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Craft, Rural Revitalization, and Transnationalism
Preliminary Findings Concerning Three Case Studies in Shimane, Shizuoka, and Tochigi, Japan

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates three grassroots craft-related enterprises in rural Japan that take advantage of natural and cultural resources, local identity, and infrastructure, as well as transnational flows of people and knowledge, to energize their communities faced with depopulation and economic decline: an international cultural exchange program for young makers in an individual potter's studio in Misato, Shimane; a biannual international ceramic art festival that holds lectures, demonstrations, and exhibitions in Sasama, Shizuoka; and a 200-year old lodge and hobby pottery school that receives volunteers from abroad in exchange for accommodation in Mashiko, Tochigi prefecture. Based on preliminary field research consisting of participant observation and interviews with creators, coordinators, and participants of these programs, I will consider their background, goals, and possible role in triggering human social transformation and local development. Aiming at rural revitalization and community invigoration through the selling and exchange of knowledge and experiences on-site, these enterprises constitute a sustainable alternative to predatory tourism by drawing on a "relationship population" (*kankei jinkô*) in between one-time visitors and permanent settlers. By encouraging the establishment of ties between locals and international artists, as well as amateur and veteran craft makers, such enterprises have not only led to the transmission of traditional craft skills beyond national borders but can also lead to the creation of cosmopolitan transnational communities in rural areas. Through the three case studies, I aim to bring a new perspective on the role of art, crafts, and creativity in a more sustainable, integrated, and humane concept of development.

Keywords: Rural development, Transnationalism, Sustainability, Community, Craft heritage

1. INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Aging population, outflow of youngsters from rural areas, and decline of traditional industries are pressing issues in many developed countries today. Cheap imports and lowering prices accelerated by globalization, added to changes in lifestyle and consumer tastes, have weakened the primary and secondary sectors, impacting traditional crafts. Yet, a rising interest in travel, culture, and leisure, reflected in the growth of the service sector and the creative industries in the past decades has brought new opportunities to counteract these trends. As a response, localities around the world are transmuting from places of production and sales of products to places to sell and consume experiences

(Reiher 2010; Morais 2020; Teraoka 2021), drawing on their natural and cultural resources to create tangible and intangible values that can be sold and exchanged beyond national borders.

Before the covid-19 pandemic hit and Japan closed its borders for temporary visitors, tourism was one of the largest growth sectors of the Japanese economy, with its role in sustainable development stressed by the United Nations. In addition, rural resettlement, officially promoted by the Japanese government through the Regional Revitalization Cooperation Officer program (*Chiiki Okoshi Kyorokutai*) since 2009, while still too rarefied to counteract rural depopulation, has been accelerated by the pandemic.

The shift from a productive paradigm to a focus on culture and tourism in approaches to local development has been happening in Japan since the late 1980s. The *furusato-zukuri* or native place-making programs carried out by the central government and local municipalities since the late 1970s have been one of the strategies put into place to counter rural exodus and centralization. Drawing on local character and heritage, while often making use of a sentiment of nostalgia for a lost "traditional" past, these programs aimed at attracting urban residents to rural areas for a short period to experience traditional country life through farm stays or craft making experiences (Robertson 1988; 1994). More recently, images of the countryside have shifted from the anachronistic idyllic spaces reflected in the concept of *furusato* (literally, "old village") to potential sites of creativity and experimentation, therefore attracting young urbanites and creatives to migrate to these areas and generating networks that transcend the geographical limits of place (Klien 2020).

This paper looks at three cases of grassroots craft-related enterprises in rural Japan that take advantage of natural and cultural resources, local identity, and infrastructure, as well as transnational flows of people and knowledge, to energize their communities faced with depopulation and economic decline. My interest in these projects arose during my doctoral research focused on the trajectories of Western nationals to practice ceramics in Japan, some of whom participated in these programs. The data presented here is the result of preliminary research based on ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, and interviews with creators, coordinators, and participants of these projects carried out intermittently since 2017. After introducing each project's background and goals, I will consider their possible impacts on social transformation, local development, and community creation. Through these case studies, I will argue for the contributions of arts, creativity, and crafts heritage, as well as multicultural, multigenerational, and transnational exchanges, to the sustainable development and wellbeing of rural communities in Japan and beyond.

