

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE CONTEMPORARY TENSIONS OF REGIONAL AND RURAL PLACES

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This chapter adopts a neo-endogenous development approach in viewing regional and rural Japan, identifying a number of specifically regional and rural tensions that portray both continuity and change, and interpreting the continuity and change associated with these themes in terms of both positive and negative implications. The themes are: urban to rural regional relocation; a neoliberal tax policy and regional tax inequalities; regional think tanks and leadership development; local vitality and regional revitalization volunteerism; and the evolving meaningfulness of the regional newspaper. For each of these, there are conditions that represent continuity, with that continuity implying stability for the area in some cases versus obsolescence of practice or policy in others. Likewise, for each theme, there are responses to the inherent and emerging tensions, proposed changes that reflect innovative policy creation as well as unintentional bias and that lead to both successful outcomes as well as unintended consequences. The content of the chapter draws on several long-term case study research projects undertaken in regional Japan, in an area that represents well the contemporary reality of regional and rural places. It is, however, when the inherent tensions of these cases are contextualized, on the basis of continuity and change, that the trajectories can be generalized to speak to the broader reality of regional Asia.

Keywords: Japan, rural society, relocation, leadership, inequality, regional media

1. Introduction

The premise of this book is that continuity and change in Asia is creating interesting and meaningful areas of research. The premise of this chapter is that the complexity of this continuity and change can be seen, articulated, and analyzed

in and through the tensions that exist both through practices of continuity, in the trajectories that follow the way things have always been, as well as in the dynamics of change, as government, businesses, and local residents act to further their interests and agendas. As society, in light of these tensions, either maintains its path and pattern or alters its course through innovation, this choice—to continue or to change—itself creates further tensions. While such tensions are obviously found throughout contemporary experience—whether urban or rural, economic or cultural, private or professional, sacred or profane—in many instances, it is in rural and regional settings that these fixed continuities and dynamic changes can most clearly be identified, contrasted, and articulated—in the continuity of regional circumstance and the sometimes corresponding, sometimes conflicting individual, social, and policy attempts at change.

This chapter focuses on regional and rural Japan, identifying a number of specifically regional and rural themes that portray tensions of places—tensions that both constitute continuity and reflect, if not necessitate, change (see Rausch 2021). Through identification of these tensions, conditions of continuity and characteristics of change will be identified, and through analysis of these two dimensions, the implications of continued continuity and responsive change will be explored, whether for better or worse. The themes taken up that reflect contemporary tensions of continuity and change in rural areas are: urban to rural and regional relocation; a neoliberal tax policy and regional tax inequalities; regional think tanks and leadership development; local vitality and regional revitalization volunteerism; and the evolving meaningfulness of the regional newspaper. For each of these themes, there are conditions that constitute continuity, with that continuity implying in some cases stability and benefit for the area while in others obsolescence of practice or policy. Each theme also offers change and a new way of thinking about an issue or some sort of specific response—whether government policy or behavioral practice—which then demands its own analysis. The broadest contribution of this chapter is the recognition that there are universal social tensions around which, in the trajectory of modern society, the dynamics of continuity and change will be contested and re-contested.

1.1 The case for rural Japan and Aomori Prefecture

Japan provides a suitable case for examining continuity and change in Asia. Given its political stability, economic growth, and general societal connectedness, Japan is a case study in contemporary continuity. Japan's current stability reflects one-party political dominance, Japan's growth was undercut by the Lost Decade of the 1990s, and the national middle-class consciousness that has long characterized Japan's citizenry is now being tested by the erosion of the norms of lifetime employment and an aging society. The dynamics of continuity in Japan, and

the tensions that are simultaneously demanding change while also then creating change, are perhaps most apparent in Japan's regional and rural settings.

I would contend that Aomori prefecture and its cities, towns and villages provide highly representative and particularly meaningful cases through which to identify, describe, assess and articulate the contemporary tensions of regional places. Aomori is the northernmost prefecture of Honshu, about 700 kilometers north of Tokyo and is a distinctly peripheral place in the overwhelmingly modern nation-state that is Japan. Situated outside the densely populated and highly modernized cityscapes that most people associate with modern Japan, Aomori is last or near last on most socio-economic measures. That said, at present, both Aomori city (population 280,000), the prefectural seat and business anchor for the prefecture, and Hachinohe city (population 230,000), a prominent fisheries port of northern Japan located on the Pacific side of the prefecture, boast Shinkansen High Speed Train stations and the contemporary business-government confluence that this confers. Hirosaki City (population 180,000), the dominant castle town during Japan's long feudal period, sits in the west-center of the prefecture and is home to a national university and central to the area's apple farming, which is top in Japan. As such, Hirosaki city has for its history claimed, and to this day rightfully so, being the cultural, intellectual and agricultural center of the prefecture.

2. Theme one: housing in urban to rural regional relocation

Contemporary regional and rural decline is common throughout Asia, if not much of the world. As young people move to urban areas, looking for promising jobs and rewarding lifestyles, the places they leave behind lose population, become less economically viable, and witness a decline in the vitality of the lives that are lived there. There are complex and combinative reasons why regional and rural areas are abandoned and urban areas sought out; ultimately, there is a push-pull dynamic at work. Lack of opportunity—educational, occupational, personal—in a rural area *pushes* young people to look elsewhere. At the same time, the opportunities—educational, occupational, personal—that can be found in urban areas *pull* these disaffected youths to the city.

Most contemporary efforts to address this hollowing out attempt to create reverse relocation: bringing new residents *from* urban places *to* regional places. The individual motivations that inspire and the policy mechanisms that operationalize such regional relocation reflect a complex, and sometimes, contradictory reality: people may seek a quieter setting to live in, but employment opportunities are a must to support them. Ultimately, it is the attractiveness of any particular municipality, in a diverse collective of natural, cultural, and institutional attributes

and assets, that creates the characteristics and qualities that people seek out. Any municipality must both build on, and build up, its inherent attractiveness and then devise the strategies, policies and programs that make relocation both desirable and possible. Rural Japan provides a relevant and revealing case for looking at the mechanisms of regional relocation. Japan has both highly dynamic urban metropolises and abundant highly-livable medium and small-sized municipalities scattered across its length, as well as dying towns and villages situated in its peripheral and outlying places. Japan's economically secure, but aging, population is countered by an increasingly anxious family cohort and a restless and mobile youth. Finally, Japan has few 'hard' barriers to relocation, whether geographical, infrastructural, political, cultural or social.

2.1 Urban to rural relocation

While always a minor movement against the dominant Tokyo-centered national migration pattern, a 2018 Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT 2018) study of 5,000 respondents confirmed a growing attraction for the reverse, an urban to rural relocation potential, finding that approximately one-quarter of those in their twenties wanted "greater government promotion for relocation to the countryside" (Baseel 2018). Indeed, a general awareness of the possibility of tele-commuting—working, teaching and learning from home through ICT—has been replaced by sudden and forced adoption of remote interaction for many in response to COVID-19. A Gakujo Corporation survey conducted with urban work staff in their twenties in the spring of 2020 found that just over one-third claimed an interest in the possibility of tele-working from a regional area, a 14 percent increase from the previous year (Motohashi and Matsuoka 2020).

The question is how to capitalize on such sentiment? Hirosaki City's case is representative of a contemporary and comprehensive approach to encouraging regional relocation. As of 2020, the Hirosaki City Relocation webpage offered over 20 specific relocation support programs: two providing for preparation, four related to housing and over ten for family life support, with five focusing on job hunting/business start-up. Hirosaki offers a 'test house'—making a house available for experiencing life in Hirosaki—and twelve of the thirteen life-support programs are directly related to childcare and education issues. The job hunting and business start-up programs detail various information sources, office support resources and business creation subsidy and loan options that are available (Hirosaki City n.d.). The program distribution in the case of Hirosaki's relocation approach clearly reflects a focus on family and housing, rather than being primarily job-related.

