

# The Great Northern Famine of 1905–1906: Two Sides of International Aid

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## Introduction

The 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, tsunami, and consequent radiation leaks from damaged nuclear plant at Fukushima ranks as one of the major disasters in world history. It also ranks as an extraordinary example of global humanitarian aid to a people and a nation in need. As of March 2012, one year after the catastrophe, more than 8 billion US dollars in cash, goods, and services have been sent to the affected areas from some 139 countries of the world and an extraordinary variety of donors, including domestic and international NGOs, NPOs, corporations and private individuals.<sup>1)</sup> This outpouring of economic aid, volunteer workers, and other expressions of sympathy and support has been impressive.

This paper deals with historical origins of this sort of domestic and international philanthropy. It examines the international response to the Great Famine of Northern Japan in 1905–1906. The crop failure was one of the worse to strike the Tohoku region in modern times. It came on the heels of Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War and received significant foreign media attention. *The New York Times*, for example, ran a series of reports that highlighted the sufferings of the people of Miyagi, Fukushima, and Iwate prefectures, claiming that thousands were on the verge of starvation, forced to live on roots, tree bark, and acorns.<sup>2)</sup> The *Christian Herald* appealed for contributions to alleviate the distress of the people, describing them as “a community of skeletons.”<sup>3)</sup> Christian missionaries set up relief stations and solicited donations. In an appeal to the American people in February 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt requested that contributions for famine relief be sent to the American Red Cross for transfer to the Japanese Red Cross. While the extensive media coverage produced an outpouring of foreign and domestic sympathy, it also, ironically, highlighted the needy, even shameful, circumstances of Northern Japan and helped to confirm negative perceptions of the Tōhoku region.

## The Great Famine

The entire summer of 1905 in North Japan was cold and wet, generating fears among farmers of a poor harvest. In Fukushima prefecture, for example, the July temperature dropped to 4.9c below the annual average; nearly every day was cold and wet. In August the cold weather continued at 4.8 c below average. Rainfall was 16.24 mm greater than average, and the 54 hours of sunshine for the month of August was far less than the annual average of 86 hours. Low temperatures, excess

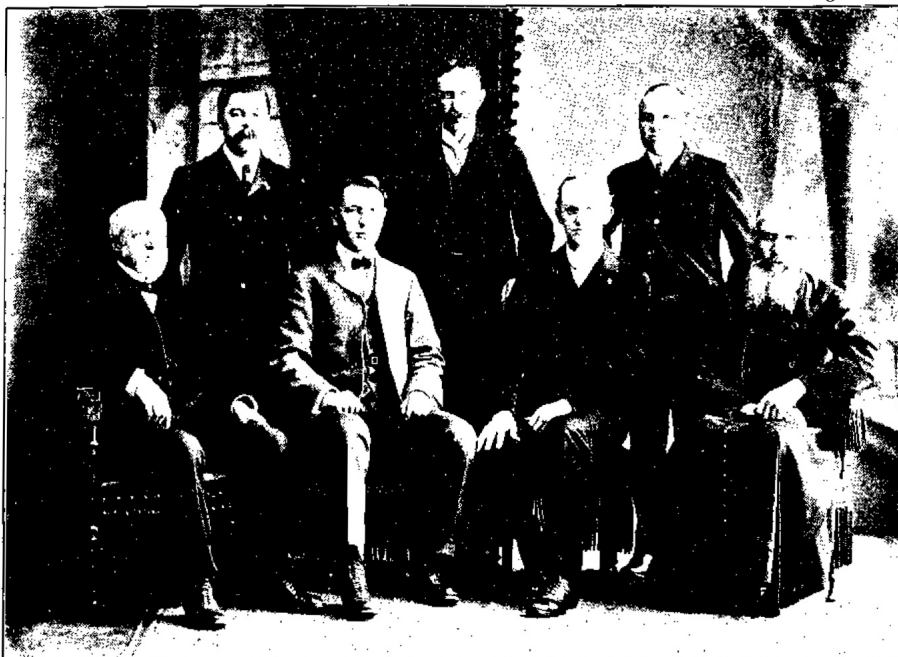
rain, and little sunshine—all ingredients of crop failure. In September, the weather was hot and dry, but this only caused the heads of the rice to shrivel. By the time of the October harvest there was almost nothing but straw. In many places the loss was total. In the prefectures worst hit, Miyagi was only able to harvest 12 percent of an average year's crop, Fukushima 25 percent, and Iwate 33 percent.<sup>4)</sup> The Great Famine of 1905 was centered in Sendai running up and down the eastern coast of Japan about 150 km in both directions.

