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Contents for tourism promotion and prefectural government policy: the case of Saitama prefecture

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Abstract: This paper describes the approach that the Saitama prefectural government adopted when launching a project to ‘make the prefecture a sacred place for anime fans’ as one of five leading projects. With a focus on the prefectural government’s tourism policy, the paper presents two specific examples—the establishment of the ‘Super Deep Tourist Association’ (2008) and the ‘Saitama “Super” Tourism Prefecture Declaration’ (2010)—and studies the characteristics and originality of the Saitama prefectural tourism policy.

アブストラクト：本稿では、埼玉県の観光政策に着目し、どのような経緯で、現在のようにアニメの聖地化推進をリーディングプロジェクトのひとつに掲げる政策をとるようになったのか、その背景を整理する。中でも、現在のこうした政策の考え方の基礎を形作った、「埼玉ちょ〜でいーぶな観光協会」の開設（2008）、「埼玉『超』観光立県宣言」（2010）の二点に注目することで、埼玉県の観光政策の特徴と独自性について考察を行う。

Keywords: Saitama prefecture, tourism policy, Saitama “Super” Tourism Prefecture Declaration, Yuru-tama ōendan, Super Deep Tourist Association, project for making the prefecture a sacred place for anime fans.

キーワード：埼玉県、観光政策、埼玉「超」観光立県宣言、ゆる玉応援団、埼玉ちょ〜でいーぶな観光協会、アニメの聖地化推進プロジェクト

Introduction

Since the ‘declaration of a tourism-oriented nation’ in 2003 by the Koizumi cabinet, many prefectural governments have declared themselves ‘tourism-oriented’, established a variety of regulations and formulated basic plans. In Saitama prefecture, the ‘regulation to promote tourism development’ (Saitama-ken kankō zukuri suishin jōrei) was enacted in March 2012. Based on this regulation, the ‘basic plan for tourism development in Saitama prefecture with Japan’s top hospitality’ (Omotenashi Nihon-ichi no Saitama-ken kankō zukuri kihon keikaku) for fiscal years 2012 to 2016 was formulated.

This plan is highly strategic and based on level-headed analysis of the prefecture’s strengths and weaknesses. What is particularly impressive about this plan is that it includes a ‘project for making the prefecture a sacred place for anime fans’ as one of the five leading projects and it proposes the transmission of information and tourism promotion using local mascot characters as basic initiatives. Behind the inclusion of such unique items in the plan was the effort made by the

prefecture in relation to the ‘Saitama “Super” Tourism Prefecture Declaration’ (Saitama ‘chō’ kankō rikken sengen). The declaration might initially sound like something of a joke, but it is a serious declaration made in January 2010 by the prefecture with the aim of boldly launching tourism programs in new ways (Table 1).

Table 1: Saitama ‘Super’ Tourism Prefecture Declaration (Saitama ‘chō’ kankō rikken sengen)

12 January 2010 Amidst protracted economic stagnation, Saitama announces its declaration of Saitama as a ‘super’ tourism prefecture to boost the dreams and energy of each citizen in the prefecture. Declaration • We have no seas, no hot spring resorts, and no world heritage sites, but Saitama Prefecture will consistently use new tourism programs to be boldly competitive. • Saitama prefecture will thoroughly connect new tourist resource gems and thereby increase their attractiveness. • Saitama prefecture will take full advantage of having a strong metropolitan area market of 40 million people nearby and aims to become Japan’s top easy-to-visit prefecture for day visitors. Saitama prefecture will utilise its feature as a microcosm of Japan in terms of the country’s natural environment, history, and culture, and will actively attract foreign tourists visiting Tokyo.

Source: Saitama prefecture (2014b). Unofficial translation by the author.

The Saitama ‘Super’ Tourism Prefecture Declaration

Generally, in a declaration of being a tourism-oriented prefecture it is customary to use words that extol the virtues of the prefecture’s history, traditions and rich natural environment. However, the Saitama ‘Super’ Tourism Prefecture Declaration does the opposite. It is an eye-catching declaration statement, almost self-deprecating in a sense, in that it lists the prefecture’s weaknesses at the beginning: the prefecture has ‘no seas, no hot spring resorts, and no world heritage sites’, and concludes with the determined statement that the prefecture will ‘actively attract foreign tourists visiting Tokyo’. What the prefecture should really aim for in order to increase the economic ripple effect of tourism is to increase the number of overnight guests, so the stated aim of being ‘Japan’s top easy-to-visit prefecture for day visitors’ is a strategy that should normally be avoided. Furthermore, the expression ‘attract’ (*yokodori*, literally ‘horizontally take’) sounds as if the prefecture sneers at itself for being unable to boost inbound tourism on its own, rather than being an expression of competitiveness.

However, this seemingly self-deprecating wording is a clarification of the prefecture’s weaknesses based on calm analysis. By laughing off these weaknesses, the prefecture turns them into ammunition and redefines the target market. It thereby aims to build a complementary relationship that allows for coexistence instead of competition with neighbouring prefectures.

In general, prefectural government tourism policies are formulated based on competitive strategies on the assumption of severe regional competition; in other words, other prefectural governments are competitors with whom the prefecture must compete for tourists and the prefecture

must edge out the competition. Such an attitude toward evaluating tourism based on winning or losing using the number of visitors and economic effects as indicators tends to lead to narrow-minded provincialism in which one does not care what happens to others as long as one's own prefecture is doing well. This approach hardly leads to cooperation or harmonious coexistence and in some cases may create contempt among one group for others. It is noteworthy that the declaration by Saitama prefecture is clearly different from these conventional competitive strategies employed by other prefectural governments.

