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“We Must Learn Foreign Knowledge”:
The Transpacific Education of a Samurai Sailor,
1864–1865

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INTRODUCTION

Despite beatings and even the threat of execution, Niijima Shimeta decided he had to get out of Japan.¹ He was twenty-one and frustrated. Eleven years earlier Commodore Matthew Perry’s “black ships” had barged into Uraga Bay, and ever since then Niijima had watched as giant foreign vessels of trade and war floated freely in and out, an endless provocation. “I want to do Western studies because Japan is surrounded by the sea,” he vowed. “I want to contribute to improving our abilities in the art of navigation so that in times of peace we can conduct trade with many other nations, and in times of war we can defend ourselves.”² He rushed into the shogun’s new naval school in Edo and nearly ruined his health studying the wonders of deep-sea navigation, but the government also decided to keep its ban on foreign travel. Teaching seafaring while barring transpacific voyaging: this kind of contradictory, confused response to the world made Niijima writhe. He was tired of arguing with friends and elders. He wanted to *do* something. “While I am burning with desire to be useful to my country, the government is doing the poorest job,” he fumed. “The country is sinking further and further into confusion.”³ With little hope things would improve,

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Nijjima Shimeta decided he would defy his grandfather, his father, his lord, and the very shogun himself. If Westerners had arrived on ships, he reasoned, he could leave on one.

In 1864 he traveled to Hakodate, a new treaty port where foreign ships clustered. Not long after, an American captain agreed to stow him aboard for the run to Shanghai and then on to Boston. Leaving Japan without permission was still a capital offense, so near midnight a friend quietly rowed him out on the dark sea and toward the bobbing brig. Sailors pulled him aboard, sealed him in an airless cabin, and there he waited for sunrise. As morning breezes pushed the *Berlin* out of Hakodate, Nijjima wondered if he could ever return. "I deeply worry about our country's future, to which there is nothing I would not give," he wrote his brother. "I know that causing one's parents great heartache for a long time is unthinkable and unforgivable. I do hope, however, that once I have achieved my goals and then do my full duty to our lord and to father that it might amount to a small atonement."⁴ For the time being, however, it all depended on canvas, ropes, wood, and wind.

Intent on his destination, Nijjima Shimeta had spent little time thinking of the journey. He certainly had not imagined a year tumbling on the seas. Nijjima's biographers, likewise, have passed lightly over his maritime service, eager instead to gauge the influences of his years at Phillips Academy, Amherst College, and Andover Seminary. We have mostly rephrased the scanty notes he kept during his voyage and waited for action to resume in Boston harbor.⁵ Yet seafaring was a startling change from Nijjima's familiar routine. The long voyages, peculiar language, cramped quarters, and frequent dangers forced everyone on board to adapt, but Nijjima even more so. Off came his Japanese clothes, into the deep went his long hair, and by the time he reached Boston both his swords—the very symbol of his samurai rank—had left his hands forever. He pitched the ancient gods overboard and pledged his soul to Christ. He even got a new name: Joe. "I am no longer the old Shimeta," he told his father. "Had I stayed home I would have believed the small place where I lived was the whole world."⁶ By the time he reached Boston he had ventured farther from home than anyone in his family for a millennium. That kind of adventure necessarily shaped a man.

Yet more than being just one traveler's tale, the story of Nijjima's voyage puts ships and sailors back at the center of early Japan-US contact. The first Americans trading Japanese soil were, after all, neither diplomats nor missionaries but shipwrecked mariners. And *they* washed up only after

naval engineers and navigation experts made transpacific voyaging both possible and profitable. “The Japan seas will soon be covered with our vessels,” Commodore Perry told Japanese officials in 1853, which is one reason why the US government entrusted treaty negotiations to a Navy officer.⁷ Obviously, naval technology and trade networks brought the United States and Japan into direct contact. But sailors pioneered that transpacific relationship. Thousands strutted through port towns every year; often they were the only Americans most Japanese in the 1860s would ever meet. From a distance these sailors looked American enough, but in fact large fissures separated them from society at home. Politicians, merchants, and reformers struggled to bridge the gaps, but seafaring life could not always fit familiar patterns. Sailors lived mobile lives in hybrid transnational spaces. Thus, while Nijjima’s courage and curiosity eased his transition from Hakodate to Boston, so, too, did living in a maritime society that first met him on his side of the Pacific.⁸

ESCAPING THE TIGER’S MOUTH

The journey did not begin well. After he scrambled aboard the *Berlin* in Hakodate, Nijjima’s adrenalin soon wore off, and life as a green-hand sailor bruised his samurai pride. For the first time in his life he washed his own clothes. Humiliated, he tried convincing himself that “even such hardships will eventually do me some good,” but he was not sure how.⁹ Then he made an enemy of the ship’s Chinese steward. One day Nijjima threw dirty dishwater overboard and watched helplessly as a spoon sailed into the deep, too. Unable to decipher the steward’s shouted scramble of English and Chinese, he nevertheless sensed he had tossed away some treasure and risked a beating. Nijjima summoned every English word he knew, begged the captain for mercy, and thrust forward all his Japanese money. Captain Savory merely chuckled and resumed his work. Made the fool, Nijjima spat, “I swear someday I will be in a position to treat that steward like a dog or a pig!”¹⁰ In the meantime, however, he still had to obey orders.

He could barely speak English, and all the nautical terms jangled his brain. Captain Savory helped when he could, pointing at objects and saying their names over and over, but more important duties kept him busy. An American passenger stepped in but soon grew impatient, then irritable, and finally exploded. He grabbed Nijjima’s “nose and jaw and opened my mouth and told me, ‘Say, *do!*’”¹¹ This was simply too much. Nijjima rushed belowdecks and grabbed his long sword. Tongue-tied and demeaned by a

maritime world he did not understand, Nijjima retreated to this comforting reminder of his social rank and competence. Its heft anchored him long enough that he paused. "I may possibly meet still harder trials hereafter," he thought; "if I cannot bear this now, how can I expect to meet a serious one?" Abandoning old instincts, he resolved to "never resort to my sword for any causes."¹² The unsuspecting tutor lived another day, and the sailing samurai continued toward Shanghai.

