MODERN TSURUGA AND SHOSHICHI OWADA: 
AN HISTORICAL-GEOGRAPHICAL APPROACH

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Abstract  Who or what was important in the formation of a region or a place in modern Japan? This paper focuses on answering this question in a case study of the modern Japanese port of Tsuruga. Of course, different actors or mechanisms have had a hand in the making or reshaping of various regions. In this study, however, it is supposed that a special human agency played an influential role in the promotion of the local town during the modernization of Japan. This hypothesis on the basis of the structuration theory is verified by the retroactive exploration of the career and achievements of this influential person, Shoshichi Owada, who was a local merchant and businessman at the port of Tsuruga for many years, and by a comparative consideration of his biography and the history of modern Tsuruga. It can be shown that Owada promoted Tsuruga through the realization of various regional and international plans as the result of his intentions, efforts, and response to contingencies. After his efforts led to setting up routes to ports in countries on the opposite shore, Tsuruga became one of the leading international ports in modern Japan. In this study we can see the interrelationships among structure, special human agency, and regionality, and the active contribution of the special human agency to regional promotion in the contingent modernization process of the port of Tsuruga.

Key words: Tsuruga, modern Japan, Shoshichi Owada, special human agency, historical geography

1. Introduction

Since ancient times, Tsuruga had been a natural port facing the Sea of Japan and the node connecting the then capital to the Hokuriku region and to Balhae on the mainland. It developed as one of the ports of call of a Japanese freight vessel called Kitamae-Bune in Japan’s early-modern era. After the Hokuriku railway line reached from Nagahama to Tsuruga in 1884, Tsuruga’s port became a modern international port and then was formed into a place that played a pivotal role in the development of Japan’s expansionist policy into the continental areas on the opposite shore during modern times.

Tsuruga was an old historical town since ancient times as mentioned above but the regional
context had changed as times changed. The coming of modern times added new important functions to this locality. Many regions, towns, or villages in Japan have also experienced similar changes in the long historical process. The author has individually explored the formative process of multi-scaled regions in the 19th and 20th centuries in Japan and the role played by human agencies in the regional formative process within certain social ‘structures’ (Yamane 2007, 2009). The view and approach of the ‘realism-structuration-locality’ school (Peet 1998) were especially used in those studies.

The goals of this study are as follows: 1) What or who was the important formative factor in a region in modern Japan? This paper tries to answer this question in a case study of the modern Japanese port of Tsuruga. 2) The author aims to explore the role of a locally powerful merchant as a ‘special human agency’ (Yamane 2009) in the formative process of the modern locality, adapting the model of structuration. 3) The author also clarifies the interrelationships among structure, a ‘special human agency,’ and regionality, and the active contribution of the ‘special human agency’ to the regional promotion of Tsuruga in modern times while facing some contingencies.

As for the methodology, this study emphasizes that exploring of interactions between multi-scaled ‘structure’ using the concept of structuration theory and a powerful local person as special human agency on the time line of the development process of this international port town in modern Japan is historically and geographically significant. The specific study method compares Owada’s time-geographical path in his lifetime as reconstructed based on Nakayasu (1934) with the modern history of Tsuruga from the 1860s to the 1940s and reveals the actor’s positive role in the making of a modern region and the reason why he became a special human agency.

2. The Development Process of Modern Tsuruga

In this part, the local history of modern Tsuruga is surveyed from the viewpoint of the construction of infrastructure, changes in the town’s population, and the passengers and trade of the port.

Making of the international port and the development of infrastructure equipment

As mentioned above, the opening of the Hokuriku rail line between Nagahama and Tsuruga in 1884 was the first important turning point for the following growth of the port town. The port was designated as an official national foreign trading port in 1899. The Tsuruga-Vladivostok Regular Shipping Line was opened in 1899. Though the Russo-Japanese War began in 1904 and continued till 1907, thereafter the Japan-Russia relationship flourished. The local merchants founded the Tsuruga Chamber of Commerce and the port was promoted to a ‘Class 1 Designated Major Port’ in 1907. These developments required and caused the expansion and functional improvements of the port. A four-year national project for Tsuruga Port renovation began in 1909. It was in 1912 when the renovation was finished that the Europe-Asia International Express opened between the new port and Tokyo. Tsuruga became the most important gateway in Japan for passenger transportation to and from Europe. The Tsuruga-Korea Regular Line was opened in 1915, and in the next year the value of Tsuruga Port’s annual trade amounted to ¥55.98 million, the fifth highest among trading ports in Japan. So Tsuruga had grown to be one of the most powerful ports for both
of international passenger transport and trade in the early 20th century. This growth of the port led to the next renovation: the national project of the 2nd Tsuruga port renovation (1922-32). However, the port’s growth ended in 1945 when Japan was defeated in World War II. In the last phase of the war, Tsuruga suffered from several airstrikes by the US Air Force and the port and town were largely destroyed. The once-prosperous international port town of modern Tsuruga was no more.

