

【Case Report】

Place Branding Strategy Initiatives by Small Municipalities: Proposed Case Study of Future Place Branding Strategy for Hirokawa Town

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Summary :

This case report is the revised and updated version of “The proposal for a place branding initiative for Hirokawa Town”, which the author submitted to the IPBA Academy's online course¹ in May 2022. Reviewed the official documents of the Regional Revitalization Strategy from the perspective of place branding, evaluated the results, and discussed directions for improvement. Then, using an analytical approach and model for place brand planning, a proposal for future place branding strategies in the town was formulated. A new concept of location, the Hirokawa River Basin, was presented and suggested to start with five informal social experimentation projects.

Keyword : Place branding and marketing, Regional Revitalization Strategy, Small municipality, Hirokawa Town

1. Introduction

The Regional Revitalization Strategy, initiated by the government in 2015, is a policy aimed at creating jobs in rural areas and halting population decline. It is characterized by a marketing strategy that concentrates regional resources through selection and concentration of business domains. The author has served as the chair of the expert committee for the Regional Revitalization Strategy of the town of Hirokawa since 2015 and has been providing advices for the project. However, like many other municipalities, Hirokawa Town has developed its own projects for attractive targets, but the results have not quite achieved the target KPIs. The town needs to create a specific image of the town, arouse the understanding, interest, and empathy of its residents, and develop them into communicators who will transmit their message outside the community. Branding is a strategy that makes this possible. However, there are virtually no models of Japanese-style place branding measures that can be implemented by local governments².

Overseas, especially in Europe, place branding measures are being implemented by local governments. Supporting these activities are university researchers who also work as place branding consultants. Over the past 20 years, place branding has been theorized and several management models have been proposed by researchers who are also practitioners with diverse academic backgrounds, including geography,

¹ International Place Branding Association Academy. <https://placebranding.org/academy>.

² Shiojiri City, Nagano Prefecture, is a significant rare municipality. Shiojiri has been an early adopter of a City brand strategy and is currently developing a model to link and integrate its brand strategy with its Comprehensive Plan.

sociology, political science, management, and urban planning. Place Branding and Public Diplomacy, and the International Place Branding Association (IPBA) publishes the journal and presides over its annual conference.

Because of this, overseas local governments have been able to engage in place branding using a framework based on practice and research. In Japan, however, place branding measures appear to be non-systematic, in part because no Japanese translations of IPBA-related publications have been published to date.

This case report is a revised and updated version of a report submitted to the IPBA Academy's online course "IPBA Place Brand Management in Practical Course" that the author attended from March to May 2022. I reviewed the official documents of the Regional Revitalization Strategy that Hirokawa Town has implemented so far from the perspective of place branding, evaluated the results, and discussed directions for improvement. Then, using an analytical approach and model for place brand planning, a proposal for future place branding strategies in the town was attempted.

This report expects to be confirmed that the approach of place branding analysis could contribute to find the problems and generate new ideas on the place marketing strategy implemented by local municipalities.

2. Proposal

2.1. Why do I propose the place branding measures for Hirokawa Town?

2.1.1. Overview of Hirokawa Town

The official administrative division of the town discussed in this article is Hirokawa Town, Yame County, Fukuoka Prefecture, Japan. Fukuoka Prefecture is divided into four distinct regions, with the southern part of the prefecture known as the Chikugo region.

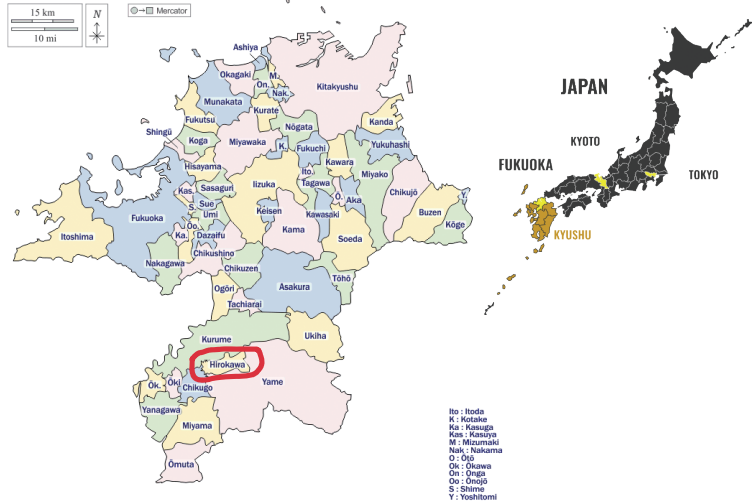
This region has a rich plain formed by the Chikugo river. There is also a mountain range near the borders of neighbouring prefectures.

Hirokawa Town is a small municipality with a population of approximately 20,000, located in Yame County, Fukuoka Prefecture, in the Kyushu region of Japan, adjacent to Kurume City (population 2020: approximately 303,300), Yame City (population 2020: approximately 60,600), and Chikugo City (population 2020: approximately 48,800).

Historically, part of Hirokawa Town belonged to the Kurume economic area of the commercial city, whereas the mountainous area belonged to the Yame economic area. Hence, when the mergers and reorganizations of Japanese municipalities took place between 2005 and 2010, there was a debate about

merging the town into Kurume City and merging it with Yame City. However, as a result, the town chose to remain on its own as an independent municipality (Doi, 2018).

Figure 1. Location of Hirokawa Town



Source: Fukuoka Prefecture Tourism Association HP and d-maps.com

Therefore, Hirokawa Town has a mixed regional identity, similar to Fukuoka, Chikugo, Kurume, and Yame, and finds it challenging to communicate the name Hirokawa to the outside world.

