

Commentary

# Symbolic Politics of Regional Revitalization: A Case Study of Yusuvara-cho, Japan, by Jin Myong-suk

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Jin Myong-suk's article delves into the process by which residents in a depopulated, mountainous Japanese district initiate actions for "regional revitalization," by presenting the residents' own narratives. The author pays special attention to the lens through which residents view a top-down policy as a means of "regional revitalization" and participate in relevant projects voluntarily and cooperatively.

This attention stems from Jin's criticism of existing studies concerning public policies in the Republic of Korea (hereafter, ROK), which are reviewed in the article. According to her review, the concept of "symbolic politics," on which these studies are based, works poorly for analyzing the phenomenon where residents actively react to the top-down policy and utilize symbols for their common purpose of "regional revitalization." Thus, the author, retroactively referring to theories in symbolic anthropology in order to analyze "regional revitalization" of this case, redefines "symbolic politics" as a process through which residents unify to take collective action under symbolism that allows various ways of interpretation.

This analysis may have important implications for advancing internal discussions in the ROK. However, if this article is translated into English and intended for broader, international anthropological dialogues, there is

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room for argument regarding its analytical validity. It is difficult to find the analytical significance beyond the descriptive level in this article. Few studies have ever tried to explore how the forest therapy road project started in the Matsubara District of Yusuvara Town. Therefore, it is considered significant that specific narratives of residents who took an active part in the project are presented here at the descriptive level. However, there are problems at the analytic level for the following two reasons.

The first reason is the setting of the analytical concept of “symbolic politics.” As mentioned above, this framework was set up through reviewing the existing studies in the ROK; however, what is addressed for examination here is a Japanese case. Usually, in anthropology based on ethnographic studies, even if the researcher is interested in a specific theory or theme, it is essential for them to understand the social and cultural context of the field. Furthermore, in such an approach, it is necessary to survey the related studies in the whole society where the field is located and to reconfigure the research subject and framework. The author would have benefited from reviewing Japanese literature on the issue.

The second reason, closely related to the first, is that the methodological assumption behind the author’s analytical concept is problematic. According to Harayama (2005), “regional revitalization” in Japan came up in the form of “grassroots movements” as part of anti-depopulation measures in the mid-1980s. Since then, a considerable number of studies have been conducted and subsequently presented to the general public. As a result, it has become a popular topic that is not limited to administrative challenges. But on the other hand, as the influence of external scrutiny intensified, it became apparent that “regional revitalization” functions as a powerful discourse, forcing internal residents to narrate a story as the “subject” of revitalizing activities. Sociologists of rural studies, such as Nakata (2001), suggest the necessity of examining the discourse critically. Based on this suggestion, Harayama (2005) explores a mechanism by which “advanced or successful examples” of “regional revitalization” are consumed and argues that autotelic studies sustaining this mechanism should take care not to fall into a superficial understanding of rural communities. I understand that these papers, from the postmodern perspective based on Foucault’s concept of power, problematize power relations produced by assuming the “subjectivity” of residents to be under the modern configuration of knowledge.

Under the influence of such criticism of modernity, academic researchers

began reconsidering rural communities in Japan. There, roles and functions of neighborhood organizations, including *iriai* (入会), which can be defined as “commons” (Yanaka 2019), have been rediscovered as the basis of bottom-up autonomy, or public perception formed in village community life structure, whose origin goes back to the pre-modern era (Matsumura 2005; Uchiyama 2010). Regarding Yusuvara Town, Sato (2014) has already suggested the necessity of studies from this perspective, with special attention given to the fact that the town has a unique bottom-up, self-governing mechanism gathering residents’ consensus from the village level, in addition to the top-down decision-making mechanism on the administrative side. These opposing mechanisms are mediated by associations of six districts, with each association leader being elected by residents. Six districts are above the village level, and each originates in an “administrative village,” dating from the Edo-era, that supervises the lower “spontaneous villages.” Sato states that this mediation system enables each district to conduct its own unique project for “regional revitalization.”

