

# Symbolic Politics of Regional Revitalization: A Case Study of Yushara-cho, Japan\*

Jin Myong-suk\*\*

(In lieu of an abstract) This article explores the various changes that the residents of Matsubara District in Japan enacted after the town was granted permission to implement forest therapy and the ways in which they embraced this public policy. However, it must be noted that the government did not unilaterally impose this policy on the residents while they passively accepted it. Although the incorporation of forest therapy could have been seen as the national government's expansion of recreational facilities for its citizens, some community members saw it as a buried treasure trove waiting to be discovered by the revitalization of their region. In this article, I will focus on the means through which a policy that was conceived and implemented by the local government won the acceptance and understanding of community members. To do so, I will investigate this case through the framework of regional revitalization. This paper is an analysis of the discourse on regional revitalization by way of forest therapy in the context of symbolic politics. Regional revitalization provided a strong motivation for residents of declining farming and mountain communities to unite. I will examine how this phenomenon functioned as a mechanism for political symbolic value.

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\*\* Research Professor, Institute of Rice, Life and Civilization, Jeonbuk National University.

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## 1. Introduction

The first thing I noticed when I arrived in Yusuhara Town [Yusuhara-cho], Japan, was the mountains. The mountains, with their pointy peaks, spanned the view and embraced a handful of villages that were sprawled across the valley. Their dark green hue and commanding presence that overpowered anything nearby seemed to permeate the mountains with tension. Yusuhara-cho's land was comprised of 91% forest, and anyone coming to this town for the first time will inevitably face this dense arboreal mountain edge. Soon after I began my research, I discovered that the forest had become the foundation upon which Yusuhara-cho's regional revitalization was built.

The town of Yusuhara-cho had implemented various business ideas by establishing a regional development policy related to the forest and environment. Forest therapy was one example. Japan's Forest Agency had pursued the business of forest therapy and therapy road as a designation enterprise since 2005.<sup>1</sup> The place for forest therapy was required to have natural and social facilities that have been medically proven to relax and enhance the health of participants. In addition, it must have access to a flat walking trail (a "therapy road") of certain distance. In 2007, the township of Yusuhara-cho converted part of the agricultural canal on Kubotani Mountain in Matsubara into a therapy road and received the permit to designate the entire Tarogawa Park in Higashi District as a base for forest therapy. This paper examines how the forest therapy road was established

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<sup>1</sup> Forest therapy is a medically proven way of maintaining and increasing psychological health and preventing disease through immersion in forests. When the term "forest bathing" was used before the term "forest therapy" was coined, there was no medical research that proved the effectiveness of taking walks in the forest, and none of the asserted benefits were supported by formal studies. However, after the term "forest therapy" began to circulate, medical professionals rapidly developed methods to measure and evaluate the biological responses of participants. Biological responses were largely measured in three ways: cardiac activity, stress hormones found in saliva, and changes in anticancer proteins in blood. Since the effects of forest therapy are now supported by medical research, many hope that it will make a significant contribution to preventive medicine. Two departments—one for the city and one for the forest—oversaw the designation and evaluation of forest therapy bases. These two departments conducted experiments based on physiological and psychological measurements: viewing and walking of participants, and physical and chemical analyses. The comparative analysis and measurements of these two departments determined the designation and evaluation of forest therapy bases. ([www.fo-society.jp/](http://www.fo-society.jp/))

in Matsubara.

This article explores the various changes that Matsubara's residents enacted after the town was granted permission to implement forest therapy and the ways in which they embraced this public policy.<sup>2</sup> However, it must be noted that the government did not unilaterally impose this policy on the residents while they passively accepted the change. Although the incorporation of forest therapy could have been seen as the national government's expansion of recreational facilities for its citizens, some community members saw it as a buried treasure trove waiting to be discovered by the revitalization of their region. In this paper, I will focus on the means through which a policy that was conceived and implemented by the local government won the acceptance and understanding of community members. To do so, I will investigate this case through the framework of regional revitalization.

This paper is an analysis of the discourse on regional revitalization by way of forest therapy in the context of symbolic politics. Regional revitalization provided a strong motivation for residents of declining farming and mountain communities to unite. The purpose of this study is to find out how such regional revitalization works as a mechanism of political symbolism, inducing strong motivation and cohesion in declining rural and mountain village communities.

## 2. Existing Studies and Theories

The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the high probability of regional revitalization functioning as a political symbol in resident communities. In the past, many scholars have largely focused on the political properties of symbols. Symbols aren't simply directive marks, such as traffic signs and signals; they refer to the connoted meanings of a subject through a comprehensive image. David Kertzer (1988: 4–5), calling the symbolic system “a shield against terror,” argued in favor of the power of symbols, as they imbue one's surroundings with meaning and help one to understand the world. In other words, symbols serve an important function that

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<sup>2</sup> I chose the therapy road in Matsubara rather than a forest therapy road in a more populous location because tourism related to forest therapy occurs mostly in Matsubara.

ensures the security and sustainability of society. Particularly, symbols inspire group unity and social integration since the foundation of symbols relies mainly on the belief and faith of group support. Abner Cohen (1981: 60–76) asserted that Creoles of Sierra Leone—generally regarded as descendants of emancipated slaves from England—created the “mystique of eliteness” as a way of uniting their group and maintaining their unique identity. The amalgamation of symbols like manners, styles of clothing, ways of speaking, leisure activities, ceremonies, rituals, and numerous other characteristics are just a few examples. Charles Elder and Roger Cobb (1983: 1) posited that symbols provide connection to a largescale political order and make group activities possible by enabling other individuals through simultaneous synchronization.

However, not all symbols serve to ensure the security and unity of society. Inherent in the images of symbols is ambiguity that could be interpreted in various ways. Therefore, when a conscious mind strongly opposes a symbol, he arouses conflict among other members of the organization, causing a division in the group. The possibility of dynamic conflict is always present in symbols.

Symbols are fundamentally ambiguous and polysemous. Symbols are not an exact mirror of the subject. Rather, a symbol is a representation and harbors multiple meanings. Through the diverse meaning structure of the milk muddy tree symbol of the Ndembu tribe, Victor Turner (1967) sought to understand the customs and culture of the tribe and shed light on the multiplicity of symbols and sociality. Cohen also claimed that symbols carried multiple meanings and were interpreted variously because of the ambiguity that was inherent in their nature (Cohen 1982: 47). Yu Yeongok called the multiple meanings of symbols “double referent meaning.” Referring to the subject automatically gives birth to a secondary meaning (Yu Yeongok 1997: 33).

Elder and Cobb (1983) focused mostly on identifying the elements of political symbols. They pointed out that the distribution of the material and symbolic benefits acted as a symbolic mechanism through which political systems operated. They asserted that the distribution of the two benefits played a significant role in the acceptance of public policy. Although symbolic benefits may or may not lead to material benefits, symbolic action preserves the trust of the public and the existing political order. A group representation becomes an official sanction (Elder and Cobb 1983: 113–115).

Similar to the concept of symbolic benefits, Elder and Cobb also developed the ideas of symbolic reassurance and symbolic consensus. Public policies are dependent on symbolism to reassure and streamline a result. Symbolic reassurance plays a significant role in the fulfillment of public policy. Public policies promise the resolution of a problem through symbolic reassurance. The government could satisfy public expectations of political acts simply through symbolic reassurance.

