

# Japanese History: A View from Tsugaru

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## A. Introduction

In contemporary Japan, Tsugaru is a name usually associated with a type of lacquer ware, or an incomprehensible dialect, or perhaps with the place in far northern Honshu where the deepest, longest underwater train tunnel in the world plunges under the waters of the Tsugaru Strait on the rail link between Aomori and Hakodate.<sup>1)</sup> This, however, is very often the extent of any acquaintance with the region. Even though its name is mentioned in the *Nihon shoki*, one of Japan's very oldest historical narratives, Tsugaru seems consistently to have been regarded as a remote, even foreign place.

The Nanbu vassal who usurped the authority of his daimyo and seized this region in the late sixteenth century was permitted to take its name for himself and his domain, after making suitably loyal and diplomatic overtures to Toyotomi Hideyoshi.<sup>2)</sup> This man, Tsugaru Tamenobu, and his descendants then ruled the domain until the Meiji government introduced the prefectural system in 1868. For much of its history before that, however, Tsugaru had been beyond the direct reach of governments in the Kinki and Kanto regions to the south. This remote, peripheral region still suffers the disadvantages of its geographic distance from Japan's powerful economic, political and cultural centres, but at the same time retains the distinct identity it developed because of that same isolation.

This paper is made up of some reflections on the experience of writing a doctoral dissertation about eighteenth-century Tsugaru politics and famine.<sup>3)</sup> It is intended as a contribution to the discussion about approaches to writing histories of peripheral regions and localities. Too often, the pasts of such places become hostage to the politics, ideologies and histories of the contemporary nation states to which they belong. In fact, the experiences of being invaded and subjugated by those very nation states are often formative elements in the histories of many peripheral places. Tsugaru is one such case. The relation of this region's history with that of the Japanese nation state is, at best, marginal.

The next section contains some jottings provoked by E.H. Carr, about the task of writing history, followed by an account of some of the complications and challenges that resulted from the decision to study a particular fragment of historical experience in the Tsugaru domain in the mid eighteenth century.<sup>4)</sup> In the third section, extracts from Dazai Osamu's *Tsugaru* are used to introduce the idea that Tsugaru's history is of no relevance to the writing of most Japanese history. This idea is explored in the fourth section through the discussion of five narrative streams that are frequently employed to shape modern histories of Japan. The paper ends with very brief mention of several of the ways in which the history of Tsugaru is being written that liberate it from the bounded contexts of local and national histories, and a plea for more historians to cross

the frontiers within and between nation states.

## B. Subjects, Materials, Styles and Genres

A properly post-modern doctoral candidate would probably not have expected to find herself looking back at E.H. Carr when starting to think seriously about writing history; but, after taking to heart the linguistic, sociological and political implications of the work of Derrida, Bourdieu, Foucault, et al., this one did. Here are two ways in which he depicts the historian:

History consists of a corpus of ascertained facts ... like fish on the fishmonger's slab. The historian collects them, takes them home, and cooks and serves them in whatever style appeals to him.

The historian is just another dim figure trudging along in another part of the procession.<sup>5)</sup>

In the first of these images, Carr seems to suggest that historian/cooks simply do what they please: that the kinds of materials they choose to study, the ways they prepare and interpret those materials, then take up some and combine them with others to concoct arguments and conclusions, that all this is a matter of uninhibited choice. When embarking on a major project, though, we cannot avoid constraints. Who supplies the fish to our fishmongers? What kinds of cooking utensils do we know how to use? Whose recipe books are on the kitchen shelf, and what were the culinary habits of our mothers and teachers? Does it matter if we are repelled by the smell of cultural chauvinism, or attracted by the smell of mighty and powerful men? Do we have more respect for certain genres, schools or traditions than others? In the end, it seems that our freedom to choose is by no means absolute.

It is also interesting to think about the historical ingredients that are seldom called for in other people's recipes. Why are they so often left behind on the fishmonger's slab? Is it not appropriate to mix them in with certain others; or is it because our recipes are too inflexible, or because our methods can't be applied to them? Or, perhaps if a dish were to be created from those materials it would not harmonize with the works that other historians are currently cooking up in related genres. The implications were not so clear at the time, but embarking on a pre-modern Japanese history project focussed on mid-Tokugawa period Tsugaru, was to choose to work on a number of ingredients that were mostly ignored by other historian cooks. Among them were: the domain of Tsugaru itself, the Hōreki crisis and famine, and a government bureaucrat called Nyūi Mitsugi.

Tsugaru was a sizeable *tozama* han in the bakuhan system, though unremarkable in any other respect.<sup>6)</sup> The Hōreki crisis occurred in 1754–5, when the domain was on the point of bankruptcy at the same time as a major famine threatened. Nyūi Mitsugi (1712–1792) was a scholar-bureaucrat who was appointed *kanjō bugyō* in response to that situation. This was a major governmental office, combining the supervision of administrative, judicial and economic affairs. Mitsugi conceived and presided over a radical reform program, widely affecting Tsugaru's fiscal and administrative institutions and practices. During the Gregorian calendar years of 1754, 1755 and 1756, this one man directed interventions in the domain's customary routines for storing and marketing

its tax rice, and organised the redistribution of food grains. The result was that not a single death by starvation was recorded in Tsugaru during the Hōreki famine of 1755, while in the neighboring Akita and Nanbu domains tens of thousands of people died. It turned out to be one of the three or four most severe famines to affect the Tohoku region during the entire Tokugawa period.

