

A bifurcation of rural gentrification?: An experience of Sasayama, Hyogo

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Abstract

Gentrification has been regarded as a very urban phenomenon unique to the inner city. It is the process of reinvestment by capital in old, deteriorated districts, resulting in changes in the landscape and the constitution of social class, as well as displacing existing low-income residents. However, gentrification is believed to occur not only in the inner city but also in rural areas. Hence, how do we understand this ‘rural’ gentrification phenomenon?

This paper tries to provide a possible understanding of ‘rural gentrification’, by referring to characteristics of the contemporary economy. In the setting of the contemporary ‘economy of enrichment’, (re)valuation of a place is regarded as a crucial process and it can lead to two divergent outcomes; it might produce ‘commons’, while also risking the problem of gentrification. This study examines this bifurcation of ‘rural gentrification’, specifically in Sasayama.

Sasayama is a small city in Hyogo prefecture located nearly 50 km away from large cities in the Kansai such as Osaka, Kyoto and Kobe. It faces the serious problems common to rural areas, such as an ageing population, population decline and a rise in the number of vacant houses. Meanwhile, a series of renovation projects is being undertaken and measures towards community revitalisation are being conducted.

1. Introduction

Gentrification occurs through the process of reinvestment by capital in old, deteriorated districts, and it results in landscape changes and the constitution of social classes, displacing existing low-income residents (Smith 1996, Lees et al. 2016, Fujitsuka 2017). Typically, gentrification has been regarded as an urban conflictual phenomenon that is unique to the inner city.

However, many researchers have recently started to mention so-called ‘rural gentrification’, which involves changing the countryside in the above-mentioned manner (Phillips 2005, Castree et al. 2013)¹. Although research on the topic has been relatively limited to the United Kingdom and the United States, the number of studies focusing on ‘rural gentrification’ has been increasing since the 2000s (Phillips & Smith 2018). This implies that the concept has been adopted at a certain level, although this might still be contested. In addition, it implies that the ‘rural gentrification’ phenomenon has been increasing. Furthermore, the phenomenon is also widely observed in non-Anglo-Saxon countries (Phillips & Smith 2018). For instance, some rural areas in Japan are currently experiencing changes similar to ‘rural gentrification’ (Yamamoto 2017). How are we to understand this phenomenon?

According to Scott (2008), gentrification should be understood in the new context of the socio-economy in a post-Fordist era, named the ‘cognitive-cultural economy’, which tends to involve a strong concentration in urban areas. The new cognitive-cultural elites that are engaged in these sectors can become gentrifiers of the old working-

1. It is characterised by the reinvestment of capital, social upgrading of a locale by incoming higher-income groups, changes and upgrades to the landscape and the displacement of indigenous low-income groups (Castree et al. 2013).

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class neighbourhoods in inner-city areas.

For an understanding of gentrification, one should consider at least two aspects in this context: capitalist enterprises' profit-seeking activity (driven by capital accumulation) and social change that is characterized by a new preference (or spirit) for authenticity and singularity (Florida 2005, Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). Such social change enables the operation of changing an industrial brownfield into industrial 'patrimony', namely the traditional architecture or the authentic atmosphere of a neighbourhood, that are attractive to gentrifiers (Boltanski and Esquerre 2017). It seems that these two aspects should also be considered in examinations of 'rural gentrification'². In other words, does capital-accumulation motivation drive this process, and is it characterised by the construction of attractiveness for possible gentrifiers?

In this paper, by referring to characteristics of the contemporary economy, we try to provide a possible understanding of 'rural gentrification'. For this tentative effort, it seems useful to mention the concepts of the 'economy of enrichment' and of (re)valuation (*(re)mise en valeur*) of 'what already exists' (e.g. traditional artisanal products, historical hotels, industrial areas), things which have links to the past, as elaborated by the French sociologists Boltanski and Esquerre (2017). Boltanski and Esquerre (2017) discussed the contemporary economy—which tends to be an 'economy of enrichment', and emphasise the idea that places are enriched when they are given a meaning. They defined value as 'an apparatus (*dispositif*) of justification or of criticism of the price of things' (p. 13). In other words, they adopted a pragmatic approach to values which are constructed as a result of the process of valuation (*valorisation*)³.

