Constructing Idealized Communities in Japan’s Countryside: Tourist Place-making in Kurokawa Onsen

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I Introduction

Recent decades have seen the growth of tourism to Japan’s rural areas, particularly to onsen (hot springs resort) villages. Despite economic hard times in large-scale onsen resorts like Atami Onsen, Shizuoka Prefecture, and Beppu Onsen, Oita Prefecture, small-scale onsen located in remote areas of Japan show the continuing presence of an “onsen boom” that began in the late 1970s. The relative inconvenience of accessing these destinations has only increased their allure as remote getaways. What factors explain the popularity of remote tourist destinations, and how have local governments and entrepreneurs adapted to the times to attract tourists?

The past few decades have seen a surge in the creation of places that offer what Duncan and Duncan refer to as “an aesthetic retreat from the perceived impersonality of modern mass society and from the psychologically unsettling processes of globalization.” Such places can be residential areas, but more typically they are tourist destinations. At such retreats, visitors are invited to escape the uncertainty of their daily lives by experiencing “traditional” values in “traditional” landscapes, either preserved from a more or less authentic past, or created by entrepreneurs who assemble the right mix of traditional symbols to (re)create idealized communities.

For Agnew, part of what “community” connotes is “a morally valued way of life”. For most Japanese, the belief that morally valued communities exist in the countryside stretches at
least to the early 1900s, when ethnologist Yanagita Kunio traveled to rural areas to record the folk tales of “authentic Japanese,” and when the Meiji government insisted that “the symbols of meaningful (Japanese) community were concentrated in the countryside”. Today, rural tourist destinations capitalize on the ideological importance of the countryside by creating nostalgic, community-like places that attract tourists weary of the fast-paced globalized world.

In order to understand the success of remote tourist destinations in Japan, this article introduces several key factors that have opened up Japan’s countryside to travel, including road-building projects by the Japanese central government in the 1970s and 1980s, the proliferation of personal automobile ownership, and a nostalgia for rural areas. Then, a case study of moves by local government and business leaders in Kurokawa Onsen, Minami-Oguni town, Kumamoto Prefecture (Figure 1) shows how a particular destination has taken advantage of increased accessibility to the countryside by creating a destination that fulfills tourist nostalgia. Finally, this article examines the process of tourist place-making in Kurokawa, including both the positive economic and social changes that have occurred, and the restrictions placed on village inhabitants, which calls into question the idealized community constructed for tourists. This study critically assesses the efforts made by the Japanese government to increase visits to the countryside by describing how those policies have been adopted in local contexts. In addition, it is hoped that this study will add to the wider discussion within geography on place and place-making, through a detailed description of a particular case of tourist place-making.

Figure 1. Map of Kyushu showing Kurokawa Onsen, major cities, and tourist destinations

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II Methods

This research was carried out between 2001 and 2004, and draws upon interviews with local government officials, business owners, workers, inhabitants, and visitors of Kurokawa, as well as participant observation conducted while the author lived and worked at a ryokan, or traditional inn, in Kurokawa in 2004. All interviews were semi-structured and centered on the recent growth of the resort and the informant’s impressions and memories of that growth. Interviews with business owners were more structured and included questions about building design and the operations of the local ryokan owners association. The author used convenience sampling and snowball sampling to find most interview subjects, wherein informants referred the author to other possible informants. In addition, the author systematically visited every ryokan in Kurokawa and conducted unstructured interviews with front desk clerks, as well as residents and guests. Most interviews with owners lasted up to 90 minutes, while conversations with workers usually lasted no longer than 30 minutes, due to their busy, day–long schedules. The author also spoke with local government officials involved in tourism decisions, including the mayor of Minami–Oguni town. Finally, the author worked in the kitchen and guestrooms of one ryokan during the spring of 2004, enabling more extended and detailed conversations with the ryokan staff, owner, and day–to–day manager, the okami. All told, the author personally spoke with over 70 staff, owners, and inhabitants of Kurokawa, as well as dozens of visitors to the onsen resort.

