

Preserving Ruralities?: Green Tourism in the Globalized Urban World

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1. Problem Statement¹

Today, in most advanced industrial societies, rural communities are in crisis. Tourism in rural areas has been one of the major policy options at least in Western Europe and Japan for sustaining rural economies and agriculture while conserving their authentic rural landscapes and cultures. Outwardly, this is considered as an example of the so-called “sustainable rural development”—a universal concept—and utilizing local resource endowments including landscapes and cultural traditions. However, from another point of view, there is the aspect that rural communities and people are only able to preserve their physical environment through the endless commodification of landscapes and cultures. Sustainable rural development could be a phenomenon that is effective only within this world view.

Let me add some explanations. From one point of view—that of traditional core-periphery theory—the unstable situation they face may be seen as that of teetering on a knife-blade: on one side, progressive depopulation and economic decline, and on the opposite side unchecked, powerful and in many ways destructive capitalist development patterns. From another point of view—that of uneven development theory—such a differentiation of rural areas may be seen as part of a more complex and uneven process of regional restructuring that is a spatial expression of the profit-maximizing behavior of the capitalist production system (Massey 1984; Markusen 1985). In any case, this geographical dynamism under the capitalist economic system may lead to urban/suburban sprawl, converting ever more remote rural regions, and bringing with it environmental degradation and social problems.²

Within this, there have been rural communities that through the promotion of tourism have succeeded in sustaining the scenery, culture, and economy of the area. However, it is mistaken to think that through commodification any rural community can indefinitely protect its identity as a rural community. The reason for this lies in the inability to avoid the competition that exists in the rural tourism market once commodification has taken place. In order to sustain a position as a salable commodity or popular destination, various factors must be considered. These include not only obvious factors such as quality of landscapes and cultural attractions (authenticity), but also location, marketing, advertising, distance between competing destinations, and the consciousness and capacity of the local government and community.

2. Purpose and Organization of the Paper

The purpose of this paper is to argue the above-mentioned commodification issue with empirical examinations from government-led rural tourism and other rural development initiatives in Japan, which were at that time often called post modern/alternative.

In the following sections, I will first introduce the concepts of urban-rural relations as well as place and space as a theoretical frame in order to consider the contemporary issues of rural areas and tourism. Then, I will present a summary of my field work from the late 1990s in six rural localities on the fringe of the greater Tokyo region. This information includes problems in local politics and different recognitions of the realities there regarding policies for local economic promotion, which includes tourism. Finally, I will present my conclusion on the commodification of rural landscapes and cultures.

3. Villages in the Urban World

The nature of cities and villages

During any historical period, urban-rural relations are an essential feature of human society, and one of the primary aspects of historically defined urban-rural relations are the social relations of production.

Although this fundamental point may not be obvious, it is the basic force that shapes the visible social, economic, environmental, and/or political phenomena in rural regions today. Taking an ideological perspective in which ‘rural’ simply represents ‘agrarian’ (or agricultural) societies, and ‘urban’ principally represents ‘industrial’ societies, is not an appropriate way to look at—and discuss—contemporary rural development problems. In fact, today, as a result of the spread of manufacturing industries to—and improved transportation in—rural areas, rural populations have largely become a wage labor proletariat in non-agricultural employment. Even within the farming sector, a significant portion of farmers in advanced industrialized societies are only engaged in agriculture part-time.³

Urban-rural relations in different theoretical traditions

Generally speaking, one of the most popular and influential concepts for distinguishing the quality of being rural from that of being urban is Tönnies’ classic typology using *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* as ideal types (Tönnies 1963). This typology still seems influential and deeply rooted in people’s minds. Likewise, Max Weber’s classical urban-rural dichotomy distinguishes cities and villages based on such criteria as dominant industrial/occupational types, residential patterns, communal kinship, and political/administrative forms (Weber 1958). In the 1920s, the rural sociologists Sorokin and Zimmerman attempted to build on Weber’s distinction by adding new social, economic, environmental, and demographic criteria to their typologies of “Urban World” and “Rural World” (1929: 56–57).⁴

Urban sociologists in the Chicago School tradition developed an influential concept of 'urbanism' in which distinctive urban life styles are essentially assumed to expand to suburbs and rural regions in an unchecked manner (Wirth 1938; Fischer 1984). Their definition of urbanism establishes ideal types of urban/industrial societies and rural/folk societies. They assume an urban-rural continuum in which cities and villages are socio-culturally continuous and their differentiation takes place according to the degree of acceptance of 'urbanism,' i.e., according to their acceptance of "urban" social, human ecological, and social psychological characteristics (Takahashi 1988: 300).⁵ However, the Chicago School's arguments on urbanism lack a serious consideration of the social relations of production as an essential dynamic of the capitalist society.⁶

New Urban Economic theorists, including geographers and urban sociologists, support the view that cities and villages are economically and spatially continuous with respect to capital accumulation and its spatial (or geographical) appearance, but they also differ in critical ways from the Chicago School. Under the capitalist mode of production ever sprawling urbanization, accompanied by geographical accumulation of capital and uneven development of space are driven by the dynamics of capital. Harvey (1985: 127–128) views the term "urban" as being a continuous basin system with a core and peripheries. He argues that the distinction between urban and rural is now meaningless with respect to production functions; the distinction is, rather, an expression of the spatial division of consumption. In this sense, regardless of their visible physical landscapes, rural villages are no longer 'rural' in the traditional sense. The extent of the relationship of rural areas to the economic core (cities and urban areas) is the critical element. The relationship (through transportation, technology, and location) determines for rural areas the availability of multiple economic bases and business opportunities.

