

Assets Rediscovered with Foreign Involvement

— Japan's Hidden Treasures —

外国人との関わりで再発見された資産

— 日本の隠れた宝 —

リンチ ギャビン (人文学部国際文化学科准教授)

Gavin LYNCH (Faculty of Humanities, Department of Intercultural Studies, Associate Professor)

〈Abstract〉

This paper draws attention to underutilized and even abandoned resources available in Japan, and argues that a fresh injection of culture, language, capital, vision and energy is required to relight their potential. It highlights and details the case study of the town of Nakatsugawa in Yamagata Prefecture, Japan, and explains the work done there as reported by Fulford (2020). Japan is one of the fastest aging countries in the world (Mathews, 2019), home to many underused property and cultural resources as a consequence of falling population and migration, and Fulford's work provides a framework called a "Shuraku OS" to tackle and mitigate the issues that arise, changing a declining trend into a vibrant incline. This OS (Operating System) is a tool that can be emulated by others faced with a declining/aging population, both in Japan and abroad. The case study highlights how the involvement of foreigners can benefit a village looking for a new way forward, and gives a framework within which roles can be decided for each stakeholder.

〈Keywords〉

underutilized resource, Shuraku OS, Japan rural areas

1 Introduction

Alex Kerr, in his Shincho Gakugei Literature Prize awarded book "Lost Japan: Last Glimpse of Beautiful Japan" writes about houses in rural areas of Japan that are beautifully built from materials no longer available (such as old forest timbers) and that have been abandoned by people in favour of city life where modern conveniences and employment opportunities abound (Kerr, 2015). He explains how some houses seem to have been left suddenly, with the tables still set and evidence of a meal having been cooked, and are now silent and empty. Ultimately, people need employment and conveniences in order to want to live in a place and, as a consequence, property that is far from either or both of these can suffer from low or even no demand. Due to this, vast swathes of countryside can be full of resources, but suffer a lack of demand and, therefore, have no value to many (Kerr,

2015).

Japan has an aging population and, in 2019, 28.4 percent of the total population were aged 65 years old and over (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2020). Not only are a large proportion of the population aged, but there has been a negative natural change rate in the population since 2005. Many point to these statistics to show why there is a lack of new demand for property from younger people, and why the villages in rural areas are doomed to quietly disappear. The population growth in Japan has primarily been driven by natural increase (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2020), with immigration being very limited due to Japan drawing on its own internal pools of workers from the rural areas instead of the Gastarbeiter immigration in other industrial powerhouses such as postwar Germany (Brody, 2007), resulting in little inward population movement from abroad.

There has been population flow towards the bigger cities (Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya), resulting in a burgeoning urban population mirrored by a rapidly decreasing and aging population in rural areas, with the result that villages are doomed to abandon in some cases. This is a picture of Japan as a whole but it, or parts of it, are not unique to Japan. A similar situation can be seen all over the world and particularly in those countries which have industrialized and have at the same time seen significant falls in fertility. There are, for example around 20,000 towns all over Italy that “dot the country, abandoned following earthquakes and mass emigration flows, when locals fled to cities in search of a better life.” (Marchetti, 2017). Towns and villages in various stages of decline can be seen, yet some believe that there are ways to reverse the trends. This paper offers an outline of a case study reported by Fulford (2020) of a village in Japan, Nakatsugawa, allowing us to gain an insight into understanding see how the resources such villages hold, tangible and intangible, can be part of increasing the demand for living in and working with these locations. We can see how community revitalization and planning can lead to success.

2 A Case Study of Nakatsugawa, Japan

2-1 Background

The remote village of Nakatsugawa is located in the town of Iide in the mountains of Yamagata prefecture, in northeast Japan, and was “named one of the 100 most beautiful villages in Japan” (Margolis, 2020). It should be noted that towns of the same name exist elsewhere in Japan and are unrelated to this case study. Nakatsugawa in Iide has a long and deep culture and traditions, as well as winter and summer festivals. They have been developing “Nōhaku” (農泊), which means “Guesthouse with agricultural, fishing and forestry experience” or, in other words, a local homestay with local practical experience included (Tsushima, 2020). This Nōhaku is a relatively new idea in Japan, with the term “Country Stay” also being used since 2018 by the Japan Countryside Stay Association (JPCSA) to advertise abroad (Jiji, 2018), and the JPCSA has made links with foreign organizations to promote mutual cooperation, with anglophone countries being targeted (Farmstay UK, 2019). In particular, Nakatsugawa has been working on its 農泊英語 “Nōhaku Eigo”, which is English language that is appropriate for

speaking and interacting with visitors who prefer to speak in a language rather than in Japanese. This indicates that, in this area, the English language is prioritized over and preferential to other foreign languages as a medium of marketing, communication and connection with foreign clients. Examples of Nōhaku Eigo would include simple tourism English such as “here it is”, “shall we take a look or keep going” and “this is a snow storehouse” (Fulford 2020, 1:32:45). They have hired a highly skilled and educated English-speaking worker originally from abroad to help with this, among other assigned jobs.

