

# Postcards from Hell: Glimpses of the Great Kanto Earthquake

M. William Steele

## Introduction

Imagine the scene. In mid-November 1923, two and a half months after the Great Kanto Earthquake, a middle-aged man on a “one sen steamer” that plies back and forth between Azumabashi and Shirohige on the Sumida River shouts out: “Picture postcards! I’ve got postcards!” And then he begins his pitch: “I’m sorry to bother you ladies and gentlemen, especially while the ship is moving and we are all crowded together. But I’m going to talk to you about something that we citizens can never, never forget. I’ve got photographs of what happened at 11:58, just before noon, on September 1 of this year, 1923. As a memorial to the souls of the dead, or as a memorial to what’s eternal, I beg for your endorsement. The first scene is of those dreadful fissures right in front of the imperial palace; next is Yurakuchō, the destruction is simply appalling! (*sangyaku*). In both, the top shows you what the area looked like before the quake and the bottom after, making it easy to grasp what’s happened. These prints are all top quality collotypes; you won’t find anything with sharper detail. No one can claim these images are blurry. The next scene is from Shin-Yoshiwara and that mound of the ashes of some 600 souls. Next is Asakusa, the most famous entertainment district in Japan. Remember that row of motion picture theaters—Ah! So sad! It’s now vanished like a dream leaving no trace but the ruins of Shochiku’s Misono-za. And then there’s Asakusa’s famous Twelve Stories (the Ryōunkaku) knocked down by the earthquake, and then, thanks to the Army Corps of Engineers, it’s completely gone. These prints are a unique remembrance of these events for all times, now and into the future—and for them I beg your endorsement. Yes, thank you. Wait a minute....”<sup>1)</sup>

On September 1, 1923, typhoon, earthquake, tsunami and fire transformed Tokyo and Yokohama into a living hell. Known collectively as the Great Kanto Earthquake, the 1923 disaster had extreme social, political, and economic consequences: around 150,000 people were killed and reconstruction costs soured Japanese economic growth in the years leading up to the Great Depression. The event has been studied from many angles, including environmental history, urban reconstruction, international aid, scapegoating in crisis situations, and for general insight into the uses of disaster for political, social, and ideological ends.

The imagining and memorializing of the 9.1 earthquake is the subject of three re-



Figure 1: Fissures in Front of the Imperial Palace, Marunouchi.  
(author's collection)



Figure 2: Yurakuchō before and after the Quake  
(author's collection)

cent books, all published, interestingly, post 3.11: Kitahara Itoko's *Kanto daijishin no shakai-shi* (A Social History of the Great Kanto Earthquake), J. Charles Schencking, *The Great Kanto Earthquake and the Chimera of National Reconstruction in Japan*, and Gennifer Weisenfeld, *Imagining Disaster: Tokyo and the Visual Culture of Japan's Great Kanto Earthquake*.<sup>2)</sup> All three books rely heavily on postcard images of the destruction caused by the earthquake. The extraordinary number of earthquake related postcards, well over one thousand, often sold in sets, is well known, but has not been fully examined. Weisenfeld shows how photography, film, and art help to "imagine disaster." And she refers to postcards as an "alternate source" offering unique insight into the social history of disasters such as the Great Kanto Earthquake, but does not go into detail. Why were postcards of disaster and destruction so popular? Why postcards from hell? Who published them and who bought them and why? What subjects were covered? Were they simply souvenirs? What news did they convey? What memories did they record? I hope to answer some of these questions and place the picture postcards within a long tradition of disaster media, including broadsheets and woodblock prints that went beyond the visual record to include political and social comment.

In an age before Twitter and Facebook, postcards functioned as a sort of primitive social networking service, bequeathing a valuable record of what people saw and what people thought in happy times and sad—and at times of major social and political upheaval. Interestingly the 1923 quake came at the peak of "golden age of picture postcards." Later advances in photography, printing and visual communications diminished their importance. The 3.11 earthquake, tsunami, and radiation disasters, for example, were not portrayed in picture postcards. Other innovative documents help us understand what people saw and thought in 2011, including Twitter, Facebook and other successors to the role played by picture postcards in the early twentieth century.