Mitsugi's subsequent reform measures, however, were so extreme and disruptive that he ended up spending most of his remaining years either under restricted house arrest or exiled to the remote countryside. Some readers will know all this already, because Kojima Yasunori, an eminent historian of Japanese thought, chose Nyūi Mitsugi from the slab of historical *shiryō* more than a decade ago; and he has created some fine, original concoctions in his preferred genre.<sup>7)</sup> Both the individual and the thought Kojima wrote about were so singular that they invited further exploration and consideration.

All of us are, like Carr's historian in the second quotation, mere individuals plodding through our own lives and times in our parts of the continuous human procession. In the clear light shed by Kojima, though, one could conjure up visions of that other individual, who is recorded to have achieved something exceptional and wonderful: in his own place and time in the historical parade, in Tsugaru han during the Hōreki period, Nyūi Mitsugi prevented tens of thousands of famine deaths. Not only that, he had, according to Kojima, written a witty political allegory with a mantis and a dragonfly as its main characters; and, in the *Complete Works of Nyūi Mitsugi* are set out all sorts of fascinating mathematical and numerological calculations and diagrams.<sup>8)</sup> These are irresistible fish to find on the slab.

There was, as well, a compelling question that cried out for investigation: how was it that a disastrous crop failure in a remote northern domain could have claimed no lives at all? Records of such occurrences are not common in Tokugawa period annals. Mitsugi's writings reveal something about what motivated him and enabled him to bring that about. One can glean from domain records, too, some of the reasons for Tsugaru's particular vulnerability to famine; why Mitsugi was given such overwhelming administrative power; how he used that power to alter so radically the distribution of food entitlements among Tsugaru's population; and how it was that he suffered such extreme reversals of fortune.

Because the Tsugaru region had been formally brought into the centrally administered Japanese polity only just before the Tokugawa triumph at Sekigahara, however, some preliminary stage-setting is in order before these specific issues are broached. It is necessary to evoke a sense of Mitsugi's individual life in that particular place, and to convey something of the nature of Tsugaru itself – its remote geographical location, its landscapes, mountains and rivers, its weather patterns, and so on. To make sense of the Hōreki fiscal crisis and the famine, readers need some kind of context for thinking about domainal politics and economics. This inevitably entails some positioning of Tsugaru in relation to Edo, Kyoto and Osaka. Finally, Mitsugi's attempts to reform Tsugaru's administrative structures and practices can be sensibly analysed only after some consideration of the thinkers and traditions of thought to which he was exposed.

Such areas of enquiry as these have been highly significant in shaping the meta-narratives of Japanese History – those that tell the big stories of the evolution of what is

now the post-modern, Japanese nation state. When one sets out, therefore, to examine and provide a multi-faceted explanation for an isolated, historical episode in a remote region, the basic explanatory schemes are in danger of ballooning out of all proportion. There is a constant problem of focus. It is uncomfortable to have one's point of view repeatedly drawn away from the peripheral place one has chosen to study, to the powerful and precocious centres whose histories propel the master narratives: to bakufu building and riparian projects, to Osaka merchant enterprises, to the Three Great (south western) Famines, or the Three Great (bakufu) Reforms, to disagreements between Sorai in Edo and Jinsai in Osaka about the innate goodness of human nature, and so forth.