III Study Site

Numerous factors along a range of geographical scales create the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental conditions necessary for the creation and prosperity of a tourist destination. These factors all seem involved in the recent success of Kurokawa Onsen (Table 1). A relatively peaceful world since 1945 and a positive international economic environment have allowed for the affluent Japan of today. In turn, the nation’s rapid urbanization and modernization; the construction and improvement of roads; and the expansion of automobile ownership have all made tourism to Japan’s remote regions possible. A late 20th century desire to visit the countryside, along with a history of domestic travel that is perpetuated by respected social institutions, created a demand for tourism to remote areas. Also, the economic growth of cities like Fukuoka and Kita–Kyushu created a regional market for remote, yet accessible, getaways, while the proximity of multiple destinations enabled tourists to experience a great deal in a single trip. Finally, the landscape of Kurokawa Onsen and the cooperation of local entrepreneurs, along with a flexible labor supply, created a destination attractive to urban tourists.

Kurokawa Onsen hosts nearly 1,200,000 annual visitors and frequently appears in television and print features listing Japan’s best onsen. Kurokawa Onsen’s success in a region filled with such well–known onsen as Beppu, Yufuin, Uchinomaki, Tsuetate, and Unzen is noteworthy.

9) (1) Kurokawa Onsen: Rurubu Gurafu Nippon no Onsen 3 (Rurubu Gurafu presents Japan’s Onsen # 3 ), JTB (Japan Travel Bureau), 15 September 2003, (J) (2) Shukan Nihon no Meiyu (Japan’s Famous Onsen Weekly), Shobunsha, 9 October 2003. (J)
Firstly, it is nearly inaccessible except by automobile. Secondly, until 1986 it was little known and economically troubled, with only fourteen ryokan and three hotels, all in need of repairs. Finally, Kurokawa Onsen has more than doubled its number of visitors from over 500,000 in 1989 to 10). Ryokan owners express thanks that no one was ever injured by the falling roof tiles or crumbling walls that they couldn’t afford to fix during that time. Kumamoto Nichinichi Shimbun Joho Senta (Kumamoto Nichinichi Newspaper Information Center), Kurokawa Onsen “Kyuseicho” wo yomu, (Kurokawa Onsen’s Rapid Growth), Kumamoto Nichinichi Shimbunsha, 2000, p. 50. (J)
nearly 1,200,000 in 2002, while large onsen throughout Japan declined in popularity. Moreover, since 1986, the existing fourteen ryokan have expanded and eleven new ryokan have opened, raising guest capacity to over 2000, nearly double 1989 totals. This recent success can be understood by exploring the following points introduced in Table 1: the improved accessibility of the resort, a newfound appreciation of remote natural locations, and the creation of a destination that satisfies tourist longings.

IV External Factors in Kurokawa Onsen’s Success

Two vital external factors from Table 1 have set the stage for Kurokawa’s success: 1) the improved accessibility of the Japanese countryside and 2) the desire of tourists to visit remote, natural settings.

(1) Improved Accessibility of the Japanese Countryside

Kurokawa Onsen’s growth partially rests on its improved accessibility, through better road conditions and a surge in passenger car ownership, both of which have enabled more exploratory travel by smaller groups. Beginning in the 1970s, the Japanese central government prioritized the construction of national expressways and highways, bridges and tunnels, as well as prefectoral and municipal roads in order to 1) ease congestion on existing roads, 2) ease the shipment of goods and produce, and 3) allow overworked urban residents to “venture into the overworked local countryside for recreational purposes”. So far, these initiatives have resulted in over 6000 km of national expressways, ten times the 1970 figures, along with nearly double the distance of national highways. The success of Kurokawa Onsen can be attributed in part to the completion of the Yamanami Highway in the 1960s, and later, the construction of expressways linking the resort to the Fukuoka / Kita–Kyushu area, home to more than half of the resort’s guests.

The post–1960s surge in passenger car ownership in Japan, which rose from around six million in 1970 to more than forty–two million in 2000, also aided the onsen. Large-scale onsen that grew popular before the spread of the automobile relied on most guests arriving by public transportation or tour bus. However, more remote onsen, like Kurokawa, rely on guests who arrive by car.

