

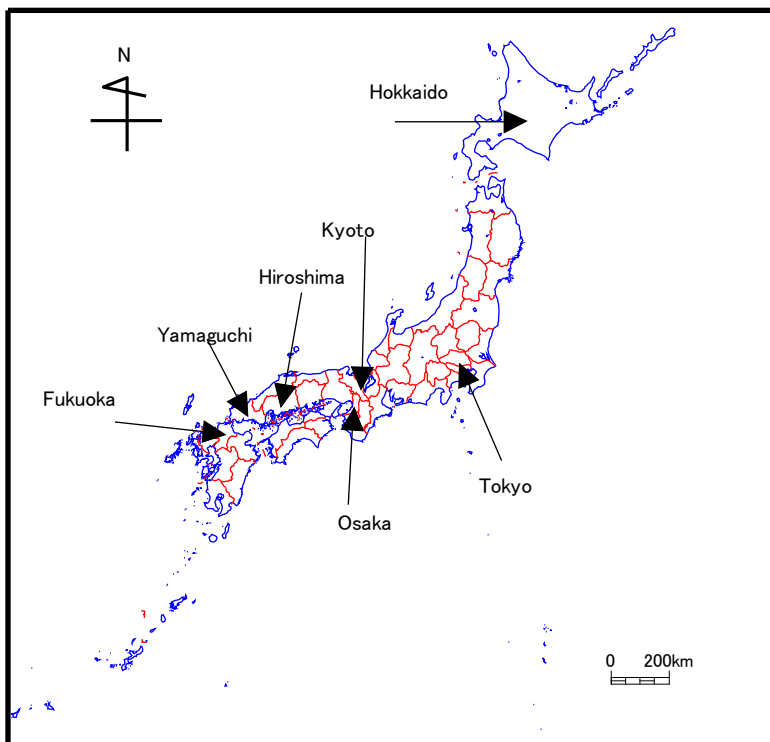
A Challenge for Rural Tourism Attraction: Case Study of Mine City, Yamaguchi Prefecture

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Introduction

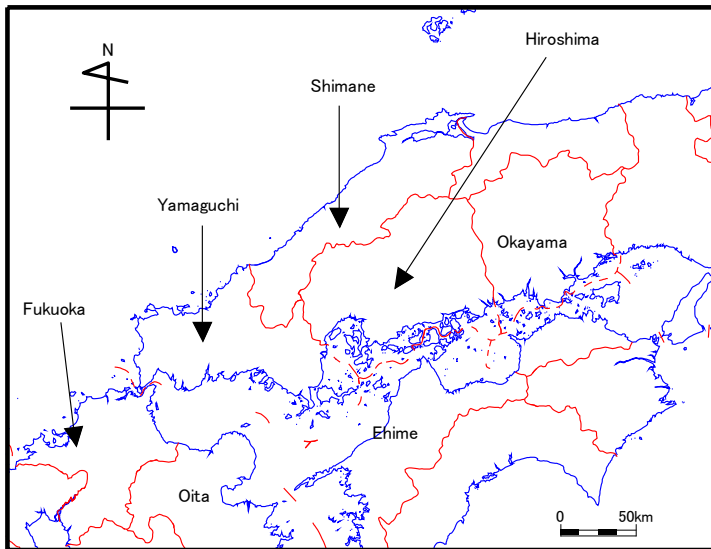
This paper, by describing the case of Mine City in Yamaguchi Prefecture, aims to discuss the growth of alternative tourism pathways currently in Japan. Yamaguchi Prefecture is located at the far west corner of Honshu Island. Mine is an inland city in this prefecture (Fig.1 and 2). Due to its unique and famous landscapes, such as Akiyoshi Do (Akiyoshi Cave) and Akiyoshi Dai (Akiyoshi Karst Plateau), Mine City has attracted a lot of tourists. The Safari park near Akiyoshi Dai is also an important tourist attraction in itself. However, the trend in Japanese tourism is changing from group tour to individual travel, and as a consequence, these tourist attractions are facing hard times.

