

The Construction of an Image of “Tsugaru” : A Comparative Study of Tsugaru-jamisen and Okinawa-sanshin

創られた「津軽」イメージ：津軽三味線と沖縄三線の比較研究

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Abstract

Tsugaru-jamisen and *Okinawan-sanshin* are musical styles inextricably linked to the regions with which they share their names. The politically and economically dominant Tokyo “center” produced different types of images and applied them to its opposed “peripheral” regions: Okinawa in the south was branded exotic and Tsugaru in the north, nostalgic. This is a form of “image colonization” which began after World War Two. Goal of this essay is to reveal the processes constructing these images through discursive analysis of movies, popular songs, tourism, and shamisen/sanshin players’ publicity.

Constructed Images: Tsugaru and Okinawa

There are not especially many instruments which are called by the name of a region: the English horn, French horn, and Irish harp are a few examples. With the exception of *Tsugaru-jamisen*, no other shamisen genre is called by the name of a place: *min’yō*, *kouta*, *nagauta*, *jiuta*, *kiyomoto*, *tokiwazu*, *gidayu*. Among instruments in the same family as the *shamisen*, there is only one which bears the name of a region: the *sanshin* of Okinawa. While the *sanshin* is similar in shape and construction to the *shamisen*, it is still called by a different name, and although therefore there is no need to modify that name for clarity, it is still referred to most frequently as the “*Okinawa-sanshin*.” It is here that the instruments are fatefully linked to the lands which share their name and background.

“Tsugaru” as Depicted in Postwar Reconstruction Films

Japan was defeated at the end of the World War Two (1941-45). The scorched earth of Tokyo was a land crushed by poverty and starvation. To the west, Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been devastated by dropping of the nuclear bombs; to the south, Okinawa and the Ogasawara Islands became occupied by American forces at the end of a bitter struggle. Tōhoku was, by comparison, untouched by the ravages of war and was able to send rations to Tokyo. Among them were the apples—originally imported from America during the Meiji Period—and film—the king of popular entertainment—which lit a light in the hearts of the Japanese after the war. It was during this postwar period of reconstruction that NAMIKI Michiko, HARA Setsuko, and MISORA Hibari were selected to star

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on the screen and become national idols. Each of them was sold to the public via the image of “the north” or “Tsugaru.”

Japan’s first postwar film, *Breeze (Soyokaze)* was released in the autumn of 1945. It was through the lead role in this story of the daughter of an apple farmer who makes it big as a singer in Tokyo that NAMIKI Michiko rose to stardom. The soundtrack “The Apple Song” (*Ringo no Uta*) was a smash hit.

In 1949, ISHIZAKA Yōjirō, a popular author from Hirosaki city, had his book “Blue Mountains” (*Aoi Sanmyaku*) turned into a movie featuring HARA Setsuko which portrayed the lively courtship of a young couple. The theme song, “*Aoi Sanmyaku*”, was a paean to youth heralding in a new era and was extremely popular. And so, soon after the end of the war, movie theaters in Tokyo were lit with a discourse of bright, dazzling, shining imaginings of “the north” and “Tsugaru”.

After the period of disorder at the end of the war, when things in Tokyo began to settle down, the depiction of Tsugaru also began to change. In the 1952 tragic love story “The Apple Orchard Maiden” (*Ringo-en no Shōjo*), MISORA Hibari plays the daughter of an apple farmer who falls in love with a man from Tokyo who turns out to be her actual father, who abandoned her and her mother in the city. While “the north” and “Tsugaru” are portrayed as “places of longing” for Tokyoites in *Breeze* and *Blue Mountains*, in “The Apple Orchard” Maiden they become “places submissive to Tokyo.” As Tokyo recovered from the war and regained its place and function as a major metropolis at the “center” of Japan, Tsugaru was swept up into a “periphery” dependent upon Tokyo.