As if to seal his vow, Nijjima cut his topknot. He snipped tentatively the first time, but about a week later he trimmed again, this time more daringly. He kept a few strands as a keepsake and threw the remainder into the sea. "Take this to my parents," he told the waters, "and bring me home, too, once I've completed my studies."¹³ He put on the trousers and coat Captain Savory gave him and donned a sailor's tarpaulin cap. "You look like a Frenchman," a sailor told him, and Nijjima's elation rose "higher than Mount Fuji."¹⁴ With his swords stashed away, his topknot gone, and his Japanese clothes tied in a useless bundle, he exulted as Shanghai hove into view. Even when ordered to work belowdecks, where the stench nearly made him vomit, he grumbled like a veteran Jack Tar but did not return home.

Captain Savory temporarily dampened the mood with news that the *Berlin* was returning to Japan before heading home. Nijjima considered this too risky, and Savory agreed, so the captain stumped the docks hunting for another American ship. Soon he turned up a sleek Boston-bound clipper, the *Wild Rover*, whose captain needed a cabin boy. "I wish to go to America, and I wish to read much books," Nijjima stammered, and Captain Horace Taylor replied by offering free passage in exchange for work.¹⁵ Two weeks slaving on the *Berlin* had tempered Nijjima's romance with the sea, but it had also toughened his determination.

Looking over his things, the little reminders of home stacked beneath his sailor's togs, he removed his long sword. Two weeks earlier it had nearly drawn blood, and Nijjima had promised he would never use it again. Now he cradled it one final time. Before his resolve collapsed, he knocked on the captain's door and with a few broken phrases of appreciation presented Taylor with the sword. "He was very pleased," Nijjima wrote.¹⁶ Still a little bewildered, Nijjima was happy, too. "I feel like I am escaping the tiger's mouth."¹⁷

WILD ROVER OF BOSTON

From the *Wild Rover*'s deck Nijjima surveyed Shanghai harbor, and the pell-mell crush of ships, sailors, and merchandise left him breathless. Seven square-rigged ships loading for London and nine for Liverpool squatted near the *Wild Rover*: sixteen ships in a fortnight heading for England alone.¹⁸ There are “hundreds of ships from many countries,” he gasped, and even a Siamese ship had “braved over a thousand miles to trade.” But “there is no ship from the land of the gods.” “Oh, why do our ships never come?”¹⁹

In fact, the *Berlin* helped explain why. With national resources pouring into self-defense Japan had little leftover to build a deepwater merchant marine, and this helped ambitious American and British captains monopolize foreign trade. Moreover, Japan had little to tempt merchants sniffing along the coast. As a result, captains of smaller brigs like the *Berlin* shuttled modest cargoes of seaweed, lacquer, and camphor to Shanghai in hopes that the great square-rigged ships still had an appetite after gorging on China's teas and silks. “Business was at first on such a Lilliputian scale, and was introduced in so dainty a manner,” one British merchant recalled of early trade with Japan, “that to merchants accustomed to the large transactions of China, the whole affair wore something of the air of a comic opera.”²⁰ Back home, Nijjima had thought it anything but funny. After foreigners arrived, prices had skyrocketed because his countrymen “don't understand [how] to do trade.” “We must,” he decided, “learn foreign knowledge.”²¹ Shanghai only strengthened his resolve.

Standing on the dock admiring the *Wild Rover*'s elegantly curved bow, her three towering masts, and her rakish black hull, Nijjima felt he had found an inspiring classroom. Year after year Yankee clipper ships such as the *Wild Rover* sprinted across the waves making eye-popping profits. On her maiden voyage in 1851 the *Flying Cloud* finished a 16,000-mile New York-to-San Francisco run around Cape Horn in just eighty-nine days, crushing her competitors. No one ever matched it. Shouldering eight thousand barrels of whale oil, the *Sovereign of the Seas* lunged out of Honolulu and averaged three hundred miles a day for ten consecutive days, a pace that left even steamships wheezing. In one voyage, the *Stag Hound* earned \$80,000 more than her construction costs. Voyages like these let owners charge double the rates of ordinary vessels, knowing their clippers would still leave port fully loaded.²²

Shipbuilders panted to keep up. When the *Wild Rover* launched in 1853 thirty more clippers were already under construction. Eight launched in

January alone.²³ Clipper ships became national celebrities, and newspapers around the country reported their exploits and rivalries. In 1851 over ten thousand Bostonians jammed the wharfs just to watch the *Stag Hound* launch, while reporters pored over her every detail. Yankee pride became insufferable, but with California added to the Union and Commodore Perry stretching the country's trading frontier, American maritime ambitions no longer sounded delusional.²⁴ Americans, Alexis de Tocqueville predicted, "are born to rule the seas, as the Romans were to conquer the world."²⁵ By 1850 over one hundred thousand people worked in maritime trade, an occupation exceeded only by agriculture.²⁶

