

# The Japanese Experience with Micronations

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Philip Streich specializes in East Asian political science and international relations. He is the author of several articles and two books, *Weird International Relations* (with D. Mislán, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) and *The Ever-Changing Sino-Japanese Rivalry* (Routledge, 2019). Dr. Streich has taught at Haverford College and Pomona College (USA), and Osaka University, Japan.

## ABSTRACT

This short article reviews the history of micronations in Japan. The Japanese experience with micronations is dominated by a micronation boom that took place in the 1980s after two events: 1) a call by a prefectural governor for more localized, innovative development and 2) the publication of a popular book, *Kirikirijin* (Inoue), that portrayed a small, rural area in northern Honshu declaring itself independent from the rest of Japan. Most of Japan's micronations existed during this 1980s and early '90s period, with approximately 150 micronations in existence in 1988. Japan possibly held most of the world's micronations during the 1980s, when the phenomenon was still not that widespread around the world. Unlike many of the more famous micronations around the world, such as Sealand and Hutt River Principality, most of Japan's micronations were not borne out of sovereignty experiments or landowner disputes with government but were rather created in order to drum up domestic tourism spending at rural businesses. The micronation experiment largely came to an end at the turn of the century, within a few years of the burst of Japan's economic bubble. Several micronations, including some micronation federations, still exist however.

## KEYWORDS

micronation, Japan, tourism, *chihō no jidai*

## Introduction

Though Japan has not hosted any of the world's better known micronations, Japan has still enjoyed a distinctive experience with micronations. The history of Japanese micronations is dominated by a micronation boom that took place in the 1980s. Most of Japan's micronations existed during this 1980s and early '90s period, with approximately 150 micronations in existence in 1988 (Kurahara et al. 167). The micronation experiment largely came to an end at the turn of the century, within a few years of the burst of Japan's economic bubble. However, it is quite possible that Japan held most of the world's micronations during the 1980s, when the phenomenon was still not that widespread around the world.

The micronation boom in Japan came after a call by the governor of Kanagawa Prefecture, Nagasu Kazuji, for more localised, innovative development and after the publication of a popular book that portrayed a small, rural area in northern Honshu declaring itself independent from the rest of Japan (Kurahara et al. 167; Paison). These ideas caught on with the owners of many inns, pensions, B&Bs (*ryokan/minshuku*), roadside rest areas, and municipal tourism boards in northern Japan, with many of these entities declaring micronational sovereignty to try to attract tourists. When Japan's economy severely deteriorated in the mid-1990s, many of these businesses closed and city halls had to tighten their budgets, which led to the demise of many of the micronations.

Japan's experience with micronations will be described in more detail below. In addition to describing this history, the point of this article is to encourage the reader to critically assess our definitions and conceptualisations of micronations. Up to this point, much of the scholarship on micronationality has focused on micronations arising out of landowners' disputes with local or central governments or from amateur sovereignty experiments. These are two of the most common origin stories for well-known micronations like Sealand and Hutt River Province. Contrary to this, the vast majority of Japanese micronations have essentially been formed to serve as PR gimmicks designed to attract tourists to come spend money at countryside businesses. If we add over 150 Japanese micronations to our empirical record, then the literature should acknowledge a new common origin story – the publicity stunt designed to boost business. Of course, Sealand and the Hutt River Province both devolved into selling trinkets, passports, and attracting tourists in attempts to raise revenue, so maybe they are not that different after all.

This next section briefly discusses the terminology and conceptualisation of micronations. The section after that covers the history of Japanese micronations. The final section analyses the research on Japanese micronations and returns to the discussion brought up here in the introduction.

## Micronations: Terms and Conceptualisations

The term *micronation* is a poor choice to describe this phenomenon. *Nation* is a very complex term. To paraphrase a common definition, a nation refers to a group of people who share a common history and common linguistic, religious, and/or other cultural aspects (Heywood 109). Politicians, journalists, and other non-academics use the term nation interchangeably with country or state, but nation is not actually synonymous with these terms. It does not denote the existence of sovereignty. In some cases, the two concepts of nation and country may congruently map over each other to describe the same territory and people contained within that territory. The Japanese people, for example, are both a nation and a people mostly contained within the territory of the country of Japan. On the other hand, there is the Kurdish nation, that group of people who are spread across Turkey, Iraq, and a few other countries in the Middle East. The Kurds are a nation, but they do not have a country or a state devoted to their nation. Some people might refer to Japan as a *nation-state*, but this term is rather anachronistic in an era with so many multicultural countries around the world. It is certainly not reflective of the fact that there are numerous overlooked minority groups within Japan, including Special Permanent Resident (*zainichi*) Koreans, Ryukyuan Islanders, and the Ainu people.

