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Ryusaku Matsuo

Toyo University, yousakum@gmail.com

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Development of Regional Revitalization Policy by Roadside Stations: From Origins to a New Response in the Post-COVID-19 World*

Ryusaku Matsuo**

Abstract

Roadside Stations are expected to serve as base facilities for regional revitalization, serving functions related to rest, information transmission, and regional alliances. This study examines why Roadside Stations have developed the way they have, based on social background and institutional characteristics, and considers future issues. First, institutional characteristics of Roadside Stations are theoretically explored and the original system supporting them is investigated. A case analysis of the effort of Priority “Roadside Station” is performed. Second, a case study is conducted on the new development of Roadside Stations, the future development of Roadside Stations that have entered the third stage, and responses in a post-COVID-19 world.

Keywords: Roadside Station, Regional Revitalization, Priority “Roadside Station,” The Third Stage, Post-COVID-19 World

1. Introduction

A Roadside Station—*Michi-no-Eki* in Japanese—is a popular public facility where drivers stop to rest. The registration and guidance system for Roadside Stations began in 1993; since the initial registration of 103 stations, their number has steadily increased—as of July 2020, there were 1,180 stations. The approximate number of their annual users nationwide is 210 million, and the approximate total sales amount is 210 billion yen (2015).¹ Moreover, the “rest function,” “information transmission function,” and “regional coordination function”—the three basic public functions identified at the time of establishment of the system—as well as the “economic function,” such as farm stands and restaurants, are well known.

Furthermore, in 2014, they were positioned as the base facilities under the “regional revitalization policy” promoted by the government. Their public functions are expanding, such as the “disaster prevention function,” “medical and welfare functions,” and “resident service function.” Local governments and residents have high expectations regarding the effects of regional revitalization. Accordingly, this study: (1) investigates the development of Roadside Stations based on the social background and institutional characteristics of their origin; (2) explores the introduction of new functions for Roadside Stations; and (3) discusses issues for future development.

* This paper is an extension of the previous work, originally published in Japanese (Matsuo (2020)) and I have obtained permission from the *Toshi Mondai (Municipal Problems)* to publish the extended paper in English.

** Visiting Reserch Fellow at Institute of Social Sciences, Toyo University.

2. Birth of the Roadside Station

The Roadside Station—popular within Japan as well as overseas—is a registration and guidance system operated by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (hereinafter referred to as MLIT). The MLIT issues registration certificates to facilities that meet specified requirements. The idea of the Roadside Station system was born in January 1990 at the “Symposium on Regional Development in Chugoku Region” when the CEO of Funakata General Farm (Current Funakata Farm Group, Yamaguchi City, Yamaguchi Prefecture), Kazuaki Sakamoto, stated: “Just as there are stations on the railways, there should be also stations on the road.”

Subsequently, social experiments, using temporary rest and guidance facilities, were conducted in the Yamaguchi, Gifu, and Tochigi Prefectures. Following a series of social experiments, an advisory group comprising intellectuals held three meetings in May, July, and December of 1992, and the “Roadside Station Recommendations” were summarized. Accordingly, in February 1993, the Roadside Station registration and guidance system was established.

The basic concept of the Roadside Station, as suggested in the Recommendations of the Advisory Group on “Roadside Station,” is that of a “unique and lively place created together with local communities with functions of rest, information exchange, and regional cooperation.”² Thus, Roadside Stations utilize local creativity and ingenuity.

In terms of business, they are public facilities established by municipalities and certified by the national government. However, a Roadside Station is an economic entity, based on self-supporting accounting. Alternatively, it is a public facility and, in itself, an economic entity. Moreover, the management method is based on the originality and ingenuity of each region—a feature hitherto unseen in other public facilities; this has significantly facilitated the development of Roadside Stations. Defining “ingenuity” as “liberty” won the registration and guidance system for Roadside Stations the Japan Marketing Award in 2015.

It is noteworthy that the concept of Roadside Stations germinated with proposals from the private sector and was mostly led by the private sector, including social experiments. The role of the government is limited to the institutional aspect of defining a “place” where the private sector can demonstrate its liberal creativity and ingenuity. The fact that Roadside Stations originated in the private sector is well-reflected in their “disaster prevention function,” which was initiated by the Chuetsu Earthquake in Niigata Prefecture in 2004, when evacuees gathered at a Roadside Station in the affected area. The Roadside Station served as a space for information exchange among disaster victims and collection and distribution of relief supplies. Thereafter, Roadside Stations have been equipped to perform the disaster prevention function, and during the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, these stations also functioned as relay stations for disaster recovery by the SDF. Thus, a Roadside Station disaster prevention function was established.³

Hence, Roadside Stations have been creating new functions not under the initiative of the government, but in response to user requests. Additionally, the “medical welfare function” and “resident service function” were also created by incorporating the requests of local residents. This shows that the Roadside Station is a unique facility serving as a “place” to facilitate the expression of ingenuity required to solve regional problems, and that, despite being a public facility, it is merely supported, and not governed, by the administration. In this manner, the functions of the Roadside Station, which is equipped with public functions such as disaster prevention, have continually changed and functionally developed

by incorporating residents' requests. The following section discusses the main facilities that constitute a general Roadside Station.

