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Fading Away: Revitalising Japanese Rural Destinations through Tourism

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Abstract

Faced with a dwindling number of options, the Japanese government has identified tourism as an economic and social lifeline to regional areas of Japan that are facing a creeping existential crisis. Economic stagnation and an ageing and declining population pose a serious threat to towns and villages. In many cases, ongoing municipal amalgamations have exacerbated the debilitating demographic trends: rural culture, traditional ways of life and ancient settlements are at serious risk of fading away. Yet with nearly 50% of inbound visitors limiting their stays to Tokyo, Osaka or Kyoto, is it realistic to assume that tourists will find the appeal of rural areas attractive enough? This paper considers key political, socio-cultural and economic issues behind the plight of Japan's rural hinterland. Drawing from recent developments in tourism management and services marketing, this paper then considers the nature of the tourism experience and how rural destinations can utilise their blend of natural and cultural resources to create an appealing tourism 'product', which can attract and engage today's visitors. Based on the tourism-related activities of the town of Wazuka, important lessons are drawn that can be applied to other rural destinations.

Keywords: Japanese tourism, sustainable regional development, niche tourism, tourism branding

Introduction

The existential crisis facing many rural towns and villages has been well-documented, yet its gradual, seemingly unstoppable realisation reflects the difficulties facing those interested in averting it. Away from the large urban conglomerations, towns and villages across Japan are experiencing a steady decline in population. Younger inhabitants are leaving in search of additional education and jobs, leaving behind an ageing and shrinking population (Mabuchi, 2001). In light of this bleak situation, tourism has been identified by the Japanese government as a possible source of salvation for rural areas, with visitor-generated income bringing economic and socio-cultural benefits that could entice younger people to stay in the countryside. On the surface, this seems eminently achievable, as Japan was making exceptional progress towards achieving its incredibly ambitious target of aiming to double its inbound visitors from 19.7 million in 2015 to 40 million by 2020 (Cabinet Office, 2016). However, as nearly 50% of visitors are confined to Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto (JTA, 2015), it cannot be assumed that a greater level of inbound visitation automatically results in more tourists exploring off the beaten track. It is necessary to consider what factors will determine if tourism can help preserve the rich cultural heritage within the Japanese countryside.

Social, economic and political context

Based on current trends, the coming decades will witness the disappearance of nearly 900 municipalities – over 50% – across Japan, as they simply run out of people (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2012; Nohara, 2015). The two main causes are the declining birth rate and concentration of workers in the Greater Tokyo area. There is an unfortunate confluence of factors which is compounding the silent devastation being experienced by many Japanese towns and villages through debilitating demographic trends. While there has always been a gravitation of people towards the cities, it is only in the last few decades that this has become problematic.

The strength of the relationship between the countryside and Japan's urban areas has varied over the last 70 years. The modern mass movement from the countryside to the cities has its roots in the post-WWII period, as the vast reconstruction and transformation of Japan into one

of the world's leading economies required significant human capital. Yet the initial effects on rural economies were less severe, as these first waves of migrants retained close ties to their rural hometowns. Regular visits meant a small but steady economic redistribution from city to countryside, which helped to maintain many small- and medium-sized businesses, though these ties would gradually weaken over time (Funck, 2013a). In the 1970s, the economic and political crises of the period were to have a significant impact on Japanese leisure behaviour.

Triggered by the termination of the Bretton Woods monetary agreement and the 1973 oil crisis, a series of government reforms were to transform the economy, and facilitated the emergence of a new leisure culture and associated consumption patterns. As the Japanese population began to experience the fruits of the economic growth, the government facilitated the growth of the emerging middle class through more favourable labour legislation, such as the five-day working week (Funck, 2013a). Greater economic prosperity saw the rapid expansion of the services sector, and the population was encouraged to appreciate family life through acquiring household goods, cars, resort vacation homes and leisure travel (Bartal, 2015). Amidst this modernisation, people experienced a heightened interest in Japanese tradition, and the new concept of Japanese uniqueness, *nihonjinron*, emerged. Clever marketing campaigns, such as the Japan Railways (JR) 'Discover Japan' campaign of the 1970s tapped into this interest, and inspired many to explore rural areas with the aim of rediscovering their identity (Bartal, 2015). Offshoots of this theme are still utilised in contemporary travel advertising for the domestic market, yet this interest in discovering rural heritage and becoming acquainted with traditional ways of life was overshadowed by macro-level events.

