Understanding the ‘Heritage’ in Heritage Tourism: Ideological Tool or Economic Tool for a Japanese Hot Springs Resort?

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ABSTRACT This study examines the complex relationship between the economic and ideological aspects of heritage, as observed in Kurokawa Onsen, a hot springs resort located on the island of Kyushu, Japan. In the 1980s, this remote village reinvented itself, on the way to becoming a nationally recognized tourist destination that currently attracts around one million visitors a year. The town’s success is largely due to its utilization of a nation-wide nostalgia for the country’s agricultural past. Through the careful incorporation of elements of the idealized rural village, known as furusato (native place), the resort’s business leaders have used the country’s rural heritage as a theme in which to situate its own business plan. This study argues that local business leaders use heritage not for ideological reasons, but purely economic ones. In other words, heritage is used as a theme that is profitable and desired by tourists, not because it offers a crucial representation of the past to be maintained at all costs. This paper argues that although the economic value of heritage can be based in its ideological significance, heritage is primarily a flexible commodity.

KEY WORDS: Heritage tourism, Japan, onsen, furusato, ideology

Introduction

What does Italian food have to do with Japanese hot springs? According to Tanaka Kenji, owner of a ryokan, or traditional inn, in Kurokawa Onsen, nothing at all. And Tanaka is not alone. When Morimoto Ryu proposed opening an Italian restaurant in Tanaka’s onsen, or hot springs resort, in the late 1990s, Tanaka and a handful of other inn owners visited Morimoto to make sure that his restaurant would not clash with the aesthetic theme of the rest of the village. Although the food was going to be European, the inn owners asked that the building’s design fit with the atmosphere of the resort—a remote village modelled loosely after the idealized furusato, or native place, of Japan’s past. These leaders had reason to be concerned. Tanaka and others had effectively used Japan’s collective heritage as a visual theme to attract tourists,
raising the resort from obscurity and economic stagnation in the mid-1980s to its current rank among the nation’s best-known onsen (Kumamoto Nichinichi Shimbun Joho Senta 2000; Shobunsha 2003). Any distraction to the tourist landscape might jeopardize their success.

When Tanaka relayed this story a few years later, he expressed satisfaction that, in the end, Morimoto co-operated with their requests, constructing a very Japanese-looking restaurant and supporting the resort’s overall theme of Japanese heritage. Tanaka’s desire for aesthetic unity is not uncommon in heritage tourist destinations. However, it is important to note that he and the others were not driven to act out of any deep ideological concern for the authenticity of the village’s heritage or a desire to preserve the past. Tanaka’s motivations were purely economic. Because the use of nostalgic elements associated with Japan’s past attracted tourists, he wanted nothing to spoil the tourist landscape. That Morimoto co-operated in packaging his Italian restaurant in a Japanese structure shows his own recognition of heritage as an effective economic tool unifying the village landscape.

This paper analyses the use of heritage tourism as a development strategy in Kurokawa Onsen, by stressing the economic over the ideological implications of heritage. Following a description of the recent rise in tourism to the Japanese countryside, the paper shows how business leaders in Kurokawa adapted their village to resemble the idealized rural landscape of the furusato, or native place. This process has been surprisingly unproblematic with regard to ideological concerns usually associated with the use of heritage, such as authenticity and representation. In fact, instead of leading to the creative destruction of the rural idyll or the loss of local identity through its consumption by tourists, heritage as a development strategy has revived Kurokawa’s local institutions and strengthened the sense of place. While this paper acknowledges that the ideological significance of heritage in tourism development cannot be ignored, the paper argues for an awakened understanding of the use of heritage in specific contexts, in an attempt to understand how local actors think about and use heritage in their everyday worlds as a powerful economic tool.

Methods

This study was conducted during multiple extended visits to Kurokawa Onsen between 2001 and 2007. Semi-structured interviews with local government officials, business owners, workers and residents of Kurokawa enquired about the recent growth of the resort and the design elements that have been responsible for much of its success. Convenience sampling and snowball sampling were used to find most interview subjects, though visits to all 28 of the resort’s hotels and inns yielded unstructured interviews with front-desk clerks and other workers. While interviews with owners lasted around one hour, the busy schedules of workers often limited conversations with them to less than 30 minutes. Interviews were also held with local government officials involved in making tourism decisions. Finally, a total of twelve months of participant observation
in the resort was conducted in 2004 and 2006–7, where the author worked in several ryokan, enabling more detailed conversations with the ryokan staff and management. In all, input from over 70 staff, owners and residents of Kurokawa comprised the study. Finally, the author reviewed works in the Japanese popular press, as well as the official resort history distributed by the Kurokawa Onsen Kanko Ryokan Kyodo Kumiai (literally, the tourist inn owners’ co-operative guild, but called the ‘Kurokawa Onsen Association’ in English by the group), to which all 28 of the resort’s inns belong.