At any rate, using the term nation to refer to constructs that have often been created by one individual, a family, a small group of friends, or a small-town city council or tourism board trivialises the term's complexity and nuance. Micronation founders or authors writing about the phenomenon presumably settled on micronation as their preferred term because the term *microstate* was already taken – that term refers to the smallest, recognised states in the world, states such as Andorra, Monaco, Vatican City, and San Marino. I used the term *aspirant states* in my co-authored book, *Weird International Relations* (Mislán and Streich), but now I am resigned to using micronations since I recognise it is an uphill battle to try to reverse its widespread use.

How can we define micronations? Why do people create them? As some define them, a micronation “formally and persistently agitates for sovereignty over a given territory and is thus differentiated from other social groups” (Sawe; Furnes 18). What differentiates this definition, however, from rebellions or separatist groups engaged in open fighting with the government? One would never refer to militant, separatist groups such as the PKK in Turkey as a micronation, yet the PKK and similar groups around the world formally and persistently agitate for sovereignty over a given territory. I settle upon a paraphrasing of a sentence used in Furnes (18): Micronations *are sovereignty projects created by individuals or small groups of people as a hobby, tourist attraction, a sign of protest, an attempt to escape taxation, a political experiment, personal entertainment, or an artistic venture, among other reasons*. This catch-all definition pragmatically captures most of the reasons why individuals and small groups of people come to declare micronation sovereignty.

The spread of the Internet has facilitated an increase in the number of micronations since the mid-1990s by enabling micronation founders to publicise their projects and making it easier for people to learn about

micronations and how to declare them and write constitutions. As mentioned above, micronation operators such as Sealand's Bates family typically promote their domains with webpages, which also help to raise revenue by offering citizenship, official titles, passports, and other trinkets for sale. Some entrepreneurial sovereignty experimenters have even declared virtual micronations which only exist on the Internet.

### The Micronation Phenomenon in Japan

The Japanese term for micronations is *mini-dokuritsukoku*, which translates to "mini-independent countries (or states)." Some writers also use the katakana form of micronation, *maikuro-nēshon* (katakana is used for foreign words). In addition, I have come across other phrases that employ the word "parody." These have been translated variously as "parody state," "parody kingdom" or "parodied states" (Kurahara et al.; Suntory Foundation; Shiraishi 111). These descriptive terms betray the intentions of many Japanese micronation founders – that their micronations are mostly light-hearted ventures. Even if these are just parody for many, it is interesting that so many businesses, tourism boards, and city halls in Japan have tried this route to increase tourism revenue. There is a noticeable pattern of copycat behavior of declaring micronations in the 1980s and early '90s. Kurahara et al. list 43 micronations on the northern island of Hokkaido alone during this period, with many of them taking place at *minshuku* and *ryokan*.

Japan's experience with micronations begins in the early 1970s with a fishing circle (a circle describes a close group of friends involved in the same hobby) based in Saikai, Nagasaki Prefecture. [1] Searching to promote their self-supporting, autonomous lifestyle, in July 1972 the friends launched their own micronation, which they called the Country of Nature (Shiraishi 123; Ichikawa 37). This first Japanese micronation was atypical of most of those that followed. It seems to fit into the hobby or sovereignty project category of micronation similar to many micronations founded outside of Japan.

Following this was the *Shin-Yamadaigoku* (New Yamatai State), formed in 1977 in Usa City, Oita Prefecture, located in Northern Kyushu. It took its inspiration from a Japanese kingdom from Japan's late Yayoi Period (300 BCE-300 CE), ruled by the legendary Queen Himiko. We only know of the Yamatai Kingdom from Chinese records of the time, and historians have long debated the actual location of Yamatai. Indeed, its location and whether the kingdom and Himiko existed are debated by Japanese historians. A study in the mid-1970s posited that the kingdom might have been centered around Oita Prefecture. After this, several residents of Usa City took it upon themselves to commemorate their area's association with the famous kingdom by launching their own micronation, which they declared on 1 August 1977. The project was undertaken with the aim of revitalisation of Usa City (Suntory Foundation). The micronation created its own national flag and national anthem and named its prime minister and cabinet members. City officials joined the effort and several local buildings were given unofficial second names. For example, the bus stop in front of Usa Shrine was renamed *Shin-Yamadaigoku* station, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry became the

[1] Long (2010) argues that the small Bonin/Ogasawara Islands and the Izu Islands, Japanese possessions located in the Western Pacific Ocean due south of Tokyo, might have incidentally been Japan's first micronations after World War II. The islands were administered by the U.S. military from 1945 to 1968. The U.S. meanwhile had to decide whether these island groups were conquests from Japan's Imperial period and thus should be removed from Japanese possession. All Japanese were removed from the islands, leaving only people of Pacific Islander, Western, and mixed heritage. The Bonin Islands subsequently created a ruling council, while there were small independence movements on Miyake and Hachijō in the Izu chain (Long 2010 105, 107).

