

JAPANESE RURAL REVITALIZATION: THE REALITY AND POTENTIAL OF CULTURAL COMMODITIES AS LOCAL BRANDS

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Abstract: Against a background of the recent *Heisei dai-gappei* municipal mergers, this paper considers the reality of local revitalization in rural Japan through local branding; that is, the process through which local products are tied to the region from which they originate. While the importance of branding was formally recognized by the Japanese national government in 2006, this paper takes the position that the current mechanisms driving place-branding ultimately miss the potential of locally appropriate products. As part of the current rush to 'brand' anything local, the Tsugaru district of Aomori Prefecture has identified eight products for branding. However, considering the historical trajectory of Tsugaru *nuri* lacquerware and Tsugaru *shamisen* music, the two cultural commodities most associated with Tsugaru, it is clear that the potential of branding is complicated, if not countered – specifically in the case of cultural commodities – by the process of branding itself. The research concludes that in order to ensure that a brand image is appropriate and effective in revitalizing the place it is to be associated with, it is necessary to take a proper analytical approach: The historical trajectory of potentially brandable cultural commodities should be assessed, while recognizing that it is through such an approach that a commodity appropriate to local branding can be identified.

1 INTRODUCTION

Much of rural Japan is uncertain about the future, due in no small part to a dramatic change in the central government's relationship with these outlying areas. From the post-war period in the late 1940s and early 1950s, through to the period of high economic growth of the 1960s, and on through the bubble economy of the 1980s and 1990s, the central government directed much of the economic, political and societal functions of Japanese society, meaning that progress was, by and large, focused on the metropolitan areas of Kantō and Kansai, predominantly Tokyo and Osaka. This was, to a degree, justified, since Japan was focused on rebuilding after the war and, thereafter, centralized most political and economic activities with an aim toward competitive participation at an international level. This centralization has, however, brought about two unanticipated and interrelated realities: first, that progress in the center does not auto-

matically result in progress everywhere else; and second, that lack of progress elsewhere ultimately compromises the power of the center to generate progress anywhere. This dual reality forced the Japanese central government to initiate a policy of *bunken-ka* [decentralization], culminating in the *Heisei dai-gappei* [Great municipal mergers of the Heisei Period]. These two consecutive policy reforms, while compelling the outlying areas of Japan to recognize that their fates now rested less on the national government in Tokyo than on actions undertaken at the local governmental level, at the same time hampered the capability of these local governments to create and sustain the economic revitalization that is now clearly necessary for these areas.

This paper will examine how local brands can play a part in providing a positive future for these outlying areas, focusing on Aomori Prefecture, and on a highly peripheral area within the prefecture, the district of Tsugaru, in particular. The paper will first outline the reality and implications of decentralization policy and the *Heisei dai-gappei*, and then focus on the mechanism of branding as both policy and practice undertaken to address the independence thus forced upon those peripheral areas. This will include examining the background of branding and the recent policy initiatives undertaken at the national level, as well as in the highly specific responses that have emerged at the local level. The paper then continues to look specifically at the potential in branding for two traditional, place-designated cultural commodities of the Tsugaru district. The position of this paper is that the focus on both the specific character of idealized models for branding and the mechanisms behind the management of branding has overshadowed the importance of identifying products that constitute locally appropriate brands that not only have economic potential, but are also more representative of the historical and cultural characteristics of an area.

2 THE HEISEI MERGERS

Kohara (2007: 9) asserted that the Heisei mergers were instituted on the basis of the national government's view that the dissolution and merging of small municipalities into more effective administrative units was of primary importance in restoring Japan's national fiscal health. With deficits increasing across levels of governmental functions throughout Japan, the central government estimated that costs for administrative services by small municipalities could be cut drastically by bringing about their amalgamation with other, often larger municipalities. Assuming this proves true, the Heisei mergers could be viewed as a success numerically, since

the number of municipalities in Japan nearly halved from 3,232 in 1999 to 1,820 by 2006. However, the reality of the mergers in terms of immediate implications for local revitalization, as well as the long-term post-merger fallout that will inevitably arrive, temper such a unilaterally positive assessment. The mergers – and with them the resulting reconfiguration of population and resources – were heavily concentrated in rural areas, while urban prefectures often underwent little change. In some rural areas the number of municipalities dropped to a quarter of what they had been. The most dramatic falls were seen in Hiroshima¹ (which went from 86 municipalities to just 23), followed by Ehime, Nagasaki, Ōita and Niigata. The five prefectures with the smallest change in the number of municipalities were Nara, Hokkaidō, Kanagawa, Tokyo and Osaka (Osaka lost only one out of an original 44 municipalities). The resulting reality for merged rural municipalities is that they have, in effect, disappeared. Places and place names were eliminated through national policy, despite an often powerful and lingering consciousness of the place on the part of local residents. In economic terms, such a loss of place-name designation, along with the loss of local identity that accompanies it, greatly limits the potential for such a place to effect its own local revitalization.

A further reality of the mergers has also had economic implications, but in a manner more connected with the fate of the nation at large. While consolidation of services in remote areas yields greater savings than the same measures in more densely populated areas – thereby justifying this unequal distribution – the financial incentives that were the default driving force for the mergers fail the test. They fail because savings in local administrative services, previously borne by the national government, were to be offset by the increase in tax allocations required for repayment of the special local bonds that were issued by newly merged municipalities to build new administrative units. Ultimately, the core areas of Japan will absorb these costs, but the long-term implications of this dramatic restructuring for outlying areas is, as Kanai (2007: 5) asserts, that the Heisei mergers will “debilitate functions and services essential to regional vitality and quality of life. The cessation of fiscal support from the national government would oblige Japan’s local governments to fend for themselves”. In contextualizing the case for mergers in Aomori Prefecture, Rausch (2006) found a similar cautionary tone for long-term implications in the literature of mergers undertaken for economic reasons in settings in Europe and North America. Thus, not only are the Heisei mergers not justified on the basis of their presumed financial objective, namely the res-

¹ For further detail on the mergers in Hiroshima Prefecture see the contribution by Funck in this volume.

toration of Japan's national fiscal health, but they also effectively contribute to further downward economic pressure on Japan's rural areas, while ultimately compromising the capability of these rural areas in their local revitalization efforts.