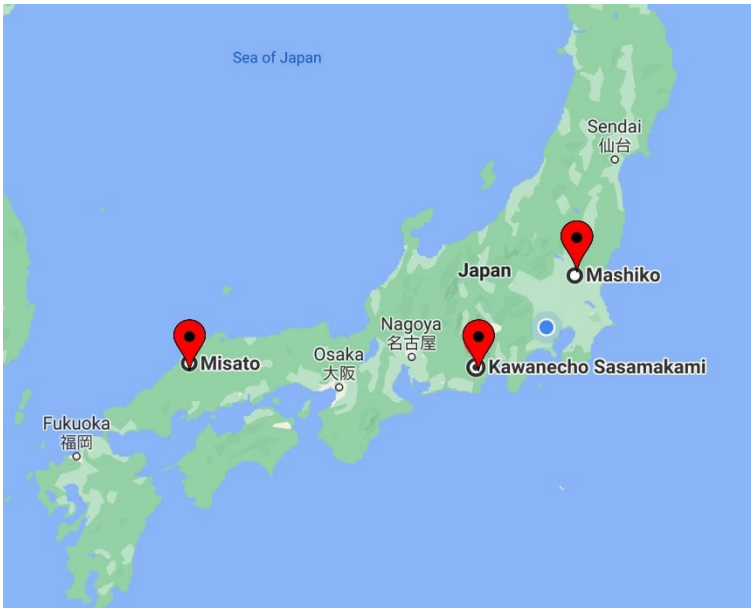

Figure 1. Location of the three case studies in Japan. (Japan [map]. Scale unknown, generated by Liliana Morais; using "Google Maps". https://www.google.co.jp/maps. (20 August 2021).

2. CASE STUDY 1: QUERIDOS AMIGOS – CONNECTING BRAZIL AND JAPAN WITH POTTERY (MISATO, SHIMANE PREFECTURE)

Figure 2. View of Misato town. (Photo by the author, September 2017)

Queridos Amigos – Connecting Brazil and Japan with pottery is an international cultural and artistic exchange program created in 2016 by Japanese potter Hashimoto Rikio (1950-), in the village of Misato, Shimane prefecture, an area of 280 square kilometers and a population of around 4,000 people, 45% of which are over 65 years old. Hashimoto Rikio, a Kyushu-born potter with extensive international experience (he studied ceramics and filmmaking in Northern Europe in the late 1990s), idealized the project while traveling in Brazil, where Japanese populations have immigrated since the early 20th century and a community of Japanese potters has flourished. It was when Hashimoto visited São João del Rei Federal University, the only with a Ceramics department in Brazil, that he came across a growing number of Brazilians eager to learn ceramics but faced with a lack of materials, tools, and

general infrastructure. This contrasted strongly with Japan's case, where well-equipped ceramic schools have been struggling with the lack of students for the past two decades.

Thus, Hashimoto decided to create an exchange program for young Brazilian potters who were aiming at professionalizing or acquiring hands-on practice (eventually, he opened the program for students of other nationalities) at his pottery studio in Misato. The project was first carried out in 2017 when three young Brazilian ceramic practitioners stayed at his studio for three months. Besides being able to use the studio's materials, tools, and equipment, the group traveled to traditional pottery centers around Japan, such as Mino, Kyoto, Arita, Shigaraki, and Bizen, where they met other ceramic artists and engaged in networking. The three participants also had the opportunity to sell their works at a local pottery market in the neighboring Matsue city, where a discrete Brazilian community has grown in the past decades.