3. Functions and systems of Roadside Stations

3.1 Basic functions and facilities

The basic functions of Roadside Station include a: (1) “rest function,” such as 24-hour free restrooms and parking spaces; (2) “information provision function” such as road information; (3) “regional cooperation function,” which is based in regional development facilities and promotes communication between regions; and (4) “economic function” such as farm stands and restaurants. They are established by municipalities or local public organizations and registered by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism upon application from the mayor of the concerned municipality. There were two installation methods: (1) “Integrated Type,” in which the road administrator installs parking lots and toilets, and municipalities install other facilities; and (2) “Single Type,” where municipalities install all facilities. Roadside Stations generally include the following three basic facilities (Figure 1).

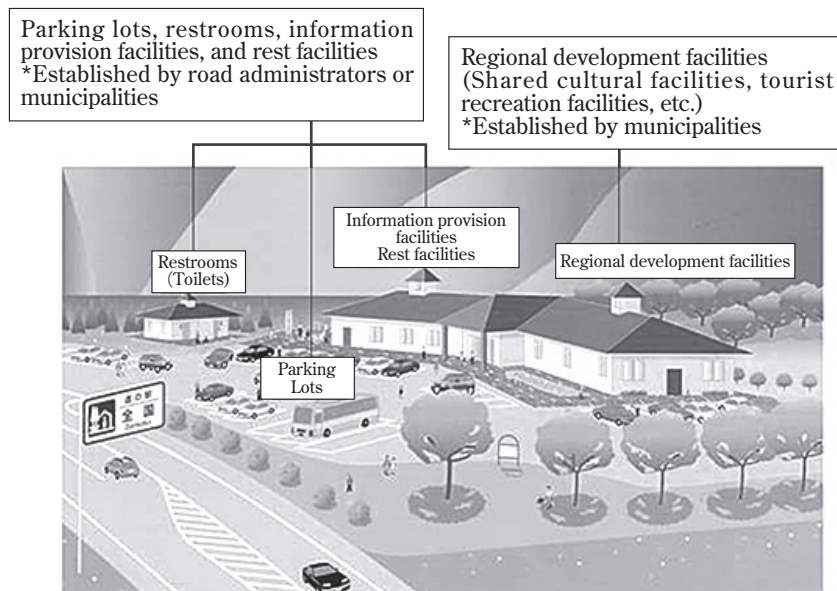


Figure 1 General “Roadside Station” Layout

Source: Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism website(<http://www.mlit.go.jp/road/Michi-no-Eki/outline.html>)

(1) Information Provision Facilities

A guide is stationed at the “Information Provision Facilities” to inform people about local specialties—local delicacies, sightseeing spots, etc.—as well as information on nearby roads. This service is only available in highway service areas, not along ordinary roads. Thus, Roadside Stations not only facilitate acquisition of information about the surroundings, they also help improve relationships between road users and local residents.

Additionally, these stations serve as bases for community medical information, public office functions, and other community services to local residents, as well as for providing road and disaster information. These functions are expected to expand in the future, making these stations base facilities for regional revitalization policies.

(2) Regional Development Facilities

Ever since Roadside Stations were launched and social experiments were conducted in the Yamaguchi, Gifu, and Tochigi Prefectures, the most popular facilities among users have been the “regional development facilities, such as agricultural product direct sales depots, local product sales depots, and restaurants using local ingredients.” Many visitors buy the fresh vegetables, fruits, and other ingredients sold on farm stands. In recent years, many Roadside Stations have expanded their farm stands, and in “Tajima Mahoroba” (Asago-city, Hyogo Prefecture), for example, sales tripled after doubling the sales area of the stand.⁴

(3) Rest Facilities

Rest facilities within Roadside Stations, including hot spring facilities and accommodations, have also diversified in recent years. As of 2018, 82 stations had accommodation facilities and 143 had hot spring bathing facilities.⁵ Given the large number of residential Roadside Stations with accommodations and hot spring facilities, an increasing number of drivers are frequenting Roadside Stations nationwide. With the advent of these stations, driving in Japan is changing from a mode of commuting to a mode of driving tourism, with elements of communal interaction.

