

A Vision of Transpacific Expansion from the Periphery

In late nineteenth-century Japan—between the time the country fully opened its ports to trade and the time it began building oceangoing steamers in its own shipyards—empire was a fertile ground for imagination. One place that loomed large in Meiji colonial discourse was Nan'yō (the “South Seas”). Its distant promise as a tropical utopia inspired a flurry of writing, firsthand as well as fictional, about southbound voyages to islands “still unclaimed” on the map of the globe. “Our future lies not in the north, but in the south, not on the continent, but on the ocean,” journalist Takekoshi Yosaburō declared in a popular account of his 1909 journey to Nan'yō, urging his readers to join in the grand task “to turn the Pacific into a Japanese lake.”¹ But Takekoshi's famed call for southern advance (*nanshin*) was built on a generation of Japanese thinkers before him—many all but forgotten—who had begun to outline strategies for transforming their insular nation into a maritime empire.

One of the young visionaries who gave shape to such hazy dreams of overseas glory was Sugiura Shigetake (also Jūgō; fig. 3). Born and raised in the province of Ōmi, Sugiura was one of the earliest Japanese to advocate expansion beyond the colonization of Hokkaido. In contrast to his better-known contemporaries such as Takekoshi, Sugiura “operated behind the spotlight” for most of his life as a “hidden patriot,” according to one biography. Yet his career arc reveals a man who imposed his vision everywhere on the Meiji public sphere, serving as educator, journalist, Diet member, nationalist, and Pan-Asianist before spending his last years as an ethics tutor to Crown Prince Hirohito.² Of the many identities Sugiura donned, his role as an early exponent of empire remains most unexplored, in spite of the fact that his ideas filled the national dailies he edited in the closing decades of the nineteenth century.

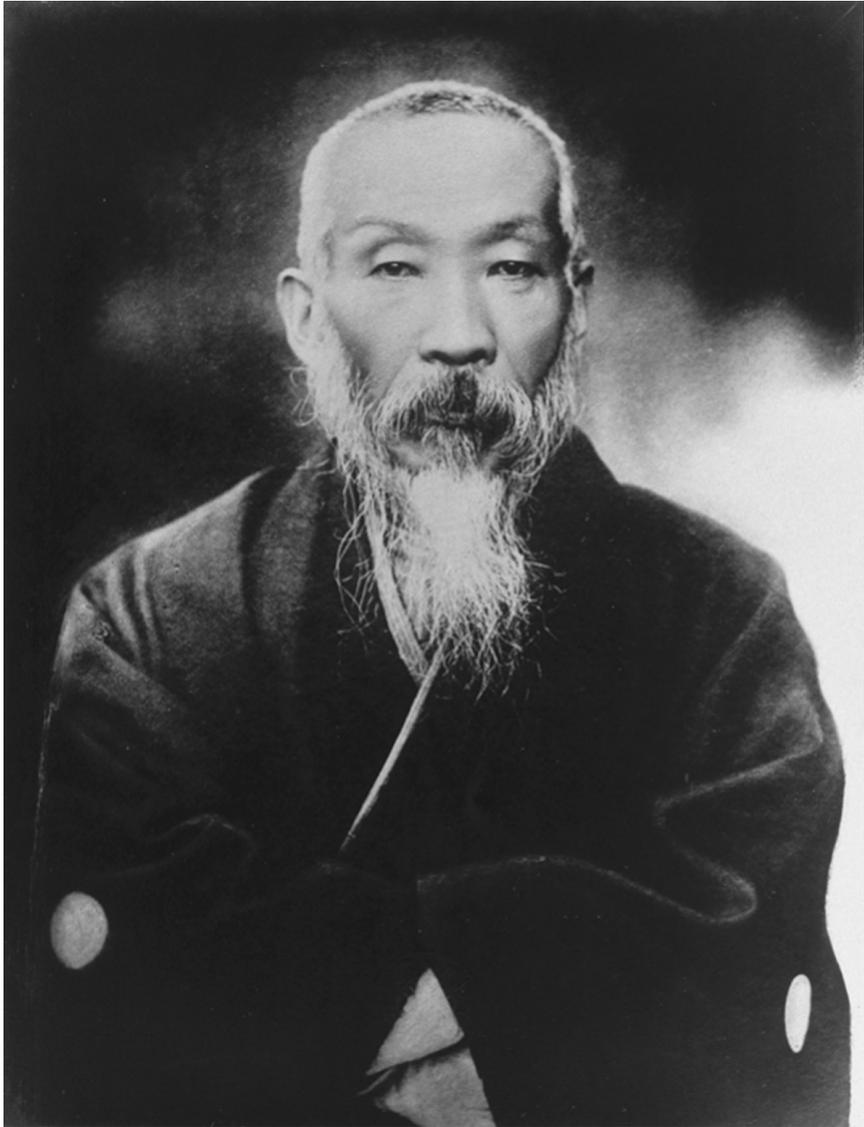


FIGURE 3. Sugiura Shigetake (Jūgō). Source: *Kinsei meishi shashin, sono 2* (Osaka: Kinsei Meiji Shashin Hanpukai, 1935), National Diet Library Online, Japan.

In outlining a possible route of expansion to the south and across the Pacific, Sugiura brought a vast array of territories within his purview, from the islands of Micronesia to South America. More often than others, however, he looked at the world of empire through a provincial lens rather than the familiar eyes of Tokyo. At a time when national attention was riveted on the West, Sugiura turned to unlikely

sources of inspiration for expansion: merchants in his native home of Ōmi and their Chinese counterparts across the sea. In addition to pairing these diasporic traders as a model of mercantilist expansion, he placed socially marginalized communities known as *burakumin*, another carry-over from the early modern era, at the heart of his proposal for southern advance. Taken together, Sugiura's writings offered a vision of provincializing "expansion" across the sea, where the nation's new peripheries, rather than the metropolis, would play a leading role. It was, above all, a call to action directed at fellow natives of Ōmi: to reenact their legacy of diasporic commerce on the global stage of capitalist and imperial expansion.