As important as support for the nuclear family appears to be in Hirosaki's program line-up, research on relocation to Hirosaki City revealed more than anything else the power of the extended family in the equation of relocation in Japan (Lee

and Sugiura 2018). The research showed that nine in ten returnees from urban areas to Hirosaki cited “being close to” or “returning outright to” a parental home as the reason for the return. Work, school and the attraction of a quiet lifestyle and natural environment were mentioned as important factors, but, on the basis of these findings, the researchers concluded that the dominant theme for regional relocation in Japan was hometown and family. There are two implications that can be drawn here. First, from the survey data, it appears that if the employment issue can be addressed, young people are open to urban to regional relocation opportunities. Second, while urbanites who are from rural areas are returning for the sake of their parents, these returnees are often as concerned about education and housing as they are about employment. As a matter of practicality then, housing is an important element in realizing the fullest possibility of urban to rural relocation.

2.2 The Akiya Bank

Enter the Akiya Bank program. Originating as a means of addressing the visual blight and tangible danger of “empty houses” (*akiya*), the Akiya Bank program is morphing into an approach to reviving depopulating cities and towns. Roughly 8.5 million houses in Japan were deemed to be *akiya* as of 2018 (Akiya-Akichi Management Center 2019), amounting to somewhere around 13 percent of the total housing stock standing empty; it is estimated that this will rise to 30 percent by 2030 (MLIT 2017). While there are empty houses in and around the urban areas of Japan, the truth is that most *akiya* are located in medium to small-sized cities, towns and villages throughout the outlying areas of the country. These are houses that are empty, that are delinquent in property tax payments, and that are unsightly, dilapidated, and dangerous. The Akiya Bank response to this problem originated with legislation enacted by the central government in 2014 allowing local governments to gather and disseminate information on privately-owned vacant or abandoned houses. In the early stages, Akiya Bank web-based information sites were largely operated at the municipal level; now MLIT has a designated webpage for *akiya* to manage information dissemination nationwide (MLIT 2019); there is even a national level NPO (Akiya-Akichi Management Center n.d.) dedicated to the problem. As described in MLIT materials, the Akiya Bank Program allows for municipalities to collect, standardize and ‘intensify’ information about vacant housing stock, aiming at easy access of the information from anywhere in Japan. With the national system organized by MLIT becoming fully operational as of April 2018, increasing municipality operation of a local Akiya Bank system has resulted in a more stable and, without a doubt, truly national vacant housing stock information system (MLIT 2019).

With more and more residents departing regional and rural municipalities, however, one view of *akiya* and the Akiya Bank has come to focus on attracting

newcomers with inexpensive, if not bargain-priced, housing in picturesque towns and villages throughout Japan. Does recycling *akiya* to attract newcomers offer, however, a significant contribution to the twin problems of empty houses and depopulating municipalities? Data on purchasers is still scarce, but a Murakami, Niigata survey of 17 Akiya Bank-using-migrants to the area found that the move was motivated more by the appeal of the area's natural and community environment than the availability of an *akiya* house, meaning that an *akiya* program alone may not bring urbanites to rural Japan (Murakami City n.d.). A case study from Shimane revealed confusion that arose with government involvement in an otherwise private real estate market, as well as "expectation mismatch" when non-local buyers discovered the true state of some of the houses and the reality of life in the neighborhoods, communities, and municipalities where *akiya* are located (Taira 2017). The long list of issues identified in one group's effort to bring an *akiya* dormitory into use included accessibility issues, the difficulty of addressing structural stability and disaster preparedness, the costs of physical appearance improvements, outdated sanitary facilities, and hesitance on its proposed use by neighborhood residents (Shimada Seminar Research Group n.d.). Other voices are also questioning *akiya* being forced into a relocation equation, particularly when there are many other options for *akiya* that are more locally centered. A Japan Construction Association group pointed to a greater need for coordination between municipal policy planning, private sector potential and citizen's group and neighborhood resident opinion to explore the range of options for *akiya*, from demolition and the creation of open space to reform and reuse at both private and public levels (Tatsukami, Yokoyama, and Tokuono 2021).

2.3 Critiquing regional relocation and the Akiya Bank

The assumption that available jobs are paramount in regional relocation may be over-simplifying the true complexity of the complete equation. People relocate – both from rural to urban and from urban to rural – for combinative and sometimes counter-intuitive reasons and objectives, and with varied realities and across a range of life stages: going to university, taking a first job, getting married, seeking a life change, raising a family, caring for aged parents, or retiring themselves. Interestingly, the truth for Japan is that most regional municipalities are very livable, if not reasonably inviting, and up to the standard of the big city in most essential matters: connectivity is high even in outlying areas; welfare services are relatively consistent across the country; educational quality is standard, negotiated between a powerful central ministry and the prefectural and municipal boards of education; transportation connections – both public and private – are continually being improved; and on and on. While it may very well be that rural to urban migration is driven by education, employment, and the lure of the big

city is an unavoidable contemporary continuity for many young people, there are undoubtedly also those big – city residents – whether born in the city or relocated from somewhere else, possibly somewhere rural – who long for the life regional places offer. And while no doubt a significant proportion of urban to rural migration is based on a return to care for parents, there are also those urbanites who aim to create their own regional life or dream of retiring in a “non-urban” setting. For these potential new residents, the question is what makes the urban to rural relocation possible? Along with place quality, part of the equation is an information source of available, and affordable, housing. Akiya Bank clearly addresses this component of the relocation equation.

That said, one might add to this assessment of Akiya Bank in urban to rural relocation by asserting that regional municipalities should work as hard to maintain their population as they do to attract new residents. This admonition means that, along with using Akiya Bank as a means of bringing urbanites to regional places by virtue of inexpensive housing, regional priorities should include a role for Akiya Bank in providing young people who are already in regional cities and towns the opportunity to create their own home without the burden of a lifelong loan. In short, while the attributes of Akiya Bank can serve the relocation needs of potential future residents from all over Japan, it most importantly should serve the needs of the young people who are already in regional Japan.

3. Theme two: regional tax equality and tax citizenship

Taxes are a constant of contemporary life, and come in many forms: on income, on property, on purchases, etc. While based in the state power to legally force tax payments on citizens, taxation also depends on citizen agreement to the obligation of paying such taxes. Payment is, of course, countered not just by what citizens get for their taxes, but also by whether they think they are getting what they think they deserve at the level of the tax they have to pay. That said, both tax compliance and satisfaction in both the distribution of taxes and the distribution of tax revenues tends to be greater when taxpayers feel their voices are being heard and that the rewards are distributed equally (Winer 2016).

3.1 Japan's *Furusato Nōzei* tax program

Japan has a tax program that turns the ideas above on their head: the *Furusato Nōzei* tax option. In 2008, the Japanese government introduced a tax option that allowed taxpayers to redirect up to 20 percent of their municipal tax burden to any municipality of their choice throughout Japan (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication n.d.). In addition to a slight deduction, the program also allows the receiving municipality to offer a thank-you-gift to the contributor.

Competition for contributions is fierce, and local governments use attractive local products as an incentive/token of appreciation for contributions: high-quality beef, fresh seafood, locally-grown melons, premium sake and other highly-desirable local specialties—some localities even offer tourism options as return gifts. The *Furusato Nōzei* tax program is controlled administratively by the Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, but operationally managed by several private websites that coordinate an easy online contribution/calculation system for taxpayers with the gift options from the municipalities. The combined ease of contributing and the attractiveness of the return gifts has meant that participation in *Furusato Nōzei* has grown steadily, to just under 35 million donations as of 2020, with diverted contributions exceeding 672.5 billion yen (Nippon.com 2021).

