



## JAPANESE SERVICE ENSIGNS IN INTERNATIONAL TRADE ACROSS THE PACIFIC

**Nozomi Kariyasu**

Japanese Vexillological Association (JAVA)

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

On 15 January 2015 the Australia-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement became effective (**Fig. 1**). It is expected that this Agreement will further strengthen Australia-Japan bilateral relations through greatly invigorating the economies of the two countries, as Australia becomes a more important strategic partner to Japan in the Asia-Pacific basin.



**Fig. 1** Prime Ministers Abbott and Abe

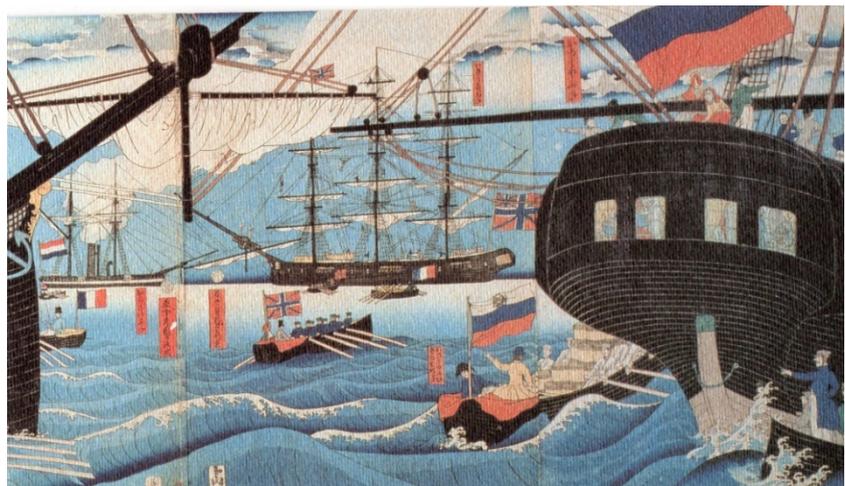
**Fig. 2** Sydney Opera House

**Fig. 3** Dock Harbour



Total annual trade between the two countries is currently A\$65 billion. Japan mainly exports automobiles, petroleum products, and construction and mining machines, amounting to A\$16 billion to Australia. In turn Australia exports mainly coal, LNG, iron ore, and beef to Japan amounting to A\$49 billion. There are 24,000 Australian residents in Japan and 79,000 Japanese residents in Australia and 108 sister city relationships between the two countries.

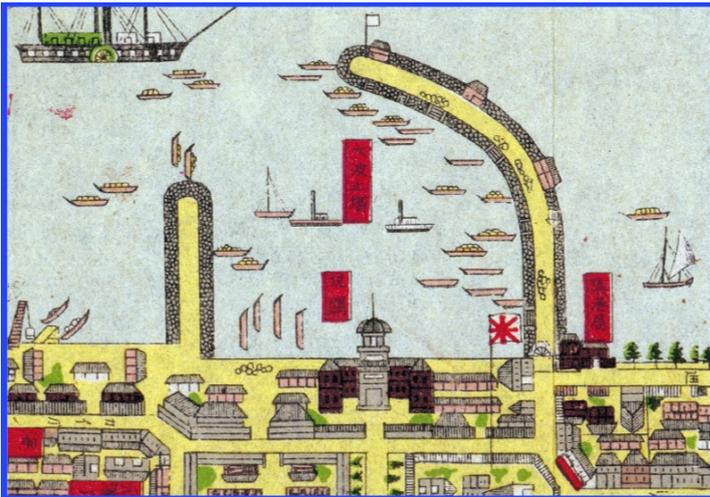
**Fig. 4:**  
Ending Japan's isolation.



Looking back to the long history of the bilateral relations, in 1854 the Anglo-Japanese Friendship Treaty and a similar treaty with the United States were signed, which forced Japan to abolish the policy of national isolation of the previous 215 years. Australia and Japan then gained momentum for bilateral relations. In 1879 the first wool products were exported from Australia to Japan (**Fig. 5**).