2.1 *The Heisei Mergers in Aomori*

Aomori Prefecture, the northernmost prefecture of Honshū, lags behind other prefectures of Japan in most economic and cultural standards. With a population of about one and a half million, Aomori has the seventh-lowest population density of Japan (YTK 2006). The prefecture has negative population growth (-2.6 %) and a highly aged population (23.1 % 65 years of age or older). Far from Tokyo and the major political and commercial centers to the south, the Shinkansen line to Hachinohe City, located on the Pacific Ocean side of the prefecture, was completed in 2002, with the line currently being extended to Aomori City. Aomori ranks low on virtually every common economic indicator – from employment and income to industrial production and small business sales. Annual per capita income for Aomori Prefecture ranks 45th nationally and half that of Tokyo, with monthly real income per working household ranked 37th nationally. 14 percent of the prefectural labor force works in the primary sector, with another 25 percent in the secondary and just under 60 percent in the service sector.

As Rausch (2006: 148) outlined, as of January 2005, the Heisei mergers in Aomori Prefecture yielded 16 new prefectural cities, towns and villages from 42 pre-merger, with an additional 23 having decided to remain independent. In truth, exclusion from merging was forced on numerous of these 23 due to their inability to attract merger partners – a consequence of their own dismal fiscal circumstances. Ten of the 16 mergers could be characterized as a joining of one or more less-populated partners with a more-populated municipality. In several cases, a smaller municipality that was fiscally sound and known for its high standard of local services was merged with a larger town or city with a less stellar reputation on both counts. Pre-merger concerns in Aomori focused primarily on identity and service, as the residents of smaller villages and towns of outlying areas anticipated a loss of both when merged with a larger municipality. As it turns out, an article in the *Tōō Nippō* newspaper reported in spring 2007 that consolidated real revenues and expenditures for the previous fiscal year were in the red in twelve of the 40 post-Heisei merger cities and towns of Aomori Prefecture.²

² The *Tōō Nippō* is the de facto prefectural newspaper for Aomori Prefecture.

2.2 Post-Merger Aomori: the 2007 Prefectural Gubernatorial Election

The *Mutsu Shinpō* newspaper ran a ten-part series on the 2007 gubernatorial election, highlighting the issues facing the prefecture immediately following the Heisei mergers.³ While most issues were universal – issues which can be expected in almost any election – the specific references to dissatisfaction with the mergers and concern about the future of the cities, towns and villages of the prefecture were telling. The themes portrayed local issues, referring to difficulties plaguing local hospitals in finding medical staff, the limited capability to improve local education, the ongoing controversies over an agricultural policy that stresses expanding production over product specialization, as well as the continuing depopulation of the prefecture. Economic themes were clearly reflected in titles that read “Urgent Demand for Local Jobs,” “No Trump-Card Found in Municipal Mergers” and “A[n Economic] Tailwind from the Shinkansen Expansion?” Rounding out the series was a column citing the lingering dissatisfaction with the municipal mergers, specifically citing the loss of local individuality, along with another column outlining the need to correct the growing reality of *kakusa* [gap] – in this context, the socio-economic gap between urban and rural Japan – and halt the continued decline of prefectural municipalities. It is against this background of a peripheral prefecture undergoing adjustments – often unsettling and, sometimes, painful adjustments – to the new economic order of the day, that the question of rural revitalization and the potential of local product branding takes on importance.

3 BRANDING AS A REVITALIZATION STRATEGY FOR RURAL JAPAN

Branding as a business strategy is well established; as a strategy in local revitalization, less so. A brand is a symbolic embodiment of all the information connected to the product and serves to create associations and expectations around that product. A brand is often based on imagery, including a logo, specific symbols, fonts, and color schemes, all of which are designed and developed to represent implicit values, ideas, and even personality characteristics of the product or the users of the product. Brand recognition and the anticipated reactions are created not only through the influence of advertising and media commentary, but also by the use of the product or service.⁴ Molotch (2003: 206) refers to

³ The *Mutsu Shinpō* serves the western part of Aomori Prefecture.

⁴ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brand> (found 1 October 2007).

the consistent look, feel and functional integration of a product line that, through branding, comes to signify a way of life, giving the example of how “the name ‘Eddie Bauer,’ once associated with camping gear, now marks a line of clothing, a chain of retail home furnishing shops, a separate line of Lane furniture, and a Ford sports utility vehicle.” The specific mechanisms of branding as cultural production are summarized by Solomon (2003: 558–589) as consisting of a creative system that creates new products and the symbols that accompany them, a managerial system that selects and produces the new products and the associated symbols, and a communication system that disseminates the symbols and provides a connection to the consumers.