### **Postcard History**

Postcards came into general use in Europe and the United States in the 1860s and in Japan in the 1870s.<sup>3)</sup> The world's first official correspondence postcard was issued in Austria in 1869. Postal services throughout the world quickly followed suit. In Japan, the first postal card was issued in 1873 as part of the establishment of a new Western-style postal system.<sup>4)</sup> Picture postcards come much later; again with Europe in the lead in the 1880s, in the United States in the 1890s, and in Japan from the beginning of the twentieth century, especially after a change in postal regulations in 1900 allowed privately produced cards to be sent in the mail.

At nearly the same time, the United States government relinquished its monopoly on the production and sale of postcards and eased restrictions on what could be mailed, allowing for the address and message to be on one side of the card and a photograph or illustration on the other. The early years of the twentieth century witnessed a worldwide boom in picture postcard production. In Japan, after 1900, picture postcards were produced in great variety, some to meet the demand of for-



Figure 3: Yokohama Street Scene, 1905  
(author's collection)

eign tourists for images of geisha, temples, shrines, and street scenes in Tokyo, Yokohama and Kyoto (Figure 3), but most for domestic consumption: risqué photos of beautiful women, celebrated famous landscapes and local landmarks, and, of course, photos and illustrations of the unusual.

In both the United States and Japan, war and natural disasters stimulated demand for picture postcards. Scenes from the Spanish-American war at the turn of the century and photos of the damage caused by the San Francisco earthquake in 1904 set off a picture postcard boom in the United States.<sup>5)</sup> Demand for images of the 1904 Russo-Japanese war helped to produce Japan's "golden age of picture postcards." For the first time, people formed long lines to buy sets of picture postcards, eager for inexpensive images from the war front—some black and white or hand-tinted photos, some more imaginative artwork derived from photos, and some cartoons with patriotic messages. (Figure 4) And, for the first time, postcards were valued more for their visual content than for the blank space reserved for communication. In 1910, for example, the citizens of Tokyo, nearly all of them victims in one way or another of a destructive flood that left 270,000 people homeless, were impatient consumers of picture postcards of the event. (Figure 5) By this time woodblock prints of current events were too expensive and newspapers were too ephemeral; picture postcards were sought out, both as keepsakes of an event experienced and as a way to inform distant friends and relatives of a key personal experience. Postcard collecting, or deltiology, became a worldwide obsession. Long lines, sometimes snaking for 200 to 300 meters, formed to buy up sets of picture postcards of the Great Kanto Earthquake when they first became available around September 9, 1923, just over a week after the great catastrophe.





Figure 4: An Imaginary Scene from the Russo-Japanese War  
(author's collection)



Figure 5: The Great Tokyo Flood of 1910  
(author's collection)

### Postcards and the Great Kanto Earthquake

After the quake struck on September 1, fires raged for nearly two days, turning Tokyo into a burning hell. The death toll is uncertain—perhaps as many as 150,000 perished. It took nearly a week for order to be restored and relief efforts to take ef-



Figure 6: Open-air sales of picture postcards and other earthquake information in front of Tokyo Station. (Used with permission from Kyodo News Agency/Amana Images). A story by one woman recounts her survival from the sea of flames that engulfed her house in Yokohama. She walked barefoot to Tokyo, pawned her ring and watch, and managed to eke out a living by selling picture postcards in a make-shift stall such as the one above. Her once affluent lifestyle was but a dream.<sup>6)</sup>

fect—and another couple weeks before cleanup and rebuilding could begin. During this period of chaos and panic, dominated by the smell of death, a few intrepid cameramen and printers began to churn out picture postcards that portrayed terrible scenes of destruction. Newspapers also struggled to recover; most of their presses and typesetting equipment had been destroyed. The *Asahi*, for example, only resumed publishing on September 12, eleven days after the quake. In the absence of radio (which did not begin broadcasting until 1925), the few printing establishments that survived the quake competed with each other to produce postcards for sale to an information-starved public. (Figure 6)