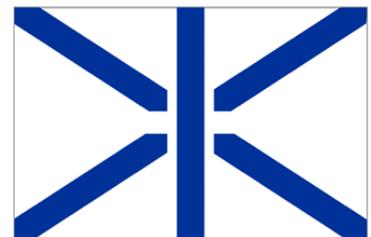
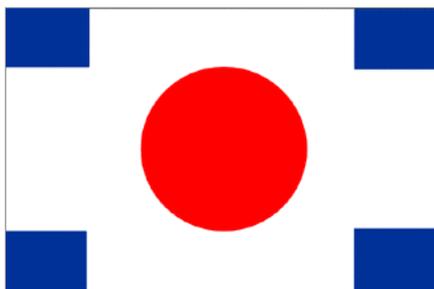
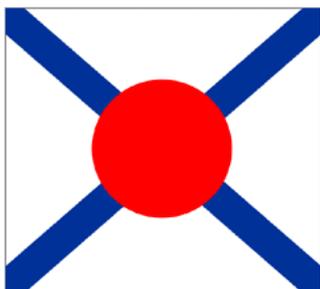


## 2. JAPANESE SERVICE ENSIGNS



To promote international trade, the first customs houses were built in 1872 in Yokohama (Fig. 6 left), Nagasaki, and Hakodate.

Following European flag practice, the ensigns shown below (Figs. 7–12) were adopted in Japan for a Port Pilot (1870), Customs (October 1871), overseas mail steamships (1872), Quarantine (1879), Lighthouse vessels (1885), and Fisheries inspection vessels (1913).



Figs. 7-12:

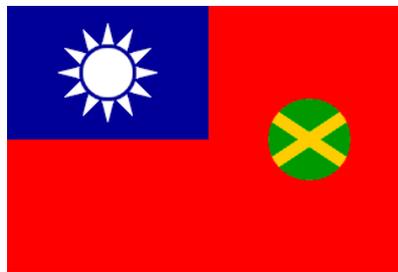
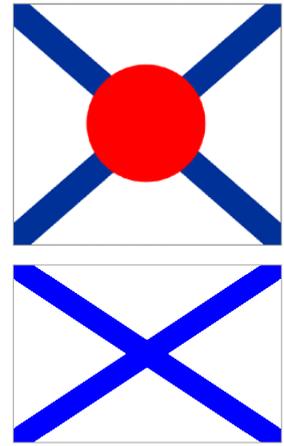
Top, left to right: Customs, Pilot, Mail

Bottom, left to right: Quarantine, Lighthouse, Fisheries

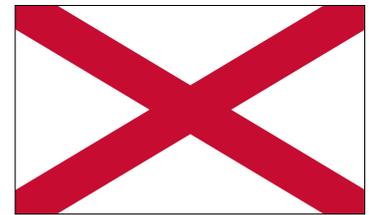
## 2.1 CUSTOMS ENSIGNS

The first Japanese Customs Ensign<sup>1</sup> (1871–73) added a blue saltire to the national flag, the Hinomaru, (**Fig. 13**) apparently inspired by the Imperial Russian Naval Ensign (adopted in 1712 and still used by the Russian Navy - **Fig. 14**). But why?

Customs ensigns used by neighbouring Russia and Qing Dynasty China in 1871 consisted of a saltire on green – in white for Russia (**Fig. 15**) and yellow for China (**Fig. 16**) – the latter was retained after the Chinese Revolution in 1910 as a canton on the Republic's five-striped flag (**Fig. 17**). It also appeared as badge in the fly of the Kuomintang national flag of 1928–31 (**Fig. 18**).

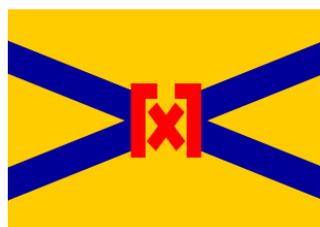


When considering the design for a Customs Ensign in the model used by its neighbours, Japan obviously felt the need to use a different colour. However, a version in the national colours, red on white, would have led to confusion with the Irish saltire (**Fig. 19**), and so it is safe to assume that a blue saltire overcame the problem, blue an appropriate reference to the sea.

