

Obuse: From a Small, Rural Japanese Town into an Urban Phoenix¹

by
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Abstract

Many local towns and cities in highly centralized Japanese administrative system have been struggling to financially and politically autonomous especially ever since the beginning of modernization. One of them was Obuse with the total population of about 12,000. It became over the last three decades a highly successful local autonomy widely recognized for its innovative development measures to achieve respectable economic and cultural development. This case study is intended to explore the possible factors which contributed to its success with a particular focus on the role of popular participation. It is mainly based on a number of interviews with residents of Obuse including the mayor and the chairperson of the Obuse Town Assembly and the published materials at the Obuse town library during three field visits of the author to the town in 2011 and 2016. The study first describes chronologically the measures to restore and strengthen the economic activities of Obuse and attempts to assess the key contributing factors to the transformation of this small rural town into a financially and culturally attractive entity.

Keywords: Japan, Obuse, Urban Development, Local Governance,

Historical and Geographical Background

Obuse, a small rural town in the north-eastern part of the landlocked prefecture of Nagano, is located in a valley at the altitude of 300 to 400 meters (about 900 to 1200 feet) above the sea level. It is surrounded by five mountains and two main rivers, the Chikuma and the Matsukawa. Its land area is only about 4km by 5km, or 19.12 km² with a population of 11,165 inhabitants, or 3,757 households, as of May 2016. The annual rain fall is rather small - less than 1,000mm, while the national average is about 1,600 mm. The temperature fluctuates significantly: from the high of about 35C degrees in summer to the low of about minus 10C degrees in winter. The town has suffered from frequent floods caused by the rivers, in particular the Matsukawa River, which contains chemicals including sulfur, which makes the soil too acidic for rice cultivation, but suitable for fruits and nuts, especially chestnuts (Obuse Machi. d, p. 1.).

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The area in and around Obuse was already inhabited about 10,000 years ago. There is some evidence that human settlements existed and that rice was cultivated there around 1st century CE. There is also evidence that the Yamato imperial dynasty established military outposts in this area in the fifth century CE to subjugate the indigenous people living in the northern part of Japan, before the rise of samurai clans, which brought about a fall in the influence of the imperial dynasty and aristocratic clans in Kyoto. Later, thanks to its strategic importance, the Obuse area enjoyed a uniquely close relationship with the old capital of Japan, Kyoto (Kobayashi and Kinoshita, p. 14 and p. 18). During the warring period of Japan in the 12th and 13th centuries CE, there were numerous battles among the feudal lords in Nagano prefecture until the unification of Japan achieved finally Tokugawa Ieyasu at the beginning of the 17th century. By the end of the rule by the Tokugawa family in the 19th century, the transportation and communication system, including the “highways” between the seat of the Tokugawa military government in Edo (present day Tokyo) and various urban or commercial areas, as well as river transportation system based on the Chikuma River, were well developed in this region. Obuse became one of the commercial hubs of the region although it remained a small rural community. (Obuse Machi d, p. 1.)

Due to geographical and geological reasons, Obuse was not known as a rice producing town during the Warring and Edo periods, although it did produce some rice. It had to develop its economy based on other agricultural products such as chestnuts, which it used, before the Meiji period, to pay tax to the local and central governments instead of rice, which was the common means of paying tax at that time. By the beginning of the 19th century (1804-1817), the quality of Obuse chestnuts improved and the town started making processed products in the form of confectionary sweets which were sold by its merchants widely, along with processed rapeseed oil, demonstrating an enterprising spirit that brought prosperity to the town. These products became important economic outputs and still remain the key products of Obuse, along with apples, grapes and wine (Kobayashi and Kinoshita, p. 26 and p. 38.). The town of Obuse now boasts of having the “6th economic sector”, composed of the primary economic sector, combined with the secondary and third sector industries (1 x 2 x 3 = 6), and comprising the production, processing and commercial sales of agricultural produce.

However, with the opening of Japan to the world market, which included the opening of Yokohama port for international trade in 1859, silk became the most attractive product, generating foreign currency needed by the new Meiji government and income and employment opportunity for many rural Japanese. The government encouraged the planting of mulberry trees to replace chestnut and other types of plants in many rural areas of Japan, including Obuse. Japan thus became one of the major producers and exporters of silk and silk products until the stock market crash in New York in 1929, which also dealt a serious blow to the economy of Obuse. Fortunately, however, Obuse was spared from an economic disaster thanks to the cultivation of apples that had been wisely promoted in the town since the beginning of the 20th century.