3.1 From Product-Branding to Place-Branding

The success realized in product-branding has led to efforts in branding places. However, as complicated as the notion and practice of branding is for any product or product line, the case for place-branding is equally, if not more, complex. Moreover, Parkerson and Saunders (2005: 262) noted that the promise and promotion of place-branding is supported by little evidence of efficacy, while Ikuta, Yukawa and Hamasaki (2006) assert that, since the notion of place-branding is relatively new, research on the practice and potential is limited, resulting in shallow theorization and haphazard policies. Place-branding is, by logical extension of the outline of product-branding above, a ‘brand’ developed for a place, be it a nation, a region or a city. Such place-branding is an important component of tourism marketing, but Papadopoulos (2004: 36–37) defined place-branding, whether global or with a nation state or at the level of sub-national region, as multi-dimensional in its objectives, objectives that include enhancing exports, protecting domestic or local businesses, attracting and retaining factors of development, and positioning the place in economic, political and social terms. This multi-dimensional nature can also be seen in the fact that in some instances place-branding is used to create distinctions between places that are by most measures fairly similar, while in others, it is used to create similarity between places that are in fact quite different. The product element of place-branding yields a ‘product-country image’ showing how a product of a specific place is viewed by its intended target market and the buyer’s willingness to consider it for purchase. This, Allen (2007: 2) asserts, must be contextualized in terms of local economic development in the broader global economy, where “the perception of place has become an important factor in distinguishing between otherwise fairly similar products and services.” What is interesting to note, and relevant to

the aim of this paper, is how the literature reflects little on the factors of product selection in the 'product as a part of place-branding' dynamic. The research by Parkerson and Saunders (2005), for example, focused on the question of whether goods and services branding can be applied to cities. Their conclusions, however, relate exclusively to management issues and give no consideration as to what constitutes an appropriate product or service for place-branding, nor consideration of the process by which it could be identified.

3.2 Post-Heisei Merger Revitalization: Product-Branding as Place-Branding

The Japanese national government has emphasized the potential of place-branding as a means by which rural Japan can promote its tourism resources and local products. These two areas are increasingly seen as vital, because the cities, towns and villages of Japan struggle to identify ways to address their post-Heisei merger fiscal fate, whether merged or unmerged. As outlined by Ikuta, Yukawa and Hamasaki (2006, 2007), the Japanese government provided support for local efforts to identify and foster regional brands, through the Japan Brand Development Assistance Program (*Japan burando ikusei shien jigyo*), launched in 2004 by the Small and Medium Enterprise Agency of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry – a program that aims at identifying internationally competitive regional brands. Specifically, the program supported development of products with brand strength through coordination of local industries that make use of regional characteristics, with 31 projects adopted in 2004 and another 30 in 2005. These efforts continued alongside the Promotion of Japan Brand Policy, which prioritizes the establishment of diverse and reliable brands through four specific proposals. These are: (1) approaching regional branding strategically through collaboration between producers, tourism operators, universities; (2) developing and disclosing standards for agricultural, forestry and fishery products, as well as creating regional brands that are trusted by consumers; (3) combining efforts of local governments and producing areas in relaying information to consumers; and (4) developing systems for the protection of regional brands (Ikuta, Yukawa and Hamasaki 2007: 132).

These proposals culminated in revisions to the Trademark Law (*Shōhyō-hō*) in April 2006, which made it possible for localities to apply place-designated brand names to local products and services, and allowed them to register trademarks that consist of the 'name of a local area' plus 'name of

a product'. Under the pre-2006 revisions, just over ten products with nationwide recognition were registered as community brands, among these *Yubari Melon*, *Utsunomiya Gyoza* and *Nishijin Brocade* (*Daily Yomiuri* 19 March 2006: 2). According to a spring 2006 *Daily Yomiuri* newspaper article, about 320 applications were received by the National Patent Office in the first week of the 2006 application period (*Daily Yomiuri* 9 April 2006: 2); a spring 2007 *Tōō Nippō* article put the total number at over 680 as of the end of February 2007 (*Tōō Nippō* 22 March 2007: 4). According to the latter article, Kyoto Prefecture alone accounted for 131 of the 680 applications, the next highest figure being neighboring Hyōgo Prefecture with 42. Aomori Prefecture ranked 27th in numerical order, with eight local brand products: garlic, two varieties of eggs, tuna, wisteria, rice, corn and a local soup. As much as this branding movement may be understood as important in aiding outlying rural areas in their economic revitalization, it is clear that the advantage still goes to prefectures and municipalities that either benefit from a nationally predominant historical trajectory or have already established themselves and/or their goods on a national level. Ikuta (2006) noted that, immediately after the mergers, only about one-third of all municipalities nationwide followed regional policies that would lead to the development of a local brand, and furthermore, that many of the municipalities that did follow such policies reported difficulties in differentiating themselves from other areas on the basis of a regional image.

Analyzing twelve regions in Japan, Ikuta, Yukawa and Hamasaki (2006; 2007: 134) identified four types of branding, based on an idealized flow of targets of regional brand measures and expected results. The types are as follows:

- Type A is a "regional image – individual brand integration pattern," in which both regional image and individual brands are integrated in local government policy goals, and furthermore, a pattern in which a synergistic effect between measures to build a regional image and measures to build individual brands is sought.
- Type B is a "regional image – individual brand ripple pattern," in which local policy measures focus on creation of regional image, with the intention of positively influencing the success of individual brands through an indirect ripple effect.
- Type C is an "individual brand – regional image ripple pattern," in which local government focuses on promoting specific individual brands, with the expectation that such brand success will recursively contribute to the broader regional image.
- Finally, Type D is a "specialized individual brands pattern," in which local government focuses on measures to support individual brands without consideration of any resulting influence on regional image.

The researchers concluded that Types C and D, which focus on individual brands but do not address regional image as a primary goal, fail by definition to meet the standard of regional branding and should rather be considered local-government-supported local product-branding.