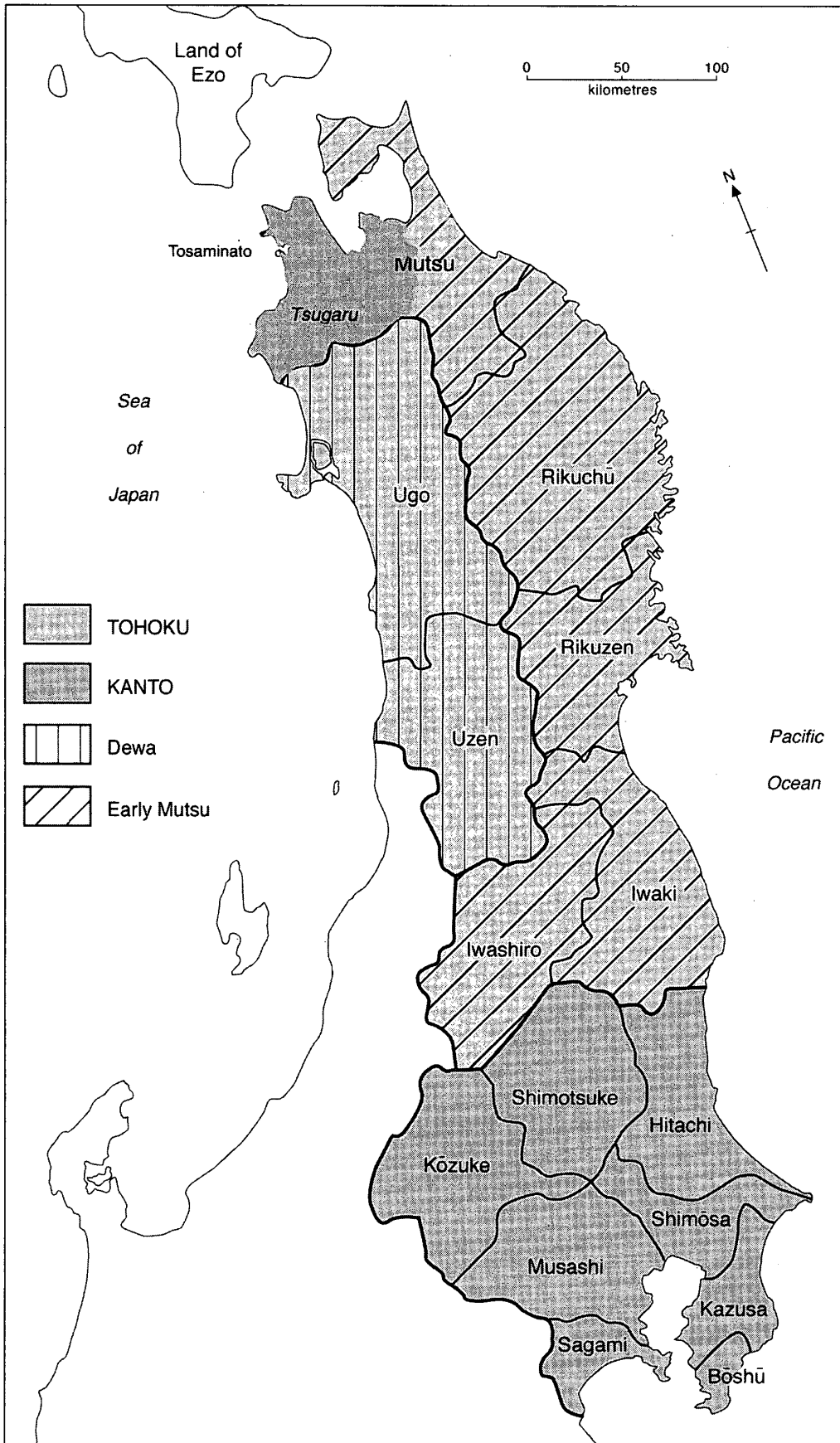
It would perhaps have been less frustrating to attempt a more clearly bounded research project. It would certainly have been more fashionable, for example, to have traced the origins and fate of the Ainu people who once lived along the Sotogahama coastline of the Tsugaru Peninsula; or to have attempted an environmental history of the impact made by large-scale rice agriculture on the ecology of the Iwaki River basin; or to have examined the unique admixtures of Buddhist traditions, communal beliefs, and political ideologies that moulded meanings, identities and institutions in far northern Honshu.

In any case, these all turn out to be relevant elements in an explanatory account of Tsugaru's susceptibility to famine, the fate of Mitsugi and his reform program, and how he might have developed the particular cosmology and patterns of thought set down in his writings. Tsugaru was, and still is, a geographic, economic and political periphery, only ever significant to Japan's centre strategically, intermittently and very briefly – as home to frontier outposts securing the southern state against barbarian incursions from the north. Mitsugi as a thinker and scholar belonged to the much wider Chinese cultural sphere, and the entrenched structures of socio-economic power in the Tsugaru domain had some of their oldest roots in yet other cultural spheres.

The upshot of the effort to concoct an original dish and set up a fairly comprehensive explanatory scheme was that ingredients, methods, recipes and genres were too mixed up, and the end result failed to satisfy the palates of all three examiner-chefs who are supremos in their respective genres. The political historian found any mention of Buddhism or local beliefs irritating and irrelevant, and the account of Tsugaru power politics intolerably inconclusive; the social historian found the discussion of famine experiences in northernmost Honshu commendable, but all attempts to acknowledge an authorial theoretical position mere "fluff"; while the historical demographer found the political and economic accounts quite satisfactory, but wanted much more specific detail on early famine experiences in Tsugaru and demanded that Nyūi Mitsugi be positioned as a thinker among those whose thought shapes familiar histories of Japanese thought. In spite of these reactions from the mountaintops of Japanese history, however, it still does not seem unreasonable or unjustifiable to have attempted such a project.

### **C. Tsugaru's Absence from the History of Japan**

In the short work, *Tsugaru*, written not long before his melodramatic love suicide in Mitaka, the novelist Dazai Osamu laments at some length the absence of his home region in Japanese history, and the ignorance of his Tokyo contemporaries about Tsugaru.<sup>9)</sup> Dazai came from the little town of Kanagi in central Tsugaru, and towards the end of



Tsugaru and the provinces of the Tohoku and Kanto regions. <sup>10)</sup>

his life made a solitary journey back to visit people and places he remembered. Partly evocative travel diary, partly fictionalised personal memoir and partly an informative introductory handbook on the region, *Tsugaru* is still widely read and has recently been re-published.<sup>11)</sup>

It is around halfway through the book, in a section entitled, “The Tsugaru Plain,” that Dazai muses about Tsugaru’s lack of reputation and the inadequacy of the school history textbooks used by his generation.

