



Name Changes and Kinship Ideology in Japan

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One of G. W. Skinner's many interests and accomplishments was the comparative study of family systems. Almost to the end of his life, he continued to analyze the society of China, but he also focused on Japan and France, where historical records and demographic data remain relatively intact. Family registration documents known as *Shūmon aratame-chō* 宗門改帳 from the Edo period, on which Skinner focused, are a rich resource for quantitative research. The modern family registration system instituted by the Meiji government, known as *koseki* 戸籍, offers qualitative data as well, because it records births, deaths, marriages, adoptions, and name changes. The *koseki* shows that it was and is possible and legal to change one's surname and/or given name, and some people did so more than once. The lack of aversion to abandoning one's birth family identity – uncommon in China or Korea – suggests a more fluid kinship system in Japan. This paper considers, through recorded name changes, how Japanese merchant families strategically used this flexible kinship system to their advantage and for the continued health of the corporate household.

Keywords: family system, kinship, personal names, adoption, Japan

Introduction

In the mid 1990s G. W. Skinner engaged in comparative studies of family systems and reproductive strategies in early modern Japan and France, in addition to continuing his studies of China. Japan and France were ideal research areas due to the availability of relatively reliable statistical data. His chapter in *Anthropological Demography: Toward a New Synthesis* (1997: 53-95) compares family systems across many societies and helps elucidate the need for demographic studies in kinship. While Skinner's contribution to the anthropology of China was significant, it is worth noting that his intellectual curiosity and research efforts extended far beyond.

Skinner's quantitative analyses of the Japanese data flesh out the reproductive strategies of farmers in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, but my interest in this same period lies with the qualitative analysis of succession and continuation strategies among merchant families. Merchant families employed various succession strategies to ensure the continuation of the merchant household as a corporate unit, even if it meant discontinuation of the bloodline. Studying the merchant class is, in a way, a shortcut to understanding the diverse kinship systems that existed in early modern Japan. Name changes, above all, are important to understanding peculiar Japanese family systems.

There are more than 300,000 surnames in Japan, compared to about 5,000 in China, and 250 in Korea. Finland has the largest number of surnames among European countries – 30,000 by one count (Okutomi 2007: 2).¹ Japanese surnames are not clan names as they are in China and Korea, they are based, for example, on places, occupations, or variations of ancestral names. The large number of surnames in Japan has resulted from new ones being created throughout history for a variety of reasons. Most Japanese women take their husband's family name at marriage. Men often change their surnames on adoption into an allied or spouse's family. Married-in sons-in-law always change their surname to that of the wife's family name. Unless one's surname has significance in terms of social value and status, abandoning it does not seem to pose a difficult choice for the Japanese.

Japanese people frequently change both their given names and surnames, while in Chinese society, as a basic rule, neither men nor women change their names. In rural areas of China, men and children in a village can all have the same surname, whereas the wives all have different surnames, since Chinese women do not change their surnames

1 Che (1999) claims that there are 3,000 surnames in China and 100,000 surnames in Japan.

after marriage. In modern Japan, women adopt their husbands' surname at marriage, and men adopt their wives' surname if they marry in as a *muko-yōshi* (adopted son-in-law). While adoption of a male child is customarily limited to agnatic kin in China, no such preferences exist in Japan, and in some cases, a man with proven capabilities may be adopted as an heir when the natural heir-to-be proves incapable (Maeda 2006). In Japan, a surname identifies the corporate household to which one belongs, not necessarily the bloodline. Changing one's given name is also quite common, and in some cases a given name is passed on or inherited over generations. Men have traditionally changed their given names through rites of passage. The frequent name change in Japan, or the lack of aversion to name change, reflects the flexibility of the kinship and family systems.

Family Registration

Toward the end of G. W. Skinner's research life, he worked extensively on projects involving data from central Japan while also studying parish records from France. He was particularly interested in family registrations called *shūmon aratame-chō* of the Tokugawa period (Skinner 1993). *Shūmon aratame-chō* is a document produced by village temples in which village households and their members were certified to be the temples' parishioners. This record, produced annually in most cases, lists household members by name, sex, age, and relationships, thus providing valuable data for historical demographic studies. This *shūmon aratame-chō* became the base of the Meiji government's census instrument, the *koseki*.