SUGIURA'S EARLY LIFE AND JAPANISM

Sugiura was born in 1855 to a Confucian scholar in Zeze domain of Ōmi Province.³ Having studied both the Chinese classics and Dutch learning, he was selected by the domain in 1870 to advance to Daigaku Nankō (forerunner of Tokyo Imperial University), where the brightest students assembled from around the country. His cohort included Komura Jutarō (1855–1911), a "trusted friend" who would later join the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. From 1876 to 1880, Sugiura studied chemistry in England as one of ten exchange students dispatched by the Ministry of Education. Four years abroad helped seed the ideology he would come to call "Japanism" (*Nihonshugi*). As he later reminisced, "I studied extremely hard, with a belief that it was necessary to learn Western culture and institutions in order to uplift the Japanese from their savage status, while also nurturing their Yamato spirit to keep off the Westerners." Reflective of his own eclectic learning, his Japanism would stress a practical fusion of the two—"kokusui hozon, gaisui yu'nyū" (preservation of national essence, importation of foreign essence)—as a key strategy of national strengthening.⁴ This idea of braiding new and old would similarly infuse his vision for Ōmi merchants and their descendants.

During his overseas study, Sugiura developed a "conviction to pursue education as a career" which began shortly after his return in 1880. Sugiura established two schools that would define his life's work as the "Educator of Meiji." One was Japan Middle School (formerly Tokyo English Institute), which was, in both nomenclature and curriculum, an institutional emblem of his Japanist pedagogy. Another was Shōkō Academy, which he opened at his abode in Tokyo. One of many private academies run by Meiji-era nationalists, Shōkō Academy gathered local youths, joined by many aspirants from Shiga prefecture, to study and live together in a dormitory.⁵ Its illustrious graduates included Yamamoto Jōtarō (1867–1936) who, after a long career with Mitsui Bussan, actively cooperated with Japan's hardline policy toward China as a member of the Seiyūkai and president of the South Manchurian Railway Company in the late 1920s.⁶

In addition to managing the two schools, Sugiura forayed into journalism, becoming a chief columnist for *Yomiuri shinbun* in 1885. He devoted the next

several years to writing editorials to disseminate his ideas of Japanism, as well as to denounce the Meiji state's compromised approach to revising the unequal treaties with the West. Like-minded young conservatives soon gathered around Sugiura to organize the Seikyōsha (Society for Political Education). It became an influential platform through which they castigated the oligarchs for falling short of abolishing extraterritoriality, warned against rampant Westernization, and argued for "Japanism at all costs" to put an end to Japan's self-colonization.⁷

After a brief stint in politics as a Diet representative from Shiga in 1890, a disaffected Sugiura resumed his attack on the government as an associate editor for *Tokyo Asahi shinbun*. This time he targeted the issue of "mixed residence" (*naichi zakkyo*), or the freedom of foreigners to reside in Japan's interior, which had been set forward by the Western powers as a precondition for treaty reform. To prepare for this prospect, he stressed, "nurturing the spirit of independence among the people" and "expanding armaments" were national priorities. When Japan signed a new treaty in 1894, he added its "urgent need" to cultivate industrial strength so as to "compete with [foreigners] in commerce and manufacturing." All these goals of national self-strengthening could be advanced by a mass effort of the Japanese to expand overseas, Sugiura argued. So did members of the Seikyōsha. They called for exporting more Japanese goods, capital, and people, as their concern increasingly shifted from a search for *kokusui* (national essence) to its diffusion across Asia.⁸

JAPAN AS A MARITIME EMPIRE AND ŌMI MERCHANTS AS PIONEERS

By the time Meiji Japan joined the race for overseas markets and territories, the world seemed entirely dominated by Western powers, leaving few uncharted lands to the new entrant. This did not deter the Japanese from giving free rein to their imagination, however. Seeing the ocean as a global arena of national ascendancy, Meiji political leaders, military officers, and opinion makers brought a wide range of lands under their scrutiny as potential markets and sites of migration and labor—not only East Asia, but also the South Pacific, Southeast Asia, Australia, and Central and South America. From their writings emerged a new understanding of Japan as a transoceanic empire: one that would dominate the Pacific through a network of shipping, trade, business, migration, and settlement. Viewing these activities as part of a holistic package of "expansion"—and conflating their meanings in the discussion of Japan as an oceanic nation—was typical of nationalist thinkers concerned with *kokusui* at the time.⁹ Sugiura and other like-minded nationalists embraced in their thought a variety of regions, from Hokkaido and Korea to Canada and Mexico—in short, theirs was a vision of constructing a Japanese diaspora across the Pacific.

Sugiura's editorials on expansion represented this early and crude outlook on the world, centered on the ocean. In an August 1887 issue of *Yomiuri*, he lamented

“how woefully small Japan looks on the map of the world” but observed nonetheless that modest-sized nations such as England, Spain, and Holland had managed to develop maritime empires, owing to their ability to navigate and trade across the seas. Hoping Japan would follow their example, he proposed that the Meiji government establish “a colonial ministry” to supervise all overseas affairs “from the jurisdiction of Hokkaido and the Ogasawara islands, to the migration and settlement of Hawai‘i” and “investigate methods for developing other colonies.”¹⁰ Seven years later in 1894, when conflict with the Qing erupted over the Korean peninsula, he continued to insist that Japan as a maritime nation expand not only its navy “but also its sea-lanes and shipping in peacetime” for promoting foreign trade and emigration.

Sugiura conceived of expansion not necessarily as military conquest but in broader and more “peaceful” terms of global trade, shipping, and migration—what many Meiji contemporaries identified as the central pillars of Western strength. Undoubtedly inspired by Victorian Britain at the height of its imperial glory, he wished to see Japan become “a great island empire,” “an empire of free trade” in which the merchant marine would carry Japanese goods and traders to far corners of the world.¹¹ Buried in his call for expansion was a criticism of government leaders for obsessing about treaty revision or discussing arms expansion while ignoring a more urgent task: promoting industry and enterprise. There was no better way for Japan to “cultivate the foundation of the state” and “maintain national sovereignty,” Sugiura argued, so as to stand on an equal footing with Western nations.

