

National Diet Library Newsletter

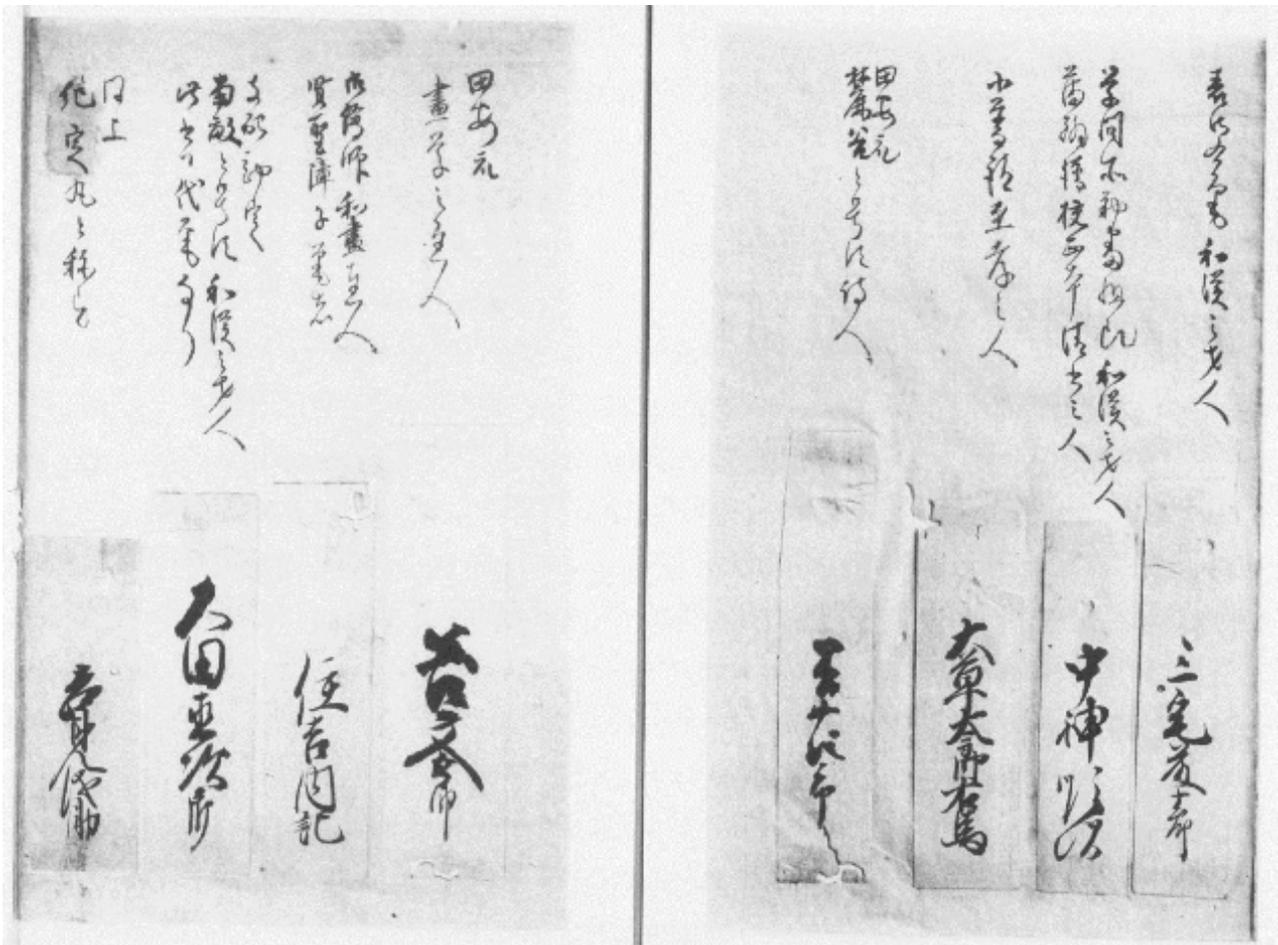
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Varieties of Japanese business cards (*meishi*):
History of *meishi* through *Meishifu*, *Udagawa Yōan meishi*, and *Harimazejō*

