

1 What is a Mon?

Japan developed a system of identifying symbols or crests, called mon () or monsh (), that is frequently compared to European heraldry. While there are some similarities to European devices, and both systems were used for similar identification purposes, the Japanese system has different basic principles and a different aesthetic.

To start, mon are in several ways simpler, graphically, than European devices. The vast majority of mon were used as single-color designs. In addition, the ways different graphical elements could be combined were more restricted; many mon were constructed of only one type of element, and those that combined multiple different types of charge only did so in restricted ways, such as adding an enclosure around another element.

What were mon used for? Primarily, they were used for identification, and by extension for decoration. Samurai would use mon on banners to identify unit affiliation. They were used as designs on kimono, armor, camp curtains, roof tiles, carriages, and personal items.

Mon are often called family crests in English, and this is the most common way they were used: to identify family/clan membership or affiliation. However, there was never a one-to-one relationship between mon and families: different branches of a family could easily use distinct, often related mon. Furthermore, different families could share similar or identical mon, either by coincidence (for families in distant parts) or due to a strong clan granting its mon to a favored supporter. Along with this, the use of mon was not restricted to families: non-family groups, such as temples and shrines, could also use mon. Family crests are specifically called kamon (), meaning just that, and this term is also used for crests in general.

Crests used by Shint shrines are generally called shinmon (), divine crests. Crests have been used for shrines approximately as long as for families, becoming increasingly popular during the Kamakura period (1185-1333). Shrine crests were generally similar to family crests, and could be adopted in either direction: a family could adopt the crest of a shrine they have a strong connection to, or a shrine could use the crest of a patron family. Crests could also move from shrine to shrine, for example when an enshrine kami was transferred. These sorts of changes could leave a shrine with more than one mon in some cases. ^{EoS:Shinmon} Buddhist temples also used crests in a similar way. ^{FCoJ127}

2 Registration

While mon were regulated in Japan the way coats of arms were in Europe, this was a relatively late development, not occurring until the Edo period (1603-1868). For the most part, in period mon were simply chosen by the bearer, and the mostly-consistent graphical style and rules were the result of custom, not regulation. What rolls of mon we have are descriptive, often recounting how mon were used in a particular battle, rather than a canonical assignment of mon to families. There are some cases of samurai based in different parts of Japan using similar mon independently. (This at times caused trouble for travellers, and could lead to a visitor temporarily using a substitute crest to avoid giving offense. ^{Dower14})

3 Color

Unlike the strong ideas of color in Western heraldry, Mon have a stronger association with shape than with color. Mon in the in the Edo period were registered purely by their shape, ignoring color. The same mon could be displayed dark on light or light on dark in any of a wide range of color combinations.

However, in pre-Edo times, Mon were often strongly associated with particular color schemes. One main use of mon was for battlefield identification, and for identification a consistent color scheme just makes sense. While the same mon with different colors could be used by different members of the same family or different branches of the same army, there are specific colors that were used for the banners of the various participants in Sengoku period battles. Mon colors were not varied arbitrarily here. While some uses of mon, such as on clothing or lacquered items, did not necessarily use distinctive colors, the primary use of Mon in Muromachi and Momoyama Japan was for battlefield identification.

Actually, banner color was used for identification in period more consistently than mon. It is unclear whether there were mon on the earliest documented Japanese uses of identifying banners, the 12th-century Gempei War and the preceding rebellions, but it is well established that the opposing sides used red and white banners for identification. ^{SH9} Even in the late period Sengoku battles, some samurai used solid-color banners ^{SH43.3} or ones with basic graphical elements but no mon. ^{SHJ}

So, what colors were used? Most commonly, the five lucky colors: yellow (or gold), blue, red, white, and black. There are also a variety of examples of green and purple. These colors can be found in a number of combinations, generally emphasizing contrast.

One point of interest: while in the Edo Period Mon were registered as two-color designs, pre-Edo Mon weren't always two-color. There are a few 3-color designs used on banners that otherwise are clearly Mon. ^{SHB2.H9} Before Mon registration was instituted, there was nothing except custom to enforce the two-color style, and some samurai did their own thing. (There are also a few banners that use non-mon-like multicolor representational paintings.)

4. CHARGES

4 Charges

What charges were used in period mon? Plants are the most common, used very widely. In addition to the famous chrysanthemum and paulownia mon mentioned above, other stylizations of plants, such as bamboo, chinese bellflower, wisteria, and hollyhock, were commonly used. These charges open themselves up to variations, with the number of petals, buds, or leaves and the general arrangement of the plant varied in period.