Koseki (family registration) is useful for tracking name changes. In 1872 the Meiji government instituted a system that required all inhabitants register their household with the local administration, providing details of its composition and demographic changes (Hayami 1987: 60; Idota 1999). Such records are invaluable for studying family systems. For example, in their research on the Chinese family, Arthur Wolf and Chieh-shan Huang (1980) made extensive use of the household registers maintained by the colonial administration during the Japanese occupation of Taiwan. By checking the years of birth and death carefully with the *koseki*, I could ascertain from which household a bride or groom came. The name of *koshu* (legal household heads) and of each member of the household with their relationship to the *koshu* are spelled out there (Maeda 2006).

Starting in May 2008, however, access to the *koseki* was tightened in the interest of protecting privacy. Siblings can no longer gain access to fellow siblings' records; access is limited to parents, grandparents, grandchildren, or spouse. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly difficult to do research on family histories because municipal offices dis-

card these records after eighty years. Thus, I was fortunate to gain access to the Murai household *koseki* before 2008. The Murai household I studied is located in Morioka in northern Japan. I reconstructed their genealogy and analyzed their use of names to try to understand the Japanese merchant family system (Maeda 2006).

The Japanese Kinship System

The corporate nature of the Japanese household unit is its distinguishing feature, as noted by Ann Waltner when she observes, “In Japan, adoptions were not restricted to those of the same surname. The concept of the Japanese household [is] ... a corporate unit rather than a blood one” (Waltner 1990: 11). If cross-surname adoption was rare in China (Waltner 1990: 49; Ebrey 1996: 25), the high frequency of such adoptions among Japanese people is equally striking. Further, Harumi Befu points out the difference between the Western family and the Japanese family:

One important way in which the stem family of Japan differs from the Western family is in the treatment of non-kin. In the West, a non-kin or a distant kin residing with a family is not, strictly speaking, a sharp distinction is made between members and non-members, kin and non-kin. In the Japanese stem family there is no such sharp distinction. This is not to say that there is no distinction whatever, or that Japanese can not tell the difference between them, but that in actual treatment of members a non-kin may be assigned a role similar to a kinsmen's role. [Befu 1971: 39]

Befu notes that the non-rigid structure of the Japanese kinship system can be manipulated “to fit the exigencies of a situation,” in sharp contrast to the Chinese patrilineal system. The Japanese adoptee may be male or female, infant or adult, a blood-relative or an unrelated individual (Befu 1971: 184). Further, most marriages in Japanese society are virilocal, though traditional families have recourse to uxorilocal marriage if they have no surviving son. In such cases, the groom will marry into his wife's family to reside with her parents and adopt their family name. These men are called *muko-yōshi* (married-in son-in-law). The *muko-yōshi* may also change his given name when he succeeds the family head.

The Adoption System in Japan

To understand differences between the family systems of Japan and China, the first significant factor is their use of surnames. Japanese families are free to adopt a child from the mother's family line as well as the father's because there is no obstacle to changing the child's surname. In China the surname is generally not changed throughout a person's life; the one exception being a man who marries into his wife's family (Ueno 1988: 199-201). Traditionally, although women established "uterine families" as daughters-in-law (Wolf 1972), such "families" were a matter of emotionally significant social ties, not a matter of descent or line; the wife remained excluded from her husband's line and retained her maiden name throughout her life. Waltner notes the importance of surnames in Chinese adoptions: "In none of the non-Chinese societies we have examined is surname a key factor in determining who would or would not be an acceptable adopted son" (Waltner 1990: 12).

In Japan, a married-in son-in-law changes his surname to his wife's surname, his children have their mother's surname, and all the children are thought of as members of their mother's household. In China, although the married-in son-in-law gives up his own surname and takes that of his wife, only his second son belongs to the mother's line; any other children (both male and female) retain the original surname of the father (Ueno 1988). In Taiwan, the married-in son-in-law even keeps his "maiden" name rather than changing his surname at marriage.

A lack of subordination to the lineage is evident in the Japanese use of surnames. At the main entrance to the Japanese house is a rectangular plate known as *hyōsatsu* (name plate). Each nameplate should, in theory, bear only one surname. However, recently it has become increasingly common to find multiple surnames on a single nameplate. This does not necessarily mean that the residents are housemates. Most often such a household may consist of the parents and a married daughter and her family; the married daughter's family uses her husband's surname. Although such husbands are not married-in sons-in-law, legally speaking, and although they keep their "maiden" names, such men are in effect members of a stem family via uxorilocal marriage. In cases such as these, we see two surnames on the nameplate near the entrance door.

