

Some remarks on the first Japanese animation films in 1917*

In this research note I intend to discuss some aspects of the history of the earliest Japanese animation films for the cinema. The first task is to assemble from the literature a list of all such films shown in 1917. I will then introduce a hitherto unknown contemporary source on SHIMOKAWA Ōten's 下川凹天 *Imokawa Mukuzō Genkanban no maki* 芋川棕三玄関番の巻 (*Imokawa Mukuzō – The Janitor*) which has been widely, but apparently wrongly, considered to have been the first Japanese animation film, and look into the chronological order of Shimokawa's films in the first half of 1917. In the third part I try to establish the animation techniques used in 1917, before looking more closely at two other contemporary Japanese sources with an American background. Based on an analysis of these texts I argue that at least two of the three pioneers of Japanese animation somewhat overstated their own ingenuity and the obstacles they had to overcome in developing these techniques respectively.

I The animation films of 1917

There is, at least, no doubt about the identity of these three pioneers:

- SHIMOKAWA Ōten 下川凹天 (also read Shimokawa Hekoten, born Shimokawa Sadanori 下川貞矩, 1892-1973), a manga artist, worked for the film company Tenkatsu 天活 (Tennen-shoku Katsudō Shashin KK 天然色活動写真株式会社), probably from around the middle of 1916 to late in 1917.¹
- KITAYAMA Seitarō 北山清太郎 (1888-1945), who had been trained in Western painting, seems to have developed an interest in animation in the second half of 1916 and approached another big film company, Nikkatsu 日活 (Nippon Katsudō Shashin KK 日本活動写真株式会社), in January 1917 (Tsugata[2007], p. 277) He left Nikkatsu again at some stage to establish his own animation studio in the autumn of 1921 (Tsugata[2007], p. 143).
- KŌUCHI Jun'ichi 幸内純一 (also read Kōuchi Sumikazu, 1886-1970), another manga artist and friend of Shimokawa's,² was asked in February 1917 by KOBAYASHI Kisaburō 小林喜三郎 (1880-1961), who had split from Tenkatsu and founded the film company Kobayashi Shōkai 小林商会, to produce animation films. This lasted until about the end of 1917 when the company's financial troubles became crippling. In 1923 Kōuchi founded his own animation studio "Sumikazu" スミカズ (Adachi[2012], pp. 61f., 67).

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¹ This assumption is based on Shimokawa's own recollection from 1934 (Shimokawa[1934]). However, as will be shown, this source is not necessarily reliable, and the dates are in any case vague.

² He wrote one of the two prefaces to Shimokawa's first book *Ponchi shōzō* ポンチ肖像 (*Punch Portraits*) in 1916 (Ōshiro[1997], p. 130).

There is also broad agreement among Japanese animation experts on the number, titles and cinema premières of animation films in 1917, all of which were made by these three people:³

- *Imokawa Mukuzō Genkanban no maki* 芋川椋三 玄関番の巻 (*Imokawa Mukuzō – The Janitor*; hereafter *Genkanban*): Shimokawa, January 1917 [but see below];
- *Dekobō shingachō – Meian no shippai*⁴ 凸坊新画帳・名案の失敗 (*Dekobō's new picture book – Failure of a great plan*; hereafter *Meian*): Shimokawa, first ten days of February 1917;
- *Chamebō shingachō – Nomi fūfu shikaeshi no maki* 茶目坊新画帳・蚤夫婦仕返し of the 巻 (*Chamebō's new picture book – The revenge of Mr. and Mrs. Flea*; hereafter *Nomi*): Shimokawa, 28 April 1917;
- *Imokawa Mukuzō Chūgaeri no maki* 芋川椋三 宙返りの巻 (*Imokawa Mukuzō – Somersault*; hereafter *Chūgaeri*): Shimokawa, middle ten days of May 1917 – Mukuzō flies happily in the air but then falls down; quite good for a Japanese production but the lines are sometimes growing thick and sometimes thin, which stands out markedly; there's quite a lot of room for further research (The Kinema Record, vol. V, no. 48, 15 June 1917, p. 302);
- *Saru to kani no gassen* サルとカニの合戦, also *Saru kani gassen* 猿蟹合戦 (*The war between monkey and crab*): Kitayama, 20 May 1917;
- *Yume no jidōsha* 夢の自動車⁵ (*The dream car*): Kitayama, last ten days of May 1917 – Dekobō dreams that his bed turns into a car and drives around; there's much research still to be done; the senga 線画⁶ should, of course, finely portray the movement; in the future it would be important that the plot be given attention, too (The Kinema Record, vol. V, no. 48, 15 June 1917, p. 302);