To be sure, the Meiji leadership had already set forth industrial strength as the nation’s priority after touring the advanced countries of Europe and America. The Iwakura mission of 1871–1873 impressed upon its members an inseparable link between industrial growth and imperial power. And they returned equally convinced that the state must orchestrate these efforts, since “Our people are particularly lacking in daring.” Dismissing the *laissez-faire* capitalism of Adam Smith in favor of the German model of active state intervention in the economy, the Meiji “developmental state” thus took charge of building and operating everything—from railroads and telegraphs to silk mills, iron mines, and shipyards—until they were passed into private hands in the 1880s.¹²

Sugiura similarly felt the Japanese were not ready to compete with foreigners, though his vision of self-strengthening emphasized promotion of commerce rather than production of “the necessities of a military nation.” Nor did he discount the state’s role in nurturing Japan’s capitalist economy in its infancy. It was the government’s task to “investigate markets” abroad, he reckoned, while “guiding” Japan’s untutored merchants; “lacking national awareness,” they were prone to “seek quick profit, mishandling goods and inviting mistrust.”¹³ Overseas expansion was, in his view, as critical as domestic industry for making a modern Japanese citizenry, infused with a sense of patriotism and national duty. Each hinged on the state’s initial support and leadership, before Japan could fully pursue the free-trade ideal.

That it was imperative for Japan as a small nation to expand for survival was a consistent theme in Sugiura's writings—logic also found in countries like Egypt, subject to unequal treaties yet eager to build an empire of their own.¹⁴ The idea of refashioning Japan as an “oceanic nation” for this purpose found many adherents. Sugiura's intellectual cousin and fellow journalist Fukumoto Nichinan (born Makoto, 1857–1921) expounded in a series of articles on the “urgent necessity” of developing Japan's shipping industry in the face of Western competition.¹⁵ A decade earlier, he had also crossed over to Hokkaido, seeking to settle a group of former samurai to develop the land as a bulwark against maritime Russia. Although this project ended in failure, Fukumoto quickly turned his attention southward after befriending Sugiura and embarked on yet another colonial venture in the Philippines.¹⁶ For the goal of strengthening and enriching their nation, other journalists and political leaders similarly stressed promoting the shipping industry, along with colonization and trade. With such an arsenal of strategies in mind, Shiga Shigetaka argued for “creating commercial new Japans [*shōgyōteki shin Nihon*] everywhere across the sea,” envisioning Japan as the leader of the Pacific.¹⁷

In sum, the ocean—or what was broadly referred to as “overseas” (*kaigai*)—was an extension of the modernizing home islands: a space where Japan would build its economic strength, nurture its human capital, and turn itself into a rich, mighty country. These concerns combined with the looming Malthusian specter of population growth outstripping food supply, giving further impetus to the argument for expansion abroad.¹⁸

At the same time, Sugiura and other Meiji thinkers called attention to Japan's vaunted history of transoceanic expansion, one that dated back to long before the nineteenth century. Underlying their maritime imaginaries was a desire to revitalize an “indigenous tradition of expansionism,” chronicled in the adventures of Japanese merchants, warriors, and seafarers in the South Pacific and elsewhere from the fifteenth to the early seventeenth centuries.¹⁹ A typical account appeared in an April 1885 bulletin of the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce. Bemoaning that few countrymen “have ventured abroad to engage in trade” since the opening of Yokohama, the author alerted readers to the golden era of maritime activity in the first decades of the seventeenth century: “our merchants, full of enterprising spirit, frequently traveled to Taiwan, Cochin [China], Siam, and Cambodia,” creating “colonies” where, in Siam alone, “as many as eight thousand Japanese, male and female, plied their trade.”²⁰

At work in this narrative was a broad strategy deployed by the new Meiji leaders of “radical nostalgia”: “the invocation of the distant past to promote radical change in the present.”²¹ In the ministry's telling, the natural expeditionary impulses of Japanese people had lapsed under the Tokugawa shogunate, whose ban on foreign travel made merchants “cowardly.” But merchants from the province of Ōmi (also Gōshū) represented a notable exception. Against all odds, the author noted, Gōshū merchants carried on the spirit of expedition and built a fortune by “braving the

mountains and high seas,” much in the way that “English merchants garnered wealth and allowed their island nation to lead the world.”²² In “an opinion on the promotion of industry,” the ministry more explicitly urged Japanese merchants to reflect on the feats of Ōmi shōnin:

Famous business magnates in today’s Gōshū such as Hoshikyū and Beni’ichi initially began with a mere 3 or 4 ryō to traverse the provinces. Already during the era of Keichō (1596–1615), [Ōmi merchants] visited regions as far afield as Matsumae, and in the course of their travel inspected local sentiments, customs, and so forth, and purchased goods suitable to local tastes. . . . They not only built enormous wealth in one generation but transmitted their business methods to posterity as well as throughout the entire province of Ōmi, to the point where Gōshū has come to be known as our country’s England.²³

This rousing call to action was redirected by Sugiura to his fellow natives of Ōmi. One of his editorials for *Yomiuri*, couched as a “plea to the merchants of Gōshū,” began with his wonted homage to their Tokugawa predecessors. “Gōshū merchants are the best businessmen” Japan had ever seen before Meiji, he proclaimed, men of daring who also pioneered expansion across the sea. They “ventured out to work in the western and eastern provinces, even as far as Ezo and Matsumae,” “transporting their products to the ports of Echizen and traveling further on to Shikoku and Kyūshū to amass a huge profit.” Not in the slightest did they mind trekking to these places, even though to reach the far corners of the archipelago at the time was “more difficult than it is to sail to Europe and America today.” Now that railroads and steamships had developed to “make Japan much smaller,” he advised their descendants in Shiga, “You must not content yourselves with conducting business within [its national borders].” It behooved them, instead, to look beyond Hokkaido and “take the initiative in trading with Europe and America, not to speak of neighboring countries like China and Korea.” Only by scaling up their commerce to the global level of exchange—by “building on the ancestors’ legacy to fly the Japanese flag across the seas”—he averred, could they “maintain the reputation of Gōshū merchants” and let their “name blaze like the sun.”²⁴

