

10 Festivals of war

Travelling the Shinsengumi in 2019

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In 2019 I attended the Hino Shinsengumi Festival in western Tokyo on 12 May and the Goryōkaku Festival in Hakodate on 18–19 May. Both festivals commemorate Shinsengumi, a corps of samurai loyal to the Tokugawa shogunate that was active from 1863 until the final defeat of shogunate forces at the Battle of Hakodate in May 1869. The focus is particularly on Hijikata Toshizō, vice-commander of Shinsengumi, who died fighting to the end in Hakodate. The festivals in 2019 marked the 150th anniversary of his death and Shinsengumi's demise.

The festivals meet Frost and Laing's (2013: 1) categorization of a commemorative event, namely one 'typically planned with intentions of affirming and reinforcing memories that provide a sense of heritage and identity'. Consequently, locations and timings matter. Hino is the birthplace of various Shinsengumi members; Hakodate is the deathplace of Hijikata and the corps; and both festivals are timed to coincide roughly with the anniversary of the final defeat of shogunate loyalists. However, the festivals are also designed to attract tourists and are held on weekends to ensure maximum tourist/community attendance.

War-related tourism continues year-round in Hino and Hakodate, often fitting the classic 'host-guest' format. Travellers from afar visit Shinsengumi-related monuments, memorials, museums, and battlefields, whether as part of the commemorative pilgrimage, educational-style heritage tourism, or as contents tourists (Figure 1.3). However, in their performative aspects, the festivals collapse or even reverse the 'host-guest' distinction. The festivals involve 're-enactments' and other performances. Festival participants/performers often come from afar, while many spectators are local residents. At the Hino Shinsengumi Festival in 2019, around 400 people in period dress participated in the parades. They came from all over the country and even abroad to take part, while many of the 50,000 people lining the streets as spectators were locals (Hino City 2021). At the Goryōkaku Festival one of the main events

is the Hijikata Contest, in which competitors perform Hijikata's death in battle. The winner and runner-up of the contest on 18 May 2019 were both from Tokyo. As part of their prize, they joined the parade the following day. Two Tokyo-based Shinsengumi fans in Hakodate as contents tourists became performers in a tourism event heavily aimed at local residents.

Both the Hino and Hakodate festivals contain 'mock battles' staged in the city's streets with tourists watching from the pavement. The jocularity during scenes of death and killing is notable. In Hino, Shinsengumi members danced and taunted the Restoration forces before being shot at. Then, the banter, dancing, and chanting started again to roars of laughter from the crowds. It was street theatre more than re-enactment. A week later, during the Hijikata Contest in Hakodate, while the winners were those who passionately acted the final moments of Hijikata before he was shot, one local group gave a performance resembling slapstick or pantomime. In the mock battle during the parade the following day, spectators cheered when Hijikata cut down the commander of the Restoration army forces. These levels of playfulness indicate that the festivals have gone beyond sombre commemoration of the war. Indeed,



Figure 10.1 The Goryōkaku Festival parade, 19 May 2019. War commemoration meets contents tourism: in the float is Yamamoto Kōji (right), the actor who played Hijikata Toshizō in NHK's 2004 Taiga drama *Shinsengumi!*. Author's photo.

it is unthinkable for such re-enactments to exist at municipal events for Japan's more recent wars. As Frost and Laing (2013: 82) observe in the western context, 're-enactments of recent wars are noticeably absent ... It may be that battles from the last 100 years are still too dark and embedded in personal memories to be commemorated in this form'.

The light-hearted nature of the festivals is possible because of 'chronological distance' (Figure 1.4). But the composition of Shinsengumi contents within popular culture and collective memories is also significant. The festivals are fundamentally celebrations of local heroes and demonstrate the pride the community feels through association with them. Hino brands itself as the *furusato* ('hometown') of Shinsengumi. It has the municipal Shinsengumi Furusato Historical Museum and three private museums run by the families of Shinsengumi members: the Hijikata Toshizō Museum, Inoue Genzaburō Museum, and Sato Hikogorō and Shinsengumi Museum. Hakodate, meanwhile, embraces Shinsengumi as part of a broader association with Meiji Restoration history via its role as a treaty port in the 1850s and 1860s.

The Goryōkaku Festival clearly sides with the losing shogunate loyalists, despite Hakodate city having no particular need to identify with the defeated. Formal commemorative events take place at Hekketsuhi (a monument to shogunate loyalists killed in the battle) and the monument at the Ippongi Gate, where Hijikata is believed to have been killed (Figure 0.1). There are no equivalent commemorations at Hakodate Gokoku [nation-protecting] Shrine, where there are graves of Restoration army soldiers and where their souls are enshrined as *eirei* (glorious dead) for their death in the service of the imperial cause. Gokoku shrines mirror the function of the controversial Yasukuni Shrine (Chapter 15) at the local level. Any involvement would inevitably embroil the festival in contested interpretations and commemorations of Japan's twentieth-century wars.