Ikuta, Yukawa and Hamasaki's conclusions emerging from these ideal branding types focused on 'gaps' that exist in regional or place branding efforts, and which can be identified as: (1) gaps between the mechanisms of policy measures and the identified goals of the measures – a planning gap; (2) gaps in the systems of implementation of branding at the local governmental level – a management gap; and (3) gaps that arise in the actual image of the region and the image to be (re)constructed through the regional branding measures – a reality gap. While the first and second of these gaps are amenable to administrative efforts that can be undertaken to address them, the third is more problematic and difficult to address. Moreover, I would contend that the designation of a reality gap simply as the tension that emerges when an authentic image is subject to efforts to create and establish a new image, oversimplifies the true potential branding for rural Japan, which is to effectively use the true characteristics of a place – including the products that have emerged over time on the basis of these characteristics – as the foundation of the construction and dissemination of a place-brand image that is meaningful and effective.

4 THE BRANDING OF AOMORI: CURRENT POLICY VERSUS UNREALIZED POTENTIAL

Ikuta, Yukawa and Hamasaki (2006, 2007) present Aomori Prefecture as a Type D pattern of regional branding; that is, a type in which no desired regional image was identified and the main goal of branding measures was assessed by the researchers to consist of increasing sales of local products to major urban spheres and boosting tourism from major cities. The specific process of branding for Aomori Prefecture was outlined as starting with the *Aomori-ken sōgō hanbai senryaku* [Aomori Prefecture comprehensive sales strategy] being enacted by the prefectural government in March 2005 (Ikuta, Yukawa and Hamasaki 2006: 55–57). The policy focus was on agricultural, fisheries and forestry products, complemented by efforts to initiate a shift from a *chisan-chishō* [local production/local consumption] market to a more national and international perspective, while also attempting to add lesser-known products with high-recognition potential to nationally-known Aomori products. Sales activities were concentrated on large-scale local product fairs, held both locally and in ven-

ues in major metropolitan areas throughout Japan, with items offered or abandoned solely on the basis of sales volume. Ikuta, Yukawa and Hamasaki (2006) thus summarized the Aomori products brand strategy as a sales strategy first, with venue management and provision of a stable supply system a priority, with minimal new product development or marketing.

However, a local media representation of branding as a local revitalization strategy in Aomori can be dated back several years. In 2005, for instance, a column in the Local Economy section of *Tōō Nippō* introduced the idea of branding local food products; that is, the idea of advocating apples, scallops, freshwater clams, sole, tuna, and garlic as the target products (along with the development of production systems that include traceability) as a means to capture and maintain consumer trust (*Tōō Nippō* 23 November 2005: 4). In the following year, the *Mutsu Shinpō* began a one-year-long, six-part newspaper series entitled “Support Tsugaru Brands” that introduced several ‘local goods’ for potential branding in each part (*Mutsu Shinpō* 1 January 2006–12 December 2006: 1). The first part was titled “Tradition” and introduced traditional Tsugaru crafts to readers. The second part, titled “Tsugaru Winters,” outlined potential for winter tourism. The third part was titled “Tourism” and introduced the district’s local cherry blossoms and Western-style architecture, along with green tourism and the abundant natural scenery of the area. The fourth part outlined local activities related to the fall Neputa/Nebuta festivals; the fifth part focused on agriculture, while the sixth and final part focused on local human resources, introducing advances in the local agricultural knowledge base, contributions of the local academic community, as well as several individuals who are working to keep local customs and traditions alive. However, the places of Aomori seem set on continuing to focus on agricultural and aqua-cultural resources, as reflected in a headline in *Tōō Nippō* in fall 2007, proclaiming that a non-profit organization in the Pacific coastal city of Hachinohe will “begin construction of a local mackerel brand” (*Tōō Nippō* 19 October 2007: 1), while another headline announced a trademark application for ‘Onoe (village) soba’ as part of its branding strategy (*Tōō Nippō* 22 October 2007: 1).

These local newspaper articles showed the potential of branding local ‘products’ following an approach of identifying ‘products’ that reflect the socio-cultural history of Tsugaru in broad, universal themes, and thus represent it in a meaningful sense, rather than resorting to a simple sales strategy or an approach that just focuses on what sells or, worse still, on a list of common agricultural and aqua-cultural products – products that can be found throughout Japan and yet are still used in branding efforts

by some local groups and municipalities. Highlighted in this media representation were brands that reflect characteristics of Tsugaru, seen naturally in the festivals, but also in Tsugaru's winters, as well as in its tradition, in the form of local craft products, and the local human resource potential of the area.

5 TWO POTENTIALLY BRANDABLE 'TSUGARU PRODUCTS'

In light of the aforementioned advantage to places with firmly established images and products (such as 'the advantage of being Kyoto'), and of the difficulties in differentiating one rural place from another on the basis of agricultural or aqua-cultural products (catch phrase: 'different varieties of rice are still rice'), as well as in light of local recognition, at some level, of the potential of exploiting an array of local *qualities* rather than just local *products*, it would seem apparent that the greatest brand potential for Japan's rural places can be detected in those 'products' that are both truly unique to a place and offer a broadly representative characteristic of the place at the same time, 'products' that will be termed cultural commodities henceforth in this paper. While most contemporary treatments of cultural commodities focus on innovative and highly technology-driven commodities (including broadcast media, film, publishing, recorded music, as well as design, architecture and new digital media), traditional and ritualized products and practices recast as commodities (including theater, music performance, literature, museums and galleries, as well as traditional arts, crafts and performances) also constitute cultural commodities (Lash and Urry 1994). This broad conceptual space was further expanded by, for example, Scott (1997) to include tourism, and Ray (1998) who includes traditional foods, regional languages, folklore, historical and prehistoric sites, and landscape systems.

The two cultural commodities that most directly capture the sense and character of the Tsugaru district are two historically important and highly visible, yet clearly distinct and unique cultural commodities: Tsugaru *nuri* lacquerware and Tsugaru *shamisen*. What makes Tsugaru lacquerware and Tsugaru *shamisen* appropriate as cultural commodities, aside from their place-name designation, is their historical depth and contemporary breadth; that is, their multi-dimensional character and reality that provides multiple meaningful empirical points of measure related to their production and consumption, on the one hand, and which can be assessed in terms of contributions to local revitalization in terms of both brand image and brand economics, on the other.

