

The Tensions of Regional Revitalization in Japan

Anthony Rausch

The vibrancy and vitality of Asia's major metropolises means that the focus of contemporary Asian studies is often focused on cities, examining tensions and offering solutions that reflect the complex realities of urban society. However, regional and rural places offer complex realities and demand imaginative solutions as well. Regional and local governments increasingly craft their own policy solutions to provide for stable and sustainable communities and to make themselves more attractive. The question is, will such policies resolve regional and rural tensions and contradictions, while also meeting the often specific-to-place objectives of regional places?

The conditions that characterize Japan's contemporary regional and rural places are those that other Asian societies will increasingly come to face. At present, Japan is facing regional and rural depopulation, residential shrinkage, and a general hollowing-out of local economies. This has, in its most nullifying effect, created a vacuum of both activity and identity in many areas and set off questions about how to build sustainable local communities. In my recent book, *Resolving the Contemporary Tensions of Regional Places: What Japan Can Teach Us*, I outline five specific tensions that characterize regional Japan and constitute points of focus for regional areas to maintain their standing and chart a future: (1) resident relocation, (2) regional finance, (3) local leadership, and (4) equitable area-to-area tax redistribution, together with (5) a revaluation of local cultural resources to revitalize local education, cultivate local activism, and generate a sense of local relevance. Local specificity is an undeniable reality from place to place, but the objectives relative to these themes are increasingly and uniformly important for all regional areas. For example, drawing urbanites to relocate in regional municipalities, dealing with an increasing instability of regional banking and capitalizing on local leadership potential, and addressing tax inequalities across geographically regional and distinct economies are common objectives for most rural places. Likewise, responding to the potential loss of cultural uniqueness by incorporating that uniqueness more effectively into policies of revitalization and understanding the changing dynamics and meaningfulness of higher education and local volunteerism in regional society are increasingly important policy points for regional municipalities. The policy responses that can be turned to these themes reflect the unique reality of Japan's regional and rural areas: establishing a vacant house information bank to ensure widespread information on low-cost housing purchase opportunities, promulgating a 'hometown tax scheme' that allows taxpayers across the country to appoint a part of their tax burden to a municipality of their choice, cultivating informed leadership through local think tanks, and reconfiguring the local landscape of national higher education so as to create local meaningfulness for regional Japanese universities.

Complex responses to complex tensions

Making urban to regional relocation both possible and desirable highlights the power of a national 'vacant-house' information bank – the Akiya Bank – providing a listing of vacant houses in locations throughout Japan. However, in addition to attracting potential new residents from urban areas,



Fig. 1: Local festival in Japan. (Photo by author, April 2016). Inset: Book Cover, *Resolving the Contemporary Tensions of Regional Places* (Kindle, 2021)

regional municipalities must also allow that their own residents may also benefit from the affordable and available 'starter' housing made possible with something like the Akiya Bank, and without the competition of a better-financed urban competitor.

Turning to finance, it is a contemporary reality that regional banks are struggling in a globally competitive finance environment. In non-metropolitan areas of Japan, regional banks are merging not only with each other, but also with national and international finance entities, often on terms that are not wholly beneficial to the host areas. Here is where the local leadership that can be developed with regional think tanks may offer local solutions, by forging stronger links that can generate meaningful economic activity within the unique economy of a specific local area. At the heart of any regional solution to any regional issue is recognition of the potential – often latent – that these think tanks have to create a credible source of independent local knowledge and capable local management/leadership. From a 'think tank theory' perspective, regional think tanks in Japan may provide a counter to the all-too-common issue-advocacy think tank, providing a blueprint for effective place-advocacy think tanks.

Equitable tax systems and how these shape regional economies are an important part of a nation's regional-area tax policy. The take-away on Japan's Furusato Nozei tax payment option – where taxpayers can direct part of their local tax obligation to any municipality in the country – is that not only are the aims of this new tax system not being met equitably across the regions of Japan, as it creates tax revenue winners and tax revenue losers; the system is also creating havoc in municipal governing throughout Japan with unpredictability in budget planning while seeding doubt in the intentions of the central government policy to redistribute national tax revenues systematically. The potential for local history and geography, together with local area cultural commodities to

contribute to a regionally-specific cultural economy have long been overlooked in regional areas. Theory asks what constitutes a place-based cultural commodity while the practical implications lie in crafting policy that valorizes and sustainably exploits such cultural commodities, both in a tourist economy for visitors as well as a lifestyle economy for local residents.

