Conclusion—The Future of Tōhoku Discourse: 1900s–1910s

Over the course of six chapters, I have traced around 120 years in the development of the discourse surrounding Tōhoku. The late pre-modern period until the end of the Meiji era was a time of friction over how Tōhoku perceived itself and how others perceived it. What has surprised me time and time again is the diversity of these interpretations of Tōhoku. While images of Tōhoku as “uncivilized” or “barbarian” were standard in the early stages of the Meiji period, at the same time the region was projected as a “frontier” and a “rich land.” The idea of Tōhoku as a “backward region” did not establish itself in the popular imagination until towards the end of the Meiji period, that is, the beginning of the 20th century.

Tōhoku discourse tells of the region’s economic wealth and future possibilities. It also shows us that the region was not necessarily viewed as one homogeneous area. Tōhoku did not simply have an inferiority complex; its complex was a double consciousness that also implied a feeling of superiority from the standpoint of the global transportation revolution and theories of civilization. In fact, Tōhoku was still a pluralistic society that was heading towards a diverse future.

Looking at population shifts, which directly reflect development and decline in regional societies, we know that in the 1880s and 1890s, the rise in Tōhoku’s population was either higher or around the same as the national average. The downturn in Tōhoku’s fortunes occurred when a Tokyo-centered domestic land transportation network was established, along with frequent crop failures that inflicted a great deal of damage in the early 20th century. Tōhoku therefore came to be considered both economically and culturally inferior to the center. The “backward region” label stuck, and led to the negative connotations surrounding Tōhoku.

Geographical ignorance also helped to accelerate this backward image. In 1909, four years after the Russo-Japanese War, the Akita Sakigake Shinpō’s main contributor Andō Wafū (1866–1936) wrote the preface for Shiraretaru Akita (Familiar Akita),1 in which he bemoaned the fact that “Although some

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Japanese do know if Kwantung is an island or a landmass, they do not know if Akita belongs to the same domain as Shibata, or if it is in the same prefecture as Sakata.” His complaint arose from the fact that most people were aware that Kwantung was on the border of China and Korea (Japan had signed a treaty with China in September that year designating this as the border), but there were people who did not know where Akita was.

It was around this time that Tōhoku’s self-consciousness took hold. Akita-born writer Itō Gingetsu (1871–1944) published a travelogue in 1910 titled Ōu oyobi Hokkaidō waraji nikki (A straw-sandals diary of Tōhoku and Hokkaidō) detailing his journey from Tokyo to Hokkaidō in the summer of 1909. Perusing his book, one can find observations such as “The train compartment was filled with passengers who had a calm and rustic Tōhoku demeanor,” “Old thatched village houses, the half-witted faces of the villagers, the taste of Tōhoku miso soup at breakfast—everything arouses nostalgia,” “Out of cigarettes, I wanted to buy a new packet, and there is nothing better than Yamato (rolled tobacco, 9 cents per pack until 1907). What else could I do? I had to buy some. The shopkeeper also gave me some practically stale tea cakes which looked somewhat in vogue. It would be much better if they provided Tōhoku tea biscuits here.” The word Tōhoku is used on the level of daily life in these descriptions. The important point here is that these images of “Tōhoku demeanor,” “the taste of Tōhoku miso soup,” and “Tōhoku tea biscuits” are used in a very natural manner by this Tōhoku-born author.

The writer Chūjō (Miyamoto) Yuriko (1899–1951) was not born in Tōhoku, but her grandfather Chūjō Masatsune (1841–1900) was involved in promoting the development of Asaka in Fukushima Prefecture, so she was acquainted with Tōhoku society from an early age. In one of her early works, Negisama Miyata (Mr. Miyata, a Shinto priest) (1917), she wrote, “The square-shaped face with protruding cheekbones is common among Tōhoku farmers.” At the beginning of Saburō Jijī (Grandpa Saburō, 1918), she described the region in the final stages of the Tokugawa shogunate.

People in Edo or the Kansai region believed that Tōhoku farmers inhabited the ends of the earth, that their bodies were entirely covered in hair, that they lived in crude houses, and that they cultivated small tracts of land at the edge of wild grass lands or on the slopes of bamboo grass hills.

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2 Itō Gingetsu. Ōu oyobi Hokkaidō Waraji nikki (A straw sandals diary of Tōhoku and Hokkaidō). 1910.

3 Miyamoto Yuriko. Miyamoto Yuriko zenshū (The complete works of Miyamoto Yuriko), vol. 1, 1979, p. 206.