Many important changes were strongly related to the modernization and expansion of Tsuruga. Modern Tsuruga had developed centered around the international trading and passenger port.

**Population growth**

The population of Tsuruga had increased steadily from the 1870s (about 10,000) to the 1930s (about 31,000). The population data are from *Nippon Chishi Teiyo* (1873), *Kyomu Seihyo* (1875-1881), *Nippon Teikoku Minseki Koko Hyo* (1884-1888), *Nippon Teikoku Tokei Nenkan* (1889-1918), and the national census (after 1920). Tsuruga merged with the neighboring village of Matsubara and became a city in 1937. But in the wartime years of the early 1940s, the population began to decrease. Air raids on three occasions in 1945 caused major damage to the town. The first air raid on July 12, 1945, caused the most actual damage from the three raids, the deaths of about a hundred citizens and the burning of the greater part of the total built-up area (4,119 houses where 19,000 persons lived) (Kimura *et al.* 1998). Compared with other large international port cities such as Yokohama and Kobe, Tsuruga remained a small-scale town. This is the reason why Tsuruga hadn’t been able to develop a hinterland for the port. There was neither concentration of modern industrial locations nor a high density of population. It remained a mere point of passage for people and goods.

**Development and change of Tsuruga Port in modern times**

Figure 1 shows that the volume of imports and exports at Tsuruga Port moved greatly up and down over time. The peak value of exports was in 1916, when the main exports were raw silk, copper, other metals, woolen cloth and serge, and other chemicals. Russia was almost the exclusive destination for exports in 1916. Russia had been the predominant partner of the export trade through Tsuruga Port for a long period. Exports had surpassed imports except for during the 1920s. The Russian domestic political situation had a great effect on this change in the volume of trade. For Tsuruga Port, China had been a major trading partner until the 1920s, but from the 1930s onward Russia was a major partner instead of China. Trade with Manchuria and the Kwantung region had also been increasing. Manchuria and Kwantung are parts of China at present but at that time both regions were regarded as foreign areas outside China among Japan’s trading partners. After the Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty (1910), Korea was not regarded as a foreign country, and the Japan-Korea trade was treated as Japanese domestic trade. Korea, as an ‘other place’ (*gaichi*), continued to be a steady and important trade partner for Tsuruga. These main trade partners of modern Tsuruga were located on the opposite shore of the Sea of Japan. Tsuruga was one of the nodes of the circum-Sea of Japan trade.

On the other hand, Tsuruga was also one of the important passenger ports on the Sea of Japan. The first regular service between Tsuruga and Vladivostok was opened by a Japanese steamship company in 1902. Oya Kisen (the Oya steamship company) was the first company and later the regular service was taken over by the Osaka Shosen (Osaka Merchant Company) and next by
Kita-Nihon Kisen (the North Japan Steamship Company). Finally the statutory company Nihonkai Kisen (the Japan-Sea Steamship Company) took over the service in 1940, when the main route between Tsuruga and the continent opposite had already moved from Vladivostok to North Korean ports. In 1904 of two years after the first regular service, the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05) broke out and Tsuruga played a role as a logistic base. A Russian volunteer fleet also opened a regular service between the same two ports in 1907. Ten years later in 1917 the Russian Revolution occurred, and the number of passengers on the regular lines through Tsuruga reached a historic peak in the following year, 1918. After the 1922 troop withdrawal from Siberia, the number decreased sharply. After that, the number of passengers stayed at a low level through some small increases caused by the conclusion of the Japan-Soviet Trading Treaty (1927), etc. The line’s frequency of service and ports of call changed, influenced by the changes in regional politics such as the founding of Manchukuo in 1932 and the opening of a new continental railway system in the circum-Sea of Japan region by the 1940s. As a result, the service between Tsuruga and Vladivostok declined, but in its place, Tsuruga developed new relations with ports on the opposite shore, such as Rajin, Chongjin, and Wonsan, connecting to Manchuria. In the next section, the historical-geographical relationship between the development of Tsuruga mentioned in this section and some local developmental activities of the powerful local merchant Shoshichi Owada is explored.

Fig. 1  Imports and exports through Tsuruga’s Port (by value). Source: *Fukui-ken Tokeisho* (Statistical Book of Fukui Pref.), *Tsuruga Shoko Kaigisho Nenpo* (Annals of Tsuruga Chamber of Commerce and Industry)
3. Biography of Shoshichi Owada: Toward a special human agency

Who was Shoshichi Owada? What did he achieve in Tsuruga? When and where did he go to realize his ideas and plan to promote not only his own business but also his home town? Whom did he meet in those visits? The author will try to answer these questions on the basis of reading and interpreting the published biography of Owada (Nakayasu 1934) in the following section.