3.2 Institutional Features of Roadside Stations

Section 2 discussed that Roadside Stations are public facilities with economic functions and based on self-supporting accounting. Each station is uniquely operated employing local ingenuity and remains institutionally flexible. This section discusses the unique characteristics of the Roadside Station system—an original institutional system introduced to balance the discretion of each station with constraints.

As mentioned above, a Roadside Station is officially defined as a national-level registration and guidance system. At its launch in 1993, the basic concept of “a unique and lively place created together with local communities with functions of rest, information exchange, and regional cooperation” was established.

According to North (1990), for an institution to fulfill its purpose, personal constraints are essential.⁷ However, the operating methods of different Roadside Stations vary, and strong and personal constraints are extremely low. Nevertheless, for many years, Roadside Stations have maintained their original concept. Furthermore, all Roadside Stations meet the basic requirements of the facility, as discussed in Section 3.1, ensuring the maintenance of the quality and image of the entire Roadside Station. Recently, several new functions—disaster prevention, medical welfare, and resident service functions—have been added, and their quality has perceptibly improved.

The Roadside Station, which has institutional characteristics, has maintained its concept for many years by effectively adopting its own system to replace the constraints of a general institution. This section discusses how Roadside Stations have maintained their original concept despite having few restrictions and significant freedom.

In the operation of this system, the following mutual confirmation system—formed by the National “Roadside Station” Liaison Committee and Priority Roadside Station System—plays a significant role in ensuring and improving the overall quality of Roadside Stations.

(1) National “Roadside Station” Liaison Committee

The National “Roadside Station” Liaison Committee was established to promote nationwide cooperation among Roadside Stations. The first National General Assembly was held in Tono, Iwate Prefecture in December 2012 with the attendance of 105 installers (municipalities) and 350 Roadside Station officials (municipalities, prefectures, national governments, and station masters). At the end of the meeting, the adopted Tono Statement read as follows: “To ensure and improve the quality of Roadside Stations by exchanging information on Roadside Stations and promoting cooperation among Roadside Stations, thereby contributing to regional development and improvement of user services in each region.” On the sidelines, a symposium was held between the government and Roadside Station officials to discuss their future development.

The following three issues were identified at the inaugural meeting. (1) The information transmission function should be strengthened, cooperation with related organizations should be further promoted, and new functions such as disaster prevention functions should be discussed. (2) Efforts should be made to share information on good practices and reaffirm the roles of local governments that have established such facilities. (3) The quality of Roadside Stations in promoting regional development should be ensured and continuously improved. A national assembly and symposium are held every year to ensure cooperation among Roadside Stations and propose further development. The ever increasing participation indicates high national expectations. Furthermore, the National Liaison Conference on “Roadside Station” was incorporated as a general foundation in May 2019, and support for the activities of the entire Roadside Station system was strengthened.⁸

(2) Priority “Roadside Station” System

This system certifies Roadside Stations as an excellent example that engage in initiatives for regional revitalization, welcome a large number of people utilizing local specialties and tourism resources, and contribute to the creation of local employment, revitalization of the economy, and improvement of resident services. Additionally, the government supports such Roadside Stations that make active efforts, following these excellent examples as models.

There are four categories of Roadside Stations selected under this system: (1) National Model “Roadside Station,” (2) Specific Theme Type Model “Roadside Station,” (3) Priority “Roadside Station,” and (4) Priority “Roadside Station.” Accordingly, *Michi-no-Eki* approved under the Priority Roadside Station System not only receives government support, but also serves as a model for as many as 1,198 Roadside Stations across the country (Table 1).

Table 1 Priority “Roadside Station” System Overview

Type of the Priority Roadside Stations	Definition/Details	Year of specification	Number of certified stations
Nationwide Model Roadside Stations	Stations that are recognized as a base for regional revitalization and continue to perform particularly excellent functions.		
	(1) MLIT selects an existing Roadside Station.		
	(2) It functions as a regional gateway and regional center for the utilization of regional resources such as tourism, industry, welfare, and disaster prevention, and for the resolution of regional problems. (3) It is required to contribute to the community continuously for a certain number of years (10 + years) after its establishment.	2014	6
Specific Theme Type Model Roadside Stations	Stations that implement initiatives that serve as a model for the nationwide improvement of the quality of Roadside Stations on a specific theme and whose results are recognized.		
	(1) In view of the fact that each Roadside Station has different features, the theme (department) is set in order to enhance exemplary performance.	2016	6
	(2) The station is approved by the Minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism for Roadside Stations more than 10 years after opening. (3) It contributes to the improvement of the quality of Roadside Stations by, for example, responding to inspections and requests from lecturers nationwide.	2017	7
Priority Roadside Stations	Stations with excellent plans that serve as a base for regional revitalization and where effective efforts can be expected in future priority support.		
	Stations with excellent projects are selected based on their innovation, effectiveness, and feasibility.	2014	35
	(1) The Minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism selects the Roadside Station from the planning stage.	2015	38
	(2) Stations with excellent plans are selected based on their innovation, effectiveness, and feasibility.	2016 2019	15 15
Priority Roadside Station Candidates	Stations where ambitious efforts by local communities can be expected to materialize projects that will serve as bases for regional revitalization.		
	(1) The director of the Regional Development Bureau selects projects for the development of Roadside Stations.	2014 2018 2019	49 14 15
	(2) Stations are selected based on the development of ambitious systems in the region for the implementation of initiatives.		