A decade later, Sugiura found himself making the same entreaties to members of the Association of Friends from the Homeland of Gōshū. He was not certain Ōmi merchants were “carrying on the keen will of their forebears and giving fullest play to their ability.” To be sure, their influence was visible along “the streets of Nihonbashi lined by a row of giant stores named Ōmi-ya,” as well as in “Hakodate and Sapporo,” where they had “built magnificent branches.” But these stores, spatially confined to their traditional turf, seemed to be relics of inherited riches rather than signs of newly earned success. “The illustrious name of Ōmi shōnin resides with expeditionary commerce,” Sugiura asserted, reminding his fellow provincials of the charge placed upon them: “Oh, heirs to Ōmi shōnin, what will happen to your stature without exerting yourselves and pressing forward vigorously?” He was not alone in voicing this concern. The governor of Shiga also

detected worrisome signs of decline among denizens of Ōmi, who appeared “more concerned with protecting their ancestral wealth than with rising up in society through education.”²⁵

Sugiura’s appeal to Ōmi natives culminated in an energetic push for expansion abroad. To prepare Japan’s new generation for this task, first and foremost, Sugiura argued for vocational education, a focal point of his campaign when he ran for the Diet in 1890.²⁶ In another article addressed to merchants of Ōmi, he urged them to “take a good look at the commercial world,” where old knowledge and apprenticeship no longer sufficed “to maintain a superior position.” “Common sense as merchants of a civilized nation” must be grafted onto their native tradition of trading across space: “an understanding of global affairs” sufficient to assess “how the outcome of the Sino-Japanese War would affect our economy, or how the collection of war bonds would relate to our financial community.” For commercial training on the ocean, he also advocated increasing merchant marine academies to inculcate young men with skills of navigation that they might “search for markets around the world.” So critical was the diffusion of “oceanic thought” in his view that he later proposed incorporating long-distance navigation into annual field trips for middle schools.²⁷

Through his newspaper editorials, Sugiura extended his message to “merchants around the country,” evoking Ōmi *shōnin* as a veritable template for “working in foreign countries.” But even these famed traders “have not progressed very far,” not least because “to board a ship for overseas travel” remained “extremely difficult” for civilians. As one solution to this logistical issue, Sugiura advanced a strikingly original proposal: to leverage warships as commercial vessels, an idea most likely inspired by the 1886 voyage of his fellow *Seikyōsha* founder Shiga Shigetaka (1863–1927) to Nan’yō. Specifically, he proposed that the navy’s training ships, which had begun to cruise the South Pacific in 1875, carry merchants in addition to its cadets “as a way to open trade and communication with the islands of Nan’yō as well as with Australia, South America,” and other markets on the Pacific Rim. Such ready access to marine transportation, he envisaged, would enable “those with the spirit of *Gōshū shōnin*” to “study the tastes of foreigners, manufacture goods suitable to them, and sell them directly” without having to rely on Chinese merchants, who dominated access to world markets.²⁸

Sugiura’s idea of doubling the function of Japan’s precious few warships—repurposing an essential tool of empire for mercantile expansionism—was elaborated later by Fukumoto Nichinan. He proposed building new cruisers, armed with cannons and ready to be deployed for battle, that would ordinarily operate as commercial vessels.²⁹ The use of the navy’s training ships was taken to yet another level when a *Seikyōsha* leader, Miyake Yūjirō (Setsurei; 1860–1945), sailed the southern Pacific in 1891; the crew, he later recollected, literally “searched in vain for a tiny island marked ‘unclaimed’ on the English sea map, hoping to acquire it for Japan.”³⁰ These nationalists, united in a goal to overcome cultural subservience to

the West, were among the nation's first civilians to voyage through Nan'yō, indeed, to find passage back to their "Japanese" roots that they believed lay in the ocean.

In order to propel more civilians into overseas commerce, Sugiura urged Meiji leaders to build infrastructures of support, including "a comprehensive plan to export Japanese goods" and "a commercial museum to display domestic and foreign merchandise." In his version of a strategy of import substitution, he particularly emphasized the export of Japan's traditional manufactures, matching each product to a specific foreign import, such as sake (to counter Western alcohol), raw silk (to counter cotton), and tea (to counter sugar). A focus on cottage industries, which reflected the embryonic state of Meiji capitalism, was echoed by Seikyōsha writers who argued for promoting rural entrepreneurship, rather than an urban-based bourgeoisie allied with the Tokyo government.³¹ For developing Japan as a trading and manufacturing empire, Sugiura also looked to Ōmi merchants as a historical precursor and a model for conducting transit trade: to capture the flow of foreign goods via Japan to sell on the global market. Considering that "alcohol, dry goods, and timber reportedly sell very well at the ports of China and Korea," he suggested, as a first step in promoting their export, "why not follow the precedent of Ōmi merchants and venture out to foreign countries to undertake aggressive peddling [*oshiuri*]?"³²

This idea of overseas peddling—a stretching across the ocean of the provincial custom of Ōmi—later became one of Sugiura's recommendations for educational reform. In a *Tokyo Asahi shinbun* editorial in 1894, he proposed that vocational schools, now found in "every port and city," incorporate peddling into their curricula and extend it to overseas locations. As potential sites of such "on-the-ground commercial training," he insisted, schools must choose "distant rather than nearby places, starting with China, Korea, Russian Vladivostok, Siam, and so forth, and gradually expand it to more faraway lands," so that students could also gain maritime expertise. Sugiura's idea of rescaling the Ōmi merchant tradition through wider, global circuits of exchange struck a chord with local teachers. Hachiman Commercial School, the first vocational institution in Shiga, not only integrated peddling into its curriculum but seriously contemplated extending this practice abroad—an idea that would materialize on the eve of the Manchurian Incident in 1931, as we will see in the next chapter.³³

OVERSEAS CHINESE AS A DIASPORIC MODEL

In calling for overseas trade or stressing the importance of navigation, Sugiura joined a chorus of Meiji thinkers who embraced an ocean-centered view of expansion. His attitudes toward the continent were more complicated. In a wide spectrum of opinions that emerged in the volatile geopolitical context of East Asia in the 1880s–1890s, Sugiura embraced a distinctive brand of "Sinic" Pan-Asianism, one that insisted on "amity with China" even at the expense of Japan's interests

in Korea.³⁴ In the face of Western encroachments on the continent, he argued, Japan and China must unite in leading a racial alliance of Asians against white imperialists, instead of bickering over the Korean peninsula³⁵—a stance shared by his affiliates in *Seikyōsha*, who were among the first intellectuals to conceptualize Asia as a cultural and racial unit in this vein. At the core of their Pan-Asian emphasis on solidarity with China, in fact, lay a quite pragmatic concern to expand Japanese economic interests on the continent. Hence, Sugiura alerted his countrymen to China's "unlimited reserve of purchasing power" and urged them to "seize commercial rights [there] to preempt the Westerners" by studying local ports and products.³⁶

