

# Hiroko, Sachiko, Yōko: The Phenomenon of Female “-ko” Names in Modern Japan<sup>1</sup>

Ivona Barešová

Palacky University Olomouc, Czech Republic

*The trend of “-ko” names, i.e. female names consisting of one or two Chinese characters to which 子 (ko), meaning “child/girl,” is attached, is one of the most striking phenomena in the history of modern Japanese names. This article traces the popularity of the “-ko” name pattern over time, discusses the situation in the last decades of the nineteenth century that gave rise to this phenomenon as well as the circumstances behind its decline a hundred years later, while also considering the position of this once-prominent name pattern among recently bestowed names.*

## 1 Introduction

When Ono Yōko<sup>2</sup> (小野 洋子), a Japanese-American artist, musician, songwriter, and peace activist, known worldwide as Yoko Ono, was born in 1933, she was given a name ending in *-ko* (子; ‘child, girl’), a type of name that was quite popular at the time. In fact, it was so popular that four out of five baby girls born received such name (see *Graph 1* in *Section 5*).

According to the name ranking by the Meiji Yasuda Life Insurance Company, which has been compiling annual lists of the most popular names since 1912, the name 洋子 (read either *Hiroko* or *Yōko*) ranked fourth in 1933, and all top ten female names ended in 子: 和子 *Kazuko*,<sup>3</sup> 幸子 *Yukiko/Sachiko*, 節子 *Setsuko*, 洋子 *Hiroko/Yōko*, 弘子 *Hiroko*, 久子 *Hisako*, 文子 *Fumiko*, 美代子 *Miyoko*, 美智子 *Michiko* and 信子 *Nobuko*.

This type of name is typically three, less frequently two-mora long, consisting of two or three Chinese characters (*kanji*), the last of which is 子 (○子, ○○子). This name

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- 1 This paper draws on my earlier research concerning this phenomenon (Barešová 2017, 2018) and a lecture delivered at Gakushuin Women’s College Institute of International Studies on December 4, 2019.
  - 2 Japanese words are transcribed using the Hepburn system of Romanization, which follows English pronunciation. Long vowels are transcribed using the macron.
  - 3 The phonological forms listed with the graphic forms are usually the most common, not the only forms possible.

pattern started gaining popularity at the end of the Meiji period (1868–1912), peaked in the 1940s, and continued until the 1980s, though it finds its roots in the social changes that took place after the Meiji Restoration (1868). This paper attempts to provide the background from which this well-known phenomenon arose, traces the popularity of this type of name over time, and describes its decline in the context of the changes in name selection in the last decades of the twentieth century. It also provides some insight into its latest development, considering the position of this name pattern among recently bestowed names.

## 2 Description of the data

The data used in this study come from multiple sources. A valuable source of information about the most frequent names is the annual survey by the Meiji Yasuda Life Insurance Company (hereafter referred to as Meiji Yasuda). This survey lists the top ten ranking male and female names of each year for more than a century, and provides a wider range of information about names bestowed in the current year. The 2019 results are based, for example, on the names of 8,455 boys and 8,407 girls born that year.

While the Meiji Yasuda rankings list the top ten most popular graphic forms of names, the Dai'ichi Life Insurance Company (hereafter referred to as Dai'ichi Life) provides the top five most popular names by reading bestowed between 1906 and 1985 (Dai'ichi sei-meï kōhōbu 1987). Since one graphic form of a name can have several different phonological forms and, reversely, one phonological form can be written with various kanji, the ranking by reading does not yield the same results and is a useful complementary source.

A much wider source of names, but limited only to 1989–2009, is the online name database *Heisei namae jiten* [Dictionary of Heisei era names]. It contains the graphic forms of names of several hundred thousand children born each year.

Female names bestowed in the Meiji period (discussed in *Section 4*) were obtained from the data collection site *Nihon no chōjusha*, a database of Japanese centenarians born between 1854 and 1908. Of the 1,175 names of females listed in the database, 988 were of females born in the Meiji period, i.e., between October 23, 1868 and July 30, 1912.

Recently bestowed female names (discussed especially in *Sections 9* and *10*) were collected over the course of several years from the website *Bebī karendā* [Baby Calendar]. Each of the 5,317 entries of names of girls born 2008–2017 contains, in addition to the graphic and phonological form of the name and the year of birth, a short explanation (*nazuke episōdo*) of the parents' motivation for selecting the particular name, its origin, and intended meaning.

Examples of names and naming practices from earlier periods, included in this text to illustrate the particular issue under discussion, were collected by the author over the years.

