



The Changing Political Economy of Rural Revitalization

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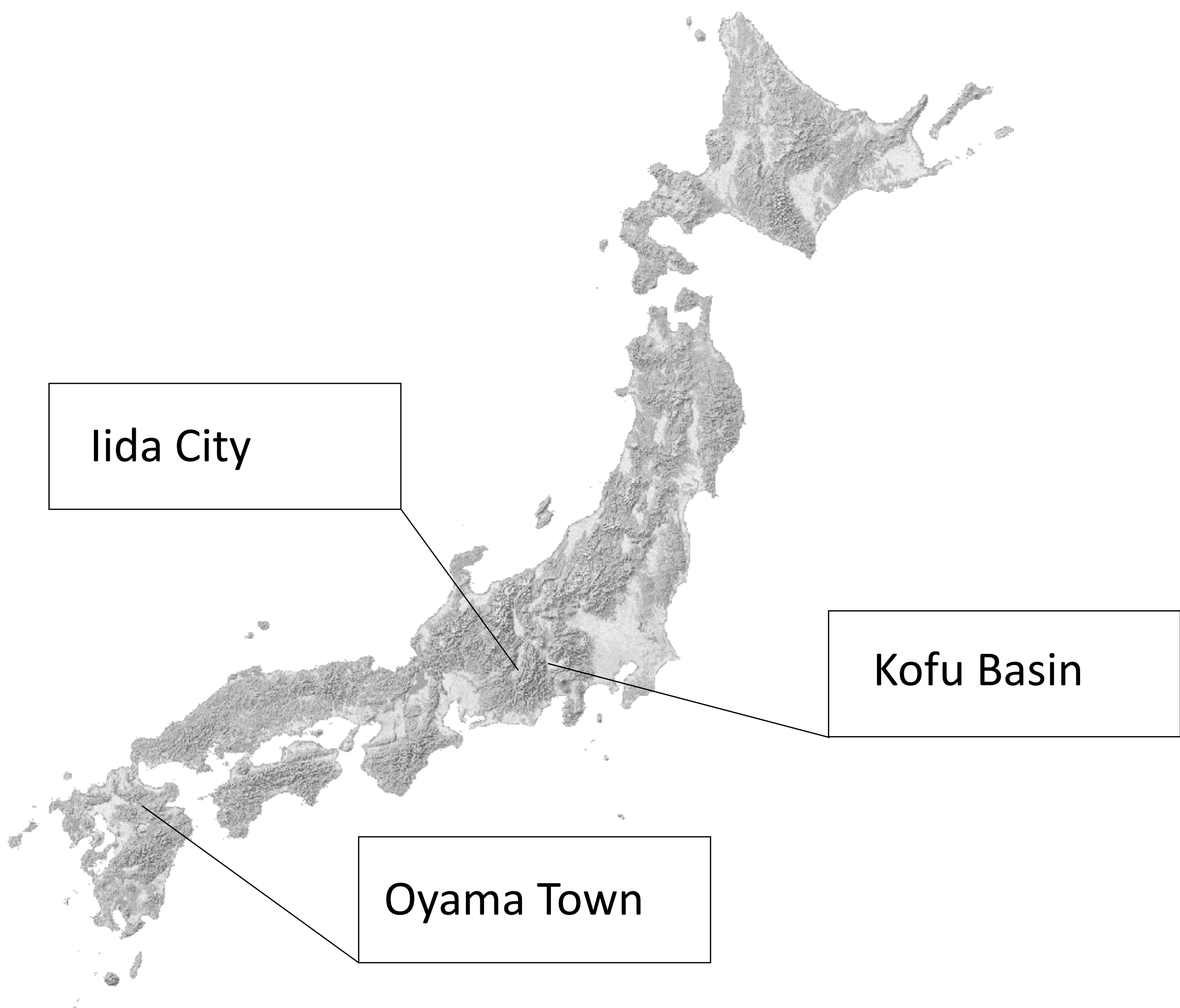
Since the mid-1990s, fiscal retrenchment and decentralization have revealed the structural problems of large parts of “regional Japan” (Kelly 1990). From the lavish redistribution programs in the postwar era, rural revitalization policies have shifted toward emphasizing local initiative and the use of local resources. Moreover, a number of deregulation processes (e.g. regarding farmland use) have opened the arena of rural revitalization for new (corporate) actors. The current Abe administration’s approach further spurred inter-local competition for investors, population gains, and not least state support. This project analyzes these macro-institutional shifts through the lens of current rural revitalization projects.

Research Questions

- How are the macro-institutional shifts mentioned above reflected in current revitalization projects?
- How do established local actors and emerging entrepreneurs interact and relate to each other in rural revitalization projects?
- What role do pre-established local and sub-local institutional settings (norms, practices, social networks) play in the local negotiation of the macro-institutional shifts?

Data and Methods

- Participatory observation, qualitative interviews in various rural/semi-urban settings, cross-case comparison
- Vertical intergration and rural tourism promotion in the Kofu Basin (Yamanashi, ongoing), Oyama Town (Oita, in planning)
- Town-building (machizukuri) and sub-local governance in Iida City (Nagano, ongoing)



Location of field sites

Preliminary Findings

Rural revitalization projects are contested arenas. They are shaped through conflict between established actors (e.g. local governments, cooperatives, farmers) and emerging (extra-local) entrepreneurs, and over different approaches to revitalization (e.g. communal vs entrepreneurial, private vs public). Municipal and cooperative mergers have disrupted local networks and organizational patterns, and complicated the governance of local initiatives. Comprehensive (communal) initiatives seem more likely to occur within stable local social and political boundaries.



Publicly sponsored wine-tourism promotion (Kofu Basin, Yamanashi)

Outlook

The preliminary findings suggest that the issue of rural/regional revitalization needs to be understood beyond purely functional notions of “success” or “failure”, but as a matter of (re)negotiating the political economy of “regional Japan”. The project will proceed with additional data collection in the current field sites, and the exploration of further cases for comparison.

References

Kelly, William (1990) ‘Regional Japan: The Price of Prosperity and the Benefits of Dependency’. *Daedalus*, 119 (3): 209–227.

