8 South Sea Romanticism and the Emergence of Frontier Tycoons

> It is of course necessary today to occupy islands large and small, and be they just coral reefs. I contend that deserted islands will become stations for the opening of the ocean … whoever owns more of them in the maritime world will be the ruler of the sea, the champion of ocean colonization!
>
> Shiga Shigetaka, *Mizu no kei'ei*, 1903

Pratas or "Dongsha" island is barely three kilometers long, enclosing a wide, shallow lagoon. The businessman Tamaoki Han'emon from Hachijō was sobered to learn from an expedition he sent there in 1901 that the low island yielded too little water for permanent habitation, and that the swarms of birds he had been told about were nothing like the giant albatrosses his business was reaping en masse back on his company island of Torishima. For several years, he had been looking for a suitable site to expand or relocate his company, since the albatrosses his business was culling in Torishima had declined sharply in numbers. Pratas, this remote "island under the Qing" west of Luzon and south of Hong Kong, had become engraved in the virtual geography of his native Hachijō when a crew of thirty-four had drifted there in 1866.[1] Carried south by a recirculation of the Kuroshio, the sailors entered the South China Sea when the current meandered across the Bashi Strait south of Taiwan. Yet contrasting the adventurous accounts that had circulated since in Hachijō, Tamaoki had to conclude that this desolate dune "did not yield a single useful product."[2]

The quest for claimable islands accentuated six years later, in 1907, when the reckless entrepreneur Mizutani Shinroku tried anew to colonize Pratas, spectacularly wrecking his *Taiwan-maru* in the attempt. The Bonin-based merchant had previously founded a bird-hunting enterprise on an uninhabited isle some 1,200 kilometers east of the Bonins,

[1] *Dai-Shinkoku hyōryūki*, in: TMET, Nagatoro ke-monjo.
[2] Cited in Hiraoka, *Ahoōdori to teikoku nihon no kakudai*, 2012, 223.

now known as Minami no Tori or Marcus Island, on a voyage back from the Caroline Islands on December 3, 1896.[3] In a rush to reach Pratas, Mizutani decided to have a steamboat tow the already battered hull of his *Taiwan-maru* to the isle, where the vessel was lost a day after the steamboat's departure. Some Chinese fishermen provided assistance, but Nishizawa and his crew of nine Hachijō and Bonin Islanders were rescued promptly by the steamboat *Fukushu-maru* three weeks later.[4] Experiences of drifting, wreckage, and abandonment were, at this point, a central element of narratives that established these frontiersmen as rightful claimants to remote isles, though not always to the same avail. Although Mizutani returned with much to say about Pratas's marine and aerial fauna, the Japanese Governor-General of Taiwan decided to grant the license to develop the island to a more reliable businessman instead. Mizutani's competitor Nishizawa Kichiji, an apprentice of Tamaoki's, reached Pratas just five months later, with a business plan that also targeted guano rather than birds alone. This enterprise soon developed into a uniquely autonomous private colony, named after its owner and paying its Hachijō laborers in a local currency, in harmony with its local "constitution."[5]

The history of these island colonies along the Kuroshio is intimately connected to Japanese myths of discovery and adventure at sea, and it built on networks of know-how and migration that formed out of village and island communities. Like the earlier bird-hunting colony of Torishima, the mine on "Nishizawa Island" was staffed with over a hundred migrant laborers from Hachijō, while Tamaoki's colony in Datiō relied on immigrants from both Hachijō and nearby Okinawa.[6] Given its history with government-led island "opening" projects under the shogunate, Hachijō figured as a particular hub of labor and know-how. Just like the much more numerous emigrants from Okinawa, who facilitated the transfer of agrarian know-how from the plantations of Hawai'i to the colonies of the Japanese Empire and later to Micronesia, Hachijō islanders formed migratory networks that eventually connected the Kuroshio islands to the empire's greater colonial projects in the Pacific.[7] These island "openings" were followed by the reading public, for whom politics and adventure novels merged into a romanticized view of the ocean frontier.

[3] *Torishima ikkatsu shorui*, p. 473, in: TMET.
[4] Kreitman, *Japan's Ocean Borderlands*, 2023, 81; Hiraoka, *Japanese Advance into the Pacific Ocean*, 2018, 121–23.
[5] Hiraoka, *Ahōdori to teikoku nihon no kakudai*, 2012, 222–29.
[6] Ibid., 227–29; Hiraoka, Hiraoka, Akitoshi 平岡明利. "Kita Daitōjima Ni Okeru Tōgyō to Kosaku-Chi No Tenkai," 1994, 205.
[7] Gotō, *"Nanshin" Suru Hitobito No Kin-Gendai Shi*, 2019.

This chapter observes the emergence of a new type of frontier tycoon toward the close of the nineteenth century, a stereotype carried by a wave of "South Sea Romanticism" in the literary and political spheres. These petty tycoons were distinct from the large corporations that had secured their share in the imperial project since the first years of the reform. Many of them in fact were former samurai in search of opportunity, which they sought in the colonization of the ocean. They transformed the insurgent demands of the People's Rights Movement of the 1870s into an expansionism from the grassroots, one that celebrated a "national right" to adventure and opportunity in the Pacific.[8] The pathos of drift and discovery, or survival in unwelcoming places, legitimized claims to private colonies and alluded to those castaways who, throughout the period of shogunal rule, subverted maritime prohibitions by surviving and returning. Time and again, frontiersmen raised claims to drifting and discovery of islands that had been vaguely known, but the still-incomplete charting of the ocean left room for outsized claims and promises.

