CHAPTER ONE

JOSEPH HECO AND THE KAIGAI SHINBUN

Having met three American presidents, obtained American citizenship, and been baptized as a Catholic, Joseph Heco—the former castaway Hamada Hikozō—was well poised to found the first periodical of world events in the Japanese language. This chapter will address in detail the two newspapers Heco founded in Yokohama, the Kaigai Shinbun 海外新聞 of 1865–1867 and an earlier iteration, Shinbunshi 新聞紙. Though both were distressingly short-lived, the scope and influence of their readership cannot be denied.1 Heco arrived in Japan in 1859 and served as an interpreter to the American Legation until February 1860, when he resigned to set up his own trading company in Yokohama. He noted in his autobiography that many Japanese merchants were originally quite hesitant about setting up shop in the new settlement, but his hope was that as a Japanese person who understood Western business practices, he might be able to mediate between the two cultures:

Since the opening of the place to trade, foreign merchants and dealers have been swarming into Yokohama from the China ports and elsewhere. On the other hand the natives have been flocking into the town from all parts of the country... But very few folks of good name and repute responded to the inducement, and those who came were mostly broken men, mere adventurers and speculators who had but little to lose and possibly something to gain. And this was so, it was reported, because respectable persons were afraid to come in contact with the foreign “barbarians,” with their strange speech and uncouth, outlandish ways.2

Unfortunately, many Japanese considered Heco a “foreign barbarian” as well, and as the fever pitch of sonnō jōi (“revere the emperor, expel the

---

1 The term “newspaper” is used with some reservation, as it immediately brings to mind an image of the contemporary newspaper: large enough in size that two hands are required to hold it, typeset in columns of rather small print, and often folded rather than bound. The newspapers under consideration in this chapter were closer in appearance to Japanese books—printed off woodblocks, and stitched together with a front and back cover. Altman neologized the term “newsbooks” to circumvent this issue; see his “The Press,” in Japan in Transition: From Tokugawa to Meiji, ed. Marius B. Jansen and Gilbert Rozman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 236ff.

barbarian”) xenophobia swept through Japan in the early 1860s, Heco was made aware of many threats made on his life. These threats—plus the brutal killings of several foreigners in Yokohama that followed on the heels of Ii Naosuke’s assassination in 1860—convinced Heco to return to the United States for his own safety in the autumn of 1861.

Anchoring in New York some two months later,

the pilot came on board with an armful of newspapers, [and] our passengers fell upon them with great avidity, for they were all wild to learn the war news.3

To Heco, it was clear that his adopted country was at war, of course, but also that the newspaper had taken on a renewed importance as a source of information in the two years he had been absent from the United States. Firsthand war reportage, communicated via telegraph, was reinventing the way Americans understood their world. After a busy ten-month jaunt in the United States—during which period he was momentarily (but mistakenly) arrested as a Confederate spy and later briefly met President Lincoln—Heco returned in 1862 to a country as chaotic and dangerous as the one he had left. This time, however, he was back to stay.

Heco and Newspapers

Heco had evinced an interest in newspapers since his earliest days in the United States. The California Daily Courier noted in its edition of March 17, 1851, that the Japanese castaways had made a visit to their offices and inspected the type, presses, and other equipment.4 Heco makes repeated mention of newspapers in his autobiography Narrative of a Japanese and lists among his friends a newspaper editor named Wallace and a reporter named Denman. In an entry from 1857, he notes with pleasure that a well-placed letter in the Washington Globe detailing his life “excited curiosity” about him in Washington circles, so much so that “the residents of the place became very friendly and invited me to dinner and evening parties and so forth.”5 Doubtless the Globe was not the only newspaper on Heco’s reading list during his long stay in the United States, given his facility with

---

3 Ibid., p. 282.
5 Heco, Narrative of a Japanese, vol. 1, p. 150.