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Introduction

A Special Focus on Shrinking Regions

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Japan is in the midst of a quiet, though profound, transformation. Some time between 2005 and 2010 the country's population began to shrink and, although history has an unerring, and unnerving, habit of delivering unexpected outcomes, based on current trends the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research projects that the nation will continue to decline in size at a rate of approximately 800,000 people per year between 2010 and 2050 (NIPSSR, 2006). This is equivalent to losing a city the size of Niigata—Japan's 15th largest—annually for the next forty years. Alongside this the country is getting progressively older, and ageing is expected to reduce the size of the labour force still further such that Japan's ratio of dependents to active workers will approach 1 to 1 by around 2030. These two interdependent processes therefore have the potential to deliver great changes to the country in the coming decades.

Regional communities, meaning those located away from the country's metropolitan centres, will most probably bear the brunt of the associated impacts, although metropolitan regions will not escape entirely. Indeed, and as the research presented in this issue of *Social Science Japan Journal* shows, shrinkage has already been happening in regional locales for almost the entire postwar period, and there is every reason to believe that this state of affairs will continue. What is new, and potentially disastrous for some communities, is the negative-sum game that the national depopulation has brought to the fore. From the late-1940s through to about 2000 it was conceivable that every community in Japan could simultaneously grow its population, and by implication its economy, given the right mixture of effort and imagination on the part of citizens and decision-makers. Indeed, that is more or less what the Japanese government and people tried, and more or less succeeded in doing, via the various

expansionary and spatial equalization measures that were implemented through the course of Japan's long economic boom.

That fortunate constellation of circumstances, to a large extent based on the so-called 'demographic dividend' delivered by the extraordinarily rapid population growth in the middle decades of the 20th century, has now abruptly ended. From now on, for the next few decades at least, as one settlement grows, another will be forced to shrink proportionately more in order to accommodate both the growth of the former and the shrinkage in the population as a whole. Assuming that Tokyo and, possibly, Nagoya and Fukuoka continue to grow, it is almost inconceivable that the rest of Japan's regional towns and cities will manage to expand. Which prompts the question: what will happen to these towns and cities, and what to do about any negative impacts?

Japan's rural regions in particular have already been shrinking and ageing since about 1955, which was precisely the moment when the structure of the emerging postwar political economy was consolidated. Throughout the following fifty years, rural areas experienced a long term relative decline in their populations, and at times in their economies, in favour of urban and industrial dynamism. Initially this was a consequence of massive migratory flows of younger people leaving the countryside in search of employment in Japan's rapidly expanding industries. Later, as the rate of natural reproduction fell to below replacement, rural regions entered a 'double negative population disequilibrium', whereby both the net-migratory and natural reproduction contributions to the population turned negative.

The impacts of depopulation on Japan's rural areas have been great, and for some communities, catastrophic. Entire villages have disappeared, or even been 'sold' (BBC, 2007), and thousands of municipalities have been judged non-viable and merged into larger entities. Thousands of businesses have collapsed, and hundreds of thousands of older people have been left to live solitary lives in neighbourless communities, as relatives have migrated away, or died, and nearby families have abandoned their homes. For those observers who grew up appreciating the 'dynamic and exuberant urban Japan' paradigm, such a description might confound the senses; but it is nonetheless true.

Around 2000 to 2005, give or take a year or two, many of Japan's regional urban locales followed their rural counterparts and began to shrink. Even Niigata City, my

home town for three years, is now shrinking. Of course, it is by no means certain that depopulation will deliver predominantly negative outcomes, nor will it necessarily be as severe as current estimates imply, though it could also be worse. Properly managed, it may result in improvements to citizens' lives. Living space may expand and the built environment be reconfigured. Consumption of material resources may decline and result in reduced human pressures on the natural environment. People may decide to spend less time at work, and devote more of their energies to family and community. The Japanese government might feel compelled to follow the lead taken by the European Union and reconfigure the parameters of the state to allow mass-immigration. Nevertheless, right now if one takes a little time to wander around some of the medium-sized towns and cities that make up what has become known as '*ura nihon*' (the backwaters of Japan), one gradually becomes aware that something is amiss. Although the built environment remains for the most part orderly and in fairly good repair, it feels somewhat deserted and shabby around the edges. While the odd convenience store or pharmacy still attracts—mostly older—customers, even at the peak of the day shops may remain closed and shuttered. And weeds occasionally compete for space in the gaps that have appeared where businesses and residential properties once stood.

Whether regional urban Japan can or should learn from the past experiences of rural Japan is a difficult question whose answer is likely to depend upon the precise circumstances of shrinkage in each locale. Many cities, however, are now decisively in the grip of shrinkage and, some will ultimately face collapse or merger. Rural villages and small towns have already been there and done that, and they may have a useful story to tell. It is, for example, becoming clearer with each passing day to some of the residents in such communities that, rather than struggling to grow in the face of increasingly improbable odds for success, it is perhaps more realistic to acknowledge, even embrace, shrinkage as a fact of life.

In July 2008 we gathered a group of scholars together at the Yorkshire Art Space in Sheffield to form the 'Shrinking Regions Research Group', and asked the simple question: what is happening right now in Japan's shrinking regions? The papers in this issue of SSJJ came out of that gathering, and tell us that Japan's 'construction state' is no longer delivering what it once promised the regions, if it ever did. Even towns and cities

fortunate enough to be chosen as the location of Shinkansen stations are now failing to grow, and post-industrial transformations are decimating entire communities as 'one horse towns', such as Yūbari in Hokkaido, collapse in all but name. To adapt a well-worn phrase from economics: the government—in all its various guises—is pushing on a piece of string. Perhaps it is now time for urban communities to listen to those residents of rural areas who have lived with shrinkage for decades and who themselves are learning to think 'beyond growth', and grope towards new ways of living that are rooted in notions of stability and, even, sustainability.

On behalf of our research group I wish to take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank the sponsors of our workshop and symposium in Sheffield: the Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation, the Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation, the British Association for Japanese Studies, the White Rose East Asia Centre, and the Project Office Philipp Oswalt for their kind cooperation. In addition, I would like to thank the Editorial Board of *Social Science Japan Journal* for the journal's high standards of peer review and the kind, thoughtful and professional management of the publication process. It has taken a long time to get to where we are now, and we are only just beginning to understand how national depopulation is affecting the regions of Japan. Let us hope and expect that the challenges Japan faces will be met with the same effort and imagination that propelled it to the front rank in nearly all measures of economic success, such that a new and equally inspiring story awaits our discovery.

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