

日本の若者が持つ農村地域の認識に ボランティア活動が与える影響について

テレサ クリスティーナ ジーラント

ハインリッヒハイネ大学デュッセルドルフ 近代日本研究所 博士課程

The influence of volunteer activities on the perception of rural regions among young people in Japan

Theresa Sieland

Doctoral student, Heinrich-Heine-University Düsseldorf

Abstract

Due to the popularity of rural revitalization through art festivals, young people from all over the world are increasingly motivated to visit Japanese rural regions as volunteers. The influence of volunteer activities on young people's perceptions of regions considered to be rural has yet to be further researched. Having talked to volunteers from the Echigo-Tsumari and Setouchi Art Triennale in 2022, I examine what kind of insights participants gain on site and discuss how volunteer work influences different perceptions of rural regions in Japan. The results offer important insights into young people's current thoughts on remote areas, as well as how the relationships between urban and rural spaces could be altered in the future.

1. Introduction

The popularity of art festivals in rural areas of Japan is still a recent phenomenon (Cai et al., 2020), being considered a new “age of the triennial” (Yoshimoto, 2014) since the 1950s. The focus of the festivals has since shifted from artist-centered projects in cities to socially engaged art in the countryside (Kobayashi, 2014), with the aim of involving local populations and revitalizing rural areas in a sustainable way. Against the backdrop of rapid economic, communal, and demographic change, the interest in art festivals is moreover considered to reflect central social issues in Japanese society today, particularly with younger generations starting to explore different lifestyles beyond metropolitan cities (Klien, 2009). However, Japan was one of the first countries to pursue the goal of socially engaged art that builds new relationships within communities, and has been linked to the goal of regional revitalization from the very beginning (Kobayashi, 2014).

In my personal experience as a volunteer and visitor of the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale in 2014, 2015 and 2018, I recognized that many participants were especially interested in the social impact of these new art projects. This led me to question the influence of volunteering on young people's perceptions of rural areas in Japan. To explore this, I conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with participants at the Echigo-Tsumari Triennale (hereafter ETAT) and Setouchi Art Triennale (hereafter SAF) in 2022, asking them about their initial interest, motivation, and experiences during their volunteer activities.

This article starts by explaining the background of the uprising of art festivals in Japan, their connection to rural revitalization and the current state of volunteer work at the ETAT and SAF. Presenting my research method and its results, I discuss what observations and experiences were particularly impactful for my interviewees while reflecting on their perspectives on rural Japan today. Finally, I will reconsider the study's implications and lay out possible questions for future research.

2. Art Festivals and Volunteer Work in Japan

In view of the increasing urbanization in recent decades, problems such as aging, population decline, and economic stagnation of rural regions have become central topics of politicians and the media in Japan. To address these issues, new concepts and ideas have been developed to make life in the countryside more attractive and to revitalize the affected regions from the 1980s onward. Local governments and residents were also increasingly encouraged to actively participate in the planning and shaping of their living space. These new strategies focus not only on economic growth, but also on environmental protection and the revitalization of rural culture. Hence, regional arts projects and festivals have been on the rise in rural Japan and are considered a significant aspect of recent revitalization strategies (e.g., Klien, 2009; *ibid.*, 2010a; *ibid.*, 2010b; Yoshimoto, 2014; Takahashi, 2015).

The art events aim to provide a cultural boost, create new forms of social, cultural, and economic capital, promote rural lifestyles and environmental awareness, attract urban visitors, and provide a platform for local artists and craftsmen to display their work (Boven et al., 2017; Cai et al., 2020). One key factor of these festivals is the recruitment and mobilization of volunteers, who play a significant role in ensuring the events run smoothly, and fostering a sense of belonging, collaboration, and cooperation among the participants (e.g., *ibid.*; Klien, 2010b; Takahashi, 2015; Favell, 2015).