5.1 Tsugaru Nuri Lacquerware

While the forms and patterns possible in lacquerwork are virtually unlimited, contemporary Tsugaru lacquerware consists largely of chopsticks and bowls adorned with one of three or four prescribed patterns. The lacquerware is made in a process of applying multiple layers of variously colored lacquers over a form, in some cases using specialized application tools and specialized techniques, and then burnishing down through these layers to reveal an underlying pattern. Contemporary Tsugaru lacquerware, which most often consists of lacquer applied over wooden forms, although sometimes the lacquer is also used on pottery, metals and plastic, comes not only in the form of eating utensils, but also furniture such as low tables, and decorative objects such as vases and stationery items, as well as in the form of address books, business card cases, pens and pen stands, and, increasingly, jewelry items.

Like most regional Japanese lacquerware, Tsugaru lacquerware originated in the early Edo Period and was produced on the basis of local patronage to meet the demands of feudal elites for original and innovative designs for lacquered military items – hence the term *saya-nuri* [sword lacquer] – and later, for household goods. Numerous entries in the Tsugaru clan diaries show the practice of patronage for these lacquerware artisans (Mochizuki 2000). In meeting this demand for original lacquerware patterns, many varied and highly innovative lacquering techniques were developed – techniques that differed substantially from the lacquerware emerging in other regions. Throughout the Edo Period, what would come to be called Tsugaru lacquerware was referred to with the catch-all term *kawari-nuri* [literally: “changed lacquer”] in reference to the unlimited technical variations possible, as well as with a variety of other terms. These are: *shunkei-nuri*, a combination of ‘spring’ and ‘rejoice’; *kara-nuri*, a word with reference to China or ‘foreign’; *shimofuri-nuri*, meaning ‘salt-and-pepper patterned’; *kan’yū-nuri*, written with the kanji characters for ‘pierce’; and *mon mushikui-nuri*, the first part of which refers to ‘family crest’ or simply ‘pattern on cloth’, the second part meaning ‘moth-eaten’. Or the lacquerware was simply referred to by the name of the maker or the town or village where it was made (Satō 2001). Evidence of this variety, unique character in technique, materials and design has been found in the recent discovery of over 500 *teita* hand-sized sample boards (used by lacquer artisans to show their skills) in the storehouse of a Tsugaru family, each of a unique design (see Rausch 2004).

When the abolition of the Edo feudal government brought to an end local clan control and its associated patronage, the Tsugaru lacquerware industry was forced to accommodate a market-oriented approach. The

lacquerware, however, enjoyed a high reputation and was included in early government showcases of Japanese crafts on a global stage, with Tsugaru-produced lacquerware included as a Japanese product at the Vienna International Exhibition of 1873 and at similar venues thereafter (Satō 2001). The term ‘Tsugaru *nuri*’ was coined specifically for these events, in order to distinguish Tsugaru-produced lacquerware from other regional varieties of Japanese lacquerware. This represented the first reference to the lacquerware produced in the Tsugaru district using a regional reference, thereby ‘branding’ it, and signaled the start of a process of standardizing Tsugaru lacquerware, since representative patterns of what was to be referred to as Tsugaru lacquerware had to be maintained.

The transition from Edo to Meiji also saw the establishment of lacquerware enterprises as legal entities, along with the formation of various professional associations. The lacquerware was designated a Prefectural Small Business Promotion Product in 1949, and the post-war period from 1950 to 1980 saw a steady rise in the fortunes of Tsugaru lacquerware, with exhibitions increasing the visibility of the craft on a national level and investigations of the industry undertaken in the following years. With its designation as a Traditional Craft Product (*dentōteki kōgeihin*) by the Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry in 1975, Tsugaru lacquerware was established as a craft tradition in four representative techniques and patterns. In the period after its designation up to the present, Tsugaru lacquerware has been the focus of extensive subsidy and promotion support by national, prefectural and local government, while experiencing a continuing downturn in sales. From a peak of approximately 200 enterprises and over 700 workers in 1974, the Tsugaru lacquerware industry comprised fewer than 100 enterprises and somewhere around 150 workers in 2005. Likewise, from a peak production value of 2.124 billion yen in 1986, the industry had contracted to just over 600 million yen by 2005 (TCPIPA 2006: 10). Most recently, the Aomori prefectural and Hirosaki City municipal governments have joined forces in promoting the lacquerware as a Japan Brand product, which has provided it with a shared logo and promotional events held in several sites in Europe.⁵

5.2 Tsugaru Shamisen

Tsugaru *shamisen* is a musical performance both delicate and raucous, traditional and modern, performed in set pieces and open to innovation and ad-lib play. Emerging in the social margins of Tsugaru society in the late

⁵ See <http://www.japanbrand.net/english/index.html> (found 12 July 2008).

19th century, Tsugaru *shamisen* is now played in the Tsugaru district in live houses and tourist venues and at special events on the one hand, while also constituting a national phenomenon, with *iemoto*-type schools based on some identifiable claim to lineage – either a particular instructor or placing high in a national competition – located throughout Japan and performances not uncommon in major cities throughout the country. The music is also being seen as a distinctly Japanese music on an international level, with global CD sales and numerous players routinely touring overseas. In an interview with the author, Daijō Kazuo, Tsugaru *shamisen* historian, recently estimated the number of hobby players as 100,000 throughout Japan with an unidentified number worldwide.

