

## Review Essay

# Pacific Steerage: Japanese Ships and Asian Mass Migration

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In the first century of Asian migration to the New World, hundreds of thousands of Chinese, Japanese, Indians, Filipinos, and others made the long journey across the Pacific (and sometimes the Indian and Atlantic oceans as well). While such figures may seem modest when compared with the millions involved in the great trans-Atlantic migrations from Europe in the pre-1924 period, Asian migrations did add an important element to the peopling of the Western Hemisphere. Strangely, little has been written about how so many people were moved so far. This absence of information on how Asians actually made it across the oceans is both puzzling and bothersome.

A new resource that addresses this shortfall from a hemispheric perspective is a slender volume by the Japanese maritime historian Michio Yamada. *Fune Ni Miru Nihonjin Iminshi: Kasato Maru kara kuruzu kyakusen e* ["Japanese Emigration History as Seen Through Ships: From the *Kasato Maru* to Passenger Liners] was first published as a series of twenty articles in the magazine *Sekai no Kansen* ("Ships

of the World”) beginning in January 1994.<sup>1</sup> All of the prose was subsequently repackaged as a paperback (without significant additions but with a serious diminution in production quality) as *Japanese Emigration History as Seen through Ships*. Informal translations of most of the original articles have been done by these writers and a team of collaborators. In this essay, we hope to convey some of the substantive information presented by Yamada.<sup>2</sup>

There are depictions in the migration literature of early Chinese migrations to North America from the era of sailing ships, when conditions in steerage were not unlike those on the Atlantic. Even after sail was augmented, if not entirely replaced, by steam, it is presumed that conditions were little different. This changed when the Japanese government set out to develop a significant maritime presence and individual Japanese began to leave the home islands in significant numbers. Yamada picks up the story at this point.

Most of the documentation previously available was produced by the shipping companies themselves and focused on the cabin-class cruise experience. Their glossy magazines showed well-heeled passengers in glamorous settings, on their way to exotic destinations. The Toyo Kisen Kaisha (TKK) line, for example, had its San Francisco office publish both *T.K.K. Topics* and *Japan: Overseas Travel Magazine*. The latter was a lavish magazine that ran from 1911 until 1930. It frequently used the artwork of Berkeley-based Japanese artist Chiura Obata<sup>3</sup> [see Figure 1] to impart a sense of the japo-nesque to potential clients, while also using photographs to emphasize the plush, Western-style accommodations of TKK’s ships on the route from San Francisco to Asia. Never was there a hint of the many passengers in steerage who would not partake of this experience.

Yamada renders an important service by giving readers the steerage experience, as his depictions of life on board the emigrant ships—governance, self-organized classes and entertainment, meals, sleeping accommodations, water-rationing—have been

1. Michio Yamada, *Fune Ni Miru Nihonjin Iminshi: Kasato Maru kara kuruzu kyakusen e* [Japanese emigration history as seen through ships: From the *Kasato Maru* to passenger liners] (Tokyo, 1998).

2. The translations were done by Jeff Bradt, R. Douglas Welch, Tomoko Negishi, Yuko Okubo, Ann Sokolsky, and Wesley Ueunten, with editorial supervision by Robert Barde.

3. For the California career of the Japanese-born Chiura Obata, see Kimi Kodani Hill, *Topaz Moon: Chiura Obata's Art of the Internment Camps* (Berkeley, 2000).



Figure 1. Cover design for *Japan: Overseas Travel Magazine*, January 1925, by Chiura Obata; courtesy of Kimi Kodani Hill.

largely absent from the literature. Those who have read accounts of the Japanese migrations to various countries of South America (including Karen Tei Yamashita's historical novel *Brazil-Maruru*) will appreciate the details of life on board—not the “luxury cruise” life of cabin-class passengers, but the conditions and institutionalized activities that were part of the experience of the great bulk of passengers who traveled in steerage. In his youth, Yamada traveled on some of these same ships and verifies certain details from personal experience. These precious insights and the anecdotes of actual travelers are one of the major charms of *Japanese Emigration History as Seen through Ships*.