The primary objective of the *Furusato Nōzei* program is to offer a means of fiscal support for municipalities, usually rural and often small, located throughout Japan that are under constant budgetary pressure. These municipalities often suffer outmigration, thereby losing local revenue when residents who grew up there, move away and pay taxes elsewhere. Ideally, *Furusato Nōzei* offers an avenue for such former residents to directly support their hometown, but it also allows for broader citizen support for such local municipalities from people who have no direct connection with the place and reside in other areas. This assumed motivation – that citizens across Japan, whether native to a particular regional or rural municipality or not, would feel a sense of association with such hard-pressed communities – lies at the heart of a program that uses the term *furusato* in its name. Indeed, *furusato* is used precisely because of its connotation of a nostalgic hometown and the warm feelings that come with supporting it, whether one's own birthplace or instead some imagined hometown of rural Japan.

3.2 Critiquing *Furusato Nōzei* and its notion of citizenship

An increasing amount of research on *Furusato Nōzei* is showing, however, that the citizen-level fiscal transfers do not reflect a *furusato* mentality and the program is not yielding the intended benefits. While contributions—the re-directed tax revenues—are moving from contributors, often wealthy contributors and often in urban municipalities, to governments of regional municipalities as envisioned, the distribution patterns are neither well-intentioned nor uniform. Indeed, analysis shows that, instead of leading to a widespread pattern of recovery for the most in-need communities, the flow of *Furusato Nōzei* contributions is disparate but in some ways predictable across Japan, where municipalities with appealing return gifts garner the lion's share of donations, while others experience further weakening of their public finances, resulting in greater inequalities both across Japan and within regions. Moreover, while a *furusato* sentiment was assumed to generate

participation in the program, the reality is that the enticement of the return gift, rather than any connection—real or illusionary—to place, is what drives contributions. The assumed *furusato* sentiment has lost out to “pay your taxes, get a gift.”

At a governance level, one must consider *Furusato Nōzei* with an understanding both of Japan’s post-war governing philosophy and a defensible notion of citizenship. It had been, for much of the latter half of the twentieth century, a policy priority of the Japanese government to work toward equality in the lifestyles of all Japanese citizens. This underlies the Local Tax Allocation, the tax policy by which the central government distributes tax revenues to rural municipal governments so as to create parity with both their urban counterparts and other municipalities in a region. *Furusato nōzei*, with its citizen-led selection of which municipalities reap the harvest of tax re-distribution, undercuts this approach and compromises this priority, replacing an informed policy with a neoliberal free-market approach which forces rural places to compete for tax revenues from residents who may not even live in the community itself. While the neoliberal basis of *Furusato Nōzei* undercuts the promise for regional Japan that is inherent in Japan’s Development State approach to center-periphery governance relationships, emerging research regarding the result of the policy has shown that the results of this approach are not only often less than promised for regional and rural Japan, but are actually also creating chaos for otherwise fiscally-sound larger municipalities and tax zones even in major metropolitan areas. In addition to creating winners and losers across regional Japan, the urban areas that generate a high volume of individual *Furusato Nōzei* contributions can also see their local revenue sources diminished, whereby now even wards within Tokyo, Osaka and other urban areas are claiming a negative fiscal balance due to the participation of local taxpayers and the resulting diversion of their tax payments to other municipalities (Hagami 2017; Fukasawa, Fukasawa, and Ogawa 2019). Rather than being a policy that is administratively and economically viable, and one that yields net positive outcomes for regional Japan, one might ask whether *Furusato Nōzei* is yet another, but exclusively Asian, example of an ideologically neoliberal policy failure.

The contribution side of this coin calls into question a notion of citizenship built on rewards for fulfilling such basic obligations as taxes. When paying taxes to one’s country, and community, is based, even in part, on the expectation of getting an individualized, and further, a self-selected, reward, a balanced and effective tax system has been ostensibly replaced with a tribute tax system that relies on the promise of spoils. From a humanistic standpoint, the *furusato* of *Furusato Nōzei* also appears to be undercutting what should be a national, citizen-based “hometown consciousness” to communities in need. *Furusato Nozei* essentially represents a national experiment in residents opting to help out their neighbors, by self-initiated diversion of their tax payments. Contributions do indeed flow from

urban areas, high population municipalities and high tax-burden municipalities to regional, low population, and fiscally-weak municipalities (as envisioned); but the true question is the reason why. *Furusato Nōzei* raises questions regarding both general predispositions toward social contributions as well as the “pay taxes, get a gift” aspect of the program. Behavioral economics informs us that the warm glow of charitable giving can be both overstated and transitory, but, for the most part, minimal when the giving is based on tax incentives (Null 2010). Coming to similar conclusions in the case of *Furusato Nōzei*, research confirming data generated in online surveys found that the altruistic motivations that were assumed in the operation of the *Furusato Nōzei* program accounted for somewhere around 20 percent of the motivation to participate, whereas the appeal of the return gift explained about 70 percent (Yamamura, Tsutsui, and Ohtake 2018).

There are also developments pointing out that the coronavirus pandemic has been something of an unintended boon for the *Furusato Nozei* program. Operators of the websites, that mediate between municipalities and the tax-paying donors, estimate that the amount donated for fiscal 2020 will top the record ¥512.7 billion in tax revenues that were redistributed in 2018 (Japan Times 2021), with 2020 breaking the 2019 record by 1.5 times (Nippon.com 2021). The reason is obvious: not only is travel limited, but with most of the population homebound and restrictions on dining out common in most urban areas, taxpayers are using the *Furusato Nōzei* program to acquire special local products to be enjoyed at home. And while the benefit to some local areas is clear—the chapter points to record-setting orders for New Year’s *osechi* meals from high-end Kyoto restaurants as well as orders for Hanamaki’s (Iwate prefecture) offerings of beef tongue and wine tripling over last year – data provided by one hometown tax website indicate that notable increases are reported by only 59 out of the 221 local governments that participate through the company – just 27 percent (Japan Times 2021). The chapter also points out that the workload borne by the municipal officials who have to process these donations has increased accordingly, without, however, also noting the potentially heightened coronavirus risk profile that could result for workers all along the production and delivery supply chain associated with the increased demand for such products.

3.3 Critiquing the *Furusato Nōzei* regional economy

The final question one should consider is what sort of economy *Furusato Nōzei* provides for the regional places of Japan. Many problems with the program have been identified: the fact that it favors areas blessed with popular local products over those without; the fact that the bulk of donors, from urban and heavily-populated areas, are engaging in what amounts to government subsidized shopping for local delicacies; the fact that this outflow of tax revenue from these urban areas to

rural areas in exchange for gifts has left some of these urban areas struggling fiscally; and the fact that *Furusato Nōzei* is a government-instituted tax program that ultimately provides commissions to private Internet platform service providers and advertisers as well as funneling money to transport service providers. As for regional economies, regional revitalization expert Kinoshita Hitoshi summarizes *Furusato Nōzei* as bad competition leading to bad results (Hijino 2020). Any reasonable and objective view cannot avoid the conclusion that the dynamics of local products offered to non-local consumers, serviced by private sector information technology companies, all underwritten by the official policy of the Japanese government is reinforcing the dependency of clientelistic regional economies on the one hand, while exacerbating the tensions between such highly contested, but ultimately, mismatched economies on the other.