Rapid economic growth and increasing wealth in the 1970s and 1980s inspired a huge increase in overseas travel, which had been forbidden for regular citizens until as recently as 1964. Advertisers were exhorting Japanese consumers to emulate western consumption trends, and this included visiting exotic locations such as Europe, Hawaii and North America, which imbued travellers with heightened social standing on their return (Bartal, 2015; Cooper, 2013b). The appeal of exploring rural areas became overlooked, as Japanese increasingly favoured overseas travel, or domestic travel to large, all-inclusive resorts. From the government's perspective, their focus was on sustaining the rapid economic growth that propelled the Japanese economy to become the 2nd largest in the world, and there was little time for

inconvenient truths, such as the dangerous demographic developments threatening the future of the countryside.

Indeed, political interest in the regions tended to be more utilitarian, manifested most clearly in the ongoing attempts to make the governing of these areas more efficient. During the Allied Occupation, there was a conscious effort to strengthen local autonomy as a means of democratising the Japanese polity. Therefore, administrative functions were to be redistributed among various levels of government, with a particular emphasis on the importance of the municipality as a means of underpinning local autonomy (Mabuchi, 2001). In the name of efficiency and economy, the following decades witnessed waves of municipal amalgamations, yet these were often met with fierce local resistance, particularly from residents of the smaller municipalities. Their fears typically centred on the loss of identity, a breakdown of community relationships and reduced democratic control over political decisions, as the government became more distant and less responsive (Mabuchi, 2001).

The most recent wave – the ‘Heisei mergers’, which ran from 1999-2010 – saw the number of municipalities decrease from 3,232 to 1,727. During these amalgamations, larger and more well-endowed municipalities have tended to benefit, at the expense of demographically less-fortunate smaller towns and villages of an area (Rausch, 2012; Rausch, 2014). While governments in the post-WWII era have invested significantly in infrastructure projects as a means of redistributing wealth to the countryside (Cooper, 2013a), Elis (2011) notes how political reforms of Prime Minister Koizumi (2001-2005) exacerbated the plight of already marginalised peripheral areas, as government support and investment were scaled down. The threat to local tradition and heritage of amalgamations and reduced political support is starkly illustrated by Odagiri (2009, cited in Rausch, 2014), who describes the ‘invisible village phenomenon’, where towns and villages consumed within the amalgamations have slipped off the political radar. This sharpening polarisation between regional areas is contributing to ‘unstoppable’ population decline and is one of the main causes of the continued fall in land values across nearly 60% of the country (Takeishi and Yamamura, 2017). Although Prime Minister Abe made the regions one of his government’s priorities in 2015 – with an eye on wooing the traditionally favourable rural electorate – these efforts appear to have met with limited success, as the rural population’s fears identified above by Mabuchi proved more deep-rooted.

It is against such a bleak background of demographic decline and political abandonment that feelings of anger and helplessness abound in many rural communities, as the inhabitants fear their customs and their life's work will slowly fade away. The following sections will consider the Japanese government's vision that tourism could offer these areas a lifeline, before analysing the necessary conditions for creating a viable tourism product that could attract visitors to the localities.

Inbound tourism in Japan

During the previous decade, Japan enjoyed record-breaking numbers of inbound tourists, facilitated greatly by eager government support. Motivated by a desire to see tourism providing a boost to regional economies, government policies made it easier for companies and local governments to apply for financial support, and significantly eased the visa application process for Asian tourists to visit Japan. While the prospect of tourism fulfilling the government's hopes is at its highest, until very recently such a case was looking decidedly unlikely. Since 2011-2015, inbound tourism to Japan has enjoyed annual growth rates of over 30%, and in 2019 a record 31.9 million inbound visitors contributed around US\$35 billion to the Japanese economy (JNTO, 2020). In early 2023 inbound tourism has been recovering rapidly, with visitor spending on a par with pre-pandemic levels and a massive 683,000 new jobs set to be created in the sector over the next decade. If these predictions prove to be accurate, tourism will contribute an unprecedented 6.5% of GDP (WTTC, 2022). However, the benefits of this tourism have historically been concentrated within the so-called 'Golden Route', stretching from Chiba and Tokyo in eastern Japan, to Kobe in the west-central area (Funck and Cooper, 2013a; McKinsey, 2015).

