

DOCUMENT READING

The writing on the back of a photograph

Two lines in Japanese, transcribed, translated and explained

Item	A photograph mounted on card, with two lines written in pen on the back
Images	2 (front and back)
Prepared for	Grandma Amy, from Ken and Lisa
Date	October 2026

Sample. The gift names on the cover are fictional; a gift order shows the names you give us.



Koseki Roots

AT A GLANCE

- **What it is:** a photograph of a young samurai (a member of the hereditary warrior class), with two lines written in pen on the back.
- **What it says:** two names of one man, Shibusawa Tokudayū (澁澤篤太夫) and Viscount Shibusawa Eiichi (澁澤榮一), one of the founders of modern Japanese business.
- **When:** the photo was most likely taken before 1867–68; the second line was written in 1920 or later.
- **How sure we are:** every character is readable. One is written in a quick form; note ① in section 4 explains it.

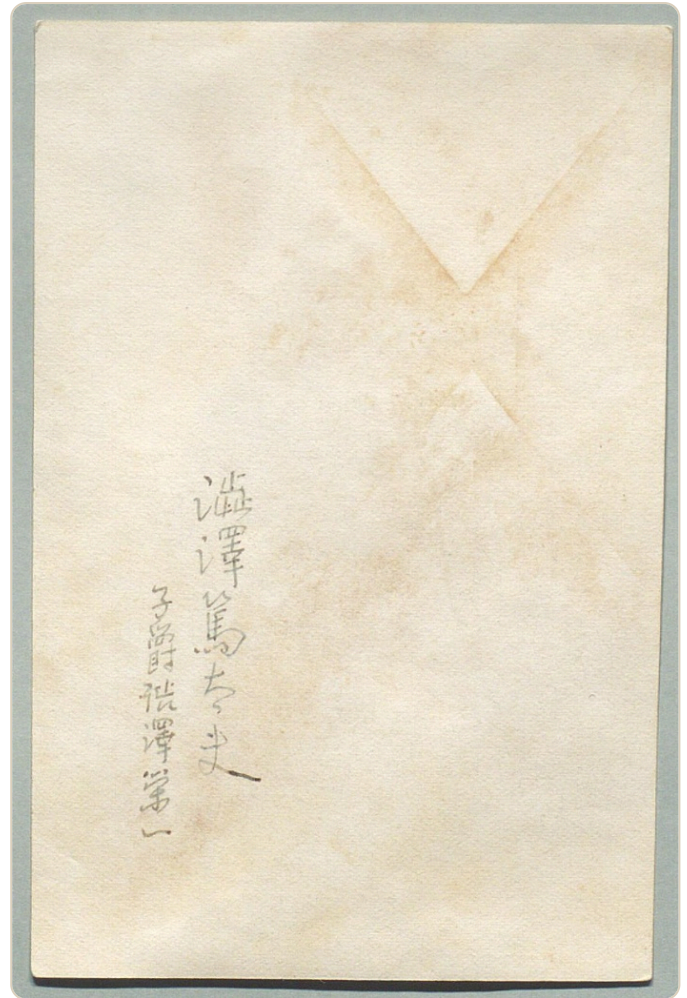
1. The item

A photograph of a young man, mounted on card about 6.5 by 10 cm (2.5 by 4 in). We measured the card against the scale in the library's image.

He stands in front of a painted backdrop. He wears a kimono (a Japanese robe) bearing a family crest (*mon*) and pleated trousers (*hakama*). He has two swords at his waist and his hair in a topknot. He holds a round, flat hat. On the back, two lines are written in pen, top to bottom.



Front (cropped).

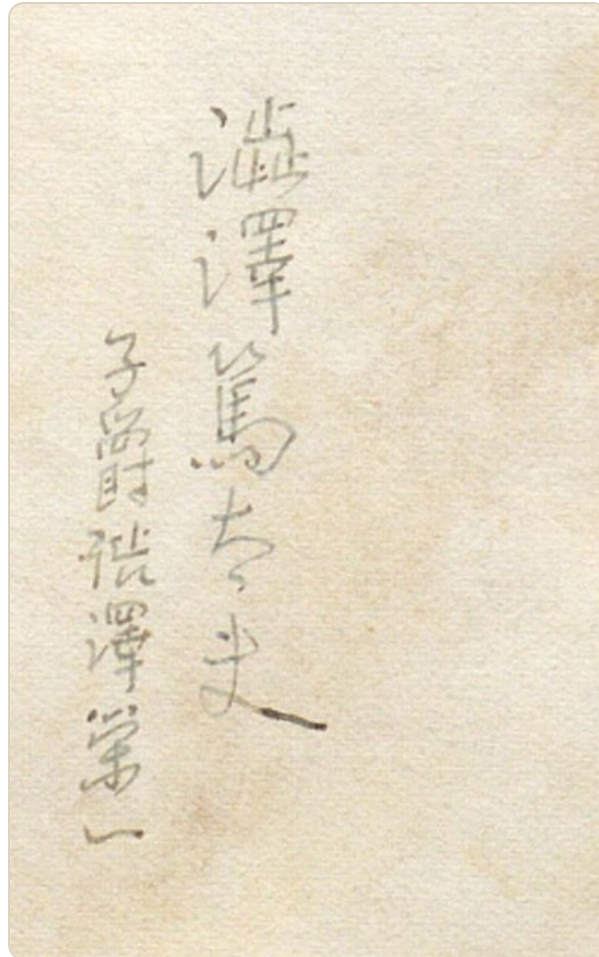


Back (cropped). The writing is in the lower middle.

