CHAPTER 1

Between Outland and Arcadia: 1780s–1880s

1 Travelers’ Accounts of Tōhoku

Historical documents show that discriminatory undertones and depictions of the Tōhoku region as an outland date back to the latter half of the eighteenth century. Tōhoku in the late Edo period was an outland situated beyond the framework of “Japan” and a “Japanese” identity. This view, already imposed since medieval times, was now coupled with rising concerns over foreign threats to the northern borders and discrimination against the Ainu to spread a sense of aversion among people in other parts of Japan.

Let us examine how Japanese living west of Edo in the late Edo period perceived Tōhoku by looking at Furukawa Koshōken’s Tōyū zakki (Miscellaneous records of travels to the east, 1788) and Tachibana Nankei’s Tōyūki (Lyrical record of a journey to the east, 1795).

1.1 The Perception of Tōhoku in Tōyū zakki

Furukawa Koshōken (1726–1807) was a geographer, scholar of Dutch learning, and physician from Okayama Prefecture who took every opportunity presented him to travel around Japan. Prior to Tōyū zakki, he had published Saiyū zakki (Miscellaneous records of travels to the west), an account of his travels around the Sanyō region and Kyūshū. It was directly after the Great Tenmei Famine (1782–1787) that he joined a party of shogunal inspectors for five and a half months on a journey around Tōhoku and Ezochi (Hokkaidō), collecting his observations in Tōyū zakki.

This volume, dedicated to Matsudaira Sadanobu (1758–1829), a senior councillor of the Tokugawa shogunate, introduces the manners and customs of the people and their occupations by comparing them to those of the “Yamato race” in Edo, the Kyoto/Osaka area, and the southern part of Kyūshū. However, where Koshōken really begins to feel Tōhoku’s literal outlandishness and “barbarity” is when he emerges on the Japan Sea side of Japan after making his way through Fukushima, Yonezawa, Yamagata, Tendō and Shinjō. Upon seeing the unfamiliar coastal scenery around the Tsuruoka (Yamagata Prefecture) area, he is unable to believe that he is “in Japan” and is surprised to feel as if he has arrived in an “unknown foreign land.” At Sakata (in Yamagata Prefecture) at the mouth of the Mogamigawa River, he reveals his astonishment at the topography, including “a continuous chain of white sand dunes” and “a vast stretch
of flat sand plains”; he remarks, “the Northern Continent, which I have never
seen, would probably not have this kind of landscape.”1

Based on his perceptions in Saiyū zakki, Koshōken conceived of the whole
country as “Japan,” but what should be noted is that Tōhoku’s topography and
cultural climate was linked in his mind with the completely unknown land of
Ezochi (“northern lands”). Even inland, he remarks that the “offensive man-
ners” of the people of Omonogawa (Akita Prefecture) are what one would
expect of such “barbaric people,” while he deemed the people of Kamioka
and Nishisenboku (both in Akita Prefecture) to have long been “barbarians.”2
At Yamamoto (Akita Prefecture) near Hachirōgata, he writes that “the people
of this area know nothing of either social duty or decorum…they are truly
barbaric.”3 He mentions the outlandishness of Futatsui (Akita Prefecture),
where “the dwellings are poorly constructed, the language is incomprehen-
sible, and the people are like the barbarians of the Northern Continent.”4

However, this lifestyle that Koshōken perceived to be peculiar was, as the
word “regional character” (kuniburi) suggests, extremely natural to the resi-
dents of such peripheral areas, and not incompatible with the idea of afflu-
ence. For example, Tsuruoka is “a land with much rice which even the lower
classes are in the habit of consuming”;5 the people around the Ōdate (Akita
Prefecture) area “care neither about their tattered clothing nor their unsightly
habitations; they can idle their days away because of the abundant rice fields.”6

As for Tsugaru at the northernmost extreme of Honshū, Koshōken notes that
since this area has an abundance of rice, the people do not want for food. The
residents of Tsugaru show “not the slightest shame” in their “unsightly cloth-
ing and habitations” which retain “an air of barbarity,” something he argues is
“reassuring when one thinks about it.”7

If Koshōken does not paint Tōhoku with the brush of poverty, the question
arises as to why the region was ravaged by famine. The answer is perhaps to be
found in his following observation about the Great Tenmei Famine in Tairadate
(Aomori Prefecture): “Because this area had always had an abundance of rice,
the people never stockpiled more than was necessary; that was their general

1 Furukawa Koshōken. Tōyū zakki (Miscellaneous records of travels to the east). 1788. In Nihon
2 Ibid., p. 484.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., p. 491.
5 Ibid., p. 475.
6 Ibid., p. 494.
7 Ibid., p. 495.