4. Theme three: regional think tanks and leadership development

The focus in this section is on regional think tanks, considering how these think tanks can be viewed in terms of the continuity and change in regional and rural leadership. Problematic in this objective is that, as research constructs, both leadership and think tanks are difficult to define, conceptually multi-dimensional, and reflect complex and often contradictory realities, which leads to various interpretations of the objectives, operationalization, function and importance of each.

Regional leadership is, in the case herein, place leadership, a construct which Hu and Hassink (2017, 225) pointed out is "still in its infancy, conceptually vague and empirically insufficient." Place leadership research is simultaneously contextual and relational: situated in both a specific geography and an institutional context while also centered on and operating through factors that include private actors, governance mechanisms and negotiated cooperation (Beer, Sotarauta, and Ayles 2021). As for think tank research, settling on a common definition often presents an initial hurdle. Autonomy is usually a primary attribute, as think tanks are defined as independent, non-profit, and non-special-interest organizations that use expertise in information generation together with conclusive analysis in order to secure operational support so as to be able to produce neutral information to inform policymaking process (Rich 2004). Think tanks operate, however, in forms as different as university-based research teams, contract-based project consultants, and special-issue advocacy lobby organizations advancing an agenda (Weaver 1989), and reflect outcomes as varied as database provision, policy promotion and issue advocacy (McGann and Johnson 2005, 11–12). Japanese think tanks, both in general and at a national level, as well as those operating with a specific agenda and in regional settings specifically, constitute a meaningful social

institution that both confirms this definitional and operational diversity while also offering new variations of form and function.

4.1 Japan's think tanks and Japan's regional think tanks

Research on Japan's think tank sector has largely focused on their role at national-level policymaking in foreign and security affairs, but within the framework of Japan's highly centralized governance, with these think tanks positioned vis-a-vis Japan's all-powerful governing bureaucracy (Maslow 2018). Recent literature on Japanese think tanks has, however, revealed an increasing trend toward think tanks making contributions to municipal policy issues as well as contributing to new patterns of local governance and community planning. While the clearest division of think tanks is on the basis of for-profit versus non-profit status, Japanese researchers have also articulated additional major categories: municipality-based, foundation or NPO-registered, academic-institutional, finance institution-based and political policy oriented. Four ideal types have been identified specifically for municipal think tanks in Japan: a comprehensive municipality-internal think tank, a special project-focused internal think tank, an external, municipality-affiliated foundation or association think tank, and finally, a third-sector cooperative arrangement, usually a tie-up with a for-profit corporate entity and/or a university (Makise 2018). Added to this are operational characteristics specific to municipal think tanks: a geographical place of interest; a direct influence on policy formation and implementation; the legal right, system-level opportunity, and accessible budget for undertaking local residential and business survey research; a deliberative process that oversees any resultant action; and the appropriate authority and responsibility for such action (Tsutsui 2018).

The logical starting point in examining regional think tanks in Japan is the Regional Think Tank Council (Chihō think tank kyōgikai, n.d.). The council listed 57 member organizations (as of July 2019), examination of which reveals the following patterns (see Table 1). First of all, there is a slight imbalance in regional think tank distribution across Japan's five major geographical blocks. Second, as opposed to the case for urban-centered think tanks – the majority of which are found in Tokyo and Osaka – where the ratio of joint-stock company based think tanks to foundation think tanks is roughly equal at just over 40 percent, the balance for regional think tanks reveals just over 30 percent of regional think tanks are based on corporate sponsors versus just under 60 percent being foundation-based.

Table 1: Regional Think Tank Council think tank data

Location	#	%
Hokkaido–Tohoku–Hokuriku North Regional Block	15	27
Chubu Middle-North Regional Block	12	21
Kinki Middle-South Regional Block	16	29
Chugoku–Shikoku Southern-Honshu Regional Block	8	14
Kyushu–Okinawa Southern Regional Block	5	9
	56	100
Form	#	%
Joint-Stock Company	18	32
Public-Interest Incorporated Foundation	15	26
General Foundation	17	29
General Incorporated Association	2	4
Sub-total	34	59
University/Prefectural-Municipal Affiliated	4	7
Non-Profit Organization	1	2
Total	57	100

Source: Author, compiled from data of Regional Think Tank Council n.d.

An examination of each of the think tank websites on the Regional Think Tank Council page provides for such general observations as histories that begin in the 1970s and 1980s, the notable presence of financial institutions in the financial base of both private (stock company) as well as public (foundation) think tanks, and a diverse range of activities that include: undertaking of local economic, industry and business surveys; leadership, participation and support in regional development projects; planning and sponsoring of seminars-lectures-research meetings; and acting both as a "library" of local area economic and industry-related data on the one hand and a "publisher-disseminator" of ongoing research and informed opinion both in an annual journal format as well as in special issue publications on the other. The regional think tank webpages are generally rich with information: tables of economic indicator data, archives of past survey results and links to local institutions.

4.2 Regional think tanks: descriptive assessment criteria

In order to identify more closely describe the character, operation, and potential of regional think tanks, the following seven assessment criteria were identified:

- (1) sponsor and financial base information;
- (2) undertaking of economic/industry survey research;

- (3) offering case-applied and for-profit business consulting;
- (4) offering seminars, lectures and study meetings;
- (5) producing and disseminating documents and magazine publications;
- (6) maintaining an area economic indicator database for public access;
- (7) advocating a local development agenda based on single issue expertise and focus.

Analyzing the 50-plus regional think tanks of the Regional Think Tank Council on the basis of the assessment criteria clearly identified the differences between the "private corporate-based think tank" and the "public foundation-based think tank" (Table 2). While there is clearly a difference between think tanks that have private shareholders versus those established according to the legal basis of foundations, it is notable that there are cases where the major supporter of a foundation-established think tank is a bank, versus those that have municipalities and multiple local companies as members. Both types of think tanks undertake area economic and industry survey research, in some cases on target themes that are determined internally and in others under contract and instruction by an outside actor. The differences between the two types can be seen in all the remaining assessment criteria. Stock-based think tanks uniformly provide development-directed for-profit business consulting, which foundation-based think tanks do not. Foundation think tanks routinely provide seminar-lecture-study meetings and publish various publications such as reports and magazines, which private-capitalized think tanks do not. An area economic indicator database with public access is common for foundation think tanks, but not common for stock-based think tanks and advocacy focus on a specific issue or agenda (nuclear power versus renewable energy) or in a specific area of expertise (infrastructural development) is common for private think tanks, but rare for public think tanks.

Table 2. Regional Japanese Think Tank Operational Criteria

criteria	Corporate-based think tank	Foundation-based think tank
sponsor & financial disclosure information	private shareholders	bank/ municipality
economic/industry survey research	yes	yes
development-directed for-profit business consulting	yes	no
seminars, lectures and study meetings	no	yes
documents and magazine publications	no	yes
area economic indicator database w/ public access	rare	common
local development agenda: single issue expertise	common	rare

Source: Author, based on analysis of think tank homepages

Considering this brief overview of Regional Think Tank Council member think tanks in terms of the definitions, characteristics, and assessments outlined herein, it is clear that the Japanese regional think tank both fits the conventional think tank pattern while simultaneously offering new points for consideration. There are regional think tanks that are independent and non-profit and non-special interest, but there are think tanks that also engage in for-profit consultancy and special-interest/special-issue advocacy. Regional think tanks undertake data generation, data analysis, special issue advocacy, and education, while also being engaged primarily with local businesses and local governments, primarily providing the data to be used to identify policy priorities and options on the one hand, while to some degree legitimizing policy to membership public on the other. When viewed within the context of Japanese governance specifically, in the traditional sense of Japanese governing, the contribution of think tanks as a clearly alternative organizational form of policy generation is significant.

