

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

There are no “states” or “provinces” in Japan, because Japan is not a federal system but a unitary state with a two-tier local government system.

“Shi” (city), “Machi” or “Cho” (town), and “Mura” or “Son” (village) are the basic municipalities that offer basic administrative services to residents. “To”, “Do”, “Fu” and “Ken” cover wider areas of local government, i.e., prefectures. However, there are some important points to know.

(1) Tokyo

There are 47 prefectures in Japan: 1 “to” (Tokyo-to), 1 “do” (Hokkai-do), 2 “fu” (Osaka-fu and Kyoto-fu), and 43 “ken.” “Do,” “Fu,” and “Ken” have the same functions. The nominal differences exist for historical reasons, but a “to” has special function. Because Tokyo is the capital of Japan and has a large population in a small area, the Tokyo Prefectural (Metropolitan) Government has the same authority as that exercised by cities in other prefectures. As a result, there are no cities, towns, or villages in within the Tokyo downtown district, but there are 23 “Ku” (wards) that have limited administrative authorities.

(2) Large Cities

19 large cities, including Saitama, Yokohama, Kawasaki, Sagamihara, Chiba (these 5 are located near Tokyo), Sapporo, Sendai, Nagoya, Kyoto, and Osaka, are government-ordinance-designated cities that have special authority that is equivalent to the authority exercised by prefectures in other areas. In these cities, there are also “ku” districts. Their authority is more limited compared to “ku” in Tokyo.

(3) Pronunciation of “Machi” or “Cho” / “Mura” or “Son”

Many Japanese “Kanji” (Chinese characters) have 2 or 3 different readings or pronunciations. “Machi” and “Cho” are pronunciations of “町”, and “Mura” and “Son” are pronunciations of “村.”

(4) Complex meaning of “Machi” and “Cho”

The Japanese word “Machi”/“Cho” has a complicated meaning. Originally, “Machi”/“Cho” simply meant a district where people lived. Today, “Machi” and “Cho” are divided into two categories: (1) towns that are municipalities; and, (2) towns that are small districts within a municipality. For instance, all four sample addresses below mean that B is the name of the municipality and A is the name of a small area within the municipality:

1-1-1, A-cho, B-machi, C-prefecture

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