Two notable examples of these festivals are the SAF and ETAT, held every three years in the Seto Inland Sea and Niigata Prefecture respectively. Both festivals were established by art director Kitagawa Fram and feature a wide variety of contemporary art installations, with performances and workshops organized by Kitagawa's Art Front Gallery in Tokyo. Starting in 2000, the ETAT in particular has become one of the largest art festivals in Japan, attracting over half a million visitors each year. Both festivals are advertised as new forms of regional revitalization, with the aim of the installation of contemporary artworks and the resulting tourism being the development of infrastructure, restoration of the regions' historical and cultural legacy, and the establishment of a renewed regional "sense of identity" (Klien, 2010b: 519). Both vents also make use of volunteers, with ETAT calling its group *kohebi-tai* ("little snake squad") and SAF *koebi-tai* ("little shrimp squad"), each representing prominent animals found in their regions. Accordingly, the areas are famous for their beautiful natural sceneries, with ETAT displaying typical border zones between mountain foothills and arable flatland known as *satoyama* and SAF's islands consisting of equivalent coastal landscapes called *satoumi*. The regions themselves have historically been known for their agriculture-related industries, which include rice farming, sake brewing and fishing, all of which notoriously have greatly suffered and lost significance during the last couple of decades (Favell, 2015).

Recent case studies on SAF and ETAT show that exchanges between urban visitors and rural residents can evoke new interest in the regions and help to embark on a path of self-sufficiency and revitalization. However, most studies so far have focused on the perspectives of residents. Volunteer work at ETAT and SAF may also have long-lasting effects on the participants themselves, from gaining knowledge about remote areas in Japan to interacting with residents on site. This will be further explored in the following.

3. Method

For my research aim, I conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews. The interviewees were chosen based on two criteria: 1) participated in ETAT or SAF activities as a volunteer at the current time or earlier this year, and 2) younger than 30 years old. The interviews were conducted in four locations (Takamatsu, Naoshima, Osaka, and Tokyo) in order to maybe also capture differences in motivations for participating in the festivals. Takamatsu and Naoshima for instance mark the bigger and more popular destinations of the SAF, with tourist information spots where young volunteers could be more easily found than at the widespread locations with artworks displayed. I used snowball sampling and previous contacts to meet with interviewees at the tourist facilities or in cafés. The interviews were conducted in English, recorded, and partially transcribed for analysis. The language and grammar of the quotes were partially cleaned up, with the nuances kept as close to the original as possible. The length of the interviews varied from 10 to 25 minutes due to the limited availability of potential interviewees during weekdays.

4. Results

My questions centered on the interviewees' initial interest and motivations for participating as a volunteer, why they came to the festival, what kind of experiences and impressions they had in the beginning compared to now, and whether they intended to get involved as volunteers again. The interviewees' key statements and results with regard to the research aim are summarized in tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: Interview Data - General information and background of the interviewees.

Name* (Place)	Age, Sex	Origin	Current occupation	Participating as a volunteer	Former experiences
Akane (Osaka)	23, F	Osaka, Japan	University Student (Economy), Tokyo	SAF	ETAT, volunteer and tourist
Charlotte (Naoshima)	22, F	Hong Kong	University Student (Event Management), Hong Kong	SAF	ETAT, tourist
Mihou (Takamatsu)	27, F	Hong Kong	Employee (Art Event Promotion), Hong Kong	SAF and ETAT	SAF, Northern Alps Festival (Omachi) and ETAT, volunteer and tourist
Edith (Tokyo)	22, F	Australia	University Exchange Student (Art Management), Tokyo	ETAT	None

*All names have been changed to protect participant's privacy and identities. Abbreviations: F = Female.

Table 2: Interview Data - Motivations and perceptions of the interviewees.