The improved road network and increased use of automobiles accompanied the rise of more

11) Kurokawa Onsen Kanko Ryokan Kyodo Kumiai (Inn Owners Cooperative Association), Shisatsu Shiryo (Inspection data), 2003. (J)
12) Graburn, op. cit., footnote 4-1), p. 201; see also Graburn, op. cit., footnote 4-4), p. 49.
15) I rode the bus to Kurokawa for two weeks in August 2003 and never encountered a tourist.
independent and smaller tourist groups. Married or dating couples, nuclear families, and small groups of friends compose the majority of Kurokawa's visitors. In addition to increased automobile use, tourists are traveling in smaller groups because of the availability of travel information in magazines, television, and the internet (obviating the need for travel agents and package tours); a growing distaste for package tours; a decline in company excursions and the social ties of companies (coupled with an increase in the percentage of part-time and temporary workers); a decrease in work and school hours; and a shrinking average household size. Thus, Japanese are spending their growing free time in ever-smaller groups and taking more responsibility for planning their holidays than in the past.

This shrinking size of groups visiting onsen has adversely affected large-scale resorts, while giving new life to small-scale destinations, usually found in remote regions. Thanks to the combination of an improved road network and the proliferation of automobiles, smaller groups visit more remote destinations, which are considered to be worth the trip. In fact, the relative inaccessibility of an onsen like Kurokawa enhances its remote, natural image.

(2) Increased Desire to Visit Remote, Natural Settings

Japan's current boom in travel to remote destinations is commonly understood as one result of its rapid 20th century urbanization and modernization. Following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the nation strove to modernize, which included building factories and recruiting workers from rural areas. The swift social changes that accompanied urbanization led many Japanese, including Yanagita, to feel displaced and look nostalgically to the countryside. Nevertheless, the economic advantages of living in cities led to a rural exodus that continues today.

Since the 1970s, the economic plight of depopulated villages has led the central government to introduce measures to encourage urban dwellers to visit rural Japan, including road projects, mura okoshi, or village revitalization grants, and advertising intended to alter the countryside's image. The Discover Japan (1970s) and Exotic Japan (1980s) campaigns, produced by the Japan National Railway (privatized in 1987), are often cited with improving the image of the countryside. They depicted young women exploring Japan's remote mountain villages and temples and mingling with elderly farmers. These campaigns idealized rural landscapes and helped bring about a general appreciation of rural Japan and a "solitary, small-scale form of travel" that continues today in remote destinations like Kurokawa.

Another government project that encouraged travel to the countryside was the furusato-zukuri (native place-or hometown-making) project, which provided funds to villages with

16) Nakamura, M., 'Kyushu Aso Kogen wo kakenuke yamazato no onsenkyo he' ('Visiting a mountain onsen village in Aso plateau of Kyushu'), Diamond Style, 1998 (Autumn and Winter), pp. 144–147. (J)
17) For more detail on the feelings of displacement and the nostalgia for the countryside see McMorran, C., Inventing Place in Kurokawa Onsen, Japan, Master's Thesis, University of Colorado at Boulder, 2002.
innovative proposals to attract tourists. Robertson points out that a key aim of furusato-zukuri projects was the recreation of "a village-like ambiance" and the preservation of nostalgic landscapes as a way to halt depopulation. The idealized rural village represents an "escape from the alienating influences of modern life via a reunion with a Japanese heritage and the values of past rural folk villages". In furusato-zukuri the rural community, that cherished institution, is recreated. Harvey writes that the revival of the community constitutes a sign "of a search for more secure moorings and longer lasting values in a shifting world". In Japan's case, this led to the creation and preservation of nostalgic landscapes in rural regions, with the intention of attracting tourists.

Creighton calls the Japanese appreciation of rural areas a "generalized romanticization of the countryside". Calling the romanticization of the countryside "generalized" indicates the level to which rural tourist villages can be successful by simply drawing from a general pool of nostalgic symbols and landscapes that fit the tourist image of rural villages. In some cases, this tendency has led to concerns of a loss of local uniqueness and identity, but as Kawamori has shown in the case of Tono village, it has also given some locales the chance to present their actual histories and traditions to tourists. As well, towns with few genuine or unique traditions have been able to attract visitors by creating nostalgic landscapes and sometimes by inventing new traditions.

