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## ***On Japanese Merchant's Marks (ie jirushi)***

Lilian CAILLEAUD

### *Abstract*

*Japan is the only country outside of Europe and its area of influence with a native form of heraldry. Japan, like European countries, has complete systems of emblems going from merchant's marks to municipal emblems and family emblems. In Japan as well as in Europe, merchant's marks can be used to represent companies or products, and they might be appended to shopfronts or displayed on employee's liveries. Many contemporary engravings illustrate how these emblems were used through colorful images, which still fascinate us today. Just like western and Japanese heraldry, Japanese merchant's marks are not framed by established rules. However, it is possible to identify practices which help us to understand the evolution and the place of this system of emblems in Japanese society.*

### *Résumé*

#### ***Au sujet des marques de marchands au Japon***

*Le Japon est le seul pays doté d'un système héraldique hors de l'Europe et de l'influence Occidentale. Comme en Europe il n'existe pas un système symbolique mais plusieurs, dont font partie les marques de marchands. Au Japon aussi les marques de marchands sont utilisées pour représenter aussi bien une maison de commerce que les produits vendus et peuvent être apposées sur les devantures comme sur les livrées des employées. Les nombreuses estampes en portent un témoignage coloré qui fascine toujours l'observateur. Les marques de marchands japonaises ne suivent pas de règles précises, à l'instar de leur consœurs européennes et de l'héraldique japonaise elle-même, ce qui n'empêche toutefois pas de pouvoir identifier des usages qui sont de précieux service pour interpréter l'évolution de cette symbolique dans la société japonaise.*



*1. Street of kimono shops in Oden-ma cho.*

Each store is identified by a specific mark on its *noren* (curtain).

In the Edo era (1600-1868), sellers association sometimes had monopoly over wholesale activities in a certain area. They would group together and sell the same type of items, in this case kimonos and cotton-based items.

東都大伝馬街繁栄之図/とうとおおてんまがいはんえいのず Utagawa Hiroshige  
<https://bit.ly/2Jlkuny> (from the National Diet Library of Japan).

In an article presented on the 13<sup>th</sup> of October 1886, Basil Hall Chamberlain introduced probably for the very first time the *ie jirushi* (家印) to an audience of western listeners<sup>1</sup>. The *ie jirushi*, literally translated as “house mark”, is used by merchants, craftsmen or peasants and is very similar to western Merchant’s Marks<sup>2</sup>. In a short article of 7 pages – of which three are exclusively devoted to illustrations – Chamberlain introduced an essential element in the family of Japanese emblems hitherto never studied or mentioned by western authors.

Chamberlain’s article is of some value because it presents house marks in the context of merchants’ emblems. While some elements are well understood by Chamberlain it could be said that he misunderstood the nature of the *ie jirushi* and the manner in which the *ie jirushi* is constructed.

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1. Basil Hall CHAMBERLAIN, « On the quasi-characters called “Ya-jirushi” », *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan*, t. 15, 1886, p. 50-57. While it is not my goal to point out all the problems in Chamberlain’s article, it must be said that the article has many shortcomings and outright misunderstandings. However, it is also very likely that Chamberlain’s article was among the very first author in any language, including Japanese, who had shown an interest in describing *ie jirushi*.

2. *Ie Jirushi* are house marks which go back much farther than merchant’s mark. According to Takahashi Masato, they were of common use among farmers, and even in rural villages, to identify belongings. In Chamberlain’s article it is only the merchant’s marks which is being studied, and likewise in this article.

## I. STATE OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT MERCHANT'S MARKS

Chamberlain's article is probably the most recent<sup>3</sup> to date solely written on the subject in a language other than Japanese<sup>4</sup>. By virtue of being the first, it leaves many questions unanswered, for which Chamberlain cannot totally be faulted. By his own admission Chamberlain recognizes that his report is mainly based on observations made while walking through the streets of Japan. Chamberlain's article offers no primary or secondary sources, Japanese or foreign, to shine a light on the use of the *ie jirushi* or to offer examples of actual use other than the three pages of illustrations accompanying the text<sup>5</sup>. Chamberlain does not clearly define what makes an *ie jirushi* and offers no comparison with the use of marks in the western world. Chamberlain also chooses to characterize the marks as quasi characters, in the sense of written symbols, because the *kana* syllabaries and *kanji* ideograms are used profusely in their design<sup>6</sup>. To him, the *ie jirushi* were proto *kanji* which could be used to explain the emergence of the ideograms<sup>7</sup>. Chamberlain does not seem to have noticed the use of figures taken directly from the *Mon*<sup>8</sup> in the construction of the *ie jirushi*<sup>9</sup> and is unaware that the Japanese descriptors, which in the West we would call blazon, used to name the *ie jirushi* function essentially like the ones for the *Mon*. Chamberlain is also completely off the mark when he mentions that *ie jirushi* are not frequent south of Tokyo and are most commonly found in the northern regions of Japan. It is likely he was unaware of multiple books published in Osaka and Kyoto which were compilations of shops names with merchant's marks and other standardized information.

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3. This article was started in January of 2020, and by December of that year an article was published on this subject: Antoine BOSSARD, « On Japanese's quasi-characters and their representation on computer systems », *Journal of Chinese Writing Systems*, t. 4, n°4, 2020, p. 313-324. I should mention here that this article sticks closely to Chamberlain's interpretation of *ie jirushi* and focuses on methods to transcribe them using computer systems. It does not delve into the interpretation or creation of the *ie jirushi*.

4. And possibly even before any Japanese scholar, since I have been unable to locate an article anterior to that of Chamberlain dealing with the subject by a Japanese author.

5. Probably the most important problem associated with these examples is that they are not given with the shop or merchant they represent, which prevents a clear understanding of the creative process and of allusive nature of the *ie jirushi*. It is true that Chamberlain tries to explain this process, but the examples become meaningless for the reasons stated above.

6. *Kanji* are one of the methods of writing used in Japan. Those ideograms are derived from those used in China. A same *kanji* might be pronounced differently, depending on the context. *Kana* (*hiragana* and *katakana*) are two other writings, based on a syllabic system. See part IV of this article.

7. Chamberlain was fascinated by the creation of eastern languages and their written representation. He spent a good deal of time looking for their written origins. From his article cited above in note 2: *The chief interest attaching to these rude ideographic signs is the way in which they show how a system of ideographic writing might be developed without any conscious effort of invention*. The tone is rather condescending for a man who was seen as an expert in all things Japanese.

8. *Mon* are Japanese heraldic emblems. See Lilian CAILLEAUD, « Le blason japonais », *Revue française d'héraldique et de sigillographie – Études en ligne*, 2020-11, octobre 2020, 18 p. and *Japanese Blazon*. Ottawa, 2018.

9. Further to that point, Chamberlain simply calls the *mitsu tomoe* "one of a few known patterns in Japan", demonstrating thereby a lack of understanding of Japanese heraldry.

Japanese historians have shown that the merchant's marks could be found on XVI<sup>th</sup> century screens depictions of Kyoto, which is well south of today's Tokyo<sup>10</sup>.

In fact, choosing to characterize the *ie jirushi* merely as a quasi character negates its principal use as an emblem. If we were to assume that they are just quasi character, it would beg the question as to why the merchants would have shop names. Authors involved in the study of this type of emblem clearly separate the shop name from its associated emblem. Actually it would be beneficial to separate the sign from the emblem. A letter, or here a *kanji*, is a sign which transcribes the idea of a sound or a word. But they become emblem when they are associated with a specific person or shop. They become less sign and more emblems because they are hereditary and employed just like their heraldic counterpart such as *Mon* in Japan.

To be sure, *ie jirushi* were at the origin of a huge sense of pride in the shop owners since the Edo era. Shop owners would often decorate the eaves of their roofs with their mark in a display which had nothing less than grandeur some would say (*fig. 2*). In a way, this is reminiscent of the manner in which merchant marks were used in Europe as an alternative to coat of arms. Merchants of medieval Europe took great pride in their marks and would place them in churches or on personal documents<sup>11</sup>.