**Theorizing Heritage Tourism**

During periods of perceived rapid change, societies often idealize the past, imagining it to be more reassuring than either the present or the future (Lowenthal 1985; Turner 1987). The Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution, urbanization, two world wars and recently amplified globalization have all inspired nostalgia for lost or vanishing architecture, ways of life and social values (Williams 1973; Lowenthal 1985; Harvey 1989; Ousby 1990). Believing that the past holds the key to identity on multiple scales, society has grasped at old buildings and ‘collective memories’ in order to not be lost in a sea of uncertainty (Halbwachs 1992; see also Nora 1996). The selective use of the past for contemporary purposes is the realm of the heritage industry. Heritage uses aspects of the past in order to satisfy nostalgic longings and curb society’s current sense of loss, or to celebrate certain aspects of past society and project them into the future (Ashworth & Larkham 1994; Graham et al. 2000). Whether heritage is a tangible resource (natural or built landscape, building, museum piece, personal heirloom) or an intangible resource (festival, value, way of life, ceremony), it is always linked to the past and selected in the present for a specific purpose (Timothy & Boyd 2003: 3). Heritage is, therefore, not ‘inherited seamlessly’ from the past, but a contemporary production for novel purposes (McCabe 1998: 234; see also Graham et al. 2000).

In the case of heritage tourism, commodification of the past can result in landscapes or relics being given a new meaning, or new landscapes being constructed to reflect society’s collective memory.

A divide exists among scholars of heritage tourism, between heritage as a highly-contested political (ideological) tool and heritage as an ever-evolving economic tool that can be adapted to local contexts (Summerby-Murray 2002). The first string of scholarship is wrapped in a discourse of representation, interpretation, authenticity and power. Because heritage is inherently selective, it is often considered ‘inherently political’ (Summerby-Murray 2002: 50). Choosing certain aspects of the past for a new use in the present removes those aspects from their historical context and excludes other aspects of the past as a matter of course. It is argued that the aspects of the past that are chosen and how they are represented today influence powerfully how that past will be interpreted in the future. For instance, Ehrentraut (1995: 225) showed that Japan’s reconstructed castles now serve as proud symbols of the country’s early
modern history and idealized backdrops for popular samurai dramas, while their more historically accurate role as ‘grim reminders of past oppression’ under Edo Period feudalism is widely ignored.

The problem of representation in heritage tourism has been discussed in the context of de-industrialized urban spaces (McCabe 1998; Summerby-Murray 2002), rural heritage shopping villages (Mitchell 1998; Mitchell et al. 2001), reconstructed historical sites (Ehrentraut 1993; 1995) and ‘culture villages’ (Timothy & Prideaux 2004). In all of these cases, it is believed that those who control the representation of heritage shape its interpretation. Scholars argue that the role of heritage in shaping place identity and national identity makes the interpretation of heritage especially important, because a collective national identity often excludes others, such as minorities, from identifying with that heritage (Rose 1995). Another concern for tourism scholars is the question of authenticity in heritage sites, as destinations tend to be sanitized and simplified for the audience, leading to a less-than-genuine representation and interpretation of the past and the potential ‘creative destruction’ of the rural idyll (Mitchell 1998; see also Urry 1995; Summerby-Murray 2002; Timothy & Prideaux 2004).

These are all legitimate concerns related to the use of heritage in the context of tourism. Which aspects of the past are chosen and how they are portrayed can affect how the past is perceived. However, to assume that any use of heritage is an inherently ideological project, as some seem to do, is to overestimate the intentions of the business leaders and development officials who are often just searching for an economic tool that will differentiate one location from another. Focusing solely on the ideological meanings behind the use of heritage leads one to overlook the agency of local actors in manipulating the past for contemporary purposes. Entrepreneurs choose to adopt the theme of heritage tourism and they choose to use it in particular ways. In addition, heritage is a product that is continually ‘defined by the consumer’ whose tastes ebb and flow (Ashworth & Larkham 1994: 18). Thus, heritage and its meanings also change over time. In fact, the commodified nature of heritage means that, like all commodification, it entails ‘an ongoing historical process of cultural construction’ (McCabe 1998: 233). Heritage, like place, ‘cannot simply be created and imposed through marketing’ but is a constant process of presentation and interpretation in which local agents and visitors engage equally (McCabe 1998: 233; see also Oakes 1999; Crang 2004). Following McCabe (1998), Kawamori (2001) and others, it is argued hereafter that heritage is an incredibly flexible commodity that should be recognized more as a malleable economic tool than as a problematic ideological one.