This positive image of the countryside also influenced the image of onsen. Onsen have a centuries-old history of being locations of physical and mental recovery. At different times they have served as resting places for weary pilgrims, farmers, writers, government officials, the sick, the elderly, and overworked salarymen, among others. As Kanda has shown in the case of Shirahama Onsen, the image (both advertised and constructed) of onsen has greatly changed, depending on the desired recovery of the clientele. Today, countless magazines, guidebooks, television programs, academic studies, and an active Onsen Gakkai (onsen society) are devoted to

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28) (1) McMorran, op. cit., footnote 17), (2) for more on the invention of tradition, see Hobsbawm, E. and Ranger, T., The Invention of Tradition, Cambridge University Press, 1983.
onsen, the latest ideal of which is a place for physical and mental recovery from stressful urban life; an extension of the bath which is central to the day of most Japanese, located in remote villages such as Kurokawa.

Thus, onsen have become more natural and nostalgic, akin to an idealized rural community, in great contrast to the large-scale onsen popular from the 1950s to the 1980s. In general, large-scale onsen are easily accessible by public transportation and tour buses, and usually cater to large groups that stay in resort-type hotels. In contrast, most accommodations at small-scale onsen are ryokan, family-run inns standing one or two stories high, which usually hold around 50 guests. Large-scale onsen hotels contain expansive tatami mat dining halls, where enkai, or dinner parties, are held. Other attractions like amusement parks, game centers, nightclubs, beaches, and zoos have also sprung up around large-scale onsen, creating vast tourist resorts that bear little resemblance to the mountain retreat carefully crafted in Kurokawa.

V Internal Factors in Kurokawa Onsen’s Success –The Act of Tourist Place-Making

Internal factors that created the current destination of Kurokawa deserve considerable credit for turning this failing onsen into one of the region’s most popular tourist destinations and one of Japan’s favorite onsen. The business and tourism leaders in Kurokawa cooperated to produce a community-like atmosphere, the same kind of atmosphere created by tourist destinations throughout the world as a nostalgic, idealized retreat from the ever-changing globalized world. Tourist place-making, defined here as the conscious construction of a landscape intended to create an idealized “community” for tourist consumption, is distinct from the more organic notion of place-making, characterized by the natural meaning-making efforts of residents of places. Instead, entrepreneurs and local governments attempting to recreate a community-like feeling that will attract tourists carefully manage tourist place-making. In rural villages like Kurokawa, the spirit of furusato-zukuri as place-making continues to be seen in the natural and built landscape.

The leaders of Kurokawa Onsen emphasize certain landscape aspects and altered others in order to reflect the heritage and values imagined to be found in rural communities. Kurokawa

35) For example, Sasaki shows that Kusatsu Onsen experienced a “high pitched economic development in [the] 1960s and 70s” (p. 64) which led to the replacement of the traditional hot spring landscape with a landscape dominated by big hotels. Sasaki, H., ‘Changes of Cultural Landscape in Kusatsu Spa in Gunma-ken, Japan’, Tsukuba Studies in Human Geography, 21, 1997, pp. 39-67.
36) Kurokawa’s smallest ryokan can accommodate up to 26 guests.
fits the stereotype of a remote tourist escape due in part to its landscape. Its small collection of shops (approx. 25) and ryokan (24), nestled in a narrow valley surrounded by forests and terraced rice fields, recreates a landscape that is generic enough to fulfill the nation’s nostalgia. Yet importantly, despite its popularity, Kurokawa is not overly developed with large parking lots and concrete hotels.