イチャジュ (*ichi ya dju*)

2. In this picture, the “*ie jirushi*” is repeated no less than three times on a rather small section of a roof, which had plenty more examples.  
(<https://bit.ly/2Y1s5vb>)

10. See OKUNI and TAKAHASHI for instance (cited in the bibliography at the end of this article).

11. For an excellent introduction to merchants' marks in Europe, see John Paul RYLANDS, « Merchants' marks and other medieval personal marks », *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, t. 62, 1910, p. 1-40.

In fact, *ie jirushi* are also mentioned in Professor Rudolf Lange's article on Japanese *mon*<sup>12</sup>, but the author groups all marks used for private or mercantile purposes in three short sentences<sup>13</sup>. These sentences form the root of the questions formulated by Arnold Van Gennep in "*Notes sur l'héraldisation de la marque de propriété et les origines du blason*"<sup>14</sup> who follows Professor Lange's presentation of the Japanese heraldic system where he makes the link between merchant's marks and heraldic emblems. Most studies on merchant marks, whether western or Japanese, are inclined to support the view that there is an intimate connection between the merchant marks and heraldic devices and that status separates the use of each type of emblems<sup>15</sup>. Both can be used in the same way on clothing and on other supports ranging from the mundane utensil to the elaborately decorated pill box. To put it clearly, *ie jirushi* form the basis of a parallel system of emblems used by commoners which was not regulated by the government of Japan, as represented by the Tokugawa *bakufu*<sup>16</sup>.

Lange describes symbols used by servant of the *daimyos*<sup>17</sup> on their *happi* and *haori*<sup>18</sup> and links them to the one used in merchants' houses. Their use is similar, that is to identify member of an extended group made of the clan or in the case of merchants the *Omise* (shop). However the designs themselves are very different since Merchant's marks use

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12. Rudolf LANGE, « Japanische Wappen », *Mitteilungen des Seminars für Orientalische Sprachen an der Königlichen Friedrich Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin*, 1903, p. 23-281. It was also, and still is, one of the better sources for the study of Japanese heraldry though published more than a century ago.

13. Professor Lange (*ibidem*) states on housemarks that : *In addition to the family and interchangeable coats of arms, each family can also have a house mark, which is given the general name shirushi. They actually do not differ from the coat of arms and are often only variants of the same. They are attached to the clothes that employees or workers wear, the so-called Happi and Hanten. Both are worn by lower people in place of the Haori. Incidentally, the family coat of arms can also be attached to the Happi, thereby identifying the affiliation of the staff. In the bukan you can find an image of such happi with every daimyo, the livery with the badge in question, but this is rarely identical to the family coat of arms. It was customary for the the servants, to wear liveries of this kind in a large daimyo procession, which often consisted of hundreds of people, so that one could see from this which daimyo they served.* Strangely this short passage is better known than Chamberlain's article. It is as if Chamberlain's article had never been read outside of *The Asiatic Society Journal*.

14. Arnold VAN GENNEP, « Notes sur l'héraldisation de la marque de propriété et les origines du blason », *Bulletins et Mémoires de la Société d'anthropologie de Paris*, 5<sup>e</sup> série, t. 6, 1905, p. 103-112.

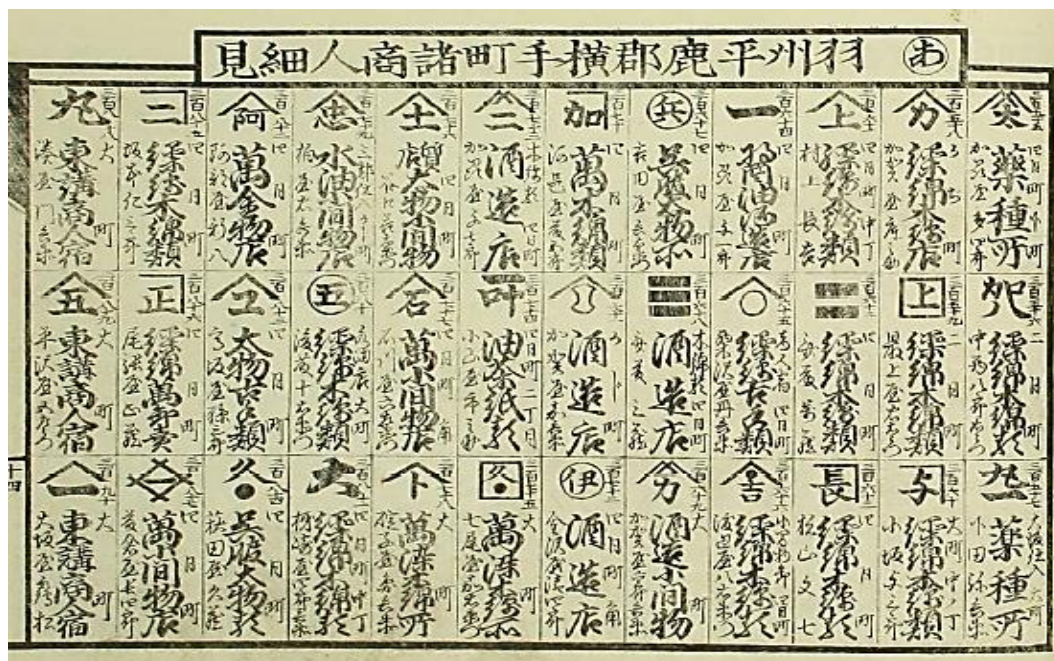
15. In *Edo noren to kanban*, OKUNI Hiroshi (see bibliography below) also supports the view that *ie jirushi* functions as a symbol rather than a sign.

16. *Bakufu*, literally the government behind the curtain, is the name of the shogun's governments. Each historical period where a shogun was in power over the emperor is a *Bakufu*. In this article we are most concerned with the *Edo bakufu* (1600-1868) under the Tokugawa family rule. To be fair the government did try to regulate the use of *mon* but failed largely, except for the use of the three aoi leaves, which was the Tokugawa own emblem.

17. A *daimyo* is a lord ruling a domain with a theoretical income of at least 10 000 Koku, a koku being the measure of rice necessary to feed one person for one year and roughly equivalent to 180 liters of rice.

18. *Happi and Hanten* are quite similar. The *happi* was used as a sort of livery often decorated with a master's symbol. The master could be a feudal lord or a craftsman or any one in position of authority over other people. The *hanten* was a padded coat used to keep warm, but which could also be beautifully decorated. Great examples are the *Sirushi banten* used by firefighters to protect themselves from the fire.

abundantly enclosures<sup>19</sup> of shapes (except for the circle or *maru* in Japanese) which are considered rare in the construction of *Mon* or *sirushi*, as defined by Professor Lange.



3. This page of the 東講商人鑑 (*azumakō akindo kagami*, 1855) is an excellent example of the type of travel books surveying the shops and hostels available to travelers. Here we see both the variety of designs of the *ie jirushi* (of the 36 examples on this page, none is exactly similar) and yet the striking commonalities, one could even say flavor, which makes a *ie jirushi* feel remarkably different from a *Mon*.

