The Case of Yamanashi Goryōrin

To summarize the story of Yamanashi Goryōrin, the problem there was shaped fundamentally by the prefecture’s geography and the local socioeconomic circumstances fostered by that geography. It was also shaped by the kokuyūrin policies pursued there during the 1870s and 1880s, which underlay Property Office decisions of the 1890s, and by the response of villagers to those government moves, which led to continual modification in both kokuyū and goryō policies.

The net result of four decades of this thrust and parry was serious damage to the prefecture’s woodlands. Despite some successful efforts at reforestation and other forms of remediation, erosion, landslides, and floods worsened, culminating in hugely disastrous inundations in 1907 and 1910. Those calamities finally led a dispirited Household Ministry to abandon its whole effort. In 1911, it turned over to Yamanashi prefectoral authorities nearly 300,000 chōbu of woodland, of which 79,300 had been supposedly sacrosanct seden goryō. And with that loss the vision of a Fuji-centered imperial estate was irreparably compromised.

GEOGRAPHY

Looking briefly at the geography, Yamanashi Prefecture occupies some 450,000 chōbu (nearly 4,500 km²) in the southeastern quadrant of Japan’s sharply incised central cordillera. Except for the northerly slope of Mt. Fuji, which lies along its southern flank, and the lovely but small (roughly 20,000 chōbu) triangular Kōfu Basin, the prefecture consists of a maze of acutely upthrust ridge lines separated by the rushing waters of two highly articulated, dendritic river systems (see Maps 3, 4, 6). Most of Yamanashi’s eastern quarter drains eastward via tributaries of the Sagami River, which debouches onto the Kantō Plain, thence flowing into Sagami Bay near Hiratsuka. The other three quarters of the prefecture drain southward via tributaries of the Fuji River, which empties into the upper end of Suruga Bay.

Being an assemblage of narrow, twisting – and beautiful – mountain valleys, little of Yamanashi’s land surface (about eleven per cent) is
arable. For centuries those sinuous valleys sustained a sparse and comparatively poor population of villagers who eked out a living from the harvest of dry fields and miscellaneous forest products and by working away from home (deka**s**egi). That very sparseness of settlement in turn helped assure that Yamanashi remained well forested and hence attractive to the builders of Goryōrin.

Yamanashi woodland was capable of growing fine stands of merchantable sugi and hinoki thanks to its topography and climate. And being situated only about 100 km from central Tokyo and less than 200 km from Nagoya, it was relatively close to major wood-consumption centers. However, its river systems were not convenient for floating or rafting because their streams were so swift, shallow, ledgy, and boulder-strewn. So timber transport was exceedingly difficult, and relatively little entrepreneurial lumbering had ever developed there. Even government-sponsored logging was spotty, and mostly it entailed the extraction of smaller-sized products for market or local use. So, as of 1870, the prefecture’s hillsides mostly continued to support mixed stands of old-growth forest. For people versed in German forestry, they must have seemed rich with silvicultural potential.

**EARLY MEIJI DEVELOPMENTS**

During the 1870s, as noted earlier, Meiji leaders undertook the land surveying and kan/min division that distinguished government property from that of others. As the project’s difficulties became clearer, leaders in Tokyo tightened their control, requiring prefectural officials to obtain Ministerial guidance in ambiguous cases. By the mid-seventies that requirement was producing a vast correspondence in which prefectural governors were attempting to explain to Tokyo the particulars of specific cases involving as little as a few acres here or there, a hillside or two, or one or two villages. In some cases prefectural authorities were simply seeking guidance; in others they wished reinforcement for unpopular actions; in yet others they were defending local interests against central authority.

In Yamanashi, most of the lowland areas, mainly in the Kōfu Basin, were quickly identified as taxable min’yūchi. And some of the most mountainous areas easily qualified as kan’yūchi. But surveyors found that villagers claimed iriai use rights on more than seventy five percent of the prefecture’s upland, and because of that complication they were unable to complete their official examination of its status until 1881. Then, however, they ruled that of this iriaichi, only 3,385 of 352,888 recorded chōbu qualified as min’yūchi; the remainder was government land. This min’yūchi figure was so low because so little of the woodland had a documented record of actually being managed by villagers in a sustained fashion. In fact, villagers had been utilizing those hillsides for generations, mostly through common-use arrangements and by the customary method of exploitation forestry: take what you need and let the forest restock itself. They viewed the land as theirs to use for little or no

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