Imagining Hijikata

Hijikata embodies unswerving loyalty and self-sacrifice to his cause. He chose a samurai's death rather than surrender. Lee also suggests that 'Hijikata is popularly imagined and loved as a hero driven by self-determination' (Lee 2011: 183). This popular image has been made possible by two intertwined processes.

The first is the broader narrative transformation of shogunate loyalists from 'traitors' immediately after the Restoration to 'heroes' in the twenty-first century. This was a lengthy process with the festivals only emerging in the latter stages. In Hino, local residents were long

discouraged from publicizing their connections to Shinsengumi. The corps were on the losing side in Japan's last civil war and became *zokugun*, 'rebels', who had opposed the restoration of imperial rule. When Shinsengumi's leader Kondō Isami was captured, he was executed as a criminal in May 1868. Antipathy towards the rebels was also evident after the Battle of Hakodate, when the bodies of 800 defeated 'rebels' were left in the open to rot. Only in 1875 was the Hekketsuhi monument erected in a secluded woodland part way up Mt Hakodate to quietly commemorate the shogunate loyalists. By contrast, their fallen adversaries were buried and enshrined at Hakodate Gokoku Shrine as loyal servants of the emperor. However, after 1945 'victor's history' assumed new meanings. Gokoku shrines became tainted by their Asia-Pacific War associations. In this postwar environment, the city has chosen to focus commemorations during the festival at sites to the 'rebels', and not to Restoration forces.

The second process is the 'romanticization' (Lee 2011) of Shinsengumi in pop culture, and the transformation of individual Shinsengumi members from historical figures to *characters* (Chapter 1). In life, Hijikata earned an infamous reputation as the 'demon vice-commander' of Shinsengumi for using torture, being a fearless killer, and ordering the *seppuku* (ritual suicide) of Shinsengumi members breaking the group's code. The image make-over of Shinsengumi started in 1928 with the publication of the novel *Shinsengumi shimatsuki* by Shimosawa Kan. It accelerated with Shiba Ryōtarō's serialized novel *Moeyo ken* (published in the magazine *Shūkan bunshun* 1962–1964), which had Hijikata as the main character. From the 2000s, Hijikata and Shinsengumi appeared in the manga/anime *Gintama* (manga 2003–) and game/anime *Hakuoki* (2008–) among many other pop culture works. Hijikata's transformation to pop idol was completed on screen when he was played by Okada Junichi of pop group V6 in the 2021 film *Baragaki: Unbroken Samurai* (based on *Moeyo ken*).

Much of this contemporary pop idol (*aidoru*) image derives from the iconic portrait of Hijikata sitting casually in black western clothing. The original photo was smuggled back to Hino by Sato Hikogorō after Hijikata's death and is stored in the Sato Hikogorō and Shinsengumi Museum. To prevent deterioration, it is on display only during the festival, giving Hijikata fans added incentive to visit Hino at that time. This photo exemplifies how an authentic artefact may inspire the transformation of a historical figure into a character, spawn a 'usable narrative world' (Figure 1.3), and ultimately generate a (war-related) contents tourism phenomenon.

Shinsengumi's story, therefore, has metamorphosed over time not only in terms of its political/commemorative meanings but also in its

value as the basis for pop culture contents and as a tourism resource. The festivals emerged within this context, although it took a century or more after 1869 for this to happen. The Goryōkaku Festival began in 1970. The first Hino festival was in 1988. By the 2020s, Shinsengumi had become pop culture icons. Its members are idolized; people openly refer to themselves as Shinsengumi ‘fans’ and post videos of their ‘pilgrimages’ to Shinsengumi ‘sacred sites’ on YouTube; cosplayers can be seen at pop culture events; and Shinsengumi imagery adorns a wide range of products from T-shirts to beer cans. Shinsengumi-related pop culture epitomizes how war can transform over time from brutal events to entertainment, and contemporary Shinsengumi tourism epitomizes how war-related entertainment cross-fertilizes tourist sites and events.

COVID-19 postscript

However, the festivals during the COVID-19 pandemic indicate that while the touristy elements of the festivals could be cancelled, the heritage elements could not. Hino cancelled its festival in 2020 but produced an online video (Hino City 2021) in lieu of the 2021 festival. It focused on heritage elements via, for example, interviews with the relatives of Shinsengumi members who run museums in the city. Hakodate, meanwhile, cancelled the parades and restricted the 2020–2021 festivals to invitation-only commemorative events at four sites including Hekketsuhi and Ippongi Gate. As such, these festivals constitute examples not only of how two communities have developed war-related events as part of a localized (contents) tourism policy but also how these events are underpinned by local heritage. It was this local heritage that sustained the festivals during the period when the pandemic precluded in-person tourism.

References

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