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Rural Tourism as a Means to Mitigate Economic Disparity in Japan

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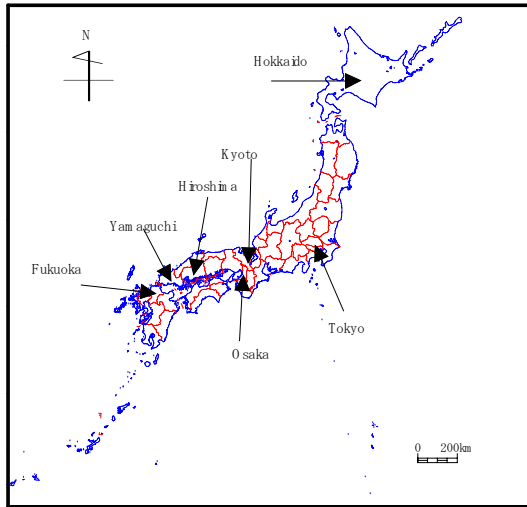
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Introduction

- This paper is an examination of case studies related to specified local tourism, especially in Yamaguchi Prefecture, Japan.
- Due to the centralization of economic activity in Tokyo, depopulation and the loss of industry have been serious problems in rural towns and villages in Japan since the 1960s.
- Several comprehensive National Development Plans have been implemented by the Japanese government to fight rural depopulation, but they have not been effective.

- As an alternative solution, the Japanese government is looking at the importance of urban-rural exchange.
- One typical example is rural tourism in depopulating areas.
- As Yamaguchi Prefecture has both urban areas and rural areas, urban-rural exchanges have been popular there.
- In addition, rural areas are facing depopulation and aging.
- Workforces of university students, often made up of volunteers, are also useful.



Map of Japan's Prefectures

1. Literature Reviews Related to Tourism for Regional Revitalization

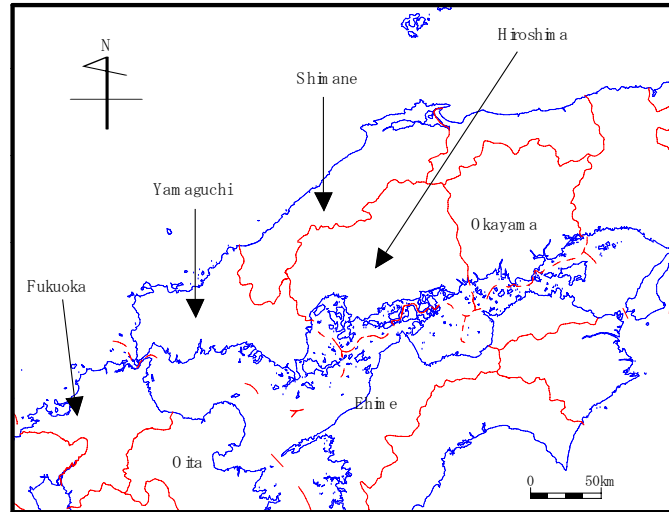
- For many developed or industrialized countries, the depopulation of rural areas may be a common problem.
- Building on the experiences of some European countries, Japanese researchers have brought new ideas to rural areas in Japan (Yamazaki 2005: 32-39, Tomikawa 2006: 161-164, Kubota and Minetoshi 2011: 205-208).

- At the same time, the redevelopment of industrialized areas as tourist destinations is also important.
- Old factories, stockyards and mines, especially in the UK, US and Germany, are often redeveloped as museums, amusement parks, shopping centers, cafes and souvenir shops (Mizoo 2003: 74-82, Nishiyama 2006: 157-160).

2. Yamaguchi Prefecture Data

- Yamaguchi Prefecture is located at the far western end of Honshu Island.
- Two major neighboring prefectures are Fukuoka Prefecture in the west and Hiroshima Prefecture in the east.
- Yamaguchi Prefecture is also at the center of an active transportation network (high-speed railway, major highways etc).

Chugoku Region



- Yamaguchi Prefecture's south coast is an urbanized area.
- Meanwhile, the inland areas and some parts of the north coast of Yamaguchi Prefecture are primarily rural.
- Like other remote cities in Japan, some cities in Yamaguchi Prefecture annexed rural areas during the Great Merging of Municipalities (*Heisei no Daigappei*) around 2006, and some cities in Yamaguchi Prefecture now contain urban areas and rural areas in the same municipality.

- Rural areas are also called *Chusankan Chiiki* in Japanese, a term that includes agriculture and forest areas.
- The total population in Yamaguchi Prefecture in 2010 was approximately 1,451,000 across 6,114 km², while the population in *Chusankan Chiiki* areas was 367,000 spread across 4,220 km² (Yamaguchi Ken 2011a: 10).
- In other words, *Chusankan Chiiki* cover a vast area with less population.