This paper deals with a process which could be seen as an apparent 'rural gentrification', using Sasayama, a small Japanese city, as the area of study. By taking a closer look at the renovation projects—which have been seen as part of a valuation process of already existing things—that have been implemented in Sasayama, we shall examine whether this city's experience could be considered an experience of 'rural gentrification'.

Sasayama is located in Hyogo prefecture in the Kansai, nearly 50 km away from metropolitan areas such as Osaka, Kyoto and Kobe. Sasayama faces the serious problems that are generally observable in rural areas, such as an ageing population, population decline and an increased number of vacant houses. In Sasayama, a series of renovation projects has been undertaken in an innovative way to restore traditional houses, and measures to revitalise the community have been implemented. During this process, incoming residents and shop owners can be observed, along with changes in the neighbourhood.

2. (Re)valuation of what already exists

2.1 Valuation and enrichment

In this section, we shall briefly describe the socio-economic changes that occurred in the post-Fordist era and the paradigm shifts that occurred in urban areas, especially in advanced Western countries. As mentioned above, Boltanski and Esquerre (2017) argue that the contemporary economy has different characteristics from the economy of the Fordist era. In the era of mass production, profits were earned from the invention of new goods and their utility, through valuation under a 'standard form'. Newer goods had higher value, and consequently, old goods tended to depreciate in value and were regarded as inferior products that must be renewed.

In contrast, in the contemporary 'economy of enrichment', value is principally found in the past; (re)valuation (enrichment) of goods that contain the 'past' generates profits and value can be enhanced with time. For example, a re-issued model of a watch is enriched by the long history of the manufacturer, and a restaurant that renovates a former factory or warehouse is enriched by the history of its location and its architectural style. In this context, older goods have a higher value than newer ones.

2. A number of studies on rural gentrification recognise the contextual differences and the incommensurability between urban and rural gentrification. They emphasise the importance of furthering the debate about rural gentrification by accumulating and comparing case studies, keeping their contextual differences in mind (Phillips & Smith 2018).

3. 'Instead of placing the value downstream of the price and in things themselves, as in the case of classical economists', they will place 'the value downstream of the price' (Boltanski and Esquerre 2017, p.111).

The shift to an ‘economy of enrichment’ involved the following steps. First, the value of the past was socially accepted. Things that had disappeared or were disappearing received a lot of attention. Second, the former conditions for generating profit collapsed with deindustrialisation after the end of a period of high economic growth. Private capitals faced the reality that they had to explore alternatives to the manufacturing industry or mass production, and they became motivated to generate profit from (re)valuation.

The current boom of the renovation of old architecture, such as churches, factories and stations, is partly due to this economic motivation, and it creates both the possibility of revitalisation and the risks of gentrification. At the same time, renovation can be considered an alternative to the orthodox approach to urbanism, as described in the following section.

2.2 The emergence of a new trend in urbanism

In the context of the contemporary economy mentioned in the previous section, a parallel tendency concerning urbanism emerged.

In the past, during the period of high economic growth, new constructions were positively valued. Large-scale urban projects containing modernist ideas, including the construction of high-density social housing blocks, de-/re-construction of neighbourhoods and infrastructure construction, were implemented in urban and suburban areas. In particular, high-density social housing blocks symbolise the dominant vision of urbanism in that period. They were built from industrial materials using prefabrication methods, and they were large and planar, embodying the modernist ideals of rationalism, future orientation and social reform by providing access to an appropriate lifestyle.

In this regard, new or renewed urban areas with modernist idea were regarded as superior to old urban areas. This was even truer for the countryside, which featured a provincial style. As a consequence, except for selected prestigious places, many old places such as outdated private dwellings, old but vibrant neighbourhoods, rural settlements in suburbs and areas within commuting distance from the city were destroyed.

At the end of the period of high economic growth, this situation changed. Large-scale urban projects became difficult to implement because of the economic crisis and the low economic growth in the 1970s. Moreover, high-density social housing blocks were plagued by a number of socioeconomic problems, such as unemployment, poverty and vandalism, and scepticism and criticism of them increased (Jacobs 1961). They no longer exemplified modernist ideals, and modernism was no longer regarded as the best approach to urbanism. Therefore, alternatives to the modernist approach were explored (Matsunaga 2005).