Nonetheless, Sugiura steadfastly insisted on Japan's partnership with the Qing, amid increasingly hawkish cries for settling their rivalry over Korea, which culminated in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895. And he continued to uphold this position even after China's defeat and subsequent departure from the peninsula—when many Pan-Asianist advocates began to demand unifying Asia under Japan's leadership and its national priorities, no longer viewing China as an equal partner.³⁷ Sugiura considered unity with China so critical and Korea's future prospect as a sovereign nation so dim that he proposed in the wake of the war that Japan "withdraw completely" from affairs of the peninsula.³⁸

If this suggestion sounded out of sync with the dominant public opinion, it was also at odds with the policy of Sugiura's now powerful friend and diplomat Komura Jutarō, who brokered the negotiations for the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895. To Sugiura and many thinkers outside the Meiji ruling circle, however, the issue of national security vis-à-vis Korea often took a backseat to the more fundamental task of economic self-strengthening.³⁹ This mercantile concern endured, along with his emphasis on amity, after the humiliating Triple Intervention exposed the weakness of Japan's diplomacy, engendering new doubt about its credentials as the leader of the "yellow race." Sugiura's lasting respect toward the old master was partly explained by his veneration of Confucian culture cultivated during his early years. His vision of expansion, by contrast, reserved particular admiration for the Chinese in the present, especially their ability to expand overseas, which appeared unshaken by the Qing military defeat in 1895.

What impressed him and other Meiji thinkers was the extraordinary success of the Chinese in spreading themselves around the globe through trade and emigration, areas in which the Japanese were seen to lag. When the Japanese set out for work abroad, indeed, Chinese merchants had already built extensive trading networks across the Pacific, including Japan's own treaty ports (the existing diaspora in Nagasaki, as well as new communities in Yokohama and Kōbe, where predominantly Cantonese merchants engaged in import-export trade).⁴⁰ From the time he began writing for *Yomiuri*, Sugiura praised the Chinese character as being "full of ambition to venture afar, resolutely overcome the high waves, and not in the least loath to live in foreign lands, abilities that we Japanese could never match." By dint

of hard work and perseverance, demonstrated in the face of recent exclusion in the United States, he noted, “the Chinese have already built trust in the realm of commerce around the world.”⁴¹

A careful reader would recognize that the diasporic portraits of Ōmi shōnin and “overseas Chinese” (*kakyō*) regularly blurred in Sugiura’s narrative. What he respected the most about the Chinese character—resilience, perseverance, and trust—corresponded, almost word for word, to the cardinal qualities he celebrated of Ōmi merchants. Cross-border mobility, shored up by ties to the native place, characterized them both as local cosmopolitans. In one *Yomiuri* article, he more explicitly noted “resemblance between Gōshū merchants and Chinese merchants,” whose sharp business tactics “could even make European traders cower.” To corroborate their affinity (and, by implication, the ability of Ōmi natives to compete in the global marketplace), Sugiura further relayed the opinion of an unnamed “friend” who had recently visited China: “Those who wish to do business in China would never succeed,” he wagered, “unless they began as Gōshū merchants had done before.” Chiding his countrymen for “not paying attention to their formidable [Chinese] rivals,” Sugiura urged reinvigorating the Ōmi tradition of expeditionary commerce for the nation: to “update the old customs of Gōshū merchants, eradicate the evil custom of aping Westerners when going abroad, and devote ourselves solely to pursuing profit.”⁴²

In Sugiura’s editorials, the weaknesses of his fellow citizens were often cast into sharp relief by their juxtaposition to overseas Chinese. If the globe-trekking Chinese were akin to Ōmi merchants, he intimated, contemporary Japanese had become too insular to bear any resemblance to their own forebears. They “are given to being ‘bossy at home but timid elsewhere,’” he rued, thanks to the Tokugawa legacy of national seclusion, which made most countrymen “introverted” and “loath to work away from home.” By staying put on the home islands, the Japanese forfeited national profit and prestige, allowing the diasporas of Cantonese, Hokkien, and Hakka to monopolize the sale of their own manufactures in overseas markets, whether in San Francisco or South America.⁴³

But no nation faced a greater competition on its home soil than the United States of America. Although China had a trade deficit with the U.S., when taking account of its contract laborers in the Pacific Northwest and the remittances they sent home, Sugiura observed, “The total value of exports can be said to exceed that of imports.” In this calculation the country most exploited by the Chinese was America; through “singular devotion to work and savings,” they dominated the local labor market, “siphoning off the largest amount of dollars.” In light of the recently growing flow of Japanese labor across the Pacific, he predicted that if these migrants worked as hard and lived as frugally as the Chinese, they would “most assuredly incur the same treatment” of exclusion. But this would be a cause for “celebration” rather than lament, a sign that “they had successfully won the competition” with white workers at the lower end of the wage scale.⁴⁴ The Japanese

should thus “take advantage” of Chinese exclusion, argued Sugiura, and step into their place to labor “without losing face as members of a sovereign nation.” According to this remarkable logic, racial exclusion became an index of success in constructing a transpacific Japanese diaspora. By the same token, he added, Japan must proceed with caution in permitting “whites” to live in its interior; just as the United States was faced with the consequences of having allowed Asian immigrants into its territory, so Japan would risk social disorder and the loss of national essence (*kokusui*).⁴⁵ Cultivating economic strength through trade and emigration offered the only sure bulwark against such turmoil.

On the topic of emigration, Sugiura found himself disagreeing with his Seikyōsha friends. Seeing “a conflict between the Eastern and Western races” on the horizon, they had rallied together behind the idea of inter-Asian unity and struggle against white imperialism since the early 1880s.⁴⁶ But the Seikyōsha leaders toned down their optimism for emigration as they gained more understanding about the severity of Asian exclusion in the Pacific Northwest—an understanding that Sugiura, as well as the rest of the Meiji public, sorely lacked.⁴⁷ The sanguine prospect of transpacific emigration was dismissed by Fukumoto Nichinan after learning about the plight of immigrants in the U.S. During his studies at Stanford University, Nagasawa Setsu (Betten; 1868–1899), too, muted his enthusiasm for emigration, having observed firsthand white discrimination against fellow Japanese, which he frequently reported in articles he sent back to Seikyōsha.⁴⁸ As Sugiura must have surely known, a trickle of fellow Shiga natives began crossing the Pacific in this period, soon becoming a stream to the Canadian West (chapter 7). But their fate in the white settler society was clearly not the focus of Sugiura’s concern in his diasporic vision of expansion.

