Capitalizing on Creativity in Rural Areas: National and Local Branding in Japan

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Abstract

In an effort to help local and rural areas respond to globalization, the Japanese national government in 2006 initiated a local products branding policy, allowing cities to brand their local products and services. The result has been an explosion of recognition for existing local products and frantic identification and development of new potential local products throughout Japan. This paper will consider the implications of this policy in terms of what has evolved to this point and the potential that can be identified in missed opportunities. The research is initially organized on the notion of intentional creation of creative areas—areas recasting themselves as cradles of creativity—and the creative character of the local products and services that are branded. Using data from a national government local products promotion policy and an independent brand research association, the research considers the limit of creativity expressed through branding for a nation or a broader geopolitical unit, along with the danger of branding overlap and dilution that may emerge; it then examines the specific case of a rural Japanese prefecture and the branding of its local products. Focusing on Aomori prefecture, a rural area of northern Japan, and more closely on a distinctive area within Aomori called Tsugaru, the research reveals the complexity of branding for rural places in contemporary nation-states.

Key words: branding, creativity, Japan

1.0 Creativity, Local Culture, and Branding Policy: Three Perspectives

A growing body of literature in urban studies attests that globally competitive cities—even domestically competitive cities—must increasingly be creative in order to thrive, with this creativity largely a function of culture and local cultural industries.[1] This research will examine this assertion as it relates to rural areas, recast, however, in terms of the reality and potential of harnessing creativity in rural economies. The research is thus based on a connection of three underlying themes: the increasing importance of culture in the success of a local economy; the importance of branding in connecting that culture with an area and disseminating that connection; and policy in the origin and development of this cultural branding, contextualized, however, by the case for rural areas.

Japan provides a suitable case for the study of contemporary branding in rural areas. The Japanese government has adopted the notion (and terminology) of branding both for the nation as a whole and as a means of stimulating local revitalization for outlying prefectures and smaller municipalities throughout Japan,

with a national-level branding project and a change in laws that allow for increased branding of local products. However, a number of unexamined questions exist regarding branding operationalized under such circumstances and with such objectives—questions that are particularly relevant, because many places around the world are taking up these notions and practices as a means of energizing their financial and cultural bases. Does this equation of branding creativity work at a local level and in outlying and peripheral areas, for cities and areas that are not seen as potentially global, or even national? Can a requisite multilevel coverage be attained, with many areas being represented by a brand? Is there a danger of brand overlap or brand dilution at the national, or more importantly, regional and local level, when multiple areas adopt the same brand profile? What are the necessary characteristics of the branded city, such that the cultural industries can contribute to a multiplier effect, whereby the brands associated with an area yield further success?

To address these questions, this paper will begin with a brief consideration of the literature of city and place branding and the importance of creativity and the cultural industries and cultural commodities in this branding, before looking at the current efforts by the Japanese government to initiate place branding on a national and local scale. Finally, the research will look at a specific case of a likely beneficiary of such cultural commodities–based place branding, Aomori prefecture, one of the poorest and most peripheral prefectures of the country.

2.0 Creative Cities, Branding, Branded Cities

A creative city is one that reflects a particular personality, the creative elements of which emerge in forms social, political, and cultural as well as economic and technological, with the brand that can be developed on the basis of this personality a reflection of the local cultural industries of the city (Landry, 2000). The personality of a creative city is drawn from the unique character of its place and its people—from the potential, both realized and latent, found in its physical attributes, geographical position, or historical face, as well as in its intangible attributes, such as history and the traditions it yields or the strengths and skills of the local inhabitants that have emerged on the basis of its geography. The characteristics of creative cities that allow them to capitalize on these attributes include: having clarity of purpose and ambition; utilizing visionary individuals and organizations; exhibiting open-mindedness and risk-taking; being strategically principled but tactically flexible; being anticipatory, able to recognize and develop local cultural resources; and ensuring widespread leadership (PeBBu, n.d.). The success of the city, however, and the key to its realizing its potential ultimately lies in the brand identity of the city. The premise of creative rural economies, and of this paper, is that rural areas can adopt a similar approach and harness local creativity and culture in a manner to energize their economies.[2]

Branding as a business strategy is well established (Aaker, 2004; Keller, 2003); as for branding as a strategy in the promotion of a place, there has been little strategic thinking and less research theorization. The notion of a brand has been defined as "a product or service made distinctive by its positioning relative to the competition and by its personality, which comprises a unique combination of functional attributes and symbolic values" (Hankinson & Cowking, 1993, p. 10). A brand is ultimately a symbolic embodiment of all the information connected to the product or service, serving to create associations and expectations around that product and

often including a specially designed representation developed to represent implicit values, ideas, and characteristics of the product or the users of the product. The specific mechanisms of branding are summarized by Solomon (2003) in a conceptualization of a cultural production system that consists of three subsystems: 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.

