Sustainable anime tourism: Dream-like town development using manga culture based on the ideas of manga artist ISHInoMORI Shotaro

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A b s t r a c t

Recently, anime tourism has been attracting attention, shown the potential of attracting overseas fans of manga and anime, and is expected to be a key factor in expanding Japan's inbound tourism demand. However, if the popularity of the anime/manga is transient, it is almost impossible to sustain the related tourism services. In this situation, we are trying to revitalize the local tourism industry of Ishinomaki City, Miyagi Prefecture, by creating a dream-like town using manga culture based on the ideas of manga artist ISHInoMORI Shotaro. Specifically, to create sustainable tourism resources, the city is being developed based on flexible and unique "free-thinking like drawing manga," rather than focusing on a single manga work. In this paper, we discuss the efforts and success of Ishinomaki City's town development and discuss future developmental pathways for further strengthening the foundations that may enable sustainable anime tourism.

K e y w o r d s

Anime tourism
Inbound tourism
Cool Japan
SDGs

Introduction

Anime tourism has been attracting attention recently; it utilizes popular Japanese manga and animation (anime) as resources, and involves visiting areas where the manga/anime is set, and towns and facilities associated with the work's creator (Anime Tourism Association, 2021). Anime tourism also manifests itself through what came to be known as "pilgrimage to the sacred sites of anime," because the spots associated with the works are called "sacred anime sites or Anime seichi" and the trip to them is called a "pilgrimage or Junrei" (Okamoto, 2018). Japanese manga and anime are considered to be world-class cultural products, have many overseas fans, and the related tourism is popular not only among Japanese people but also among foreigners. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that anime tourism is part of the "Cool Japan" policy, a brand strategy of the Cabinet Office to achieve economic growth in Japan by promoting inbound tourism.

A successful example of this policy can be seen in Hida City, Gifu Prefecture, which is the setting of the anime film "Your Name." This film was released in 2016 across 135 countries and regions and became a big international hit. As a result, in the subsequent year, 2017, the number of visitors to Hida City (i.e., about 1.13 million) was reported to have increased by 12.4% compared with 2016. This mostly owed to an increase in the number of pilgrims attempting to visit the anime's sacred sites. Although the introduction of anime tourism has been progressing in various areas of Japan for quite some time now, it was only in 2016 that the Anime Tourism Association was established. It comprises about 50 companies related to the manga and anime industry, including comic publishers, local governments, and corporations. Since 2018, the association

has been promoting the visualization of sacred anime sites and the development of wide-area tour routes by selecting and officially recognizing such sites across Japan; thus far, there have been 88 officially recognized sacred sites. Through this process, anime tourism has become a key driver of the Japanese tourism industry and inbound tourism. In Miyagi Prefecture, there is a city called Ishinomaki City that is associated with a famous manga artist named ISHInoMORI Shotaro (1938-1998), also known as the producer of "Masked Rider" and "Cyborg 009". We are trying to revitalizing the local tourism industry of the city by creating a dream-like town using manga culture based on the ideas of manga artist ISHInoMORI Shotaro. In this paper, we will examine the efforts and successes of Ishinomaki City regarding the introduction of anime tourism and explore developmental pathways for further consolidating the underpinnings of sustainable anime tourism.

The concept of Ishinomaki Manga Land

With a population of around 140,000 people, Ishinomaki City is located within Miyagi Prefecture. The city's economy is based on the primary industries of fishing, fish processing, agriculture, and paper manufacturing. Located at the mouth of the Kitakami River, the largest river in the Tohoku region, Ishinomaki originally was a rice port, and it has prospered since the Edo period. In March 1997, as an attempt to revitalize the city center that was hollowing out as the population declined, the local government of Ishinomaki City formulated the Ishinomaki Manga Land's basic concept with the idea of creating a "dream-like town" based on manga culture. Although ISHInoMORI was born in Tome City, Miyagi Prefecture, he understood Ishinomaki City's project and

cooperated with the implementation of the concept. At the core of the Ishinomaki Manga Land Basic Concept, a manga museum was constructed. Then, in order to operationalize the concept, the local government established a town management organization named MACHIZUKURI MANBOW Co., Ltd.; thereafter, both the local government and this newly created organization cooperated with the Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the shopping district in the city center, the Japan Railways Group (also known as JR), citizens, and others, to implement the project. The project was launched in earnest in 2001, when the concepts of anime tourism or anime sanctuaries were still nonexistent.