This local valuation is vital to building and sustaining place identity, the sustainable foundation of a cultural economy for regional places. Along with identity, place relevance – both nationwide and locally – is not a given. For many outlying areas, local educational opportunities and activating local volunteerism are meaningful mechanisms to cultivate this relevance. As a higher percentage of students continue onto higher education, it may be that a sense of place relevance can be cultivated through educational institutions that act as anchors in their communities. The relatively short history of volunteerism in Japan has seen an intriguing evolution, with educational and social welfare volunteerism giving way to high-profile disaster response and event volunteerism, the latter particularly vital in large-scale international sporting events. One could envision the next turn to be in the form of highly local 'revitalization volunteerism' for the regional areas of Japan.

Extending the study of regional revitalization

However, beyond the purview of the book outlined above is another set of organizational and planning-related tensions and contradictions. These reflect a complex intersection of preference, policy, practice, and reality that must be negotiated in order to realize regional and rural revitalization. These include the practical expertise, the sources of funding, the characteristics of local participation and membership, and the frequency and continuity of local activities

and how these influence the potential of local revitalization efforts. There are also tensions that emerge in the inherent limitations of local economies and the economic relationships that are forged with external entities, as well as the role of Information Computing Technology in realizing or diminishing the possibilities and meaningfulness of modern life in regional and rural places.

If one describes local revitalization in terms of the constituent details – i.e., who plans it, who pays for it, who participates in it, how often it takes place, what it offers, and what it aims for – and out of this develops a working set of guiding principles, such vague dimensions take on a concrete and common-sense reality.

The questions are many. And often those questions intersect, leading to more questions. Who should lead local revitalization? Locals certainly know about their locale – its history, culture, and scenic vistas – and their instincts for revitalization policy and practice are certainly meaningful, but experts often bring a broader, more informed view. Local activities require funding, whether for the set-up of an annual festival or for paying for printed materials to promote an area. While 'official' funding for such elements is often subject to long wait times, fiscal year compromises, fixed-term terminations, and delicate negotiations with the businesses that can offer it, 'local' funding that originates within a community is often temporary, insufficient, or non-existent. Local membership, often limited to retirees, homemakers, or the self-employed, can be dedicated and hard-working, but generating and maintaining such membership is difficult.

On the other hand, trying to continually develop new membership invites an undesirable churning that can leave the dedicated base unhappy. Similarly, what constitutes the backbone of local revitalization efforts and activities? Is it a low-key and warm-hearted festival for local residents held once a year, where planning and participation are the same act? Or is it something more 'profitable,' something that will appeal outside the community, drawing tourists and their one-night, two-day financial contributions to the area? Is a distinction between organizer/volunteer/participant on the one side and attendee/tourist/observer on the other necessary, possible, preferable, or profitable? The sale of local products – those hand-crafted, traditionally-meaningful items one finds both in the homes of long-term residents and tourist shops around the area – is both an important source of income for local artisans as well as a tangible symbol of the place. That said, one could question the gain when locally and traditionally handcrafted cultural products are marketed via global web-based shopping and transported through environmentally-questionable shipping networks to distant buyers who have little understanding of either the character or the place of such culturally significant and earth-friendly local goods. Likewise, ICT is certainly a big part of the potential of any regional place. But one might also ask if the possibilities that ICT brings in allowing people to engage in big-city corporate jobs from the countryside might also be diluting the purity of what 'rural' and 'regional' mean in terms of offering truly complete lifestyle alternatives?

Understanding the reality of regional rural places is a topic of increasing importance. The question then is how to identify the tensions that characterize regional places while also crafting policies that can be brought to address them. And while every place has its own combination of historical, geographical, and contemporary societal characteristics, the study of the tensions and contradictions that characterize regional and rural Asian locales will certainly provide a range of important and highly informative cases.

Anthony Rausch is professor at Hirosaki University, Japan. His research interests focus on regional Japanese society, and he is the author of several books, including *Resolving the Contemporary Tensions of Regional Places: What Japan Can Teach Us*, published in 2021 with Kindle. Email: asrausch@hirosaki-u.ac.jp