Life and activities of the powerful merchant Shoshichi Owada (1857-1947)

Shoshichi Owada, the local powerful merchant focused on in this section, was born Kamejiro Yamamoto, the son of a druggist’s family in Tsuruga in 1857 (Ansei 4 in the Japanese calendar). In his childhood he had aspired to go to Tokyo to become a scientist, but his intentions were strongly opposed by his parents. Though he seemed to be a child of ability, he was expected or obligated to go into business in Tsuruga in the near future. He was adopted into the Owada family, an old and powerful family of shipping agents in Tsuruga, in 1878 (Meiji 11). His adoption from his parents’ home by another family in order to succeed to the business was not rare in modern Japan. His father-in-law, Shoshichi Owada I, was also an adopted son. In 1879, now named Kamejiro Owada, he succeeded to the birthright of his adopted father and was installed as the manager of the shipping agency. Two years later in 1881, he married Masuko Owada, the daughter of his adopted father. He succeeded to the name of ‘Shoshichi Owada’ after the first retired from the business in 1887. His great achievements in Tsuruga and many other places both within and beyond the confines of the country for the promotion of Tsuruga are almost too numerous to mention. Owada had lived in Tsuruga for 68 years since his birth but moved to Kyoto in 1925, a troubled year for him. Finally, he died in the famous hot spring town of Beppu in Kyushu in 1947.

His business and public activities were mostly accomplished while he lived in Tsuruga and his contributions brought about prosperity for his home town and elevated it to its special functional position as an indispensable international port for Japan.

Important events in the career of Shoshichi Owada related to Tsuruga

Owada engaged in multiple local activities to vigorously promote the region. He served as a shipping agent (his regular occupation), a local bank owner (the Owada Bank, founded 1892), a local association’s leader as the president of Tsuruga Chamber of Commerce (1907), a promoter of international trade (he sent trade investigators to Vladivostok in 1895 and had a hand in the Tsuruga Trading and Steamship Company in 1900), an effective port manager and planner (twice involved in port renovation projects, in 1909 and 1922) and a leader in the local economy and local politics (in the Tsuruga Prosperity Association 1923), etc. Kawamura (2010) enumerates the followings as Owada’s great activities or tasks to contribute the local development of modern Tsuruga: 1) a construction of the Banshokaku, a guest house for VIPs visiting Tsuruga, 2) the founding of the Owada Bank, 3) Tsuruga’s designation as an open port, 4) the revival and branding of Tsuruga straw mats, 5) the advancement of international trading, 6) the opening of the regular service between Tsuruga and Vladivostok, 7) management of the Owada coal mine in Hokkaido, 8) the foundation of the Tsuruga Chamber of Commerce, 9) the first and second renovations of Tsuruga port, 10) the opening of a subsidized line between Tsuruga and Korea, 11) the promotion of Korean cattle imports by setting up the Tsuruga quarantine station, 12) an afforestation business,
and 13) the construction of the main office building of the Owada Bank. He was also said to be devoted to making social contributions in a variety of fields: disaster relief, voluntary social service, donation of public facilities and to the public fund, contributions to the promotion of education, and donations to religious shrines and temples. Owada was never installed as the mayor of Tsuruga or as governor of Fukui Prefecture, but he was surely the outstanding local leader, especially in the economic realm, but also in the other aspects. And it means that he became a ‘special human agency’ that embodied ‘structure.’

**Significance of encounters with important persons**

Encounters with key people led Owada to his own promotion and reinforcement of relationships with the national government and made him understand the ‘structures’ related to Tsuruga and his work benefited from their advice and help.

His first meeting with a key person was a talk he had with Nobuaki Makino, who was then governor of Fukui Prefecture, in Tsuruga in 1891. They talked about establishing an exchange market for rice and fertilizer, and the improvement of the banking system for the development of local commerce in Tsuruga. Makino introduced statesman Masayoshi Matsukata (then Prime and Finance Minister) to Owada after their meeting, because Owada showed an interest in establishing a new bank in Tsuruga. The next year, 1892, Owada went to Tokyo and discussed this problem with Matsukata. Matsukata recommended that Owada open the new bank by himself for the local merchants.

Masana Maeda (1850-1921), from Kagoshima, had been an economic bureaucrat in the Japanese government (1875-1890) and after resigning from office he had acted energetically and traveled all over Japan as a leading promoter of local industries. Owada perhaps first met Maeda in Tokyo in 1893. Then Owada went to Tokyo to petition the Diet members to designate Tsuruga as an international trading port, it seems he was in touch with Maeda. But they had a substantial meeting and talked face to face in Osaka in 1894, after Owada had heard about the reputation and personality of Maeda from Nobuaki Makino. Thereafter, Owada became a fervent supporter of Maeda and his local industrial development policy. Owada gained much knowledge and information about localities and local industries throughout the country from him. Their friendship, a sort of a teacher-pupil, continued for a quarter of a century till Maeda’s death in 1921. In addition, Fusajiro Shimomura and Masaki Terauchi also much influenced Owada’s policy and projects to make inroads into the Northeast Asian continent.