### 3 子 in names before the establishment of the modern Japanese name system

It may not be widely acknowledged that the 子, which became so strongly associated with female names in the twentieth century, was originally used as a male naming element. As Makino (2012, 80) points out, the original meaning of this kanji is “man,” which is evidenced, for example, by words such as 王子 (*ōji* ‘prince’) as opposed to 王女 (*ōjo* ‘princess’) or 息子 (*musuko* ‘son’) as opposed to 娘 (*musume* ‘daughter’). In ancient China, it had the meaning of “respected man, master” (e.g., 孔子 *Confucius*, 孟子 *Mencius*). In Japan, it was first used as a naming element in male names of the upper class, such as, for example, 蘇我馬子 *Soga no Umako*.<sup>4</sup>

According to Yamaguchi (2013, 42), 子 started appearing in female names in the Imperial family probably in the Nara period (710–794). One of the first female names in which 子 can be traced is 蘇我娍子 *Soga no Masako* (*Sōshi*), who was born several decades earlier. For many subsequent centuries, the use of 子 in female names was, however, limited to the Imperial family and high aristocracy, thus serving as a kind of marker of social status.

### 4 Basic characteristics of female names in the Meiji period

This situation began to change with the establishment of the modern Japanese name system in the Meiji period. As part of the reforms of the new Meiji government, the system of four social classes based upon Confucianism, *shi-nō-kō-shō*, was abolished in 1869, followed by the establishment of the comprehensive Family Registry (*koseki*) in 1872. Until then, a person could be known by several names during their lifetime; however, according to the new system, every individual had to be registered under just one name, consisting of the family name and the given name (e.g., Tsunoda 1988, 305). The social developments stimulated by these and other reforms impacted female names in various ways, including the gradual disappearance of names with meanings that were seen as old-fashioned, and especially the shift from *kana*<sup>5</sup> to kanji and the almost correspondingly rapid rise in “-ko” names.

These changes were not immediate, however, and only became apparent toward the end of the Meiji era. For most of the period, names were not all that different from those bestowed before the Meiji Restoration. This section briefly summarizes the main characteristics of female names from the point of view of their orthography and structure, and also their meanings prior to these changes (for a more detailed description see Barešová

4 An associate of Prince Shōtoku.

5 Two phonographic syllabic alphabets, *hiragana* and *katakana*, collectively known as *kana*.

2017).

Before and during the Meiji period, the majority of female names were written in kana. Kanji were used in names of females in the Imperial and aristocratic families, and in the Edo period (1603–1868), also in samurai families and by the educated class, while being somewhat taboo for lower-class women (Jugaku 1979, 48). In the Meiji period, especially in its second half, this situation quickly began to change and by the end of the Taishō period (1912–1926), names written in kanji were the majority.

As concerns their structure, most female names were two-mora long, some had three and very few had four morae. When addressing or referring to female commoners, the prefix *o-* was often added to a two-mora name, but when addressing or referring to a woman of high social status, the honorific suffix *-ko* was added (cf., *Tsuru: O-Tsuru – Tsuru-ko*, *Haru: O-Haru – Haru-ko*) (Hearn 1905, 119).

Three-mora names were often created by attaching a suffix to a two-mora base. For example, in addition to the name *Matsu* ('pine'), there were names such as *Matsue*, *Matsui*, *Matsuno*, *Matsuo*, and *Matsuyo*. They were also created by the prefix *ko-*, meaning "little" (e.g., *Komatsu*).

As the majority of female names were written in kana, their meaning is not always obvious. They originate in words denoting abstract notions as well as concrete objects. The list below provides examples of two-mora names divided into several semantic groups (accompanied by the corresponding kanji and its meaning):

1. **Human virtues and other personal qualities:** *Kiyo* (清 'pure'), *Masa* (正 'righteousness'), *Nao* (直 'honesty'), *Nobu* (信 'faithfulness'), *Sada* (貞 'chastity'), *Setsu* (節 'fidelity'), *Tada* (忠 'loyalty'), *Toku* (徳 'virtue'), etc.
2. **Life conditions:** *Ei* (榮 'prosperity'), *Fuku* (福 'good fortune/luck,' also 富久 'wealth' + 'eternity'), *Kichi* (吉 'good luck/fortune'), *Shige* (繁 'prosperity', also 茂 'growing thickly, in abundance'), *Tomi* (富 'wealth'), etc.
3. **Numerals and order:** *Ichi* (一 'one'), *Mitsu* (三 'three'), *Mutsu* (六 'six'), *Shichi* ('seven'), *Yaso* (八十 'eighty'), *Sen* (千 'thousand'), *Michi* (三千 'three thousand'), *Hatsu* (初 'first time, beginning'), *Naka* (中 'middle'), *Sue* (末 'last'), etc.
4. **Time:** *Haru* (春 'spring'), *Natsu* (夏 'summer'), *Aki* (秋 'autumn'), *Asa* (朝 'morning'), *Chiharu* (千春 'thousand' + 'spring'), *Chiyo* (千代 'thousand' + 'generation'), *Hisa* (久 'long time, eternity'), *Toki* (時 'toki'), *Toshi* (年 'year'), etc.
5. **Plants:** *Hana* (花 'flower'), *Ine* (稻 'rice plant'), *Kiku* (菊 'chrysanthemum'), *Matsu* (松 'pine'), *Take* (竹 'bamboo'), (*M*)*ume* (梅 'plum-blossom'), *Yone* (米 'rice grains'), etc.
6. **Animals:** *Kame* (亀 'tortoise'), *Shika* (鹿 'deer'), *Taka* (鷹 'hawk'), *Tatsu* (龍 'dragon'), *Tora* (虎 'tiger'), *Tori* (鳥 'bird'), *Tsuru* (鶴 'crane'), *Ushi* (牛 'cow'), etc.
7. **Materials:** *Gin* (銀 'silver'), *Ishi* (石 'stone'), *Ito* (糸 'thread'), *Kane* (金 'metal'), *Kin* (金 'gold', 錦 'brocade'), *Kinu* (絹 'cloth of silk'), *Tetsu* (鉄 'iron'), etc.
8. **Geographical names and landscape features:** *Fuji* (富士), *Hama* (浜 'shore, coast'),

