

New Japanese Railway Scenery 2



JR East's Class *Kiba* 40 DMU running on Gono Line (147.2 km) near Fukaura in Aomori Prefecture. The line was first opened in 1908 between Noshiro (now Higashi Noshiro) and Noshiro City (now Noshiro) as a branch of the government railways' Ou main line, but was later named Noshiro Line. In 1918, the private Mutsu Railway opened a line between Kawabe and Goshogawara as a connection to the Ou main line. Further gradual extension continued but the line was nationalized in 1927. The final section between Mutsu Iwasaki and Fukaura was completed in 1936 when the line was renamed Gono Line. Although it is one of the most scenic railway lines in northern Honshu, the line suffers from low ridership due to severe competition with the parallel national road. JR East runs *Resort Shirakami* limited express trains with observation saloons on weekends during tourist seasons for passengers visiting the Shirakami Sanchi (Mountains), a UNESCO world heritage site since 1993.

(Photo: M.Mashima Photo Office)



The photograph shows a parade of huge *tachi-neputa* figures, a symbol of Goshogawara City's summer festival that takes place for five nights from 4 August every year. The origin of the *neputa* is unclear, but the custom may have started with the traditional floating of candle-lit lanterns down rivers and out to sea in order to dispel the languid summer heat. In some regions *neputa* are called *nebuta* and even today street parades of illuminated lanterns resembling human figures are common in various towns throughout Aomori Prefecture. Giant *neputa* saw their heyday in the late 19th and early 20th century when Goshogawara was home to rice and timber merchants and landowners who competed in power and wealth by building and parading *neputa*. However, the figures disappeared from Goshogawara in the 1920s when new overhead telegraph and power lines crisscrossing the streets made parades difficult and dangerous. Many older people's dream of reviving the tradition became reality when a local theatre company built a 7-m figure as part of its stage props in 1994. Volunteers formed an organization to revive the giant figures. The magnificent 20.6-m, 7-tonne giant *tachi-neputa* made its debut in summer 1996, using historical documents as references. The figures are named *tachi-neputa*, meaning 'tall *neputa*' to differentiate them from the shorter *neputa* figures.

The writer Osamu Dazai (1909–48) was born as a son of wealthy landlord in a village near Goshogawara. His still popular works include *Shayo* (The Setting Sun), and *Ningen Shikkaku* (No Longer Human). The house where he was born is preserved as a museum and designated as an important cultural asset by the government.

(Photo: Goshogawara City Tourist Association)



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