic semantic base represented by one kanji and a suffix represented by one kanji: e.g., *Hanae* 花江, *Yukie* 雪恵, *Kiyoko* 清子, *Naoko* 直子.

2c) Three-mora three-kanji names

This type became widely popular in the second half of the twentieth century. With this type, the phonological form is decided first, and then each mora is assigned one kanji. Names such as the above-mentioned *Yukie* and *Kiyoko* can be written, for example, as 由紀恵 and 喜代子, respectively. The morphemes *yuki* and *kiyo* are written with two kanji, each representing one mora. According to Sakuma and Sakuma (1966, p. 65), this type of name gained popularity alongside the main protagonist *Machiko* 真知子 of the 1952–1954 TV drama *Kimi no na wa* [Your Name]. Crown Princess *Michiko* 美智子 further contributed to the popularity of this name pattern at the end of the 1950s.

2d) Two-mora two-kanji names

Another type that became popular in the second half of the twentieth century is two-mora names ending in a feminine suffix such as *Kiko* 希子, *Riko* 理子, *Chie* 知恵, *Rie* 理恵, *Emi* 恵美, *Kumi* 久美, *Yumi* 由美, which utilize Sino-Japanese reading of the first kanji.

2e) Three-mora names written in kana

Three-mora names can also be fully written in hiragana or katakana, including the suffix syllable, which would otherwise be written in kanji (e.g., *Michiko* みちこ/ミチコ, ゆきこ/ユキコ, *Michie* みちえ/ミチエ, *Yukie* ゆきえ/ユキエ).

3) Trimoraic names without feminine suffixes

While bimoraic, usually monothematic names written in kana were widespread until the first decades of the last century, trimoraic names began to gain popularity in the second half of that century. These names do not contain a specific feminine suffix but correspond to words whose sound and/or meaning are perceived as feminine (Sakuma, 1964, p. 89), e.g., *Yukari*, *Hibari*, *Midori*, *Akane*, *Aoi*, *Sayuri*. Although Sakuma also lists, for example, *Kaoru* as a name given to both genders (p. 90; see also Section 5.3), its rendering in kana, as opposed to 薫, contributes to its perception as feminine.

4) Two-mora two-kanji names without feminine suffixes

This pattern consists of two morae, which is typical of feminine names. However, unlike the old bimoraic names, these are written with two kanji, i.e., each mora is represented by one kanji. These names resemble the 2c) pattern but do not utilize the traditional *tomeji* (name-final kanji). They became popular in the second half of the twentieth century (e.g., *Yuki* 由紀, *Mika* 美加, *Mari* 真理).

5) Three-mora two-kanji names without feminine suffixes

This type is structurally similar to masculine two-kanji four-mora names but they only have three morae: *Chiharu* 千春, *Chinami* 千波, *Chigusa* 千草, *Chiaki* 千晶, *Yayoi* 弥生, *Sanae* 早苗, *Masumi* 真澄, *Mayumi* 真弓, etc.

6) Single-kanji names

Single-kanji names are listed last as they are more typical of men. During the Meiji and Taisho periods, it was possible to encounter women's bimoraic names (see pattern 1), such as *Kiyo*, written in kanji (清) without the 子 suffix. These could easily be confused with

men's names, such as *Kiyoshi* 清 in this particular case. With the widespread use of 子, single-kanji names were rarely given to girls. However, their popularity grew in the second half of the twentieth century, especially in the last two decades. Sakuma (1969, p. 183) lists examples of single-kanji names that he considers feminine, including *Sakura* 桜, *Ai* 愛, *Miyako* 都, *Kaori/Kaoru* 香, *Emi* 笑, *Beni* 紅, *Tae* 妙, etc.

5.3 Names Common to Both Men and Women

As Jugaku (1968, p. 62) points out, Japanese names were typically clearly differentiated between men and women, although exceptions can be found in any period.

The following two sets of names are of 51 women and 60 men born in the first half of the 1940s. They come from a 2019 survey conducted by one of the authors among 111 students at Gakushuin Joshi Daigaku, during which she collected their names as well as the names of their family members.

Women (1940–1944)

Ai 愛, *Akiko* 明子, *Eiko* 榮子, *Emiko* 恵美子 (2x), *Fujie* 藤枝, *Fumiko* 富子, *Hideko* 淑子, *Hideko* 秀子, *Isako* イサ子, *Kayoko* 香代子, *Kazuko* 和子 (3x), *Kazuyo* 和代, *Keiko* 慶子, *Kiwako* 僖和子, *Kiyoko* キヨ子, *Kiyoko* 清子 (2x), *Kumiko* 久美子, *Machiko* 美智子, *Michiko* 通子, *Mitsu* ミツ, *Nobuko* 信子, *Noriko* 功子, *Noriko* 法子, *Noriko* 則子, *Ritsuko* りつ子, *Seiko* 征子, *Setsuko* 節子, *Sueko* 末子, *Takako* 孝子 (2x), *Teiko* 禎子, *Teruko* 照子, *Tomie* 富江, *Toyoko* 登洋子, *Yaeko* 八重子 (2x), *Yasuko* 康子, *Yasuko* 育子, *Yōko* 洋子, *Yōko* 陽子, *Yoshie* 好枝, *Yoshie* 吉江, *Yoshiko* 美子, *Yoshiko* 良子, *Yoshiko* 與師子, *Yukuko* 行子, *Yuriko* 百合子

Men (1940–1944)

Eisuke 栄助, *Fujiyoshi* 藤義, *Hajime* 始, *Haruo* 治男, *Haruo* 春夫, *Heiichi* 平一, *Hiroshi* 弘 (2x), *Hisakazu* 之一, *Isao* 功, *Itsuo* 五男 (2x), *Iwao* 巖, *Jūsaburō* 重三郎, *Kaoru* 馨, *Katsuhiko* 勝彦, *Katsumi* 勝三, *Katsutoshi* 勝利, *Kazumi* 一水, *Kazuo* 一雄, *Kazuya* 和也, *Ken'ichi* 健一, *Keiichirō* 賢一郎, *Ken'ichirō* 賢一郎, *Kenji* 研二, *Kenji* 健二, *Kimio* 公夫, *Kiyoshi* 清, *Kiyoshi* 清志, *Kichio* 吉雄, *Kōichi* 紘一, *Masaaki* 正明, *Masaharu* 正治, *Masaru* 勝, *Masatake* 正武, *Misao* 政夫, *Mitsuharu* 三治, *Mitsunobu* 光延, *Niroku* 二六, *Nobuo* 信郎, *Norisato* 了郷, *Osamu* 修, *Osamu* 修三, *Sakae* 榮, *Shigenobu* 繁昌, *Shigeo* 重夫, *Shigeo* 繁郎, *Takaaki* 孝明, *Takashi* 隆, *Takeshi* 武, *Takemitsu* 武光, *Tatsuo* 辰夫, *Tomogorō* 富五郎, *Toshihiko* 敏彦, *Toshikazu* 聡和, *Tsuyoshi* 毅, *Yasushi* 靖, *Yoshihide* 義英, *Yukio* 幸雄, *Yūzō* 悠造

A brief look at the names reveals that most of them clearly indicate the gender of the bearer. In the sample of 51 women's names, 49 (96,08 %) end in one of the typically feminine suffixes, *-ko*, *-e* or *-yo* described in 5.2, with *-ko* being the most common (86.27%). One name is bimoraic and written in katakana, and one is a single-kanji name, *Ai* 愛, with the feminine meaning of 'love'. Names on the men's names list from the same period can also mostly be clearly identified as men's. Of the 60 names, 42 (70%) are two-kanji names ending in a masculine suffix, such as *-o*, *-hiko*, *-suke*, *-ya*, or a number, or follow the two-kanji four-mora pattern. The four three-kanji names are of a typically masculine pattern, indicating the order of birth and most of the single-kanji names are also clearly masculine.

In the 1950s and 1960s, a number of authors began to note an increasing number of names given to both boys and girls from which the gender of the bearer could not be identified. Tominaga (1957, p. 42) draws an analogy to the widespread wearing of [Western-style] shirts: both men and women wear them, and it

does not look strange on either gender. Sano (1961, p. 62) mentions that there are names that do not clearly distinguish gender, such as *Misao* and *Kaoru*, and emphasizes the importance of choosing kanji that are representative of men or women for such names. Jugaku (1968, pp. 62–63) observed an increase in names that do not readily indicate gender in their graphic form. She researched the names of young people based on a list for an alumni reunion and encountered difficulties distinguishing between the names of men and women. Both Tominaga (1957) and Jugaku (1968) estimated that names would become less gendered in the future.

The next two lists of names, collected in the same survey, are from two decades later, specifically from the first half of the 1960s, when names common to both genders were increasingly noticed:

Women (1960–1964)

Akane 茜, *Akemi* 朱美, *Aimi* 愛実, *Atsuko* 敦子, *Ayako* 綾子 (2x), *Chiaki* 千晶, *Chifumi* 千文, *Chizuko* 千鶴子, *Emiko* 恵美子, *Erika* エリカ, *Etsuko* 悦子, *Harumi* 春美, *Hiroko* 弘子, *Hiroko* 裕子, *Hiroko* 博子, *Hiromi* ひろみ, *Hisako* 寿子, *Ineko* 稲子, *Kanae* 佳苗, *Kazue* 和恵, *Keiko* 敬子, *Keiko* 恵子, *Kiyoko* 清子, *Kuniko* 邦子, *Kyōko* 京子, *Machi* 万智, *Mahoko* 真秀子, *Mari* 真里, *Mayumi* 真由美, *Michiko* 道子, *Michiyo* 美智代, *Miki* 美貴, *Minako* 美奈子 (2x), *Nobuyo* 申代, *Noriko* 則子 (2x), *Noriko* 典子 (2x), *Reiko* 玲子 (2x), *Rieko* 鯉恵子, *Rikayo* 理香代, *Sachiko* 幸子 (2x), *Saemi* 小恵美, *Sanae* 早苗, *Satoko* 理子, *Sayuri* 小百合, *Shigemi* 茂美, *Sumiko* 純子, *Taeko* 妙子, *Tomoko* 智子, *Wakaba* 若葉, *Yōko* 洋子 (2x), *Yōko* 陽子, *Yōko* 葉子, *Yukiyo* 幸代, *Yumi* 由美 (2x), *Yumiko* 由実子

Men (1960–1964)

Akira 明, *Akito* 章人, *Hideki* 英樹, *Hideshi* 秀史, *Hiroshi* 博, *Hiroyuki* 広行, *Hiroyuki* 浩之, *Hiroyuki* 博之, *Hisayoshi* 久義, *Hisayuki* 久幸, *Issei* 一世, *Kazuaki* 和昭, *Kazuhiko* 和彦, *Kazunori* 和則, *Kazuyuki* 和

幸, *Keizō* 圭三, *Kenji* 健次, *Kiyoyuki* 清之, *Makoto* 誠 (2x), *Masachika* 正近, *Masafumi* 雅文, *Masahiko* 雅彦, *Masahiro* 正博, *Masaji* 雅治, *Masaki* 正樹, *Masaki* 昌樹, *Masato* 昌人, *Mitsuo* 充男, *Mitsuyuki* 光行, *Mutsuhiro* 睦浩, *Mutsumi* 睦, *Nobuaki* 信朗, *Nobuhiro* 靖弘, *Ryūichirō* 龍一郎, *Seiichi* 誠一, *Seinosuke* 清之助, *Shigeki* 滋樹, *Shin* 伸, *Shūichi* 秀一, *Sōki* 壮規, *Takaya* 孝哉, *Takayuki* 貴之, *Takeshi* 猛, *Takumi* 拓己, *Tatsuhiro* 龍弘, *Tatsuya* 達也, *Teruhisa* 照久, *Tetsuji* 哲治 (2x), *Tōru* 亨, *Toshinari* 年成, *Toshiyuki* 敏幸, *Tsuguo* 次男, *Yasushi* 康, *Yōichi* 洋一 (2x), *Yōji* 譲治, *Yoshiaki* 義明, *Yoshihiro* 義浩, *Yoshihiro* 善博, *Yoshihiro* 好弘, *Yoshito* 祥人 (63)

Compared to the list from the earlier period, women's names exhibit a wider diversity in their structure, encompassing most of the feminine name patterns described above in 5.2. Out of the 63 names, 42 (66.67%) still end in *-ko* (60.3%), *-e*, or *-yo*. Ten names end in *-mi*, a type that was on the rise in the 1960s. The remaining 11 names are of various types, including a feminine single-kanji name, the ateji-type two-mora two-kanji names, and three-mora two-kanji names without typical feminine suffixes. Men's names mostly follow the masculine patterns described in 5.1.

The lists contain several names that could potentially be confused for gender. These names, just as the various examples pointed out by the above-mentioned authors, fit into one of the following categories.

1) Single-kanji names

While the single-kanji name pattern was strongly associated with masculine names (Sano, 1988, p. 120), single-kanji names also began to appear for girls. Our samples from the first half of the 1940s and 1960s feature only one such name each, and these are perceived as feminine due to their meanings (*Ai* 愛 'love',

Akane 茜 'Japanese madder', a plant). However, the 1940s list of men's names includes *Kaoru* 馨 and *Sakae* 榮, and the 1960s list features *Akira* 明 and *Mutsumi* 睦, which are more likely than the other single-kanji names in the men's name lists to be found on women. Examples of gender-ambiguous single-kanji names mentioned by other authors include *Hikaru/Hikari* 光, *Kaname* 要, *Kaoru/Kaori* 薫, *Kaoru/Kaori/Iku* 郁, *Megumu/Megumi* 恵, *Sakae* 栄, and *Shinobu* 忍. As evident from these examples, some names have multiple phonological forms, some of which are gender-specific. While a single-kanji name with a Japanese reading corresponding to a verbal form ending in *-u* is typically used for boys (see 5.1), several such names are also used for girls. A nominal form ending in *-i* is usually used as a girls' name.

2) Names ending in *-mi* (美, 実, 巳, etc.)

Two kanji names ending in *-mi*, which are treated above as a feminine feature, may give an impression of being gender-neutral since some men also have such names. However, the number of men with these names is extremely low compared to the number of women. In the second half of the last century, *-mi* became the most common onymic suffix after *-ko*, appearing in a wide variety of feminine names, and only a small part of these names were also used for boys. Examples include *Kazumi*, written, for instance, as 和美, 一美, 和巳, 一巳, and 一実, *Kiyomi* 清美 and *Yoshimi*, written as 良美, 良実, 嘉美, 義美, 喜美 etc. *Katsumi* (e.g., 勝美, 勝巳, 克巳, 克己, 克美) might be even more common for boys. The 1960s list of women's names includes *Harumi* 春美 and *Shigemi* 茂美, which can also be found among men's names. *Kazumi* 一水 (in the 1940s men's names list) does not follow any common graphic pattern for men's names and has a gender-ambiguous phonological form.

3) Two-kanji three-mora names

There are some two-kanji names that utilize Japanese readings, but unlike the typical masculine pattern of two-kanji four-mora names, they have only three morae. This pattern is more common for women's names (see 5.2), but some of these names are also given to men. Examples include *Chihiro* 千尋, *Masumi* 真澄, *Makoto* 真琴, *Chiharu* 千春, and *Chiaki* 千秋. Several names from the 1960s women's list follow this two-kanji three-mora pattern, such as *Chiaki* 千晶 and *Chifumi* 千文. These names resemble masculine names (cf. the women's name *Chifumi* 千文 and the men's name *Masafumi* 雅文) and contribute to a certain gender ambiguity.

Finally, Sakuma (1964, pp. 90–93) offers examples of actual men and women who have the same names or names with the same pronunciation but different written forms, such as *Noboru* 昇 (m) – *Noboru* のぼる (f), *Izumi* 泉 (m) – *Izumi* いづみ (f), *Seiko* 星湖 (m) – *Seiko* せい子 (f), and *Toshi* 敏 (m) – *Toshi* トシ (f). However, most of these names are predominantly used for one gender and the people of the opposite gender often have the name as their pseudonym. For example, Kiritachi Noboru 霧立のぼる's real name was Shimada Kimi 島田キミ, and, similarly, Yukimura Izumi 雪村いづみ was born Asahina Tomoko 朝比奈 知子. Nakamura Seiko 中村星湖 was born Nakamura Masatame 中村 将為. The names of men written in hiragana that he provides as examples are also pseudonyms. Masaki Hiroshi 正木ひろし's name was officially written in kanji, 昊. Rather than reflecting everyday naming practices, these cases point to the role of pseudonyms, where gender-neutral or cross-gender names can be used to create a distinctive or unconventional image. However, such usage may also influence broader perceptions of gender neutrality in names and, indirectly, naming choices beyond the pseudonymous context.

5.4 Summary

Both men's and women's names changed over time, with the choice of kanji used reflecting changing societal values and perceptions of men and women and their valued qualities (see, e.g., Makino, 2012; Barešová, 2016). Even so, up until the latter half of the twentieth century, they predominantly adhered to the gender-specific patterns described in this chapter. These patterns usually clearly distinguish gender through their phonological and graphic forms, and even more strongly as a whole.

A two-kanji four-mora name was typically masculine regardless of the meanings of the kanji used, while a two-kanji two-mora name, which became more common in the second half of the twentieth century, was typically feminine. Three-mora names often ended in a limited range of gender-specific onymic suffixes represented by a limited number of kanji. Such names could be, at first glance, identified as masculine or feminine. While some suffixes are explicitly linked to a specific gender by their meaning (e.g., 男 'man'), many have become conventionalized. The most common feminine end suffix 子, typically translated as 'child' in girls' names, was originally used in names for boys (Makino, 2012, p. 80, also Yamaguchi, 2013). With few exceptions, these suffixes were used exclusively in either boys' or girls' names.

Within most of the name patterns described in 5.1 and 5.2, the phonological and graphic forms of names are closely connected. There exists a close correspondence between a morpheme and the kanji representing it. Even in names written in kana, one can often discern the kanji that the kana graphemes replaced. This relationship is disrupted in feminine three-mora three-kanji names (2c), where each individual mora is assigned a kanji. Consequently, one morpheme, which is typically represented by a single kanji, is written

with two kanji. In the 1960s, *ateji*-type names became increasingly popular for girls. Names such as *Yukiko* 由紀子 allowed for greater variety while ensuring unambiguous pronunciation, compared to names like 幸子, which could be read not only as *Yukiko* but also as *Sachiko* or even *Kōko*. The feminine two-kanji two-mora names are based on the same principle. While these names maintained their gender-distinctiveness, this trend contributed to a weakening of the relationship between the phonological and graphic form of a name, as the kanji assigned to the phonological form were not necessarily linked to it through their meaning but solely through the sound they represented. Toward the end of the century, the *ateji* type of name also became increasingly common for boys, ultimately impacting the gender distinctiveness of names.

6 Diversity and the Blurring of Gender in Contemporary Japanese Baby Names

6.1 A Move Toward Greater Diversity

As outlined in the Introduction, the last two decades of the twentieth century saw more significant changes in name selection than earlier periods, driven by parents' desire to choose a *koseiteki-na namae* 個性的な名前 – a name that is not only unique but also expressive of individuality, one that would reflect the distinctive future character parents envisioned for their child. The increase in *ateji*-type names, introduced in the previous chapter, is linked to a name selection process where the sound is prioritized, and kanji are subsequently assigned to the chosen form. Before these changes, the primary focus was on kanji. The tradition of reflecting family continuity by sharing a particular kanji or a kanji pattern, especially in boys' names, across generations, also played a role. The process of creating a name typically began with selecting a preferred kanji, which was then incorporated into a specific structural pattern. As a result, names primarily varied within established patterns, with the phonological form shaped by the chosen pattern and the possible

readings of the kanji. The following two examples[34] illustrate this common practice.

> *A boy born in 1964 in Sapporo, Hokkaido, was named Tatsuhiro 龍弘. The first kanji, meaning 'dragon,' was chosen to reflect his birth in the Year of the Dragon, while the second kanji was added as it was a popular name-final kanji for boys in the 1960s.*

> *A girl born in 1969 in Nogi, Tochigi Prefecture, was named Hisako 尚子. 尚 means 'esteem' and was used to wish her to grow up as a dignified and reliable eldest daughter. 子, a commonly used feminine suffix, was added to complete the name.*

In his baby-naming guide, Sano (1988, p. 79) pointed out that "the traditional and orthodox method of starting with the selection of appropriate kanji for a person's name tends to result in a mediocre [plain and not particularly unique] name." As an alternative name selection method, he even suggests choosing a desirable initial syllable and then combining it with all possible syllables to select combinations that could work as a name. A decade later, Yasuda (1998, p. 18) notes that "one of the major characteristics of recent naming trends is the emphasis on sound quality. Not only are kanji with positive meanings used, but names with sounds that are perceived as soft and refreshing are preferred."

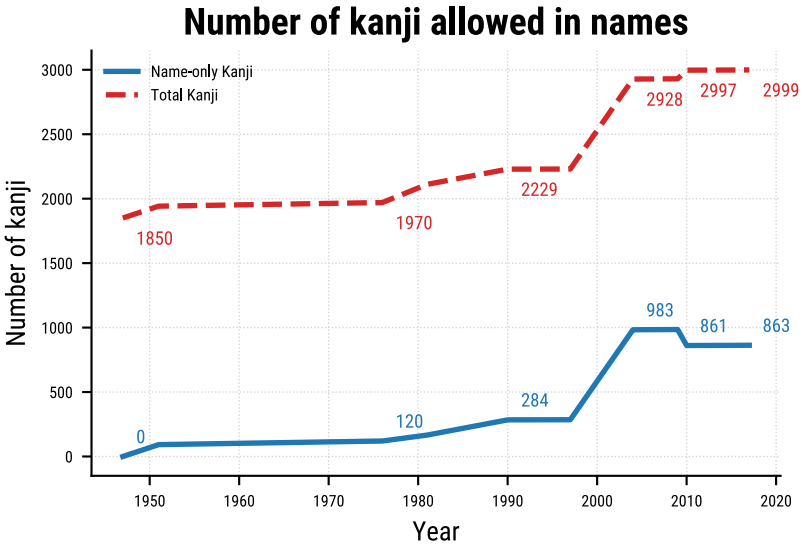
Starting with the phonological form, often created by merely combining good-sounding syllables (as recommended by Sano, 1988) or adapting foreign names, led to the emergence of many new-sounding names, represented by novel kanji combinations and

[34] These examples are drawn from a collection of name-selection stories gathered by one of the authors over the years through a questionnaire survey.

kanji that until then were not commonly used in names. In addition, the set of kanji permitted for use in names (see also 3.1) has grown considerably since the late 1970s. Figure 6 illustrates this increase. In 1981, the Japanese government extended the list of kanji officially designated for general use in publications, education, and official documents from 1,850 to 1,945 characters (*Jōyō kanji*). Additionally, by the end of the century, the number of kanji that were not part of this list, but could be used also in names (*Jinmeiyō kanji*), had risen to 285. Many of these, such as 葵 ('hollyhock') and 瑠 ('lapis lazuli'), gained popularity in names over the following decades. The most substantial expansion to date came in 2004, when 484 kanji were added, along with variant forms of 209 *Jōyō kanji* (Yasuoka, 2017).

Figure 6

The development of kanji permitted for use in names



Note: The decrease in Jinmeiyō kanji in 2010 resulted from shifts between the Jinmeiyō and Jōyō kanji sets; as shown by the red curve, these changes did not affect the total number of kanji permitted in names.

6.1.1 Trends in the Graphic and Phonological Diversity of Names

To measure how diverse the names are, we look at how many babies are given the most popular name (or most popular 10, 50 or 100). The more babies are given the most popular name(s) the less diverse the names are. This measure is an extension of the **Berger Parker Index** (Berger & Parker, 1970), originally used in ecology to measure the dominance of a single species in an ecosystem. We extend it by adding a parameter (n) which allows us to measure the dominance of the top (n) species (or in our case names): BPI = number of babies with the *n* most common names, divided by the total number of babies.

This approach has been used in previous name-related research (e.g., Ogihara, 2021; Ogihara et al., 2015; Varnum & Kitayama, 2011). With this measure, a lower score indicates less dominance by the most common names, and thus greater diversity. We therefore transform this to the Berger-Parker Diversity Index (BPDI = 1 − BPI) where higher scores indicate greater diversity.

In addition to showing the actual data points, we also added trend lines to help visualize whether each diversity measure is increasing, decreasing, or remaining stable over time. These trend lines are created using simple linear regression, where we treat the year as the predictor (what influences the outcome) and each diversity measure as the outcome we are trying to predict. If the correlation is statistically significant, we show the trend line as a solid line, otherwise as a dashed line.

For each trend, we calculated three key statistics to quantify the patterns:

Correlation with year (r): This number (ranging from -1 to +1) indicates the strength and direction of the relationship between time and each diversity measure. A positive correlation means

the measure tends to increase over time, while a negative correlation means it tends to decrease. Values closer to +1 or -1 indicate stronger, more consistent trends, while values near 0 suggest little systematic change over time. When this correlation is statistically reliable ($p < 0.05$), we mark it with an asterisk (*) to indicate the trend is unlikely to be due to random chance.

Annual change (%): This shows the average yearly percentage change in each diversity measure. For example, +2.5%/yr means the measure typically increases by about 2.5% each year, while -1.2%/yr means it typically decreases by 1.2% annually. This helps us understand not just whether something is changing, but how quickly it is changing.

Mean ($\bar{x}$): This shows on average how diverse the names are.

Together, these statistics help distinguish between meaningful trends in naming diversity and random year-to-year fluctuations.

Figure 7a (Heisei Namae Jiten) shows a clear increase in diversity from 1989 to 2009. The levels of diversity are similar when looking at the single most popular name and the top 10 names. When we expand the range to the top 100 names, however, boys' names show slightly greater variety than girls' names. The data is not so smooth for single most popular name (n=1), but it gets smoother as we take more names into account. Consistent increases are observed for the top 1, 10, 50 and 100 names, which shows that the results are robust across for different values of n. Although the diversity is normalized for the sample size, a larger sample size will appear to contain more diversity, just because there are more names in the sample. The last several years (see Section 4.5) have much less data per year compared to the middle years, and this explains why the diversity appears to decrease in the final years of the dataset.

Figure 7a

Diversity for Heisei Jiten Namae using Berger-Parker (graphic form)

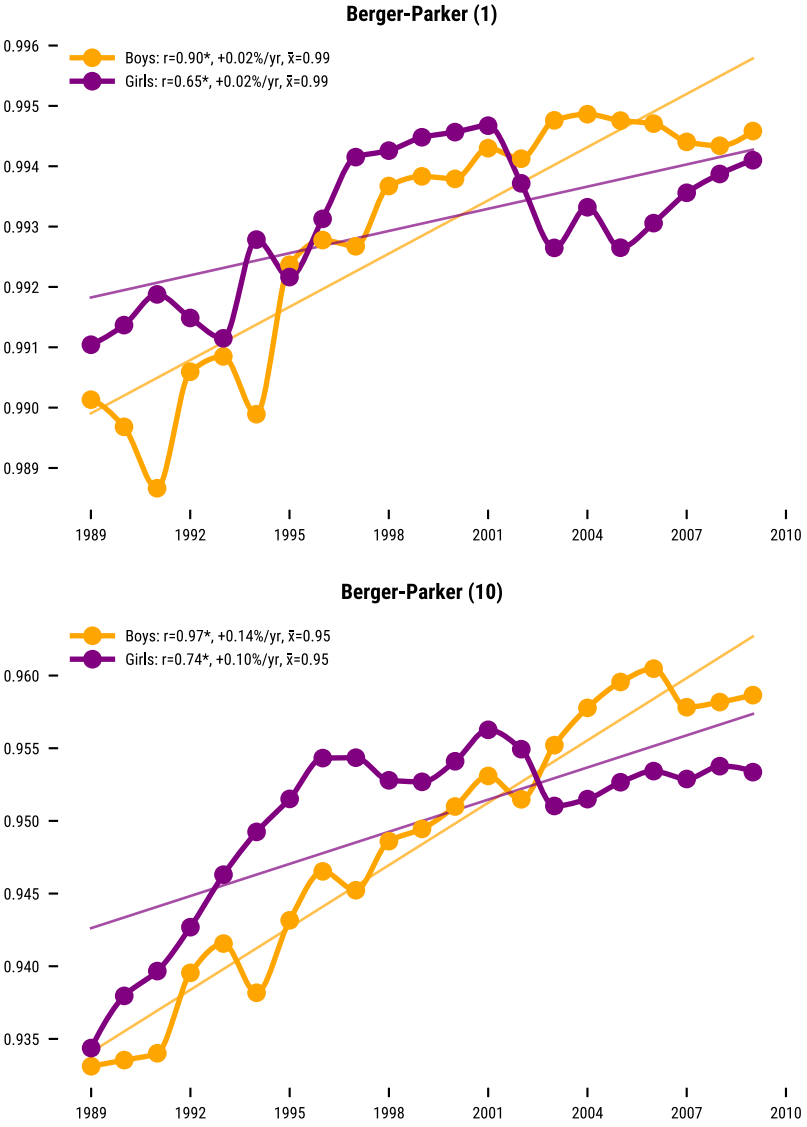


Figure 7a *(continue)*

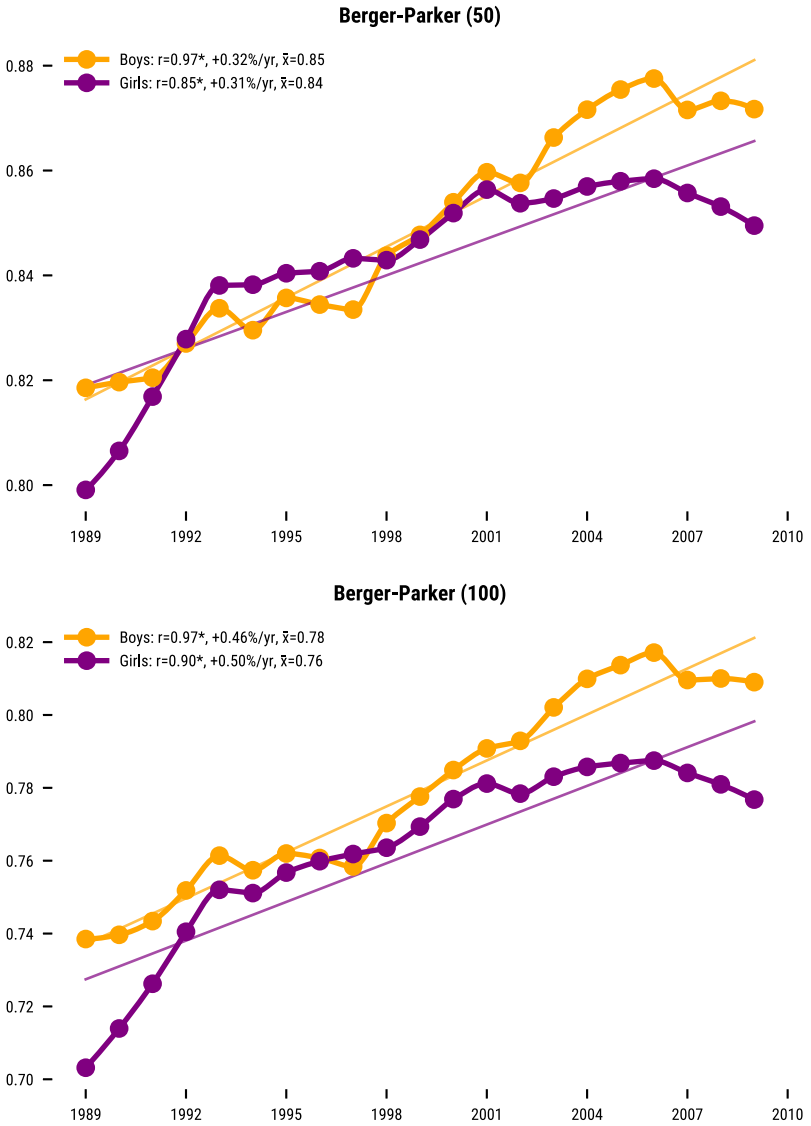


Figure 7b

Diversity for Meiji Yasuda using Berger-Parker (graphic form)