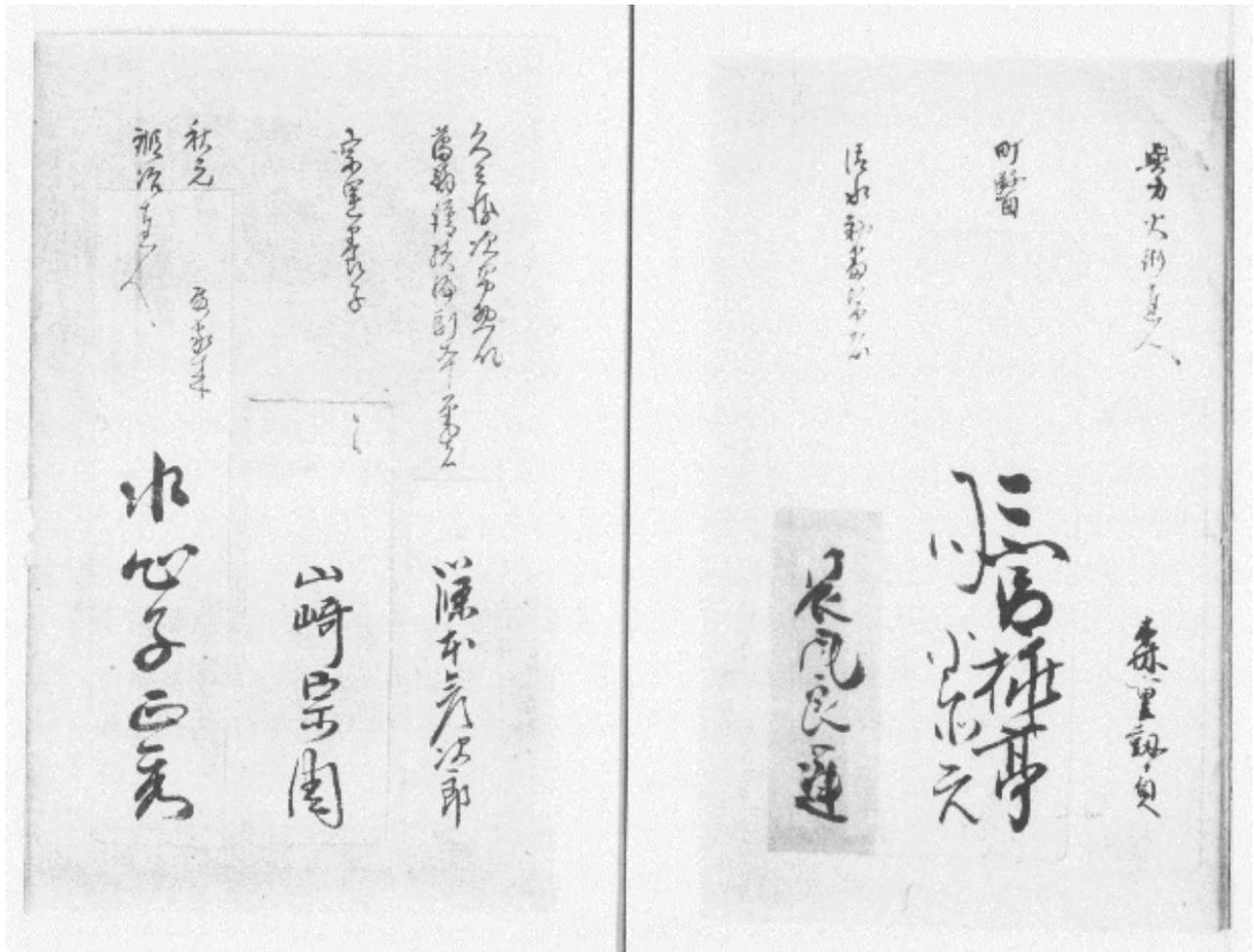
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*This is a translation of the article in Japanese of the same title
in NDL Monthly Bulletin No. 636 (March 2014).*

While business cards are indispensable for the current business etiquette, Japanese people in the Edo period were already using them.



<<Photo 1: (left) the back of the first leaf:
The card second from left says "OHTA Nampo (Naojiro)"
(right) the front of the second leaf
YASHIRO Hirokata (editor), HAYASHI Kinji "Meishifu," 1939
*Available in the [National Diet Library Digital Collections](#)>>



<<Photo 2: (left) the back of the fifth leaf:
 The card in the left end says "SUISHINSHI Masahide"
 (right) the front of the sixth leaf
 YASHIRO Hirokata (editor), HAYASHI Kinji "Meishifu," 1939
 *Available in the [National Diet Library Digital Collections](#)>>

Photos 1 and 2 show a reproduction of "Meishifu," which was transferred from MIMURA Chikusei (1872-1953), a recognized expert on the Edo period and also known as a book collector, to a person with the same interests HAYASHI Wakaki (1875-1939). Mimura's short essay "Rinchishu Meishifu"¹ describes how YASHIRO Hirokata (1758-1841), a vassal of the Tokugawas and also a scholar of ancient Japanese thought and culture, kept business cards from visitors during a certain New Year season. It also says that most of the cards are in the visitors' own handwriting and Yashiro added superscriptions to each card to explain their jobs and status. The cards contain only the visitors' name. That is the reason why he added the information.