Mostly, the islands these frontiersmen claimed were desolate places, yet their incorporation expanded the ocean frontier in contempt of the government's concerns over diplomatic conflicts. Tamaoki had gained public visibility when he was marooned on Torishima for several weeks in 1887, an episode that helped him gain a free lease over the island.[9] Mizutani proved a particular daredevil as he claimed the remote Marcus Island, running counter to governmental policies and testing the government's resoluteness by applying for a permanent loan of "Mizutani Island."[10] His unauthorized founding of a small colony there and his success in securing governmental approval after the fact underline how narratives of adventurous first discovery became a blunt but effective point of argument. Mizutani's applications for approval of the settlement he established there were in fact ignored until 1898, when the United States annexed Hawai'i.[11] Others, like Koga Tatsushirō, who appropriated the Senkaku (Diaoyu) islands in 1896, secured full approval of their colonies beforehand.[12] We will see how Tamaoki and his competitors

[8] Yanagita, "Seiji shōsetsu no ippan (2)," 1967, 445.
[9] An account of these events is found in *Torishima haishaku o-negai*, in: OVBE.
[10] Kreitman, *Japan's Ocean Borderlands*, 2023, 79–81. Hiraoka, *Japanese Advance into the Pacific Ocean*, 2018, 16–20. *Torishima ikkatsu shorui*, pp. 489–90, in: TMET.
[11] Hiraoka, *Japanese Advance into the Pacific Ocean*, 2018, 17–20; Kreitman, *Japan's Ocean Borderlands*, 2023, 79–81. Kreitman, "Feathers, Fertilizer and States of Nature," 2015, 56, has it that Mizutani claimed to have been "shipwrecked" on Marcus Island as early as 1892.
[12] Hiraoka, "Meiji-ki ni okeru Senkaku Shotō e no Nihonjin no shinshutsu to Koga Tatsushirō," 2005, 49. Eldridge, *The Origins of U.S. Policy in the East China Sea Islands Dispute: Okinawa's Reversion and the Senkaku Islands*, 2014a, 36.

and emulators operated below the government's radar and eventually connected the "opening" of islands in the Kuroshio region to the colonization of the Japanese South Seas Mandate in Micronesia. This romanticized culture of claiming developed within the Japanese discourse, where entrepreneurs primarily strove for official acknowledgment over competing claimants.

Many of these frontier businesses went after albatrosses, which they monetized as downs, decorative feathers, or as carcass-derived fertilizers, a phenomenon Hiraoka Akitoshi characterizes as the "bird rush."[13] The incorporation first of the Bonin Islands and, toward the close of the nineteenth century, a number of uninhabited isles, was perceived prominently in the public sphere and shaped expansionist ideologies in the realm of *Nan'yō-ron* or "South Sea Expansionism." Under the aegis of elite strategists such as navy minister Enomoto Takeaki, the autonomy in seclusion which many of these petty tycoons enjoyed proved formative for the emergence of a new type of colonial capitalism. Reminiscent of the "chartered company states" that appeared in the Scramble for Africa around the same time, or the rule Benjamin Pease had enforced in the Bonin Islands a few years prior, these petty empires continued to challenge the boundaries between business, state and – piracy.[14]

Oligarchy and Developmentalism at Sea

The Meiji period was an era of radical social and political change, but it was also a reality built on the experiences and assumptions of men and women who grew up under the Tokugawa shogunate. As previous chapters of this book have shown, especially during the last decades of shogunal rule, the general interest in naval technology and maritime exploration spread among intellectual and business elites. Even the revolutionary Sakamoto Ryōma resolved in early 1867 to "open" the (allegedly) newly discovered "Takeshima" island in the Sea of Japan – probably referring to the large Ulleungdo island off the Korean coast.[15] Ryōma's premature death upended these plans, but his native Tosa domain pursued the project with the support of the later shipping magnate Iwasaki Yatarō instead. Iwasaki undertook an expedition to Ulleungdo with the intent to erect a stela that declared: "Iwasaki Yatarō discovered this island at the

[13] Hiraoka, *Ahōdori to teikoku nihon no kakudai*, 2012, 110–12.
[14] Press, *Rogue Empires*, 2017, 6–8.
[15] Yamamoto, "Sakamoto Ryōma no Takeshima kaitaku keikaku," 2003, 60. The name Takeshima/Dokdo today commonly designates the contested Liancourt Rocks.

order of the Tosa clan of Great Japan."[16] Ulleungdo was of course neither uninhabited nor was it unknown to smugglers in Korea and Japan. Iwasaki's claim to "opening" the island had little to do with island development, rather, his was a tactical move to secure a route to Korea once a more liberal trading regime would have been imposed.

The episode illustrates how the boundary between state and private actors was fluid and negotiable in the reform era. Under the Tokugawa shogunate, Japan had seen the development of capitalist business practices such as wage labor, future markets, and subscription-based home delivery, and it saw the emergence of corporations that still weigh in on the global economy today. Capital-intensive enterprises often operated in close collaboration or with direct participation of shogunal or domainal state institutions, as, for example, the attempts at pelagic whaling under the shogunate illustrate (see Chapter 6). Conversely, infrastructure or development projects were often funded and executed by private entrepreneurs to enhance their standing with the government and on the market rather than to reap direct gains.

This relationship between business and state in the frontier changed significantly over the two decades following the Meiji reform. The Meiji oligarchs, whose emergence marked the establishment of a new social order, initially continued the practice of deploying private business to the Bonins, even ahead of the government's own ability to reclaim the islands. In early 1870, the third year of the Meiji era, the entrepreneur Iguchi Naosuke and his assistants traveled to the Bonins on the US post ship *New York* to explore the archipelago. Iguchi and his partner Tani Yōkei, both retainers of a high-ranking *kazoku* nobleman, obtained a personal permission from the foreign minister to start a privately funded colony in the islands.[17] It was made clear to the entrepreneurs that "the costs will be significant and the profit marginal, making it an uncertain mission for private capital. Therefore, this shall be done not just for the profit, but for the honor of it, so that we may see the colonization succeed at last!"[18] Yet despite the ready cooperation of Thomas Webb, who had served as the harbor pilot in Chichijima under the shogunate, Iguchi's assessment was sobering, and he aborted the startup. Almost immediately, the license was reassigned to Fujikawa Sankei's whaling corporation *Kaiyōsha*, which pledged to modernize the Japanese whaling industry with Western methods. In his business plan, which he

[16] Iwasaki-ke denki kankō kai ed., *Iwasaki Koyata Den*, 1950, vol. 5, pp. 430–31. Iwasaki traveled to Ulleungdo and spent as little as one or two days there in 1867, but it is unclear if this stela was ever erected.
[17] *Ogasawara-tō yōran*, p. 103, in: OVBE.
[18] Ibid., p. 103, in: OVBE.

submitted to Imperial Councilor Ōkuma Shigenobu (the later founder of Waseda University), Fujikawa claimed that his enterprise would bring three essential benefits to the empire:

> First, we aspire to increase the number of large ships and to provide the means to train sailors for national defense. Second, opening up the great resources of the sea will provide the basis for domestic strength and prosperity, and third, by colonizing peripheral islands we shall expand the map of our country.[19]

Whaling had long been linked to naval defense in theory, but the rationale that whaling fleets can form a self-financing naval defense facility proved faulty both technically, and due to the industry's global decline. Subsequently, the focus of private entrepreneurs shifted toward bird-hunting settlements, guano mines, and processing plants to be built on distant islands.