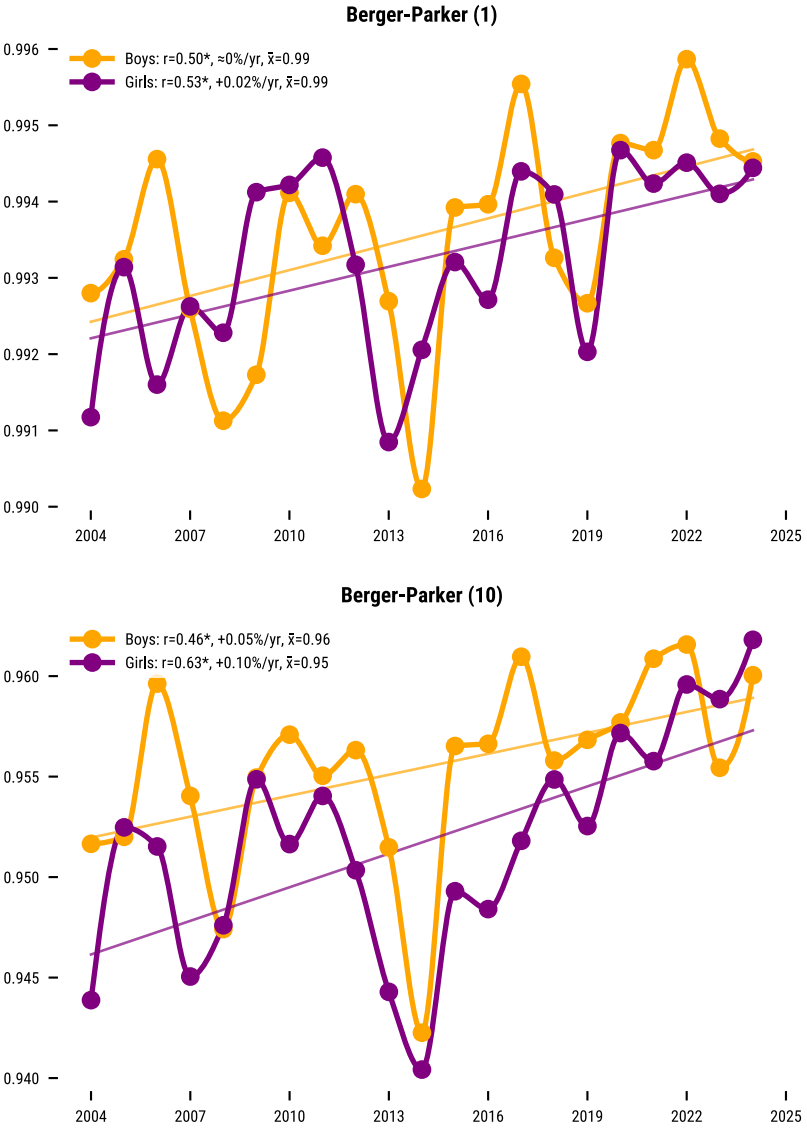
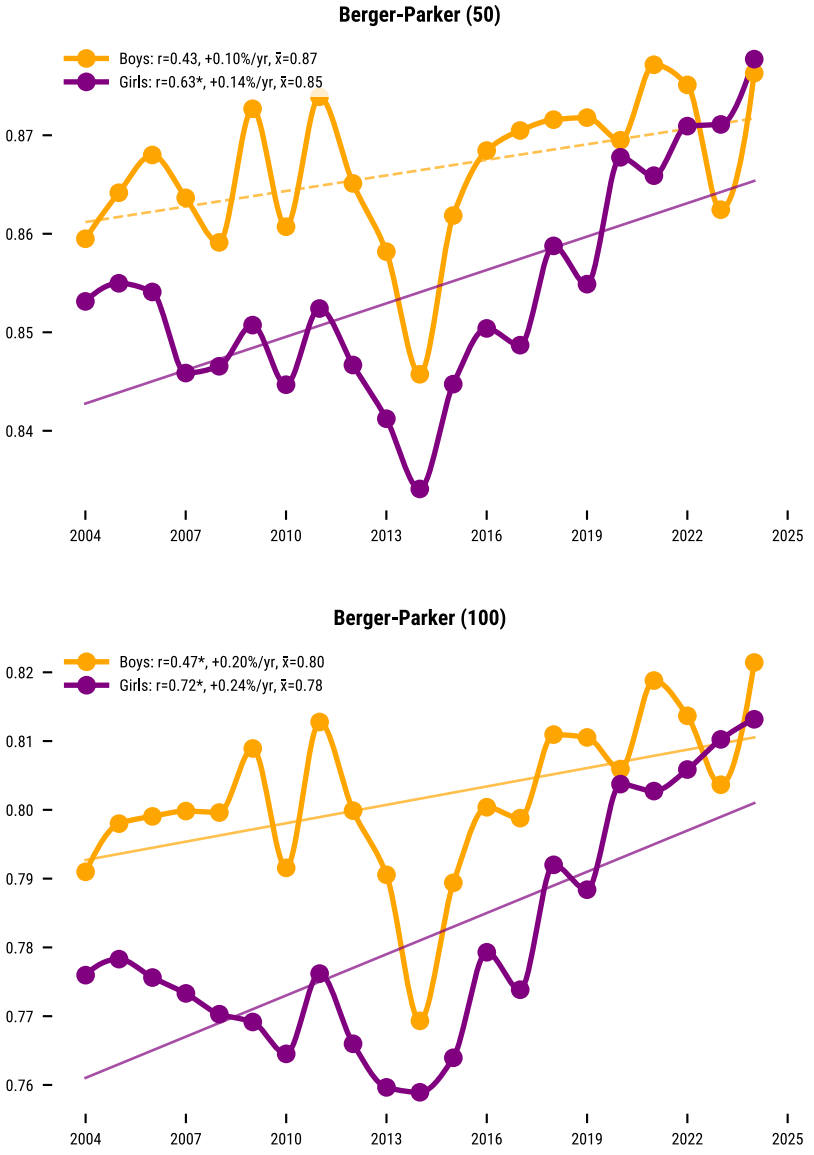


Figure 7b *(continue)*



When looking at Figure 7b (Meiji Yasuda), it is apparent that diversity continues to increase, with the diversity of boys' and girls' names gradually becoming more similar: girls' names start off less diverse but become more diverse at a faster rate. The Meiji Yasuda samples are much smaller, an average of 22,000 names per year compared to 692,000 for Heisei Namae Jiten. As a result, the Meiji Yasuda graphs are less smooth: even adding one name can change the rankings of the names, so even a slightly different sample can produce a noticeably different result. Nevertheless, the trend of increasing diversity remains statistically significant and is evident across all levels.

Based on these two datasets, we can state with confidence that the diversity of the graphic forms of names has increased consistently for 35 years from 1989 to 2024 and shows no signs of slowing down. Generally, boys' names are more diverse than girls', although the difference is small and decreasing.

Finally, we look at the phonological data. Meiji Yasuda reports only the top 50 phonological forms (not 100), so we present the top 1, 5, 10 and 50 (not 1, 10, 50 and 100 as we did for the graphic form). Figure 7c reveals two main points. First, phonological forms are less diverse than graphic forms, as shown by consistently lower diversity index scores (for example, 0.976 and 0.984 for boys and girls for the top phonological form in Meiji Yasuda vs. 0.994 and 0.993 for the top graphic form, or 0.612 and 0.613 vs. 0.866 and 0.854 for the top 50). In other words, the same phonological forms are used more often and frequently correspond to multiple written variants. Second, the diversity of girls' names' phonological forms is higher for the most popular (1–10) names than that of boys', although the gap between the two is narrowing (as is also the case for the written form). The increase in the diversity of the phonological forms of girls' names (1, 5, and 10 most common names) is not significant:

more varied characters are being used, but they correspond to a limited range of phonological forms. Unfortunately, there is not enough data to draw broader conclusions than this.

We do not show the Berger-Parker diversity scores for the Baby Calendar data – they cover the same period as the Meiji Yasuda data and the sample size is too small (around 1,000 names/year on average) to provide reliable results.

Figure 7c

Diversity for Meiji Yasuda using Berger-Parker (phonological form)

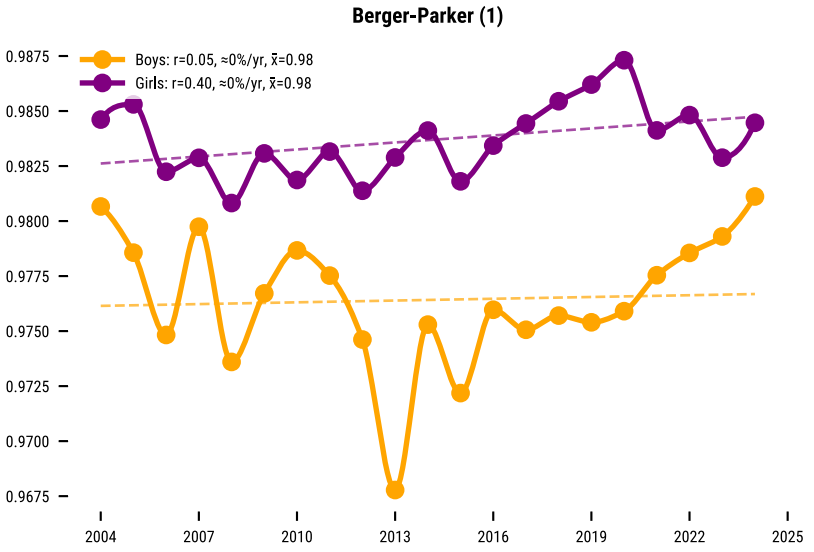


Figure 7c *(continue)*

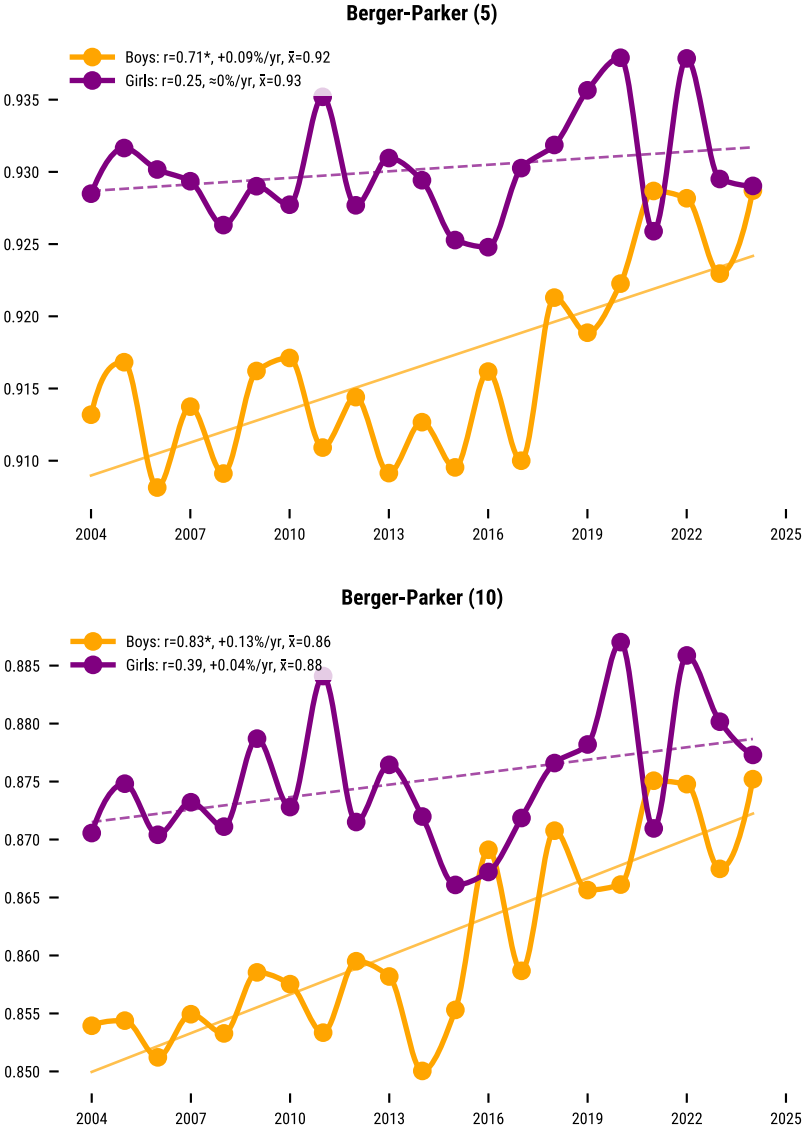
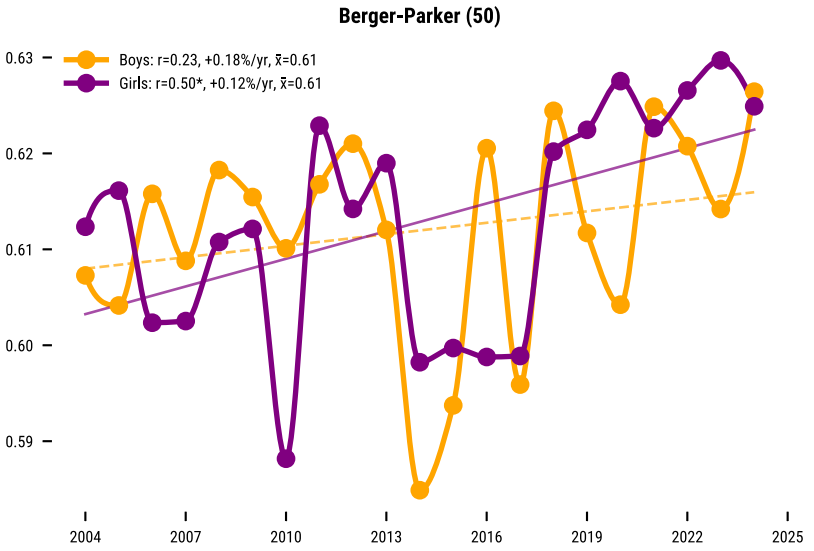


Figure 7c *(continue)*



There are several other diversity measures (Figure 8), which can tell us more about the distribution of the names. To calculate them, we need the full distribution of names, not just the top 100. We can therefore only calculate them for the Heisei Namae Jiten data (1989–2009). We calculate the following:

Shannon-Wiener Index: This measure captures both how many different names are used and how evenly they are distributed. One might think of it as measuring the "richness" of a naming system. A higher Shannon-Wiener score means either there are more different names being used, or the popular names are not completely dominant (or both). For example, if everyone used the same name, the score would be 0. If names were perfectly evenly distributed, the score would be higher. This measure is borrowed from ecology, where it is used to measure species diversity in ecosystems. It was

originally developed by Claude Shannon (1948) for information theory, later applied to ecology by Margalef (1958) and widely adopted following MacArthur (1965).

Gini-Simpson Index: Similar to Shannon-Wiener, this also measures diversity, but has a more intuitive interpretation. The Gini-Simpson value represents the probability that two randomly selected children would have different names. A score of 0.8, for instance, means there is an 80% chance that any two children picked at random would have different names. Higher scores indicate more diverse naming practices. This is based on Simpson's diversity index (Simpson, 1949), with the Gini-Simpson transformation (1 - Simpson's D) providing the probability of encountering different types.

Type-Token Ratio: This is the ratio of unique names (types) to total children (tokens). If 100 children have 50 different names between them, the type-token ratio is 0.5. A higher ratio means more naming diversity – closer to 1 would mean almost every child has a unique name, while closer to 0 means many children share the same few names. This measure is commonly used in linguistics to assess vocabulary diversity in texts (e.g., Johnson, 1944). It was applied to naming research by Gerhards and Hackenbroch (2000) to measure the diversity of German names.

Singleton Ratio: This measures what percentage of individuals have a name that appears only once in the dataset – essentially, what proportion of people have a "unique" name that no one else shares. For example, if 30% of children have singleton names, it means 30% of the population has a name that is theirs alone. This measure captures the individual experience of name uniqueness, telling us how common it is for someone to have a name that sets them apart from everyone else in their cohort. The concept of singleton analysis originated in ecology for the study of rare species (Fisher et al., 1943). It was applied to naming research by

Lieberson and Mikelson (1995) in their study of African American names, where they found that 31% of African American girls and 25% of African American boys in Illinois (1920) had unique names.

It is apparent that there is a significant upward trend for all four measures, similar to that shown by the BPDI. The **Gini-Simpson Index** shows less difference between the diversity of names of boys and girls. Since the Gini-Simpson calculation uses squared proportions, small proportions become even smaller when squared. This means that rare names contribute much less to the overall index value. Thus, the boys are more diverse because they have rarer names compared to girls, which explains their higher overall diversity. This is especially clear with the Singleton ratio, which shows the proportion of names that are unique – it is consistently higher for boys.

There is a noticeable drop around 2005, which coincides with a sharp decrease in the amount of yearly data available. This affects the diversity indices, as smaller samples tend to contain fewer unique names – even if the underlying distribution remains the same. The Meiji Yasuda data does not show the same drop, but they do display an anomalously low value in 2013, the year with the least data. We therefore interpret this decline as an artifact of the sample size. While our datasets are imperfect, comparing multiple datasets allows us to confirm that the overall trends persist across different time periods.

Not having a nationwide dataset makes the measurement of name trends very challenging. Despite severe limitations in sample size, the overall trends are clear and consistent across multiple datasets and metrics: naming diversity in Japan has steadily increased over the past 35 years. Boys' names are more diverse overall than girls' names for the written form. We have less data for the phonological form, but it suggests that the reverse is true for the most popular names.

Figure 8

Diversity measures for the Heisei Namae Jiten data

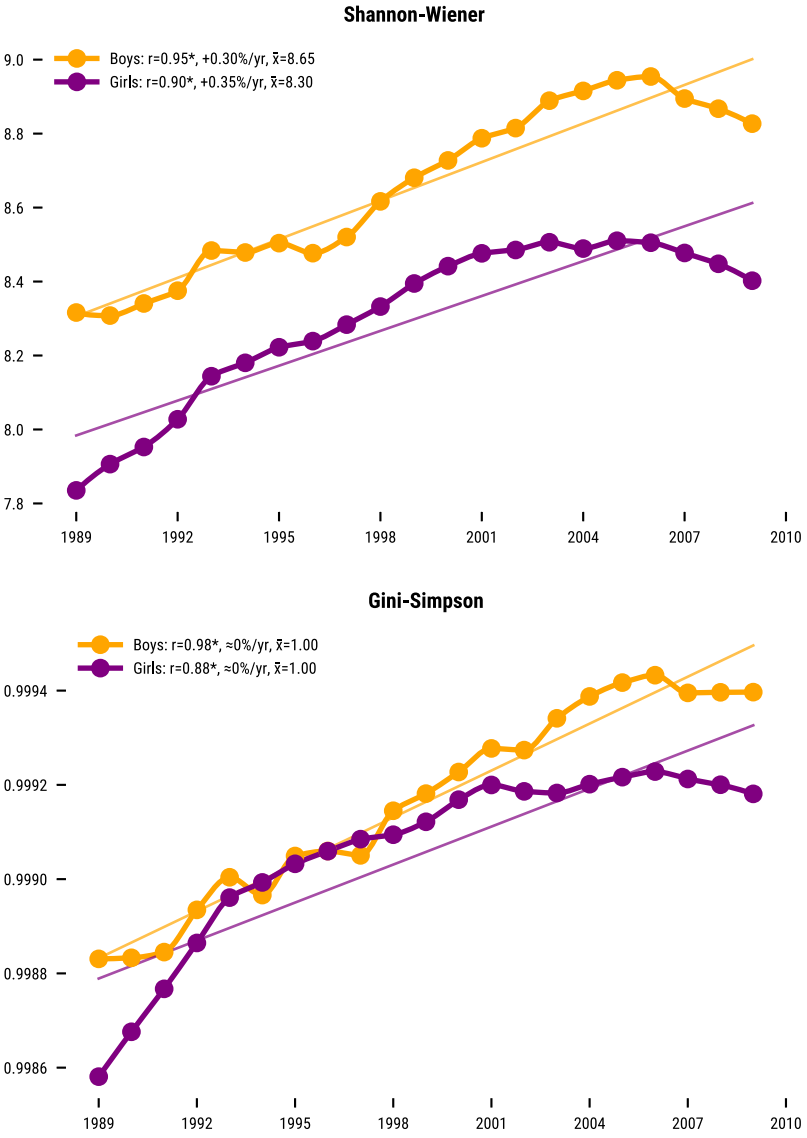
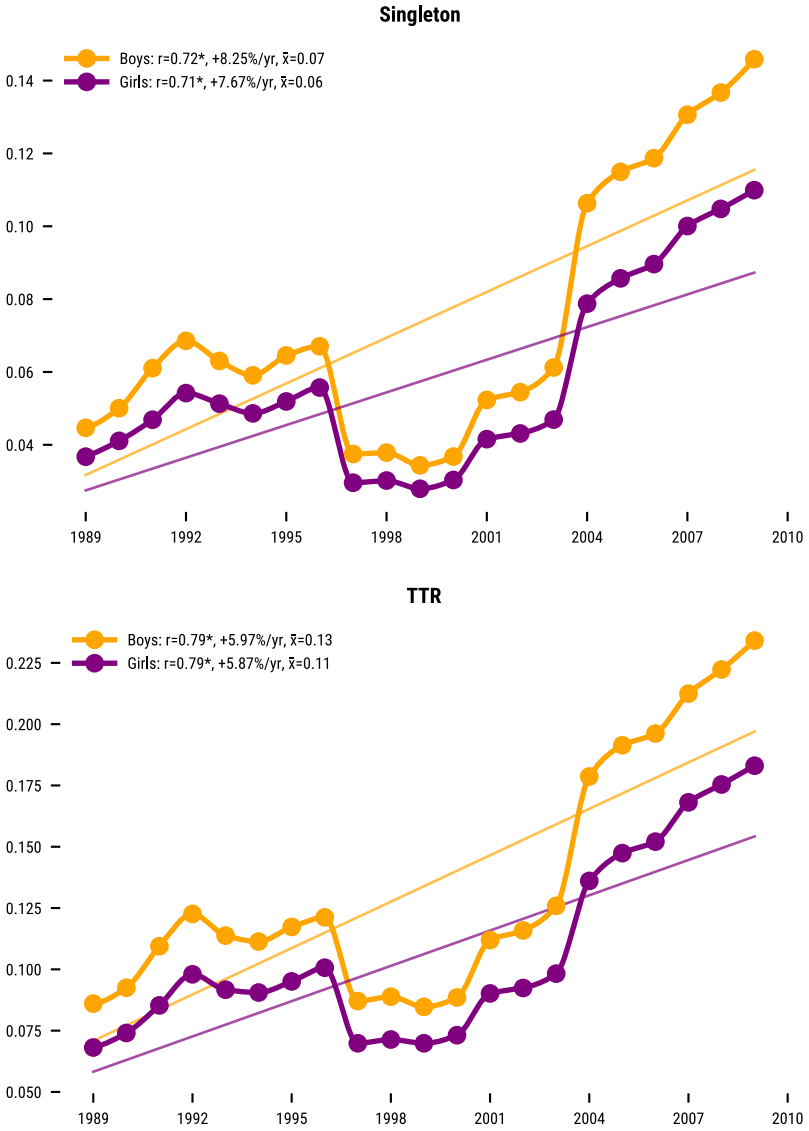


Figure 8 *(continue)*



6.1.2 Trends in Irregular Readings of Names

Another possible measure of diversity is how often names have irregular readings. This is a very name-specific phenomenon. We can only calculate this if we have both the graphic and phonological forms, which we do for the Baby Calendar data. We measure how common irregular readings are – that is, cases where a name's reading cannot be derived from standard kanji readings. Our kanji reading data comes from KANJIDIC, a comprehensive Japanese kanji dictionary project that provides *kun'yomi* (native Japanese readings), *on'yomi* (Chinese-derived readings), and *nanori* (name-specific readings) for each character (Breen, 2000; WWWJDIC, 2024).

Our matching algorithm uses backtracking to find the optimal character-to-sound mappings. For example, when analyzing 敦士 – あつし (*atsushi*), the system first tries the longest possible reading for 敦 – the *nanori* reading あつし (*atsushi*) – but this would leave no pronunciation for 士. The algorithm then backtracks and instead selects the shorter *nanori* reading あつ (*atsu*) for 敦, allowing 士 to match its *on'yomi* reading し (*shi*). This produces the successful parsing: [('敦', 'あつ', 'nanori'), ('士', 'し', 'on'yomi')].

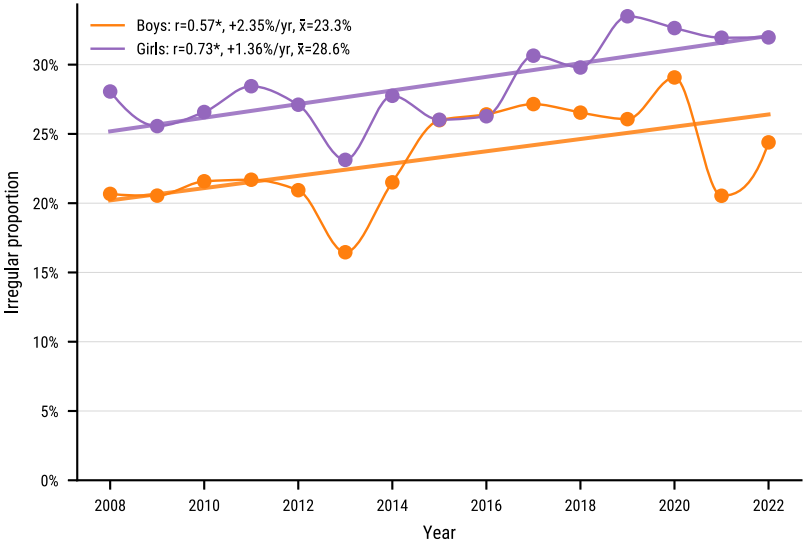
The system handles various character types: hiragana match directly (みか → [('み', 'み', 'hiragana'), ('か', 'か', 'hiragana')]), katakana converts to hiragana (ユキ|ゆき → [('ユ', 'ゆ', 'katakana'), ('キ', 'き', 'katakana')]), and the repetition mark 々 duplicates the previous reading, possibly with voicing (寿々|すず → [('寿', 'す', 'on'yomi'), ('々', 'ず', 'repetition')]). For *kun'yomi* readings with *okurigana*[35] markers such as かけ.る, the system tries both the stem (かけ) and full form (かける).

[35] Hiragana suffixes following kanji stems.

Names are classified as irregular when characters cannot be matched to any known reading. For instance, if parents named a child 翔 – ひかる (*hikaru*), this would be irregular because 翔 has readings {kun'yomi: かけ.る, と.ぶ; on'yomi: しょう; nanori: か} but none match ひかる. We show the change in irregular readings for boys and girls in Figure 9.

Figure 9

Distribution of irregular readings in the Baby Calendar database



The data reveals a statistically significant increase in reading irregularity over a 15-year period ($p < 0.05$ for boys, $p < 0.01$ for girls). Irregularity rates rose from around 23–25% in 2008–2012 to nearly 30% by 2019–2020, representing a substantial shift in Japanese naming practices. This upward trend aligns with the well-documented *kira-kira* name phenomenon – the practice of

giving children names with creative, non-standard readings that prioritize aesthetics over conventional kanji usage.

On average, girls' names show significantly higher irregularity rates than boys' names (28.7% vs 23.2%, $p < 0.001$). This 5.5 percentage point gap suggests that parents are more willing to experiment with unconventional readings for daughters, possibly reflecting different expectations around femininity and creativity in naming. The gender disparity is consistent across most years in our dataset, indicating this is a persistent pattern rather than a temporary trend. Over 25% of names have irregular readings in our dataset, demonstrating that this is not a rare phenomenon, but quite widespread: girls' names have gone from 1 in 4 being irregular to 1 in 3, and boys from 1 in 5 to 1 in 4!

Overall, the steady rise in irregular readings adds another dimension to the growing diversity of contemporary Japanese names. With more than a quarter of all names now departing from standard readings, and with girls' names showing consistently higher irregularity than boys', this development illustrates how naming practices are moving further away from conventions. This study contributes to the literature on *kira-kira* names by providing empirical evidence of this trend.

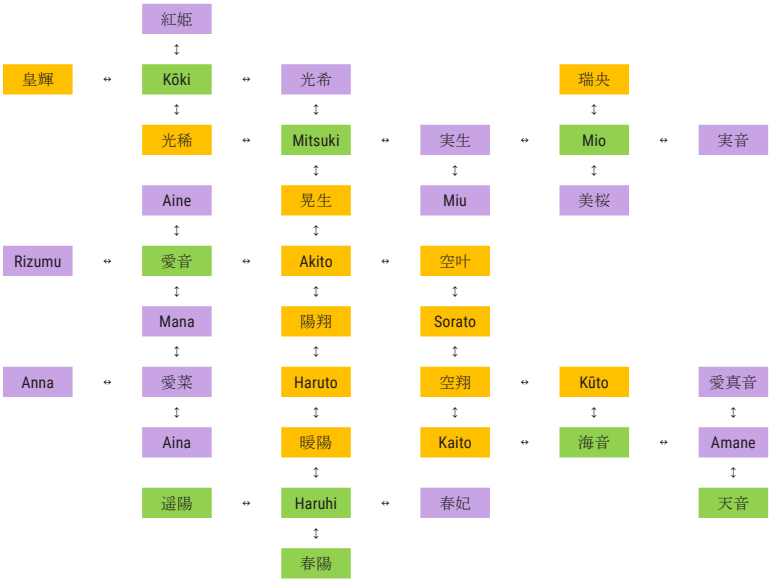
6.2 The Blurring of Gender Boundaries

The increase in the number of kanji permitted for use in names during the final decades of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century, combined with the growing acceptance of unconventional kanji readings to match novel phonological forms, has contributed to the emergence of a wide variety of new names and the blurring of previously established naming patterns. For instance, single-kanji

names, which were characteristic of boys' names, became common for girls. Boys' names such as *Aru* 亜瑠, *Riki* 里樹, and *Sena* 聖那 conform to the two-kanji two-mora pattern that was previously associated with girls' names. Contemporary names end in a greater variety of syllables represented by an even broader range of kanji. As a result, an increasing number of names share phonological or graphic forms across genders. The following chart illustrates this development. For example, the name 実生 can be found in the set of boys' names with the reading *Mio* and in the girls' names set as *Miu* and *Mitsuki*. *Mio* itself, in various graphic forms, can also be found with both boys and girls. The same is true for *Mitsuki*. Similarly, the graphic form 愛音 is shared by structurally diverse and differently gendered names such as *Aine*, *Mana*, *Rizumu* (Rhythm), and *Akito*.

Figure 10

Phonological and graphic overlap in boys' and girls' names



6.2.1 Gender Distribution of Names

The overlap in phonological and graphic forms between boys' and girls' names has led to a growing pool of names that cannot be readily categorized as either. While most contemporary baby names continue to be assigned specifically to one gender, the number of names that circulate across both is no longer limited to a few exceptional cases. The following figures illustrate this development using our dataset of 15,058 names collected from the parenting website Baby Calendar between 2008 and 2022, as described in Chapter 4. Figure 11a is based on the phonological forms of names, Figure 11b on their graphic forms and Figure 11c on full graphic/phonological forms of names. The bars represent the percentage of babies receiving names within specific gender ranges. The x-axis shows the percentage of a name's association with girls (e.g., 0% indicates the name is used exclusively for boys, while 100% indicates it is used exclusively for girls). The y-axis indicates the proportion of babies receiving names in each category. This visualization method is inspired by Cohen (2023), who uses similar histograms to show differences in the distribution of names by gender for US baby names in 1972 and 2021.

The graphs show that gender is more frequently expressed through the graphic form than in the phonological form, as indicated by the lower proportion of graphic forms between the extremes, and that only a small portion of names are truly gender-neutral, meaning both their phonological and graphic forms are used for both boys and girls. At the same time, the figures highlight a blurring of gender in baby names, particularly in their phonological forms, similarly indicated.

There are not many names in the dataset, but if split into two roughly equal groups (Figures 12a and 12b), a change over time can be clearly seen. The proportion of names used only by boys or

only by girls has decreased, while the proportion of names used by both (the bars in between) has increased.

This tendency is especially visible in Baby Calendar's rankings, which list the top 100 phonological forms for each gender over the past eight years, whereas Meiji Yasuda and Tamahiyo limit their lists to 50. In 2017, 11 out of the 100 most popular names in the Baby Calendar ranking appeared on both lists.[36] In 2018, this number dropped to 7, as some names in the lower positions fell below the 100th place for one gender or the other. In the following years, a steady increase is observed: 10 in 2019, 12 in 2020, 13 in 2021, and a jump to 19 in 2022. The latest statistics confirm this upward trend, with 19 names in 2023 and 21 in 2024. In addition to these numbers, many of the other names that appear in the rankings are used for both genders, as evidenced in our dataset, but place within the top-ranking names for only one gender.

[36] The ranking is based on 33,789 names (M=16,905, F=16,884).

