CHAPTER TWO

THE TSUGARU DISTRICT OF AOMORI PREFECTURE

This study focuses on a real place, examining real cultural commodities in real local policy. That place is the Tsugaru District, a historically and culturally defined district located in the western half of Aomori prefecture. The research will focus on Tsugaru revitalization policy in its relevance to the cultural resources of Tsugaru on the one hand, along with examination of the two dominant Tsugaru cultural commodities, Tsugaru nuri lacquerware and Tsugaru shamisen music performance, on the other. Aomori Prefecture and the Tsugaru District provide a suitable case study site, first by providing an example of a clearly peripheral area in an economically-advanced nation-state and second by virtue of the distinctiveness of the cultural commodities base it provides as well as the concrete place-name designation of Tsugaru lacquerware and Tsugaru shamisen.

Contextualizing Local Revitalization in Aomori Prefecture

While social and economic peripheralization have characterized Aomori Prefecture’s relationship with the rest of Japan for most of the 20th century, this has been exacerbated in the early years of the 21st, with the Heisei Gappei, the municipal mergers of the Heisei Period. Kohara (2007: 9) asserted that the Heisei mergers were instituted on the basis of the national government’s view that the dissolution and merging of small municipalities into more effective administrative units was of primary importance in restoring Japan’s national fiscal health. With deficits increasing across levels of governmental functions throughout Japan, the central government estimated that costs for administrative services by small municipalities could be cut drastically by bringing about their amalgamation with other, often larger, municipalities. Assuming this will prove true, the Heisei Mergers can be viewed as a success numerically, as they nearly halved the number of municipalities in Japan, from 3,232 as of 1999 to 1,820 by 2006. However,
the reality of the mergers, as well as the post-merger fallout that will inevitably arrive, temper such a unilaterally positive assessment.

First of all, the mergers, and the resulting reconfiguration of population and resources, did not proceed uniformly throughout the country. In general, rural prefectures saw the number of municipalities fall, in some cases dropping to a quarter of what they had been, while other urban prefectures often underwent little change. Top in terms of decrease was Hiroshima, which went from 86 municipalities to just 23, followed by Ehime, Nagasaki, Oita and Niigata; the five prefectures with the smallest change in number of municipalities were Nara, Hokkaido, Kanagawa, Tokyo and Osaka (Osaka lost only one out of an original 44 municipalities).

While consolidation of services in remote areas yields greater savings than the same measures in more densely populated areas, thereby justifying this unequal distribution, the second of the merger realities is more impacting. Despite justifications otherwise, the financial incentives that were the default driving force for the mergers fail the test—savings in local administrative services previously borne by the national government will be offset by the increase in tax allocations required for repayment of the special local bonds that were issued by newly merged municipalities to build new administrative units. Third, and perhaps most importantly for the rural areas that underwent such dramatic restructuring, Kanai (2007) asserts that the long-term implications of the decentralization that underlie the Heisei Mergers will “debilitate functions and services essential to regional vitality and quality of life. The cessation of fiscal support from the national government would oblige Japan’s local governments to fend for themselves,” (5).

As of January 2005, the Heisei Mergers in Aomori Prefecture yielded 16 new prefectural cities, towns and villages from 42 pre-merger, with an additional 23 having decided to remain independent. In truth, exclusion from merging was forced on numerous of these twenty-three due to their inability to attract merger partners, this a consequence of their own dismal fiscal circumstances. Ten of the 16 mergers could be characterized as a joining of one or more less-populated partners with a more-populated municipality. In several cases, a smaller municipality, fiscally sound and known for its high standard of local services, was merged with a larger town or city with a less stellar reputation on both counts.

Pre-merger concerns in Aomori focused primarily on identity and service, as the residents of smaller villages and towns of outlying areas