Although present-day apologists of industrial whaling in Japan like to stress the industry's long history, there is a notable caesura between its early modern and modern developments. After the decline of coast-based whaling businesses in the late nineteenth century, attempts to modernize the industry by moving it off shore failed repeatedly. It was not until after the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–1905 that "modern," pelagic whaling was introduced successfully to Japan, built on state-of-the-art technology and know-how from Norway.[20] The fact that these new whaling bases mushroomed mostly in locations without a previous history of whaling – industrial harbors emerged far from the secluded early modern whaling bases of Taiji or Muroto along the Kuroshio – underlines the rupture from networks of labor and know-how of earlier, proto-industrial whaling. In 1864, the Norwegian entrepreneur Svend Foyn (1809–1894) had developed a new model of the explosive whale gun the Japanese had already encountered in the Bonin Islands in 1861, one that was fired from a cannon mounted on a factory ship capable of also harvesting meat and bones.[21] The move offshore essentially dissolved the place-bound character of the early modern business and severed its networks of labor and know-how. In other words, the mechanical industrialization of whaling in Japan is characterized by a radically new type of large-scale and capital-intensive enterprises that operated over vast distances, rather than evolving out of early modern practices.[22]

[19] *Kaiyōsha dai'i*, p. 2, in: WUL.
[20] Holm, "Bringing Fish to the Shore," 2020, 3, 10–12. Norwegian vessels and whaling gear were among the spoils of war when Japan captured a Russian whaling station at Wonsan.
[21] Ibid., 4.
[22] Likewise, with mechanical industrialization, the *gōnō* farmer-entrepreneurs were displaced by more flexible urban investors. Pratt, *Japan's Protoindustrial Elite*, 1999.

By the time Japanese whaling businesses could have modernized into a veritable pelagic industry, tapping offshore whaling grounds with effective and wasteful technologies like the "bomb lance" whale gun, the heyday of whaling was long gone by (see Chapter 4).[23] By 1870, the whaling frontier had shifted to the northern rims of the Sea of Okhotsk, leaving the Kuroshio region with a sharply decimated whale population. Fujikawa's *Kaiyōsha* was ultimately brought down by the accentuated competition over declining coastal resources. Grievances uttered by fisherfolk in the Bōsō Peninsula concerning the effects of whaling on local sardine fisheries halted the start of the company's whaling voyages for several months before clear regulations for the industry were laid out.[24]

At least two more entrepreneurs attempted their luck with pelagic whaling out of the Bonin Islands between 1889 and 1891, but both businesses failed within a short period.[25] In a publication from 1896, the island governor complained that:

> Even now, we Japanese stand by idly and watch as guests from countries then thousand miles away raise myriad treasures, and we leave it to them to deprive us from great profits. I must say, this is truly sad. However, if sooner or later some men of high purpose made ambitious plans for the [whaling] business, these sources of wealth will be within reach for our country![26]

In reality, the number of foreign whalers cruising in the Japan Ground had been shrinking for decades as it became less and less profitable to seek out the dwindling number of cetaceans in the vast sea. Even the number of foreign traders calling in the Bonins hit zero in 1898.[27] The once-bustling whaling entrepôt of the Bonin Islands became a periphery, an experimental plantation in the Pacific.[28] It was not until the 1890s

[23] In 1862–1863, twelve foreign whaling vessels visited the Bonin Islands, of which nine sailed under the American, two under the Hawai'ian, and one under the Russian flag. *Ogasawara-tō fūdo ryakki*, p. 58, in: NAJ. Competing over a dwindling number of cetaceans, Yankee whaling had been in decline for well over a decade, and pressure on the industry increased with the commercial extraction of petroleum after 1857. Black, "Oil Creek as Industrial Apparatus," 1998, 210.

[24] *Ogasawara-tō yōran*, p. 104, in: OVBE.

[25] Yoshihara, *Bōnan hogei*, 1982, 61; *Ogasawara-tō yōran*, pp. 103–04, in: OVBE. In 1889, Kiino Kichibei, an entrepreneur from Izu, hired an American whaling expert and caught one whale near Hahajima, one more in the next, and a last one in 1891. On his last trip, Kiino got caught in a storm and lost his freight, the crew making it barely back to Shimoda.

[26] *Ogasawara-tō Yōran*, p. 258, in: OVBE.

[27] Ishihara, "Wasurerareta shokuminchi," 2007b, 62.

[28] The most prominent representative being Oligarch Enomoto Takeaki, the later founder of the *Colonial Society* that forestalled the annexation of Taiwan in 1893, had shared the public craze for plantation colonialism in the Pacific. In 1887, he authorized an

that the colony first became financially profitable thanks to sugar exports, but the experimental and ideological value sustained the government's increasingly unilateral management of the Pacific outpost.

After Japan's takeover of the Bonin Islands in 1875, the government had pursued a developmental strategy that incorporated semi-private businesses by granting exclusive monopolies. After his venture to Ulleungdo, Iwasaki Yatarō used the unstable economic policy environment to secure governmental flagship projects, establishing himself among the Meiji oligarchs. His *Mitsubishi Steamship Company*, the later Mitsubishi conglomerate, was privatized out of the estate of the former Tosa domain in 1871. Under Iwasaki, Mitsubishi outcompeted the state-backed *Japan Mail Steamship Company* within a few years, so that by the time of the Taiwan Expedition of 1874, Mitsubishi was the only domestic shipping company capable of supporting the naval venture logistically.[29] The bonds established through this public-private partnership in 1875 led to Ōkubo's proposition to offer the company governmental guarantees in exchange for the performance of assigned duties in shipping and naval defense.[30] This decision, again, reflects fiscal concerns about the cost of defense infrastructure and the government's interest in outsourcing as much of it as possible to commercially viable enterprises.