Country people in the affected region began to feel the effects of the crop failure by early autumn. As one observer described the situation in north Japan in November 1905: "Officials were buying up seed rice in other provinces as it was evident that there would be no seed in what was now the famine district. As even the straw was worthless, many fields were left uncut. Work became scarce and soon farm laborers had no employment whatsoever. Many persons who used to ride were now compelled to walk and jinrikisha men with large families became distressed. The chronic poor were lost sight of altogether and their condition became pitiful. The dark days had come and there was consternation on many faces."<sup>5)</sup>

William Lampe, a missionary from the German Reformed Church stationed in Sendai, was quick to recognize the scale of the calamity that would soon engulf the northern prefectures. Here is how he described the origins of what would become a worldwide campaign to come to the aid of the starving Japanese. "On the afternoon of Thanksgiving Day (1905) the Americans of Sendai and Morioka met for a service of praise and prayer. After a meeting, a consultation was held to consider how we could best help our stricken brothers. Five persons were appointed to represent those present, and when two days later these five met, it was unanimously decided to invite a representative of England and one of France to join, thus forming a committee of seven. Thus was organized the Foreign Committee of Relief, the first committee whose aim was to secure funds for those in distress because of the famine. The prime motive of the Committee was to enlist international sympathy and to act as a bureau of information."<sup>6)</sup> The chief organizers were William Lampe and J. H. De Forest. (Figure 1)

In December, Sendai missionaries began to send out regular reports of the famine to friends and organizations in Yokohama, Kobe and to their home country. As a result, local and national newspapers throughout the world reported on the famine. *The Auckland Star*, December 30, 1905: "The Famine in Japan: Selling the Children For Money." *The Los Angeles Herald*, March 23: "Japan Famine Most Terrible of Late Years: One Million Estimated to be Starving." *The Pittsburg Gazette*: "Rice Famine in Japan, 650,000 Now Eat Straw." Many missionaries wrote directly to *The Christian Herald* appealing for help in publicizing the plight of the people in Northeastern Japan: "The children especially had become thin and pale, the result of meager supply of food—often of the most wretched sort—with which they were fed. 'Nourishment' is a word not to be used in this connection; it is simply a fierce battle for existence. Gaunt-eyed, hollow-cheeked mothers, with hopelessness written on their faces, look at their weak little ones who are growing feebler daily."<sup>7)</sup> By the winter months, heavy snows put an end to the gathering of food from the forests and hill-sides. One of the severest winters on record brought intense suffering. The January

THE FOREIGN COMMITTEE OF RELIEF FOR THE FAMINE IN NORTH JAPAN



	America	England	America
	Rev. M. B. Madden	Prof. G. R. Forrest	Rev. William Axling
	(Christian)	(Episcopal) 2nd Koto Gakko	(Baptist)
America	America	America	France
Rev. J. H. De Forest, D.D.	Rev. C. S. Davison	Rev. William E. Lampe	L. Abbe C. Jacquet
(Congregationalist)	Sec'y and Treas	Chairman, (Reformed)	(Roman Catholic)
	(Methodist)		

Figure 1: The Foreign Committee of Relief for the Famine in North Japan

Source: William E. Lampe, *The Famine in North Japan*

20, 1906 headlines of the *New York Times* proclaimed: “680,000 Japanese are Now Starving. Tokio Government Would Welcome Aid from Abroad. People Selling Children. Eating Roots and the Bark of Trees and Living in Dugouts—Misery due to Failure of Crops.”<sup>8)</sup> The February 21, 1906 paper reported: “Many Japanese Perishing. Misery in the Famine Region Increased by the Bitter Cold.”<sup>9)</sup> The February 14 *Christian Herald* made an impassioned plea for help: “People who live in lands of plenty, where such a condition of things is unknown, can form no idea of the character of the suffering, nor of the straits to which these poor villagers have been driven, to keep the life within their miserable bodies. They are for the most part like a community of skeletons; and if it had not been for the aid rendered by government relief, small and totally inadequate as it is, they would have perished ere now. It is impossible to describe the situation in these village homes of the simple Japanese farmers. ... There can be but one outcome to all the suffering, unless help arrives soon.”<sup>10)</sup>

**International Humanitarian Aid**

In 1906, this sort of appeal for humanitarian aid and the generous donation of

money and goods to peoples unknown and far away was of recent origin. The International Committee of the Red Cross was founded in 1876, an outgrowth of the Geneva Conventions of the 1860s and the establishment of relief societies for wounded soldiers. Peacetime disaster relief operations began in the 1880s. The American Red Cross was founded in 1881; the Japanese Red Cross in 1887; that next year, in 1888, the society began its first disaster relief work after the massive eruption of Mt. Bandai.<sup>11)</sup>

Christian missionary groups, such as the Salvation Army also began to engage in disaster relief in the 1880s. Particularly noteworthy is the role played by Louis Klopsch, the editor of The *Christian Herald*, a popular Christian weekly published in the United States between 1878 and 1992.<sup>12)</sup> Klopsch, a former missionary in India, took charge of the magazine in 1890 and immediately used it as a vehicle for fundraising efforts to aid peoples throughout the world suffering from famines and other natural disasters. In 1892, for example, the *Christian Herald* managed to raise one million dollars in goods and services for Russian famine relief. Klopsch published somewhat exaggerated accounts of starvation and guilt-inducing appeals for famine relief, and was similarly successful in raising funds in response to famines in India in 1897 and 1900, earning him the moniker of “The modern knight of mercy.” It was he who called upon the world to feed the “starving Armenians” and other peoples in need.<sup>13)</sup> By the turn of the century it had become a desirable and possible practice in the United States, England, and other affluent countries to engage in humanitarian good works and fund raising activities in service of peoples in need. Around this time, a confluence of advances in communications, popular Christian journalism, and international banking (the Western Union pioneered international money transfers by telegraph) allowed the rich to readily fulfill this moral duty and obligation to help the poor, no matter where in the world.