On the other hand, symbolic consensus does not equate substantive consensus. Although substantive consensus appears to be imperative for the maintenance of democracy, in reality, substantive consensus is almost nonexistent in stable democratic systems. The power of unity driven by symbols is influenced, in large part, by symbolic consensus. However, when people have a clear understanding of a symbol through a direct interpretation from someone nearby who takes frequent symbolic actions, symbolic consensus deteriorates, which may lead to the collapse of symbolic unity (Elder and Cobb 1983: 119–121). Although greater ambiguity spurs stronger symbolic unity, one must also be wary of its complete incompatibility with substantive consensus.

In South Korea, there have been an increasing number of studies based on theories of symbolic politics. Studies include symbols of public enterprises, public policies, activities of politicians, and political systems of the national and local governments (Yu Yeongok 1991, 1996; Jeong Byeonggeol and Seong Jieun 2004; Seong Jieun and Kim Juhwan 2005; Jeong Mungi and O Sugil 2008; Fujii 2008; Jo Hyeonsu 2010). In addition, South Korean scholars have examined the relationship between seemingly nonpolitical activities and actions of ordinary people and political symbols (Song Doyeong 2002; Yang Sunchang 2003; Jeong Hogi 2000; Ha Sangbok 2005).

However, South Korean scholars were mainly interested in deciphering the kind of symbolic images that governing institutions utilized to elucidate on ruling ideologies. In other words, their works were largely focused on the techniques of symbolic strategies. No substantial studies exist on the relationship between the self (a member of society)—as argued by Cohen—and political symbols, nor were there any significant additions to the research conducted by Elder and Cobb on the methods individuals used to react to symbols. Even research on policies did not reveal the processes and methods through which group beneficiaries (community members) came to understand the public policies they eventually adopted.

Most studies excluded an analysis of the cognitive process research participants underwent to comprehend the policies; scholars only focused on the activities and actions of the groups who mapped out and implemented the policies. Does the audience of a symbol—made up of conscious minds—simply accept the symbol without condition? Do the group members immediately understand and accept the symbols? Because of the ambiguous nature of symbols, symbols produce double referent and secondary meanings. Do existing studies point this out? The methods through which group members accept and understand symbols are important and must be included in symbol analyses.

The reason I decided to examine regional revitalization in the context of symbolic politics was because of the symbolic power that revitalization yields. For communities, regional revitalization could mean economic progress, an increase in the number of tourists or permanent residents, reconstruction of resident organizations, or attainment of national projects. The ambiguous characteristics of regional revitalization are opening conduits for a more diverse discourse on symbolic politics.

Public policies are planned and created by national and local governments. The mechanism through which the policies win legitimacy and yield influence on local residents is based on the symbolic benefits found in regional revitalization. There is nothing more urgent than reviving a desiccated area and overcoming the crisis of depopulation and the aging of residents. Hence, regional revitalization is very likely to be perceived as a benefit to all resident communities. In addition, the revitalization of an area could become the leading motivational factor for regional unity and the key to strengthening local communities. In other words, regional revitalization potentially harbors a significant amount of power for symbolic unity.

Many studies have been conducted on regional symbols and identify them as part of a political process (Jeong Geunsik 1996, 1997, 1999; Yi Jeongdeok 1999; Yi Seongho 2002; Yeom Migyeong 2000; Jin Myeongsuk 2003; Mun Jaewon and Yi Sangbong 2007). However, no studies have approached regional revitalization as both symbolic and political. Existing works stopped at specifying the contents and methods of regional revitalization or illuminating the changes in local communities during revitalization. In contrast, this paper focuses on the attributes of political symbols of regional revitalization discourse. By analyzing the symbolic attributes of regional revitalization, I will discuss how symbolic politics is

utilized in regional revitalization.

### 3. Research Subject

Yusuhara-cho is located in Kochi, one of the four prefectures that make up the island of Shikoku. The town spans 23,651 hectares, of which 21,511 hectares (91%) consist of mountains, and 338 hectares (1.5%) constitute farmlands. The town is made up of six districts: Ochimen, Shimagawa, Higashi, Nishi, Hatsuse, and Matsubara. There are 58 villages in Yusuhara-cho, and the therapy road is located in Matsubara.

Matsubara is farthest away from the main town; it is located in the most remote area of Yusuhara-cho and can be reached in 40–50 minutes by car on a narrow and winding one-lane road. However, despite its remoteness, it connects Yusuhara-cho to Taisho, a town that is now a part of Shimanto-cho. Matsubara consists of six villages and, according to the July 31, 2010 census, has 312 residents in 158 households in the district. Of the residents, 190 people were over the age of 65 in 118 households, making up 60.9% of the district population. Among the six districts, Matsubara has the highest number of elderly people.

On Kubotani Mountain, which hugs the valley of Matsubara, an agricultural canal runs along a mountain ridge to channel a stream of water into the village. People in Matsubara Village, which is the main village in the Matsubara District, and Shimogubotani Village used the canal water to grow rice. The canal is six kilometers long, and of the 37 hectares of farmland in Matsubara, 4 hectares are watered by this canal.

It is not clear exactly when the canal was constructed. The former



**Figure 1.** Reconstructing the Forest Therapy Road

district mayor estimated that it may have been built 90 to 100 years ago. The canal became equipped with its present-day facilities around 1978, when the village received a government subsidy of 30 million yen to replace the reddish soil in the canal with pipes and concrete. When the mountains flooded with rain, the soil would wash away and the canal would collapse. But its maintenance became much easier after the dirt was replaced with concrete. Yamazaki (74, male) is the current canal association president; he served as district mayor of Matsubara until 2010. The number of canal association members has decreased from twenty-four households to nine, and presently only six households continue to farm.

The canal was designated as part of a therapy road in 2007. In 2005, residents of Yusuvara-cho applied for the designation of a different trail in Tarogawa Park in Higashi for forest therapy. However, on May 9 of the same year, after a preliminary investigation, it was decided that the trail was not suitable for forest therapy. The residents of Yusuvara-cho needed to find another trail that was more appropriate. Not long after, an employee of the forest department, who was visiting Matsubara Village on forest-thinning duty, unwittingly discovered the canal. After the discovery, the organization in charge of therapy road designation conducted a medical experiment in the area from May 16 to 19 of 2006. As a result, some parts of Tarogawa Park, including the canal on Kubotani Mountain, officially became the base for forest therapy on March 22, 2007.

The first task the residents undertook after their area was approved for forest therapy was to fix up the canal and its surroundings. Yusuvara-cho Town Council decided to use the grant from Kochi Prefecture's "forest-making" and "forest-factory"<sup>3</sup> enterprises to reconstruct the area. The grant from the forest-making project was used for signs, and funds from the forest factory were used for reconstructing the canal.

After the area was approved for forest therapy, activities and host groups began to emerge to systemize therapy tourism in Matsubara. Team Matsubara was a prime example. Until it was integrated with Maroudokai in 2011, Team Matsubara welcomed outsiders who came to visit Yusuvara-

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3 The "forest factory" is an enterprise undertaken by Kochi Prefecture. Its responsibilities include building a forest production infrastructure that can operate effectively and organize forests with multiple owners into one division (factory) in order to increase the productivity and efficiency of forest management (Susaki Forestry Office 2009: 21). With multiple owners, making trails and roads and carrying out tasks such as forest thinning takes an inordinate amount of time.

cho and joined up with experts to discuss the forest therapy road project and come up with other ways to revitalize Matsubara. The members of Team Matsubara, who were in charge of building the official website for the Matsubara Forest Therapy Road, took additional steps to promote the forest therapy business in a strategic way. The main homepage greeted visitors with details of the “story of the forest” and a photograph of the main road. The website included other content, such as photographs of a monitoring tour, scenic views of Kubotani Mountain in all four seasons, and the therapy roads as well as visitors’ reviews, information on lodging, press releases, and tour information.