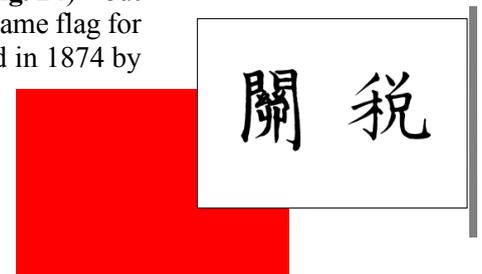
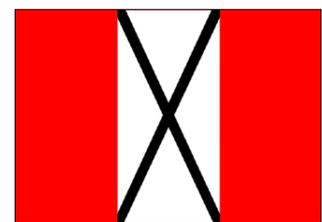


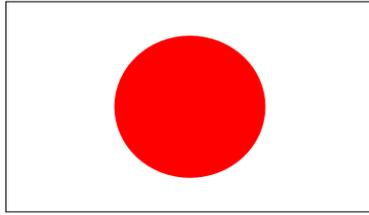
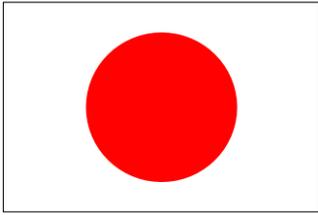
The saltire, or X-shape, is commonly used in Japan to mean negation, as in stop signs (**Fig. 20**) and even in domestic situations (**Fig. 21**), so the local usage is not seen as St. Andrew's Cross.

Incidentally the saltire was used for the same reason on the Customs Ensigns from 1928 of the Governor-Generalate of Korea<sup>2</sup> (**Fig. 22**) and from 1934 (**Fig. 23**) of Manchukuo.<sup>3</sup>



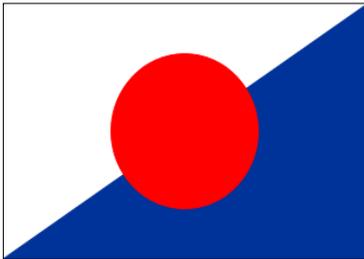
The first Japanese Customs Ensign was abolished in 1873, and replaced by a plain red flag (**Fig. 24**) – but for only one year, as the Army used the same flag for explosive storage, and so it was replaced in 1874 by a plain white flag (**Fig. 25**) inscribed in *kanji* 税関 (“Customs”).





In 1881 two versions of the Hinomaru were flown with the Customs Ensign, in ratios of 2:3 (**Fig. 26**) in rough weather, and 3.7:6.1 (**Fig. 27**) in calm weather. The white *kanji* ensign was used on small boats.

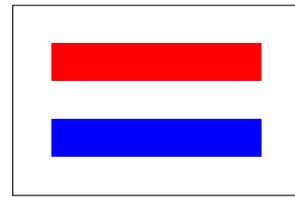
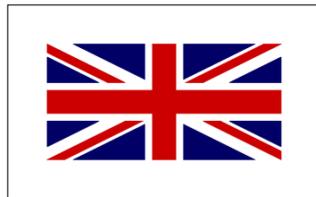
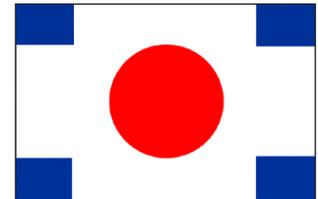
In 1892 all three ensigns were abolished and a new ensign<sup>4</sup> adopted, diagonally white over blue with red disc in the centre. Originally designed as an ensign at sea, it was later hoisted on Customs buildings and is still so used. White stands for the sky, blue for the sea, red for the Sun rising from the sea (**Figs. 28–30 below**).



Incidentally, before their return to Japan, the Government of the Ryukyu Islands (1952–72) used a similar diagonal Customs Ensign<sup>5</sup> (**Fig. 31**), with the Rising Sun replaced by the Ryukyu Customs emblem featuring a pigeon.

## 2.2 PILOT ENSIGNS

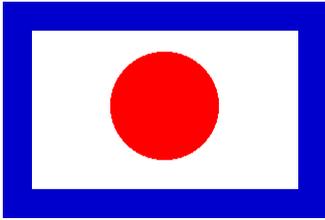
The first Japanese Pilot Ensign<sup>6</sup> was adopted in 1870 for the Imperial Navy – the national flag with a blue rectangle in each corner (**Fig. 32**). At the time, many countries used pilot ensigns depicting the respective national flag (British, German, Dutch) within a white border (**Figs. 33–35**).



Obviously, Japan could not follow suit as it already had a white flag, so Japan inserted blue, as it had with the Customs Ensign.