Source: Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism website

Note: Excerpt from Matsuo and Yamaguchi (2019), Table 1 -9.

(3) System for quality assurance and improvement

The quality of the entire Roadside Station is secured and improved through the interaction of the National “Roadside Station” Liaison Committee and Priority “Roadside Station” System. The mechanism for ensuring and improving the quality of Roadside Stations is explained as follows. First, the operation status of Roadside Stations nationwide is understood and shared through cooperation among stations by the National “Roadside Station” Liaison Committee. The operating methods of each Roadside Station are then mutually verified to ensure their compliance with the basic concepts. Furthermore, the Priority “Roadside Station” System identified the “advanced cases” that can serve as models for other Roadside Stations.

Thus, the intended direction is indicated by the Priority “Roadside Station” System, and the National “Roadside Station” Liaison Committee serves as a mutual confirmation mechanism to support further development toward the indicated policy and direction. Alternatively, with the establishment of the Priority “Roadside Station” System and National “Roadside Station” Liaison Committee, the system is equipped with the functions of codes and restrictions of the general system. A diagrammatic representation of the mutual verification system is shown in Figure 2.

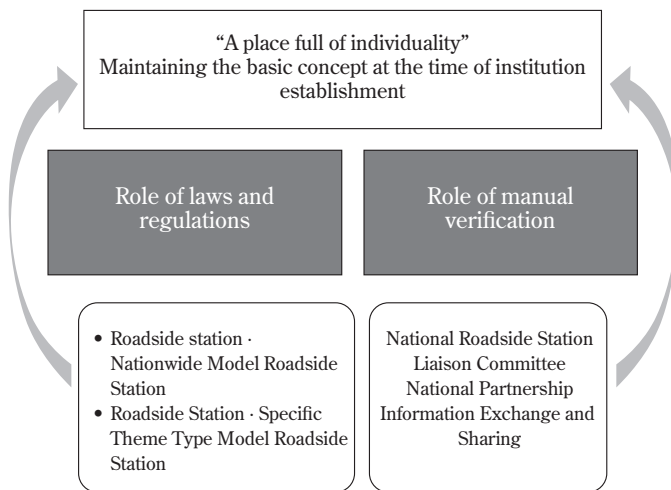


Figure 2 Mutual Confirmation System for Quality Assurance and Improvement

Note: Based on interviews with the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, the author illustrated the concept. Excerpt from Matsuo and Yamaguchi (2019) Figure 1-7.

4. Current Status and Latest Development of Roadside Stations

4.1 Examples of Roadside Station initiatives selected for the Priority “Roadside Station” System

This section presents and compares the efforts of the major Roadside Stations selected as excellent examples under the Priority “Roadside Station” system. First, out of the six stations selected as National Model “Roadside Station”—these stations continuously make excellent efforts for regional revitalization—three stations are selected, and their efforts are discussed. The Roadside Station “Tono Kaze no Oka” (Tono city, Iwate Prefecture) has taken the lead in “disaster prevention” (Photos 1 and 2). It performs advanced disaster prevention functions and can be used as a disaster rescue and recovery operations

base in the event of a calamity, as it is equipped with modern equipment such as satellite communications sets. It has valuable experience of serving as a logistic support base for self-defense forces, firefighters, and volunteers during the rescue operations after the Great East Japan Earthquake. The station has also made significant contributions to the promotion of local industries, such as establishing a fresh fish store selling Sanriku (Ofunato) seafood and supporting the reconstruction of disaster-struck areas. On March 12, 2019, the number of visitors to the station reached 20 million, indicating its popularity with the public.