For lodging in Matsubara, a hosting system for forest therapy was created.<sup>4</sup> Three years after the approval for forest therapy, resident-run lodging facilities called Sanyutei and Yairo were established. A year later, in 2010, an “eco-house” for lodging was built as part of an environment-friendly model-city enterprise. Including the “eco-house,” Matsubara now boasts a total of three lodging buildings.

In 2010, the road-therapy tourism system was nearly completed after residents decided on the price of lodging, sack meals, and tour guides and solidified the method of management. Tourists who participated in guided tours numbered at 600, and in 2010, between 150–200 people lodged in Matsubara.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike mass tourism built around historic sites, resorts, or theme parks, therapy road tourism relied on the relationship between tourists and community members. In order to take walks on the therapy trails, tourists needed to enter the heart of the village and travel deep into the mountains

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<sup>4</sup> In order to be approved for forest therapy, an area must be equipped with facilities and a service system for tourists. Within Tarogawa Park—which is the main area for forest therapy—there is a relatively large Kumono Hotel and a hot spring. In addition, a town can be reached in five minutes by car. There are a variety of restaurants and a Michinoeki, a gift shop that sells local products. Tourists can easily find lodging and places to shop. However, Matsubara is some distance away from the nearest town, and at the time of the approval, no lodging was available. A bakery called Shemuwa was the only eatery available.

<sup>5</sup> The numbers for 2010 were taken from only eight months, April to November. If the tourists who did not take guided tours were added to the figure, the number of visitors who came to Matsubara would have been higher. Also, the sales at Shemuwa bakery increased 26.7% in 2009, compared to the sales in 2004. According to the owner of the bakery, Ikeda (52, male), “Sales dropped in mid-summer and mid-winter before the therapy-road business started. But now I maintain the average sale numbers in those months as well. I think I get customers regularly year-round.”

to reach the trails and Chunbun Hill. To do so, tourists needed guides and packed lunches. The therapy road tourists stayed in lodges managed by the local residents, took walks on the trails with resident guides, and purchased local products. Since the village residents provided all tourist services, interaction between tourists and residents was inevitable.

Therapy road tourism was a type of green tourism for city-rural exchange, which stressed the importance of the connection between farm and mountain village residents and urban tourists.

#### 4. Symbolic Politics of Forest Therapy Roads and Regional Revitalization

##### 1) *The Rediscovery of the Canal as Treasure or Takaramono*

In January of 2004, residents of Yusuhara-cho created a group called “Thinking of Yusuhara-cho’s Tomorrow.” It consisted of about 30 people who gathered to conduct research on the management of the Yusuhara-cho region. The residents in the meetings usually dealt with topics such as the environment, economy, and education. An expert adviser from out of town named Goda was hired to help develop the area and establish a relationship with the residents of Yusuhara-cho. In June 2005, Goda received one million yen from the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism for regional development and hired a consultant in the city of Kochi to pursue the project. This consultant was put in charge of the villages of Nishi and Matsubara. Although he participated in several workshops with the residents and went on a monitor tour, the canal in Matsubara was never considered as a resource for regional development during the entire year the project was underway. It was an employee who went to Matsubara on a forest-thinning assignment who accidentally “discovered” the canal. The Matsubara residents were in disbelief that all their meetings with the consultant to revitalize their town counted for nothing. They were disappointed that a resident of another village found the *takaramono* (treasure) they earnestly searched for (Yoshiae, 50s, female).

The village residents remembered the canal in different ways. One person thought of the canal area as a “playground” (Ikeda, 52, male), another considered it an “inconvenient place” (Hiroko, 60s, female), and yet another person remembered it as “someone else’s land” (wife of Nakano,

60s, female). However, as the number of therapy road tourists increased, more and more residents became knowledgeable about the canal and the therapy road. They came to understand that the canal played a valuable role in the region.

I could sense the growing excitement about the therapy road when I visited Matsubara on August 20, 2009. I had come to Yusuhara-cho to participate in a meeting to prepare for the therapy road monitor tour. When I arrived, Matsubara residents and town office workers were conversing about a program on NHK (Japan's national broadcast channel) that aired a few days prior. They were thrilled that their village was covered on a television show called "Everything about Kochi." The program crew conducted research on August 5 and 6, and the contents aired on August 14.

The residents were excited and proud that their village was featured on NHK. After the designation of the area as a base for forest therapy, they began to see the canal, which they previously considered as shoddy and worthless, as treasure. The main point of the villagers' conversation was the importance of the rediscovery of the canal. Finding regional treasures is one of the processes of regional revitalization. Its significance rested in the fact that the treasure could be named as an important historical or cultural resource or environment-friendly reserve, which could also become a resource for a regional symbol.

Matsubara was the remotest village in Yusuhara-cho, and no tourist facilities existed before the revitalization. According to Yoshiae, "Matsubara wasn't a place outsiders normally visited, but new people began to visit for forest therapy." One resident reported that, "One day, a tourist on a motorcycle passed by and said, 'Oh, I didn't know there was a village here.'" The residents began to see the canal and their own village, located in the middle of a remote mountain, in a new light after tourists began to frequent Matsubara. The canal became a resource for public tourism that would play a central role in the revitalization of the area. The village revitalization project, through the rediscovery of a tourist resource, could become a mechanism through which residents could cultivate positive self-awareness or self-identity (Mun Okpyo 2000; Bak Dongseong 2009). As such, Matsubara residents viewed the canal as a valuable and important asset. Because they considered the therapy road as a source of their village revitalization, they came to view the canal as something positive and meaningful.

2) *From the Resource of a Canal Association to the Resource of Yusuhara-Cho: Therapy Road as a Public Resource*

“Since Matsubara’s forest therapy is a public asset, I hope people don’t think it belongs only to the residents of Matsubara. I hope people refrain from littering, erecting irrelevant signs, or doing things experts wouldn’t do. We hope people take the right path.” (Yamashita, 40s, male)

The above statement was given by a resident of Shimagawa District. As someone highly interested in the therapy road, he hoped that Matsubara residents wouldn’t consider the therapy road solely as their own but as a property of the entire region of Yusuhara-cho.

Before this canal was approved as a therapy road, it was seen merely as one of many canals in Matsubara Village. Moreover, it belonged to only a handful of residents of Matsubara. The forest near the therapy road was private property, and the Matsubara Canal Association restricted the use of the canal where the therapy road was located.

The villagers who lived on the ridge of Kubotani Mountain created the Matsubara Canal Association in order to effectively manage and use the canal. Around 1978, the association reorganized the group and regulations in order to apply for a government subsidy to reconstruct the canal with concrete. According to Yamazaki (74, male), president of the canal association, the farm owner contributed about one to five percent of the total construction fees in accordance with the regulation made for the beneficiaries of the reconstruction, but he did not recall the exact amount.

Most of the cleanup work on the canal was done right before the rice-planting season. Water needed to flow easily to reach the rice paddies. All the members of the canal association cleaned the canal for an entire day before planting began. They cleaned out accumulated leaves, branches, and rocks in the canal and cleared the surrounding areas. Since the members of the canal association were few and the length of the canal spanned six kilometers, it took them from early morning until evening to finish the task. One person from each family was required to help, but if no one was available, they had to either find a substitute or pay a wage for the day. Everyone brought a sack lunch. The association did not require a fee for canal management because it didn’t require much additional management outside of the preparatory cleanup before rice planting.