Leaving aside the anomalous 1868 sailing of the *Scioto* that brought the *Gannenmono* (or first group) of Japanese workers to Hawai'i, Japanese emigration relied on steam-powered, metal-hulled ships, covering a period from when Japanese contract laborers first went to Hawai'i in 1885 to the end of large-scale emigration to Brazil in the 1950s. Yamada asks such questions as: How and where were these ships constructed? How were they configured? What aspects of the immigration business determined their configurations? What was the steerage passenger's experience? Fully half of the book is devoted to aspects of the great Japanese migration to Brazil and the ships that were instrumental to it, with other chapters covering emigration to Hawai'i, to Australia, to Peru and Mexico, and, of course, to North America.

One is struck by the persistent differences in accommodations between Japanese emigration ships and passenger ships on the North Atlantic. Drew Keeling has pointed out that a “maritime enclosure movement” began on the North Atlantic in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, with lines such as Cunard converting to cabins the large, open, steerage quarters pictured in many articles about trans-Atlantic migration.<sup>4</sup> Yamada's evidence, including photos from the 1950s, shows that Japanese ships continued to employ the more open “steerage” concept (including the “silkworm shelves”—family-size sleeping platforms) long after Europeans had discarded such arrangements. In other work, Keeling has speculated that “better travel conditions, not lower fares, [were] the primary means by which steamship companies facilitated population

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4. Drew Keeling, “Freight and Steerage on the North Atlantic: Cunard and the Business of Migration, 1881–1914” [working paper prepared for the All-UC Conference in Economic History (2000)].



Figure 2. NYK Steerage. Artwork originally published in *Yusen Zue*, October 25, 1901, a guidebook for cruise ship passengers issued by Toyodo, a Japanese publishing company. This illustration shows steerage/third-class accommodations on an NYK ship. Courtesy of NYK Line, Tokyo.



Figure 3. Photograph of steerage/third-class accommodations on an NYK ship in the 1920s. Courtesy of NYK Line, Tokyo.

flows between the labor markets of Europe and the United States.”<sup>5</sup> Yamada, however, is reluctant to theorize on how the organization of the Japanese migration and shipping industries as a whole affected the “mechanics” of migration.

Many of the destinations for Japanese emigrants also received sizable numbers of migrants from China, most of whom sailed on Japanese ships. Unfortunately, Yamada does not tell us, among other things, what food the Chinese emigrants were served, if their passage was proportionately more (or less) expensive than that of (subsidized) Japanese passengers, and what the mechanisms were for signing up Chinese passengers and allotting them space. Still, Yamada offers intriguing glimpses into the accommodations provided for Chinese migrants. The layout of the *Anyo Maru* shows clearly how important the Chinese were to the economics of Japanese migration: It had space for 334 Japanese in steerage and for 304 Chinese. As for relations between the two groups, “On TKK’s passenger ships the atmosphere was traditionally one of warm hospitality toward the Chinese passengers. An opium den-style opium smoking room was furnished in the *Tenyo Maru* class steerage for Chinese passengers, but naturally the *Anyo Maru* had none.”<sup>6</sup>

A prized source of information is the historical novel *Sobo*, written by Tatsuzo Ishikawa in 1935.<sup>7</sup> Ishikawa traveled to South America as a special third-class passenger (i.e., not a contract laborer) on the *La Plata Maru*, returning on the *Buenos Aires Maru*. Yamada carefully mines *Sobo* for a passenger’s-eye view of life on board, especially of the accommodations where Ishikawa’s emigrants spent eight days before they boarded their ship.

In 1928 a facility managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was opened in Kobe in response to the private hotels’ inability to handle

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5. “The Transportation Revolution and Transatlantic Migration, 1850–1914,” *Research in Economic History*, 19 (1999), 39.

6. The *Tenyo Maru* and *Chiyo Maru* were put into service in 1908 on the North American route and were nearly twice as large as the *Nippon Maru* and her sister ships. These ships are presented in Yamada’s chapter on “The Anti-Japanese Exclusion and the North American Route,” in Yamada, *Fune Ni Miru Nihonjin Iminshi*, 33–44. The quotation is from Yamada, “The First Ship Specially Built for Emigrants, the Anyo Maru,” *Sekai No Kansen* (1993), 100; translated by Douglas R. Welch.

