

China's Earth Art Festival - Where is the way?

Min Yuan

1273286933@qq.com

The School of Art is at Jiangsu University in Zhenjiang, Jiangsu, China.

[Abstract]: Currently, China is facing pressing issues such as rural hollowing out and an aging population, which require immediate attention. The "Opinions on Promoting the Cultural Industry to Enable Rural Revitalization" document highlights the viability of utilizing art as a means to drive rural revitalization and offers guidance in this regard. Thanks to the Echigo-Tsumari Earth Art Festival in Japan, public enthusiasm in revitalizing the region via art returned in 2022. The Echigo-Tsumari Earth Art Festival in Japan is used as a case study to evaluate the host region's cultural attributes, the festival's strategies, and its accomplishments. This study then proposes concrete recommendations for revitalizing rural areas through artistic endeavors in China's countryside and earth art festivals. Establishing a government-led collaborative framework would maintain the Chinese countryside's uniqueness. The Earth Art Festival would be organized by rural communities, artists, and society. The festival would preserve regional culture and enhance rural revival.

[Keywords]: Rural Revitalization, Earth Art Festival, Echigo Tsumari

1. Introduction

Earth art straddles architecture and sculpture. Artisans use dirt, rocks, soil, and other natural materials to create works that increase environmental awareness. The 1960s US art movement spread to Europe, Canada, and other countries, gaining global prominence. The Earth Art Festival began indoors, moved outdoors, and became a three-dimensional artistic movement in the natural environment. The Echigo-Tsumari Earth Art Festival emphasizes participatory art and operates on the ideals of "nature embracing mankind" and "local reconstruction." This festival, supported by the local government and led by renowned Japanese curator Fram Kitagawa, invites internationally known artists to work amid the Echigo-Tsumari region's 760 square kilometers of natural surroundings. The overall purpose is to revitalize the inactive Echigo-Tsumari region through artistic expression, regional growth, and local well-being. The Echigo-Tsumari Earth Art Festival in Japan is worth considering as a model for how art may revitalize rural areas.

2. The Earth Art of Echigo Tsumari

2.1 From the region of Echigo Tsumari

The area, known as "Echigo-Tsumari" from the ancient Japanese place name "Echigo-Kuni, Tsumari Sho", is in the southern part of Niigata Prefecture in Japan (Fig. 1) and consists of two

local governments, Tokaichi City and Tsunami Town, with a total area of 760 square kilometers. The 4,500-year-old Jomon culture originated in the area. Siberian cold currents make it snowy year-round, with one-third of the year being snowy. "Through the long tunnels on the prefecture's border lies the Land of Snow." Kawabata described the snowy country. Hot springs, terraced rice fields, rivers, and rice, sake, and fresh foodstuffs, notably Japan's Koshihikari rice and Ginjo Sake, are found in the area, along with rich cultural elements. Traditional businesses including silk, pottery, and modern flower art are also present.

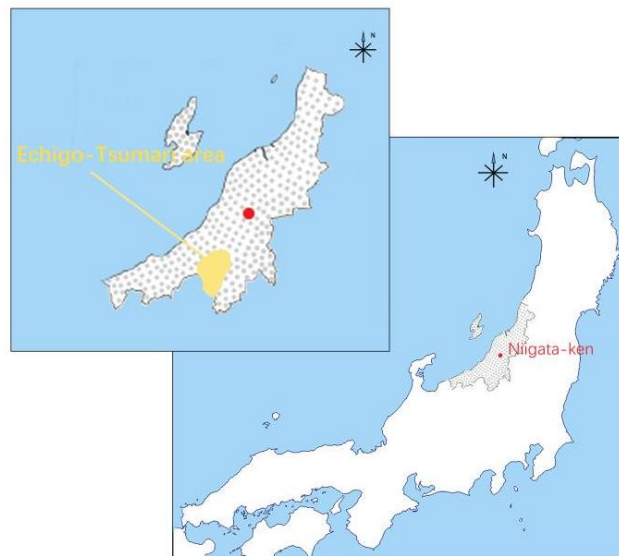


Fig. 1. Schematic map of Echigo-Tsumari area, Japan (Photo credit: author's own)

A great number of young, strong individuals moved from the countryside to the metropolis to become industrial workers during the Meiji period, as Japan quickly industrialized from an agrarian society. After World War II, Japan's industrial transformation made cities the core of development under state backing, creating a development gap between cities and countryside. Lost young laborers from the villages left Echigo Tsumari with an older population, fewer children, a hollowing out of the countryside, and major economic backwardness, turning it from a romantic snowy countryside into an abandoned community full with ruins and imagery. The gradual decline of farming life and the out-migration of a large number of laborers have resulted in the abandonment of many terraces, houses, and school buildings. The decline of regional power caused by overpopulation and aging has turned the area into a cultural vacuum.^[1]