The *Wild Rover* helped put teeth into American aspirations. Before taking on a runaway samurai in Shanghai, she had spent a decade tramping through dozens of ports from Melbourne, Manila, and Calcutta to Hong Kong, Callou, and Liverpool. Although she never grabbed headlines and set records like the *Flying Cloud* and *Red Jacket*, the *Wild Rover* compensated with dependability and capacity. She survived two lightning strikes that set her afire during one stormy North Atlantic passage and batted waves aside in both oceans. While her famed and dainty sisters ferried teas and silks, the *Wild Rover* hauled it all: guano, linseed, whiskey, bricks, iron bolts, currant jelly, gunny cloth, lumber, hemp, tea, animal hides, castor oil, catechu, indigo, rice, figs, dried apples, cranberry seed, pianos, turpentine, hams, popcorn, salt, barley, parlor lamps, ox yokes, scythes, oysters, grindstones, hats, pepper sauce, sewing machines, sarsaparilla, pig iron, grape vine cradles, crockery, and glassware. "If California suffers for want of sugar and syrup, it will not be the fault of Boston shippers," groaned a San Francisco newspaper after the *Wild Rover* and the *Matchless* together unloaded over 400,000 gallons. "Hold! enough!"²⁷ Hardly breaking a sweat, the *Wild Rover* left for Calcutta. Nijjima's new ship, then, was a veteran. She had brought the world to Boston, made her owner a rich man, and unfurled the Stars and Stripes over the farthest oceans. By 1864 when Nijjima first strode her deck, steamships, economic hard times, and civil war had begun pushing clippers aside. But Nijjima did not notice or care. Impressed, he carefully traced the English words into his diary, "*Wild Rover* of Boston."

SUNDAY

Not everyone in Asia admired these massive vessels. Those on the losing end of their guns and inventory feared that these Western ships would

enslave them, and Niijima certainly saw enough evidence to make him concerned. Like every samurai, he had closely studied the Chinese classics and been taught to venerate Chinese culture, but the *Wild Rover* showed him a people who were politically, militarily, and morally prostrate. Rather than blame Western ships, he faulted the Chinese. It was bad enough that “Westerners despise the Chinese as if they were pigs and dogs,” Niijima wrote his brother.²⁸ Worse, he thought, the Chinese acted like pigs and dogs. Opulent British homes in Hong Kong only made the filthy Chinese dwellings even more shocking. “Generally the Chinese only care about appearances, are low-minded and spineless,” he wrote in his diary. “That is why the British despise them.”²⁹ Saigon was more of the same. He noticed that local men dyed their teeth black, a custom he knew from Japan but only among women, and he was astonished that they also reddened their lips. “This is all quite unmanly.” Three thousand French soldiers and eighteen gunboats patrolled Saigon while the natives “are all very poor and walk around in bare feet.” “No wonder they were conquered and are now ruled by the French.”³⁰ He began thinking imperial degradation was a self-inflicted wound.

He feared Japan, “with so many arrogant and blind people,” faced similarly bleak prospects.³¹ In Shanghai, for example, he watched a British flotilla steam off to pound a Japanese battery in Chōshū because its feudal lord breathed defiance. Although he admired his countrymen’s fighting spirit, he also railed at their stupidity. “How can Japan fight against Britain?” he groaned. “Why can’t the Japanese government see the way things are in the world?”³² In Fuzhou he saw an autumn festival where locals offered the full moon chicken and rice. “These customs are so foolish,” he sighed. But he also remembered a similar festival back home. “I hope my people will soon become more enlightened and abolish such meaningless practices. We should not worship the moon and stars.”³³

All this set him wondering about the relationship between national power and spiritual power. He knew curious and ambitious men could quickly close Japan’s technological gap. But there seemed something else, a mysterious engine propelling Western countries ahead and stalling Japan, China, and their Pacific neighbors. Before leaving home he had already suspected the Christian God played some role, but his transpacific voyage made him certain. Japan “is in trouble because we have not been introduced to God’s teaching,” he confided to a friend. “If all our people learn the teaching of the one and only God, we could defeat even the mightiest European military, and our nation would thrive.”³⁴ But first he would have

to learn more about this God.

That a year aboard a Yankee clipper encouraged Niijima's Christian faith would have surprised most. The experience ruined many an upright lad. Niijima resisted the endless temptations of port and peer pressure to play the jolly mate, but equally stout mariners rarely forswore their daily grog allowance. Yet the number of drunks alarmed nearly everyone. "O whiskey is the life of man," rang out the men at the ropes, "*Whiskey! Johnny!*"

I drink whiskey when I can,
Whiskey! Johnny!
 I drink whiskey when I can,
 O, whiskey for my Johnny.³⁵

One disgusted mariner wrote home, "I believe a party of sailors, set ashore on a desert island in the middle of the sea would contrive to get drunk in less than two hours without even looking for something to eat."³⁶ Not surprisingly, one of the first English words Niijima penned into his seafaring diary was "intoxicaded" [*sic*].

Niijima had not always disdained a tippie. Back home when he had spent a few weeks sailing on a little packet roving the Japan coast, he and his mates landed in one town and immediately engaged two pretty geisha and enough sake to go around. Sober and poorer the next day, he groaned, "I'm afraid my true colors surfaced."³⁷ Not long after, in a different port, he and his friends strutted around until they located the geisha district. This time they had no money and could only enjoy a private reverie. "It would have been fun to have a party in one of those places," Niijima dreamed, "drinking sake and having the women dance."³⁸ The gaiety of the mariner's life quickly wore thin, however, and the unbridled behavior of his companions repelled him. Even before boarding the *Wild Rover* he swore off liquor and debauchery, and despite enticements at every port he never again wavered. "Do not drink sake, and refrain from smoking as much as possible," he advised his younger brother. And "if some of your friends want to take you to the prostitution district, break off your friendship with them."³⁹ Coming from a clipper ship sailor this was unusual advice.