The globalized urban world

The widespread terms *global economy* and *globalization* describe the present stage of capitalist development. Generally speaking, the first three quarters or, at least, two quarters of the twentieth century were an era of state-driven industrialization accompanying powerful urbanization. These forces affected the physical space, as well as people's mentality and way of life. During this process the ultimate objectives of the state and that of industrial capitalists were essentially the same. In the present age of the global economy, there is an ever growing dominance of multinational capital in all dimensions of economic activity. Regions and localities, including both cities and villages, are being transformed. Nothing on earth can be isolated from these forces. No one can escape the global economy's influence. Today, rural communities are only allowed to exist within the globalized urban world.

4. Concept of Place and Space

Living with the contradiction

One cannot deny the uniqueness of a rural place and the lives of people there as being distinctively different from that of an urban place. People often tend to link the distinctiveness of rural life and environment with ecological/cultural ideologies based on a site-specific, place-bound perception. Nevertheless, I propose that there must be another way to look at contemporary rural or, more accurately, regional problems in advanced industrialized societies. As I mentioned above, cities and villages are continuous entities, driven to this continuity by the universal social, economic, and spatial dynamics of a world-historical process that takes place regardless of visible differences in demography, cultural values, physical landscapes, and dominant economic activities. The underlying concept here is 'space,' not place.

We must understand that everyone in a region, locality, or community is affected by the past and by the present, and that there is a dualistic nature of any locality— 'place' as a particularistic concept and 'space' as a relative one (Lobao 1996: 77). Thus the issue of commodification through rural tourism could be considered within this framework.

Nature of place

Place is an empirical concept that reflects local identity or *genius loci*. In rural areas "place" has its origin as "a fragment of agro-pastoral space" (Lefebvre 1991: 234). "Place" is a subjective vernacular entity expressing people's experience and a locality's history. Every locality has its own identity as a *place*, an identity that has been nourished by a unique historical context including natural environment, architecture, topography, physical distance from the outside, cultural (often religious) values, and tribal/communal customs. It is appropriate to quote Relph (1993: 34), because his explanation seems to be closest to the image of *place*, as I define it in this section:

"A place is a whole phenomenon, consisting of the three intertwined elements of a specific landscape with both built and natural elements, a pattern of social activities that should be adapted to the advantages or virtues of a particular location, and a set of personal and shared meanings."

One often possesses an intimate feeling of nostalgia with respect to his or her *place*. In Japanese, the term *furusato*, meaning "native place," has the connotation of referring to a country or rural village; and is frequently used when people speak of rural areas. The value of rural areas as part of a country's cultural heritage is often spoken of in this context. Thus, people often consider place and absolute space as being identical. Consider, for example, Gottfried's explanation of rural landscapes:

“People’s intense experiences with the land have enhanced the cultural value of rural areas. Most rural landscapes are “constructed” —that is, they show a many-layered history of human intervention. Cultural conservation holds an important place in rural policy because it reinforces the sensory experience of the rural landscape and strengthens landscape’s role as a symbol of stability.” (Gottfried 1995: 13)

Yet places are not merely remnants of the past, but rather their “local identities,” as cultural expressions of the outside world are changing. In this sense, place can mean ‘bounded performance’ at a particular historical moment (Harvey 1996: 294). In the context of *place*, the urban-rural dichotomy proposed by earlier sociologists is still a useful concept and is effective language for taking into account differences in social and physical elements between urban and rural regions. Nevertheless, while it is common for people to view *place* in a parochial way—as a (culturally, socially, or sometimes economically) bounded territory (Massey 1993: 143), there is another dimension of place in the broader context of political economy to which social scientists must pay serious attention.

Nature of space

Space is both an abstract and an objective concept for describing society (Castells 1992). The concept of space has been developed in the tradition of western Marxist theorists based on the work of Lefebvre (Soja 1989: 43–51). Unlike *place*, *space* is a continuous entity—not a bounded territory. *Space* is best recognized as a contradiction of capital accumulation as capitalism evolves. Capital does not belong to any *place*; rather it is highly mobile spatially. Uneven regional development is an inevitable consequence of uneven capital accumulation, accompanying socio-spatial differentiation between a core and its peripheries and/or a spatial division of labor. Castells (1977: 115) gives an explicit definition of *space*:

“Space is a material product, in relation with other material elements—among others, men, who themselves enter into particular social relations, which give to space (and to the other elements of the combination) a form, a function, a social signification. It is not, therefore, a mere occasion for the deployment of the social structure, but a concrete expression of each historical ensemble in which a society is specified.”

Lobao (1996: 88) provides a summary of the nature of *space*:

“Global economic change is an uneven process over time and within and between nations. It transforms economic structure. It alters social relations or class structure and other asymmetrical power relations of gender, age, and ethnicity brings about new strategies of state

intervention, and affects the levels at which populations are able to reproduce themselves. As a consequence, places are differentiated with regard to production structures, social relations, demographic and other characteristics reflective of local reproduction...”

