

History of Tsugaru-jamisen: From Mesopotamian Origins to World War II

津軽三味線の歴史：メソポタミアから第二次世界大戦まで

Akira TOMITA *

富 田 晃 *

Abstract

Tsugaru-jamisen (Tsugaru-shamisen) refers to an instrument and genre of Japanese traditional stringed music, shamisen. Tsugaru-jamisen developed as a genre distinct from other shamisen styles during the Meiji Period. The style and instrument bear the name “Tsugaru” because they were created in the Tsugaru region of Aomori prefecture in the northernmost part of Honshū, the main island of Japanese archipelago.

Tsugaru-jamisen lutes have larger bodies and thicker necks than those used in most other shamisen genres. The music itself is characterized by a strong rhythmicity and underlying percussive sound produced by the plectrum striking the body of the instrument.

This essay provides a broad overview of the history of the physical Tsugaru-jamisen instrument, looking back to the origins and spread of stringed instruments from Mesopotamia in ancient times, through the establishment of shamisen in medieval Japan, to the modern formation of Tsugaru-jamisen in the Tsugaru region.

The Origins of Stringed Instruments

It is unclear when humankind first came to take pleasure in sound and began to create music. Since ancient times, humans have listened to the whispers of the wind and water; the songs of birds in the forest; and, over time, have come to appreciate the sounds produced by their compatriots as well. Perhaps it was in that distant past when humans first felt the inclination to express to their fellow beings interest or feelings of joy, or that they felt the desire to create something new, that they first began to sing, add shouts of encouragement, and clap their hands in rhythm.

At some point in ancient prehistory, humankind began cutting rock and wood, baking clay, and making physical “things.” These things were not only tools directly connected to daily survival things like weapons for hunting and vessels for holding water: from the very beginning humans made things which produced sound and used them to banish evil spirits, offer prayers to the heavens, spread joy, and overcome grief. In addition to daily necessities like axes and water jugs, various objects such as clay and stone idols, necklaces and other accessories, as well as drums, ceramic bells, bone and clay flutes, animal horns and conch shells have all been uncovered at archaeological sites around the globe.

* 弘前大学教育学部
Faculty of Education, Hirosaki University

Things for hitting, rubbing together, shaking, blowing to produce sound—in other words, percussion and wind instruments—are universal.

Musical instruments can be generally categorized as percussion (idiophone/membranophone), winds (aerophone), and strings (chordophone). If only percussion and wind instruments have been discovered in the most ancient of excavations, when then did string instruments come into being? It is believed that the first stringed instruments originated in the form of bows. Bows were first invented in the Middle East during the end of the Paleolithic era, approximately 15,000 BCE, after which they spread east and west throughout all of Eurasia.

However, present-day stringed instruments did not develop directly from the bow. When plucked, the string of a bow produces a sound of very low intensity, which fades almost immediately. These prototypical string instruments did not produce loud enough sounds to be performed alongside percussion and wind instruments. Because of the simplicity of the string's vibration, its true potential would not be realized until multiple pitches were used to form melodies and harmonies. The “music bow” was created during ancient times: it was plucked, vibrated inside one's mouth, or adorned with resonators and rattles to make the sound more interesting. However, to find where this primitive form lies in the lineage of present-day string instruments we must first look to the Sumerian Kingdom, after the rise of civilization in Mesopotamia, when sounds were scientifically classified and matured in the form of music.

The Sumerian city-state was organized around a monarch ruler until 3,500 BCE. It flourished in the Mesopotamian region, from which agricultural society had sprung 4,500 years earlier. The Kingdom of Sumer boasted cuneiform—the world's oldest writing system—and large-scale architecture, and oversaw the official patronage of fine, applied, and performing arts. Additionally, the fields of astronomy and mathematics were advanced through the development of an agricultural calendar. The monarch considered music to be an integral method of correspondence with the gods in the heavens, and sponsored an institute for music education research. Acoustic theory was refined by astronomers and mathematicians, leading to the creation of musical notation and scales. Sumerian government policy guided this music's evolution, and eventually led to the construction of a string instrument which embodied that process: a prototype of the modern harp, bearing multiple strings of various pitches stretched between a frame and bow arm. This development occurred sometime around 3,000 BCE. In this type of design, however, each string can produce only a single pitch, and as a result the only method of increasing the acoustic range was to add more strings and build a larger instrument.