Unfortunately, few Jack Tars could count on a similar reservoir of willpower. Sailors, one reformer lamented, knew virtually nothing about "almost every subject connected with their moral improvement and highest destiny."⁴⁰ Oh, lamented another, "how it makes a true American blush for his country!"⁴¹ Banding together, reformers created the American Seamen's

Friend Society to establish boarding houses where sailors could enjoy wholesome recreation and religious fellowship. The society followed the men aboard as well, handing out a shelf of chaste tracts for every American ship leaving Boston and New York City. The Marine Bible Society, the Seaman’s Aid Society, and the New England Tract Society tagged behind with more. Congress also yielded to pressure, repealing the Navy’s grog ration, and some merchant marine captains began running dry ships. In 1862 Congress even banned drunkenness in the Navy along with “all other scandalous conduct tending to the destruction of good morals.”⁴² Few thought Satan would surrender to an act of Congress, but at least they had laid down a principle.⁴³

Nijjima admired the effort and considered the *Wild Rover* a lesson in divine providence. Only “the kindness of God” explained how he found a pious clipper in the China trade.⁴⁴ She belonged to Alpheus Hardy, a Boston merchant whose name was, a friend once said, “the synonym of high character.”⁴⁵ Hardy spent lavishly on Christian causes, and for years he served as Boston branch president of the American Seamen’s Friend Society, helping sailors navigate the moral shoals of seafaring life. He stocked his ships with religious pamphlets, and their sentimental tales of prodigal sons, weeping mothers, and promising young men led astray by the merry sailor’s life all struck a chord.⁴⁶ Nijjima had stunned even himself in rushing off to sea just like the frivolous boys in the pamphlets. “The bamboo forest in Shanghai, the bright moon in Fuzhou, the lights of the fishing boats in Hong Kong, the monkeys screeching in Saigon, it all made me think of home,” he wrote his brother, “and of our parents’ grief.”⁴⁷ To his bewildered family he could only say, “Think of me as dead for several years.”⁴⁸

In truth, however, as he disappeared across the waves he had never felt more alive. For the first time in his life he could read the Bible without fear. On the *Berlin* he had borrowed an English translation, and, despite his stumbling through its antiquated words, it brought him “happiness beyond description.”⁴⁹ On the *Wild Rover*, Captain Taylor presented him with a new Bible in English. Nijjima had never owned a Bible that went from Genesis to Revelation. No Japanese had risked execution by producing a translation, and no Westerner had mastered Japanese well enough to do more than hew out the Gospel of John. After a few months, however, the Bible’s idioms became so familiar that he sometimes sounded like he lived in the days of old King James, telling about doing things “thrice a week,” talking of setting off “thither,” and speaking of being “obliged to go up to” a certain place.⁵⁰ Still eager to clarify things in his own mind, he sold his short sword to

Captain Taylor, and while his shipmates crowded Hong Kong's bars and brothels Nijjima raced to a bookstore. There he bought a New Testament in a Chinese translation, and with Scriptures in two languages he settled in for study, often marking "Sunday" in his diary even when he left the remaining week blank.

I MUST BELONG TO HIM

Nijjima learned soon enough, however, that the *Wild Rover* was not a floating Sunday school. "A Yankee ship came down the river," went one seaman's shanty,

A Yankee ship with a Yankee skipper . . .
 Oh, how d'ye know she's a Yankee clipper?
 Blow, boys, blow.
 Oh, how d'ye know she's a Yankee clipper?

Because the blood runs from her scuppers,
 Blow, boys, blow.
 Because the blood runs from her scuppers.⁵¹

Clipper ships ate their workers, and even as a lowly cabin boy Nijjima quickly learned, as one sailor put it, "the discipline of the ship requires every man to be at work upon *something* when he is on deck."⁵² Captain Taylor kept Nijjima busy heaving and coiling ropes, loading and unloading cargo, holystoning the deck, picking oakum, keeping watch, repairing sails, caulking, washing the officers' laundry and serving their meals. "I first understood [the] duty of [a] servant," he groaned.⁵³

Because Nijjima had never been to sea he had the lowest standing on board. Understanding a Yankee clipper's interconnected skein of ropes, yards, masts, and sails; performing vital tasks in the proper order; instinctively reacting in cases when the ship threatened to go under—these were beyond the ken of any green hand, let alone one still learning English. Even if the first mate had roared at him to help send down the topgallant yard, Nijjima did not know a bowline from a buntline, nor did he have a clue how to reeve a yard-rope through a jack-block at the mast-head, unhook the tye, cast off the parral-lashing, and then bend the yard-rope to the slings of the yard by a fisherman's bend.⁵⁴ For a while he just watched, slack-jawed. He wrote the English word "stupid" into his diary. Still, calluses bloomed

soon enough, and Niijima could hardly wait to show off. “Japanese sailors say that dragons ride typhoons up to heaven, but this is just silliness,” he informed his mother. “No such creatures live in the sea.”⁵⁵ Even at the bottom of the heap, the *Wild Rover*’s greenest hand started swaggering like a real Jack Tar.

Life aboard the *Wild Rover* contradicted what Niijima had read about American society. Back in Japan he had stumbled across a missionary pamphlet called *A Brief Account of the United States of America*. Its author, E. C. Bridgman, extolled American democracy, explaining how people chose their leaders and that even the president “must vow to conform to the laws, and do his utmost to govern the people without any consideration of self interest.”⁵⁶ Niijima was impressed. “We must cast away [our] savage government,” he responded, “and we must pick out a president as the United States of America.” In the meantime, he thought the shogun should start acting more presidential. “If you govern us, you must love us as your children,” he thought.⁵⁷ Unfortunately, Bridgman failed to mention slavery or the Southern states. Reading about life below the Mason-Dixon Line might have better prepared Niijima for seafaring.

American society under sail so closely resembled a Deep South cotton plantation that by the 1840s some in Congress grew uncomfortable with the situation. They thought it anachronistic that American sailors still called captains “master” and faced punishment by the lash. In 1849 an outspoken antislavery senator from New Hampshire named John Parker Hale demanded an end to this “relic of barbarism” by proposing a ban on flogging. When you reduce the sailor “to a position which God never intended he should occupy,” he warned, “it will produce mutiny.” And, he continued, in any coming revolution his sympathies “will be with the mutineers.” Everyone in the chamber knew that lurking behind Hale’s concern for the sailor was his attack on slavery, but in either case Southerners thought it unduly inflammatory to openly endorse rebellion. Their dismay increased as Hale collected allies. Must we really debate, another colleague intoned, “whether, freeman as he is, [the sailor] shall be scourged like a slave?”⁵⁸ All Hale’s supporters agreed that you could trust no man with lordly power and a whip.

