
Accompanying Materials to the ‘Toyotomi Hideyoshi Letter’

HEIMA Rika

The ‘Toyotomi Letter’ in the collection of the Ishibashi Foundation was written by Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598) to Chiku, a lady-in-waiting from the Sugihara family who served his lawful wife, Kōdaiin (1546–1624), and it is dated, ‘2nd day, twelfth month’ (fig. 1). It is signed ‘*Tenka*’ [Ruler] from which we can surmise it was written sometime between the 11th day, 7th month, 1585, when he was appointed *Kanpaku* [Imperial Regent] and the 28th day, twelfth month, 1591, when he entrusted the position to his nephew, and later adopted son, Hidetsugu. In this letter he expresses his gratitude for the delivery of a kimono, etc., saying he will present her with some *kaishi* paper in return. He also states that he will spend the New Year’s celebrations ‘over there’ with his family and asks her to inform the children.

Approximately 80 letters known to have been written by Hideyoshi’s hand remain in existence and the majority of these are addressed to family members. Mainly written using *hiragana* phonetic syllabary, with only the occasional *kanji* [ideogram], it has been pointed out that these letters are characterized by the fact that he was not shy about using characters phonetically, writing broken Japanese and sometimes using honorific language in reference to himself.¹ This ‘Toyotomi Letter’ employs only *hiragana* syllabary, written in a flowing hand, and provides us with a glimpse of Hideyoshi’s private character.

Although it is addressed to ‘Chiku,’ the contents of the letter appear to be directed towards his wife, Kōdaiin. In it he mentions his adopted daughters ‘Ohime’ and ‘Gomoshi’ as well as his adopted son, ‘Kingo,’ who was later to become known as Hideaki. He writes that he plans to return to Osaka on the ‘6th or 7th’ and as we know that between 1585 and 1591, it was in 1587 that he returned to Osaka from Kyoto on the 6th day of the twelfth month, remaining there for the New Year’s celebrations, this would appear to be the year in which the letter was written.

Over 400 years have passed since this letter was delivered to Chiku and although it was written as a private missive, it is now on display in a museum where it can be viewed by large numbers of people and has become something by which people remember Hideyoshi. In this report, I would like to refer to the materials that accompanied the letter to introduce the way in which it became the subject of appreciation for its own sake.

There is a letter written by Kozai Yoshinao (1864–1934), a doctor of agricultural chemistry and president of the Tokyo Imperial University (now Tokyo University), to Kōno Shunzō, dated July 27, 1926 (ref. 4, see p. 44), in which he expresses his gratitude

for the loan of some historical documents and from this we know that the ‘Toyotomi Letter’ was in the possession of Kōno Shunzō’s at that time. Two years later, in 1928, Tsuji Zennosuke (1877–1955), a Doctor of Literature and head of the Office of Historiography in the Faculty of Letters at Tokyo Imperial University, wrote four letters to Kōno in quick succession, these being dated: September 22 (ref. 5, see p. 45), October 19 (ref. 6, see p. 45), November 5 (ref. 7, see p. 45) and December 26 (ref. 9, see p. 46).

The letter dated September 22 states that although a copy of the document had been made when it was borrowed previously, the university would like to borrow the original once more as part of a project to produce a compilation of historical materials, it also contained a piece of paper requesting that it be delivered by October 5. The letter dated October 19 stated that an exhibition was to be held for a period of four days from October 26 at the Office of Historiography and asked Kōno’s permission to include the borrowed document in the display. The letter dated November 5 reported that a total of over 4,600 people visited the exhibition, which was the 13th in a series of triennial exhibitions of historical materials that had been held by the Tokyo Imperial University’s Office of Historiography since 1902. The December 26 letter notifies him of the return of the historical document. All of these letters express appreciation regarding the loan of the document and, as in 1926, there was a final letter, signed personally by the university’s president, in which he expressed his deep gratitude for the loan (ref. 8, see p. 46).

1928 marked the 330th anniversary of the death of Toyotomi Hideyoshi and a proposal had been put forward by the Osaka municipal government to rebuild the donjon of Osaka Castle in celebration of this fact. This may have provided the motivation for the Tokyo Imperial University to launch the project to produce a compilation of historical materials relating to Hideyoshi. The exhibition lasted for only 4 days, but the fact that it received an average of over 1,000 visitors per day illustrates the wide general interest in Hideyoshi that existed at that time.