Around 1,500 BCE necks were being affixed to the resonating bodies of chordophones so that long strings could be stretched across them, and so that by pressing down on the same string in different places different pitches could be produced. These instruments are classified as “lutes.” An advantage of the lute—modern incarnations of which include the guitar and *shamisen*—is its extreme portability; lutes can even be played while walking.

Biwa, Komuz, Sanxien, Sanshin, and Shamisen

The *shamisen* falls into the category of long-necked chordophones called “lutes.” Lutes which spread to the Japanese archipelago in pre-modern times can be generally categorized into two typologies: the *biwa*-style, introduced during the Nara Period (710-794 CE) via interaction with the Silk Road; and spike-necked *sanxian/sanshin*-style, which entered during the Muromachi Period (1333-1573 CE) via trade relations with China and Okinawa. The *biwa* is pear-shaped and constructed using flat wooden boards; the *sanxian* and *sanshin* (and *shamisen*) are formed by inserting a spike-like neck through a wooden sound box covered with animal skin. In fact, the established theory is that the Chinese *sanxian* and Okinawa *sanshin* were used as the models in developing the Japanese *shamisen*. However, unlike the *sanxian* and *sanshin*, which are played using one’s fingernails (or a finger-shaped plectrum, *tsume*), both the *shamisen* and the *biwa* are played with a large wedge-shaped plectrum (*bachi*) and utilize a static resonator (*sawari*), which generates an excess buzzing sound and is absent from the *sanxian* and *sanshin*.

When considering the transmission of instruments like these to new locations, we must ask did the instrument come alone or did it travel with a musician? In what kind of situation was it used, and by members of what social class? Asking these questions reveals how social factors influence the reception of new instruments.

The earliest lute to be imported to Japan was the *biwa*, which was originally played in the courts of China and Korea. It was brought to Japan between the seventh and eighth centuries and became a fixture of Nara and Heian court music (*gagaku*).

In Japan there have also long been so-called *hokai-hito*, people who put on public performances in exchange for handouts of food. Many of these were people forced out of greater society by some kind of misfortune or illness. Although the *biwa* earned a high place as a royal court instrument in *gagaku*, it was ironically also taken up by lower-class traveling performers in the tradition of the *hokai-hito*, perhaps because of its great portability. Later, during the mid-Heian Period, the *biwa* was played by blind traveling monks (*biwa-hōshi*) and spread throughout Japan as an instrumental accompaniment to the chanted Pure Land Buddhism (*jodo-bukkyo*) dogma of salvation. The *biwa-hōshi* attached a static resonator to the neck of their instrument, a mechanism which produces a characteristic twanging noise.

It was eight hundred years after the introduction of the *biwa*, during the Muromachi Period in the sixteenth century, that the Chinese *sanxian* and Okinawa *sanshin* came to Japan. It is believed that these instruments were to be the direct models for the Japanese *shamisen*.