Because most of Kurokawa Onsen’s inn owners were long-time local residents without the capital to build hotels during the resort’s brief growth spurt in the 1960s, they maintained or built small ryokan, sometimes referred to as “nostalgic repositories of ‘pure’ Japaneseness”. When a nostalgic fervor for the countryside swept Japan in the 1980s, local leaders, some of whom had attended universities in Tokyo and returned home to run family businesses, recognized the village’s potential as a tourist destination. In response, the Kurokawa ryokan association became increasingly active in conserving and improving the landscape by annually planting trees, discouraging the construction or parking lots, and creating an aesthetic template for all tourism-related buildings. Creating this traditional landscape, and doing so through a locally-run cooperative organization, are a few of the ways that Kurokawa has fulfilled the nostalgic ideal of a community.

Instead of the fierce competition that exists in some onsen resorts, Kurokawa’s owners share the risks and rewards of cooperation, both in continually improving the landscape and in advertising. All inns provide guests with geta (raised wooden sandals) that carry the onsen logo. In addition, ryokan association funds built the tourist information center, called kaze no ya (wind hut), in 1995. The ryokan association publishes maps showing all of the resort’s inns and maintains a website that has resort-wide booking information and links to all of the ryokan websites. Most significantly, the ryokan and hotel owners have cooperated in inn design.

The aesthetic template for Kurokawa’s ryokan and shops, which owners told me blend with the surrounding landscape, is a one or two-story building painted earth tones, and trimmed with local wood painted black. Incidentally, the only remaining large hotel, built in 1966, underwent major renovations in 2000 to adapt to this aesthetic and has changed its name to include the word “ryokan.” The similarity among all ryokan makes tourism officials think of Kurokawa as one inn with 24 rooms, further emphasizing the idea of the resort as a cohesive community. Nearly every inn has an irori (open fire) near its entrance, as well as antique farm implements hanging on walls or leaning against doorframes, causing all passersby to exclaim nostalgically, “natsukashii”. Graburn has remarked that the weaving of these obsolete historical items into landscapes is one way that Japanese tourist sites convince tourists that they are

42) This is said to hide the village’s “boring” reforestation efforts. (1) op. cit., footnote 10), pp. 48-52, (2) Ura, op. cit., footnote 32), 2001, p. 3-4, (3) Weekly Toyo Keizai, op. cit., footnote 37).
43) The one exception to the resort’s similarity was a white concrete hotel, built in 1973 and reminiscent of those in larger onsen. In a 2003 incident that made national headlines, this hotel refused to accommodate former victims of Hansen’s disease (leprosy). One month later it was removed from the ryokan association (as well as its maps and website). Despite repeated apologies, the hotel was not readmitted. The hotel closed its doors and then was demolished later in 2004. This case shows the power of the ryokan association in controlling the image of the onsen and access to visitor information.
partaking in a traditional activity.

Ryokan are also similar inside. Because beds are considered modern and are increasingly common in Japanese homes, most guests sleep on futons. All guest rooms have tokonoma, an alcove holding seasonal works of art like calligraphy, ikebana, or landscape paintings. While rooms have televisions, most are hidden in decorative closets. Finally, some ryokan have built freestanding koya (a cabin or mountain hut), which have a thatch roof, interior irori, dirt floor entrance, and private rotenburo. Despite being the onsen’s most expensive accommodations, these private koya are very popular, reinforcing the idea that Kurokawa’s clientele are usually small groups who do not need amenities like dining halls for large parties. Instead, these tourists wish to experience their perception of life in a traditional village.

VI Consequences of Tourist Place-Making

Residents and workers of Kurokawa are nearly unanimous in their gratitude to the ryokan association for making the resort a success. Tourist place-making has led to an influx of jobs, young people, and interest in the resort, as well as capital from millions of tourists. Tourist profits have led to the introduction of summer music concerts, and most notably, tourist profits paid for the construction of a community center, completed in 2004. This community center, built in the style of the resort’s ryokan, exists explicitly for use by local residents and citizen groups, not tourists. The vitality of the community can be seen in its festivals, and few, including this author, believe that tourism has not sparked the revival of this once-forgotten, remote village. However, not all of Kurokawa’s residents and workers sing the praises of the tourist place-making process or the ryokan owners association, and their opinions speak volumes about the negative consequences of tourist place-making. While Kurokawa is indeed a success story among remote villages, the tourist place-making process has resulted in highly unequal power relations within the village that should not be ignored.