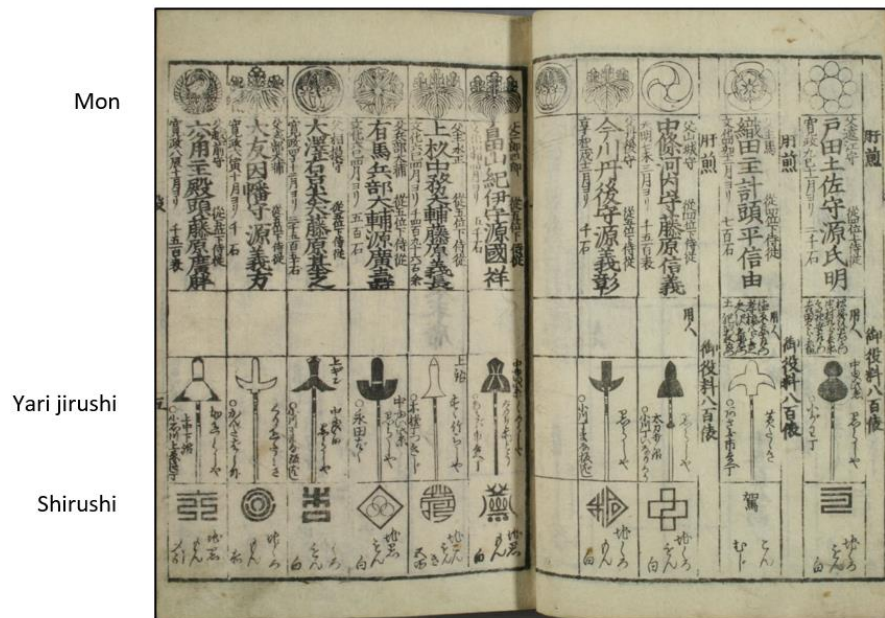
Some merchants were from old samurai stock<sup>20</sup> and had a *Mon* of their own but also used very different merchant's mark. It would be rather difficult to say whether a *Mon* is also a *ie jirushi* or if a *ie jirushi* is used as a *Mon* unless a family's emblems have been thoroughly researched. The case of the *Mitsui* family is one of best researched examples available to us, but also one of the few example thoroughly studied and understood<sup>21</sup>. However, it does not mean that primary sources do not exist. Throughout the XVIII<sup>th</sup> and XIX<sup>th</sup> centuries, plenty of merchants' marks were recorded in various forms, be it in voluminous manuscript listing merchant shippers' trademarks and sail recognition patterns

19. By enclosure I mean a figure enclosing one. However, the *kane* (carpenters square) and the *yama* (mountain) do not fully enclose another element of design. Yet their position on the outer layer of the *ie jirushi* makes them akin to fully enclosing designs such as the *maru* (circle) or the *kaku* (square). While I am aware of the contradiction enclosure seemed the only logical choice. The Japanese themselves do not characterize these elements.

20. Some samurai were finding difficult to get gainful employment during the peaceful era of the *Edo Bakufu* and decided to leave their warrior status to become farmers or merchants with varying degrees of success.

21. See part four of this article.

or in printed traveler's encyclopedia displaying the best places to buy goods<sup>22</sup>. There is actually a large number of documents which are covering different periods of history from the end of the *Muromachi* (1573) to the *Meiji* (1868-1912) eras, waiting to be studied and analyzed.



4. In this double page from the *Bunka Bukan* (c. 1810, *Bunka* being the name of the era), the *Mon* at the top appear very different from the “*shirushi*” below, used to decorate the “*happi*” and “*hanten*” of the household of *bakufu* officials. While they do show some commonality of design with *ie jirushi*, they also look definitely different. This is mainly due to the structure of the designs where merchant's marks use enclosure in nearly 80 % of their designs. To be more precise, the *yama* and *kane* enclosures are represented in more than 50 % of the designs of merchant's marks, but they are nearly inexistent in the *Mon* and other designs related to the warrior class.

The challenge, in regards of finding early primary sources, is that the books are rarely simply described as books of house marks or trademarks. House marks, although their appearance is quite remarkable and immediately attracts the eyes, are simply an additional element to help in identifying a merchant's or manufacturer's house. In the *Meiji* era it is possible to find books like the *Sake and shoyu brewer national record of trademarks* (全国醸造物登録商標便覧表 published in 1903) as well as a *National record of manufacturer* (日本全国商工人名録 published in 1892)<sup>23</sup> which shows the names and addresses of several thousand business from all over Japan.

22. A note of caution is necessary here. While it is possible to see a great deal of *ie jirushi* in these books, they do not reflect exactly all the shop in activity. Often shop owners had to pay to be placed in these travel books as a sort of advertising material. We must assume however that the types of design are representative of the category as a whole.

23. See bibliography below.

The issue is not a lack of material but rather a relatively low level of scholarly analysis. The most important work to date has been produced by Takahashi Masato who published in 1978 *Nihon no Jirushi*, a study in four volumes dedicated to “Japanese signs”<sup>24</sup>. His bibliography is remarkable, and it has been extremely useful in finding several of the primary sources cited here. Of the less than ten articles written in Japanese about *ie jirushi* since 1973<sup>25</sup>, nine had used Takahashi’s work in one way or another. Quite strikingly, most of the articles were written from an anthropological and industrial design, rather than historical, point of view. Not surprisingly, Japanese scholars have as little knowledge about western Merchant’s marks as western scholars have about Japanese *ie jirushi*.

Defining what are merchant’s marks and what are not merchant’s marks in Japan is somewhat difficult since in the world of Japanese emblems, there are no clear cut difference between one type of emblem and another. For instance trying to say such sign is a *Mon* and cannot be a *ie jirushi* is arduous because the Japanese themselves do not see a difference between the two from the design perspective : only the use explains what type of emblem it is. What could help in the definition is to see whether an emblem is used to identify a merchant’s House and its activities. On the other hand, the way merchant’s marks are used is entirely similar to the way *Mon* are used. They are a mean of identification which can be placed on items going from carrying bags to saddles, storehouses, books or slate to name but a few.

## II. *IE JIRUSHI* IN HISTORY

According to Takahashi Masato, *ie jirushi* appeared at the end of the *Sengoku* era<sup>26</sup>. Precursors can be seen in farmer’s wood signs (*ki jirushi*/木印) and *Mon*, which were used by samurai prior to moving from the warrior class into the financially more secure merchant class. Over numerous iterations, the *ie jirushi* became more and more stylised and arrived at the style observed in for example *Edo Kaimono Hitori An’nai* (1834) and *Kidai Syouran* (1805). According to Takahashi’s research, documents from the *Muromachi* era already depict shops with curtains (*noren*) adorned with specific emblems<sup>27</sup>. From these examples it appears that the designs changed through time and reached their distinctive style in the XIX<sup>th</sup> century. The “traditional”<sup>28</sup> use and design of the *ie jirushi* has slowly been replaced by a type more directly inspired by western designs.

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24. Masato TAKAHASHI, “Tanbo Nihon no shirushi” (see bibliography below). A fifth volume by the same author which covers martial emblems was published in 1985.

25. I have not found a single article written in either English, French, Spanish or Russian on the subject since Van Gennep article.

26. The *Sengoku* era (戦国時代 ; 1477-1573) was a great period of trouble which led to the emergence of unifiers Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu, the latter being the originator of the great period of prosperity known as the *Edo* era (1603-1868) under which the merchant class flourished.

27. The *Kidai syouran* is a multi meter long scroll depicting the streets surrounding *Nippon Bashi*, the beginning of every road in Edo Japan. The stores depicted on the scroll show various types of designs which demonstrate a wide range of possible combinations.

28. Traditional has to be taken with a pinch of salt in the present context since a trend effect can be observed throughout the centuries leading up to the XIX<sup>th</sup> century archetypes.



5. “*Ie jirushi*” in the top part of a store seal stamp (“*inkan*”). This example combines a *kane* (carpenter square), an *igeta* (well crib) with, inside, the *katakana* “*hi*” (カネイゲタヒ).

The astonishing thing is that *ie jirushi*, which are not specific to merchants in the non warrior class, are the perfect pendant to the *Mon*. Moreover, merchants do also use family *Mon* and emblem which can sometimes be derived from their merchant marks, or not.



6. Eaves of the Kasai Ya Company. The first plan shows on the left the *ie jirushi* “*Yama San*” (山三), taken from the name of the founder Nakayama Sanzo, and, above it at the second plan, the family *Mon* (*maru ni chigai taka no ha*), which happens to be one of the most common *Mon* in Japan. In this case, it is not clear whether the *Mon* or the *ie jirushi* came first. This example of eaves (*kawara*) shows how a merchant family can have two different symbols which are equally important in the eyes of the company owner.