ISHInoMORI Shotaro

Although the Ishinomaki Manga Land Basic Concept project is not focused on specific anime or manga works, it is undeniable that its mainstay revolves around the manga artist ISHInoMORI Shotaro, whose manga and the related anime were renowned worldwide. In fact, ISHInoMORI produced works in various genres, including science fiction, gag, girls' manga, period drama, and learning manga, and was recognized by Guinness World Records as the manga artist with the world's largest number of published comics drawn by a single author. Within the science fiction genre, ISHInoMORI (Figure 1, on the left) has created many works based on the theme of modified human beings and been credited for major hits such as "Masked Rider" (Figure 1, in the center) and "Cyborg 009" (Figure 1, on the right). In particular, in 1971, "Masked Rider" was launched as a mixed media project that involved both a manga and a live-action TV program; the series achieved so much success that it continued to be produced and broadcast even after ISHInoMORI's death in 1998. Despite having been born in Tome City, ISHInoMORI is said to have spent his youth riding his bicycle to the Okada Gekijo movie theater in Ishinomaki City, 40 kilometers away from Tome City, to watch movies and hone his sensibilities as a manga artist. Then, in 1995, although he went to Ishinomaki City to visit a paper mill, he eventually had a conversation with Ishinomaki's mayor, which brought up the topic of a town development plan based on manga and anime culture. Reportedly, ISHInoMORI promised to cooperate with the

project. Specifically, he said, "Manga is a medium with infinite possibilities for expressing all kinds of things," and believed in this notion to the point that he called his flexible and unique way of thinking, which was not bound by conventional fixed concepts, "free-thinking like drawing manga" (Endo, 2021). This way of thinking may be one of the factors that led to the success of Ishinomaki City's efforts to create a dream-like town using manga culture.

ISHInoMORI MANGA MUSEUM

The core facility of the Ishinomaki Manga Land Basic Concept project is the ISHInoMORI MANGA MUSEUM, which opened in 2001 and is located on a sandbar at the mouth of the Kitakami River. Figure 2 shows the museum's exterior, which was built to resemble a spaceship, creating the sense that it landed on "a manga planet." Based on the basic concept of being "a base for the continuous dissemination of manga culture," the museum has a permanent exhibition of ISHInoMORI's work, a special exhibition room, a manga library, a digital archive viewing room, a goods sales area, an animation creation studio, and an original animation theater. The special exhibition room displays not only ISHInoMORI's works but also original drawings of other manga, and events and workshops are held by young manga creators in the space around the manga library. The museum was conceived to be a space that provides visitors with the possibility of experiencing ISHInoMORI's world and works, as well as the whole Japanese manga and anime culture in an integrated manner. Figure 3 shows a Masked Rider at the left in the upper row, Cyborg 009 at the middle of the upper row, Kikaider at the right of the upper row, the permanent exhibition of ISHInoMORI's original drawings at the left of the lower row, an event of the local character "SeaJetter Kaito" in the middle of the lower row, and the entrance and goods sales areas at the right of the lower row. In summary, the ISHInoMORI MANGA MUSEUM is a place for people attracted to and/or connected by manga and anime culture to gather and interact, a sacred place for ISHInoMORI's fans, and at the center of a dream-like town development using manga culture based on ISHInoMORI's idea.