The success realized in product branding has led to increasing efforts in the branding of places. Branding is "becoming one of the core strategic and commercial competences driving firms, clusters, *regions and nations* in the contemporary economy" (Power & Hauge, 2006, p. 3; italics added). 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, while Anholt (2002) optimistically saw a body of academic research on branding emerging, Ikuta, Yukawa, and Hamasaki (2006) warned that research on the practice and potential of place branding is limited, based on shallow theorization yielding haphazard policy and unintended consequences. Parkerson and Saunders (2005) noted that the polemic and promotion in place branding is countered by little evidence of any effectiveness.

Place branding in its simplest form, and by logical extension of the outline of product branding above, is a brand developed for a place, be it a nation, a region, or a city. Such place branding is an important component of selling places, as in public relations and tourism marketing, but the diverse and complex nature of a place brand transcends the narrow confines of any single industry sector (Dinnie, 2004). Indeed, Papadopoulos (2004) considered place branding, be it global, national, or regional, as multidimensional in its objectives and implications. Such branding includes a range of outcomes as broad and as varied as enhancing exports, protecting domestic or local businesses, attracting and retaining tangible components of development, such as new businesses, and positioning a place in the broadest economic, political, and social landscape.

Culture and cultural activities are seen as vital to the place branding of creative cities, because culture creates meaning and identity, culture is inextricably linked to innovation and creativity, culture plays a positive role in attracting business and tourism, and culture, in the form of cultural industries, provides an economic anchor in its own right (PeBBu, n.d.). The elements of place in such objectives as they are related to products have evolved to become an increasingly important source of product association and product attribute for a specific and place-based product (Hudson, 2005), influencing how the product is viewed by its intended target market and on the buyer's willingness to consider it for purchase. Interest in provenance—where and how goods are produced, along with implications of authenticity, quality, reliability, and sustainability—suggest that the myriad and particular attributes of place are becoming increasingly important for consumers, and subsequently producers (Hudson, 2005; Hughes & Reimer, 2004; Ilbery & Kneafsey, 1998; Molotch, 2002). The success of the contemporary city can be found in the created, developed, and nurtured brand, a reality that brings with it three important dimensions: the necessity of instant recognition, the necessity of comfort and certainty combined, and the necessity of a point of identification for consumers in an increasingly crowded marketplace (Hannigan, 2003).

Hannigan (2003) emphasized that the cultural, historical, and environmental linkages to a community constitute a viable, long-term basis for urban regeneration. Moreover, place distinctiveness, which is at the heart of successful city branding, only comes through interactive layering and active enrollments over time. Allen (2007) asserted that the multidimensionality of a city brand must be contextualized in terms of local economic development in a broader economic scale, where "the perception of place has become an important factor in distinguishing between otherwise fairly similar products and services" (p. 2).

To sum, creative cities can create brands that are based at least in part on cultural industries, and the brand that can be formed on this basis can bring multidimensional contributions to the city. The applied question then becomes the processes by which brands are created and the observed results of such processes. In the case of Japan, this process is highly centralized on the one hand, yet also highly diverse in its pattern at the local level.

3.0 Japanese Place Brands: Product Overlap and National Distribution

The Japanese national government has recently emphasized the potential of branding as a means of broadening the image of Japan as a producer of highly specialized and high-quality goods on the global market as well as a means of revitalizing local economies. This can be seen, on the international level, in the JAPAN BRAND Development Assistance Program, an attempt to support the products of "regional small and medium enterprises" that "have the passion, pride and responsibility in manufacturing and the local [*sic*] they belong to" (JAPAN BRAND, n.d.).[3] Launched in 2004 by the Small and Medium Enterprise Agency of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, the program aims at identifying and fostering internationally competitive regional brands by supporting projects related to development of products with brand strength through coordination of local industries that make use of regional characteristics: "evolve the unique values of local small and medium enterprises, produce products and services that are accepted in modern life, as well as in the Japanese and overseas markets, establish local brands, strengthen the company's management base, and contribute to local economy activation" (JAPAN BRAND, n.d.).