*Ise* (伊勢 name of a province/shrine), *Iwa* (岩 ‘rock’), *Kuni* (國 / 邦 ‘province, country’), *Mura* (村 ‘village’), *Taki* (滝 ‘waterfall’), etc.

9. **Household and other objects:** *Fusa* (房 ‘tassel’), *Kama* (釜 ‘kettle’, 鎌 ‘sickle’), *Kura* (倉 ‘treasure-house’), *Shina* (品 ‘articles, goods’), *Suzu* (鈴 ‘small bell’), etc.
10. **Art and literature:** *Fude* (筆 ‘writing brush’), *Fumi* (文 ‘literature’), *Koto* (琴 ‘koto’), *Uta* (歌 ‘song, poem’), etc.

The desired meanings and wishes for the child were expressed either directly, through words denoting the particular meaning, or indirectly, using words that through various associations or symbolism expressed the desired qualities or aspirations (e.g., longevity expressed through associations with large numbers, plants and animals), reflected or commemorated the place, time or circumstances of birth, etc. Some of the most ordinary-seeming names might have been motivated by some old practice or belief in favor of the newborn child.

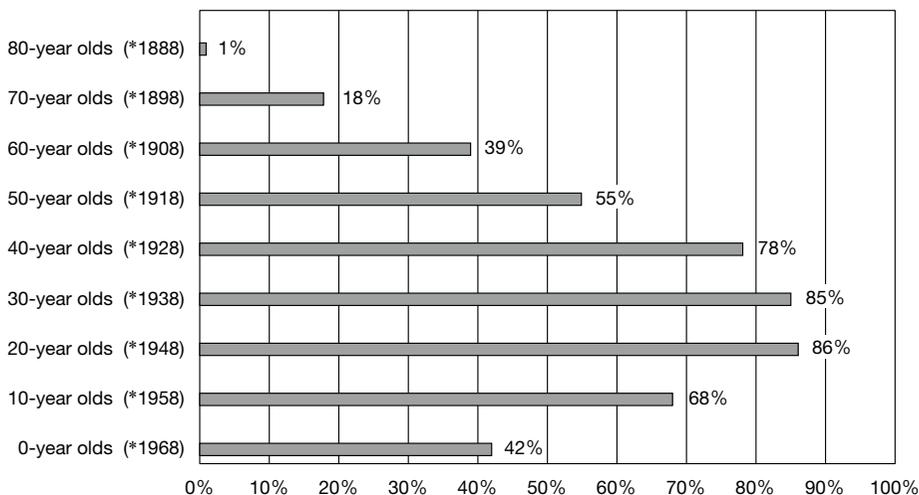
## 5 The spread of 子 in female names

The spread of 子 in female names began with the new name system established at the beginning of the Meiji era. In 1871, the Family Registration Law (*Kosekihō*) was adopted, and the following year, each citizen had to register one “real name” (*jitsumei*) that, in principle, could not be changed after being registered (Plutschow 1995, 197). The names of females in the Imperial and aristocratic class families that were not already of the (○)○子 pattern were registered with 子, and women of the feudal lord families also took up 子 instead of 姫 (*hime* ‘princess’) (Tsunoda 1988, 306). According to Hashimoto and Itō (2011, 52), 97 % (344 out of 354) names of wives recorded in the Nobility Directory (*Kazoku meikan*) in 1887 included 子. In addition, wives of high officials also registered their names with the final 子.

In later years, it became popular among educated and emancipated women to unofficially change their names, writing them in kanji and with the attached 子. For example, the educator and feminist Tsuda Umeko (津田 梅子) was born in 1864 as Tsuda Mume (むめ *mume/ume* ‘plum’), but in 1902 started writing her name in kanji and also added *-ko* (梅子). The celebrated woman poet Yosano Akiko (与謝野 晶子) is registered in the *koseki* as Yosano Shō (志やう); *Akiko* is her pen name. She chose the kanji 晶, which is read *aki*, but also *shō* (as her original name), and added *-ko* (晶子). In addition, women who were known under two-mora names were, for example, presented in newspapers with 子, as it was perceived as a kind of courtesy title (Hashimoto and Itō 2011, 57).

Towards the end of the Meiji era, names with 子 also became increasingly popular among newborn girls, gradually beginning to prevail in the Taishō period. This is well documented by Sakuma’s 1968 survey (see **Graph 1**). While in 1888 only 1% of newborn girls had 子 in their name, in 1908, four years before the end of the Meiji era, it was

Graph 1 子 in names of various age groups (Sakuma 1969, 98)



already 39%, and ten years later, in 1918, it was as many as 55%.