<https://www.kasaiya.co.jp/company/history.html>.

According to Morimoto Kenji<sup>29</sup>, it seems that one of the reason (among others) for the appearance of the *Onna Mon* (a type of *Mon* inherited only in the female line in the *Kansai*<sup>30</sup> region) came from the use of emblems in merchant houses, which often had strong female heads. *Onna Mon* are not only region specific but also class specific and era specific since they really took off in the second half of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century. This highlights in no small way how intertwined the creation and use of various types of emblems are in Japan. It is not an error to say that, as long as an emblem is used by a shop, it can be considered a *ie jirushi* with the proviso that emblems came to the fore not in a prescribed and normative manner, but rather in a tacitly agreed and unregulated form which could be characterized as custom (see blazon part).

*Ie jirushi* of *Edo* (1603-1868) and *Meiji* (1868-1912) Japan are quite different from the logos and corporate emblems of the XXI<sup>st</sup> century. The study of *ie jirushi* is fascinating because of the obvious modernity of the emblems created some 300 years ago. Other equally beautiful *ie jirushi* were created in the *Taisho* era (1912-1926). Some companies still use these emblems and, luckily for us, their meaning and origin has in some cases been preserved for us. Unfortunately, countless more shops have disappeared or lost the meaning or the reason for adopting this or that emblem. A visit to the website of the Japanese trademark office<sup>31</sup> will show both extremely modern company logo, which in all likelihood will not outlast the fashion of the time which saw their creation, and centuries old designs such as those used by the sake and soy sauce brewers. The emergence and display of the *ie jirushi* throughout the Edo era can also be used to explain the progressive increase in power of the merchant class as opposed to the decline of the warrior. The same parallel could be made with the different emblems used by the non warriors class which became more and more visible throughout Japan in the XVII<sup>th</sup>, XVIII<sup>th</sup> and XIX<sup>th</sup> century as the warrior class was slowly succumbing to a chronic lack of funds and continuous degradation of their status in a society more preoccupied by peace and mercantile activities.

### III. CONSTRUCTION OF THE *IE JIRUSHI*

Just like merchant's marks in Europe the construction of the *ie jirushi* is based on unwritten rules, and patterns can be seen in how the marks are elaborated. I believe Chamberlain is mistaken when he assumes that the simplicity of the post Edo era designs is associated with rough and unelaborated concept. On the contrary, centuries of practice lead to the culmination in artistic designs which concentrated and simplified the signification of the mark to make them easier to remember, and as a consequence most *ie jirushi* can be readily blazoned<sup>32</sup>. The simplicity of the way in which house mark can be described highlights the way in which the *Mon* are also blazoned by the Japanese. From the point of view of the design and blazon *ie jirushi* and *Mon* are quite different. For

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29. Kenji MORIMOTO, *Onna Mon*, 2005, Kyoto.

30. *Kansai* means the area of land comprising Osaka, Kobe, Kyoto, Himeji to name the largest cities.

31. The webpage themselves are not exempt from mistake, and it is possible to see *Yama bishi* filed under *Kane*. Moreover, in some cases, the blazon is inaccurate or barely descriptive.

32. In fact, from the Japanese standpoint, each house mark has a name, just like each *Mon* has a name. What Westerners understand as a complete blazon is in reality just a name, albeit a somewhat long and rather descriptive one.

instance “*ni*”, which is paramount to construct the blazon of the *Mon*, is always absent in contemporary blazon of the *ie jirushi*. The examples following below (fig. 7 and 8) show the blazon for the *mon* *Maru ni Yama mo ji* 丸に山文字 which would be read *Maru yama* マルヤマ if it were a *ie jirushi*. It is quite literally the chinese character for mountain (*yama* / 山) in a circle (*maru* / 丸).



7. *Mon* composed of the kanji “*yama*” (mountain) in a cercle, blazoned “*maru ni yama mo ji*” (丸に山文字) but read “*maru yama*” (マルヤマ) when used as a “*ie jirushi*”.



8. The same *Mon* with a different calligraphy for the kanji, read the same way as a “*ie jirushi*” (*maru yama* / マルヤマ) but which would be blazonned “*maru ni yama no kaku ji*” (丸に山の角字) if it were a *mon*.

A potential issue, related to the simplicity of the blazon in regards of the *ie jirushi*, is that it is so direct that it may leave otherwise important design aspects out. In fig. 8 the *ie jirushi* would still be blazoned *maru yama* (マルヤマ) but the design would also work perfectly well as a *Mon*, in which case it would be described as *maru ni yama no kaku ji* (丸に山の角字). “*Kaku ji*” refers to the square type of calligraphic design sometimes used for Japanese seals, which was common in the Edo era. It is patently different from the design of fig. 7, yet this would not be apparent in the description and there are no good explanations as to the origins of the difference in description between *mon* and *ie jirushi*.

Unlike western heraldry, there are not concept of main charge – as in charge more important than the other and taking precedence in the blazon – with *Mon* and, likewise, with *ie jirushi*<sup>33</sup>. In fact *ie jirushi*’s blazon, that is to say its description in words, are rarely met in the various books where they have been reproduced. In Japanese, the *reader* will describe naturally what he or she sees and going from the outside in, just like for the *Mon*. However there will be discrepancies since there are no rulebooks solely concentrated on

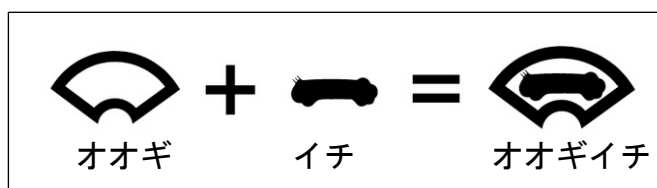
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33. Charges are nonetheless presented in alphabetical order with all possible variations, including the different enclosures.

the design and blazon of *ie jirushi*<sup>34</sup>. Finally I must stress that, to best understand the *ie jirushi*, it is necessary to blazon them in Japanese and to be able to read the names of the owners, or of the shop, in kanji because valuable information will be derived from these abilities. Chamberlain explained how to read the Japanese house mark: *The order in which the component parts of the signs are read is generally from the outside to the inside, and from top to bottom, but sometimes from left to right (more rarely from right to left)*<sup>35</sup>.

It seems that the practice of blazoning *ie jirushi* started after the *Meiji* restoration. For instance Takahashi blazons the *ie jirushi* like a *Mon* as explained in Chamberlains's article<sup>36</sup>. That is to say with the outermost element first. Takahashi sometimes blazons in *hiragana* and sometimes in *katakana*, sometimes he adds the connector *ni* and sometimes not<sup>37</sup>.

At times, the blazon of the *ie jirushi* can be quite challenging. In fact it could be said that, since there are no rule books, anyone can feel its way through it. In the example in *fig. 9*, a Shoyu company is giving *Oogi itchi* for the blazon of its *ie jirushi* which shows the numeral "1" in a fan shaped enclosure. The issue is that this fan shape is called *jigami* and represents the piece of paper before it is pasted on the ribs of the fan, which when completed is called *oogi*. As a matter of fact the next example is universally known as *jigami sa* (*fig. 10*) : *Jigami* referring to the previously mentioned enclosure and *sa* being the letter *sa* (サ in *katakana*). This design is especially original and appealing due to the transformation of the letter *sa* to an almost new figure. The question is then how can there be two words for the same figure. The answer is probably that Japanese themselves do not know very well the blazon of *ie jirushi* and assume that using *Oogi* instead of *Jigami* is probably fine. An interesting side note is that the vocabulary related to the blazon of the *Mon* is clear and specific and would prevent such a mistake. To be entirely accurate those enclosure would be called *kage jigami* (陰地紙) or shadow *jigami*. So technically, while *jigami itchi* is more accurate than *oogi itchi*, it is still somewhat unsatisfactory since the accurate blazon in terms of the *Mon* would be *chu kage jigami ni itchi mo ji* (陰地紙に一文). I have not yet found a reason for the difference between the two despite the obvious design similarities, other than a sort of ignorance on part of the mainstream Japanese who try to describe the *ie jirushi*<sup>38</sup>.