During World War II, Obuse suffered from the destruction of the national economy, the consequences of which were manifested especially by high infant mortality and the prevalence of various communicable diseases, such as tuberculosis. The infant mortality rate in 1924 was 122.0 per 1,000 live births, and did not improve very much during the war period: 99.2 and 80.1 in 1930 and 1943, respectively. It was still 61.4 per 1,000 live births in 1947, two years after the war, and did not decrease to 12.3 until 1960, the beginning of the rapid economic growth of

Japan. In fact, Nagano prefecture, including Obuse, was known as one of the poorest areas in Japan at that time. Nonetheless, the infant mortality rate there went further down to 8.2 in 1980, to 4.4 in 1990 and 1.5 in 2010. Another useful indicator of the living conditions in Obuse are the intestinal parasitic infection rates of school children. In 1948 the ringworm intestinal parasitic infection rate for 1,405 grade school children in Obuse was 72.5 percent, but this disease was eradicated shortly afterward. The improvement of the health conditions in Obuse, as well as in the neighboring city of Suzaka, was in part due the effort of the predecessor of the Japan Family Planning Association, which promoted the so called “New Life Movement” and aimed to improve rural health conditions in this region by reducing infant and maternal mortality and eradicating communicable diseases. Nagano prefecture is now known to have the longest longevity in Japan surpassing that of Okinawa. (Nagano, pp. 66-67, Obuse Machi, b, p. 795; Obuse Machi, g, p. 1 and *Garbagenews*. net; and JOICFP, 5-23)

Obuse, like Japan as a whole, went through the post war reconstruction and experienced a rapid economic growth in the 1960s, especially through the change and expansion of the physical infrastructure. In Japan urbanization was carried out by constructing highways, expanding railway systems and building new high-rise, “Western” style buildings replacing old, traditional buildings, especially in the commercial areas, such as around the railway stations, which serve as transportation and communication hubs. Among the new buildings, there were many edifices that were called “bill board buildings”, while new shopping areas were dubbed “Ginza”, as a reference to Tokyo’s famous “Ginza Boulevard” (Japanese version of the Fifth Avenue). This process was greatly facilitated by intensive programs for integrating small local administrative units into larger ones, first carried out by the Japanese government in the Meiji period and continued in the Showa era (in 1954) and the Heisei era (in 2000).

In contrast, however, Obuse did not follow this “urbanization” or “modernization” pattern, although the Obuse village did grow into a town integrating 16 traditional rural communities in 1954. The town decided to preserve, with certain careful modifications, the traditional houses and landscapes, while meeting the modern needs of its people. Initially, Obuse was considered an “ordinary” or “unattractive town”, especially by young people, and consequently its population decreased to about 7,000. (Kawamukai, p.40 and pp. 48-49).

The Urban Development of Obuse: Key Activities

Obuse, as mentioned above, unlike other cities and towns in Japan which were trying to “modernize” through conventional urban development measures, especially during the period of Japan’s economic boom during 1960-1980s, adopted a different approach which consisted in creating a modern but more amiable and healthy environment for its residents, while respecting historical heritage and maintaining its traditional cultural and economic assets, such as old residential buildings, gardens and roads and lanes. This approach subsequently generated a considerable amount of financial resources for Obuse through tourism, as well as through agricultural products, such as chestnuts, grapes, apples and wine. It also attracted popular and professional attention, both domestically and internationally, to Obuse’s unique mode of urbanization.

One of the first and significant urban planning activities conducted by Obuse was to build a new primary school for the children of Obuse and a neighboring town in 1969. Mr. Ikuo

Ichimura, the then mayor of Obuse who was also the manager of a family-owned confectionary store, appalled by disastrous “modernization” projects in Nagano Prefecture and elsewhere in Japan, wanted to preserve as much as possible the old school building rather than to build a completely new one, like many other local governments were doing at that time. After negotiations between the concerned, it was finally decided in 1970 that the school would be built on the site of the old Obuse primary school. The name of the new school “Kurigaoka” (Chestnut Hill) was chosen by popular consensus. The mayor wanted to preserve as much as possible the old school building because the students who had graduated from it would miss it very much if it disappeared. The architect chosen for the work, Mr. Tadanaga Miyamoto also fully concurred with the mayor’s view. The construction plan was approved by the Town Assembly in April 1970, and the new school building was completed thereafter. Many parts of the old primary school building that were not reused for the new one were utilized elsewhere in the town. For instance, one wing of the old school building was converted into a kindergarten. Nothing was wasted (Kawamukou, pp. 61-64).