Name	Initial interest	Initial impressions	Changes in perception	Return?
Akane	Interest in art and community; Learned about ETAT from a friend, got involved with activities and decided to travel to SAF after moving to Osaka.	ETAT: Remote, opportunity to talk about current and future problems in Japan. SAF: Roughly the same, but not as remote and isolated as ETAT.	Never thought of areas as rural, rather as an example or symptom of Japan's current challenges; Realized that revitalization of local communities must be more concrete for locals; Good for building communities but offer nothing definite.	Yes
Charlotte	Heard about SAF from a university program; Wanted to initially go to SAF (more popular), but due to scheduling difficulties because of COVID, went to ETAT as a tourist first.	ETAT: Considered as the "original" of Japan's art festivals; Very remote and vast, difficult to travel around. SAF: Easier to travel around, more exciting to discover artworks.	ETAT: Makes reality of demographic change etc. more visible; Experiences as a volunteer were way harsher; More variety and beauty than expected. SAF: Was surprised by the rich history of each island; Discovered many strange and special things.	Yes
Mihou	First went to SAF with a university program; Does not like to call areas "rural"; Had the initial image of Japan in general as very neat, tidy etc., but realized that no place fit into any stereotype.	ETAT: Most difficult place to go around, very vast; People initially were more reserved than at SAF; Landscape feels very real and wild. SAF: Feels more accessible; Local people eager to meet young volunteers.	Always encountered places through volunteering, does not want to comment on local people in general; Activities very tiring and exhausting; Is always looking forward to the opening of the Triennale, especially with the prospect of getting sleep; All festivals and places are special, mostly characterized by the people they met and the memories they now share.	Yes
Edith	Went skiing in Yuzawa and got recommended to attend winter events at ETAT, hence first volunteering in 2022; Read book about ETAT and wanted to learn more about the concept.	ETAT: Felt very typically rural; Vastly different from big cities, especially because of the beautiful landscape, buildings, and outdoor activities.	ETAT: Experience felt like a magical tour; Heard about problems like depopulation, seeing closed schools etc.; Idea of community art fascinating, but feels they need more time to get to know the place; Learned that motivation to change must come from the community rather than from outside.	Yes

4.1 Initial impressions and growing connections to the region

As I assumed, the volunteers I talked to were mostly art students and young professionals from urban areas, who were interested in gaining contacts with artists and organizing a large art festival. They were already aware of the social issues faced by rural areas in Japan, such as depopulation and economic stagnation, before their participation. During their stay, they were able to gain hands-on experiences that deepened their understanding of the specific challenges faced by each region, through interactions with local staff and helping with artworks located in abandoned buildings. As a result, some of the volunteers, such as Edith and Charlotte, felt more connected to the region and had a sense of accomplishment and belonging, suggesting that longer stays could further enhance this feeling:

“When we talked to the artists and locals, I learned a lot about the schools and houses that were abandoned because people moved away. I learned so much more about these regions and never before would have thought, ‘Wow, this is a region with a rich history.’” (Edith)

“It's an indirect way to learn more about each place, more than ‘Okay, this is a region that's aging fast.’ Through the artwork and volunteering, you get connected to what's happening. It becomes more emotional and more real.” (Charlotte)

In summary, while most of the interviewees initially wanted to gain experience in organizing art festivals, they also gained hands-on experiences that deepened their understanding of the specific challenges facing rural areas in Japan. As a result, they developed a desire to make positive contributions to the local communities and considered the ongoing well-being of the regions as an important factor for their involvement in volunteer activities.