Photo 1: A Panoramic View of the Roadside Station “Tono Kaze no Oka” (Photo Courtesy of Roadside Station “Tono Kaze no Oka”)



Photo 2: Seafood Section at the Roadside Station “Tono Kaze no Oka” (Photo Courtesy of Roadside Station “Tono Kaze no Oka”)

Second, Roadside Station “Motegi” (Motegi-cho, Tochigi Prefecture) is a local specialty processing plant—that is, “Tezukuri Kobo (Handmade Workshop),”—engaged in developing 33 kinds of products with regional characteristics, such as processed products of local yuzu and strawberries, and “sesame oil”

using specialty perilla, to promote the industry of the town (Photos 3 and 4). Drawing lessons from the 1986 floods, the “Disaster Prevention Hall” was established, which has been useful in raising awareness of disaster prevention among residents and promoting local exchange.



Photo 3: Outside View of the Roadside Station “Motegi” (Photo Courtesy of Roadside Station “Motegi”)



Photo 4: Farm Stand in the Roadside Station “Motegi” (Photo Courtesy of Roadside Station “Motegi”)

Third, the Roadside Station “Kawaba-Denen Plaza” (Kawaba-mura, Gumma Prefecture), to promote “sightseeing,” is developing policies to attract tourists based on “agriculture plus tourism,” which views agriculture in rural areas as a tourism resource. This Roadside Station facilitates villager–visitor interactions, with many villagers participating as leaders through agricultural experiences and local cuisine classes. Although the village has a population of only 3,700, approximately 1.2 million people visit annually—the rate of repeat visits is as high as 70% (Photo 5).



Photo 5: Roadside Station “Kawaba-Denen Plaza” (Photo Courtesy of NPO Hito-to-Michi Kenkyukai)

A characteristic feature of the Roadside Station system is that each station operates under its own management policy, using unique regional characteristics. To respond to these institutional characteristics, in 2016, the Specific Theme Type Model Roadside Station was established for specific themes and supporting policies in line with various management policies were initiated. The first theme was “resident service” (2016; six stations in total); the second was “regional transportation hub” (2017; seven stations in total).

Among these stations, “Ryokami Onsen Yakushinoyu” (Ogano-cho, Saitama Prefecture) positioned Roadside Stations as a base for “health promotion” (Photos 6 and 7). For example, a bus stop has been erected at the station, facilitating transportation for those without a private means of transportation. There is also a welfare center for the elderly in the station, providing daily daycare service to up to 20 people.

The hot spring facility, which is used by 74,000 people annually, is popular not only among tourists but also among the elderly in the community and has become a salon for local residents. The farm stand serves as a place for residents to shop and ship agricultural and forestry products, encouraging and motivating local elderly farmers. This Roadside Station is the core that supports the lives of approximately 13,000 people in the community.



Photo 6: Outside View of the Roadside Station “Ryokami Onsen Yakushinoyu” (Photo Courtesy of Ogano-cho Tourist Association)



Photo 7: Hot Spring Facility in the Roadside Station “Ryokami Onsen Yakushinoyu” (Photo Courtesy of Ogano-cho Tourist Association)

The Roadside Station “Sakaya” (Nichinan-city, Miyazaki Prefecture) returns profits to the “Sakaya District Promotion Committee” and promotes local self-governing activities, exchange activities, and employment generation. Residents are provided services such as boxed lunch delivery and collection of agricultural products on behalf of the elderly. Thatched roofed facilities provide places for people to gather in a calm, convivial environment (Photo 8).



Photo 8: Roadside Station “Sakaya” with Distinctive Thatched Roof (Photo Courtesy of Nichinan City Tourist Association)

Subsequently, for the “regional transportation hub” theme section, seven stations were selected. The Roadside Station became a connection base for public transportation in hilly and mountainous regions and, thus, achieved favorable results in securing means of transportation for the residents.¹⁰ In hilly and mountainous areas, as the population ages and decreases, it becomes difficult to maintain public transportation. Additionally, securing secondary transportation to the homes of the elderly is a significant problem. To cope with such problems, there are stations nationwide that have established traffic

connection bases and that provide secondary transportation within the town. Roadside Stations that are actively implementing these initiatives and achieving results were selected as stations under the theme of “regional transportation hub.”

Among the seven stations selected, Roadside Station “Yoshinoji Kurotaki” (Kurotaki-mura, Nara Prefecture) has implemented a system to make the Roadside Station a connection base between public transportation modes. Route buses and community buses are halted at points installed at the stations, and users obtain a round-trip bus ticket free of charge, with a subsidy from the local government. This initiative has made it easier for residents to visit hospitals, high schools, and supermarkets outside the village, especially in areas with few trains or buses (Photo 9).