The second major development plan implemented by the town was the establishment of the Hokusai Hall for the purpose of exhibiting works of the world-famous Edo period Japanese *ukiyo-e* artist, Katsushika Hokusai³. He came to Obuse in 1842 to work at the “invitation” of Mr. Kouzan Takai, a member of a prominent local merchant family, who studied Confucian philosophy, Chinese and Japanese poetry, calligraphy and painting, as well as classical Japanese and Dutch studies (*Rangaku*) in Edo, as did many other sons of rich merchant families at that time. Apparently, he came in contact with Hokusai in Edo, although he was much younger than the *ukiyo-e* artist. Later, Hokusai, while in his 80s, came all the way from Edo, which normally took at least five days to travel, to stay as a guest artist at the Kouzan’s residence several times until his death at the age of 90. While in Obuse, he produced a number of masterpieces, including the painting of a phoenix on the ceiling of the main hall of *Gansho-in* temple (as large as 21 *tatami* mats, or 18 x 21 feet) at the outskirts of the then Obuse village. However, few Obuse people appreciated the importance of his work until exhibitions of his art pieces were held in Moscow and Leningrad (St. Petersburg) in 1966, and later at Goto Museum in Tokyo among others. Until then, to most of Obuse residents Hokusai was simply an old painter from Edo invited by Kouzan Takai. At that time, it was also very rare for local governments in Japan to have any museums (Kawamukou, pp. 64-65).

In November, 1976, an exhibition hall was completed for Hokusai’s works at the main town square. This started attracting a large number of visitors to Obuse. Initially the Hokusai Hall

³ Katsushika Hokusai is in particular famous for a series of woodcut block prints of Mt. Fuji. His depiction of Mt. Fuji over the huge waves off Yokohama and other works influenced a number of European artists including Claude Debussy, Claude Monet and Vincent van Gogh. Although he and Kouzan Takai had known each other, Hokusai came to Kouzan’s house without prior notice. Some speculate that Hokusai decided to leave Edo when the Tokugawa government started persecuting those associated with Philipp Franz von Siebold, a German doctor working at a Dutch trading outpost in Nagasaki prefecture, who, when leaving Japan, was found to have acquired a number of prohibited items, such as maps of Japan and artifacts. As a result, many famous artists and scholars were arrested and imprisoned (This is known as the Dark Imprisonment of the Taisei Era). The German doctor allegedly had some works by Hokusai in his possession. Thus, it is said that he escaped from Edo to avoid persecution.

was expected to attract up to 30,000 visitors per year, but in the following year the number exceeded 50,000. Yet, Obuse did not designate it as a museum, since it wanted to keep it as modest as possible, so that visitors would feel more comfortable in it. (Obuse Machi. b, pp. 355-358; Obuse Machi, c, pp. 877-878; and Obuse Machi. d., p. 3.)

In 1982, the town administration continued to implement its zoning program, based on its comprehensive development plan. The plan was to preserve the old chestnut confectionary stores and storage buildings in the central part of the town, where the Hokusai Hall was built with the goal of maintaining the historical scenery while generating more comfortable space for the visitors. The aim was also to create a pleasant living environment for Obuse residents. This was accomplished through close consultations between the town administration and the inhabitants, especially with property owners who were directly affected by this urban planning. This involved the renewal and relocation of the old residential house of Takai Kouzan, where he had accommodated Hokusai in 1840s. The house was opened to the public in 1983 as a memorial building, named *Yuuzenrou*, along with the main chestnut confectionary store building and a *sake* brewery building. The *sake* brewery building was further converted into a small but highly sophisticated inn and restaurant, designed by a well-known American architect from Hong Kong, forming the central part of the historical and cultural zone. A considerable amount of care and effort was made to provide comfortable walking lanes for pedestrians, which were paved with chestnut wood bricks instead of conventional baked clay bricks although they are more expensive and require more care. Again, this urban development area became extremely popular with visitors from within and outside Japan. (Obuse Machi, d., p. 3). [This development, however, required unique cooperation and a lot of patience, as well as some financial sacrifice among the five parties involved: two corporations, one of which was a local bank, two building owners and the town administration. The “five-party-negotiations” were held based on the common understanding that the owners would sell no part of the land they owned to each other or to outsiders, and that they would expect no financial support from the town government. Thus, it took them two years to reach a mutual agreement. One of the five members donated a portion of his land for a patch of bamboo grove to be made in the center of the main town square under the name “Bamboo Grove Square” for visitors to stroll by (Kawamukou, p. 80).