What Jin’s article takes up, specifically, is the case of a forest therapy road project in Matsubara District, which is one of the six districts, and the irrigation canal selected as a part of a forest therapy road, which had been used by residents of two villages in this district. Considering the above points, it should be discussed whether residents’ active involvement in “regional revitalization” has traditional foundations, from the perspective transcending the dichotomy between modernity and tradition. However, there is no consideration of this. The author’s argument seems to be developed on the assumption that residents are modern subjects. For example, this can be seen in an explanation of the primary trigger that inspired residents to act for the revitalization project. According to her view, their actions were triggered by an event—the canal shifted from a private resource for members of the canal association to a public resource—and this shift raised the residents’ public awareness of the importance of preserving the canal’s environment toward revitalization. Here, “public” is obviously assumed to be modern; therefore, the canal association seems to be an anachronistic “squaresville” that should be taken over by a newly created residents’ organization in order to manage the canal for the “public” good. Nevertheless, the existing canal association may at least partially inherit a self-governing role or function, as in traditional communities that basically formed for mutual help between neighbors.

From a diachronic perspective, “regional revitalization” is just a recent

phenomenon. As Murata (2019) discusses, residents' autonomy and community management, which have developed over a long history of village life, must be sustainable in some form, even if they seem to be declining. In this light, "regional revitalization" is regarded as accepted under this foundational condition. Although the author argues that "regional revitalization" is a powerful incentive for the residents of declining communities to unite, a report of the therapy road project's current inactive situation (Suwa 2016) tells us that it is a temporary phenomenon in a long process. If the level of residents' autonomy is assessed only by the desirable level of "regional revitalization," assuming the modern concept of "public," then traditional aspects of residents' autonomy, embodied in reciprocal practices of small groups in village life, are almost completely disregarded. The author, indeed, describes narratives expressing a desire for gradual changes of "regional revitalization," which should be reasonably built around the existing daily life of residents, but she does not examine how residents participate in village community life developed in the historical context. Judging from the way that Jin avoids any mention of her fieldwork period, she probably did not have much time for it. On the other hand, the methodological modernistic standpoint may make it unnecessary.

Above, I have discussed the problems related to the article's methodological assumption. Additionally, I suggest that these problems should not be attributed solely to the author's individual circumstances. I surmise that they may also be due to the intellectual orientation in which Korean anthropologists do their field research in Japan. They tend to focus more on establishing a modernist agenda on the basis of their research results than on establishing empirical and analytical validity of the data. Further, I think that the modernist agenda found in Korean anthropologists' Japanese studies may reflect Korean social preference for modernization as inferred from the discussions of literature on Korean public policies to which Jin refers.

In any case, reinterpretation of "tradition" with consideration of post-modern critical theory is a crucial issue for anthropology based on ethnographic studies. Recently, this is shown through discussions on the possibilities of a multipolar pluriverse of anthropological knowledge production in the World Anthropologies section of *American Anthropologist* (2019: 497–511). As many have noted there, there would be considerable difficulty in overcoming the barriers of modern epistemology and cultural exceptionalism complexly intertwined with anthropological knowledge itself. There

are also many challenges to be overcome in anthropological studies of the area covering Korea and Japan because the relationship between these two nations is still greatly affected by nationalism closely related to colonialism. However, cross-cultural relations in this geographic area have continued beyond the boundaries of modern nation-states since the “pre-historic” era. Therefore, we should rethink cultural diversity and commonalities in this region. The latter of these two aspects, which has not been given much attention so far, demands a more self-reflective approach since the discussion on traditional common grounds has been considered to be closely related to colonialist discourses (Harajiri and Kim 2017). In summary, I argue that, in order to contribute to anthropological dialogues for promoting multiple anthropologies, we as anthropologists in this area should first go to the field with professional ethics and a broader historical perspective to reconsider cultural diversity and commonalities from the bottom. Work conducted in this fashion would be able to connect with the intra-Asia work Hyang Jin Jung (2019) asserts as necessary to resolve the serious present situation, in which Asian anthropologies are lacking in mutual recognition and interreference.

In conclusion, I would like to state again that Jin’s descriptive data have implications for better interpretation. But at the same time, I have high expectations for her future fieldwork. Since I believe that this journal is an endeavor for anthropological dialogues, I hope for the author’s positive reaction toward this attempt at contributing to that effort.

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