Figure 11a

Distribution of baby names by gender association (phonological form, 2008–2022)

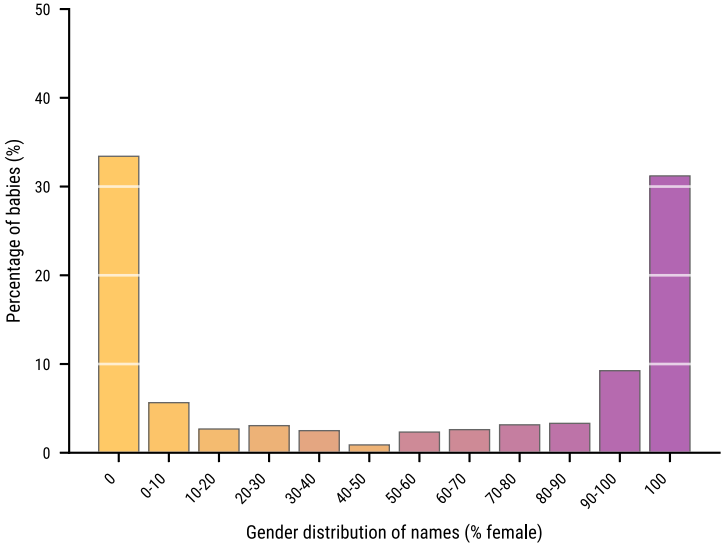


Figure 11b

Distribution of baby names by gender association (graphic form, 2008–2022)

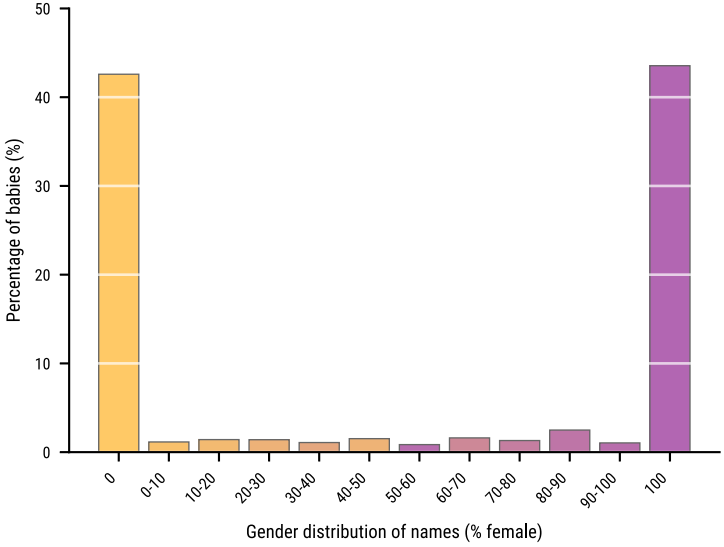
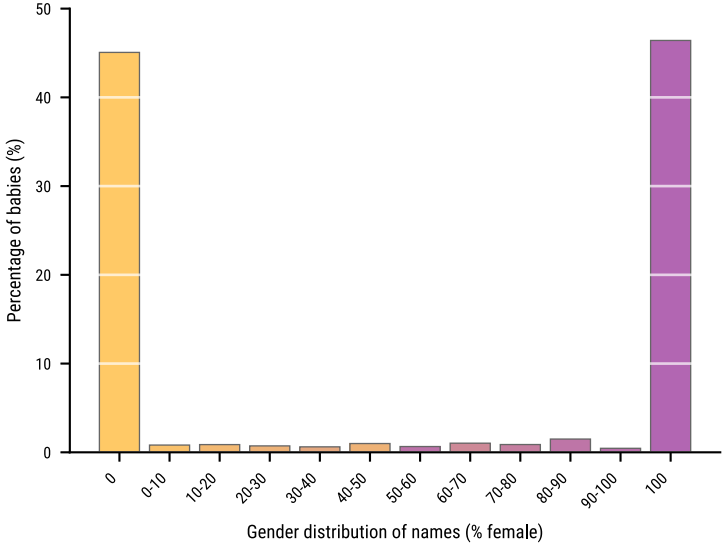


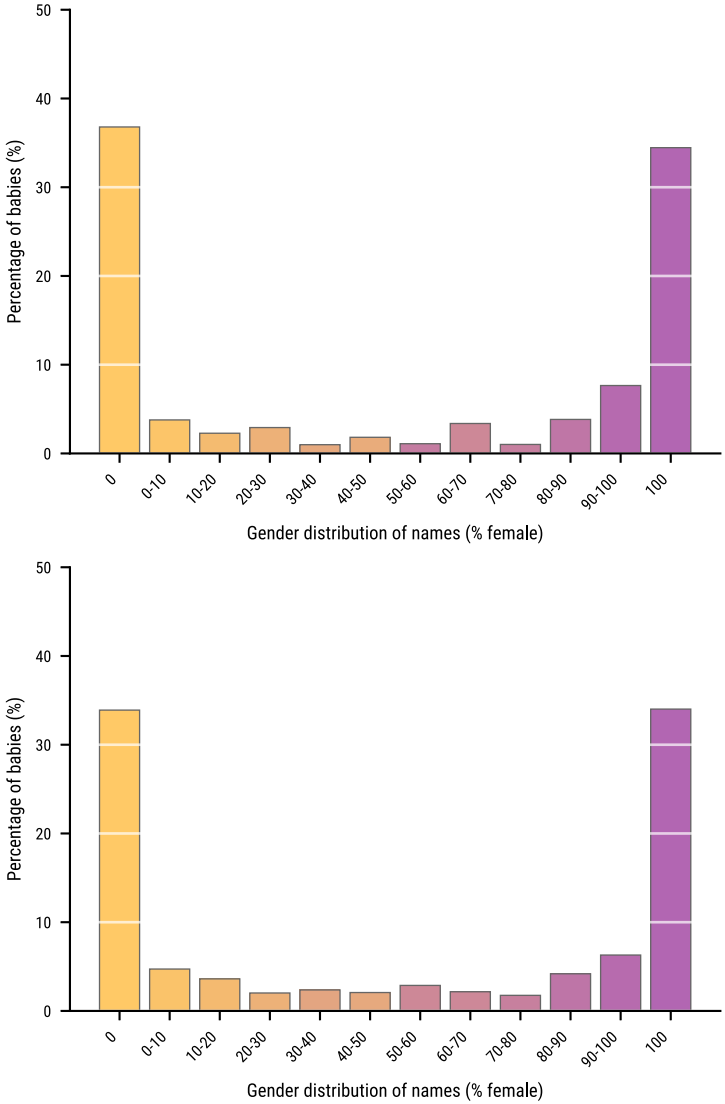
Figure 11c

Distribution of baby names by gender association (full graphic/phonological form, 2008–2022)



Figures 12a, 12b

Distribution of baby names by gender association (phonological form, 2008–2013 vs. 2014–2022)



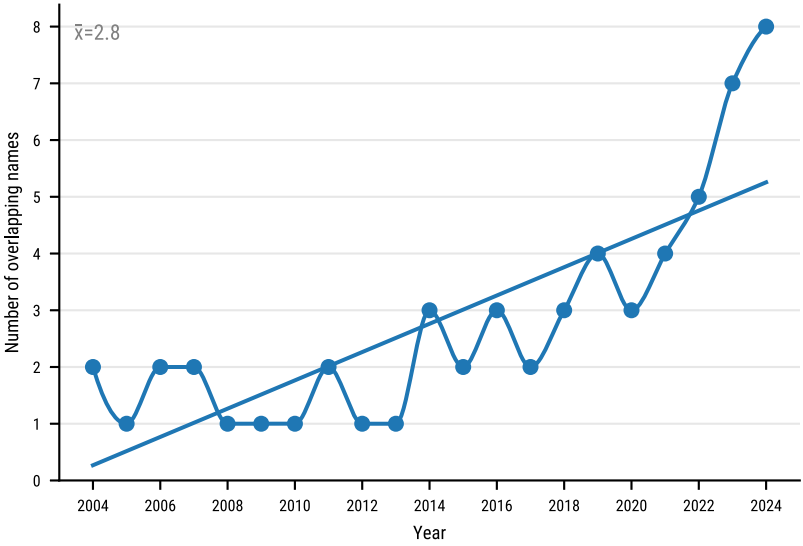
6.2.2 Trends in Gender-Neutral Names over Time

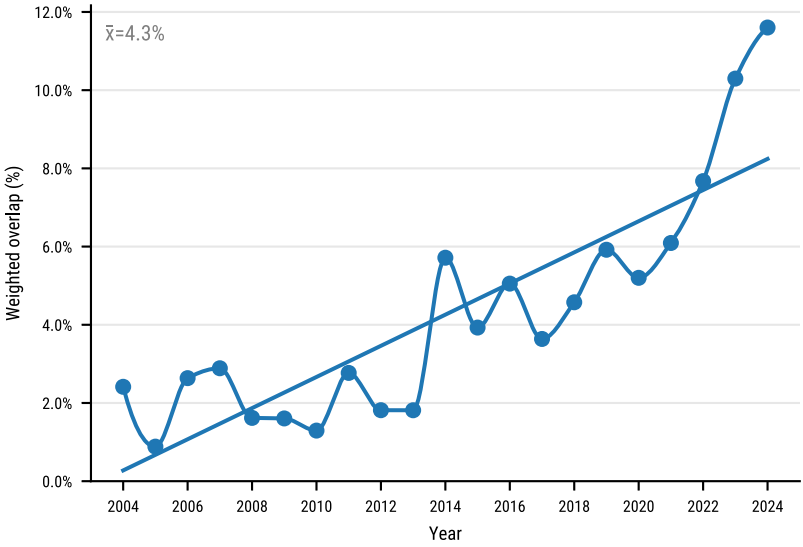
While Baby Calendar provides the clearest evidence of this recent rise in overlapping names, its rankings are available only for 2017–2024. In contrast, Meiji Yasuda allows us to trace developments over a longer span of 20 years, although its lists are limited to the top 50 phonological forms and 100 graphic forms. Figures 13a and 13b show how many names in the top 50 lists for boys and girls in the annual rankings by Meiji Yasuda appear in both lists: both in terms of the number of overlapping names (13a) and the proportion of babies with these names (13b).[37]

[37] Twice the number of overlapping names (boys and girls) divided by the total number of names. This takes into account the different amounts of data in different years.

Figure 13a, 13b

Overlap trend in the top 50 Meiji Yasuda names (phonological forms)





From 2004–2013, there is little overlap, with only 1 or 2 names per year. From 2014 onward, however, names used by both genders become more common, reaching 8 by 2024. This clearly shows that gender-neutral names are becoming more common. The eight names for 2024 are *Aoi*, *Sena*, *Hinata*, *Haru*, *Nagi*, *Rio*, *Oto*, and *Rei*. Most of these also overlap in earlier years, with *Aoi* and *Hinata* being the most persistent, followed by *Haru*, then *Rei*. Only two other phonological forms appear for both boys and girls: *Sora* (in 2022) and *Sui* (in 2023).

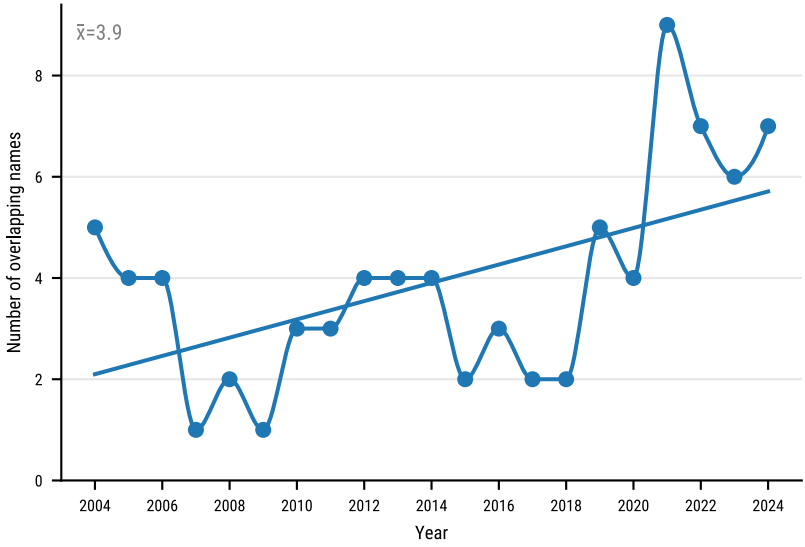
For graphic forms, there is less overlap in the top 50, with overlap ranging between 1 and 5, with a rise over time. The final five overlapping names are all single-kanji names: 凪, 葵, 碧, 凛 and 藍. 凪 and 葵 were consistently popular, 楓 and 優 were also popular especially from 2002–2015. Note that gender-neutral names may be pronounced differently for boys and girls. While the Meiji Yasuda data does not provide their pronunciation, these particular names are usually pronounced the same for both genders: 凪 as *Nagi*, 葵 and 碧 as *Aoi* or *Ao* (although *Ao* may be more common for boys), 凛 as *Rin*, 藍 as *Ai* and *Ran*, 楓 most commonly as *Kaede* and 優 as *Yū*.

However, we have data for the top 100 graphic forms, which exhibit more overlap (shown in Figures 14a and 14b). Again, the trend is rising, although quite noisy.

For the Heisei Namae Jiten data spanning 1989–2009, there is no overlap among the top 50 names. For the top 100, there are only 1 to 5 shared names. However, when we extend the range to the top 500, we see a similar increase in the number of names used by both genders (Figures 15a and 15b).

Figure 14a, 14b

Overlap trend in the top 100 Meiji Yasuda names (graphic forms)



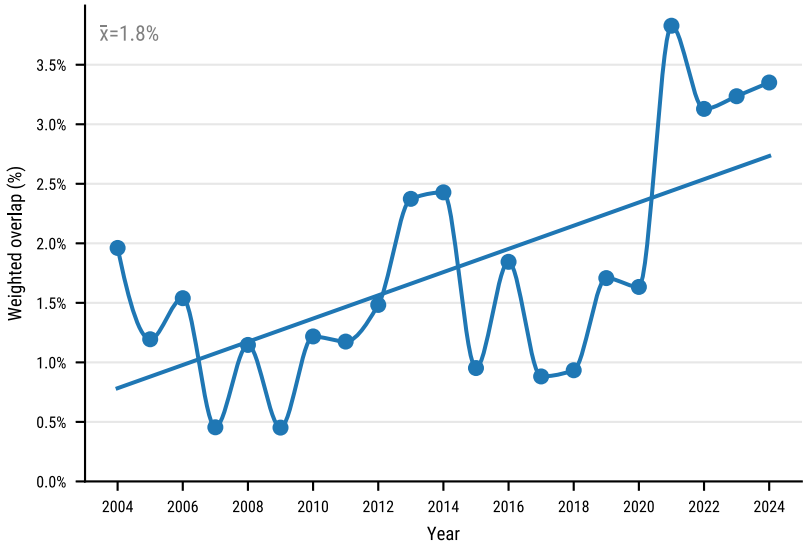
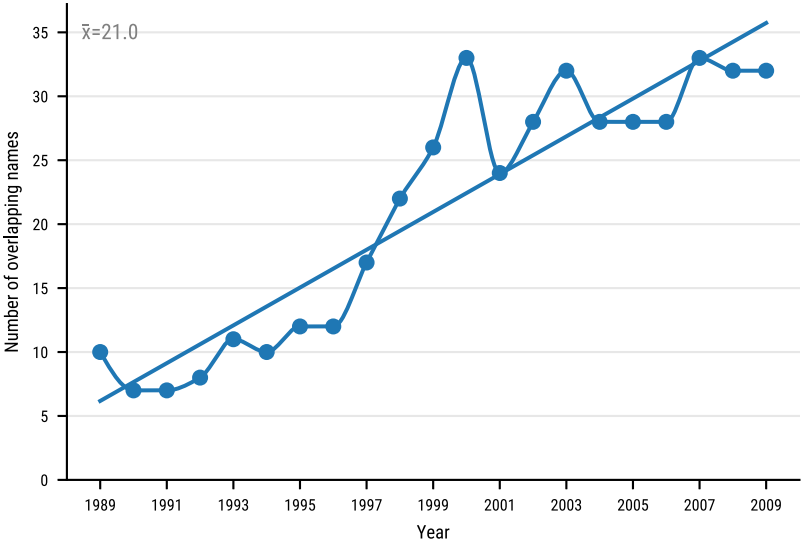
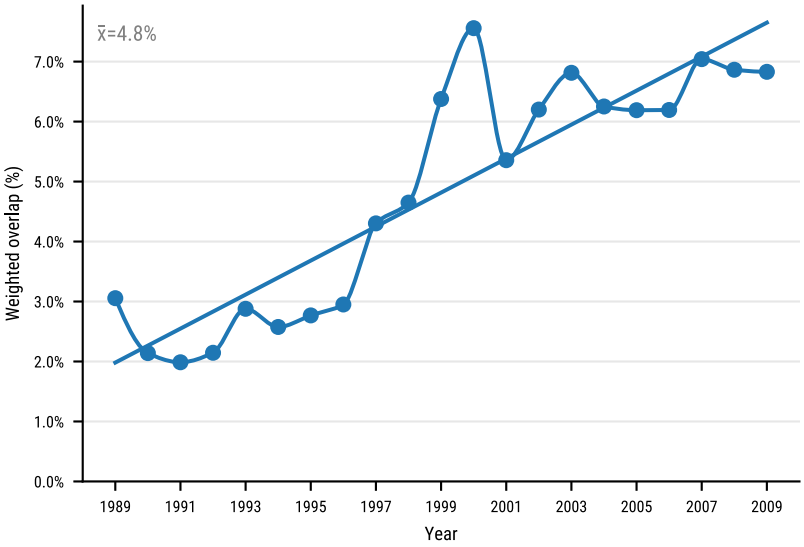


Figure 15a, 15b

Overlap trend in the top 500 Heisei Namae Jiten names (graphic forms)



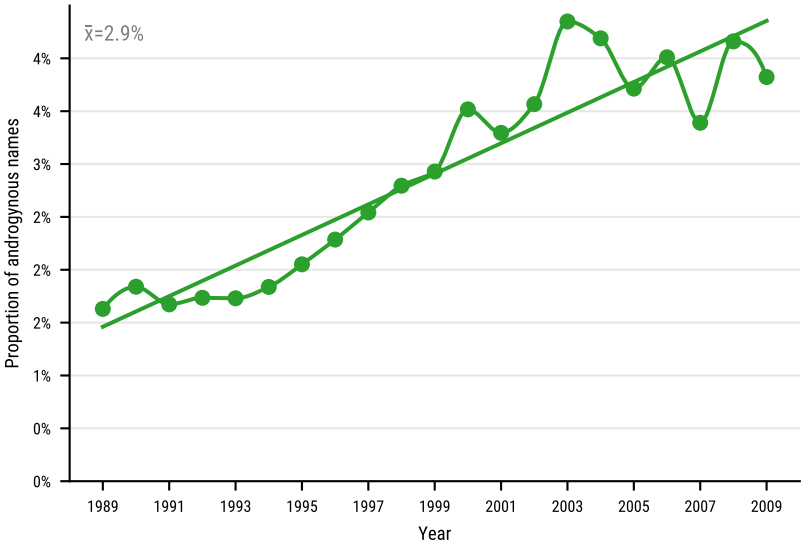


Taking these datasets together, a rise can be seen in the number of graphic forms of names used by both genders, starting low in the 1980s, gradually rising in the 1990s and continuing to increase up to the present. We only have phonological data from 2004 (and only the top 50), but it shows the same upward trend. Here we are looking only at the top names; if we had the full dataset, we would expect many more overlapping names, because there are many names that are mainly used by one gender but occasionally used by the other.

Finally, we look at an even stricter overlap, the proportion of babies born each year who receive a name that is between 20% and 80% single-gender ($0.2 < \text{F-ratio} < 0.8$). This is the threshold used to define androgyny by Cohen (2023). Here again we see a significant increase over the years 1998 to 2009, from 1.6% to 3.8%. Unfortunately, we cannot reliably calculate this for the Meiji Yasuda data, as we do not have all the names, and there are so few names in the Baby Calendar data that many years have no names classified as gender-neutral.

Figure 16

Gender-neutral names (F-ratio ∈ [0.2, 0.8]) in the Heisei Namae Jiten data



6.3 Summary

Overall, the analysis of the Heisei Namae Jiten, Meiji Yasuda, and Baby Calendar datasets provides evidence from multiple metrics that naming practices in contemporary Japan have become substantially more diverse from the late 1980s to the mid-2020s. Three major shifts stand out.

There is increasing diversity in both graphic and phonological forms. Across all diversity measures – Berger-Parker (BPDI), Shannon-Wiener, Gini-Simpson, type-token ratios, and singleton rates – steady and statistically significant increases can be observed. For example, BPDI values for the written form rise consistently from 1989 to 2024, and even conservative, sample-size-insensitive measures such as Gini-Simpson show long-term upward trends. These findings hold across datasets of different sizes collected by different groups. Boys' graphic forms remain slightly more diverse than girls', but the gap is small and narrowing, reflecting a broader spread of kanji and structures in both genders.

There is a rise in irregular readings, especially for girls. Readings deviating from standard *kun'yomi*, *on'yomi*, or *nanori* have increased from around 23–25% in 2008–2012 to almost 30% by 2020. Girls' names show significantly higher irregularity than boys (mean 28.7% vs. 23.2%, $p < 0.001$). This pattern aligns with the *kira-kira* naming trend and indicates that the shift toward sound-driven name creation increasingly decouples pronunciation from conventional kanji usage. In many cases, a single graphic form now corresponds to multiple, sometimes creative, phonological realizations.

Gender distinctions, historically quite sharp, are increasingly blurred. The number of top-ranking names shared by both genders has risen steadily in all datasets. In the Baby Calendar rankings, shared names in the top 100 phonological forms grow from 11 in 2017 to 21 in 2024. In Meiji Yasuda's top 50 lists, overlap increases

from 1–2 names per year (2004–2013) to 8 names in 2024, including persistent gender-neutral forms such as *Aoi*, *Hinata*, and *Haru*. Graphic overlap shows growth as well, especially among single-kanji names (e.g. 凪, 葵, 碧, 凛, 藍).

Although most names are still characteristic of a single gender, the proportion used for both boys and girls is steadily increasing. The shift is especially pronounced in phonological forms, suggesting that gender is now encoded less strongly in sound and more in orthography. However, even orthographic distinctions are becoming less sharp over time.

Altogether, these findings demonstrate a long-term move away from inherited, pattern-based naming conventions and toward more individualized, flexible, and creative naming practices. The expansion of permissible kanji, the rise of phonologically driven name creation, the growing acceptance of irregular readings, and the increasing pool of names used across genders all point to a shared conclusion: contemporary Japanese naming is characterized by greater freedom of choice and a weakening of previously stable structural and gendered norms.

7 Expression of Gender in Contemporary Japanese Baby Names

As contemporary Japanese names become increasingly diverse and gender boundaries continue to blur, it becomes all the more intriguing to ask how gender distinctions are still encoded in naming practices today. Over the following pages, we focus on the ways in which gender information is embedded in contemporary Japanese baby names. We analyze phonological length, graphic length, the use of different scripts, and the initial and end parts of both phonological and graphic forms. We also pay attention to heavy syllables, which seem to dominate in boys' names, and reduplication, frequently observed in girls' names.

In section 7.1, we first introduce the procedures and in section 7.2, we present the overall results. The subsequent sections explore individual gender-specific features of names in more detail, illustrated with numerous examples of current names.

7.1 Method

To analyze gender-specific features of contemporary baby names, we build on recent research by Barešová et al. (2024), co-authored by the first author of this book. Using statistical tests, the study

examined several features of names to identify the key factors contributing to gender distinction in Japanese names today. While the previous study focused on distinct name forms, here we analyze the frequencies of name instances (tokens), taking name popularity into account. Each method has its advantages. Excluding frequency from the analysis prevents very popular names from disproportionately influencing the results, ensuring that every name is weighted equally. This approach enables the uncovering of broader connections between features and genders. A feature significantly associated with masculine or feminine names can be attributed to its prevalence across a larger proportion of those names rather than being skewed by the popularity of a few outlier names. On the other hand, the approach we adopt in this book provides insight into contemporary name popularity trends, offering a more nuanced understanding of societal preferences and cultural influences shaping naming practices. Working with all instances of names also allows us to examine the association of single-kanji names with gender.

We use the dataset of 15,058 baby names collected from the Baby Calendar website (described in Chapter 4) as it contains information about both the graphic and phonological forms. First, we test the same name features as in the previous study, that is phonological length, graphic length, the use of different scripts, and initial and end parts of both phonological and graphic forms but using the dataset of all instances. We use morae to measure the length of phonological forms (see 3.3), and graphemes to measure the length of graphic forms. Unlike the previous study, where we tested the initial/last mora (corresponding to a light syllable) and last two morae (corresponding to a heavy syllable), here we work directly with syllables.

The procedure consists of two steps. In the first step, we assess whether the tested aspect significantly differentiates between boys'

and girls' names, using Pearson's chi-squared test. If the first step finds a significant difference, each feature (i.e., each length, each kanji in the initial or final position, each script, etc.) is individually tested for its association with gender using Fisher's exact test on a 2 x 2 contingency table. This step provides a detailed understanding of which specific features and combinations are associated with each gender. Since multiple tests are carried out to test all the features, the significance threshold $\alpha = .05$ is lowered accordingly using Bonferroni's correction (Bland & Altman, 1995; McEwan, 2017). [38]

For a detailed description of the methods used, see Barešová et al. (2024, pp. 3–5). The code to calculate the statistics given below is available in the data repository described in Chapter 4.[39]

7.2 Overall Results

The overall results are summarized in Table 9 and discussed in more detail in the following subsections. The tests conducted across all name instances confirmed our previous findings that, in contemporary names, gender is more frequently encoded through graphic forms than phonological ones. The final part of a name – both kanji

[38] This means that when we test several features at once – such as the length, ending syllable, or number of morae in names – the overall chance of a false alarm is kept below 5% (the familywise $\alpha = 0.05$). In order to do so, the threshold for each individual test (per-test α) is made stricter, dividing 0.05 by the number of features tested. For example, if we test five features (m = 5), each one must have a p-value below 0.01 to count as significant. In the tables that follow, p-adj means the Bonferroni-corrected p-value where this adjustment has already been applied (p-adj=p*m).

[39] https://github.com/bond-lab/namae-bc

and syllables – plays a more important role in gender distinction than the initial part. Overall, name length and script are only weakly associated with gender, however certain lengths and certain types of script are gender-specific, although not widely used today.

Table 9

Summary of the individual feature evaluations

Source	Feature	Association (all instances)	ϕ (all instances)
Both	Last symbol	Very strong	.86
Graphic	Last symbol	Very strong	.81
Phono	Last symbol	Strong	.73
Graphic	First symbol	Strong	.71
Phono	First symbol	Strong	.60
Phono	Length	Weak	.37
Graphic	Script	Very weak	.17
Graphic	Length	Very weak	.15

7.3 Phonological Form

7.3.1 Length

Contemporary names typically range from two to six morae in length, the same as they have for the past century. In general, the longer the name, the more likely its bearer is a man. Certain lengths are more strongly associated with gender than others (Table 10). In this and the following sections, we report on the F-ratio: the number of girls with the name divided by the total number of babies with the name. An F-ratio of zero means that the name is used only for boys and a value of one means it is only used for

girls. We consider names with an F-ratio of 0-0.1 to be masculine, and 0.9-1.0 to be feminine.

Table 10

Individual lengths of the phonological forms in morae (all instances)

Length	Boys	Girls	F-ratio	p-adj
2	1 156	2 963	0.72	< .001
3	4 942	4 656	0.49	.110
4	1 023	28	0.03	< .001
5	262	0	0.00	< .001
6	28	0	0.00	< .001

Note: Significance uses Bonferroni correction (m = 5, familywise α = 0.05). Rows in bold pass the corrected threshold.

Bimoraic names are associated with girls' names, reflected in a high F-ratio (0.72). While this association is statistically significant, it is not particularly strong, as bimoraic names have grown in popularity for boys over the last few decades, especially in recent years. For instance, the Meiji Yasuda rankings show that during the examined 15-year period, the number of bimoraic names among the 50 most popular boys' names fluctuated between 6 and 12 from 2008 to 2020. However, in 2021 and 2022, it rose significantly, reaching 17 and 16, respectively. In 2024, it increased even further to 21. Meiji Yasuda's 2022 report suggests reasons for the rising popularity of bimoraic names, including their global appeal, as they are supposedly easier for foreigners to pronounce and remember. The report also highlights the flexibility in how these names are written, either with a single kanji (if the name is monothematic) to emphasize the meaning, or with a different kanji for each mora to allow for more creative expression (Meiji Yasuda, 2022, p. 10).

Bimoraic names given to girls predominantly consist of two-kanji combinations, following the two-mora two-kanji pattern that began to rise in popularity during the latter half of the twentieth century (see Chapter 5). Even monothematic names often employ two kanji, with each representing one mora (cf., *Hana* 花/華 ('flower') – *Hana* 葉菜 ('leave' + 'rapeseed blossom'), *Hana* 羽奈 ('wing' + 'Nara'[40])). Two-mora names that are given to boys are typically single-kanji forms, often employing Sino-Japanese readings, a trend that also saw increased popularity during the latter half of the last century. However, some of the two-mora names found with boys also employ the two-mora two-kanji structure, even for names that could be written with one kanji (cf. *Kai* 海 ('sea') – *Kai* 海衣 ('sea' + 'cloth'), *Kai* 夏維 ('summer' + 'tie/connection')). A number of bimoraic names, including the most popular ones, such as *Haru*, *Sora* or *Sena*, are now given to both boys and girls (see Chapter 8).

Trimoraic names are the most common length for both boys and girls. While there is a greater variety of trimoraic names for girls than for boys (F-ratio = 0.53), the difference in total occurrences is not statistically significant. Trimoraic names usually distinguish gender through their last syllables: *Haruto* is perceived as masculine due to its final *-to*, whereas *Haruna* is considered feminine because of its final *-na* (see 7.3.2).

Four- to six-mora names are significantly associated with boys, with the F-ratio very close to zero. Unsurprisingly, no five- or six-mora names were found among girls' names. However, unlike in the past, they are also infrequently used for boys. They are mostly limited to several traditional patterns, such as ending in

[40] The character 奈, as in 奈良 (a city), is primarily used in feminine names for its reading /na/.

-tarō (*Kōtarō* 幸太郎) or *-nosuke* (*Ryūnosuke* 龍之介; see 5.1), which are not particularly popular now.

Girls are rarely given four-mora names. Only 28 occurrences of 15 distinct four-mora names were identified in the girls' name dataset. Among these, three originated in English feminine names: *Aimī* [Amy] アイミー, *Emirī* [Emily] エミリー, and *Oribia* [Olivia] 織美亜. The name Himawari, appearing four times and written as 向日葵 or 陽葵, carries the meaning 'sunflower'. The majority of four-mora names are names such as *Sakurako* 桜子/櫻子, *Kaoruko* 馨子, and *Akariko* 明里子, i.e., consisting of a trimoraic onymic base used as standalone names and paired with a feminine suffix, most commonly *-ko* 子. Unlike *Sakura*, *Kaoru*, and *Akari*, which are common names, this name pattern is infrequent. Only one four-mora name found among girls' names, *Kotobuki*, lacks typical feminine features.

Overall, the statistics indicate that the majority of contemporary names for both boys and girls are trimoraic. Girls' names, which shifted from predominantly bimoraic in the early twentieth century to predominantly trimoraic by the mid-twentieth century, have regained considerable popularity in their shorter form. Despite the drive for greater originality and uniqueness, names given to girls typically remain two or three morae in length, rarely extending to four and not exceeding this. It should also be noted that five- and six-mora names have become rare for boys as well, who similarly show a trend toward shorter names. Although the variety of bimoraic names for boys is half that of four-mora names (177 vs. 364), their total occurrences surpass those of four-mora names (1,156 vs. 1,023). While two morae offer less potential for diversity than three or four morae, this only further underscores the popularity of bimoraic names.

7.3.2 Gender-Specific Syllables

Certain syllables are associated with either boys' or girls' names. In some cases, their gender association depends on their position within the name. When deciding on a child's name, we often focus on the initial sound or letter. In Japan, it is typically the first mora. Gender differences, however, are more pronounced at the syllable level (cf. ϕ=0.49 for the first mora and 0.61 for the first syllable). The name *Shinta* can be seen as an example. While 94 boys' names and 127 girls' names in the dataset start with the mora *shi*, making it unhelpful in determining gender, the initial syllable *shin* provides clearer insight. It appears in 47 boys' names but only in one girl's name, suggesting that *Shinta* is likely a boy's name.

The names in the dataset feature 110 distinct initial syllables (occurring in at least three names). Out of these, 22 are strongly masculine (with an F-ratio of 0–0.1) and 6 are strongly feminine (with an F-ratio of 1.0–0.9). Except for *ta* and *ga*, the masculine syllables are all heavy syllables, such as *ryū*, *sō*, *shō*, *kō*, *tai*, *kai*.[41] Some of these heavy syllables were once commonly used with the onymic suffix *-ko* 子 (see 5.2) to form feminine names such as *Keiko*, *Ryōko*, *Ryūko*, and *Shōko.* For instance, *Keiko* was the most popular girls' name between 1947 and 1963 (Dai'ichi Seimei Kōhōbu, 1987) and remained widely used beyond that period.[42] However, as the popularity of *-ko* names declined, these heavy syllables became less

[41] いっ /i'/ is also a long syllable. The small っ /tsu/ has the effect of lengthening the following consonant and is normally transliterated as a doubling of the following consonant (e.g., いっぽん /ippon/).

[42] Except for 1960 when Prince Hiro (浩宮 *Hiro no miya*) was born and *Keiko* was preceded by *Hiroko* and *Hiromi.*

common in girls' names and are now rarely combined with other feminine end syllables. Examples of contemporary girls' names include *Kei* (圭), *Keito* (けいと, 恵都, 景都), *Ryō* (鈴, 凉), and *Ryōka* (涼香, 凌佳, 涼夏). Except for the last one, these phonological forms are more frequently used as boys' names.

There are far fewer strongly feminine initial syllables than masculine ones. Feminine syllables include light syllables *e*, *me*, *ne* and heavy syllables *an*, *mei*, and *sā*. The syllable *sā* appears only in the names *Sāya* and *Sāra* and *an*, *mai*, *mei* also occur in only a few distinct names. For instance, *mei* is part of names such as *Meiko*, *Meina*, *Meiri* and *Meisa*. These names were likely influenced by the name *Mei*, which has been one of the most popular phonological forms over the past fifteen years, ranking first in the Meiji Yasuda rankings four times.

