Parallel Paths and Chance Encounters: Navigating the Journeys of Matsuo Gisuke, Ōura Kei, and their Narrator

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Summary:
A chance encounter between the author and former Rikkyo student Tagawa Eikichi unveils the captivating stories of two Meiji-era figures, Matsuo Gisuke and Ōura Kei. Matsuo, a visionary overseas art dealer, faced triumph and bankruptcy, contributing significantly to Japan's economic transition. Ōura Kei, an adventurous tea exporter, defied odds and rebuilt her fortune in Yokohama after bankruptcy. Both exemplify resilience, humility, and pivotal roles in Japan's modernisation. Tagawa's research challenges historical misconceptions, offering inspiring tales of triumph from the pages of Meiji-era history.

keywords: Matsuo Gisuke, Ōura Kei, Meiji-era, Kiritsu, Japonism

Meeting former Rikkyo student Tagawa Eikichi

A sunny autumn morning in Kamakura. While having breakfast in a local café near the beach, I met a gentleman by the name of Tagawa Eikichi（田川永吉）. In a mix of Japanese, English, Spanish, French and German, all of which Mr. Tagawa spoke and understood, I learned about his interest for Japanese history and the role some of his relatives had played in Japan's modernisation process during the Meiji-era. When we exchanged *meishi*, Mr. Tagawa noticed my affiliation as a visiting scholar at Rikkyo university, which to our mutual delight, turned out to be his former university.

A few weeks later, we met again in Kamakura. During this meeting at a Japanese restaurant near the station, and later at Mr. Tagawa's house in Kamakura, we dove deeper into the lives of two fascinating Meiji-era figures he had written about: Matsuo Gisuke（松尾儀助）and Ōura Kei（大浦慶）. We will look at some of the highlights in the lives of these figures later on but let us first find out some more about Mr. Tagawa and how he came to write about Japanese history.

Tagawa Eikichi

Tagawa Eikichi（b. 1936）graduated from Rikkyo university in March 1959 with a degree in Business Administration（経営科）from the former Faculty of Economics（経済学部）. After a successful career in various businesses, including Nippon Express（1959-1974）, and living overseas in New York and Hawaii, Mr. Tagawa retired. It was around this time that he started to take a greater interest in his family history.

Tagawa Eikichi

One day in 1995, Mr. Tagawa was watching an NHK television program called "Sunday Art Museum"（日曜美術館）. The program showed an art exhibition at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts with pictures and objects made by a company named "Kiritsu", which was represented by Mr. Tagawa's great grandfather Matsuo Gisuke. He remembered this, because his father and uncle had told him about his ancestor Gisuke and the work he did as an overseas art dealer.

Matsuo Gisuke at a sayōnara party in Vienna (1874)

Upon hearing about the Kiritsu exhibition on television, Mr. Tagawa decided to go to Boston to visit the museum in person with his wife and son（who was then studying at New York University）. Inspired by what he saw there, and by another temporary Kiritsu exhibition at the Yokohama Sogo department in 1998, Mr. Tagawa decided to start his own research on his great-grandfather Matsuo Gisuke, and share his fascinating story with the rest of the world. This resulted in the writing of Mr. Tagawa's book "Biography of Matsuo Gisuke, Political Merchant"（政商 松尾儀助伝）, which was published in 2009 by Bungeisha Co., Ltd.

Matsuo Gisuke

Born in 1837, Gisuke was the oldest son of a poor farmer（農）named Matsuo Gihachi. After tragically losing his father at age 5, Gisuke was adopted by a remote relative from Saga, which was then under control of the powerful Nabeshima *daimyō*. Gisuke's younger brother was brought to Hokkaido and later became the head of a ranch owned by a businessperson named Takashima Kaemon, who introduced the gas lantern in Japan. Gisuke's mother and sister were brought to work as maids in the residence of the Kubota *daimyō*.

Gisuke's adoptive father was Nonaka Motoemon（野中元右衛門）. In addition to being a poet, Nonaka was a rich merchant working both in Saga and Nagasaki, trading products like tea and camphor with China and the Netherlands.