By mid-2008, 54 JAPAN BRAND projects were listed on the homepage—14 fashion related, 7 food related, and 33 housing or crafts related—with an additional 16 being developed under the Strategy Establishment Assistance Project, bringing the total of JAPAN BRAND projects to 70 (JAPAN BRAND, undated). Looking at these projects in terms of geographic coverage and overlap, the 70 local products under the JAPAN BRAND project represent 35 of the 47 (74%) prefectural administrative units of Japan, with two prefectures having five JAPAN BRAND items, one having four items, and six prefectures having three items each. This means that nine prefectures (26% of the total holding JAPAN BRAND items [N = 35]), comprising 19% of all prefectures (N = 47), account for 32 items (46% of the total number of items [N = 70]). On the other hand, prefectures claiming one branded item each number 14, or 40% of the total number holding JAPAN BRAND items.

The JAPAN BRAND program coincided with the national-level Promotion of Japan Brand Policy. This policy emphasized the potential of local place branding as a means by which rural areas of Japan could promote tourism resources and

local products within Japan, which are seen as vital while the cities, towns, and villages of Japan struggle to identify ways to address increasingly difficult fiscal circumstances. This policy seeks establishment of diverse and reliable local brands through four specific action proposals: (1) approaching regional branding strategically through collaboration between producers, tourism operators, and universities; (2) developing and disclosing product standards for agricultural, forestry, and fishery products, thereby contributing to regional brands that are trusted by consumers; (3) coordinating efforts by local governments and specialized industries in producing and disseminating information; and (4) developing systems for the protection of regional brands (Ikuta, Yukawa, & Hamasaki, 2007). These proposals culminated in revisions to the Trademark Law in April 2006 making it possible for localities to apply place-designated brand names to local products and services and allowing for registration of trademarks consisting of "name of a local area" plus "name of a product." Under the pre-2006 revisions, just over 10 products with nationwide recognition were registered as local place brands, the most famous among these being a local melon, a local dumpling, and a local stitched fabric ("Localities Seek," 2006).[4] A spring 2006 *Daily Yomiuri* newspaper article reported that about 320 applications were received by the National Patent Office in the first week of the 2006 application period ("Law Revision," 2006); by summer 2008 the total number was over 823 (*Brand Sōgō Kenkyujo,* n.d.).

4.0 Japanese Place Brands: National Distribution and the Multiplier Effect

While this branding policy was conceived as important in economically revitalizing outlying rural areas of Japan, it is clear that the advantage still goes to the prefectures and municipalities that either benefit from a nationally predominant historical trajectory or have already established themselves or their goods on a national level. Ikuta (2006) noted that only about one third of municipalities nationally had proposed local policies that would lead to development of a local brand and that many of those that did reported difficulty in differentiating themselves from other areas on the basis of a specific local image. Data on the *Brand Sōgō Kenkyujo* website shows that of the 823 products registered as local brands, Kyoto prefecture, famous throughout Japan by virtue of the importance of Kyoto city in Japan's history, alone accounted for 138, or 17% of the total number; the next highest number of applications went to neighboring Hyogo prefecture with 46, followed by Gifu and Hokkaido (the northernmost island of Japan, constituting one of the 47 national administrative units), each with 37, and Okinawa (the chain of islands lying to the south of Japan, also constituting 1 of the 47 national administrative units), with 35 (see Table 1).[5] This means that these 5 prefectures, of the 47 total in Japan, accounted for 36% of the brand applications. Another 6 prefectures claimed 21, 24, 25, 27, 29, and 33 brand products, respectively, meaning that these 11 prefectures (23% of the total 47) claimed 452 brands (55% of the 823 total). Following this trend, 17 prefectures claimed from 10 to 20 brands, with 19 prefectures claiming fewer than 10, with the fewest brands claimed by any prefecture being 3.