One of the "orders" (*meirei-jō*) issued to Mitsubishi was to provide a regular shipping connection to the Bonin Islands, with three annual connections at a rate of 3,000 yen per voyage.[31] Only when the Mitsubishi Steamboat Company attempted to enter the insurance business with its *Tokyo Marine Insurance Co*. in 1879 – the first insurance company in Japan – Iwasaki's rival Shibuzawa Eiichi and other voices from the business elite urged the government to prevent the shipping magnate from expanding its quasi-monopoly to the insurance industry.[32] Regardless, it was impossible for competitors to enter the Tokyo–Bonin route. When Tamaoki Han'emon, then working as a shipwright in Yokosuka, applied first for permission to engage in this island's "colonization (*kaitaku*)"

expedition of explorers and Journalists to Iōtō (also "Iwo Jima") that spread enthusiasm over the *Nan'yō ron* or *South Sea Expansionism* debate far beyond the intellectual elite. Hiraoka, *Ahōdori o otta Nihonjin*, 2015, 16–20.

29 Wray, *Mitsubishi and the N.Y.K.*, 1870–1914, 1984, 43–49.

30 Ibid., 78–81.

31 *Ogasawara-tō yōroku*, vol. 1, entry 81, p. 216, December 8, 1876, in: OVBE.

32 Sakamoto, *Sempaku Oyobi Tsumini to Kaijō Hoken*, 1922, 180. Japan's first shipping insurance, Tokyo Marine Insurance Co., was preceded in the insurance business by an unsuccessful attempt at a public social security insurance system in 1875, that, however, led to the founding of the life insurance *Meiji Seimei Hoken Kabushiki Gaisha* in 1881, which was, incidentally, also affiliated with the Mitsubishi zaibatsu. Moran, "Delivering Security in Modern Japan," 2018, 623; Wray, *Mitsubishi and the N.Y.K.*, 1870–1914, 1984, 43–47, 93–94.

privately, and later, in 1878, to operate a shipping line, the window for such state-sanctioned enterprises was already closed.[33] This deflected the attention of private entrepreneurs to more remote and less hospitable isles.

Rogue Business and the Making of Frontier Tycoons

As a public figure, Tamaoki Han'emon embodied the frontier pathos of Meiji Japan (see Figure 8.2). Starting with the isle of Torishima north of the Bonins, and later expanding to the Daitō Islands near Okinawa, the later tycoon eventually ruled several island colonies in the "nearer South Sea."[34] Born a commoner in Hachijō, Tamaoki had served as the chief carpenter in the shogunate's expedition to the Bonin Islands at age twenty-three, which was staffed with Hachijō islanders for geomantic considerations.[35] After his petition to participate in the islands' reclamation in 1875, the entrepreneur started a wharf in Yokosuka, but applied repeatedly for permission to trade with the colony despite Mitsubishi's shipping monopoly.[36] The resourceful networker eventually joined an expedition of politicians and journalists to "discover" the (already known) isle of Iōtō (also "Iwo Jima") in 1887 that was attentively followed by the public. As planned, Tamaoki disembarked on the uninhabited Torishima on November 5, which he examined for its commercial potential. The return cruise failed to pick him up due to bad weather, however, leaving Tamaoki marooned on Torishima. Shiga Shigetaka and other prominent journalists who had joined the expedition subsequently vented their indignation about the "pioneer's" poor treatment, making Tamaoki famous overnight. Within two months of his rescue in late December, equally well-noted in the media, Tamaoki was granted a free ten-year lease over Torishima.[37]

The business Tamaoki built in Torishima, staffed with laborers from his native Hachijō, ostensibly developed the barren isle by farming cattle, but its true business centered on the exportation of bird feathers and downs. Feathers were in high demand on international fashion markets. Within a few years, around 150 laborers killed five

[33] *Ogasawara-tō yōroku*, vol. 3, entry 55, p. 75. In: OVBE.
[34] The term *kin-Nan'yō* or "near Pacific" was coined by expansionist Shiga Shigetaka's 1889 publication *Kin-Nan'yō kikō* or "Records of a Trip to the Near Pacific." Hiraoka, *Ahōdori o otta Nihonjin*, 2015, 19.
[35] *Torishima ikkatsu shorui*, in: TMET.
[36] Hiraoka, *Ahōdori to teikoku nihon no kakudai*, 2012, 82; *Ogasawara-tō yōroku*, vol. 3, entry 55, pp. 75–77, in: OVBE. On Tamaoki's biography: Mochizuki, "Tamaoki Han'emon to Torishima kaitaku," 1992, 41–59.
[37] *Shiga Shigetaka zenshū* 1928 [1919], 106; Hiraoka, *Ahōdori o otta Nihonjin*, 2015, 16–20.

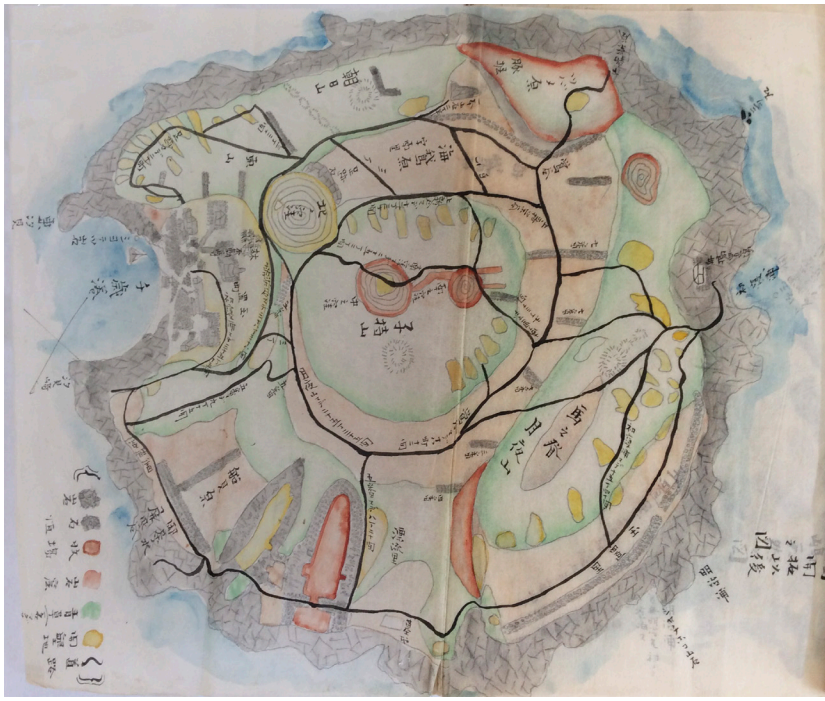

Figure 8.1 Representation of infrastructure development on Torishima Island (1898). This largely fictive map was attached to the self-assessment Tamaoki submitted to the government in 1898. *Torishima ikkatsu shorui*, image. 31, in: TMET, Acc. No. 625.D4.19.

million giant albatrosses, bringing the species to the verge of extinction.[38] When Tamaoki's lease was about to expire in 1897, a governmental inspector was first sent to Torishima. Outraged about the island's state, the inspector reported that, far from the infrastructure Tamaoki had claimed built in his re-application (Figure 8.1), the village consisted of a few miserable shacks and was lacking even a proper harbor facility. Regardless, the authorities decided to extend the powerful entrepreneur's lease by another ten years.[39] Before the end of this contract, however, a volcanic eruption in 1902 destroyed "Tamaoki Village" with all its inhabitants, leaving the island entirely

[38] Kreitman, "Feathers, Fertilizer and States of Nature," 2015, 56.
[39] Hiraoka, *Ahōdori o otta Nihonjin*, 2015, 32–36.

