Cross-National Transfer and Community Participation in Regional Art Festivals: Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale and Art at Fuliang

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Abstract

This paper examines how local resident involvement changes when a regional art festival model travels across national boundaries. It focuses on the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale in Japan and Art at Fuliang in China. Echigo-Tsumari is treated as a reference case for art-led rural revitalization, while Art at Fuliang is examined as a receiving and translating case that publicly drew on Japanese regional art festival practices. Based on linked comparative fieldwork, including participation in Kohebi-tai in Echigo-Tsumari and long-term embedded fieldwork in Art at Fuliang, the paper traces how participation mechanisms are formed within different local conditions. The analysis shows that resident involvement did not travel as a ready-made component of the festival model. Instead, it was reorganized through different forms of mediation, coordination, and everyday practice in each case. These processes created possibilities for local involvement, but also revealed tensions over how participation was defined, valued, and sustained. The paper argues that cross-national transfer should therefore be examined not only through visible festival formats, but also through the less visible social arrangements that make local participation possible.

Keywords: regional art festivals, community participation, cross-national transfer, Echigo-Tsumari, Art at Fuliang

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Introduction

Regional art festivals have become an important cultural form through which rural and peripheral regions seek new visibility, visitors, and forms of social connection. In Japan, contemporary art projects have increasingly moved beyond conventional art spaces and entered schools, vacant houses, shopping streets, islands, and rural landscapes. Since the early 2000s, these projects have been linked to regional revitalization, tourism, exchange populations, and the rediscovery of local resources (Agency for Cultural Affairs, Japan, 2015; Yoshizawa, 2019). In this paper, regional art festivals refer to place-based contemporary art events in rural, island, or peripheral regions, where site-specific artworks are connected with local revitalization and resident–external collaboration.

The Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale in Niigata, Japan, is one of the most influential examples of this development. Since its launch in 2000, it has been widely discussed as a reference case for art-led regional revitalization, especially because it connects contemporary art with depopulated rural landscapes, local communities, and long-term project operation (Klien, 2010; World Bank, 2024; Yoda, 2016). Its influence has also traveled beyond Japan. In China, recent rural art initiatives have drawn public attention to Japanese regional art festival practices, especially through projects associated with Art Field China. Art at Fuliang, launched in Fuliang County, Jingdezhen City, in 2021, was publicly framed in relation to the Echigo-Tsumari Art Field Triennale, with Fram Kitagawa serving as advisor and with site-specific art, rural landscape, local materials, and resident involvement forming part of its public narrative (Art Front Gallery, 2021; Zheng, 2022).

This movement from a Japanese reference case to a Chinese rural project raises a question about transfer. Existing studies have examined regional art festivals through tourism, place-making, governance, social capital, and resident evaluation. These works show that the local effects of art festivals are shaped through social relations and organizational processes, rather than through artworks or visitor numbers alone (Aoo, 2021; Klien, 2010; Miyaji et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023). Yet when a festival model moves across national contexts, the place of resident participation becomes less certain. The visible format of the festival may be recognizable, but the arrangements that allow residents to enter, interpret, support, or question the project have to take shape within specific local conditions.

This paper therefore asks how local resident involvement changes when a regional art festival model travels across national boundaries. It focuses on the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale as a reference case and Art at Fuliang as a receiving and translating case. The purpose is not to evaluate which case is more successful, but to examine how participation mechanisms are formed within different social and organizational settings. By tracing this process, the paper draws attention to a less visible dimension of cross-national festival transfer: the work through which local participation becomes possible, meaningful, and contested.

Literature Review

Research on regional art festivals has often begun from the question of local effects. Studies of Echigo-Tsumari, Setouchi, and related rural art projects have examined visitor flows, tourism income, regional visibility, social capital, and resident evaluation (Cai et al., 2023; Kōno, 2024; Miyaji et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023). This literature has made it clear that art festivals can generate measurable changes, yet it also cautions against treating visitor numbers or public

visibility as sufficient evidence of local revitalization. The more difficult question concerns how artistic events become connected to local social life over time.

A second line of research has therefore paid closer attention to collaboration and social relations. Klien's studies of Echigo-Tsumari show that relations between local and non-local actors can produce cooperation, local initiative, and pride, while also generating friction and misunderstanding (Klien, 2010). Studies of volunteer activity and civil society involvement further suggest that festival effects are shaped by the work of mediators who connect artists, residents, visitors, and organizers (Aoo, 2021; Yoda, 2016). From this perspective, participation is not simply an additional value attached to art festivals. It is part of the social process through which the festival becomes locally meaningful.