- Most *Chusankan Chiiki* areas are facing depopulation and aging issues.
- Depopulation especially hits the younger generation, and has resulted in the closure of elementary and junior high schools in *Chusankan Chiiki* in Yamaguchi Prefecture.
- In 1991, there were 200 elementary schools in *Chusankan Chiiki* in Yamaguchi, and as of 2010 that number has fallen to 150 (Yamaguchi Ken: 2011a: 22).

3. Urban-Rural Exchanges in Yamaguchi Prefecture

- To mitigate depopulation in rural areas, the Japanese government established several resettlement plans, most of which were not very effective.
- Instead of settlers, the Japanese government now realizes the important role that can be played by population exchanges.
- Green tourism is an already established attraction that draws urban people to rural areas temporarily, so the Japanese government established the Green Tourism Law in 1994.

- Three years later, Yamaguchi Prefecture published a green tourism manual that covered farmers' restaurants, farmers' markets, tourism farms and farmers' inns (Yamaguchi Ken 1997: 20-24).
- This manual also introduced some green tourism case studies in Towa Town (now Suo Oshima Town), Aga Town (now Iwakuni City), Nishiki Town (now Iwakuni City), Kumage Town (now Shunan City) and Ato Town (now Yamaguchi City).
- According to this manual, farmers in Yamaguchi Prefecture already received 224 visiting high school students between 1989 and 1996 via an official farm stay promotion program (called *Koukousei Nouka Home Stay Suishin Jigyō*).

- There are two types of farm stays for students in Yamaguchi Prefecture.
- One is for elementary school students in and around Yamaguchi Prefecture.
- As the southern coast of Yamaguchi Prefecture is urbanized, the rural lifestyle is new to these students.
- Another is for high school and junior high school students from all over Japan, especially from Osaka and Tokyo.
- Some municipalities in Yamaguchi Prefecture, including Suo Oshima Town, are already successfully inviting rural tourists from urban schools.

- Urban-rural exchanges involving university students (Faculty of Agriculture, Education etc) are available.
- Yamaguchi Prefecture also understands the importance of student activities in rural areas.
- The prefectural government established a project to support student activities for rural revitalization (*Chusankan Chiiki Genki Sōshutsu Wakamono Katsudo Shien Jigyō*) in 2011.
- Seven universities and one college of technology joined this support program in 2011 (Yamaguchi Ken 2011b: web).

DVD Filming
Iwakuni City (October 29, 2011)



4. A Case of Rural Tourism at Yamashiro District in Iwakuni City

- Like other cities in Yamaguchi Prefecture, Iwakuni was divided into an urban area (old Iwakuni on the coastal side) and rural areas including Yamashiro District (which was the former Nishiki Town, Hongou Village, Mikawa Town and Miwa Town).
- One of the sub-districts, Nishiki-chou (formerly Nishiki Town), established an NPO (Non Profit Organization) called “Hot Nishiki” in 2006.
- This organization, along with a related experience & exchange center, operates tourist attractions that include canoeing, fishing, local cooking, and farming.

- Using Yamaguchi Prefecture’s support program in 2011, students from the Faculty of Economics, Yamaguchi University visited Yamashiro District to assist with rural excursion programs organized by local residents.
- In 2011, a group of 19 students from the faculty of Economics visited Yamashiro District using the prefectural support budget.

- This student support program assists local people by providing volunteer workers.
- As outdoor activities require some assistance to maintain safety for the children, voluntary assistants are important workers in depopulated districts.
- As Yamashiro District is dealing with aging demographics, university students also help by serving as liaisons between elderly residents and younger visitors (high school, junior high school and elementary school students).

Lifeguard Training Iwakuni City (May 11, 2011)



Former Aga Elementary School



Iwakuni City, July 2011



Cooking Experience about Local Food

- Iwakuni City, July 2011

- However, the Faculty of Economics student group has some disadvantages.
- To understand a particular place, repeated visits are necessary.
- Though 19 university students joined this Yamashiro project, only 9 volunteered to repeat the experience.
- To communicate with local people, longer visiting hours are helpful.
- However, only 4 university students out of 9 stayed overnight in Yamashiro District.

Conclusion

- A group of 11 second-year university students enrolled in an introductory internship class called “Project Seminar I” during the Yamashiro project.
- However, as most Yamaguchi University classes are semester-based, activities that cross semesters reduce student motivation.
- School excursions programs (especially for high school students) to the Yamashiro District are held on weekdays, but second-year university students also have a lot of classes during weekdays, making it hard to work the excursions into their schedules.

- As in other rural areas, rural tourism in Yamaguchi Prefecture is vital to mitigating the economic gap between urban and rural residents.
- As rural areas in Yamaguchi are facing depopulation and aging, workforces of university students are quite useful.
- Economics students of Yamaguchi University present possibilities of expanding the menu and increasing destinations, and Yamashiro project is worth continuing.

References

- Urban school excursions (for high school, junior high school and elementary school students) to rural areas contribute to the local economy and help students understand the rural way of life.
- With some knowledge from university, student volunteers also can serve as local NPO workers in rural areas.

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Thank you for your attention.

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Auf Wiedersehen.

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