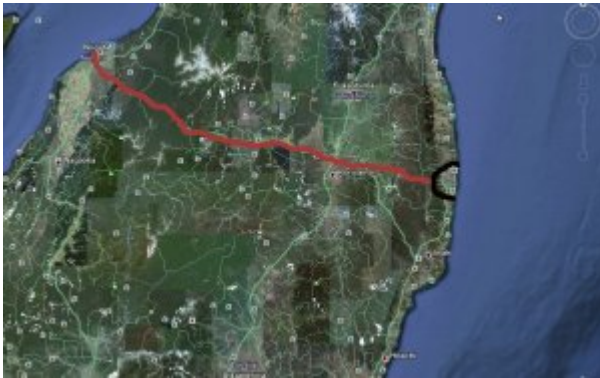


Attempt to hitchhike to the Fukushima Pacific coastline



An attempt to visit the damaged nuclear power plants in Fukushima, Japan.

Japanese traditional drink for the new year: Otoso

お屠蘇

Otoso, the traditional Japanese drink during new year celebration.

Every year for three days from January 1st, the Japanese drink [Otoso](#) as part of their celebration of the new year. It is made of spiced Japanese rice wine.

Most Japanese don't know the root of the meaning of the word Otoso which literally means, "something that was slaughtered and resurrected." Yes! This name literally has Christian roots! It has to do with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ!

Reading from left to right as in English, the first character for O makes a word honorific, the same meaning as the o in *Ocha*, Japanese green tea.

The second character with the sound of to means a person who was slaughtered or killed.

The third character, so, has the meaning of resurrection, coming back to life. Interestingly part of this character is the character for fish. A fish

symbol was used among early Christians as a secret sign to know one other. The top part of the character is used in all characters that are plants. Some people say it represents a crown of thorns. The right part of the character has the meaning of tree with a cross.

There is not a single educated Japanese person who will argue the meaning of those Chinese characters! I repeat, not a single person. It is as clear as the difference between black and white to them. Some doubters may argue the Christian roots of that word, but they will not deny those characters mean something killed / resurrected.

There are **many** things in Japanese language and culture that indicate Christianity came to Japan far earlier than most Japanese believe. They were taught in school that Christianity first came to Japan with a Jesuit priest, Francis Xavier, who came to Japan in 1549. But evidence abounds that Christian missionaries came to Japan much earlier, from the 2nd century. This knowledge has been covered.

I hope to add to this blog from time to time more information about Christian influence in Japan that have become central to Japan culture.

Adventure to Akita station



I needed to travel from Niigata to Aomori city for important business the following day. If I hitchhike, I like to give myself two days to be on the safe side to be on time for such matters. Aomori city is 470 kilometers from home and mostly by regular highway. I often can only get as far as Akita city – a little over half way – where I spend the night at a friend's house. But this time I couldn't spare an extra day. That meant a long ride by the slow, non-express train to save money.

There was an hour and a half wait time between changing trains in Akita. Rather than take the train to Akita station, I opted to get off at Kamihama station which is close to Route 7 and half way between Sakata city and Akita city. The train station man was surprised I got off at Kamihama. He said,

"There is nothing here!" I told him, "I'll find something to do!"

After only a few minutes wait at the traffic signal just in front of the station, a man in a recycle truck carrying what he referred to as "sleeping resources" (a junk motorcycle and some metal trash) picked me up and said he could take me just before Akita city, about 80 kilometers! I knew I could still easily make the train connection at Akita station if I couldn't hitchhike further past Akita.

The man, Mr. Shindo (63) is a metal recycle dealer. His business card says, "Metal recycle with a smile". Mr. Shindo's philosophy of life is similar to mine. "Life is a journey" he says. It began to rain and so he decided after a while to take me all the way to Akita station. On the way Mr. Shindo bought me a nice lunch of fried noddles and introduced me to his lady friend at the noodle shop. By hitchhiking, I made two new friends, got a free lunch, and saved 1000 yen of train fare. Life is indeed a journey.

Adventure hitchhiking home from Ajigasawa



Route of trip from Ajigasawa to Niigata

I was invited to do some work for a hotel in the city of Ajigasawa on the northern coast of the Sea of Japan in Aomori Prefecture. The hotel people treated me like a king and served me a dinner of what the Japanese would consider to be a gourmet specialty – half of which was [biblically unclean seafood](#) which I couldn't eat! But the breakfast was fantastic, a smorgasbord type of setting from which I could choose what I liked. The hotel paid the 10,000 yen (\$90) train fare to get me there, but as usual I always opt to hitchhike as much as possible to save money getting back home. I couldn't

leave Ajigasawa until 11:30AM the next day to begin my race with the sun to try to catch the last ride before dark. In the summer I have two extra hours to hitchhike, but I knew it would still be pretty tough considering the distance of 450 plus kilometers to Niigata, and most of it on a regular road.

This trip brought me one ride over the 2000th mark of the number of rides I caught hitchhiking since keeping records from Aug. 2, 2003. Since then, I've traveled 97.900 kilometers.



Scene from route
101 in Aomori
Prefecture



Couple who took me
from Ajigasawa to
Noshiro city in
Akita



Lady with her
Terrier dog who
took me just past
Akita city

After waiting over 40 minutes for the first ride, a couple picked me up and took me as far as Noshiro City in Akita Prefecture, a good distance of 100 kilometers! They even bought me lunch, a bowl of Ramen noodles.



Makoto Hasegawa

After that a lady took me about 40 kilometers toward Akita city. After her, a second lady with a cute little Terrier dog took me just past Akita city. This lady was very talkative. And it turns out that she knows a person who picked me up in 2006, Makoto Hasegawa, the captain of a professional basketball team in Niigata! She says that Mr. Hasegawa comes to visit her house from time to time because his native town is Akita and she has something to do with promoting basketball in Japan. This sport is not nearly as popular in Japan as it is in America. The average player works for a salary no better than an

office worker in a regular company.

The 4th driver works for the income tax bureau. He was friendly, but not too talkative, and not very responsive to my questions about his work. But he took me with 10 minutes to spare to Sakata station from where I caught a train the rest of the way home. It was 7:30PM, already dark (no daylight savings time in Japan) and the train from Sakata City was the last one that day I could catch to avoid hitchhiking in the dark the rest of the way. I saved 2/3rds of the train fare I would have paid had I taken a train all the way.

Nattou – fermented soy beans



Nattou in the styrofoam package it comes in

Recently I've been eating a traditional Japanese food called [nattou](#) nearly every day for lunch. Nattou is also known as "sticky beans." Click the photo to see why! Normally people eat it on top of rice, but I often eat it right out of the package with chopsticks after sprinkling on the soy sauce that comes with it. Nattou is very nutritious and good for health.

When I first ate nattou shortly after coming to Japan, I didn't like it very much then, but I've grown fond of it over the years. It's an [acquired taste](#). I often ate nattou on the road in the early days because it's the cheapest protein available.

Not all Japanese eat nattou. The people in the Kansai area (Kobe / Osaka / Kyoto) don't eat nattou as much as the Kanto (Tokyo and surrounding area) people do because they don't like the smell.

Did you know there is a major difference in health benefits between fermented

and unfermented soy? Fermented soy like natto and [Miso](#) are good for you, unfermented soy like tofu and soy protein power are not.