In light of the importance that recent government have attached to tourism (e.g. JTA, 2012; 2015), it is ironic that Japanese government attitudes towards inbound tourism were much more favourable in the period from the Meiji Restoration (1871) to the 1930s than in most of the post-WWII period. In the late 19th century, domestic tourism was booming due to great improvements in infrastructure and private sector innovation. Yet the government appreciated that revenue from foreign tourists represented a valuable source of income that could help fund

its ambitious plans for the rapid development of modern state apparatus as well as the transformation of the Japanese military; by 1936 income from foreign visitors represented the 4th largest source of foreign currency, after cotton, raw silk and silk (Funck, 2013b). Yet from the 1950s until the new millennium, successive governments did not take tourism seriously, and was deemed to be of secondary importance to other facets of the economy. Interestingly, the economic potential of *outbound* tourism was valued more, due to its ability to reduce the country's embarrassing trade deficits its tourists travelling and spending overseas.

Despite its impressive infrastructure and rich variety of tourism resources, including 25 World Heritage Sites, the surprisingly low numbers of inbound tourists was a reflection of the low level of government support. In 2000, Japan welcomed fewer than 5 million inbound visitors, and received the lowest income from tourism among the G20 countries. At that time, the country was stuck in post-bubble stagnation, with the regions in strong need of economic stimulus. The catalyst for transforming Japan's attitudes was Prime Minister Koizumi (2001-2005), who was the first post-war leader to appreciate the socio-economic benefits that tourism could bring to Japan.

Koizumi's vision and reforms heralded a sweeping revision of inbound tourism policy, elevating the importance of tourism within the top levels of government (Cooper, 2013a). In 2001, the newly established Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport (MLIT) was given total responsibility and coordination of tourism policy, and 10 regional MLIT bureaux around the country helped foster collaboration between the government and the private sector (Cooper, 2013a). As well as offering strong support to the 2002 World Cup that was co-hosted by Japan and South Korea, the prime ministerial support he afforded the '*Yōkoso Japan*' inbound tourism campaign was a powerful symbolic gesture. Such activities were driven by his government's desire for the better utilisation and capitalisation of Japan's soft power to improve the global image and reputation of Japan (Dinnie, 2008).

This strategic shift helped to energise tourism policy-making, and in 2008 the MLIT established the Japan Tourism Agency (JTA) to involve the private sector and enhance collaboration between government departments. Notably, it was given special status within the cabinet. Among its early successes was to persuade the Ministry of Justice in 2009 to relax restrictions on Chinese visitors; this has since been extended around the Asia region and can be

seen as the catalyst for today's tourism boom. Importantly, the JTA and MLIT have both been active in encouraging regional prefectures to be more proactive in targeting tourists and enticing them away from the big cities (JTA, 2011; 2015). Reflecting growing confidence at the national level, the JTA has set high targets for encouraging both domestic and international tourists away from the Golden Route, such as raising the number of international visitors from 10 million in 2010 to 24 million by 2016 (JTA, 2011). Yet the skewed regional distribution of tourism is one of the three critical issues that are currently preventing Japan from benefitting more from inbound tourism, and without reform of the current approach to tourism management and marketing, meeting these targets remains unlikely (McKinsey, 2015). It is now necessary to consider this enduring imbalance, and how prefectures can develop tourism that is economically sustainable.

Creating tourist appeal: the challenges of stimulating tourism demand

For many of Japan's lesser-known areas, tourism offers a panacea to the pressing socio-economic issues they are confronted with. Faced with critical demographic pressures and with agriculture playing a diminishing role in many rural areas' economies and identities, regional prefectural governments have been encouraging many towns and villages in the countryside to turn to tourism (Funck, 2013a). Yet establishing, marketing and managing tourism resources that can attract and satisfy tourists is by no means an automatic process. The process of establishing themselves as a tourist destination begins with reconceptualisation: an acceptance by key stakeholders of the need and desirability to redefine themselves as tourist consumption spaces through the unique blend of their history and traditional ways of life (Richards and Wilson, 2006).

Practically, towns and villages will conduct a situational analysis of their intangible and tangible resources and decide what will be the basis for attempting to attract potential tourists to visit their particular location. The tangible resources are often nature-based and can range from the setting of the habitation to particular natural features in or around it. These can range from beaches, rivers and lakes to mountains, valleys and forests. Such features can have inherent value for visitors or facilitate additional value-creating activities, such as fishing, hiking or bird-watching. Tangible built resources can also attract visitors; UNESCO (2017)

defines these as buildings, historic places and monuments that are representative of a particular culture's architecture or technology. Intangible resources are grounded in the area's culture, and can include ways of life, language and events, which have been inherited from previous generations. While this forms a rich list of potential resources, the key issue is whether it can prove attractive enough to inspire visitors away from more iconic or well-known destinations to make the journey off well-travelled roads, be willing to accept a more limited range of visitor amenities, and all for a less mainstream experience with narrower appeal.