Fortunately for Gisuke, Nonaka was a very influential man. One day in 1854, while still a young man, Gisuke landed in jail after a fencing skirmish with a group of Russian soldiers who got hold of Gisuke's sword. At that time, the *katana* was considered a samurai's most important possession.

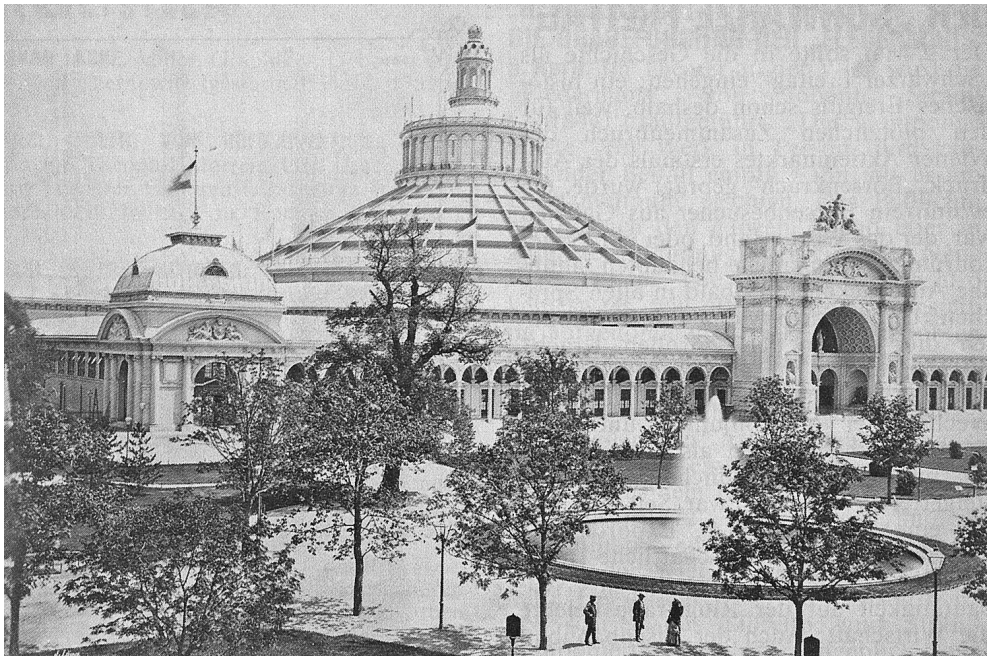
Consequently, the incident was reported to the Japanese army stationed in Nagasaki, and Gisuke was put in the army prison. However, upon hearing the news, Gisuke's stepfather sent a messenger from Saga to Nagasaki and young Gisuke was quickly released from the army jail.

Under Nonaka's wing, Gisuke learned how to read, write, and use the abacus. In addition, he was taught how to behave properly in line with Japanese etiquette. It was from his adoptive father that Gisuke also learned how to become a merchant.

Nonaka Motoemon

Like Nonaka, who was later dispatched to Paris to join the world fair held in 1867, Gisuke initially started to trade tea. In addition, Gisuke was the first who tried to cultivate British tea in Japan. Soon he started to trade many other products as well, including works of art. To accommodate the demand for his products, Gisuke established a factory in Asakusa and hired 150 artisans who had lost their jobs after the collapse of the Tokugawa shogunate in 1867.

Over five years into the Meiji-era, in 1873, the Vienna International Exposition was held, which was the first international exposition the Meiji government officially took part in. During the exposition, a Shinto shrine and a Japanese garden featuring a white wooden gate were built. Behind the gate was a



Vienna International Exposition

Entrance into the Japanese exhibition hall

traditional Japanese music and tea house, and an arched bridge. The government also exhibited *ukiyo-e* works and other art items, in addition to *kinshachi* (golden dolphins of Nagoya Castle), a model of the Great Buddha of Kamakura, and a model of the famous five-story pagoda of Tennōji Temple in Tokyo.

