

10 Tourism as a future for local rail services?

*An analysis of debates in Akita prefecture**

Peter Ackermann

In 2004, I travelled by rail from Hirokawa in Akita's prefecture through the mountains of Akita to Kakunodate, a remarkable journey (no major towns, across wild rivers, and past ancient farm houses). The elegance and calmness of the rural people as they went about their work or boarded the train left a deep impression (a remarkable photo-book in Kasai 2006). A few years later, I was back, this time in winter. The silvery beauty of the landscape, the brilliant blue skies and falling blizzards remain unforgettable. I was then alerted to find that the AN was on the list of railways earmarked for closure, as deficits had reached astronomical levels (Kasai, 2010; Naito and Yamashita, 2012).

I wanted to investigate the actual situation in detail, as the railway was not some old relic. On the contrary, it had only been completed in 1988. I wondered what specific potential this late railway had, considering that its southern point of departure, Kakunodate, is on the Shintokan route from Tokyo. Can small railway lines contribute to a peaceful way of enjoying more remote regions, to green tourism, and to the revitalisation of villages through tourism? Was Japan keeping up with such developments as we know them from countries like Switzerland, France or Britain, and if so, did Japan have its own unique approach?

The Akita Nairiku Jikan railway today

In 2011 the line was about to close if its deficit could not be reduced to under 200 million yen (Naito and Yamashita, 2012; Haseo 2012; Naito, 2012; Naito-Ito 2012; Oikari, 2012). The main shareholders, who have the power to pronounce such a threat, are Akita prefecture (38.6 percent), Rias Akita City (entering at Takahama 22.7 percent), Iizuka City (entering at Kakunodate 13.4 percent), local banks (3 percent), others (13.3 percent).¹

The AN is an unusually long local line covering 94 kilometres in 2½ hours. The population it served in 2010 stood at approximately 76,000 adults (compared with

* AN stands for Akita Nairiku Jikan (Local, The Inland Railway through Central Akita).



Figure 10.1 The Aka-Nishiki Inland Railway at Kam (Hokkaido).
Photograph Peter Ashmann

54,000 in 1990, 7000 persons under the age of 15 (compared with 14,000 in 1990, and 21,000 persons over 65 (compared with 13,000 in 1990) (Jūhō Sōgō Kenkyūjo, 2013).

How has the railway been used since its inauguration in 1907? In 1998, over one million passengers used the line,² in 1999 this figure had fallen to about 900,000, in 2011 it stood at around 400,000, and in 2012 it had fallen to 270,000. Data available for regular commuters, who in 2005 made up around 52 percent of the line's traffic, show that the majority of the passengers are high school children (Sasaki, 2009). Due to the decrease in population this figure has since gone down. Non-regular local customers are mainly old persons, usually doing errands or on their way to a regional hospital. Excluding regular commuters, the AN homepage lists non-regular customer figures from March to November 2012 as 136,289 people, March to November 2013 as 121,328 and March to November 2014 as 114,624 people (Ōshima Nishiki Inland Trainway Homepage, 2014).

The AN is not able to serve the entire population of the area. Especially in the north the settlements lie on the other side of the river, which makes the stations hard to reach. Also, there are bus services along most parts of the line, while the main road runs largely parallel to the AN. As the road has little traffic, it is easy to use and much faster than the train. There are bus and to regional airports, and taxis offer lifts for individuals and groups to sights of interest (Sasaki, 2009).

Since 2005, the AN's deficit has been consistently hovering around 250 to 280 million yen. Not surprisingly, the directors of the railway were in favour of closing the line (Pohly, 2008, 2009). Chūmei was involved in 2003, but thanks to much support (Pohly, 2009) and a vague concept of tourist development, the AN still operates (Mitsukawa Ōkita, 2012; Plummer, 2012), although it suffered a blow in 2007, when most elementary and secondary school children were required to use special school buses (Belokobov, 2011).

Apart from the depopulation of the region, heavy snowfalls have driven up costs, while tourists declined to a trickle in the part of Japan after the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011 (Sato and Yamamoto, 2012; Livstone, 2012).