“Ministry of Commerce,” and a public hall was renamed the “National Diet Building.” *Shin-Yamadaigoku* also held summit meetings for micronations. For its efforts it was given the Suntory Award for Community Cultural Activities in 1986. The micronation’s activities were suspended in 2010, but a local politician and tourist facility owner re-started *Shin-Yamadaigoku* in 2020 to rally locals’ spirits amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (Miyamoto).

[2] Japanese names are presented family name first.

After the establishment of *Shin-Yamadaigoku*, Japan experienced a boom in “micronation-hood” declarations. These new micronations were inspired by two events. First, in 1978, the governor of Kanagawa Prefecture, Nagasu Kazuji, [2] called for the formation of a *chihō no jidai* (“local era”) that advocated the decentralisation of domestic development policies and the implementation of innovative local government policies in their place. Nagasu’s idea was that social, economic, and cultural creation should be regionally conceived and implemented (Tsujiyama; Kurahara et al. 167). The phrase *chihō no jidai* became a catchphrase in short order to represent the promotion of local culture. Second, the new micronations also took their cue from a 1981 novel, *Kirikirijin* (“The Kirikiri People”), written by the author and playwright Inoue Hisashi (Ichikawa). In his book, Inoue wrote about a fictitious rural village located in the northern Tohoku region of Japan that successfully declares independence, adopts the local dialect as their official language, and establishes food and energy self-sufficiency. The popularity of the book, particularly in northern Japan, led to dozens of micronation independence declarations, with most of the efforts led by city halls, chambers of commerce, tourism boards, and small businesses (Paison).

By 1982, a micronation calling itself *Kirikiri koku* (Kirikiri Country) was established in Iwate Prefecture. *Kirikiri koku* was joined by another 5 micronations in 1982 (Kurahara et al. 168-169; Ichikawa, 37). After this, the number of micronations exploded: Over 20 micronations were declared in 1983 and again in 1984 (Kurahara et al. 168-169; Ichikawa 37-39). By 1988, there were over 150 micronations in all of Japan, according to Kurahara et al. (167). With such a flurry of declarations in such a short period of time, Japanese micronations possibly accounted for a majority of the world’s micronations during the 1980s.

The new micronations in the north of Japan featured colorful names such as the *Nikoniko kyōwa-koku* (Nikoniko Republic), established in 1982 in Fukushima Prefecture; the *Arukōru kyōwa-koku* (Alcohol Republic), 1983, Sado Island, Niigata Prefecture; the *Akita kaeru mura* (Akita Frog Village), 1983, Akita Prefecture; the *Poteto kyōwa-koku* (Potato Republic), 1984, Hokkaido; and the *Ryūbyō aisurando kyōwa-koku* (the Drift Ice Iceland Republic), 1984, Hokkaido. From elsewhere in Japan, they were joined by various micronations such as the *Kani ōkoku* (Crab Kingdom), 1982, Hyogo Prefecture; the *Soyanka gasshūkoku* (Soyanka United States), 1983, Osaka Prefecture; and the *Yoron panauru ōkoku* (Yoron Panauru Kingdom), 1983, Kagoshima Prefecture.

Many of the forty-three *ryokan/minshuku*-based micronations in Hokkaido uncovered by Kurahara et al. were influenced by the same movement that hit Northern Honshu in the early 1980s. Their research shows the first micronation in Hokkaido was the *Abōtsuku kyōwa-koku* (Akhotsk Republic),

founded in 1978 in Bihoro Town in the eastern part of Hokkaido, but that virtually all the other Hokkaido micronations came after publication of *Kirikirijin* (Kurahara et al. 168-169). Kurahara et al. (167) helpfully create a typology of purposes for these Hokkaido micronations as well as their main activities. The purposes (and the number of micronations the purpose applies to) are as follows:

1. Tourism (6 micronations)
2. To help maintain local businesses (5)
3. Countering Depopulation (5)
4. Enjoying the Winter Climate (4)
5. Protecting Nature (9)
6. For the benefit of local children (5)
7. Promotion of local history and culture (5)
8. Regional promotion (14)