Arguing that heritage is an economic tool does not deny its ideological power. One might even argue that creating a dichotomy between economic and ideological uses of heritage gives the impression that they are mutually exclusive. In fact, the economic value of heritage often stems from its ideological importance, as the following example of heritage tourism in rural Japan will show. Entrepreneurs that use heritage as an economic tool do so precisely because the past appeals to potential visitors for varying reasons. However, much that passes for heritage in tourist sites is misrepresented,
misinterpreted, or just used because it has a veneer of old age. Also, the interpretation of the past is frequently left open to the visitors. Thus, heritage is often simply a theme that serves as a context for contemporary economic pursuits. An analysis of the adoption of heritage tourism in Kurokawa Onsen shows how local actors have used a collective Japanese heritage as a tool for economic development, without losing their sense of local identity or sacrificing their uniqueness. Far from contributing to the resort’s theoretical consumption and creative destruction, heritage tourism has given the villagers a creative method to rejuvenate their community by adapting the resort to fit tourists’ preconceived impressions of a rural Japanese village, the model for which is the furusato, (lit. old village) or native place. The next section will detail the growth in popularity of the theme of furusato in tourism, which began in the 1980s.

**Discovering Japan and Furusato-zukuri**

Following the Meiji Restoration (1868), Japan strove to catch up with the West by reforming its educational, political, social and economic systems, often modelling them after European and US institutions. In the decades that followed, people gained an aesthetic appreciation for things modern and Western, including fashion, music, food, film and architecture. As with most periods of rapid social and economic change, the widespread acceptance of these foreign ideas help create nostalgia for the symbols of the country’s unique history. At first, these symbols were located typically in urban areas, such as the architecture of Tokyo during the Edo Period (1603–1867) (Gluck 1998) or castles and shrines destroyed during World War II (Ehrentraut 1995). However, massive migration from the countryside to urban areas helped create a new nostalgic symbol of Japan’s past: the rural village. By the end of the twentieth century, the countryside had taken on the dual meaning of both a backward place and the location of a simpler, relaxed lifestyle to which it would be difficult or impossible to return (Knight 1994a; 1994b; Graburn 1998). Thanks to a groundswell of nostalgia for the countryside and clever advertising by the nationalized railways in the 1970s and 1980s, the idyllic rural village became a site in which tourists were invited to experience their rural heritage, thus encouraging entrepreneurial and governmental investment as well (Robertson 1988; Ehrentraut 1993, 1995).

The Discover Japan (1970s) and Exotic Japan (1980s) travel campaigns by Japan Railways are considered the major stimulus for Japan’s collective nostalgia for its rural heritage. The campaigns showed trendy young women visiting shrines and mingling with elderly farmers in Japan’s remote mountain landscapes, finding themselves and their rural heritage along the way (Robertson 1988; Ivy 1995). At the same time, these campaigns served the tourism industry’s economic interests by encouraging visits to a wider range of domestic destinations, especially in the wake of the energy crises of the 1970s. These campaigns worked less by defining what the countryside was, and more by contrasting it with urban Japan, which was conceived as being impersonal, distant from nature and Westernized (Moon 2002). Rural Japan (which
implied the past) was seen as the ‘other’; a place so different from urban Japan as to be foreign (even referred to as ‘exotic’ in the second Japan Railways campaign) (see also Lowenthal 1985). Yet, the countryside was believed to be the heart of Japan, which all citizens should visit to better understand their national identity.

Nostalgia for the countryside took shape in the idea of furusato, or native place. While furusato can refer to one’s actual birthplace or hometown, it generally refers to an idealized rural village that is spiritual home to all Japanese people. In the 1980s, thanks to the above-mentioned ad campaigns and a conservative political agenda that played upon a perceived loss of national identity in the face of global engagement, rural villages that either had or could create a ‘village-like ambiance’ were seen as potential furusato for spiritually ‘homeless’ Japanese (Robertson 1988: 503). The cultural and natural landscape of rural villages was thus treated as a collective heritage amid a ‘vacuum’ of symbols of national identity (Befu 2001). Based on an idealized past marked by co-operative agricultural production (Robertson 1988; Creighton 1997), furusato heritage can be said to consist of three key aspects, all of which are considered absent from city life, yet crucial to Japanese national identity: (1) a proximity to nature; (2) an architectural cohesiveness and familiarity; and (3) a sense of co-operation and community.

Tourism became the method by which this heritage could be commodified. In the hopes of halting rural out-migration and increasing visits to rural areas, the central government encouraged rural villages to recreate the furusato ideal for tourists and encouraged tourists to reconnect with their rural past by visiting such places. The 1984 furusato-zukuri (native place-making) project helped fund innovative proposals by local governments, by either preserving or creating nostalgic landscapes and community-like atmosphere (Robertson 1988; Knight 1994b; Ivy 1995; Graburn 1998; Robertson 1998). This project shared traits with the muraokoshi, or rural revitalization, movements begun in the late 1970s, in that it encouraged rural entrepreneurs to develop unique local resources or characteristics in order to integrate themselves directly into potential urban markets. The effects of these projects were far-reaching and were partially responsible for altered conceptions of the countryside, from a backwards hinterland (inaka) to an attractive ‘escape from the alienating influences of modern life’ (Creighton 1995: 465). Thanks in part to improved road networks to remote areas and growth in personal automobile ownership, the result was a marked increase in a ‘solitary, small-scale form of travel’ to the countryside in the 1980s, which has only grown since then and can clearly be seen in remote destinations like Kurokawa (Ivy 1995: 35; McMorran 2005).