A look at the history of the line raises questions. As mentioned, the AN started operation in 1909, after two existing branches had been converted through a new intermediate section. This new section, however, linked not just two old-line railway lines, but also two culturally and economically very different areas, the mountain valley of Aom in the north and the Tawawa Lake plateau in the south. The cost for the construction of the Nishiki Tunnel, which is almost six kilometres long and now crosses these two areas, was enormous (Aoi 1900, 1978). Local people say that there was no need for it, as there had never been contacts between the villages on either side (Ōkita, 1999; Plummer, 2012; Yabuo-Ishibashi, 2011).



Figure 10.2 Riding the Aka-Nishiki Inland Railway.
Photograph Peter Ashmann

The construction of the line in the 1980s helps us to understand some of the problems that Japan's regions are struggling with. Historically, only the upper end of the northern section, built in 1916, had any importance, as it connected the former copper mines at Aomori to the main line from Aomori to Aomori. The rest of the northern section southward through the valley as far as Hirakawa was added in 1963. The southern end-to-end section from Kikumoto to the village of Matsuda started operating in 1970 and was abandoned for closure shortly after it had opened. Both end-to-end lines were operated—and the deficits paid for—by Japan's National Railways JNR (Tozoku Lines, 1981; Tozoku Lines, 1992).

Considering the huge deficit, including passenger figures, depreciation, and the ownership of cars in rural areas, the operation of the AN turned into a disaster. Services were cut, and bonus payments and other allowances for the employees dropped (Livelihood, 2002). Yet, the new director of the line, who was elected in 2001, argues that it shouldn't be abandoned.

The history leading up to today's problems

The line's awkward name Akita Matsuda Jikoku Tozoku (railway meaning longhouses through the interior part of Akita) suggests that a local means of transport, but not the enjoyment of the region, stood in focus. Other small railways that were privatised were often given far more appealing names associated with scenic sites, such as Tozoku Hamanako Railway, referring to the wild Tozoku River and Lake Hamanako in Miyazaki prefecture, or Wakana Kaihoku Railway, referring to the Wakana Gorge in Gumma and Tozoku prefectures.

Seeking to understand the neglected potential of a rural railway like the AN, we need to consider the industrial and social changes in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s by looking at three institutions, the National Railways, the Japan Railway Construction Corporation, and the so-called Third Sector railways.

As a railway and as one of Japan's most important employees, the National Railways of Japan (JNR) played a significant role in the post-war development of inter-regional communication (Tanemura, 1976; Takemura, 1976). However, by 1964, rising expenditures, changes in transport needs, the decline of the coal industry, a rising concentration of the population in the large cities, and the use of private cars and improvement of road conditions, turned JNR from a profitable enterprise into a loss-making business. Therefore, nationalisation occurred and the plan to close 83 lines was propagated in 1968 (these lines were referred to as *unwanted child/child-care*, Special Local Traffic Lines, cf. Aoki et al., 1981; Tozoku Lines 1981, 1992).

JNR's deficit grew and grew, trains were filthy and late, services became unreliable, while strikes and conflict between labor and management paralyzed the JNR throughout the 1970s. The oil price shock of 1973 and the politically motivated reluctance to raise fares made things worse. It was not until 1980 that, on the basis of the *Kaikoku Senryo-ho* (the JNR Reorganization Law) (Aoki et al., 1981; Tozoku Lines, 1981; Aoki, 1988), the government started to get rid

of the 83 lines (828 kilometers) scheduled for closure in 1988. However, at that time the Japan Railway Construction Corporation was still building new lines. When this activity was finally halted, hundreds of half-finished bridges, tunnels, and even complete railway systems all over Japan (Tanemura, 1976) were left in decay. Thanks to the JNR Reorganization Law, 75 lines could eventually be eliminated by the time JNR ceased to exist in 1987 (Tozoku Lines, 1990, 1992).

The Japan Railway Construction Corporation, which was established in 1964, located in Tokyo and run by former JNR officials and Development Banks, built new railways with aid of government finance (Tanemura, 1976; Tozoku Lines, 1991; Takemura, 2011).¹ With regard to the AN line, the Construction Corporation had completed the southern section by 1971, and soon the Shinjiko Tunnel was ready for use. It needs to be mentioned here that Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei (1972–1974) (aka *OKAMA*, 1978), known for his *Shinryu Judo Kyoju-ron* (Japanese Archipelago Remodelling Plan) propagated in 1972, thought of railway transportation as a basic necessity for which the state should pay. Naturally, the local regions thus limited their activities to lobbying for new lines, without feeling responsible for them (Tanemura, 1976).