³ The following list is based on the standard history by Yamaguchi/Watanabe[1977], p. 192f. Further information on content is only included as a paraphrase in cases where neither this book nor Tsugata[2007], p. 118, contains any (and I happened upon it). None of the films seems to have exceeded a length of 15 minutes, most were much shorter.

⁴ The title is given as it appears in The Kinema Record, vol. V, no. 45, 10 March 1917, p. 140. The later literature usually calls it *Dekoboko shingachō – Meian no shippai* 凸凹新画帳・名案の失敗, which would translate as *Bumpy new picture book – Failure of a great plan*. “Dekobō” 凸坊 and “Chame” 茶目 and variants later on refer to manga characters by KITAZAWA Rakuten 北沢楽天 (1876-1955). “Dekobō shingachō” was a generic title for animation films at the time (see Litten[2013], 5).

⁵ 自働車 in the original is presumably a misprint; see also Yamaguchi/Watanabe[1977], p. 192. Tsugata[2007], p. 118 and elsewhere, writes *Yume no jitensha* 夢の自転車 (*The dream bicycle*), but has no information on the content.

⁶ “Senga”, literally “line picture”, is used here for animation.

- *Namakuragatana* なまくら刀 (*The blunt sword*)⁷, also *Hanawa Hekonai Meitō no maki* 塙内名刀の巻 (*Hanawa Hekonai – The famous sword*), also *Tameshigiri* 試し斬 (*The sword test*): Kōuchi, 30 June 1917;



Postcard by the National Film Center, Tokyo, showing frames from *Namakuragatana*. (From Matsumoto Natsuki's collection.)

- *Neko to nezumi* 猫と鼠 (*Cat and Mice*)⁸: Kitayama, 4 July 1917;
- *Itazura posuto* いたずらポスト (*Naughty mailbox*): Kitayama, 28 July 1917;
- *Chamebō Kūkiyū no maki* 茶目坊空気銃の巻 (*Chamebō – Air gun*), also *Chame no kūkiyū* 茶目の空気銃 (*Chame's air gun*): Kōuchi, 11 August 1917;
- *Hanasaka-jiji* 花咲爺 (*The old man who made flowers bloom*): Kitayama, 26 August 1917;
- *Imokawa Mukuzō Tsuru no maki* 芋川椋三釣の巻 (*Imokawa Mukuzō goes fishing*; hereafter *Tsuru*), also called *Chamebōzu Uozuri no maki* 茶目坊主魚釣の巻 (*Chamebōzu goes fishing*): Shimokawa, 9 September 1917 – Mukuzō goes fishing but fastens the fishing line to a car which ends in failure; clownish (The Kinema Record, vol. 5, no. 50, October 1917, p. 26; mid-September is given there for the opening date);
- *Chokin no susume* 貯金の勧 (*What to do with your postal savings*): Kitayama, 7 October 1917;⁹
- (*Otogibanashi* →) *Bunbuku chagama* (お伽噺・)文福茶釜 ((*Fairy-tale*;) *Bunbuku kettle*): Kitayama, 10 October 1917;
- *Shitakire suzume* 舌切雀 (*Sparrow with no tongue*): Kitayama, 18 October 1917;

⁷ After stating “with regret” that animation was a foreign invention, an article based on an interview with ŌFUJI Noburo (1900-1961), a disciple of Kōuchi, mentions in 1933 *Namakuragatana* ナマクラ刀 by TERAUCHI[!] Jun'ichi 寺内純一 as one of the first Japanese animation films, besides the otherwise unknown, and probably wrongly remembered, *Dekobō shin mangachō* 凸坊新漫画帳 by Kitayama Seitarō (Mina-san ga daisukina “Manga no Katsudō”[1933]).

