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Original Article

Internal processes of Geographical Indication and their effects: an evaluation framework for geographical indication applicants in Japan

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ABSTRACT

Background: The internal processes of geographical indications (GIs) by the applicants in rural specific regions primarily remain unexplored, although GIs can facilitate retention of long-term accumulated traditional knowledge in ethnic foods. This article sheds light on (1) analysis of phase-wise internal processes of GI registration and (2) examine relationships between the duration of application and perceived effects of GI registration in Northwestern Japan. GI in Japan is a comparatively a new system introduced in 2015.

Methods: This article applied thematic analysis. The criteria for evaluating the gap of GI registration effects among the seven GI cases were descriptive and analytical with the information and data coming from official documents, questionnaire survey, and personal communications with key informants of the GI applicants. Qualitative information with quantitative data was also applied to visualize the complex internal GI registration processes and their effects.

Results: This article identified that GI applicants who took a relatively long time to complete GI registration tended to perceive the relatively weak registration effects. Alternatively, GI applicants who took a relatively short time to complete their GI registration tended to evaluate the effects of the registration highly. For the preparation process, the most difficult phases for applications were drafting the application documents and long-term communication with a GI regulator.

Conclusion: This article provides insights on the methods to uncover the complex, both ex-ante and ex-post, GI registration processes to reorganize current members of GI applicants and to fill the gaps and enhance the effects of GI registration.

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1. Introduction

The geographical indication (GI) has proliferated as a legal protection for foods with terroir or taste of place, a concept most often associated with traditional foods produced by small farmers in specific regions. In this respect, GIs can facilitate retention of long-term accumulated traditional knowledge in ethnic foods. Actually, the number of GIs registration has increased worldwide following the emergence of various international and regional agreements, with the most prominent one being the World Trade Organization Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights [1–3]. Following its introduction in the EU, members of ASEAN such as the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF) have enforced the Act on Protection of the Names of Specific Agricultural, Forestry, and Fishery Products

and Foodstuffs [4]. Extending the protection by GIs would benefit ASEAN countries; GIs can reinforce the economic fabric in local communities through the presence of additional industries and stimulating quality. ASEAN countries have also acknowledged GIs in agriculture, food, and handicrafts from which they might profit. Facilitating market differentiation by GIs for a variety of common commodities such as tea, coffee, and rice that would secure an opportunity for emerging economies to use intellectual property rules which improve their living standards by generating wealth for their communities and preserve their cultural heritage and landscape [34]. By introducing the GI in June 2015, MAFF aims to increase the added values of agricultural products and increase Japan's exports of agriculture, forestry, and fishery products. Japan has finalized negotiation for the Economic Partnership Agreement with EU (The EU-Japan EPA) on December 8, 2017. The GI-registered products in EU can be registered in Japan and vice versa. For example, Japan's National Tax Agency approved 139 EU-proposed GIs for wine, spirits, and other alcoholic beverages on January 19, 2018 [5].

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The Japanese GI system for agricultural products and foodstuffs was officially launched in June 2015. As of December 15, 2017, 58 products are registered for GI in Japan [6]. The Japanese laws legislated by the MAFF require the same standard set of rules adopted in the EU. They include consensus building within the members of a GI applicant group, preparing written common rules (listed in the product specification), and establishing a control system for monitoring compliance to these rules and an enforcement system [7,8]. To meet these requirements, GI applicants in Japan need to collect data that show historical, cultural, and environmental relationships between the products and production areas before GI registration [9]. The current Japanese GI legal framework is new, and the level of understanding amongst GI applicants is often too weak to establish a consensus building system for GI registration. The GI system is frequently used by farmers, small size to midsize agricultural companies, or organizations to survive in an increasingly competitive and saturated agrifood market [10]. Under these circumstances, local producers and processors must organize and collectively define the area of production and the nature of the final product [11]. These standard rules are summarized in the so-called “product specification” or *Meisai sho* in Japanese, which is mandatory for all applications.

There are existing studies on the GI registration process related to quality control, products promotion, and effects of the registration. However, little is known about the processes of collective institutional efforts for GI registration among various GI applicants [12]. To date, there is limited literature on the interlinked processes of GI applicants' recognition and efforts [13,14]. To explore these internal processes largely overlooked in the existing literature, we look at GI applicants in the Tohoku region of Japan. GI applications in Tohoku are primarily by smallholders in rural areas. The smallholders' attempts to revive Japan's rural areas are now shifting from productivity-based approaches to broader landscapes and tourism-oriented approaches [15–17]. GIs are useful tools in these approaches to promote products embedded in local socioecological landscapes.