Figure 2. Topography and images of the area around the Hirokawa Town



Source: Adapted from Fukuoka Prefecture Tourism Association HP and Google Map

The climate is relatively mild, and the Hirokawa River, which originates at Mount Hosshin, flows from the east, creating an elongated basin-like plain in its basin and emptying into the Chikugo River. This river basin is one of Japan's leading agricultural production areas. It is known not only for its rice, fruit, and green tea, but also for its sake and other processed agricultural products that support Japanese food culture. Since Kurume had been a castle city ruled by a feudal lord in the Edo Shogun period (1603–1868), concentrations of livelihood industries were found in its suburbs, including Hirokawa, such as traditional crafts and handicrafts. Kurume Kasuri, an indigo-dyed textile, is a famous product in Japan.

Yame is a leading producer of green tea in Japan. Yame tea has a strong reputation as a branded, premium tea. There are many tea farmers in Hirokawa Town, but they sell their tea under the Yame brand name.

Kurume is also the place where tyre manufacturer the Bridgestone was founded. The company's business began by producing rubber-soled shoes as an extension of the textile industry. After shifting its primary focus to rubber products, it quickly developed into one of the world's leading tyre manufacturers.

A service area and an interchange of the Kyushu Expressway are located in the town, and a national road runs through it, making land transportation convenient. Therefore, there are some residents of Hirokawa who commute not only to Kurume and other neighbouring urban areas but also to Fukuoka City (2020 population: approximately 1.6 million), which is attracting attention as the only local metropolitan city in Japan with an ever-increasing population except for the greater Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya area (2020 census).

Hirokawa Town is also less than one hour away from Fukuoka Airport. This has contributed to the movement of 36 manufacturing companies and logistics facilities to the town's industrial park. Therefore, the town's employee population comprises various occupations, including transport, commerce, services, agriculture, traditional industries, medicine, and nursing care.

Hence, the proportion of people who have lived in the area since birth is 15.4% of the total general household population (2015 census), which is also characterized by an extremely high number of migrants. In other words, Hirokawa was home to residents with diverse values and backgrounds.

It is thought that people other than those born in Hirokawa, who are farmers or engaged in traditional industries, chose to live in Hirokawa because of the convenience of commuting to the surrounding cities and low housing prices. It can be described as a typical rural, suburban city.

2.1.2. Why are place branding measures required?

2.1.2.1. Intensifying inter-regional competition regarding securing a permanent population

Every year, Japan's population continues to decline and is becoming increasingly concentrated in the Tokyo metropolitan area. For a small rural town such as Hirokawa, securing residents and creating jobs

is essential. However, the method of creating jobs by attracting factories has been a topic in the past.

Having always secured migrants from outside the town, Hirokawa must use methods other than attracting factories, which it had done in the past, to attract permanent residents, especially, young families with children and create places for them to work. In other words, place marketing and branding are required for residents and businesses.

To attract people to live and work in Hirokawa, it is necessary to re-edit and create a unique way of living and working in this place through marketing and select and brand an image that can be communicated internally and externally.

The Government of Japan has launched a new law and program to support population reduction measures and job creation in each region and a measure to provide subsidies to municipalities that have developed appropriate business plans. Based on a literature review of this measure, this chapter identifies issues regarding the place strategy of Hirokawa.

2.1.2.2. National Regional Revitalization policies

In December 2014, the Japanese Cabinet approved two bills, the Long-Term Vision for Overcoming Population Decline and Revitalizing Regional Economies in Japan and the Comprehensive Strategy.

The policy aims to halt the population decline, correct the excessive concentration of the population in the Tokyo area, ensure a suitable living environment in each region, and maintain a vibrant Japanese society in the future. The Government of Japan has formulated a Comprehensive Strategy for Regional Revitalizing, which outlines the goals, primary direction of measures, and individual measures to achieve these goals and has encouraged local governments to formulate a ‘Regional Population Vision’ and a local version of ‘The first Comprehensive Strategy for Regional Revitalizing.’ It has granted project funds to those strategies that are expected to be effective and capable of achieving the goals.

2.2. Regional Revitalization Strategy of Hirokawa municipality

2.2.1. Regional Revitalization Strategy for the policy hierarchy of Hirokawa Town

Most local governments in Japan have formulated Comprehensive Plans and made them the mainstay of their policies. The Comprehensive Plans were divided into Basic Concepts, Basic Plans, and Implementation Plans, starting from the highest hierarchical level and the longest period.

This Basic Concept defines their vision and principles for the future. The Basic Plan for the medium term is formulated to realise the Basic Concept, and measures are implemented. The Basic Concept is the top-level plan of a municipality, and the comprehensive strategy is positioned under the Basic Concept and Plan.

As Figure 3 shows, Hirokawa Town’s Regional Revitalization Strategy is the selection and

concentration project implemented based on grants from the central government. In other words, the strategy is a focused version of the Comprehensive Plan that selects, integrates, and prioritizes policy projects that should be specifically addressed to achieve the target population.

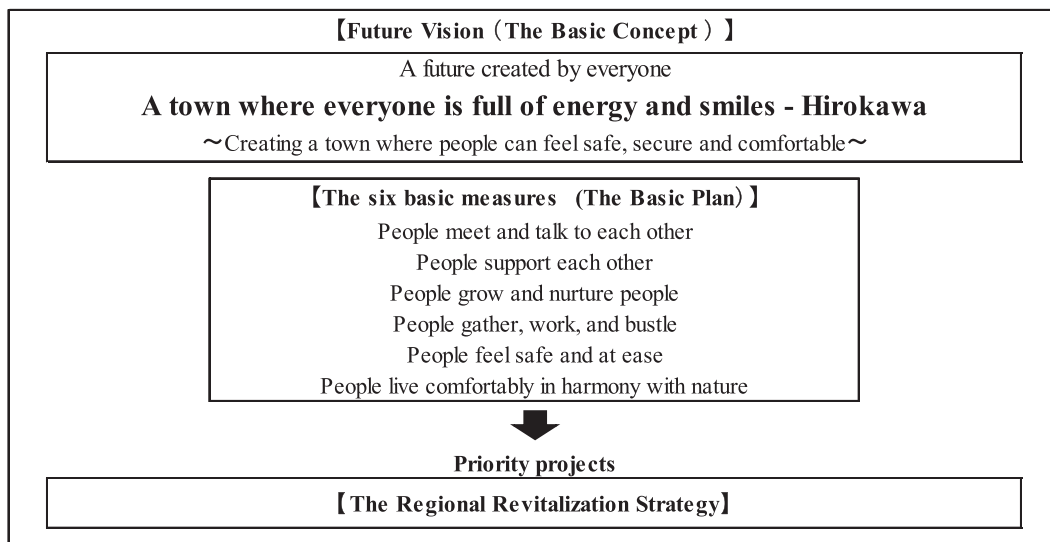
Therefore, this strategy can be described as a place marketing strategy, but the Basic Concept does not include the idea of a place branding strategy.

