



The impact of world heritage site designation on local communities – A case study of Ogimachi, Shirakawa–mura, Japan

Takamitsu Jimura*

York St John Business School, York St John University, Lord Mayor's Walk, York YO31 7EX, UK

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines economic, socio-cultural, physical and attitudinal changes in/around World Heritage Site (WHS) Ogimachi since WHS designation from the local communities' standpoint and explores the background of these changes and views. Both positive and negative changes for local communities in/around WHS Ogimachi after WHS listing are identified. There are three main factors behind these changes: the extensive and rapid tourism development after WHS inscription; the high level of appeal of a WHS status for domestic tourists; and local people's attitudes towards conservation of the cultural environment and WHS status. In addition to its conservation plan, WHS Ogimachi must have a comprehensive tourism management plan for its successful future as a place to live, as a WHS and a tourist destination.

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1. Introduction

In tourism studies generally, the economic, socio-cultural, physical and attitudinal changes in the local community, resulting from tourism, have been examined by numerous researchers (e.g. Greenwood, 1989; Murphy, 1985; Pizam, 1978); however, these studies do not focus specifically on World Heritage Sites (WHSs) and their designation but are concerned with general tourist destinations. Numerous studies have focused on the various changes since WHS designation at WHSs all over the world; however, these works mainly look at tourists, tourism development, conservation and visitor management (Hall & Piggin, 2003; Kim, Wong, & Cho, 2007; Leask & Fyall, 2006; Li, Wu, & Cai, 2008; Rakic & Chambers, 2008; Shackley, 1998a; Ying & Zhou, 2007). There is a lack of research on the views of local communities in/around the WHS. Furthermore, these studies have tended to focus more on the actual and tangible changes in local communities since WHS designation rather than on the local communities' views of the changes. However, true satisfaction for local people would depend more on their views of the changes rather than on the actual changes. Moreover, the local communities' views of the changes since WHS designation are vital for long-term tourism development as WHSs. In addition to economic, socio-cultural and physical changes in local communities, the changes from tourism and/or WHS designation also occur in

local people's minds. Although this kind of change has not received much attention in tourism studies, especially those on WHSs, it is also significant for the local communities and tourism development as WHSs. Moreover, the tourism research which examines cultural and heritage tourist destinations in Japan is highly limited. The aim of this study, therefore, is to examine four major areas of change: economic, socio-cultural, physical and attitudinal changes in/around WHS Ogimachi since WHS designation from the views of local communities and to explore the background of these changes and local communities' views. For the above-mentioned reasons, the survey has contributed to the study of the impact of WHS designation and tourism on local communities.

2. Shirakawa-mura and Ogimachi

Shirakawa-mura is a rural village located in a mountainous region with heavy snowfall. Although Japan has a highly-developed transportation network, Shirakawa-mura is still difficult to access. This factor has contributed to the conservation of this authentic traditional Japanese village. Ogimachi is an area in Shirakawa-mura. In terms of architectural history, the gassho-style house is one of the most significant types of Japanese farmhouse, because of its rarity and the fact that the surviving examples remain as clusters (Agency for Cultural Affairs, 1994). Hence, the central part of Ogimachi (WHS Ogimachi), where gassho-style houses remain as a group, corresponds to the definition of "groups of buildings" described in Article 1 of World Heritage Convention (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2010a) and was inscribed as a WHS in

* Tel.: +44 (0) 1904 87 6787; fax: +44 (0) 1904 87 6759.

E-mail addresses: T.Jimura@yorks.j.ac.uk, takamitsu@jimura@yahoo.co.uk

December 1995 together with Gokayama. Gassho-style houses are characterised by a steep thatched roof (Fig. 1). The shape of the roof looks like the hands' shape folded in a prayer and this is called "gassho" in Japanese. Most gassho-style houses in WHS Ogimachi were built between the mid-18th century and the mid-19th century (Saito & Inaba, 1996).

Kumi is the self-governing community unit and yui is the traditional custom of mutual help based on the exchange of labour and operated by the members of the kumi. These customs show that Shirakawa-mura still has a certain level of community spirit which has seriously declined or been lost in most Japanese cities and towns. Kumi and yui have also supported the conservation works of gassho-style houses. WHS Ogimachi is important as a living example of a historic village because of its historic buildings and landscape, and the continued existence of traditional life in all forms (Agency for Cultural Affairs, 1994). The Preservation Plan for the Shirakawa-mura Ogimachi Important Preservation District for Groups of Historic Buildings was enacted in 1976 (Shirakawa-mura Ogimachi, 1994). The buildings and structures forming WHS Ogimachi are described in the Preservation Plan. The proper management of these buildings is the obligation of the owners of the buildings, and alterations to the existing state are strictly controlled. Canals, trees, and irrigated rice fields are also important elements of the landscape of WHS Ogimachi, and these elements are listed as environmental features in the Preservation Plan (Agency for Cultural Affairs, 1994). Regarding tourism, a great increase in the number of tourists was confirmed after WHS designation (Fig. 2). Overall, this trend continued until 2003. 2008 saw a huge increase again as the Shirakawa-go interchange was opened in July (Shirakawa-mura Commerce Industry and Tourism Section, 2009). The proportion of overnight tourists has been relatively small, especially after 1997.

Tourism development since WHS designation has caused "real" changes in the environment of Shirakawa-mura. The number of tourism-related businesses, such as restaurants, cafes, souvenir shops, and parking lots, has increased (Jimura, 2007; Saito, 2003,

2004, 2006). Intriguingly, however, the number of accommodation facilities has hardly changed in the WHS and has slightly decreased around the WHS (Jimura, 2007; Shirakawa-go Tourist Association, 2008, 2009). Overall, these accommodation facilities are small minsyuku (Japanese-style inns) and are family-run; however, the young people who can take over the business tend to stay in a big city after they graduate from a university or college (Jimura, 2007). This trend is noticeable in young people whose parents' homes are located outside the WHS (Jimura, 2007). Traffic congestion has become a serious problem. It worsens during the consecutive holidays at the beginning of May and in the middle of August (Jimura, 2007). Taniguchi, Koike, and Seto (2006) suggest that Shirakawa-mura should introduce a system which can control traffic volume. In fact, a park-and-ride system in peak seasons was introduced in 2006 to mitigate the level of traffic congestion in WHS Ogimachi (Shirakawa-mura Commerce Industry and Tourism Section, 2006).

3. Theoretical framework

3.1. The implication between heritage and tourism

The accelerating pace of heritage resource creation is a well-remarked contemporary phenomenon (Graham, Ashworth, & Tunbridge, 2000; Hewison, 1987). Hall (2001) points out that renovation, re-use or reconstruction of past urban landscape has become an almost universal aspect of the contemporary urban scene. Regarding tourism, some researchers admit that heritage is regarded as one of the most significant and fastest growing components of tourism (Alzua, O'Leary, & Morrison, 1998; Herbert, 1995). Along with this phenomenon, tourists over the last 30 years have increasingly become more interested in consuming heritage (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2000). Consequently, today historic towns and quarters are competing to attract tourists, and previously unknown places are appearing on the heritage market (Orbasli, 2000). For instance, Eastern Europe has become accessible and



Fig. 1. Gassho-style houses in WHS Ogimachi.

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