Deconstructing/Reconstructing Images of the Future in a Post-Bubble Japanese Community Revitalization Program

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This article presents a critical assessment of futures images in a post-bubble Japanese community, Ashibetsu. In this retrospective account of an actual case study, I critique the problematic associated with this community's revitalization program in light of an uncertain future and rising conflict between ordinary citizens and the local government. From this problematic I identify a suite of virtual fractures from which a comprehensive strategy for a preferred future transformation can be formulated. I continue to discuss the consequences if future-oriented social strategies are not pursued and assess their prospects when considered within the context of local and Japanese social realities and pressures. I conclude by citing some of the real-world outcomes this research facilitated.

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Case Study: Post-Bubble Futures Images in a Japanese Community

During the uncontrollable days/daze of Japan's legendary bubble economy with its attendant opulence, decadence, myths of Japanese invincibility and the almighty Yen, lurking behind the main stage there unfolded the smaller and subtler dramas of small communities and the particular plights they endured while the world relentlessly focused on Tokyo. This is the tale of one such neglected post-bubble Japanese community, Ashibetsu, affectionately referred to as the 'nipple' of Japan's northern-most island of Hokkaido.

Ashibetsu City: Brief Background to the Study Area

I recently conducted fieldwork[1] into a communication/futures problematic in this former booming coal mining community. In March of 1999, the official population of Ashibetsu had dwindled to 22,009 - down 30 from just the previous month and down from a maximum population of 75,000 less than two decades before. Historically, Ashibetsu's economy had been supported by a triad of pivotal industries that included agriculture, forestry and coal. As coal mining was phased out, city planners and policy makers envisaged the city's future economic base to lie in the new paradigm based on tourism, a strategy adopted by a large percentage of Japan's rural communities.

The insightful Kenneth E. Boulding[2] once pointed out that all advanced economies bring forth their own pathologies. In post-bubble Japan, Ashibetsu was no exception. Those pathologies characterizing the nation as a whole included increases in suicides; disappearing citizens; divorce; unemployment; bankruptcies; homelessness and the usual high profile social ills including a rapidly aging population, too few children, loss of economic dynamism, developmental fatigue, breakdown in traditional values especially among youth, and escalating poverty crimes. In Ashibetsu, while local pathologies by and large reflected those of the nation, local informants described a set of micro-problems including a loss of direction; cynicism towards politics and politicians; fear of the future; and loss of perceived control over personal and community futures.

One major perceived problem stood out. Riding the wave of a national obsession with theme-parks, massive loans financed the construction of a local theme park that came to be called Canadian World. As the economy decelerated, loans outstanding became unpayable. The theme park became a ghost town, virtually bankrupt, waiting for a solution. By

the mid 1990s, Ashibetsu was confronted with a mapless future. Under this mood of pessimism, Ashibetsu citizens complained of a hostile communication climate. Local government had failed to openly and equitably consult with the community regarding the construction of the Canadian World theme park. Yet, in a desperate turnabout, once the tourism venture was forced into premature closure, local government promptly initiated consultations with citizens with the aim of finding solutions to the 'Canadian World problem'. Canadian World was now everyone's problem, and everyone's duty to solve.

Layering the Problematic of Ashibetsu's Futures Images

Official descriptions of Ashibetsu's problem centered on the meta-theme of Ashibetsu's survival and continuation as a community. Local government, ordinary citizens and even young children, were found to express the real fear that life in Ashibetsu was at best, rapidly becoming less livable than in former times, and at worst, was degenerating literally into a 'ghost-town' from which the majority of the young and the skilled had out-migrated. The official solution at this level was to implement a series of community revitalization programs based on meticulously documented citizen surveys from which a five-point 'vision' of the future was formulated.

Respondents to the futures images questionnaire (in this case, a minority of dissenters referred to in the Japanese as the katayaburi - literally, the 'mold-breakers')[3] were invited to describe what they believed was the official public description of Ashibetsu's futures problematic and whether they agreed with the officially reported assessment. To summarize, there was a generally shared mood that living in Ashibetsu would become increasingly unpleasant as the economic base became untenable. It was pessimistically conceived that Ashibetsu could, and indeed probably would in the near future, ultimately degenerate into a ghost-town. Like the official discourse on Ashibetsu's future, the katayaburi ask the same disturbing question: Does Ashibetsu have a future?