Furthermore, Roadside Station “Jouban no Sato” (Ishinomaki city, Miyagi Prefecture) promotes the city’s comprehensive transportation strategy under the motto: “Local public transportation supporting healthy ‘Machi’ and people.”¹¹ This strategy aims to support recovery from the Great East Japan Earthquake from a transportation perspective, positioning Roadside Stations as transportation hubs. In Ishinomaki city, the Resident Bus Operation Committee, comprising local residents as representatives, has commenced operations of resident buses and set up a traffic connection base with route buses at the Roadside Station. The waiting room at the bus stop inside the station has become a recreation and relaxation space for local elderly people.



Photo 9: Bus Transfer Station in the Roadside Station. “Yoshinoji Kurotaki” (Photo Courtesy of NPO Hito-to-Michi Kenkyukai)

Based on the examples of Roadside Stations discussed above, the characteristics of their efforts are summarized as follows. Roadside Stations aim to support the lives of residents and visitors from outside the area. This can be attributed to the fact that although it is a public facility, it functions as an economic entity in itself. Its facilitation of residents to ship local agricultural products and sell processed items will stimulate the local economy and create local employment opportunities. Local governments, naturally, have high expectations from Roadside Stations, which function as bases for regional revitalization.

Currently, Roadside Stations serve as places that help address various issues faced by the

government—Japan’s welfare, disaster prevention, tourism, cultural activities, and regional economy. Moreover, their significance in the country’s regional revitalization policy is expected to increase. The following section discusses a new deployment direction for Roadside Stations with an example.

4.2 New Development of Roadside Stations—Toward the Third Stage

In April 2018, Roadside Stations celebrated their 25th anniversary. During this period, the economic effects of farm stands became the driving force for regional development, and new functions such as the “disaster prevention function,” “resident service function,” and “medical and welfare functions” were added. Table 2 summarizes the development of Roadside Stations.

This section discusses certain newly developed features of Roadside Stations and presents a few examples. First, as part of their “resident service function,” Roadside Stations have begun providing information and a support window for migration to solve the problem of population decline in rural areas. Many Roadside Stations offer a one-stop approach to promoting rural migration through U- and I-turns. Among them, Roadside Station “Paretopia-Ohno” (Ono-cho, Gifu Prefect) supports child rearing to help immigrants settle down; examples of efforts made by the station are discussed below.

A child-rearing support room, “Child-rearing House Pastel @ Ono-cho,” has been set up; accessible to both children and parents, it has been well received. The facility operates under the following four basic policies: (1) providing opportunities for interaction between parents and children of child-rearing generations, (2) offering consultation and support for childcare, (3) providing information related to local child-rearing, and (4) implementing training on childcare and childcare support.¹²

With the Tokyo Olympics postponed to 2021, Roadside Stations were expected to have an “Inbound Facilitation” function. According to the “Action Program for Realizing a Tourism Nation” proposed in 2013, Roadside Stations nationwide were officially positioned as key facilities for promoting Japan as a tourism-oriented country. Accordingly, they have commenced receiving and entertaining foreign tourists.¹³ Specifically, foreign language guides and bulletin boards have been installed to respond to foreign visitors, and efforts are being made to expose foreigners to local culture and regional history.

For example, Roadside Station “Aso” employs international students from local universities as guides. The employment of foreigners also attracts tourists from their home countries. Additionally, at Roadside Station “Higashi no sato Higashichichibu,” the paper-making experience course for “Hosokawa paper,”—a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage—is popular with foreigners (Photo 13). Thus, several efforts are underway to enable foreign visitors experience the traditional Japanese culture and enjoy personal exchanges with locals.

Additionally, significant emphasis is placed on enhancing disaster information transmission functions and put automated driving services into practical use, with Roadside Stations as a base. As a Roadside Station is an ideal place to understand tourism promotion and regional development, efforts are being made to provide students with hands-on work experience (internship) at these stations during their long vacations—this is promoted through coordination between the National “Roadside Station” Liaison Committee and the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism.

In this manner, each Roadside Station creates new functions with its own originality and ingenuity to solve regional problems. Roadside Stations continue to develop as bases for regional revitalization, as efforts at certified priority Roadside Stations serve as model cases for other stations. The evolution of Roadside Stations can be divided into three stages, based on the history of development from conception

to the present—1993–2012 was the first stage; 2013–2019 was the second stage; and 2020–present was the third stage. The stages are summarized as follows.