These purposes are not mutually exclusive and some micronations have more than one purpose. In addition, Kurahara et al. (167) observed and categorised their main activities as follows (with the number of micronations carrying out these activities in parentheses):

- a. Continuous events and festivals (15)
- b. Fun outdoor activities (20)
- c. Creative cultural activities (5)
- d. Hand-made craftsmanship (3)
- e. Intra-regional and inter-regional exchange (25)

Again, the numbers are overlapping as they total more than 43. With this research, we can form a good picture of the typical Japanese micronation in the 1980s. Kurahara et al. (167) summarise the Japanese micronations of this era by stating that the movement was developed with humorous and playful motives, purposes, and activities, with micronations reflecting the cultures and values of their respective regions. For instance, the *Abōtsuku kyōwa-koku* is a self-demeaning play on words regarding Bihoro's location in Hokkaido's Okhotsk Subprefecture, which lies along the Okhotsk Sea. The word *abo* means stupid or foolish in Japanese.

To illustrate an example of tourist-driven motivations, let us look at the Nikoniko Republic, located in Nihonmatsu City, Fukushima Prefecture. This micronation started rather early in the post-*Kirikirijin* boom in April 1982, two months earlier than Kirikiri Country. The businesses of the Dake Onsen Ryokan Cooperative became upset that the Tōhoku Shinkansen was ending service to their closest major train station, Nihonmatsu (Ichikawa 37). To ensure that tourists from Tokyo would keep coming, they came up with the idea of declaring independence under the banner of the Nikoniko Republic (*nikoniko* is a phenomime that means “smile” or “smiley”). In keeping with some of the innovations used in *Kirikirijin*, the Nikoniko Republic issued its own currency, the *cosmo*, and they set their clocks back one hour (“nikoniko time”). As many micronations do, they wrote their own constitution and created their own passports. They set up many of their “national” offices at the Dake Onsen Tourism Association Office and appointed tourism board

officials and cooperating business owners to official positions. They have hosted yearly festivals and visitors can buy souvenirs at their businesses, rest stops, and the tourism office. The operation was successful at bringing in tourists for a while, but the micronation was folded at the end of August 2006 (Shimokawa).

In 1988-89, at the apex of Japan's asset price bubble, the national government implemented the "100 Million Yen Project," in which it provided each municipality 100 million yen to develop their communities as they saw fit (Ichikawa 36). Undoubtedly much of that money and other generous government spending of the era was used for tourism-boosting projects. After the burst of the bubble economy in 1992 though, Japan entered its so-called "lost decades" of anemic economic performance, declining domestic tourism, and tightened municipal government budgets. Consequently, much of this carefree spending came to an end. Municipalities had to close up many of their tourism-boosting ventures and many of Japan's tourism-related micronations thus came to an end. The Nikoniko Republic actually lasted longer than many of its contemporaries.

Post-bubble municipal consolidation also contributed to micronations shutting down. Several cities, towns, and villages across Japan were joined together in order to cut down on duplicated services and to consolidate revenue and spending. This led to many municipality-linked micronations (those run by city halls and city tourism boards) coming to an end. Promotional budgets for city-run micronations were likely considered fanciful frills fit for the chopping block in the lean days of the late 1990s and 2000s. Kurahara et al. (168) also state that the continued maintenance of micronations was problematised by a general lack of successors of the next generation of micronation operators. Many children in rural Japan leave their villages for universities and employment, or they simply do not have interest in the operating the micronation.

A number of micronation federations have been created in Japan as well. The *Kashiopea renpō* (Commonwealth of Cassiopeia), established in 1991, and the *Shisō shinrin ōkoku* (Shiso Forest Kingdom), established in 1992, are examples of federations of micronations in Japan. Cassiopeia consists of five towns in Iwate Prefecture that form the "W" shape of the Cassiopeia constellation when joined by lines on a map. Cassiopeia holds many events for citizens of the five towns and promotes tourism for the area. The commonwealth is managed by the Iwate Cassiopeia Brand Promotion Council, the office of which is housed inside the tourism association offices of one of the member towns (Commonwealth of Cassiopeia n.d.).

The Shiso Forest Kingdom, which is still active but no longer a federation, originally consisted of micronations from five different towns, all located in a mountainous part of Hyogo that used to be called Shiso County. The purpose of joining together originally was forest management with an eye toward revitalisation of the forestry industry. In 2006, four of the towns were integrated into Shiso City, which took over management of the federation as a single micronation. Conservation and cooperative forestry still remain goals of the kingdom, along with attracting tourists (Shiso City Tourism Association).