Analyzed at a deeper level, the threat of Ashibetsu's degeneration into a ghost-town and eventual extinction as a viable human community, had given rise to a range of social causes which tended to cluster around a grid of specific issues that included the failure of Canadian World, the more general issue of Ashibetsu's lack of economic vitality, and out-mi-

gration of population. The local problematic was generally perceived as inextricably linked to the nation's post-bubble economic recession. This, at least, was the line of argument promoted by the local government via the conduit of its influential publication, Kouhou Ashibetsu. Consistently, the plight of Ashibetsu's future was contextualized as a microcosm of a nationwide economic recession, presented to the Japanese public by the national Diet as a problem of 'bad debts' (furyou-saiken). Local government officials had also framed the problem of Ashibetsu as a failure of the people to accept and adopt persuasive messages to 'try harder' - ganbaru — and 'to work together with government'. Local government promoted itself as the ultimate knowers of the answers to problems and claimed to have responsibly disseminated a variety of strategies to revitalize the economy.

However, according to government officials the people had failed to mobilize in accordance with government prescribed recommendations. Unsaid was the possibility that national and local crises as manifested in the superficial symptoms of poor economic indicators, were rooted in deeper structural crises. This point of view, necessarily gave rise to solutions in the form of stimulatory incentives to save less and resume consuming at pre-bubble economy rates.

If read with post-structural scrutiny, the propaganda-like nature of the plan starts to become prominent. The deployment of the slogan 'Eco-Powerful-Human-Culture-Challenge Town', fails to reflect the concerns of the citizens. Planners of the future neglect to deal with past failures involving the attempted transition from a coal to a tourism-led paradigm, and the failure of local government to communicate and consult with Ashibetsu citizens vis-a-vis the planning and construction Canadian World, upon which the future of the community was perceived to rest. Implied in this communicative vacuum is that past failures are the result of collective failure, not local government. The authority of official planners and the plans they produce remain unquestioned, the planner remains unaccountable. The fundament of trying within a renewed framework of power relations, in which communication is participatory and equitable, remains unresolved.

In the case of Ashibetsu, regardless of the image, the basic orientation generally corresponded closely to the dominant discourse of economics and Japan Inc.'s postwar 'catch-up' and overtake model. Growth of any kind was good; a bigger population was better than a smaller population; the outwardly genki individual citizen is preferred over the wise or compassionate because more genki means more production and

consumptive behaviour. However, the emergent signs of a new type of consciousness are also present. A singular and dominant corporatist worldview is experienced as fragmenting to alternative micro-worldviews. Recalled here is the movement in Hokkaido for an abolition of Japan's postwar 'company man' driven society. This radical proposal suggests that corporatist motivated lifestyles should be replaced by 'local lifestyles'[4], which interpreted in their wider sense need not mean provincial and rural, but merely beyond Japan's materialist-consumerist worldview.

The worldview that Japan seems to be has modeled its futures - in pastiche form - on an image rooted in America's Golden Age experiment in modernity[5], itself an extension of enlightenment ideals. As Chambon notes, the "Enlightenment was and is a highly gendered term", where "only men were in fact envisioned as ideal knowers"[6]. Japan's postwar ultra-corporatist, industrialist, consumerist worldview too, is a product of elite male planners, bureaucrats, politicians, corporatists and technologists. In contemporary terms, it is necessary to imagine how Japan's postwar futures images might have been framed if the designers had been other than the male successors of Japan's defeated war elite.

Markley and Harman[7] note how the social constructions of reality in the form of myth and metaphor can enslave individuals and societies to recognized metaphors, especially contemporary economic man as servant to industrial metaphors. Specific to Ashibetsu's futures images, other-than-rational social mythologies found to support images of the above reported official, social cause and worldview perspectives reveal the existence of a binary social mythology. On the one hand, Ashibetsu's social mythology is supported by the national matrix of macro-myths including the vestigial ideologies of Japanese identity and uniqueness, in which it is implied that to be Japanese means to be fixed in an immutable core of Japanese-ness, and by Japan's postwar corporatist national mythology. Here, Ashibetsu is captive to both historical notions of Japanese-ness and to the metaphor of big business.

The local mythology of Ashibetsu keeps the community tied to a matrix of beliefs ranging from the legacy of Ashibetsu's coal mining days, in part enshrined in the local symbols of a citizen charter and the city emblem in which the vestigial remnants of a modernistic, industrial, male-dominated, growth-means-bigger outlook in which social orderliness, discipline of the self and conformity to social norms are valorized.

