HIST 110

Prof. Ropers

Something in the Water: Hazards of Travel and Pilgrimage on the *Gokaido* in Tokugawa Japan

By Phillip Spain.

The Tokugawa period is widely regarded as a period of unprecedented peace and prosperity for pre-modern Japan. In the late 17th century, the economy was stable and growing due to the increased trade and traffic of goods and people.[1] Amidst all of this, Japan experienced a new phenomenon – the emergence of widespread recreational travel.[2] Both recreational travel and widespread religious pilgrimage amongst the laity became major components of Japanese culture during the Tokugawa period. Despite significant risks, the people of Tokugawa Japan frequently enjoyed domestic travel as a means of recreation, as well as pursuing religious pilgrimages for spiritual enlightenment. The purpose of this article will be to enumerate the potential dangers and risks associated with travel during this time, and determine what effects they had on the motivations of the travelers.

Much of the existing scholarship on this topic tends to focus on either chronological descriptions of how pilgrimage, and recreational travel by extension, became prominent features of the time, or on the ritual nature of pilgrimages and the motivations for travel. While this is certainly of value to the study of the phenomenon, there is little discussion of the details of travel

[1] Constantine N. Vaporis, *Breaking Barriers: Travel and the State in Early Modern Japan,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 218.
[2] Vaporis, 218.

as it happened on the road. Whether this is due to a lack of interest or simply because the details of travel were taken for granted remains to be seen.

It has been suggested by C. Vaporis that this sudden increase in road traffic was a consequence of the relatively peaceful and prosperous conditions created by the Tokugawa Shogunate. This was due in part to the *Gokaido* highway system that was developed and constructed by the shogun as a means of centralizing control over trade and communications earlier in the century. As part of this, the Tokugawa completely reorganized the existing *sekisho* barriers from the defensive and economic roles they had played in the past for local daimyo. They removed old barriers or built new ones as needed, creating a system that promoted trade and economic growth whilst also serving to control the daimyo.[3] The roads to and from the capitol were improved upon, as well as lodging and travelers' services.[4] These mechanisms would provide the means by which people would move to and from the major pilgrimage sites, as well as the cities, hot springs, and other destinations.[5] Vaporis also provides a detailed examination of the development of recreational travel in Japan, including the process whereby pilgrimage became more secular in nature.[6]

Pilgrimage was a major part of this travel for all walks of life in Tokugawa Japan. As a general practice, pilgrimage was not new at this time, with the earliest known instances of travel for religious or spiritual reasons dating back to the Nara period. In particular, it was the Japanese nobility and the imperial family who made these journeys on a regular basis, paying their respects at the Ise shrine, the Todai-ji Temple, or any of a number of important Shinto and

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[3] Vaporis, *Breaking Barriers*, 17, 100-101.
[4] Carmen Blacker, "The Religious Traveller in the Edo Period." Modern Asian Studies 18, no. 4 (1984): 593.
[5] Vaporis, *Breaking Barriers*, 217.
[6] Vaporis, *Breaking Barriers*, 217, 236.

Buddhist sanctuaries.[7] Laypersons might also make pilgrimages to the same places and, indeed, according to Hoshino Eiki, a significant portion of those going on pilgrimage in the Tokugawa period were from amongst the general populace, rather than being restricted to the nobility and the clergy as it was during the Heian period.[8] Hoshino discusses in detail the finer point of Japanese pilgrimage history, especially the *Shikoku Henro* eighty-eight stage and *Saikoku Junrei* thirty-three stage pilgrimage circuits.

There were also various specialty groups, such as the *shugendo* as discussed by P. Swanson, that used the physical nature of pilgrimage in their rituals. In this particular case, a pilgrimage was a specific set of rituals carried out throughout the journey, combined with ascetic practices to bring about spiritual transformation in the pilgrim.[9] The *shugendo* practiced along specific mountain ranges, and so perforce experienced a unique set of risks and challenges that may not include those discussed below. Further discussion of the *shugendo* is covered by Swanson elsewhere.[10] There were also numerous groups who practiced individually. C. Blacker has discussed the phenomenon of lay pilgrimage, along with an intense study of the wandering ascetics known as *yugyosha.*[11]

Irrespective of what group or sect a traveler or pilgrim did or did not belong to, the physical process of travel in the Tokugawa Period, regardless of whether it was for religious pilgrimage or purely recreational in nature, was long, physically demanding, and dangerous.