A year later the red disc was removed from the ensign<sup>7</sup> (**Fig. 36**) and in 1877 a new Pilot Ensign was adopted, a white over red bicolour<sup>8</sup> with *kanji* 官許水先 (“Chartered Pilot”) in black (**Fig. 37**).



In 1882 the bicolour was abolished and yet another Pilot Ensign<sup>9</sup> was adopted, the national flag within a blue border (Fig. 38), only to be changed again in 1914 to a plain white over red bicolour (Fig. 39).



In 1933 the horizontal bicolour ensign was abolished and replaced by a vertical bi-colour (Fig. 40), white at hoist, red in the fly<sup>10</sup>, apparently inspired by the H flag (Figs. 41–42) of the international maritime signal code introduced in 1857 in the UK. (The H flag represents “Pilot on board”).



### 2.3 POSTAL ENSIGN AND FLAG

Considered the first Japanese Mail Ensign, that of the Imperial Mail Steamship Company<sup>11</sup> (Fig. 43) was adopted in 1872 – a white-red bi-colour with the stylized *kanji* character 日 Ni (for “Nihon”, Japan) in red.

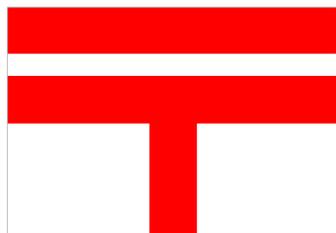
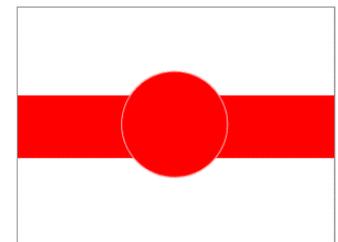


A postage stamp (Fig. 44) depicts two other flags of this period.

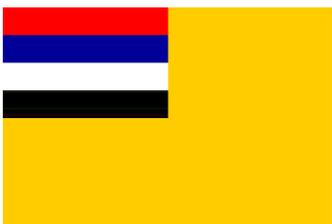
In 1885, the Imperial Mail Steamship Company merged with NYK Nippon Yusen Kaisha and the new company adopted a simple white flag charged with two horizontal red stripes (Fig. 45) representing the two companies as well as a global sea route.



A Postal Flag<sup>12</sup> (Fig. 46) shown on the stamp had also been adopted the year before – the national flag with a red horizontal stripe across the centre. In 1887 the flag was abolished.



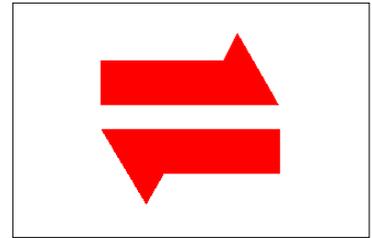
In 1887 a new Postal Flag<sup>13</sup> was adopted, a white flag with stylized *katakana* character ㇿ Te (for “Teishinsho”, Ministry of Communications). It is still in use (Fig. 47 left) and found on post boxes (Fig. 48).



Incidentally the Postal Flag in Manchukuo (Figs. 49 and 50) adopted in 1935 was also a red and white bi-colour, charged with the Chinese letter *yu* (“post”), turned 90 degrees.



The Mengjiang United Autonomous Government established by Japan in Inner Mongolia (1934-45) also adopted a postal flag in 1939, a red and white bicolour charged with two red chicken feathers in the centre (Fig. 51) and apparently signifying the to-and-fro of messages in the mail.



Postcards (Fig. 52 below) issued in 1939 advertising the Mongolian puppet entities show the blue-field flag of the 1936 Mongolian Military Government (Fig. 53), the yellow-field flags of the North Shanxi Autonomous Government and of the South Chahar Autonomous Government from 1937 (Figs. 54 and 55) and the 7-striped flag of the Mengjiang United Autonomous Government from 1939 (Fig. 56).