The earthquake and tsunami that struck the Sanriku area on June 15, 1896, close to the epicenter of the 2011 disaster, produced a death toll of over 20,000 and strained the resources of the Japanese Red Cross. As the *National Geographic Magazine* of September 1896 noted: “Besides the generous relief fund subscribed by the people, the government has made large assignments from its available funds and sent stores of provisions, clothing, tools, etc., to the 60,000 homeless, ruined, bereaved, and starving people of the San-Riku coast.”<sup>14)</sup> The Great Famine of North Japan of 1905–1906, however, was the first major example of joint domestic and international disaster relief, involving extensive media coverage in the Japanese and world press, government and non-government aid projects, the delegation of groups of volunteer workers, and fundraising campaigns throughout the world.

It is well known that many colleges and universities around the world responded immediately to the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami in 2011, staging teach-ins and other fundraising events to help Japan. The June 16, 2011 issue of the *Harvard Gazette*, for example, reported: “Harvard rushes to aid Japan; Web portals, discussions, benefits are being held in response to quake-created tragedy.”<sup>15)</sup> The *Harvard Crimson* of 1906 contains one of the first examples of this sort of student response to an international disaster: “In response to an appeal from President Roosevelt and to direct appeals from Harvard men and other foreign residents in Japan,

the Harvard Mission has undertaken to raise by general subscription in the University a substantial sum of money toward the fund for relieving the famine in the north of Japan.”<sup>16)</sup> The article went on to describe the famine in the three northern provinces—Miyagi, Fukushima, and Iwate—noting that some 680,000 people were in extreme distress, and that their suffering would only get worse. “The Japanese government is doing all in its power to relieve the famine by the postponement and remission of taxes, opening of public works and distribution of food at cost and, where necessary, free; but the authorities are unable adequately to meet the need. The appeals for aid, however, have emanated not from the Japanese themselves, but from foreign residents in the provinces affected.”<sup>17)</sup> *The Crimson* described how the fund-raising was to take place: “The committee in charge of the subscription has asked one man in each entry of a dormitory to be responsible for the collection in his building. The canvass will be finished next Saturday, night, and collectors are asked to turn in the money collected to H. H. Perry ‘07, at Phillips Brooks House, next Monday afternoon, between 1 and 5 o’clock. Any men wishing to subscribe who are not called on personally should send checks to H. H. Perry.”<sup>18)</sup> Similar fund-raising activities were held at Yale and Princeton.

It was the American missionary community, however, that assumed the lead in raising money and distributing aid. In January 1906, the Sendai-based Foreign Committee of Relief made its first distribution of 9,000 yen, money contributed entirely by foreigners residing in Japan. As Lampe noted, “This being the first systematic distribution throughout the three ken brought great relief. It was like rain upon parched ground.”<sup>19)</sup> *The Christian Herald* sent its first \$10,000 in February (Figure 2). But the magazine used the occasion to make an appeal for more donations: “This money will be expended in food, and hurried forward to the famine districts, where it will be distributed by the Japanese National Red Cross Society. But what is such a sum where a million are starving? The great army of hunger’s victims will be still unrelieved. How long can men, women and little children sustain life on a diet of straw and roots? Send it your offering quickly, and let it be as liberal as a kindly and generous heart may dictate.”<sup>20)</sup> “Even in the best of times,” the February 14 *Christian Herald* noted, “the people of these provinces are very poor. When a drought comes, followed by crop failures, there is need for the greatest thrift to make ends meet. But never in the experience of those now living, have these provinces faced a condition like the present, when the almost total loss of the staple crop—rice—has reduced them to starvation and ruin.”<sup>21)</sup> Contributions poured in from readers of the *Christian Herald* (Figure 3). Klopsch guaranteed that all contributions would be recognized and sent to where it could do the most good. “It is earnestly urged that all who sympathize with the Japanese farmers in their present unfortunate condition, should send in their gifts to the fund as early as possible. Even a small sum may save a human life, what a dollar gives quickly may be the means of keeping an entire family from starvations. Every contribution, however small, will be acknowledged in the columns of the *Christian Herald*.”<sup>22)</sup>

On February 13, President Theodore Roosevelt encouraged Americans to come to the aid of the starving Japanese. “The famine situation in northern Japan is proving much more serious than at first suspected and thousands of persons are upon the

# FIRST \$10,000 FOR STARVING JAPAN

LATE news from Japan, received through official sources, confirms in every particular the earlier reports of the terrible famine now raging in the three northern provinces. For some estimate that was at first believed, the famine is now growing to serious proportions. No opinion is the author's that President Roosevelt has been moved to address an appeal to the American people in behalf of the suffering nation, as with the reply:

*Cabled by The Christian Herald—President Roosevelt's Strong Appeal—More Aid Quickly Needed to Save Life*

The famine situation in northern Japan is proving much more serious than at first supposed, and thousands of persons are on the verge of starvation. It is a calamity such as may occasionally befall any nation. Nations that men should stand ever ready to aid each other in distress, and I appeal to the American people to help from their abundance their suffering fellow-men of the great and friendly nation of Japan.