The Future Vision (Figure 3) set out in the Basic Concepts is similar to the brand essence (Hirokawa Town, 2021), but its content does not differentiate it from other towns and cities. The description of the vision subtitles is quoted below.

‘A future created by everyone’ expresses the will of all residents to take the initiative and work together to pass on the town’s development to the next generation, while ‘a town where everyone is full of energy and smiles’ means ‘a town that cares about people’ and ‘a town where everyone is healthy and active?’. Through lifelong learning activities and industrial activities, we aim to keep everyone smiling and the town in a state of vitality.

‘Creating a town where people can feel safe, secure and comfortable’ expresses the image of a town where everyone can live safely, securely and comfortably for life, where people want to live and work in this town, where they can create a vibrant lifestyle, where everyone can feel happy to live here.

Figure 3. Position of the Regional Revitalization Strategy in the policy hierarchy of Hirokawa Town



Source: Adapted and redrawn from Hirokawa Town (2020)

This description appears to be an objective and clichéd ideal image rather than a subjectively perceived brand value. The vision set out in the comprehensive plan does not reflect a sense of will. It is kind, simple, and fair to everyone. Therefore, it does not aim to create a brand identity that can be distinguished from other regions. In other words, it remains merely a slogan.

The term branding is often used in the regional revitalization strategy, even though branding is not mentioned in the comprehensive plan. This appears to have caused the confusion. The strategy is then outlined, and it is found that expression branding is used.

2.2.2. The outline of the Regional Revitalization Strategy

In 2015, Hirokawa formulated its 'First Phase Comprehensive Strategy', worked on various measures and, based on the verification of the results, and formulated its 'Second Phase Comprehensive Strategy' in 2021, which has been in place ever since.

Since the first phase, Hirokawa has been promoting this strategy with the following four Objectives:

Objective 1: To create stable employment

Objective 2: To create an influx of new people

Objective 3: Fulfil the wishes of the younger generation to marry, have children, and raise children.

Objective 4: Create a region that fits the times, protects secure livelihoods, and links the region with the rest of the country.

The characteristic of Hirokawa's strategy was that it was defined as four distinctive symbolic projects, and many project funds were invested.

'Project to promote migration by creating a sanctuary for fashionable adult women', 'Raise healthy children here! The Migration and Settlement Promotion Project' is a symbolic project that promotes migration and settlement in relation to Objectives 1 and 2. These can be described as the promotion of place marketing through selection and focus on the market of women in their 30s who like clothes, sewing, and textiles in general. The basis for this strategy is the legitimacy of Hirokawa as a dyeing and weaving centre for Kurume Kasuri, one of Japan's most representative traditional textiles.

Regarding this project, it took over from the second phase, *'Objective 1: Expand the potential of local resources to enable people to work with peace of mind'* to encourage migration and settlement, help secure employment, and support business start-ups, expansion of employment in companies and expansion of local industries such as agriculture and traditional crafts, in line with the needs of young individuals, It was reiterated that efforts would be made to create new jobs by utilising resources expanding employment and job opportunities.

The reinforcement of this was also referred to in *'Objective 2: Increase the number of people connected to the Hirokawa and create a new flow of people'*, whereby the town's attractions will be widely communicated, information will be delivered to people who are considering moving to the town,

opportunities will be created to actually experience its attractions, the number of people who resonate with the way of life and atmosphere of the town will be increased, and the number of people who are interested in moving to Hirokawa will increase. It was specified that the cycle would be linked to securing jobs and housing while simultaneously creating various connections, such as support for local events from afar and financial support from businesses.

The symbolic project has also been promoted, with amendments and changes to the measures' content and various restrictions imposed by COVID-19.

2.2.3. Review on the First phase Strategy

2.2.3.1. Description of place branding in the official project plans

The project plans for multiple applications for grants to the government since 2016 have revealed several problems and inconsistencies in the process of place branding.

The 2016 application plan set out the following four objectives for the project to support product development and employment by utilizing the power of fashionable adult women (Hirokawa Town, 2016A).

- 1) Support for women's employment and business start-ups.
- 2) Expansion of production and creation of employment through the development of various Kurume Kasuri products.
- 3) Consultation services for immigration and settlement.
- 4) Branding the region as a town where fashionable women gather³.

It also states the following advantages of cooperation with immigration and settlement promotion policies.

In line with the acquisition of an image as an area where fashionable women gather, information on the town's housing acquisition support and childcare support will be disseminated at the centre, and consultations on migration and settlement will also be provided. The synergy effect between the image strategy and the settlement policy can be exploited to strongly promote the area as a destination for immigration and settlement, particularly among women of child-bearing age.

To achieve this objective, a vacant house was renovated to create a shared facility where sewing machines, other sewing equipment, and support from textile designers were made available. Training and courses were held there and began to attract women interested in fashion and handcrafted clothes. A

³ Underlined sentences referring to describe about branding, hereafter.

project was also implemented to invite young designers to work while staying in Hirokawa. However, participation by women with children and those wishing to start their own businesses—the main target groups—hardly increased.

An additional plan submitted to the state in 2017 relates to a project named the Hirokawa New Editing Project: a project to support start-ups and promote migration, to strengthen the project started in 2016. The overview of this project is as follows (Hirokawa Town, 2017).

