The Development of the Japanese Shipping Industries in the Post-War Era

INTRODUCTION

The history of modern Japan began in 1853 with the arrival of Commodore Perry of the U.S. Navy in what is now Tokyo Bay. His visit marked the end of two and a half centuries of isolation during which Japan had been almost entirely cut off from the technical advances that were being made in the West. This “Era of Seclusion” had particularly severe consequences on shipping for all overseas trade and voyages were banned and only the coasting sector of the industry survived. This, however, did continue in a vigorous manner and Japanese “wasen” – traditional small, wooden, sailing ships – carried cargoes of rice, saké and fruit from outlying provinces to the major centres of population at Edo (Tokyo) and Kyoto.

The political consequences of Commodore Perry’s arrival were dramatic. The existing Tokugawa regime, which was already weak, found itself in an impossible position. On the one hand powerful elements in Japan insisted that the traditional policy of excluding foreigners be continued while, on the other, it was aware that this was not a practical course of action. A considerable controversy then arose and the position of the Tokugawa government gradually deteriorated as it was obliged to make concessions to the United States and then to all the major European powers. These difficulties came to a head in 1868 and the Shogun resigned by transferring his authority back to the Imperial throne. As the Emperor Meiji was then a boy of only thirteen this meant that power was assumed by a group of his advisers and it was under their guidance that Japan accepted the need to adopt Western technology and practices.

Following what has become known as the Meiji Restoration the new government was faced with the immense task of modernising virtually every aspect of the country’s economic, social and political life. From the very beginning, however, shipping was given a high priority. This was because it was firmly believed that it was the West’s control of communications that had enabled it to exploit the trade and resources of China and of the East. In the first instance, therefore, Japan was determined to retain its coastal trades in its own hands and then made every effort to
support attempts by its own nationals to break into the short-sea and, eventually, the ocean routes which would link it with the outside world. Such was the success of this policy that the Japanese ship-operating industry grew rapidly and by 1910 it comprised over 1¼ million net tons and was employing the world’s third largest ocean going fleet after the U.K. (over 12 million tons) and Germany (near 3 million tons) (see Table 1).

Japan’s shipbuilding capacity had grown more slowly because of its lack of efficient steel and engineering industries but by 1914 it was capable of constructing virtually every type of vessel. However, as its costs – even with the advantage of low labour charges – were still above the international level, it could not export and approximately 50% of its domestic requirements were purchased from abroad. Nevertheless, its annual production had by then reached 86,000 gross tons which placed it in sixth place after the U.K. (1,680,000 g.t.), Germany (387,000 g.t.), the U.S.A. (201,000 g.t.), Holland (188,000 g.t.) and France (114,000 g.t.) (see Table 2).

The First World War saw a great expansion in both ship-operating and shipbuilding but both sectors lost much ground in the early post-war era. Ship operators were the more successful. By adopting advanced design motor ships they gained a foothold in a number of the more profitable routes (especially to New York). They also competed at the bottom of the market with Greek owners by utilising substandard vessels and poorly paid crews. This enabled the merchant fleet to grow, but its average age gradually increased and, apart from a smallish number of modern ships, it was characterised by poor quality and a low level of efficiency. It was only the moderate wage costs, then, which allowed it to remain cost-effective.

In 1919 shipbuilding returned to the production of 1914 and only slowly recovered. It still had a significant cost disadvantage compared with the West – especially Britain – and there is no record of any commercial ship exports during the whole of the inter-war period. After c. 1931 – and particularly after 1937 – both industries were moved on to a war-time footing and their activities were directed by strategic as well as economic considerations.

THE SECOND WORLD WAR

At the beginning of the war with Britain and the U.S.A. in December, 1941, Japan possessed a merchant fleet of just under 6 million gross tons plus a large number of wooden coastal and fishing vessels totalling 1.1 m. tons. During the war 3.3 m. tons were constructed (less than might have been expected because of the demand for naval ships) and many were captured but losses were so severe that only 1.5 m. tons remained at the end of hostilities. Of these only 557,000 tons were operable (see Table 3).

Construction of wooden ships was also undertaken but, again, failed to keep pace with sinkings. As a result only 244,000 tons survived in August, 1945, and only 105,000 tons remained serviceable. Losses were sustained as follows:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Submarines</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>Mines</td>
<td>4.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrier Aircraft</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>Surface ships</td>
<td>1.00%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Land based Aircraft</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>Misc.</td>
<td>4.25%</td>
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