In the 1980s, the construction ban on new lines was lifted under the condition that their necessity for local development was proved. In this context eliminating dead-end branch lines by connecting them to other lines was considered worthwhile in order to create new flows of traffic, and much engineering work on the future AN line had anyway been completed by the Railway Construction Corporation (Tozoku Lines 1990, 1991).²

The AN opened as a Third Sector railway. "Third Sector" denotes an undertaking in which professional, regional and national administrations (i.e., the First Sector) join private businesses (i.e., the Second Sector). All sides accept financial and operational responsibility (Tozoku Lines 1983, 1992). Third Sector operations thus appeared to guarantee flexibility and greater independence from rigid budgets. At the same time it was seen as a way to take financial risks that were backed by the local government. In effect, this brought about a new role of the *chihai chihai* (regional society, regional communities), which recognized the need to be involved in a variety of operations (Aoki, 1988; Suzuki, 1989; Solly, 2001).³

When Third Sector railways started operating, their structure reflected the interests of the region, including tourism. However, their efforts have often failed. There are several reasons for that. First, in many cases the responsibilities of the administration and the private sector were not clearly outlined. Local governments made losses, and the taxpayers had to pay the debts. Moreover, the responsibility of operating the railway often rested with members—or even retired members—of local governments, while private businesses were quick to jump off as soon as the initial enthusiasm had evaporated. The heart of the bubble economy left the focus of many Third Sector railways fixed not on development but on sheer survival. During that time, very few new operations were initiated despite the fact that competition from trucks, highway express buses and private cars was growing fast.⁴ To make things worse, although most Third Sector railways had created

deposits of subsidies when they started business. Hoping to operate largely on their interest, interest rates dropped in almost 50%. Flats, however, were not raised due to fear of losing more passengers (Suzuki, 1999).

Is There a Future for the Aomori Nairiku Railway as a Tourist Line?

An Kazuo Mizuno and Takahashi Masayuki have described in their book *Chūki Kiseitei* (*Charting of the Regions*) (2008), during the first decade of the 21st century Japan's central government pursued a policy whereby regions should be responsible for themselves. For that reason, regional governments came under great pressure to reduce deficits. Yet one member has much vitality: the former director of the AN, who was also the mayor of Kita Aomori City, actually insisted when he resigned at age 71. He was replaced by manager Wakagami in 2009, a man from a private enterprise who was experienced in tourist and tourist projects. Wakagami was under pressure to reduce the AN's deficit. However, he soon withdrew. This led to the next stage in Japan's debates about local lines. Now the keyword became *shōto shokai* (general managers found through public advertising) (Ishiyoshi and Sakagawa, 2011; Terakawa, 2010a,b).

The new manager of the AN, Sakai Ichirō (aged 65 in 2012), is a man from Kōbe known for his success in restructuring the Sogo Department Store and experienced in the areas of public relations and advertising (Saito and Yamashita, 2012; DNT 5). Sakai sees the tourist railway business as a particular challenge, as—unlike department stores with steady regional customers—such business needs to appeal to the entire country (Saito and Yamashita, 2012).

As mentioned, staff on the AN suffered cuts in pay and allowances (Livelihood, 2012), while the reduction of personnel has resulted in further savings. Sakai himself was engaged in exchanges within the network of *hito shakō* (Hosono, 2012a,b, 2011; Terakawa, 2011a; Yano-sho, 2011a), all of whom like to be out in the field talking to passengers and observing operations, often at night—moving around personally (Hosono, 2012a). For Sakai, not just the railway line, but also its context is important. Visitors not only take a ride on the train, they are also interested in buying souvenirs like toys, hand towels, DVDs, and cakes. They also wish to enjoy communication and to dine on the train (Saito and Yamashita, 2012; Livelihood, 2011). Moreover, the AN line is now being shown as an access point to drinking, boat-ride and other regional events. Restaurants serve local food and sake, cultural centers display local housing traditions, and archaeological sites, nature trails, mountain flora and waterfalls are advertised.⁷

Promotional activities in Tokyo highlight the beauty of the countryside along the AN. However, as Aomori has many attractions, the AN itself receives comparatively little attention. Moreover, the majority of pamphlets advertising the AN are published by JR and displayed at JR railway stations. Thus they obviously reflect JR's interest in propagating its own special offer of the railway-ride through northern Japan. For instance in the Aomori Shinkansen trains through the Shinkansen mountain range on the impressive Coast-Line along the coast, that at least one

11-page pamphlet published by JR East Japan (JR Higashi-Nihon, 2011) is fully dedicated to the AN, advertised as *Kakumōri-tei*—Moriwaki, their love train a (*Kakumōri-tei* to Moriwaki, from ancient capital to ancient capital).