For some time, it was common to encounter names with the same base without and with the final 子, the former being written in kana, the latter usually in kanji: フミ / ふみ (*Fumi*) – 文子 (*Fumiko*), ヒサ / ひさ (*Hisa*) – 久子 (*Hisako*), キヨ / きよ (*Kiyo*) – 清子 (*Kiyoko*), etc. (○)○子 names gradually came to symbolize the difference between the old times and the new age, and 子 became a common feature of female names. By the end of the Taishō period, the two-mora names written in kana had gradually gained the stigma of being old-fashioned, as evidenced not only from the graph, which shows an even further increase of *-ko* names among newborn girls, but also by the fact that increasingly more women born in earlier years, who had received a simple name such as *Hide* or *Kiyo*, at a later point in life attached 子 to their name to make it sound better (e.g., Kida 2002, 127).

Several times during my research I came across a respondent who was not sure about the name of his or her grandmother, whether *Etsu* or *Etsuko*, *Ichi* or *Ichiko*—in other words, whether it contained 子 officially or she was just addressed and referred to that way.

Iwabuchi and Shibata (1964, 36) noted that those belonging to their generation were still somewhat conscious of 子 being an honorific or courtesy title, and, when sending a letter to a woman whose name was, for example, *Haru*, they were taught to write *Haruko*. Similarly, Kida (2002, 16) noted that, when writing a letter to an older woman whose name is two-mora long, it is considered by some people a matter of etiquette to attach 子.

## 6 The period of the dominance of (○)○子 names

子 became a typical end kanji (*tomeji*) and gender marker of female names just as kana was before, and this type of name remained prevalent among Japanese female names for several decades. In 1921, all top ten ranking names in the survey by Meiji Yasuda ended in 子 and this situation remained unchanged for another thirty-five years, up until 1956 (**Table 1**). The ranking by Dai’ichi Life, listing the top five most popular names by reading (**Table 2**), offers similar results: between the years 1916 and 1959, all top five female names ended in *-ko* (Dai’ichi seimei kōhōbu 1987).

Sakuma’s 1968 survey (see **Graph 1**) indicates that the phenomenon of “-ko” names was not a matter of a few of the most popular names, but that the majority of names followed this pattern at the time. At the beginning of the Shōwa period (1926–1989), over 70% of newborn girls received a name with 子, and during World War II and

**Table 1** *The prevalence of (○)○子 names (data from Meiji Yasuda)*

	1921	1925	1930	1935	1940	1945	1950	1956
1.	文子	幸子	和子	和子	紀子	和子	和子	恵子
2.	千代子	文子	幸子	幸子	和子	幸子	洋子	京子
3.	清子	美代子	節子	節子	幸子	洋子	幸子	洋子
4.	久子	久子	美代子	弘子	節子	節子	恵子	幸子
5.	芳子	芳子	愛子	久子	洋子	弘子	節子	和子
6.	静子	愛子	久子	洋子	弘子	美智子	京子	久美子
7.	幸子	信子	文子	美智子	美智子	勝子	悦子	由美子
8.	美代子	和子	光子	栄子	久子	信子	恵美子	裕子
9.	敏子	千代子	孝子	良子	文子	美代子	順子	順子
10.	愛子	八重子	敏子	美代子	悦子	京子	由美子	典子

**Table 2** *The prevalence of “-ko” names (Dai’ichi seimei kōhōbu 1987, 244-246)*

	1916	1920	1925	1930	1935	1940	1945	1950	1955	1959
1.	<i>Yoshiko</i>	<i>Yoshiko</i>	<i>Yoshiko</i>	<i>Kazuko</i>	<i>Yoshiko</i>	<i>Noriko</i>	<i>Kazuko</i>	<i>Keiko</i>	<i>Keiko</i>	<i>Keiko</i>
2.	<i>Toshiko</i>	<i>Fumiko</i>	<i>Toshiko</i>	<i>Yoshiko</i>	<i>Hiroko</i>	<i>Hiroko</i>	<i>Hiroko</i>	<i>Yōko</i>	<i>Yōko</i>	<i>Tomoko</i>
3.	<i>Masako</i>	<i>Toshiko</i>	<i>Fumiko</i>	<i>Toshiko</i>	<i>Kazuko</i>	<i>Yoshiko</i>	<i>Keiko</i>	<i>Kazuko</i>	<i>Kyōko</i>	<i>Noriko</i>
4.	<i>Kiyoko</i>	<i>Kiyoko</i>	<i>Kiyoko</i>	<i>Michiko</i>	<i>Toshiko</i>	<i>Keiko</i>	<i>Yoshiko</i>	<i>Michiko</i>	<i>Hiroko</i>	<i>Yōko</i>
5.	<i>Fumiko</i>	<i>Masako</i>	<i>Kimiko</i>	<i>Masako</i>	<i>Masako</i>	<i>Yōko</i>	<i>Masako</i>	<i>Yoshiko</i>	<i>Noriko</i>	<i>Michiko</i>

shortly after the war it even reached 85%. The number began decreasing in the 1950s, though it still remained over 40% at the end of the 1960s.