In response to the challenges posed by population decline and land abandonment, the Japanese government has devised a policy known as "local creation." This strategy emphasizes the revitalization of rural areas through the promotion of regional cultural practices and the cultivation of shared values. By fostering diverse exchanges and creative endeavors, this approach aims to preserve the natural ecosystem, nurture indigenous culture, and attract new talent in the fields of art, science, technology, and human resources.^[2] As a manifestation of this policy, the Echigo-Tsumari Earth Art Festival was established.

2.2 Approaches for the Earth Arts Festival

From the conception of the festival in 1996 to the successful organization of the first Echigo-Tsumari Earth Art Festival in 2000, Fram Kitagawa spent more than four years researching, coordinating, and planning for the festival, adapting each year's theme to the changes and latest needs of the countryside. It is held once every three years and has been held eight times so far. It has attracted a large number of tourists and art lovers from home and abroad. Accompanied by strong criticism from local knowledgeable people, the first Earth Art Festival came to an end amidst opposition and skepticism. Learning from the lessons of the first edition and combining them with the actual situation of the Echigo-Tsumari region, Kitagawa Tomoru and his team reflected on the situation. From the second edition, the festival gradually revealed its uniqueness, and by the third edition, many people had begun to recognize it and accept the concepts and works conveyed by the Echigo-Tsumari Earth Art Festival. From skepticism to recognition, it took Fram Kitagawa and his team nearly ten years to make the Echigo-Tsumari Earth Art Festival as "long-lived" as it is today.

The importance of art in rural construction is obvious, therefore what sort of art encourages rural revitalization? First Earth Art Festival revealed that didactic and illuminating aerial installations might offend. Connecting the works to Yuehouwu's land and population helps us create public art that better captures the festival's splendor. Ilya and Emilia Kabakov's "Terraces" (Fig. 2) depict Echigo Tsumari's farming culture and folkways. The bright colors of the work and the environment form a sharp visual impact, so the original traditional farming culture and art produce a new collision, visitors to appreciate this piece of land will unconsciously produce a new state of mind and feelings, this piece of land is no longer the farming culture itself, but also carries the medium of art and vitality, so the viewer is reminded of the civilization that once existed and opens This is the festival's signature work. Many artists call this style of work "patches"^[3] because it lovingly adds to the architectural functions and rural structures of the land in need of rehabilitation, uniting modern art with ancient culture. Other Terraces-like works include Ritsuko Tafu's Green Villa, Oskar Oiwa's Scarecrow Project, and James Turrell's Hall of Light. The historicity of farming culture and the modernism of contemporary art are reflected in these works' tremendous infectiousness after interacting with the local earth.^[4]

A community's passive observers cannot actively contribute to a common cultural memory and a greater link with the rural environment. After this discovery, master planner Fram Kitagawa proposed including the local people in the collaborative development of artworks that would alter their living areas. Fram Kitagawa's "Echigo Tsumari Art Chain Concept" includes the "Flower Path," a community-based project. Floral arrangements along streets and near homeowners' gardens target older gardeners, establishing a sense of community among gardening lovers in different localities. Flower communication creates a beautiful and complex network. Additionally, the initiative advances infrastructure like roads and parks.^[5] The locals know and love this rural area best. The festival helps artists further their careers, while village residents help rural areas thrive.



Fig. 2. "Terraces"

(Photo credit: <https://http://www.artdesign.org.cn/article/view/id/67105>)