From “Shamisen of Tsugaru” to “Tsugaru-jamisen”

After postwar reconstruction wound down a period of high growth began, lasting from 1955 to 1973. People from rural Japan poured into Tokyo via group employment programs and migratory labor opportunities. Performing arts thrived as televisions became commonplace to every household, and SHIRAKAWA Gunpachirō’s student MIHASHI Michiya (b. KITASAWA Michiya, 1930-96) took advantage of that by moving to Tokyo and recording hit after hit with her *min’yō*-trained voice. She also showed off the *shamisen* technique acquired under her master, and invited him in 1959 to hold a recital in the Theater of Japan (*Nihon Gekijō*). This is one way in which the music of Tsugaru was relayed to Tokyo. Around the same period, the Oyama Association (*Oyama-kai*) was created by OYAMA Mitsugu (b. 1930), and, using Tokyo as a base of operations, issued a host of disciples. KIDA Rinshōei (1911-74) also moved to the capital, carrying on Gunpachirō’s legacy of vigorous “striking plectrum” (*tataki-shamisen*) technique, and laying the foundations for the coming *shamisen* boom in popularity.

On the other hand, there was also the folk song movement of the postwar period, spread by NARITA Unchiku (b. NARITA Musashi, 1888-1947) from his base in Aomori City. Unchiku was accompanied by *shamisen* and *taiko* (drums) on Tsugaru *min’yō*, his most skillful songs, and he devoted himself to broadening their appeal. Beginning around 1950, he took as his accompanist TAKAHASHI Chikuzan (b. TAKAHASHI Sadazō, 1910-1998), who until that point had survived on handouts from door to door performances (*kado-zuke*) and working as a masseur.

While NARITA Unchiku was being recognized as an active leading figure in the world of *min’yō* throughout all of Japan, Chikuzan’s sound caught the ears of Tokyo record producers, who released a LP “Headwaters: TAKAHASHI Chikuzan’s World – Tsugaru-jamisen” (*Genryū*:

Takahashi Chikuzan no Sekai – Tsugaru-jamisen) in 1963. This landmark solo recording turned the spotlight on the shamisen, which until that point had been primarily considered only as an instrument for accompanying song. Furthermore, in addition to information from NARITA Unchiku, musicologist TANABE Hisao’s explanatory comments were also included with the record, making it a scholastically-sound product. This is how the names “TAKAHASHI Chikuzan” and “Tsugaru-jamisen” first entered Japanese music industry; the album was a hit, selling 70,000 copies over the next two years. After listening to this album, music appreciation societies with branches across the country also planned Chikuzan concerts. Chikuzan’s style, matured from many years of accompanying his mentor Unchiku, was not the “striking plectrum” of KIDA Rinshōei, but instead a restrained “plucking plectrum” (*hiki-jamisen*) which produces a warmer sound.

The 1970s: TAKAHASHI Chikuzan’s Break into Stardom

Chikuzan had already been well-known in the 1950s as Unchiku’s accompanist. He began performing solo across the country after the release of his album in 1963, but at that point his audiences were still limited. This all changed in the 70s when the mass media picked up Chikuzan and launched him into fame. “Tsugaru Chikuzan-bushi” and “Frozen Plectrum” (*Kan Bachi*), both television documentaries based on Chikuzan’s life, were broadcast nationally one after the other in 1971 and 1972, respectively; and from 1973 he began performing regularly at the Shibuya, Tokyo music club Jan Jan. In 1975 Chikuzan’s producer/manager SATO Sadaki published “Tsugaru-jamisen Solitary Journey” (*Tsugaru-jamisen Hitori Tabi*), a transcription of Chikuzan’s life stories, which became the basis for a film released in 1977. There were also other books about him as well as Chikuzan-inspired magazine specials.

Chikuzan’s rush to stardom in the 1970s was a result more of the efforts of the entertainment industry—specifically the strategic crafting of his image in television, film, records, publications, and performances—than of his own personal ambition or effort. Although color photography was already popular, the image circulated of Chikuzan was always one of black and white. During his stage performances the background would be cleared of any decorations, leaving just the man himself. In his television appearances, he was accompanied by images of children in kimono playing colloquial games which summoned up strong feelings of *furusato* (native place, one’s old home). In every media form available—television, film, record, publication, performance—Chikuzan’s past would be described as “because he was blind, Chikuzan had no choice but to play *shamisen* just to survive.” The media discourse surrounding him thus created images of “isolation” and “endurance” which became allegories to not only Chikuzan himself, but “Tsugaru-jamisen” the instrument and music, and the Tsugaru region itself.