4.3 The potential of regional think tanks in leadership development

Regional think tanks prioritize specific local aims and issues: area economic data generation, image-making, infrastructure improvements and disaster risk reduction. To a lesser degree, regional think tanks may also be involved in activities related to local health, welfare and education. They work to provide local governments and small businesses with accurate and detailed information with which to make appropriate local policy and local business decisions. They provide the information they produce largely for free or at low cost, through think tank publications on the one hand and a focus on education and activation of local human resources through training seminars and the development of professional connections on the other.

While the reality of regional think tanks in Japan is that there is an ad hoc, loosely-defined and under-recognized sector of this type of activity in regional areas – those municipal offices, foundation-banked research centers, and informal groups that have designated themselves a think tank – this reality contributes to an argument that this particular and particularly local institution in regional society has great potential as an agent of social change. The regional think tank in Japan – the geographically-affiliated, central government-independent, and local issues/local opportunities-focused regional think tank – must be viewed in the context of its place and in light of the potential for it to be the change agent in its host locale. In short, the regional think tank is truly a think tank dedicated to the future of a place: their place. That is enough, on its own merits, to recognize the change potential of the regional and local think tank. Given the degree to which the foundation-based think tanks of regional Japan engage with their own membership and the public at large through seminars, lectures and study

meetings, it is clear that the potential for these think tanks to develop local leadership from the ground up and contribute to enhancing the leadership potential of both local government and private sector leaders is also enormous. Regional think tanks can maximize their potential in their combinative contextual – the place and institutional context – and relational – through cooperative influence on governance and private actors – acumen. It is here that the potential of regional and local think tanks can be anticipated.

5. Theme four: regional vitality and volunteerism

Two assumptions preface this section. First, regional vitality implies the meaningfulness of lives lived in regional places. Second, meaningful lives are, in part, created through the social institutions and social activities that comprise life in regional places. Volunteerism is one such social institution and volunteer activity is another. While volunteerism in Japan had in the past predominantly been engaged in such areas as neighborhood councils, educational support and social welfare activity, more recently disaster volunteerism and event volunteerism have emerged as highly visible forms of Japanese volunteer activity. The argument here is that the continuity of change that characterizes volunteerism anywhere may find Japanese volunteerism shifting again, to where its focus is on regional revitalization. For better or for worse, the future and fate of regional and local places may largely be in the intentions and efforts, and the vitality, of the local people of those places, and the trends of both a volunteer consciousness and the character of volunteer activity thus reflect elements of simultaneous continuity and change.

5.1 Contemporary Japanese volunteerism

The emergence of modern volunteerism in Japan can be traced, as Avenell (2010) pointed out, to independent groups organizing themselves to contribute to local welfare and educational activities just after the Pacific War ended. This gradually shifted to a highly-institutionalized form of voluntary participation, largely in the form of neighborhood associations and local cooperative welfare assistance in the 1970s and 1980s. It was the 1.4 million citizens who participated in some sort of disaster recovery activity, however, in the year after the Kobe (Hanshin-Awaji) Earthquake that prompted marking 1995 as *Year One of the Volunteer Era* (Japan Times 2020). After Kobe, heavy rains, flooding and landslides became regular events across Japan, creating recurring needs for such disaster volunteers. Volunteer activities in other diverse areas have seen increased participation as well, to where volunteer participation among the adult Japanese population has come to mirror a relatively global and universal set of demographic variables and volunteer activity overall has become routinely accepted in Japanese society.

To set the stage for tracing further potential shifts in volunteerism in Japan, consider the first 100 references appearing in Google Scholar in a post-2018 Japanese-language “volunteer research” search. Generalizing the distribution of research themes, disaster volunteerism, education volunteerism and social welfare volunteerism were the most apparent activity areas, followed by public institutional volunteerism and volunteering at sports events (see Table 3). The emergence of disaster volunteerism was pointed out above; volunteering at museums and cultural sites and sport-event volunteerism, however, can be seen as emerging areas of contemporary Japanese volunteer activity. In addition, topical research on volunteerism and volunteer activity focused generally on volunteers’ descriptive attributes (student volunteers, elder volunteers, etc.), the philosophy of volunteering, and the technical aspects of volunteering and volunteer management.

Table 3: Google Scholar “volunteer research” Search (N=100)

Theme	Article Content	References (#)
Activity Target	Disaster	21
	Education	15
	Social Welfare (disabled, aged)	14
	Public Institution (museum, cultural site)	12
	Sporting Event	9
	Community	5
	Safety / Crime Prevention	3
	Snow Removal	3
	Section Total	82
Specific Topic	Volunteer Attribute (student, elderly, resident)	18
	Volunteer Philosophy / Social Value	14
	Technical (training, use of technology)	10
	Data (participation, value of effort)	7
	Support of Volunteer Activity	5
	International Participation	2
	Section Total	38
Table Total		120

Source: Google Scholar search by author, keyword: “volunteer research,” March 2021

While Table 3 alludes to a wide range of topics, some of the research therein provides an inroad to the potential and characteristics of volunteerism in regional revitalization. An important finding on disaster volunteerism articulates a powerful tension between formal volunteer management and the need for a human element, concluding that volunteerism in Japan is the site of a struggle

between formal and highly organizational institutionalism versus prioritization of an affective and human support-oriented approach that focuses on volunteer-disaster victim interaction (Atsumi and Goltz 2014). Perhaps a purview to revitalization volunteerism is research on neighborhood association participation, crime prevention, snow removal, and local area conservation, where volunteers see their efforts as abstractly idealistic, expressed in expansive terms such as town building and creating a positive living environment (Taniguchi and Marshall 2016; Herber 2018). The view that volunteers at area cultural facilities such as museums and archaeological ruins have of their role is also telling: they see themselves not as volunteers, but rather as specialist intermediaries between operators and users/visitors (Tatara 2017). These cultural volunteers see their contribution as making it possible for such facilities to overcome the increasing financial hardships they face. Recognition of this intersection of government institution, individual volunteer, and activity recipient was likewise revealed in individuals volunteering in rural cultural site preservation (Tanaka 2017), in participation in local area management aiming at reforming urban neighborhood districts (Aoki, Morita, and Eguchi 2018), and in a movement bringing residents into urban and rural environmental maintenance and rejuvenation (Kuramoto 2019). A case study of volunteer snow removal highlighted the independent, interdependent, and ultimately cooperative communities that must be brought together as indicative of the multiple lines of communication that must be activated between local government, diverse volunteer groups, irregular volunteers, and activity recipients in, for example, seasonal volunteer activities (Takahashi 2017). This research summary reveals volunteer activity to be a complex dynamic that depends on situation, objective, institutional structure, organizational leadership, individual volunteers and the communities served. While volunteer activity itself, together with individual participation in volunteer activity, should be viewed as meaningful to the community at large, to the institution where it takes place, to the recipient community in terms of resolving a need, and to the volunteer in signifying a social and humanistic endeavor, the question here is the potential for Japanese volunteer activity to be meaningfully linked to something as diffuse as regional revitalization. Depending on how one defines revitalization – as simple and vague as neighborhood association membership or as networked, organized, and direct as volunteering in youth activities, crime prevention participation, or guiding at a local cultural facility – it appears that there is some sense of a revitalization volunteer activity consciousness that can be tapped into.