The *sanxian* has been discovered throughout China from the Qin Dynasty more than two thousand years ago. Although the origins of the *sanxian* are unclear, there is a convincing theory that it was inspired by the *komuz*, a stringed instrument used by nomadic tribes in the northern part of the Asian Continent. The theory states that the *sanxian* was created by the builders of the Great Wall, who had previously been invaded from the north. The number of extant *komuz* is very small, and therefore this theory remains in the realm of supposition, but it appears that the instrument the nomads used had sheep skin stretched over the resonating body and used strings made of sheep intestines. In contrast, the *sanxian* used in China is covered with python skin and uses silk strings. Here we can perhaps

say that the differences in people's lifestyles and surrounding environments brought differences to the instruments themselves: from the dry vast lands of Mongolia, where people are mobile, living on horseback and nomadically herding sheep; to humid lands in China where people live in permanent settlements. The *corvée* laborers who built the Great Wall played the *sanxian* to accompany song and dance as they relaxed after exhausting days of work. Eventually the *sanxian* diffused throughout China as a form of layman's entertainment, and then was incorporated into Kunqu Opera with which it traveled southward of China.

The *sanxian* did not, however, enter Japan directly from China. It was transferred from China to Okinawa sometime around the beginning of the fifteenth century, where it became model from which the *sanshin* was created. The person who brought the *sanxien* to Okinawa was a Chinese immigrant from Fujian Province. The Ryūkyū Kingdom created a foreign settlement for the purposes of encouraging exchange with its more advanced neighbor; they treated the Chinese culture courteously, and encouraged the *sanshin* as an aesthetic of the *bushi* (warrior) class. The Okinawa *sanshin* is similar to the Chinese *sanxian* in that its body is covered in python skin and that it is plucked with the fingernail. There are no snakes large enough to use for *sanshin* skins in Okinawa, so the warriors of the Ryūkyū Kingdom who played the instrument had skins specially imported from overseas. Because their public image became tied to the quality of their instrument, they also lacquered the wooden parts to improve their reputation.

Soon after the *sanshin* was created, it appeared with the Chinese *sanxian* in the Osaka port town of Sakai. However, the Ryūkyū Kingdom had little interaction with the contemporary Japanese Muromachi government, and so the *sanxian* and *sanshin* entered without an exchange of music or musicians. The ones who first took an interest in these instruments were members of the lowest social class—the *biwa-hōshi*. This was because the *sanxian* and *sanshin* have a wider range than the *biwa* and no frets restricting the variety of pitch the strings can produce; they were liberating in this way, and provided a way for the *biwa-hōshi* to expand their repertoire of self expression. Because there was no way for the *biwa-hōshi* to know how these lutes were originally performed in China and Okinawa, they performed using the same plectrum as they had with the *biwa*. When they designed new instruments based off of the *sanxian* and *sanshin* they were not concerned with deliberately creating faithful reproductions of the originals, but rather employed the material most close at hand, cat skin. Additionally, they attached a static resonator to produce a buzzing sound as on the *biwa* they had previously used. This is how the *shamisen* came into its current form, differing from the Chinese *sanxian* and Okinawan *sanshin* in its use of cat skin, wedge-shaped plectrum, and static resonator. The instrument the *biwa-hōshi* created later became popular as an accompaniment to folk song (*min'yō*) and popular songs (*hayari-uta*). During the Edo Period the *shamisen* came to be used in *gidayū*, *jōruri*, and *kabuki* theater performances; by *geisha*; and in other forms of performing arts which came into vogue as city culture (*chōmin bunka*) thrived.

Shamisen in the Tsugaru Region

Tsugaru is the northwestern region of present-day Aomori Prefecture. The Tsugaru plain is surrounded by the Sea of Japan to the west, the Tsugaru Straits to the north, the Hakkōda mountain range to the east, and the Shirakami-mountains to the south. The solitary Mt. Iwaki towers over the plain 1,625 meters tall, observable from any point in the region. Tsugaru has long been recognized as a

consolidated political region, and is referenced in the historical record *Nihon Shoki* (655 CE). The land was unified under the Tsugaru clan and Hirosaki Castle was constructed during the Warring States Period (1467-1568); during the Edo Period it became the domain (*han*) of the Hirosaki *daimyō*. The land annually endures heavy snows which cover it for a full quarter of the year. Separated by distance from Edo (Tokyo) in eastern Honshu and Kyoto/Osaka further west, the Tsugaru region is isolated even from its contiguous regions by the sea and mountains. It is within this closed-off realm and amid the stark rotation of seasons that the Tsugaru dialect (*Tsugaru-ben*), Tsugaru folksong (*Tsugaru-min'yō*), the *Nebuta* and *Neputa* festivals, and other highly-original aspects of its culture were created.