In contrast, the syllable *e* appears in more than 20 different girls' names, including *Ema*, *Emi*, *Emika*, *Emina*, *Emiri*, *Emiru*, *Emu*, *Ena*, *Eren*, *Erena*, *Eri*, *Erika*, *Erina*, *Esora*, etc. However, names starting with the heavy syllable *ei* are predominantly masculine. This again underscores the point that the syllable level plays a more significant role in gender marking than the mora.

Table 11

Initial syllables (Boys)

Initial syllable	Boys	Girls	F Ratio	p-adj
りゅう /ryū/	174	0	0.00	<0.001
けん /ken/	92	0	0.00	<0.001
いっ /i'/	35	0	0.00	<0.001
じょう /jō/	17	0	0.00	0.002
が /ga/	16	0	0.00	0.003
そう /sō/	293	1	0.00	<0.001
たい /tai/	153	1	0.01	<0.001
かい /kai/	135	1	0.01	<0.001
こう /kō/	352	6	0.02	<0.001
だい /dai/	57	1	0.02	<0.001
しょう /shō/	144	3	0.02	<0.001
えい /ei/	95	2	0.02	<0.001
しん /shin/	38	1	0.03	<0.001
りょう /ryō/	123	5	0.04	<0.001
しゅん /shun/	49	2	0.04	<0.001
しゅう /shū/	62	3	0.05	<0.001
けい /kei/	98	5	0.05	<0.001
よう /yō/	39	3	0.07	<0.001
らい /rai/	42	4	0.09	<0.001
とう /tō/	83	8	0.09	<0.001
た /ta/	259	25	0.09	<0.001
おう /ō/	76	8	0.10	<0.001

Note: Significance uses Bonferroni correction (m = 104, familywise α = 0.05). Only significant features shown.

Table 12

Initial syllables (Girls)

Initial syllable	Boys	Girls	F Ratio	p-adj
さあ /sā/	0	28	1.00	<0.001
あん /an/	2	62	0.97	<0.001
ね /ne/	1	26	0.96	<0.001
め /me/	1	19	0.95	0.001
え /e/	9	112	0.93	<0.001
めい /mei/	4	39	0.91	<0.001

Final syllables show a stronger association with gender, although the difference is less pronounced than might be expected (cf. ϕ=0.61 for initial syllables and 0.72 for final syllables). Table 13 and 14 list the final syllables that are strongly associated with each gender. The final syllable *-ke*, identified as the most masculine ending, appears in 274 out of 276 names (47 out of 49 distinct forms) as part of the morpheme *-suke* (as in *Sōsuke* and *Yūsuke*), which is represented in writing by one kanji (*suke*: 介, 佑, 助; see Section 5.1).[43] Therefore, *-suke*, rather than only *-ke*, is recognized as a distinctly masculine feature.

Table 13

Last syllables (Boys: F-ratio < 0.1)

Last syllable	Boys	Girls	F Ratio	p-adj
け /ke/	276	0	0.00	<0.001
ろう /rō/	261	0	0.00	<0.001
せい /sei/	230	0	0.00	<0.001
が /ga/	160	0	0.00	<0.001
だい /dai/	49	0	0.00	<0.001
へい /hei/	33	0	0.00	<0.001
よう /yō/	18	0	0.00	<0.001
ぺい /pei/	17	0	0.00	0.001
しん /shin/	74	1	0.01	<0.001
ご /go/	106	3	0.03	<0.001
し /shi/	137	5	0.04	<0.001
と /to/	1 437	88	0.06	<0.001
じ /ji/	59	4	0.06	<0.001
た /ta/	604	64	0.10	<0.001

Note: Significance uses Bonferroni correction (m = 82, familywise α = 0.05). Only significant features shown.

[43] In normal speech, the /u/ in *-suke* is often devoiced and may be barely audible, yielding a surface pronunciation close to [ske].

Table 14

Last syllables (Girls: F-ratio > 0.9)

Last syllable	Boys	Girls	F Ratio	p-adj
え /e/	1	83	0.99	<0.001
ゆ /yu/	3	147	0.98	<0.001
こ /ko/	8	301	0.97	<0.001
の /no/	6	223	0.97	<0.001
りん /rin/	1	36	0.97	<0.001
のん /non/	2	66	0.97	<0.001
な /na/	38	1 076	0.97	<0.001
ほ /ho/	7	155	0.96	<0.001
う /u/	2	35	0.95	<0.001
か /ka/	67	860	0.93	<0.001
は /ha/	20	217	0.92	<0.001
ね /ne/	16	157	0.91	<0.001

Note: Significance uses Bonferroni correction ($m = 82$, familywise $\alpha = 0.05$). Only significant features shown.

The final syllables include the traditional onymic suffixes commonly used earlier in the twentieth century, such as the masculine *-rō*, *-suke* (a disyllabic morpheme), *-shi*, *-ji*, and *-hei* (or *-pei*), as well as the feminine *-e*, *-ko* and *-no*. Additionally, some final syllables gained prominence in later periods, including the masculine *-ta* and *-to*, and the feminine *-ka* and *-na*.

The following sections provide a brief overview of individual masculine and feminine final syllables. In addition to those strongly associated with a specific gender (F-ratio 0–0.1 for masculine names and 1.0–0.9 for feminine names), the description also includes several syllables with slightly weaker statistical associations but which are widely recognized – and often featured in baby-naming books – as masculine (*-ma*, *-ya*) or feminine (*-mi*, *-ri*). The syllables are presented in descending order of frequency in the dataset, along with the kanji that most frequently represent them. Given the wide variety

of kanji used, only those with a statistically significant occurrence for the specific reading in the dataset are included.

Masculine end syllables

- ***-to*** （斗, 人, 翔, 仁, 士, 和, 大, 叶, 登）
  This syllable is by far the most productive and popular ending in contemporary boys' names. Approximately one in five boys' names in the corpus (19.39%) ends in *-to*. At the turn of the millennium, names such as *Kaito* 海斗, *Yūto* 優斗/悠斗, *Hiroto* 大翔, and *Yamato* 大和 began to gain in popularity, as evidenced by their rankings in the Meiji Yasuda lists. During the 15 years we examined, *Haruto* – written in 54 different combinations in the dataset – has consistently been the most popular boys' name. Most names ending in *-to*, like these examples, are three-mora two-kanji names, but some are of the *ateji* type, represented by three kanji (e.g., *Naruto* 成琉大, *Riato* 璃愛斗, *Ririto* 凛々斗, *Shūto* 詩友翔, etc.). Less commonly, *-to* also appears in two-mora two-kanji names, including *Ito*, *Oto*, *Mito*, and *Rito*. Except for *Rito*, these names appear more frequently in the dataset as girls' names. Historically, names such as *Sato*, *Koto* and *Ito* were given to girls. In four-mora names, *-to* often forms part of the morpheme *-hito* (e.g., *Atsuhito*).

- ***-ta*** （太, 大, 汰, 多）
  This end syllable began to gain in popularity together with other end syllables ending in *-a* (*-ma*, *ya* for boys and *-ka*, *-na* for girls) in the last decades of the twentieth century (Barešová, 2016, p. 61). Ōno (2013, p. 143) notes that the character 太 was used in names such as *Genta* 源太 and *Heita* 平太 prior to the Edo period, suggesting that its contemporary use can be seen as a revival. It is typically used in three-mora two-kanji names

such as *Eita*, *Haruta*, *Keita*, *Kenta*, *Kōta*, *Ryōta*, *Ryūta*, *Shōta*, *Sōta*, *Yūta*. Names used for both genders include *Hinata*, *Uta* and *Rita*.

- ***-ma***（真, 馬, 磨）
  The most common boys' names ending in *-ma*, which also follow the three-mora two-kanji pattern, include *Haruma*, *Shōma*, *Sōma*, *Tōma*, *Takuma*, and *Yūma*. While names ending in *-ma* are also given to girls, these are usually two-mora long, e.g., *Ema*, *Ima*, *Koma*, and *Yuma*.

- ***-suke***（介, 佑, 助, 輔, 祐）
  See also Section 5.1. In current names, it is used predominantly in four-mora two-kanji names such as *Eisuke*, *Keisuke*, *Kōsuke*, *Ōsuke*, *Ryūsuke*, *Shunsuke*, *Shūsuke*, *Sōsuke* and *Yūsuke*, and less frequently in five-mora three-kanji names such as *Ryūnosuke*, *Toranosuke*, and *Yūnosuke*. A three-mora two-kanji name, *Sasuke*, is an exception.

- ***-rō***（郎, 朗）
  See also Section 5.1. Names with this end syllable range from three morae (*Tarō*) to six morae (*Ryōichirō*, *Shūichirō*) and are typically written with two or three kanji. As is apparent from the name selection stories, some names following the *-ichirō*, *-tarō*, *-jirō* and occasionally *-saburō* patterns still reflect the order of birth, denoting the first, second, or third-born son, respectively).

- ***-sei***（成, 晴, 生, 誠, 星, 聖, 晟）
  This heavy syllable is mostly used in combination with another heavy syllable, forming four-mora two kanji names such as

Kaisei, *Kyōsei*, *Ryōsei*, *Ryūsei*, *Shinsei*, *Yūsei*. Three-mora names such as *Chisei* or *Shisei* are infrequent.

- ***-ya***（也, 哉, 矢, 弥）
  See also Section 5.1. This syllable appears in a variety of three-mora, two-kanji names such as *Kazuya*, *Kōya*, *Sakuya*, *Seiya*, *Shōya*, *Takuya*, *Tatsuya*, and *Tomoya*. It is also found in a few two-mora names, which are, however, more commonly used for girls (*Kaya*, *Maya*). While it remains predominantly associated with boys' names, this association has weakened over time, as indicated by an F-ratio of 0.24. When used in girls' names, it is typically represented by different kanji, with the exception of 弥, which also appears in names for girls.

- ***-ga***（雅, 河）
  Similarly, *-ga* is used mostly in three-mora two-kanji names (e.g., *Kōga*, *Kūga*, *Ryūga*, *Seiga*, *Taiga*, *Yūga*) and several two-mora names (*Aga*, *Muga*, *Shuga*).

- ***-shi***（志, 士）
  See also Section 5.1. This syllable is used in three-mora names such as *Akashi*, *Aoshi*, *Atsushi*, *Eishi*, *Kazushi*, *Keishi*, *Sōshi*, *Yūshi*, represented by two, less frequently one kanji. When it appears in the final position of four-mora names, it is part of morphemes *-toshi* or *-yoshi* (e.g., *Akitoshi*, *Saneyoshi*).

- ***-ji***（士）
  See also Section 5.1. It can also be pronounced *-shi* (as above). This suffix appears in three-mora two-kanji names (e.g., *Eiji*, *Keiji*, *Kenji*, *Reiji*, *Ryūji*, *Sōji*, *Yūji*). In the past, it was often represented

by the kanji 二 and 次 to refer to the order of birth. While these representations are still in use, they are much less common today.

- ***-go*** （吾, 悟）
  There are only 16 distinct boys' names ending in *-go*, but with 106 total occurrences among boys' names compared to only three occurrences among girls' names, names ending in *-go* are strongly masculine. They are mostly three-mora long, such as *Keigo*, *Shōgo* and *Yūgo*, and written with two kanji.

- ***-shin*** （心）
  This syllable appears in four-mora names (e.g., *Eishin*, *Isshin*, *Kenshin*, *Ryūshin*, *Yūshin*), less frequently in three-mora names (e.g., *Rushin*, *Rishin*, *Kishin*, *Yushin*) and five-mora names, utilizing *no*, similar to *-nosuke* (*Jōnoshin*, *Katsunoshin*, *Michinoshin*).

- ***-hei/-pei*** （平）
  See also Section 5.1. It became particularly popular during the early years of the Heisei era, as the kanji 平, used to write it, is also found in the era's name. Examples include *Kōhei*, *Ryōhei*, *Ryūhei* and *Ippei.*

- ***-dai*** （大）
  Except for the one three-mora name (*Midai*), *-dai* is used for four-mora two-kanji names (e.g., *Kandai*, *Kendai*, *Kōdai*, *Ōdai*, *Seidai*, *Sōdai*, *Yūdai*), usually represented by 大, creating strongly masculine names.

- ***-yō*** （陽）
  -yō appears in only a handful of names that are exclusively boys' names. The most frequent is *Taiyō*, written as 太陽 ('sun') or

with various other kanji combinations. Other examples include *Kōyō*, *Ten'yō* and *Taiheiyō*.

Feminine end syllables

- ***-na*** (菜, 奈, 那, 愛, 夏, 花, 南, 奏)
- ***-ka*** (花, 香, 華, 佳, 夏, 果, 歌)

  These two end syllables are by far the most productive and most popular end syllables in girls' names. One-fourth of girls' names in the corpus ends in one of these two syllables. They are used in both two and three-mora names, represented by one to three kanji. The structure of names utilizing *-na* and *-ka* is very similar. Some kanji even represent both of them, especially 花 (*Ena*/*Sana*/*Emika* 咲花, *Mana*/*Madoka* 茉花, *Mina*/*Meika* 明花, *Rena*/*Reika* 玲花, *Rina*/*Reika* 莉花, *Yuna*/*Yūka* 優花, etc.) and 夏 (*Aina* 葵夏, *Mika* 美夏, *Rinka*/*Rinna* 凛夏, *Runa*/*Ruka* 琉夏).

- ***-ri*** (莉, 里, 梨, 葵, 璃, 凛)

  The most popular feminine names ending in *-ri* include three-mora names *Akari*, *Himari*, *Hiyori*, *Airi*, and *Shiori*. Two-mora names such as *Yuri*, *Juri*, and *Ruri* are also common. The lower F-ratio (0.86) can be partly attributed to the occurrence of *-ri* in boys' names such as *Toshinari* or *Yukinari*, where it forms part of the morpheme *-nari*. These names are distinctly masculine due to their four mora two-kanji structure. However, three-mora names ending in *-ri* are also gaining popularity for boys. Names such as *Iori* and *Yūri* are used for both genders, while *Kairi* and *Tōri* are almost exclusively masculine. Even names predominantly associated with girls, such as *Hiyori* and *Shiori*, are occasionally found among boys.

- ***-mi*** （美）

  See also Section 5.2. As noted in 5.3, names ending in *-mi* were also given to boys in the past, although their use was far more common for girls. The lower F-ratio (0.83) reflects their continued use for boys, particularly the name *Takumi*. The most popular feminine names include the three-mora names *Nanami*, *Nozomi*, and *Kokomi*. The most frequent two-mora names are *Ami*, *Umi,* and *Yumi. -mi* is represented by various kanji, but only 美 was found exclusively in girls' names.

- ***-ko*** （子, 心）

  See also Section 5.2. Compared to the past, names ending in *-ko* are more diverse in terms of length, ranging from two to four morae. Additionally, *-ko* is now represented by a greater variety of kanji, although 子 remains by far the most common. The most popular *-ko* name is the two-mora name *Riko*. While two-mora names are less numerous in variety (only 12 out of 71 distinct names), they make up almost half of all *-ko* names. The *ateji* type 3-mora 3-kanji pattern (e.g., *Maiko* 真衣子, discussed in Section 5.2) is more frequent than the more traditional 3-mora 2-kanji pattern (e.g., *Maiko* 苺子). The relative popularity of the four-mora name *Sakurako* (the 6th most frequent *-ko* name in the corpus with 11 occurrences) may be attributed to the popularity of the name *Sakura.*

- ***-no*** （乃）

  See also Section 5.2. The most frequent names ending in *-no* are the three-mora names *Hinano* and *Ayano*, and the two-mora names *Yuno* and *Rino. -no* is mostly represented by 乃, which was also used in the past, and, among other kanji, by 音, 望, and 希, which are not typically read as /no/.

- ***-ha***（葉, 羽）
  Names ending in *-ha* are predominantly three-mora long, written in two or three kanji. The most frequent are *Iroha*, *Yuzuha* and *Kotoha*.

- ***-ne***（音）
  The four most frequent names ending in *-ne* – *Ayane*, *Nene*, *Kotone*, and *Kokone* – account for more than half of all occurrences of girls' names ending in this syllable. *-ne* is most often represented by 音, which also represents a number of other end syllables, including the masculine *-to*.

- ***-ho***（帆, 歩, 穂）
  See also Section 5.2. In terms of the overall number of occurrences of girls' names ending in *-ho*, two-mora two-kanji names (e.g., *Kaho*, *Shiho*, *Riho*, *Maho*, and *Miho*), which became popular in the second half of the previous century, still strongly prevail. However, this end syllable now also appears in three-mora names, such as *Akiho*, *Mizuho, Sakiho*, and *Yukiho*, which even slightly prevail in variety.

- ***-yu***（結, 優）
  This end syllable appears in 13 distinct names. *Miyu*, with 84 occurrences, strongly outnumbers the other 12 names, which have a total of 63 occurrences. The popularity of *Miyu* has likely triggered the emergence of these other names (e.g., *Mayu*, *Sayu*, *Ayu*).

- ***-e***（恵, 衣）
  Unlike in the past, names ending in *-e* are infrequent now, except for the relatively popular name *Sae*. Only a few names,

such as *Hanae*, *Momoe*, and *Tomoe*, follow the typical three-mora two- or three-kanji name pattern that was popular in the past. *-e* is most frequently represented by 恵, which was popular in the second half of the last century.

- ***-non***（音）
  This final syllable was found in 10 distinct names. The popularity of the name *Kanon* has likely influenced the creation of names such as *Anon*, *Hanon*, *Honon*, *Jūnon*, *Konon*, *Manon*, *Rinon*, *Sanon*, and *Yunon*.

- ***-rin***（凛）
  -rin appears in only three names: *Karin*, *Marin* and *Ririn*.

- ***-u***（羽）
  The final syllable *-u* is most commonly found in the name *Miu*. Other examples include *Mau*, *Meu*, *Nau*, and *Riu*.

As can be seen from the overview, strongly masculine light final syllables such as *-to*, *-ta*, or *-ga*, are typically found in three-mora two-kanji names, and, less commonly, in two-mora two-kanji names – a pattern not traditionally associated with masculine names. Heavy end syllables are generally used in four-mora two-kanji names. *-suke* and *-shin*, when combined with *-no-* (*-nosuke*, *-noshin*), form five-mora three-kanji names, while *-rō* can extend to create six-mora three-kanji names. In feminine names, the use of heavy syllables in the final position is a more recent development. These syllables mostly combine with light ones, typically not exceeding the common three-mora length for girls' names.

Some syllables identified as strongly masculine or feminine are gender-specific only when they appear in the final position. For instance, *-shi* in the final position makes a name masculine, whereas in the initial position, it occurred more often in feminine names in the dataset, although the difference was not statistically significant. In some cases, the length of the name also plays a role. Generally, *-ma* is more frequent for boys' names when it appears in the final position and in girls' names when it is at the beginning, but unlike trimoraic names, bimoraic names ending in *-ma* are feminine (cf. *Yūma* and *Yuma*). However, most syllables that are gender-specific in the final position of contemporary names tend to occur more frequently in names for that gender regardless of where they appear in the name.

Interestingly, while some end syllables are exclusive to boys' names, there are no syllables that appear exclusively in girls' names. The dataset includes 1,044 boys' names ending in one of eight masculine syllables listed above that are not found in any girls' names. Specifically, no girls' names in the dataset end in *-(su)ke*, *-rō*, *-sei*, *-ga*, *-hei/pei*, or *dai.* In contrast, girls' names with the highest F-ratios are occasionally found among boys' names. For instance, there are 83 girls with a name ending in *-e* and one boy named *Ichie*; 147 girls with a name ending in *-yu* and three boys (*Ayu*, *Yūyu*, and *Chifuyu*); and 301 girls with a name ending in *-ko* and eight boys (including *Niko, Riko*, and *Maruko*).[44] This pattern, which is also evident in initial syllables, suggests that feminine features are more readily adopted in boys' names than masculine features are in girls' names.

[44] These names resemble the foreign masculine names Nico, Rico and Marc.

7.3.3 Reduplication in Names

Some names feature reduplication, where part of the name is repeated. Reduplicated forms are more common in Chinese than Japanese names and are often used as childhood names, although they also appear as official names, particularly for girls. The following examples are names of Chinese women born in the 1990s: 45 *Lanlan* 兰兰 ('orchid'), *Shanshan* 珊珊 ('coral'), *Zhenzhen* 真真 ('sincere, true, genuine'), *Tingting* 婷婷 ('pretty, attractive, graceful'), *Yingying* 莹莹 ('lustrous'), and *Bingbing* 冰冰 ('ice'). In contrast to Chinese names, repetition in Japanese names typically occurs only in the phonological form, specifically at the level of morae (short syllables). The following 14 names (see also Table 15 below), totaling 102 instances, consist of two identical morae and were all found to be girls' names: *Kiki*, *Koko*, *Nana*, *Nene*, *Nono*, *Bibi*, *Mimi*, *Mumu*, *Momo*, *Yaya*, *Yuyu*, *Rara*, *Riri*, *Ruru*

Some of these names resemble or originate from reduplicated appellatives, such as *Momo* (*momo* 'peach') and *Nana* (*nana* 'seven'), or resemble foreign names, such as *Koko* (Coco), *Riri* (Lily), *Mimi*, or *Bibi*. Others represent only the desired sound. For instance, as evident from the name selection stories, the name *Rara* may be inspired by the English name Lara and its associated image[46]

[45] These examples are based on data from a questionnaire survey conducted among Chinese university students, which gathered the given names of family members and narratives about their selection.

[46] "[The name] embodies the meaning of being strong and kind like Lara Croft from Tomb Raider, believing in your own will, and cherishing justice!" (Mother of Rara 來々, girl, 2018, Baby Calendar)

or the melodic refrain "la la."[47] *Nene* is an old Japanese women's name likely in use as early as the late twelfth century (Kida 2002, p. 114). Perhaps the most famous bearer of this name was the wife of Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who lived in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Some of these names are written in hiragana, giving them a feminine appearance, but none use the repetition of the same kanji, as seen in Chinese names. Instead, they either include an iteration mark, 々, as in *Koko* 瑚々, *Nana* 奈々, *Nene* 音々, *Nono* 叶々, *Mimi* 美々, *Momo* 萌々, *Mumu* 夢々, *Rara* 麗々, *Riri* 莉々, *Ruru* 琉々, or *Yaya* 弥々, or consist of two different kanji. These kanji represent the same sound but different meanings, allowing for the combination of multiple meanings or the creation of an appealing image, as in the name *Mimi* 美海 ('beautiful' + 'sea'). In some cases, this comes at the price of a non-standard relationship between the phonological and graphic form of the name, as in *Nana* 夏音 ('summer' + 'sound') or *Yuyu* 優心 ('kind' + 'heart').

There are also longer names containing a reduplicated component. These are predominantly girls' names (34 with 325 instances), although some are also boys' names (8 with 18 instances). Aside from the name *Kokoro*, which originates from a common noun meaning 'heart' or 'mind,' and *Kukuru*, which comes from *kukuru*, the Ryukyuan variant of *kokoro*, these names are created from a two-mora reduplicated core combined with a suffix. This reduplicated part is often a common noun (like 七

[47] "Song lyrics often feature ♪ la la la [ra ra ra] … It seems to express feelings of joy, happiness, and delight that words cannot capture. I named her Rara with the wish that her life would be filled with such feelings." (Mother of Rara 麗々, girl, 2012, Baby Calendar)

nana 'seven' or 桃 *momo* 'peach') but can also appear as pairs of unrelated characters.

For example, *nana* appears in girls' names such as *Nana'i*, *Nanae*, *Nanaka*, *Nanako*, *Nanane*, *Nanase*, *Nanaha*, and *Nanami*, and boys' names like *Nanaki* and *Nanato*. Reduplication appears in approximately 3% of names and is predominantly found in girls' names, making it a gender-distinctive feature.

Table 15

Names consisting of two identical morae found in the dataset

Phonological form	Gender	Frequency	Graphic form
なな /nana/	F	25	奈々 (8), 七菜 (3), 夏奈 (2), 菜々 (2), 那奈 (2), なな, 七渚, 凪那, 和奈, 夏那, 夏音, 菜花, 菜那,
ねね /nene/	F	21	寧々 (12), 寧音 (6), ねね (1), 希寧, 音々
もも /momo/	F	12	もも (4), 萌々 (2), 桃々, 桃萌, 百, 百桃, 若々, 萌冬
ここ /koko/	F	9	心瑚 (2), 瑚々 (2), ここ, 心, 心弧, 心虹, 瑚子
りり /riri/	F	9	莉里 (2), 凛莉, 理莉, 璃莉, 莉々, 莉理, 莉璃, 里梨
らら /rara/	F	6	來々 (2), 愛々 (2), 來咲, 麗々
のの /nono/	F	5	乃音, 叶々, 希望, 希音, 暖乃
みみ /mimi/	F	4	美海 (2), みみ, 美々
ゆゆ /yuyu/	F	4	優心, 優結, 夢結, 結優,
きき /kiki/	F	2	希姫, 希嬉
びび /bibi/	F	1	美日
るる /ruru/	F	2	月星, 琉々
むむ /mumu/	F	1	夢々
やや /yaya/	F	1	弥々

7.4 Graphic Form

7.4.1 Choice of Script

The naming regulations allow for the use of five different types of script: kanji, hiragana, katakana, a combination of hiragana and kanji and a combination of katakana and kanji. All these possibilities are indeed utilized but, as is evident from Table 16, to widely differing degrees.

Today, all except for a handful of boys' names are written in kanji (99.6%) and an overwhelming majority (93.21%) of girls' names as well. Hiragana is predominantly used to write girls' names. Its overall usage is not high, accounting for only 6.09%, which gives the names a distinctive appearance among contemporary names. Hiragana is used for some popular feminine names such as *Akari*, *Sakura*, and *Himari*. It is a way of making popular names look unique without requiring an unusual kanji combination. Many of the names written in hiragana have a phonological form used for both genders (e.g., *Aoi*, *Hinata*, *Haru*, *Natsu*, and *Sora*). Hiragana lends a feminine appearance to these names. A common motivation for its use is also a family tradition. In addition to being recommended as an option for girls, it is also suggested, along with katakana, for boys to create a unique name (e.g., Tamago Club and Kurihara, 2022). Although uniqueness seems to be an important criterion for present-day parents, its use in boys' names is minimal, possibly due to its historical association with girls' names. Some of the few boys' names in the corpus written in hiragana are typically masculine in their sound (e.g., *Akito*, *Aruku*, *Daigo*, and *Kenzō*), while others are used by both genders (e.g. *Aoba*, *Ito*, *Miki*,

and *Uta*). Unlike with the former examples, hiragana may cause them to be perceived as girls' names.

Table 16

Use of individual scripts

Script	Male	Female	F Ratio	p-adj
only kanji	7 381	7 128	0.49	1.385
only hiragana	17	466	0.96	< .001
only katakana	6	21	0.78	0.016
hiragana-kanji	0	27	1.00	< .001
katakana-kanji	7	5	0.42	3.873

Note: Significance uses Bonferroni correction (m = 5, familywise α = 0.05).

The results indicate that hiragana combined with kanji is also used significantly more often to write girls' names (it was found exclusively in girls' names). This method is now rarely employed but with a wider variety of name-final kanji (e.g., *Honoka* ほの香, *Meguru* めぐ瑠, *Momoka* もも花, *Yotsuha* よつ葉, *Yukina* ゆき渚), and, again, the choice of script makes the name look feminine and distinctive.

Similarly, katakana is used significantly more often to write girls' names, but its overall use is marginal and mostly for names of foreign origin. The stories behind the name selections indicate that children whose names are written in katakana often have a parent of non-Japanese nationality, such as Marina マリナ, who is half Spanish,[48] or Rūku [Luke] ルーク, who is half American.

[48] "[…] Since my husband is Spanish, I considered several names that would also work in Spain. When I shared the options with my mother-in-law, she said, "Marina is the prettiest," so we chose that name. The question then was which kanji to use. Since our daughter is half-Japanese, I felt using kanji might be a bit awkward. We decided that if she had a typically Japanese appearance at birth, we would use kanji, but if she had a mixed-race appearance, we would use katakana. When she was born, she had mixed-race

However, even foreign-sounding names are typically written in kanji, including the name *Marina* (e.g., 真里奈, 茉莉奈, 茉莉那, and 麻理菜) and *Rūku* (琉空, 瑠空). Katakana does not seem to be used much in traditional Japanese names, not even for girls' names, perhaps to avoid resembling old-fashioned Meiji-era names.

The combination of katakana and kanji is extremely rare for both boys and girls. Boys' names follow the traditional *-nosuke* pattern, where *no*, originally a grammatical particle, is written in katakana (e.g., *Momonosuke* 桃ノ助, *Ryūnosuke* 隆ノ介/龍ノ介), or in kanji, 之 and 乃. In girls' names, ノ is also used to represent *no* (*Honoka* 帆ノ歌/穂ノ佳/穂ノ歌, *Nonoka* 桧ノ香), and ツ to represent *tsu* (*Mitsuha* 三ツ葉). The traditional feminine pattern of combining katakana with 子 or some other feminine name-final kanji (e.g., *Tomoko* トモ子) was not found.

In summary, the choices of hiragana, katakana, and hiragana combined with kanji carry gender-specific markings but are uncommon. Kanji are evidently favored for their contribution to enhancing the originality and distinctiveness of a name. However, the infrequent use of the other scripts also underscores their role as a means for uniqueness.

7.4.2 Length

Similar to the length of the phonological forms of names, the length of the graphic forms is also significantly associated with gender, although this association is even weaker (Table 18). Both boys'

features, so we wrote her name in katakana: Marina." (Mother of Marina マリナ, girl, 2021, Baby Calendar)

and girls' names range between one and three kanji; two-kanji names are most common. The few names with more than three graphemes are written in kana, not kanji. The most distinct length is three kanji, which is significantly associated with girls' names. One-kanji names are significantly more frequent with boys. Two-kanji names show a greater variety of distinct forms for boys (3,726 vs. 2,945), but their total numbers for boys and girls are very similar (6,050 vs. 5,913).

The predominance of two-kanji names may be attributed to the fact that most Japanese family names also consist of two kanji, creating a sense of balance. The tendency for girls' names to be longer than boys' names reflects the popularity of *ateji*-style names for girls, where each mora is represented by a single kanji.

Table 17

Individual lengths of the graphic forms (all instances)

Length	Boys	Girls	F Ratio	p-adj
1	908	599	0.40	<0.001
2	6 050	5 913	0.49	1.176
3	448	1 132	0.72	<0.001
4	2	3	0.60	2.731

Note: Significance uses Bonferroni correction ($m = 4$, familywise $\alpha = 0.05$).

7.4.3 Gender-Specific Kanji

Table 16 above clearly demonstrates that, unlike until the late nineteenth century when kanji were predominantly used in men's names, the use of kanji itself is no longer associated with a particular gender. However, the choice of particular kanji plays an important role in the expression of gender in names; certain kanji are significantly more common in boys' or girls' names.

The names in the dataset feature 495 different kanji and kana in the initial position and 371 in the final, each appearing in at least three examples. Similar to syllables, the difference in the strength of the association with gender between the initial and final positions is not as large as might be expected (cf. ϕ=0.71 for the first feature and 0.81 for the last feature). Characters in the initial and final position that can be considered strongly masculine (F-ratio = 0–0.1), and those that can be considered strongly feminine (F-ratio = 1.0–0.9) are presented in the Appendix (only statistically significant characters shown) and the full list is on the website.

Some of these kanji are distinctly gender-specific due to their semantics, representing or symbolizing qualities or aspirations traditionally associated with a particular gender. Those strongly associated with men include kanji that explicitly mean 'man', such as 雄 ('male', 'hero'), 匠 ('artisan', 'master'), 将 ('leader', 'general'), or those that express – directly or through associations – qualities or aspirations traditionally linked to men, such as 大 ('big', 'great'), 太 ('big around', 'grand'), and 勇 ('brave', 'courage'), 龍/竜 ('dragon'), and 虎 (tiger). In contrast, kanji strongly associated with femininity denote or symbolize women (姫/妃 'princess'), reflect traditionally recognized feminine qualities and emotions (美 'beautiful', 小 'small', 愛/恋 'love'), or relate to things associated with femininity. These include plants and their elements, such as 花/華 ('flower'), 果/実 ('fruit'), 咲 ('to bloom'), 香 ('fragrance', 'incense'), 菜 ('rapeseed blossom'), 莉/茉 ('jasmine'), 蘭 ('orchid'), 杏 ('apricot'), and 梨 ('pear'), as well as delicate and precious objects such as 珠 ('pearl') and 紗 ('gauze', 'gossamer').

Some kanji, however, are predominantly used for one gender not because of their semantics but primarily for the sound they represent. This is especially true for kanji used primarily in girls' names. For example, the use of 衣 ('clothing') and 依 ('rely on,

depend') may be more motivated by their pronunciation /i/ than by their meaning, which, arguably, is also more associated with femininity. The use of 奈 is motivated by its reading /na/, and 乃 by its reading /no/. Similarly, the kanji 帆 ('sail') is not used in boys' names not because of its meaning, but rather because its reading /ho/ is strongly associated with girls' names.