Of the more than 300 printing companies in Tokyo in 1923, only around 10 escaped the disaster relatively unscathed. One of them, Mitsumura Printing, a small company with an established reputation in the picture postcard business, and with offset printing equipment in good working order, was especially well posed to take advantage of the calamity for profit. Mitsumura Toshimo originally set up shop in Kobe in 1904. A cameraman himself, his company became known for its picture postcards of special events connected with the Russo-Japanese War. Perhaps inspired by a book published in 1917 claiming that selling postcards was one way to

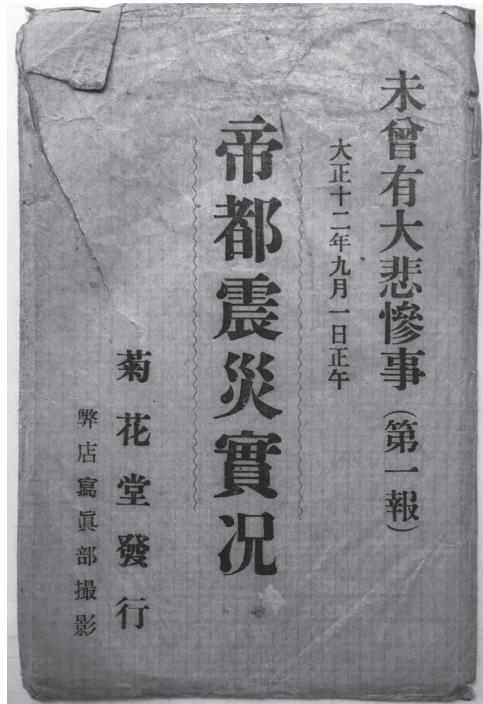


Figure 7: Packet cover of set of earthquake postcards. “A Record of the Earthquake Disaster in the Imperial Capital: A Disaster of Unprecedented Proportions (First Report) Noon, September 1, 1923. Published by Kikukadō; pictures taken by our company’s photography division.” (author’s collection)

get rich quick, he moved to Tokyo in 1918.<sup>7)</sup> His office in Jinbōchō was burnt to the ground, but the warehouse and factory in Tengenji escaped destruction. Other publishing houses that specialized in postcards, including Ishikawa Shoten, Shobidō, and Aomidō, were forced to turn to Mitsumura for help. Mitsumura’s quake memories were different from those of other more traumatized survivors. In the days after September 1, he ran around madly in search of paper, ink, and other printing supplies, relying on his Kansai contacts, in order to meet the orders that came rushing in one after the other. The earthquake was the making of his fortune.<sup>8)</sup>

Of course, Mitsumura was not the only publisher of earthquake postcards. Small presses were the first to churn out cards, but by the middle of September larger presses, newspapers and magazines entered the market. Some Nagoya publishers, for example Kikukadō, also dispatched cameraman men to Tokyo immediately after the quake.<sup>9)</sup> Kikukadō billed its packets of postcards as “first reports” of “the disaster of unprecedented proportions.” (Figure 7) Nonetheless the publisher of most of the surviving postcards is unknown; they were in a sense illegal publications, sold on the streets and at makeshift stands. For about 10 to 20 days after the earthquake there was an unquenchable demand for images of the disaster. As a book published in 1925 recalled, some people got rich selling earthquake postcards: “the street be-

tween Hibiya and the Marunouchi Building (in front of Tokyo Station) was lined with nearly 300 stalls selling picture postcards.”<sup>10)</sup> Most were sold in packets of 8 or 10, but some were offered for sale in uncut sheets. Miyatake Gaikotsu linked the phenomena to the sales of catfish prints after the Ansei Earthquake of 1855 but noted that the earthquake prints of 1923 were more varied and realistic, focusing on ruined buildings and burnt-out street scenes. He also took note of a gradual decline in the demand for postcards. “At first a set of cards worth 3 *sen* were sold at 20 *sen*; gradually the price came down, first to 15 *sen*, 10 *sen*, and then 6 *sen*, when cards were no longer sought after in the city, the vendors took the cards to the countryside.”<sup>11)</sup>