4.2 Revitalization vs. understanding of a region

The interviewees began to consider their role and impact as volunteers and the goal of a successful revitalization. They believe that revitalization should 1) take its time, 2) measures should not be imposed, and 3) ideally, the desire to change should come from within the local community:

“It has to come from the people wanting change, that's the basic idea. But you must be very careful, the people who come have to really get to know the residents. Maybe they bring in an idea, but the locals are the ones who must get the show on the road.” (Edith)

Currently, the most common criticism of the ETAT and SAF among scholars is that both festivals have not yet been able to establish long-term autonomy among local people and prevent population decline in the areas. However, scholars such as Klien (2010a; *ibid.*, 2010b), Favell (2015) and Jesty (2021) emphasize the importance of considering each festival's impacts, goals, and the aim of socially engaged art in Japan. Contrary to Europe or America, art festivals in Japan, especially those initiated by Kitagawa Fram, reject the notion of making art useful or practical. The festivals therefore prioritize sustainability and stability over economic success and seek to develop new relationships on site. Mihou also concludes that the festivals' economic benefits should not be the primary concern, but rather the development of relationships among people involved:

“If you don't take enough time, you're not helping at all, you're actually just turning the place into a city you imagine [...]. When the volunteers come back every year, the locals

recognize us as a team, even if they don't remember individual faces. It becomes easier, but it takes time.” (Mihou)

4.3 Changes in perceptions of “rural vs. urban”

Depending on their access and source that caught their interest in participating as a volunteer, three out of four interviewees had preconceived notions about the rural areas before volunteering. However, they gradually came to realize that each region had its unique characteristics. One of the interviewees, Akane, felt that volunteering at the ETAT was like a vacation:

“I was born in Osaka and grew up in Tokyo, so I was stressed all the time. Because the big cities, especially Tokyo, are so crowded, and there are too many people. But when I went to Echigo-Tsumari, I felt very relaxed, especially because of the *satoyama* and the people there. Both Echigo-Tsumari and Setouchi feel like home to me now, I feel relaxed when I go there.” (Akane)

While Akane happily seizes the opportunity to get away from big city centers by volunteering at the art festivals, all interviewees nevertheless realized that each region did not match the common images of rural areas in Japan popularized by tourism or media coverage. They found neither a romantically idealized homeland in the countryside nor an isolated ghost town on site. Mihou is especially aware of the stereotypical rural vs. urban dichotomy and expressed her skepticism accordingly:

“Rural' or '*inaka*' still kind of suggests that something is not that advanced or slow, right? And urban areas are often considered more developed and so on. There's always this comparison between the two. To me, each region has its own history, and so they're just different, right? We tend to measure the value of a place by its economic importance, and it doesn't make sense to me. I think that kind of thinking is very short-sighted.” (Mihou)

Akane is also critical of the current situation in Japan where the focus is primarily on large metropolitan areas such as Tokyo and Osaka, and she wishes that more attention could be given to smaller regions in terms of job opportunities and education. She believes that a more balanced approach is necessary to ensure a sustainable future for these areas:

“The problem is the centralization in Tokyo. For example, we could move more university campuses to the countryside, while keeping the standard of education the same, which is a huge problem right now.” (Akane)

Though Charlotte has her reservations about classifying things as “urban or rural” as well, she nonetheless pointed out differences she made out during her stays at SAF and ETAT:

“Okay, I think it's very rural in the sense that you don't have much entertainment here, on the islands themselves, and around Echigo-Tsumari even less. I mean, of course you can live here, and there are shopping streets and so on. But compared to the activities you can do in a city, it's quite different and rural, I would say.” (Charlotte)

The lack of recreational activities for young people in the Setouchi islands and the Echigo-Tsumari region leads to Charlotte expressing her reservations about living in these places. Additionally, some interviewees mentioned that the challenging living conditions and lack of free time during volunteer

activities were the biggest barriers to considering longer stays or even permanent residence in the festivals' locations.