Based on research carried out for this project, Tokyo Imperial University’s Office of Historiography published *Hōtaikō shinsekishū* [Collection of Handwriting by Toyotomi Hideyoshi] in 1938. Consisting of 3 volumes—volume one, volume two and an explanatory volume—it provided examples of 216 letters and *waka* poems written by Hideyoshi, together with examples of the handwriting of his son, Hideyori, and his wife, Kōdaiin. The ‘Toyotomi Letter’ discussed here is number 19 in volume one. We can learn more about the publication of

this work from a letter written by the then head of the Office of Historiography, Tsuji Zennosuke, dated March 31, 1938, in which he states that due to the expense, they would be unable to present complimentary copies of the book to all the contributors, but would send photographic plates of three of the documents instead (ref. 10, see p. 46). The box set of three volumes measured 41.0 × 32.0 × 12.5 cm. and it being such an extravagant book, it would certainly have been financially difficult to have presented complimentary copies to the holders of all 216 documents included.

With the introduction of the ‘Law Relating to the Preservation of Important Fine Arts’ etc., that was enacted in 1933, the ‘Toyotomi Letter’ was designated an Important Art Object the same year (ref. 11, see p. 47). It is not clear if this was due to the efforts of the Tokyo Imperial University’s Office of Historiography or whether it was a famous old document that had long been known to historians and people of cultivated tastes. It has proved impossible to find any trace of the document in any available auction lists, etc., so it is not clear who possessed it prior to Kōno Shunzō. However, in Tsuji’s letter of September 22 (ref. 5, see p. 45) it is described as ‘One Hanging Scroll,’ from which we know that it had already been mounted as a hanging scroll at this time, but it is not clear when this work was carried out.

Of all the various materials accompanying this work, the earliest is the ‘Kanpō kanototori certificate of authenticity’ (ref. 12, see p. 47). The Kohitsu family, founded by Kohitsu Ryōsa (1572–1662), specialized in the authentication of antique writings for numerous generations. Among Ryōsa’s pupils was a man named Kanda Dōki (1580–1655), who went on to establish his own authentication business and it was the seventh-generation head of the Kanda family, Kanda Dōhan who issued this authentication of the work as having been written by Hideyoshi’s hand. The title of this certificate of authenticity, Kanpō kanototori, denotes the year in which it was issued, 1741, and in it, the work is described as being ‘text on letter paper,’ from which we can surmise that it still remained unmounted at that time. There is also another ‘certificate of authenticity’ (ref. 13, see p. 47), that was issued by the seventh-generation head of the Kohitsu family, Kohitsu Ryōen (1704–1774). This certificate has been stamped with the seal, “Kinzan,” that had been given to the first generation of the Kohitsu family, Ryōsa, by Toyotomi Hidetsugu (1568–1595), the nephew and adopted son of Toyotomi Hideyoshi. It bears the character 巳 (mi [snake]) on the top right and the character 己 (tsuchinoto [earth]) on the bottom left, which would appear to refer to the year 1749. The addition of these two certificates of authenticity, one by the Kanda family and a later one by the Kohitsu family, no doubt served to raise the value of the work, proving it to be by the hand of Hideyoshi himself. It is thought likely that the letter was mounted as a hanging picture scroll for use in a tea ceremony room not long after these were issued.

In order to minimize the wear resulting from its great age, such as insect damage, creases, etc., and to prepare it for permanent preservation, the scroll was dissembled and repairs carried out in 2014. From this, we were able to discover marks indicating that a backing paper had been removed at some time, hinting at the possibility of previous restoration, also

the thin *hadaura* paper applied behind the fabric of the scroll mounts consisted of papers that had been dyed according to where they were applied, showing a careful attention to detail in the finish. The fabric used for the *ichimonji* (the narrow strips of fabric directly above and below the work) and *fūtai* (two strips of fabric suspended from the top) is decorated with a ‘double vine peony arabesque’ pattern in gold on thin silk crepe and despite its small surface area, it consists of multiple pieces that have been joined together. This may indicate that instead of using new fabric, some famous fabric had been repurposed when mounting the letter as the hanging scroll. The 2014 restoration retained all these original materials. It would be most interesting if the fabric used had some connection with the letter itself or with its owner, but unfortunately there is no data available to throw light on this. All that can be said is that this scroll serves as a memorial to the writer of the letter and that its appearance is suitable for use in a tea ceremony room.

The accompanying materials introduced below were all stuffed inside the original paulownia-wood box (ref. 1, see p. 44) that the ‘Toyotomi Letter’ was stored in. Among these was an envelope, inscribed with the title: ‘*Kyōto daibutsu myōhōin monzeki jūhō Hōtaikō ihō e-hagaki*’ [Treasures of the Kyoto Daibutsu Myōhōin Temple — Postcards of Relics Belonging to Hōtaikō (Hideyoshi)] that contained a set of 6 picture postcards (ref. 14, see p. 47). One of the postcards features a letter written by Hideyoshi, however it is not the same letter but one addressed to his mother, Ōmandokoro. Whether it was included simply as another example of a letter by Hideyoshi or whether it hints at some connection with the Myōhōin temple, the relationship between this set of postcards and the ‘Toyotomi Letter’ remains unclear.

