

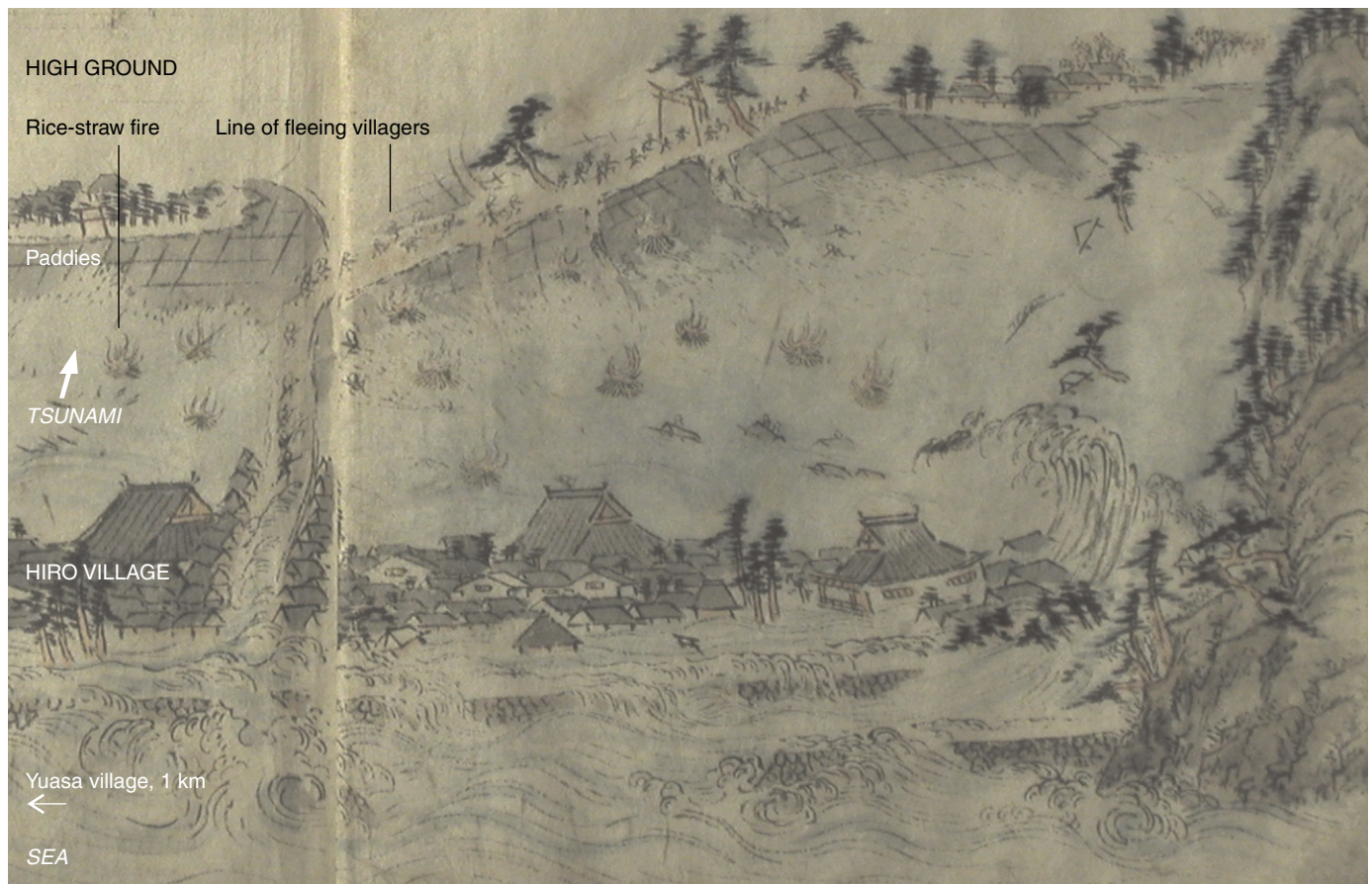
## 1854 tsunami

Hamaguchi Gohei, a village elder, knows “all the traditions of the coast.” One autumn evening, high above the seaside village that he heads, the old man feels an earthquake “not strong enough to frighten anybody.” Soon the sea withdraws in a “monstrous ebb.” As unknowing villagers flock to the beach, Gohei torches his rice harvest—“most of his invested capital.” The villagers rush uphill to fight the fire. Their headman’s selfless ruse has saved them from a tsunami.

As “Inamura no hi” (“The rice-sheaf fire”), this story first appeared in a Japanese grade-school reader in 1937 (p. 113) and later appeared in video (p. 115-121). As “The Wave,” an American children’s book, the tale similarly became a video sent to hundreds of schools in the 1990s for tsunami education in British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, and California. As public art inscribed in stone in Seattle, a “true story” tells of “an old farmer in Japan who saved an entire village from destruction by a tidal wave.”

The story, timeless as a cautionary tale about natural tsunami warnings, originated in 1897 as “A living god” by Lafcadio Hearn. Hearn blended two 19th-century disasters: Honshu’s giant waves of 1896 (p. 41), whose parent earthquake was weak; and a tsunami evacuation a half century earlier in the southwest Honshu village of Hiro. On the night of December 24, 1854, 34-year-old Hamaguchi Goryō lit rice-straw fires in Hiro during a tsunami that shortly followed a violent earthquake of estimated magnitude 8.5. Lost that night in Hiro were 36 lives and 158 of 374 houses. Goryō himself nearly drowned.

Hamaguchi Goryō’s rice-straw fires in Hiro village beckoned villagers well-rehearsed in seeking high ground. As a precaution against tsunamis, Hiro had already evacuated twice in 1854—after earthquakes on July 9 and December 23. Goryō’s beacons on December 24, depicted below, are said to have guided nine persons to safety.



HAMAGUCHI GORYŌ, who founded Hiro’s first public school in 1852, underwrote the village’s recovery from the 1854 disaster (Tsumura, 1991; Shimizu, 1996). Drawing on proceeds from his family’s soy-sauce business (today’s Yamasa brand), he employed villagers to rebuild 50 houses and to replace the seawalls being overwashed in the painting, above. His wall, still standing, rises 5 m and extends 0.6 km. Hiro village is now the town of Hirogawa.

THE PAINTING above, courtesy of Yōgen temple in Hirogawa, portrays Goryō’s fires as numerous and widely dispersed in rice paddies being covered by the tsunami of December 24, 1854. The artist, Furuta Shōemon (also known as Furuta Eisho), witnessed the tsunami in adjoining Yuasa village (Shimizu, 2003).

“A LIVING GOD,” quoted in the first paragraph above, contains the first use of *tsunami* cited in the Oxford English Dictionary: “‘*Tsunami*!’ shrieked the people; and then all shrieks and all sounds and all power to hear sounds were annihilated by a nameless shock heavier than any thunder, as the colossal swell smote the shore with a weight that sent a shudder through the hills...” (Hearn, 1897, p. 7).

“INAMURA NO HI” remained, until 1947, in a national reader for students 10-11 years old (p. 113). Nakai Tsunezō, a grade-school teacher, wrote this adaptation. Hodges (1964) similarly made “A living god” into “The wave.” Ellen Ziegler, with a 1987 grant from the Seattle Arts Commission, inscribed the tale on tablets fronting Jefferson Park fire station.