TOPONYMIC FACTFILE

pcgn
The Permanent Committee on Geographical Names

Japan

Country name	Japan
State title	Japan
Name of citizen	Japanese
Official language	Japanese (*jpn*[1])
Country name in official language	日本 (Nippon / Nihon[2])
State title in official language	日本国 (Nippon Koku / Nihon Koku)
Scripts	Sino-Japanese characters (Kanji); Hiragana; Katakana
Romanization System	Romanization of Japanese, modified Hepburn system
ISO-3166 code (alpha-2/alpha-3)	(JP/JPN)
Capital (English conventional name)	Tokyo
Capital in official language	東京 (Tōkyō)
Population/Area	122.7 million (UN data) / 378, 000 km^2

Introduction

Japan forms an archipelago comprising over 6000 islands, so has no international land boundaries. Internally mountainous and forested, the large urban agglomerations are principally coastal on the five main islands, Honshū, Kyūshū, Hokkaidō, Shikoku and Okinawa.

Geographical names policy

PCGN policy for geographical names in Japan is to use official sources from Japan, romanizing these as required according to the agreed modified Hepburn system of romanization (see below), or preferably to use official sources from Japan that have already been romanized according to this method.

In 2007, the Geospatial Information Authority of Japan (which commonly uses the alphabetism GSI) issued their document "Toponymic Guidelines for Map Editors and other Editors", Japan (Third Edition) http://www.gsi.go.jp/ENGLISH/page_e30064.html laying out information on

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[1] ISO 639 codes are given for the languages mentioned in this Factfile.

[2] 日本 may be pronounced either *Nippon* or *Nihon*: *Nippon,* as the traditional reading, is used more formally, and *Nihon*, which reflects changes in modern phonology, is more often used in common speech.

1

TOPONYMIC FACTFILE

language, writing systems and geographical names as well as providing source materials and information on the administrative structure of Japan.

Good sources of geographical names information include: Japan's GSI http://www.gsi.go.jp/ and the Hydrographic and Oceanographic Department of the Japan Coast Guard: http://www1.kaiho.mlit.go.jp/. The GSI website includes a downloadable map (in Japanese): http://www1.gsi.go.jp/geowww/globalmap-gsi/globalmap-gsi.html and with romanized forms: https://maps.gsi.go.jp/#6/37.291535/138.153076/&base=english&ls=english&disp=1&vs=c1g1 j0h0k0l0u0t0z0r0s0m0f1

The official GSI Gazetteer of Japan, 2021, is available here: https://www.gsi.go.jp/common/000238295.pdf and the US Board on Geographic Names (BGN) GEOnet Names Server: https://geonames.nga.mil/namesgaz/ is also a good source of names for Japan.

It should be noted that Japan is engaged in several maritime and/or territorial disputes with its neighbours (see 'Maritime/territorial disputes' below), and for these the names appearing on the Japanese sources noted above may not align with HMG policy. Care should be taken to apply appropriate names in these areas in order to reflect sovereignty appropriately according to the HMG position. Please contact PCGN for any further specific queries.

Language

Japan's official language is Japanese (ISO language code *jpn*).

Japanese is written with three different writing systems: Sino-Japanese characters (called *kanji* in Japanese) and two syllabaries called '*kana*': *hiragana* (the more cursive style, e.g. か, き, く, け, こ =ka, ki, ku, ke, ko) and *katakana* (the more angular style, e.g. カ, キ, ク, ケ, コ =ka, ki, ku, ke, ko) (there also exists a smaller version of *kana* known as *furigana* which indicates the *kana* reading of a word written in *kanji* if there is ambiguity (which may be the case in place names)). Most place names are written in *kanji*, though there exist some place names (mostly new names/places) that are written exclusively in *kana* (e.g. see footnote 7).

Katakana symbols were originally derived from parts of *kanji* characters and today are used primarily for the phonetic transcription of foreign words and as the equivalent of italics. *Hiragana* symbols were originally created by simplifying the strokes of whole *kanji* characters and are mainly used to represent grammatical particles and suffixes. Each *kana* character represents a syllable, which may be composed of a vowel, consonant-vowel combination, or syllabic nasal.

