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著者	Wood Donald C.
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Thinking Locally and Acting Globally in Regional Japan: Development with Respect to a Community's Base¹

Donald C. Wood

Introduction

Considering that the “think globally, act locally” slogan, which rose to popularity in the 1970s, is said to have grown from the urban planning and sociological work of Scottish scholar Patrick Geddes (1854-1932), it seems fitting to use it in reference to local revitalization in regional Japan, where communities are now facing serious social problems relating to the plummeting birthrate, attrition, and a growing sense of urgency that drives some to consider proposals like becoming a candidate for hosting a nuclear power-related facility.

The “think globally, act locally” rubric has been employed mainly with regards to ethical consumption over the last several decades, but my concern here is with regional development in Japan—commonly known as “revitalization”—and there is one point at least on which the two issues cross. This is in the relationship between the local and the global in the act of consumption, which was a major concern of Adam Smith in his seminal *Wealth of Nations*, and also of Aristotle, who contrasted actions performed as means to defined ends (“economic,” in common parlance) with actions performed for the sake of themselves, such as maintaining social relationships (Gudeman 2008: 9). As noted economic historian Karl Polanyi (1957: 79) explains: “Whenever Aristotle touched on a question of the economy he aimed at developing its relationship to society as a whole.”

In ethical consumption, buyers generally seek to send signals back to the producers and marketers of products when they purchase them—to create a

¹ An earlier version of this essay was presented at a meeting of the British Association for Japanese Studies at Akita University on November 2, 2013.

better world by means of informed consumption. This is the core of the “think globally, act locally” concept. Its slogan, James Carrier points out, admonished us to “consider things in terms of their broader, even global, context and especially the ways that our decisions and actions would affect that context” (Carrier 2008: 33). In other words, changing local behavior was supposed to also change the global system. However, Carrier doubts that this truly works, partly because even “ethical” consumers have too strong a tendency to think locally—in a way governed mainly by market principles and a desire for maximum profit at minimal expense—and partly because the signaling mechanism tends to encourage promoters of ethical consumption to truss up their products (such as package tours) as being hyper-ethical when they are really not to such a degree (see De Neve et al. 2008 and Carrier and Luetchford 2012). In other words, “ethical” consumers wind up participating in market transactions that are at least partially false—their expectations are not totally reasonable and therefore they cannot assess situations reasonably in terms of their expectations. Carrier argues that inverting the “think globally, act locally” rubric paints a clearer picture of ethical consumption because consumers are primarily balancing very local ideas—a desire to get a “good deal”—with a desire to make a difference in the larger, more distant world.

Two aspects of Carrier’s argument help me to make my point in the present case: 1) regional revitalization efforts in Japan which focus on strengthening and protecting a community’s base are more likely to succeed over those that focus mainly on market transactions, and 2) making local decisions based on ideas about how the greater outside world *ought* to be rather than merely reacting to regional and global forces, will prove more fruitful over the long term. Thinking locally first—as in placing emphasis on local benefits—is fine as long as local communities do not sacrifice long-term prosperity over short-term profits and as long as they act in terms of a greater sense of “oughtness” about the world in their efforts to revitalize and maintain their base.

A Community's Base

Central to the point of this essay is Stephen Gudeman's concept of a community's base, defined as its "shared materials and services" (Gudeman 2008: 28):

A base is a shifting, heterogeneous collection through which relationships are made. Contingent and locally specified, a base mediates relations between people and relates them to things. It is a heritage that lies outside the person as material resources, tools, and knowledge, and within as sediments from others that create an identity (Ibid.).

Furthermore, according to Gudeman, a community's base is created, maintained, and utilized by way of social relationships—such as connections revolving around rights to a well or to some common pool resource—and also appears in vastly different forms across cultures. It could be something that a society's members can freely help themselves to, or it might be distributed to them by the state, as in Cuba or North Korea. A base might be grounded in communal rights to the land upon which a people lives—rights passed down to them by their ancestors—or it might take the form of a production system that supports the community's economy, such as the industrial agricultural system of the village of Ogata-mura in Akita Prefecture, northeastern Japan, with which this essay is largely concerned. In other words, it can be embedded to a greater or lesser degree in social relations. It can also be organized in terms of formal institutions.