What a gorgeous lineup "Meishifu" has! That's just what one would expect of a knot of scholars and literary people in those days. It contains cards from 52 people including the following distinguished names:

KOGA Seiri (a famous Confucian scholar), NARUSHIMA Motonao (a Confucian scholar), OHTA Nampo (a literary man), YOSHIMI Gisuke (also known as KINO Sadamaru, a novelist), ICHIKAWA Beian (a poet, also a calligrapher), ISHIHARA Masaakira and NASA Katsutaka (both scholars of ancient Japanese thought and culture), MIZUNO Tamenaga (served as an attendant to MATSUDAIRA Sadanobu, a senior councilor of the Tokugawa shogunate) and SUMIYOSHI Naiki (an artist who conducted research on temples and shrines in the Kansai area (around Kyoto and Nara) with Yashiro).

Moreover, it includes a card from SUISHINSHI Masahide, a sword maker well known

among sword enthusiasts. Interestingly, the friendship between *Suishinshi*, a master craftsman who advocated *Fukkotou*² (the revival of medieval swords), and *Yashiro*, a scholar who loved history, proves that *Yashiro* had a large circle of acquaintances beyond his field with the core history consciousness in respect for antiques. Additionally, *Yashiro* added "*kaji tatsujin* (a master smith)" to the left shoulder of *Suishinshi*'s card.

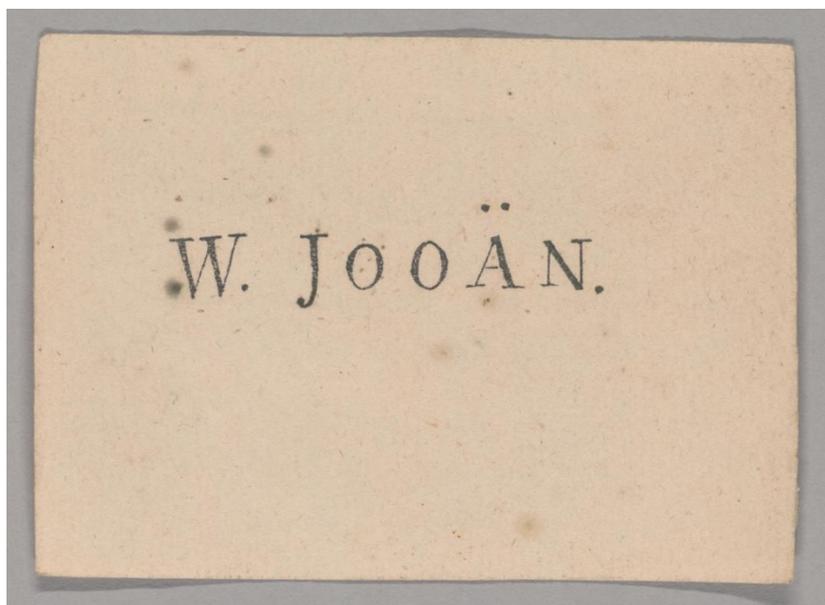


<<Photo 3: The cards on the left page have holes at the top. It seems to have been tied up with a paper string or something like that.

YASHIRO Hirokata (editor) '*Meishifu*,' from vol. 15 of "*Shinobazu Soshō*" [NDL call no.: 183-384]>>

"*Meishifu*" is regarded as an old example which illustrates Japanese business cards.³ Although the original "*Meishifu*" is missing, the National Diet Library (NDL) fortunately has a similar binding of "*Meishifu*" (see Photo 3). It consists of 24 cards from people who visited *Yashiro* around 1839. It includes no celebrity, but helps us to sense what the original "*Meishifu*" (Photo 1 and 2) was like. It actually contains different sizes of cards, which seem mostly to be made of ordinary paper. Some of them have rough edges.

In fact, there are some rather better cards made in the same age.