Contrary to western countries at that time, Japan had not yet industrialised. To acquire foreign currency, the government relied on other strategies such as the export of art. "Japonism", the French term referring to the craze of Western countries for Japanese art, was booming at that time. Sometimes, this craze took extreme proportions, as the example of the British trading company Alexander Park illustrates. Not only did they want to buy Japanese art, but entire Japanese teahouses, *including* the garden and the trees and stones in it.

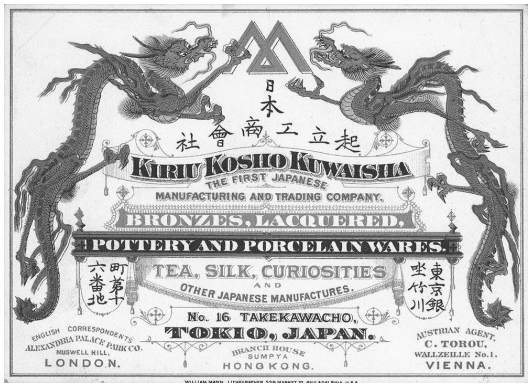
Since the Meiji government could not sell this on a large scale, the head of the Japanese delegation, Sano Tsunetami (佐野常民), decided to establish a company that enabled the trade of other products that were high in demand. Gisuke was assigned as a representative of this company. This made him not just a merchant, but a *political* merchant. After all, in his capacity as an overseas art dealer, Gisuke would contribute greatly to the economic transition of the Meiji-era.

The full name of the company of which Gisuke became the representative was called "Kiritsu Kosho Kaisha" (起立工商会社). Kiritsu (起立) is a Japanese saying used in educational contexts and translates to something like: "stand up". Later, this name was changed into "Kiriu" or "Kiryu" (see illustration below), because foreigners, especially the French, had difficulties pronouncing "Kiritsu".

Through his overseas experience, Gisuke learned about the wants and needs of Westerners, which, in

addition to tea, craved for paintings, Arita porcelain（有田焼）and bronze sculptures.

Kiritsu products were appreciated for their artistic character and with exhibitions in Paris, Barcelona, Amsterdam, and Genève, the became highly sought-after in Europe and the rest of the world.



Apart from a European office in Paris – the main office was located in Tokyo's Ginza district – Gisuke also established a Kiritsu office in New York after an exhibition in Philadelphia （1876）. More exhibitions followed in Sydney, Melbourne, and in Chicago.

Kiritsu office in Ney York（*Broadway*）

However, despite the international success, Kiritsu went bankrupt in 1892 both in Paris and in New York. The main reason was that Japonism declined towards the end of the 19th century, following the changing taste of the European and American people.

Being a political merchant, however, Gisuke could count with the support of the Japanese government. He was even recommended for a *kizoku* distinction（貴族）, which was the second highest award one could receive. But he refused the honours because he felt he didn't deserve it after spending so much government money. As a mark of honour, the Prime Minister at that time, Matsukata Masayoshi still conferred Gisuke the Order of the Rising Sun（勲三等縦 5 位）.

The fact that Gisuke initially refused the *kizuko* award fits well with his modest character. Although he amassed great wealth during his lifetime, Gisuke never forgot about his humble background. This was also reflected in his preference to commute by rickshaw instead of more luxurious means of transportation. In addition, Gisuke was a generous man. He donated many pictures and works of porcelain to different art


Lantern at Yasukuni shrine, Tokyo

institutions, including the Tokyo University of the Arts, and the aforementioned Boston Museum of Fine Arts. The lanterns of Yasukuni shrine in Tokyo were also donated by Gisuke, to commemorate the policemen that were killed during the Seinan War（西南戦争）in 1877.

Moreover, a preliminary drawing of Kiritsu pottery is kept at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music in Ueno（東京藝術大学）.