4.4 The ups and downs of volunteer activities

The festivals' volunteer groups, *koebi-tai* and *kohebi-tai*, consist mostly of students and committed residents who follow a conventional Japanese corporate style hierarchy with orders coming from the top. Though volunteers play an important mediating role between locals, artists, and the organization teams, Art Front Gallery in Tokyo controls artist selection, placement, and dispatch of volunteer groups, while the NPO communicates with residents and assigns volunteer tasks daily. The festivals' organization with schedules, preparations, and tasks is therefore considered "very strict" ("*kibishii*") among volunteers, but viewed as a necessary evil to get things done:

"Well, it's meaningful, there are many chances to communicate with everyone. But also, it's harsh, I have to say, harsher than I ever thought, incredibly harsh." (Charlotte)

"Yeah, I think it's totally exhausting, but also really nice here. Yeah, it makes you want to come back. Even though it's exhausting." (Edith)

When asked what she was looking most forward to each time she participated as a volunteer at the festivals, Mihou immediately blurted out:

"Sleep! [...] Because it is just so exhausting. But honestly, in the past, once the festival opened, I just went to sleep immediately and couldn't get up until the next morning." (Mihou)

A local organizer I interviewed at ETAT in 2015 accordingly expressed her concerns for young volunteers, who still tend to do most of the hard physical and mental work in preparation for the festivals. Her major fear was the risk of exploitation, with young people soon getting sick of coming to the regions if the strict style of management continued. While the festivals have been hailed as models for community revitalization and tourism, there are still remaining questions about whether top-down initiatives can achieve bottom-up, sustainable development in the long run (Klien, 2010a; *ibid.*, 2010b; Qu and Funck, 2021). Within the framework of a heavy-handed management, studies about the realities on site have reported many misunderstandings, a lack of involvement by unhappy locals, and a generally very strict, almost hierarchical organization of the ETAT (Favell, 2015; Jesty, 2021). Despite the criticisms, the participants interviewed in 2022 still expressed excitement about the tasks and meeting people from different backgrounds:

"You can just do so many strange and special things. One day I just cut bamboo all day, another I cleaned up a forest. All of that must be done at some point so that both the locals and the visitors can enjoy the festival. So, it's okay, it pays off in the end." (Charlotte)

"The most fun for me is when we are on location with the artists and talk to them about their projects. That's fantastic. Working with people who come to the rice fields, working with the artists, and talking to them, that's just awesome." (Edith)

All four interviewees hence expressed their excitement about their volunteer work at the festivals, despite the harsh conditions. Focusing on the positive impacts of participation, all of them expressed

wanting to volunteer again in the future. Due to the sense of purpose and belonging they gained, they happily recalled pleasant encounters they had on site:

“I remember we were in Echigo-Tsumari, very close to a village, and the residents wanted to show us that they had the best apples. [...] Someone would always come by and bring us whole boxes of apples. And then I met one of the older ladies again, and we immediately started talking about apples, for longer than I care to admit. It was delightful!” (Mihou)

The promise of personal fulfillment, skill development, and networking with like-minded individuals make up for possible risks of high time commitment and exhaustion due to hard physical labor. The main accomplishment of the art festivals according to Akane is therefore the establishment of new social connections, especially between participants from urban and rural areas, that could last for the long run:

“Both triennales promote a new relationship between local and city residents, and also artists and students, especially foreign students. [...] They all come here and experience the culture and the life of the local community, so it's very healthy for the future. [...] The most important thing is this new relationship.” (Akane)

5. Conclusion

The article explored the impact of volunteering at art festivals on young participants' knowledge and perceptions of rural areas in Japan. The results of the study show that volunteering can have a positive impact on young people's views of rural areas, helping them to see these areas as unique and not just as idealized, backward, or hopeless. The most common sentiment expressed by the interviewees was a new appreciation of each place's uniqueness and a growth in critical thinking towards urban vs. rural stereotypes. Working together on art projects and interacting with local residents not only changed their image of rural areas but also gave them a new sense of purpose and social connections.

In the context of the current popularity of art festivals in Japan and the country's forecast to lose around 40% of its population by 2100, Jesty (2021) suggests that revitalization to the extent of returning to economic growth may not even be feasible. Since villages and regions nowadays are constantly dying, and are even encouraged to do so due to their lack of contributions to the market, revitalization in Japan, as shown in the study, nowadays mainly aims for social and communal sustainability, with the goal to collectively survive (ibid.). The art festivals can therefore, as Favell suggests, be seen as an “ongoing experiment in relational and community art” (Favell, 2015: 166), with the potential to create new social relations and public spaces.