Dixie took the bait. “Society cannot exist without the possession of power in some quarter or other,” lectured Senator George Edward Badger from North Carolina. “And we are obliged to submit to the occasional abuse of power in order to avoid the greater evil of anarchy.” Andrew Butler of South Carolina sneered at Hale’s “sickly sentimentality,” and Florida’s senator David Yulee mocked Hale, asking “by what means he proposes to maintain

discipline on board the ships of the navy?" Perhaps Senator Hale, he continued, "would propose that the commanding officer should be elected, and that the government on board the ship . . . should emanate from the will of a majority of those on board." No, Yulee thundered, "there must be discipline; there must be arbitrary power."⁵⁹ Hale listened to the harangue with a smile, for he had maneuvered Southerners into arguing against republicanism. And in 1850 he won. Tucked away in a naval appropriations bill, Congress banned flogging in the Navy and merchant marine. Yet it was merely a temporary reprieve, and by the time Niijima boarded the *Wild Rover* the larger fight had moved off deepwater vessels and slave plantations onto the battlefields of Antietam and Gettysburg.

Hale removed the lash, but on the high seas the captain still ruled. Even the most liberal reformers conceded that shipmasters needed to make it clear, as one sailing manual put it, that "I *will*, I *must* be *obeyed*."⁶⁰ Toward that end he could use fists, boots, and belaying pins to beat a sailor into submission, or he could reduce his rations, make him work twice as hard, or chain him in irons belowdecks. "Put them down at once," a merchant instructed his captain. "Do not spare them."⁶¹ Taking that lesson to heart, one captain heard out a sailor's grievance and then told him "to go to hell and jump overboard."⁶² Captains also insisted on rigid distinctions dividing sailors from officers. One seaman remembered his captain parading the quarterdeck wearing kid gloves and speaking directly only to the first and second mates.⁶³ And Niijima learned that no one—not even the captain—addressed the first mate by his given name. On the *Wild Rover* it was always and everywhere *Mr.* Null. Like every clipper commander, Horace Taylor patrolled the quarterdeck like a king.

If the captain set the ship's tone, few had a greater stake in his attitude than the cabin boy who bore the brunt of his moods. Unlike the seamen, Niijima could not escape before the mast. And as a samurai, moreover, he had a prickly regard for his status. A group of lower-ranking men back home had once shocked him when they did not, as was customary, "get off their horses even when they passed us samurai." Niijima and his friends accosted the men and demanded proper obeisance.⁶⁴ With considerable relief, then, he reported that Captain Taylor "is quite gentle and kind."⁶⁵ Captain Horace Taylor took a paternal interest in his cabin boy, explaining everything from sewing to navigation. He bought Niijima new clothes and in spare moments taught him English, at least the kind useful for a sailing man. "This is Pagoda Anchorage," Niijima copied into his diary; "There is not water enough for ships to go up to Foo Chow."⁶⁶ About the only thing Taylor did not like

about his cabin boy was that name: Shimeta. With barely a thought Taylor rechristened him “Joe.” Tickled, Niijima called himself Joseph the rest of his life. Like a smitten schoolboy he practiced writing the captain’s name in script and capital letters, HORACE TAYLOR, *Horace S. Taylor*, HORACE S. Taylor.

The captain and the cabin boy liked each other, but their relationship blossomed because they agreed on the proper relationship between superior and subordinate. Maritime society’s rigid hierarchies did not disturb a samurai like Niijima. “I must belong to him,” he wrote a friend just after transferring to Taylor’s command. Within the week he presented Taylor his long sword. Taylor may not have grasped all of the gesture’s cultural nuances, but he recognized loyalty, gratitude, and obedience.⁶⁷ Nor did Niijima blanch at distinctions dividing sailors from officers. “I often wished to go to the forecabin to see the sailors, but I was not allowed to do so,” he wrote. Taylor “warned me to keep far from them.”⁶⁸ Taylor wanted to protect Niijima from grog, cards, and loose talk, but like all deepwater captains he also insisted on enforcing the hierarchy separating bow and stern. Although he worked alongside the *Wild Rover*’s sailors for a year, in his diary Niijima never mentioned a single one. Only his friendship with Taylor outlasted the voyage.

The quarterdeck also preserved his dignity from the rudest shocks of deepwater life. Being a green hand on the *Berlin* stunned him, and he grumbled when the captain treated him indifferently. But on the *Wild Rover* he rode with the officers and escaped many of Jack Tar’s worst humiliations and hardships. Taylor even encouraged Niijima to master the *Wild Rover*’s navigational equipment, skipping the long and brutal apprenticeship that turned ordinary seamen into commanders. Although Senator Hale and his liberal colleagues feared absolute authority, Niijima wished more leaders in Japan ruled like Taylor. As much as the two simply liked each other, the culture of hierarchy, obedience, and obligation that characterized maritime life turned a Yankee clipper into an unlikely bridge between a Chatham captain and an Edo samurai.

CONCLUSION

After nearly a year of tramping the China Sea, Captain Taylor finally raised his speaking trumpet and sung out, “Lay aloft and loose all sails!” The anchor rattled home, the first mate shouted, “Anchor’s hove short, sir!” and Taylor carefully eased the *Wild Rover* through the Sunda Strait before

loosening her reins for the sprint home. Niijima was exhilarated. “Despite myself,” he chuckled as they rounded Africa, “I shouted, ‘Hello, Cape of Good Hope!’”⁶⁹ When they arrived off of Cape Cod in July 1865, a fishing boat captain told them the Civil War had ended and an assassin had killed President Lincoln.⁷⁰ Niijima barely noticed. He had more pressing concerns.