Most people know little about the history of Tsugaru ... It seems some even think Tsugaru is the same thing as Mutsu Province or Aomori Prefecture. This is hardly surprising. In the textbooks on Japanese history that we used at school, Tsugaru was mentioned only once, and that was in passing ...<sup>12)</sup>

Dazai goes on to quote the old textbook passage that tells how during the reign of the Empress Saimei, in the year 658 of the Common Era, Abe no Hirafu was despatched to “pacify the regions that are now known as Akita and Tsugaru.” The name of Tsugaru was actually there in the text; but that was its one and only appearance. Worse still, the place is associated with yet-to-be-subdued barbarians. Dazai expands on his theme, building a crescendo that ends with a set of rhetorical questions:

... But there was no reference to Tsugaru anywhere else, not in our elementary school textbooks, or middle school textbooks, or even in classes at high school ... It fills me with sadness to think that our textbooks treated the Age of the Gods with great reverence, but only mentioned the name of Tsugaru once – in all those years between the Emperor Jinmu and the present ...

What were they doing in Tsugaru all those years? Just standing up, smoothing the hems of their kimonos, and sitting down again? For two thousand six hundred years, did they never venture out anywhere? Did they do nothing but blink at what passed by?<sup>13)</sup>

It’s more than half a century since *Tsugaru* first appeared, but a glance through the indexes of any number of historical monographs, textbooks and reference works will confirm that during the intervening decades the situation has not changed. Occasionally, historians of the *kinsei*, or early modern period, will tantalisingly include “Tohoku” in a title, but their books almost always turn out to be about another place: the Sendai domain, or Aizu or Shonai.

There are some fairly obvious reasons for Tsugaru’s fleeting appearance in Japanese national history, which are suggested by the textbook narrative Dazai outlines to highlight his point. This is the standard meta-narrative that shapes the Japanese history most Japanese tertiary students are familiar with – to the extent that they are familiar with any history at all. It is also the basis of the historical chronologies that are widely used as reference books in Japan.

Japanese history, as Dazai traces it, begins before Yamato Takeru’s legendary campaign in Ezo, passes through Abe no Hirafu’s so-called pacification expedition and the glorious achievements of Sakanoue no Tamura maro, who “subdued” and “subjugated” the Ezo during the ninth century, and continues in that vein to what is recorded in the textbooks as Minamoto Yoritomo’s “subjugation of the whole of the northeast” in the

late 12th century. He then leaps over some seven centuries to complete his dismal catalogue of Tsugaru's absences from the national history he and his contemporaries were taught. The impression to be gained from school textbooks, he claims, is that absolutely nothing at all happened in the north at the time of the overthrow of the Tokugawa regime: during the time when the series of events now called the Meiji Restoration were being initiated and executed by a triumvirate of *tozama* domains from the far distant south and east.<sup>14)</sup> Had he wished to include those seven centuries between the Kamakura and Meiji periods in his chronological survey, Dazai could have mentioned the Sengoku Period, when regional warlords were fighting the epic battles that gave the period its name of "countries at war." There was no figure from Tsugaru at this time, either, to compare with Takeda Shingen, the legendary daimyo of Kai, or Uesugi Kenshin, his equally celebrated enemy. Nor were there battle sites in Tsugaru to mention alongside Kawanakajima or Sekigahara. All of these names have now become vivid elements of mainstream popular culture by way of such media as cinema, television dramas, and electronic games – not to mention the domestic tourist industry.

In Dazai's time, and possibly even now, having completely failed in the political and military stakes, Tsugaru does not even claim any places of national historic, religious or scenic significance. Nowhere, for instance, whose name had such poetic or historic resonance that Bassho would have considered putting it on the itinerary of his journey to the remote north. No Hiraizumi. Nothing like Matsushima, or Hagurosan, Gassan and Yudono, the three sacred mountains of Dewa. Just one end of the Seikan Tunnel. But this train of thought tends to run in circles: Tsugaru is not in history because nothing significant happened there, because we don't find it in history. In fact, a convincing argument can be made that Tsugaru was not even a part of Japan during most of what is now known as historical time. To explore this proposition, let us consider a sampling of the narrative streams that shape that history.

#### **D. Some Familiar Narratives**

Each of the historical episodes listed by Dazai belongs in one or more of the streams that form the great meta-narratives of Japanese history: the history that culminates with the global political and economic role of the rich and powerful Japanese nation state. Of course, there are hiccups along the way that historians of Japan, like those of all nations, are obliged to explain, or ignore; but the absence of Tsugaru from these meta-narratives and their tributary streams is, as Dazai points out, palapable. There is, for example, the long story line that traces the efforts made by southern rulers to arrange for the subjugation and pacification, then the occupation and fortification, and eventually the taxation and exploitation of the northern regions of Honshu. Other associated narratives portray the gradual emergence of a powerful warrior class and the founding of a series of shogunal governments.<sup>15)</sup> Paralleling these accounts are those that trace the consolidation and centralisation of Japanese state power, along with the refinement of the bureaucratic tradition and the growth of Edo and Osaka as national metropolises. In many narrative histories, the logic of Japan's progress seems so inexorable that the collapse of the Tokugawa bakufu and its replacement with a constitutional monarchy and bureaucratic administration appears almost automatic.