It is an initiative to create new value. The situation is reconfigured using the method of editing in the broadest sense, and the existing materials create new value. New products and services are created, new jobs appear, new workplaces are created, and even people who share these values migrate and settle in the area strategically.

A concept planner with a proven track record in local product development and renewal based on various local resources was employed as the overall business producer and under his guidance, training courses, business adviser services, new product developments and communications were undertaken as concrete projects.

It then describes the three-year outcomes guided by the implementation of the program.

The third-year is positioned as a year for delivering information to a wide range of people, not only those who are originally interested in living and manufacturing in rural areas, but also for branding the area with 'fashionable living' in Hirokawa and increasing the number of migrants, as well as for making the town self-starting. It is also positioned as a year of preparation for becoming self-financing.

2.2.3.2. Concerns in place branding strategies in the First phase

The objective of the 2016 business plan was to brand the area as a town for fashionable women. However, the 2017 business plan changed to area brand through 'fashionable living' in Hirokawa Town.

The abstract brand image that was envisioned by the project team and concept planner was put forward, and communication activities were carried out, without any activities to identify the image of 'fashionable women' or 'fashionable life', the elements of the brand identity and the values offered.

Hirokawa Town used the abundant subsidies granted by the government to build, under the coordination of the producer, a guesthouse and a laboratory with product development functions for various agricultural products in Hirokawa, in addition to a shared office with sewing equipment. All logos and names of the facilities were designed by the same designer in the direction of the producers. However, there were no experts on place branding in the team, so the projects were unable to create a narrative in which the three facilities were widely known and used in the way they had envisaged for the purpose.

Therefore, the business plan for the second phase of the project must be reoriented. In addition, the

textile industry was hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, so a strategy that also focused on textiles but also on the continued development of the textile industry is needed.

2.2.4. Review on the Second phase Strategy

2.2.4.1. Description of place branding in the official project plans

In the first phase, the project team tried to develop marketing and branding to create a fashionable image based on the assets of the textile industry, targeting women in their 20s and 30s; however, this was not sufficiently effective. Therefore, in the second phase, a major change in the strategy was made to address the issue of business succession for production businesses that were on the verge of business continuity in COVID-19. Hirokawa Town is the place of the producer of Kurume Kasuri, a yarn-dyed plain-weave cotton fabric, which is a traditional craft; there was a time when the textile industry was a major employer in the town, but production and the number of people employed declined along with the slowdown of the domestic textile industry.

In recent years, however, trousers made from Kurume Kasuri have attracted the attention of young people as fashionable clothing, and the textile material itself has attracted renewed interest owing to its sophisticated design and comfort.

However, all Kasuri producers are small-scale, and many have mainly subcontracted their businesses to wholesalers. As a result, they are not sufficiently engaged in managing and utilizing designs such as patterns, improving productivity by improving ageing production equipment, passing on the advanced skills of their ageing bearers, and training young people.

In addition, Kurume Kasuri, as a designated traditional craft, has made efforts to promote and raise awareness of its techniques and production methods but has rarely transferred part of its production technology to other production areas to develop new textiles or collaborate with other production areas and industries to develop new products. Therefore, the potential of technology and design accumulated over the years has not been fully utilized for industrial promotion and cultural development. The textile industry's craftsmen are ageing, and if this trend continues, the textile industry will inevitably decline, and the textile production centre will not be preserved for future generations.

In the first phase of the project, Hirokawa Town renovated a vacant community facility to generate an atelier equipped with sewing tools that can be used by aspiring designers for a low fee and developed a guesthouse to promote immigration and settlement for long-term stays.

Through these projects, the potential targets of interest in the textile industry began to visit the region. Through residential and work experiences, a small number of people migrated to the area. However, there were few jobs after migration, and employment conditions were not good, so prospective migrants

sometimes gave up. In the second phase of the project, marketing is planned to target potential prospective migrants who want to work in the textile industry and live in Hirokawa, which was discovered in the first phase.

To achieve this, it is necessary to strengthen the profitability of the textile industry, which is the recipient of post-migration jobs, to create high-quality employment and to present a hopeful future image for the textile production area.

Therefore, a new entrepreneurial consultant with a proven track record in combining innovation and traditional craft culture was contracted to develop the *'Creating the Future of the Hirokawa Textile Production Area Project'*. As a first step, the new project team has organized a *'Business Innovation Council for the Hirokawa Textile Production Area (BIC)'*, comprising textile trading companies, wholesalers, the town hall, the town chamber of commerce and industry and the local technical university, to analyse the current situation and draw up a future vision (Hirokawa Town, 2020A).

2.2.4.2. Concerns in place branding strategies in the Second phase

The Council formulated the Kurume Kasuri Wide-area Future Vision, defining *'Native =Origin ×Story×Sustainable'* for the Native Textile Production Area Project in 2021 and promoting Kasuri overseas not as a textile but as 'ikat', the name of a world-accepted textile design technique. This decision was made to communicate from an international perspective. Based on wide-area cooperation with Kurume City and Chikugo City, the vision was to build a brand image not as an industrial production centre for Kurume Kasuri but as a cultural production centre for Kurume Kasuri (BIC, 2021).

However, Hirokawa Town has a problem with place branding. Branding Kurume only diminished the brand image of the textile industry in Hirokawa Town. The minutes of the council meeting also states that it is unlikely that Hirokawa will take the initiative in place branding of the production area. Moreover, even if the textile industry is revitalized and interest in working in Hirokawa Town increases, it is difficult to imagine how people can live there. Furthermore, many residents who are not involved in the textile industry are likely to be shunned as a topic of no interest.

2.2.5. The need for the integrated brand essence and the brand value formulation

It is important to promote projects that increase employment and migration by promoting the Kurume Kasuri industry.

However, the time has come to visualize the existing place identity of the residents of Hirokawa and create a brand essence and brand value that is integrated with the tangible and intangible values created by marketing that has been strategically implemented so far.