While these coverage relationships describe an unequal distribution across Japan, it is also important how this local branding can come to function as a multiplier

Table 1. *Local Brand Registration (2008)*

Prefecture, ranked by no. of products	% of prefectures	No. of products	% total products
Top 5			
Kyoto	2	138	17
Hyogo	2	46	5.5
Gifu	2	37	4.5
Hokkaido	2	37	4.5
Okinawa	2	35	4.25
Subtotal	11	293	36
Next 6 (no. of products, descending order)			
Ishikawa (33); Aichi (29); Niigata (27); Tokyo (25); Nagano (24); Shizuoka (21)	13	159	19
Total	23	452	55

Source: The *Brand Sōgō Kenkyujo* website: http://www.tiiki.jp/news/index.html

effect for cities that enjoy an advantage based on some other characteristic. In regional brand surveys conducted in 2006 and 2007 by the *Brand Sōgō Kenkyujo,* a brand research center in Japan, from among the top 300 recognized cities, towns, and villages of Japan, Sapporo (population 1.89 million, 2007 est.), the major city of Hokkaido, was cited to be the most *miryoku-teki* (fascinating, charming) city in terms of brand appeal. The 2007 survey showed Kyoto (population 1.47 million, 2007 est.) and Yokohama (population 3.64 million, 2007 est.) as second and third, with two more Hokkaido cities, Hakodate (population 294,000 million, 2007 est.) and Otaru (population 137,000 million, 2007 est.) fourth and fifth. These surveys based the *miryoku-teki* status as being a function of four combinative factors: natural resources, historical resources, infrastructural resources, and service resources. These were descriptively elaborated as follows:

> Natural resources: the abundance of nature and greenery, the beauty of the streetways, the convenience of the transportation systems
>
> Historical resources: the maintenance of history, the ambience of history, the presence of historical structures
>
> Infrastructural resources: the reputation of local foods, the attractiveness of local shopping areas, the presence of attractive theme parks, the presence of meaningful museums, the presence of local products
>
> Service resources: the abundance of culture and art, the presence of leisure and sports, the attractiveness of local events, the presence of local lodging
>
> —Translation of *Brand Sōgō Kenkyujo* information by author

In the 2007 survey, sites were evaluated specifically on the basis of 15 regional resource rankings, as shown in Table 2. This configuration of *miryoku-teki* reveals the multiplier effect in terms of overall appeal, as Kyoto, Yokohama, and Sapporo, along with the smaller Hokkaido cities of Otaru and Hakodate, each possess

multidimensional appeal, with Kyoto scoring first or second in seven areas: traditional culture, historical areas, historical persons, art and science facilities, local goods, a traditional craft culture, and friendly local people. Yokohama and Sapporo each scored in the top five in five areas: sports opportunities, art and science facilities, shopping areas, local cuisine, and transportation for Yokohama, leisure and sports, events, shopping, and local cuisine for Sapporo. The two Hokkaido cities of Otaru and Hakodate scored high on historical areas, local goods, and notable local cuisine, and six other Hokkaido locations were ranked in the top five in various categories as well.

What this means in terms of local products can be seen in "desire to purchase local goods" data from the 2007 survey. In the foods category, Sapporo ranked second, Kyoto fourth, and Hakodate sixth, each on the basis of a number of local foods. In the case of Sapporo and Hakodate, these were largely seafood products, while for Kyoto, these reflected a number of specially processed foods, such as various confectioneries. Other areas were largely ranked on the basis of one or two local aquacultural or agricultural products, as was the case in the first-place ranking of Yubari, a medium-sized city in Hokkaido, on the basis of its famous Yubari melons. While the food products featured reflected a fairly simplistic categorization on the basis of being either an agricultural/aquacultural product or a locally produced food product, what was more difficult to summarize was the desirability ranking for nonfood products. Kyoto ranked fourth, on the basis of multiple local products, following three much smaller locales, which were selected on the basis of single-product associations. Similar to the case for Kyoto, Otaru ranked seventh, also on the basis of several local products, but behind two smaller locales that were cited for just a single product. In addition, among the products listed for the top 10 cities, pottery was cited in selection criteria for six, with lacquerware cited in two.