Figure 3. Queridos Amigos – Connecting Brazil and Japan's 2017 participants from Brazil Kazue Morita, Douglas Barnez, and Welling Emmerich, with Japanese potter Hashimoto Rikio. (Photo by the author, September 2017)

The stay also involved frequent exchanges with residents, who came to the studio to bring vegetables, cook, and organize and partake in informal dinners and drinking parties, with traditional singing and music, as well as participation in local activities, such as seasonal festivals, rice harvesting, flower arrangement (*ikebana*) and tea ceremony experiences, and workshops and presentations at local schools. The project continued in 2018 and 2019 when it was joined by a total of 10 participants, 8 from Brazil, one from Lithuania, and one from Sweden. According to Kazue Morita, a third-generation Japanese-Brazilian who participated in the first edition of the program in 2017, the experience of being immersed in the everyday life of a small and close-knit Japanese rural community, which included frequent exchanges with residents and other people from neighboring regions who came to help with pottery firing, cooking, and other activities, was the most enriching aspect of the whole experience. Knowledge and inspiration came not only from the often-indirect teachings of Hashimoto, but also from various actors, such as the other participants, the surrounding natural environment, and even the "rice paddy old lady". Since partaking in the program, Kazue Morita has opened a pottery studio in the south of Brazil, where she produces original ceramics works and teaches workshops for the general public.

The funding for *Queridos amigos* (meaning "Dear friends" in Portuguese) project was done via local donations, crowdfunding (where it gathered a total of one million yen from 150 people via the Japanese *Campfire* platform), and funding from the Shimane International Center. The goal is to continue the project as an official exchange program between Japanese and Brazilian educational institutions, but

so far this has not been accomplished. As with the programs to be introduced in the next sections, the covid-19 global pandemic and subsequent closure of Japan's borders to international visitors has put this exchange program on hold.

3. CASE STUDY 2: SASAMA INTERNATIONAL CERAMIC ART FESTIVAL (SHIMADA, SHIZUOKA PREFECTURE)

The Sasama International Ceramic Art Festival is, as the name indicates, an international ceramic art festival held biannually in Sasama, a mountain hamlet district (*chiku*) of Kawane town, an area of 120.48 km2 of which 90% is forested, now part of Shimada city in Shizuoka prefecture. With a population of about 400 people, Sasama falls under the designation of "marginal settlements" (*genkai* shûraku) for 60% of its inhabitants are over 65 years old.

Figure 4. Landscape of Sasama district in Kawane-cho, Shimada city. (Photo by the author, November 2017)

The creation of the festival owes to Hokkaido-born ceramic artist Michikawa Shozo (1953-) who has been working in the historical ceramic town of Seto, in the neighboring Aichi prefecture, for three decades. In the past several years, Michikawa's clay work has received international attention, with his ceramic pieces being shown in exhibitions and workshops held in galleries and museums around the world. Yet, it was more than a decade earlier, after building a woodfired kiln *anagama* in Shimada city in 2003, that Michikawa visited Sasama for the first time, becoming involved in the citizen's activities aimed at its revitalization.

The bottom-up revitalization effort took place in the backdrop of Japan's municipal mergers policy (*shichōson gappei*) that integrated Kawane and Shimada cities in 2007, leading to the closing of Sasama elementary and junior high schools. This prompted Sasama residents to set up a community revitalization promotion council. Through their activities, the elementary school became the Sasama Exchange Center (*Shimadashi sanson toshi kôryû sentâ Sasama*), which now functions as accommodation and educational facility focusing on the concept of *satoyama* (traditional mountain village based on forestry and farming), operated by Kureba, a business union (*kigyô kumiai*) established by residents in 2008.

However, in 2009, locals were still considering what to do with the abandoned junior high school and thus invited Michikawa to brainstorm some ideas. The potter had just come back from Wales, where he had partaken in the International Ceramics Festival held in Aberystwyth University campus, a small town on the mid-Wales coast about 4 hours from London. Michikawa suggested a similar

project for Sasama and in the fall of 2011, the first edition of the Sasama International Ceramic Art Festival was held. Despite many events being canceled due to the Great East Japan Earthquake that hit Tohoku and the surrounding prefectures a few months earlier and a flood impeded access between Sasama and the closest train station, forcing invited artists to walk through the forest to reach the facility where the festival was scheduled to happen, a total of fourteen international ceramicists and about 1,500 people attended. Demonstrations and lectures were held in the Exchange Center, while the former junior high school was repurposed as an exhibition space for two days.