Gudeman distinguishes between two different modes of the economy, making it contradictory by nature. These are market (impersonal trade) and mutuality (community), and the ever-present conflict between these creates economy's tension. Explains Gudeman: "Economies are shifting combinations of the two,

and individuals are pulled in both directions, which they modulate, hide, disguise, and veil in practices and discourse” (Gudeman 2008: 5). It should be noted that Gudeman does not take a classical Marxist approach in focusing on the alienation of the worker. Rather, he argues that all market participants “become separated from their mutual relationships, from goods and services that mediate and maintain social relations” through an overly-strong focus on trade (Gudeman 2008: 12). The important take-home point here is Gudeman’s argument that when trade cascades into the realm of mutuality, which happens “when market participants, through the search for profit, extend their reach to non-commoditized things and services” (Gudeman 2008: 19), impersonal market models, the likes of which are championed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), and the World Trade Organization (WTO), begin to take precedence and a community’s base becomes threatened. Of even greater importance to the current situation in regional Japan is the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which is essentially a panacea for the WTO (at least in part).

Ogata-mura: Background and Revitalization

I would like to now consider some examples of revitalization efforts that I have investigated in the village (“mura”) of Ogata, Akita Prefecture, northeastern Japan. Although some of these have some merits, they basically stand as “do not try this at home” examples—they serve as reminders that local regional revitalization efforts which focus on strengthening and protecting a community’s base are more likely to succeed over those that focus mainly on market transactions, and making local decisions based on ideas about how the greater outside world *ought* to be rather than merely reacting to regional and global forces, should prove more fruitful over the long term.

For more than fifteen years I’ve been researching the social, political, and economic development of Ogata-mura. I spent two years as the village’s Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) from 1995 to 1997 conducting ethnographic

fieldwork there, returned in 2001 for about one year of follow-up research, and then conducted a series of investigations that stretched from 2004 to the summer of 2012 (see Wood 1999; 2003; 2005; 2012). The village is located about a one-hour drive north of Akita City, just to the east of the Oga Peninsula. Ogata-mura is a quite unlike other rice farming villages in Japan in that its territory was created by filling in a natural lagoon—the largest single reclamation project ever undertaken in the country. Also, the residents were chosen through a national, competitive, selection process and they settled in the new village over a relatively short time span, from 1967 to 1974.

The village's rice farming system was large from the start. Individual holdings were ten hectares, and these were later increased to fifteen. The system was supposed to be a model for modern agriculture—rational and efficient farm management and a high degree of mechanization. Furthermore, in contrast to the typical Japanese postwar agrarian situation of small, privately-owned farms dependent on household-based labor, the settlers of Ogata-mura originally worked their farms collectively, in teams of five to ten men, and all rice produced for the market was sold to the local grain elevator corporation, in accordance with the law. But problems arose when about one-half of the settlers refused to initiate cutbacks in rice production beginning in the mid-1970s, and started marketing their grains through non-government (illegal) channels as well—even selling rice directly to consumers. At the same time, a significant proportion of the village's settlers disagreed with their law-breaking neighbors, and deep divisions appeared within the young community. The result of all this, in a nutshell, was a fractioning of the village society into two main camps: those who fought against the government and grew and sold rice illegally, and those who complied with government orders.

Under the control of a powerful mayor who migrated to Ogata-mura from a nearby town as a member of the third settler wave and who had always been loyal to the national government regarding rice policies, the village administration had become very concerned about the effects of the municipality's