Images were supplied by a variety of cameramen, some professionals who operated photography studios, some pioneer photojournalists associated with newspapers and magazines (such as the *Asahi Graph* which was established in January 1923), and many amateurs armed with their imported Kodak brownies or the domestically produced Konica Sakura or better yet, the Lily—cameras that helped to make Japan into a nation of photographers.<sup>12)</sup>

We know the names of some of the cameramen who risked their lives to take dramatic shots of the destruction. Kudō Tetsurō was a cameraman attached to the army; he was able to use his military connections to gain access to burnt-out areas declared off-limits.<sup>13)</sup> Umeta Joichi was another source of quake images; he maintained a well-known photography studio in Koishigawa and dispatched his students throughout the city to record Tokyo burning. Another professional photographer known for his earthquake shots was Okada Kōyō, now more famous for his photo of Mt. Fuji on the 5,000 yen note; in January 1923 he published a photo-record of damage caused by the earthquake in Tokyo: *Tokyo shinsai shashin-cho* (Photo Album of the Tokyo Disaster).<sup>14)</sup> For the most part, however, like the publishers of picture postcards, the cameramen remain unknown.

In many ways, Miyatake Gaikoku was correct to suggest similarities between the picture postcards of 1923 and the earthquake prints of 1856. Both sought to meet the information demands of a traumatized public. Both disaster *kawaraban* and disaster postcards included maps of affected areas. (Figure 8) Moreover, the quality of the printing and the paper used was poor as priority was placed on speed and cheapness. Some images were used repeatedly in different formats; often with slightly different captions. And the prints were largely unregulated; sales took advantage of a breakdown of normal regulatory practices. For example, attempts by the government to prevent the use of photos of dead bodies went unheeded. Jennifer Weisenfeld describes what she calls a sort of voyeuristic “dark tourism” that made grisly picture postcards of death and destruction especially sought after. And if the photos themselves were not sufficient macabre, images were touched up with the addition of red flames and billows of grey smoke. (Figure 9)





Figure 8: Map of the Burnt Area  
(author's collection)

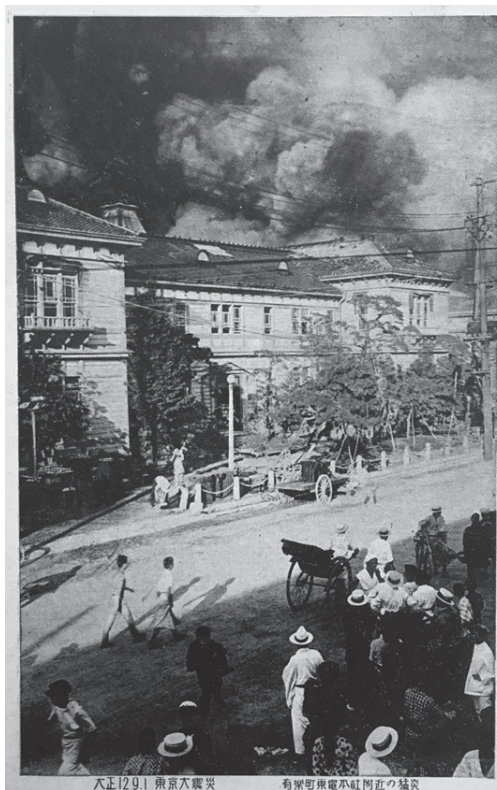


Figure 9: Yurakucho area in Flames  
(author's collection)

## A Picture is Worth 1,000 Words

And like late Edo period *kawaraban* dealing with natural and man-made disasters, picture postcards often suggested a message to viewers beyond the realistic depiction of people fleeing from flames, ruined buildings and burnt-out areas, famous monuments destroyed, piles of the dead and mounds of ashes, fissures in the ground, collapsed bridges, and survivors living in tents—a message more moralistic and cautionary than a simple warning to prepare better for the next disaster. But whereas *kawaraban* often included witty and satirical texts, the postcard captions were straightforward; the message derived more from the image itself. On the whole, they warned against the evils of excessive consumption, materialism, secularism, eroticism, internationalism and modernity in general. The Taisho period is often celebrated as Japan's liberal age; but resistance to modernity had deep roots predating the onset of militarism in the 1930s. Like the Ansei earthquake prints, the message of 1923 disaster postcards was one of world renovation (*yonaoshi*)—the need to repudiate Western modernity and its values and rebuilt Japan anew.<sup>15)</sup>

