The world’s rural places face an increasingly pessimistic future. Urbanization and modernization, globalization and economic rationalization, depopulation and social shrinking—these phenomenon put rural places in circumstances where they must compete in what is an increasingly high-stakes contest of social and economic survival, while at the same time, handicapping them in their efforts to do so. As economic, institutional, political and social powers are increasingly concentrated in and shifted among global mega-cities, the rural places of the world are left behind and left out. However, as these trends continue, and their implications and outcomes become increasingly clear, there is also an emerging understanding of the value of rural places—an awareness that they fulfill many important roles in contemporary society and that they are meaningful, if only to the people who live and work in them. Attention then turns to how to ensure their future. This is the primary focus of this book: identifying a means of providing appropriate, meaningful and sustainable futures for rural places.

This book takes up this challenge through examination of a highly peripheral place in a highly-developed modern nation-state; a place that is host to a wealth of historical and cultural richness, yet is also in dire need of revitalization. This book focuses on that place, and two locally-traditional commodities that share an origin in this place. This is the second focus of this book is a detailed examination of both a unique place and its two highly-specific cultural commodities. This examination yields a conclusion showing how the differing historical trajectories of specific commodities, which bring them to distinctly different contemporary circumstances, also yield contrasting contributions for local revitalization. Taking these two local cultural commodities in combination, however, the research leads to a means for better recognizing both the character of cultural commodities and how these characteristics contribute to the future of the host area, in organizing a more broadly appealing, yet distinctive and sustainable approach to revitalization, through identification of the conceptual and operational space that these cultural commodities provide it.
Cultural Commodities in Local Revitalization

Times change, circumstances change and the strategies employed by places in forging a future must likewise change, particularly for the peripheral places of the world. Looking to the future, the cities, towns and villages of rural places must organize policies that not only ensure a quality of life and are locally meaningful, but are also sustainable and competitive nationally and globally. These polices must incorporate a broad combination of elements, some of which must link to the universal principles of local revitalization, with others specific to the place itself, shaped by its unique social history and contemporary cultural character. This book examines a part of this complex equation by focusing on a place called Tsugaru and two prominent cultural commodities of Tsugaru and their role in local revitalization.

The Tsugaru District and Tsugaru Cultural Commodities

Much of rural Japan is uncertain about the future, due in no small part to a dramatic change in the central government’s relationship with these outlying areas. From the post-war period in the late 1940s and early 1950s through to the period of high economic growth of the 1960s, and on through the bubble economy of the 1980s and 1990s, the central government directed much of economic, political and societal functions of Japanese society, meaning that progress was, by and large, focused on the metropolitan areas of Kanto and Kansai, predominantly Tokyo and Osaka. This was, to a degree, justified, as Japan was focusing on rebuilding after the war and thereafter centralized most political and economic activities with an aim toward competitive participation at an international level. This centralization has, however, forced two unanticipated and inter-related realities: first, that progress ensured at the center does not automatically equal progress everywhere else, and second, that such lack of progress elsewhere ultimately compromises the power of the center to generate progress anywhere. This dual reality forced the Japanese central government to initiate a policy of *bunkenka* (decentralization), culminating in the *Heisei Gappei*, the municipal mergers of the Heisei Period. These two consecutive policy trends have forced the outlying areas of Japan to recognize that the fate of their communities, the fate of the economies of their communities, and the fate of the lives of the residents who live in these communities, now depend less on the national government in