Japanese Shipping and Shipbuilding: An Introduction to the Motives Behind Its Early Expansion

I

When the Meiji Government came to power in 1868 it quickly decided to give a high degree of priority to the development of its shipping industry. This was then technically very backward and so undoubtedly required much support if it were to compete with international rivals. However, in view of the other enormous tasks facing the new Administration it is a matter of some debate as to what persuaded the ruling elite to favour this course of action.

Some scholars, including Professor Kunio Katayama, are convinced that their prime motivation was commercial while others, including myself, believe that this was secondary to what were essentially strategic decisions designed to strengthen Japan’s imperialistic ambitions.

It is hoped that this paper will make a useful contribution to this discussion by outlining the relevant events. These will then be analysed and a tentative conclusion will be suggested.

II

Prior to the Tokugawa period Japanese vessels had ranged over large areas of what is now known as Indonesia, the Philippines and even parts of Australia as well as the Asian mainland. The onset of the Era of Seclusion ended any long-distance voyages and the only journeys which were permitted were by small, wooden, sailing vessels known as Wasen. These provided inter-island and coastal services which, given the geography of Japan, were vital to maintain the economy. Indeed without them it would certainly not have been possible to have fed the population of Tokyo which had reached one million by 1800. Over the era many improvements were made to the Wasen but the arrival of Commodore Perry in 1853 showed the enormous extent to which Japanese shipping technology had fallen behind that of the West.

Over the next 15 years this topic was widely discussed amongst the ruling elite.
This was partly because it was believed to be the key to colonial expansion and the domination of trade which the Western powers were exploiting so successfully.

As a first practical step the Shogunate and many of the Hans acquired technically advanced ships – sail from North America and steam from mainly Britain – so as to gain experience with the latest developments; but little could be achieved until after the formation of the Meiji Government in 1868.

When this came to power it faced the need to undertake the complete modernization of Japan’s armed services and its political, economic, educational and social institutions. Nevertheless the new regime indicated that it was prepared to give the creation of modern shipbuilding and ship-operating industries considerable support. The vessels it had inherited from the Shogunate plus a number that were acquired when the Government replaced the old Hans with Prefectures in 1871 were placed in a state-controlled concern which then attempted to run commercial services. These proved to be unsuccessful, partly because of an unsuitable structure but mainly because of the competition provided by a private Line which by 1874 had become known as the Mitsubishi Shokai.³

In the same year Mitsubishi’s enterprise in operating viable services between Tokyo, Osaka and Kochi was strengthened by an unexpected bonus. The Japanese Government had planned a military expedition to Formosa on the basis that their troops would be carried in chartered, foreign vessels. When this proposal was vetoed by the principal powers it was decided to use Japanese tonnage and thirteen steamships were purchased for this purpose. These were entrusted to Mitsubishi who managed them for the length of the campaign. Then, when it had been successfully concluded, the Government showed its gratitude by allowing Mitsubishi to retain the vessels for a purely nominal fee.

This generosity was not without reason. The Government appreciated that at this stage of Japan’s economic development one strong Line was preferable to a number of weak ones and so it gave all of its support to what it regarded as the most promising firm. This was further demonstrated when the state divested itself of all its remaining vessels which, again, were handed over to Mitsubishi at nominal cost.

These events then encouraged the Company, now re-constituted as the Yubin Kisen Mitsubishi Kaisha to increase the range of its activities. It established its own marine training school so that a start could be made in the replacement of expatriate deck officers with Japanese nationals. Then, with the aid of its additional capacity Mitsubishi further developed its coastal routes and also commenced a new service between Yokohama and Shanghai. The inauguration of this China Line brought the firm into conflict with the (American) Pacific Steamship Company and this was only ended when Mitsubishi (with the aid of the state) was able to buy the ships and the shore facilities which their rivals had utilised on that route. Mitsubishi’s strength was further tested when, in 1876, the P & O Line attempted to secure a footing in the trade. A six-months’ freight war followed before the British Company was obliged to give up the fight.⁴

In 1877 the outbreak of the Satsuma Rebellion gave Mitsubishi a second opportunity to aid the state. With the exception of those vessels employed on the Shanghai run all of its tonnage was placed at the disposal of the Government. The excellent relationship which this engendered can be judged by the high level of support which Mitsubishi received to aid its commercial activities once the revolt had been put down. However, the very size of the grants given by the Reform Party,