Simple graphical elements were also common. While these were often described as representing specific objects, in a way similar to the billet and delf in Western heraldry, they are best thought of abstractly. The most well-known of these is the sun disc, which is found on the flag of modern Japan but not used as a national emblem in period.^{SH52} More than one such disc could be used, in this case described as stars. Other common examples of this type are the square eye, found in groups of three or more;^{FCoJ113} the similar nail puller design;^{FCoJ100} the snake eye voided circle, originally patterned after a leather bow-string spool;^{SHG2FCoJ94} and several variations of the chestnut three joined rhombus motif.^{SH63KnJ7}

Japanese characters, specifically kanji (those of Chinese origin), were another common choice. These might be a reference to a patron deity, the first character of a clans family name, or something that describes the samurai in question. One example is Koide Yoshichikas use of the character ko in his mon.^{SH19}

Religion was important to many samurai, and religious symbols beyond characters that refer to deities were commonly used. The most popular of these was the comma shape of the tomoe, generally seen in threes, with various interpretations focusing on Shint and imperial connections. It can be interpreted as a jewel or whirlpool, but it is most commonly associated with Hachiman, god of archery and war. Other symbols include shrine amulets and the (disallowed in the SCA) swastika, strongly associated in Japan with Buddhism.

After the introduction of Christianity, some Japanese chose Christian symbols such as crosses for their mon;^{SH47} such symbolism was used openly until Christianitys violent suppression culminating in the massacre ending the Shimbara rebellion in 1638. (Afterwards, Christianity was not eliminated from Japan, but it was forced into hiding; hidden Christians sometimes used mon containing hidden crosses, such as the Gion shrine amulet or crossed oars.)^{Dower32}

Some mon incorporated objects, such as arrow fletchings, coins, fans, cart wheels, and the like. These often had symbolic significance. Geographic features, such waves, rivers, and mountains, were also used.

Finally, the last category of charge is animals, most commonly birds and butterflies. While animals were much rarer in Japan than in European heraldry, there are examples of a variety of different animals, extending as far as crabs and rabbits.

5 Variation

The practices for combining multiple instances of a charge into a mon were relatively restricted. Repeated charges tended to be simple, with geometric shapes, feathers, or leaves the most common. While a single coin might be depicted with Chinese writing when alone in a mon, when multiple coins were used, a solid, geometrical depiction was used.^{SHD2J1}

Most mon featured geometric symmetry, either reflectional or rotational, whether composed of one charge or several. Unlike in European heraldry, which often featured multiple instance of an asymmetric charge, such as an animal, all facing the same direction, most Japanese charges themselves were symmetrical, and when an asymmetrical charge like a bird was repeated in a mon, the charges would face each other as a mirror image.

Relative to European heraldry, the ways that distinct elements were combined into a single mon were limited, and some more complicated means of variation were uncommon or unknown before the Edo period (1603-1868). While sometimes different elements were combined, only harmonious combinations were used, in contrast to European arms combining unrelated charges.^{Dower11} The most common combination of elements was the addition of an enclosure, most frequently a circular ring or other geometric outline, around a charge. These enclosures became almost omnipresent in crests by the early Edo period.^{Dower15}

While enclosures were the most common, they were not the only way different charges could be combined. A very similar variation was to place a charge on a disc, with the charge color and background matching and the disc contrasting, effectively piercing the disc with a charge.^{SH57}

Characters could also be placed among other charges; for example, Takezaki Suenaga, when fighting the mongols in 1274, used three square eye designs and a character yoshi, meaning good fortune.^{SH12} Wisterias depiction with two branches making a circle creates an obvious place for another charge, which kubo Tadayo (1531-1593) used to include the character dai, meaning great.^{SS73.4}

It was rare for multiple different plants to be combined, but Yamana Szen Mochitoyo (1404-1473) used a paulownia above two gentian-like plants as his mon.^{SS73.14} Another uncommon arrangement was used by Kusunoki Masashige (1294-1336), who symbolized his support of the emperor by depicting the imperial chrysanthemum supported by water.^{SHB1}

Another form of variation that became widespread in the Edo period (1603-1868) but is still found before then is depicting one element in such a way that it mimics the standard depiction of another element. A pre-Edo example of mimicry is the mon of Kuroda Yoshitaka (1546-1604), which depicted wiseria in the shape resembling three tomoe swirls.^{SS36.9.53}

In addition to these obvious forms of variation, there were more subtle variations. Different branches of the same family would sometimes use closely-related mon that differed only by differences of style or minor details. Similarly, the limited set of motifs from which crests were most commonly drawn meant that at times completely unrelated families would end up with almost identical mon by coincidence.^{Dower10} Since there was no formal registration, exactly what constituted a different mon vs a different depiction of the same mon was unclear; there are also examples of the mon of the same individual being depicted with rather different style at different times. [TODO: SH cite]

6. HOW CHOSEN?

6 How chosen?

There are a number of ways samurai could choose a mon. Some presumably just picked designs that they liked; at least, plenty have no obvious connection to their bearer. Some picked designs that refer to a patron deity or their family names, such as the character-based mon described above.