However, even in such an intensely closed-off region there was a degree of exchange of people. The first obvious example is that of the *sankin-kōtai*, a mandatory triennial visitation of the *daimyō* to the *shōgun* in Edo. The goods, martial and performing arts, etc, that the *daimyō* brought back from Edo to Tsugaru received public recognition and were treated with the utmost formality. *Gidayu*, a genre of *jōruri* dramatic storytelling popular in Edo at the time, was brought to Hirosaki under the auspices of the government along with its accompanying thick-necked *gidayu-shamisen*.

Cultural exchange also occurred with the arrival of the *kitamae-bune*, which traded along the Sea of Japan. *Kitamae-bune* were commercial ships which launched out of the Osaka port town of Sakai and, passing the Kanmon Straits via the inland sea, strafed the Sea of Japan stopping at trading ports along the way. The ships traveled back and forth between Sakai and Esashi in Hokkaido. The trade route benefited Osaka by introducing a variety of marine products from the west coast and earning it the name “The Greatest Kitchen under Heaven”; equally, a mass of products including cloth, salt, paper, candles, liquor, and tobacco made their way up to the northern ports. In addition to these physical goods, intangible folk performance from around the country was also transmitted northward along the *kitamae-bune* trade routes, as in the case of Kyūshū’s folk song “*Haiya-bushi*” which took root in new locations with the new names “*Sado Okesa*” and “*Tsugaru Aiya-bushi*.”

Another example of this type of cultural exchange are the itinerant blind performing monks called *bosama* and *goze*. *Bosama* is the name used in Tōhoku to refer to *zatō*, the lowest ranking members of the *tōdōza*. *Tōdōza* was an organization of blind monks in the tradition of the *biwa-hōshi*, and was registered with the Edo government. It was created to act as a system of social support and regulation for the many that lost their vision due to the measles or difficult births. Upon entering the guild, one was either instructed in a musical art like *shamisen* or in medicine, such as acupuncture, moxibustion, and massage. The *bosama* would be put into small groups at the completion of their training and travel the country together. *Tōdōza* members were exclusively male. *Gozeza* were organized for women, and its visually-impaired members were called *gozesama*.

Bosama and *gozesama* took up either the medium-sized *jiuta-shamisen* that was developed by the *biwa-hōshi* in Osaka, or the smaller and more portable thin-necked *shamisen*, and traveled the land. They were particularly welcome in the deep snow country of Tōhoku to provide entertaining respite from the winter, and so they often resided in the region for long periods of time.

Among such traveling performers were some who stayed to live in the regions they visited. Once breaking away from their group, they would be excommunicated from the *tōdōza* or *gozeza* and lose their publicly-recognized social status. These people were called “*hagure-bosama*” and “*hagure-goze*.” To acquire food to eat and live, they traveled performing door-to-door (*kado-zuke*), collecting handouts of rice or coin to live on day by day. Because they lived off of alms, they were pejoratively referred

to as beggars (*hoido*) and generally scorned by society. To join the *tōdōza* or *gozeza* one must have parents in the city with access to those facilities to bring their vision-impaired child; however, there were people who could not, or would not, join the guilds. There were some among these people who learned *shamisen* or massage at the hands of the *hagure-bosama* and *hagure-goze* as a way to survive.

When performing unannounced, the performer had to first create an intense amount of sound to draw an audience. When the *bosama*'s audience came out of their house or gathered from nearby, the performers created entertainment on the spot to fit the present atmosphere—this is why the genre developed into one characterized by energetic and improvisatory performance. The body of the *shamisen* itself was also improved from cat skin to dog skin, which is tougher and able to endure the beatings entailed by louder playing.