National Diet Library of Japan, Akamatsu Noriyoshi Papers (赤松則良関係文書), item 111. Public domain.

2. Transcription and translation

Japanese written top to bottom is read from the right-hand line to the left-hand line, so line 1 is on the right. We copy each line character by character, then translate it.



The two lines, enlarged.

Transcription	Translation
澁澤篤太夫	Line 1 (right): Shibusawa Tokudayū 澁澤篤太夫
子爵澁澤榮一	Line 2 (left): Viscount (a hereditary noble rank; see section 3) Shibusawa Eiichi 澁澤榮一 (see note ① in section 4)

3. Notes on the names, titles and dates

- **Shibusawa** (澁澤). A family name. Both characters are written in their older forms; today the name is usually written 渋沢. Japan adopted simplified forms for everyday use in 1946.
- **Tokudayū** (篤太夫). An everyday name. Shibusawa Eiichi 渋沢榮一 (1840–1931), one of the founders of modern Japanese business and banking, used several everyday names in his life. He used this one from 1864, when he entered the service of the Hitotsubashi 一橋 house, a branch of the Tokugawa shogun's family (the shogun was Japan's military ruler until 1868). In 1867, he went

to the Paris world's fair (the Exposition Universelle) with the shogun's younger brother, Tokugawa Akitake 徳川昭武.

- **Viscount (子爵, *shishaku*).** A rank of the Japanese peerage (the hereditary nobility, which existed from 1884 to 1947). Shibusawa was made a baron in 1900 and a viscount in 1920 (the 9th year of the Taishō era, 1912–26). So line 2 was written in 1920 or later.
- **Eiichi (栄一).** His given name. Eiichi is the usual reading of these characters.
- **What the two lines tell us.** Line 1 gives the name he used in the 1860s, and line 2 the title he held from 1920. The two lines may have been written at different times, perhaps to identify an early photo for later readers. The back does not say who wrote them.
- **When the photo was taken.** He wears the topknot and two swords of a samurai (the hereditary warrior class). He cut his topknot during his stay in Europe in 1867–68, so the photo was most likely taken before then.

4. Notes on uncertain readings

1. ① The third character of line 2 is written in a quick form close to the simplified 栄. The older form, 榮, was standard in his day. Both are the "Ei" of Eiichi, so the reading is the same either way.

Every character on this item is readable. Where a character cannot be read, we put a question mark in its place in the transcription. Where two readings are possible, we give both, with our confidence in each.

5. What this means for a family item

On a family photo, the same kinds of clues can date the picture and the writing. They include an old or new form of a character, a title, or a name that a person used for only part of their life. In a reading for your family, this section says what the item tells you. It also names a record that could take it further, such as the koseki of the person named.

Sources

1. The item: National Diet Library of Japan, Modern Japanese Political History Materials Room, Akamatsu Noriyoshi Papers (赤松則良関係文書), item 111, "Photograph of Shibusawa Tokudayū" (渋沢篤太夫写真), 1 sheet, written in pen, with writing on the back. Digital image:

dl.ndl.go.jp/pid/11609395. The library marks this item as public domain (copyright protection expired) and allows free reuse without application: National Diet Library, reproduction of content (in Japanese). We cropped the images.

2. The Akamatsu Noriyoshi Papers: Akamatsu Noriyoshi 赤松則良 (1841–1920) was a naval officer who studied in the Netherlands from 1862 to 1867. National Diet Library, Research Navi: Akamatsu Noriyoshi Papers (in Japanese).
3. The everyday name Tokudayū, used from 1864 by Shibusawa Eiichi 渋沢栄一, and the cutting of his topknot in Europe: Japanese Wikipedia, "Shibusawa Eiichi".
4. Shibusawa Eiichi's life (1840–1931), his service with the Hitotsubashi house, his journey to Paris in 1867 and his ranks: Shibusawa Eiichi Memorial Foundation, "Shibusawa Eiichi Chronology" (in Japanese).
5. His rank of viscount in 1920: Shibusawa Eiichi Memorial Foundation, "Detailed Chronology: 1920" (in Japanese).

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As a rule, \$79 for up to 80 Japanese characters: the writing on the back of a photo, a gravestone, a memorial tablet or a short note. Tell us about the item first. We will send you a private upload code for the photo and talk it over with you before you pay. PDF in about 1 week after we receive your images; you pay only after we confirm your images are readable.