The Japanese Merchant Family System

Since the Tokugawa period, when a recognizable merchant class first appeared in Japan, the flexible kinship system enabled some merchants to continue their businesses and to prosper for generations. Economic historians have been trying to understand why some Japanese businesses managed to continue for centuries and have concluded that the family system played a significant role in their success. The normative inheritance pattern of early modern Japanese history is believed to have been male primogeniture. However, among the merchant class, household heads might choose any son or even a daughter on whom their legacy would devolve to maintain continued economic stability. Economic historian Johannes Hirschmeier has studied Japanese business history over three decades and observes early modern Japanese merchants taking advantage of the adoption system:

There was no guarantee, of course, that the eldest son, or for that matter any son, would automatically be the most suited for such an important position. The value-priority assigned to the House as an economic unit, over family and blood considerations, led many Osaka merchants to put blood considerations aside and, almost as a matter of principle, take an adopted son as successor. It was clearly simpler to choose a capable manager, who had proven himself, as son-in-law than to worry about the business abilities of the natural eldest son. [Hirschmeier and Yui 1981: 38]

Women also played important roles in merchant families by bringing in capable sons-in-law. A uxorilocally married woman, as daughter of the head of the household, tended to have power vis-à-vis her husband, even though the husband ostensibly gained the status of *kachō* (household head) once her father died. In these cases, the *muko-yōshi* had to change both his given and surname when he assumed the status of *kachō*.

Name Giving

The main family of the Murai household, the Ono family, who established the first bank in Japan with the Mitsui family at the beginning of the Meiji period, had many able *bantō* (senior clerks). One of the most notable was Nishimura Kanroku (Yamamoto 1984), who later gained the legal name Ono Zen'emon. The Ono Group, a *zaibatsu* (conglomerate), had a system where every four years the *bantō* took turns acting as

head of the store and being known by the name Ono Zen'emon. However, the last Ono Zen'emon was able to keep this name legally and indefinitely because of political reforms instituted by the Meiji government in 1871. In 1870 (Meiji 3) the government allowed *heimin* (commoners) to use their own surnames.² Then, in 1871, the government established the *koseki-hō* (family-registration law). Nishimura Kanroku was adopted into his natal family's *bekke* (non-kin branch family). His natal family had the surname Tawa; therefore, he changed his name from Tawa Kanroku to Nishimura Kanroku, then to Ono Zen'emon. It was to his great advantage to legally use the famous surname Ono (Kunimitsu 1983: 109-118). But a political mistake he made in the banking business led the entire Ono family business in Kyoto to bankruptcy in 1874.

As the Ono family in Kyoto declined, its branch families in Iwate prefecture continued to flourish. The Murai Yahei family was one of these. The Murai Yahei family had helped established the first bank in Iwate prefecture and flourished during the middle and late Meiji period (Miyamoto 1970: 411, 812; Kubota 1994: 233) to become the biggest tax payer in the prefecture (Komai 1987: 200). In 1904 the head of the household, Murai Yahei III, was appointed member of the *kizokuin* (House of Peers) ("Shojiki" 1900).³

According to "Shoyōdome," a journal kept by Murai Yahei III from 1883 to 1903, the Ono family had offered the name Ono as a gift to the late Murai Yahei II in 1894. The catalogue of the gift recorded: (1) the family name Ono; (2) permission to claim kinship relation; (3) permission to use the Ono family crest (two nails in a circle); and (4) textile material for one *kuro-montsuki-haori* (black jacket with family crest). Reciprocity was important and the Murai Yahei family had to return gifts equivalent to the items they received: an auspicious fish, a gold coin, a gold-plated clock, a silver vase, and a woven textile. In the end, however, the Murai Yahei family opted not to use the name because the Ono family had already gone into decline.

The Murai Yahei family had three *muko-yōshi*. All of them were former *bantō* who were highly regarded and showed promise of being successful. Two came from the same Seki family. Seki Jūzō changed his name to Murai Jūzō and became Murai Yahei II when

2 Unlike Chinese surnames, which are regarded as descending from emperor's branch families and have consisted of a single character through their long history, Japanese surnames consist of one or more characters. According to the Chinese Social Science Bureau, only 25 surnames account for about 60 percent of the population (Ebrey 1996: 21).