An innovative federation of micronations is the *Ginga renpō* (Galactic Federation), which consists of seven member cities, which are not all in one region but are rather spread up and down Japan. The participating cities (and their micronations) are:

1. Taiki-cho, Hokkaido, *Taiki kyōwa-koku* (Republic of Taiki).
2. Ofunato City, Iwate Prefecture, *Sanrikuōfunato kyōwa-koku* (Republic of Sanrikuofunato).
3. Kakuda City, Miyagi Prefecture, *Kakuda kyōwa-koku* (Republic of Kakuda).
4. Noshiro City, Akita Prefecture, *Noshiro kyōwa-koku* (Republic of Noshiro).
5. Sagamihara City, Kanagawa Prefecture, *Sagamihara kyōwa-koku* (Republic of Sagamihara).
6. Saku City, Nagano Prefecture, *Saku kyōwa-koku* (Republic of Saku).
7. Kimotsuki-cho, Kagoshima Prefecture. *Uchinōrakimotsuki kyōwa-koku*. (Republic of Uchinourakimotsuki).

What sets this apart from other micronations and federations in Japan, or anywhere else in the world, for that matter? Each city hosts a Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) facility and bases their micronation and federation membership on that facility (Ofunato City). Instead of trying to drum up tourism revenue, they all share between them a domestic version of a sister-city relationship, with economic, sports, and youth study-“abroad” exchange programs. While many Japanese micronations have become inactive, the Galactic Federation is still active and has added to its membership. It started in 1987 during the micronation boom with five micronations and added its sixth and seventh members in 2010 and 2016 (Ofunato City). It must be noted that one member-city no longer hosts a JAXA facility – Ofunato City in Iwate Prefecture was the host of the Sanriku Atmospheric Observatory until its closure in 2007 – but Ofunato City and its micronation, the Sanrikuofunato Republic, are still welcome members in the Galactic Federation (Ofunato City). These qualities make the Galactic Federation quite different from the vast majority of Japanese micronations. By creating a long-distance network of micronations with a shared goal of mutual exchange, the cities have also found an economical substitute for international exchange programs that would not be so useful if the cities were all neighboring each other. Plus, it turns out that basing a micronation on something other than tourism can have a profound effect on its sustainability.

## Discussion

In this short article, I have introduced the Japanese experience with micronations, a topic which has not been covered much in English. Mimicking a well-known book about a small rural area declaring statehood, *Kirikirijin* (Inoue), most of Japan’s micronations came into being in the 1980s in a copycat fashion. The most common form of Japanese micronation has been some kind of business, a collective of businesses, or a municipal tourism board trying to boost domestic tourism by declaring a micronation. Many of these



micronation efforts came to an end within several years of the burst of Japan's economic bubble as a result of municipal finances and tourism spending drying up.

I would like the readers of this article to ponder whether these Japanese business-focused PR stunts should be considered as “true” micronations. Should we take the vast majority of these Japanese micronations seriously? On one hand, many of those following the trend did not desire sovereignty after having a dispute with the government, a path that many micronations followed. Many of these Japanese micronations were simply business owners and municipal leaders concerned with boosting tourism to their rural areas. On the other hand, I consider the Japanese micronations to be more fully conceived and operated, with great effort expended on the operation, than any online-only or virtual micronation. Maybe it is not as much effort or with the same degree of seriousness that the operators of Sealand possess, but still Japanese micronations have laid their footprint on the ground to a greater extent than any virtual micronation.

We should question why there are not many politically focused micronations in Japan. In the study of Japanese politics, it is commonly thought that the Japanese people are relatively apolitical and that they do not like to disturb the status quo, which helps to explain why they keep voting in the same Liberal Democratic Party election after election, as well as why political protests are relatively uncommon in Japan. It is possible that Japanese society would see a serious effort at a politically minded micronation as upsetting the status quo and being bothersome to neighbours. Declaring a micronation with the intention to disrupt the link between society and government would run afoul of typical societal pressures to not “rock the boat,” draw attention to oneself, or be dramatic. Japanese people like their neighbourhoods to be quiet, and no one likes drama.

Finally, we should consider the positive side of that copycat trend of declaring micronations. In contrast to the stereotypical image of the boring, staid Japanese bureaucrat, I consider the many city halls and tourism boards taking part in micronation activities to be examples of innovative thinking. These were positive actions taken to build pride in local towns and villages as well as provide activities and historical education to engage local residents and domestic tourists. My research assistant on this paper told me that her mother has fond memories of visiting a micronation in her region when she was young. The fact that she and likely many others are still able to remember micronations decades later shows that these efforts made a strong impact.

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