There are two principal systems of romanization that may be encountered for Japanese *kana*: the Hepburn system (also known as Hebon-shiki) and Kunrei-shiki.

The Hepburn system was developed in the late 1800s and since then has undergone several revisions. The BGN/PCGN 1976 Agreement for Japanese kana is referred to as the modified Hepburn system and the Geographic Information Authority of Japan (GSI) shifted its use of romanization system from Kunrei-shiki to modified Hepburn for geographical names in 2000.

Kunrei-shiki was promulgated by the government of Japan in the 1930s and is considered the official romanization system in Japan (though not now for geographical names). However, given

2

TOPONYMIC FACTFILE

that the adoption of the Hepburn system for geographical names is fairly recent, it may be that names are still encountered represented according to Kunrei-shiki in Japanese sources.

The modified Hepburn system has been in use by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names and PCGN since the 1930s.

Kanji may be romanized by determining the *furigana* of the *kanji* characters using a Japanese dictionary (e.g. *Kokugo Jiten* or *Kanji Jiten*), then romanizing the *furigana* using the modified Hepburn system. Additionally, as Japanese incorporates both Chinese-origin readings and native Japanese readings, most *kanji* will have more than one reading. This may be manifest in geographical names, e.g. 富士山 (Fuji San, where *San* is the *On* (Chinese) reading for mountain) and 立山 (Tate Yama, where *Yama* is the *Kun* (Japanese) reading of the same character).

A further consideration in the representation of Japanese in Roman script concerns word division and use of uppercase/lowercase initials for generic terms. These only become relevant in the context of romanization, the original Japanese being presented without word division. Neither the hyphen nor a separation is an integral part of the Hepburn system. For example, 三宅島 could be represented Miyake Jima or Miyake-jima; the lexical standalone reading for 島 is *shima* (しま in *Hiragana*). Though linguistically PCGN had previously favoured the hyphenation approach[3], given the density and availability of Roman-script names being produced by Japan, it is difficult to justify the work and differing result that would come of re-representing these. Since Japanese sources, such as the gazetteer noted above, use spaces and uppercase generics, PCGN accepts that it is sensible, as BGN does[4], to follow this approach. The place names contained in this document therefore follow this style.

Other languages
In addition to Japanese there are a number of Japonic languages (Ryukyuan languages (*ryu*)) related to Japanese which, though classed together, are not mutually intelligible with Japanese or each other: all the language variants are classified as endangered, and are undergoing a language shift as they incorporate more standard Japanese and there is lower transmission to new generations.

The sole minority indigenous language is Ainu (*ain*), spoken now by only a few indigenous people on Hokkaidō; it has no written form, and it is classified as critically endangered and may be nearly extinct, though with Japan's legal recognition in 2019 of the indigenous people there have been accompanying efforts at language revitalisation.

Inventory of characters (and their Unicode encodings[5]):

The [BGN/PCGN Romanization system for Japanese kana](#) (i.e the modified Hepburn system, as described above) contains the following letter-diacritic combinations in addition to the unmodified letters of the basic Roman script (shown with the appropriate Unicode encoding):

All apostrophes appearing in romanization are U+2019.

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[3] This method of connection preventing giving the impression that mutated generic forms existed as genuine stand-alone lexical 'words' in Japanese.

[4] See more in BGN's [Japan Country Policy](#).

[5] See www.unicode.org

TOPONYMIC FACTFILE

Upper-case character	Unicode encoding	Lower-case character	Unicode encoding
Ā	0100	ā	0101
Ī	012A	ī	012B
Ū	016A	ū	016B
Ē	0112	ē	0113
Ō	014C	ō	014D

4

TOPONYMIC FACTFILE

pcgn
The Permanent Committee on Geographical Names

Administrative structure

Japan is divided into 47 prefectures at the first-order administrative level. Prefecture names are shown with the relevant generic term in the table below: the generic is 県 *Ken* (=prefecture) for 43 of the 47 ADM1s, and alongside these there are two 府 *Fu,* Osaka and Kyōto, (=urban prefectures); one 道 *Dō,* Hokkaidō, (='circuit' or territory)[6] and one 都 *To,* Tōkyō (=metropolitan area).