Hence, Harvey argues that ‘urban’ is the agglomeration of physical infrastructure and facilities for production, exchange, and consumption, and that it is a necessary means of capital accumulation for reproduction (using his term, ‘urban built environment’). This is one material aspect of space and is the appropriation of space (Harvey 1985: 1994). In this sense, what we call rural areas (except those rural areas where resource-exploitative, mechanistic, industrial agriculture is operated) in terms of landscape is increasingly a spatial periphery of the global capitalist system. Hence, a rural space does not imply a stationary state; instead rural spaces change constantly in relation to the entire uneven social-economic process.

In primitive pre-capitalist societies, there was no (or little) difference between place and space. Their differentiation is the product of history. In the early capitalist mode of production, then-extant semi-autonomous rural (or agrarian) communities were forced to be involved in the process of exchange for goods and services produced in the cities (a *spatial* practice). Nevertheless their local identity as ‘rural’ in a cultural or socio-ecological sense tended to remain the same (a *place* practice). Unlike manufacturing and service industries, agriculture is a space-based activity, applying labor to a specific place and using extensive physical space for production.

Under the current GATT/WTO international trade regime, food production can shift internationally, for example from domestic locations (that have economically inefficient labor-intensive agricultural operations) to other locations where intensive capital investment is possible (the mid-western United States, for example), or where cheap farm labor is available (rural areas in the third world and, to some extent, areas in the United States that employ low-wage migrant labor).

In contemporary society, we live in a dualistic spatial environment in which there are always communications, negotiations, and conflicts between a *place* and a *space*. In this world, the visible physical landscape of a locality can be understood as a product of the interaction between *place*, as an expression of local identity, and *space*, which is the product of a broader regional, national, and global political and economic system.⁷

5. Rural Tourism as a Post-modern Practice?

Rural tourism, often called agri- or agro-tourism (Italian: *agritourismo*; French: *tourisme vert*), is a phenomena particular to and popular policy means of industrialized societies.

In Japan, agro-tourism was introduced as “green tourism” (Japanese: *guri-in tsu-rizumu*) by the government in the early 1990s. Prior to this introduction, in the 1980s, a word became

frequently used among policy makers, scholars, and practitioners: *mura-okoshi* (translated “village revitalization”).⁸ This word refers to a kind of self-development initiative that utilizes the unique resources and knowledge of a locality to attract urban consumers and tourists. *Mura-okoshi* has been recognized as a movement in rural Japan. It is both a practice and an ideology. Locally-based or endogenous rural revitalizing efforts are usually regarded as essential to *mura-okoshi*.

Both green tourism and *mura-okoshi* were called post modern/alternative in regards to what they mean to conventional economic policy. To a large extent, this recognition has still been commonly shared by planners and practitioners, including participants from rural communities.

6. Stories of Six Rural Localities

In the following sub-sections, I present a summary of case studies for six rural localities in Gunma Prefecture, conducted in the late 1990s. These localities were chosen as illustrative examples of various scenarios of development, stagnation, and/or underdevelopment. The history and current struggles of these six rural localities are presented with extensive use made of interviews conducted with over 150 villagers, as well as field observations and additional document surveys.

The geographical setting

Like the greater Tokyo metropolitan region, the Gunma Prefecture is located in the northern fringe of the Plains of Kanto. Gunma Prefecture developed in a polarized way. On the one hand, the central-southern part of the prefecture is significantly urbanized; economically it is directly integrated into the Tokyo metropolitan region. This is due to its flat topography and easy access for commuting to the Tokyo region. On the other hand, most villages and towns,⁹ especially those in the northern and southeastern parts of the prefecture, have become economically depleted and depopulated due to their mountainous topography, poor non-farming employment opportunities, and less productive small-scale agriculture. This is despite their relatively close location to the metropolitan region.

Green tourism under the name “Sister City Alliance”

Kawaba Village lies at the base of Mt. Hotaka in northern Gunma Prefecture. Kawaba has become famous nationally for its *mura-okoshi* activities, which include the so-called “City and Village Exchange” activities it conducts with Tokyo’s Setagaya Ward. Originally Kawaba was a typical rural community for the area, involved in sericulture, forestry and agriculture. However, during Japan’s postwar high growth period (1950–60s), the village suffered from a decline in traditional industries coupled with a rapid outflow and aging of the population. Given

these circumstances, through the strong initiative of the village mayor at the time, Kawaba began the process of *mura-okoshi* with the intention of raising awareness of the village and promoting visitation to the village. Over the next 30 years the economic, social and, geographic environment of Kawaba has been greatly altered. While a mountain village, Kawaba is bordered by Numata City, and in the 1980s the Joetsu Bullet Train and Kanetsu Expressway were completed. In addition, better roads were constructed linking Numata to Takasaki and Maebashi, making work commutations to these areas possible. These factors, combined with the exchange work done with Setagaya have together halted the depopulation of the village, reversing the trend toward one of slight population increases. Following the Bubble Economy's resort development boom in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a 180-degree shift has occurred from *mura-okoshi*, which seeks to suppress development and conserve the environment.

