

New Light on the Riddle of *Kirakira* Names in Japanese

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1. Introduction

My relative's son has an unusual name. His name is 蒼樹 *Sōju*, which in Japanese is made up of two kanji 蒼 *sou*, meaning 'blue' and 樹 *ju*, 'tree.' In all honesty, I was quite surprised by the name when I first heard it, because I thought the name sounded like a *kirakira* name. *Kirakira* (literally, 'shiny') is the term given to unusual and or unreadable first names in Japan. These names are sweeping the nation of Japan in popularity these days, but at the same time *kirakira* names have been widely criticized. For example, *Byokan Sunday*, an internet news website, ran an article about *kirakira* names. A summary of the article is as follows. *News Zero*, which is one of Japan's most popular news programs, broadcast that one emergency room doctor had suggested that *kirakira* names might be a cause for making medical mistakes on Twitter and his twitter was flooded by comments on August 8th, 2013. Some members of the audience who watched it criticized this naming trend on Twitter. They said things like "The parents who named their children with *kirakira* names are terrible." and "I pity children who were given *kirakira* names."

In addition, Yushi Matsuura, who is a medical intern of the Japanese Red Cross Medical Center in *Wakawama* Prefecture, published a paper in 2015. The title was "What do we do when patients with *kirakira* names come to the Emergency Room?" According to that paper, they insisted that the parents who gave their children *kirakira* names do such things as decide to visit hospitals after midnight in spite of

recommendations to visit hospitals during usual visitation hours. In other words, the medical intern hinted that the parents who give their children *kirakira* names might be somehow socially inept or unintelligent.

This comment brings up an important question. Is it true that parents who give their children *kirakira* names are actually socially inept or unintelligent? Though this paper furnishes an argument against those opinions, what I would really like to show is that *kirakira* names reflect a number of recent and some historical social conditions in Japan. The study was undertaken in order to point out the Japanese legal system and Japanese social situation's influence on *kirakira* naming trends. I will show the definition and some examples of *kirakira* names, or *DQN* names, as they are also sometimes called.

2. Definition and examples of *kirakira* names

2.1 Definition of *kirakira* names (or *DQN* Names)

First, I will quote one definition of *kirakira* names from *Akihabara News*, which is an internet news website that is published in Japanese and English.

Kirakira literally means "shiny" or "sparkly" and what is going on is kids are getting shiny new names that look or sound cute or interesting, but are unintelligible to all but the kid's parents. The Chinese Kanji are being used as a phonetic symbol rather than for the meaning of the kanji. And names are being given that sound like characters from

animation films or games.

In other words, *kirakira* names are “shiny” or “sparkly” Japanese names. Those names are unique and generally unintelligible, which is to say, they are unreadable using conventional kanji rules. DQN, which is pronounced *dokyun*, is an internet slang term meaning a stupid person or behaving foolishly. On the Internet, those *kirakira* names are also called *DQN* names out of spite. According to *NicoNico*pedia, the term *DQN* is derived from a television program named “*Witnessing! Dokyun*” broadcast from 1994 to 2002. Some people have insisted that *DQN* is a discriminatory term because it is used to denote a stupid person, one to be looked down upon. To argue this point would carry us too far away from the purpose of this paper, so I will leave that problem untouched. From this point, I will use the term *kirakira* names to refer to the new types of first names that some medical personnel are currently criticizing in Japan.

2.2 Examples of *kirakira* names

These names first gave rise to public controversy in 1993. A father sued to get permission to give his child the name *akuma*, the Japanese word for devil. The father discussed the name with municipal office staff workers and was rejected. But in the end, he gave his child another name. Since this was reported widely in the media, the Japanese public has paid special attention to these strange and seemingly senseless names from that time on. I have classified *kirakira* names into the four categories below based on *A Study of Kirakira Names* by Hitomi Ito.