Geographers have been critical of tourist place-making projects for a number of reasons. In most cases, this kind of place-making implies a single image, typically elitist and nostalgic, which is then applied to the location as a whole. Duncan and Duncan argue that the creation and maintenance of a particular aesthetic landscape, crucial in most place-making, does less to stimulate an authentic sense of community and more to act as a “subtle but highly effective mechanism of exclusion”. Herzfeld cites tourist place-making efforts in Crete as a government method of imposing a monolithic and repressive ideal on the residents of a particular area, who cannot remodel their homes due to the need to retain a specific, authorized heritage.

In Kurokawa, tourists remark on the aesthetic similarity in the village, and the village leaders seem to have succeeded in making the town feel uniform and thus a “community;”

45) op. cit., footnote 5), pp. 388-389, see also Duncan, J, ‘Elite landscapes as cultural (re) productions: The case of Shaughnessy Heights’, (Anderson, K. and Gale, F, eds., Cultural Geographies, Longman, 1999). In these cases, the authors are not talking about tourist place-making, rather they are describing a kind of residential place making similar to that discussed in Ben-Ari, footnote 39), in which the image of a traditional community is modeled and enhanced for current residents. While these are not, therefore, examples of tourist place-making per se, they are instructive in their use of elements of traditional communities to appeal to contemporary residents.
46) op. cit., footnote 38).
however, the previously unwritten aesthetic rules have trickled down to other residents and
entrepreneurs in significant negative ways. The economic prosperity brought about by the tourist
place-making efforts of village leaders has given area businessmen a great deal of power in local
decision making. And now that the image of the village has been established, homeowners who
want to build or remodel their homes are pressured to conform to the aesthetic, nostalgic
template.

One result of the town’s all-important aesthetic design is that instead of the town building
affordable apartments for its growing number of workers, ryokan have built dormitories, which
resemble the inns themselves. The dormitories have maintained the cohesive design of the
village and reduced the number of commuters and parking lots in the village, which owners
argue would ruin the traditional atmosphere. Thus, the ideal community feeling remains intact
for visitors, while workers live out a temporary existence in the resort and complain of no
entertainment (including pachinko), grocery store, shopping center, book store, or public space to
socialize. At the same time, inn owners maximize worker productivity and efficiency by housing
them nearby. Plus, some owners charge workers for room and board. Workers have little choice
but to comply, because of the shortage of housing options.

Entrepreneurs have also felt the might of the ryokan owners, who are the village’s de facto
political leaders. Several years ago a local gentleman wanted to open an Italian restaurant,
complete with a European architectural exterior and a bright red, green and white flag hanging
outside. Many tourist villages would gladly encourage new investors, but Kurokawa’s leaders
believed that a foreign restaurant would ruin the resort’s traditional atmosphere. Before the
restaurant was built, several powerful inn owners visited the entrepreneur and threatened to
turn their guests away from the restaurant if he didn’t maintain the village theme. The inn
owner who described this encounter to me was among those who tried to change the
restaurateur’s mind, and he expressed disbelief at the man’s lack of cooperative vision. In the
end, fearful of bad kuchi-komi, or word-of-mouth communication, the entrepreneur compromised
by still serving Italian food, but doing so in a Japanese mountain hut, instead of a European
cafe. Today the restaurant, hidawari, meaning “in a sunny place,” is hidden in a bamboo grove
and is indistinguishable from the other village buildings. The pressure to conform to the
manufactured, cohesive village ideal cost the business owner his individual vision and highlights
a stark reality of actual village life that is often forgotten in nostalgic re-imaginings—the
constant interference of others into one’s personal business.

Incidentally, until 2003 the aesthetic rules followed in Kurokawa were merely rules, enforced
by powerful community members and threats of negative kuchi-komi. However, in 2003 these
rules were codified into law, as Kurokawa received a national machi-zukuri, or town-making,
grant. Now all home and business owners are legally bound to follow the landscape rules that
have been so vigorously encouraged since the 1980s. A colorful brochure with the new
restrictions stipulates a building’s color and design, the color of the roof (black, gray, or brown),
as well as the kind of wall that can surround the property (stone or dark wood). And public projects

47) Kurokawa Onsen, Kurokawa Chiku Machi-zukuri Kyotei (Kurokawa Area Town-making Agreement), 2004. (1)
to enhance the resort's traditional atmosphere, such as the construction of a new red bridge, completed in 2003, will be paid for in part by the national government, thus legitimizing the idealized community design.