Problems and Solutions

(1) Local Government Vision for a New Kind of Town

It is at the level of social causes that most solutions to perceived problems are articulated, most of which emanate from Ashibetsu's local government initiatives. Ingeniously and industrially, Ashibetsu planners had administered extensive quantitative surveys to the local population which in turn were used to substantiate the formulation of an umbrella vision for Ashibetsu's future. This future consisted of five organizing sub-plans embodied in slogans conspicuously worded in the English language: Eco-Town, Powerful Town, Human Town, Culture Town, and Challenge Town. From these, concrete plans of action were to be generated. Local government surveys displayed a strong fixation with statistical configurations that support existing structures, perpetuate the paradigms of the past, and failed to incorporate alternative futures images or open up any transformative spaces from which new futures could emerge.

(2) 'Furusato' and a Return to Origins Strategy- aka Forward to the Past

A prominent solution in Ashibetsu's revitalization discourse included the strategy of promoting Ashibetsu as furusato — (town-making) whose dubious history is unmasked by Robertson[8] as the empty slogan to fill the hole in Japan's postwar identity, which, with the collapse of the bubble economy has achieved even greater momentum, yet, though promising much, delivers little for the future. Lifetime education has also been posited as a solution. The aim here is to revitalize the economy by ensuring an educated, or 'skilled' population at all age levels in an approximation of Foucault's 'bio-power', the form of power the local government, invisibly but ubiquitously, holds over populations of docile bodies, a community's individuals subject to constant surveillance[9], "more powerful yet easier to direct and subjugate, and also more calculable and easier to know, a predictable object for the quasi-scientific knowledge of the social or human sciences"[10]. A post-structural reading of this return to cultural origins (genten) strategy problematizes the very notion whether authentically points-of-origin exist in the first place. Recalling archaic ways of knowing and doing which Valorize, or worse, romanticize oppressive past realities and afford limited practical utility to communication of the here-and-now may be illusionary.

(3) When All else Fails, Blame the Population

Analyses of Ashibetsu's futures highlighted the centrality of population as a problem. Notions of population were perceived by all but a minority of katayaburi as a primary problem in Ashibetsu's future. Population as statistical entity is strictly monitored on a month-by-month basis in the local government's monthly newsletter. Population is variously represented to a concerned public as out-migrating and ageing. Out-migration of Ashibetsu's population, especially the young and skilled to metropolitan centres, can be reframed as the inevitable outcome of new macro and micro realities and transformed from problem to natural cyclic phenomenon. Does population need to grow or even be stable?

It is a major premise of the Causal Layered Analysis technique that how one frames the problem creates the solution[11]. Conceptions of Ashibetsu's population as a problem, when viewed alternatively, assume different meanings. Notably, Ashibetsu's population loss is an inevitable consequence of two phenomena. The first is that Ashibetsu's population attained a maximum of 70,000 in the first place as a direct consequence of the then prosperous coal industry. Take away the coal, and the employment that first brought population in the first place, and what one is left with is a natural social phenomenon. Functionally, historical Ashibetsu was constructed upon a functionalist paradigm — in which the function, in the form of mining, has become obsolete as the consequence of new global energy imperatives. The loss of population masks a hidden perception of a loss of capacity to repay outstanding loans through citizens taxes for insurmountable debts amassed by the excesses of the bubble economy, in particular of Canadian World.

(4) Deconstruction and Genealogy of the Canadian World Heteropolis

On the problem of Canadian World and its impact on Ashibetsu's futures we are reminded of the words of Inayatullah and Stevenson[12] who spoke of the "tension caused by the pervasive tendency to colonize our minds through the mainly Western (but not exclusively) owners of capital who bankroll the likes of the Disney Corporation and, on the other, the search for clear, truthful thinking detached from oppressive, artificial ideologies and other insistent myths which masquerade as realities". Based on the above observations, we find in Canadian World the result of the ideology of corporatism parasitic upon the community of Ashibetsu who were kept out of the consultation process about the theme of the park, its implications for the community, and contingency plans in case the venture failed.

Similarly, in the current Canadian World discourse, couched in terms

of 'what shall we do with it now and how can we still make it profitable? '- the question of how the theme park came about in the first place and who was it really intended for, remains unasked. Yet, without asking these awkward questions, offensive to the proponents of Canadian World and analogous projects, the initial conditions that led to its possibility will never be acknowledged. In future, despite past failures, other Canadian Worlds can be continually justified.

