

OBUSE:

A Town of “Chestnuts” & “Hokusai”

How a Town Attracts Tourists 100 Times Its Population

By Yuka KOIKE

Only about a two-hour ride from Tokyo via *Shinkansen* (bullet train) and a private railway, the Town of Obuse (pronounced as “ob-say”) in northern Nagano Prefecture, central Japan, is known as a town of “chestnuts” and “Hokusai.” This small town, only 19 square kilometers large and with a population of some 12,000, annually attracts more than 1.2 million tourists from all over Japan and abroad.

This is a report on town revitalization – how Obuse has managed to attract so many visitors.

1. History of Obuse

It is said that the name, Obuse, derives from *ause* in Japanese, which means a point where two rivers meet.

Running through Obuse is the Chikuma River, the longest river in Japan. Approximately 160 years ago, there was busy traffic by river boats on the Chikuma, which carried various goods for trade. There was a river port in Obuse. Via the river, salt, fish and other marine products from the sea were brought to Obuse, from where raw cotton and rapeseed oil, grown in the town, were shipped to other regions. For land transport, too, Obuse was an important place. As a result, it developed as a commercial town, producing many prosperous merchants. Although it was a small town in the mountains, it not only prospered as a center of economic activities but also attracted information and diverse cultures through goods and people. Even woodblock print artist Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), the world-famous *Ukiyoe* master, was charmed enough to visit Obuse.



Exterior view of “Hokusai Museum” where his brush paintings are exhibited

2. Hokusai & Obuse

Despite being past 80, Hokusai visited Obuse several times at the invitation of local business tycoon Takai Kouzan, traveling from Edo (now Tokyo) 240 km away.

Kouzan himself was an accomplished scholar well-versed in art. He built a special atelier in the compound of his house for Hokusai, and supported him financially and spiritually. Surprisingly, it is said they were as many as 40 years apart in age. With the support from this rich patron, Hokusai concentrated on his brush paintings in Obuse, although he had formerly produced woodblock prints, the most famous of which is “*Fugaku-sanjurokkei*” (Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji). As Hokusai is known for his woodblock prints, his rare brush paintings have a scarcity value. Masterpieces into which Hokusai put all his heart in his final years are still there in Obuse.



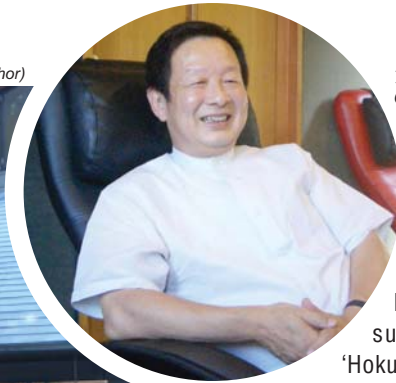
“Chestnut lane” paved with brick-like blocks of chestnut wood.

3. A Town of “Chestnuts” & “Hokusai”

Sweet chestnuts are a specialty of Obuse. Its climate and soil are excellent for growing chestnuts, which have been cultivated there for some 600 years. Obuse’s chestnuts have long been well-known to be of the finest quality.

Today, the image of Obuse as a town of “chestnuts” and “Hokusai” has taken root. This can largely be attributed to the contribution of an old, established manufacturer of chestnut sweets, Obusedo Corp., which has played a key role in the town’s rebirth.

In 1976, as a symbol of the town’s tourism, the “Hokusai Museum” opened to exhibit his brush paintings. In those days, the museum was surrounded by vegetable fields. After visiting the museum, tourists would just get in the car and leave the town. Even though the town attracted tourists, they stayed in it just for a short while and had little economic effect on the town. This prompted Obusedo President Tsugio Ichimura to work on reenergizing the town to make it attractive. Obusedo (founded in 1900) has its origin in the Masuichi-Ichimura Sake Brewery (founded in 1755), which introduced canning technology and a factory production method to start making chestnut sweets. Ichimura is an offspring of Kouzan, the patron who invited Hokusai to Obuse.



Tsugio Ichimura, President, Obusedo Corp.

by its beautiful landscape and local foods in season as well as its art, history and culture. “It is because we are backed by our history and culture, such as ‘chestnuts’ and ‘Hokusai,’ that our businesses are thriving,” adds Ichimura. “I cannot think of relocating our shop floor out of this place even in the future. Maybe it is not in the main line of business management, but Obusedo will not stint its efforts for cultural activities.”

4. Cultural Activities of Obusedo

There is another person who played a key role in Obuse’s rebuilding efforts. She is Sarah Marie Cummings from the United States. Cummings, who had studied in Japan, came to this country again in 1993 to work for the Olympic Winter Games in Nagano. She was fascinated by the culture and industry of Obuse and joined

Obusedo/Masuichi-Ichimura Sake Brewery. She is famous for having made such innovations in business management as the development of “Square One,” a new brand of *sake*, and restoration of *sake* brewing in wooden casks. The cultural activities she proposed, such as “Obusection” [=Obsession + you (u)] and “Obuse mini Marathon” (a half marathon to see Obuse; “mini” meaning “go and see” in Japanese), contribute greatly in attracting large numbers of visitors both from within and outside the prefecture. Drawing numerous people looking for intellectual stimuli in such cultural activities is another characteristic of Obuse.

Looking back on its history, it is “Obuse’s specialty as well to absorb different cultures,” as Kouzan once invited Hokusai, Ichimura says. Cultural activities bring people together, encouraging exchanges. Because they offer new stimuli, they attract more people.

5. Future of Obuse

I asked Ichimura about the future path for Obuse. He answered, “Obuse has long been a place of cultural creation. In this sense, it is rather easy for clusters of craftsmen’s shops to develop here. In the olden days, there were some local craftsmen who met most of our needs for items relating to our clothing, food and shelter. From now on, it would enrich our lives if we can add our obsession and personal preferences in the designs of our clothing, food and shelter, wouldn’t it?”

Behind Obuse’s development as a revitalized town are two engines: its spiritual richness that has allowed it to adopt the motto, “Learning from history,” and its power to support its economy.

By pursuing newness and values that exist only in old things, Obuse will continue to communicate its charms to other places in Japan and the rest of the world. **J.S.**

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Visitors to Obusedo can enjoy chestnut sweets, a local specialty.

“The Hokusai Museum is important as a tourism resource,” Ichimura says. “But it alone is only a cultural heritage. I thought of building a cultural town in the true sense of the word, taking the museum as its starting point.”

He began with *Shukei Jigyo*, a project to restore the landscape of the old town. It was an attempt to restore the landscape and

lifestyle of the old rural village through repairs and reconstruction of the then disappearing old buildings, including warehouses, mud walls and clay roof tiles. “Just keeping things from the past stops short of revitalizing a sleepy town. The major characteristic of town rebuilding in Obuse is that it has incorporated its traditional industry and business establishments into the project,” says Ichimura.

Japanese restaurant “The Club (Kurabu)” in renovated part of sake storehouse

Through *Shukei Jigyo* emerged an Obuse street lined with a set of tourism resources, such as “The Club (*Kurabu*),” a restaurant in a renovated *sakagura* (*sake* storehouse), and the Takai Kouzan Memorial Center, all along the same stretch as the main store and brewery of Obusedo/ Masuichi-Ichimura Sake Brewery. The promenade connecting the Hokusai Museum and the street is paved with brick-like blocks of chestnut wood to keep it harmonious with nature, and so that visitors can enjoy a leisurely walk. People who visit the town are charmed

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