Nagatsugawa is located on the map using the following DD (Decimal Degrees) of 37.91954766197856°, 139.87461316893018° (latitude and longitude, respectively), and “faces the same daunting challenge” (Margolis, 2020) that many other countryside areas have come up against: an aging and falling population that has knock-on detrimental effects on the local tax revenues. However, it decided to coordinate with town leaders and community consultants to form a strategy to increase the number of foreign visitors, with the strategy being called Shuraku OS (from the Japanese word “shuraku” (集落) meaning “village” or “village settlement”, and “OS” meaning “operating system”). Fulford (2020) explains that “Shuraku OS is a comprehensive solution for local governments... including consulting and programming that brings in Japanese and international interns, corporate trainees, and tourists... that helps Japan’s countryside build a path forward by sharing these villages’ unique wisdom, beauty, and resilience with the world”, and discusses the 44 disappearing lifestyle values discovered by Ryuzo Furukawa that are important for community resilience and sustainability (Furukawa, 2020). An English translation of those 44 disappearing lifestyle values has been created by Fulford (2020) and is accessible from the references section of this paper.

Fulford (2020) explains how “convenience culture” is damaging to a society and, in particular, affects those living in cities as it reduces resilience under unexpected circumstances. In fact, cities can learn from villages in the countryside to create a more resilient future. Furukawa (2020) explains how the 44 values are a way of nature, community and family, and that there are many commonalities with the situation in foreign countries. He points out that the “blessings and menace of nature”, with the latter including hardships such as natural disasters

exist along with clean living, and how the natural environment changes the way of living, making a connection between lifestyles and environment. Through interviews with local people, he identified the disappearing 44 values that underpin people's lifestyles and how it is part of ontology engineering. It must be remembered, however, that those 44 values "only come together when they are applied as a whole, cohesive way of life" (Furukawa in Margolis, 2020).

Furukawa (2020) shows us goal related behaviors and methods and uses it to explain how we can pursue nature and enjoyment, explaining the "contours of a wholesome, fulfilling lifestyle" (Ishida and Furukawa, 2016), and Fulford introduces us to examples of such sustainable lifestyles from Japan, the UK and Uganda, before coming back to Nakatsugawa and describing it (Fulford, 2020). He says that there is a lot of culture to experience, and that a local set of rules are important to living there.

Charles Henry Dallas worked in the Nakatsugawa area from 1871 to 1875 as an English teacher, and introduced it through his papers printed in the Transactions of the Asiatic Society in 1875 (Matsuno, 1981). We find how the area was a great rice producer, and that exports and imports were transported by river to/from the west coast of Japan connected to the city of Sakata over 166 km away in the same prefecture of Yamagata, a city which takes 3 hours and 10 minutes by modern cars on current roads to travel to from Nakatsugawa (Google Maps, n.d.). The area was described as an "Asiatic Arcadia" by the British explorer, Isabella Lucy Bird in her travels through the region in 1878 in her travel diary (Bird, 1885), and we learn how the houses are surrounded by (often planned and planted) trees in and around the rice plains to prevent wind and for cooling effects, as well as to enable growing of fruit within planted forest walls, along with providing a place for wildlife to live and shelter (Ito in Fulford, 2020). These types of houses surrounded by a dense wall of trees are called "Yashikibayashi", meaning "forest mansions". Fulford also outlines how continuation of farming is essential to the maintenance of the area due to the connected way nature and people exist, and that, by extension, if people cease to live in the locality, the area will rapidly no longer be functional as a place to live, but that there are "people who buy old Yashikibayashi and start living in them", showing how new people can sometimes be attracted to the area and that they are

comfortable to live in, or can be made to be so.