This point is especially important when a festival model travels. Artworks, rural settings, and revitalization narratives can be made visible relatively quickly. The formation of resident involvement is less immediate. It requires practical arrangements through which local people come to understand the project, take on roles, interact with visitors, and negotiate the project's meaning in relation to their own place. The same festival format may therefore produce different forms of participation under different institutional and community conditions.

This paper uses resident participation as an entry point for examining cross-national transfer. Here, participation mechanism refers to the situated social and organizational process through which residents or external supporters become connected to festival practice. The concept is used in a modest sense. It does not assume that participation is necessarily deep, equal, or empowering. It directs attention to how involvement is made possible, how it changes through practice, and where it becomes difficult to sustain.

Methodology

This paper adopts a linked and asymmetrical comparative design. The two cases are linked because Art at Fuliang was publicly framed in relation to Echigo-Tsumari, while both projects connect contemporary art with rural revitalization and resident involvement. The comparison is asymmetrical because the cases are not treated as equivalent festivals at the same developmental stage. Echigo-Tsumari is examined as a mature reference case, while Art at Fuliang is examined as a receiving and translating case. This design helps trace how a reference model is reworked within a different rural governance and project-operation context.

The empirical materials come from fieldwork conducted in both sites. In Echigo-Tsumari, fieldwork was carried out from 2019 to 2020 through participation in Kohebi-tai and external participant observation. The materials include field notes, interviews, Kohebi-related materials, official publications, and public records. In Fuliang, the study draws on long-term on-site fieldwork from 2021 to 2026. The author participated in the project as a curatorial and operational team member, which provided access to the everyday process of project implementation. These materials are supplemented by interviews, project documents, public reports, and field observations.

The different field positions shaped the comparison. The Echigo-Tsumari materials were produced from the position of an external supporter observing a mature festival system, while the Fuliang materials were produced from a more embedded position within everyday project operation. This difference is treated as a methodological condition rather than a problem to be

removed. To reduce the risk of relying only on insider experience, field observations are read together with interviews, project documents, public materials, and existing studies.

The analysis uses process tracing and thematic interpretation to examine how resident involvement became organized in each case. The focus is on the formation of participation mechanisms, including how residents or external supporters encountered the festival, how roles developed through practice, and where participation became difficult to sustain.

Findings and Discussion

Relational Mediation in Echigo-Tsumari

The Echigo-Tsumari case shows that resident involvement in regional art festivals cannot be understood only as a response to artworks or revitalization narratives. In the early stage of the festival, local residents did not necessarily share the expectations of organizers, artists, or external supporters. Participation had to be made gradually workable through explanation, practical help, and repeated contact. Kohebi-tai, the volunteer group associated with the festival, played an important mediating role in this process.

Kohebi-tai should be understood as a mediating layer. Its members entered villages as external supporters and became visible through ordinary forms of festival work. Their presence helped connect the festival organization with local residents before resident participation became more stable. The significance of this mediation was therefore not simply that volunteers provided labor. More importantly, they created repeated occasions for residents to encounter the festival through people and practices, rather than only through abstract project goals. This process suggests that participation in Echigo-Tsumari was shaped, at least in part, through relational accumulation. Some residents gradually became collaborators such as guides and artwork supporters, while others remained cautious or distant. Such unevenness is important because it shows that resident involvement did not emerge as community-wide acceptance. It developed through selective and gradual connections among residents, external supporters, artists, and organizing bodies. The local embeddedness of the festival was therefore supported by a social process that required time, mediation, and changing roles.

Echigo-Tsumari thus provides a reference point for thinking about participation mechanisms in regional art festivals. Even in a mature and widely cited case, resident involvement required more than the circulation of an art-led revitalization idea. It had to be made practical through human contact and repeated presence. This observation is important for the comparison with Art at Fuliang, where resident involvement emerged within a more compressed project history and a different organizational setting.

Operational Incorporation in Art at Fuliang

Art at Fuliang shows another way in which local participation can be organized after a festival model travels. Before the public opening, villagers had encountered the project through scattered forms of contact, including production support, rental arrangements, temporary labor, etc. A more visible channel of resident involvement appeared when locally recruited “volunteers” entered the project’s public-facing operation. The word “volunteer” needs to be used carefully in this case. These participants were not unpaid volunteers in the conventional sense. They were recruited through coordination between the festival team and township- or village-level administrative organizations, received fixed work subsidies, and took on regular

public-facing tasks during the project period. Although they were still referred to as "volunteers" in everyday project language, their role was closer to a compensated project-based work arrangement.