Traditional name-final kanji are typically associated with a particular gender by convention rather than their meanings. As explained in Chapter 5, some name-final kanji, such as those representing the onymic suffix *-suke* (e.g., 介, 助, 輔, or 佑), originate from titles of offices historically held by men, which gives them a strongly masculine connotation. Similarly, the feminine suffix 子 is not used exclusively in girls' names because of its meaning 'child', although it is often perceived this way – not only by foreigners but also domestically. In fact, it has a long history as an honorific onymic suffix that was originally used in men's names (Makino, 2012; Yamaguchi, 2013).

While the number of kanji that were found exclusively in the final position of boys' or girls' names is not all that different (22:17), there is a considerable difference in the initial position. Only seven kanji are used exclusively in girls' names in the initial position, while 33 are used exclusively in boys' names. Interestingly, many kanji that now appear exclusively in boys' names were used in girls' names in the past (see, e.g., Sakuma, 1969). These kanji, expressing various character traits and aspirations, include: 慶 ('to celebrate', 'joy'), 泰 ('peaceful', 'calm'), 健 ('health', 'strong'), 康 ('health'), 隆 ('prosperity'), 諒 ('understanding', 'trust'), 誠 ('sincerity'), 秀 ('to excel', 'superior'), 俊 ('talented', 'excellent'), 正 ('righteous'), 啓 ('to enlighten', 'open'), 稜 ('angle', 'edge', 'majestic'), 聡 ('intelligent/wise'), 孝 ('filial piety'), 尊 ('respect/honor'), 広 ('broad/vast'), 晃 ('clear/bright'), 直 ('honest/direct'), 遼 ('distant/far'). These kanji were especially common in

combination with the *-ko* suffix in names such as *Keiko* 慶子/啓子, *Ryōko* 諒子/遼子, *Takako* 隆子/孝子/尊子 and *Yasuko* 泰子/康子.

The decline of these kanji in girls' names may reflect the diminished popularity of names ending in *-ko* and other traditional feminine suffixes. While these kanji may now seem old-fashioned in girls' names, they may be perceived as traditional or reflective of family heritage in boys' names. The name-selection stories demonstrate that some parents choose these kanji inspired by names of historical figures, such as samurai lords from the Sengoku period, including Toyotomi Hideyoshi 豊臣秀吉[49] and Maeda Keiji 前田慶次.[50] Others incorporate kanji from a grandparent's name, particularly if the grandparent recently passed away. In some families, a specific kanji is passed down through generations. For instance, a boy born in 2018 was named *Taisei* 泰誠, which includes the kanji 泰, also present in his grandfather's name *Taizō* 泰造 and his father's name *Yasuhiro* 泰弘. Such practices are notably more common for boys than for girls.

---

[49] "We chose the name Hidemitsu (秀充) because it evokes Toyotomi Hideyoshi and sounds cool, like a Sengoku-period warlord. (Honestly, we could have named him Hideyoshi, but that would have been a bit too much.)" (Mother of *Hidemitsu* 秀充, boy, 2009, Baby Calendar)

[50] "My husband is incredibly knowledgeable about Japanese history, and whenever the topic turns to Sengoku-period warlords, he gets unusually passionate: 'My favorite Sengoku warlord is Maeda Keiji! Did you know the video game *Nobunaga's Ambition*? Keiji has the highest power stats in the game! And there's this story about him…' Once he started talking, he just wouldn't stop. Because of that, he'd apparently decided long ago that if he ever had a son, he would name him *Keiji*. […] Like Maeda Keiji, I hope our son will grow up with a strong will, someone who doesn't flatter others or go along with the crowd […]." (Mother of *Keiji* 慶次, boy, 2016, Baby Calendar)

Some kanji are gender-specific only in the final position. For example, 結 is predominantly used in girls' names but only in the final position is it clearly gender-distinctive. 志 is used for both boys and girls in the initial position but it makes a name masculine in the final position. Similarly, 一 is more commonly used in boys' names, but in the final position, it is used exclusively for boys. Several kanji that are used in the final position are confined to this position and rarely appear in a different position in a name. For example, 子 typically represents *-ko* in the final position but not *ko-* in the initial position. The masculine 馬 ('horse') also appears almost exclusively in the final position, while other kanji representing the same sound, /ma/, appear in the initial position.

In addition to traditional name-final kanji, more recent ones have emerged. For example, with the growing popularity of names ending in *-to*, 斗 ('Big Dipper') became a popular name-final kanji in the Heisei era (Figure 17). 翔 ('to soar/fly'), another kanji representing *-to*, had a different development. It was newly included in the list of kanji approved for use in names in 1981. First it gained popularity as a single-kanji name, *Shō*/*Kakeru* 翔, and in the initial position of names such as *Shōta* 翔太 and *Shōhei* 翔平. However, its usage evolved over time, becoming predominantly used in the final position to represent *-to* in names such as *Hiroto* 大翔 and *Haruto* 陽翔. Figure 18 illustrates this shift using the Heisei Namae Jiten data. The left axis shows the proportion of names containing the character, broken down by its position in the name. At first, it is mainly used in the initial position, but from 1998 it is increasingly used at the end, which is now its most common use. Its use as a single-kanji name has also decreased. The online interface makes similar graphs available for every character.

Figure 17

Emergence of 斗 in boys' names (Heisei Namae Jiten data)

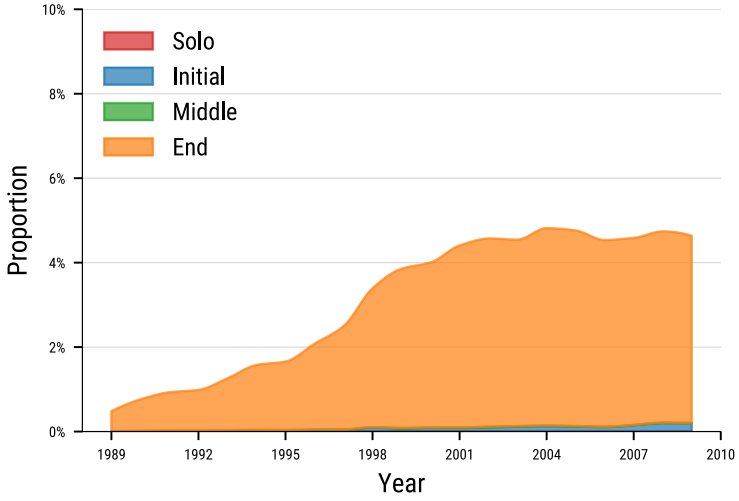
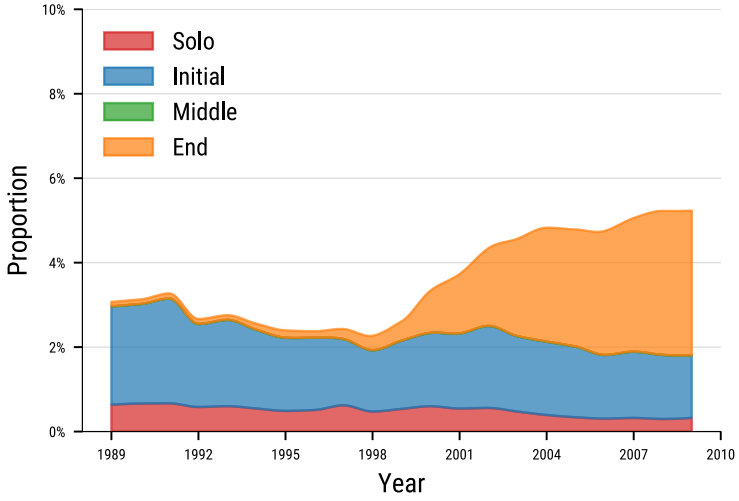


Figure 18

Shift in the positional use of 翔 in boys' names (Heisei Namae Jiten data)



7.5 Final Syllable and Character

The analysis confirmed that the graphic form is a stronger indicator of gender than the phonological form and that the ending – whether the last character (kanji or kana) or the final syllable – serves as a better gender marker than the beginning. Moreover, the combination of the last grapheme and syllable exhibits the strongest association with gender (ϕ=0.81 for the last grapheme and 0.86 for the combination of the last grapheme and syllable; see Table 9, Section 7.2). While the difference may not be highly significant, it highlights a new phenomenon: certain kanji represent two or more distinct syllables, each associated with a different gender. Examples of such kanji include 叶, 星, 心, and 音.

In boys' names, 叶 most often represents the masculine syllable *-to*, as seen in *Aoto* 蒼叶, *Naruto* 成叶, and *Yuito* 結叶, whereas in girls' names, it typically stands for *-ka*, as in *Yumeka* 夢叶, *Fūka* 楓叶, and *Suzuka* 紗叶. For instance, a boy named 優叶 is likely called *Yūto*, while a girl with the same name would be *Yūka*.

星 is predominantly read as *-sei* in boys' names (e.g., *Kōsei* 虎星/虹星, *Ryūsei* 琉星/龍星/瑠星, and *Yūsei* 佑星/優星/友星), but in girls' names, it represents a broader range of (non-standard) readings (e.g., *Miho* 美星, *Kira* 姫星, and *Nanase* 七星).

For 心, boys' names frequently use the reading *-shin* (e.g., *Eishin* 瑛心, *Kenshin* 健心, *Ryūshin* 琉心), whereas girls' names often use *-mi* (e.g., *Ami*/*Manami* 愛心, *Ayami* 彩心, and *Umi* 美心), or *-ko* (e.g., *Ako* 愛心, *Niko* 虹心, and *Riko* 璃心).

音 represents the masculine *-to* (e.g., *Akito* 光音/秋音, *Kaito* 海音, *Ryūto* 琉音), and the feminine *-ne* (e.g., *Ayane* 絢音/綾音, *Kokone* 心音, *Sakine* 咲音), and *-non* (e.g., *Kanon* 夏音/花音, *Manon* 舞音, and *Rinon* 璃音). Additionally, it is increasingly used as *-on* and

-o in both boys' and girls' names (e.g., *Shion* 聖音 and *Reo* 伶音 as boy's names, and *Shion* 雫音and *Rio* 凛音 as girls' names).

Perhaps calling it a new phenomenon is somewhat exaggerated. Comparable examples can be found among older names. Sakuma (1964, p. 93) mentions the kanji 重, which was used in feminine names to represent the onymic suffix *-e*, as in *Yoshie* 良重 or *Hiroe* 広重. It also appeared in masculine two-kanji four-mora names, where it was typically read as *shige*. Thus, 良重 could be read as *Yoshishige*, and 広重 as *Hiroshige*. Names such as *Shigeyoshi* 重良 and *Shigehiro* 重広 also exist. However, examples like these are relatively rare compared to the current situation.

At present, individual final syllables are represented by a much wider variety of kanji than was common in the past, a difference that is especially pronounced in girls' names. Moreover, individual kanji often represent more than one final syllable and, as explained here, some of them represent final syllables linked to different genders.

7.6 One-Kanji Names

The gender-specific kanji in initial and final positions, described in the previous section, apply only to names consisting of at least two kanji. In addition to two- and three-kanji names, the dataset also includes single-kanji names. The use of single-kanji names is strongly associated with gender ($\phi = 0.78$, $p < 0.0001$), with these names being significantly more common for boys than for girls. The dataset contains 140 different single-kanji names with at least three occurrences each. These names account for a total of 1,243 instances, comprising 709 boys' names and 534 girls' names. Of the 140 single-kanji names, only 12 distinct names show a significant gender association – 10 are predominantly masculine and 2 are predominantly feminine. The

remaining names either lack sufficient occurrences to determine a gender association or are used for both boys and girls.

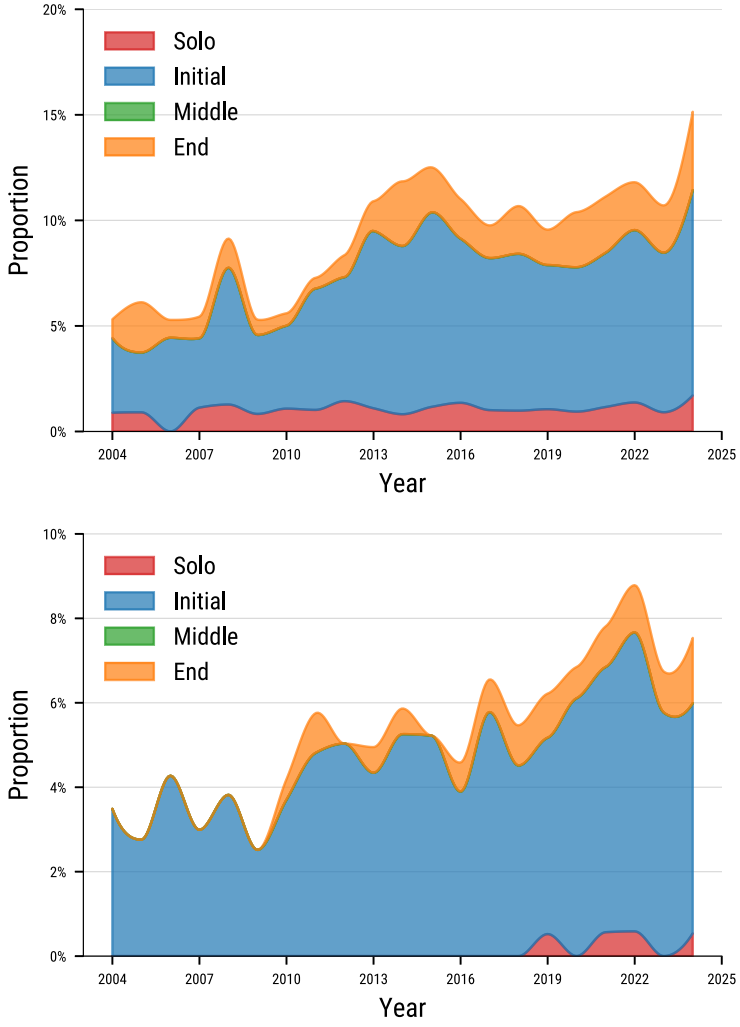
The most frequent among boys' names is 蓮 ('lotus'), which, except for two years, has consistently ranked among the top ten most popular boys' names (graphic forms) in the Meiji Yasuda rankings since 1999. While predominantly used for boys (F-ratio = 0.09), 蓮 denotes a plant, a common motif in girls' names. Its phonological form is bimoraic, typically pronounced *Ren* and less frequently *Hasu*. While the former is a heavy syllable, a feature characteristic of boys' names, the latter is a disyllabic structure more commonly associated with girls' names. What gives the name 蓮 a masculine connotation is the image it evokes: a plant with a beautiful blossom that grows resiliently in a muddy pond, symbolizing strength and the ability to overcome adversity (Barešová, 2016, p. 123).

The other masculine names are: 陸 (*Riku*), 翔 (esp. *Kakeru/Shō*), 颯 (esp. *Hayate/Sō*), 仁 (esp. *Jin*), 慶 (*Kei*), 駿 (esp. *Shun*), 湊 (*Minato/Sō*), 樹 (*Itsuki/Tatsuki*), and 陽 (esp. *Haru/Yō/Hinata*). The last one, 陽, has been one of the most popular kanji in recent decades, and this popularity extends to its use as a single-kanji name. Its F-ratio of 0.17 shows that it is also used for girls, a trend further supported by the Meiji Yasuda rankings (Figure 19, red color). For boys, 陽 has consistently ranked among the most popular names since 2004, holding positions between 11th and 36th. In 2019, it appeared for the first time among the top 100 names for girls, reaching the 83rd position.

The two feminine names are 杏 (*An/Anzu*) and 凛 (*Rin*). The first, 杏, is considered feminine due to its meaning and its similarity to the foreign name Ann. It is found exclusively among girls' names. The second, 凛, has been popular for girls and, more recently, for boys as well. It has ranked among the top 100 girls' names since 2004 and also entered the top 100 for boys' names in 2013, reappearing in the rankings in 2021, 2023, and 2024 (Figure 20).

Figure 19a, 19b

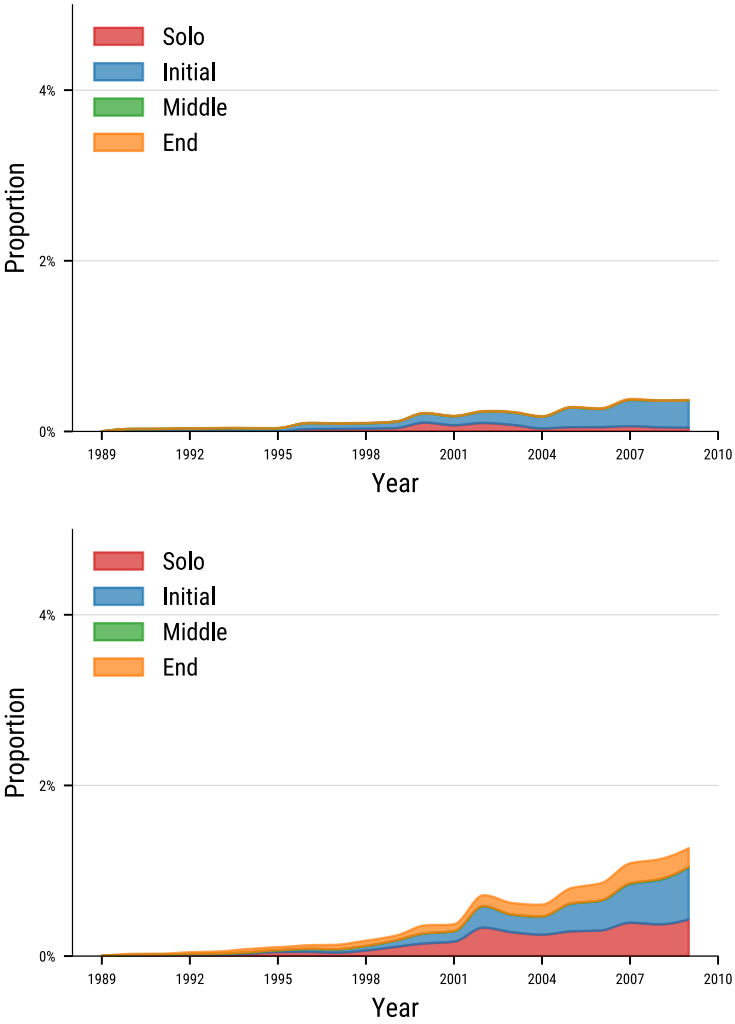
Position distribution of 陽 in names and as a single-kanji name (boys' names top, girls' names bottom; Meiji Yasuda data)



Note: The y-axis scales differ: the upper graph (boys' names) reaches higher proportions (up to 20%), whereas the lower graph (girls' names) goes up to 10%.

Figure 20a, 20b

Position distribution of 凛 in names and as a single-kanji name (boys' names top, girls' names bottom; Meiji Yasuda data)



The Baby Calendar dataset is small, so many names are not statistically significantly associated with gender, although we would expect them to be so from their meaning. For example, single-kanji names that appear exclusively for boys in the dataset include kanji that are used in the initial position of longer boys' names, expressing desired traits and aspirations, such as 諒 ('understanding', 'trust'), 誠 ('sincerity'), 尊 ('respect/honor') and 健 ('health', 'strength') (see 7.4.3). Similarly, single-kanji names found exclusively as girls' names in the dataset often feature kanji representing plants, particularly flowers and fruit trees, such as 華 ('flower'), 杏 ('apricot'), 桜 ('sakura'), 菫 ('violet'), and 柚 ('yuzu'). Others convey meanings commonly associated with femininity, such as 愛 ('love'), 紬 ('pongee'[51]), 鈴 ('bell'), 舞 ('dance'), and 彩 ('bright, vivid color'). In some cases, a kanji's possible readings, rather than its meaning, make it more appealing for one gender over the other. For example, 灯 ('light') does not have an inherent gender association and appears in a similar number of boys' and girls' names in the dataset. However, as a single-kanji name, it takes the reading /akari/, a phonological form predominantly used for girls. When we examine the characters in the larger Meiji Yasuda dataset, all of these kanji are significantly associated with gender except for 柚 ('yuzu') and 灯 ('light'). In the top 100 names of the Meiji Yasuda data, there are 122 single-kanji boys' names and 55 single-kanji girls' names, out of 564 distinct boys' names and 577 distinct girls' names.

In summary, while semantics strongly shape gender associations, traditional usage and especially the possible readings of a given kanji also play a role in determining the association of a single-kanji name.

[51] Soft, thin cloth woven from raw silk.

7.7 How Gendered Are the Names?

As was apparent in Section 6.2, the distinction between boys' and girls' names has become less sharp. This could occur, however, in various ways: boys' names could become more feminine, girls' names could become more masculine, or both. In order to assess this, we need a measure of the genderedness of names. We do so by training a binary classifier that predicts, given a name, whether it is a boys' or a girls' name. We can then calculate the average probability that a name will be classified as the opposite gender and examine how that changes over time. This approach is similar in spirit to Huang and Wang (2022), who examined the genderedness of Chinese names.

To measure genderedness in our data, we trained a Bayesian classifier[52] on several features that were shown to be significant. For the graphic form, the features included the script used, the final character (for names longer than two characters), the character itself (for single-character names), and any characters appearing anywhere in the name. For the phonological form, we used the first and last syllables. The classifier was then used to predict the gender of each name. Change in genderedness is defined as the percentage of names that are misclassified. Thus, an increase in genderedness indicates that it is becoming harder to predict gender from the form alone.

These features were selected to satisfy two criteria: (i) The features strike a balance between giving the classifier too much

[52] We used a Naive Bayes classifier for multivariate Bernoulli models from the python scikit-learn module. This classifier is suitable for discrete data with binary/boolean features such as the presence or absence of a character.

information (which could lead to overfitting, where it memorizes names rather than generalizing) and too little (which would reduce prediction accuracy). We experimented with adding features such as the first character or name length, and with removing some of the existing features. The overall trends remained the same. (ii) To enable comparison, we adopted a feature set similar to that used by Huang and Wang (2022), who relied on the first and last character. Their study, however, dealt with Chinese names, which differ in having a single script, typically no more than two characters, and a predictable phonological form.

We present the results for the Heisei Namae Jiten data in Figure 21a and for the Meiji Yasuda data in Figures 21b (graphic forms) and 21c (phonological forms).

The figures show the change in genderedness. For male names, how likely a given male name is to be classified as female, and for female names, how likely is it to be classified as male. The trend is very clear for the Heisei Namae Jiten data, both male and female names are becoming less gendered, and the change is stronger for male names: they are acquiring feminine features faster than female names are acquiring masculine features. The trend is similar for the Meiji Yasuda graphic forms data, although because there is much less data, the trends are not statistically significant. For the Meiji Yasuda phonological forms data, the trend is the same, male names are acquiring feminine features and becoming less characteristically male.

Figure 21a

Change in genderedness for Heisei Namae Jiten data

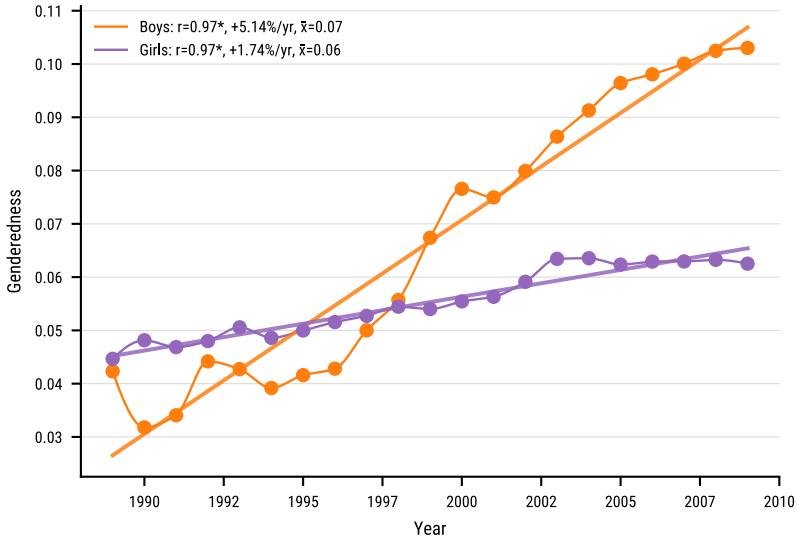


Figure 21b

Change in genderedness for Meiji Yasuda data (top 100 graphic)

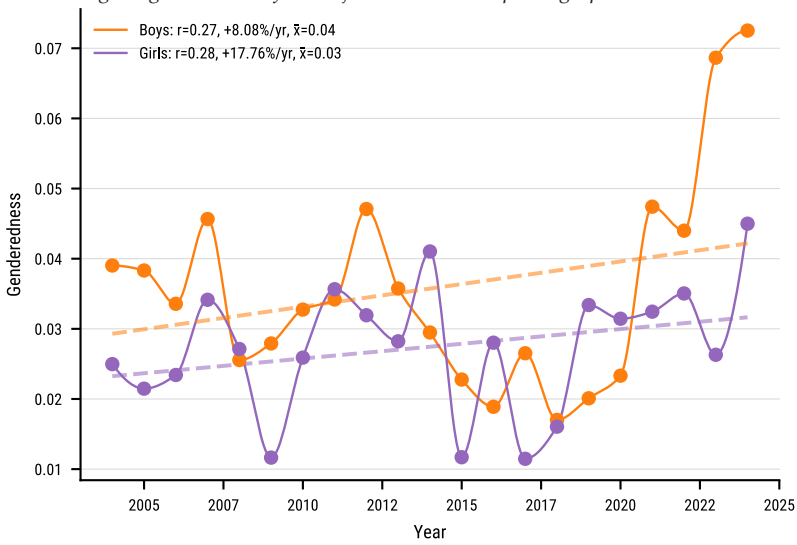
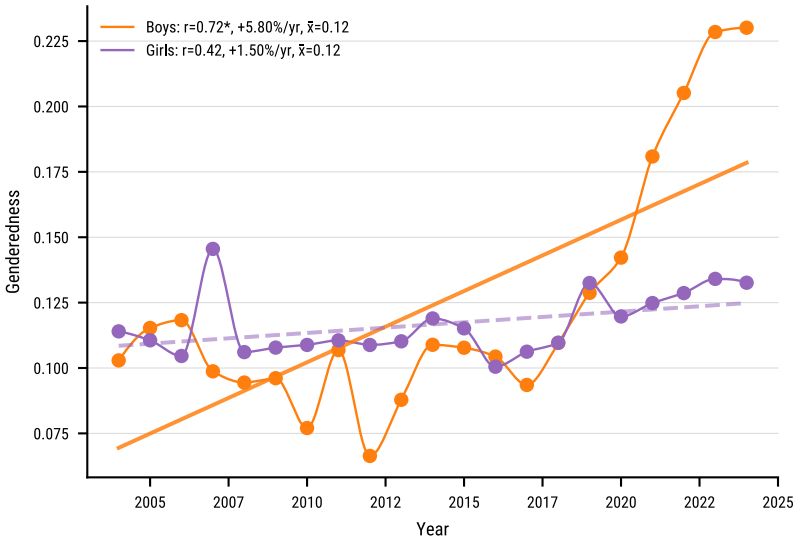


Figure 21c

Change in genderedness for Meiji Yasuda data (top 50 phonological)



7.8 Summary: Shifts in Name Patterns and Expression of Gender

Contemporary names reflect the trends foreshadowed in Section 5.4 and further explained in 6.1. Some name patterns characteristic of earlier periods remain gender-specific, while others have lost their gender markedness, and new ones have emerged in their place. Names given to children today are more diverse and, overall, exhibit a looser relationship between their phonological and graphic forms. In older names, kanji typically represented morphemes and the relationship was grounded in both phonological and semantic values; now it is often based on only one or the other. Yet, as demonstrated in this chapter, even such names more often than not distinguish gender.

The graphic form is more indicative of gender than the phonological form. There are more names that lack gender-distinctive features in their phonological form but indicate gender in their graphic form than the other way around. The strongest association with gender is found in the combination of the final syllable and kanji, which is slightly stronger than the final kanji alone. While the final position shows a stronger association with gender than the initial position, the difference is not as pronounced as one might expect, as sound and meaning often appear to play a more prominent role than morphology. Names that lack a gender-specific kanji in the final position may indicate gender in the initial position. Older names had a gendered final part regardless of whether the initial part was gendered as well. As will be further discussed in the following chapter, this new phenomenon partly stems from an increasing trend among parents to choose a name that is gender-neutral in the phonological form, but gender-specific at least through the graphic form.

At the phonological level, the distribution of heavy and light syllables seems to play a non-negligible role in gender distinction. Although some heavy syllables can also be found in girls' names, they are considerably more popular in boys' names. Some tend to appear solely in the initial or the final position, but in either case, most of them are gender-specific. These linguistic patterns reveal clear gender asymmetries in the distribution of specific syllables and kanji. The most masculine final syllables show a stronger association with men than the most feminine final syllables do with women, and a similar pattern appears with kanji, especially in the final position. Masculine name-final kanji appear in fewer names given to girls than feminine name-final kanji appear in names given to boys, suggesting that feminine features are more readily incorporated into boys' names than masculine features into girls' names.

The classifier-based analysis confirms and extends these observations. A binary classifier trained to predict gender from names shows that both boys' and girls' names have become less gendered over time, with the trend especially clear in the Heisei Namae Jiten data. More boys' names are acquiring feminine features than girls' names are acquiring masculine ones. The Meiji Yasuda data point in the same direction, although the smaller sample size means the trends are not statistically significant. Together, the findings indicate that the boundary between boys' and girls' names is loosening, but in a way driven primarily by changes on the boys' side rather than a symmetrical convergence.

8 Contemporary Japanese Gender-Neutral Names

The Nameless Child in Toshikazu Kawaguchi's novel *Before We Forget Kindness*[53] presents a captivating scenario. When Megumi shares with her husband Ryūji the news of her pregnancy, he eagerly suggests they start picking a name right away. Megumi, however, believes it is premature and proposes waiting until they know the baby's sex. Ryūji, wanting to preserve the surprise until birth, suggests coming up with both a girl's and a boy's name. Megumi dismisses the idea, arguing that if the baby turned out to be a boy, they would never use the carefully chosen girl's name – or vice versa. The thought of discarding a name intended for their child feels unsettling to her. To address the dilemma, they decide to keep the baby's sex a surprise for Ryūji, while Megumi secretly finds out to avoid disappointing the grandparents, who would otherwise not know whether to buy gifts for a boy or a girl. Together, they agree to choose the name after the birth – but unexpected events intervene…

In real life, some parents in this situation might resolve the uncertainty by choosing a name that feels right for any child, regardless of gender. This prompts broader questions. What do such names look like, and what makes them acceptable across genders?

---

[53] Japanese original: *Yasashisa o wasurenu uchi ni* (2023).

Beyond managing uncertainty, what other factors lead parents to select a gender-neutral name? Are such decisions shaped by societal trends toward gender inclusivity and a desire to challenge traditional norms? Or do personal and practical considerations – such as wanting to decide on a name before knowing the baby's sex – play a greater role? Section 8.1 examines the linguistic characteristics of gender-neutral names currently in use and the mechanisms driving their evolution, while Section 8.2 explores the motivations behind their selection.[54]

8.1 Characteristics of Gender-Neutral Names

One of the most popular gender-neutral names of the last two decades is *Aoi*. In Japanese history, it is known as the name of Prince Genji's first wife, 葵, in the famous eleventh-century work *Genji Monogatari* (The Tale of Genji). Today, however, it is a commonly chosen name for children regardless of gender. The name was rarely used for most of the twentieth century because it did not align with any popular feminine name pattern of the time. Its re-emergence was likely spurred by the addition of 葵 ('hollyhock') to the *Jinmeiyō kanji* list in 1976, followed by the inclusion of two other kanji that can be read as *Aoi*: 碧 in 1981, and 蒼 in 1990, both denoting a shade of blue-green. In the 2004 Meiji Yasuda ranking, Aoi was the 16th most popular name for girls and the 46th for boys. In 2013 and 2015, it had risen to 3rd place for girls, but in 2020 and 2021, it ranked higher for boys. In 2022, its popularity was nearly

[54] The former section is adapted and further developed from Barešová and Nakaya (2025a) and the latter from Barešová and Nakaya (2025b).

equal, ranking 7th for girls and 8th for boys. By 2024, two decades after its first appearance in the rankings for both genders, *Aoi* remained firmly established as a widely accepted gender-neutral name for both boys and girls. While Barešová and Machů (2025) found it to be perceived as slightly more feminine, their study also confirmed its broad acceptance across genders. Reflecting this, the name continued to hold high visibility, ranking 6th among girls' names and 13th among boys' names.

Aoi currently appears in numerous kanji combinations, including 葵香 (葵 + 'scent'), 葵衣 (葵 + 'clothes/garment'), 葵琉 (葵 + 'precious stone'), 葵海 (葵 + 'sea'), 蒼生 (蒼 + 'live'), 蒼唯 (蒼 + 'only'), 蒼天 (蒼 + 'sky/heaven'), 蒼空 (蒼 + 'sky'), 碧生 (碧 + 'live'), 碧泉 (碧 + 'spring/fountain'), and 青巳 ('blue' + 'sixth sign of the Chinese zodiac, the Serpent'). Some combinations convey a more feminine impression, such as 葵香 ('hollyhock' + 'scent'), due to their meanings, while others give a more masculine impression, such as 蒼生 ('blue/green' + 'live'), as the second kanji is more commonly found in the final position of boys' names. The name is also widely used in fiction, particularly in manga, anime, and light novels.