internal political problems on its image by the early 1980s. Indeed, these “problems” had been quite serious, culminating in police roadblocks to prevent rice from leaving the village covertly and land seizures, and even motivating some settlers to commit suicide. The administration’s concerns were not unfounded. At one time Ogata-mura was widely known as the “black market rice village” (*yami-gome mura*) and its farmers were widely considered to be little more than an uppity bunch of greedy, profit-minded and spoiled princelings across the country (even though a great number of the settlers had always abided by the law). To be sure, the central and prefectural governments held no great feelings of love for the village as of the 1980s. In an attempt at cleaning up the image of Ogata-mura, the village administration attempted to redefine the municipality as a place where people could enjoy recreation in a rural setting with a new development plan it aptly dubbed the “Rurec Plan”—the administration’s version of village revitalization (*mura-okoshi*). One of the earliest signs of this was its attempt in the late 1980s to build a golf course on an open piece of land that had neither been used for settlement nor farming. This proposal, however, was soundly defeated by a large consortium of village residents that transcended the community’s political divide, which had become very deep by that time.

Now I will briefly consider three of the village’s main image-building, or revitalization, projects which may have served some of their purposes, but which also increased the tension in the community. All of these would probably have worked out much better had they been planned with the community’s base in mind, rather than for maximum impact.

Ogata-mura’s Solar Vehicle Races

Inspired by a solar vehicle race held annually in the Australian outback, a well-known Akita hairstylist proposed to the mayor of Ogata-mura around 1990 that the village try hosting a similar event. After two or three years of work the

first race was held in August of 1993 as “The World Solar Car Rallye Japan in Ogata” on the public roads of the village. This first event—heavily funded by outside sources, including Akita Prefecture, PepsiCo, IBM, and Honda—could be said to have still been fairly well-connected to and protective of the village’s base, as laid out by Gudeman, and it was deemed an overwhelming success. Next, however, the mayor pushed through the village council a plan to build a new 31 kilometer solar track running from the south pumping station along the primary north-south irrigation canal to the main east-west canal and back. The track was ready for use by the time the second event, known as “The World Solar Car Rallye in Akita,” was held in July of 1994. Foreign teams became regular competitors in the race from the second time. The administration offered special financial assistance to these teams. Starting in 1995 solar bicycle races became part of the annual event, and the funding remained high.

On the surface the solar (and also electric) car events—the stars of the Rurec Plan—helped to clean up the village’s image. Clean air, clean water, and clean farming: all of these were interlinked in this package. Resident interest in the events, however, dwindled over time. A few sons of settlers formed teams and joined, and younger people of the village enjoyed having something unusual happen. It was also interesting for many villagers to have some foreigners to speak English with. But the events do not last all year, and even though money came from Akita Prefecture and from large corporate sponsors, the village was spending tremendous amounts on the events and on the maintenance of the track. Opposition farmers complained and ran for positions on the village council with anti-solar event platforms, but with little success. Things only began to really change when the mayor left office in the year 2000 and the true scale of the village’s investment in the events became fully known. Not surprisingly, the solar vehicle races all underwent significant reorganization at the beginning of the current century (explained in greater detail in Wood 2012).

Ogata-mura's *Bunkajin* Project

One of the village's most curious endeavors is the “*bunkajin* settlement project.” In the early 1990s, when the council was controlled by settlers loyal to the mayor at the time, and who had not broken the central government's rice production or marketing laws, it passed a plan to build an area for people with special skills or talents (*bunkajin*) on an unused block of land located on the southeast corner of “east section three” of the village. It was felt that these exceptional settlers would be able to mingle with the villagers, share their knowledge with them, and inspire them somehow—especially the school children. The plan was to select people from among a number of applicants and pay the newcomers a salary of one hundred thousand yen per month for three years as well as to hand over the residential property to each person after he (or she) had built a house on it and lived there for seven years.

From the beginning, however, there were problems with the plan. Many villagers immediately complained about the use of their taxes for the project. Another problem was the label *bunkajin* – a politically-loaded expression that is frequently used to refer to literary figures, traditional performers, scholars, artists, and the like. Translated into English it could be “a cultural person,” or perhaps even “a cultured person.” When used on the national stage the term does not usually offend people, but using the term inside the village in this way made many farmers wonder: “If these people are ‘cultured’ then what are we: barbarians?”