- **First Stage (1993–2012):** In this stage, users began recognizing Roadside Stations as places providing services to travelers. During this period, the Niigataken Chuetsu Earthquake (2004) attracted significant attention toward their disaster prevention function as shelters for disaster victims, and local specialties gained popularity.
- **Second Stage (2013–2019):** This stage commenced when the Roadside Station registration and information system was launched and lasted until the number of registered Roadside Stations reached 1,005—the milestone reflecting the transformation of Roadside Stations and their development since foundation. The theme of this stage was: “The Roadside Station is a destination in itself.” During this stage, the establishment and further expansion of the newly added “disaster prevention function,” “medical and welfare functions,” and “resident service function” were promoted. Policies were implemented to promote the regional revitalization and tourism promotion functions of Roadside Stations and support them as tourism destinations. Among the most significant steps was the creation of the Priority “Roadside Station” System, which encourages and supports exemplary efforts at other stations.
- **Third Stage (2020–present):** The third stage is based on the following theme: “A base for accelerating regional revitalization and tourism” + “Contributing to Regional Design through Networking.” It aims to achieve the following three objectives by 2025.
 - **New inbound base:** To make Roadside Stations a base for regional revitalization and tourism policies, JNTO foreign tourist information centers will be established at Roadside Stations, which will serve as regional gateways and provide multilingual responses. To promote the concept of Roadside Stations as “transportation hubs,” the government will encourage the active movement of people in cooperation with Mobility as a Service (MaaS).
 - **Disaster prevention base:** A new system will be established to certify Roadside Stations that will serve as bases for wide-area recovery and reconstruction as “Disaster Prevention Roadside Stations.” The Central government will urge Roadside Stations, positioned in the regional disaster prevention plan, to draw up a BCP, conduct disaster prevention drills, and prepare for disasters.
 - **Regional centers where all generations play an active role:** By 2025, approximately half of the Roadside Stations will have “childcare support facilities” and internships will be provided at 50 Roadside Stations.

In terms of future Roadside Station policies, in the third stage, a policy was formulated to further strengthen initiatives from the “individual” to the “aspect” of disaster response, medical welfare issues, and inbound response.¹⁴ Additionally, efforts have been made to enhance the “collaboration” between Roadside Stations and residents, universities, municipalities, and other relevant organizations.¹⁵

Furthermore, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the National “Roadside Station” Liaison Committee and the National Roadside Station Project Promotion Committee made urgent recommendations on the “Evolution of Roadside Stations across Japan with a View to ‘new normal’.” Migration to rural areas is expected to increase in the future because of the pandemic, and to respond to

this, Roadside Stations will have to be equipped with more public functions by 2025.

Table 2 History of the Development of Roadside Stations

Year	Matters
1993	The Roadside Stations registration and information system was launched. 103 stations were registered.
1998	The number of registered stations increased to 470.
2003	The number of registered stations increased to 743.
2004	The Niigata-Chuetsu Earthquake occurred on October 23. Roadside Stations became a shelter and a base for rescue and restoration, and their disaster prevention (base) function started attracting attention.
2011	The Great East Japan Earthquake occurred on March 11. The Roadside Stations disaster prevention (base) function was added to the official function.
2012	The National Liaison Conference of Roadside Stations was Established, and its inaugural general meeting was held (at Tono City, Iwate Prefecture).
2013	The Roadside Stations registration and guidance system celebrated its 20th anniversary. The number of stations registered increased to 1,005.
2014	The Third National Liaison Meeting of Roadside Stations was held at Nasu-machi, Tochigi Prefecture. The Second Stage of Roadside Stations was confirmed to have started running. Roadside Stations were formally positioned as base facilities for regional revitalization. The Priority Roadside Station System was established, and six stations of the nationwide model, 35 stations of the Priority Roadside Station System, and 49 stations among the Priority Roadside Station Candidates were selected.
2015	Thirty-eight stations of the Priority Roadside Station System were selected. The Third United Nations World Disaster Reduction Forum “Role of Japan’s Roadside Stations: A country prone to disasters” was held.
2016	Specific Theme-Type Model Roadside Stations (residential service sector) Six stations were selected. It is positioned as a hub facility for Regional Revitalization SDGs and has begun leading efforts to achieve SDGs in the region.
2017	Specific Theme-Type Model Roadside Stations (regional transportation hub sector). Seven stations were selected.
2018	The 15 Priority Roadside Stations and the 14 Priority Roadside Stations Candidates were selected.
2019	The 15 Priority Roadside Stations and the 15 Priority Roadside Stations Candidate were selected. The Eighth National Liaison Meeting of Roadside Stations was held at Utazu-cho, Kagawa Prefecture. The National Roadside Station Liaison Council was incorporated as a general incorporated association. In the New Roadside Station Discussion group, recommendations for the Third Stage of Roadside Stations were compiled.