The town issued the second part of the second Obuse general development plan in 1986 to promote the theme of “*uruoi*” (amiable) to make the town more comfortable, healthy and elegant. It formulated a “general outline or framework for environmental design cooperation” with the goal of promoting the uniqueness and special quality of each local community within the town. Obuse was divided into three zones: *Yuzenrou*, which means “calm but dignified”, a historical and cultural zone around the old but renovated residential area of Kouzan Takai; a pleasant zone around the Obuse railway station; and an old country-side zone centering on *Gansho-in* temple, where Hokusai painted the phoenix on the ceiling. This was followed by a more operational plan, called “HOPE Plan” for regional housing planning in 1987, also developed with the intent to respect and promote the individual characteristics of each local community. In 1989, the town also opened the Consultative Office for Designing Space to help its residents build their houses taking into account the historical and ecological factors. In 1990, the Town Assembly

formally adopted an ordinance to promote the application of the principle of *keikan shukei*⁴- modifying physical and esthetic environment of the town so as to make it more attractive, comfortable and pleasant to its residents and visitors. The goal was to encourage the residents to follow the ordinance with the provision of financial support and [to establish an award program for those who do so. In 1991 Obuse also started offering financial incentives to those who follow this ordinance when building new houses, expanding or repairing the existing ones, or when removing or renovating buildings with commercial advertisements.

This was followed in 1992 by the issuance of a manual that allowed citizens to apply the principle of *keikan shukei*. It was prepared and issued to help local communities preserve their unique qualities when rebuilding their physical environment. It was designed to obtain the understanding and support of the local residents for improving the physical and cultural environment, without forcefully imposing on them the *keikan shusei* ordinance. The manual was also intended for training programs promoting the concept of *keikan shusei*. Furthermore, the town office facilitated the implementation of the ordinance by offering financial subsidies to those who improved their hedge fences and by giving awards to those who improved buildings, advertisements and sign boards. The practice of setting standards by ordinances, combined with the provision of financial support or awards for facilitating their implementation continued in the following years (Obuse Machi, d,, p. 4).

In 1998, to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the passing away of Hokusai, Obuse organized the first international conference on Hokusai in Japan. It invited about 100 experts from 17 countries. This was held simultaneously with the Hokusai Festival organized by the townspeople. The two events attracted about 150,000 visitors. Two years later, Obuse organized the [first international music festival in Obuse through an organizing committee composed mostly of townspeople.

In accordance with the town ordinance for promoting the urban scenery planning, the town also initiated in 2000 a program aimed at cultivating a sense of hospitality in consultation with the townspeople. The program, called “Open Gardens”, invited the residents to grow flowers in their home gardens and allow everyone to visit them. Now more than 100 Obuse families participate in this program, displaying the “Welcome to my garden” signs. Anybody, including tourists, can walk in and enjoy the flowers, often together with the owners over a cup of tea. In addition, town volunteers maintain flower beds along the sidewalks in the whole town making it possible for local residents and visitors to have a pleasant, leisurely walk around the town as they please. Town volunteers now plant grapeseed plants on the banks of the Chikuma

⁴ “Keikan shusei” is fundamentally different from the conventional preservation or restoration of traditional cultural properties such as old castles, pavilions or houses, in that the main purpose of kaikan shusei, which literally means “adjusting the scenery”, is to create a more esthetically acceptable and physically more comfortable environment for residents and visitors, while maintaining the traditional cultural assets, as much as possible. Therefore, keikan shusei allows moving historical buildings to new sites to have better views and more comfortable spaces. Not infrequently, in Obuse the technique of “hikiya” (pulling a house on rolling logs to a new site) is used. The basic philosophy behind this is to enable the people to live with modern amenities, while at the same time preserving the traditional culture.

River, so that their yellow flowers can accompany the pink cheery blossoms every spring. Furthermore, the town in 2008 opened a public parking space with trees, called “Parking Lot Forest” to provide space for people to relax and interact comfortably. The town now has a botanical garden with a greenhouse to help townspeople grow their flowers.

With all the measures and activities mentioned above, Obuse transformed itself into a very culturally and environmentally attractive and prosperous town by 2010. It has also become an economically viable town.