In the final months of the Sino-Japanese War, Sugiura declared to his fellow Shiga natives that a larger battle awaited them in the realm of commerce. “Even though our brave imperial army may destroy the Chinese empire, the Chinese people will not perish,” he asserted. Nor would “the powers . . . be foolish enough to remain neutral in the coming economic war” to be waged around the world. “At this critical juncture,” he asked his readers, “whose duty is it to secure commercial supremacy in the Orient with an abacus?” The answer was none other than “our Ōmi shōnin, descendants of expeditionary merchants.” “If you have inherited anything from your ancestors,” Sugiura exhorted the people of Ōmi, “you owe it to them to stake a claim on the battlefield of the global economy.”⁴⁹ Expansion, he suggested, was in their DNA.

Following Japan’s victory, Sugiura urged all Japanese—not only the gentlemanly class of bureaucrats and capitalists but the general public—to “make full use of the trade treaty” newly signed with the Qing to advance into the area of overseas commerce. Viewing it as key to “preparing for treaty revision,” Sugiura also connected his support of mercantile expansion more explicitly to his abiding concern with Japanism. “The so-called progress” Japan had made thus far was “nothing more

than an imitation” of Western things, which “has generated a tendency to despise the indigenous and revere the foreign.” Decades of cultural borrowing from the West, in short, emasculated the nation. Prescriptions for resuscitating the indefatigable spirit of “*Nippon danji*” (traditionally masculine Japanese men) were to be sought in a rescaling of domestic commerce to global trade of transoceanic scope. In anticipation of “mixed residence,” he argued, “we must compete with the great powers in enterprises of all kinds” at home and abroad, mustering “the indomitable spirit” once demonstrated by merchants of Ōmi. Overseas expansion, in other words, was a means of Japanese cultural renewal, consonant with his vision of braiding the best of new and old worlds. Having adopted and digested the “material merits of Western culture,” he declared, “we must make a new departure in order to surpass foreign products.” It was time for Japan to become a power in its own right.⁵⁰

Even as his contemporaries began to speak of China’s decline in the late 1880s and 1890s, Sugiura treated the Qing as a competitor who had still many lessons to offer Japan, not a mere object of assistance (*hozen*) as viewed by most Pan-Asianist thinkers.⁵¹ China may have ceded political leadership in Asia, but Japan remained on the fringes of the global market dominated by diasporic Chinese. “It is patently clear that to seek to rival and reign over these people requires no ordinary strategy,” he observed at the turn of the century.⁵² Sugiura’s vision of expansion, too, stayed focused on commerce, even as the Meiji state “reverted to the policy of promoting heavy industry” and machine making following the Sino-Japanese War. Local merchants of Kansai, meanwhile, began to “reduce their dependence upon their [Chinese] mentors,” “develop[ing] their own capacity, resources, and connections” to the world economy, including markets of the Asian mainland.⁵³ Sugiura invested much hope in merchants of Ōmi for edging out the Chinese from the path of Japanese expansion; it permeated the house code he drafted for the Tsukamoto Sadaemon family, reminding its members that “the rise and fall [of their business] can even affect the state’s fortune.”⁵⁴ Apart from North America, nowhere was the Chinese economic power more entrenched than in the South Seas, or Nan’yō, a region of great interest to Japanese traders and emigrants but one not without redoubtable obstacles to overcome in the decades to follow.

“SOUTHERN ADVANCE” AND ITS UNLIKELY AGENTS

Sugiura’s colonial discourse, overall, reveals three contrapuntal vectors of Japanese expansion: the maritime, the continental, and the transpacific. Of the three, the continental orientation has occupied center stage in historical writing on the Japanese archipelago since ancient times, generating a “terrestrial bias” common to studies on modern empires.⁵⁵ Less pronounced but equally significant in Meiji imaginaries was what Eiichirō Azuma calls “transpacific eastward expansionism,” which envisioned “emigration-led colonization” in Hawai’i and the Pacific Coast

region of America.⁵⁶ As noted, this eastward movement would find expression in Shiga people's emigration to Canada, but it was only vaguely entertained in Sugiura's proposal to supplant Chinese labor in white America. More explicitly, he made a case for advancing this task in the southern Pacific Ocean.

A counterpoint to his argument for amity with China was precisely his focus on Nan'yō as the proper locus of Japanese colonial activity. For several decades before policy makers set their minds on the Chinese continent as a security concern, Nan'yō occupied the hearts of many journalists, politicians, intellectuals, and naval officers. They argued for redirecting Japan's territorial drive from the northern island of Hokkaido to the southern tropics, a call for "southern advance" (*nanshin*) that reverberated into the 1910s.⁵⁷ As early as 1886, Sugiura editorialized that the tiny island nation of Japan "must expand its territory" by "choosing a prospective colony in the East Indies." In addition to utilizing the navy's vessels, he proposed creating a trading firm like the East India Company to "open contact with the region"; thereby, he hoped, Japan would "at least reach the level of Holland and Spain," if not the imperial grandeur of England and France.⁵⁸ In the recent past, the English and Dutch East India Companies themselves had become maritime powers, building trading outposts across Asia. These "trading-post empires" commanded the Asian waters before transitioning to territorial rule in the mid-late eighteenth century.⁵⁹ No doubt Sugiura had a similar process in mind for Japan's diasporic traders, viewing mercantile capital as the pathway to territorial colonization.

