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**Item 10 of the provisional agenda**

**Activities relating to the Working Group on Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers**

## **Changes in the Names of New Municipalities through Municipality Mergers in Japan<sup>\*</sup>**

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## Abstract

There have been three major periods of municipal mergers in Japan in the past 100 years. As a result, the number of municipalities has declined dramatically, from 71,314 in 1889, to about 1,700 in 2008. In this process, the traditional municipal names were dissolved, and various new names were generated.

Current laws on naming of new municipalities do not specify a need to consider historical backgrounds or geographical features, and the matter is left to the judgment of each municipality. In this report, the origins of the new municipal names were researched and analyzed.

### 1. Origins of the municipal names during the previous mergers

During the “Meiji mergers” (1889), the name of the largest municipality was automatically used as the name of the new municipality due to official directives, if there was a difference in the populations of the merging municipalities. When the sizes of the merging municipalities were similar, many new names were created by combining one Chinese character from each municipality into a compound name. For example, the name of the new municipality, ‘Tsu-da-numa’ village, was derived by combining ‘tsu’ from ‘Yatsu’, ‘ta’ from ‘Kuguta’ and ‘numa’ from ‘Saginuma’ to make the new compound name 谷津+久々田+鷺沼⇒津田沼村. In other cases, names such as ‘Mutsuaimura’ (six party village) and ‘Nanaomura’ (seven lives village) stemmed from the number of merging villages. Also generated were names with propitious meanings, such as ‘Yamato’ (old name for Japan), ‘Chitose’ (longevity), ‘Mizuho’ (beautiful rice ears), and ‘Asahi’ (morning sun, sunrise).

It seems that during the “Showa mergers” (1953~1961) many of the new municipality names were either abbreviated compound names, derived from the number of merging municipalities, or names with propitious meanings as during the Meiji mergers. Some new names also used old province names.

### 2. Origins of the new municipal names during the “Heisei mergers”

During the “Heisei mergers”, which started in 1999, a total of 598 municipalities had been formed by merger from 1 April 1999 to 1 January 2008, of which 330 kept their existing names and 268 got new names. The 268 cases of new names can be classified into the following 6 categories based on the origin of the new name. (Table 1)

Table 1. Origins of the new municipal names

Category	Number of municipalities	Characteristics
Names of a wider area	96	The names of an area wider than the actual municipality such as a name for a county or a prefecture. These have mostly originated from a county name.
Names originating from natural features	69	This includes geographic names originating from plains, hills, mountains, cliffs, wetlands, rivers, alluvial plain, capes, seashores, or islands. Names originating from a river are the most common and there are 26 of them.
Old province names	38	The names of an old province, district or town (revived names). Some names are similar because they originated from the name of the same old province.
Compound names	35	These are names generated by taking one Chinese character from each of the merging municipalities and combining them. In addition to names created from parts of existing names, many are combined with an old province name.
Names with pleasant connotations	24	These are names using auspicious or lucky meaning words with or without modification. They have nothing to do with history. Image-conscious names are popular, such as ‘Sakura’ (cherry blossom) City, ‘Midori’ (green) City, ‘Ozora’ (big sky) City, and ‘Asagiri’ (morning mist) Town. There are as many as 6 towns with the name ‘Misato’ (beautiful countryside) in Japan.
Others	6	These are names that cannot be classified into any of the above categories.

Also, as many as 31 *Hiragana*<sup>(\*1)</sup> new names have been generated during the Heisei mergers. One reason may be that *Hiragana* names look gentle, soft and friendly. Other reasons could be to make a difficult-to-read name easier to read, or to avoid confusion about annexation versus merger if an existing name using Chinese characters is adopted.

There is only one *Katakana* name, ‘Minami (south) –Alps’ City.

There are 45 municipality names using locations (directions, above, middle, below),

many of which use one of the four compass directions, especially when an old provincial name or a name of a wider area has been adopted.

(\*1) The *Kana* (*Hiragana* and *Katakana*) were derived from the *Chinese character*. Unlike *Chinese character*, *Kana* provide no specific meaning, only phonetics. And unlike the Roman alphabet, each *Kana* character represents a syllable. Thus, all Japanese pronunciations can be expressed by *Kana* characters. (Quoted from “Toponymic guidelines for map editors and other editors, Japan”)

### 3. Names of dissolved municipalities

A survey was conducted to see how names of dissolved municipalities were handled in the 268 new municipality names. The results show that old names have remained to some extent: nearly 40% of merging municipalities have retained the old name in their address system.

While this is not about municipality names, Article 9-2 of the Law for Listing Address states that “those block names (*machi* or *aza*) with a long and distinguished history that disappeared in conjunction with changes in address listings should be retained and necessary actions for preserving them such as erecting signs or collecting background materials should be taken.”

### 4. Rules for naming new municipalities in Japan

The following are some rules about naming new municipalities.

#### (1) Article 3 of the Local Autonomy Law

“The alteration of the name of local public bodies other than the prefecture shall be effected by bylaw unless otherwise provided for in this Law. The relevant local authorities shall consult the governor of the prefecture in advance of the alteration of the name of the local public body under the preceding paragraph.”

#### (2) Notification of the Administrative Vice-Minister of Home Affairs (1970)

“When a new city is established, or a town is converted into a city, due consideration should be given so that the name of the new city will not be the same as or similar to the name of an existing city.”

#### (3) Manual for Managing Legal Councils for Municipality Mergers (2006)

The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications set up an expert group for study of municipality mergers. The expert group prepared this manual.

In this manual, it stated that the name of the new municipality is one of the matters which expected to be the most controversial issue. And if a name of an existing municipality is used as the name of the new municipality, careful discussion should be given to avoid possible disputes.

Considering the above (1), the names of new municipalities can be decided freely from a legal standpoint. It is necessary to pay attention to the above (2) and (3). Everything else is left to the municipalities' judgment, including full discretion about considerations related to the historical origin or background of names. Therefore, many municipalities have set up their own points to consider in deciding a new name.

## 5. Conclusions

The following is a summary on the naming of new municipalities in Japan:

(1) During previous mergers, there were relatively many compound names created due to official directives; however, during the recent Heisei mergers, many names have been generated using names of wider areas, names that originated from natural features, or old province names.

(2) It thus seems that names are often chosen based on history, geographic characteristics and name recognition. However, some names sound similar because they are derived from the same origin, and others take a geographic name which signifies a wider area than the actual municipality.

(3) Names of dissolved municipalities are often retained in some way in the new municipality name or address system. This indicates that efforts to preserve those names have been made.