

## Five Must-Knows When Getting a Kanji Tattoo

**Q: What do famous celebrities like Pink, Britney Spears and the Spice Girls' Mel C all have in common?**

**A: They all have Japanese tattoos!**

Japanese tattoos are cool. Of course, if you have money to burn like any of these ladies, you can afford to hire a professional translator to pick out the perfect character combination. But if personal translation is out of your league how can you avoid becoming a kanji fashion victim and get stuck with a tattoo you will really regret?

### 1. Know the difference – hiragana, katakana and kanji

Before you talk to your tattoo artist, make sure you know what you are talking about. You say you want a Japanese tattoo, but what do you know about Japanese characters? You need a quick stint in 2-minute Japanese boot camp.

First off, let's be clear that there is no Japanese "alphabet". There are three sets of Japanese characters – hiragana, katakana and kanji – and each group has its own history, function and style. Get your head around these facts and you will already know more than 99% of the people walking around with Japanese tattoos right now:

**Hiragana** – These **simple, rounded** characters represent **sounds**, but have **no independent meaning**. They were developed by women in the **Heian** period and are still considered **feminine** by Japanese people.

**Katakana** – Developed by Buddhist monks around the same time as hiragana, these are **simple, angular** characters that also represent **sounds** and have **no meaning** of their own. You saw them cascading down the screen in **Matrix** (although they were backwards!)

**Kanji** – Originally **from China**, these characters are **like pictures**,

representing a **meaning** and also **several different sounds** depending on the situation.

Just reading this has probably given you an idea of which style you might like for your tattoo – but don't stop just yet! Now you know what kinds of Japanese characters there are, let's move on to...

## 2. Writing styles

Come a bit closer. Lean forward towards the screen. That's right. Now, look at the words in front of you. Take a good, close look at the shapes of these letters. OK? Now tell me honestly: Would you want a tattoo in *Times New Roman*? How about *Tahoma*? What's that? You don't want a tattoo by Canon or Epson? Sure you don't. And in the same way, you don't want to have your Japanese tattoo looking like a printout either!

So, now we move on to writing styles. Just like there are three kinds of Japanese characters, there are also three ways they can be written. Don't worry. This is easy! I know, you are thinking that you can't even read Japanese, so how on earth will you be able to recognize these different styles? Well, try this:

***Kaisho* – Block letters.** You learned to write your ABCs like this, and Japanese kids learn to write their characters in just the same way: Like a Volvo – boxy but good.

***Gyousho* – Cursive letters.** You moved up to middle school and learned you could write faster by letting the parts of some letters flow into the next. Yes, you guessed it - the Japanese do the same thing, and they call it *gyousho*.

***Sousho* – Super-cursive letters.** Ever seen a prescription from a doctor? Then you know what *sousho* is like in Japanese: Sure, the writer or some other trained person can (probably) read it, but no one else has a clue what it says!

Are you getting the picture? If you want to look like a computer printout, then be my guest and go for the *kaisho* style. That's your choice. But I think you probably want to use either *gyousho* or *sousho* for your tattoo. My personal

preference would be *gyousho*: It's stylish, but it won't leave even native speakers baffled.

### 3. Real or fake?

Remember I mentioned Mel C at the beginning? Well guess what kanji she got tattooed on her arm? That's right – “Girl Power”: Great in English, but show this kanji combination to most Japanese people and you'll get a blank look at best. Want a worse example? Try “big daddy”. Now, you know what it means in English, but put it into kanji and you end up with “large father”! It just doesn't work.

I'm sure you remember that kanji are the only characters that have meaning as well as sound. And their beauty means that they are what most people want for their tattoos. But watch out: As well as being popular, they can also be the most dangerous!

Let's see if we can find a pattern here: Look carefully at the examples above. What are they communicating - concrete concepts or abstract ideas? Can you see the difficulty the translators had? The kanji for “dragon”, “samurai”, “love” or any other concrete ideas are pretty easy to discover. But go for anything with an idiomatic meaning and whoever is trying to help you translate it is going to get a major headache!

Just an idea, but how about this suggestion: Rather than trying to force a round English peg into a square Japanese hole, why not find a real Japanese phrase that you like and get that instead? *Bushidou* (the Way of the Warrior) and *Ninjutsu* (The Art of Stealth) are two good examples of real Japanese terms that would make great tattoos. (You can printout thirty great [kanji designs here](#).)

### 4. Your name in Japanese

As I'm sure you remember from 2-minute Japanese boot camp, katakana are the characters usually used to write foreign words and names. So, if you want to get a tattoo of your name, technically these would be the characters you would choose. (If katakana floats your boat, then you should check out the [katakana](#)

[name translator here.](#)) But I am guessing that, like most people, you want your name written in kanji.

Do a quick search on Google and you can find a number of sites that specialize in translating names into kanji. Basically there are two different methods that these sites use, so let's look at them here.

***Translating the meaning*** – This method involves finding out the original meaning of the English name, and then researching the kanji equivalent.

For example, my name has its origins in Greek and means “crowned one”. The one who is crowned is the king, so I could translate my name into the kanji for king and call myself *ohsama*. (Perhaps a little pretentious – and disturbingly similar to Mr. Bin Laden's first name!)

***Translating the sound*** – This is a lot more difficult! Flick through a dictionary and you will find a bunch of kanji that can be combined to sound like your name. But sound isn't everything: Remember that kanji have meaning as well. In fact, it is even more complex than this! Be sure to check each of the following factors with anyone who translates your name like using this method:

1. **Sound** – Does it sound like your name or not? I have seen my name “translated” on certain websites to sound like *Stefan*. Shame my name (Stephen) is actually said the same as Steven!
2. **On-yomi and kun-yomi** – Yes, more technical words! But don't panic – they are easy to understand: Basically, kanji have two kinds of reading. One kind, on-yomi, is their original Chinese sound. The other, kun-yomi, is their Japanese-only sound. What to watch is that (like oil and water) on-yomi and kun-yomi don't mix. Use either all on-yomi reading or all kun-yomi readings to make the sound of your name.
3. **Meaning** – Do the kanji have a good meaning together? Now, it can be very difficult to find kanji that sound right *and* have a good meaning, so you may need to compromise a little on one of these.
4. **Masculine or feminine** – I guess this is more like a sub-category of meaning, but it is something you need to check out to avoid

embarrassment. For example, while “Asian Beauty” may be a great combination for a woman, I get the feeling most men would not be too happy about having that permanently written into their skin!

#### 5. If in doubt, check!

First, use your new-found knowledge of Japanese to ask a few difficult questions to your tattoo artist or kanji “specialist”. If you get the feeling they don’t know what they are talking about, you probably want to look elsewhere.

Next, before you get anything permanent done, use an online [dictionary](#) to check whether the Japanese really means what you want it to. You may not be able to input Japanese yourself, but you can copy and paste characters from an email or web page and see what they mean.

Finally, if you are lucky enough to know any, ask a Japanese person what they think. Their confused expression may tell you that you have come up with another “big daddy”!

Follow this advice and you will avoid the most dangerous pitfalls of Japanese tattoos and get a kanji tattoo you can be proud of.

#### **About the Author**

Stephen Munday lives in Japan and is the creator of [www.japanese-name-translation.com](http://www.japanese-name-translation.com), where you can download images of over 2,200 names in kanji or have a unique phrase translated into Japanese for a tattoo. This article is © Stephen Munday 2005.