5.0 Local Branding: The Reality of Products versus Brands

Turning to the specific case of branding in a specific rural location of Japan, the research takes up the case of Aomori prefecture, examining the reality, implications, and potential of branding at the prefecture and municipal levels, framed by the notion of the creation of a creative area. Aomori prefecture, the northernmost prefecture of the island of Honshū, lags behind other areas of Japan in most contemporary economic and cultural standards. With a population of about 1.5 million, the prefecture has the seventh-lowest population density, as well as negative population growth of -2.6% and a high proportion of elderly inhabitants, with 23.1% being over 65 years of age (Yano Tsuneda Kinenkai, 2006). It is far from Tokyo and the major political and commercial centers to the south. The high-speed Shinkansen train line to Hachinohe city, located on the Pacific Ocean side of the prefecture, was completed in 2002 and is currently being extended to Aomori city, the prefectural capital. Aomori ranks low on virtually every economic indicator—including employment and income, industrial production, and small business sales. Annual per capita income for Aomori prefecture ranks 45th nationally, half that of Tokyo, with monthly real income per working household ranked 37th nationally. Fourteen percent of the prefectural labor force works in the

Table 2. *Regional Resources Ranking*

Resource Category	Ranking of City, with Prefecture, in Descending Order from 1 to 5
Nature	(1) Furano, Hokkaido; (2) Ashikawa, Hokkaido; (3) Aomori, Aomori; (4) Wakkanai, Hokkaido; (5) Towada, Aomori
Public leisure facilities	(1) Beppu, Oita; (2) Noboribetsu, Hokkaido; (3) Urayasu, Chiba; (4) Atami, Shizuoka; (5) Sapporo, Hokkaido
Sports opportunities	(1) Suzuka, Mie; (2) Iwata, Shizuoka; (3) Yokohama, Kanagawa; (4) Fukuoka, Fukuoda; (5) Sapporo, Hokkaido
Traditional culture and events	(1) Kyoto, Kyoto; (2) Kishiwada, Osaka; (3) Sapporo, Hokkaido; (4) Sendai, Miyagi; (5) Akita, Akita & Hirosaki, Aomori
Historical areas and buildings	(1) Kyoto, Kyoto; (2) Kamakura, Kanagawa; (3) Otaru, Hokkaido; (4) Hakodate, Hokkaido; (5) Nara, Nara
Historical persons	(1) Kyoto, Kyoto; (2) Kamakura, Kanagawa; (3) Aizu-Wakamatsu, Fukushima; (4) Nara, Nara; (5) Sendai, Miyagi
Art and science facilities	(1) Kyoto, Kyoto; (2) Kamakura, Kanagawa; (3) Nara, Nara; (4) Yokohama, Kanagawa; (5) Kobe, Hyogo
Local goods shopping areas	(1) Sapporo, Hokkaido; (2) Kyoto, Kyoto; (3) Hakodate, Hokkaido; (4) Yubari, Hokkaido; (5) Otaru, Hokkaido
Traditional crafts culture	(1) Kyoto, Kyoto; (2) Wajima, Ishikawa; (3) Imari, Saga; (4) Arita, Nagasaki; (5) Kanazawa, Ishikawa
Shopping areas	(1) Shibuya, Tokyo; (2) Yokohama, Kanagawa; (3) Shinjuku, Tokyo; (4) Kobe, Hyogo; (5) Osaka, Osaka
Notable local cuisine	(1) Sapporo, Hokkaido; (2) Hakodate, Hokkaido; (3) Otaru, Hokkaido; (4) Yokohama, Kanagawa; (5) Kitakata, Fukushima
Transportation facilities	(1) Shinjuku, Tokyo; (2) Shibuya, Tokyo; (3) Shingawa, Tokyo; (4) Yokohama; Kanagawa; (5) Setagaya, Tokyo
Notable lodging facilities	(1) Karuizawa, Nagano; (2) Beppu, Oita; (3) Hakone, Kanagawa; (4) Izu, Shizuoka; (5) Atami, Shizuoka
Friendly local people	(1) Akita, Akita; (2) Kyoto, Kyoto; (3) Naha, Okinawa; (4) Furano, Hokkaido; (5) Aomori, Aomori & Okinawa
A representative local industry	(1) Toyota, Aichi; (2) Nagoya, Aichi; (3) Hitachi, Ibaraki; (4) Kawasaki, Kanagawa; (5) Osaka, Osaka