2020	<p>The Third Stage of Roadside Stations started.</p> <p>In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, the National Roadside Stations Liaison Committee and the National Roadside Station Project Promotion Committee made emergency recommendations for the “Evolution of Roadside Stations across Japan Focusing on the ‘new normal.’”</p>
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5. Summary and Conclusion

This study examines the status and development of Roadside Stations by discussing their origin, institutional characteristics, examples of local revitalization efforts, new functions, and future developments. The following is a summary of the contents: (1) The concept of Roadside Stations originated from a private sector idea that, “There should be a station on the road.” (2) The basic concept is, “A unique and lively place created together with local communities with functions of rest, information exchange, and regional cooperation.” Each Roadside Station is a public facility based on management with local originality and ingenuity. (3) The basic concept is firmly maintained through the operation of a quality assurance and improvement framework by the National “Roadside Station” Liaison Committee and Priority “Roadside Station” System. (4) As each Roadside Station is positioned as a base for regional revitalization, each endeavors to revitalize the region with its own originality and ingenuity. (5) Efforts should be made to further strengthen cooperation and networks in the third stage.

From the viewpoint of traffic economics, roads are defined as the transportation infrastructure to destinations and are closed spaces for users. Moreover, their relationship with surrounding areas is considered secondary. Prior to the establishment of Roadside Stations, roads had only negative economic effects—causing environmental degradation in surrounding areas. Roadside Stations are a groundbreaking idea, facilitating a relationship between road users and roadside areas. It has added a new aspect to roads, that of a “window” to the area.

The original functions of Roadside Stations include information transmission and local collaboration. However, modern Roadside Stations have evolved into hubs for information, people, and government services. Accordingly, they provide one-stop support services, including information on migration to rural areas. In the post-COVID-19 era, as people seek new ways of living, it seems Roadside Stations of the future will serve as the core of a region. It is expected that their diversity, locations, and collaboration as well as the uniqueness of each region will help create more vibrant communities.

Notes

- 1) See Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism Tohoku Regional Development Bureau (2017).
- 2) See Commission on “Roadside Station” and H. Okamoto (1993).
- 3) The Roadside Station's disaster prevention functions are attracting worldwide attention. At the 3rd United Nations World Conference on Disaster Reduction (In Sendai, Miyagi Prefecture, 2015) Public Forum, the “Role of Japan ‘Roadside Station’, a country prone to disasters” Symposium was held. About 300 people, including the general public, Roadside Station officials, local governments, and government officials, were invited to the symposium and the role of Japan’s Roadside Station in disaster risk reduction was communicated to the world.
- 4) The Kobe Shimbun, published in the morning on October 17, 2015.

- 5) Roadside Station Official Website (<https://www.michi-no-eki.jp/>)
- 6) See Matsuo and Yamaguchi (2019), pp. 26-31.
- 7) See North, D. (1990), pp. 3-10(See North, D. (1994) p3, in Japanese).
- 8) National Roadside Station Liaison Meeting (2019).
- 9) There are 6 stations: “Ryokami Onsen Yakushinoyu” “Sakura no sato Shokawa” “Miyama Fureai Hiroba” “Koigakubo” “Shodoshima Olive Park” and “Sakatani”.
- 10) There are 7 stations: “Ashoro Galaxy Hall 21” “Joubon no sato” “Wajima” “Yoshinoji Kurotaki” “Mai Road IC Chiyoda” “Nijinomori Park Matsuno” and “Munakata”.
- 11) See Ishinomaki City (2016).
- 12) See Roadside Station “Paretopia-Ohno” Childcare Support Room “Childcare House Pastel@ Oono-cho” HP (<http://www.pastel-kosodate.jp/policy.html>).
- 13) Following “Declaration to promote Japan as a tourism-oriented nation” in 2003, “Basic Act for Promoting Japan as a Tourism-Oriented Country” was established in 2006. The Ministerial Conference for the Promotion of Japan as a Tourism-Oriented Country, which was established under this policy, proposed the “Action Program for Realizing a Tourism Nation” in 2013. Nationwide Roadside Stations were officially designated as key facilities for promoting Japan as a tourism-oriented country under the program. (See Japan Tourism Agency (2003, 2006, 2013).
- 14) See New “Roadside Station” Discussion Group (2019).
- 15) The “telemedicine” project, which connects the Roadside Station to a large hospital, is being actively discussed for its practical application. Telemedicine refers to the practice of performing medical procedures, such as diagnosis and instruction, and activities related to medical care from a remote location based on the transmission of patient information, including images. The “The 23rd meeting of the Telemedicine Society of Japan” Special Symposium “Telemedicine Supports Local Communities and the Path to Lives” addressed the establishment of regional perinatal healthcare information networks and management systems at the Roadside Station. Held on October 6, 2019, at the Morioka City Iwate Information Exchange Center.

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*Each Access to all URLs is January 2021.