Figure 1. ISHInoMORI Shotaro and his representative works.
Source: Photos and original pictures were provided by Ishimori Production Inc.

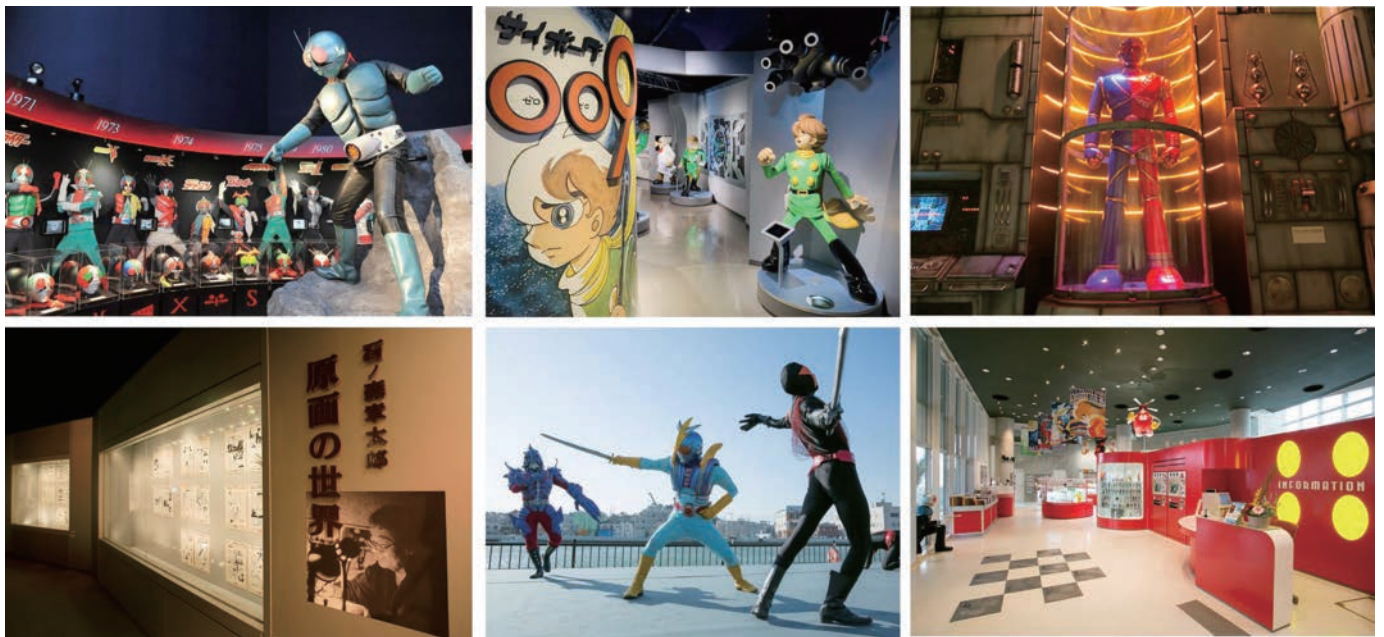**Figure 2**. ISHInoMORI MANGA MUSEUM's exterior
Source: Author

Figure 3. Exhibitions inside the museum and outdoor events
Source: Author

Ishinomaki Manga Road

In the city center, there is a street called Ishinomaki Manga Road, which is dotted with monuments of ISHInoMORI characters. In total, this street comprises 27 monuments, and they are scattered from Ishinomaki Station to the ISHInoMORI MANGA MUSEUM. Figure 4 shows map of Ishinomaki Manga Road, Figure 5 shows some of these monuments. In addition to these monuments, characters from ISHInoMORI's works are lurking everywhere and are featured in places that stretch from post boxes to trains, flagships, and maintenance hole covers on the streets. The real space created by the connection of these scattered characters enhances the creativity of visitors and functions as a campus that embodies ISHInoMORI's idea of a dream-like town development plan using manga culture.