## 7 Types of 子 names

As seen in *Table 1*, the most frequent type of 子 names is the pattern ○子, consisting of one “core” kanji followed by 子. The “core” kanji utilizes either a Japanese reading (*kun’yomi*) or a Sino-Japanese reading (*on’yomi*). In the first half of the twentieth century the Japanese reading was more common; however, in later years, names with Sino-Japanese reading became popular as well, as they gave the names a new, fresh feeling.

Many names with this prevailing pattern thus have more than one reading—such as the name 洋子 *Hiroko/Yōko* mentioned in the Introduction, and, for instance, 淳子 *Atsuko/Junko*, 裕子 *Hiroko/Yūko*, 幸子 *Sachiko/Yukiko*, 純子 *Sumiko/Junko*, 順子 *Yoriko/Junko*, 良子 *Yoshiko/Ryōko*, etc.

A more recent type of 子 names is the pattern ○○子, consisting of two kanji followed by 子. In this type of name, usually referred to as the *ateji* or *manyōgana* type, each mora is written with one kanji. Compared to the previous type, these names always have only one particular reading. While, for example, the abovementioned name 幸子 is read as *Sachiko* (*sachi.ko*) or *Yukiko* (*yuki.ko*), the three-kanji name 佐知子 is only read *Sachiko* (*sa.chi.ko*) and the name 由紀子 is always read *Yukiko* (*yu.ki.ko*). Names of the latter type became more frequent after the war, and by the 1970s, they had become as frequent as names of the ○子 pattern. They can be found in earlier periods as well, though mostly limited to a few commonly used names, such as 千代子 *Chiyoko*, 千枝子 *Chieko*, 三千子 *Michiko* or 八重子 *Yaeko* (Sakuma 1969, 149).

There are also names in which the first two morae are written in kana, either *hiragana* or *katakana*, but their occurrence is less frequent compared to the previous two patterns. One of the reasons for the choice of kana instead of kanji is the idea of sharing this feature with other female members in the family, as in the following example:

(1) *The name of a woman born in 1966, Tomoko (トモ子), is written in katakana after her mother, whose name, Yōko, was also written in katakana (ヨウコ). The name of Tomoko’s daughter born in 1991, Yui, observes this tradition and is also written in katakana (ユイ).*

The (○)○子 pattern remained steadily in use for several decades. The “core” kanji of these names varied depending on a number of factors—the changing values and needs of each particular period, including the hopes and aspirations of the parents for their daughters, and also the influence of important contemporary events and personalities. The kanji that frequently occurred in female names in the first half of the twentieth century evidence the desire for a prosperous and happy life (e.g., 栄子 *Eiko* ‘prosper/flourish’ + 子; 悦子 *Etsuko* ‘joy/delight’ + 子; 幸子 *Sachiko/Yukiko* ‘happiness’ + 子; 富子 *Tomiko* ‘wealth/fortune’ + 子) and also reveal what qualities were appreciated in women—those

were, similar to previous periods, primarily virtue, faithfulness, and filial piety (節子 *Setsuko* ‘fidelity’ + 子; 貞子 *Sadako/Teiko* ‘chastity/fidelity’ + 子; 信子 *Nobuko* ‘faithfulness/belief’ + 子; 孝子 *Takako* ‘filial duty’ + 子; 順子 *Yoriko/Junko* ‘obedient’ + 子).

An example of a name that remained popular for more than three decades is 和子 *Kazuko*, which was frequently given to girls throughout the first half of the Shōwa period, both for its association with the name of the era (昭和) and the meaning of “peace and harmony.” A good example of a short-term influence is the name 紀子 *Noriko*, which became very popular in 1940, the year of the 2,600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the legendary establishment of the Japanese state (紀元二千六百年記念行事). This event immediately reflected in the names of children born that year, especially through the character 紀 from the word 紀元, meaning the beginning of the new era.

## 8 The decline of the (○)○子 pattern and the emergence of new names

In the second half of the 1950s, names with the kanji 美 (*mi* ‘beauty’) as an end kanji (tomeji) started growing in popularity. This kanji, referring to both physical beauty and character traits, had already been frequently used in female names before the Second World War, but became even more popular after it. In the early 1960s, it became the most frequent kanji in female names after 子 (Jugaku 1979, 160–162), and the popular tomeji. It was just as feminine as the ubiquitous 子, but gave the names a fresh feeling.

This tendency is apparent from the ranking by Meiji Yasuda (Table 3). In 1965, six out of the top ten most frequent names given to newborn girls contained this kanji, four of them as a tomeji. The ranking by Dai’ichi Life, listing the top five most popular names by reading, includes three names ending in *-mi*<sup>6</sup> that year (Table 4).