After an adventurous life with great successes and bitter losses, Gisuke died in 1902 in Shibuya aged 65. More stories about Gisuke's life, including his meeting with the famous writer Nitobe Inazō and his wife Mary Patterson Elkington, are described in Mr. Tagawa's book. Former Rikkyo University professor Noroda Junichi also wrote about Matsuo Gisuke in his 2014 book "Aesthetic Sense and Art Policy at the End of the Edo and Meiji Periods"（幕末明治の美意識と美術政策）. Let us now turn to our next historical figure.

Ōura Kei

Another fascinating Meiji-era character Mr. Tagawa dedicated a book to is the businesswoman Ōura Kei（1828-1884）. The book is titled "Biography of brave woman – Ōura Kei"（女丈夫 大浦慶伝）, and it was published in 2010 by the same publisher, a year after Tagawa's book on Matsuo Gisuke. Ōura Kei was the daughter of an oil merchant from Nagasaki. At that time, oil was used for lamps, which had yet to become electric. One day, the Ōura family house burned down in a fire that ruined all their belongings. After the fire, Ōura tried to continue her father's business, but she failed as Japan was in the process of moving away from oil to gas for illumination.

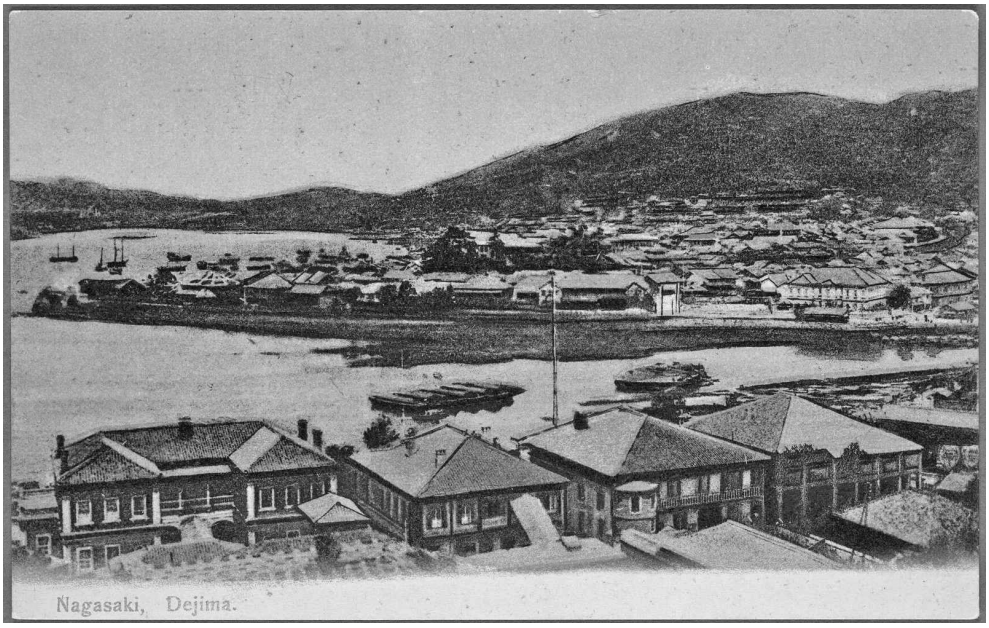
Ōura Kei

Aged 20, Ōura secretly went to Shanghai on a small boat. She knew from the Chinese living in Nagasaki – who resided there before later settling in Yokohama – that many foreigners aspiring to become wealthy assembled in China at that time. Upon returning to Japan, Ōura started her overseas trading company, focusing on the export of Japanese tea.

One day, in 1856, a Dutch merchant named Carl Julius Textor（テキストル）, who was a commercial attaché（商務員）came to her tea shop in Nagasaki. He requested three samples of Kyūshū tea and said he would take it to the Netherlands so that he could start selling it to the rest of the world. Ōura never heard back from him.

The Dutch had a long history in the port city due to the special privilege they enjoyed during the strict Tokugawa-era isolationist foreign policy called *sakoku*（鎖国）, literally meaning "country in chains". Almost all Western countries who were interested in trading with Japan, simultaneously wanted to spread Christianity. But shortly after the appointment of shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu in 1603, Christianity was prohibited due to the Christian conception of God, which threatened the dominant position of the shogun in the social hierarchy.