Factors Contributing to the Successful Transformation of Obuse

Farsighted and Selfless Local Leadership

The unique and successful urban development program of Obuse involved a number of various internal and external factors. One of them is the local leadership, which had the foresight necessary to revive the town economically and culturally from the devastating effects of World War II, which destroyed the main economic base of Obuse, since the production of chestnuts and apples, and the sale of their processed products, as well as rice wine, was virtually forbidden by the central government during the war to force Japanese citizens to produce only staple food items. After the war, it was the key merchants who got together and decided to use the town’s cultural assets, especially the work of Hokusai, to increase the number of visitors and thus revive the town economy. Subsequently, a number of the merchants became mayors of Obuse. For instance, Mr. Ikuo Ichimura, the owner of the main chestnut confectionary company and a sake brewery. During his tenure as mayor, he dedicated himself to the improvement of Obuse to the extent of neglecting his company. He was subsequently succeeded by his son, Tsuguo, who shared the same philosophy about the future of Obuse. They constructed the Hokusai Hall and improved the town environment by applying the philosophy of *keikan shukei*, which meant the relocation of some of the key buildings, including their own, for the purpose of improving the scenery and the ambience of the area where the Hokusai Hall was built.

The town’s merchant class was traditionally keen to learn what was happening outside Obuse and would adopt innovative and proactive measures to ensure the survival of their community in rapidly changing domestic and international economic and political conditions. They came up with the innovative means of reviving the town by taking advantage of the cultural heritage or assets left behind by Hokusai and his young friend and patron Kouzan Takai in the 19th century. They followed [the tradition of attaining higher education and were quite knowledgeable about the external world, thus becoming competent and responsible community leaders, they were open to the new approach of developing the town through the concept of *keikan shukei*.

In the initial stage of *keikan shukei* movement, the key progressive merchant families in Obuse played a critical role, even sacrificing their own economic assets. For instance, the “five-party” group debated whether to save a giant chestnut tree at the parking lot when developing the town square, which would reduce the space and the parking fees that could be earned. The group, however, decided to save the tree because that meant more greenery and fresh air for the residents and visitors. (interview with Ms. Etsuko Seki, Vice-chair of Obuse Town Assembly, in Obuse, 17 May 2016).

In addition to the “five-party-group”, a number of other local merchants followed the *keikan shukei*. One of them built in 1982 a museum of light, which exhibits various kinds of traditional lighting instruments like lanterns. Another converted a warehouse in his garden behind his confectionary shop into a museum that exhibits his art collection in 1988. (Kawamukou, p. 78)

Popular Participation

The second but, possibly, the most important factor which contributed to the success of the Obuse urban development program is the active participation of its citizens, as exemplified by the organization of the flower festival and opening of private home gardens to anybody from outside. This was facilitated by constant effort of the town office to get its citizens involved through periodic and frequent consultations with them and joint activities (Obuse Machi, f., p. 28 and p. 76). The consultations often took place even at sub-town level through traditional community associations which predate the upgrading of Obuse village into Obuse town in 1954, as part of a campaign by the central government to consolidate smaller administrative units. The Obuse of today is, still essentially composed of 16 old “villages”. Through this traditional community organizations, the citizens familiarize themselves with important current financial and administrative issues of Obuse, and express their views. They are also well informed thanks to the effort of the town administration which strives to be as transparent and accountable to its people as possible by, among other methods, issuing monthly newsletters. The newsletters regularly provide information on the town budgetary and other issues to the residents, and are now easily available on the Internet. For instance, the *Obuse chouhou (Obuse News)* of April 2016 carried a succinct article containing information on the total town budget of about \$45 million for 2016, a breakdown of key expenditure items such as health and education, and a justification of the expenses. (Obuse Machi, a., p.7). In addition, the townspeople are often asked about their views and suggestions through questionnaire surveys conducted by the town office. This multifaceted communication between the townspeople and the town office increased the sense of ownership of the *keikan shukei* program among the former and facilitated their active participation in the projects. As a result, the town office was able to mobilize precious resources, financial and otherwise, to help Obuse become more attractive and comfortable for its inhabitants to live in and for visitors to enjoy its beautiful and comfortable rural town environment. This would not have been possible if the entire burden of development had rested solely on the shoulders of about 80 town officials, including the mayor and vice-mayor.