9. "Oogi itchi" : "*ie jirushi*" of the Shoyu company of the same name, showing numeral 1 in a fan shape.

Courtesy of <https://www.s-shoyu.com/knowledge/1053>  
(the description is also provided on the webpage).

34. Most Japanese books with blazon give no clear explanations for why or how the blazon works regarding the *Mon*.

35. Which is the way Japanese blazon works (see CAILLEAUD, *Japanese Blazon*, footnote 8).

36. See bibliography below.

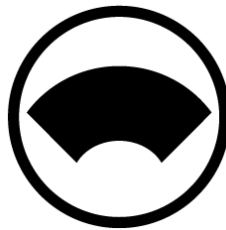
37. It reflects, I think, the way he conceived the different kinds of *shirushi* (house marks). Those of merchants being blazoned mostly in *katakana* while other types are in *hiragana* and *kanji*.

38. In an entirely unscientific way I asked my wife, who is Japanese and has no knowledge of heraldry be it Japanese or Western, what she would call the *jigami*, her direct answer was *oogi*.



10. “Jigami sa” (ジガミサ)

Courtesy of <http://chicory.seesaa.net/article/12617776.html>



11. “Jigami” (地紙) from the Mon perspective.

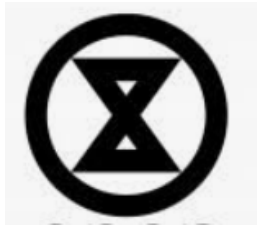


12. “Oogi” (扇) from the Mon perspective.

Another example of a famous *ie jirushi* which can be confusing can be found with the Sogo company which bears *maru chikiri* (マルチキリ). The Sogo company chose the *chikiri* as its emblem (fig. 13) because it was a reminder of the joints holding the spinning wheel together, which had a very positive image of future prosperity as well as a meaningful connection with the company's past. This is extremely interesting because, unless you know what you are looking at, you might be mistaken. At first glance the *chigiri* can be confused with other figures called *ryugo*, *miozukusi*, or even *go Monji*. As a matter of fact the form of the *chikiri* changed over time from square to *ryugo*, diabolo shaped (fig. 15). Takasawa Hitoshi explains that it first started as a squarish butterfly joints and that over times like the joints themselves the heraldic figure changed style to achieve its *ryugo* shape appearance<sup>39</sup>.

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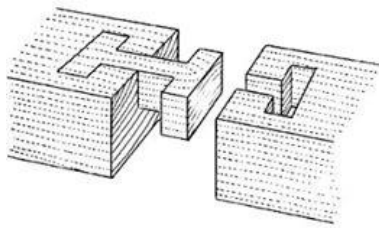
39. Takasawa Hitoshi provided this information in a mail exchange.



13. “*Ie jirushi*” of the Sogo company showing a cercle with a butterfly joint (*maru chikiri*).  
<https://www.sogo-seibu.co.jp/>



14. “*Chikiri*” ancient square type (千切り).



15. Square Japanese joint (left) and butterfly Japanese joint “*chikiri*” (right).

The *chikiri* design has a long history in Japanese emblem but it used to be represented like a traditional butterfly connection joint connecting 3 square shapes (fig. 14). This figure was also linked to silk spinning and used in ancient form on samurai fabrics for decorative purposes.

The confusion created by the likeness of different figures is further illustrated here from an example taken out of illustrations in Chamberlain’s article and blazoned as *obi ryugo* (fig. 16). *Obi* references the wide belt used for kimonos. The issue here is that the term *obi* has never been used in Japanese to describe the horizontal line in the middle of the figure and that the figure itself is not a *Ryugo* but a *Miozukushi* (fig. 17). In fact, while rare, the figure is blazoned *kawari miozukushi* (変わり濁標). A *miozukushi* is a traditional signpost planted in the water to indicate directions to vessels. Moreover, a *ryugo* is never open at the base while, in Chamberlain’s example, it is. Chamberlain also claims, after Hepburn’s Japanese dictionary, that a *ryugo* is a *small wheel on the spindle of a spinning-wheel, over which the band passes*. However, all Japanese authors describe the *ryugo* as a toy very

similar to a modern diabolos (fig. 18). In fact, it derives its name from the traditional drum which shape it resembles (fig. 19). While *ryugo* is indeed the name of the spindle, which also resemble in shape the toy and drum, it is really the toy which is represented and not the tool.



**16.** Emblem of a Miozukushi (water sign post) blazoned by mistake as obi ryugo (diabolos toy with kimono belt).

Basil Hall CHAMBERLAIN, « On the quasi-characters called "Ya-jirushi" », *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan*, t. 15, 1886, p. 50-57.



**17.** Circle with a signpost (miozukushi), blazoned "maru ni kawari miozukushi" (丸に変わり濁標/まるにかわりみおつくし).



**18**



**19**

**18.** "Ryugo" toy diabolos (*chu kage ryugo* / 中陰輪鼓)

**19.** "Ryugo" drum in the shape of a diabolos (*ryugo* / 立鼓).

Both fig. 18 and 19 are called *ryugo* although they are not written exactly the same way.

In both cases, the second *kanji* for the sound "go" is the same. This *kanji* is for the word *tsutsumi* (鼓) which means a drum. Which is to say that the *ryugo* toy shape resembles the *ryugo* drum.

Stylization can also lead to industry specific looks in terms of *ie jirushi* designs. It is particularly clear when looking at the brewers of sake and soy sauces and their emblems (fig. 20 to 22). The widening of the stroke is pushed to a level where the *kanji* and figure become nearly unrecognizable and combine to create new emblems of striking beauty.



20



21

20. *Yama jyu* (山十/ヤマジュウ).

21. (*Yama*) *jyoujyu* / (ヤマ) ジョウジュウ.

In this example (fig. 21), I have placed *yama* in parenthesis because it is not used in the *ie jirushi* name although it really should be since the figure for *yama* (a stylized mountain) is present and stands as an important point a differentiation between different shoyu brands. This brand, started by the *Takanishi* family, was considered one of the most important in the *Kanto* region surrounding *Edo*.



22. “*ie jirushi*” of the sake brand “*Ken bishi*” (剣菱/ケンビシ)  
in the form of a sword (*ken*) and a lozenge (*bishi*).  
Old version on the left, new design on the right.

In the example above (fig. 22), *Ken bishi*, the name of the *ie jirushi*, is also the name of a sake brand which was established in 1505. According to the company, the reason for the *Ken bishi ie jirushi* is unknown but what is sure is that the sake company *yagou* (name) was *Inadera ya* and, when it became famous for its quality, it started to be named after its *ie jirushi* with the sword and lozenge. The *ie jirushi* was preceded by a simpler version, here illustrated on the left, known since at least 1799 when it is mentioned in the *Nippon sankai meisan zue* (日本山海名産図会). The second version exists at the very least since 1849 when it was shown in *Ni sen nen sodekagami* (二千年袖鑑). The second version is the best known today and is still in use.

The stylization mentioned above for *ken bishi* gives a very distinctive appeal to the creation but many aspects of the stylization of *Mon*, where thickness would be specified, or a certain style, are never reported in the blazon of *ie jirushi*. This can give a wide berth to interpretation and, while the outcome is distinctive and properly attached to a specific owner, its blazon will give none of these clues. This does not preclude a *ie jirushi* from being reinterpreted, some would say modernized, but not so far as to make the original unrecognizable.

