

2 THEMATIC EXPLORATIONS

Place Names of Note

It's helpful to know kanji for place names, especially at train stations. But the names also have interesting breakdowns, prompting one to puzzle over the etymology.

The Country

Nihon (Japan): 日本 (sun + origin). This name means "origin of the sun."

Main Islands (North to South)

Hokkaidō: 北海道 (north + sea + way)

Honshū: 本州 (origin + province)

Shikoku: 四国 (4 + country)

Kyūshū: 九州 (9 + province)

Okinawa: 沖縄 (open sea + rope)

Most Populous Cities

Fukuoka: 福岡 (fortune, happiness + hill)

Hiroshima: 広島 (wide + island). Hiroshima isn't on an island. Well, everything in Japan is on an island. But the kanji might make you think that this city is on an island in the nearby Inland Sea, when in fact it's on Honshu, the main island in Japan. Go figure.

Kawasaki: 川崎 (river + land jutting out into water)

Kitakyūshū: 北九州 (north + 9 + province)

Kōbe: 神戸 (god + door). An auspicious address, I would say!

Kyōto: 京都 (capital + capital)

Nagoya: 名古屋 (name + old + shop)

Ōsaka: 大阪 (big + slope)

Sapporo: 札幌 (paper money + awning)

Sendai: 仙台 (wizard, hermit + platform)

Tōkyō: 東京 (east + capital)

Yokohama: 横浜 (side + beach)

3 SPECTACULAR SHAPES

Busy Bodies

Some kanji are laughably complicated:

露 *tsuyu*: dew

議 *gi*: discussion

熱 *atsu*: hot

驚 *odoro*: to be surprised

機 *ki*: machinery, chance

離 *hana*: to separate

Real Lookers

A great-aunt of mine sometimes says in a thick New York accent, "Oh, I was a real looker (look-ah) back then!" I consider these kanji to be real lookers:

意 *i*: intention

風 *fū*, *kaze*: wind, style

齒 *shi*, *ha*: tooth

歌 *ka*, *uta*: song

巡 *jūn*, *meguru*: to go around

過 *ka*, *suguru*: to exceed

飛 *hi*, *to*: to fly

刻 *koku*, *kizamu*: to engrave