Photographs of the Asakura Twelve Stories (the Ryōunkaku), broken at the sixth floor level, was the ultimate disaster spectacle. (Figure 10) The iconic image appeared in nearly every set of earthquake postcards. And, as Gennifer Weisenfeld explains, it was also the ultimate modern ruin. “Seeing such signature buildings in ruins suddenly made the unstoppable forward vector of the modern seem reversible.”<sup>16)</sup> Asakusa became Japan's “Ground Zero,” shattering any confidence in abandoning tradition in favor of the modern. Again, to quote Weisenfeld, “Images of the imperial capital in ruins,” the prime subject of earthquake postcards, “presented serious problems for Japan's on-going project of modernity.”<sup>17)</sup>

Asakusa was Ground Zero in another regard; it was the center of Tokyo's entertainment district where money could buy hedonistic pleasures of all sorts, traditional and modern. Aside from the rakugo, manzai, and high and low geisha establishments, Asakaka was known for its amusement park (Hanayashiki), game parlors, strip shows, motion picture theaters, and music halls where “modern boys and girls” danced to jazz. The images of entertainment district burnt to the ground sent a clear message: Japanese society had become degenerate and deserved divine punishment.<sup>18)</sup> (Figure 11)

And what was the cause of such degeneracy? One was consumerism, especially of luxury goods. The Ground Zero of Japanese consumerism was Nihonbashi, the site of Mitsukoshi Department Store, the charred ruins of which were another popular postcard image. (Figure 12) Postcards showing the burnt-out ruins of department stores and luxury shops along the Ginza gave a similar warnings against excessive consumptions and crass materialism. (Figure 13)

Just down the street from Mitsukoshi was another iconic building, the Maruzen Book Store (Figure 14), founded in 1869 by a disciple of Fukuzawa Yukichi, Japan's first Western language bookstore, and symbol of Japan's Western inspired *bunmei*



Figure 10: Ryōunkaku: Asakusa Twelve Stories Broken at the Sixth Floor (author's collection)



Figure 11: Asakusa Entertainment District Before and After the Quake (author's collection)



Figure 12: Nihonbashi in Ruins: Mitsukoshi Department Store is on the Left (author's collection)





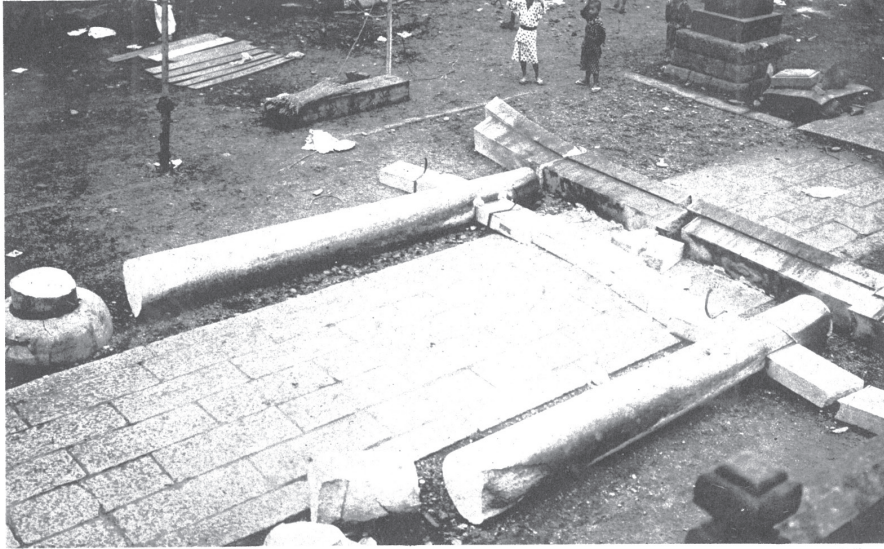
Figure 13: Ginza in Ruins  
(author's collection)



Figure 14: Maruzen Bookstore in Ruins. The caption reads:  
“Center of culture Mazuzen Bookstore burnt down and destroyed by the force of nature”  
(author's collection)

*kaika* (civilization and enlightenment). Maruzen's fate and the burning of its books was easily interpreted as punishment for its sinister role it played in spreading Western culture—the original sin that had brought on the ero-gro-nonsense of the Taisho years.





