

33 THEMATIC EXPLORATIONS

Just Add Water

To how many things can you add water, creating a new substance? Water + powder = soapsuds. And water + dirt = mud. But in Japan it works differently, in terms of kanji, anyway. When the water radical 氵 combines with certain kanji, it produces new and sometimes surprising characters.

1. 洗 *SEN, ara•u*
water + previous = to wash
The kanji 洗 appears in お手洗い (*otearai*: bathroom), 洗脳 (*sennō*: brainwashing), and 丸洗い (*maruarai*: washing a kimono without taking it apart).
2. 洋 *YŌ*
water + sheep = ocean, with an associated meaning of “Western”
The kanji 洋 appears in 太平洋 (*Taiheiyō*: Pacific Ocean), 東洋 (*tōyō*: the Orient), and 洋食 (*yōshoku*: Western food).
3. 海 *KAI, umi*
water + every = sea
The kanji 海 appears in 海水 (*kaisui*: seawater), 海員 (*kaiin*: sailor), 海馬 (*kaiba*: seahorse), and 海坊主 (*umibōzu*: sea monster).
4. 汗 *KAN, ase*
water + dry = sweat
The kanji 汗 appears in 汗顔 (*kangan*: sweating from shame).
5. 法 *HŌ, nori*
water + to leave = method, law
The kanji 法 appears in 文法 (*bunpō*: grammar), 方法 (*hōhō*: method), and 法律 (*hōritsu*: law). The character is also in 法皇 (*hōō*: ex-emperor who has become a monk), as well as 一寸法師, *issunbōshi*, translated as “dwarf, midget, Tom Thumb.”
6. 油 *YU, YŪ, abura*
water + reason = oil
The kanji 油 appears in 油絵 (*aburae*: oil painting) and 醤油 (*shōyu*: soy sauce).

7. 決 *KETSU, ki•meru*
water + to pull apart = to decide
The kanji 決 appears in 決定 (*kettei*: decision, determination), 決起 (*kekki*: springing to one’s feet with renewed resolve), 決勝点 (*kesshōten*: goal, finish line), and the rhyming word 決裂 (*ketsuretsu*: breakdown, rupture, collapse).
8. 泣 *KYŪ, na•ku*
water + to stand = to cry
These components prompted an older male classmate of mine to say, “I usually sit down to cry.” The kanji 泣 appears in 男泣き (*otokonaki*: weeping in spite of being a man), 泣き笑い (*nakiwarai*: smiling through tears), 泣き腫 (*nakiha•rasu*: to get swollen eyes from crying), 泣き上戸 (*nakijōgo*: maudlin drinker), and 嬉し泣き (*ureshinaki*: crying for joy).
9. 注 *CHŪ, soso•gu*
water + master = to pour
The kanji 注 appears in 注文 (*chūmon*: [food] order) and 注意 (*chūi*: attention, warning, caution).
10. 治 *SHI, JI, nao•su, nao•ru*
water + platform, self = to govern, heal
The kanji 治 appears in 政治家 (*seijika*: politician) and 明治 (*Meiji*: the era from 1868 to 1912).
11. 濃 *NŌ, ko•i*
water + farming = thick, deep, rich
Shouldn’t wet farming produce the kanji for “rice”? The character 濃 has to do with the concentration of liquids and colors, as in 濃度 (*nōdo*: degree of concentration) and 濃紫 (*komurasaki*: deep purple).
12. 活 *KATSU, i•kiru*
water + tongue = life, activity
If your tongue isn’t wet, you’re no longer alive! The kanji 活 appears in 生活 (*seikatsu*: life), 活力 (*katsuryoku*: vitality, vigor), and 活動 (*katsudō*: activity).