CHAPTER 2

A Dirt-Cheap Wasteland: 1870s–1880s

1  A Self-Portrait of Tōhoku

1.1  “Japan” and “Country”

Set in a rural landscape of apple orchards and rice paddies, Goshogawara is a city of some 50,000 people situated in the Tsugaru region that occupies the western part of Aomori Prefecture. In the former village of Ishioka, near the city center, a diary was passed down in the Terada family and, while most of the entries relate to farm life in the Meiji period, this document is fascinating in that it reveals how people of the time saw Japan.

A distinguishing feature of the “Terada Family Diary” is that words such as “government” (seifu) and “Emperor” (tennō, literally “heavenly sovereign”) feature only rarely; instead, terms such as “imperial court” (chōtei) and “Child of Heaven” (tenshi) are used, as can be seen in the following entries:

1) In late May in the village of Hyakuzawa (present-day Naka-Tsugaru-gun, Iwaki-chō), the imperial court ordered that 500 rakan statues be either burned or thrown away. Of these, 160 statues had been received from the imperial court earlier and were eventually placed at Chōshōji Temple (1875).¹
2) The honorable Child of Heaven toured Aomori Prefecture, and arrived in Aomori City on July 14 (1876).²
3) In the Satsuma domain, there was a conspiracy in the 9th year of Meiji. The imperial court dispatched an army to engage in pitched battles against the rebels (1877).³
4) The Satsuma domain rebels were brave and fought against the official army but they were executed upon defeat. The number of dead is not clear. The imperial army spent 100,000 yen per month. It appears that more uprisings are being plotted in the west (1877).⁴

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² Ibid., p. 43.
³ Ibid., p. 45.
⁴ Ibid., p. 45.
The first entry relates to the Separation of Shintō and Buddhism as a result of a decree implemented in 1868 and the subsequent movement to eradicate Buddhism: Hyakutakuji Temple (part of the Shingon sect of Buddhism), which was part of Iwakisan Shrine, was abolished, and 500 sculptures (depicting 500 disciples of Buddha who attained Nirvana) were either burned or disposed of by the order of the government. The 160 sculptures that had been bestowed by the government were stored inside the gate hall of Chōshōji, the family temple of the Tsugaru clan in Hirosaki. The third and fourth entries refer to the Satsuma Rebellion led by Saigō Takamori (1828–1877). What is notable about these entries is that they refer to the Meiji government as the “imperial court.” The second entry, which describes the imperial tour of Tōhoku in 1876, refers to the Emperor as the “honorable child of heaven.” These examples show that the general populace of Tōhoku was not yet familiar with the post-Meiji Restoration system of government and that the ideology of the early-modern period still held sway. Terms such as “pitched battles” (kassen) further illustrate this point.

It is possible to gauge the level of public awareness of the concepts of Japan and region in the following entries:

5) In Japan, three fu and 262 prefectures were amalgamated into 35 larger prefectures this past September (1876).
6) Cholera has been running rampant in our country (kuni) since June 1879.5
7) On April 30, strong easterly winds combined with little rain badly damaged the roofs of houses in the Nuruyu and Itadome areas (present-day Kuroishi City), and uprooted huge trees in the grounds of many temples. The whole of our country (kuni) was buffeted by strong winds (1879).6

It is obvious that there is a difference between “Japan” as used in the fifth entry and “country” (kuni) as used in the sixth and seventh entries. Aomori Prefecture, the home region, is described as “country,” clearly illustrating just how people of this era used this word. “Japan” and “country” coexisted as different concepts, although this way of thinking was not unique to Tōhoku.

If the people of Tōhoku had this image of the state, then what of their image of themselves and their region, and how was that formed? Let us look for answers in the numerous proposals, memorials, and petitions found in Meiji kenpakusho shūsei (A compilation of Meiji petitions).

5  Ibid., p. 52.
6  Ibid.