居島の社神間浅市津沼 (災震大東關)

Figure 15: The Fallen Torii Gate of Asama Shrine in Numazu  
(author's collection)

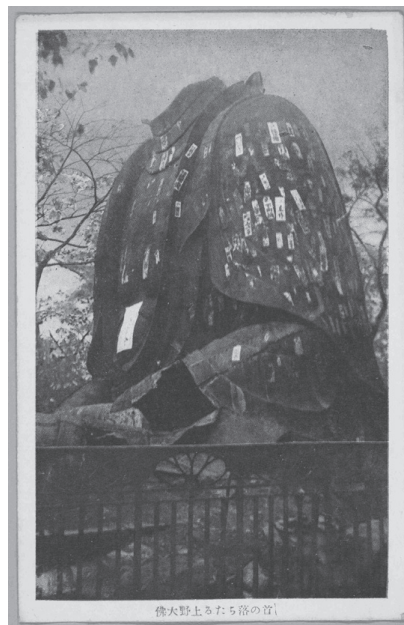


Figure 16: The Headless Ueno Daibutsu  
(Tokyo Metropolitan Central Library)

A fallen *torii* gate to a Shinto Shrine could imply criticism of failure to show proper respect to the gods. (Figure 15) But the headless great Buddha in Ueno Park sent out a completely different message of perseverance in the face of adversity. (Figure 16) The original Buddha was built in 1631 on the grounds of Kaneiji Temple. It was

destroyed by an earthquake in 1647, but rebuilt. It was damaged by fire in 1847 and again in the Ansei Earthquake in 1855. The Buddha lost its head in the 1923 earthquake, but still stood its ground. Notes pasted on to the Buddha's body asked for help to locate lost relatives and friends. At the beginning of Pacific War, in 1940, the body of the headless Buddha was melted down for military use, leaving only the face of the Buddha, but still an object of worship and inspiration.

## Conclusion

As historical documents, picture postcards offer unique insights into Japan's modern social and cultural history. While promising to portray the "actual situation" (*jikkuyō*), the picture postcards nonetheless invite viewers to make their own interpretations, placing them not only within the moment that the quake struck or in the days that the fire raged, but within the political, social, economic and cultural context of Japan in the early 1920s. The Taisho Period was itself a time of rupture, between the end of Meiji and the onset of military rule in the 1930s. The September 1 quake came as tensions were rising between the legacy of conservative authoritarian politics and growing demands for more participatory democracy, between irrepressible desires for middle-class modernity and equally irrepressible desires to restore a past that was quickly fading, and between the excitement of free individual expression and a rapidly materializing mass society, and critics of excessive self interest, greed and corruption. For many, the earthquake postcards of 1923 were simply souvenirs of an existential experience and at the same time a means to inform others of this experience. But for others, the scenes of destruction served to deepen existing anxieties about the future of Japan and one's place in society. Like the Ansei earthquake prints of 1855, they shook up a society that was already shaking and urged a reconstruction and renewal beyond the rebuilding of roads, bridges, office buildings and the places people called home.