Figure 1 Map of Japan



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Figure 2 Map of Yamaguchi Prefecture

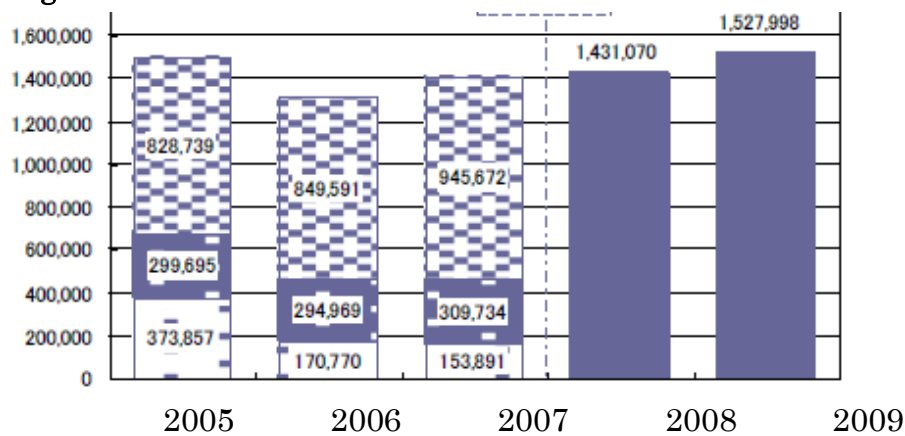


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1. Problems of Tourism in Mine

According to Mine City (2011), the number of tourists to Mine looked stable from 2005 to 2009 (Fig.3). However, according to long term statistics, the number of tourists to Akiyoshi Dai, one of the major tourist destinations, is decreasing (Fig.4).

Figure 3 Number of Tourists to Mine

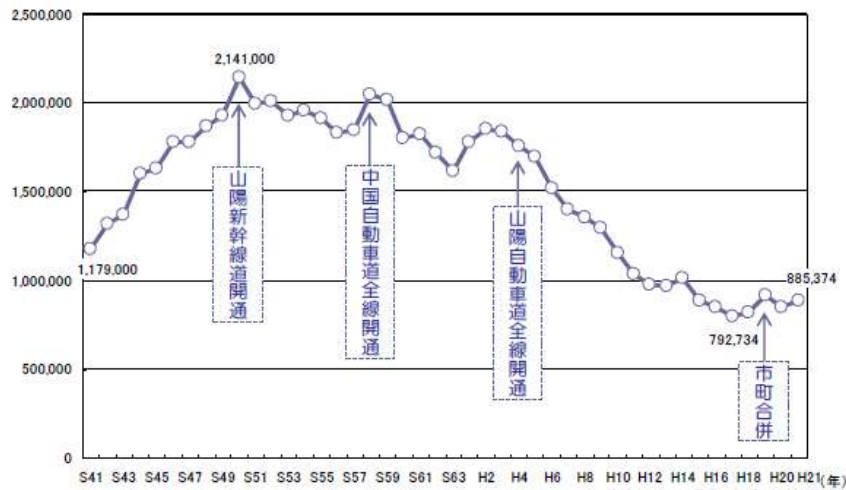


Note: Figure 3 shows the combined statistics of Shuhou Town (spot), Mitou Town (paint) and old Mine (white) from 2005 to 2007. The new Mine City was

established in 2008.

Source: Mine City (2011) p.7

Figure 4 Number of Tourists to Akiyoshi Dai



Note: S41=1966, H1=1989

Source: Mine City (2011) p.7

Developments in transportation infrastructure in Yamaguchi Prefecture, such as the Sanyo Shinkansen High Speed Railway (Osaka to Fukuoka: 1975), Chugoku Highway (Osaka to Inland Yamaguchi: 1983) and Sanyo Highway (Osaka to Coastal Yamaguchi: 1997) did not contribute to attracting tourists to Akiyoshi Dai permanently. These transportation systems contribute to increase tourists to the far remote areas, especially in Kyushu.

Except for coastal areas which have airports and Shinkansen stations, secondary public transportation systems in Yamaguchi Prefecture are inconvenient. This inefficient public transportation system is a major disadvantage (obstacle) in attracting individual travelers. On the other hand, due to the depopulation of Mine City, development of a new public transportation system is not a feasible solution.