Aoi thus exemplifies not only the rise of gender-neutral naming but also the flexibility such names offer in combining phonetic ambiguity with written forms that allow for both masculine and feminine nuances. Its shifting popularity, diverse kanji combinations, and strong presence in popular culture make it a useful starting point for understanding broader trends in how gender-neutral names are formed and perceived in contemporary Japan.

To move from this example to a wider perspective, we examined the characteristics and common linguistic features of gender-neutral names across the entire Baby Calendar dataset. Out of the 1,408 distinct phonological and 4,370 distinct graphic forms of

boys' names, and the 1,224 distinct phonological and 3,906 distinct graphic forms of girls' names (see Table 1), 256 (18.18%) and 333 (7.62%), respectively, occurred in both sets. For closer analysis, we then narrowed this group to names with an F-ratio between 0.2 and 0.8, whose frequency is more than average in both the boys' and girls' name lists. Any choice of cutoff is somewhat arbitrary; we chose an at least 20% overlap, as this ensures that the selected names are recognizably androgynous, rather than names that are only occasionally given to the opposite gender. This procedure resulted in 39 phonological and 57 graphic forms, which we refer to as 'gender-neutral' in the following discussion.

8.1.1 Phonological Forms

Table 18 presents the 39 phonological forms. Based on their F-ratios, these forms can be divided into three groups: those more frequently used for boys, those more frequently used for girls and those with a relatively balanced gender distribution in the dataset. However, it is important to note that some names, while occurring more frequently than average, still have low overall frequency, and the dataset itself is limited. Therefore, this categorization should be seen as an approximate reference rather than a definitive classification.

At first glance, these names seem to be quite diverse. They are either two or three morae long, a length now commonly found in names of both genders. While bimoraic names are significantly more common among girls, the association is not particularly strong, and trimoraic names are nearly equally common for both genders (7.3.1). Some of these names lack features strongly associated with either gender, such as typically masculine or feminine final syllables. Others exhibit features commonly linked to one gender – such as

the bimoraic names *Sena* and *Ruka*, which end in distinctly feminine syllables – yet are also used for the other gender. Despite their apparent diversity, some of these names share structural or thematic similarities, as well as factors or circumstances that have contributed to their use across both genders. The most notable commonalities are outlined below, with the understanding that a single name may fall into more than one category.

Table 18

Gender-neutral phonological forms with their F-ratios (Baby Calendar)

Names more common for boys		Names with balanced gender distribution		Names more common for girls	
Sora	0.200	Nagi	0.429	Aoi	0.606
Asahi	0.208	Haruhi	0.481	Kaede	0.632
Towa	0.214	Natsu	0.500	Mitsuki	0.655
Mahiro	0.261	Aki	0.500	Yūri	0.650
Toa	0.259	Shiki	0.500	Yuzuki (づ)	0.781
Tsubasa	0.273	Sena	0.521	Yuzuki (ず)	0.760
Ao	0.292	Rei	0.548	Ruka	0.762
Haru	0.313	Kanade	0.550	Yura	0.767
Shion	0.344	Mizuki	0.553	Uta	0.739
Aoba	0.353	Nao	0.561	Chihiro	0.742
Chiaki	0.375	Ito	0.571	Natsuki	0.731
Iori	0.378	Rion	0.567	Mikoto	0.722
Hinata	0.384	Yū	0.576	Nagisa	0.786

1) Bimoraic form corresponding to the semantic core of longer gender-specific names

Some of the bimoraic names popular for both boys and girls, such as *Aki*, *Haru*, *Nao*, and *Yū*, were likely motivated by longer, gender-specific names that share the same bimoraic core but include a typically gendered final syllable (onymic suffix). For example, the gender-neutral name *Aki* corresponds to the bimoraic core of boys' names such as *Akito*, *Akiyoshi*, and *Akiharu*, as well as girls' names like *Akiko* and *Akie*. Similarly, *Nao* may reflect the influence

of feminine names *Naoko* and *Naomi* and the masculine names *Naoto* and *Naoki*. *Yū* also appears in many names, such as *Yūto*, *Yūta*, and *Yūsei* for boys, and *Yūka*, *Yūko*, and *Yūna* for girls. Since it is the final part that determines gender-specificity, its absence leads to a lack of gender distinction.

Some of these bimoraic names may be perceived as feminine, especially by older generations, as they may evoke memories of simplex Meiji-era girls' names, typically written in kana (see 5.2). For instance, when one hears the name *Haru*, it may conjure memories of someone's great-grandmother. This name was still frequently used even in the Taisho era, appearing among the top ten girls' names in the Meiji Yasuda ranking between 1912–1918. However, with the widespread adoption of names ending in *-ko* (such as *Haruko* and *Akiko*) in the first half of the twentieth century, these bimoraic names experienced a severe decline in use (Hashimoto & Itō, 2011; Barešová, 2020b) and after several decades, the gender association with bimoraic names weakened. As modern names, they are written in various kanji combinations and are no longer related to the old feminine names, especially among younger generations. Notably, the name *Haru*, written in various kanji, is even more popular as a name for boys, as is evident from recent Meiji Yasuda name rankings.

These bimoraic names are also easily associated with both genders as they are identical to the clipped forms of those longer, gender-specific names that are frequently used as nicknames or which serve as the basis for creating nicknames and affectionate forms (e.g., masculine names *Yūto*, *Yūta*, *Yūma* → *Yū-chan*; feminine names *Yūko*, *Yūka*, *Yūna* → *Yū-chan*). Lieberson et al. (2000, p. 1269) noted that many gender-neutral names in the United States originated from diminutive forms of names that were distinct for each gender (e.g., Jackie from both Jack and Jacqueline), or from

a diminutive form of a name for one gender and an identical existing formal name for the other gender. It is difficult to argue for the same development in the case of Japanese bimoraic names, but some Japanese parents might perceive bimoraic names as diminutive in nature.

2) Trimoraic structure with a non-gendered or weakly gendered end syllable

Some trimoraic names now given to both boys and girls contain an end syllable that is not strongly associated with either gender. The most frequent is *-ki* (e.g., *Mizuki*, *Mitsuki*, *Natsuki*, *Yuzuki*), which, with 1,470 occurrences, is the second most frequent end syllable in the corpus, preceded by the masculine *-to* and followed by the feminine *-na*. In the past, *-ki* was predominantly associated with masculine names, as documented by Watanabe (2005, p. 36). She explains that names like *Haru* and *Natsu* were feminine names, but when combined with a suffix such as *-ki* (resulting in *Haruki* and *Natsuki*), they became masculine names. Although *-ki* still appears significantly more often in the names of boys (with an F-ratio of 0.38 in the dataset), over the last decade or two, the names *Haru* and *Natsu* have become used by both genders, and the same is true for a number of names ending in *-ki*. Other end syllables, such as *-hi* (*Haruhi*), *-ba* (*Aoba*), and -(*o*)*n* (*Rion*, *Shion*), have become popular only recently and are not strongly associated with either gender.

3) Meaning associated with neither gender

Some phonological forms are semantically transparent; they are identical to commonly used appellatives or common names of plants, and their meaning, in addition to their sound, also influences their perception in terms of gender. Those given to both boys and girls represent meanings or evoke images that are not strongly associated

with either gender, express character traits and aspirations that are desirable for both boys and girls, or reflect the time of birth (through seasons of the year and their typical manifestations) in a way that is not gender specific. These include various images, such as of the sea, the sky, light, the sun, and the seasons which are found in names for both boys and girls, expressing the parents' aspirations for their child's future life and character and reflecting qualities such as kindness, tranquility, optimism, and inner purity. Such semantically motivated names include *Ao* ('blue'), *Aoi* ('blue', 'hollyhock'), *Aoba* ('green leaves'), *Asahi* ('morning sun'), *Haru* ('spring'),[55] *Hinata* ('sunny place'), *Kaede* ('maple'), *Mikoto* ('Lord/Highness'), *Nagi* ('calm (at sea)'), *Nagisa* ('water's edge'), *Natsu* ('summer'), *Shiki* ('four seasons'), *Sora* ('sky'), *Towa* ('eternity'), *Tsubasa* ('wing'), and *Uta* ('song/poem'). While these forms can be usually considered simplex as they are phonetically straightforward, often using a single morpheme, their graphic form often conveys additional or completely different meanings, enriching the name with another dimension, and sometimes also gender specification.

4) Association with both genders

Some names are perceived as suitable for both boys and girls, despite ending in a gender-specific syllable, due to circumstances that associate them with the opposite gender. For example, the name *Iori* ends in the syllable *-ri*, which appears more frequently in girls' names than boys' names (the same applies to the morpheme *-ori*) and resembles feminine names such as *Kaori*, which was popular in the past, and *Shiori*, which is popular at

[55] */haru/* is also one of the possible readings of 陽 ('sunshine'), a character commonly used in names for both genders.

present. However, the best-known bearer of the name is the seventeenth-century samurai Miyamoto Iori, who is now also a popular anime character.[56]

Another factor contributing to the unisex character of some of the names is their resemblance to a foreign name or word. The name may be used in other countries as gender-neutral or may be used for the opposite gender to the one it is associated with in Japan. The gender-neutrality of such a name may result from a combination of factors, typically phonological and pragmatic or semantic.

For example, the name *Ruka* ends in a distinctly feminine syllable, but also evokes or may have been inspired by the Italian masculine name Lucca,[57] which highlights its suitability for boys as well. Similarly, the name selection stories collected with the names indicate that the name *Yūri* sounds soft and feminine due to the final syllable *-ri*, but is also associated with the Russian masculine name Yury (Yuri, Yuriy). Likewise, *Sena* ends in *-na*, a syllable strongly associated with girls' names. However, when given to boys, it is usually motivated by the Brazilian race car driver Ayrton Senna, i.e., the surname of a famous sportsman. The name *Toa* ends in *-a*, which is more common in girls' names, but is sometimes associated with 'tor,' the German word for a goal in soccer when given to a boy.

[56] Sano (1988, p. 190) lists names such as *Kaori*, *Kiori*, *Saori*, *Shiori*, *Taori*, *Hiori*, *Maori*, and *Miori* as possible names for girls, while identifying *Iori* as a boy's name and referring to it as traditionally masculine.

[57] Japanese does not differentiate between the /l/ and /r/ sounds as English does.

As shown in the example of *Aoi* at the beginning of this chapter, a gender-neutral phonological form can be represented by a graphic form that is gender-specific. Gender-neutral names with spelling variations that are gender-specific or more common for one gender or the other can also be found in English-speaking countries, e.g., Francis – Frances, Tony – Toni (Lieberson et al., 2000). Due to the use of kanji and the way in which Japanese names are selected, a single phonological form of a name can be written not only in two or three variations but often in numerous forms, each of which may be associated with a particular gender.

In fact, parenting websites (such as Shogakukan HugKum, mamari, and Baby Calendar) that recommend gender-neutral names often refer to names that are neutral in their phonological form. They may then propose different graphic forms for each gender, presenting the resultant names as gender-neutral names "suitable" or "ideal" for boys and gender-neutral names "suitable" or "ideal" for girls. In such cases, while these names remain phonologically gender-neutral, their graphic forms can become gender-specific, conveying a particular impression and intended image through the semantics of the chosen kanji (Barešová & Nakaya, 2025a, 2025b).

8.1.2 Gender-Neutral Graphic Forms

Next, what can be observed about names that are gender-neutral in their graphic forms? The 57 gender-neutral graphic forms, listed in Table 19, comprise 24 single-kanji names and 33 two-kanji names, utilizing a total of 50 different kanji. While hiragana is generally associated with names for girls, katakana is rarely used in contemporary names (see Section 7.4.1).

Table 19

Gender-neutral graphic forms (Baby Calendar)

Single-kanji names	葵, 楓, 優, 心, 和, 凪, 晴, 奏, 碧, 翼, 蒼, 空, 絆, 縁, 光, 明, 虹, 雅, 凌, 海, 涼, 爽, 薫, 輝
Two-kanji names	柚希, 結心, 陽向, 光希, 琉愛, 璃音, 伊織, 優空, 星那, 優希, 春陽, 陽和, 奏音, 希望, 悠月, 愛叶, 日向, 琉夏, 結生, 結音, 充希, 叶夢, 瑠海, 遥陽, 陽希, 愛琉, 楓和, 海音, 真生, 碧海, 碧音, 那月, 陽音

First, let us examine the single-kanji names. Several of these were already used for both genders earlier in the twentieth century (e.g., 薫 read as *Kaoru* or *Kaori*, and 光 read as *Hikaru* or *Hikari*; see also 5.3) or were originally given to boys but have since become common for girls, often with a different phonological form. For example, the name 優 was typically given to boys during the Showa period, pronounced as *Masaru*, and less commonly as *Suguru* or *Yutaka*. According to Makino (2017), this kanji gained popularity as a single-kanji name for both genders partly due to the influence of the Japanese singer and TV actress known under her stage name as Hayami Yū.[58] She adopted the kanji 優 ('kind') with the pronunciation *Yū*, which was also prevalent at the time in various longer names, such as *Yūko* for girls and *Yūta* for boys (8.1.1).

However, the majority of single-kanji names in our dataset are composed of kanji that began to be more widely used in names only in the second half of the twentieth century, especially in the last two decades. In fact, of the 50 kanji used across the 57 gender-neutral graphic forms – including both single- and two-kanji names – about a third only emerged or re-emerged in names following their inclusion on the official list of kanji approved for use in names. 葵 ('hollyhock'), 瑠 ('lapis lazuli'), 悠 ('everlasting, calm, at

[58] Born Tateno Kazumi in 1966.

ease'), and 那 ('beautiful') were introduced in 1976, followed by 楓 ('maple'), 碧 ('blue, green'), 虹 ('rainbow'), 璃 (another character for 'lapis lazuli'), and 遥 ('faraway, distant') in 1981. In 1990, 凪 ('calm (at sea), lull'), 蒼 ('blue, azure'), 凌 ('to endure'), 爽 ('refreshing'), 柚 ('yuzu'), and 叶 ('to come true, to fulfill') were added, with 琉 ('precious stone, lapis lazuli') joining the list in 1997. This period also saw a notable increase in the use of single-kanji names for girls.

Some of these gender-neutral single-kanji names may convey gender distinctions through their phonological forms. A single-kanji name with a Sino-Japanese reading is more commonly associated with boys, whereas the Japanese reading is typically preferred for girls' names, for example: 心 (*Shin*/*Jin* for boys, *Kokoro*/*Koko* for girls), 海 (*Kai* for boys, *Umi* for girls), 蒼 (*Sō* for boys, *Aoi* for both genders), and 涼 (*Ryō* more commonly for boys, *Suzu* for girls). Additionally, single-kanji names with Japanese readings that correspond to verbal forms ending in *-u* are more frequently used for boys, while nominal forms ending in *-i* are typically used for girls. Beyond the previously mentioned 薫 and 光, examples include 和 (*Nagomu* for boys, *Nagomi* for girls) and 輝 (*Hikaru* for boys, *Hikari* for girls).

Turning to the two-kanji names, these, like the single-kanji names, are generally more recent. Except for 日向 (*Hinata*), derived from a common noun meaning 'sunny place', and 伊織 (*Iori*), a historical name, most two-kanji names that are given to both boys and girls are more recent developments. They typically end with kanji that were not commonly used in the final position of names in the past. These kanji represent weakly gendered syllables or are used to represent multiple final syllables. For example, 希 ('hope'), as seen in names such as 柚希 (*Yuzuki*), 光希 (*Mitsuki*, *Kōki*, *Teruki*), 優希 (mostly *Yūki*), 陽希 (*Haruki*), or 充希 (mostly *Mitsuki*), represents the syllable *-ki*. As explained above, *-ki* was associated

with masculinity earlier in the last century but was traditionally represented by different kanji. However, 希 has appeared in the final position of names relatively recently and lacks the traditional masculine connotations tied to other kanji representing *-ki*. Similarly, 月 ('moon'), which also represents *-ki* or more specifically *-zuki* (e.g., 悠月 *Yuzuki*), carries no strong traditional gender associations. Another example is 陽 ('sun') one of the most popular kanji in recent years, which can be read as *-hi* in the final position (遥陽 *Haruhi*, 春陽 mostly *Haruhi*). This usage is uncommon for traditional masculine or feminine names.

Some of the kanji used in the final position now leverage multiple readings to represent both masculine and feminine syllables (see also 7.5). For example, the graphic form 愛叶 can be found as a boys' name *Manato* or girls' names *Manaka* and *Aika*, or 結音 as boys' names *Yuito* and *Yūto* or girls' names *Yuine* and *Yuno*. Similar examples include 碧音 (*Aoto* – *Aone*), 陽音 (*Haruto* – *Harune*), 海音 (*Kaito* – *Amane*), and 奏音 (*Kanato* – *Kanon*). Additionally, some kanji in the final position represent a wide range of syllables, both gender-specific and non-gender specific, including non-standard readings. For example, the kanji 生 can represent *-ki*, *-i*, *-u*, *-o*, and *-mi* and 海 is used to represent *-ka*, *-a*, *-i*, and *-u*, among others. This practice of utilizing multiple regular and non-standard readings of kanji in the final position contributes to blurring gender distinctions in contemporary names.

Regarding their meanings, many of these kanji are connected to the natural world (e.g., 海 'sea,' 空 'sky,' 陽 'sun,' 月 'moon,' 楓 'maple,' and 葵 'hollyhock'). These characters became popular in names during the 1990s (Makino, 2012, pp. 83–84) and have remained widely favored since. They are used not only for their literal meanings and the sounds they represent but also for the associations and imagery they evoke. Other kanji directly reflect

human qualities, emotions, aspects of life, and relationships (e.g., 優 'gentle/kind,' 愛 'love,' 心 'heart,' 夢 'dream,' 望 'desire'), or actions and activities (e.g., 結 'tie/bind,' 叶 'fulfill').

Many of these kanji convey, either directly or metaphorically, human qualities and values that are appreciated in both boys and girls. Among these, *yasashisa*—kindness or gentleness—stands out as particularly prominent, along with related traits such as good-heartedness, friendliness, optimism, and values associated with interpersonal relationships. Unlike qualities such as strength or beauty, which are often tied to traditional gender roles, these traits have a broad appeal, providing a foundation for names that transcend conventional gender associations.

Some of the currently popular names are truly gender-neutral, i.e., they are gender-neutral in their phonological as well as graphic form. These are mainly single-kanji names (*Aoi* 葵, 碧, 蒼; *Haru* 晴; *Kaede* 楓; *Nagi* 凪; *Kanade* 奏; *Sora* 空; *Tsubasa* 翼; *Yū* 優) that are often semantically transparent (such as *Sora* meaning the sky, or *Kaede* meaning a maple). Two-kanji names that are gender-neutral in both aspects are usually names with a traditional or conventional graphic form, such as the above-mentioned *Hinata* (日向, 陽向) and *Iori* (伊織).

8.1.3 Origin and Evolution of Gender-Neutral Names

The characteristics of gender-neutral names outlined above, such as a particular structure or foreign sound, are closely tied to their evolution. Specifically, these features indicate that the names (phonological forms) now used for both genders have emerged through distinct mechanisms, including the adaptation of gender-specific

names and independent development for each gender (cf. Lieberson et al., 2000).

Some names that are now used for both genders were historically associated with only one. Their adoption for the opposite gender did not happen by chance but was driven by specific circumstances. Bimoraic names consisting of two light syllables, such as *Haru*, were the most common type of name given to girls during the Meiji period. Their use declined along with the rise in popularity of the feminine suffix *-ko* and re-emerged with its decline and the rise of new naming patterns half a century later. Contemporary parents no longer view them as names once exclusively given to girls. Instead, in contrast to names that share the same onymic base but are complemented by different gendered suffixes, they are seen as gender-neutral.

Names such as *Aoi*, *Yura* and *Iori* are associated with famous historical figures.[59] While they retain this historical connection, they were not widely used in the past and do not possess features strongly tied to gender in the modern era – or, in the case of *Iori*, incorporate elements more commonly associated with the opposite gender. This absence of strong modern gendered associations, or even the presence of features linked with the opposite gender, enables these names to be given to both boys and girls.

Other names have emerged relatively recently with distinct origins for each gender, one of which is typically foreign. With globalization, names that sound foreign or resemble foreign names – thereby facilitating international communication – have grown in

[59] *Aoi* with Aoi no Ue, wife of Hikaru Genji; *Yura* with Yura Gozen, wife of Minamoto no Yoshitomo; *Iori* with Miyamoto Iori, an adoptive son of Miyamoto Musashi.

popularity. Examples such as *Sena*, *Ruka*, *Yūri*, and *Toa* demonstrate that names used for both genders tend to exhibit features associated with one gender in Japan while also resembling foreign names or words linked to the opposite gender.

Finally, the emergence or re-emergence of these currently popular gender-neutral names, and their use for both genders, can be attributed to various celebrities and fictional characters from manga and anime. Due to the unique way Japanese names are crafted and the vast diversity of contemporary names, only those with significant exposure tend to achieve widespread recognition. This is particularly true for gender-neutral names. For a name associated with one gender to achieve broad acceptance as gender-neutral, its use by individuals of the opposite gender has to be highly visible in the public sphere. The analyzed names often appear in diverse fictional works as characters of both genders. Many of these fictional characters also embody a mix of masculine and feminine traits, further facilitating their association with both genders (Barešová, 2020). The name selection stories also reveal that some parents are inspired by their favorite characters when choosing names for their children.

Due to the lack of comprehensive longitudinal data, it is difficult to systematically trace the popularity of names in Japan in the same way as in the United States or other countries where historical records and statistical datasets on given names are more readily available. Tracking these names in baby name books is not entirely reliable for systematic analysis. Each publication is organized differently, and the criteria for name inclusion or gender categorization are rarely specified, making cross-comparison difficult. The first volume of the popular Tamahiyo series (2003) lists all 39 names examined in this chapter under both boys' and girls' names, except for *Ito*, which still appears only as a girls' name. In contrast, the earlier baby-naming

guides we examined – specifically Sakuma and Sakuma (1966), Sano (1988), and Yasuda (1998) – include only a portion of these names, with the oldest source listing only six, and typically recommend them for only one gender. This suggests that many of the names now considered suitable for both boys and girls either reemerged after a period of limited use or were newly introduced during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

One clear example is *Hinata*, a name that seems to have gained popularity for both genders at roughly the same time. It is listed in the 2003 Tamahiyo guide but does not appear in any of the older books. The Heisei Namae Jiten database, which contains nearly a million names of children born in the first year of the Heisei era (1989), records only nine instances of *Hinata* for each gender. Fifteen years later, in 2004, *Hinata* appeared in the Meiji Yasuda ranking in 29th place for both boys and girls. The comparison between older and more recent sources points to a notable shift toward gender-neutral naming practices in Japan during this period.

Of the 39 names listed in the 2003 Tamahiyo book as suitable for both boys and girls, most were treated in earlier baby-naming guides only as girls' names. Specifically, 19 appeared as girls' names and only 5 as boys' names. Four were listed as names for both genders, while 11 were absent from all three earlier sources.

This distribution suggests that the trend toward gender-neutral naming in Japan has, in many cases, involved the extension of names originally seen as feminine to boys, rather than the other way around. Such a pattern may reflect a broader shift in social attitudes, in which the boundaries around what constitutes an appropriate boys' name have become more flexible, allowing for the adoption of softer or formerly feminine name forms. The data thus points not only to an increase in names used across genders, but also to an asymmetrical process, as we saw in section 7.6. While

overall names are becoming less gendered, the change is stronger for boys' names: they are acquiring feminine features faster than girls' names are acquiring masculine features.

8.2 Why Children Are Given Gender-Neutral Names

The previous section explored the linguistic characteristics of gender-neutral names and what makes them acceptable across genders. Understanding their origins and spread tells, however, only part of the story: it does not reveal the personal considerations that lead parents to choose them today.

To explore the most common motivations, considerations, and pathways guiding the choice of gender-neutral names, Barešová and Nakaya (2025b) conducted a qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014) of 1,571 name-selection stories, all involving the same 39 gender-neutral phonological forms drawn from the dataset used in this book. Using search terms related to gender, gender neutrality, and unisex naming, they first identified potentially relevant stories, then manually excluded those that, despite matching the search terms, contained no explicit reference to gender neutrality.

This process resulted in a final set of 125 stories, which were analyzed thematically using an inductive, fully manual approach without predefined categories, allowing patterns to emerge organically from the material. Each account was examined in detail to uncover the circumstances or motivations behind the choice of a gender-neutral name. During the open-coding stage, notable phrases and recurring ideas linked to these factors were identified and labeled. These initial codes were then consolidated in the

axial-coding stage into broader thematic categories, providing a structured framework for interpretation. The following text, adapted from Barešová and Nakaya (2025b), introduces the main findings.

Surprisingly, the vast majority (92%) of the examined stories made no mention or comment about the gender aspect of the chosen name. While parents considered a range of criteria and motivations, gender neutrality was conspicuously absent from their stated considerations. What might initially seem surprising becomes less so upon further consideration. When selecting a name for their child, parents usually think of it as being for a child of a particular gender, a practice that reflects the gendered expectations built into naming conventions (Pilcher, 2016, 2017). With that in mind, they do not often consider, or at least it is not evident from their name-selection story, whether the name is also suitable for the other gender. This does not necessarily mean they are unaware of it; it is simply outside their focus. Nonetheless, given the increasing diversity of contemporary names, including many that are new or unconventional (Ogihara et al., 2015; Ogihara, 2021; Unser-Schutz, 2015, 2016), some parents may not even be aware of this aspect of the name, as some of the name selection stories have revealed. Their perception is shaped by their specific context, experiences with the name, and the information available to them at the time of naming.

Naming resources may also contribute to this lack of recognition. Baby naming books do not usually have a category of gender-neutral names. They discuss them to some extent and provide examples in the introduction, but actual names are usually listed separately for boys and girls, and gender-neutral names are included in these two categories (Unser-Schutz, 2025). This binary organization echoes what Pilcher (2016) describes as the embeddedness of naming

within sexed and binary gender systems. The popular Tamahiyo baby-naming guides (*Tamahiyo akachan no shiawase namae jiten* [The Tamahiyo happy baby names dictionary]), which have been published annually since 2003 and are considered particularly influential with expectant parents (Kobayashi, 2009), even feature separate gendered editions (Unser-Schutz, 2025). Consequently, one might not even recognize the gender-neutral aspect of a name, as illustrated by the following example:

> *When my husband went to buy a book of names, he ignored my advice to get one that included both boys' and girls' names and bought a book for girls' names only. The image we had in mind was 'a person with a broad, generous, and warm heart'. From that book, we considered the stroke count and other factors. Ultimately, we combined* 遥 [which evokes an image of 'broad' and 'generous'] *and* 陽 [which evokes an image of warmth] *to create the name Haruhi. Later, we heard that this name is more commonly used for boys, and we wondered if it wasn't a bad idea.*
>
> Mother of Haruhi 遥陽 , girl, 2011, Baby Calendar (transl. from Japanese)

Parenting and baby name websites pay more attention to gender-neutral names, offering advice on their selection and providing lists of such names. However, similar to baby naming books, one may unintentionally choose a gender-neutral name when searching on these websites, as they often list names in multiple thematic categories; for example, names such as *Aoi* and *Kaede*, which appear on gender-neutral name lists, are also frequently categorized as traditional or retro Japanese names for girls.

Only eight percent of parents explicitly mentioned gender neutrality, and in fewer than five percent of cases it was a deliberate and conscious choice. In other instances, gender neutrality was either

unintentional or not a primary consideration, as demonstrated by the following two stories. The first example represents cases where parents had chosen a name for a child of a specific gender but later discovered that the child was of the opposite gender. Despite efforts to select a different name, they struggled to let go of their initial choice, having grown attached to it after using it to address the baby during pregnancy. The second example represents cases where parents used a temporary name – *taiji nēmu*[60] – until the baby's sex was known. Over time, their fondness for the name grew, leading them to retain it after the child's birth.

> *My husband had always hoped for a girl. When I was pregnant, he was convinced it was a girl and wanted to name her Yuzuki because he liked the sound of yuzu. During the ultrasound, when we saw it was a boy, he was genuinely shocked […]. He then suggested we save the name for our second child if it were a girl [...]. But we didn't know if we would have a second child, and even if we did, it might be another boy. […] We had already been calling the baby Yuzu, so in the end, I decided that our child would be Yuzuki. […]*
>
> (Mother of *Yuzuki* 橙生, boy, 2018)

> *It was four months after we got married that we found out I was pregnant with our first child. From that point on, we talked about the baby every night. […] During this time, we started using the*

[60] This is typically a temporary means of addressing a child during pregnancy until its sex is known. Hence, it usually represents a gender-neutral designation, often taking the form of a nickname but also occasionally of an existing name or its shortened version. While a temporary name in the form of a nickname (e.g., *Mame-chan* – 'Bean', *Chibi-chan* – 'Little One') will be replaced by a regular name once the parents learn the child's sex, a diminutive form of a name can become the resultant name.

> *temporary name Haru. We liked its warm and gentle sound, and one of the deciding factors was that, since we didn't yet know the baby's sex, it was a name that could be used regardless […]. However, since we viewed this name as temporary, we started considering other names around the ninth month of pregnancy. […] [I]n the end, we agreed that Haru, which we had been using all along, felt the most fitting. […]*
> (Mother of *Haru* 遥, boy, 2020)

While some parents use a temporary name, which is inherently gender-neutral, to address their child before knowing their sex, others choose a gender-neutral name as the official name for the same reason. Among parents who intentionally selected a gender-neutral name, uncertainty about the child's sex at the time of naming emerged as the most frequently mentioned motivation.

Traditionally, names were chosen after the child's birth. This practice allowed parents to consider various factors such as the child's sex, the circumstances of the birth, and even the time of birth, which holds significance in astrological beliefs (Kida, 2002). However, advancements in prenatal care have shifted this practice. Contemporary parents often begin preparing for their child's arrival, including selecting a name, as soon as they learn the baby's sex. Many start even earlier, compiling lists of favorite names for a boy and a girl – a method Megumi in Kawaguchi's story opposed. Some parents also opt for a temporary name to address the child and establish a psychological bond during pregnancy. For others, choosing a gender-neutral name serves as both a practical solution during this period and a permanent choice from the outset.

The desire to address the child before birth and build a relationship with them makes the phonological form of a name a primary consideration. This approach to name selection, along with its advantages and the key role of a name's sound, is presented on parenting

websites and in baby name guides. As some examples illustrate, it is not uncommon for only the phonological form of a name to be gender-neutral, allowing parents to address the child early in pregnancy, while the graphic form, chosen later, may reflect a specific gender. The following story is a good example of this practice:

> *Until birth, we couldn't determine the child's sex, so we looked for a name that could be used for both a boy and a girl. Yūri was our first choice. Grandpa examined the stroke count of various kanji and provided several options. Then, our baby was born – a girl. We decided on the name 悠梨, which combines the meanings of being gentle and having a broad heart. We thought it suited her best, and it had the most favorable stroke count.*
>
> (Mother of *Yūri* 悠梨, girl, 2008)

Only a small number of parents cited social reasons as part of their motivation. Some mentioned that, in today's society, gender is no longer viewed as a binary concept. Others noted that a gender-neutral name could help mitigate social or professional discrimination based on gender, or challenge stereotypes associated with femininity and masculinity. As illustrated by the following example, a few even considered the possibility that their child might identify differently in adulthood and valued the advantage of a gender-neutral name, which would avoid the need for a potentially complicated name change later.

> *We named our child Natsuki 夏葵 because she was born in the summer when sunflowers bloom* [夏 means 'summer' and 葵 is used in 向日葵 'sunflower']. *Although Natsuki-chan is a girl, there may come a time in her life when she wants to live as a boy. To make it easy for her to continue using her name even if she becomes a boy, we chose a gender-neutral name.*
>
> (Mother of *Natsuki* 夏葵, girl, 2021)

It seems likely that many parents who explicitly stated their preference for a gender-neutral name but did not provide further justification were also motivated, at least in part, by social considerations. The phrasing used in the name-selection stories – such as "We like gender-neutral names," "I insisted on a gender-neutral name," or "A gender-neutral name was the point" – suggests that the gender-neutral aspect of the name holds significant value for these parents. They appear to view it as a meaningful choice and a benefit for their child's future.

The growing visibility of gender-neutral names in popular discourse and online media also suggests that broader social trends may be playing a background role in shaping parental preferences. Online sources often present these names as part of a wider cultural shift, linking their popularity to the rise of jendāresu ('genderless') or jendāfurī ('gender-free') values and increasing public interest in gender issues (e.g., Baby Calendar ed. team, 2021; HugKum ed. team, 2023). Some even refer to global frameworks such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 5, which promotes gender equality at all levels of society (Baby Calendar ed. team, 2021; see also Noel ed. team, 2019). These sources emphasize that moving beyond rigid gender stereotypes – a shift visible not only in naming but also in fashion, cosmetics, and interpersonal relationships – may influence parents' choices.