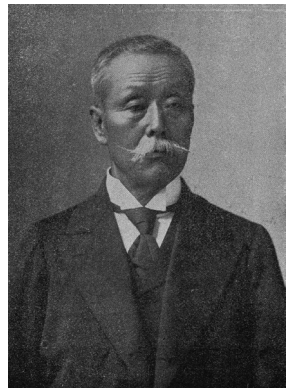

Figure 8.2 Portrait of Tamaoki Han'emon. In: NDL, Acc. No. 419-34.

uninhabitable.[40] *Tamaoki Trading Association*, however, had long entered into guano mining on Rasa Island near Okinawa, and ran a sugar cane plantation in the Daitō islands. The company later merged with the *zaibatsu* conglomerate Suzuki Shōten, and was later purchased by Dai Nippon Seitō sugar corporation. Under changing umbrellas, the island's management kept emphasizing the value of its autonomous administration as a laboratory for the empire's colonial management (Figure 8.2).[41]

Like Tamaoki, subsequent self-made entrepreneurs often substantiated their claims to uninhabited islands through experiences of drifting or shipwreck, a narrative that built on both the widely circulating reports of Japanese castaways such as Tosa no Chōhei or Nakahama Manjirō, and on the romantic idea of destiny and determinism embraced by exponents of the *Nan'yō-ron* or "South Sea Expansion" debate. In their literary versions, these frontiersmen became steeped in a pathos of adventure, discovery, subjection, and colonial rule and a presumption of racial hierarchy. The storylines increasingly turned ideology and frontier practice into a co-production of literary fiction and lived experience. (Figure 8.3)

Toward the century's close, rudimentary settlements set up by breakneck entrepreneurs lured there by the prospect of quick fortunes mushroomed throughout the frontier. In Torishima, Marcus Island, and even

[40] Hiraoka, *Japanese Advance into the Pacific Ocean*, 2018, 50. The explosion of Torishima was reported worldwide, also in the *The New York Times* of August 19, 1902.
[41] Dai Nippon Seitō ed., *Nittō saikin nijūgo nen shi*, 1934, 167–68; Hiraoka, *Ahōdori o otta Nihonjin,* 2015, 168.

near Hawai'i, Japanese laborers began to hunt albatrosses in quasi-autonomous, but mostly short-lived corporate settlements that, like Tamaoki's business, traded in feathers, downs, and bird-carcass fertilizers.[42] Off the government's radar, petty entrepreneurs settled on islands as far into the Pacific as Midway. These remote settlements were mostly seasonal and did not result in lasting Japanese presence, yet they posed a constant diplomatic risk.[43] Paul Kreitman has shown how seasonal bird-hunting settlements in Marcus Island, Midway, and Lisianski islands near Hawai'i led to a heated showdown with the United States over sovereignty and avian conservation.[44]

In the more stable settlements in the Senkaku and Daitō islands – the latter one surviving down to the present – near-extinction and resource depletion forced frontier businesses to explore new resources: In Senkaku, the "bird rush" was followed by bonito fishery, and in Daitō, down production yielded to guano mining and sugar plantation. These state-approved corporate colonies developed their autonomy to the point of issuing their own currencies that could be converted at the companies' headquarters.[45] As can be observed in the history of sealing and whaling stations or guano mines elsewhere around that time, unsustainable practices further necessitated continuous shifting from resource to resource and from island to island – a "frontier mode" of capitalist expansion, to use Jason Moore's term, that built on continued spatial expansion and paved the way to expand state control to the empire's maritime fringes.[46]

From Island Colonies to South Sea Mandate

Tamaoki's stranding and later business success in Torishima became the precedent to an expansionist momentum from the grassroots, followed and whipped up by novelists who celebrated and romanticized stories of drifting, discovery, and the sweet incantations of southern

[42] Kreitman, "Feathers, Fertilizer and States of Nature," 2015, 56, 146–55; Hiraoka, *Ahōdori o otta Nihonjin*, 2015, 22, 143.

[43] Hiraoka calculates that over fifteen years, the colony in Torishima with its 150 inhabitants must have generated a revenue of 1 million yen, the annual income of a laborer amounting to 80 yen. Hiraoka, *Ahōdori o otta Nihonjin*, 2015, 22; 143.

[44] Krietman, *Japan's Ocean Borderlands,* 2023, 106–10.

[45] E.g. on Nishizawa's Pratas Island, as well as in Tamaoki's Daitō island. Hiraoka, Ritō kenkyū, 2013, 228–29; Hiraoka, *Ahōdori o otta Nihonjin*, 2015, 166–68.

[46] Cawthorn, *Maori, Whales and "Whaling*," 2000, 1–17; Moore, "Sugar and the Expansion of the Early Modern World-Economy Commodity Frontiers, Ecological Transformation, and Industrialization," 2000, 411, 428–29.

Figure 8.3 Children holding tropical fruits, with the remark "approved by the military command of the Chichijima base, April 15, 1941." (*Senzen no Ogasawara no ehagaki*, images 68, in: OVBE, Dehumidified Closet, Compartment B-76.)

islands. Many authors of such educational novels or "*kairyō shōsetsu*," like Komiyama Tenkō, Suehiro "Tecchō" Shigeyasu, Suidō Nansui, and Chizuka Reisui had been politicized in the *people's rights movement* of the 1870s, which called for constitutional government, broader political participation, and a military intervention in Korea. These authors were affiliated with the *Rikken kaishintō* party, which emerged from and outlived the People's Rights Movement.[47] With the proclamation of the imperial constitution in 1889, the once-radical movement subsided, and many of the activists redirected their subversive thrust into expansionist literature.[48] Telling the adventures of young naval officers and other male protagonists, their novels propagated expansionism to the island Pacific or, in the case of Suehiro's *Furious Waves of the South Sea* (1892), the Philippines. For these "South Sea Romanticists," Tamaoki served as a model protagonist.[49]

[47] Daliot-Bul, "Hōchi's Strange Rumors," 2019, 324; *Kōdansha Encyclopedia of Japan*, "Rikken kaishintō."