The conscious effort to encourage popular participation in the town management of Obuse goes as far back as to 1980 when Mayor Ikuo Nakamura proposed Obuse among his platforms to have each citizen the main character in the management promoting the welfare of its citizens and protect the environment and cultural asset. This political philosophy has been inherited by the succeeding Mayors of Obuse. (Obuse machi, c., 180-182).

One recent example indicates how the town office tries to obtain the consensus and support of its residents. In a rather heartwarming gesture, in 2006 the town administration, which was reviewing the award-winning design of the town library, asked the residents whether to preserve an old cheery tree scheduled to be felled, despite the fact that preserving the tree would have required considerable changes in the construction plan. The majority view was to save the cheery tree even if that meant modifying the building facing the tree. The library now

has a big picture window, so that people can view the cheery tree from within the library. The design of the town library itself was also selected through an open competition by the townspeople. It is a beautiful building in which the chestnut wood harvested in Obuse was used as the main construction material.

The high degree of popular participation in the management of town affairs might be in part due to historical factors. Being directly administered by the Tokugawa government during the latter part of the Edo period, Obuse villagers had more opportunity to make direct appeals to the central government against power abuse by the local officials. [During this period, there were many more appeals made by Obuse for justice than by the neighboring villages. This political orientation may have been further encouraged by the land reform of 1947, which was a rather complicated exercise. Many former tenants became economically independent and politically active after the reform. (Obuse Machi, b., 1975)⁵.

The “Souson” System: Traditional Local Autonomy

Another socio-political factor nurturing the high level of popular participation may be the traditional village governance system, called the “souson” system, which was developed during the warring period, from the 13th through 14th century⁶. During this period, few villages or local communities were able to rely on the protection of any ruling class families, since they were fighting against each other. During this period of political turmoil, the villagers had to defend themselves and be self-reliant and autonomous in terms of political, economic and military security. This induced the members of the local communities to work together in order to survive, especially in maintaining and protecting communal property, such as dikes and water reservoirs, forests and rice fields. They developed their own collective governance systems to work, including physical forces to protect their lives, land and other possessions. Such strife and self-governance continued until the emergence of the centralized government by military lords and shoguns at the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century. But, the community-wide popular participation in various activities apparently continues even now.

Other Supporting Factors:

⁵ It is interesting to note that the town of Obuse is even now essentially composed of 16 old autonomous “villages”, with their own community meeting halls. Many political and economic issues are usually discussed in these community halls before being brought up for debate before the Town Council. Many of Town Council members have also been nominated and ultimately elected by these communities (Interview with Ms. Seki, 2016).

⁶ The “souson” system seems to be similar to communal cooperative systems such as “bayanihan”, especially in rice growing Luzon in the Philippines, or “gotong royong” in Java, Indonesia. In the “souson” system, each family is allowed to cultivate its own land freely but is expected to participate in communal works, such as the maintenance of dikes and other communal property necessary for the agricultural life of the community. Interestingly, this system did not exist in Korea, Japan’s neighbor, in part due to the strong influence of the Confucian concept of a highly centralized rule, “Son of Heaven”. (Oh Song-hwa (吳善花), pp. 26-45)

a. Administrative Decentralization by the Central Government

There seem to be other factors facilitating popular participation. One such critical and positive factor is the promotion of decentralization of local administrative units by the central government, which began during the Meiji period with the integration of smaller rural units into larger units and was initiated again in 1954. This was followed further decentralization measures which increased the financial autonomy and responsibility of the local administrative units, but decreased subsidiary support from the central government, among which was the “One Million Dollar Village Revitalization Fund” in 1982, promoted by the then Prime Minister Takeshita. The decentralization measures, especially since the year 2000, pressured the local governments to seek their own financial resources locally, while allowing them to be more independent from the central government, since the government subsidies started decreasing but the usage of subsidies by the local governments became more flexible. The Obuse town administration, especially the officials in managerial positions, such as the mayor and deputy-mayor (who were from merchant families, as mentioned earlier) must have realized the critical implications of decentralization. Currently, Obuse receives about 40 percent of the total town budget from the central government, which it can dispense, basically, as it sees fit. For the Obuse town administration, political autonomy meant financial autonomy and responsibility. (Interview with Ms. Seki, 17 May 2016).

b. City-University Partnership (CUP)