Despite the nebulous roots of the theme park that is now Canadian World, asking the simple question is taboo: How was the future of an entire community — population 22,000 - gambled away on a tourist fad based on the adolescent Anne of Green Gables, icon to a generation of young Japanese women and newly weds, from a distant culture and epoch? But perhaps there is an even deeper myth - the unspoken myth that Japan's bubble-economy was no bubble, but the authentic manifestation of a superior culture, in which, once the financial and technology super-structure had been fixed in place, the future would be found in the infinite pursuit of a leisure economy.

Identifying Virtual Fractures

Non-dissonance Between Dominant and Alternative Images

Although it was found that differences in futures images do exist between the official and the *katayaburi*, rather than maintaining an antagonistic binary relationship as initially hypothesized, findings from this study indicated rather, that official and *katayaburi* futures images concur as much as they differentiate. On the whole, the assumptions that underlined the non-conventional *katayaburi* futures images were characterized by high degrees of concurrence with dominant and official futures images. However, Foucault recognized the transformational significance of micro-difference.

For example, whereas local government perceived its own role was to solve the future, local *katayaburi* complained that local government were the cause. Finding solutions then, implied that it would be ordinary citizens, not local government, who should have the responsibility of creating futures alternative to those promoted by local government. Another significant difference was that whereas the local government perceived the future as the past extrapolated, and the revitalization of the community in economic terms where economic vitality is achieved through individual *genki* (health, vitality); a reversion to the status of

furusato (home town) and the revival of ancient festivals; planning through statistical rigour, societal orderliness and other industrial images; katayaburi imagined other kinds of futures.

The Semiotics of 'Genki'

Genki is one of the most used and curious of Japanese words. The post-structural perspective is forced to ask the simple questions: What is genki? Why is it never far from the surface of all public futures discourse? And by inference, What is meant by community revitalization? *Genki* is a surface reading of superficial human wellness, or outwardly expressed vitality. *Genki* must be seen — not felt within. *Genki* is tied to sub-textual notions of being vital, beholding potential earning and consuming potential. *Genki* has charismatic value. *Genki* is used in the current fiscal recession for its quantitative dimension. Individual and collective genki fuelled the excesses of the bubble economy but has now temporarily demobilized by external influences. Yet, post-bubble social realities unmasked pre-bubble genki as illusory, as a misfit accomplice of the economic paradigm pathologically money-oriented and enemy to human physical and mental well-being.

Issues Impacting upon Alternative Futures

(1) The impossibility of Communication

Multifarious aspects of Ashibetsu's communication climate were found to structurally impede the generation of alternative and authentic futures images and their introduction into real-world situations. The first virtual fracture is located in Ashibetsu's meta-communication climate by using a term Irving refers to as "the impossibility of communication"[13]. In reference to the influence of Samuel Beckett's literature on Foucault, Irving eloquently expresses the idea of the impossibility of communication in the following words: "because there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express", for the ultimate fear is the "fear of destroying an illusion of unanimity"[14].

(2) Universe Maintenance and the Dynamics of Social Harmony (Wa)

The illusion of unanimity is found in the maintenance of harmony through the term *wa*. Unanimity is associated with the idea of an origi-

nal Japanese character, in which harmony and solidarity of opinion are promoted by the dominant Japanese ideology as fundaments to Japanese culture. From a post-structural perspective, the operation of this harmony-maintaining ideology through *wa* can also function negatively as a strategy of social control. Human to human communication is restricted to communication modes, styles and practices which maintain harmony, minimize chaos, conflict and open discussion, and ultimately the possibility of articulating images which function detrimentally to carefully manipulated dominant ideologies. This deep myth is manifested in contemporary Japanese society in the form of superficial and perfunctory interpersonal relationships which, in social and political and economic terms, privileges existing power and futures-making elites. The implicit strategy of *wa* ex-communicates the voice of dissent.