The AN does not have an easy position competing with other attractions in Aomori and northern Japan. In addition, maps inside indicate regionally operated railways such as the AN, in contrast to JR lines, is a badly visible way.

Local railway managers have begun to define regionally operated railways as regional lines (*shōto no senetsu*) (Hosono, 2012a,b, 2011; Yano-sho, 2011a; Mizuki, 2011a; Yoneda, 2011a). At the same time they warn that the "regions" are not Tokyo. In Tokyo, things will disappear but are quickly replaced by new things—in large cities this is a natural process (collaborative cities). In contrast, when things disappear in the regions they have gone for good (Pietruszewska, 2012). Therefore, such assets as the AN need to be cherished.

In January 2013, an extensive 141-page report (Fukui Shōgi Kenkyūjo, 2011) pointed out that the attractive ancient samurai town of Kakumōri was not born in acknowledgment that it was the principle starting point for a trip on the AN. It will require much political skill to change this. The report also showed that 90 percent of the visitors to the AN (as opposed to its regular customer-base from outside Aomori, mainly from Tokyo, yet the fact that it can be reached directly by Shinkansen needs far more advertising. Only 10 percent of the visitors to Kakumōri appeared to have traveled on the AN, while 50 percent said they had not even heard about the railway.

The AN itself has made great efforts in targeting women and children. This includes the director's call for more women to take photos of the line (Saito, 2012), which has been given the name *Aomori Hijiri Line* (*hijiri* meaning "honest/god"). At the same time, the mascot figure *Nairikūan* (see Figure 18.3) appeals to children (Yamada, 2012).

Much effort has gone into associating the railway with art. There have been remarkable poster displays of the line's beauty, or exhibitions of *shōto art* (art objects made from local harvest), while models are freely made, i.e., giant pictures in public fields created by planting rice of various types and colors along the line attracts much attention. Also the composition of haiku poems related to specific spots in nature is featured (Saito and Yamashita, 2012; Saito, 2011; Akita-mirika, 2012a,b, 2012b; Gendai-ka, 2011a,b). Furthermore, there is a steady flow of events, which take place in galleries and exhibitions, at festivals and on stage art, as well as various possibilities for custom (physical experiences of doing or producing something) (Mizuki, 2011a; Akita-mirika, 2012).

For manager Sakai one of the most highlighted elements of revitalization is the sale of goods. A survey of January 2013 lists an amazing number of objects that could be sold for profit, many of these being regionally produced handcraft and foodstuffs, as locally grown fruits and vegetables (Fukui Shōgi Kenkyūjo, 2011: 77–80). Some products, such as regional potatoes or chestnuts, are important ingredients for the production of cookies. Also, the railway line passes through one of the few remaining regions where the *hatakeki* plant—the original basis for *hatakeki* starch—grows in large numbers.



Figure 10.1 Nirikku

The most preoccupying aspect of the line, however, is certainly its link to nature: *shiki no itada* (the landscape in the course of the line season), *satoyama itada*, *satoyama itada* (typical landscape and culture of village Japan), *shiki nochi itada* (local beauty), or in winter (when no grounds in world of growing silver) are key concepts. All this underlines the message (checking out of the carriage window) a particular experience, while *satoyama* – ‘slow life’ – also forms a central aspect. These concepts are embraced under the idea of *shiki nochi itada* (seasonal landscape) and marketed as *shiki nochi itada* (landscape that speaks of the very basic system of Japanese identity) (Ishii and Yamashita, 2012; Sakai, 2012). To enable tourists to access this landscape, the general information site of Third Sector railways in Akita prefecture presents detailed information about the cultural and natural surroundings of every station (Miyabe, 2014).

