

THE DEVELOPMENT OF JAPANESE JOURNALISM

CHAPTER I

THE PRE-JOURNALISTIC PERIOD

The mission of present-day newspapers was achieved in olden days by folk songs which were made to prevail among the people, and by scribblings on the walls of houses. However, the news conveyed in this way was often mingled with some piquant criticisms or witty warnings as to the politics of those days. Later there appeared what was called 'yomiuri' (selling by reading aloud), 'ezoshiuri' (selling illustrations), or 'fure-uri' (selling by announcing news). These names came from the fashion of selling sheets of paper with illustrations of striking news. These sheets were also called 'seki-ban' or 'kawara-ban', meaning respectively 'stone impression' or 'slate impression.'

The name of 'seki-ban' first appeared in Japanese literature in the periods of Horeki (1751-1763) and Meiwa (1764-1771). As to the origin of the name of 'kawara-ban', nothing is yet known.

Although these sheets were called 'seki-ban' or 'kawara-ban', the copies of most of these papers now remaining show us that they were printed from wood cuts and not with slates.

But it is surmised that the original method of printing was to make impression with slates and even when the method was changed the first name was allowed to remain.

Regarding the slate impression, the oldest papers in existence are the two sheets issued in the years of Genna (1615-1623). They were illustrations of the siege of Osaka Castle by the Tokugawa army in May, 1615. One of the pictures shows the castle in flame under cannon fire and the soldiers of both camps fighting hand to hand. The other shows Hideyori, lord of Osaka Castle, and Yodogimi, his mother, escaping from the castle, accompanied by their retainers. These prints were widely sold in Osaka, Kyoto and environs in those days.

The author of these pictures is supposed to have been none but Iyeyasu himself. He distributed the news of his victory throughout the country to influence the feudal lords to aid him in his work to unify Japan under his command.

Later, in 1701, a popular print was made and sold the day after the famous forty-seven ronin

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vendetta was accomplished, which took place the night of December 14, 1701. Among others now remaining are the prints of big fires, great earthquakes, famous double suicides, floods, visits of foreigners to Japan, and so forth.

In the Genroku era (1688-1703) love ballads became popular and every sensational love affair was hawked by the ballad singers on the streets. This was one of news distributing devices in those days. The romance of Okichi and Seiza was one of the most famous love incidents in the Tokugawa period and it became a heated subject for old news prints and street ballads.

The following is a translation by Lafcadio Hearn of one of the popular street ballads of those days sung by the wandering banjo players:

Now hear the pitiful story of two that died for love. In Kyoto was the thread shop of Yoemon, a merchant known far and near, a man of much wealth. His business prospered; his life was fortunate. One daughter he had, an only child, by name O-kichi: at sixteen years she was as lovely as a flower. Also he had a clerk in his house, by name Seiza, just in the prime of youth, aged twenty-and-two.

Yanrei! (Refrain for Pause)

Now the young man Seiza was handsome; and O-kichi fell in love with him at sight. And the two were so often together that their secret affection became known; and the matter came to the ears of the parents of O-kichi; and they, hearing of it, felt that such a thing could not be suffered to continue.

Yanrei!

So, at last, the mother, having called O-kichi into a private room, thus spoke to her: "O my daugh-

ter, I hear that you have formed a secret relation with the young man Seiza, of our shop. Are you willing to end that relation at once, and not to think any more about that man, O-kichi? Answer me, O my daughter."

Yanrei!

"O my dear mother," answered O-Kichi, "what is this that you ask me to do? The closeness of the relation between Seiza and me is the closeness of the relation of the ink to the paper that it penetrates. Therefore, whatever may happen, O mother of mine, to separate from Seiza is more than I can bear."

Yanrei!

Then the father, having called Seiza to the innermost private room, thus spoke to him: "I have called you here only to tell you this: You have turned the mind of our daughter away from what is right; and even to hear of such a matter is not to be borne. Pack up your things at once, and go! To-day is the utmost limit of the time that you remain in this house."

Yanrei!

Now Seiza was a native of Osaka. Without saying more than "Yes, yes", he obeyed and went away, returning to his home. There he remained four or five days, thinking only of O-kichi. And because of his longing for her, he fell sick; and as there was no cure and no hope for him, he died.

Yanrei!

Then one night O-kichi, in a moment of sleep, saw the face of Seiza close to her pillow, so plainly that she could not tell whether it was real, or only a dream. And rising up, she looked about; but the form of Seiza had vanished.

Yanrei!

Because of this she made up her mind to go at once to the house of Seiza. And, without being seen

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by anyone, she fled from the home of her parents.

Yanrei!

Arriving at last before the house of Seiza, she took off her travelling hat of straw; and seating herself on the threshold of the entrance, she cried out: "Pardon me kindly! Is not this the house of Master Seiza?"

Yanrei!

Then—O the pity of it! She saw the mother of Seiza, weeping bitterly, and holding in her hand a Buddhist rosary.

Yanrei!

"Alas!" said the weeping mother, "Seiza, whom you have come so far to see, is dead. To-day is the seventh day from the day on which he died."...Hearing these words O-kichi herself could only shed tears.

Yanrei!

Another interesting wood cut print was issued when the Japanese coasts were first visited by a fleet of American ships. It has a picture of four big American ships in port at Uraga, with an explanation that on the night of June 3, 1850, American ships came to Uraga and the ships were 75 ken in length, one ken being six feet, with 13 sails and 18 guns.

A map of the Osaka fire on June 13, 1856, still remains. It is a map of streets destroyed by the fire, but how useful it was can easily be imagined when we remember we had the same experience last year in the Tokyo fires which followed the great earthquake. We remember in the commotion after the quake and fire, no papers were issued, but a small sheet of paper printed with a limited number of large types, as almost all the types for hand setting were shaken down on the floor and the gas supply was cut off on account of damage to the gas system. Such a sheet was enough to report to the citizens how many persons were killed, how many bales of rice were imported from Osaka for relief, where field hospitals were opened, where building materials were to be obtained, how often after-shocks might be experienced and various other things which the public wanted to know. Even those who scorned the importance of newspapers realised their vital necessity to the community. It is easy to imagine, therefore, that the sheets of prints in the Tokugawa periods, however small in size, served as newspapers and were naturally popular among the citizens.