The role of image in inspiring potential tourists to travel long distances, endure various hardships and to choose one destination over another has been well documented and is widely accepted in the literature (e.g. Bigne, Sanchez and Sanchez, 2001; Chen and Tsai, 2007; Lee, Lee and Lee, 2005). As competition for tourists becomes more intense in an increasingly globalised economy, the process of distinguishing a destination from its domestic and international competitors is of critical importance (Dinnie, 2014). 'Branding' is often pursued as part of such differentiation strategies, where a particular location will attempt to create an attractive blend of functional and emotional values that promises visitors a unique and welcome experience (Lynch and de Chernatony, 2004). In terms of stimulating tourism demand, branding communicates to potential visitors the 'personality' and characteristics of a destination. Building an identity can help to create an emotional attachment to a destination, and this can be a valuable source of competitive advantage over domestic and international rivals (Hosany and Gilbert, 2010).

There have been some impressive success stories, for example the promotional campaigns of Kumamoto and Hokkaido prefectures have certainly helped to raise the profile of these more regional areas, yet both of these prefectures enjoyed certain levels of pre-campaign awareness and some unique resources that are unavailable to the 'invisible villages' in Japan's forgotten hinterland. Unfortunately, the law of 'accumulated advantage' – where destinations already in the public eye attract more attention than unknown places (Hospers, 2011: 31) – works in favour of those destinations within the already popular Golden Route. A recent report on tourism in Japan highlighted the difficulties surrounding such efforts. Three key prefectures within the Golden Route – Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto – not only attract 48% of all inbound visitors, but 60% of inbound tourism expenditure (McKinsey, 2015). While Asian tourists are more likely to travel outside of the Golden Route than Western tourists, there is an alarming

lack of awareness among foreign tourists of Japan's tourism resources, even those considered 'iconic'. A study of Western tourists revealed that only Mount Fuji was recognised by more than 50% of surveyed visitors; fewer than 10% were aware of supposedly well-known destinations such as the temples and great Buddha in Kamakura and Nara, the temples of Nikko, and Himeji Castle (McKinsey, 2015). As these results indicate, one of the weaknesses of tourism in Japan is the low awareness of the range of tourism resources, even within the Golden Route. This leads to a general disinclination to venture beyond the major cities and sights. The following section will consider how the 'invisible villages' – lacking in iconic tangible or intangible tourism resources and not featuring in any guidebook – can attempt to create a viable tourism product that can appeal to tourists' desires for a memorable and rewarding experience.

Memorable tourism experiences for today's tourists

Trends in tourist preferences indicate that there could well be interest in and demand for the type of experience that more rural areas can provide. The modern mass tourism holiday emerged in the 1960s as various primary and secondary supply industries rapidly developed to meet burgeoning demand. It offered a fairly standardised holiday experience, and, based on industries of scale, soon became the dominant form of vacationing. Yet due to a number of socio-economic drivers, including globalisation and concerns over sustainability, increasing numbers of tourists are seeking a change from the convenience and comfort of the traditional package holiday and guided tour. Tourist interests have become much more heterogeneous, and alternative, or 'niche', forms of tourism offer a deeper and more engaging experience to travellers who are much more confident about 'going off the beaten track' (Novelli, 2004; Smith, 2016). Tourists have much higher expectations compared to previous generations of travellers and are playing an increasingly active role in the 'consumption' of their holiday experience (Burns, 2006). It is believed that current tourists' renewed interest in cultural resources and an enhanced desire to communicate with the past is linked to rapid technological development and modernisation (Bartal, 2015; Nuryanti, 1996). Satisfying foreign tourists through alternative experiences is not a new phenomenon: since Japan ended its isolation in 1871, overseas visitors have been escaping the cities to explore the natural, cultural and climatic delights of Japan's countryside (Funck, 2013b).

Countries such as Japan can offer potential visitors a variety of tourism experiences due to the diverse nature of its tangible and intangible tourism resources. Pertinently, Japan's rural destinations can offer an authentic and engaging experience, and on a smaller and more personalised scale, that can appeal to several types of niche tourists. The range of niche tourism types potentially available within the 'invisible villages' is outlined in Table 1. In contrast to a mass tourism 'commodification' approach to the supply of tourism, niche tourism operates on a more limited scale and aims for a more sustainable approach to the local destination's resources and population.