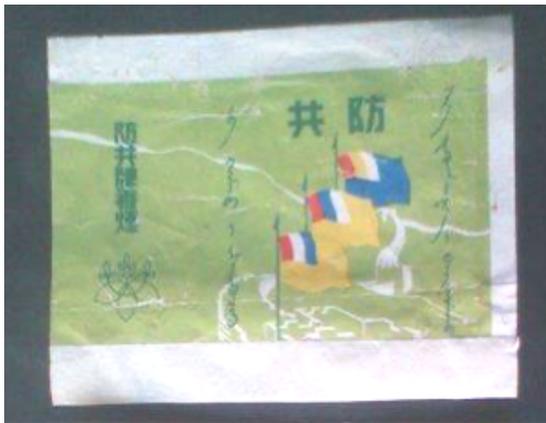


Fig. 53 - Mongolian Military Government (1936)



Fig. 54 –North Shanxi Autonomous Government (1937)



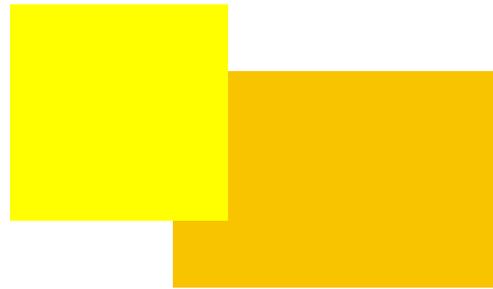
Fig. 55 – South Chahar Autonomous Government (1937)



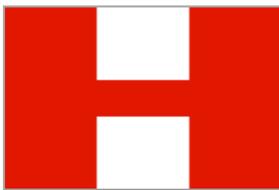
Fig. 56 – Mengjiang United Autonomous Government (1939)



Fig. 57 Japanese Quarantine Office



In 1879 the first Japanese Quarantine Ensign was adopted, which was plain yellow (**Figs. 58 and 59** above) and probably based on the Q flag from the international maritime signal code introduced in 1857 in the UK, which represented Request for “Pratique” (permission to enter port as a ship free of disease).



In 1902 the first Quarantine Ensign<sup>14</sup> was abolished and replaced by a white ensign with the letter H (for Harbour Master) in red (**Fig. 60**).



In 1913 it was replaced by white ensign with a yellow border and stylized *kanji* character 検 Ken (for “Keneki”, quarantine) in the centre (**Fig. 61**).



This was followed in 1921 by a new Quarantine Ensign<sup>15</sup> (**Fig. 62**), blue over yellow, which remained in use for many years. Incidentally the Quarantine Ensign adopted in 1929 by the Governor-Generalate of Taiwan<sup>16</sup> was also blue over yellow, but defaced by a stylized *kanji* character 台 Tai (for “Taiwan”) in red in the centre (**Fig. 63**).



After World War II, in 1948 a new Quarantine Ensign<sup>17</sup> was adopted – a stylized letter Q in yellow on a white field overall.

After six years this was abolished: as every vexillologist knows, yellow on white is hard to distinguish, at sea as on land. The new ensign<sup>18</sup> was yellow over blue with the Q in blue in the canton (a reversal of the 1921 colours (**Figs. 64 and 65** at right)).



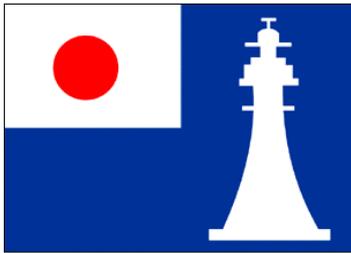
The first European-style lighthouse was built at Kannonzaki, in Kanagawa Prefecture, in 1869 (**Fig. 66 next page**). In December 1885 the Ministry of Communications was established and the Lighthouse Bureau within it.



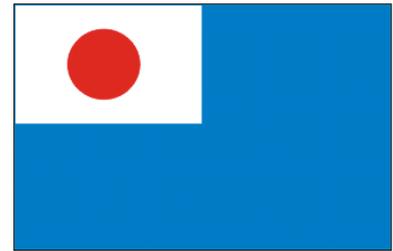
The Lighthouse Ensign was red with the stylized *katakana* character 燈 as the ministerial emblem at the top and the name in the centre in white in *kanji* (Fig. 67).



This ensign was replaced in 1886, with a design with a dark blue field<sup>19</sup> and the national flag in the canton and a white silhouette of a lighthouse in the fly – a design apparently inspired by the British blue ensigns (Fig. 68).



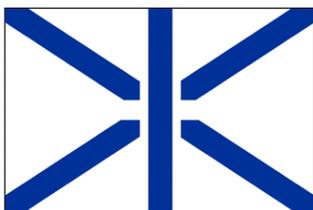
There have been only two blue ensigns charged with the national flag in Japan – this one and the flag of the Japanese Resident-General of Korea<sup>20</sup> adopted in 1906 (Fig. 69 right).