Meanwhile, the great heart of our nation has been deeply touched by the presentation of the case of the Japanese famine in the columns of *The Christian Herald*, and contributions to the Famine Relief Fund continue to flow in from all parts of the Union. The proprietor of this journal, cooperating with its readers, as on previous occasions of a similar character when immediate action became necessary to save human life and avert a great calamity.

are facing extreme conditions and must succumb unless help is speedily given." These represent the worst case only. These statements are fully corroborated in letters from missionary and other sources, the most recent of which describe the desperation of the people, as deriving many to robbery and acts of violence; in their desperate desire to obtain food for their wives and children. Heavy snows have fallen in the northern provinces, aggravating the suffering. School children, mistreated with hunger, fight each other to obtain possession of a morsel of food. In Fukushima, many persons must inevitably perish. The poorest and most wretched suffering, however, has not yet been reached, but will come in May, June and July, when the supply of acorns, nuts and grasses will be exhausted. A great effort, yet forth now, would avert the loss of many lives.

In the editorial advice, some of the people and by the people of the famine provinces are given, and they receive, probably with more stirring effect than anything else done, the desperate results in which the sufferers have been relieved. These occur as far as the preparation of what is designated as emergency food, though it is hard for any one not similarly situated to

understand the necessity and extent of the need of the famine-stricken are received in blocks of rice by the most quantity of whole products they are able to acquire. We have today made a survey of such commodities that will be required, and I recommend whether it contained any poisonous matter. From samples the following were found:

1. Rice was found containing small quantities of arsenic.
2. Rice was found containing small quantities of lead.
3. Potatoes were found containing small quantities of arsenic.
4. Potatoes were found containing small quantities of lead.
5. Potatoes were found containing small quantities of arsenic.
6. Potatoes were found containing small quantities of lead.
7. Potatoes were found containing small quantities of arsenic.
8. Potatoes were found containing small quantities of lead.
9. Potatoes were found containing small quantities of arsenic.
10. Potatoes were found containing small quantities of lead.

The foregoing shows to what desperate straits the people have been driven in their struggle with starvation. Who could withhold sympathy in such a pitiful case?

Figure 2: "First \$10,000 for Starving Japan," *Christian Herald*, vol. 22, no. 22, May 30, 1906.

**Contributions to The Christian Herald Japan Relief Fund to April 28, 1906**

ABOUT 1500 NEW YORK CONTRIBUTIONS ALSO RECEIVED BEFORE THIS DATE, WILL BE ACKNOWLEDGED LATER ON

NEW YORK	NEW YORK	NEW YORK	NEW YORK	NEW YORK	NEW YORK	NEW YORK	NEW YORK	NEW YORK	NEW YORK
Adams, Geo. B. 1.00	Adams, Geo. B. 1.00	Adams, Geo. B. 1.00	Adams, Geo. B. 1.00	Adams, Geo. B. 1.00	Adams, Geo. B. 1.00	Adams, Geo. B. 1.00	Adams, Geo. B. 1.00	Adams, Geo. B. 1.00	Adams, Geo. B. 1.00

Figure 3: Contributions to the *Christian Herald* Famine Relief Fund, *Christian Herald*, vol. 29, no. 9, February 28, 1906.

verge of starvation. It is a calamity such as may occasionally befall any country. Nations, like men should stand ever ready to aid each other in distress, and I appeal to the American people to help from their abundance the suffering men of the great and friendly nation of Japan. I recommend that contributions for this purpose be sent to the American National Red Cross, which will forward such funds to the Japanese Red Cross to be used as the Japanese government may direct."<sup>23</sup>

Earlier in February, the Foreign Relief Committee received four thousand dollars from Penang, and with this and further generous gifts from foreigners residing in Japan, was able to make its second distribution, this time 16,000 yen.<sup>24</sup> Money began to arrive from the American Red Cross Society and the *Christian Herald*. As Lampe noted in his report of the activities of the Relief Committee, by the end of February, "the life-saving machinery was in full running order and hundreds of thousands were being supplied with food for each day's needs."<sup>25</sup> Money and goods came from around the world: England sent its ally several hundred thousand yen. Australia and Canada sent shipments of flour and some money, around 100,000 yen. The Germans gave approximately 25,000 yen. The King of Siam gave rice and 15,000 yen. Indian merchants contributed 10,000 yen. The Foreign Committee of Relief gathered information which was translated into Chinese and forwarded to Peking. As a result, the Empress Dowager contributed 150,000 yen from her private purse. Lampe commented on this generosity: "Such a gift is without precedent and should do much to draw together the hearts of the these two great people's of the East."<sup>26</sup>



Figure 4: Special Issue on the Tohoku Famine, *Kinji Gahō*, February 1, 1906.

