

KEN SHIN KAI MON (EMBLEM)



Based on a leaf of a paulownia tree (kiri), as used within the mon of the SHOGUN Hideyoshi Toyotomi and his family. It used to be used only by the Imperial Family.

The paulownia, i.e., kiri was the most popular of Japanese crest motifs. According to Chinese legend, the mythical phoenix alights only in the branches of the paulownia tree when it comes to earth and eats only the seed of the bamboo.

As an explicitly imperial crest, the paulownia ranks only slightly behind the chrysanthemum, and both are usually taken as the dual emblems of the Japanese throne.

Hideyoshi, who was born a commoner, after adopting it as his own crest also gave out the motif to some of his most loyal supporters. By the late feudal period nearly 20% of the warrior class wore it as their own personal crest.

Farmers once planted kiri trees upon the birth of a daughter because it was so fast growing that by the time she was ready to marry the tree could be cut down and made into a tansu or chest.

The name kiri came from the kiru (to cut) as it was believed that the tree would grow better and quicker when it was cut down often. It can grow to more than 30' in height and has fragrant purplish blossoms in April or May.

Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536 – 1598)

One of the most remarkable men in Japanese history, Toyotomi Hideyoshi was born a peasant and yet rose to finally end the Sengoku Period.

The most significant figure in Japanese history, as far as the Japanese are concerned, is Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598). Even his lifetime he was considered one of the greatest of the Japanese, and he was made a Shinto deity shortly after his death and given the title, Hokoku, or "Wealth of the Nation." He began in the most obscure circumstances—the homeless son of a peasant—and rose to become the complete master of Japan by 1590. Hideyoshi had no last name when he began to serve Oda Nobunaga; by the end of his life, he had assumed the family name, Toyotomi, or "Abundant Provider."

Oda Nobunaga had attempted to unify Japan through sheer brute force; Toyotomi furthered this endeavor by concentrating on the arts of peace and administration. Oda had done, you might say, all the dirty work and it was left to Toyotomi to forge a new administrative organization to guarantee unification. His goal was to establish a national structure which allowed various regional feudatories to remain independent and yet still cooperate among one another. He did not wish to establish a centralized government under his control, even though, by 1590, he was the undisputed master of Japan. The government that he built was founded on the old feudal system of personal loyalties rather than administrative centrality. While he pacified the country, he did not fundamentally change the Japanese way of national life.

Most of the measures that Hideyoshi employed would become the basis of Tokugawa rule only a decade later and were instrumental in the long period of domestic quiet that characterized the Tokugawa period (1603-1868). Foremost among these was Hideyoshi's laws barring social mobility. He was concerned about people like himself and his former lord, Oda Nobunaga, who had risen from obscurity through the force of ambition and ruthless single-mindedness. Hideyoshi made class a permanent status for individuals and their offspring; in particular, he made the samurai ("servants"), who were the professional soldiers of Japan, into a separate class and forbade anyone from the non-samurai class to carry weapons or armor.

Hideyoshi's greatest ambition, however, was a Japanese empire extending over the whole of Asia. Throughout the medieval period, the centrality of Japan became more and more an intrinsic aspect of the Japanese national identity. Nobunaga had harbored dreams of a Japanese conquest of China and Hideyoshi attempted to bring those dreams into reality. Shortly after he had unified the feudatories of Japan, he began planning his conquest of China. In 1592 and 1597, he invaded Korea and seized much territory in order to prepare a jumping-off point for the conquest of China through Korea. When he died in 1598, however, all his plans died with him. It was not until the twentieth century that the dream of a Japanese empire would again stir the Japanese to attack Korea and then China.

Hideyoshi's imperial ambitions led him to neglect domestic politics throughout the 1590's. The peace he had brought to Japan had held together only out of personal loyalties to Hideyoshi. These loyalties ran deep, for Hideyoshi had amassed tremendous wealth and lavished it on the imperial court and on various lords throughout the country (hence his posthumous title, "Wealth of the Nation"). When he died, however, the loyalties that people felt for him died as well. He was enshrined in his own temple, called Toyokuni ("Wealth of the Nation") sitting above the Great Buddha he had built in Kyoto. His shrine became a prominent Shinto site, but the affection for him and his era could not hold the country together. The various feudal lords again fell into contention with one another and Hideyoshi's son lost out in the scramble for regional power. The final unification of Japan would fall to the third great hero of Japanese history, Tokugawa Ieyasu.