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## Sustainability at Dead-Ends: The Future of Hope in Rural Japan

Nowhere is the fiscal and demographic slowdown of twenty-first-century Japan reflected more dramatically than in the mountainous regions of its countryside. In the 1990s, sociologist Ōno Akira (1995) coined the term “hamlets at their limits” (*genkai shūraku*) to denote a rapidly growing category of rural communities aged and depopulated to the point of collapse. They are the outcome of long-term rural decline, unfolding against the grain of the nation’s Tokyo-centered postwar economic “miracle” and high-speed growth. Today, Japan’s rural peripheries face an increasingly precarious future in an era of protracted recession and state streamlining. As decentralization policy demands greater autonomy of the nation’s regions, self-sufficiency has become a dominant priority of rural sustainable development in Japan. In this short paper, I examine a community mapping initiative that empowers regional residents to rediscover the character of their depleted surroundings. I argue that it is an exercise suited to a climate in which responsibility for the future of the countryside is devolved onto its inhabitants, yet also indicative of the status of Japan’s regions as unexpected sites of hope in a nation mired in downturns.

During my fieldwork in northeastern Japan in the early 2000s, residents and officials of the Nishiwaga region in Iwate Prefecture organized locality studies workshops in the area’s far-flung mountain hamlets.<sup>1</sup> A popular community mapping exercise, locality studies (*jimotogaku*) begins with “treasure hunts,” during which small groups of local residents explore their surroundings on foot in order to catalogue their important features. As part of my research on rural revitalization, I participated in several workshops in Nishiwaga, including in its most radically depopulated regions where the closing of once-bustling copper mines in the 1970s has left hamlets, up to 75 percent elderly, that dead-end in the region’s deep mountains. Treasure hunts were upbeat expeditions during which elderly hamlet members, accompanied by one or two outside visitors, charted and photographed antique farm tools and architecture, sites related to ancestral tales and historical rumors, and spots that triggered memories of childhood experiences. In follow-up sessions, groups compiled their findings on paper maps and in hamlet “treasure” databases. According to locality studies proponents, the goal of workshops

1 See Love 2013 for a more thorough analysis of locality studies in relation to sustainability discourse and neoliberal reform in Japan.

is the “rediscovery” (*saihakken*) of a region by its inhabitants. They are forums for re-envisioning an area not as a depleted periphery, but as a durable community rooted in its physical surroundings and ancestral history.

“Rediscovery” is a precondition of regional “activation” (*kasseika*), a vision of rural revitalization achieved through resident initiatives to awaken the dormant vitality of their homes. At a roundtable organized by a popular agricultural publisher on how to activate Japan’s countryside, locality studies enthusiast Yoshimoto Tetsuro explained: “To begin with, it’s important that people know the richness of their regional life, the richness of delicious water, food and air, the unique character of a region’s natural features and life-culture, things beyond monetary value” (Yoshimoto 2001, 194). Credited as a founder of locality studies, Yoshimoto is a former municipal official of Minamata in Kumamoto Prefecture, a city known internationally as the site of a devastating industrial disaster. In the 1970s, residents waged a legal battle against the Chisso Corporation for flushing decades’ worth of mercury-laden toxins into local waterways. Years later, Yoshimoto mobilized residents to explore their natural environment and cultural history as clues to a new self-image, unbiased by the stigmas of contamination. Today, Minamata has rebranded itself an “eco-town,” celebrated by activists and government officials, not for its success in prevailing over corporate and governmental irresponsibility, but as an example of the power of proactive civic engagement.

Locality studies emerged on the national scene in the early 2000s as a technique of regional renewal suited to an era of state streamlining. Neoliberal reforms pursued aggressively by the Koizumi administration in the early twenty-first century included decentralization reforms that reapportion taxes long shunted from Japan’s populous urban centers to subsidize its flagging countryside. A national wave of municipal mergers was intended to pave the way for subsidy cuts by creating larger, more effective, and autonomous municipalities. So were calls for a flexible network of private enterprise, nonprofit organizations, and civic groups to emerge and shoulder responsibility for regional upkeep in the wake of withdrawing state support. Critics fear that decentralization represents a government divestiture in Japan’s aging and economically moribund countryside. In Iwate Prefecture, where Nishiwaga is located, outreach units from both the prefectural university and government began separately promoting locality studies workshops as a way of helping communities adapt to these policy realignments. In helping residents envision their homes as durable, treasure-laden communities of

which they are stewards, locality studies organizers pursue layered outcomes—from community bonding to small-scale economic development. As a technique of regional activation, locality studies is similar to other technologies of governance that aim to foster self-motivating and self-sustaining citizens and communities that can survive on less and less government support (see also Cruikshank 2010).