(3) A Panoptic Social Environment

From the impossibility of communication emerge by-products. The first major pertains to the apparatuses of surveillance and the harmony-maintaining structures in Ashibetsu — in a quasi-panoptic social environment. Found in Ashibetsu are the attributes of the kind of societal framework that Markley and Harman[15] refer to as "friendly fascism" — a term they define as "a managed society which rules by faceless and widely dispersed complex of warfare-welfare-industrial-communications-police bureaucracies with a technocratic ideology". In Ashibetsu, one witnesses the constant overseeing of the population by the fear, not of big things but the mundane everyday occurrences, as an unconsciously deployed, invisible and ubiquitous strategy for keeping vigilance. The watchful gaze of the local government remains entrenched in the modernist-industrialist roots of a pre-war coal-producing growth machine.

(4) The Bind of Language

In a Foucauldian sense, language is constructive of and organizes our perceived social realities and delimits the ways in which we as humans are able to engage with the world we perceive around us. Accomplice to the panoptic social and communication environment in Ashibetsu is the usage of contemporary Japanese language and its impacts upon interpersonal communication and the creation of alternative futures. Existing societal frameworks and hierarchies are effectively maintained by the invisible and apparently natural structure of language, in particular, those communication practices which set inherently inequitable relations through language. The most virulent because it is the most invis-

ible and naturalized are the effects of honorific Japanese (*keigo*). From *keigo*, the social human is fixed in a readily identifiable and knowable social position. Tradition is revered over the novel; male over female; senior over insubordinate; the economically productive over the passive. Discussion between these binaries is ruled out because chaos and conflict would be the products. The possibility of futures-creating communication between binaries is demoted to the status of perfunctoriness and politeness.

Strategies for Social Reconstruction

By applying our analysis to Ashibetsu's community revitalization program and the lack of viable images of the future, a matrix of fissures, or what Foucault refers to as virtual fractures emerged as the sites of potential transformative social change. What was immediately apparent was the existence of a meta-problematic situation which superceded band-aid prescriptive responses. In this case, the meta-problematic presented itself as consisting of a communication climate antagonistic toward the articulation and public discussion of alternative futures. Consequently, transformative solutions presented here do not take the form of specific strategies to discrete problems confronted by the Ashibetsu community - which include the bottleneck posed by the Canadian World theme park for example, but rather, in the form of a new Communicative Age paradigm, whose effect is the generation of a new social reality conducive to opening up pluralistic, authentic, alternative futures less characterized by economic imperatives and less submissive to dominant images.

Features of A Communicative Age Paradigm

Borrowing from Stevenson and Lennie's[16] generic model, I formulate a matrix of features for a Communicative Age paradigm appropriate to the problematic unearthed in Ashibetsu's community. Although both virtual fractures and candidate transformative strategies are more complex than presented in this abbreviated version, three major fractures form the focus of the analysis here. These three include (1) a systematic abandonment of overarching panoptic cultural practices indicating - as the respondents of Ashibetsu have testified to - the dire need for new communication modes to facilitate alternative futures; (2) a new social paradigm in which the other is included in local policy and social change

and; (3) the creation of a learning-oriented societal mood.

The people of Ashibetsu have appealed to a new form of inter-personal communicativeness, a new kind of communicator for whom revitalizing the "art of conversation"[17] is an organizing principle in the realization of the individual's human potential. By the art of conversation, Stevenson and Lennie[18] refer to "the ability to sit and patiently explore the formation of a workable relationship with each other, by sharing ideas, exploring, challenging, negotiating, confirming and reconfirming. This new communicator will understand life as inherently chaotic. Chaos however, even when its outcome is conflict, can be embraced as regenerative and revitalizing. Conflict is socially possible. As Hinchcliff[9] puts the advantage of embracing chaos as social metaphor: "In other words, by ignoring the total infatuation with order, specialization and reductionism, and by exploring and accepting the vast richness of structural complexity, we can see that chaos is an essential aspect of reality and that we participate in and affect this complexity". The new communicator also integrates pluralism into the social fabric. The revived notion that there is more than one way to do something, would catalyze the acceptability of new notions about power. The recognition of new kinds of power will empower the once voiceless.

Chambon[20] advances the idea of developing new "hybrid languages of experience" and "inventing a new accessible language for dealing with change". Change is re-potentiated through the conduit of de-heirarchified language. Simultaneously, dismantling and reconstructing currently restrictive linguistic practices would facilitate the re-politicization of ordinary people. As language itself is perceived as communicative rather than socially restrictive, participation in political processes will become possible for the previously de-politicized.