The town administrators, however, needed technical support and advice from outside. Initially, they were fortunate to have a university-trained architect to help renovate the primary school. He was seconded by a famous architecture professor from one of the major universities in Tokyo. The architect, Tadanaga Miyamoto, was originally from Suzaka, neighboring town of Obuse, where his family had been in construction business. He wanted to preserve the original design and materials used for the school buildings in order to preserve the memory of students who studied there. After the construction of the new primary school, he decided to return to work with the town by establishing his own architectural firm. He continued to help Obuse in promoting *keikan shusei*. Additional technical support, especially in connection with the holistic redesign of the town, came in the form of expertise extended to the town by Professor Masato Kawamukou and his graduate students from the Tokyo University of Technology (TUT). [This CUP (City-University Partnership) assistance was institutionalized through a formal agreement between the professor and the Obuse town administration. A research room was set up in the Obuse town administration building in 2006 for the period of ten years to give valuable technical assistance to the town. Obuse in turn provided a valuable practical laboratory for his students, while receiving useful technical advice on how to promote *keikan shuusei* program from the TUT group. The CUP support was critical for the adoption of *keikan shuusei*, as related by one of the mayors who remarked that “outside technical assistance is critical, since town officers tend to be very bureaucratic and would not adopt any innovative ideas in order to play safe. They tend to be conservative, because they prefer to follow precedents, so as not to make any mistakes.” (Kawamukou, pp.166-167; Obuse Machi, e, pp. 28 and 52, AUICK, p. 5 and Ness, b.,p.4).

Other universities, such as Shinshu University in Nagano prefecture and Tokyo University and Keio University in Tokyo, joined the CUP program to provide technical support and advice not only on the physical modification of the town, but, increasingly, on various socio-economic

and cultural issues. Among them are the problems of decreasing population due to low fertility, and of attracting and keeping the young labor force that would engage in agricultural activities in Obuse and its vicinity, which was brought about by emigration of young people to larger urban areas (Obuse Machi, e., p. 29 and pp. 50-53 and Obuse Machi, f., p. 34).

c. Economic Gardening

Another unique factor behind the success of Obuse is the adoption of the principle of economic gardening (Ness, a; Obuse Machi, e., p. 29 and pp. 64-66; and Obuse Machi, f., pp. 46-48). Even at the beginning of the physical modification of the town for the purpose of creating the main square around the Hokusai Hall, as described earlier, the five parties involved made conscious effort not to sell any parts of their ancestral land even to each other, and let alone to outsiders. In terms of financing, all the projects undertaken by the town have been grown locally. This enabled the administration to economically revitalize the town while at the same time maintaining to a great extent the unique traditional cultural characteristics and the maximum environmental quality, since it was not bound by outside pressure that might have come together with financial investment. There was only one minor exception in which Obuse invited a health food manufacturer from a nearby town to renovate and use one of the decaying old farm houses as a storage space for its products, since it believed in Obuse's *keikan shusei*. The restored farm house with two storage units and a spacious garden provides the residents of Obuse and visitors with a restful space and beautiful scenery. One of the storage buildings also serves as a small art gallery. However, in principle, the underlying management philosophy of Obuse is not to rely on financial inputs from outside the town and that any project by Obuse should be self-reliant and sustainable. This philosophical foundation may be traced back to the rise of the *souson* system, as described above, and the market economy Obuse developed during the Tokugawa period. The residents of Obuse, therefore, do not expect the town government to support community-based activities financially, but to facilitate them administratively.

d. Use of Semi-public Corporation System:

The Hokusai Hall, one of the key buildings in Obuse, was not financed from the town government budget. This is because Obuse residents, especially the town leaders themselves, were in principle against the use of any town budget for such a project. For that reason, the hall was built with the funding from a semi-public, non-profit corporation of Obuse, [which generated sufficient funds for the Hokusai Hall from public housing projects at the outskirts of the town. The semi-public corporation was also used to build a travel information office and guest house "A la Obuse", to help accommodate the increasing number of visitors to Obuse. The semi-public corporation was established and sold 330 shares of stocks at 50,000 yen each in 1994, generating the total of 16.5 million yen. The town administration bought twenty shares, or about 6% of the total. Thirty-three individuals and two NGOs subscribed to the scheme to run the tourist information office and the guest house adjacent to it, which consisted of four guest rooms which can accommodate up to ten guests. The guest house was built by converting an old storage building following the concept of *keikan shukei*, and was managed by the stock holders, who also contribute their time for cleaning, fixing breakfast for the guests and other chores. The shareholders do not receive individually any dividend – instead, the income is used for worthwhile activities and events in the town, such as the annual flower festivals. Currently, there

are 55 individual shareholders and four NGOs, and the number of shares is 560, totaling 28 million yen. Now the information center and guest house employ 14 staff members, two of whom are permanent employees, whereas there were only five staff members, one of whom was permanently employed, when it was established. The guest house does not receive any financial support from the town administration, but receives support from a dozen local business enterprises through purchasing guest house B/B coupons. (Kawamukou, pp. 115-116).