Yuru-tama ōendan (mascot characters' cheerleading squad)

One of the embodiments of the philosophy seen in the Saitama 'Super' Tourism Prefecture Declaration is Yuru-tama ōendan (mascot characters' cheerleading squad). The strategy stipulated in the declaration, which is to 'thoroughly connect new tourist resource gems and thereby increase their attractiveness', has come to fruition in the form of Yuru-tama ōendan.

Yuru-tama ōendan is a group of the mascot characters of various organisations – such as municipalities, tourist associations, chambers of commerce and commerce and industry associations in Saitama prefecture – and was formed on 14 November 2008 with the aim of promoting the attractiveness of Saitama. According to Article 2 of the Yuru-tama ōendan guidelines, 'the said cheering squad shall be composed of the mascot characters who wish to be members of the squad and are able to participate in tourism or local product promotion events as well as engage in PR activities. The characters will be decided by the prefectural governor.'

The policy of turning Saitama into 'the sacred place of *yuru-kyara*' (literally, 'loose characters') was clearly stipulated in the Saitama 'Super' Tourism Prefecture Declaration. Ueda Kiyoshi, the governor of Saitama, urged all 70 municipalities (at the time in 2012) in the prefecture to create their own local mascot character. By the end of January 2014, with the mascot character of Saitama prefecture, Kobaton, serving as the captain, 103 local mascot characters existed, mainly working at tourism promotion events (Saitama prefecture 2014c).

The prefecture was also successful in hosting the Yuru-kyara Summit, an event at which local mascot characters gathered from around the country. The first summit was held on 28 November 2010. It was held in November using Hanyu Suigo Park in Hanyu city as its main venue until 2013. The number of visitors increased annually. The fourth summit (held on 23 and 24 November 2013) was very successful, attracting 450,000 visitors over two days (Table 2) although the numbers dropped slightly in 2014, when the summit was renamed the World Character Summit in Hanyu.

Table 2: Numbers of visitors to the Yuru-kyara Summit in Hanyu*

Date	Number of visitors
First summit: Sunday 28 November 2010	50,000
Second summit: Saturday to Sunday, 27-28 November 2011	135,000
Third summit: Saturday to Sunday, 24-25 November 2012	295,000
Fourth summit: Saturday to Sunday, 23-24 November 2013	450,000
Fifth summit*: Saturday to Sunday, 22-23 November 2014	410,000

Source: Prepared by the author based on the Yuru-kyara Summit guidebook (Yuru-kyara Summit in Hanyu Jikkō Iinkai 2013: 10-11), Hanyu city (2014) and Sekai Kyarakutā Samitto in Hanyu Jikkō Iinkai (2014).

*The name of the summit changed to Sekai Kyarakutā Samitto in Hanyu (World Character Summit in Hanyu).

The goal of this summit is to gather local mascot characters from around the country and for the characters to convey the attractiveness of their localities together. However, the event is not held to determine which areas are better; instead, it focuses on encouraging cooperation and mutual assistance among the represented areas. Especially after the Great East Japan Earthquake of 11 March 2011, this philosophy of cooperation became stronger in order to support the devastated areas in Tohoku and provide mutual assistance through inter-regional cooperation. The fact that cooperative and complementary relationships focusing on coexistence rather than competition among prefectural governments have been built through this kind of event deserves special mention. It is one of the key achievements of the summit.

One of the underlying reasons why cooperative relationships were possible was probably that the local mascot characters have a *yurui* (loose) presence, which elicits laughs through comical designs. Interactions are encouraged through these characters because people smile, relax and lose their competitive spirit when they see them. Therefore, the idea that regional differences are not a competition but can be recognised and celebrated in a humorous way has prevailed.

Can Saitama be a model for Japan's tourism future? From the competition model to the independent path

Going even further back in time, a virtual tourist association was established on 1 April 2008 on the internet called Saitama Chō Deep-na (Super Deep) Tourist Association by the Tourism Promotion Office, Department of Industry and Labour, Saitama Prefecture (currently the Tourism Division, Department of Industry and Labour). The association consists of five sections: Animation Section, Entertainment Section, Location Section, Interesting Spot Section, and Yuru-kyara Section. It is a tourist information website introducing the interesting spots within the prefecture and has generated significant publicity. I remember being deeply impressed when the people in charge of the prefecture told me passionately at the time of the site's launch that they wanted to 'promote the prefecture to the world using the animations that Saitama prefecture is proud to have as tourist resources'. This virtual tourist association is still in operation, constantly transmitting hobby-oriented tourist information (Saitama prefecture 2014a).

Many tourists respond more positively to these true-to-life and heart-warming tourism measures of Saitama prefecture, in which the prefecture acknowledges its weaknesses and does what it can with its small-scale resources, than they do to the top-ranked tourist resources of other areas. Of course, the Kanto metropolitan area has the geographical advantage of being close to a gigantic market. However, even without such an advantage, we can learn greatly from the attitude of Saitama prefecture. If rural prefectures in Japan followed Saitama's example and energetically presented the appeal of their own prefectures in their own unique ways without just being obsessed with the competition model, Japan would be much more vigorous.

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