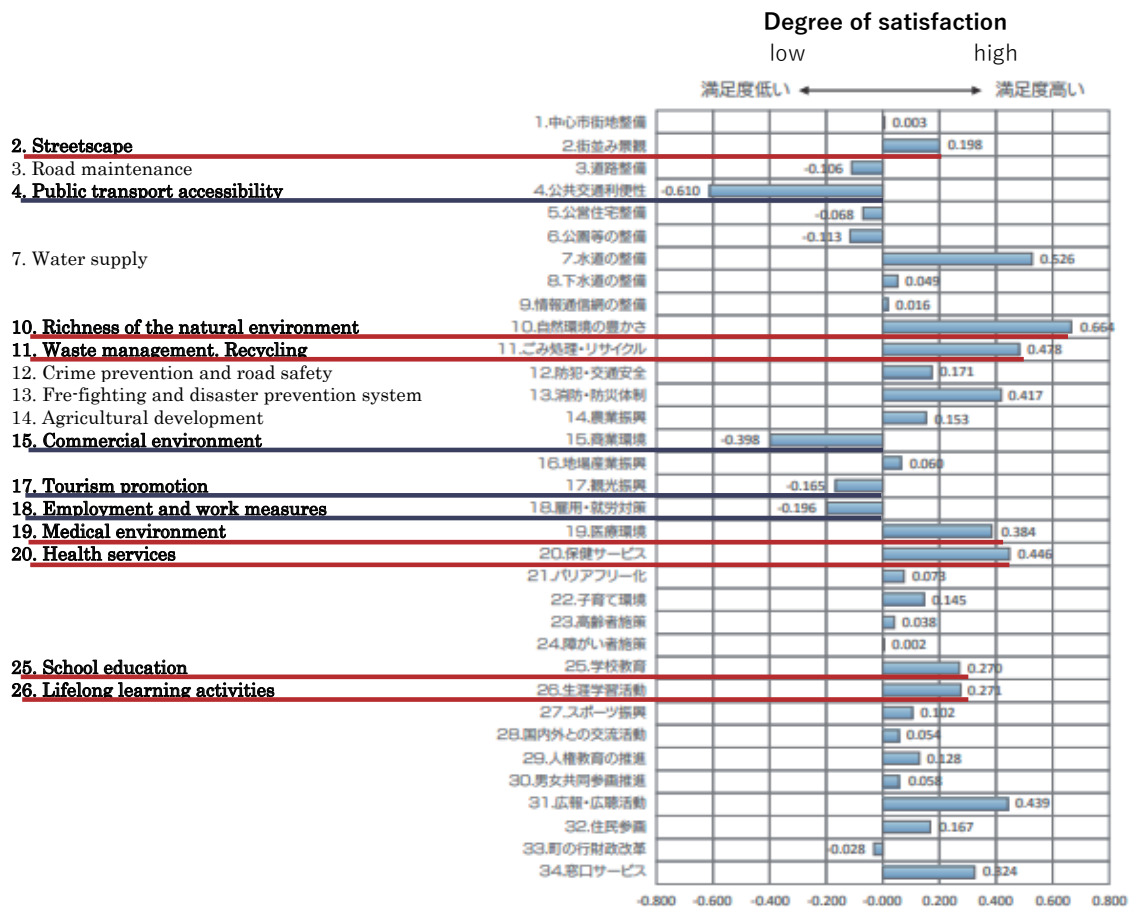
2.3. Identity of Hirokawa residents

2.3.1. Brand identities inferred from the results of the residents' survey

The Fourth Comprehensive Plan for Hirokawa Town (Revised Version), which covers the planning period 2021-2023, listed the following five positive characteristics of Hirokawa Town. The natural environment, infrastructure, culture, community, and agriculture-based industries are also mentioned (Hirokawa Town, 2021).

- 1) A town that maintains an excellent natural environment, including beautiful rural landscapes, mountains and rivers.
- 2) Towns with a safe, secure and comfortable living environment and local resources in key locations for automobile traffic.
- 3) A town that works together with the local community to improve educational capacity, pass on history and traditional culture, and promote the creation of a new culture.
- 4) A town that promotes cooperation and regional development with the community at its core.
- 5) A town where agriculture continues to develop as a key industry and where the industry is full of vitality.

Figure 4. The satisfaction index (Likert scale)



Source: Adapted and redrawn from Hirokawa Town (2020)

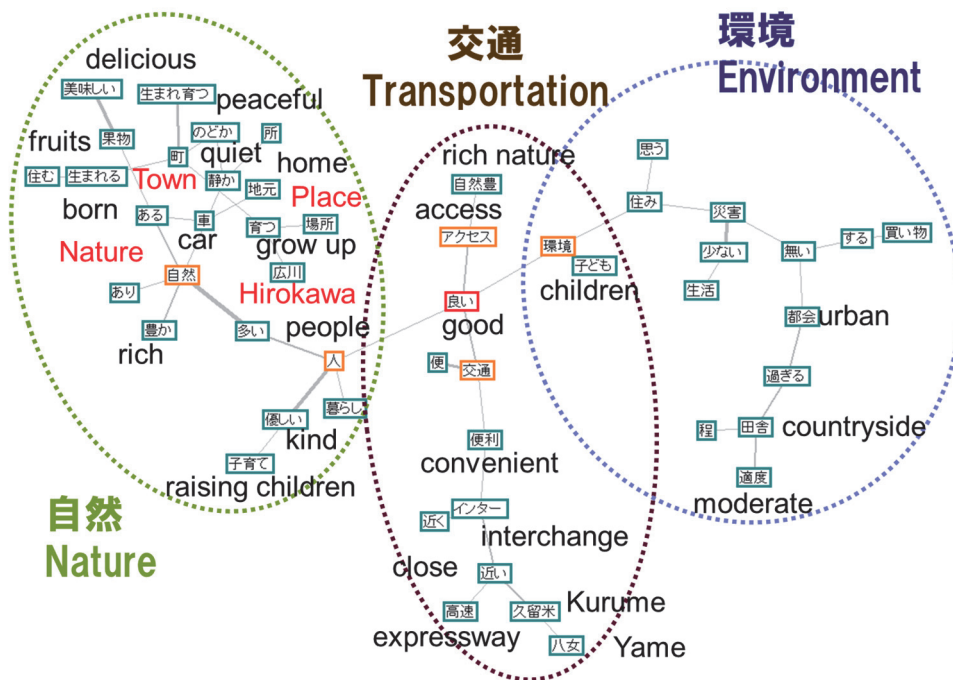
However, the satisfaction index (Likert scale) (Figure 4) from the 2019 Resident Survey shows that the positive characteristics described by the administration of Hirokawa Town do not necessarily correspond to residents' satisfaction. Basic life satisfaction with nature, waste disposal and recycling, medical care, health, and education is high, but satisfaction with transport, which is highly rated by the administration, is low. This is also linked to poor accessibility to commercial facilities. There is no railway station in Hirokawa Town and only vertical bus routes, which means that there is no horizontal mobility. This is inconvenient without the use of a private car.