The choice of a gender-neutral name, or one more commonly associated with the opposite gender, may also be driven by a desire for distinctiveness. These names stand out because their sound differs from typically masculine or feminine names, which often have gender-specific endings. Their uniqueness remains, even when these names become more frequently used or rank highly on baby name lists, as they continue to differ from gender-specific names. Distinctiveness can be achieved in various ways. In addition

to selecting an original name with an uncommon phonological or graphic form, it can also be achieved by choosing a name more commonly associated with the opposite gender. According to some parenting websites (e.g., Hirota, 2022), this option can create a 'cool' effect for girls and a 'cute' or 'kind' effect for boys.

Finally, the use of gender-neutral names is also driven by their fashionable appeal. As explained above, popularity and uniqueness or distinctiveness are not necessarily contradictory. Many of the names identified as gender-neutral rank among the top 100 baby names for both boys and girls. Their popularity is largely influenced by well-known figures: celebrities, public figures, and fictional characters from manga, anime, video games, etc. People who follow naming trends are influenced by the popularity of these names, including gender-neutral ones, and often choose them for their children, which in turn contributes to their continued spread in society.

8.3 Summary

The findings of this chapter demonstrate how contemporary Japanese gender-neutral names emerge from a combination of linguistic flexibility, shifting aesthetic preferences and perceptions of gender and gender roles, as well as changing parental practices. These names are not new to the Japanese naming landscape, but their visibility and range have increased markedly in recent years.

The 39 gender-neutral phonological forms analyzed represent 1,575 names, or 10.46% of the 15,058 names in the corpus, while the 57 gender-neutral graphic forms account for 623 names (4.14%). Although these figures may appear modest, they are notable given the short, 15-year span of the dataset and the fact that only a small

number of names tend to be popular among both boys and girls at the same time (Barry & Harper, 1993; Lieberson et al., 2000).

When viewed from a longer perspective, a clearer picture of the rise of gender-neutral names emerges. As shown in Section 6.2, the number of gender-neutral names – measured by overlapping names given to both boys and girls – has been increasing over the past decades and has accelerated in the last decade. The degree of overlap varies depending on the size of the dataset – whether analyzing only the top 50 names or a larger sample – but all measures reveal a clear upward trend. Thus, while gender-neutral names have existed for some time, their prevalence is a relatively recent phenomenon and one that continues to grow.

The relatively small number of truly gender-neutral names, as defined here, is partly due to the generally low occurrence of names sharing both the same phonological and graphic form. When parents opt for a more popular phonological form, they often seek to make the name more distinctive by choosing a less common graphic form. They may also customize it for the particular child, for example, by choosing kanji that, when combined with those in the surname, yield auspicious stroke counts.

The linguistic characteristics of these names help explain their flexibility across genders. Some are identical to name bases shared across masculine and feminine names, while others contain weakly gendered or newly popular end syllables. Still others derive their neutrality from meanings linked to nature or to universally valued personal qualities, making them intuitively suitable for any child. The graphic forms manifest parallel tendencies: parents frequently choose kanji that are recent additions to the *Jinmeiyō kanji* list, semantically evocative, or capable of representing multiple readings, thereby allowing gendered nuance to be added or withheld.

These names have evolved in varied ways – through weakened historical gender associations, the reappearance of kanji newly approved for naming, and influences from foreign names that encouraged parallel development across genders. Public culture also plays a central role: names borne by well-known celebrities or fictional characters often gain traction as broadly acceptable options especially when those characters combine traits traditionally coded as masculine and feminine.

Parents' motivations reflect this diversity. In the vast majority of the 1,571 name-selection stories examined, parents did not comment on the gender-neutral aspect of the name at all. Their attention lay elsewhere – on sound, imagery, meaning, seasonality, or kanji preferences – and some were not even aware that the name was commonly used for both genders. When parents did address gender neutrality directly, it was usually for practical reasons: uncertainty about the baby's sex during pregnancy, or the decision to retain a temporary prenatal name. A smaller group mentioned social considerations, including the belief that gender is no longer viewed as strictly binary, concern about gendered expectations or discrimination, or the desire to give the child a name that would remain usable if their gender identity changed in the future. These cases suggest that, although less common, shifting perceptions of gender and gender roles do influence some contemporary naming decisions.

Overall, the emergence and growing presence of gender-neutral names reflects both innovation within language and broader social change. The small but noticeable number of parents who link their choice to broader social views on gender suggests that shifts in gender perceptions, while not the main driver, are beginning to shape naming practices – and are most visible in recent years.

9 How Japan Compares to Other Countries

Trends in name selection reflect broader societal changes. In present-day Japan, naming practices – including preferences for expressing gender – are one of many ways in which major societal shifts since the late twentieth century have become visible. These shifts, which include the renegotiation of gender roles, changes in family structure, advancing globalization, and increasing individualism, are reflected in a growing diversity of names and, consequently, their expression of gender. Such developments, however, are not unique to Japan. An increasing preference among recent cohorts of parents for names less traditionally tied to a specific gender has been observed in various countries, with its extent varying and shaped by local laws, linguistic structures, and cultural expectations.

For example, Cohen (2023) reports that androgynous names in the United States have reached a historic high, accounting for over 6% in 2022 compared to less than 2% fifty years ago. A comparable trend has been observed in the Netherlands (Bloothooft & Onland, 2018). In England and Wales, the proportion of such names has also risen, now standing at around 3% (Cohen, 2023). Recent evidence from Canada points in the same direction, showing a marked increase in their prevalence (Guppy & Kolpashnikova, 2025). This can also be seen in Japan, where the proportion of androgynous names (graphic form) in 2009 was 3.8%, compared to only 1.6% in 1989 (Section 6.2.2).

In this chapter, we consider recent preferences for the expression of gender in Japanese names within a broader context, drawing on findings from several other countries. We highlight culture-specific aspects while also pointing to phenomena that appear significant across different cultures. Taking a closer look at the changing diversity of girls' and boys' names, the growing interest in gender-neutral names, and the tendency toward softer boys' names reveals both interesting similarities and differences.

9.1 Individuality and the Decline of Naming Traditions

The growing preference among recent cohorts of name-givers for less traditionally gender-distinctive names appears to be closely tied to the increasing diversity of names – a phenomenon observed in Japan (see Chapter 6) and in many other countries. Rising name diversity has been documented in the United States (Twenge et al., 2010, 2016), the United Kingdom (Bush et al., 2018), Spain (Fernández Juncal, 2019), France (Mignot, 2022), China (Bao et al., 2024), Bulgaria (Vlahova-Angelova, 2025), and elsewhere.

This trend can be at least partly attributed to a weakening of tradition and a stronger emphasis on individuality and uniqueness. In Germany, Gerhards (2018) links increasing name diversity to declining religiosity and the diminishing role of family lineage and patriarchy. As parents and children gain greater economic independence from one another, the likelihood of reusing names across generations decreases. Guppy and Kolpashnikova (2025) make similar observations in Canada.

A number of studies highlight differences in the diversity of names chosen for boys and girls. In the United States, research

from the second half of the twentieth century showed that boys' names tended to be more stereotyped and traditional, often reflecting kinship ties, whereas girls' names were more diverse and more often drawn from sources outside the family (Rossi, 1965; Busse & Seraydarian, 1978; Alford, 1988; Obasi, 2016). Girls were also more frequently given less common or currently fashionable names (Lieberson & Bell, 1992; Joubert, 1993; Lieberson et al., 2000). Statistical comparisons confirmed that while boys were more likely to receive the most frequent names, lower-frequency names were disproportionately given to girls (Barry & Harper, 2000, p. 50).

Similar patterns appear in Spain, where Fernández Juncal (2019) traces a broad shift toward less common choices between the 1930s and 2018, with the decline of dominant names especially pronounced among girls. In Germany, Gerhards (2018, p. 111) also shows that turnover among the ten most popular names is much higher for girls, suggesting that their names are more trend-driven, whereas boys' names remain comparatively stable and traditional. This contrast reflects broader gendered attitudes: boys' names emphasize continuity and tradition, reinforcing their stronger incorporation into established family practices, while girls' names are more closely tied to novelty, fashion, and often foreign influences – a dynamic that parallels gender differences in fashion more generally.

In recent decades, however, the gap between boys' and girls' names in terms of diversity appears to be diminishing. He (2020), in a large-scale analysis of 348 million American children's names spanning 137 years, confirmed that unconventional names remain more common for girls, although such names have become increasingly popular for both genders in line with the broader rise of individualism (p. 617; see also Twenge, 2016). In line with this trend, Kihm (Nameberry) notes a marked increase in name diversity

among members of Generation Z. Mignot (2022) similarly found that while girls' names were once considerably more diverse than boys', this gap has been narrowing – a pattern also reported in Canada by Guppy and Kolpashnikova (2025).

In Japan, the situation is somewhat different. It is not customary to share the same exact name across generations or even within an extended family. In fact, the existence of a name within the family can be a reason *not* to choose it. The transition from extended to nuclear family has greatly influenced naming practices (Unser-Schutz, 2019; Barešová & Janda, 2023), but not in the sense of passing the same names down through generations. While patrilineality has also played a significant role in Japanese society, and boys' names in particular often reflected birth order, succession is not indicated by using identical names but rather by the sharing of certain features, typically a common kanji (or part of a kanji) within the name. Thus, while in Western contexts it is not uncommon for several men in succession to be named John or Joseph, in Japan, they might instead have names that share the same first kanji, as in the following example spanning five generations: 明顕 *Akitaka* → 明寿 *Akitoshi* → 明博 *Akihiro* → 明知 *Akitomo* → 明陽 *Akiharu*. Thus, the decline in connecting names across generations did not have a direct impact on name diversity.

In Japan, it is actually the boys' names that have always been more diverse. The structural range of masculine name patterns (discussed in Chapter 5) suggests that boys' names have historically offered greater scope for variation than girls' names. Quantitative evidence supports this: Figure 8 in Chapter 6 shows that during the first two decades of the Heisei period, diversity in graphic forms increased for both genders but remained consistently higher for boys. Likewise, in the dataset of 15,058 names of children born between 2008 and 2022, the average frequency of boys' names is

lower than that of girls' names, again indicating greater variety among boys' names.

Table 20

Average occurrence of phonological forms, graphic forms and full names in the Baby Calendar dataset

	Phonological	Graphic	Combination
Boys	5.26	1.7	1.53
Girls	6.25	1.96	1.71

At the same time, contemporary girls' names reveal higher irregularity rates than boys' names, reflecting a stronger orientation toward novelty, aesthetic experimentation, and individuality. Yet boys' names remain more diverse overall in terms of the number of names in use. In other words, while both boys' and girls' names are becoming increasingly irregular, this tendency is more pronounced among girls. This pattern contrasts with the historical situation in Japan, where boys' names exhibited greater structural variety, yet it parallels developments in Western contexts, where girls' names have long been the main site of innovation and change. In both cases, growing irregularity and creative variation in girls' names point to a weakening of traditional constraints and to a stronger emphasis on uniqueness and personal expression.

9.2 International Influences on Naming Practices

Internationalization plays an important role in increasing diversity and serves as a catalyst for changes in how gender is marked through names (e.g., Balbach, 2025; Fernández Juncal,

2025; Vlahova-Angelova, 2025). Barešová and Pilcher (2025, p. 12) highlight the influence of what they call the "Netflix effect." This term is not meant to single out one specific streaming platform but rather to illustrate how digital culture easily transcends national boundaries, making diverse languages and cultures more accessible. Viewers' exposure to foreign content contributes to a wider awareness and adoption of names from various linguistic backgrounds.

Both the Netflix effect and global migration, which bring different naming traditions into contact, have given recent and upcoming generations of namegivers access to a richer and more diverse pool of names and new ways of expressing gender through them, compared to their own cultural traditions. In Bulgaria, for example, the adoption of foreign names has led to structural changes within the first-name system, facilitating the emergence of new gender-neutral options (Vlahova-Angelova, 2025). Unlike in the past, foreign names are no longer adapted to fit the Bulgarian language – specifically, they often retain their original form without being given traditionally feminine endings. This shift not only affects how foreign names are used but also influences the creation of new names, weakening the conventional gender distinctions embedded in the native naming system. In Germany as well, gender-neutral names are most often of international origin (Balbach, 2025).

As discussed in the previous chapter, some names that are now used in Japan for both boys and girls have foreign or international origins. In their source countries, these names are typically associated with a single gender, but in Japanese, their final syllables give them a sound that makes them appear suitable for the opposite gender. This phonological adaptation contributes to their use as names for both boys and girls in Japan. Moreover,

foreign names do not only contribute to the emergence of gender-neutral options. As they are introduced and subsequently imitated within Japanese naming practices, they also expand the repertoire of clearly gendered names for both boys and girls, further increasing diversity in the system.

In this respect, Japan is not an exception: like Bulgaria, Germany, and other contexts discussed here, international influences are expanding the space for new gender associations in names, even as each country adapts such influences according to its own linguistic and cultural norms.

9.3 Patterns in the Use of Gender-Neutral Names

As introduced in Section 2.3, earlier studies from English-speaking countries have shown that gender-neutral names typically evolve from masculine names, as names that deviate from common gender associations tend to be more favorably received for girls. This aligns with the tendencies described above, where boys were more likely to receive traditional or family names and faced stricter gender norms in naming practices.

This pattern has also been observed in other countries, including those where gender-neutral names are less common. Vlahova-Angelova (2025) reports a similar trend in Bulgaria, while Fernández Juncal (2025) identifies the same direction in Spain. Balbach's (2025) research indicates that this pattern holds true for Germany, France, England/Wales, and Denmark. However, Balbach also finds that in the Netherlands, the ratio of girls receiving names more commonly given to boys and boys receiving names more commonly

given to girls is nearly balanced and, in the United States, the gap is narrowing as well.[61]

In Japan, the direction of this process appears somewhat different. As discussed in the previous chapter, many names (phonological forms) now considered gender-neutral were originally associated with girls and only later adopted for boys. This suggests that gender-neutral naming here often emerges by allowing boys to receive names previously associated with girls, rather than by neutralizing traditionally masculine ones – a pattern that contrasts with Western trends.

The Japanese trend is also shaped by the linguistic and graphic flexibility of the naming system, which allows parents to create names that sound and look equally suitable for any gender. Phonological forms and kanji choices often combine in ways that blur gender associations, resulting in names that feel natural for any child without necessarily aiming for neutrality as such.

Cultural visibility has further reinforced this flexibility. Gender-neutral names frequently appear in popular media across genders, where characters embody a mix of masculine and feminine traits. Such portrayals have helped normalize these names' use for both boys and girls and encouraged parents to view them as stylish and adaptable choices.

This greater openness in boys' naming is also reflected in parental attitudes. In the 2017 Miki House survey on name selection criteria

[61] Green (2024) shows that the distribution of unisex names in the United States is now nearly balanced, and even slightly favors boys: among babies born in 2023 who received a unisex name, 52% were boys and 48% were girls. However, it is important to keep in mind that different authors use varying definitions of gender-neutral or unisex names. For Green, unisex names are defined as those given to at least 10% of the less common gender.

(PR Times, 2018), 23.2% of respondents considered femininity or masculinity important, while only 2.6% prioritized gender neutrality. Although gender was not among the most influential factors – especially compared with a pleasant sound (59%) or a favorable stroke count (57.4%) – the survey revealed a notable pattern. It provided separate statistics based on the gender of the child respondents had or were expecting: among those with or expecting a girl, 30.6% considered femininity or masculinity important, compared with 16.4% of those with or expecting a boy. Meanwhile, 2.3% of the former group consciously considered gender neutrality in name selection, compared with 2.9% of the latter. These results suggest that parents are more inclined to emphasize gender when naming girls than boys, reinforcing the linguistic and cultural flexibility observed above.

Placed alongside findings from Europe and the United States, the Japanese case underscores that the emergence of gender-neutral names can follow distinct linguistic and cultural pathways, reflecting differing social dynamics around gender.

9.4 Shifts in Gender Marking in Boys' and Girls' Names

Okrent (2014) made an interesting observation about the phonetic evolution of baby names in the United States. Using Barry and Harper's (1995) phonetic gender score, which evaluates names based on their sound rather than spelling, she analyzed changes from 1880 to 2013. While boys' and girls' names have always had distinct phonetic profiles, both have shifted toward more feminine-sounding features since the 1950s. Several factors contribute to this trend: one-syllable names have declined in popularity for

both genders, vowel-ending names have become more common – especially for girls – and boys' names have moved away from stop consonant endings and consonant clusters. Biblical names such as *Elijah* and *Joshua* exemplify this softer, more vowel-rich pattern.

In her account of names given to Generation Z, Kihm (2023) confirms this trend toward softer-sounding boys' names. She observes that the fastest-rising boy names from the mid-to-late 1990s through the early 2010s were traditionally masculine names that end in *-a* – a sound typically associated with girls' names – such as *Noah* and *Elijah*.

A similar pattern can be observed in Germany. Balbach (2025, p. 56) reports that around 2000, boys' names ending in *-a* began appearing among the most popular choices, with *Luca* being the first to enter the top 10. Other names, such as *Noah*, *Jonah*, *Mika*, *Joshua*, and *Elia*, have since become increasingly common. These names not only share the *-a* ending but also tend to contain more vowels than consonants, a phonetic feature that had traditionally been characteristic of girls' names. Together, the U.S. and German trends suggest that boys' names are gradually adopting softer, more traditionally "feminine" sound patterns, raising the question of whether the perceived masculinity of boys' names is diminishing.

While Balbach notes a phonological convergence between boys' and girls' names in Germany, Okrent's findings for the United States point in a different direction: as boys' names have softened, girls' names have intensified in their feminine sound patterns, indicating a continued effort to preserve gender distinctions in naming.

A different development has been observed in China. Huang and Wang (2022) show that, over the past century, gender differences in naming have narrowed, largely because names given to girls have become less strongly marked as feminine. This shift toward more neutral-sounding girls' names was particularly pronounced

during the 1960s and again in the 1980s. This pattern aligns with observations by Li and Allassonnière-Tang (2025), who argue that Chinese characters (hanzi) associated with masculinity are considered more universally applicable and can be incorporated into girls' names without issue, as masculine traits are more highly valued. In contrast, characters linked to femininity are not easily adopted in boys' names due to the perceived risk of devaluation by association with feminine traits.

In Japan, similar shifts in the gender marking of names can be observed, although they follow a somewhat different trajectory. As discussed in Chapter 7, both boys' and girls' names have become less sharply gendered over time, with the change being more pronounced for boys. Analyses of the Heisei Namae Jiten data and the Meiji Yasuda data show a clear decline in the average "genderedness" of names, with boys' names, in particular, acquiring feminine features at a faster rate than girls' names are acquiring masculine ones. While the trend is less statistically robust in the Meiji dataset due to its smaller sample size, the overall direction is consistent across periods: Japanese boys' names show a tendency toward becoming progressively less masculine.

This corresponds to the pattern described earlier, in which many forms now regarded as gender-neutral were once associated primarily with girls. In other words, Japan's movement toward less strongly marked names appears to be driven less by the neutralization of masculine forms than by the incorporation of feminine or formerly feminine ones into boys' naming. Phonological and semantic features reinforce this asymmetry: the most masculine final syllables and kanji are more strongly associated with men than the most feminine ones are with women, suggesting that feminine features are more acceptable for boys than masculine features are for girls.

These naming patterns may be viewed in relation to broader discussions of shifting masculine norms in contemporary Japan. Rather than indicating a simple "feminization" or erosion of gender distinctions, scholars have argued that recent transformations involve the selective incorporation of attributes culturally coded as feminine into masculinity, without a symmetrical revaluation of femininity itself (Iida, 2005). Studies of youth culture and men's self-presentation likewise note an increased emphasis on aesthetic sensitivity, moderation, and "pleasantness" among younger men (e.g., Monden, 2012), alongside the diversification and pluralization of masculine styles beyond the postwar salaryman ideal (see also Charlebois, 2017). While such developments do not directly explain naming practices, they suggest a cultural context in which the adoption of feminine or formerly feminine features in boys' names becomes more readily intelligible. From this perspective, the asymmetric convergence observed in Japanese naming patterns appears consistent with broader rearticulations of masculinity that expand its expressive range without fully neutralizing gender differentiation (Charlebois, 2017; Monden, 2012).

9.5 Summary

Across all the cases reviewed, naming practices reveal a continual negotiation between individuality and convention, global influence and local traditions, and flexibility and boundary-keeping in gender expression. While Japan maintains distinctive characteristics – such as the strong role of kanji and the long-standing structural variety of boys' names – many recent developments resonate with those observed in other countries. International influences have expanded the range of possibilities, including through phonological adaptations

that allow some foreign names to be used for both boys and girls. Around the world, parents increasingly draw from broader cultural resources and show a growing openness to names that challenge traditional gender associations. At the same time, preferences for clearly gendered forms persist. Situating Japan within this broader comparative context therefore highlights common trends toward greater diversity and experimentation, as well as culturally specific pathways through which naming continues to reflect social values and expectations.

10 Conclusion: What does the Future Hold?

Names, as this book has attempted to show, are more than just linguistic labels or personal ornaments. They connect families and communities, link generations, and convey individual intentions within shared cultural settings. They function as social instruments through which cultural values, aesthetic preferences, and social change become visible. Against this background, the analyses presented here show how gender is expressed in contemporary Japanese baby names, how strongly it is marked, and how current preferences reflect both local cultural specificities and broader global trends.

Although our work has been shaped by the limitations of the available data, we have brought together several forms of evidence to offer a clearer view of how Japanese names articulate gendered meaning. By combining datasets rarely examined side by side and integrating quantitative patterns with qualitative insights, we provide evidence for developments that, until now, had been inferred mostly from small-scale observations rather than examined across larger, integrated datasets.

10.1 Naming Trends and the Transformation of Gender Expression

While the Japanese population is shrinking and the number of children born each year has fallen to almost half of what it was at the beginning of the Heisei era, the diversity in name choices continues to increase. This diversity manifests itself in multiple ways: in the greater variation of phonological forms, in the even wider range of kanji representations, and in the intricate interplay between sound and writing. Not only can a single phonological form be represented by multiple kanji combinations, but, more frequently than in the past, a single graphic form corresponds to multiple phonological forms, despite the irregularities these relationships often involve. The result is a naming system of remarkable richness and flexibility.

The once-dominant gender markers that clearly separated boys' and girls' names, such as the feminine suffix *-ko* and the masculine *-o*, no longer define the onomastic landscape as they once did. Gender has not disappeared from names; the majority of contemporary names remain gendered, but it is now expressed through a wider range of means, including a greater variety of final syllables and kanji, both traditional and newly emerged. The strongest gender associations are found in the combination of the final syllable and final kanji, which together convey gender more reliably than the kanji alone. In many contemporary names, however, gender is conveyed through subtle cues rather than through morphology.

Against this backdrop of growing variability, the distinction between boys' and girls' names has become less pronounced. The number of names used for both has increased, and although

gender-neutral names still account for only a minority, their presence is non-negligible. Gender-neutrality is far more common at the level of phonological forms than at the level of graphic forms, a pattern that is closely tied to the structure of the Japanese writing system and has few direct parallels in alphabetic naming traditions.

Gender-neutral names also carry symbolic significance. They exemplify the broader softening of gender boundaries within language and culture. However, they are not usually chosen primarily for their gender ambiguity. As the analysis of name-selection narratives demonstrates, gender-neutrality most often emerges as a by-product of parents' desire for originality, aesthetic appeal, or meaningful symbolism, rather than as an explicit ideological stance.

The asymmetry in this development is also revealing. Gender-neutral forms more frequently derive from names historically used for girls. The emergence of such names reflects not only linguistic innovation but also a transformation in the values that shape how gender is lived and imagined. This asymmetry is consistent with the quantitative patterns observed across the datasets. Measures of genderedness show a more pronounced weakening of masculine features in boys' names than a corresponding weakening of feminine features in girls' names, a trend that is especially clear in the phonological form. Rather than resulting from a symmetrical convergence of boys' and girls' naming practices, the growing pool of shared and weakly gendered names emerges largely from the expansion of forms once marked as feminine into boys' naming repertoires.

One of the most distinctive characteristics of gender expression in contemporary Japanese names is that the phonological and graphic forms do not always align in their gender associations. The same phonological form may give rise to markedly different impressions depending on how it is written, or a name that sounds

broadly gender-neutral may acquire a strongly gendered character through its graphic representation (e.g., the gender-neutral name *Mizuki* written as 瑞姫, where the second kanji means 'princess'). The Japanese writing system makes this layered mode of gender expression possible, something rarely seen elsewhere. It allows parents to modulate gender impressions subtly – through combinations of sounds and characters, they can reinforce, soften, or create a contrast between the gendered associations suggested by the phonology and those suggested by the kanji.

10.2 Naming as a Reflection of Broader Social Change

Overall, these findings depict Japanese naming practices as both responsive to and constitutive of social change. The shift toward more flexible expressions of gender goes hand in hand with broader changes in family structures, parenting roles, and ideas about individuality. The increased involvement of mothers in naming, now stronger than in the past, and the weakening of traditional gender norms are mirrored in the linguistic and symbolic patterns of names.

This evolution also connects Japan to broader international developments. Similar moves toward greater diversity, softness, and gender fluidity in naming are evident in other societies, suggesting a shared, although culturally specific, rethinking of how identity is linguistically encoded. At the same time, Japan's unique writing system gives these changes a specific character. The central role of kanji, the separation of phonological and graphic forms, and the persistence of culturally specific gender cues give these changes a distinct shape. Gender in Japanese names is not disappearing

but is being expressed in new ways through sound, writing, and meaning.

10.3 Looking Ahead

The coming years may bring further transformation. The very recent policy requiring the recording of name readings in the Family Register, along with expectations regarding generally recognized readings (as explained in Section 3.1) may reduce some of the irregularities between phonological and graphic forms of names. At the same time, as demographic decline continues and the number of births falls, each child's name may carry even greater emotional and symbolic weight, intensifying the desire to choose a name that is both unique and resonant.

Nationwide surveys conducted by Miki House since 2017 reveal a steady shift in parental attitudes toward gender expression in names. Initially, in 2017, 23.2% of respondents considered femininity or masculinity an important naming criterion, while only 2.6% prioritized gender neutrality (PR Times, 2018). By 2022, the proportion emphasizing traditional gender markers had declined to 17.7%, while the preference for gender neutrality rose to 10.7% (Miki House Editorial team, 2022). This trend continued in 2024, with just 14.9% marking masculinity or femininity as a criterion to consider, while 15.2% marked gender neutrality (Miki House Editorial team, 2025). These figures align closely with the patterns identified in our datasets and suggest a gradual but consistent rethinking of how gender is expressed in naming practices. This shift is further supported by our study among Japanese high-school students, which shows that contemporary youth are relatively open

to gender-neutral names and to names that deviate from established gender stereotypes (Barešová & Machů, 2025).

In this evolving landscape, names will continue to serve as sensitive indicators of cultural and social change. The growing use of gender-neutral and creatively composed names points to a society that is increasingly comfortable with nuance and diversity, where identity is defined less by fixed categories and more by personal meaning. As Japan continues to renegotiate what gender represents in everyday life, naming will remain one of the earliest and most enduring arenas where these shifts become visible.

Finally, another contribution of this book lies in the digital resources created alongside it: accessible, curated datasets and an interactive website that allows users to explore not only gender expression but also other phenomena. These tools extend the reach of our research beyond the written volume, enabling scholars – and anyone interested in names – to investigate patterns, test new hypotheses, and build on the material we have assembled. By making these materials publicly available, we hope to encourage continued research, cross-cultural comparison, and new perspectives on Japanese names as they continue to evolve in rich and revealing ways.

References

Ackermann, T., & Zimmer, C. (2021). The sound of gender: Correlations of name phonology and gender across languages. *Linguistics, 59*, 1143–1177. https://doi.org/10.1515/ling-2020-0027

Alford, R. D. (1988). *Naming and identity: A cross-cultural study of personal naming practices*. HRAF Press.

Anderson, J. M. (2007). *The grammar of names*. Oxford University Press.

Anghelescu, S. (2019, June 14). Namepedia blog | All about names, without the gloves. Retrieved November 1, 2025, from https://blog-en.namepedia.org/2015/03/lahu-names-china/

Atsuji, T. (2005). *"Namae" no kanjigaku [The science of characters used in names]*. Seishun Shuppansha.

Attorney-General's Department (Australia). (2015, November). Australian Government guidelines on the recognition of sex and gender. Australian Government. https://www.ag.gov.au/rights-and-protections/publications/australian-government-guidelines-recognition-sex-and-gender

Backhouse, A. E. (2004). *The Japanese Language: An Introduction.* Oxford University Press.

Balbach, A. (2025). Emilia, Noah, or Charly? Current developments of boys', girls', and gender-neutral names in Germany and other (European) countries. *Sociolinguistic Studies, 19*(1–2), 36–66. https://doi.org/10.3138/ss-2024-0021

Bao, H. W. S., Cai, H., & Jing, Y. (2024). Understanding the rise of unique names: The emphasis on uniqueness matters. *Acta Psychologica Sinica, 56*(7), 954–963.

References

Barešová, I. (2015). Plant motifs in Japanese female names in the context of current name-giving trends. *Czech and Slovak Linguistic Review, 2*, 4–17.

Barešová, I. (2016). *Japanese given names: A window into contemporary Japanese society*. Palacký University Press.

Barešová, I. (2017). Chrysanthemum, pine and crane – Female names of Meiji period Japan. *Studia Orientalia Slovaca, 16*(2), 39–67.

Barešová, I. (2019). Our second son is number one: Numbers in recent Japanese given names. *Investigationes Linguisticae, 43*(1), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.14746/il.2019.43.1

Barešová, I. (2020a). Boy or girl? The rise of non-gender-specific names in Japan. *Silva Iaponicarum, 56–59*, 26–41. https://doi.org/10.12775/sijp.2020.56-59.2

Barešová, I. (2020b). Hiroko, Sachiko, Yōko: The phenomenon of female "-ko" names in modern Japan. *The Gakushuin Journal of International Studies, 6*, 23–38.

Barešová, I. (2020c). Name-based nickname formation among Japanese junior high school students. *Acta Onomastica, 61*(2), 267–286.

Barešová, I. (2023). Born in the Reiwa era: The reflection of contemporary events in Japanese given names. In U. Bijak, P. Swoboda, & J. B. Walkowiak (Eds.), *Onomastics in interaction with other branches of science* (Vol. 2, pp. 49–66). Jagiellonian University Press. https://doi.org/10.4467/K7446.46/22.23.17269

Barešová, I., & Janda, P. (2023). Tradition and change: Naming practices in contemporary Japan and Taiwan. In F. Kraus, K. Šamajová, R. Westlake, & B. Ferklová (Eds.), *Continuity and change in Asia* (pp. 393–411). Palacký University Press. https://doi.org/10.5507/ff.23.24463476.13

Barešová, I., & Machů, K. (2025). Japanese High School Students' Perceptions of the Gender-Neutral Naming Trend. *Names, 73*(3), 11–25. https://doi.org/10.5195/names.2025.2709

Barešová, I., Nakaya, T., & Matlach, V. (2024). Gender-specific features in contemporary Japanese names. *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities, 39*(2), 467–484. https://doi.org/10.1093/llc/fqae022

Barešová, I., & Nakaya, T. (2025a). Gender-neutral names in the youngest Japanese generation: Characteristics of their phonological and graphic forms. *Sociolinguistic Studies, 19*(1–2), 86–106. https://doi.org/10.3138/ss-2024-0017

Barešová, I., & Nakaya, T. (2025b). Gender-neutral names in contemporary Japan: Reasons and motivations behind their choice. *Acta Onomastica, 66*(2), 217–239. https://doi.org/10.58756/a1662861

Barešová, I., & Pilcher, J. (2025). Dis/Continuity in the representation of gender in names across cultures: An introduction. *Sociolinguistic Studies, 19*(1–2), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.3138/SS-2024-0016

Barry, H. B., & Harper, A. S. (1982). Evolution of unisex names. *American Name Society, 30*, 15–22.

Barry, H. B., & Harper, A. S. (1993). Feminization of unisex names from 1960 to 1990. *Names, 41*, 228–238.

Barry, H., & Harper, A. S. (1995). Increased choice of female phonetic attributes in first names. *Sex Roles, 32*, 809–819.

Barry, H. B., & Harper, A. S. (2000). Three last letters identify most female first names. *Psychological Reports, 87*, 48–54.

