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2011 By Nathan Hopson

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journal or publication title	Japan review : Journal of the International Research Center for Japanese Studies
volume	32
page range	199-201
year	2019
URL	http://doi.org/10.15055/00007209

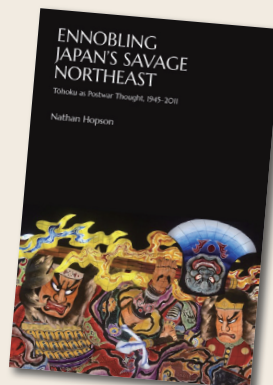
BOOK REVIEW

Ennobling Japan's Savage Northeast: Tohoku as Postwar Thought, 1945–2011

By Nathan Hopson

Harvard University Press, 2017
362 pages.

Reviewed by Shayne A. P. DAHL



Tōhoku appeared in the global spotlight within hours of the earthquake and tsunami of 11 March 2011 and sustained the world's attention for months as public awareness of the nuclear meltdown in Fukushima spread. A call for “urgent ethnography” in post-3/11 Tōhoku was answered by many, and continues to break new ground.¹ Yet, one problem, perhaps too obvious to notice, has so far eluded scrutiny: the concept of “Tōhoku” itself.

In *Ennobling Japan's Savage Northeast*, Nathan Hopson sets his analytic sights on the idea of Tōhoku in national discourse during the postwar, pre-3/11 period. In a well-researched and compelling narrative, Hopson traces a genealogy of “postwar thoughts” that imagine Japan anew through the alterity of Tōhoku. “For much of Japan's recorded history,” Hopson writes, Tōhoku was rendered a place of “savagery and backwardness” (p. 2). This haughty portrayal reflects the resistance of the people of Tōhoku to Yamato colonialism since the eighth century (p. 32). However, following World War II, Tōhoku underwent a discursive transformation, becoming “a privileged locus for the creation of postwar values,” a “floating ... signifier in Japanese discourses of national reinvention...” (pp. 1–2).

As Japan's first colony, Tōhoku was recast by postwar intellectuals into “a virtuous victim and marginal repository of values and traditions oppressed, suppressed, and ignored by mainstream Japan” (p. 8). In an atmosphere of postwar gloom and with growing antipathy to the imperial order, Tōhoku's link to an alternative ancestral past held redemptive potential. Until the end of the war, the Emishi, a vague moniker for the people of Tōhoku, were viewed as proto-Ainu and therefore non-Japanese (p. 40). Shifting views on the Emishi in the postwar period rendered Tōhoku ethnically Japanese. By claiming the historical legacy of Tōhoku as ethnically (yet not politically) Japanese, postwar thinkers opened a temporal doorway for Japan to return to “the stretch of history before the mistaken detour.” (p. 6).²

In the arch of Hopson's analysis, Tōhoku becomes a placeworld into which postwar Japanese could envision a “halcyon era” (p. 10) imbued with ancestral “values and virtues” that could serve as a “panacea for modernity's ills” (p. 6). Such postwar thoughts, Hopson

1 See Slater 2015 and Dahl 2017.

2 Hopson integrates lines from Schivbusch's *The Culture of Defeat* (2003, pp. 29–31) into this quote.

shows, are manifest in pop culture primitivism and nostalgia. For instance, the protagonist of Miyazaki Hayao's *Princess Mononoke*, Ashitaka, is an Emishi prince who opposed "a range of antagonists that represent various aspects of 'Japanese' culture and modernity" (pp. 16–17). The *Tower of the Sun* by Okamoto Tarō, which stands in the center of Expo '70 Commemorative Park in Osaka, is a landmark of the "Jōmonism" he himself spearheaded in the late 1960s and early 1970s (p. 203). And then there is *Oshin*, the most popular television program in Japanese history, which sentimentalizes "preexisting notions of Tōhoku as the heartland and privileged locus of the sacrosanct national past" (p. 16).

Hopson's historical narrative begins on 22 March 1950 in Hiraizumi, Iwate Prefecture, with the mummified remains of the Fujiwara family who ruled the region for generations. It is in this "moment," he claims, that a "distinctively postwar Tōhoku Studies began" (p. 21). Once a morphological analysis of the Fujiwara mummies revealed that the Emishi were not proto-Ainu, the idea of Hiraizumi as an independent but ethnically Japanese polity rivaling Kyoto quickly gained traction. The discursive removal of the Emishi from Ainu ancestry liberated Tōhoku from its "ignoble" status in the popular imagination and made it malleable for postwar self-fashioning.

One lingering question concerns the role of the Ainu in national reinvention. Unlike the Emishi, the Ainu were not figured as "noble savages" in postwar discourse because they are not ethnically "Japanese." Hopson notes Takahashi Tomio's conviction that "if Tōhoku's history and culture had been produced by a non-Japanese (Ainu) ethnic or racial heritage, [the Emishi] could and would be dismissed" as a new source of ethnic identity (p. 139). He does not clarify whether the Ainu remained ignoble in postwar discourse, or just ignored. The Ainu question strikes me as crucial to the idea of Tōhoku, at least in its absence and traces.

Hopson's analysis is rigorous and detailed but centered on Hiraizumi and the eastern prefectures of Tōhoku. Akita and Yamagata are mentioned briefly, and Aomori makes a late but significant entry in the form of the Sannai Maruyama archaeological site (p. 206). The limits of Hopson's analytic scope are understandable because, as he argues, Hiraizumi's Fujiwara mummies played a significant role in undermining racial assumptions about the Emishi. Chūsonji, the main temple complex of Hiraizumi, also gained UNESCO World Heritage status months after 3/11, which further elevates Hiraizumi's relevance (pp. 152–55). Nevertheless, the idea of Tōhoku in the popular imagination is an assemblage of constituent regions, not exclusively the politically elite, as Hopson's argument implies.

Regions along the Sea of Japan such as the Oga Peninsula of Akita and the Shōnai area of Yamagata have had a formidable influence on popular perceptions and "postwar thoughts" of Tōhoku as well. The monstrous *Namahage* of the Oga Peninsula, for example, have fanned the flames of the metropolitan imagination in scholarship for years.³ Demanding a comparison to the Hiraizumi mummies are the self-mummified monks (*sokushinbutsu*) in the Shōnai region.⁴ So, while Hiraizumi is pivotal in the scholarly debate that Hopson traces, other places in Tōhoku have contributed to the postwar reimagining of Tōhoku. There is more to unpack from within the idea of Tōhoku than any one text can accomplish.

³ Yamamoto 1978 and Foster 2013.

⁴ See Hori 1962 and Castiglioni 2015.

Despite its necessary limits, *Ennobling Japan's Savage Northeast* is groundbreaking. It is both a critical examination of and a seismic shift within Tōhoku studies that invites further debate about postwar identity and its lasting effects.

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