What visitors wanted to experience was a countryside seemingly unchanged by time. This meant villages that were unspoilt by the neon lights, large buildings and constant noise that accompany urban life. They wanted to visit places that looked like the villages where their grandparents grew up, where one could see the changing of the seasons, watch a local festival and stay in a Japanese-style inn that looked old. The furusato model in tourism development was so useful because of its adaptability.
Far from being a single conception of what rural heritage had to look like, the three key elements of *furusato* – proximity to nature, architectural cohesiveness and familiarity, and a sense of co-operation and community – were easily adaptable to villages throughout the nation. However, no village could develop without the vision and hard work of local agents and a practice or resource in the village that could be enhanced through its connection to rural heritage. Local entrepreneurs had to accept the heritage model, adapt it to unique local contexts and build a tourist infrastructure. Festivals, unique foods, locally hand-made products, potters, hot springs; any number of things could be adapted to the heritage discourse and used in developing a tourist destination. In this way, one can see how the collective heritage on display does not erode local identity, but gives local identity a venue to be expressed and appreciated. As Kawamori (2001: 86) showed in the case of Tono, Iwate Prefecture, the use of collective heritage initially attracted tourists, but the village has been able to ‘manipulate the imposed touristic image to their own ends’ by including local uniqueness. Thus, Japan’s rural heritage is not a monolithic symbol of national ideology that can be seen everywhere. Instead, the concept of *furusato* has been an economic tool used freely by inspired local actors for their own unique purposes.

**Heritage Tourism in Kurokawa Onsen**

Kurokawa’s development as a tourist destination has come in waves and has adapted to both its physical landscape and the changing tastes of Japanese tourists. Located in the centre of the island of Kyushu and an hour’s drive from the nearest railway station, Kurokawa has always been considered remote (Figure 1). It rests in a narrow river valley containing only enough level land for small-scale rice and vegetable cultivation on terraced fields and several dozen structures packed tightly around the Tano Hara River. In many ways, Kurokawa resembles thousands of other remote villages found throughout Japan’s mountains, a country with over 70 percent of its area considered too steep for normal cultivation (Mather et al. 1998). However, the abundance of mineral-rich hot springs found beneath Kurokawa, which many remote villages lack, increases its potential for tourism development (Doi 2002). Kurokawa’s leaders developed their heritage tourism image around this resource.

The first ryokan, or traditional inn, in Kurokawa was established in the mid-1700s to accommodate the required travel of the Hosokawa Clan, from its base in Kumamoto City to Tokyo. However, travel restrictions throughout the Edo Period and poor accessibility greatly discouraged visits to Kurokawa, except by local farmers and religious pilgrims. However, within a decade following World War II, tourist development expanded throughout the country and, as *onsen* resorts became especially popular destinations, Kurokawa had the potential to grow. Between 1955 and 1968, 11 inns opened, adding to the two that already existed. However, the lack of physical space in Kurokawa meant most accommodations were small family businesses. Some of these
inns were only a handful of rooms attached to the owner’s home, but for a remote village it was growth none the less.

This small boom was short lived, however, as most tourists passed over Kurokawa for more ‘modern’ nearby onsen, like Beppu, Uchinomaki and Tsuetate, which had hotels that could accommodate hundreds of guests, parking lots large enough to handle tour buses and European-styled interior baths. From the 1950s to the mid-1980s, group excursions helped business boom in large-scale onsen resorts, while
small remote destinations like Kurokawa remained stagnant. By the early 1980s, the infrequent visitors almost exclusively consisted of groups of local residents or longer-term health tourists. Recalling those financially difficult times, one inn owner jokingly expressed thanks that none of the rare visitors was ever injured by the falling roof tiles that he could not afford to fix (Kumamoto Nichinichi Shimbun Joho Senta 2000). Other owners recall that until the 1980s the name of the *onsen* was not even on prefectural maps, further emphasizing Kurokawa’s peripheral status in the tourism industry.