Figure 5 shows the survey on changes in the attitudes and behaviour of Hirokawa residents under the influence of COVID-19 (Yamashita, 2020), which was conducted by the author in collaboration with Hirokawa Town in October 2020. Of the respondents to this questionnaire, the proportion of those who said they liked or rather liked Hirokawa Town reached 90%.

A text-mining analysis was conducted on the free answers given by the residents who answered that they liked Hirokawa Town and the reasons for this.

The results of the survey also show that residents highly value the richness of nature and are satisfied with the quietness, as well as a peaceful life with a good balance between urbanization and rurality. The deliciousness of the fruit also caught attention. The convenience of transport is rated highly for vertical travel in the direction of Kurume and Yame and for access to expressway.

Figure 5. The reasons why I like Hirokawa Town



Source: Yamashita, E. (2020)

2.3.2. The need for the integrated brand essence and the brand story formulation

Textiles, such as Kasuri, do not appear to be among the reasons residents like Hirokawa. There needs to be a brand essence and story that links the peaceful life blessed with nature and the traditional textile industry rooted in nature so that they can be recalled together.

Hirokawa Town has various local resources, including fruits, tea, and Kasuri, but products with surrounding place names, such as Chikugo fruit, Yame tea, and Kurume Kasuri, have already formed a strong brand image.

To promote Hirokawa’s branding, the concept of place needs to be reconsidered.

2.4. Proposal to raise the new place area concept and organise workshops

2.4.1. Branding of the Hirokawa (river) Basin

How about branding the town of Hirokawa (river) Basin? In fact, the meaning of HIRO in Japanese is broad, and KAWA is a river. The Hirokawa (river) itself is a narrow tributary with no presence. However, it flows out of the mountains, runs through Hirokawa Town and Kurume City, and flows into the Chikugo River. Fruit and other agriculture and the Kasuri dyeing process come from the blessings of Hirokawa (river). Sake producers are also downstream of Hirokawa (river).

It should be noted that the Hirokawa (river) has had a wide influence on the lifestyle, culture, and traditional industry of not only Hirokawa Town but also Kurume City and the Chikugo Region.

Figure 6. Chikugo River Basin and Hirokawa (river)



Source: Adapted and redrawn from Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism HP

2.4.2. Branding of the Hirokawa (river) Basin

2.4.2.1. Unofficial brand formulation process

The author would like to suggest that the following phased research activities, social experiments, will be carried out in collaboration with Hirokawa Town Hall: the project will be conducted as an informal brand essence search activity that calls for residents and young key people in the textile industry.

Phase 1. Event: Hirokawa (river) Basin walking tour

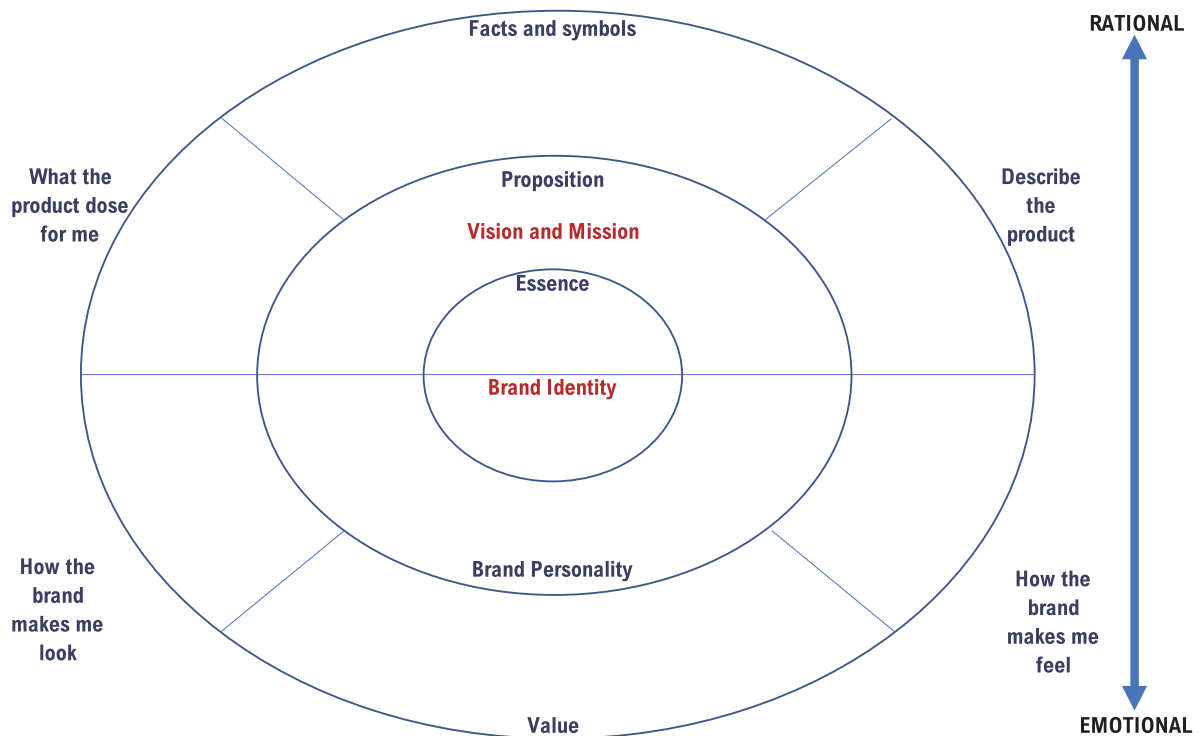
Phase 2. Workshop: Hirokawa (river) Basin nature & cultural map

Phase 3. Symposium: Hirokawa (river) Basin!?