<<Photo 4: '*Udagawa Yoan meishi*' [NDL call no.: WA21-14]

*Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#)>>

Photo 4 shows a business card of *UDAGAWA Yoan* (1798-1846), a scholar of Dutch studies. The Dutch transcription of his name "W. JOOÄN." is printed on the face. It is thicker than the cards in the NDL binding of "*Meishifu*" and is almost the same shape as contemporary cards.

ITO Keisuke (1803-1901), a specialist in traditional pharmacognosy and one of the pupils of *Udagawa*, formerly stored this card of *Udagawa*. His grandson *ITO Tokutaro* (1865-1941) jotted down on the wrapping paper that the card was found in the portfolio which *ITO Keisuke* exchanged at his meeting with Siebold (Philipp Franz von -, 1796-1866, a German physician working at the Dutch merchant office in *Dejima*, an artificial island which was the only place where Dutch people were allowed to reside).

If that is true, this card was the one which *Udagawa* had given to Siebold before the meeting, or else one which someone later slipped into the portfolio by mistake.

Anyway, some people had already used printed business cards just before the last days of the *Tokugawa* shogunate when, as it is generally said, officials who waited on foreign visitors started to use them in response to western culture.⁴



<<Photo 5: (from left) *KOSUGI Sugimura*, *FUKUBA Bisei*, *TANAKA Kambe* from "*Harimazejo*" [NDL call no.: Hon-Betsu 9-24]

This is a scrapbook of *NEGISHI Takeka* (1839-1902), known as a wealthy person, a scholar of Japanese thought and culture, and a member of the House of Peers. >>

Well, the left of Photo 5 shows a card of *KOSUGI Sugimura* (1834-1910), a scholar of ancient Japanese thought and culture, also an art historian. As you may have noticed, it is in his own handwriting and gives the majestic impression as a well known calligrapher. The center of Photo 5 is a card of *FUKUBA Bisei* (1831-1907), a scholar of ancient Japanese thought and culture, and also a member of the House of Peers. The right is that of *TANAKA Kambe* (1838-1934), a collector of old books in Kyoto.

Both of them were printed in the mid-*Meiji* period. Down to this era, the cards look in same size and thickness as modern ones.

After I wrote the above paragraph, I stopped and looked at a pile of business cards in a drawer in my desk. If I stick them on leaves and bind them, will anyone (probably of

unusual tastes) a hundred years from now enjoy reading it? I took them in my hand, but thought again. Who enjoys reading business cards held by a petty civil servant? H'm... In the end, I put them back in my drawer.

[Column] one more example of a well-known business card:

IKEDA Nagaoki, Chikugo-no-kami (Lord of *Chikugo*), and a member of the *Bunkyu* (1861-1863) mission to Europe, also had his cards made in Paris.



<<Photo for reference: A card of *IKEDA Nagaoki* (1837-1879) printed in Paris. *KOBAYASHI Kumao* "Bakumatsu gaikou shisetsu Ikeda Chikugo-no-kami," p.53, *Koushinsha*, 1934 [NDL call no.: 631-444]
It says "*Ikeda Tsikougo-no-kami* Ambassadeur du S.M. le Taicoun du Japon" (*Ikeda*, Lord of *Chikugo*, Ambassador of the shogun of Japan).
The family crest of Ikeda bears a swallowtail butterfly. >>

¹ *MIMURA Seizaburo* (author), *HIDA Kozo*, *NAKANO Mitsutoshi* (editors) "*Mimura Chikusei Shu*" Vol.2, *Seishodo Shoten*, 1982 <NDL call no.: UM11-95>, pp.177-178

² Swords after famous and excellent antique swords, and made in the latter part of the Edo period. *Suishinshi Masahide* attached greater importance to practical use, and advocated the theory of *Fukkoto*, which idealized swords made in the *Kamakura* period.

³ "*Sekai Dai Hyakkajiten*" Vol.28, revised edition, *Heibonsha*, 2007 <NDL call no.: UR1-J31> See the heading of "*Meishi*."

⁴ op. cit.

According to *ISHII Kendo* (1865-1943), some articles show that people gave business cards to the U.S. delegates in January of *Ansei 1* (1854), and another shows that a member of the shogunate mission of *Man'en 1* (1860) to the United States was asked for business cards by Americans. (*Ishii Kendo* '*Meishi-no-shiyou* (Use of business cards),' in "*Meiji Bunka Kenkyu*" Vol.4 No.4, Serial No.34, 1928, p.38, [NDL call no.: 雑 19-153]