

Selections from NDL collections

Browsing library materials—A look at documents from medieval Japan, Part 5: "Since I have eye trouble"—Medieval etiquette when using carved seals

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The Browsing Library Materials series features historical documents from medieval Japan that require a bit of explanation to be fully appreciated. Here is a list of past articles in this series:

- [Browsing library materials—A look at documents from medieval Japan, Part 1: A document from an arrogant sender?](#) (No. 212, June 2017)
- [Browsing library materials—A look at documents from medieval Japan, Part 2: Shoguns of the Kamakura Shogunate "reigned but did not rule"?](#) (No. 213, Aug 2017)
- [Browsing library materials—A look at documents from medieval Japan, Part 3: A document within a document?](#) (No. 214, October 2017)
- [Browsing library materials—A look at documents from medieval Japan, Part 4: Was ebony-colored paper a hallmark of imperial documents!?](#) (No. 215, December 2017)



Takeda shingen shuinjo January 22
From *Zaiin komonjo*; NDL call no: WA25-38
*Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#)

This document is a letter sent by Takeda Shingen, lord of Kai Province, which is in-present-day's Yamanashi Prefecture. It was most likely written in 1546 and contains instructions for local samurai military operations in Kozuke Province, which is in-present-day's Gunma Prefecture. At the lower-left corner of the image is Shingen's signature as well as the impression of a magnificent *shuin* or "red seal."

There is also another rather odd feature of this document. Inside the red box is a short postscript that reads "PS Since I have eye trouble, I used my seal." (追々眼病気故、用二印判一候) What is the meaning of this phrase? Why did he feel the need for an excuse to use the seal?

In modern Japan, a seal is generally and officially used as a means of personal authentication or confirmation. Seals were already widely used, both by ordinary people and government officials, during the Edo period, which began in the early 17th century. Until the late 16th century, however, which was when Shingen lived, an elegant form of brush-written signature, known as a *kao* (See Part 1 of this series.), was most commonly used to sign letters.

The transition from *kao* to seal appears to have begun in the 15th century. The practice of using seals, also called *inbanjo*, to sign documents appears to have started with the feudal lords in the eastern provinces. Of particular note were the *shuin* (red seals) engraved with the image of a tiger that was used by the Hojo in Odawara (See Figure 1.) and engraved with the image of a dragon that was used by the Takeda. (See Figure 3.)



Figure 1: Red seal engraved with the image of a tiger and used by the Hojo of Odawara. An image of a sleeping tiger is at the top of the square seal.

From a *shuinjo* or letter marked with red seal from the Hojo clan and dated July 23.

Zaiin komonjo, NDL call no: WA25-38

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Compared with individual hand-written *kao*, using a carved seal is an efficient means for issuing large numbers of official documents. And since such documentation became increasingly common during this period, government officials handling civil affairs found the use of carved seals to be an ideal solution. This was particularly true since carved seals enabled subordinates to issue documents in the absence of their superiors. *Kao* were elaborately designed signatures that

could not be imitated by a different person. In contrast, the red tiger seal of the Hojo clan was used by successive heads of the Hojo clan. Similarly, Shingen's red dragon seal was handed down to his son, Katsuyori. Thus, the use of carved seals contributed to the efficiency of administrative processes.

Since a carved seal could be used by any subordinate, however, it was considered inferior to a *kao*, and in this sense, it was more polite to sign documents with a *kao*. Although a carved seal was often used to authenticate official documents addressed to subordinates, many feudal lords recognized the need to sign a letter to an equal partner with a *kao*. Shingen himself also generally preferred to sign his letters with his *kao*. But given how elaborate it was, doing so required extra time and effort. (See Figure 2.) Typically, documents issued by feudal lords were produced entirely by scribes except for the final signature. Therefore, if a seal were used rather than a *kao*, nothing in the document would have been written by Shingen himself. Even in modern day Japan, a printed New Year's card lacking a handwritten signature is likely to be considered rather impersonal. Thus, even a medieval daimyo would extend the courtesy of giving some short excuse for having used a seal in place of his *kao*.



Figure 2:
Takeda Shingen's *kao*

Figure 3:
Artist's conception of
the Takeda seal engraved
with the image of a dragon

Figure 4:
Impression made by the
Takeda seal engraved
with the image of a dragon

Shingen often made some short excuse – "My hand hurts...", "A rash appeared...", or "I've been busy on the battlefield..."—when he used a seal. It is unlikely that all of these excuses were true, however, since he also signed letters with his *kao* shortly after using such excuses. Actually, there was a case where such excuses were used as a ruse after Shingen's death in an attempt to hide the truth from Takeda's enemies. This document might be written and sealed by a scribe after Singen's brief check. The use of such an excuse is an interesting aspect of medieval etiquette at a time when carved seals were just coming into common use.

This is the fifth and final part of the series "A look at documents from medieval Japan." Historical documents like these are a primary source of our knowledge about the conventions that governed written communication, including signatures (*kao*), writing styles, and formats for positioning the names of the sender and recipient as well as the types of paper and calligraphy used in correspondence. We hope this series has piqued your interest in the amazing world of medieval Japanese documents.

(Illustrations by Shobo Satsuki,
translated by Rie Watanabe)