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[7] Hoshino Eiki, Ian Reader and 星野 (tieng nhat). "Pilgrimage and Peregrination: Contextualizing the Saikoku Junrei and the Shikoku Henro." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 24, no. ¾ (Fall 1997): 273. https://www.jstor.org/stable/30233587.

[8] Hoshino, "Pilgrimage and Peregrination," 273.

[9] Paul L. Swanson, "Shugendō and the Yoshino-Kumano Pilgrimage: An Example of Mountain Pilgrimage." *Monumenta Nipponica* 36, no. 1 (Spring, 1981): 59. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2384087.

[10] Swanson, "Shugendo," 55.

[11] Blacker, "The Religious Traveller," 594.

Despite the well-cared-for nature of the *Gokaido* road system, travelers and pilgrims still had to be prepared to deal with all manner of dangers and risks. In fact, many writers of the period produced travel dairies with anecdotes of misadventures that served as warnings, or that provided advice on how to make journeys safe and positive experiences. Excellent examples include the travel dairy of Matsuo Basho, *Oku No Hosomichi,* and Yasumi Roan's *Ryoko Yojinshu,* which is specifically dedicated to providing expert travel advice.[12] In general, the information on the dangers of travel and pilgrimage provided by these two gentlemen falls into three categories – 1) Natural forces; 2) physical conditions or illnesses; and 3) Other travelers or persons encountered in the course of travel.

The first of these – natural forces – is best exemplified by severe weather and its ability to alter the landscape in sudden and dangerous ways. During his travels, Basho writes of having to stay indoors during a particularly harsh storm, with high winds and rain.[13] During such a storm, the combination of wind and rain causes rivers to swell, damaging bridges and may induce flooding in certain areas. Indeed, regardless of weather, river crossings were inherently dangerous, and Yasumi provides some very careful and practical instructions for how to handle them:

> *"When a bridge gets washed away, there are other ways of crossing the river, for example, on foot or by ferry. But never wade across an unfamiliar river. On such occasions, go and confer with the post-station officials in person; if*

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[12] Matsuo Bashō, Selections of *Narrow Road to the Deep North,* ca. 1694, in *Early Modern Japanese Literature: An Anthology, 1600-1900*, ed., Haruo Shirane (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 211; Yasumi Roan, Ryoko Yojinshu, 1810, in "Caveat Viator: Advice to Travelers in the Edo Period," by Constantine N. Vaporis. *Monumenta Nipponica* 44, no. 4 (Winter, 1989): 469.

[13] Basho, *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, 222.

you do this, then things will turn out for the best no matter what the conditions are."[14]

Swollen rivers were also a concern for boat travel, which was required in some cases in order to safely cross rivers. Basho discusses an instance of having to cross a river after heavy rain which, predictably, had caused the river to swell and become more rapid, thus making the attempt to cross much more dangerous.[15] Additionally, landslides may occur which could cover or collapse roads, as well as destroy buildings or temporary campsites. Yasumi cautions against resting at places where the risk of landslide is high, such as under mountain cliffs or river banks.[16]

Besides the forces of nature, travelers had to deal with their own bodily needs, as well as the risks associated therewith. Heat-related illnesses, one of the most easily encountered physical conditions, particularly in the summer, can be very dangerous. Basho himself describes something similar to what we would today call heat exhaustion, whereby he "...suffered from the extreme heat [and] fell ill..." and was unable to do much of anything for a time.[17] Yasumi offers a potential remedy for this, in the form of *shochu,* which, according to Vaporis, is a kind of low-grade distilled spirit.[18] The heat of summer is, according to Yasumi, "...the season in which you must take most care."[19]

Related to heat exhaustion are the problems of the traveler's food and drink, as water and food poisoning were apparently also among the list of things to watch out for. Yasumi provides