Non-dominant subgroups of society bring different values and experiences to alternative futures images and to innovative strategies in community revitalization more appropriate to future needs and less burdened by paradigms of the past. Involving and taking seriously the other also opens up new metaphoric potentials found in the new non-corporatist metaphors. The aim here is not perpetuate idolized mythologies of the past but to actively create new mythologies around which preferred futures can be imaged, articulated and applied.

Under the umbrella of a new communicative age model, the shift away from rote-learning, where knowledge structures are transferred from the 'expert' teacher to the student, in favour of a chaotic/active type of learning. Wildman[21] for example, posits the emergence of the

"New Learning Community" which actively seeks to use Chaos Theory in community organization. Such an approach, he admits, "requires the ability to embrace diversity and creative disagreement". It is precisely these attributes of diversity and creative disagreement that are denied and suppressed within the Japanese community of Ashibetsu. In a learning society, there is psychological space to redefine what is knowable, who knows, how it is known and how it is operationalized in real world situations. Ultimately, social learning will promote Foucault's important and guiding role to show people that "they are much freer than they feel"[22].

Prospects for Reconstruction

While the Communicative Age model is one suggestion for a preferred future for Ashibetsu, its emergence under present circumstances of the community has to be in doubt given the Japanese proclivity to shun chaotic and harmony-disturbing situations from which transformative ways of doing and thinking can emerge. As Stevenson and Lennie[23] note: "there are strong pressures on people to conform to current social and cultural practices and this has the effect of maintaining conventional ways of thinking and operating". This is particularly so in the case of Japan and our specific study area where futures-making elites have so much to loose. The dominant party to any Japanese relationship, that is, the male over the female, older over younger, the government official over the ordinary citizen; the teacher over the student, all profit socially and financially from inequitable relationships. Much of Japan's past scientific, technological and economic success can be attributed to fixed, unchallengeable and inflexible interpersonal relationships.

Where dominant images are challenged, resistance to change is usually experienced. Markley and Harman[24] note that "It is a well-known phenomenon in psychotherapy that the client will resist and evade the very knowledge he most needs to resolve his problems. A similar situation probably exists in society and there is suggestive evidence both in anthropology and in history that a society tends to hide from itself knowledge which is deeply threatening to the status quo but may in fact be badly needed for resolution of the society's most fundamental problems".

As pointed out by future-oriented Japanese economist Tadashi Nakamae[25], short of catastrophe or foreign pressure — *gai-atsu* — Japan is unlikely to undergo transformation. Ashibetsu is, it would seem, at the

brink of a micro-catastrophe, the kind and scale of which is much more impacting than any catastrophe that could hit Japan as a whole. Such a catastrophe is potentially precipitated by Canadian World and the massive debt incurred upon the citizens. The problem with *gai-atsu* is that it operates between power elites of different culture areas and tends to prioritize the needs and political preferences of the pressuring culture.

Consequences of Failing to Implement Transformative Strategies

In a study of this nature, emphasis should be afforded to seriously considering the potential consequences for personal and community futures if transformative strategies are not implemented. Here, respondents from the study area speak for themselves by presenting a wide range of worst-case futures. To illustrate, a selection of worst-case futures are reproduced here in translated form (translated by the author).

Repayments of the Canadian World debt meant that local facilities and amenities went un-maintained. Our children and grandchildren were burdened with a debt whose origins they did not know nor understand. Ashibetsu became an unattractive place to live, the young out-migrated in masses to larger cities, rendering Ashibetsu a ghost town. Scary!

The 6 billion Yen plus debt from Canadian World is still being repaid after more than 20 years. Frustrated by the debt, the young have abandoned Ashibetsu for other cities. The community rapidly declines. Finally, the burden of debt repayment becomes unsupportable for the remaining citizens, and the city declares itself insolvent. Taken under the jurisdiction of state authorities, Ashibetsu citizens form city restructuring organizations, but even this is hopeless.

The un-payable debt problem has become a chronic drain on community resources. Taxes are drastically raised. Company bankruptcies skyrocket. Why should I and my children have to sacrifice ourselves for this debt! We have no choice but to leave! Soon, the population plummets, unemployment climbs, and resentment leads to crime. Neighboring communities start to gossip that Ashibetsu is a dangerous town and warn each other not to go out there at night alone.

Ashibetsu citizens have lost the battle against the three evils: indifference,

inactivity, and unawareness. Incapable of negotiating and consolidating cooperative ties with surrounding communities, Ashibetsu gains a reputation as 'the good-for-nothing town'. Private enterprises go bankrupt and the local government is paralyzed into inaction.