2. Alternative Tourism as a Solution

To overcome these disadvantages, a different point of view is called for. Around Akiyoshi Dai, there are a lot of natural and historical walking trails. During the 1970s and 80s, Japanese tourists were group oriented. To invite these kinds of mass-tourists, effective transportation system and large accommodation facilities were needed. However, as previously mentioned, sometimes effective transportation systems also create competitive tourist destinations in remote areas.

On the other hand, after the burst of the economic bubble in the early 1990s, individual tourists aim to do their own research to find proper accommodation. More recently, individual trekkers have been observed. As trekkers do not need additional public transportation, there is a greater potential to increase tourists without new development (Figure 5). International trekkers from neighboring countries are also increasing at Akiyoshi Dai (Figure 6). Like other remote areas in Japan, Mine is aspiring to be a “Geopark” (Mine City 2014: newsletter). Geoparks are geologically important areas which attract many tourists especially in Europe and East Asia.

Figure 5 Public Announcement Paper on Trekking



Source: Mine City (2013) *Genki Mine*, No.115, Front Page

Figure 6 International Trekkers from Korea



Source: Yamaguchi Shinbun (2013) p.16

3. Historical Trails and Local Volunteers

Historical heritage is another important attraction for alternative tourists. There are numerous historically significant places from former mining sites dating back to the Nara Period (AD 710-794) to war memorials erected during the Edo Period (AD 1603-1868) and the Meiji Period (AD 1868-1912) in Mine City. An example of this is the ruins of ancient cooper mines being re-developed as historical tourism sites (Fig. 7 and 8).

Figure 7 Former Naganobori Copper Mine



Photo by author (August 27, 2013)

Figure 8 Copper Mine Museum



Photo by author (August 27, 2013)

Point to point tourism is important at the first stage. However, a novel way to overcome challenges posed by inadequate traffic infrastructure is the development of walking tours from local centers. On the other hand, the maintenances of walking trails need human resources. Local residents and local university students are supporting these walking events as volunteer staff. Since 2011, walking events at Akamagaseki historical trail in Mine City have been conducted by local residents (Yamaguchi Shinbun 2011: web). Since 2013, local university volunteers financially supported by Yamaguchi prefectural government are supporting these events (Fig.9 and 10).

Figure 9 Map of Akamagaseki Historical Trail



Photo by author (August 27, 2013)

Figure 10 Walking Signs and Brief Explanations



Photo by author (August 27, 2013)

4. New Innovation of Old Destinations

As mentioned above, Akiyoshi Dai has several tourist destinations. Natural and historical trails connect each tourist destination along a course. More recently, however, a wider destination networking is also being created. For example, “Rogaining” is a relatively new imported attraction to Japan; historical destinations are also being used as check points for this event (Fig.11).

Figure 11 Rogaining on the Public Announcement Paper



Mine City (2013) *Genki Mine*, No116, front page

When historical trails are re-developed, they can be marketed as historical trekking courses, like the Akamagaseki historical trail. However, to maintain these courses, some of the human resources are needed as mentioned above. Sometimes local tour guides with some historical knowledge are also required.

On the other hand, Rogaining does not require a specific course despite it being a walking event. As participants of Rogaining have self-navigation knowledge, only maps and minimal information are required. When this event is organized in the off-peak season, existing accommodations near the local center are large enough for the trekkers. If local volunteers can manage the check points or water stands, low cost walking events become possible (Fig.12). Both natural and historical monuments can be check points for this event and many of the local communities have the possibility to be a host.

Figure 12 Check Point near Historical Monument



Photo by author (October 5, 2013)

Conclusion

As the trend in Japanese tourism is changing from group tours to individual travel, pre-bubble tourist attractions are facing hard times. To invite a lot of individual tourists, inefficient public transportation systems in depopulated areas are a major disadvantage. To overcome these disadvantages, Mine City is creating various kinds of walking events. To assist local events in the depopulated areas, student volunteers are also acting as an important role.

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