[48] Some of the most influential early examples of "South Sea" Romanticism were Komiyama Tenkō's *Bōken kigyō, rentō daiō* "An Adventurous Enterprise, or: The King of the Lagoon" (1887) and Suehiro Shigeyasu (Tecchō)'s *Nan'yō no ō-haran* "Furious Waves of the South Sea" (1891), both propagating expansionism to the Pacific and the Philippines in a romanticized way. Also see: Peattie, *Nan'yō*, 1988, 14–15.

[49] Hiraoka, *Ahōdori to teikoku nihon no kakudai*, 2012, 29–31. Suehiro, *Nan'yō No ō-Haran*, 1892.

The myth of drift and discovery also surrounds the figure of Mori Koben, who reached Chuuk Lagoon in the Caroline Islands in 1892. As his story was later purported, the then twenty-two-year-old daredevil landed on the island of Moen in distress, having sailed there on the schooner *Tenyū-maru* of the Yokohama-based Nan'yō Trading Company – "all alone, drowning almost,"[50] as one epitaph gave it in 1940. Armed with a sword and a dagger, the story goes, Tamaoki came ashore defying the violent reputation the lagoon had long suffered. The tribes of Chuuk were indeed at war around that time, and Mori began to advise one tribal chief named Manuppis. But more than his strategic advice, it may have been the Murata repeating rifles Mori shipped from Japan that helped Manuppis destroy opposing tribes. These actions gained the Japanese the trust of the chief, who subsequently married off his eleven-year-old daughter to him, making Mori his heir according to the matrilinear tradition.[51] Subsequently Mori built a flourishing trading firm with the approval of Spanish, and later, German colonial authorities.[52]

Komiyama Tenkō's 1887 novel *An Adventurous Enterprise: The King of the Archipelago* seemed to anticipate Mori's life in Chuuk – or perhaps, it was the narratives built around Mori that affirmed romanticized ideas about the discovery and subjection of "South Sea" islands that emerged from this sort of literature.[53] In 1884, fifteen-year-old Mori had become politicized by the People's Rights Movement of his native Kōchi prefecture. When the movement escalated in the so-called Osaka Incident of 1885, when an attempted putsch in Korea and plans against the Meiji government came to light, his activism as an underage *kokushi* nationalist earned Mori a year in jail. According to various records, it was the serial novel *The Floating Castle*, published in 1890 in the newspaper *Yūbin Hōchi Shimbun*, that ignited Mori's fantasies about personal and national adventures in the Pacific.[54] The author, Yano Ryūkei, was a journalist and elite bureaucrat who has been labeled a utopist, a Jules Verne mimic, or Japan's first authentic science fiction author – all designations that also apply, and more obviously, to Oshikawa Shunrō

[50] *Torakku kaitaku-sha Mori Koben-ō shōtoku no hi*, EPIT, Tonoas Village, Chuuk/FSM. Transcript also published in Morizawa, "Truk no Mori Family," 1985a, 70.
[51] Peattie, *Nan'yō*, 1988, 28–30.
[52] Peattie, *Nan'yō*, 1988, 26; *Nan'yō guntō: nettai no Nihon*, p. 27, in: MARC, Mark Peattie Papers.
[53] Komiyama, "Bōken Kigyō," 1967 [1887].
[54] Peattie, *Nan'yō*, 1988, 27. On the wider reception of Yano's *Floating Castle*, see Daliot-Bul, "Hōchi's Strange Rumors," 2019.

and his *Amazing Island Adventures: The Seafloor Battleship*, published in 1900.[55] Yano's *Floating Castle*, anyway, was a meandering adventure and renegade story that, though it broke off mid-story, propagated perceptions of racial hierarchy, masculinity, and a presumed right to colonize among the Japanese public.

Mori embodied these attitudes as an opportunist who always chose his sides aptly. Immediately after Germany had purchased the Caroline Islands from Spain in the summer of 1899, Mori started working for the German *Jaluit Gesellschaft*, a fact that only became known after most of his Japanese coworkers at the Japanese South Seas Trading Company had been arrested and expelled by the new authorities in 1901.[56] Though he arranged himself with German rule, later accounts describe Mori as an ardent nationalist who, it seems, thought of himself as a pathbreaker for a future Japanese empire in the "South Sea." When the Japanese Imperial Navy eventually occupied Chuuk Lagoon in October 1914, Mori was appointed adviser to the Headquarters of the Japanese South Sea Islands Defense Force, a role in which he provided the navy with detailed intelligence on the islands. As his son Saburō remembered in 1967,

> He did not only convey the orders and guidance of the administration to the people, particularly to the Native islanders, but also, he worked hard for people to stick to the orders and guidance. For these efforts, he was given a 8th class order of the sacred treasure, and a war service medal."[57]

Mori had turned into a piece of colonial infrastructure.

Yorimitsu Shigechika, the local director of the Japanese colonial bureau (*takumushō*) later recalled about his appointment in Chuuk around 1938 that Mori "had the role of giving people the directions of the Japanese government, and if you do that directly, there will be friction." In this, Mori, the old man with pith helmet, stick, and white gloves was "more than just an authority, he was the general troubleshooter in Chuuk."[58] Fluent in Chuukese, Mori gave hourlong talks to Japanese settlers about the importance of language competence to effectuate planning and control. From the funds of his plantation business, the patriarch made regular donations to the local school. At one point, he even

[55] *Kokushi daijiten*, keyword Oshikawa Shunrō.
[56] Nakajima, "Meiji 34 nen no Truk zaijū Nihonjin zen'in tsuihō jiken," 1984, 65.
[57] Mori, "My Father, Koben Mori's Personal History," 1984 [1967], 66; Morizawa, "Truk no Mori Family," 1985b, 41.
[58] Morizawa, "Truk no Mori Family," 1985a, 70.

donated the skull of a Chuukese islander to Tokyo Imperial University of Science for its academic collections.[59]