⁸ Translations of Kitayama titles from here on based on Tsugata[2003], p. 21.

⁹ This advertising film was already described as one of three films presented by the Ministry of Communications on 11 August 1917 to encourage the use of postal saving accounts. Another film in this package to tour Japan was a foreign produced version of *The ant and the grasshopper*, possibly also an animation film (Katsudō shashin[1917]).

- *Kachikachiyama* カチカチ山 (*Kachikachi Mountain*): Kitayama, 20 October 1917;
- *Chiri mo tsumoreba yama to naru* 塵も積もれば山となる (*Great oaks from little acorns grow*¹⁰): Kitayama, completed at the end of 1917 (Tsugata[2007], p. 118);
- *Hanawa Hekonai Kappa matsuri* 塙内かつぱまつり (*Hanawa Hekonai – The Kappa festival*): Kōuchi, sometime in 1917.¹¹

SHIBATA Katsu¹² 柴田勝 (1897-1991), who was a cameraman for Tenkatsu at the time, mentions two further films by Shimokawa which apparently are not listed anywhere else: *Bunten no maki* 文展の巻 (*The Ministry of Culture's art exhibition*¹³) and *Onabe to kuroneko no maki* お鍋と黒猫の巻 (*The pot and the black cat*) (Shibata[1973], 8).¹⁴

II Concerning *Imokawa Mukuzō Genkanban no maki* and other films by Shimokawa

There is widespread agreement in the literature that Shimokawa's *Genkanban* was the first Japanese animation film to be shown in a cinema, in this case in January 1917 in the Asakusa Kinema Kurabu 浅草キネマ倶楽部, a theater in Tokyo managed directly by Tenkatsu.¹⁵ Only sometimes do we find an explicit note of doubt, such as with AKITA Takahiro who mentions that there is no record of *Genkanban*'s showing and that *Meian* might have been the first instead, but leaves the question open because of a lack of sources (Akita[2005], p. 94).

In fact, scarcely any study gives a source for the claim that *Genkanban* was, a) the first Japanese animation film, and b) that it premiered in January 1917. The earliest source for a) that I know of is Shimokawa's article in 1934: he writes that *Genkanban* was his first film, and the first Japanese animation, and shown in the Asakusa Kinema Kurabu (Shimokawa[1934]); but he does not give a date.¹⁶ Information on b) must have come from another source, possibly from an article on Japanese animation in the July 1917 issue of the film journal *The Kinema Record* (*Kinema rekōdo* キネマ・レコード) which states that the first animation, by Tenkatsu, was shown in January 1917 (Wasei katon[1917]),¹⁷ but provides not title.

¹⁰ Literally, *If dust accumulates, it will grow into a mountain*.

¹¹ For unknown reasons, the most recent attempt to list all anime omits this film, as well as *Meian*, *Yume no jidōsha*, and *Chiri mo tsumoreba yama to naru* (Stingray/Nichigai[2010], p. 891).

¹² He is read Shibata Masaru by Tsugata (e.g., Tsugata[2007], p. 109), but the National Diet Library catalogue, not always reliable either, reads his name as Shibata Katsu.

¹³ This translation assumes that “bunten” 文展 is an acronym for “Monbushō bijutsu tenrankai” 文部省美術展覧会. The topic would seem somewhat unusual for Shimokawa.

¹⁴ Shibata[1974] mentions only one film by Shimokawa by title, see below.

¹⁵ In addition to the literature already mentioned, e.g.: Okada[1988], p. 111; Animēju henshūbu[1989], p. 4; Yamaguchi Yasuo[2004], p. 46; Tsugata[2010], p. 13; Matsumoto[2011], p. 96.

¹⁶ There has also been, for example, a claim for another title, Kitayama's *Saru to kani no gassen*, to have been the first Japanese animation film. (*Forty years history of Nikkatsu*, published in 1952, p. 81, quoted by Ōshiro[1995], p. 65).