At the end of the 1970s, and especially in the 1980s and 1990s, new types of names emerged and names with 子 began to disappear. This change is evident in the Meiji Yasuda rankings. While names bestowed between the 1920s and 1970s were structurally almost uniform, consisting of two or three kanji, the last being 子 and later also 美, names bestowed in the following decades (see Table 5) also included, in addition to two and three-kanji compounds, single-kanji names, which had been rare for female names in the past, and even a name in hiragana (さくら *Sakura*).

This rather major change is connected with the increasing emphasis placed on individuality, originality, and uniqueness (*kosei*) and the changes in method and criteria for name selection, namely the shift from name selection based on the meaning or preference for some particular kanji to name selection based on the sound and overall image of the

6 While *Mayumi* and *Akemi* are listed in the Meiji Yasuda ranking as well (真由美 and 明美), *Hiromi* is not because of the variety of graphic forms (e.g., 弘美, 浩美, 裕美, 洋美).

**Table 3** *The increase of 美 in female names* (data from Meiji Yasuda)

	1960	1965	1970	1975
1.	恵子	明美	直美	久美子
2.	由美子	真由美	智子	裕子
3.	久美子	由美子	陽子	真由美
4.	智子	恵子	裕子	智子
5.	浩子	久美子	由美子	陽子
6.	裕子	裕子	真由美	優子
7.	洋子	智子	直子	純子
8.	明美	由美	久美子	香織
9.	幸子	幸子	由美	美穂
10.	和子	直美	恵子	美紀

**Table 4** *The increase of -mi in female names* (Dai'ichi seimei kōhōbu 1987, 246-247)

	1960	1965	1970	1975
1.	Hiroko	Mayumi	Hiromi	Yūko
2.	Hiromi	Keiko	Yōko	Akiko
3.	Keiko	Hiromi	Tomoko	Tomoko
4.	Noriko	Akemi	Keiko	Junko
5.	Yūko	Tomoko	Yūko	Hiromi

**Table 5** *Popular female names since 1980* (data from Meiji Yasuda)

	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015
1.	絵美	愛	愛彩	美咲	さくら 優花	陽菜	さくら	葵
2.	裕子	麻衣		愛		さくら		陽菜
3.	久美子	麻美	愛美	遥	美咲 菜月	美咲	陽菜 結愛 莉子	結衣
4.	恵	恵	千尋	佳奈 舞		葵 美羽		さくら
5.	智子	香織	麻衣		七海 葵	美優	美桜	凜
6.	愛	彩	舞	葵		美優	美羽	花
7.	香織	あゆみ	美穂	彩	美月 萌	凜	葵 結衣	結愛 花音 心結 陽葵
8.	恵美	友美	瞳	菜摘				
9.	理恵	舞	彩香 沙織	桃子	明日香 愛美 詩織 彩夏 彩乃	七海 美月 結衣	美咲 結菜	
10.	陽子	裕子		茜				

name (e.g., Tsuruta 2003, 26).

The decreasing birth rate and the gradual change in life values became apparent in the increased care shown in name selection. Given names began to be considered mainly in terms of the child's place within the family (*shinmitsu kūkan*, or private space) rather than in respect to the child's future social roles (*kōkyō kūkan*, or public space) (Kobayashi 2009, 18). A name is now primarily understood as a means of addressing a child from

their birth or even during pregnancy and establishing a close relationship with them in the narrow family circle, and therefore it is important that it sounds pleasant.

Among the factors that have contributed to this change are maternity and naming publications, including the influential monthly maternity magazine *Tamago Club* (*Tamago kurabu*), which has been published since 1993, and the *Tamahiyo* maternity publications, both published by the Benesse Corporation. They emphasize the importance of a good sound (*hibiki*) and a pleasant image (*imēji*), as these two components are believed to affect people the most. The criterion of sound is now generally understood as primary, and many parents take it as their starting point when choosing a name.

## 9 Basic characteristics of recently bestowed names

The corpus of 5,317 female names bestowed between 2008 and 2017 demonstrates that, despite the various possibilities Japanese script offers, currently bestowed female names are not particularly diverse in their orthography: 93% are, in fact, written in kanji (77% are two-kanji compounds). Names written in kanji are richer in expression than those written in kana, which only record the phonological form of the name, and therefore are strongly preferred. The phonological length of current names is not all that diverse either; the most common length is three morae (approximately 62%), and there is a tendency toward shorter forms.

The most striking differences between current and older names can be found in the greater variety and types of current phonological forms, in the selection of kanji, and, most dramatically, in an increasingly common discordance in the character-sound relationship,<sup>7</sup> all of which are related to the new style of name creation and the increased emphasis placed on uniqueness.

While the majority of older names end in a limited number of syllables corresponding to end kanji, the most frequent being *-ko* (子), current names display a greater variety of end syllables, the more prominent being *-na*, *-ka*, *-ki*, *-ri* and *-mi*, each represented by various kanji. Increasingly, phonological forms resemble foreign names and words, or are at least meant to sound European. In contrast, a number of current two-mora names are reminiscent of Meiji period female names. Many names are a result of a mere combination of syllables appealing to the ear. Traditional phonological forms are still chosen, but with a widening selection of kanji and justifications for their selection. For example, *-ko* is, in addition to the traditional 子, also written with various other kanji, as demonstrated by the following examples from the corpus:

(2) A couple named their daughter born in 2009 Riko 凜恋 (‘cool, dignified, elegant

7 For the causes of this phenomenon and its consequences, see Kida (2002), Atsuji (2005), Ueno (2006), Satō (2007), Kobayashi (2009) and Makino (2012); for a description of various types of such names, see Barešová (2016b).