All of this contributed to Mori's fame, to the point that he became a celebrity in the empire's popular culture as well. The popular song *The Chief's Daughter* by Ishida Ichimatsu hit the charts in 1931, alluding to Mori's romance with the daughter of Chief Manuppis. The song merged racialized tropes of savagery and violence with the prospect of conquest and sexual adventure in Japan's new *Nan'yō* territories:

> My lover is the daughter of the chief
> Her skin is black, but for a girl from the South Sea, she's a beauty
> Below the equator on the Marshall Islands
> I saw her dancing rhythmically in the shade of a palm tree
> Dance! Dance! And drink my rice wine
> I can't wait for tomorrow's head-hunting festival.[60]

Beyond the straight-out condescending attitude toward the "black" girl vying to marry a Japanese, the song calls up images of island paradises awaiting male Japanese adventurers with palm-shaded beaches, rice wine, and subservient Natives. The trope of interracial romance by that point had become a characteristic of Japanese *Nan'yō* fiction, an ambivalence between the possibility of Japanization and the urge to affirm markers of difference into a stereotypical Native culture.[61]

The life of Mori Koben, the patriarch of Chuuk, marked both the beginning and the end of Japanese Micronesia. Mori's health declined with the demise of Japanese power in the Pacific. On February 17, 1945, allied planes bombarded the Japanese fleet stationed in the lagoon, sinking dozens of ships, killing thousands and, over several months, starving out thousands more.[62] Though Mori remained unwounded in the allied bombings, the war chipped away his life. According to his sons, Mori fell into a state of coma just in time to avoid hearing the news of Japan's defeat. The "colonizer (*kaitaku-sha*) of Chuuk" passed away on August 23, 1945, just one week after the Emperor's radio-broadcast surrender.[63]

[59] *Mori Koben yori kifu ni tsuki kōshō kata Kōchi ken chiji he shōkai no ken*, in: TUGL, Acc. No. S0003/33/0055.
[60] Apparently first sung by nationalist students at a school in Kōchi in the early 1920s, the song *The Chief's Daughter* was picked up by the producers Suzuki Katsumaru (1904–1986) and Ishida Ichimatsu (1902–1956) and circulated in various versions.
[61] Sudō, *Nanyo-Orientalism*, 2010, 9.
[62] A firsthand memory of these events has been published in Strong, *Witness to War*, 2013.
[63] Morizawa, "Truk no Mori Family," 1985b, 51–52; *Torakku kaitaku-sha…* EPIT.

Tropes of Japanese *Nan'yō* Orientalism

Not unlike Western Orientalism, Japanese ideas about the Pacific were informed by racialized and gendered tropes of discovery and conquest. The projected island "paradises" were fashioned as savage and violent, at the same time that they promised sexual opportunity and were waiting to be tamed – all these are topics Edward Said has identified at the foundation of European Orientalism.[64] Japan's "*Nan'yō* Orientalism," as Sudō Naoto calls the genre, descended from a globalized genealogy of myths reaching from an early modern fascination with drifter reports from Pacific islands to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and the topos of the noble savage. The celebration of such drifter stories in the "political novels" of the late nineteenth century – a set of literature I have labeled above as "South Sea Romanticism" – consolidated narratives of destined discovery as a legitimization for private claims.[65] With characters such as Tamaoki Han'emon, Mizutani Shinroku, and Mori Koben, novelists could draw from model frontier tycoons, but soon it was the tycoons themselves whose purported biographies took on novelistic traits. This chapter has shown how the co-production of literature and expansionist practice merged into a broader culture of *Nan'yō* Orientalism.

These tropes pervade the representation of Pacific colonies throughout and beyond the half-century of the Japanese empire. It is widely believed that the popular graphic novel *Adventurous Dankichi*, a comic series profuse with racist stereotypes of "black-skinned" and dull-witted islanders, alluded to Mori's life in Chuuk (see Figure 8.4).[66] The series was published 1933–1939 in the youth magazine *Shōnen Club* and feeds into the same romanticism of drift, discovery, and ascent to island chiefdom that was already celebrated by authors in the previous century. The protagonist, a boy called *Dankichi*, drifts to an island in the south where he finds himself surrounded by a savage tribe and wild animals. Dankichi tricks the Natives by blackfacing with dirt at first, but soon he outwits the chief and convinces the islanders to name him their leader. Subsequently, he

[64] Said, *Orientalism*, 1978.

[65] These political novels have been described as two pronges of the same movement, the radical-liberal "people's rights novel" and the expansionist "national rights novel." Yanagita, "Seiji shōsetsu no ippan (2)," 1967, 445. Robinson Crusoe was among the first Western novels to be translated into Japanese, with manuscript translations circulating as early as 1848. Sudō, *Nanyo-Orientalism*, 2010, 26.

[66] This widely-circulating thesis was spread by the 1984 *Kōchi Shimbun* report cited in this chapter. One author responded casting doubt on the specific connection between Mori and the character of Dankichi. Morizawa, "Truk no Mori Family," 1985a, Nakajima, "Meiji 34 nen no Truk zaijū Nihonjin zen'in tsuihō jiken," 1984, 65. Either way, the parallels are telling about the general perception of Japan's relationship with its "South Seas Mandate."

leads the tribe to war against a rival clan and helps improve the islanders' primitive lives. Since the islanders all look the same, Dankichi at one point resorts to painting white numbers on their black chests. This inspires him to have his subjects form a human blackboard and to teach the islanders writing at an improvised school.[67]

In Dankichi's world, the islanders were waiting to be educated into law-abiding subjects: Japanese almost, but not quite. Different attributes of colonial power appear in the comic, and many of them reproduce a stereotype of colonial tropics coined in Africa rather than in the Pacific: Besides the Natives' skin color, dangerous animals such as lions, crocodiles, and giant snakes spiced up the story, creating a stereotypical colonial somewhere. Importantly, these tropes were influenced by American popular renderings of the Pacific, as Sudō Naoto has pointed out. The American cartoon *Betty Boop's Bamboo Isle*, was screened in Japan immediately after its publication in 1932 under the title *The Chief's Daughter*. As in the series *Dankichi*, which started the year after, the protagonist, a white boy character, blackfaces and is immediately made chief of the island. Unlike Dankichi, however, he is aggressed by the Natives when rain washes off the dirt from his face, and he flees together with the Chief's daughter. At the same time that they were globalized, the tropes of "*Nan'yō* Orientalism" in the Taishō and Shōwaeras kept referring back to traditional stories of drift and banishment by refashioning them, like Akutawaga Ryūnosuke's novella *Shunkan*, based on a story from the twelfth century, into romanticized narratives of island conquest and development.[68]