2.2.1 *Kirakira* names that are like a part of word’ s syllables

According to *Tamahiyo*, a magazine which researched the most popular names in 2015, 結愛—standing third on the list— was pronounced *Yu-a*. According to Hiromi Ito, *kirakira* names

have a feature which are used a part of word’ s syllables. 愛 means ‘love’ and the most general pronunciation is “*a-i*” and it has two syllables, *a* and *i*, not “*a*.” Parents probably using the “*a*” syllable from the start of 愛. The following is same type as the above example. *Mamafam*, is an information magazine for families who live in Akita Prefecture. In this publication there are girls named 莉愛 *Ri-a*.

2.2.2 *Kirakira* names which use unusual *nanori*

I will examine *nanori* further in the next chapter. *Nanori* is a special pronunciation system whose pronunciations are only used in Japanese people’ s names. Some pronunciations of *nanori* are normally used when giving names, however recently some parents have been choosing unusual *nanori* pronunciations.

柳原愛子, Yanagihara Naruko (1859 –1943) was a concubine of Emperor Meiji and she was the mother of Emperor Taishō. 愛子 usually is not read *Naruko*, however, according to the kanji dictionary, it can be read this way. 愛 has 13 *nanori* readings, and one is *naru*. Choosing these unusual *nanori* readings is one type of *kirakira* name.

Another example is 真心 (*Masamune*) which is a masculine name as reported on the *Wakaba* Maternity clinic’s homepage. 真心 means ‘true heartedness or sincerity’ in Japanese and it is usually pronounced *magokoro*. I could not understand why 真心 is read *masa-mune*. Pronunciation of *masa* is the usual pronunciation, however I cannot read 心 as *mune*. Researching *nanori* pronunciations of 心, it turns out that there is a *nanori* pronunciation of *mune* for this kanji. People cannot read these unusual *nanori* pronunciations and choosing them causes people to label children’s names as *kirakira* names.

2.2.3 *Kirakira* names using *okiji*

Okiji is the term for kanji which are left unpronounced when reading Chinese characters.

There are many *kirakira* names which use *okiji*. For example, a boy who was named 晴空, usually read as *Seikū*, (lit. 'clear sky') was introduced on *Kongetsu-no akachan*, which is a homepage of the *Shiina* maternity clinic. One might also think this name is read as *Haru-sora*, or *Sei-sora*. This name is not read as *Seikū*, rather, it is used as *Sora*. Thus the 晴 of 晴空 is an *okiji*, a redundant kanji contributing no pronunciation.

2.2.4 Examples of *kirakira* names that are like word association games

Some names resemble word association games; they are like games of match the pronunciation. A Japanese newspaper named *Asahi Shinbun* published a name, written 月 that is pronounced *Luna*, or *Runa*. 月 actually means 'moon' and is pronounced *tsuki* in Japanese, while *luna* is the Latin word for moon. This name is an example where parents decided to match another language pronunciation with kanji meanings.

Another example, reported by the website DQN Names, is the child's name 紗冬, which is inexplicably pronounced *Sugā*. One of the pronunciations of 紗 is *sa* and one of the pronunciations for 冬 is *tō*. The Japanese word for sugar is 砂糖 *satō*. In other words, 紗冬 can read as *satō*, a homonym for the Japanese word for sugar. It seems this child's parents associated the reading of 紗冬, *satō* with the word 砂糖, *satō*, 'sugar.' This is a strange example of a *kirakira* name created via English meaning and pronunciation. A third example is the name 宇宙, meaning 'outer space' and is pronounced *uchu*. Using these characters, some parents have named their child *Nasa*, in another incredible word association game. Of course, this pronunciation is completely wrong, and no Japanese would be able to read the name without instruction.

2.2.5 International-sounding *Kirakira* names

Below are some *kirakira* names that fit into the category of international or western influenced names, which were given on *Takkett*, an on-line website for names.