*beauty* + *love*). They wanted a cute two-kanji name ending in *-ko*, but written with a different kanji than the conventional 子 [...].

- (3) Another couple also named their daughter born in 2009 Riko 莉湖 (*'jasmine' + 'lake'*) [...]. They liked the sound of the name, but could not decide on the kanji. Finally, they chose 湖 instead of 子 because they liked its association with a calm, gentle character.
- (4) A couple named their daughter born in 2010 Nanako 七瑚. The first kanji is a "lucky seven" [...]. The second is taken from the word 珊瑚 (*'coral'*). They liked it more than 子, conveying their wish for their daughter to have a beautiful heart like a coral [...].

The growing trend of finding a unique name is resulting in an increasing array of graphic forms for each phonological form, and an increasing variety of phonological forms for each graphic form. This phenomenon has become characteristic of new Japanese names.

Kanji are increasingly selected not only for the meanings they denote, but also for the various images and associations they evoke (as in examples 3 and 4), through which one expresses parental aspirations and/or in some manner commemorates some aspect or circumstances of the child's birth, or some other important event. Naturally, the popularity of a particular kanji is heavily influenced by its possible readings. Kanji related to various aspects of the natural world, a trend which started in the 1990s (e.g., Makino 2012, 84), offer many alternatives to express good wishes for the child or reflect the time of her birth, allowing for the accommodation of other criteria considered important, such as the desired phonological form, the right numbers of strokes, etc.

## 10 (○)○子 names in recent years

Names ending in 子 dropped off the top five names ranking by Dai'ichi Life in 1985, and off the top ten names ranking by Meiji Yasuda in 1986 as new types of names emerged; only three (○)○子 names appeared among the top ten names during the thirty years of the Heisei era (1989–2019): 桃子 *Momoko* (1992, 1994–96), 菜々子 *Nanako* (1999) and 莉子 *Riko* (2002, 2008–2011, 2014, 2016–2019). The online *Heisei namae jiten*, which lists names of children born between 1989 and 2009, displays similar results during the period it covers.

The corpus of 5,317 recently bestowed female names contains 145 names with 子, which is less than three percent of all the names. At the same time, however, as 子 is used exclusively in the end position, it is the sixth most frequent end kanji in the corpus (preceded only by 愛 *'love/affection'*, 花 *'flower'*, 菜 *'rapeseed blossom'*, 奈 *'Nara'*, and 音 *'sound'*. The (○)○子 names include:<sup>8</sup>

8 Some names appeared repeatedly.

愛子 / 藍子 *Aiko*, 亜子 / 明子 *Ako*, 朝子 *Asako*, 史子 / 彩子 *Ayako*, 智夏子 / 智佳子 / 千歌子 *Chikako*, 千咲子 *Chisako*, 恵理子 *Eriko*, 楓子 *Fūko*, 楓咲子 *Fumiko*, 華子 *Hanako*, 治子 / 晴子 / 暖子 *Haruko*, 向子 / 陽菜子 / 陽南子 / 陽奈子 / 妃奈子 / 比菜子 / 桧菜子 *Hinako*, 佳子 / 加子 *Kako*, 馨子 *Kaoruko*, 瑚子 *Koko*, 真彩子 / 真衣子 / 舞依子 / 莓子 *Maiko*, 真子 / 眞子 *Mako*, 真白子 *Mashiroko*, 倍子 *Masuko*, 麻里子 *Mariko*, 真悠子 *Mayuko*, 萌依子 / 芽衣子 / 芽生子 *Meiko*, 実子 *Miko*, 美津子 *Mitsuko*, 美哉子 *Miyako*, 桃子 *Momoko*, 菜子 *Nako*, 菜々子 / 奈菜子 / 那奈子 / 菜那子 / 奈那子 *Nanako*, 夏子 / 菜都子 *Natsuko*, 礼子 *Reiko*, 璃衣子 / 里維子 *Riiko*, 梨花子 / 里香子 *Rikako*, 璃子 / 莉子 / 俐子 / 凜子 / 理子 *Riko*, 里咲子 *Risako*, 瑠璃子 *Ruriko*, 佐智子 *Sachiko*, 桜英子 *Saeko*, 咲子 *Sakiko*, 桜子 / 櫻子 *Sakurako*, 紗和子 *Sawako*, 翔子 *Shōko*, 貴子 *Takako*, 塔子 / 透子 *Tōko*, 智子 *Tomoko*, 佑佐子 *Usako*, 八子 *Yako*, 陽子 *Yōko*, 美子 *Yoshiko*, ゆい子 / 結子 / 唯子 *Yuiko*, 祐希子 / 侑希子 *Yukiko*, 紫子 *Yukako*, 佑子 / 夕佑子 / 裕子 / 優子 *Yūko*, 紫子 *Yukariko*, 由美子 *Yumiko*, 百合子 *Yuriko*.