Sugiura's argument for southern advance found a more dramatic outlet in *Hankai yume monogatari* (Tale of a dream of Hankai), a novella he co-authored with Fukumoto Nichinan in 1886.⁶⁰ Like many Meiji writers who turned the South Pacific into an object of popular curiosity and romantic adventure, Sugiura borrowed the power of fiction to advocate expansion. But he made an unlikely community its protagonists: Japan's minority group known as *burakumin*, social outcastes who were more pejoratively labeled *eta* and *hinin* in the Tokugawa period. Presented as the dream of a recluse, this fantastic tale unfolds around a speech delivered at an assembly of burakumin people. The leader of the burakumin begins by deploring the discrimination they have historically endured (much like India's outcastes and Europe's Jews), citing their mixed descent from the ancient Korean kingdoms and Ezo (Emishi) and their "custom" of butchery and meat-eating. Their predicament continues, he bemoans, even after the Emancipation Edict of 1871 declared them "commoners" in name and in law. "So long as we stay in the [Japanese] empire, we will never be treated as equal by this society," avers the leader, who subsequently proposes an "extraordinary measure": to "build a [new] nation" in the Philippines.⁶¹ As a first step toward colonization, he calls for sending an army of ninety thousand able-bodied men to supersede the aging Spanish ruler and liberate the natives from colonial tyranny. Once the islands, and the hearts of locals, are secured, he explains to an enthusiastic audience, the rest

of the burakumin people will follow to engage in a variety of enterprises and build the ground for their new homeland.

Sugiura made the kernel of his argument more explicit in several editorials he penned for *Yomiuri*. Although he criticized the ongoing injustice against the *shin heimin* (new commoners, a euphemism for outcastes coined in the Meiji period), he frankly acknowledged it as “a long-standing custom that cannot be dispelled overnight.” Given the failure of law to protect and liberate them, implied Sugiura, there was no remedy to be sought in a society inured to inequality. “Rather than feeling indignant in vain” at home, members of *shin heimin* would be better off relocating abroad to make a living, using their “strong bodies and capacity for endurance, nurtured by meat-eating.” Evoking the Malthusian rationale of securing a source of foodstuff and an outlet for Japan’s surplus population, he addressed “the gentlemen of *shin heimin*”: “If you opened a New Japan, you would not only recover your honor but also help project Japan’s prestige overseas” and contribute to the strategy of “raising Asia” (*kōa*)—a three-fold mission of advancing the nation’s liberal, imperial, and Pan-Asian projects at once. By appointing burakumin to spearhead this task, Sugiura hoped to recast a colonizing venture as an emancipatory project, for the former outcastes as much as for the Filipinos.⁶²

Hankai yume monogatari was both distinctive and characteristic of the times. The novella stands out among Meiji writings in linking the issue of discrimination against the burakumin directly to southern expansionism.⁶³ Yet it was also typical of an emergent genre that Robert Tierney has termed “folklore imperialism,” where fact and fiction conspire to offer a compelling utopian scenario: a fantastic metamorphosis of outcastes into heroic pioneers who emancipate themselves by freeing their Asian brothers from European rule.⁶⁴ The narrative was punctuated by deep-seated (and spurious) claims about burakumin, among them their alien origins and “meat-eating custom” that made them racially distinct and physically fit for laboring abroad—fit enough, Sugiura implied, to compete with the diasporic Chinese.⁶⁵

Sugiura’s proposal more broadly captured an epochal challenge facing Meiji Japan: to meet the twin imperatives of fostering “liberalism at home and imperialism abroad.” Understood as essential rather than contradictory pursuits of a modern civilized nation, both schools of thought were, scholars have long revealed, of a piece with belief in reason and historical progress.⁶⁶ In the eyes of Sugiura and his contemporaries, more glaring contradictions lay between liberalism and vestiges of “feudalism” at home: the limits of the law in guaranteeing equality to all, bared by persistent prejudice against former outcastes.⁶⁷ A subtext for the utopian tale of southern advance was a grim portrait of Meiji Japan as a society whose promises of modernity and freedom had fallen short. Conceived in this context, the resettlement of burakumin abroad was essentially a strategy of social imperialism:⁶⁸ to export a problematic population issuing from the failure of emancipation, an idea that, in fact, had a broad appeal across the Pacific.⁶⁹

Far less obvious but equal significant is what linked Ōmi merchants and outcastes, who inhabited a critical part in Sugiura's colonial thinking. The idea of mobilizing each community for overseas expansion reflected his personal roots in Shiga, which had one of the largest burakumin communities in prewar Japan.⁷⁰ Both groups were portrayed as newly liberated from the shackles of feudalism to aspire beyond the national borders. If Ōmi peddlers and outcastes, unmoored from agrarian society, had been disdained by the Confucian-minded elite in the Tokugawa era, so were their "continental origins," in a rather ironic coincidence, similarly entertained by local scholars in Shiga⁷¹ (who also noted Shin Buddhism as their shared religion of choice). Sugiura's proposal revealed a specific concern to resuscitate non-samurai classes, rather than the declassed samurai who became the target of state and early migration programs. Former outcastes and peddlers were linked, above all, by an agenda to overcome their respective marginalities vis-à-vis the political center: the burakumin's status as noncitizen and the status of Ōmi-Shiga as a new "periphery" of Japan. Sugiura's vision of transpacific expansion charted a particular spatiotemporal sequence: the northern colonization of Ainu lands pioneered by Ōmi merchants, to be followed by the southern advance of former outcastes. If the dream of a hermit was enacted as outlined in his novella, indeed, it would have turned the burakumin into true successors of the diasporic Ōmi shōnin.

Nonetheless, their commonalities quickly fade when considering the place that the burakumin, along with the Ainu, were perceived to occupy in the new nation-state: a racialized surplus population. In the Meiji-era fiction, as in government policies, the burakumin were targeted for export at the same time that the Ainu were marked as a "dying race"—the very group exploited by Ōmi merchant contractors in colonial Hokkaido as discussed in chapter 2. When their lived and imagined realities (including supposed distant lineage from Ezo/Emishi) are thus juxtaposed, the hidden dynamics of racial capitalism—which worked to exaggerate, not rupture, preexisting modes and social relations of production into racial difference⁷²—come into view. Sugiura's idea of redirecting the colonizing effort from Hokkaido to the South Seas extended not only the capitalist project of settler colonization but the very task of extracting surplus value from one racialized labor to another. From the perspective of the Meiji capitalist state guided by fear of overpopulation, it would mean applying a "spatial fix" to the threat of surplus bodies,⁷³ deemed useful for projecting Japan's sovereign power abroad but superfluous to its national polity.⁷⁴

The idea of using marginalized people for the dual purpose of accumulation and colonization had many contemporary and global parallels.⁷⁵ Rather than insist on their full social integration, political leaders often sidestepped the question and sought an overseas outlet for the productive deployment of their labor, in effect exporting the contradiction to a colonial hinterland. This marriage of social imperialism with racial capitalism would have left the former outcastes, along with

the “former natives,” as the Ainu were labeled, literally if not legally outside the boundaries of “the Japanese.”⁷⁶ For the descendants of expeditionary Ōmi shōnin, by contrast, to venture abroad meant to (re)claim their place, not outside but at the center of the national community. In Sugiura’s discourse, this regionalist agenda ultimately took precedence over the issue of social equality for burakumin.