The name 真九州 is read as *Makkusu*. The child's parents were obviously trying to find characters that would fit the sound of the Western name, Max. Another, 明日, read *ashita*, the Japanese word for tomorrow, is meant to be pronounced as *Tomoroh*. This is another case of a foreign language reading given to a Japanese kanji character. 美風子 is pronounced *Biinasu*, almost in line with some of the kanji's actual pronunciations. The characters respectively mean 'beauty', 'calm', and 'child' or 'young woman,' with the last one often appearing at the end of girl's names. Because the Japanese language lacks the 'v' sound, this is the closest to Venus this girl's parents could get to name their daughter. Finally comes 音 "oto," the Japanese way to pronounce sound, which the parents decided to read as *Rizumu*, or Rhythm. What makes this particularly strange is that though this kanji is used for the word music, it is in no way associated with beats or keeping rhythm.

Rioko Kurihara, who is an expert in onomancy, which is a type of astrology based on order and number of strokes in kanji names, published a book entitled *Sekai de Tsuujiru Namae Bukku* ('A Book on How to Give Names That are Used Worldwide'), to provide some international names. This book is enough evidence to show that some parents have a desire to give their children international names.

2.2.6 Names based on how they sound

Naomi Matsushima, who is an entertainer in Japan, made her first daughter's name public on her weblog. Her first daughter's name is *Lara*, written as 空詩. 空 means sky and 詩 is poem in Japanese. 空 has two syllables, *so* and *ra*. Her

mother probably used the second syllable at the end of a word for the pronunciation. However there are strong doubts about 詩. 詩 “*shi*” is never pronounced *ra*. In my opinion, this kanji was chosen to improve the image of her name. According to her weblog, she was calling the baby Lara temporarily during pregnancy. Consequently, she did not relate to other names. In this respect, it can be presumed that Naomi Matsushima concentrated on names with a nice ring or appearance when she named her baby.

3. The system of *Koseki-hō*

3.1 Naming customs and laws in Japan

In Japan, there is a law called Family Registration or *Koseki-hō*, which provides the guidelines for giving names. The *koseki* is the system by which births, deaths, marriages, and divorces of Japanese nationals are recorded. Here, let us devote some time to understand how names are given to newborn babies in Japan.

3.1.1 Japanese scripts – hiragana and katakana

Before explaining some of the detailed ways of naming newborn babies in Japan, we must understand a little about the written Japanese language. In Japanese there are three written scripts; *hiragana*, *katakana*, and *kanji*. *Hiragana* and *katakana* consist of 46 characters respectively, and each character has a single pronunciation.

3.1.2 Japanese kanji characters

Almost every Japanese kanji character has multiple pronunciations. It is possible to divide these pronunciations into two categories; Chinese readings, *on-yomi* and Japanese readings, *kun-yomi*. Added to these, a few kanji also have a pronunciation of a system called the *nanori*. The *nanori* are that kanji character readings used in Japanese people's names which differ from the

standard *on-yomi* and *kun-yomi*. According to the *koseki-hō*, the *nanori* pronunciations of kanji are the only ones that are permitted to be used in names.

The figure below indicates a variety of pronunciations of the character for *bi* (美). *Bi* means ‘beauty’ in Japanese and it is one of the most popular kanji and it is often for girl in names. For examples, 美咲 (*misaki*, ‘beautiful bloom’), 美香 (*mika*, ‘beautiful scent’), 美海 (*mi-u* ‘beautiful sea’). The kanji has a single *kun-yomi* and *on-yomi* pronunciation respectively, but also a total of fifteen *nanori* pronunciations. However, the other *nanori* pronunciations except for ‘*bi*’, are not usual pronunciations. There are few people who even know about these other pronunciations.

Kanji	type	pronunciation
美	Chinese reading, 訓読み	うつく・し (Utsuku-si)
	Japanese reading, 音読み	ビ(Bi)
	Nanori, 名乗り	あい(Ai) うま(Uma) うまし(Umashi) きよし(Kiyoshi) し(Shi) とみ(Tomi) はし(Hashi) はる(Haru) び(Bi) ふみ(Humi) み(Mi) みつ(Mitsu) よ(Yo) よし(Yoshi) よしみ(Yoshimi)

Figure 1: Pronunciation of 美

The other example is 太, the most popular masculine kanji for naming in 2016. This has two Japanese and Chinese readings and 15 *nanori* readings, for example, 太郎, *Tarō* and 太一, *Taichi*. These same *nanori* pronunciations are not usual pronunciations.