**Adapting Kurokawa to the Furusato Ideal**

By the early 1980s a wave of nostalgia for the aesthetics and traditions of rural Japan arose throughout the country. The creation of this nostalgia by the travel industry, central government and media convinced tourists to seek out Japan’s heritage in rural tourist destinations (Robertson 1988; Ivy 1995). Inn owners recall being slowly discovered by these new independent, nostalgic tourists in the mid-1980s. Owners tell of plans to go shopping or to play softball suddenly interrupted by guests asking for accommodation. The owners had become so accustomed to not having guests, that their sudden arrival was a shock. Whenever possible, owners asked guests why they had come to Kurokawa. The answers were usually the same: guests wished to avoid the overbuilt, modern *onsen* in favour of a more natural, traditional experience, which they felt they had stumbled upon in Kurokawa. Picking up on similar clues from the popular media, the owners thus recognized the changing tastes of consumers and began to sense their potential for growth. Although inn owners differ in who was most responsible for redesigning Kurokawa to suit the new consumer needs, most written narratives emphasize the work of a handful of younger, second-generation owners, and one older owner, Goto Tetsuya (Kumamoto Nichinichi Shimbun Joho Senta 2000; Asahi Weekly Shimbun AERA 2002; Weekly Toyo Keizai 2002; Nonaka & Katsumi 2004; Goto 2005). Partly because the resort had not exploded in growth in the 1960s and 1970s to accommodate large groups and tour buses, the existing tourist infrastructure needed only slight adjustment to resemble the nostalgic model of *furusato*. The family-run inns and narrow roads that had deterred large tour groups in the past were now attractive to smaller groups looking to encounter Japan’s rural heritage. Through the work of the Kurokawa Onsen Association (hereafter, the Association), to which all inn owners belonged, the three elements of *furusato* – proximity to nature, architectural similarity and familiarity, and a sense of community – were soon emphasized in the tourist landscape.

These changes, first instituted in the mid-1980s, led to dramatic growth in the number of visitors and literally put Kurokawa on the map. The number of overnight stays in Kurokawa more than doubled, from 169,912 in 1989, when figures were first collected, to a peak of 396,720 in 2002 (Figure 2). According to informants, visitor growth from the mid-1980s to 1989 was even more acute, as inns were pressed to
accommodate the sudden influx of guests. What was once a part-time business to supplement farming, operated only during major holidays and occasional weekends, was suddenly a full-time venture requiring owners to hire regular employees. A more revealing statistic of the resort’s sudden popularity is the increase in the sales of nyuto tegata, or bath passes, following their introduction in 1986 (Figure 2). From 6,000 passes sold in 1986, the number increased ten-fold to 60,757 just five years later. Sales peaked in 2002 with 213,612 passes sold and, in 2007, Kurokawa celebrated the sale of 2,000,000 bath passes since their introduction. Each pass represents at least one visit to the resort during the year, though possibly more, because the pass can be used up to three times (more below).

Statistics from the Association help paint the overall picture of Kurokawa’s economic impact. Currently, there are 28 inns, with approximately 600 employees. The inns range in size from four rooms to 62, while most (21) have 18 rooms or fewer. The inns together have a total guest capacity of nearly 2,000, in 480 rooms per night, though the resort averages less than half that number each night, approximately 900 guests. As with other tourist destinations, seasonal factors affect numbers, with summer, New Year and the first week of May being the busiest times of the year. Kurokawa currently averages around 1,000,000 total visitors each year. Of that total, more than 300,000 are overnight guests, each spending between 13,000 and 35,000 yen ($US108–290) per night for a room and two meals. The total financial impact of Kurokawa’s growth is difficult to estimate, but thanks to a bath tax of 150 yen (approximately SUS1.25), which is added to the bill of every overnight guest, the town of Minami-Oguni has
earned 728,683,980 yen (approximately $US6,000,000) from 1989 to 2005 from this tax alone. In addition, Kurokawa's growth has generated the establishment and growth of numerous restaurants and shops in the area, as well as industries that support the resort, like cleaning services, food suppliers, souvenir manufacturers and construction firms.

Proximity to nature. The first element of furusato addressed by the Association was increasing the guests’ proximity to nature. Owners imagine that most of their guests work with computers in a world surrounded by concrete and steel. They talk of the stress that guests build from overexposure to these unnatural surroundings. Owners claim that guests come to Kurokawa to escape their cold, harsh world and connect with nature, leading to a temporary sense of iyashi, or healing, at the hands of nature. Owners define nature as the trees and flowering bushes seen all around, the birds in the trees, the stars visible above, and the river flowing through the resort. Simply by visiting the resort, guests can hear, touch, smell and see nature in a way that is impossible in the city and idealized in the countryside. Kurokawa’s business owners present the resort as the antithesis of high-tech, hyper-modern Japan. Comments from visitors and the resort’s popularity strongly support the owners’ claim that visitors desire such a traditional, natural destination.