### The Japanese Response

From January, a number of Japanese Christian groups began to join forces with the foreign missionaries. Moreover, Japanese newspapers, notably the *Asahi Shinbun* and the *Jiji Shinpō*, began to take special interest in the “great Tohoku crop failure.” (*dai Tōhoku kyōsaku*). The *Kinji Gahō* (The Japanese Graphic), a popular illustrated news magazine, devoted its February 1, 1906 issue to the “*Tōhoku Kikin*”—the Tohoku Famine, describing it as more devastating than the Tenpō Famine of 1840 (Figure 4).<sup>27)</sup>

Newspapers and magazines sent their special correspondents to the affected areas. They sent in daily reports, sometimes heartwarming examples of charity in action, but often more sensational news of people starving and freezing to death. The *Japan Graphic* helped people to visualize the suffering (Figures 5 and 6). From January 23, the *Asahi* began to solicit contributions (*gienkin*) to help the distressed people in the Tohoku. Names of those who contributed money were printed in special columns that were printed nearly every day. The *Asahi* relief operations continued until May 9, 1906, collecting a total of 188,413 yen. On February 1, the Emperor and the Empress contributed 50,000 yen to the relief effort, followed by gifts by princes, members of the cabinet, and ordinary Japanese people. Steamship and railway companies carried goods free of charge or at greatly reduced rates and thus made large, although indirect, contributions.

Lampe was impressed with the success of the fundraising campaigns. “Gifts came from all quarters of the globe. Although larger amounts have been given in time of famine in other parts of the world, this famine called forth such an expression of



Figure 5: In the Famine Districts, *Kinki gahō*, February 6, 1906.

Our artist writes: “Umezu Kesagorō of Ouichi-mura in Miyagi-ken is truly to be sympathized. He has recently come back from Manchuria to find that during his absence his wife died having been attacked by dysentery while in confinement. His old father to whom fell the duty of bringing up the baby she left and another child, the returned soldier found on the verge of starvation.”

world-wide sympathy as has never before been known in the world’s history.”<sup>28)</sup> Some missionaries, however, were disappointed with the Japanese response. A New Zealand newspaper, *The Poverty Bay Herald*, described what it called a “sinister element in the Japanese national character”: “There is a good deal of money in Japan at the present time, yet people are not contributing as they might be expected to do to the needs of the three northern prefectures of the Japanese Empire. Even the Government, no longer paternal, is accused of neglecting the people.” It continued: “The Japanese people are still elated with their victory over the Russians, and are ready enough to spend money in celebrating their victory. They are, however, ... too insensible to the miserable plight in which the northern provinces are lying.”<sup>29)</sup> To some extent Lampe agreed: “Japan is nominally a Buddhist country, but although the Buddhist Committee held meetings all over the Empire and tried to collect money wherever possible, the Japanese people contributed very little though them. On the contrary, thousands of yen in money and goods were given through the Committee of Christian parties.”<sup>30)</sup> Tokyo’s leading satirical journal, *Tokyo Puck*, ran a cartoon critical of people of with some wealth who nonetheless found more im-





Figure 6: In the Famine Districts, *Kinki gahō*, February 6, 1906.

Our artist writes: “Two sick old women in the village of Arai in Fukushima-ken died the other day from lack of nourishing, saying all the while, ‘How I wish I could eat some rice.’”

portant uses for their money than contributing to a famine relief fund (Figure 7).<sup>31)</sup>

Nonetheless, missionaries praised the efforts of the Japanese newspapers to bring the Tohoku problem to the attention of the general public, even in the midst of victory celebrations, and made it clear that subscriptions for relief appeared in Japanese newspapers “long before and appeal was made through the columns of the foreign local press.”<sup>32)</sup> As Lampe noted, “The Japanese newspapers have correspondents out in the famine districts, and their tales of woe and misery fill column after column of the Japanese Press.”<sup>33)</sup> The Tōhoku San-ken Kyūjutsu-kai (Association for Relief to the Three Tohoku Prefectures) was singled out for its good works.

The basic problem, according to the missionary community, was the scale of the problem and failure of the government, not the general populace, to act quickly. The missionaries complained that government relief measures, including tax relief and public work projects designed to give work to the unemployed, failed to come to the aid of those most in need: some “25,000 to 40,000 sick and aged persons and helpless children, not one of whom can support himself by his own labour and who must be helped for some months whether it snows or not. How bitter is their lot in this severe winter.”<sup>34)</sup> As the *Japan Weekly Chronicle* wrote on February 15, “Great as these individual contribution are, they are only sufficient to give very temporary relief to 680,000 persons, the number, we are informed, who are in an absolutely starving condition. Several days ago the public were told that a bill was to be introduced into the Diet, voting “immediate” relief, a word that will surely be bitter irony



Figure 7: Money which might be contributed to the famine relief-fund for the people of North Japan, *Tokyo Puck*, February 1, 1906.

to the thousands who are now starving and waiting for the sustenance that is promised them.”<sup>35)</sup>

Of the three million who lived in the three prefectures, it was estimated that one million, or one-third of the population was poverty-stricken. Local and national governments sought to alleviate suffering with a variety of measures, including tax relief, donation or sale at nominal cost of foodstuffs, and public work projects, but direct relief was slow to reach those in remote farming communities.