Administrative division (romanization)	Administrative division (Japanese)	ISO 3166-2 code	Centre (romanization)	Centre (Japanese)	Coordinates of centre
Aichi Ken	愛知県	JP-23	Nagoya	名古屋	35°11'00"N 136°54'00"E
Akita Ken	秋田県	JP-05	Akita	秋田	39°43'00"N 140°06'00"E
Aomori Ken	青森県	JP-02	Aomori	青森	40°49'00"N 140°44'00"E
Chiba Ken	千葉県	JP-12	Chiba	千葉	35°36'00"N 140°07'00"E
Ehime Ken	愛媛県	JP-38	Matsuyama	松山	33°50'00"N 132°46'00"E
Fukui Ken	福井県	JP-18	Fukui	福井	36°04'00"N 136°13'00"E
Fukuoka Ken	福岡県	JP-40	Fukuoka	福岡	33°36'00"N 130°25'00"E
Fukushima Ken	福島県	JP-07	Fukushima	福島	37°45'00"N 140°28'00"E
Gifu Ken	岐阜県	JP-21	Gifu	岐阜	35°26'00"N 136°47'00"E
Gunma Ken	群馬県	JP-10	Maebashi	前橋	36°24'00"N 139°05'00"E
Hiroshima Ken	広島県	JP-34	Hiroshima	広島	34°24'00"N 132°27'00"E
Hokkaidō	北海道	JP-01	Sapporo	札幌	43°04'00"N 141°21'00"E
Hyōgo Ken	兵庫県	JP-28	Kōbe	神戸	34°41'00"N 135°11'00"E

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[6] The generic term has been retained as one word with the specific here, since the island is well known in this form.

5

TOPONYMIC FACTFILE

Administrative division (romanization)	Administrative division (Japanese)	ISO 3166-2 code	Centre (romanization)	Centre (Japanese)	Coordinates of centre
Ibaraki Ken	茨城県	JP-08	Mito	水戸	36°21'00"N 140°27'00"E
Ishikawa Ken	石川県	JP-17	Kanazawa	金沢	36°36'00"N 136°37'00"E
Iwate Ken	岩手県	JP-03	Morioka	盛岡	39°42'00"N 141°09'00"E
Kagawa Ken	香川県	JP-37	Takamatsu	高松	34°20'00"N 134°03'00"E
Kagoshima Ken	鹿児島県	JP-46	Kagoshima	鹿児島	31°34'00"N 130°33'00"E
Kanagawa Ken	神奈川県	JP-14	Yokohama	横浜	35°26'00"N 139°39'00"E
Kōchi Ken	高知県	JP-39	Kōchi	高知	33°33'00"N 133°32'00"E
Kumamoto Ken	熊本県	JP-43	Kumamoto	熊本	32°47'00"N 130°44'00"E
Kyōto Fu	京都府	JP-26	Kyōto	京都	35°01'00"N 135°45'00"E
Mie Ken	三重県	JP-24	Tsu	津	34°44'00"N 136°31'00"E
Miyagi Ken	宮城県	JP-04	Sendai	仙台	38°16'00"N 140°52'00"E
Miyazaki Ken	宮崎県	JP-45	Miyazaki	宮崎	31°55'00"N 131°25'00"E
Nagano Ken	長野県	JP-20	Nagano	長野	36°39'00"N 138°11'00"E
Nagasaki Ken	長崎県	JP-42	Nagasaki	長崎	32°45'00"N 129°53'00"E
Nara Ken	奈良県	JP-29	Nara	奈良	34°41'00"N 135°50'00"E
Niigata Ken	新潟県	JP-15	Niigata	新潟	37°54'00"N 139°00'00"E
Ōita Ken	大分県	JP-44	Ōita	大分	33°14'00"N 131°36'00"E
Okayama Ken	岡山県	JP-33	Okayama	岡山	34°39'00"N 133°56'00"E
Okinawa Ken	沖縄県	JP-47	Naha	那覇	26°13'00"N 127°41'00"E