One of the changes brought on by the forest therapy designation was that volunteers came forward to help, making the annual cleanup an event



Figure 2. People cleaning the canal (left) and eating lunch after the cleanup (right)

for the entire village. In 2009, when I was in Matsubara for research, volunteers, including Kochi University students, returning farmers from other parts of Yusuhara-cho and Tsuno-cho, and employees of the Forest Agency and Yusuhara-cho town office visited Matsubara to help clean the canal and the surrounding areas.

A new management system was also developed for the canal. The canal was mainly used for farming purposes from the time of rice planting through the growing season. Farmers only needed the water from the canal for about six months, from spring through summer. However, after the therapy road became the main source of tourism, the canal needed to be managed through all four seasons of the year.

Compared to forest therapy roads of other regions, the Matsubara therapy road had the benefit of access to natural water. Water ran on both sides of the therapy road in Matsubara. One side was the main irrigation canal (Figure 3, on the left side) and Kubotani Creek (Figure 3, on the right side) ran on the other side. Water flowed from Kubotani Valley into Kubotani Creek, which met Yusuhara Creek and merged with Shimanto River.<sup>6</sup> The therapy road in the village was located farther up from Kubotani Creek, but a full view of the creek could be had at the end of the

<sup>6</sup> The Shimanto River is the longest river in Shikoku, flowing 196 kilometers. The river begins on Irazu Mountain in Tsuno-cho, Kochi Prefecture, wraps around the mid-west of the prefecture and flows into the Pacific Ocean. The Shimanto is a class “A” river, and since no large dam has been constructed on the main stream, it is considered the last natural river in Japan. In 2000, Kochi Prefecture established “The Shimanto River Ordinance” and various other policies to preserve the river. The Shimanto River runs through the Serikawa area of Matsubara District. In order to preserve the Shimanto River and its surrounding areas, Yusuhara-cho signed a Serikawa area forest inauguration agreement in conjunction with the national government and a civic organization.



Figure 3. Running water beside a forest therapy road.

trail. One could hear the loud gushing of the water during the entire walk on the trail. The canal followed the ridge of the mountain in a winding line, painting a pastoral landscape. One of the tourists wrote on the tour website that the theme of the road seemed to be water and likened her experience on the road to when she was most comfortable in the womb of her mother in amniotic fluid.

“What is this feeling of comfort? Is it the feeling of being in my mother’s womb?... A sound that a fetus hears in the womb. The running of Kubotani Creek makes the noise, “shah!” as it runs down, like the sound a fetus hears in her mother’s womb.... The artificial canal looks like a winding umbilical cord, and the water flows leisurely at 0.4 meters a second, which is the same speed of blood in the human artery. While the fetus lives in the womb for 280 days, he can subconsciously feel the rhythm of the heartbeats of his own and those of his mother.” (<http://matsubara-forest.blogspot.com>)

From the perspective of the tourism website manager, the above text from an obviously literary-minded tourist helped illustrate what was so attractive about the therapy road. The water became an important element of the therapy road and a powerful resource to capture the hearts of tourists. Since water was an important part of the therapy road, it was imperative that the canal was managed year-round. The amount of water that flowed needed to be controlled during drought and flooding seasons, and the sunken debris had to be cleaned up immediately. I confirmed in 2011 that a resident organization called Maroudokai managed the therapy road. The canal that was previously overseen by the Matsubara Canal Association had been taken over by a newly created resident organization that managed the entire therapy road.

What did it mean that the canal cleanup had become a village event and that its management was run by a new resident organization? It meant that a canal that was once primarily used for farming by a few families had become a public resource. Before the area was designated for forest therapy, farmers cleaned the canal to irrigate the paddy fields during the rice-planting and growing season. After the region became a therapy road tourist attraction, residents cleaned the canal for the tourists. The meaning of the cleanup has expanded from merely cleaning the canal to cleaning up the surroundings of the therapy road. To the residents, who felt a special affinity toward mountain villages and forests, the canal cleanup meant more than merely cleaning a farm canal for a few farming families. The canal had become a public resource that needed to be preserved by everyone. The funds for lunch after the cleanup were taken out of the public budget of the District-making Council of Matsubara of Life Study Promotion Assembly. After lunch, the volunteers and village residents introduced themselves to each other and shared how they felt about the cleanup. They all mentioned the importance of the therapy road as a resource to Matsubara.

Since the Kubotani Canal only provided water to a few farming families, only a handful of people came to the mountain once a year to clean up. It seemed clear that once the farms disappeared, the canal would be rendered useless, and no one would visit the mountain. However, because of the therapy road, the canal and the entire Kubotani Mountain became a resource to all residents. The canal, as a public resource, could possibly become a mechanism through which a series of policies related to the canal could be legitimized.

The residents of the area, in fact, introduced the various tourist programs. When I asked Yamazaki, former district mayor, if the district leaders asked the residents for their approval for forest therapy and other related projects, he replied in the negative. However, they did ask for permission from the mountain residents when they undertook the “forest-factory” project because they needed the approval from the proprietors. Yamazaki claimed that he did not face one iota of resistance or conflict from the farming families in the canal association or owners of private property on the mountain when he needed to prepare the village for forest therapy.

We did not ask for permission from the residents when we were approved for

the therapy road. The town office applied for it on its own, and people in charge came to investigate if the road was good or not. It was approved after that. The town office just informed us when they applied and when we were approved. We did not explain anything to the canal association either. We just explained to them what the approval meant. We didn't ask the members of the canal association, "There is this thing. Can we do it?" Even though it looks like the town office pursued this on its own and got the approval, the residents cooperated and were supportive of it. No one opposed saying, "This is my land, my mountain." And no one opposes now. For the forest-factory project, we needed to speak with the landowners to explain the process and sign a contract because we paid our budget to them. The residents here are all cooperative, so there wasn't any trouble carrying that out. But it was difficult because there was a landowner in Osaka, and it was hard to get ahold of him. But when I got ahold of him, he said, "This is for a good cause for my mountain so I will cooperate." That's how we prepared the mountain for the project. I was very thankful. (Yamazaki, 74, male)

Evidently, the fact that the town office omitted the process of asking for permission from the canal association and the owners of properties on the mountain was not a big problem because it was for a "good cause." They believed this was for a "good cause" because the therapy road would benefit the public. The mountain property owners gladly agreed to use their land for the good of the public.

The therapy road changed the existing system of cleanup and canal management. The residents accepted the therapy road project initiated by the town office and took on the subsequent preparation of the mountain. The residents of other villages also came to believe that the canal belonged to the entire region of Yusuhara-cho, not just the members of the canal association. The preservation and revitalization of the therapy road was now a task that belonged to all the residents of Yusuhara-cho.

The discourse on regional revitalization surrounding the therapy road stemmed from the time when the canal became a source for public profit. Public profit is a byproduct of a basic operation principle of the government (Elder and Cobb 1983: 114). Reaping public profit from the canal helped win the approval and understanding of the residents and contributed to making the therapy road and tourist activities a public endeavor. The idea of public profit helped legitimize a series of policies concerning the canal, and the residents actively and assertively led the necessary changes. This was possible because the residents regarded the canal as a public resource.

### 3) *The “Medical” Discourse on the Forest Therapy Road and Community Residents’ Acceptance*

The purpose of this section is to examine the mechanism of medical discourse by which the residents had come to accept the therapy road as “good and valuable.” In addition to the fact that the canal had become a tourist resource, the fact that it could contribute to the health of all Japanese citizens also played an important role in the community residents’ acceptance and forging of change.