On the one hand, government resources were limited. The Tohoku famine came at a time when finances were strained as a result of the war with Russia. Moreover, different approaches to disaster relief were at work. In January, the American State Department inquired whether the Japanese government would accept American contributions. The Japanese reply: “The government is conducting all means of relief, and although they are not at present counting upon outside aid, any voluntary contributions of charitable parties will be gladly accepted by them. It being the scheme of the Government, however, to establish works and give employment to the distressed population instead of promiscuously distributing money among them, so as to enable them to earn their own livelihood without depending upon charity, the government would desire that the disposition of such relief funds may be entirely intrusted (sic) to them.”<sup>36)</sup>

Japanese authorities were reluctant to give money or even food directly, preferring to foster a spirit of “self help.” As the Japanese Red Cross informed its American counterpart: “Before distributing the money which you sent to us, we very carefully investigated the best methods by which no peasant there should ‘laze’ away his time, simply relying upon such helps.”<sup>37)</sup> The *Japan Weekly Mail* later described government policy that sought “to encourage a spirit of self-help among the people rather than a spirit of dependence on charity.”<sup>38)</sup> Lampe and other Sendai missionaries were aware of the government’s good intentions: “Self help is the official cry and the efforts of the officials met with great success while actual deaths from starvation were very few, it was thought necessary to save the spirit of the people and better to allow some suffering, while making everyone feel his responsibility for his own support, than to use large sums of money and make chronic paupers, lazy and unwilling to work.”<sup>39)</sup> In another place: “It seems to be felt that, as far as possible, the suffering people, who are not all of the most provident or the most industrious type, should be encouraged to help themselves by taking employment on works.”<sup>40)</sup> The problem was, however, that not everyone was strong enough to work, nor was work available for everyone in need of help, especially in the dead of winter. As Lampe wrote on January 15: “So far relief works have not been begun except by a few philanthropic individuals, but after work is begun even the able-bodied must rest many days when snow is falling or on the ground. The nations of Europe and America do not as governments dispense charity and here at this time in Japan there is as yet no provision for the sick and aged and those who are for any reason cannot work.”<sup>41)</sup>

A subtext to government inaction was a widely shared, even among the missionary community, characterization of Tohoku people as backwards, as less industrious and less intelligent than people in other more advanced parts of Japan. The Diet de-

bates over famine relief often included references to Tohoku backwardness. As Abe Tokusaburō (Seiyūkai, Representative from Iwate Prefecture) put it in arguing for government relief, “As we all know, the Tohoku, compared with the rest of Japan, is extraordinarily deficient in terms of wealth (*tomi*), and its standard of living is also low. Therefore, when a famine like this comes and not even one grain of rice can be harvested, even those who may have had aspirations to join the middle class are forced to remain among the poor and distressed.”<sup>42)</sup> A Yokohama merchant was more direct in his evaluation of the intellectual and moral backbone of the people in the affected areas: “Large sums continue to be collected and sent for the benefit of the famine sufferers in the North, but in view of the fact that these people seem to be unwilling to do anything for themselves, it seems to us that much of the money contributed for their support is thrown away and wasted to no purpose whatsoever, except to make permanent paupers, who are a useless drag upon the country. No offer to work comes from the famine districts, no articles that these people might make and no doubt can make, are sent to the south, or anywhere else for sale. They simply seem to be rooted to the ground, crying: ‘We can’t work and we won’t work and we won’t go where there is work. Feed us and keep feeding us, or we starve.’”<sup>43)</sup> The merchant wrote to one of the foreign missionaries engaged in relief work, offering to give work to one or two men from the famine region. The answer, however, confirmed his negative assessment of the character of the northerners. “The famine is limited to about 500,000 farmers who seem to be unable to do any but farming work and those farmers, physically and intellectually, are an inferior class, even amongst their own surroundings. About 10,000 of the more active and intelligent have emigrated to the Hokkaido, and those who have remained are inferior people and certainly very much inferior to the people in the south. If they were sent to Yokohama to work as jinrikisha coolies they probably could not do the work, and certainly not any work requiring greater intelligence than that of jinrikisha coolies. ... They would only be a source of trouble.”<sup>44)</sup>

## Conclusion

The Great Northern Famine of 1905–1906 is an important episode in modern Japanese history. This paper has covered only a small part of the story. The relocation of teenage girls to “good homes” in Tokyo and Yokohama; the establishment of orphanages to care for thousands of abandoned children; the efforts of agricultural specialists to develop crops better suited to the Tohoku climate, the massive out-migration of people to other parts of Japan—these are all stories that deserve telling.<sup>45)</sup> But here, the points that I wish to make are:

First, the Tohoku Famine of 1905–06 was a disaster affecting the lives of nearly a million people in Japan; it was also an international media event. People throughout the world sympathized with the fate of the “starving Japanese.” The Japanese government was forced to take heed of this global pressure. In conjunction with the Russo-Japanese War it had been conducting its own propaganda campaign, hoping to assure the countries of Europe and America that it was a modern industrial state, able to conduct war in accordance with the Geneva Conventions, and by no means a

threat to civilization. But as Mori Ōgai feared, win or lose, Japan's image would suffer: "If we win we are the yellow peril; but if we lose, we are confirmed as barbarians."<sup>46)</sup> On the very different battlefield in Tohoku, Japan's ability to succor its own people was put to the test. The emperor, the government, and Japanese civil society rose to the occasion; but at the same time, the famine and how it was handled conflicted the image of a Japan victorious in war. Two sides of international aid were at work: while extensive media coverage produced an outpouring of foreign and domestic sympathy, it also highlighted needy, backwards, and even shameful circumstances that existed within Japan. Even in victory, Japan not easily able to escape its "barbarian" status.