The efforts of Kawaba Village took a turn in 1979, when it was chosen by Tokyo's Setagaya Ward to be the site of its "Ward Resident Health Village," resulting in the conclusion of a City and Village Alliance Agreement. As Setagaya is a relatively affluent district even within Tokyo, they were searching not just for a location but rather for a "partner with whom a long-term relationship is possible." Through trial-and-error, the exchange activities between Kawaba and Setagaya showed diverse developments over the next 20 years. First, programs have been established such as one in which all 5th grade students attending the ward's public elementary schools participate in a mobile classroom, spending two nights and three days in the village experiencing agricultural work and other aspects of rural life. In addition, many other activities aimed at Setagaya residents are conducted including *rentaru apple* (an ownership system of apple trees), home delivery services of local agricultural products, volunteer activities for Setagaya residents to participate in forest management work, opportunities to experience making *miso* paste, noodles and Japanese *washi* paper, as well as farmers' markets. For Kawaba the most direct merit of these exchange activities is economic. The planning division of the village office (municipal government) has stated:

"The agricultural output of the village is 1.6 billion yens. If each of the 800,000 residents of Setagaya Ward purchase 20,000 yens (about US\$200) worth of agricultural products we will be fine. Therefore, we will fundamentally concentrate on Setagaya, and feel it is not necessary to expand into other areas. Kawaba's farmers visit Setagaya, allowing us to understand the preferences and needs of consumers there."

Certainly, Kawaba's farming sector is comparatively healthy considering its relative mountainous topography. For example, in 1985 an agricultural processing union was established. In the Nakano district, which independently promotes its agricultural industry together with exchange activities with Setagaya, one local leader in his 60s stated: "There are

no problems finding people to continue farming (in this district).” Young farmers have formed organic farming groups, and people from Setagaya have relocated to Kawaba to engage in farming. A Section Chief at the Setagaya-Kawaba Hometown Public Company stated that:

“The health of Kawaba is linked to the serious efforts made by Setagaya. The consciousness there is that it is unacceptable for Kawaba to fall to ruin. They feel that Kawaba must have a healthy farming sector... The people of Setagaya Ward have taught the people in this village, and now they too feel that Kawaba has a good natural environment and clean water. People have come to think that they must be caretakers of the environment they inherited from their ancestors.”

Until now, the incentive for Kawaba to restrain development and conserve the environment has come from outside demands, specifically its relationship with Setagaya. As a “second hometown” for Setagaya residents, it was necessary to preserve and conserve the rural landscape (including farming areas and forests). The provision of the required know-how, the bearing of costs, and planning initiatives are all borne by the Setagaya side (government, key figures, and residents).

“Local employment expands (through exchange activities). There are 800,000 people in Setagaya, and we have to this point received 4.6 billion yens in investments from them. (From the point of Setagaya Ward’s financial abilities) this is not a great burden.” (Planning Division, Village Office)

For a mountain village such as Kawaba, Setagaya has shown itself to be an ideal marriage partner. In this regard, it can be considered that the case of Kawaba is an extremely unusual example.

Community divisions and environmental destruction resulting from the commodification of the rural landscape

Niiharu Village lies at the very northernmost point of Gunma Prefecture. Like Kawaba, it has changed from a mountain community engaged in farming and sericulture to one that develops regional promotion through tourism. It has become known nationwide for being both a new rural resort village as well as for being a model for green tourism. Originally, Niiharu was an important location along the National Route 17 (*Mikuni Kaido*) connecting Tokyo and Niigata. Along the road are the Sarugakyo and Mikuni *onsen* hot springs. Inside the village there are skiing areas and golf courses, forming a resort area. Population has consistently been in a state of decline, but the rate of decline has slowed since the 1980s.

Niiharu was made famous by its “village park” initiative. Realizing that something needed to be done in the post-sericulture era, in 1978 a stamp rally of freestanding Buddhist statues was held through what is now the *Takumi-no-sato* Area. This rally became the starting point for the village park initiative. The stamp rally did not cost any money, and was apparently rather popular at the time.

“Eating establishments are necessary for visitors. We can also provide direct sales of agricultural products. Our mulberry fields have been reborn as fields for apple and cherry trees, tomatoes, corn, and grapes.” (Village Office Manager)

Following this Sugawajuku, the main street through the *Takumi-no-sato* Area, was designated a Historical Road Program by the Ministry of Works, and conservation and restoration work of the historical landscape progressed. Furthermore as the name *Takumi-no-sato* (English: “Hometown of Master Craftsmen”) implies, many craftsmen engaging in areas such as pottery and textiles have moved into the surrounding area, making it a popular tourist spot which some 400,000 people visit annually. Even as many tourist areas have been dealt a sharp blow by the recession in the 1990s, the number of visitors to the *Takumi-no-Sato* Area is steadily increasing. Many of the surrounding farming households have specialized as sightseeing farms, some of which are exceeding a hundred million yens in annual sales. In order to spread the benefits of tourism throughout the entire communities, a plan to turn the entire area of Niiharu into a village park is being promoted, including fruit orchards and a lake resort zone. In 1990, municipal scenic regulations were enacted, and in 1993 the “Hometown Vitalization Fund” was established so the village can independently perform maintenance of scenic areas.