Some picked mon that relate to stories about their ancestors. For example, in the 14th century, the Chiba used a seven stars mon and variations thereon, which was inspired by a legend from 931, when the Chiba were on the brink of defeat. The constellation of the Plough was bright in the night sky, so they prayed to Myomi Bosatsu, a deity associated with the Plough. As a result the deity appeared to them in a vision, and they then escaped defeat.^{SH11} Other such stories about heraldry are common, though its unclear if anyone used a story about themselves personally in their heraldry, rather than a story about an ancestor.^{SH11}

Western devices often use a type of pun called canting, where part of the device sounds like the persons name. While, as discussed above, characters from the holders name were often used, less trivial puns were not common. One example is Aoyama Tadanari (15511613), whose family name means blue mountain; his mon featured a white character for mountain (yama) on a blue background.^{SH32} (This also is an example of the significance of color for pre-Edo mon.) A similar example is a Kuroda mon that used a black disc on white to refer to their name, which means black field.^{SS53}

Similarly, since many Japanese family names refer to plants or other natural elements, some mon depicted literally something referred to in a clan name.^{Dower33}

Shrines, as could be expected, would often choose explicitly religious motifs for their mon, with the tomoe in particular being used by shrines dedicated to Hachiman. Other shrines would use plant-based motifs, either to show patronage, as with the paulownia mon granted to shrines by Toyotomi Hideyoshi (15371598), or due to symbolic connections, as with the sheaves of rice mon favored by shrines of Inari, god of rice.
EoS:Shinmon

7 Display

The earliest known use of mon was not on banners, but on Imperial ox carts going back as far back as the Nara period (710784).^{SH6} From here mon spread to be used by most of the court nobility in the Heian period, though given the small and highly interconnected noble class, there was little need to use them for identification.^{Dower4}

Mon were not used in a military context until the 12th-century Gempei wars, where they were used on wooden mantlet (war-door) shields, camp curtains, and flags.^{SH8} Later in period, their use became progressively more widespread, leading to their use in such places as various pieces of warriors equipment, boxes, and paper lanterns.^{Dower11}

Some mon motifs originate in fabric patterns, and thus mon-like designs can be seen on clothing from an early age, without serving as an identifying feature. In the Muromachi period (13371573), some warrior families would wear highly elaborate kimono called daimon, or great crest, incorporating family crests half as tall as the wearer on large billowing sleeves.^{Dower12} By the late Muromachi period (13371573), family crests were standardly used in more restrained ways to decorate various everyday and formal garments worn by samurai, generally with three or five prominent 1.5-inch mon.^{Dower15} Black clothing with five crests became universal to all levels of society by 1688, in the early Edo period.^{Dower18}

Another place where mon were displayed is on noren, cloth curtains used in doorways to keep out dust and identify a business. While modern noren are generally labeled with kanji or decorative paintings, Momoyama period (15731615) folding screen paintings show the use of mon on noren.^{Oribe224}

Mon were, of course, also used on several different varieties of banners. While a full discussion of Japanese banner variations is outside of the scope of this discussion, I will mention that mon were often not displayed plain: often multiple instances of the same mon would be used or colored stripes or other graphical decorations would be added, and at time passages of text would be added as well.

8 Other Forms of Heraldry

- Other banners
 - Color/simple banners
 - Mottos/invocations
 - Christian
- 3d objects and such

9 Mon in the SCA

While Mon may be registered as devices or badges in the SCA, and many Mon-style devices are currently registered, the SCA heraldic rules default to a generic European standard, and thus it is not always obvious how to register authentic mon in the SCA.

9. MON IN THE SCA

9.1 Ways to Register Mon

First, under SENA (the new rules), there are two main ways to register a device, and mon can be registered under either. The common way of registering devices are the Core Style Rules (SENA A.1.A.1), based on the heraldry of Western Europe. Devices that are not registerable under Core Style but follow period examples can still be registered under the Individually Attested Patterns rules (SENA A.4). You can also think of these two methods as the easy way and the hard way.

Under the Core Style Rules, you can register any device that fits into the framework of the default SCA heraldic rules, with at most one element from outside the European default, called a Step from Period Practice (SFPP). While these are optimized for European usage, since most mon are simple and use a single charge, you can often have that charge be your SFPP and otherwise have a device compatible with European standards. This method of registration doesn't require you to have extensive documentation, which makes it relatively straightforward. You do generally need to provide evidence that your SFPP is an element used in non-European armory or a plant or animal known to pre-1600 Europe, but unlike when using the Individually Attested Patterns rules, a single example is sufficient.