2.3 The Efficacy of the Earth Arts Festival

The Echigo-Tsumari Earth Art Festival has a longstanding history of 23 years, during which it has attracted the participation of 148 artist groups from 32 nations and regions. These artists have contributed to the creation of over 1,000 artworks that capture the scenic allure and rustic essence of the countryside. Echigo Tsumari has emerged as a renowned tourist destination within the country of Japan. The festival has experienced significant growth in attendance, with the number of visitors rising from 160,000 during its inaugural edition to 500,000 in its sixth iteration. This translates to an average daily attendance of about 10,000 individuals over the course of the 50-day art show. Such a substantial increase in attendance is particularly noteworthy considering the previously neglected and impoverished state of the rural area where the festival takes place. ^[6] The phenomenon has resulted in a significant transformation in the livelihoods of the indigenous population, fostering considerable growth in the local hospitality sector, culinary establishments, and the production of tourist mementos, while simultaneously generating a major number of job prospects. The implementation of the "Revitalization of Public Facilities," "Empty House Project," and "Abandoned School Program" initiatives has significantly enhanced the quality of the residents' living environment. To amuse tourists hailing from various regions of the nation, certain individuals within the local community engage in the preparation of traditional cuisine, while others assume the role of docents, elucidating the intricacies of artistic creation to these visitors. This dual endeavor not only serves to educate tourists but also engenders a sense of enjoyment among the participants. The aesthetically pleasing natural surroundings and vibrant creative ambiance have also enticed several international individuals to establish residences and businesses in this region, thereby infusing a perpetual influx of energy into Niigata Prefecture. Echigo Tsumari has emerged as a widely acknowledged cultural emblem and regional entity of significance on a global scale. Furthermore, the accomplishments of Echigo Tsumari have given rise to the inception of the Setouchi International Art Festival, an artistic event taking place on the island.

3. The Current State of Affairs in China

3.1 Rural depopulation and economic decline

As in Japan, the phenomenon of overpopulation and aging exists in our countryside. With economic development and urban construction, the rural life of men farming and women weaving is no longer sufficient to meet the development needs of villagers, and the many employment opportunities provided by the urbanization process have attracted the population from the countryside to the cities. Data from the seventh population census show that the urban population accounts for 63.89%, while the rural population accounts for 36.11%, and compared with 2010, the rural population has decreased by 164.36 million people.^[7] The loss of the labor force and the serious aging of the population has led to stagnant and shrinking rural development and hollowing out of the countryside. Research shows that the degree of rural hollowing out is inversely proportional to the level of the local economy, and rural development faces a sharp decline as urbanization agglomeration accelerates. The rural economies of China's southwestern and northwestern regions are backward, and the urbanization process is slow, making these regions areas of low rural hollowing out. Highly rural hollowed-out counties are mainly found in economically developed areas such as the northern border and the eastern coast.^[8]

3.2 Strong policy

The issue of rural development has always been a major issue in our country's national construction and is also an important issue that the Party and the State pay close attention to. 2022 January released the Central Committee Document No. 1, "Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on the Comprehensively Promoting Rural Revitalization in the Year of 2022", clearly put forward the launch of the implementation of the cultural industry empowered by rural revitalization plan.^[9] In March of the same year, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and other departments jointly issued the Opinions on Promoting Cultural Industry Empowering Rural Revitalization, which clearly defines the general requirements, key areas, policy initiatives, and organization and implementation of cultural industry empowering rural revitalization, and encourages localities to combine the endowment of cultural resources with the characteristics of the development of cultural industries and to cultivate and build cultural industries with distinctive local characteristics and outstanding cultural connotations, Encourage localities to combine the endowment of cultural resources and the development characteristics of cultural industries and cultivate and build cultural industries with distinctive local characteristics, outstanding cultural connotations and organic integration of one, two and three industries. Encourage conditional places to introduce art institutions to operate art festivals and exhibitions with local cultural characteristics in a market-oriented manner.^[10] There are clear guidelines for art to promote rural revitalization.

3.3 Exploration by knowledgeable people

The Echigo-Tsumari Earth Art Festival encourages people to re-examine the relationship between the city and the countryside and to attract a group of knowledgeable people to put their enthusiasm into the construction of the countryside, art to promote the construction of the countryside (referred to as the art of the countryside construction) of the boom in the countryside is quietly emerging. In Anhui Bishan Village, Shanxi Xu Village, Guangdong Qingtian Village,

Guizhou Yangstirrup Town, Gansu Shijiezi Village, Jiangxi Jingdezhen, and other places, have organized large and small art festivals, art countryside construction projects. Some of them have taken the lead, stimulating discussion at the first attempt and arousing widespread interest in artistic rural construction. Some have achieved remarkable results, bringing great improvements to the lives of local people and forming a brand effect of vernacular culture. The dedication and practice of these predecessors have left us with valuable experience. By analyzing these cases, the following shortcomings are summarized.

Promoting rural revival through art is difficult and time-consuming. One or two art festivals cannot drive rural development. A project requires substantial research, organization, planning, preparation, and communication before launch. After the project matures, it's important to plan for future development and optimize present efforts. Strategic preparation involves a lot of time and work from organizers. The success of the Earth Art Festival has highlighted economic opportunities in this industry. Since this trend has caught hold, more people and organizations are rapidly planning events with sculptures and art installations and charging entry to attract customers. However, these projects often disregard foundational labor and infrastructural demands. Due to transportation, food, and lodging challenges, visitors have a poor experience. This increases doubts about repeat visits.

