

Lost in Gokanoshō

Wayne McCallum

The expression on Hiromi's face tells the story, exhausted and questioning: *Why did I ever marry this crazy gaijin?* We have been moving steadily upward for the last hour, following a path through the dense forest. Ahead, through the trees, we can make out the bare summit of Kunimidake, the prefecture's tallest mountain and the physical heart of one of Japan's unique "lost" places: Gokanoshō.

Ten minutes later and we are standing on the peak. Around us grey clouds swirl through the moss-clad trees, the occasional break revealing a landscape of compact hills and tight river valleys. Alongside us a small wooden shrine adds to the eerie atmosphere.

"It's beautiful," murmurs Hiromi.

I nod in agreement.

"And not a vending machine or any concrete in sight."

My partner, smiling now, reaches across and grasps my hand. I feel the warmth of her palm as drops of rain pepper our faces.

"I want to stay here forever," Hiromi whispers, "but I think we need to start moving."

We return to the path that brought us to the summit, while, around us, the lost world of Gokanoshō shape-shifts through the mountain mist.

Search for Gokanoshō on any map of Japan and you will swiftly become frustrated. The reason is simple, for Gokanoshō is not a defined location but a domestic term for the collection of individual valleys and hamlets in the centre of the southern island of Kyushū. For those who know the place — and precious few do — it carries the reputation of a wild and secluded land, a world where roads, electricity and wanderlusting foreigners remain novelties. A grasp of the region's geography explains why: Gokanoshō is a place of snug valleys, steep slopes and narrow roads, a world at odds with the neo-sheen images of cosmopolitan Japan. Moreover, without a vehicle or an understanding of the Japanese language the casual visitor will find Gokanoshō virtually impenetrable.

Yet it is these very "apart" qualities that have earned Gokanoshō a place in Japanese history and literature. For it was to its lonely valleys that the survivors of the Heike clan, defeated by the Genji in the Genpei War (1180–85), fled to escape persecution from their vengeful foe. Over time the story of the Heike's rise and fall, filled with the themes of impermanence and karma, coalesced into a sequence of oral stories that were carried across Japan by *biwa hōshi* performers. Later, in the fourteenth century, these stories were compiled into a written account, *The Tale of the Heike*, the medieval work regarded as a literary classic and the *Iliad* of Japan.

Nowadays the descendants of the fugitive clan and a hardy bunch of other families eke out a living from forestry and agriculture and by catering for the odd tourist. It is a near-subsistence existence made possible only through the ready availability of wild greens and other resources gathered from the surrounding mountains and streams. But add the delicateness of the domestic economy to long weeks of winter isolation, when the region's roads are regularly blocked by ice and snow, and it is easy to understand the tenuousness of human existence in Gokanoshō. Perhaps this is why only the descendants of a people sentenced to death would have the determination to survive and persevere.

Yet today it is not Gokanoshō's environmental or economic constraints that pose the greatest test to

its future; that lies in the dual effects of demographic change — an ageing population and falling birth rates — and outward migration by the young. None of these factors are unique to the region, but in Gokanoshō their consequences are more immediate and noticeable. Outwardly, to the untrained eye the effects are often subtle — the blacked-out windows at a local primary school, the *akiya* (abandoned houses) fringing the roadside, and an overgrown playground in a quiet valley corner. Explore deeper, however, and you will find the village school of Izumi-hachi, with its numerous classrooms and a roll of seven students, or the nearby hamlet of Itsuki, with an average age of over sixty. With this deeper knowledge comes an understanding that the villages of the Gokanoshō have become *genkai shūraku* (marginal villages), places of rich history and unclear futures.

But there is hope for the region, as a number of younger Japanese, especially those wishing to start families, have started to search for new lives in Japan's rural climes. These migrants, seeking alternatives to the salary-man culture and the uncertainties cast by the earthquake and nuclear disaster of 2011, have brought new ideas and fresh inspiration to places such as Gokanoshō, starting organic food enterprises and artisanal and craft businesses and repurposing abandoned school buildings as community centres.

Hiromi Tara is one such individual who, with his wife and infant son, returned to his native home, to establish a travel guide business. Like many of Gokanoshō's young people, he left after high school, moving to Tokyo, where, as he recounts, things did not work out as he expected. "I moved to the city when I was younger," he said, "but I got in with a bad crowd. I came back here to settle myself. To build a good future. It is hard living here sometimes, but Gokanoshō is a special place, a place in my heart."

While some are able to return, others cannot. The Honshū wolf — one of two *Canis lupus* species that inhabited Japan — was once common in the mountains and forests of Gokanoshō but has since died out. Brett L. Walker's *The Lost Wolves of Japan* provides a detailed account of the animal's place in Japanese culture and an explanation of its path to extinction. Walker's work is a rich piece of environmental history; it provides tantalising insights into how economic and social change over the course of Japan's modern era has reshaped the physical environment and its citizens' relationship with it.

Today, hiking through the forests of Gokanoshō, there are telling signs of what the demise of the wolf has meant. At one point, during our climb to the summit of Kunimidake, we disturbed a family of deer feeding on the shoots of some low-slung shrubs. Around us the undergrowth was bare and open, shorn clear by the animals we had just interrupted. Such encounters illustrate how the loss of an apex predator has affected Gokanoshō's indigenous vegetation, with deer and pigs left undisturbed to breed and feed. Given Gokanoshō's high levels of rainfall, the ensuing erosion has clogged many of the region's streams with gravel and silt. This change has had adverse consequences for native trout species (*yamame*), which have traditionally provided a food and recreational resource for local inhabitants. And downstream settlements have become more prone to flooding, as the capacity of waterways to retain the flows from typhoons has been vastly reduced.

But for all the physical changes caused by the wolf's extinction there is one that Walker suggests is closer to the soul: the "arresting silence that deafens" in the woods and mountains of its former home. Still, for the layperson visiting Gokanoshō for the first time, the social and environmental forces at play across the region are difficult to discern. In their place what one encounters is the splendour of forested valleys and streams where, with a spark of imagination, one can fancy seven samurai emerging from the shrouded mist, swords drawn, the breaths of their horses rising in the cool dawn mist.

In the evening after our mountain climb Hiromi and I are finishing a meal of *yamame* and wild vegetables at a local *minshuku* (inn). It is after nine, and the owners have retreated to the rear of the building. Outside, raindrops tap gently against the window pane. Sleep is beckoning, then the howl of a lone dog startles us. I shudder, the call a poignant reminder of a lost relative, one that once called this land home. Relaxing once again, I look across at my tired partner, a question on my lips.

"How do you feel, dear?"

"Found," Hiromi smiles. "Found in lost Japan." □

Wayne McCallum is the author of *A River and a Valley Far Away*



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