Phase 4. Workshop: The Brand Wheel Model mapping

Phase 5. Analysis: Current and Potential Stakeholders

Figure 7. The Brand Wheel Model

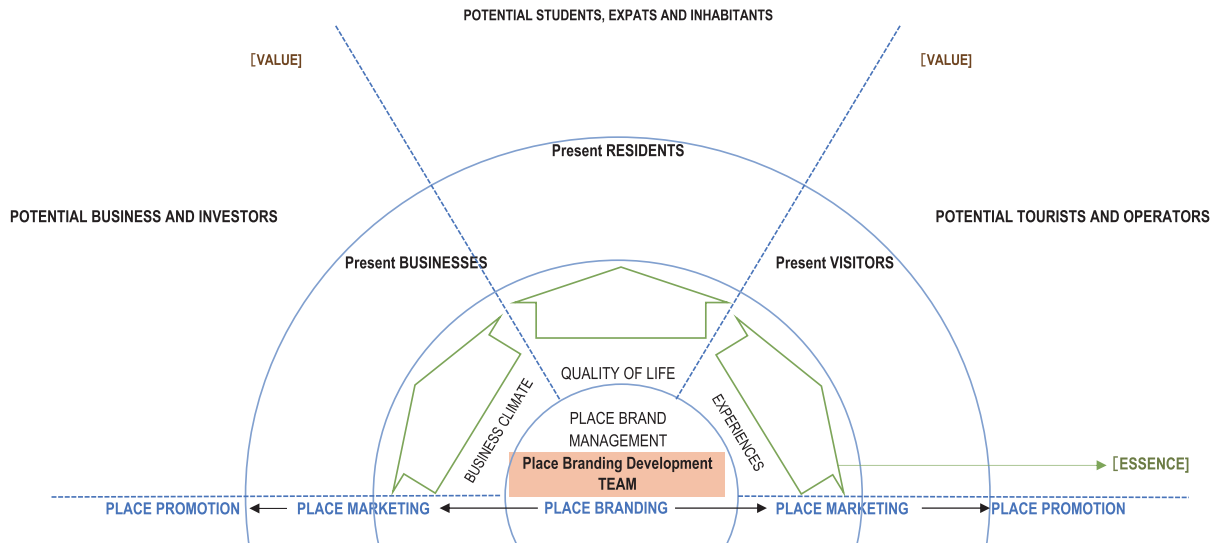


Source: Adapted and redrawn from World Tourism Organization and European Travel Commission (2009) and Florek, M. (2021)

2.4.2.2. Aiming at proposing the official brand formulation program

The author has participated in the Regional Revitalization Strategy development stage since 2015 as the chairperson of the advisory committee and continues to chair the expert advisory panel. As part of my research activities, I conducted surveys and focus group interviews with residents during this period. For this assignment, the chief officer in charge of the strategy presented all past documents to me, and

Figure 8. Current and Potential Stakeholders in Place Marketing process



Source: Adapted and redrawn from Boisen, M. et.al., (2017)

we exchanged views on the branding initiatives in Hirokawa Town.

Expected to propose informal initiatives for key local persons, and if there is potential for citizen participation in social experiments, I would like to find a way to proceed with the formulation process as a full-fledged project by obtaining a budget as an official project and present the ideal organization to implement the branding project.