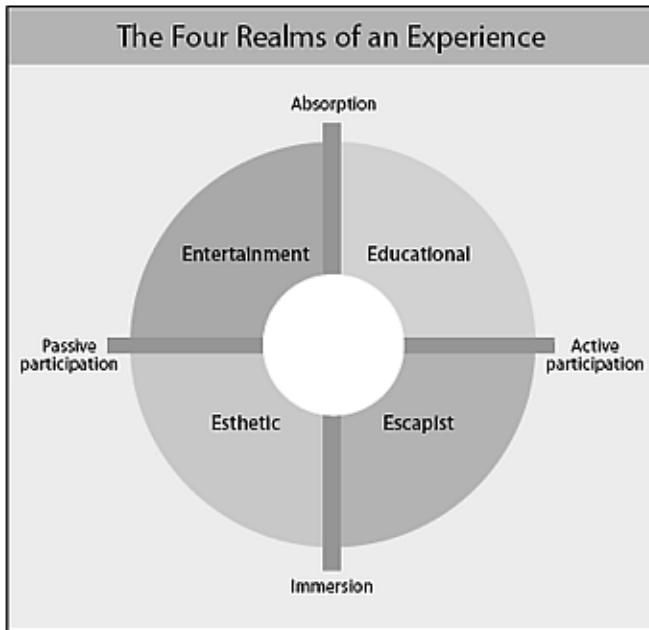
Table 1: Relevant forms of niche tourism

Kind of tourism	Definition
Agritourism	Involves visitors doing a variety of farm-related activities, including picking fruit and vegetables, feeding animals or staying on a farm.
Ecotourism	Small scale, low-impact tourism that visits fragile, relatively undisturbed sites. It has a socio-political purpose to educate travellers, raise funds for conservation and to empower local communities.
Geotourism	Visiting areas of special geographical and geological interest with the aim of conserving them through visitation by contributing financially and raising awareness.
Culinary tourism	An increasingly important form of tourism where visitors enjoy eating and drinking experiences unique to a local area.
Cultural tourism	Where visitors travel to see aspects of a destination's history, traditions and ways of life, including art, architecture, religion, music and festivals.
Wildlife tourism	Traveling to view animals in their natural habitats.
Rural tourism	Visiting areas of a country where agriculture is the primary form of industry to learn more about traditional ways of life. Can also contain aspects of culinary tourism and wildlife tourism.
Wellness tourism	Where tourists travel to improve their physical, psychological and spiritual health.
Voluntourism (or volunteer tourism)	Where tourists can work on short- and long-term projects to help the local community and visit new destinations.

This has important implications for destinations' efforts to create an appealing and rewarding experience for tourists. With the emergence of more active and discerning consumers, Pine and Gilmore (1999) posited that the economy was evolving into a so-called 'experience economy', where the ability of companies to design and deliver memorable experiences represented the key source of competitive advantage. Arguing that such experiences were the most effective way of differentiating products and services, Pine and Gilmore (1999; 2004) conceptualised the experience as consisting of four realms, across two dimensions, and can be seen in Figure 1.

The first dimension is 'customer participation' and ranges from 'passive' to 'active', with active participation providing customers with opportunities to play key roles within the environment that hosts the experience. The second dimension reflects the relationship that customers have with the event or performance and ranges from 'absorption' to 'immersion'. Immersive experiences will engage customers' senses, while absorptive activities will draw them in more. This creates the four 'realms': *Entertainment*, *Educational*, *Esthetic* and *Escapist*. *Entertainment* is where customers are passively absorbed in an experience; in a rural tourism setting this could mean observing farm workers, fishermen or craft workers undertaking traditional activities. It could also extend to cultural events or festivals. *Educational* refers to customers learning or acquiring skills or knowledge through more active involvement. For visitors to rural towns and villages, this could be participating in cookery workshops, or learning traditional forms of dance or music. *Esthetic* is where customers are passively immersed in the sensory stimulation of an experience, such as observing a tea ceremony, which consists of many unique sights, sounds and olfactory delights. *Escapist* is when visitors are actively involved in some new activity that often involves physical exertion, such as assisting with crop planting or harvesting or getting involved in a local festival.