Chikuzan was most frequently featured in mass media in the mid 70s. This period overlapped with the first oil crisis (1973), which interrupted the period of high economic growth and necessitated a restructuring of the national plan for stable growth. During the growth cycle, society was based on the idea of mass production and mass consumption, by which products like cars, televisions, refrigerators, and washing machines spread across the country. As a result, the bullet train and highway road opened for business, and life in Japan was becoming more convenient and comfortable. However, along with the rapid industrialization came smog and other public pollution which damaged the environment. As urbanization progressed and the number of company workers increased,

traditional societal forms also began to crumble.

The 1973 oil crisis signaled the end of Japan's high-economic growth period, and the once-popular slogan "Consumption is a Virtue" (*shōhi ha bitoku*) was rejected by calls for conservation and moderation. While searching for a way of applying this new system of values, people began to feel that "something important" had been lost in the completely economically-oriented society to that point. This was the context in which the entertainment industry strategically created imagery about Chikuzan which actively called upon those feelings of loss, and at the same time brought him into celebrity.

In 1977, the apex of the Chikuzan boom and the year the movie version of "Tsugaru-jamisen Solitary Journey" came out, ISHIKAWA Sayuri's "Tsugaru Straits, Winter Scene" (*Tsugaru Kaikyō, Fuyu Geshiki*) became extremely popular on the *enka* (sad and melancholic Japanese songs) scene. This tragic love song's popularity enhanced and reinforced the images of "isolation" and "endurance" associated with Tsugaru that were first circulated via Chikuzan.

Okinawa

Until it was returned to Japanese sovereignty in 1972, Okinawa—first the location of the tragic ground fighting in World War Two and then a site of American occupation—was seen as a taboo place by the mass media and left untouched. However, once the land was returned to Japan, the once-unthinkable Okinawa suddenly became a major topic of conversation.

The Tokyo music industry carefully timed the debuts of MINAMI Saori and Finger 5, all Okinawan natives, with the restoration of the islands. These groups were marketed with an Americanized image; they sang carefree melodies and heart-throbbing love songs. MINAMI Saori and Finger 5 rushed to stardom as they graced the screens of new color televisions, a brilliant presence shining in the Japanese entertainment world.

Starting in 1975 with the Okinawa International Ocean Expo (*Okinawa Kaiyō Haku*), the Japanese government poured its resources into developing Okinawa and Okinawan tourism in particular. The Okinawan word "*mensore*," meaning "welcome," became a household term via extensive poster and television advertising. A major hotel was lured to beach, and palm trees and hibiscus were planted in an act of "performing" the tropics.

Two major airlines in Tokyo ran specials on Okinawa after the government sponsorship of the Expo. Posters adorned with blue oceans and bikini-clad women created a visual metaphor for the "Southern Sea Paradise." Women who were "not completely foreigners, but had something about them that was different from the Japanese" were explicitly picked to serve as advertising models. When people saw these posters they felt the possibility of "fresh, new encounters in Okinawa."

Colonization of Image

As a result, in the 1970s Okinawa's public image was of "south," "blue oceans," "island," "foreign country," "release, liberation," and "new experiences." In opposition to this, Tsugaru was coded with "north," "blizzards," "frontier region," "native place (*furusato*)," "nostalgia," "severity, intensity," "perseverance," and "isolation." This is a form of "colonization of image," in which powers in the Tokyo "center" assigned different types of images based on their personal preferences to the "periphery" regions of Okinawa and Tsugaru.

By consuming the television produced in Tokyo and circulated throughout the country, the people of Tsugaru began to internalize that “Tsugaru image” and believe it to be the “essence” of Tsugaru.