The most obvious way that the Association has increased guests’ proximity to nature is by planting thousands of trees throughout the resort. Beginning in the 1980s, the Association began a tradition of planting trees and shrubs each March to beautify the landscape. Significantly, the trees chosen are never sugi, or Japanese cypress (cryptomeria), because of sugi’s commercial value. Sugi surround the resort and are the primary building material of the inns, but they are usually planted in neat rows, taking the appearance of crops. According to a tourist official, the trees planted each year around the resort are supposed to feel as if they appeared naturally, not planted. Thus, they are planted in purposefully irregular patterns, as would be found in nature. The trees and shrubs have ornamental value and often flower or change colour with the seasons, like ajisai (Hydrangea macrophylla), tsubaki (Camellia japonica) and kaede (Acer palmatum, also called momiji, or Japanese red maple), which owners consider more appropriate for creating a natural, traditional landscape.

The final significant method of bringing guests closer to nature came through the construction of rotemburo (outdoor bath) (Figure 3). While creating a nostalgic destination that would appeal to general ideas of Japanese heritage, the owners also recognized the importance of distinguishing the onsen from other resorts via a unique trait. Beginning in the early-1980s each inn decided that by building rotemburo guests could experience nature in an extremely intimate setting. While slowly soaking in the baths beneath a variety of trees and shrubs, guests are encouraged to contemplate the beauty of nature in all four seasons. Following the construction of the rotemburo, the resort advertised itself as a rotemburo destination, where visitors were encouraged to try the different waters and views of every inn. This was a very unique idea among
onsen resorts at the time, and it required a great deal of co-operation among the owners of the many inns.

Architectural similarity and familiarity. Achieving architectural similarity and familiarity, the second feature of furusato, was fairly simple, as most inns had been built in the same style: a one or two-storey structure with a shallow black roof, walls painted an earthen colour, and trimmed with wood painted black (Figure 4). This basic building design, which owners vaguely refer to as ‘traditional Japanese’, is not unique to Kurokawa. In fact, it can be seen in small ryokan and other rural villages throughout Japan. Therefore, the design fits the collective furusato ideal. However, crucial in commodifying the village as a whole was the acceptance of this standard design not only in all subsequent ryokan construction, but also in the construction and reform of homes and businesses. This consistent use of heritage-inspired design creates what has been referred to as ‘a world in a different dimension’ (ijigen sekai) in which the visitor feels ‘caught in an optical illusion’ (sakkaku ni torawareru) (Nonaka & Katsumi 2004: 186). While this might be an exaggeration, it resembles the comments expressed to the author by guests about how dentoteki, or traditional, the resort appeared and how the similarity of all of the buildings contributed to its appeal. Significantly, this building design is not based on a local icon or any actual long-standing local architectural style. Thus, while visitors may feel that they are walking around a village preserving its heritage, in fact, the heritage is just a standard...
form of rural architecture. Also, there is no interpretation provided, describing, for instance, the history or the source of the building design.

Another form of architectural similarity and familiarity is found outside the entrance of many of the inns in the form of an *irori* (open-hearth fire) and antique farm implements hanging on walls or leaning against doorframes. Both of these cause passersby to exclaim, *natsukashii*, or ‘how nostalgic’. These obsolete technologies serve as tangible reminders of Japan’s agricultural past, allowing tourists to consume Japan’s heritage visually (Graburn 1995). Collectively, these design flourishes tap into the nostalgia that Japanese have for their agricultural past. Inn owners hope to remind visitors of trips to grandmother’s house, sitting around the smoky *irori* and listening to stories of the past. Again, these items have a veneer of old age, but they are only recent additions to the tourist landscape, all with the intention of appealing to a generic sense of national heritage familiar to all visitors.

**A sense of community and co-operation.** Through the above practices and others, the inn owners satisfied the final aspect of Japan’s rural heritage idealized in *furusato*, a sense of community and co-operation. Close co-operation is believed to be missing from urban life. However, through the metaphor of *furusato*, rural life has long been valorized for its close-knit ties between neighbours. Prior to the widespread use of machinery, most agriculture, as well as home construction, required the co-operative effort of villagers. With increased urbanization and rural out-migration has come nostalgia for the co-operative features of village life. Robertson (1991) highlighted this nostalgia in her study of the efforts of a suburban municipality attempting to create a sense of community by using the rural *furusato* as a model. This community
aspect of *furusato* is also emphasized by rural tourist destinations. In the early 1990s the Kurokawa Onsen Association adopted a catchphrase that encapsulates the spirit of community: ‘Kurokawa Onsen, *One Ryokan*’. This encourages visitors to imagine that the resort is one large inn, in which the 28 actual inns are merely individual rooms that are connected by a hallway (the road). When speaking about the co-operation between inns, one owner pointed out that the Association realized quickly that the power of two inns working together is not merely double the power of one inn. Especially when it comes to advertising, including the creation of tourist maps, road signs and the overall public face of the resort, the 28 inns working together have the power and reach of over one hundred individual inns. Inns commonly refer guests to other inns, and through the myriad efforts of the Association, the inns have shown more co-operation than competition.