(i) Subduing the North

On the whole, the lives, communities and experiences of peoples in northern Tohoku have been represented in modern histories of Japan as those of peripheral aliens. These accounts are typically shaped by, and encompassed within, chronicles of the ambitions and fates of key figures connected with imperial or bakufu state structures located in various political centres. The histories follow these centers as they move from sites in the Yamato Basin to Nagaoka, Nara, Heiankyo/Kyoto, and finally to Edo/Tokyo. Pacification of the eastern and northern regions of Honshu in the name of this shifting Japanese state is a crucial component of modern, national historical narratives. It is intimately intertwined with accounts of state formation and the nature of ruling authority in Japan. <sup>16)</sup>

These histories are never constructed from a viewpoint within the actual northern regions where the recorded events took place; where the bloody battles were fought, the troops encamped, the land trampled and livelihoods destroyed. They do teach us, however, where the southerners built their forts, how their commanders were rewarded in the southern capital, and about some of the commodities – and alliances – that were traded. It was, for example, from an origin in the Yamato court that Abe no Hirafu's expedition in the year 658 pressed on as far north as Akita and Tsugaru, as was noted in Dazai's textbook. The purpose of this campaign, and of the castles built at Taga (near Sendai) and Akita, was to secure a frontier: a boundary between the lands controlled by the Yamato and those ranged over by the non-Yamato. This dividing line seems to have existed primarily in the minds of court functionaries in the successive southern capitals. It was reproduced, with considerable embellishment, in the plots of contemporary warrior chronicles; and has been transmitted through the centuries, to generation after generation of Japanese consumers of imaginative literature, drama, television series and comic books.

These are the images that still inform popular historical story lines, even though the people responsible for pillage, rebellion and general lawlessness in the north were just as likely to have been *wajin* (Yamato people) settlers and warriors from the south as Ainu *emishi*. <sup>17)</sup> The court waged a campaign over twelve years in the middle of the eleventh century, for example, against the armies of Abe no Yoritoki, the very official it had appointed to keep the peace in the province of Mutsu. Yoritoki was killed in 1057; but his son subsequently avenged his death in a rout of the southern forces. Imperial armies returned to the fray with reinforcements in 1062 to claim the son's head. It was the legendary Minamoto Yoshiie, great-grandfather of Yoritomo and Yoshitsune, who finally bore this grisly trophy all the way back to the temporarily pacified capital we know as Kyoto.

(ii) The Evolution of Military Government

Accounts of valiant exploits in northeastern Honshu are early trickles that flow into the narrative stream of emerging warrior rule. Successive warrior commanders fought and finagled their way to powerful posts in central governments after returning from engagements with the so-called eastern barbarians. Yoshiie, for example, went on to be appointed Governor of Mutsu Province, and fought a second war in the north against insubordinate *wajin* of southern stock before returning to the southern capital. For the



ensuing half millennium or so, such contests for power amongst regional chieftains continued in the northeast. Minamoto Yoritomo, the first Kamakura shogun, made history in 1185 by having himself appointed Sei-I Taishogun, “barbarian-subduing great general”, by the Kyoto court. He was claiming the title originally instituted for Sakanoue no Tamura maro who had been despatched to pacify unruly northerners three centuries earlier. In Yoritomo’s case, however, it ranked him as the most powerful military officer in the emperor’s realm. Ashikaga Takauji was another eastern military leader who succeeded to the title of Sei-I-Taishogun as the founder of a second Shogunal administration. Under his successors contests for supremacy continued between well-established warlords from western Japan and newly-emerging contenders from the east, which at this time was still as far west as the Kanto region.

As Dazai goes to some pains to point out, it took many centuries for even the imagined northern frontier of the Yamato state to extend as far as Tsugaru. This process paralleled the long, slow shift of military and political power from the old noble lineages to more newly constituted warrior clans. In the earliest historical context where Tsugaru is mentioned in the textbooks, court control is conceived as ending somewhere in present-day Miyagi Prefecture. Centuries later, in the 1330’s, Nanbu Masanaga established himself in Hachinohe, on the Pacific coastline of present-day Aomori Prefecture, while campaigning against the Kamakura Hōjō and the southern branch of the imperial court. Successive generations of Nanbu overlords gradually extended their own outposts throughout province of Mutsu in the far north, until they lost the Tsugaru region to their vassal, Tamenobu. After some deft diplomatic manoeuvring in Osaka and Kyoto, he had himself enfeoffed by Hideyoshi, then Ieyasu, as the first Tsugaru daimyo. Needless to say, this detail does not figure in the core narrative of warrior power, which is taken up with the imperial succession dispute in Kyoto, the weakening Ashikaga shogunate, the Ōnin War, political fragmentation, over a century of wars fought between shifting alliances of regional warlords, and Tokugawa Ieyasu’s conclusive victory at Sekigahara: all far to the south of Tsugaru.

### (iii) Japan’s Evolution to Nation-state-hood

Warriors of legendary power emerging from the east and subduing the north feature prominently in another important narrative stream, whose theme is the organic evolution of a modern unified Japanese polity, ruled from a historically determined center and administered by a loyal bureaucracy. This process was one in which a gradual increase in the military, political and economic power of successive Sei-I Taishogun subjugators of the barbarians paralleled an eastward shift of the heartlands from which they amassed and wielded that power. This shift can be traced over at least eight centuries, from the time of Sakanoue no Tamura maro to 1603, when Tokugawa Ieyasu was appointed Sei-I Taishogun and subsequently established a bakufu that eclipsed all other seats of authority in the land. The place he chose for his political and military headquarters was where the modern nation’s capital would later be constructed.

