

Book Reviews

Anthony Rausch, *Cultural commodities in Japanese rural revitalization: Tsugaru Nuri Lacquerware and Tsugaru Shamisen*. Brill, 2010, 200pp

In *Cultural commodities in Japanese rural revitalization*, Anthony Rausch identifies a problem with implications not only in Japan but throughout the industrialized world: the potential demise of peripheral communities. According to Rausch, this problem is acute in Japan, given recent decentralization (*bunkenka*) by leaders in Tokyo, the aging of the populace, and the continued concentration of population, wealth and power in urban centers. Geographically and politically peripheral municipalities struggle amid a “high-stakes contest of social and economic survival” (p. 1). To understand this contest, Rausch examines revitalization efforts in the Tsugaru region of Aomori Prefecture through two cultural commodities.

One is *Tsugaru Nuri Lacquerware*, a folk craft with roots in seventeenth-century patronage by local elites. It consists of tableware (chopsticks, trays, bowls) made with patterns and techniques distinct to the region. The other is *Tsugaru Shamisen*, a musical form developed nearly 150 years ago and passed down in ways that encourage improvisation, yet retain regional characteristics. Rausch suggests that besides revitalizing the region economically, these two commodities might be used to instill a renewed sense of local identity among residents. Associating commodities with places is not new in Japan. In fact there is a long history of linking specific locations with foods and other commodities (*meibutsu*). However, Rausch investigates this phenomenon at a salient time, immediately following the merger of hundreds of small towns and villages into larger units in the early 2000s. This Tokyo-driven plan to decrease spending has left the fate of peripheral communities and their cultural products unclear.

The book opens with the central issue, followed by the historical and economic context of Aomori, which frames the recent revitalization efforts. Later chapters examine how policies incorporate the production and consumption of the two cultural commodities. The aspect of distribution is considered less crucial, and receives only a brief discussion here. The final chapter addresses the future of the commodities and what role they might play in further revitalization. Rausch incorporates media representations of the two commodities, surveys of producers and consumers, and interviews with lacquerware artisans, shamisen players, policy makers, and others. By way of comparison, he cites many EU-based cases and theories, seemingly addressing policy makers and academics in Europe who face the same challenges of decentralization and increased reliance on local branding. However, the book’s admitted specificity will likely limit its readership to a few specialists, especially since Rausch would be the first to acknowledge that there are no secrets to developing and promoting a successful cultural commodity, nor is there any guarantee that a well-known commodity will lead to an economically, politically, or culturally-revitalized community.

Rausch claims that well-managed cultural resources can “yield economic benefits while contributing to a sense of local identity” (p. 5). “Well-managed” resources need to be “recognized, valorized, exploited and sustained” (p. 5). This is a tall order, and one that contradicts some of the book’s findings. Rausch charts both the (limited) successes and failures of cultural resource management in Tsugaru. However, he acknowledges that the more successful cultural product, both in terms of global recognition and sheer numbers of producers (artists) and consumers (listeners), is the least-managed resource. Compared with lacquerware, the shamisen is ignored in policy making; however it is the commodity with the brighter future. Rausch states that policy makers must actively celebrate cultural commodities, so that they can be used effectively in local revitalization. However, the effectiveness of such policy work remains unclear. Chapter five argues that innovation will increase both the profile and the consumption of cultural commodities. But how does one create policy that stimulates innovation, while retaining an essence of the place, thereby leading to local revitalization? Rausch does not provide answers, which will frustrate readers searching for concrete ideas.

More troubling is Rausch’s failure to define several key terms. For instance, he separates the processes of production and consumption, devoting a chapter to each topic. While this may make sense on some level, readers might question this delineation. For some commodities, production and consumption may occur simultaneously, such as with music. Rausch acknowledges the difficulty of separating production from consumption several times in the book, but he does not examine this idea further or justify his decision to call some practices ‘production’ and others ‘consumption’. For instance, in the production chapter he includes shamisen schools, where individuals pay for lessons by established players. On the other hand, in the consumption chapter he discusses a recent Ministry of Education policy that requires all junior high school students to learn a traditional instrument like the shamisen. One wonders, at what point does a shamisen student shift from consumer to producer, and are such distinctions even useful?

In a similar vein, Rausch privileges “the rural” as peripheral throughout the text, thereby missing an opportunity to further theoretical discourses on peripherality. In doing so, he overlooks other peripheral spaces in Japan, such as certain Tokyo neighborhoods (cf. Kondo 1990; Cybriwsky 2011). This may be a matter of perspective, with Rausch framing peripherality through the lens of Tsugaru residents and media. However, his case would be more compelling if he first acknowledged the complexities of peripherality as a social, economic, political and geographical phenomenon. Karen Wigen’s (1995) work might have helped illuminate the complexity of peripherality in Japanese history. In addition to privileging the rural, Rausch conceptualizes “the local” in a nostalgic and underdeveloped way. Local equals rural, and rural equals peripheral. Policy makers in Japan’s gradually aging and depopulating municipalities might be forgiven for conceiving of their towns and villages in such black-and-white terms, especially when faced with the possibility of their communities becoming ghost towns. However, one hopes for a more nuanced approach to the problem from Rausch. Unfortunately, these associations further narrow the potential readership to scholars and policy makers of self-defined rural regions.

Finally, the book suffers from numerous copy-editing errors and several missing citations, further alienating the reader and making it impossible to track down several poten-

tially useful books or articles. In the end, Rausch has studied a compelling problem in contemporary Japan, but he misses the chance to provide insights into the central processes or to aid our understanding of the importance of cultural commodities in Japan's future.

Chris McMorran
Department of Japanese Studies
National University of Singapore

Works cited

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