3.2 Kanji used in naming

According to the *koseki-hō*, the characters when used as names are decided by government authorities. Some kanji are only permitted to be used in personal names. The following articles

are directly quoted from the webpage of 2016 Ministry of Justice, Chapter IV Notifications Section 2 Birth Article 50.

- (1) For the given name of a child, characters that are simple and in common use shall be used.
- (2) The scope of characters that are simple and in common use shall be defined by Ordinance of the Ministry of Justice.

There are 983 approved name kanji that are only permitted to be used in personal names. Known as *jīnmeiyō kanji*, these were a separate category from the commonly used characters called *jōyō kanji*.

3.2.1 *Tōyō kanji*

In 1946, after World War II, the Japanese ministry redesignated 1850 kanji characters which were permitted for daily use, known as the 当用漢字 (*tōyō kanji*, 'kanji used for the time being'.) This limit was purposed to promote the Romanization of the Japanese language (Society for the Romanization of the Japanese Alphabet). However, this limit was not applied for giving names. Then there are many unreadable names which use difficult kanji.

The kanji which could be used in given names was limited when in December 1947 the *koseki-hō* (Registration Law) was proclaimed. Since then, only 1850 *tōyō kanji* were permitted to choose from when giving names. However some parents petitioned for the loosening of these regulations because some popular name kanjis were permitted. As parents requested, The Japanese government decided to add 92 kanji additional characters to the list of *jīnmeiyō kanji*.

A few years later, after World War II, the Japanese education standard was extremely high and the Japanese Language Council insisted on the importance of kanji for daily use. As petitioned, the Japanese government announced that *jōyō kanji*, which included *tōyō kanji*, was then additionally increased by another 95 kanji

characters in 1981. According to the Japanese agency for Cultural Affairs, there are 2928 kanji characters that can be used in giving names.

3.2.3 The increase in “feeling kanji”

Even if we have not learned a kanji's meaning, we can sometimes recognize kanji as “feeling characters.” For example, some parents have requested to use the characters 腥 which is pronounced *sei* or *shō*. 腥, 膀胱, *kō* and 蠢, *oroka* for naming. 腥 is composed of the characters for moon (月) and star (星) however, 腥 has nuances of fishy, raw, meat, or dirty. The kanji 腥 looks beautiful but the meaning is not suitable for a person's name. Also, characters such as 膀胱 (meaning 'bladder' or 'rubber bag for collecting urine') and 蠢 (means 'foolish') do not have appropriate meanings for use in a person's name.

3.3 Lack of laws regarding kanji for names

The second reason how *kirakira* names reflect problems with the Japanese law system is that there is no provision in which parents should decide how we pronounce kanji for names. I will explain simply. In the former section, I explained that parents should use the designated 2928 kanji in personal names from the Ministry of Justice's Ordinance. There are regulations when giving names, however, there is no provision in which parents decide how we should pronounce kanji for names. Therefore some parents use names which are difficult to read when naming children.

3.4 Too many conditions for “the perfect name”

Parents now tend to worry that they must give their children the “perfect name.” This trend has been reported by Kobayashi Kosei, a professor at Kyoto Bunkyo University. According to Kobayashi, it is difficult to make the perfect name, because there are too many standards in giving names.

First, the kanji's meaning is vital. It is not good to use kanji which have negative meanings for names. In the previous chapter, I mentioned that parents want to add the kanji such as 腥, 朧 and 蠢 to the list of kanji which can be used in names. Of course, well-chosen names would not contain these negative kanji. A second condition is the combination of kanji.

The balance of the kanji's first name and family name is important. For example, 福田 恵里 (Fukuda Eri). Every kanji in this that name contains a variation of 田 (ta, 'a rice field'). Thus that name might be considered to not be in good balance. Other examples are 森村 麻李 (Morimura Maki) which contains a multitude of trees (木), and 沢渡 潤治 (Sawatari Junji) which contains too many water markers “氵,” represented by the three-stroke radical to the left of each character.