#### IV. UNDERSTANDING AN *IE JIRUSHI*

A good example of an *ie jirushi* created in the Edo era is provided by the one from the *Mitsui* family more than 350 years ago. Mitsui<sup>40</sup> is nowadays one of the largest banking groups in Japan, with subsidiaries in a wide range of industries. *Mitsui* is the name taken after the original family left the warrior class to become merchants and insure that the name would last for generations. The founder kept the name *Echigo* from the title used by his ancestor as *Echigo no Kami* (Lord of Echigo). The *yagou* (name of the company) is *Echigo ya* but the *ie jirushi* (*maru ni igeta ni san no mo ji*) reflected the name of the family owners Mitsui (fig. 23) : *mitsu* can be read “3” and *ii* refers to the *igeta* (well crib). Merchants from the Echigo province were famous for their business acumen, and often they would use the *kanji* for Echigo (which can also be read *koshi*) as their *ie jirushi*. *Koshi* has a very auspicious meaning and it is the *kanji* placed in a circle which serves as the famous Mitsukoshi department store *ie jirushi* (fig. 24). This department store chain was created in 1904 after the Mitsui corporation decided to split its financial services from its original retail activities. The Mitsukoshi department stores are still operating today and are among the most influential in Japan.



23



24

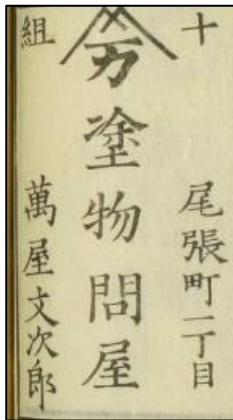
23. On this page, it can be read : “Echigo Ya” (which is owned by the Mitsui family) ; “gen kin” (cash only – fixed price). At the top, the *ie jirushi* of the Mitsui Company : in a circle, a well crib (*igeta*) and the numeral 3 (*mitsu*). From *Edo Kaimono Hitori An'nai*.

24. Mitsukoshi house mark : a circle with the kanji “koshi” which can also be read “echigo”, original name of this company.

In many cases the *ie jirushi* matches partially or completely the *yagou* (the public name of the shop owner).

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40. <https://www.mitsui.com/jp/en/company/outline/profile/index.html> for an overview of the different areas of activity of the Mitsui Group.



25. *Nurimono no doya* (塗物問屋/ぬりものどいや) is a store which both sales and makes goods related to paint and painted supplies such as “urushi” (lacquer). It is located Owari machi 1 chome, which was very close to Nippon bashi, the center of commercial activity in Edo.

In figure 25, the *ie jirushi* is based on the shop name, which also serves as the public name<sup>41</sup> of the store owner: *Man Ya Bunjiro* 萬屋文次郎. Here, the shop name is *Man Ya* (萬屋) and the *ie jirushi* is *iri yama man* (イリヤママン/入山 万). Both *kanji* for *man* (萬 /万) mean 10.000, the former being the traditional way of writing *man*. The blazon of the *ie jirushi*, *iri yama man*, can be read (*iri*) *ya*(*ma*) *man* which phonetically matches the *yagou* *Man Ya*.

In fig. 26, the company's name is *Sakura Kane Yo* (サクラカネヨ). It is also the exact blazon of the *ie jirushi* of the company. The company website<sup>42</sup> reveals that the *katakana* “Yo” (ヨ), at the center, stems from the first syllable of the founder's last name, which was Yoshimura. The carpenter square (*kane* / 兼ね) represented is a homophone of *okane* (お金), which means “money”, and the expected prosperity of the store. Finally, the store owners do not know exactly why the *Sakura* flower was placed on the outside. The company was founded in 1928 but the thought process to create this *ie jirushi* is most likely identical to the one followed by merchants and shop keepers of the past.

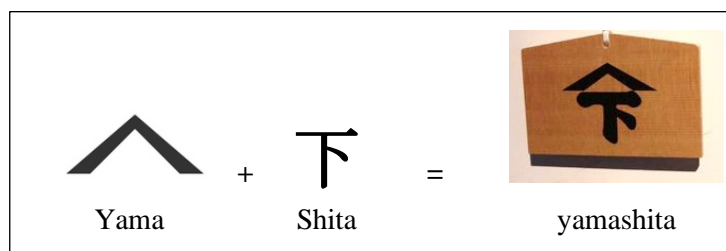


26. “*ie jirushi*” of the *Sakura Kane Yo* company :  
inside a *Sakura* flower, a carpenter square (*kane*) and the *katakana* “yo”.

41. In the *Edo* era, commoners were barred from having a public last name, though they had one in village or city records. Shop keepers, and merchants in general, are often referred to by their *yagou* (in this example *Man Ya*) and their first name (here *Bunjiro*).

42. <https://bit.ly/3pyWFrP>

An *ie jirushi* can be read different ways. For instance, *Yamashita* (ヤマシタ) which can be represented by a mountain (*yama*) and the *kanji* for *Shita* (fig. 27), can be the allusive mark to a *Yamashita san*<sup>43</sup> (山下) or a *Shimoyama san* (下山) since both names use exactly the same *kanji* but in opposite order. This shows how the blazon itself has very little impact on the way the *ie jirushi* is designed since the presence of the proper elements is more important than the order in which the description is made.



27. *Yamashita Ie jirushi*.

## 1. Main branch and related branches

The term *ie jirushi* can cover a wide range of emblems used in multiple ways by various types of individuals<sup>44</sup>. In the context of Merchant's marks, they are part of the identity of the shop they represent. This identity is constituted by the shop's name (*ya gou*/屋号), the shop sign (*ie jirushi*/家印, also referred to as *Me jirushi*/目印 in certain XIX<sup>th</sup> century travel guides), the owner's name and, in some cases, the lineage of the shop. This last element is not always obvious but long-established houses have pedigrees, at times very much like those of the warrior class, where it is possible to see the relationship of the Primary house (*honke*/本家) with its related branches (*bunke*/分家) and the branches related to the former (*mago bunke*/孫分家, granddaughter branches). This relationship within a group is called *dozoku* and conditions the interactions between even very distantly related shop houses, be it in the type of business or in the location of the business. It is sometimes possible to see this relation through the development of related branches regarding the main branch in what is known as *Noren Wake* or splitting the curtain. The relationship between *honke* and *bunke* is shown peculiarly well in example taken from the *Shyo koku dou chyuu shyuu nin kagami* (諸国道中商人鑑)<sup>45</sup> about the *Izumi ya*.

43. *San* is an honorific word, meaning both Mr and Mrs.

44. So much so that doctors' personal marks are very different from *ie jirushi* of the sort used by merchants and not quite like *Mon*. From the examples in our possession, it appears that they bear closer resemblance to the secondary signs used by *daimyos* servant on their *happi* and *hanten*.

45. Published in 1827, its contents are akin to a modern commercial directory. It introduces representative merchant houses such as *Hatagoya* at each inn station from the east to the west of *Koshu*. Some of them have stores and shops along with street names, and there are also parts where common people and travelers are shown deciding what goods to purchase and resting. This books like most travel guides shows only a part of the shops on the route covered.

The shop name *Izumi* (和泉) is the same, although the first name of each store owner is different, for the four branches and this is illustrated by the use of the same *kanji* for *izumi* (泉) but the enclosure of the *ie jirushi* has been modified in each case: *Yama*, *Maru*, *Kane*, *Kaku* (fig. 28). I have not been able to decipher which one is the *honke*, but in some case, the information related to the shop will emphasize its relationship with another shop or the fact that it is the *honke*.



28. The different “*ie jirushi*” of the stores “*Izumi ya*” : the *kanji* for *Izumi* remains the same but the enclosure changes to a cercle (*maru*) and a square (*kaku*), and under a carpenter square (*kane*) and a mountain (*yama*).  
From 諸国道中商人鑑 (author collection).