The therapy road is one of the scientific approaches to understanding forests. The term “therapy road” was coined based on the medical effects of forest “bathing,” and the approval for therapy roads was conditional upon scientific measurements. Hence, approaching the forest from a medical perspective was only natural. The most important part of the evaluation was physiological research. The experiment consisted of a comprehensive test that measured research participants’ chronotropic index, cortisol from their saliva, amylase concentration, blood pressure, and pulse. To measure the changes in research participants’ bodies, researchers conducted various tests on them before and after the tour. These tests were conducted to scientifically gauge the effects of spending time in the forest. Since the designation of an area suitable for a therapy road was dependent on the physiological effects of the forest on the human body, forest therapy was touted as a form of medical tourism.

A medical approach to forest therapy could also be gleaned from the monitor tour of Yusuvara-cho Forest Therapy Research Association. In 2009, the town of Yusuvara-cho received 1,330,000 yen from the Regional Society Promotion Foundation to conduct studies on health and other long-term benefits of forest therapy in Yusuvara-cho. The purpose of this research was to shed light on the medical effects of the therapy road, and approximately half of the research group members had medical backgrounds. Yoshiie explained why they applied for funding for this project from the Regional Society Promotion Foundation:

Even though we had the scientific data from when Yusuvara-cho was approved for forest therapy, some of us were still skeptical of its effects. I, who work for doctors and health centers, was skeptical of the data. Think about how much more skeptical other residents might have been. Of course, you feel good going into the forest, but we wanted to know the kind of effects it produced. We thought we needed accurate scientific data to

promote it to other regions. (Yoshiae, 50s, female)

The monitor tour led to the creation of health-related programs for tourists. In addition to taking walks on the trail and forest “bathing,” other programs were organized to help tourists elevate the condition of their mind and body to an optimal level. These programs included soaking in hot springs, participating in physical therapy and aromatherapy, and partaking of low-sodium meal plans. Other programs that encouraged plentiful sleep, quiet time for listening to the sounds of insects, and teatime were also created and assigned to appropriate locations on a daily basis. The following text is an excerpt from a research observation journal of the monitoring tour on the second day.

It seems like we had relocated a hospital to this place. The tourists went through various examinations at the Yusu-hara Hospital yesterday, and today, it seems like they are being treated at an outdoor Matsubara hospital. In the morning, they drank healthy tea and only engaged in activities that were good for the body. After talking a walk on the therapy road, they ate lunch that had been carefully prepared by the village residents and received aroma and physical therapy all afternoon at the Fureai Community Center. When I saw them receiving physical therapy, I also wanted to be one of them and lie down on the bed. In late afternoon, they returned to their lodgings at Sanyutei or Yairo. Even though I wasn't able to have dinner with them, I am sure the meals were made with healthy ingredients. The lady in charge of cooking, no doubt, had put all of her skills to each dish.

The members of the research committee met every week to report findings on their respective topics, share problems, and search for solutions together. The meal department's preparation process was particularly meticulous. The team was required to report the caloric, nutrient, and sodium content in each meal and prepare for future meals according to the instructions of the nutritionist. The meal department carefully checked the number of calories and the nutrients for all the menus. In meetings, if they discovered that one of the meal plans had too many calories and too much sodium, they would choose a different menu with fewer calories and less sodium and report the changes at the next meeting. The meal preparation process seemed analogous to diet therapy.<sup>7</sup> However, preparing meals that

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<sup>7</sup> The following table was created with the data that was used during the monitor tour preparation meetings of the meal department.

were based on “scientific” data didn’t necessarily come easily to the residents. It was quite difficult for them since they were not used to controlling calories and sodium.

We had to measure each seasoning. I was so nervous because I had to bring the ingredients. I couldn’t just do what I had done at home. I had never cooked using exact measurements, following a recipe, such as using a tablespoon. So, I was nervous, and the dishes didn’t turn out the way I had wanted them to. For example, I couldn’t add soy sauce or miso if it tasted bland. It was so difficult at first that I wanted to quit. (Hiroko, 60s, female)

Hiroko was a Matsubara resident who had been providing sack lunches to tourists. At the time of the monitor tour, she provided two sack meals. She was known as a good cook in the community, and hearing the nutritionist criticize her cooking by saying, “The calories and sodium are too high” was hard for her to bear.

However, one of the reasons the residents took meticulous care to provide a balanced meal was to produce a high-quality therapy product.

Meal format	The meal contents and nutritional values
Kumono Hotel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Western breakfast 685 kcal, sodium 1.4 g, Western dinner 701 kcal, sodium 3.5 g.</li> <li>•For Japanese meals, calories are low enough but sodium is too high.</li> </ul>
Sack lunch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•4<sup>th</sup> 554 kcal, sodium 3.0 g</li> <li>•5<sup>th</sup> 563 kcal, sodium 3.1 g</li> </ul>
Dinner at Sanyutei Lodging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•598 kcal, sodium 3.0 g</li> <li>•We replaced the tofu garnish and soba juice with grilled eggplant as we discussed in the last meeting. We also replaced kidney bean peanut salad with paprika peanut salad. Calories were reduced from 727 kcal to 598 kcal and sodium from 5.8 g to 3.0 g.</li> </ul>
Shemuwa Bakery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Butter roll: 133 kcal, protein 3.8 g, fat 3.3 g, carbohydrates 20.9 g, sodium 0.6 g</li> <li>•Bread: 109 kcal, protein 2.9 g, fat 2.2 g, carbohydrates 18.2 g, sodium 0.5 g</li> <li>•Croissant: 309 kcal, protein 6.5 g, fat 13.3 g, carbohydrates 41.0 g, sodium 1.3 g</li> <li>•Raisin buns: 105 kcal, protein 2.6 g, fat 2.1 g, carbohydrates 19.0 g, sodium 0.4 g</li> <li>•Salad: 60 kcal, protein 1.0 g, fat 4.6 g, carbohydrates 4.4 g, sodium 1.2 g</li> <li>•Yogurt: 83 kcal, protein 3.6 g, fat 3.0 g, carbohydrates 10.0 g, sodium 0.1 g</li> </ul>

The nutritionist informed the tourists about the contents of their meals and the number of calories and amount of sodium they contained. The tourists learned that the meals they consumed were of the highest quality, and they weren't simply tasty but were healthy as well. The monitor tour met all its intended goals when it came to an end. At the tour evaluation meeting, Dr. Gana (53, female) presented various medical results. She could hardly contain her excitement when she declared, "The forest therapy's anti-aging effects were beyond what we had anticipated! We plan to present the results at a medical conference." Hiroko (60, female), the cook who struggled to create meals based on scientific data, including the right levels of calories, nutrients, and sodium, said, "At first I was worried about the amount of sodium I could use. But I realized that if I made meals within the calories the nutritionist had calculated, I didn't need much sodium. It was a good learning experience for me." Geiko (64, female) confessed, "I hadn't gone to the canal for decades due to my poor health, but now I understand that it's something good for my health." The medical data helped residents accept the value of the canal.

It was decided that Matsubara's therapy road would take the approach of medical tourism. Gana and Yoshiae asserted that, in order to differentiate the therapy road from other tourist attractions, they needed to concentrate on medical-type tourism. In their promotional pamphlet, "four secrets of the forest" were listed as having medically proven effects on health.