**Owada’s visits during his lifetime and becoming a ‘special human agency’**

Owada lived in three places and visited a number of cities and towns in his lifetime. His activity space developed not only within Japan’s home islands but also in the areas on the opposite shore of the Sea of Japan: Korea, Japan’s colony; Russia; and Manchuria in the northeastern region of China. There were some important places for Owada’s time-geographical life-path in this wider area. These were, first of all, Tsuruga, his home town and center of his life and business; and Fukui, the capital of Fukui Prefecture. Tokyo was obviously the capital of Japan and for Shosichi Owada the place for meetings and negotiations with statesmen and government officials to promote the prosperity of modern Tsuruga. The continental ports such as Vladivostok, Chongjin, and Wonsan were the entranceways to the Asian continent and important partners for trade and economic development for Tsuruga businessmen, and for Japan’s military advancement.
Owada visited many places, including these areas and places located in Japan and the neighborhood countries during his lifetime. His activity space was very wide in this period. His diverse and vigorous activities gave him various experiences and knowledge, and helped bring about the economic prosperity of Tsuruga.

Figure 2 shows the time-geographical lifetime paths of Shoshichi Owada, by which we can trace when and where he was during his lifetime. It is not confirmed, in this figure drawn on the basis of Nakayasu’s biography (1934), that he had experienced leaving Tsuruga before his thirties. According to the biography, the campaigning in Tohoku and Hokuriku for opening a regular line along the Sea of Japan in 1884 seemed to be his first time to visit any place outside of Tsuruga, and it may have been the starting point for his ascendency as a powerful local merchant.

The last decade of the 19th century and the first quarter of the 20th century were a very fruitful period for him. He had actively and frequently visited Tokyo and the Asian continent across the Sea of Japan to solve the problems of the local promotion of Tsuruga, especially in the last decade of the period. Tokyo was an indispensable activity space in which to realize his development policy for Tsuruga. The Asian continent was the new target of his business policy for the promotion of Tsuruga under the national policy of land expansion and resource development. In those places, he talked and negotiated with statesmen and bureaucrats, governors, merchants, businessmen, industrial promoters, etc. and investigated markets and resources. His activities
produced some results that contributed to the development and modernization of his small locality. With his own rich and varied experience in mind, he made an enlightening speech about the past, present and future of Tsuruga to the general public and to his colleagues in the town. Owada presented a ‘Proposal of 24 visions’ at the general meeting of the Fukui Association of Business on the continental littoral in March, 1924.

However, 1925 was a turning point for Owada, because he moved away from Tsuruga to Kyoto after a local political dispute. He could not avoid giving up most of his work for the locality and retired from the formal stage of local promotion projects in Tsuruga. But after that, he continued to donate large amounts of money to his home town from Kyoto.

Position of Tsuruga and a special human agency within multiple spatial structures

We can position the lifetime trail of time-geographical activities by Owada from the viewpoint of structuration theory. There were the town, and his human agency under multi-spatial structures. The town’s development was constrained by four spatial-level structures surrounding Tsuruga.

With accumulated age and experience, Owada had gradually recognized the multi-spatial structures and contributed to the development of the port town by his political and economic work. In the process, he had become a ‘special human agency’ reproducing ‘structure’ proactively.

4. Conclusion

This paper aims at an historical-geographical explanation of the action and participation of a powerful merchant in the formative process of a modern port town by analyzing his biography and the relationship between a ‘special human agency’ and ‘structure.’

The urban growth of Tsuruga as an important focal point of modern Japanese foreign and domestic policy was mostly achieved by the tremendous efforts of Shoshichi Owada. We can identify four spatially scaled structures, ‘international,’ ‘national,’ ‘regional,’ and ‘local’ controlling modern Tsuruga as an ‘event’ in observing Owada’s time-geographical activities and path. The reason for Owada’s success is that he exactly understood the four-scaled structures and the position of Tsuruga within these structures, and that he himself actively pursued many policies to realize prosperity. His contingent encounters with key people at the national scale also had a great effect on his thought and activity. Later, his activities embodied these structures and his intentions conformed to the structures. This is a case, I assert, of his becoming a ‘special human agency.’ This process in actuality is generally contingent, and we can also imagine that another historical-geographical scenario for Tsuruga might have been prepared by the occurrence of different facts. Counterfactual historical geography may be able to try to approach the contingencies (Gilbert and Lambert 2010).

References


(*: in Japanese)