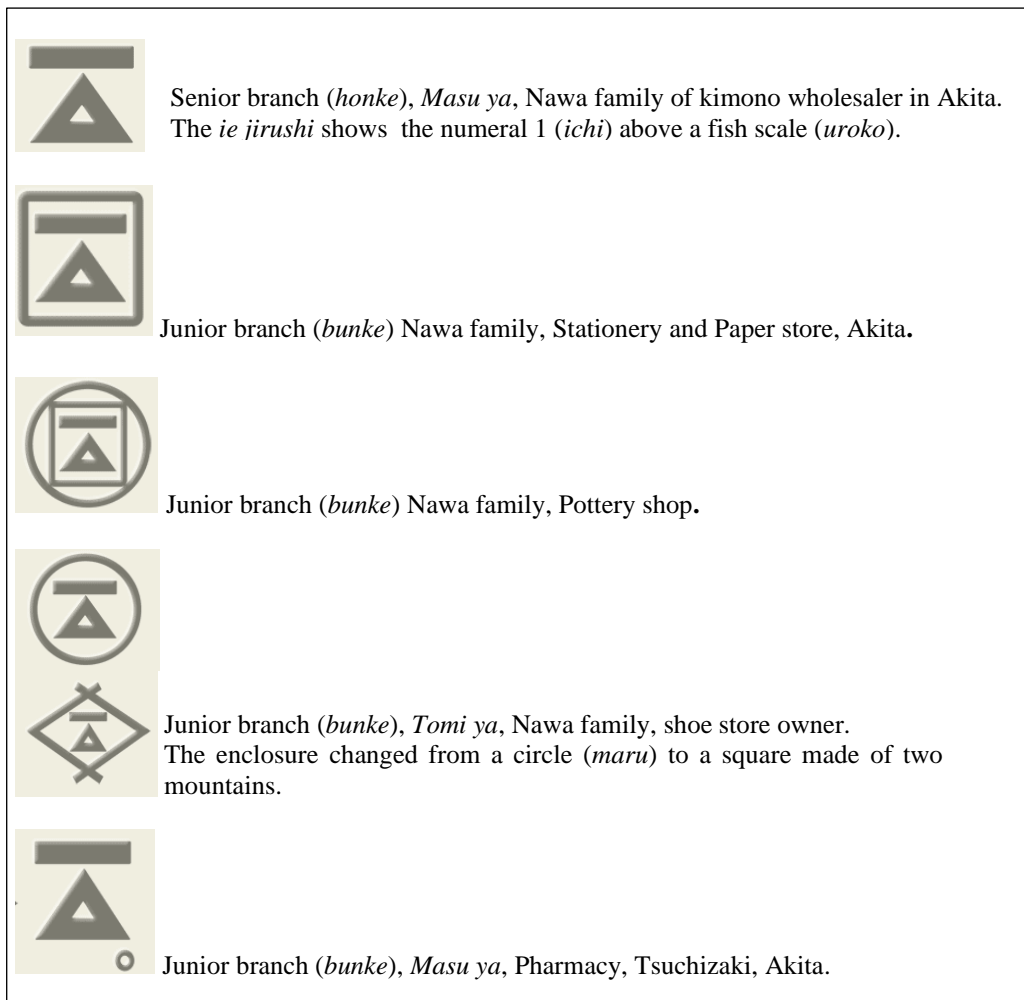
The second example from the same book shows a different way of indicating the relationship by keeping the enclosure the same and changing the *kanji* (fig. 29). It does not mean however that all the *yama* enclosure stem from the same family. The variation here could only be identified because the shops were together and their name identical and their relationship obvious to the reader.



29. In this example, the enclosure (mountain / “*yama*”) remains the same but the “*kanji*” changes.  
From 諸国道中商人鑑 *Kama ya* (釜屋); author’s collection.

Chamberlain gives a valid idea about possible ways for branch shops to display their relationship with the original shop. Unfortunately, it is never as simple as adding a number in the *yagou* or the *ie jirushi*. Unlike heraldic practices observed in England or Scotland<sup>46</sup>, there is no automatic or standardized way in altering the shop *ie jirushi* and *yagou*.

The example below shows the main branch of the *Nawa Family*, owner of the *Masu Ya Kimono* store and its different branches<sup>47</sup> which have all nearly completely unrelated activities (*fig. 30*). The main element of the numeral one (*ichi*) and the fish scale (*uroko*) is preserved and the difference is made by modifying the surrounding element.



30. “*Ie jirushi*” of the Nawa family and its different branches.

46. Thomas INNES OF LEAMEY, *Scots Heraldry*, Edimbourg, 1934.

47. <http://20century.blog2.fc2.com/blog-entry-912.html?sp>.

## 2. Design elements of an *ie jirushi*

Where Chamberlain identifies 43 main types of figures, the Japanese see only really 13 types which can be further separated in *enclosures* (*yama*, *maru*, *kane*, *igeta*, *kaku*, and other less frequent one such as *ogi*) and *enclosed*. By and large, the most common of the later would be either a *kana* or a *kanji*. This is well illustrated by the few example (74) given in Chamberlain. Further to this, I have made a rapid survey from the *Azumakō akindo kagami* (東講商人鑑), a book with more than 2 000 *ie jirushi* amongst which I selected random pages to provide 344 examples. I found the following result regarding the most common enclosures viz : *yama* - 44 % ; *maru* - 23 % ; *kane* - 9,5 % ; *igeta* - 7 % ; *kaku* - 4,5 % ; *ryugo* - 1,5 % ; other - 13 %. Of these, more than 75 % were accompanied by a *kanji* or a *kana*. Designs looking like *Mon* can be seen in 20 % of the cases but it is hard to say whether they are used as *Mon* and *ie jirushi*, or just as *ie jirushi* in the shape of a *Mon*. To further complicate the matter, *kanji* can be seen in many *Mon* used throughout history and only careful research would help in figuring which one is which.

### a. Enclosures

While the elements below are enclosures (*fig. 31 to 36*), they can also be seen combined with each other to create an *ie jirushi*.

*Yama* (山), the mountain enclosures, are mainly used for the phonetic proximity with *ya* (屋) which means “shop”. The variation on mountain is sometimes a mean to differentiate between shops in what western heraldry would consider cadencing



31. Different types of “yama” (mountains) enclosures.

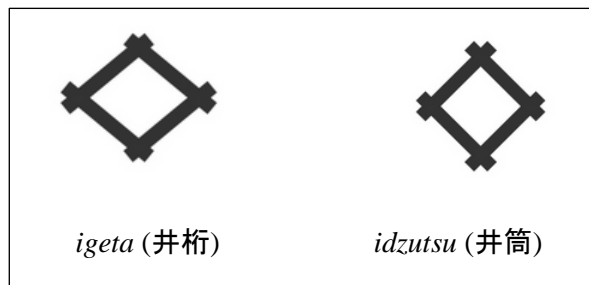


32. “Maru” (丸, circle) enclosure.

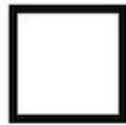
*Kane* (兼) it is the representation of a carpenter's square (兼ね尺). However, it is used for its homophony with *kane* (金), "gold", as a propitious omen, essentially to mean prosperity.



33. "Kane" (兼, carpenter square) enclosure.