¹⁷ However, according to Tsugata[2007], p. 98, this source had up to then been rarely introduced.

In the May 1917 issue of the same journal, however, we find the following, up to now overlooked or ignored, notice in a column called *Film Visits: April*:

“Kinema Kurabu: Imokawa Mukuzō Genkanban no maki – Mr. Imokawa’s Janitor (Tenkatsu). It is Tenkatsu’s third senga trick. I’m glad about such an attempt. The title is fetching. It is skilled.” (Furumu kenbutsu[1917], p. 240)¹⁸

In other words, this source – which seems to be not just the only contemporaneous one, but also the earliest by far – contradicts the standard account of the beginning of Japanese animation film. It suggests that *Genkanban* was not the first film by Shimokawa and Tenkatsu, and thus the first Japanese animation film, nor was it shown in January, but in April 1917.

Which leads us to the question: How credible is this source? There is no *prima facie* reason to doubt *The Kinema Record*. It had earlier identified *Meian* as the “second senga trick”, opening at the Kinema Kurabu sometime during the first ten days of February 1917, and it had given a brief description: “Mukuzō tries to capture a boar, digs a pit, and brings about a big failure” (The Kinema Record, vol. V, no. 45, 10 March 1917, p. 140). The dates it gives for *Chūgaeri* and for *Tsuri* also agree reasonably with those listed by Yamaguchi and Watanabe, which seem to come from another source (Yamaguchi/Watanabe[1977], p. 192).

Besides, it is unlikely that the reviewer saw a re-run of a film already shown in January, but did not recognize it as such, especially considering his comment about “such an attempt” and “skilled”. That the film had already been completed in January, but was released only in April, is not likely either.

Now the question arises: How credible is Shimokawa’s article from 1934? One point worth noting in this context is that Shimokawa claims that only one monthly film magazine existed when he began his work in animation (Shimokawa[1934]). But in 1916 there were, at the least, two such magazines – *Katsudō no sekai* 活動之世界 and *The Kinema Record* –, in 1917 *Katsudō gahō* 活動画報 was added. So he did make mistakes.

Moreover, the structure of his article is a bit strange. First he goes into his being hired by Tenkatsu, then he discusses his animation techniques (blackboard and paper animation, see below), the second of which he holds responsible for his eye damage and the subsequent end of his career in animation. He mentions Kitayama and Kōuchi. Only then, seemingly deviating from his chronological narrative, does he assert: “The first work *Imokawa Mukuzō Genkanban no maki* and two others opened at the Kinema Kurabu” (Shimokawa[1934]).

How can we reconcile these contradictory sources? Considering that all of his films that we know of for certain opened at the Kinema Kurabu, it would seem possible that Shimokawa here refers not to his very first animation film, done in an inferior technique, but to the first one done with the new technique, which he wanted to have remembered and which might well have been *Genkanban* (but see below). In that case, the “two other” films would, presumably, have been *Chūgaeri* and *Tsuri*.

¹⁸ 「キネマ倶楽部 / 芋川棕三玄關番の巻 Mr. Imokawa’s Janitor (天活) / 天活第三次の線畫トリックだ。こういふ、試みは嬉しい。タイトルが馬鹿に気に入った。巧妙である。」

But this leaves us with a troublesome question: What to do with *Nomi*, which is said to have premiered on 28 April 1917? I have not been able to identify the source for the opening date or the production information on *Nomi*, but see no reason to doubt the existence of such a record. If it was shown after *Genkanban*, as would seem likely considering its première late in April, it would presumably have been made with the new technique, too, but then Shimokawa should have written about three, rather than two other films. Moreover, this would squeeze three films, including *Chūgaeri*, into at most one and a half months, whereas the last(?) film came four months later.