As Shiga Shigetaka, the influential *Nan'yō* expansionist, framed Japan's relationship with the Pacific after a government-sponsored expedition in 1887: "Our Japan is towering above the Pacific, as it overlooks the islands of the South Sea on its sunny side."[69] The romanticization of the "South Sea" as a space of adventure, discovery, and conquest was celebrated in novelistic publications that celebrated figures like the self-made island tycoon Tamaoki Han'emon, or the colonial patriarch Mori Koben in the Caroline Islands, whose lives I have outlined in this chapter. Navy minister Enomoto Takeaki and other elite strategists actively funneled the thrust of the People's Rights Movement into maritime expansionism. Novels and polemic debates that presumed romantic conceptions of destiny, discovery, and conquest, propagated exoticizing fantasies of southern island paradises.

[67] Shimada, *Bōken Dankichi*, 1976 [1933].
[68] Sudō, *Nanyo-Orientalism*, 2010, 32, 35; Shimada, *Bōken Dankichi*, 1976.
[69] *Nan'yō jiji*, p. 11, in: NDL.

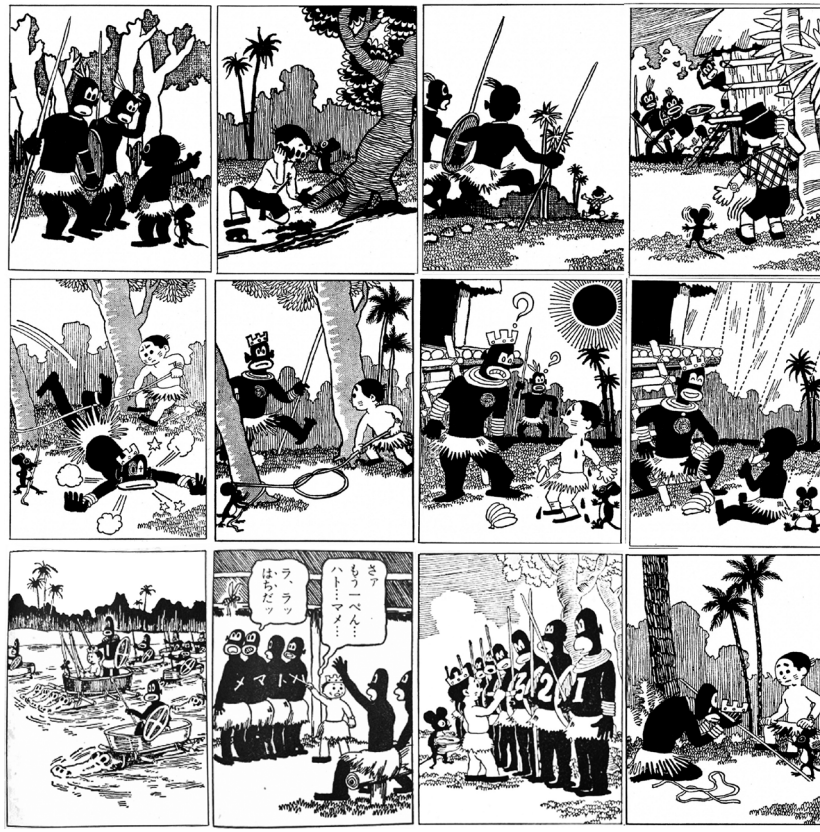

Figure 8.4 Scenes from Shimada's *Adventurous Dankichi* to be read from right to left. Shimada, *Bōken Dankichi*, 1976 [1933], vol. 1.

Over the 1890s, the craze for "South Sea" expansionism was only growing, and on the eve of World War I, Japanese leaders, entrepreneurs, and public intellectuals were obsessed with Pacific expansionism. Even government institutions believed firmly in the discovery of still-unknown southern island paradises, and sponsored sometimes hopeless explorations. In 1887, the gunboat *Amagi* was dispatched in vain to find the mythical island of ancestors *Pai-Patirōma*, which appears in folktales of the Yaeyama islands, and as late as 1913, a steamer headed out to explore an island Japan had claimed in 1907, only to find out it had never existed.[70]

[70] Taketomi-cho shi henshū iinkai, ed., *Taketomi-cho shi*, 2018, 295; Hiraoka, *Ahōdori o otta Nihonjin*, 2015, 98–115.

With Japan's takeover of the German South Sea colonies in 1914, the archipelagic empire expanded as far as the Caroline and Marshall islands, spanning thousands of kilometers of maritime space. The sea of islands embraced by the Kuroshio's fluctuating path had become the spatial and temporal nexus between the metropole and a greater oceanic empire.

By the 1930s, the systematic expansion of pelagic fisheries as a strategic industry turned virtually the entire Pacific into what William Tsutsui calls a "pelagic empire," detached from insular infrastructures.[71] Steady expansion into the Pacific continued independently of insular land bases. The pursuit of ever-farther tuna stocks, a rare treat in Japan before 1900, became "symbolic capital," writes Nadin Heé, when the "victory fish," *katsu-uo* was celebrated as the empire's most essential resource in the 1930s. Subsequently, the race for tuna in the "South Sea" was portrayed in imperial propaganda as a race to drive out foreign fisheries. The search for ever-new fishing grounds had made the deep-diving fish both an important source of protein, and a cash commodity to quench the empire's thirst for imported fuel.[72] The archipelago's resource base kept expanding horizontally and vertically, in ways invisible to terrestrial maps.

With the permanent colonization of the Korean Peninsula in 1910 and the installation of Manchukuo two decades later, Japan's archipelagic empire eventually crept ashore on the East Asian continent. The "opening" of islands along the Kuroshio current and in more distant zones of the Pacific had been a formative process for private and state-led colonization – and for the public perception of lasting colonial tropes pertaining to the "South Sea." Decades before its colonialism on the continent, the gentle beaches of the Kuroshio frontier had offered a sandbox for Japan's colonial expansion, yet it was in the depths of the ocean that this hubristic project was ultimately wrecked in a fatal Pacific War.

[71] Tsutsui, "The Pelagic Empire," 2013, 31.
[72] Heé, "Tuna as an Economic Resource and Symbolic Capital in Japan's 'Imperialism of the Sea,'" 2019, 215–18.