



HOKKAIDO UNIVERSITY

Title	The Social Roles and Sustainability of Rural Grocery Stores : Exploring Their Future as the Heart of Rural Communities
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Degree Grantor	北海道大学
Degree Name	博士(食資源学)
Dissertation Number	甲第17004号
Issue Date	2026-03-25
DOI	https://doi.org/10.14943/doctoral.k17004
Doc URL	https://hdl.handle.net/2115/99848
Type	doctoral thesis
File Information	LI_Sh_u_abstract.pdf, 論文内容の要旨 https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/



学 位 論 文 内 容 の 要 旨

博士の専攻分野の名称： 博 士（食資源学）

氏名 李 澍

学 位 論 文 題 名

英語題目
(和訳題目)

The Social Roles and Sustainability of Rural Grocery Stores: Exploring Their Future as the Heart of Rural Communities (農村地域における食料品小売店が持つ社会的役割とその発揮の持続性について)

Abstract

Rural grocery stores are increasingly under pressure worldwide due to population decline, aging, changing consumption patterns, and the expansion of large-scale retailers and online shopping. Although these developments may superficially improve food access, they simultaneously generate new forms of exclusion for residents with limited mobility or time constraints, weaken opportunities for everyday social interaction, and reduce circulation of local products. In rural communities, the decline of grocery stores threatens not only retail viability but also the foundations of daily life.

Previous studies and policy debates have largely approached rural grocery stores through the lenses of food access and economic efficiency, focusing on profitability, location, and cost structures. While these perspectives are indispensable, they inadequately capture the broader social functions that grocery stores perform within rural communities. This dissertation reconceptualizes rural grocery stores as socially embedded places in which social roles emerge organically through reciprocal, everyday interactions between stores and communities, rather than through formally designed community programs.

The central objective of this study is to clarify (1) what kinds of social roles rural grocery stores perform, (2) how these roles are enacted through everyday practices, and (3) under what conditions they can be sustained over time. To achieve this objective, the dissertation adopts a comparative, multi-case research design encompassing three empirical contexts: a rural town in Hokkaido, Japan; community-run cooperative grocery stores (kyōdō baiten) in Okinawa, Japan; and community-based grocery store succession cases in the rural Midwestern United States.

Chapter 2 examines the social roles of grocery stores in Okoppe Town, Hokkaido, where multiple store formats coexist within a single living area. Based on semi-structured interviews with store managers and an analytical framework emphasizing managerial independence and local embeddedness, the analysis identifies four dimensions of social roles: (1) spaces for conversation and interaction, (2) support for people with limited access to shopping, (3) provision of attractive and locally distinctive choices, and (4) creation of new value through community-based initiatives. The findings demonstrate that even chain-affiliated stores can perform meaningful social roles when managers possess local ties and operational discretion, while independently operated stores with deep community connections are particularly responsive to latent

local needs. Diversity in store types enhances overall resilience at the living-area level.

Chapter 3 focuses on community-run cooperative grocery stores in Okinawa and analyzes how social roles are embedded in management structures and everyday practices. Drawing on fieldwork at ten stores with varying operational arrangements, the chapter shows that *kyōdō baiten* continue to function as essential community institutions despite severe economic constraints. Their social roles include serving as gathering spaces, providing informal care and monitoring, supporting residents' initiatives, creating local employment, and facilitating regional outreach. Sustainability depends not only on economic performance but also on shared recognition among residents, operators, and local organizations that the store is an indispensable community asset. At the same time, the analysis highlights challenges related to the concentration of responsibility on individual operators and the fragility of support structures.

Chapter 4 examines six rural grocery stores in the Midwestern United States that achieved business succession through community involvement. By comparing different ownership and governance models, the chapter demonstrates that separating ownership and operation can reduce managerial burdens, while community ownership fosters strong collective commitment. Across cases, stores actively responded to local needs through product offerings, operating hours, and the creation of spaces for social interaction. Business succession emerges not as a single event but as an ongoing, community-shaped process.

Chapter 5 explicitly situates the analysis in Okinawa, Japan, focusing on community-run cooperative grocery stores (*kyōdō baiten*) as a historically distinctive case. This chapter examines how dense, reciprocal community-store connections form the foundation of sustainability. Social roles emerge through accumulated everyday practices—such as daily use, participation in management, volunteer activities, and the presence of staff as bridging actors—rather than through formal programs. These roles are deeply shaped by Okinawa's historical, institutional, and cultural context, while new challenges arise as demographic and social conditions change.

The conclusion argues that rural grocery stores should be understood not merely as commercial facilities but as socially embedded institutions that support everyday life, community cohesion, and local resilience. The dissertation's key contribution lies in conceptualizing these contributions as social roles grounded in reciprocal community relationships and empirically demonstrating their contemporary significance. Future research should further integrate economic analysis with social role assessment and explore governance frameworks that distribute responsibility more equitably among stores, communities, and public actors.