## Notes

- 1) *Asahi Graph*, November 11, 1923. See also Kitahara Itoko, *Shashin-shū Kantō Daishinsai*, (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 2010), 292. The cost of the set was 20 sen for 16 prints; the price included a second set of 16 for free.
- 2) Kitahara Itoko, *Kantō daishinsai no shakai-shi* (A Social History of the Great Kanto Disaster), (Tokyo: Asahi Shinbunsha, 2011). J. Charles Schencking, *The Great Kanto Earthquake and the Chimera of National Reconstruction in Japan*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) and Jennifer Weisenfeld, *Imagining Disaster: Tokyo and the Visual Culture of Japan's Great Kanto Earthquake*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).
- 3) For history of postcards, see Martin Willoughby, *A History of Postcards: A Pictorial Record from the Turn of the Century to the Present day*, (Bracken Books, 1994). Online resources include: Fred Bassett, "Wish You Were Here!: The Story of the Golden Age of Picture Postcards in the United States," New York State Library: <http://www.nysl.nysed.gov/msscfa/qc16510ess.htm>, and "A not so Concise History of the Evolution of Postcards in the United States": <http://www.metropostcard.com/metropchistory.html>.
- 4) Patricia Maclachlan, *The People's Post Office: The History and Politics of the Japanese Postal System, 1871-2010*, (Harvard East Asian Monographs, 2012).
- 5) For details, see: "Birth of the Golden Age, 1898-1906" <http://www.metropostcard.com/history1898-1906.html>.
- 6) For the story of the Yokohama woman: Sadamura Seihyō, ed., *Taishō no dai-jishin dai-kasai sōnan*

- hyakuwa* (One Hundred Stories of Woe at the Time of the Taisho Great Earthquake and Fire), (Chiba: Tadayama Shoten, 1923), 145–46.
- 7) Fueda Yaekichi, *Jōkyō shite seikō shiuru made* (How to Succeed by Going to the Capital), (Tokyo: Tōkyō Seikatsudō, 1917). For fortunes to be made by selling picture postcards of the sights (and beauties) of Tokyo, see pages 57–8. The book’s sales pitch was that increasing numbers of tourists from the countryside were arriving in Tokyo, all of them eager to buy souvenir postcards.
  - 8) For details, see Masuo Nobuyuki, *Mitsumura Toshimo-den*, (Tokyo: Mitsumura Toshiyuki, 1964).
  - 9) Kikukadō began producing picture postcards in 1903 from its offices in downtown Nagoya. Its founder was Tomatsu Enzō. It specialized in Nagoya themes, but in the 1920s, especially after the Great Kantō earthquake, sold to a national market. For a gallery of its postcards, including several earthquake shots, and short history of the company, see: <http://www.walklionbuil.com/index.html>.
  - 10) Jitsugyō no Nihonsha, ed., *Kōsokudo kanemōke-hō: shōshi kaiten daishihonka*, Tokyo (How to Get Rich Quick: Great Wealth from Small Investments), (Jitsugyō no Nihonsha, 1925), 182. Interestingly, even in 1925, two years after the boom in earthquake postcards, the book still saw opportunities to get rich by making and selling picture postcards.
  - 11) Kimura Matsuo, Ishii Toshio eds., *Ishii Toshio korekushon: ehagaki ga kataru Kanto Dai-shinsai* (The Ishii Toshio Collection: The Great Kantō Earthquake as seen through Postcards), (Tokyo: Tsuge Shobō, 1990), 142.
  - 12) On the history of cameras in Japan, see Kerry Ross, *Photography for Everyone: the Cultural Lives of Cameras and Consumers in Early Twentieth-Century Japan*, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press), 2015.
  - 13) For details, see Kudō Miyoko, *Kudō Shashinkan no Shōwa*, (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1991).
  - 14) Okada Kōyō, *Tōkyō shinsai shashinchō*, (Tokyo: Bunsansha, 1923). For online digital version, see the National Diet Library site: <http://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/981812>
  - 15) On the “earthquake prints” or “catfish prints” that appeared in great numbers following the 1855 Ansei earthquake, see: Gregory Smits, “Shaking Up Japan: Edo Society and the 1855 Catfish Picture Prints,” *Journal of Social History*, vol. 39, no. 4 (Summer 2006), 1045–1078.
  - 16) Weisenfeld, *Imagining Disaster*, 145.
  - 17) *Ibid.*, 148.
  - 18) See J. Charles Schencking, *The Great Kanto Earthquake*, 143.