<table.1> Images Created by Mass Media

OKINAWA	TSUGARU
South	North
Blue Ocean	Blizzards
Island	Frontier Region
Foreign Country	Native Place
Exotic	Nostalgia
Fun, Entertaining	Severity, Intensity
Release, Liberation	Perseverance
Encounter	Isolation
Okinawa-sanshin	Tsugaru-jamisen

Although SHIRAKAWA Gunpachirō did perform solo *shamisen* in Tsugaru itself, during the postwar period it was still primarily an instrument for accompanying and highlighting song, often played at banquets and parties in a lively fashion. During the 1970s and Chikuzan’s break in to fame, however, Tsugaru-jamisen started to be understood as a solo instrument. Shamisen fans of the time began to split between followers of NARITA Chikuzan’s tasteful if subdued “plucking plectrum” style and Kida Rinshōei’s bounding rhythm and aggressive “striking plectrum.”

The number of tourists visiting the Tsugaru region in the 60s and 70s steadily increased, although not in such an explosive manner as in Okinawa. People began to gather in the castle town of Hirosaki from across the country for the cherry-blossom festival in May and the Neputa festival in August, and it was there in 1964 that YAMADA Chisato (1931-2004) of KIDA’s “striking plectrum” school opened Live House Yamauta, a *shamisen* music club. Once TAKAHASHI Chikuzan entered the limelight and Tsugaru-jamisen started taking on national attention, Japanese youths began to dream of becoming professional players themselves, and students gathered from across the country to learn under YAMADA. Because *shamisen* technique and phrasing is transmitted directly from teacher to student, it is difficult for disciples of different teachers to practice and perform together; conversely, students of the same teacher can. This type of *shamisen* only ensemble performance became both a form of training and a method of artistic expression. Thus, in addition to “song accompaniment(*uta-zuke*)” and “solo,” “ensemble” became a new performance setting. Also around the same time, some Tsugaru-jamisen performers started leaving Tsugaru region for Tokyo and elsewhere to start schools, creating new factions in different places.

The 1980s: Tsugaru-jamisen as Competition

While the *bosama* (monk/beggar) *shamisen* players of Tsugaru were historically harshly scorned, their negative image was diluted by the success of TAKAHASHI Chikuzan’s television performances. A plethora of schools and new factions formed, each with new students, and the population of *Tsugaru-jamisen* players boomed.

As more and more people started playing Tsugaru-jamisen, YAMADA Chisato started holding the “Tsugaru-jamisen National Competition” in *Hirosaki*, beginning in 1982. It was conducted as a point-based competition where judges graded each performance. Players who wanted to become professionals would use the competitions to display their highly-complex technique, win first place, and use that credit as proof of being best in the nation to start their careers. Although competitors received grades on their performances, reactions focused only on the distinction between “winners” and “losers.”

Most of the participants played “*Jonkara-bushi*,” a song that allowed the free use of various techniques and ostentatious displays of skill; they also utilized the flashy “striking plectrum” style. As yearly participants in the competition devoted themselves obsessively to increasing the level of their performance technique, each year the level of competition also increased. However, there appeared some friction between YAMADA’s school and the visiting competitors concerning the judging of the competition. In 1989 a different host started a different competition in Kanagi town, Aomori Prefecture. Presently there are six “national competitions” held each year, each naming a competitor “best in Japan.”

<table.2> “National Competitions of Tsugaru-jamisen”

from 1982	Hirosaki City, Aomori Pref.
from 1989	Kanagi Town, Aomori Pref.
from 1997	Tokyo
from 2002	Osaka
from 2004	Kobe
from 2007	Aomori City, Aomori Pref.

Return to Okinawa: The Revival of the Sanshin

In the 1970s Okinawa was coded with the rhetoric of “south,” “blue oceans,” “island,” “foreign country,” “release, liberation,” and “encounter.” These images, created in Tokyo, differed little from Gauguin’s depiction of the south Pacific or Hollywood’s portrayal of the Caribbean: the economically- and politically-powerful “north” merely assigned imagery to its “south” for its own benefit, reflecting nothing of the personal character of the southern lands themselves.