5.2 Volunteerism in local revitalization

Volunteerism in its ideal form is an aspirational activity that emerges and adjusts its objectives and operations depending on circumstances and objectives. On that basis, perhaps the best we can do is to identify the conceptual and operational boundaries of a "volunteer space," which can then provide the basis for defining, identifying and constructing volunteer types and activities appropriate to any particular activity objective. As a starting point to articulate the conceptual space of the "revitalization volunteer," I turn to previous "volunteer space" research, comparing the early parameters that were identified in a 1994 350-respondent survey with those of a more recent survey (Rausch 1998). Summarizing the 22 survey prompts, constituting the parameters of volunteer activity in the earlier research, the following "volunteer space" characteristics were identified:

Volunteer activity

- ... is based on human nature and not restricted to personal or strategic interest.
- ... can be undertaken by individuals as well as groups and anyone can participate.
- ... is not based on religion or obligation; nor expected from all citizens.
- ... should be a continuous activity and not just a one-time effort.
- ... can be either direct to need or indirect, as in some support activity.
- ... is supplementary to administrative effort and can accept government assistance.
- ... can be self-advantageous and should accommodate forms of compensation.

(Rausch 1998, 128)

For comparative purposes, a contemporary survey was undertaken in the fall of 2020. Under the conditions of the coronavirus pandemic and the restrictions this created, this survey yielded 58 adult and 82 university student respondents. While these levels of response are quite limiting, consideration of these results in combination with the 1994 results can be seen as highlighting similar patterns and trends while also being indicative of particular points of focus and potentially emerging conceptualizations. The survey mirrored the 1994 version, expanded by an additional four points. The comparative responses are shown in Table 4, by prompt together with "positive response, negative response, or don't know," for the 1994 survey and the two 2020 survey respondent groups.

Table 4: Volunteer definition/conception survey responses: 1994 - 2020

Survey Statement (SS)	1994 all +	1994 all -	2020 adult +	2020 adult -	2020 adult ?	2020 univst +	2020 univst -	2020 univst ?
1. All people should volunteer	27	56	11	67	22	30	70	0
2. Volunteer basis is human nature	66	19	67	12	12	70	22	7
3. If need is recognized, should help	86	4	73	12	12	74	11	11
4. Only directly concerned need vol.	20	63	24	53	18	48	48	4
5. Volunteer activity: continuous	60	23	53	24	18	56	39	4
6. Individual resident: volunteerism	81	4	94	0	5	94	4	2
7. Volunteer should be direct to need	44	39	73	0	27	96	0	4
8. Volunteer relies on contributions	69	19	68	12	12	98	2	0
9. Volunteer: non-compensatory	26	51	10	78	12	15	81	4
10. Volunteer: accept admin. support	76	9	72	6	20	83	12	4
11. Anyone can perform vol. activity	65	22	68	12	18	85	7	7
12. Volunteer: supplements gov't	66	16	67	18	12	74	19	7
13. Volunteer: personal advantage	68	9	80	0	18	94	6	0
14. Volunteer: regional revitalization	-	-	67	12	14	41	30	22
15. Specialized skill=-vol. obligation	-	-	18	58	16	12	69	19
16. w/o vol.: events impossible	-	-	58	6	33	82	4	8

Source: Author 1994 data from Rausch (1998); 2020 data original by author; 1994 $n=350$; 2020 $n=58$ adults, 82 university students; (+): positive response, (-): negative response, (?) neutral response

Combining and contrasting the survey questions reported above confirms the 1994 *volunteer space*; reframing the survey with the idea of revitalization provided hints regarding the *revitalization-oriented volunteer space* outlined below.

A potential volunteerism base: residents as revitalization volunteers.

- SS-6: Individual resident participation is volunteer activity
- SS-11: Anyone can participate in volunteer activity
- SS-4: Even those not directly concerned should volunteer
- SS-3: If a need is recognized, residents should join in
- SS-14: Volunteer activity can be directed toward local revitalization.

Volunteerism direct to revitalization is vital; so is administrative revitalization effort.

- SS-7: Volunteer activity should be direct to needs
- SS-12: Volunteer activity supplements government effort
- SS-10: Volunteer activity can accept administrative support

The characteristics of volunteer activity: flexibility in conception and practice

- SS-5: Volunteer activity should be continuous ... but
- SS-16: Without volunteer participation, some events would be impossible
- SS-13: Volunteer activity can be personally advantageous
- SS-9: Volunteer activity can permit some form of compensation

5.3 The potential for regional vitality in regional revitalization volunteerism

Japanese volunteerism has evolved from institutionalized service provision to various volunteer formats emerging in education, social welfare, and community activity, with recent research illuminating disaster volunteerism and cultural guide/sport event volunteerism. While this continual expansion and re-definition has revealed tensions in the practice of volunteer activity regarding management and activity routines versus the individuals' motivations for participation, there is also a clear community orientation evident in such activities as crime prevention, snow removal and area conservation, as well as a largely self-defined and essentialist role in volunteers' conceptualization of their voluntary participation at cultural institutions and in support of sporting events. As with volunteer activity anywhere, Japanese volunteerism can be viewed as responsive and adaptive when specific needs are identified.

Generating reliable data on volunteerism, volunteer activity and volunteers specifically is difficult in the best of times; obviously, it is not those times at present. In addition, creating an accurate picture of citizens and residents, adults and students, business owners and company employees, and locals and tourists about their views on regional revitalization is also illusive. The intent of the present work is not to quantify these social phenomena in a conclusive manner as much as to propose new ways of looking at and re-interpreting the volunteerism and volunteer activity that occurs in regional society at present.

Volunteerism is a continuing social fact of contemporary regional Japan, and by connecting the minimal results that could be gained through the 2020 survey with both the more extensive results from 1994 as well as the literature that is continually emerging about Japanese volunteerism at large, the intent of this section is to propose that volunteerism and volunteer activity has potential for further change, to come to be a significant component in regional revitalization. Much of what we see emerging in contemporary society is a result of how we define and re-define phenomena we are already familiar with. Volunteer activity in the form of 'regional revitalization volunteerism' may be one promising example of such constructivism.

6. Theme five: regional meaningfulness in the regional newspaper

Local media in regional areas is a dynamic area of continuity and change, and this is best seen in the case for the local newspaper. At the peak of Japan's post-war newspaper trend, the 200-plus regional and local newspapers that were thriving across the country ensured a powerful mechanism that both provided national news through a local lens of implication as well as contributing to the development of a powerful place identity among the readership. The continuity element of this section is based on the continued relevance of regional and local newspapers in their readership areas, with the aspect of change emerging in recognition that, at the same time, the role of the local newspaper in regional Japan is shifting in ways both subtle but meaningful. Under threat from the more pervasive, often more attractive, but also the more cost effective ICT platforms that are taking over contemporary media, local newspapers can be seen as gradually moving away from what was once a regional identity function and more to an individual reader accommodation. What this means for the towns and villages of outlying areas is an interesting question of continuity and change.

6.1 Regional and local newspaper readership

Local newspapers have long been a staple of local life in Japan. Indeed, as pointed by Rausch (2012) and shown in Table 5, readership of a local or regional newspaper was often higher than readership of one of the national newspapers, and despite the decrease in newspaper readership overall, this trend continues.