Currently, those in charge of organizing the tours are running a health examination program utilizing the therapy road. The Japanese government subsidized a special health guidance program for those who had received a yearly medical examination and were diagnosed with health problems. The Matsubara public health center had these patients go through the therapy road program; subsequently, the health center developed and executed a plan called "a special health guidance at Kubotani road and forest therapy." For the recipients of the special health guidance, it would only cost 10,000 to 22,000 yen per person for one night and two days, including food and lodging. The organizers of the therapy road were planning to underscore and promote the importance of this program.

The medical therapy road tour was created based on medical knowledge. It included diet therapy (meal plans), diverse treatment services, and tour guides who offered medical explanations of the benefits of taking walks in the forest. The forest was no longer a place that merely provided silence, clean air, and romantic metaphors. It had turned into a space of science,

wherein medically proven effects of anti-aging and other therapies were found.

Disseminating medical knowledge concerning the therapy road turned forests into a space of scientifically substantiated therapy.<sup>8</sup> In order to help community residents understand their shared interest, the organizers of the therapy road sought to persuade them by using medically based knowledge. The medical discourse, based on objective and scientific data, reconstructed the therapy road as a meaningful and valuable space. It placed emphasis on the objective and public value of the therapy road. Further, the therapy road was understood as a resource for all the residents and a contributing factor to the health of all Japanese citizens. As a result, the residents came to see the entire project even more as source of public benefit.

The public benefit, as contended by Elder and Cobb, is not unlike symbolic benefit. Symbolic politics infers the assumption that policies somehow benefit all society members and have public value even when the benefits do not directly reach every single member of society. Like the way the canal had gone from being a resource only for the canal association to being a resource for all residents of Yusuhara, and the way the medical discourse on therapy road tourism won popular opinion because it promoted the health of national citizens, thus strengthening the symbolic benefits of the therapy road.

#### *4) The Union of the Maroudokai Group and the Residents*

Mun Okpyo (2000: 226–228) posited that the changes in farming and mountain villages due to the growth of tourism should not be interpreted as a development that was enforced unilaterally by city dwellers without any consent from local residents. The process of rural commercialization involved allowing the local residents—who had generally been isolated from urbanization and industrialization—to take pride in the establishment of their community relationships built on mutual assistance, uncontaminated nature, and a humane living environment. Bak Dongseong (2009) also

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<sup>8</sup> The argument that scientific technology is a product of negotiation and social process is gaining increasing support. From a positivist perspective, scientific technology seems to embrace rationality and universality by using objective science as evidence. However, the arguments against scientific technology assert that it is easily influenced by the relationship between parties, structural variables, and social negotiations (Kim Seoyong 2006).

asserted that claiming a region as a source for historic tourism helped unify the residents and strengthened their identity.

The discussion of regional revitalization began to gravitate toward the idea that the residents should now become the owners of the project. Yi Sijae (2008: 74) argued that the primary success of Japanese village-making (Machisukuri) or village rebuilding (Muraokosi) was based on the autonomy and participation of the residents. He further emphasized that the residents needed to consider not only the materialistic conditions, such as urban planning, but also human resources, community management structure, and other conditions for human society. Goto (2007) further elaborated that the residents should be the primary rebuilders of their village for the benefit of the region, in order to resolve regional problems. As such, changes should be undertaken for improved management of their daily living. The process of village-making should also encourage the residents' sense of belonging, ownership, and collaboration with each other (Sato 2011: 35). Sato (2010: 77) also asserted that regional revitalization policy should be centered on the residents.

The residents' gradual ownership of the Matsubara therapy road project could be seen throughout the preparation process. One example was the resident-centered hosting system. It was Matsubara residents who ran the lodgings and provided sack meals and tours to the visitors. Among the residents, seven people obtained a forest therapy guide license. The therapy road tourism movement that was instigated by only a few led to the beginning of a community organization created by the residents themselves. An organization called Maroudokai was born for the purpose of Matsubara regional revitalization.

Before Maroudokai was created, community meetings were held through Team Matsubara or the Forest Therapy Research Group. The members of Team Matsubara discussed ways to vitalize the therapy road with outside experts, while the research group helped the residents learn to systematically manage tourist activities. However, Team Matsubara was run by the employees of the Yusuvara-cho Town Office and outside experts, and the Forest Therapy Research Group was organized to temporarily undertake the project. The former district mayor of Matsubara, Yamazaki, who headed the tourist activities, decided that the residents needed a structured and systematic group to revitalize the village. As a result, Maroudokai was created in April 2010. Yamazaki tentatively named the group "Thinking and Acting for Matsubara's Tomorrow" and canvassed

each household to recruit members of the group. He explained that the lodgings, sack meal eateries, and even the group, Maroudokai, were organized thanks to the new forest therapy industry, and the group itself was created to ensure the protection of the therapy road. The residents named the group Maroudokai at a “Thinking and Acting for Matsubara’s Tomorrow” meeting on April 20, which was advertised by flyer.<sup>9</sup> The inaugural meeting occurred in May, attended by the first eighteen people who joined Maroudokai, and, in June, they held a general meeting. The number of members increased to 23 by February of 2011.

Maroudokai can be seen as an expansion of Team Matsubara. It was organized not only for the therapy road but also for the general revitalization of Matsubara Village. The following list of guidelines defines the purpose of the organization and the types of businesses they intended to pursue.

(Purpose)

Article 2. To think and act for Matsubara’s tomorrow, mobilizing the members who love and are passionate about their homeland. We contribute to the revitalization of Matsubara by rebuilding the village through diverse activities and inspiring people to think, “I am glad I live in Matsubara” or “I want to live in Matsubara.”

(Business)

Article 3. In order to accomplish the goals we set at this meeting, we will pursue the following businesses:

1. Using the resources of Matsubara’s abundant nature and green foliage, we will attract an exchange population and pursue tourist businesses related to regional revitalization.
2. Using the individual talents and wisdom of the residents, we will develop services and products for profit.
3. We will pursue businesses related to improving the health and welfare of the residents.
4. We will pursue other businesses and projects that are necessary to accomplish our goals.

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<sup>9</sup> The name “Thinking and Acting for Matsubara’s Tomorrow” was used in 2004 when the residents worked with a consultant. Yamazaki tentatively used this name in the beginning, and the official name “Maroudokai” was created at its first meeting. The word “maroudokai” means guest. It also means the performing of rites to gods from the other side. Some argue that it is from the word “marui,” which means “round,” which has evolved to the word “hope.” The “roudo” in “maroudokai” also mimics the Japanese pronunciation of the English word “road.” (<http://matsubara-forest.blogspot.com>)

The members of Maroudokai far outnumbered the members of Team Matsubara and the members of the Forest Therapy Research Group. Even the residents who were unassociated with matters of the canal, lodging, or tourism also joined the group. Gana underscored the fact that the activities Maroudokai sponsored also included projects that were unrelated to the therapy road.<sup>10</sup> Even Ikeda, who had never concerned herself with village activities, became a member of Maroudokai to help revitalize the area.

The members of the group held a meeting once every two to three months or when an issue needed to be addressed. Although they mostly discussed matters related to the therapy road, the members also conferred about issues like the sale of a special product or the use of an old farm warehouse. As a result of these meetings, handcrafts made by the residents are currently displayed and sold in town in a shop called Michinoeki (道の驛). Further, some members of the group established an agricultural production corporation, Rokabo, in 2011, which produced and sold organic farm produce. Rokabo promoted forest therapy along with their own products to urban consumers of agricultural goods.