Figure 1: The Four Realms of an Experience



From: Pine and Gilmore (1998: 102)

More effectively marketing and managing the rural tourist experience

As tourist behaviour evolves, the management and marketing of tourism destinations is also undergoing significant changes. This section considers these changes and how they relate to the situation in rural Japanese areas. Despite the national-level political reforms that have enhanced tourism policy-making since the beginning of the new millennium, major issues require addressing in order to allow the regions to realise more of the benefits that tourism can provide. The first relates to the lack of regional coordination, as each prefecture, city and town tends to pursue its own tourism agenda (McKinsey, 2015). This leads to an inefficient use of resources, and hampers the ability to create broader regional appeal through tourist routes or 'trails', representing a missed opportunity to attract tourists to a region. Since the 1980s and 1990s, a number of destinations in other countries have been adopting a more collaborative approach to destination management, sometimes termed 'co-opetition', in light of the co-operative and competitive nature of the relationship (Wang and Xiang, 2007). Following such an approach, various destination stakeholders from different sectors establish alliances to

collectively decide how best to manage and market the area, consequently enhancing their ability to attract tourists. By encouraging traditional rivals to pool their resources, it allows the area to create a stronger brand and an enhanced offering for potential visitors, with a more unified stakeholder voice (Palmer, 1995; Wang and Xiang, 2007). This is significant as many destinations are struggling to remain appealing to today's tourists, and to maintain visibility in an increasingly crowded marketplace.

Another major issue is the lack of a customised marketing approach that highlights the unique appeal of rural areas. Tourism marketing in Japan has been criticised for utilising the same approach towards urban and rural areas, which impairs the ability of the regions to maximise tourism revenue (McKinsey, 2015). Additionally, much of the marketing still focuses on the features of a destination, and neglects to include the experiential benefits that visitors can gain. As these experiences are at the heart of the tourism product, it is essential that tourism marketing focuses on how a destination can affect the emotional, intellectual, spiritual and physical aspects of an individual (Gilbert and Abdullah, 2004; Pernecky and Jamal, 2010; Tung and Ritchie, 2011). Although tangible destination features play an important role in creating appeal and should not be neglected in marketing, visitors are becoming more interested in the experiences, fulfilment and rejuvenation that destinations can offer (King, 2002; Laws, 1998). Having established the plight of Japan's regions, and how evolutions in tourist behaviour and tourism management increase the possibility of creating an engaging tourist experience, it is now possible to consider the efforts of an NPO in promoting rural villages in Japan. Through analysis of the tourism-related activities of a village in the Kyoto area, valuable insights can be gained into successful destination management practices.

The Association of the Most Beautiful Villages in Japan

The Association of the Most Beautiful Villages in Japan (MBVJ) is an NPO that began operations in 2005. As part of a global network 'The Most Beautiful Villages on Earth', its aim is to enhance and conserve Japanese rural heritage. Its activities are centred on the management and revitalisation of small villages that face degradation and abandonment. When it first launched, its membership was limited to seven villages; it now has 60 members, which includes 51 villages and nine areas. Not every village can join, however, as it has a strict set of

criteria that must be met. These relate to the integrity and harmony of the village's architecture and villages must draw up a management plan, where inhabitants commit to the sustainable use of local resources in their daily activities. It must have a blend of resources, i.e. attractive natural scenery as well as an intangible aspect, such as unique indigenous culture, a particular festival or traditional performance. Additionally, the population must be below 10,000 (MBVJ, n.d.).

The high entry requirements are to ensure a particular standard of quality for the visitor experience, and helps to maintain the MBVJ brand value. This is sustained through quality control, where members must follow 30 criteria relating to the management of the village or town, and are retested every five years. As the MBVJ website states, locals are strongly encouraged to develop networks of local suppliers (MBVJ, n.d.), which can help spread the economic benefit among other local businesses, as opposed to importing goods and services from outside the area. Members are also encouraged to hold locally-themed events, which can help raise awareness of local heritage and provide reasons for tourists to visit at different times of the year (Bowdin, McDonnell, Allen and O'Toole, 2001). One of the greatest benefits is the ability of members to significantly raise awareness among potential visitors through the MBVJ network. The NPO has both a domestic and international reach, and conducts various marketing and promotional activities around the year. These include nationwide events, to highlight the varied gastronomy of member villages, and more practical activities, such as producing maps, DVDs and guidebooks to facilitate visitors' ability to understand and access member villages (MBVJ, n.d.).