Many rural revival artists have idealistic views of the countryside and its people. They don't comprehend the peasants' needs and won't talk to them because they've never lived there as locals. A beer festival in a rice wine-loving town was poorly planned because high-level artists influence village architecture. The countryside has become unrecognizable due to the establishment of cafes, bars, and other stores that have no link to the residents and undermine its natural beauty. Contrary to the villagers' desire for wealth, some artists establish cultural activities like studies and reading clubs in villages, which they cannot engage in. They give the villagers hope and brutally confine them in art. Creating their utopia on someone else's land contradicts rural rejuvenation.

The Earth Art Festival has encountered a misinterpretation of the concept of earth art during its organization, resulting in a deviation from its intended purpose and a decline in the intrinsic value of earth art. It is observed that the festival has been transformed into a form of substandard art under the guise of the Earth Art Festival. To rectify this situation, it is imperative to adopt a localized approach for the Earth Art Festival in China. This entails incorporating specific suggestions and measures, which are outlined below.

4. The Orientation of the Earth Art Festival with Chinese Characteristics

China's agricultural civilization boasts a rich historical legacy. The rural areas must not fade into mere nostalgic recollections or sentimental notions. The countryside should not be equated with dilapidation and backwardness. In line with the objectives outlined in the twentieth CPC National Congress, it is crucial to actively advance the rejuvenation of rural industry, talent, culture, ecology, and organization, thereby fostering the revitalization of rural areas. Is it possible to rejuvenate villages that have seen a decline in vitality through the utilization of art? Is it possible for the Earth Art Festival to establish itself in China, and does the Chinese culture perceive it as "a stone from another mountain can attack jade"?

4.1 Let the Earth Art Festival store the regional cultural memory

In the 1990s, Mr. and Mrs. Jan Assmann conceptualized "cultural memory". They characterized this idea as the memory created by social institutions through different mechanisms, including verbal communication, visual representations, physical structures, museums, traditional events, and ceremonies. This recollection comprises historical knowledge essential to a society or period, forming its collective memory. Remembrance is rekindled through cultural manifestations including recital, celebration, and devotion.^[11] Declining rural populations lead to stagnant development and loss of cultural recollection. The Earth Art Festival aimed to reinvigorate rural communities through artistic means. Consider the event as a blend of art and local realities, rather than just a type of public art. Consider the Echigo Tsumari concept for building rural communities, preserving unique qualities and memories. Moreover, these cultural significances should be reinterpreted to reflect modern aesthetics.

4.2 Preserving and upholding the distinctiveness of rural areas in China

What villages are suited for art-promoted rural revitalization? Using the Echigo-Tsumari Earth Art Festival paradigm, villages with developed natural and human resources are stronger competitors. Chinese villages are abundant due to its enormous landmass and gorgeous sceneries. The countrysides of China and Japan are significantly distinct. Since Japan is small, its countryside is close to its cities. Infrastructure is well-developed, and the countryside is accessible from towns. Tokyo-Echigo Tsumari is a two-hour drive. Convenient transportation underpins the festival. Although China has a wide countryside, some remote rural locations are rich in natural and cultural resources but far from the city and cumbersome to transport, which makes festival planning and development difficult. So, when choosing villages, consider their location and transportation. Our countryside is unusual in this.

An earth art event incorporating Chinese elements must respect and preserve the countryside's distinctiveness. The industrious and wise masses of working people in China have created many works of art and folk activities with strong local characteristics and national styles to satisfy their living and aesthetic needs, making them an important part of Chinese culture. There are 964 Chinese folk culture and art hometowns in 2018. Young people don't have time to practice these skills, thus largely the elderly do. The elderly's withdrawal has endangered many great folk arts. With its rural art characteristics, the Earth Art Festival is a good opportunity to revive traditional art. Folk art heritage is not only history and culture, but also the inheritance and development of China's spiritual wealth. Creating "one village, one art" of China's earth art festival helps preserve regional culture.

4.3 Multi-party cooperation is key

Can the Earth Arts Festival contribute to the revitalization of rural areas? The affirmative response to this question prompts us to consider how to effectively implement earth art festivals in China. Drawing on the examples of the Echigo Wife Earth Art Festival, as well as other domestic earth art festivals and initiatives aimed at revitalizing rural communities, this article argues that the key to the success of the earth art festival lies in fostering multi-party collaboration and allowing each stakeholder to contribute in their unique way.