Table 5: Readership ratios of national versus regional/local newspapers

	(1) 2007 % five national newspapers per area total newspaper sales	(2) 2007 % regional/local per area total newspaper sales	(3) 2018 % major national newspaper per area total newspaper sales	(4) 2018 % regional/local per area total newspaper sales
Hokkaido	30	70	27	73
Aomori	23	77	14	86
Iwate	36	64	31	69
Miyagi	32	68	26	74
Akita	29	71	23	77
Yamagata	45	55	39	61
Fukushima	42	58	31	69
Ibaraki	88	12	84	16
Tochigi	56	44	48	52
Gunma	60	40	53	47
Saitama	93	7	90	10
Chiba	91	9	87	13
Tokyo	94	6	93	7
Kanagawa	93	7	88	12
Niigata	35	65	31	69
Toyama	33	67	29	71
Ishikawa	16	84	11	89
Fukui	18	82	13	87
Yamanashi	34	66	27	73
Nagano	28	72	21	79
Gifu	25	75	15	85
Shizuoka	33	67	25	75
Aichi	26	74	20	80
Mie	46	54	33	67
Shiga	83	17	68	32
Kyoto	58	42	56	44
Osaka	89	11	98	2
Hyogo	74	26	68	32
Nara	81	19	81	19
Wakayama	91	9	88	12
Tottori	29	71	20	80
Shimane	37	63	22	78

Okayama	35	65	29	71
Hiroshima	39	61	32	68
Yamaguchi	86	14	70	30
Tokushima	15	85	14	86
Kagawa	46	54	37	63
Ehime	41	59	43	57
Kochi	14	86	12	88
Fukuoka	63	37	63	37
Saga	38	62	27	73
Nagasaki	52	48	23	77
Kumamoto	28	72	23	77
Oita	41	59	36	64
Miyazaki	36	64	26	74
Kagoshima	19	81	13	87
National Avg.	47.8	66.3	41.5	58.5
Dominant Area Average	N = 16 78.3	N = 30 52.2	N = 14 77.6	N = 32 74.3

Source: Rausch (2012) and *Shakai Jitsujō Zuroku* n.d.

As can be seen, the overall readership of one of the major “big five” newspapers was 48 percent in the 2007 data and just over 41 percent in 2018, while the readership of a regional or local newspaper across Japan averaged 66 percent in 2007 and 59 percent in 2018. The urban trend of the national newspaper readership based on the metropolitan areas along the eastern coast and/or having a major city can clearly be seen in the 14 prefectures where national newspaper readership is high: a short list includes Tokyo, Saitama, Chiba, Kanagawa, Osaka, Hyogo, Nara and Fukuoka. Conversely, the prefectures in which the regional or local newspapers dominate, more than 30 prefectures total, lie across Japan in the outlying areas. Notably, in the 30-plus prefectures where readership of a regional or local newspaper was more common than a national newspaper, the readership of that local newspaper has increased over this period, from 52 percent to 74 percent, whereas the readership of a national newspaper in its 14-plus high readership prefectures has not changed significantly, remaining at 78 percent.

6.2 Regional newspapers, newspaper *rensai* and revitalization journalism

This steady readership of regional and local newspapers in regional and rural areas constitutes a continuous relevance for these newspapers within their host regions. The nature of this relevance is changing, however, in subtle but meaningful ways. As part of a regional newspaper research project undertaken over several years

in the early 2000s, 15 regional newspapers were analyzed at intervals through both their paper versions and their websites (Rausch 2012). A notable part of this research was a focus on *rensai* in Japanese newspapers, which provided a means of capturing the trends of these regional newspapers over the research period. The conventional definition of *rensai* is a serialized newspaper column, a themed and recurring unit of newspaper writing. As operationalized in the present research, *rensai* are defined as taking up a particular and specific theme in a manner that is consistent over time, often in ways educational, in the sense of providing necessary fundamental knowledge about a theme, or informative, in the sense of providing information on the theme. *Rensai* in the post-Great East Japan Earthquake period (March 11, 2011) functioned, for example, both educationally and informationally, but also in social memory creation, by establishing a long-running event narrative by which readers could come to understand and process the disaster. *Rensai* as in the regional newspapers studied were identified on the basis of a distinctive and appealing title, being set off from other newspaper content by an image heading and a clear border, being numbered and appearing in the same place in the newspaper at regular intervals (e.g., every Monday in the upper left corner of page 5; see Figure 1).

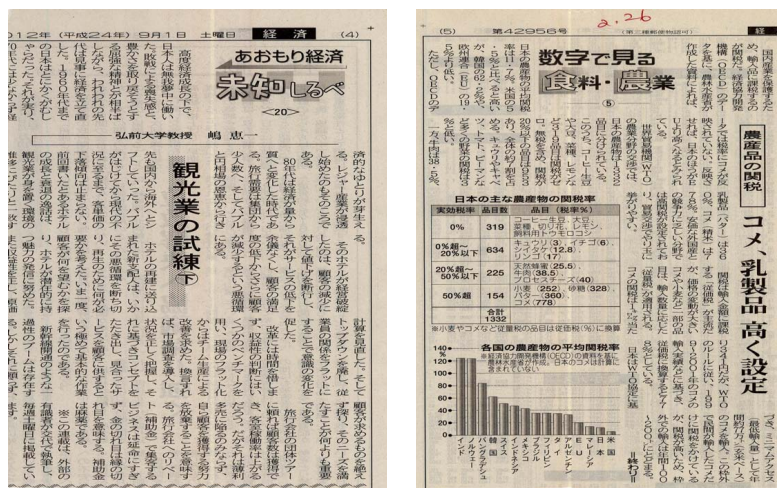


Figure 1. Newspaper *rensai* samples

Note: notice the distinctive headings, numeration and being in the form of a text block.

Left: Aomori's Economy (#20; September 1, 2012).

Right: Food and Agriculture by the Numbers (#5; February 26, 2012).

(Source: Aomori Prefecture's Tōnippō newspaper)

Using a grounded theory approach in the form of news framing analysis, the broader implications of the *rensai* in regional journalism were identified. News framing analysis offers a means of objectively identifying, extracting, coding, and analyzing content in a manner so as to define, assess, and confirm not only the frame that connects content over time, but also to allow for identifying both sub-thematic content frames and the meta-implicative frame (Van Gorp 2010). In the case of the research, the initial frame was identified on the basis of form: a newspaper *rensai*. Coding the themes of the *rensai* yielded such groupings as economy and finance, politics and international/domestic affairs, social issues and trends, local business boosterism, local agriculture/fisheries/forestry, local lifestyle and people, local history and heritage and local controversy. Extracting and analyzing the contents within these groups allowed for tracking and defining the major meta-implicative messages that the *rensai* were providing for readers.

The primary case study used the prefectural paper of Aomori prefecture, the *Tōōnippō*. Over four one-month research periods in 2003, 2005, 2011 and 2012, there were at any one time, as many as 18 *rensai* appearing concurrently in the *Tōōnippō*, with many *rensai* continuing for years: one *rensai* numbered over 550 continuous columns, another over 330 columns and six around 100 columns. Analyzing the *rensai* upwards from column theme to a regionally-relevant meta-implicative message defined in terms of regional objectives, three dominant groups were identified, with the implications and several examples and number of *rensai* in the series shown (for samples, see Figure 2):

(1) Education and information for area revitalization: contributing to knowledge and better informed local residents; *rensai* title examples:

(1) *Economics a la carte* (150+ *rensai*); (2) *Mr. Miura's "Don't Lose Aomori Economy"* (100+ *rensai*); (3) *Aomori Economy Seminar* (90+ *rensai*) (4) *Mr. Miura's Aomori Management Cram School* (25+ *rensai*).

(2) Interviews with local business management/employees: contributing to wide recognition of the local business circumstance; *rensai* title examples:

(1) *Aomori Economy: Listening to this Person* (290+ *rensai*); (2) *Challenge: Aomori Enterprise* (335+ *rensai*); (3) *Learning from Young Employees* (30+ *rensai*); (4) *My Focus on Aomori Business* (20+ *rensai*).

(3) Content focusing on local history, heritage, and natural and human resources: contributing to regional identity affirmation; *rensai* title examples:

(1) *Notable Aomori Resources, Technology, Research* (100+ *rensai*); (2) *Fly Aomori Brands: Aomori's Traditional Enterprises* (100+ *rensai*); (3) *Step Up Aomori's Tourism* (45+ *rensai*); (4) *Branding Aomori's Image* (20+ *rensai*).