Figure 5. Photos from the fourth and fifth editions of the Sasama International Ceramic Art Festival held in November 2017 and 2019. (Photos by the author)

Since then, the Sasama International Ceramic Art Festival has been held every two years for four days. Besides lectures and demonstrations by ceramics artists from various countries, the festival includes a two-day pottery market open for the public and other events such as *kagura* performances and other dance and musical presentations. Because of the international attention it received, a result of the participation of high-profile ceramic artists, some of whom published articles about the experience in international ceramics magazines, Shimada city started allocating funds for the festival from its second edition in 2013. The rest of the funding comes from registration fees, company donations, and advertisements. Each edition since 2013 has received between 3,000 and 4,000 visitors from all over Japan and abroad. While most are drawn by an interest in ceramics, some also come through tea, due to the region's long history of tea cultivation.

Due to its focus on knowledge exchange via lectures and demonstrations, it is the only ceramic festival of its type in Japan, a country where craft workshops are historically known for keeping their "secrets". While exchanges with Sasama residents are involved, including homestays for the invited artists, it was a different project, the Wabisabi Village Sasama, an artist-in-residency program started in 2013 that has won locals' over. Through this new project, resident artists live and work in an old tea factory for a few months while engaging daily with Sasama residents, who bring them vegetables and teach them cooking, calligraphy, and other skills. According to Michikawa Watami, former Shimada City Community Development Cooperation (*Chiiki Okoshi Kyorokutai*) volunteer now employed by Kureba, while the festival has contributed to the international branding of Sasama, drawing on Michikawa Shozo's global networks and recognition, it has been the artist-in-residence program that has had the strongest impact on the locals' lives.

4. CASE STUDY 3: MASHIKO CERAMIC ART CLUB (MASHIKO, TOCHIGI PREFECTURE)

Figure 6. Mashiko landscape. (Photo by the author, November 2015)

Differently from Queridos Amigos in Misato and the International Ceramic Art Festival in Sasama, created in areas with no conspicuous ceramic tradition, the Mashiko Ceramic Art Club is located in the famous pottery town of Mashiko, Tochigi prefecture, known for its connections with the Japanese folk crafts movement (*mingei*) and home to two former Living National Treasures. With an area of 89.40 km^2 and a population of 21,533 as of 2021, Mashiko receives around 600,000 tourists every year, who come to visit the town's ceramic-related attractions and the Pottery Festival held every spring and fall, facilitated by the town's closeness to Tokyo, just a two-hour *Yakimono Liner* bus trip from Akihabara.

The history of the Mashiko Ceramic Art Club began in the 1950s, when it functioned as an individual pottery studio, then transformed into a guesthouse in the 1970s. Taking advantage of the existing facilities, third-generation Furuki Ryoichi (1979-) created a hobby pottery school (*tôgei kyoshitsu*), which has been running for forty years. Born in Mashiko, Furuki went to art school in Tokyo, worked as an editor and reporter, traveled to India as a backpacker, finally returning to Mashiko to become a potter in the late 1970s, when he created the club, which holds a large studio space with 35 pottery wheels and several types of kilns available for rent.

In 2019, about 1,500 people stayed overnight at the guesthouse, including groups of students from high school to university from Japan and abroad, and domestic and overseas tourists, who stay at the 200-year-old Japanese-style house (*kominka*) while trying their hands at pottery making. The club is also frequented by hobby potters from Tokyo, as well as young potters based in Mashiko who have yet to set up their kilns. Since the 1980s, the Mashiko Ceramic Art Club has accepted practitioners from abroad to volunteer as studio assistants in exchange for accommodation and free use of the facilities for pottery making, an opportunity that is mostly shared by word of mouth. Foreign volunteers account for about five people per year and stay from a few weeks up to one year, depending on the expiry date of their visas. They come mainly from the United States, Australia, Europe, and South America with tourist and working holiday visas, as well as cultural-activities visas obtained via the sponsorship of the club.