To convert a railway line into a tourist attraction will not be easy, and it is uncertain whether the local and aging population will go along with such a concept. Moreover, there is a glimpse at the timetable of the AN, it is not evident whether this line runs (traditionally) as a means of transport or a means of tourism and recreation. Railway in other locations that heavily depend on tourists no longer serve local transport needs and instead focus on providing attractive access to scenic views, quite often in special passenger services.

Unfortunately, the AN has terminated its run (though to Hinata, the most important regional city it used to serve) in the north,⁵ because using the JR main line from Takizawa proved to be too costly. Moreover, it remains doubtful whether any one of the line's proposed railway stops along the AN has sufficient potential to attract significant numbers of tourists.

As noted, Japan's large cities, especially Tokyo, appear to be the main source of visitors. A new manager who does not belong to the closed circle of ‘Old Boys’ in Akita might be better able to tap this source. However, Akita's interior will always remain a cold and bleak place in winter. In 2011, even the Mishima

detailed here due to heavy snow. Another question is how far the pattern of vacations in Japan will permit a substantial increase of visitors from Tokyo. In Japan, employees are otherwise able to take longer vacations. Day trips from Tokyo to Akita are not feasible, and the attractiveness of the AN might be the real depend on whether it can appeal to tourists who wish to the region to spend just one night there.

Finally, due to the remoteness of tourist locations in Akita, it is essential to attract visitors who come by car, and to offer them an infrastructure that will enable them to move easily from a car park to an attraction. However, new concepts demand caution, considering how many remote attractions have gone bankrupt in recent years. Attention must also be given to the fact that it is difficult to visit the smaller places of interest advertised on the AN homepage by train due to the sparse and irregular timetable. Finally, many of the locations for photographing the AN in its full beauty can only be reached from the road, and this does not contribute to the line's running costs.

A mixture of hope and doubt surrounds the AN. Can this unique railway line tap new sources of income by staging events and art festivals and offering regional products for sale? Can depopulation of the area be tackled by appeals to (rich) or diaspora efforts of the local region? As any one, a more business-like approach promoted by a table should might be a first attempt towards a more sustainable revitalisation of the AN and Akita prefecture.

Footnote

In May 2014 director Sakai suddenly stepped down. The reasons for his departure remain obscure. Some say his understanding of the tourist railway business was limited (personal interview), while others say that Akita prefecture had a hidden agenda which aimed at quickly closing the railway (Aoyama, 2014). Sakai has been replaced by Kenji Takahashi, aged 58, a man from the region who was an officer at JTB (Japan Travel Bureau's Akita branch and his closest ties to the regional tourist industry (Sakai, 2014). In his blog (Toriwaka, 2014), the director of the relatively successful Inami Railway on the Edo's Peninsula evokes Sakai but draws attention to the fact that a local population usually has no more interest in and no more need for a railway line. In fact, their attitude towards maintaining a railway can even be quite nasty (Toriwaka, 2014). Meanwhile, the AN continues to propagate really impressive artistic activity, such as Minami AN being type of thousands of tiny photographs to create images, or Chamae AN (Ishii, 2014). A recent detailed description of the line is found in *Shiki nochi itada* (Sakai, 2014).

Notes

1. Comprehensive data on the AN can be found in Wikipedia, 2011. See also Ishii/Yamashita 2012 and Fisher 2012/2014/2015, 2013.
2. A description of the railway soon after it had opened is found in Adkisson 1999.

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ROUTLEDGE STUDIES IN ASIA
AND THE ENVIRONMENT

SUSTAINABILITY IN CONTEMPORARY RURAL JAPAN

Rural communities in Japan have suffered from significant depopulation and economic downturn in post-war years. Low birth rates, aging populations, agricultural decline and youth migration to large cities have been compounded by the triple disaster of 11 March 2011, which destroyed farming and fishing communities and left thousands of people homeless. This book identifies these challenges and acknowledges that an era of post-growth has arrived in Japan. Through exploring new forms of regional employment, community empowerment, and reverse migration, the authors address potential opportunities and benefits that may help to create and sustain the quality of life in depopulating areas and post-disaster scenarios. This book will be of interest not only to students of Japanese society but also to those outside Japan who are seeking new approaches for handling depopulation challenges.

Stephanie Asanuma is a professor in the Research Faculty of Media and Communication, Hokkaido University, Japan.

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Challenges and opportunities

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