In addition, there are names ending in *-ko* that are written with a different kanji (see above) or, less frequently, with hiragana (e.g., あいこ *Aiko*, りこ *Riko*, なのこ *Nanoko*).

As it appears from the list, the “*-ko*” names are no longer predominantly made of three morae, but are also two-mora long, just as other recent types of female names, and several are four-mora long. They utilize both Japanese and Sino-Japanese readings of the “core” kanji. Some of them combine a traditional phonological form with currently popular kanji, such as, for example, 楓咲子 *Fumiko* (‘maple’ + ‘bloom’ + 子).

There are families who observe the tradition of adopting a kanji from the name of a parent or grandparent, which is also why some people still currently choose a name with 子. As examples 5–7 illustrate, however, the fact that 子 is not commonly used anymore is actually why some parents choose this type of name. They perceive it as a return to tradition or, more frequently, a way of differentiating their child’s name from the majority:

- (5) A couple named their daughter born in 2008 *Sakurako* 桜子 (‘cherry blossom’ + 子). They wanted a name with 子, which differed from current names and gave a feeling of Japanese-style [...].
- (6) A couple named their daughter born in 2008 *Yukiko* 祐希子 (‘help’ + ‘hope’ + 子). They decided for a “子” name, because this type of name is not very common these days and they liked its traditional feminine sound [...].
- (7) A couple named their daughter born in 2012 *Hinako* 陽南子 (‘sunshine’ + ‘south’ + 子). The mother wanted a “子” name because such names are currently rather rare and actually feel fresh; in addition, these names sound feminine. She chose this particular one with respect to the image the kanji create and the number of strokes.

子 is attached to some currently popular names to make them look different. This is the case of names such as *Hina* → *Hinako* (example 8), *Mei* → *Meiko* (example 9), *Sakura* → *Sakurako*, *Yui* → *Yuiko* and others.

- (8) Parents named their daughter born in 2010 *Hinako* 陽奈子 (‘sunshine’ + *Nara* + 子).

*They wanted to use the first kanji because of its positive, energetic image, while the second is adopted from the mother's name. As the name Hina was very popular at that time, they decided to add 子 to make it different.*

- (9) *A couple named their daughter born in 2012 Meiko 萌依子 ('sprout, bud' + 'rely on, trust' + 子), because she was born in May. As Mei was rather common at that time, they decided to add 子, which, by contrast, had become quite rare. The other two kanji were chosen with respect to the number of strokes, the meaning and the overall balance.*

The examples given contrast with the following one from 1950, when names without 子 were the minority:

- (10) *Parents named their daughter born in 1950 Yukie (ゆき江) because, in a period when most names ended in 子, they wanted a name that would be different. They could not decide between 夕起江 and 由紀江, thus they finally chose hiragana.*

As demonstrated with these examples, the 子, which had been the most typical feature of female names for so many decades, has turned into a feature that makes the name look different. In addition, these (○)○子 names are usually easy to read and are gender marked. As such, they stand in opposition to contemporary trends toward names that are hard to read and often gender unmarked—this is also why they may be preferred by some.

- (11) *Parents named their daughter born in 2016 Hinako 比菜子 ('compare' + 'rapeseed flower' + 子). They did not want to express any special wish through the kanji chosen, but wanted, first and foremost, to choose a name anyone could read [...].*
- (12) *Another couple named their daughter born in 2017 Hinako 桧菜子 ('Japanese cypress' + 'rapeseed flower' + 子). Nowadays, when kirakira names<sup>9</sup> are so popular, they wanted to choose a name with the final 子 [...].*

## 11 Conclusion

No other kanji has been as widely used in modern Japanese names as 子. From the point of view of its use as an end kanji in female names, the century and a half since the establishment of the modern Japanese name system in the 1870s has seen three major phases: the period before the wide spread of (○)○子 names, the period between the 1920s and 1970s when this pattern dominated female names, and the period after this prominent name pattern had faded away.

As with many other things, given names are subject to fashion and other various influ-

9 This term refers to contemporary names which are characterized by unusual phonological and graphic forms, often with a discordant character-sound relationship, which makes them hard or even impossible to read (Barešová 2016a, 62; cf. Barešová 2016b).

ences. At the end of the Meiji period and during the Taishō period, 子 became very popular in female names since it conveyed a feeling of being something special, as a result of its earlier use as an honorific element. After more than half a century during which it became a conventional, gender-marking element of female names, it naturally lost this special image. In the 1980s, as in the first decades of the twentieth century, 子 became the primary feature differentiating old-fashioned and modern names, however, to the opposite effect.

At present, 子 is just one of many various end kanji that appear in female baby names, and it has once again started to have positive connotations. (○)○子 names are now selected for the beauty of tradition, femininity and simplicity, which actually makes them stand out among contemporary names.

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