Third, there exists a common superstition regarding number of strokes in your name determining your fortune. This divination by the total number of strokes in kanji is called onomancy. It is a foretelling which predicts a person's fortune by the total number of strokes in the kanjis of family and first name. However, there are numberless school in Japan and if parents want to give their children a perfect name of all school, they can never decide it. I showed a feature of *kirakira* names based on how they sound in the second chapter. Parents tend to decide on names how they sound. If the total number of strokes is not good is that, parents have to research for other kanjis that have same pronunciations. The result parents are swayed by onomancy and it causes difficulty in picking kanji for names. In the second chapter, I introduced the name Lara. Actually, her mother, Ms. Matsushima placed importance on onomancy. As can be seen, there are many conditions for the perfect name and these conditions have made the children's names problem all the more complicated.

4. *Kirakira* names reflect social conditions

4.1 Before *kirakira* names became popular

Kunio Makino, who is a researcher of naming practices, clearly shows that names reflect social conditions in his book. According to his book, *Kodomo-no-namae ga abunai*, we can divide them into three categories. First, there are some names coined during the World War II. Second, there are some names that were used during the food shortage in the post-World War II period. Finally, there are the names that sound foreign or new.

When Japan was at war, Japanese believed that they were destined to win the war. However, at a pivotal point in World War II, the Japanese navy was heavily defeated in the Battle of Midway Island in 1942. When the future looked black, some names that related to victory in war were popular, for example, 進, 勇 and 勝 (62-65). After World War II was over, people suffered from the food shortage. At that time it was popular to give names which are related food and crops such as 茂, 実, 豊 (66).

From 1929 to 1968, Hiroshi was the most popular boy's name, represented by a number of different one- and two-character names such as 博 and 宏. In 1964, overseas travel was deregulated, and the number of Japanese going abroad increased rapidly. In other words, everyday Japanese were usually not able to travel abroad by 1964. Parents desired that their children would actively go all over the world, so Hiroshi was the most popular name in those days.

4.2 Reflecting a desire for individuality

Kunio Makino asserts that names reflect prevailing social conditions. If that is so, what social conditions do *kirakira* names reflect? Tayoshi Doi, in his book entitled *Kosei o Aorareru Kodomotachi*, posits that contemporary Japanese are looking for individuality or

uniqueness in their naming customs. After the postwar period of high economic growth, Japan became a rich and prosperous country. Japanese have been able to get material wealth. It's now an age in which they can also acquire individuality.

There is further evidence to show that parents tend to give unique names. *Tamago Kurabu*, a magazine read by about one third of expectant Japanese mothers, often contains various names for those who are looking for good ideas to give names for their children. *Tamago Kurabu* provided examples of unique names in their July 2013 issue and many issues since.

5. Conclusion

Kirakira names, which are unreadable children's first names in Japan, have been roundly criticized in social circles and the media. There is even a web page which criticizes *kirakira* names and on it, parents who give their children *kirakira* names are castigated as senseless. As we have seen in this paper that there are the other reasons for, which *kirakira* names are given the Japanese legal system and the Japanese social system have also had an influence on the trend of children receiving *kirakira* names.

A chief reason that *kirakira* names are sweeping the country is because of the Japanese legal system. A Japanese law called Koseki-hō was established to decide what kanji characters to use when names are given. However, it has no provision in which parents decide how we should pronounce kanji for names. These law systems cause this situation where parents decide selfish-decided reading of kanji or unusual *nanori* pronunciations, 'special kanji's readings in names' which Japanese usually cannot read. In addition, there are 2928 kanji characters which can be used in names now. "Feeling kanji" which look beautiful but have strange meanings that

are not suitable for person's names, the problem is getting worse.

These are some of the Japanese social situation influences *kirakira* naming trends. As I showed, *kirakira* names are the symbol of parents giving their children individuality. After the high economic growth period of the 1990s, these old and contemporary trends have effect on names in Japan. It is now the age where Japanese can "acquire" individuality though their names, and parents are given their children *kirakira* names to magnetize their children's personalities.

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