Since the members of Maroudokai did not represent all Matsubara residents, there was room for debate on whether the group could be seen as a united organization for all the residents of Matsubara. Someone could also perceive the organization as an interest group. However, many programs were created through Maroudokai to promote the revitalization of Matsubara, and the group members worked hard to unify the residents. In this regard, Maroudokai could be seen as a source of regional unity.

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<sup>10</sup> On the website of Matsubara Forest Therapy Road, the purpose of Maroudokai was explained as follows: "An increasing number of people began to visit after a small road in the forest was approved for a therapy road. Maroudokai is a group that was established to improve the village of Matsubara by revitalizing this modest road. Anyone who would like to visit Matsubara, take a walk on the forest therapy road, request to sell forest therapy sack meals, or stay in one of the lodgings can become a member of Maroudokai" (<http://matsubara-forest.blospot.com>). As a researcher, I wondered why there was a need for a new group when there already was an established Matsubara Village meeting group and the Matsubara District-making Association of Life Learning Research Group. When I asked Gana (53, female) about this, she answered, "The ultimate goal of Maroudokai is the revitalization of Matsubara, but right now we need to focus on specializing the therapy road while it is getting a lot of attention. We created the group because we wanted to develop (revitalize) the region autonomously and make the Kubotani Village (where the canal is), Matsubara Village, and canal association its centers." In Life Learning Research Group, or other groups whose members did not have a stake in the therapy road, the residents were not as free to offer suggestions or pursue businesses, which limited the breadth of their activities.

A resident-centered tourist system, new community organizations, and even an agricultural corporation were all built on the foundation of therapy road tourism. As Mun Okpyo (2000) argued, turning farm and mountain villages into tourist resources had inspired residents to see their respective villages in a more positive light and inspired them to take ownership of their region. When the Matsubara residents saw the forest therapy road as a source of revitalization for Matsubara, they actively sought change and adapted. The revitalization of Matsubara became a mechanism that incentivized residents to take action for further development of their region.

### *5) The Ambiguity and Equivocality of Matsubara's Revitalization*

Maroudokai was a group newly organized by the members of the Matsubara community for the purpose of expanding businesses that branched out as a byproduct of the therapy road. So, what did Matsubara's revitalization mean? At a monitor tour evaluation meeting on September 17, 2009, Omayá said the following:

If everything was perfect (during the monitor tour), there is no reason for us to sit here. No matter how good the medical effects are, we must think about how we can make money from this. Who cares if you eat the best French cuisine in Yusuhara? People from rural areas go to Tokyo and Osaka and hire women and spend money like water without thinking twice about it. By the same token, city people should find something of value here that they don't feel bad about spending money on. Our village needs to be economically independent. We don't know for how long the town office is going to subsidize us. Even if we can't make an entire living doing this, we need to make enough. For how long are we going to keep providing sack meals at a low cost, make chopsticks for the tourists, and give away local products? It costs us labor and wages. For how long are we just going to volunteer? At the very least, we need to have funds to keep the system running. It's important to discuss how we are going to make an organization that does that. (Omayá, 50s, male)

Omayá was a team leader of the forest therapy project at Yusuhara-cho. When most people provided positive feedback at the monitor evaluation tour, he voiced his disagreement. He gave a pointed critique on the evaluation that excluded the economic feasibility of the therapy road. Emphasizing the importance of the region's economic autonomy, he asserted that they should stop providing free programs to tourists and

begin organizing a tourism system that would be profitable.

The forest therapy project was a different group from the Forest Therapy Research Group. While the research group was formed temporarily to conduct a monitor tour in 2009, the project team was created to provide direction and devise strategies for the activation of forest therapy within a certain timeframe (from April to September of 2009). Ultimately, what Omayá argued for was the need to attract as many tourists as possible and activate the local economy. Since the therapy road would be the source of tourism for Yusuhara-cho, the expectation of economic advancement for the region was only inevitable. This meant that the residents needed to create an economic profit structure for therapy road tourism. Yoshiae, who was hurt by the criticism of the project team, underscored the economic aspect of the therapy road.<sup>11</sup>

I hope that the residents can interact with tourists without overextending themselves and live happily. The population in this area is aging, and people no longer want to live here. But if one can earn a living of 3,000,000 yen a year, people might think, “I might be able to earn money and live in Yusuhara-cho.” (Yoshiae, 50s, female)

What Yoshiae emphasized wasn't too different from what Omayá had pointed out. There were two types of village revitalization she wanted to pursue through the therapy road. One was to allow residents to live happily. The other was to increase profits to a reasonable level in order to attract more permanent residents to Yusuhara-cho. She asserted that it was of primary importance for the residents to happily interact with city visitors without overextending themselves. This implied that if too many tourists came, it would overtax the residents and make them unhappy. However, she also saw that they needed to make a profit. She estimated that 3,000,000 yen a year from the therapy road tourism business or activity would be needed for someone to reside in Matsubara. Her idea of

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<sup>11</sup> The members of the research group expressed how uncomfortable they were when the project team attended their evaluation meeting unannounced and poured out criticism. “Forest Therapy Road Quality Management Research Group’ was the name of the project team that came to the meeting. This project team did not share their group’s activities with us and came to our meeting pointing out the faults in this and that. We didn’t like that they criticized the monitor tour that we had worked so hard for. When the project team left, I heard a *buing* (a Japanese word for sarcastic and scoffing remarks) from the residents” (Yoshiae, 50s, female).

Matsubara's revitalization was increasing the number of permanent residents through a steady income from therapy road tourism. After investing in a half-year's worth of activities, the forest therapy road project team also established a goal for therapy road tourism: the autonomy of Matsubara. However, this did not simply mean economic independence.

The "autonomy of Matsubara" means "thinking about what you want to do and acting on it." In addition, it means the residents of Matsubara taking charge of and managing their regional resource of forest therapy by evaluating and taking action to accomplish their goals.... The project team's vision was specifically "the autonomy of Matsubara." For example, if Yamazaki, who represents Matsubara Village, believes that he could revive Matsubara using the therapy road and Sanyutei as resources, and he is confident about making decisions while involving other residents, that would be true autonomy. The residents can come up with ideas and create sack and sit-down meals for the therapy road and Sanyutei. It would be recreating the imagery of the scene of the two-level tasting party of *bentos* and sit-down meals for the therapy road that occurred at the end of April, 2011, in Sanyutei. (Forest Therapy Project Report 2009: 4-5)

Matsubara's autonomy, as defined by the project team, was to be found in specifying the vision and goals of the residents while working to realize them. What did the Matsubara residents expect from the forest therapy road? The middle-aged women who participated in therapy road tourism activities said they hoped that a greater number of younger people visited the therapy road and advanced the industry, just as many people in the village experienced inconveniences in the countryside and relocated to urban areas.

Because it's inconvenient living [in a farming village], people here leave when they get older. To prevent that, the therapy road was created. I hope that those who have established a relationship with the therapy road say, "It's nice here," and relocate to this area. It would be great if we got more young people and revitalized the industry. (Sizue, 62, female)

Even if it's only one or two people, when visitors come, the village becomes energized. We hear people's voices, and the bakery sales go up. I hope we get many tourists. (Geiko, 62, female)

Hearing the voices of children and adults and younger people visiting their village meant a great deal to the residents. To them, the voices of children and young people in their quiet village were an indicator that their

area was becoming energized. Saito (40s, male), who lived in Tsuno-cho and worked as a forest therapy tour guide, heard many times in meetings with the Matsubara residents that “they hoped their village would become a busy place, full of energy, with the voices of children, just like the way it was before.” However, they were also reluctant about attracting an uncontrollable number of tourists that might overwhelm them. Hiroko, who made sack meals, and Keiko and Sizue, who managed lodgings, all agreed that there was a physical limitation to receiving tourists.