3 Lebra (1993: 296) explains *Kizokuin* as: The Kizokuin...was set up to form the Imperial Parliament in 1890, the memorable year of its first session, as stipulated by the 1889 Imperial Constitution and *kizokuinrei* (ordinance of the House of Peers)... As for the high taxpayers, initially one member was elected from each prefecture out of the fifteen top national-taxpayers in that prefecture.

he succeeded in the household headship. The third came from another Murai family that was distantly related. The Murai Yahei family itself had one son who married out: The youngest son of the founder Murai Yahei I became a *muko-yōshi* in his mother's natal family.

The second oldest son of Murai Yahei II married the daughter of the distantly related Murai Gonbei family who had risen to be *shizoku* (samurai class),⁴ but he died soon after the marriage. The daughter-in-law returned to her natal family after the death of her young husband and later remarried, but the couple's daughter, born after the husband had died, was adopted by Murai Yahei III, who was the younger brother of Murai Yahei II's wife. Murai Yahei III registered the baby girl as Rika, naming her after her mother's father's grandmother. Because the mother's natal family had higher status than the merchant-class Murai Yahei family, Murai Yahei III opted for a name from Murai Gonbei family.

The Succession of Names

The succession of given names is commonly observed in Western societies and traditional Japan, but not in China. The economic historians Hirschmeier and Yui explain the custom of Japanese merchant families:

In the merchant House the head of the family took up the traditional name reserved for the head (e.g., in the case of Mitsui, Hachirōemon); in order to know which in the line of descendancy was meant, after death records added the Buddhist death name to the House head name. [Hirschmeier and Yui 1981: 38]

Murai Gonbei, previously mentioned as one of Murai family brides' father, was noted in the petition to the county office, which was recorded in "Shoyōdome" in 1896:

Meiji 29.9⁵

The previous generation of Murai Tomojirō was named Gonbei. We have had

4 Some branch families of the Murai rose from the *shōnin* (merchant) class to *shizoku* when they contributed enough wealth to the local samurai lord.

5 Dates are presented as they appear in original documents: period name, year, month, and day.

business dealings with Tomojirō under his name, but this had created some inconveniences in our business dealings. A petition to the county magistrate to change Tomojirō's name to Gonbei required the seals of three relatives, and this was done. On Meiji 29.9.28, a directive, copied below, was received.

Directive Number 328

To:

Murai Tomojirō

Shiwa County, Shiwa Village, Kamihirazawa No. 7

Concerning the petition dated Meiji 29.9.23 regarding the assumption of the name Gonbei:

The petition has been accepted and permission is hereby given. However, be sure to carve a new seal that is distinct from that of the previous Gonbei.

Meiji 29.9.28

Minami Iwate Shiwa County Chief

Matsuhashi Munetoshi [Seal]

“Shoyōdome”

Murai Yahei III chose an heir in 1910 and then died of erysipelas (a skin infection) a year later. His heir, the 18-year-old Yashichirō (childhood name of Murai Yahei IV), was named the *moshu* (chief mourner) in the obituary (Iwate Nippō, February 18, 1911). Assuming the name Murai Yahei after Murai Yahei III passed away, this Murai Yahei IV embarked on a round-the-world trip – a common practice among sons of wealthy families at that time. His first destination was Taiwan. The people there welcomed the young man enthusiastically, mistakenly thinking that he was Murai Yahei III, the member of the House of Peers. Clearly they were not aware of the Japanese system of name succession.

As we have seen, it was long customary for heads of the Murai Yahei family to assume the given name Yahei. But in the Showa period, the Murai Yahei V-to-be decided to keep his birth name, believing the old custom to be outmoded. Even though a former head employee (*bantō*) begged him to continue the tradition, on becoming the fifth generation head of the Murai Yahei family, he indeed retained his birth name (Maeda 2006).

Posthumous Names

Almost all Japanese are given a second name when they die. The posthumous name, called *kaimyō* or *hōmyō*, is a Buddhist initiation name based on the idea that one enters nirvana after death. These names do not consist of either family names or given names. It is prestigious to have a long *kaimyō* or *hōmyō*, but this is more expensive since it must be assigned by an initiating Buddhist priest. Interestingly, payments for such services are tax deductible.