Next, I will introduce two episodes from the standpoint of “community segmentation” and “development and environmental problems.” First, in the *Takumi-no-sato* Area where town upgrades are taking place, supporting and opposing factions have been in contention from the very beginning of the planning stage. “The direct cause for the enactment of the scenic regulations was the fact that residents belonging to the opposition faction were erecting modern-style homes in the area without consultation.” (Village Office Manager) The opposing faction consisted of businessmen, and the supporting faction was largely composed of shop owners and farmers. At present each faction has about the same number of supporters. For the opposing faction, tourism amounts to nothing more than a nuisance. According to a gardener in the supporting faction, the main arguments of the opposing faction are: 1) Tourists will inundate the area on holidays, make noise, cause problems, and increase the amount of trash, 2) When reconstructing one’s own home there is a possibility that other people and the government may interfere in regards to the architectural style, color and building materials, and

3) As the craftsmen in the *Takumi-no-sato* retire, the next generation will cause the number of outsiders seeking economic gain to increase, and the face of local residents will not be visible (to tourists). On the other hand, for the supporting faction there is no way to sustain farming and local business except to tie tourism and farming together, and sell the scenery. The gardener was originally in the opposition faction, but is now a leader of the supporting faction. In the beginning, a concrete overall picture for the initiative was not presented.

“(Suddenly) the village office announced they wanted to turn Sugawa into a tourist area revolving around the freestanding Buddha statues. They formed a vitalization committee at which only myself and one other person were in opposition. I was hesitant given the suddenness of their move to tourism.” (Gardener)

After the overall picture of the plan and its concrete benefits became clear, he joined the supporting faction. He says that his landscaping work has increased as a result of the village park initiative.

Second, an environmental group of local residents points out the inherent inconsistency between the fact that the village park is supposed to be a place where people and nature can interact, and environmental degradation and deficiencies in the view of the ecosystem. In the headwaters area deep behind Niiharu live many endangered species listed in the Red Data Book including golden eagles, mountain eagles, and goshawks. Even now there are plans to construct a dam and related lakeside recreation facilities.

“I can go along with the thinking behind (the village park initiative), but the way the ecosystem is viewed is lacking. The water system of the Mikuni Mountains behind the village is connected. The mountains behind the village are connected. A plan to co-exist with nature in a real sense must be devised. The *mura-zukuri* being performed by the village is destroying the ecosystem through preparing farms, and although it was canceled, there were even plans to construct grounds for paragliding (which would involve the clearing of forest). Niiharu Village is inconsistent. In the terrain, environmentally, there is a line where the backbone of the mountain range runs into itself. Because of this there is unique biodiversity there. In a single village you can find differing classes of vegetation. It is a place that must not be disturbed. It is a place that must not be developed. Nature comes before infrastructure. It is nonsense to ask if people are more important than eagles. What they’ve done to *Takumi-no-sato* may be fine, but what will it look like if they move deeper into the mountains? (In the past near *Takumi-no-sato*, the village) buried trash, and now the surrounding cedar trees are dying. It may be that the ground has been polluted. But the village office will not allow tests to be conducted. Is that okay? Just to put a lid on things that smell bad? Is it really possible to perform organic farming like that?”

(Leader of the local environmental group)

There are people who believe that, from the viewpoint of the ecosystem, that the village park initiative has become in some respects merely a tool to lure in various types of subsidy monies. On the other hand, among the owners of *onsen*¹⁰ hotels concerned about dramatic declines in overnight customers due to recession, there is increasing hope that the increase in visitors and further establishment of resort facilities that would result from dam construction will revitalize the hot springs areas.

Cooperative as an engine for development and its limitations

Sawada Agricultural Cooperative (JA Sawada) in Agatsuma County's Nakanojo Town is a local cooperative with about 500 members, quite small in scale for a Japanese cooperative. From the 1960s the cooperative has been engaged in processing agricultural products, and in recent years they have become active in the medicinal herbs business. Through these the cooperative has been engaged in developing local industry. Nakanojo was born through the merger of four villages including the old Nakanojo and Sawada Villages. Each of the old villages had their own agricultural cooperative prior to the village merger, but these were combined with neighboring Agatsuma County's agricultural cooperative during a period of mergers resulting in the widening of areas of cooperatives (JA Agatsuma). Now only the Sawada Cooperative remains independent. The old Sawada Village is located in a mountainous area, and geographically possesses the worst conditions of all the districts in Nakanojo. It suffers from both depopulation and aging of the remaining population. Because of this, the cooperative takes on a strategy of raising profits by controlling all aspects of agricultural product production, processing, and sales, increasing local employment, and securing stable sales routes in order to return these benefits to the local population. Today, this cooperative sells over 40 varieties of processed agricultural products, of which Sawada's *Tsukemono*.¹¹ With the main focus on these *tsukemono*, yearly sales have reached six to seven hundred million yens. These products are sold at directly-operated stores and agricultural tourism theme parks managed by the cooperative. In the efforts of the Sawada Cooperative the following characteristics can be seen:

- 1) As aged and small-scale farmers make up most of the cooperative, large-scale mass production is difficult. Products made by cooperative members are purchased at the highest possible price, regardless of volume;
- 2) Products are sold through independently created sales routes, and are not sold in department stores, supermarkets, or other markets across the country;

- 3) The provision of employment to Sawada residents not engaged in agriculture through their processing plants and tourist enterprises (directly-operated medicinal herb agriculture theme parks); and
- 4) In order to respond to the preferences of consumers, they employ specialized staff at their own expense, and continually conduct experimental research and new product development before releasing products. They are emphasizing their project ownership.