As illustrated in the examples above, the residents’ expectations for the revitalization of Matsubara varied. They were also ambiguous and abstract. Matsubara’s revitalization could easily be the discovery of their “treasure” or an increased number of tourists. It could also mean an interactive exchange with city dwellers or simply the daily life of residents who participated in therapy road tourism. To others, revitalization might be the guarantee of an income, the sound of children’s voices, or the possibility of outsiders moving in permanently. It could also mean what the project team had declared: envisioning what the residents themselves wanted and working to realize that vision. The concept of Matsubara’s revitalization seemed vague, and the residents’ views differed to varying degrees. What did that imply? Did that ultimately mean Matsubara’s revitalization was an impossible task? The main point of this argument is that Matsubara’s revitalization itself was ambiguous and contained symbols of multiple meanings. It could also be interpreted as harnessing the ability to symbolically unite the community. Cohen (1979) asserted that the more meanings a symbol possesses, the greater its strength and ability to carry out multiple functions (Cohen 1982: 60).

To the residents of Matsubara, there was nothing more important and valuable than their own regional revitalization. Population was aging in the village, and no outsider visited this remote mountain area. Thus, it was no surprise that the residents regarded the forest therapy road as a resource to energize their lethargic village. The resident community considered the therapy road not so much as an ecological resource that needed to be groomed and preserved but as a tourist resource for the revitalization of Matsubara and the advancement of Yusuhara-cho. Gana declared that environmental policy in Yusuhara-cho was focused more on regional revitalization than on the environment.

The resident community valued Matsubara’s forest therapy road because they expected the therapy road to become a repository for regional

revitalization, not necessarily for the environment. The medical approach that was mentioned earlier was also a means to promote the revitalization of Matsubara. People in charge of the therapy road believed that they needed to take a medical approach in order to differentiate their region from other areas and attract even more tourists to revitalize their village.

Even though people's expectations of the therapy road differed, and Matsubara's revitalization had various meanings to the residents, the revitalization of their village was the common desire of everyone in the community. The desire of the residents formed a symbolic consensus. Additionally, forest therapy road public policy provided the residents with symbolic reassurance that Matsubara's revitalization was possible through their own efforts. Elder and Cobb (1983: 121) argued that when symbols were understood directly and clearly, the symbolic consensus was not as powerful and could lead to the destruction of symbolic unity. If Matsubara's revitalization was understood only as an increase in economic profit in the community, the conflict and friction between the residents could have intensified, becoming a hurdle for communal unity. This meant that if Matsubara's revitalization was understood in a direct and specific form, the symbolic unity that the revitalization provided could have become weakened.

## 5. Conclusion

The approval for forest therapy in Matsubara, due to the discovery of a small canal on the mountain, spurred many changes in the community. In order to receive and accommodate forest therapy tourists, the residents established a hosting system and created a new management structure for the canal. The community members regarded the canal as *takaramono*, or treasure, and formed a community group to aid the therapy road's and Matsubara's revitalization.

My question at this juncture was: can the acceptance of the forest therapy road policy by the community members and the changes they willingly initiated be interpreted only as a way of serving their own self-interests? The forest therapy road policy was a central government policy that did not take into consideration the approval or participation of Matsubara residents. The policy was communicated only through the town office. So, what was the motivating factor for the residents to regard the

forest therapy road positively and initiate action? I attempted to find the answer in symbolic unity found in regional revitalization.

In order to understand this mechanism, I examined the changes in the residents' perception of the canal and how the canal, previously used for farming, became a public resource. The changes that followed the therapy road designation and the turning of the canal into a public resource meant that the residents perceived the forest therapy road as a resource for public benefit. Public benefit, in effect, signaled the revitalization of Matsubara. The community members regarded the forest therapy road as good and valuable. They initiated various activities to promote therapy road tourism because they saw the therapy road as a resource for the revitalization of Matsubara.

From the perspective of the government, the goal of the forest therapy road was to help citizens maintain and promote good health and prevent disease by utilizing the forest environment. The regional revitalization might have just been a good byproduct for the government. However, in the village and mountain communities, the therapy road was considered as a resource for revitalization of their area rather than as an environmental or preventative care resource. Even the medical discourse on the therapy road was disseminated simply as a means to revitalize their region. While the residents wanted to revitalize Matsubara through the therapy road, their ideas of how that could be achieved were diverse and ambiguous. Symbolism is a representation of something else and is metaphorical, ambiguous, and abstract. The meaning of symbols isn't confined to one interpretation. Rather, it has dual referential meaning and has many different interpretations. The revitalization of Matsubara was no different. The greater the symbolic consensus and abstractness of Matsubara's revitalization, the greater was the strength of symbolic unity for the revitalization. Symbols can be extremely political in that they can lead group members to solidarity and unity. In this context, Matsubara's revitalization contained attributes of political symbolism.

This study explored the kind of symbolic power regional revitalization yielded in local communities. I approached the topic of regional revitalization through the prism of symbols because I believed it was important to focus on the political nature of symbols from the outset. Admittedly, if the discrepancy between symbolic benefits and real benefits was too big and led to the deepening of disagreement and conflict, then symbolic power would be greatly weakened.

Previous studies on the subject were mainly focused on the concept or the methods of regional revitalization. Further, research on regional symbolic politics was generally conducted on the various opinions of interest groups of regional symbolic resources and simply regarded regional symbols as products of competition and conflict. As a result, they overlooked or underestimated the ability of symbols to produce political unity. By so doing, these scholars neglected the political symbolism aspect of regional revitalization.

Regional revitalization is not a tangible product but a political-symbolic process through which community members continuously operate by engaging in mutually beneficial relationships. Conversely, the understanding of regional revitalization as a process of symbolic politics also means it could develop into a touchstone that regulates the direction of regional revitalization. When symbols are formed and operated within a community, the symbols—including the symbol of regional revitalization—must be created and discussed directly by community members. If a policy with the pretext of regional revitalization impedes the participation of the community or pursues an agenda that does not enhance the economic or sociocultural lives of the community members and uses the policy only to seek the political legitimacy of a politician, true regional revitalization will not be possible.

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Jin Myong-suk is a research professor at the Institute of Rice, Life and Civilization at Jeonbuk National University. She received her PhD in cultural anthropology from Jeonbuk National University in 2012. Her research interests lie in the areas of gender, rural villages, and community. Among her recent publications are “전주한옥마을 관광화와 결사체 정치” [Tourism development and the politics of association: A case of Jeonju Hanok Village] (『비교민속학』 [Comparative folklore studies], 2017), “근현대 남성 농민 일기에 나타난 여성 표상” [Representations of women in modern male farmers' diaries] (『비교민속학』 [Comparative folklore studies], 2018), “귀농귀촌인 주도 커뮤니티 유형과 특징” [The types and features of rural migrants' communities] (『지역사회연구』 [Regional community studies], 2019), “Korean Male Farmers' Patriarchal Perception: A Case Study of Apo Diary (1969-2000)” (*Asian Women*, 2019), and “에코페미니즘 관점에서 본 귀농귀촌 여성의 토종씨앗지키기 실천 분석” [An analysis on urban-to-rural migrant women's indigenous seed preservation practices from an eco-feminist perspective] (『한국농촌사회학회』 [The Korea rural sociological society], 2019).