Amongst the foreign nationals who have volunteered at the club are high school graduates wanting to take a break and experience rural life in Japan before entering university, recent art graduates, and young professional ceramicists wishing to get hands-on experience with Japanese processes and techniques but who don't have the opportunity to enroll in an artist-in-residence program or to

partake in a more traditional apprenticeship (*totei seido*). While some volunteers plan to remain in Japan to set up their potteries, the majority have returned to their home countries with the knowledge, skills, and experience gained at the Club. In this manner, they contribute to the global dissemination of Japanese styles and techniques and the branding of the Japanese countryside, adding to Japan's *soft power*.

Figure 7. Daytime studio work and evening gathering at Mashiko Ceramic Art Club. (Photo by the author, November 2016 and July 2017 respectively)

At the Club, aspiring and early-career potters and artists from different countries can engage with both veteran and other young Japanese potters, who frequent the club for both work and fun. Due to the habitual presence of international and Japanese students, as well as both beginner and experienced ceramic artists from Mashiko and beyond, Furuki is one of the few informal gathering places for potters to engage in multicultural and multigenerational exchanges in the countryside town today. At the hobby pottery school, amateurs and hobbyists are instructed by the foreign nationals volunteering at the club, thus inversing typical roles where craft learning in Japan is concerned.

3. PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In the previous sections, I presented three cases of craft-related grassroots enterprises that take advantage of local heritage, identity, and infrastructure to reenergize their businesses and communities: an international cultural exchange program for young potters in Misato, Shimane prefecture; a biannual international ceramic art festival and artist-in-residence program in Shimada, Shizuoka; and a hobby pottery school and lodging in Mashiko, Tochigi. The three projects were implemented by or in collaboration with residents and exemplify the various responses to the changing image and role of rural areas as old-fashioned and nostalgic spaces of goods' production to reservoirs of knowledge and driving force for creativity and experimentation. They draw on natural and cultural resources to create intangible values that can be exchanged beyond the borders of place by focusing on human relationships and community creation.

These projects differ from other approaches to rural revitalization by taking advantage of global interest in Japanese craft heritage and culture to draw in foreign creatives as short-term, mid-term, and in some cases, long-term residents. The presence of international artists and ceramic practitioners has contributed to attracting a "relationship population" (*kankei jinkô*) comprised of students, artists, and other interested individuals who come from neighboring regions to take part in the various events and gatherings that happen in a more or less informal manner, thus contributing to the strengthening of trans-local connections. The concept of *kankei jinkô*, translated as "relationship" or "involved" population, was coined by Shimane-based journalist Tanaka Terumi to refer to people who regularly visit rural areas, not as tourists or permanent residents, but as 'reverse commuters' (Tanaka 2017, 55). They are urban residents who are interested in and involved with the local community in a variety of ways and that have the potential to enact local change. Examples of this involvement include simple

acts such as buying local products or making donations up to deeper interactions like frequent visits, volunteering, double residency, and sometimes even resettlement (ibid.: 59). The concept of *kankei jinkô* has been taken up by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications of Japan in approaches to rural revitalization as a sustainable alternative to predatory tourism (Sômushô 2018).

Rather than drawing hordes of one-time visitors or competing with neighboring municipalities to attract permanent settlers, the three enterprises presented have contributed to attracting a "relationship population", distinguished by an informal but regular involvement with the region and their residents, thus prioritizing qualitative rather than quantitative results. For example, in the case of Sasama, while the newly implemented projects have helped bring in one or two families to resettle in the region each year, the fact that the hamlet has only 200 houses makes concerted efforts to attract permanent migrants unproductive. And even when houses are empty, locals are reluctant to sell to strangers. By establishing a "relationship population" that can act as ambassadors to the region, locals can warm up to outsiders while keeping a low expectation about their level of commitment to the community (Tanaka 2017).