Shamisen technique and repertoire were related directly from master to disciple, one on one, through the endless repetition of phrase after phrase and the teaching of oral mnemonic devices "*kuchi-jamisen*". Although contemporary musical notation for *shamisen* did exist in the form of numbers, letters, and symbols, the *tōdōza* and *gozeza* followed the tradition of the blind *biwa-hōshi* by engaging in direct transmission between performers.

According to DAIJO Kazuo, a historian of *Tsugaru-jamisen*, the lineage of the present-day genre is traceable to the single father figure of Nitabō (b. AKIMOTO Nitarō, 1857-1928). Although Nitabō died quite recently, there are no photographs remaining of him, and the better part of his biography is shrouded in mystery. It is generally thought that this is a result of the low social status conferred to contemporary *shamisen* performers in Tsugaru. All that is known for certain is that he was born the son of a ferryman on the Iwaki River, that he lost his vision around the age of eight, and that the types of performance he was skilled in overlapped with those of the *goze* from Niigata/Echigo.

Nitabō began to use a thick-necked *gidayu-shamisen* in an effort to master *shamisen* techniques which he had likely picked up from *hagure-goze*. The new instrument increased his dynamic and expressive potential, and created the bridge to the new performance style now known as *Tsugaru-jamisen*.

Over his life, Nitabō took on five disciples. All current-day *Tsugaru-jamisen* performers have taken up the tradition begun at this single point of genesis. Of Nitabō's five students, Kase no Momo (b. Kurokawa Momotarō, 1886-1931) and Shirakawa Gunpachirō (1909-62) left the greatest mark on history.

Kase no Momo polished the folksong of the Tsugaru region by adding *shamisen* accompaniment to song. Soon after, "*Yosare-bushi*", "*Ohara-bushi*", and "*Jonkara-bushi*" took hold as the three-song Tsugaru canon (*Tsugaru-mitsumono*).

As the years progressed through the Meiji, Taishō, and Shōwa periods, the Tsugaru region began to profit from the expansion of the apple industry, imported from the United States of America. At harvest festivals, shrine-festivals (*yomiya*), and other events, huge musical gatherings (*uta-kai*) were held where folk singers and *shamisen* players were called upon to entertain the local people. It was during such performances where Nitabō's final disciple, Shirakawa Gunpachirō, made the *shamisen* an independent solo instrument. He achieved this by gradually extending the length of instrumental solos before and after the vocals until ultimately forgoing the singer altogether. While he deeply impressed audiences with his virtuosic technique, the *shamisen* was still looked down upon at the time as a thing tainted by *hoido* beggars, and it was considered a disgrace for one's family to be associated with a *shamisen* performer. This was the situation in *Tsugaru* as the world plunged into the World War II.

** This essay is a translated excerpt from the first half of the following essay in Japanese. It was translated with assistance from Joshua SOLOMON.*

富田晃「弦の響き：津軽三味線の形成と現在」『季刊民族学』135, pp3-56,2011

Reference

王耀華『中国と琉球の三弦音楽』第一書房,1998

ザックス、クルト『楽器の歴史』全音楽譜出版社,1965

大條和雄『津軽三味線の誕生』新曜社,1995

田中悠美子（編）『まるごと三味線の本』青弓社,2009

田辺尚雄『三味線音楽史』創思社,1963

李義昭「江戸期における視覚障害者組織『当道座』」『六甲台論集』46(3),1999

Gerald Groemer, *The Spirit of Tsugaru: Blind Musicians, Tsugaru-Jamisen, and the Folk Music of Northern Japan*, Harmonie Park Pr, 1999

Suda Naoyuki, Daijo Kazuo and Anthony Rausch, *The Birth of Tsugaru Shamisen Music: The Origin and Development of a Japanese Folk Performing Art*, Aomori U.P. 1998

(2012. 8. 9 受理)