Barry III, H., & Harper, A. S. (2014). Unisex names for babies born in Pennsylvania 1990–2010. *Names, 62*(1), 13–22. https://doi.org/10.1179/0027773813Z.00000000060

Berger, W. H., & Parker, F. L. (1970). Diversity of planktonic foraminifera in deep-sea sediments. *Science, 168*(3937), 1345–1347. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.168.3937.1345

Bland, J. M., & Altman, D. G. (1995). Multiple Significance Tests: The Bonferroni Method. *BMJ*, *310*, 170. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.310.6973.170

Bond, F., & Baldwin, T. (2016). Introduction to Japanese Computational Linguistics. In *Readings in Japanese Natural Language Processing*, Chapter 1, pp. 1–28. CSLI Studies in Computational Linguistics. CSLI Publications, Stanford. PDF: https://web.stanford.edu/group/cslipublications/cslipublications/pdf/RJNLP-Ch1.pdf

Bond, F., & Barešová, I. (2025). Japanese Given Names: Data, Analysis, and Interactive Resources. Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18591986

Breen, J. (2000). A WWW Japanese dictionary. *Japanese Studies, 20*(3), 313–317. https://doi.org/10.1080/713683789

Bush, S. J., Powell-Smith, A., & Freeman, T. C. (2018). Network analysis of the social and demographic influences on name choice within the UK (1838–2016). *PLoS One, 13*(10), e0205759.

Busse, T., & Seraydarian, L. (1978). Frequency and desirability of first names. *The Journal of Social Psychology, 104*(1), 143–144.

Carey, B. (2019, March 22). Can we get better at forgetting? *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/22/health/memory-forgetting-psychology.html

Cassidy, K. W., Kelly, M. H., & Sharoni, L. J. (1999). Inferring gender from name phonology. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 128*, 362–381.

Chapman, D. (2011). Geographies of self and other: Mapping Japan through the koseki. *The Asia-Pacific Journal, 9*(29)2, 1–20.

Charlebois, J. (2017). Herbivore Masculinities in Post-Millennial Japan. In X. Lin, C. Haywood, & M. Mac an Ghaill (Eds.), *East Asian Men: Masculinity, Sexuality and Desire* (pp. 165–181). London, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan.

CIA Fact Book. (2025, April 30). The Central Intelligence Agency of the United States. https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/

Cohen, F. N. (2023, May 16). US name androgyny hit record high again in 2022. *Family Inequality*. Retrieved November 1, 2025, from https://familyinequality.wordpress.com/2023/05/15/us-name-androgyny-hit-record-high-again-in-2022/

Collazo, A. (2016). *The Japanese Naming System — Morphology and Semantics of Individual Names*. Kyōto University. https://repository.kulib.kyoto-u.ac.jp/dspace/bitstream/2433/215635/2/dnink00780.pdf

Dai'ichi Seimei Kōhōbu (Eds.). (1987). *Nihon zenkoku myōji to namae omoshiro book [A book of interesting facts concerning Japanese family names and given names nationwide]*. Kōyū Shuppan.

de Klerk, V., & Bosch, B. (1996). The sound patterns of English first names: Evidence from gender differentiation. *Language and Society, 25*(4), 499–517.

Evans, J. D. (1996). *Straightforward statistics for the behavioral sciences*. Thomson Brooks/Cole Publishing Co.

Federal Chancellery of Austria. (n.d.). Vorname des Kindes [Child's first name]. Retrieved July 31, 2024, from https://www.oesterreich.gv.at/themen/familie_und_partnerschaft/geburt-eines-kindes/3/3/Seite.182101.html

Fernández Juncal, C. (2019). Evolución de los usos antroponímicos en España. *Moenia, 25*, 149–177.

Fernández Juncal, C. (2025). Gender distinction in European Spanish anthroponyms. *Sociolinguistic Studies, 19*(1–2), 67–85. https://doi.org/10.3138/SS-2024-0020

Fisher, R. A., Corbet, A. S., & Williams, C. B. (1943). The relation between the number of species and the number of individuals in a random sample of an animal population. *Journal of Animal Ecology, 12*(1), 42–58. https://doi.org/10.2307/1411

Gao, G. (2011). Shall I name her "Wisdom" or "Elegance"? Naming in China. *Names, 59*(3), 164–174.

Gerhards, J., & Hackenbroch, R. (2000). Trends and causes of cultural modernization: An empirical study of first names. *International Sociology, 15*(3), 501–531. https://doi.org/10.1177/026858000015003004

Green, C. (2024, September 23). Unisex names: How balanced is your state? *Nameberry Newsletter*. Retrieved November 1, 2025, from https://nameberry.substack.com/p/unisex-names-how-balanced-is-your

General Register Office (United Kingdom). (n.d.). Register a birth. GOV.UK. Retrieved July 31, 2024, from https://www.gov.uk/register-birth

Guppy, N., & Kolpashnikova, K. (2025). Naming patterns for Canadian children: Evidence from British Columbia (1924–2024), Ontario (1921–2023), and Canada (1991–2023). *Canadian Studies in Population, 52*, 12. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42650-025-00098-4

Haig, D. (2004). The Inexorable Rise of Gender and the Decline of Sex: Social Change in Academic Titles, 1945–2001, *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 33: 87–96. https://doi.org/10.1023/B:ASEB.0000014323.56281.0d.

Handschuh, C. (2019). The classification of names: A crosslinguistic study of sex-specific forms, classifiers, and gender marking on personal names. *STUF - Language Typology and Universals, 72*(4), 539–572. https://doi.org/10.1515/stuf-2019-0021

Haraguchi, S. (1996). Syllable, mora and accent. In T. Otake & A. Cutler (Eds.), *Phonological structure and language processing: Cross-linguistic studies* (pp. 45–75). Mouton de Gruyter.

Hashimoto, J., & Itō, N. (2011). *"Ko" no tsuku namae no tanjō [The birth of names with "ko"]*. Kasetsusha.

He, K. (2020). Long-term sociolinguistics trends and phonological patterns of American names. *Proceedings of the Linguistic Society of America, 5*, 616. https://doi.org/10.3765/plsa.v5i1.4741

Hirota, S. (2022). Danjo erabazu tsukaeru chūseiteki na hibiki no namae 75-sen! Mojisū-betsu ni shōkai! [75 gender-neutral names with unisex sounds! Introduced by character count]. *Tomonite*. Retrieved November 1, 2025, from https://tomonite.com/articles/5366

Hozumi, N. (1926). *Jitsumei keihizoku kenkyū [Research into the practice of avoiding the true name of a man]*. Tōkō Shoin.

Huang, Y., & Wang, T. (2022). MULAN in the name: Causes and consequences of gendered Chinese names. *China Economic Review, 75*, 101851. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chieco.2022.101851

HugKum editorial team. (2023). Otoko no ko demo onna no ko demo! Chūsei-teki jendāresu na namae 20-sen [Whether a boy or a girl! 20 neutral and genderless names]. *HugKum.* Shōgakukan. Retrieved November 9, 2024, from https://hugkum.sho.jp/317624

Iida, Y. (2005). Beyond the 'feminization of masculinity': transforming patriarchy with the 'feminine' in contemporary Japanese youth culture. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, 6*, 56–74.

Instituto dos Registos e do Notariado (Ministry of Justice, Portugal). (n.d.). Composição do nome [Name composition]. Retrieved July 31,

2024, from https://irn.justica.gov.pt/Servicos/Cidadao/Nascimento/Composicao-do-nome

Iwasaki, S. (2013). *Japanese*. Revised Edition. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Japanese National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (IPSS). Table 04-01. Retrieved November 1, 2025, from https://web.archive.org/web/20230507202901/https://www.ipss.go.jp/p-info/e/psj2012/PSJ2012-04.xls

Johnson, W. (1944). Studies in language behavior: A program of research. *Psychological Monographs*, *56*(2), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0093508

Joubert, C. E. (1993). Personal names as a psychological variable. *Psychological Reports, 73*, 1123–1145.

Jugaku, A. (1968). *Onna wa ikiru: Namae ga monogataru onna no rekishi [Women live: The history of women as told through names]*. Sanseidō.

Jugaku, A. (1979). *Nihonjin no namae [Names of the Japanese]*. Taishūkan Shoten.

Kałużyńska, I. (2016). Linguistic composition and characteristics of Chinese given names. *Onoma, 51*, 161–186. https://doi.org/10.34158/ONOMA.51/2016/8

Kamata, M., & Yoneyama, T. (2011). *Shinkangorin* (2nd ed.). Taishūkan Shoten.

Kawaguchi, T. (2023). *Yasashisa o wasurenu uchi ni [Before we forget kindness]*. Sunmark Publishing.

Kida, J. (2002). *Namae no nihonshi [History of names in Japan]*. Bungeishunjū.

Kihm, S. (2023). How Gen Z is your name? *Nameberry*. Retrieved November 1, 2025, from https://nameberry.com/blog/gen-z-names

Knappová, M. (2010). *Jak se bude vaše dítě jmenovat? [What to name your baby?]* (5th ed., 1st ed. 1978). Academia.

Kobayashi, Y. (2009). *Nazuke no sesōshi. "Koseiteki na namae" o fīrudowāku [History of social conditions concerning names. Fieldwork on "unique names"]*. Fūkyōsha.

Komori, Y. (2002). Trends in Japanese first names in the twentieth century: A comparative study. *Kokusai Kirisutokyō Daigaku Gakuhō. III-A, Ajia Bunka Kenkyū [International Christian University Publications 3-A, Asian Cultural Studies], 28*, 67–82.

Kosekihō [Family Register Act], Law No. 224 of 1947, as amended May 26, 2025. https://laws.e-gov.go.jp/law/322AC0000000224/20250526_505AC0000000048#Mp-Ch_3-At_13

Kyzer, L. (2019, June 22). Icelandic names will no longer be gendered. *Iceland Review*. https://www.icelandreview.com/news/icelandic-names-will-no-longer-be-gendered/

Ley 20/2011, de 21 de julio, del Registro Civil [Law 20/2011, of July 21, on Civil Registration]. Boletín Oficial del Estado, 175, 2011. https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-2011-12628

Li, P. C., & Allassonnière-Tang, M. (2025). Gendered and gender-neutral naming practices in Mandarin Chinese: Metaphoric and non-metaphoric imagery over time in Taiwan. *Sociolinguistic Studies, 19*(1–2), 128–152. https://doi.org/10.3138/SS-2024-0022

Lieberson, S. (2000). *A matter of taste: How names, fashions and culture change*. Yale University Press.

Lieberson, S., & Bell, E. O. (1992). Children's first names: An empirical study of social taste. *American Journal of Sociology, 98*, 511–554.

Lieberson, S., Dumais, S., & Bauman, S. (2000). The instability of androgynous names. *American Journal of Sociology, 105*, 1249–1287.

Lieberson, S., & Mikelson, K. S. (1995). Distinctive African American names: An experimental, historical, and linguistic analysis of innovation. *American Sociological Review, 60*(6), 928–946. https://doi.org/10.2307/2096433

Lin, J. (1991). Divergence measures based on the Shannon entropy. *IEEE Transactions on Information Theory, 37*(1), 145–151. https://doi.org/10.1109/18.61115

Lloyd, M., & Ghelardi, R. J. (1964). A table for calculating the "equitability" component of species diversity. *Journal of Animal Ecology, 33*(2), 217–225. https://doi.org/10.2307/2628

MacArthur, R. H. (1965). Patterns of species diversity. *Biological Reviews, 40*(4), 510–533. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-185X.1965.tb00815.x

Makino, K. (2012). *Kodomo no namae ga abunai [Endangered children's names]*. Besuto Serāzu.

Makino, K. (2017, September 21). Danjo kyōtsū no namae wa fuete iru? Otoko no ko ni kana wa OK? [Are unisex names increasing? Is kana OK for boys?]. *All About Kurashi*. Retrieved November 1, 2025, from https://allabout.co.jp/gm/gc/469246/

Margalef, R. (1958). Information theory in ecology. *General Systems, 3*, 36–71.

Matisoff, J. A. (2006). *English-Lahu lexicon*. University of California Press. http://repositories.cdlib.org/ucpress/ucpl/vol_139

Mayring, P. (2014). *Qualitative content analysis: Theoretical foundation, basic procedures and software solution*. SSOAR.

McEwan, B. (2017). Bonferroni correction. In *The Sage encyclopedia of communication research methods* (Vol. 4, pp. 105–106). SAGE Publications, Inc. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483381411.n45

Meiji Yasuda. (2022, December 5). 2022nen umare no kodomo no namae chōsa [Survey of names for children born in 2022] [Press release]. Retrieved November 1, 2025, from https://www.meijiyasuda.co.jp/profile/news/release/2022/pdf/20221205_01.pdf

Mignot, J. F. (2022). First names given in France, 1800–2019: A window into the process of individualization. *Population and Economics, 6*(2), 108–119.

Miki House Editorial team. (2022, November 24). Mikihausu nazuke chōsa 2022 (Mikihausu kurabu ankēto chōsa) [Miki House Naming Survey 2022 (Miki House Club survey)]. *Miki House.* Retrieved November 12, 2025, from https://baby.mikihouse.co.jp/information/post-17848.html

Miki House Editorial team. (2025, January 9). 'Jendāresu namae' wa fuete iru no? Mikihausu namae chōsa kara wakaru mama, papa no namae jijō [Are 'genderless names' increasing? What we can learn from the Miki House 'name survey' about mothers' and fathers'

naming circumstances]. *Miki House.* Retrieved November 12, 2025, from https://baby.mikihouse.co.jp/information/post-20801.html

Ministerstvo vnitra České republiky. (n.d.). Seznam jmen [Name list]. Retrieved November 1, 2025, from https://www.mvcr.cz/clanek/seznam-rodove-neutralnich-jmen.aspx

Ministry of Justice, Public Administration and Digital Transformation (Croatia). (n.d.). Rules to naming a child (Zakon o osobnom imenu). Retrieved July 31, 2024, from https://mpudt.gov.hr/citizens/civil-status/birth-registration-25365/rules-to-naming-a-child-25368/25368

Ministry of Justice (Estonia). (n.d.). Nimeseadus [Name Act]. Riigi Teataja. Retrieved July 31, 2024, from https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/106032015032

Ministry of Justice (Finland). (2017). Etu- ja sukunimilaki (946/2017) [Act on Forenames and Surnames]. Finlex. https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/ajantasa/2017/20170946

Ministry of Social Affairs and Housing (Denmark). (2015). Vejledning om navne (VEJ nr 11359 af 30/12/2015). Retsinformation. https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/retsinfo/2015/11359

Monden, M. (2012). The Importance of Looking Pleasant: Reading Japanese Men's Fashion Magazines. *Fashion Theory*, *16*(3), 297–316. https://doi.org/10.2752/175174112X13340749707169

Mutsukawa, M. (2007). How can Japanese speakers tell the gender of their given names? In *Proceedings of the 6th High Desert International Linguistics Conference* (pp. 83–94). High Desert Linguistics Society.

National Center for Health Statistics. (2011). Model State Vital Statistics Act and Regulations (2011 revision). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/misc/mvsact92b.pdf

Obasi, S. (2016). Naming patterns in rural South-Central Nebraska. *Names, 64*(3), 158–165. https://doi.org/10.1080/00277738.2016.1197644

Oelkers, S. (2003). *Naming gender: Empirische Untersuchungen zur phonologischen Struktur von Vornamen im Deutschen*. Peter Lang.

Ogihara, Y. (2018). The rise in individualism in Japan: Temporal changes in family structure, 1947–2015.

Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 49(8), 1219–1226. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022118781504

Ogihara, Y. (2020). Baby names in Japan, 2004–2018: Common writings and their readings. *BMC Research Notes, 13*, 553. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13104-020-05409-3

Ogihara, Y. (2022). Common names decreased in Japan: Further evidence of an increase in individualism. *Experimental Results, 3*, e5. https://doi.org/10.1017/exp.2021.27

Ogihara, Y., Fujita, H., Tominaga, H., Ishigaki, S., Kashimoto, T., Takahashi, A., Toyohara, K., & Uchida, Y. (2015). Are common names becoming less common? The rise in uniqueness and individualism in Japan. *Frontiers in Psychology, 6*, 1490. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01490

Okrent, A. (2014). Why have baby names become increasingly female-sounding? *Mental Floss*. Retrieved November 1, 2025, from http://mentalfloss.com/article/57175/why-have-baby-names-become-increasingly-female-sounding

Okutomi, T. (1999). *Nihonjin no namae no rekishi [The history of the names of Japanese people]*. Shinjinbutsujūraisha.

Ōno, T. (2013). *Nipponjin nara shitte okitai namae no yurai, nazuke no iware [The origin of names and history of naming Japanese people should know]*. Jitsugyō no Nihonsha.

Pielou, E. C. (1966). The measurement of diversity in different types of biological collections. *Journal of Theoretical Biology, 13*, 131–144. https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-5193(66)90013-0

Pilcher, J. (2016). Names, bodies and identities. *Sociology, 50*(4), 764–779.

Pilcher, J. (2017). Names and "doing gender": How forenames and surnames contribute to gender identities, difference, and inequalities. *Sex Roles, 77*, 812–822. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-017-0805-4

Plutschow, H. E. (1995). *Japan's name culture: The significance of names in a religious, political and social context*. Japan Library.

PR Times. (2018, January 25). Mikihausu, kodomo no 'nazuke chōsa' kekka o happyō [Miki House: Results of a Child Naming Survey].

PR Times. Retrieved November 12, 2025, from https://prtimes.jp/main/html/rd/p/000000004.000027487.html

Rebick, M., & Takenaka, A. (Eds.). (2006). *The changing Japanese family*. Routledge.

Robertson, W. C. (2021). *Scripting Japan: Orthography, Variation, and the Creation of Meaning in Written Japanese*. Routledge Studies in Sociolinguistics. Routledge.

Rossi, A. S. (1965). Naming children in middle-class families. *American Sociological Review, 30*, 499–513.

Rubner, Y., Tomasi, C., & Guibas, L. J. (2000). The Earth Mover's Distance as a metric for image retrieval. *International Journal of Computer Vision, 40*, 99–121. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1026543900054

Sakata, S. (2006). *Myōji to namae no rekishi [The history of family names and given names]*. Yoshikawa Kōbunkan.

Sakuma, E. (1964). *O-namae haiken [Look at your name]*. Hayakawa Shobō.

Sakuma, E. (1969). *Akachan nazuke hyakka [An encyclopedia of baby naming]*. Daisen Shoten.

Sakuma, E., & Sakuma, T. (1966). *Akachan no nazukekata [How to name a baby]*. Shufu to seikatsusha.

Sano, T. (1988). *Shiawase no tame no atarashii nazuke jiten [A New Baby Naming Dictionary for Happiness]*. Gotō Shoin.

Satō, M. (2007). *Yominikui namae wa naze fueta ka [Why we see more hard-to-read names]*. Yoshikawa Kōbunkan.

Seguin, C., Julien, C., & Zhang, Y. (2021). The stability of androgynous names: Dynamics of gendered naming practices in the United States 1880–2016. *Poetics, 85*, 101501. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2020.101501

Shannon, C. E. (1948). A mathematical theory of communication. *Bell System Technical Journal, 27*(3), 379–423. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1538-7305.1948.tb01338.x

Simpson, E. H. (1949). Measurement of diversity. *Nature, 163*(4148), 688. https://doi.org/10.1038/163688a0

Slaměníková, T. (2018). Muž nebo žena? Role grafemického systému v čínských antroponymech. *Acta Onomastica, 58*, 135–149.

Slater, A. S., & Feinman, S. (1985). Gender and the phonology of North American first names. *Sex Roles, 13*, 429–440.

Slepian, M. L., & Galinsky, A. D. (2016). The voiced pronunciation of initial phonemes predicts the gender of names. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 110*, 509–527.

Slovenko, R. (1986). Article commentary: Unisex and cross-sex names. *The Journal of Psychiatry & Law, 14*(1–2), 249–326. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093185386014001-216

Social Security Administration. (n.d.). *Beyond the top 1000 names*. Retrieved July 2, 2024, from https://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/limits.html

Sue, C. A., & Telles, E. E. (2007). Assimilation and gender in naming. *American Journal of Sociology, 112*(5), 1383–1415.

Sugihara, Y., & Katsurada, E. (2002). Gender role development in Japanese culture: Diminishing gender role differences in a contemporary society. *Sex Roles, 47*, 443–452. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1021648426787

Sullivan, L., & Kang, Y. (2019). Phonology of gender in English and French given names. *Proceedings of the 19th International Congress of Phonetic Sciences*, 2124–2128.

Tahara, H. (1991). Jinmei [Names]. *Nihongogaku, 10*(6), 42–50.

Tamago Club (Ed.) & Kurihara, R. (Supervising Ed.). (2022). *Tamahiyo akachan no shiawase namae jiten 2023–2024 [The Tamahiyo happy baby names dictionary 2023–2024]*. Benesse.

Tominaga, Y. (1957). *Korekara no namae no tsukekata [Naming from now on]*. Taikōdō.

Tsunoda, B. (1988). *Nihon no Josei-mei (3): Rekishiteki tenbō [Japanese female names (3): A historical view]*. Kyōikusha.

Twenge, J., Abebe, E., & Campbell, K. (2010). Fitting in or standing out: Trends in American parents' choices for children's names, 1880–2007. *Social Psychological and Personality Science, 1*(1), 19–25.

Twenge, J., Abebe, E., & Campbell, K. (2016). Still standing out: Children's names in the United States during the great recession and

correlations with economic indicators. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 46*(11), 663–670.

Unser-Schutz, G. (2015). "Don't call my name kirakira!": On the evaluation and discourse surrounding recent Japanese names. *The International Association for Japan Studies Newsletter*, 42–57.

Unser-Schutz, G. (2016a). Changing naming practices in Japan and the United States: Similar values, differing social impacts? *The International Association for Japan Studies Newsletter, 12*, 41–47.

Unser-Schutz, G. (2016b). Gendai nihon ni okeru nazuke jijō to sono hensen – danseimei to joseimei no henka ni chakumoku shite [Current trends in Japanese naming practices – Focusing on changes in men's and women's names]. *Risshō Daigaku Shinrigaku Kenkyūjo Kiyō, 14*, 89–99. https://rissho.repo.nii.ac.jp/records/5660

Unser-Schutz, G. (2017). Evaluating Contradictory Hypotheses on the Effects of Regional Differences in the Selection of Novel Naming Patterns in Japan. *Orientaliska Studier*, *147*, 55–76. https://orientaliskastudier.se/documents/03_Unser-Schutz_55_76.pdf

Unser-Schutz, G. (2019). For Whom and by Whom Children Are Named: Family Involvement in Contemporary Japanese Naming Practices. *Genealogy, 3*(2), 29. https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy3020029

Unser-Schutz, G. (2024). Nihon no nazuke shūkan no yukue – kosekihō no kaisei ni tomonau henka yosō [The future of Japanese naming practices: Predicting how names will change under the amended Family Register Act]. *Risshō Daigaku Shinrigaku Kenkyū Nenpō, 15*, 1–9.

Unser-Schutz, G. (2025). The Role of Baby-Naming Guides in the Presentation of Gender in Names: A Case Study of the Tamahiyo Baby Naming Guides. *Sociolinguistic Studies, 19*(1–2), 107–127. https://doi.org/10.3138/SS-2024-0018

van de Weijer, J., et al. (2020). Gender identification in Chinese names. *Lingua, 234*, 102759. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lingua.2019.102759

Van Fleet, D. D., & Atwater, L. (1997). Gender neutral names: Don't be so sure! *Sex Roles, 37*, 111–123. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1025696905342

Vlahova-Angelova, M. (2025). Gender-neutral names: A boundary phenomenon in the Bulgarian anthroponomasticon. *Sociolinguistic Studies, 19*(1–2), 17–35. https://doi.org/10.3138/SS-2024-0015

vom Bruck, G., & Bodenhorn, B. (Eds.). (2006). *An anthropology of names and naming*. Cambridge University Press.

Watanabe, M. (1980). *Nihonjin no seimei: Kamei, jinmei, pen nēmu [Japanese names: Family names, personal names, pen names]*. Gyōsei.

Whissell, C. (2001). Cues to referent gender in randomly constructed names. *Perceptual and Motor Skills, 93*, 856–858.

Wilkinson, M. D., Dumontier, M., Aalbersberg, I. J., et al. (2016). The FAIR guiding principles for scientific data management and stewardship. *Scientific Data, 3*, 160018. https://doi.org/10.1038/sdata.2016.18

WWWJDIC. (2024). Edrdg.org. https://www.edrdg.org/cgi-bin/wwwjdic/wwwjdic?1B

Yamaguchi, Y. (2013). *Namae no angō [Encryptations within names]*. Shinchō Shinsho.

Yasuda, Y. (1998). *Imēji de erabu akachan no fresh namae jiten [A dictionary of fresh baby names selected according to image]*. Takahashi Shoten.

Yasuoka, K. (2017). Jinmeiyō kanji beppyō no hensen [Changes in the supplementary list of name-use kanji]. http://kanji.zinbun.kyoto-u.ac.jp/~yasuoka/kanjibukuro/japan-jimmei3.html

Yui, M. (2011). 'Name and Identity in Japanese: From Questionnaire Data', in Maree, C. and Satoh, K. (eds), *Proceedings of the 6th Biennial International Gender and Language Association Conference IGALA 6*, pp.446–458.

Zákon č. 301/2000 Sb., o matrikách, jménu a příjmení [Act on Civil Registration, Name and Surname]. Zákony pro lidi. Retrieved July 31, 2024, from https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/2000-301

Zakon za grazhdanskata registratsiya [Civil Registration Act]. Civil Registration and Administrative Services General Directorate (Bulgaria). Retrieved July 31, 2024, from https://lex.bg/bg/laws/ldoc/2134673409

Appendix

Table 21

First characters in names (Boys: F-ratio < 0.1)

First Character	Boys	Girls	F-Ratio	p-adj
龍	92	0	0.00	<0.001
拓	66	0	0.00	<0.001
健	61	0	0.00	<0.001
煌	53	0	0.00	<0.001
航	47	0	0.00	<0.001
陸	37	0	0.00	<0.001
晃	31	0	0.00	<0.001
泰	31	0	0.00	<0.001
隼	29	0	0.00	<0.001
雄	29	0	0.00	<0.001
慶	28	0	0.00	<0.001
昊	28	0	0.00	<0.001
快	27	0	0.00	<0.001
康	26	0	0.00	<0.001
隆	25	0	0.00	<0.001
壮	21	0	0.00	<0.001
将	20	0	0.00	0.001
正	20	0	0.00	0.001
秀	20	0	0.00	0.001
駿	19	0	0.00	0.003
匠	18	0	0.00	0.005
竜	18	0	0.00	0.005
俊	17	0	0.00	0.010
啓	17	0	0.00	0.010
誠	17	0	0.00	0.010
稜	16	0	0.00	0.019
聡	16	0	0.00	0.019
旺	15	0	0.00	0.036
諒	15	0	0.00	0.036
大	211	2	0.01	<0.001
勇	37	1	0.03	<0.001
翔	103	3	0.03	<0.001
凌	33	1	0.03	<0.001
虎	33	1	0.03	<0.001
湊	65	2	0.03	<0.001
直	30	1	0.03	<0.001
朔	24	1	0.04	0.001
太	38	2	0.05	<0.001
圭	18	1	0.05	0.049
颯	114	8	0.07	<0.001

Table 22

First characters in names (Girls: F-ratio < 0.9)

First Character	Boys	Girls	F-Ratio	p-adj
紗	0	124	1.00	<0.001
さ	0	32	1.00	<0.001
妃	0	28	1.00	<0.001
ゆ	0	24	1.00	<0.001
姫	0	24	1.00	<0.001
沙	0	22	1.00	<0.001
な	0	21	1.00	<0.001
す	0	19	1.00	<0.001
り	0	19	1.00	<0.001
ま	0	18	1.00	<0.001
鈴	0	17	1.00	0.001
果	0	15	1.00	0.006
苺	0	15	1.00	0.006
つ	0	13	1.00	0.028
美	1	308	1.00	<0.001
実	1	71	0.99	<0.001
花	1	63	0.98	<0.001
ひ	1	62	0.98	<0.001
茉	1	56	0.98	<0.001
琴	1	52	0.98	<0.001
芽	2	92	0.98	<0.001
み	1	42	0.98	<0.001
こ	1	39	0.97	<0.001
萌	1	38	0.97	<0.001
菜	2	68	0.97	<0.001
杏	2	61	0.97	<0.001
香	1	25	0.96	<0.001
あ	3	68	0.96	<0.001
乃	1	22	0.96	<0.001
梨	3	64	0.96	<0.001
百	2	42	0.95	<0.001
瑚	1	20	0.95	0.002
華	2	37	0.95	<0.001
舞	1	17	0.94	0.018
栞	2	33	0.94	<0.001
彩	12	156	0.93	<0.001
奈	3	34	0.92	<0.001
小	3	34	0.92	<0.001
寧	2	21	0.91	0.009
心	25	251	0.91	<0.001
月	2	20	0.91	0.017
朱	4	39	0.91	<0.001
莉	15	144	0.91	<0.001
帆	4	38	0.90	<0.001

Table 23

Last characters in names (Boys: F-ratio < 0.1)

Last Character	Boys	Girls	F-Ratio	p-adj
大	214	0	0.00	<0.001
郎	167	0	0.00	<0.001
介	114	0	0.00	<0.001
朗	96	0	0.00	<0.001
士	84	0	0.00	<0.001
志	53	0	0.00	<0.001
馬	52	0	0.00	<0.001
平	50	0	0.00	<0.001
一	44	0	0.00	<0.001
哉	42	0	0.00	<0.001
吾	36	0	0.00	<0.001
助	33	0	0.00	<0.001
悟	33	0	0.00	<0.001
磨	33	0	0.00	<0.001
誠	32	0	0.00	<0.001
河	24	0	0.00	<0.001
飛	23	0	0.00	<0.001
輔	22	0	0.00	<0.001
晟	18	0	0.00	0.004
虎	17	0	0.00	0.008
史	16	0	0.00	0.015
司	16	0	0.00	0.015
斗	315	1	0.00	<0.001
太	308	1	0.00	<0.001
人	277	1	0.00	<0.001
汰	84	1	0.01	<0.001
仁	79	1	0.01	<0.001
翔	283	6	0.02	<0.001
登	43	1	0.02	<0.001
佑	39	1	0.03	<0.001
成	56	2	0.03	<0.001
真	255	10	0.04	<0.001
也	74	3	0.04	<0.001
雅	63	3	0.05	<0.001
祐	20	1	0.05	0.011
輝	148	8	0.05	<0.001
己	25	2	0.07	0.006
矢	25	2	0.07	0.006
多	23	2	0.08	0.011

Note: Significance uses Bonferroni correction ($m = 371$, familywise $\alpha = 0.05$). Only significant features shown.

Table 24

Last characters in names (Girls: F-ratio > 0.9)

Last Character	Boys	Girls	F-Ratio	p-adj
花	0	345	1.00	<0.001
菜	0	301	1.00	<0.001
奈	0	289	1.00	<0.001
子	0	201	1.00	<0.001
美	0	108	1.00	<0.001
り	0	90	1.00	<0.001
結	0	89	1.00	<0.001
々	0	43	1.00	<0.001
み	0	37	1.00	<0.001
な	0	34	1.00	<0.001
か	0	28	1.00	<0.001
姫	0	28	1.00	<0.001
果	0	25	1.00	<0.001
茉	0	24	1.00	<0.001
鈴	0	21	1.00	<0.001
恵	0	20	1.00	<0.001
恋	0	19	1.00	<0.001
沙	0	18	1.00	<0.001
は	0	16	1.00	0.002
る	0	14	1.00	0.011
ろ	0	14	1.00	0.011
こ	0	13	1.00	0.023
さ	0	13	1.00	0.023
妃	0	13	1.00	0.023
蘭	0	13	1.00	0.023
禾	0	12	1.00	0.049
乃	2	180	0.99	<0.001
香	2	153	0.99	<0.001
莉	2	124	0.98	<0.001
帆	1	60	0.98	<0.001
梨	1	59	0.98	<0.001
衣	2	115	0.98	<0.001
ら	1	40	0.98	<0.001
華	3	116	0.97	<0.001
佳	2	64	0.97	<0.001
愛	10	319	0.97	<0.001
彩	2	62	0.97	<0.001
杏	1	23	0.96	<0.001
紗	2	35	0.95	<0.001
依	4	64	0.94	<0.001
穂	3	45	0.94	<0.001
夏	8	116	0.94	<0.001
珠	2	29	0.94	<0.001
春	3	40	0.93	<0.001

Table 24 *(continue)*

Last characters in names (Girls: F-ratio > 0.9)

Last Character	Boys	Girls	F-Ratio	p-adj
那	8	94	0.92	<0.001
璃	2	23	0.92	0.002
南	3	33	0.92	<0.001
里	9	98	0.92	<0.001
咲	9	92	0.91	<0.001
い	2	19	0.90	0.026

Note: Significance uses Bonferroni correction ($m = 371$, familywise $\alpha = 0.05$). Only significant features shown.

Gender in Japanese Names Today

doc. Mgr. Ivona Barešová, Ph.D.
Francis Bond, Ph.D.

Managing editor Vendula Kopecká
Proofreading UPLIFT
Graphic design Jan Janošík
Published and printed by Palacký University in Olomouc,
Křížkovského 8, 779 00 Olomouc

vydavatelstvi.upol.cz
vupshop.cz
vup@upol.cz

1st edition
Olomouc 2026

DOI: 10.5507/ff.26.24465500
ISBN 978-80-244-6550-0 (print)
ISBN 978-80-244-6551-7 (online: iPDF)
ISBN 978-80-244-6782-5 (online: ePub)
VUP [2024/0431 a 0432, 2026/0129]

Not for sale