A year before the *Wild Rover* had appeared like a miracle. Now that he was in Boston, the ship felt like a prison. “I cannot even begin to describe how deeply impressed I was with the fine houses and the fantastic steam engines, and with the convenience of gas and water supplies and carriages,” he panted after touring the city one day.⁷¹ Yet empty pockets and no prospects kept him on board facing another voyage. The thought crushed him. He was already twenty-two, and the way he figured it “we only live for fifty years or so, and of those years how many of them can be productive?” He had endured so much, and now he could even hear Boston’s school bells; but the *Wild Rover* kept him caged, frittering away his prime years unloading hemp, guarding against thieves, and stewing in frustration. “I am full of plans,” he fumed.⁷² He left home promising his father he would return wearing brocade as splendid as Mount Tatsuta’s autumn leaves. It was a touch of bravado, but he thought the ancient metaphor still might ease his father’s grief. An inventory of his sailor’s trunk, however, told a more prosaic tale: a flannel blanket, a straw hat, a pair of white pants, four “very old socks,” a white shirt “half worn,” two “useless pr. pants,” and a mildewed pile of Japanese clothes. “I knew it would be difficult,” he sighed, “but this is worse than I expected.”⁷³

His mind clouded with gloom; he did not feel like reflecting on how far the *Berlin* and the *Wild Rover* had brought him. But just a year earlier he could not distinguish a topgallant sail from a spanker and he had thought dragons rode storms to heaven. He blundered through the English language and had never traveled outside his own country or met an American. He had never washed his own clothes or known how to mend them if torn. He had never read the Bible past Genesis or learned much of what Jesus taught. He had never earned his bread by the sweat of his brow. Now, a year later, if a befuddled green hand asked for help finding the fore topgallant sail, Niijima could point it out and even correct the boy’s pronunciation: “t’garns’l.” In an emergency he could navigate a Yankee clipper across open seas. He kept his Japanese clothes but only unwrapped them to show the crew; he thought his sailor’s pants, shirt, and cap sufficient, and he expertly wielded a needle should anything require repair. He pushed deeper into the Bible, explored a new world of devotional literature, and contemplated the connections

between individual faith and national progress. Hard physical labor did not suit him, but he endured better than he would have expected. In short, by the time he reached Boston he found the *Wild Rover* cramped only because he had grown so much. “After first leaving the mountains you understand how big is the sky,” he wrote. “After crossing the ocean you realize how small is your home.”⁷⁴

Sailors shipping the opposite direction felt much the same. “While at school studying geography,” one American on his first voyage wrote in 1854, “I used to wonder what sort of a looking place Patagonia was and would have hooted at the idea had anyone told me that I should see it and pass around the Horn into the Pacific. And yet here I am having done it all.”⁷⁵ Despite his undeniable courage, Niijima was not blazing a trail. Nineteenth-century ships were carting sailors and adventurers in every direction. Fifty years before Niijima arrived, Opukaha’ia and Hopu left their Sandwich Islands home aboard the *Triumph* and came to New York. Opukaha’ia never took to the sea again—he died in Connecticut—but in 1819 Hopu rode the *Thaddeus* back home. Stopping in Canton in 1847, the *Huntress* took aboard Yung Wing, Wong Shing, and Wong Foon. Yung graduated from Yale when Niijima was just ten years old, and by the time Niijima arrived in America more than thirty-five thousand Chinese immigrants had preceded him across the Pacific. The *Triumph*, the *Thaddeus*, the *Huntress*, the *Berlin*, the *Wild Rover*, and all their wooden sisters remind us that ships crossed the Pacific in more than one direction. Rummaging through the barrels and crates of Oriental wonders that their vessels carted home, Americans also met travelers full of their own transpacific dreams.

NOTES

¹ Niijima Shimeta is better known outside of Japan as Joseph Neesima, a name he adopted while living in the United States from 1865 to 1874, and better known in Japan as Niijima Jō, a name he began using after returning to Japan in 1874. Because events in this essay took place when he still used the name Shimeta, I will use that name except in the notes, where I use Jō to be consistent with previous publications.

² Niijima Jō [hereafter NJ] to Nikolai Kasatkin, May 24, 1864, *Niijima Jō Zenshū*, [The collected works of Niijima Jō; hereafter *NJZ*], 10 vols. (Kyoto: Dō hō sha, 1983–1996), 3:16. See also Arthur Sherburne Hardy, *Life and Letters of Joseph Hardy Neesima* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1891), 28.

³ NJ to Nikolai Kasatkin, May 24, 1864, *NJZ*, 3:16.

⁴ NJ to Niijima Sōroku, 1865, *NJZ*, 3:21.

⁵ Niijima's life, work, and faith have inspired a robust literature, yet even standard biographical works devote only a few pages to his year at sea. For some of the most important overviews of Niijima's life, see Hardy, *Life and Letters*; Watanabe Minoru, *Niijima Jō* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1959); Irwin Scheiner, *Christian Converts and Social Protest in Meiji Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 127–87; Wada Yōichi, *Niijima Jō* (Tokyo: Nihon kuristokyōdan shuppankyoku, 1973); Yoshida Hiroshi, *Niijima Jō: Jiyū e no senryaku* [Niijima Jō: Strategy for freedom] (Tokyo: Shinkyō shuppansha, 1988); Inoue Katsuya, *Niijima Jō: Hito to shisō* [Niijima Jō: Person and thought] (Kyoto: Kōyō shobō, 1990); Kitagaki Munehara, ed., *Niijima Jō no sekai: Eimin hyakunen no jiten kara* [Niijima Jō's world: One hundred years after his death] (Kyoto: Kōyō shobō, 1990); Miyazawa Masanori, *Niijima Jō: Kindai Nihon no senkakusha* [Niijima Jō: Pioneer of modern Japan] (Kyoto: Kōyō shobō, 1993); John E. van Sant, *Pacific Pioneers: Japanese Journeys to America and Hawaii, 1850–80* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 64–78; Masatoshi Abe, *Niijima Jō to Amerika* [Niijima Jō and America] (Okayama-shi: Daigaku Kyōiku shuppan, 2001); Ōta Yūzō, *Niijima Jō: Ryōshin no zenshin ni jūmanshitaru masurao* [Niijima Jō: Man of conscience] (Kyoto: Mineruva shobō, 2005); Yasuhiro Motoi, *Ganso reberarisuto* [Pioneering liberal] (Kyoto: Shibunkaku shuppan, 2008); and Yuhiko Itō, *Naruhodo Niijima Jō* [Understanding Niijima Jō] (Nara: Kizasushobō, 2012).