Source: The *Brand Sōgō Kenkyujo* homepage: www.tiiki.jp/news/index.html

primary sector, with another 25% in the secondary and just under 60% in the service sector (Yano Tsuneda Kinenkai, 2006). While Aomori is the name of both the prefecture and the prefectural seat and largest city, a district place-name within the prefecture that has equal significance both historically and in terms of contemporary recognition is Tsugaru. A reference to an unofficial demarcation of the western half of the prefecture, the Tsugaru place-name designation arose with

the Tsugaru clan's control of the area throughout the Edo period (1600–1868). This historical significance, along with a local traditional instrumental music called Tsugaru *shamisen*, which is national in scope, gives the Tsugaru district its brand power both locally and nationally.

Representation of branding as a local revitalization strategy in the local media in Aomori is clear. A 2005 *Tōō-nippō* newspaper "Local Economy" column introduced the idea of branding local food products, advocating apples, scallops, freshwater clams, sole, tuna, and garlic as the target products, along with development of production systems that include use of bar codes and traceability as means to establish and maintain consumer trust ("*Kensan shokizai*," 2005). In January 2006, the *Mutsu Shimpō* newspaper began a "Support Tsugaru Brands" yearlong six-volume newspaper series, with each volume introducing several local goods for potential branding ("*Tsugaru,"* 2006).[6] The first volume focused on tradition and introduced traditional Tsugaru district crafts; the second focused on Tsugaru winters, introducing winter tours, hot springs, and other winter-related products and activities. The third volume was titled *Tourism,* introducing local cherry blossoms, local Western architecture, green tourism, and the abundant nature of the area, and the fourth outlined local activities related to the fall *Neputa/Nebuta* festivals of the area. The fifth volume focused on agriculture, and the sixth and final volume on "local human resources," introducing advances in a local agricultural knowledge base, contributions of the local academic community, and individuals who are working to keep local customs and traditions alive. Recent Aomori-local newspaper columns reveal the chaos that local branding has become, as private associations and government committees at the municipal and prefectural level propose, persuade, and confirm a wide variety of brand products, from fish to knives. Early 2007 saw a *Mutsu Shimpō* article refer to a prefectural committee considering confirmation for 133 local foods as Tsugaru "food treasures" ("*Tsugaru ryori*," 2007), a move that was confirmed by fall ("*Tsugaru ryori isan—nintei e*," 2007). By summer and fall of 2007, there were articles proposing local forged cutlery as a municipal (Hirosaki city) brand ("*Tsugaru uchi hamono-shinshohin,"* 2007; "*Tsugaru uchi hamono,"* 2007), another local cooking style as a municipal (Inakadate town) brand ("*Inakadate ryori,"* 2007), the creation of the Fukaura town brand to cover this seaside town's aquaculture (*Fukaura burando,* 2007), the mackerel (saba) as the Pacific port city of Hachinohe's national brand ("*Burando kōchiku,"* 2007), and a buckwheat noodle as a municipal (Onoe town) brand ("*Onoe Soba,*" 2007). Early 2008 saw three local municipalities (Fujisaki town, Tokiwa village, and Hirosaki city) propose confirmation of apple juice and garlic ("*Fujisaki burando kakuritsu,"* 2008) and a local hot pepper ("*Hanro-kakudaishi,"* 2008) as nationally recognized brands.

Aomori has two brands listed in the JAPAN BRAND project, one a highly place-based multiproduct brand titled *Higashi-doori Umi Yama Kasamai* (Higashi-doori Village Sea Mountain and Rice; JAPAN BRAND, n.d.). Details elaborate on the full range of products under this brand, which include scallops, abalone, sea cucumber, local rice, spring water, beef, soba (buckwheat) noodles, and blueberries. The information stresses that the project involves "healthy, safe and secure products" and that "it appeals [*sic*] the connection between water and health to develop and market a product with additional value" (English in original; JAPAN BRAND, n.d.). The other JAPAN BRAND product is a lacquerware project, focusing on the single, nationally designated, traditional national craftwork of Aomori. The lacquerware, called Tsugaru lacquerware, is distinguished by its