Consequently, what was ignored in the past came to be respected, including historical districts, landscapes that represent local cultures and ecological surroundings. The concept of renovation, which involves physically restoring old, devaluated buildings and districts without deconstructing them, returning their value and giving them new uses, received a lot of attention as a new approach to architecture and urbanisation. This approach is in direct opposition to large-scale de-/re-construction, and it is not necessarily economically motivated. Any place or space that has lost its value in the past is re-valuated.

2.3 The approach to renovation in Japan

The ‘economy of enrichment’ also is emerging in Japan (Tatemi 2018), leading to a boom in renovation projects. In addition, a new view concerning urbanism has emerged. This section provides a brief history of urbanism and urban planning in Japan.

After the post-World War II era, highly urbanised landscapes and advanced industrial structures were most valued. From the ‘land readjustment project of war-damaged reconstruction’⁴ to the ‘urban redevelopment project’⁵, urban planners aimed to improve the quality of urban areas and use them in a rational way. Modern high-rise concrete housing was constructed and urban infrastructure was properly arranged, while old districts, wooden houses and suburban natural surroundings were destroyed. The private sector served as the main actor in these huge re-

4. It started in 1946 and it covered 102 cities and 27877 ha.

5. It was provided for in the Urban Renewal Act of 1969.

development projects and benefitted from them through increased land prices and support by the public authorities.

Due to the prevailing ideas of modernisation, occidentalisation and economic reconstruction and growth, as well as the economic motivations of the private sector, new and future objects were important in this period, as in advanced Western countries. Modern urban forms were regarded as superior to old styles, and urbanised spaces were regarded as superior to rural spaces. In Japan, this tendency continued after the end of the period of high economic growth. During the following period of moderate growth, many large-scale reconstruction and development projects were implemented in urban and suburban areas. Japan differed from Western countries in several ways during this period. First, the de-/re-construction approach was firmly entrenched in Japan. Second, at that time, Japan had not faced any challenges that required alternative approaches.

This situation changed in the latter half of the 1990s. Due to ongoing economic stagnation and a decline in land prices, urban redevelopment projects were no longer regarded as the unique approach to urbanism. In the field of urbanism, emerged progressively urban planning and architecture which adopted attitudes that opposed modernism, embracing local history and culture, traditional landscapes and ecological settings. As a result, many renovation projects were implemented, and spaces that lost its value for a long time were re-valued. Importantly, in Japan, these projects were possible only in limited areas in urban districts, and in rural areas; due to the massive ‘urban redevelopment projects’, few historical spaces still existed. This is one reason why the (re)valuation movement occurred in the Japanese countryside.

The next section aims to answer two questions: How do spaces actually undergo (re)valuation? What are the outcomes of (re)valuation with relation to ‘rural gentrification’? To seek answers to these questions, the case of Sasayama is examined.

3. Renovation projects in Sasayama

3-1. Sasayama, a small provincial town

Sasayama is a historical provincial town, below a castle, comprised of old urban and rural areas. Two sites are officially designated as important districts in which groups of historic buildings are preserved: 40.2 ha of an old urban area with merchant houses and samurai houses, and 25.2 ha of a post station in Fukuzumi, a rural area. These traditional landscapes are some of Sasayama’s main tourist attractions aside from pottery (Tachikui-yaki) and local food. Many tourists take one-day trips to the city.

Sasayama faces the same problems as many other provincial Japanese cities. For instance, the population—41,490 in 2015—is declining⁶. Additionally, as of 2017, 32.5% of the population is aged 65 and over⁷, whereas the national rate is 27.3%. Further, the number of vacant houses is increasing. The rate of vacancy was 16.5% in 2014, 3% higher than for the zone 40-50km far from Osaka⁸. In several neighbourhoods and settlements, these problems are so severe that it is difficult to maintain the community-based socio-economic system⁹.