“Those guys (outside consultants) don’t have any sense of responsibility. They just (come for a few days), make a plan and go home. While it’s true that there are places that hire consultants to make plans for them, the services they provide are of no use. In the flow from planning to construction to operations, it is we employees that actually perform these operations. If the people that actually do the work are the people that make the plans, they will be proud of themselves. It will instill in them a desire to work.” (Cooperative Executive)

But what implications are suggested by the kinds of integrated rural development suggested by him and others? Here I will identify three points. First, there is the successful “enterprise/business” aspect. By hiring their own specialists in areas such as food science, planning and marketing, their managerial and technical abilities as an enterprise are worthy of note given their status as a small agricultural cooperative. The planning decision process that allows the participation of residents is also quite interesting. However, the limitations borne from being an agricultural cooperative must also be identified. For cooperative members and local residents (particularly non-agricultural households and comparatively large-scale full-time farmers) who do not directly benefit from the cooperative’s projects, the coop is viewed as being nothing more than “in the business of staying in business,” or being “a social welfare enterprise to sustain elderly, small-scale farmers.” For example, one local *onsen* hotel owner criticized the cooperative thusly: “Sawada’s products are only sold through their exclusive sales channels, including the cooperative’s direct sales stores. They won’t let anyone sell their products in the local stores or at hotel shops.” A full-time farmer in his 40s stated that, “They only partner with small-scale, elderly farmers. They won’t accept the somewhat larger volumes of products that large-scale, full-time farming households (turn out).”

By determining who among local residents profit, the cooperative has achieved commodification to the letter.

The dilemma of being between the cracks of development

From the 1980s onwards, transportation infrastructure improvements in the northern Kanto Region including the bullet train and the Kanetsu and Joshin Expressways have greatly

changed the geographical environment of nearby mountainous rural communities. In the above-mentioned examples of Kawaba and Niiharu, the effect of these can be seen in increases numbers of visitors and in the expansion of work commuting areas. On the other hand, there are also localities that have fallen between the “cracks of development.”

Gunma County’s Kurabuchi Village has to the present experienced a high rate of depopulation coupled with a problematic aging of the remaining population. Geographically it is situated in a mountainous area on the southwest side of Mt. Haruna. Nothing in particular presents itself as a tourist attraction. In spite of this, during tourist season there were some visitors to the village, as it is a back route to the major tourist destination Kusatsu. However with the opening of the Joshinetsu Expressway, the volume of traffic in the village and sales at local stores is said to have decreased dramatically.

In the beginning of the 1990s, this village had a period in which it and with the German word *kleingarten* (English: lit. “small garden,” allotment garden) suddenly found themselves at the center of attention. The village office purchased some unused farmland, and under the name “Kurabuchi Kleingarten” began a rental farm enterprise with some *onsen* facilities. This was seen in Japan as one form of green tourism. It became the vanguard for the *kleingarten*/allotment garden boom, but due to the development of similar facilities in other regions (particularly on the outskirts of cities), the number of people who use the *kleingarten* are declining. In addition, the *onsen* facilities are used widely as “public onsen” by residents of the village and surrounding areas, and it has become unclear which is the main focus. In the middle of the Kurabuchi’s economic decline there are two areas showing new growth. These are horticultural therapy and organic farming.

The idea for the *kleingarten* was originally introduced to Kurabuchi by the family of Tatsuyoshi Kondo, a former businessman who lived in Germany for many years. The family learned of horticultural therapy in Germany, and decided that for the benefit of their intellectually-impaired son and for the families of others with similar handicaps should be practiced in Japan. After returning to Japan, he quit his job, took advantage of an opportunity to move to Kurabuchi, and established an organization for this purpose. This organization has been acknowledged as being a pioneering example of “social welfare-rooted *mura-zukuri*” and has been widely introduced, but Kondo himself admits that the purpose and goals of his efforts are not fully understood by the village residents.

“(Using newcomer’s societies as seen in Europe as an example) realization is very difficult. Money quickly becomes a problem... In actuality, rumors spread rapidly, with people saying things like, ‘They’re going to bring those idiot children (handicapped children) here and do something.’ There is a very delicate part to the interests of the village.” (Kondo)

He stresses that the path to developing Kurabuchi must lie in the networking that comes from keywords such as “social welfare,” not just in the shortsighted creation of factories or *onsen* resorts.

Shigeru Sato has been engaged in organic farming in Kurabuchi for 30 years, and in addition to spreading organic farming among young farmers, he also proactively provides assistance to former city businessmen that having an interest in organic farming have moved to the village. In the midst of a situation in which the average age of general farming households is rising dramatically and many are forced to engage in supplementary businesses, the age of most of the new organic farmers are in their 20s and 30s. At present, just over 30 organic farming households are in the village. The organic boom of recent years has helped in this, and the prices of organic agricultural goods have stable, high prices. The situation is one in that, “The only people doing well in the village are the organic farmers.”

The ideal for this village may at some point become that of an “eco-welfare village” rooted in social welfare, health, environment, and co-existence. However, the reaction of other residents as evidenced in interviews was one of cool indifference. The social welfare (horticultural therapy) and organic farming espoused by these people has not permeated into other districts, and are at present isolated endeavors.