When the dawn of Japan’s modern age was signalled in 1867 by the surrender of the Tokugawa shogun to the authority of the imperial throne and the forces behind it, the political capital stayed where it was. The emperor moved east to occupy the shogun’s castle as figurehead of the new, enlightened Meiji epoch – presided over by a

hierarchical bureaucracy under the control of a new alliance of warriors! Aware of the new nation's territorial vulnerability, Japan's imperial government moved quickly to protect its heartlands by extending the peripheral boundaries to include what we know as Hokkaido, the northern islands and Okinawa. While significant resources and energy were ploughed into the development of Hokkaido, the new northern frontier with imperial Russia, remote Tsugaru was largely neglected; although its people did not escape the nationwide dragnets of military conscription, taxation imposts and *dekasegi* labour. Relations with the political centre still largely featured the neglect, obligations and exactions that had characterised the Tokugawa period.

(iv) The Bureaucratic Tradition

The dispatch with which the transition between the centralised Tokugawa bakufu and imperial Meiji government was accomplished is explained in Japan's national history as an almost organic outcome of longterm transformations in the political and social roles of the warriors. Over many centuries, randomly put together bands of mercenary thugs gradually consolidated into permanent groups identified with certain leaders and districts. These groups of followers evolved into the disciplined ranks of pledged retainers fighting for regional overlords vying for absolute supremacy. After the Tokugawa settlement, their military roles suddenly made irrelevant, many of these bushi retainers and their daimyos found themselves obliged to participate, mostly as civilians, in an elaborately structured and highly regulated hierarchical system of bureaucratic government.

There is no doubt that in the early 1600's, with prowess in battle and knowledge of weapons and strategy suddenly superfluous, warriors urgently needed to develop administrative and managerial skills. Though many did not, the majority probably did achieve over two or three generations something approximating, more or less, the transformation we often read about. They redirected their zeal from military training and exploits to re-skilling in literacy and numeracy ready for reassignment as domain or shogunal functionaries in the Confucian scholar-official mode.<sup>18)</sup> For some, this new bushi calling was predicated on serious attention being paid to literary, cultural and political skills. Tsugaru's Nyūi Mitsugi can be placed in this narrative, as an heir to the intellectual traditions of Yamaga Sokō and Ogyū Sorai. This is the analytical context adopted by Kojima, though not, it should be noted, with too much deference to so-called mainstream histories of political thought. In some of these accounts, the one-time warrior class studied various Confucian Classics, then beavered away as bureaucrats in the bakuhan administrative structure with such diligence and efficiency that the transition to a modern, centralised, Japanese national bureaucracy in the nineteenth century can be interpreted as an unproblematic and inevitable one.

(v) The Natural End of "Feudalism"

One other narrative imperative that renders the history of Tsugaru irrelevant is one that could be called, "The waxing, waning and implosion of the Tokugawa regime." Accounts of the pre-modern period are often structured in histories of Japan to portray a series of increasingly serious crises and disasters, confronted by less and less competent administrators with more and more inadequate policies and reforms. This pattern could

be depicted as an uneven sine curve drawn through time with an overall downward trend. Various crises occur at minimum points and recovery is temporarily achieved at the maxima. Japan is conceived as having been unnaturally prevented from achieving its national destiny by Tokugawa reluctance to push for complete political and military unification after Sekigahara.

Some of the best-known points along this particular narrative path are three great famines and three bakufu reform programs. They are the Kyōhō famine (1732–33) and the Kyōhō Reforms of Tokugawa Yoshimune (1721–28)<sup>19)</sup>; the Tenmei Famines (1782–87) followed by the Kansei Reforms (1789–99) of Matsudaira Sadanobu; the Tenpō famines (1833–37), and the Tenpō Reforms of Mizuno Tadakuni (1830–44). The downward trend is pretty steep at the end because the positive outcomes of the Tenpō reforms were mitigated by unstable leadership and factional strife in Edo. When an experienced and capable shogun finally did take office, it was too late to prevent the bakufu's overthrow. Given Tsugaru's isolation from, and lack of importance in, metropolitan politics, it is not surprising that the domain remained aloof from the bloody conflicts that actually did occur during this transition. Tsugaru's distinctiveness, even in the northeast, was highlighted by the domain's decision not to support the powerful alliance of Tohoku domains fighting to resist the revolutionaries from the southwest.

There are at least two drawbacks to this narrative pattern. One is that unique regional historical experiences either disappear altogether or fade into insignificance. The ups and downs of the political and economic centres do not coincide with much that went on in the Tokugawa period, such as the 160-odd reform programs instituted by various domains throughout the polity, and a number of severe famines that did not affect the major urban centres of Kyoto, Osaka and Edo. It also tends to erase or overshadow singular tragedies or achievements, wherever they occurred. The other problem is that the declining sine curve pattern invites teleological interpretations of evidence from the entire pre-modern period. The overall scheme of decline can be enlisted to explain events that occurred, and policies enacted, a whole century or even longer before what was, actually, the quite rapid disintegration of a relatively stable structure of government. It turns the history of administrative change into a series of scarcely differentiated stories about reactionary officials making futile efforts to prop up archaic regimes. That clearly was not the case. Whether it is informed by a Marxist, Hegelian, neo-classical economist, or some other determinist meta-narrative, the conviction that the Tokugawa system was always bound to collapse is not an illuminating one.<sup>20)</sup>