Fulford (2020, 1:29:00) explained the essence of what is needed, in terms of tourism, in an area to ensure its vitality and sustainability. He says we begin with a green space and people to visit that space who "represent different realms of experience and expertise", and gives a typical example of a mix of business people, teachers, journalists, people of different ages with different backgrounds. With this, people will not simply visit, buy something, and return home but will also engage with the people already in the community. Fulford calls this 貢献型観光 (koukengatakankou) in Japanese, meaning "contribution tourism" which is described as community based tourism in which the visitors try to contribute to an area from the perspective of the residents.

2-2 Community Interns Facilitating Connections

To facilitate or make a bridge between the local people and outsiders, and accelerate the contribution tourism project, a "community intern" is needed (in Japanese it is 仮村民, karisonmin). This (current at time of writing) community intern in Nakatsugawa is a foreign national, Priya Mu, who was resident in Japan for education and is now working in the Nakatsugawa community.



Community Intern from Abroad in Nakatsugawa (Fulford 2020, 1:30:10)

Such a person can help with activities in which language/cultural support is needed, or when the number of visitors is large. Fulford suggests that the community intern could be a person who visits Japan on a working holiday (for example) and they would need to be able to speak English and the local language, Japanese. That person would live in the community for from one month to six months. It is this person who would also be expected to teach English to the local people to train them to be able to host visitors to their rural area, and this is the

aforementioned “Nōhaku Eigo”. They are also asked to think of new products and marketing ideas or methods for the area, and how to maximize the commercial value of local products through developing imagery and sales concepts. Fulford gives the example of making a branding character of a polar bear to help market their snowhouse stored coffee product (Yukimuro Jukusei Coffee) and uses it to connect with the image of the winter snow country of Nakatsugawa. They also record local events and market them, and bring “an outsider’s perspective” to the village due to being born and raised abroad (Margolis, 2020).

There are other community interns that include Japanese university students and regular company workers, and are called “volunteers” by Fulford in his research. These go to the village for a few days in periods when young labour is needed, such as during festivals. For example, preparation for and running of snow festivals in winter require a lot of hard work in sometimes poor weather conditions and, as a large part of the population of Nakatsugawa is elderly, university students are very welcome at those times. Students gain by acquiring knowledge about the area through practical experience as a type of fieldwork.

2-3 Funding: Products, Marketing and Sales

Products are developed, marketed, and sold with the village branding and the profits go towards funding the local activities, including travel costs of volunteers. These become a type of social business, allowing the community to continue the activities without outside assistance in the future. Products that have been developed in Nakatsugawa include coffee and local sake ice-cream (with the alcohol removed to enable sales to all ages), and an idea suggested by a foreign coordinator (Fulford himself) that they digitally market this product was put into action.



Local Sake Ice Cream Advertised on a Digital Signboard in Nakatsugawa (Fulford 2020, 1:34:55)

2-4 Committees for Planning/Future Sustainability

There is a local council which supports and makes decisions for the community, as in many towns all over Japan (and, indeed, in communities around the world). In Nakatsugawa, there is a subcommittee of the local council which is called “Mirai wo kangaeru kai”, meaning “Future Committee” of the area, and the members are those who live in or are closely associated with Nakatsugawa, with Fulford (an external consultant) also a member. They actively ensure that the village implements new ideas for its sustainable future, and are an important mechanism for receiving the community interns (Fulford 2020, 1:36:30). As they are local people, some of them may work in the local town hall, allowing good communications between the committee and local authorities as well as record keeping. The Future Committee works closely with the community interns, with the community intern providing ideas and other contributions while the future committee makes requests to the interns for various types of support.

2-5 Business Approach, and Reproducibility

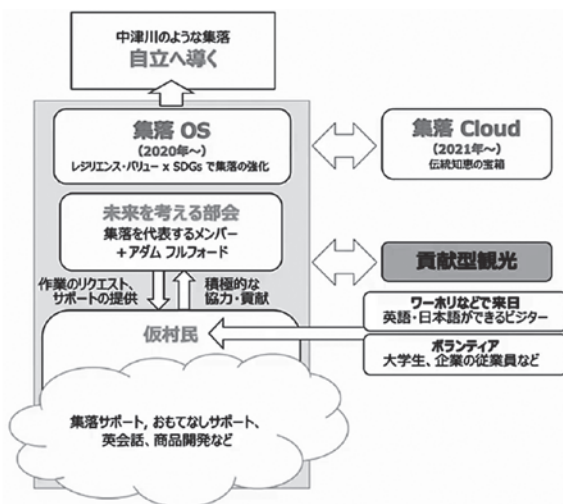
The combination of the future subcommittee and the interns are called the Shuraku OS, combining the resilience values and SDGs (sustainable development goals) (UN, 2020) to strengthen the community. This combination allows the formation of a business way of thinking, and then the challenges of a business can be kept in mind and discussed, including sourcing and retaining new employees and marketing the business to clients (Fulford 2020, 1:39:30). One of the goals of the (business) community is to spread the idea of a Shuraku OS to other areas domestically and internationally, allowing other communities to thrive in a “self-propelled/self-driven” way (Fulford 2020, 1:40:20). Another goal is to ensure sustainability of the business in the future, in the absence of advisors.