VII Conclusions

Japan's remote areas, still considered backward and uninhabitable by many, hold a unique place in the nation's conscience as a space of escape from the pressures of contemporary urban life. As this paper has shown, a vast number of factors have helped create this nostalgic image and to open up the countryside to tourists. The work of the central and local governments in road construction, and in advertising the merits of travel to remote regions, has combined with a surge in automobile ownership to provide the means by which city dwellers can unwind in the countryside. In turn, this has led to a new kind of independent Japanese tourist, one who is eager to seek out new experiences and visit rural tourist destinations.

The creation of tourist destinations located far enough away to feel distant, yet close enough to reach in several hours, represents the second half of the picture. Kurokawa Onsen is one such natural getaway that has successfully enhanced its rural landscape in order to conform to the idealized rural community image held by potential visitors. In recognizing the importance of conforming to the nostalgic community ideal, village leaders have struggled to control the onsen's growth, successfully maintaining a traditional aesthetic and retaining local ownership of nearly all inns. Kurokawa's success points to wider changes in Japan's domestic tourism industry, as tourists are eager to drive to hard-to-reach destinations and spend their holidays relaxing in nature. While large, resort-style onsen resorts have lost visitors over the past twenty years, small onsen such as Kurokawa have become the model for many remote onsen: traditional ryokan built in a natural, nostalgic environment. Through the act of tourist place-making, culminating in its official distinction as a machi-zukuri village, resort leaders have maintained a nostalgic atmosphere that attracts Japanese visitors seeking stability in the countryside.

After decades of population loss due to urban migration, Kurokawa now attracts visitors from across the nation and provides hundreds of jobs for local workers. In addition, its lack of public transportation and its distance from major cities has served only to enhance its image as a remote destination. However, through place-making and their unwavering allegiance to a particular nostalgic ideal, resort leaders have created a rift in their community, imposing their aesthetic rules on homeowners, workers, and entrepreneurs in turn, and leading to a power imbalance in the idealized community. In the end, the nostalgic sense of community that the village leaders have attempted to recreate through tourist place-making remains an unattainable ideal.

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Constructing Idealized Communities in Japan's Countryside: Tourist Place-making in Kurokawa Onsen

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This paper examines the recent dramatic increase in tourists visiting Japan's countryside, specifically onsen (hot spring resorts). Citing government efforts to improve access to remote regions, the increase in passenger cars, and an underlying desire to escape the city, this paper describes Japan's new independent tourist and the recent popularity of small-scale onsen. In stark contrast to huge onsen resorts that were popular 20 years ago, these smaller onsen have become popular through tourist place-making, in which idealized rural villages are recreated for commercial purposes. Through the example of Kumamoto Prefecture's Kurokawa Onsen, this paper shows recent trends in Japanese tourism and highlights the problematic nature of tourist place-making in Japan's countryside.

Key words: onsen, Japan, tourism, sightseeing, place-making, accessibility, remote areas

日本の遠隔地域における観光客増加の潜在的要因—黒川温泉を事例として—

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最近、日本の非大都市圏の地方、とりわけ、温泉地を訪れる観光客が急激に増えてきた。「地方へのアクセスの改善」、「自動車の増加」、「大都市からの逃避」、この三つのポイントに基づき、本論文では日本の「新しい形の個人旅行者」と小規模な温泉との関係について分析する。小規模な温泉では観光目的の「町おこし」として理想的なムラを作る傾向が強まり、20年前の大規模な温泉に比べ、人気が高まってきている。この論文では、熊本県黒川温泉を例に、最近の日本における観光の流行と「町おこし」が抱える様々な問題点を指摘する。

キーワード：温泉、日本、ツーリズム、観光、町おこし、アクセス、地方