PART I
1

Historical Background

Goryōrin was a modern invention, a Meiji-era solution to problems of the day. Like so many Meiji solutions, of course, it was grounded in earlier precedents, both domestic and foreign. However, those precedents were full of mutual inconsistencies, and many were ill-fitted to the times. So we shall see, as our story unfolds, that both the devising and implementing of policy on imperial land-holding were riddled with uncertainty and disagreement and involved much trial and error.

PRE-MEIJI IMPERIAL LANDS

The insurgent samurai who in 1868 toppled the Tokugawa regime and formed their own, the Meiji government, claimed to have restored ruling authority to the emperor. It was a rationale that helped justify not only their “rebellion” against the shogun, liege lord of their own lords (daimyō), but also their assaults upon those other daimyo who refused to “betray” the shogun. The immediate convenience of their rhetoric notwithstanding, however, these restorationist claims, like political rationales in general, carried more complications than their proponents seem to have realized at the time.

Central to the claim of “restoration” was a principle that enabled the insurgents to assert their “right” to assign and reassign land as they saw fit and to extract from it such usufruct as they deemed appropriate. The principle had been nicely expressed some 1100 years earlier by Emperor Shōmu (r. 724–49). In the year 743, when dedicating a grand new Buddhist statue at Tōdaiji in Nara, he declared:

It is We who possess the wealth of the land; it is We who possess all power in the land.1

And in his day all the realm did “belong” – nominally – to the emperor. His government allocated parcels of land to deserving officials and institutions and even to cultivators. And recipients were expected, in grateful return, to provide loyal service and material tribute as specified by law.