To overcome these circumstances, a series of measures to revitalise the community has been recently launched. Especially, one actor in civil society plays a central role in these efforts: NOTE, a general incorporated association that implements the renovation of vacant traditional houses and protects ancient heritage, ‘to attract more tourists and to bring businesses into the rural area while improving the general quality of life’¹⁰. In the following section, we shall examine projects implemented by NOTE, especially in Sasayama’s old urban area.

6. National Census in 2017. The population of Sasayama was 57,083 in 1950, 51,611 in 1960, 43,428 in 1970, 41,685 in 1980, 41,802 in 1990, 46,325 in 2000, 43,263 in 2010. It is declining, although it increased from 2000 to 2010 because of the consolidation of municipalities in 2009.

7. Sasayama City’s statistics in 2017.

8. Housing and Land Survey in 2014. In 2013, the rate of vacant houses in the zone 40-50km far from Osaka was 13.45%.

9. Collectively, these issues are known as the problem of ‘the marginal village’.

10. NOTE’s web-site. <http://plus-note.jp/english.html> (accessed 15 February 2019)



Fig. 1: Maruyama settlement



Fig. 2: Onae lodge

3-2. Projects implemented by NOTE

The most widely known project implemented by NOTE concerns the Maruyama settlement (Fig. 1). Maruyama is a small settlement that suffered from the problem of the ‘marginal village’ (i.e. difficulties in maintaining community-based social, economic and everyday activities because of an increased number of vacant houses and an ageing population). Since 2009, NOTE and residents of the settlement (a non-profit organisation ‘Settlement Maruyama’ constituted of 19 residents) have renovated and converted vacant thatched houses into restaurants and lodges. This has revitalised the settlement, attracting tourists to the classy lodges and fine restaurants, slightly increasing the population, decreasing the number of vacant houses and enabling maintenance of the agricultural landscape.

Similarly, in the old urban area (castle town) in Sasayama, NOTE renovated and converted vacant traditional houses to lodges. Thus far, four lodges, named Onae, Sawashiro, Sion and Noji, opened in 2015. They were named after the chrysanthemum, a species of flower that a general gave to the local lord in the Edo period. Two of the lodges are located in the Nishimachi neighbourhood, at the west end of the old urban area. Onae, a former merchant mansion constructed in the Meiji era, is the most luxurious in terms of price and original design. Details evoking the past were changed as little as possible (Fig. 2).

These could be regarded as good examples of enrichment. In the case of Maruyama, the settlement and rural surroundings are enriched by the traditional rural life and culture represented in the architecture. In the case of an old urban area, the place is enriched by its urban history and sophisticated culture. These examples show that non-modern characteristics, such as irrationality, lower productivity, tradition and history, which were not valued earlier in the 20th century, can enrich settlements or districts today.

New socio-economic systems and programs that fit the contemporary economy of enrichment have emerged. NOTE utilises several of these programs to realise its projects. First, it designates areas as ‘national strategic economic zones’, a deregulation system for strengthening international competitiveness that was introduced by the government in 2014. This system reduces regulation in areas with the potential for future growth. For example, hotels that are converted from old traditional houses can open without an around-the-clock attendant at the front desk, which is normally required by the Hotel Business law. Thus, a certain amount of profitability is ensured by reducing labour costs. This is what enabled the Onae lodge to open. Second, NOTE’s projects are financed by private funds and the local bank to revitalise tourism. This implies that the funding and the bank recognise traditional houses as profitable real estate, unlike previously.

As noted above, NOTE takes advantage of programs intended to increase competition and ensure profitability, and most of its lodges and restaurants are quite expensive. In this regard, NOTE seems to have an orientation

towards profitability. However, we could find another motivations in the projects. The following section describes motivations related to social objectives (or general interest) and signs of where this is occurring.

4. Towards the production of commons

4-1. Actors' motivation

According to a representative of NOTE, the organisation's projects promote an alternative to conventional thinking, which prioritises economic growth. Prioritising economic growth caused traditional local landscapes to be de-valued, ignored or destroyed in the period of high economic growth. NOTE's philosophy is partly a protest against these orthodox perspectives; the organisation aims to contribute to the inheritance of local history, culture and communities mainly through renovation projects¹¹. Yukio Kinno, a representative of NOTE, states that the 'old traditional houses were constructed using local materials and they are deeply rooted in the local climate and culture. They contain the authentic local culture, such as lifestyles and gastronomic traditions. The old traditional houses are nothing less than a local resource'¹². Moreover, NOTE has social objectives aiming to 'maintain the landscapes, farmland villages and woodlands in order to protect agriculture and organic farming'¹³, in promoting local business and revitalising a local community in decline.