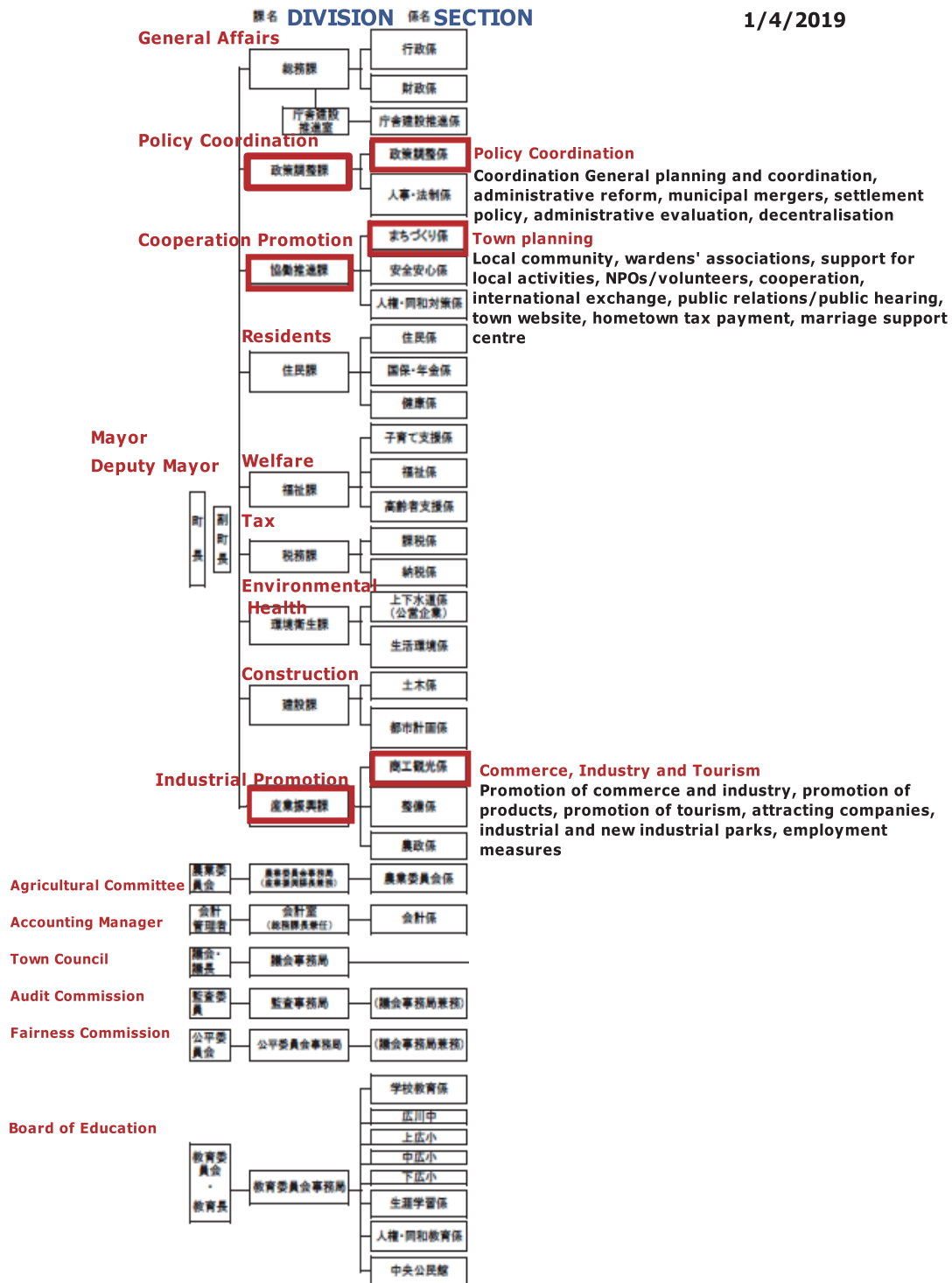
2.5. The ideal managerial organization to implement the branding project

Few Japanese local authorities have a department with the name ‘marketing’. Larger municipalities have set up organizations to promote tourism and investment, or DMOs, while smaller cities have only established tourism associations with local operators, whose main purpose is to promote tourism. Very small municipalities, such as Hirokawa Town, have not even established such associations. Figure 9 shows the organizational chart of Hirokawa Town. Departments that may be relevant to place marketing and branding are written at section level on the right-hand side.

This shows that in the current system, communication with the target audience is carried out discretely by different departments. Therefore, the organization needs to be restructured and a department in charge needs to be set up. The Secretariat of the Regional Revitalization Strategy is handled by the Policy Coordination Section. This section has the function of coordinating the projects of the various departments across the board.

As a proposal for reorganization, the Policy Coordination Section should be renamed the Policy Planning and Coordination Section which is responsible for marketing and branding. The Regional revitalization strategy has been supervised by the Special Task Force, headed by the mayor, which has

Figure 9. The Organization Chart of Hirokawa Town



Source: Adapted and redrawn from Hirokawa Town HP

established the project team of relevant staff to promote the strategy under a headquarters meeting of executives and managers. In the team, section chiefs and young staffs from relating departments have developed and carried out action plans. The city council has given its opinion on the decisions of the Task Force and the expert panel has provided advice. As the secretariat of this Task Force is also located

in the Policy Coordination Division, this structure should be maintained, and the strategy developed in the promotion of place marketing and branding.

3. Conclusion

The review of the Regional Revitalization Strategy that Hirokawa Town has implemented since 2015, showed that although slogans using the expression ‘branding’ were found, they did not create an image for people living within and outside the town. But it was partially confirmed that marketing to fashionable women, focusing on the Kurume Kasuri traditional textile industry clustered in the town, was successful.

Through the first phase, some of these activities aroused interest among urban creators who interested in the textile industry. Therefore, in the second phase, a new vision was formulated for Hirokawa Town as a wide textile production area, which also aimed to halt the decline in the textile industry itself. Work on branding the town as a native production area for Kurume Kasuri began in 2021. However, Hirokawa was hesitant to take the initiative in branding the Kurume Kasuri project, which has the name of a neighbouring municipality, because the name of Hirokawa Town would be erased.

While the town image held by Hirokawa residents is different from that of textiles. Many residents of Hirokawa cite an excellent natural environment and peaceful life as reasons for liking the town. However, many of them moved to Hirokawa for the convenience of commuting and cheap housing, not because they were attracted by nature. They became cognizant of the richness of nature and its delicious fruit after they started living in the area. The element that residents appreciate should be a brand value. As many inhabitants live independently of the traditional textile industry, a straightforward story integrated with nature should be presented to extract this brand value.

Therefore, the proposal is to focus on the Hirokawa (river) basin, a local resource common to the natural environment and textile industry, and the town’s name (in Japanese, HIRO =broad, KAWA =river). A new concept of location, the Hirokawa River Basin, was proposed. Hirokawa (river) is a small river; however, it has contributed to the town’s agriculture and supported the textile dyeing industry, and it runs through Kurume City, which gave Kurume Kasuri its name, before joining the Chikugo River.

The proposal starts with the following five informal social experimentation projects:

(1) Event: Hirokawa (river) Basin walking tour; (2) Workshop: Hirokawa (river) Basin nature & cultural map; (3) Symposium: Hirokawa (river) Basin!?!; (4) Workshop: The Brand Wheel Model mapping; and (5) Analysis: Current and Potential Stakeholders⁴.

⁴ The author has published this idea in the Hirokawa New Edition, the owned media of the Regional Revitalization Strategy of Hirokawa Town (Yamashita, 2023).

If the potential of this activity is identified, I would consider making an official recommendation with the ideal managerial organization to implement the branding project.

Consequently, through the case of Hirokawa Town the approach of place branding analysis could support to create new ideas on the place marketing strategy. The other municipalities should consider using this evaluation approach when they review Regional Revitalization Strategy.

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