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[14] Yasumi, Ryoko Yojinshu, 475.
[15] Basho, *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, 224.
[16] Yasumi, Ryoko Yojinshu, 476.
[17] Basho, *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, 228.
[18] Yasumi, Ryoko Yojinshu, 472; Vaporis, "Caveat Viator," 472.
[19] Yasumi, Ryoko Yojinshu, 472

specific warnings about drinking from unknown water sources while on the road, especially if the water is not perfectly clear. He provides some suggestions for remedies such as *goreisan*, which may be some type of drug or herb although this is not made clear, as well as hot peppers.[20] This is particularly sage advice, as water is something that every traveler and even modern-day backpackers would have to manage carefully in order to avoid the dangerous effects of dehydration. Adding bacteria or toxic chemicals to the mix makes Yasumi's warning rather sensible indeed.[21] Food management is an equally important task, and Yasumi offers some interesting instructions as to what foods to avoid during one's travels, particularly seafood, certain rice dishes, as well as melons, bamboo shoots, and mushrooms.[22] It should be noted that these cautions are issued for the summer months, especially, and may not necessarily apply in colder temperatures.

Last amongst the category of risks associated with the traveler's health is that of over-exertion. This is something that almost anyone will be familiar with in some form or another, whether it be a strained back from lifting heavy objects or running faster and/or farther than one is normally accustomed to. For Yasumi, this is especially poignant for inexperienced travelers when they first set out on a journey. He cautions against haste and suggests that travelers should pause and rest at various points during the day to avoid "...overdo[ing] it..."[23]

The final category of potential hazards to travelers is that of other travelers or persons encountered *en route*. Basho provides two rather interesting anecdotes about his interactions with others. The first interaction is with the keeper of an inn that Basho and his traveling company

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[20] Yasumi, Ryoko Yojinshu, 473; Vaporis, "Caveat Viator," 473.
[21] Yasumi, Ryoko Yojinshu, 473.
[22] Yasumi, Ryoko Yojinshu, 472.
[23] Yasumi, Ryoko Yojinshu, 471.

stay at. The innkeeper swears up and down that he is honest and trustworthy, going so far as to claim that his customers named him "Buddha Gozaemon" on account of his integrity. Basho is skeptical of this but apparently found no fault with the man.[24] Basho's second anecdote comes in the form of an interaction with a pair of prostitutes who begged Basho to let them join his pilgrimage, as they were apparently anxious to be traveling alone. Basho and his companion declined, but encouraged them to continue on their way and walk with the flow of regular traffic, telling the women that the gods would be watching over them.[25] While neither of these interactions were particularly harrowing, they do seem to demonstrate Basho's caution when interacting with others.

Yasumi takes a more direct approach, providing multiple warnings regarding everything from what etiquette to use when you encounter another traveler to what to do in case there are other guests at the same inn as oneself who might cause trouble. The first of these comes in the form of a warning against prejudice towards the local customs of towns that one might pass through, saying that "...making fun of other [people]...will surely lead to quarrels." Similarly, he warns against stopping at fights, village events, or execution grounds, and generally suggest that the conscientious traveler should just "...avoid all places where crowds gather."[26]

The other half of his suggestions, cover the actions of other people. One pair of entries suggests that if there is another group staying at the same inn as the reader, and said group is up late partying, then the reader should make sure that their belongs are secure, the doors to their room is closed, and that someone is up to watch the gear until the other party is done and gone to

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[24] Basho, *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, 213.
[25] Basho, *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, 229-30.
[26] Yasumi, Ryoko Yojinshu, 478.

bed.[27] Another warning appears against taking medicine from random inn guests or travelers. Yasumi sensibly advises that "If you are really in need of medicine, go to an established medicinal shop."[28]

Between Basho and Yasumi, we are presented with a broad array of potential hazards to foot traffic along the *Gokaido.* Ranging from the wrath of nature to personal carelessness, and the ever-present dangers of other humans, these journeys, whether for spiritual enlightenment or simply going from point 'A' to point 'B', were not to be taken lightly. Yet, despite all of these dangers, people still chose to go out on the road and walk to a destination. Basho himself describes a feeling of restlessness and simply wanting to "...cross the Shirakawa Barrier..."[29] Yasumi also describes a love of traveling, and apparently did so to such an extent that those who knew him frequently asked for his help and advice before setting out on the road themselves.[30] Ultimately, however, it appears that the risk of death or serious injury was insufficient to deter the people of the Tokugawa period from embracing the spirit of adventure or searching for enlightenment on the mountain roads.

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[27] Yasumi, Ryoko Yojinshu, 479.
[28] Yasumi, Ryoko Yojinshu, 479.
[29] Basho, *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, 211.
[30] Yasumi, Ryoko Yojinshu, 470.

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