This arrangement reflected the practical conditions of the project's early operation. Recruiting a large pool of open-call volunteers from wider society would have required a different management system and was difficult to establish quickly in the local setting. At the same time, the project needed a stable way to involve villagers in daily operation. The locally recruited volunteer system therefore functioned as an initial participation channel: it helped build an operational team while giving residents a direct route into the festival's public work. Through this arrangement, residents did more than support basic operation. Some local participants gradually moved from assigned tasks toward situated narration of the village. Guiding and visitor interaction became occasions for connecting artwork explanations with local memories, village experience, and everyday understandings of place. In this sense, operational work created a limited but significant space for local interpretation. The project did not simply place residents inside a pre-existing festival format; it also created situations in which residents could reinterpret that format from their own position.

At the same time, the Fuliang case reveals the tension of project-based participation. Because the role stood between volunteering, paid work, public service, and local contribution, its meaning was not always stable. This ambiguity shaped how participants evaluated their roles and how the project related to the village community. Compared with the longer relational accumulation in Echigo-Tsumari, Fuliang's participation mechanism was more directly connected to operational incorporation and local coordination.

Participation as Situated Translation

The comparison suggests that resident involvement is one of the more difficult parts of a regional art festival model to carry across contexts. Visible elements of the model can appear relatively quickly: a rural landscape can become an exhibition site, artworks can be installed, and visitors can be attracted. Resident participation requires a different form of translation. It has to become socially intelligible and practically workable within a specific local setting.In Echigo-Tsumari, the formation of participation was mediated through external supporters and long-term contact. In Art at Fuliang, participation was organized more directly through a locally recruited operational system. These two processes should not be reduced to a simple contrast between Japanese and Chinese models. They reflect different project histories, organizational arrangements, and ways of connecting residents to the festival.

This perspective also helps clarify what is meant by "community participation" in regional art festivals. The fieldwork suggests that it may include support, work, interpretation, coordination, and negotiation in overlapping ways. Residents may support the festival without shaping its direction, perform assigned roles while developing their own interpretations, or engage with the project only when it becomes relevant to their livelihood, memory, or social relations. These variations do not make participation meaningless. They show why it must be studied as a process rather than assumed as an outcome.

The two cases therefore draw attention to the social arrangements behind festival transfer. A regional art festival model may travel through curatorial references, organizational networks, and public narratives, but its local operation is shaped by how resident involvement becomes possible on the ground. For this reason, the cross-national transfer of regional art festivals

requires attention to the practical formation of participation, especially where public goals, project management, and local life intersect.

Conclusion

This study approached cross-national transfer through the formation of resident participation. The comparison suggests that a regional art festival model may travel as a recognizable set of references, while local involvement takes shape through the conditions of each site. In Echigo-Tsumari, participation developed through long-term relational mediation. External supporters helped make the festival understandable to residents and sustained contact through repeated practices. In Art at Fuliang, locally recruited "volunteers" became an early operational channel. Their compensated and project-based role can be understood as a response to the need for stable public-facing operation and a direct route for villagers to enter the project.

These cases draw attention to the organizational layer between festival ideals and local effects. Art-led rural revitalization is often discussed through visible outcomes, such as artworks, visitor flows, and public narratives. The comparison in this paper suggests that resident participation requires closer attention as a practical process. It is through this process that a festival becomes connected to local labor, interpretation, expectation, and tension. The study also shows that participation should be examined without assuming that it is necessarily equal, voluntary, or empowering. In both cases, formal and informal arrangements shaped the more visible forms of participation, although they did not exhaust the ways residents and supporters encountered the festival. Participation therefore appears as a situated process through which the festival model becomes locally workable, interpreted, and contested.

The comparison remains limited by the different histories of the two cases and by the author's different field positions. Echigo-Tsumari is a mature festival system, while Art at Fuliang was observed as a younger project from a more embedded position. This paper also focuses mainly on actors who came into direct contact with festival operation. Further research could follow how participation changes after the initial operational stage and how more distant residents understand the festival's place in village life.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that ChatGPT, a generative AI-assisted technology, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and improving readability. The author further declares that, apart from ChatGPT, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from the careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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