Marginalization and a dependence on public utilities

The Seimo Area in southern Gunma Prefecture lies in the river basin of the Kanna River adjacent to the Chichibu Area of Saitama Prefecture. This mountainous area has the most severe rates of depopulation and aging in eastern Japan. Ueno is located in the deepest part of Tano County. The population of elderly persons (those over age 65) exceeds 40% in Ueno. The main places of employment are the village office, agricultural cooperative, and forestry union, and excluding these, the main avenue of employment comes from labor on subcontracted public works construction. The larger settlements are along Route 299, which has seen road improvements over the last several years (for a dam project that will be discussed later). Other settlements are scattered throughout the mountain gorges with steep cliffs looming overhead, earning the village its nickname: “The Tibet of Gunma.” In these villages it is felt that depopulation and aging have gone as far as is possible, and that these villages are in the process of disappearing altogether. Empty houses and derelict buildings are quite noticeable.

In spite of this, in the latter part of the 1990s, Ueno Village experienced a period that could be considered a gold rush. The reason for this is that in the inner part of the village, the Tokyo Electric and Power Company began construction of a hydroelectric power plant and dam. Approximately 1,000 individuals not registered as residents but involved in construction are stationed in Ueno. This has had a profound positive effect on the local economy, mainly for stores and inns. The small, eight hectare portion of remaining agricultural land has been

converted to temporary housing. Employment in areas such as part-time office work and cleaning has also emerged. The number of necessary personnel will in stages be reduced, but the project will require more than 10 years to complete (following completion it will be unmanned, and operated from a remote location). However, the impact of the hydroelectric power plant is for the municipal government (village office) that of monetary assistance. Over the next 10 years, a total of 4.5 billion yens will be distributed to this village of 1,500 residents. Tokyo Electric is donating 2.1 billion yens, and the Resources and Energy Agency is donating 2.4 billion yens (only usable for infrastructure improvements). Because of this, in recent years there has been a continual construction and upgrading of roads, and various types of public and tourism facilities (museums, lodgings, etc.), creating a very clear disparity with neighboring municipalities.¹²

It may be that as there are no homes in the area to be submerged, no criticism of the construction of the dam was heard. Rather, many people hope that upgrades near the dam will positively affect the efforts to promote tourism being made by the village. Most people are entirely concerned with the best way to utilize the funds after construction is complete.

Most of Japan's local municipal governments are largely dependent on financial assistance from the central government (tax allocations to local governments, various types of grant monies, etc.). Most of them have a tendency to desire large-scale projects and grants. In general the globalization of economic activity is stressed, but in this regard the role of the state remains extremely important. On the other hand, the decline of former key industries (agriculture, sericulture, forestry) and the closure of branch plants are truly manifestations of the globalization of economic activity. However, for the residents of Ueno, the existence of the village office, prefecture, state, and corporations are still strongly felt. The *mura-okoshi* strategy in which public funds are used to set up publicly-run companies for the purposes of tourism and the production and sales of specialty products is not unique to Ueno; rather it is a general format that was already in existence and is seen all over Japan. A worker at the Ueno Village Office described the status quo as being a form of "communism." For remote localities in which tourism is not fully established, the current reality is that without funding from the central government there is no way to sustain these communities.

Urbanization and loss of regional identity

Ogo Town is situated at the base of the gentle south slope of Mt. Akagi. It was the last locality in the prefecture to practice widespread sericulture, but in the last ten-odd years it has seen itself transformed into a "bedroom community" for neighboring Maebashi City, the capital city of Gunma Prefecture. It has become an important point for roads and bypasses connecting different cities in the prefecture. Furthermore, agricultural land is being converted to facilities such as housing and shopping malls, creating a situation of sprawl-type urbanization and

suburbanization often seen elsewhere. The problems most commonly cited at the town office's hearings and interviews with residents were issues such as: 1) In contrast to the rapidly growing population, schools are small and decrepit, 2) Inconsistent development and disorderly land use creates mutual disadvantage to both farmers (particularly those engaged in animal husbandry) and new residents not engaged in farming, 3) The opening of large-scale stores is causing the shops in the main shopping area to fall into decline, and 4) Concerns regarding the increasing number of delinquents.

For many years Ogo was the center of Seta County's economy, and flourished in the Edo Period as the town connected to the castle of the feudal lord (Ogo Castle). Regardless of this, while researching Ogo, when the questions "What is unique about Ogo?" and "What are Ogo's good points?" were posed to residents most people did not return answers. This was rather striking. This contrasts with the general, strong consciousness towards the good points of one's village that was felt among residents of the preceding five localities (most people answered along the lines of, "Natural Scenery" or "Quiet Environment"). However, this is not something to be surprised about. Nowadays in most urban and suburban areas that are becoming so-called "bedroom communities," it is difficult to find the unique qualities of the locality as a place. In environments where the special "gaze" of outsiders is not present, it is likely that among residents consciousness regarding local culture and identity will be low.

