Japan’s civil registration system

Japanese civil registration system (Koseki-Touhon)

Koseki Ttouhon 戸籍謄本【こせきとうほん】

“Koseki” is an official document that every Japanese citizen has, and it tells you about your birth date, birth address, parents’ names etc. People usually have it registered to the birth place. If you know where your “Koseki” is registered to, as well as your family’s official Japanese name in Japanese writing.

The koseki is often confused with the jyuminhyou. The jyuminhyou registers your current address, and is not the same document as the koseki. The koseki, or Family Registration, is the system by which births, deaths, marriages and divorces of Japanese nationals are recorded. In some sense, it is a national identity registration, since Japanese public offices collect and maintain these detailed records about all Japanese citizens. Under Family Registration Law, foreign nationals living in Japan also have to notify a municipal office of the births and deaths of their family members. When they marry, divorce, or have children, Japanese nationals, must notify a municipal office. All this and more are recorded in the koseki. A person’s koseki follows them for their entire life. The format of a koseki has changed over the years. It used to be hand written, but is now, of course, printed on a computer, and then stamped with a hanko to verify authenticity.

Each koseki has a “head” of the family unit, listed at the far right, as well as a honseki-chi, the owner's symbolic home. (Described in more detail later on.) You must know both of these in order to get a copy of a koseki, although there are other ways to find these if you have a legal right to, as described below. A koseki is held at the municipal offices in the town, city, or village for that honseki-chi. In the event that an individual on a koseki of which they are not the “head” of, marries and creates a new family unit, a note is made in their new koseki which states the name and honseki-chi of the koseki from which they seceded. (When Japanese marry foreigners they form their own koseki. Women can also have their own koseki in the case of muko-yoshi, when a man is “adopted” by the family of his wife.) You’ll likely find that both forms of records contain a wealth of information.

Koseki family registries however are held with a deference similar to that with which adoption records are held in some other countries; their contents are considered extremely private. Normally, everyone on a koseki must have the same last name. Of course, many Japanese, particularly women, object to this. When a non-Japanese marries a Japanese, the non-Japanese is listed as the spouse, but the head of household must remain the Japanese partner, regardless of gender. As of at least 2005, upon marriage, both the foreign spouse and the Japanese spouse will be given the opportunity to change their last name to that of the other. (Reported true for a foreign man and Japanese woman and assumed true for the reverse, although this has not been confirmed.)

A child is listed on his or her parent’s koseki until they create their own. This typically happens when they get married. But in case of a divorce, the child will move to the person with shinken (legal custody.) In case of a non-Japanese getting full custody in Japan, you should break your child off of the Japanese parent’s Family Registration and onto his or her own. (You probably need both Shinken and Kangoken types of child custody.) This is not a complete solution to a future abduction by the Japanese parent, but it will make it more difficult, since it will be clearly obvious that the Japanese parent does not have custody. It will take an additional legal procedure to move the child back. So it is one more obstacle and a good precautionary and preventative measure.

Records of civil actions pertaining to non-Japanese citizens, such as marriage, adoption, divorce or death are available from the Municipal Office where the action was registered, in the same manner as
the birth record of a non-Japanese citizen. Marriage and adoption records are maintained for 50 years. Divorce and death records are kept for 10 years.

**Related Terms**

**Hittousya 筆頭者 【ひっとうしゃ】**

The head of the family, listed on the far right of the koseki.

**Honseki-chi 本籍地 【ほんせきち】**

This is often just referred to as the “honseki”. This is the place where one is registered. Dictionaries define this as the “domicile” however individuals may live in one town and retain their koseki in a different village. It may better to think of this as the place one considers their true home, new home, real home, birth place, or an important place in their family’s or genealogical past. The honseki is literally, an address. The address itself seems to usually slightly shorter than a real address you might live at, leaving out the final “ban” part. But that address determines what government office controls the koseki. So that is who you send any koseki related requests, notifications, etc to.

Depending upon the individual’s preference, they may transfer their family registry or koseki to the city they live in and this new town would become their new “home place” or honseki-chi. Family abstracts, koseki shouhon, and entire family records, koseki touhon, therefore may list previous towns, villages, or cities in which the family registry was held; basically a list of places that previously may have been considered home (or the honseki-chi) by the individual. An owner can move their honseki at will. But if you know it once, you can fill out more forms to track where it has moved to. A hassle, but should be doable. (Although I believe it is worth the money to pay a lawyer to do this, since it may involve multiple forms, submissions and waiting time in between.)

People often times leave their birth place but still consider it their “real” home. Though some individuals move to a large city or completely different prefecture than that in which they were born, they may choose to maintain their koseki in their hometown or place of birth. The city, village, or town where an individual chooses to maintain their koseki (family records) is called the honseki-chi. The possibility therefore exists that an individual could reside for the majority of their life in a big city (for example Tokyo), but could choose to maintain their family registry in the place they consider their home, their honseki-chi (for example Nagoya). On the other hand, the honseki may not in fact be a real location that a person might live at. For example, some people are rumored to use the Imperial Palace for their Honseki.

**Koseki Touhon 戸籍謄本 【こせきとうはん】vs. Koseki Shouhon 戸籍抄本 【こせきしょうほん】**

- Koseki Touhon – Alternate romanization: tohon, touhon.
- Koseki Shouhon – Alternate romanization: shohon, shouhon, syouhon.

There is really only one family registry for each family but the contents of the registry are available in two styles or formats. They are referred to in Japanese as koseki touhon and koseki shouhon.

Touhon in koseki touhon means a copy, a transcript, or a duplicate. A koseki touhon therefore refers to one's entire family registry which would include the names of relations beyond one's own parents.
Shouhon in koseki shouhon refers to an abstract, an extract, or an excerpt. As implied, the koseki shouhon is merely a swatch or a piece of one's family register. A koseki shouhon will likely only list a specific individual’s name along with the names of his or her parents, the specified individual’s date of birth, their birth order number or title in respect to gender, and the specified individual’s place of birth which may or may not include the name of the prefecture, the name of the county or district, and the name of the city, town, or village. The shouhon also usually notes who brought forth or informed the municipal office of specific information and the date that the information was received by the office.

The koseki shohon usually omits outdated records such as annulled adoptions, former marriages, divorces or deaths of former spouses. In case of a person who was removed from one koseki and placed into another by adoption or marriage, the current koseki sometimes does not indicate place of birth. If the omitted portion is required, you will need to get an extract from the canceled koseki (joseki shohon) from the Municipal Office holding the applicant’s previous family register. (It may not be necessary to actually go to that office. Ask at your local office to see if they can get it for you.)