⁶ NJ to Niijima Tamiharu, March 29, 1867, *NJZ*, 3:34–35.

⁷ Matthew Calbraith Perry, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan* (Washington, DC: Beverly Tucker, 1856), 258. For recent work on the Pacific world from a maritime perspective, see Matt K. Matsuda, *Pacific Worlds: A History of Seas, Peoples and Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); and David Iglar, *The Great Ocean: Pacific Worlds from Captain Cook to the Gold Rush* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁸ For major interpretations of nineteenth-century American merchant marine culture on which this essay builds, see Margaret Creighton, “The Private Life of Jack Tar: Sailors at Sea in the Nineteenth Century,” PhD diss. (Boston University, 1985); Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Briton Cooper Busch, “Whaling Will Never Do for Me”: *The American Whaleman in the Nineteenth Century* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994); Margaret S. Creighton, *Rites and Passages: The Experience of American Whaling, 1830–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African-American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Benjamin W. Larabee, William M. Fowler, Jr., John B. Hattendorf, Jeffrey J. Safford, Edward W. Sloan, and Andrew W. German, *America and the Sea: A Maritime History* (Mystic, CT: Mystic Seaport, 1998); Paul A. Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront:*

American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Michael J. Bennett, *Union Jacks: Yankee Sailors in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Daniel Vickers, *Young Men and the Sea: Yankee Seafarers in the Age of Sail* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005); Eric Jay Dolin, *Leviathan: The History of Whaling in America* (NY: W. W. Norton, 2007); Myra C. Glenn, *Jack Tar’s Story: The Autobiography and Memoirs of Sailors in Antebellum America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Matthew Taylor Raffety, *The Republic Afloat: Law, Honor, and Citizenship in Maritime America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

⁹ NJ, “Kōkai Nikki” [Diary of a voyage], *NJZ*, 5:38.

¹⁰ NJ, “Kōkai Nikki,” *NJZ*, 5:38; Hardy, *Life and Letters*, 39–40.

¹¹ NJ, “Kōkai Nikki,” *NJZ*, 5:39; Hardy, *Life and Letters*, 39.

¹² Hardy, *Life and Letters*, 39.

¹³ NJ, “Kōkai Nikki,” *NJZ*, 5:41.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ NJ to Fukushi Unokichi, August 10, 1864, *NJZ*, 6:3.

¹⁶ NJ, “Kōkai Nikki,” *NJZ*, 5:43.

¹⁷ NJ, “Kōkai Nikki,” *NJZ*, 5:42.

¹⁸ *London and China Telegraph*, August 2, 1864, 419.

¹⁹ NJ, “Kōkai Nikki,” *NJZ*, 5:44.

²⁰ Alexander Michie, *The Englishman in China*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1900), 27. See also Henry Arthur Tilley, *Japan, the Amoor, and the Pacific* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1861), 100–101.

²¹ Hardy, *Life and Letters*, 6.

²² For more on clipper ships, see Arthur H. Clark, *The Clipper Ship Era: An Epitome of Famous American and British Clipper Ships, Their Owners, Builders, Commanders, and Crews, 1843–1869* (NY: G. P. Putnam’s and Sons, 1910); Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Maritime History of Massachusetts, 1783–1860* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1921), 339–64; Carl C. Cutler, *Greyhounds of the Sea: The Story of the American Clipper Ship* (Annapolis, MD: United States Naval Academy, 1930); Charles R. Schultz, *Life on Board American Clipper Ships* (College Station: Texas A&M University Sea Grant College Program, 1983); A. B. C. Whipple, *The Challenge* (NY: William Morrow, 1987); and David W. Shaw, *Flying Cloud: The True Story of American’s Most Famous Clipper Ship and the Woman Who Guided Her* (NY: William Morrow, 2000). For profits and costs, see Robert Evans, Jr., “‘Without Regard to Cost’: The Returns on Clipper Ships,” *Journal of Political Economy* 72 (February 1964): 35.

²³ Cutler, *Greyhounds of the Sea*, 247. For details of the *Wild Rover*’s construction and dimensions, see Cutler, *Greyhounds of the Sea*, 434; and *American Lloyd’s Register of American and Foreign Shipping* (1864), <http://library.mysticseaport.org/initiative/>

SPSearch.cfm?ID=630650 ,accessed February 24, 2013.

²⁴ For the contest between Boston and Britain, see Federal Writers' Program, *Boston Looks Seaward: The Story of a Port, 1630–1940* (Boston: Bruce Humphries, 1941), 132, 135.

²⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835; repr., NY: Vintage Books, 1980), 1:447.

²⁶ Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront*, 24–25; Raffety, *Republic Afloat*, 131–34.

²⁷ *San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin*, December 22, 1855.

²⁸ NJ to Niijima Sōroku, 1865, *NJZ*, 3:22.

²⁹ NJ, “Hakodate yori no ryakki,” [Brief journal of leaving from Hakodate] *NJZ*, 5:75.

³⁰ NJ, “Hakodate yori no ryakki,” *NJZ*, 5:76.

³¹ NJ, “Hakodate yori no ryakki,” *NJZ*, 5:75.

³² NJ, “Hakodate yori no ryakki,” *NJZ*, 5:74.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ NJ to Nikolai Kasatkin, May 24, 1864, *NJZ*, 3:16.

³⁵ Frank Shay, *Iron Men and Wooden Ships* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1924), 5.