The accompanying materials make it possible for us to trace the owners of the work subsequent to Kōno Shunzō. In 1940 the work passed from Kōno Shunzō to Matsunaga Zenzaburō, an antique dealer located in Kanda Hatago-cho (ref. 15, see p. 47). In 1942, the work was then acquired by Ishibashi Tokujirō (1886–1958) (ref. 16, see p. 48), the elder brother of the founder of this museum, Ishibashi Shōjirō (1889–1976). Ishibashi Tokujirō later passed the work on to Shōjirō or Shōjirō’s eldest son, Kan’ichirō then, in 1998, after Kan’ichirō’s death, the work was donated to the Ishibashi Foundation by his surviving family members.²

Few details are known regarding Kōno Shunzō, but the Important Art Object certificate that was issued in 1933 was addressed to ‘Minamienoki-cho 24, Ushigome,’ (ref. 11, see p. 47) and the subsequent change of ownership registration (ref. 17, see pp. 48–49) carried the same address, so it can be assumed that he lived in Tokyo. However, when the *Hōtaikō shinsekishū* [Collection of Handwriting by Toyotomi Hideyoshi] was published in 1938, the location was given as ‘Saga Prefecture,’ indicating that perhaps he was originally from there. However, a search of the residents’ directory, etc., for Saga Prefecture at that time failed to find anyone of that name.

The research note that was published in this museum’s Bulletin last year under the title, ‘Reference Materials Relating to the Detached Segments of the Poem Anthology *Iseshū*, Known as “*Ishiyama-gire*,”’ traced the ownership of 3 hanging scrolls

from this series that belong to the museum. This research noted that all of these works passed from Ishibashi Tokujirō to Ishibashi Shōjirō or Ishibashi Kan'ichirō and the 'Toyotomi Letter' introduced in this report, together with several other works, were also acquired in the same way. Ishibashi Tokujirō was an entrepreneur who developed businesses nationwide, he also served as mayor of Kurume City, was an aficionado of the tea ceremony and a collector of calligraphy, paintings and antiques. A very small part of his collection was inherited by Ishibashi Shōjirō or Kan'ichirō. Among the materials accompanying to this 'Toyotomi Letter' is a memo, written in pencil, listing the names of several art works (ref. 18, see p. 49). Some of the works listed in this memo now belong to the Ishibashi Foundation but there are others that do not. It is a simple note and there is a strong possibility that it is not the final list of items he intended to hand over. One point of interest among the items is the *ishiyama-gire* 'Detached Segments of the Poem Anthology Iseshū' hanging scrolls. These are listed as being '*Ishiyama-gire Kamo-no-uta/ dō Tanabata-no-uta*' [The Poem of Kamo / ditto, The Poem of the Star Festival], however, there is no mention of the third scroll in the series that belongs to the Foundation's collection. The '*Kamo-no-uta*' refers to the '*Ishiyama-gire Nisaeya*,' the '*Tanabata-no-uta*' refers to the '*Ishiyama-gire Misomesumo*' and the third scroll is the '*Ishiyama-gire Momoshikino*.' The only reference we have proving that the '*Ishiyama-gire Momoshikino*' was received from Tokujirō is a single record card from the Bridgestone Museum that managed the collection and no other documentation exists to show that it was previously in the possession of Tokujirō. It is possible that it was acquired at a different time to the other two but in closing it should be mentioned that the appearance of this memo raises the possibility that the '*Ishiyama-gire Misomesumo*' could have been handed over to Shōjirō by his close friend, Dan Inō (1892–1973).

(Chief Curator, Artizon Museum, Ishibashi Foundation)
(Translated by Gavin Frew)

Notes

1. Kuwata Tadachika, *Toyotomi Hideyoshi Kenkyū* [Toyotomi Hideyoshi Research], Kadokawa Shoten, 1975, pp. 495–499.
2. From the 'Change of Ownership of Important Cultural Properties' records it would appear there is a strong possibility that the works handed over by Tokujirō did not pass through Shōjirō but became the property of Kan'ichirō. However, in a speech given by Kan'ichirō on the occasion of opening the annex to the Ishibashi Museum of Art, he said, 'Shōjirō also...had a collection of Japanese calligraphy and paintings, and I inherited these upon the death of my father...' raising the possibility that the route by which they arrived in the collection varied according to the work.

List of illustrations (p. 42)

fig. 1—TOYOTOMI Hideyoshi, Letter, Azuchi-Momoyama period | 16th century, Artizon Museum, Ishibashi Foundation