But an exception was made in Japan's policy. As it turned out, and contrary to other countries, the Dutch seemed more interested in trade than the spread of faith. As a result of this, and their unparalleled

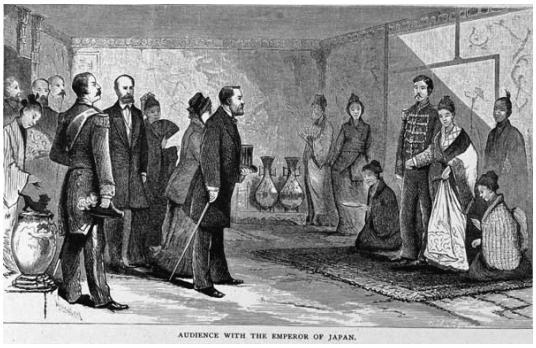


business mentality, the Dutch got the exclusive privilege among Western countries to trade with Japan for the next 228 years. They did so from a small artificial island off Nagasaki called Dejima（出島）, meaning "exit island", which can still be visited to this day.

Three years after Dutchman Textor visited Ōura, an Englishman named William Olt appeared in her shop. Olt worked for Thomas Blake Glover, the famous Scottish merchant who came to Nagasaki to buy green tea before emerging as a key figure in the industrialisation of Japan, helping to establish Mitsubishi Corporation and the Kirin Brewery Company. Olt had received the samples from the Dutch merchant Textor and told Ōura that he could sell her tea. He subsequently ordered large quantities of Kyūsyū and Ureshino tea from Saga.

Japanese tea was popular all over the world in the 19th century, especially in Southern Arabia, the United States and England. Responding to the demand, Ōura became the harbinger of the Japanese tea export and earned a fortune in the process. It also brought her considerable fame.

One day, she was invited to the party on the American ship of the late president of the United States, Ulysses S. Grant, who visited Nagasaki and Yokohama after his retirement.



After Nagasaki, Grant came to the Hama-rikyu Gardens in Tokyo and watched an exhibition match of the legendary inventor of modern judo, Kanō Jigorō. Remarkably, Kanō was also one of the distinguished guests, and *nakōdo*（"matchmaker"）at Mr. Tagawa's parent's wedding.

Weddingphoto of the Tagawa's. Kanō Jigorō is directly behind the bridegroom

During this time, Ōura also became a patron to several influential people, including the famous Sakamoto Ryōma, who played a key role during the *bakumatsu*（幕末，1853-1868）, Mutsu Munemitsu（1844-1897）, a Japanese statesman and diplomat in the Meiji period, and Ōkuma Shigenobu（1838-1922）, who later became a two-time Prime Minister of the Meiji Empire. Ōura's relationship with Ōkuma, which most likely also included romantic episodes, would later turn out to be a relationship of pivotal importance. Ōkuma was also a friend of Gisuke.

After twenty years of blooming business, the demand for Japanese tea declined. On top of that, competition increased. Shizuoka Prefecture had also started to plant tea, which directly competed with the tea coming from Kyūshū. The added advantage for the Shizuoka tea merchants was that they were close to Yokohama, which became the main port for overseas trade, causing the ports of Nagasaki and Kobe to lose business.

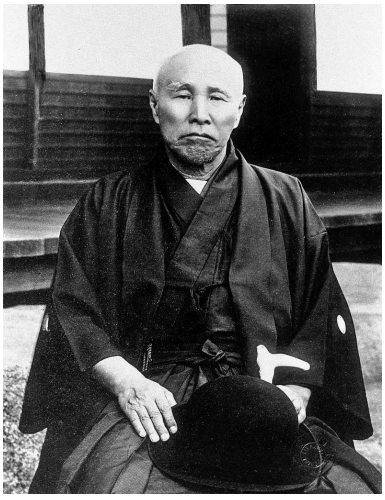
Ōura foresaw this and started to look for other business opportunities. In 1872, she met a samurai from Kumamoto named Tōyama Kazuya. He offered to collaborate with her, but instead ended up swindling Ōura. Tōyama was eventually arrested, but his arrest did not prevent Ōura to lose her entire fortune: her tea business went bankrupt, and she was forced to sell her mansion in Saga.