Figure 2: Early *renesai* samples: local business and information/education;
 left: *Aomori Economy*: *Listening to this Person* (#288; October 16, 2005);
 right: *Economics a la carte* (#137; November 23, 2005)
 (Source: Aomori Prefecture's *Tōhōnippō* newspaper)

On this basis, the early research concluded with a meta-implicative “revitalization frame” for regional and local newspapers, where content related to the area was organized in the form of *renesai* columns in order to “revitalize the area,” in terms of knowledge levels, in terms of the character and circumstance of the local economy, and in terms of place attachment and identity (Rausch 2012). This was thus labeled “revitalization journalism.”

6.3 From “focus on area” to “focus on reader”

By 2016, a slight shift could be noted. The 2016 research utilized websites to examine 44 regional and local newspapers, where it was found that 28 out of the 44 (64%) were using the *renesai* format. In total, 179 *renesai* were identified across the 28 newspapers, with the average number of *renesai* columns per newspaper at 6.4; the lowest was just one *renesai* for a newspaper over the research period, with the highest number of *renesai* carried in any of the 28 being 17. An analysis similar to what had been conducted in the earlier research revealed that the major thematic groupings that could be identified were Contemporary Topics and Modern Life, Thematic Essay columns with content written by local residents, Place Creation in the form of enjoying the recreation opportunities of the area, Medical and Health related content, and Disaster Consciousness content. Specifically,

the *rensay* in this period lacked the revitalization frame that had characterized the previous *rensay*.

Summarizing this stage of the research, local newspaper readership was still high across the regions of Japan and the newspaper remained a relevant medium in regional and rural life. Furthermore, the *rensay* format was still an organizational characteristic of the local newspaper, used not infrequently in over half of regional and local newspapers. The implicative use of the *rensay*, however, had shifted: from education/information, a focus on local business, and local history and heritage to modern life and contemporary topics, a medium for expressive content by residents, place creation in the form of recreational opportunities, medical and health related content and disaster-related content, particularly in terms of readiness and continued long term post-event memorialization related to the Great East Japan Earthquake.

A final stage of this regional newspaper content research was undertaken in late 2020. By this point, both the form of the dominant *rensay* itself had shifted, while simultaneously, there was introduction of a pure local boosterism and business themes representation, in the form of direct introduction of local shops, along with a return to representations of local historical and cultural elements. The 2020 research set of *rensay* similar to the original set included a series produced in cooperation with the Prefectural Local History and Culture Museum (numbering 200+ *rensay*) and a *rensay* that presented the basics of World Heritage sites, two economy and business columns – one that featured “the faces of Aomori’s economy” and one that was “from the offices of Aomori’s finance experts” – and two columns featuring Aomori restaurants and shops (see Figure 3).

Representative of the totally new format and function for the *rensay* was a complete shift toward the individual reader as target, in the form of the *Freshness Lively Life rensay* and the *Enjoy View Hear Create rensay* (see Figure 4). These two *rensay* can be characterized as dominant forms in the research newspaper (Aomori prefecture’s *Tōōnippō*) in that they each covered one entire newspaper page in some cases, and crossed over two pages in others, and covered such reader-direct topics as, for example, “clothes-food-house,” “hobbies and leisure,” “gardening skills,” along with columns on health, fitness and parenting. Perhaps most notable were the frequent columns penned by residents on wholly personal themes—aging gracefully, enjoying free time, adapting to new media—as opposed to making a connection with some societal or current events-related theme. This content was a clear shift away from the outward view of revitalization journalism, that which sought to educate, inform and connect about their place. It was predominantly inward oriented, toward the reader themselves; their concerns, their hobbies, and their lives. For the regional and local newspaper, revitalization journalism had given way to a newspaper of, by and about local residents.



Figure 3: Rensai samples 2020

Left: *Stories of Furusato (Hometown)* by the Prefectural Local History and Culture Museum (#183; October 22, 2020); right: *The Faces of Aomori's Economy* (#8; October 28, 2020)

(Source: Aomori Prefecture's Tōonippō newspaper)

7. Summary and conclusions

This chapter has focused on continuity and change in regional and rural Japan by focusing on five contemporary themes that illustrate five contemporary tensions. The objective of the chapter was to use these themes, and the tensions they identify, to show continuity and change as an inter-twinned and multi-dimensional contemporary phenomenon.

Migration, heretofore generally rural to urban, has been a constant in most societies over history. This is also the case in contemporary Japan. Countering this dominant pattern is an effort to change, however, the dynamics of relocation. The efforts of municipalities to craft locally specific relocation policies and the initiation of an Akiya Bank program to provide information on affordable housing – based on the reality of akiya – are the elements of this effort at change.



Figure 4: *Rensai* sample 2020: *Enjoy View Hear Create*;
 note: Full Page *Rensai* + Fashion Content (unnumbered, November 6, 2020)
 (Source: Aomori Prefecture's Tōonippō newspaper)

The question that emerges with an analysis of this scenario of change is whether the intended outcome is probable, and if so, will it provide for the demographic profile that is sought.

National finance generally trends toward predictability. Japan's *Furusato Nōzei* tax option has brought change to that continuity while also initiating a redirection in the broader national policy of rural development and regional equality through a national tax revenue redistribution equation. Undercut by a tax payment option that is innovative, but individually motivational – both by virtue of *furusato* sentiment and the incentive of a return gift – and unpredictable for both recipient rural region and the contributing urban municipality, the continuity of a stable tax policy has been lost to a change that yields regional inequality and a weakening of the sense of sincere citizenship that creates connection to one's own community.

Regional and local think tanks in Japan have largely focused on generating local economic data, undertaking local infrastructural development, and providing seminars, lectures, and publications for members. Given that the think tank sector in Japan is for the most part entering its fourth to fifth decade, this continuity of objective and activity must be reviewed in light of the need for informed and innovative regional and local leadership, a potential for which the foundation-based regional and local think tanks may be uniquely suited.

Volunteerism and volunteer activity, while representing continuity as a social sector of public activity, reflects significant dynamics of change, trending in Japan from a focus on social issues to a dramatic shift to disaster volunteerism, and further to where, at present, volunteerism represents an expanding multi-dimensional social reality. Further change in the sector reflects further change in society, as volunteerism is now a part of sporting and event management and local cultural resource management. It is in regional revitalization, an area only recently emerging in most conceptions of volunteer activity, that the future of change though volunteerism and volunteer activity may lie, a change that will continue to see volunteerism as a key to the vitality of community.

Finally, regional and local newspapers have represented continuity in their regions and communities for most of Japan's post-war history. That newspapers are responding as businesses to a changing media world is obvious, but as significantly, regional and local newspapers are also shifting – whether intentionally or unconsciously – from what was a place-centered orientation in what has been termed “revitalization journalism” to a more individual reader centered philosophy. This can be seen in the shift in the *rensai* format, where the focus in the past was on broadly educational, place identity-related, and local economy-informing content, to emerging *rensai* columns and content that focus on individual expression, individual issues, such as health and medical care, and individual lifestyle themes – leisure, fashion and free time. While the regional newspaper continues to be a fixture of regional society, its meaningfulness is constantly changing.

The conclusion of this chapter is twofold. First is recognition that both continuity and change can be found across the range of contemporary social circumstances and that we must not overlook the value of exploring such social science themes even in rural settings. Second is recognition of the complex reality of continuity and change; while the tensions of relocation, taxation, leadership, revitalization and media that were identified in rural Japan are universal to all Asian societies, the nature of the responses – whether in continuity or through change – are unique to the circumstances and characteristics of each community itself.

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