Like lacquerware, the birth of Tsugaru *shamisen* was very much a function of the socio-economic climate of the times – in the case of *shamisen*, however, a climate that pressed hard on the weakest members of society, the rural blind in particular. As of the 16th century, a centralized organization known as the *tōdō-za* [literally: “our way” or “proper way”] had emerged controlling the activities of blind performers who chanted historical narratives while performing the *biwa* [lute] in exchange for alms. By the late 17th century, the *tōdō-za* was less committed to the well-being of the blind than maintaining the economic welfare of its top-ranking members. Membership was based on fees, providing funds which were then redistributed among the higher echelons of the guild depending on rank. Further consolidating the power of the *tōdō-za*, a 1776 law forbade blind men outside the *tōdō-za* from earning a living by playing the *shamisen* or *koto*. While the Meiji Restoration brought the end of the *tōdō-za* in its drive to modernize and westernize, the Meiji government established laws restricting the activities of both the blind and beggars. Without the benefits of urban industrialization, such laws resulted in an even harsher reality for the blind in rural areas such as Tsugaru.

According to Groemer (1999), the blind in the Tsugaru area were placed under the official control of the *tōdō-za* in the late 17th century. As elsewhere, the blind of wealthy families benefited most, with the poor receiving little and the poorest excluded altogether. The poorest, referred to as *bosama*, were considered nothing more than simple beggars, yet some were highly skilled on the *shamisen*. Daijō (1995; see also: Suda, Daijō and Rausch 1998) proposed that the origin of what would come to be called Tsugaru *shamisen* lies with one *bosama* named Akimoto Nitarō (1857–1928) who came to be known as ‘Nitabō’. Like the other *bosama* of his time and those who followed, Nitabō survived by what was called *kadotsuke*; that is, going from village to village, corner to corner and gate to gate, playing a bit and hoping to attract patrons who would pay for a performance in rice or money. The key to survival in this highly competitive world was inno-

vation and creativity in play. While Daijō traces the lineage of *shamisen* players back to Nitabō, it is likely that there were numerous *shamisen* performers of the day who were improvising their own style. Still, cast as a skilled and innovative *shamisen* player and an entertaining performer, Nitabō provides a romantic story for the origins of this local music.

Important in the transition of Tsugaru *shamisen* from *kadotsuke* to its contemporary form is its association with *min'yō*, traditional Japanese folk songs. As Tsugaru slowly modernized, *kadotsuke* gradually gave way to local singing contests called *utakai*, bringing together popular *min'yō* pieces and the energy of *shamisen* competitions. The Second World War saw such frivolity frowned upon, but after the war, Tsugaru *shamisen* and the *utakai* became both a source of solace for the defeated nation and a basis for national and regional pride. By the time the *utakai* peaked in the 1950s, radio and record companies were bringing the music of rural Japan to urban residents, however often in the form of a standardized and representative repertoire of 'Tsugaru songs'. By the 1960s, live Tsugaru *shamisen* performance was booming in Tokyo, a function of Japan's high growth economy bringing rural laborers from the north, whose nostalgic longing for home brought Tsugaru *shamisen* players to the big city and provided the base by which the popularity of Tsugaru *min'yō* and *shamisen* expanded to include urbanites and those from other rural locations. Most famous among the players was Takahashi Chikuzan, a Tsugaru native for whom the term 'Tsugaru *shamisen*' was coined, thereby 'branding' the music as a 'Tsugaru product' and prompting the period to be referred to as the Chikuzan boom. The Chikuzan boom brought media focus, with Tsugaru *shamisen* being broadcast on national radio and the airing of several television documentaries. This in turn produced both an emergence of 'fake Tsugaru *shamisen*,' characterized by poor playing accompanying Japanese *enka* songs rather than *min'yō*, while also providing for a renewed local appreciation within Tsugaru, as the music was heralded as a Japanese ethnic jazz worthy of national and international recognition. From the 1970s on, LP records, which gave way to tapes and CDs, as well as books profiling players, appeared with increasing frequency. The 1980s saw the establishment of two national-level Tsugaru *shamisen* competitions, the *Tsugaru shamisen zenkoku taikai* and the *Tsugaru shamisen zen-Nihon taikai*, both held in the Tsugaru district. However, due to its popularity and accessibility, with hobby players taking up the instrument throughout Japan, such 'national' competitions have come to be held several times through the year and in numerous venues throughout Japan. Out of this period of widening exposure and popularity emerged highly proficient and popular players who were neither from Tsugaru nor had an allegiance to Tsugaru as the origin of the music as a cultural product.

What is significant to note, however, is that, unlike Tsugaru lacquerware, which has enjoyed the attention and support of both national and local government, Tsugaru *shamisen* has long received virtually no such support. Indeed, many leaders of the local Tsugaru *shamisen* community have accused the prefectural and local municipal governments of getting a 'free ride' on the popularity of the music without providing any support. The impact of such criticism is debatable, but in 2000, the Tsugaru district town of Kanagi opened a Tsugaru Shamisen Museum, and in 2001, Hiro-saki City inaugurated a Tsugaru Festival that featured Tsugaru *shamisen* in a central role.⁶

6 TSUGARU LACQUERWARE AND TSUGARU SHAMISEN AS TSUGARU BRANDS

While it is clear that these two place name-designated Tsugaru cultural commodities have vastly different origins and historical trajectories – one originating in the patronage of elites yet now floundering with the other emerging in the margins of society only to enjoy contemporary success – it is also clear that they both draw more on the characteristics of Tsugaru as a place than such ubiquitous products as garlic and tuna, or rice and eggs. With this in mind, the focus of this paper shifts to how these historical trajectories and contemporary realities translate into potential in terms of regional branding for regional revitalization. At present, these two cultural commodities are either viewed somewhat negatively or not viewed at all, ignored in the very location where they originated. Tsugaru lacquerware is seen as depressing in its fixed coloration and patterns and limited in its use by virtue of its prescribed forms, both functions of its designation as a Traditional Craft. Sales are down and the Hirosaki Chamber of Commerce is participating in a project to develop international markets, giving up, it would seem, on the local Tsugaru market for its own namesake lacquerware. As for Tsugaru *shamisen*, while its popularity is rising, this is taking place nationally and internationally. Locally, Tsugaru *shamisen* is known, but either largely ignored by a generation that would prefer to hide a music which originated with blind beggars and was played in what were seen as downtrodden live houses or given only occasional attention at best by a contemporary generation with ample alternative entertainment choices.