Or was *Nomi* in fact only an alternative title of *Genkanban*? This would explain a lot,¹⁹ but it would seem to collide with testimony by Shibata if we assume *Genkanban* and the later *Chūgaeri* were made with the new technique. According to a text by him quite closely based on his production diary, Shimokawa's, and Tenkatsu's, first animation film – called by Shibata *Hekobō shingachō* 凹坊新画帳²⁰ – was only made in mid-April 1917, and used the old technique (Shibata[1974], p. 51). This might then refer to *Nomi* or, though unlikely, to an otherwise unknown film. In the 1973 version of his memoirs, which was written later than the one (re-)published in 1974, Shibata explicitly notes *Chūgaeri* as the film he worked on with Shimokawa, but uses a pseudonym for himself and does not mention the title given in his 1974 version (Shibata[1973], p. 8; Ōshiro[1995], p. 66). Yet at that stage he obviously had done some research (he quotes from *The Kinema Record's* review) implying that he had attempted to identify which title he had actually filmed. As *The Kinema Record* does not list *Nomi*, he may have been led astray and mistaken it for *Chūgaeri* – a film that would have come to the cinema quite late for being filmed in mid-April anyway.²¹ If *Hekobō shingachō* was *Nomi*, then *Genkanban* must have been produced and shown in the cinema very shortly afterwards, which is possible but also means that three films (*Nomi*, *Genkanban*, and *Chūgaeri*) were produced within about a month using two different techniques.

Another solution would be to assume that *Genkanban* and *Nomi* were just two titles of the same film, opening in late April 1917, but produced with the old technique and filmed by Shibata. Why the reviewer of *The Kinema Record* would then applaud *Genkanban*, however, would remain a bit of a mystery.

We could get around this by making a different assumption: that Shibata erred in the date of his filming the ominous *Hekobō shingachō*. In fact, in the 1974 version – which I consider the more reliable of his two publications, even if it was still not the original production diary – he does not give an absolute date. Rather he mentions this work as having been filmed between coming back from on-location filming on Mt. Myōgi in Gunma Prefecture for the 29th film he

¹⁹ It would also, for example, make Imokawa Mukuzō the “star” of all films certainly made by Shimokawa. On Imokawa's “background” as a manga character, see Ōshiro[1995], p. 66ff.

²⁰ Either a misprint for *Dekobō shingachō*, or a pun on Shimokawa's name, but presented as if it were an individual, not a generic, title.

²¹ According to Shibata's records films seem to have usually premiered less than a week after the end of his work. See for example the dates of his 29th and 30th film for a director (Shibata[1974], p. 51). His quoting from the review does not necessarily mean that he remembered the film's content, too, after more than half a century.

made with a director (7 to 9 April 1917), and the long-awaited first film of his own, for which he travelled to Kamakura on 15 April. But he does not put a number to *Hekobō shingachō*; after his second own film comes the 30th film with a director (Shibata[1974], p. 51).

Might he actually have filmed *Dekobō shingachō – Meian no shippai*, in January or early February? However, we should note that Shibata's placing this film between a long excursion to the mountains and the first film he made alone sounds like a true memory; it might also be difficult to squeeze *Hekobō shingachō* into his earlier schedule. On the other hand again, assuming that *Hekobō shingachō* was *Meian* would be helpful for the considerations below on animation technique and would mean that Shimokawa had had enough time to change his technique for *Genkanban*.

It might also muddle the question of what really was the first animation film by Shimokawa. Both the entry on *Meian* ("second senga trick") and later the article on Japanese cartoons in *The Kinema Record* point to an animation film produced by Tenkatsu and shown in January 1917, yet none seems to have been recorded at the time.²² In the version of his memoirs written later, Shibata claims that a "manga dekobō shingachō" マンガ凸坊新画帳 (apparently meant as a generic title, not an individual one) was completed by Shimokawa already in 1916 (Shibata[1973], p. 6). But in the 1974 version he obviously did not know about that and asserted that *Hekobō shingachō* had been the first animation.