If these are the kinds of narrative patterns that determine the contexts bestowing Japanese historical significance, there is clearly no reason to expect Tsugaru – or the Hōreki famine experience or Nyūi Mitsugi – to be included in any history of the nation, or even of Japan in the Tokugawa period. Given the way these histories are structured, such ingredients are irrelevant. That is not to say that the lives lived, the events and other phenomena that occurred in Tsugaru were not connected with what went on in the rest of Japan: far from it. It is to say, though, that those lives and events were peripheral to the ones that form the central core of what has become Japan's national story. The history of Tsugaru is not like that of the Ina valley, northwest of Nagoya, which Karen Wigen describes as once having been alive with profitable manufacturing enterprises, commercial transactions and communications services. Before the crude mechanisms

of modernisation turned it into a rural backwater, Ina was an integral component in the webs of activity radiating from the proto-national city hubs of Edo, Kyoto and Osaka. <sup>21)</sup> Tsugaru has never had such a relation with Japan's vital metropolises: it has always been peripheral, and is even now only incompletely articulated with the centre.

### **E. Writing History in a Global Age**

The globalisation of agricultural, fisheries and forestry markets and an aging population have combined with the accumulated disadvantages of being a longterm socio-economic periphery to create the formidable challenges presently facing the people and government of Aomori Prefecture as a whole. <sup>22)</sup> A more optimistic, positive picture emerges, in Tsugaru at least, when the region's unique history, culture and geography are considered. Much of its stunning natural beauty remains unspoiled, and cultural features like the once-derided local accent now attract interest and attention. In contrast with Shimokita, which hosts military bases and a nuclear power plant, Tsugaru's economic peripherality is currently being addressed by comparatively sensitive development and exploitation of the region's natural environment and opportunities for post-industrial lifestyles and occupations. The disadvantages of political and geographic peripherality continue to take their toll while long-held hopes for fundamental structural reforms remain on Tokyo drawing boards.

Where the writing of history is concerned, however, the possibilities are expanding. Tosaminato, for example, whose present remoteness is indicated by the fact that it is no longer accessible public transport, was once a major maritime trading port. During its heyday, from the twelfth through the fourteenth centuries, sojourners from present-day China, Korea, Siberia, Hokkaido and Sakhalin were received and entertained. More remains of traded porcelain have been excavated there than in any other site east of Kamakura, including Hiraizumi. Tsugaru's inclusion in economic and cultural spheres that were separate from those to which the southern regions of Japan belonged, enabled it to act as a commercial and cultural intermediary and conduit, in much the same way as the Kingdom of Okinawa did to the south. The history of trade and diplomacy across modern Northeast Asian national boundaries is an exciting field, which still too often plays second fiddle to the chauvinistic preoccupation with constructing national histories. Perhaps historical projects in this field would be one way to open up exchange relations with North Korean scholars in the present troubled times.

Important work has already been done, too, by historians of various traditions of thought in the Chinese cultural sphere; and this is another context in which it would be rewarding to examine the writings of Nyūi Mitsugi. <sup>23)</sup> In remote Tsugaru, he was able to become thoroughly conversant with continental Daoist traditions, as well as those of Ijing-related numerology and ancient Chinese statecraft. And, as well as considering those wider networks of economic, political and intellectual exchange, historians of a peripheral region like Tsugaru might also trace the byways that crisscrossed the pre-modern Buddhist cultural sphere, which extended from somewhere in present-day Afghanistan at least as far as Tsugaru. Here, stone steles still mark some of the routes taken by priests and believers of various denominations who came by sea and land. These monuments predate by centuries the stones that were placed along local roadways

when units of distance were altered to fit metropolitan Japanese standards, well after the Tokugawa settlement. The nature of local religious and material culture, the structures of pre-modern institutional power, and the seasonal rhythms of communal life in Tsugaru, seem all to have been influenced by cultural spheres which are customarily regarded as foreign to Japan.

The usefulness of the idea of writing Tsugaru's history in terms of the cultural spheres with which the region had contact is further illustrated by studies of Ainu ethno genesis and the fate of the Ainu who are known to have inhabited far northern Honshu well into the eighteenth century. An impressive collection of documents relating to the Tsugaru and Shimokita Ainu has been edited and recently published in the new *Aomori ken shi*; and Mark Hudson, in Part III of his *Ruins of Identity* has summarized some recent findings of Japanese scholars that have challenged a number of long-held cultural and historical assumptions regarding Ainu ethno genesis and the transitions between the so-called Epi-Jomon, Jomon, Satsumon and Yayoi cultures.

Of course, this kind of study involves argument over the origins of the Japanese people among some scholars, but a number of the most exciting archaeological findings stimulating the discussion are currently being made in Tsugaru; and on a map of thirteenth century Northeast Asia in his 1987 monograph, Kaiho Mineo has firmly placed the entire present-day prefecture of Aomori in the Satsumon cultural sphere, which has Tosaminato as its hub.<sup>24)</sup> Clearly, then, at this stage in its past Tsugaru was on the periphery of several cultural spheres: Buddhist, Satsumon, Japanese, and continental North Asian. Histories of the northeast Asian region would surely be more lively and enlightening if this multi-culturalism were taken into account.