Arguably the most significant and lasting co-operative decision made in the mid-1980s was the creation of the *nyuto tegata*, or bath pass, the sales of which best show the remarkable growth of the resort. After each inn built an outdoor bath, the Association members wanted to encourage guests to walk around the resort and try the various outdoor baths, in turn exploring other shops as well. The solution was a small, circular wooden pass costing 1200 yen (approximately $US10) that had an image of a happily bathing man on one side and three removable stickers on the reverse (Figure 5). Upon visiting each *rotemburo*, one sticker was removed and the inn’s unique stamp was applied to the pass, thus becoming a souvenir of the trip. The pass could be used anytime within six months, which encouraged further repeat visits. Although no one refers to it by this name, the bath pass essentially turned Kurokawa into an *onsen* theme park, with Japan’s rural heritage serving as an aesthetic backdrop. The

![Used bath passes hanging at a local temple.](image)

*Figure 5.* Used bath passes hanging at a local temple.
design similarity of the buildings tends to exaggerate the actual level of co-operation of Kurokawa’s inn owners, as they are typically too concerned about the affairs of their own inns to spend much time thinking about the resort as a whole. However, the fact that the Association members co-operate to establish architectural cohesiveness, plant trees, advertise, control growth and share their outdoor baths with guests of other inns, shows that in some ways the ideals believed to be epitomized by the generic rural village actually exist.

Discussion: The Creative Destruction of Kurokawa Onsen?

The concept of creative destruction has been used to chart heritage tourism development in rural communities, in order to ascertain whether or not tourism leads to destruction of the rural idyll (Mitchell 1998; Mitchell et al. 2001). The crux of the argument is that the development of heritage tourism in rural villages typically creates a situation in which many residents fail to benefit from tourism. As the village increasingly relies on the tourism economy, local businesses that do not cater to tourists may close, and ultimately residents who are frustrated with life in a tourist destination may relocate, thus destroying the original sense of community that characterized the rural idyll.

While the model of creative destruction may apply in some cases, it does not seem to hold true in Kurokawa. Far from leading to creative destruction, the use of heritage through these three idealized aspects of *furusato* has led to the resort’s repopulation and a swelling of local pride. Such a broad assertion might be criticized easily as playing solely into the economic and ideological hands of the owners of the means of production, the entrepreneurs who own and operate the inns and shops that cater to tourists. There is no denying that public displays of heritage often become sanitized versions of the past, in which the owners of capital present themselves as historical heroes uniting communities and providing a unified sense of place (Summerby-Murray 2007). At first glance, this depiction seems to fit Kurokawa, since members of the Association publicly take much of the credit for rescuing the village from stagnation and eventual decay. The owners of the inns are in the position to benefit most from the continued use of heritage tourism and the protection of the overall nostalgic aesthetic. However, extended contact with local residents shows an overwhelming acceptance and support of the use of heritage tourism for both the economic and intangible benefits that it brings. Interviews have revealed that local residents accept the somewhat inflated image of the Association with a grain of salt, while revelling in the tourist landscape and savouring the reawakened local sense of pride and identity.

Young people, both the children of local residents and new arrivals, are moving to Kurokawa, excited about working in a place now considered cool. These young adults say that even when they lived in Osaka or Tokyo they never had to explain where Kurokawa is, since it is featured so often on television and in travel magazines. One elderly man, bent double by a lifetime of farming in the village, boasted that he sold...
part of his land to a developer who built one of the resort’s finest inns. He indicates no regret that he no longer has a hand in what has become a lucrative business. Instead, he savours the social capital that accompanies his association with the inn and the resort as a whole, which has included having his image featured on a tourism poster. A maid at an inn expressed satisfaction at finally having an accessible work opportunity besides farming. For her, growth in tourism means having the ability to remain in her family home instead of moving elsewhere to earn a living. She added that she enjoys showing off her town and her abilities to guests from Hokkaido, Tokyo and even Europe. A driver from another inn explained that his job allows him not only to subsidize his part-time farming, but also to build an addition onto his home, which he hopes will be sufficiently up to date to encourage his daughter to return home one day with her own family. The Association also invites the driver’s dance group, with its own continuous tradition that dates back over 100 years, to perform at Kurokawa’s annual summer festival. Work at the inn provides him with reinvigorated local pride and the financial wherewithal to imagine that his only child might some day return to care for him and the family home.

These stories differ from the dire consequences found in some rural villages flooded by tourists, yet they are echoed in daily conversations in Kurokawa. Throughout the town, people talk about concrete benefits from heritage tourism, like sending their children to better schools, opening their own businesses, having their adult children move back home to care for them in old age, enjoying the beautified natural and built landscape and, most powerfully for many, having nation-wide exposure as a trendy tourist destination. In addition to those employed directly by the tourist industry, the resort’s success has created a trickle-down effect that supports dozens of businesses, provides new markets for local farmers and artisans, and inspires a stronger overall sense of place among residents.