Thus an animation film by Shimokawa only may, not must, have been shown in January 1917, not necessarily at the Kinema Kurabu. The Yūrakuzo 有楽座 cinema in Marunouchi 丸の内, Tokyo, for example, held a Tenkatsu animation festival ("dekobō taikai" 凸坊大会) with imported films beginning on 10 January 1917 (Asahi shinbun, 10 January 1917, p. 7).²³ Maybe a Shimokawa film was also presented there. In the end, however, we do not know anything (yet) about such a film. For the time being, therefore, *Dekobō shingachō – Meian no shippai* has to be regarded as the oldest confirmed Japanese animation film. *Genkanban* came later. Yet we must also accept that it is not possible to be fully confident about how many films Shimokawa actually made and in which order, without finding fault with at least one of the sources.

III Animation techniques

With only one film extant from 1917 (Kōuchi's *Namakuragatana*), and another one from February 1918 (Kitayama's *Urashima Tarō*²⁴ 浦島太郎), both discovered by Matsumoto Natsuki in 2007 (Matsumoto[2011], p. 97), we have to rely on the literature to an unusual degree to find out about the techniques used by Japan's animation pioneers.

²² However, there seem to have been quite a lot of cinema-related periodicals in early 1917 which probably have not been examined yet. Cf. Kisha no koe[1917].

²³ At an earlier "dekobō taikai" at the Yūrakuzo, in July 1916, Kitayama seems to have first encountered animation (Tsugata[2007], p. 64f.). Yamamoto[1982], p. 77, more specifically points to a film by the Fleischer Brothers.

²⁴ The Japanese version of *Rip van Winkle*.



Postcard by the National Film Center, Tokyo, showing frames from *Urashima Tarō*. (From Matsumoto Natsuki's collection.)

Concerning Shimokawa's films, we have his own article from 1934 in which he states that he at first used chalk on blackboard, with those portions changing from picture to picture being wiped away and drawn anew. This method, however, was uncomfortable and couldn't be perfected, so he changed to paper animation, using three types of printed backgrounds on which he drew the characters freehand, whitening out any lines on the background that would interfere. For this technique he also constructed a kind of worktable, consisting of two boxes on which lay a glass plate illuminated from below by a strong light (Shimokawa[1934]).

Shimokawa gives no clear indication when exactly this change in technique occurred. However, since he mentions that he used his work table for about half a year before constantly looking into the strong light caused him eye damage, and because his last film seems to have opened in September, it can be deduced that he would have begun using paper animation roughly between February and June 1917.²⁵ This would also correspond with Shibata's statement that Shimokawa still used the blackboard technique in mid-April (Shibata[1974], p. 51) or, if we use the assumption introduced above, for *Meian* in late January, early February.

Whereas we can therefore be quite certain that Shimokawa first employed blackboard animation and then paper animation with printed backgrounds, the date of the change-over cannot be established precisely, with March 1917 being the most likely, in my opinion.

Kitayama also used two techniques in 1917/18. At first, according to an article on Nikkatsu in the October 1918 issue of *Katsudō no sekai* (quoted in Tsugata[2007], p. 95), he used a method called "kōgashiki" 稿画式, then, "lately", "kirinukigashiki" 切抜画式. While the latter is obviously cut-out animation, the former is explained by TSUGATA Nobuyuki as "today's paper animation, the method where, starting with the background to the people etc. and moving stuff, everything is drawn on one sheet" (Tsugata[2007], p. 95).

However, the memoirs of Kitayama's assistant YAMAMOTO Sanae 山本早苗 (a.k.a. Yamamoto Zenjirō 山本善次郎, 1898-1981) give a different impression. He mentions that the sheets with the moving characters, made from a special paper, were laid upon background sheets

²⁵ The long gap between *Chūgaeri* and *Tsuri* might have been caused by this change, but it might also be explained by Shimokawa's "strange illness" which he contracted in addition to his eye trouble (Shimokawa[1934]).

before being filmed (Yamamoto[1982], p. 82).²⁶ In fact, considering Kitayama's output and his use of (a few) assistants, it would have made sense to separate the drawing of backgrounds, which could be re-used, from the drawing of the moving characters. But Yamamoto also confirms that Kitayama then proceeded to cut-out animation (Yamamoto[1982], p. 83).

Again, we cannot pinpoint the moment when the change-over occurred. However, *Urashima Tarō* already employed cut-out animation plus drawn animation, so it would have been before February 1918, and likely already in 1917.