Second, the 1905–1906 famine confirmed Japanese domestic perceptions of the Tohoku region as an impoverished place prone to famine and a place inhabited by stupid, backwards people, lacking the industrious spirit so necessary to modernize Japan. The people once stigmatized as former enemies of the court had become second-class citizens of the empire, good for cannon fodder but not much else. The 1905–1906 famine may be seen as the origin of a sort of "Tohoku problem" (*Tōhoku mondai*) that continued to plague the region. Sadly, there are many parallels with international and domestic relief operations in the affected areas of Tohoku today.<sup>47)</sup>

Finally, the 1905–1906 famine provides a unique lens through which to view modern Japanese history. On the one hand it is a natural disaster brought on by unusual weather: a cold and wet summer. But at the same time it is a social event involving physical, social and even cultural damage, mechanisms of relief, government intervention, and the economics of reconstruction. As one critic of the way the Japanese government handled the disaster concluded: "The government has done much in the way of relief, at times even employing the people to take away the snow from the fields, and to relaying it again. But giving half a million people even only 5 sen a day means at least 750,000 yen a month and probably not less than a million yen a month, so that both private and government help has still proved insufficient. ... Nor has the Government established labor bureaus at which employers of labor may state their wants and where those in need of work might apply for work. It seems to us, therefore that there is a good deal of constitutional laziness at the bottom of that famine which even famine cannot cure."<sup>48)</sup>

#### Notes

- 1) Wikipedia, to its credit, has compiled the most detailed report the humanitarian response to the 2011 Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanitarian\\_response\\_to\\_the\\_2011\\_Tōhoku\\_earthquake\\_and\\_tsunami](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanitarian_response_to_the_2011_Tōhoku_earthquake_and_tsunami) (assessed September 13, 2012).
- 2) See, for example, "680,000 Japanese Are Now Starving," *New York Times*, January 20, 1906, 5.
- 3) "Japan's Famine Appeal Is Heard," *Christian Herald*, February 14, 1906, 137.
- 4) Fukushima-ken Shōbō Bōsaika, ed., *Fukushima-ken saigai-shi*, 1972, 152.
- 5) William Lampe produced three pamphlets on the famine, all of which are available in Princeton University Library. They are: *Report of the Foreign Committee of Relief for the Famine in Northern Japan*, Published at the "Japan Mail" Office, Yokohama, 1906, 14 pages; Rev. William E. Lampe, *Christians and Relief Work in Northern Japan*, Sendai, nd (1906?), 4 pages; and Rev. William E. Lampe, Chairman of the Foreign Committee of Relief, *The Famine in North Japan*, nd (1906?), 8 pages. The quote above is taken from *The Famine in North Japan*, 2. I wish to thank Christopher Mayo, a graduate student at Princeton University, for his help in obtaining copies of these docu-

ments.