large number of lacquer coatings, which yield a toughness and durability not found in other Japanese lacquerwares, and by its color and design, which emerge through a unique lacquer application and sanding process. Data from the *Brand Sōgō Kenkyujo* shows that Aomori prefecture accounted for eight local brand products registered with the site: garlic, two varieties of eggs, tuna, wisteria, rice, sweet corn, and a local soup. Despite its relative paucity of brands, Aomori, via Hirosaki city, ranks 20th on the prefectural *miryoku-teki* ranking and 19th on the regional resources ranking, as well as 7th on tourism appeal and 4th on local foods appeal; Aomori is known for its apples (as the top producer in Japan) and for its rice, as well for being the top producer of other agricultural products.

Despite the media representation and the efforts that have driven it and the presence of these national brands, Ikuta, Yukawa, and Hamasaki (2006; 2007) presented Aomori prefecture as a Type D pattern of regional branding. This they defined as a "specialized individual brands pattern" (p. 137), in which local government focuses on measures to support individual local brands, without identifying, however, the potential contribution or influence of these on regional image. What this means is that the brand image that is created for Tsugaru lacquerware, for example, is not extended to the region in any way. This also implies that the municipality is not looking to Tsugaru lacquerware as a means of broader place branding. This is in stark contrast to the other three types they describe. Type A is a "regional image–individual brand integration pattern" (p. 134), in which regional image and individual brands are both managed within local government policy goals and with a synergistic effect between regional image measures and individual brand measures sought. Type B is a "regional image–individual brand ripple pattern" (p. 134), in which policy focuses exclusively on creation of regional image with the intention of positively influencing the success of individual local brands via a ripple effect. Type C is an "individual brand–regional image ripple pattern" (p. 134), in which local government focuses on promotion of individual local brands, with an expectation that any brand's success will contribute to the regional image.

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, & Hamasaki, 2006). The policy focus was on agricultural, fisheries, and forestry products, together with 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 products fairs, held locally as well as in venues in major metropolitan areas throughout Japan, with items continued or abandoned in the strategy on the basis of sales volume. The Aomori Prefectural Products Brand Strategy was thus summarized as a sales strategy first, with venue management and provision of a stable supply system a priority, with minimal new product development or marketing effort.

The case for Aomori shows that, on the one hand, there is a general awareness of the potential for local product branding in outlying areas of Japan, but that, on the other, the reality is chaos and missed opportunity. Not only have local branding activities led, in the case of Aomori, to a rush of a range of products being proposed as local brands, but the lack of integration between products and the lack

of strategic leadership on the part of local government have resulted in the existence of many brands with none contributing notably to the area.

6.0 The Research Questions Revisited

This paper opened with three research questions: Does creativity branding work at local levels and in outlying and peripheral areas? Can multilevel coverage be attained for a nation and is there a danger of brand overlap or brand dilution, when multiple areas adopt the same brand profile? What are the characteristics of successfully branded cities, whereby the brands associated with an area yields further success? Based on this assessment of national and local branding activities in Japan and the branding activities of Aomori prefecture, three conclusions seem apparent. The first concerns the coverage and overlap of branding, where it was shown that both are problematic in the case for Japan. Not only is there a concentration in similar product areas overall, the array of goods is unsurprisingly similar from place to place, with, for example, six different local lacquerwares included. In addition, the geographic distribution of branded products is skewed toward a limited number of places in Japan, most notably a single prefecture that has an inherent advantage on the basis of its historical significance.

The second conclusion is linked to this unequal distribution and concerns the limited potential of a multiplier effect based solely on cultural creativity and creative cultural industries for rural places. It is quite apparent that a multiplier effect is potent in the case of a city like Kyoto or Sapporo, albeit on the basis of different factors. In the case of Kyoto, the city is significant historically, which is multiplied through its highly creative cultural industries and supported by its large resident population and proximity to other large cities, yielding positive impressions on image and local cultural resources rankings. In the case of Sapporo, its inherent tourist appeal relative to other areas of Japan is multiplied through its local seafood as the primary focus of image and resource, rather than any creativity or culture per se. In the case of Hakodate and Otaru, both cities in Hokkaido with small populations far from the major areas of Kanto (Tokyo) and Kansai (Osaka) and which lack significant cultural significance, their desirability as a travel destination as a part of the larger attractiveness of Hokkaido also lends to the multiplier effect, which is again based not on creativity and culture, but rather on their local foods. In the case of Aomori, while enjoying historical significance and a rich and highly creative cultural base that has provided some degree of local product recognition, its geographical isolation limits the potential for this to multiply. However, this must be contextualized by the assertion that Aomori prefecture has not fully appropriated and utilized its branding potential.