The citizens of Ashibetsu failed to envision a new future and mobilize themselves towards its creation. People left, businesses went bust, companies pulled out of the area, employment opportunities dropped and the town degenerated.

A mood of despair has gripped the town. Local facilities including education and welfare have been sacrificed in the face of unpayable debts. Citizens have become increasingly skeptical and mistrusting of government officials and have lost pride in being Ashibetsu citizens. Nonetheless, I believe this scenario will not come about because Ashibetsu people will be mobilized by their love of the hometown to prevent this worst-case scenario.

Local government drafted plans to boost tourism, but tourists found the attractions boring and never came back. Everything the council tried their hands at failed. The town slipped back into its old ways — "pacified from the peaceful lifestyle" (heiwa-boke) and "selfishness" - (riko-shugi).

Changing the town's catchphrase from "Ashibetsu the mining town" to "Ashibetsu the tourist spot" did not work. Instead Ashibetsu became known as "the town that failed at mining ... and tourism". The only thing to be seen in Ashibetsu now are the weeds and old people. Ashibetsu is like a cowboy western where prairie grass rolls through the town and you can hear the wind howling mercilessly. Chilly!

The idea of a worst-case scenario future for Ashibetsu is too terrible to even contemplate.

Post-Research Real-World Outcomes

Does futures research have effects and contribute to the production of real-world outcomes? In the case of this investigation, the answer appears to be Yes. Of the many post-research effects observed or reported, one was that the *katayaburi* citizens of Ashibetsu were able to find an avenue which allowed them to articulate in their own words and stories

and to effectively to rewrite, that is, positively subvert, conventional futures discourses. The articulation of an alternative preferred futures image alongside its reverse once committed to paper may have both a therapeutic and invigorating effects upon the individual. This manifested in the emergence of a revived awareness of using futures knowledge as a tool. New types of conversations appeared to start between Ashibetsu residents, previous questionnaire participants wanted books about the future in Japanese, and at least one local woman suddenly became animated to participating in local politics. The defunct Canadian World was reopened July 11, 1999 to the public free of charge after being locked up for several years. The decision to re-open Canadian World, on an experimental 'wait-and-see what would happen' basis, followed soon after the election in which the local Mayor vowed to try and salvage the disgraced symbol of Ashibetsu's new post-coal, post-bubble, tourism-led economy. Finally, within months of completing the investigation, at least one team of Japanese academics had already advertised to conduct a future-oriented workshop on community futures and local empowerment.

Summary

It has been shown that Ashibetsu's communication futures problematic shares much in common with Japan's national post-bubble environment. It has also been shown that although dominant futures images differentiate minimally from unconventional *katayaburi* futures images, that transformation, in a Japanese context is nonetheless possible as well as desirable in light of Ashibetsu's post-coal mining, post-bubble disorientation and atrophy of futures images. The investigation also highlighted the pivotal roles of communication in the generation of futures images which theoretically function to pull the imager - individual or collective - towards the imaged social reality.

The critical aspect of this investigation has also attempted to address the question of what is the problem with Ashibetsu? - from an alternative perspective. It is not for local government alone to unilaterally frame problems, set the initial conditions that lead to problematic situations, act as sole charge for 'fixing' problems, and requesting the 'help' of 'ordinary people' when their un-consulted projects do not behave as planned. When addressing the problem of Ashibetsu's futures from this other perspective, it is found that the problem is less clear-cut than official

versions suggest. To *katayaburi* and other citizens, the future is more than economics and statistics.

The triadic problematic of Ashibetsu's communication, futures images and revitalization, requires closure by way of a new recognition of new identities that are multiple, pluralistic, multi-vocal, inclusive, conflict-embracing and chaotic; and needs to be set free in order to unleash the bonded potential of the bonsai tree. Revitalization implies a new kind of vitality that transcends mere economic performance and the need to search for and identify new symbols of the community that express the liberating qualities of a new communicative age.

Notes

1. The research presented in this paper is based on findings conducted as part of a Masters thesis investigation undertaken from June 1998 to June 1999.
2. Boulding, Elise and Boulding, Kenneth E. 1995. The Future: Images and Processes. Sage Publications (paperback)
3. The kata-yaburi may be described as a non-mainstream subculture in Japan who find themselves at odds with the dominant culture.
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