Finally, in 2004 Ogo Village was annexed into the prefectural capital, Maebashi City. The population has been expanding rapidly, a situation the Ogo Town Office (municipal government) finds meritorious from a management perspective. One person living near the shopping area commented:

"Our culture is important. It is from this that different cultures are born. If we do not try hard, then we ourselves are to blame. When I say 'try hard,' I mean have the drive to do things ourselves. If a moment in the flow of time destroys Ogo (through annexation), there may not be anything that can be done about that. If there is something we must learn from that, we must position ourselves to try to learn it. Through that we will be born again as a new town. I want to treat the culture of the past as something important. What is the kind of culture that must be transmitted to others? I want make Ogo into the kind of town that people think is good."

If "commodification" cannot be realized, the pride of the castle town will also be powerless.

7. Conclusions

The first three localities have been successful in local economic promotion, resulting in stabilized settlements, whereas the three other localities have been unsuccessful, either in maintaining stable settlements and economic bases, or in preserving the landscape and rural environment,

regardless of people's efforts and hopes. Only exceptional localities with privileged conditions of location and resources can survive successfully. In other words, preservation through the commodification of rurality is not an easy task.

My general conclusion from the case studies is that a rural development model based on traditional concepts of "rural," including tourism and amenities—often referred to as *mura-okoshi* (or *mura-zukuri*)—should not be an essential or primary planning strategy for villages that are attempting to address the problem of uneven rural development. Today, many rural municipalities in Japan view tourism promotion as a panacea for local economic and agricultural revitalization. Clearly, it is impossible for all villages to follow that model.

It seems possible that there is some logic to the argument that rurality is the conscious products of people. Rural areas as "absolute spaces" can no longer exist. As Shucksmith (1994) stresses, modern rurality can only be perceived as a societal representation. The gaze of tourists, who are consumers, transforms the culture and landscape of a place, as well as the form that accompanies it. Through this, garden or pastoral landscapes of the countryside for consumers are formed, and the term "rurality" is redefined. This is not contradictory to Urry's famous thesis (Urry 1990, 1995). Supposing that even if the authenticity of a certain place's rurality can only be a social construction, and that it is the strategy of existence for the people living there, there may also be a position to pardon the problem of the truth of that authenticity. However, the opportunities and chances of success for a place to commoditize as an existence strategy are not given evenly; rather, it is more accurate to say they are highly uneven.

If one were to ask me whether tourism is an effective method for vitalizing the economies of rural communities and conserving the landscape, I would have to say that in the globalized urban world, it is impossible to answer "yes" without conditions.

Notes

1. Paper presented at the 21st Dokkyo International Forum, "Beyond Tourism." November 15, 2009. This is a partial summary and compilation of the contents of Kitano (2009) for the purposes of this conference. This paper includes direct quotations of entire paragraphs, but these paragraphs do not include special notes or citations.
2. An expression of the "knife-edge path between preservation and destruction" is used in Soja (1989: 108) in reference to David Harvey's argument on uneven geographical landscape.
3. The 1978 OECD Report reports that between 40% and 60% of farmers in member countries are part-time, defined as having more than 50% of household income coming from off-farm jobs (Fuller 1984: 202). In Japan, 79% of farmers in 1990 are part-time by this definition. In this sense, they are already semi-proletariat (Lobao 1996: 87).
4. See Sorokin and Zimmerman (1929), for example.
5. For a comprehensive review of classical and recent debates on the urban-rural continuum, see Pahl (1996).
6. Because of its insufficiently scientific definition of 'urban,' Castells (1976) regards the Chicago School's arguments merely as 'urban ideology.'
7. While there may be a tendency to view all rural areas, i.e., those looking "rural," as *place*, those rural

- areas dominated by capital-intensive industrial agriculture and related agro-industry (both of which form a kind of quasi-urban built environment) must be regarded as fundamentally *different* spaces.
8. After the 2000s, another but essentially similar term, *mura-zukuri* (translated as “village (re-)building”) has been more popular. The difference in connotation is that *mura-zukuri* refers mainly to local policy that includes residents’ participation, while *mura-okoshi* implies a more voluntary local movement.
 9. Villages, towns, and cities are Japanese municipal units representing the lowest administrative authority (municipality). They are basically distinguished according to population: a village has a population of 5,000 or less; a town has a population of 5,000 to 50,000; and a city has a population of 50,000 or more. A village usually can be divided into several administrative districts or *aza* which, in some cases, are former municipal villages merged into a current, bigger village. These old villages include several hamlets or *buraku*, which sometimes can be considered natural villages. Hence, a village in the latter meaning consists of a relatively large spatial territory. Besides those areas of residential hamlets, the remaining physical space is farmland or forest. Therefore, the spatial area of a Japanese village is typically greater than that of a U.S. village. For example, the area of Niiharu village, one of the six cases studied in this paper, is 182km²; 84% of its area is covered by forest.
 10. For Japanese people, *onsen*, which can be translated as a spa or hot spring, does not have the same meaning as spa resorts in western cultures. *Onsen* tours have always been major parts of Japanese popular resort and recreational life. Generally these *onsen* are located in mountainous regions and form resort areas. Sugiura and Gillespie explains, “*Onsen* heal the body and nature heals the mind and heart” (1994: 192).
 11. *Tsukemono* are traditional Japanese pickles and salted vegetables, and are an essential and popular part of the Japanese diet.
 12. For example, when driving on Route 299, the road through Nakazato Village is one-lane and winding, but the moment you enter Ueno Village you notice immediately the road has been upgraded.

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