The overall purpose is for the community to be independent and able to continue to move forward. Then, if other communities also build their business base, they can form connected entities and support each other in times of need. An instance Fulford gives is the case of natural disaster when a settlement such as Nakatsugawa could send their products to areas requiring assistance to other places in Japan or also internationally, with an example presented of Nakatsugawa’s new product of freeze-dried food pouches (Fulford, 2020, 1:41:20).

Fulford presents the issue of international mutual community support, and raises the opportunity of connection between a project in a settlement in Uganda which grows a lot of coffee yet lacks varied foods and extra opportunities to earn a living, and Nakatsugawa's freeze-dried food products which could be exported easily. He is developing a barter system to exchange these goods, supporting both local economies as they would receive products to sell and realize greater profits, and expects this to be up and running (between Nakatsugawa and Uganda) in 2021.

These types of community to community connections form a “Shuraku Cloud”, which is a treasure box from which a variety of cultural and traditional knowledge flows (Fulford 2020, 1:44:11). Then, this would be a positive feeding loop, with tourism increasing to places like Nakatsugawa from people interested in seeing the projects going on there, those who have heard about the area, and from communities who would like to try to replicate some aspects of the Nakatsugawa project.

The above system, the Shuraku OS, “provides a suite of solutions for villages that includes, as mentioned above, a local Future Committee, a community intern, English-language training, support for university and corporate trips and training, and marketing assistance to generate more value out of local products” (Margolis, 2020). The following diagram is the original, which was supplied only in Japanese. Following is a translation of terms (by the author of this paper).



The Project Idea and Community OS/Community Cloud Behind Nakatsugawa, by (Fulford 2020, 1:44:30)

Translation of terms, from top to bottom, left to right, is given as follows:

- ◇ 中津川のような集落: Villages similar to Nakatsugawa
- ◇ 自立へ導く: Lead to independence
- ◇ 集落OS(2020年～): Village OS (from year 2020)
- ◇ レジリエンス・バリュー x SDGsで集落の強化: Strengthening Villages by Resilience & Value matched with SDGs
- ◇ 未来を考える部会: The Future (sub) Committee
- ◇ 集落を代表するメンバー + アダム フルフォード: Village representative members + Adam Fulford
- ◇ 作業のリクエスト、サポートの提供: Work requests, support provision
- ◇ 積極的な協力・貢献: Positive/Active cooperation & contribution
- ◇ 仮村民: Community Intern
- ◇ 集落サポート、おもてなしサポート、英会話、商品開発など: Village support, hospitality support, English conversation, product development, etc.
- ◇ 集落 Cloud (2021年～): Village Cloud (from year 2021)
- ◇ 伝統知恵の宝箱: Treasure box of traditional wisdom
- ◇ 貢献型観光: Contributory Tourism
- ◇ ワーホリなどで来日: Coming to Japan on a working holiday
- ◇ 英語・日本語ができるビジター: Visitors who can speak English/Japanese
- ◇ ボランティア: Volunteers
- ◇ 大学生、企業の従業員など: University students, corporate employees, etc.

Fulford tells Margolis that “Some people may think that Japan’s villages are simply doomed” but “others, like me, can see buried cultural treasures glinting in those communities.” (Margolis, 2020) showing that it is worth putting effort into ensuring those areas survive and thrive.

3 Findings and Conclusions

The Nakatsugawa project is of importance to the many towns and villages all over Japan and globally who are suffering from a decreasing population. The project includes international connections, also making it of benefit to educational programs with a global focus. With Fulford offering his “Shuraku OS” to others, it is a chance for them to experience results similar to those that Nakatsugawa is able to enjoy. It also offers the opportunity to connect into a cloud of mutual support, offering a new

approach to revitalization of the rural cultural landscape. Further research is needed to discover and analyze the

relationship between villages who plug into that Village OS Cloud network.

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