According to conventional history, Ōura died in poverty after having been frauded and losing everything. However, Mr. Tagawa doubted this theory and decided to find out more about the latter half of her life. He began searching through old government documents and found out that Ōura, instead of dying in poverty, had instead returned to doing business after going bankrupt, only this time, in Yokohama.

Upon losing her business and wealth, Ōura went to see Ōkuma Shigenobu, who had become a very influential figure. She knew Yokohama was now a more important port for international trade than Nagasaki, and she requested Ōkuma's help to buy a steam ship which had belonged to emperor Meiji and

was now for sale at 20.000 dollars. During this time, only Mitsubishi was allowed to do sea transport in Japan.

Okuma arranged for Ōura to buy the ship, and Ōura started another flourishing business – directly competing with Mitsubishi – transporting products such as rice,（shell）fish and *kombu* from Yokohama to Osaka and Kyūshū. She became very successful yet again. Two years after buying the ship, Ōura sold it with a healthy profit to a British trading company called Jardine, Matheson & Company, which to this day, still has an office in Yokohama.



Ōkuma Shigenobu

Last year, a Nagasaki historian named Ishida Takashi（石田孝）, confirmed that Mr. Tagawa's historical retelling of her story was indeed correct, and that Ōura had in fact not died lonely and in poverty after the Tōyama fraud. The real cause of her death has yet to be established but based on Mr. Tagawa's findings, the city of Nagasaki decided to adapt the history of Ōura Kei in three places:（1） the information was corrected on the sign in front of Ōura's grave,（2）on the road in front of Kiyomizu-dera temple in Nagasaki, and（3） on the sign in front of her former mansion in Saga, which has been demolished and is now a parking lot.

Ōura Kei and Gisuke

Although Mr. Tagawa is not a direct descendant of Ōura, she and his great-grandfather Gisuke became friends through the tea business. On one occasion, Ōura even saved Gisuke's life, who had run into trouble with Nagasaki gangsters.

The story goes that one night, Gisuke had drunk substantial quantities of sake. He was walking in Nagasaki town, which clearly wasn't as safe as it is today, when suddenly a group of four or five gangsters assaulted him. They injured Gisuke severely, but he was able to make it to Ōura's residence to get help. At that time, a French woman named Liya（リヤ）was hiding in Ōura's house from the French Government. Her father was involved in the political struggles in Paris at that time – known as the Paris Commune. Her father had fled to Shanghai, but Liya ended up living in Nagasaki with Ōura.

During Gisuke's stay in Ōura's residence, Liya helped him to recover. Little did he know then that she would later become his wife. They had five daughters and one son. Eikichi's great-grandfather, Keinosuke Tagawa（田川啓之助）, would later marry Gisuke's eldest daughter Shigeko, who died before giving birth to a child. He then married Gisuke's second daughter Nishikiko, and she gave birth to Yusuke Tagawa, Eikichi's father.

Closing thoughts

After Mr. Tagawa's book was published in 2010, television, newspapers, and other media described it as "excellent". In addition, the magazine for working women "Nikkei woman" even commented in its January 2010 edition, that it was the number one book for businesswomen.

Both Matsuo Gisuke and Ōura Kei were visionary pioneers and as such, they played a seminal role in the modernization of Japan during the Meiji-era. Gisuke and Ōura acquired tremendous monetary wealth, but they also suffered great hardship, having lost their parents at a young age, and having gone through the pains of bankruptcy and exploitation.

Ōura Kei's grave in Nagasaki,

For Gisuke's humble and generous character, not prone to boastfulness, and for Ōura's tenacity, despite unfavourable social attitudes towards women, and her willingness to act as a patron to others, both figures merit to be celebrated and remembered today. Owing to Mr. Tagawa's research and writing, today, their stories serve to inspire future generations.