In Okinawa, the wave of development meant the erasure of traditional lifestyles, and the number of young people who understood the language of Okinawa (*uchinaguchi*) fell dramatically. During the late 80s and early 90s voices rose up against the Tokyo-generated discourse, demanding an expression which truly represented themselves, not some conventional set of “southern” images. As youths of Okinawa struggled to discover their personal identities, the sanshin became a subject of attention.

The *sanshin*, once the celebrated diversion of the warrior class of the Ryūkyū Kingdom, soon became a popular hobby for the Okinawan everyman. However, because of the contemporary Japanese-government sponsored incorporation of Okinawa into “Japan” (*Yamato*) and the Americanization of Japan itself, the *sanshin* was viewed as an anachronism only to be enjoyed by the elderly. The young Okinawans searching their roots for something “Okinawa” took the traditional *sanshin* instrument on the one hand, and, incorporating their personal sense of identity, started writing and singing new songs. This is how so-called “Okinawan pop,” represented by KINA Shōkichi &

Champloo, the Nēnēs, and the Rinken Band, began. While the *sanshin* had been previously been called the *jamisen*, *jabisen*, and *shamisen*, the promoters of this new Okinawan pop used the word “*sanshin*” to emphasize both the music’s connection with the Japanese archipelago, as well as its heterogeneous qualities. This dual nature connected with the Okinawan self conception that “Okinawans (*uchinanchu*) are concurrently Japanese (*yamatonchu*) and not.”

Changing Tsugaru-jamisen

From the beginning of the Heisei Period (1989-) a new kind of Tsugaru-jamisen was introduced by the multiple-championship winning KINOSHITA Shin’ichi (b. 1965), AGATSUMA Hiromitsu (b. 1973), and the YOSHIDA Brothers (YOSHIDA Ryōichirō, b. 1977, and YOSHIDA Ken’ichi, b. 1970). Through hybridizing *shamisen* music with jazz, rock, and world music, these young players gained access to an entirely new fan base. It was the major 1999 debut of the YOSHIDA brothers, both around the age of twenty, followed by worldwide performance success, which increased awareness and interested in *shamisen* and Japanese folk music among young listeners to the point where even the performers’ lifestyles became a topic of interest.

None of these performers was born or raised in Tsugaru—KINOSHITA is from Wakayama Prefecture, AGATSUMA from Ibaraki Prefecture, and the YOSHIDA Brothers from Hokkaido—and yet they became skilled in playing *shamisen*, launched careers in Tokyo, and continue to perform in Japan and abroad. In other words, Tsugaru-born “Tsugaru-jamisen” has moved beyond the frame of Tsugaru itself, becoming a more universal musical form. That said, it now falls into the new frame of “Japan” instead.

Still, since the invention of the term “Tsugaru-jamisen,” the Tsugaru region has been fated to bear the instrument’s name; this distinguishes it from other instruments, like the guitar or piano, whose origins normally undiscussed may be unclear. As long as Tsugaru-jamisen is called “Tsugaru-jamisen,” its “authentic form” will be identified with that region, and people will visit Tsugaru for that reason. Now, between Hirosaki and Aomori City there are about ten *shamisen* folk song bars where tourists go to seeking that “authentic form.” These places also become the livelihood for *shamisen* players in Tsugaru now.

Young Okinawans contested the airlines’ artificially-created Okinawan image of “south,” “blue oceans,” “island,” “foreign country,” “release, liberation,” and “new experiences” by creating an “Okinawan pop” counterculture via the *sanshin*. Should we assume the young people of Tsugaru are merely passively accepting the Tsugaru images of “north,” “blizzards,” “frontier region,” “native place (*urusato*),” “nostalgia,” “severity, intensity,” “perseverance,” and “isolation” reproduced by Japan Railway Company ad campaigns? It is true, however, that this stereotype functions as a mainstay for those participating in the tourism industry, including Tsugaru-jamisen players. If that is the case, at times performers strategically manipulate that preexisting image, at others consciously subverting it, bringing a new sense of excitement to their audiences. The free reign of this type of “cultural negotiation” is what leads to the constant reinvention of the *shamisen*.

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