Hence, to identify a contemporary potential in the branding of Tsugaru *nuri* or Tsugaru *shamisen* for the sake of the Tsugaru district and

⁶ See http://www.goshogawara.net.pref.aomori.jp/16_kanko/syami/syamikaikan.html#1 (found 12 July 2008).

Aomori Prefecture, it is necessary to approach appraisal of these cultural commodities through a more informed examination and analysis of the history and contemporary circumstance based on the following criteria:

- (1) the place of production and consumption of the commodity;
- (2) the circumstances of production and consumption of the commodity;
- (3) the character of the techniques and the forms and patterns of the commodity;
- (4) the conception and consciousness of the commodity producer; and
- (5) the conception and consciousness of the commodity consumer.

Examination of cultural commodities in this manner allows for consideration of how the past can contribute to a contemporary brand, both in terms that apply directly to the product as well as in terms that can be extended to the place. Examination of cultural commodities in this manner also allows for consideration of how the brand image that is developed will contribute to the future success of both the product and the place with which it comes to be associated.

Using these criteria, as shown in Table 1, the production and consumption of Tsugaru lacquerware exhibits high place connection, whereas, by virtue of its expansion nationally and internationally, the connection of Tsugaru *shamisen* to Tsugaru as a place has been diluted. Regarding the circumstances of production and consumption, as described above, Tsugaru lacquerware emerged in patronage systems, after which the industry was forced to adapt to market circumstances, with the industry now heavily supported by government in what can be termed 'modern patronage'. On the other hand, Tsugaru *shamisen* emerged in what can be viewed as severe market conditions, but which has succeeded in expanding its sphere of influence, primarily as performance, but as well as an educational service. Unlike the other criteria, the character of the techniques and forms of the two Tsugaru cultural commodities are surprisingly similar in origin and subsequent development, as both were based on creative innovation, which has given way to standardized and representative forms. The conception and consciousness of the producer and consumer can, in the case of Tsugaru lacquerware, be summarized as a transition from craftsman to worker and elite patron to purchases based on tourism, gift motives, and appreciation of high-priced Japanese crafts. In the case of Tsugaru *shamisen*, the transition for producer is from social outcast to a combination of professional musician, performer and teacher, and for consumer from a mix of nostalgia and pride to traditional music aficionado, new 'traditional-pop' fusion music fan hobby player and 'Japan' identity seeker.

	Tsugaru lacquerware	Tsugaru shamisen
Place of production/consumption	<p><u>Origin:</u> Tsugaru district</p> <p><u>Transition:</u> none</p> <p><u>Current:</u> local, increasing national/international promotion</p> <p><u>Analysis:</u> high place connection</p> <p><u>Future:</u> remain place-based</p>	<p><u>Origin:</u> Tsugaru district</p> <p><u>Transition:</u> Tokyo, media, national</p> <p><u>Current:</u> local, national, international</p> <p><u>Analysis:</u> low place connection</p> <p><u>Future:</u> regain Tsugaru significance</p>
Circumstance of production/consumption	<p><u>Origin:</u> artisans with elite patronage (1600s to late 1800s)</p> <p><u>Transition:</u> market competition (1870 to 1970)</p> <p><u>Current:</u> modern patronage in subsidies; sales through specialty stores and tourist venues</p> <p><u>Analysis:</u> from traditional patronage to modern patronage</p> <p><u>Future:</u> independent crafters</p>	<p><u>Origin:</u> social outcasts in social margins (late 1800s)</p> <p><u>Transition:</u> competition and popularization (1910 to 1960s)</p> <p><u>Current:</u> live house, concert, competition, CDs; education</p> <p><u>Analysis:</u> from peripherality to professionalism</p> <p><u>Future:</u> performance/competition/education</p>
Character of techniques and resulting forms	<p><u>Origin:</u> creative innovation, varied techniques and patterns</p> <p><u>Transition:</u> mass production with techniques/patterns standardized</p> <p><u>Current:</u> standardized, but reappraisal of traditional creativity</p> <p><u>Analysis:</u> from creative innovation to standardization</p> <p><u>Future:</u> traditional modernity</p>	<p><u>Origin:</u> creative innovation; varied play styles and pieces</p> <p><u>Transition:</u> development of a representative repertoire</p> <p><u>Current:</u> representative repertoire; with innovation/fusion</p> <p><u>Analysis:</u> from creative innovation to integrative creativity</p> <p><u>Future:</u> multi-stranded creativity</p>
Conception/consciousness of producer	<p><u>Origin:</u> <i>nushi</i> [lacquer crafter]</p> <p><u>Transition:</u> <i>shokunin</i> [worker]</p> <p><u>Current:</u> tension between <i>shokunin</i>, <i>nushi</i>, lacquer artisan and lacquer artist</p> <p><u>Analysis:</u> from craftsman to worker</p> <p><u>Future:</u> craftsman and artisan</p>	<p><u>Origin:</u> <i>hoido</i> [blind beggar]</p> <p><u>Transition:</u> traditional musician</p> <p><u>Current:</u> skilled musician and performer, teacher</p> <p><u>Analysis:</u> from outcast to professional</p> <p><u>Future:</u> multi-dimensional professional</p>
Conception/consciousness of consumer	<p><u>Origin:</u> elite patrons purchasing social prestige</p> <p><u>Transition:</u> personal use, use for guests and as a gift</p> <p><u>Current:</u> tourism, gift, high-priced Japanese-style items; non-traditional forms: jewelry/art</p> <p><u>Analysis:</u> from elitism to functional utilitarianism</p> <p><u>Future:</u> multi-dimensional social utilitarianism vs. epiphany</p>	<p><u>Origin:</u> wealthy benefactor or business owner</p> <p><u>Transition:</u> festival, competition, nostalgia in urban Japan</p> <p><u>Current:</u> traditional music aficionado, 'traditional-pop' fusion fan, hobby player, Japan/Tsugaru identity seeker</p> <p><u>Analysis:</u> from entertainment to social identity</p> <p><u>Future:</u> participatory consumption</p>

