

Hanko culture set to survive Taro Kono's purge of cheaper stamps  
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## Hanko culture set to survive Taro Kono's purge of cheaper stamps



- With hand-carved, high-quality hanko made by artisans considered virtually impossible to counterfeit, hanko culture — which has existed in Japan for more than a millennium — is likely to endure. | RYUSEI TAKAHASHI

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*Hanko* seals made headlines like never before in recent months, as administrative reform minister Taro Kono made it his priority to do away with the traditional stamps, used to approve official paperwork, which are as ubiquitous in Japan as signatures elsewhere.

Kono has been targeting the nation's reliance on cheap, ready-made hanko seals, often ridiculed by foreign media outlets as a symbol of Japan's outdated customs in an age of widespread digital signature use.

But with hand-carved, high-quality hanko made by artisans considered virtually impossible to counterfeit, hanko culture — which has existed in Japan for over a millennium — is likely to endure.

“Each shop makes unique imprints, and they often have lots of loyal local fans, so people are often told to make hanko at particular shops because their grandparents or parents made one there,” says Masaki Takeguchi, whose shop, Takeguchi Sanshodo, in Chuo Ward, Tokyo, has served for decades as a purveyor to the Imperial Household Agency and other government and corporate clients.

“This is a tradition that will continue to be passed down into the future,” says Takeguchi.

While more and more new customized hanko are made by machines amid a wave of automation and industrialization in recent years, connoisseurs like Takeguchi, who holds a first-degree national hand-engraving license and has more than 10 years of experience, stick to hand engraving techniques that make one-of-a-kind hanko seal impressions possible.

In Japan's deeply ingrained hanko culture, seals are registered at government offices and banks for important transactions. Unique seals help prevent forgeries of documents related to important financial transactions, and scams such as having your bank balance withdrawn, your properties sold or big loans signed without your knowledge.

For those reasons, many people turn to artisans when they need a hanko made.

Machine-made hanko that are engraved based on computerized fonts tend to have awkward-looking spaces between characters. Their hand-carved peers often have lines or patterns too thin to be scanned, providing better security, and are considered extremely difficult to forge.

That said, the industry had already suffered from a decline in sales at physical hanko shops amid the COVID-19 pandemic when Kono dealt it another blow in September with his resolution to break with the tradition of rubber-stamping, declared as part of a pledge to make municipal paperwork more efficient.



One-of-a-kind hanko seals help prevent forgeries of important financial transactions, as well as scams. | RYUSEI TAKAHASHI

After careful consideration, the government in November announced it would scrap the use of hanko in more than 99% of about 15,000 administrative procedures, except for the 83 processes that legally require customized *jitsuin*, or traditional carved and personally identifying hanko, and those that involve the registration of their impressions in governments records, such as those for vehicle and company ownership. The government will maintain the current system of registering seal impressions with local governments.

There are essentially two types of hanko — inexpensive, ready-made seals and those that are custom-made. Fancy *jitsuin*, fashioned from horn, crystal or ivory (stocks of which have been limited in line with the clampdown on the ivory trade), can cost upwards of hundreds of thousands of yen.

Bank hanko registered specifically for financial transactions are also usually custom-made. Rubber hanko and *shachihata* self-inking stamps are not accepted for government records because their imprints tend to change with use.

It is primarily the inexpensive stamps, often sold even at ¥100 shops, that have been the subject of discussions over ending their use for more or less the past two decades.

Critics have questioned why local governments require hanko not registered in government records for various procedures such as for applying for a residence card, when they can verify the identity of the applicant using a driver's license or other identification cards.

## Hanko

Unregistered seals are often used for casual occasions at home or in the workplace, such as when people sign for a parcel upon delivery or when employees are required to verify expenses.

Many companies, for example, make it customary to manually stamp such hanko to show approval on various documents, forcing many staff to visit their offices just for that purpose.



Masaki Takeguchi, whose shop, Takeguchi Sanshodo, in Chuo Ward, Tokyo, has served for decades as a purveyor to the Imperial Household Agency and other government and corporate clients | RYUSEI TAKAHASHI

That practice came under intense scrutiny earlier this year when it forced thousands of workers to physically travel to their offices to stamp seals even in the midst of a state of emergency, when people had been urged to stay at home due to the pandemic.

“Unregistered seals that do not function as identification will be abolished altogether,” Kono said in mid-November, adding that ending the use of hanko would also help promote efforts to go paperless.

There are signs that local governments are also following suit. A Kyodo News survey in October found that nearly 80% of all 47 prefectures and the capital cities of prefectures except Tokyo have decided to abolish or are considering halting the use of hanko in most government procedures.

## Hanko

Hanko customs date back more than 7,500 years, to 5500 B.C., when people in the Middle East began engraving their personal symbols on stones, shells and clay and leaving impressions to identify property as their own.

The use of hanko first spread to Europe, and then Asia. The oldest existing hanko in Japan is made of gold. It was gifted in A.D. 57 by Emperor Guangwu of China's Han Dynasty to a ruler of a small area of northern Kyushu, to demonstrate that the recipient was vested with political authority by China.

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During the middle ages, brush-stroke signatures did enjoy a brief period of popularity among nobles and samurai. But hanko have been employed by high-ranking officials and samurai for most of Japan's recorded history, and were already common among merchants and farmers by the Edo Period (1603-1868).

The modern hanko system took root in the early 1870s, during the Meiji Era (1868-1912), when legislation was passed requiring people to register their hanko and use them on important documents.

Despite the history of hanko, which remains inseparable from Japanese culture, the number of hanko shops that belong to the All Japan Seal Industry Association has fallen

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from 4,252 in 1990 to 897, amid the graying of the population and a lack of successors, association data shows.

Takao Tokui, chairman of the association, says many people mistakenly believe that Japan is getting rid of hanko culture for good, but that jitsuin and other important hanko registered at banks and other purposes will be here to stay and passed on to the future generations.

“Hanko culture is deeply rooted, as a foundation for contracts between individuals and corporations, and it’s important for the industry to keep supplying new hanko seals,” he said. “We in the industry have pride in supporting the cultural system that uses hanko.