The third conclusion that can be drawn from this research thus concerns the potential of branding in rural settings specifically, as based on the case for Aomori prefecture product branding (what there is of it) and place branding (what there is lacking of it). In the case of Tsugaru, the Type D pattern of regional branding, in which there is no identified regional image as part of the branding, reflects several missed opportunities for the branding of local products. The case of the *Higashi-doori* local food products illustrates both the limitations of "local food as local brand" as well as the potential of a metamessage that can be created on the basis of the characteristics of the food. Food as a brand can be seen as having limited, if not questionable, potential. The ubiquity of food culture in Japan means that the brand based on any food product must be accompanied by a brand value, as in "tourist

area plus delicious seafood." However, the potential in a metamessage as part of local food branding that appears to be underutilized in the examples of local branding in Japan can be seen in the case of *Higashi-doori* local food products, where the potential appeal of the products themselves may be overshadowed by the appeal of a message that ensures consumers that the food is safe and healthy and that the food is produced domestically for the Japanese consumer, and locally for the Aomori consumer. This is a message with particular resonance for Japan, both due to numerous food-quality scares over the past several years and the fact that Japan's food self-sufficiency levels have been declining dramatically over the past 20-some years.

Such a metamessage can be created for Tsugaru lacquerware as well, as a product that is environmentally friendly both in its production as well as its post-use elimination—the product is based entirely on natural components that degrade naturally and without environmental impact. The message that accompanies the lacquerware thus becomes one of Aomori as a home to natural products: a natural place producing natural products. The reality facing rural areas is whether such metamessages are ultimately meaningful for consumers in a manner and at a level that can contribute to a multiplier effect. In addition, the case for Aomori prefecture's Tsugaru lacquerware reflects missed opportunity in creating brands that better reflect the sociocultural history of an area rather than the all-too-common food and craft products that are the focus in most branding efforts in Japan. The branding potential for Tsugaru lacquerware could be maximized based on its historic significance, cultural value, and the creative elements of its production traditions. For the lacquerware of Aomori prefecture, these traditions emerged over 400 years ago and have been revered and preserved, perfected and practiced since. While the lacquerware is representative of a uniquely Aomori brand, the Aomori brand that it creates is one of creativity, in the creative processes of the lacquerware's production. The brand is Aomori, Home of Traditional Creativity.

Clearly branding is a municipal management mechanism through which rural areas can capitalize on their historical and contemporary creativity. That noted, the reality is, however, first, that areas both more significant due to historical chance and demographic growth have an inherent advantage, and second, that such branding is not the province of one rural area alone. All rural areas are attempting to generate their own brands, often, unfortunately, using similar and highly ubiquitous local products. The key to capitalizing on creativity through local product branding for rural areas, then, can be seen as focusing on the creativity, first and foremost, and only then on the branding.

7.0 Notes

1. This paper is based on a presentation given at the International Sociological Association (ISA) Research Committee on Urban and Regional Development (RC21) Tokyo Conference 2008, in Session 11–2: Creative Cities in Comparative Perspectives: Industries, Policy, Culture and Networks.

2. The term "creative rural economy" reflects an origin in a 2006 conference held at the University of Lancaster, which was subtitled "The arts and rural regeneration: Mapping the new creative rural industries."

3. The JAPAN BRAND homepage is offered in Japanese, English, French, Chinese, German, and Italian.

4. The *Daily Yomiuri* is the English-language counterpart to the *Yomiuri Shimbun,* one of the four major national newspapers of Japan.

5. The *Brand Sōgō Kenkyujo* website is in Japanese.

6. The *Tōō-nippō* is the de facto newspaper of Aomori prefecture, with a wide readership and high credibility, particularly in local business matters. The *Mutsu Shimpō* is the newspaper of the Tsugaru district. All translations from newspaper sources originally in Japanese are by the author.

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