Although applications of that much-banded-about concept, globalization, seem so far to have spawned more contradictions and injustices than clarity and equity, perhaps it can be creatively applied to the writing of history. Careful histories of peripheral, suppressed and oppressed minorities living within the borders of contemporary nation states do not undo the injustices of the past, but they do address the wrongs perpetuated when powerful metropolises and dominant institutions are privileged in the histories of those states. And, as well as bringing to life the pasts of dispossessed indigenous peoples, exploited immigrant workers, and other marginal groups within states, historians can also find rich funds of inspiration on the frontiers between those states. Centers change their appearance when they are viewed from peripheries.<sup>25)</sup> Reminding future generations of the past experience of the least privileged, rich and powerful human beings among their predecessors on earth could not possibly make for a more divided and frightening world than the one we presently live in. All power, therefore, to historians who attempt to cross boundaries and write comparative, multi-cultural, or multi-national studies of marginal regions and peoples. May many more conferences be devoted to their labours!

**Notes:**

- 1) Tsugaru-nuri, Tsugaru-ben, and the Seikan Tunnel, which was completed in 1989.
- 2) The Nanbu prevailed over the entire province of Mutsu at this stage.
- 3) Jeffcott, Rosemary Gray, "The Politics of Famine in a Far-off Place," doctoral dissertation completed in the Division of Pacific and Asian History, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian

- National University, Canberra, Australia, 2002.
- 4) Carr, E.H., *What is History?* Second edition. London: Penguin Books, 1987.
  - 5) Carr, pages 9 and 36.
  - 6) Tsugaru's formal status was not high in the bakuhan system, nor was it a wealthy or politically influential domain, though it frequently appears in lists of 'major' domains.
  - 7) See, for example, Kojima, Yasunori, "The Thought of Nyūi Mitsugi: Practicality and Reform in Tsugaru Domain." *Asian Cultural Studies* 19, pp. 35-51.
  - 8) Nyūi Mitsugi, *Nyūi Mitsugi Zenshū*, Vols.1-4. Ed. Nakamichi Hitoshi, Tokyo: Nyūi Mitsugi Kenshokai, 1935-37.
  - 9) Born into a rich local banking family, Dazai Osamu (1909-1948) briefly attended Tokyo Imperial University before he turned to writing fiction. He and his lover drowned in the Tama Jōsui canal.
  - 10) Map based on: "Provinces of Japan in 1808," in Smith, Thomas, *The Agrarian Origins of Modern Japan*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959, facing p.1; and "Provinces and regions of early modern Japan," in Hall, John Whitney (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Japan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. xxiv-xxvii.
  - 11) Dazai Osamu, *Tsugaru*. Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 2002. First published in 1951. Translated into English by James Westerhoven as *Return to Tsugaru*. Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd, 1985. The passages quoted appear in the English version on pages 100-102. I have altered the translation in places.
  - 12) *Tsugaru*, page 106.
  - 13) *Tsugaru*, pages 107-8.
  - 14) Those domains were Tosa, in southern Shikoku; Chōshū, in far western Honshu; and Satsuma, in the far south of Kyushu.
  - 15) One impressive, informative and readable work tracing the flow of these narrative streams is George Sansom, *A History of Japan to 1334*. London: The Cresset Press, 1958.
  - 17) The word *emishi* is usually taken as meaning Ainu, but as Mark Hudson points out, it seems that in older texts to be used to denote a political category of peoples who had not yet been brought under the rule of the southern capitals. Hudson, Mark, *Ruins of Identity*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999, pp. 198-200.
  - 18) For an account of this process among higher echelons of samurai in the Kanto region, see the following article: Birt, Michael, "Samurai in Passage: Transformation of the Sixteenth-Century Kanto," in *Journal of Japanese Studies* 11-2, 1985, pp. 369-399.
  - 19) Conrad Totman calls this the "Heyday of the *Kyōhō* reform." Totman, Conrad, *Early Modern Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, p. 296.
  - 20) More sanguine studies of Tokugawa bakufu management do exist. Patricia Sippel's unpublished doctoral dissertation, "Financing the Long Peace," is an example. She examines bakufu financial policy over an extended period, and shows that there was not a pattern of uninterrupted fiscal decline.
  - 21) Wigen, Karen, *The Making of a Japanese Periphery, 1750-1920*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
  - 22) In the early chapters of his monograph on contemporary Aomori Prefecture, Anthony Rausch discusses current regional issues in the light of Japan-wide data to demonstrate that Aomori's relation to the rest of the nation is undeniably peripheral, socially and economically as well as geographically. Anthony Rausch, *A Year with the Local Newspaper*. Lanham: University Press of America, 2001.
  - 23) Here, the research done by Minamoto Ryōen and his international colleagues in the study of *jitsugaku* are crucially important. For example: Minamoto, Ryōen, *Tokugawa gōri shisō no keifu*. Tokyo: Chuōkōronsha, 1972. Also, "Jitsugaku and Empirical Rationalism in the First Half of the Tokugawa Period" in de Bary & Bloom (eds.), *Principle and Practicality*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1979, pp. 375-469
  - 24) Kaiho, Mineo, *Chūsei no Ezochi*. Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1987, p.132.
  - 25) For an example of this kind of approach focussed on the Japanese nation state, see: Morris-Suzuki, Tessa, *Re-inventing Japan*. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1998.