Part of the trickle-down effect of Kurokawa’s success has been the use of tourist revenue to pay for the construction of *kominkan*, or public halls, in other villages within the larger town of Minami-Oguni, where Kurokawa is located. Kurokawa itself recently constructed its first-ever *kominkan*, called Betchin-kan, which provides another source of pride and *furusato*-like community development (Figure 6). This building, paid for by the Association and the town government primarily through tourism generated tax revenues and constructed to match the existing village aesthetic, serves as a meeting centre for community groups, as well as a location for concerts and other events.

The local sense of identity created from Kurokawa’s success has also affected the political arena strongly. With the passage of the Municipal Merger Law in the mid-1990s, the Japanese national government encouraged municipalities to combine in order to help reduce overall spending. This push ended in early 2006, when the amalgamation of hundreds of municipalities cut the total number in Japan nearly in half. Because of its remote location and small population (4,851 in 2005), Minami-Oguni seemed like a perfect candidate for amalgamation with its neighbour to the
north, Oguni. However, following two years of intense public debate and repeated pleas by the central government, the citizens of Minami-Oguni rejected the plan. The widely recognized reason is that citizens did not want income generated from Kurokawa used to pay down Oguni’s larger public debt. Another interpretation is residents felt their strong local identity, fostered by Kurokawa’s success, would be under threat following amalgamation. Either way, it seems clear that heritage tourism in this rural community has failed to bring about any sense of creative destruction and has instead raised the town’s sense of place identity.

Conclusions

The case of heritage tourism in Kurokawa Onsen shows the complex relationship between the ideological and economic aspects of heritage. The massive economic and cultural changes of the twentieth century awakened nostalgia for rural Japan that was then translated into a physical reality by the entrepreneurs of Kurokawa. Some may argue that this celebration of Japan’s rural past serves innumerable ideological projects, such as the myth of the nation’s homogeneity, a sanitized notion of rural life that was actually a constant struggle, and the strong belief in society’s dominance over nature. While one may be able to read all of this in Kurokawa’s representation
of the ideal furusato, the business leaders of Kurokawa, like entrepreneurs in many heritage tourism destinations, are far more concerned with understanding and producing what their ever-fickle customers want to see and experience than with maintaining a cohesive, ideologically driven tourist destination. This makes heritage an inherently flexible and reflexive commodity, continually adjusted to suit the needs of visitors instead of being a take-it-or-leave-it interpretation of the past on display. Thus, although questions of authenticity, representation, interpretation and identity make for intriguing theoretical discussions, the case of Kurokawa shows that they often have little relevance in the actual decisions made by individual actors who produce heritage tourism destinations.

This study shows how heritage is often implemented as a flexible economic tool without concern for the kind of ideological problems discussed at length in much of the tourism literature. More importantly, the case of Kurokawa shows how heritage tourism in a rural setting can rejuvenate a local sense of place, and not any creative destruction of the rural idyll, which is often associated with this type of tourism development. Local actors are acquiring concrete, long-lasting social and economic benefits that can exist comfortably within the heritage tourism landscape.

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References

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Understanding the ‘Heritage’ in Heritage Tourism: Japan


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Résumé: Comprendre ce que représente le ‘patrimoine’ dans le tourisme historique: outil idéologique ou outil économique pour une station thermale japonaise?

Dans cette étude on examine la relation complexe entre les aspects économiques et idéologiques du patrimoine telle qu’on l’a observée à Kurokawa Onsen, une station thermale de l’île de Kyushu, au Japon. Des les années 1980, ce village éloigné s’est réinventé pour devenir une destination touristique reconnue nationalement qui attire un million de visiteurs par an. Son succès est dû surtout à son utilisation d’une nostalgie nationale pour le passé agricole du pays. En incorporant soigneusement les éléments d’un village idealisé dénommé furusato (lieu natif), les dirigeants commerciaux de la station ont utilisé le patrimoine rural du pays comme theme qu’ils ont incorporé dans leur plan d’affaires. Cette étude argumente que les dirigeants locaux utilisent le patrimoine non point pour des raisons idéologiques mais pour des raisons purement économiques. C’est-à-dire, on a utilisé le patrimoine comme theme qui rapporte et que les touristes désirent et non point parce qu’il décrit un passé que l’on doit entretenir à tout prix. Nous soulignons donc que bien que la valeur économique du patrimoine puisse passer dans sa valeur idéologique, le patrimoine est avant tout un produit flexible.

Mots-clés: Tourisme historique, Japon, onsen, furusato, idéologie
Zusammenfassung: Zum Verständnis von ‘Erbe’ im Erbe (Heritage)-Tourismus: Ideologisches Werkzeug oder ökonomisches Werkzeug für ein japanisches Thermalresort?


Stichwörter: Erbe-Tourismus, Japan, Onsen, Furusato, Ideologie