4.3.1 An efficient and effective government

When art intervenes to promote the revitalization of the countryside, art is only a means to an end, and it is the government that coordinates the relationship between the two and achieves the effect of "revitalization". The government has a huge role to play as the link between art and the countryside. The local government understands the nature, culture, and people in the countryside, and can provide support in terms of resources, talents, and funds, which is a strong guarantee for the success of the festival. In addition to Echigo Tsuma's Earth Art Festival, successful international cases of artistic revitalization of villages, such as Italy's Akumeja Village, Finland's Fiskars Village, and South Korea's Gamcheon-dong Village, have all been led by the government. Domestic artists have also taken the initiative to enter the countryside in an attempt to revitalize the countryside through art but unfortunately failed. After all, the power of individual artists is limited, and without government support, it will lead to weak or even powerless follow-up development. Government-led is to provide maximum protection and convenience for the festival, and moderate intervention can be a lubricant between the artists and villagers so that the Earth Art Festival is in a reasonable range of vigorous growth. The excessive intervention will be too much, government-led key to grasp the "degree".

4.3.2 Ensuring the Subjectivity of Rural Areas

The focus of this study is to examine the rural areas by considering the local environment, culture, industry, and other relevant factors, with an emphasis on the local population, specifically the villagers. It is essential to gain a comprehensive understanding of the natural resources, cultural assets, and specialized industries in the area. In the case of villages with a rich heritage of traditional arts, it is crucial to actively promote the preservation and continuation of these artistic practices. Additionally, the introduction of contemporary art should be tailored to the local context, ensuring a harmonious coexistence with the local culture, rather than being incongruous or solely pursued for artistic purposes, disregarding the rural setting as a whole. In his work "The General Idea of Countryside Construction," Mr. Liang Shuming also highlights the importance of not only alleviating the challenges faced by rural areas but also actively fostering a new cultural identity. The development of a new culture is not a spontaneous occurrence but rather necessitates compatibility with local traditions and culture. ^[12]The objective of rural revitalization is to advance regional development and enhance the well-being of villagers, who play dual roles as both beneficiaries and contributors to a contented life. As permanent residents of rural areas, villagers serve as the foundation for revitalizing the countryside. The extent to which villages can progress following artistic revitalization relies on the resilience of the villagers. It is crucial to ensure that villagers hold a prominent position, fully respect their desires, and effectively stimulate their initiative and creativity. The transfer of responsibility for rural revitalization from artists to villagers is pivotal for the artistic rejuvenation of rural areas. Failure to do so may result in the predicament of attempting to initiate a movement in the countryside without the participation of farmers.

4.3.3 Artist co-construction

The act of creating art is inherently subjective, serving as a means for artists to express their emotions, temperament, spirit, and individual style. However, the primary objective of the Earth Art Festival is to enhance the quality of life for villagers and promote the revitalization of rural areas. Consequently, when artists engage in the creative process, their works must align with the festival's theme, incorporate local characteristics, seamlessly integrate with the rural

landscape, and reflect the region's natural and cultural heritage. By utilizing contemporary art as a medium, artists can narrate the story of the village. It is important to note that the artist's role is not that of the central figure, nor is the village a mere backdrop for their artistic display. Rather, the artist assumes the role of a guide, facilitating the expression of the villagers' sentiments towards their hometown through artistic means. Furthermore, the artist also serves as a guide for tourists, enabling them to comprehend the rural landscape through the lens of art, a universal language shared by all humanity.

4.3.4 Social Resource Synergy

According to the Echigo-Tsumari Earth Art Festival paradigm, involving social resources ensures its success. Commercial engagement should be minimal, but complete exclusion or reliance on business is biased. The Echigo-Tsumari Earth Art Festival has grown economically independent from the government thanks to the Fukutake Foundation, and its professional commercial operation has brought tourists and cash to the region. Festival operations need a lot of money and labor. The public service organization "Little Snake Team" handled many of these issues and helped Earth Art Festival residents achieve "complicity" and "collaboration". The "Little Snake Team" made "complicity" and "collaboration" with festivalgoers possible. A balance between fair commercialism and the social side of the public interest can boost local business and improve Festival organization. Finally, the above points support the thesis. This paper's analysis illuminated and comprehensively covered the topic.

5. Conclusions

The Earth Arts Festival may help China revitalize the countryside. An successful and universally applicable rural implementation technique requires more work. Successful models from other countries are important, but they should not be copied. Analyze specific challenges instead. China's rural culture must be respected and preserved. Stakeholder collaboration, including government-led programs and artist participation, can achieve this. The Earth Art Festival can conserve regional culture by creating a multi-faceted cooperative framework that uses social resources. Art can revitalize rural places and the Earth.

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