Because of the involvement of international artists and creatives, some of whom end up returning to those regions or become permanently involved with the community even if not physically present, the three projects feature a transnational and cosmopolitan character that adds to their attractiveness. The presence of artists and young creatives from around the world has contributed to attracting Japanese students, rural resettlers, and other individuals with cosmopolitan orientations or international experience to join the various activities, which often involve engagement with the local community and its residents. For locals of diverse ages and backgrounds, the opportunity to connect with a diverse group of people in the context of their community to share place-bound experiences, skills, and knowledge has generally been enriching and can lead to a heightened sense of dignity, pride, and well-being. This is especially true when we consider the sentiment of marginalization that many rural residents feel from the priorities of the national and municipal governments.

Because of this, I argue that such enterprises can lead to the creation of cosmopolitan transnational communities in rural areas. While operating in the global context, cosmopolitan transnational communities maintain their roots in the local and are thus defined by their fluid, hybrid, dynamic, and mobile character (Delanty 2003). Adding to the creation of human connections beyond regional, national, cultural, and generational borders, these projects can contribute to multicultural understanding and the global dissemination of local knowledge and skill. This deterritorialization is, in part, possible by the ubiquity of clay as raw material, and the characteristic of ceramic-making as an almost universal technique, with various regional adaptations that can nonetheless be transposed beyond borders. This, added to the bottom-up aspect of these enterprises, which receive little to no government support and function outside the institutionalized and hierarchical Japanese craft world, adds to their informality, flexibility, and effectiveness.

The three project idealizers all share a similar background. They are individual ceramic artists of the baby-boomer generation who have partaken in the atmosphere of adventure and experimentation of the 1970s, have extensive international experience, with two being originally outsiders to the regions where the projects were implemented: in the case study in Misato, an I-turn Kyushu-born potter who settled in the region in the 1990s; and in Sasama, a Hokkaido-born company dropout turned potter who set-up his kiln in the region in the 2000s, thus becoming himself a "relationship person" to Sasama. Furthermore, they are all outsiders to the institutionalized Japanese craft world and its rigid institutional arrangements (see Moeran 1987). The fact that two of the enterprises are carried out in regions without conspicuous pottery production adds to the freedom to conduct them without the government bureaucracy and pressure from local craft associations with conflicting interests in their lobbying for political attention.

These particularities add to the grassroots, bottom-up character of these programs, which rely on informal networks, social media, and word of mouth for their dissemination. Similar projects, aimed at temporarily attracting professional artists to historical craft regions to produce exceptional works of art in well-equipped studios, with a variety of tools and materials in the presence of other international artists and specialized staff, have been put into place with the support of municipal governments. Yet, they don't often allow for a deep level of connection and involvement with residents and the wider community. In contrast, the programs presented here are open to practitioners of any level, prioritizing the impact on the locals and participants. By strengthening human connections through the creative exchange of experiences and knowledge they can foster a sense of place, joy, and pride in one's skills and community, thus nurturing a feeling of competence and self-esteem. All projects involve daily mundane exchanges with residents and the informal transmission of intangible cultural heritage and require creative problem-solving due to the limited materials, resources, and infrastructure available for production (see Marchand 2016). In this manner, they subvert elitist and Eurocentric views of aesthetics, illustrating art's potential for human social development and well-being (Clammer 2015).

When I did participant observation at the three sites, I encountered vibrant and open atmospheres, where both foreigner and Japanese nationals, amateur and veteran craft makers, locals and international artists engaged informally, leading to both intercultural and intergenerational exchanges. That is not to say tensions are inexistent, but an in-depth analysis of this component will require further research. While these are the preliminary results of an ongoing research project, I want to argue for the transformative role of these enterprises, which draw on human relationships and crafts heritage, in its broader understanding, to advance the sustainable and qualitative development of rural communities through their engagement with local identity, resources, and transnational flows. In a broader arena, these case studies can add to discussions about the role of leisure, beauty, and creative expression, as well as respect from others and pride in one's community and skills, to human happiness and well-being (Clammer 2012; 2015; Fischer 2014).

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