Tab. 1: **Historical Trajectory: Tsugaru Lacquerware and Tsugaru shamisen**

Source: Rausch (2007: 215).

Returning then, to the theme of rural revitalization and the potential of cultural commodities as local brands, what do Tsugaru lacquerware and Tsugaru *shamisen* offer Aomori Prefecture and the Tsugaru district in terms of, at minimum, a Type C branding (Ikuta, Yukawa and Hamasaki 2006, 2007), in which Tsugaru policymakers focus on the creation and dissemination of an individual brand, with the expectation that the brand success will contribute to regional image, if not at a higher level of connection, as in a Type A or B branding approach. In the case of Tsugaru lacquerware, the future success of the lacquerware can be imagined as being based on an independent craftsman producing lacquerware that is relevant to contemporary lifestyles, but with a link to the creativity exhibited by the Tsugaru lacquerware craftsman of the Edo Period: what can be termed a 'local traditional modernity'. The image created for the lacquerware itself would be an object that 'connects': people to a place visited in the case of tourism; people to people in the case of gifts; people to their sense of 'Japaneseness' in the case of traditional craft items; and people to themselves in terms of Tsugaru lacquerware as jewelry, or even art. But in all cases, the connection of consumer to the socio-cultural history of Tsugaru as the place where the lacquerware originated should be stressed.

In the case of Tsugaru *shamisen*, the future success that is meaningful for Aomori and the Tsugaru district specifically would entail the music recapturing 'significance' in Tsugaru and Tsugaru recapturing 'ownership' of its namesake music. This would include a return to national championships being held only in Tsugaru (as opposed to the competitions which are held in various sites throughout Japan) and support of a Tsugaru-based music production industry and Tsugaru-based players. Prefectural and municipal promotional policy should assert the notion that the best Tsugaru *shamisen* music derives its essential character from the socio-cultural history of the music in Tsugaru – a quality only attainable in the place. Like Tsugaru lacquerware, a 'local traditional modernity' for Tsugaru *shamisen* that embraces the original innovation together with contemporary inspiration constitutes a meaningful brand for Tsugaru *shamisen*. The branded producer is a multi-dimensional professional Tsugaru *shamisen* player and the branded image of consumption is participation: in an exciting performance, a tension-filled competition or in picking up the instrument and participating in Tsugaru *shamisen* through hobby-play. The recursive potential of the product-branding of these two cultural commodities for Aomori Prefecture and the Tsugaru district also lies in this 'local traditional modernity,' a broad and powerfully universal image that stresses the innovative creativity in craft and performance combining the tradition of innovation that was born in Tsugaru lacquerware and Tsugaru *shamisen* with modern forms that are contemporarily meaningful.

A second place-brand that could be defined is 'connection': connection of the past to the present and people with the past and a connection of Tsugaru to the world along with the connection of person to person through the gift of Tsugaru lacquerware and the connection of teacher to learner in Tsugaru *shamisen*.

7 CONCLUSION

Branding is an increasingly important part of the economic fate of places at every geographic level, be it the nation-state in the global economy or a town or village in a multi-layered national, sub-national, or local economy. This paper has considered place-branding in revitalization efforts in rural Japan, contextualized by the recently-added pressure on rural places by decentralization and the *Heisei dai-gappei* mergers, looking at the specific case for the Tsugaru district of Aomori Prefecture. Assessment of the literature on place-branding, as well as the directives by the Japanese national government in promoting local branding and the prefectures and municipalities in forging local branding policy and practice, reveals a focus on idealized types and various management models, but little attention regarding the selection of the local product that is appropriate as the focus of the branding effort.

The position of this paper is that the cultural commodities of a place provide the ideal product in place-branding. Cultural commodities capture the character of a place in a way that other products, predominantly agricultural and aqua-cultural alone, cannot. It appears on the one hand, as if municipal administrative support for local branding has largely been undertaken without consideration of the contribution that cultural commodities can make, while, on the other, municipal administrative support for cultural commodities has avoided creating any clear expectations of a recursive place-branding effect being derived from such support. By virtue of the inherent and powerful place characteristics of cultural commodities, branding support for cultural commodities can be a clearly recursive contribution to a place-brand. As shown in the case of Tsugaru *nuri* lacquerware and Tsugaru *shamisen* musical performance, despite whatever contemporary circumstance the cultural commodities occupies, such local products offer multiple points of focus on which to base branding – for both the product itself and the place of the product. Moreover, and most importantly, the place-brands that emerge through a focus on cultural commodities are meaningful and attractive across a broad geographic scale and, as they are often based on historical trajectory and the inherent transitions of such processes, universal and timeless in their relevance.

The conclusion to be stressed is that as valuable as place-branding is for rural villages, towns and cities, and outlying prefectures in general, the full potential of place-branding in post-*Heisei dai-gappei* Japan can best be realized in branding efforts that focus on place-based cultural commodities.

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