Yet the ideals of regional self-sufficiency that underpin locality studies so hold particular appeal in Tōhoku, Japan's large and historically underdeveloped northeast. Long viewed from the perspective of central Japan both as a reservoir of cultural tradition and a remote backwater, Tōhoku was where Japanese ethnology burgeoned in the early twentieth century to document the underside of the nation's emerging modernity. Its rural villages were objects of nostalgic metropolitan longing as the old hometown or “native place” (*furusato*) of a nation rapidly transformed by economic growth (Ivy 1995; Robertson 1991). Such nostalgia obscured an extractive relationship that drained Tōhoku of its natural resources and population to serve the needs of Japan's center. It became the basis for government-promoted tourism development that transformed the landscape of the countryside through the frenzied building of subsidized hot springs resorts and ski slopes during Japan's economic heyday. Today, many stand empty, gathering dust and debt.



Community mapping groups set off on “treasure hunts.” (Courtesy of the author.)

As a dominant approach to rural development today, activation reflects a rejection of conspicuous consumer and public works spending in post-bubble Japan. It is part of a changing paradigm that favors small-scale and regionally-distinct agrotourism, eco-museum, and heirloom farming initiatives undertaken by residents rather than planned by government officials. In promoting heritage-themed, eco-friendly, and self-propelled development, activists, academics, and government officials align themselves with the priorities of a global sustainability discourse. They also draw on an intellectual current of regionalism prominent in 1970 and 80s Japan as a critical alternative to center-led rural

development agendas. Regionalists, like Tsurumi Kazuko (1989), promoted efforts by local populations to pursue development agendas suited to their regional ecologies and cultural traditions, rather than the dominant priorities of Western capitalism. Her theory of “endogenous development” hinged on a folkloric notion of rural communities as solidarities defined by shared ancestral histories, and formed within unique geo-climatic circumstances. Locality studies is premised on a similar vision of regional social cohesion—especially in contrast to characterizations of the individualized and stagnating agency of contemporary urban Japan. It promotes a vision of rural stewardship undertaken by regional communities as agents of “sustainable region-making” (*jizoku kanōna chiiki-zukuri*). Along these lines, staff writer for the nonprofit organization Japan for Sustainability Takahashi Ayako (2003) claims that locality studies can foster rural sustainability by invigorating *en* (the bonds of fate) that tie localities together. She explains: “There is *en* with nature, *en* with ancestors, and *en* with local residents who share a common future. Locality studies helps remind citizens of their communal *en*, a feeling that has been fading in recent years.”

Such idealized visions of rural community solidarity are not just based on reactionary nostalgia, but rather evoke the supple connections through which academics, activists, and government officials hope post-growth Japan might generate its future. Economist Hiroi Yoshinori (2010, 40) argues that a pervasive belief that “time will pass and growth will solve our problem” represents an outdated way of thinking along a “temporal axis” about solutions to pressing social problems. He proposes instead that Japanese imagine the future along a “spatial axis” along which people “sink roots into their regions,” improving life conditions by cultivating the diversity of regional cultures and ecologies. For Hiroi, this shift requires a decentered national geography in which the “monocentric concentration” of people and finances in Tokyo is replaced by a “multi-polar concentration” in regional hubs and hamlets where people are attached via bonds of care and community (41). Even agencies of Japan’s central government emphasize the importance of rooted connections as vital to civic engagement and rural sustainability in the regions. A Ministry of the Environment report on sustainable development describes locality studies as a means of helping regional inhabitants “sense the relationship between themselves and their environments” such that that “*aichaku* (affection or attachment) wells up and leads to action” (Kankyō-shō 2003).

As a technique for mobilizing engaged stewardship, locality studies prioritizes regional self-sufficiency and self-sustainability, rooted in an ethic of locality and care that characterizes rural development approaches in Japan. In Nishiwaga, treasure hunts and mapping workshops have been followed in some hamlets by more intensive sessions to study local history or plan heritage festivals surrounding, for example, the revival of old industries, such as making charcoal or gathering mountain plants. Such activities cannot sustain the region in a normative sense against a future of projected decline. The area has lost 60 percent of its population to outmigration over the past half-century; today nearly half of its population is at least 50 years old. Remaining residents struggle with the logistics of decline: the care of elderly, the upkeep of vacant homes and land, encroaching forests, shrinking budgets for municipal snowplowing, and closing schools. Yet due to its radical demographics and remote location vis-à-vis Japan's center, the region also draws a small but steady influx of activists, bureaucrats, academics, and volunteers working to encourage civic regional revitalization projects like heirloom farming, heritage projects, community currencies, and community mapping. Their hopeful vitality is welcomed in the area as a sign that the region's distinctive character might become a resource for fostering a post-growth future in Japan.

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