TOPONYMIC FACTFILE

Administrative division (romanization)	Administrative division (Japanese)	ISO 3166-2 code	Centre (romanization)	Centre (Japanese)	Coordinates of centre
Ōsaka Fu	大阪府	JP-27	Ōsaka	大阪	34°41'00"N 135°31'00"E
Saga Ken	佐賀県	JP-41	Saga	佐賀	33°14'00"N 130°18'00"E
Saitama Ken	埼玉県	JP-11	Saitama	さいたま[7]	35°54'00"N 139°39'00"E
Shiga Ken	滋賀県	JP-25	Ōtsu	大津	35°00'00"N 135°52'00"E
Shimane Ken	島根県	JP-32	Matsue	松江	35°29'00"N 133°03'00"E
Shizuoka Ken	静岡県	JP-22	Shizuoka	静岡	34°59'00"N 138°23'00"E
Tochigi Ken	栃木県	JP-09	Utsunomiya	宇都宮	36°34'00"N 139°53'00"E
Tokushima Ken	徳島県	JP-36	Tokushima	徳島	34°04'00"N 134°34'00"E
Tōkyō To	東京都	JP-13	Tōkyō	東京	35°41'06"N 139°45'05"E
Tottori Ken	鳥取県	JP-31	Tottori	鳥取	35°30'00"N 134°14'00"E
Toyama Ken	富山県	JP-16	Toyama	富山	36°42'00"N 137°13'00"E
Wakayama Ken	和歌山県	JP-30	Wakayama	和歌山	34°14'00"N 135°10'00"E
Yamagata Ken	山形県	JP-06	Yamagata	山形	38°14'00"N 140°22'00"E
Yamaguchi Ken	山口県	JP-35	Yamaguchi	山口	34°11'00"N 131°28'00"E
Yamanashi Ken	山梨県	JP-19	Kōfu	甲府	35°40'00"N 138°34'00"E

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[7] This is the only '*hiragana* name' in the list of administrative centres. Most names are written in *kanji*: for Saitama, as a 'new' prefecture centre (created from the amalgamation of 4 cities), it was chosen to have a *hiragana*-only name, in contrast to the prefecture of the same name which retains its *kanji* form.

TOPONYMIC FACTFILE

Maritime/territorial disputes

Japan is engaged in several maritime and/or territorial disputes with its neighbours described briefly here. Please contact PCGN for more specific information on any of these.

Kuril Islands
The islands at the southern end of the Kuril Islands chain *(44°30'N 147°00'E)*, i.e. those south-west of the Iturup Strait, are disputed between Russia and Japan. HMG's position is that Russian-language forms should be used for all geographical names in the Kuril Islands; where none exists (e.g. Habomai Islands), English-language rather than Japanese-language names should be employed. Japanese-language names may be shown in brackets if desired and the descriptor '*(administered by Russia, claimed by Japan)*' may also be shown. It should also be noted that Japan refers to these islands as the Northern Territories (and does not consider these islands to be part of the Kuril Islands); this name should not appear on HMG products.

Liancourt Rocks (37°15'N 131°52'E)
Liancourt Rocks is the English-language name for these uninhabited rocks in the Sea of Japan. Claimed by Japan (which uses the name Take Shima), they are administered by South Korea (which uses the name Dokdo). PCGN advises use of the English name so as not to attribute sovereignty.

Sea of Japan (43°30'N 135°45'E)
The name of this sea has been the subject of a significant diplomatic issue since North and South Korea joined the United Nations in 1991. Japan believes that the name Sea of Japan should continue to be used for this body of water in English-language contexts. South Korea promotes the name East Sea and North Korea the name East Sea of Korea. PCGN policy is to use the established English conventional name for this body of water, which is Sea of Japan.

Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands (25°45'N 123°30'E)
There is a group of five uninhabited islands and several rocks in the East China Sea which is the subject of a dispute between China and Japan. The islets, which lie in an area of potentially rich resources and in the midst of important shipping routes, are known in Chinese as Diaoyutai Lieyu (China: 钓鱼台列屿; Taiwan: 釣魚台列嶼)[8] or Diaoyudao Qundao (China: 钓鱼岛群岛; Taiwan: 釣魚島群島) and in Japanese as Senkaku Shotō (尖閣諸島 / せんかくしょとう)[9]. They also have an English name, Pinnacle Islands, applied during a 19th century British survey of the area, but this is rarely encountered.

It is usual PCGN policy to apply a long-standing English conventional name in cases where HMG does not wish to show support for one side over another in territorial or naming disputes. However, in the case of these islands, it would not be helpful to apply the English name Pinnacle Islands, as it is rarely encountered and, moreover, it may not have been originally intended to cover all of the islands of the group.

Therefore, the convention used by HMG is to show both the Japanese and Chinese names as follows: Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands.

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[8] Simplified characters as used in the People's Republic of China and traditional or long-form characters as used in Taiwan.
[9] Sino-Japanese characters (*kanji / hiragana)*.

TOPONYMIC FACTFILE

Other Significant Locations

PCGN Approved Name	Name in Japanese	Conventional Name	Location	Feature Type
Fuji San	富士山 (*Fuji San*)	Fuji San (or Mount Fuji)	35°22'00"N 138°44'00"E	Mountain (active volcano)
Haku San	白山 (*Haku San*)	-	36°09'00"N 136°46'00"E	Mountain
Iō Tō	硫黄島 (*Iō Tō*)	Iwo Jima	24°47'09"N 141°18'59"E	Island (one of the 3 Volcano Islands)
Kazan Rettō	火山列島 (*Kazan Rettō*)	Volcano Islands	25°00'00"N 141°00'00"E	Islands
Korea Strait	対馬海峡 (*Tsushima Kaikyō)*[10]	Korea Strait	34°40'00" N 129°00'00"E	Strait between South Korea and Japan
Minamitori Shima	南鳥島 (*Minamitori Shima*)	Marcus Island	24°16'00"N 154°00'00"E	Island (easternmost point of Japan)
Nansei Shotō	南西諸島 (*Nansei Shotō*) or 琉球諸島 (*Ryūkyū Shotō*)	Ryukyu Islands	26°30'00"N 128°00'00"E	Islands
Ogasawara Guntō[11]	小笠原群島 (*Ogasawara Guntō*)	Bonin Islands	26°59'53"N 142°13'05"E	Islands
Tate Yama	立山 (*Tate Yama*)	-	36°34'33"N 137°37'11"E	Mountains
Tone Gawa	利根川 (*Tone Gawa*)	-	35°44'45"N 140°51'07"E	River
Tsu Shima	対馬 (*Tsu Shima*)	-	34°25'0"N 129°20'0"E	Island in the Korea Strait

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[10] Japanese sources may use separate names for the strait either side of Tsu Shima:

[11] In spite of the furthest being over 1800km from Tokyo, these islands are administered as part of Tokyo metropolitan area.

TOPONYMIC FACTFILE

Useful references

- BBC country profile (no longer updated): https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-14918801
- BGN/PCGN Romanization of Japanese kana: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/693719/ROMANIZATION_OF_JAPANESE_KANA.pdf
- Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) Travel Advice https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice
- International Organization for Standardization (ISO): http://www.iso.org
- ISO Online Browsing Platform (OBP): https://www.iso.org/obp/ui
- Japanese official sources (selection):
  Romanized country map: https://maps.gsi.go.jp/#6/37.291535/138.153076/&base=english&ls=english&disp=1&vs=c1g1j0h0k0l0u0t0z0r0s0m0f1 ;
  Gazetteer of Japan: https://www.gsi.go.jp/common/000238295.pdf
- PCGN Country Names list: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/country-names
- Unicode www.unicode.org
- US Board on Geographic Names GEOnet Names Server: http://earth-info.nga.mil/gns/html/index.html
- US BGN Geographic Names Standardization Policy for Japan: https://geonames.nga.mil/gns/html/Policies/Japan_Country_Policy_webversion_revAug2019.pdf

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