CHAPTER SEVEN

CULTURAL COMMODITIES AND LOCAL REVITALIZATION

The contents of this book has focused on the cultural commodities of a peripheral area of an advanced nation state, examined with the aim of illuminating the role these commodities can play in the revitalization of that area. The research site was the Tsugaru District of Aomori Prefecture and the cultural commodities were Tsugaru nuri lacquerware and Tsugaru shamisen music. A framework organized the relationship between cultural commodities and local revitalization as one of place, process and product, which in concrete terms brought the focus to policy, production and consumption. This chapter first takes up the applied question of Tsugaru District revitalization and cultural commodities, in the form of a culture economy, in Tsugaru District revitalization and the specific future of the two cultural commodities. The chapter then highlights a linking of cultural commodities and local revitalization—first through an examination of the importance of historical trajectory for the cultural commodities and second through identification of the potential of these cultural commodities in their conceptual and operational spaces.

Tsugaru Revitalization: Government Policy and a Culture Economy

Economic policy for Aomori Prefecture and Hirosaki City as outlined in the plans and policies examined in Chapter Four acknowledges the reality of the local natural resource base of the area, which in the form of cultural commodities translates to agricultural products and tourism. The Hirosaki City Comprehensive Plan focuses on local agricultural resources and tourism, together with a local industrial base that prioritizes Tsugaru lacquerware and a municipal budget that reflects a range of specific measures to improve these areas. Analysis of the Hirosaki City Commerce, Industry and Tourism Department reveals an emphasis on a commerce approach consisting of finance measures to support these aims, followed by operational support and promotion of local tourism and local products.
These policies reflect the reality of life in Aomori Prefecture and the Tsugaru District—an objective reality of peripherality and limited opportunity. While being the top national producer of several agricultural and fisheries products and near the top in numerous others, Aomori, in reality, has a rural employment economy with below-average prefectural income levels, below-average small enterprise sales levels, negative population growth and an aging population. Conflicting attitudes can be seen in self-assessments of Tsugaru identity, with clear recognition of the natural resource base and the importance of agriculture and fisheries countered by dismissal of both local enterprise and industry as well as local solidarity and participation. Agriculture and fisheries were viewed as primary factors in Tsugaru development, along with cultural commodities and events, and interestingly, innovation and entrepreneurship and new industry and enterprise—the latter clearly contradicting the rejection of local enterprise of the identity findings. In a similar manner, local consumer support of local enterprise was emphasized in relation to development, contradicting the rejection of local solidarity as a Tsugaru identity trait.

As a part of the culture economy necessary to realize the potential of cultural commodities in revitalization, media representation of local development and revitalization was abundant and clear in its orientation. Tourism, product branding and product quality and safety (particularly in agricultural products), together with local financing, local cooperation between industry, government and research together with local consumption of local products (chisan-chishō) were clearly prioritized in this representation. The completion of the Shinkansen high-speed train link between Tokyo and Hachinohe City, to be extended to Aomori City, and the potential presented by the Heisei-era municipal mergers were represented as important externally-controlled elements of local revitalization. The potential of culture in local development was also identified in the opinions of local residents and cultural commodities producers—indicative of a grassroots recognition of this purely local element as well. Well-informed or not, these responses reflected an emphasis on local festivals and the area’s natural resources, followed by priorities that emphasized local character, local tradition and a local consciousness of that tradition, along with tourism promotion and a consciousness that supports entrepreneurship based on that local character and tradition.