- 6) *The Famine in North Japan*, 3.
- 7) "Japan's Famine Appeal Is Heard," 137.
- 8) "680,000 Japanese Are Now Starving," 5.
- 9) "Many Japanese Perishing," *New York Times*, February 21, 1906, 5.
- 10) "Japan's Famine Appeal Is Heard," 137.
- 11) Kawamata Keiichi, *The History of Red Cross Society of Japan*, Tokyo: Nippon Sekijūjisha Hattatsushi Hakkōjo, 1919, 46–54 for the founding of the Red Cross Society of Japan; 74–77 for relief efforts for survivors of the Bandai eruption.
- 12) For details on Klopsch, see Charles Melville Pepper, *Life Work of Louis Klopsch, Romance of a Modern Knight of Mercy*, Christian Herald, 1910; reprint Kessinger Publishing, 2005. Available in digital format: <http://ia700404.us.archive.org/29/items/lifeworkoflouisk00peppiala/lifeworkoflouisk00peppiala.pdf> (accessed September 16, 2012).
- 13) *Life Work of Louis Klopsch* details these global relief activities; Chapter 2 (Russia), Chapter 3 (Armenia), Chapters 4, 5, 6 (India), Chapter 7 (Cuba), Chapter 8 (Finland and Sweden), Chapter 9 (Macedonia), Chapters 10 and 11 (China), Chapter 12 (Japan), Chapter 12 (Italy) and the remaining chapters deal with poverty in the United States. Chapter 12 on Japan (Sympathy with the New Japan) is located on pages 202–18.
- 14) "The Recent Earthquake Wave on the Coast of Japan," *National Geographic Magazine*, September 1896. Text and photos are available online: <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/1896/09/japan-tsunami/scidmore-text> (accessed September 16, 2012).
- 15) *Harvard Gazette*, March 17, 2011; available online: <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2011/03/harvard-pushes-to-aid-japan/> (accessed September 16, 2012).
- 16) "Japan Famine Relief Fund: Subscription to be Opened in University toward Relief of Japanese Famine," *Harvard Crimson*, March 27, 1906; available online: <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1906/3/27/japan-famine-relief-fund-pin-response/> (accessed September 16, 2012).
- 17) "Japan Famine Relief Fund."
- 18) "Japan Famine Relief Fund."
- 19) *The Famine in North Japan*, 4.
- 20) "Japan's Famine Appeal Is Heard," 137.
- 21) "Japan's Famine Appeal Is Heard," 137.
- 22) "Japan's Famine Appeal Is Heard," 137.
- 23) Reported in the *New York Times*, "President Aids Japanese: Issues an Appeal for Aid for the Famine Suffers," February 14, 1906, 4.
- 24) *The Famine in North Japan*, 4.
- 25) *The Famine in North Japan*, 4–5.
- 26) *The Famine in North Japan*, 5.
- 27) *Kinji gahō, Tōhoku kikin-gō*, vol. 80, February 1, 1905, 16.
- 28) *The Famine in North Japan*, 6.
- 29) *Poverty Bay Herald*, June 18, 1906. Available online: <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast?a=d&d=PBH19060618.2.25&l=mi&e=-----10-1----0--> (accessed September 13, 2012).
- 30) Lampe, *Christians and Relief Work during the Famine in Northern Japan*, 1–2.
- 31) *Tokyo Puck*, vol. 2, no. 4, February 15, 1906, 52.
- 32) "The Famine in the North," *Japan Weekly Mail*, January 13, 1906.
- 33) "To the Editor of the *Chronicle*," *Japan Weekly Chronicle* (Kobe), February 22, 1906, 245.
- 34) "To the Editor of the *Chronicle*," 245.
- 35) "The Famine," *Japan Weekly Chronicle*, February 15, 1906, 190.
- 36) "Reply from the Japan Legation with Telegraph Instructions from Tokyo," *Foreign Papers of the United States*, 1906, vol. 2, 999.
- 37) "Report of a Vice president of our Red Cross Society who made a tour to those famine stricken regions to investigate conditions of the sufferers," *The History of the Red Cross Society of Japan*, 306.
- 38) "The Famine in the North," *Japan Weekly Mail*, March 3, 1906, 225.
- 39) *Report of the Foreign Committee of Relief for the Famine in Northern Japan*, 4.

- 40) “The Famine in the North,” *Japan Weekly Mail*, January 3, 1906, 33.
- 41) “To the Editor of the *Chronicle*,” *The Japan Weekly Chronicle*, January 11, 1906, 54.
- 42) Proceedings of the 22ed Diet, February 23, 1906. Second hearing on Bill to provide relief to sufferers of famine in the three prefectures of the Tohoku region, 5. Available online from the National Diet Library: <http://teikokugikai-i.ndl.go.jp/SENTAKU/syugiin/022/5527/main.html> (accessed September 18, 2012).
- 43) “Charity Thrown Away,” *The Eastern World*, March 24, 1906, 5.
- 44) “Charity Thrown Away,” *The Eastern World*, March 24, 1906, 5.
- 45) In the Correspondence column of the *Japan Weekly Mail*, March 3, 1906, a Colonel Henry Bullard reports that the famine has resulted in “a large number of girls are being secured for immoral purposes.” He quotes from the *Kahoku shinbun*: “When we remember the condition of many of these poor people, who know that unless they get help from somewhere, they must starve to death, we can understand their willingness to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their parents. But what a future for these poor things! From one village alone, called Kamigun, from 40 to 50 girls have been secured and shipped off to Manchuria, where they are forced into an evil life.” Bullard laments: “What a pity that some other way cannot be found to prevent the starvation of these families without the necessity for this sacrifice of these girls.” (236) The May 30, 1906 issue of the *Christian Herald* carries an article (“Sheltering Japan’s Famine Waifs,” 479) on the hundreds (the article mentioned 480 to be followed by 200 additional children) of homeless children who were sent to the Okayama Orphanage founded by Ishii Jūji.
- 46) Hashikawa Bunzo, *Kōka-monogatari*, Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1976, 34–35.
- 47) Charles McJilton, “Obstacles to Providing Aid,” in Tom Gill, Brigitte Steger and David Slater, eds., *Japan Copes with Calamity: Ethnographies of the Earthquake, Tsunami and Nuclear Disasters of March 2011*, Peter Lang, Forthcoming, 2013. A Japanese version has already been published: “Shien o kobamu hitobito—hisaichi shien no shōheki to bunka-teki haikai,” in *Higashi Nihon dai-shinsai no jinruigaku—Tsunami, genpatsu jiko to hisaisha-tachi no ‘sono go,’* Jinbun Shoin, 2103.
- 48) “Charity Thrown Away,” *The Eastern World*, March 24, 1906, 5.