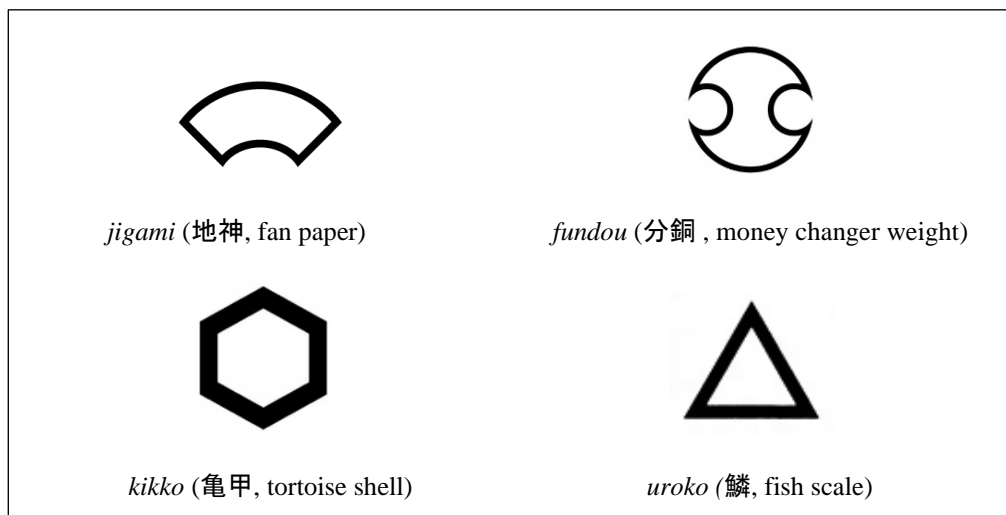


34. "Igeta" and "idzutsu" enclosures (well cribs in both cases).



35. "Kaku" enclosure (角, square).

Note that the square can be pivoted and still be considered a square.



36. Other enclosures (uroko, ogi, etc).

### *b. kana and kanji (仮名)*

As seen throughout this article, *kanji* and *kanas* take a very large place in the merchants' emblem design. This is far from surprising, since the same can be observed in western merchants marks. After all, alphabet and writing system in general are sounds turned into signs, whether they remain ideographic or not. These signs can become emblem when they start to be conceived as part of a design meant to represent an idea or the idea of someone. The ideographic nature of the *kanji* is especially well suited to calligraphic alteration and the creation of telling design mixing both image and letters.

#### *Kanji*

If we take the case of the mountain (*yama*, やま/山) we can see a sample of the possible variations with the 7 examples below which could all be used in an *ie jirushi* (fig. 37). They are all the same mountain but their calligraphic designs make them unique and appropriate to differentiate between the merchants using them. Except for the cases where there is an enclosure (here a circular one), these *kanji* would all be described as *yama* in the merchants mark's world. On the other hand, from the *Mon* perspective, they would all be blazoned differently with clear difference representative of the designs variations.



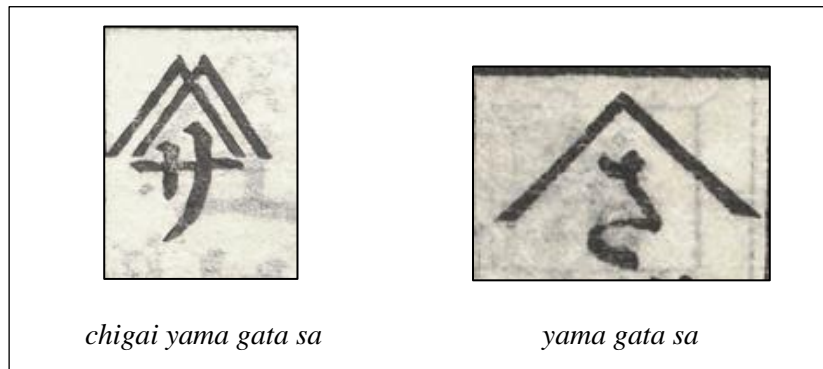
37. Examples of variations of the kanji "yama", sometimes with a circular enclosure ("maru").

#### *Katakana and hiragana*

*Katakana* and *hiragana* are collectively referred to as *kana*. They are sets of 46 syllables used to write Japanese which differ in their writing. *Katakana* are very angular and often used to transcribe foreign words, onomatopoeia and names, whereas *hiragana* are more rounded and will be used for Japanese nouns or words. For instance, the syllable *sa* will be written さ in *hiragana* and サ in *katakana* (fig. 38). It is the same sound, but it may have a different use according to the word being written<sup>48</sup>. *Kana* in general account for 10 to 15% of the case surveyed with merchants' marks. The numbers may vary between era, and it is fairly possible that a greater number of *kana* based *ie jirushi* were created after the Meiji restoration (1868). *Katakana* account for the largest number of designs within the *kana* family to such an extent that it may requires more effort to locate examples of *hiragana*.

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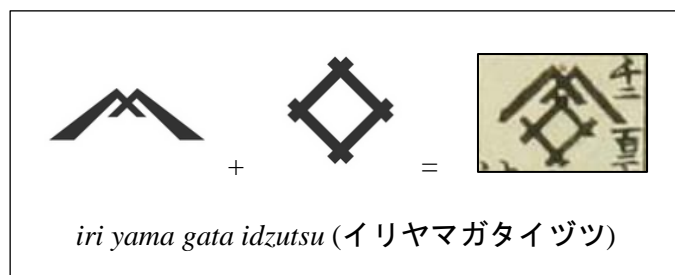
48. While I disagree with some of Chamberlain's findings regarding the *ie jirushi*, his *Introduction to Japanese* contains a wonderful chapter on *kana* which I recommend reading to get an understanding of the history and usage of the syllabaries. Basil Hall CHAMBERLAIN, *A Practical Introduction to the Study of Japanese Writing*. London, 1899.



38. Examples of "yama" (mountain) enclosure and the syllable "sa" written in "katakana" (right) and "hiragana" (left)





### c. Figures

Japanese merchants marks are overwhelmingly made with a combination of enclosures and *kanji* or *kanas*. It is nonetheless possible to see *ie jirushi* made completely with figures<sup>49</sup>. It is also possible to see combination of *kanji* or *kana* with figures or enclosures. These figures are relatively unfrequent and limited in number but not by any obvious rules. All the enclosures can be recombined with each other to forme a design (fig. 39). A possible way to set appart *Mon* from merchants *ie jirushi* is in the variety of figures. In the case of *Mon*, the types of figures run well above 300 from all aspects of nature and man made object as well *kanas* and *kanji*. On the other hand, and though there are no explicit rules for it, it is clear that the number of figures used to devise *ie jirushi* is very limited. This limitation is not a prohibition but it seems to stem from usage rather than anything else. Every so often a decidedly different figure, from outside of the common types, will appear but with no clear repetitiveness.



39. "ie jirushi" combining two enclosures :  
"yama" (mountain) and "igeta" (well crib).

49. *Mon*, which represent on average between 20 and 25% of *ie jirushi* in the surveyed documents, would fall in this category although some *Mon* are actually made of *kanji*.

	<i>ryugo</i> (see discussion above)
	<i>hoshi</i> : can be used as a single or not. These are stars as seen through the Japanese eye.
	<i>hikiryō</i> : single or not, vertical or horizontal. Not to be confused with <i>kanji</i> numerals (1 to 3).
	<i>sangi</i> : divination rods. Always by three as the name suggests. Must not be confused with <i>hikiryō</i> or <i>kanji</i> numerals.

#### 40. Other type of figures.

There is no defined maximum for the number of elements to compose an *ie jirushi*. However, it appears that for practicality, 4 to 5 elements at most will be put together to form an *ie jirushi*. The merchant's marks look in general far more angular than the *Mon*. It may be because the enclosures are structuring the overall layout of the *ie jirushi* and that most of them being either square or triangular (since *maru* – cercles – represent about 25 % of the total, which is not little but far from being as common as in the *Mon*)<sup>50</sup>. The same idea could be verified by the abundant utilization of *kanji* and *katakana* which have a very square aspect, calligraphic style notwithstanding as shown above.

## CONCLUSION

Much has yet to be learned in order to truly grasp the importance and meaning of Japanese merchant's marks. It is one facet of a myriad of emblems in ancient and modern Japan. The study of *ie jirushi* must be met with the certainty that many of these marks have been forgotten as well as their origin. Japanese merchant's marks should also be taken in context with the overall structure of Japanese society prior and after the *Meiji* restoration, since their evolution can teach much about the changing society.

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50. One thing to stress is that the *ie jirushi* studied are those of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century. XVII<sup>th</sup> century *ie jirushi* on *noren* (Japanese shop curtain) were far less homogenous and included a greater variety of *Mon*.

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