³⁶ Quoted in Bennett, *Union Jacks*, 108–9.

³⁷ NJ, “Hakodate Kikō,” *NJZ*, 5:13.

³⁸ NJ, “Tamashima Hyōgo Kikō” [Journal of a trip from Tamashima to Hyōgo], *NJZ*, 5:6.

³⁹ NJ to Niijima Sōroku, December 24, 1867, *NJZ*, 3:41.

⁴⁰ John Truair, *Call from the Ocean; or An Appeal to the Patriot and the Christian in Behalf of the Seaman* (NY: John Gray and Co., 1826), 16.

⁴¹ *The Sailor's Magazine*, 30 (February 1858): 169.

⁴² Quoted in Bennett, *Union Jacks*, 110.

⁴³ For more on religion in the Navy and merchant marine, see Rediker, *Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, 169–79; Harold Langley, *Social Reform in the United States Navy, 1798–1862* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967), 43–67; Peter J. Wosh, *Spreading the Word: The Bible Business in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 89–104; Bennett, *Union Jacks*, 126–54; Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront*, 195–227; Roald Kverndal, *Seamen's Missions, Their Origin and Early Growth: A Contribution to the History of the Church Maritime* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1986); and Glenn, *Jack Tar's Story*, 144–74. For how sailors reacted to these evangelical campaigns, see Glenn, *Jack Tar's Story*, 167–72; and Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront*, 195–227.

⁴⁴ NJ, “Why I Departed from Japan,” *NJZ*, 7:7.

⁴⁵ Josiah Bushnell Grinnell, *Men and Events of Forty Years: Autobiographical Reminiscences of an Active Career from 1850–1890* (Boston: D. Lothrop Company,

1891), 238.

⁴⁶ Finding aid, Records of the American Seamen’s Friend Society, Mystic Seaport, <http://library.mysticseaport.org/Manuscripts/coll/coll158.cfm>, accessed June 28, 2013; “Order of Services at the Thirty-eighth Anniversary of the Boston Seamen’s Friend Society,” (1866), Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage> , accessed February 20, 2013.

⁴⁷ NJ to Nijijima Sōroku, 1865, *NJZ*, 3:22. See also NJ, “Kōkai Nikki,” *NJZ*, 5:46.

⁴⁸ NJ to Nijijima Tamiharu, February 21, 1866, *NJZ*, 3:28.

⁴⁹ NJ, “Kōkai Nikki,” *NJZ*, 5:40.

⁵⁰ NJ, “Why I Departed from Japan,” *NJZ*, 7:3–7.

⁵¹ Shay, *Iron Men and Wooden Ships*, 10. “Scuppers” were openings in the rail circling the deck that allowed waves to drain off back into the sea.

⁵² Richard Henry Dana, *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840; repr., NY: Library of America, 2005), 16.

⁵³ NJ to Fukushi Unokichi, August 10, 1864, *NJZ*, 6:3.

⁵⁴ A paraphrase from Richard Henry Dana, *The Seaman’s Friend* (Boston: Thomas Groom and Co., 1851), 37.

⁵⁵ NJ to Nijijima Tomi, December 24, 1867, *NJZ*, 3:44.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Michael C. Lazich, *E.C. Bridgman (1801–1861): America’s First Missionary to China* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000), 150.

⁵⁷ Hardy, *Life and Letters*, 7, 4.

⁵⁸ US Congress, *Congressional Globe*, 30th Congress, 2nd Session (February 12, 1849): 507, 508; US Congress, *Congressional Globe*, 32nd Congress, 1st Session (January 7, 1852): 219. For more on the campaign against flogging, see Langley, *Social Reform in the United States Navy*, 131–206; Myra C. Glenn, “The Naval Reform Campaign against Flogging: A Case Study of Changing Attitudes toward Corporal Punishment, 1830–1850,” *American Quarterly* 35 (Autumn, 1983): 408–25; and Glenn, *Jack Tar’s Story*, 112–43.

⁵⁹ US Congress, *Congressional Globe*, 30th Congress, 2nd Session (February 12, 1849): 509, 511, 510.

⁶⁰ William Sullivan, *Sea Life: or, What May or May Not be Done, and what Ought to be Done by Ship-Owners, Ship-Masters, Mates and Seamen* (Boston: James B. Dow, 1837), 50.

⁶¹ Quoted in Creighton, *Rites and Passages*, 93.

⁶² Quoted in Raffety, *Republic Afloat*, 73. For more on a captain’s authority, see Vickers, *Young Men and the Sea*, 214–47; and Creighton, *Rites and Passages*, 85–115.

⁶³ Charles P. Low, *Some Recollections by Charles P. Low* (Boston: George H. Ellis, 1906), 19.

⁶⁴ NJ, “Hakodate Kikō” [Diary of a trip to Hakodate], *NJZ*, 5:14.

⁶⁵ NJ, “Kōkai Nikki,” *NJZ*, 5:43.

⁶⁶ NJ, “Kōkai Nikki,” *NJZ*, 5:46.

⁶⁷ NJ to Fukushi Unokichi, August 10, 1864, *NJZ*, 6:3.

⁶⁸ NJ, “My Younger Days,” *NJZ*, 7:27.

⁶⁹ NJ, “Hakodate yori no ryakki,” *NJZ*, 5:77.

⁷⁰ Hardy, *Life and Letters*, 42.

⁷¹ NJ, “Hakodate yori no ryakki,” *NJZ*, 5:78.

⁷² NJ to Nikolai Kasatkin, May 24, 1864, *NJZ*, 3:16.

⁷³ NJ, “Kōkai Nikki,” *NJZ*, 5:66–67, 62.

⁷⁴ NJ, “Kōkai Nikki,” *NJZ*, 5:63.

⁷⁵ Robert H. Burgess, ed., *The Sea Serpent Journal: Hugh McCulloch Gregory's Voyage around the World in a Clipper Ship, 1854–55* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1975), 38.