Generally, when NOTE looks for new shop owners to run renovated houses, they focus on whether the candidates want to help generate social benefits and participate in the activities of the local community.

4-2. The production of commons

NOTE's practices, motivated by pursuing social benefits, likely contribute to the maintenance and expansion of 'commons', defined as resources and areas of cultural heritage that are open to all individuals (Coriat 2015). The organisation's activities lead to the production of commons as NOTE cooperates with local residents, actors involved in community revitalisation and new residents and shop owners.

In this regard, first, let us consider the renovation sites. In the case of NOTE, a renovation project is often implemented with the participation of indigenous and new residents as well as volunteers. To produce and maintain commons, the things that are recognised as valuable which could become commons must always be defined by discussion among the all individuals involved. Renovation sites provide the opportunity to discuss a new way of using traditional houses as commons. Because of the long history of modernist thought (or a type of valuation under 'standard form' according to Boltanski and Esquerre), residents have tended to under-estimate the value of local traditional houses. NOTE's projects play a role in raising awareness of alternative types of value through renovation, especially for local residents.

Other actors also play a role in this. For example, a local association, Machiya-ken, conducts house-restoration workshops at actual renovation sites. The association enlists volunteers to participate in the restoration and thus gain knowledge about traditional architectural styles and learn new skills. The visualization of a renovation site can raise awareness of the value of traditional local houses. In addition, new shop owners and residents who prefer renovated houses contribute to this. Consequently, the concept of value among residents seems to be changing¹⁴.

11. Presentation provided by Yukio Kinno on November 17th 2015.

12. *Asahi Journal* dated January 6th, p.8, 2016.

13. Note's web-site. <http://plus-note.jp/english.html> (accessed 15 February 2019)

14. Cited previously: *Asahi Journal* dated January 6th, p.8, 2016.



Fig. 3: A poster for an event, 'Nishimachi- Flea Market'

NOTE also promotes local-community revitalisation activities (Fig. 3). For example, an event conducted by new and local shop owners is scheduled in Nishimachi, where Onae is located. This event is a good opportunity for new and local residents to discuss and share their visions for the community and what will be commons. In addition, it also helps minimise conflict between new and old residents.

5. Conclusion

Through the experience of Sasayama, we can provide information for debate about ‘rural gentrification’ in Japan.

The following aspects of the case of Sasayama were discussed. First, the projects conducted in Sasayama emerged from the severe problems faced by rural areas in Japan. Second, they were possible due to the emergence of the ‘economy of enrichment’, which (re)values historical things and places, such as the traditional houses and rural landscapes of Sasayama. Third, the projects implemented by NOTE were not motivated only by profitability but also by an increasing awareness of an alternative to conventional modernist thought. Fourth, the observed cooperation among local actors has the potential to lead to the production of commons.

In the first section, we identified two drivers of gentrification: the role of capitalist enterprises that seek private profit and the construction of what is attractive for possible gentrifiers. As far as this relates to Sasayama, the latter was clearly observed through the valuation of what already existed in an ‘economy of enrichment’. However, as for the former, the motivation of actors is different, that is, oriented to social benefit or commons.

In general, (re)valuation of a place is regarded as a crucial process. It could lead to two divergent outcomes. First, it could lead to gentrification. Any old district, architecture or landscape can be enriched, but doing so has risks. Second, (re)valuation could revitalize deteriorating districts. In this regard, (re)valuation in an economy of enrichment could lead to the production of commons that are open to everyone (Harvey 2012). Thus, (re)valuation is ambiguous; it could lead to the production of commons or their deprivation. This highlights the importance of considering this bifurcation of the (re)valuation process, which also results in the bifurcation of ‘rural gentrification’.

The process of (re)valuation is relatively positive in comparison to gentrification. However, it must be remembered that the changes are still in an early stage and the contemporary situation can easily change. Hence, further detailed studies must be continued.

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