When a name that signifies household headship is passed down over generations, it can be confusing to track just which head among the deceased one is talking about. To avoid this confusion, people use the posthumous Buddhist initiation name. During the four-day O-bon Festival (a midyear memorial service), which falls in mid-August, some families practice ancestor worship and hang scrolls at the Buddhist altar in the house. Each scroll bears a posthumous name and the date of that ancestor's passing (Figure 1). People use these to distinguish which is which. In the *koseki-bo* (family records), a former house head's *kaimyō* or *hōmyō* is used instead of listing his given name in the "father" column.

Frequent Name Changes

The historical example of Toyotomi Hideyoshi, a well-known figure of the 1500s, shows just how frequently, and for what various reasons, an individual might change his name over the course of his life. Historians cannot agree on his childhood or family name due to his humble origins, but when he became a samurai he called himself Kinoshita Tōkichirō, and later still he changed his name to Kinoshita Hideyoshi. When he rose in ranks, he borrowed one character each from the surnames of two fellow lieutenants and created a new one, becoming Hashiba Hideyoshi. After defeating his rivals and subjugating the whole of Japan, he petitioned to obtain a court title. Lacking the proper pedigree for court rank and title, he arranged to have himself adopted by a court noble named Konoe of the prestigious Fujiwara clan, thus becoming Fujiwara Hideyoshi. He eventually obtained the desired court rank and title and received the new surname Toyotomi from the emperor. His was an example of a man changing his name for the purpose of social advancement as well as acquiring a name to suit his new status each step of the way. We can get a sense from this of the long history of the name changing practice in Japan.



Figure 1 O-bon Festival decorations of the Murai Yahei family with memorial scrolls on which posthumous names are written. Photograph by author, August 2004.

Conclusion

Japan is regarded as a society that assigns great importance to the family. Naturally, the Japanese people are understood to place value on family names. However, throughout Japan's early modern history, some Japanese showed no adherence to a particular surname. In some cases people even offered family names to non-kin. This changed in 1870 with the establishment of the Meiji government, when its strict family registration forced Japanese people to adopt a more rigid family structure. Even so, people could still change their registration so long as they submitted an application to relevant public office and the change was granted. The flexibility of this system has enabled people to continue the practice of changing both their given names and surnames.

The perception that Japan is a patriarchal society comes from the family registration system and various codes established in the Meiji period – a period of rapid modernization and Westernization – which codified male primogeniture and gave the male house head absolute authority over his household members. The Meiji codes made the norms of the patriarchal samurai class the model for modern Japan, but in earlier periods, family systems in Japan varied significantly depending on the region, class, and period. In other words, patriarchy was far from the norm in premodern and early modern Japan, when the kinship system was very flexible. This flexibility still survives in practice, and the family registration system and civil codes have recently gone through a series of revisions to reflect this reality.

Frequent name changes and the relative ease with which these are formalized in Japan reflect the continued flexibility of the Japanese kinship system. Despite the patriarchal structure of the Meiji civil code, which remained in effect until the end of World War II, Japan has remained a society in which family and kinship systems are constantly debated, modified, and negotiated to suit the needs of its members.

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日本的姓名變更和親屬觀念

前田浩子

獨立研究

施堅雅教授的諸多興趣和成就之一，是家庭體系的比較研究。他一生持續分析中國社會，但也關注日本和法國，這兩地的歷史記載和人口資料相對而言十分完整。從江戶時期開始的戶口登記文件（稱為宗門改帳 *Shūmon aratamechō*）提供他豐富的量化研究資料來源。明治政府建立的現代戶口登記制度（稱為戶籍 *koseki*）也提供了量化資料，其中記錄了出生、死亡、婚姻、領養和改名。戶籍記載顯示人們可以合法的更改姓氏或姓名，有些人還不只變更一次。有別於中國或韓國，日本人對拋棄原生家庭姓氏並不反感，顯示了日本的親屬體系更有流動性。本文透過更名記錄探討日本商賈家庭如何策略性的利用彈性的親屬體系謀求利益，並延續企業家戶（corporate household）的興旺。

關鍵詞：社會科學，區域研究，人類學史，區域體系，闡述