This article sheds light on the black box of GI registration processes in rural GI production areas in Japan. Considering both the ex-ante and ex-post of GI registration, this study provides empirical insights into the GI registration processes by highlighting the associated efforts of GI applicants, the expectations before GI registration, and the effects of registration. This research aims to identify the perceived gaps of GI applicants, and to develop a new systematic evaluation framework of GI effects observed before and after GI registration. Our suggestion for an evaluation framework might contribute to making coherent policies that facilitate the innovative processes and sustainable management of local products using GI.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Study site

We selected seven registered GI cases out of eight in the Tohoku region as of 15th December 2017. Aomori Cassis and Jusankosan Yamato Shijimi (freshwater clam) from Aomori Prefecture, Odate Tonburi (processed Kochia seeds) from Akita Pref., Yonezawa Beef and Higashine Cherry from Yamagata Pref., Maesawa Beef from Iwate Pref. and Miyagi Salmon from Miyagi Pref. were selected. Each product is located in a delimited territory (Fig. 1).

We focused on the Tohoku region for two reasons: first, with its heavy dependence on agriculture, forestry, and fishery production, this region has a relatively high potential for the use of GI. Second, the area needed to expand the supply channels in the region using local and traditional products after the heavy damage caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami in 2011. Following this historic event, producers and retailers suffered heavy losses in market shares, both domestically and internationally. Additionally, there is a nationwide initiative to improve the promotion of traditional products. For example, traditional Japanese cuisine, *washoku*, which include GI products such as local vegetables and seafood, was registered as intangible cultural heritage by the

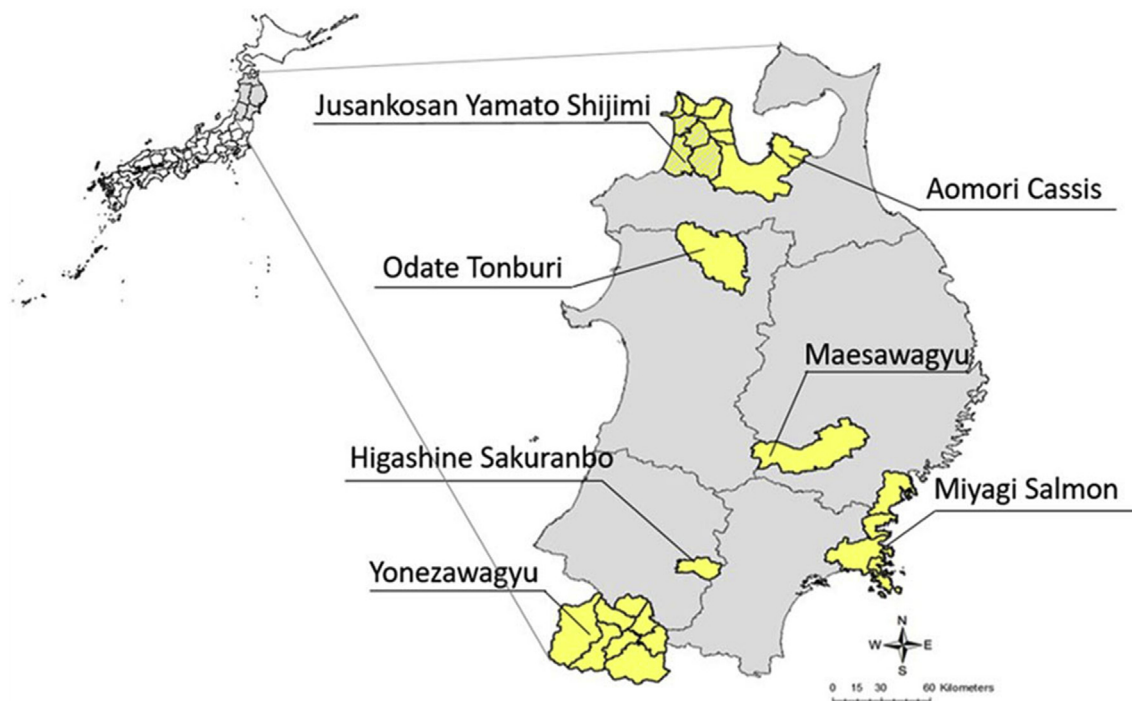


Fig. 1. Case study sites for GI products in northeast Japan (Tohoku region). GI, geographical indication.

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