The situation regarding Kōuchi's animation technique is somewhat easier because, while we don't seem to have a statement from him, his first film *Namakuragatana* clearly employs cut-out animation, with some drawn animation thrown in. There is no reason to assume that he changed this with his later films in 1917; in fact, he still used cut-out animation at the end of his career (Manga firumu[1930]).

IV Knowledge about foreign animation techniques in 1916/17

In retrospect both Shimokawa and Kitayama claim that they had no written reference material to learn from. Shimokawa wrote in 1934: "[...] so I could not but think about everything myself" (Shimokawa[1934]). In his book on animation published in 1930, Kitayama stated that he had "solved the mechanism [of Western animation] in my head" (quoted in Tsugata[2007], p. 66). He also claimed: "Research at the desk began. There were no reference books or such. There was not even a fragment of a senga film" (quoted in Tsugata[2007], p. 70).

In this context Tsugata mentions a Japanese article based on an American one and published in the February issue of *Katsudō gahō*, but does not relate its contents (Tsugata[2007], p. 72). In a later publication he additionally refers to an article from 1916, but claims that these were just outlines and that one could not learn all about animation from them (Tsugata[2010], p. 14).²⁷

Yet the relevant point here is not whether one could learn everything from these articles, but whether they would have provided the basic inspiration for animation techniques. If we look first at the article *The Story of Dekobō Shingachō* by the pseudonymous Shōfūsei,²⁸ published in *Katsudō no sekai* in November 1916, we see that it starts with early animation in France, but then shifts to the US, with a special emphasis on John Randolph BRAY (1879-1978).²⁹ There follows a part on animation techniques and filming: "Now, formally the filming method of 'Dekobō gachō' is exceedingly simple. There are mainly two methods ...". The first is cut-

²⁶ Yamamoto here also mentions a worktable (tōshaki 投射机) with a light below. At the time one could not get electricity while the sun was still high, unless one had a factory. So they had to wait until the afternoon to start using it (Yamamoto[1982], p. 82).

²⁷ Both sources are also mentioned in Hagihara[2008], 266.

²⁸ This is only a guess at the reading of the name.

²⁹ Bray's *Colonel Heeza-Liar* series was well received in Japan, as an article in *The Kinema Record* shows, too (Wasei katon[1917]).

out animation on drawn backgrounds, which is said to be called “animated cartoon” in foreign countries.

The second method is based on flip-books (“katsudō ehon” 活動絵本), only more precisely drawn and extended to reach the length of a film (Shōfūsei[1916], pp. 28f.). Again, the backgrounds are separately drawn in batches of tens or even hundreds, and only the moving bodies are then drawn in with the slight variations necessary for giving the appearance of movement. But this method is laborious both for the one who draws the pictures and for the one who operates the camera, because the drawings have to be centered exactly. So, if the cut-outs from the first method are moved on the backgrounds during filming, this might be the best and “let birds fly freely through the sky and let Chame move fully like a living human being, coming out from the left, entering to the right, going in all directions” (Shōfūsei[1916], pp. 29f.).

There follows information about filming, about the number of frames necessary for a film, about economizing (Bray is said to film one drawing three to five times in a row and still to get a splendid result), and about perspective and depth in the backgrounds. At the end we find a list of mostly American companies and their artists whose work had recently been shown in Japan: Rubin, American Pathé, Universal, Powers, ... (Shōfūsei[1916], pp. 30f.). All in all, this article does not read like a translation of an American one, but seems to have been written from a Japanese viewpoint, based on American materials.