The blue Lighthouse Ensign was replaced after World War II when lighthouse maintenance was transferred to the Japanese Coast Guard Traffic Bureau. The Japanese Coast Guard Ensign<sup>21</sup> was adopted in 1948 – a blue field charged with a white compass rose in the centre symbolizing a route marker of safe navigation, and flown at all lighthouses (Figs. 70 and 71).



## 2.6 FISHERIES ENSIGNS



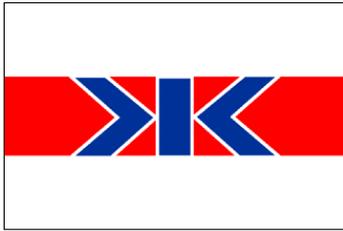
The first Japanese Fishery Inspection Vessel Ensign<sup>22</sup> (Fig. 72) was adopted in 1913 by the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce was a white ensign with stylized *kanji* character 水 Mizu (for “Water”) in blue.

This was replaced in 1920 as a red ensign<sup>23</sup> with 水 Mizu in blue, fimbriated in white (Fig. 73). The “water” emblem became the Fisheries logo.



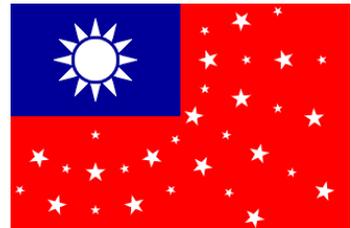
In 1928 Governor-Generalate of Korea Fisheries Ensign was adopted (Fig. 74) – white with the “water” emblem in the canton, stylized as a light blue six-pointed star fimbriated dark blue, with the name of the agency in *kanji* the lower fly.<sup>24</sup>

In 1930 the Government Office of South Sea Islands (formerly a German colony and now the Palau Republic) adopted a Fisheries Ensign (**Fig. 75**), white with a stylized 水 in red throughout.



In 1940 the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry adopted the current Fisheries Ensign<sup>26</sup> consisting of the stylized “water” emblem in blue, fimbriated in white, centred on a central red band upon a white field (**Fig. 76**).

The Fisheries Ensign used in China<sup>27</sup> 1935–1949 did not use the “water” emblem but 31 white stars in the fly of national flag (**Fig. 77**), suggesting that the “water” emblem as a mark of Fisheries vessels was a uniquely Japanese usage.

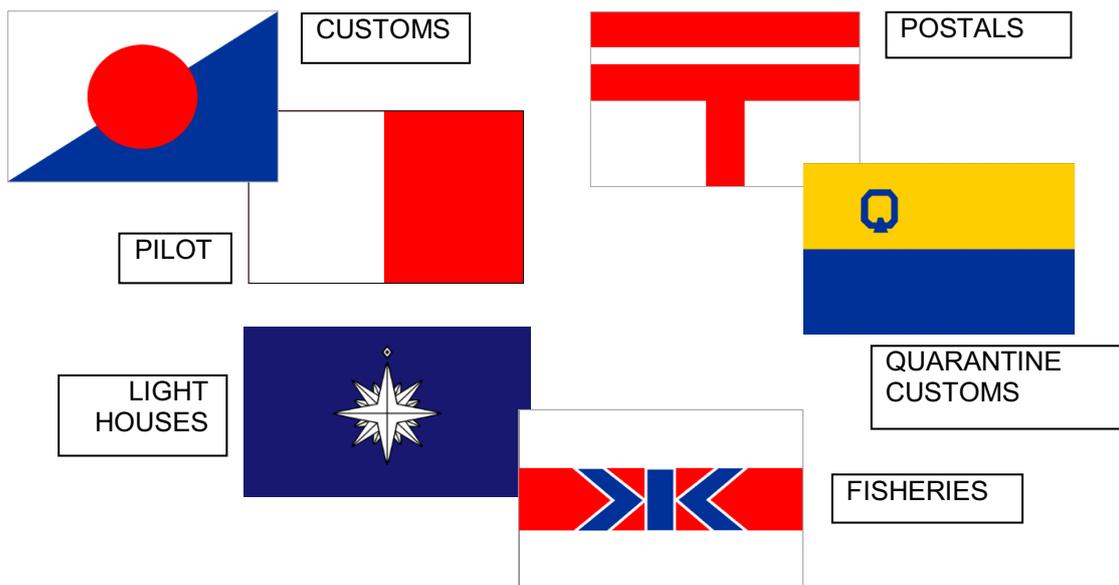


### 3. CONCLUSION

To summarise, six service ensigns of Japanese administrative agencies assisting international trade are presently in use:

- The Customs Ensign (**Fig. 78**) at 9 centres
- The Pilot Ensign (**Fig. 79**) at 35 ports
- The Postal Ensign and Flag (**Fig. 80**) at 24,700 post offices
- The Quarantine Ensign (**Fig. 81**) at 13 locations
- The Lighthouse Ensign (**Fig. 82**) at 3,229 locations
- The Fisheries Ensign (**Fig. 83**) at 6 centres.

Japanese service ensigns have continued to play a very important role in promoting international trade with Australia and other countries across the Pacific for the 160 years since Japan’s opening to the world in 1854.



## END NOTES

- 1 The Great Council of State Proclamation Number 557, 27 October 1871
- 2 Governor-General of Korea Notice Number 25, 27 January 1928
- 3 Manchukuo Finance Department Notice Number 8, 3 October 1934
- 4 Ministry of Finance Notice Number 37, 3 August 1892
- 5 Ryukyu Government Internal Affairs Bureau Notice Number 11, 20 April 1954
- 6 The Great Council of State Proclamation Number 651, 3 October 1870
- 7 The Great Council of State Proclamation Number 62, 29 November 29<sup>th</sup> 1871
- 8 Ministry of Navy Order A Number 3, 29 January 1877
- 9 The Great Council of State Proclamation Number 13, 22 February 1882
- 10 Ministry of Communications Instructions Number 51, 23 December 1933
- 11 The Great Council of State Order Number 329, 3 November 1872
- 12 The Great Council of State Order Number 15, 23 June 1884
- 13 Ministry of Communications Announcement Number 60, 28 March 1887
- 14 Imperial Ordinance Number 139, 8 July 1898
- 15 Ministry of Agriculture & Commerce Notice Number 184, 1 August 1921
- 16 Governor-General of Taiwan Notice Number 50, 14 April 1929
- 17 Ministry of Welfare Instruction Number 7, 8 April 1948
- 18 Ministry of Welfare Instruction Number 3, 16 June 1954
- 19 Ministry of Communications Notice Number 99, 16 November 1886
- 20 Imperial Ordinance Number 21, 14 February 1906
- 21 Japan Coast Guard Act Third clause of Article IV, 30 April 1948
- 22 Ministry of Agriculture & Commerce Notice Number 102, 1 April 1913
- 23 Ministry of Agriculture & Commerce Notice Number 165, 16 July 1920
- 24 Governor-General of Korea Notice Number 25, 27 January 1928
- 25 Government Office of the South Sea Islands Notice Number 13, 18 September 1930
- 26 Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry Notice Number 612, 15 December 1940
- 27 Republic of China Nationalist Government Official Gazette Number 1712, 10 April 1935

## BIOGRAPHY:

My interest in studying flags began at the age of 10 years, focused particularly on colonial flags at the time.

I graduated from Waseda University in 1973 with a Bachelor's degree in political science.

I joined Mitsubishi Corporation, with postings in New York (1984–1989) and Melbourne (1994–1999). I became a member of the Flag Society of Australia while in Melbourne and in 2000 on my return to Japan established the Japanese Vexillological Association in Tokyo, which became a member of FIAV in 2001 and from there organized the 23<sup>rd</sup> ICV in July 2009 in Yokohama, the first ICV held in Asia.

Works published:

- The Pictorial Book of National Flags and Emblems of the World, 2003 (updated 2006, 2007, 2008, 2010 and 2012)
- The Pictorial Book of National Flags of the World, 2007
- Pictorial Book of Military Flags, Roundels and National Flags of the World, 2007
- Pictorial Book of Maritime Flags of the World, 2008
- Flags of Former Colonies & Overseas Territories of The Great Powers, 2009
- National Flags of the World for Children, 2009, 2011, 2012, and 2014
- Flags and Emblems of Stateless Nations, 2011

Currently President of the Japanese Vexillological Association (JAVA)

email contact [melnk@s04.itscom.net](mailto:melnk@s04.itscom.net)  
Tokyo, Japan