Membership of the MBVJ network can provide reassurance to villages or towns in the hinterland, and help assuage fears of being sidelined as a result of the waves of municipal amalgamations. The network also offers valuable access to a wider network, of particular value to villages that are in less well-known areas, or are in the shadow of more popular destinations. The management practices of a member village in the Kyoto area will now be considered in order to provide illustrative examples of how its MBVJ-related activities have complemented its own marketing plans.

Wazuka, Kyoto Prefecture

Wazuka has a population of around 4,100, and is located under two hours' drive south-east of Kyoto. Despite being famed for locally-produced *uji* green tea, its location in the shadow of one of Japan's most iconic cities has meant it has even greater need of awareness-raising activities, such as inclusion within the MBVJ network. Membership has brought both social and economic benefits to the village. In order to improve its tourism infrastructure, the village renovated an old meeting room, which then served as both a centre that both tourists and the local community could use. Tourists are able to use the centre to plan and familiarise themselves with the village and its resources, and it is also being used by the locals. They are able to sell their local produce, and it has helped the ageing community strengthen their social ties and provided a valuable focal point. It has also created a place where tourists can meet and interact with locals and help to plan their stay (Wazuka, 2017).

Signing up to the MBVJ town management plan and inclusion in the MBVJ promotional activities also effectively complement the town's existing management activities. The town was facing declining visitor numbers, which fell below 39,000 in 2011 (National Chamber of Commerce and Industry Association, 2017), so embarked on a strategy to build on existing strengths in order to create an appealing, multi-faceted brand. Centered on green tea and its attractive natural scenery, this aimed to tap into the heightened awareness of healthy lifestyles and an interest in traditional Japanese ways of life. A number of 'working events' were developed in and around a visitor-friendly 'green farm', including tea-making, making handmade soap and tea-based souvenirs, as well as the chance to pick tea (Waku Kankō, 2013). A café was also established, which has proven popular for overnighters and daytrippers (Cabinet Office, 2015; National Chamber of Commerce and Industry Association, 2017). The MLIT reported on how successful Wazuka has been in creating wider appeal beyond its core product of tea, offering visitors a healthy rural environment in which visitors can also appreciate the area's distinct history and culture (MLIT, 2016). More actively-oriented tourists can engage in the mountain biking events and trails. Through membership of the MBVJ and its branding activities, Wazuka is beginning to tempt more visitors away from the popular areas around Kyoto, with visitor numbers reaching nearly 82,000 in 2015. Its long-term goal is also attract more overseas visitors, in particular high-end and repeat Asian visitors, as only around 6,000 foreigners visited in 2015 (MLIT, 2016). A tourist-oriented website with information in

Japanese, English and Chinese is available, and outlines the various cultural and gastronomical attractions in the area, as well as the various ‘working events’. The town has active social media representation, particularly on Facebook. Due to its activities it has attracted the attention of international organisations, notably the Swedish Scout Association, and hosted 600 of its scouts during their trip to Japan in 2015 (Waku Kankō, 2013).

Discussion

The activities of the MBVJ offer useful insights into how rural villages can become tourist destinations. While the setting of arbitrary targets for tourism away from the Golden Route is easy to accomplish (e.g. JTA, 2011), it is far from guaranteed that tourists will find what is on offer beyond the established areas enjoyable and appealing enough to make the journey. The strict criteria of the MBVJ shows that tourism is not a realistic option for all the towns and villages in Japan’s remote hinterlands. For those villages that lack a blend of resources with which to appeal to potential tourists, the volume of tourism and its subsequent benefits are likely to be limited. Eager to assist villages with a realistic chance of success and which can be worthy ambassadors of the MBVJ brand, the NPO is very careful about accepting new members. It is careful to only welcome those that can capitalise on an attractive mix of resources, in order to preserve the social and economic fabric of village life.

From a management perspective, it is clear that the resources on their own are insufficient to attract tourists. The resources must be utilised in a way that can provide an entertaining and engaging experience. In the logic of Pine and Gilmore (1998; 1999 & 2004), visitors are not only experiencing the destination but should be transformed in some way by their experience, and it is the quality of such experiences that creates differentiation and enhances tourist appeal. Villages aiming to attract visitors through the strength and depth of their experience must provide “...the opportunity to develop their creative potential through active participation in courses and learning experiences which are characteristic of the holiday destination in which they are undertaken.” (Richards and Raymond, 2000, cited in Richards and Wilson, 2006: 1215). Richards and Wilson (2006) stress the importance of creativity for delivering a memorable and differentiated visitor experience. The various ‘working events’ available in

Wazuka provide an illustration of this point, as these can represent both the *Educational* and *Entertainment* realms of the visitor experience (Pine and Gilmore, 2004).