Despite protests, the project proceeded. As of April 1994, three people—a luthier, a retired pilot and sky-sports instructor, and an engineer—had been accepted by the village government. In the end, the engineer backed out, so the other two became the first to build homes in the new area. With only those two houses standing, the neighborhood seemed lonely and empty when I left the village in 1997. Upon my return in 2001, however, I was astonished to find that six more houses had been constructed. The first settlers had been joined by a

chemist, a professor of computer engineering, a professor emeritus of Akita University, a champion water skier, a sculptor, and an education specialist. Yet although the neighborhood had shaped up, of the eight *bunkajin* who had built homes as of 2004, only the luthier resided there all the time. The other seven continued to maintain homes elsewhere. There are more *bunkajin* houses in the neighborhood today, but the general residential situation has not changed much. In some cases village farmers may have made the professional newcomers feel a bit unwelcome – one of the *bunkajin* complained privately of discrimination.

Several steps have been taken, though, to bring the *bunkajin* into the community, like adding their neighborhood to one of the neighborhoods of the farmer settlers for village clean-up duties, for end-of-year and beginning-of-year parties, and for the biannual community sports day. Over the last ten years or so the *bunkajin* have also been visiting the village schools to make demonstrations for the students. I found that this had some positive effects (Wood 2012). The recruitment project continues today, but the *bunkajin* name has been dropped, and the monthly cash payments have been discontinued.

Ogata-mura's Land Reclamation Museum

Perhaps the most problematic revitalization project the village has seen to-date is Ogata-mura Land Reclamation Museum (The Polder Museum of Ogata-mura), which is located on the west side of the settlement, across the highway from the JA gas station. It occupies about 2,530 square meters of land, and cost over one and a half billion yen to build, including the displays within. The village covered the entire cost alone, through loans of course, because the national and prefectural governments refused to help (see Wood 2005 for more). The facility opened its doors on April 29th, 2000, but it was not a happy occasion for the many Ogata-mura residents who had opposed the mayor's plan from the beginning. They had even asked for a referendum—a chance to vote against it—but were denied this by the village assembly, which was packed with

supporters of the mayor.

Although the administration had ostensibly expected one hundred and fifty thousand visitors to the museum during its first year, this number was not attained until about three years after the grand opening. Visitor number two-hundred thousand walked in the door in October of 2004, bringing the total income from ticket sales to about twenty-five million yen – still a far cry from the 1.5 billion that the village spent to build it. The museum's failure to generate a profit has been a major point of contention for many villagers. Even two or three years after its opening, it was not hard to find adults in the community who had yet to set foot inside. Nor was it hard to find residents who claimed that they would never do so. This partly reflected the fact that the facility never related very much to the actual lives of the farmers. For example, the museum focuses mostly on the reclamation and the earliest years— a theme to which only the first settlers can relate very well. Those who came in the fifth wave had different experiences. Also, for most village farmers problems with rice production and marketing dominated their lives since the mid-1970s, and this entire aspect of the village's history was intentionally glossed over by the museum at the beginning. Basically therefore, what the museum offered was a fairly sterile, textbook version of the creation of the land and the construction of the farming community. Improvements have been made, however, such as expanding the museum's coverage of the village's earlier years. Volunteer guides have also been added. This is a positive development, but not one without its own problems; villagers who fought against the government have not been considered safe guides for groups of rice farmers that visit the museum.

The facility stands out among the big projects of the pre-2000 administration of the village as its greatest attempt to whitewash the past, rewrite the history of the village, and remake its identity. It is also a good example of the “if we build it they will come” train of thought regarding regional construction that became very deeply ingrained in Japanese politics during the bubble economy years (see Matanle and Rausch et al. 2011— esp. Ch. 6). From the time of the project's birth

the majority of villagers were displeased at best about the prospect of their tax revenues being used for such an endeavor, and although this sentiment has tapered off somewhat over the years it has never completely vanished. In fact, in some cases it only grew with time. Of course, the facility is not totally without value, but it does not speak much to the real concerns of most of the community residents. Like the solar races, it does not relate well to the village community's base.

Conclusions: A New Direction?