Figure 4. Map of Ishinomaki Manga Road
Source:Author

Figure 5. Characters that decorate the city
Source: Author

The outcomes of creating a dream-like town using manga culture

The exhibition of ISHInoMORI's works and characters at the two aforementioned hubs and the holding of manga events have, together, been successful in revitalizing the central portion of Ishinomaki City, making it livelier. Indeed, manga, anime, and ISHInoMORI's fans began to visit Ishinomaki City to the point that, in 2018, the ISHInoMORI MANGA MUSEUM was selected and officially recognized as one of the 88 Sacred Anime Sites by the Anime Tourism Association. Furthermore, in 2019, the number of annual visitors to the museum reached approximately 230,000.

Despite the city's success, the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011 devastated Ishinomaki City. During this dire period, the ISHInoMORI MANGA MUSEUM functioned as an emergency evacuation center, and as the citizens of Ishinomaki worked to recover from the disaster, the monuments that remained standing (despite being damaged) on Ishinomaki Manga Road provided the locals with a ray of hope. In fact, Ishinomaki City was able to recover from this huge setback, being now recognized by ISHInoMORI's fans as a mecca for manga and anime: a city that makes the most of, and a tourist destination where people can experience, Japan's manga and anime culture.

Considerations

Prior research shows that one of the challenges of introducing anime tourism as a local revitalization strategy is its sustainability (Iwama et al., 2017). This is because if the popularity of the introduced manga and anime works declines, the local area loses tourism resources and can no longer attract tourists. Therefore, if the popularity of the related works is transient, the sustainability of anime tourism is likely to be hindered as well. In response to this issue, we discuss the factors that led to the sustainable 24-year success of the town development plan of Ishinomaki City using manga culture. First, the promotion of anime tourism in Ishinomaki City was not limited to a specific number of works, but on the idea of the genius manga artist ISHInoMORI. It proposed the creation of a dream-like town based on general manga and anime culture; this concept was also not grounded on the idea of promoting a "one-time event." Second, the hubs of ISHInoMORI MANGA MUSEUM and Ishinomaki Manga Road are not just theme parks or tourist spots; instead, they concomitantly serve as landmarks and hosting places for events, festivals, and other manga-related happenings, which are held dozens of times a year. Further, such events are promoted while stakeholders coordinate with city center merchants, and all these factors have successfully promoted sustainable local anime tourism, namely, a steady inflow of tourism that is not swayed by the popularity of a particular work. Finally, Ishinomaki City has a system in place that promotes this town development concept; the central players of this system are Ishinomaki City Hall and MACHIZUKURI MANBOW Co., Ltd., which manage and operate ISHInoMORI MANGA MUSEUM. In 2020, MACHIZUKURI MANBOW Co., Ltd. was designated by Ishinomaki City Hall as an urban renewal promotion corporation. This system, the clear vision/targets behind it, and the understanding and cooperation of citizens has enabled the city to continue its manga/anime-based town development project over a long period. In this way, Ishinomaki City has built a sustainable anime tourism platform.

Conclusion

In this paper, we discussed the necessary measures for sustainable anime tourism, with a focus on Ishinomaki City's town development using manga culture. To continuously attract tourists through anime tourism, it is essential to create tourism resources that are not influenced by the popularity of a single work. Rather than promoting the work itself, anime tourism requires sustaining the curiosity of tourists by continuously providing unique services related to the works in the space for free-thinking like drawing manga. Today, the manga and anime industries are changing rapidly. We have been conducting continuous research to find new ways to use manga and anime culture to ensure the sustainability of anime tourism and align it with the current times. For example, the local government has created an art animation[1] to brand Ishinomaki City as "the town of manga," releasing it on YouTube in an attempt to develop a new fan base. As for the future, we are focused on continuing to create sustainable tourism resources through town development based on free-thinking like drawing manga.

Endnote

[1]For more information about this art animation, please refer to the URL below.
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