SENA recognizes that not all period devices fit under the default rules, and also allows registration using Individually Attested Patterns. When using these rules, all elements used, both charges and arrangement, must be from the same general time and place, and the device must be still expressible in blazon. For every element not in the core style rules, either three closely matching examples or six examples that bracket the device in complexity must be included. All examples must be pre-1650 examples from different families. While many books of mon are readily available, they generally contain many post-1650 mon and often do not contain usage dates, so finding good examples can be a considerable amount of work.

9.2 Mon vs Devices

One interesting consideration when registering a Japanese device is that, in period usage, there is not a one-to-one correspondance between a mon and a device. As discussed above, samurai banners might have multiple mon or other graphical elements in addition to the mon, or even no mon at all. Since different members of a clan or different divisions of an army might use the same mon but distinct banners, arguably what makes sense to register as a device is not the mon itself but the overall banner design.

Since there are many examples of banners that are just a mon on a solid background, registering single mon is reasonable regardless. There are other period banner designs that seem reasonably compatible with SCA usage, however. For using multiple mon arranged vertically, banners could have: 2, 3, or 5 copies of the same mon in the same color on a solid background; two different mon, possibly in different colors, on a solid background; or two copies of the same mon in different colors on a vertically-divided background. Mon could also be displayed with (most frequently, above) other elements: text passages (often slogans or prayers), geometrical stripes or background changes. Basically, to reflect period practice in a Japanese device, one does not need to restrict oneself to just a single mon.

9.3 Color

One constant issue with registering mon in the SCA has been issues with color.

This has led to some issues with mon registration in the SCA, since blazon always includes color. Some gentiles have suggested using metacolors like dark and light instead of specific colors, but this doesn't really solve anything and interferes with things like conflict checking. Others have suggested that Japanese mon should be registered as fieldless badges instead of as devices. This has two issues. Practically, not registering a device causes problems when receiving awards scrolls and in other situations where devices are used for identification. In terms of period practice, mon were always drawn with contrasting colors, not drawn with a consistent color on an arbitrary background, as a fieldless badge would imply.

These suggest that registering mon using two specific contrasting colors makes sense, but there is a better reason: it better reflects how mon were used for identification in period. In the SCA, devices are used primarily for identification, so it closely reflects period Japanese practice to have a given individual use a consistent color scheme for his mon as would be used on banners. (A second color scheme or fieldless badge could be registered for secondary usages on clothing or personal items.) Color variations could be registered for different members of the same clan.

Conveniently for the College of Arms, the colors used in Japanese heraldry, as discussed above, were almost entirely the same set used in Western heraldry: mostly the five lucky colors of yellow, blue, red, white, and black, plus green and purple. In terms of contrast, while many banners followed the rule of tincture, some did not: black on red and red on black are common^{SHC}, and I have also seen red on blue^{SHC4} and black on green^{SHH13}. Registrations of these color schemes would need to use the Individually Attested Patterns rules.

9.4 Restricted Charges

Since there was no formal registration of mon in the SCA period, samurai could generally pick any mon they wished. There were a few motifs that were, however, effectively reserved in period. The most well known is the doubled sixteen-petaled chrysanthemum (kiku) mon used by the Emperor, with variations used by other members of the imperial family.^{SH6} While people outside the imperial line, such as Kusunoki Masashige, did use a chrysanthemum variation, this was an Imperial gift^{SH13}, so such usage in the SCA might be presumptuous.

A similar restriction was in place for the paulownia (kiri) mon given to the Ashikaga shogunate by Emperor Godaigo. While the Ashikaga bestowed the right to use the paulownia to powerful supporters, the motif is strongly associated in period with imperial and shogunal favor, and thus its usage might also be presumptuous.^{Dower68}

The swastika, while a Buddhist symbol in Japan used in Momoyama mon, is also forbidden in the SCA for obvious reasons.

9.5 Other Relevant Rules

While many historical Japanese banners consisted solely of a single Japanese character or a longer Japanese phrase or sentence, such devices cannot be registered in the SCA: their registration might limit someone from using their initials or a written version of their name or motto (See SENA A.3.E.3.) Furthermore, even when Japanese characters are combined with other elements, such as the rings and enclosures found on historical banners, all characters, in any alphabet, are considered identical for purposes of conflict checking. (See Constantina von Ravenna in the May 2008 LoAR.) This means that Japanese Mon that use different characters will often conflict.

10 Sources Cited

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