Other tourist-oriented activities available in Wazuka are ‘detox and relax’ events and a major mountain biking event, which represent the *Esthetic* and *Escapist* realms. Given the highly subjective nature of holiday preferences, there is no ‘ideal’ visitor experience, though by including events that represent all the four realms, Wazuka is effectively broadening its appeal to potential visitors. Interestingly, some resident-oriented events are also on offer, such as practical seminars on tourism, which can help residents better understand visitor needs and how to provide visitors with a more memorable stay.

Designing and delivering memorable experiences brings many rewards, the most obvious being satisfied tourists. This can generate positive referrals (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014), via online or offline positive word of mouth feedback, and can greatly increase the likelihood of repeat visits due to enhanced brand loyalty and satisfaction (Chandler and Lusch, 2015). As customers are now much more trusting of the feedback and reviews of other customers than of official sources of information, satisfied customers can play a vital role in sales and marketing (Erdly and Kesterton-Townes, 2003). Indeed, satisfied niche tourists could act as brand ambassadors (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014), spreading awareness of the destinations, as well as the MBVJ organisation and its goals. The brand loyalty of satisfied tourists can help the Japan brand more generally, inspiring them to continue to buy Japanese brands once they have returned to their home country (Dinnie, 2008).

Another important success factor is stakeholder buy-in. The development of the Wazuka brand and design and delivery of its tourism offering are the result of close stakeholder collaboration from a wide range of backgrounds (MLIT 0014). This allows the destination to collectively decide policy and is particularly valuable from a branding perspective, as the image that a village or town wishes to project of itself must include local opinion and enjoy local ‘buy-in’. Houghton and Stevens (2011) state that the most effective destination brands involve a wide range of local stakeholders to create an accurate and rounded message; conversely, a key reason for the failure of brands is to not properly engage and ‘energise’ a wide variety of local groups from different sectors. This is also a feature of the MBVJ approach, as importance is attached to the level of support across public, private and community sectors. As villages and

towns seeking membership have to submit a management plan and commit to responsible use of local resources in their everyday activities, this requires the various stakeholders within a habitation to agree on a common approach (MBVJ, n.d.).

The Wazuka example raises the role of social media in supplementing marketing activity. Given the prevalence of technology among today's consumers, it is essential that villages engage with online platforms, and commit resources to developing an online presence. Offering websites and content in multiple languages is a given; the challenge is to create interesting and appealing content in a creative way that can attract attention – enough to persuade visitors to make the sometimes difficult journey off the beaten track. It is very important that destinations try and integrate the viewpoints of foreign visitors in their marketing, to improve the effectiveness and appeal of the message. This is a notable weakness of Japanese tourism marketing in general (McKinsey, 2015); solutions could be to include feedback from overseas visitors in their marketing, either on the tourist experience itself, or on the ability to understand the message from a foreigner's viewpoint.

The boom in inbound tourism that Japan enjoyed until 2019 was remarkable in scale. As coronavirus-related restrictions on inbound visitors are relaxed, a rapid recovery of tourism is predicted (e.g. WTTC, 2022), with inbound tourist spending in 2023 set to nearly match figures in 2019. Yet it remains to be seen if the Japanese tourism authorities will ultimately succeed in their aim to spread the benefits of this boom beyond the Golden Route. Regional areas are in desperate need of a lifeline in order to counter the demographic forces that threaten their very existence. However, it is naïve to assume that all of Japan's 'invisible villages' can or will benefit. As the example of Wazuka demonstrates, it is essential for village stakeholders to agree on a management plan to manage and market a blend of natural and cultural resources as part of a brand. Tourists and locals can benefit from well-designed infrastructure improvements, such as the Wazuka community centre. Creativity in the design of tourist activities can be highly effective, particularly if there is synergy between the village's resources and current trends, such as healthy living. Online activity through a website and social media accounts can help to raise the profile, particularly if this is provided in different languages. Wazuka shows that even an unenviable location – being located in the shadow of the hugely-popular Kyoto – it is still possible to attract tourists should the brand be appealing enough. Although success is by no means guaranteed, through creative and coordinated managing and

marketing, villages can avoid simply ‘fading away’ and instead preserve valuable aspects of rural Japanese life by sharing these with visitors seeking a deeper experience.

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