Relations aboard ship between Japanese and Chinese were not always harmonious. A headline in the October 11, 1915, *San Francisco Examiner* reported “300 Orientals in Deadly Fight on Board Ship”—a brawl involving the mixed Japanese-Chinese crew of the gigantic American ship *Minnesota*.

7. Tatsuzo Ishikawa, *Sobo* (Tokyo, 1935).



the large numbers of immigrants destined for Brazil who were part of the national policy of encouraging emigration. Prior to that date, emigrants had lodged in private facilities; Kobe alone had eight “emigrant hotels,” two-story wooden buildings in the port area, each capable of housing 100 emigrants. “Emigrants were very busy during their stay in Kobe. They had to obtain their own passports (which they had to apply for in their hometowns or prefectures), purchase their tickets, undergo physical inspections, get inoculated for diseases and checked for trachoma and hookworm, and have their baggage sterilized. . . . For emigrants, most of whom were farmers, the complexity of the experience taxed their bodies and minds.”<sup>8</sup> Yamada’s easy familiarity with emigration ships never obscures his empathy for emigrants facing the wrenching experience of leaving home and hearth for distant, not necessarily welcoming lands.

There are several caveats about using *Japanese Emigration History as Seen through Ships*. Since it was compiled for a popular magazine, readers looking for more than cursory information about sources will be disappointed. The economics of the emigration shipping business is barely dealt with. And Yamada has relied only on Japanese-language sources—not unreasonably, but, in several instances, his work would have benefited from consulting American sources (especially for Hawai‘i and California). These include such important works as John Van Sant’s *Pacific Pioneers: Japanese Journeys to America and Hawaii, 1850–80* and Alan Takeo Moriyama’s *Imingaisha: Japanese Emigration Companies and Hawaii, 1894–1908*.<sup>9</sup>

*Japanese Emigration History as Seen through Ships* avoids any in-depth discussion of diversity among the Japanese emigrants and how it affected social dynamics aboard the ships. Even today, Japan is by no means a homogeneous nation if we consider the regional, class, and even ethnic variation among its inhabitants. The large numbers of Okinawan emigrants, for example, were from a region that had been forcibly annexed by Japan in 1879, and differences from “mainland Japanese” in language, culture, and, to some extent, physical features would have been potentially explosive additions to the social dynamics on long sailings. Differences in class and

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8. “Kobe Emigrant Camp,” translated by Wesley Ueunten, in Yamada, *Fune Ni Miru Nihonjin Iminshi*, 146–164.

9. John E. Van Sant, *Pacific Pioneers: Japanese Journeys to America and Hawaii, 1850–80* (Urbana, Ill., 2000); Alan Takeo Moriyama, *Imingaisha: Japanese Emigration Companies and Hawaii, 1894–1908* (Honolulu, 1985).

educational background and, of course, gender differences among the emigrants no doubt played an important role in the social structure that emerged on board.

To paraphrase F. Scott Fitzgerald, “People who love ships are very different.” Yamada is one of those people. He does not quite refer to ships in the anthropomorphic way that is *de rigueur* in such journals as *The American Neptune*, but he clearly has an affection for ships and a feeling of intimacy with their “lives” and “careers.” To cite but one example, in one chapter he traces the earliest migration of Japanese contract laborers to Brazil, beginning in 1908 with the eponymous *Kasato Maru*. That ship had been built in England (as the *Potosi*), sold to the Russian Volunteer Fleet (as the *Kazan*), then seized by the Japanese Navy. It was later leased to TKK, then to the OSK line for carrying emigrants to Brazil, then sold several more times. Its last days were as a sardine fishery ship, finally sunk by Soviet forces off the Kamchatka Peninsula in the closing days of World War II. Yamada closes this chapter sentimentally: “I heard an old song playing on TV the other day. It told of the *Kasato Maru*’s last years as a fishing ship. I could not help but think back on that ship and its long, poignant history.”<sup>10</sup>

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10. Yamada, “First Emigrants to Brazil on the *Kasato Maru*,” translated by Tomoko Negishi, in *Sekai No Kansens* (April 1994), 116.