In conclusion, volunteer work at the ETAT and SAF can have a positive impact on both individuals and local communities in the long run. However, the strict organization and physical exertion of volunteers can be a potential hindrance to meaningful exchange and connections. To address this issue, it is important to take the repeated criticisms of researchers and participants seriously and, as I suggest, focus on strengthening exchange between participants through other platforms that promote ongoing projects and skill development. This can help minimize burnout risks and improve social connections, leading to a better understanding of different lifestyles among all participants.

Still, it is crucial to note that this study is based on a small sample of only female participants, and more diversity in gender and location is necessary for future research. A deeper analysis of volunteer work among different ages and resident groups would also be valuable. Assessing the long-term development and relevance of volunteer work in urban-rural relationships is important, especially as the borders between the two continue to blur.

Bibliography

Boven, Thekla, Ariga, Takashi and Worrall, Julian. 2017. "Culture-led Reuse of Former Elementary Schools: A Survey of Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial's Involvement in Tokamachi, Japan." *Journal of Asian Architecture and Building Engineering* 16 (1): 61–66.

Cai, Gangwei et al. 2020. "The Positive Impacts of Exhibition-Driven Tourism on Sustainable Tourism, Economics, and Population: The Case of the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale in Japan." *International journal of environmental research and public health* 17 (5): 1-24.

Favell, Adrian. 2015. "Echigo-Tsumari and the Art of the Possible: The Fram Kitagawa Philosophy in Theory and Practice". Pp. 142–173 in *Art Place Japan. The Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale and the Vision to Reconnect Art and Nature*, edited by Fram Kitagawa. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.

Jesty, Justin. 2021. "Japan's Rural Art Festivals. The Echigo-Tsumari Paradigm." Pp. 23–36 in *The Routledge companion to art in the public realm*, edited by Cameron Cartiere and Leon Tan. New York, London: Routledge.

Klien, Susanne. 2010a. "Collaboration or confrontation? Local and non-local actors in the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale." *Contemporary Japan* 22: 153–178.

Klien, Susanne. 2010b. "Contemporary art and regional revitalisation. Selected artworks in the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial 2000-6." *Japan Forum* 22 (3–4): 513–543.

Klien, Susanne. 2009. "Ländliche Regionen und Tourismusvermarktung zwischen Revitalisierung oder Exotisierung: das Beispiel Echigo-Tsumari." *Japan: Politik, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* 2009: 217–241.

Kobayashi, Rune. 2014. "The Role of Art Projects for the Aging Society of Japan in the Context of Rural Regeneration: Entering a New Era of Asking Why We Need 'Art' Projects?" Pp. 101-124 in *Japanisch-Deutsches Zentrum, Berlin*. Retrieved February 20, 2023 (https://www.jdzb.de/fileadmin/Redaktion/PDF/veroeffentlichungen/tagungsbaende/D64/P1581_21_Kobayashi.pdf).

Qu, Meng and Funck, Carolin. 2021. "Rural art festival revitalizing a Japanese declining tourism island." Pp. 51–68 in *Cultural sustainability, tourism and development. (re)articulations in tourism contexts*, edited by Nancy Duxbury. London, New York: Routledge.

Takahashi, Naoko. 2015. *The role of arts festivals in contemporary Japan*. Leicester: Arts and Festival Management De Montfort University.

吉本光宏, 2014 「トリエンナーレの時代、国際芸術祭は何を問いかけているのか」 . NLI Research Institute. Retrieved February 20, 2023 (https://www.nli-research.co.jp/files/topics/41479_ext_18_0.pdf?site=nli).