The course of revitalization Ogata-mura pursued in the 1990s, while not a total failure, had detrimental social impacts on the community and has not proven to be sustainable (without large financial inputs, which the municipality can hardly afford today). This is the result of ignoring the relationship between revitalization and a community's base. The Rurec Plan, after all, was mainly directed at outsiders, which little thought to what was important to the majority of the residents. This strategy can be compared to impersonal market-oriented trade, which as Gudeman points out, infringes on mutuality, cascading into that realm and threatening the base. Especially worrisome now, with the current national obsession with oil and natural gas exploration, the rejuvenation of the construction industry under "Abenomics," and the empty promises offered by the Liberal Democratic Party to protect the national base as it seeks a way to become party to the TPP, is the possibility that Ogata-mura's 1990 path might be reflected in regional revitalization projects across Japan to an even greater degree. This would not be exactly on the same scale, but if communities ignore their bases to pursue initiatives that seem to promise great short-term returns, and ones that are essentially only reactions to external stimuli such as Abenomics, the results cannot be expected to be any better than those seen in Ogata-mura.

However, Ogata-mura now has a project that might offer a solution to the

problem of how to revitalize while being mindful of mutuality: a new clean-energy business enterprise—a joint venture between the village, Akita University, TDK Corporation, and several smaller businesses—that was launched in April of 2010². This project, termed “Local Smart Grid,” combines wind and solar power with fuel cell batteries in an attempt to create a clean and dependable energy network for the village, the technology for which is of course intended for eventual use elsewhere. Currently, three solar arrays, a 700-watt fuel cell battery, and a windmill capable of putting out up to twelve kilowatts of power, are now helping to provide the Polder Museum with electricity and to power LED streetlights nearby. Other windmills are also now being built, and others are planned. Village residents—even those who strongly opposed the projects of the Rurec Plan—are generally supportive of this new venture, and the project has received support from the national government as well. In addition, in March of 2012 the village announced a plan to form a new wind power corporation and build two windmills, capable of generating 1,990 kilowatts of power, and start selling the electricity by 2015, and it announced at the same time that a new wind power enterprise had agreed to invest in the proposed company (Akita Sakigage Shinpō 2012). This project is related to a so-called “feed-in tariff scheme” that the Democratic Party of Japan initiated before falling from power at the end of 2012 (Eda Hiro 2011), and it mirrors the current aspirations of numerous other high-tech companies (Kyodo News 2011b). It is unclear if this plan will live up to its expectations, however. Obstacles include concern over the wellbeing of the many wild birds that make their home in the bird preserve near the museum (Akita Sakigage Shinpō 2013). But it would be a major step in the right direction if Ogata-mura could eventually reach a point at which it no longer needed to rely on the national power grid. If the village could at least become capable of generating enough power by itself to operate its three large pumping stations, which must run around the clock to

² Although I am employed by Akita University, I am uninvolved with this project. The university’s medical school, where I work, is also uninvolved.

keep the lagoon from reclaiming the village, the project could be called a success. After all, there is plenty of space in Ogata-mura for windmills and solar arrays.

One example of where this kind of progressive, base-conscious development (i.e. “revitalization”) might be heading comes from the tiny German island of Pellworm, which lies below sea level at high tide and which produces about three times as much electricity as it needs (AFP-Jiji 2013)³. Residents of this island own large individual stakes in its main electricity-generating enterprise, and individual farms are fitted with windmills and solar arrays, making them into farmers of energy as much as of food. Thus, the island community’s base is well-linked to an economy in which nearly all (or at least the great majority) residents seem to share, achieving an apparent balance between trade and mutuality that should minimize social or political alienation.

What Ogata-mura needs—and has needed—is greater integration between the community’s base and its revitalization projects. The potential for linking its pre-existing solar vehicle races with sustainable energy-production in this era of TPP, fracking, and Abenomics—this time of great uncertainty in the future of agriculture—is too good to overlook. Furthermore, lessons we can learn from Ogata-mura about the importance of base-nurturing revitalization over maximum-impact revitalization should be heeded by all other communities across Japan and elsewhere—thinking locally for the locality’s sake while acting globally for the sake of something bigger.

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³ See also <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oh9C5IBRV5g>

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