In February 1917 *Katsudō gahō* published an article that was clearly marked as a translation from an American original. The journal *Scientific American* had published an essay on *Animated Cartoons in the Making* in its issue of 14 October 1916, and a slightly re-arranged and abbreviated version of this was published in Japanese by the again pseudonymous Rakuyōsei³⁰. Two pieces of information from this account of cel animation should be noted here: “The various backgrounds of the moving manga [katsudō manga 活動漫画] are only drawn once each.” (Rakuyōsei[1917], p. 33)

Also, a worktable is described for use by the animator. In this case one piece of information was, in fact, lost in the translation: “The master artist works on an easel consisting of a slanted piece of **ground glass** held in a suitable frame, through which pass the rays of an electric lamp placed below it” (Animated Cartoons[1916]; emphasis added). The Japanese translation, on the other hand, only says “glass” (Rakuyōsei[1917], p. 34). Shimokawa might have needed normal glass anyway, as he could not use cels, but only paper, yet this missing detail is revealing and may have contributed to his going blind on his right eye (cf. Ōshiro[1995], p. 66).

Of course, this article, too, includes more information, but these data should suffice for the question at hand. If we consider the animation techniques of Shimokawa, Kitayama and Kōuchi, we find that only Shimokawa’s blackboard animation is not covered here. Obviously, Shimokawa had watched – or heard about – some of the oldest foreign animated films for the cinema, perhaps even James Stuart BLACKTON’s (1875-1941) *Humorous Phases of Funny Faces* from 1906, which was available in Japan, although we do not know when it was shown in theaters, if at all (Litten[2013], p. 4). That film was done as blackboard animation, and several of Emile COHL’s (1857-1938) films, including parts of *Les Exploits de Feu Follet* alias

³⁰ Cf. note 28.

Nipparu no henkei ニッパルの変形, which premiered in Japan in 1912 (Litten[2013]), looked as if they were made in the same way.

But it would be hard to argue that Shimokawa's change in technique was not due to the article in *Katsudō gahō*. Also, that change would have come after the article had been published in February 1917, possibly even immediately afterwards, if Shibata erred in placing his work on a Shimokawa film in mid-April.

As far as Kitayama and Kōuchi are concerned, both were very likely influenced by either or both of these articles (witness Kitayama's worktable as described by Yamamoto). It would be difficult to believe that they did not notice those articles when they were trying to find out how to do animation. And even if they did not, someone at the companies who paid them surely would have alerted them to this content. Obviously, putting it into practice was still hard work, but the claims Shimokawa and Kitayama later made about their discovering the secrets of animation on their own would seem to be highly dubious. (Kōuchi does not seem to have made similar claims.)

Conclusion

The earliest history of Japanese animation film is still partly clouded. While we know the identity of its three pioneers – Shimokawa Ōten, Kitayama Seitarō, and Kōuchi Jun'ichi –, several problems remain. The first Japanese animation film that we can be certain of was Shimokawa's *Dekobō shingachō – Meian no shippai* for Tenkatsu, which opened in early February 1917. It was very likely made using blackboard animation. *Imokawa Mukuzō Genkanban no maki* followed in April, probably made as paper animation with printed backgrounds. If there was a film by Shimokawa opening already in January 1917, we have no information on it, not even a title. The new list of the very earliest Japanese animation films, all made by Shimokawa, would thus read:

- [unknown title in January 1917, existence uncertain;]
- *Dekobō shingachō – Meian no shippai*: first ten days of February 1917;
- *Imokawa Mukuzō Genkanban no maki*: April 1917; might be identical with, or later than
 - *Chamebō shingachō – Nomi fūfu shikaeshi no maki*: 28 April 1917;
- *Imokawa Mukuzō Chūgaeri no maki*: middle ten days of May 1917

For Kitayama's and Kōuchi's films the situation is better: Kitayama's *Saru to kani no gassen* came out on 20 May 1917 using paper animation, likely with separate backgrounds; Kōuchi's *Namakuragatana* followed on 30 June 1917 using the cut-out animation which would soon become the standard technique for Japanese animators. With the exception of Shimokawa's earliest film(s?), which seems to have been inspired by older Western animation, all of these films were very likely animated using American techniques and ideas, as collected and translated in two articles published in Japanese film journals in late 1916 and early 1917. The roots of Japanese animation do have a strong American flavor.³¹

³¹ Whether the very early imports of German animation and their likely imitation, the film strip *Katsudō shashin* 活動写真, were seen by the pioneers of Japanese cinema animation is unknown. See Litten[2014].

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