e. Carrots Rather Than Sticks

The ordinances by the Obuse town administration, including those regarding *keikan shukei*, are normally fully discussed with its residents before they are issued, through the traditional local community system and through the debates at the Town Assembly. They are usually guidelines, rather than strict administrative rules. Therefore, usually there are no penalties for non-compliance. They have been developed gradually over the last few decades, reflecting the reactions and views of Obuse residents, even before the national government introduced a similar ordinance in 2000. The implementation of the regulations depends essentially on the willingness and active participation of its residents. Besides, the implementation was often partially supported by financial assistance for public recognition, which is more important, of the townsfolk's adherence to the regulations in the form of various awards given for improving the existing buildings, gardens and hedges. Through a technical consultant unit at the town office, the town government also provides advice and technical assistance to help the citizens. In short, it can be said that the town administration uses "carrots" rather than "sticks". It is interesting to note that an increasing number of new houses in Obuse are constructed incorporating traditional designs, such as white walls with black wooden frames, while using modern materials, such as steel and glass. Such houses fit well into the traditional environment. (Obuse Machi, e., p. 76)

f. Festivities

In addition, the town, through civic organizations such as the Lions Club and the Junior Chamber of Commerce, organizes festive events to encourage citizens to participate in many of its public cultural activities. Such activities are intended to increase citizens' participation in the affairs of the town itself. One such event was the international festival held in commemoration of the 150th year of the passing away of Hokusai that invited Hokusai experts from within and outside Japan. It also organizes the annual flower festival with awards given to citizens who have gardens with most beautiful flowers and plants. Obuse town itself established a large flower garden at the outskirts of the town with a greenhouse, which also serves to provide technical advice to town residents interested in improving their private gardens. The flower garden also has a restaurant where visitors can enjoy dishes made of local agricultural products. Many of these festive activities are actually organized by the residents themselves through the Hokusai Hall and another art museum, the Obuse - Nakajima Chinami Museum. The activities and events include concerts and public lectures based on the themes of the work of Hokusai, or on urban planning, including *keikan shukei*. These festivities help the townsfolk to appreciate the

uniqueness of their town, Obuse. They also attract many domestic and foreign visitors to Obuse, thus stimulating cultural exchange. (Interview with Ms. Seki)⁷.

Summary and Conclusion

The transformation of the small and relatively poor rural town of Obuse into an urban phoenix was facilitated by a number of internal and external factors. These factors are all inter-related or inter-dependent. They include an enlightened and dedicated leadership and a liberal administration, economic gardening, the use of outside technical advice and support through the CUP program, continuing decentralization implemented by the Japanese government and, most importantly, popular participation.

The town leaders developed a number of key projects in 1970s and instituted an organizational culture in the town administration in which its main role is to act as a facilitator of projects and programs conceived and developed by and for the town residents, rather than to be an imposer of rules and regulations on them. Through close communication with the townspeople, the Obuse town government has become highly transparent and accountable to its citizens.

This political orientation of the town administration was critical for stimulating and maintaining the most important factor, namely the popular participation, in many, if not all the projects and activities in Obuse, beginning with the Hokusai Hall in 1976. Without such political factor, the unique urban development of the small rural town of Obuse would not have been possible.

The background of the political and organizational culture that strives to facilitate popular participation may be traced back to the “*souson*” system, developed during the warring period, between about 600 and 800 years ago, when villages had to defend themselves against physical violence and natural disasters on their own. Such circumstances promoted self-defense and self-sustainability. An important aspect of this political philosophy is that Obuse still respects the local communities and autonomy of its own 16 traditional “villages” in its attempt to increase and maintain its own local autonomy within the highly centralized political and administrative system of Japan. This means that the success of the urban development of Obuse, is largely due to popular participation, which, in turn, is based on the town’s internal decentralization.

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⁷ For instance, a chamber music concert was held at the Obuse Museum on 21 May, 2016. It was a performance by one violinist and one pianist, who played the piece “La Mer” by Debussy, on the theme of waves, as a reference to the famous woodcut print by Hokusai. The Obuse Museum was also built in honor of a local artist, Chinami Nakajima.

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