Although *Hankai yume monogatari* received mixed reviews from the press,⁷⁷ it enthralled some young men of Meiji. Suganuma Teifū (1865–1889), who read the novella while studying at the University of Tokyo, brought a copy back to his hometown of Hirado, where local school pupils excitedly “competed to devour” the story. And to these young advocates of southern advance, he evidently proposed “organizing troops to prepare for an expedition, in order to open a place to work for the men of Hirado.” Suganuma’s desire to travel to the south was so strong that he quit his job at Tokyo Higher Commercial School and left for the Philippines in May 1889, where he was joined by Fukumoto Nichinan.⁷⁸ Although Suganuma’s death from cholera brought a sudden end to their grand scheme of building a Japanese enclave on the islands, his vision of *nanshin* was inherited by a friend and journalist colleague, Kuga Katsunan (1857–1907). Chief editor of *Tokyo denpō*, Kuga would advocate mass colonization of the Philippines, underscoring the alleged “Malay lineage in the Japanese race.”⁷⁹

In the aftermath of the Sino-Japanese War, Sugiura argued more forcefully for shifting Japan’s focus from the north to the south, proposing “Taiwan as a stepping-stone” for advancing into the East Indies and the Nan’yō islands.⁸⁰ So did Tokutomi Sohō (1863–1957) and his Min’yūsha colleagues, who envisioned the creation of “new Japans” across the South Pacific region. Their discourse had significant purchase on the Meiji public, alerting them to the profitability of southern advance and turning their attention, if momentarily, from domestic political battles to the shared goal of expansion.⁸¹ Although the rhetoric of *nanshin* garnered little sustained support from government leaders, whose concern for national security pivoted toward the continent, it shaped the emerging debate on northern advance (*hokushin*) versus southern advance, which culminated in a protracted competition between the army and the navy. Aspirations to establish naval hegemony in the western Pacific would begin to materialize after World War I, when Japan took control of the former German possessions in Micronesia.⁸²

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Spanning the last decades of the nineteenth century, Sugiura Shigetake’s colonial discourse offers a portal into some of the central concerns that drove Japan’s rise as an oceanic nation-empire. In part unique in his provincial attachment and in part emblematic of the Meiji ideological milieu, Sugiura’s writings stitched together fluid and inchoate ideas about nation building, capitalist modernity, and Pan-Asian unity that grew out of Japan’s halting efforts to join the world powers. In the capacious Japanese understanding of Western strength, imperialism was but one of a

wide repertoire of strategies for projecting national power abroad: from trade and shipping, arms and diplomacy to overseas migration and settlement. This inclusive approach to “expansion in all directions”⁸³ framed Sugiura’s maritime vision. To the terms of transpacific history, his writings adumbrated Japan’s metamorphosis from an island nation into an oceanic empire: one that turned the northern Pacific into a space of economic exchange and cultural solidarity against the West, and the South Pacific into a site of colonization and settlement. What linked the two was the capitalist regime of extraction targeting Japan’s racialized minorities.

A search for national essence also led Sugiura deep into the annals of Japanese history. For Sugiura and his *Seikyōsha* friends, empire signified not so much a rupture into modernity as a return to Japan’s ancestral origins as a seafaring community, while breaking with the more recent Tokugawa past of perceived inertia. Overseas expansion had a longer and more complex genealogy than the rise of imperialism in the late nineteenth century, one that could be tracked across the ocean linking Japan to the distant shores of Nan’yō. This dynamic tension between continuity and discontinuity infused Sugiura’s understanding of the Pacific as a logical maritime extension of Ōmi merchants’ activity across the early modern archipelago.

Sugiura’s diasporic vision revealed a strong undercurrent of regionalism in Japanese colonial thought—echoing a long-standing claim in Guangdong and Fujian that their provincials boasted an oceanic culture and “tradition of venturing abroad” nurtured independent of Western influence.⁸⁴ In virtually every proposal for expansion he penned, Sugiura evoked the venerable Ōmi *shōnin*, often in tacit comparison with overseas Chinese, as a model for his countrymen to follow. Calling attention to these local cosmopolitans, he hoped, would fillip a shared memory of border-crossing vigor, a trait allegedly embedded in the Japanese character, while fashioning the legend of expeditionary pioneers. Beyond the political leadership of ex-samurai, he viewed private enterprise as key to capital accumulation and colonial adventure, a project awaiting the initiatives of the nation’s provincials. Sublimating regional exceptionalism of Ōmi into cultural essentialism of the Japanese ethnoses, Sugiura made an emphatic call for provincializing the national project of expansion.

After the turn of the century, the focus of Sugiura’s career shifted from journalism to education.⁸⁵ His Pan-Asianist credentials led to his appointment in 1902–1903 as the head of the *Tōa Dōbun Shoin* (East Asian Common Culture Academy) in Shanghai: an academy designed to train young Japanese as “China hands” who would aid their country’s military and business operations on the continent. Although ill health cut short his tenure, Sugiura continued to support its activities—suggesting that his earlier, romantic notion of racial and cultural unity gave way to a more pragmatic concern to prioritize Japan’s imperial interests by the turn of the century.⁸⁶ Meanwhile, his vision of expansion, along with the mythologization of Ōmi *shōnin*, would be taken up and energetically carried

forward by his followers and fellow Shiga natives. His vision of stretching the Ōmi custom of expeditionary commerce around the globe resonated powerfully with local boosters seeking to reclaim their place at the center of national life. Among their paramount tasks was educating a new generation of Ōmi shōnin, who would open and expand frontiers of capital, trade, and industry, as their ancestors had done, across the sea.